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The Dishonest Woman: an ekphrastic novel
with a critical reflection on Bruegel, Bourdieu and writing Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The Dishonest Woman: an ekphrastic novel
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Through an informed exercise in creating and writing original historical fiction, this practice-based thesis examines how Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practice* can help both the process of research and in the development of a work of fiction based on a real past. The creative element of this research is presented as a novel set in sixteenth-century Flanders, which is an ekphrastic interpretation of a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The novel has been written in three parts, the first two included in this thesis (approx. 70,000 words).

The works of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, a sixteenth-century painter, continues to draw much interest. Yet, as inspiring as his works are, they provide few answers and much contemplation. Understanding life at this time, as material for a novel, is not straightforward.

The critical element of this study draws on the work by French sociologist, anthropologist, philosopher and public intellectual, Pierre Bourdieu, and the application of his tools in the fields of art and creative production. This reflection initially explores a critical analysis of the world of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and in the second half, discusses the application of Bourdieu's tools to develop historically authentic characters, settings and plot ideas.

With the completion of the creative and critical elements of this thesis, a research study rooted as much in process as on focused outcome is established. The creative practice is seen to critically inform how an ekphrastic interpretation of a sixteenth-century painting inspired novel is delivered and as such, the thesis introduces an approach that can be applied by other academics and practitioners working within the fields of creative writing and historical fiction.

Keywords: creative writing, historical fiction, Pieter Bruegel, Pierre Bourdieu

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION AND COPYRIGHT STATEMENT2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS3

ABSTRACT.....4

NOVEL (2 PARTS).....6

CRITICAL REFLECTION..... 188

APPENDIX: BOURDIEU’S KEY TERMS..... 252

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED..... 255

NOVEL (2 Parts)

THE DISHONEST WOMAN



Extract from 'Netherlandish Proverbs'
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1559

Seven Prominent Men, Seven Secrets, One Dishonest Woman

prologue

The Banquet

September 1548

These seven men sitting around the banquet table, my deceased husband once called his brothers. But there is not one among them who would have hesitated to slit his throat from left to right, or from right to left, had it been in their benefit to do so. And it is these very men that I must now tell what is so blatantly untrue, and convince them, convince myself, that I speak without falsity. Because of these men I will make myself a liar.

‘Was my husband not the best innkeeper in all of Antwerpen?’ I announce loudly as my grandmother, Oma, and I, along with the potboys, deliver half a dozen delicate hams, smoked ox-tongues, bottargas, goat stew and gigantic sausages to the table. The feast, begun early afternoon, has continued for many hours into the evening, all to the accompaniment of minstrels entertaining us with their lutes. The men have gorged themselves on Spanish black olives, Italian ricotta, French truffles, Mediterranean grapes, dates and nuts from exotic lands. But they are nothing more than gluttons. When they have eaten their fill, they go outside and purge themselves, returning to commence all over again.

‘Ah,’ acknowledges the Physician. Such a vain man dressed in the latest of fashion or so he tells us. He has just returned from Nuremberg and wears a high jerkin that elongates his neck and cradles his beard like a tulip in a vase. I have no concern that I can fool this learned man for, despite his standing at Leuven University, he is all too fond of the fable and mystical tale. Not to mention the velvet down of my inner thighs that tempts him so.

‘Surely he was the best innkeeper in Vlaanderen?’ I try to steady my voice, to hide the quavering, but it is so very difficult. Much depends on the success of this evening, on convincing these men.

Oma moves discreetly around the table, filling goblets to brimming with wine from Bordeaux. She looks to me and nods ever so slightly, encouraging me to go on. I have begun to spin my lie and there is no turning back. Our future depends on my bravado for there is much at stake. My reputation, my livelihood, my family, my very own life. I speak with a voice I do not recognise, one that is powerful and confident.

The Burgermeister pushes back his chair and attempts to stand. That anyone can have such a ferocious appetite is indecent and the huge belly that overhangs his codpiece is evidence enough

that he lacks any self-control. He sucks at a pheasant leg before tossing it to the floor and then lunges clumsily for his goblet. He spits the wine out behind him, as though cleansing his pallet before beginning his next course. The Lawyer slept for a time with his head on the table, snoring with his face in blackbird pie, but now he is awake and wipes his mouth on the front of his shirt. Streaks of piecrust intermingle with wine and other, now indiscriminate, stains to make his vest almost a meal in itself. The Burgermeister finally staggers to his feet; the Physician and the Astrologer just managing to hold him up.

‘To Willem. He was the best innkeeper in all of Nederland,’ the Burgermeister shouts, his tongue slurred. He holds up his goblet to toast my dead husband and more wine slops over the table.

Oma nudges me, urging me on. I take a deep breath.

‘But surely he remains the best innkeeper in all of Nederland? Nay! All the world,’ I say. The men stop mid toast and look to me. My dress shows just enough cleavage as I hold my chin steady. My grandmother and I have been meticulous in our preparation, leaving nothing to chance. But still, I pray we have not overlooked anything. ‘Tonight, do you not sit at his table and eat the best foods, drink the finest wines? Does he not take the utmost care of his guests? Can you find fault in his hospitality? If so, please insult me no further by staying seated. Come forward and tell this grief-stricken widow to her face what the fault be, that I bring shame to my beloved’s house, so I can rectify it immediately.’

‘Gertrud, my dear woman, we apologise whole-heartedly,’ the Bookseller says. ‘It is our failing not to acknowledge what you so perfectly articulate. Our dearest friend was an innkeeper unlike any other!’ He is the only guest who has managed to keep his ruffle unstained and his soft cap still perched, as it should be, upon his head. He sips his wine and picks at the food on his plate, yet his pristine manners are deceiving. I playfully dismiss his groping fingers as they expertly find their way under my skirt, but my maid is far more accommodating. Beatrix is a pretty young thing, barely fifteen, and easily impressed by the heavy gold chains around his neck. She and the Bookseller disappeared into the courtyard earlier, only to return with the girl clearly smitten by his charms.

The other men raise their goblets in my direction before emptying more wine into mouths already stuffed. Grease drips down chins, while they hold up sleeves caked in muck. How can such men hold power over this city? They are not princes or vice-regents, yet they govern the Grote Markt, and for us every day folk, that is the real world. It is not the grand castles or vast estates that matter, but the heart of the city where every transaction, from life to death, occurs. To control the marketplace is to rule the people. If I am to be my own master, then it is these men whom I must deceive.

‘I have wonderful news gentleman, and as my dear Willem considered you all his kin, I wish to share it with you.’ Silence descends as the Burgermeister signals for the minstrels to stop playing. My heart pounds such that I can feel the pressure in my forehead. ‘As some of you may know, what Willem desired most in this world was an heir.’

In truth, my husband, his forty-seven years to my seventeen when we wed, was a dismal failure on our wedding evening and continued in such form until his demise. He would clamber atop me and shoot his seed in every direction except between my legs, for there was never enough time. Any child born of him would need to crawl before conception.

‘Your husband has been dead some three months, dear Gertrud,’ the Bookseller remarks.

I hold his stare. ‘I have received a blessing. Gentlemen, I carry within my womb Willem’s son.’

The men stare at me in disbelief.

‘You are with child?’ the Lawyer says slowly. He is a small framed man with a heavily lined face and hawk-like nose. An influential figure, some say even beyond our city gates. His stare bears down upon me, calling me out for the liar that I am. But I can answer his question truthfully.

‘It is so.’ My legs begin to shake, and Oma rests a hand gently on my arm.

He raises his eyebrows. Of course, he recalls our conversation only three months prior. ‘Then the child will be born in...?’ He stares at my flat stomach, as though challenging my claim.

The moment of my deceit has arrived. I resist the urge to bite my lower lip, instead raising my chin and pulling my shoulders back. ‘A child born of a great man carries many responsibilities. Is that not true, gentleman?’

I want only to flee from these men and far from the inn, but I feel the tiny bump hidden under my dress. My child will have a prosperous future.

The men shrug and look at each other, confused.

I turn to the young Friar, a learned gentleman, even for his few years. ‘And is it not true the old masters declared that such an offspring, born of greatness, needs longer within the womb, for there is much to develop?’

The Friar has a nervous disposition, especially around women. He speaks softly and keeps his head bowed, looking up through his blonde fringe. ‘That has been said, I... I can confirm,’ he stutters. Words are a struggle for the Friar; they cause his mouth to twist and contort, only to emerge deformed.

‘A few months perhaps,’ the Lawyer says. ‘If it has ever been seen, so very rare it must be.’

‘I believe Rabelais referred to it in his writing,’ the Bookseller adds. The men continue to look at each other, puzzled.

‘Could not the son of a man so great as Willem, require more time inside his mother’s womb?’ I say. ‘Already I am convinced of his importance, from size and strength alone.’

My husband’s body was found behind the inn, murdered. Witnesses came forward to speak of a dispute between my husband and a travelling entertainer. A disagreement started when Willem remarked he found the plot of the entertainer’s play confusing; it had quickly escalated into blows. My husband had a short temper. The entertainer was duly hanged for the crime.

The Astrologer clears his throat. ‘You are convinced the child is a boy?’ It is the first time he has spoken. A learned man, he is most guarded in nature.

‘I have no doubt.’ That the babe could be anything other than male is inconceivable. The Astrologer watches me closely with piercing blue eyes but asks no more.

The men lean forward on their stools, huddled in private discussion. I feel my forehead burn, the sweat under my partlet grows such that it begins to stain the front of my dress. Foreboding, I fear, of the temperatures I will endure when they burn my body at the stake.

The men finally sit back, and the room falls silent. A shutter slams as the wind howls outside. It has all come to this. Oma and I await our fate. I dare not look to her. These men cannot be deceived, it is clear. My lie will be exposed.

To my surprise it is the Artist who steps forward and finally speaks. He is a man of the brush who prefers to watch. An elegant, beautiful man, with the hands of a painter. Fingers that are long and delicate, fine almost feminine wrists that contrast with his strong muscular forearms. ‘A blessing,’ he says. ‘Willem, our brother has left us the greatest gift of all. I, for one, will consider his child as one of my own.’

I do not know the Artist well and am most taken aback. An act of kindness but he dices with his position if the others do not agree. For the first time all evening, I do not know what to say.

But around the table each man makes his solemn promise to me and to my unborn child, for care and provision. The Burgermeister first, then the others, before finally the Astrologer, going last in allegiance to his so-called brothers. But a promise made in front of others is a pledge, and while I trust few of them, I know each will honour his word.

Again, Oma gently prods me, this time to complete my performance. With my heart pounding such to cause my chest to ache, I take a moment to compose myself. Picking up a glass, I fill it with wine and raise it slowly before the men around the table. ‘And to you gentlemen, I give you my promise. To always welcome you at my husband’s inn and to provide such service as you are accustomed and duly deserve.’

I should be pleased, yet fear grips me. Have I replaced one husband with seven?

PART ONE

chapter one

Feast of Fools

April 1547 (seventeen months earlier)

Streets crammed with people eager to celebrate; men, women and children, all laughing, singing and dancing, making their way to the Grote Markt; some wear colourful costumes, others are dressed as animals or jesters or hidden behind elaborate masks; drums competed with flutes and tambourines, to deafen those nearby; Feast of Fools had arrived.

‘Gertje! Gertje! Such a treat. Was there ever such beauty in the street?’ Though I couldn’t see him, I blushed at the poor poet’s attempt at gaining my attention.

A group of flute players rushed by and I held my basket close to my chest, careful not to damage the bread. More people followed the musicians, shouting and singing; a stranger grabbed my arms and twirled me around before dashing on.

‘Gertje!’ he shouted again. I could blame Feast of Fools and say I was carried away by the festivities, but in truth, I did not set out to go via the Corn Market, as Papa had instructed. Instead, I took the long way to Fuggers House, where I was to deliver the bread, taking the route through the market square and past the docks. I hoped only to run into Pieter and then be quickly on my way. I knew the delivery was important, for so rarely was I let out on my own. But I planned to return swiftly home again, to help Papa and Oma in our bakery.

Pieter worked for his father unloading and loading the many ships that lined the docks. Baltic grain, English textiles, Portuguese spices, Spanish silver and German wines arrived daily bound for foreign cities. Wool destined for far-off lands; Flemish tapestries to hang in English houses; saffron, sheepskin, fine furs, precious stones, and sugar; such fineries that passed through our city. I loved hearing Pieter’s stories of the exotic cargo he had carried upon his shoulders that day. I was so proud of him.

But I did not have to go looking for Pieter as he found me. ‘Gertje! Wait up,’ he called out. I turned and saw him coming towards me, arms wide and grinning broadly.

‘You are a poor poet!’ I laughed.

‘Ah, perhaps, but I speak the truth. There is no prettier girl here today! Come Gertje, let us celebrate. I have the afternoon off.’

‘Alas, I have this order to deliver.’

He leant forward and gave me a peck on the cheek.

'Stop that,' I said, blushing.

'Come now, in a few months' time you'll be mine and I will be able to do much more than that!'

'Ah be away with you. Such talk. You should be ashamed.'

He took my basket and put it aside before pulling me in close. 'Never ashamed of my love for you,' he declared, and I could not resist him. Not that I wanted to. With hair the colour of fresh cut hay and bright blue eyes that glittered, Pieter was as handsome as he was charming. And with a promising future ahead; one day he would take over his father's business. Papa did not hesitate when Pieter had asked to marry me, and I couldn't have been happier.

He picked up the basket and took my hand. 'Then I shall accompany you part of the way.'

We walked slowly to the beginning of Sugar Canal, avoiding the crowded market square and taking the smaller laneways. Only when he was to leave me did he kiss me softly on the lips.

'I'll call by this evening,' he promised, before walking back down the lane, heading in the direction of the market square.

It was only when he had turned the corner that I realised I would be unable to see him later on. Papa and Oma needed my help.

'Pieter - wait!' I ran after him, but he was gone. Reaching the square, I caught sight of him standing at a stall that sold fabrics. As I drew near, I could see he was talking with a girl, his hand resting upon her elbow. Katharina du Bos, the pretty daughter of a prominent local merchant.

I seethed. I had heard talk that he and Katharina were friendly, but when I mentioned this to him, he'd only laughed. Nothing but fish wives' tales, he assured me. The smile on her face, as she giggled and looked up at him, now told me otherwise.

Distracted, I stepped backwards and into the path of a man leading a donkey laden with baskets. He shouted and cursed as I tried to regain my footing without dropping my delivery.

'Why Gertrud Vermeulen! You must be more careful!' said a loud voice. I turned to be greeted by Willem Smekens, a local innkeeper. He pulled me to one side and waved the man and his donkey on.

'Thank you, sir,' I said, relieved that my basket of bread remained intact.

'At your service! It is not every day that a humble man as I can save a beautiful girl.' The smell of brandy was strong on his breath. I did not know the innkeeper well, though he had on occasion called upon my father. I blushed at his remark, unaccustomed as I was to receiving compliments from an older man. Willem Smekens was known for his fancy clothes and for enjoying the company of women, and I was becoming aware that some people on the market were watching us.

I looked up and smiled. 'You are most kind.' In the corner of my eye I could see Pieter still talking with Katharina, and I hoped he would notice I too could attract the attention of another.

'I speak sincerely,' Willem Smekens said. 'You have dirt on your cheek. Here, allow me. It must have come from that mule.' He removed a handkerchief from his coat, and gently wiped my face. I smiled nervously and tried not to giggle, for I was flattered by his attention.

I glanced briefly towards Pieter. Although I could not see clearly, I was sure his head turned in my direction.

'Thank you. I fear that incident has left me shaken.'

'Perhaps you will allow me to buy you a drink? To settle your nerves after such a nasty experience,' the Innkeeper said, leaning in close. His eyes shone brightly, and he wore a fine black velvet cap upon his head. He smelt unusual, a combination of hops and rosemary.

'I must make this delivery for my father,' I replied, indicating the basket. Despite his years, the Innkeeper had a charming disposition and I could well understand why women might find him attractive. But I had no wish to encourage him. And from his rosy cheeks, I could tell he had already drunk more than his fair share, even with the festivities.

'But it is the Feast of Fools! A time to celebrate!' he persisted.

'And a banquet awaits this bread. I must be on my way.'

'Of course. Another time,' he sighed, taking my hand and bringing it to his lips. I left my hand in his for a moment, before removing it.

I said goodbye to the Innkeeper and walked on. The basket of bread had become heavy and I was aware of how much time I had wasted. Papa would be getting worried. I knew I must make haste.

Hurrying along busy Sugar Canal, I turned down a small lane that led to Fuggers House and had almost reached the end when someone grabbed me from behind. I immediately recognised the scent of hops and rosemary. The Innkeeper moved quickly to overpower me; the basket falling from my grasp and bread spilling over the ground. Quickly pushing me through a doorway, I was suddenly in a dark, dank space that smelt strongly of fish.

The Innkeeper continued to grip my arm. 'Come now, Gertrud. Do stop this foolishness.' His tone had changed markedly since our exchange on the market square, his pleasant demeanour replaced with one of urgency and want.

'Please,' I begged. 'You're hurting me.'

The Innkeeper laughed as he continued to restrain me. 'Why such a pretence?'

Grabbing me with both arms, he threw me face down onto a crate. Pain struck across my nose and then my cheeks; my mouth filled with the metallic taste of blood. I screamed with all my might, but my outburst was greeted with a swift rebuttal to the back of my head. He moved swiftly to hold me down, his fingers groped at my partlet, feeling my breasts, while he pressed his body into mine. I could smell his breath, heavy with brandy. All the while I struggled against his probing hands, yet my anger only made him more determined. Using one arm he gripped my wrists behind my back and with the other, he pushed up my skirt. As the cold air rushed between my legs, I yelled so hard I thought my ribs would break. And then light broke through the darkness.

‘Get off her,’ said a familiar voice. I looked up and there, in the doorway, was Pieter. Though my face ached, and my body shook, I felt only relief.

The intrusion was enough to cause my assailant to hesitate; enough time for me to break free from his grasp and run for the doorway.

‘Run Gertje, as fast as you can. Straight home,’ Pieter said.

‘Please Piet -’

‘Go.’ His voice was firm, such as I had never heard him speak before.

I turned and ran. It was dark but the streets remained busy, carnival festivities continuing on into the night. Yet I was barely conscious of what was taking place around me. My legs trembled as my feet carried me the distance home. Although my body ached and there was a searing pain across my forehead, I felt only desperation to get away from all the people and the celebrations. I wanted no one to see me. The horror and shame of what had taken place left me full of disgust, and I was distraught Pieter had seen me in such a state. I reached our bakery and collapsed on the kitchen floor.

‘Who was it?’ My father’s anger was uncontrollable, his fists beating down on the table.

‘Niklaas, please,’ Oma soothed. I lay sobbing, my head in her lap. ‘Let me tend to her first and then you can ask your questions.’

Papa placed his hand gently on my shoulder before leaving the room, closing the door behind him. My grandmother put her face close to mine, kissing my bloodied cheeks. ‘What brute would do such a thing?’

She held me to her chest, rocking me soothingly as she had done when I was small and had hurt myself.

‘Speak child,’ she whispered.

‘Willem Smekens,’ I replied.

Oma sighed. ‘The Innkeeper.’

I nodded.

'He has been watching you for some time. You didn't go past his inn, did you? You were told not to go via the Grote Markt, Gertje.'

I stared at Oma in horror.

'Oh, dear girl. That man must have seen you... followed you.'

'I wanted to see Pieter... just to say hello.'

She took my face in her hands, caressed my bruised cheeks with her fingers, and looked at me closely. 'This is very important. You must speak the truth.'

'Of course.'

'What we say to others, can be something else. But I must know. You understand, don't you?'

'I do.'

'Tell me. What did he do to you?'

I drew a deep breath and closed my eyes. 'He lifted my skirt from behind and spread my ... but... he did not enter me.'

'You're absolutely sure? Not even... did he... touch you?'

'No. If Pieter hadn't arrived when he did... a moment longer, and I have no doubt he would have.' I was not as innocent as Oma thought me to be. While I had not permitted Pieter to lie with me, such as a husband would with his wife, I was familiar with his touch.

'Well, that's something to be grateful for.'

Days passed and still Pieter had not called to see me. I wanted to go to him, but Papa would not hear of it. Oma had yet to tell him who my assailant was, fearing what he might do. Finally, my grandmother relented to my pleas and together we walked to the docks, while Papa was away tending to deliveries. We found Pieter carrying sugar sacks from a newly arrived ship. Oma waited and left me to approach him alone.

'Pieter,' I said, drawing near.

He stopped but did not put down his load. I smiled, pleased to see him again, yet he could barely even look at me. 'Not now, Gertje. Work to be done.'

I shook my head, confused. 'Please, for a moment?'

He sighed before dropping the sack and pulling me to one side. 'It's not a good time.'

'You haven't been to see me in days. Whatever is the matter?'

He looked at me, shocked. 'You are surprised?'

'Of course.'

'You must know what people are saying.'

'No... no, I don't.'

He sighed and looked away. 'People saw you with... him. Some say you were talking sweetly.'

'But it's not true. He stopped me from being trampled. I was grateful. Nothing more.'

'I saw you, Gertje. Smiling... encouraging him.'

'Surely the bruises upon my face tell you all you need to know.'

'It's not that I haven't thought of you,' he said, looking at his feet.

'I've missed you,' I said. Briefly our eyes locked and though he said nothing, I could tell he too had missed me.

'The ship must be loaded,' he said, bending down to pick up the sack before changing his mind.

'I wanted to thank you,' I said. 'For rescuing me. I dare think what he would have done had you not found me when you did.'

'You must know, Gertje. I struck that brute. Knocked him down hard. But... I'm so sorry... so very sorry. I just can't...' He looked away from me, staring out over the water.

'What are you saying?' I reached out and touched his arm.

He sighed, taking my chin in his hand to look down into my eyes. 'You are so very beautiful. To look at you...but things are complicated. My family... the business...'

'You no longer love me?'

'If only love was all that mattered.' He let go of my chin and turned away.

'And Katharina?'

Pieter shook his head. 'I care nothing for her.'

'Then surely...'

He looked back at me, his eyes watering. 'I can't marry you.'

'But... why ever?'

'My father says I can't take a wife who has been... spoiled.'

'But I am not,' I stammered. 'You heard me scream, you must have seen me try to fight him off.'

'I know. But your skirt was raised. He was...'

'I promise you. He didn't... not what you're thinking.'

Pieter sighed. 'If only it could be otherwise... but father, he says I should not take your word.'

'When I become your wife, you will discover it to be true.'

'And if I was to take you as my wife and find out otherwise? It would be too late then. That is what my father says.'

'You wish to punish me for something that was not of my doing?' My voice was raised, causing some of the men on the docks to look over at us.

'I am sorry.'

'But the promise of marriage - it is sacred.'

I could see his father watching us. 'Pieter! Come!' he shouted out.

'Please,' I begged. 'Oma says any midwife could tell...'

'I must go. The men, they are waiting.' He turned to leave but then paused to take my hand in his. 'I... I do love you.'

As he reached the dockside, he looked back, the pain clear in his eyes.

It was impossible to keep my distress from Papa. That evening Oma told him of Pieter's decision not to marry me.

'Is there no such thing as honour?' Papa said, resting his head in his hands. 'First my daughter is assaulted and now this.'

'Pieter's not a bad lad; it's his father's doing,' Oma replied.

Three plates of food sat before us, barely touched.

'I've heard his father has received a very large contract,' Papa said. 'Strange that he should come into good fortune when ours has taken such a downward turn.'

My grandmother poured beer into our mugs. 'What are you suggesting?'

'Probably nothing,' Papa sighed. 'Now please, tell me. Who is the perpetrator that has so wronged our family? I'll not react without careful consideration.'

Oma looked to me and nodded.

'Willem Smekens,' I said softly.

He shook his head. 'The Innkeeper. It comes as no surprise.'

'I too have feared his intentions for some time,' Oma added.

'Then I must go to his inn. No man should treat another's daughter in such a way.'

'It is most tempting to face him, I concede,' Oma said, 'but he is not one to be trifled with. Do you know who drinks at his establishment? Prominent men. They say the Burgermeister is among them.'

'What would my dear wife do?' At times of worry, Papa inevitably spoke of mother. She was gone near on eight years, but her presence was almost as strong as when she was alive. Sweating sickness; even Oma, with all her potions and cures, couldn't save her. One afternoon my mother complained of cold shivers and a pain in her neck. We sat at her bedside as she shook violently, a fire raging through her body. She died before the sun rose.

'You must tread carefully,' Oma said gently.

'A man can do nothing but tread carefully in this city,' Papa snapped.

Oma leaned across the table and took his fist in her hands. 'You are a good father Niklaas, who cares for his family. I understand you want to avenge the wrong that has been done our Gertje, and you will, in time. But the Innkeeper is a powerful man. It would not be wise to get on the wrong side of one such as he.'

'Ah Mama, you ask much of me, that I should not defend my own daughter's honour. My beautiful daughter, she should have her choice from many eligible suitors. But now ...'

'Bide your time son.'

Word spread quickly across the Grote Markt. I had been caught by my betrothed with another man. While I rarely left the bakery except to accompany Oma on short errands, it was impossible not to notice the stares. My precious reputation, one so carefully guarded, was in tatters. And to compound matters, our bread sales were dwindling. Though nothing was said, we were struggling, each meal getting smaller.

Guilt weighed heavily and my despair often turned to anger. Both Papa and Oma assured me it was not my fault, but perhaps if I had behaved differently that day on the marketplace, things might have taken a different course.

'Is there not anything we can do?' I insisted. We were seated in our tidy bakery. There was little to do with no orders for bread.

'Do not sit on hot coals, Gertje,' Oma said softly.

I smiled. 'Old wives' proverbs will not help us. Surely there is something... sell bread elsewhere?'

Papa sighed. 'I have tried but there are many bakers. We bake so few loaves... how quickly customers turn away.'

My grandmother placed her hand on Papa's arm. 'We will make do.'

Papa shook his head. 'If this goes on much longer, my hand will be forced. I will have to find work beyond these city walls.'

'Leave Antwerpen?' Oma said, shocked.

'Not by choice, Mama.'

'But where?' I asked, horrified at his suggestion.

'Gent, Brussel,' he said. 'Or perhaps we should go far away from here.'

A short time later the Innkeeper called at the bakery, one eye black and a cut on his right cheek. I'm sure it took all of my father's resolve not to add to the man's injuries, but eventually, he permitted him across our threshold. I trembled at the sight of Willem Smekens; the anguish of my

assault still raw. Yet I also wanted to spit and lash out at the man who had so harmed my family and my reputation. Oma ushered me upstairs, but I insisted on sitting on the top step. In any case, our house was small, and we could hear the men's voices clearly.

I knew of the Innkeeper's powerful connections. In the evenings, after I had retired to my bed, Papa and Oma would speak in hushed tones of the men he associated with and the influence he somehow managed to yield.

'I am not one to heed any attention to mindless talk,' the Innkeeper began, 'yet I hear disturbing news. Out of concern, I thought it wise to check it was not true.'

'Folks at the market make much out of nothing,' my father replied.

'They say your bakery is struggling.'

Papa cleared his throat. 'No one goes hungry under my roof.'

'That's exactly what I said. Niklaas Vermeulen is a good, decent man.'

'Good, decent men are hard to find,' my father snapped. I heard a chair scrape against the floor.

'Word is, you barely sell more than a few loaves.'

'No cause for concern. Soon enough we'll be selling bread again.' Papa spoke carefully, his words clipped. I could sense the tension that accompanied each word.

'So, there is a problem?'

My poor father was an honest man, certainly not up to the manipulations of one such as Willem Smekens.

'Probably nothing more than another bakery opening up close by.'

'My dear man, why didn't you come to me? I am your neighbour, your friend.'

'I have no need of your assistance,' my father replied, his tone scathing.

'Be cautious, my dear man. If a trader wishes to succeed in this city... well, he needs his... friends. Now, let us drink this fine wine I have bought us to share.'

'I will not drink with a man who has wronged my daughter.'

'Come now. A misunderstanding surely. I fear Gertrud is a sensitive girl. But I have come to offer my assistance. You are clearly in need of it. Do not let pride prevent you from accepting help.'

'A few more customers are all I need.'

'Then you shall have mine! You can bake the bread for my inn. And if we were to become family... why I have many friends... wealthy friends... with interests.'

I looked at my grandmother in horror. Had the man come seeking my hand in marriage?

'If you speak of Gertrud, she is promised to another.'

'Your daughter is a beautiful young woman. She resembles her mother when she was young.'

Oma took my hand and held it tightly in her lap. Why the Innkeeper was now mentioning my mother, I did not understand. I listened on, my thoughts a muddle, but there was only silence from the kitchen below.

‘I do believe Gertrud’s promise of marriage no longer stands,’ the Innkeeper said finally.

‘A misunderstanding.’

‘To marry a prosperous innkeeper such as I... well, it would be a most fortunate match, especially for a baker’s daughter. I would provide well for her. And her family.’

‘She loves the young man.’

I thought of Pieter and his last words to me. He loves me too, I wanted to shout out.

‘Love?’ Willem Smekens laughed. ‘What good is love if he won’t marry her. I assume you have a dowry?’

I heard the front door open.

‘I am not yet considering other marriage proposals for my daughter.’

Their voices dropped to a faint whisper and we struggled to hear anything, picking up only snippets.

‘As her father,’ I caught the Innkeeper say, ‘best take caution... the Familia Caritatis... you know well the situation. Yours would not be the first business forced to close its doors due to lack of... cooperation?’

I could not hear my father’s response, but it sounded as though a fist hit down on the table, hard.

The Innkeeper continued, ‘there are plenty in Antwerpen who make their fortune, dare I say it, at the cost to others. It would be wise to have... friends looking out for you.’ A moment later the front door slammed.

Oma and I went downstairs to find Papa sitting forlornly by the table. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, feeling the tension in his body. He patted my hands gently before indicating I should sit down beside him.

‘I will do all I can to protect you,’ he said gently.

Oma sighed, sitting down. ‘I fear the pig is stabbed through the belly.’

Papa looked up and stared at his mother. ‘Not while I breathe. This is not a foregone conclusion.’

‘Will he be back?’ she asked.

‘I expect so,’ Papa sighed.

‘He spoke of a Familia Caritatis,’ I asked. ‘What is that?’

‘You are mistaken, Gertje,’ my father snapped. ‘He said no such thing.’

Four weeks later Papa packed up a few of his belongings and left for Brussel, leaving Oma and me with our few remaining coins and promises of his prompt return.

chapter two

Grote Markt

“She will appear in public on occasion, but as rarely as possible, for many reasons. First, because every time she issues forth in public she undergoes what we might almost call a fatal judgement of her beauty, modesty, prudence, propriety, and integrity, since there is nothing more fragile or more vulnerable than the reputation and good name of women; it may well seem to hang by a cobweb.”

The Education of a Christian Woman, a sixteenth-century manual, Juan Luis Vives

June 1547

Oma stood in the doorway, a basket over her arm. ‘Come my girl, let us go the Grote Markt.’

‘I’d prefer to work on my sewing.’ I was letting down the hem of a pretty pink dress that had once belonged to my mother. It was well worn and faded but I was reluctant to let it go, even though it was now much too short for me. To wear her dress and feel the fabric against my own skin kept her memory close. With still no word from Papa, Oma and I were beset with worry. To be reminded of my mother helped keep me going.

Oma shook her head and smiled. ‘You cannot avoid the market place forever.’

I put the dress aside and looked up. ‘The stares and sly talk.’

‘Ah! Just talk, Gertje. Some people love to blow in the ear.’

‘All the same, I’d rather stay away.’

You know the truth. Hold your head high,’ Oma held out the basket. ‘Besides, my health is not what it was.’

‘Your health? Why you are as fit as an ox!’

She laughed. ‘You compare your grandmother to such a slovenly beast. In any case, you must know who you can trust; the few good people who will extend a little kindness, should you need it.’

I reluctantly walked to the Grote Markt, staying close to Oma’s side, all too conscious of the whispers and knowing glances. People I’d known all my life, now so eager to pass judgement on my fall from grace. We drew near the stadhuis, a large building that dominated one end of the square and were confronted by a sea of traders. The market square was filled with carts and baskets, selling everything from kitchen items and food, to paintings and sculptures. Young men and boys scurried

between the stalls, carrying goods to and fro. A man pushed by balancing a short barrel on his head. He carried a basket of eggs and in each hand, three or four fowl. I quickly moved to one side.

‘Should we not have come earlier?’ I said.

‘As good a time as any,’ my grandmother replied, forging her way ahead through the many buyers inspecting the produce on sale. Those vying for their custom were shouting out across the square, eager to rouse interest. Members of the clergy, scholars, even thieves mingled alongside ladies, nuns, harlots, and maids sent on errands for their masters and mistresses. Anything and everything could be bought for a price, and anyone’s coins were as good as the next.

‘You always say the best can be found early morning,’ I remarked, struggling to keep up. I managed to avoid three dark-skinned men wearing colourful robes, carrying baskets of vegetables through the narrow market passages.

On a small platform stood a doctor extolling the virtues of his various potions; a small crowd had gathered before him. A large sign announced, ‘Oynements with mercury - For all maladies and ailments!’

‘Quack,’ Oma muttered, hurrying on.

A wine merchant tried to capture our attention by holding out a mug. Further on, a print seller declared his prices the best in all of Antwerpen. As we neared a cart filled with rounds of cheese and urns of milk and cream, a trader stepped in front of us.

‘Kaas from the province of Holland?’ he asked.

‘No thank you,’ Oma replied.

‘Ah, Aliet. Not seen you in church lately,’ the man said.

‘We attend a different church than you.’

He leaned in closer, lowering his voice. ‘Some say thunder and lightning will strike should you enter the house of the Lord.’

My grandmother raised her chin. ‘And they would do better to serve our Lord than to talk so.’

Taking my arm, she stepped around the trader.

‘Just a warning,’ he called out after us.

Oh my,’ I exclaimed. The man’s words had left me reeling. Such talk was perilous and could quickly lead to accusations.

‘Pillar biter!’ Oma whispered.

‘Really Oma. You must be careful calling someone a hypocrite in public.’

‘Well he is. Pious hypocrite and his wife and children have the bruises to show. Pay no heed, we have purchases to make.’

She stopped at a well-stocked vegetable stall. Before us were baskets laden to brimming, so bountiful as to make my empty stomach cry out in anguish. Turnips, marrows and carrots, cabbages and beans, onions and potatoes.

‘Victor and Johanna,’ Oma whispered. ‘Don’t be misled by their brisk demeanour. You’ll find no better people.’

A man with a thick beard approached us, a soft black cap on his head. ‘Beste Aliet.’

My grandmother smiled. ‘Good afternoon, Victor. You remember Gertrud?’

‘Of course,’ he turned to me and nodded. I vaguely recognised him as an acquaintance of my father’s.

‘Still no word from Niklaas?’

‘None,’ Oma replied. ‘We are very worried.’

A woman who had been busy sorting through a crate of apples stopped what she was doing. She looked around quickly, checking if anyone might see her speaking with us. I assumed she was Johanna.

‘I expect word has become lost,’ she said. ‘Not always easy to find a reliable man.’

‘Let us hope, Johanna,’ Oma said.

‘Ah, probably just busy.’ Victor spoke kindly but the creases across his brow revealed he shared our concern. ‘Have you been to the town hall?’

Oma nodded. ‘Said we must be patient... but it’s so unlike Niklaas.’

‘Didn’t you help the Burgermeister’s grandson a few months back?’ Johanna asked.

‘I did... but the Burgermeister...’

‘They say his wife was most pleased; that it was you who saved the boy,’ Victor added. ‘Never know, she might help.’

A young man appeared at the fruit seller’s side.

‘Hello Rogier,’ I said, smiling. We had once played together as children; Rogier was a mute who often suffered at the hands of the other children, the brunt of their cruel antics. But I liked his gentle ways, his lack of words somehow reassuring. Now older, we no longer played on the Grote Markt, and Rogier was mostly ignored by those who had once teased him.

The woman removed a few bruised apples from the crate and put them in my basket. As she leaned in close, she whispered. ‘Find strength. Other women know what that man is capable of.’

My grandmother put her hand into her pocket to retrieve a coin, but Victor shook his head. Oma nodded but I could see the pain in her eyes. We walked away, my head still spinning from Johanna’s words.

At another stall we acquired a cabbage that was destined for the rubbish pile. It would make soup, a few herbs disguising the fact that it was already spoiled.

'Now, the fishmonger,' my grandmother said. I kept my head down, keen to avoid eye contact with anyone, but still, I sensed I was under scrutiny. I noticed a young woman that I had once attended church with, accompanying her mother. Both knew me well yet now they pretended I was a stranger.

'Fish? We cannot...' I said, but Oma was not listening. We passed a butcher, his cart laden with sides of mutton, sausages dangling, skewered hog's heads and pig's trotters. Chickens and geese clucked and honked noisily in cages. I paused, breathing in the heavy odour of blood and offal. The sight of raw meat was enough to send my poor empty belly into spasms. It was but cruel temptation.

Oma pulled at my sleeve. 'Best be moving on.'

But the butcher had noticed me and approached. A stocky man, he was probably only a few years younger than my father.

'Hello Gertrud,' he said, his smile revealing his missing front teeth. 'I pray you are keeping well?'

'I am, thank you,' I replied. I knew him only by sight from the occasions I had accompanied Oma to the market. How he knew my name, I had no idea.

'Can I be getting you something?'

He was not a butcher that my grandmother frequented. She said he sold sausages full of gristle.

'No... I'm sorry... I must be moving on.'

'Wait,' he said, retrieving a couple of sausages. 'For you.'

The butcher was insistent, pushing the meat into my hand. As he did so his large fingers brushed against my wrist.

'You are kind.' I did not want to accept them, but the sausages looked so very tempting.

'Do call by again.' He paused. 'Not everyone believes... well... we all make mistakes.'

I thanked him again, before walking on to find Oma.

I found her a few stalls on, at a fishmonger.

She looked at the sausages in the basket. 'A gift?'

'We are hungry,' I shrugged.

'Such gifts are given with expectations.'

'Perhaps I should be considering the likes of a butcher.'

Oma scoffed. 'He has no wife and four little ones. Times might be dire but not so that you will consider one such as that. You have your beauty. And we have our intellect.'

'What value is beauty if we will have no roof to sleep beneath?'

‘Banish such thoughts. We will receive word from your father any day and then worry no more. Besides, it is Thursday. The fishmonger will have fresh supplies tomorrow. The fish on sale today is going cheap.’

We were greeted by a red-faced woman with large breasts almost tumbling out of her smock and a belly to match. It was hardly surprising that the women who worked the fish stalls had a reputation for offering much more. Her dress was splattered with fish guts, her sleeves wet and covered in muck. The stall smelt strongly of seafood and salt.

‘If it an’t the Vermeulens. Haven’t seen you around much lately,’ she said to Oma, before looking me up and down.

My grandmother smiled. ‘Just busy.’

The woman wiped her hands on her skirt. ‘Not busy selling bread... or so I hear.’

My grandmother said nothing.

‘Where’s Niklaas then?’ the woman continued.

‘Away... on business,’ Oma replied, holding her head high. But the constant enquiring over my father’s whereabouts only heightened our growing fears. What little funds he had left behind were almost gone. If he did not send for us soon, not even the charity from a few kind souls would be enough to save us from the streets.

A young man approached with a basket of eels, placing them at the woman’s feet.

‘Don’t be putting that there!’ she snapped. ‘Over by the cart. Next to the herrings.’

The young man hurriedly retrieved the basket and placed it as instructed.

‘That’s Dirk, my Ida’s man. Learning the trade, you see. Though slow, he can test my patience! Still, can’t complain. Ida’s carrying a little one.’

‘Your family is blessed,’ Oma said.

‘Such a shame for you, hey Aliet? Still, she’s pretty. Give it time. No doubt someone will take her as his wife,’ she said, lowering her voice as she glanced at me through the corner of her eyes. But I could hear her all too clearly, the reminder of Pieter still so raw as to cause a lump in my throat. Not a day passed when I didn’t think of him and pray he would seek me out, to tell me that he loved me like he used to. I did not want to marry just any man. I wanted only to marry Pieter.

‘Something for our supper,’ Oma said, ignoring the woman’s remark.

‘Some lovely mussels. Or oysters?’ she asked, a grin spreading from red cheek to red cheek. ‘Cod is good.’

‘Maybe just a small piece of fish,’ she said, indicating a basket where a large volume of flies had gathered.

‘Can’t guarantee you won’t be feeling it in the belly later on.’ The woman retrieved a piece of cod that hung limply in her hand. ‘That’s likely the best of it.’ It was covered in places with dark shades of orange, and specks of yellow and black.

As evening arrived, shadows from the cathedral spire cast dark tendrils across the market square. We made our way back through the narrow passages, the traders now heading home. By the time we passed the stadhuis and neared the Innkeeper’s establishment, the Grote Markt was much quieter than when we had first arrived.

As we reached the inn three men emerged, almost colliding with my grandmother and me.

‘Beste Aliet,’ one of the men slurred. A familiar face, a local potter, but the others I did not know.

‘Evening Meneer Loep,’ Oma said, walking on.

‘Not good enough for the likes of you, eh?’ he shouted out. He moved towards us but stumbled and fell.

‘A few more weeks without their Niklaas and they won’t be so proud,’ one of his companions added, just as drunk.

The third, a thinner, much younger man, ran on ahead and stopped us in our path.

‘Pretty Gertrud Vermeulen. If you should need money, you’ll have no trouble finding work,’ he sniggered. ‘I’d be happy to pay for the pleasure.’

‘That’s enough!’ came a loud voice. The men stopped, to be confronted by the Innkeeper himself. ‘I’ll have no such behaviour outside my establishment. Harassing such fine women. Go on, be on your way. Drunkards!’

He took two of them by their collars and shoved them in the other direction. The younger man moved on without any encouragement.

‘Accept my apology, dear ladies. I should be happy to accompany you home,’ the Innkeeper offered. To see my assailant again caused my chest to pound and I could feel myself trembling.

‘Did us no harm,’ Oma replied, squeezing my hand. ‘Thank you but we can make our own way.’

When we arrived home, I inspected our meagre purchases. ‘It’s not much,’ I sighed.

‘It will see us through a couple more days,’ Oma said gently.

‘How bad things have become.’

Oma wrapped her arms around me. ‘Who knows why geese go barefoot.’

I smiled. ‘If there is a reason for everything that has happened, it is not obvious to me.’

Oma took up Victor's suggestion to contact the Burgermeister's wife and to our surprise, she agreed for us to call upon her and her husband. Their house was one of the grandest in Antwerpen, with its own tower and a garden filled with exotic plants and ornate statues. I was so very nervous to be visiting such an important man, having only seen him from a distance on special occasions. He was a short man with broad shoulders and a protruding belly that partly disguised his stumpy legs. But his loud voice, warm and rich, gave him presence. I knew little of the man other than snippets of talk overheard at the marketplace. Some said he helped foster trade; others said he did more to line his own pockets than the city's coffers.

A maid ushered us into a chamber where a large fire was glowering in the grate. On the wall hung an ornate tapestry between two large windows filled with coloured glass. I stood beside Oma afraid to move, feeling out of place amongst the grandeur.

A moment later the Burgermeister's wife joined us. An older woman, her walk was slow and cautious, yet she retained a graceful poise. She approached my grandmother, taking her hand. 'Aliet, such a pleasure to see you again.'

'And you, Mevrouw de Vriese. How is young Adriaan?'

'Very well, thank you. He has regained his strength and returned to his studies.'

The doors to the room flung open again and the Burgermeister entered, his arms outstretched.

'My wife speaks highly of you,' he said, drawing closer to my grandmother. 'My dear lady, we are indebted to you.'

'I'm sure your grandson would have recovered without me. But your kind words are appreciated.'

'Tell me, I consulted the best medical minds in Vlaanderen, yet none could ease Adriaan's pain. What do you know that they don't?'

'Little more than diligent care,' Oma replied, her head bowed.

'The doctors would come and leave so quickly,' his wife added. 'But you remained at his bedside.'

'How may we assist you? My wife tells me you are burdened with worry over your own son,' the Burgermeister said. 'And you must be... his wife?' he said, turning to me. His boisterous nature was rather overbearing, and I struggled to find my voice.

'This is Gertrud, Niklaas' daughter,' Oma said.

'Thank you for seeing us,' I said, looking down at the ornate green and black tiles under our feet.

'Please, take a seat,' he invited, as he also sat down. 'Your son, Niklaas Vermeulen, I believe?'

'That is correct,' Oma replied.

'He left for Brussel some weeks ago and you have received no word?' It seemed he was already aware of our plight.

'Eight weeks, sir, and not a word.'

'Why, may I ask, did he leave for Brussel?'

'Our bakery has not done so well of late.'

'Surely our city eats as much bread as it has ever done, if not more so, as our population grows. I've not heard of other bakeries struggling. It seems... unusual?' He leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs before him.

'I do not know,' Oma said, her eyes downcast.

'Perhaps you, my dear,' he said, turning to me, 'do you know why your father's business suddenly lost its trade? That any trader should need to leave Antwerpen...'

I remained quiet, all the while growing ever more nervous. The Burgermeister was playing a game, he clearly knew much more than he was letting on. That he should ask the opinion of a baker's daughter, seemed nothing more than absurd.

The Burgermeister rose from his chair and walked to the window before turning back to us, 'Do you think perhaps your son has become involved in... shall we say... something untoward?'

'My son is an honest man, sir,' my grandmother replied.

'There has been talk... that your son left behind debts.'

'I assure you, sir, on my good name - my family has no debts.'

'Very well.' The Burgermeister paced the room. 'I will contact the authorities in Brussel and inform them of your son's disappearance.'

'I fear he may have come to some harm,' Oma said, looking pleadingly at the Burgermeister's wife.

'There can be many reasons,' Mevrouw de Vriese said gently.

'Indeed,' the Burgermeister interjected. 'You would be best not to worry yourselves unduly. I'm sure matters will soon be in hand.'

'Perhaps we could assist you with a loan?' his wife offered.

'It is my father that we ...' I began but my grandmother gently nudged me.

'You are most generous,' Oma replied. 'But as I said, we have no debts.'

After our meeting with the Burgermeister and his wife, we walked back along the canal. We said little, both lost in our thoughts.

'Do you think they will help?' I said finally.

Oma shrugged. 'Perhaps. His wife is a kind woman. She will do what she can.'

'Why did you not accept the loan? Surely we need it.'

'Your father told me not to borrow from anyone. Not even the Burgermeister.'

'Why ever would he tell you such a thing?'

Oma sighed. 'Better not to chalk up debt.'

'But surely under the circumstances...'

'Niklaas was insistent. He made me promise.'

chapter three

The Inn

August 1547

Wearing my cloak with the hood up to conceal my face, I ran to the Grote Markt and found Johanna serving a customer while Victor and Rogier unloaded their cart. They looked up as I approached.

‘What is the matter, my dear?’ Victor asked, putting a case of cabbages down on the ground.

My heart pounded as I struggled to catch up breath. ‘It’s Oma. She cannot get out of bed. I am very worried.’

Johanna quickly finished with her customer and joined us. ‘There is an apothecary... he doesn’t charge much. But your grandmother, she needs a doctor.’

Johanna was right, but we had barely enough money for food. I knew I could not pay for medicines, even cheap ones. I did not want to reveal our circumstances to the fruit sellers, but I expect they knew it well enough.

‘Aren’t you selling bread to that inn?’ Victor asked, nodding towards the inn on the edge of the square that loomed behind us.

I nodded. ‘he has not paid us for three weeks. There is a delivery to take this morning; I must collect what he owes us.’

Rogier stepped forward.

‘Then my son will go with you,’ Victor said. ‘He’s a strong young man.’

‘Thank you.’ I smiled at Rogier. I dreaded going to the inn, but I knew it must be done and having him with me would make it easier.

‘Come by when the delivery is ready,’ Victor replied, he and Rogier returning to the cart to continue unloading their produce.

Johanna stepped in close. ‘Be careful, Gertje. There is no stopping that man. I know what he is capable of.’ As she spoke her cheeks began to flush.

I gasped. ‘Did he...?’

Johanna nodded. ‘It was a time ago now, but it is not something a woman ever forgets. I was a young girl, helping my father sell flowers.’

‘He...?’

She nodded. ‘An insistent man, especially when he’s drunk too much. Plenty of women on this square will tell you to keep out of the path of Willem Smekens when he’s inebriated.’

‘Victor - he knows?’

‘Ah. He’s a good man. Refused to accept he’d taken away my virtue. Not many would. Now, take great care. Rogier’s presence may be enough to deter the brute this time, but I fear he will not be deterred so easily from what he wants.’

My legs trembled as we approached the inn. Rogier tugged at my sleeve as he wrinkled up his nose, staring in dismay at the building before us. It was of sturdy build but had fallen into disrepair, the walls crumbling away to expose bare cob and straw. I wondered how it could be when Smekens was a wealthy man.

Had my grandmother not been so sick, our circumstances so dire, I would have turned and run, throwing the bread in the canal as small revenge. But such a pleasure was not mine. Swallowing down bile to sting my throat, we walked up to the front entry. Rogier pushed open the door and a strong smell of barley, sweet liquor, urine and rotting meat bid us welcome. Someone had hastily thrown straw over the ground, covering the mess left from the previous night’s revelry. I stepped over the threshold and my shoes sank deeply into something soft and sticky.

It was not yet midday, the inn deserted apart from a mangy dog that growled but did not move. Rogier patted the animal on the head and it seemed to appease the creature. The room was not large, containing only four long tables and benches each side, with little space to move between. A few stools and two small tables by the windows. Behind a counter stood casks stacked upon each other, one dripping, a pail underneath to catch the wine.

‘Hello?’ I called out, my voice quavering.

A dirty, wizened man appeared; I assumed a manservant. He moved towards us, his left leg dragging. His face was distorted to one side, drooping severely, giving him a grotesque appearance.

‘You be wanting something?’ he said, looking first at Rogier and then at me.

‘Meneer Smekens, may I speak with him?’ I replied.

‘I’ll take that,’ he said, nodding at the bread.

I moved the basket to my other hip. ‘Please tell Meneer Smekens that Gertrud Vermeulen wishes to see him.’

The man shrugged and walked away, leaving us once again alone with the dog, its piercing yellow eyes staring intently at me.

The Innkeeper kept us waiting for a time. I reluctantly placed the basket down upon a table and looked around. The windows were coated in a layer of thick soot, adding to the room’s gloomy and drab appearance. A few brass holders were placed haphazardly on tables, but the candles had burned low and did little but cast grim shadows. Dripping tallow had hardened onto surfaces, forming mounds among the soot and muck. Heavy beams and low rafters divided the space; I

expected it could quickly become crowded and rowdy. Bottles and goblets still lay where they had fallen alongside half eaten bread rolls and cheese rind, pigs' trotters, chicken bones.

Finally, the Innkeeper appeared. 'Ah, dear Gertrud. What a pleasure!' He still wore his fine clothes, though his linen was soiled and without a cap I was surprised to see that what was left of his hair was grey, thinning on top and beginning to recede. He wiped his chin as he staggered unsteadily towards us.

Rogier stepped forward and the Innkeeper laughed. 'Ah, you have brought the mute with you. I know this idiot well.'

I shuddered to be in the close vicinity of the man again, the memories of his vile touch all too familiar. Rogier pushed out his chest, eager to protect me. He was a large man, but Rogier was bigger and the Innkeeper took a step back before moving behind the counter. He retrieved two goblets and proceeded to splash the contents of a jug in their direction, letting most spill over the surface. The dog moved towards the ale dripping onto the floor.

'Be off with you, stupid mongrel,' the Innkeeper said.

I placed the basket down on the counter. My muscles tensed and I spoke with a clenched jaw. 'Your bread. I do believe you owe us for the past three deliveries.'

'Send the mute on his way and you'll get your money.'

Neither Rogier nor I moved, causing the Innkeeper to turn and walk towards the back door. 'As you wish,' he said.

'Wait,' I called out, before turning to Rogier. 'If you could wait outside?'

He looked at me, frowning. I did not want to be in the Innkeeper's company alone, but all I could think of was Oma, too ill to even sit up in bed.

'I'll be alright,' I replied, but still he would not budge. 'I won't be long,' I added, gently touching his arm, and he reluctantly left.

'A drink my dear,' He handed me a goblet, and I looked down at the murky brown liquid swirling inside. How I despised the way he said *my dear*, allowing it to roll slowly off his tongue as though emphasising that I was his.

'My grandmother is most unwell; I must return at once. If I may collect our money?'

Leaning over the counter, he pushed back my hood and held my chin between fingers. Rough calluses brushed over my skin; his touch repugnant.

'You are exquisite. Your skin, so divine. Some speak of your beauty as breath taking, unmatched for many miles around. Indeed...'

He ran a finger down my cheek to tuck a stray hair behind my ear. My anger was seething. To perform such an intimate act as though he knew me well; the man had gone too far. He had no claim

to me, no right to treat me so. I pulled back, the stench of meat on his breath causing me to recoil. But he was quicker, his hand grabbing hold of my head, preventing me from turning away.

‘Just like your mother.’ His leering eyes dropped to my breasts, such a blatant display of want bringing back vivid memories. With all my resolve, I stood firm and fought off a desire to slap away his hand. My instinct told me that the situation could quickly turn far uglier.

‘Take your hands off me.’

The Innkeeper sighed. ‘Really Gertrud, we both know you will be mine.’

He continued to run his fingers down my neck, across my shoulder and then slowly down my arm.

‘I will never be yours.’ I was trapped, my head a whirl, dizzy with panic. My dress clung to my body as I sweated profusely.

He laughed. ‘With your reputation... who do you think will have you? Certainly not your young merchant. Come now! Drink up,’ he said, letting me go. I was free from his grasp, but I did not have my money. Picking up the goblet, I brought it to my lips. It smelt no better than the dirty water from the Scheldt.

‘Please,’ I said softly. ‘My grandmother needs medicine.’

‘Things could be very different.’ He leaned on the counter, his face level with mine. ‘Should you marry me, you would never worry over such things again. I can arrange for a physician to call upon your grandmother this very afternoon.’

‘My father will return soon. My grandmother and I will make do until then.’

‘How long has it been? More than three months I would say. A long time to hear no word. Accept my help, girl. Give me your promise and I will send a man to Brussel. Together we can find your father.’

‘I should trust you?’

‘My dear, who else will help you?’

I took a deep breath and stared at the Innkeeper. He was not an unattractive man, but it was his manner that disturbed me most. One moment so charming, the next, vile. And then something behind him caught my attention. Hanging from a hook, beside other cloaks, was one so familiar. An ordinary green cloak. I gasped, shutting my eyes briefly before opening them again. Green is a common colour, especially for a cloak. I shook my head. Surely, no. But there it was before me. A large L-shaped tear that had been stitched by my own hands in cotton that did not quite match the green of the fabric. It was Papa’s cloak; I had no doubt.

A chill crept through my body. I was aware of my numb, wet toes and hands that shook uncontrollably. Clenching my fists tightly, I tried to focus my thoughts. Taking a deep breath, I

harshly dismissed the tears that threatened to come flooding out. I wanted to scream and shout; to call this despicable man as many foul names as could pass my lips; to rip the hair from his head; to drive my foot hard into his disgusting crotch.

But before me hung a green cloak. My father's. I could almost recall its scent. He had been wearing it when he kissed me goodbye, on his way to Brussel. But now, all was not as it had appeared. My father had called at the inn after he left the bakery but where did he go after that? And without a cloak. Was he alive or was he...? I dared not even think it. I was convinced the Innkeeper was key to finding out the answers to my father's disappearance. I could have asked the man, right there and then, what he knew. But he would tell me lies, of that I was sure. To uncover the truth, I would need to use all my cunning.

Despite my prayers, I realised I could no longer depend on my father returning. Oma urgently needed help; I knew what I had to do. Raising my head, I stared unflinchingly at Willem Smekens.

'Very well. I will become your wife.' The words passed my lips, but I felt nothing. My legs weak, I leaned into the counter to prevent myself from crumbling into a heap on the floor.

The Innkeeper choked on his beer. 'Did my ears just deceive me?' He moved around to the other side of the counter, to stand directly beside me. 'You'll marry me?' His expression dazed, the veins in his neck pulsating.

'Yes, I will.' I could barely believe my own words.

'Why the change of heart?' his tone was harsh. I sensed a need for caution so that I did not make him suspicious of my motives.

'I am a young woman with no man to care for her.' That at least was true. My grandmother would not survive much longer without medicine, and we need money for rent and food. But more than that, a plan was beginning to form.

He watched me closely; his eyes narrowed and his brow wrinkled. He wasn't yet convinced.

'I will marry you,' I continued. 'But I have...'

'You're going to make demands?' he laughed. Leaning in closely, he pressed a leg against mine. I could feel his breath against my cheek, short and sharp.

As he leered down at my breasts, my stomach curdled. Beads of saliva began to form on his lips, his face flushed, his eyes bright with desire. I tried desperately to suppress thoughts of his recent violation, but his proximity made it impossible. I recalled how it felt when he placed his full weight upon me, crushing me; how he'd gripped my wrists so tightly I could not feel my fingers. But worst of all, how he forced my legs apart.

But I looked to my father's green cloak, reminding myself of what was at stake. And once I found Papa, he would save me from such a fate as going through with the marriage. In the meantime, the

Innkeeper would help Oma and put food on our table. But it was important the man realised; I would not agree so easily.

‘Not so much demands as... requests,’ I continued, moving away from him to walk amongst the tables. He followed me as a lion does its prey.

‘Go on,’ he said, but I knew I only had part of his attention. He had little interest in my conditions. He wanted only to push me down onto a table and satisfy his filthy urges.

‘First, you must get a physician for my grandmother, immediately... and any medicine...’

He nodded. ‘I have already offered that girl.’

I sighed and felt a sense of relief. ‘Thank you.’

‘I am true to my word.’

I prayed that would be the case. ‘And my father?’

‘As I said, I will send a man to Brussel.’

‘This place is disgusting. If this is to be my home, it must be repaired and cleaned, inside and out.’

‘As you wish,’ the Innkeeper sighed. ‘The inn is a low-key establishment. But for you, my dear...’

I was sorely tempted to tell him not to call me dear, but I knew there were more important matters. ‘You must restore my reputation. Make it clear that nothing happened between us.’

‘Nothing did happen between us,’ he smirked. ‘But I have seen your arse, as white as the first snow of winter. Like the best asparagus, ready to be savoured. Oh, how I want you, Gertrud.’

‘My reputation,’ I continued, moving carefully around the table, just managing to keep out of his reach. If I could restore my reputation then, dared to hope, perhaps there was a chance with Pieter.

‘That can be done,’ he sighed. ‘But as my wife you will satisfy every one of my pleasures. And more.’

‘I am not your wife yet. I expect you to remain honourable until such time as I am.’

‘Then we will marry with haste.’

Inhaling deeply and tightening my shoulders, I held his stare. The desire in his eyes all too evident; now was my chance to make my final demand. I gripped my skirt tightly.

‘There is more?’ He had tired of my resistance. Despite my attempts to push him away, he pulled me in close against his chest.

‘Just one. My grandmother. She is to live with us.’

His eyes flared. ‘I’m not having that old hag...’ Stepping back, he released his grip, and I steadied myself.

‘If you wish to marry me, those are my conditions.’

He sighed. ‘I suppose she can stay in a room over the stable.’

'She will live with us, here.' I pushed his hands away, but he remained pressed against me.

'I will not have her in my inn,' he said, holding my glare.

'Then I will not marry you.'

Neither of us spoke or moved, each determined not to break.

It was the Innkeeper who finally gave in. 'Alright, my dear.'

'And you must stop referring to me as your dear. My name is Gertrud.'

'We must set a date,' the Innkeeper said. He had arrived at the bakery bearing a large box.

'As soon as Papa is back,' I said, smiling.

He reached across the table and took my hand. 'I want you as my wife.'

Whereas once the touch of Pieter's fingers upon mine would quicken my breath, the Innkeeper had no such effect.

'I too am eager to wed,' I lied.

He removed his hand and sat upright. 'How many times must I explain? I received word from your father. He gives our union his blessing. In fact, he is keen for us to marry without delay.'

The previous week he had announced with much excitement that Papa had been found. But with no letter I was not convinced.

'Why has he not written to Oma and me?'

The Innkeeper pulled at his collar. 'The poor man is busy... and in an unfamiliar city. You must show understanding. It would be unkind to put pressure on a man trying to do the best for his family.'

'He would return for my marriage; of that I am sure.'

'And he will try, no doubt. But he has much to do in Brussel and it may not be easy for him to leave. I offered him money... but is a proud man.'

'He is struggling?'

The Innkeeper shrugged. 'He would not admit such a thing. But it is unlikely he has yet hired help. If he cannot make it, do not be angry nor make him feel ashamed. He is much relieved that you now have me to care for you. Now, how is your grandmother?'

Perhaps he spoke the truth, but I had my doubts. My father was always reluctant to accept the help of others. That much seemed possible. As much as it pained me, the fact that Oma was still alive I owed to the Innkeeper and his physician. 'She is much improved, thank you.'

He smiled. 'Then we have much to be grateful for.'

'Yes, very much so. May I see the letter from my father?'

'Word of mouth, I'm afraid. But my man assures me all is well. Now, your gift. Please, open it.'

I lifted the lid to reveal a startling crimson fabric inside. On carefully removing it, I discovered a dress. It was soft and delicate under my fingertips, most unlike the wool I usually wore.

'A baker's daughter did not wear silk,' I stammered.

'Soon you'll be an innkeeper's wife. It's for our marriage.'

I held the dress up before me. Such a low neckline, certainly not the gown I had envisaged wearing to my wedding.

'The fabric is from a Turkish trader... made especially for you.'

I bit down on my bottom lip. 'But it is red. A bride should wear black.'

'Your mother wore such a dress.' He watched me closely.

'You knew Mama?'

'Carnival of 1533. I suppose she would have been your age. We danced together all evening. Such a night.' He spoke softly.

'She never owned a...' But then I recalled my favourite dress, the one that had belonged to my mother, now faded pink.

'She did when she was young. So pretty was Margareta. Her face lit up when she laughed. You look a lot like her, Gertrud. Though I don't know if your face lights up when you laugh.'

There had been a time when Pieter made my face light up, but that seemed so long ago.

He smiled. 'I should like to make you happy.' He looked sincere though I doubted such a man could ever make me happy.

Taking a deep breath, I responded with a weak smile. It mattered little. My purpose in marrying was not to find happiness.

I showed Oma the dress as I sat by her bed. Her strength was returning, though I insisted she continue to rest.

'That is no dress to wed in,' she sighed. 'And Niklaas? What does he say of my son?' Despite the improvements in her health, the worry over Papa's disappearance weighed heavy, evident by the dark circles under her eyes.

'That he is in Brussel, busy setting up a bakery. He says Papa will return for the wedding.'

'I do not believe...'

'Nor I.'

'Something is terribly wrong. It is so unlike Niklaas.'

'Once I have married the Innkeeper... perhaps I can travel to Brussel myself.'

'To marry him.' She shook her head. 'There must be other options. Did you visit Pieter? I thought maybe once he heard that you were to marry...'

'He does not want to see me.'

Oma took my hand in hers. 'There are others. The butcher from the market place...'

'And what can he do, other than burden us with his four children?'

'Perhaps that is better than becoming entwined with a man such as Smekens.'

'He has connections, money... and respect. You said so yourself. As the Innkeeper's wife, I too will acquire some of that.'

Oma tossed the dress aside. 'You are standing in your own light.'

'Nonsense. I must do all I can for Papa.'

'But Smekens? Your future, Gertje?'

I sighed. 'He is getting impatient. I hear from Johanna there is talk I am giving him false promises. If such words reach his ears - he is not a man to take such a slight easily.'

'You have no dowry - of course they will talk. He could have wed any number of women from well-respected families.'

'He speaks often of Mama. Perhaps he was once in love with her.'

'Be careful. Playing with a man's heart is a dangerous pursuit.'

'The Innkeeper will surely see to my ruin if I do not go ahead with the wedding. And how then shall I help Papa?'

'I do not trust the man.'

'These are perilous times. Only last week, a man from Germany was preaching on the Grote Markt. He spoke of a woman feeding her cat with blood. And another who had the devil bewitch a man into marrying her. Such things are no longer the silly talk of peasants. Soon people will say such things about me. That a respected man such as the Innkeeper, could be seduced by a poor baker's daughter; it is most irregular. I must go ahead with this marriage, Oma. Our future depends on it.'

'Can you not delay it? A few more weeks?'

'The Innkeeper is insistent. Either I marry him next week or he will call off our nuptials.'

chapter four

Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal

“Among the virtues proper to a married woman, two must be regarded as the most important, surpassing all others. If these two are present, they can render marriages strong, stable, lasting, easy, light, pleasant, happy. If either of them is absent, they become weak, burdensome, unloving, intolerable, and full of misery. These two virtues are chastity and great love for one’s husband.”

The Education of a Christian Woman, a sixteenth-century manual, Juan Luis Vives

October 1547

The spire of Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal reached into the heavens like a finger pointing directly to God. Church bells rang out over the city, a familiar sound that interwove with daily life, yet on the day of my wedding, I prayed to stop the chimes. If I could halt the bells perhaps I could free myself from the future that lay ahead. A ring was placed on my finger before Willem and I moved inside the cathedral, as husband and wife, to celebrate mass. I had become the Innkeeper’s wife.

Our wedding banquet was held at the inn and I discovered it had been transformed for the occasion. A large table was prepared for the celebration and covered in white cloth, now laden with many delicacies to feast upon. Minstrels moved amongst the guests, providing entertainment while servants brought out an endless supply of ale, wine and beere.

‘Please, sit down, my dear bride,’ Willem said, indicating to the centre of a bench. On the wall behind hung a cloth of honour and from the ceiling a paper crown. ‘Today, we celebrate our union!’

My husband was looking his finest, hair combed back from his forehead, and dressed in a new doublet and jerkin. His breeches sat proudly, like an inverted pear, the latest of fashion with pristine white hose and new shoes. Around his neck was an elegant lace collar. Yet, despite the refined clothing and charming display, I could not forget the other side to this man I knew all too well.

I took my seat with Oma at my side, the miserable look on her face revealing her feelings. Even outside the cathedral, she had tried to persuade me not to go ahead with the ceremony. But too much was at stake. If I was to have a say in my own destiny, then the Innkeeper would be my means to do so. It was a sacrifice, but if I could find Papa and ensure a future for my family, it would be worth it. Others, however, saw a rather different sacrifice.

'... no money on the Prayer book,' I overheard Jacob Mears, a local bookseller, remark.

Standing beside him was Adriaen Tillens, the Physician who had assisted my grandmother. 'She is very beautiful. We tried to persuade him, but Willem was determined.'

'Why he didn't take her as his mistress...' But before I could hear more, a fiddle player came by the table.

'You have spared no expense,' the Burgermeister declared, as whole pheasants, turkeys and fowl appeared before us.

'Of course not!' my husband said. 'It is not every day one acquires a wife as delightful as my Gertrud.'

Just hearing him call me his wife was enough to cause my head to throb and my stomach to turn. But, as the bride, I do not eat or speak. So, I smiled up at my husband, determined not to reveal my true feelings.

'A woman has finally tethered our innkeeper! Who would have thought,' a man said, slapping Willem on the back. He was introduced as Claus Spelman, my husband's lawyer. 'The inn is looking most fine. I do hope your bedchamber has received such attention. Your lovely bride will be expecting clean sheets.'

The Bookseller slammed down his goblet. 'Ah! They won't stay clean for long.'

The crude jokes continued, mocking me and alluding to the pending loss of my innocence. What was so trivial to them weighed heavily upon me. I did not want to lose my virginity to this man, and it was difficult not to recall his brutal attempt. While they laughed raucously, I seethed inside.

Oma leaned in close. 'Your husband holds a candle to the devil,' she whispered.

I watched as a pretty girl danced and giggled; a young man in tight yellow breeches took her hand as they moved back and forth to the music. Not once did he take his eyes off her, clearly besotted. He gently led her, their bodies moving in time, both enchanted with each other. There was a time when I had danced with Pieter in such a way, when he had held me close and spoke of a future together. But I dispelled such thoughts. Pieter was no longer mine.

A troupe of minstrels pranced around the table, singing light-hearted tunes, one blowing the shawm, another plucking on a lute. I watched the revelry taking place around me with little enthusiasm. My red dress made me self-conscious, aware that my breasts were partially revealed. Try as I might, I could not pull the fabric higher without risk of tearing a seam. Oma sensed my discomfort and squeezed my hand, a silent message that she understood my pain. But it offered me little peace knowing what lay ahead. And what I must face alone.

'My dear wife, what a shame you cannot eat at our feast,' Willem said, placing his hand in the curve of my lower back, causing me to sit upright. He was a loud man, with a booming laugh, raw

and guttural. His words could be so charming one minute and then crude the next. But there was no doubting his popularity.

The Burgermeister raised his goblet. 'To Willem and Gertrud. May their marriage be long lasting and filled with joy and children.'

Another man got to his feet; one I would later learn was an Astrologer. Cornelis de Fosse was mature in years and moved with some difficulty. He leaned heavily on the table causing it to wobble and a bowl of fruit toppled to the floor.

'Gertrud is a woman of exquisite beauty, such as I have rarely seen outside of my home town,' he began.

'Hear, hear,' the Bookseller replied.

The Astrologer continued. 'Willem is a fortunate man to acquire such a wife. And Gertrud, she is blessed to have such an honourable man for a husband.'

'Tell us a prediction, Cornelis,' the Lawyer shouted out. The effects of the beere and wine were taking its toll.

'I shall make a prediction! Our good friend Willem will not get any sleep this evening,' the Bookseller roared, to the amusement of our guests.

'Allow Cornelis to speak,' the Lawyer said.

The Astrologer was the elder of the group, a thoughtful man. Only rarely did he speak, when the topic was of some interest to him, and even then, his contribution was slight but purposeful.

'Yes! Your work will be published shortly. Share with us some of what you know,' the Bookseller remarked.

'As you wish,' the Astrologer said. 'I predict that our young bride will upturn the first stone, one that will cause many to follow. There will be repercussions.'

Silence befell the group. I was puzzled by his prediction. Had he somehow become suspicious? But I did not know the man.

It was the Bookseller who finally laughed. 'Beautiful Gertrud may upturn my stones whenever -'

'Really, Cornelis, such conjecture belongs in times past,' the Burgermeister remarked.

'Don't be so harsh on our dear Astrologer,' the Lawyer said. 'After all, he has a haircut like that effected by Julius Caesar.'

'Hmph,' Cornelis snorted. He sat back down but not before glancing at Oma.

We received many lavish gifts that day: a tablecloth from the Bookseller, a Bible in Latin from a Friar, a silver platter from the Burgermeister and his wife. But it was the gift from the Artist that made the greatest impression. He arrived late, carrying an easel with a painting concealed by a cloth.

‘A present for the bride.’ The Artist was a slight man, yet he held himself with grace, a large black hat sat elegantly to the back of his head. His clothes had fine trimmings, including a white collar with intricate black edging.

‘Come now, Anthonys! What with the suspense,’ Willem called out.

‘Yes, remove that cloth at once,’ the Bookseller said.

‘I wish for Gertrud to have the honour.’ The Artist spoke calmly, making it clear he would not be coerced by the other men.

‘Well then, wife. To your feet and let us see the gift he has bestowed upon us.’

I approached the easel, hesitating to look at the Artist.

‘Please,’ he indicated, placing a hand gently on my elbow. I pulled at the cloth and it fell to the floor, revealing a mass of colours.

I gasped.

‘Really, Anthonys!’ Willem huffed. ‘You are known for your landscapes! And you paint us flowers.’

On the large canvas, the Artist had painted a stoneware vase filled with exquisite flowers. Out of the vase rose long-stemmed red and white tulips, yellow cornflowers, the palest pink peonies, delicate guelder roses, white lilies and blue irises. A hush spread over our guests. Even the minstrels stopped playing.

‘But such flowers... they would never appear together! They are from different seasons,’ the Lawyer remarked.

‘True,’ the Artist acknowledged. ‘But I wanted Gertrud to have a display of flowers that would last all year long.’

I was unable to take my eyes from the painting.

‘Do you like it?’ he said.

I nodded and smiled.

‘I painted it for you. So that you will always know -’

‘Where ever shall we put it?’ Willem interjected.

I looked to the Artist, eager for him to finish his sentence, but he remained silent.

‘Lodewijk, take this out back,’ Willem instructed, before turning his back on the Artist. ‘Gertrud, it is time we retired upstairs.’

I nodded. It was the moment I had been dreading. Going to Oma, I placed my arms around her neck and she held me close before whispering into my ear, ‘Strength, dear girl.’

I kissed her on the cheek before following the Innkeeper upstairs, taking each step with utmost dread and fear. Although I had not enjoyed the festivities, I now longed to stay with the others, to

eat and drink without a care. I looked back and saw the Artist watching me, an expression of sadness on his face. Our eyes locked for just a moment before I looked away and followed my husband.

‘Come,’ Willem said, holding back the drape to reveal a bed. Meanwhile, music continued to play below, strangers celebrating our union. My heart pounded. I was now his, to do with as he wanted.

My husband pulled me into his embrace, strong arms pinning me tightly against him as his eager lips pressed against my neck. Lower down, I was aware of his growing codpiece digging into my stomach. He made no attempt to constrain his desire, knowing that finally, I would not resist. He placed his mouth over mine and I tasted the bitter tang of endive. His mouth was demanding, and a fat, bulbous tongue filled mine, to make me gag. If that was not enough, his hands moved fervently over my body, hot fingers over my breasts, stomach, thighs, before grabbing roughly at my backside. He pulled aside the fabric of my dress to touch my skin, his breathing becoming more rapid. Wasting no time, he ripped at my dress, the silk billowing to the floor. He stepped back to hold me at arms’ distance, such as a farmer might inspect a sow.

‘You are lovely. A little on the thin side... but I shall fatten you up.’ I shivered, my naked body trembling.

He pushed me down onto the bed, forcing my knees apart. I closed my eyes as he moved over me, his weight heavy. I made a silent vow that never would he look into my eyes in such a moment.

‘Oh Margareta,’ he gasped suddenly, a wetness running down my thighs.

I recoiled in disgust. That he should say my mother’s name was horrifying. ‘I am Gertrud not...’

But my husband rolled over and shortly afterwards, was snoring. I lay beside him, wide awake, the festivities still continuing below. His mention of my mother made it even more unbearable, that he was still clearly in love with her, now seemed undeniable. I thought of my father and where he might be. That he did not return, seemed to cast grave doubts he was alive. Looking at the man beside me, I swore to everything possible, to find Papa.

‘I’m afraid you must,’ Willem announced. ‘The extra help hasn’t arrived. I’d would prefer that you didn’t have to serve, but tonight is an exception.’

His request took me by surprise. For the first weeks after our marriage, I had avoided going down to the inn when it was open. ‘But... I don’t know how...’

He laughed. ‘Pouring beere is not difficult. An innkeeper’s wife must learn such things.’

Hesitantly I followed him downstairs into the noisy main chamber. Men were standing around while others sat by benches, all drinking and talking loudly. A few were perched on stools around upturned barrels, playing cards and dice. Suddenly there was a loud crash behind the counter.

'Oh, not again, Beatrix,' Willem sighed. On the ground lay a porcelain pitcher, now in pieces.

'So sorry, sir.' She was young, I guessed barely fifteen and dressed in simple peasant clothes, a plain underdress and open laced bodice, her fair hair braided and held back by a cap.

'Clean up this mess,' he snapped, and the maid scurried off to the kitchen.

'Useless! If the men didn't like having her around, I'd have been rid of her long ago. You can take over filling these mugs. When Beatrix returns, she can serve the tables.'

I stood bewildered, unsure of what to do.

'Really Gertje, surely you can fill mugs?' Willem said, taking down another jug from the shelf and filling it with beer. 'Stay behind the counter. You'll have less trouble there.'

'Trouble?'

'I shouldn't worry. Even fools know better than to mess with the innkeeper's wife.'

The evening passed quickly, no sooner had I filled mugs than Beatrix returned with more to be replenished. At times some of the men would become rowdy, a table knocked over during one heated exchange. But Willem hastily saw to it, the men involved sent on their way. Minstrels arrived and began providing entertainment, the music and song only encouraging the men to drink more.

I was surprised to see Pieter and his father amongst the men drinking. They did not stay long, speaking only briefly with Willem before leaving.

Shortly afterwards, I overheard Willem remark to Lodewijk. 'Keep an eye on those Rombouts.'

'Of course, sir,' the servant replied.

'Coming in here and making demands,' he scoffed. 'They have a harsh lesson to learn. And I don't want Pieter Rombout hanging around.'

Lodewijk nodded before collecting more jugs for our demanding customers.

Later in the evening a few women arrived, their hair flowing freely over their shoulders, and they proceeded to sit on the laps of anyone willing to pay for their attention. As the hours drew on, the crowd began to diminish, until only two men remained seated at a corner table. When they finally left, I went to clear away their table and noticed a pamphlet left behind.

'What's that?' Willem asked, coming up behind me.

'I... I don't know,' I replied. 'The men left it behind.'

I handed him the small pamphlet but not before the title caught my eye. 'What is the Familia Caritatis?' I asked, recalling that Willem has mentioned such a name when he came to the bakery before Papa left for Brussel.

'Nothing,' he replied, throwing it onto the fire. 'Much too dangerous... unfortunately an inn attracts such talk.'

'I have heard of it -'

'You are mistaken. I did not know you could read, Gertje?'

'Papa taught me.'

'Why anyone should teach a woman to read... in any case, it has been a long night.' He stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I was surprised at how little he drank when he was working.

'Running an inn is exhausting,' I said.

'Such is the life of an innkeeper.'

'There is another room. Who uses that?' I had noticed a door leading to a smaller room, just off the main chamber.

'I call it our banquet hall,' he laughed. 'It is where the men meet.'

'Men?'

'The Burgermeister and the others.'

'Do you mean the Physician? I believe your Lawyer, and is there an Astrologer?'

He nodded. 'And our dear Friar, also the Bookseller and the Artist. Seven of us.'

'And you meet often?'

Willem shrugged. 'Monthly, sometimes more.'

'How mysterious,' I remark. 'A secret society?'

He laughed and poured brandy into two goblets. 'We are... associates. They are important men who decide much that takes place in this city.'

'Isn't there somewhere more appropriate to meet?' I swallowed the brandy and felt a burning feeling in my throat.

'You would be surprised to know how many prominent men meet in humble places such as this. Discretion is extremely valuable.'

'Really? And you are a part of this group?'

Willem smirked. 'I may seem just an innkeeper, but there are things I know...'

'Oh?'

He pulled me close. 'Another time, my dear wife. Let us retreat upstairs. If you are to provide me with a son...'

'You should like a child?'

'Of course, what man doesn't want an heir? I should hope, having such a young wife, we will have many.'

'What is this slop?' Willem said, walking towards the table with an unsteady gait. He had been away all day and returned with a foul temper and smelling strongly of brandy.

'Cabbage soup,' I replied.

He slumped down heavily on a stool. 'Wouldn't serve this to the pigs. What is that useless mutt doing at my table?' he said, staring at the dog.

'Jute is doing no harm,' Oma replied, reaching down to pat the dog on her head before giving her a hunk of cheese.

'Giving my food to such a worthless beast!' Willem grumbled.

Oma ignored his remark and took more cheese. 'And what are you but a worthless drunkard?'

'You be quiet,' he said getting up to kick the dog in her side before taking the cheese and throwing it out the window. We sat in silence as the dog whimpered in the corner. I feared my grandmother had pushed him too far this time.

'Shall I take the dog downstairs?' I asked.

'You shall serve me a meal fit for eating,' he said, sitting back down.

'My son never spoke to his wife so,' Oma said.

'And where is your son now? Too busy in Brussel it seems, to care for his family.'

'So you say.'

My husband picked up his bowl to drink his soup. 'You question my word, woman?'

'Months have passed since you said he would return, and nothing,' Oma continued.

He sighed. 'Why would any man return to the likes of this?'

'A man gets what he deserves,' she mumbled, just loud enough to be heard.

'Treat me with respect.'

'And who are you, to deserve it?' Oma replied.

'I am your granddaughter's husband! And you are living under my roof.'

A tosspot...' she taunted. 'Why! There has yet to be any blood on the sheets.'

Willem sat upright, placing back down his bowl. My grandmother was playing a reckless game. I looked to her, begging her with my eyes to stop but she was clearly enjoying herself. Willem got to his feet, glaring at me with cold, piercing eyes and then stormed downstairs.

'I hope you are going to search for my son,' Oma called out before the front door slammed.

'More likely, he's going to confess to the devil!'

'Come now Oma, as you always say, we must all stoop to get on in this world.'

'Stoop but not bow and scrape, and you have had to stoop more than most, my dear.'

‘Anthony van Hille, the Artist, is going to Brussel next week. He has contacts who may be able to help. Willem, of course, knows nothing of this.’

‘You have an address?’

‘Willem has said the bakery is by Laeken gate. I cannot press for more details without him becoming suspicious. But there shouldn’t be too many bakeries in the area.’

‘Can you trust anything he says?’

I shrugged. ‘It is a start. We must tread carefully. Riling Willem does not help.’

‘He doesn’t care what I say.’

‘Only the other day I heard him speak with Lodewijk and call you the Old Hag.’

Oma smirked. ‘He would never accuse me of being a heks! Why just think of the connotations... to be married into a family of witches!’

‘He will have you moved out to a room over the stables.’

She laughed. ‘Over my dead body. Or his.’

My husband returned some hours later, stumbling into bed. He said nothing but roughly turned me over, so I was face down on the mattress. I did not mind this position, for it was preferable to having his mouth pressed into mine. I grasped the sheet, holding it to my nose, for I sprinkled it each morning with dried lavender. I could think of something else and pretend it wasn’t happening. Sometimes I would study the flower painting, now hanging above the bed. The pretty white lilies were almost translucent and the tallest of tulips rose out of the small vase. In truth, no tulip could ever be so long, which made it all the more wonderful. I would follow each brush stroke, pretending I was the painter, focused on my work and nothing else.

It was a small blessing, for no sooner had Willem dropped his breeches, he was satisfied and would fall asleep. I could then slide out from underneath, careful not to wake him, and retreat to clean myself. I wondered whether I might need to prick my own finger, at least stop Oma’s remarks, but how I should come to bear his child, I did not know.

‘Are you serving again, Gertje?’ Oma said. It was midday and we already had a few customers.

‘Willem and Lodewijk went out earlier and haven’t returned. Why does he like that servant so?’

‘Horse droppings are not figs!’

‘Indeed,’ I laughed. ‘Lodewijk might look a fool but he surely isn’t that.’

At that moment, the main door flung open filling the room with cold air. A man entered, dressed in black, his cloak dripping with water, and a broad cap pulled low concealing his eyes. He approached the counter.

'I'm looking for Willem Smekens,' he said in excellent Dutch, but with a heavy English accent.

'My husband is not here. What is it that you require?'

'Husband?' He looked me up and down.

'That's correct,' my grandmother interjected, her arms crossed.

'A fortunate man. Alas, my business does not concern women.'

'Then you may wait for his return,' I said.

The stranger laughed. 'I wait for no one. Tell him I came to collect my due. He'd be wise to have it ready next time. I never make a third visit.'

'Your name, sir?'

The stranger pushed back his hat, revealing a well-worn face. 'Henry Goodwyn.'

Instinctively I did not like him. He was too well spoken, especially for someone from a foreign land.

'And your business, sir?' Oma asked. But before we could find out more Willem arrived back.

'Ah, Meneer Goodwyn,' he said, shaking his hand.

'How fortunate. I was about to leave.'

'Please, come through.'

Henry Goodwyn turned to Oma and I. 'Good day, ladies.'

After the men had left, my grandmother grabbed a broom and handed it to me. 'Quickly,' nodding towards Willem's office.

I rushed to the hallway and pressed my ear to the door.

'I will pay when I have proof!' I heard my husband say.

'You should have made that clear when we came to our agreement.'

The Innkeeper huffed. 'How do I know you've done the deed?'

'I have my reputation to maintain.'

I could hear heavy footsteps traipsing back and forth across the room.

'He is dead. I assure you,' Henry Goodwyn said.

'As you say.'

'I expect the body has washed up in Calais by now.'

'You'd better hope so. I don't need him turning up. Not now.'

chapter five

Carnival

April 1548

Doorways covered in garlands and window boxes filled with flowers; air laced with scents of cinnamon, cloves and sugar, bakers up since dawn, preparing special treats; minstrels entertaining on street corners; it was Carnival.

‘Have you ever seen the city look so fine,’ I declared. Oma grabbed hold of my arm, eager not to lose me, as we walked down footpaths that had been washed and scrubbed. Overhead, the city’s emblem hung from flagpoles.

‘Ah! It’s a grand day, that’s for sure,’ Johanna remarked.

Antwerpen was heaving with locals and visitors alike, all making their way to watch the opening procession. At Meir Bridge, we stopped on a verge where we would have a good view of the grand procession and waited with the gathering crowd for the festivities to begin.

The parade opened with the pipers and drummers, loudly announcing that this year’s Carnival had begun. We watched the Guilds march down the street, first the goldsmiths, then the masons, and to cheering from the crowd, the painters. Anthonys van Hille waved to me as he passed by. I hoped to see him later on and speak at length of his trip to Brussel. He had found no trace of my father but still, I refused to give up hope.

‘Look at those bakers!’ Oma declared. ‘Every one of them eats far too much of their delectable goodies!! Never did my Niklaas look so plump!’

The mention of my father brought a pang to my chest.

‘Really Oma,’ I whispered. But it was unnecessary, for the crowd was cheering so loudly it was impossible that anyone could have heard her.

The shopkeepers and merchants were next, Victor and his son at the front, Rogier waving enthusiastically when he saw me. Then came Willem, marching tall and proud alongside the other innkeepers.

‘Your husband looks mighty pleased with himself,’ said Johanna.

‘He has much to be happy about. Carnival means more business for the inn.’

He saw me and called out, ‘Head home, Gertje, and collect my cloak. The blue one! And wear your red dress.’

I sighed at his mention of the red dress. I could say it was still in disrepair from our wedding evening. In truth, my grandmother had stitched together the ripped seams.

‘It is but a small request for a husband to make,’ Johanna said. ‘No point upsetting the man without good reason. In my experience, husbands are more obliging if you keep them happy.’

Oma huffed. ‘Ah! There’s no rush. We can head back after the procession is over.’

Suddenly the crowd went quiet. Balancing on my toes, I strained to see over the heads before me. ‘The lords and magistrates,’ I said.

‘Those men! They look through their own fingers,’ my grandmother muttered, disinterested in the splendidly clad men in their red robes.

I sighed. ‘Must you say such things!’

Johanna laughed. ‘Ah but it’s true. Too often they turn a blind eye.’

Oma was equally unimpressed with the religious orders. It was to only the large company of widows, dressed from head to foot in white linen, that she made any acknowledgement. The wagons were next, depicting scenes from the New Testament, and then finally the great dragon appeared, led by St. Margaret and her maidens.

‘Oh Gertje! The maiden of Antwerpen. Why it should have been you this year.’

‘Shh Oma. We do not know that.’ I looked up and recognised Katharina de Bos walking past and waving at the crowd.

‘Your father was certain you would be chosen. It was decided months ago.’

‘Of course, my dear father would believe such things.’

Johanna whispered, ‘I suspect her choice as the maiden is due more to her father’s connections than any charm, grace or beauty. Besides, you are no longer suitable, my dear.’

I leaned in close. ‘As it so happens... I’m still a maiden.’

My friend looked at me, her eyes wide. ‘Still? After all this time?’

I nodded.

Johanna sniggered. ‘I know... all too well, sadly... his intentions are far grander than his abilities. But I would have thought...’

‘It is all over very quickly - the boat can’t quite reach the harbour,’ I remarked, catching sight of St. George behind the maidens. He was accompanied by squires, dressed in costumes from many lands and representing the saints.

While Johanna stifled a laugh, Oma said, ‘Let’s make our way to the Stadhuis.’

‘Not for me,’ Johanna replied. ‘I’ve no desire to see those men with big heads, who think they lord over our city!’

The Grote Markt would be the centre of events over the coming days. At one end stood the Cathedral, and directly opposite, at the other end of the square, was the Stadhuis. We arrived just as the Barker walked out onto the balcony. A hush spread over the crowd as he began to speak:

Listen, listen all together, commence enjoyment now

You desirous merchants, come and join in

The jolly market, be you man or woman

Come too, you slatterns who brew miracles

You peasants, too, come joyfully forth

From wherever you are, come aboard

Come buy all sorts of things, make Lijnken happy

Because you can do merry business with her

'I should like to do merry with Lijnken!' a voice called out, coming from a group of men at the front of the crowd.

'Go to the fishmongers, if that's what you're seeking,' another said.

'Ah! One can go to the fishmongers any day of the week. It is Carnival, let us celebrate with women of finery!'

'What nonsense,' Oma whispered to me. 'This crowd needs no encouragement.'

'Perhaps we could purchase masks?' I suggested.

'Really Gertje!' she sighed, shaking her head.

After the Barker had finished, the city magistrates appeared on the balcony, all dressed in brown and black mantles.

'It is time to make our way to the house of the Maid of Antwerpen,' announced the Public Crier. 'Please my dear gentlemen and ladies. Follow us to Iron Bridge where we shall join our Fair Official, Short Rod.'

Along with the crowd, we followed behind the magistrates, the short walk to the maiden's house. I recognised it immediately as the home of Katharina de Bos. After much cheering, she appeared in the doorway, to receive homage from the magistrates, and to each, she presented a bouquet of red and white roses.

'Short Rod has arrived,' the Barker announced.

I caught sight of the Fair Official from behind, his crimson robe shimmering in the sunshine as he made his way towards the Maiden's house. Reached the doorway, he turned and waved to the crowd. I gasped. The familiar curve of his cheek, the way his hair fell to sit with a curl on his collar. It was Pieter. I yearned to reach out and touch him. To be held firmly in his arms once again. But instead, I watched as he presented Katharina with a plate of sugarplums, to receive a kiss in return. Although some months had passed since he had declared our promise no more, the hurt was as strong as the day he had told me. To witness him kiss someone else caused a stabbing pain to my chest. As Short Rod accompanied the Maiden in the carriage to the ongoing festivities, Oma and I headed back to the inn to collect Willem's cloak and to change into my red dress.

I arrived at the afternoon festivities outside the churchyard to find Willem sitting with a group of men.

'Ah, my love, are you not the most enchanting woman here today!' he exclaimed as I placed his blue cloak around his shoulders. He pulled me down upon his knee and kissed me. 'Are you having the most wonderful time?'

'Carnival is quite a celebration.'

'What is it that most awakens men to art?' the man opposite my husband interrupted. I recognised him from our wedding celebrations. A Bookseller, I recalled; a man who paid much attention to his appearance, including his moustache which was turned up at the ends.

Willem sighed. 'Come now Jacob, why must you always talk of business?'

'Because I am interested in such matters!'

'But today is for rejoicing, surely.'

'If art is not for rejoicing, then I know not its purpose!'

Alongside the Bookseller sat Claus Spelman, my husband's lawyer. 'What is this sudden interest in art?' he asked. 'You sell books not paintings!'

'My shop sells much more than books. In fact, I know of a certain painting that may be - shall we say - of particular interest to you?' he replied, looking directly at Willem.

'Then bring it around for me to see,' my husband replied. 'But now we have women and song to amuse us.'

'That I should be mocked when I try to introduce some finery into the lives of my friends!' the Bookseller said, pretending to be insulted. Though I suspected it would take much more than a few harmless quips to cause him offence.

'To have a wife as resplendent as my Gertje,' Willem said. 'Why, I have the utmost finery in my life already.'

'That she is. But how long have you been married? I believe it is at least three months, yet her belly remains flat. Either you are not tending to your duties or your seed...'

'Ah, leave him be,' the Lawyer chuckled. 'He is an old man after all. With just a peck of corn a week, or perhaps a month, to grind.'

'Then he must take heed, lest others will grind it for him. Should he be unable to satisfy the wants of one so young and so pretty, well...'

'My wife is more than satisfied,' Willem grumbled, taking a large gulp from his tankard and turning his back to his companions. I was tempted to tell him that they spoke the truth that I was far from satisfied. But instead, I suppressed the urge to smirk and sat quietly beside my husband.

A fight suddenly broke out on the next table. A group of men had been playing dice, but the merriment had suddenly turned nasty. A few punches were exchanged, but the men were too drunk to do each other any real harm. Eventually, one man stormed off, the others laughing and returning to their game. While my attention had been distracted by the brawl, a young peasant girl had joined us and was standing behind the Bookseller, her arms wrapped around his shoulders.

'Not as satisfied as my Martha here,' he said, pulling the girl into his arms and pressing his lips into her ample cleavage.

'Come Gertje,' Willem announced, getting up from the bench. 'Let us dance. We have much to celebrate. I have good news for you. I've received word that your father plans to visit in ten days.'

It was not the first time my husband had made such promises. 'Really?'

'Of course.'

I stared into his face, desperate to tell if he spoke the truth. His eyes seemed sincere as he smiled at me.

'My father...' I began, 'he is truly coming... to Antwerpen?'

'To visit us, my dear. He has his bakery in Brussel now and is making good money. But he is coming to see you and your grandmother.'

'Ten days you say?'

'Yes, ten days,' he said, smiling.

'Then we must prepare!' My head was spinning with thoughts of seeing Papa again.

Willem laughed. 'As you wish. If it is a celebration you want, then that is what you shall have. But it is Carnival, Gertje, let us enjoy ourselves tonight. I shall get us a drink!'

As Willem went to fetch more drinks, I watched a troupe of minstrels arrive, their shawms, pipes, trumpets and drums causing much rumpus. A jester rushed through the throng of people causing havoc in his wake. Beggars moved from table to table, asking for a coin or a little food. Adults danced to the music while children ran underfoot, playing their own games.

‘Drink up Gertje, and then we can join the dancing!’ Willem declared, returning with two mugs of cider. I drank it quickly, enjoying the sweetness of the apples.

I took my place beside my husband, his hand upon mine. Keeping time to the music, we moved in a circle, along with the other couples. Willem was a far better dancer than I, but we moved to the music, and I turned in time to allow my husband to lead me.

As the sun began to set, we headed back to the inn, my arm linked with Willem’s.

‘What is happening?’ I remarked. It was early morning, and I was standing at the window and looking out onto the square.

Oma was sitting at the table, dried herbs laid out before her. ‘Oh?’

‘The traders are gone and there is scaffolding for a stage... directly before the Stadhuis.’

She continued sorting the herbs. ‘Entertainers, I expect. Thankfully it will be over by the time your father arrives. He never likes such things.’

‘I can hardly wait to see him.’

‘I will only believe it when I see Niklaas with my very own eyes.’

‘I believe Willem speaks the truth.’

Oma looked up but said nothing.

‘He has made arrangements for Papa to take lodgings across the square,’ I continued.

‘Surely Niklaas can stay here?’

‘I should like that but there is no room.’

‘And where is Willem? I’ve barely seen him today.’

‘He said he would be back later on. Do you think there shall be a performance this evening?’

‘I expect so,’ said Oma, selecting a few herbs before crushing them in a small mortar.

‘I’ve never seen a play.’

‘Really Gertje, these things get so very rowdy. And there is little order.’

‘It is just a celebration.’

‘They all play on the pillory! Such shameful behaviour on display.’

‘Does a little merrymaking do any harm?’

‘Nothing good comes from allowing people to misbehave. The things they will do when they believe no one is watching! Before the sun rises in the morning, don’t be surprised if a few dead bodies are floating in the canals. Or children conceived by the seeds of men who will never be called their father.’

‘Oma!’

'You should know such things. Carnival is more than a celebration. Wrongs are put to right. Should a man mistreat his neighbour, or a trader sell an old sow for a pig, each will seek his retribution. And just so, a woman will put right what God has seen fit to bestow upon her, in the form of a useless husband who cannot provide her with a child.'

I sighed.

'Go if you must but keep your eye on the sail.'

'Perhaps when Willem returns.'

But the evening drew near and still my husband had not returned.

'I shall head to the performance - can you tell Willem to come and find me?' I said to Oma, kissing her on the cheek.

'Be careful not to draw attention to yourself, Gertje.'

'I doubt anyone should notice me.'

'A pretty young woman on her own.' Oma stood up and went to a trunk beside her bed. She began searching through its contents, discarding items of clothing around her.

'Ah, here it is,' she said, passing me a mask. It was a simple design yet elegant, white in colour and surrounded by goose feathers. It would cover the top half of my face.

'How did you come to own such a thing?' I said, brushing the feathers with my fingers.

'It was your mother's.'

I put it on and Oma gasped. 'You remind me so much of her.'

'Then I shall go in disguise!' I laughed.

'A farce from Parijs,' I overheard a woman say to her companion. A crowd had begun to congregate before the stage. I did not know what a farce was, but to witness anything from Frankrijk seemed immensely extravagant. Around me was an array of costumes: a weeping Jew, another a satyr, a butcher, a king with his sceptre, a man with a monkey on his shoulder, a peasant girl and a baby, a street ruffian, a masquerader on stilts. Wearing my ordinary dress and a plain mask, I felt the stranger, and I kept a watchful eye for Willem, keen to have him by my side.

The Barker walked upon the stage and welcomed the crowd before announcing that we would shortly be witnessing 'La Cornette'. An old man then appeared, encouraging everyone to settle down, or otherwise, the play could not begin.

I watched in awe as the story unfolded. A young man heavily made up and wearing an elaborate woman's wig appeared. He, or should I say she, was introduced as the pretty young wife, to tittering from the audience.

Never before had I witnessed a story performed before my very eyes. The actors, wearing such fancy costumes, regaled the audience with a colourful tale. The old man is married to a much younger wife, but she is not to be trusted. First, she has relations with a canon, and then she falls for a handsome young man. Much to the amusement of the crowd. I however, found the story rather more poignant. A young woman wed to a much older man did not always bide well, or such was my experience.

‘Old fool! Cuckold!’ the crowd called out.

‘Margareta,’ I heard suddenly. A hand reached for my arm and pulled me back. I caught my breath as Willem snatched the mask from my face.

‘Where did you get...?’ he demanded.

I stared at my husband. ‘My name is Gertrud.’

His face began to flush. ‘I’m sorry. The mask... it reminded...’

‘It is not the first time you have called me by my mother’s name.’ I turned and pushed my way through the crowd. Anger boiled inside me as tears streamed down my face.

‘Gertje!’ I heard Willem call out as he tried to catch up with me. But I was far nimbler, ducking and weaving my way through the crowd. Reaching the inn, I discovered it just as busy with revellers.

I went behind the counter to help Oma and Beatrix, ignoring Willem’s attempts to catch my attention. Annoyed at my snub, he chose instead to vent his anger on anyone who came near him.

‘It is very busy this evening,’ I said.

Oma smiled. ‘We cast roses before swine,’ she remarked, causing Beatrix to laugh.

A band of minstrels arrived, eager to provide entertainment, much to the enthusiasm of our patrons. Soon we were serving playwrights, actors, set designers, poets and others from travelling theatre groups. Amongst them, I recognised a few local painters, including Anthonys. Soon the men became boisterous and loud, keen to drink, tell stories and boast. My husband was not impressed, appearing to argue with Anthonys before storming outside.

Willem had hired extra hands to help, but it wasn’t enough as thirsty patrons demanded their mugs be refilled. More and then more men arrived, and I was taken aback to notice Pieter and his father amongst them. Unlike the others, they did not stay long. Instead, they approached Willem, and all three disappeared to his office.

‘Is everything alright?’ I asked, when my husband returned a short time later, Pieter and his father quickly departing.

Willem shot me an angry look. ‘Concerned over your former love?’ he snapped.

‘It seemed an urgent matter, is all.’

'Doing trade in this city is not difficult if you abide by the rules. That young upstart has much to -' but before he could continue, there were more raised voices and Willem had to throw more people out. It was shortly before midnight when Beatrix announced that the wine cask was getting low.

'Keep serving. I'll find Willem and get another brought up,' I told her.

I found my husband in the kitchen, speaking with a striking woman, almost as tall as he. She wore a well-cut, fine gown made of satin, and her black hair fell in elaborate curls around her shoulders. Yet it was the thick white makeup that I found most shocking.

'Ah, Gertrud,' Willem said, abruptly cutting off his conversation.

'Sorry to interrupt,' I said, before smiling at the woman. 'Hello, I'm Gertrud.'

'Zwane,' the woman replied, though her face remained stern. Her voice was much deeper than I had expected.

'You need something?' Willem asked.

'Another cask, I'm afraid.'

He nodded. 'I'll get it. If you give me a moment?'

'Of course.' I left the kitchen but remained by the door, just out of sight.

'I implore of you, do not do this,' I heard Zwane say.

'You disgust me so,' Willem retorted. 'Ones such as you are... are... a disgrace.'

'Have you not done enough? Must you tell the others? It will destroy me.'

'You come here, to my inn, and ask such favours? It's not Carnival all year round. We are respectable traders. Now, get out. You would be wise to leave town this very evening. Once the church finds out...'

I slipped into the main chamber, just as Willem headed out of the kitchen and down into the cellar. As I began filling pitchers a man approached, wearing an ugly mask of an elongated bird beak and a long black domino. He removed his costume to place it upon the counter, and I recognised the young actor from the earlier performance.

'Your best beere! But my... what do we have here? Is it not the most beautiful inn wench I have ever laid eyes upon?' He spoke in a heavy French accent as he leant over the counter.

I blushed for he was handsome, with black wavy hair and intense blue eyes that danced as he spoke.

'Take this and be off with you,' Oma replied, placing down a mug before him.

'Then I shall humbly beg your pardon, ma'am. I meant no insult. Gabriel Legoux at your service.' His playful smile was enough to mellow even my grandmother's staunch resolve.

'I enjoyed your play,' I remarked.

'Ah! so you were there, at our first performance today?'

'That I was.'

'Spare not my feelings. Truly, how was it? I fear we were not on fine form!' He was a lively character and as he spoke, he waved his arms around dramatically, his shoulder-length hair swishing around his face.

'Oh, but I know nothing of plays.'

'But I want to know what you thought.' He stared at me intently as though my every word was as precious as gold.

'Well... it was... magical, truly magical.'

'You are too kind,' he said, a broad grin showing his delight. 'Now pray tell, how does one so delightful as to stop a man's heart from beating, come to be serving behind the counter of an inn?'

'I am the innkeeper's wife.'

'No! You leave me a broken man.'

I laughed and turned to serve another patron, a well-attired man who nodded at the actor. My husband appeared at that moment, carrying the cask.

'Frans,' the actor said. 'This young woman found your play... if I may quote her words... magical.'

I blushed.

'Praise indeed,' said the man, bowing before me.

'This is Pierre de Ricart, the writer of La Cornette,' the actor said.

Willem slammed the cask down heavy on the ground and then turned to the playwright. 'I didn't understand the ending of your play,' he grumbled.

'What did you just say?' the playwright asked.

'I believe he just questioned your ability to compose a play,' the actor replied.

'Well, who stands before me but a critic himself!' The playwright laughed, standing tall to face Willem. 'And what does a foolish old innkeeper know about the arts?'

Willem glared at the playwright, before turning to me. 'Gertrud, upstairs now.'

'What gives you the right to speak to her like that?' the actor demanded.

'That I am her husband gives me every right,' Willem said, grabbing the actor by his collar. But the playwright stepped in and pushed Willem back.

'Husband?' the actor laughed. 'You should be on the stage! Such a jester!'

'Surely you mean her father?' the playwright added. 'Someone as old and as ugly as you cannot be wed to one so delightful.'

I left the room but continued to peer around the door frame. My husband was fuming, his face flushed.

'I am not her father,' he said slowly.

'What a fool you are!' the playwright taunted. 'Far too long in the bones to go to bed with one so... so palatable. Think you can satisfy her needs?'

Willem threw the first punch, his fist landing firmly on the left cheek of the playwright. 'I am not her father. That fool is dea... gone, and so shall you be if you don't shut your mouth.'

My world stopped turning in that moment. I waited to see if Willem would say any more, but he stopped suddenly. Finding my strength, I approached him.

'What did you just say?' I stammered.

'Be off with you Gertrud,' he said, shocked to see that I had not left the room.

'You said my father is...'

'Gone. He is gone.'

'You said he was dead.'

'What of it?' he replied, his face red with anger.

'But... you said he was in Brussel, with a bakery. That he would be returning soon!'

'I...' he began, but then looked away.

'How could you deceive me like this?' I shouted at him. Grabbing the actor's costume from the counter, I pushed my way through the revellers, making my way to the front door.

'Gertrud, please. If you would let me...' Willem called after me.

'May you hang from the gallows!' I yelled, before disappearing out into the night and the depths of Carnival.

chapter six

Court of Misrule

“The nature of women, my friend, is depicted for us by the moon, in this respect among others: that they conceal themselves, restrain themselves, and dissemble in the sight and presence of their husbands. When these are absent, they take their advantage, give themselves a good time, roam, gad about, lay aside their pretences, and come into the open”

The Inevitability of Cuckoldry: Chapter 32: Rondibilis declared that Cuckoldry is one of the natural Attributes of Marriage

The door slammed behind me as I ran out onto the Grote Markt carrying the actor's outfit, my feet barely touching the cobblestones. Carnival was well and truly underway with costumed figures producing a sea of colours over the square.

I made my way into the hordes, my pulse racing, quickly slipping the ugly bird mask over my head and wrapping the black domino cloak around my shoulders. It was far too big, and the hem caught underfoot. But I managed to stay upright and ran onwards. Pushing my way indiscriminately through the celebrations, faster and faster I went, spurred on by the fear Willem might be following me. I needed to get far away, to flee from him and the inn.

I was still reeling from hearing of my father's death. Grief had not yet taken hold and fury at my husband knew no bounds. That he had lied and concealed his death from me, was inexcusable. Perhaps I did not want to accept what I had just heard, desperate to believe it couldn't be true. But my heart pounded, telling me otherwise. My father could not be dead. I thought of Oma but knew she would understand. Where I was headed, I had no clue, only that I needed to get away from the inn and all that was associated with it.

As I neared the Glove Market a couple of dogs ran across my path, almost tripping me over. I paused, daring to look over my shoulder. There was no sign of Willem, so I chanced to stop running and catch my breath. Straightening my back and holding my head high, such as I'd seen many a man stride, I walked on. I was no longer Gertje but just another anonymous soul out to enjoy the festivities.

‘What pleasures are you seeking this fine night, good sir?’ a woman called out. She wore a tiger mask, her hair loose and tangled. I shook my head and walked on.

‘Wait,’ the tiger said, running after me to reach out and stroke my arm. ‘Don't be shy. I'm skilled at all manner of delights. Name it, I will not be shocked.’

As I turned away, she pulled at my cloak to reveal my dress underneath.

'All the more delectable!' But I ignored her and headed towards Sugar Canal.

Making my way along the water's edge, fireworks suddenly burst into the night sky. The air was thick with smoke, causing my eyes to sting. Dogs howled at the loud bangs, scattering madly as the crowd exclaimed at each display. Colours splashed overhead like paint on a canvas, turning night into day for brief moments, giving the masked profiles around me a disturbing appearance. Faces of ugly clowns, distorted witches, huge giants and twisted dwarfs, were everywhere. Scholars turned into fools, wealthy patrons were peasants, beautiful young women had become ugly old hags. Had I wandered into Hell?

'Is this not the greatest show on earth?' a pope declared.

'And I the king,' a jester replied.

'If you're king than I'm a vestal virgin,' a large man in a nun's robe responded.

Crossing Brewer's Gate bridge, I joined people carrying candles as they made their way down Stonecutter's Rampart, creating a sea of flickering light that cast ominous shadows. Reaching the Egg Market, the throng had become denser, and bodies pressed against me. But being among so many provided a sense of safety; I was but one among so many. I allowed myself to be carried forward, content to move at a steady pace, although others were impatient.

'Devils!' came calls from all around and a path appeared as the crowd parted. Actors, disguised as devils, came rushing towards us, leaving abuse and obscenities in their wake. People looked away in hope of avoiding a dreaded curse. A troupe of performers followed, their belts hung with cow bells, making an abominable sound as they played tunes on their flutes and bagpipes. Then jugglers, barely managing to keep knives in the air; the crowds cheering them on. A drunk lunged forward and fell to the ground, others casually stepped over him. A masked figure suddenly appeared at my side, wearing men's clothing and a plain white mask that went from brow to chin, giving the face a featureless appearance. I kept my distance, for the figure was accompanied by a small black bear on a lead.

Tired of the crowds and the noise, I turned down a laneway. Although busy, it at least offered some respite. My mask was heavy and uncomfortable, and I wanted desperately to remove it and take a breath of fresh air. But such an act would be reckless. And so, I moved onward, my thoughts muddled and confused. In the shadows bodies were merging, shapeless figures giving no indication whether they were male or female.

'The door is open,' a woman from a second-storey window called down to me. Other women were crammed beside her in the window frame, some wearing only partlets, others wearing masks of gold and silver while their hair hung loosely over their shoulders.

'Take your pick, sir,' one of the young women added, throwing flowers down upon me.

'Or have us all,' offered another, while others laughed and hung out of the window, providing an ample view of what was on offer.

I lowered my head and continued on, stepping over discarded costumes, remnants of food, feathers, a broken cup or two, when suddenly I felt a hand inside my cape. Moving quickly, I grabbed the offending limb and found a small filthy child at the end of it.

'What are you doing there girl?' I said, bending low to stare directly into a grubby face.

'I'm no girl!' the child snapped, trying fervently to get free from my grasp. The voice was clearly male but long hair and oversized shirt disguised him as otherwise.

'Well then, we have something in common.' I opened my cloak briefly to reveal my dress.

The boy laughed. 'Spare us a coin or two, lady?' he asked, looking up at me with pleading eyes, made large by his tiny face.

'Tell you what - if you take me to somewhere that sells decent food, I'll buy us both something to eat.'

'This way,' the child said, taking my hand. We walked a short distance to a small square where stalls were selling sausages grilled over open fires and pigs roasted on spits.

'What would you like?' I asked.

'Sausage please,' he replied.

'Very well, which stall?' The boy pointed to a woman selling large, greasy sausages, and we made our way over. Retrieving a coin from the purse concealed within my dress, I purchased two. We sat down in a nearby lane and he wasted no time devouring the sausage.

'I'm Gertje.'

'Carel.'

'Where you from, Carel?'

'Oh... here, there... don't matter, really.'

'How old are you then?'

'You ask a lot of questions for only one sausage.'

I laughed.

The child stretched out his legs. His feet were wrapped in filthy cloth. His face was sweet, despite the dirt. From his small frame, he seemed young, perhaps barely eight years old. But he spoke as someone older.

'Right then, another?'

Carel jumped to his feet. 'You're awfully kind, Gertje.' It was the first time he said my name, and I was surprised he'd remembered it. We walked back to the woman and purchased another sausage.

'You have my costume,' a voice said, coming from over my shoulder. I turned and before me stood a figure wearing a frog's mask.

The frog leaned in closely and whispered, 'I know it's you.'

I tried to move away, but he reached out and caught my arm. 'I had my mask made in Venice. I'd recognise it anywhere. Do you know how long it's taken me to find you?'

The actor from the inn; I recognised his voice. Somehow, he had managed to locate me amongst the crowds, and he wanted his costume back. I remained silent.

'Because of you, I have been forced to wear this ridiculous disguise! Do I look like a frog to you?'

I snatched my arm away.

'Very well,' he sighed. 'If you wish to wear it, you may. Perhaps you would be so kind as to return it in the morning? It cost me a small fortune.'

I relaxed a little, relieved that he would not leave me in the midst of Carnival without a costume.'

'Perhaps I could buy you something to drink,' he suggested.

Carel pulled on my arm and stared at the frog suspiciously.

'Be off with you,' the frog said, throwing Carel a coin. The boy grabbed it and ran off into the shadows.

'Wait,' I called out, but he was gone.

The frog slipped his hand into mine. It was a gentle touch, so slight that I could have removed my hand. But I didn't, the warmth of his hold calming. He led me to a woman serving drinks from a cauldron. We watched as she added beere, followed by butter and eggs and then finally an array of herbs.

'Buttered beere will warm you,' he said, handing the woman some coins in return for two goblets. It tasted good, and we stood by a fire, warming ourselves.

'You've had a shock,' he said, facing me as we drank our beere. I nodded though still no words passed my lips. He reached down and took my hand, placing his fingertips gently against mine, our fingers slowly entwining.

'Let me take you to the charivari?' he suggested.

'What is that?' I said, finally.

'Ah she speaks! Charivari? Well, the Judge of Misrule will shortly preside over a mock court.'

We walked back to the Grote Markt and joined a crowd gathered at the stage, where two men were dressed as magistrates.

'The Bench of Bad Advice,' the frog whispered. 'That's the Judge and the Lord of Misprint.'

A man was brought to the bench. 'What is his charge?' the Judge asked.

'I declare this man to be beaten by his wife!' said one of the men who had dragged the poor soul forward. I recognised the accused from the marketplace, a kind merchant who on occasion had given me a little extra butter. I'd heard talk of his wife's temper and hoped he would not suffer too harshly for his gentle ways.

'And what is it exactly you have seen?' the Lord asked.

'This man's wife can be heard each night chastising her husband. She does not allow him to go out drinking with his friends. On the rare occasion he does, she has cause to hit him with a wooden spoon.'

'Is there another witness?' the Judge enquired.

A woman, dressed in men's clothing, stepped forward. 'It's true!'

'Then he must be punished,' the Judge announced, to roars from the crowd. An ass appeared, and the husband was placed upon it, facing the wrong direction and led away.

Next, an elderly gentleman was brought forward, with horns on his head.

'Old carcass, crazy with love,' someone shouted.

'A cornard,' the frog whispered. I looked at him, confused. 'The cuckolded husband. Here's his wife.' A young woman appeared before the court. The irony was not lost on me. Here I stood with a young man while my much older husband was probably out looking for me.

Another woman, much older, stepped forward and declared herself to be the couple's neighbour. 'I have seen, on more times than can be excused as for an honourable purpose, a young man entering the house when her husband is away.'

'And how long does this man stay?' the Judge asked.

'Oh, for so long as to make a woman, such as I, blush with shame,' she replied dramatically.

'And what do you have to say about this accusation?' the Judge said, turning to the young wife.

'Nothing but lies. That old hag has never liked me! Jealous she is. Reckon she wants my husband for herself!'

'And you sir?' the Judge asked of the husband. 'Do you have cause to doubt your wife's loyalty?'

'She is a good wife, sir.'

'Then be off with you, and unless you wish to be brought before this court again, I suggest you keep a better watch over your wife.'

The young woman rushed to her husband throwing her arms around him while he kissed her. They walked off together, his arm firmly around her waist, she attentive to his words. Perhaps the accusation was true, but they appeared very much in love.

'It is getting late,' the frog said. 'While I would very much like to stay with you until the sun rises, I will do the honourable thing and take you home.'

I nodded. While I did not want to return to the inn, I was tired and had nowhere else to go.

He took my hand again and led me back to the Grote Markt, to the other side of the square, just out of sight of the inn. He stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I leant back against his chest and felt his warmth envelop me.

'I should like to see you again. We shall be in the city for another five days,' he said, taking off the mask to reveal my face. 'Ah, that's better.'

'I am -' But before I could say more, he brushed his lips softly against my neck.

'Hush,' he said softly.

Strange unfamiliar emotions stirred inside me. He kissed the nape of my neck, causing such intense feelings that I yearned for his touch. My heart pounded, and I longed for more.

I turned around and placed my hands on his chest, looking up, wanting him to kiss me. But he pulled back.

'Alas I must leave you,' he said, untying the domino cloak and removing it from around my shoulders. I shivered as the cool night breeze drifted through my dress.

'I will return, my lovely,' he whispered, before stepping away and disappearing into the darkness. But my attention was quickly drawn back to the Grote Markt.

A scream, loud enough to wake the heavens above, tore through the now deserted square. It came from the inn.

I raced across the square and ran through the open front entry. As I entered the inn, someone pushed past me. I managed only a brief glimpse, but I was sure it was the woman called Zwane, who had been speaking with Willem earlier. The door to the courtyard was wide, and I could hear sobbing. Making my way out to the back, I found Oma standing next to Beatrix. The maid was shaking hysterically while Lodewijk had his arm protectively around her shoulders. The courtyard was shrouded in darkness, my grandmother holding the only candle.

As I moved closer, I looked to the ground, the sight of a body causing me to recoil in horror. Stumbling, I retched and emptied the contents of my stomach, my tired, intoxicated head spinning madly. There was a deep gash to the back of the head, the hair caked in blood, and the face downward in a pool of dark liquid. I knew who it was.

Oma came and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. Others had followed me into the courtyard, stragglers from the festivities still in their costumes, probably making their way home when they heard the disturbance. Around the body gathered a battered hawk, a wizened gargoyle, and a leper. A woman screamed. Another cursed the devil.

'Is he...?' someone whispered. But of course, he was dead; my husband lay so still there wasn't a single breath left within his body.

chapter seven

Courtyard

The inn was shut, the shutters closed tight, and the doors bolted. The once busy chamber was now in darkness, silent apart from the occasional mouse. Outside, perhaps the murderer still roamed the streets. Meanwhile, we lived in fear.

Oma, Beatrix and I were seated around the table, the Sheriff at the end. He turned towards me. 'So, you say you wandered Carnival alone. Did you notice anything unusual when you returned?'

'There was someone. She pushed past me and quickly disappeared across the square.'

'Did you see who it was?'

'Perhaps. Only... I can't be sure. It was a brief glance... She and Willem had been speaking earlier that evening; a disagreement, or so it seemed. I interrupted them. Zwane was her name.'

'Swan?' he asked.

'That is how she introduced herself.'

'Mevrouw Zwane perhaps?'

I shrugged. 'She simply said it was Zwane.'

'What was the disagreement about?'

'Sorry, I couldn't really tell you. But it seemed heated.'

'Might she be connected in some way?' Oma asked.

'Perhaps she saw something,' the Sheriff replied. 'But no, the murderer is a man. I'm sure of it. What with the bruises and cuts; he had a nasty fight before his death. No woman could have inflicted such wounds. And to use an axe to kill a man the size of Willem; it would require a lot of strength. Had you seen this Zwane before that evening?'

'Not at all,' I replied.

'And would you say... from her appearance, that she was... of a certain profession?'

I nodded. 'I would say so, yes.'

The Sheriff turned to Oma. 'When was the last time you saw Meneer Smekens?'

'He was in his office when I retired to my bed upstairs, exhausted. Such a busy evening. I left Beatrix to close up. She can vouch for what I say.'

'Ah, she says the truth,' the maid said softly, 'After closing, I went upstairs to tend the fire and Mevrouw Vermeulen was asleep in her cot, snoring.'

The Sheriff placed a ribbon before us. 'This familiar?'

It was a pretty, bright blue. 'I'm afraid not. Where did you find it?' I replied.

'In Willem's right hand; within his clenched fist. Not yours?'

'Never seen it.'

He looked to Oma and then Beatrix but they both shook their heads.

'Might Willem have been seeing...' but my look stopped him saying more.

'And you found the body?' the Sheriff said to Beatrix.

The maid nodded. 'Lodewijk asked me to take the slop bucket out back. At first I thought sir had fallen but when I got closer...'

'Anyone else around?'

'Not as I saw, no.'

'And when did you last see Meneer Smekens alive?'

'After his words with Mevrouw Smekens, he stormed off to his office and I didn't see him again,' the maid replied.

'These words?'

Beatrix blushed. 'Oh, nothing more than happens between a man and his wife.'

The Sheriff looked back at me. 'I hear it was rather more than just a few words. In fact, you threatened your husband. I believe you said - he should hang from the gallows?'

Word had spread quickly.

'She was upset and her words careless. Nothing more,' Oma interjected.

The Sheriff turned to Oma. 'I understand you arrived at the courtyard with a black dog at your side.'

She shrugged. 'Why... it is possible. We have a black dog here; her name is Jute. She belonged to Willem.'

'Who would say such a thing?' I asked the Sheriff.

'That will be all for the moment,' he said, ignoring my question. 'Thank you for your time ladies.'

A week passed, and still there was no word on the Sheriff's investigation. I had not forgotten Henry Goodwyn, the English man who spoke of a body washing up in Calais. I sensed he was not a man to be trifled with, and no stranger to murder. My thoughts also led me to the actor, and a quandary. He and the playwright had argued with Willem that evening. Had I spent the evening with someone involved in my husband's murder? Guilt weighed upon me heavily.

With the inn still closed, I decided to venture to the market, eager for a walk and fresh air. Oma had decided to wash the linen, so I went alone. It was a brisk morning, the sun shining providing warmth to the breeze coming in off the river. I walked slowly enjoying the fervent activity all around,

the smell of the salt intermingling with the scents from a nearby spice merchant. I purchased some cardamom before moving onto a stall selling apples.

‘Two please,’ I said to a young girl, but she made no reaction.

‘Some apples?’ I repeated, this time more loudly.

An older woman appeared. She stared at me, her eyes piercing. ‘None for sale today.’

‘But you have some there,’ I said indicating a barrel filled with bright red apples.

The woman pushed her chest forward and placed her hands on her hips. ‘We’re not selling to the likes of you.’

Others stopped what they were doing and looked over. I was puzzled, unsure of the woman’s meaning.

‘The cheek! Walking amongst us,’ someone shouted out.

I looked around and saw a crowd milling, drawing in closer towards me.

‘Not mourning her husband, I see,’ another said.

But a woman spoke up. ‘Ah leave the lass be. That brute deserves no tears shed.’

Suddenly a small child rushed past and grabbed an apple from the barrel. The child looked at me and grinned as he took a bite from the stolen fruit. It was Carel. The street child from Carnival.

‘Best run,’ he said, throwing the bitten apple at the fruit seller and placing his hand in mine, dragging me after him.

‘Stop that wretched child,’ the fruit seller shouted out.

I struggled to keep up but managed somehow, and with Carel knowing the narrow lanes of the marketplace well, we were quickly on the other side of the square and away from the curious crowd. He let go of my hand as we caught our breath down a quiet side lane behind the stadhuis.

‘They were going to assail you, I reckon,’ Carel said, with a worried expression.

I looked at the boy. He was thinner than I had remembered. ‘I was lucky you came upon me.’

‘Luck? Heck no. I was watching you.’

‘You know where I live?’

‘Sure. I followed you. Saw you go into that inn. You’ve not been outside for days. Was wondering if you might have died or something. Like that man everyone’s been talking over.’

‘That man was my husband.’

‘They say someone chopped his head off!’

‘What else do they say?’

Carel looked away, remaining silent.

‘Come now. Words won’t harm me.’

The child looked up at me with large eyes. ‘Some say it’s you that did it. But I don’t believe ’em.’

'No?'

'Nah. You're no killer. I don't reckon someone who could murder a man would buy the likes of me a sausage.'

'Haven't you got a home to go to Carel? Family somewhere?'

He shook his head and looked away, avoiding my gaze.

'You ran away?'

'Suppose you could say that.'

'Right then, we'd better get you something to eat.'

'Until someone swings from the city gates for his death, people will think I'm guilty,' I sighed, sitting down on a stool. The sun had already set, the square outside now quiet apart from the occasional dog barking, and we were getting ready for bed.

Oma untied my cap and began to remove the braids in my hair. 'The sheriff has plenty of questions but tells us nothing.'

'Do you believe he couldn't find a woman by the name of Zwane?'

Oma shrugged, taking a comb and gently running it down the length of my hair. 'It's an odd name. Maybe not her real one.'

'He does not believe I was at Carnival all evening.' I closed my eyes and breathed in the heady scent of rosemary. Oma had been busy that afternoon in the courtyard, tending her herb garden.

'Perhaps... but how will he prove otherwise?'

'There is talk.'

'You have such fine hair, Gertje. Just like your mothers,' Oma sighed. 'You shouldn't listen to talk. Remember what got us here in the first place. Talk! Our so-called neighbours and friends, who did they believe when that wretched man tried to take from you, that most precious to a young maiden? What of Pieter and his family? Did they stand by you?'

'But the Sheriff...'

'Don't carry the day out in baskets. There's no proof.' She placed the comb down and sat beside me.

'The Physician believes it was an axe that struck Willem. In all likelihood, it is now lying at the bottom of a canal.'

'Besides, you're still a girl. Couldn't even lift an axe. No, they are looking for a man. Someone will be charged soon enough. They are questioning others, those who are far more likely suspects.'

'Such as?' I asked.

‘Why that artist and playwright, Gabriel Legoux and Pierre de Ricart, from Frankrijk. Their extravagant behaviour, so boastful and assured. And for all to see that night. They were taunting the poor man to fight.’

‘They wasted no time in leaving Antwerpen.’ I had not seen nor received word from the actor since Carnival. ‘The actor, Gabriel Legoux... he was with me on...’

Oma took my face in her hands, to squeeze my cheeks tightly. ‘You must not say that! Do you understand?’

I nodded, shocked. On only a handful of occasions had she spoken to me so harshly. ‘But surely I should declare the man innocent? Besides, he can also prove I am without blame.’

‘A married woman enjoying Carnival with a man who is not her husband. They will conclude only one thing.’

I blushed. ‘I swear, nothing happened.’

‘I believe you, child. But no one else will. They will only conclude you were lovers who colluded to murder your husband.’

I shook my head. ‘But I did not know the man before that evening.’

‘How many lovers on Carnival night do you think ever met before? Or should meet again?’

‘He was a kind man,’ I stammered. ‘I was upset, drank a little. Nothing more.’

‘Do you not see, girl? It matters not what is true and what are lies. People will believe what they want. Just like those that came to celebrate your union with Willem. They knew him for what he was, what he did to you. But they were only too contented to believe the Innkeeper. Now, promise me... those words will never again pass your lips.’

With my cheek still stinging from my grandmother’s hand, I made my promise.

Two weeks after the gruesome discovery of Willem’s body, the Sheriff declared the murderer had been apprehended in Parijs. The playwright, Pierre de Ricart, was to be brought back to Antwerpen to face trial. I could find out no more, except that we could now proceed with Willem’s funeral.

Shortly afterwards my husband’s lawyer, Claus Spelman, arrived at the inn and informed me of Willem’s instructions for his burial. He was to have a funeral procession, candles and services. There were, of course, charitable endowments, the distribution of alms and a generous pious bequest.

‘And suggestions for his epitaph,’ the Lawyer said.

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘Whatever he wanted.’

‘That is the extent of his will.’

‘And his family?’

'His will was prepared before your marriage. There is no provision for a wife.'

'None at all?' I sat, shocked, my heart beating madly.

'Don't worry, my dear. I will ensure that you are adequately provided for.'

Though he smiled kindly at me, his words left me with no reassurance.

The night before the funeral Willem's closest friends gathered to sit by his body. With Oma's help, I washed and dressed my husband, first in a shirt and cap, and then the winding sheet. Alongside his body we placed sweet-smelling herbs; a combination of rosemary, bay and thyme.

'You have tended the body we - well,' stammered Peter Goossens, the Friar.

'If only I could do more,' I said, indicating the wound. I had placed his hair to cover the gash, but it did not sufficiently disguise it.

To see my husband's body lying so still, brought out many confusing emotions. I could not forget how brutal he could be when intoxicated, yet there had been another side to the man. He had provided protection from the harshness that life can deal. And while he aroused no feelings of love inside of me, I had come to care for him. Tears slowly ran down my cheeks. Without a father, and now no husband, I was again at the mercy of those around me.

'Do not think of his brutal ending. Willem's soul has already started eternal life and will soon be reunited with his body, ensuring his immortality.'

'Thank you,' I replied, taking my handkerchief and wiping away my tears.

He nodded. 'In the end, all virtue is fairly rewarded, all vice justly punished. That Willem's body now continues, will ensure justice is served.'

An elderly man sat beside Oma and throughout the evening the two engaged in deep discussion, so softly I could not hear about what. I did not immediately recognise him. He was a thin man who did not look well, with patchy bald spots on his scalp. When he had taken my hands in his to offer his sympathy, I had noticed his palms were covered in reddish-brown spots and his hands shook profusely.

'Cornelis de Fosse,' he introduced himself. It was then that I recalled he was a guest at my wedding, only seven months previous. The learned Astrologer.

'You were a dear friend of Willem's.'

He nodded.

The Friar excused himself and left the room, and I became aware of a conversation between the Lawyer and the Physician.

'... men should meditate on a death that invites man's reason not to become attached to life,' the Lawyer said.

'every man or woman is predestined to salvation or condemnation depending on God's will,' the Physician replied.

Such talk I did not fully comprehend. I had been raised on the belief to prepare for death throughout one's life, that good works would determine a person's salvation. But the Friar returned, and no more was said.

The following morning members of the Guild of Brewers congregated outside the inn and waited for the arrival of the priest and parish clerk. Two men arrived carrying the elm coffin. Willem's body, wrapped in a shroud knotted at the head and feet, was slowly placed inside. The journey to the church could begin.

'The priest will follow me,' the clerk declared. 'Then family and friends.'

He led the way, ringing a bell to indicate the orderly procession had begun. The coffin was carried at waist height by seven men: Claus Spelman, his Lawyer, Adrien Tillens, a Physician, Cornelis de Fosse, an Astrologer, Jacob Maes, a Bookseller, Anthonys de Hille, an Artist, Peter Goossens, a Friar and, Jan de Vries, the Burgermeister.

Clothed in black, I walked with Oma, while behind us came associates and members of the Guild of Brewers. My husband had not spoken of any siblings. I thought perhaps some relatives, even distant, might attend his funeral, but while there were many faces I did not recognise, no one declared they were of his blood.

No sooner had I become the Innkeeper's wife, than I was the Innkeeper's widow.

Some days later, I asked Johanna and Rogier to accompany me down into the cellar.

The stairs were in poor condition, the rungs crumbling, and sections had fallen away, and I was relieved to reach the bottom. The ground was soggy underfoot and I was pleased to have worn pattens. The air was foul, reminding me of vinegar and rotten apples.

'Take care - hold onto the railing,' I called out to Johanna. Rogier began lighting candles, slowly revealing cobwebs, shelves in various states of disrepair, and empty bottles strewn over the ground. Three barrels stood in the middle, used as a makeshift table with upturned crates as stools, a chipped jug and few beakers left behind.

'No wonder your servant didn't want you coming down here,' Johanna said, reaching the bottom.

'Lodewijk was not keen I check our stocks.'

Rogier began investigating the shelves against the walls. 'I am sorry. I didn't realise it would be in such a state.'

'Ah, dirt and grime does us no harm,' Johanna said, pushing one of the barrels. 'Seems this one's full.'

'Even with stock, I doubt they will let me open,' I sighed. 'Willem's Lawyer thinks it best we remain closed until an innkeeper has been found.'

'You know how this place runs, as good as anyone.'

Rogier waved at us to come over. I carried a candle to the far wall and placed it on a filthy shelf alongside rat droppings, broken tankards and empty flagons. He had discovered six kegs stacked in the corner.

'Seems we might have something here,' I said, trying to read the stamp on the side. 'I believe it's wine... from Frankrijk.'

'Should get a decent price. But you'll need beere. Perhaps you can order enough for a week?'

'There is a small sum remaining from our last takings. But is this wise? Especially given the circumstances.' I slumped down on a nearby crate.

'Whatever do you mean?' Johanna said, leaning against a nearby shelf.

'I shall be hanged. Or burnt at the stake.'

'Don't say such things.'

'I cannot set foot upon the market square without whispering and worse. Talk abounds that I wanted my husband dead. I'm frightened... scared for my life.'

'Shouldn't listen to the stories of that street child,' Johanna said, picking up a bottle to inspect the label.

'You're sounding like Oma now. She calls it blowing in the ear.'

Johanna laughed. 'Your grandmother and her sayings.'

'But Carel speaks the truth. They say I only married Willem to see him in the ground.'

She placed the bottle back down. 'Tis talk, only talk.'

'People have gone to the gallows because of talk.'

'It will die away soon enough, always does.' Johanna stood before me, the flickering light of the candles causing odd shadows to fall over her face.

'I'm so very frightened. The Sheriff... what if he thinks...' She wiped the tears from my cheeks with her handkerchief.

'Come now, to your feet. It's just talk, nothing more. We have to see what else is down here.'

I stood up and took a deep breath. 'We both know what it can lead to. Why, can you recall the midwife, Agnes Godefroy?'

'But it is nonsense. She was charged with keeping Satan as a toad and feeding it with blood. Who would believe it?'

'And her mother. There was talk they put people into fits and bewitched to death a child.'

'Dear girl, you are no witch.'

'My husband is dead. My father gone. And people think Oma...'

'Say no more, Gertje. Aliet is a good woman. Sadly, some do not understand her healing ways. But you cannot pay heed to such fears. Now is your chance.'

I looked at Johanna. 'What do you mean?'

'Running an inn. It cannot be so difficult. You are clever and will learn. Who do you think runs the fruit stall? It may have Victor's name, but it is I that keeps it going.'

Rogier appeared out of the darkness, carrying two flagons of cider.

Standing in that damp cellar, amid the smell of rotting cider and stale beere, I realised what I must do. I would not be the Innkeeper's widow; I would become the Innkeeper.

chapter eight

City Gates

“for we woo them with our vertues, & they wed us with vanities, and men being of wit sufficient to consider of the vertues which are in us women, are ravished with the delight of those dainties, which allure & draw the senses of them to serve us, whereby they become ravenous haukes, who doe not only seize upon us, but devour us.”

Jane Anger, her Protection for Women

May 1548

‘Really, Gertrud, you cannot stay here.’ The Lawyer stood by the hearth while I sat with the Physician and the Astrologer at the table, a single candle burning in the centre.

‘You are a grieving widow, after all,’ the Astrologer added. He spoke kindly yet I suspected his compassion was based on my cooperation. It was getting late and their visit had been unexpected. Oma was asleep upstairs and Lodewijk had left earlier that evening and not yet returned. The men wasted no time in making their intentions clear. They wanted us to leave.

‘Our concern is your welfare,’ the Physician said.

I smiled. ‘Of course.’ Underneath the table, I gently removed his hand from my thigh.

‘The servant, what is his name?’ the Astrologer asked.

The Lawyer shrugged, but the Physician replied, ‘Lodewijk.’

‘Can he not take over until someone has been found?’

I was aware of Jute, the dog, sitting at my side watching the men. ‘He has no mind for business. Willem said as much to me in private,’ I said.

‘I’m sure the servant would suffice, at least temporarily,’ the Astrologer said. In the candlelight, I could see his neck was covered in a mass of tiny red lesions.

My breathing quickened as I gathered the courage to continue. ‘My husband was happy to involve me. What difference should it make that he is now no longer with us?’

‘A huge difference, my dear,’ the Lawyer replied.

I was aware of the men’s presence in the kitchen, closing in around me. ‘I have checked our stock. There is enough to open.’ In truth, I had barely enough beere to last a day, but that was a problem I could resolve later. First, I needed to convince them to let us remain.

‘You and your grandmother would be better suited to smaller lodgings. We can arrange for you to take in sewing or washing,’ the Lawyer said, helping himself to the jug. It had not missed my attention that the men seemed well at home at the inn.

I smiled. ‘Sewing and washing, you say?’

He blushed, realising his slight. I was a baker’s daughter after all, and now an innkeeper’s widow. ‘Perhaps we can find something... more suitable.’

I knew I must proceed with caution. I did not have a winning hand; the only card I held was that I lived at the inn. Something I would not give up without a fight. ‘A generous offer, gentlemen, but this is the home I shared with my husband. I have fond memories here.’ I began to sniff and withdrew a handkerchief to dab my eyes. It was a shameful performance, but it served to make them feel uneasy.

‘Please, do not upset yourself,’ the Astrologer said.

The Physician smiled. ‘You shouldn’t be selling ale to drunkards.’ His hand returned to my thigh, and I moved my leg away. Although he said no more, the inference was clear. Should I be more obliging to the dutiful but married doctor, then I could be his mistress.

I held myself tall while my chest pounded. Oh Papa, I thought to myself, what would you do? I cleared my throat. ‘There is no one who knows my husband’s business, such as I.’ A lie but I needed to convince them there was no other alternative. ‘Perhaps you would permit me, at least for the next few weeks, to continue trading in my husband’s name? I will, of course, have Lodewijk to assist me.’

The men looked at each other, clearly troubled by my suggestion. I had not reacted as they had expected.

‘Very well,’ the Lawyer said finally. ‘This matter is far from resolved. But for the time being, you may once again open the inn. But be prepared Gertrud, we will find a new landlord.’

Over my dead body, I thought. And I’m not dead like my husband, poor man.

‘Are you sure this is correct?’ I said to Carel. At my side, Rogier was frowning. We had turned a corner down by the docks, into a narrow laneway. I stepped carefully, trying to avoid the muck covering the ground.

‘Just down here. Not far.’ Carel pushed on ahead, Rogier and I remaining close to his heels, determined not to lose the child. We reached a busy street where brazen women sold their services to passing trade as men rushed by, carrying their wares and shouting loudly to get out of their way. It was not a part of town I was familiar with, but I knew of its reputation.

Carel stopped abruptly at a doorway. ‘Here it is.’

I looked up at the sign, *Robijns en zoon, Brewers*, and knocked on the door. I waited before knocking again, and then the door opened a crack.

The face of an elderly man appeared. He looked us up and down before raising his eyebrows.
'You lost?'

'Victor Guyot, the fruit seller, gave me your ...'

'Victor you say?' The old man stared at me suspiciously before opening the door.

'I run an inn by the Grote -'

'Hush girl, come inside,' he said, standing back so we could enter.

I stepped over the threshold, Rogier and Carel close behind. Inside, the warehouse smelled of malt and barley. A group of young men were busy stacking barrels. Another man approached, I guessed the older man's son for they shared the same hooked nose and sharp cheekbones. The two exchanged a few words.

'Meneer Robijns?' I asked the younger man.

He looked up but ignored my question. 'What inn you from?'

'My husband was Willem Smekens. I -'

'Smekens you say?'

I nodded.

'Then we've nothing to sell you.' He went to the door and opened it wide.

'I'll pay well. The inn does a good trade.'

The man laughed. 'Ah! I bet it does. But I'll have none to do with that inn. Good day, ma'am.'

There was no point trying to persuade him. Clearly, they did not need or want, my business.

As I stepped back out into the laneway, the old man grabbed my arm. 'You'd be wise to do the same.'

Back out on the street, Rogier shrugged.

'What now?' Carel asked.

'Best take us back,' I sighed. Where I should find another brewer, I had no idea.

We walked back down the lane, ignoring the whistles and crude comments from a few men standing around. As we rounded the corner, I heard footsteps behind me. Turning, I recognised one of the young men from the warehouse.

'Wait!' he said, drawing near.

I stopped and looked at him, puzzled. He too resembled the old man though much younger.

'My name is Jeroen Robijns. A brief word, if I may, ma'am?' He indicated that we should follow him down another laneway, away from the busy street. Rogier looked at me concerned, but I nodded. The young man, barely older than I, had an earnest look, and I felt he meant us no harm.

When we reached the middle of the lane, he stopped. 'I overheard your conversation back there. You want beere?'

I nodded.

'How much you after?'

'Three vats.' I could feel my purse against my leg, hidden within the depths of my skirt. It contained all the money we had left. I prayed it would be enough.

'I'll get it for you.'

'But your ...'

'Don't mind them. You'll get your order.'

'How much?'

'One twenty groten, per vat. You'll pay me directly. Easier that way.'

'That's already more than we're paying. One ten, if it's direct to you.'

He smiled, 'I'm taking a risk.'

'We both are.'

'One fifteen and we have a deal?'

'Deal,' I replied. It was high though not excessively so. Certainly more than Willem paid, but I had expected that. Papa had taught me to always be hesitant when dealing with suppliers. Given the circumstances, I was not in a position to barter but I won't be pushed around either. 'If your beere's good, I mean very good, then there might be a regular order.'

'You won't be disappointed,' he replied. 'My family are brewers from Gent. We make crabbelaer. The finest in Vlaanderen. We also make klein bier, dubbel bier, clauwaert, dubbele clauwaert, dusselaer.'

Rogier tugged at my sleeve, while shaking his head. I didn't ask Jeroen Robijns his intentions. Perhaps it was ambition. In any case, he was prepared to provide the beere I needed. I held out my hand. I didn't know what crabbelaer was, but it would have to do.

Jeroen Robijns was good to his word, and the following morning Three vats stood in the courtyard. Rogier went to carry one inside but it was much too heavy for one man.

Lodewijk appeared from the stables. 'Where did they come from?'

'One of our suppliers. Can you help Rogier carry one inside?'

He bent down and with much complaining, he and Rogier managed to lift a vat. Taking a few steps, Lodewijk began to sway and wobble. Rogier tried to steady it but couldn't, and the vat fell to the ground. I watched in dismay as the bung flew out, beere washing over the ground.

'No!' I exclaimed, rushing to stand the vat upright. Rogier retrieved the bung and placed it back in place, but I guessed at least a good quarter had been lost.

'Should have got the idiot to do it,' the servant remarked, shrugging.

'Call him that again and I'll give him your job,' I snapped.

He raised his eyebrows. 'Wouldn't speak too hastily or I'll follow the cook.'

'What do you mean?'

He sniggered. 'Packed his bag last night and moved on. Said he's not working for some woman.'

'Well, if you plan to do the same, let me know. I'll soon find someone else.' His face dropped and I was glad of it.

'Our customers like the crabbelaer,' Oma remarked. She had just filled a further four pitchers and Beatrix was serving on the tables. It was our first day of trading, and the inn was busy.

She handed me a mug. 'Much stronger than our previous beere.'

I brought it to my nose and inhaled. It was not unpleasant, a combination of malt, yeast, hops and something else I could not identify. 'Is that cinnamon?'

Oma nodded. 'And I think cloves.'

'How much have we sold?'

'Almost an entire barrel. Lodewijk's bringing up another.'

'If the fool hadn't spilt...'

Oma began filling mugs. 'Sooner we're rid -'

'He knows his luck! I suspect he knows of my conversation with the Lawyer. He's praying I won't be here for much longer. Heard him earlier, complaining the bung was faulty,' I said, placing the mugs onto a tray.

'Always one to look for the hatchet. Never his wrongdoing!'

Beatrix appeared at the counter. 'I can barely keep up,' she sighed.

'Try not to spill so much this time,' I said, handing her a filled tray. I turned to Oma, 'We need to find ourselves a cook.'

She sighed. 'Ah. Some bread and cheese, and if the beers good, they won't complain.'

'Just as well. There's no money for more servants. I'm only managing to pay Rogier.'

'He's a good lad. You were wise to take him on.'

Pierre de Ricart's trial lasted only two days. An axe was presented, apparently found in the playwright's room, concealed in a trunk. He vehemently denied having ever seen it before, but it was all the proof needed. De Ricart was declared guilty and charged with murder.

Despite the evidence, I remained less convinced. While the entertainers had argued with my husband, it seemed excessive to strike him with an axe over an insult. But if de Ricart wasn't the murderer then it meant the felon was still roaming the streets, and possibly still in Antwerpen. Such thoughts gave me many a sleepless night as I lay on my own in bed. It was in these moments I missed the presence of a husband beside me. How I wished Papa would return, and we could return to our simple life at the bakery.

I did not attend the playwright's execution. Pierre de Ricart was hanged from the city gates, his corpse left to rot for days. The man had no friends or family in Antwerpen to take him down and bury him. Or if he did, no one came forward.

There was no denying I was relieved when the guilty verdict was declared, for it meant that suspicion no longer fell to Oma and me. Talk quickly turned to travelling entertainers and how they could not be trusted. At times, I was overwhelmed by sadness at the man's fate, plagued with thoughts he did not commit the crime. Images of the playwright's friend, Gabriel Legoux, and his frog mask would appear in my dreams. I was sure Papa would have also sought the truth, always such a Christian man.

'A stark warning to all foreigners,' the Bookseller remarked, it was early afternoon, and we had only a few customers. He sat drinking with Anthonys at a table close by the counter where I was preparing mugs as Beatrix served.

The Artist was breaking off chunks of Edam. 'Perhaps it will serve as a deterrent to those who come to commit such crimes within our city walls.'

'Hmph,' the Bookseller replied, signalling to Beatrix.

'Did he confess his sins before his death?'

The Bookseller shook his head. 'Took it to his grave it seems.'

'I'm told he was offered a sword stroke to the neck in exchange for a confession, but he refused. Insisted his innocence to the very end.'

'Why anyone would choose to die by the rope?'

The Bookseller reached for Beatrix as she walked past. 'Did you see the hanging, my lovely?' he asked her.

'Oh, I did. Quite a show,' she said, ducking out of his reach. My servant girl was ever watchful of my presence. Should I leave the room I knew she would happily sit down on his knees.

‘A most unpleasant execution, I must say,’ Anthony’s remarked. ‘Why the crowds seem to delight in such torture, I shall never understand.’

‘Big turnout?’

‘Hundreds. Lining the streets from the gallows to the gate. All cheering and regaling at the man’s pending fate.’

‘Still, we can’t have good men, the likes of Willem Smekens, being murdered in their own homes. What is becoming of this city? Too many foreigners, I say. Bringing their troubles and mischief with them.’

‘And the playwright’s companion, the young actor?’ the Bookseller asked. I could see he was only partially engaged in the conversation, his eyes firmly fixed on Beatrix as she moved about the room, flirting with customers. An astute girl, she knew all too well that a smile and a glimpse of her bosom mean generous tips. The Bookseller, however, seemed none too impressed with her behaviour.

‘Seems he fled as soon as he was given leave to do so,’ the Artist replied.

‘You knew him?’ the Bookseller asked.

‘Shared a few drinks, is all.’

I was keen to listen on, perhaps hear if they knew where Gabriel Legoux had fled to, but my attention was distracted when a stranger appeared in the doorway. He wore simple clothes and his face was heavily tanned. I guessed a farmer.

‘Mevrouw Smekens?’ he asked, approaching the counter.

‘And you are, sir?’

‘Smekens, Hendryk Smekens.’ He removed his hat and bowed slightly.

‘Smekens?’

The man nodded. ‘I believe my brother, Willem, owned this inn?’

‘That is correct.’

‘And his widow? I would very much like to meet her.’

‘I am Willem’s widow,’ I said, staring intently at the stranger. If he bore any resemblance to my husband, it was slight. He was much smaller than my husband, and whereas Willem drew attention, this man was hunched over and most unassuming.

‘Willem was my older brother. We share a common grief.’

‘My husband spoke of no siblings.’

‘No? That saddens me. Had four brothers; only Willem and I survived. Still, we’ve not seen each other for many a year.’

‘You are not from around these parts?’

'Moved south to Utrecht. When word of my brother's death reached me, I made haste to come to you.'

'Why would that be, sir?'

'Family, of course. I will do whatever is required to help. I should not want to you in need.'

'You are most generous, and I am, of course, pleased to meet my husband's family. But I am in no need of assistance.'

'There is an inn to run.'

'As you can see, we are open.'

The man leaned on the counter. 'A temporary measure surely. I couldn't permit my brother's business to suffer. Despite our differences, well, it just wouldn't be right now, would it?'

'And you have proof, that you are in truth who you say you are?'

'You doubt my word?'

'My husband has been murdered. One must be cautious... in such times.'

'Indeed. I have just visited your husband's lawyer. He has seen my papers. But I will impose on you no further.'

I had been surprised that he knew Willem had married. It appeared Claus Spelman had informed him. The man's sudden appearance made me anxious. Having only just reopened, I did not need someone with interest in the inn.

'Are you staying long in Antwerpen?'

The man nodded and put his hat back on his head before leaving, giving my question no answer. I was left standing by the doorway, watching Hendryk Smekens walk slowly across the Grote Markt. Wrapping my arms around my stomach, I couldn't help feeling yet another obstacle had been placed between me and the inn. I thought of Papa and how quickly he lost his bakery. Was I facing a similar fate?

I decided to visit my husband's lawyer at his home off Short Guesthouse street. Claus Spelman lived in a comfortable residence in an affluent part of the city, with his wife and three daughters. A maid ushered me through to an elegant sitting room where I was shortly joined by the Lawyer.

'Ah Gertrud. What a pleasure it is to see you again. You look pale my dear, and thin. Though understandable with your grief. How may I be of assistance?' he said, approaching me to take my hand in his, before indicating a nearby settee.

I sat down on the edge of the chair. 'I have come to enquire over the inn,' I began, my voice trembling despite my best efforts to remain calm.

‘Really my dear. That is not necessary.’ The Lawyer remained standing, suggesting strongly that our meeting would be a brief one.

My mouth was dry, and my head ached such that I struggled to find the right words. ‘I’m afraid... due to recent events, I feel I must.’

He sat down on the chair opposite and leaned back. Behind him hung a tapestry, so intricate I could barely draw my eyes from it. A lush scene filled with cabbage leaves and all variety of flora and fauna. A forest inhabited by wild animals, a village in the background, and surrounded by a border of fruit, hares and birds. And in the middle two wild dogs were attacking a white horse. The horse I think was female, the dogs, male, intent on destroying her.

The Lawyer ran his tongue over his lips. ‘A widow should not concern herself over such matters.’

Despite the pounding in my head, I resisted a strong desire to run. ‘I assume... as Willem’s wife...’

‘As I told you at the funeral, Willem’s will made no mention of you.’

‘If I may be so bold, Meneer Spelman... I understand that a man has called upon you this very day. One claiming to be Willem’s brother.’

‘Yes, such a man has been to see me.’

‘And his papers, they are authentic?’

The Lawyer nodded. ‘They appear to be in order.’

‘So, what does this mean?’

‘As your husband’s only living relative...’ he sighed and shook his head.

‘He will inherit the inn?’

‘Hendryk Smekens has expressed such an interest in taking over the inn. In my opinion that seems the most... ideal outcome.’

I felt my hands start to sweat, and I gripped the folds of my skirt. ‘How so?’

The Lawyer cocked his head. ‘Well... you are a fortunate woman.’

‘Fortunate?’

‘He seems an honourable man, prepared to take on his brother’s responsibilities. As you know, we are also keen to find an innkeeper. The man has no family of his own. No wife. It’s very likely he will ensure you are provided for.’

‘Likely?’

‘Come now, Gertrud. A woman in your position, no father or husband. There are no certainties. In time, he may decide to take you as his wife. But, for now, he is prepared to be your guardian. A most satisfactory arrangement, I would say.’

A pit formed in the bottom of my stomach as I recalled the man who declared himself Willem’s brother. ‘I barely know the man,’ I stammered.

‘In time, of course. Until then I have made you the offer of the rooms not far from the Grote Markt. I will ensure you have a small allowance.’

I took a deep breath. ‘And should I wish to run the inn?’

‘Really Gertrud. You are being preposterous. An inn is man’s work,’ he replied, giving me a condescending smile.

I pressed my lips together. ‘I assure you, Meneer Spelman, I am more than capable.’

The Lawyer got to his feet and looked down at me. ‘Under the watchful eye of your husband, perhaps. But sadly, Willem is no longer with us.’

‘I am still Willem’s widow. Is there not something I can do?’

The Lawyer shrugged. ‘If Willem had left an heir, perhaps matters would be different.’

‘I will not lose the inn... not after all we’ve been through.’ It was early morning and Oma and I were walking along the canal. Already Farmers were arriving with their carts, filled with produce to sell at the market. We passed a cheese seller and then another, filled with milk-cans.

‘It won’t be much, but we’ll find a way to get by,’ Oma said gently, patting my hand. We stepped aside for two hens, followed a short time after by a young boy in pursuit.

‘There are times when I even miss Willem. At least we did not have to worry over such matters.’

‘Perhaps we should accept the Lawyer’s offer. It is somewhere to live. We can take in work.’

‘If only Hendryk Smekens hadn’t arrived.’

‘That man thinks he can catch fish without a net,’ Oma scoffed. ‘It’s not so easy to become rich from the work of others. In any case, the men would never let you stay on, even if Hendryk hadn’t turned up.’

‘And if we accept their offer, what will happen after a year or two, when they no longer pay our rent? I have no intention of becoming beholden to these men!’

‘It’s an inn not a bakery, Gertje. It’s hardly a reputable business.’

‘My husband wore fine clothes and well respected. I am the daughter of a good baker. I will not stoop so low as to become a washerwoman.’

‘You have your mother’s determination, girl,’ Oma laughed. We crossed over a bridge and watched two young children throwing sticks into the water below. ‘You must be careful.’

‘I have an idea,’ I began.

She looked at me, her brow wrinkled. ‘Oh no. I do not like it when you have that look in your eye.’

‘The Lawyer said things be different if Willem had left behind an heir.’

She gasped. 'Come now! You can't be serious.'

'Suppose I was already pregnant.'

'But Gertje, we know that isn't -'

'A predicament that can be... put right.'

'You are trying to bell a cat!' Oma stared at me, her mouth agape. 'It's too dangerous. You're surely not suggesting...'

'What does a man desire most, when it is his time to depart this earth? What does he want to leave behind?'

She considered my question. 'Well... I suppose... a child... a son?'

'Exactly. I would be doing Willem a favour.'

chapter nine

Masquerade Ball

June 1548

The Stadhuis aglow, lighting up the market square with a thousand candles. From the building hangs the flags of Vlaanderen and Spanje, side by side, in recognition of the Duke of Alba. Affluent merchants rubbing shoulders with artists and scholars, everyone vying to show their talent and worth. The Burgermeister's ball would demonstrate just how important Antwerpen was, not just to the Duke, but to the king himself.

'Do stop fidgeting, Gertje... the banquet starts in less than an hour,' Oma despaired, stitching yet another peacock feather onto my back. Scattered over the floor was sea blue and green plumage, edged with flecks of gold and yellow, like eyes staring up at me.

'This costume...' she said, looking down at my legs clad in tight vivid blue breeches.

'No one will know who is inside,' I said.

'A night such as this, with such prominent people attending. Are you sure?' She took another feather.

'The Burgermeister's ball is just the place!'

'Surely there are quieter, less public places...'

I squirmed as a pin jabbed my shoulder. 'It is a masked ball. People will be eating to excess, drinking copious amounts of liquor and kissing everyone in sight.'

'It sounds truly awful.' Oma cut off another length of cotton with her teeth.

'But more suitable an occasion for my purposes. And I have been invited. It is fate, surely!' I pulled on the matching blue gloves, made to perfectly fit my hands and extending up to my elbows.

'If you're going to go through with this, you must stick to our plan. Let's go over it again. What type of man are you seeking?'

I sighed, knowing the answer all too well. 'One of greatness, in size and in presence. Strong, fit and able. Intelligent and discerning. How I should ascertain all of this in just an evening...'

'Nonsense. One can tell a fool within minutes.'

'But how will I know he is attractive, with his face hidden behind a mask!'

'His stance, of course, a confident man stands with pride. Holds his head high, speaks with a firm voice, refined and of good health. You will know. Trust your instincts.'

An individual feather is almost weightless, but oddly, as the number of feathers on my back continued to grow, they were becoming heavy on my body.

'Will you not change your mind and come with me?' I looked at Oma.

'There. I can't fit another feather.'

'If you were there you could advise me. Surely if two of us were on the lookout...'

'And in my company, it is far more likely someone will guess who you are. No, you must go alone. No one would expect that. Besides, I am no longer a young woman, what a surprise for any man to kiss me and discover my wizened lips! Right, you are ready,' Oma said, standing back to inspect me. 'Now strength, my dear girl.'

'Why do you always wish me strength?' I said, wrapping my feathered arms around her.

'Your charm is exacting, your grace evident. You have been transformed into a beautiful peacock!'

'How did you manage to collect so many feathers?' I remarked.

'Oh, my afternoon walks through the park were not without purpose. A dozen or more feathers a day, hidden under my skirt of course. Over a month, well, that was more than enough. But I was not the only one interested in peacocks. A young painter has taken his easel there each afternoon. He was quite enraptured with them.'

Oma placed a jewel-encrusted mask over my face and fastened it securely behind my head. It was the same vivid blue of my costume with white lines to emphasise my eyes. As the final piece to my disguise, a tight green cap went over my head to cover my hair while she fitted the bird mask over the top half of my face. Over the top of the cap, she placed a small crown of tiny short feathers.

'Choose with great caution. Be sure he has no rash or lumps. Too many men are stricken with the disease.'

'I will be careful.' I closed my eyes and tempered my thoughts to focus on what needed to be done. To find a man suitable to provide the child I so desperately needed.

'Do not fall through the basket, Gertje.'

'Your costume is much too good for that to happen. But there is one thing - should I find this man; you are sure the timing is right... to create a child?'

'It is just over two weeks since last you bled. With the herbs you have been drinking, well, it is as good a time as any for a blessing. We will pray. Remember, it must be a stranger. Someone local may recognise your voice. Say very little until you know you are speaking to a foreigner.'

'I understand. How should I retain his interest, if I cannot speak his language?'

'Your eyes, my dear! Now, you are holding an eel by the tail, but I know you can do it.'

I breathed in deeply. 'I shall become the mistress of my own destiny.'

'No,' Oma replied. 'You are no mistress. You are the master of your future.'

I left for the masquerade ball wearing a large black cloak, concealing not only my costume but my fear and trepidation. Even though my husband was dead, many would consider what I was about to commit, an act of adultery. My benefactors would not look favourably on such an act and their interest in my well-being could quickly turn sour. But my thoughts also returned to my father and mother. They would not approve of my plan. I told myself that my life depended on it, that they would understand. My grandmother was still alive and for that I was grateful. I was strong and could perform the deed, I kept telling myself as I walked across the Grote Markt, while my heart pounded.

My peacock costume was astonishing, all extravagance and excess. When the time came to raise my arms, I would put on a display just as dramatic as the real-life bird. The invitation requested arrival as the cathedral bells chimed eight. The bells rang out as I stepped out of the inn, but it was not so late as to suggest insult to my host. Just enough time that most people would have arrived and be in the entry of the town hall, all ready to witness my grand entry.

The balls hosted by the Burgermeister and his wife were now famous, our city known for its grand banquets and all manner of lavish activities. It was, of course, another occasion to draw foreigners within our gates, to show them the wealth and grandeur we had to offer. I walked up the stadhuis stairs before entering a grand hall lined with flaming torches. Hundreds had gathered and were now standing shoulder to shoulder. Some wore elaborate animal costumes of lions, tigers, elephants and cats. Amongst them stood Nero, Plato, Thor and Medusa, all conversing and laughing. Devils and fools flittered in between the crowd, mingling with nuns and bishops.

I took a deep breath and removed my outer cloak and handed it to the attendant, before stepping forward and slowly raising both my arms in a circular movement, the anonymity of my mask affording me courage.

I remained staring straight ahead, conscious that I raised barely an eyebrow. I was not the only one who had come along with intentions of making an impression and while my costume had seemed startling back at the inn, here it was just another outfit among so many.

I turned to run, desperate to leave this place filled with strangers, when a man dressed as a Roman legionary stepped forward.

'But you have only just arrived,' he said, taking my arm gently and urging me forward. A couple of women watched and whispered, no doubt trying to guess who I was. I took a deep breath and entered the crowd. It was slow progress, my feathers catching against other guests as I walked. Entering the main hall, the heat inside was intense, with the many bodies contained in elaborate

costumes; I could feel myself beginning to sweat. Large vases stood atop pillars around the room, filled with colourful bouquets of flowers that gave off a strong fragrant scent.

‘A drink?’ the man asked, his accent local and a voice I recognised. I shook my head, removed my hand from his arm and slipped away.

A waiter approached with a tray filled with goblets of wine. I took one and drank the contents quickly before taking another. The cool liquid soothed my dry throat and helped quell my nerves. People were milling all around me, touching my costume, putting their faces close to mine in an attempt to see who I was. But my tight cap and mask prevented even the slightest hint of who I might be.

‘Hmph! Such a handsome bird,’ someone dressed as Cleopatra announced.

‘A peafowl,’ another remarked, running a long elegant finger across a feather on my arm. ‘I should like to consume this particular pheasant.’

‘I think you’ll find it is actually peahen in disguise,’ said a man with a French accent and dressed as an Arabian prince. ‘That is no male body, of that I am sure,’ placing his hand on my backside. I moved aside but he was not to be deterred. I looked down to his legs and saw they were thin and bowed. Trusting my instinct, I moved onward, pushing between more and more masked figures.

A hand brushed my arm. ‘An astonishing costume’. I immediately recognised the voice as Anthony van Hille. I turned and saw the Artist disguised as a woman of the theatre. Concealed behind a brightly painted female face and wearing an audacious gown of purple silk, he made quite the beguiling lady.

Nodding, I dropped my gaze, hoping he would not capture a glimmer of familiarity in my eyes.

‘Local?’ he asked.

I shrugged, hoping to give the impression that I was foreign and did not understand.

‘And what do you think of our magnificent Stadhuis then?’ he said. ‘Our Burgermeister and his wife have excelled themselves.’ He used his hands to indicate the walls around us, in case I didn’t understand him.

I followed his gaze, nodding.

The Artist leaned in close, to whisper in my ear, ‘No doubt he has emptied the city’s reserves. But will the Duke even notice?’

The walls were clad in tapestries filled with unicorns, wild animals, princes and princesses, produced by the most skilled hands in Bruges.

‘Come, let me show you the Schilder’s room. Such an exhibition, I wager, you cannot find in Rome herself.’

I shook my head and turned, keen to move away from Anthony's. He was a kind man but not what I needed.

'But you must! I insist. There is something you must see.' He gently placed his hand on my elbow and manoeuvred me towards the back of the room and through a doorway. On the other side was a chamber filled with paintings. The room was quieter, offering a reprieve from the raucous chatter of the main hall.

'Mooi,' I said, staring at the painting before me. It was very beautiful, in three parts. A square panel with two smaller side panes.

'Ah! She speaks. This is called a triptych. The Burgermeister has it on loan, especially for the occasion. It is called *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.'

'Astonishing,' I remarked, lowering my voice in an attempt to disguise it. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. Before me was a holy depiction containing many images of men and women enjoying the heavenly garden, all naked. 'By?'

'Hieronymus Bosch. But this is not what I wished to show you. There is more. Antwerpen has some several hundred artists, painters, sculptors, and engravers.'

'Oh?'

'Why, our Schilderpad is the centre of the art world. And this evening the best is here for you to behold.'

We left behind the Bosch painting and I followed Anthony's to the other side of the room. But my attention was suddenly drawn to a sight I could barely believe. Another peacock.

Certainly not a costume to compare with mine, for the feathers were pitiful in comparison, but I was more interested in the body contained inside. This peacock was clearly male, muscular and broad, but instead of wearing a costume, the top half of his body was covered in Azure paint.

The Artist laughed, 'Ah, it appears you have found your mate! As it so happens, I know this particular cock. Come, I shall introduce you.'

And before I could stop him, Anthony's had walked over to the male peacock. 'Pauwel, can you believe this? Someone has stolen your costume idea,' he declared, embracing the man.

'Why do you spoil everything? We are supposed to be nameless this evening,' the peacock laughed.

'Then you should have found lodgings under another roof!'

'And who do we have here?' the peacock said, turning to greet me.

'I have no idea. She has barely said a word.'

I held out my hand and the peacock took it, inclining his head to place his lips upon my fingers. He was tall and stood confidently despite towering over most in the room. He continued to hold my fingers in his grasp for a moment longer than necessary, his skin warm against mine.

‘But words are overrated. Do we not convey much more with our canvas and paint?’ He spoke with a heavy Hollandse accent, I guessed from Amsterdam.

Anthony turned to me. ‘My friend here is visiting Antwerpen and training with some of our local painters. No doubt his work will be hanging on these walls in a few years’ time. In fact, he has just had a painting sold to a Countess no less.’

‘Ah but she was a plain woman who could be easily charmed,’ the peacock said, ‘but keep us in suspense no longer. Tell us where you come from at least, if you will not reveal your name?’

I smiled back at the blue bird before turning to walk away.

‘Wait,’ he called, gently capturing my feathered arm within his firm grip. ‘If you wish to remain unknown, that is alright with me.’

I was in turmoil. The man before me was almost perfect. The physique of a strong, healthy young man, a few golden curls of hair had escaped to frame the edge of his mask. Clearly a talented artist, and a foreigner who could charm a Countess. Yet, I knew his name. But it was just his first name, was that so important?

He placed his face before me, his eyes looking into mine. Eyes bright and alert, playful and alluring. Surely his costume was a sign?

He took my hand and led me to the crowded dance floor, filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of bodies pressed tightly together, moving to the music provided by minstrels of every kind. Despite the complication of our costumes, he managed to pull my body close to his, his feathered arms wrapped in amongst my feathers. I could feel his muscular form against mine, his strong arms holding my body against his.

‘I suspect you are quite a beauty beneath all these feathers,’ he whispered, his lips brushing against my ear.

‘And if I am not?’

‘There is more to beauty than simply how one appears. Look at all the beauty around you. Smell the exotic scents from far lands, adorning bodies for the sole purpose of attraction. But I wager you, most in this room are truly ugly.’

‘You speak as though you are a regular to such events?’

‘Not many. I detest such things. It seems the anonymity makes people, shall we say, reckless?’

‘So why this evening?’

He ran his hands gently down my sides to rest on my lower back. 'Such things are expected. If I am to become the artist some foretell, then I must do more than paint.'

'You sound cynical,' I replied, placing a hand on a broad shoulder to feel the dried paint on his skin.

'I would rather be at my canvas than have to mingle with such people. Though, I must say, present company is very much the exception.'

'Will you stay long in Antwerpen?'

'Alas no. I will continue my studies in Rome. I leave the day after tomorrow.'

He leaned down to brush his lips against my exposed cheek at the side of my mask. I moved my head, tilting it upward so that my mouth was close to his and then slowly he brushed his lips against mine, leaving them to linger. The touch was slight, barely making contact.

'Come. Let us eat,' he said, leading me through the entwined couples until we reached a table laden with food. He picked up a macaron and held it before my mouth for me to take a bite.

'Delicious,' I remarked as he ate the remainder.

He brushed a crumb from my lower lip, causing me to quiver and stirring unfamiliar feelings. 'There are many delicacies on offer.'

We made our way along the table, sharing a fig, drinking wine, eating exquisite pies, fine pastries and delicate cakes. All the while, we laughed, teasing each other with morsels, playfully enticing each other with mouthfuls of the most astonishing foods.

'I should like to know who you are,' he said, pulling me close to kiss me fully on the mouth.

'But do you need to look upon a person, to know them?' I said, boldly running my finger along his cheekbone and allowing my desires to take hold.

He sighed and then kissed my neck. 'No. Still, I should like to feast my eyes on you.'

'Alas that is not what this evening is for,' I replied. Never before had I behaved so brazen. Never had I felt so aware of my power, as aware of his desires as well as my own, growing ever more intense, demanding. His arms encased me, and I could feel his strength as he held me close. I relaxed and leaned into him, his lips were gentle yet his tongue giving away his urgency, a strong musky scent revealing his desire. I meanwhile gave in to my hunger, allowing myself to delight in his touch.

He took my hand and whispered, 'Let us leave this place.'

chapter ten

Painter's Studio

Hand in hand we walked the short distance to a painter's studio, and then I permitted my peacock to carry me effortlessly up the steep narrow stairs. I wrapped my legs around his waist to face him, my feathers brushing against the walls as we made our ascent. We paused only briefly to kiss. Pushing the door open we were greeted by the strong odour of turpentine, paint and freshly cut wood.

We lit no candles as the studio graced the top floor of a building not far from the Stadhuis, with large windows cut into the walls and part of the ceiling, welcoming in the heavens above. The festivities from the Burgermeister's ball were still ongoing, a display of fireworks bursting into the night sky. It provided enough light to reveal a busy studio filled with work tables and stools, paint splattered palettes, glass vases sprouting paintbrushes. Around the walls were stacked canvases, some empty, others framed.

He placed me down on the edge of a long wooden table in the centre of the room. We were surrounded by easels displaying canvases of all sizes, in various stages of completion. A large painting dominated the space, an image of Christ and his disciples, on a pilgrimage or so it seemed, for the work was not yet finished. Two large beams stretched outward behind the holy depiction, holding it upright.

With a wide sweeping movement, my peacock cleared the table, sending etchings and drawings into the air, to then scatter over the floor. Spreading my knees apart, he moved closer to press against me, our bodies moulding together. With his teeth he pulled at my gloves, taking each hand in turn to reveal my arms, now bare to the elbow. Running a finger down his torso I left a trail in his blue colouring, to rest my palm upon his chest. Like silk mixed with oil, his paint was intoxicating, and I left behind an imprint. He meanwhile held me close, his hands against my lower back. Lifting my chin, he brushed his lips over my neck, to then nibble at my ear. The light from fireworks came in irregular bursts, illuminating his face and reflecting off his blue skin, causing it to shimmer. I could feel his heart beat rapidly, see the muscles in his neck straining, his arms tense as they wrapped around me.

My knees bent each side of his thighs, I watched his face, eyes wide and alert, staring intently back at me. As I touched him blue pigment came away, exposing milky white skin underneath. I ran a finger along his cheekbone, over his jaw, around the outskirts of his ears. He grinned as I did so, taking his own fingertips to press them to my lips, allowing me to slowly lick his fingers, to then run my tongue along his wrists. He tasted of salt but there was something else, a bitterness, perhaps traces of paint. He kissed me full on the mouth, lingering for a time as we explored each other. I

eased myself towards him, his touch hot against my skin, caressing my spine, all the while feeling his hardness between us. Our bodies took command, pulling into each other, an all-consuming ache to merge into one, devouring and embracing as the sounds of the festivities drifted upwards into the night. We were surrounded by images of she-devils, demons and other abominations, but they were nothing compared to my own cravings. I wanted only to delight in my lover and experience the full breadth of my desire.

When he raised a hand to remove my mask, I brushed it aside gently. And as he went to protest, I placed a finger upon his lips. He tried again, this time endeavouring to pull away at my disguise, before realising it was to no avail. He would not see my face. Lifting up my arms, he carefully removed the top half of my costume, throwing it onto the floor, the mass of feathers lay among the debris of papers. I was naked from the waist up.

My breath quickened as he stroked my collarbone, tracing a path ever so lightly downward to my breasts, my skin responding to his touch to tingle and break out in small goosebumps, my nipples hardening. I giggled, nervous yet eager for him to continue, and he smiled back at me before leaning down to ease a breast into his mouth, his tongue toying with a nipple. His shoulder blades, still covered in blue paint, moved with his body as he continued to consume me. Rocking me backwards and forth, I arched closer, allowing my want for him to take hold. I looked down at my body, now too smeared blue.

Raising his head, he laid me back onto the table, the wood firm and cold against my bare skin. He stood before me and lifted each leg to pull down my breeches to quickly discard my shoes, his own clothing quickly discarded. I shivered under his touch, desperate for more. Gliding his tongue over my stomach, he licked the inside of my thighs while gently caressing my skin. Climbing onto the table he loomed above me, gazing down our eyes locking, to gently suck my top lip. Meanwhile, his hands slipped between my legs to slide a finger inside, releasing a sudden burst of pleasure. I groaned as he held me in his hands, his palm slowly pressed into me while his fingers stroked in a circular motion.

Taking my hand, he encouraged me to touch him. Solid and erect, I held him firmly in my grasp, he moaned softly as I pleased him with gentle movements. When he could take no more, he stopped me, pushing me back down onto the table, pressing me underneath his weight. His gaze was mesmerising. I could not look away, wanting to take in his boyish grin, the slope of his nose, his nostrils expanding ever so slightly as he breathed. I brushed his forehead, glistening with sweat, touched his eyebrows, stared at the delicate blond lashes.

Languorously he lay down upon me, fitting perfectly between my legs, my thighs trembling as he entered, sinking deeper and then deeper. I wrapped my legs tightly around his waist. We groaned and writhed, gasping for breath as we moved together, responsive to each other's needs. Finally, I

acknowledged the pleasure, succumbed to the strong desire washing through me. Over his shoulder, the image of Christ and his disciples faded into darkness. I had finally become a woman.

PART TWO

chapter eleven

Maid

“My masters, the ancient Pantagruelists, have confirmed that which I say, and withal declared it to be not only possible, but also maintained the lawful birth and legitimation of the infant born of a woman in the eleventh month after the decease of her husband... By means whereof the honest widows may without danger play at the close buttock game with might and main, and as hard as they can, for the space of the first two months after the decease of their husbands. I pray you, my good lusty springal lads, if you find any of these females, that are worth the pains of untying the codpiece-point, get up, ride upon them, and bring them to me; for, if they happen within the third month to conceive, the child should be heir to the deceased, if, before he died, he had no other children, and the mother shall pass for an honest woman.”

Gargantua and Pantagruel, by Francois Rabelais

Chapter 3: How Gargantua was carried eleven months in his mother's belly

October 1548

I am the widow who carries her husband's child long after his death. I can walk down any street; it may be Langenieustraat, or Keiserstraat, even Hoochstraat, it matters little which one because I can go wherever I like. I hold my head high and buy smoked herrings from the Rookhuis on Kraaiwyk, acquire grain from the Corn Market, or venture to the fish seller by the riverbank. I am free to go wherever I desire and people acknowledge me, greet me politely, and even ask how I am and smile. All because of my husband's seven associates, men he referred to as his brothers. Their close association puzzles me, and I wonder how my dead husband, nothing more than an innkeeper, came to mix with such prominent men. Yet their concern for my well-being is without fault; I am treated as though family. And should anyone raise a doubt that the child I carry be from the seed of a man other than my husband, any one of these men would step forward and declare them a rogue of the worst kind. For I am an honourable woman, carrying the child of a man of importance.

‘Leave the window, Gertje,’ Oma says.

It has rained all day and into the night. A persistent, unrelenting drizzle that seeps into the walls, leaving clothes dank and sticky, and soaking through to your bones. The window is open and I can smell the damp rising off the cobbles from the street below; hear the knorren sounds of pigs,

snuffling amongst the city's muck. Most people are asleep but a few roam the streets, mostly drunkards heading home or in search of a warm bed.

Oma sits before the small fire that Beatrix prepared earlier, but I am restless. The wind picks up outside and the shutters are banging against the frame.

'With the baby growing, it is not good to overheat,' she continues.

Outside the rain is coming down in heavy sheets and the wind has gathered pace, causing water to lash against the exterior of the building. With some difficulty, I manage to close the shutters. I sit back down, stretching out my legs and placing my feet on the footstool. It has been a long day and I am tired. Bouts of nausea blight my day, although Oma insists it should pass soon. At least it is warm and dry inside. It is six months since Willem's death, yet his presence remains. I sold his clothes and packed his possessions away in the small room he used as his office. But his spirit remains, tiny reminders that it was once his home.

'We can hardly rest when Hendryk Smekens behaves as though he owns the place,' I remark.

'That man yawns against the oven!'

'As useless as he is, he believes he can do everything,' I laugh. 'Caught him down in the cellar earlier. Said he was checking on stock. It doesn't help that Claus Spelman is busy consulting him over future plans.'

'They think they know this inn, but really we keep it going,' Oma says.

'I know they are only letting me stay on until Hendryk can take over.'

'He must prove his claim. You are Willem's widow and carry his child. It is not straightforward.'

'If Papa were here, he would know what is best.'

Oma pats my hand. 'I too miss Niklaas. At least the matter of Willem's murder has been put to rest.'

'Carel says there is still talk the wrong man was hanged.'

'Ah! That boy spends too much time on the square eavesdropping.'

'Do you not wonder if the playwright really did kill Willem? I do.'

'It is for the Magistrate to decide. Besides, he was found with the axe. It does no good to fret over such things. Speaking of Carel, I see he now sleeps in the kitchen with Jute.'

I smile. 'Ah, they keep each other warm. Besides, the boy more than earns his keep. This morning he took another order to the brewer.'

'We need it. The Astrologer said the men are planning another banquet. Those men can drink this city dry.' Oma removes her cap and I notice more grey streaks in her blonde hair.

The wind is blowing a gale outside and there is a sudden banging against the back wall of the house.

'Just a branch of the cherry tree,' she remarks. 'I told Lodewijk to cut it back, but he still hasn't done it.'

'He barely does anything; too busy lurking around corners, listening into conversations.'

'With his master gone, he thinks he can stick out the broom.'

'His fun might soon be over,' I say. 'But for now, we need him.'

Oma poured more beer. 'I worry that you must serve such ugly men. You know what they say. It will cause the child to be plain.'

I laugh. 'Why do you believe such things!'

'Or worse... a girl,' she continues.

'If anyone were to hear you speak so, they would call you a heks.' I whisper the word, for even to say the word *witch* sends shivers through my body.

Oma sighs. 'Some already do.' A tapping, coming from downstairs, interrupts our conversation. 'Probably a confused drunkard,' she says.

We go downstairs and find Mevrouw de Bok, the fishmonger's wife, standing on the doorstep, her cape drenched through and water dripping from her bonnet.

'It's Ida,' she stammers as Oma ushers her inside. 'The babe's not due for three months but she's bleeding so! Aliet, you must help!'

'Perhaps a midwife would be better?' I say. The situation may be dire and, while my grandmother has assisted in the delivery of many a babe, she is no midwife. We do not need a young woman's death on our hands. Not now.

'I cannot pay...' she says, looking away.

I am shocked. The fishmonger sells a good trade at the markets. He wears fine clothes and is often at the inn buying drinks and boasting of his fortune.

'You see more of my husband than I do,' she replies, looking at me coldly.

Oma places a hand on my arm. 'I will go.'

I nod and fetch her cape. 'Be careful.'

Oma embraces me before following Mevrouw de Bok into the downpour outside, and I secure the door after them.

It is not the first time my grandmother has been called away to help someone in need. I am accustomed to people, women mostly, discreetly calling upon us. Oma charges nothing, asking only for discretion in return. She says that it is good to have people owe you favours. You never know when you might need them.

Retreating back upstairs, I look out the back window and notice a light burning in the stables. Lodewijk is standing by the door and appears to be waiting, for whom, I have no idea. Surely, we do

not receive deliveries at such a late hour. But I am tired and have Oma on my mind. I tell myself to ask Lodewijk about it in the morning.

The following day I keep myself busy. There is always plenty that requires my attention, from supplies to demanding patrons. But my thoughts are uneasy with Oma's absence, and by early afternoon I am weary.

'I will be out in the courtyard if you need me,' I say to Lodewijk.

'Very good, ma'am,' he says, nodding.

'If you can continue serving.'

'As you wish.'

'And get Beatrix to place fresh straw down.'

'Very good, ma'am,' but I catch a glimpse of his snigger as he turns away.

A small courtyard sits behind the inn, separating the main dwelling from the stable and is surrounded on three sides by walls, according it much privacy. A gardener recently cleared away the weeds and debris, replacing it with a small garden. Oma and I set aside an area for our herbs and I especially like the lavender. Since carrying the child, I find odours much more offensive and have taken to carrying handkerchiefs filled with herbs.

The bench under the cherry tree is my favourite place to rest and I ease myself down, leaning back against the trunk. Smells of baking bread emanate from the kitchen, reminding me of Papa. I miss his gentle ways and how he would encourage me to knead the dough. Be kind to it, he would always say, or the bread will be tough. I close my eyes and drift into a light slumber.

It is the Bookseller's voice that stirs me, loud and distinctive. I open my eyes and see him sitting by the window. His companion has his back to me, so I do not recognise him. He speaks softly and I have to strain to hear his words.

'You have it?' the Bookseller asks.

'... I'll send my boy to fetch it,' I catch his companion's reply.

'Have him take it around to the stable at the back. Beatrix will show him where to go. Who is it by?'

'Hans Baldung.'

'... not familiar with any painter by such a name.'

'... gaining prominence in Germany... an apprentice of Albrecht Dürer.'

'And the name of the work?'

'Two Witches.'

'You can prove it is genuine?'

'There is a letter of provenance... have it inspected if you wish... you will find it authentic.'

I listen with interest as the men discuss the painting and the Bookseller begins negotiating a price.

A short time later Beatrix leads a young lad to the stables, carrying what appears to be a painting contained in a blanket. She doesn't notice me on the bench, for she is too busy flirting.

Many come to our city for the Schilderpad, where artwork is bought and sold every day. But I am intrigued that the Bookseller should be engaged in such a deal at my inn. Keen to catch a glimpse of the painting, I slip into the stable by a side door and move behind a large crate, just as I hear the Bookseller and his companion approaching.

Beatrix retrieves an easel and the boy places his parcel upon it, leaving the blanket in place. I rarely go into the stable, for it is simply where our visitors leave their horses. That it should contain an easel is odd. The Bookseller opens the stable doors wide, letting the full light of day inside. It is then that I see the Bookseller's companion; a merchant, no doubt, but not one I know.

The two men stand before the easel, while the boy and Beatrix step aside. It is the Bookseller who reaches forward and pulls the blanket down to expose the painting. Beatrix lets out a gasp. It looks absurdly out of place in a stable for it is a breath-taking work of art. I stare, unable to take my eyes off it; it is as shocking as it is beautiful. Four figures; two female nudes, a little boy and a she-goat. One woman stands with her back to the artist, looking over her shoulder provocatively, her breast and nipple clearly visible, her backside voluptuous and muscular. The other woman sits upon the she-goat, a flask in her hand.

'I will have someone inspect it,' the Bookseller says, his eyes fixated on the image.

'Of course,' the merchant replies. 'I will bring it back.'

'The painting may remain here. It will be secure; I give you my assurance.'

Final arrangements are made for the inspection and the merchant and his boy leave. Beatrix shuts the stable doors behind them.

'What do you think of such art?' the Bookseller asks, once he and Beatrix are alone, or so they believe.

'Me? Oh, I know nothing of such things,' the maid replies.

'But surely when you look at it you must feel... something?'

Beatrix stands before the easel, looking intently. 'What's that?' she says, pointing at the flask in the naked woman's hand. 'It looks like a little dragon,' she says, peering in closely.

The Bookseller laughs as he comes up behind Beatrix, wrapping his arms around her and pulling at her smock and partlet. My maid delights in his attention, leaning her head back onto his shoulder and allowing him full access to scoop up her breasts in his hands.

‘Some say that the creature imprisoned in the flask stands for quicksilver. Which, my dear, is used in salves to relieve the great pox.’

I feel my cheeks burning and divert my eyes, having no desire to watch the Bookseller and Beatrix in such wanton behaviour. But the stable is only one room and to extract myself would reveal my presence.

‘The great pox?’ Beatrix asks.

‘Of course, that is nothing that we should worry ourselves over,’ the Bookseller replies, a little too quickly as he devours her neck. ‘Does the painting arouse you?’

‘Should it?’ she asks, still staring at the picture while he bends down and pulls up her skirt, his hands grabbing her behind.

‘You remind me of the woman on the left. The one with her back to us.’

Beatrix laughs. ‘Be off with you.’

‘I’ve seen you with that same look in your eyes. Take your dress off and stand like her.’

‘Oh no! I couldn’t!’

‘I should very much like you to. Do it for me.’

The Bookseller begins to kiss her, to tell her how beautiful she is, how she could easily become a painter’s model, before tugging at her smock. Eventually, her dress falls down around her feet. My maid puts up no resistance and steps out of her clothing. She looks at the painting before pulling her hair up in a similar manner. Standing with her legs crossed and one arm in the air, she tries to mimic the witch before her. I cannot deny that Beatrix is as beautiful as the woman depicted on the canvas.

‘It’s ever so difficult,’ Beatrix says giggling, ‘she’s got her leg in a very strange way. I’m not sure...’

‘Never mind. That shall suffice. Now turn slightly and look over your shoulder towards me,’ instructs the Bookseller.

Beatrix obediently does as requested, though she appears unsteady.

‘Perfect, perfect,’ the Bookseller mumbles, unbuttoning his trousers to reveal his own piqued interest.

The maid turns to move towards him, but he snaps harshly. ‘Don’t.’

And so, Beatrix is left standing there, as the Bookseller pleasures himself.

‘The baby?’ I say, bringing Oma ale and bread as she rests by the fire.

'A healthy girl. A good eight pounds, I would say. But you shouldn't have waited up; it's late.'

'I was worried. You were gone all day. What did they call her?'

'Lote. A pretty name alas the child will be no beauty.'

I smile and sit down beside her. My grandmother is as blunt as she is kind.

'And Ida?' The fishmonger's daughter is no friend of mine, though we are acquaintances.

'Needs her rest. She will carry no more children; her womb did not fare well. Can you prepare some herbs, perhaps black cohosh root? It might ease her discomfort.'

'Of course. So, the child, she was not three months early?'

Oma smirks. 'If that child was three months too early then I am the king's mistress.'

'Won't people realise?'

'I expect Ida will not leave the house for a few months. Besides, folk hang their cloak according to the wind.'

'I suppose you are right. Ida is married?'

'Six months ago.'

To hear of Ida and her husband makes me envious, reminding me of Pieter. How I wish I was carrying his child.

'If Ida can fool others into believing her baby arrived early, would anyone really be surprised if my baby arrived late?'

Oma puts down her ale and looks at me. 'We have spoken of this many a time. Two weeks late, perhaps four. But two months?'

'I know. And if we had waited until the child arrived to say he needed more time?'

'People would only doubt Willem was the father. And if the men did not believe you, what would you do then?'

'And you're so sure they really think they believe me now?'

'Such learned men are no fools. But if it suits them, they will accept it as the truth. And you have given them a good reason to do so. Why! Who would doubt the word of Rabelais? Gargantua himself was carried for eleven months,' Oma laughs softly.

'It was fortunate Anthony's lent me his book. That Willem has an heir, is all that gives the men cause to hesitate. I fear they would have already signed the inn over to Hendryk Smekens.'

'And still might, my dear. The inn is far from yours. The men are only waiting to confirm that the child is a boy. But there is honour amongst them; it seems they will ensure Willem's son is well provided for.'

'How I fear, every day that I breathe, people will begin to question whether my dead husband is really the father.'

She takes my face in her hands. 'Only someone truthful and honourable would come out with something so impossible as this. Besides, the men believe you and that is all that matters.'

'It is so ridiculous, so inconceivable. Perhaps that is the beauty of our plan.'

'Now my dear. You must do one thing for me.'

'For you, Oma, anything.'

'You must believe, without a doubt, that the child you carry is Willem's rightful heir and we, his guardians in trust.'



Two Witches

Hans Baldung Grien, 1523

chapter twelve

Physician

November 1548

Beyond the window, the courtyard is bathed in darkness apart from an oil light flickering softly. A lamp hangs in an inset by the gate, its yellowing shadows barely reach the entrance. The early hours, a time when only feral beasts roam the streets.

I cannot rest but to lie down brings on the most sudden urge to retch. So instead I pace with bare feet across our small room, careful not to wake Oma.

Outside in our enclosed garden, I can hear rats and mice skitter around the perimeter. I watch the branches of the cherry tree sway gently, throwing shadows against the courtyard walls, playing havoc with my imagination. In the corner of my eye, I catch something move, but it is just rats fighting over food scraps the cook discarded outside the kitchen window. There is a wind blowing and a light dusting of snow coats the stone pavers. Two cats appear suddenly, jumping over the closed gates, hissing and spitting, one chasing the other. They are momentarily distracted by the rats and forget each other, tempted by the moving feast they have discovered.

Two carts have been left overnight in the courtyard. One is laden with casks, a delivery of wines from Southern France that arrived this morning. Hendryk Smekens arranged the order, in agreement with Claus Spelman. Neither man informed me. I found out when the merchant arrived with his goods. He is staying in the city for two nights and asked if he may leave his cart here.

The second cart intrigues me. I do not recall seeing it there earlier in the day and it is only as my eyes become accustomed to the dim light that I notice it at all. It has been pushed into the far corner, partly concealed by the cherry tree. It is of shabby construction, timber planks coming away at the sides and the visible wheel in much need of repairs. The cart's contents have been covered by blankets.

A screech draws my attention back to the cats. One has caught a mouse and is carrying it proudly by the tail as his companion tries to relieve him of it. They circle the courtyard a few times before climbing the cherry tree and then leaping onto the tattered cart. The first cat lands on the blanket, the second jumping on top of him; a tussle ensues disrupting the cart's load.

Suddenly an arm falls down the side of the cart, a small limb almost translucent against the darkness of the courtyard.

A boy lies on the cart, his eyes soulless, staring up at me. His hair, jet black, is cut short against his scalp, as though hastily done, with little regard to his appearance. His age is difficult to tell, perhaps twelve or he could be younger, for I suspect this child has known much hunger in his brief life. He wears a dirty sack, barely concealing weeping red blotches that cover his body. He reminds me of Carel, and I am thankful it is not he. But then I feel shame. Children like this are much too common a sight, scurrying like rats across the city. How does one come to be dead in my courtyard? It leaves me reeling.

I return to my bed knowing there is nothing I can do until morning, but my sleep is restless. No sooner do I finally drift into a fitful slumber than Oma is rousing me.

‘Meneer Tillens is downstairs,’ she announces.

‘Will he not speak with you?’ I say, slowly stirring.

‘He insisted it must be you.’

‘Then he can wait until I am ready,’ I say, sitting up.

‘He’s an important man; best not keep him waiting.’

‘What should he want with me?’

‘Have you not wondered how your husband came to associate with the likes of a reputed Physician?’

‘Of course,’ I reply, getting out of bed. ‘Perhaps they knew each other before Meneer Tillens gained his qualifications... and reputation?’

‘Possibly, but the Physician does not seem a man prone to sentimental attachments.’ Oma says. ‘I suspect there is more to it. As they say, wild bears prefer each other’s company.’

‘It is strange. After all, Willem was innkeeper... a popular one... but only an innkeeper.’

She helps me out of my nightdress and pulls a smock over my head, followed by my kirtle and gown. ‘Your stomach is growing. The lacing needs letting out again.’

‘It will be alright, won’t it, Oma?’

‘Of course. You have your benefactors.’ She quickly twists my hair into a bun, before concealing it under my cap. ‘Now, see what Meneer Tillens wants.’

I head downstairs and find Lodewijk in the kitchen. ‘There’s an old cart out in the courtyard -’ I begin.

‘Only the wine merchant’s cart,’ he replies.

I push open the back door to look out outside. The cart is gone and with it the boy's body. 'There was another there last night.'

'Not so I was aware. Ma'am, Meneer Tillens is waiting to speak with you.' I notice that my manservant is wearing his least stained shirt and has combed back his hair.

'Very well.' I close the back door and go to greet my visitor.

The Physician stands by the hearth, staring intently into the fire. He is an elegant man and his height results in him having to stoop to avoid striking his head on the beam above the hearth.

'I apologise for keeping you, Meneer Tillens.'

'Do not apologise, Mevrouw Smekens. I have, after all, called by unannounced.' He takes my hand, bringing my fingers to his lips, kissing them briskly. He is a regular visitor at the inn, showing much concern for my welfare since Willem's death. However, his knowledge of the body concerns me. Of all my benefactors, he is the one most likely to follow my condition with much interest. I wonder if his diligence is due more to curiosity than kindness.

'You are always welcome. I hope all is well?'

He looks at me with intense brown eyes. 'Most. I trust you are keeping in good health, especially in your condition?' The Physician is an attractive man. Perhaps if he were not married, I would be more flattered. But I have no intention of becoming a man's mistress, not even one so well respected.

'I am, thank you. And your wife and children?'

He nods. 'Clementia sends her regards and says you must join us for dinner one evening.'

His wife is an austere woman of few words. I very much doubt that she would extend an invitation, but I acknowledge his kindness with a smile.

Lodewijk appears and places a jug on the table with two goblets. 'Will there be anything else, ma'am?'

'Please check on supplies. Last night was busy.'

He nods and leaves, and I turn back to my guest. 'Please, take a seat.'

'Thank you,' the Physician says, sitting down. 'I wish to discuss a certain... business arrangement.'

'Oh?'

'I must travel to Bruges and I would like to borrow your servant, Lodewijk. The trip will take three days, no more. I will reimburse you for any inconvenience.'

'Surely you have your own servants?' I say, confused. Lodewijk is hardly a fit and able young man, and as for his demeanour, he is not the most co-operative.

'Of course. But Clementia and the children...'

'I see.' It is a difficult request for I have only Lodewijk and Beatrix as servants.

The front door opens suddenly, our solitude broken by the chatter of the marketplace. It is Beatrix.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ the girl begins. ‘Ever so... oh dear, ma’am. Didn’t see you had company.’

‘There is much to do, Beatrix. Start with sweeping.’ I return my attention to the Physician. ‘My apologies for the interruptions.’

He smiles, though I notice the tendons on his neck are raised, his shoulders tensed. ‘Of course. I will not keep you. Your husband was a good man, someone I could depend on.’

Before I can reply there is a knock at the front door. ‘Lodewijk,’ I call out. ‘Please see to the door.’

‘And you are a good woman,’ the Physician continues.

We pause for a moment while Lodewijk speaks with the visitor before he approaches me.

‘It is the wine merchant,’ my manservant says, ‘He wishes to retrieve his cart. The wine, ma’am?’

‘It must, of course, be taken down to the cellar,’ I sigh. Lodewijk knows, all too well, where the casks are stored.

‘Very good, ma’am,’ he says before leaving.

‘As you can see,’ I say, turning back to the Physician, ‘my manservant requires much instruction.’

He pauses before responding. ‘Perhaps he has not adjusted well to losing his master and gaining a mistress. Under my authority, even for a brief time, I could ensure he is... shall we say... more cooperative?’

‘But why Lodewijk?’

‘Some matters better left unexplained,’ the Physician replies. It is difficult for me to hear above the hubbub of the inn. Beatrix has begun to sweep but is careless and knocks into the furniture as she hastily runs the broom over the floor. Meanwhile, Lodewijk is sighing loudly as he carries the casks from the courtyard down to the cellar.

‘There appears to be something that you do not wish to tell me,’ I begin. ‘But I now run the inn -’

‘For the time being, my dear,’ he interjects.

I am thankful for those times I accompanied Papa when he made purchases for the bakery. He was a shrewd businessman, always cautious but fair. I try to imagine how he would behave in such a situation. ‘True. But it is me you now approach. Maybe it would be best if you treat me as you would my husband?’

‘Be careful. You may come to regret such words.’

I keep a watchful eye on my maid, aware that she is more interested in my conversation than her sweeping. ‘Be off to the kitchen, Beatrix.’

The Physician and I are once again alone.

I refill his mug. ‘Once I have the full picture...’

'As you wish. Your husband acquired certain things for me that are... difficult to obtain.'

'I cannot imagine that there is anything that cannot be purchased in Antwerpen. Pray tell, what is it you require?'

'As you know, I am a physician, a surgeon, of some standing. I teach anatomy at Louvain University and am tasked with educating the next generation of medical men. To learn anatomy requires hands-on experience. However, if one is to learn of the human body, one cannot always do so on a living person. We need to dissect cadavers.'

'Cadavers,' I gasp. 'You... you require dead bodies?' The sight of the young boy on the cart returns vividly to my thoughts.

The Physician winces but nods.

'Your university doesn't provide you with such things?'

'Sometimes we receive the body of an executed criminal, however, many believe it is degrading for educated people to handle such contemptible specimens.'

'A dilemma, I am sure, but how did my husband and his servant assist?'

The Physician grimaces. 'I need only... borrow your servant. As you can imagine, timing is of the essence.'

'Your trip to Brussel this afternoon?'

'A certain delivery, a very special... rare case. The body has only today become available. Your manservant has made the necessary arrangements.'

'Lodewijk... already?'

The Physician looks away. 'I'm sure you can appreciate; these are delicate matters. As a woman... it is best you know as little as possible.'

I nod and take a deep breath. 'I appreciate your concern.'

'I will say no more, only that it is wise to take heed of my advice,' he speaks slowly and with emphasis. He reaches out and takes my hand. 'Do you understand?'

I pause for a moment before responding. 'I do. Lodewijk may accompany you this afternoon however I will require another servant to replace him.'

'Of course, Gertrud.' It is the first time he has called me by my name. I have been taken into his confidence and it gives me an uneasy feeling. I know there is little choice but to agree to his request and any future ones he may have.

He rises to his feet. 'Now, I must be on my way. I am to call in at the printer's, Frans de Bot. His young daughters have fallen ill.'

'I do hope it's not serious?' I ask, accompanying him to the door. The mention of the printer brings back memories of Pieter. His sister, Magdalena, wed Frans de Bot only two years previous.

‘Probably just a mother being overly cautious. The children are barely a year old.’

‘There was a time I knew Magdalena and Frans well.’ I hold out my hand. ‘Please give them my regards. Their daughters will be in my prayers.’

‘Of course. Now, in your condition, I recommend you take your rest.’

After the Physician has left, I call Lodewijk into the front room. Much to my annoyance, the man takes his time to appear.

‘You called ma’am? Just taking the wine down to the cellar.’ He stands before me, hands behind his back.

‘You are to help Meneer Tillens, such as you did when Meneer Smekens was alive. But I should like to know whom you deal with.’

‘Best to leave that with me, ma’am,’ he replies, looking to the ground. ‘They aren’t the type you’d wish to meet.’

‘Tell me then, where do these... items... come from?’

Lodewijk shrugs. ‘Don’t really know. I suppose it’s the poor, those that die with nothing. At least they can leave their families a little something.’

‘And is this... within the law?’

He stares at me with cold, steely eyes. ‘I know nothing of the law.’

Later that afternoon I find Hendryk Smekens trying to open the door of my husband’s study. He has a large chain of keys in his hand.

‘May I help you?’ I ask.

‘Ah Gertrud. Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me which key is for this door?’

I take the chain from him and try a few before sighing. ‘You know! I don’t believe any of these are. Oh, that’s right... it’s a separate key. Where did I put it... as soon as I find it... perhaps I can help?’

‘Do you know where Willem kept his contracts? I am meeting with a merchant later,’ he asks.

‘I’m afraid I don’t. If you’ll excuse me, I have beer to serve.’

‘Of course,’ he says, stepping aside so that I can pass. I have no intention of informing him I have already organised the purchase of beer.

I find the Astrologer at the counter speaking with Oma.

‘... usually have to travel to Gent to find it,’ I hear him say.

He smiles as I approach. ‘Ah, Gertrud. I was just saying how good your crabbelaer is.’

‘Thank you. Having lunch with us Cornelis?’

He nods. 'You've made changes around here. Must say, I'm impressed. I hope Hendryk continues your good work. You must be looking forward to him taking over!'

I force a smile. 'Oh, I am. If only I knew when.'

'Claus hasn't told you the good news? I expect he's just busy. I believe he is planning to sign the deeds next week.'

Beatrix arrives with a bowl of goose stew for the Astrologer, who heads off to a table.

I turn to Oma. 'The herbs you prepared earlier - were they for Cornelis?'

'They ease his pain a little, is all.'

'You're a kind soul.'

'Always wise to show kindness -'

I smile. 'I know - you never know when you might need it in return!'

'You're looking pale - feeling queasy again?'

I nod. 'Gets worse around midday.'

She takes my hand and squeezes it. 'The first twelve weeks are the worst my dear. It should pass soon. It is quiet enough in here; Beatrix and I can manage. Go have something to eat.'

'The smell of food is bad enough. I have little desire in eating.'

'But you must. For your strength, and to grow a strong and healthy child.'

'I had always imagined I would have Pieter... a husband... by my side, when I would carry a babe.'

A sudden rush of sadness overwhelms me, and I choke back tears. 'Now I am being silly.'

'Being with child makes a woman teary.'

I recall the moment the child was conceived, and the rush of emotions I experienced. Never before had I felt such passion. My peacock. I know only his name, Pauwel. It wasn't love, I understand that. But he is still the father of my child.

Oma embraces me.

'I know this is hard for you. But while there is breath in my body, I will never leave your side.'

'Good morning, ma'am. I am Meneer de Jonge,' It is mid-morning and we have yet to open. The man on my doorstep is wearing a hat adorned with a larger feather. 'Is this the inn belonging to....' He looks down at a piece of paper. 'Meneer Smekens?'

'Meneer Smekens died seven months ago. I am his widow.'

The man bows his head. 'I offer you my condolences, ma'am. But it is most odd. I received this letter only 2 weeks ago.'

'May I see that?' I indicate the letter.

'Of course,' he says, handing it to me. I look down and see that the signature at the bottom is H Smekens.

'This letter is from my husband's brother, Hendryk. He is not here right now, but perhaps you would like to come inside and wait?' I step back, holding open the door.

'Most kind!' he says, stepping inside.

'Let me take your coat and hat,' I say, reaching out to take his garments. 'My! Such a fine hat. Where did you get it, may I ask?' I slip the letter into my skirt, hoping my question will divert his attention.

'You have an eye for the finer things, I see. Yes, a new purchase. From Parijs.'

I lead the way across the room, retrieving a jug of beere and two goblets on the way. 'I'm sure Hendryk will be here at any moment. May I join you until he arrives?'

'That would be delightful.' Meneer de Jonge has a jovial appearance, with red cheeks and ears that stick out from his head. As I sit down, I notice he is inspecting the room, first looking up at the ceiling and then tapping at window frames.

'I hope our inn is to your liking?' I say, pouring the beere.

'Well... as Hendryk said in his letter, it needs repairs, outside especially. But the location... it is ideal.'

'You are from Antwerpen?'

He nods. 'I run a small kroeg by Red Gate. I must say, this beer is delicious. Why, if I didn't know better, I would say it is crabbelaer.'

'You know your beers, sir.'

'As an innkeeper, it is my duty. But how do you obtain crabbelaer in Antwerpen? The Brewers Guild are insistent that we use our own brewers.'

'I have sourced it through a local supplier.'

He looks at me, puzzled. 'Then you must give me their details. The inn does a good trade?'

'We are busy most nights.'

'Perhaps it is a good investment. If the -'

At that moment, the door opens and in rushes Hendryk, his shirt hanging out of his britches and his cap to one side. 'I am so sorry!' he gasps, trying to gather his breath. 'I overslept.'

'Not a problem, good man. Mevrouw Smekens has been kind enough to entertain me.'

Hendryk looks at me, his eyebrows drawn together.

'I understand Meneer de Jonge is interested in purchasing our inn,' I say, smiling.

'No,' he replies, shaking his head quickly. 'No. You misunderstand. An associate is all. I am seeking his advice for he is an innkeeper himself.'

I rise to my feet. 'Then I shall leave you to talk business. Good day, Meneer de Jonge.'

He stands up and takes my hand. 'The pleasure was all mine.'

But as I reach the doorway, convinced that I have proof of Hendryk's deceit in the folds of my skirt, Meneer de Jonge calls out. 'My dear, I almost forgot. My letter - may I have it back?'

chapter thirteen

Cook

“Brawne is best from a forth-nighte before Michaelmas till lent. Beife and Bacon is good all tymes in the yere. Mutton is good at all tymes / but from Easter to Midsommer it is wurste. A fat pigge is ever in season.”

A Propre new booke of Cokery, 1545

December 1548

A hotchpotch of scents: anise, liquorice and fennel, all competing with the likes of fenugreek, cloves and cumin. In the background hang traces of mint, sage and cinnamon. The Apotheke.

It is a tiny shop, barely accommodating more than two or three customers at a time, but the floors have been scrubbed leaving not a speck of dirt. Despite the cold, it is warm inside, heated by a small stove in the corner. I look around to see all available walls are covered floor to ceiling with shelves, and these are overflowing with pots of varying shapes and sizes, all stacked in neat rows. Behind the counter is the apothecary, an elderly man who is stooped over the counter, his sleeves pushed up as he prepares a mixture in a mortar.

He looks up and smiles. ‘Hello Gertrud. You’re out early.’

‘Good morning Meneer Ghysman.’

‘Your child is growing,’ he remarks. I am six months with child, though Oma tells me the child is large for the number of weeks. I am pleased of course, providing further reassurance that the child will be a boy, big and strong. Just like the peacock that fathered him. At times, I think of Pauwel and wonder if our child will resemble him.

The apothecary continues to grind his herbs. ‘How may I assist?’

‘I come about my grandmother.’

‘Is she unwell again?’

‘She is much improved, Thank you. But she gets the occasional pain in her head. The Physician has suggested the juice of horehound.’

He nods his head fervently. ‘Must be taken with food. So many make the mistake of drinking it. And mix it with diapenidion.’ He begins searching his shelves, taking down jars before replacing them and gathering others.

He pours the liquid into a small bottle, handing it to me. Before I can reply, the door opens. To my surprise someone enters who is never far from my thoughts.

'Pieter!' I exclaim, the word barely escaping my lips. While I have seen him occasionally, it has been some time since we have spoken. I am shocked by how much he has aged. His face is gaunt and he has lost weight; the once boyish cheeks gone.

He seems equally taken aback to see me, standing fixed to the spot. 'Gertrud.'

The apothecary clears his throat. 'Your preparation is ready, Pieter. I will just collect it.'

Pieter turns and nods, brushing his fringe from his eyes. An instinctive movement, one he always did when nervous.

'I understand your nieces, Magdalena's babies, are unwell? The Physician was at the inn yesterday, he mentioned...'

'Very,' Pieter says, removing his soft cap. He looks to me, the despair in his eyes clearly evident. It is painful to see. I want only to hold him close, to share in his hurting. I place a hand lightly on his arm and he feels warm under my finger-tips.

'Do not give up hope.'

But his eyes fall from my face to stare at my swelling. 'You are... with child?'

'I have been blessed,' I reply, slowly removing my hand from his arm to my stomach, aware that he has pulled away from me.

'The father?'

'Why, my husband.'

Pieter looks at me puzzled but says no more. He shuffles his feet before placing his hands in his pockets.

The apothecary returns and holds out a small bottle to Pieter. 'One small drop each.'

'Thank you,' Pieter replies, before heading to the door. But he pauses before leaving and looks to me. 'I know this is much to ask... you once cared for Magdalena, for little Eva and Johanna. Your grandmother, people say she has healed others. Would she...?'

My thoughts are confused, awash with so many feelings. To see Pieter again brings back the pain I experienced when he left. A reminder of how angry I was that he would not even see me. Yet, despite all of this, I cannot deny I still care for the man I once loved, so very much.

'I will ask.'

'Thank you, Gertrud.' He looks to me for a moment longer, before placing his cap back on his head and stepping out onto the street.

'That man! He has no idea!' Our new Cook from Lyon is standing at the back door, shaking his fist. He has been with us for only a week, but already has made an impression. His meals are exquisite, but alas he is a temperamental man with exacting standards and little patience.

'Whatever is the matter?' I ask, coming into the kitchen. Oma and Rogier sit at the table, preparing the vegetables.

'Fool! The menu for the banquet - Meneer Smekens has instructed that I am to change it.'

I grimace. 'What do you mean, change it? We have already purchased the goose.'

'We did say that,' Oma remarks.

'It must be mutton stew,' the Cook says, mimicking Hendryk. 'A stew! Idiot farmer.'

I take a deep breath before replying calmly, 'nothing has changed. You are not preparing stew.'

'Hendryk was rather insistent,' Oma says.

'Regardless, there is no time to change the menu now.'

Oma smiles. 'Ah Gertje! You are trying to get the lid on the head.'

'I must take responsibility if we are to have this banquet ready for this evening,' I say.

Cook shakes his head. 'How is one to make meals under such conditions! I must have more help.'

'Where are Beatrix and Lodewijk?' I ask.

Oma sighs. 'Our maid returned with duck; I sent her back for the goose. As for Lodewijk, he left earlier with the Physician.'

The Cook grumbles as he goes to stir the large pot over the fire.

'I saw Pieter at the apotheke,' I say, sitting down. 'Magdalena's babies are very sick. He asked if you might call upon them.'

'You wish me to visit his sister?'

Magdalena is two years older than me and there was a time when we were close. I remember her marriage well. Standing at Pieter's side, I watched as she and Frans de Bot wed, happy in the certainty that we would soon follow.

'Surely innocent babes should not be punished for the wrongs of their elders,' I say.

My grandmother nods. 'You are right, but Pieter, his family... it was not so long ago that you swore you would have nothing to do with them.'

The twins, Eva and Johanna, were born nine months to the day after the wedding, my grandmother helped to bring the girls into the world. Adorable babies, sadly I saw no more of them after Pieter left me.

'Smaller! Smaller!' Cook snaps, looking over Rogier's shoulders.

'Seeing Pieter today, he is so thin and worn. I fear things have not been easy for him either.'

'You are too generous, girl. His family now own one of the largest trading companies in Antwerpen. If he is tired, it is only from their success.'

I recall Pieter's visit with his father to see Willem. Neither man seemed happy when they left, and I wonder if all is as prosperous as some would think. 'Surely we should not begrudge Pieter and his family good fortune.'

Oma stops chopping and looks up at me. 'Do you not see, schatje? We're not good enough for them... we never were.'

Perhaps my grandmother is right, but I do not want to admit it. Seeing Pieter today, to have spoken to him has lifted my spirits and reminded me of the love we once shared. 'But the babies... they might die.'

'I will go to them, of course. Though what I can do...'

'Shall I go with you?' My heart pounds as I say this. Although I dare not admit it, I know a visit to Magdalena's brings me closer to Pieter again.

'Certainly not.'

'I could...'

'No, Gertje. Besides, you are needed here.'

'At least someone has sense,' Cook grumbles, as he stands at the hearth.

'Oh, before I forget,' Oma says, getting to her feet. 'The Physician was here earlier. He was rather insistent on getting into Willem's office. I told him we have mislaid the key.'

'What do they think is in his office? I have gone through everything. Apart from a few contracts and the deeds to the inn, there is nothing of interest.'

'Well, he is not the first person to want to go through Willem's possessions. Perhaps you should look again?'

I nod. 'When there is time! But for now, we have a banquet to prepare, have you seen Carel? Perhaps he can help.'

Rogier points to the courtyard.

'What are you doing there?' I ask.

Carel sits back on his knees. 'Cook asked me to plant these thyme seeds. He says it's good for flavour.'

I smile, recalling how Father would encourage me to grow herbs when I was Carel's age.

'Have I done something wrong?' he asks. I look up and see the child watching me, concerned.

'No. Not at all. This patch of garden was intended for herbs, we just hadn't got around to it yet. I was just thinking of my Father.'

'Is he dead too?' Carel asks. His question startles me, though I know it is just his way. The child means no hurt.

I nod. 'I don't know. Perhaps he is. I miss him so very much.'

'What happened to him?'

'One day I hope to find out.'

Carel sits down beside me. 'I never knew my Pa. Though my mother said he was a brave soldier. She told me once I was just like him.'

'And your ma?'

'She would go off with men. One day she just didn't come back.'

'Come, Carel,' I say, getting slowly to my feet and holding out my hand. 'We have work to do.'

The Astrologer is the first to arrive, over an hour before the banquet should begin. Though he is unperturbed and sits down at the table. I fetch a tankard and jug of ale and place it down before him.

'The sky has turned grey, Gertrud,' he says in his strong German accent.

'We shall have storms shortly.' I am fond of the Astrologer; he is a quiet man who keeps his hands to himself.

'Come, sit down. A rest will do you good.'

I take a seat opposite him, surprised that he seeks my company.

'How is your Grandmother?'

'Much improved. Though at times she complains of pain in her head.'

'Perhaps we should consider bloodletting. I have discussed her condition with The Physician.'

'I know little of such things, but bloodletting... it sounds dangerous.'

Cornelis smiles gently. 'Do not concern yourself. I have done much reading on the matter. It is highly recommended. I do believe it is simply that her bodily humours need rebalancing.'

'Oma's health is of great concern to me.'

'The Greek physician Galen tells us that blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile correspond to the four elements that make our physical environment of earth, air, fire and water. In your grandmother's case, I suspect there is an excess of blood.'

'And the Physician?'

'He is inclined to agree with my diagnosis. But now is not the right time. We must wait until the moon is in the correct position.'

'I see.'

'But there is another matter I wish to discuss with you.'

'Oh?' There is much to tend to before the other guests arrive, however I know better than to dismiss the Astrologer.

'I have consulted my calendar, Gertrud, and there is something that puzzles me over the child you carry. The position of the moon and the movements of the stars, they all suggest many... complications.'

'I doubt I suffer more discomfort than any other mother.' I fear where the conversation is heading, knowing all too well he is basing his conclusions on incorrect dates.

'You are carrying a big child,' he remarks. 'But the shape... it is unusual.'

'A strong, healthy boy. I am sure.'

'What makes you certain? Many a mother has wanted a boy, only to be disappointed.'

'I sense my child is strong. And Oma... it is something her mother taught her. She is rarely wrong.'

'To predict the sex of a child? Be careful, such ways can be misunderstood.'

'It is but a stone hanging from a piece of string.'

'I have heard of such things on my travels.'

'She has done it many times. Three times out of four, it has shown the child to be a boy.'

'And you will carry the child for eleven months?'

'To fully develop,' I reply, though my words quaver as I speak.

'Very unusual. There are instances where women say such things...'

I remain silent, fearful of what he will say next.

'Very well, Gertrud,' he says finally. 'I do find that such things reveal themselves with time.'

Though I must say that I agree with your grandmother. I also believe the child will be a boy.'

There is a knock at the door, interrupting our conversation. I desperately want to ask him more, to find out what his intentions are, but there is no time.

'Come in,' he calls out, before grabbing hold of my arm. 'Worry not, my dear.'

The door opens and we are joined by Peter Goossens, the Friar, and Anthony van Hille, the Artist.

'Ah Gertrud. How lovely to see you,' Anthony declares, before kissing me on both cheeks. He looks resplendent in a velvet purple cloak.

Cornelis rises to his feet and approaches the Artist to shake his hand. 'Ah, dear Anthony. You are looking fine. Your appearance is always impeccable!'

'Such excess and a disposition to trifle, I will never understand,' the Friar remarks as he greets the Astrologer.

'There you are wrong,' Anthony's replies. 'Do not mistake my interest in my clothing as an inclination for levity. I take my work most seriously. In fact, I sold a painting this very afternoon! I am a happy man. To a Countess who may soon become my patron. So you see, I dressed only so I impress.'

'And that you did! Well done!' Cornelis says, slapping Anthony's on the back. The Artist winks at me. 'She purchased a painting from someone else we know. An artist who has a certain affinity for peacock costumes.'

My cheeks begin to burn at the mention of Pauwel. 'Congratulations. That is very good news. And our friend - he is well, I hope?'

'Indeed, he is! I received word he is making quite a name for himself in Rome. Alas, he has no plans to return to our city. Such a shame. I do miss his company. Ah! Here is Jacob. I must speak with him over a recent publication. If you will excuse me, Gertrud?'

'Of course,' I look around to find the Astrologer, but the other men have arrived and he is deep in conversation with the Physician. Anything further to be said between us will have to wait. The Astrologer's accusation has left me uneasy but there is little I can do. There is a banquet to deliver and I must pray that he will not share his thoughts with his companions.

An hour passes and still the Burgermeister has not yet arrived. In the kitchen I discover Cook frantic, Lodewijk and Carel trying desperate to calm him down.

'The goose! It was ready over an hour ago. Now it is ruined.' Laid before him are three overcooked geese.

'Cover it with the sauce,' I reply.

Cook shakes his head. 'Ridiculous!'

'Perhaps they will think it is stew,' Lodewijk mutters.

I go to the pot simmering over the stove and put a spoon into the sauce. 'Delicious! Your best yet.'

Cook sighs. 'You really think so?'

I nod. 'Cover the goose and no one will know.'

'Perhaps... perhaps... we can serve it... if I add a little...' and then he disappears out to the courtyard.

Lodewijk looks to me and sighs.

'I understand that you were out this afternoon,' I say. 'Does that mean another...'

'It's best you do not know, ma'am.'

'Be that as it may, I do want to know if I should find anything... unpleasant in the courtyard.'

'That will not happen, I assure you.'

Beatrix appears suddenly in the doorway. 'The Burgermeister has arrived!'

Despite the blustery conditions outside, it has not kept our patrons from their ale, and I must push my way through. I find the Burgermeister standing by the entry, accompanied by two burly men that I do not recognise. They are discarding their dripping wet coats as I approach.

'Damn the Duke!' I hear the Burgermeister exclaim, but he gives me no greeting other than to thrust his drenched hat and coat in my direction.

'Make haste with the meal,' he remarks.

'Of course,' I reply, taking his sodden items and placing them before the fire to dry out.

'Bring the food and wine at once. We do not wish to be disturbed.'

'We can serve immediately, sir.'

'And you received my message about goat stew?'

I open my mouth to speak, but no words form.

'A special guest is joining us. I specifically requested his favourite.'

'I am so very sorry. There has been a mix up. It is my fault. We have prepared goose.'

'Goose!' he says, cracking his knuckles. 'Goose!'

'I am sorr -'

'Sorry will not do! I promised him goat stew. And that he must have!'

'Perhaps goose stew?' I offer.

He sighs loudly. 'Very well. Perhaps the service at this inn will improve once Willem's brother has taken over. It certainly can't get any worse!' He storms off in the direction of the dining room, his companions following close behind.

I rush to the kitchen and inform the Cook of what must be done. The goose is hastily cut into pieces and added to a large pot filled with vegetables and wine.

A short time after, we set down bowls of steaming goose stew, platters of fruit and nuts, bread and pancakes before the men, but they are unusually quiet. It seems the Burgermeister's foul temper, or perhaps the impending arrival of their important guest, has quelled their earlier enthusiasm.

I close the door behind me as I leave, apprehensive that the Astrologer might share his views on my child with the others. But I have an inn full of hungry and thirsty men; there is no time to contemplate such thoughts. Besides, I keep reminding myself, Cornelis is a good man, he will not do anything to cause me trouble.

'The babies?' I ask, stirring from my sleep. All is quiet when Oma returns, and she sits down on the edge of the bed. Snow continues to fall, muffling any sounds from outside but I can smell the strong scent of brandy.

'Much improved.'

'The banquet? I was so very tired, I left Lodewijk to lock up.'

'The men were gone when I got back.'

'Magdalena must be relieved. What do you think it was?'

'I found them lifeless, lying side-by-side in their cot. The fever had almost consumed them. The Physician advised to keep them warm. The fool. Fresh air, cool water, a change of bedsheets. We bathed the girls, a few herbs. It will be some days before we know they have recovered. Much now depends on the fall of the cards. I will call upon them tomorrow.'

'You have given them a chance,'

She lays down beside me. 'Before I forget. Please tell Carel to tie Jute up in the courtyard. Followed me again today. There was nothing I could say or do, to make her go home.'

'Jute is fond of you.'

'She sat outside Magdalena's, waiting.'

'Did you see...?'

Oma rolls over to face me. 'Forget Pieter.'

'It is not so easy.'

'You are young; there is time to find love again.'

I sigh. 'I do not care to think of having another man in my life.' Though one such as Pauwel, in his fine peacock costume, would be a much better proposition. 'Perhaps in time.'

chapter fourteen

Astrologer

Early morning and all is still. Outside the streets are coated in a layer of thick pristine white snow, footsteps just beginning to appear. The boy sleeps, curled up on a rug before the hearth, hidden beneath a pile of blankets and old coats, the dog's tail just poking out.

The boy stirs as I prepare myself a little ginger and herbs to drink.

'I'm sorry if I disturbed you,' I say, sitting down at the table.

Carel comes and sits beside me. 'I sleep better now than ever before. It's warm here...and nice.'

I notice he is beginning to fill out, his cheeks rounding and his limbs not as slight as they once were. He wears clothes that fit, a shirt and britches that were once Rogier's.

'Did the men keep you awake last night?' I ask. 'They did not leave until late.'

He shakes his head. 'Feel asleep easy enough, though I heard Mevrouw Vermeulen get back.'

'You heard Oma?'

Carel nods. 'She was talking with that man... he speaks funny.'

'A German accent?'

'That's right.'

I wonder why Oma did not mention she'd spoken with Cornelis, but my thoughts are interrupted by a knock at the front door. 'It's early for visitors,' I remark, getting up to answer it.

I am surprised to see it is Pieter.

'Is everything okay with Eva and Johanna?' I say, ushering him inside. 'My grandmother is still asleep.'

'They were sitting on their mother's lap when I left them, only a short while ago,' he says, smiling. 'I know it's early, but I was passing and saw a light on.'

'I am pleased the girls are doing well. I thought... but, do take a seat.'

Pieter shakes his head. 'I won't keep you. I just wanted to say thank you,' he says, holding his cap firmly in his hands. His head is bowed and his eyes dart nervously.

'It was Oma who did everything.'

'You have been generous, Gertrud.'

I look at Pieter, his eyes revealing his honesty. At that moment, I want only to be in his arms again.

'Much has happened,' I say gently.

He looks to my stomach. 'You are to become a mother.'

I am conscious of my plain dress and how large I must appear. 'It has been very hard. But this child is a blessing.'

'I know. The loss of your father and now your husband...' Pieter moves towards me and I can smell his familiar scent, one of sea and salt. It is wonderful to be near him again, to hear him speak, to recognise the way he laces up his shirt. 'Your father was a good man. Sadly, I cannot say the same for your deceased husband.'

'I'm sorry?'

He looks down and pauses before replying. 'Willem Smekens was a powerful man in this city. My father and I discovered this, but it was too late.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'My father won a large contract. One of the biggest this city has ever received, to manage exports to England. But before the deal went through, your husband convinced the Burgermeister to set up a local trading company.'

'You lost the deal?'

'Oh no, in hindsight I wish we had. No, we got the deal. But instead of dealing directly with the English, we were forced to go via your husband's company. Let's just say the terms were... less than favourable.'

'But your family made a lot of money...'

'We did,' he says nodding. 'But it was at a cost. One we did not realise at the time. Now we find ourselves beholden to the men that govern this city. Once my father was an independent man; now he is a shadow of his former self. A man who must take orders.'

I shrug. 'So must we all.'

'But you Gertrud, you run an inn.'

'Because I must.'

'Often I have wished... for things to be different.'

I hold his gaze.

'What happened between us, it wasn't what I wanted,' he says, continuing to toy with his cap. Old feelings return, ones that I have been trying to forget, yet refuse to go away. His hair is ruffled and he is anxious. Compared to my now deceased husband, he seems but a boy.

'We've all been through so -' I say.

'Please, Gertje. There is something I must say.'

I nod. It is nice to hear him call me this once again.

He places his cap down on the table. 'My father... my family... they expect much from me.'

'Of course. You are the eldest son.'

'I couldn't marry you,' he blurts out.

'I know, Pieter. People were saying many things. Awful things.'

He looks to his feet, avoiding my stare. 'My father wouldn't hear of it. I wanted to see you... but then your father disappeared. When I heard you were to marry Willem Smekens...'

'I tried to find you, to tell you myself.'

'It can't have been easy, especially with such talk.'

'Talk?'

'Your grandmother. People say -'

'People say she cures the sick,' I say firmly. 'Such as your nieces.'

Pieter cringes at my words. 'I know, it was wrong, and I am sorry. But there is something I must tell you...'

I steady myself against a table. For so long had I hoped that Pieter would see that it had all been a misunderstanding.

He bites his bottom lip before continuing. 'I too am to become a parent.'

'Who?' I stammer.

'Katherina. We are to wed next month.'

I ease myself down slowly on the table edge. 'Do you love her?'

He pauses and looks at me solemnly. 'She is a fine woman. I'm sure, with time, I can grow to love her. I hope in time, you and I, we can be friends. Our children will be close in age.'

Getting to my feet, I walk to the door. 'Of course,' I say, holding it open.

'I wish only the best for you, Gertje,' he says.

'And I you.' I force a smile as he steps out onto the market square.

After the door closes behind him, I begin to sob. Not just for Pieter, but for my father too and perhaps my innocence. I long to be that girl once again, the one happy and cared for.

I hear Beatrix in the kitchen and the sound of something breaking. The maid, yet again so clumsy. Taking a deep breath, I tell myself there is work to be done. It is then I notice that Pieter left his cap behind. I pick it up and feel the wool between my fingers. It was not so long ago we were to be married; now everything is twisted and distorted. We are both to have children. He with a woman he doesn't love, and I carry Pauwel's child, a man I know intimately yet barely at all. What has become of me? I feel shame too, for the pleasure I experienced that evening. But then the child flutters inside my belly. My son who deserves my love and gives me purpose. Heading to the dining room, I pass the fire burning in the grate and throw Pieter's cap onto it.

I open the dining room door and am hit by the stench of the left-over food and drink. Heading towards the windows, I realise someone has not yet left. Still seated is the Astrologer, his head forward on the table.

‘Come now, Cornelis, it is morning.’ But he neither moves nor says anything.

‘Cornelis?’ I put my hand on his shoulders, his body stiff.

Looking down at the table, I see he has been sick, his face in vomit. I place my hand on his forehead and it is cold. Cornelis is dead.

‘I believe he was poisoned,’ the Physician announces. He is standing at the head of the table while the other men are seated. Word spread quickly and the men have hastily gathered. Barely five hours have passed since they last left their banquet and the body remains in the dining room, awaiting the arrival of the Sheriff. At the Physician’s insistence, Oma and I joined them.

‘How can you be sure?’ the Burgermeister asks. ‘After all, we ate the same meal, drank the same wine. Is anyone else feeling unwell?’

The men look to each other before shaking their heads.

‘So, it seems it is only our dear Astrologer,’ the Bookseller says.

‘He left with the rest of us,’ the Friar adds. ‘Why should he return? It makes no sense.’

The Lawyer clears his throat. ‘And as always, he ate little. What makes you suspect poison, Adriaen?’

‘Blood in his vomit...I have seen such a reaction before.’

The Burgermeister begins pacing the room, before slamming a chair to the side. ‘God verdoeme het!’

The other men sit nervously, apprehensive of what the Burgermeister will do next. Oma reaches over and gently takes my hand. I wonder if they are even aware of our presence. The Burgermeister leans down on the table, slowly looking around. ‘Who would commit such a crime to our Astrologer? They will pay dearly for this.’ He pauses when he reaches me. ‘Gertrud. I apologise. I am exhausted and in shock. I should not have raised my voice in your house.’

I nod. ‘I understand. Cornelis was a good man.’

The Lawyer sighs. ‘How do we know it wasn’t the food?’

‘Then we would all be as stiff as...’ the Bookseller says.

‘Really Jacob,’ the Artist interrupts, ‘Cornelis has barely stopped breathing.’

The Burgermeister turns and faces me. ‘Your Cook... he is new, is he not?’

I nod. ‘He came to work for us two weeks ago. He was highly recommended.’

‘That’s right, I endorsed the man,’ the Lawyer says. ‘He worked for the Royal Court of King Charles himself.’

‘And his reason for coming to Antwerpen?’ the Burgermeister asks.

‘He recently married a young woman of this city,’ the Lawyer replies.

‘There seems no obvious reason to suspect the man. Especially as no one else is afflicted,’ the Burgermeister continues. ‘And serving the food, I do believe it was yourself, the Cook and a young boy?’

I nod. ‘There was no one else.’

The back door opens and the Sheriff appears, ducking as he enters the kitchen. ‘Twice in barely six months,’ he declares, shaking the hands of the Burgermeister and the Physician before looking around the kitchen. ‘It seems this inn attracts trouble.’

‘You cannot think there is any connection between Willem’s death and Cornelis?’ the Artist asks.

The Burgermeister remains standing, holding himself tall before the Sheriff. ‘Yes, what are you implying?’

‘I am not implying anything,’ the Sheriff says. ‘I am simply stating a fact. Two men have died at this inn. Surely I am not the only one to find this rather... unusual?’

‘Willem was killed at the hands of an angry playwright,’ The Physician says slowly. ‘An impulsive act, no doubt. This situation with Cornelis is different. If my early hypothesis is true, he was poisoned, which means it was planned.’

The Sheriff leans against the window-sill, his arms folded across his chest. ‘Poisoned?’

‘I will need to further tests. But there was blood in his vomit. And the smell... it may well be Black Hellebore, but I cannot say for sure.’

The Sheriff looks around at the men. ‘Who was the last to see him?’

‘He left with Claus and me,’ the Bookseller replies. ‘We walked together as far as Dominicans before he headed in the direction of Greyfriars... appeared in good spirits, a little tired, but nothing more.’

‘Did he say if he was meeting anyone?’ the Sheriff asks.

The Bookseller shakes his head. ‘I assumed he was heading home.’

‘He lives near Greyfriars,’ the Lawyer adds.

‘And no one else saw him after that?’ the Sheriff continues.

The men look to each other, shaking their heads. ‘It appears not,’ the Burgermeister says.

‘And you, ladies?’ the Sheriff continues, turning to Oma and me.

‘I was out visiting the de Bot family,’ my Grandmother replies. ‘They have two sick babies. I was there until late. When I returned the men had already left. My granddaughter can confirm this.’

The Sheriff looks to me and I feel my cheeks burning. All I can think of is Carel's remark that he had overheard Oma speaking with Cornelis.

'That is correct,' I say, hoping he will not doubt my honesty.

'Very well. Now if you ladies would be so kind as to leave us. There are matters that do not concern you.'

I am relieved when the Astrologer's body is finally removed and shortly afterwards the men begin to leave.

The Lawyer approaches me as he puts on his cloak. 'It is in everyone's best interest to proceed quickly with transferring the deeds to Hendryk.'

His words cut through me, causing my chest to ache. I will not give up the inn so easily. All the pain I have endured, the acts I have committed, have all been to help the ones I love. And now the child I carry; I must also provide for him. So much depends on the inn. Drawing my breath, I hold myself tall to look the Lawyer in the eyes. 'The Astrologer's death is shocking, but we do not yet know the circumstances to which it came about. I ask you, please do not act hastily.'

'First Willem and now Cornelis. The other men and I... we are concerned. Whereas once we had a strong brotherhood, now it seems there are weaknesses. It is imperative that we get back to the stability we once had. We believe Hendryk can provide this.'

I consider telling him of Hendryk intentions to sell the inn, but I know he will only deny it. Until I can prove what he has planned, it will be his word over mine.

'I will draw up the paperwork,' Claus says. 'Come to my office tomorrow. Hendryk will also be there. It will not take long.'

It is not until later that afternoon when I managed to speak with Oma alone, away from prying eyes and ever alert ears.

'I am very tired, Gertje, does this require my attention?' my grandmother sighs, sitting down on a stool. We are seated upstairs in our room, the inn closed and the servants retired for the evening.

'Cornelis' death raises many questions,' I say, joining her before the fire.

'Poor dear man.'

'Carel said that he heard you speaking with Cornelis, when you returned last night.'

Oma looks to me, surprised. 'I was not aware... Carel?'

'He was asleep in the kitchen.'

'I see... If I do not tell you of matters, it is for a good reason.'

'If I must lie for you then surely I can know why.'

'Goodness, child,' my grandmother snaps, looking away. 'You must know I think only of your welfare and that of the babe you carry.'

I take her hand in mine. 'A man has died. You must tell me what you know.'

'Enough, Gertje, enough. Must you gnaw on a single bone?'

'Oma, I am no longer a child.'

'You are becoming a woman, I can see that,' she sighs. 'But we are entangled in things we know nothing about.'

'You and Cornelis?'

She sighs. 'We met last night. He was dear friend... he asked me to provide him with some herbs.'

'You... you gave him... the?'

'Cornelis was a sick man... the pain tortured him. I warned him to take only a small amount.'

'Do you think he took too much?'

Oma shrugs. 'It's possible. But he was a learned man. He knew to be careful.'

'Why would he go to the dining room?'

Oma shrugs. 'Perhaps he was seeking something to drink?'

'Should anyone...'

'Hush now. No one is aware I met Cornelis. I was at the de Bots' all evening. They will vouch for it.'

'And the last time you saw him?'

'He kissed me and then left to go home.' As she speaks, the pain is evident in her eyes. 'I did not know it would be the last time...'

I recall the times Oma has slipped away without reason. Had they been to visit the Astrologer? The looks between her and Cornelis, I had assumed to be nothing more than respect. Was it love?

I wake earlier the following morning. I have an idea to expose Hendryk, but it requires much to fall into place before my meeting at the Lawyer's office, in only a few hours.

'Ah Jeroen, prompt again with your delivery,' I remark, walking out into the courtyard.

He leans against his wagon, six vats neatly stacked against the wall. 'You're making a good trade, Gertrud. Doubled your order in the last month. I hope this continues.'

'Alas, the situation here is going to change shortly. The inn is to be sold to another.'

'Oh, that's a shame. I had hoped we would continue working together.'

‘Still, there is no reason why your business should suffer. The gentleman who will be purchasing the inn is called Meneer de Jonge. He runs a small kroeg by Red Gate. If you tell him that Gertrud sent you, I’m sure you’ll be able to come to an arrangement with him.’

He nods. ‘It has been a pleasure. But you are most generous. I shall visit Meneer de Jonge this afternoon.’

I smile and wave as he leaves the courtyard with his wagon. If all goes well, not only has Jeroen another customer, but I will have evidence to reveal Hendryk and his plan to sell on the inn.

‘Carel,’ I call out as I tie my winter cloak around my shoulders and pull the hood up.

‘Yes?’ the boy says, appearing quickly.

‘Are you sure you know where to find me?’

‘Meneer Spelman’s offices, on Princes Street.’

‘And you must ask Jeroen for his order with Meneer de Jonge.’

‘Yes, Meneer de Jonge’s,’ he says, repeating my words carefully.

Oma stands by the doorway. ‘Oh Gertje, you don’t even know the men agreed to anything.’

‘One wants to sell crabbelaer, and the other can sell it to him. It is my only hope.’

I turn back to Carel. ‘Tell Jeroen it is of utmost importance I borrow the order. That if all goes well, I will ensure that he provides all the beer, wine and spirits for the inn.’

‘Really Gertje!’ Oma exclaims.

‘I am asking him to trust me. I must offer something in return,’ I say, before turning back to the boy. ‘Now, run Carel! As fast as you can.’

I arrive at the Lawyer’s office early and discover Hendryk already there.

‘Do come in Gertrud. Please sit down. Everything is prepared,’ Claus Spelman says, ushering me into his small but elegant office, dominated by a large mahogany desk.

I take a seat beside Hendryk and begin to read the document the Lawyer places before me. My grandmother and I are to be provided with rooms in the New Town area, some distance away from the Grote Markt. A small allowance is to be provided by Hendryk until such time as I remarry. We would not go hungry.

‘I believe your husband’s brother has been most reasonable. He will take over the running of the inn immediately. A relief, I am sure.’

‘You and your child will be provided for,’ Hendryk adds.

I smile though say nothing. Inside I am seething. Being reliant on this man is something I pray will not happen.

‘Meneer Smekens will also provide for his nephew’s upbringing,’ Claus Spelman continues.

I look to the door, but there is no sign of Carel. The boy runs fast; he should have been here by now. I try to remain calm, reminding myself that one egg remains in my nest, as Oma would say.

I ask a few questions regarding the property that will be rented on my behalf, keen only to stall proceedings, but it does not take long for the Lawyer to become impatient. ‘I assure you; all is in hand.’

There is a knock at the door and the Lawyer’s assistant enters the room before whispering into the Lawyer ear.

‘Very well,’ he snaps. The man disappears, closing the door behind him.

‘Now Gertrud,’ the Lawyer says, holding out a quill. ‘If you would sign at the bottom of the page?’

‘And my son,’ I begin. But before I can continue, the assistant once again enters, this time handing a piece of paper to Hendryk. He nods before unfolding it.

‘Really. I am a very busy man. Is it important?’ the Lawyer remarks.

Hendryk begins to rub his forehead. ‘It is an order... why it has been delivered here, I have no -’

‘May I see that,’ the Lawyer asks, holding out his hand and accepting the paper. ‘Why, this is an order for the inn, for next month.’

‘It is not important,’ Hendryk replies. ‘If I may have it back?’

The Lawyer continues reading. ‘This is not with the stamp of the Antwerp Brewers Guild.’

‘I... I’m... sure there is an explanation,’ Hendryk replies.

The Lawyer sighs before throwing the paper down on the table. ‘I should like to hear it?’ He sits back, staring at Hendryk. ‘The Burgermeister has made it very clear. All taverns and inns in Antwerpen must only use breweries approved by the Guild.’

Hendryk looks to me, confused, but I say nothing.

‘Then it must be a mistake. I assure you; I will see that this is rectified immediately,’ he stammers.

The Lawyer picks up the page again. ‘Crabbelaer? From Gent! Once the Guild finds out...’

‘I know nothing about this,’ Hendryk says.

‘And this signature?’ the Lawyer asks, pointing to the bottom of the page.

I close my eyes briefly, praying it will reveal the name I am hoping for but Hendryk remains silent.

‘I do believe it says... Meneer de Jonge,’ the Lawyer says. ‘Why does this order not contain your name?’

Hendryk leans forward in his chair. ‘A misunderstanding...’

'Indeed there has been. Who is this Meneer de Jonge? I certainly know no one of that name. And why would he be paying for next month's supply of beer?'

'A partnership is all...' Hendryk stammers.

'Are you telling me, you entered into a partnership, without first discussing it with me?'

'I... this can all very quickly rectified.'

'That won't be necessary,' the Lawyer says, getting to his feet. 'My associates and I, we expect the utmost discretion.'

I see sweat forming on Hendryk's forehead. 'Meneer Spelmen, I assure you. You can trust me.'

'Trust you?' The Lawyer laughs as he crosses the room before opening the door. 'If you would see yourself out?'

'Please, sir. This is a misunderstanding, is all. I can resolve this.'

'I do not take kindly to deception and nor do my associates. I strongly advise that you leave Antwerpen at once, Meneer Smekens.'

After Hendryk has left, the Lawyer sits back down and sighs. 'Well Gertrud, it seems the inn is determined to cause me strife!'

I hold myself tall, my chin upright. 'Not necessarily.'

'Dear girl,' he laughs. 'You simply cannot continue to run the inn.'

'I do believe I can.' I take a deep breath. 'My husband was more than just an innkeeper to you and your associates. I know he was a... shall we say... a broker?'

The Lawyer stares at me. 'What do you know?'

'My husband was a clever man. His value came in not revealing what he knew. And if I am to fill his shoes, then I must do the same.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'That I become your Keeper of Secrets, sir.'

The Lawyer stares at me and I hold his gaze. 'What we had worked -' he begins.

'If I may interject?' My heart pounds as I speak.

He nods.

I close my eyes briefly before continuing, feeling the child inside me kicking and turning. 'It worked because you did not know each other's secrets.'

'Such a role... it is not easy.' His eyes are narrow and his brow wrinkled, yet he does not stop me from continuing.

'If I may be so bold... who would suspect a woman?'

He laughs. 'True indeed. Who would suspect a woman!'

I sit rigidly in my chair, my lips trembling. 'We have a deal?'

The Lawyer sits back in his chair. 'Provided the child is a boy,' he says finally, 'the inn becomes his, and you his guardian. Then yes, we have a deal.'

chapter fifteen

Lawyer

“Woman’s insatiable sexual drives can only be characterised as a ploy to ruin man’s health and drain him of his vitality.”

Jean de Marconville, De l’Heur et malheur de mariage, 1564

January 1549

The servants have cleared away our course of woodcock and thrush and have just brought sweetmeats and spiced wines to the table. It is a simple yet elegant meal, served on plates made of pewter.

The Lawyer helps himself to more wine. ‘I hope the meal is to your liking?’

‘The bird is delicious,’ I reply graciously, before turning to Marta. ‘But of course, moderation is best.’

The quantities are meagre, but that is only due to the pious nature of the Lawyer’s wife, and not in any way a reflection of their wealth or status.

Marta smiles. ‘We do not overindulge. Good for neither the soul nor the body.’

The Lawyer’s wife is a devout Christian, simple in appearance and sharp of tongue. She is well known for her strict religious doctrines; only the bravest would choose to cross her path. But she nods in approval at my remark. Oma and I have dressed plainly for our visit and our hair covered with modest caps. Yet our hostess’s dour appearance makes us appear almost elegant.

Claus and Marta are an odd match; his liking of the finer things all too clear. A secular lawyer, he is much smaller than his tall wife, with a hawk-like nose that dominates his heavily lined face. An influential figure, many a time have I heard his name whispered at the inn. Not just a lawyer who can negotiate deals and prepare legal papers, he is someone to go to if you find yourself in a difficult predicament. So long as you can pay handsomely. While their home is austere, the few pieces of furniture and the artwork that hangs on the walls reflect the fee he charges. And residing on Princes Street, a most fashionable district among eminent businessmen, traders, and foreign dignitaries, it would be foolish to think they lead the pauper’s life Marta so highly praises.

‘Has there been progress on Cornelis’s murder?’ Marta asks.

Claus sighs. ‘If there is, then the Sheriff is keeping it to himself. Though poison has been confirmed. Adriaen was correct. Black Hellebore.’

‘A common enough flower,’ Oma remarks.

'It would appear someone placed it in his food or wine. But why? Our dear Astrologer had so few enemies. Has the Sheriff spoken with your servants?' Claus asks.

'On numerous occasions,' I reply. 'But I see no reason for the servants to be involved.'

The Lawyer nods. 'The young boy? What is his connection to you?'

'A street child,' Oma replies. 'On occasion, we permit him to sleep in the kitchen.'

'Could it be that someone paid him to put something in his food?' Claus suggests.

I shake my head. 'Carel is a suspicious child, and fearful of men. I doubt anyone could even approach him, let alone convince him to do such a deed,'

'Such wickedness!' Marta snaps. 'Deeds of the devil himself.'

The Lawyer reaches across and pats his wife's hand, however she snatches it away quickly.

'Let us talk of more pleasant things,' he says. 'Now Gertrud, how is business at the inn?'

'We are doing well enough,' I say, sipping my wine.

Marta sits up primly in her chair. 'But is it an acceptable profession for two women? Especially in your... condition.'

'As soon as we can afford to, we will employ more help,' I say, resting my hands on my now obvious swelling. It is becoming more difficult to sit still for a time with the child's frequent movements.

The Lawyer pours more wine into our goblets. 'Have you considered other... uses for the inn... to make it work for you, shall we say?'

'I'm not sure what you mean,' I say.

'The rooms above the inn, how many do you have?' he continues.

'Two, that is all. Where my grandmother and I live.'

'And over the stable?'

'Why, there are more on the other side of the courtyard, above the stable, yes, but these are in a very poor state.'

'Our man-servant lives in one,' Oma adds.

The Lawyer rubs his chin. 'I require... accommodation. Perhaps these rooms might be suitable?'

I fear he has untoward purposes, for he is known for frequenting the city's brothels. 'I very much doubt they would be of any use to you. As I said, they are in much need of repair.'

'Perhaps we may be able to assist one another?' he says, smiling awkwardly with a lopsided mouth.

'Assist?' I am wary of Meneer Spelman. He is not a man to engage in any arrangement unless it is swayed heavily in his favour.

'I have important visitors who regularly come to Antwerpen on business. They need comfortable rooms that are well located... and discreet.'

'The city often has visiting foreigners,' Oma remarks. 'I hear it is often difficult to find accommodation.'

The Lawyer nods. 'Very true.'

'Perhaps you should see the rooms first,' I say. 'I expect they are in much worse condition than you realise. It will take a lot of work to make them inhabitable. And money.' Money which I do not have.

Claus leans forward. 'This is what I propose: I pay for the repairs and to decorate the rooms to a high standard. In return, you let my visitors stay for no charge.'

It seems a reasonable deal, which makes me suspicious.

'Who might these visitors be?' Oma asks.

'Business-men, important people, members of the Guild and the like. Highly respectable people who need to come and go and conduct their business with a certain level of discretion. I assure you that nothing inappropriate will take place in your establishment.'

'Surely there are inns across the city more suitable than this one?' my Grandmother says.

'Your inn is... shall we say... modest. It draws no attention upon itself.'

'The offer is generous...' I begin.

'Then I shall call by tomorrow morning!' the Lawyer interrupts, sitting back in his chair, smiling.

I empty the contents of the purse onto the table before us.

'Oh my!' Oma exclaims. 'The inn does not make so much money in a year.'

I nod. 'It seems the Lawyer has grand plans. The rooms above our humble stable are to be transformed.'

'He does not waste any time. He decided all of this, after just one visit?'

'And he knows builders who can start work on the repairs immediately.'

Oma picks up some of the coins and holds them in her hands. 'Is he having the king come to stay?'

'They must be decorated to a very high standard. Fine furniture, tapestries, paintings... But can we trust the man? Such an arrangement... it means we are becoming entangled with Claus Spelman. I cannot doubt his generosity, but he is a clever man. He will, undoubtedly, benefit handsomely from the deal.'

'There is more in it for him than an empty herring,' Oma remarks.

I sigh. 'The Lawyer is not a man to upset unduly.'

'Then we must use the situation to our advantage. Raising the standards of the inn can only be to our benefit. And with the money you are now earning from the Physician, you could also put that to good purpose, no?'

'I suppose we could also decorate the dining room. Offer our refined guests a pleasant room to partake of their meals?' The room has not been used since the Astrologer's death and I am keen to remove all traces of the dreadful happening.

'It would seem fortuitous. If we are to have overnight guests, they will need somewhere to eat their meals in quiet, away from the bustle of the inn. I'm sure your father would agree.'

My father is never far from our thoughts and I often wonder what he would think if he returned to discover we now run an inn. 'I feel uneasy using the money from the Physician. But this place does need work.'

'Powerful men, such as Claus Spelman and Adriaen Tillens, will always get their way,' Oma replies. 'I suspect there is more in it than an empty herring.'

'There usually is when it comes to my benefactors, but they reveal so little. Papa would not approve of such dealings.'

'Your father would understand the choices you have been forced to make. Perhaps it is just a mother's silliness, but I always feel Niklaas is with us in spirit. But you should not underestimate yourself, Gertje. Look around you. We have a home, an income, and you have a child. When your father returns, he will be proud of his daughter.'

'Such time has passed but until I know of Papa's fate, I will not rest. Anthony's tells me his contacts continue to ask around Brussel, but not a trace. Still, I have hope.'

'Ah, I miss him so,' Oma says.

I hug her. 'So we shall accept the Lawyer's arrangement then?'

'I'm not so sure you have any choice, if I'm honest with you, Gertje.'

As Oma and I head back from the Vleeshuis, our baskets filled with mutton and sausages, I notice the Friar standing before a small crowd gathering on the Grote Markt. 'God is our refuge and strength,' he declares loudly. His name is Peter Goossens, another of my benefactors. I know little of him for he rarely visits the inn and even then, it is only at the request of the Burgermeister.

Oma and I pause for a moment, intrigued at what he has to say.

'Carnival will be upon us in three short months. I compel you to reject all that it represents,' the Friar continues. 'There is no place in our good city for such pagan rituals.' His voice booms over the

crowd, his face distorted as he gestures extravagantly. 'Look no further than the visiting play of last year. Representing the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, they say! But what do such depictions bring about? I challenge you! Most deplorable behaviour. Encouraging acts that are little short of scandal, especially in those who are not firm in their holy Catholic faith. When they see the disorders and excesses of these plays, why, they only want to emulate it!'

'Never believe someone who carries fire in one hand and water in the other,' Oma whispers in my ear.

'My, look who has come to hear our good Friar speak?' says a voice from behind.

I turn around to be confronted by a large woman wearing an apron and cap. I recognise her as one of the women that takes in washing.

'Their inn is licensed to encourage overindulgence and wanton behaviour,' she declares, pointing her finger directly at Oma and me.

'They say she converses with pagan gods and demons,' says a woman standing beside her. She looks at me with disdain.

Others move in closer, gathering in a circle around us.

A man leans in close to my face. 'Husband dead... and father... where is he?'

'She carries a child. How is that possible?' another asks.

'And the Astrologer? Found poisoned at the inn!' a woman adds.

'Heks!' an elderly woman declares, moving in closer to poke me in the arm.

Oma takes my hand in hers, but we are hemmed in and unable to move.

'Pair of witches! Beware! Or they shall cast bad luck upon you,' another shouts.

Others in the crowd have noticed the exchange and have stopped watching the Friar and are watching with interest. I take a deep breath and feel the baby kick inside me.

I look around, desperate to recognise someone, a familiar face who might come to our rescue. But there is no-one I know. I push away hands as they begin to tug at my skirt, wrapping my trembling arms around my belly.

'Be gone with you,' an old woman snarls, pushing at my arm. 'We don't want you in Antwerpen.'

'Stay right where you are,' a firm voice announces. I turn around and see that it is Mevrouw de Bot, the fishmonger's wife.

She steps in front of the crowd. 'Aliet and Gertrud Vermeulen are going nowhere. They have as much right as any of you, to hear the good word of the Lord.'

'Right? And who are you to declare so?' a man says, stepping forward to face her.

'I am Mevrouw de Bot. Only three months ago my daughter, Ida, would surely have died in childbirth. No medical man would call upon us, yet this good woman,' she says, pointing to Oma,

'she came out at night during a gale, and saw to the safe delivery of the child. Thanks to the kindness of these women, I have a daughter and a granddaughter today.'

Another woman moves forward. 'Ah, she speaks the truth. Aliet also helped deliver my neighbour's child.'

The man steps away, the crowd finally loses interest and turns back to the Friar. I breathe a sigh of relief.

'How is little Lote?' my grandmother asks, after thanking Mevrouw de Bot for her help.

'Ah, she's a hungry one. My poor Ida struggles to keep up with her demands. The babe cries from morning to night, wanting more and then more. Her mother cries from the pain. Perhaps if you might look in upon her?'

Oma nods. 'I will visit Ida later this afternoon.'

'You have a kind heart, Aliet. Call by at the stall, any time. We have some lovely mackerel just in.'

We leave the Friar on the square and return to the inn, but if I am hoping for a quiet afternoon, one is not in store. I discover a heated argument taking place in the main chamber, between the Bookseller and a merchant. It is the same merchant that was with him in the stable, looking at the painting of two witches.

'Whatever is going on?' I whisper to Beatrix.

'It is over a painting, ma'am. Jacob paid a grand sum for it and now it seems it's an imitation. Meneer Merckx is one of Antwerpen's leading art merchants.'

I can well see why both men would be angered. If the painting is not an original, it would cause a huge stir and even ruin the merchant's reputation.

'How long has this been going on?'

'At least an hour. They asked Lodewijk if they might have access to sir's study, but he does not have the key.'

'Ah! Gertrud,' shouts out the Bookseller.

I head over to the table where six goblets sit empty.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen,' I say, standing before them.

'Perhaps you could help settle this matter?' the merchant declares. 'Our good friend here is concerned that a painting I sold him is a forgery.'

'I am no art expert,' I say, shrugging.

'No, my dear, not concerning the painting itself,' the Bookseller says. 'It is regarding some papers. I had the painting checked by an authority who says it is a forgery.'

'It is genuine,' the merchant says, raising his hands in disgust.

‘An official from the Guild of Saint Luke inspected it. He says it’s a copy. A very good copy but he has no doubt. The painting is not original.’

‘There is a letter of provenance,’ the merchant continues, his voice raised.

‘As you keep informing me,’ the Bookseller snaps, ‘but I have yet to see it.’

‘Mevrouw Smekens,’ the merchant says, turning to me. ‘This is where you may be able to assist. The painting was originally for Willem, you see.’

‘My husband purchased the painting?’ I ask, recalling all too well the depiction of two naked women.

‘Not exactly. He was interested in the painting and arranged for me to acquire it on his behalf. I left him with the letter to prove its authenticity and was to bring him the painting the following week. But then the unfortunate event of his death meant that Meneer Maes was left with the picture and your husband in possession of the letter. Would you, by chance, have seen such a letter?’

‘I’m sorry, I haven’t. I have sorted through all of his papers and letters.’

‘Perhaps if you would permit me to have a look in his office?’ Maes asks. ‘I may have a better idea as to where it could be located.’

First the Physician, then Hendryk and now the Bookseller, all eager to search my husband’s office. There must be something I have overlooked. ‘If you know where it may be, I am happy to look again once I have had a key made. Or perhaps if you try Claus Spelman, Willem’s Lawyer, he may know more.’

Maes looks uneasy, before wiping his brow. ‘Thank you, Gertrud, but that won’t be necessary.’

The merchant shakes his head. ‘No, this painting... it was not something that your husband was going to put... shall we say, on public display. I very much doubt he would have informed Claus of the purchase. Despite its value.’

‘This painting, it is of some value?’ I enquire.

The merchant nods. ‘It is an original, despite my friend’s insistence that it is not.’

I turn to the Bookseller. ‘And you are now in possession of the painting?’

He nods. ‘But without the letter of authenticity...’

‘Then surely, my good sirs, this painting belongs to my husband. If you would be so good as to bring it around this evening, I will ensure that it is locked away.’

The Bookseller shifts uneasily on his stool. ‘I would strongly advise against that, Gertrud. Until such time as the letter of authenticity has been found, I will ensure its safekeeping.’

‘Very well. But I will inform my husband’s Lawyer of its existence. Good day, gentleman.’

I wait until Beatrix has left and Lodewijk has retired for the evening before I retrieve the key to Willem's study. Inside the small room, I go through the cupboard once again, checking shelves and looking through books, but there is nothing. Sitting down at the desk, I stare at the drawers on either side. I have been through them many times, and know they contain no papers. In despair, I run my hand over the top of the desk and then underneath. The timber is smooth and when I reach the back, my finger feels a tiny notch. Getting down on my knees I crawl under, taking a candle to look closely at the indentation. It is small, just wide enough to fit a finger, and as I push mine into it, I feel something loose at the end. Pressing, it suddenly releases. A piece of timber slides back, revealing an enclosed nook, no bigger than my hand. Inside are four pieces of paper, neatly folded. Retrieving them, I crawl out and sit down on Willem's chair.

The first document appears to be the deeds to a property. The second document I do not fully understand, but it appears to refer to an Antwerpen shipping company. The third is the letter of provenance, for the painting *Two Witches*, by the painter, Hans Baldung. The fourth, however, is written in a foreign language.

There is a knock at the door and I hear my grandmother's voice. I unlock the door and usher her inside, before locking it again. 'You were gone for a long time. How is Ida's daughter?'

Oma shakes her head. 'Worse than I'd hoped. She produces barely any milk. The child is much too small for her age.'

'They did not get a wet nurse?'

'Of course, but Ida is a stubborn girl. I left her with some herbs but they will not work so quickly. But what more can I do? Some people are beyond help. But whatever are you doing in here?'

I show her the documents. 'I found these a hidden compartment under the desk. It would seem Willem owned a stake in the Antwerpen Shipping Company.'

'My, your husband had more secrets than we realised,' she says, unfolding the pages. 'This is the property deeds for... The Chapel of Rose and Parrot. It looks like a house in the Streets of Stews.'

'Likely a brothel or a gambling den,' I sigh. 'I have found the letter of authenticity the Bookseller is after.'

Oma holds up a page. 'And this is written in English. Who knows what this contains?'

'May I see it, please?'

Oma hands it to me and I look at the foreign writing, none of which makes any sense, apart from my husband's signature at the end. Alongside it is another. 'There is an Englishman that comes to this inn. I do believe he has signed this document.'

I show her the paper.

'My!' she gasps. 'That would appear to be the signature of Henry Goodwyn!'

chapter sixteen

Friar

'Zotten!' the Lawyer declares, kicking his foot at the door frame. 'You call this craftsmanship! What do you think I'm paying for?' Timber come away from the wall to collapse onto the ground.

'I think you will find that is because we had not yet fixed the frame to the wall,' says one of the builders.

'Gek!' the Lawyer mutters, walking over to the newly installed hand railing that accompanies the vastly improved stairway leading to the first floor above the stable. 'Another two layers of polish,' he shouts out over the noise.

'A further coat will go on this afternoon,' the builder replies, a look of disdain on his face.

I step over a stack of beams lying in the hallway and lift my skirt slightly to avoid the sawdust.

'Do be careful, Gertrud. A building site is no place for a woman, especially in your condition,' Claus says, shaking his head.

'I was eager to see the rooms,' I say.

'There is little to see, I'm afraid. Progress has been very slow. I suspect I may need to find new men.' He says this remark loudly, intended for the ears of the builders, rather than mine.

'Perhaps I should be overseeing the work? When you are not here, of course,' I suggest.

The Lawyer laughs. 'That won't be necessary. Lodewijk is well informed of what needs to be done.' He turns to a man working on replacing floorboards. 'This timber, what is it?'

The man stares at him but says nothing.

'Well is it oak? I am damn well paying for oak.'

'I believe it is oak,' the man replies, heading off to find his foreman.

'You say Lodewijk is informed?' I ask, following behind the Lawyer as he strides into the next room. I have not seen any drawings so am surprised that he has shown these to my servant.

'What? Oh yes, Lodewijk. He has the plans and is working with Jan.'

'Jan?'

Claus stops and looks at me. 'Really Gertrud, such matters are of no concern for a woman. All is in hand. Perhaps if you concentrate on the furnishings?'

'I should...'

Before I can say more someone calls out from the bottom of the stairs.

'Ah! That will be Anthony's. Do come up,' Claus shouts out and a moment later the Artist comes bounding up the stairs.

‘Claus! Gertrud! Good morning to you both,’ he says brightly, stepping nimbly over the missing floorboards to join us in a room that is little more than a shell.

‘Thank you for stopping by,’ the Lawyer replies, shaking his hand. ‘Still, a lot of work to be done. The men are behind schedule. My goodness, Anthony, what is that hat upon your head?’

It is a wide hat with a large feather coming out of one side. I find it rather fetching for the Artist has such attractive features, with high cheekbones and a fine chin.

‘I thought it rather grand,’ Anthony replies, looks around. ‘You have wasted no time. New joists I see.’

Claus nods. ‘New floors, a new roof... why we’re virtually rebuilding this damn stable.’

‘So, how can I be of assistance? Alas, these hands are more suited to the paintbrush than hard labour!’

‘Well, I thought, given your recent admittance to the Guild, you might be able to offer some advice?’

‘You’ve been accepted?’ I gasp. The Guild of St. Luke’s represents only the most prominent painters in Antwerpen. To be admitted is prestigious and recognition of a truly talented artist.

Anthony blushes but his wide grin reveals his pride. ‘Last week, in fact.’

‘I want to purchase a painting for each of the four chambers,’ the Lawyer says. ‘But not just any paintings, you understand. I want significant pieces of art. From renowned painters. Our guests will be expecting handsome accommodation.’

‘Of course,’ Anthony replies. He takes out a ruler to measure the size of the wall. ‘Perhaps.... I know of a landscape by Patinir that is coming up for sale. It will fetch a high price but...’

Claus shakes his head. ‘No, no, no... Patinir’s work is beautiful but it is not... stimulating enough...’

‘Perhaps something by Bosch?’

Claus raises an eyebrow, ‘Hmmm... that might be interesting...’

‘Excuse me, sir,’ a builder interrupts. ‘But you wanted to know of the timber?’

‘If you’ll excuse me a moment,’ Claus remarks, before turning to speak with the foreman.

‘And what do you think of your stable now?’ Anthony asks.

‘It is quite something. The inn will seem rather shabby once the accommodation is completed.’

‘I suspect that is part of the appeal. In any case, I’m sure in time you will be able to have work done on the inn.’

I nod. ‘I think I will start with the dining room.’

‘Why don’t you consider purchasing a painting? The right piece of art can transform a room.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’

‘Oak! I damn well said oak,’ the Lawyer shouts out behind us.

'It will be replaced,' the foreman replies, before rolling his eyes and walking away.

'Of course it will!' Claus snaps.

'Come to the Schilderspand,' Anthony's suggests.

I have heard of the permanent painting market but certainly never visited. 'I couldn't... not to such a grand place.'

'Nonsense, Gertrud. It has paintings of all types and prices. I'm sure we can find something suitable. I should be happy to escort you.'

His eyes sparkle as he speaks and I am quite taken with the idea of visiting the Schilderspand, especially if it is Anthony's who will show me around.

'An excellent idea,' the Lawyer says, joining our conversation. 'And Gertrud can select some paintings for these rooms.'

'That's settled then,' Anthony's replies. 'Second floor of the new Stock Exchange building. Do you think you can find that? You can't miss it. Cross the bridge and it's the building with magnificent stone columns out the front.'

Some days later I accept Anthony's offer and visit the Schilderspand. I discover a huge hall, well-lit by large gabled windows along each side. Half walls rise towards the ceiling and divide the room into smaller galleries. It is around lunchtime and I fear I have chosen a poor time to visit as it is so very busy, the hall filled with keen art admirers. I pass landscapes of mountains and strange foreign vistas of places I could not name. Paintings of all sizes hang on the walls, some so large they take up an entire panel, others with scenes depicting stories from the Bible, or of myths and legends. Large ornate frames surround the paintings, the gold embossing glittering in the midday sunshine. Some of the Guild's artists idle beside their work, chatting with potential buyers, ever hopeful to catch the eye of a wealthy patron. I find Anthony's standing alone in a quiet gallery at the far end of the hall. He looks resplendent in his velvet trousers, a bright white shirt and enormous lace collar.

'Ah, Gertrud,' he says, taking my hand to bring it to his lips. 'How delightful!'

'Thank you, Anthony's. But... so many paintings, I barely know where to begin.'

'Then I shall guide you. Tell me, what is it that you require?'

'To be honest, I'm not sure. It should be fitting for a dining room. And the cost? How does one know...'

'Why, that is easy. The paintings are weighed. Now, let us begin.' He leads me back down the hall, asking me questions as we go. He moves with a skip in his step and speaks loudly so that I can hear him over the chatter and noise from the gathered art admirers.

'A religious depiction?'

I recall the large painting of Christ and his disciples, in Pauwel's studio. The place where my son was conceived. I shake my head.

Anthony continues to move onward, gesturing wildly as he does so. 'Perhaps a portrait?'

'I should like to have something interesting hanging upon the wall. Something that would... encourage conversations.'

'Why my dear, you are turning into quite the humanist! But... perhaps... yes...' weaving his way through the busy hall. He moves with such flair and grace that I cannot help but smile. He stops at a gallery filled with paintings of village scenes, peasants and merriment. I slowly peruse the paintings, looking at each one intently. They are intriguing but one particularly catches my attention. A strange depiction of villagers busy playing music, games and tricks upon each other. 'Why, how captivating! The artist?'

'Jan Mandijn. It's called *The Mocking of Job*. He has more.' He moves onto the next painting. 'This is *The temptation of Saint-Antonius*.'

But it is the painting beside it that captures my attention. 'And this one?'

'I do believe this is called *The Satirical Banquet*. But... are you sure? It is a wedding scene after all, and the bride is none too happy.' Anthony looks at me curiously and I understand his hesitation. Surely the depiction of an unhappy wedding is too much of a reminder. But there is something more to the work. Something that I find truly compelling.

'A peasant wedding. Why it is truly magnificent,' I remark boldly.

'I'm not sure peasants are so appealing.' I can see he is eager to move on.

'Are they not a reminder to be thankful for what we have? That there are others, much less fortunate?'

He sighs. 'You have a kind soul, Gertrud. Perhaps you are right. Reminding others to be more grateful is not a bad thing. Come! Let us see some of Bosch's work.'

I nod and feel a tightening in my chest, recalling Bosch's painting at the Masquerade Ball.

'Perhaps you might like to meet an artist who has started painting in a style similar to Bosch. Jacob Maes, the bookseller, is holding a banquet on Thursday evening. This artist will be attending. Perhaps you would care to join me?'

'I would love to Anthony. Very much so!'

'These chambers over the stable,' the Friar begins. We are sitting in a pew at the back of the cathedral. He requested I meet him there alone. The young Friar is a good-natured man, who comes

only to the inn when requested by the Burgermeister. Although pious in his ways, he is weak-willed and susceptible to the beckoning of the brandy jug.

‘It will provide accommodation for travellers. Surely one of the intended purposes of an inn?’ I say perplexed. He fidgets in his seat and looks around us, nervously.

‘It is not so much the... provision of... lodgings that concern me.’ He struggles with his words, his agitation only making his impediment worse. ‘More the... the type of accommodation you are offering. And, shall we say, the customers it will attract,’ he continues.

I find his comment amusing. Despite his regular sermons espousing the virtues of restraint and simple living, I have witnessed the Friar partaking in the pleasures of gluttony and alcohol. And if talk is true, perhaps also the flesh.

‘Then I’m afraid you would be best to speak with Claus Spelman. But he assures me nothing... inappropriate... will take place in the rooms.’

The Friar wears a long brown robe with a rope belt around his middle. I can just see his sandals peeping out from beneath his hem.

‘The Lord does not approve of such extravagance and excess.’ He turns and looks at me closely, making me feel most uncomfortable. ‘I implore you to reconsider.’

‘But I have gone into an agreement with Claus. The chambers are almost ready. I give you my word, as much as it is within my control to prevent it, nothing ungodly will take place under my roof.’

‘Dear Gertrud. I fear for your soul. You are but a young and, dare I say it, innocent woman.’ Then he leans forward and whispers, ‘I must warn you! You are playing with the Devil.’ As he speaks, his words arrive more quickly, his stutter worsening. He is clearly distressed. And then he gets up quickly and walks away, leaving me to watch in horror as his brown robe disappears into the distance.

‘Welcome to my home, gentlemen, ladies!’ Jacob declares, holding up a goblet. ‘Tonight we celebrate Abraham and Anthonys becoming members of the Guild of Saint Luke’s!’

In the Bookseller’s dining room are gathered some of Antwerpen’s finest artists. I am sitting beside Abraham Ortelius, a map-engraver with a growing reputation. I have accompanied Anthonys, but Sara, the Bookseller’s wife, has placed him at the other end of the table.

‘What a... pretty dress,’ Sara says. She smiles at me, as she sits opposite, and I notice she is discreetly inspecting my dress. I touch my bare neckline, conscious that I wear no jewellery. Sara is most exquisite, with fair hair that frames her porcelain features. ‘You know, yellow is such a lovely colour. I don’t know why we don’t choose it more often.’ Her gown is made of burgundy velvet with

large navy sleeves that gather together at her hands, in folds of soft white satin. Across her milky white décolletage is a string of beads.

'Thank you,' I reply, my cheeks beginning to colour. I am wearing a gown that once belonged to my mother but is no longer fashionable. My growing belly has left me with only a few dresses that still fit, and there was no time to have one made. Oma added a panel to the skirt, but its yellow colour does little to complement my complexion.

'Gertrud looks delightful,' Jacob remarks.

On the wall behind Sara are numerous paintings. A dour-looking woman stares down upon me, wearing a black dress and a high neckline. Her hand rests on her stomach. Perhaps she too is pregnant and is judging me for my lie. Alongside the portrait is a scene from the Bible, where angelic children bathe in a river while a man and a woman sit together on the banks. A family, as it should be. How I long for my child to have the same.

'Tell us of your plans!' Jacob asks Abraham.

'I hope to one day draw a map of the world,' he replies.

'When you do, you must permit me to sell it in my shop,' Jacob declares jovially. He laughs but I sense the Bookseller is an astute trader, always on the lookout.

Sara watches her husband intently and although she says nothing, she makes no effort to conceal a yawn. The meal arrives, consisting of oranges and lemons, a *pigg* sauced with tongue, a tart in puff pastry and preserved fruit and pippins.

'And you Pieter, when shall we celebrate your admittance to the Guild?' Jacob asks. On my other side sits the painter Pieter Bruegel. He is a young artist who is attracting much attention in the art community, having recently joined the studio of Coecke van Aelst.

'First, I intend to travel to Italy... to learn from the Italian masters,' he says, before turning to me. 'Do you have an interest in art?'

'An interest, yes, but I know very little. I do enjoy looking at paintings though. Do you have plans to paint our city?' I can see that Anthony's is watchful of my conversation with the painter.

'Perhaps, although I also like to paint people,' Bruegel replies.

'Portraits?'

'No, not as such,' he says. 'I prefer to paint... common people. I am so very fascinated by folk celebrations.'

'Such as Carnival?'

'Carnival, yes. But also, the festivities that occur in our small villages. I would very much like to attend a peasant wedding one day.'

I am conscious of Anthony's eyes fixed on me. He seems to have little desire to speak with Sara, showing only enough interest so as not to appear rude. His goblet is yet again empty, and I worry that he is becoming drunk and may soon make a spectacle of himself.

'The lives of peasants say much about our society,' Bruegel continues.

'Oh?' Jacob interjects, 'How interesting! And what exactly do peasants have to say?'

Bruegel sits upright. The room goes quiet and all eyes are on him. 'Not that they have anything to say, of course. But how they live, well... I do believe we should pay more attention. That is all.'

'He has a point,' Anthony remarks. 'More should be done to encourage the lower orders to behave... morally.'

'Morals?' Jacob scoffs. 'Do peasants even have such things! Shall we teach them to read and write next?'

I notice Bruegel's knees are bouncing under the table. 'Anything that might bring attention to some of the shameful behaviour that takes place in our villages and towns... well, it can only benefit us all.'

Anthony signals to the servants for more wine. 'Such prosperity in Antwerpen - if it is to be maintained... perhaps we need to find a means of overcoming... such differences in our community,' he says.

Jacob laughs. 'With your self-indulgent and effeminate ways, dear Anthony - since when did you care so much for peasants?'

I look to Anthony and see his face flush and his eyes glare at the Bookseller.

'That's if we can stop them *vogelen* in the hedges!' Abraham says crudely.

Sara touches her husband on the arm and he clears his throat. 'Perhaps we should speak of something else?'

'Did you hear of recent events in Leuven?' Anthony says. 'The sister of Quentin van Plaats and her husband have been trialed and convicted.'

'For?' Abraham enquires.

'Reading the Bible, apparently,' Anthony replies.

'What is to become of them?' I ask. The men go quiet and stare, surprised by my interruption.

Sara puts down her napkin and glares at me. 'I'm sure Gertrud does not wish to know the gruesome details.'

'It is a reasonable question,' Anthony says. 'Van Plaats is to be decapitated. His wife will be buried alive.'

I shiver to hear of such barbarity.

'These are dangerous times,' the Bookseller sighs. 'One cannot be too careful.'

'You publish books,' Abraham remarks, turning to Jacob. 'Where do you stand on printing the Bible in the vernacular?'

Jacob clears his throat. 'To do such a thing is treason.'

I am relieved when the evening finally draws to a close. It was an interesting night but the conversations were heavily laden, hinting at much that was not said nor did I fully comprehend. Anthony and I walk back to the inn beside the canal filled with frozen waters. He is not much taller than me and I enjoy being at his side, my hand resting lightly on his arm.

He slows his pace to match mine. 'Thank you for accompanying me.'

'It was a pleasure.'

'It seems the company of Pieter Bruegel was to your liking.' He says this in a jovial tone, though I sense he is a little annoyed at the attention I received.

'A talented young man with big ideas. However, in my humble opinion, not as skilled as you.'

He stops and stands before me, grinning. 'Ah! You tease me so!'

I find him so very handsome when he smiles. His hair has fallen in his eyes and his cheeks have become dimpled.

'Not at all,' I say, laughing. We keep walking and as we approach a tavern, he places a protective arm around my shoulder. Despite the cold air, I feel warm against his body. A few drunken men are slumped outside, and Anthony leads me to the other side of the street.

'I hope you did not find it too tiresome?'

'Not at all. I enjoyed the change from the inn,' In truth my feet are swollen and my back aches.

'When the child arrives, things will become even harder for you.'

'Trade is improving. Soon I should be able to afford more servants.'

'Perhaps you should hire someone to run the inn. It is a tough occupation, especially for a young woman. And with a child to care for.'

'In time,' I reply smiling. He is right, but for the moment I enjoy being in charge of my future. Having endured poverty and hardship, my own money is a rare treat. To be deciding how I should like to spend it, gives me such pleasure as I have never experienced before. It is not something I will easily give up.

We pass the Cathedral in silence and walk across the Grote Markt to the inn. Stopping at the door, he leans in close. I can smell his cologne, feel his body next to mine yet not touching, his breath against my neck. He cups my face gently in his hands and then kisses me, his cheek soft against mine. A gentle caress, so slight that it barely brushes my lips, yet it leaves me breathless.

And then suddenly he pulls away from me. 'I can't Gertrud. I'm sorry,' he says, before quickly walking away.

chapter seventeen

Bookseller

“In books I only look for the pleasure of honest entertainment; or if I study, only learning I look for is that which tells me how to know myself, and teaches me how to die well and to live well.”

Montaigne (1533-1592), Essays, Book 2: On Books

February 1549

My belly grows ever bigger as each week passes, a reminder that the child will shortly arrive. It has snowed heavily for days, and I am reluctant to cross the Grote Markt as it has become treacherous with icy patches. I find walking cumbersome and navigating the busy marketplace is difficult. The child is now very big, much larger than most at eight months, or so Oma tells me. I complain of leg cramps and pain in my back, but in truth, I do not mind. Frequent kicks and movements remind me of his presence, and just to think of him leaves me awash with love. We have begun to make preparations for the baby's arrival. Johanna has given me a crib and a small child's stool.

‘I have dropped another stitch,’ I sigh. Johanna and I are sitting in her small room, the embers burning in the hearth, keeping us warm. She has been unwell and on Victor's insistence, she is having a day's rest from the fruit stall. Their home consists of two small rooms by Falcon's Cloister, sparsely furnished, yet I enjoy visiting as it has a welcoming feel.

Johanna has been embroidering tiny blue flowers on a tiny cotton frock, but she puts it down and takes my hand. ‘It is no matter; we will have enough to clothe the babe.’ She pours us two ales and I notice that she is sipping hers. She has been suppressing a cough all afternoon.

‘Pieter and Katharina were married today,’ I say. Despite my best efforts to forget Pieter, I have thought of nothing else since waking.

‘Do not ponder over such things. As your grandmother would say, you are gazing at the stork.’

‘That's true,’ I sigh. ‘I am wasting my time... but what Pieter and I had, it is not so easy to forget. The Lawyer and his wife stopped by after the wedding party. They said it was quite a celebration. No expense spared. Though you know Marta, any money is too much!’

Johanna nods. ‘The Lawyer seems to attend most events in this city.’

I gather more wool and continue knitting the baby's hat. ‘And the Burgermeister.’

‘He also attended your marriage,’ Johanna replies. She struggles to talk as her coughing worsens.

'That's a bad cough...'

'Tis! It is nothing. There was talk of the marriage on the market square.'

I watch as she adds small cross stitches onto the fabric. 'The bride... did they say she was beautiful?'

Johanna smirks. 'Even a lavish gown cannot turn her into a beauty.'

I laugh.

'But it is true. I hope for his sake, their children do not take after her,' she continues.

'Her uncle has connections with Duke, or so I've heard.'

'Privilege does not always mean money.'

'Peter's family have plenty of that now. I hear their shipping company has expanded once again.'

'I'm sure his father is delighted with the match.' She pauses to cough again. 'They are -' But before Johanna can finish her sentence, her coughing takes over.

I pour more ale into her mug and pass it to her. 'You must see a doctor.'

She swallows down the ale. 'Oh, it is just the time of year. I always get a tickle in my throat during the winter months.'

'You need to rest. Standing out in the cold does you no good at all.'

She smiles. 'And trust the stall to Victor! It is bad enough that I am not there today.'

I sigh and lean back as I feel the baby kicking. Johanna places a hand on my belly. 'An active child is a good sign. Though I suspect this one is going to keep you on your toes.'

'He does not want to lie still. Always tossing and turning.'

She chuckles. 'You think this is bad? Wait until your little one is running about. Not so long now. I can remember when Rogier was but a whelp. He was into everything. Ah! But it's such a joy too.'

'I am in no rush for this child to arrive. At least now I can keep him safe. I fear for the life I shall be able to give him. One without a father.'

'All will be right, you'll see,' Johanna says. 'Besides, did you not accompany Anthonys to the banquet recently? Is he not attentive?'

I blush. 'He was most attentive. But the evening ending... rather abruptly. I have not heard from him since.'

'Ah! Artists can be so temperamental!'

'Perhaps you're right. Anyway, I have enough to keep me busy. I should be heading home, but first I must go by the bookshop. Oma is keen to read Anna Bijns' latest poems.'

Jacob Maes' bookstore is off Hoogstraat, a neat shop, nestled between a tailor and a mercer selling ornate cloths. It is fronted by a large glass window displaying books and prints. On entering, I

am surrounded by bookshelves and the smell of paper and ink. It is intoxicating and I look around, tempted to take a book down and wonder over its contents.

The Bookseller is behind the counter and looks up. 'Ah, Gertrud, how lovely to see you.'

I am the only customer and he immediately walks around to take my hand in his and shake it keenly.

'Hello, Jacob.'

He smiles proudly. 'How can I be of assistance?'

'I am looking for a book for my grandmother. It is the poems by Anna Bijns.'

'Of course, my dear, of course. It came in only last week.'

He goes to a shelf and takes down a small book before placing it on the counter.

'How much is it?' I ask. But before he can reply, the doorbell rings and an elderly man enters the store. I recognise him immediately, although it has been some years since I last saw him. He is now badly hunched over and walks with the aid of a stick.

'Meneer van Liesvelt,' I say, approaching him.

He looks up and stares at me. 'Gertrud Vermeulen is that you?' he says slowly.

'It is. Lovely to see you again, sir.'

'And you, my dear, and you! My! When last I saw you... you were but a young lass.'

Jacob comes over and joins us. 'I see introductions are not necessary.'

'We once knew each other well,' he says. 'Gertrud's father, Niklaas, and I were good friends.'

'I have fond memories of your visits, Meneer van Liesvelt,' I reply. 'Many an evening you would sit in our kitchen talking with Papa. On occasion, you brought me treats.'

The old man nods and smiles. 'I did enjoy those times. Ah. It is so sad what has happened. Such injustice!'

I notice briefly a look of caution wash over Jacob's face and he stares for a moment longer than necessary at Meneer van Liesvelt. 'At his disappearance, of course.'

'Yes, of course... his disappearance,' the elderly man says cautiously.

I reach out and touch his arm. 'Please sir, do you –'

'I assume you have come for your book,' Jacob says, steering him towards the counter. 'I have it here.' He quickly retrieves a book and begins to wrap it in paper. I am eager to speak with Meneer van Liesvelt further, but before I can do so, the doorbell rings again and another customer enters the store.

Meneer van Liesvelt looks at me and smiles before tucking the book under his arm. 'Good day to you, Gertrud. And God bless.'

'Wait, Meneer -' but before I can finish my sentence Jacob steps in front of me. I wanted to ask if I may visit him, but Jacob has already opened the door and the elderly man is on his way. I try to follow but the Bookseller has other ideas.

'You cannot leave without your book,' Jacob says, smiling. 'I will just see to this other customer, and then wrap it for you.'

'I should just like to have a word with Meneer van Liesvelt,' I say, but Jacob stands in the doorway, obstructing my exit.

'Perhaps another time, Gertrud. He is a busy man.' I watch with disappointment as the old man disappears down the street and out of my sight.

'Do you have Meneer van Liesvelt's details?' I ask, after Jacob's customer has left. 'I should like to call upon him. He was good to Papa and was generous to my family. Now that he is getting on in years, he may be in need of assistance.'

'You would be wise to steer clear.'

'Oh? He is but a kindly old man. What harm can it be, surely?'

'He is the brother of Jacob van Liesvelt,' Jacob replies in little more than a whisper.

I shake my head, confused. 'I do not know his brother.'

'Jacob van Liesvelt was an Antwerpen book printer. He was beheaded three years ago for heresy.'

I gasp in horror.

'When did you last see Michel?' Jacob asks.

'Six years ago, perhaps more. His visits became less and less frequent until they finally stopped. I was young and didn't give it much thought. What did his brother do?'

'He published the first Dutch translation of the Bible. Before his death he reissued the Lutheran version, including comments of Martin Luther.'

'And Michel? Did he have anything to do with it?'

The Bookseller looks around, checking that no one has entered the store. 'Let us just say that he is more... cautious.'

'You mean...'

'Really, Gertrud. Forget Michel van Liesvelt. Trust me on this.'

'I would like to know if he has any information on my father's disappearance.'

Jacob takes a deep breath. 'Take my advice. Don't seek him out. He is an old man with strange ideas... do not get involved.'

'And the book you just sold him?'

Jacob laughs. 'Why! That was just the latest almanac.'

The first guest for our new accommodation arrives under the cover of darkness. I am woken from a fitful sleep by the sound of hooves on the cobblestones. Our guest was not expected to arrive until the following morning, so it takes me by surprise. Lodewijk is away, called out again by the Physician. Oma is fast asleep in her cot while Carel and Jute are snoring before the kitchen hearth. I wrap a cloak over my nightdress and head outside, carrying a lantern. In the courtyard I am greeted by a man wearing all black, sitting upon a large dark horse. Although it is not raining, his clothes are drenched through.

‘Good evening, Mevrouw Smekens,’ he says, dismounting and removing his hat. It is a familiar face and one I have been eager to see again.

‘Meneer Goodwyn,’ I reply. The last time I heard his voice he was arguing with Willem over a body washed up in Calais. I suspect he may know something of my father but despite my enquires over Henry Goodwyn’s whereabouts, I have been unable to discover anything of the man. That he should turn up now, takes me by surprise.

‘I believe you have been expecting me.’ His tone is brisk though not impolite.

‘Meneer Spelman mentioned he had a guest arriving tomorrow; I did not know it would be you, Meneer Goodwyn.’

‘My journey was shorter than I had expected. I trust it isn’t a problem?’

‘Of course not; your room is ready. Please, tie your horse up and my servant will tend to her on his return. If you would care to follow me?’

He is travelling alone and carries only a small bag. I lead the way up the stable stairs to the chamber that Beatrix prepared earlier.

‘You must be weary. Where have you travelled from?’ A hearth is glowing, its embers red, and has been doing so for the past few hours, ensuring the room is pleasantly warm, in readiness for his arrival in the morning. I see him briefly look around before placing his bag down.

‘Not far,’ he says, looking out the window over the courtyard. An odd comment given how wet his clothes are and we have had no rain for some days.

I light the candle on the table. ‘Shall I bring you something to eat or drink?’

‘That won’t be necessary; I ate only a few hours ago. If you would be so kind as to bring me some brandy.’

‘Of course. Your clothes are damp. Shall I see to them?’

He shakes his head. ‘I will hang them before the fire.’

‘Is there anything you require in the morning?’ I offer.

‘No, all is in hand.’

'We have a small meeting area two doors down. Perhaps that would be suitable...?'

'Thank you.'

'Perhaps refreshments for your guests?'

But he ignores my suggestion and walks to the door, opening it. 'I believe Claus has discussed arrangements. I will require lodgings every Monday.'

'He said that yes. Should you find everything in order.'

'So long as there are no interruptions, this shall be suitable enough.'

'Of course,' I say, before heading back down the stairs. I ponder over the arrival of Henry Goodwyn. There are so many questions I want to ask him, but I know I will get no answers at such a late hour.

When I wake in the morning, shortly after sunrise, I discover that Goodwyn's mare is no longer in the stables. On inspecting the chamber, his bag is also gone, the room left in immaculate condition.

'He is generous,' Oma remarks, looking at the coins from the table.

'But how odd that he would move on so quickly.'

'And our next guests - when are they arriving?' she asks.

'This evening. Meneer Jansen - an associate of Jacob Maes. A bookseller from Amsterdam, apparently.'

'Bookseller, you say. Do we know anything about him?'

'Well... no. I hardly felt it appropriate to question Meneer Maes over his guest.'

Oma nods. 'Yes, I'm sure you're right. I'm just cautious of booksellers. You hear such talk over the publications that are getting printed these days.'

I recall my encounter earlier in the bookstore. 'Do you remember a friend of Papa's, a gentleman by the name of Michel van Liesvelt?'

A frown appears suddenly over Oma's forehead. 'No... no. I cannot say that I do.' But before I can continue she quickly leaves the room.

Meneer Jansen arrives in the early afternoon, bringing a large chest with him that Rogier struggles to get up to his chamber.

'Do be careful,' Meneer Jansen says, using the handrail to steady himself as he ascends the stairs. He is an elderly gentleman, tall and frail, and his clothes hang awkwardly on his frame.

Rogier nods. Although much stronger, even he grapples with the weight.

'The case seems very heavy,' I remark.

'Books, just books,' Meneer Jansen mumbles, in a thick Amsterdam accent.

'Jacob said that you plan to sell books in Antwerp,' I say.

'That's right.'

'Will he not be selling them in his bookshop?' I enquire.

Meneer Jansen shakes his head. 'No, I prefer to sell my books directly to my customers. But these will all be sold by tomorrow evening. My buyers know of my location and will come directly to my room. They will not cause you any bother.'

I nod. 'Will you be requiring wine or beer for your guests?'

'No. They will not stay long.'

A steady flow of people arrives to see Meneer Jansen, throughout the morning until lunchtime, staying only a short time. I assume they are buying his books, but it all happens without fuss and, as he predicted, he appears in the afternoon and informs me that he will be on his way.

'You will not be staying tonight?'

He shakes his head. 'All my books have sold. But I should like to return next month.'

I place the register before him as he pays, including a handsome tip.

After he has left Oma opens our guest log. 'Still empty I see. At least he is not a hen-feeler!'

I laugh. 'I cannot insist. Besides, he was more than generous.'

'And this publication Meneer Jansen has been selling?'

'I have no idea,' I say.

'Ic zal cause winnen in spijte van Gode ende van zynder moeder!' Jacob Maes declares. He slams his fist down, before throwing coins to the other side of the table and taking a swig of ale. Four men have been playing dice all evening. What began as a friendly game of raffle quickly deteriorates as the night draws on.

'My goodness,' Oma remarks. We are sitting at another table, patiently waiting for the men to finish. It is late and everyone else has gone home. I am hoping the game will end soon and we can close up.

'It is an inn, after all,' I whisper.

'Such language! When I was a child, a man had part of his tongue removed for cursing the good Lord.'

The Bookseller attracts a motley bunch, I assume artists keen to have him sell their work. Like bees to a hive, they hover around him seeking his attention.

'Get on with it and roll the bones,' one of the men slurs, so drunk he can barely stay upright.

Another man throws three dice. 'Bij the Lords five wounds!' he exclaims angrily.

'Ons Heerens billen,' another laughs.

My grandmother gets suddenly to her feet. 'Enough! I will not have such blasphemy under my roof.'

The men stop playing and look up stunned. I fear they will react angrily having been spoken to in such a manner. And by a woman.

'I am sorry,' I interject. 'She is but very tired. Please, continue with your game. I'll bring more ale.'

'Come now.' I say, leading my grandmother gently away.

She reluctantly accompanies me upstairs. 'You cannot speak to customers like that. Especially when the Bookseller is one of my benefactors.'

'It is our inn; I shall speak to them however I wish. To curse the Lord!'

I realise she is more than a little drunk herself. 'Men will be men, especially when they have been drinking. My benefactors are important men. We cannot be upsetting them.'

'The scissors hang out there!' she snaps.

'Oma, how can you say such a thing?'

My grandmother sighs. 'I am just old and tired. I am sorry.'

I kiss her on the forehead and go back downstairs to find the men are putting on their coats. The Bookseller is the last to leave, pausing by the open door. He struggles to stand straight and tries to steady himself by leaning against the frame.

'Your grandmother... she was foolish this evening,' he remarks, pulling down his hat against the cold night air.

'I am sorry. She meant no harm. Careless words is all.'

'Careless indeed. She is not always a wise woman. It does her no good to make enemies.'

I laugh at his words, hoping to brush them aside, but I know it is no humorous matter. 'Enemies? She is but an elderly woman upset when the Lord is cursed. Would not your own mother...'

'Ha! My mother! That whore. Why she barely stepped inside a church. I will not be spoken to in such a way. Nor any man.'

'Then please, accept my apology on her behalf.' I take hold of the door and start to close it.

'Perhaps we could share a drink?' He leans towards me, a strong smell of liquor on his breath, before lifting his hand and stopping the door from going any further.

'It is late and you should be on your way,' I say.

'Or I could stay.'

'Good night, Meneer Maes. I am a pregnant widow after all,' I reply, standing firmly in the doorway. I hold my head high although he is much bigger than I. If he so chooses, he could force his way back in and there would be nothing I could do other than scream.

'Ah, what a shame to end the evening on bad terms,' he sighs, before backing away and stumbling off into the darkness of the deserted Grote Markt.

chapter eighteen

Actors

March 1549

As soon as we enter Victor and Johanna's house, I know the situation is dire. There is an unpleasant odour of sickness. Handkerchiefs coated in blood are scattered over the floor. My dear friend lies on a mattress, curled up like a child and facing the wall. She is completely still.

'Aliet, Gertrud,' says Victor, getting up from a stool beside Johanna. There are dark circles under his eyes. 'You've come quickly.'

'Of course,' Oma replies.

'As soon as Rogier came...' I add.

'She is having trouble breathing,' Victor says, rubbing his chin. 'She is so weak.'

Rogier kneels beside his mother and takes her hand, but she doesn't move.

'May I?' Oma asks, and Victor nods. My grandmother leans over Johanna and places a hand on her forehead. 'She has a fever. Her urine?'

Victor collects a chamber pot and holds it up to Oma. She smells it but says nothing.

'Prepare vinegar and rose water,' she says, turning to me. 'We must bathe her.'

'Fetch eggs,' Oma instructs Carel. 'Then roast and grind the shells. And marigold flowers - try the neighbours, tell them Johanna is gravely ill. If they have none, go to the market, but run.'

I give the boy coins and he quickly disappears out the door.

'Victor - your best ale. And treacle...' Oma continues.

'Is it -' Victor begins.

Oma looks at him but will not say the word that is on all of our tongues. It needs no name; we all know the signs. 'Ale, Victor. And treacle. With haste.'

A short time later the eggshells and marigolds are stirred into a pot with the ale before treacle is added and warmed over the fire. We wash Johanna in the vinegar and rose water, but she remains limp and barely conscious. Already the swellings are appearing, under her armpits and on her back. Oma takes a knife and cuts them open, allowing the liquid to seep out. She places a mixture of tree resin, white lily roots and dried excrement, over the cuts. With clean sheets on the mattress, Victor gently lays Johanna back down.

We sit together, a constant vigil by Johanna's side, and take it in turns to give her the marigold mixture and to hold her hand. I make tea but no one has any interest; even the brandy is left untouched. From time to time, Rogier gets up and paces the room. I notice that he has chewed his

lower lip, causing it to bleed. Victor sits quietly, rocking on his stool, hunched over and his head drooped.

But it is to no avail. After two days, Johanna stops breathing.

The authorities arrive, removing Johanna's body and placing the house under isolation. Neighbours come out and stare, though wary enough to keep a distance. I can hear their whispers and feel their eyes bearing down on me. It will do us little good to be associated with Johanna's death and I fear talk will quickly spread.

'Thank you Aliet, Gertrud. I know you did all you could,' Victor says. He stands by a wagon, loaded with a few belongings from his market stall. He looks at me with frightened eyes.

Oma places a coat around his shoulders. 'It was Willem's... please take it.'

I place a bag of clothing in the wagon. 'There are some more things in there, you and Rogier might be able to use.'

His son stands beside me, looking to the ground.

'Please, can Rogier stay with you?' Victor says, his voice shaking. He pulls out coins from his pocket.

'That isn't necessary. Rogier more than earns his keep. He can stay if he wishes to. But surely it would be better to remain together,' I say.

Victor wrings his hands. 'I'm a sad and lost soul. Rogier deserves a proper life. He'd do better to stay working at the inn. It's a decent job and he's happy.'

'You could also stay with us,' I offer. 'At least until -'

'No. It's kind of you, but an inn has too many temptations for a lonely man. I shall go to Brussel. My sister lives there.'

Rogier embraces his father before standing beside me as we watch Victor lead his wagon away down the street. It is a sad vision and I continue to cry. I cannot believe that he and Johanna will no longer sell vegetables on the Grote Markt. My heart aches for the friend who showed me kindness when no one else would. We walk back to the inn, all silent.

'You stupid, stupid girl!' I hear Oma exclaim as I come downstairs. A dozen jugs stand on the counter and Beatrix is sobbing. Thankfully we have not yet opened.

'Whatever is the matter?' I ask.

'Beatrix has poured ale into the crabbelaer! All wasted!' Oma snaps. Her nostrils are flaring and her face red.

'I am sorry, but you did say to fill them with ale,' the maid replies.

'Je ben stoom!' Oma shouts back at her.

I take my grandmother by the arm and lead her to a table. There is a strong smell of brandy on her breath.

'Come now. It was a silly act but there is no need to shout.'

'Really, Gertje!' she replies, refusing to sit down and walking instead to the front entry. 'Anybody can see through an oak plank if there is a hole in it!'

As the door slams behind her, I take a deep breath.

'I am sorry, ma'am,' says Beatrix, coming to stand beside me. 'I was sure she said ale but perhaps I made a mistake. I was... distracted this morning.'

'Has something happened?'

'The Bookseller... He can no longer see me. His wife demands he curb his ways. What shall become of me now?'

'It is harsh, I know. But men like the Bookseller make promises they never intend to keep. You will choose more wisely next time.'

Joseph and Isabella arrive one Friday afternoon, apparently at the recommendation of an associate, but they cannot recall who. An elegant and well-spoken couple, who have travelled from France, it seems foolish to turn them away. Even more so when they are happy to pay our rate. It is far from modest, even for Antwerpen, and they wish to stay for two weeks. Their trunks are unloaded from the carriage, three large chests that can barely fit into their chamber.

'Delightful,' Joseph declares, as Isabella inspects the room. She is a striking woman, I guess only a few years older than I, her features exaggerated by white make-up and bright rouge such as I had only seen in theatre productions during Carnival. She has luxurious long black hair piled high on her head and wears an elaborate silk dress of pale blue. I find her simply captivating.

'Are you with a theatre troupe?' I enquire.

'What? Oh, not as such, no. My husband is a writer and actor,' she remarks. 'Such a... charming inn,' she declares in a mist of exquisite perfume. 'Not at all what I expected from the outside.'

Her husband is a flamboyant character, who moves quickly. 'Simply perfect! Now we must eat! I am ravenous!' he says.

'Come now, Joseph. The show begins in no time at all. You know how I hate to be late.'

'Very well. We shall eat afterwards. We should like breakfast brought to our chamber,' he says, turning to me.

Joseph and Isabella leave in their carriage, to return later in the evening. I watch discreetly from my window above the inn and am surprised to see they are not alone. A man and woman are in their company, all disappearing up the stairs over the stable. When I bring their breakfast the following morning, I discover all four of them in bed, snoring.

'I fear we shocked you,' Isabella remarks. She wears only a thin nightgown, the front ties hanging open to reveal her cleavage. Her feet are bare and her hair hangs loosely over her shoulders. Although I know I shouldn't stare, she is very beautiful. I do not want to look away.

'It is not my concern,' I reply, placing the jug down on the table. 'The ale you requested.'

'Thank you,' she says, smiling. 'You are prudent. Very wise, of course, when running an establishment such as this.'

'Such as this?' I find Isabella intriguing. She exudes such finery and class, yet manages to behave however she chooses, or so it seems.

'You were recommended to us because you turn a blind eye.'

'By who?'

'Why that would be telling, now wouldn't it?' Her voice is sweet and soft. 'It seems you are with child. When is the baby due?'

'My grandmother thinks it will not be long now.'

She wanders over to the window and stares out into the courtyard. The sunlight causing her nightdress to become almost transparent, revealing her curves. I catch up breath.

'Joseph and I... we enjoy the company of others. My husband finds you most attractive. Should you find him... appealing...'

'I have no wish to...' I begin, but before I can finish, she approaches. Standing before me, she runs an elegant finger down my cheek and over my mouth before leaning in to brush her lips gently against mine. I pull back, a tingling sensation running through my body.

'She has never kissed a woman before,' Isabella laughs, her nightdress now hanging down off one shoulder.

I move towards the door, but she gently takes hold of my hand. 'Come now, I was only toying. You are so very lovely, after all. I was simply curious to know what it would be like to kiss those enticing lips. You did not disappoint.'

'You are mistaken,' I reply. She has taken me by surprise, yet I find myself drawn to her lack of restraint and such extravagant manner. Never before have I met someone so intriguing, so alluring. Though I hesitate, I am tempted to know her better.

She brushes my arm. 'Then I apologise for my brazen behaviour. I can be naughty at times, but I mean no harm. There is something I should like to request of you.'

'Oh?'

'We would like to hold a dinner for a few friends. I believe you have a dining room in the inn?'

'It is very ordinary. I doubt it will be adequate for your needs,' I reply.

'Nonsense. Any room can be transformed!'

'Perhaps somewhere more... refined... would better suit your needs?'

She laughs and approaches me. My heart beats quickly and I find myself pulling away from her ever so slightly. 'Strange that you should be running a place like this. Pray tell, how did you come to be an innkeeper?'

'My husband is deceased.'

She places her hand gently on my belly. 'So clever and attractive... you could do much better than an innkeeper. You carry a child - your husband... he must not be long deceased?'

'Not long,' I reply. Isabella makes me nervous, yet I am strangely drawn to her.

'Now then... my dinner. I should very much like to hold it in your inn. And you will be a guest.'

'Oh no, I couldn't.'

'But of course you could, and you shall.'

Mevrouw de Bot rushes into the inn, her face rosy and blotched, tears streaming down her face. It is early evening and there are only a few patrons, but they stop and stare at the Fishmonger's wife.

'The baby is dead,' she shouts.

Oma approaches her, arms outstretched. 'Oh, dear Lord. What has happened?'

But Mevrouw de Bot pushes her away. 'Get away from me. You will pay for what you did to my grandchild, you evil witch!'

She then turns to look around at the others, watching. 'Take heed and flee this place at once. I was warned but took no notice. I trusted her. Said she could help the babe, she did! Now my poor wee one is dead.'

'Come now,' I say, 'we are so very saddened to hear of the baby. But she was poorly...'

'The child only fell sick after she came,' she continues, pointing at Oma. 'She cursed an innocent babe. Converses with the devil does this woman!'

The front door opens again and the Fishmonger appears, placing an arm around his wife's shoulders. 'Janette please, let us go home.'

He looks at me, a pitiful look in his eyes, though says nothing before leading his wife away. After they have left our customers sit in stunned silence.

I take my leave and head upstairs, before collapsing at our table to rest my head in my hands. Oma appears shortly afterwards.

'Do not cry, Gertje,' she says, putting her arms around me. 'It is but a distraught grandmother.'

'But she called you...'

'It is only her grief that speaks. The baby died because it had not enough milk. I told them so, only six weeks ago, but they wouldn't listen.'

I start to sob, my emotions getting the better of me. 'We cannot have such talk about you. Is it not bad enough, the misfortune that surrounds this inn? We do not...'

'Hush now. Do not shoulder the burden,' Oma says.

'You know what people will say... Papa missing, Willem dead, my pregnancy... there is already enough talk of witchcraft and colluding with the devil himself. Now Mevrouw de Bot saying you caused this baby's demise.'

'Her allegations are nonsense and not worth our attention. I want no more talk of this.' Oma takes me in her arms and holds me tightly. Yet as she does so, I can feel her body trembling.

The afternoon of the dinner party, the dining room is taken over by Isabella and her friends and shrouded in much secrecy. She emerges at one stage and bestows upon me a box with a tiger mask inside. The invitation is most precise: all guests are to come dressed as men and should wear masks. Women are to wear those of wild beasts while men, those of small animals.

Oma manages to alter some of Willem's clothes to fit me, a linen shirt with a ruff and matching wrist cuffs, which she has laundered with starch to make them stiff and bright. Over this I wear an elaborate doublet of deep purple, with long sleeves and a dipped waistline that covers my belly. To complete my costume, I add trunk hose and stockings, and flat shoes. Atop my tiger mask, I wear a soft fabric hat with my hair neatly concealed underneath.

As I enter the dining room, I discover a room transformed. It is dark inside and smelling strongly of incense and citrus. Thick curtains cover the windows and velvet drapes hang over the walls. The only light is from two fire dancers. A man wearing a mouse mask approaches.

'Please swear to secrecy,' he says, holding a sword against the palm of my hand. A woman appears wearing a stag's head.

'Ah! Our tiger has arrived.' I recognise Isabella's voice. 'Come! Be seated.'

There are only eight chairs around the table, and she sits me down between a hare and a turtle. On the other side is a monkey, alongside an elephant, a bear and a zebra. A sugar sculpture is the centrepiece, a giant elephant standing up on its two back legs.

Throughout dinner we are entertained by a performer who contorts her body as we eat, twisting and turning around us. We feast on a boar's head followed by peacock, still with all its feathers and spewing fire from its beak. Feathers, bright blue and bold green, with golden eyes, such as the costume I once wore. And Pauwel too. How strange, it now seems to me, that we wore the same outfit.

'Is this not divine?' the monkey asks. He has a high-pitched voice for a man. The performer leans over backwards to remove a pheasant drumstick from the monkey's hand. He laughs with delight.

'Astonishing,' I reply, drinking more wine.

'You are an artist?' he enquires.

'Alas no. Though I enjoy the theatre.'

'Then you must accompany me, one evening!'

From the other side of the table, the bear stands up.

'Should you like to hear a poem?' she asks.

'But of course!' the hare replies, who sounds very much like Joseph.

The bear clears her throat:

*To be a woman's fine, a man is better
You maids, you widows keep this to the letter;
Don't haste or fret to see yourselves soon wed.
It's said that manless you are honour's debtor;
If finding food and clothes though does not fetter,
Let no man master both your house and bed.*

Everyone applauds. 'You treat us with your words,' Isabella declares.

'My dear,' Joseph says, 'is it so bad to be wed to one such as I?'

'Of course not, darling,' she says, blowing him a kiss.

'Our dear tiger, do you have plans to wed again?' he says, turning to me.

I shake my head.

'Nor should she,' the bear replies. 'Why our tiger has her own business. She does not need a man to provide for her.'

'But the child?' the mouse asks. 'Surely the child would fare better with a father?'

'He will have me... and my grandmother,' I say. 'Besides, my husband had close associates, men that have given their word to regard the child as their own.' As I say the words, I feel a chill come over me. Many a time have I tried to convince myself that the men will have my son's best interests at heart. Yet still, I feel uneasy at the thought that these men are entwined in our lives.

'Then he is luckier than most. A toast,' Joseph declares. 'To our tiger and her cub.'

All the animals around the table raise their glasses.

'Joseph. Can you read us an English poem?' the Bear asks.

'Anything for you, darling.'

'You read English?' I say, turning to Joseph.

'I can indeed,' he replies, getting to his feet. 'I shall just collect a book and will read to you my favourite poem.'

It is an enchanting evening; unlike any occasion I have experienced and nothing as I had expected. The company is delightful, and I find myself engaging in the most intriguing conversations. We discuss plays from foreign lands, paintings that have recently sold and the latest books to be published. While I can contribute little, my opinion is sought, and much interest given to my humble words.

'I have a letter written in English,' I begin, after asking Joseph to Willem's office. 'I wondered... might you be able to tell me what it contains?'

'Anything for you, my darling,' he says smiling.

'I must ask your utmost discretion. I do not know what it contains.'

I barely know the man, but my instinct is I can trust him. Besides, I know no-one else who speaks English, so if I wish to discover what the letter contains, I have little choice.

'Of course.'

I hand him the letter and wait a moment while he reads it.

'It is a contract. Meneer Smekens, I assume, is your deceased husband?'

'That's right. Willem.'

'It would seem he was engaging the services of ... Mr H Goodwyn. It states that Goodwyn is to take the baker -'

I catch my breath. 'Did you say baker?'

Joseph nods, 'it says that he will take the baker to Brussel... to be delivered to the Sheriff.'

'The date of the letter?'

Joseph pauses as he looks to the top of the page. '5th May 1547.'

'My father left for Brussel only a few weeks later. And the Sheriff? There is no mention of... of... anything untoward?'

'No. Though I doubt any such thing would be put down in writing. However, he does have his fee listed.'

'Thank you, Joseph,' I say, taking back the letter and putting it away in the drawer. 'May I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'Have you heard the name, Jacob van Liesvelt? Apparently, he was beheaded here in Antwerpen about three years ago?'

He turns around and checks that the door is still closed, before leaning forward. 'You mention a dangerous name. Be very careful who you say it to.'

'I met his brother recently in a bookstore. He may know something about my father.'

Joseph lowers his voice. 'I can tell you very little. Van Liesvelt was a printer who produced copies of the Bible in Dutch. I have not seen any, but I hear that version was furnished with outspoken reformational marginal notes. They say he put a woodcut picture of the Devil as a bearded monk with a rosary and goat's feet.'

'Was this the cause of his death?'

'Well, of course, this infuriated the church. It was used to condemn him to death. I'm afraid that's all I know. And it is mostly talk. His brother, is he also a printer?'

'An old man. But yes, so I'm told.'

'Do you think it might be possible that your father was in some way involved with these Dutch editions of the bible?'

I consider his question, before replying. 'If he did, then he was most secretive about it. If it is my father referred to in the letter signed by Henry Goodwyn, then it might explain his disappearance. But it must be a misunderstanding. My father was a good Christian man.'

'Sometimes even the most modest of men can be concealing a great secret. This is not my business, Gertrud, but as your friend, I strongly advise you to not act hastily. These are dangerous times and, such as what happened to van Liesvelt, most unforgiving. Be very cautious who you speak with.'

'A few enquiries. What harm could that do?'

'I have not been in this city long, but I have drunk in your inn and spoken with locals. You must know there is talk. About you and your family.'

'People speak over the child I carry?'

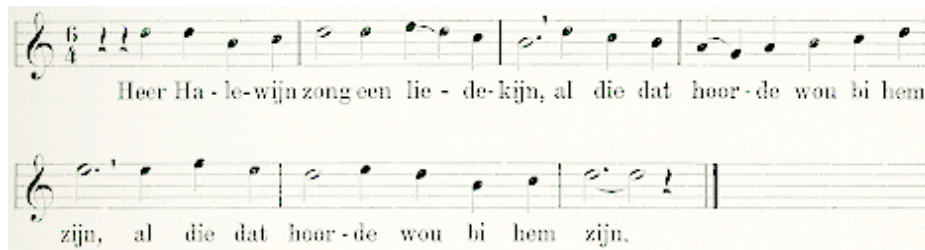
He nods. 'And your grandmother. There are rumours of witchery. You must distance yourself, Gertrud. If not for your own sake, then for your child.'

Of course, Joseph speaks the truth. I too have heard such talk but what I should do about Oma, I have no idea. First her involvement with the Astrologer and now her liking for brandy. It seems she is determined to put herself in harm's way. 'You have been kind to offer such advice. Thank you.'

After Joseph leaves, I sit at Willem's desk and ponder over what deeds took place in this room, the men that came to see my husband and the arrangements made. How much of this was to do with the seven men, the ones he called his brothers? There is so much I do not understand and the more I find out, the more nervous and afraid I feel. Yet, as much as I know it would be wise to go no further, I cannot stop, nor can I turn back. To tell the men that I will instead accept their offer of a small room and meagre allowance is surely the sensible thing to do. Yet to do so would mean giving up all hope of finding my father, and while there is even the slightest hope that he is still alive, I must keep trying. Nor will I confine my child to a life of poverty, or worse.

chapter nineteen

Artist



The wind howls outside as a blind storyteller sits by the hearth. He is accompanied by an old woman and a dwarf. The trio turned up at the inn early afternoon, offering entertainment in return for sleeping in the stable. Lodewijk was eager to send them on their way, but persistent rains had battered the city for days and I felt sorry for them. Besides, an inn needs amusement, especially when the weather drives folk indoors.

The dwarf is a jovial man, wandering from table to table acting the buffoon while performing magic tricks. Earlier, he drew batons from a sack and began juggling. Oma is not impressed and declares she is going to bed, but I find him amusing. And it seems most of our patrons do as well, for they have been encouraging his antics with coins.

Our customers are subdued, and I wonder if it is to do with the inclement weather. Amongst our drinkers are two familiar faces, Pieter and Jeroen. They are seated together with a group of men at one of the long tables.

The old woman stands up slowly, her back hunched and invites the audience to be silent. She is haggard and worn, though likely younger than she appears, for her life on the road cannot be easy. It is hard to guess her true age, concealed as she is under layers of filthy clothing and dirt. 'Come, come... draw closer,' she says, her voice deep and entrancing, 'hear the tale of Heer Halewijn.'

The dwarf sits down at the feet of the storyteller. Some men bring their stools over, to gather by the fire. When everyone is quiet, the storyteller finally begins.

'Ah Gertje,' says Anthonys, when the tale comes to an end. 'The story of Heer Halewijn and his magical song. Do you pity the maiden who hears his melody and is drawn to the forest, only to fall under his spell?'

'Ah yes, the poor maiden,' I laugh. 'Never to marry. Alas, no one could ever match the passion she experienced with her Lord.'

'But what a maiden! Sneaking off in her brother's clothes! It is a good evening,' he says. 'The inn should have entertainment more often.'

'I quite agree but Willem would not approve. He was adamant that such nonsense had no place under his roof.'

'Well, it is no longer his roof and the inn is thriving.'

'They come for decent food and drink,' I reply. 'But finding good entertainers ... I don't know where to even begin.'

'Perhaps I can help. I received word from Pauwel last week.'

I feel myself beginning to blush at the mention of my peacock, and quickly take a sip of ale hoping to quell my nerves. 'He is well?'

'Very much so. He's travelling with a band of entertainers, but he hopes to be back in Antwerpen in February.'

My heart pounds. I had not contemplated seeing the man again who fathered my child.

'For how long, I do not know,' Anthony's continues. 'Pauwel rarely stays anywhere for long. I expect it will depend on whether they can find work. Perhaps they could play here.'

'They would not want to perform in a small establishment such as this,' I say quickly. He cannot see me in such a condition.

'You never know. They might welcome such an opportunity.'

'I don't want to disrespect the wishes of my dead husband.'

'Of course.'

'And you, Anthony's, how is your painting? I hear you may have a patron shortly?'

'There has been interest shown, but no formal offer as yet. Perhaps I should journey to Italy, such as Bruegel. To learn from the masters! Why it must be a true honour.'

'Just to travel to Italy... what a wonderful experience.'

'Perhaps one day we shall see Rome or Venice.' His remark confuses me.

'You speak as though it is so easy to do. For you perhaps.'

'None of us know what lies ahead.' He goes to take my hand, but I pull it away.

He looks down into his ale. 'I haven't been to see you and I should have. Things are... confusing.'

'Oh?'

'I cannot offer you -'

Suddenly the old woman is standing before us. 'Your future,' she declares, 'I can tell your future.'

'Ah, be gone with you, we do not believe in such nonsense,' Anthony's replies, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

'Nonsense you say. Fool!' she says, turning to walk away.

'Wait,' I call out. 'I should like to know what you predict.'

'Really, Gertje. Don't waste your money!' Anthony's replies.

The woman scoffs. 'I will not charge Mevrouw Smekens.'

Anthony's laughs. 'Ah, you're all charlatans.'

But the woman has already sat down opposite me, taken my hand in hers and is staring intently at my palm. She runs a dirty finger along the lines but says nothing.

'What do you see?'

'A complicated future!' Anthony's says, amused. 'Even I could tell you that.'

'Hush,' the woman spits. 'This woman needs help, not your ridicule.'

'I do not...' he begins, but she raises her hand to silence him.

'There is one that looks out for you. An older woman?'

'My grandmother?'

The woman nods. 'Your lives are entwined. She has lost her way and is no longer able to guide you. This is not good, not good at all. But that is not what complicates your future.' She points at my stomach. 'Shortly your world is going to change.'

'She is about to have a child!' Anthony's says. 'Of course, her world will change.'

The old woman glares at him with cold piercing eyes, before turning back to me. 'I sense you are strong but be careful the answers you seek. There is no going back.'

She gets up and walks away, leaving me to ponder over her words. I hope that Anthony's and I can pick up our earlier conversation about our future together, but he sits quietly beside me. It seems the moment is lost.

It is a Monday evening, and yet another visit from Henry Goodwyn. It is his sixth such stay and still, I have not been able to discover anything of his purpose. He arrives and leaves without me even sighting him and has no visitors. I have asked Carel to let me know if he hears anything during the night, but the child has neither seen nor heard anything. However, this week Goodwyn's behaviour is different. He arrived early on a Sunday evening, heading straight to his chamber and he has remained there since.

'Where is Lodewijk?' I ask Carel, coming into the kitchen where the boy is peeling potatoes. The child is hardworking, and the Cook has taken a liking to him, teaching him how to prepare vegetables and bake bread. I am pleased, for his presence in the kitchen seems to have a calming effect on Cook.

'He headed over to the stable, not so long ago,' Carel replies.

I go out into the courtyard just as Lodewijk is on his way out the gate.

'Lodewijk,' I call out. 'Where are you going?' I am tired of my servant doing as he chooses, showing little regard for his mistress.

'I must go out, ma'am. An errand for Meneer Goodwyn,' he replies, barely slowing his step.

'An errand?'

'Just delivering a letter... will be no time at all.' He pauses; however, I can see he is agitated.

'A letter for whom?'

'I...' Lodewijk blushes and looks away. 'It's not for me to say, ma'am.'

'Excuse me? You go to leave without informing me and now you are refusing to answer my question. Must I remind you, who it is that pays your wages?'

'Of course, ma'am.' He removes his hat and bows his head. 'I am only acting under instruction.'

'The letter,' I demand, holding out my hand.

'Meneer Goodwyn specifically...'

'Perhaps Meneer Goodwyn would care to employ you directly?'

Lodewijk sighs and finally hands me the letter. I look down at the neat handwriting and see that it is addressed to the Burgermeister.

'Be on your way,' I say, giving him the letter back. 'And the next time you decide to leave these premises without my permission, it will be the last.'

Some hours later, in the dead of the night, I am awoken by Carel.

'Gertje,' he says, shaking me. 'There are two strange men in the courtyard.'

I sit up in my bed, still drowsy. It is pitch black, apart from a single candle Carel holds, casting a shadow over his worried face. We are not expecting any guests.

'Where's Rogier?' I ask, eager to ensure there is someone to offer protection should we need it.

'Downstairs in the kitchen,' the child whispers.

I quickly rise and follow him downstairs. Carel signals that I should crouch down so that we are not seen through the back windows. I follow him to the other side of the kitchen, and we join Rogier to sit against the wall by the door to the courtyard. Outside I can make out the men, one of them Henry Goodwyn.

'... and you're late,' I hear Goodwyn remark.

'Had to wait until the right moment,' a gruff voice replies that I do not recognise.

'You gave him the diamonds?' Goodwyn replies.

The man grumbles.

'And he'll be at the West gate? You're sure?' he asks.

'Yeah, he'll be waiting. I told him to be alone.'

The men are interrupted by the sound of hooves and Lodewijk's voice telling them the mare is ready. A moment later the courtyard goes silent.

That evening Anthony's and Jacob, the Bookseller, are having dinner at the inn. I have just served them goat stew when the Lawyer bursts through the door, his face ashen.

'Whatever is the matter, dear man?' Jacob asks. I bring over more ale and another goblet.

'I have just been called to the Magistrates,' Claus sighs, slumping down on a stool. 'A body has been pulled from the canal.'

The men stop drinking and stare at the Lawyer in horror.

'Peter Goossens,' he says in a low voice.

'No,' Anthony's says, shaking his head. 'Not our dear Friar.'

'But he was barely nineteen,' Jacob adds, looking incredulously at the Lawyer. 'Surely not!'

I sit down at the table, even though I have not been invited to do so. I did not know the young Friar well, but thoughts of his warning quickly come to mind. A sickening feeling fills my stomach. Another of my benefactors, dead.

'Oh my, this is dreadful, truly dreadful,' Anthony's exclaims. 'Tell us what you know, Claus.'

'Very little, I'm afraid. A body was found floating in the canal this morning. I was asked to confirm the identity.'

'But it just cannot be. It makes no sense at all,' Jacob remarks. 'A humble man of the church. He did no one any harm ...'

'Ah well, not so humble as we were led to believe,' the Lawyer says. 'A pouch was found on his body. It contained diamonds.'

'Not Peter. I cannot believe that!' Anthony's says. 'He despised all material possessions. What would he want with diamonds? No! This is ridiculous.'

The Lawyer shrugs. 'I have no idea.'

I also have no clue as to what the Friar would want with diamonds but have a very good idea as to where they came from. Henry Goodwyn left town the day after his conversation in the courtyard. Surely it is just too much of a coincidence.

'These are dark times, Gertje,' says Anthony's, as we sit alone in the kitchen.

It is a week after the discovery of the Friar's body and word has spread quickly across the Grote Markt. People are shocked and frightened. That something so evil could happen to a man of the church, is seen as a very bad sign and talk abounds of wickedness blighting the city. Yet again, my

family are viewed with suspicion. First Willem, then the Astrologer and now the Friar. Although I know the cause of Cornelis' death, I cannot inform anyone. To do so would only implicate my grandmother. And so, investigations continue, and talk of his murder. It is hardly surprising folk wonder as to why three men, well known to each other, should die so quickly in succession.

'The Friar warned me before the rooms over the stable were built,' I say. 'He said I was playing with Satan.'

'A religious man,' Anthony's replies. 'Perhaps he was just wary of their purpose. In any case, it would be best not to tell anyone of what he said to you. No need to draw further attention to yourself.'

'I have told no one else. But what do you mean, drawing attention to myself?'

'You must realise that it has not escaped the magistrate's attention... since Willem's death, his associates have also been turning up dead. First Cornelis and now Peter.'

'Are you suggesting...?'

'Not at all. I know you had nothing to do with any of the deaths. But... others... well...you must be so very careful. They are searching for the culprits. Until the perpetrators have been found, any of us may fall under the Sheriff's gaze.'

I sigh. 'At least the Friar's body was not found at the inn.'

'But should you reveal your warning from the Friar... well... it may implicate you.'

'Of course,' I say, nodding. I had considered informing him of my suspicions regarding Henry Goodwyn but hold my tongue.

'You need to seek out a simpler life,' he continues. 'This inn brings... complications. You are becoming involved... it would be better you didn't know of such things.'

'The inn provides my income.'

'I must warn you. Talk of witchcraft is spreading. Your father disappeared, then Willem's death. You are carrying the child within your womb for longer than is normal. All this gives too many reasons for people to distrust you.'

I feel the baby turn, as though sensing my turmoil. 'I am so very scared.'

'I wish I could offer you more,' he says softly, taking my hand in his.

'I understand. You have a promising future ahead. Any association with me -'

'I care for you deeply, Gertje, and want nothing more than to provide for you and your child. But these are dangerous times, and all is not what it seems. Should I marry you, it would make your life so much more complicated.'

At that moment, I realise how strong my feelings are for Anthony's. 'And I for you,' I say. 'Is that not enough?'

He looks at me, with eyes so expressive that hide behind long lashes.

'My love for you is so great I will give you up,' he replies. 'So that you can have the life you deserve.'

'Do I not deserve love?'

'Of course. Love and all that it entails. But our love is too dangerous. It has the potential to destroy us both. Even that fortune-teller foresaw it.'

I laugh. 'You made light of everything she said.'

He places my hand back in my lap before kissing me lightly on the lips. 'Remember Gertje, I will always love you.'

I watch as he walks away, my heart pounding as I try to hold back my tears. But it is simply not possible.

I approach Henry Goodwyn that afternoon. Beatrix has just taken him a meal and I knock on the door to his chamber. A moment later he appears at the door.

'Yes?' he says.

'I would like to have a word,' I say.

'Regarding?' he replies, remaining in the doorway.

'I have a letter. One I discovered in my late husband's possessions,' I begin.

He steps back and holds the door open. 'Perhaps it would be best that you come in.'

His meal remains on the table, half-eaten. 'I won't take up your time, Meneer Goodwyn, only I believe the contents of this letter refer to my father?'

'Your father?'

'Yes, he was a baker. And it would seem you know something of him.'

'There are many bakers in these lands, my dear,' he sighs.

'I doubt many that you take to Brussel and hand over to the Sheriff.'

He stares at me, holding my gaze and I strongly suspect he is testing me, to see if I am but a foolish woman. 'I don't know anything of what you speak.'

'I should like to know why my husband should pay someone from England, to accompany a humble baker to Brussel. I found your letter to my husband. It was dated April 1547. Oddly enough, that is the same month that my father travelled to Brussel and has not been seen or heard of since.'

He raises his eyebrows but says nothing.

'I know little of you and your business, Meneer Goodwyn, but I know a few matters that may be of interest to the authorities.'

'Oh?'

'A small matter of diamonds?'

'You would be wise to stay well clear of matters that do not concern you,' he says slowly.

'I have no desire to become entangled in anything that involves you, sir. For anyone who does, has the misfortune of turning up dead. But I have a deal for you.'

He laughs. 'You have a deal! For me. Go on then. This should be amusing.'

'I shall keep the letter, for safekeeping. Should anything happen to me, or anyone in my family, I have taken measures that it should go to the authorities. But I shall keep it hidden and I shall say nothing of the diamonds that found their way upon the poor Friar's body. In exchange for information.'

'What information might that be?'

'Of my father.' I bite down on my lower lip. 'It is of no consequence to you, yet it shall give me peace. That is all I ask. In return, I will continue to turn a blind eye to whatever it is you do when you visit this city.'

'And are you sure? There are consequences to knowledge.'

'I must know the truth.' My heart pounds as I clench my hands into fists, hidden within the folds of my skirt.

'Very well. Yes, Willem Smekens paid me to take your father to Brussel. I met him at the inn; of course, he thought he was going to Brussel for work.'

'But his cloak? He left it behind.'

'He became suspicious... we had to force your father onto the carriage.'

'And your instructions for when you arrived in Brussel?'

I was to hand him over to the Sheriff.'

'On what charges?'

'Treason, I believe.'

'What?' I reply, astonished. 'But that is ridiculous.'

'Be that as it may. I was contracted to do a job, and that is what I did.'

'And what happened to my father?'

'Most likely put in gaol, but I do not know for sure. I'm afraid I can tell you no more.'

So many feelings engulf me; ones of elation that my father may very well be alive, and then others, that suggest he was involved in something most treacherous. As the fortune-teller predicted, once a question has been answered there is no going back.

'We must get to Brussel,' I say, lying on the bed while Oma holds a string with a stone tied at the end, over my belly. It has been a difficult morning, and I feel the child is eager to come out.

'If Niklaas is still alive, after so long in a gaol, he will be in a very bad state,' Oma says.

'We must hope he is alive. We will fight these treason charges.'

'Fighting words but it will be some time before we can travel.'

We stare intently at the string. 'What is it telling us?'

'Do not sit on hot coals,' she replies as the string swings from side to side. 'Ah! There... a boy!'

'Last week it was a girl. It cannot make up its...'. Before I can finish speaking, I am struck with a sharp stabbing pain. It started this morning, but it comes and then goes.

'Just relax, my dear. First babies often take their time.'

'Oh, Oma! I'm not sure I can...'

'Such nonsense! You can and you will. You have the world spinning on your thumb, Gertje. You can do anything!'

We are interrupted by a loud banging on the front door. 'Open up!' shouts out a voice.

I look at Oma. 'It sounds like the Sheriff?' I whisper.

She nods. 'Best see what he wants.'

I go downstairs and open the door to find the Sheriff standing there, the Burgermeister beside him.

'Yes?'

'Aliet Vermeulen, is she in?' the Sheriff asks.

'She is resting, sir. What is it about?'

'I suggest you wake her, and she dress immediately,' the Burgermeister instructs, as the two men push past me.

'Why is...?' I begin.

Before I can continue, my grandmother appears at my side. 'I am Aliet Vermeulen.'

'Then madam, you must accompany us to the gaol,' the Sheriff says.

'Oh?'

'Where you will be charged with witchcraft,' he continues.

The shock ripples through my body. The word witchcraft resounds in my head. 'No!'

The Sheriff takes my grandmother by the arm.

'On what evidence?' I demand.

'It is best this is conducted back at the gaol,' the Burgermeister says. 'If you cooperate, Aliet, I will do all I can to protect Gertrud.'

My grandmother nods. 'I will cooperate.'

I feel a rush of water down my legs and a sudden pain in my back. 'No,' I scream, dropping to the floor as the pain returns.

Oma bends down beside me. 'It is the baby. Please, I must deliver the child.'

The Sheriff shakes his head. 'Impossible.'

My stomach begins to cramp, and I cry out in agony. 'Please sir,' I beg. 'I have no one else to help deliver the child.'

'There are other midwives in this city,' he replies.

'You have my word,' Oma says. 'As soon as I have seen this baby safely into his mother's arms, I will go with you.'

'I cannot...' the Sheriff begins.

'Very well,' the Burgermeister interrupts. 'But I will stay to ensure you do not leave the inn.'

chapter twenty

Burgermeister

'You must be calm, Gertje,' Oma says gently. 'For the child's sake.'

I gasp and struggle to breathe as I lay on the bed. 'How can I when the Burgermeister is downstairs waiting to take you to gaol.' With each word, agonising pain shudders through my body.

'Come now. You are about to become a mother. This is no time to dwell over such matters. Conserve your strength.'

'But you cannot leave me.' Tears run steadily down my cheek.

Oma gathers a bottle of rose oil from a shelf before turning to Beatrix. 'Please, can you collect as much firewood as you can carry.'

After the maid has left, Oma encases me in her arms, allowing me to weep. 'My dearest, dearest child. Once the baby is born, they will take me away. It is unavoidable. But I will ensure he arrives safely if it is the last thing I do.'

I look up at her desperately. 'What do I know of caring for a baby or raising a child? I can't do this alone.'

'You can. And you must. Such as I love you, will you love this babe. Your mother didn't want to leave you either, bless her soul. And nor do I now. My heart is breaking. But all is not over. I've overcome hardship before; I can survive gaol and perhaps their case against me will come to nothing.'

'Not without you, Oma... no...' but the cramping returns and I can speak no more.

'What can smoke do to iron, dear girl! Now, breathe slowly.'

'Not the birthing stool?' I ask. In the middle of the floor sits the stool she obtained for the birth. It has sat ready for many weeks, my grandmother ensuring that everything was prepared in case the baby should arrive early.

'In time... in time... but I expect we are some hours away from that yet.'

'Hours?' I gasp. 'I shall suffer like this for hours?'

'The babe will be with us soon enough. Now, sit up and I will help you in to your nightdress.'

She helps me out of my dress and partlet before pulling a nightdress over my head. 'Lay back down and I will rub you with rose oil.'

Beatrix returns laden with wood and begins tending to the fire.

'The room must remain very warm,' Oma remarks. 'Warm, dark and quiet - we must recreate the womb for the child.'

'Yes ma'am,' replies the maid. 'Leave it with me. I will see to the fire.'

'Is there anything else can I do?' she asks. Beatrix places a hand gently on my shoulder and I am grateful for her presence.

'Say your prayers to Saint Margaret.' Oma smiles at Beatrix before pouring me a mug of dark ale.

I sip at my drink, fearful that I will be unable to keep it down, but slowly I feel my body starting to relax. The warmth of the oil, the scent of roses, combines with Oma's touch and I rest my head back and remind myself of all that is important. Despite everything, this child will make it all worthwhile. My family will live on.

'Carel?' I hear Oma say softly, trying not to disturb me. The child is quickly by the side of the bed; I guess he must have been waiting on the steps. 'Carel, please can you close all of the shutters.'

'Can I not have a little air?' I ask as a wave of pain washes over me.

'That would not be wise. The humours of the body should be protected. And boys are always hotter. It is essential we keep out any draughts. Cold air must not enter the open womb.'

I cry out in pain and feel Oma slip something cold and hard into my hand.

'What is that?' I ask.

'A magnet stone. It will give some relief. Carel, can you bring up some brandy? It will hurt less, my love, if you do not fight this. The babe knows best what must be done. He will push his way out. Now I must check the position.'

The labour is exhausting, stretching out over the day and then into the evening. Oma insists I walk up and down the stairs until I am so fatigued that I can barely put one foot before the other. Pain surges through my body, as though I am being twisted and contorted from the inside. Cramps take hold of my stomach such that I can hardly breathe.

My grandmother remains by my side throughout, rubbing my back when the pain causes me to double over. 'I know it's difficult, but the movement will encourage the baby.'

She prepares vinegar and sugar for me to drink, an awful-tasting concoction, but she insists it will help. As the hours drag on, I become more and more exhausted, barely able to lift my head at times. Yet I cannot rest for I am impatient to finally meet my child.

The inn is closed, and it seems so oddly quiet not to have the sounds and chatter of our patrons below. The Burgermeister remains downstairs, to ensure Oma does not leave but it is unnecessary, for she would never leave me.

Just before midnight, so very weary and shaking from the pangs which are now giving me no reprieve, I feel an urgent pressing down.

'I think it is time,' I gasp. Oma and Beatrix help me up and I settle onto the birthing stool.

'The child?' shouts out the Burgermeister, from downstairs.

'Please wait in the main chamber,' Oma replies. 'The baby is not yet with us. It is bad luck to have a man in the birthing room.'

'You must bring the child down as soon as it's born,' he says.

'Of course,' Oma calls out. She lifts my nightdress and crouches before me. 'Now Gertje, do as I say.'

With Beatrix standing behind me, her arms wrapped around my shoulders, and my grandmother between my legs, my baby is born just as the sun is beginning to rise. I look down and see my grandmother's hands holding a tiny head with black hair streaked with blood. Forgetting the pain of the past hours, all I can feel is love.

'And?' I gasp, looking at Oma. She is flushed but smiling broadly.

'A boy, my darling,' she says, holding him up before me. 'You have a son. The boy we have been praying for.'

He is a tiny babe, pale and fragile, and has made not a peep, yet I have never seen anything so precious in all my life. She takes a knife and cuts the cord.

'I shall call him Niklaas, after Papa. May I hold him?'

Oma begins to weep but then quickly contains herself. 'Of course, of course. But first, I must make him cry.' She takes the wee babe and places him down on the bed, rubbing his back vigorously, but still, he does not make a sound. She picks him up and washes his mouth with a piece of cotton, before lying him down on the bed and making a sign of the cross.

'Are you baptising...' I begin, fearing all is not as it should be. But at last, he gives out a small cry. Tears begin to fall for I am so relieved. Oma wraps little Niklaas up in white linen and brings him to me. To feel the warmth of his body in my arms, to gaze upon his tiny eyes, is more joy than I have ever before experienced.

'He is a wee one, Gertje. I fear his entry has not been easy. But he is beautiful. A cherub if ever there was one.'

I look down at my son and tears fall such that I cannot stop them. Everything I have done for the past year has been for this moment and I love him so very much.

Beatrix and Carel gather around and just for a moment we all simply watch him, in delight and amazement.

Word of my labour had spread quickly amongst my benefactors with many of them gathering below in the inn, along with the Burgermeister, all awaiting the baby's arrival.

'The child?' shouts out the Burgermeister again.

'Has been born,' replies Oma. 'Please give Gertje a moment and then I shall bring the baby down for you to see.'

Oma gently takes little Niklaas from me. 'Remember Gertje, who knows why geese go barefoot.' She kisses me on the forehead before heading downstairs.

'Pass the child to me,' I hear the Burgermeister say.

And then a moment later, 'I declare, a boy has been born,' he shouts, followed by cheering from my other benefactors.

'The miracle child,' someone calls out. 'Willem has blessed us with a boy.'

'Bring out the brandy,' another declares.

And then the front door closes.

Beatrix appears a short time later, my son in her arms. Try as she might, she cannot stop herself from crying.

'I'm so sorry,' she says, handing me little Niklaas. 'The Burgermeister insisted on taking your grandmother.'

'No!' I cry out, desperate to get up from the birthing stool, but I am hit by another wave of pain.

'She told me to tell you, it is best this way. She couldn't say goodbye.' The maid rushes to my side as the pain intensifies. 'I think I'd better take the babe.'

I nod, fearful I might drop Niklaas, my limbs so weak. Beatrix gently takes the baby and places him down in the crib. He seems content to go to sleep.

'There is pressing,' I begin. 'Oma. You must...'

'It's just the cord, ma'am. It always arrives after the baby. I helped my Ma deliver my little sister.'

But the pain is too sudden, too familiar. 'The pain... I think there is another...'

Beatrix bends down and looks between my legs. I hear her gasp. 'There is another head.'

I wince as the pain intensifies. 'Quickly! Send Carel after the Burgermeister. Oma must return at once.'

The maid goes downstairs before returning to my side. 'He is running,' she says.

'I'm not sure we have time,' I manage between gasping for breath. 'You watched Oma deliver Niklaas.'

'Oh! I can't deliver a -'

'You must. I have no one else. You can do this, Beatrix.'

My daughter is born shortly afterwards, guided into the world by my maid. Her arrival is much swifter than her brother's, as though she is in a rush to make her appearance. She has a head of

black hair, just like Niklaas, but is a much chubbier baby, round and pink, with a healthy pair of lungs. Beatrix cuts the cord and after she is placed in my arms, my daughter lets out an almighty cry. Recalling how Oma had tended little Niklaas, we clean her mouth, though she is determined to make herself heard.

‘What shall you call her?’ Beatrix asks.

I have given no thought to a girl’s name. ‘I... I don’t know.’

While I am wrapping my daughter in a linen cloth, Beatrix checks on my son. I know something is wrong as soon as she picks him up.

‘Bring Niklaas to me.’ But I can tell he has already departed his fragile tiny body. I take him from the maid and hold him close, my two children at my chest. For just a moment my daughter goes silent. I sob uncontrollably, distraught at the loss of my beautiful son.

‘Is everything alright up there?’ calls out a familiar voice. It is Anthony’s.

I look to Beatrix; she too is weeping.

‘Everyone else has left. May I come up?’ he asks.

‘A man... not in the birthing room,’ the maid stammers.

She is right, but we need help. ‘There is no one else,’ I say.

Beatrix reluctantly goes downstairs and shortly returns with Anthony’s. He looks in shock at the scene before him. The afterbirth lying on the ground at my feet. My nightdress bloody and drenched in sweat. In my arms, two babies, one tiny and so still, the other large and screaming.

‘Another?’ he says slowly.

‘A girl.’

He looks down at my son. ‘Oh, good Lord.’

I say nothing but look up at Anthony’s, tears streaming down my face. He takes Niklaas from me and gently kisses him on the forehead before wrapping him up in a cloth and laying him down in the crib.

‘He... he must be baptised,’ I stammer.

‘I will do it,’ Anthony’s says. ‘His name?’

‘Niklaas.’

He nods and I sit sobbing as he blesses my son, giving him his name.

Anthony’s then reaches for my daughter and hands her to Beatrix. Gently, he helps me onto the bed and places a sheet over me. ‘I will put the cord on the fire. You have a healthy child. Grieve, of course. But your daughter needs you, Gertje.’

‘Oma,’ I cry out.

‘She is in gaol, my love. There is nothing we can do for her tonight. But all is not lost.’

'I must...' I try to sit up, but it is impossible.

'Lay down and rest.' Anthony's leans in and kisses me on the lips, a caress so gentle and soft, it reminds me of Isabella. I open my eyes suddenly, the realisation of what is before me, so very obvious. The smooth-skinned face, the fine, delicate hands, such kind and gentle ways.

'Marry me, Gertje.'

I stare at Anthony's, unable to speak.

'Before you say anything,' he says, taking my hand. 'There is something -'

'I know,' I say before *she* can finish.

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CRITICAL REFLECTION

Bruegel, Bourdieu and writing historical fiction

1. Introduction

The writer of historical fiction faces the challenge of recreating a world that is both familiar yet strange and unknown. This creative undertaking requires equal research and invention, to construct the historicity of characters, settings and events that are believable to the reader. While discussing what historical fiction is, Margaret Atwood distinguishes between a past that is 'yesterday not so long ago' and 'The Past' such as that which Charles Dickens' Scrooge calls long past (1998). This thesis focuses on the long past; periods in time way before the memory of any living person. These are stories set hundreds of years ago where conclusive facts and verifiable truths are thin on the ground. What information remains was often recorded by those with a vested interest and produced for a particular purpose, such as moral advice or political gain, for example. Therefore, the veracity of contemporary accounts is a challenge. Any details uncovered may be questionable in authenticity, often revealing conflict between different sources and containing large gaps. So, the writer of historical fiction must be a creative inventor. As Mantel (2013) shows, the Seymours and the Boleyns may have told the story of Thomas Cromwell differently from each other but her job was to deliver a believable consensus. Yet such invention comes with inherent boundaries. We are dealing with real periods of history with known facts. The art of this invention reaches its greatest potential when it constructs a world that the reader feels is real. This realness can be difficult to identify or define, but it is when the reader senses authenticity. They know the story is a work of fiction and accept it may not be factual, but it is recognisable from a historical perspective.

The need for research when writing historical fiction is without debate. To piece together a credible image of the past, a writer must gather a huge amount of pre-existing content which often includes several surprises (which I will come to – regarding my own novel and related research into the painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder). However, the biggest challenge appears to be what approach to take when researching a work of fiction rather than a historical thesis produced by a historian. As Hayden White describes, 'historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real - which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable' (2005: 147). It is the 'real' inside the 'true' which interests me.

If we accept that the writer of fiction can also be an inventor, or as White calls it, a magician 'conjuring up the past', there still lies the dilemma of how to deal with history effectively for the discerning reader. From my literary research experience, it would seem there is no correct approach to take, merely examples that can be followed. Some writers have taken a real event and with artistic treatment transcended the truth, often claiming to give it a truer, deeper reality. Others are doggedly faithful to what factual information remains. Regardless of where a writer stands on how they wish to deal with history, what is apparent is that, regardless of how history is used, it is complicated. This is evidenced in the mountain of fictional history books available but also by its frequent presence in creative writing conference programmes and journal articles. However, in many of the articles and conference papers I have encountered, while they discuss the related issues and the need for quality research, few offer viable approaches or strategies on how it could be conducted (and see my final paragraph in this section below).

Critical theorists, dealing in historicism, historicity and such like, can help however the challenge in dealing with real fact in fiction remains topical (and which I will expand on further in the next section). Indeed, it's challenged by ideas on fiction itself. The meaning of fiction is twofold; it is the form of prose that describes imaginary events and people, but it is also something that is invented or untrue and therefore, potentially, a lie. A debate which is further enhanced by Ali Smith's notion that 'Fiction and lies are the opposite of each other. Lies go out of the way to distort and turn you away from the truth. But fiction is one of our ways of telling the truth' (Charlotte Higgins, 2018). And this 'way of telling the truth' is the bequest of artists, such as writers.

This part of my thesis, then, discusses some of the challenges this presents using my novel as a working example. But to explore this further, I aim to do so using an approach based on techniques developed by French social philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu. I used his *theory of practice* when researching and writing my novel set in the sixteenth century because at the time I found it a useful tool. It's not the only tool, of course, but I highlight the approach taken to be a useful tool for future writers who are looking for such a thing (as I was at the start of this research). This will be outlined and followed by detailed examples taken from my novel, *The Dishonest Woman*, which is also part of the thesis submission.

2. Writing Fiction about History

Fundamental to any discussion about writing a novel about history, is to qualify what fiction falls into this genre. When writing about history, there are three basic approaches a writer can take.

1. **General Facts** - this is taking the facts and telling the readers purely the story based on the known facts. For example, a writer takes a well-known figure from the past and, similarly to a history book, retells what is known.
2. **Present History through Fact** - this is where the writer interprets history through various representations, for example, art. The writer considers the various discourse that surrounds such representations, such as interpretations by contemporary art historians, and builds a story around this. The resulting work may be interweaved with known facts, such as events and figures, of the time.
3. **The Historical Novel** - building upon the above, the writer fictionalises a story around and through characters. The writer takes a well-known figure and fills gaps, making choices where there are conflicting facts, and even inventing.

According to György Lukács the “Historical Novel” first appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Before this, there were novels with historical settings, but the characters had the psychology and manners of those of the writer’s own day (1962: 19). What distinguished the historical novel were characters with the ‘historical peculiarity of their age’. What emerged were novels that re-imagined the sociological conditions of the period the story is set.

There are novels, such as Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2010), where the author has taken a well-known figure, such as Henry VIII, and fictionalised a story, and these fall into the Historical Novel category. However, there are others with predominantly fictional characters yet in a recognisable era, such as Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999). In this novel, we have the well-known figure of artist Vermeer, surrounded by fictional characters and within a fictionalised story. These characters are not known to the readership, yet they too must exhibit the ‘historical peculiarity of their age’. Some might argue, given it is purely a work of fiction with made-up characters, the author is at liberty to create at will. Yet I would contend those stories which achieve a real sense of historical authenticity for the reader, do so because they are bound and behave according to the social conditions of their place and time.



Fig 1: **Nederlandsch Proverbs**, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1559, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



Fig 2: Associated proverb: *“Zij hangt haar man de blauwe huik om”*
(roughly translated: She hangs over her husband the blue cloak, deceiving him)

The approach taken for my novel, *The Dishonest Woman*, was a combination of 2 and 3 above. The novel was inspired by a painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (see Fig 1), and my objective was to use interpretations of the characters and ideas depicted in his work and to build a story around them. For example, cuckoldry is a theme in the novel, and this was based on two characters in the painting

and the associated proverb (see Fig 2). But inspiration is one thing; I needed to bring these characters to life and give them a sense of authenticity.

What distinguishes the historical novel from other genres is its response from the reader, one that Jerome de Groom describes as 'a sense of otherness and difference'. Therefore, regardless of whether using real characters or invented ones, the aim of the writer is to achieve such a response. My objective then was to understand how the writer of historical fiction could achieve this and this was why I ultimately turned to the techniques of Pierre Bourdieu. But first I will describe the key challenges the writer of historical fiction faces when embarking on such an objective.

3. Challenges of Writing Historical Fiction

3.1 Don't lie

Regardless of the writer's diligence, when it comes to research there remains the key issue of how fact is handled in fiction. The truth can be questionable, there may be gaps in available information, and sources that conflict. At the 2018 Great Writing Conference in London, Bryony Stocker advised 'Don't Lie' but when it comes to history, the truth can be elusive. Author Sarah Dunant at the 2018 Historical Novel Society Conference, described how the historical figure of Lucrezia Borgia she uncovered from her research was markedly different from the character perpetuated through history. In such situations, where an author's research reveals inconsistencies and inaccuracies in recorded history, how they deal with these is of immense importance. Such as in Dunant's case, there is a true history and a perceived history. A reader with a cursory knowledge of the Borgia family history might conclude that she has her facts wrong. So, if an author is going to depart from known facts, what they write needs to have authority in the eyes of the reader. The reader needs to be able to trust the author and the authority of the history being portrayed can only be achieved through the diligence of a writer who approaches their research with a methodical emphasis and precise interpretation. Mantel provides many such examples in *Bring Up The Bodies* (2013), such as this fictional conversation Cromwell has with Lady Rochford:

Lady Rochford sits back. She says softly, 'Before they were married, she used to practise with Henry in the French fashion.'
'I have no idea what you mean. Were you ever in France yourself?'
'No. I thought you were.'
'As a soldier. Among the military, the arts amatoria is not refined.'

(2013: 314)

There is no way Mantel is repeating a true conversation, she is estimating what the conversation might have been. As can be seen from this extract, the Boleyn story is being told through dialogue which is attempting to create an authentic idea of the conversation that might have taken place. Through a work of fiction Mantel gets her audience to take another look at a very well-known historical figure, Thomas Cromwell, and his relationship with Henry VIII. This is a well-travelled period for the historical writer. It is a period full of intrigue, sex and politics – and how many times can we hope Anne Boleyn escapes? Mantel approaches her retelling by depicting Cromwell in a different light to one often portrayed in official histories. He is recognisable as the historical figure 'Cromwell', yet she reveals to her reader a complex, human character, taking into consideration the various structures influencing his society while aligning against his personal struggles, such as his relationship with his father (and father figures) and the death of his wife and daughter. Stephen

Greenblatt, a notable academic Shakespeare critic, wrote a review for *The New York Review of Books* on *Wolf Hall* and he concluded that Cromwell probably didn't sound very much Mantel's hero, but that what matters in historical fiction is the 'illusion of reality, the ability to summon up ghosts' (2009). And this is what Mantel does, she makes the ghost real through the illusion of it.

Key to the historical novel is the concern for authenticity. The reader knows it is a work of fiction and, to use Jerome de Groot's idea, they are being 'consciously hoodwinked' (2010: 6). The author may be misleading them, providing misinformation and duping them, but they do so knowingly and, according to de Groot, in collusion with the audience. The story may not be true, but it is believable.

3.2 Historical accuracy?

The 2018 Josie Rourke movie, *Mary Queen of Scots*, has drawn criticism for its historical inaccuracy. The film explores the relationship between Mary Stuart and her cousin, Elizabeth I of England. Controversially, the film has the two queens meeting face to face. However, according to historians, this meeting never took place. Dr Estelle Paranque says there is proof of this inaccuracy, by way of letters. She sees this portrayal as 'problematic... misleading viewers about their relationship' (BBC News, 2018). There are other inaccuracies. For example, the Mary depicted in the film speaks with a Scottish accent, yet Paranque believes this was unlikely given she was raised in France. One review of the film, comparing it to other movie depictions of Mary Queen of Scots, describes it as, 'Rourke's film does quite well at blending the established narrative about Mary with creative licence' (The Conversation, 2019). What the same review highlights is the disagreement between historians of the portrayal of Mary and whether she was 'essentially a blameless victim or scheming perpetrator' (ibid). But what the reviews do seem to mostly agree on is that the film depicts her 'mainly as a sympathetic, strong heroine' (ibid) and its rating on IMDB of 7.4

(<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2328900/> accessed on 23 February 2019) indicates that moviegoers are not overly concerned. As Scottish film critic Eddie Harrison says, 'the historical accuracy would not bother cinema goers if the film was exciting', that 'The primary purpose of the film is to make money and to entertain. If it sends people back to history books that's great but a history book and a film are two very different things' (ibid).

Alison Weir is both a historian and a writer of historical fiction. In her novel, *The Lady Elizabeth* (2009), she depicts the young Elizabeth I with an illicit pregnancy by Thomas Seymour, her stepfather. Weir writes of her decision to include this in her novel:

He definitely ‘romped’ with her and was caught by his wife Katherine Parr in a compromising situation – we don’t know the details – but Elizabeth was sent away and he ended up executed. As a historian I’ve argued that there is some evidence on which to base this storyline, but it’s not good enough to support the theory that she was pregnant. There were rumours of a child being born, but as a historian I would discount them. Yet, as a novelist, you can ask, What if?

(Katharine Clements, 2016)

Weir has not steered away from depicting the pregnancy because she does not have the facts to support its accuracy. When asked why she chose to move from writing non-fiction to fiction, Weir’s response is interesting. She made the jump around the late nineties and writes she was aware that novels about historical figures were not selling (Clements, 2016). Weir is now a top-selling author in the United Kingdom and has sold over 2.7 million books worldwide. It would seem readers enjoy and want stories that explore possibilities, such as the ‘what if’ of this possible illicit pregnancy.

3.3 Filling the gaps

In her BBC4 Reith Lectures, Hilary Mantel argued that ‘We need fiction to remind us that the unknown and unknowable is real, and exerts its force’ (2017), which confirms that the author’s job is to create this unknown from what is knowable. When faced with gaps in history, or conflicting facts, the writer must make choices that appear credible for the characters and setting. But this appearance is important, once again it comes back to, not just the research itself, but to how the writer works with the information available. Jen Webb writes about this act of filling in the gaps by saying, ‘For historians, truth is what is valued; for novelists, it is the texture of truth that matters; and sometimes matters more than the truth itself’ (2015: 17). Given there are unknowns and gaps, this advice seems sensible, yet the problem remains: if a writer is to fabricate history, how can they do so and still make it credible to the reader? Which leads onto my next challenge, which is how a writer of historical fiction then uses their research – and indeed what to use and what to keep back.

The twenty-first-century reader of historical fiction is one immersed in a world of fast-moving, televisual and internet popular culture, where it is easy to check facts. For a novel to appeal to such an audience it must ‘bring to life’ the period it is portraying. In this respect, Mantel and other writers such as Sarah Dunant, Alison Weir, Deborah Moggach, and Barbara Kingsolver, to name a few, have driven up the appeal for historical fiction.

3.4 Putting flesh back on the skeleton of history

Historical novelist Alessandro Manzoni, writing in 1850, described historical fiction as ‘not just the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history’ (de Groot, 2010: 3). Hayden White explains, ‘The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information’ (2005). An influential scholar of historicism, White maintained that historical meaning is imposed on historical facts by historians and writers alike and by choices in storytelling. Which then brings into question authenticity and any impact the personal interpretation has on this. Stocker describes authenticity as, ‘a negotiation between the evidence available to the writer, the reader’s existing understanding of the period and the imaginative power of the author, which combined, can only present the spirit of an era rather than its actuality’ (2012: 310).

This is a convincing idea. As both White and Stocker seem to advocate, this requires the writer to use their artistic skills combined with their research, to construct a story based on known information that reflects a sense of what the time was like, rather than an exact truth. This advice helps and gives at the same time the writer of fiction scope to be inventive. Yet the challenge of achieving authenticity in the eyes of the reader remains. As Stocker further says, ‘In setting such exacting standards for the historical novel, these critics do not specify how they are to be met’ (2012).

Coming back to György Lukács and his description of characters with the ‘historical peculiarity of their age’, the writer of historical fiction has to uncover and reconstruct the sociological conditions of the period.

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.

(1962: 42)

Lukács’ focus on the people opens up a lot of potential for the writer. According to de Groot, ‘The historical novel fundamentally challenges subjectivities, offering multiple identities and historical story lines’ (2010: 139) which builds on Lukács’ idea of the human experience, now taking into consideration the many and varied people who lived at any particular time. Historical novels have been used to give once marginalised communities a voice, or as de Groot describes it ‘reinserting them into the past’ (2010: 148). Going back to Weir, she refers to depictions of women in historical

fiction in the later sixties and seventies as 'mere footnotes'. Given so many of her novels are about female figures in history, it would seem she is eager to rectify this. But she faced the challenge, 'With medieval women you're dealing with fragments of information that you have to piece together to make a credible whole. It came to me that the only way you could fill those gaps was to write fiction' (Clements, 2016). So again, we see the need for invention when writing historical fiction, but it comes back to my question of how to do this in a credible way.

3.5 A fresh look at history

Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith* (2011) is set in the nineteenth century and she came up with a very interesting solution to this problem. Two of the characters are lesbians and one becomes involved in the assembly of a bibliography of literary pornography. A fairly common historical view of such pornography would be representing the objectification of women by men (de Groot, 2010: 152). However, Waters reverses this trend, using the images as a record of female pleasure and desire. Whether such a thing happened or not doesn't matter here (though I can't see why it couldn't have), it's a work of fiction and importantly for the reader, it is believable. As Slotkin describes 'All historical interpretation begins with hypotheses about the way things, people and institutions work. The historian develops hypotheses analytically; the novelist synthetically' (2005). Even within the recognisable histories, Waters and Mantel, for example, expand on possibilities. As I have mentioned above, the French way in Renaissance sexual matters and lesbian and porn issues in the Victorian era are hitherto little discussed in fiction of their own time and often in modern historical versions of that time too. However, this doesn't mean the modern historical novelist cannot explore marginal ideas - this being just a small example.

As writers of historical fiction, then, the challenges faced when dealing with history seem clear, and while these challenges need to be taken seriously, they also offer much potential and scope. Such as Water's achievement, the historical novel can give marginalised communities a voice. It can also move beyond simply telling history, transcending the truth to provide the reader with a more rounded portrayal of the human experience. My objective was clear but what I needed was a structured approach to achieve such an outcome.

4. Creative Practice and Sociological Methodology

In considering how I would approach the development of the novel, my focus was very much on depicting realistic characters. In line with Lukács' emphasis on characters with 'historical peculiarity of their age', I wanted to take an approach that revealed social and human motives, to then drive how the characters think, feel and act. A sociological approach seemed a logical path to explore.

In considering the application of sociological methods to creative writing research, I was interested in a Gina Colarelli O'Connor idea that 'it is unusual for teams of scholars from different disciplines to work together, not because the need doesn't exist, but because the mechanisms to do so are not well established' (Spencer, 2013: 81). I began to wonder if the limited use of Bourdieu's *theory of practice* in creative writing practice was more due to a lack of 'established mechanisms' than any inherent lack of suitability. Indeed, Spencer acknowledges that 'anthropologists and sociologists, experts on culture and cultural expressions, may be able to help creative writing researchers discern where culture ends and where creativity begins' (Spencer, 2013: 95).

Writing on the Creative Writing pedagogy, Jeri Kroll describes 'discovering, unearthing, remembering, revising, re-perceiving material are all processes involved in creative research' (Kroll, 2013: 107). These all describe the process of researching a historical novel extremely well. There are many historical details to discover and unearth, with many gaps and contradictions. Of course, tapping into contemporary memories of historical periods such as the sixteenth-century, is not possible. There are no living people to interview, no recordings and precious little else in the way of historical accounts. The writer can, to some extent, consider written memoirs and literature alongside artefacts and what historical records there might be. But the revising and re-perceiving implies an additional creative undertaking, and this relates particularly well to my use of Bourdieu's methods. Kroll further describes the difference between local research, such as uncovering basic facts, and global research, which can 'revise our understanding of key historical events' and 'lead to new or substantially improved insights' (2013: 112). This approach seems applicable to Bourdieu's methods, and particularly to researching suppressed historical groups, such as women. I would contend that exploring the *habitus*, *field*, *field of power* and *capitals* of such social groups, can provide new insights that can then take a historical novel much further. It is not just recounting a story set in the past but revealing details that are less known or have been lost/distorted/forgotten over time. In such a vein, I hoped to reveal something insightful of sixteenth-century life in Northern Europe, particularly for a young woman from humble origins and what we would now consider to be a working-class family, working day-to-day in a bakery, doing what they have to do to survive.

In considering writing as an act akin to architectural design, Jenn Webb writes that,

...it is writers who open the doors and peep inside. Writers act the voyeurs, and their works suggest something about how people might inhabit designed and built environments by showing them in their everyday lives: making a kind of zoo for anthropologists (or philosophers and architects) or the ordinary.

(Webb, 2006: 219)

Critchley takes this idea of a world exposed further when referring to poetry,

13. Poetry describes life as it is, but in all the intricate evasions of as. It gives us the world as it is – common, newer, low, recognizable – but imagined, illumined, turned about. It is a world both seen and unseen until seen with the poet's eyes.

(Critchley, 2005:12)

It is this focus on everyday life as is, and a desire to bring a much wider environment into my novel, that drew me towards a sociological approach. I wanted much more than characters, setting and plot events. I was seeking out the 'zoo' or environment full of social forces. A vibrant world that could bring the novel to life.

4.1 Creative Writing pedagogy and a Bourdieusian approach

For a writer of fiction, specifically historical fiction, a core part of creating the novel involves transforming researched information into a story. As an artist, creativity is at the heart of this undertaking, yet it is acknowledged by Webb and Brien that a Bourdieusian approach can at times seem at odds with this and that for Bourdieu this 'undermines practice because it turns it into an object for scholarly dissection rather than for creation' (Webb and Brien, 2010: 189). However, such a view doesn't acknowledge the advantages of a scholarly dissection at the developing stage of a creative product.

While constructing my novel, I was aware that I needed to remain focused on my objective.

I wanted to reveal and understand aspects of society, not for 'scholarly purposes' but as information to feed into the story as character traits, motivations, and event and setting details. My objective in my research was to dissect what information was available through paintings, writings and so forth, so that I could analyse aspects of the society they came from. My research was a continual process, moving back and forth between reading, viewing, analysing and writing, to uncover more details or to clarify 'facts' that would then aid my decision making. As a writer, the aim of my research was to

understand what information was available and to then make creative choices that are believable to my readers and therefore giving the work a sense of authority. I was aware that taking a structured approach such as Bourdieu's could suggest I was hoping to find verifiable facts, but that was not the case. Whereas an art historian might reject information that cannot be verified, as a creative writer I could employ a more flexible approach. I was willing to explore and consider possibilities, and to then create and invent. To some extent, I was using Bourdieu's methodology to open the door to the past that allowed me to explore and question, constructing a view of the past that readers consider a possible interpretation and representation.

A criticism sometimes levelled at Bourdieu's work is that it 'reduces everything to a single schematic model' (Dubois, 2000: 84). Such a reduction, should a writer analyse to this extent, would be almost crippling. To support my project, I wanted almost a smorgasbord of possibilities to explore.

However, in practice, I was able to construct a schematic model of Bruegel's world, acknowledging that some of the details were based on fact, while other aspects were based on hearsay and my own invention. Bourdieu himself, in referring to modelling, described it as 'continually reformulated, adapted and refined', (Dubois, 2000: 84) which suggests an on-going process. The model evolves as more information is revealed, but also as a writer, as more decisions and creative choices are made. For example, in deciding that my protagonist would be able to convince learned men of the idea of an 11-month pregnancy (based not on fact but on an idea purported by a sixteenth-century novel written by Rabelais) I then needed to explore what this would have meant to society at that time. I needed to decide whether the men actually believed her, or if they chose to believe her because it suited them. So rather than viewing Bourdieu's theory as a limiting single schematic model, I preferred to take the approach of something that would evolve and adapt as my work progressed.

Bourdieu's *theory of practice* has been described as "deterministic" (Dubois, 2000: 85), meaning 'human action is not free but necessarily determined by motives, which are regarded as external factors acting upon the will' (Oxford English Dictionary²). On first glance, this idea of determinism would seem almost at loggerheads with the premise of my novel. The protagonist is a young woman who must navigate her way through the complexities of sixteenth-century Antwerp society to survive. She is not a character who is a victim of circumstance, but someone who actively influences the outcome of events. Gertje, faced with the reality of being a widow and the possibility of losing her husband's inn, manages to become a 'player' on the *field of power* at the heart of the city. She does this by learning the men's secrets and becoming their keeper or broker, enabling them to

² "determinism" oed.com019. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/51252> [accessed 20/07/2019]

function as a powerful unit. While this may suggest she has power and can affect outcomes, she does so within the boundaries of society. Gertje is still operating within the rules (or *doxa*) of the *field*. It is her knowledge (*symbolic capital*) and her contacts (*social capital*), that gives her influence on the *field*. I would argue that Gertje's actions may be socially determined, but she uses her knowledge and works within the rules of the *field* to influence outcomes. But she also comes with her *habitus*.

The social agent, according to Bourdieu, is 'defined through a process of inculcation, which, derived from his primary relationship, imposes a series of constraints on his actions.' (Dubois, 2000: 85) According to this then, Gertje, a baker's daughter, has inscribed within her, constraints and patterns of behaviour consistent with someone of her social background. Her dispositions and behaviour are a consequence of her *habitus*, which is passed down through generations and inculcated from an early age and reinforced through her education and culture (Wolfreys, 2000: 3). For example, as a child, she did not expect to go to school, as a boy of the same social background might have. As she became a young woman, she did not aspire to find a profession but was brought up and indeed content to be a wife and mother.

This created somewhat of a quandary. At the beginning of the novel, Gertje is a naïve young woman with limited education and certainly no experience in dealing with powerful men. My challenge was to develop her character so that it was believable, taking into consideration her primary *habitus*. To achieve this, I created events that provided Gertje opportunities to change social and economic position in the field and acquire positional *capitals*. For example, the Lawyer proposes a business deal to convert the stables at Gertje's inn into accommodation. He does so because it is beneficial for him (improving his *economic* and *symbolic capital*) and he views Gertje as someone he can control. However, Gertje can use this to her advantage. The deal provides her with much needed income (*economic capital*) and she makes useful contacts (*social capital*). But she is also astute and learns about the men's activities (*symbolic capital*) and then make plans of her own. In effect, she is accruing *capital*, which is valuable and allows her to participate in the struggle for power that is taking place within the *field*.

Most importantly when Gertje becomes an innkeeper, she changes position in the hospitality field. The rest, including capitals and dispositions, follow. As her experience and networking improves, she changes position and is continually adding to her primary *habitus* a set of secondary dispositions and new capitals necessary to maintain and even advance her new position.

Other aspects of her *habitus* are eventually revealed by her choices throughout the plot. Her grandmother, Oma, and her mother (deceased) were healers, and these skills and disposition have been passed on to Gertje. This is capital, but risky. Oma helps others for no charge, believing she is fostering goodwill. This is true in the case of the fruit sellers, especially Rogier, who becomes a trusted friend. But is not true in all cases. The fishmonger accuses Oma of witchcraft, an example of the grandmother's *misrecognition* where she has misinterpreted something for what it is. Gertje has been raised in a loving home. She helps her family run their small bakery providing her knowledge of how to manage a business (*cultural capital*). And inherently we see the family's values coming through in their actions. Gertje's father chooses to leave the city rather than have Gertje marry the Innkeeper (*inalienable values*). This is an example of how a character's *habitus* can influence the plot decisions. While Gertje (not consciously) becomes aware of the rules of the *field (doxa)* and operates within these to establish a place on the *field*, ultimately it is her core beliefs (love for her family) and disposition that drive her decisions. She chooses to lie and raise her daughter as her son, not because it helps her position on the *field* (if anything, it puts it at risk), but because as a woman with a daughter, she will not be in the hospitality field or the field of power at all and will lose much of her *symbolic capital*.

A criticism hotly debated on Bourdieu's work is that it is "intrinsically resistant to social change" (Hir, 2000: 147). However, this idea actually provided me with a creative impetus. My novel is set in the sixteenth century and the protagonist is a woman who is trying to survive in a male-dominated world. While I would not describe the novel as a feminist story, it is the story of a strong female character. But in viewing the setting of my novel through Bourdieu's tools – specifically that of a *field* and *field of power* – I was aware this was not a static structure, that society was ever-evolving and changing around it. Regarding this criticism and how I set about using Bourdieu's *theory of practice*, while I would agree on a post-textual critical level, on a creative level, being aware at the point of creativity means I could disrupt the fields for literary effect. I recognise that Bourdieu's tools helped me to identify the commonplace constraints to social change in the period I was representing, but I would content that becoming aware of these constraints, through using Bourdieu's tools, allows the writer of fiction to then resist them in a way that raises the characters from commonplace to become more individual and interesting. Used in this way, Bourdieu helped to enhance the possibilities in the creative process.

If I were to decide on the greatest benefit of applying a Bourdieusian approach to writing historical fiction, I would conclude it is the ability to consider the world within the novel as much more than their subjective consciousness of the characters that exist within it. To bring the setting and characters alive in a world that existed in reality so long ago requires much more than well-rounded characters and accurate descriptions. What Gertje and the cast of characters needed was an awareness of this 'sphere' around them. Gertje befriends two theatre actors, Edward and Isabella, and she does so in a world that looks upon these characters in a particular way (suspicion and intrigue). When she rushes to the aid of her friend, Johanna, who is dying of the plague, she does so in the knowledge that people may view her involvement suspiciously in the light of witchcraft beliefs. When the maid embarks on an affair with a prominent city bookseller, they do so aware that her social position is greatly different to his. And so it unfolds, this is Antwerp in the sixteenth century and the everyday world taking place around the Grote Markt. And a Bourdieusian approach enabled me to not necessarily 'use' all my research but to have it subtly influence my characters' behaviour and choices, and my own decisions regarding plot events, to aid the overall authenticity of the story.

In considering how Bourdieu's approach might be applied by other creative writers, I can see several benefits. This includes how information uncovered during research is approached and interpreted. For example, Gertje's choice of a yellow dress to a dinner party is significant and comes with inherent meaning within her society. Her dress, the way she wears it, whether the colour is fashionable and how it compares with those of the other women in the room, indicates her social standing and how she is subsequently treated at a banquet, which lends itself to authenticating the historical experience. Periods, such as the sixteenth-century, are less well known to contemporary readers, and the author is tasked with reconstructing a time and place based on what information remains. A character's *habitus* takes the character profile to a further level, influencing their opinions, behaviours and dispositions. It provides a logic to explain characters actions and why they are disposed to act in particular ways. Characters acquire and lose *capital*, affecting the *fields* they may be players on, as well as their relationships. But everything a character does occurs within a social space and with various forces around them (social, political, religious, cultural and so forth). It is important, however, to remain aware that ultimately the writer is using Bourdieu's *theory of practice* as a means to understand and reveal. It is not a scholarly dissection to expose a truth, but a practical analysis to interpret, explore and fill gaps in representations of a distant historical period. Ultimately the novelist is undertaking a creative process, and it is this creativity combined with a Bourdieusian analysis, that has the potential to create believable characters, places and events for

the reader. Returning to Webb, 'it is writers who open the doors and peep inside... showing them in their everyday lives: making a kind of zoo for anthropologists (or philosophers and architects) or the ordinary' (Webb,2006: 219).

4.2 A Sociological history of the Past

Cultural studies, literary studies, philosophy, gender studies are just a few examples of fields that are useful ways of providing methods of understanding the research that underlies a work of fiction. Jen Webb describes sociology as an art that 'brings the unseen things in society, or the things that are disguised, to light' (Webb et al., 2010: 72). Returning to the goal of invention as discussed in my Introduction, this revealing of unseen things seemed to offer potential.

Creative writers can utilise a range of theories and fields to support their craft. In considering approaches popular with and on creative writers, and looking at the critical works currently available, there is much by critics such as Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, for example. Bourdieu does have certain affinities with thinkers such as Foucault, considering aspects such as systems of thought, social institutions and forms of material and symbolic power. While useful and their work was very much normalised in its use in the field of Creative Writing, I found I was looking for something different. I got to the point where the critical works I was reading did not fully meet my objectives. This was especially so in regard to specific techniques to help develop a work of historical fiction and a structure for the novel to take shape.

4.3 Bourdieu and the field of Creative Writing

Bourdieu's interest in the creative field was ongoing throughout his career. He wrote about cultural producers in the literary field, including an analysis of writer Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) in *The Rule of Arts* (Bourdieu, 1996) and pre-impressionist painter Edouard Manet (1832-1883) in *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution* (Bourdieu, 2017). The principal issues Bourdieu is raising here is:

the extent to which such artists create their audience, indeed somewhat reflect them, and thus the status of their cultural works. Are they self-serving egoists intent on financial gain, or 'heroic' critics of social conservatism?

(Koning and Grenfell, 2019)

In 1999 Bourdieu gave a talk to a group of fine art students in Nîmes (2016/2001), offering his approach as tools for analysis, to aid the students in understanding how the art world works.

Bourdieu described this art world as a social world amidst others. This world, or *field*, has social

issues, struggles, power relations, and accumulated *capital*. Everything that occurs within this *field* has specific forms, original, of value to this field but not necessarily in others.

Please note, I have included a list of Bourdieu terms in an appendix at the end of this thesis.

In understanding how Bourdieu's approach can be useful to creative arts practitioners, there are numerous aspects to take into consideration. In contra to Emmanuel Kant's views on an 'aesthetic experience', where the viewer of art has a 'pure' or 'disinterested' gaze to experience an almost 'transcendental' view of art and the creative experience, Bourdieu sees the subject-object relationship as the very expression of the pre-existent social world:

For Bourdieu, everything was in the nature of that structural relationship between the subject and that object, and the way their interaction was constituted by social norms and the generative structural forms, which underlay them (see Grenfell and Hardy, 2007). One consequence of this argument is that art is simply another form of social differentiation and distinction, and thus is characteristic of those producing and, indeed, consuming it. Bourdieu's ambition is to develop a new 'science of aesthetics', which uncovers such social derivation in art as a way of developing another aesthetic informed by a reflexive relationship to the subject and object of artistic production and consumption.

(Koning and Grenfell, 2019)

Bourdieu's approach involves objecting the relationship between the subject and object of art, as well as the nature of that objectification itself. I will expand further on Bourdieu's ideas in the next section, however for the purposes of my own analysis, I began to consider my work in terms of two social worlds: one that existed in a historical period, that of sixteenth-century Flanders, and another I would create within my novel. Such as Bourdieu offered to the fine art students, I was intrigued to understand what such an analysis might bring to my own research.

Bourdieu's methods have found applications in many diverse fields:

... his works have become standard points of reference in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, art history, cultural studies, politics, sociology, and beyond. Yet Bourdieu's work on literature has so far received relatively little attention, especially in the Anglophone world.

(Speller, 2011: 13)

But as Speller's quote above highlights, Bourdieu's work on literature, and also on Creative Writing as a discipline, has been limited. Webb and Brien describe how:

the particular ways in which creative writing is mobilized for research outcomes has received rather less attention than its cousins in the disciplines of visual and performing arts or in the humanities (and especially in literary and cultural studies).

(2011: 189)

Webb considers this due, in part, to the typical academic location of Creative Writing within Humanities rather than Arts, and partly because the medium of writing results in outputs that comply with traditional research products in traditional forms (written language). I was particularly interested in taking Bourdieu's approach and using it with the intention of turning my output into useful material for a historical fiction novel, and in this regard, I could find no practical examples where this has been done.

4.4 Why Bourdieu?

Taking a more sociological approach offered potential and since Pierre Bourdieu is considered a leading cultural theorist, amongst other prominent thinkers such as those mentioned above, I began to think he might have a place in my study. Bourdieu's model for social analysis, combining rigorous empirical understanding with a highly elaborate theoretical frame, offered the potential to reveal cultural practices but also everyday life. In terms of a writer wanting to build realistic historical characters, this offers a very practical approach.

Nevertheless, I approached his work with some caution until I read Michael Grenfell, a Bourdieu scholar, describing Bourdieu's positioning as a social philosophy, encompassing specialisms including history, philosophy and psychology. This almost seemed like an invitation. In discovering Bourdieu's methods, also described as a *theory of practice*, are 'a series of conceptual tools used to explicate social phenomena' (Grenfell and Pahl, 2018), I became intrigued about their limited use in the Creative Writing field. Bourdieu is best known as a sociologist, however, the sociology he ascribed to is considered different to that practised in most English-speaking countries and it was partly this difference which appealed. Grenfell describes this theory of practice as 'restoring to men and women the meaning of their actions', and that Bourdieu's sociology can become both a means of cultural analysis and also part of the production of the cultural object itself (Grenfell and Pahl, 2018).

Randal Johnson describes,

Bourdieu's analytical method represents a fruitful alternative to many of the immanent models of analysis - ranging from New Criticism and various brands of formalism to structuralism and deconstruction - which have dominated literary studies... His work converges with and in many ways anticipates the renewed interest in the socio-historical ground of cultural production exemplified in different ways by 'New Historicism', depth hermeneutics, studies of the institutional framework of literature and literary criticism and, in a broad sense, cultural studies.

(Bourdieu, 1993: Editor's Introduction)

These alternative analytical methods that Johnson refers to, offered aspects I found appealing. There is a certain structure to Bourdieu's approach, sometimes referred to as *thinking tools*; it encourages understanding a specific 'world' as a dynamic space, one that is inhabited by numerous players. These players contribute and bring value, must conform to certain rules, struggle over power, all within an ever-changing domain. Any such analysis seemed to offer the possibility of providing a layered understanding of what might be taking place in society at that given time. Such as Bourdieu analysed Manet and his painting, I wondered if I could take a similar approach, and analyse another painter to uncover something of the world I wanted to depict. In this case, the world of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. I began with the painting by Bruegel, *Nederlandish Proverbs* (fig 1), containing approximately one hundred and twelve identifiable proverbs and idiots representing themes such as absurdity, wickedness and foolishness. The challenge I faced was how I, as a contemporary woman, should interpret these and I shall explore shortly how Bourdieu's approach provided me with a way to do this.

4.5 A socio-historical approach

Bourdieu's approach involves different levels of analysis. This ranges from the relationship between different cultural *fields* and the broader *field of power*, as well as the strategies, trajectories and world of individual agents (Bourdieu, 1993: 18). His method attempts to incorporate three levels of social reality: 1) the position of the *field* with the *field of power*; 2) the structure of the *field*; and 3) the genesis of the producers' *habitus*. (Bourdieu, 1993: 14).

This socio-historical ground of cultural production seems particularly relevant to writing historical fiction and the possibility of constructing a world with a focus on the social aspects. Bourdieu argues that:

systems of domination find expression in virtually all areas of cultural practice and symbolic exchange, including such things as preferences in dress, sports, food, music, literature, art and so, on, or, in a more general sense, in taste.

(Bourdieu, 1993: Editor's Introduction)

With this in mind, the information I was uncovering as part of my research began to reveal much more than might be initially assumed. For example, details such as what the characters wore or ate, start to represent cultural practices. Serving venison at a sixteenth-century banquet reveals much about the host's social status. I began to wonder if, by gaining an understanding of some of these 'systems of domination', I could incorporate these ideas within my novel as character traits, behaviours, tastes and so on. Recreating a credible world in historical fiction begins with realistic descriptions; the streets, buildings, food, clothing etc., all contribute to establishing the novel's

setting. But characters have to have their own lives which take place within a wider cultural realm. As Atwood explains, characters exist within a context, 'a fictional world comprised of geology, rather, economic forces, social classes, cultural references, and wars and plagues and such big public events' (1998). By 'geology' Atwood surely means the earthy connections of those immersed in the socio-cultural discourse. Therefore, what the writer of historical fiction also needs to do is to create this context. I began to explore if Bourdieu's approach might help create this context and realised that much of what was being uncovered could be interpreted in Bourdieusian terms, as *symbolic capital*, which in turn points to *social, cultural and economic capital*. I will explore the term *capital*, in more detail shortly.

In considering the cultural production of painter, Bruegel the Elder, I was interested in the relationship between cultural practices and broader social processes, and both his social position but also his role as an artist and an intellectual. My work began to reveal that I wasn't so much taking a different approach but coming at it from a different perspective. One that enabled me to focus in on social aspects of history, particularly that of everyday life and how people felt, thought and behaved.

A novel is a fabricated world filled with conflicts and tension; characters exist in social groups and behave according to social practices. To understand society at a historical point exposes and enriches the known facts. For example, we know as a fact that witch trials were held during the sixteenth century. However, how this 'fact' might have impacted everyday life is where a writer can use facts to construct fiction. Do people believe in witchcraft at this time? How might this belief have differed depending on social status? Did people live in fear of being accused of witchery? And if so, how might this fear have manifested itself? And so, a complex sociological approach, such as Bourdieu provides with his *theory of practice*, enables a writer to shape and construct a narrative from what is known. By gaining an understanding of society in terms of its many interlinked structures and their interactions, it opens up for the writer, many possibilities for plot themes and events, as well as characters that are realistic for the time.

4.6 Bringing Structure

Bourdieu's *theory of practice* offered the possibility to not only shape how I approached my research, but it also provided focus. As with any period in history, there is much taking place from religious, economic, cultural and social perspectives. Understanding what was possibly dominant isn't always obvious and is often determined by perspective. For example, the political unrest during this period may be of significant worry to the upper classes, while fear of possible religious persecution might be of more concern to lower classes.

There was ample information to process, and I needed a way to approach it. Understanding human social behaviour alongside the dynamics of its various groups revealed more than just basic details. What emerged were hints and suggestions; intriguing possibilities. For example, an early theme that I adopted for my novel, was that of cuckoldry, inspired by the couple in Bruegel's painting (see Figures 1 and 2). On first glance, we see a couple, that of a young woman married to a much older man. But on closer inspection, much more is revealed. His cloak has a long hood that covers his eyes, suggesting that perhaps she is concealing something from him. The more I was to explore the concept of cuckoldry, the more I was to see it was something much more than an act of adultery. Another of Bruegel's paintings, *Twelve Proverbs*, includes the theme of cuckoldry, but this time it has the words written underneath: The proverb under this image is "Ick stoppe my onder een blau hvycke, meer worde ick bekent koe ick meer duycke" (Seegers, 2011) (roughly translated: I put myself under a blue hood, the more I am known the more I duck), revealing a man who knows what is going on. For a writer wanting to recreate the everyday lives of ordinary people, these possibilities offer so much. Research revealed certain facts, such as the dates of major events and typical food and clothing of the time. But these are just surface details; what is more revealing is understanding perspectives, dominant practices, moral and social expectations. Then a world starts to become alive.

An appreciation for the impact of social structures can translate into how characters interact and behave around one another. Did people lay awake at night, worried their loved ones would catch the plague? These are just a few examples to demonstrate how research, needs to be worked and tested, to hopefully unmask more depth to what was going on.

In the third part of this thesis, I will provide examples of how the analysis of the chosen place and period of history was then developed into plot themes and events, but before doing so, I will discuss the approach taken to the development of my novel, *The Dishonest Woman*.

5. A Bourdieusian Approach

Bourdieu considered art as a 'collective act of magic', that the act of viewing and appreciating any form of art offers a sense of exclusivity associated with social role, function and experience. But he also argues that there is a 'collective misrecognition' and that all is not what it seems, opening up the potential to 'uncover another more prosaic and socially functional reality behind this ineffability and beyond the mystery of art' (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 108). As a writer, using painting as a core component of my research, this suggests a lot of possibilities; the ability to explore what might be behind a piece of art, to reveal a social reality.

In deciding how I would approach using Bourdieu's tools, I turned to examples of how they were applied to other areas of the arts. Bourdieu himself explore the art history in *The Rules of Art* and considered:

A science of the history of art must go beyond a straight examination of individual art objects, and artistic movements and their techniques. Moreover, a simple alternative account of an artist's biography and social context is equally insufficient. Rather, Bourdieu is looking to analyse the structure of social spaces: of products and producers, and of consumers.

(Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 58)

I will include brief descriptions of Bourdieu's terms as I refer to them, but more detailed definitions have been provided in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

Bourdieu, in his talk to the art students in Nîmes (2016/2001), described the world as consisting of social spaces or microcosms with their own social laws. These social spaces, or *fields*, have their own social issues, struggles, power relations, accumulated *capital* and he compares the field to a game. This game is developed slowly over time, not by anyone in particular, but it becomes a collective accumulation of resources, such as knowledge, systems and rules. In this game, people become *agents* within the *field*, and they occupy positions that are determined in large part by their symbolic *capital*. This *capital* might be esteem, notoriety or other forms of recognition that denoted importance. A person can belong to any number of fields, and as the fields themselves are dynamic, the players within the field can change at any time. The next instrument he refers to is called *habitus*. People have social origins and are the product of social and historical conditions. They have dispositions, academic trajectories, ways of being.

Bourdieu described his methodological approach as having 3 levels:

1. Analyse the position of the *field* vis-a-vis the *field of power*

2. Map out the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by *agents* who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which the field is the site.
3. Analyse the *habitus* of agents; the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalising a deterministic type of social and economic condition

(Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 60)

Grenfell advises a 3 phased framework based on his interpretation of Bourdieu's methodological approach. This framework is based on the relationship between Bourdieu's key concepts and empirical research. The phases are:

1. Construction of the Research Object
2. Field Analysis
3. Participant Objectivation

(Grenfell, 2014:213-228)

5.1 Construction of the Research Object

Bourdieu refers to the Construction of the Research Object as a "summum of the art" of social science research (Grenfell and Blackledge, 2012: 200), and that as researchers, our choice of topic is shaped by our own academic backgrounds and trajectories. My understanding of 'summum of the art' is the very essence that defines the finished piece as art, the pinnacle or supreme moment, not the making but the piece where 'art' is the 'making' and the 'artwork' is the 'made'.

At a simplistic level, my Research Object is the painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder. I am interested in his life, both as an artist but also as a person who lived in sixteenth-century Flanders. My research included the various societies in which he might have been active, such as, religious, political, economic and social groups. Sources for my research included non-fictional books written on the painter and this period, but also books and papers written by art historians, providing interpretations on his work. In effect, I was developing a gaze or metanoia where I could see Bruegel within his social spaces (or fields) and the social forces acting on them. Central to this, are the structural relations at the social and personal level. The painter himself is not key to my novel, but his world is. His world is the setting, and the structural relations within it (at various levels) are what created the plot themes and influenced how the various characters think, feel and behave.

The Construction of the Research Object is an ongoing process and the more I researched the more I found myself questioning my own assumptions. As explained by Bourdieu, this stage is one that is: 'Not something that is effected once and for all, with one stroke, through a sort of inaugural

theoretical act... it is a protracted and exacting task that is accomplished little by little through a whole series of rectifications and amendments...' (Grenfell, 2014: 221)

5.2 Field Analysis

For the Field analysis, I followed the three levels as described above as Bourdieu's methodological approach: 1) the position of the field with the field of power; 2) the structure of the field; and 3) the genesis of the producers' habitus. (Bourdieu, 1993: 14).

I applied these in two ways:

The first was to conduct a Bourdieusian analysis on the painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. I constructed a possible *field* for artists in Antwerp in the sixteenth century and positioned Bruegel within this field. It's a possible field because I can only go on what information remains on painters in Antwerp in the sixteenth century, and I focused on artists who painted similar subjects to Bruegel. I also understood this field within the possible field of power, for Flanders at this time. Fundamental to this was building an *empirical habitus* of the painter (based on facts known about the artist and other artists at this time).

Using my analysis of Bruegel and his society, I then took a Bourdieusian approach to build the world within the novel. Similar to any society, the one within my novel also consists of fields and a field of power, and I could use the details of my Bruegel analysis to construct this. But I could also use other aspects, such as various agents within the fields, who could become characters within the story, as well as the power struggles, relationships, strategies and trajectories that could influence the various themes and plot events. Some examples of these are provided in section 6 of this paper.

5.3 Participant Objectivation

The third phase involves researcher reflexivity. Bourdieu argued that, in order to understand the historical transcendental that may unconsciously influence the thinking of any researcher, they should reflexively apply scientific methods to themselves. This involves engaging in *participant objectivation*, a reflexive act of objectifying the subject of objectivation.

In constructing the research object, the focus is to try and break with the "pre-given" of the world, especially the academic one, and re-think the object of study in a new way (Grenfell, 2014: 224). Through opening up the complexity of the 'world' under consideration, the aim is to reveal new insights. However, this is not an end in itself. A key aspect for Bourdieu is reflexivity and to avoid

what he terms 'scholastic fallacy' and is described as 'Where what is offered in the name of scientific knowledge is in actuality simply the reproduction of a certain scholastic relation to the world, and one indeed imbued with its own interests'. (Grenfell, 2014: 225)

I will develop this phase further as part of my postdoctoral research, which I am compiling into a book.

5.4 The Practical Application

The intention of this paper is not to document all aspect of my investigation but to provide examples that highlight where the phases and concepts proved valuable. I am an academic and practising writer who is applying Bourdieu's framework to my research and creative writing practice.

In the following section, I will set out details of Bruegel's background as empirical data before discussing aspects of my field analysis. I will then consider the socio-cultural aspects to his life and his 'world' at this time, taking into consideration the dominant fields he was involved in. My aim is to consider his biography and artistic creations within the socio-cultural context of the time, including aspects such as social, political, economic and religious influences.

In the subsequent sections, I will outline how I took a Bourdieusian approach to develop the novel. I will begin by providing a background to the story, before detailing my analysis of Bruegel and his world. This analysis includes the *empirical habitus*, *fields*, and *field of power*. In approaching the construction of the novel, I have broken this into two sections: the characters and setting, and then the themes and plot ideas. Examples will be provided from the novel, to demonstrate the practical application.

6. Using Bourdieu's tools for writing historical fiction: a practical example

6.1 Background to *The Dishonest Woman*

As mentioned earlier, my aim with *The Dishonest Woman* was to bring to life the world depicted in paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in a literary narrative. It is not a story about the painter, but a fictional narrative set in *his* world and, inspired by themes suggested in his work. In this section, I will describe how my Bourdieusian analysis of Bruegel influenced the themes within the story and the development of characters. I will begin by explaining my ekphrastic approach.

One definition of ekphrasis is that of a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art³, and this is often connected to the idea of a poem created by a poet looking at a painting – for example, Homer's description of Achilles' shield in Book 18 of *The Iliad* (Homer, trans., Hammond, 1897) and W. H Auden and William Carlos Williams poems on Bruegel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560). My interpretation of the term is somewhat broader, as I am a creative writer who is looking at a painting to create a story. My novel, *The Dishonest Woman*, is based on what I see as imaginary inner lives (based on historical research) of those being painted. But my act of ekphrasis was something more than describing a work of art. In a way, for my novel, I wanted to work collaboratively with the painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He set about depicting a scene on a canvas that contained a young woman and her much older husband. Despite some 500 years between our creative endeavours, for my part of the collaboration I wanted to go further than to tell the story of what was being depicted in his painting; my goal was to give the young woman a voice.

Nigel Krauth and Christopher Bowman (2018:18) say 'that ekphrasis as a rhetorical device is a not a process solely about transferral of a visual image from one mind to another, it also involves emotion, engagement, interpretation, enthrallment and so on'. As a short summary, this description is one that best fits my ekphrastic interpretation of Bruegel's painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559). The image painting by Bruegel, perhaps itself also an ekphrastic interpretation of something he saw (even as a lot of observations bundled together, we will never know), is depicting a scene heavily laden with possible meaning. For example, in its depiction of a young woman embracing a much older man wearing a cloak and hood, the scene would seem to refer to the proverb about cuckoldry. But my ekphrastic response and subsequent creative endeavour, was to interpret his depiction and consider what it might have meant in the sixteenth-century. I set about inventing a credible story about this – hence the dishonest woman, laden with imagery that expanded on, 'emotion,

³ "ekphrasis." *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (8 May 2019)

engagement, interpretation, enthrallment’ alongside creative invention, supported by historical evidence.

As with many writers, when I began this process, I simply wanted to write a story. An avid reader of historical fiction and having already written my first novel in the genre, I knew the type of novel I wanted to produce. The historical novels I enjoy most have a strong sense of place and characters and convey a real sense of their time period. Whether real or fictional characters, those that remain with me long after the last page, are the ones that have a real sense of authenticity stitched into the story. I know they’re not real, but they could be, and for the duration of the novel, I’ve travelled back in time with characters and events that are believable. At this early stage, I knew my objective, just not how I would reach it, and Pierre Bourdieu wasn’t even a consideration.

I was keen to challenge myself and write about a period that was a long way back in history and my preliminary research led me to the compelling world of Carnival, specifically in the pre-seventeenth century. It was a world turned up-side-down, one of celebration and excess, taking place outside the normal rules that governed society. It was a moment when social order was suspended and misrule permitted; the borders between art and life blurred, a performance with no boundaries between the performers and audience. It offered the potential for new perspectives, a new order and disorder, by showing the relative nature of all that exists. But importantly, once Carnival was over everything was expected to return to the ‘old’ ways – despite the fact changes must have taken place. In regard to my novel, I am using the terms ‘Carnival’ and ‘Carnavalesque’ as a concept, such as originated by Bakhtin (1968) and later used by scholars such as Stallybrass and White (1995), and as a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of dominant style and atmosphere through humour and chaos. These themes will become relevant as I discuss my analysis of the novel.

I decided on the sixteenth century as the period for the novel, beginning in 1548. Some ten years earlier, Rabelais has published his works, *Gargantua* and before that *Pantagruel*. It is a fascinating and turbulent era, with much taking place from social, cultural, economic and religious perspectives. The power of the Catholic Church is shifting with the rise of Protestant beliefs. Discoveries, such as the printing press, are bringing about a significant change to the dissemination of information. Artists, such as Bruegel, are beginning to paint everyday scenes, such as the kermis and peasants, as was rarely seen before.

But researching the sixteenth century as the backdrop for a novel comes with challenges. There are no photographs, magazines, newspapers or articles and what literature remains were often

produced by men with a particular purpose in mind. The official histories typically reflect dominant practices, repeated in authoritative publications, only to become what is remembered, sometimes written long after the event. I was particularly interested in the unofficial histories, the stories of minorities such as women and the poor, and these are much less documented. *The Education of a Christian Woman*, a sixteenth-century manual by Juan Luis Vives, offers advice on how an honourable woman should behave. However, it was written by a man for well-educated men; whether this was how all women behaved, or if they agreed, cannot be assumed. Writers such as Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Karel van Mander, are other sources I have turned to. The story plays with the idea of an eleven-month birth, one I discovered from Rabelais' in *Gargantua*, and Montaigne provided insight into sixteenth-century views on topics such as lying, cruelty and education. I turned to art and it was there I discovered the rich and enticing world of Bruegel and paintings which come alive with characters, proverbs, stories, a history. But there was my challenge. How should I approach the information I was uncovering from my research, such that it could become useful material for a novel? With so many intriguing and fascinating details, I quickly realised I could become lost. I needed a structured approach to navigate my way through vast quantities of details, to ultimately reveal what I needed to build an authentic world.

Contemporary historical sources were of helpful, and these provided the major events of the time and place. But I wanted more, particularly the social history and how ordinary people led their lives, interacted with others, and what kept them awake at night. Bruegel's paintings were captivating, potentially revealing insight into everyday life, but interpreting paintings isn't always as it might first appear, and as Reindert Falkenburg and Michel Weemans discussed in their lecture "Bruegel: Ground for speculation, traps to see" (24 January 2019, Erasmus House, Brussels), Bruegel's paintings are perhaps more discussion pieces, designed to encourage speculation, that providing definite ideas or answers.

My starting point was to define the *empirical habitus* of Bruegel, to then use this as part of my socio-historical analysis.

6.2 Bourdieu's *theory of practice* and Pieter Bruegel the Elder

In applying Bourdieu's *theory of practice*, I am not solely interested in a historical contextualisation of what occurred and what was produced but am performing a structural constructivist's analysis to reveal interrelations between *field* and *habitus*. This, in turn, provided an understanding of the logic of practice which constitutes the *field* at this time, and then the effect this had on the agents on the *field*, and the work they produce.

Field and *habitus* are two key conceptual terms of Bourdieu approach. Bruegel's *habitus* is his biography (or his empirical facts) and consequent dispositions, as well as his knowledge, skills and experiences. It also includes his social identity, his outlooks and actions that shaped his choices and behaviour, both aesthetic and social. I began by constructing his *empirical habitus*.

6.2.1 The Empirical Habitus: Symbolic Capital



Fig 3: **The Painter and The Connoisseur**, c. 1565, possibly Bruegel's self-portrait, Albertina Museum in Vienna

In regard to genealogical *habitus*, very little is known of Bruegel's life, such as his family background or the social status of his parents. However, I also explored the *habitus* of other people known to associate with Bruegel, to potentially reveal something of the artist's own *habitus*. Again, considering my purpose, which was to gain an understanding of his world, the *habitus* of other associates and artists helped fill gaps. My aim was to piece together a possible picture of his *habitus* and his possible *capital*.

The details in this section have been gathered from numerous sources which I have listed in my bibliography. This includes the *Schilder-boeck*, written by the Flemish writer and painter Karel van Mander and first published in 1604 in Haarlem in the Dutch Republic. It was written in 17th century Dutch and consists of six parts. It is considered one of the principal sources on the history of art and art theory in the 15th and 16th century Low Countries. I have used an English translation: https://arthum.college.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/PDFs/arthum_bruegel_reader.pdf

As I detail Bruegel's *habitus* below, I will indicate the influences in brackets, identifying types of *capital* and whether positive or negative impact. *Capital* is important to an *agent* when they enter the *field* as it is a form of currency, determining their position, and ultimately, their power.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was born around 1525/1530 possibly in Bruegel or in Antwerp but there is no record of the place or actual date of his birth. Nothing is known of his formal schooling however his subsequent artist training and associations indicates he was likely well educated (+ *cultural capital*). Bruegel left behind no letters or writings, nor are there any records of his beliefs or opinions. Therefore, much of this analysis is based on possibilities.

Around 1545 - 1550, Bruegel received artistic training in the studio of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (+ *cultural capital*). Some historians have questioned if this is true, given Bruegel's work is almost entirely free of the influence of Italian art (which Coecke was an exponent of). However, given it's a possibility, I will explore the implications of this relationship. Coecke van Aelst was born in 1502, the son of the Deputy Mayor of Aalst. In van Mander's *Schilder-boeck*, Coecke van Aelst is described as studying under Bernard van Orley, a leading Renaissance painter based in Brussels. Coecke in addition to painting was considered a sculptor, architect, author and designer of woodcuts, goldsmith's work, stained glass and tapestries. His principal subjects were Christian religious themes and he was appointed court painter to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. Coecke van Aelst is recorded joining the Guild of Saint Luke of Antwerp in 1527 and in 1537 he is elected a Dean of the Guild. He also received a stipend from the Antwerp city government and received major commissions for the design of stained-glass windows including for the Antwerp Cathedral. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Coecke van Aelst was an artist of high repute and for Bruegel to receive training from him around 1545, is significant - hence why I have given this *cultural capital* +.

Around 1538/39 Coecke van Aelst married Mayken Verhulst. Verhulst (born 1518) was a miniature, tempera and watercolour painter, identified by Lodovico Guicciardini in 1567 as one of the four most important female artists in the Low Countries. Verhulst will later become Bruegel's mother-in-law and, according to Karel van Mander, the first teacher of her grandsons Pieter Brueghel the Younger

and Jan Brueghel the Elder. Her sister married the engraver and painter Hubert Goltzius, and another sister married painter Jacob de Punder. Verhulst's influence on Bruegel seems to be in training him to paint in miniature (+ *cultural capital*) - such as can be seen with his painting *The Tower of Babel* (Figs 4 and 5).



(left) Fig 4: **The Tower of Babel**, 1563, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna
(right) Fig 5: *Extract from The Tower of Babel - an example of his miniature work*

Returning to Bruegel's own life:

In 1551, he paints the exterior of an altar for the glovers' guild in Mechelen (+ *economic capital*) and this indicates a positive impact on his reputation (+ *symbolic capital*) and he joins the Guild of Saint Luke's, the Antwerp painters' guild, as a free master (+ *cultural capital*).

Between 1552 and 1554 he travels to Italy, presumed to be with painter Maerten de Vos and the sculptor Jacques Jongelinck. This provides us with an indication of his circle of friends and associates, and I will discuss these artists briefly. Maerten de Vos was born in 1532, so only a few years younger than Bruegel, the son of Pieter de Vos, a painter and pupil of Jerome Scuelens. De Vos, together with his brothers Ambrosius Francken I and Frans Francken I, will become one of the leading history painters in the Spanish Netherlands. Jacques Jonghelinck, Bruegel's other travelling companion, was born in 1530. In 1562, he moves from Antwerp to Brussels and is appointed court sculptor the following year. His brother, Nicolaes Jonghelinck, will become a major patron of Bruegel's, owning 16 pictures of his by 1565. While we know little of Bruegel in his early years, this trip to Italy can help to piece together a picture - his companions are the sons of reputed artists, who are going to Italy to develop their talents (+ *cultural and economic capital*). While there is no evidence to prove Bruegel was of the same social status as de Vos and Jongelinck, it seems probable (+ *social capital*).

In Rome, Bruegel collaborates with Giulio Clovio, an illuminator, miniaturist, painter and priest. Clovio, born 1498 in the Kingdom of Croatia, was mostly active in Renaissance Italy. By 1524, he was at Buda at the Hungarian court of King Louis II. To train with such an artist again reveals something of Bruegel's growing talent (+ *cultural, economic and symbolic capital*).

Between 1554 and 1563 Bruegel returns to Antwerp, possibly via the Alps given his subsequent mountain landscape drawings (+ *cultural capital*). Back in Antwerp, he works principally as a draughtsman for the publishing house of Hieronymus Cock (+ *economic capital*). Cock is a Flemish painter, etcher, publisher and distributor of prints and is regarded as one of the most important print publishers of his time in northern Europe. His house published more than 1,100 prints between 1548 and his death in 1570, a vast number by earlier standards. His publishing house played a key role in transforming printmaking from an activity of individual artists and craftsmen into an industry based on the division of labour.

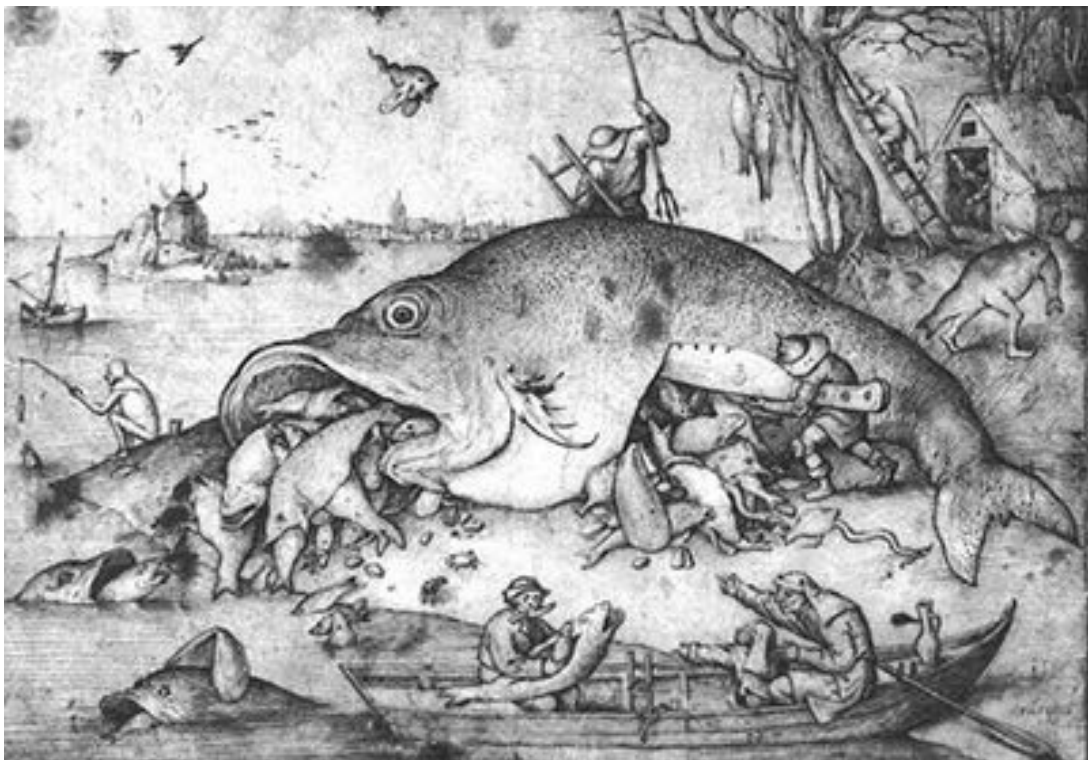


Fig 6: **Big Fish Eat Little Fish**, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1556



Fig 7: Big Fish Eat Little Fish, Pieter van der Heyden
after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1557, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In 1557, Hieronymus Cock produced the print *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (fig. 5) and although the engraving was based on a drawing by Bruegel (fig. 4), Cock credited the design to Hieronymus Bosch (see bottom left of image). Why Bruegel's name was replaced with that of Bosch, is not known. Between 1555 and 1557, Cock published thirteen engravings after Bruegel's landscapes and these bear Bruegel's name as the inventor. According to Kerry Barrett:

Hans Mielke has observed that since Bruegel was already an established artist in his own right, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* was not necessarily an attempt to capitalize on the marketability of Bosch's name. Perhaps, as proposed by Matthijs IJssink, working in a Boschian mode was a means for Bruegel to emulate an artist he admired.

(Barrett, 2013)

Rather than for any economic reason, perhaps Bruegel chose to evoke Bosch (+ *symbolic capital*) as an artist he wished to emulate.

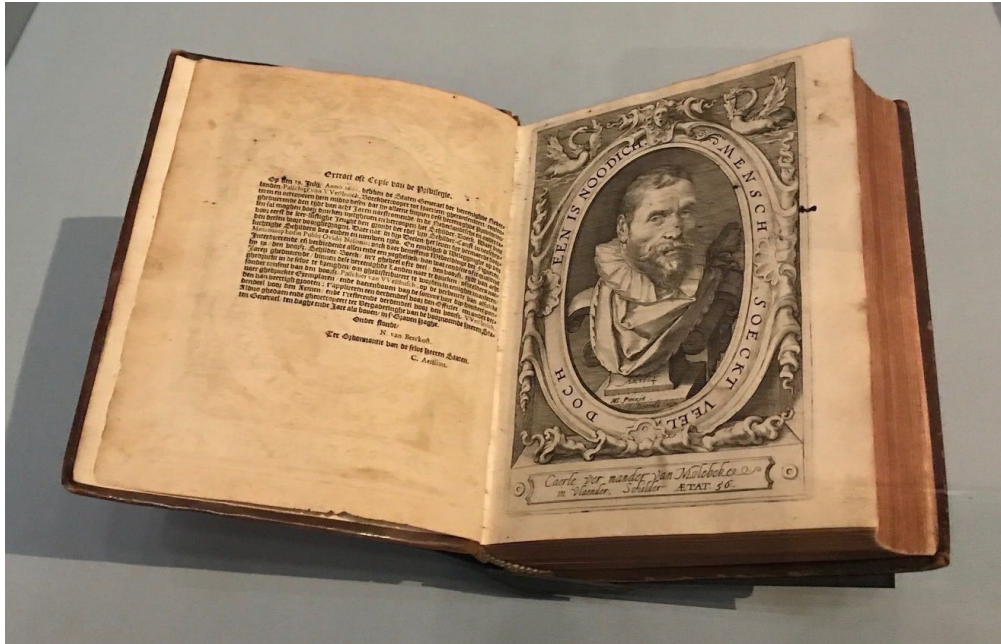


Fig 8. Het Schilder-boeck, photograph by Lisa Koning from **Bruegel - Once in a Lifetime** exhibition, Vienna 2018

However, it must be taken into consideration that the Schilder-boeck was written in 1604, some thirty-five years after Bruegel's death, and art historians have questioned the accuracy of some of what he has reported. But, as a writer, I am interested in what his writing might reveal. This is an extract from the Schilder-boeck on Bruegel:

As long as he remained in Antwerp, he lived with a servant girl whom indeed he would have married, had it not been for the unfortunate fact that she used to lie all the time, which was repugnant to his love of truth. He made a contract or agreement with her that he would check off all her lies upon a stick. For this purpose he took a fairly long one, and he said that if the stick became full of notches in the course of time it would prevent the wedding. This happened before much time had elapsed.

At last, since Pieter Coecke's widow had finally settled in Brussels, he fell in love with her daughter, whom, as we have said, he had often carried in his arms, and he married her; but her mother requested that Breughel leave Antwerp, and make his residence in Brussels, in order that he might get his former girl out of sight and out of mind. This also happened.

Breughel was a quiet and able man who did not talk much, but was jovial in company, and he loved to frighten people, often his own pupils, with all kinds of ghostly sounds and pranks that he played.

(Van Mander, 1604)

Working on the premise of possibilities, if Bruegel was to marry his servant girl, as an educated artist, this would have been socially beneath him (- *social capital*). In 1563 Bruegel moves to Brussels and marries Mayken Coecke, the daughter of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (+ *social capital*). They have three children: Pieter the Younger (1564-1638), Jan (1568-1625) and Maria (1566 - unknown). Pieter the

Younger and Jan will also become artists. Van Mander's states that on his death bed, Bruegel instructs his wife to destroy a number of his drawings with inscriptions on them lest they get her into trouble on account of their sharp and biting character. Bruegel dies in Brussels in 1569 and is buried in Notre-Dame de la Chapelle (+ *symbolic capital*).

This Bourdieusian analysis of Bruegel's *empirical habitus* provides an overview of the artist himself, but also gives valuable insight into the life of an artist in Flanders during this period. But in addition to this, it also provides useful information on society, and as a writer, this became the material I would work with, effectively turning my research into rich details to build a story upon. In effect, Bourdieu's *theory of practice* provided me with a way of looking at the research facts to reveal much more. Further, it provided focus on what I really wanted to concentrate on; which is the people and how society operated. For example, this *empirical habitus* reveals what was important to an artist at this time, and how they would have needed to become a member of the Guild to become recognised, as well as the importance of gaining and learning from other recognised artists. What this provides, beyond the basic facts, is an understanding of the research object, not simply as an individual, but as someone who is operating in a much wider society. This individual is influenced, and possibly influences, much that is going on around them. In Bruegel's case, we see the importance of the church with his appointment to paint the altar, and his training with prestigious artists demonstrates how an artist would have built up his reputation at this time. A resulting thread in the novel concerns a painting that is questioned for being a fake, and I use this to show the complex art world of sixteenth-century Flanders. There are many and varied agents who determined how important a piece of art would become. It is not just the artist, but the merchant, the guild, and other prominent members of society, who together will ultimately decide the fate of a painting. And these are all fields which artists, including Bruegel, would have participated in, to varying degrees. I shall now consider some of the *fields* Bruegel may have been an agent of.

6.2.2 Fields

Fields are the particular social contexts Bruegel might have found himself in. Again, as there is little information remaining about Bruegel and his life, I will consider some of the other people who he was known to associate with. In effect, I will need to fill gaps. It is not my intention to explore all of Bruegel's fields in this paper, but to provide examples, to then demonstrate what this revealed. In the subsequent section, I will then show how this became useful to my own creative process of writing historical fiction. I will begin with what I do know of Bruegel, and that is he was an artist living in Antwerp and Brussels, in the mid sixteenth century.

The Antwerp School is a *field*. It was a group of artists active in Antwerp during the sixteenth century and continued into the seventeenth century. The Antwerp Mannerists is *another* field that emerged at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Gothic in style, it bore no relation to Renaissance or Italian Mannerism, but was a reaction to the classic style of the earlier Flemish painters. These various schools of artists aspired to belong to the *Guild of St Luke*, providing recognition and associated reputation, for their work.



Fig 9. Coat of Arms of the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke, by Flemish School

6.2.2.1 Fields of Power

Bourdieu considered that collectives of people could occupy more than one social field at a time. This common social space, or *field of power*, consists of multiple social fields. A *field of power* does not determine what happens in each social field, but via a mutual process of influence and ongoing co-construction, shape what happens in a social field and influence other fields. (Grenfell: 2014)

In this regard, The Guild of Saint Luke seems to fit the description of a *field of power*. The Guild was the city's association of painters, artists and craftsmen that educated apprentices and ensured artistic quality. Guilds were an important aspect for craftsmen, providing artists with support and contacts. Of its 90,000 inhabitants in Antwerp in 1560, the Guild of St Luke had accepted 270

masters and 223 apprentice painters (twice the number of Antwerp's bakers). Even Italy could not compete with this concentration of talent:

Whereas in the fifteenth century Antwerp had no painters of note, by Bruegel's time the city dominated northern European art production. Demand for paintings came partly from Antwerp's affluent merchant class and from the city itself, which funded lavish commissions and recruited foreign talent through special favours and bonuses.

(Koerner, 2016: 21)

Research into the Guild revealed something of the life of a painter at this time. Artists would begin their career as apprentices, under the guidance of other established artists, where they would undergo training. This would demand a level of skills and disposition (*habitus*), beliefs and values (*orthodoxy*) to allow the apprentice to be educated in the ways of the master, who already is a member of the *field*. Success would result in acceptance by the Guild, when an artist could demonstrate that they had met the 'rules' of the field (*doxa*). Terms such as *orthodoxy* and *doxa*, are explained further in the Key Terms section, included as an Appendix in this paper.

To highlight some of the possible fields he may have been a part of, I will now consider some of Bruegel's associates and patrons.

6.2.2.2 Bruegel's Associates

According to art historian, Charles de Tolnay (1935) Bruegel was a cultured Renaissance humanist who associated with a group of distinguished scholars, artists, and authors. This included geographer **Abraham Ortelius**, the printer and publisher **Christophe Plantin**, and the artist, poet, playwright, and political theorist **Dirck Coornhert**. De Tolnay described them as religious libertines whose unorthodox opinions Bruegel shared. (Zagorin, 2003). Whether this was actually the case, it is not being validated as there is no evidence to back this up. But as a writer of fiction, I'm willing to explore the possibility. And coming back to my Bourdieusian analysis, this reveals something of Bruegel's society, the types of conversations learned people would have been having, and the concerns they felt.

Abraham Ortelius (1527 - 1598):

Ortelius was a renowned scholar and erudite geographer and compiler of maps. In 1573, he was awarded the title of Geographer Royal. What is known of his relationship with Bruegel is limited to Ortelius' Latin eulogy about the deceased artist in his *Album Amicorum* (Book of Friends):

Abraham Ortelius "TRIBUTE TO PIETER BRUEGEL," c. 1570

That Pieter Bruegel was the most perfect painter of his age, no one -- unless jealous or envious or ignorant of his art-- could ever deny. But that he was snatched away from us in the flower of his age -- I cannot say whether I should attribute it to Death, who thought Bruegel was more advanced in age (sc. than he actually was) when he observed the distinguished skill of his art, or whether I should attribute it to Nature who feared that she would be held up in contempt because of his artistic and talented skills at imitation. (Van Mander: 1605)

Ortelius extols the artist as the most perfect painter of his age, so true to nature that his works were really works of nature rather than of art; that, 'This Bruegel painted many things which are not able to be painted, as Pany says of Apelles. In all his works, more is always to be understood than he actually painted, as the same writer says of Timanthes.' According to Zagorin, rather than implying his work was esoteric art hiding its meaning, it indicates the painter's rank by placing him in the same category as the foremost artists of antiquity.

Christophe Plantin (c. 1520-89):

Although seemingly a conforming Catholic, it has been known since the late nineteenth century that Plantin was a secret adherent of the Family of Love sect. He printed many of the sect's writings, which followers in several countries distributed widely through underground channels.

Although occasionally suspected of printing heretical books and holding heterodox opinions, he was never prosecuted for any of these offences. In the course of the Netherlands rebellion, he maintained cordial relations not only with Spanish officials and government authorities but also with the rebel leader William of Orange, publishing the propaganda of both sides without suffering harm from either. From my Bourdieusian perspective, these are other important *fields* that an artist would have been impacted by. An artist such as Bruegel would have been well aware of such prevalent events going on in the world around them and reacted accordingly. For example, being cautious in the way they depicted certain themes (religious and/or political) in their work. And we see this come through strongly in Bruegel's paintings, where things are hinted at but no more. Bruegel's depiction of a popular festival celebrated on 11 November in Fig 10, is an example of this. While not a religious painting, it does contain references to Christianity such as a roadside cross, which the peasants seemingly ignore.



Fig 10: **The Wine of Saint Martin's Day**, c. 1565–1568, Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Museo del Prado, Madrid

Dirck Coornhert (1522 – 1590):

Coornhert was a Dutch writer, philosopher, translator, politician, theologian and artist and is often considered the Father of Dutch Renaissance scholarship. He was the youngest son of an Amsterdam cloth merchant but was disinherited from his father's will when he married a portionless gentlewoman (one with a dowry). After learning Latin in 1552, Coornhert published Dutch translations from Cicero, Seneca and Boethius. His 1562 translation of the first twelve books of Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the first major works of Dutch Renaissance poetry. He was appointed secretary to the city of Haarlem and secretary to the burgomasters. Supporting the struggle against Spanish rule, he drew up the manifesto of William the Silent, Prince of Orange.

6.2.2.3 Bruegel's patrons

According to Van Mander, Bruegel did no public commissions for churches, religious foundations, town councils, or other bodies. Apart from his prints, which were sold to the public, it seems Bruegel worked solely for private individuals and patrons (+ *cultural and economic capital*). In regard to my analysis, what is beginning to emerge are the 'players' in the fields. These are the people of importance and influence, and while I am not using these 'real' people as such, I could base my characters on them. They became the people in the world of the novel, wielding power to control those around them, and endeavouring to influence their society.

Some of Breughel's most significant works are at present in the possession of the Emperor; for example, a great Tower of Babel with many beautiful details.... Sr Herman Pilgrims, art lover in Amsterdam, has a Peasant Wedding done in oils, which is very beautiful.... Two canvases painted in water-color can be seen in the home of Sr Willem Jacobsz., who lives near the new church in Amsterdam.

(Van Mander, 1605)

His patrons provide an indication of the possible value of his paintings while he was alive. These include: Antione Perrenot Cardinal de Granvelle, president of the council of state in the Netherlands; Niclaes Jonghelinck acquired 16 of his paintings by 1566 and commissioning a series of *The Months*; and Abraham Ortelius. (+ *cultural and economic capital*). From the bankruptcy sale in 1572 of the property of the merchant Jean Noirot, the Master of the Mint at Antwerp, his possessions included a large collection of about fifty paintings, five of which were Bruegel's (+ *cultural and economic capital*).

There are other fields that Bruegel was likely an agent of, though his position within these fields, can only be guessed. For example, as an artist selling his work, he is involved in economic fields. There are also political and religious *fields*, and I will now touch on these briefly.

6.2.2.4 Other Fields

Bruegel's lifetime is a period of great conflict and religious and political division caused by the advance of the Protestant Reformation and its conflict with the Catholic church. Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anabaptism were spreading throughout northern Europe despite censorship and persecution and many people of all classes under Catholic rule were changing their religious allegiance. Bruegel would have witnessed the growing manifestations of religious and political opposition followed by the outbreak of armed resistance and revolution in the Netherlands against the policies and government of its absentee sovereign, Philip II of Spain. For example, he would have been living in Brussels when the Duke of Alva entered, sent by King Philip II on 22 August 1567.

These are large themes and the potential for my research to lose focus was great. But while I wanted to have the influence of such important events in the background, these were not central to the story. What my Bourdieusian analysis enabled me to do, was incorporate such details into the plot, such that there were always present but not dominating the storyline. Because ultimately these are just influences, important ones, but not the story itself. An example of this is a masquerade ball held by a key character, the Burgermeister. At the ball, in honour of the Duke of Alva, numerous prominent visitors and local influencers attend. The protagonist hears snippets of conversations, revealing political tensions, albeit only slightly.

Bruegel's political beliefs:

It is possible that, like many Netherlanders in the 1560s, Bruegel disliked some of the policies of Philip II's government, especially its persecution of religious dissent.



Fig 11: **Massacre of the Innocents**, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, c 1565-67
British Royal Collection

Bruegel's painting *The Massacre of The Innocents* (Fig 8) depicts the biblical scene described in Matthew 2:16 of the slaughter of the infant male children of Bethlehem at King Herod's order. In a snow-covered Flemish village, soldiers are seizing and killing children amidst the pleas and lamentations of parents and villagers. In the centre and commanding the action, is a black-clad figure on a horse. It has been argued the painting alludes to the cruel and punitive treatment at the hands of Spanish soldiery and the mounted figure in black is the Duke of Alva, dispatched by Philip II to the Netherlands to suppress the revolt. But there is no evidence of such, and whether Bruegel is making a political statement, is disputed by Bruegel art historians. Coming back to my analysis, what Bourdieu's tools are providing to me as a writer, are a way of interpreting his paintings and to ask questions about what he might be suggesting. In considering the artist and his *empirical habitus*, I can start to pull together a realistic narrative about living in Flanders in the sixteenth century. Regardless of whether Bruegel is making a political statement or not, it seems reasonable to assume that common people would have lived in fear of such persecutions and rumours of events, such as the one depicted, would have spread quickly throughout towns and villages.



Fig 12: **The Magpie on the Gallows**, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1568
Hessisches Landesmuseum

The Magpie on the Gallows (Fig 12) is another of Bruegel's paintings, produced the year following the Duke of Alva arrived in the Netherlands to suppress the Dutch Revolt. The gallows may represent the threat of execution of those preaching Protestant doctrines, and it may also allude to several Netherlandish proverbs. For example, there is a direct allusion to the Netherlandish proverbs of dancing on the gallows or sitting on the gallows, meaning to mock the state. In the bottom left of the painting, a man is defecating. There is also a possible reference to the belief that magpies are gossips, and that gossip leads to hangings. Coming back to my novel, I was able to use the idea of gossiping in this sixteenth-century society, as a means to demonstrate the impact of such gossip on the common people, not just as everyday talk, but as an aspect of life that caused fear and could lead to persecution and death. The main protagonist's grandmother is a healer, helping many in her community when they fall sick and give birth, with herbal remedies. However, her mystical ways lead to others questioning whether she may be a witch. While this is just one of many threads that run through the story, it helps to add to the tension and create the atmosphere of living at this time.

Bruegel's religious beliefs:

While Bruegel appears to have associated with a circle of humanists, some of which have been identified as belonging to the Familia Caritatis, or the Family of Love, there is no evidence that he

shared their views, or reason to suppose he was anything but a Catholic. Some of his paintings are clearly Catholic in character, such as *The Death of The Virgin*, *The Adoration of The Kings*, and *Christ on The Procession to Calvary* (Fig 13).



Fig 13: **The Procession to Calvary**, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1564
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

But again, exploring possibilities Familia Caritatis is an interesting angle to investigate:

Familia Caritatis was a heretical religious sect founder by Hendrik Niclaes (1502-c.1580). There is no evidence that Bruegel was a member. The Family of Love belonged to the spiritualist wing of the Protestant Reformation, believing that true Christianity had nothing to do with any visible church or creed. Instead, it exalted that the spirit dwelled within the individual believer through which God communicates his presence and truth. Distaining rites and ceremonies, “familists” advocated love, peace, and salvation through the individual’s experiential communion with the spirit to become “godded” or deified. This is a complex and intriguing idea, one that had the potential to detract away from the main plot of the story. But viewing this as another *field* that has an influence, I was able to incorporate it into the story, again such that it reflects society but does not dominate the main themes of the novel. The main protagonist’s father disappears early on in the story and using the idea of Familia Caritatis as a mysterious element, one that the protagonist herself knows nothing about, added further to the tension of her world.

I have included here just some aspects of Bruegel's *habitus*. There are many influences that a complete Bourdieusian analysis of the artist's life would include, such as his early landscape paintings showing affinity with the Flemish sixteenth-century landscape tradition, or the multifigure compositions during the last six years of his life, possibly influenced by Italian Renaissance art. But my aim was to conduct a limited analysis to provide focus for my research as a writer producing a work of historical fiction. I have explained briefly in this section how my analysis then translated into material for my novel, and I will now elaborate on this in more detail.

6.3 Bourdieu's *theory of practice* to develop characters

After conducting my analysis, I then set about applying Bourdieu's *theory of practice* to the world of the novel, taking a Bourdieusian approach to developing the structure of the characters development and their society.

The Dishonest Woman begins with the protagonist, seventeen-year-old Gertrud, needing to convince seven prominent men of the city that she carries her deceased husband's child. Not so unusual, except that she fell pregnant three months after her husband's death, meaning she must persuade them that she will carry the child for eleven rather than nine months. Milan Kundera (2007: 87) has written that 'To Understand We Must Compare' and goes on to reveal, 'Hermann Broch... first seized on the character's essential position and then progressed to his more individual traits.' The premise for my story, and the essential position. The premise for my story, and the essential position, comes from Rabelais's novel, *Gargantua*, where it is written that learned men believed that a child of greatness may need longer inside the womb.

My masters, the ancient Pantagruelists, have confirmed that which I say, and withal declared it to be not only possible, but also maintained the lawful birth and legitimation of the infant born of a woman in the eleventh month after the decease of her husband.

(Rabelais, *Gargantua*: Chapter 3)

Incorporating an eleven-month pregnancy into the story needed careful consideration for a modern-day audience. In contemporary society, a woman making such a claim would not be believed, our knowledge of science such that we know it isn't possible. Therefore, I need to create for my readers a world where such a claim seems realistic and true to life. To achieve this, I wanted to instil in all my characters, beliefs, ways of behaviour and attitudes, that are consistent with the place and period. I started by defining the *habitus* of each of my characters and through my research, built comprehensive profiles. By way of example, I will describe below the *empirical facts* and *habitus* of the main protagonist, Gertrud Vermuelen, revealing how this helped to build an extensive and hopefully realistic profile of such a young woman in sixteenth-century Flanders.

6.3.1 Empirical facts

Gertrud (or Gertje) is a fictional character and below are the biographical details that I have invented for her.

Name:	Gertrud Vermuelen (married name Smekens)
Born:	1531

Place of Birth:	Antwerp, Flanders, The Netherlands
Lives:	By the Grote Markt (central market square) in Antwerp
Father:	Niklaas Vermuelen (1507 - unknown), a baker
Mother:	Margareta Vermeulen (1510 - 1542)
Paternal Grandmother:	Aliet Vermuelen (1490 -), herbalist & healer
First love:	Pieter Koeysman (1530 -), shipping merchant's son
Marries:	Willem Smekens (1504 - 1548), an Innkeeper
Occupation:	Becomes an innkeeper on her husband's death
Educated:	By her parents and grandmother Can read and write
Aspirations:	Initially - To marry Pieter, her first love Evolves - To support herself and her family
Most important assets:	Her honour and virtue
Skills:	Helped her family run the bakery Cook, sew, clean
Monetary Wealth:	None

Table 1: Gertje's Empirical Facts

6.3.2 *Habitus* and *capital* of main protagonist

I then used Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, to develop Gertje's character further. For example, she is the daughter of a baker, but I wanted to understand how this would impact her and how she lived. But having a Bourdieusian focus, I was able to construct her society, to consider who she might have interacted with, or in Bourdieu's terms, the *fields* she would have operated within. This then enabled me to consider what would have been Gertje's *capital*, and what would change this positively or negatively.

By doing so, I hoped to reveal her as a complete and complex young woman, exposing her dispositions, her knowledge, her skills and experience. In line with Bourdieu's approach, I wanted to develop a character that existed and operated within a society. As with a real person, how Gertje behaved and reacted depends greatly on the world around her. While Gertje is fictional, for my readers she becomes 'real' and her behaviour, her decisions, her outlooks and beliefs, must be believable. To achieve this, I set about developing her social identity, consistent with the time, period and place.

Symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu, has three principal forms: *economic* (real money and possessions), *social* (contacts, networks with well-placed individuals) and *cultural* (education, qualification, marks of distinction - accent, clothing, behaviour, objects - books, art, etc.).

Gertje comes from a working-class family. Her father is a trader, running a small bakery in the centre of Antwerp. The family have limited financial means. They would not own the property they live and work in but pay rent to a landlord (- *economic capital*). The family's livelihood comes from baking and selling bread; they would not own the oven but have some assets such as cooking equipment and supplies (+ *economic capital*). Their furniture would be valuable to them, often being passed onto the next generation, including a table, stools, and a bed with a feather mattress (+ *economical capital*). An item such as a feather mattress (rather than made from straw) indicates that the bakery was doing reasonably well. These are all minor details, but together they become the fabric of a sixteenth-century baker's daughter's life. It is what makes her world unusual and interesting to a contemporary reader. And while I am using my Bourdieusian analysis differently to say a sociologist, what I am aiming to achieve is rather similar: constructing a social identity. But Gertje does not live in isolation; she is strongly influenced by her family and those around her. Her father would associate with other tradesmen in the city and be part of a network (+*social capital*). He is accepting of his position in society, not questioning that others are more capable of running the city (*symbolic violence*).

Typical for a young woman during this period, Gertje's aspirations initially do not go beyond finding a suitable husband and raising children. Her significant beauty and her virtue (+ *symbolic capital*) are very important as these are the assets that will help her secure a good husband. When she is assaulted by an innkeeper, he takes away from her something extremely valuable. Her virtue is her *symbolic capital* and without it, she loses her chance to marry the young man she was due to wed. Pieter, the son of another trader of similar social status, had been a very suitable match. The innkeeper then uses his *symbolic power* over Gertje's father to ask for her hand in marriage. While furious at the violation to his family, Gertje's father and grandmother are cautious of what they can do, realising the innkeeper's power in the city (*symbolic violence*).

I could use my characters' social identities to reveal aspects of life in the sixteenth century. For example, what people choose to wear, the colour and fabric, was determined by their social standing. Purple was reserved for royalty. Lower classes were only allowed to use brown, beige, yellow, orange, green, grey and blue in wool, linen and sheepskin, while usual fabrics for upper

classes were silk or velvet. As Gertje acquires wealth and status through her marriage to the innkeeper, her dresses reflect this in better fabrics and colours (+*cultural capital*).

Bourdieu defines *bodily hexis* as the expression of all the factors which make up one's *habitus*, embodied in their physical being, and it is in *bodily hexis* that the personal combines with the social. How Gertje behaves, acts and reacts, is determined by her *habitus*. When she is reluctant to attend the Schilderspand (the Artists Gallery) this is because her *bodily hexis* has ingrained in her that this is not appropriate for someone of her (previous) social standing.

Regarding Gertje and her outlook on life: she has received some education from her parents and grandmother and has been taught to read and write (+ *cultural capital*), receiving more instruction than many girls at this time. She also helped her family run the bakery which means she has further knowledge and skills (+ *economic capital*). When she needs to take over the running of the inn, she can do so because she has some skills in running a business (+ *economic capital*). She is able to negotiate deals as well as engaging in business negotiations. Gertje's grandmother, is a herbalist and healer and she passes on these skills and knowledge (+ *cultural capital*) to her granddaughter. In a society where there is limited medical knowledge and services, such skills are extremely valuable. Oma is also a lay midwife, helping those who cannot afford the services of a physician. Although she has no formal qualifications, her practical skills and knowledge make her skills useful to many in the city. But Oma does not accept payment for her services, instead hoping to acquire the future goodwill from the people she helps (+ *symbolic capital*). But when the family need the help of others, it becomes evident that Oma had assumed it to be inherently more valuable than what it actually is (*misrecognition*).

As Gertje develops as a character, she begins to understand the *field* she is a member of (*agency*). Initially, running the inn on her deceased husband's behalf, she has little to no influence, with a position on the edge of the field. It is a precarious place, one that she knows she can lose at any moment. But through her experiences and ingenuity, Gertje learns the 'rules' (*doxa*) of the field, her power grows and her position on the field improves. She also begins to understand the *field of power* in her society, and this knowledge she can use to influence her position. Using these Bourdieusian concepts, I developed my protagonist as a character within her society. She is operating within the constraints of her world, but through the structures of the novel's setting, albeit fictional but based on my analysis, she can influence events around her. Another example is Gertje's father and the field of which he is a member. He has an understanding of its rules, but ultimately his loyalty to his family drives his decision to leave the city and find work and a new home for his family (*inalienable values*).

My Bourdieusian analysis began with defining the *empirical facts*, which is similar to a writer's character profile, but what was extremely useful was the resultant *habitus* that I constructed. Believable characters evolve over time, in both good and bad ways, and who they are at the beginning of a novel is often very different to the person they become. This character arc is influenced, not just by a character's experiences, but by the world around them. As with Gertje, she is affected by her *habitus* and finds ways that she can control her destiny. Through her knowledge of the *doxa*, she can make choices and decision, that influence her future, making choices within her world (*agency*). While Gertje is not conscious she is operating within fields, as a writer, it provides me with a real-life structure for the character to manipulate and utilise. As she learns more about her deceased husband, and the power and influence he had, she can use this knowledge to wield influence herself. Though she must do so with great caution and ingenuity, for a woman to have any position on a *field of power* at this time, would be extremely precarious and dangerous. And so, Bourdieu's *theory of practice* has provided the structure of this complex world of power struggles to unfold. But it has the added bonus of allowing me, as the writer, to disrupt the complexities as I developed the 'individual traits' of my characters.

6.3.3 Capital - other characters

As demonstrated above, key to building a comprehensive view of a character's *habitus*, is defining their capital. Bourdieu argues that "all capital is symbolic because they only have value in terms of a socio-culturally defined arbitrary." (Grenfell, 2004: 28)

To constructed well rounded characters, I build a table of their *symbolic capital*, to reveal the *habitus* of each. Below is an extract of this, focusing on the *field of power*, at a point in time.

	Economic	Social	Cultural
Burgermeister	Extensive wealth, opulent home and gardens, furnishings & possessions (gold, silver, jewels, art, paintings, tapestries, linens).	Extremely well connected in the city and beyond - ultimate authority in the city.	City major ⁴ . Clothing, behaviour and tastes are enviable, identifying him as upper class (<i>distinction</i>). Well educated.

⁴ Antwerp was a free commune with a College of Magistrates having administrative, legislative, and judicial power. The magistrates consisted of 2 burgermeisters and by 1558, 18 aldermen. This group had jurisdiction and administration of the "freedom of Antwerp" and over the Schelde river from Rupelmonde to Zeeland. The city's aldermen had power over live and death and at times took legal action against the duke and his representatives. They were even empowered to make treaties for the town without consultation with the duke. (Murray, 1972: 32)

	Many servants.		Deems respect from his position. He is caught up in the power game, believing he is all power and can do anything (<i>Illusio</i>).
Physician	Wealthy, opulent home and gardens, & possession. Many servants.	Well connected - From a respected profession.	Medical knowledge & qualifications (<i>discourse</i>). He understands the field and its rules (orthodoxy) representing its traditional values.
Astrologer	Wealthy and from a distinguished family. Owns an opulent home and gardens, with possessions. Many servants.	Well connected - Respected profession.	Astrological knowledge & qualification (<i>discourse</i>) however, reliance on astrology for answers (such as science & medicine) is waning
Lawyer	Very wealthy, has considerable possessions. Owns a home in a prominent area of city. Has shares in numerous businesses across the city, including a brewery. Servants. Able to see the value in deals - such as converting the Inn stables into accommodation (commoditisation).	Well connected. Provides legal services to prominent men in the city. He has a strong understanding of what is important to others, different perspectives, and how issues will impact them. (<i>Metaliteracy</i>)	Legal expertise. Known for his discretion.
Friar	No wealth or possessions.	Represents the church, and therefore seen as holding power over life, and life after death.	'God was Everywhere' ⁵ clothing emulates his pious nature.
Bookseller	Rapid accumulating wealth due to introduction of printing press. ⁶	Well-connected in city, as others recognise the importance of printing.	Does not have the recognition of a traditional profession.

⁵ 'They saw God at work in many aspects of day-to-day existence, where we now offer an undefined, scientific explanation. They saw God in the weather... In Dutch the plague was known as *De Gave Gods*: God's gift' (Pettegree, 2002: 15-17)

⁶ 'Of the 3814 books that appeared in the Netherlands between 1500 and 1540, Antwerp produced 2137 or 56% of these' (Murray, 1972: 68)

	Owns a book store and has shares in a printing company with assets (such as printing press). Owns his home and acquiring possessions. Some servants.		His wealth is reflected in his clothing - fine fabrics, choice of attire, size of collar etc. He brings with him new knowledge and ways that challenges the status quo of tradition fields, such as commerce (<i>heterodoxy</i>)
Apothecary	Some wealth through a distinguished family name. Has an Apotheke, family homes in Antwerp and Mechelen. Significant family possessions.	Connected through family.	Knowledge & qualifications.
Artist	Makes a living from his paintings, which provide a comfortable life. He does not own his own home but lives with another artist. His money is spent on himself and his art.	Beginning to make connections in the art world and in the city, who recognise him as a rising talent.	Dresses in a flamboyant style identifying him as an artist. Behaves in an extravagant manner. (<i>Bodily hexis</i>)
Innkeeper	Owns a modest but well-located inn, on the Grote Markt (main city square). Has limited wealth - reflected in possessions such as a bed, table, wall hangings and paintings. 2 Servants helps run the inn.	Has connections in the city due to his ability to arrange deals for prominent men in the city.	Has no qualifications or education. His appearance belies his power.

Table 2: Capital of Gertje's benefactors and husband (Innkeeper)

6.3.3 Realistic characters

The above is not an exhaustive list but begins to illustrate a profile for each character. But what is also beginning to unfold are the interactions between the members of the *field*. These men have power and influence over the city of Antwerp but are heavily dependent upon others. For example, the Lawyer is powerful because he can provide legal services which the other men need, and the Bookseller is someone who can distribute information. A complex map of power is starting to emerge. But it is not as simple as someone having the means to affect something for another. There

is a social order at play. For example, men such as the Astrologer and Apothecary come from distinguished families that bring benefits. Their family names bring respect and opportunity. Others, such as the Physician, are deemed, through their qualifications and expertise, to be able to hold power over life itself. Bourdieu, in his study of French society, said:

through the differentiated and differentiating conditionings associated with the different conditions of existence, through the exclusions and inclusions, unions and divisions which govern the social structure and the structuring force it exerts, through all the hierarchies and classifications inscribed in objects (especially cultural products), in institutions or simply in language, and through all the judgements, verdicts, gradings and warnings imposed by the institutions specially designed for this purpose, such as the family or the educational system, or constantly arising from the meetings and interactions of everyday life, the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds. Social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world. Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a 'sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.

(Bourdieu, 1986: 473)

The *social divisions* that Bourdieu refers to in this quote appear in Table 2, determining the various positions that each man occupies in the *field of power*. This impacts the individuals, and the group, but also all those that interact with the *field*, including the people who live in Antwerp. If someone should seek help, for example, if they incurred a criminal injustice, they may look to someone within this network, to assist them. Though in all likelihood, the majority of people living in the city would not have any access to this *field*.

This is all very useful information for a writer, but my challenge was how to replicate this network for the novel's characters. To achieve this, I have converted the *habitus* into the character profiles, building depth and intrigue into each. By understanding a character's *habitus* enabled me to shape each once according to the *social order* Bourdieu refers to above.

According to Bourdieu, "the balance of forces between social agents who have entirely real interest in the different possibilities available to them as stakes and who deploy every sort of strategy to make one set or the other prevail." (1993: 34)

These possibilities that Bourdieu refers to, are where I began to develop the characters' arcs. As social agents, characters make choices. These decisions may mean much is at stake and using their knowledge, characters can deploy various strategies. They behave, think and feel within the many

structures that order their lives. What unfolded was a way to create an authentic piece of life during this period, or hopefully as close to as I can be.

And so, the novel began to unfold. While Bourdieu's terms and theory of practice are not visible constructs, for the writer, these provide a structure and a way of considering a complex society, even a fictional one. As with a real-life analysis, stories consist of much more than people and places, and I would argue that being able to incorporate this, brings a story alive. Societies are complex worlds with many fields, power struggles, multiple influences, and where agents are always changing positions. Being able to incorporate this within a novel, enables the writer to reflect a multifaceted and realistic society. This is especially relevant to a genre such as historical fiction, that is endeavouring to portray a particular time and place. Sixteenth-century Flanders is not a place contemporary reader might be familiar with and constructing such a world that contains these aspects conveys a sense of authenticity, a key challenge discussed in the first section of this paper. My focus so far has been on the characters and settings, but my analysis was also key to the development of themes and plot ideas, the subject of the next section.

6.4 Bourdieu's *theory of practice* to develop plot, setting and themes

6.4.1 The Plot

The Dishonest Woman is the story of Gertje Vermeulen, a young woman who must use her wits and ingenuity to survive in sixteenth-century Antwerp, a world ruled by men. The main plot is Gertje's story, but around her are many events and people, that together contribute to building tension and suspense. As with any novel, these threads interweave together to allow a story to unfold. My research, some of which I have described earlier in this paper, was the starting point for these threads, and by using Bourdieu's tools, I was able to achieve two things. On one hand, I could ensure a focus on the big picture, enabling the plot to develop enabling the protagonist to develop and grow. And on the other hand, I could also develop numerous threads, creating a web of ideas that interweaved together.

At the beginning of the novel, Gertje and her family are running a small bakery not far from the Grote Markt in Antwerp. Her father is a baker which means that he would exist as a player in the Commercial field of Antwerp traders, but he is a minor player with little power or influence. He may, for example, be able to negotiate a good deal for his purchase of wheat, but he would have no power over any trade restrictions the city officials might introduce. Like many tradesmen at this time, when they lost their livelihood/business, they had very little to fall back on. As a writer, these Bourdieusian concepts can become useful plot devices, enabling me to depict the life of a baker at this time and place. When the bakery suddenly loses its trade and the family are unable to sell bread, it becomes apparent that the 'powers' that control the field, are working against the family. Very quickly, Gertrud's father has to leave Antwerp and go to another city, in search of work.

Fields undergoing rapid changes and incorporating this volatility enabled me to build tension in the plot. For example, the Bourdieu term of *hysteresis* implies a certain delay in adapting to changes in the field. Those with prominent positions on a field can adjust and are better placed to succeed. Gertje's father is only a very minor player. He *misrecognises* the strengths and weaknesses of relative field positions and ultimately loses his position and falls victim to more stronger players in the field.

When Gertrud inherits her husband's inn on his death, she becomes the innkeeper and takes over the running of the business. In doing so she enters the Commerce *field* in Antwerp. She would have a weak position, being a new member and also a woman, but none the less, she is part of the field. Over time Gertje enters into deals with her benefactors while further improving her position. For

example, she enters in an arrangement with the Lawyer to transform the rooms over the inn's stables into accommodation. This provides her with additional income but also makes her valuable to the Lawyer. For Gertje, these deals initially seem to be beneficial economic transactions. But as her knowledge of the field grows, she realises that these deals bring value to others and she can use this to improve her position on the field. By entering into arrangements with her benefactors, she is accepting an alternative type of 'currency' that is of value to the players. What she believes is a fair deal for both of them, is much more beneficial to the Lawyer while she is unknowingly implicating herself in illicit business. This, in Bourdieu terms, is *misrecognition*. But at the end of the novel, Gertje's position on the *field of power* significantly improves, her economic and social capital becoming so significant that she gains influence in the city.

6.4.2 The Setting: Antwerp in the Sixteenth Century

Flanders, and Antwerp as its capital city, provided much potential as a setting for a sixteenth-century novel. At this point in history, it is an important European city. The Netherlands, of which Flanders was a part, is under Spanish rule. In August 1567, the Duke of Alva is sent by the Spanish King, Phillip II, to enter Brussels. His orders are to forcibly convert the Protestants, resulting in an uprising and the 80-year war, which will end in Catholic Belgium and Protestant Netherlands.

Early sixteenth-century Antwerp, although very much part of a Catholic empire, was reasonably tolerant to the activities of Protestants and fellow travellers. Protestant ideas were spreading, including the revolutionary concept of the bible being available in a language the people could understand. However, the council of Trent, the ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, was not in favour of a Bible in the vernacular but Antwerp and its numerous printers, were already producing bibles in different languages.

The *political field* brings a tremendous sense of unrest and fear. It is undergoing substantial change, impacting on other fields, such as *religious*, resulting in people questioning long held beliefs (such as the power of the church over their daily lives). There are growing *commercial* fields benefiting from this upheaval, such as Printing. These *commercial* fields contribute to the growth of the Protestant faith, through the production of literature, allowing, for the first time, for ideas to be disseminated amongst the mass population. Other *fields* are also undergoing rapid change, such as *scientific fields*. Beliefs, including those in Astrology, are being questioned as advances are made in medicine and science.

6.4.2.1 The Grote Markt

While Antwerp, as the setting, helps determine events that will take place, so too does the actual location within the city. I needed somewhere that was pivotal to the city's residents. The Grote Markt, or central marketplace, is the centre of the city and is a place where people come together, rich and poor, to buy and sell commodities, gossip and generally go about their daily lives. It is where traders make a living and where deals are struck. Important buildings, such as the Stadhuis (town hall) and the Cathedral, sit on the edge of the Grote Markt. It is the location for important festivals, such as Carnival. The central marketplace effectively drives a city, and this was why I selected it as the key location to base the story. Gertje goes to the Grote Markt to buy food, to seek help from friends, to witness a play, and she crosses it to attend a masquerade ball at the town hall. Her grandmother helps deliver the baby of the fishmonger's daughter, a market trader. And Gertje marries the innkeeper, who owns an inn on the Grote Markt.

Governing the Grote Markt are a group of prominent local men that rule over the city, operating within the boundaries determined by higher authorities (such as the ruling King). These are professional men such as the Burgermeister, a physician, an artist, an astrologer etc. that have power over local matters. In Bourdieu's terms, these men constitute the *field of power* controlling the city. But power is volatile, and positions within the *field of power* are constantly changing. Whereas once the Astrologer held influence due to his knowledge, new professions, such as the Bookseller, are challenging his authority. When Gertje discovers that her husband is a member of this group, she realises this is unusual. That an innkeeper of a very modest establishment, should associate with men of power, seems most unlikely. Therefore, the story needs to have realistic and believable reasons, for him to be part of the *field*. And this is just one example of how, taking such an approach and constructing the plot through Bourdieu's *theory of practice*, enabled me to give the setting some authenticity; somewhere to base the story in order to develop the characteristics and inner life of the characters.

6.4.3 The Themes

6.4.3.1 Carnival

Carnavalesque is a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos. It can be marked by a mocking or satirical challenge to authority and the traditional social hierarchy.

The carnival of the novel is a world turned upside down that exists for a limited time and has its own field with a temporary *field of power*. To capture the idea of Carnavalesque within my story, I first needed to understand what was meant by everyday life at this time - this is where the definition of fields became useful. I could then construct a *Carnival field*, providing a useful means to turn the world of the novel on its head, enabling my protagonist to achieve her goals, without exceeding the boundaries of her usual life. For example, when Gertje needs to conceive an heir, even though her husband has recently died, this opened up the potential for an interesting plot development. She attends a Masquerade ball with the explicit intention of finding a suitable partner and falling pregnant. Using the temporary state of Carnival, she can take control of her situation and conceive her child. Something she would not be able to do (without exceeding social boundaries of the time) outside of Carnival.

6.4.3.2 The Art World

The art world is a key aspect of Antwerp during this period. As highlighted in the previous chapter, there is a large percentage of artists living in the city, resulting in a thriving and dynamic *art field*. My analysis included a selected list of artists working in Antwerp around 1550 (when my novel is set). I have focused on artists who joined the Guild of St Luke's. I was interested to see what was predominantly being painted before Bruegel appeared. I have highlighted in Table 3 Bruegel as well as those artists who are reputed to have influenced him.

ARTIST	Lived	Joined Guild	STYLE
Quentin Matsys	1466 - 1529	1491	Religious / Flemish / grotesque *Cult figure in 17 th century
Jan Gossaert	1478 - 1532	1503	Nederlandse / Flemish Renaissance
Joos van Cleve	1485 - 1540	1511	Religious, Nederlandse / contemporary Renaissance
Joachim Patinir	1480 - 1524	1515	Flemish Renaissance, landscapes
Jan Sanders van Hemessen	1500 - 1566	1524	Flemish Renaissance
Pieter van Aelst Coecke	1502 - 1550	1527	Flemish Renaissance, religious, mythological, nudes Court painter to Charles V * Bruegel apprenticed to in 1545
Jan van Amstel	1500 - 1542	1528	Landscape, Nederlandse Northern Renaissance

			<i>* Strong influence on Bruegel</i>
Jan Mandijn	1500 - 1560	? (Moved to Antwerp 1530)	Nederlandse Renaissance
Jan Matsys	1510 - 1575	1531	Flemish Renaissance, history, genre scenes and landscapes
Frans Floris	1517 - 1570	1539-40	Northern Renaissance / history paintings and portraits
Pieter Aertsen	1508 - 1575	c. 1542	Northern Mannerism, Peasants
Adam van Noort	1561 - 1641	1549	Mannerist / Romanist
Pieter Baltens	1527 - 1584	1550	Flemish Renaissance, Peasants <i>* Bruegel worked with on altarpiece</i>
Pieter Bruegel the Elder	1525 - 1569	1551 apprentice 1555 master	Nederlandse / Flemish Renaissance, Landscapes, Peasants
Marten de Vos	1532 - 1603	1558	History and portraits
Lucas de Heere	1534 - 1584	? (Fled to England)	Portrait Painter
Hieronymus Francken the Elder	1540 - 1610	?	Court Painter / Mannerist
Frans Francken the Elder	1542 - 1616	1567 (Deacon 1587)	Large altar pieces and allegorical
Gillis van Coninxloo	1544 - 1607	1570	Landscapes
Ambrosius Francken the Elder	1544 - 1618	1573	Late Mannerist
Paul Bril	1554 - 1626	(Moved to Rome c. 1575)	Landscapes
Joos de Momper	1564 - 1635	1581	Flemish Landscape <i>*Influenced by Bruegel</i>
Frans Pourbus the Elder	1545 - 1581	?	Religious
Frans Pourbus the Younger	1569 - 1622	1591?	Portraits, history
Bartholomeus Spranger	1546 - 1611	?	Painter to imperial court of Prague
Otto van Veen	1556 - 1629	1593	Altar pieces, emblem books

Sebastiaan Vranckx	1573 - 1647	1600	Flemish Baroque
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Table 3: The Field of Painters in Antwerp in sixteenth century (selection only)

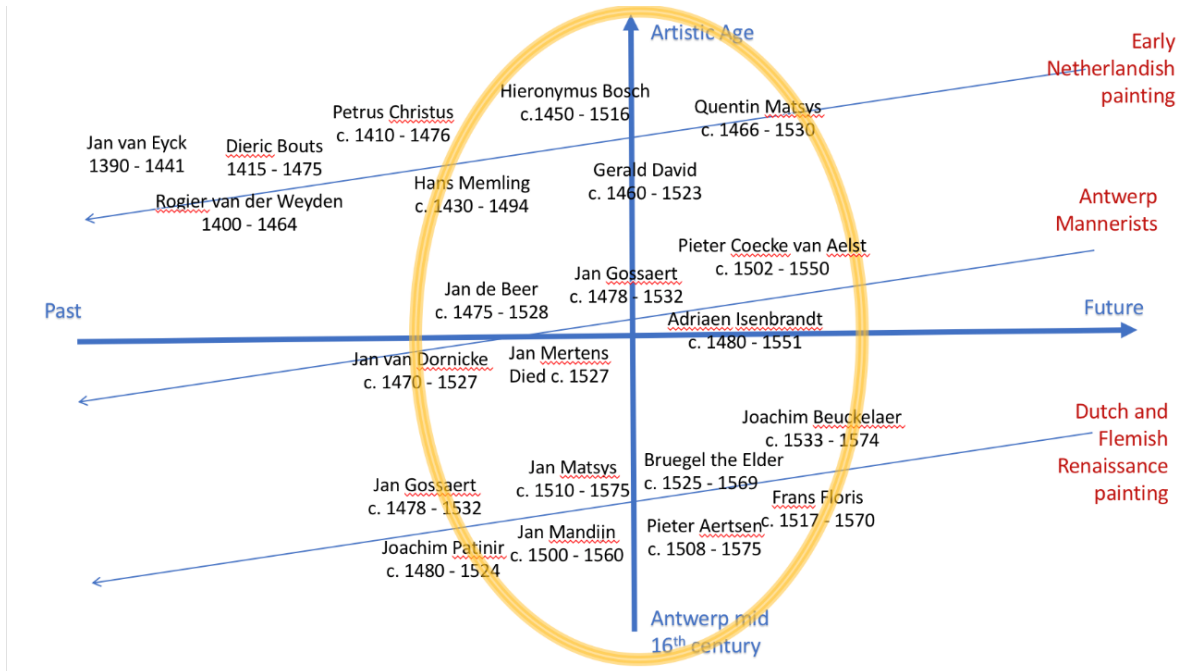


Fig 14. The Field of Painters in Antwerp in sixteenth century (selection only)
(Koning and Grenfell (2019))

One of Gertje's benefactors is a young successful painter, and to gain an understanding on the Field of Painters in Antwerp at this time, I constructed a diagram (see Fig 14), based on one similar produced by Bourdieu and adapted for my purposes. This is a static representation of what is a dynamic and changing process. For example, should I do the same view 100 years later, some of the same artists may remain, although no longer alive, but may continue to be recognised. Typically, an artist would enter at the bottom of the diagram and as their talent and reputation grows, they would move along the line heading upward. In the case of my analysis, I'm focused on the 1650s and at this point Bruegel is a 'recognised' artist.

Any person's position on a field is dynamic. As can be seen with the young painter, depending on his recognition as a painter, his ability to sell his work and gain a patron, and his network of associates, his position can quickly change. Some artists, at the top of their game, will be highly respected (*consecration*). Bosch is an example of this, as a painter that was heavily imitated at this time. Some painters, such as Bruegel's sons, are born into a family of painters (his father, and his maternal

grandfather and grandmother), therefore this *capital* enables them to move across and between various fields (*cultural trajectories*).

To map all 270+ painters in Antwerp during this period is a massive task, however for my purposes, I attempted an excerpt to see, even on a small scale, what it might reveal. I have chosen three painting styles, but there are many more. The placement of the painter on the horizontal lines is based on my initial research and driven largely by their age (due to the lack of available info for some). Some historians might place them differently. There are some painters included on the line that are 'better recognised' today than others. For example, Hieronymus Bosch and Jan van Eyck. I'm interested in influences and to gain a picture of what is possibly going on in the Field of Painting production in Antwerp in the sixteenth century, what's driving this community of painters, and compelling their placement within the field. This is all useful information that I can then use to build my story thread about Gertje's painter benefactor. For example, as his talent and reputation grow, his position improves. He becomes an apprentice to a reputable studio and is eventually accepted into the Guild of St Luke's. These are just a few examples of valuable *capital* for an artist at this time. But he also begins to challenge the accepted artistic subjects, effectively challenging the rules, or *doxa*, of the field. Similar to Bruegel painting peasants, they are challenging the status quo of the field, or in Bourdieu terms *heterodoxy*.

6.4.4 The Field of Power within the Novel

While in reality Antwerp during the sixteenth century would have had many *fields* and a *complex field of power*, I was keen to encapsulate just a small version of this within the novel. To do this I focused on seven key men, who represent the men of power in the city. Viewing this as the *field of power* within the novel's society, I then mapped out the position of each man on the field (see Fig. 16). Power in the field is dynamic, fluctuating according to the value of the agents' capital. This is value in as far as it can be determined but also recognised by those within (by the *agents*) and external to the field. Therefore, the stories threads began to evolve, with these key characters, vying for better positions on the *field*.

MOST	Burgermeister	The equivalent of the mayor, the Burgermeister is the most powerful man in the city and holds the top position in the field. Although answering to the King and to religious authorities, he would ultimately control much of what happens in the city (such as commercial arrangements and laws). His power comes from his authority; he knows and believes in the game, or in Bourdieu's terms, <i>illusion</i> .
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	Physician	Having the potential power of life or death gives the Physician authority in the city. He is well respected and would be consulted on for his medical expertise and knowledge. He would advise the Burgermeister, should he need medical attention, but also on other important matters that affect the city.
	Astrologer	Similar to the Physician, the Astrology provided an explanation for the birth, growth and decline of all things in the material world. Enlightenment has not yet arrived; therefore, the Astrologer provides answers to the unknown. The Burgermeister and other men of influence would seek out his opinion, believing that he has foresight. But his time is running out, for there are others, bringing with them new knowledge and expertise, that threaten his position and power.
	Lawyer	The Lawyer is the legal authority in the city and beyond. With his understanding of what is within the bounds of the law, his power comes from knowing what is permissible and the other men turn to him when their need advice and legal services. This power comes from being able to negotiate the Legal <i>field</i> . This makes him hugely important to other influential men.
	Friar	Religion in the sixteenth century plays a dominant role in everyday life. The Friar represents good and pious behaviour, and he obtains his authority by his power to determine who is righteous. The church during this time influences every aspect of daily life. Even those in authority would not want to risk their fate after death.
	Bookseller	The Bookseller is a newcomer to the <i>field of power</i> . Printing and selling books are something new and exciting, bringing with it much commercial and artistic opportunities. He enters the <i>field</i> suddenly and immediately has a position of power, which he is keen to increase. The other men recognise this and can utilise the Printing <i>field</i> for their advantage (such as the distribution of information).
	Apothecary	The Apothecary is in the field because of his family's reputation. Similar to the Physician (but to a much lesser degree) he has potentially lifesaving knowledge and expertise in herbs and medicinal preparations. His family have long been on the field (cultural trajectories) therefore he has a strong understanding of the rules. For those who cannot afford a Physician, the Apothecary can potentially provide relief from illness and disease. However, his power fluctuates as the men constantly shift around him, and he has little influence over his position.
	Innkeeper	The Innkeeper exists in the <i>field of power</i> because he is useful to those who are more powerful. He is of lower social status than others in the field, speaks with in a local dialect (- <i>linguistic capital</i>) reflecting his humble upbringing. But he allows the other men to meet at his inn discretely, as well as facilitating numerous deals (such as arranging for the collection bodies for the Physician, and commercial dealings). His position is precarious, but he has cleverly worked out that the other men need him and can use this to his advantage.
LEAST	Artist	At the beginning of the novel, the Artist is a young painter, not yet accepted into the Guild of St Luke's. He is on the <i>field of power</i> but

		only just. His talent is recognised therefore he has drawn interest and acceptance by the Guild greatly improves his position. There is the potential he may attract a patron, increasing his reputation. But if this doesn't happen, it's possible he will lose his position on the <i>field</i> .
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Table 3. Field of power within the novel.

Networking is a form of social *capital* that can be transferred into other forms of capital, as can be seen in numerous examples in the table above. The Apothecary has less *economic capital* than some of the others, but his network provides him with other forms of *capital* which are valuable, such as an ability to have some influence over the Burgermeister. But as his position weakens, he is at risk of displacement. All fields have network, and this network is similar to being in a profession. It has restricted membership and new members are only accepted if they met the standards according to its *ethos* that may involve training and socialisation into it. Those in the middle of the field are in a constant battle, hoping to improve their position, but at least not to move downward, or off the field completely. Once on the field the *agents* are also dependent upon each other. Even the Burgermeister is limited with what he can achieve if he doesn't have the support of the other agents. And so, Gertje as a sixteenth-century woman endeavouring to secure her future and gain some control over her destiny, she too must learn the rules, or *doxa*, of this field of power. When she realises the position her deceased husband once held, in being a broker of deals for the other men, she realises the potential influence and power she too could hold.

Above are just a few examples of how I have used a Bourdieusian structure to build the plot and story threads of the novel. Sixteenth-century Antwerp is a world of much change and upheaval, and trying to incorporate this into a novel, is a complex undertaking. Not wanting to have certain events dominate, but still including them to help create a sense of everyday life, was an important goal. Ultimately it is a writer's creativity and writing abilities that produce the story, but from my own experience, having a structure to give focus, was very useful. And coming back to the goal of authenticity, I believe building threads within this social structure, ensured I did not lose sight of my reconstructed sixteenth-century Antwerp society.

7. In Conclusion

This thesis has included selected examples of how taking a Bourdieusian approach to my research and analysis, influenced the development of my novel. As with any historical novel, research is fundamental, and a key challenge is how to approach this task with a key goal of attaining a sense of authenticity. Bourdieu's *theory of practice* provided tools and concepts that I could utilise to identify aspects within my research to focus on. But also of value was the structure it provided to construct the story. Many of my decisions, such as character development and building plot and story threads, were driven by my analysis, including the ways in which I could disrupt and manipulate the order being presented. Coming back to Lukács' idea of characters with the 'historical peculiarity of their age' and de Groom's 'sense of otherness and difference', such a Bourdieusian approach allowed for a sociological history of the past.

Some of Bourdieu's concepts were easily adaptable to techniques I have employed previously as a writer. For example, building the *empirical facts* is similar to a character profile. However, where it really became of value, was how I dealt with such a large amount of research. Focus was essential and given my desire to take a sociological drive approach, Bourdieu's *theory of practice* enabled a structure to evolve. This structure consisted of numerous components, most importantly the characters' *habitus* and *capital*, and *fields* and *agents*, and these enabled the world of the novel to come together. All novels have settings and occur during a particular period, whether past, present or future. Enabling the reader to identify what makes it unique and peculiar, contributes to any novel's success. Tension and suspense play out in various ways within any story. There are various writer's techniques to achieve this, but utilising Bourdieusian concepts, such as *fields of power* and *doxa* (rules), I was able to construct threads that built on power struggles.

But ultimately, what was of most value to this three-year writing project, has been the sociological approach. I have considered my characters as social beings, who are influenced by and have an influence on the world around them. This world can be viewed through a very broad perspective, such as political and religious events, but also very localised, such as gossip on a market place. When deciding what a character is to do, think, feel or say, I found having this structure to work within was hugely beneficial. By reconstructing sixteenth-century Antwerp from the perspective of my protagonist and other key characters using Bourdieu's tools revealed, not just characters and setting, but a society that is both authentic and intriguing.

APPENDIX: BOURDIEU'S KEY TERMS

Typically, any study undertaken within a Bourdieusian framework begins with real, empirical data providing a biographical analysis of the subject. Bourdieu then provides principal concepts which, when considered as interconnected entities, make up the structure and conditions of the social context under study.

Below are definitions for the main concepts use throughout this paper, beginning with the principal concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*. Unless otherwise stated, the meanings below are from *Pierre Bourdieu Key Concepts* (Grenfell, 2014).

Habitus:

A property of actors (whether individual, groups or institutions) that comprises a “structured and structuring structure” (Grenfell, 2014: 170). It is “structured” by one’s past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is “structuring” in that one’s habitus helps to shape one’s present and future practices. It is a “structure” in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned. This “structure” comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Grenfell, 2014: 50).

Field:

For Bourdieu, *field* is the ‘objective’ elements of the social environment and is defined as: “A network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (dominations, subordination, homology, etc.)” (Grenfell, 2016: 13)

Capital:

Bourdieu defines *capital* as:

‘*economic capital* in the strict sense (i.e. material wealth in the form of money, stocks and shares, property, etc), but also *cultural capital* (i.e. knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications), *symbolic capital* (i.e. accumulated capital or honour).’ (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 351)

There are three basic forms of capital: *social*, *economic* and *cultural*. All capital has value and provides advantage, often bringing about advantage through position in a social space or *field*, where is it recognised and considered valuable. These forms of capital can act symbolically but operate differentially as they are characterised by different modes of delivery.

Bourdieu defines *social capital* as: ‘the resources which can be brought together per procuration through the network of “relations” of various sizes and offering density’ (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 216)

Cultural capital refers to any cultural products, such as personal style and taste, education or objectives, that are considered valuable by an individual and through the acquisition, display their

cultural taste and standing. *Linguistic Capital* is a form of cultural capital defined at the level of the human individual. For example, in many speech situations a speaker endowed with a particular accent, such as upper class, will enjoy more credibility or legitimacy than a speaker of lesser eloquence. Therefore, dialects can represent a form of capital to the extent that they yield a benefit or have a negative impact, to the speakers endowed with them.

Symbolic capital is a form of capital that is not recognised as capital. It can have little quantifiable value in itself, such as reputation or status, but when people consider the possession of such a quality important, it gains value. (Webb et al., 2010)

Other concepts

Agency: A concept that individuals have the ability to understand and control her/his own actions, regardless of her/his circumstances but contextualised in regard to their relation to the objective's structures of society. (Webb et al., 2010)

Autonomy: The extent to which the actions and behaviours of members of a *field* are governed by the *field's* internal logic. Autonomy can be impacted by the amount of independence a field has in regard to other fields it interacts with, and particularly any fields of power.

Commoditisation: The process of producing or assessing something in regard to its ability to be exchanged for something else.

Consecration: Within a field, particular positions and practices can become considered as highly important and distinctive to that field.

Discourse: In a particular field, the forms of language representative of, and expressing the values of, that social space.

Distinction: A set of acquired tastes that denotes goodness, fineness or grandeur. Often associated with upper classes, or elitism, where a taste, or appreciation, for 'the finer' things such as art, indicates distinction.

Doxa: A set of rules for a particular field, that defines what the field's members consider thinkable and sayable. The difference between doxa and opinion is that doxa is a form of unquestioned truth whereas opinion can be openly contested and discussed. Bourdieu considered doxa to be beyond a common belief, potentially giving rise to common action. In evaluating any individual's place within a field, the doxa is used to determine their legitimate position. (Grenfell, 2014: 114-125)

Field of Power: Collectives of people occupy more than one social field at a time. They/we can be thought of as occupying a common social space - Bourdieu called this the field of power - which consists of multiple social fields such as the economic field, the education field, the field of the arts, bureaucratic and political fields, and so on. (Grenfell, 2014: 68)

Hexis: Bodily hexis is political mythology realised, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking. (Grenfell, 2014: 68)

Heterodoxy: A set of beliefs and values that challenges the status quo and trusted knowledge of a field.

Heteronomous pole: A part of a field that has connections with other fields and expresses their values.

Hysteresis: This implies a certain delay in adapting to changes in the field. The hysteresis of habitus... is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them, which is the cause of missed opportunities and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past. (Grenfell, 2014: 68)

Illusio: when an agent on a field is caught up and by the game, believing that it is worth playing and recognising what is at stake.

Inalienable values: Values that are held to be intrinsic to a person and not subject to the values of any field, such as an honour, loyalty and family allegiances.

Metaliteracy: The ability to move across different perspectives and ways of seeing, such as different social contexts.

Misrecognition: The systematic denial of the fact that symbolic capitals are transubstantiated types of economic capital. It can occur when certain individuals obtain benefits at the expense of others, without actually appearing to do so. For Bourdieu, misrecognition refers to: an everyday and dynamic social process where one thing (say, a situation, process, or action) is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously 'cognised' within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it. (Bourdieu, 2000/1997)

Orthodoxy: Beliefs and values that constitute the knowledge and wisdom of a field, maintaining the status quo. It reflects the official history of a field. (Webb et al., 2010)

Symbolic Power: Disciplines used against another to confirm an individual's place in a social hierarchy. It may be in regard to individual relations or through system institutions. Symbolic Power can be described by the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour. It is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*).

Symbolic Violence: According to Bourdieu, cultural roles are more dominant than economic forces in determining how hierarchies of power are situated and reproduced across societies. Both status and economic capital are required to maintain dominance in a system. Ownership over the means of production is not sufficient. Symbolic Violence is violence exercised upon a social agent with his /her complicity. Examples of the exercise of symbolic violence include gender relations in which both men and women agree that women are weaker, less capable etc, or class relations in which both working-class and middle-class people agree that the middle classes are more intelligent, more capable of running the country, more deserving of higher pay etc.

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