

# One

The Hague, January 1882

It is winter, the evening bitterly cold. The north-westerly is so sharp it feels like pins. All day it has been battering this precarious coastline as if determined to return the sandy contours once more to the sea.

In Geest, where the city's poor live, a small barrel tumble-rolls down an alley, an abandoned broom knocks urgently against a door while awnings flap and furl, and shutters bang against the brick like a chorus of hammers.

The crowds, swaddled and hunched against the wind, are heading home, their working day finished. They rush past a mother and child wending their way towards the centre of the city. For this mother, Sien, her working hours have only just begun. As she pulls the black shawl tighter around her shoulders, she takes care to leave a glimpse of her modest décolletage. Her belly, however, she keeps well hidden beneath the garment's thick

woollen folds. She is tired, her energy sapped by the fledgling life inside her. But her rent is due the next day, and she cannot afford rest. She must find at least two clients – preferably three – if she is to have enough for her jenever as well.

Feeling a tug on her skirt, she looks down. Maria's cheeks are red-raw like beets, and her nose, which is never dry in winter, glistens.

'I'm hungry, Mama.'

'Hush, maybe soon,' Sien murmurs, refusing to indulge the girl with pity. Pity, like rest, is something she cannot afford.

Above, a smattering of stars is piercing the bruised sky. Soon twilight will give way to night and, worried the wind will not only thin the crowd but keep the men indoors, Sien presses on, her steps brisker than before. Maria scuttles along behind in her wooden shoes, struggling to keep up.

It is not long before they are traipsing the narrow streets of Kalvermarkt. Despite the weather, the taverns are doing a roaring trade. Sien should have known: wind or no wind, the men flock to them like thirsty pigs to a trough. Laughter, throaty and beer-swollen, erupts from their doorways while their fogged windows glow with warm yellow light. Sien quickly averts her gaze. She'd like nothing better than to join the men and drown her sorrows in their sodden company. Born with cocks, they are free to carouse, leaving women to huddle at home with their shivering children as they stoke the dying embers of the fire and pray the men will remember to return with a coin or two in their pockets.

She is sure there is no better proof of God being a man.

But whether from the heavens or Geest, she no longer cares,

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as there are no men for the likes of her. Has she not always found herself abandoned? Pushing out their babies alone? And afterwards, too? Thankfully, the two others beside Maria – sickly, pitiful things – were smart enough to depart the world early.

At last, spotting a familiar figure stepping out of one raucous venue, she hurries towards him. She has no trouble recognising Johan's peculiar gait – his legs are always bowed as if he is astride a horse – even in the busiest of streets. It is said that an unfortunate curse afflicts him, leaving that eleventh finger between his thighs as hard as a rod, day and night – though some would argue his condition is far from a misfortune. But it is one that he must seek 'treatment' for outside his marital bed because his wife, having tended to him for twenty years, refuses to have anything more to do with it. And who could blame the poor woman? Luckily for Johan, he does not have to suffer, for the city teems with girls and women more than willing to relieve him of not only his hardship but his coins.

Because it has been some weeks since their last rendezvous, Sien sidles up to him and flashes a knowing smile. But when Johan pushes his cap over his eyes and attempts to swerve past her, Sien, bristling, quickly blocks his path. Well, the nerve of him! Surely, if anyone should do the snubbing, it should be her. A butcher, that tallow stench of slaughtered meat clings to him as indelible as skin. And what of his collars, which are always sprayed with goutts of rusty-red blood? How these games tire her, forcing her to play the seductress when she'd prefer to be no more than a whore. But aware that it is often her sweet-talking that stirs the men's loins, and fearing he may be the evening's only

customer, she holds her temper and purrs, ‘Come, Johan, I’m wet already.’

But instead of giving her a dissolute smile, tonight he steps back as though to avoid a fast-moving carriage, tucking his chin so deeply into his neck that his doughy jowls concertina like a ruff collar.

In the end it is Maria who changes his mind. Now exhausted and on the verge of tears, the girl wails again, ‘I’m hungry, Mama.’

Johan, a man with five of his own, sighs, resigned.

Sien seizes his arm and leads him to the stable behind the tavern. Inside, two horses resting in their stalls flick their tails and snort at the intruders as the air chokes with the pong of manure and the sour-damp of loamy hay. Normally, she would not even pinch her nose, but today, overcome with nausea, she can’t help but gasp as she hoists herself onto the bales of hay stacked against the wall. Maria, knowing what to do, hides behind the door.

Ha – just as Sien expected, Johan’s one-eyed eel has sprung up beneath his shirt tail as hard as the tip of a broomstick, casting his earlier rebuff in a doubtful light – more an act, and a churlish one at best. How glad she is for the dimming light. For at such hair’s-breadth distance, as their features turn beast-ugly, it is the men’s faces more than their prodding that repulse her.

Over time, her mind – that clever thing – has learnt to grow wings. So, at these moments, as her head knocks against the mortar and her shoulders slam against the brick, it duly takes flight, detaching from her just as would skin after a burn, and she is somehow at once both outside and inside herself. If not for

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this neat trick, as indispensable – if not more – as that split flesh between her legs, she is convinced she would have been sent to the cells long ago for digging her nails deep into a man's back or sinking her teeth into an ear.

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