Chapter One

My Christian name is Gerrit, and I am a de Waal.

I am an only child, if you don't count the two my Mama Anneka miscarried. My older brother Karel and younger sister Kathrijn are buried under the same tree in the apple orchard.

I never eat its fruit when it ripens in Autumn.

I was born on Monday, June 3, 1686, and I spent the first twenty-five years of my life in Middelburg, in the Dutch province of Zeeland.

I lived in the attic of the three-storey wooden house my *overgrootvader*, my great-grandfather, Hendrick, built. He used timber salvaged from the *Santiago*, a Portuguese cargo vessel loaded with spices his ship captured off the mid-Atlantic island of St Helena in March 1602.

Hendrick's full-length portrait hung on the wall beside the stairway to the first floor.

In one of my earliest memories, I was playing at the top of the stairs when my Papa Maarten appeared.

Towering over me, he stooped, took my hand and guided me down the stairs, one careful step at a time. Then he stopped beside the portrait and swept me up without warning to straddle his shoulders.

Gripping me there with one hand, he turned to face the painting.

'This is Hendrick,' he said, pointing. 'He is my grandfather and your great grandfather.'

I saw a pair of grey eyes so piercing they stared right through me.

His face was square. He was frowning beneath the black leather peak of his sun-bleached red cap pulled low across his forehead. Wind-burned wrinkles fanned down his cheeks from the corners of his eyes. He had a black beard streaked with grey and his lips were so compressed his mouth was a straight line.

There was no hint of a smile.

He was wearing a pale blue uniform jacket with silver-buttons and a lace-collar. The sleeves were rolled up, halfway to the elbow. His large hands, with fingers linked, rested across his lap.

Then I saw the tattoos of tiger lizards on the backs of each hand.

Their dark blue scaly tails were coiled round his muscular forearms. Their open mouths were blasting red and orange flames across his fingers.

I froze and screamed.

I locked my legs against Papa's chest and dug my fingers into his throat as my mind raced: *The dragons in the stories my Opa, my Grandfather Laurens, has read to me are real!*

'That's enough of that,' Papa said, choking as he staggered down the stairs.

He tore my hands loose, put me on the floor and squatted beside me. He held me at arm's length with one hand, rubbing his neck with the other.

‘You’d better get used to him, Gerrit,’ he said before he let me go. ‘You are the latest de Waal, so he’ll be watching over everything you do.’

Watching over everything I do?

I stumbled across the black and white tiles towards the safety of the kitchen without looking back.

That was in 1689, when Papa was home for a year between voyages to the East Indies. He had returned the day before, after a three-year absence and he was a stranger to me.

Apart from that incident with the dragons, I have only the faintest memory of him when he was home that time.

One thing I do remember is the weird sensation of hovering in the air over smiling faces in the apple orchard when he threw me skywards, before I fell into his waiting arms.

Was it the terror of falling I experienced then, or the joy at flying once I got used to it?

Was I too young to feel either?

I was three years old.

It took me several years before I could look up at Great Grandfather Hendrick’s piercing gaze and fiery hands without feeling terrified as I passed up and down the stairs.

I knew I had many challenges to face, and a family reputation to live up to.

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I met Papa again three years later, when he returned from Batavia aboard the *Ridderschap van Holland* in October 1692.

The day he reappeared we gathered in the dining room to watch him open one of his leather bags.

He took out two stuffed birds-of-paradise from Java. Each one was mounted on polished wooden carvings of a leafy tree branch.

‘That’s rosewood,’ Opa Laurens said, reaching out to admire the timber and the sculpting of the leaves. ‘It’s beautiful work.’

The taxidermist had done a perfect job. Their glossy brown wings were spread as though they were both about to fly and their brilliant golden tails stretched down beneath them.

Papa had also brought a beautiful pen and ink drawing on a piece of leather vellum[1] he discovered in Cape Town—two more birds of paradise, one above the other, copied from a sketch by Rembrandt van Rijn, already my favourite painter.

Opa Laurens framed it and hung it in our *kunstkamer*, our little curiosity and natural history collection room. He hung it beside my childish sketches of wild

[1] Vellum is drawing parchment made from the skin of young lambs or kid goats

animals. I'd been drawing them since Mama had given me a box of pastels on my previous birthday. A lion, a tiger, black and polar bears. Even a hyena.

I copied them from a children's picture book at school, showing animals kept in the royal zoo in the Palace of Versailles in Paris.

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I got to know and understand Papa for the first time during the nine months he was home that time.

I was six years old, turning seven.

It still took me some months to get used to him, though.

He was a tall, deep-voiced stranger who had invaded my space and interfered in my relationship with Mama.

It was frightening to look up at his tanned angular face at first. His eyes were as blue as mine. Their amused, sarcastic expression scared me, and I wasn't used to his teasing.

I thought his words meant he still disapproved of me. My memory of his anger on the stairs three years ago was vivid.

He often gave me a questioning look with his eyebrows raised; or stared at me with a watchful silence that left me confused and shy. He may have meant me no harm, but I felt I wasn't living up to his expectations and was disappointing him.

'I'm toughening him up,' I overheard him explain to Mama the first time she asked him to stop teasing me during the first week.

I was hidden at the top of the stairs behind the banisters, observing them in the *voorkamer*, the front room below.

'He doesn't know you yet. He thinks you're bullying him. And you are.'

'It's a challenging world out there, Anneka. Things are changing. You must be strong and resilient. Or you will fail.'

'Let him get used to you first,' she replied. 'And give him time to grow up. He's strong enough for his age.'

'Not from what I've seen so far. He has a lot to learn.'

'He's not one of your ship's crew.'

He gave a quiet chuckle. 'Not yet, but I'll work on him, and he soon will be. We have boys his age on board.'

'Over my dead body,' she muttered. Twice. Louder the second time. And then, 'God willing.'

He smiled and put his arms around her. 'Over your dead body? No, no, my dear. God *forbid*, of all things, that.'

There was a long silence as he looked into her eyes.

'He's a de Waal, remember. A Zeelander. He can't shame the family.'

'And a Tuineman. He's a Tuineman as well. Don't you forget that Maarten,' she said forcefully.

His smile broadened.

‘Ah, his sensitive artistic side. The painter. That excuses him, does it?’

‘He doesn’t need excuses. Leave him alone.’

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Unsure how to respond to him during those first weeks, I’d run to Opa Laurens in his woodwork carving shed instead.

Or hide in my bedroom attic and bury myself in the book Papa handed to me the day he arrived—*Gerrit in Nova Zembla*. It was a children’s book, the latest best-seller by Jan Mijsters.

Or play with the globe of the world Opa Laurens had bought for me. I loved spinning it, to see how often the island of St Helena in the mid-Atlantic Ocean appeared when it came to a stop.

Or sit in my favourite position on the attic window ledge, three storeys up. I’d brace myself against the frame, my legs dangling against the outside brickwork. Concentrating deeply, I’d hold a short length of rope attached to the window latch in one hand, as though the open window was a sail caught by the wind.

Then I’d enter an imaginary world, sailing the house.

I loved the occasional summer storms when the winds blew against the windowpanes. They powered the house across the thrashing leaf-waves of the rose bushes below, as though their white flowers were foaming at the bow.

Then the razor-sharp rocks of the apple orchard and the coral reefs of birch trees lining the garden showed their teeth and I steered the house to safety past the dangers, the gales whipping rain across the garden pathways.

Sometimes there was a stillness after the storm.

Not a breath of wind.

No ripples in the dark canal.

A cold mist settled over the landscape, and I could barely see the sails of the distant saw windmills as the setting sun turned the moisture on the windowpanes into golden fern leaves.

Then, becalmed and disappointed, I’d lash the rope to the window catch and close it, before shyly seeking out Papa’s company, hoping for his approval.

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I liked Papa’s thoughtful present of the book, though; and as the months passed, he softened, or I became used to him.

He no longer teased me for playing my imaginary violin when Mama was practising on the clavichord piano.

He didn’t stare at my primitive drawings with a frown and then give me a sarcastic smile.

He stopped shouting sailing instructions from the garden below when he saw me sitting on my attic window ledge three stories up, voyaging across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans on my way to Batavia in the East Indies—as if my house-ship really was the *Santiago*.

I especially appreciated the time he took to help me make my first kite.

We spent an afternoon cutting up one of Mama's spare scarlet and green silk skirts for the panels and shaped several flexible strips of whale baleen[2] for the spine and crosspiece.

He taught me to fly it on the beach at Domburg on a windy day, the racing sand yachts swerving around us, spraying us with sand.

He even took me fishing for herring from the Oranjedijk sea wall in Vlissingen during the spring tides.

We prepared a bucket of bait from the maggots of bluebottles feasting on dead eels we netted the week before. I used to slam the lid down after taking some maggots to fish with, when the horrible stink made me sick to my stomach.

After the New Year, he took me to a secret beach at Westcapelle.

'It used to be ankle-deep in coloured pebbles when I was a boy,' he told me. 'All the colours of the rainbow.'

It was a special place—a hidden Roman ruin deep beneath the dunes.

The tides and currents met there, gathering the glass and porcelain fragments thrown overboard from passing ships and grinding them into smooth jewels of various sizes over the centuries.

'I came here for the first time when I was your age,' he said, as he led me to the tunnel entrance hidden among windswept reeds and grasses.

I followed him into the sloping passageway that angled down through crumbling limestone brickwork to a man-made cavern. It was an ancient storage warehouse for Roman galleys anchored beside the beach a thousand years ago.

It was filled with the fresh salt smell of seaweed and echoed with the smack and hiss of breaking waves. You could only enter it at low tide, and it was on the turn that day.

The water was shin deep.

I took off my shoes, and my bare feet scrunched the fragments. The brilliantly coloured pieces I picked up were amazing, and I sorted them in my palm. The polished glass and shining porcelain pebbles were a treasure the sea had offered up to me, and I selected various colours, shapes and sizes, filling both my pockets for the curiosity room.

Papa found a marvellous oval stone, smooth and rounded, the size of his palm.

'This looks like Mexican fire opal,' he said as he inspected it.

When he held it out to show me, I could hardly believe my eyes. The deep transparent greens and blues flecked with red and polished by the seawater reflected the faint light in the cavern like a dark flame.

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[2] Strips of strong plastic-like keratin in a whale's mouth used to filter plankton and krill when feeding

‘It must be the remains of the base of a vase or wine cask or some such, made by an imaginative Roman glassmaker. A nice addition to our collection.’ He turned it over. ‘Think of the centuries of experience that’s gone into it, Gerrit. Man’s creative technical skill, drawn from his observations of the natural world is concentrated in this rarity the sea has perfected for us.’

With a quick nod, he handed it to me to carry home.

‘It’s so heavy, Papa! And its colours are amazing,’ I said, holding it in both hands.

Confused by what he’d said I looked away, making certain he couldn’t see any change in my expression. At the same time, I was glad he thought I’d understood.

‘That’s something for the Tuineman in you to think about,’ he said.

‘Thank you, Papa. I will.’

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The day before he left in July 1693, Mama and I spent the day in Vlissingen with him.

He was overseeing the loading of four treasure chests packed with gold and silver coins and Spanish treasure to his ship, the *Ridderschap van Holland.*

She was anchored out in the Wielingen channel.

‘The chests are going to the Councils in Cape Town and Batavia,’ Papa told us.

Eight riflemen walked alongside six of Papa’s sailors staggering under the padlocked, canvas-covered chests from the red-and-black brick warehouse of the Admiralty Arsenal. Loaded onto a trolley, they dragged them to the company yacht, moored alongside the breakwater.

Before we returned to Middelburg, Papa introduced us to his new schipper, Dirk de Lange.

Tall, rangy and hawklike, the dark-haired schipper looked down his long, sunburned nose at me, then ruffled my hair.

I flinched and clenched my jaw.

‘So, Gerrit. Are you going to follow in your papa’s footsteps?’ he asked.

His pointy Adam’s apple caught my eye, sliding up and down his throat between the tendons.

‘There’s no mistaking you for anyone but a de Waal. How old are you? We still have vacancies aboard for boys with your good breeding, if you’re interested.’

I looked up at Papa, who nodded.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said, wondering what to say. ‘I’m only seven, but I already have a job. On a ship.’

‘You have? Are you the schipper?’

‘No, I’m the First Mate and Helmsman, like Papa.’

‘And your ship? Do I know it?’

Mama, who was then eight months pregnant, interrupted him. She gestured with open hands.

'It's the *Santiago*. He sails the house.'

'Ah, the *Santiago*! So, your next destination is St Helena Island?'

'No, it's Eendrachtsland. In Nieuw Holland.'

'*Eendrachtsland!* Why Eendrachtsland? There's nothing there. Except a few blacks, I understand.'

'We are learning about Dirck Hartog at school,' I said.

We had recently traced Hartog's journey from Amsterdam to the west coast of the Great South Land aboard the *Eendracht* in 1616. We copied a chart of his exploration of that stretch of coast with its empty interior, and coloured it in.

Our maps were hanging on the classroom wall.

I used pale blue and green pastels.

He listened intently, before bending to gaze sternly at me, his hands on my shoulders as if making sure I was listening.

'Interesting. Then here is my advice. Keep your eyes well and truly open. Look out for Houtman's Abrolhos Islands. You don't want to end up stranded there on a coral reef like the *Batavia*,' he said. 'It's one place in the world where the sun meets the sea,' he said.

'The sun meets the sea there?'

'It does. At sunset, on the horizon in the west.'

'That was good advice,' Papa said as we walked away. 'Whatever you do when you're sailing the house, don't you forget it. We don't want you shipwrecked. Especially not in that part of the world. I've seen it. The cliffs there are so steep it looks as if some angry pagan god in a wild rage chopped off the land with a giant axe.'

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I will never forget the day Papa boarded his ship.

That gusty early dawn in Vlissingen on Friday, 10 July, is burnt into my memory.

Sunlight was streaming across the estuary, lighting up the waterfront.

It threw my shadow onto the whitewashed bricks of the newly opened mill as I stood beneath its sails. I watched them crank slowly into life.

They quickened, and I placed the green and scarlet silk kite I'd been trying to launch down on the grass. The drumbeat of the giant wooden cogs driving the grinding stones inside thudded through my hands when I placed them against the wall, so I turned and leant back into the building, my head and chest vibrating, my teeth juddering.

Laughing, I waved at the group gathered beside the outer breakwater twenty *roeden*[3] to my right.

Papa's tall figure stood out among them in his starched and laundered light blue officer's jacket and lace collar. I'd watched Mama sweating over his uniform with a heated flat iron for an hour the evening before.

He raised his arm and called me back to join them.

With the westerly blowing directly in from the open sea, I lined myself up, held the kite at shoulder height before running forward and releasing it. It lifted overhead for several promising seconds, before it zigzagged back to the grass as if it was tormenting me.

Determined to send a signal to the two ships on the horizon, I tried again.

With the same result.

After my fifth unsuccessful try, a workman from the team loading bags of barley from the horse-drawn cart onto the mill hoist for grinding walked across and offered to help.

Embarrassed, but not defeated, I thanked him and this time sprinted into the wind with the kite soaring behind me, the string sliding out across my palm between my thumb and forefinger.

I ran along the uneven brick path on the Oranjedijk sea wall towards Papa, hauling on the kite string as it rose.

My shouts were blown away by the crash of waves sweeping up the embankment. They ricocheted in bursts of spray the length of the waterfront, wrenching the moorings of boats in the inner harbour, sending them bumping and grinding together beneath jostling ropes, snapping flags and whistling masts.

Flocks of herring gulls stirred and shuffled on the lip of the dijk.

They lifted in succession as I tore through them, gliding weightless on spread wings on the wind gusts as I screamed instructions at the kite swooping and swerving across the sky, tugging at my arm.

When I looked back, I saw the messenger-key Papa had attached to the cord spin slowly up towards the kite's thrashing tail. I followed its flash as it lodged itself hard against the cross splice.

A stronger gust caught the kite and shook it so violently the panels flashed in the sun as though in flames. In my mind, the kite had reached the sky and sent a signal to the ships.

When it settled again, I imagined the key turning the lock and swinging the kite open as if it was a door to the brightening blue.

It seemed to invite me into a universe of exploration with infinite horizons

Eyes streaming, I sprinted along the narrow path as though crossing a bridge across a void.

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[3] One Rijnland roede is 3.767 metres, so approximately 75 metres.

When I reached Papa, I tripped and lay on the bricks at his feet, panting with laughter. The cord tugged at my outstretched arm as though I'd hooked a struggling herring.

Papa leant across and caught the string. He lifted me to my feet and hugged me, the silver buttons on his officer's tunic digging into my ribs.

Out in the Wielingen channel lay two sunlit ships, their departure flags flickering blue, silver and orange—the *Lands Welvaren* and the *Ridderschap van Holland*.

In the inner harbour, the owner's yacht prepared to cast off, her bell sounding. The last group of officers boarded along the bouncing gangplank.

I recognised the figure of schipper Dirk de Lange shaking each by the hand as they boarded.

Papa lowered me to the grass. He cupped my face in his hands and bent to kiss my forehead, murmuring a farewell that I responded to before turning away to disentangle the kite string snagged painfully around my fingers.

Mama and Opa Laurens waited for me further along the path.

I began winding in the kite, watching as Papa turned to board the yacht. He sent the three of us a final wave before he disappeared.

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Mama's lips were clamped shut.

Her eyes were slits beneath a heavy frown.

She was fighting back tears.

She ducked against the wind, dark hair whipping about her cheeks as she struggled to tuck it under her cap.

I guessed she was dreading the year ahead before she heard from Papa. He had promised her a bundle of letters from Cape Town sent home on a ship in the first return fleet.

And worse than that, I knew she was preparing to see out a two or three-year wait until his return, as we all were.

Looking back now, I realise Mama's expression showed how much she hated the sea. It had robbed her of Papa's companionship for most of their married life. She must have felt abandoned—pregnant once again—left behind to care for the family and the household.

I never heard her complain, but she must have been filled with dread before he departed. Perhaps the feeling that Papa would not return was running through her mind. Perhaps she expressed her fear to no one except her God in silent prayer as his departure came closer, believing that if she said anything to Papa or her friends, she'd put a curse on the voyage.

And Papa?

He was free to take his place aboard his ship, a figure of authority in a tight-knit society of two hundred men heading for the Indies.

Together, the three of us watched the yacht scud towards the anchored ships as the kite descended.

It rattled and bounced away as it struck the bricks.

Chapter Two

When we returned to Middelburg and the coach was crossing the central square, there were people stirring in the grounds of the circus, which had been set up for the Pentecost celebrations a month before.

The gaudy tents were still there. They were steeped in dew; and the tightrope and flying trapeze were strung high across the square from a turret below the *Stadhuis* City Hall clock tower to a building opposite.

One afternoon two weeks before, I had strolled through the jostling crowds with Papa and Opa Laurens. We enjoyed the laughter, the chatter and the raw energy of the entertainers.

Opa and I shared a smile across the carriage compartment as memories of that afternoon flooded my mind. I knelt up on the seat, craned my neck and peered through the back window.

I caught sight of the solitary mournful black dancing bear asleep in the corner of its cage.

An amazing technicolour mandrill baboon was squatting in the cage beside it. The last time I saw it that afternoon, it strutted in a half-circle the length of its jangling chain, its tail-lifted, and its red and blue backside and scrotum on full display. It responded to the commands of its keeper brandishing his boathook, its snarling mouth and long curved white teeth so terrifying my stomach turned to a block of ice.

Beyond it were two mangy old lions asleep. Last time we saw them they prowled round their cages with snarling grunts when the crackling fireworks were lit. I remember laughing when Papa told me: 'They're doing a roaring trade.'

Now there was no sign of the juggler on stilts, and the clowning dwarves, the tumbling Italian acrobats in dazzling rainbow-coloured silks, and the wandering Ashkenazi[4] street musicians with their haunting violins. They were nowhere to be seen

But *there*, seated outside his stall, was the crafty old Egyptian magician in a red fez hat, who had produced a yellow chick from my nose and then an egg from my ear.

Opa had chuckled: 'The chicken first! Your magician got the order right, *mijn kleinzoon*, my grandson. Now you know which came first.'

I glanced back at the lions and saw one of them yawn.

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[4] Jewish people who migrated to the Netherlands after 1492, when they were banished from Spain and Portugal. There are many brilliant people among them, including world-class musicians.

It raised its head and closed its eyes, its huge pink tongue curling out between its curving lower teeth. With its mouth wide, there was a row of snarling wrinkles in the fur on each side of its jaws.

I looked at Mama, about to ask her to stop the carriage so I could take another look at the baboon. I wanted to check its features and draw it from memory when I got home, but her eyes were closed.

She seemed distant and unapproachable.

She was shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

Both hands were spread across her swollen belly.

She seemed to be in pain, and her fearful expression put me off.

The carriage slowed to follow the creaking wheels of a horse-drawn milk cart crossing the Binnenhaven canal bridge. Its churns were clanking, and red and yellow cheeses glowed in the net of shadows thrown by the tall, narrow buildings. The clatter of wheels as we crossed the bridge resonated among the shipyard warehouses beyond, where I glimpsed the upright hull of a new ship on the slipway.

The water was brown and still. Multicoloured wooden sledges were lined along the embankment, waiting for the next winter freeze.

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At the house, Opa paid the coachman.

I helped Mama down from the carriage and walked her to the front door as the coach drove away.

Then I went up to the attic to return the kite to its shelf.

When I returned, Grandfather was waiting for me beside his wood carving workshop.

He was relaxing in his oak chair, smoking his favourite long-stemmed Gouda pipe, the strong tobacco smell reaching me.

As I ran towards him, he blew a chain of five grey smoke-rings. He thrust a finger through them, turning them into a fading puff of smoke before he spread his arms wide to hug me.

He gave me the reassuring embrace I was used to.

‘I have something special for you, mijn kleinzoon,’ he whispered in my ear as I sat down on the step beside him.

Reaching into a side-pocket, he withdrew a small, lacquered walnut box and handed it to me. Its sides were intricately dovetailed, the brass clasp and hinges highly polished—sure signs of his faultless workmanship.

I looked up at him. ‘Shall I open it?’

‘Of course, what else?’

I lifted the lid.

Encased in purple velvet lining lay a two-piece silver spyglass.

I carefully lifted it out, surprised at its weight. On the barrel was etched the label ‘Lippershey & Sons’ and beneath it, in barely legible print, ‘*Kalverstraat* M.Z.—*Gemaakt* in 1690’.

‘It’s a special instrument to add to your collection,’ he said. ‘Take good care of it. It will help you navigate those reefs you tell me sometimes threaten your ship. Remember, close your left eye and use your right to look through it.’

Speechless, I extended the two barrels to put the spyglass to my right eye. Before I did so, I deliberately turned it the wrong way round. I gave a burst of laughter when Opa clicked his tongue and took it from me. He reversed it and carefully aligned it once again.

‘Very funny,’ he said, smiling, before reassuring me: ‘But if by chance danger does get too close, you can look at it the other way round as you just did, to put yourself at a safe distance!’

I swept the spyglass around to inspect the apple trees and the trunks of the elms and beech trees across the road. When I focussed on the cemetery beyond them, I could almost make out the inscriptions on the mossy gravestones.

‘Is this for me to keep?’ I asked.

‘It’s yours, to help you track your papa’s voyage to Batavia and home again.’

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That evening after dinner, when I was propped up in bed beneath my polar bearskin rug and reading in the colza-oil[5] lamplight, I heard Opa tap with his walking stick on the bottom step of the ladder leading up to the trapdoor in the floor.

‘Come on up, Grandpapa,’ I called.

His face soon appeared. His sky-blue eyes were wickedly alight. As always. he gave me a broad smile. He looked like one of the silver-bearded gnomes we had in the garden—he was much taller of course, with his thinning white hair, his lean nobleman’s face and curving nose. And his back was hunched after a lifetime working at his wood carvings in the shipyard.

He was a captivating and clever storyteller I adored.

He possessed a wealth of tales and tricky parables handed down through the family. He had such a witty knack for telling them when he was in the mood, I couldn’t tear myself away and never wanted him to stop. I never had to prompt him.

He climbed into the room, limped to the chair and hoisted himself into it.

‘So, what are you reading this time?’

I closed the book, a finger between the pages, and showed him the title—*Gerrit in Nova Zembla*.

‘The book Papa gave me. I’m reading it for the second time.’

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[5] Oil from seeds of the rapeseed plant, like canola. It was used in lamps in the 17th and 18th centuries.

‘Ah, the story of Gerrit de Veer, the carpenter on Willem Barentsz’s ship. Or was he the first mate?’

‘The mate, but I like the cabin boy, Jakob.’

‘Are you enjoying it?’

‘I can’t put it down, Opa. Some words I can’t make out, but I can’t wait to read about their journey home again.’

‘It’s all true. The story’s taken from Gerrit’s diary. How far have you got? Have they built their Safe House[6] yet?’

I looked down at the enlarged print. ‘I’ve reached October 19.’

‘In 1596?’

‘Yes. The ship’s stuck in the ice. A black bear is looking for food around it. Most of the crew are in the Safe House with Willem Barentsz. Only Jakob and two sailors are on board, collecting firewood. They’ve thrown some chunks of wood at the bear, but it wasn’t scared off. It has attacked them and they’ve run for shelter. Jakob has climbed the mast and he’s hiding in the rigging.’ I looked across at him. ‘Do you remember that part?’

‘Well done, Gerrit. That’s a long way in. You’re an excellent reader.’ He smiled and held my glance. ‘It’s a pity your namesake, Gerrit, had to leave his girlfriend Catharina behind, eh?’

‘He couldn’t take her with him.’

‘Hardly. It’s no life for a girl up there in the Arctic. Better she stays home with her father, Pastor Plancius, and waits for Gerrit to return.’ He gave me a knowing chuckle. ‘I’m sure she misses him playing his flute for her.’

‘Would you read some to me?’

‘If you’d like me to, of course I will. You’re not too tired?’

I shook my head. He took the book open at the page and began reading aloud.

His gravelly voice was a growl, and I was soon half asleep. When he lowered his voice, I could barely hear him or keep my eyes open.

After several further minutes of reading, I faintly heard:

> *‘The 27 October 1596. The wind blew north-east and the snow so heavy that we could not work outdoors. That day our men shot a white fox, which they skinned, and, after roasting it, they ate thereof, which tasted like rabbit’s flesh. The same day we set up our clock, repairing the striker so that it sounded on the hour and we hung up a lamp to light our*

[6] Willem Barentzs’s ship, *the Witte Swaen*, was crushed in the ice in the Arctic in 1596 during his search for a northeast passage to Asia. He and his crew built a *behouden huis*—a safe house—from the ship’s timbers and driftwood. They survived the winter in it, on the island of Nova Zemlya. Twelve of the crew of seventeen returned to the Netherlands in a lifeboat, but Barentzs and four others died on the journey home.

nights, wherein we used the fat of a bear we killed, which we melted in the bowl of the lamp…'

Opa stopped reading. I knew he was checking to see if I was asleep, so I tightened shut my eyelids to give him the impression that I really was. It was a game we sometimes played when he was reading to me—he would end the reading with a riddle or a joke.

I was not disappointed when he continued.

'The 27 October 1696. While there was still sufficient light, I reached for the marvellous book I was then reading. It was titled Gerrit in Eendrachtsland*, a diary describing the explorations of young Gerrit de Waal in the Great South Land. When I opened it at the page I had reached, I was truly amazed to read the passage in which young Gerrit describes his Opa Laurens reading to him this entry for 27 October 1596.'*

I half-opened one eye and stifled a laugh when I saw Opa lick a forefinger and pretend to turn the page before he continued.

'I was so astonished at the coincidence I could not give credit to what I read there—an entry a century into the future to the very day. Therein, I saw the miracle of the meeting of minds across time and space, truly a thing of dreams… so much so that it seemed to me the two Gerrits had both partaken of the roasted fox at the same meal and agreed that it did indeed have the flavour of rabbit.'

Then I heard Opa close the book and murmur, 'Whereas now, *jonge*[7] Gerrit, in your case, it's lights out.'

He reached across, covered me with the polar bearskin, and then stretched to snuff out the lantern before shuffling across the floor.

As he descended, I wished him, '*Welterusten*, Opa,' in a whisper. 'Sleep well, Opa.'

'*Zoete dromen*, *mijn kleinzoon*, sweet dreams, my grandson,' he replied, as he closed the trapdoor behind him.

[7] Young