

CHAPTER ONE



BEGIJNHOF, AMSTERDAM

Thursday, 22 May 1572

Old Mariken knelt before the altar of the chapel in Begijnhof, as she had each night since receiving the letter, and prayed for guidance.

Written in an elegant hand, on fine paper, sealed with wax and a noble crest; it was her duty to answer. Yet the days had passed and still she had not replied. The words seemed to burn through her clothing, branding her skin with the hiss of calumny. A promise made thirty years ago at a deathbed in a boarding house off Kalverstraat.

'Heer, leid mij,' Mariken whispered. 'Lord, guide me.'

The author of the letter was a French cardinal, a powerful man. It would not do to refuse him. The request for information about the boy and his mother seemed harmless, couched in plain and reasonable language. There was no cause for alarm. Yet Mariken could sense a malignancy beneath the official words. She feared if she gave his Eminence what he sought, not only would she be breaking her vow to a dying woman, but she would also be signing the boy's death warrant. Such knowledge as she possessed was powerful and dangerous.

For an instant, Mariken smiled at her foolishness. If the boy still lived, then he was a man of some thirty-five years standing. Yet he was forever fixed in her memory as a child sobbing over the cold body of his mother, clasping a package given to him.

Mariken had entrusted the package to her friend, Sister Agatha, for safekeeping, intending to retrieve it and return it to the boy when the time was right. But in the passage of the years, she had forgotten about it. She never knew what was in the package, though she suspected what it might contain. A common enough story: details of a betrothal, a promise made and broken, an illegitimate birth, another woman ruined.

'Domine, exaudi orationem meum.' Lord, hear my prayer.

Mariken's words echoed loud in the empty space, too loud. Her heart stumbled and she turned from the altar, fearful of being discovered alone in the chapel at such an hour of the night. But no one lifted the latch, no one stepped into the nave.

She raised her eyes to the Cross and wondered if anyone else would remember Marta Reydon and her son. She doubted it. Most of her companions of those days were gone. Though many years had passed, she still prayed for Marta's soul. She had been a woman as ill-served in death as she had been ill-used in life.

Mariken had first made Marta's acquaintance in the alleyways around the old parish church of Sint Nicolaas, where the women who sold themselves to the sailors coming off the ships gathered. Mariken and her friend Sister Agatha, a nun from a nearby convent, had done what they could for the poor creatures.

Mariken shook her head. It was so long ago. Her memories had lost their colour. Her fist tightened around the letter concealed beneath her long plain robes. She could delay no longer. It would go ill for her if she failed to furnish the cardinal with the details he wanted – no, the confirmation of what he appeared already to know. For although the Beguines were religious women, not cloistered nuns, they, too, took a vow of obedience and service, and their community also needed protection in these lawless times. Though Amsterdam had not yet

THE CITY OF TEARS

joined the Protestant rebels, Mariken feared it was but a matter of time before the city fell. The Calvinists were gathering at the gates. Many of their Catholic sisters and brothers had already been forced from their convents and monasteries and quiet gardens, and had fled. The Mistress of Begijnhof would expect her to do her duty to the Holy Mother Church.

All the same.

When receiving the letter, Mariken had first made inquiries up towards the harbour, where information could be bought in the taverns of Zeedijk and Nieuwendijk for the right price. Then, she had turned to a powerful acquaintance on Warmoesstraat. A wealthy grain merchant, Willem van Raay was a pious man, a discreet man, a keeper of secrets. Mariken had nursed his daughter back to health some years previously, so she trusted him well enough to ask if he might have heard of a Pieter Reydon, or if there was gossip about why so eminent a French cardinal might have his gaze fixed upon Amsterdam. He had taken a letter for Reydon, to pass on if he managed to find him, and promised to investigate.

But two weeks had passed and still she had heard nothing.

Mariken accepted now the only thing was to call upon Willem van Raay in person. It was another burden on her conscience. They were forbidden to go out during the day without permission and, since she could not confide her reasons for wishing to leave the community, she would have to lie. At least by slipping out at night, she tried to persuade herself, she was avoiding that second transgression.

She had purloined the key to the outer gate earlier, though she hadn't absolutely decided to use it: not least, Mariken didn't relish the thought of being out unaccompanied in the dark streets at such an hour. But God would surely watch over her. Once she had spoken to Burgher van Raay, she would have

information enough to compose an appropriate letter to the cardinal and her conscience would be clear. The burden would be lifted from her shoulders.

Mariken crossed herself and rose slowly to her weary feet, still feeling the cold imprint of the tiles on her knees. Every single bone seemed to ache with the pain of living.

She rearranged her *falie* over her wisps of grey hair and went out into the night. It was dark in the courtyard, though a few midnight candles were burning in one or two of the wooden houses around the green. The brook babbled its night-time song between the thorn bushes. Mariken glanced up at the Mistress's window, praying she had not woken and found the key gone, and was relieved to see her window was dark.

Fearful and troubled, Mariken fumbled and dropped the key. In all her years in the community she had never disobeyed the rules in such a manner. Her old heart thumping, she finally succeeded in unlocking the gate. She stepped onto Begijnensloot and into the narrow medieval streets beyond the bridge. Mariken was so anxious that she did not observe the shadows shimmer behind her. As she crossed Kalverstraat, head bowed, she did not feel the shifting of the air. So when the blow came, pitching her forward into the Amstel, she had no time to think.

Like many Amsterdammers who lived their lives ringed by canals, Mariken could not swim. As the first mouthful of water filled her lungs, she just had time to think how glad she was that now she could not be forced to betray the trust placed in her. She was aware of a man standing on the quay watching her drown. As her heavy grey robes quickly pulled her under, Mariken prayed that the boy Pieter and his mother would, in time, be reunited in God's grace.

And that the cardinal would never know the truth.