

# THE WINDMILL'S SECRET



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# CHAPTER 1



Marie was vaguely aware of a faint acrid smell as she bent over the charcoal drawing spread before her. She was so consumed with her work, the tip of her tongue peeking out from the corner of her mouth, that she ignored the warning bells ringing in the back of her mind. As usual, her fingers were stained black from the bit of charcoal she held in her hand, and she traced the curves and angles of her project carefully. After adding some final touches, she lifted the drawing, examining it from several angles before deciding that the picture of a swan diving for a small fish in the canal was finally complete. She gave a nod of satisfaction, blinking as she became aware of the room around her.

Horror wiped the satisfaction from her face as the ashy scent of burnt flour finally registered, and she saw the smoke rising from the small woodstove in the corner.

“Oh no!” Marie blurted, a jolt of terror racing through her. She jumped up from her seat at the kitchen table, sending her chair sprawling in a loud clatter behind her. Quickly, she

covered her hand with a folded towel and pulled the bread pan out of the heat, accidentally dragging one of the fabric corners across the stove embers as she did so. Marie's eyes widened as she watched the towel ignite, the bright flash of a small flame greedily licking at the fabric in her hand.

Marie froze, frightened but also mesmerized by the spreading orange glow. Anyone who lived in a windmill was well aware of the danger posed by the smallest spark. The mill was made almost entirely of wood—the walls, floors, gears, furniture, and ladders leading to the upper levels. Even the mill's exterior was covered in a thatch of dried reeds that repelled the constant rain but burned easily.

“Oma!” Marie cried out, panic rising as heat began to seep through the towel. “Oma!” she shouted now, her voice terrified. She only hoped her grandmother could hear her.

Oma hurried into the cramped kitchen, taking in the danger with a glance. “Put it out!” Her grandmother frantically pushed Marie toward the washbasin, and in her haste, Oma touched the hot bread pan with her bare hand. The pan and the burning cloth hit the waiting water with a sizzle, extinguishing the flame.

Marie turned to see Oma's lips pressed into a thin line. She was holding the wrist of her scalded hand, palm up, with pain etched on her face. An angry red line was already forming across her wrinkled fingers where she had touched the hot bread pan. Thinking quickly, Marie lifted the soaked towel from the washbasin, noticing how the soggy, blackened bread was beginning to disintegrate. Carefully avoiding the charred section of the towel, she pressed the cloth onto Oma's hand,

unwittingly dripping water all over both of their skirts and aprons. Oma winced, unable to hold back a groan as the towel rubbed against her injured skin.

“Oh, does that hurt you even more? What can I do?” Marie asked desperately, looking around for something else that would help.

“You’ve done quite enough for now. You nearly burned down our home, you’ve soaked us both, and we have no bread to eat for dinner. Go outside while I wrap my hand and clean up this mess,” Oma ordered sternly.

Marie cringed as a hot wave of guilt filled her; she couldn’t just leave her grandmother alone and in pain! Racking her brain, she tried to remember what her mother had done when Marie had accidentally touched the hot stove as a child. A memory sparked, and she moved to the small kitchen shelf and grabbed a clay pot filled with golden liquid. “Honey!” she exclaimed, rushing over with the small pot. “Honey can help soothe burns. Here, let me put it on.” She eagerly pulled the honey spoon out of the pot, and a large, runny dollop dribbled over the rim, sliding down the side and onto the floor.

Oma sighed in exasperation. “I’ll take care of it. The kitchen garden needs weeding. *Go.*”

The short wooden door banged shut behind Marie as she fled down the narrow front path, frowning as she bit back tears.

“Close the door *gently!*” called Oma’s muffled voice from inside.

Marie frowned even more deeply, furrows forming between her brows. “I know, I know,” she muttered, hurrying toward the

garden. Frustration over her many mistakes pummeled her. The windmill behind her whooshed in its familiar way as it spun in the early evening breeze, but she barely registered the gentle sound.

Marie plopped herself down in the garden, her thoughts in turmoil as she plucked the unwelcome baby weeds that had emerged. Much of the kitchen garden was a laboratory for her grandfather's experiments with cross-pollinating new varieties of plants. Right now, the cabbages, kale, and leeks were growing. Marie's grandparents had carefully trained her to recognize what was a vegetable and what was an intrusive weed, though she still didn't always get it right. Marie was overcome with discouragement. She wondered if she would ever feel truly needed here instead of fearing she was underfoot.

The goat bleated from her shed for attention, and the chickens scratched and pecked in the yard. It was 1634, nearly six years since the bubonic plague had run through her small town in southern Holland, taking the lives of more than a third of its inhabitants. Marie's mama and papa had been among the unfortunate ones, so she and her older brother, Pieter, had come north to live in the mill with Opa and Oma, her mother's parents.

There were different types of mills in the area—industrial mills that would grind grain, crush seeds for oil and mustard, or saw logs into planks thirty times faster than a man could do by hand. Their mill was called a *poldermolen* in the Dutch language and was part of a series of water-pumping mills that drained the ever-present water from the surrounding land,

much of which lay below sea level. The rich, fertile land left behind once the water was removed was called *polder*, and it made up about a quarter of the country's landmass.

Pieter, now sixteen, had immediately fallen in love with the milling trade, apprenticing with their grandfather as soon as he turned twelve. Though he was usually quiet and serious, late one evening as they lay in their beds, Pieter explained to Marie that knowing how to harness the power of the wind thrilled his heart. "It's such an important job," he said with feeling, his dedication evident even in the darkness of the room. "Without the windmills, the water would flood much of the Dutch Republic in the blink of an eye. I love using nature to combat nature. I'm proud to play a part in holding back the sea."

Marie was now twelve years old and envied Pieter for his direction and dedication to the trade. Opa was so proud of his sidekick grandson, but Marie didn't know what she had to contribute to the family or to society.

*Cheer up, she chided herself. It was just a hard day. My art is improving. That doesn't help me much here at the mill, but one day I'll find a use for my skills.*

Continuing to pull weeds, Marie heard the soft quacks and honks coming from the ducks and geese nesting in the land along the canals that crisscrossed the fields. The birds' pleasant, contented sounds soothed Marie's frustrations, and soon she found herself humming to the whooshing beat of the long, spinning windmill arms, called sails. She realized with a start that the tune was a song her mama had often sung as she worked to spin wool into thread on the spinning wheel.

*Sarasponda, sarasponda, sarasponda ret set set.*

*Sarasponda, sarasponda, sarasponda ret set set.*

*Ah do ray oh, ah do ray boom day oh.*

*Ah do ray boom day ret set set,*

*Ah say pa say oh.*

The lyrics were meant to imitate the sounds of the spinning wheel and didn't mean anything themselves, but the cheerful tune and the sweet memory brought a smile to Marie's face. Just then, she heard the same song sailing across the fields from a distance away—a happy, whistling tune, which was a sure sign that Opa was returning from the sawmill along the dike path. Marie finished pulling the last few weeds from the patch she was working on, then dusted her hands on her skirt and went to the fence to wait for the first sight of his white hair coming over the rise.

“Marie, *mijn kind!* What a beautiful day to be gardening!” he greeted her with his boisterous voice that was slightly louder than necessary, as usual. His nickname for her had always been “my child,” and Marie still loved it, despite the fact that she was not much of a child anymore. As Opa entered the yard with several planks of wood thrown over his broad shoulder, Oma opened the door, waving a fresh kitchen towel and coughing lightly as she attempted to air out the kitchen.

“Cornelia, a lovelier sight I have not seen all day than you coming through that door,” Opa proclaimed, his face lighting up as he set down his load and spun his wife's small frame in a circle. Her dark skirt swirled, and a lock of brown hair streaked

with gray came loose as she swatted at him in protest. Then he paused and sniffed the air. “What is that terrible smell?” he asked, setting her down.

“Marie’s contribution to our dinner,” she responded dryly, tucking the loose hair back into her bun and reclaiming the wooden clog that had fallen off her foot. Marie cringed again, her brightened mood darkening once more. Opa’s loud guffaw rang through the yard, and he strode over to his granddaughter and pulled her into a hug.

“Never you mind,” he whispered in her ear, a twinkle in his eye. “You wouldn’t believe some of the meals I suffered through when we were first married.” He straightened and loudly declared, “Well then, I suppose I am a real hero today! Not only have I brought back the wood to repair the goat shed, but I also passed by the bakehouse and got two loaves of rye bread. We will feast like kings tonight! Now, where’s your brother? I’m hungry.”



Once Marie had helped clear the dinner dishes, she returned to the fenced yard next to the mill to feed and water the goat and chickens before she was asked. She wasn’t anxious to be scolded anymore today, and she figured this was the best way to help out and also give everyone some space. Quarters were cramped inside the windmill, and Marie preferred the fresh air and the wide sky anytime over the indoor chores. The wind on her face helped her feel relaxed.

Soon the sun dipped below the horizon, and the clouds were as bright and orange as the fire had been earlier, turning the

now-still windmill into a dark silhouette against the flaming sky. A slight movement caught her eye as she raked the last bit of old straw from the shed that functioned as the goat house. Along the bank of the canal, a figure was hurrying toward the mill—just a blackened outline in the setting sun. It was clearly a young man with a brimmed hat and slightly uneven steps, and he was coming closer. Marie didn't recognize him, so she stayed in the shadows of the shed as he neared, approaching the waterwheel on the westward side of the mill. She expected him to go up and knock at the door, but he suddenly stopped, glanced around, took another step, and disappeared completely.

Marie covered her mouth, muffling the gasp that was threatening to escape. *Where did he go?* She silently climbed over the fence and took a cautious step into the yard, then another. Soon she was speeding across the lawn, keeping her footsteps silent. *Has he fallen into the canal? Is he drowning?* She hadn't heard a splash, but she couldn't fathom where else he could have gone. Seconds ticked by as she searched the darkness.

With a sudden lurch, Marie's body instinctively stopped moving. She knew she was banned from going any farther on this side of the windmill; the spinning sails, churning waterwheel, and sloping land combined to create a dangerous place, and though she was getting older, she was still prohibited from the area. Breathing hard, she wasn't sure what to do, but thankfully, Pieter rounded the mill from the other side just at that moment, wrapping a length of rope around his arm as he walked. He jumped when Marie popped out of the shadows, but she didn't have time to waste on an apology.

“Pieter! There was a strange boy here; he was coming, and then suddenly, he was just gone! I don’t know where he went! He might be drowning! You have to help!” The words tumbled out in a jumbled rush as Marie grabbed hold of her brother’s arms and jumped up and down.

Concerned, Pieter furrowed his eyebrows as he put his hands on her shoulders to make her stand still. “Hold on, little sister. Slow down. Someone is drowning, you say?”

Marie nodded quickly, then shook her head. “I don’t actually know. There was someone standing right over there a few moments ago, but he has disappeared, and I don’t know what happened.”

Pieter looked over to where Marie indicated, then pointed. “You mean him?”

Marie whirled around. In the distance, striding away from the mill, was a silhouetted figure with a slight limp in his step. “That’s him! How did he get away so fast? Do you know who that is?”

Pieter peered after the boy, but it was too dark to see more than a receding outline. “I’m not too sure, but he looks completely fine to me. Your imagination is wild tonight! Perhaps you should get ready for bed and see what kind of interesting dreams you might have!” He laughed lightly, casting a glance at her over his shoulder as he hung the rope in the outbuilding, then busied himself with the rest of the nighttime preparations.

Marie stared at the spot where the boy had disappeared. She huffed a bit, frustrated that Pieter wasn’t concerned at all. Head down, she went to finish milking the goat, making sure the

gate was shut and all the animals were securely in their shelters before she went inside. She was embarrassed that she had overreacted in front of Pieter, but as she climbed the ladder to her bed on the third level of the mill, a thought struck her. *That young man obviously hadn't drowned, but where had he gone? And what was he doing here in the first place?*

# THE WINDMILL'S SECRET

Marie lives in a Dutch windmill with her eclectic grandfather, her stern grandmother, and her hardworking brother. Despite her scenic surroundings, Marie struggles to figure out what she has to contribute. When a disastrous mistake affects the whole family and forces them to move to the big city of Amsterdam, Marie must take a deep look at herself and decide who she wants to be. With the help of her grandparents, a mysterious boy, an unkind cousin, and a charitable artist, Marie learns the importance of helping others, telling the truth, and extending forgiveness.



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