

ONE/ The Missing Clothes

Saskia came to an abrupt halt just before the reeds at the edge of the frozen wetlands. She took off her skates, pushed through the reeds to the shrubs lining the wetlands, and reached between the leafless branches of the alder shrub where she had left her town clothes before setting out on her skates to skim the shiny black ice. But her probing fingers met only with alder branches and twigs.

Again she felt for the softness of her velvet winter cloak. But surely, her clothes had to be here, the blue cloak, wrapped around her linen petticoat and woolen gown, firmly lodged in the fork of two branches. And yet, they had inexplicably vanished.

"Spioen, come here and sit!" She touched the dog's nose to the rim of her fur-lined boot. "Take a deep breath, and remember the scent! Now, try finding my clothes! Go, seek!"

At a wave of her hand, the duck spaniel trundled off, halfheartedly, poking around in the shrubs before he returned to sit down by her feet, puzzled, wagging his tail, *'what, what?'*

Saskia made an effort not to panic, glancing at the clothes she was wearing, scruffy men's breeches—cast offs surrendered by Rindert, her older brother, for her to use on skating adventures. Men's clothes were more suited to skating than long, cumbersome skirts.

Deeply uneasy, Saskia searched through the alder bush one more time, scanning her surroundings. The tangle of alder branches kept her from seeing the distant palisade wall around New Amsterdam, her new hometown on the tip of Manhattan. Those alders would prevent the guards at the town gate seeing anything happening here in the wetlands.

Never mind her town clothes. It was time to return to the security inside the palisade. What had she been thinking this morning,

going here by herself for a long, solitary skate?

Granted, the time she had spent navigating meandering ice lanes in the frozen wetlands between walls of whispering reeds, had blown her head clear of worries, though not for long. Since their arrival last summer from Amsterdam, an ocean away from this small town on the tip of Manhattan, worries over the future of their small family of three had been mounting.

And today, she cringed at the thought of walking through the streets of New Amsterdam, dressed in shabby men's clothes. What could be better to send tongues wagging, than a young girl wearing men's breeches, marching by in the street?

'Did you see that Saskia girl going by in oversized men's clothes?'

It would add yet more fuel to the gossip circulating through town since their arrival. 'What on earth made them come here to the wilds of Manhattan, a young well-to-do couple from a prominent Amsterdam family? And why, I ask you, would a pair of newly weds be towing that young man's little sister along?'

Saskia straightened her shoulders. "Come, Spioen, we're going home!"

She took the narrow cow path leading through largely cleared woodland back to the town gate. Some of the land served as a commons pasture to graze livestock. Close up to the gate were fenced plots for vegetable growing, though most people grew what they needed in kitchen gardens behind their homes inside the palisade. Much of the land outside town, after decades of lumber and firewood cutting, lay desolate, littered with waste wood, shrubs and rotting tree stumps. A few ancient elms had been spared from the axe, large trees that couldn't be easily cut down and hauled away.

Saskia paused before a lone, ancient elm tree. Awed, she looked up to the majestic canopy of intertwined branches overhead, until she became aware of the eerie silence around her.

"Spi-oe-oen, where are you? "There was no sign of the dog.

“What’re you up to now? Chasing rabbits?”

Startled by an eruption of frantic barking, she peered into the shrubs by the side of the trail, waiting and listening, hoping for another sound from her dog. Could he have run into a bear? But how could that be, in the middle of winter, when bears supposedly were asleep? Regular brown bears, wild living cousins of the familiar Muscovy *bruins*, dancing bears seen performing on Amsterdam fairgrounds slept all through the winter in their Russian homeland, according to their gypsy owners. But here on Manhattan, wild bears appeared to look different from the captive *bruins* seen in Amsterdam. All bearskin rugs offered for sale in New Amsterdam were shiny black with contrasting snouts the color of coffee with cream. Maybe Manhattan bears were of a different kind than their Russian cousins. Maybe they, unlike regular browns, were not given to sleeping the winters away?

She inched further along the trail. The dog had stopped barking. She stood still, calling again, listening closely to the disturbing sounds up ahead, the anxious whimpering of a dog in trouble. Saskia clasped her skates by the leather straps and rushed forward, skating pole raised, sending her skates wheeling like windmill wings going berserk in a storm. Around the bend she pulled to a halt—face-to-face with a tall, dark-skinned lad clutching Spioen in his arms.

Saskia breathed relief. Next, she burst into laughter.

The dark boy looked like a fairground jester, decked out in her missing gown, cream-colored petticoat and blue cloak trimmed with rabbit fur—all much too small for him.

“Niango!” she snickered, stifling another fit of laughter. “Have you gone out of your mind? Put that dog down, or I’ll tell the overseer. You’ll be in big trouble!”