
The Love Of Money

by

Lesley Broster Kinch

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About the Author

Lesley Broster Kinch worked at The Times and The Sunday Times Newspapers and in the Press and Promotion Departments of Polydor Records, Rocket Records and Virgin Records.

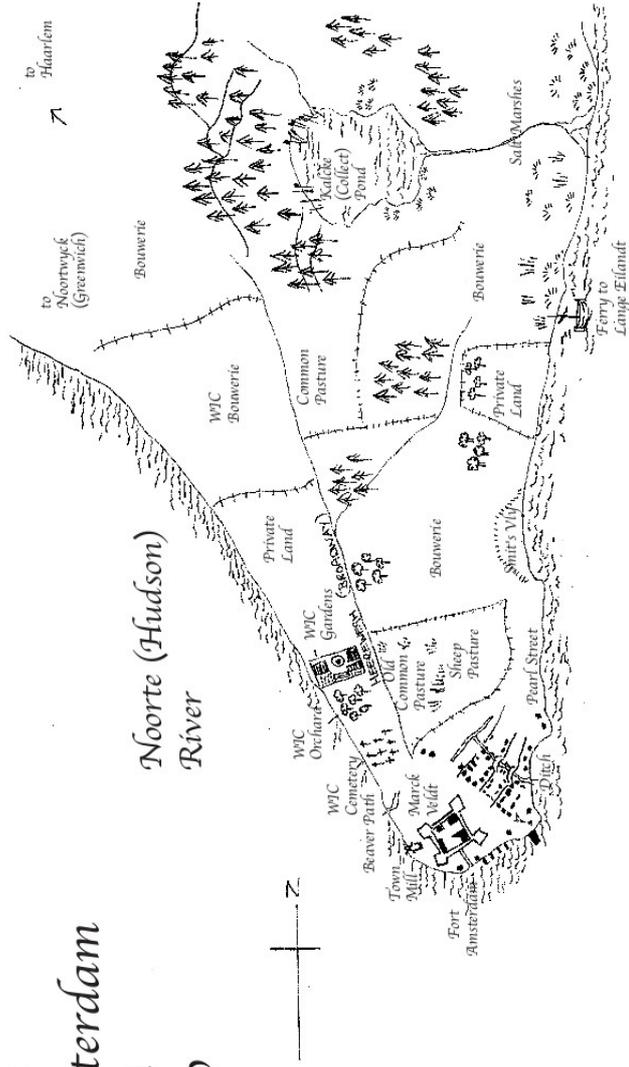
Author's Notes

The author was inspired to write *The Love Of Money* after seeing a simple woodcut image of Wall Street in 1653. After ten years of research and writing, the first book is now completed. There are scenes in *The Love Of Money* that some gentlefolk may find upsetting. The Seventeenth Century was a brutal period in history on many fronts and the author's writing reflects this. The author has also chosen to write this in the modern idiom, mainly for ease of reading, but also because there were more than eighteen different languages spoken in Manhattan at that time. The characters are fictional, as is the story, but there are references to historical figures of the time; Willem Kieft and Pieter Stuyvesant. Both held the post of Director General of the West India Company in New Amsterdam/New York.

“For The Love Of Money is the Root Of All Evil”

1 Timothy 6:10
(King James Version)

New
Amsterdam
circa
1640



October 1643
Amsterdam

His memory of two days ago he realised was not entirely clear, it was a series of staccato moments. Although the morning had been cold, he'd not been aware of it as he followed the girl to their rendezvous.

Every so often, he noticed, she would stop to make sure he was still following. Why did she have to be so blatant about it in public, touching her breast and licking her lips, goading him? It irritated him, but the frisson of the game and the anticipation made it worthwhile.

The maid had been teasing him for weeks: posing on the top of the stairs to the servants' quarters with her skirts exposing her thighs, stooping to pick up imaginary objects from the floor in front of him. The passably pretty housemaid exuded an animal magnetism that he found difficult to ignore; the slightest smell of her musky body odour sent him to the privacy of his bedroom.

The neglected wood ran parallel to Amsterdam's main highway a mile or so beyond the city walls. He watched as she tried to find a suitable place to enter the undergrowth, not easy as it was thick with brambles and tangled ivy. A gap between two skinny trees provided an ideal opening. He chuckled as he pursued her, a confident hunter closing in on his quarry, but his humour soon evaporated as the thorny bushes tore at his face and exposed hands.

He emerged into a clearing and saw the maid straddling a fallen tree trunk, skirts above her knees, her hands clasping her breasts. His only sexual experiences had been with city whores, flashes of female flesh blurred by alcohol, vague vignettes of weighty breasts, painted faces and failed erections. Confronting this sight in chilly daylight and sober was both intimidating and exhilarating.

He found it difficult now, on reflection, to pinpoint the exact

point at which he lost physical and mental control of himself. Her pretty talk, as he caressed her neck, turned to ear-splitting shrieks of objection as he placed a hand over one breast and squeezed hard. Her cries ignited a fuse in him and he felled her to the ground slapping a hand across her mouth to silence her. She fought him as he ripped apart her fragile bodice and exposed her childish breasts. She kicked out with her legs as his hand found the unexpected softness between her legs. He felt the heat of her fiery punches to his cheek and jaw as he ripped through her maidenhead and rode his hot spasms of orgasm. His final, physical relief came in the violent struggle to break her neck. An exquisite climax.

Hiding her body was done in a haze of heated after glow, the uppermost thought in his head was the craving for more.

With his adrenaline rush quickly subsiding Jan felt a strong urge to go to ground. He had to get back home. He edged towards the perimeter of the copse, before crouching motionless, listening for any sounds of life from the road. Across the track one of Holland's many areas of water-drained flatlands, known as polders, stretched away smoothly into the distance. He stilled his breathing as a cart rattled by, passing very close to where he was hidden. He recognised it as belonging to Thys van Dyk, a local farmer who supplied fresh produce for his father's table. Hemp sacks bulging with root vegetables and corn piled high on the creaky vehicle suggested he was on his way to one of the many open markets in Amsterdam.

He waited until the old horse had drawn the farmer past the wood. He glanced backwards. Whatever had happened today, the local wildlife would soon obliterate the damning evidence. He smiled as he forced his way out through the bushes and onto the road.

Straightening up, he started to brush the debris from his breeches, only then to realise that the farmer had halted his horse a few yards away and was bending down to attend to a wheel spoke that had split. How had he missed hearing this? The nag snorted and the farmer turned his gaze upwards to the young man. Jan strolled as casually as he could towards the cart.

"Afternoon, Master Jan, now where'd you come from? And

what's a fine young man like you doing outside the city's limits on your own? There's all those banished devils, thieves and vagabonds out here."

"And murdering bastards like me!" thought Jan. He suppressed a smirk. "Good day to you, Menheer van Dyk," Jan replied. "Thank you for your concern. I'll be getting home now." He bowed his head curtly.

The farmer squinted at him. "Have you been set about? That graze looks painful."

Jan touched his bruised and scuffed cheek. It felt sticky to the touch and stung like mad. "No, I didn't see a branch, that's all," he offered.

The farmer nodded, finished binding the spoke, climbed aboard and passed on his way with a short wave and a flick of the reins.

Jan watched as the cart and its load disappeared into the distance. Crossing the dirt track he stooped down beside the waters of the polder and gingerly sluiced his knuckles and face. He used a handful of coarse grass to rub dirt from his hands. The gentle lapping sounds of the water soothed his throbbing head. He took in a long, salty breath, closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. Damn that farmer. Jan listened again for sounds, any sounds to fear. There were none save for the wind rustling in the reeds and the pulse of constantly rolling ripples. It was time to go before anyone else chanced upon him.

The trek back to the city was frustratingly slow; the deep ruts and holes from countless cartwheels and cattle hooves provided a danger of twisted and broken ankles for the incautious traveler.

Jan's thoughts turned to what he was about to face at home. There was no guilt in his mind about taking life. The only thing that rankled was the thought of having to swallow his pride and confess all to his father.

For most of his seventeen years his merchantman father, Willem Van Der Linde, had spoiled Jan. His mother, Elsa, had died in childbirth. She had been the daughter of a wealthy trader, who had disapproved of her union with the socially inferior Van Der Linde.

A tall youth, he had inherited much of his good looks from his mother: his curly, ebony hair, shoulder length and thick, his straight nose with a slight upturn, sensuous lips, sadly marred by

a crookedness that gave a sneer to his expression. Only the intense shot of chill from the cold blue eyes belied his careless, almost foppish outward manner.

His character came from his father: selfish, ruthless and lacking in any emotional sensibilities. Jan had been a keen observer of his father's callous manipulation of affairs, not only in business, but also in personal matters. He bore a grudging respect for the way in which his father outwitted and outmanoeuvred fellow traders, twisted the loyalty of friends to his own ends and sucked the passion and fire from his numerous lovers. No one complained because the old man held such sway with those that mattered, that bringing a charge was pointless and potentially suicidal.

From a young age he had accompanied his father to the bustling Commodity Exchange in Amsterdam's financial heart. A rectangular stone building surrounding a courtyard, it attracted all who wanted to trade freely, regardless of nationality or religion. Around the huge courtyard, with its colonnaded arches supporting the upper rooms, all manner of merchants, gaudily dressed in rich red and gold brocades, and traders, similarly clothed in velvets and silks, topped with flamboyant hats swathed in ostrich feathers, mingled and talked business.

As an influential member of the elite Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company, Willem Van Der Linde was both respected and feared.

Although the morning had dawned bright and sunny, rain clouds were now pushing in across the marshlands. Arrow-headed flocks of migratory birds fled the on-coming storm. The coarse, tall grasses of the dunes swayed and shivered in the freshening breeze.

"That's all I need," muttered the youth. Pulling his black linen cape about his shoulders, he hurried his pace as he approached the city boundary. The polygonal Regulierspoort came into view just as a few, chill spots of rain assaulted him.

The wooden gate was part of the old medieval stone city wall, its grey slate roof supporting a clock tower and steeple with an openwork orb. Jan noted that the time was just after two in the afternoon, but it seemed dark enough to be early evening.

Huddling into his now sodden cape, he entered the city, turning then to hurry alongside the Rokin, the waterway that had been

formed when the River Amstel had been dammed several centuries earlier.

The soaking squall added to his feeling of irritation and discomfort, but he was also grateful that the storm had prevented his father's friends congregating in Dam Square where they exchanged trade gossip on a daily basis.

He hurried past the fourteenth century Nieuwe Kerk, which stood at the corner of the square and moved briskly over two canals and a sluice gate that straddled the Singel canal.

His father's house was situated on Herensgracht, a newly built canal. Amsterdam's recent expansion had seen the building of three new canal rings and it was a matter of social standing to own one of the grand mansions situated along these new waterways; wealthy merchants, city officials and businessmen had flocked to acquire plots. It was, therefore, a matter of no surprise when Willem Van Der Linde had purchased the largest, most prized house in Herensgracht.

Outside the Van Der Linde home, Jan paused. The downpour was not letting up, but he didn't want to face his father, not yet, he needed a few more moments to compose himself. This was going to be a little harder to explain than his previous misdemeanours. He had lived in the warm and secure knowledge that his father's sole weakness was himself, his precious son and heir, and that his father would move heaven and earth itself to protect him.

When Willem Van Der Linde had used his elevated office as a senior City Magistrate on Jan's behalf, compromising both his position and reputation, it was something Jan took for granted. As for thinking through the consequences of his actions, that had never occurred to him. Why bother when the old man always dealt with it?

He looked upward at the vast maroon brick and cream stone façade of the family mansion. A flamboyant step gable, with marble obelisks and scrollwork, towered above the elegant, double-fronted house. Beside the magnificent, wooden door was a discreet, white porcelain plaque bearing a brilliant, blood-red tulip. Jan hadn't really taken any notice of it before and he grinned as he suddenly appreciated the spite behind that symbol. Time to face the music.

October 1643
Alkmaar

Marc Storm added a final flourish of vermilion to the illuminated letter on the penultimate page of the renovated manuscript. Around him, in the hushed grandeur of the Church of St. Lauren's, dedicated craftsmen worked on the magnificent Great Organ that dominated the interior of the gothic church of Alkmaar.

A settlement of 60,000 guilders, awarded to the people of Alkmaar as compensation for lands misappropriated by the neighbouring town of Haarlem, had been given to the church for the construction of a new organ.

Work had begun in 1638 and, although it meant years of disruption and unwelcome dirt in his splendid church, for Bishop Corlies it would be worth it. He saw this as a time of blessed renewal and growth. His life in the service of his Lord was rewarding: his congregation comprised hard-working, God-fearing folk and his church was undergoing a miraculous transformation that would serve generations to come. Yes, he was indeed blessed.

Aside from his faith, his other great passion was the collection of ancient books and manuscripts, kept under lock and key in the church's underground vaults. Many of them were frail and tattered and in need of careful restoration. For this, the bishop had looked to one among his flock, a young man who had shown an unusual talent when it came to language, numeracy and illustration. He had taken him under his wing as a five-year old when he had drawn a remarkable likeness of the Church. Marc Storm was now seventeen.

Three years had passed since the bishop had given the precious manuscripts to Marc and now their restoration was close to completion.

October's early unpleasantness continued with sharp frosts and cold sunshine. The remnants of a punishing snowstorm earlier in

the month were slow to lessen their legacy of freezing temperatures and frozen earth. Craftsmen working within the confines of the church layered on clothing, clapped their hands and stamped their feet to combat the paralysing chill. Threadbare light from the dominant, arched windows of the building meant that Marc had to work on the manuscript surrounded by dozens of flickering candles, their light-distorting movements making his work heavy going.

Marc felt a familiar burning sensation stab through his wrist and knew he had to rest it. Putting down his quill, he spread out his fingers to relieve the tension and as he did so he leaned forward to inspect his initial character. Content with it he sat back and closed his eyes. A slight sound behind him made him start. Marc swung his head around.

“Piet, you made me jump,” said Marc, slapping his palm against his chest.

“Marc, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you.” The stout, lumpen youth said in apology, his lisping voice hushed and as soft as moth wings flapping.

“Please, don’t apologise, Piet, I was taking a break anyway,” said Marc, patting the stonemason’s arm.

Piet Van Dyk craned his neck to get a better look at Marc’s work.

“It’s so beautiful, you are surely blessed by our Lord.”

“I’ve seen your statuary remember and we have *both* been blessed by God’s Grace.”

Piet flushed at the compliment. “How long will it take you to finish that page?”

Marc looked back at his work. “Another couple of days, maybe less.” He got to his feet, stretched his arms to relieve the cramping across his shoulders. He stood a good head-height taller than the mason and seemed as whippy as a willow sapling beside Piet’s ample girth.

“How’s your cherub coming along?” asked Marc. He had seen the unhewn chunk of rock before Piet had taken his chisel to it and had marvelled at how the angelic creature had risen from the rough stone as Piet had chipped away at it. He saw a beam of happiness flood Piet’s face as he felt his hand being taken.

“Come and see for yourself. I had some good advice from Stonemason Wouter,” said Piet, grinning and revealing two

dimples sunk into his cheeks. He drew Marc towards a shrouded mound and withdrew the cloth.

Marc gasped as he saw the cherub's face. "It's me, Piet, I can't believe it, it's me!"

Piet's hands flew to his face in dismay. "Don't you like it?"

Marc was looking at his own image in creamy stone.

Once a short, chubby boy with a face spattered in unsightly spots and rat-tailed hair, his reflection in the small, distorted mirror in his cell now showed an oval, blemish-free face that was balanced in classical proportion, a tall forehead atop a straight nose, his lips full and curved above a proud chin. His shoulder-length flaxen hair was fired through with gold and his green eyes glowed.

The cherub beamed at him. Marc touched his friend's shoulder. "Of course, I like it, Piet, it's beautiful." He let his hand glide over the cool stone, a smooth surface with undulating curves that touched his soul. "I can't imagine how I'd begin to do something like this." He shook his head in wonderment.

Back at his table he continued with his work oblivious to the clanging hammers on metal, the thumping of axes on wood and the endless tap-tapping of chisels against stone and marble.

Marc took a break for soup at midday and it was only when he needed to rest his arm again that he realised that most of the workmen had left for the day and he was cold and stiff. Silver moonlight outshone the candles and cast a soft glow over the new metal of the organ. A few yards away Piet was using a soft rag to remove dust from an emergent stone cherub.

"I'm finished for the day," said Marc, stretching his arms towards the ceiling and yawning.

"Me, too," said Piet. He rose off his stool, covered his statuette with a cloth and hefted a canvas bag containing his precious tools onto his shoulder. "I'll come back to the house with you, just let me get the lantern."

The sacristan was dousing candles and securing the church for the night as they left. The evening air was sharp and the sky bare but for some scrappy fronds of charcoal cloud trailing across a gibbous moon. Piet had hurried ahead of Marc eager to be out of the icy atmosphere and tucked up in the warmth of his bed. He held the lantern at shoulder height and as he waddled, it swung

back and forth stretching and contracting the shadows of the night.

Marc saw the sneak thief unfold from gloomy shrubs bordering the path and launch itself at Piet. Off balance, Piet pitched forward, falling in a cascade of arms, legs and woolen clothes. Marc watched as the pale hands of the attacker darted in and out of the stonemason's cloak, picking and probing for valuables.

Finding nothing of value the thief upended Piet's bag of hammers and chisels, saw they were only workman's tools and swore. "Bastard! Where's your gold, priest?" The robber was on top of Piet and had hold of the neck of his tunic, shaking him. "Where is it, you bastard?"

Marc threw himself at the attacker, the momentum slamming them both to the ground.

The robber was winded and lying on his back. Marc straddled the thief, not knowing what to do next, but sure that he wasn't going to let the villain escape.

"Bastard." The robber sniffled from behind arms crossed over his face.

Marc gasped at the sound of the voice. He knew who was trapped beneath him. He knew this boy. He looked at Piet and was relieved to see that he was rummaging around trying to gather his scattered tools.

"Are you all right, Piet?" Marc asked.

The stonemason coughed to find his voice. Cloudy plumes escaped from between his lips as the freezing air transformed his breath into vapour. He clambered to his feet. "Yes, I'm okay." He nodded at the prone figure beneath Marc. "Do you know who is it?"

"I think so, but I hope I'm wrong," said Marc. He hooked apart the robber's arms and saw below him the ferret-like face of a boy around six or seven years old. Pale branches of tear tracks ran between caked on dirt and a thousand pimples. Greasy hair framed sunken eyes that looked back at Marc with the feral fear of a trapped animal.

Marc's heart sank. "Adriaen, Adriaen de Grood. So it is you." He sighed and recrossed the arms, as if trying to hide a sad truth. "Why, Adriaen?" Shivering for many reasons: freezing temperature, physical shock and recognition of a robber, Marc sat

for a moment, then got to his feet. He grabbed Adriaen's arms and hauled him up. "Come on, Adriaen, let's get into the warm. We need to speak to the bishop about this."

The boy stood before them, a silent statue. Pulled closely about his body was a grey, threadbare cloak with a deep cowl, his facial features obscured by its shadow.

The bishop listened for most of Marc's account with an impassive face, but Marc saw a brief shadow of dismay cross his face as he learned the sneak thief's name.

"Paulus de Grood's son, Adriaen?" he said. "No, it can't be, he's a good boy, you're mistaken." The bishop reached out to pull back the boy's hood for confirmation, but the child recoiled. "Don't be afraid, I mean you no harm."

Marc stepped forward and put a reassuring hand on Adriaen's shoulders. A shudder caught him as he felt cold bones. The boy drew back his cowl to reveal himself.

"I know you must have an explanation for this, Adriaen." The bishop steered him towards the simmering fire while Piet placed a chair behind him. "Please tell us everything and we'll see what we can do to help."

The bishop went in search of a jug of warmed spiced ale and a dish of cold meats. Ten minutes later Adriaen spoke.

"Mamma's so ill, sirs, I know you has lots of money, I seen inside your church. It's got gold and silver and an organ, misters. Healer won't see mamma until she pay her." He sobbed.

Marc looked between the bishop and the shivering boy. "A healer won't tend to your sick mother?" He felt his stomach turn with revulsion. "Adriaen, tell us what's wrong with your mamma."

There was silence as they listened to the harrowing tale of Anna de Grood's agony and despair in the grip of a prolonged labor, her baby already overdue by days. A local cunning woman had given herbs and tinctures while the family could scrape together the money needed, but that had run dry a few days earlier.

"I took bread from Menheer Beeker and small beer from Menheer van der Veen's tap room."

The bishop raised his eyebrows at this confession, but spoke gently, "Well, you will need to apologise to them both and offer to work in exchange for what you took. Do you understand me?"

Adriaen nodded. "Yes, sir, I know it was wrong of me to steal,

I'm sorry." His contrition was evident.

The bishop rose to his feet and indicated that Adriaen should do so too. "We must think of your mamma now, Adriaen. She's probably worried sick about you and where you might be."

Gathering some bread and cold mutton soup from the kitchen and armed with a large flagon of cider from the bishop's pantry, they hurried to the boy's home, a lean-to beside the town's walls. On seeing the distressed state of Anna de Grood, Marc dispatched Piet to the home of physician, Dr. Herrman, a man well versed in the body's humours and anatomy. His advice on how to manage a difficult birth would be invaluable. An hour later the de Grood family fortunes began to change for the better. As they left the family's hovel in the early hours of the morning the bishop pressed the coin bag into Adriaen's hand.

"Please don't steal, Adriaen, if you need help, come and find me."

Back at the bishop's residence and settled into padded chairs with blankets about their shoulders and a hot nightcap in hands Marc, Piet and Bishop Corlies finished their discussion of the night's events. Marc noted that the bishop had steepled his fingers before his nose, a particular idiosyncrasy of his before asking a question. "Marc, Piet, do either of you feel inclined to report this incident to the sheriff, bearing in mind that a crime has been committed in the church's grounds and that you two were the victims?"

The two apprentices glanced at each other. Piet shrugged and looked confused, while Marc was taken aback by the idea.

"Tell the sheriff? No, no, Bishop, that would be wrong," he said. He slapped his palms down on the chairs arms making Piet jump a little.

"You feel strongly about this then, young Marc?" asked the bishop.

"I do!" said Marc. He had leaned forward in his chair with his hands still on its arms and chin thrust forward. He couldn't allow anything like that to happen to someone who was really only a victim, could he?

Piet broke his silence. "Why, Marc? He could have hurt us badly."

"I know Piet, and that would have been terrible, but what good would it do the de Grood family to lose Adriaen to prison or

worse? It would add untold hardship to an already suffering mother. Look, Adriaen was only trying to help his mamma, not steal for himself.” He was adamant that his opinion was fair and was relieved to see Piet nod his agreement. He looked to the bishop. “Surely that’s what matters most, isn’t it, sir?”

He waited as the bishop considered his question. “Sometimes we must use our own judgment. There will be many times in your life, Marc, when you will have to balance right, wrong, compassion and justice. It’s not necessarily as straightforward as you might think, but, in this instance, your judgment is sound and I agree with you.”

October 1643
Amsterdam

Jan walked down the narrow alleyway towards the back of the house. Smells of cooking and animated chatter from the kitchen staff reminded him that his father was entertaining some of the West India Company officials. It was a celebration of yet more immense profits made in the New World.

There had been many stories of the fabulous fortunes to be had from this new land, but reports of savages massacring the settlers, of disease, famine and deprivation, had labeled it, in Jan's mind, a place to be avoided at all costs. He made his way through the house to the enormous vestibule that spanned the mansion's front.

"Good afternoon, Master Jan," said a grave voice. He spun around to find the butler peering at him solemnly. "I notice that you are not only injured, but very wet, sir. Might I suggest that you go and ask Housekeeper to tend to your face, then dry yourself before you become ill? Your father will be pleased to see you presently in the dining room." The senior servant bowed his head slightly and started to leave.

"Don't you *dare* tell me what to do, you lowlife scum!" Jan hissed. "Tell my father I want to see him now! In his study!"

"With all due respect, Sir, I really don't think he'll be at all pleased to be disturbed. He's in the middle of a game of cards with Menheer Winter. You know how cross he'll get to be interrupted during a game with that man!" emphasised the butler.

"I don't care about a pathetic game of cards! Just damn well do as you're fucking told! Tell my father I want to speak with him - NOW!" he yelled, turning on his heel and marching across the black and white tiled hall towards his father's study.

On entering, Jan pulled at the nearest chair and settled it in front of the wide stone fireplace. He removed his sodden cape, dropping it on the floor before slumping into the chair. The heat

from the glowing fire began to seep into his body, warming his frozen hands and feet.

The book-lined study was his father's asylum, a place for quiet thought and political scheming. It was Van der Linde's lair from which he ran his trading empire with the occasional sortie to savage some poor, unsuspecting opponent. It was a place into which whole men entered and desiccated ghosts departed. The room itself, furnished in the dark, heavy, medieval-Gothic style, was reminiscent of its master: implacable, indestructible and unyielding.

It was not a room in which Jan had ever relaxed, but he was too tired and too cold to care right now. He was fast asleep when his father stormed through the door, slamming it shut behind him.

"How dare you! Who the hell d'you think you are? Demanding to see me when I'm entertaining guests! How dare you put Kroes in a position like that! He's a senior member of my household and I will not have you treating him like that!"

Willem Van Der Linde was livid. His burgundy velvet doublet, trimmed with gold latticework, strained across his powerfully built upper body. He was rigid with rage, his fists clenched and his face purple-puffed. A thick vein throbbed over the thick ridges of his forehead stopping just short of unruly grey eyebrows that curled down over his black eyes. His snarl exposed decayed teeth, ragged and brown like the fangs of a feral dog. "And I was winning against that bloody Prussian!" he hissed at his son, who was now fully awake. "This had better be good, boy!"

"I'll speak to Kroes as I see fit." Jan couldn't keep the sneering tone out of voice." As far as I'm concerned he is just a glorified lackey."

"A what? God! There really is no hope for you, is there?" Van Der Linde was rapidly losing his steam and began calmly studying his son. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Jan. It really doesn't reflect well on the way I've brought you up. If only your mother...ah, well. So, what's it this time? What's so important that I've got to be dragged away from my game?" He looked more closely at his son. Seizing Jan's chin, he inspected the wounds. "What've you done to your face? Don't tell me you've been in another bloody brawl. The only time I see you is when you need my help."

Jan pushed himself up from his chair a sharp, aching stiffness ripping through his muscles as he did so, and stood face to face with the older man.

“No, not another brawl. Well... no, not really...”

“Get to the point, will you? I’ve got a game to win,” interrupted his father impatiently.

“All right,” snapped Jan. “I killed someone today. Is that ‘to the point’ enough for you?”

Willem stood unnaturally stiff and silent. He turned his back on his son and walked slowly to his desk. Sinking into the padded leather chair behind it, he lowered his eyes and focused, unblinkingly, on the clasped hands in his lap for several, uncomfortable minutes.

“Jesus Christ!” He exhaled one long breath. “Well, I have to say it doesn’t surprise me. I always knew something like this would happen one day.” Van Der Linde was muttering almost to himself. It made Jan jump when his father’s head suddenly snapped up. “Were there any witnesses?”

“No.” Jan was beginning to feel unsettled. Why hadn’t his father thrown his arms about him like he always did, reassuring him, telling him that everything was going to be all right? It was unlike his father to be so distant.

“No witnesses then?” said Van Der Linde, his narrowing eyes boring into Jan’s. “So, that just leaves us with the one murder victim, right? And who was that?”

“Oh, just a servant. She worked here,” said Jan, with a dismissive shrug of his shoulders

“Just a servant and she worked here,” his father mimicked. “Oh, I see. So the fact that she was ‘just a servant’ makes it all right, does it? Does she have a name?”

“I don’t remember, it wasn’t important.”

“God! This just gets so much better, doesn’t it! So the fact that she worked here wouldn’t implicate someone in this household, now would it?” The sarcastically rhetorical question was delivered dripping with bile. “So how is it that a female servant was such a threat to you that you had no choice but to murder her?”

Jan flinched. ‘Murder’ was such a brutal word. “I got carried away. She did things that ladies wouldn’t do, if you see what I

mean.”

“You mean sex, is that it, Jan? Sex?” said his father. His disgust was clearly evident.

“Yes, I suppose so, but it got out of hand.”

“These things do.” He got to his feet and walked towards Jan. Raising his hand he slapped him harshly across his injured cheek. “If I’d done that to you every time you’d committed a crime, then we wouldn’t be having this conversation now. Some of this has to be my fault, I know that, but I’m not going to allow it to ruin me.”

Holding his stinging cheek, Jan was stunned into silence. His father had never lifted his hand to him, never. Anger began to well up in him as the wounds from his fight began to leak a fine line of pale blood. “But it was you who taught me that a man should stand up against an enemy and defend himself. A matter of honour, you said. Be a man.”

“Be a man!” shrieked his father. “Dear God! A matter of honour? Defending yourself against a girl? I didn’t mean that! Do not put the blame for this on me! Even if it was done in self-defence, which I very much doubt, there’s no way you can escape the law if you stay here.”

Willem Van Der Linde studied his son for a moment. “You realise that I can’t do anything to help you with this. No! Not can’t, I won’t! Your past behaviour has been disgraceful, but nothing like this. Murder is something I won’t condone. Besides, even with my position as magistrate, there’d be nothing I could do if any of this came to light and I really can’t risk that happening.” He marched up and down the length of his study, stroking his chin in deep thought.

After a long silence, Van Der Linde exhaled and lowered his shoulders in resignation.

“You are my only son and heir, Jan, and it’s my hope that one day you will inherit my businesses, but for now I’ve no choice other than to get you away from here, as far away as possible. Even New Amsterdam may not be far enough, but at least life there will make you understand why there are rules that govern civilised behaviour. If you stay here there’ll be something, someday, that’ll give you away. Then you’ll be tried and possibly executed. I can’t have that.” He shook his head and looked away

into the fire. Then almost to himself, he muttered. "It'll affect me, my business, my reputation. No, I can't even think about that! Your exile wouldn't have to last more than a couple of years, five at most."

"Five years? How can you even think about sending me away?" He knew he sounded pathetic, but Jan could feel the panic rising up through his legs. "Can't I go to France or Italy? At least I'd be closer to you, wouldn't I? How could I survive, on my own, in a place like New Amsterdam? You've told me about it, remember? And the journey over there — that would kill me before I even got there."

Willem snorted in disgust. "Dear God! You're a disgrace! Maybe this is a blessing in disguise. You're a lazy, spoilt, snivelling coward. This is my fault and I've got to put it right. You will go to the New World," he paused. "But you won't be going alone. I intend sending Anton Smit with you to be your guardian."

"That slimy weasel. He hates me!"

"For God's sake! Grow up, will you! Anton is a far greater man than you'll ever be. You disgust me!" He prodded Jan's chest with a stubby forefinger. "You'd do well to study him and learn from him. It might be the only way you'll survive over there. Now, tell me, are you quite sure there were no witnesses to your stupidity?" He fixed his son with hard, black eyes.

"Yes, quite sure!" Jan glared back at his father.

A sharp rapping at the door startled them both. In walked a florid faced, portly man. "Ach, so here you are hiding!" His strong Prussian accent rankled on Van Der Linde.

"I'm not hiding, I have some urgent business with my son here. I'll be with you shortly," snapped his host.

"I shall be waiting. Please don't be too long, I have a long journey tonight and must leave within the hour." He swung sharply around on his heel and left the room.

"Insufferable arse!" swore Van Der Linde. "Now, where were we? Ah yes, I remember - Anton!"

Willem strode to the door, opened it and bellowed for Kroes.

Kroes appeared instantly at the study door. "Yes, Sir?"

"I need a porter to fetch Menheer Smit as soon as possible. Make sure he understands that this is of the utmost urgency. Thank you, Kroes." He dismissed his butler.

“Perhaps you should get back to your guests, Father. I’ve got to go and get out of these wet clothes.” Jan turned to leave.

“Of course, but one thing, Jan,” his father’s voice was menacing and soft, “just make sure that you are here when Anton arrives, I really don’t think you’d like the consequences if you weren’t.” He strode out of the study.

It hadn’t gone well, thought Jan, not well at all. He had over-estimated the level of his father’s unconditional love for him and he was now reeling from the realisation that his future was uncertain and that, whatever it was, it was definitely not going to be pleasant.

Anton Smit was a slight man. His clipped manner and precise habits were honed through years of self-discipline. Smit’s clothes were custom made, his dark beard triangular and his speech slow and considered. This demeanour, however, hid a man of courage, adventure and steel. He had undertaken scores of perilous journeys to the New World for Van Der Linde, acting as agent both for the West India Company and the Van Der Linde business. He also worked privately for the Van Der Linde family. Some of the time, these interests were also the interests of the Company.

He had been poring over recently acquired maps of the Americas when a knock on his front door had interrupted him. Another summons. He sighed and thanked the courier.

No more time for his maps. Not that he resented these missives, it was these that had made him a very rich man. So rich that he could afford such luxuries as the precious maps. Changing from a floor-length, brocade gown into his habitual, unadorned black doublet above black side-buttoned breeches, a white lace trimmed collar, he completed his dressing with a pair of black gauntlets before flinging a heavy woollen cloak about his shoulders and setting out into the foul early evening. He didn’t believe in using carriages. Walking cleared his head and made him sharp.

He was intrigued at being summoned at such short notice. He knew that all current ventures had been finalised; all future plans not urgent.

Kroes answered the door instantly. “Good evening, sir, what a

nasty storm! Menheer Van Der Linde is in his study.” He took Smit’s cloak and led the way across the hall. Smit paused before a large wall-mounted mirror and smoothed back his dark hair. His charcoal eyes took in the mirror’s background reflections. They told him that a gaming evening was in progress, that the kitchen was at full flow and that if Van Der Linde had summoned him it must be something urgent to drag him from his guests.

“Thank you for coming so promptly, Anton, I’ve a problem to solve and you’re the only one who can help.” Willem shook his guest’s hand.

“I’m flattered, Menheer Van Der Linde,” he effected a small bow in return.

“Please be seated,” Willem gestured towards an armchair into which Smit neatly lowered himself.

“I have a situation here that needs urgent and confidential action,” Willem paused and took a long breath. “For reasons best known to himself, my son has found it necessary to commit murder.” Jan snapped his head to stare at his father, who ignored him.

Smit sat quietly, ingesting this news. Eventually he asked, “Were there any witnesses?”

“I’m assured that there weren’t,” said the father.

“What had you in mind?” Smit addressed Van der Linde, but his eyes were on Jan.

“New Amsterdam, as soon as possible, I thought you could sort out our outstanding business over there, while making sure that Jan is escorted to the settlement,” suggested Van Der Linde.

“Yes, that makes sense. I can’t help feeling though that you need to distance yourself further still. Van Der Linde is a powerful name, especially so in our colonies. He can’t keep that name.”

“Mmm, good point.” A sly smile slid across the old man’s face.

“How about Jan De Kuyper?”

Smit’s reaction was immediate. “That’s not a good idea, It’s still a link to your family.” Regardless of the cause of the feud that had erupted a decade ago between Van Der Linde and his late wife’s father, Jaap De Kuyper, Smit felt it was high time it was laid to rest. As for Jan, it was a long time coming.

Without moral guidance or discipline from his father, of course the boy was going to push the limits of bad behaviour. Smit

suspected that Van Der Linde was secretly proud of his son's disgraceful actions. This latest exploit, though, seemed to have crossed a fine line of acceptability.

"That's as maybe, but my decision stands." Van der Linde dismissed Smit's concerns with a wave of the hand.

"As you wish, Menheer Van der Linde. I'll deal with the arrangements and let you know in due course. I do know that there is a small trader going to New Amsterdam within the next few days. Shall I see what I can do?"

Smit noticed a passing flicker of sadness cross Van Der Linde's face as he glanced at his son and nodded slowly. "Yes, do that. Let me know how you get on before our meeting tomorrow."

October 1643
Amsterdam

Willem Van Der Linde had been and still was a highly efficient scavenger, a brutal, tenacious fighter. As a street urchin in the harsh port environments of Rotterdam survival and ingenuity were more prized than owning a cow. He had rooted through the rubbish thrown away by wealthy merchants' households, trawled through discarded debris about the streets of the city. He salvaged all he could and sold it on for one hundred per cent profit. He was a tough, callous youth who climbed the criminal ladder, firstly by becoming a 'monkey' for local smugglers, an intermediary between traders and thieves, selling hijacked French brandy, laces, wool and silks and when he'd gathered sufficient means he had set a course for Amsterdam and become a respectable merchant.

Respectability though was a sham, a veneer under which Van Der Linde operated a network of cutthroats, buccaneers, robbers of all nationalities. His coup de grâce had come during the fiasco of the tulip.

A flower that could be startling in appearance, had become a highly prized possession in the Provinces of Holland. The flower could also be plain and dull. The unpredictability of the tulip's patterning was enough to drive sensible men to gambling and ruinous debt. It became a national obsession.

Van Der Linde had picked up on this phenomena early and had milked Man's greed with all his might. He betrayed traders, friends, family to achieve the power and riches he had craved as a small boy. He had handpicked same-minded rogues from countries competing in trade and set up a highly efficient union that was informed of every new trading route and current fashion obsession be that diamonds, beaver, silks, spices, even flowers.

Smit had been invaluable to Van Der Linde. An intellectual, with a calculating mind and an expensive appetite for maps, Smit had facilitated Van Der Linde's greatest coups. He'd quashed all

querulous opposition from his fellow directors in matters of dubious ventures, he'd nurtured the relationship with the blackguards in New Amsterdam and he'd advised against certain actions based on information garnered from his various snitches throughout the Provinces.

Heavy, burgundy and gold, tapestry drapes had been drawn across the tall windows, effective barriers against the bitter chill of winter's worst weather in years. Eight-branched, silver candelabra were lined up along the middle of the long, mahogany dining table. Van Der Linde had forgone his usual sweet scented beeswax candles and specifically asked for tallow candles. The primitive tallow gave up light, stench and reeking black smoke in equal amounts. Apart from causing discomfort to his guests for his own personal amusement, the smoke also served as an effective screen through which his fellow directors were unable to read his expression. The dark wooden paneling of the dining room had retreated into the obfuscation of the room, focusing the diners' attention inwards.

Seated at the head of the table, Willem Van Der Linde took stock of his guests. What a bunch of bastards, he thought. So much for the thin veneer of civilisation - that had long gone, along with a seven-course meal and a large percentage of his cellar's finest wines. Lunch had wandered off into early evening and now all four of his guests were behaving like drunken, lewd boors. They might be wealthy men, but they were also ill-bred, backstabbing, thieving scum apart from perhaps, the newcomer, the elegant Sir Sydney Grundy. He could, at least, lay claim to some aristocratic English roots.

From the belching, farting Prussian prick, Otto Mann, with his unintelligible accent, obscenely protruding stomach and greasy thick lips, the brooding Scotsman, Gordon Bruce, with his red-face, watery red eyes and wild red hair and finally to Sven Larsson, a pallid, blonde giant with disturbingly pale eyes, expressionless as a dead fish, each of these men had helped Van Der Linde to his immense fortune and had helped him to an untouchable position in the influential Amsterdam Chamber of Commerce. He owed them nothing. They'd all made their fortunes because of him and would continue to do so as long as

they didn't cross him. He didn't trust any of them.

Otto Mann belched then roared with laughter, slapping a podgy hand down onto the table. "Fine food, Van Der Linde. Now all I need is a good fuck!" He belched again. Van Der Linde shuddered with revulsion.

"Aye, bring in the whores, Dutchman," said Bruce. His rough voice was slurred. He wiped his mouth clean of spittle.

"We're here to discuss business, gentlemen," said Van Der Linde stiffly. "Can I suggest that we concentrate on that and not on debauchery?"

"Dear Gott, Willem, you sound like that preacher, Calvin."

"Well, you know how close a follower I am of Calvin's doctrines. Some of his thoughts on Man's depravity and his inability to step away from sin are especially enlightening. Ha ha ha!" Van Der Linde exploded in laughter.

"I'm sorry, but I don't appreciate your disrespect for Calvin, he's a man of great vision." The flaming red Scotsman was angry. He punched his fist through the pall of acrid smoke for emphasis.

"Apologies, Gordon, I meant no offence," said Van Der Linde. Slightly mollified, Gordon Bruce suggested that they return to the matter in hand.

"Quite so," said Van Der Linde. He rose to his feet and gently tapped the side of his glass to call for quiet.

"Gentlemen, I would like to report that our last venture, and I'm sure you know what I'm going to say," he took a deliberate pause, "our last venture has been our best to date. The fact that it also comes at a time when we are celebrating our tenth anniversary just makes it all the more satisfactory." He lifted his glass. "I would like us to raise our glasses to another spectacular profit. I shall issue accountings in due course, but be assured, they are exceptional."

The chinking of delicate crystal rang out around the table. "In marking this tenth anniversary," he continued, "I would like to pay homage to those knights of old, whose tenets have brought us untold wealth and influence. Like them, we have no national borders, we pay few taxes and we answer to only one authority... no, not the Pope," that brought a rattle of laughter from his guests, "but ourselves. We are indebted to them for founding the basic principles of money, land and business acquisition and the

idea of international banking. To the Knights Templar!” He punched the air with one fist and sank the contents of his glass with the other. “Let’s also not forget our absent partners. Unfortunately, they are otherwise occupied.” This remark brought instant honks of knowing laughter.

Gordon Bruce got unsteadily to his feet, held on to the back of his chair for support and thrust his glass into the air. “I say we need to thank our patron. Without him, we wouldn’t be the rich, powerful men we are today. To Willem Van Der Linde!”

There was unanimous chorus of agreement. Still standing, Van Der Linde raised a hand for further silence. “Gentlemen, I think now is a good time to explain to our potential new member here a few facts about our business.” He sat down and engaged Sydney Grundy’s attention.

“Our club is a private concern. No one outside this room, aside from our partners, knows that we exist in the way that we do. We prefer it that way. We have strict rules and principles, one of the most important of which, is discretion.” Van Der Linde stopped to take a sip of wine. “The brotherhood’s creed is about taking risks and reaping the rewards. Each of us knows that all it takes is one wrong decision, one indiscreet word and we could lose everything, but that’s part of the fun, the challenge of it. So far, we’ve been successful in all our chosen ventures.” He paused again. “There is, however, an aspect to our business that is a little less than straightforward.”

Sydney Grundy raised his eyebrows.

“A little less than straightforward? Speak plainly, man! You mean you are crooked?”

“Crooked? Oh, such a vulgar way of putting it, but yes, you’re right. We do whatever it takes to succeed. Scruples and morals are for the weak and the poor, two things we certainly aren’t.” Sniggers accompanied this statement.

The languid Englishman smiled pleasantly enough although beneath his curly, sandy eyebrows, his black eyes glittered. “I see.”

“Does that upset your sensibilities, Sir Sydney?”

“Not at all, if truth be told, I’m afraid it rather excites me.” He smiled at Van Der Linde. “Tell me about these partners.”

“First things first, I’d like to officially welcome you into our

brotherhood. Before I approached you with our offer, we discussed your credentials in depth and felt that anyone who can betray his own brother, as you did for personal and financial gain, is one of us at heart. You will abide by our rules. These are set out in a charter drawn up when our club was started. I've already made these known to you. Do you have any questions about them?" The knight shook his head. "I have a copy here ready for you to sign. Should you break any of our rules, the consequences for you will be immediate and final. Do I make myself clear?" He pushed the parchment document towards Sir Sydney and gestured towards an already loaded quill in front of him.

The knight nodded his head in agreement, studied the contents, then picked up the pen and signed. He pushed the completed document back to his host.

Van Der Linde continued. "As merchants, we have strategically positioned ourselves within trading companies, so that we are privy to information about trading opportunities, investment possibilities and commodity deals. I, myself, am a member and director of the West India Company and my colleagues here are equally well placed as directors of other such companies. I'm sure our reputations precede us." He smiled modestly. "Your association with the London Muscovy Company, Sir Sydney, will be invaluable to us. However, what isn't known about us, is our brotherhood and our alliance with partners who do us proud in their particular field of activity." This brought a round of cheering and hooting from his guests.

"Ah, these partners again. Stop being so cagey, will you." Sir Sydney was growing irritable. "Who the hell are they?"

"Patience, my dear man. All in good time," said Van Der Linde, behind his veil of smoke. "I call on Menheer Smit to give us his thoughts." A figure emerged from the shadows and sat down at the far end of the table. "Perhaps a glass of Port before we proceed." He turned from the table and yelled for his butler. "Kroes! The Port, if you please."

With glasses charged, Van Der Linde waved a hand in Smit's direction.

"Your news, if you please. Menheer Smit."

Anton Smit got to his feet and welcomed their newest colleague. That done he began his latest report.

“I will keep this short. Our last consignment has reached our friends and they are now awaiting further instruction. Arrangements for our next shipment have been finalised as well as the last minute addition.” Smit did not need to elaborate further on the removal of Van Der Linde’s son to New Amsterdam. “I have also calculated the investment necessary and the profit margin we can expect on our next shipment.” He gave a little bow and sat down again.

“Thank you, Anton, succinct as ever.” Van Der Linde bowed his head slightly to his agent. “I think we have covered all the relevant issues tonight, so unless someone has a question, may I suggest that we leave business for now and enjoy the port.”

“I have a question, Menheer Van Der Linde.” Otto Mann raised a thick arm into the air. “I hear rumours of a pirate hunter. Has anyone else?”

“I can answer that, Otto,” said Sven Larsson. “It seems that the East and West India Companies are pissed off that so many of their prize galleons are being attacked and plundered by buccaneers and they need someone to put an end to their activities. Surely, you’ve heard about this, Willem?”

“I have, but it doesn’t really concern me much. I’m going to be on the committee that selects the man, so we’ll know exactly what he’s up to, won’t we?” He chuckled to himself and downed his port in one.

Two men stood on the main deck as the trading ship, *Kestrel*, took its leave from Amsterdam’s port heading for the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam.

“What am I doing on this rat-infested ship?” asked De Kuyper. Dressed head to toe in blue velvet and cream lace ruffles, he towered over his companion.

“I think you know the answer to that, Jan,” replied Anton Smit. “I’m going below to unpack the cases.” The older man drew his long, black cloak tightly about his body. He pulled down on the short brimmed hat wedging it against his forehead. “Perhaps you might like to change into something a little more appropriate?” He raised an eyebrow at Jan De Kuyper’s clothes.

De Kuyper looked down at his attire and threw his arms open. “What’s wrong with this?”

“Nothing in a drawing room or at Court, but it’s totally incorrect for sea travel. Don’t you feel at all cold?” Smit shivered.

“I suppose I do. Fetch me my black woollen cape, will you? Oh, and my black hat.”

“Perhaps you might like to get them for yourself. I’m here as your guardian, not your manservant, please remember that.” Smit strode away.

Under louring skies, De Kuyper watched as the city’s medieval stone walls began to recede. An unexpected shaft of sunlight escaped the clouds and struck the white spire of the Oude Kerk’s bell tower that rose above the tall merchant’s houses. Its flash burned into the back of De Kuyper’s eyes. How ironic that the Spire of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of seafarers, should send him a parting shot. He doubted it was a goodwill gesture.

As the *Kestrel’s* pitch deepened, De Kuyper fell prey to a surge of sea sickness. He rushed to the gunwale and emptied his stomach over the edge. When the retching had stopped, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slumped over the rail, exhausted. He raised his salt-bitten eyes and took stock of his surroundings.

Men-of-war rocked back and forth at anchor while smaller fishing vessels darted around them making for the quayside. Merchantmen, warships, ferries and working boats creaked and groaned with every passing wash and wave. On departing vessels captains yelled out orders, officers repeated those orders and sailors, fleet as salamanders, skittered up and down rigging, across yardarms and canvas sails. They sang sea shanties to give rhythm to their chores. Shallops and wherries attended ships that were newly arrived to off load passengers and their luggage. Crew opened hatches and stowed sails, officers marshalled passengers and cargo while captains checked their logs and last minute inventories for customs officials.

The *Kestrel*, a square-rigged, three-masted galleon, was filled to capacity: excited emigrants, some talking loudly about their plans for the New World, others quiet, lonely, and thoughtful. Halyard, tools, crew, settlers and tradesmen; there was a claustrophobic air about her that smothered De Kuyper. His head swam from such concentrated chaos, he needed to find some air. He made his way up to the poop deck and took in several deep breaths.

How could he survive this journey of nearly three thousand miles on a ship half the size of Amsterdam's Dam Square on to which fifty crew and one hundred and thirty passengers were as tightly packed as a barrel of salt fish?

De Kuyper considered the woman standing beside the gunwale below him. She was possibly a little older than him, maybe in her early twenties. Her dress was plain in the manner of the lowborn and clearly too tight, but within that garment was a promising body. Her breasts moved under the loose bodice and the sacking-like material grasped her broad hips, very tempting.

He surveyed the great expanse of leaden sea ahead with dismay. Broken by a necklace of sandy outcrops, dunes and small islands that protected it from the North Sea, the Waddensee had very little character. Skyline met sea line in a seamless union. No hills, no trees. A solitary dot broke the monotony — a small fishing boat, its rust brown sail bloated by the wind, was tacking its way against the flow of the tide, towards Amsterdam. De Kuyper sighed.

Walking with deliberation down the steps to the lower deck, De Kuyper made sure he caught her attention and was satisfied when she returned his interest with a slight widening of her eyes. She's game, he thought.

The hand on his shoulder was firm. Smit, his voice quiet and unemotional, said, "If I witness one more of your indiscretions, you will not live to make another. Do I make myself clear?"

De Kuyper nodded and ground his teeth, cursing Smit and his sanctimonious attitude.

November 1643

The fog was a help and a hindrance to the swordsman as was the pitching of the ship in rough seas. Dawn had been coral when the fighting had begun, but an hour into the battle a sea fog had rolled over the ship, a chill, creeping shroud that created illusion and delusion and sapped the hot adrenaline from muscled arms and legs and now his men were flagging. Van Orden felt that same fatigue as he drew on reserves of energy to defeat this one last pirate. So far the fight had been well-matched with both men skilled in swordsmanship and technique, but the pirate was tiring. Strings of drool hung from the lower lip of his opponent, flowing between stumps of rotted black teeth. He rocked from side to side on bare feet that gripped the wooden planks of the ship with toes so long they could have been fingers. In his sinewy hands were weapons, one a ballock dagger, the other a rapier.

Van Orden stood still, bent forward a little at the waist, knees flexed, waiting, his dark eyes fixed on the pirate. Although he was a good head higher than his opponent, he knew his longer reach could prove his undoing if the pirate slipped beneath his guard. This one might be the captain, thought Van Orden, but he was an impatient man, he'd let him make the next move.

The pirate duly obliged. He sprang forward swinging his blades with both arms in a crisscrossing fashion, a style Van Orden had seen in the Orient. Still, that style was of no matter here, as Van Orden brought his sword down hard into the middle of the cruciform blades, parting them and sending the pirate reeling to one side. With a cry of rage the pirate dropped his dagger, but he quickly regained his balance. He grasped the rapier's grip and faced Van Orden. The captain moved the sword in a tight figure of eight in front of him.

"You're dead, you pox-ridden bitch," he squealed, yellow eyes like a boar sizing up a meal, bristly grey whiskers on his cheeks and chin completed the porcine image. "You swyving bastard,"

rasped the pirate. “Your pissant prick is mine.”

Inwardly, Van Orden sighed. If he’d heard that said once, he’d heard it a thousand times and he’d not lost his prick yet. Why did these morons have to be so predicable?

“You’ll have to do better than that to get my dick, nackle-ass,” said Van Orden. The insult cost him valuable breath, but it had the desired effect.

The deep roar started in the pirate’s belly and reached his mouth in an explosion of spit, venom and hate. He outstretched his arm and thrust the rapier forward aiming for Van Orden’s chest. Van Orden sidestepped the right-armed parry, seized the pirate’s wrist with his left hand and struck down on the forearm with his cutlass. The blade sliced with ease through flesh, gristle and bone leaving a severed arm swinging on a slim tendon beneath a filthy sleeve. The pirate stared in disbelief at his arm and then to his sword on the deck. His eyes swivelled to Van Orden’s blade at his neck.

“Time to surrender, Captain,” said Van Orden, “give your orders.”

The pirate mumbled some unintelligible words, before slumping on the deck, passed out cold from shock and injury.

Van Orden could hear the cries of a few more skirmishes, but the battle was won, regardless of unuttered captain’s orders. On board the pirate sloop, *Corazones de Roble*, there were now eighty-seven dead buccaneers, one unconscious pirate captain, two live captives and twenty-four men-at-arms serving under orders from Tomas Van Orden, freelance pirate hunter.

A ferric odour clung to the air; blood, knives and ship’s chains. Acrid fumes plumed from smouldering hempen ropes and singed canvas sails while above the devastated decks the seabirds screeched like rusted pawl and ratchet mechanisms struggling to work.

Van Orden looked out towards the approaching coastline and sighed at the inhospitable Irish landscape that had made this task more difficult. His bronze eyes shone like newly fallen conkers as he regained his breath from the fight. He touched the throbbing bruise on his high cheekbones, his normally smiling, slightly feminine, full lips compacted from the pain. He shrugged his shoulders to release their cramped muscles. Green cliffs that

belied the unyielding granite beneath, coves that looked like they might offer shelter, but betrayed that promise with razor sharp beds, unpredictable currents and verdant beaches that were no more than sucking bogs that dragged the naïve to a suffocating death.

Still, thought Van Orden, a good job done, his Lordship would be as grateful and generous as ever. He removed his Meerschaum clay pipe and tamped tobacco hard down into its bowl. It took a few strikes with his flint to ignite the weed in the drizzly dampness of Irish air, but when he had sucked the smoky narcotic into his mouth a couple of times he could feel his muscles surrender to its calming properties.

“Where will you go after this?” asked a voice behind him.

Van Orden turned to see his friend and temporary captain of the captured ship, Peter Maine.

“I’m not sure yet, his Lordship’s away in Paris, but I think he’ll be very pleased with this result,” he tossed his head in the direction of a growing pile of dead pirates, “they’ve been the bane of his life for the past year.” He took a long inhalation of smoke and let it slowly drift from between his lips. “I might take a trip to Amsterdam, I’ve unfinished business there I need to attend to. What about you, Peter?”

“I’ve to hand this ship, cargo and dead bodies over to the authorities in Dublin and after that we head back to London on the first available tide. You’ll accompany us to London?” Van Orden nodded. The sandy-haired captain gave a gap-toothed grin, “His Lordship’s latest venture is planned for next month, so I’m off to see Betsie.”

“Give your lovely wife my love and don’t wear her out too much,” laughed Van Orden.

All in all, mused Van Orden, this past year had been a success. Three nests of marauding buccaneers had been routed, their stolen cargoes and ships returned to their rightful owners and the villains responsible brought to justice. Now he could add a fourth to that list.

The rugged coastlines of Florida, Dominica and Venezuela provided a combination of deep bays and easy access to lucrative trade routes and were perfect for piratical forays. Van Orden’s small network of spies had given him impeccable information on

the location of the four gangs: planning and timing had seen an end to their raids.

Sadly, none of these had been what Van Orden was searching for.