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Mistress Kathenka

Chapter 1
Delft, April 1654

'Annie – please! I don't need a chaperone, not while I am having my portrait painted!' Louise Eeden gazed at her old nurse, torn between love and exasperation. 'I have run wild in this town since I was ten years old, and now you've gone all broody on me.'

The door to master painter Jacob Haitink's house stood open. A diminutive maid had gone to find her mistress. Annie was poking her head inside like a chicken, her nose wrinkling disapprovingly at the lingering smell of stale beer that emerged from the bar that occupied the ground floor below the artist's studio.

'Mistress Kathenka will be here any moment; she can conduct me upstairs. There's no need for you to stay.' Louise thought for a moment, 'Why don't you call in at the Oude Kerk on the way home?' But Annie, like most of the strictly Protestant population of Delft, had her own ideas about 'calling into' a church.

'I'm not a Catholic that I have to use God's house as if it was the baker's or the butcher's.' The old lady shook her head, scattering dark disapproval about her. 'I'll stay here.

Things are ... different for you now, Louise. And with your poor mother being ill, I have extra responsibilities ...'

'No, Annie! Nothing is different. It's all in your funny old head. Mother is looking so much better these days, and please,' she pleaded, 'don't shake your wattles at me.'

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Louise put her hand on Annie's arm. 'Here is Mistress Kathenka. I will tell you all about it when I get home.' She took the house-shoes that Annie had been holding for her, slipped off her clogs, arranged them neatly just inside the door, and bent and kissed what she could see of the wrinkled face in the severe bonnet. Then she skipped over to where Mistress Kathenka was standing at the foot of the stairs. She was surprised to find that the Master, who she knew to be an old man, had a wife so young; she could hardly be thirty.

'Louise, isn't it? I'm Kathenka,' the woman introduced herself. Louise began a curtsy, but the other woman just laughed and put an arm around her waist. 'Save that for the Master. Come on up the stairs; they're quite steep.' They mounted steadily. 'Don't worry about your old friend, I'll look after her – your chaperone,' she added.

'Oh don't!' panted Louise.

'Don't look after her?' the mistress queried, puzzled. They had arrived at the second floor landing and paused to get their breath.

'No, it's just the word "chaperone", it implies ...' Louise tried a smile, but it faded, and she turned to look down over the Markt. The view through the rough glass was like an oil painting, but an animated one. People, free people, fore-

shortened to her view, could be seen laying out their stalls below. The silence drew out.

'Implies?' Kathenka asked quietly. It was an invitation, not an intrusion. It caught Louise unaware, she felt a constriction in her throat, and pressed her face against the glass so that her linen head-cloth hid her face.

'It's all my fault,' she whispered. She felt the woman come closer. She stiffened, but there was no touch. 'You see, I've let everybody, even poor Mother, believe that we – Reynier and me – well ... got on. Now, suddenly, it seems that we are engaged.'

'And you're not sure about him ... perhaps there is someone else?'

'No, nobody.' She shook her head against the glass. 'I'm perfectly content in my father's company. We are so close, Father and I. I thought he'd know that Reynier meant nothing to me.' She smiled sadly. 'I thought he'd know instinctively ... absorb it somehow through his skin. But how could he?' She turned and put her back to the window and took a deep breath.

'When we were children, Reynier and I were neighbours. The pottery families stuck together in those days, even if they were at each other's throats in matters of business. First we were toddlers together, then we played together. Then, because having Reynier around meant that other boys left me alone, I was happy to be seen with him. Anyway, we were old friends. He was a way around the problem of elegant young men at the door, clutching their caps and looking for Miss Eeden. There were more interesting things to

do than be played court to.'

'And he fell in love with you?'

'Oh no! Look at me!' Louise laughed ruefully. 'Perhaps he thinks he did, but I'm not attractive enough for that. He's handsome; he could have the prettiest girl in town. He's putting a brave face on it. I'm the devil he knows, or thinks he knows. It isn't he who has started the rumours. It is ... I don't know ... busybodies. You see, I'm a good match.' What had got her telling all this to a total stranger? Perhaps it was because she reminded her of her mother, years ago, when she had been strong and healthy. Perhaps also it was because the woman was taking it all quite matter of factly.

'And who is this Reynier? What is his surname?'

'DeVries.' Louise heard a small intake of breath, quickly suppressed. 'So, you understand?' she said.

'Oh yes,' Mistress Kathenka nodded. 'The perfect alliance: Eeden's pottery – the best, allied to DeVries's – the largest. What a union! But you don't have to, not if you don't want it!'

'Yes, Mistress, I do. It's my fault, you see. I've never said no to him. I've sheltered behind Reynier all my life. Somehow I've fooled Father, and occasionally even myself, into thinking that Reynier would do. He has been proposing to me since we were children. It came to be a game. I would say, "Not now!" in a jokey sort of way. I just wanted things to stay the same – just Father and me. Now, suddenly, it seems that the town has got tired of waiting and decided for us. Everyone is talking of us as the perfect match. Reynier is as embarrassed about it as I am. He is charming, as always; he says that he wants me, but that I mustn't be forced into it.

He's even taking himself away travelling for a month.'

'And what about the big prize for him: Eeden's pottery?'

'That's another reason for his going away. He says such rumours are disgraceful.' Louise hesitated, then added ruefully. 'He's so honourable it hurts.'

She made to move but the older woman stood in her way. 'And you don't want him?' Louise shook her head dumbly. 'Did you ever say "yes" to this young man?'

'Why no, Mistress, not in so many words ...'

'I'm not talking of many words, just one word, child ... the word "yes!"'

'I know you are trying to be helpful, Mistress,' Louise said bitterly. 'But you see, the pot is fired now; it can't be turned back into clay. All that remains is to cover it with a pretty glaze – marriage is what they call it.' She lifted her shoulders. 'It is just how things will be. Reynier will get a plain wife, but will inherit Eeden's pottery when Father dies. I will get velvet and silk and ...' she smiled wryly, 'a handsome pot for a husband!' She felt her face beginning to crumple. She wanted to throw herself into this woman's arms and cry her heart out, but Mistress Kathenka was having none of that. She held Louise with a level gaze.

'Don't cry, child. It will make your eyes red. I'll take you up to the Master now; he's *my* particular trouble. But if there's not something to be put right here I'm not Kathenka Haitink.' She turned and walked firmly up the stairs ahead of Louise. Louise looked after her.

'Mistress, you won't tell anyone what I have said?' No matter what the Master's wife thought, there was nothing

that could be put right; nobody had committed any wrong or sin against her. Yet, as she climbed the creaking stairs, she felt her heart give an involuntary lift.

The mistress was waiting for her at the board door that closed off the top of the stairs; her hand was raised. 'I won't tell anyone, but I think you should. All right?' Louise nodded. The woman looked at her critically, then smiled. 'That's better. And don't stand any nonsense from the Master. He can be as obstinate as a mule, but his heart is in the right place.'

Bad Behaviour

Chapter 2

That morning, before the girl arrived for her portrait, the Master had been behaving abominably.

'She'll be as ugly as sin. You'll see!' he complained over his shoulder as Pieter helped him into his painter's gown. He wiggled his shoulders, then shot his arms out like a scarecrow. The gown had long sleeves, but they were slashed from the wrist to the elbow so that they could hang down out of his way while he painted. 'See this gown, Pieter? Belonged to van Rijn. He gave it to me when we were students together in Leiden.'

'Yes, Master.' If Pieter had heard that story once, he'd heard it a dozen times. He had a strong suspicion that the old scoundrel had stolen the gown from the now famous artist all those years ago.

'Rough painter, van Rijn. Not painterly at all!' Pieter could hear the familiar refrain as he rummaged in the paint cupboard, looking for his master's cap.

'At least his paints don't go solid from lack of use,' he muttered.

'What's that?'

'They say he is very wealthy,' he improvised quickly.

'A man like me shouldn't have to paint for his bread,' the

Master said, sweeping one arm across his chest. 'I should have a patron.'

Pieter smiled to himself, remembering how Mistress Kathenka had called him back as he climbed the stairs to the studio to begin the day's work.

'Psst ... here, Pieter. If you let the Master escape from the studio before that girl arrives, you can find somewhere else to work in the evenings.'

Had she seen trouble brewing? Pieter liked Kathenka. She was less than half the Master's age, and mothered and bullied them both by turn. It was she who provided most of the income on which they lived, by running the public house that occupied the ground floor of the premises. As this opened on to the usually crowded Markt, they did well. Pieter often worked for her as a tap-boy of an evening, and was glad of the few stuivers cash.

Now the Master was grumbling again, '... and she won't have a thought in her head. You'll see!' Pieter paid no attention. He spotted the Master's hat on the floor, where he had thrown it down a week ago. He picked it up and started to bang it against his leg. He had his pride, and spiders descending from his master's hat while he was painting would not do.

'What the devil are you doing with that? Give it here.' He snatched it from Pieter's hand. 'Precious hat this.' He walked busily over to the window and pretended to look out, while squinting at his reflection in the glass. He set the floppy white beret at a jaunty angle.

Keeping one eye on his master to make sure he didn't try

to sneak out of the door, Pieter got on with preparing the studio for the sitting. For weeks now he had been working on a new canvas, coating it with size, then lime, and then several layers of gypsum plaster. The final float of plaster of Paris was rubbed so smooth that it looked like ivory. He reached into the back of the cupboard in which they kept their paints, oils and brushes; it was a massive affair, smelling richly of turpentine and linseed oil. He fetched out a shallow box of charcoal twigs and put this down beside the easel. There would be no need for paints today, not at a first sitting. The canvas was just for show.

When he turned around, the Master was still standing at the window, gazing out over the town; he had stopped puffing and blowing for the moment. Pieter knew that view well, having spent many hours looking out, waiting for paint, or size, or plaster to dry. The glass in the leaded panes was rough and uneven. It broke the red roofs across the market square into surprising segments and blobs, so they looked like reflections in water. Low spring sunshine was pouring in from the east, lighting the dust motes that danced in the air about the old man. His white beret was banded with colour from the strip of stained glass that framed the windows. Pieter made a face at his back – the old codger. But when the Master spoke, the petulance was gone from his voice.

'Pieter, you shouldn't be locked up in here with a crotchety old man. You should be chasing young maidens through the meadows beyond the walls.'

What could one do with a man like that? One minute like

a bear on a chain, the next wanting him to chase maidens! It was at times like this, when he surprised him, that Pieter loved the old man. He'd been with him for nearly four years now; apprenticed at fourteen. Soon he would have to move on, work for another master painter, acquire new skills and, if possible, earn enough guilders to pay for membership of the Guild of St Luke. Only then could he teach and sell his pictures as his own. It would be nice to rub shoulders with other members of the Guild as an equal. And as for chasing maidens ... Pieter had decided long ago that God had made him with too many angles and bones for the girls to look at him twice, meadows or no meadows.

'Aach!' A thud and an exclamation broke his reverie. 'Ha! Look, Pieter! Didn't I tell you – ugly as sin!' The Master had cracked his head against the glass of the window and was turned towards him, rubbing his forehead and pointing down. It was nonsense; he couldn't see anything properly through those distorting panes.

Suddenly he was pleading. 'Pieter, let's get out of here. Spring calls: you to the meadows, and me to the taproom!' Pieter shook his head. Kathenka might give the Master a wallop on the backside when he acted like this, but something told him that this was more than his master's usual 'old fuss'. He noticed him wiping his hands on his trousers as if they were sweating, and now he produced a groan that could almost be called a whimper. Surely the man couldn't be scared of a mere girl? Then it dawned on him.

'You've been watching her!' he accused. 'You've seen her – and you're scared silly!'

'Of course I've seen her!' snapped his master. 'If you could see beyond the length of your nose I'd make you paint her yourself.' Then he became conspiratorial, 'Tell you what ... we'll scare her off! Watch me.'

'No, you –'

Just then there was a knock on the door. It opened, and Mistress Kathenka came in and stepped to one side.

'Master,' she said, 'Miss Eeden.' She bobbed a curtsy towards him. The girl followed her into the room, looking around to see where the Master was. Then she curtsied too, but deeper, an obeisance almost. Out of the corner of his eye, Pieter was aware of Kathenka, first glaring at the Master and then shooting a warning glance at him. He looked at the girl with interest. Her dress was covered by an unadorned cloak, her face was plain. She had dropped her eyes – demure – he thought. He had seen a dozen rich girls and fine ladies come in that door; this was just another. The Master would do a competent job and get a fat fee for it. There was nothing here for the Master to be agitated about at any rate. The Mistress closed the door and Pieter dropped a chip of lapis lazuli into the hollow of his grinding block. Work had to go on.

Perhaps it was the flash of blue from the precious stone that caught her eye, but the girl looked around. Her glance lasted only a second, for as long as it takes lightning to cross the sky, but in that second Pieter understood what it was that had the Master in a state of agitation. Later he would say that she thrilled and shimmered, as if a sudden light had fallen on blowing silk. At other times he would say that it

was as if her whole body had suddenly become transparent – a shell revealing a hidden girl within – someone full of wild wonder, pulsing with life. But by then he was in love with her. At this moment, however, he was realising why the Master had been behaving so strangely.

Two years ago, Jacob Haitink had given Pieter an exercise to do; his challenge was to draw an empty glass, and it nearly killed him.

'Pieter,' the Master had said when at last he had succeeded, 'I have one great fear, and that is that one day someone will walk in that door who is completely without conceit. Someone who is as transparent as your empty glass there. That is a portrait I must never paint, because you see, Pieter, people's conceits are what we paint. We caricature them, we expose their little vanities, we flatter them. But someone who is without conceit is as intangible and as illusive as your empty glass. Truly, if such a person comes in you must stop me, because if I try, it will destroy me.' Pieter looked at the girl again now; the vision had passed. How do you paint something that has no apparent form, no outline, but just exists in numerous reflections and refractions of imagined light? Could this girl really be the Master's nemesis, his end?



Stepping into the studio from the dark stairway, Louise was dazzled by the light. The room was longer and larger than she had expected. It must be a single attic spread over two adjoining houses. The ceiling was arched, following the

line of the supporting timbers of the roof. She felt as if she had walked into the inside of an upturned boat. Suffused light from dormer windows on the north side filled the room. The windows to the south were curtained, except for one, through which a blaze of morning sun was streaming. She noticed that the Mistress was curtsying, but couldn't, for the moment, see to whom. Then she saw him, the Master, in the very centre of the stream of sunlight. His pose was dramatic, one arm raised as if to make a proclamation. Her first impression was of a rather squat mediaeval herald in a tabard; all he lacked was a trumpet. When he was sure that she had seen him, he plucked a ridiculous, floppy, white beret from his head, swept it across his chest, and bowed. Louise was delighted and responded with the deepest curtsy she could achieve without actually falling over.

As she rose, she heard Mistress Kathenka close the door behind her. So, she was on her own now, and the Master was hurrying in her direction, swinging his hat across the floor as if sweeping a path for her with it.

'Miss Eeden, you are so welcome!' he boomed, bowing again. 'Come and sit down, you can take your clothes off later; it is still cool ... ' Louise blinked – perhaps she did need a chaperone after all? She thought of poor, fussy little Annie below and all her worst fears, but somehow she didn't feel in immediate danger. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a flash of blue, like a glimpse of a kingfisher, skimming fast and low over the water of the Schiekanaal. She turned and found herself staring at a boy, a little older than herself, standing by what looked like a tree stump in

the corner of the studio. There was that gleam of blue again! It came from a piece of stone he held in his hand. Of course, an apprentice, the Master would have an assistant. As Louise turned, she caught the boy staring, grim-faced, at his master. But when he saw her looking at him, he smiled, and his smile was big and generous. Her first impression was that he was most wonderfully ugly. He looked as if he had been whittled out of a piece of wood by someone using a blunt penknife. Her heart opened to him in a sudden affinity. She wanted to smile back, but shyness overcame her. Blushing, she turned away, to find the Master busily dusting a chair for her with his hat.

'Sit down, my dear and we will have a little chat.'

As Louise settled herself, she could feel the unaccustomed slip and movement of her dress, as the silk protested beneath her cloak. There were strange and exciting scents. The studio, or this corner of it, had obviously been set up for her portrait. There was an easel with a canvas on it; the wooden stretchers at its back were turned to her. Beyond this was a chair, for the Master, presumably, and a table. She craned to see what was on it: a blue Delft-ware jug containing brushes of various lengths and thicknesses, some green bottles filled with liquids, pottery jars, and what looked like small bladders, all neatly tied at their tops.

'I'll need more white lead, Pieter,' said the Master, fussing with the brushes and poking at the little bladders. He put his floppy hat on, took it off, shook it, and put it back on again. He gave the impression of constant motion. Now he was searching for something.