Chapter 1

1628

The child sails in a crowded boat to the end of the Zyder Zee. Past the foreshores of shipyards and warehouses, past new stone houses and the occasional steeple, on this day of dull weather, persistent drizzle and sneaking cold. There are many layers to this child: undergarments, middle garments and top garments. Mayken is made of pale skin and small white teeth and fine fair hair and linen and lace and wool and leather. There are treasures sewn into the seams of her clothing, small and valuable, like her.

Mayken has a father she's never met. Her father is a merchant who lives in a distant land where the midday sun is fierce enough to melt a Dutch child.

Her father has a marble mansion, so she's told. He has a legion of servants and stacks of gold dishes. He has chestnut stallions and dapple mares. Red and white roses grow around his doorway, they twine together, blood and snow mixed. By day the roses raise their faces to the sun. By night they empty their scent into the air. Cut them and they'll live only an hour. Their thorns are vicious and will take out an eye.

Mayken's father left just before she was born. Mayken's

mother would boast about the absent man. So wholesomely dedicated to the making of wealth. So staunch in the face of native unrest and strange pestilences. But she had no intention of joining her husband, being too delicate for such a perilous journey. Mayken doubted this. Her mother had sturdy calves and a good appetite. She had a big laugh and glossy curls. Her mother was as durable as a well-built cabinet. Until a baby got stuck inside her.

Mayken must not say a word about the baby because it shouldn't have been up there in the first place. She has practised with her nursemaid.

'Your mother, she's dead?'

'Yes, from the bloody flux.'

'How did your mother die, Mayken?'

'My mother died from the bloody flux, Imke.'

'Tell me, child, how is your mother?'

'She's dead, unfortunately, from the bloody flux.'

Bloody flux, says Mayken to the rhythm of the oars and the slap of the water on the bow of the boat that rocks her towards the East Indiaman. *Bloody flux*, she answers to the cows swung on high. They bellow as they are lowered into the ship. *Bloody flux*, she says to the people that swarm over her decks. The sailors and fine merchants, the plume-hatted soldiers and the bewildered passengers. *Bloody flux*, she replies to the *pip*, *pip*, *pip*, *toot* of trumpeters relaying commands. The ship waits in the water. Around her a chaos of people and goods are loaded from a flotilla of vessels. Like flies circling a patient mare.

Bloody flux, that is a big ship.

She is beautiful. Her upper works are painted green and yellow and at her prow – oh, best of all – crouches a carved red lion! His golden mane curls; his claws sink into the beam. He snarls down at the water.

Mayken's boat rocks round the ship's bowed belly. High

up, the ship is lovely with her bright gunwale and curved balustrades and stern decks reaching up, up, into the sky. Lower down, she's a fortress, an armoured hull studded with close-set, square-headed nails, already rusting.

Mayken cries out. 'The ship is bleeding!'

A passenger sitting on the plank seat opposite laughs.

'The iron nails keep the shipworms out. They love to eat fresh juicy wood.' The passenger leans forward and demonstrates with his finger on Mayken's cheek. 'They burrow and twist and gnaw tiny holes.'

Fortunately, Mayken, too, has teeth.

The man recoils. 'She bit me!'

'You poked her.' The nursemaid turns to the child. 'What are you? A stoat? A rat? A puppy? Put your teeth away.'

The man, good-naturedly, raises one gloved hand. 'No harm done.'

He wears the black costume of a preacher, a *predikant*. There is a Mrs Predikant in a gown cut from the same cloth. Between them a line of children, big to small, dressed in the same dark wool as their parents. All with clean white collars. A minister and his family dressed for a portrait, pressed together like barrelled mackerel, bumping knees with the other passengers. The eldest daughter cradles a carefully wrapped package, Bible-shaped. The youngest son, a ringleted cherub, picks his nose and wipes his finger on his sister's leg.

Mayken addresses his father politely. 'Speak more about the shipworms, if you please.'

'The holes they bore are tiny,' says the predikant. 'But enough tiny holes—'

He makes a glugging sound and a motion with his hand: a ship sinking. The cherub pouts and his sister rolls her eyes.

Rounding the ship's flank, they see gun ports painted red. The predikant points them out to the cherub.

'For the big cannons, Roelant. Against marauders,' he adds darkly.

Decorating the stern of the ship is a row of great wooden men. Great in that they are almost life-height and full-bearded. Great, too, in that they wear long robes.

'They're to keep pirates away.'

Mayken frowns at the predikant. Of this she is doubtful. One of the carved men looks like a pork butcher from Haarlem market, only he holds a sword, not a pig's leg. The other three just look peevish.

She glances at her nursemaid. Imke is rapt. Imke believes all sorts of pap. Eels are made from wet horsehair. Blowing your nose vigorously can kill you. Statues and carvings can occasionally come alive. Because an object crafted with love can't help but live.

They tried it with a pie. Mayken made pastry snakes to go on top. She rolled them carefully, pricked eyes and kissed them. When the pie was baked, the snakes were still pastry, only golden. There was no wriggling or seething. Mayken ate them in disgust. They didn't even taste like snakes. Imke said the snakes were merely sleepy, that they had been basking in the heat of the oven.

Another time, Imke took Mayken to the Church of Saint Bavo, the jewel of Haarlem. The old nursemaid told her to open her eyes and take notice. Mayken opened her eyes and took notice. Even so she missed the grin of a stone gargoyle and the wink of a wooden toad on the choir stall.

And now her heart hurts to think of Haarlem and all the things they are leaving behind, the tall clean house, the market boys, the kitchen cat, Mama and the secret stuck-inside baby. He was a brother, of that Mayken is sure. She only ever wanted a brother.

The great-bellied ship looms above. One, two, three masts – rising up through a web of rope. The pennant flags snap and stream against a sky of louring clouds.

Imke pipes up. 'When they loosen the sails, it will be like all the washdays have come at once.'

Gulls are nervously testing the yardarm, clumsy-footed compared to the sailors who are all over the rigging: climbing, dangling, rolling, lashing, hollering and cursing.

Mayken loves the sailors instantly. The daring of them, their speed along the ropes, the heights they climb to! The predikant is pointing out the Dutch East India Company cadets and officials gathering at the top of the stern castle. Look, there is the upper-merchant in his red coat and plumed hat. Flanked by the under-merchant, also well hatted, and the stout old skipper, hatless. Three men entrusted by the Company with a cargo richer than the treasuries of many kingdoms, the lives of hundreds of innocent souls and this wonderful ship, newly built – her maiden voyage! Imke nods as though she's interested. Mrs Predikant stares ahead with her mouth turned down, trout-like, abiding.

Mayken's vessel holds back. There's another boat unloading alongside the ship. The passengers look sick and pinched-faced as they wait their turn to board. A fine lady is hauled up the ship's flank on a wooden seat, her expression one of horror as she grips the ropes. Above her, a chaos of shouting sailors. Below, dirty October waves.

Mayken's nursemaid looks on with satisfaction. Imke revels in the trials of others with a pure and shameless joy.

'What is the ship's name, Imke?'

Mayken knows it, of course; she just likes hearing the way Imke says it.

'*Batavia*.'

'Is that a *charmed* word?'

Imke doesn't answer.

Imke says *Batavia* like a charmed word, carefully, with a peasant's respect for the hidden nature of things. A charmed word carelessly uttered curdles luck.

The ship is named for their destination. There must be a store of luck in that: a ship that looks ahead to a new life somewhere hot and strange.

'*Batavia*,' Mayken the unruly sings. '*Batavia*. *Ba-tahhhh–veeee-ah*.' She waits for a catastrophe.

A rope falls, a cask drops, a sailor stumbles on the rigging.

Imke looks alarmed; she is superstitious even for a peasant. 'Close your mouth.'

Mayken does. Imke is not to be messed with.

She is broad of beam and shoulder, short of leg and large of foot. She is almost as wide as she's tall so will stand in any storm. She has eight teeth, of which she is proud. If she smiles pursed (which she does among strangers) you'd think she had a full set. Imke is not young. The hair under her cap is white and as fine as chicken down. This is on account of the worry Mayken causes her. Imke has pale blue eyes, as watery as pickled eggs. When Imke is angry her eyes bulge; when she's loving, her eyes look soft enough to eat.

The best thing about Imke is her missing finger tops. Mayken gets a thrill just looking at them. Second and third fingers, right hand, nubbed joints smoothed over where nails ought to be. Imke will not tell how she lost her finger tops. Mayken never tires of guessing.

Mayken is a fine lady so she gets the winched seat, which is a plank with ropes attached at the corners. An old sailor wearing an India shawl around his head helps her up.

Mayken's legs shake. Imke is watching so she makes her expression grave and enduring.

The sailor smiles at her. 'Are you ready, little grandmother?'

Mayken nods.

'Be brave.' He puts his big hands over her small hands. His old scarred knuckles gnarled like knotted wood.

'Hold fast,' says the sailor.

Mayken doesn't bite at his touch because her teeth are chattering. The seat lurches skyward. The boat below gets smaller and Imke too. Mayken is hauled up over the wide flank of the ship, hands gripping, feet dangling. At the top the winch stutters and her heart leaps but then she is hoisted briskly on board and tipped onto her feet. A boy sailor takes her to where she must stand and wait for the other passengers to be loaded. Like the other sailors he wears loose trousers and no shoes with a neckerchief tied about his head.

'Don't move,' he tells her. 'Danger everywhere, see?'

He points: hands run up the rigging; men cart heavy goods across the deck; open hatches lie in wait, dark apertures down into the belly of the ship.

Mayken doesn't doubt it.

Lesser passengers must climb a rope ladder to board. Imke is landed over the side, breathless. She shows her palms to Mayken, rubbed raw from the rope. The predikant and his family struggle after. Mrs Predikant floundering, skirts flapping, face red, counting her children, taking Roelant from the back of a sailor. The child clings on, his small fingers must be prised open. Soldiers are boarding now, one after another, tight-lipped and grim-eyed. Mayken looks at them with interest, their different hat shapes, various breeches, not all of them seem Dutch. They carry their few possessions in canvas sacks and move with hesitation. This is not their world. Some of them are very young but all look battle-worn. Mayken would pick a fight with none of them.

A formidable figure elbows down the deck. A giant of terrifying proportions with a full blond beard and shorn head dressed in a leather tunic with no undershirt. Bands of leather go about his bare thick arms.

Mayken turns to the boy sailor. 'Who is he?'

'Stonecutter.'

Mayken watches in fascination as Stonecutter swipes one of his soldiers around the head with the easy savagery of a bear. As he paces along the line several of the men flinch. No one meets his eyes.

'He was a mason,' adds the boy sailor. 'He can break rocks and crush skulls with just one hand.'

Mayken would like to watch to see if Stonecutter crushes any of the soldiers' skulls but now the passengers must follow the boy sailor.

'You are aft-the-mast,' he tells them, pointing to the vast mainmast. 'You can never go forward of that.'

Mayken frowns. 'What happens if I do?'

'Stonecutter crushes your skull.'

The cabin is the size of a linen cabinet.

Mayken catches Imke's look of panic before the nursemaid rearranges her face. There are two shelves on the wall, one above the other. This is where they will sleep, stacked like crockery. Mayken climbs up onto the top bunk and surveys their domain.

As tiny as it is, the cabin contains a lamp, a slatted window and a narrow table and stool. Their chests are already waiting in the corner. Imke's chest contains three wheels of cheese, a spare skirt and a needlework box. Mayken's contains mostly silverware.

'Your father has a house of marble,' reassures Imke.

'Red and white roses and dapple mares.'

Imke nods. 'Gold plates and shaded courtyards.'

Because Imke looks as if she might cry and Mayken loves her, she reaches out her hand and strokes the tops of the old woman's missing fingers.

'Leave off my bloody fingers.'

'Tell me how you lost them,' Mayken wheedles. 'Just this once.'

'Guess right and I will.'

Mayken thinks a moment. 'You were feeding pigs and they were very, very hungry—'

'Not even close.'

It is very early. Mayken and Imke slumber yet. The nursemaid, a poor sailor, still cradles a bucket, her old head nodding. On the bunk above, her charge, lulled by the ship's motion, cleaves to the wall breathing new-sawn wood. They have spent their first night on board at anchor in the lee of the island of Texel. There's no improvement in the weather; the air is heavy with drizzle.

Batavia the beautiful is almost ready to depart. On the quarter deck stands the upper-merchant, Francisco Pelsaert, a fine-boned man in a splendid red coat. The rat-faced under-merchant, Jeronimus Cornelisz, is at his side, laughing and pointing. Pelsaert inclines his head and smiles politely. The skipper, Ariaen Jacobsz, with shaved head and drab garb, stands behind the two merchants. His meaty legs planted, eyes everywhere. The sailors look only to him.

The anchors are raised in readiness now. The *Batavia* wears them close to her sides, inverted. Her gun ports are closed. A break in the clouds, the sun catches the wet deck, the unfurling sails and the ship's stern lamp polished to a dazzle. This lamp will show light to the other ships in the *Batavia*'s convoy. Her sister ships are a day out ahead. The *Dordrecht*, the *Galiasse* (poor *Gravenhage*, storm damaged, is already turning back to port), the *Assendelft* and the *Sardam*. The little messenger ship *Kleine David* and the sturdy warship *Buren*. The *Batavia* will not be alone in the vast seas.

The frustration of the wait builds to the excitement of the leaving, now that her final treasure has been loaded. Twelve coin-chests of considerable weight and ridiculous worth have been rowed to the ship under guard, hoisted

under guard, lugged by six men apiece into the Great Cabin in the stern and set down with a guard to watch over them at all hours.

What else does the *Batavia* carry?

Goods, declared and otherwise. Plate, velvet, brocade, jewels, a Roman cameo the size of a soup bowl, silver bedposts, an ugly agate vase of vast worth. Crew, declared and otherwise. Passengers ditto.

What else does the *Batavia* carry?

Thirty cannons, iron and bronze, bow-chasers and big firers, some new-cast, some survivors from past campaigns. Beloved by their gunners, each cannon is wheel-blocked and lashed into place. Massive and fickle, there's no telling if they'll buck or leap or explode on firing. To deafen, blind or crush the men who serve them.

What else does the *Batavia* carry?

Salted meat in tight barrels, buckwheat and peas, three thousand pounds of cheese, hardtack biscuits (worm-castles, teeth-dullers) and pickled herring by the ton. Lining the hold, a stone archway for Castle Batavia.

All secure now the ship is under way.

The *Batavia* sails!

From a distance, a queenly glide; on board, the frantic effort of all hands. Roars and curses and trumpeted orders. The new ship must be learnt and felt. A week at sea and ship and crew will be one.

The *Batavia* heads out to meet the stormy Noord Zee with her cargo of wealth and wharf rats and souls.

Mayken, woken by the change in the ship's movement, slips out of her bunk. She peers at her nursemaid. The old woman sleeps on, mouth open, breath evil, cap crooked.

The corridor outside the cabin is empty. Mayken opens the heavy door to the deck with difficulty and fights her way

out. The quarter deck is heaving with Company men and cadets and first-class passengers. The main deck below is worse: sailors and before-the-mast passengers crush between the pig pen and the goat pen and the two upturned boats lashed on the deck.

The *Batavia* is picking up speed with a sudden southwesterly breeze that sends canvas scudding and sailors shouting and the deck tilting. Mayken reaches out for a balustrade and, on it, a carved wooden head, bearded, eyes popping.

'There, there,' she says to the head. 'Hold fast now.'

The predikant greets Mayken like a favoured member of his congregation.

Mrs Predikant adds sourly, 'Where is your nursemaid, Mayken van den Heuvel?'

'In the cabin, madam.'

Her fish mouth twitches. Her cold eye kindles. 'Is she unwell?'

'Oh, heartily, she's filled a whole bucket with sick.'

The grown daughter, listening, hides a smile.

'Your father will be overjoyed to see you in Batavia.'

'I don't know about that.'

'Your late mother—'

'Bloody flux,' says Mayken, one eye on the skipper as he aims a long spit overboard.

Mayken would love to spit like that.

She feels a soft touch on her arm. The grown daughter is saying something earnest about mothers and angels.

Mayken's attention is elsewhere. Rapt by the salvo of exquisite swearing erupting from the skipper.

Later, a rap on the cabin door and a tall boy outside.

'I am the upper-merchant's own steward.'

'Good for you,' says Imke.

'You are sick. May I come in?'

He's already over the threshold.

Mayken sits up on her bunk and watches the steward with interest. He has a narrow face and a wide mouth and prominent dirty-green eyes. His head is shaved and he goes barefoot. The steward smiles up at her, quick and wolfish.

He is all action, everywhere at once. Taking out the bucket and bringing it back sluiced clean with seawater. He mops the floor and brings hot ginger tea for Imke and kneels by her side. Her hand's in his as she sips.

'You're a good boy,' says the old woman. 'What's your name?'

'Jan Pelgrom.'

'And the upper-merchant sent you?'

'It was reported that a well-to-do passenger was roaming the decks without her nursemaid.'

Mayken hangs over the side of the bunk to see Imke's reaction but the old woman is asleep. Pelgrom extracts his hand from Imke's and wipes it on the blanket. He glances up at Mayken. 'What?'

'Have you been in the Great Cabin?'

'Of course.'

'You've seen the treasure chests?'

'I've seen *inside* them.' Pelgrom sniffs. 'The upper-merchant opened them to make sure there were coins, not turnips, inside.'

'You saw the silver?'

'I saw the glitter of a thousand fallen stars. There's other treasure, too, better treasure.'

'What better treasure?'

'The upper-merchant's jewels. Sapphires and rubies the size of duck eggs and a golden crown. He puts it on, just so.' Pelgrom mimes, his expression serious. 'He sleeps in it every night.'

Mayken smiles. 'He doesn't!'

'He keeps the keys to the treasure chests in the crack of his arse. Pirates wouldn't dream of looking there.'

Mayken roars laughing. In her bunk, Imke stirs.

Mayken whispers, 'I don't want to think about pirates.'

'Fair enough. When the pirates attack, it's worse for children.'

'How?'

'Pirates love small toes and fingers. If they take the ship, they'll cut them off and eat them. Then they'll hang you from the yardarm. Then they'll skin you, jug you like a hare and throw you overboard in pieces. Then they'll wear your face as a hat.'

Mayken is thrilled and horrified. 'I'm not so scared of pirates.'

'Are you not? I am.'

'Where else have you been in the ship, Jan Pelgrom?'

'Where haven't I been, Lady Mayken?'

'Down there,' she points to the floor, 'in the belly?'

Pelgrom looks at her slyly. 'The Below World?'

'What happens there?'

'First of all there's the gun deck. Where sailors bicker and curse, eat and sleep and the ship's barber lops off legs. Where the cook's galley gets hotter than Hell and the rats the cats can't catch grow big enough to steal babies.' He glances at her. 'The orlop deck below that is for cows and soldiers. And below that, there's the hold.'

They sit, listening to the wheeze and slump of Imke sleeping.

'I want to go,' says Mayken quietly. 'To the Below World.'

'You can't. You belong here, in the Above World.'

Mayken reddens. 'I can go wherever I want. Just like you can.'

'No, you can't. They'd bring you back and tie you to that bunk like a bad puppy.'

'They'd have to catch me.'

Pelgrom looks amused. 'You believe you could pass unnoticed on this ship packed with people?'

'Yes!'

'And what of the thousand misadventures that could befall a fine lady—'

'I like misadventures.' Mayken gathers a spit in her mouth, thinks twice, swallows it. 'And I'm not a fine lady.'

Pelgrom looks closely at Mayken with his mouth pursed and his eyes narrowed. The exact same way Imke would regard a salmon held up by a Haarlem fishmonger. Mayken tries to look bright-eyed and fresh.

'There is a way to go anywhere you want on this ship,' he says. 'Even to visit the Below World.'

'Tell me!'

Pelgrom smiles.