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THE SAFEKEEP

A Novel

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Wouden**



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PART I

The Netherlands, 1961

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ISABEL FOUND A BROKEN PIECE OF CERAMIC UNDER the roots of a dead gourd. Spring had brought a shock of frost, a week of wet snow, and now—at the lip of summer—the vegetable garden was shrinking into itself. The beans, the radishes, the cauliflower: browned and rotting. Isabel was on her knees, gloved hands and a stringed hat, removing the dying things. The shard nicked through her glove, pierced a little hole.

It wasn't a wound and it didn't bleed. Isabel took off her glove and stretched the skin of her palm tight, looking for a puncture. There was none, only a sting of pain that left quickly.

Back at the house she washed the piece and held it in watery hands. Blue flowers along the inch of a rim, the suggestion of a hare's leg where the crockery had broken. It had once been a plate, which was part of a set—her mother's favorite: the good chinaware, for holidays, for guests. When Mother was alive the set was kept in a glass vitrine in the dining room and no one was allowed to handle it. It had been years since her passing and the plates were still kept behind the closed doors, unused. On the rare occasion when Isabel's brothers visited, Isabel would set the table using everyday plates and Hendrik would try to pry open the vitrine and say, "Isa, Isa, come now, what's the point of having good things if you can't touch them?" And Isabel would answer: "They are not for touching. They are for keeping."

There was no explanation for the broken piece, for where it had come from and why it had been buried. None of Mother's plates had ever gone missing. Isabel knew this and still she checked now. The set was as it had been left: a deck of plates, bowls, a little milk jug. In the middle of each one—three hares, chasing one another in a circle.

She took the piece with her on the train to Den Haag the next day, wrapped in brown paper. Hendrik's car was parked outside the restaurant when she arrived, and he was at the wheel: windows down, smoking. Rubbing a thumb into his eye, looking like he was having a conversation with himself over something, a disagreement. His hair was longer than she liked it. She bent down and said, "Hello," and he startled and knocked his elbow and said, "Jesus Christ, Isa."

She got in the car next to him and kept her purse in her lap. He sighed out smoke and leaned over, kissed her three times—once on each cheek, and one more for good measure.

"You're early," she said.

He said, "That's a nice hat."

She touched it. "Yes." She'd worried over it, leaving the house. It was bigger than what she usually wore. It had a bright-green ribbon. "How are you, then?"

"Oh, you know." He ashed his cigarette out the window, leaned back. "Sebastian's been talking about going home."

Isabel touched her hat once more, her nape. She pushed a bobby pin further into place. Hendrik had called recently to tell her as much: Sebastian's mother's health taking a turn for the worse, Sebastian wanting to visit her. Sebastian wanting Hendrik to come with him. Isabel had not known what to say of it, and so she said nothing. And so she ignored the information and instead updated him about the state of the garden, about Neelke the maid and how she might be stealing things, about Johan's

disruptive visits that left her nonplussed, and about a recent car bill. Hendrik hung up quickly after that.

"I think I will have to go with him," he continued, not looking at her. "I can't let him go alone, I can't—"

"I found this," she interrupted, and took the wrapped package from her purse. Opened it for him, still in her palm. "Buried in the garden. Under one of the gourds."

He considered her for a moment, confused. Then, with a quick blink, a breath, took the piece and inspected it. Turned it over. "One of Mother's plates?"

"It is, isn't it?"

"All right," he said cautiously, and gave it back. On the other side of the street, a couple argued while they walked. The woman tried to hush the conversation, the man only raised his voice in response.

Isabel continued on a held breath: "I think Neelke—"

"Isabel." Hendrik turned to face her now, cigarette still in hand. The space between them clouded with smoke. "There's not going to be any maids left in the province if you keep on firing all of them with some imaginary ideas of—"

"Imaginary! I have been *stolen* from. They have—"

"Once," he said. "That happened *once*, and she was so young, Isa, come on. Haven't you been young?" She'd looked away from him and he ducked to catch her eye. He was putting on his funny voice. "Haven't I, once?"

They were not old now. She was nearly thirty, and he was younger still. The youngest of them all. She wrapped the piece back into the paper and put it back in her purse.

"And besides," he said. "It could've been in that ground a long time. Maybe Louis accidentally broke a plate once and panicked and—"

"Mother would've noticed," Isabel said.

Hendrik wasn't taking her seriously. "Well, I mean, who knows how the house was kept before we moved in."

"What do you mean, before?"

"Before we moved in. Someone else might've broken a plate. There were always only five of them, no? What happened to the sixth?"

"Those are—Hendrik. Those are Mother's plates."

"No, no. The house came with the . . ." He gestured vaguely. "Crockery. Chairs."

She had been eleven when they moved to the east of the country, and Louis—the oldest—thirteen. Hendrik was small for his age at ten, a hollow-cheeked and melancholy boy. Isabel hadn't thought he remembered much of those early days in the house. They mostly spoke of what came before: their childhood in Amsterdam, Father before he got sick, the smell of the city in December, a toy train that went round and round.

But he was right somehow. An odd angle of a thought that hadn't struck her before—they'd moved into a finished house, a full house. Nearly everything laid out: the sheets, the pots, the vases in the windowsills.

"But it was Mother's . . ." Isabel trailed off. Their mother had loved the hare's pattern. The house was full of it: hare figurines on sills, hares on the tiled back of the hearth.

Hendrik said, "We used to have—Oh, you remember, in Amsterdam, we had the plates with the bluebells. No, I think it belonged to—that woman Uncle Karel was married to back then, no? Didn't she get the house ready for us?"

"Uncle Karel was never married," Isabel said.

"Oh, briefly. Tall. Birthmark on her cheek. Would say hello with a yodel."

"No."

"She was with us for a while, before Mother joined. You really don't remember?"

She didn't remember a woman. She didn't remember the day of their arrival, or anyone showing them around, telling them where to go, where to sleep, why the beds were already made, already—

"Don't obsess over this," Hendrik said. "Isa? Don't do that."

She was pinching the skin on the back of her hand. She stopped. Cleared her throat, touched her hat a third time. "Well, maybe Louis knows."

"Right," Hendrik said, like the thought of Louis knowing anything was entertaining. "He's bringing a girl, did he tell you?"

Louis usually brought girls to their dinners. The last time they'd had a meal with just the three of them had been accidental: Louis's date stood him up. Isabel had thought, *Good riddance*, and then found that Louis—when not in the company of relative strangers—in fact had little to say to his siblings. It was a long and stilted evening. Hendrik got very drunk, first loud and then very quiet. She and Louis had had to deliver him home: Hendrik lolling in the back of Louis's car, throwing up in the gutter outside his building. Sebastian had leaned out the window in a dressing gown and called down, *Jesus, what have you two done to him?*

"I reserved for three," she told Hendrik. It was the principle of the thing, the fact that Louis yet again hadn't told her he'd be bringing a girl. Hadn't called her. He never called her.

"I know you did."

"It's bad manners."

"Hmm," Hendrik agreed.

"Is it the same one as last time? I didn't like her. Her neck was too wide."

Hendrik laughed at this. Isa hadn't meant it as a joke. He told her, "No. He's bringing a new one," and Isabel *tsk'd* and Hendrik smiled, closed-mouthed. "The love of his life this time, I'm told."

"Really."

"Really." The cigarette was finished. People were coming in and out of the restaurant, guided by a server in a buttoned suit. Hendrik said, "Shall we?"

"He's not inside yet."

"I know." Hendrik rolled up the window. "But shall we?"

They went. It still took another half hour before Louis showed up, during which Hendrik smoked three more cigarettes, drank two beers, chattered idly, and then started up again about whether or not he should join Sebastian on his trip to Paris, to see the ill mother. It would be an indefinite stay. The doctors weren't overly confident. He said this and kept eyeing Isabel in a way that felt like he knew she didn't want to hear it and still he wanted her to tell him: to either go or not go, to give him some sort of blessing. Isabel could not. Isabel said, "You must do what you want to do." She had a glass of water. She drank from it.

Hendrik said, "Would you be all right? If I were gone for a while?"

"Is that how you think I live? Breathlessly awaiting your next visit?"

"Isabel."

"You're gone now, too. You don't live at home, might as well be in Paris, really. Might as well—" Isabel wanted to say more but stopped herself. She had never been to Paris. She knew it was far. She knew that when *their* mother was sick, all Hendrik had had to do was take a single train home, and that he rarely did.

Hendrik touched her arm. "Never mind," he said. Then he picked up a new thread, a cheerful "So never mind that for now,

anyway tell me something new, something exciting. Tell me how's your man, Isa, tell me about that."

It brought her up short. "My—what?"

"Oh, you know. Old neighbor Johan."

A terrible kick of a feeling—as though she'd been caught in embarrassment: showing too much skin, speaking out of turn. She ignored the heat at the base of her neck and answered with a "Johan is certainly *not* my . . ."

Hendrik's gaze drifted, refocused on the entrance: Louis had arrived. He was having a stern conversation with the *maître d'*, leaning too far over the front desk, gesturing his argument. His new girl stood to the side, looking embarrassed and nervous, a shaky smile stuck on tightly. She had a violently peroxidized bob, a badly made dress—the bodice had been sewn too tight and the hems were messy. Her face was very red. She was pretty in a way men thought women ought to be pretty.

"Good lord," Isabel said, and Hendrik snorted. Louis looked up just then, to nod at them in indication to the manager. Hendrik waved good-naturedly. The couple made their way over, a fourth chair in tow, and the first thing Louis said was, "They said they didn't have enough *chairs*, can you believe how—"

"I reserved for three," Isabel said. Louis sat down in a huff, arranging his dinner jacket, and his girl hovered awkwardly—did an uneasy dance with the waiter who'd come with the extra chair, his trying to get the seat pushed under her, her not understanding, fumbling.

"They're a restaurant," Louis said. "They should have spare chairs."

"Hello, Louis, welcome," Hendrik said. The table stilled a moment. Then Louis answered with a sound, a short and frustrated sound, and got back out of his chair: leaned over to kiss Isabel,

shake Hendrik's hand. He smelled strongly of cologne. His hair was slicked back. His tie done tightly against the apple of his throat.

He said, "Hello. This is Eva."

The girl rose to shake hands. She tipped over the flower piece with her chest, said "Oh no," and tried to right it, accidentally pulled at the tablecloth when she sat back down. All the cutlery gave a shake.

Hendrik said: "Lovely to meet you."

"Oh, it's so good to meet you, both of you. I've heard so much, and I've been telling Louis how I've been wanting to meet you, haven't I, Louis? Haven't I been saying how much I—"

"She has," Louis confirmed. He was inspecting the menu.

"So you two have known each other for—" Hendrik started, and Eva jumped back in with an "Oh, a little while but it feels like forever, doesn't it, Louis? I always say, I always say how it's only been a few months but I'm sure we must've known each other in a past life because I'm so certain we're—"

"Shall we order?" Isabel said, waving down a passing waiter. Louis had kept them waiting. She wasn't used to eating so late in the evening, was hungry, all the more irritated for it.

Eva, caught midbreath, kept her smile intact. She turned even redder. "All the same," she said, and then trailed off, didn't finish her thought. When it was her turn to order she fussed and said she'd never heard of half the words on the menu, and leaned into Louis and said, "Oh, but you order, darling. You're always so smart about these things anyway."

They went with the scallops. When the food arrived Eva asked what scallops were, and Louis meant to answer just as Hendrik jumped in and said, "Oh, but guess."

Eva seemed caught out but then guessed, quietly: a potato of some sort?

No one said anything a moment, and then Hendrik jostled as though he'd been kicked under the table. He put his elbows on the table and asked Eva what it was that she did—if she studied, or worked, or lounged happily about all day—and Eva, in reply, cycled through a new flush, took her time in answering: putting down her cutlery, wiping her hands on her napkin, draining the last of her glass. It was her second, Isabel noted, or third. "Well," Eva said. And, "Well, you see—" And then a tumble of words: "Oh, must we talk work? So boring."

Isabel looked away, out the window. It was only the reflection of the restaurant, echoed back at them in muted shadows. She said, "You don't seem the type who can afford to be bored of it."

Louis said her name once, a dagger: "*Isabel.*"

Isabel met his gaze and offered no apology.

Louis said, "Eva is being humble. Aren't you?" He didn't wait for Eva to reply, answered for her: "Eva was a typist for Van Dongen. She stopped, recently, when ah, an . . . ah—"

"An aunt," Eva supplied.

"An aunt, yes, you see, passed on a sum of money—"

"Yes," said Eva, breathless.

"So this clever girl here is quite self-sufficient, Isabel. I don't care to think about what you were implying."

Isabel retreated into a sharp silence. The conversation continued—stopped and stuttered. Hendrik pushed at the tension, teased in a way that went over Eva's head. Louis clearly noted it, then ignored it: with every irritation he turned to Eva and immediately went soft with a wet-eyed look, an easing of the mouth. Isabel thought the expression made him look stupid. Louis had also brought a girl to their mother's funeral, years ago. She was in all the pictures now, and no one remembered her name. Not even Louis, the one time Isabel asked him. She'd been making an album.

When they were leaving the restaurant, Isabel excused herself to the bathroom. She hadn't had much wine—it always made her heavy-headed, mean—but the little bit she'd had, in the humid evening, settled over her like a fever. She wet a paper towel, pressed it to her neck.

Eva came in right then. Isabel threw away the towel. Eva didn't go into any of the cubicles: she leaned back against the counter, clumsy. She was drunker than Isabel. The crooked hemming of her dress showed even more like this. The lights gleaned brightly off the yolky shine of her hair. Isabel thought she could almost smell the peroxide.

"Tonight was lovely," Eva said.

"Mm," Isabel said, washing her hands.

"I really *have* been wanting to meet you, you know. You most of all. Louis has told me so much. You live in the old family home, right? In the house where you three grew—"

"I did not invite you here tonight."

Eva was caught in a breath, mouth moving a moment. There was a sheen of sweat under the line of her collar. Isabel was annoyed by the very act of looking at her right then. Annoyed by the tight seams of her dress, the dark roots of her hair, the painted eyebrows. *How humiliating*, she thought, *to have a bad performance show so plainly*.

Then Eva laughed. A single, humorless laugh. "Well!" she said. "Don't you speak your mind!"

Isabel dried her hands. "I don't mean to be rude." This was a lie. "But you will be gone soon." She made sure it came through clearly: "He will be bored of you, and I'll never hear of you again."

It didn't have the desired effect. "Oh," Eva said. She tilted her head. "We'll see." It wasn't the same voice she'd used before, not the same voice that laughed nervously over every exchange, not the same voice that apologized—*oh sorry, oh I'm*

so silly I'm sorry—when knocking over a glass, scraping a knife too loudly on the plate.

Isabel looked at her and caught a flash of something in her expression—a fissure, something, but it was gone very quickly and immediately Isabel couldn't say whether she'd imagined it. If it had been there at all.

Isabel made to leave. Eva didn't move from her perch, watched her go, gaze steady. Keen. Outside on the street it was hot and wet all at once, a misty drizzle in the air. The sea pushed into the streets, the smell of salt. Louis asked, "Where is Eva?" And Isabel said, "Am I responsible for her now?"

Hendrik hooked his arm into hers. She held on. Louis said, "You were terrible tonight. You were terrible to her."

"Oh, pooh," Hendrik said.

Louis took a step closer, trying not to raise his voice. "What will it *take* to get you two to—"

But then Eva joined them again. She was fixing her hat. It was very red. Her lipstick had been redone. It was noticeable now, how short she was in comparison: the three of them were all tall, all narrow. "What did I miss?" she said, and the voice was back again: higher than before, lilting. She seemed to think it made her softer. It didn't, Isabel thought. It didn't at all.

Louis sweetened at her presence and turned from them. "Nothing," he said. "What could possibly happen without you around?"

She liked that. Went peach-cheeked, leaned into him, then quickly insisted the night could not yet be over—it couldn't possibly be over! "Come over for drinks, oh please, oh, you must!"

"To—Louis's?" Hendrik asked. Louis had a sparse, small room in a second-floor apartment near his work. It was old and badly kept, a moldy shower, and he shared the house with a suspicious little man with a heavy brow and rimmed glasses. But the rent was covered by his engineering company, and Louis was often