

Until  
the  
Dawn



ELIZABETH CAMDEN



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Blessed are the pure in heart:  
for they shall see God.  
—Matthew 5:8

# 1

## **The Hudson River Valley Summer 1898**

“THAT’S WHERE THE BODY WAS FOUND, floating face-down in the river,” an ominous voice intoned. “He was stone-cold dead.”

Sophie sank behind the blackberry brambles to avoid being seen by the people ambling down the old pier toward the shore. She had hoped to take advantage of the river’s low tide to gather oysters but had paused as a tour guide led a group of sightseers closer to the infamous spot in the river. The village needed the income from the tourists, and it would be best not to have the wild splendor of the spot spoiled by the sight of a local girl gathering oysters. She scooted a little higher up the hillside to remain hidden behind the bushes.

Every morning, steamboats left the bustling city of New York, only forty miles downriver but a world away from the primeval splendor of this isolated inlet in the Hudson River Valley. The steamboats always stopped so the tourists could admire the famous vista looming just behind Sophie, where

one of the oldest mansions in America looked like a medieval fortress perched on the edge of the harsh granite cliff. Dating all the way back to 1635, when Dutch settlers arrived in North America, the gloomy sight of the Vandermark mansion had dominated this windswept cliff for centuries. Built of rough-hewn stone with steep gables and rambling wings, it had the grandeur of a Renaissance painting.

“There wasn’t a scratch on him,” the tour guide continued. “Karl Vandermark was in the prime of life, and no one could explain what caused his death. Was it murder? Suicide? The Vandermark curse? Karl Vandermark was one of the richest men in America and beloved by everyone in the village. It’s been sixty years since his body was found on this very spot, but there are still no answers.”

Sophie sighed in resignation. Why was everyone still fascinated by the Vandermark death so long ago? Perhaps it had something to do with the foreboding appearance of the Vandermarks’ mansion, which had been made famous by painters and photographers who couldn’t resist the gothic appeal of the isolated estate on the edge of a cliff. Named Dierenpark after the old Dutch word for paradise, the mansion was a familiar sight to tourists from all over the world.

The steamships usually stayed for only an hour, just long enough to let the visitors stretch their legs and buy a few trinkets from the stands set up near the Vandermark pier. In a few minutes, the sightseers would reboard the ship and be on their way farther north up the river.

It was an unusually large group of sightseers this morning. Most of them clustered around the tour guide at the base of the pier, but there was a group of ominous-looking strangers gathered close to the base of the cliff.

Marten Graaf was the most colorful of all the tour guides who led visitors up the river, and he was in fine form this morn-

ing, layering dark excitement into his voice as he told the tale directly to a young boy he pulled aside to point to the infamous spot in the river.

“The dead man’s son found the body,” he said. “Young Nickolaas Vandermark was only fourteen years old when he found his father floating in the river. Legend says the lad never got over it, but others suspect that the boy killed his own father, for he inherited forty million dollars the day his father died. There was no sign of foul play, but what would cause a healthy man to keel over in the prime of life? No one ever dared accuse Nickolaas Vandermark directly to his face, but something very bad was afoot. All the Vandermarks have come to terrible ends, and most of the folks around here think it was the Vandermark curse.”

Even from a distance, Sophie could see the young boy Marten was speaking to flinch and withdraw. Most tourists loved the spooky tales about the old mansion, but this boy seemed unusually apprehensive.

“The house has been empty since Karl Vandermark’s death,” the guide continued. “A lawyer swooped in to take the young lad away, and not one Vandermark has set foot in the house since. They didn’t take a stick of furniture or even a change of clothing for fear the curse would travel with them. Their clothes still hang in the closets; the papers are stacked on the desk as they were when the family fled all those years ago. Everything inside the house is exactly the same, like it’s frozen in time. That house has been sitting empty for sixty years, with only a few servants to keep the place from being plundered for the treasures still inside.”

“Why don’t they sell it?” a sightseer from the back of the group asked.

“Who would buy such a house?” Marten burst out, startling a flock of crows into flight. The crows rode a wind current high

above the cliff, where they wheeled around the mansion, their raucous cries echoing on the wind.

“Anyone who spends too much time in that house is likely to be tainted by the curse, as well,” Marten continued to the spellbound tourists. “The first groundskeeper died when he stumbled over a rake. The next died after his joints took on a disease that twisted his body so he could barely walk. Even now, the housekeeper who tends to the inside of the house has turned into a hunchback. And the girl who brings them food each day? Well, she was the prettiest lass in the whole village, but the curse has tainted her, too.”

Sophie blanched, stunned that Marten would draw her into the spooky tale told to the tourists. Mortification flooded her as she shrank even farther behind the blackberry brambles and prayed Marten wouldn’t spot her. She wouldn’t put it past him to point her out, just like any other attraction on today’s trip up the river.

“Oh yes, even Miss Sophie van Riijn, who spends only a few hours each day in the house, has been afflicted,” Marten continued. “She’s had three fiancés and every one of them came to a bad end. The last one died just a month before the wedding. His lungs seized up so bad he could no longer draw a proper breath of air. Now no man in the village will come within a yard of Miss Sophie for fear of the curse.”

Sophie averted her eyes, wishing she could block her hearing, as well. It was infuriating that Marten was exploiting Albert’s death this way. Her heart still ached for Albert, a kind and gentle man who never put any stock in the curse. They had been planning a life together, and Sophie had such hopes for becoming a wife, a helpmeet, and a mother. Instead, she helped tend Albert during his final painful months.

If he were alive, Albert would tell her not to let the rumors dim her spirit, but to go out and find another man to love. But

it was getting hard. She was twenty-six years old, and her string of broken engagements might be an intriguing tale for the tourists, but it was a deep and unrelenting ache for her.

“Did he go to a doctor?” The timid boy’s question broke her dismal train of thought. “The one with the bad lungs? Did he go to a doctor?”

“Well of course he did!” Marten exclaimed. “He was dying, boy. The curse had gotten ahold of him and there was no hope. The man was a goner.”

Even from a distance Sophie could see the boy’s eyes widen in horror, and she ached with sympathy. This boy appeared to be terrified and, oddly, it seemed he was alone.

Sophie stood. She’d rather stay hidden than risk being pointed out as the tragic victim of three failed engagements, but she wouldn’t let Marten terrorize a child in order to boost his tips. Her skirts brushed through the cattails as she made her way to the sandy shoreline and straight to the boy’s side. The tour guide looked stunned to see her, and a guilty flush stained his cheeks.

“Ease up, Marten,” she muttered as she passed him and drew the boy aside. He was a handsome lad, no more than eight or nine years old, with dark hair and enormous gray eyes that remained locked on the house at the top of the cliff. He barely reached her elbow, and she crouched down to be on eye level with him.

“There now,” she soothed. “You know that man is just spinning tales in hopes of getting more tips, don’t you? There’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“It looks like a scary place to live,” the boy said tightly.

Sophie laughed. “But you don’t have to live there, right? Tonight you’ll go home with your parents and sleep safe and sound in your own bed. Everything will feel better once you’re home, don’t you think? What’s your name, lad?”



“Pieter,” he said. “Pieter spelled with an *I*.”

“Pieter with an *I*! What a fine Dutch name, just like the saint. Even when he was afraid, St. Peter was a good man, wasn’t he? There’s no shame in being a little scared now and then.”

The boy’s gaze remained riveted on the mansion. His lower lip wobbled, and tears pooled in his eyes, on the verge of spilling over. This sort of trepidation seemed unnatural. Something was wrong with this boy.

“Come now, what’s got you so upset?” she asked softly. “It can’t all be about that silly old house. I always feel better when I talk to someone about what’s worrying me. You can tell me anything. I promise not to laugh.”

The boy glanced over her shoulder, and she turned to follow his gaze.

Oh dear . . . they were being watched.

The gang of tough men stood only a few yards away, glaring at her with hard eyes. There was only one woman with them, a timid-looking young lady who seemed as anxious as the boy. The half dozen men in the group looked like prizefighters, with massive shoulders and no necks. One of the men wore a fine gentleman’s suit, but he looked no less fierce as he scrutinized her. There was no family resemblance between this boy and the hard strangers. Something was wrong. She turned back to the boy.

“Are you with those people behind me?” she whispered.

He nodded.

“Are they your family?”

He shook his head, and a trickle of ice curled around Sophie’s heart.

“Where are your parents?”

“My mother is dead, and my father went back to the village. My father is really angry.”

A man from the gang of strangers started heading their way.

He was dressed in flawless attire, but dread settled in the pit of her stomach as she eyed the man coming toward them. “This isn’t your father?” she asked as he drew closer.

“That’s Mr. Gilroy. He’s my father’s butler. He always watches me.”

Sophie stood, moving to stand in front of the boy. This boy seemed frightened beyond all reason, and if he was in danger, she wouldn’t stand aside.

Mr. Gilroy seemed taller and more daunting as he stood before her. For all his fine clothing and starched collar, a sense of barely leashed power radiated from the imposing man.

“Thank you for comforting the boy,” Mr. Gilroy said in a gentle voice with a hint of a British accent. “I’m afraid young Pieter doesn’t care for ghost stories, and your kindness is much appreciated.”

Had there ever been a more courteous voice? It had a velvety, calming quality that set her nerves at ease.

“You’re welcome. Most of the tourists enjoy tales about the old Vandermark estate, but some of us are more sensitive. Your group is touring the river, I take it?”

There was a slight pause. “Not precisely.”

She waited for Mr. Gilroy to elaborate, but he said nothing. Tourism had been their village’s salvation ever since the Vandermarks had abandoned the estate and closed down their timber mills, paper mills, and iron mines. The fishing and oyster industry had helped fill the void, but even those had collapsed in the past decade.

When Sophie’s Dutch ancestors had come to America in the seventeenth century, the Hudson River was so bountiful that a basket dipped in the river could scoop up striped bass, perch, and bluefish. But all that was a thing of the past now. As Manhattan filled its riverfront with factories, the fish farther up the river died off and the oyster beds failed. Now the village

needed revenue from the tourists who flocked to the Hudson River Valley to catch a glimpse of the unspoiled wilderness north of the city.

Sophie brushed back a strand of her blond hair that had broken free in the morning breeze. “Well, I hope you have a nice visit to New Holland. It’s a lovely village, and most travelers enjoy the shops and cafés.”

Pieter kicked the ground, scattering a spray of sand. “My father won’t enjoy it. He never enjoys anything.”

“That’s enough,” Mr. Gilroy said firmly but not unkindly. “Your father has been very sick, but he is doing what’s right. He isn’t doing this to punish you.”

To her horror, the boy’s face crumpled, and the tears finally erupted. “I just want to go home,” he sobbed. “I want to go live with Grandpa again. Please, Mr. Gilroy, please, can’t you take me back home?”

She couldn’t help herself. Never had she heard so much misery in a voice, and she gave in to the urge to console him. Hunkering back down, she slid an arm around the boy’s narrow shoulders. “There now, go ahead and have a good cry if it will make you feel better,” she soothed.

There was something terribly wrong with this boy. He was too old to be blubbering in public, and none of the adults who traveled with him seemed interested in extending comfort.

She looked up at Mr. Gilroy. “Will the boy’s father return soon? If you arrived on that steamboat, I don’t know how much longer it will be here.”

“We didn’t come on the steamboat,” Mr. Gilroy said. “The carriage we arrived in can’t scale the hill, so my employer has gone to the village to get a lighter one.”

She blinked in confusion. “Why do you want to scale the hill? There’s not much up there but the Vandermark estate, and it isn’t open for visitors.”

“It will be open for us,” Mr. Gilroy said.

“No, I’m afraid Dierenpark is entirely closed to the public. It has been for the past sixty years.”

“It will be open for us,” Mr. Gilroy repeated, not so gently this time. A note of steel lay beneath the velvet of his voice.

Oh dear, this was going to be awkward. This wouldn’t be the first group of people disappointed they couldn’t tour the mansion, but it was impossible. The narrow, rutted lane leading up the cliff was treacherous, and even though the Vandermarks had supplied funds to maintain the house and keep it safe from troublemakers, it was in no condition for visitors.

“There’s not much to see,” Sophie hedged. “The crows have taken up residence in the east wing and have a nasty habit of attacking strangers. There are some postcards for sale if you are curious about what the Vandermark mansion looks like up close.”

“Thank you, but we will tour the mansion shortly and have no need of postcards.”

Sophie took a step back. The staff hired to maintain the estate had been walking a fine line for decades, and strangers were almost always discouraged. Almost . . . but not always. Any group that traveled with a butler must be people of means, and Sophie sometimes made exceptions for people willing to pay ridiculous sums to take a peek inside the house. The village needed all the revenue it could get.

“On rare occasions, arrangements can be made for a very select type of visitor,” she said. “It takes some time to arrange, for the estate is never open to visitors who arrive unannounced.”

“We’re not visitors,” Mr. Gilroy said in an implacable voice. “We are the Vandermarks. And we’ve come home to stay.”



Sophie scrambled up the steep footpath, heedless of the vines and shrubbery that slapped at her skirts as she raced toward

the top of the cliff. Rotted with centuries of maple roots and corroded by runoff, it was a treacherous path, but she had to hurry. Mr. Gilroy had told her that Quentin Vandermark, the great-grandson of the man found floating dead in the river, intended to take up residence in the house immediately. Today!

Which was a huge problem. No one had expected the family to ever return, and well . . . over the years, certain liberties had been taken with the house. Mostly by her. Some of it could be hidden, but she'd have to hurry. She hiked her skirts in one hand, using the other for balance as she scaled the hillside with careful steps. With each step higher, the air got sweeter and the leaves grew greener.

Despite the blather told to the tourists, Dierenpark wasn't haunted. Quite the opposite, in fact. Sophie had no explanation for it, but every square inch of the Vandermark estate bloomed with health and abundance. It seemed like the blossoms were more vibrant, the grass softer and greener, and the fruit grown on the estate sweeter than anything harvested in the village.

A screen of weather-beaten juniper trees provided a wind-break at the edge of the property, sheltering Dierenpark and creating an isolated haven of beauty and peace at the top of the cliff. Built of granite block, Dierenpark was a sprawling mansion with gables, turrets, and mullioned windows. The oldest portion of the house had been built in 1635, but over the centuries, it had been expanded to become a rambling mansion, one of the largest private homes in America.

Tearing across the meadow, she burst through the front door and barreled down the center hallway to the sun-filled kitchen at the rear of the house. It was in the newest part of the mansion, with plenty of windows to let in natural light. A fire burned in the brick hearth, and bundles of herbs hung alongside copper pots dangling over the scrubbed wooden work table.

"The Vandermarks are here!" Sophie gasped, doubling over

from her frantic dash up the side of the cliff. “Quick, get the merchandise out of here, and hide everything else.”

Florence Hengeveld pushed herself off the stool where she’d been bagging up Dutch cookies to sell to the tourists. With a face withered like a dried apple and a widow’s hump slowing her walk, Florence had been the estate’s housekeeper for forty years. She was the “hunchback” mentioned by the tour guide. But Florence wasn’t a victim of the Vandermark curse. She was merely old, and old women often had a widow’s hump.

“What do you mean?” Florence asked. “The Vandermarks’ lawyer is here?”

For the past sixty years, the only contact they’d had with the Vandermarks was from a series of attorneys who paid their wages and settled the annual tax bill. So why had the family suddenly returned? Sophie bit her lip, praying they hadn’t heard rumors about the equipment she’d installed on the roof of the mansion.

“They’re here in person,” she said. “Quentin Vandermark and his son. I thought they were living in Europe, but they’re back, and they intend to take up residence today. Their carriage can’t get up the hill, so they’ve gone to get a lighter one and will be here any moment. Quick! Hide anything having to do with the tourists. I’ll find Emil to help.”

“He’s working on the garden fence,” Florence said as she shuffled to a cupboard, dumping the bags of Dutch cookies and shortbread out of sight.

Sophie ran outside, calling for Emil Broeder, a simple-hearted man with a rapidly expanding family, including twin boys and a baby daughter only two months old. He and his family lived in the old groundskeeper’s cabin a few acres away.

She found him repairing the fence that kept deer from plundering Sophie’s herb garden. In short order she dispatched him to the house to hide all evidence of their tourism business.

But the biggest problem was on the roof, and it wasn't exactly something Sophie could hide. She would just hope the Vandermarks wouldn't notice until she could smooth the waters. Surely, with so grand an estate, they'd never even notice the paltry structures Emil had helped her erect on the roof, would they?

Because in her long line of failed engagements and thwarted dreams, her tiny weather station on the top of the Vandermark mansion was what gave meaning and purpose to Sophie's world. In a dying village where economic opportunities dwindled by the year, Sophie was part of a grand, national experiment to create the first system of accurate and reliable weather forecasts for anyone who chose to buy the morning newspaper. She'd never asked permission to install the weather station, but the roof of Dierenpark was now one of three thousand monitoring stations manned by volunteers who gathered climate data in hopes of creating accurate weather predictions that would make the world a safer place for everyone.

And she prayed Quentin Vandermark would not interfere with that.



Sophie heard the Vandermarks before she saw them. The clapping of horse hooves and the bumping of carriage wheels across the rocky front drive sounded like impending doom. Florence had put a kettle on to heat, and a bowl of Sophie's blueberry muffins and a Dutch sweet cake were at the center of the table, still warm from the oven and lending a comforting aroma of sweetened vanilla to the room.

Sophie sat at the kitchen table, rotating a mug of tea between her suddenly icy fingers. Why was she so anxious? They hadn't done anything wrong . . . or at least, they hadn't done anything the Vandermarks explicitly forbade them to do. It had been easy to feel like she belonged in this wonderful old house, but

all that would change now that the real owners had returned. Sixty years—it had been *sixty years*—how was she supposed to know they would return with no warning?

Footsteps thudded up the porch steps. She had already unlocked the front door, since it would seem presumptuous to force Quentin Vandermark to knock for admittance into his own house.

He didn't knock. The front door banged open, and more heavy footsteps clomped on the hardwood floors.

"Where is she?" An angry voice roared through the old house, echoing off the walnut paneling in the grand foyer and hurting her ears.

Sophie sprang to her feet and headed to the entrance hall, where the group of imposing men trudged into the house. Mr. Gilroy passed her a tense smile, but the man whose bellow had shaken the rafters was a stranger to her. He was a slender man who leaned heavily on a cane as he lurched around the entrance hall. With dark hair and stormy gray eyes, his lean face was drawn tight with anger.

"Where is she?" he roared again as he limped toward the formal parlor, raising his cane long enough to strike at the draperies. Dust motes swirled in the air, and she feared the fragile silk might rip and come tearing down.

"Are you looking for me?" she asked calmly. Fighting fire with fire was rarely a good idea, and Sophie refused to do it.

He whirled around, shooting her a scorching glare. "Are you the one who has been telling ghost stories to my son? The one who terrified him so badly we can't get him out of the carriage?"

His voice lashed like a whip, and he was so daunting it was hard to look him in the face. Even the burly men in the grand foyer seemed cowed.

"Somehow I doubt I'm the cause of the boy's anxiety, Mr. Vandermark."



The man's eyes narrowed as he plodded across the parquet floor to scrutinize her. He would be a handsome man were he not so ferociously angry. With a lean face and high cheekbones, he looked like something straight out of a Brontë novel, and apparently he had the temper to match.

"Are you the person responsible for turning my home into an obscene tourist attraction? The one selling postcards and cookies down by the pier?"

"My name is Sophie van Rijn. I provide meals to the staff at the house, but I am not on your payroll, nor am I the cause of whatever has put you into a foul mood. I'd be happy to welcome you inside and get you all something to eat and drink. I imagine you are tired after your journey."

Mr. Gilroy stepped forward, unruffled by the raging tantrum of his employer. "Thank you, Miss van Rijn. We would be grateful."

Quentin Vandermark acted as though he hadn't heard. Leaning both hands on his cane, he scanned the impressive rooms on either side of the entrance hall. He seemed particularly fascinated by the portraits of a dozen Vandermark ancestors from earlier centuries, their powdered wigs looking strange to modern eyes. What must this man be thinking as he saw his ancestral estate for the first time? Sophie had been coming to this house since she was a child, but everything was new to Mr. Vandermark. He would need a guide just to find his way through the forty-room mansion.

"If you'll follow me to the kitchen, we have a kettle warming and some fresh blueberry muffins. I'm sorry we did not know of your arrival or we'd have prepared the dining room. Will Pieter be joining us?"

Mr. Vandermark tore his gaze from the old portraits. "He is in the carriage with his governess. I don't want him in the house until we establish the ground rules. My son has had a difficult

year and is prone to fits of anxiety. Filling his head with tales of his ancestors floating dead in the river and people turning into hunchbacks from setting foot in this house is going to stop at once. Is that clear, Miss van Rijn?”

“Perfectly.”

“And whoever is selling postcards with photographs of this home will cease and desist immediately.”

Sophie tilted her head. “Artists and photographers have been featuring this house on their postcards for decades. We aren’t responsible for that.”

Reaching inside his coat, he grabbed a postcard and waved it in her face. “This postcard shows the *inside* of the house. Someone let them in to take those photographs, and I demand to know who.”

Sure enough, the postcard he clenched in his fist was of the drawing room, sunlight streaming through the windows and fresh flowers in vases placed about the room. For scale, a little blond girl stood beside the fireplace, a bouquet of tulips in her hands. The photograph had been taken by her father more than twenty years ago, and Sophie was the little child, but she doubted Mr. Vandermark would recognize her.

“I believe that photograph was taken decades ago,” she said. “I doubt you’ll discover who is responsible. There has been a lot of turnover here at the house.”

“So I gather. Dead people stumbling over rakes and dying of terrible diseases. Such charming tales you tell.”

“Mr. Vandermark, the tour guides on the steamboats are all from Manhattan. If you have a complaint with their services, you will need to return to the city and take it up with them. All we do is tend to the house. Florence has the tea ready, if you’d like to follow me to the kitchen.”

She didn’t wait for a reply, but given the lumbering footsteps behind her, the men followed. Both Florence and Emil rose as

they heard the group approach. Emil swept the cap from his head, brushing his straw-colored hair from his forehead with a nervous hand.

“This is Florence Hengeveld, the housekeeper here for more than forty years. And Emil Broeder has been keeping the grounds ever since he took over for his father two years ago.”

“Tea?” Florence asked, lifting the copper kettle. The scent of Earl Grey filled the kitchen as Sophie began slicing a loaf of *ontbijtkoek*, a Dutch sweet cake spiced with cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg.

Mr. Vandermark kicked out a stool from beneath the work table and twisted around to sit. His teeth clenched as he rubbed his knee, but he ignored the basket of blueberry muffins Florence pushed toward him.

“And what is *your* role here?” he asked, piercing Sophie with narrowed eyes.

She hedged. Apparently none of them had noticed the weather station on the roof, and now wasn’t the time to discuss it. “My mother was the cook here before she died. There really isn’t need for a permanent cook anymore, but I’ve always loved cooking, and Florence lets me use the kitchen to prepare a few meals for the staff each day. I also do a little baking now and then.”

He reached inside his coat and then threw a packet of Dutch cookies on the counter. “Are you responsible for those?”

Her mouth went dry. She wasn’t the only one to sell goodies to the tourists who stepped onto the pier each morning, but Sophie’s baked goods were always the most popular. She sold cookies and sweet cakes to the vendors who manned the stalls near the pier and then gave the proceeds to her father. That money had paid for the town’s only telegraph station.

“I am, but I haven’t done anything wrong,” Sophie said. “I don’t use Vandermark money for the ingredients, and there is no crime in selling food to hungry travelers.”

“Then let me outline the *crimes* for which I have evidence,” he said in a clipped voice. “The servants at Dierenpark have participated in exploiting my home as an obscene tourist attraction. You have fueled malicious slander about the tragedies in my family. You have used this house in a manner I never authorized. You’ve done nothing wrong? Miss van Rijjn, let me count the ways. Your wrongs surpass the depth and breadth and height a soul can reach. . . .”

His ability to mangle the immortal sonnet of Elizabeth Barrett Browning would have been amusing if she weren’t so intimidated by him. She forced her voice to remain calm.

“I’ve never met someone who can take one of poetry’s most remarkable passages about the purity of love and twist it into embittered screed on the spot,” she said.

He quirked a brow, and for the first time, she saw a gleam of respect light his handsome features. “We all have our talents,” he said dryly. The flash of humor was fleeting. His face iced over again as he fired another question at her. “How many tourists have you allowed into my house?”

“We don’t allow tourists inside,” Sophie said, wincing at the memory of telling Mr. Gilroy that on special occasions some tourists were welcomed in. Mr. Vandermark rose from the stool and stalked down the hall leading to the parlor where they relaxed once their daily chores were finished. It was an impressive room, with a bank of windows overlooking the river and a fire burning in the brick fireplace. A table beneath the window was full of antiques—a large Delft platter from the seventeenth century, a silver soup tureen embellished with arching dolphins for handles, even a few candlesticks from a medieval monastery. At the front of the table was a small card printed in Sophie’s own handwriting.

*Please don’t touch.*

It was proof they had allowed visitors into the home.

Mr. Vandermark stiffened as he glared at the note. He picked it up and carried it toward her, leaning heavily on his cane as he approached.

“If you allow no visitors, which of the servants need a reminder such as this?” he asked in a tight voice.

Heat flushed her face. She needed to confess what they’d been doing, but there wasn’t an ounce of compassion or kindness in his expression. “On rare occasions we invite a select type of visitor—”

He cut her off. “And *on rare occasions* I believe the staff at Dierenpark are conspiring to violate every principle of loyalty on earth. You’re fired. You’re all fired. You have ten minutes to get off my property, and don’t ever come back.”

Sophie flinched. This estate was her refuge, her paradise on earth.

Mr. Gilroy stepped out of the shadows. “Quentin, perhaps we should wait . . .”

Sophie held her breath, praying for a reprieve. Mr. Vandermark seemed to sag and weaken as he hobbled toward a kitchen stool, easing onto it with a grimace. His face was ashen and drawn in pain. Perspiration beaded on his face, and when he dabbed at it with a handkerchief, Sophie noticed his hand trembled. Perhaps it was her imagination, but it seemed he was barely ahead of an avalanche of pain and sorrow gathering behind him. When he finally spoke, his voice was devoid of anger.

“Loyalty is important to me,” he said with an exhausted, hollow tone. “I need to make this house a safe place for my son, and I don’t trust any of you. It is clear that the misuse of Dierenpark has been occurring for decades. I want you out of here. The lot of you.”

Behind her, Emil let out a mighty whoosh as though he’d been punched in the gut. Emil had lived his entire life on this

estate. How was he going to get his wife and three children out in the space of ten minutes? Where would they go?

But even worse was Florence. The old woman had crumpled into a chair, her head sagging on her hunched shoulders. Florence had lived most of her life in this house. She started to quietly weep.

Sophie blanched as two of the fearsome men lumbered toward her. Instinctively, she stepped back. She'd never had such menacing glares directed at her, and it was intimidating.

"All right," she said quietly, picking up her cloak and folding it over her arm. "You'll find plenty to eat in the larder, and there is firewood on the back terrace. I'll help Florence collect her things, and we will be on our way."

But she would be back first thing tomorrow morning. There had to be a way to defuse the acrimony simmering inside Quentin Vandermark, and she just needed a bit of time to plan her attack. Her weapons wouldn't be menacing bodyguards or seething anger. She wouldn't fight on his level. But that didn't mean she intended to surrender. The real battle would begin tomorrow morning, and she wouldn't be put off easily.