

Chapter 1

The empty house

‘Come on, Mary!’ said Andy. ‘Look at the time. We’ve got to get back to the hotel. Mum said eight o’clock at the latest. It’s almost that now.’

‘Just a minute,’ said Mary. ‘I want to see what’s in here. Quick!’ She took her brother by the hand and pulled him through the half-open front door of a house.

‘Hey ...’ began Andy. ‘Mary, what are you doing? We can’t go in here. This is someone’s house.’

Sometimes he couldn’t believe the things his sister did. She was always getting them into trouble¹ – and he usually had to get them out.



Andrew, always called Andy, and Mary Lawson were spending the evening walking round the streets of Amsterdam near their hotel. They were on the Lijnbaansgracht when Mary saw the half-open door and pulled her brother inside.

They looked round the room in the half light of the evening.

‘Well, no one’s living here,’ said Mary. ‘But look – there are builders working here. Maybe they just forgot to shut the door.’ There was no furniture in the room, just a lot of builders’ things. ‘Let’s have a look round,’ she said. ‘It’ll be interesting to see inside a Dutch house.’

‘Mary!’ said Andy. ‘What if someone comes?’

‘No one’s going to come,’ said Mary.

‘But Mum’s going to be really angry if we’re not back,’ said Andy. ‘She’ll just say that we can’t go out any more without her. Then we’ll have to stay in the hotel all the time and that’ll be really boring.’

‘OK, OK,’ said Mary. ‘You’re right, as usual.’

Andy turned and started to go out of the door, but suddenly he stopped and pushed Mary back into the room.

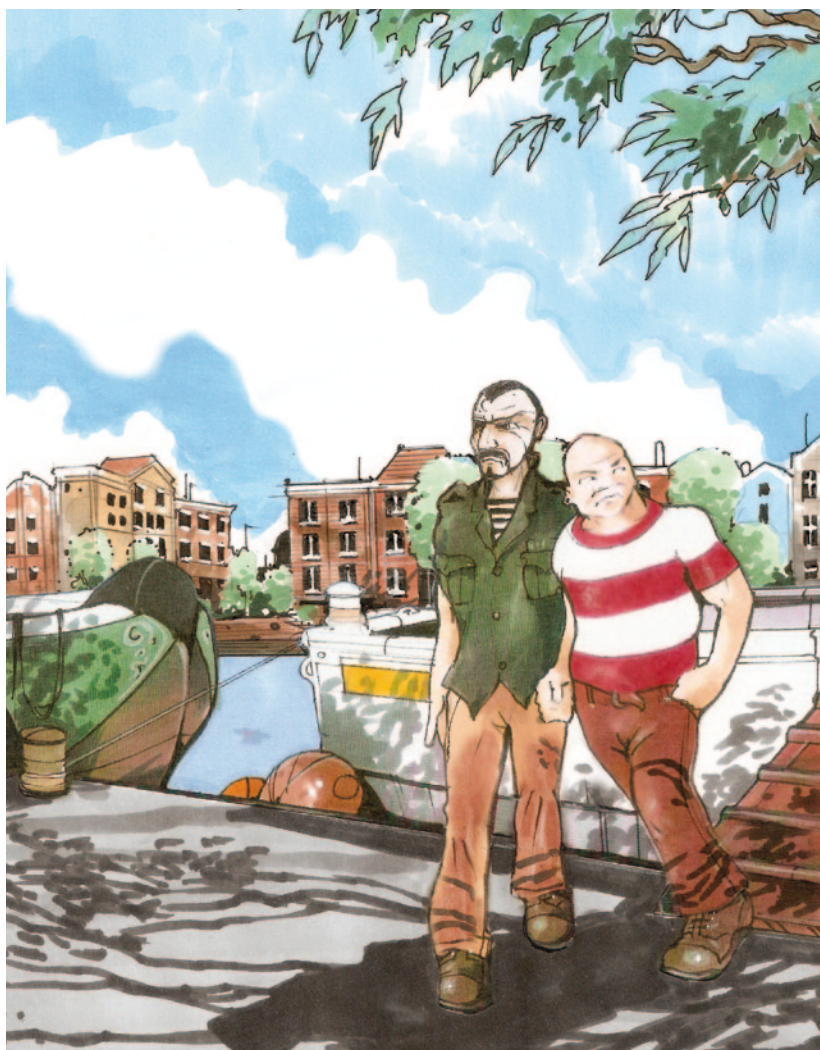
‘Someone’s outside,’ he said very quietly.

Together they looked through the half-open door, careful that no one could see them. It wasn’t their house: they didn’t want anyone to ask them what they were doing there.

Amsterdam is an unusual city. It has streets, houses, shops, restaurants and cinemas, like other cities; but, because it is very flat, it has lots and lots of bicycles and not so many cars; and it also has a lot of canals and a lot of boats on the canals.

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Excerpt
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Lijnbaansgracht is really the name of the canal. There is a narrow² street with houses down one side of the canal, and the backs of some houses down the other side. And there was now a boat tied up outside the house that Mary and Andy were in. Two men were getting off the boat. One of the men was short but very big. He had a neck like a bull, fingers like



large bananas, and almost no hair. He looked strong. The other man was taller but, not so wide.³ He had long hair tied back behind his head. He looked strong too.

The shorter man stayed near the boat; the tall one walked across to the houses. Mary and Andy moved back behind the door, but the man didn't come in. They heard the noise of a door opening. He was going into the house next door. Mary and Andy looked through the door again.

After a few moments they heard the short man call across to the house.

'Jake,' he said. 'Jake, is everything OK?'

'Fine, Os,' Jake called back.

They were speaking English but not like Mary and Andy's English. It sounded strange: the pronunciation was different. Jake went back and then he and Os went down into the boat.

'Let's go,' said Andy, starting to go out of the door and onto the street.

But Mary put out a hand and pulled him back.

'No. Wait,' she said. 'They're coming out again.'



Jake and Os came back out of the boat carrying something. Andy and Mary couldn't see what it was, but it was large and quite difficult to carry. It was tall and wide and quite thin, and there was cloth⁴ all round it so you couldn't see what it was. The men looked up and down the street carefully. It seemed that they didn't want anyone to see them.

'OK?' asked Os. 'Is anyone coming?'

'No,' said Jake. 'Let's go.'

Almost running, the men came quickly across the street and into the house next door.

'Now,' said Andy.

'OK,' said Mary.

The teenagers ran out through the door of the empty house and turned left down the street. They didn't look back. At the end of the street they turned the corner and Andy looked at his watch.

'We're really late now,' he said. 'Mum will kill us.'

Their hotel wasn't far away. They ran quickly in through the front door and up the stairs to their room. Andy already had the key in his hand when they got to the door.

He looked at Mary.

'What are we going to say to Mum?' he asked.

'She'll be all right,' said Mary. 'She won't mind.' But she didn't really think so.

Andy gave her a disbelieving look and opened the door.