



## *Chapter One*

Johanna was sitting on the windowsill, in her little attic room, waiting for the clock on the church steeple to strike twelve. It was a very warm summer day and her window was opened wide. From her window, Johanna had the best view of the church steeple in the whole town. That was why it was her favorite spot.

Once when her father was a little boy, he had slept in that same room and had sat on the win-

dowsill waiting for the clock to strike twelve. He had waited for the doors under the church steeple to open, just as Johanna was doing now. And he had counted the twelve little riders as they rode out on their white horses. Johanna always thought of her father at this time of the day, as she sat on the windowsill.

It had been a long time since she had been home in America with her parents. She couldn't even remember her father very clearly. He was a sea captain, and because he had become very lonesome on his long voyages, he had decided to take Johanna's mother with him on one of them. So he had sent Johanna to Holland to visit her grandparents.

She remembered as clearly as if it happened yesterday how she had said good-bye to her father and mother. She had kissed them both and tried very hard to show them a happy face.

While her father had held her in his arms, he had said to her, "Thank you very much, my little Johanna, for giving me Mother for such a long time. Think of me when you are in my country and don't forget to give my very special love to the little riders in the church steeple. Help Grandfather take care of them, so that when I come with Mother to bring you back home, they will

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ride for us, whenever the church clock strikes." Now Johanna had been in Holland more than four years. Soon after she had come to her grandparents the war in Europe had broken out, and less than a year later, in the early days of May, Holland had been invaded by the German army. For the people of Holland, who had always loved their freedom more than anything else in the world, the presence of the German soldiers was very hard to bear.

From her window seat Johanna looked down over the town. It was an old town with a canal around the center. Behind the canal were the strong fortifications that had once protected the town from enemies that threatened from outside. Her grandparents' house stood at the marketplace, where all the old houses were huddled together, as if they were leaning on each other for support. There were few people in the streets, mostly women and children. It was dangerous these days for men to be out in the streets, since at any time they could be seized and taken far away to work for the Germans.

Johanna looked again at the hands of the big clock on the church steeple. Soon it would be twelve o'clock. After the clock had struck twelve times, the little doors under the steeple would

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