

BAANTJER

DeKok
and the Lost
Child

Written by Peter Römer

Translated by Kenneth Kuhn

De Fontein

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It was New Year's Eve.

Detective Jurre DeKok stood at the window and looked out over the canal. No one was out on the street. They were all sitting in their homes behind the glowing windows, waiting for the clock to strike twelve so they could escape the obligatory coziness of the eve. Every so often, an illegal firework went off in the distance and a lone bang echoed across the canal. Drizzle swirled in the yellowish light of the streetlamp, but that would stop few from taking to the streets later to wish one another a Happy New Year.

He disliked New Year's Eve. It was a moment to look back at the past year, and while he realized he was fortunate that both he and his wife were in good health, he also saw the countless faces of the less fortunate, many of them victims of fatal crimes. Murders that he had investigated, some of which, unfortunately, he had been unable to bring to a successful conclusion. Not yet at least. Maybe the new year would bring new opportunities. He preferred to focus on the future.

His wife interrupted his musings and asked him to take a seat at the table, which was laden with bowls lined with

chicken patties and deviled eggs, a fish platter, and other treats she traditionally served on the last day of the year. And, of course, the *oliebollen* and apple turnovers DeKok had picked up that afternoon at one of the countless pastry stalls that sprang up around the city as the year drew to a close.

Mrs. DeKok's sister had come from The Hague to experience the festivities in the capital, but fortunately, Dick Vledder had also found time to drop by. He had joined the small group enthusiastically, warning on arrival that he would be leaving at midnight to paint the town red. He had a healthy plateful of treats in his lap and was doing most of the talking. DeKok had filled the glasses and was just about to make a toast when the doorbell rang.

Mrs. DeKok looked up in surprise. 'Were you expecting someone?'

'Not that I know of. I'll take a look.'

'The best guests always arrive late,' his sister-in-law called after him. But in this case, she was clearly wrong. The man standing at the door looked shabby and miserable, and soaking wet due to the rain that had continued to nag throughout the evening. His wet hair hung in wisps over his forehead and two bleary yellowed eyes peered out from above the man's neglected beard.

'DeKok?' the man asked hoarsely.

The grey detective nodded kindly, but intuitively kept some distance, wondering if he knew the faded figure standing on his doorstep from somewhere.

'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'You have to help me, DeKok. They're after me.'

'Who's after you?'

‘Two young guys, they’re after me. They want to kill me.’

DeKok looked around but saw no one else along the canal. Was this a joke? The pitiable figure standing in front of him didn’t exactly look like a prankster. But he had no idea who the man was or how he had got hold of his address. He knew men like this one from the Salvation Army shelter. Poor bums who had ended up on the fringes of society due to some sad turn of fate.

‘You have to do something!’ the man urged.

‘I... um... I really can’t help you.’

‘They’re coming to kill me!’

‘It’d be best to go the station and report them.’

The man looked at him as if he couldn’t believe his ears. As if this advice, which in DeKok’s eyes was really the best advice he could possibly give, was the last thing he expected to hear. He started to say something else, changed his mind, then turned and scurried away. DeKok watched for a moment as the ragged figure disappeared down the canal. Then, he shrugged and gently closed the front door.

The first few days of the new year were as quiet as New Year’s Eve itself had been. Due to the persistent rain, the traditional fireworks had been unspectacular, which in turn dampened the enthusiasm of potential troublemakers. In the days that followed, it had continued to rain, and, in DeKok’s opinion, it had been a long time since the city had looked and felt so desolate. After the obligatory New Year’s drink at the station, where Commissioner Buitendam had urged his officers to see the new year as a challenge to work even harder to do their very best, DeKok

began reviewing an old case that he had been unable to bring to a satisfactory conclusion. Vledder reluctantly began working on some overdue reports. Appie Keizer was assisting a group of fellow officers with their investigation of a smash and grab in the Jan Evertsenstraat. It was quiet in the large precinct room. Until Lotty appeared in the doorway.

‘Wow, look how gloomy you guys are!’

Vledder looked up. ‘What are you doing here?’ Lotty had taken a few days off and was not due back until the following Monday.

‘I missed you guys, your pleasant company...’

DeKok chuckled. ‘You didn’t know where else to go in this weather.’

‘Bingo! And look: I brought *oliebollen*.’ She held up a paper bag.

Vledder suppressed a belch. ‘Gimme a break!’

‘That’s sweet of you,’ DeKok said, but immediately regretted the kindness of his response when she held the opened bag out to him. He held up a hand. ‘Maybe this afternoon. Did you have a nice holiday?’

Before Lotty could answer, the phone on his desk rang.

‘DeKok.’ He listened, nodded, and hung up again. He pushed himself up from his office chair. ‘Work to be done.’

He had the collar of his old raincoat pulled up and his hat was pulled down to cover his eyes. They stood around the children’s playground on the Noordermarkt and stared at the figure lying on his stomach on the bench next to the swings. Bent over him stood coroner Den Koninghe, who beckoned towards the two paramedics who were standing

at the edge of the playground awaiting his instructions.

‘Turn him over on his back.’

Next to DeKok, Ben Kreuger hoisted himself into a white protective suit.

‘This is pointless,’ he grumbled. DeKok looked at him questioningly.

‘You won’t find any traces here with this rain.’

The paramedics had carefully turned the dead man over and placed him on his back, and at that moment a shock of recognition went through DeKok. He took a step closer to make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him. But no, he had seen it right. The pale face, wreathed in wisps of hair and a tousled beard, was the face of the man who had stood at his door on New Year’s Eve. The man who had been afraid of being killed and who had been proven right.

Doctor Den Koninghe, dressed in a long black coat, took off his hat and shook off the rainwater. He looked up but saw little hope of improvement in the grey sky.

‘Bad for my gout,’ he grumbled to himself.

‘The rain?’ DeKok had lined up next to him.

‘Bad for my mood.’

Vledder burst into laughter, but quickly turned around when the doctor gave him a deadly look.

‘Well anyway, it won’t bother him anymore.’ He pointed to the man on the bench. ‘He’s dead.’

‘Yes, I got that impression. Knifed?’

The doctor nodded. ‘He has a big wound just under the heart, but the autopsy may reveal more. He’s been stabbed.’

‘How long has he been here?’

‘Hard to say. The outside temperature and the rain have

a big influence on the course of the rigor mortis. You'll have to wait for the results of the autopsy. I'm out of here.' He lifted his wet hat and walked with long strides towards the Prinsengracht.

'Who found him?'

Lotty turned to the sandbox and pointed to two little boys with dazed expressions on their faces, both gripping their skateboards as they waited to see what was going to happen.

'Amir and Chris.' She read the names from her notebook.

DeKok strolled over to the boys and gave them a fatherly wink.

'Which of you is Amir and which is Chris?'

The boy with short blond hair and glasses pointed to his friend, the smaller of the two. 'He's Amir.'

The boy, with big brown eyes and black curls flattened by a red cap, looked up at him. 'Is he dead, sir?'

DeKok nodded. 'I'm afraid so. Which of you found him?'

'He did, sir.' The blond boy pointed to his friend again.

'We were skating here and then I saw him,' the curly-haired boy said.

'I thought he was asleep.'

'I told you he wasn't, man.'

'My mother said the same thing, when she came over here.'

The little boy shook his curls in incomprehension. 'You're not gonna lie down here if you live right over there.' He pointed nonchalantly over his shoulder.

'You know who he is,' Lotty intervened.

'Yes, ma'am. That's Uncle Joop.'

'And he lives nearby?' asked DeKok.

‘Over there.’ The boy pointed more precisely this time, towards the Lindenstraat. ‘Above Auntie Annie’s shop.’

‘Okay guys,’ DeKok said with satisfaction. ‘You’ve helped us a lot.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Both boys dropped their skateboards onto the street and skated away.

‘Well raised,’ Lotty observed with satisfaction.

Vledder looked at her amused. ‘In five years, they’ll be throwing bricks through windows because Ajax lost.’

‘Don’t be so pessimistic, Dick! Those kids aren’t all like you.’ Lotty tucked away her notebook. ‘What do we do with Uncle Joop?’

DeKok looked over his shoulder at the bench where the paramedics were busy lifting the body onto a stretcher and two men from the technical detective team photographed the scene of the crime and searched for traces.

‘Uncle Joop... Well, let’s see who Auntie Annie is.’

‘DeKok!’

Ben Kreuger arrived with a plastic bag in his hand.

‘I found this under the bench.’

He showed DeKok the knife that was in the bag.

‘The murder weapon?’

‘Then they must have wiped all the blood off it before throwing it under the bench,’ he replied with a hint of sarcasm. ‘No, I’d say not.’

‘You think it belonged to the victim?’

‘I think that’s more likely.’

‘Let’s hope there’s some prints on it.’

‘It was in a dry place, so with a bit of luck, it’ll have been shielded from the rain, to some extent at least.’

‘I’d like to hear from you as soon as possible.’

‘We’re doing our best, DeKok.’ He walked back to the bench and raised a hand. ‘Our very best.’

DeKok strolled over the cobblestones of the Noordermarkt towards the Lindenstraat, hands deep in the pockets of his raincoat, shoulders raised and head bowed.

‘You look so dejected.’

DeKok looked up at his loyal deputy and grimaced.

‘That man who was lying there on the bench, Uncle Joop, that man came to my door on New Year’s Eve.’

‘He came to collect for charity?’

‘I wouldn’t have given him a dime,’ Lotty remarked.

‘He didn’t come for a charity,’ DeKok confessed. He had lied that night that someone with a collection box had rung the doorbell. He hadn’t wanted to spoil the atmosphere with the story of a clearly deranged man. Mrs. DeKok had thought it was a strange time for a collection, but Vledder had thought it was good timing. After all, everyone is home on New Year’s Eve.

‘So, what did he come for?’

‘Somehow, he had found my address and was at my door, because...’ He was silent for a moment.

‘Because?’

‘Because he was afraid he was about to be killed. He wanted me to protect him, because, according to him, there were two young guys after him.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘That he had to report to a police station, what else was I supposed to do?’ replied DeKok, somewhat embarrassed.

‘Quite right,’ Lotty told her boss. ‘What kind of story is

that on New Year's Eve? Of course you'd think you were dealing with a madman.'

Vledder nodded in agreement. 'Yes, understandably, but the fact that we found him on a bench today, murdered, is pretty embarrassing. That's no coincidence.'

'No, that's certainly not a coincidence,' DeKok agreed. 'But that does raise the question of why he came to visit me. Understand? That bothers me.'

They had stopped in front of a shop. *Brik-a-Brak* was written in curly letters on the window, a rather careless translation of the French *brique et braque*, DeKok assumed. The display consisted of old billboards for beer and chocolate, an English tea set and a striking number of old spectacles in all shapes and sizes. DeKok pointed to a frameless pair with round lenses. 'I used to have glasses like that. We used to call them health insurance glasses.'

Lotty burst out laughing. 'You must have looked cute.'
'I hated them.'

As he opened the door, a bell rang over his head. Behind the counter, a young woman looked up from her reading.

'Hello,' said DeKok, glancing at the collection of trinkets displayed in the shop.

The young woman put her book upside down on the counter and pulled her long, woolen cardigan a little tighter around her. Apparently, the electric heater was insufficient to keep out the winter chill. She stepped over a basket that stood in front of the heater, in which a shaggy dog was sleeping.

'Are you looking for something special?' she asked in a friendly tone of voice.

'Not so much something as someone.'

The woman raised her eyebrows.
'Auntie Annie, to be exact.'
The woman burst into laughter. 'That's me!'

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Now it was DeKok's turn to look surprised. In his mind, Auntie Annie was an older woman, a typical inhabitant of the Jordaan district, most probably a bleached blonde, not this young woman who was looking at him with a friendly expression in her pale green eyes.

'I keep telling them, my name is Anna, so call me Anna, but they just keep calling me Auntie Annie. I'm convinced they do it on purpose.'

'Amsterdam humor,' DeKok concluded wryly.

'That's right,' she agreed, laughing. 'What can I do for you?'

'My name is DeKok, kay-oh-kay, and these are my colleagues. We're criminal detectives.'

The smile on Anna's face gave way to a worried look. 'Detectives? Did I do something wrong?'

DeKok smiled. 'We're looking for information about... Uncle Joop.'

'Joop?'

'You know him.'

'Yes, of course. He lives upstairs on the first floor. What about him?'

DeKok hesitated for a moment but decided to deliver the message bluntly. ‘We just found him dead on a bench on the Noordermarkt.’

‘Oh no!’ It was an expression of compassion rather than shock. ‘Ah... Joop.’ Suddenly she raised her head. ‘That’s why!’

‘That’s why what?’

‘The police cars and the ambulance. I looked around the corner of the door to see if I could see anything. Poor man, in the cold like that...’

‘Did you know him well?’

She smiled sympathetically, brushing a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. ‘How do you define “well”? He rented the first floor, but he was already living here when I bought the house.’

‘You live here too?’

‘Yes, on the second and third floors. And I have the shop, of course. I didn’t have much to do with Joop. He’d walk in every once in a while for a cup of coffee. And he paid the rent on time.’

‘Did you notice anything strange about him in the last few days? Anything different, I mean.’

A suspicious look came into her eyes. ‘Is there something unusual about his death?’ As she asked the question, the answer came to her and she suddenly understood why the detectives had come to her shop. ‘Was he murdered?’

‘I’m sorry, but that seems to be the case.’

‘Yes... Yes, of course. You’re here for a reason.’ She shook her head, as if reproaching herself for not arriving at that conclusion sooner. ‘On the Noordermarkt?’

‘That’s what we’re investigating.’

She stared out through the shop window and tried to remember when she had last seen her tenant. ‘I haven’t seen him in a few days. But there’s nothing out of the ordinary in that. He’d sit upstairs for days sometimes, without leaving the house at all. I think he watched football all day, because I’d regularly hear the cheering. And other times he’d hang out in the café until closing time and I’d hear him stumbling up the stairs in the middle of the night. He’d wake me up trying to be silent.’ She smiled at the memory.

‘We’d like to take a look at his apartment,’ DeKok interjected gently.

Anna hesitated, as if she wasn’t sure she could give permission.

‘I assume you have a key,’ the old sleuth persisted.

‘Yes, of course, but...’

‘It would be very helpful.’

Anna looked at the detectives, who looked back so seriously that she decided to give in. ‘You’re police officers, so I’m sure it’s okay.’

As Anna opened the door next to the shop’s and searched the keyring for the key to the first-floor apartment, DeKok examined the nameplates next to the doorbell. *Anna Duvekot* was engraved on the upper brass plate, and the lower plate read *J. Koedam*.

‘Ah, of course!’ DeKok hit his forehead, almost causing his hat to slip off his head. ‘Joop!’

Anna looked over her shoulder in surprise. ‘Did you know him?’

‘Jopie Kapok.’

Lotty looked at the nameplate again. ‘Koedam.’

‘Yes, but they called him Jopie Kapok, because he sold cushions filled with kapok at the outdoor market on the Westerstraat.’

‘Amsterdam humor,’ she concluded.

‘Yeah, I guess so, let’s go in.’

Anna had let them into the first-floor apartment and then closed the door gently behind them. The apartment had the same layout as thousands of other apartments in Amsterdam’s older neighborhoods. A living room that overlooked the street, a back room that was used as a bedroom, a side room at the front, a small kitchen at the back and a toilet with a built-in shower. The remarkable thing here was the pristine condition of the apartment. Although sparsely furnished, the apartment was tidy and virtually spotless.

‘Not what you’d expect from from an older man on his own,’ Lotty said.

‘Humanity is a continual source of surprises,’ DeKok replied philosophically, as he tugged his disposable latex gloves on.

‘As are you,’ Vledder said. ‘You knew the man who appeared at your front door that night.’

‘Yes, but I didn’t recognize him. Because of that beard, and, unlike his home, Jopie looked unkempt, neglected. Jopie Kapok... it’s been years since I’ve had to deal with him.’

‘Penose?’

‘From back when we still had a real underworld, yes. Jopie would break into houses and take anything of value, preferably cash, but jewelry was also welcome.’

‘Nice guy!’ sneered Lotty from the bedroom where she was going through a wardrobe.

‘But he wanted nothing to do with violence. He was an old-school burglar, the type of craftsman you seldom see these days. I picked him up a few times.’

‘But what was he doing at your door?’

‘He was afraid he was going to be killed.’

‘Then he could have visited any other officer,’ Vledder insisted. ‘Why visit you, of all people?’

DeKok stared out the window pensively. ‘No idea, maybe he remembered me from the past.’

‘Look what I just found.’ Lotty returned from the bedroom with a rolled-up piece of thick, worn leather in her hands. She unrolled it on the table in the living room, revealing a wondrous collection of picks, pliers and keybeards jutting out of various compartments and pouches that were stitched into the leather.

‘His tools.’

‘Perfectly maintained, as if he still used them each day.’

DeKok pulled a pair of pliers from its compartment and examined it closely under a light.

‘I don’t think so. I haven’t heard his name in years. I think Jopie was retired.’

‘I also found this in the same drawer as those pliers.’

Lotty placed a notebook bound in red on the table next to the leather tool wrap. DeKok picked up the booklet and leafed through it. Most of the pages were adorned with sketches of doors and locks. A diagram of a safe appeared on one of the pages. ‘These were the accompanying notes,’ DeKok concluded. He returned the notebook to Lotty.

‘Have you found a cellphone or maybe a laptop?’ he asked Vledder, who held up a Nokia from the end of the last century in response.

‘And the battery’s dead. I don’t think Jopie really believed in the digital world.’

‘Then I think we’re done here.’

‘You need to see this!’

They looked at Lotty, who showed them the last page of the notebook. There were some hastily scribbled words on it. ‘This is your address!’

It had finally stopped raining, and for the first time in days faint spots of light had appeared in the grey roof that covered the city. While Vledder and Lotty stepped into the old Volkswagen Golf, DeKok trudged across the bridge over the Prinsengracht, on his way to the Prinsenstraat. He wanted to take advantage of the break in the rain by walking back to his desk at the precinct, which would give him a chance to think about what had happened in the last few days. Jopie Kapok, an old-school burglar, had come to see him on New Year’s Eve because he was afraid of being killed by... “two young guys”, as Jopie himself had said. Why had he come to him? Was there a connection and if so, what was the connection? He had not seen Jopie in years, and he did not know whether the old burglar had retired or not. Just days after ringing his doorbell, the man is found dead on a bench on the Noordermarkt. Murdered. By the two young guys he had mentioned? But why? Was there a connection between him and these guys? Who were these guys anyway?

There were too many questions. And each question led

to new questions, none of which he could answer. What they had found in Jopie's house had made them none the wiser either. Aside from his lock-picking tools, they had found nothing to indicate a criminal past or present. Not a single clue about his death or about anything else for that matter. All they had found was his address in Jopie's notebook... DeKok shook his head and quickened his pace. All this pondering was getting him nowhere. He saw only one way out.

The Lowietje, a café so narrow it could pass for a hallway, was still decked out in tawdry Christmas finery, with plastic greenery dripping from the walls, along with silver Christmas bells and tables adorned with Christmas centerpieces. Lowie, the owner of the café, whose scrawny build had earned him the nickname "Smalle Lowietje", was perched atop a low kitchen ladder struggling to pull out one of the pushpins that held the greenery to the walls. Despite his effort, the stubborn pin refused to budge and a loud expletive rang from Lowie's pinched lips.

'Watch your language!' barked DeKok as he walked into the establishment.

Lowie was so startled by the sudden sound that he almost lost his balance and another loud curse echoed through the café. As he scrambled down the two steps of his ladder, he glared angrily at his guest. 'Thanks a lot, DeKok. That could have killed me.'

'I wouldn't worry about that, Lowie. Weeds are hard to kill. And season's greetings!'

'I'm just glad the holidays are over,' grumbled the cafe owner. 'Christmas music drives me up the wall.' He wiped

his hands on a soiled old dishcloth he had draped over his shoulder and positioned himself behind the bar.

‘What’ll it be?’ he asked sullenly.

‘I’ll leave that entirely to your good taste,’ DeKok replied lightheartedly as the café owner bent down to retrieve a bottle of Napoleon brandy from a shelf beneath the bar. ‘To usher in the new year.’ He polished two cognac glasses and poured a layer of the golden yellow liquid into each glass with the care and precision of a laboratory assistant. The two men rolled their brandy in the bulbous glasses, sniffed the aroma like connoisseurs with their eyes closed, and then took a sip that warmed first their mouths and then spread to their entire bodies.

‘It’s still good stuff,’ Lowie concluded with satisfaction. ‘Anything going on out there during the holidays?’

‘The streets were pretty quiet.’

‘The weather wasn’t too bad.’

‘Have you seen Jopie Kapok around?’

A suspicious look crept into the café owner’s small, rat-like eyes. He knew DeKok had to have a reason for the question. He had known him long enough to be absolutely certain of that.

‘Jopie Kapok? Yeah, I’ve seen him around. He stops in occasionally for a chat and a beer. Why do you ask?’

‘Jopie’s dead.’

‘Oh no.’ He raised his eyebrows and raised his glass with a laugh. ‘To Jopie then.’

‘He was murdered.’

The glass lingered in the air for a moment and then made a soft landing on the bar. ‘And do you know who did it?’ he asked hoarsely.

‘I was hoping you could tell me that.’

Lowie fell silent, which seldom happened, at least when DeKok was around. He sipped his brandy thoughtfully and looked through the café’s large window at the dreary world outside.

‘You used to know him well.’ DeKok tried to keep the conversation going.

‘He was a true craftsman.’

‘Just like you.’

Lowie gave a slight growl. He disliked being reminded of his past employment.

‘I thought he was retired,’ DeKok continued.

‘Jopie’d become an anachronism, DeKok, and we both know it. Nowadays, it’s about drugs and big money, which was never his thing. He went out on the streets for nickels and dimes. He got in quick and then got the hell out. That’s how it was back then. Today, they drive a car through your shop front and blow up your safe.’

He shook his head and looked intently at his now empty glass. He sighed, reached for the bottle of Napoleon, and poured again.

‘Come on, Lowie, what’s bothering you?’

‘You know I’d do just about anything to help you out, DeKok, but I’m not a rat.’

The grey-haired detective waited silently for what was coming. He knew that his old friend sometimes struggled with the loyalty he still felt for the world he had inhabited in the past, and he knew he had to take that feeling seriously.

‘I gave my word to keep it to myself, but yeah, Jopie’s dead now...’

‘Murdered.’

Lowie nodded; he had cleared the hurdle. 'Someone came in here last week asking about him, about Jopie Kapok.'

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