

BAANTJER

DeKok  
*and the* Dead  
Lovers

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

# 1

Inspector DeKok pulled up the grease-stained collar of his well-worn raincoat, knotted a woolen scarf under his chin, and shoved his dilapidated hat farther down on his head. It was cold, he thought, much too cold for this time of year. November impetuously announced the coming winter with biting cold rain mixed with sleet. A bone-chilling northwestern wind blew through the streets of Amsterdam.

DeKok glanced aside at his partner and friend, Dick Vledder. Theirs was a curious relationship. For many years DeKok had worked his cases alone and, despite unorthodox methods, had built a reputation for solving difficult cases quickly. One year, when DeKok was on holiday, Warmoes Street Station recalled him to help solve a grisly murder. The new crop of bright and shiny detectives had made no progress. At Vledder's insistence, the then *commissaris* had specifically requested DeKok. Vledder assisted DeKok with the case. Somehow, without official recognition of the fact, Vledder attached himself to DeKok. Over the years his role had changed from assistant to friend and partner. Together they had successfully solved at least two-dozen murders.

Vledder's hands were buried deep inside the pockets of his coat. He trudged silently along.

'You're awfully quiet,' DeKok said with concern in his voice.

The young inspector grunted.

'You're always full of surprises,' he said through clenched teeth. 'I wonder where we're going this time?'

DeKok made a dismissive gesture.

'We're going to *Arti et Amicitiae*.'

Vledder grimaced.

'Where?'

DeKok smiled at the reaction.

'You don't have to pull such a face. I think it sounds very nice. *Arti et Amicitiae*,' he repeated with relish. 'It means something like "friends of the arts," or maybe "devoted to art and friendship."'

Vledder's expression did not change.

'Where is it?'

DeKok looked surprised.

'You've never heard of it?'

'No.'

DeKok shook his head. His face was solemn.

'You should be ashamed,' he said sternly. '*Arti et Amicitiae* is part of the soul of a true Amsterdammer. It is one of the oldest, best-known art associations in Amsterdam. They host regular art exhibits in their building at the corner of Spui and Rokin.'

'And that's where we're going?'

DeKok nodded comfortably.

'Certainly. Those are our instructions.'

'Ours?'

‘Yes.’

‘But the Spui is not our bailiwick. It’s far outside the Warmoes Street precinct. It has nothing to do with us; it’s a job for Lijnbaansgracht Station, eh, the seventh precinct, isn’t it?’

DeKok took a deep breath.

‘I know, I know,’ he said, resigned. ‘But it is a special request from Commissaris Buitendam.’ He paused. ‘I didn’t much feel like it at first, and I was just about to unleash a storm of objections when I thought about you.’

‘About me?’

DeKok grinned boyishly.

‘You keep saying I should be nice to the commissaris. You’d like me to keep his blood pressure in mind, not to mention his dear wife and darling children. I’m merely being deferential and cooperative.’

Vledder grinned.

‘That must have been hard for you.’

‘Precisely. It *was* hard, especially since this is more or a less a private matter.’

Vledder frowned.

‘A private matter? You mean this has nothing to do with the police?’

DeKok did not answer at once. A strong gust of cold wind chased Dam Square pigeons into a confusing flurry of feathers. The noisy, flapping birds barely missed the heads of the two inspectors. DeKok and Vledder found haven in the niches under the roof of the Royal Palace.

Once they reached Kalver Street and the relative protection from the wind, DeKok continued the conversation.

‘Both. It has *something* to do with crime. You see, in his

personal life, the commissaris is acquainted with a certain Manfred Nettelhorst.’

Vledder whistled between his teeth.

‘The commissaris,’ he said with admiration, ‘has very wealthy acquaintances.’

‘You know Nettelhorst?’

Vledder gestured vaguely.

‘I’ve seen his picture in some of the scandal sheets.’

DeKok snorted.

‘You read those?’

Vledder shook his head.

‘Not me, but Celine buys them all, every week. She’s crazy about sensational revelations and spicy scandals.’

DeKok nodded his understanding.

‘Your fiancée has lurid taste in literature,’ he lectured.

‘What can I say?’

‘Nothing. But in one of those sheets you read that Nettelhorst was a rich man?’

‘He’s stinking rich... doesn’t even know how many millions he has.’

DeKok rubbed the bridge of his nose with his little finger.

‘Well, I know how many millions *I* have. Last I checked it was exactly zero.’

Vledder gave a short, snorting laugh.

‘Manfred’s biggest hobby is art collecting. But he doesn’t like to be called an art collector.’

DeKok looked surprised.

‘What *does* he like to be called?’

‘He calls himself a “dedicated gatherer of unblemished beauty.”’

DeKok grinned.

‘Say that again.’

‘A “dedicated gatherer of unblemished beauty.”’

DeKok snorted.

‘Un-blem-ished, you say?’

Vledder nodded.

‘According to Nettelhorst, art can only exist through the experience of it. A painting or piece of music elicits feelings of emotion in reaction to beauty. Once one eliminates emotion, the irrational, only beauty remains. Beauty, according to Manfred Nettelhorst, is synonymous with purity and chastity; it is untouched and –’

‘Unblemished,’ finished DeKok. ‘Exactly.’

DeKok pushed his hat farther down on his forehead.

‘An eccentric person.’

Vledder shrugged.

‘Clearly,’ he said, ‘the very wealthy can afford to be eccentric.’

DeKok ignored the remark.

‘Manfred Nettelhorst,’ he said in a businesslike voice, ‘has organized an exhibition of his collection in the halls of *Arti et Amicitiae*.’

‘I see, and our instructions, if I understand you correctly, are to guard the exhibition.’

‘We won’t be alone. There are private detectives and uniformed guards from a security company as well. But the commissaris asked us to keep an eye on things. It seems that Manfred has received several anonymous calls over the last few weeks indicating his collection is in danger of being stolen. And such an exhibition does offer many possibilities along those lines.’

Vledder reacted angrily.

‘If Moneybags is so afraid his priceless treasures are going to be stolen,’ he said hotly, ‘how about keeping them safe at home, behind lock and key?’

DeKok shook his head.

‘You don’t understand the soul of a collector,’ he corrected. ‘What’s the use of a priceless collection if one cannot show it off?’

Vledder snorted.

‘Poppycock.’

They turned the corner and entered onto Spui. *Spui* means sluiceway or drain. In times past the street was indeed a drainage canal. Like so many Amsterdam streets, it has since been paved over, but the name remains.

They stopped in front of the distinctive façade of Arti et Amicitiae. Vledder motioned.

‘Should we buy tickets?’

DeKok shook his head with irritation.

‘Tickets?’ he asked indignantly. ‘Come now. We’re not here for our amusement. This is official police business.’

Ignoring the ticket booth, DeKok stepped inside with Vledder close behind. A tall uniformed guard with a walkie-talkie and a forbidding face approached the inspectors.

‘Hey, you two,’ he called with an authentic Amsterdam accent. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

The grey sleuth stopped and looked at the man with interest. Vledder hastily pulled his identification out of an inside pocket and waved it under the guard’s nose.

‘Police,’ said Vledder. ‘We’re inspectors attached to Warmoes Street Station. My name is Vledder and this,’

he waved a thumb at DeKok, 'is my colleague, DeKok... with a kay-oh-kay.'

'Oh, okay,' said the guard.

'Not oh-oh-kay, but *kay-oh-kay*,' corrected DeKok. 'We're here to attend the art exhibition.'

'Do you have an invitation?'

'You could say that.'

The guard hesitated a moment. Apparently he had no idea what to do about the situation. After a few more seconds of frowning, he turned on his heels and led the inspectors to a heavy double door. He opened one side of the door and the men entered.

It was comfortably warm inside the main hall. DeKok took off his hat and loosened his woolen scarf.

Together he and Vledder strolled past the exhibits.

Every once in a while DeKok's eyes searched the hall. None among the few visitors raised his suspicions. To the left, in a corner, a few men in morning coats spoke softly. DeKok stopped in front of a high pedestal surmounted by a tastefully decorated silver ewer. He was fascinated by the exquisite sample of the silversmith's art. Absorbed, leaning slightly forward, he studied the mythological depictions on the side of the ewer.

'Paulus van Vianen,' he read from the white card behind the Plexiglas. 'Seventeenth century.'

Slowly they walked on. First they came to a tenth-century icon of the crucifixion of Christ in a richly carved rosewood frame. Next they gazed at a blue crystal vase with engraved verses by Anna Roemer Fischer, the seventeenth-century poet. They stopped in front of some exquisite etchings and watercolors by Rembrandt. Opposite the Rembrandts hung



a powerful bas-relief carved by an ancient Greek master before the birth of Christ.

DeKok became entranced. As they progressed, he stood before original oils by the French impressionists he so admired. Captivated by a Monet landscape, he heard a sudden, angry outburst. It came from one of the gentlemen in morning coats. A short, squat man strode angrily toward an elderly woman. The woman held the sterling ewer close to her face. She examined it through the thick glasses she wore on the point of her nose.

The man roared.

'Return it immediately! Damn you. Put it back!'

The elderly woman looked up in shock.

*'Put it back!'*

Hastily, her hands shaking, the woman returned the ewer to the pedestal. The object tottered for a few seconds before settling on its base.

The stocky man closed both eyes. His round face was red with purplish spots. He vibrated with tension, his fleshy cheeks quivering. Within a few moments the man regained a reasonable amount of control over himself. He glared at the elderly woman, his green eyes narrowed with disgust. His hands were balled into fists; he appeared overcome with an urge to kill.

'Why did you touch it?' he hissed.

The woman swallowed hard. Her mouth, wreathed by fine wrinkles, moved nervously. She waved both hands anxiously, as if to ward off evil.

'I just, I wanted...'. She could not go on.

The man pressed his lips together. His cheeks changed color once again. He wildly gestured toward the woman.

‘Woman,’ he yelled, ‘go away! Out! I don’t want to see you here again, not for a moment. This is not a flea market where you can touch anything you want. Get your...’ He did not finish the sentence, but turned and walked away. The heightened heels of his shoes sounded like pistol shots on the parquet floor.

DeKok looked at Vledder.

‘That isn’t... Is it?’

The young inspector nodded slowly.

‘Manfred Nettelhorst.’

DeKok had lost his desire to see the rest of the exhibition. He looked compassionately at the elderly woman who scurried away, her head bowed.

Rebellion and a sense of disquiet overtook him. His glance passed over the entrances to the other halls, where more objects were displayed. His gaze came to rest on the group of men in the corner. A lively discussion was under way, a wild, gesticulating Manfred Nettelhorst in the center.

The image of the porcine man burned into DeKok’s retina. He would never forget the look on Nettelhorst’s face. DeKok had a near-photographic memory, a curse at times like this. The senior inspector sighed deeply. Slowly the mutinous disquiet ebbed away. With a nonchalant gesture he placed his hat back on his head.

Vledder looked at him.

‘We’re leaving?’ he questioned.

‘Yes.’

‘And what about our assignment?’

DeKok growled.

‘It no longer interests me.’ He strolled toward the exit.

Vledder shrugged and followed him.

Near the door DeKok nearly bumped into the uniformed guard.

'Oh,' said the man, 'there's a telephone call for you, Inspector.'

'Where?'

The man pointed.

'In the office.'

Without any prompting, Vledder walked away to take the call instead of DeKok. The old-school inspector hated telephones.

'Well, who is it?' DeKok asked the guard.

'The watch commander at Warmoes Street,' the man offered. 'He said it was urgent.'

DeKok nodded his understanding and waited patiently for Vledder's return.

After a few minutes, Vledder came out of the office and walked toward DeKok.

'Well?' prompted DeKok.

'Someone reported finding a young man on Beuning Street,' said Vledder, 'handcuffed to a radiator.'

'And?'

'He's dead.'

'How?'

Vledder swallowed.

'Murdered.'

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