

BAANTJER

DeKok  
*and the* Dead  
Harlequin

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

# 1

The envelope was addressed to Inspector DeKok at the renowned police station on Warmoes Street, located on the edge of Amsterdam's Red Light District.

Inspector DeKok opened it; at first glance the content seemed ridiculous. Or was it? The note was short and written in an easy, fluid handwriting. The writer had a laconic, but lucid, style.

*Dear Inspector DeKok:*

*I have seriously decided to kill a man. For obvious reasons I cannot tell you the name of the intended victim, nor will I tell you the place and the time of the murder. In any case, that has already been decided. There are, however, just a few unimportant details that I would like to discuss with you in advance. Would Wednesday night, eight o'clock exactly, be convenient for you?*

*Yours Very Truly, Pierre Brassel*

The station house was often described as the busiest police station in Western Europe. DeKok seemed lost in the large, inhospitable detective room on the second floor. His tired, often painful feet rested on the desk. His short, strong fingers raked his gray hair. His broad face, lined with the deep marks of a good-natured boxer, looked solemn. He was not at all happy. He had read the strange note several times. Each time he read it, he was as surprised as he had been the first time.

This was an entirely new wrinkle in a career of more than twenty years. A person contacts Homicide and details in a short, businesslike letter his intention to kill someone. DeKok felt he'd entered the theater of the absurd.

Of course, he could recall plenty of instances in which a murder had been announced in advance. Not this way, however. Usually such announcements were full of self-justification and pathos. They were unfailingly anonymous. But this note, which wasted hardly a word, was signed, presumably with a real name.

DeKok looked up Brassel in the phone book. He dialed the number.

'Hello?'

'Yes.'

'Mr. Brassel?'

'Speaking.'

'Inspector DeKok, Homicide. I, eh...'

'Oh, yes. You're from Warmoes Street. Inspector DeKok, did you receive my letter?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. Is eight o'clock convenient?'

'Yes, that, eh...'

‘Fine, fine. Expect me. I shall be on time.’

Before DeKok could ask a single question, Brassel broke the connection. DeKok thought it inadvisable to call back right away.

After about half an hour, unable to contain his curiosity, DeKok tried the line again and found it engaged. It remained busy every time he called. Pierre Brassel seemed a busy man.

After a few more failed attempts, DeKok angrily slammed the receiver down. If nothing else, he was comforted that he had asked his partner Vledder to do some digging around. Maybe that would bring some clarity to the circumstances.

To help get his anger under control, he stood in front of the small mirror over the water fountain and uttered a number of unflattering things for about two minutes. He said things about foolish people and how they so often succeeded in plaguing him, DeKok, with near insoluble puzzles.

Finally, he decided not to call anymore. He decided to just wait for the appointment. At least he knew that somewhere in Amsterdam there was a Pierre Brassel who had written him a remarkable little letter.

DeKok stood up. He paced past deserted desks with his typical, somewhat swaying gait and his hands deep in his trouser pockets. He tried to form a picture of Pierre Brassel in his mind, a picture that would fit with the voice he had heard over the telephone. He did not succeed.

He stopped in front of the window and looked outside, slowly rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet. His gaze passed over the backlit rooftops of the houses across

the street and rested on the illuminated tower of the Old Church, so called because the New Church was a mere three hundred years old. It was seven thirty. He hoped Vledder would finish soon, in any case before eight.

‘Well?’

With an amused smile on his handsome face, Vledder looked at his mentor. ‘Well, if, eh, you ask me,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘then, somebody’s trying to play some sort of joke on you.’

‘A joke?’

‘Yes.’

DeKok slipped lazily into his chair and looked at the still-boyish face of his congenial partner and pupil.

‘If that’s the case, my friend,’ he said with just a tiny hint of sarcasm, ‘when am I supposed to start laughing? At the time this joker Brassel lets me in on the joke, or when a murder really *has* been committed? Tell me, please.’

Vledder pulled a moody face. DeKok’s remarks seemed to have offended him.

‘But it’s crazy,’ he exclaimed stubbornly. ‘Totally foolish. I’m sorry, DeKok, but I can’t see the seriousness of it.’ He snorted deprecatingly. ‘Come on, admit it, who would write such a letter? Even if somebody planned to kill somebody, they certainly wouldn’t announce it to the police. Nobody does that.’

DeKok looked at him.

‘Nobody?’

‘Well, maybe somebody who’s crazy.’

DeKok rubbed his large nose with the back of his hand.

‘So you think he’s crazy?’

Vledder sighed deeply.

‘No,’ he admitted, shaking his head. ‘No, I don’t think Brassel is crazy. That is, during my investigation today, there was no indication of that. On the contrary, the people who discussed him with me generally agreed Pierre Brassel has above-average intelligence.’

DeKok nodded.

‘That’s too bad,’ he said hesitatingly. ‘I honestly wonder whether it is something to fear.’

‘Why?’

DeKok rubbed his chin with the other hand.

‘Well, if Pierre Brassel were known as a friendly, harmless madman, everything would be a lot easier. I’d just make one quick phone call to the nut removal team; they could take him away and observe him for a few days. As things stand, though...’ He did not complete the sentence, but scratched the back of his neck. ‘What exactly does our above-average friend do for a living?’

Vledder pulled a chair closer to the desk.

‘Brassel and his elderly father own a modest but highly regarded accounting firm, along Emperor’s Canal. The business is a holdover from the previous century, an unshakable monument of solid respectability.’

DeKok laughed.

‘One calls that renowned.’

Vledder made a nonchalant gesture.

‘Have it your way,’ he grunted. ‘A renowned accountant’s office, with a bookkeeper, a clerk, and a darling of a secretary.’

‘Old?’

‘Who?’

‘The secretary.’

‘Oh, hardly! She’s twenty-three, with chestnut hair, olive skin, and green flashing eyes. She has an irresistible dimple in her left cheek, or, wait a moment, no, it was the right cheek, yes, the right cheek.’

DeKok looked searchingly at his younger colleague.

‘Apparently you spent some time with the hardly old lady?’

Vledder grinned broadly.

‘Yes, with the assumed identity of an inspector of historic preservation coming to look at the interior of the old canal house.’

‘Did you meet Brassel?’

Vledder shook his head.

‘No, I managed to avoid him. When the secretary started to insist she wanted to introduce me, I quickly made my excuses and disappeared.’ He smiled at the memory. ‘It’s a dank, old office, but the secretary...’ He looked dreamily into the distance.

DeKok tapped a finger on the desk.

‘What about family?’

‘Whose?’ Vledder asked absentmindedly.

DeKok jumped up.

‘Not the secretary’s family!’ he said, irritated.

Vledder swallowed. DeKok’s heated voice brought him back to reality. He took his notebook from his pocket and read in a monotonous voice.

‘Pete or, as he prefers to be called, Pierre Brassel is a handsome man, attractive to women. He’s thirty-three. According to my informants, he finished high school and college without any problem. He continued his studies

and became a certified public accountant. Immediately upon obtaining his CPA, he was offered a management position in the office. He's been married almost five years, has two children, a boy and a girl. His son is three years old, his daughter is eighteen months. There appears to be no friction in the household. The family lives in a nice villa outside of town, just off the road to Schiphol Airport. There is almost no mortgage left on the house. The financial status of the family is evidently solid.'

DeKok grunted.

'An altogether respectable citizen.'

Vledder nodded.

'Exactly, a solid citizen. The terms *murderer* or *latent killer* don't spring to mind. I've been unable to discover anything negative about the man. As far as anyone knows, there are no skeletons in his closet. He's not in the police files.' He rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the detective room. He halted in front of DeKok's desk. 'I don't know what *you* think about it,' he said with a gesture of barely suppressed impatience, 'but as far as I'm concerned we've already wasted far too much time on that idiotic letter.'

Thoughtfully, DeKok chewed his lower lip.

'I hope,' he said uncertainly, 'you're right. In any case, let's wait for Pierre Brassel. It's only three minutes until eight.'



## 2

DeKok watched the clock like a raptor, barely blinking. He realized his constant gaze was becoming compulsive. Although he could not explain it, his eyes remained fixed on the clock's second hand. It was like an athletic event in slow motion; it was impossible to resist watching.

Driven by the same subconscious compulsion, he had asked Vledder to check the time by telephone; they had then synchronized their watches. DeKok had an intuition. He had the feeling time would be of vital importance. It was of the utmost importance to Pierre Brassel.

A few seconds before eight, the partners heard sounds of footsteps in the corridor leading to the detective room. Within seconds they could see an indistinct shadow against the frosted glass of the door.

Both inspectors looked on silently, Vledder annoyed and DeKok tensely expectant.

The arm of the shadow rose and knocked softly on the glass.

'Enter,' called DeKok.

There was a moment of hesitation. Once the door opened, a tall, slender, handsome man entered. He gave a confusing

first impression. There was something unbalanced about his appearance. He looked something like a Calvinist church warden out on a weekday. He wore a long, somber dark coat, but the pearl gray scarf he wore outside the collar gave him an elegant, worldly appearance. The most noticeable feature, however, was his high forehead, which was accented by a receding hairline. A mocking grin played around his weak, thin-lipped mouth.

‘I have an appointment,’ he said, carefully enunciating every letter, ‘an appointment for eight o’clock exactly.’ He glanced at the electric clock on the wall. ‘I notice with pleasure that I am exactly on time. My name is Pierre Brassel.’ He announced himself like a gameshow host announcing a new champion.

DeKok looked at him searchingly for several seconds, trying to sort out his impression of the baffling visitor, but the man remained enigmatic. Slowly he extended a hand.

‘DeKok,’ he said vaguely. ‘DeKok with, eh, a kay-oh-kay.’ He pointed at his younger partner. ‘This is Inspector Vledder, my invaluable partner.’

Pierre Brassel grinned again, and DeKok offered him a chair next to the desk.

The first skirmishes passed in a calm atmosphere. At first it was no more than a mutual, careful probing. The men exchanged the usual platitudes and banalities, fleshed out with polite clichés. Vledder cracked Pierre Brassel’s façade, eliciting the first real emotion. In a casual tone, he said, ‘Homicide really cannot be bothered with practical-joke letters. The police department is not an institution charged with providing public entertainment.’ For that, he opined, there were different avenues.

Vledder's remarks hit a sore spot.

Pierre's eyes glistened dangerously. He spread his arms in a theatrical gesture.

'But gentlemen,' he exclaimed, irritated and with a hint of astonishment, 'surely you have not considered my note a tasteless joke? Really! The very idea is insufferable. In fact, it would be an insult to me, a very grave insult. I am no charlatan.'

Vledder grinned broadly.

'Oh no?' he asked mockingly. 'Not a charlatan, you say?'

Agitated, Brassel stood up. Vledder's question had visibly upset him. His indignation was not an act, it was real. A red flush colored his cheeks.

'This is the limit,' he cried angrily. 'I did not come here to be ridiculed. I wrote you about a matter I assumed would be of interest to your department. You agreed to this appointment, to discuss a case. I did everything in accordance with common decency and good manners. There is no reason why you should—'

DeKok raised a hand in a restraining gesture.

'Please sit down and calm yourself, Mr. Brassel,' he said soothingly. 'I ask your indulgence and I apologize for my young colleague. You must admit it does seem strange for an intelligent man to contact Homicide in order to acquaint us with his intent to commit murder.'

Brassel forced his lips into a winning smile.

'Your colleague,' he said, much calmer, 'is not just young and tactless, he also lacks imagination.'

DeKok looked at him, his head cocked to one side.

'How's that?' he asked, interested.

Brassel sighed and resumed his seat.

‘How can I best explain it,’ he said slowly, looking for words. ‘I’ll give you an example: if you intend to plant flowers in your garden and you are not sure about timing or the best method for planting, you will ask for advice from a florist or a gardener. Logical, I should think. After all, they are professionals.’ He laughed pleasantly and gestured vaguely toward DeKok with a slender hand. ‘I have taken it upon myself to commit murder, so where do I go for professional help?’ He looked smugly about, as if expecting a spontaneous answer from an attentive audience. Then he answered his own question. ‘Of course, from the famous Inspector DeKok, expert in homicide.’

There was a sudden silence.

DeKok looked intently at the gleaming, beaming face of Brassel and tried to detect a hint of the facetious. He saw none. He encountered a pair of cunning, alert eyes that carefully measured the reaction created by the earlier remarks. He got his reaction.

Vledder looked at Brassel with wide, surprised eyes, and DeKok swallowed. It took a while before he trusted himself to speak again.

‘I believe,’ he said heatedly, ‘you have made a serious mistake. Your comparison is incorrect. Your premise is faulty. I’m not an expert in the committing of murders. I merely try to solve them. I bring perpetrators to justice after they have committed murders. *Others* commit the crimes. You understand?’

Pierre Brassel nodded emphatically and showed rows of white teeth.

‘Exactly, yes,’ he cried enthusiastically. ‘Exactly right! And that is precisely why I addressed what you think is

such a ridiculous letter to you. You have experience with murder. Afterward, you can say exactly what mistakes the killer has made. Why should I not utilize your knowledge to avoid mistakes of my own?’

He moved his chair slightly and sighed deeply. Then he continued. ‘See here, Inspector,’ he said earnestly, ‘you can only start your work after I have committed a crime, not before! That is too late for my purposes. I cannot change my actions once the deed is done, so to speak. From that moment on, you and I have to be enemies. A normal, open exchange of ideas will cease to be possible. Obviously our goals will no longer be mutual. Right now, under the present circumstances, I mean, during the preliminaries, we could...’

He did not complete the sentence. He appeared to ponder something, turning it over in his mind. ‘Inspector,’ he said after a considerable silence, and with a more determined tone of voice, ‘I want to make you an honest offer. You tell me what mistakes to avoid in committing my murder, and I will deliver myself to you as the culprit.’ Brassel smiled charmingly. ‘Call it a gentlemen’s agreement,’ he added.

He paused. When DeKok did not react, he continued, ‘In fact, you already have my part of the bargain in your hands. I have delivered myself to you. I just have yet to do what I must. You understand? My motive is to commit the perfect crime.’

DeKok rubbed his broad face with his hands. He peeked at Brassel from between his fingers. It was as though DeKok hoped the image would vanish. The visitor looked as if he had just spread a royal flush on a poker table.

‘I do believe,’ answered DeKok quietly, ‘I understand you. You expect from me, as the expert in the field, a set of

instructions for the perfect murder. A sort of recipe.’

‘Indeed.’

‘A complete recipe, including all the ingredients to guarantee you will not be caught or punished.’

Brassel nodded joyfully.

‘Exactly!’ he said.

DeKok pushed his lower lip forward.

‘In exchange, you offer me inside knowledge. I’ll know you committed the murder.’ DeKok’s voice dripped with sweet sarcasm. ‘That’s what you mean, right?’

‘Indeed, that is what I mean.’

‘You underestimate me,’ grinned DeKok. ‘It seems to me a rather one-sided agreement. It seems I would know you committed a murder but would be unable to prove your guilt, thanks to *my* recipe. No one prosecutes a murderer who has managed to commit the perfect crime. What’s in it for me? Nothing! Absolutely nothing. You offer me a perpetrator, but with no ability to serve justice.’

Pierre Brassel gave him his most winning smile.

‘You are clever, Inspector. You’re right, I just want to escape the consequences.’ He shrugged his shoulders in a negligent gesture. ‘Understandable, do you not agree? I am relatively young. I have a darling wife and two wonderful children, a good job. It would be too silly to risk all that for a somewhat belated murder.’ He halted suddenly, smiling sheepishly. For the first time it seemed as if he had lost part of his self-control.

DeKok looked at him, a challenge in his eyes.

‘What do you mean, “somewhat belated”?’ he asked.

Brassel stroked his temples with the flat of his hands.

‘You *will* find out,’ he said slowly. ‘Believe me, you will

see. There is no reason to get ahead of ourselves.' A new silence fell upon the room.

Vledder, who leaned against a wall diagonally behind Brassel, pointed at his head with a meaningful look. The gesture did not escape DeKok. He released a deep sigh, again focusing his attention on Brassel.

'You *are*,' he asked wearily, 'actually planning to commit murder?'

'Yes, I am. Even if you do not help me, even without the help of a foolproof recipe. I wrote it clearly enough. I've already decided upon the time and place. Nothing can change my mind.'

DeKok leaned forward and studied Brassel's face with care.

'Seriously,' he said finally, 'you really didn't expect for a moment I would help you commit murder, now did you?'

Pierre Brassel looked up and shook his head. A sad smile marred his handsome face.

'No,' he answered cheerlessly, 'I did not believe that for an instant.'

DeKok's eyebrows rippled slightly. People who knew the senior inspector swore his eyebrows lived a life of their own. It was certain those eyebrows could do gymnastics outside the capabilities of ordinary eyebrows.

Vledder watched with fascination. He thought he could sometimes predict DeKok's actions or words from the way the eyebrows moved. He was always wrong.

'Let's get to why you wrote the letter,' said DeKok.

Brassel did not answer. He stretched his left arm slightly forward, pushed the sleeve of his coat back, and looked intently at his watch.

‘Why,’ repeated DeKok, irritated, ‘did you write me the letter?’

Brassel completely ignored the question. He kept staring at his watch without raising his eyes. After a few seconds he stood up and looked first at DeKok, then at Vledder, then back again. His demeanor changed. He took the spotlight, like a toastmaster ready to begin the longwinded, well-rehearsed introduction of the next speaker.

‘Gentlemen,’ he announced dramatically, ‘in room twenty-one of the Greenland Arms Hotel, about three hundred yards from here as the crow flies, you will find the corpse of Jan Brets.’

‘What?’

Pierre Brassel grinned.

‘Jan Brets,’ he continued cheerfully. ‘His skull is crushed.’ He gestured toward the telephone on DeKok’s desk.

‘Please call them,’ he encouraged, ‘the Greenland Arms Hotel, or send one of your alert constables to verify.’

DeKok’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

‘What kind of a joke is this?!’ DeKok roared in anger.

Brassel gave him a sad look.

‘It seems,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘you find it difficult to take me seriously. Am I right?’

DeKok bit his lower lip and stared at the eccentric before him. He could not penetrate the thoughts of his adversary. Neither could he tread the tightrope between joviality and seriousness on which Brassel seemed continually to balance. For a moment he was buffaloed, his equilibrium disturbed. DeKok never hesitated long, however.

‘Dick,’ he commanded, ‘call the Greenland Arms.’

\*



The three men stood grouped around the phone. Vledder dialed the number. The only sound in the room was the beeping of the touch-tone phone. DeKok's face was serious. Around Brassel's lips played a faint smile, a glow of triumph lit up his light gray eyes.

DeKok listened on an extension.

'Greenland Arms,' said a voice, 'concierge speaking.'

'Police,' answered Vledder. 'Vledder, Warmoes Street Station. Can you tell me the name of the guest in room twenty-one?'

'One moment, please. Yes, that's Mr. Brets.'

'Is he still alive?'

'What did you say?'

'Is Brets still alive?'

A soft chuckle came over the line.

'I handed him his key at eight o'clock.'

'That was at eight o'clock. But is he alive *now*?'

'I believe so.' Vledder sighed.

'If it's not too much to ask, would you please take a look in his room?'

'All right. Police, you said? As you wish. Please hold the line.'

Meanwhile, DeKok looked at the clock in the detective room. It was a quarter to nine.

It took exactly four minutes until the concierge of the Greenland Arms manifested himself again on the other side of the line.

'Police, police!'

His voice was shaky, anguished.

'Yes?'

'Please send someone here. Mr. Brets... Brets is dead!'

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