

Murder along The Spaarne

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Action thriller

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Chapter 1

E*very year on King's Day, the annual fair takes place at Haarlem's market square.*

This year, the weather gods were in a good mood, and when the attractions opened at ten o'clock in the morning, the sun was already shining in all its glory. It was soon quite busy at the fair, and the terraces around the square filled up.

Completely against his habit, René van Veursen had agreed to make the trip to the market square this year, at the invitation of his friend Robert Kleiboom. They had just made a tour of the fair when René made a comment.

"Well, that was enough for me, as far as the fair is concerned. I do not need any of that. But look at those terraces! If we do not search for a place somewhere soon, we can drink our orange beer standing up, and I do not have to do that either, in such a crowd." Robert smiled.

"Yes, yes, I know you would have preferred to go to The Playground right away, but we can always do that later, friend. Let us find a place then, because there are a few more guys coming, and today we can have an early beer." René was not yet completely convinced.

"Well, hurry, because if we have to stand, they can kiss my ass; then it will be a one-way ticket to The Playground." There is always room there, and the beer is also a lot cheaper; also, not unimportant."

An hour later there was still no trace of the friends, and René was already biting his nails because he was not really having a good time.

"Hey, chubby. I have seen it all now. Four euros for a beer? Are they completely screwed up? I do not know what you do, but I am going to The Playground; I drink twice as much there for the same money." His friend tried again.

"Yes, that could be true, but it tastes better in a big glass than in a can, and you have to stand there too. All the normal tables will be occupied." I will call where those guys are. If they do not come soon, you will get your way, little one."

So, the Playground was actually a real playground, but especially on days like this, the visitors consisted more of bar guests than children. The bar was no more than a counter where the drinks had to be picked up and paid for, and in front of it were several high tables to stand around and a few normal tables with chairs. René had a better time here, and everyone should know that.

"Four euros for a beer, crazy! And when I hear all those sirens in the distance, there are already quite a few complainers, hi-hi." Erwin Struif, who had just joined the high table, had something to say about that.

"Well, I just read something about those sirens on Facebook. I think you left the market just in time, because now it seems to be total chaos there. This chaos is mainly due to many panicked, fleeing people. A bomb seems to have gone off at the Ferris wheel. Two people are dead, and at least eighteen others are wounded, with three of those injuries being life-threatening." René suddenly saw dead white.

"We were less than ten meters away from that, chubby? I may have saved your life; let us just take another beer, on your account!"

At that moment, the market square had changed into a tumultuous scene, with terraces and catering establishments bursting at their edges.

Many people had fled the terraces and had gone into the bars and restaurants. The last wounded victims were now taken away, and a tent had been built around the two dead bodies. Authorities cleared and cordoned off the entire market square. It had created a sinister scene: a completely empty fair, and around it a bustle of activities on the terraces and in the bars and restaurants surrounding the square. At the fairground attraction where the bomb had gone off, the Haarlem criminal investigation department and their forensic service did their work. Of course, only one subject was talked about on the terraces, and partly because of the heavy drinking, the necessary gossip and exaggerated or incorrect stories soon arose.

It became a King's Day focused solely on one topic, which may have contributed to the excessive consumption of alcohol. This made the evening and night turbulent, with a lot of work for the police.

The next day was Sunday, so most people were free, and in the afternoon the pubs were fuller than on a normal Sunday. Some pubs were normally closed on Sundays but had decided to open this Sunday. The bar was full early in the afternoon at René's local pub, and the talk was the same as yesterday. However, several new stories emerged at the bar, and discussions about the truthfulness of some of them began to dominate. René did not hesitate to express his dismay loudly.

"Fuck off, man. I was there with Big Bear, and we were less than ten meters away from the blast site. We may have left there, less than half an hour before that explosion. What you are saying is impossible and simply a fabrication. I did not see any police officers present when we walked across the fair, and I also did not see any police afterwards on the terrace. Therefore, your statement is incorrect. If they knew of any issues, would they let a few hundred people walk around? If you believe that, you should have yourself checked." Grant Gleeson, originally English but living in Haarlem for years, reacted in his own way. "Fucked it is, but you did not see anything about it on TV this morning. I think it is worse than we think now, mate. And, listen, there are plenty of them coming, and what we hear now are sirens of police, ambulance, and fire brigade, and I think they are coming this way.

What the fuck! Look there, at the Meibloem; I do not think we are safe here."

People were already standing up from the tables and wanted to leave through the back exit, but in no time, the whole place was surrounded by the police, and two policemen walked in. Outside, they saw that at the aforementioned Chinese restaurant, Meibloem, everyone was led outside, and it also became clear that people from the explosive ordnance disposal service were entering.

One of the officers who had just walked into the lunchroom took the floor.

"Do not panic, everyone; nothing is happening, but please exit calmly through the side door. You can go home, or else, to the parking lot, walk to the right, and gather there. The evacuation of this shopping center is currently underway. While he was still speaking, people were already leaving, and one of the two owners of the place called something after them.

"Yes, nice, but when we are open again, you will come back to pay, eh, people?" Jo, as she was called by everyone, was already closing when a big bang was heard and the windows started to shake. Jo and Barbara, the two owners, were the only ones left in the lunchroom at that time, along with the two officers who guided them in closing the business. It was immediately clear that the bang had come from the Chinese restaurant Meibloem, and looking through the window, they saw a large black cloud of smoke coming out. However, the previously led guests appeared to maintain a safe distance.

Some of Jo and Barbara's former lunchroom guests had gathered at The Playground, where King's Day had been celebrated the day before, even though that celebration had also been special. Mouse, as one of the regulars of lunchroom Bar & Jo was called, was the first with a peppery statement.

"They can kiss my ass: I will go where I want, as long as I can!"

René and Grant, who sometimes called each other idiot number one and idiot number three, had also walked to The Playground.

This year, their other friend, known as idiot number two, was not present. He lived in Vietnam and was not in Haarlem this time. Grant was already standing with a can of beer in his hand and raised a toast to idiot number one, René. Grant often mixed words, Dutch mixed with English, or the other way around, and also some Dutch phrases got Grant's own translation.

"Now, mate, cheers, we are still alive. In any case, they will not take this beer away from us anymore. The scene resembles the Wild West. What have we now, hanging on our clogs?"

René reacted as he always did to his English friend.

"Speak Dutch, figure. Resembling the Wild West, you say? These explosions of time bombs and the actions of the culprits are quite modern! Oh, there we have Struif, our Facebook specialist. So, Struiffie, do you have any news yet? Are there any dead or wounded in the Meibloem?" Struif, who previously owned a pub by the name Bij Struif, next to the Chinese restaurant, did indeed have fresh news, and everyone eagerly awaited his every word.

"Yes, there is one dead and two seriously injured, but all three victims are from the explosive ordnance disposal service." Apparently they did not work very smartly. No one mentions anything else. It appears that the media as a whole is under control. Isn't that strange? There is simply no mention of yesterday, and now the news is also sparse. What you read are usually assumptions and not facts. This situation reflects a broader trend: while they seek to learn more about us, they simultaneously want to keep us uninformed about their actions, all while still labeling this as a democracy. If you ask me, by the way, the perpetrators are targeting the Haarlem catering industry. Hansie's future is in jeopardy due to the ban on public performances. What is also strange is that from the center to behind here, the banks of The Spaarne are blue with cops, and all houseboats along The Spaarne seem to have been evacuated as well." René also had something to say about this.

"Yes, Struiffie, all lovely and mysterious again, but for now three guests are already dead. I do not believe they will be the last victims either. What the...! Look! There! It seems they are on their way here; what will this bring again?"

Three uniformed policemen, along with a man in civilian clothes, entered the square, and one of the officers selected the most central spot to address everyone.

"May I have everyone's attention, please?" "Thank you. I am Chief Constable Blom, of the Haarlem police. Everyone needs to leave this location.

We are currently evacuating and closing all bars and restaurants in Haarlem until further notice. The mayor has now issued an order prohibiting anyone from entering a closed catering establishment. Please leave this location quietly; there is no need to panic. All this is just a preventive measure."

While everyone started to move, Erwin Struif shouted a peppy statement to the policemen.

"Preventive? For what? It seems as if we have ended up in the Second World War again. We are being driven out like cows, without any real explanation. Nazi behavior, that is what I call it!" That was against the sore leg of the chief constable, who was standing right next to Struif.

"Would you like to come with us? We cannot tolerate this behavior and the words you have chosen against officials on duty. I understand that emotions can play tricks here, so I give you the chance to apologize, and then we can just get back to what matters here: the safety of all residents of Haarlem, including yours." Although the chief constable had not expected any reaction, it did come.

"Apologies? Listen. Have you ever heard of freedom of speech? Or has the law already eliminated that now?"

After receiving a signal from the man in civilian clothes, the chief cop decided to leave things as they were, and within minutes, the location was empty. Mouse also had an afterburner when leaving the location.

"Fortunately, there is also beer in the fridge at home!"

Chapter 2

T*he next day, the bar in the lunchroom, Bar & Jo, was already fully occupied at three o'clock in the afternoon.*

The subject of the talks was, of course, still the same as that of the previous two days. René van Veursen was also present early.

"So, Jo, fortunately that was not so bad, that closure. Is it really feasible for them to halt the entire hospitality industry like that? By the way, yesterday at The Playground, Struif was also in top form. You should have seen the faces of those cops, hi-hi. Too bad there isn't one here today. We do not hear or see anything about it." A reaction came from the corner of the bar. It was someone who was not one of the regular bar guests.

"I just cycled from the center, and everything at the market square is open again. I also think that the people living in houseboats along The Spaarne have returned home." However, riot police are currently patrolling along the quays, and they have also closed the Haarlemse Poort. Furthermore, traffic to the center is completely blocked because all parking garages seem to be closed. They have announced a press conference at five o'clock, which will air on all TV stations. Jo responded promptly, recalling her experience this Monday with Barbara, also known as Bar.

"Bar, grab your tablet from the kitchen so we can watch the press conference here." Bar sighed.

"Okay, I will; it is already giving me the creeps again.

I just took a quick peek inside the Meibloem, but it is currently closed. There is significant damage inside the restaurant. So, you better go into the kitchen, because the first table customers are already arriving. I will take care of the orders and the bar."

"Yes, my glass is empty." René shouted. Grant walked towards the sliding door to smoke a cigarette outside and also had a comment.

"I have never seen so many police on the street, and this morning I wanted to walk along the river, and I was just sent away. That Struif was right yesterday."

Just before five o'clock that afternoon, all the guests were sitting and standing at and around the bar, where Bar had installed her tablet in the corner. The press conference started exactly at five o'clock.

The mayor of Haarlem sat at a long table with police and municipal officials on either side, and the chief of police to the mayor's right. To the left of the mayor sat the leader of the detective team. The mayor was the first to speak. It was hushed in the lunchroom.

"Dear residents of Haarlem and the surrounding area. At nine o'clock this morning, I felt compelled to declare a state of emergency. This is, of course, mainly because of the events of the past two days. We witnessed a dramatic attack on our city's market square on King's Day, followed by a bomb attack on the Schalkwijk shopping center the following day.

Firstly, I would like to express our deepest condolences to the families of the victims, whose loss we deeply regret. I will now first give the floor to Chief Inspector Remco Harmsen, who will briefly present the state of affairs.

"Good afternoon. First of all, also on behalf of the Haarlem police force, our deepest condolences to the relatives of the three very regretted victims.

An event like the one we are now dealing with in Haarlem entails a degree of secrecy, especially at the beginning of an investigation. That is why not many of the terrible events have come to you through the media yet. We, as an investigation team, sometimes have to make sure that certain details do not become public too quickly. On the one hand, our goal is to keep the perpetrators in the dark about our progress, but also we want to prevent too many incorrect stories from emerging. What I can tell you currently is that there were two explosions last Saturday and Sunday. The first was on the market square, where the annual fair takes place and where there were two fatalities and dozens of injuries. Among those wounded, four are still in critical condition. The second bomb, in restaurant Meibloem in Schalkwijk, unfortunately went off when our people from the explosive ordnance disposal service were inside. Regretfully, this brought another death and two wounded. These wounded officers are in stable condition and will soon be able to leave the hospital.

Currently, there is no suspect or motive known. No one has yet claimed responsibility for these acts, but we assume for now that it is not a terrorist act. There are indications that make us draw this preliminary conclusion. We carried out a variety of actions on Saturday and Sunday, but later retracted or discontinued them. For instance, we have now rescinded the closure of all catering establishments in the city. The residents of the houseboats along The Spaarne are now also back in their familiar surroundings. The fair on the market square has ended, and the market square will be empty again tonight.

Local markets will not take place anywhere in the municipality until further notice.

Of course, any new events or clues can produce new decisions.

We ask everyone who has something to say about the two bombings to report via the telephone number that will be shown later, at the end of this broadcast. We also encourage anyone who observed any unusual activity prior to the aforementioned attacks, even if it was hours earlier, to report it.

Again, we cannot give you real details at this time in the interest of the investigation. We ask for your understanding.

We want to assure you that there will be constant street patrols throughout Haarlem to ensure everyone's safety. For this we have also received the support and commitment of the police forces of Amsterdam and Haarlemmermeer.

Currently, we urge the residents of Haarlem to maintain peace and refrain from speculating about unknown events. Once again, the mayor took the floor, but the press conference concluded at half past five due to the lack of further news.

Cries of disbelief, anger, and irritation echoed at the bar. René thought it was all beneficial.

"I understand that they cannot reveal details; we will just have to wait and see." "I think it is just some idiot who has lost his way. Give me another beer, Bar." The man who previously reported the press conference responded to René's words.

"I do not think he was a complete idiot. Those bombings were well prepared, and not everyone knows the necessary details about bombs either."

"You are right about that again," René responded resignedly. "I am going home; I have seen it for today. Cheers."

He paid and left the lunchroom. It was a day when everyone went home earlier than usual.

That evening, René was sitting in his flat with a glass of red wine in front of the television and followed the news, where some more information seemed to be released.

The news reported a manhunt for a suspect for the bombings, which had not yet resulted in any result. The police now suspected that a single perpetrator was responsible for both bombings. There was also mention of another scheduled press conference the next day at five o'clock in the afternoon.

The next day, Tuesday, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the bar of Lunchroom Bar & Jo was fully occupied again, with almost the same guests as the day before. Of course, the topic of conversation was also the same. The guest who was not known in the lunchroom was also present again, and he gave a round.

"My name is Karel Visser. I came to live here last week, in the Belgiëlaan. Due to my work-related disability, I anticipate finding a place here by the end of the afternoon. René van Veursen had something to say about that.

"Just keep giving rounds, then it will all be fine, hi-hi. But where are you from? You do not sound like someone from the neighborhood here." The man appeared to take some time to respond, but he eventually did.

"No, I am from Rotterdam, but I was able to get a rental house here through an acquaintance for a reasonable price. In Rotterdam I could not find anything affordable after my divorce, and I was also ready for a little change in my life." René went a little further.

"Well, then you have been lucky, because here the rents are also skyrocketing, but you are a Feyenoord fan, surely?" "Don't be afraid, because I am too, and more guests from here are, so that's fine too. Cheers, then."

Mouse, who was also present again, apparently thought differently about the newcomer, and he was not someone who hid his thoughts.

"Another Rotterdam blowhard, it does not get any better!"

It went on like this for a while, until the time of the press conference came again, and everyone rallied in front of Jo's laptop.

On the screen they saw the same setup as the day before, only now the chief inspector of the criminal investigation department started the press conference.

"Unfortunately, I come with some varying messages for you, and I have to start with a sad message.

Last night, two of the injured people in the bombing on the market square died of their injuries. It concerns a 38-year-old man and his 12-year-old son from Haarlem. We wish all relatives a lot of strength with this unspeakably heavy loss. The official death toll of both bombings now stands at 5. The good news here is that none of the remaining wounded are in a critical condition anymore.

Next, the investigation into the perpetrator begins to get some direction. We have news to share with you, as some of you may be able to help us find the suspected perpetrator.

For that purpose, I now give you the description of a man who was seen early Saturday morning near the Ferris wheel on the market square. This man is about 1 meter, 70 centimeters tall, bald, and has a stocky build. On Saturday morning, he was wearing black sneakers, jeans, and a black woolen sweater, and he had a sports bag in his hand with the inscription 'Olympia Haarlem' and the logo of the softball club of the same name in Haarlem-Schalkwijk.

We request anyone who can provide additional information about this man to contact us immediately via the telephone number that will appear on the screen later, at the end of this press conference.

Actually, this is all I can say at the moment. In the next press conference, we will also answer questions from the press present at that time. I now give the final word to your mayor, Mr. Weinen."

René shouted right through the mayor's words, and his words drowned out the mayor's, but no one cared.

"Bald, stocky, not too big, exactly like Struif", he yelled, laughing. "But then again, I do not see him making any bombs with those fingers of his, and you will not find an Olympia sports bag at his house either."