

Even the kindest person can become a killer

RENÉ APPEL

Zinloos geweld

Random Attack

With his expanding series of psychological thrillers René Appel ranks among the best mystery writers in the Netherlands. His work has won him many plaudits, including the 'Gouden Strop' award for the best Dutch crime novel. But his success does not lie in his use of the ingredients of the typical blood-and-guts thriller. Appel writes psychological novels, in which ordinary people suddenly find themselves wrested out of their ordinary lives. 'People do stupid things when they lose control,' the author explains in an interview. 'If you harass them long enough, if you hound them until they're witless, they turn vicious. Even the kindest person can be driven over the edge and become a killer.'

His latest book, *Random Attack*, is again based on this theme. Martin Hogeveen, a successful management consultant, is involved in the overhaul and reorganisation of a local public service authority. Privately he is trying hard to secure his girlfriend's commitment because he wants her to have his child. Meanwhile we follow Felix Nieberg, a trainee journalist setting out to find a father he has never known. These two story-lines, each dramatic in its own right, become entangled in a pointedly gratuitous manner. Both Martin and Felix let their frustration get the better of them, with unforeseen tragic consequences.

Random Attack tells a modern story. In recent years there has been a rise in stranger assaults, with random members of the public being attacked and sometimes killed by strangers. Appel latches onto this contemporary theme of senseless aggression, but he gives it a critical twist: while the violent actions of the main character Martin turn out to serve no purpose at all, his victims are hardly random. The atmosphere of violence and aggression extends to the psychological level, too. Martin is gradually and subtly driven over the edge of reason. However monstrous the excuses he invents for himself to ward off the consequences of his actions, the reader cannot help watching in suspense as this basically sympathetic character sinks deeper and deeper into the morass of his fervid imagination.

Appel writes with astonishing ease, giving the reader a smooth ride through the idiom of modern society. This is thanks largely to the distinctive ways in which the different characters express themselves, most notably the student Felix and the managerial-minded Martin. Deft touches of irony imperceptibly sharpen the reader's sense of language, with the result that the modern world becomes that much easier to see through.



photo Klaas Koppe

René Appel was born in 1945, in Hoogkarspel (West-Friesland). After ten years of reviewing crime fiction for a leading Dutch newspaper he decided to try his own hand at the genre. His debut thriller *Handicap* (1987), like his second book *Third Person* (1990), contained echoes of Patricia Highsmith (Appel introduced both Highsmith and Ruth Rendell to the Dutch readership). He won the 'Gouden Strop' award with *Third Person* and again with

Random Attack. Of the eleven thrillers he has written no fewer than seven have been shortlisted for this award. Appel, who has published two collections of mystery stories, was appointed Professor of Dutch as a Foreign Language at the University of Amsterdam in 1994. In *Conspiracy* (1999) he explores a new genre: mystery writing for children.

René Appel is unsurpassed in the skill of meting out expertly timed, low-key hints to keep the reader in mounting suspense until the final, shattering conclusion.

DE VOLKSKRANT

With his thrillers Appel has aimed to raise the standard of crime fiction. His latest, Random Attack, is yet another outstanding example of how well he has succeeded. Suspense, an original plot, and an excellent style.

BN/DE STEM

The dialogues are especially convincing, a delight to read.

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OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

Mord in der dritten Person (De derde persoon) Berlin: Twenne, 1991.
Gefangen in Kids City (Complot) Zürich: Nagel & Kimche, 2000.
Rachsucht (Tweestrijd) Zürich: Nagel & Kimche, 2001
Ein schrecklicher Verdacht (Foute boel) Zürich: Nagel & Kimche, 2001.
Tod am Leuchtturm (Geweten) Zürich: Nagel & Kimche, 2000.



SYNOPSIS

RANDOM ATTACK

by René Appel

Characters

Martin Hogeveen – mid-fifties, independent management consultant, lives alone; keeps fit by jogging and working out at the gym.

Carina Steinvooort – late twenties, marketing manager at a publishing house, Hogeveen's girlfriend.

Felix Nieberg – student, whose mother died soon after he was born (suicide due to postnatal depression); has his mother's surname.

Richard Karmeling – Felix's elder half-brother; has a different surname because their mother Irma was married when he was born. Felix and Richard are very alike (and like their mother).

Verlinden – sixty, head of the Department of Education, Welfare and Sport in a medium-sized municipality, chairman of a local football club.

Tom Knegthuis – works at the Department, in-law of Verlinden, marriage on the rocks.

Story

Martin Hogeveen is investigating the dysfunction of the local public authority, which includes the aforementioned Department. He proposes far-reaching changes, as a consequence of which the head of the Department becomes redundant. This Verlinden is entitled to relocation to another position, but he refuses to cooperate in any way. Eventually he takes sick leave, but his resentment against Hogeveen is all-consuming.

Felix is preoccupied by his roots, especially now that his brother Richard has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. They believe their mother's suicide was largely or wholly attributable to her being abandoned by her lover, Felix's father, when she was a few months pregnant. Richard's mental breakdown triggers his brother's decision to track the man down. Through their aunt, who raised them, Felix finds out his father's name: Martin Hogeveen.

Felix gets in touch with Hogeveen under the pretext of a college assignment to conduct an in-depth interview with a prominent member of the community. He doesn't say who he is (he introduces himself as Frits Blekemolen), because he wants to catch Martin Hogeveen off guard. When Felix starts asking personal questions – was he married, and so on – Hogeveen gets cagey and breaks off the interview.

Meanwhile Verlinden is determined to get reinstated. He pursues and even threatens Hogeveen, who is already under considerable strain in his private life.

He is tired of his old hedonistic lifestyle with strings of brief affairs, and longs for stability in a permanent relationship with Carina. He wants them to live together and to have a child, but she is not ready to give up her freedom and independence.

Felix tries to talk with Hogeveen again, without success. He then discovers who Hogeveen's girlfriend is, and also that she is looking for someone to clean her flat. Felix applies for the job, not under his own name, but under that of his brother Richard, whose student ID he carries with him. One day he arrives at Carina's flat to find her in bed with a cold. She seduces him: they have sex.

Meanwhile Hogeveen has been appointed interim head of the Department, where he is deluged with organisational problems. He finds it increasingly difficult to cope. To make matters worse, Tom Knegthuis, who also works at the department, turns out to be Carina's teenage lover, which inflames Hogeveen's jealousy.

Felix pays a third visit to Hogeveen, who reluctantly lets him in. Felix's leading questions and hostile tone soon make Hogeveen think he must in fact be Richard Karmeling, the son of a woman he lived with many years ago. Not only that, he is also the student who keeps his girlfriend Carina's flat tidy. When Felix (Richard to Hogeveen) lets on that he went to bed with Carina, Hogeveen spins out of control. They fight and Felix gets killed. He removes the student ID from Felix's jacket and dumps the body near a railway tunnel in a shady district where someone has recently been killed in a random attack.

Hogeveen is shocked and intrigued by the death notice in the papers: it is for someone called Felix Nieberg. The name of Richard Karmeling is among the deceased's relatives. Hogeveen follows this up, and in a telephone conversation with the aunt who raised the boys he discovers that the young man he has killed was his son. This cynical twist (since he wants Carina to have his child) adds to the torment of knowing he is under police observation. His worst fears are confirmed when it transpires that Verlinden, who has been stalking him, saw him get rid of the body.

Hogeveen's relationship with Carina is deteriorating fast. He thinks (mistakenly) that she is having an affair with Tom Knegthuis. Relations at the Department are more strained than ever. He's losing his touch, he's irritable, his behaviour is increasingly erratic. Meanwhile he is being blackmailed by Verlinden, who threatens to go to the police unless he gets his job back.

In a last-ditch effort to save his skin Hogeveen lures Verlinden to the football club and kills him in the yard by the deserted canteen, making it look as if the murderer is Tom Knegthuis. The police do not fall for this. They are still hunting for the random killer, and they find clues linking Felix to Hogeveen. The noose tightens around Hogeveen's neck while he withdraws deeper and deeper into a fantasy world of his own in which he gets to keep his freedom and his girl.

When the police finally present themselves at Hogeveen's apartment to take him in for questioning, he is not in. He has gone for his daily run along the canal. It is to be his last run, for he suffers a fatal heart attack before the end. Now that he is dead, the violence perpetrated by him is doubly senseless.

Sample translation from

Senseless Violence by René Appel (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2001)

Translated by Ina Rilke

Chapter 11

The switchboard operator refused to put him through.

‘But I have to talk to him,’ Verlinden insisted.

‘I’m sorry sir, but he’s not to be disturbed. Not by anyone.’

She wasn’t in the least sorry, the silly cow. She couldn’t have cared less.

She probably even enjoyed putting him in his place like this. Maybe she remembered some offensive remark he had made, maybe he had snapped at her last time.

‘In that case I’d like to speak to Tom Knegthuis.’

‘I’ll see if he’s available. Just a moment. No. There’s no reply.’

‘How about Harry Smeets, is he in?’

‘Mr. Smeets is not in the office today, sir.’

‘Tessa van Drongelen?’

‘I’ll check.’

There was a click, followed by muffled voices and thudding on the line.

Such was his life nowadays – muffled and thudding.

‘Mrs. van Drongelen is in a meeting. Until three, and after that she’s got an appointment elsewhere. Shall I pass you on to her secretary?’

‘No, don’t bother. Could you try Hogeveen again. It’s really important. Once I get back, I’ll.’

‘Mr. Hogeveen is not taking any calls, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, too lofty is he? I’m sure he...’

‘Is there anything else I can do for you?’

‘No.’ He slammed down the receiver. ‘Cow,’ he muttered. ‘Stupid cow.’

No one would speak to him. They were avoiding him. Last week there'd been a delivery of gift-wrapped fruit and a large bunch of flowers with a card saying 'Get well soon.' He had wanted to dump the whole lot in the dustbin but Marjan had stopped him. Since then he hadn't heard a thing from the Department. Verlinden a pariah! Contagious! He was in quarantine all right – in his study at home. What was the point of having his own study anyway? There was nothing for him to do. Over and done with. Finis. The End. The referee had called off the match before time.

Marjan stuck her head round the door. 'Want to come and have some tea?'

'No.'

'D'you want something else?'

'No.'

The atmosphere was stifling, as if the air was being sucked out of the room with a vacuum pump. He was finding it hard to breathe.

'Why not?'

'Because.' He noticed her eyes moisten. 'I mean... I've got to nip out first, drop by at the Department.'

'Oh, did they...'

'Yes, they asked me to come over.'

'See? What did I tell you, everything's going to be all right.' She was smiling again.

He drove to the office. He couldn't find anywhere to park nearby and didn't have the courage to check whether his reserved space was still available. What if the doorman waved him back? The humiliation. Quite likely that his parking bay had already been claimed by Hogeveen for his posh car. Hogeveen. Interim manager. Sneak. Taking advantage as usual. He parked about five hundred metres from the main entrance, walked back and posted himself on the other side of the street to look at the building. His best years lay there, his ambitions, his achievements. He aimed his Polaroid and took two pictures.

He couldn't hang around here for very long. Someone might have noticed him already. The place would already be buzzing with the news: Verlinden's

across the street, he's taking pictures! What, Verlinden? I thought he was on sick leave? Yes, sure, sick of work, that's what he is. Smiles all round – of relief. Good riddance, they were thinking. Tom most of all, the ungrateful dog.

But were they rid of him? It was half past four. Another thirty-odd minutes and the staff would start leaving. This was not a good place to collar Hogeveen. Too many onlookers. Better to confront him at home. He went back to his car and drove round for a bit. He stopped at the primary school he had done so much to get built, and took a photograph.

A little boy aged about six came up to him. 'Is that for the newspaper?'

'No, I just like taking pictures, that's all.'

The photograph slid out of the front.

'See, there's nothing there yet,' he said, and started flapping the print from side to side. 'And now it's a proper photograph. Take a look.'

'Brilliant, a magic camera! I've seen one before, of course.'

'Is this your school?'

'Yes, I'm zeven. I can read, you know.'

'Nice school, isn't it?'

A woman came past with a pushchair. She eyed Verlinden with a hint of suspicion.

The little boy nodded.

'I built this school, you know.' Verlinden said.

'The whole school?' the little boy asked. 'All the walls, all the windows? And the toilets and the sports hall?'

'Yes, everything.'

'All by yourself?' The child's eyes shone with profound respect.

'No, with a bunch of other people. Nobody could build such a nice big school all on their own. You know that.'

The little boy nodded vigorously.

'What's your name?' Verlinden asked.

'Timothy.'

Verlinden repeated the name.

The boy smiled briefly. 'Well, that's what my mother calls me. But you can call me Tim if you like.'

A woman strode towards them. 'Timothy! How often haven't we told you? You're not to talk to ...' she glanced at Verlinden. 'What's on that photograph?'

'It's a picture of the school.'

She took the boy by the hand. 'Come on, we must be off. Kimberley's home already.'

'Would you like to keep the picture, Tim?' Verlinden asked.

The boy took the photograph. Then his mother pulled him along to the corner of the street.

Verlinden got into his car and drove off in the same direction as the mother and her son. He caught a glimpse of her dropping the Polaroid print in a refuse bin.

Martin rubbed his eyes. It had been a late night, he hadn't got to sleep until well after two a.m. The film had been a bit of a disappointment. Afterwards they'd had a drink in a café, which was too crowded and too noisy to his taste. Not that he had said so. Carina knew one of the girls behind the bar. He had gone home with Carina, and they'd had another drink in her living room. 'So, what do you think?' 'About what?' 'Well, the state of my living room of course.' She had been very proud. As if she'd done all the work herself instead of hiring a student odd-jobber. 'Ah yes, fantastic. Looks like a cleaning tornado's been here.'

He had stayed over. After she drifted off he had lain there for some time, unable to sleep. At one point he had even got up to pour himself another glass of red wine in the living room.

It was now nearly a quarter to six. He'd go for a run first, he reflected, then take a shower, have a bite to eat... he thought there must still be a quiche in the freezer. Then he'd read the paper, watch tv. Dammit, he still had that batch of papers to get through before tomorrow, when they'd be deciding what to do with the Minorities policy unit. The unit itself was, you might say, something of a foreign body within the Department. Set up once upon a time during the eighties,

it had more or less automatically been taken under the wing of Education, Culture and Welfare, but now the idea was to make the council's Minorities policy everyone's business, which meant involving Economic Affairs and Employment as well as, say, Education. But Osman Cevic was not going to give up his position without a fuss. It did not make good political sense to dissolve the special unit at this point. It would mean giving people the sack, or at any rate having to shuffle staff around, a fair number of whom would belong to minority groups.

He stuffed the memos into his briefcase, strolled to the reserved parking space and drove home. He was about to enter his apartment block when he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Verlinden. Martin swung round.

'We must talk. You're avoiding me. This can't go on.'

'Mr. Verlinden. Surely the situation is quite clear. But if it is not, let me explain one more time. It has unfortunately proved impossible to keep you in your position as head of Department. There has been no difference of opinion about that, agreement was reached on all levels, political and otherwise, down to the chief secretary himself. All subsequent offers of alternative posts were dismissed by you out of hand...'

Verlinden lit a cigarette.

'You turned down every single offer,' Martin went on. 'Then you took sick leave. It is not within my competence to make further statements or offers, or to...'. He decided he'd had enough. 'Goodbye Mr. Verlinden. Have a nice evening.'

Verlinden grabbed his arm. 'Not so quick. I'm not some old coat you can shrug off just like that.'

'But Mr. Verlinden. We've been through all this. I advise you to consult your personal physician, it might be a good idea to see a psychiatrist..'

'There's nothing wrong with me,' Verlinden blurted. 'What are you getting at? That I'm...'

Martin stepped into the building, with Verlinden following close behind. Trying to ignore him, Martin crossed to the door leading to the elevators. Verlinden was poised to slip inside behind him.

Martin swore. 'This is outrageous. You know it is. I want you to go away. Now.'

'We must talk. I insist. An honest, open conversation.'

'Mr. Verlinden. You are only making things worse. Conversation would be pointless. Truly.' By now his irritation far exceeded any compassion he might have felt for Verlinden.

'You won't talk to me because your arguments don't stand up.'

Verlinden flung down his cigarette and ground it out with his shoe. 'You're scared you'll have to admit that I'm right. Which would signal the end for you, and you know it.'

'Mr. Verlinden, I'm serious. You must go away and leave me alone and stop bothering me. Is that clear?'

Verlinden lit another cigarette and blew the smoke defiantly in Martin's direction.

'If you don't stop this behaviour I will have to report you to the police.'

Verlinden did not react.

'I assume it was you ringing my doorbell in the middle of the night and refusing to give your name. Is that part of your strategy too?'

'We must sit down and talk. I can explain.' Verlinden said, with a catch in his voice.

Martin thought of all those corporations and public bodies that had been overhauled at his instigation, of the drastic reorganisations he had set in motion, as a result of which all those people had been reallocated against their will, or had been divested of responsibilities and tasks, or had even found themselves out on the street. So much misery, so much resentment and rage. But he could hardly let such thoughts stop him, however tragic the upheaval in people's lives. The point was to be sensible, not sentimental. Sometimes it was necessary to make a few individuals within an organisation suffer in order to improve efficiency and harmony in the workplace for hundreds if not thousands of others. Corporations weren't charitable institutions, but nor was the public sector. 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs,' Pieter, his colleague, was fond of saying. Hardly

original, but no less true for that. Verlinden was one of the broken eggs. Personally, Martin would certainly have preferred to find something suitable for him to do in some other capacity, but as long as Verlinden himself refused to cooperate, there was no chance of that.

‘Mr. Verlinden, this has got to stop.’ Martin realised he was repeating himself, but hadn’t given up hope of drumming the message into Verlinden’s head. ‘There is nothing to discuss. Decisions have been taken and they are irreversible. If you need to talk about your situation, you should do so with members of the medical profession. Why don’t you talk to your doctor, see what he has to say.’

Martin ducked into the hall with the elevators, shutting the door so quickly behind him that Verlinden was unable to follow in his slipstream. He could hear Verlinden, his voice breaking, ‘I’ll get you. Just you wait!’

[...]

Richard glanced warily at Mireille. ‘What’s she doing here? Who sent her?’

‘She came along. Surely that’s...’

‘I wanted to know how you were,’ broke in Mireille.

‘She just felt like coming,’ Felix added.

‘Ah. Felt like it.’

Mireille was talking non-stop. About her college courses, her room, her job at La Malène. ‘It’s great, it really is and the pay’s good too. Sometimes, at the end of a busy night at the weekend, I’m utterly knackered, it’s a drag, but it comes with the job.’

Richard nodded.

‘And did you know it looks really good on your cv, to have a few years’ experience in the catering trade? It means you’ve got social skills, and that you can deal with stress. That sort of thing.’ She launched into a story about a customer who’d ordered an expensive meal and who couldn’t pay the bill. ‘He was broke. Turned out he was doing this all over the place. A sort of dine-and-run artist. He’d been arrested a couple of times, but he didn’t give a fuck, so long as they fed

him in jail.'

Felix glanced at Mireille. There she was, chattering away without Richard showing the slightest interest in what she was saying. He might have been stone deaf, he was so unmoved.

'And then the other day we had some people in and they'd had a huge meal, and when we asked if they'd enjoyed the food they said they'd never had such awful food in their lives. All of it was awful, they said. So they refused to pay the bill. At least that's what they said. Anyway, they demanded to see the manager and so on. In the end they got a sort of discount.'

Mireille lit a cigarette. Richard followed suit. Felix was enveloped in smoke. He wished he could go up in it.

'And how are you doing?' Mireille inquired. 'Getting on OK?'

'Yeah, getting on, you could say that.' At last the hint of a smile appeared on Richard's face.

Mireille asked him how things were at the clinic, but Richard said he wasn't supposed to talk about it. 'Least of all about Irma.'

Felix cycled with Mireille to her bedsit and followed her upstairs. It was a quarter to three, but Mireille reached in the fridge for some beer anyway. 'I'm thirsty, how about you.?''

They drank and talked about Richard.

After about half an hour Felix got up. Mireille got up too. She put her arms around him.

'I feel so sorry for him,' she said between kisses.

'It's just as if you can't get through to him, as if he's barricaded himself behind some sort of wall. He was always a bit like that, of course, but now...'

Felix felt her skin, her breasts, he laid his hands on her buttocks. Meanwhile he thought of the stained panties which were still in his trouser pocket. Mireille unbuttoned his shirt, pulled down the zipper of his jeans. Falling over themselves and each other they landed on her bed.

After they had made love, they lay in each other's arms for a time.

‘You’re not at all like Richard, if you ask me.’

‘Different and yet the same.’

Mireille propped herself up on her elbow. ‘And what he said about Irma, what was that supposed to mean? You mother’s name was Irma, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, Irma.’

‘And you didn’t have the same father. No wonder Richard and you are so different.’ She lay back on the mattress. ‘Did you get to see your father at all?’

He said nothing.

Mireille repeated her question, running her hand over his belly and twisting his public hair round her fingers.

In stops and starts he told her about his contacts with Hogeveen. That he’d spoken to him, but hadn’t revealed who he was.

‘So you just said you were a trainee reporter?’ Mireille asked. ‘Cool. And what did you find out?’

‘Not much. Nothing, really. Not about his time with Irma, anyway. Why he left her, that sort of thing. I couldn’t get him to talk about that.’

‘Perhaps you should have told him you’re her son, that he’s your father. He might have come up with the goods then.’ She gave a little laugh and threw back the covers. ‘The goods.’

‘No, I don’t want to do that,’ Felix said. ‘He doesn’t need to know that he... besides, I don’t want anything to do with him. Who knows what he might get up to, what sort of claims he’d make. He’s a smooth talker, and he’d come up with all sorts of excuses. I don’t want to hear them. All I want is...’

‘No need to bite my head off,’ said Mireille.

He breathed deeply, in and out, two or three times. ‘You’re right.’

‘Shit, it’s almost five o’clock. I’ve got to do a shift at La Malène’s. You can stay in bed if you like.’

It was six by the time he cycled back to his own room, where he set to work immediately on his college courses. First there was a short piece he had to write on the basis of a press statement from the police. Next he forced himself to concentrate on the reading he had to do for his Sociology class. Social structures,

community relations, immigration, population statistics. His eyelids drooped over the blurred columns of jargon. He glanced at his watch: past eight o'clock. He felt hungry, but there was nothing to eat, not even a slice of stale bread. He had hung Richard's painting over his desk. Little figures trudging in a lunar landscape with heavy burdens on their backs. A bit clumsily drawn, but all the more endearing for that. Drenched in symbolism, but maybe that hadn't been Richard's intention at all.

He went out to get something to eat. The shoarma kiosk on the corner was closed, probably closed down by the umpteenth owner who hadn't made it. He unlocked his bike and rode into town. What if he dropped in at La Malène, and got himself waited on by Mireille. No, far too expensive. It would take up half his food budget for the month.

There was only one place he could go, really. He could hear Mireille's voice again, Why don't you go and see him? Tell him you're his son. No, not that. Tell him you're Irma's son. Which son? It was very unlikely that he knew about more than one son. He would be the one son who wanted to settle accounts. Who wanted an account from him, who demanded to be told. For Richard's sake, because he wouldn't or couldn't hear.

The lights were out in Hogeveen's windows. Felix rang the bell just the same. There was no response. He rang again. In vain. He was angry. Hogeveen had to be at home. There he was, doing his disappearing act again. Absconding, as usual. He turned and walked across the parking lot towards Hogeveen's gleaming, glamorous Alfa Romeo sports car. Felix was sure he was at home, that he was lying in bed with Carina by now. He could picture their bodies, hear their sounds, smell the sweat mixed with sex. He glanced round quickly. The place was deserted. He took out his key-ring and scratched a long sharp line into the paintwork on the side of the Alfa.

Harry Smeets and his wife were already there, and so were Osman Cevic, Karel Tuling and Tessa van Drongelen, who showed up with a girlfriend. Martin introduced Carina to the others. This little get-together with department heads and

unit managers and their partners, assuming they had them, was one of those organised attempts to improve social relations between colleagues. Of course, meeting up at the bowling alley of an evening was an incredibly old-fashioned and boring thing to do, but somehow that was precisely what made it appealing. A nice touch of retro. Everyone was sick of laser games, Paintball and Karting anyway. Maybe the time was ripe for office parties with Snakes & Ladders and Monopoly.

Tom Kneghuis arrived. Alone. Martin had heard about his divorce problems from Saskia.

He was about to introduce Carina to him when she exclaimed 'Tom! Tommy Kneghuis!' She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on both cheeks. Carina and Tom went back a long way, it turned out: they'd been at school together when they were kids.

The group counted sixteen people, which was convenient for making up four teams for the bowling alleys. Carina was in Tom's team, Martin was with Tessa van Drongelen and her friend, and Osman Cevic. From the corner of his eye he kept watch over Carina and Tom, who had so much to say to each other that the others had to call them to attention when it was their turn to bowl.

Afterwards they all went to a restaurant. Martin sat next to Carina, who had Tom at her other side. He caught the odd snatch of their conversation. Remember when... Yes, and Lakerveld, such a hopeless teacher, we used to run wild ... have you seen Eva at all, didn't she...?'

Meanwhile Martin was at pains to carry on a civil conversation with Harry Smeets' wife. She kept telling him how much better things were at the Department nowadays. 'I can tell by Harry's mood when he gets home. So different to what it used to be, before Theo Verlinden left. I mean, there are still problems, but he tends to see them as challenges now, instead of ...' The words poured from her mouth.

At midnight Martin and Carina left in a taxi.

'You seemed to be enjoying yourself, with that guy Tom Kneghuis.'

Carina kissed him.' Is that a note of jealousy I hear?'

‘No, of course not, but...’

‘But what?’

‘You seemed pretty wrapped up in each other, that’s all.’

‘We hadn’t seen each other for such ages. More than fifteen years!’

‘Childhood friends.’

‘Yes. Actually, he was even my boyfriend for a bit.’ Carina laughed. ‘After a school outing, that’s when it started, although I’d known him for ages. Isn’t it funny, bumping into him like this, and him working for you! I could never have guessed.’

Upon arrival at Martin’s apartment they went straight to the bedroom. Carina slipped into the bathroom. Martin got undressed and lay down on the bed, tired, but wide awake. Too awake. Verlinden. That wasn’t the last he’d heard of him, he was sure, but there was nothing he could do at this stage except advise all staff members to keep out of harm’s way. Contact with Verlinden would only make things difficult, create new problems. He had enough on his plate as it was. Fancy Tom being Carina’s teenage sweetheart. Turning up like a bad penny. When they’d left the restaurant Carina and Tom had embraced when they said goodbye. Martin suspected they’d arranged to meet, but he hadn’t been able to hear what they were saying. Better not ask Carina, he thought.

Suddenly he noticed her standing beside him, wearing a tiny leopard-print bra and briefs. ‘You looked as if you were asleep with your eyes open.’

Chapter 12

Martin was at least ten metres from his car when he noticed the deep scratch from front to rear. This was no accident, not another car that had grazed his, this was deliberate. He glanced round the car park. All the other vehicles looked fine. When had it happened? On Friday they had taken a taxi. He hadn’t used the car over the weekend. That meant it could have happened on Friday night at the earliest.

The person who had done this clearly wanted to get him where it hurt. It was a threat. He remembered Verlinden's choking voice: 'I'll get you, just you wait!' This was too close for comfort, things were closing in on him. Verlinden had to be made to understand that he was ruining any chances he might still have had. Any more of this behaviour and Martin would see to it that he got the sack. There were plenty of grounds for rightful dismissal.

He got in his car and drove to the Municipal office. The first thing he did on arrival was phone Verlinden.

'Mr. Verlinden, this is too much. Unacceptable.'

'What?'

'You know perfectly well what I mean.'

'No, I don't.'

'You came to my house the other day,' Martin said, 'and you know what my car looks like.'

'Indeed I do.'

Martin paused before blurting: 'Why did you damage my car?'

'Me? Damage your car?' Verlinden gave a short forced laugh. 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about an enormous scratch someone made on my car.'

'Serves you right,' Verlinden said, 'If you damage other people, it's hardly surprising if they damage you...'

'So you're admitting it?' Martin could see Verlinden in his mind's eye, with a pair of scissors, a key or some other sharp object, standing next to the Alfa.

'Of course not. This is absurd. Making wild accusations again are you? Your favourite ploy it seems, same as with all that other stuff. Something goes wrong and you promptly put the blame on me. Well, I've got better things to do. Goodbye.' Verlinden slammed the phone down.

Martin stared at the receiver, as if there might yet be some particle of information about to issue forth. He set to work reading dossiers, making phone calls, reading his e-mails, studying the report submitted by Cevic, but all the time at the back of his mind was the nagging thought of Verlinden and the scratch on his car.

Verlinden was going berserk, it must have been him. Like the other day when he'd rung his doorbell in the middle of the night. He strained to focus on Cevic's turgid prose. The grammar wasn't perfect, but that wasn't the problem – it just went on and on. 'The majority strategy should be seen in the perspective of the growing tensions in relations between ethnic groups within a changing society where solidarity and equal opportunities must be fostered notwithstanding current trends of market-economy thinking. Notions of ethnic and/or cultural superiority are, overtly or covertly, the determining factors in the allocation of the respective positions.' What did it mean? Verlinden reappeared in his mind's eye. Serves you right, that was what he'd said. It amounted to an admission of guilt. The compassion he had felt for Verlinden was reaching its nadir. If the fool refused to see how counter-productive his behaviour was, what could Martin possibly do to help him.

The phone rang: Carina. She was a bit under the weather, she said, it had started at the weekend. She had decided to stay home for the day to give herself a chance to get over it. Colds could drag on so. He told her about his car.

'How awful for you. So you're quite sure it was Verlinden who did it?'

'Not 100 percent sure, but who else could it have been?'

'No idea.' Her voice sounded sleepy. It made him think of her bed, of the air thick with sexy, animal warmth.

'I love you,' he said.

Carina tried reading a book, but couldn't concentrate on the story. Then she had a look at the newspaper, leaning back against two pillows. Actually, she was feeling a lot better already, but decided to stay in bed anyway. She laid the paper aside. A day of complete rest would do her a world of good.

She was startled by the sound of a door shutting.

'Martin, is it you?' Her heart pounded in her throat.

'Er, sorry. I didn't know anyone was in.' Richard stuck his head round the bedroom door. He drew back at once, despite the fact that she was half under the covers and wearing a modest night-dress.

‘Not to worry,’ she said, fighting to get her breathing back to normal. ‘I’d forgotten you were coming today.’

‘I’ll come back another time if you like...’

‘You might as well come in, you know. It’s a bit weird carrying on a conversation with someone in the corridor.’

He stepped gingerly into the bedroom. ‘I could come back some other time.’

‘Why would you do that? I won’t be in your way.’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Well, and you’re not in my way either, so why don’t you just go ahead and take no notice of me. I wasn’t feeling too good this morning, so I’m staying in bed.’

She could hear him setting the house to rights. The vacuum cleaner would hum for a while, then there’d be an interlude of silence. By the sound of it he was cleaning her bathroom too.

An hour and a half later he came into the bedroom. ‘Shall I give this place a quick clean as well?’

She had wanted to say that wouldn’t be necessary, but she nodded. ‘Okay.’

He busied himself about the room. She eyed him coolly as he moved around, but she was beginning to feel a tinge of unease about the situation with her as boss and him as her employee, her cleaner. There he was, tidying up her things with her observing him from the luxury of her bed, like an old-fashioned lady of leisure with servants to wait on her hand and foot.

‘Would you like something to drink?’ she asked when he was done. ‘Tea? Actually, I’d like some myself.’ She started getting out of bed.

‘I’ll do it.’ And off he was, to the kitchen.

Five minutes later he brought her a cup of tea and a biscuit, after which he walked out again.

‘Why don’t you have your tea in here?’

He came back and hesitated by the only chair in the bedroom. There was a pile of her clothes on it.

She patted the edge of her bed. ‘You can sit here if you like.’

He asked her if she was feeling very sick. No, she wasn't. Conversation between them dried up after that. She looked at him. She reached out to put her cup on the bedside table, and in doing so brushed against his arm, accidentally on purpose.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I've got to get back to work.'

'More classes today? Lectures and things?'

'No, not today. I don't have classes on Wednesdays.'

'So you're not in a rush.'

'No. I just have one essay to finish.'

They both fell silent again.

'More tea?'

'Yes please.'

He fetched her another cup and made to leave the room straight away.

'Richard.'

He turned, a surprised look on his face.

'Why don't you stay with me for a bit. It's rather boring lying here all day.'

He sat down again on the edge of the bed.

She took his hand. 'Why don't you lie down.' She noticed the commanding tone in her own voice. It was an order, and there was no going back. He would do what he was told.

He cleared his throat. 'But...'

'Don't worry. I'm not going to bite.'

He lay back on top of the duvet, leaving plenty of space between him and her. She stroked his hand, snuggled up to him, slipped her hand under his sweatshirt, felt his smooth, taut skin. Slowly his body began to respond. She threw back the duvet, took her night-dress off and guided his hand to her right breast. Neither of them said a word.

Felix kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He didn't dare look at her, but he was very aware of her body beside him. Her skin, her breasts, her thighs, the pungent, moist warmth between her thighs. Soon he would get up and go, and never show

his face again. Not a word need be exchanged between them. He glanced sideways. Her eyes were shut. He tried to tell by her breathing whether she was asleep. He glanced at the photograph on the bedside table. Carina with Hogeveen, smiling, arms around each other, on a pavement café by the look of it.

Suddenly she said. 'Are you mad at me?'

'Why?'

'For seducing you. Naughty of me, I know.'

'Not at all.'

She stroked his chest, his thighs, his hips.

'You seem to be ready for an encore, I'd say,' she said, clambering on top of him.

She felt a pang of guilt, which was what she wanted to feel. Bad person, she mouthed soundlessly. The deceit, the seduction. You could even call it some sort of rape, or maybe sexual abuse was a better term. But the guilt seemed very far away. She studied his body. Now was the time. Her only chance.

He drew himself up.

'Don't go just yet,' she said, rubbing herself against him.

He pointed to the photograph on the bedside table. 'Who's that?'

'My boyfriend, but he...' She didn't finish her sentence.

'But what?'

'This has nothing to do with him. With us, I mean, just now.'

'Oh.' He propped himself on one elbow and fixed her with his eyes. 'He knows you go to bed with other blokes and he doesn't mind.'

'No, it's not that. He doesn't know, and he'd hate it if he did.' She saw the hint of a smile on his face. 'Does that amuse you?'

'No, not at all.'

'So why smile?'

'Oh, just, because I feel good,' Felix said. 'Because it was great. I've never... I mean...'

'You've never had such a good fuck, is that it?'

‘What about you?’

‘You don’t ask a lady that sort of thing, Richard.’

‘But...’

‘It was great. Really. You’ll be a wonderful lover one day, no doubt about that.’

He got up. ‘I really must go.’

‘Take a shower first.’

When he came back in the bedroom she watched him get dressed. ‘This is just between us,’ she said. ‘I don’t want Martin picking up any kind of gossip or anything.’

He pointed to the photograph again. ‘That’s Martin?’

‘Yes.’

He leaned over for a better look. ‘He seems quite a bit older than you.’

‘So he is. Early fifties.’

‘Been married?’

‘Who? Me?’ she asked.

‘No, him of course.’

‘You’re very nosy.’

He peered even closer at the picture. ‘Was he married before?’

‘No, he’s been single all his life. Well, he lived with someone for a while once, twenty years ago I think it was. But why do you want...?’

He didn’t let her finish. ‘And since then?’

She looked at him, wondering why he was so inquisitive. ‘I don’t think that’s any of your business,’ she said. ‘It’s private.’

He sat down again, ran his hand along the line of her cheek, her throat, stroked her breasts. ‘But what we were doing just now was pretty private too, wasn’t it?’ His voice softened. ‘But you’re right of course. I’m just curious. Curious about what sort of a man he is. Lucky guy... Ah well...’ He shrugged his shoulders, which made him look defenceless, hurt almost.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘Give me a kiss.’

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on her lips.

‘No, a proper one.’

She put her hands around his neck, pulled him towards her and pressed her parted lips against his, flicked her tongue into his mouth, sucked his tongue into hers, so hard that it must have hurt. Not that he showed it.

He rose unsteadily to his feet.

‘Before me he had lots of affairs,’ she said. ‘You know the kind of thing, he’d have a fling, short but sweet. Not always sweet, maybe. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.’

He put his shoes on. ‘And what about you two?’

‘We’ve been together for close on two years. He wants me to move in with him, he wants us to have a baby.’

‘And you?’

‘I’m not ready. It’s early days yet. But why are we discussing this? Martin’s got nothing to do with it.’

‘No, perhaps not.’ He paused by the door. ‘I’m off.’

‘Richard.’ She placed her index finger on her lips.

‘Of course.’

‘And you’ll go on working for me? It’s happened, a one-off, but...’

‘Do you regret it?’

‘No, not at all.’ She smiled. ‘But I’d hate it if I had to go looking for someone else to do my cleaning and so on.’ She felt an urge to say something vulgar, something crass, such as: ‘Richard, for great servicing of house and body!’

Richard hadn’t been gone five minutes when the phone rang. It was Martin, asking how she was feeling. Not too bad. Should he drop by? Later this evening, maybe, at nine-ish? No, he wouldn’t stay long. He just wanted to see her. He was terribly busy, actually. The Minorities business was getting very involved. For one thing, there was Cevic who had always been protected by Verlinden, for political reasons if nothing else. That guy was a pain in the neck, even now he was stirring things up. But he didn’t want to bore her with his concerns. She could feel Richard’s hands cupping her breasts, his nails digging into her skin. The warmth

spread through her body, concentrating in her lower belly. She wasn't listening to what Martin was saying. Richard's body shook when she bit his hand, probably to suppress a cry.

'What did you say?' Martin asked.

She shut her eyes and shook her head vigorously from side to side. 'Nothing.'

'I thought I heard something. Maybe the line's breaking up. But shall I come later on...?'

'I don't know if I'm up to it. Perhaps I should have an early night.'

'But you've been all on your own all day. Don't you mind?'

'It's lovely and quiet. Besides, I can hardly keep my eyes open, I'm so sleepy.' She heard him sigh at the other end, but she really didn't fancy seeing him just now. Couldn't face it. Things would be different tomorrow.

Felix had raced to the clinic on his bike as if chased by demons. He couldn't think why, but he'd been seized by a sudden urge to see Richard. He arrived out of breath. It was supper time. That is to say, they were all sitting around the table, with Richard staring blankly at his plate.

Afterwards they drank coffee in the common room. Felix asked Richard if he felt like a game of billiards, but there was no reaction. They sat side by side without speaking.

'I think I'd better be off,' Felix said in a low voice.

'Right.' Richard said, looking unmoved.

Cycling home, Felix chanted 'Carina and Martin' over and over under his breath. Might as well add a third name while he was at it: Irma's. His mind reeled, touched upon the memory of what had happened earlier and then let it go at once, so that it rose up in the air, floated above the street and over the town. It didn't rise any further, though, and didn't evaporate either, it drizzled down in tiny particles, blurring his vision, kneading his emotions. He could barely believe it, he marvelled at his own audacity. But at the same time he knew perfectly well why he had done it.

He stopped at a snack bar for a bag of chips and a croquette and a can of beer. A woman aged about sixty was feeding coins into a fruit machine. After about ten minutes she went to the counter to change a fifty-guilder note.

‘No luck yet, Auntie Sien?’

‘Almost there. Won’t be long now.’

The proprietor counted out fifty coins, which she scooped up and dropped in her coat pocket.

Felix got on his bike again. The automatic pilot steered him towards Hogeveen’s apartment block.

Chapter 13

[...]

Verlinden sat in his study staring at the photographs. They were evidence, and he’d show them to anyone who cared to see them. Problem was that no one cared. No one expressed the slightest interest. Only yesterday he’d called Kuypers, the local party chairman. At least Kuypers had listened to his story, he’d said it was disgraceful, not fair either. ‘Everything you’ve done for this town just thrown out the window.’ But what could he do. There was the new, managerial approach that local government had seen fit to adopt, and then there were the problems in the Department, which he couldn’t do anything about, of course, but which he was held responsible for. Yes, it was tough, but that’s life. It didn’t help having the media breathing down their necks, either, including the local tv station. Verlinden remembered the young reporter who’d come to interview him and who’d made those insinuations about fraud, deceit and blunders. At one point he’d put a stop to the interview, and had asked the reporter and the cameraman to leave. He’d refused to watch the item on tv and wouldn’t let Marjan watch either.

The photographs. His personal triumphs. The theatre, completely refurbished and expanded with a restaurant and spacious café. Two primary schools. The

stunning Prisma college, which architects from all over, even from abroad, came to admire. The brand-new community centre, which had replaced a huddle of tumble-down shacks. The women's refuge – not his first and greatest sympathy admittedly, although he'd always succeeded in putting personal emotions to one side. The sports complex with two gymnastics halls and a sauna.

Who else could claim credit for such services to the public good? Not Hogeveen, for sure.

Things had presumably settled down a bit at the office. Hogeveen must have got some sort of grip by now, on how things worked and why things happened the way they did. It was time to get in touch with him again.

A man with crutches staggered out of the building. His right leg was in a white plaster cast. Felix held the door open for him.

'Thank you.'

Felix rang the bell.

'Who is it?'

'Frits Blekemolen.'

The intercom fell silent.

'You know me, I'm the person who interviewed you for a college assignment.'

'I remember it well.' There was some crackling on the intercom as if the apparatus were commenting on Hogeveen's words. Then the door clicked open. Felix was surprised. He took the elevator upstairs. Hogeveen was waiting for him in the hall, relaxed in his slippers, narrow reading glasses on the tip of his nose.

'Come on in.' His tone was businesslike. 'Sit down. Go ahead, tell me. What's your story this time?' Hogeveen smiled, laid his glasses on the newspaper.

'My story? It's about the interview. I'd like to ask you some more questions about...'

Hogeveen interrupted him. His tone was sharp. 'What's your name?'

'Frits Blekemolen. I've got...'

Hogeveen raised his voice to silence him. He repeated his question.

‘I...er...’ it was unclear how much Hogeveen knew, how much he suspected.

‘There’s isn’t a Frits Blekemolen at your college. They’ve never heard of him. Mister Mystery. What is it you want? Why did you lie about your name?’

Felix glanced around the room. The same two books on photography were lying on the vast glass coffee table.

‘Answer me: what are you after, what’s all this about?’

‘I... really had to do that assignment, do an interview with somebody.’

Hogeveen stared at him fixedly, picked up his glasses and put them down again. ‘All right, let’s just assume that you’re telling the truth about that, but that doesn’t alter the fact that you are not Frits Blekemolen.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘So what is your name?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Hogeveen leaned forward in his chair. ‘I think I should be the judge of that. What is your name, who are you, what are you looking for?’

‘I...er, my name’s Richard.’ He left it at that, plenty of time to add a surname later. If pressed he could always give him Richard’s surname. Felix felt something brush against his legs. He patted Hogeveen’s cat on the head.

Hogeveen seemed doubtful. He leaned back again, rubbed his hand over his cheek. ‘Richard, is it? And I’m supposed to believe that?’

‘That’s up to you. I can show you my student ID, if you like.’ Just as well he’d kept the card in the pocket of his jacket. You never knew when an alternative identity might come in handy.

‘Richard.’ Hogeveen repeated.

‘Yes.’

Hogeveen eyed him pensively. ‘Richard... what a coincidence.’

‘What d’you mean by coincidence?’

‘“Quite a lot. For one thing, my girlfriend hires a student to clean her flat. His name’s Richard too. A curious coincidence.” Hogeveen peered at him over his

glasses. 'You're not the... er..'

Felix nodded.

Hogeveen seemed taken aback. 'But...' He stood up, crossed the room, picked up a book, put it down somewhere else, sat down again. 'So you're Richard. That Richard. You wormed your way into my... But that's...' he raised his hands and let them drop again.

Felix said nothing. Hogeveen bowed his head, breathed deeply. Felix thought he could hear him sniff.

'You insinuated yourself into her flat,' Hogeveen said at last, sounding as if he'd finally found the solution to a problem. 'A sort of infiltration, espionage. It's preposterous, quite mad. Was it because of me?' Another penetrating look. 'Were you trying to find out about me through her?'

'Possibly,' Felix mumbled. He remembered her body, smelled her body. He could reach into his inside pocket and draw out her picture. Look, it's Carina. Where was that? Greece, most likely.

'What did you say?'

'Perhaps.' His hands cupping her breasts.

'You're an impostor. Maybe I should report you to the police, or at any rate to your college.'

Felix shrugged his shoulders. It didn't matter any more. Hogeveen having the gall to call him deceitful. That was rich.

'I'll just call my girlfriend,' said Hogeveen. He started dialling, but replaced the receiver before he was finished. 'No, that can wait. She's not very well. Maybe...'

'No, she's not well,' Felix said. 'She's in bed.'

'How do you know?'

'I was at her flat today. It's Wednesday, my cleaning day.'

'So you were there while she was in bed?'

'Yes. Anything wrong with that?' He felt like winding Hogeveen up a little more. 'It's not the first time I've seen a woman lying in bed. My mother, for instance. But then that was too long ago for me to remember. I was too young.'

Hogeveen swore. He stood up again, took a step in Felix's direction, but seemed to want to restrain himself and stiffened. 'What's behind all this?'

'I'm just curious', said Felix.

'Curious? About what? What do you want to know? Why pick on me?'

'Because.' Felix said, for want of anything better to say.

Hogeveen sniffed again. 'Because! What kind of answer is that? You'll have to think of a better explanation. Or else...' He stopped in mid-sentence, as if he'd suddenly seen a connection, as if he'd drawn a line between the past and present. 'Richard. Isn't your name Richard?'

Felix nodded.

'You're not Richard Karmeli... er, Richard Karmeling, are you?'

'Yes, I'm Richard Karmeling.'

'So you're...?' Hogeveen fell silent, his eyes filled with amazement and disbelief. They sat for a while face to face without speaking. Then Hogeveen got up and left the room. He returned with a glass of water which he proceeded to gulp down. 'Irma's son,' he said. 'That little kid, Richard... Ritchie, she used to call him, the boy whose father had that accident... Christ Almighty!' He raised his hands to his cheeks and kept them there for a time. 'Richard... It's incredible. I had this feeling... from the first time I saw you. Your face, it rang a bell somehow. You look like her, d'you know that?' Hogeveen seemed staggered by his discovery.

'Yes, I know. People who knew her, or who've seen her photograph, say I'm like her.'

'Er, would you like a drink maybe?'

'A beer please. I'm thirsty.'

Hogeveen vanished into the kitchen. It was several minutes before he returned with beer and a glass of red wine. They drank in silence.

'Irma,' Hogeveen said at last.

'You abandoned her,' said Felix.

Hogeveen frowned. 'Abandoned?'

'Yes.'

‘It was finished, that’s all. Over. Didn’t work out. End of story. Happens all the time, to all sorts of people. Just one of those things. It wasn’t as if we’d signed a contract or anything. We hadn’t pledged eternal fidelity, and even if we had...’

‘Oh, just one of those things, eh? And that makes it all right?’ Felix took a sip of his beer. ‘Imagine if Carina were to walk out on you from one day to the next. Just one of those things?’

‘This has nothing to do with Carina.’

Felix repeated his question.

‘She wouldn’t do that.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure.’

‘Why not? What do you mean?’

Felix just stared.

‘Did she say anything? Did she mention Tom?’

Felix didn’t reply. ‘I want to know why you left Irma, why you walked out on her just like that, from one day to the next. It destroyed her, completely destroyed her, did you know that?’

Hogeveen reached for his glass but changed his mind and set it down again. ‘Look here, I’m not accountable to you, but I’ll tell you if you want. I suppose you’re entitled to know. And it’s no secret anyway. It was no different from the way other people decide to split up. We just weren’t getting along. I know, I know, she was your mother, so it was awkward for you...’

‘Awkward?’ Felix sneered. ‘Awkward? It was bloody awful, a fucking mess, and it still is. You have no idea, do you?’

‘All right then, it was bloody awful,’ Hogeveen conceded. ‘But it wasn’t working out. Her behaviour was increasingly unpredictable, strange, chaotic. She was fine sometimes, and then it was all very cosy and pleasant, but the next day she’d get the craziest ideas in her head. Actually, I stayed around for quite a while after it was over between us, but she was impossible to live with. Impossible for me, anyway.’

‘So you dumped her.’

‘Well, I...’

Felix got up from his chair. 'You dumped her. A dead-weight, she was. A difficult woman. So you walked out!' He was close to shouting now. 'What did you care? All you cared about was yourself, you were fine so long as you had some bimbo to get into bed with. Am I right?'

Hogeveen bowed his head. He was obviously not going to let this get to him, the way he never let anything get to him, ever since the days with Irma. He was your typical shirker of responsibilities, a smooth talker. He was good at that, he was a professional smooth talker.

'Well, am I right?' Felix persisted.

Hogeveen still said nothing.

'I ought to know, Goddammit. She was my mother.' He fumbled in the inside pocket of his jacket and drew out the two photographs. He held out the one of Carina.

Hogeveen reached out to take it, but Felix took a step back.

'Watch. This is what you did to her.' He tore up the photograph and scattered the pieces on the floor. 'That's what you did. You destroyed her.'

Hogeveen stood up. 'Where did you get that picture?'

'None of your business. Why did you walk out on Irma?'

'Where did you get that picture?'

'Why didn't you take any notice of how she managed after you left? She meant nothing to you, nothing at all.'

Hogeveen repeated his question.

'You wouldn't treat your own cat like that. You take care of your cat. Why not of Irma? She needed you, she needed someone to take care of her. She couldn't manage on her own. You should have known that. But it's too late now. She's dead. Suicide, did you know? But it wasn't really suicide, it was you who...'

Hogeveen grabbed him by the shoulders. Ah, a hug at last. More than a cool handshake anyway. A lot more. 'Where did you get that photograph?'

Felix laughed. As if the photograph meant anything. 'She gave it to me, a memento. Today, when she was in bed. I was cleaning, I vacuumed the whole

place, including the bedroom. And then we... you know.' He wanted to sound as crass as possible, and stuck his right thumb between his fore finger and middle finger.

'No!' Hogeveen shook him. 'No, you're lying! It's not true. You're lying.'

'That birthmark on her right thigh, that...'

'No!'

Felix laughed. He went on laughing until it hurt.

Verlinden glanced at the alarm clock: 01.17. He had been lying in bed for close on two hours already, with an innocently slumbering body beside him. Now and then Marjan gave a little moan. He was inclined to follow suit, to moan along with her and so to blot out the memory of Hogeveen sitting at his desk, Hogeveen usurping his parking space, Hogeveen in conversation with the secretary who was likewise his by rights.

It had been the same pattern the past few nights: sleepiness at bed-time followed by a long period of near-sleep, by the end of which he felt as if his body were straining to resist the pull of a dark, scary void. Wide awake now, he crept out of bed and got dressed in the clothes he had left on the chair. Marjan turned over. He held his breath. She did not wake up.

He sat for a while at the dining table. He smoked a cigarette, then another one. He studied the photographs.

He wanted out. He'd go outside, needed some fresh air.

He had been victimised, and he wasn't going to let the person responsible get away with it.

Martin had got his breathing under control again, his hands had stopped trembling. He pushed the curtain aside a little way and looked outside. Almost one thirty a.m. The street was deserted, but he thought it wiser to wait a little longer. At least he was able to look out of the window again without being seized with heart-stopping panic which left him gasping for breath and sweating all over.

He'd been on the point of ringing Carina several times, but had stopped

himself. Far better for her not to know. For no one to know. The boy's voice, Richard's voice, sounded in his head. The birthmark. She was bound to think he'd done it deliberately, to get his own back, whereas in fact it had been an unfortunate accident. All right, he'd punched him. Hard, too hard maybe. He'd vented his rage with his fists on the face that was thrust before him, blurring his vision. Richard had fought back. Then he'd hit him again, hard. Harder than he'd ever hit before, just to obliterate the image of those mocking eyes. Richard keeled over backwards. Perhaps he'd imagined it, but he couldn't think how else it could have happened. One thing was clear: the pieces had slotted into place. First there was Richard's pretending to be someone else, then his idiotic accusations about Irma, a hysteric after all, and finally the sleaze about Carina. All together it had been simply too much.

And yet.

The cat was sitting in the corridor, withdrawn and wary.

Martin went to the bathroom to splash his face with water. Then he looked in the mirror. A man aged fifty-two was staring at him distraughtly. He returned the distraught stare, widened his lips in a grimace, rubbed his hands over his face. A turning point, that's what this was.

'Turning point in your life,' he whispered.

He felt his right cheek. Right, that's where Richard had hit him. The cheekbone was sore. Richard must have knocked his head against the arm of the chair when he fell. The way he was lying there you'd swear he would jump to his feet any minute. As if he were joking: time for my rest now, don't take any notice of me.

Martin went back to the living room. What now? His hand was already reaching for the telephone to call the police. He conducted a mental conversation with the officer on duty. They would accuse him. He would be the prime suspect, especially if they found out what had gone on between Carina and Richard, and find out they would, he was in no doubt. He would lose his clients, his position, and he would certainly lose Carina. In which case he would have lost everything, all the things he'd worked so hard for would be gone. And only on account of a

stupid accident, on account of some kid with a personal grudge. On account of his having quite rightly ended a relationship with an impossible woman nearly twenty years ago. It was too crazy for words.

He returned to the window. It was quiet outside, deathly quiet. It was a nice quiet neighbourhood. He'd have to take his chances. There was plenty of time to get in touch with the police afterwards, even if his plan went wrong. Strategic thinking, that was what was needed, and that was what he did best anyway. Panic must be avoided. Careful and rational consideration of all options. The pros and cons. The relative merits and demerits of each alternative. His strengths and his weaknesses. Surely that was the normal way to proceed.

It was unlikely that anyone knew that Richard had been here. He had to get rid of the body. It didn't seem a good idea to dump it too close to where he lived. Dump it. Richard had used that word, too. Richard, Ritchie... He'd actually changed his diapers a couple of times.

So his own neighbourhood was not an option, it would have to be further away, somewhere that no one could trace back to him. An item in the paper flashed across his mind. Carina had read it out to him the other day. That would do as an explanation. A random killing. Who knows, there might be a silent march held in the victim's memory. People carrying burning candles in one hand and a bunch of flowers in the other making a beeline for the scene of the crime. There would be speeches. An appeal to the government, the community, to all individual citizens. This must never happen again. There had been several of these stranger assaults lately in different Dutch towns. Now it had happened here. A small memorial plaque might even be installed.

He forced himself to look at the body. Now for the next step: he felt in the inside pocket of the jacket and drew out a student ID card with Richard Karmeling's name on it, and a photograph. The photograph was of him. It was hardly likely that he'd got it from Carina, so he must have pinched it. He felt a surge of anger.

Fighting down his fear and revulsion, he raised the body a little way and dragged it a few metres across the floor. Richard wasn't tall. He was fairly slim,

skinny even. It was as if he'd spent all those hours working out at the gym expressly for this occasion. There was a pool of dark fluid on the parquet. He fetched a pail of water from the kitchen and cleaned the floor with a mop. He was in luck. Mrs. Kooistra would be coming in the morning. She could be relied on to remove all traces quite unknowingly, what with all the cleaning, vacuuming, and polishing she did. Richard's visit had never happened.

Verlinden lit a cigarette. The light was still on in Hogeveen's apartment. For a moment he considered ringing the doorbell, but he decided to wait until the light went out.