

Sherry Marie Gallagher

Betrayal Of Bosch

A Felly van Vliet Mystery Series



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Femke McNeela's mother and father had been working remotely whenever they could until their little girl started her first year of compulsory school in the Netherlands. Under the Dutch system of paternal leave, they were able to be with her when she took those important first steps into toddlerhood. Now at five-years-old, the pre-schooler was ready for kindergarten, or the second group, as the Dutch refer to it, which left her parents little excuse not to return to the classroom and courthouse. Felly found herself enjoying working with students again, as research in cognitive semantics was interesting but left her all too often feeling isolated. Kieran too had longed for a more active role in the De Veer Law Group, and he got his wish when asked to become a junior partner. His long-held staff attorney position was one that he was more than happy to leave behind, which he texted as much to his wife while walking out the office door after the good news. In a celebratory mood, he saddled his bike and headed for the liquor store. While Kieran set out to restock their larder, Felly texted family living in town to join them in an impromptu houseboat party.

The parents were first at the door. Martinus kissed his daughter on each cheek then once again for good measure, as her mother, Anneke, handed her a bouquet of autumn-coloured leaves and flowers. Felly admired the arrangement. 'Oh, how lovely. Did you get these at Happy Flower? All the colours match your outfit.'

The elder woman glimpsed her sweater and smiled. 'Yes, they do. I hadn't noticed. Congratulations, schat. Congratulations to you both. Kieran must be thrilled.'

'To bits,' she replied.

Anneke crossed over to the open bottles of wine atop the kitchenette countertop and poured herself a glass of red. Tinus helped himself to a shot of Dutch Jenever after setting down the covered dish in his hands. He took a sip of the gin, asking, 'Does this casserole need refrigeration?'

‘Yes, of course it does,’ said Anneke. ‘It just needs reheating.’

Felly grinned at them both, eyeing her blonde, hazel-eyed mother in white slacks and yellow cashmere sweater. The woman had no problem speaking her mind, nor had she struggled to maintain the sporty figure she carried well into seniorhood. She glimpsed her father, thinking him handsome still. His vibrant eyes and chestnut hair had been passed on to her and her twin brother, Filip. ‘What have you got there, Papa? Just put it in the fridge, yes, that is if you can find room.’

A rattle of bicycle chain locks was soon heard accompanied by a metallic clank of bikes set against the canal embankment railing. Then Filip and his Irish wife, Moira, burst through the sliding deck door. Wrapped around the brother’s left wrist were strings of a half dozen helium balloons. ‘Hello, everyone!’ he said. ‘We come bearing gifts.’

‘Balloons!’ squealed Femke. The child skipped in from the hall, her father following close behind. ‘Look, Papa, balloons!’

‘I see, I see.’ Kieran smiled broadly. ‘We were corralling cats into the back room, but I guess we can let them out. We just have to mind them from escaping outside.’

‘Oh, them wee devils are sure to like these if they get a whiff of them.’ Moira, handed him the airtight container she’d been holding.

‘Salmon wraps?’ He opened the box. ‘They smell delicious.’ Then he brushed aside fingerbowls filled with nuts and cheese and set the box on top of the kitchen counter. Lifting the lid, he took one out and bit into it. ‘Mm, heavenly. And sure not to be wasted on the likes of them mischievous fluffballs. So, what’s yer poison, Moira?’

‘A Murphy’s would be grand.’

He opened the fridge, grabbed a bottle, popped its lid on the counter and handed it to her.

She raised her beer to him. ‘Sláinte.’

‘Sláinte mhath, he said, raising his dram glass.’ Their eyes met in unspoken recognition, almost tribal, then slid away to the sounds of a giggling child and her uncle. Filip had unfastened one of the helium balloons and inhaled some its contents. Now he was chasing Femke around the living room as he quacked like a duck.

Kieran manoeuvred his way around them to greet his father-in-law seated on the couch. Martinus rose, extending his hand with congratulations before telling him about the collection of artifacts he had seen that morning at the Egyptian exhibit in Leiden’s National Museum of Antiquities. Kieran had the elder man’s ear while still managing to catch bits and pieces of his countrywoman’s entertaining story told to their mother-in-law. Apparently, one of Moira’s Irish aunts had phoned her that morning complaining about a nanny goat and her kid sneaking into her kitchen. She had left the door ajar while cooling off a batch of freshly

baked buns that were intended for an afternoon bridge club when the two goats sauntered in and consumed them all.

Moira laughed as she continued her story. 'I never before heard the auld woman in such a pickle. "Jeannie Mac!" she cursed. "And didn't those Hoovering little shites gobble up the lot of 'em.'"

Felly's mother dried her eyes, laughing with her. 'I imagine the bridge club left with goat cheese for a snack.'

'Oh, wouldn't Aunt Mary have liked that, now? So's, she told me that she made a mad skedaddle to the grocer and bought one of them Cadbury cakes.'

'Cadbury cakes?'

'They're delicious,' Felly told her mother. 'They taste just like the chocolates.'

'Oh? Then I'll have to try a slice someday then.'

'Remind me, and I'll bring you a box when we're back in Ireland.'

'Are you still planning on being there Christmas day? It's the Eve at our house, remember?'

'Don't worry, Ma. We haven't forgotten.'

She smiled at her daughter then rose from her chair, her eyes now locking onto her husband's. 'We should be off, Tinus. We hadn't planned to stay long, just to pop in and congratulate Kieran.'

'Is it that time already?' The long, thin man glimpsed his Timex wristband.

'And, schat, whenever you feel like dinner, just pop the sauerkraut potato casserole in the microwave.'

Felly's eyes drifted over to the covered Pyrex bowl still sitting on the counter. 'I don't think we'll be eating much more tonight, not after all this booze and snacks. Kieran does love your casseroles, though. And neither of us will have to cook tomorrow. Thanks, Ma.' Then she called out, 'Poppie, your grandparents are leaving!'

'Again, well done, you,' Tinus said to Kieran. 'I know how you've been working long and hard for this promotion.'

Kieran smiled warmly. 'Yeah, I'm chuffed.'

'Bye Opa, bye Oma,' said the small face staring up at everyone with a yawn.

'Bye liefje,' said the grandparents. 'You're growing up so fast.'

'Bye Ma, bye Pa. Doeit, dag.'

Kieran picked up his daughter, holding her in his arms as she waved at the departing elders. He set her back down, pyjama feet skipping along the bleached wood living room floor towards the balloons, their sagging streamers skating across the floor. He spied a half empty bottle of champagne and poured its contents into two empty glasses,

handing one to his wife. 'My partnership fee will set us back some, but it won't take long to recoup the funds.'

'I'm not worried. You just landed that nice contract with the Bollenstreek.'

'Proost and sláinte to that. I believe they're one of the biggest flower-cutting companies in the Netherlands.'

'I believe you're right.'

They smiled and drank, their eyes following the few loose streamers floating out the lattice framed garden box kitchen window. They danced onto the waters of the Rijnkade, the tranquil river inlet where their houseboat was moored. And they floated across its surface, too light to sink.

The inlet was a result of mountain runoff waters beginning at the Franco-German border of the Swiss Alps and ending up forming the vast and picturesque river known as the Rhine. This passed through Germany and into the Netherlands while flowing into numerous tributaries and canals along the way. A few of these turned into still water ponds and ditches, but most meandered along until emptying into the North Sea. And one of the Rhine's many quays in North Holland's city of Leiden was the Rijnkade, where Felly and Kieran lived with Femke on a houseboat in a quiet neighbourhood tucked away from major traffic areas and perfect for raising a child. The canal of the Rijnkade was a slow moving one, and the waterfowl travelling its waters were spellbinding to watch as these swans, geese and ducks glided across the surface like skaters on clear ice.

Kieran shook off his daydreaming and rose to shut the window before the two mischievous Ragdolls noticed that it was open, though they were currently shimmying their backsides and tumbling over one of the balloons as Femke watched with glee.

Felly was so heartbroken when Nikki, her fat little Persian, had died. Afterwards, she decided not to raise any more cats. But Femke persisted and eventually got her way after proving she could manage an animal by the responsible manner in which she daily fed the goldfish she had won at the previous year's summer carnival. So, on her fifth birthday, two Ragdoll kittens had come home with Papa after work. This breed was of particular interest to Kieran, who would come home sharing a work colleague's stories about the family cat named Figaro who not only flopped when held, but he also fetched alongside Fleur, their fox terrier. And when Fleur required bathing, the Ragdoll stood close by and fearlessly lapped up water, as if somehow aiding the dog's plight. Figaro got along well with the children in the house too, Kieran's colleague told him. So, he did some further digging and found an online site that discussed the breed's origins. Felly grew more receptive, as well, when

he pointed out to her that the breed was developed by a cross-breeding accident of a Persian/Angora mix with Burmese-like cats. All Felly had to hear was the word 'Persian', and she was sold.

After closing the window, Kieran went over to his daughter. 'Time for bed, poppie.'

'Can Pip and Puk sleep with me tonight?'

'Well, ye know how cats have minds of their own. But ye can try luring them under the covers with a catnip toy.'

'That's a great idea,' she said, her smile growing wider. 'Oh, kittens? Where are you?'

Moira entered from the aft deck just then. She and Felly's brother had married the year before when Taisce, the family farmhouse in Ireland, had been sold and its proceeds split among her and her cousins, Aidan and Sean, both still working for the Irish coastguard. She was pointing at the screen on her mobile phone when she came in. 'Did you see this, Fel?'

'What's that?'

'News about a Leiden professor drowning in 's-Hertogenbosch. That's in the province of Utrecht, right? Gads, that's just horrible.'

Felly read the screen with Kieran peering over her shoulder, reading it too.

'The article doesn't say much more than the woman's body was found drowned in a canal not far from the train station. I should call and make sure our conference is still going.'

'Oh right,' said Kieran. 'Best to check on that.'

Her phone went off just then, giving her a start. 'Dr De Vos?' she said, speaking into it. 'No, I don't mind at all. Should I knock on the door? Oh, okay. Anything in particular I should be looking for? Right. No, no problem. See you then. Bye.' She raised a brow. 'That was Sebastian De Vos, the head of our anthropology section.'

'What did he want?' said Kieran.

'He asked if I'd mind swinging by the house of Dr Anneveldt. She's one of his staff.'

'Oh? Why does he want you to do that?'

She shrugged. 'Just checking on her, I guess. No bother, really. It's not out of my way.'

Kieran furrowed a dark blonde brow. 'So, why doesn't yer man go over there, himself?'

'I think he's at the hotel already, Kier. And I'm guessing Evi isn't. He's probably just checking on her is all.'

'I thought the conference begins on Saturday.'

She shrugged. 'Who knows what those anthropologists are up to. Maybe they had a team meeting a day earlier. I'm in the social sciences,

which is a whole different section. We just happen to be under the same umbrella of humanities.'

Moira puzzled. 'So, why attend their conference then?'

'Because of this new information sharing programme our department head has us involved in. Anyway, Dr Huijsman asked if I'd join them, and as a personal favour I said, yes. Besides, I like Den Bosch, and I'm just thinking of it as a mini-vacation, all expenses paid. I just wish you were coming with me too, Kier.'

He gave her a warm smile. 'Maybe next time.'

'Jayzus,' said Moira, crossing herself. 'Do ye think it might have been this Evi woman who drowned?'

'Oh my God, Moira. Do you think?' Her eyes widening. 'I hope not. I hardly knew the woman, but still.'

Kieran reached for her hand. 'Just mind yerself while there, darlin'.'

'I'm all right. I know how to take care of myself.' She breathed in and out. 'So, do we still have a party going, or what?'

'I think I saw yer brother heading out to the deck,' Kieran said. 'I'll check and see if he needs a top up. Are ye sure you're alright, darlin?'

'Fine and dandy.'

He smiled at his anglicised Dutch wife and kissed her cheek. When he left, Felly glanced at the darkening window. 'Thanks again for picking up Femke from school tomorrow, Moira. If Kieran hadn't had that late deposition, he would've been able to do so.'

'Yer grand. I'll just have shepherd's pie ready, knowing that he'll be joining us for dinner too. It's a nice excuse to cook up a good Irish meal.'

'I thought shepherd's pie was English.'

'Ach no, it's been made in Ireland for ages. Me mam served it, and so did me Gran.'

'That reminds me.... I'd better put my mother's casserole in the freezer if you're cooking for them then. Kieran loves her cooking as much as he does yours.'

'What doesn't that man love to eat?'

'Speaking of which, please don't feed Femke too many home-baked cookies. She's had a few stomach bugs lately. I also don't want her getting too used to all those yummy things at your place. I always fear she'll never want to come home again to my bland cooking.'

'No worries,' Moira laughed, the dimple in her left cheek deepening. 'She couldn't part from them gremlin puff balls.'

'They are entertaining.'

One of the balloons popped just then and caught their attention as two fluffy white kittens raced across the hardwood floor, colliding with each other.

'Aw, jeez. Could they be any cuter? So's, let's go check on the lads and see what they're up to.'

'I can guarantee they're talking football.'

'I can't say much about yer Ajax, me being a diehard Cork fan and all.'

'Football is all the same to me.' Felly pointed to her empty glass. 'I could use a top up. You?'

'Another Murphy's would be grand. Any left?'

'I'm sure there are. It's Kieran's drink of choice, besides Paddy's Whiskey, that is.'

Moira grinned, nodding her head. 'Ye can take the boy from Ireland but ye can't take the Cork whiskey from the boy.'

'Ain't that the truth,' laughed Felly.'

2

Silver light streamed through the denim bedroom curtains as Felly awoke to the soft snoring beside her. In such a light Kieran looked the same to her as he had when he was one of the local guards in Youghal, Ireland. Youghal's notoriety came from its 11th century Viking settlements, which seafaring Scandinavians used as base camps to raid gold and silver from the monasteries along the southern coastline. In the 5th century, Declán of Ardmore had founded a monastery in the nearby county of Waterford and brought Christianity to the nearby provinces, as well as the whole of Ireland, even earlier than Saint Patrick. And the Irish Tourist Board designated this sleepy Irish town and seaside resort as an 'Irish Heritage Port', as its remains of rock-wall fortifications still displayed remnants of medieval architecture that whispered of its not so sleepy past. Today there are few traces left of the Viking plunderers, but an ancient carving of one of their infamous longboats can be spotted on a stone in St Mary's Collegiate Church.

When Kieran and Felly met, he had been recently promoted to inspector and was making his rounds to check up on a crime committed only days before Felly had come to teach a seminar. Their chance meeting had only happened because of her summer lodging, which was on a houseboat docked only metres away from where a teacher had been gruesomely murdered. So goes life and its fated connections.

When Felly was in graduate school, she came across the works of Plato on a reading list, his treatise on the predator/prey phenomena catching her interest. 'Who is the true victim?' he would ask his students. 'The predator or his prey?' According to the work, they would answer unanimously, 'His prey.' Then Plato would tell them, 'The prey, though wronged, can seek restitution and peace. Not so for the predator. He will carry his sins to the grave.' In the mythical dialogues, Felly read Plato's discourse on twin souls, thinking the notion presumptuously quaint and

silly. Yet, when she and Kieran met, something had undeniably clicked. And theirs had grown into an unshakeable bond over the years.

Her husband turned to her just then. 'What is it, mo stór?'

'Only scattered thoughts, schatje. Go back to sleep.'

'Worries about the conference?'

'No, not really. I love you, Kieran.'

He touched her cheek and kissing her lips.

'Uh, thank you?'

'Is breá liom níos mó.'

'I think I'm in need of a translator?'

'No translation necessary. Actions speak louder.' He kissed her again, his kiss still lingering on her lips.

And she kissed him back, fire in her cheeks, just as tapping sounds were heard at the door accompanied by the scratching of tiny claws. They glanced at each other and sighed, knowing that their lovemaking would be put on hold. Kieran rose and slipped on pyjama bottoms before unlocking the door and greeting the child who burst into the room with two silky white and grey, black-nosed kittens. Felly took this as her cue to shower and dress while Femke bounced atop the king-sized bed. 'I'm queen of the hill!' she announced, giggling.

'And just who might ye be addressin'?'

The little girl shook her head, laughing. 'A big hairy monster!'

'Well, that may be. But I'm king of this mountain, and I don't give up without a fight.' He manned his pillowed post as child and cats toppled all over him.

'I'm the winner!' came a sudden small cry of victory.

'The definite article, alright.' He mussed her hair and picked up one of the cats, who'd just nipped his big toe and caused Femke to laugh out loud. 'Ouch, ye little devil. Okay, now time to get dressed. It's still a work and school day.'

'Awh,' the little girl pouted. 'Let's play hooky.'

'Not today, poppie. Now scoot.'

Late fall weather was setting in. After showering, Felly dressed in patterned Cashmere and black leggings. Her boots were lined with soft faux fur, and her woollen jacket and scarf would keep her warm enough for the short cycle to work. She turned to her daughter next and coaxed her into a puffy sleeved sweater dress. Then she braided her soft, fine hair into a side braid, which she fastened with candy-coloured hairclips. 'There, all done.'

'Mama, I don't like orange.'

'Your dress is browner than orange, and it looks smashing on you.'

'I don't wanna be smashed.'

‘Go put on your blue one then, but hurry up. Papa’s taking you to school today. Don’t make him late for work.’

The little girl skipped into her room, singing in a fragmented mixture of the three languages she now spoke, one better or worse than the other depending on who she was with and where she was spending her time. Summers were spent mostly with family in Cork, and Gaelic was still spoken in the household.

Sinead and her husband, Mick, had taken over Kieran’s place in Youghal, a generous gift to the youngest sibling and beau when they married. He had been glad to help out his little sister, and Felly was fond of her husband Mick. The two would drop in occasionally but mostly to check in on the health of their mother. Brigid insisted that she was in fine form and didn’t need anyone to be checking in on her, though she enjoyed the attention and her children’s company. Only one of Kieran’s five siblings had never ventured far from the nest, but they saw more of Mairead’s competition ribbons than they ever saw of her. His older middle sister did make an appearance on the occasion that she wasn’t off on a training session or involved in shows. The more frequent lodgers, like the holidaying Kieran and Felly, had plenty of room in the McNeela home. The few stragglers showing up on a whim with overnight bags in hand would always have room made for them as well. And granddaughter Femke had slipped happily into this culture of her father’s, a household of easy chaos and freely spoken Irish with its west country dialect. She’d be near native in her speech when returning home to the Netherlands, but she’d lose much of it again throughout the schoolyear. Moira would sometimes break into her native tongue with her around, though Kieran encouraged his daughter to converse with him in English. The international school Femke attended was also bilingual, though a second language wasn’t mandatory in the younger groups where Dutch was primarily spoken, which was what she would mostly speak when her grandparents were around.

‘I like this sweater, Mama.’ Femke had returned wearing an embroidered sequined unicorn that flipped colours when stroked.

Felly winced then smiled her approval. ‘Don’t you look nice, poppie.’

‘Mama, when are you coming back home?’

‘I’m only gone the weekend. Papa will be joining you for dinner with Tante Moira and Oom Filip before bringing you back home.’

One of the hairclips got suddenly loose and fell to the floor, which Femke scooped up and deftly fastened back in her hair. ‘Do we have to go to Opa and Oma’s church Sunday? It’s so boring. But if I put Pip and Puk in my backpack, they can play outside with me when that man in the white dress starts talking.’

'That's a clerical robe, silly.'

'Why does he talk so much?'

Stifling her laughter, 'Don't worry. We're not going to Opa and Oma's church on Sunday.'

'Papa is staying home with me, right?'

'Yes, he is. And Saturday he's taking you to see turtles in the Schildpaddencentrum. You'll like seeing all those turtles.'

'Can we get a turtle?'

'No, but they're fun to look at just the same.'

'Can I pick them up and pet them?' she said eagerly.

'I'm sure you can. Okay, so lunch is made and in your pack. Now I have to go finish packing, myself.'

Kieran poked his head around the corner just then, shaver in hand. 'Is my favourite girl raring to go?' He winked at Felly. 'My other favourite, I mean?'

'I was just telling Femke about the turtle centre you're taking her to on Saturday.'

'Right, that. I was telling a colleague yesterday and he said it's a bit disappointing.'

'Oh? How so?'

'The other patrons he and his son saw were mostly elderly folk in wheelchairs being pushed by their not much older companions. There weren't too many live turtles on display, either. And those that were he said were in sparsely decorated, high-walled glass tanks. Kids couldn't touch them, which was disappointing to his little lad. But they liked the displays of relics and African neckwear made from snake and turtle eggs. A favourite of theirs was some kind of wooden-looking instrument that he said was decorated with snakeskin and turtle platelets.'

Felly screwed up her face. 'That sounds grotesque.'

'His son even asked if it would make a hissing sound when played, like something from a Hogwarts' Smithereen snake.'

She laughed at that. 'Children have such imaginations, don't they?'

Kieran laughed with her. 'Then my colleague told his kid that it just might hiss at that, and he suddenly reached for it and got yelled at by the museum docent. Ha, poor kid. So, get yer coat on, poppie. Yer riding in back of my bike today.'

'Why can't I ride my own bike?'

'Because we won't be home till after dark is why.'

'Do you want some coffee, Kier? It's freshly made.'

He came into the kitchen and poured half a cup, slugging it down with a bite of toast. 'I'm sure you'll have a nice time in Den Bosch. It's such a great old city.'

'Honestly, I'd rather be here with you guys.'

‘Be careful you’re not turning into a house mouse.’

She laughed briefly, thinking that the Dutch expression had lost something in translation. ‘I’ll call you this evening when I’m settled in at the hotel, I promise.’

‘Don’t worry about us. We’ll be grand.’ He glanced at the wall mirror, shaking back loose strands of blond hair that were falling in his eyes. ‘I need a haircut.’ He looked back to his daughter. ‘Ready? Give Mama a kiss before we head out the door.’

Cycling is an integral part of Dutch culture, and Femke would usually ride her bicycle to school alongside one or both parents. She sadly strolled over to her pink and white frame bike that was locked to the embankment railing. But her father shook his head, no. ‘But I can ride in the dark.’ She switched on the bike lamp. ‘See, my bike has a light.’

‘Nice try, but not this time, kiddo.’

‘Child seats are for babies.’

‘And big girls who want to go to the turtle zoo on Saturday.’

She poked out her lips. ‘Okay, fine.’

Kieran clicked on the portable child seat that Felly’s parents had brought over the day before. Bulky items such as the barely used car seat were hindrances in the precious little space available on a houseboat. Ankie and Tinus didn’t mind storing a few things for their children either, which included Kieran’s Bertone 2000. And their garage was spacious enough. The trade-off was that the parents could take the sports car out for a spin whenever they felt the yen to do so, which was seldom if ever.

Felly waved to the two people she loved more than this world before going back inside and collecting her coat and gloves. With bike cover removed and set aside, she stuffed the side saddlebag with her purse and strapped her carry-on luggage on the rack in back, securing it with elastic ties. The Ragdolls were crowded together and watching her from the kitchen sill, Pip stretching her paw as Puk chewed on a basil leaf in the herbal planter next to him. She grinned, waving to them and feeling ridiculous for doing so. They continued staring back as she cycled off toward the address that Sebastian De Vos had texted her.

It was a pretty stretch of green along the widening canal and row of redbrick houses. When she arrived at the Werfpark, she propped her bike against a small lattice fence across from it and rang the bell. She knocked at the door and waited, hearing nothing. She knocked again and peered through half-drawn venetian blinds of the large front window. No one was there. She texted this to De Vos and cycled on to school.

The linguistic aspect of Felly’s social science curriculum looked at language-based materials, the everyday signs and symbols used throughout history. This included jargon, slang and art in all its forms.

Other soft sciences shared the humanities department with her, but their studies differed in focus. The psychologists observed personal behaviours and psychoses; the sociologists, groups. And cultural anthropologists, such as Dr De Vos and his academic team, researched folk art, traditions and social habits. The man, himself, she knew only by a smile and handshake at interdepartmental meetings. So, why he had suddenly reached out to her was baffling, especially since she thought he could be off-putting with his old-school demeanour that to her came across as arrogant. Evi Anneveldt had been one of his head teachers, and the elder woman was popular with her students, though her mop of dishevelled hair and forever unlit cigarette at the corner of her mouth made Felly think more of a barfly at closing time than anyone's scholarly advisor. By contrast, Pascal van Houten, the department's younger and more progressive assistant professor, dressed himself in clean and classic fitted clothing. He too was popular, perhaps for different reasons than the eccentric elder, and she would often see him engaged in friendly conversation with one or two students clustered around his office door.

She walked through the department doors, hearing soft flute music coming from a corner office, the largest niche in the room. She caught sight of her mentor, Dr Ernie Huijsman, his recognisable shock of white hair muffled in headphones. His gaze was off in the distance, and she thought it best not to disturb him. Instead, she walked over to the cluttered desk of the department secretary, Jolanda Wiersma. Jolanda had attended Felly and Kieran's wedding along with the dean and his wife. Was it six years ago now? The secretary gave her a friendly smile but caught the strand of beads she was wearing around her neck on a desk handle when rising from her chair, her eyes now trailing after small plastic pieces bouncing across the linoleum floor. 'Jeetje, I'm the clumsiest person I know. Trudi makes these eyeglass beads. Kind of cute, aren't they? It's a hobby of hers. She says they help her concentrate, like a mantra. I hear her chanting 'oohm' in her office sometimes when she's stringing them.'

Felly broke into a grin. 'Trudi, as in...?'

'Baas's secretary?'

Felly rested her purse and carry-on against the desk while pouring coffee from the office percolator. 'Oh, Dr De Vos's secretary. Langmeijer, is it?'

'That's her.'

'I really don't know their department well.'

'Then you must not have heard the news about Evi Anneveldt.'

'So, it was Professor Anneveldt who drowned? Oh my. De Vos had called and asked if I'd swing by her house on my way over. I did have my suspicions, especially when no one was home. Gosh, that's awful.'

'What an odd request of Baas. What did he hope you would see?'

She shrugged, sipping coffee. 'Like I said, I don't know their department, but it was on my way and I didn't mind doing it for him. Maybe it was just to put his mind at ease...or not. Dealing with someone dying can be such a painful process.'

'Yes, it can be. So, was everything in order?'

'I guess. Did she live alone? I didn't see signs of anyone else there.'

'Yes, she did. So sad. Maybe Baas was just hoping against hope.'

Jolanda inspected the small plastic bead she had stepped on just then as Felly bent down and picked up the few multicoloured shapes in front of her. She rolled them in her palm, handing them back to Jolanda. 'Were they close then, Baas and Evi?'

'Honestly, I'm not all that sure what goes on in that department. There is a strange lot, and you didn't hear that from me.'

Felly winked and smiled. 'What was that?'

'And their conference? Nothing is deterring it from happening, especially after contracting the guest speaker.'

'Guest speaker even? Sounds intriguing.'

'Too bad you have the morning class. Most of your colleagues have already hooked up and are carpooling together. You could've ridden down with them.'

Felly eyed the wall clock. 'Speaking of which, I'd best be going.'

'Evi's drowning does cast a heavy shadow on things. Doesn't it?'

'It's very sad news, yes.'

'She has family in Den Bosch she was staying with when it happened.'

'She does? Why didn't De Vos know that? Oh well, whatever.' She sighed a brief sigh. 'How's Dr Ernie taking it?'

'Not good.' Jolanda motioned towards the dean's office. 'He's been sulking all morning. I'm just leaving him be for now, best thing.'

Felly looked over, still hearing music. 'Well, my class is about to start. Have a good weekend, Jolanda.'

'And you too at your conference.'

The midmorning class was a socio-linguistics course involved in a knowledge exchange programme coupled to an IT learning platform known as SPOC, where students were taught in small groups with added course material. This was evaluated through peer and faculty online reviews with a goal of developing higher levels of participation. So far, Felly was the lone staff member in her particular module, which she had

set up for her students to apply the logical analysis skills they had been developing while examining cold cases. Bouncing their ideas off one another, they would analyse and argue collected data before running it through an internet programme which was designed to look for flaws or loopholes to challenge theories. Over the course of the semester, a few of these findings had even piqued the interests of agencies, such as the Dutch Department of Justice. This thrilled her and students alike after attempting to become a more interactive academic community, meaning working outside of the classroom. In this way, they took charge of their own learning while the professor team took on more of a coaching role, guiding them throughout. Felly also observed her motivated students linking into social discussion forums that were set up by the department. And their engagement grew dynamic, more so than with a traditionally styled learning module.

Felly wheeled her carry-on into a corner of the classroom and sat at a desk, where she rifled through folders she had taken out of her pack. 'Morning everyone,' she said. 'Today I want to talk about recreational communities.'

A young man with sandy blond pompadour gave her a sideways smile. 'Do you mean actually creating something fun, even at the university level?'

She looked at him with sardonic amusement. 'Haven't you been enjoying all our stimulating cold cases?'

'Don't get me wrong. It's just that the word 'fun' and 'academics' don't mix.'

'And why not? Why not have fun, especially at higher levels of learning?'

'How about serious gaming as a learning forum?' said a student in faded jeans. 'What do you think, Professor? Couldn't that be given course credit?'

'You mean credit for using strategic gaming, Reinier?' the other replied. 'I don't know, like in DEFCON?'

Reinier scratched at a hole in his jeans. 'My little sister has an avatar in an online adventure program. It's an IT set-up that one of her middle school teachers has put together for his class. She's having some serious fun with that.'

Felly's interest piqued. The jeans scratcher was also in her academic writing class, and some of his 'out of the box' ideas were certainly engaging. 'Reinier, how do you believe this gaming....'

'Serious gaming,' he clarified.

'Okay, serious gaming. How does this encourage learning?'

'Simple. Everyone starts at a basic level and moves up. In my sister's science class, her teacher applies elementary forms of calculus to the steps they're taking. Seems pretty woke to me.'

'Maybe we could create something like an online *Whodunit!* as our last project?'

Felly stared into the brown eyes of the woman wearing an oversized lacy white sweater, whom she thought couldn't be much older than a secondary school senior. 'So, you're talking about a serious game that uses analysis to solve crimes? Interesting, Annemiek. Could we do that?'

The class grew excited, muttering to each other. 'Hell, yeah...I mean, heck yeah. What's to think about? Hmm...all the IT involved, for one. Putting it together for another.'

'Yes, it is a great idea, guys. But how would you go about building, or, should I say, programming, a storyline into this game? I honestly don't have a clue.'

Hands raised along with excited voices all talking at once. 'We do, Professor van Vliet! Yes, and those that don't can be shown by the others.'

'Okay, I'm listening.'

'First we get together and assess everyone's skillsets.' Annemiek smoothed the patterns in her dark leggings with her darkly painted nails. Then she went on. 'I know that Lucas and I are good at storytelling.' She motioned to the tall thin student who had spoken earlier, his pompadour bobbing as he smiled at her.

Then Reiner took the floor. 'Minke and I could handle coding.'

A young woman in a pinstripe jacket agreed with him. 'I'm good at design, yes.'

Felly eyed her keenly. 'And then what?'

'Like Annemiek says,' spoke Lucas. 'We can design a storyboard. Easy peasy.'

'And asking key questions as we divide them into sections of topics.' Annemiek ticked them off, saying: 'The telling, the planning, the content.'

'What does that mean, exactly? Explain it to me,' said Felly.

'Meaning to ask questions, like what's our narrative?'

'And should the game include a narrator? Hey, like Detective Van der Valk,' said Lucas, grinning.

Annemiek grinned back. 'You mean the Dutch detective who was really British?'

'That's the one. Great series.'

'If we're using Van Der Valk,' said Reinier, 'we should have the setting be Amsterdam. That's where he was based, anyway.'

'Well, it doesn't have to be him.' Felly was grinning along with her fired-up students. 'Most importantly you need to think about motives and outcomes.'

'We could also think about set-up, building a setting, movements,' said Minke.'

'Yeah, and the game's logistics.'

Minke nodded her head at Reinier. 'Like is it going to be in levels, you mean?'

'Exactly, along with thoughts on how all this progress is going to be saved. We should be able to check ourselves individually, as well as in a group...that sort of thing.'

Annemiek asked, 'This could be our capstone project, right?'

Felly scanned the room, seeing the show of hands that agreed. Only one in the room seemed hesitant, and Felly made a note to talk to Lotte Wehkamp after class. 'First I'd like to see some kind of paper storyboard that includes a rough timeline and task list. In other words, everyone needs to be somehow involved. You can show me next week, though. Meanwhile, we can chat online if you run into any snags. Just not this weekend because of the teachers' conference.'

Heads nodded as students began pulling out their phones as they packed up and shuffled out of the room, a few excitedly chatting about the project.

'Lotte?' She went over to the student who had lingered behind with wisps of flaxen hair almost covering her eyes. 'Why didn't you raise your hand? Don't you like the project?'

'It's not that,' she said almost in a whisper. 'I'm just not technically savvy enough to contribute much. And if this our capstone project, I'm worried about my final course grade.'

'You've been one of our strongest project analysers all term. I don't think you need to worry.'

'I do if I can't contribute.' She brushed loose strands of hair from her face. 'I'm majoring in neuro-linguistics. Analysis is something that comes natural to me, but I don't know anything about gaming...online or otherwise.'

'The way your classmates are describing it, I think you'll find your niche easily enough and fit right in.'

'Oh? In what way?'

'Well, the team that's designing the narrative will need to think about how to apply strategies towards specific outcomes. That's right up your alley. Yes?'

She nodded, brightening. 'Yes, it is. And I don't have to do any programming?'

'Just stick with the creative students and leave the coding to the designers.'

'Okay, I guess I can do that. Thanks, Professor.'

'Not at all.' They left the room together then parted ways, Lotte to her next class and Felly to the station to catch a train to Den Bosch.