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978-0-521-68632-7 - The Amsterdam Connection

Sue Leather

Excerpt

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Chapter 1 *At the pub*

‘You need a holiday, Kate,’ said Max Carson. It was early evening and we were having a beer in the Queen’s Head. ‘A break from London,’ he added.

‘Oh sure, Max.’ I smiled. ‘Go and tell Balzano. I’m sure he’ll agree with you!’

Dave Balzano was an excellent newspaper editor, but he was often angry with his reporters. In fact, he was famous for his bad temper. The thought of Balzano giving me a holiday because I needed one was funny. I said this to Max.

‘So Dave hasn’t changed, then?’ asked Max, laughing. Max knew Dave – and me – from some years ago when we all worked on the *Manchester Evening News*. Max was the editor and Dave was head of foreign news. Max gave me my first job. I was just a young reporter then, trying to make a name for myself. That was before I came to London.

‘Er ... no,’ I said. ‘He certainly hasn’t.’ I smiled and drank some of my beer. ‘But tell me about you,’ I added.

I hadn’t seen much of Max for a while, mainly because he lived in Holland now. He had been born there. His mother was Dutch, his father was English. He came to England when he was in his early twenties to train as a journalist and he stayed. But Max retired from the *Evening News* five years ago when he was fifty-five, and returned to Holland.

‘I’m fine,’ said Max.

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‘And the club?’ I asked.

Max’s brother, Tom, was the owner and manager of Rotterdam City Football Club and the Carson Football School. When Max left the *Manchester Evening News* he had joined his brother, to help him with his business. Max now had about twenty-five per cent of the shares and a nice income for his ‘retirement’.

‘It’s OK,’ said Max.

‘Only OK?’ I asked, surprised.

‘Mmm ... yes,’ said Max. I got the feeling that he didn’t really want to talk about it, so we changed the subject.

Max didn’t often come to England these days, except to see friends and to look for new players for Rotterdam City Football Club. When he did come to London he would come to the *Echo’s* offices to see me and we usually had a beer at the Queen’s Head. It was a typical central London pub, full of office workers with mobile phones. It was smoky and noisy at this time in the evening, but the beer was good.

‘So what’s happening here in London, Kate?’ Max asked.

Max always asked me about my latest story; he liked to know what was happening. He still loved the newspaper business. He and Balzano were complete opposites, and not just because Balzano’s father was Italian and Max’s mother was Dutch. Balzano was a very good editor, but you never knew when he was going to explode. Max, though, was calm and easy to work with – he was one of the best.

I told him about my last story and the reason I was so exhausted.

‘You just need a break,’ Max said again.

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Max was right, I did need a holiday. Life in the city had been really tough for the past few months. I had had some difficult murder stories, the usual zero information from the London police and Balzano pushing me as usual. I was beginning to feel tired and the idea of getting away from London was a very attractive one.

‘You like Holland, don’t you?’ asked Max suddenly.

I laughed. ‘Well, yes, but . . .’ I’d been to Amsterdam once, chasing a story, and I’d loved it.

‘And you know something about sport,’ he added.

‘Well, I know about karate and a bit about boxing,’ I said. ‘I don’t know that much about other sports.’ I had trained in karate for ten years and my father had been a boxer when he was young.

I looked at Max, waiting for the rest.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘why don’t you come and write a story about our club in Holland?’

Rotterdam City Football Club was one of the top clubs in Europe now. Many of the young men who had been trained at the school – the Carson Football School – played for Rotterdam City. The club took kids who could play football off the streets and trained them to be the best. Football schools like theirs were one reason why Holland had so many great footballers. It was perfect: the school and the club.

Max had always been crazy about football. When he was editor of the *Evening News* he spent all his free time watching football matches. He even took me to see Manchester United once. He was one of those guys who knew the name of every footballer in Europe.

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‘What me?’ I laughed. ‘A sports reporter? You know me, Max, I only write about crime.’

Max smiled. ‘I know, Kate, and you’re great. But it would be a holiday for you!’

Max looked at his watch and finished his beer quickly. He had arranged to have dinner with a friend that evening and he had to leave immediately. He was already late. He got up, promising that he would ring me in a few days.

But Max never rang. In fact, I never saw him again. Two days later, he was found lying dead in an Amsterdam street with twenty knife wounds in his body.