

If you have to run for your life, every second counts

# Scorpio

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Thriller

## Prologue

A shrill piercing sound woke her, penetrating deep into her sleep. It was a warning.

*Run.*

She wanted to sit up, but her body was too heavy. The same stupor kept her eyes shut and stopped her from screaming. She tried to swallow the sour taste in her mouth but failed.

She had no idea where she was. The high-pitched rhythmic tone continued unabated, like an alarm. Other sounds slowly trickled through. Voices at a distance. A door closing.

And then the smell.

She tried to remember what the smell reminded her of. Medication. A child. The smell made her think of a child.

*Something terrible had happened to that child.*

She tried again to sit upright, but a sharp pain shot through her neck to the back of her head. This pain wasn't there before. She saw it as a sign that her body was slowly waking up. She would probably be able to open her eyes in a few minutes and as soon as she felt strong enough she would go.

That was what she had to do. The child needed her.

The lethargy that imprisoned her came in waves. Sleepiness began to take hold again and the voices disappeared to the back of her mind. Even the repetitive high-pitched tones became muffled and were finally reduced to the dripping of a leaking tap.

She struggled not to slip away.

Otherwise she'd be too late.

She repeated the thoughts that had wormed their way into her head.

*There was a child.*

*Something terrible had happened to that child.*

Another voice suddenly emerged from the darkness, little more than a whisper.

*And you're to blame.*

*Four days earlier*

1

She should have known that Bernd's pigheadedness would send them in the wrong direction. This was the first morning of a weekend in Altensteig, an idyllic old town in Baden-Württemberg not far from the Black Forest Nature Reserve, and Gaelle's mood had already reached rock bottom. She was following Bernd along a narrow path in the woods, swiping one mosquito after the other from her arm. And one of the same little buggers had just treated itself to a taste of her calf and she'd shouted it out for all to hear. That made Bernd mad. He turned on the path, which was completely shaded from the sun by thick overgrowth. 'Don't be such a child, Gaelle. What will Lukas think?'

Her bespectacled son peered at her and looked very serious. He was probably wondering if seven was the age you should start to protect your mother from irritating insects or whether he could still presume that it was her job to do the same for him.

A bump had appeared on the back of her leg with a tiny drop of blood in the middle. She wiped it away with her hand.

'Nothing to worry about, Lukas.'

She had even smiled. Lukas didn't move a muscle. He looked tired, Gaelle thought. Dark hair, pale complexion, far too fragile for his age. His chronic asthma made travelling difficult. What was supposed to be a dust-free room in the family hotel they had booked for him didn't meet their expectations. She had removed the rugs the moment they arrived. The duvet clearly wasn't made of synthetic material either, and she suspected that the previous guests had smuggled a dog into the room in spite of the hotel regulations. The black hairs she found in one of the corners had to come from somewhere.

She had heard Lukas coughing the night before from the neighbouring room. The combination with Bernd's snoring and the extra hard mattress hadn't exactly been conducive to a good night's sleep.

She looked at her watch. The short, child-friendly walk Bernd had mapped out in the hotel that morning had evolved into a one and a half hour hike, twice as long as he'd promised. Bernd's promises had to be taken with a pinch of salt often enough.

*'Will you be back for dinner before six?'*

*'Of course, honey.'*

That was a week ago. When it turned eleven and there was still no sign of him or a response to her texts she dumped the remains of a casserole in the trash.

She looked at Bernd's back over Lukas' head. Her eyes travelled from his black hair – always neatly trimmed, perfectly parallel with the collar of the shirts he wore as an investment consultant for a bank – to his square neck. There were sweat stains on his T-shirt, as if the child-friendly walk had also tested his own staying power in spite of his visits to

the gym, the biggest in Potsdam. After knocking himself out three times a week, he would collapse on the sofa with a beer and watch TV.

The walk was far from being a physical challenge as far as Gaelle was concerned, if you exclude the irritating insects. As a former European running champion she had to stop herself from forcing the pace. That's why she usually walked at the back.

As the bushes either side of the path got thicker, the path itself got narrower. The protruding branch of a thorn bush scratched her leg before she even noticed it was there. She warned Lukas to keep an eye out. It struck her that she hadn't seen any markings on the trees for a while.

'Are you sure we're on the right track, Bernd?' she asked.

He didn't even bother to turn when he said that he'd never lost his way. That wasn't true, she thought. Ten years earlier, before they got married, they had lost their way one sultry summer day during a walk in the Eifel Mountains. Instead of worrying about it they had made love on a rock near a waterfall until an elderly couple interrupted them.

Her eyes returned to Bernd's back and she asked herself when exactly things had taken a turn for the worse. She couldn't think of a specific tipping point.

On second thoughts. The birth of Lukas.

She didn't want to go back to those days. Never again. The therapist told her it could happen to anyone and that she shouldn't blame herself. Issues between her and Bernd had just heaped up, she remembered, like a pile of stones that could cause an avalanche at any minute.

She jumped.

A twig snapped to her left, but she couldn't see anything through the thick bushes. She knew the forest had wild boar in it. A hiker had been attacked there the year before when he got too close to a wild sow with piglets.

'Did you hear that, Bernd?' she asked.

He turned.

'That murmuring sound? There must be a stream close by,' he said. He sounded a lot breezier than a couple of minutes earlier. 'If I'm right it'll be visible round the next bend. It has to be the stream on the ordinance map.'

*The ordinance map he had left back in the hotel because he didn't need it for such a short walk.*

She had reminded him about it more than once in the last hour, which hadn't done much to improve the atmosphere.

Now she too could hear running water.

She stopped. The gurgling sound was relaxing. But not relaxing enough.

She had a feeling they were being watched.

She looked up at the tall trees surrounding her, at their thick foliage, and at the bushes on either side of the path. The vegetation formed dark walls behind which all sorts of dangers could be lurking.

*You always act as if something terrible is about to happen.*

Bernd had said the same when she woke him up in the middle of the night recently because she thought she heard burglars downstairs. It turned out to be a door that hadn't been properly.

She shivered in spite of the heat.

She looked at the path in front of her

It was empty.

She was alone.

2

His name was Michael, but she called him Chameleon. No one used their full identity in his line of work. For the services he offered, leaving a calling card could be deadly or lead at the very least to a lengthy stay behind bars. That would have been a novelty for him. Like Scorpio's other contract killers, he lived in the shadows. He was a master in the art of vanishing; he was everyone and no one all at once. He could speak eight languages with fluency. In recent years he'd become a specialist in the latest high-tech products, like microchips that masked his voice. He used false teeth and professional make-up techniques to allow him to assume different identities. There were future victims who had ignored a beggar holding out his hand to them at the metro, unaware of the fact that the same beggar would take their lives a couple of hours later. He was the foreign waiter; the one female diners were drawn to for his typically Mediterranean flair. He was the ailing old man to whom boys with skateboards would willingly offer their seat on a busy underground. He lived everywhere and nowhere.

At this moment in time he was living on a campsite in Altensteig, not far from his next target. He still had four days to complete his assignment.

He looked down at the woodland soil under his sturdy walking shoes. Today he was a middle-aged British tourist with red hair, a beer belly and a beanie for the sun. He looked like the type you would direct to the nearest pub without a second thought or spontaneously offer a tube of sun cream.

He pushed aside the broken twig with the point of his shoe. He had just broken one of his own rules. He had to be inaudible as well as invisible. When he spotted his target through the bushes he should have stopped, but he didn't. The woman on the trail probably heard something, but he was sure she hadn't seen him. He stood still and observed her through the leaves. The thirty-six year old woman looked athletic at first sight, with her light brown hair tied back in a ponytail, her tight figure and her even tighter shorts. But the way she walked had an air of tiredness about it. She didn't look like the same woman who threw her arms in the air when she crossed the line first during the 100 meter sprint at the European Athletics Championship. He had watched videos of her victory on YouTube as part of his preparation. It wasn't the only medal she had won in her sporting career, but it was her last. A year later she gave birth to her son. She was 29 years old at the time. She didn't take part in competition level athletics after that. He had done his homework.

His modus operandi was always the same. Phase one: learn and observe. Phase two: devise a strategy on the basis of phase one for a natural death, an accident, or suicide. Phase three: liquidate. And it all had to be rounded off within the allotted time. The woman who led Scorpio called the shots. He had never met her in person. All he knew was her first

name, the one she used to sign off on her messages: Dolores. It might as well have been her real name, he figured, since the rest of her identity was impossible to trace on the internet. She despatched her assignments using the so-called Dark Web, a term used for a collection of websites you could only visit with special tools without sharing access to IP-addresses or server details. Future clients could visit Scorpio's site via the Dark Web. The Dark Web formed a small portion of the Deep Web, the invisible side of the internet, undetectable to standard search engines. Years back, during an information session, the instructor had observed as an aside that the Dark Web was just as mysterious as the dark side of the moon. Michael found the comparison inappropriate. The Dark Web was more than a place without light; it was a hideaway for paedophiles, gangsters and contract killers.

Dolores' messages never alluded to contract killers. Scorpio was her business and she was a businesswoman who traded in murder on demand. She had customers, contracts, personnel.

But there was also competition.

Hitman Market on the Dark Web featured other organisations, all of them recommending their services and boasting excellent results at competitive prices.

Dolores had decided as a result to expand her business. Michael had learned about it when he took on his present contract.

From now on, children were also potential targets.



3

Gaëlle hadn't budged an inch on the forest trail, lost in thoughts about where she wanted to go with her life. The fork in the trail they had just encountered seemed symbolic of their relationship: Bernd had wanted to go left and she had wanted to go right. They had argued about it.

Bernd finally got his way.

That's what usually happened.

The only reason she backed down was because she wanted to spare Lukas.

She looked around, at the trees and the impenetrable bushes that blocked her view. They had lost their way and Bernd would never admit it. Another symbol for their marriage. When she had suggested the previous summer that they see a relational therapist together he had answered that quacks like that should stay out of their affairs.

They would find a solution, he had said. Every marriage has its highs and lows. He had sounded as if he believed what he was saying. And he probably did, she thought.

But it didn't solve itself. The gulf between them grew wider and wider, and this weekend away only confirmed it.

She suddenly tilted her head.

She could hear Lukas' voice in the distance.

And Bernd's voice. Calling her name.

Something had happened.

She started to run as fast as she could, the thorn bushes along the trail scratching her legs.

As soon as she rounded the bend she could see them. The bushes were less dense and Lukas was lying on the ground in one of those open spots with Bernd crouched at his side. They were close to fast-flowing water with boulders either side and a wooden bridge.

Gaëlle was out of breath when she reached them. She took off her rucksack, threw it to the ground and sat down beside her son.

She knew immediately what was going on. She heard Lukas wheezing, read the panic in his eyes, and saw the colour drain from his face.

Their GP had said that forest air was good for asthma patients. But that didn't apply to strenuous walks in hot weather on trails that didn't exist. Of course it didn't.

'Why do you always have to insist?' she said to Bernd, opening her rucksack in search of Lukas' inhaler. 'If we'd turned right at the fork we would've been back in the hotel ages ago.'

Bernd held Lukas in his arms in an effort to calm him and said nothing.

She rummaged through her rucksack, felt the water bottle, the sandwiches in tinfoil, the first-aid kit, and the anti-insect spray that was completely useless.

But there was no inhaler.

Lukas' face was getting greyer and his entire body was trembling.

'Where is that bloody thing,' asked Bernd as he fiddled with his mobile.

His voice sounded higher than usual when he announced they had no signal.

She turned her rucksack upside down and emptied it on the ground. She inspected the contents three times over as if she refused to believe what she was seeing. She returned to the rucksack and checked the external pockets one more time.

She sensed her own breath suddenly stop.

'The inhaler's back at the hotel,' she said.

'What?' said Bernd. 'You must be bloody kidding! I asked you about it before we left the room!'

She had never forgotten the inhaler before. She didn't look for an excuse. It was her fault. Maybe it was tiredness. She'd hardly slept the night before. She remembered leaving the inhaler out that morning on the bathroom cabinet and leaving moments later convinced that she'd put it in her rucksack.

'You forget his inhaler? How stupid can you get?' Bernd shouted.

'Just as stupid as wandering around without a map,' she said. 'Or don't you think I already figured we were lost?'

Lukas was still in Bernd's arms, rasping like an animal at death's door. The forest around them rustled as if nothing was going on. Gaelle closed her eyes for a fraction of a second and absorbed the silence.

Then she asked Bernd if she could take Lukas. Bernd seemed to hesitate for a second, but then he handed him to her.

The boy lashed out in panic. She took him in her arms and cradled him.

She caressed his head and told him that it would all be fine, even without the inhaler. She said it without a trace of doubt in her voice. The hand caressing Lukas' head wasn't clammy. She hummed the lullaby that had always calmed him as a baby and said that everything would be fine. She told him what the doctor had said, that he could get through an asthma attack without an inhaler in an emergency.

With every word, every gentle gesture, Lukas' panic slowly subsided. She didn't know how long the attack had lasted, but it felt like an eternity when his breathing finally returned to normal and the colour returned to his face.

She wiped away his tears.

'You were fantastic, Lukas,' she whispered.

'And so were you,' said Bernd.

He caressed her cheek, as she had just caressed Lukas' cheek. It was a fleeting gesture, like the air, but she could still feel it when they arrived back at the hotel half an hour later.

4

Michael had seen everything. He had watched from a distance as the boy had suddenly started to struggle for breath, as if the air had been poisoned by the one who'd been observing them all this time.

For a second he thought that his job was half done, without him having to lift a finger. It had happened once in his career. His target at the time was a rich old man in his eighties who spent almost every day at the golf club. The client's name – the one who commissioned the contract killing – was never shared with Scorpio staff. Only Dolores knew. Michael figured that one or more of the elderly man's heirs had succumbed to impatience. As he followed his target's Jaguar home one evening after a customary round of golf, he was surprised that the man didn't drive directly to his villa with its security systems and vigilant neighbourhood watch. He drove instead to a bar where the red lights in the windows suggested that there was more on offer inside than booze.

The old man never came out again. An ambulance arrived an hour later without sirens, as if the nurses knew there was no reason to hurry. He had watched from a doorway as a second vehicle drove up moments later. A woman with a black bag stepped out and into the bar, most likely a police doctor. Then the hearse arrived with the undertaker. He had tossed his cigarette into the gutter and made his way back to his hotel. He had called the bar in question using an untraceable mobile, had pretended to be a police inspector, and had informed that manageress that he wouldn't make an issue of her dodgy work permits if she would be willing to answer a few questions. The woman had informed him with a trembling voice that the elderly gentleman had died of heart failure in the middle of a sex show. He had suspected as much. She then added with a sniffle that it was a beautiful death. He quickly cranked up his laptop and logged in to his personal page on Scorpio's website.

*Goods delivered.*

It only took a few seconds for the response. Professional as always.

*The due sum will be transferred soon.*

The money Michael had earned over the years was in a Swiss bank account. It was enough for him to lead a life of leisure from then on – he was forty-six and still had a serious stretch ahead of him – but he knew Dolores wouldn't let him go until he'd turned fifty-five, the average age at which Scorpio's contract killers were allowed to round off their careers and walk. Some wanted to stay longer, but Dolores felt that employees started to lose their edge after fifty-five, especially in her extremely demanding line of business.

Perhaps he was already losing his edge, Michael thought, reminding himself never to mention it to Dolores. Something strange had just happened. As he watched the boy gasping for air, Michael had thought he would feel relieved.

If the boy were to die here in the middle of the forest there would be no need to kill him. He wouldn't have the blood of a child on his hands. He had seen the woman search desperately for something in her rucksack and had heard the couple argue.

All that time the boy was lying beside the stream gasping for air like a fish out of water.

He had seen the woman take the boy in her arms and had watched the two of them, mother and son. It reminded him of Michelangelo's Pieta. But in contrast to the marble statue, this mother had not mourned her dead son. On the contrary, she had done everything she could to bring him back to life.

She had succeeded.

At that moment something bizarre happened.

A feeling had taken hold of him that he couldn't describe or name. It had left him confused. If he had wanted the boy to die, he should have felt disappointed. But he didn't.

Lukas, the boy's name was Lukas.

The presence of the name in his head only added to his confusion. Once he knew the identity of the person he had to kill he would erase the name from his mind. His target then became an object, neutral, to be eliminated. The frail young boy he had just seen fighting for his life in his mother's arms had stirred something deep inside him. A memory he had tried to suppress for more than thirty years, a memory buried under a layer of dust and blood.

*Janek had been counting on him. And he didn't quite make it.*

When he saw that the boy was back on his feet, he turned and made his way out of the forest. He bumped into a friendly German tourist on his way back to the campsite who struck up a conversation in the best English she could muster. Hadn't the weather turned out pretty good after all, in spite of the incessant rain the week before, far too miserable for June. Did he know of a decent pub anywhere near the campsite? She ended the conversation by taking a look at his puffy red face and recommending an extra layer of sun cream.

He had promised to give it some serious thought and they parted company with the kind of awkwardness one would expect from a middle-aged Brit who looked like a perpetual bachelor.

Once inside his tent he switched on his laptop. He had checked wifi availability at the campsite in the same way as someone might check they'd packed a toothbrush.

He surfed through the murky streets of the Dark Web and logged into the Scorpio site using his personal code.

*Janekbfleur83*

He heard a child laugh outside.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard. The decision he was about to make could never be undone. The contract between Dolores and her hired assassins contained dozens of stipulations. Most were specific demands requiring the signatory to stay abreast of new high-

tech devices, untraceable toxins and developments in weaponry, in addition to honing their martial arts and language skills. But one of the stipulations was a gesture of goodwill.

Once and only once in the course of his career, and for whatever reason, a contract killer was free to reject an assignment.

Michael started to type.

5

Dolores Bartosz stared out of the office window on the first floor of her safe house, a cube-shaped building that looked like a bunker. Her private estate was hidden in the dense Knyszynska Forest in Poland's North West. Her office window took up the entire exterior wall and was made of armoured glass. If someone were to fire a bullet at it she wouldn't move a muscle, just watch with a hint of perverse delight as it ricocheted, like a bird crashing into the glass.

Dark clouds accumulated over the forest. She didn't like the patter of rain on the windows. If it stormed later she would press a button and move to complete lock-down. Concrete shutters would close automatically over the windows, the garage and the front door. The shutters were a meter thick, just like walls of the house. The Danish architect who designed the place had a test chamber where she was able to confirm with her own eyes that the walls were a match for grenades and Kalashnikovs. The same architect had also built safe houses for well-known film stars, drugs barons and Russian oil magnates. She had paid him enough to keep his mouth shut about the commission and thus far the man had been smart enough to keep his side of the bargain. She had had his computer hacked and had been following his online communications without him knowing it.

She looked at the rosebush in the garden below. It was the only plant to grace the perfectly maintained lawn that was surrounded by a high wall with motion detectors, an initial obstacle to potential intruders. The gate in the wall was also an obstacle. It only opened after the computer had confirmed the identity of the visitor via a fingerprint scan. The man who delivered her monthly supplies – her only regular visitor – clearly didn't like having his finger scanned, but did it anyway.

The same man who left her supplies in the garage returned each time to his van and drove off without ever seeing his customer. As far as he was concerned, the place housed some reclusive and elderly businessman.

She looked up at the sky and decided she had just enough time to visit the garden before it started to rain. She left her office and headed for the stairs.

She stood by the rosebush, inhaled its sweet perfume, and examined the unique variety's red petals that were folded inwards into what she described as one of nature's works of art. Every flower was different. If it weren't for the impending rain, she would have spent an age looking at them. The rosebush was in exceptionally full bloom.

The quality of the compost that spring had more than a little to do with it.

Three months earlier she had instructed Cedric to mix a pot of ash with artificial fertiliser and sprinkle it around the rosebush. She hadn't told him that the ash consisted of the cremated

remains of a former employee who had ventured a transfer to the competition. A bad move, for him at least. The ash had been sent to her in a package as agreed with Vasili, one of her employees who specialised in torture techniques who had murdered the man on her orders. She had looked on as Cedric crossed the lawn with a heaped barrow and a shovel. Dark brown hair, average height, with his ever present sunglasses, which he only took off at night. His stately posture gave the impression that the wheelbarrow was full of caviar and not fertiliser. His serious expression also made him look older than he really was, thirty-eight. Cedric hadn't needed his white stick to find his goal. It was March at the time and the roses were still closed, but he might have followed the sound of the wind rustling the leaves of the rosebush or smelled the chicken manure he'd sprinkled around it the week before. The keenness of his ears and nose was well above average even for a blind person, and had surprised her more than once over the years. Perhaps he had also been able to smell the presence of a corpse in the ash she had asked him to mix with the fertiliser.

As always he had asked no questions. He was a good butler, she thought. She was almost a quarter century older than Cedric, but he always seemed to know exactly what she needed. The sugar in her tea was always the perfect amount and the meals he prepared, which they ate apart, were healthy and wholesome. He also managed to keep the house spic and span using the latest in household robotics, without ever seeing the shine on the floor.

She caressed the velvet softness of the rose petals with the tips of her fingers and then ran her hand over the stem. *Semper Dolor*. The name of the rose variety with the most beautiful flowers and the biggest thorns.

She clenched her hand around the stem and didn't flinch when the thorns pierced her skin. A couple of drops of blood seeped through her fingers, almost as red as the roses.

*Semper Dolor*.

No life without pain.

She slowly licked the blood from her fingers.

The first raindrops started to fall. Dolores turned and went inside. She pressed some buttons on the panel in her living room and set the lock-down in motion. It took a few minutes for the massive shutters to slide into place around the exterior.

She caught sight of her face in the reflection in the window and jerked her head away.

She heard Cedric on the corridor. It was his job to ensure that none of the components malfunctioned. An ultrasonic device allowed him to check if each shutter was in position. Her thoughts remained with Cedric. He probably thought she had taken him into service when she did out of compassion, thinking a poor, blind eighteen-year-old orphan like him had no future. But he was wrong. Dolores Bartosz had no compassion.

She was only willing to accept a blind person around her for the same reason as she had banned mirrors from the house.

As the shutters slowly blacked out her office she was reminded of the message Michael had sent her that day. The Chameleon had taken a form she had never seen before. Clause 48 wasn't a gesture of goodwill as her employees thought, but a loyalty test. No one had ever appealed to it before and Michael had been mistaken to do so.

She had already transferred the assignment to Vasili, who would eliminate both targets within four days, in line with the original customer agreement. Dolores had no need to worry about that.

But she was worried about Michael.

Had she misjudged him?