

The Scorpion's Head

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

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An extract

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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.
