

Sacrifice

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An extract

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1

The wolf is on the prowl.

For Alex, the most unmistakable signal comes from the large, black raven nervously circling an outcrop of bushes near the edge of the forest on the north side of the stone massif. The bird is trying to attract the wolf's attention with its hoarse, guttural *caw-caws*.

Although the wolf doesn't make an appearance, Alex knows he's there.

There have been other signs these past few days. Large paw prints in the dried mud, oval and ringed with the imprint of sharp claws. Tracks running for hundreds of metres straight towards the rocks and the woods. Dogs saunter back and forth and sniff around, but wolves stride straight ahead, determined, deliberate.

Ivory-coloured droppings lie clearly visible on a hill a couple of hundred metres from his current lair. The bony remnants of the prey he's outsmarted make the scat look like dirty chalk. A deer? A young Alpine chamois? Alex has yet to find the victim's remains, although that could mean anything.

The wolf is a large male, roughly four years old, a powerhouse, at the top of his game, and he's new in town, looking for a partner and a patch of turf.

Alex rests the binoculars on the grass and rubs his eyelids. The sun was bright today; his eyes are burning from hours of endless staring. The day is drawing to a close.

Alex Berger has spent the last several weeks in the Italian Apennine Mountains, in the Gran Sasso National Park, at the invitation of a good acquaintance named Marc Daniels. Daniels made a fortune as an architect designing urban palazzos and beach houses for sheikhs and other well-to-do patrons in Dubai. He is a man of extremes: luxurious opulence in his penthouse on the Vindictivelaan in the Belgian city of Ostend, and nothing but the bare necessities here in the Italian mountains. His vacation house is in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, in the middle of nowhere, at an altitude of more than 1200 metres in the mountains of the Gran Sasso. In fact, the term 'house' is an overstatement. It's just a shack, an old, simple shepherd's dwelling with stables; the architect had the place fixed up and reinforced, after which he furnished it spartanly. There's a wood stove you can cook on, a wooden table ringed with milking stools, and a sagging leather sofa for sinking into with a good book. And reading is about the only thing you can do in the evenings because there's no Internet or cell phone reception. Walking from the village to the house along the mountain path takes fifteen minutes, and it's a steep climb, especially when lugging a backpack full of groceries.

Alex Berger was once a zealous chief inspector with the homicide squad, but that life is far behind him now. In recent years, he's made ends meet with freelance assignments as a private eye. A

dead end, as he soon realised. Not his thing; he's not cut out for it. But he has no clue as to what else he should do to keep a roof over his head, although clearly something has to change. Alex's professional life has been at a standstill for some time. He has no assignments to speak of and fewer prospects, so he came here to think. As his friend Eric, the book dealer, likes to say, he needs to find some peace and quiet in that addled head of his. Eric gave him a stack of books to take along: *A Whole Life* by Robert Seethaler, *The Wild Boy* by Cognetti and something about a dog by Sander Kollaard. Two books about life in the mountains and one about the search for life's simple joys. Eric's reading lists always have a deeper meaning.

Alex has been living in the mountains for about three weeks, holed up in total seclusion; he fills his days with reading, thinking and hours of hiking. It's early November. The nights are cold; during the day, when the sky is bright blue, the temperature rarely climbs above twelve or thirteen degrees Celsius.

At the request of a local nature association that Daniels sponsors, Alex keeps track of the animals he sees or whose spoor he has found. At first, he had no clue and could hardly tell a chicken leg from an eagle's claw. But soon, he realised that this simple favour triggered his investigative instincts. He could use his senses to examine scents or broken branches, hair and scat, and footprints in the still-damp earth along the early-morning trails. Alex prefers hiking in the afternoons for his own pleasure, but when searching for animals, he leaves first thing in the morning, hunting for traces of brown bear and, especially, the wolf. Wolves are rare in these parts, and the solitary hunter tops the nature association's list.

Today, Alex followed a raven, a strapping specimen with a wingspan of more than a metre, now carrying out daredevil stunts high above an outcropping of shrubbery near the rocks. And, according to the old local saying, where there are ravens, there are wolves. Because when a raven spots a wounded animal from the air, he searches for a wolf. He tries to attract the wolf's attention and draw him to the spot. Because once the wolf has finished eating, the raven gets the leftovers.

But today, the wolf doesn't make an appearance.

Alex returns the binoculars to his eyes and scans the surroundings. He's downwind, safe from the wolf's keen nose and pointed ears.

He's become so focused on his quest that he's lost track of time until, a good hour or so later, he shivers from the cold rising from the ground; he realises it's late, too late.

He curses; he's lingered here too long.

Alex leaps to his feet, gathers his things and leaves. He races towards his hut, in the direction of the setting sun. Darkness descends rapidly here in the mountains; it would be suicide to try to find your way in the dark, with so many ravines and steep slopes to traverse. Darkness crawls from behind the treetops and slowly engulfs the landscape. It grows colder.

Alex starts running. He stumbles once or twice over the stones on either side of the narrow path, combing the area for landmarks, familiar vistas, or some oddly shaped rocks he can still recognise in the fading light. He swallows his rising panic. Suddenly, the mountain range around him has lost all its charm, and he feels strangely threatened.

Now it's genuinely dark.

He feverishly searches for the right path, the trail leading to his hut.

2

If Jean-Philippe Lamotte had to give one reason for his boundless love of the Forest of Anlier, it would be the silence. Or, more precisely: the silence of the early morning, before the world

makes any noise and visitors are not yet swarming like red ants in a pine forest. And this crisp, cold morning in autumn, with mist draped like a veil between the trees, fills the *garde forestier* with even greater delight.

When people ask him what he does for a living, he replies with an enigmatic grin that he's a forest helper. He loves the phrase. In the past, when he'd just embarked on his career, Jean-Philippe enjoyed expounding on the many responsibilities of a *garde forestier*, a state inspector with judicial powers, a combined police officer and forest ranger; a *garde forestier* maintains order when needed and oversees agreements relating to forestry and hunting. All well and good, especially back then, in the eyes of such a determined, newly appointed inspector to this stretch of the immense Forêt d'Anlier.

But in recent years, Lamotte simply says he's a forest helper. For a man with so much sympathy for woods and animals, it's a fitting description.

It's been fifteen minutes since Jean-Philippe Lamotte parked his moss-green Land Rover; he's now strolling through an old section of the woods, humming contentedly. About a month ago, he'd marked some trees where martens live. He's here to see how they're faring.

He passes a pile of clothes, but their significance doesn't initially dawn on him. A white shirt, torn to shreds. A knitted, sunflower yellow cardigan. A pair of jeans.

Only when he clocks the panties and the pair of black boots lying near the clothes does Jean-Philippe understand precisely what he's seeing. The strap of his hunting rifle reflexively slides off his shoulder, and he clasps the weapon more firmly. He carefully steps around a bush, and the tableau before him is revealed. His heart skips a beat.

Months later, the *garde forestier* still wakes up at night, screaming and covered in sweat, because of what he saw that autumnal morning.

The naked body of a girl lying in the middle of the forest, her arms and legs splayed over a tree trunk.

3

When Alex returns from his afternoon walk, the farmer's youngest son is waiting for him. The boy is twelve, scrawny, a timid look in his eyes.

'Telephone for you, *signore*.'

'Have you been waiting long?'

'A quarter of an hour.'

The farm, unlike Alex's shack, lies lower in the valley and is equipped with a landline.

He follows the boy down the narrow, twisting trail carved over many years by the hoofs of countless sheep. The farmer's son darts along the path, but Alex has trouble keeping up. He treads gingerly: yesterday evening, he twisted his ankle in his panic to reach home before nightfall.

He hobbles along until he reaches the old house where the farmer waves from atop a large stack of hay bales wrapped in black plastic; the farmer shouts something Alex doesn't understand as Alex passes through the kitchen to the hall where there's a white, modern looking telephone on a small table, the handset beside it.

It's the architect, Marc Daniels, Alex thinks, or someone well acquainted with them both, because Marc's the only one who knows how to reach Alex. That line of thinking gives him a pretty good hunch.

'Hello Sara,' he says.

She doesn't seem surprised.

'I need your help,' she begins, skipping the small talk.

Sara Cavani, chief inspector with the Brussels' criminal investigation department, has in recent years been primarily active with the Belgian branch of Interpol; she's Alex's best friend. Or rather, his only friend. He's never been the type of man to easily open up to others, male or female. By the same token, he lacks the social skills to charm people into showing even marginal interest in him. But of course, things were different when Camille was still alive; then, he could use her as a shield. She had enough empathy and humour for two. Camille could strike up a conversation with a stranger in the supermarket's freezer section and take a genuine interest, while Alex, like an icicle, would stand by, never knowing what to say.

Everything was different when Camille was alive.

In recent years, Sara had become his best friend; at times, it went beyond that. When skin hunger and loneliness got the better of them, they'd sleep together. But that's over now. Sara has a new boyfriend, and it looks like it's serious.

'It's a madhouse here,' Sara says. 'We're short-staffed enough under normal circumstances, but now....'

Alex doesn't reply. He watches a young puppy on the kitchen floor rollicking with a ball, doing improbable somersaults. He thinks, when she says 'here', she means 'there', the city, Brussels, and suddenly his head fills with the irritating din of crowds and traffic and the smell of exhaust fumes. Last night, a thunderstorm washed over the mountains; this morning, at dawn, it rained briefly but torrentially. The minute he woke up, Alex hiked to the ridge and looked around for a long time, inhaling the almost sweet aroma of the earth and the thick raindrops on the dry ground.

'Are you still there?' Sara asks.

'Yes. You said you needed my help.'

'The daughter of a European Commission bigwig has been murdered. Caroline Bingenheim, from Luxembourg. Her body was found in the Forest of Anlier. And she's not the first, Alex: five years ago, another young woman, just a girl, was also murdered there. The circumstances were identical, albeit with slight variations in the MO. Between that first murder and this one, two other young women have gone missing in that same stretch of woods, never to be seen again. I'm supposed to lead a task force, but I haven't even assembled a team yet. Would you like to help?'

'I'm looking for a large wolf, Sara. And for a brown bear, as well. Yesterday I spotted a pawprint and some droppings. I think I finally know where I can find him.' 'The bear or the wolf?' She doesn't wait for his answer but continues: 'It's a temporary gig, Alex, consultant at Interpol. The pay's not bad, and, what's more, it's a darn site better than what you're earning now.'

Because as Sara knows, he's earning next to nothing these days. And sometimes it feels like the only assignments that come Alex's way as a private detective involve catching people, either at work, with their hands in the till, or in a hotel room in the arms of a lover; in both cases, Alex refuses to play ball.

'You mustn't stay there too long on your own, Alex,' her tone is suddenly softer.

'Nothing wrong with a little solitude, but I don't want you getting lonely.'

I'm not lonely here, he wants to say; I have the silence of the mountains and all the animals around me. No people, but he doesn't mind that. Humans are the only mammals Alex finds increasingly problematic.

'So will you come?' she asks.

'Where's the forest?'

'Under Bastogne. More or less the entire south-eastern tip of Belgium, bordering Luxembourg. I spent a weekend there a year ago; it's stunning.' She sighs. 'It's bizarre, Alex. From the crime scene pictures, you'd think it was the set of some horror film.'

'In what way?'

'She was lying naked, draped across a tree trunk in the middle of the woods, a place where hikers aren't allowed. All her clothes were piled up nearby. The forest ranger found her in the morning, a lucky break for the coroner because foxes had ravaged her body during the night.'

'Was she sexually molested?'

As soon as Alex poses the question, he knows he's made up his mind. And Sara knows it, too. She tries to mask her relief.

'Yes. And strangled. Just like that other young woman, Laura Keyzer, five years ago, but then, for some reason, the killer dressed her again after the murder. We have no idea what happened to the two missing girls, but I fear the worst. As I said, the forest is vast.'

Alex doesn't reply.

'So I'll see you tomorrow?' Sara asks.

'The day after,' Alex answers. 'I don't have a car here, Sara. I came by train. But a neighbour will drive me to the station.'

'Excellent, then you'll have plenty of time to kill en route. There's a series of podcasts you have to hear,' she says. "'The missing girls of Anlier,'" the project of two college kids from Ghent. Their podcast is called "The Mystery;" they've been at it a while and have a huge following, but I get the idea they're in over their heads, especially now, with this new series about the girls who've disappeared.'

'I don't have Internet or a wireless connection here,' Alex replies.

And I'm not in the mood, he wants to add, but doesn't.

'You can download a few episodes once you're on the train,' Sara snaps. 'I'll email you some pictures and excerpts from the file. Look at it as background for your new assignment. I think you might even be able to declare travelling expenses; I have a healthy budget – one of the advantages of being in cahoots with the European Commission.' The door to the courtyard and farmyard is open. It's a sunny day, the light outside is clear and bright, and he can hear laughter and deep male voices.

'And Alex?'

'Yes?'

'Thanks,' Sara says.

4

As the train barrels through southern Tuscany, Alex watches the landscape unfold. Rows of cypresses nod in the wind, there are distant vistas in yellow, green, and umber, and villages are sheltering beneath terracotta roof tiles. Passengers gathered on a station platform hurl past. Later, in northern Italy, the calm of extensive fields of grazing cows is interspersed with the striking ugliness of urban sprawl and highways intertwining like strands of tagliatelle.

Alex sips his bottle of mineral water and thinks about his friend Eric, who manages the Kafka bookstore in Ostend, the coastal community where Alex washed up two years ago. And as he's since realised, he was on the run from memories, from the bustle and blare of the big city, and especially from himself. When Eric comes to mind, his thoughts automatically turn to Sara. The three have a strong bond. All have experienced a personal drama that cut so deeply they've never entirely gotten over it. In the beginning, their raw grief united them, three bruised souls who needed no words to express their feelings; they simply found comfort in silent togetherness. As time passed and the loss gradually settled into place, the friendship cemented their connection. Today, they have blind faith in one another.

Alex lays his cell phone on the fold-down table and finds his earbuds. He's done what Sara asked and downloaded the podcast's first episode, 'The missing girls of Anlier,' onto his phone. The podcast went online three months ago.

The authors are Ada Fonteyn and Sam Hennes, and by the sound of it, they know each other well. Alex guesses they're in their mid-twenties. They explain they're not a couple, but bosom buddies. It takes a while for them to arrive at their subject: during the first ten minutes, they give each other and the listeners a hearty welcome as they pass around a bottle, glasses, and a box of biscuits. Sara told him the podcast is popular; maybe that's why Alex was subconsciously expecting a polished, no-nonsense account. But instead, this sounds like two friends shooting the breeze in a bar or in the back garden, talking over what they've discovered. Oddly enough, the loose, relaxed style helps focus his attention. Both students present their tale as if it's about a mutual friend, and their involvement hits the mark.

'Right, shall we get started?' Ada asks in English. 'This is the first episode about a new mystery, an unsolved murder and two inexplicable disappearances.'

'And all three took place in the Forest of Anlier,' Sam adds, 'one of Belgium's few remaining forests, deep in the Ardennes.'

While he's listening, Alex stares out the window. He watches empty fields and farmlands whizz by as the podcast's hosts set the scene in the region and the Anlier Forest. They talk like kids nowadays, with enthusiastic gusto, and they can't resist shoehorning in some foreign words and phrases. Still, their story has him hooked from the word go.

Finally, Ada arrives at the first murder, that of seventeen-year-old Laura Keyzer.

'On 25 June 2017 at 2 pm, Laura left her family's holiday home in the village of Suxy to go running. Nothing unusual about that; Laura was quite athletic. In Leuven, where the Keyzers lived, she belonged to a track and field club. Laura's summer holiday was just starting – all she had to do was pick up her final grades, and her real life could begin. But events took a different turn.' Her friend Sam takes over.

'The Keyzer family – father Hans, mother Hannelore and Laura – owned a holiday home in the village, and for many years, they spent almost every weekend there. Laura was a strong and healthy bookworm, a goody-goody who preferred hiking in the woods with her parents to going out.' Sam chuckled. 'But like most good girls, she had her secrets. Laura hadn't mentioned to her parents that her plans that day went beyond merely jogging. She'd also agreed to meet her twenty-five-year-old boyfriend Carlo Simons, a young municipal employee, at the reservoir south of Suxy. Laura and Carlo had known each other for years: at one time, Carlo's mother, a single parent with two kids, also had a holiday home in the area. In fact, Carlo didn't just fall in love with Laura; he fell in love with the village and moved there permanently as an adult. He lived in a house just outside town and worked as a groundskeeper for the municipality. In the Ardennes, that meant spending practically the entire day roaming the forest.'

'Yes,' Ada interjects, 'when I read that while researching this episode, it was like:

come on, girl... I mean, he—.' Sam cuts her off.

'Hold on; let's set the scene before we get to the rest, OK?'

'*D'accord*. Carlo's car was parked close to the reservoir, and according to his statement, he was waiting for Laura,' Ada continues. 'It's a stretch of just under five kilometres, a dirt road running primarily through the forest. However, Laura never arrived. Two hours after she left home, around four in the afternoon, Carlo started to suspect something was wrong.'

'Because you need to know, and this is key to the episode about the investigation—'

'Yeah, right, no cell phones!'

'You have to bear in mind that there's no cell phone reception in the village or the surrounding woods, so Carlo couldn't reach Laura, and her parents couldn't reach her, either. Carlo started to worry. And he's insecure anyway because of his...' Ada hesitates. 'Should I bring up Carlo's affliction, or whatever you call it?'

'Hold your horses, you're getting ahead of yourself!'

Ada sniggers. '*Enfin*, as Carlo later explained in his first written testimony, eventually, at four-thirty, he drove home and waited for Laura there. He knew her parents were strongly opposed to their relationship: Hans Keyzer had even threatened to take legal action because Laura was still a minor, so Carl couldn't just drive past Laura's weekend house to find out why she hadn't turned up.'

'At six o'clock, Hans and Hannelore decided to look for their daughter. They parked the car along the path Laura usually takes when running, and they walked the entire route. At eight o'clock, Papa Hans phoned the police. Three days later, her body was found by someone walking deep in the woods.'

'But what he saw when he found her,' Sam adds, 'is truly something from a horror film. Gruesome.'

'We'll save that for the episode about the police investigation,' Ada breaks in. 'Today, we'll focus on Laura and her parents because, boy, that's something else...'

'Yeah, ain't it the truth? Heavy stuff...'

'Her father, Hans Keyzer, gets the idea the police are dragging their heels with the investigation, so he starts looking for Laura's murderer himself. He becomes totally obsessed.'

'But her mum, Hannelore, goes to pieces; she's never gotten over her daughter's death.'

'I mean, how would anyone react...?'

When it comes to murders, Alex is used to police jargon, so now and then, the hosts' speculations make him cringe. But credit where credit's due, they present the story in an accessible way. The speech patterns of both hosts reveal unmistakable traces of a Ghent accent, but it's evident their success is down to their off-the-cuff approach. Alex, as a former chief inspector, knows more than anyone that folks get a kick out of unsolved murders. Back when Camille hosted dinners for their friends, he often disappointed guests who wanted all the gory details about the latest case flooding the media.

Alex listened to the rest of the podcast while fishing a notebook and a brown paper bag from his travel bag. His neighbour had not only brought him to the station, he'd also provided supplies for the journey. Alex stared blankly out the window while savouring the home-baked bread and farmer's cheese, occasionally jotting down a name or phrase.

'In the next episode, we'll focus on the key players,' Ada Fonteyn says. 'Were there any immediate suspects? The answer is a resounding *oui*!'