
CHAPTER ONE

It was a good night for a killing.

Those were the first thoughts of the assassin known as the Scorpion, as he quietly entered the darkened room of the rented rundown apartment. He set down the thick black canvas bag on the dirty rug. His muscles were cramped, so he stretched his shoulders and slowly rotated his neck until he could feel the discomfort easing.

Crouching down, he crawled over to the window and peered out. The neon lights of the brothel on the opposite side of the street blinked on and off, slightly illuminating the apartment.

But the Scorpion remained in the shadows. There was no real need to worry - there was zero chance of the target's bodyguards noticing him up there on the fifth floor. He had been observing them for almost a

week, and he had rapidly come to the conclusion that they were all inept idiots, hired for their brawn, rather than their brains.

But the Scorpion hadn't survived this long by taking unnecessary risks. In fact, he was excessive in the amount of caution he took, as well as the preparation time before he carried out a job.

He took off his expensive dark suede jacket and folded it neatly, placing it beside him, despite the grime that covered the floor. The meticulousness of the process calmed him before each job, each routine having an important place in his mind. Any disruption to this routine deeply disturbed him. Superstition was a weakness of his, although he would be loathe to admit it.

The absence of the jacket revealed that he was a muscular athletic man. He had a chiseled chin, a buzzcut haircut, skin tight around the face, and a dark brown suntan, courtesy of the French Foreign Legion. But nobody knew of his Legion background. Nor did anyone know his real name. He had taken steps after coming out of the Legion to ensure all traces of his existence had been totally wiped out. He remained a shadow, living on the fringes of society. Those in the business that live a high profile are the ones begging to be arrested.

The Scorpion had no such desire to end up like that.

He flipped up the catches on his case and opened the lid, to reveal a sniper's rifle inside. Lightweight and with a range of just over 700 metres, the battered rifle had always been his weapon of choice. It had never let him down once, and had travelled the world with him. He had lost count of the number of kills he had managed to achieve with it. There was something almost sexual by the way he stroked it and examined it minutely. It had never jammed on him and had saved his life on more than one occasion.

Realising he was wasting precious time with his thoughts, he screwed a silencer onto the end of the barrel, then methodically began to load the gun with high-calibre ammunition. All the time, he periodically peered out of the window to make sure things were as they should be outside.

When he was satisfied the gun was ready, he moved over to the window and opened it. He had been back earlier that day to oil the hinges to ensure the window frame didn't squeak, and sure enough, it soundlessly swung open a slight crack. The Scorpion smiled. So far, so good.

The room was stifling hot, so the sudden breeze

from outside brushed against his face and felt very pleasant. He tilted his face back and forth against the cold air until the cloying sweat on his forehead began to disappear. He then carefully and slowly swung up the gun, and checking the street once more, pushed the gun barrel through the crack of the open window.

Looking through the telescopic sights, he turned on the night-vision and everything in the street suddenly turned green and brought into sharp contrast. He slowly moved the gun around, taking in the entire area. Then he saw a glow, and eventually realised it was a couple of men standing in the shadows of the adjacent alleyway smoking. At first he thought they were customers or just plain drunks taking a detour on the next stop to a bar. But then he realised it was the target's bodyguards.

Amateurs, he snorted in derision. They had just given their position away with their nicotine cravings. Ah well, their idiocy would be his gain. He now knew exactly where the hired help was.

He swung the gun back to the entrance. The door opened, and the Scorpion tensed, with his finger hovering near the trigger guard. But when the man came out, he could see that it was not who he had been contracted to take out. Instead it was a drunk

and sated businessman who had experienced the illicit pleasures of the flesh, and was now going home to lie to his wife about where he had been. The Scorpion took a deep breath and slowly moved his index finger away from the trigger.

As he continued scanning the street down below, he thought to himself that the longer he waited here, the more chance there was of one of the bodyguards looking up, and seeing him. But then he remembered his wait wouldn't be long, as his client was preparing to lure the target out into the Scorpion's waiting arms. They were both keen to get it done quickly, so the client was going to provide a big nudge towards the door.



Vladimir Rostov was considered by Interpol to be one of the biggest crime bosses in the whole of Europe. But he preferred to think of himself as an "aggressive entrepreneur". The tentacles of his empire stretched all over the continent and into Russia. Drugs, guns, women, gambling....he was basically into anything that guaranteed a fast easy buck. Hell, for the right price, he would even kill someone. It didn't take a lot of skill to stab someone

in the back or push them in front of a car. But the one thing he would not do was anything that acted against the best interests of the Russian state. Whatever else he might be, Rostov was a patriot.

He was in his late forties, but looked at least ten years older. Excessive amounts of vodka tended to do that to people. But he didn't care. In his line of work, you needed something to stay calm and take the edge off. People he worked with snorted drugs up their nose, but all he needed was a good bottle of spirits. Plus in his business, you didn't live to a ripe old age anyway.

His phone started buzzing in his pocket. He pulled it out, frowned when he saw the number on the caller ID screen, and eventually pressed the green 'call' button.

"Yes? Why the hell are you calling me? What do you want?"

"I need to see you" said the voice at the other end, "it's urgent. Can you meet me now?"

"Meet you? Why would I meet you? I have better things to do" he said abruptly, and prepared to hang up.

"Wait!" snapped the voice. "I've found out someone is stealing from you".

Being stolen from always got his attention. If

there was one thing he didn't like, it was other people stealing his money. The irony was lost on him that he had stolen the money from someone else first.

He slowly put the phone back to his ear.

"Alright, it was probably you, but I'll bite. You've piqued my interest. Keep talking".

"Not on the phone. It's too risky. Meet me outside the Adlon Hotel in 30 minutes. We'll talk in the back of your car".

Rostov's eyes looked upwards, as he silently counted to three, and then sighed heavily. "Fine, but if this is a waste of my time, your head will be on a rusty metal spike. Understand?"

"30 minutes" said the other man, and hung up.

Rostov swore softly. It was bloody cold outside and he had no desire to go halfway across the city just to see that leech. But if he was really getting ripped off, he had to find out who it was.

He signalled to the bodyguard standing inside the door.

"Get the car round. I'm meeting someone at the Adlon".



The Scorpion was patiently waiting. Finally, his patience was rewarded by a text message on his burner phone. The target was coming out.

He once again rested his eye against the telescopic sight, and breathed in deeply to steady his hands. He placed his finger next to the trigger guard, ready to take the shot.

Suddenly the door of the brothel creaked open, and there was a short burst of loud noise from inside, which abruptly stopped again when the door slammed closed. Rostov was now standing on the pavement, looking thoroughly unhappy, as if he really wanted someone to suffer for his inconveniences. The assassin smiled as he thought about how permanently unhappy Rostov was going to be in a moment.

Who said he couldn't take a perverse pleasure in his work?

The bodyguards who were standing in the shadows hurriedly stamped out their cigarettes when they saw their employer clearly in a bad temper. The back door of the car was opened and Rostov moved forward to get in.

But he never made it. Suddenly a whizzing and popping sound could be heard and a bullet slammed into Rostov's head. The top of the skull disinte-

grated, and the bodyguard behind him had the unfortunate experience of being sprayed with Rostov's blood and brain matter. Rostov spiralled to the ground like a yo-yo, with a look of utter surprise on what was left of his face.

Suddenly time seemed to stand still. The bodyguards looked at Rostov's corpse lying in a pool of his own blood. Their shock made them unable to immediately react. Which was all the time the Scorpion needed. Several more pops could be heard in quick succession, and all three bodyguards fell dead on top of their boss. Their blood mingled together on the ground and onto the roadside.

Six seconds. Damn, he was good. But now he had to get out of there before Rostov's men from inside discovered the bodies, and figured out where the shots had come from.

The Scorpion calmly picked up his brass cartridges from the floor, placed the rifle inside the case again, and put his jacket on. As he opened the door, he cautiously peered out and saw the hallway was empty. The last thing he needed was for a neighbour to take a late night stroll.

Seeing nobody, he closed the door as quietly as he could, walked quickly to the ground floor, and headed for the fire exit at the back. As he walked out

the door, he could already hear females screaming coming from out front. Probably one of the workers had gone for a cigarette break and found more than she bargained for. The Scorpion considered screaming the sound of success.

Moments later, he was gone. Gone to collect the rest of his money and to move on to the next assignment. It was a busy life sending people to their deaths.

CHAPTER TWO

Captain Sophie Decker was in trouble.

This in itself was nothing new. She was always getting into trouble. If her superiors were asked, they would say that Decker's main weakness was that she took far too much initiative, whereas others would be more cautious by reporting in and requesting orders.

While initiative was generally commendable, Decker got into trouble because her idea of initiative would quickly turn to recklessness and a bad attitude with her superior officers. The military tended to call that "insubordination".

Decker secretly despised the bureaucrats and resolved never to become one herself. They were easy to recognise. They were the ones who assessed everything by how much it would hurt the elected

officials. The ones who had never served a single day in the military or the intelligence service. The ones who had never had to make a spontaneous operational decision out in the field.

So who were they to tell her how to do her job?

At that precise moment, she was standing in front of one of these very people, Section Chief Franz Richter, whom she regarded as a little despicable toad of a man. Richter made a show of slowly running his expensive silver fountain pen down Decker's report, while Decker stood there waiting. It was a pathetic attempt to exercise power, to show her that she had to stand there until he deigned to talk to her. Decker resisted the urge to stab Richter in the hand with his own fountain pen.

"So you decided the only possible solution to the matter was to shoot the man?" he said finally in his nasally voice.

"Considering he had a gun and a knife, and was about to start shooting hostages....yeah, you could say that kind of restricted my options a lot" said Decker, irritably.

"So you fired an entire gun into this man's head in broad daylight, in front of tourists? All of whom had cameras on their phones? Did you know a video

was uploaded to YouTube before we managed to get it taken down?"

"How many hits did it get?"

"Considering the situation you're in" said Richter, "you don't seem unduly concerned about your predicament".

"Oh and what situation is that?" said Decker, "saving the lives of civilians? Decisively taking down an armed terrorist? Please, no need to get up and thank me".

Richter shot up behind his desk, and slammed his fists against the surface. "Do you think this is funny, Captain? That this is an amusing game to you? We have rules and you are not immune from them".

"I never find it amusing to kill someone" said Decker with menace creeping into her voice. "But if I have to choose between someone's grandmother and an unhinged terrorist begging to go to his seventy-two virgins in Paradise, I'll choose sweet old Granny any day. Tell me, when was the last time you shot someone out in the field?"

That earned a long murderous glare from Richter but when it came to staring people down, Decker was better at it than anyone else. Eventually Richter

broke eye contact, brought Decker's service record forward and scribbled a note in it.

"As of now, you are suspended Captain" he said stiffly, "pending further enquiries of your actions. When I am asked, I will be recommending your dismissal from the service. Get out of my office".

"Yes sir" said Decker, saluting. "thank you sir. nice day to work on the tan, sir".



The Scorpion was used to meeting new clients under the strictest security. It came with the job, and he could hardly complain about it. His profession was not one where he could open a smart office, hire a secretary, and openly advertise. "*Gunman for hire. Will travel. High success rate*". To avoid undercover police, he and his clients naturally had to be wary of one another.

He had received a message from a friend who filtered all requests from potential clients for him. He only worked on referral from someone he had worked with in the past, to try and reduce the chances of police entrapment. This limited his scope of potential clients, but the Scorpion preferred less money if it meant his life and continued freedom.

But even though he only worked on referrals from trusted past clients, he still couldn't field the queries and offers himself. That would leave him too exposed. So his friend - if the Scorpion could be said to have any friends - was the cutout point.

If the police tried to recruit the Scorpion in an attempt to entrap him, they would only get as far as the friend, who was more of a "cutout guy". He was well paid to take the fall and go to prison, or even die if necessary. They communicated via the Dark Web, using disposable email addresses and if it was an absolute emergency, burner phones, which were replaced every month. But the Scorpion, for obvious reasons, had a deep aversion to phones.

The cutout was unnaturally talented in automatically sniffing out law enforcement. He just knew when he was looking at police, no matter how disguised they were, or how good they were at acting like a bad guy. No matter how hard they tried, they just had that "cop look" which was impossible for them to shake off. Several times he had been right in his assessments, and had dealt with the situation promptly and professionally. Of course this meant moving on afterwards, but the Scorpion always took care of relocation costs.

This latest one seemed to check out, according to

the cutout guy. Definitely not police, and quite possibly serious money was involved. But he said something that the Scorpion had never heard him say before.

"Be careful man. These guys...I don't know...you might be getting in over your head on this one. I've got a bad vibe".

Those words replayed over and over in the Scorpion's head when some heavily-built men, assigned to drive him to his potential new client demanded he get into the car boot to conceal where they were taking him. They were very put out however when he quite firmly told them where they could stick that idea. Once in the boot, he would not have control anymore, and the Scorpion never relinquished control to anyone. This was another reason why he was still alive.

When intimidation didn't work, they reluctantly pointed to the back seat of the car. When he got in, a canvas bag was suddenly thrust over his head, and a gun painfully jabbed in his ribs. This really wasn't a whole lot better than the boot. But at least his hands were free, and he could disarm the fool sitting next to him in less than five seconds, before the ones in front knew what had hit them. He filed that away for future reference if he felt the situation was about to go sideways.



The Scorpion tried to memorise the route, but it very quickly became evident they were making a huge effort to disorient him. So he eventually gave up, and after roughly forty minutes, the car finally arrived at its destination. He was bundled out roughly and pushed through an open door.



Once inside, the Scorpion felt himself being expertly searched, and his gun was taken. It wasn't long before his backup weapon was found in its ankle holster, and taken too. Satisfied he was now unarmed, they pushed him along a narrow featureless corridor until he reached another room and the bag was finally pulled off his head. He suddenly felt very disoriented. Fresh air rushed to his face, and the light from the room hit his eyes like a full-frontal assault.

Then he heard soft chuckling in the corner. He turned and saw a man sitting in a leather chair examining him closely. He had a well-trimmed goatee beard, and slicked-back dark hair. He was also dressed in a very expensive grey suit. His dark soul-

less eyes reminded the Scorpion of a wolf, for some reason. But he had seen all types in his line of work, so it didn't bother him in the slightest.

"You're quite all right Mr Scorpion" said the man watching him, "just breathe and you'll be back to your old self in no time. Being a professional yourself, I'm sure you appreciate our need for strict security".

The rough treatment angered Scorpion enormously. "I don't particularly like being thrown around like a piece of meat in an abattoir. To me, that implies enormous disrespect. Not exactly the way to start a business relationship, is it?"

There was a pause, then a nod. "Fair point. I apologise if my men got a little too...enthusiastic. But you are a very tough man. I'm sure you can handle a bit of pushing and shoving".

"You can start making it up to me by giving me my damn guns back" said the Scorpion looking at him intensely, "they were taken from me before I was pushed in here".

Grey Suit looked at the Scorpion curiously for a moment, tilting his head in thought, as if wondering why the Scorpion would make such a big deal over guns. Finally, he sighed and picked up a phone, dialling an internal number.

"Bring his guns" was all he said, when the line was answered.

He hung up without breaking eye contact.

"Your guns will be brought in in a moment, but they will remain with me until you leave. We wouldn't want you getting any ideas about shooting me if we happen to disagree on anything else. Do you have any other grievances Mr Scorpion, before we continue?"

"Let me make this clear so even you can understand this" said the Scorpion, calmly, "if anyone puts their hands on me again, I'll break their goddamn necks. Then I'll calmly walk out of here and you can find someone else to do your dirty work".

Grey Suit gave a small tight smile. "A man with courage - and attitude. I appreciate that, because if this task which I want to give you goes wrong, you are going to need all the courage you possess to survive - from the authorities and from us".

"Assuming I accept - which I haven't yet. You assume too much. Tell me who the target is and I'll tell you if I'm interested".

Before Grey Suit could reply, the door opened and another beefy muscular man came in, with the Scorpion's guns. The room was quiet while the guns were placed on a table next to Grey Suit, and the

room was left to the two of them again. But not before the hired muscle gave the Scorpion a double-take that made him slightly uncomfortable. *Almost as if he knew him.*

Something else to file away for possible future reference.

It was another minute before Grey Suit decided to tell the Scorpion the target. He tapped his fingers on the armrests of his chair, and looked at Scorpion intensely.

"I want you to kill Claudia Meyer" he said finally.

"You want me to kill the German chancellor?" said the Scorpion, incredulously. "I think you need to lie down then take a long holiday".

"Why? Is it a problem? Does it scare you?" said the man, tauntingly.

"Not impossible. Just extremely difficult" the Scorpion replied, ignoring the crass attempt to get a rise out of him. "She hardly pops out to the supermarket in her lunch break. Getting past her bodyguards and getting close to her is going to be a challenge".

"Don't people like you thrive on challenges?" laughed Grey Suit.

"Challenges, yes. Suicide missions, not so much.

What's the point of earning money if you're not alive to enjoy it?"

"I'm sure a man of your capabilities would be able to find a way around her security" replied Grey Suit, dismissively.

"You do understand the consequences of asking me to do something like this, don't you?" said the Scorpion. "If she gets assassinated or even just gets a tiny bruise, the full weight of the German state is going to come down on both you and I. And if you think they won't eventually figure out who was behind it, then you really are naive".

"I think you give the government far too much credit".

"I think you don't give them enough"

Grey Suit smirked at this remark. "So...assuming you were to accept this...'challenge'...how much would you charge?".

The Scorpion decided to humour the idiot. "For something like this, once it's done, I would need to disappear forever. There's also the risk factor..."

"A number Scorpion" said Grey Suit irritably, "not a laundry list of excuses".

The Scorpion struggled to remain calm. "I was about to say before you rudely interrupted me, 20 million Euros in Bitcoin - and expenses. Let's say

50,000 Euros for expenses. Half of the fee and the full expenses now, the other half of the fee on completion. You and I will never meet again. When I leave here and get my first 50%, you cannot contact me ever again, and the job cannot be cancelled. The other 50% will be held in escrow, to be released when news of Meyer's death is confirmed".

"That sounds fair. But I don't like that we cannot contact you again. We have information sources that can help you. I would need to know how to get in touch".

"I just told you. You can't. And I have my own information sources".

"Unacceptable. A contact number."

"No" said the Scorpion, firmly, "I think we're done here".

Grey Suit looked at him in astonishment. "You would throw away 20 million Euros over a phone number?"

The Scorpion looked at Grey Suit. "Do you know why I am alive? Because I am careful. I wear disguises, I make sure there are no photos of me, no fingerprints. You may have noticed the leather gloves I am wearing right now. But you want me to carry what is essentially a tracking device in my pocket?

And you wonder why I am making a big deal about it?"

Grey Suit glared at him for a moment. He wasn't used to being talked to like this. He was more used to obedience and submission.

"Fine" he snapped. "Have it your way. But let me make something clear to you. If you disappear with your first ten million Euros without doing the job, we will eventually find you. And when we do, you will be begging us for mercy. Others have tried to cheat me, and they have paid with their lives. Money doesn't matter to me, but being cheated does".

In reply, the Scorpion simulated a lengthy yawn, stood and walked over slowly to Grey Suit. He leaned over and stared into Grey Suit's eyes.

"And the same applies to you, my friend" he said softly, "cheat me out of the rest of my money, or betray me to the police, and I will spend the rest of my days hunting you down. Others have underestimated me and have paid with their lives too".

His hand suddenly shot down and Grey Suit momentarily flinched. When he looked to his left, he saw that the Scorpion had merely snatched up his guns.

"I'll give my Bitcoin account details to your goons outside" said the Scorpion, enjoying Grey Suit's

sudden discomfort. "Then they can drive me back to my car. We're done here".

As he left the room, Grey Suit burned with humiliation at showing weakness. He picked up an heavy cut crystal glass sitting on a small side table and threw it savagely against the wall. It shattered into tiny little pieces, the dregs of the alcohol rolling down the wall.



"It's me".

"Why are you calling now? Your call-in time is not until tomorrow".

"I can't stay on the line for long. I'll be missed, but you need to know this now. The Scorpion just turned up at the club".

"The assassin?"

"No, the bloody animal. Of course, the assassin".

"What the hell did he want?"

"He was summoned by the boss. He was given a job. I had to bring the man's guns back into the room, and I listened through the door when they thought I was gone. The hit is on the Chancellor".

"The Chancellor? Are you sure?"

Suddenly there were two loud gunshots in the distance. The man on the phone swore.

"Are you there? What just happened?"

"Wait".

There was silence for a moment. Then a muffled voice in the background.



"Put the phone down" said the Scorpion.

The pimp from the club had his hands up and spread wide. The phone was in one hand, still connected to the person at the other end. He stared at the ugly menacing black pistol in the Scorpion's hand.

"I said put it down" repeated the Scorpion, calmly.

The pimp dropped it. "I assume those two shots means my colleagues are dead?"

"Somehow I get the feeling they were not really your colleagues. What are you? Police? Government? I saw the way you looked at me in the club".

"You're not getting a damn thing out of me. You may as well shoot me now".

The Scorpion made a show of thinking about it. Then "OK sure".

He fired and the bullet hit the pimp directly between the eyes. The head was jerked back and he crumpled to the ground. The Scorpion walked up to him and calmly put another bullet in the pimp's heart to be sure.



The Scorpion picked up the dropped phone.

"Who is this?"

The other man, who had heard the gunshots and knew his man was dead, didn't dare reply.

"If I had to guess" said the Scorpion, "I'm probably talking to the government. Don't bother tracing this call. I'll be long gone before anyone can get here. I just wanted to say hi and to let you know your man is dead. If he's married, please pass on my condolences to the widow".

"You'll never get to Meyer".

"Well then I guess you have nothing to worry about then, do you?"

"You're dead".

The Scorpion laughed. "You have to catch me first".

He hung up, dropped the phone again, and slammed his foot into it, breaking the screen.



The Scorpion quickly took one last look at the man he had just shot. He was certain the man who had brought his guns back had recognised him, and he was right. His gut had never failed him once. When he had been back in the car, the man was sitting in the front seat, looking at him in the rear view mirror. That was when he knew for sure he really had a problem. He knew he had to be taken out.

So when the car had stopped, the man pleaded the call of nature and skipped behind a wall. Without hesitating, the Scorpion had shot dead the other two men in the car, and then went to deal with the other one.

He wasn't that concerned about the reaction of Grey Suit. He could just add it to the fee. But now the person at the other end of the line knew the Chancellor was a target. Her security would be increased.

He knew it had been stupid to talk on the line. Now they probably had an audio recording of his voice. To the best of his knowledge, there were no reliable photos of him that the authorities could use, but talking on an open line was just stupid. He knew

better than that. But he couldn't resist taunting them.

Only thirty minutes in, and already the mission was blown.

He should have asked for more money.