

# Cut

The word 'Cut' is rendered in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. A vertical line, resembling a cut or a tear, runs through the center of the word, specifically through the 'u' and 't'. The line is slightly irregular, with some white space visible on either side, giving it a three-dimensional, paper-cut appearance. The background is plain white.



# Cut

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*'We are each our own devil, and we make  
this world our hell.'*

OSCAR WILDE



## Prologue

*West Berlin – 13 October, 11.09 p.m.*

Gabriel stood in the doorway and stared. The light from the hall fell down the cellar stairs and was swallowed by the brick walls.

He hated the cellar, particularly at night. Not that it would've made any difference whether it was light or dark outside. It was always night in the cellar. Then again, during the day, you could always run out into the garden, out into the light. At night, on the other hand, it was dark *everywhere*, even outside, and ghosts lurked in every corner. Ghosts that no grown-up could see. Ghosts that were just waiting to sink their claws into the neck of an eleven-year-old boy.

Still, he just couldn't help but stare, entranced, down into the far end of the cellar where the light faded away.

*The door!*

It was open!

There was a gaping black opening between the dark green wall and the door. And behind it was the lab, dark like Darth Vader's Death Star.

His heart beat in his throat. Gabriel wiped his clammy, trembling hands on his pyjamas – his favourite pyjamas with Luke Skywalker on the front.

The long, dark crack of the door drew him in as if by magic. He slowly placed his bare foot on the first step. The wood of the cellar stairs felt rough and creaked as if it were trying to give him away. But he knew that they wouldn't hear him. Not as long as they were fighting behind the closed kitchen door. It was a bad one. Worse than normal. And it frightened him. Good that David wasn't there, he thought. Good that he'd taken him out of harm's way. His little brother would've cried.

Then again, it would've been nice not to be alone right now in this cellar with the ghosts. Gabriel swallowed. The opening stared back at him like the gates of hell.

*Go look! That's what Luke would do.*

Dad would be furious if he could see him now. The lab was Dad's secret and it was secured like a fortress with a metal door and a shiny black peephole. No one else had ever seen the lab. Not even Mum.

Gabriel's feet touched the bare concrete floor of the cellar and he shuddered. First the warm wooden steps and now the cold stone.

*Now or never!*

Suddenly, a rumbling came through the cellar ceiling. Gabriel flinched. The noise came from the kitchen above him. It sounded like the table had been scraped across the tiles. For a moment, he considered whether he should go upstairs. Mum was up there all alone with *him* and Gabriel knew how angry he could get.

His eyes darted back to the door, glimmering in the dark. Such an opportunity might never come again.

He had stood there once before, about two years ago. That time, Dad had forgotten to lock the upper cellar door. Gabriel was nine. He had stood in the hall for a while and peered down.





In the end, curiosity triumphed. That time, he had also crept down into the cellar, entirely afraid of the ghosts, but still in complete darkness because he didn't dare turn on the light.

The peephole had glowed red like the eye of a monster.

In a mad rush, he had fled back up the stairs, back to David in their room, and crawled into his bed.

Now he was eleven. Now he stood there downstairs again and the monster eye wasn't glowing. Still, the peephole stared at him, cold and black like a dead eye. The only things reflecting in it were the dim light on the cellar stairs and him. The closer he got, the larger his face grew.

And why did it smell so disgusting?

He groped out in front of him with his bare feet and stepped in something wet and mushy. *Puke. It was puke!* That's why it smelled so disgusting. But why was there puke *here* in the first place?

He choked down his disgust and rubbed his foot clean on a dry area of the concrete floor. Some was still stuck between his toes. He would've liked a towel or a wet cloth right about now, but the lab was more important. He reached out his hand, placed it on the knob, pulled the heavy metal door open a bit more, and pressed on into the darkness. An unnatural silence enveloped him.

A deathly silence.

A sharp chemical smell crept into his nose like at the film lab where his father had once taken him after one of his days of shooting.

His heart was pounding. Much too fast, much too loud. He wished he were somewhere else, maybe with David, under the covers.





*Luke Skywalker would never hide under the covers.*

The trembling fingers on his left hand searched for the light switch, always expecting to find something else entirely. What if the ghosts were here? If they grabbed his arm? If he accidentally reached into one's mouth and it snapped its teeth shut?

*There!* Cool plastic.

He flipped the switch. Three red lights lit up and bathed the room in front of him in a strange red glow. Red, like in the belly of a monster.

A chill ran up his spine all the way to the roots of his hair. He stopped at the threshold to the lab; somehow, there was a sort of invisible border that he didn't want to cross. He squinted and tried to make out the details.

The lab was larger than he had thought, a narrow space about three metres wide and seven metres deep. A heavy black curtain hung directly beside him. Someone had hastily pushed it aside.

Clothes lines were strung under the concrete ceiling with photos hanging from them. Some had been torn down and lay on the floor.

On the left stood a photo enlarger. On the right, a shelf spanned the entire wall, crammed with pieces of equipment. Gabriel's eyes widened. He recognised most of them immediately: Arri, Beaulieu, Leicina, with other, smaller cameras in between. The trade magazines that were piled up in Dad's study on the first floor were full of them. Whenever one of those magazines wound up in the bin, Gabriel fished it out, stuck it under his pillow, and read it under the covers by torchlight until his eyelids were too heavy to keep open.

Beside the cameras lay a dozen lenses, some as long as gun barrels; next to them, small cameras, cases to absorb



camera operating sounds, 8- and 16-mm film cartridges, a stack of three VCRs with four monitors, and finally, two brand-new camcorders. Dad always scoffed at the things. In one of the magazines, he had read that you could film for almost two hours with the new video technology without having to change the cassette – absolutely unbelievable! On top of that, the plastic bombers didn't rattle like film cameras, but ran silently.

Gabriel's shining eyes wandered over the treasures. He wished he could show all of this to David. He immediately felt guilty. After all, this was dangerous, so it was best that he didn't get David involved. Besides, his brother had already fallen asleep. He was right to have locked the door to their room.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash. He spun around. There was no one there. No parents, no ghost. His parents were probably still quarrelling up in the kitchen.

He looked back into the lab at all of the treasures. *Come closer*, they seemed to whisper. But he was still standing on the threshold next to the curtain. Fear rose in him. He could still turn back. He had now seen the lab; he didn't have to go all the way in.

*Eleven! You're eleven! Come on, don't be a chicken!*

How old was Luke?

Gabriel reluctantly took two steps into the room.

What were those photos? He bent down, picked one up from the floor, and stared at the faded grainy image. A sudden feeling of disgust and a strange excitement spread through his stomach. He looked up at the photos on the clothes line. The photo directly above him attracted his eyes like a magnet. His face was hot and red, like everything else around him. He also felt a bit

sick. It looked so real, so . . . or were they actors? It looked like in the movie! The columns, the walls, like in the Middle Ages, and the black clothes . . .

He tore himself away and his eyes jumped over the jumbled storage and the shelf, and finally rested on the modern VCRs with their glittering little JVC logos. The lowest one was switched on. Numbers and characters were illuminated in its shining display. Like in *Star Wars* in the cockpit of a spaceship, he thought.

As if of its own accord, Gabriel's index finger approached the buttons and pushed one. A loud click inside the device made him jump. Twice, three times, then the hum of a motor. *A cassette!* There was a cassette in the VCR! His cheeks burned. He feverishly pushed another button. The JVC responded with a rattle. Interference lines flashed across the monitor beside the VCRs. The image wobbled for a moment, and then it was there. Diffuse with flickering colour, unreal, like a window to another world.

Gabriel had been leaning forward without knowing it – and now he jerked back. His mouth went totally dry. It was the same image as in the photo! The same place, the same columns, the same people, only now they were moving. He wanted to look away, but it was impossible. He sucked the stifling air in through his gaping mouth, and then held his breath without realising it.

The images pummelled him like the popping of flashbulbs; he couldn't help but watch, mesmerised.

The cut through the black fabric of the dress.

The pale triangle on the still paler skin.

The long, tangled blond hair.

The chaos.

And then another cut – a sharp, angry motion that spread into Gabriel's guts. He suddenly felt sick and everything was spinning. The television stared at him viciously. Trembling, he found the button and switched it off.

The image collapsed with a dull thud, as if there were a black hole inside the monitor, just like in outer space. The noise was awful, but reassuring at the same time. He stared at the dark screen and the reflection of his own bright red face. A ghost stared back, eyes wide with fear.

*Don't think about it! Just don't think about it . . .* He stared at the photos, at the whole mess, anything but the monitor.

*What you can't see isn't there!*

But it was there. Somewhere in the monitor, deep inside the black hole. The VCR made a soft grinding noise. He wanted to squeeze his eyes shut and wake up somewhere else. Anywhere. Anywhere but here. He was still crouched in front of his ghostly reflection in the monitors.

Suddenly, Gabriel was overcome by the desperate desire to see something pleasant, or even just something different. As if it had a will of its own, his finger drifted towards the other monitors.

Thud. Thud. The two upper monitors flashed on. Two washed-out images crystallised, casting their steel-blue glimmer into the red light of the lab. One image showed the hall and the open cellar door; the stairs were swallowed up by darkness. The second image showed the kitchen. The kitchen – and his parents. His father's voice rasped from the speaker.

Gabriel's eyes widened.

*No! Please, no!*

His father shoved the kitchen table. The table legs scraped loudly across the floor. The noise carried through the ceiling, and Gabriel winced. His father threw open a drawer, reached inside and his hand re-emerged.

Gabriel stared at the monitor in horror. Blinking, he wished he were blind. Blind and deaf.

But he wasn't.

His eyes flooded with tears. The chemical smell of the lab combined with the vomit outside the door made him gag. He wished someone would come and hug him and talk it all away.

But no one would come. He was alone.

The realisation hit him with a crushing blow. *Someone had to do something.* And now *he* was the only one who could do anything.

*What would Luke do?*

Quietly, he crept up the cellar stairs, his bare feet no longer able to feel the cold floor. The red room behind him glowed like hell.

*If only he had a lightsabre!* And then, very suddenly, he thought of something much, much better than a sabre.

# Chapter 1

*29 Years Later*

*Berlin – 1 September, 11.04 p.m.*

The photo hovers like a threat in the windowless cellar. Outside, the rain is raging. The old roof of the mansion groans beneath the mass of water, and there is a dim red light rotating above the front door on the half-timbered facade, lighting up the house at brief intervals.

The torch beam darts about the dark cellar hall, revealing the slashed black fabric of a sparkling dress, which dangles from a hanger. The photo pinned onto the dress looks like a piece of wallpaper from a distance; a pale, rough scrap that has absorbed the ink from the printer, leaving the colours dull, fading away.

The dress and the photo are still swaying back and forth, as if only just hung up, and the swinging makes them seem like a decorative mobile; moving but lifeless.

The photo shows a young, very thin, heartbreakingly beautiful woman. She is slender, almost boyish, her breasts are small and flat, her face frozen, expressionless.

Her very long and very blond hair is like a crumpled yellow sheet beneath her head. She is wearing the dress to which this photo is now pinned. It seems tailor-made for her; it resembles

her: flowing, extravagant, useless and costly. And the front is slashed open all the way down, as if it had an open zipper.

Beneath the dress, her skin is also slashed open – with one sharp incision starting between her legs, over her pubis and up to her chest. The abdominal wall is agape, the fleshy red of the innards veiled in merciful darkness. The black dress engulfs the body like death itself. A perfect symbol, just like the place where the dress is now hanging, waiting for him to find it: Kadettenweg 107.

The torchlight is again pointed at the bulky grey box on the wall and the tarnished lock. The key fit, but was difficult to turn, as if it couldn't remember what it was supposed to do at first. Inside, there is a row of little red light bulbs. Three are broken, and they glow at irregular intervals. The tungsten filaments have corroded over the years. But that doesn't matter. The necessary bulb is glowing.

The torchlight hastily gropes its way back to the cellar stairs and up the steps. There are footprints in the beam of light, and that's a good thing. When he returns, they will guide him down the cellar stairs to the black dress. And to the photo.

All at once, he will remember. The hairs on the back of his neck will rise, and he will say to himself: this is impossible.

And yet: it is true. He will know it. Because of the cellar alone – even if it wasn't *this* cellar or *this* woman. And of course, it will be a different woman. *His* woman.

And on her birthday, too. A lovely detail!

But the best part is the way it all comes full circle. Everything started in a cellar, and it would end in a cellar.

Cellars are the vestibules of hell. And who should know that better than someone who has been burning in hell for an eternity.



## Chapter 2

*Berlin – 1 September, 11.11 p.m.*

The alarm has already been going off for nine minutes. Anyone else would have reached for his weapon on the way to the car – at least for a moment, to feel if it was where it was supposed to be, just in case: in its holster, right on his hip.

Gabriel doesn't reach for it; he doesn't carry a weapon. For as long as he can remember, guns have made him profoundly uneasy. Quite apart from the fact that the German authorities would probably never issue him a gun licence.

By the time he reaches the car, rain is already trickling down his collar. Gabriel presses the button for the power locks, and the lights flare orange in the darkness. He throws himself into the driver's seat and slams the door. Water splashes in his face from the rubber seal on the door. It's pouring as if the heavens were putting out a wildfire. Gabriel stares into the rear-view mirror, where his eyes hover in front of the windscreen.

He knows he should start the engine right away, but something stops him; a warning tingle flows beneath his skin like an electric current. Something is wrong here. And today of all days. Now of all times.

*Fuck it, Luke. What are you waiting for? It's not because of her, is it?* an urgent voice whispers in his head.

I promised her I'd be back just after twelve, Gabriel thinks.

*You didn't promise her. That's just how she took it. It's not your problem if she's going to get so stroppy about it.*

Shit, he mumbles.

*Shit? Why? Don't you see what she's doing to you? The moment you let someone in, you turn into a weakling. As if you don't know how dangerous that is! Better to worry about the alarm.*

Gabriel grits his teeth. Damn alarm. He's been working at Python for twenty years and spent most of his time with alarm systems or personal security. Up until a few months ago, he even lived on the fenced-in grounds of the security company in two sparsely furnished rooms right by the gate to the street. His boss Yuri had taken him under his wing and given him some stability. Martial arts training in the mornings, night school from 6 p.m. and Python every other free minute of the day. The problem was the weekends. When there wasn't much to do, his memories would tear him apart. That is, until he discovered the wrecked car in Yuri's garage – an old Mercedes SL. Yuri gave him the run-down cabriolet, and Gabriel, who had never so much as changed his own oil, dove into the repairs as if he were restoring his soul.

When the Mercedes was finished, Yuri gave him a Jaguar E-Type and then followed it with other classics from the seventies, so the garage was never empty.

All Yuri asked in return was that Gabriel do his job. And Gabriel really didn't need asking, since work was the closest thing he had to a home.

Motionless, Gabriel stares into the rear-view mirror. The rain beats down on the bonnet of the car in the light of the yard. His eyes shine colourlessly in the darkness, and the three short, vertical wrinkles between his brows form deep trenches.

Gabriel turns the key in the ignition. The drumming of the rain on the car roof drowns out the sound of the motor starting. He turns on the windscreen wipers and steps on the accelerator, and the dark grey VW Golf with its yellow Python Security logo tears across the yard, past the other cars in the car park, through the open gate and out on to the street, where it blends into the darkness of the rainy night.

Kadettenweg 107.

Up until a few minutes ago, they hadn't even known that this address was in Python's database. The alert had practically come out of nowhere. With his perpetually red eyes, Bert Cogan stared at the monitor in the office as if a haunted house had just materialised on the spot. Cogan had been working for Python for over nine years and the monitors were his own personal parallel universe; in the affluent residential district of Lichterfelde, he knew every pixel and every house that Python protected. 'Hey, have a look at this,' he muttered in consternation.

'What is it?' asked Gabriel.

'This here, what else!' Cogan snapped. His pale, chapped index finger pointed at a red, blinking dot on the screen. 'Can you explain what this house is doing there?'

Gabriel shrugged. 'Not a clue. If you don't know, I sure don't.'

'I just thought. . .' said Cogan, fiddling with the stubble that covered his receding chin.

'What did you think?'

‘Well,’ he mumbled, ‘you have been working here forever . . .’

‘I may have been working for Yuri forever,’ Gabriel pointed at the monitors. ‘But that there is something else entirely. Did you look in the directory?’

Cogan grunted. ‘I don’t need to. I know the Lichterfelde directory. There’s nothing there. Absolutely nothing.’

Gabriel furrowed his brow and stared at the silently pulsing red dot with the number 107 next to the thin white line labelled Kadettenweg. A shiver crept down his spine.

*What’s wrong, Luke?* the voice in his head whispered. *It’s just a red dot, like all the others. You’ve seen that a thousand times. Don’t make such a big deal out of it!*

‘All, right. All right,’ he mumbled quietly, without realising it.

‘What did you say?’ Cogan asked.

‘Huh? Oh, nothing,’ Gabriel replied quickly. He then silently fished his mobile phone from the inside pocket of his black leather jacket and dialled Yuri Sarkov.

It rang for a while before Yuri picked up. ‘Hello, Gabriel,’ he rasped. His voice sounded wide-awake, even though it was already well past 1 a.m. in Moscow. ‘What’s up?’

‘Hello,’ Gabriel mumbled, wondering whether Yuri ever slept or turned off his phone. ‘We’ve got something strange here. A silent alarm in Lichterfelde West. It’s in the middle of the residential area, but the house doesn’t belong to one of our customers.’

‘Hm. What’s the address?’

‘Kadettenweg 107,’ said Gabriel, holding the mobile so that Cogan could listen in.

Silence. Nothing but quiet static on the line. ‘Yuri? Still there?’

‘107? Kadettenweg? Are you sure?’ Yuri asked.

‘That’s what it says on the monitor,’ Gabriel growled. ‘Does that mean anything to you?’

‘*Blyad*,’ Yuri murmured so softly that Gabriel could hardly understand him. Yuri was half-Russian, and whenever there was something to curse about he automatically switched to Russian.

‘Is that one of our customers?’

‘Essentially, yes.’

Essentially? Gabriel raised his eyebrows. Either someone was a customer or they weren’t. ‘Who’s the owner? If you have the phone number, I can take care of it.’

‘The house isn’t occupied,’ replied Yuri.

Gabriel paused for a long moment. ‘So what now?’

Silence. Gabriel could practically see Yuri Sarkov somewhere in Moscow on an obligatory visit to relatives. He could see him thinking: the phone pressed to his ear; the narrow, expressionless lips that were always slightly blue; the thinning hair; the rimless accountant’s glasses in front of his grey eyes; the unnaturally smooth skin for a sixty-year-old.

Finally, Yuri sighed. ‘Send someone over. Who’s there now?’

‘Just Cogan and me. Should we report it to the police?’

‘No, no. It’s our issue. Doesn’t sound like anything big. Send Cogan, that’ll be fine.’

Cogan shook his head vehemently and pointed to his legs. Gabriel motioned him to keep quiet. ‘Why Cogan? He doesn’t usually do field work.’

‘I said: send Cogan,’ Yuri growled irritably. ‘Otherwise he’ll get stuck to his monitor. He doesn’t even know what it’s like out there any more.’

‘OK. Cogan will go,’ said Gabriel. ‘And who’s the owner? Don’t I have to call before one of us shows up?’

‘Let me take care of that,’ said Yuri. ‘You take over the office while Cogan is out.’

Cogan rolled his eyes, spread his arms in despair and pointed to his legs again.

‘And the keys?’ Gabriel asked.

‘Just put Cogan on, OK?’

Without a word, Gabriel handed the phone to his colleague. With a tortured expression, Cogan pressed it to his ear.

‘Boss?’

‘Listen,’ Sarkov’s voice rasped, ‘I want *you* to check it out, but don’t do anything on your own, OK? Just the usual routine, that’s all. First, I just want to know what’s actually going on there.’

‘Boss, couldn’t . . . I mean . . . I don’t actually do field work and –’

‘Just shut up and do as I say,’ Sarkov’s voice barked from the phone.

‘OK, boss,’ Cogan said hastily. Red blotches formed on his cheeks.

‘The keys are in the small key safe in my office. They’re labelled K107. The combination is 3722. Report back when you find out what’s going on there, OK?’

‘OK,’ Cogan responded apprehensively, but Sarkov had already hung up. Cogan lowered the phone and looked at Gabriel. ‘Shit, man,’ he groaned softly, rubbing his brow. ‘He suspects something.’

Gabriel frowned. Cogan was a diabetic and his sugar levels had been bad for years. At this point, he regularly had cramps in his calves and pain in his legs, and it was getting harder and harder for him to walk, but he still made a great effort to hide it from Sarkov. He knew that he had virtually no chance of staying on at Python with a disability. He stared down blankly



at the blinking red dot on his monitor. 'I can't go. Not with this pain.'

Gabriel bit his lip. He knew Cogan wasn't capable of driving to Lichterfelde. On the other hand, Liz was waiting for him, and if he took over the office, he could hand it over to Jegorow at twelve and get out of there on time.

'Shit,' Cogan groaned. 'What do I do if there is actually someone there? I can't even run away.'

'You're not supposed to run away. You've got a gun, after all.'

Cogan made a face. It was supposed to look angry, but it was really sheer desperation.

'All right,' said Gabriel. 'I'll go. I'm the one who does the field work, after all.'

Cogan breathed a sigh of relief. 'You sure?'

Gabriel nodded half-heartedly. He thought about how he wouldn't be back for at least two hours and wondered how to break it to Liz.

'And Sarkov?' asked Cogan. 'What do we tell him?'

'Yuri doesn't have to find out. I'll call you and tell you what's going on. Then you can phone him.'

'OK.' There was a faint gleam in Cogan's dull eyes. 'Thanks for saving my arse, man.'

Gabriel smiled crookedly. 'And you're sure there's nothing about the client in the directory?'

Cogan shrugged. 'My legs might not work properly, but up here,' he tapped his forehead, 'everything's still in top shape.'

Gabriel nodded and took a quick look at the clock. 'Shit,' he muttered. Just half an hour later and his shift would have been over. He stood up, dialled Liz's number and hurried up the stairs to Yuri's office to get the key.



When she picked up, he had to strain to filter her voice out of the pub noise in the background.

‘Liz? It’s me.’

‘Hey,’ she sounded cheerful. ‘I’m still at the Linus. I was just chatting with Vanessa but now she’s gone home. Are you coming? We’re finishing our drinks and taking a midnight stroll in the park.’

The Linus. Ugh, what else? Suddenly, he was happy to have an excuse. Wild horses couldn’t drag him to the Linus. ‘To be honest,’ Gabriel mumbled, walking into Sarkov’s office, ‘I have a problem here. I have to go back out.’

‘Oh no. Please don’t,’ Liz said. ‘Not today.’

Gabriel entered the combination on the key safe’s number pad and the door unlocked. Three dozen keys from Python’s VIP customers hung in front of him.

‘Is it because of the pub?’ Liz asked. ‘If you don’t want to see all the media people, you really don’t have to come in. Just pick me up.’

‘It’s not about that.’

‘Is it about David? Come on, you can’t run away from him forever. Besides, he’s not even here.’

‘Liz, it’s not about that. Like I said, I have to go back out.’

She was silent for a moment. ‘Is there no one else who can do it?’

‘Not a chance,’ Gabriel said. ‘Unfortunately.’ He preferred to stay quiet about the thing with Cogan. She would just take it the wrong way anyway.

‘You have a real shit job,’ Liz said.

‘So do you,’ Gabriel shot back. Gingerly, he took two rusty security keys that had a pale-red plastic key chain labelled





K107 from the hook. 'And you never had a problem with my job before.'

She sighed, but said nothing. She seemed to be waiting for something. The noisy pub sounded like it was echoing inside a metal bucket.

'OK,' she said, sighing again. 'Then, the same as always, I guess.'

'Liz, look, I –'

'Spare me, OK? Anyway, I have to go to the loo.' She hung up and the sounds of the pub abruptly went silent.

Gabriel swore softly, closed the safe and hurried down the stairs. *Then, the same as always, I guess.* At some point that night, he would climb into bed with her, Liz would toss and turn once or twice and then the same thing as always would happen again, which he could still never believe.

He would fall asleep.

No staring at the ceiling, no loose fragments of memory keeping him awake like camera flashes. Only his dreams hadn't disappeared, even if they did stay in their dark cave more often, lying in wait, just to attack him again at some point – with dead eyes, with electric shocks, or with the sensation of being burned alive. But, unlike before, there was now something to calm him when he jolted awake with his heart racing from a chaotic dream that was so real that reality felt like a hallucination instead.

Barely two minutes later, Gabriel was driving the Golf through the courtyard, past his old flat and the garage with his two motor-cycles, through the open gate, and onto the street, where he turned left and followed the GPS towards Kadettenweg.

He didn't miss his old flat. On the contrary, he felt as if he had been freed of a burden, like an old dried-up part of his soul. When he had gone to Yuri a year ago, his guilt had weighed him



down. Yuri had given him a new life. But still, Gabriel knew that he couldn't live at Python any longer. He had done so for twenty years, and it was only thanks to Liz that he had recognised that something had to change if he didn't want to become a part of the furniture at Python Security.

Yuri raised his thin brown eyebrows and took a long look at him. His grey eyes searched for the real reason. 'What's the problem? Is the flat not big enough for you any more?'

Gabriel shook his head. 'My new flat isn't any bigger. That's not it. But . . . I have to get out of here. The new flat is on the top floor and it's got a small terrace.'

'Terrace,' Yuri snorted. 'The entire courtyard is your terrace. And what are you going to do with your workshop?'

'I'd like to keep on using the garage.'

Sarkov nodded slowly, but it was clear that he was not pleased.

'Yuri,' Gabriel said. 'I'm forty. Sometimes I want to go out the door and find a pub or a café nearby. Nothing wild, just some little place right outside where I know the waitress and she brings me a decent coffee without my having to say much, where I can pick up a few rolls at the bakery. This here,' he drew a circle in the air with his finger, 'is an industrial area.'

'An industrial area with nice brothel around the corner,' Sarkov added. 'Or have you met someone?'

Gabriel shook his head. 'There's one where I'm moving, too, and the girls are pretty.' Gabriel looked Sarkov straight in the eyes and lied. Strictly speaking, Yuri was right. He had met someone. In fact, Liz had been the actual reason for his moving out, but Yuri wasn't to know about that under any circumstances.

'You can fuck as often as you want. Just not with the same girl,' Yuri had always stressed. 'It makes you weak and dependent.'

Gabriel had taken this advice, in that he hardly ever fucked anyone, and when he did, it was always in other cities where he was booked with a Python team as personal security. There were always women in celebrity entourages who operated just like him. Sex? Yes please. Intimacy, no thank you.

Until Liz called him about two months after their chance meeting at the Berlinale film festival.

Since then, everything was different.

Gabriel's eyes drift over to the navigation device. The small arrow is pointing to the right on Kadettenweg.

Gabriel turns the steering wheel. The windscreen wipers scrape across the glass. The rain has stopped, as if it were simply cut off. He turns off the wipers and leans forward a bit to better make out the numbers on the passing houses. There are trees at irregular intervals on both sides of the narrow street, many even older than the villas behind them. Lichterfelde is full of stately and often quirky houses: small palazzi, Swiss chalets, art nouveau villas and castle-like brick constructions with towers. A wrought-iron 31 shines above a curved entryway.

When his mobile suddenly shrieks at him, he flinches and the car swerves.

The thought of Liz immediately pops into his head.

*Goddamn it, are you even able to think about anything else, Luke?*

He already knows that it won't be her. Not after that phone call earlier. If not shut off entirely, then her mobile was at least set to silent and lost in one of her coat pockets.

He takes his foot off the accelerator and presses the green button. 'Hello?'

'It's me, Cogan. I checked again.'

‘Checked? Checked what?’

‘The address, Kadettenweg 107.’

‘So it is in the directory?’

‘In a manner of speaking. Not in the current one. I went down into the archives.’

Gabriel has to grin. Cogan hates the archives as much as fieldwork, but he hates it even more when there’s something in his universe that he doesn’t know. ‘And?’

‘Well, the file on the house isn’t there anymore. It’s strange, really.’

‘So what now? Have you found something or not?’ Gabriel asks, squinting, trying to determine whether it’s a forty-five or forty-nine peeking out between two trees.

‘Ashton,’ Cogan says. ‘The owner’s name is Ashton. There’s an old file with the name in it.’

‘Ashton. Aha. Anything else?’

‘Well, there’s something. A little thing, but strange.’

‘Don’t make me drag it out of you, man. Just spit it out.’

‘The name Ashton was registered on September 17th, 1975. It was probably when the system was first activated. But right after it is a second, handwritten date. And a small cross. And the name is crossed out.’ Cogan takes a meaningful pause. ‘It looks as if the owner died exactly two days after moving in.’

‘Strange,’ Gabriel mutters. On his right, a house with several imposing columns glides past. House number sixty-seven.

‘We still haven’t got to the part that’s really strange,’ Cogan whispers. ‘Since then, the house seems to have stayed empty.’

‘What?’ Gabriel exclaims. ‘Since 1975? That’s almost thirty-five years ago!’

‘You said it.’

‘What kind of lunatic leaves a villa empty for thirty-three years in this neighbourhood? Is there no one to inherit it?’

‘No idea. There’s nothing written about it here.’

‘And the alarm system? What alarm system still works after so many years?’

‘No idea,’ Cogan says. ‘I don’t know anything about it. I don’t even know what brand. Up until today, it was never active in my system.’

‘Once more, just so I understand correctly,’ Gabriel says, deliberately drawing things out. ‘The alarm system was dead for thirty-three years and then today it went active out of nowhere and spontaneously sent out an alarm?’

‘I don’t know exactly when the system was shut down. Judging by Sarkov’s reaction, it or the owner still seems to be a client. But since *I’ve* been here, and that’s around nine years, there has definitely been no activation. Let alone an alarm.’

‘So who’s that supposed to be now? A ghost?’

‘Or maybe a malfunction . . .’

‘Hmm,’ Gabriel grumbles and cranes his neck. On the right, an open entrance gate emerges from the darkness. A weathered 107 is mounted to one of the brick posts. ‘I’m here. Let me go for now and I’ll be in touch later.’

‘All right. My greetings to old Ashton if you find him haunting the place,’ Cogan says and lets out a cackle.

Gabriel puts his phone away and rolls in between the brick posts of the opened gate. The gravel entryway has knee-high weeds.

A villa that’s been uninhabited for nearly thirty-five years and the gate is wide open?

The gravel crunches under the tyres. Overgrown hedges alternate with dark fir trees. A large half-timbered mansion rises up from behind the treetops with its decorated bay windows and two towers pressed up against it. The villa looks like an oversized witch's house.

Moist air rises from the ground and evaporates. Above the entrance, the red light from the alarm system rotates like a fire detector and makes the misty air glow.

Goddamned haunted house, Gabriel thinks.

As always, when he stands in front of a building that he wants to enter, he has to think about the cellar, how the stairs leading down to it will probably look. The hair on the back of his neck stands up and he peers up at the roof.

This house is old, and in old houses the alarm systems are usually in the cellar.