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THE

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# SCORPIO ILLUSION

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ROBERT LUDLUM



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# **THE SCORPIO ILLUSION**

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The Rhinemann Exchange  
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The Matlock Paper  
The Osterman Weekend  
The Scarlatti Inheritance

**For Jeffrey, Shannon, and James  
Ever a joy!**

# THE SCORPIO ILLUSION

## About the Author

ROBERT LUDLUM is the author of eighteen novels published in thirty-two languages and forty countries, with worldwide sales in excess of 200 million copies. His works include *The Scarlatti Inheritance*, *The Osterman Weekend*, *The Matlock Paper*, *The Rhinemann Exchange*, *The Gemini Contenders*, *The Chancellor Manuscript*, *The Road to Gandolfo*, *The Holcroft Covenant*, *The Matarese Circle*, *The Bourne Identity*, *The Parsifal Mosaic*, *The Aquitaine Progression*, *The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Icarus Agenda*, *Trevayne*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, and *The Road to Omaha*. He lives with his wife, Mary, in Florida.

# PROLOGUE

ASHKELON, ISRAEL, 2:47 A.M.

The night rain came down like sheets of silver knives, the dark sky filled with darker masses of swirling black clouds, the swells of the sea and the whipping winds murderous for the two rubber rafts lashed to each other as they approached the shoreline.

The raiding party was drenched, their blackened faces streaked with anxious sweat and rain, their eyes blinking continuously, straining to catch glimpses of the beach. The unit consisted of eight Palestinian men from the Baaka Valley, and one woman, not of their birthright, but committed to their cause, for it was an integral part of her own, inseparable from the commitment she had made years before. *Muerte a toda autoridad!* She was the wife of the raiding party's leader.

"Only minutes now!" cried the large man as he knelt beside the woman. Like the others, his weapons were tightly strapped to his dark clothes; a black waterproof knapsack high on his back contained explosives. "Remember, when we get off, throw the anchor over between the boats, that's important."

"I understand, my husband, but I'd feel better going with you—"

"And leave us no means of getting away to fight again?" he asked. "The electrical power grids are less than three kilometers from the coast; they feed Tel Aviv, and once we blow them up, there'll be chaos. We'll steal a vehicle and be back within the hour, but our equipment must be here!"

"I understand."



"Do you, my wife? Can you imagine what it will be like? Most, if not all, of Tel Aviv in darkness! And Ashkelon itself, of course. It's perfect . . . and you, my love, you were the one who found the vulnerability, the perfect target!"

"I merely suggested it." Her hand caressed his cheek. "Just come back to me, my love, for you *are* my love."

"There's no doubt of it, my Amaya of the fires. . . . We're close enough. . . . *Now!*" The leader of the raiding party signaled his men on both rafts. All slipped over the sides into the heavy surf, their weapons held high, their bodies assaulted by the crashing waves as they lurched through the soft sand to the beach. On shore, the leader pressed his flashlight once, a single, short illumination that meant the entire unit was on enemy ground, prepared to penetrate and do its work. The wife threw the heavy anchor over the side between the two lashed rubber boats, keeping them in concert in the waves. She pulled her hand-held radio to ear and mouth; it would be used only in an emergency, as the Jews were too smart not to have the coastal frequencies monitored.

Then, suddenly, with terrible finality, all dreams of glory exploded with the savage bursts of gunfire on the flanks of the raiding party. It was a massacre, soldiers racing down in the sand, firing their weapons into the pulsating bodies of the Ashkelon Brigade, blowing heads apart, showing no mercy for the invading enemies. *No prisoners! Only death!*

The woman-wife in the outlying raft moved swiftly despite her torment, despite the shock that paralyzed her mind, her rapid movements failing to lessen the agony that swept through her, merely blurring it with action born of survival. She plunged her long-bladed knife into the sides and bottoms of both PVC boats, grabbed her waterproof pouch containing weapons and forged documents, and slipped over the side into the heavy sea. Fighting the surf and the undertow with all her considerable strength, she made her way south along the shore about fifty meters, where she swam diagonally over the waves into the beach. Prone in the shallow water, the harsh rain nearly blinding her, she crawled back to the killing ground. Then she heard the shouts of Israeli soliders yelling in Hebrew; every muscle and fiber in her body froze in ice-hot fury.

*"We should have taken prisoners."*

*"Why, to kill our children later, as they slaughtered my two sons in the school bus?"*

*"We'll be criticized—they're all dead."*

*"So are my mother and father. The bastards gunned them down in a vineyard, two old people among the grapes."*

*"Let them rot in hell! The Hezbollah tortured my brother to death!"*

*"Take out their weapons and fire off rounds . . . graze our arms and our legs!"*

*"Jacob's right! They fought back; we might all have been killed!"*

*"Then one of us should run back to the compound for reinforcements!"*

*"Where are their boats?"*

*"They're gone now, nowhere to be seen! There were probably dozens! That's the reason we killed the ones we saw!"*

*"Hurry, Jacob! We can't give the goddamn liberal press any ammunition!"*

*"Wait! This one's still alive!"*

*"Let him die. Remove their weapons and commence firing."*

The staccato fusillade filled the night and the rain. Then the soldiers threw the raiding party's guns down beside the corpses and raced back up into the sand dunes filled with wild sea grass. In moments there were erractic flashes of cupped matches and cigarette lighters; the savage massacre was over, the cover-up begun.

Still, the woman moved cautiously forward on her stomach in the shallow water, the ringing echoes of the gunfire fueling the loathing that filled her—loathing and great loss. They had slaughtered the one man on earth she could love, the only man she could commit to as an equal, for none other had her strengths, her determination. He was gone, and there would never be another like him, a godlike firebrand with fierce eyes, whose voice could move crowds to both tears and laughter. And she was always there beside him, guiding him, adoring him. Their world of violence would never see a team like the two of them again.

She heard a moan, a quiet cry that pierced the rain and the surf. A body was rolling down the slope of sand to the water's edge—only feet ahead of her. She crawled rapidly to the figure and grabbed him; his head was facedown in the sand. She turned him over, the rain washing over the blood-soaked features. It was her husband, a large part of his throat and skull a mass of scarlet-red tissue. She held him fiercely; he opened his eyes once, then closed them for the final time.

The wife looked up at the sand dunes and the cupped flares of

matches and the glows of lighted cigarettes through the rain. With money and her false papers, she would cut a path through the despised Israel, leaving death in her wake. She would return to the Baaka Valley and reach the High Councils. She knew exactly what she was going to do.

*Muerte a toda autoridad!*

#### BAAKA VALLEY, LEBANON, 12:17 P.M.

The scorching noonday sun caked the dirt roads of the refugee camp, an enclave of a displaced people, many beaten into submission by events they could neither fathom nor control. Their gaits were slow, trudging, their faces set, and in their dark, downcast eyes a hollowness that bespoke the pain of fading memories, of images that would never be real again. Others, however, were defiant, submission to be reviled, acceptance of the status quo unthinkable, something to be scorned. These were the *muquateen*, the soldiers of Allah, the avengers of God. They walked rapidly, with purpose, their ever-present weapons strapped to their shoulders, their heads moving sharply, constantly aware, their eyes focused and filled with hatred.

It was four days since the massacre at Ashkelon. The woman clad in a green khaki uniform, its sleeves rolled up, walked out of her modest three-room structure; “house” would be misleading. Its door was covered with black cloth, the universal sign of death; passersby stared at it and raised their eyes to the sky, mumbling prayers for the departed; every now and then a wail emerged, asking Allah to avenge the dreadful death. For this was the home of the Ashkelon Brigade’s leader, and the woman striding down the dirt road had been his wife. But more than a woman, more than a wife, she was among the great *muquateen* in this convoluted valley of submission and rebellion, she and her husband symbols of hope for a cause all but lost.

As she strode down the caked street past an open market, the crowd dispersed for her, many touching her gently, worshipfully, uttering continuous prayers, until all, as one, began chanting “*Baj, Baj, Baj . . . Baj!*”

The woman acknowledged no one, instead pressing forward to a wooden, barracklike meeting hall at the end of the road. Inside, waiting for her, were the leaders of the Baaka Valley’s High Coun-

cils. She walked inside; a guard closed the door and she faced nine men seated behind a long table. The greetings were brief, solemn condolences offered. The chairman of the committee, an elderly Arab, spoke from the central chair.

"Your communication reached us. To say that it was astonishing would be a grave understatement."

"Grave, in a word, says it," said a middle-aged man dressed in one of the many uniforms of the *muquateen*. "For that's what you'll be buying, I hope you know that."

"If that's so, I'll join my husband quicker, won't I?"

"I wasn't aware that you subscribed to our beliefs," said another.

"Whether I do or not is irrelevant. I ask only that you support me financially. I believe that over the years I've earned that support."

"Unquestionably," agreed yet another. "You've been a remarkable force, and with your husband, may he rest with Allah in His gardens, even extraordinary. Yet, I see a difficulty—"

"I, and those few I choose to go with me, will be acting alone, solely in revenge for Ashkelon. We will be a provisional wing accountable to no one but ourselves. Does that answer your 'difficulty'?"

"If you can do it," replied another leader.

"I've already proved that I can. Do I have to refer you to the records?"

"No, it's not necessary," said the chairman. "On numerous occasions you've sent our enemies searching in such outrageous directions that several brother governments were penalized for acts they knew nothing about."

"If it's necessary, I shall continue that practice. We—you—have enemies and traitors everywhere, even among your 'brother governments.' Authority everywhere corrupts itself."

"You don't trust anyone, do you?" asked the middle-aged Arab.

"I resent that statement. I married one of you for life. I gave you his life."

"I apologize."

"You should. My answer, please?"

"You shall have whatever you need," said the chairman of the committee. "Coordinate with Bahrain, as you have done in the past."

"Thank you."

"Finally, when you reach the United States, you will operate

through another network. They will watch you, test you, and when they are convinced that you are truly a stealth weapon of your own making and no threat to them, they will reach you and you will become one of them."

"Who are they?"

"They are known in the deepest channels of secrecy as the Scorpions—*Scorpions*, to be precise."

# 1

Sundown. The distressed sloop, its mainmast shattered by lightning, its sails ripped by the winds of the open sea, drifted into the small, quiet beach of a private island in the Lesser Antilles. During the past three days, before the dead calm descended, this section of the Caribbean had suffered not only a hurricane with the force of the infamous Hugo, but sixteen hours later a tropical storm whose bolts of lightning and earth-shaking thunder had set fire to a thousand palms and caused a hundred thousand residents of the island chain to look to their gods for deliverance.

The Great House on this island, however, had survived both catastrophes. It was made of iron-bolted stone and steel and built into the huge rising hill on the north side, impenetrable, indestructible, a fortress. That the nearly destroyed sloop had managed to survive and find its way into the sweeping rock-hewn cove and the small beach was a miracle, but it was an ominous miracle, not of her God's making, that caused the tall black maid in a white uniform to rush down the stone steps to the water's edge and fire four shots into the air from the gun in her hand.

"*Ganja!*" she yelled. "No lousy *ganja* here! You go 'way!"

The lone figure, kneeling on the deck of the boat, was a woman in her mid-thirties. Her features were sharp, her long hair stringy and unkempt, her shorts and halter abused by the weather she had endured . . . and her eyes were enigmatically cold as she rested her powerful rifle on the gunwale and peered through the telescopic sight; she squeezed the trigger. The loud report shattered the stillness of the island cove, echoing off the rocks and the hill beyond. In-

stantly, the uniformed maid fell facedown into the gently lapping waves.

"There's shooting, *gunshots*!" A shirtless, strapping young man, well over six feet in height and seventeen years of age, burst out of the cabin below. He was well-muscled and handsome, with cleanly chiseled, even classic Roman features. "What's happening? What have you done?"

"No more than had to be done," said the woman calmly. "Please get to the bow and jump over when you see the sand; it's still light enough. Then pull us into shore."

He did not move to obey, but stared at the slain white-uniformed figure on the beach, rubbing his hands nervously over his cutoff jeans. "My God, she's just a servant!" he cried, his English accented with his native Italian. "You are a monster!"

"It is ever so, my child. Am I not in bed? And was I not when I killed those three men who bound your hands, whipped a rope around your neck, and were about to throw you off the pier, hanging you for murdering the dock *suprèmo*?"

"I didn't kill him. I've told you that over and over again!"

"They thought you did and that was enough."

"I wanted to go to the police. You wouldn't let me!"

"Foolish child. Do you think you would ever have reached a courtroom? Never. You would have been shot in the streets, a piece of garbage blown away, for the *suprèmo* benefited the dockworkers with his thefts and corruption."

"I had angry words with him, nothing more! I went away and drank wine."

"Oh, you certainly did, a great deal of wine by yourself. When they found you in the alley, you were incoherent until you realized that a rope was around your throat, your feet at the edge of the pier. . . . And for how many weeks did I hide you, racing from one place to another while the scum of the waterfronts were hunting you, sworn to kill you on sight?"

"I never understood why you were so good to me."

"I had my reasons . . . I still have them."

"As God is my witness, Cabi," the young man said, still staring at the white-uniformed corpse on the beach. "I owe you my life, but I never . . . never expected anything like this!"

"Would you rather return to Italy, to Portici and your family, and face certain death?"

"No, no, of course not, Signora Cabrini."

"Then welcome to our world, my darling toy," said the woman, smiling. "And believe me, you'll want whatever I care to give you. You're so perfect; I cannot tell you how perfect you are. . . . Over the side, my adorable Nico. . . . *Now!*"

The young man did as he was told.

## DEUXIÈME BUREAU, PARIS

"It is she," said the man behind the desk in the darkened office. On the right wall was projected a detailed map of the Caribbean, specifically of the Lesser Antilles, a flickering blue dot centered on the island of Saba. "We can presume she sailed through the Anegada Passage between Dog Island and Virgin Gorda—that's the only way she could survive the weather. If she survived."

"Perhaps she didn't," said an aide, sitting in front of the desk and staring at the map. "It would certainly make our lives easier."

"Of course it would." The head of the Deuxième lit a cigarette. "But for a she-wolf who has lived through the worst of Beirut and the Baaka Valley, I want irrefutable proof before I call off the hunt."

"I know those waters," said a second man, who stood to the left of the desk. "I was posted to Martinique during the Soviet-Cuban threat, and I can tell you the winds can be vicious. From what I understand of the battering those seas took, my guess is that she did not survive, not with what she was sailing."

"My assumption is that she did." The Deuxième chief spoke sharply. "I cannot afford to guess. I know those waters only by the maps, but I see scores of natural recesses and small harbors she could have gone into. I've studied them."

"Not so, Henri. In those islands the storms blow first one minute clockwise, the next counterclockwise. If such inlets existed, they'd be marked, inhabited. I *know* them; studying them on a map is merely a distant exercise, not seeking them out, looking for Soviet submarines. I tell you, she did not survive."

"I hope you're right, Ardisonne. This world cannot afford Amaya Bajaratt."

\* \* \*



## CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

In the white-walled subcellar communications complex of the CIA, a single locked room was reserved for a unit of twelve analysts, nine men and three women, who worked in shifts of four around the clock. They were multilingual specialists in international radio traffic, including two of the Agency's most experienced cryptographers, and all were ordered not to discuss their activities with anyone, spouses no exception.

A fortyish man in shirt-sleeves wheeled back his cushioned swivel chair and glanced at his colleagues on the midnight shift, a woman and two other men; it was nearing four o'clock in the morning, half their tour over. "I may have something," he said to no one specifically.

"What?" asked the woman. "It's a dull night as far as I'm concerned."

"Break it up for us, Ron," the man nearest the speaker said. "Radio Baghdad is lulling me to sleep with its bilge."

"Try Bahrain, not Baghdad," said Ron, picking up a printout discharged from his word processor into a wire basket.

"What's with the rich folks?" The third man looked up from his electronic console.

"That's just it, rich. Our source in Manamah passed the word that a half a million, U.S., had been transferred to a coded account in Zurich destined for—"

"Half a million?" interrupted the second man. "In their league that's chickenshit!"

"I haven't told you its destination or the method of transfer. The Bank of Abu Dhabi to Zurich's Crédit Suisse—"

"That's the Baaka Valley routing." The woman spoke with instant recognition. "Destination?"

"The Caribbean, the precise location unknown."

"Find it!"

"At the moment, that's impossible."

"Why?" asked the third man. "Because it can't be confirmed?"

"It's confirmed all right, the worst way possible. Our source was killed an hour after he made contact with our embassy point man, a protocol officer who's being pulled out posthaste."

"The Baaka," said the woman quietly. "The Caribbean. *Bajaratt.*"