

Wolfram Fleischhauer

# The Silent Forest

Thriller



# 1

She didn't have any clear sense of what the sight of the town would stir up inside her. The images she'd carried with her for the past twenty years were varied. A landscape of gently rolling hills. Small farms. Fields stretching off in every direction until they met walls of dense evergreen forest. They were vague memories that had always triggered mixed emotions. Fear, suspicion, but also a melancholy sense of longing.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel when they passed the town sign, and she read the name. But as soon as she caught sight of the first few houses, it became clear to her that her premonitions must have been based on an illusion. Otherwise, the farms and fields appearing before her eyes would have had to inspire some sense of familiarity. But there was nothing. What she saw was alien to her, even if it did reflect something that she had pictured to herself, again and again, ever since she was eight years old.

"LOOK OUT!"

Anja gave a start and jerked the wheel to the right. The man in the passenger seat lost his balance. His strong left upper arm pressed against her. The left front wheel got the worst of the pothole. A hard jolt shook the VW bus and it started to swerve. Anja spun the wheel sharply in the opposite direction. The man next to her flew hard into the passenger-side door. He shot her a look that could have meant a lot of different things, but for the moment, she didn't even want to guess.

"Why'd you unbuckle your seatbelt so early, anyway?" she asked irritably.

Without a word, Obermüller fished for his seatbelt, which he'd unbuckled as soon as they'd passed the sign for the town, and rammed the metal tongue into the buckle. At the same moment, the right front wheel hit the next pothole, and the sound of metal rods clanging against each other immediately filled the interior of the car.

Anja winced and thought of her shocks, and about how she had absolutely no money for new ones. Then she turned her head and glanced back at the cargo area, annoyed—two heavy soil probes were rolling this way and that across the metal floor. But they were almost there. It wasn't worth stopping now just to secure the probes.

She rolled the window down a bit. The fall air was cool. Early fog nestled between the wooded hills, but apparently the weather was supposed to clear up later. There were no people in sight. In a field at the edge of the forest stood a combine harvester. Part of the crop had already been cleared. It probably wouldn't be long before the combine was in operation, and the noise would follow them deep into the forest. What a shame! The silence in the forest was the best reward for the huge amount of work they had ahead of them.

They would fight their way through the worst thickets imaginable, upright, crouching, or, if necessary, on all fours. Every fifty meters Obermüller would hammer a soil probe into the ground, twist it back out, and then set it down for her to look at. By that time, she would have used her compass to determine the next sampling point, and he would march off fifty meters in the direction she gave him and extract the next sample while she analyzed the soil horizons from the first probe and entered them into her chart. Maybe there would be unpleasant surprises? An angry swarm of wasps or a rabid fox? And just how many ticks would she have to pick off her skin that night?

She had managed to settle down into a bit of a routine in the three weeks since her internship began, but really every day had been different. That they were even surveying in this area to begin with hadn't been planned. But the area where they'd been stationed up until now had been so hard hit by a fall storm over the weekend that there wouldn't be any hope of working there for months. She had learned of the switch only yesterday, and hadn't let on that it might affect her; she just went and got new maps and spent her whole Sunday working out how they'd plan to approach the new terrain. Saying nothing. Focused. Ignoring any sense of unease she might have felt.

She hadn't told anyone why she was here. The only person who knew was Dr. Venner-Brock. These double names! The age of indecision. You couldn't even tell which name belonged to whom. Had she been in therapy for four months with a Herr Brock who had married a Frau Venner? Or was it the other way around? The man knew just about everything there was to know about her, and she didn't even know his last name. Around here, no one had double names. Folks had names like Fuchs, Huber, Bauer, Riedel, or indeed Obermüller, like the man next to her, who was now staring sullenly through the windshield. Really she wouldn't have had any objection to calling him Michel—but Michel Obermüller was in his mid-forties and unmarried. There was, she knew, a question that had come up for discussion more than once at the bar in Waldmünchen, where Obermüller was a regular: who would get to take the young forestry student out to the woods and drill her first real hole for her. Around here, there was little room for experimentation on the gender relations front.

Anja brought the VW bus to a stop and peered down a country road that came to a fork a few yards ahead of them. To their left, cowering at the edge of the wood, was an old farmhouse with an ugly extension that looked like it had been dragged across the border from what, ten years ago, had been the East. To their right, a dirt road led straight into the forest. Anja reached for the maps on the dashboard.

Yesterday, in the rush of things that followed the hastily improvised change of plans, she had sometimes had to make do with old maps. *Northeast LLX 34* was printed in big letters at the top of the old chart. *Faunried, Leybach, Haingries, Hinterweiher*. The boundaries and property lines were all there, but whether they were all still accurate was doubtful. Over the last few decades, people had died and been born; property had been sold and inherited. Of course, compared to the enormous timescales present in the soil they were about to start poking around in, the reckoning of time here above ground was hardly worth mentioning, but still indispensable if they wanted to have a rough sense of where they were.

She put the car back in gear, drove forward till she was even with the first few trees, then pulled over to the right and turned off the engine.

“Are we here?” Obermüller asked impatiently as Anja continued to study the map in silence. “What’s on the docket for today?”

“Leybach and Haingries,” she answered and pulled the compass out of her shirt pocket. “We should be able to manage it in a week. Then it’s Hinterweiher after that.”

“And Faunried?”

“Hasn’t got any forested areas left. Not many people here, but not much wilderness, either.” She pointed at an ugly biogas silo behind them. “I don’t need a probe to tell you what the soil looks like back there.”

Obermüller’s eyes followed Anja’s finger on the map, which now pointed at three small shaded rectangles in the middle of the forest. “The Leybach place,” she said, then moved her finger to another spot. “The Gollas place.”

She turned around and looked over at the little cluster of buildings at the edge of town, which came right up under the eaves of the forest. They built an extension, she said to herself. But from the looks of it, they’d run out of money. Only some of the walls were finished. In the rear of the new addition, panels of particle board were nailed over the windows. The plaster was flaking off the walls of the main house.

“We’ll start here for now and then keep going along this axis until we get to the Haingries. After that, we’ll see which side we branch out towards. Let’s go.”

Anja got out and took a few steps into the forest while Obermüller got the gear out of the bus. When he was standing next to her, all packed up and ready to go, she checked her bearings one last time and then said, “Here.” Obermüller planted the tip of the soil probe on the forest floor and pushed it down a ways into the soil. Next, he lifted a white plastic hammer. Anja looked around, anxious. No. Not now. An unpleasant, numbing sensation crept up the back of her neck and slowly began to close

in on her chest. She reached into her pants pocket, but it was empty.

“I’ll be right back,” she said in a strained voice to Obermüller—but he wasn’t paying any attention to her; he was eyeing the probe and getting ready to start hammering. She made it to the car just in time. The medicine was in the glove compartment. She ripped it open, reached for the inhaler, bit down on the mouthpiece, pressed down on the top, and sucked the cool, moist spray deep into her lungs. The constriction eased immediately. Relieved to feel the medicine taking effect, she stood there for a few seconds breathing in and out, marking every breath, still a little leery of whether the attack might pick right back up again, then increasingly relaxed and grateful that the pressure in her lungs was gone.

Obermüller’s hammering echoed dully in the morning stillness. When she got back to where he stood, he was driving the metal probe to the desired depth with two last powerful strokes. He tossed the white plastic hammer aside, bent down to the remaining part of the shaft that still stuck out of the ground, and stuck a round rod through a narrow opening in its head, forming a handle that allowed him to twist it back out. The probe was about halfway out of the ground when from a distance, there came a rattling and droning.

The combine was awake.

## 2

The sample that Obermüller had pulled out of the twenty-fourth hole and set down next to it looked almost exactly like the ones from the three prior sampling points. Anja grabbed a new datasheet, wrote down the sample number, measured the extent of each successive soil horizon, and filled out the rest of the column.

The humus layer in the topsoil measured eleven centimeters. In the A horizon, fine-grained loam predominated. In the B horizon, silty loam rich in mica, alternating with loam that was reddish and ocher-brown. Even in the C horizon, at a depth of 116 centimeters, the soil was still loose, with no rock to speak of and only sporadic signs of compression, and contained a fine network of roots that was clearly visible. Anja entered all the details and then gently tapped the bottom of the soil probe a few times. A thin film of moisture appeared. She wrote down “good” and “solidly moist” in the Water Balance field and, under Location, entered the code 204+. Then she heard Obermüller’s hammer pounding again on the other side of the thicket ahead of her.

But suddenly, there was something else, too. Here the beech trees gave way to conifers. The last time she’d thought to take notice, brief glimpses of sunlight could be seen shining sporadically through the crowns of the beeches, still covered in leaves ahead of the approaching autumn.

By now, though, the moisture in the air had driven the sun away again and lain a heavy, cool haze over the wood. Anja paused and listened. The combine wasn’t running anymore. Was that what made her feel like something was different than before?

She looked around. You didn’t often see a forest like this. There was dead, rotten wood lying all over the place. Sloe and blackberry bushes grew wild and unchecked and, at times, made it almost impossible to make headway. Several times over the last few hours, she’d come close to tearing her hair out as she tried to keep at least halfway to the general framework of the sample

extraction plan she'd drawn up at her desk. But despite these difficulties, she enjoyed the unspoiled surroundings, sometimes pausing to let her eye wander into the enchanted depths between the densely clustered trees, further and further into a world in which clearly no human hand had altered anything for years. But if all this here was untouched and deserted, why did she have this strange feeling all of a sudden?

She took her clipboard and pinned it under her arm. By some instinct, she tightened her grip on the soil probe and took a few steps in the direction of where Obermüller was. He couldn't be far. But then again, he was completely out of sight, past the thick wall of conifers ahead of her. And she didn't hear any hammering, either. But should she call out? Nonsense. Obermüller would make fun of her. In two minutes, she would have caught up with him. Suddenly she stopped. Something had moved among the spruce trees. She stared at the spot. And then she saw the man. He was standing, well hidden, in a cluster of squat spruce, looking right at her through a pair of binoculars. Now he seemed to have realized that she'd seen him; he lowered the binoculars and stood motionless, staring at her. Anja raised her right hand. The man made no response. A bit startled, but still without suspicion, she started heading towards him. She had a friendly greeting ready on her lips when the stranger abruptly spun around and vanished among the tree trunks. The last she saw of him was his broad back and the barrel of a rifle that jutted out over his shoulder.

She froze in mid-step. She'd heard enough about strange run-ins in the woods to know that the best thing for her to do now was to go find Obermüller as quickly as possible. She felt uneasy. At the same time, though, she could hear a mocking voice in her head. What was she so worried about? It was just some guy with binoculars who'd been looking at her while she worked. It was probably a curious local who didn't want to have to explain himself for watching her. But a second voice took a very different tack, reminding her that her own rifle was back in the car and that you could never know who might be prowling around in an isolated patch of forest a few hundred yards from the Czech border. This was a pretty remote area, and the manner in which this man had suddenly taken off once she'd noticed him made all

her alarm bells go off. And even before she had reached the thicket she had to pass through to get to Obermüller, she was suddenly crying out loud and clear: "HEY! HEY! HEY!"

It took a few seconds. But then there came a clear reply: "YEAH?"

She fought her way through the branches and then looked ahead towards Obermüller, feeling both relief and surprise. He stood waiting in a clearing, and looked back at her in surprise. The soil probe lay before him on the ground; he held the rod in his hand. Now Anja was even more confused. Why was there a meadow here?

As she hurried to join Obermüller, she kept looking around, checking whether the man with the binoculars was anywhere to be seen. But the forest had swallowed him back up. She quickly closed the last few feet that lay between her and Obermüller.

"What's up?" he asked. "We stopping for breakfast?"

Anja pulled some spruce needles out of her hair and rubbed her dirt-caked fingers off on her dark green pants. "There was a man in the forest just now. He's armed. Did he come by here?"

"No, Frau Grimm," Obermüller replied formally and gave her a look, studying her. "There wasn't anyone here."

Anja consulted her map. Had they gotten off track? Or had she overlooked this clearing? But a second, closer look assured her this wasn't the case. No doubt about it, they were standing on the parcel of land marked *Haingries*, a good two hundred yards from the Leybach place and about twice that much from the Gollas place. But on her map, spruce forest was clearly indicated. She looked around. Not far from the spot where she'd come out of the forest was a hunting blind. The platform was so old and rotted away that it seemed almost to have become part of the forest. She turned around and took in the rest of the field. A short ways away from her stood something that looked like a crate. Anja walked up to it. Someone had taken old planks of wood and nailed them together to make a square hutch, maybe forty centimeters tall. Inside, tied to a wooden stake, lay what was left of a dead

chicken. Bait for a fox, she thought. Apparently, they were standing on a hunting ground.

She went back over to Obermüller, who still stood there, soil probe in hand, watching her with bewilderment. Then they heard footsteps. They both spun around in surprise. The man came out of the woods on the eastern edge of the meadow and marched straight towards them. Muttering a faint “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Obermüller shrank back, while Anja stood there as if rooted to the spot.

The stranger’s gaze was fixed rigidly upon them. He charged toward them, and all the while, his eyes remained locked, unmoving; there was nothing reassuring to be found in them. His attire was as strange as his demeanor was menacing and unsettling. He wore heavy dark brown boots, dark green knickerbockers, and a short, black leather jacket with belts and buckles all fastened. Not at all matching this ensemble was the blue fabric baseball cap on his head, upon which could be seen, even at a distance, the logo of a well-known fertilizer company. A three-barreled rifle hung from a wide leather strap slung over his right shoulder. The muzzle of the gun was pointed at their legs, and Anja was quite cognizant of the fact that from this position, it would take just a single motion of the hands to raise the barrel.

Anja and Obermüller stood there stock-still and couldn’t say a word. Anja was struck by the thought that this man seemed to be wearing the full span of his years on his body: shoes and pants from the post-war era, a leather jacket that called to mind the Stasi and East German police, and on top a fertilizer company gimme cap that had probably been made in China. Taken all together, it fit the impression that the man was about sixty years old. Now he had reached them. He planted himself about six feet in front of them and started shouting. Just what the hell did they think they were doing here?

Or, in any case, that was what Anja took to be the gist of the words flung at them in a scarcely intelligible dialect. The mouth which opened briefly to speak had revealed an incomplete set of front teeth. The broad forehead was creased. Around the dark eyes, full of boundless anger, but also, Anja thought, a trace of

bewilderment and utter incomprehension, the skin was slack and scored with wrinkles. An untrimmed gray beard covered the man's face and completely obscured his lips. Only when he spoke could his mouth be seen.

"Please put the gun down right now!" Anja ordered with a vehemence that surprised even herself. "And I mean RIGHT NOW. Do you hear me?"

But the man didn't respond. He kept looking right at her, didn't move an inch, and seemed not to understand what she'd said—then he launched back into his tirade. The gun dangled at his side, but thankfully he seemed uninterested in it—at least for the moment.

Anja felt a cold sweat on her back. She turned to Obermüller for help. Apparently, he had just been waiting for her to let him take over because he immediately started shouting back.

Whatever he said—he'd also spoken dialect—the stranger went quiet. But the situation was unchanged. The man still looked like he could lose control at any moment and gun them both down, just like that.

Anja glanced over at Obermüller, who kept speaking, probably trying to explain to the stranger what they were doing there. Anja still couldn't understand the actual words, no more than she could understand the man's tirade, which he now resumed. Anja could only gather that they were dealing with the owner of this particular patch of forest, who had neither been informed of their activity here nor did he approve of it.

As the exchange between Obermüller and the stranger grew ever more heated, Anja's fearful gaze kept wandering to the man's right hand, which gripped the strap of his gun and twitched nervously. That clipped ring finger! Anja stared at the man's face, twisted with rage. Was that *him*? Unsure, her eyes wandered between the face completely alien to her and the right ring finger with its missing tip, which was perfectly familiar.

Making up her mind, she interrupted the intense shouting match between the two men by blurting out suddenly: "Xaver?" The stranger went silent. Obermüller also stopped talking and

crossed his arms over his chest, disappointed, maybe, but in any case, astounded that this single word of Anja's should be so much more effective than all he'd said.

"Xaver?" Anja asked again, this time in a calmer, gentler tone since she no longer had to make herself heard over an argument, and plus, now she was entirely certain this person posed no danger to them.

The stranger stared at her as if she were some supernatural vision. "Xaver?" she asked a third time and even took a step towards him. "It's just me. The Grimm girl. Anja."

It was him! Or was it? But who else could it be? Why else would he have gone quiet as suddenly as he had? This man was Xaver Leybach, son of Anna and Alois Leybach, the brother of Traudel Gollas. Just like that, the names all came back to her.

"We're testing the soil here," she added since Xaver continued to show no response; he just stared straight ahead, silent, grim, not moving. "I'm from the Waldmünchen Forestry Office," she calmly continued. "We're just surveying here. That's all. Look." She held her clipboard out toward him and then pointed at her soil probe, which she continued to grip so tightly that her fingers were starting to hurt. He let out a snort. That was it.

Anja wanted to add that he actually had been given advance notice, just like all the other property owners in the district, but Xaver seemed to have decided that for him, the conversation was over. Without another word, he spun on his heel and walked off.

"Xaver . . . Herr Leybach," Anja called out and hurried a few steps after him. But the old man just waved his hand down by his waist, as if he were shooing away a fly. Anja stopped and watched him go, totally at a loss.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Obermüller swore behind her.

### 3

She enjoyed the sharp taste of toothpaste in her mouth and brushed until her gums started to bleed. Before showering, she had checked her body for ticks with the help of a hand mirror and then thoroughly washed her hair to get rid of the greasy, smoky stench of the restaurant where she'd eaten dinner. But it wasn't enough. The smell was everywhere. She took her pajamas off and slathered lotion over her body from top to bottom. Only then did she realize that it was her clothes befouling her small room with this rank tavern smell. Sullenly she looked around. It was already past ten o'clock. Climbing down the creaking stairs was out of the question. Frau Anhuber had already eyed her suspiciously enough with those close-set little pig eyes of hers when she didn't get home till 8:30 instead of the usual seven o'clock. Without further hesitation, she stuffed her clothes in a plastic bag, opened the window, and pinned the bag's handle under the bottom edge as she closed it again. Tomorrow morning she just had to be sure not to forget that the bag was hanging there.

The encounter with Xaver had left her more shaken than she'd expected. Naturally, Obermüller had asked her how in the world she knew this crazy whack job's name. But thankfully, he hadn't pressed her any further after the vague answer she gave. Xaver of all people. And of all the ways to run into him. She hadn't been at all prepared for it. Should she go ahead and call Dr. Venner-Brock and ask if there might be any significance to it? And also, if, according to his theory, it was beneficial for her condition that she'd run into Xaver Leybach?

Her cell phone finally had service again. But she didn't dial her therapist's number; instead, she scrolled through the names until "Sonja" appeared, and then hit the call button.

"Hello hello," came the sound of her bright voice after the second ring.

"How was it today?" Anja asked, skipping the small talk.

“No change. She ate a little at lunch. ‘Fraid I couldn’t get her to eat any dinner, but she did have some tea. I think she’s asleep by now. Do you want to talk to her? Should I check?”

“No. Not necessary. There’s nothing to report here. Did she ask about me?”

“Well, to be honest . . .”

“You should always be honest with me, Sonja.”

“Then no. She hardly said a word all day. The medication is pretty strong.”

“Not too strong, I hope.”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think you should take any risks in her case.”

“Thanks for everything. I’ll check in tomorrow. Are you making good progress?”

“Oh yeah. I’m living like a monk here. It’s glorious.”

It was good to hear Sonja’s voice. What a lucky break it was to have found her! She would stay for two more months, looking after her mother and cramming for med school in the many hours when there was, thankfully, nothing at all to do. And then what? What was supposed to happen after that? Should she have her mother placed under observation for the rest of her life to make sure she didn’t try to harm herself again? Would she always have to be on medication from now on?

Anja let her arm drop and looked morosely around her room. The sight of it depressed her almost as much as the thought of her depressive mother. If only she could at least be there in their house in Planegg, just outside of Munich. There they had shelves full of books, a fireplace, cozy, comfortable couches, and paintings on the walls. These accommodations she’d found here were awful. Someone must have been having a clearance sale on pinewood paneling when this room was built. A sauna was nothing compared to this place. She looked around for her socks so she wouldn’t have to walk barefoot on the green needlefelt carpet. When she found them, she put them on, stepped in front of the mirror, undid the towel she’d wrapped around her head, and let her wet hair down. The view out the window didn’t lift

her spirits any. No matter how she looked at it, no matter what kind of spin she might try to put on it: sooner or later, she would wind up having to live in some boring town exactly like this one. People who worked in forestry tended not to live in Munich or Hamburg; no, they mostly lived in places like this. And Waldmünchen was still relatively large, with a population of almost seven thousand and its own water park. She'd only been here three weeks, and already, the place was getting her down. Or maybe the town had nothing to do with it; maybe it was something else entirely?

She lay down on the narrow bed and closed her eyes. Maybe she would just go right to sleep tonight. After all, she'd gotten up at six o'clock that morning and had spent the whole day mapping the forest. But as soon as she closed her eyes, the scene in the clearing lay waiting for her. Xaver came marching out of the woods, gun at his side, mad eyes staring right at her. Like some kind of wood gnome, she thought. That's what the past twenty years had turned him into. That's how people aged here. What would the others look like today? Lukas? Rupert? The whole Gollas family? Would she run into them, too? What was she supposed to do next? How was she supposed to act? Should she just keep on working and hope for a miracle?

She thought back on the past few months, above all, that horrible weekend in April. For three days and nights, she'd sat in the intensive care unit and prayed that her mother would survive her suicide attempt. She'd felt sick with fear. She'd wept with despair. And at some point, this rage had welled up within her. Her mother's life was a fiasco. And her own? She'd been having these asthma attacks for more than two years now. Was there anything to Dr. Venner-Brock's theory that the root of it all could be psychological? Wouldn't the attacks have had to have started when she was eight years old, shortly after her father's disappearance? Why so many years later?

But she wouldn't have found herself an internship in Waldmünchen just because she occasionally had some shortness of breath. What had done it was her mother, after Anja had found her at the last minute and taken her to the emergency room in Großhadern with an overdose of sleeping pills. She wouldn't die

without finding out what happened to her husband, Anja had sworn to herself. She would search for her dad. No matter how hopeless it was.

She thought about the day ahead of her. In the morning, she had to stop by the office and drop off her data sheets. At 8:30, Grossreither, the director of the Forestry Office, had a meeting with some Chinese lumber importers in the Hochbrunn Municipal Forest, and she was supposed to accompany him. The Chinese wanted to have a look at beech lumber. She wasn't particularly excited. She found working with Grossreither unpleasant; it was no secret what the man thought of the fact that women were starting to turn up in Forestry Office jobs. On the other hand, maybe she should try to get used to bosses like him. After the meeting, it was back to soil surveying. Obermüller was standing by for tomorrow. And in Faunried, of all places. Chance had willed it that she and Xaver had crossed paths on the very first day. Would the pattern continue? Would she run into the rest of them, too? And what did she expect would come of it?

She listened to the church bells strike eleven. When they struck the half-hour, she was still wide awake. She was tempted to take one of the sleeping pills she'd gone through the house and gathered up after the catastrophe with her mother—she hadn't gotten rid of all of them. She figured it couldn't hurt to have a few handy for emergencies. But she thought better of it, got up, went to the little table by the window that served as her desk, and started getting her data sheets in order. She tried to estimate the time it would take them to map the rest of the Leybach woods. A few days, at least.

Then she froze. What had she put down on sheet 25? She compared the data with sheets 24 and 26, then looked back at 25. The soil layers were conspicuously different than those of the samples in the immediate vicinity. She looked for the spot on the map and tried to think where the discrepancy might be coming from. Then it hit her what the most obvious explanation was: she'd messed up. No wonder. It was the sample that Obermüller had drawn just before Xaver had turned up. Had she even really looked at the soil probe? She couldn't remember. All she could

remember was that she'd been pretty flustered. Could there be more than one faulty entry?

She cursed softly. She couldn't very well turn in a set of botched samples. She separated the data sheet from the rest, drew a question mark at the top of the page, then put it on top of the stack. She put the stack in her bag. She would take another sample tomorrow and turn in the sheets at the end of the day. Then all of a sudden, the weariness hit her, and she dropped down onto her pillow, exhausted.