

ELEVEN

ALICE

On our way downstairs, I briefly explain Alice to Lorenzo and tell him that I don't believe her to be a threat. But I suggest we do not discuss anything contentious in front of her. I descend the steps to the front gate alone while Lorenzo stays at the doorway to activate the barrier mechanism. When the iron gate finally opens fully, Alice stands in her usual designer splendour, a small Delvaux handbag clutched to the side of her camel skin coat. She does not move from her spot but stares at me with incredulity.

"Thank heavens you're okay," she says, and the relief in her expression is palpable.

"Why would I not be?" I ask.

"No, I'm—I was worried you might be sleeping rough. At first, you weren't answering any of my calls or text messages. Then your number was disconnected."

I know Alice well enough to know when she is holding something back.

"My phone died on me," I answer, not untruthfully. "Then I lost the damn thing before I had a chance to back

anything up. But I have a local pay-as-you-go replacement now."

"This is the place, right?" she says, accepting my response and filling the pause. "That Albert left you in his will?"

"Eagle House."

"But Edward's solicitor told him—"

"Everybody assumed the place to be derelict, including me. Until I got here. What are you doing here, Alice?"

"Nobody knew where you were, Gabriel. Not your work colleagues, nor any of your old friends. Or if they did, they were keeping tight-lipped. I told Edward somebody ought to make sure you were okay. Grief can be a horrible thing to deal with alone. But you know what he's like and how busy he gets. And I'd run out of options. Coleman inadvertently helped me in the end. When I told him I was worried about you, he said if he were in your shoes he'd head for the farthest place on the planet. Fiji or Chile. Somewhere the Callico poison had not yet reached. And then I remembered Edward mentioning the wasteland Albert left you in Monticiano. Anyway, I told him I had a work trip to Italy—which is true—and that I planned to pop along and check to see if you might be here. He told me to drop it and let sleeping dogs lie, but I came anyway. Do I get a hug, or what?"

I relax and step forward to embrace her and smell her trademark floral perfume. Despite her poor timing, I am pleased to see her, a familiar and friendly face from a less hospitable past.

"Welcome to Wonderland, Alice," I say, stepping back, and we both laugh. "You'd better come in. You don't have any luggage?"

I lead her up the steps to the open front door, which

now stands empty. Behind me, Alice keeps talking and doesn't register my concern about what Lorenzo might make of this intrusion.

"Seriously? I thought this would be a building site. And as I say, I have legitimate business in Florence. I'm booked into the Four Seasons in downtown. Very exclusive. The driver they loaned me drove me here in the hotel Bentley, can you believe? But this lane is a little narrow and dusty. A nice man in the inn down the road pointed us in this direction, asked if Mrs Somebody-Or-Another—Italian name—was expecting me. I told him I was looking for you and he seemed to understand. Anyway, when we reached a wider part of the lane and I could see the house, I told the driver to let me out, said I'd walk the rest of the way. He'll return to pick me up at five or earlier if I call him."

We move into the shade of the hallway, and Alice appraises the space with evident approval. I notice Lorenzo through the glass door leading out to the verandah, setting the table with a jug of something orange that looks like Negroni.

"The Mrs Somebody-Or-Another you mentioned is Mrs Bellacci the housekeeper. She's out shopping right now, getting supplies in town. There's also Lorenzo, the groundsman. You'll probably meet him. The house is staffed by the two of them and managed by a local doctor."

"And Albert arranged all of this?"

"He did."

"Tell me honestly. Did you know?"

"Alice. I had no idea. His local contact, Doctor Romano, said he was going to surprise me later in the year. I think we're having cocktails on the verandah. Do you want to freshen up? There's a downstairs cloakroom."

Alice does, and once I show her the room and the door

is closed behind her, I hurry to the library. The book by A R Luria sits on the desk still. I close the pages, lock the volume into a desk drawer, and pop the key into my pocket. Once Alice has left, I will recheck the contents, although I feel confident this is not the book Albert meant, a medical journal, not a biography.

I am already seated at the patio table when Alice reappears. She stands in the doorway for a moment, her eyes wide, appraising the view from the verandah.

"Albert Callico truly was a man of mystery. What incredible views. I thought I'd lucked out at the hotel, but this is simply stunning. What is it? Eighteenth century?"

"Originally seventeenth. But extensively renovated and modernised over the years."

"Lovingly so, I'd say," she says, lowering herself demurely into a seat. "And now it's all yours. Best all round if nobody tells Edward."

I finish pouring generous measures of the cocktail and push a glass across the table to her. She does not move but stares me straight in the eye.

"Come on," she says. "Get me up to speed? What's been happening?"

I exhale and recline against the rigid spine of the metal chair, quickly assessing how much I can tell her. I detail the trip to the solicitor, assuming she will know that much from Edward. She knows I stayed with friends and had problems with my phone, so I tell her my phone eventually died, but I keep things vague. I embellish more when I talk about my journey here, especially on being met with the finished villa and not a bomb site. I say nothing about Albert's message or the previous night's assault. She nods her understanding as I speak, repeatedly sipping from the glass.

"Enough about me. What's been happening back in England?"

In true Alice style, she rolls her eyes heavenwards.

"Edward's insisting we move into the bloody family crypt. Apparently, it's expected of us. I agreed on the basis that I'm not giving up our place in Marylebone. The bastard will have a fight on his hands if he tries to sell that."

Hearing her badmouth Edward, I decide to ask something that has bothered me for years.

"Now that we're far from London, Alice," I say, clinking my glass with hers. "Can I ask you something candid and personal?"

"When did you ever ask permission?"

"Edward and you. I don't understand. You're nothing like each other. You do everything for him. What does he ever do for you?"

Alice sighs deeply. During my time in Callico House, we have discussed many things, but never the one I find most intriguing.

"He gets things done, Gabriel. And we make a good partnership. He's wildly ambitious but, as you know from first hand experience, he rarely thinks things through before he acts and has no scruples about throwing people under the bus. My job is to manage him. I advise on implications before he makes rash decisions, especially ones I foresee as bad ones. And if he still decides to go ahead, I ensure something happens very quickly afterwards to make him sit up and take notice, to reevaluate and, hopefully, revoke the decision. Do you remember the so-called financial whizz he took on as his director of finance? Son of Lord Ponsonby-Posh—or some equally ridiculous double-barrelled name. Father's one of those entitled pricks who sleeps in the House of Lords."

"Lord Porter-Dunholme."

"If you say so. I advised Edward not to employ him. Said not only did he lack relevant experience, but his credentials did not stack up. More importantly, there had been rumours from very credible sources about his dubious business activities which could, potentially, have tarnished the reputation of our company. Edward ignored me."

"You were right in the end. Didn't Edward let him go after one of the Sunday tabloids did an exposé on his involvement with human traffickers?"

"Amazing what you can achieve when you have the right sources, isn't it? So you see, the more times Edward fucks up and I have to clear up his shit, the more he seeks out my advice."

"You manipulate him."

"I prefer the word manage."

"And he never suspects?"

"Amazing how an overinflated male ego can blind an individual, isn't it?"

Am I surprised? I'm not sure I am, even though I had no idea she had such a devious streak. I am mildly impressed and happier than ever that she has my back.

"You're married to him to manage him? That can't be all. What do you get out of the relationship, Alice?"

"Security. Companionship. The usual. He also has a talented tongue and a large penis he knows how to use. The man is incredible in bed."

"Alice!" I say before laughing. She is not a prude but has never been as frank with me. She stares out across the lawns, a wistful expression in her gaze and a sadness in her voice.

"And we both wanted children, thought having them might ground us both, but that hasn't been possible. Despite

everything we have, we don't have the one thing we really desire."

As she is speaking, I notice Lorenzo approaching. He stops a few paces from the table until Alice stops talking, and we both turn in his direction.

"Good afternoon, signora. Would you like something to eat?"

I feel uncomfortable hearing Lorenzo adopt a subservient role. I still have images of him tackling adversaries in the lush gardens behind him that look so beautiful and innocent in the afternoon light.

"Lorenzo, I can get Alice food from the kitchen if she wants anything. I don't want to trouble you. I'm sure you have better things to do."

"But it is my pleasure. And la signora is our guest," he says, and he winks with a barely discernible grin. I interpret the gesture as meaning I can make things up to him later.

"The Negroni is utter perfection, by the way," says Alice, holding up the glass. "But something to nibble on would be wonderful. Maybe some slithers of cheese?"

Lorenzo nods and leaves while Alice's gaze lingers on his backside as he moves away.

"And the view just keeps getting better."

"Alice. Stop. It's disrespectful."

"Oh, please. Tell me you haven't noticed?"

My eyes swing back to Lorenzo's backside and memories of sampling his body begin to permeate my thoughts. Alice knows me too well and I need to change tack.

"Any news on Sylvie Leblanc?"

"Good and bad," she says, her playful face gone. "She's been doing well, getting better by the day. But they had an incident at the hospital—they're treating her at the top specialist neurology and neurosurgery hospital in London. I

don't know the exact details, but one of the life support machines tripped and went offline during the night. She almost went into cardiac arrest. Almost. They managed to get to her in time and stabilise her. And someone's with her twenty-four-seven now. But on the upside, she came round for a number of minutes, although she was very agitated and had no idea where she was or what had happened to her. They returned her to an induced coma state to speed her recovery, but they're confident now that she'll pull through."

I have never liked the word incident used in this context. I especially don't accept that a piece of equipment designed by medical technicians and tested exhaustively before being put into production for the sole purpose of keeping a patient alive could simply trip.

"She's going to be okay, Gabriel," says Alice, reading my mind.

"Good. Then maybe we'll get some answers."

We finish up two jugs of Negroni and a plate of cold cuts and cheese while Alice catches me up on stories from the funeral and other updates. We laugh together like old times, and I can almost feel Albert sitting with us, pretending to read a book but rolling his eyes, tutting his disapproval, and secretly enjoying the interaction. Far too soon, her phone rings. We hug our farewell and promise to keep our meeting to ourselves but to stay in touch. I accompany her to the front door to say goodbye. From the top step, I spot the sleek cream Bentley not far away, stationed majestically in the lane, a dark uniformed driver stationed by the car door.

"Okay, look," says Alice, turning to me at the door. "One last thing before I go. And this, too, is strictly between you and I. The police returned Albert's belongings to us, his clothes and the items he had on him when the accident

happened. They boxed them up before they performed the autopsy. I know this is a little unorthodox, but I went through Albert's things. Folded into the top pocket handkerchief was a note on a recycled paper serviette, the type they use in Callico House kitchen, which had the CH insignia in the corner. Out of morbid curiosity I suppose, I unfolded the paper and saw someone had written him a note."

"Saying what?"

She unclips her handbag and pulls out the folded paper, something I recognise instantly. Embroidered silk napkins were always brought out for formal events. This thick paper equivalent was used in the kitchens or when staff provided meals to rooms.

"Take a look for yourself."

I unfold the napkin and stare at the words in beautiful cursive handwriting, the loops and embellishments of French penmanship.

Don't call or text or speak for now. We don't know who we can trust. Say nothing until we can meet privately. But I tell you now, if SJP finds out we know about this, he will destroy us.

"Do you recognise the handwriting?"

I witnessed handwritten notes on files from various of Albert's colleagues. In total contrast to the often unreadable scribble of most, Sylvie's handwriting had been a thing of beauty.

"Sylvie Leblanc. This is definitely penned by her."

"And the initials SJP?"

I search my memory but come up blank. The only colleagues of Albert's whose name begins with S are Sylvie Leblanc and Stephan Dytrovich.

"No idea."

"The thing is, Gabriel, I don't know what to do. Should I

take this to the police? Or would they laugh at me, tell me it reads like a secret message between forbidden lovers? Which it does. I suppose I could show Edward but would he even care? As far as the police are concerned the accident was just that and the case is closed."

I agree with her. This is further proof that something was amiss that morning. Nishan said as much about the trail of text messages between him and Leblanc a few days before the accident. Alice is also correct that the note hardly constitutes solid evidence. But then, an idea comes to me.

"Would you mind leaving this with me?"

Alice visibly relaxes and closes her bag.

"I hoped you might say that. Honestly, I've been carrying this around with me for the past few weeks like a dead weight, wondering what I should do."

"It's no longer your problem. I'll do some digging from here, but I'm not sure what else I will find. What are you going to tell Edward? About your visit here?"

"I will tell him that I did my best to find you, drove down a dirt trail until the Bentley could go no further. That I was about to step out and walk the rest of the way, when I realised I have my favourite beige Jimmy Choo heels on. At that moment, I had an epiphany. If Gabriel wants me to find him, he will get in touch. Edward will believe every word."

"Perfect."

I operate the gate mechanism inside the house before stepping outside and waving her off. The afternoon sun is golden, and she looks like a perfume advert in her finest, strutting down the olive-lined lane. Before closing the front door, I wait until the car heads down the track.

"She is nice, this Alice," says Lorenzo. I had not realised he was standing behind me.

"She is. And, more importantly, I trust her," I say before turning to him.

"Teresa called. She is on her way back with il dottor. They need to speak to us both. Do you want to keep searching the books?"

"No," I reply, noticing the afternoon light beginning to wane. "But while it's fresh in my mind, do you have a computer I can use? I want to check something."

Lorenzo leads me to the kitchen where he keeps his tablet computer. He flicks through a couple of screens, brings up a browser and hands me the device. I find what I am looking for without much trouble.

Details of the medical conference Albert and his friends were attending are still available online and show the original agenda. I scroll through each day's events but see nothing that jumps out at me.

But then I notice a highlight of the conference on the evening of day two, Saturday, a panel discussion on the development of a new combination super vaccination which not only provides six-in-one immunisation against common diseases such as tetanus and diphtheria but also incorporates influenza and coronavirus protection. More importantly, the drug is touted as being relatively inexpensive to produce, store, and administer and is considered a godsend for all nations, including third-world countries;

Six persons are listed as participating in the discussion, all with a string of letters after their names. Two are from the World Health Organisation, one from the US Center for Disease Control, while two names I instantly recognise are Sylvie Leblanc and Stephan Dytrovich.

But the last name, and the person accredited with having led the trials and pushed various governments to

commit to funding the project, is a name I am unfamiliar with.

Professor Sergio Jaroslav Puchinsky.

"Is there a problem?" asks Lorenzo from behind me.

I decide to share what I have found with him and quickly explain what Alice told me. When I show him the napkin message and the name on the screen, he nods slowly but says nothing.

"The problem is, Lorenzo. What the hell am I supposed to do with this information?"