

TEN
NEW DAY

Before Romano leaves, Bellacci tells him about my tattoo. He appears less intrigued and, like me, believes it to be either a birthmark or a poorly executed inking and sees no significance in the design. Bellacci, on the other hand, will not let the matter drop and after saying something to him in Italian, he sighs, and I agree to let him take a photo on his phone to show a colleague.

When I bid Romano farewell in the hallway, Lorenzo accompanies him out into the morning sunshine, out towards his car. I say nothing, assuming they are checking on their human cargo.

"Would you like me to come and help you search in the library?" asks Bellacci.

"Not right now. I need a swim to clear my head," I say, and I am about to turn towards the stairs when she responds in Russian.

"Rabota ne volk, v les ni ubezhit!"

I laugh aloud. The humorous idiom translates as work not being like a wolf and that it will not run away into the forest. The closest English equivalent, I suppose, would be

something like being okay to put off work for a while because it will still be waiting for you when you return.

"I understand," she says. "I also have tasks to finish. But before you swim, I will show you our secure room. It will take not very long."

Now she has my full attention. During my casual search of the villa, I found nothing to indicate any secret room or stronghold.

"Lead the way," I respond—in Russian, of course.

She returns to the kitchen to what I had mistaken as the door to a larder. After she reaches in and clicks on a light, we descend a flight of concrete steps down to what I assume used to be a wine cellar—at least in the villa's original incarnation. Only as we stop before the strongroom door do I realise the material is a dark fortified metal, solid and metal studded, the door and frame barely distinguishable from each other.

She turns an industrial-sized handle with both hands, and the heavy door cracks inwards. Using her shoulder, she pushes into a room of pitted reinforced concrete, housing a simple table and chairs and bunk beds to one side. When I turn, the door is matt stainless steel with solid handles top and bottom that presumably engage locks integrated into the door, activated from the inside.

My attention is instantly drawn to the back of the room, where a low desk sits before a wall of CCTV monitors. I notice some screens show the lane leading to the house and assume cameras have been placed strategically in trees along the approach. Perhaps that is how Bellacci knew to be at the gate when I arrived. As I take in the other angles, I notice Romano's burgundy SUV driving off down the lane. The picture quality is superb. I am still mesmerised when Bellacci strides to a sliding metal door to one side of the

room and summons me over. When she opens the door, I am only allowed to look in from the entrance. Neon lighting illuminates a deep recess housing a well-organised wall of weaponry from handguns, assault and long-range rifles, grenades, and even a couple of tactical rocket launchers.

I notice her watching for my reaction. Apparently, she merely wants to show me the arsenal and is about to slide the door closed when she hesitates. A second later, she strides into the space, plucks something from the wall, and grabs a clutch of what looks like gun magazines.

"Here. Keep these safe in case."

She thrusts the handgun at me, a nine-millimetre Colt that fits perfectly in my palm. I love the weight and handling. Activating the release, a magazine pops out.

"Be careful. It is loaded."

"I will," I reply, stuffing the weapon into the back of my jeans.

"Can I ask, Mrs Bellacci. Why were you so interested in my tattoo?"

"I am probably wrong. Il dottor Romano will find out. Do not worry. It is probably nothing."

Not the answer I wanted, but she is busy closing doors and ushering me back out of the strongroom. She stops at the top of the stairs and assesses me for a moment before telling me to follow her into daylight. We head to a part of the grounds I have not explored before, around the back of the kitchen, through the olive grove and out into a clearing. The area is cordoned off by dry stone walling and a gate which leads onto a fallow field. Now that I am looking for them, I notice cameras set up on posts, partially hidden in trees on either side of the gate.

She tells me to stay where I am before heading to the right of the glade and pulling covers from what I see are two

rubber dummies. The ones she unveils are riddled with bullet marks, but instead of using those, she pulls down paper targets from a roller secured above and fixes them tightly into place. When she returns to me, she instructs me to take out the gun and fire three shots at the target on the right.

I don't hesitate. Handling a gun is missing from my memory skill and should feel alien or unfamiliar, but as I have come to understand, that does not mean that I have not learnt the skill in my lost past.

I take aim and fire the first shot, too far away to tell if I have hit the target. Steadying the gun, I do the same again for the next two. Once I am finished, Bellacci pulls a weapon from her housecoat and does the same, this time into the second target.

I am interested to see how I have done. I follow her to my target and see her smiling grimly and nodding. I have hit two nines and a ten.

"Beginner's luck?" I venture with a shrug. She grins but does not appear surprised.

When we check her target, she has scored a full house, three tens. While she tears off our paper targets and begins to cover up the target area, she tells me to go and swim. As I turn to head away, she explains that she will be tidying up the kitchen and beginning preparations for lunch.

A woman of many talents.

Today's swim is punishing, and only as I stop for breath and peer around the grounds do I realise I have seen no sign of Lorenzo since the morning. When I climb out, I also notice that Bellacci has not set the single porch table for lunch and assume I will join them in the kitchen from now on. In some essential way, this unspoken arrangement pleases me. I am no longer a guest but a part of something.

After I dry off and change, I enter the kitchen to find Lorenzo sitting there. He nods a welcome. Another simple meal affair, I sit and listen as Lorenzo and Bellacci converse in Italian. From the occasional word concerning produce, I presume she preparing to do some shopping later in the day. At the end of the meal, she stands first and addresses me.

"Lorenzo will help you in the library. Let me finish up here and I will also come and do what I can. But I will need to leave at three because I must drive to the village to buy provisions. But with three of us, I am sure we can make good progress."

True to their word, once lunch is out of the way, Bellacci and Lorenzo assist me in searching for Albert's clue. Rather than have them search through books for me—I know this seems ungrateful, but I want to find whatever Albert left for me alone—I ask them only to pass me the books to check. Bellacci helps for around an hour before excusing herself to prepare for her trip into town.

"Do you only work with Mrs Bellacci?" I ask Lorenzo as he hands me a pile of books.

"I work for il dottor Romano. But Teresa and I have been teamed together for over five years. Romano thinks we make a good pairing. As you can tell, she is calm but strict. I am told I can be—uh, how do you say—quick of temper?"

I snort, and Lorenzo manages one of his half-smiles. He brushes past me repeatedly as he helps, sometimes touching but always coming very close. A few of those times, he breathes warm air into my ear. I know he also catches me staring at his backside as he turns from the top of the stepladder to hand me a pile of books, but he says nothing. I wonder if he is testing my resolve, and the truth is my body is awakening to his proximity.

"What about family?" I ask to try and diffuse the sexual

tension. I place another dusty book onto a pile of others I've checked on the floor. "You said Mrs Bellacci is not your mother."

"I grew up on the streets of Napoli from the age of nine. But I was born in a suburb of Roma. Until one night, when my mother and father were sitting outside our regular osteria having dinner. They had just ordered coffee and I was playing with the owner's kids out the back. I remember hearing the roar of a motorbike, loud machine gunfire followed by people screaming and shouting. By the time we'd run to find out what had happened, the motorbike had gone. Even at that age, I knew what'd happened, My father did on and off work for some bad people—my mother argued with him about it all the time. Anyway, I ran away and hiked a lift to Napoli. I was scared they might come for me if I went to any of my local relatives' homes for help. I learnt to survive the streets by doing odd jobs for people but mainly by stealing. That all changed when I was caught by a retired military man. Instead of handing me over to the police, he took me in and trained me. Hard. Very hard. Until I was old enough to join the army. From day one, I had mastered combat training and, within the year, they assigned me to a special forces division."

As Lorenzo is speaking, I listen but also continue checking books. My breath catches when I open the cover of one dusty volume to the title page. The author's name printed beneath the title jumps out at me. Restoration Of Function After Brain Injury by A R Luria. I barely notice the sound of a car door slamming, an engine starting up and moving away. Very slowly, I check the inside covers, front and back, for any inscription, then begin turning pages, barely noticing that Lorenzo has neither moved nor spoken from his place at the top of the ladder.

I turn the book upside down and shake the pages to see if anything is lodged between them, but I find nothing. A loud smack of something heavy hitting the floor grabs my attention. A large book sits at the bottom of the ladder, one that Lorenzo has clearly dropped. When I peer up, I find him looking at me intently.

"She will not return for two hours. You want to have some fun."

The last sentence is not a question, and his intention is plain when he rubs a hand over one of his buttocks. I place the book to one side—unlike the wolf, it will be here when I return—and head for the door.

"My bedroom," I call without turning.

Once in the chamber, there begins a rough and tumble confusion of shoes flying, buttons popping, and stubborn zippers undoing, accompanied by muttered Italian curses as we make our way onto the cover of my bed. Lorenzo seems to enjoy kissing and foreplay, neither of which has been my thing. He catches on quickly and resorts to nipping me in sensitive places, along the line of my chin, on the earlobes, around the nipples, something new for me that is an unexpected turn-on.

When he jumps from the bed to pull down his briefs, his erection bounces a few times before coming to a stop, solid and curving upwards. He half turns away, slapping one cheek of his arse and grinning wickedly.

"You want this, don't you?"

His body is a work of art, the tattoo running down the whole side of his body, and I scramble for the lube and condoms I am pleased I packed. While ripping the top off the foil wrapper, he tugs my jeans off before doing the same with my briefs.

In the past, I have used sex to earn money and to give

another maximum pleasure without giving anything of myself away. When I am fucking someone—nobody has ever penetrated me—I try to hold off the moment of my orgasm as long as possible, preferably avoiding climaxing altogether. I innately equate release as a temporary loss of control and abandonment, a split second of weakness. Something to be avoided.

Lorenzo's approach to sex is not something I have experienced. He takes charge, rolling the condom on me, then snatching the lube and squirting a generous pool into his hands before liberally greasing my erection. When he has finished, as he wipes the rest into himself, I am about to switch positions, but he pins me down by my shoulders. Scowling down at me, he transfers his bunched fists to my chest and, sporting a sheen on his forehead, positions himself over my cock and sinks down slowly. Warmth slowly envelopes me until he stops. I might have begun thrusting back in the past, but I sense he wants to control the encounter. I may be the one fucking, but he is the one holding the power.

When he finally presses his knees into my sides and rises up, sensations sizzle through me, igniting every nerve-ending with remembered pleasure. I grab onto his upper arms and squeeze my eyes shut to centre myself. He lifts off me and descends slowly but smoothly, with obvious experience, and gains momentum quickly until I cannot stop my hips from rising up to meet his.

Neither of us speaks for long minutes, both breathing increasingly heavily. When I open my eyes, he has a pronounced glisten of sweat on his brow and is staring hard at me as though he has been waiting for me to see him, another total turn-on. Dropping his head down, he swipes the length of his tongue along the underside of my nose

before straightening up and smirking at me. My body is not used to being the one aroused, and I can feel the orgasmic coiling of muscles and nerves inside my lower core, readying for release, something I consciously hold back. I move a hand and reach for his straining erection that glistens with pre-cum, but he pushes my hand away. If he is playing a game of who will climax first, we will be here until nightfall.

I wait for a moment when his eyes to close in concentration before twisting our bodies to one side and unbalancing him. How I manage to keep inside him is pure luck, but I waste no time hammering into him brutally, taking control and giving him everything I have. And my ploy works. He is taken by surprise, his eyes widening helplessly and his legs clamping around me. Unable to stop the orgasm from ripping through him, he spills onto his chest and stomach. The clenching of his muscles undoes me also, and I let out a moan of pure pleasure as I release my load into the condom inside him.

When we finally stop moving, we are both slick with sweat and breathing heavily. I wonder if I have crossed a line by taking control, but when my eyes finally focus, he is smirking up at me. He could ask for anything at that moment, and I would give it to him. As though hearing my thoughts, he pulls my head down and kisses me deeply.

Something inside fractures then, and I am not sure what. His tongue explores my mouth, and soon mine is wrestling his, moving past his lips into his mouth. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I find this amusing, wondering if there is such a thing as after-play.

Before long, I can feel myself getting aroused again, but then a loud chime echoes throughout the building. Lorenzo stops instantly and pushes me away. His head turns towards

the door as though he is uncertain whether he heard the sound.

"Are you expecting somebody?" I ask. Last night's visitors did not ring the front doorbell, so I can only assume this person is either anticipated or known to them.

He jumps up naked from under me, reaches for his jeans and pulls out his phone. After pressing and tapping buttons on an app, he stops and frowns at the display before turning the screen to show me. The front video has picked out a lone but familiar figure standing at the front gate, staring around herself, puzzled.

Alice.