

TWELVE

GHOST

Before Lorenzo and I can discuss Alice's visit, Mrs Bellacci bustles into the kitchen with Doctor Romano, both weighed down by heavy bags of goods. Romano says something in Italian, and Lorenzo hurries out of the kitchen, presumably to fetch more groceries from the car.

While Mrs Bellacci busies herself around the kitchen, putting things away and readying to prepare the evening meal, the doctor asks me to sit.

"How did you progress? With your search for the book?"

"No luck yet. We covered a lot of ground, but I've not found a relevant biography."

"I see. And what about the rest of your afternoon?"

I stall for a second. Romano's stern gaze burns into me, and I wonder for a moment if there is a spy camera in my bedroom that recorded Lorenzo and I having sex. Romano must notice my discomfort because he continues on.

"After Mrs Bellacci left you had a visitor, did you not?"

I gape at him before looking around the kitchen to see if we have left any evidence of Alice's visit. Mrs Bellacci stops

what she is doing and stares hard at me before holding up her phone.

"Security cameras," says Romano, without looking at her. "And a call from il signor Galli who spoke to an expensive-looking Asian woman in an equally expensive car, a woman who was looking for you. Gabriel, if we are to trust each other, it is important that we do not keep important things from each other. Unless you are planning to return to your family in London."

His words shock me. But he is right. I must be open and honest with them if I want them to continue helping me.

"I'm not going anywhere, Doctor Romano. Albert was the only person I would consider family in London. And it was he who told me to trust nobody. So if I appear to be overcautious, please forgive me. I do have friends back in London who have helped me, but the only people I would consider family in the the world right now are here in this villa."

Although she has turned away, I notice Mrs Bellacci nodding.

"I wanted to wait until Lorenzo returned before I told you about the visitor. Alice Callico is Albert's sister-in-law, the one I told you about. She's staying at the Four Seasons in Florence. At least, that's what she told me. I disclosed nothing to her about Albert's message or what has been happening here."

"She has been validated," says Romano, as Mrs Bellacci continues working. "We were suspicious that her arrival coincided with Mrs Bellacci's departure from the house. But your friend's story checks out. We have verified the car plates and the hotel room booking. She arrived from London yesterday."

"She has business in Florence and dropped by to check

if I was okay. And I believe she left satisfied. But there are other things she told me that I want your thoughts on."

"When Lorenzo returns then. I also have news I need to share."

I have decided I will tell them everything Alice told me. I need the doctor's sound judgment. Maybe I am too suspicious by nature, but I cannot help thinking—however fanciful it may seem—that Puchinsky not only had a hand in the crash that killed Albert but may even have found a way to tamper with Leblanc's equipment at the hospital.

At that moment, Lorenzo returns, and after he has placed the box of goods where Mrs Bellacci specifies, Romano demands our attention.

"Now we are all here, let me begin by updating you on everything I have found out about last night's raid. Spataro said the sponsor wished to remain anonymous and paid for the hit in full by cash transfer from a Swiss bank account. They have never before done business with this person or persons. And bearing in mind what transpired last night, he has asked a favour. The sponsor requested a phone photo as soon as the operation has succeeded to prove that Gabriel has been dispatched. Spataro said he has been offered a ten percent cash bonus for this evidence. In all honesty, he thinks they have more money than wisdom, which is one of the reasons he believes they are a one-off client, not professionals. Anyway, he asks if we would be prepared to stage a scene showing Gabriel's body. Personally, I like this idea. We all benefit. Spataro's reputation remains unblemished, the client will be satisfied and not tempted to send people to verify the hit. And, more importantly, this is an excellent opportunity for you, Gabriel, to become a ghost. Digging for clues and following trails the professor left you will be much easier if you are invisible.

And we always have room for a ghost on our team, don't we?"

Bellacci nods as she wipes her hands on a tea towel while Lorenzo grins at me. I admire Romano's reasoning. Being out of the picture will allow me to investigate without fear of being hunted.

"How will you make the scene look realistic?" I ask. "And isn't there a date stamp on phone photos these days?"

"You do not need to worry about this detail," says Lorenzo. "Teresa grew up in Sicily where, in kindergarten, they teach faking a crime scene and how to tamper with evidence."

Bellacci scowls and barks out a couple of curses at Lorenzo in Italian while Dr Romano and I laugh aloud.

"Did you just make a joke?" I ask Lorenzo and am rewarded with his rare, gap-toothed smile.

"One minute," he says, his face becoming serious again. "Did Spataro tell the client when this hit would take place?"

"No," answers Romano. "He said the client did not want details. Only confirmation that the job had been carried out successfully together with a photograph."

"Perfect."

"I don't understand," says Romano.

"Gabriel?" says Lorenzo. "Tell them what your visitor told you today."

We are all in so deep now that I tell them everything. I can see Romano wants to ask about Puchinsky, but I don't want to divert attention from what we are planning.

"And do you completely trust that she will say nothing?" asks Lorenzo.

I take a moment to catch up with his reasoning, but he is absolutely right.

"Before she left," I tell them. "Alice said she wouldn't say

anything about what she had seen or heard here. But I only have her word for that. I think what Lorenzo is saying is that, to foolproof this plan in case Spataro is ever asked, he needs to say the raid went ahead tonight. In that way, Alice will have visited before the operation took place and would be none the wiser. Am I right, Lorenzo?"

"Precisamente," says Lorenzo beaming at me, and even Romano nods.

"Yes. This is a very good plan and easier to execute," says Bellacci, pointing at my chest. "Did you change your clothes? Since the visit from your friend?"

"No," I reply, confused, looking down at my plain white tee shirt with the distinctive sports logo, which I pulled on from the bedroom floor after Lorenzo and I were interrupted. "Why do you ask?"

"When we kill you, you must have on the same clothes you were wearing when your friend visited. In case she is involved."

Lorenzo smirks. "When we fake killing him, you mean. Please don't kill him. We need him."

"You will remove your shirt and give it to Mrs Bellacci," said Romano before addressing Mrs Bellacci. "Go out to the range while there is still light and place the shirt on one of the target dummies. Take the assault weapon one of the attackers dropped. Fire two or three shots into the chest, then bring the shirt back to me. Once you wear the tee again, Gabriel, I will dress the holes to look like bullet wounds. All we'll need is to find somewhere in the grounds to stage your death."

Mrs Bellacci and Romano share a few words in Italian, but he shakes his head and appears reluctant. Even Lorenzo seems to object. Eventually, I ask what they are saying.

"Leave your shirt on. Mrs Bellacci believes it would be

better if she fired the weapon directly at you—" begins Romano.

"What?" I reply, horrified, and begin to back out of the kitchen.

"No, listen," says Lorenzo. "You would be wearing body armour. She thinks we should begin your training straight away and what better way than to test your reaction to being shot while wearing a vest. I told her I believe you've have had enough excitement for one day—"

I'm sure I am the only one to register Lorenzo's smirk.

"No, it's fine," I hear myself say.

Not surprisingly, I have never knowingly worn anything like the black armoured jacket she drapes over a chair after emerging from the passage to the strongroom. Maybe I have noticed something similar in passing on random police dramas, but I have never handled one in person. Lorenzo and Mrs Bellacci help to fix the garment in place. Secured with velcro straps, the vest is surprisingly lightweight and fits snugly against my upper body like a thick sleeveless pullover. When I pull the tee shirt over the top, I know the effect must be bulky and comical, like wearing too many tee shirts, but I imagine that worn beneath my puffer or even my leather bomber jacket, nobody would be any the wiser.

"Stand against the olive tree to the side of the swimming pool," instructs Mrs Bellacci. "Where you were last night when the intruders came."

"So far away?" I ask. "What if you miss?"

"I will not miss," says Mrs Bellacci, and I laugh aloud before moving in the direction she has indicated. It's only then that I fully realise my vulnerability and the complete trust I am placing in her. If she wanted to aim at my unprotected head, I know she would not miss either. But I also know I must show them they have my complete trust.

When Mrs Bellacci raises the weapon to fire, I brace myself, ready to be fired upon. Instead of looking directly at her, I gaze at my bedroom balcony and concentrate on the soft light inside my room. After what feels like ages, I notice movement and see Mrs Bellacci walking towards me, the gun in her hand lowered.

"Good, Gabriel. You have proven yourself. Now remove the shirt," she says. "I need to go to the firing range."

"I don't understand."

"You were prepared for me to shoot at you. That is either very brave or foolish. I like to think the first one. Even with this modern type of armour you would have suffered bad bruising, if not broken ribs. And we all agreed that we would benefit more from having you unharmed."

When I pull off my tee shirt and hand the garment to her, she immediately heads off into the olive grove. I return to Romano and Lorenzo, where both are grinning at me.

"She is impressed with you," says Romano. "And that takes a lot. Remove the armour and I will accompany you to your room to fetch a change of shirt. We need to talk privately. Lorenzo, can you please continue helping with dinner preparation?"

Lorenzo stills, his gaze drifting to me briefly before he turns and nods at Romano. I walk with the doctor back towards the house. In a way, I need time alone with the doctor. There are a lot of questions crowding my brain.

"Did Albert know? About you and your team? About all the modifications to the villa?"

Romano hikes up the bag on his shoulder and sighs as we walk towards the terrace doors.

"He did. Believe it or not, we found each other, and the arrangement was mutual. Although he considered the strong room more of a panic room, if you know what I

mean? Protection because of being so far out in the countryside. But he planned to show everything to you once he had brought you here. He did all this for you, Gabriel, to protect you. But, I'm sorry. He never told me why."

I hold the door open for the doctor and allow him to enter first while I ponder his words. Why did Albert go to such extraordinary lengths to protect me? He must have known things I did not. The thing is, in all of our time spent together, I never suspected anything. And, if nothing else, I do pay attention.

"Gabriel," continues Romano, heading for the stairs. "I will make some enquiries concerning the news Alice Callico brought you about what happened to Sylvie Leblanc. Professionally speaking, though, modern life support equipment is designed with built-in failsafes. I find what happened in what I assume to be a private ward highly implausible. In fact, I am sensing something far more troubling at work here."

"I agree with you. But I don't know where to start."

"Then you must leave this with me. I have numerous professional resources at my disposal, people who can make discrete enquiries on my behalf. If the truth behind the death of Professore Callico involves a crime, then we will not stop until somebody pays. He was a good man, Gabriel. And our form of justice will not involve any long drawn-out legal systems, if you understand my meaning. But I get a distinct sense of urgency. Can I ask you, if she met you again and her memory was intact, do you think Sylvie Leblanc would recognise you?"

"Absolutely. I only met her a couple of times, but we did speak at length together. I wouldn't say we had much in common, but she was always polite and sociable."

Now that I think back, Sylvie used to talk to me like an

overenthusiastic teacher speaks to a promising but underperforming student. She always asked about my health, about my swimming, and what other physical activities I might be involved in. Whenever I mentioned anything to Albert, he used to gently chastise me and tell me she was that breed of doctor, always interested in the welfare of others. While I have been thinking, Romano and I reach my room. I notice the bed is no longer untidy and can only assume Lorenzo came in and tidied while I was with Alice. While I go to the wardrobe to find a tee shirt, Romano places his bag on the bed and continues talking.

"I am not sure how or why," he says, reaching into the bag. "But Lorenzo appears to have warmed to you. This is very good. My concern has always been that he sees himself as an outsider, a maverick who cares nothing for his own safety, and, because of that, might put in jeopardy the lives of others. But I notice something different when he is around you. Whatever it is you are doing, please continue."

Strange that this observation fills me with warmth. I dig out a plain white tee and toss the item onto the bed.

"I think we may be kindred spirits, doctor. Both of us have suffered losses, even if I have no idea what mine are."

Dimly, in the distance, I hear three successive pops that sound like a car backfiring.

"Gabriel, if you are going to disappear completely, we need to make some immediate and radical changes. Tomorrow we will also need to dispose of your passport, phone and your luggage. Does anyone else know about you being here?"

My mind immediately goes to Josh and Nishan. I explain to the doctor that they knew about Albert's message and how they helped me to reach Monticiano.

"Will I still be able to stay in contact with them?" I ask,

even though I think I already know the answer. "They are completely on my side."

"How often do you speak to them?"

"Only when necessary. We don't have regular calls."

Romano takes a deep breath and shakes his head, as I had anticipated.

"If this is to work, nobody can know, Gabriel. Everyone must think the worst. You say Alice has spoken to them already. She will most likely speak to them again, if she finds out anything. I know this will be hard on them all, but it is for the best."

"What if they come looking for me, asking questions?"

"We will tell them that you chose to move on and we assumed you had returned to London. There will be no evidence of your time here. And by then you will have a new name, a new identity and look entirely different. Mrs Bellacci and I discussed this when we met in town. Have you ever cropped your hair?"

I've never really paid much attention to my appearance and certainly not my hair. A towel dry after swimming or showering is the most effort I ever lavished. Albert was always on at me to have a professional cut, but I had always snipped the dark unruly locks or fringe myself whenever they became too wild. In other ways, with untidy dark brown hair, I always managed to blend into a crowd. A crop might have been too severe, too distinguishing.

"Never."

"Maybe I'll let Mrs Bellacci explain her reasoning later. And, if you are willing, I would like to check your health and take some blood. For a few reasons. Firstly, I do this with my team every three months, or after they have completed a mission. For you, I would also like to hold onto the tee shirt Mrs Bellacci has taken. We can use some of the

blood I take to soak into the cloth to make identification and confirmation easier—should the need ever arise.”

His reasoning, as always, makes perfect sense. “I have no problem with that.”

“And you are happy to do this now? Before we head back? Just a few simple checks.”

I nod my acceptance, and Romano produces an old-style blood pressure monitor with a small rubber tube and pump, together with a stainless steel stethoscope. Unknown to me, there is a set of weighing scales beneath the bed, and he checks my weight and uses a workman’s extendable tape measure to check my height. After completing these simple checks, he unwraps a syringe and draws my blood.

“Good. I’ve heard about your morning swims so I have no questions about your exercise regime. But don’t put on the tee yet. We have a death scene to create.”

What follows is almost comical. Before I put on the hole-riddled tee shirt, Romano adds my blood around the darkened edges while Mrs Bellacci produces a sizeable make-up bag and quickly daubs deep mauve and black colouring to parts of my chest while getting me to rub a whitening paste into my face and exposed skin. Once satisfied, she strolls back to the kitchen to continue preparations for dinner as though this is something she performs every day. Lorenzo appears to be having too much of a good time, coming up with various places for me to have been shot. He also insists on staging the scene using Romano’s phone, barking instructions at me like a movie director.

When he has finished, Romano and I join him to check the results on the screen. I am shocked at how lifelike—or rather, deathlike—they are. The one Romano decides to use shows me staring lifelessly at the evening sky, the bullet holes through my distinctive tee slick with my blood, my

face a deathly pallor. Lorenzo even has my wrist on display with the tattoo or birthmark showing to further confirm identification. An involuntary shiver runs through me.

"Okay," says Romano, squeezing my shoulder. "Hand this tee shirt to me then follow Lorenzo. He will take you to the outdoor washing area to clean up and put on your fresh tee. Then come to the kitchen so we can enjoy dinner together. We will help you continue the search again tomorrow, but your rigorous training will also begin. Mrs Bellacci seems more interested in how much you are already capable of rather than teaching you new things. But I am keen for us all to be completely familiar with each other's capabilities. And I am sure you will find the training a welcome distraction from the less energising search the library."

Dinner that night is relaxed and cordial, the best I have enjoyed the whole time I have been here. I wonder if she aims to impress whenever Romano is present, but tonight's asparagus and pancetta crostini, followed by a porcini mushroom risotto, is nothing short of spectacular. Dessert is again in the form of a bowl of seasonal fruit and a jug of coffee. Mrs Bellacci finally relaxes and tells stories about missions she has shared with Lorenzo, many of them little more than acting as a bodyguard to a promising political figure or another. Lorenzo chips in with funny anecdotes, which has us all laughing. I don't think I have ever seen him so relaxed. These people truly are my family now.

When I am finally in bed, I feel comfortably full and tired. The night is seasonably cool, and I have left the balcony doors slightly ajar to let the night breezes temper the stuffy bedroom air. For long minutes I stare at the ceiling fan pondering the day's events. Since I arrived at Eagle House, I have felt more belonging and affiliation than at any other time in my life. And tomorrow, Mrs Bellacci

will work with me on completely changing my appearance. As I fall asleep, there is one thing I know beyond question.

Gabriel Redbrick is no more. If he ever existed in the first place.

And I wonder who will rise from his ashes.

A barely noticeable noise from the balcony wakes me. After last night's intrusion, I am fully alert to any sounds. Within a flash, I am awake, perched on the side of the bed with the gun steadied in both hands and levelled at the balcony door.

"Gabriel?" I know the voice instantly. Lorenzo. I breathe out a sigh and place the weapon back beneath my pillow.

"Are you awake?"

"I am now."

What better way to end a perfect day.