

FIFTEEN

TRAINING

Two weeks rush by, and I have never felt more alive and focused. Every morning, Lorenzo joins me for a punishing swim. I love his competitiveness which spurs me to put even more effort into the exercise. I still beat him, but he is no longer sore because when he takes me on the five-mile run that follows straight afterwards, across Tuscan terrain, over drystone walls and up rocky outcrops, he beats me without fail.

I can now scale any side of the villa a few seconds behind him. His skill is in recognising footholds and handholds from a quick scan of a building facade, which he must have mastered over time because I can only follow his path.

And when we collapse into bed each night, we have both stored enough energy to wring the sexual tension out of each other's bodies before falling into a deep sleep.

Mrs Bellacci has not only improved my marksmanship, showing me how to relax and centre myself when I take a shot using any weapon, but has also given me something I know I have never been taught. How to cook a handful of incredible meals.

She treats me differently now. I used to feel a guardedness in her during any interaction, which has now evaporated. Lorenzo laughed when I told him. He thinks she is doing the same she does with him and, internally, at least, has adopted me as a son. But I feel it runs deeper, especially remembering her eyes when she begged the question, 'what parent would allow their child to be used in this way?' Maybe Lorenzo is correct, and these are latent maternal feelings. Whatever they are, I feel there is now an unbreakable bond between us.

She takes great pains to show me the elaborate camera system that has been installed around the property, how periphery alarms are triggered if any crucial boundaries are breached and how each can be operated from the strongroom master terminal or her tablet computer. I do my best to follow her explanations and show my interest by asking pertinent questions.

"How then did Spataro's men manage to reach the back lawn without being detected?"

My question clearly hits a nerve and is met with a grunt and a few whispered words in Italian that I am sure are expletives.

"Those men were imbeciles. They drove into the wrong almost twenty kilometres west of here. Fortunately, they had the coordinates of the villa on a GPS device, but had no idea how far they would need to hike. Which is why they entered the villa grounds over the stone wall near the firing range—"

"But you have cameras installed there. I saw them."

"We do now. And in other vulnerable places. Sometimes all it takes is a failed attempt to break in to recognise blind spots. It will not happen again."

Mrs Bellacci appears to enjoy furnishing me with

various disguises to adopt when I need to become someone else, showing me how to change in seconds. Two jackets and three pairs of trousers she provides are reversible in contrasting colours and materials. One pair of sneakers has a switch in the heel that, when kicked in the right place, changes their colour. When I look at my bespectacled self in the mirror, suited, booted, and wearing a tidy wig in dark brown to match my moustache and goatee, decked out like a trendy businessman from any metropolis in the world, I begin to wonder who I really am.

Some things have been more problematic. Trying to learn a smattering of everyday Latvian and Italian has been an uphill struggle. But I have persevered. Other skills have come instinctively, like driving Romano's car or riding one of Lorenzo's motorcycles—or maybe that has been more like remembering or relearning.

And then some talents have surprised us all. Doctor Romano presented me with a collection of vials containing liquid drugs to knock out or kill a mark. He told me the medical names for each of the five, and I wrote them down but did not really commit them to memory, although one I had heard Josh talk about was called gamma-hydroxybutyrate, GHB, also known as a date drug. The vials are marked from one to five, with four and five being lethal but undetectable poisons. Romano's concern was also making sure I knew what to do if someone had drugged me with them. The strange thing was that I could smell each of them, no matter in what liquid form they were presented or how strong smelling. Mrs Bellacci devised a range of cocktails, fortified wines, strong teas and coffees, etc., to see if I could pick out the drugged drink. Every time, without fail, I could discern a slight change in odour. Sceptical at first, Romano put this down to a hyper-sensitive sense of smell. I

wonder if this is also something I have been taught in the past and never really forgotten. In a quiet moment of reflection together, raking over my progress, Lorenzo tells me that maybe it was not only Eagle House that I inherited.

We take my new identity for a spin a few days after finding the files. Lorenzo and I ride motorbikes out to a place called San Vincenzo along the Tuscan coast. We park up at a coffee shop he knows overlooking the town. The decking out back provides a panorama of the coastline and beyond. While we sit in silence enjoying the last of the day's sunshine, my gaze takes in the seascape before snagging on a luxury yacht anchored off the coast. A sudden memory sparks, of panicked voices and screams, of flames and pain. I flinch away from the sight and tell Lorenzo we ought to go before the sun sets.

He leads us back to Pension Galli, knowing a few regulars will be there that evening. Lorenzo has coached me on how to move differently, less upright and rigid, and to lower the tone of my spoken voice—not that anyone in the bar is likely to have remembered Gabriel.

The outing works beautifully. He introduces me as his ex-colleague from Latvia. Lorenzo leaves me to order beers while he heads off to chat with people he knows. Signor Galli singles me out and fires some questions at me in English. I answer curtly in heavily accented English.

"And how do you find our beautiful country?" he asks.

"I like your fresh pasta. But everything else is old," I reply bluntly. "Old art, old statues, old buildings and old music. Nothing is new."

Galli's eyes widen as he almost chokes on my dismissive appraisal.

"You do not like opera? Have you ever listened to the

works of masters like Puccini or Verdi? Music written for the gods, music to touch the soul."

"I prefer music that sears the skin from my bones. Have you ever listened to any doom death metal? Bands like Frailty? From my home country?"

On our way home, Lorenzo laughs aloud when I tell him the story and I ask him what words were spoken between him and Galli as we left. He says Galli told him he was welcome in the bar any time but please not to bring the uncultured Russian punk again. I certainly made an impression that night.

At night, Lorenzo and I make as little noise as possible. We often wait until Mrs Bellacci switches off the light in the living area, closes her bedroom door, then spend a precautionary half an hour on quiet foreplay—kissing, touching and sucking—giving her time to fall asleep before the heavy sessions begin.

"This new look is good on you," he says, breathing deeply after wiping his cum from my chest. He has developed a habit of rubbing a hand around my cropped head when we're in bed. "But I cannot call you Janis, not when we are together. You will always be Gabriel to me, the angel that flew into my life."

I try hard to laugh off comments like this, but my stomach twists in knots every time. I have never allowed anybody to get close to me, but Lorenzo has managed to breach my defences. And now I worry that what we have may be short-lived.

Doctor Romano visits the villa each weekend, and I am beginning to learn more about him. He is a master of intelligence. Within days of locating the file, he has not only found the name of the hospital where Leblanc was taken

but the number and location of the secure ward where she is being treated.

"Mrs Bellacci tells me your training is going well," he tells me at the end of my second week of instruction. Each of us has a private one-to-one session with him after he has finished talking to the three of us together. "You pick things up quickly. Another three weeks and I will send you to London for your first assignment, after which you will visit Leblanc. The job I have for you is a fairly simple one. You will need to get into the hotel suite of a specific businessman and place surveillance devices in all the living areas. We would normally do this in advance of a person's stay once we know the booking details, but this man rents three or four identical suites for his entourage, and only allocates them on the day they arrive. You should be in and out in an hour, but you'll need to carry out surveillance for two or three days beforehand to become familiar with his comings and goings. Now, let's talk about you."

"About me?"

"We need to make sure no stones are left unturned. Who in England might worry about Gabriel? You mentioned working for a charity—"

"I do. I did. They've given me—Gabriel—three weeks' compassionate leave."

"Which will end soon. What will happen when you don't report back?"

Romano is good at grounding me. I have been so focused on training and moving forward that I have lost sight of these small but essential details in my past.

"I'm not sure. My connection with them was through Albert and he's still listed as my emergency contact. I suppose they might contact Edward, but even if they did,

I'm not sure he would give a damn. But if he told Alice, that might be another matter altogether."

"What about this friend called Josh? The one who knows you're here?"

"No, they don't know who Josh is."

"Have you kept in regular contact with him?"

"Irregular. With him and his partner, Nishan. Out of everyone, they might be the ones to worry if they try to contact me and get no response."

"And what are they likely to do? This is important, Janis. Are they likely to come and look for you?"

"No," I reply too quickly. "I don't know. They both have busy lives. But Josh is as close to a best friend as I have ever come. I don't know what they might do."

"I see. Well, Lorenzo and Mrs Bellacci will need to have a plausible story in place to feed them, about you moving on and having left no forwarding address, should that eventuality arise. Something they would swallow. You will need to help us with that."

"That would seem sensible." I stall a moment at the thought of Josh and Nishan. Letting them believe I have gone missing—or worse—feels like a betrayal.

"Janis," says the doctor, becoming severe and drawing my attention to him. "Somebody who knew you were here in Monticiano sent people to try and kill you. I know you think you can trust people like Josh and Alice, but you need to let them go."

"I understand," I reply simply.

Doctor Romano does not know that I saved Josh's life a couple of times when we were on the streets, once from a group of three knife-wielding thugs trying to steal the weekly wage he had just been handed, and the other at a club when

he overdosed, and I literally carried him to the accident and emergency unit of the nearby hospital. In the recovery ward, I was his only visitor in the days that followed. On one of those, in a moment of crystal clarity, he promised to clean himself up, told me he owed me his life and swore on his own that he would repay the debt one day. Moreover, I have survived this long by following my instincts, and I know I can trust Josh. Alice is different. We are not dissimilar. Both of us are trying to survive as best we can in a hostile world.

"And you will leave Puchinsky to me," says the doctor out of the blue. "Do you understand?"

"But he—"

"No, Janis. Focus on finding out about yourself. Puchinsky I will deal with. In the right way, at the right time. In this matter, I need you to trust me. Professore Callico will have his retribution."

"But don't you want me to speak to Dr Leblanc about the medical reports—"

"Janis," says Romano, with a similar patient smile that Bellacci often gives me. "You forget who you're talking to. Concentrate on yourself. That is your priority. Now, I am going to be gone for the next three weeks but I expect you to be ready to leave when I come back."

Four days later, I know something is wrong when Mrs Bellacci interrupts our morning swim to tell us to come to the kitchen because the doctor is on his way. Everything is going too smoothly that I should have suspected dark clouds on the horizon.

When he arrives, Romano gets straight to the point.

"A hostile assault team is being assembled and sent here. Elite Spetsnaz soldiers from Russia or one of its allies. Probably this weekend."

"How did they find us?" asks Mrs Bellacci. "Gabriel's lady friend that came here?"

"No, I believe it was one of Spataro's hired hands, one of those we freed who may have blabbed about our capabilities. They undoubtedly work for other people, many of them undesirables. How our enemy found you is not important right now. We need to act fast. Unlike Spataro's men, these soldiers will not be untrained and opportunistic roughnecks. Janis, your assignment in London has been brought forward and you will leave as soon as we have finished here. I have all the instructions with me. Teresa and Lorenzo. Go now and prepare the house for an imminent attack—"

"We should stay together," I begin to say.

"Now I will speak to Janis privately."

Mrs Bellacci and Lorenzo spring up and leave the kitchen without a word. Maybe they are prepared for something like this, but I still have questions. As I begin to speak, Romano holds a hand up to still me before heading over and closing the kitchen door.

"The other news," he says, returning to his seat, "is that, just as I feared, the picture of your tattoo has stirred up a hornet's nest. Instructions from way up the ladder—about as far as it goes—have been issued that Gabriel Redbrick is a highly trained and extremely dangerous traitor, and should not be approached. Some nonsense about you being a specialised agent who recently defected and is now working for hostile intelligence services. I bought you some time telling them that you are no longer in the villa, that you left in the night without a word and that we have no idea when you will return. But I need you gone from here in case they send anyone to verify."

I am reeling slightly at everything happening at once.

After everything that has happened since Albert's death, I should know better than to get too comfortable in my world.

"Is the job in London really on?" I ask. "Or did you say that simply to get me away from the villa?"

Romano smiles grimly and shakes his head before reaching to the floor and lifting a small rucksack onto the table.

"Fate has a strange way of messing with us. The mark has changed his plans and is flying in from South Africa tomorrow night instead of three weeks from now. These things happen and we need to adjust our plans accordingly. I want you there ready for his arrival. All the details are in the rucksack including the surveillance cameras, a secure phone, and an envelope with your flight ticket, and your pickup and hotel booking details. As soon as we are finished here, go and pack and meet me out front. I will drop you off at Florence airport."

After the virtual calm of the past weeks, everything is suddenly taking flight. I pause to process what Romano has told me and breathe deeply to centre myself. And as I do so, a plan forms in my mind, each part snapping cleanly into place like the mosaic tiles on the kitchen floor.

"I understand. Packing will take me minutes. I have very little. But let me ask you this. Have you considered the idea of manipulating your intel?" I ask him.

"What do you mean?"

"Reaffirm with your superiors that Gabriel stayed at the villa and that you have no idea of his current whereabouts. However, you've heard through reliable intelligence sources that a foreign team of elite soldiers are being dispatched to confront and eliminate your agents who are residing here. Suggest that perhaps this special force has a secondary mission, to rendezvous with and extract their precious asset.

Tell them this is pure speculation on your part and that you have no solid proof of the second motive. But suggest that perhaps they could check their own intel to corroborate. If they want me badly enough, they will take the bait. Then make sure you get Lorenzo and Mrs Bellacci the hell away from here. Why risk your own valuable assets when someone at the top of the food chain can do the job for you?"

Doctor Romano reclines in his chair, folds his arms and studies me. I can almost see the wheels turning as he processes what I have said. Anybody else might ask me to clarify but he understands exactly what I have suggested.

"Fly in an elite team of our own to take on theirs? Eagle House would become a war zone."

"Temporarily. And she has been rebuilt once. She can be rebuilt again."

"If my superiors were to suspect I was manipulating them—"

"How can they? Everything you would be telling them is the truth."

Doctor Romano stands abruptly. Unusually for him, he leans across the table and holds out a hand for me to shake. I stand and return the gesture, sealing some kind of unspoken contract.

"Go and pack. I will meet you out front. Once I drop you off at the airport, I do not expect to hear from you again until you have completed your assignment. Or unless you encounter problems and need urgent assistance."

"That will not happen."

Between packing and heading to Romano's SUV, I spot Mrs Bellacci through the kitchen window, but Lorenzo is nowhere to be seen. As we drive away, I cannot shake the cold dread that I will never see him again.