

FOURTEEN

FILES

The code is easy to decrypt, one of the simpler ones Albert and I used. After a couple of attempts, as soon as I realise the letter S corresponds to the letter A, and T with B, the riddle is solved. Everyone stands by, intrigued.

"Gabriel," I tell them, reading from my pencilled code. "Key to black case in garage."

Mrs Bellacci shakes her head at the fuss, but I know Albert went to this trouble for a reason. Even if someone had found the envelope and key, they would be unlikely to know about our obsession with codes. Had I not known, I might have assumed this was a simple doodle.

"Is there a garage here?"

"There is," says Lorenzo. "For storage. We park cars there if we have guests."

"Did Albert stow anything in there?"

"No, I do not think—"

"Yes, he did," says Mrs Bellacci. "A few boxes. Things he did not need in the house. But I don't know if there was a black case. We shall go and check?"

The double garage turns out to be something I had

mistaken as a wooden-slatted outhouse—a little rundown in appearance from the outside—at the back of the grounds behind the lemon grove. Only as we draw closer do I realise the door is double-fronted, and the building stands before a rough gravel track that leads back to the villa's front gate.

Lorenzo unlocks the heavy padlocks, and I help him open one of the doors, which swings outwards remarkably easily. Inside is not what I had been expecting—I had envisaged a cavernous space of cobwebs and dust—but a clean concrete floor with only a seated lawnmower and the silhouettes of three motorcycles. When Lorenzo flicks a wall switch, and bright neon lighting bleaches the room, I recognise one of them from when I first arrived, the black BMW sitting outside Pensione Galli. There is also a steel rack filling the back wall containing wooden crates, large plastics storage boxes and cardboard packing boxes.

"Where do we start?" I ask.

"The plastic crates belong to Mrs Bellacci. Do not touch them unless you want your hand cut off," Lorenzo says with a sly smile.

Mrs Bellacci tuts and gives him one of her humoured looks as she shuffles towards the cardboard packing boxes. "Those contain my professional wardrobes and accessories. Things I might take with me when I am on assignment."

"Perhaps you could introduce Janis to la contessa tonight?" says Lorenzo, going over to help her.

"I have work to do and food to cook," she says, pulling open one box after another. She leaves Lorenzo to check containers on the top shelf that are just out of her reach.

Doctor Romano leans into me and whispers. "One of Mrs Bellacci's skills is her amazing range of disguises. I have worked with them both for almost seven years now, and I

am always amazed at how she can perform such transformations, so quickly."

"When we start his instruction—the sooner the better, Dr Romano—I will give him basic camouflage training and come up with a handful of simple characters for him to become."

"Hey, Janis," says Roberto, turning and nodding at the motorbikes. "Do you know how to ride?"

"As far as I know, I have never ridden a bike," I reply, looking over at the collection.

"Then we will need to add another skill to your list," says Lorenzo. "One I will gladly teach you."

"I think I have found it," says Mrs Bellacci.

Standing before one of the boxes, she lifts out a compact briefcase made of black steel. She holds the case before her for a moment, checking the locks before coming over to us.

"This has a key lock," she says. "And those boxes all belonged to the professore."

She holds the case with the locks towards me, and I try the key. We watch as the key slides in, turns, and the case unlocks. When I click the clasps, the lid springs open.

Contained inside are two stiff plastic file folders. I lift them both out as Mrs Bellacci places the case on the ground.

"I suggest we return to the house. There is better light there," says the doctor, and nobody objects.

Back in the kitchen, we settle around the table with the doctor and me together on one side. Mrs Bellacci and Lorenzo remain standing together. She takes one file, and I take the other. Romano peers over my shoulder as I read through. A shiver runs through me when I read a label on top with the name Gabriel R written in felt pen, in beautiful cursive lettering.

Inside the folder, the various documents are clearly photocopies. Another note inside is clipped to the front, once again in beautiful handwriting, and reads simply:

Please be careful. This is dangerous information. But I agree that he needs to know.

Romano and I look through the file together, with me reading and then passing items to him. Each report is headed by Special Operation KW and refers to somebody called Subject K5. Tests on general health and fitness, agility, survival skills and language skills include an official-looking document called an AFIC. Every test appears to have a scribbled rating of 98%-100%, A+ or O/S. Each is stamped with a simple Hartfield Facility seal and contains an indecipherable signature.

"Advanced Fitness, Intelligence and Cognitive test," says Romano. "Not many know about that. It is a dedicated and highly specialised test all elite special forces in the UK have to undertake and pass. It is a huge step up from the MATT, the annual test for all armed forces. If this is you, Gabriel, you would have been considered top of your...."

Doctor Romano stops speaking, and I let him take the AFIC report from me, his attention drawn to something on the page.

"Do you think that might be you, Gabe—Janis?" asks Lorenzo, shaking his head in defeat at the file Mrs Bellacci has in her hands and is sifting through.

"I have no idea. I would not have thought so. These tests sound punishing. And surely they're aimed at adult soldiers. I know everything that's happened to me since the age of eleven and none of that included anything to do with the military."

Doctor Roman holds up the AFIC sheet with the word

O/S scrawled across the top. I shrug at him. I assume the letters mean outstanding.

"Like I said, I don't remember any test," I say, offering up a shrug.

"Not the score. Look at the age of the subject."

Even Mrs Bellacci's attention is drawn to him now. We all stare. The subject's age is recorded as seven years old. I may not know much about the army, but I am reasonably sure no modern military service of any country would allow someone that young to be recruited.

"A mistake?" I suggest.

"No," says Romano, holding up another. "This health report is dated a year earlier and has the subject's age as six. If this is you, Janis—or whoever you are—you were in some kind of elite armed forces unit that recruited and trained young persons."

"That would not be legal—" I begin but am interrupted by Mrs Bellacci.

"I thought so," she says, staring at me intently. "The tattoo on your wrist. The knight and the number five. I believe you are the subject, K5."

Now I am baffled. If she is right, how could Albert have known this and never told me? Does this explain who I was before my accident and memory loss? And was this the reason Albert was killed? I am confident the handwriting on the file belongs to Sylvie Leblanc.

"This is why I was curious earlier," she continues and now has everyone's attention.

"In 2002, many years before I worked with either of you," she says, looking at the doctor and Lorenzo. "I volunteered for an undercover reconnaissance operation in Iraq. This was before the US-led invasion. My assignment was to help rescue three political prisoners—one Italian and two

Germans—from a high security prison compound a few miles north of Baghdad. The Italian UN general who briefed me at the time said I would pose as the widow of an Iraqi officer and would be accompanied by my six-year-old daughter, another agent, who could speak fluent arabic. I objected, naturally. I always worked alone back then. And in our line of work children are a liability. But my objections were overridden. That is when I was paired with Jamila, a British girl of mixed parenting. To this day, I have met nobody like her. Physically, she looked like a small girl. But she had the head and wisdom of an old woman and the skills of a seasoned fighter. In public, she became a sweet, innocent little girl who could charm and beguile anyone. Privately, she knew how to strategise, could climb as well as Lorenzo, could squeeze through small spaces, and knew how to fight. I watched her strangle a guard with a skipping rope. Without her help, getting into the compound where the prisoners were held would have been impossible. Our mission was a success, but I only found out about other outcomes when we returned. As part of our cover, Jamila had been enrolled in an exclusive preparatory school that she attended during the day. Only after we parted ways did I learn that a high ranking officer in the Iraqi armed forces had died in an explosion in the school carpark after visiting his nephew. The UN general told me that, apart from helping me, Jamila had been given a special operation of her own."

"But how does that relate to Janis?" asks Lorenzo.

"Not only would she have been around his age, but she had a similar tattoo on her wrist, a chess knight with the number two in old numerals beneath."

"You think they are related, her and Janis?" asks Lorenzo, staring at me.

"This I do not know," says Mrs Bellacci. "But the coincidence is remarkable, is it not?"

I have a swarm of questions crowding my head. Most focus on how much Albert knew and why he told me nothing. To protect me?

"Have you ever heard talk of a chassin?" asks Romano out of the blue.

"Only the town," says Mrs Bellacci, with a shrug. "In St Lucia, I think."

"That is also correct, but—and this is something I have always considered speculation or even carefully planted misinformation—there were rumours in the early part of the new century about the British military having raised an elite team of ethnically diverse children in early to mid childhood, nicknamed Chassin—short for child assassin. The story sounded too fanciful for me—in Italy we laughingly called them Bambassino—because, to begin with, young children of any nationality are impossible to discipline effectively, lack concentration and dedication, and moreover, they would never be allowed into highly secure places where targetable figures might congregate. Except Teresa's account substantiates this crazy theory. What if Jamila had been part of a team?"

"If I am number five and she was number two, how many of us are there?" I ask, staring into space. "And where are the others?"

"What parent would allow their child to be used in this way?" asks Mrs Bellacci. "I remember thinking that at the time, when I worked with Jamila."

I had not even considered who my parents might be. Maybe because I have never had any real parents in my life. My anger is still aimed at Albert and why he kept this

crucial information from me. I notice Doctor Romano has become quiet and appears troubled.

"Naturally, I could make enquiries. I have already sent the photograph of your tattoo to a few close colleagues at UN command headquarters. But, in the light of this file, I am wondering if that was such a sensible idea. The note says this is dangerous information, but not why, or for whom it might be dangerous. I can only assume this means Janis. Did you ever hear from the girl again, Teresa?"

"Never," says Mrs Bellacci. "Could she and Janis have both had their memory taken from them?"

"No," I reply because this I know beyond any doubt. "Mine was due to head trauma from the train accident. The doctors who treated me in the public hospital studied me and wrote reports about my retrograde amnesia. It's not common, and they took time to analyse me. And, from what I understood, the kind of amnesia I suffered from is not something that could be induced."

"Moreover," says Doctor Romano. "If the military had been involved, they would never have allowed reports to be published. Can I see the other folder?"

"This is something entirely different," says Bellacci, handing over the file. "I cannot understand much, but you might have better luck with your medical background. Come on, Lorenzo. You too, Janis. While the doctor studies the file, you can help me prepare dinner."

The opportunity to do something commonplace has an oddly calming effect. After she doles out instructions, Lorenzo and I work around each other to peel and chop onions, garlic, red peppers and other legumes while she sets about preparing the meal. Every now and then, Lorenzo finds the opportunity to move past me, brushing the back of his hand along my groin or leaning across me to grab a bowl

or utensil, breathing hotly on my neck or ear. Eventually, as Mrs Bellacci instructs us to sit at the table while she finishes cooking the meal, a thought comes to me.

"Did you find out where this girl, Jamila, came from in the UK?" I ask, wondering if this might give me a place to start my search.

"We only ever talked about the mission. Never any idle talk. I had the impression she would have told me nothing anyway."

"Do you think it is the information on the first file that got Professor Callico killed?" asks Lorenzo.

"No," says Romano decisively. He has been quiet all this time, a frown painted across his forehead, but he looks up at Lorenzo's words and taps his forefinger on the documents in front of him. "What is contained in this file got him killed. Although I do not believe he was the target, simply collateral damage. There are two medical reports in here. The larger is the official paper about the three-year clinical trials for a new combination super vaccination against coronavirus and other common diseases. From the looks of the comments, licenses were granted based on the outcomes. But there appears to have been another trial conducted in parallel—unofficially, I believe, but not unlawfully—by a small group of immunology specialists, the results of which have been discarded. The efficacy and success rates in the official report are notably higher than the secondary. The second also includes a list of significant longer term serious and sometimes fatal side effects for people suffering from certain blood or respiratory diseases. There is a copy of an email from a senior clinician to members of a medical council bringing into question the results of what he describes as a rogue trial by disgruntled ex-colleagues

behaving unprofessionally to try and stall their collective efforts."

"Who headed up the main clinical trial?" I ask, wanting my suspicions confirmed.

"Have a guess?" says Romano.

"Puchinsky?"

"Professor S J Puchinsky."

"And the secondary one?" asks Lorenzo.

"It does not say, but I am sure none of us would be surprised if Doctor Sylvie LeBlanc's name appeared in the team roster somewhere. What I do know is that if the WHO had been presented officially with this supplementary report, this drug would never have been granted a license for manufacturing. Not until further checks and balances had been carried out. But that would have delayed the release."

"And would have lost Puchinsky significant publicity, credibility and, above all, money," I add. "Medical companies must be clambering over themselves to patent the drug."

Mrs Bellacci serves the meal, a bed of flat ribbons of pappardelle served with minced wild boar and a deliciously creamy sauce. I still find it hard to believe this talented woman also kills people for a living.

"You know, Janis," says Doctor Romano, raising a glass of red wine to Mrs Bellacci. "There is still somebody who might be able to help unravel this mystery for you."

"Sylvie Leblanc." I had been thinking the same thing. Across from me, Lorenzo had been wiping his bottom lip with a thumb and catches me staring at him. Almost imperceptibly, he smiles, and I know tonight in bed will be as satisfying as the meal. "But she is in a coma in a hospital in London."

"Or so we are led to believe," he says, raising an eyebrow. "There is only one way to find out. And I am sure she would not object to a visitor. Especially if that visitor is a ghost. We also have a small job that needs taking care of in London."

"He is not ready," says Mrs Bellacci, looking abruptly at Romano.

"I thought that was to be my job," says Lorenzo, at the same time.

"No, he is not ready. Not yet," agrees Romano. "But I don't believe it will take much. A few weeks of intensive training will get you combat ready if you are going to be of any use to yourself or us. And he has another reason to be there, Lorenzo."

"Then I will go with him—"

"No. London is not a two person job. You will stay here."

I have seen the sharp defiance in Lorenzo's eyes before when I first arrived. He is not happy with the decision but sits back and says nothing.

"The question is, Janis, are you up for the challenge?"

As if he needs to ask.