

## THIRTEEN

### KEY

With the moonlight silhouetting his body, I watch Lorenzo tear off his clothes. When he pulls down his underpants and turns to toss them onto a chair, I see he is already fully aroused. I throw back the covers allowing him to dive onto the bed, meeting me with a fierce kiss. When he pulls away, we both chuckle. Tonight is unhurried, not frenzied like in the afternoon. Tonight there is no urgency, and, unusually for me, I let go and allow him to take his fill of my body. I know I am giving in to trust, and a part of me is wary. But everything about his presence in my bed feels natural, too fervent and mutually pleasurable to be a simple act of seduction. Eventually, I silence my brain and allow myself to enjoy the exchange.

Once again, he ends up sitting on my stomach, but this time shuffles up to my chest, his intention plain. His head and hair dangle down as he stares intently at me. With a jerk of his hips, the head of his cock bobs down and touches my lips. Wrapping my hands around his arse cheeks, I yank him forward, taking his length into my mouth while caressing my fingers into his crevice. I have already come to learn that

Lorenzo gives very little away when we make love, but there are small tells—a stutter in his breath, a tremor in his thighs, or, as I hear right now, a barely inaudible whimper when I swallow his whole length while delving my forefinger into him.

Before long, he pushes back, a hand gripping my hair but not painfully. I can feel him occasionally tensing and trying to hold off the inevitable. Eventually, as he reaches climax, he begins to pull away, but I hold him tight and let his cum fill my throat, taking every drop of him. His hands on either side of my head ball into fistfuls of bed covering, and his thighs shudder. I cannot read his face in the darkened room but sense the glint of pleasure in his eyes.

Once he has caught his breath, he shifts back and kisses me again, his tongue tasting the saltiness of himself in my mouth. Only for a few seconds, though. After that, it soon becomes clear that he is intent on undoing me, reciprocating and squeezing an orgasm from me. I lie with my hands behind my head and watch him work on me, his silhouetted head bobbing up and down on my groin, alternating speeds and using his tongue to work my head until I can feel the gathering climax.

With one hand pumping my cock, he reaches the other between my legs and touches the crease of my backside. With a lightning reflex, I reach down and grab his wrist. He snorts and withdraws the offending hand.

"Maybe not today, Gabriel." His hot breath caresses the head of my cock. "But one day. One day you will beg me to have you."

"Maybe," I reply, but I don't believe I ever will.

Fortunately, the intrusion has not affected my arousal, and very soon, he has me spilling my seed on my stomach. Once I am drained, he makes a point of reciprocating,

licking up every spill before kissing me and letting me taste my salty cum.

We lie on our backs together, unspeaking, staring up into the corners of the ceiling, until I feel myself drift off to sleep.

I stir too early with nightfall outside the window. When I rise on my elbows, Lorenzo is still in my bed, lying on his back, breathing gently. Moonlight shines a path across the bedroom floor, lighting his face. Asleep, he seems at peace, untroubled by dreams. I also see a man at his most vulnerable who trusts me enough to share my bed. The sudden thought makes me miss a breath. Since Albert's passing, I have only looked out for myself. But I know, as I look down at Lorenzo's face, that if anyone should even think of harming him, I would end them. I breathe deeply and analyse that thought. Unusually, there are no dissenting voices, no critical opinions arguing or finding logical flaws in my assertion.

I lie back down and wonder what is happening to me. But not for long because the sound of his breathing combined with his body warmth lulls me back to sleep.

When I wake again, Lorenzo is gone. I notice light beginning to dilute the darkness, and I step naked from the bed to reach for my speedos and towel. There is something to be said for swimming lengths as dawn breaks.

On my way through the villa, as I head back to the bedroom, I spot Doctor Romano standing by the front door, a phone clamped to his ear. When I nod a welcome, he ends his call.

"Once you've changed, come to the kitchen. Mrs Bellacci is up early to make you breakfast and get started on your reinvention," he says. I wonder absently if he stayed

the night. "Once she's finished I need you with me. We have a lot to accomplish today."

Once breakfast is out of the way, Mrs Bellacci takes me to the bathroom in her lodgings and sits me down. I notice the annexe is at a right angle, and Bellacci's bedroom and bathroom sit at one end with French doors out onto the grounds. With a communal living area in the middle, I assume Lorenzo's bedroom must be at the other end. A chair sits in the middle of the shower area, and after telling me to remove my shoes, socks and shirt, she instructs me to be seated. I close my eyes and let her cut my hair with an electric shaver. After she sweeps up my dark hair, I remain seated while she mixes a potent chemical concoction. She applies this to my head, massages the potion in thoroughly, rinses while I lean backward, and then repeats the process. This happens four or five times. After she has towelled off and then blow-dried my head, she instructs me to put on a dark woollen cap.

"Now get dressed. Il dottor is waiting by his car outside the front gate."

"What will I need?"

"He has everything. Maybe get a jacket to wear but take nothing else from your room."

"The gun?"

Mrs Bellacci provides one of her smiles that feels as though she is humouring me.

"You will be with the doctor. You have no need of a gun."

Romano is waiting outside the front gate by his SUV and nods his approval when he sees me wearing the hat. I still have no idea what Mrs Bellacci has done to my hair, but I trust them. I go over and open the passenger door.

"What kind of clothing does Gabriel Redbrick usually

prefer to wear?" asks the doctor as we drive slowly down the lane.

I talk through my unremarkable wardrobe consisting mainly of jeans and plain tee shirts by a particular sportswear company, my faux-leather bomber jacket in a rustic brown and navy blue puffer. He nods as I am speaking and appears to understand my choice.

"As I thought. You like to blend into a crowd."

"I prefer not to stand out, if that's what you mean."

"Were Gabriel more ostentatious and style conscious, I would suggest we dress him unremarkably. But I fear we are going to have to work the reverse to make the new you believable."

"Won't that draw attention?"

"Not necessarily. Let's keep an open mind today. But please remember that we are trying to create someone as far from Gabriel as possible. Have you ever sported a beard or a goatee?"

"Never. I am not a fan of facial hair."

"Good. Then we have another angle to pursue."

Romano drives me into town and introduces me to the man who will help me with my appearance. He sits me down, pulls off my hat and says some words to Romano in Italian. I feel slightly uncomfortable with how he frowns at me and scrutinises my face. Eventually, he leaves me seated and heads out through one of the doors.

"He has a few ideas he thinks will work. You will be getting an ear pierced. We talked about the nose, but he says there can be swelling so he will concentrate on the ear. He also feels having one eyebrow stylised will give someone like you—how do you say in English—more of an edge."

I say nothing. When the man returns, I allow him to do his work, with Romano standing over us and occasionally

murmuring his approval. Like Bellacci, this man works without mirrors, so I have no idea what he is doing. Surprisingly, the piercing is not painful, and when Romano swings the chair around to view me, he nods his approval. But the man has not finished. He brings out a trolley containing an unusual array of instruments and hair pieces. Working painfully slowly, he shaves my face and paints some cool liquid around my mouth. He gradually applies some pre-prepared hair, which I assume to be a beard and moustache. Every now and then, Romano points and offers a suggestion. What feels like hours later, he appears to have finished, and I bring my fingers up to touch the hair, only to have them slapped away by the guy.

"He asks that you don't touch anything today, not for at least three hours. Now, there is a small changing room through this door. Marco has left some old clothes for you to wear. Go and try them on."

The worn trousers hanging over a wooden chair instantly catch my eye, black leather Gothic style with buckles, studs and belts. Gabriel Redbrick would run a mile from this kind of attire. Even the sleeveless waistcoat in black leather he has chosen for me to wear over a plain black tee follows the same Gothic theme, with thick belts and buckles fastening from one side. To finish off, he has furnished me with leather wristbands—presumably to cover up the marks on my wrists—and a pair of matching fingerless leather gloves, complete with painful-looking studs. I snort when I see the chunky biker boots, black, of course, and with a single strap and buckle.

Once I am fully dressed, the outfit feels remarkably comfortable. I take a moment to adjust myself before ripping off the cap and stepping out into the main room.

Doctor Romano is talking to the man but turns and

looks delighted. Even the stylist, if that's what he is, seems impressed. He reaches into a drawer and pulls out a pair of round sunglasses before handing them to me. I put them on, even though I hardly need them in the room, and he leads me to an open door that he closes to reveal a full-length mirror.

I barely recognise my face. With cropped platinum blond hair, single black ear stud, dark moustache and goatee, chevrons through my right eyebrow and dark glasses, I ought to look conspicuous. And I feel sure that if Lorenzo had opted for this kind of makeover, he would stand out. But I am not naturally attractive like him, and this transformation gives me an almost dangerous edge, was though I have a 'Don't Approach' sign over my head. I cannot help but smile.

"When you first came to Italy you did not look well. I think you needed the extra pounds that you have gained, and with the regular exercise together with the sunshine, your skin and muscle tone are both much better. How do you feel?"

"Different. Surprisingly comfortable."

"Good. This is important. The old you may have disappeared, but this new version will still need to be ready for action at any moment."

The man, Marco—who speaks no English—hands me bags of more clothing. Romano pays him and whisks me off to the next venue. The woman in a small downstairs apartment is suited professionally. She only needs to capture my fingerprints on a glass-panelled machine before taking my photograph using a floor-mounted camera in her small back-room studio. The whole visit takes no longer than twenty minutes, but I notice Romano handing over a great deal of money.

"What was that all about?" I ask as we head out to the car.

"New identification. We will return later in the afternoon."

"I see. What will happen to my old passport?"

"That is already being taken care of. Let us go for lunch. Somewhere with outdoor seating. I need you to become comfortable in public with this new image."

Romano takes me to one of the restaurants around a piazza, and we settle down for an alfresco lunch. The weather is overcast and almost as unremarkable as the food, not a patch on what Mrs Bellacci serves, but I enjoy being out in the open. I am also curious to see if people stare as I sit there, and I am slightly surprised to draw very little attention. Perhaps Italians are more accustomed to people with eclectic fashion choices. If I had walked into Callico House dressed like this, I am sure Albert and Alice would have had a few things to say.

"You haven't once addressed me as Gabriel this morning," I say to Romano.

"That's because Gabriel is no longer with us. I am having lunch with Janis Petersone." Romano pulls an envelope from his inside pocket and places it on the table. "This is a summary. I have a full file in the car for you to study. And, yes, I will be testing you. What's listed here are the basics of your new identity. But very briefly, you are a Latvian national who served in the same UN peacekeeping force as Lorenzo, which is how you became friends and why you dress in a not dissimilar fashion."

"You had all this planned?"

"Not everything. Your Latvian EU passport is being assembled while we lunch."

I read the overview of Janis Petersone. An only child, I

had a Latvian father and a Russian mother. He was a mechanical engineer, and she was a high school teacher who taught and encouraged me to speak English and Russian. Both parents are deceased. According to the report, I am twenty-six, only a year younger than Gabriel. I was born in Ventspils, a city in northwestern Latvia, and joined the army—NBS—straight from school after I turned eighteen. My parents died in a car accident while I was deployed overseas. I met Lorenzo during UN operations in Africa, which is how we became friends.

"The folder has more comprehensive information such as lists of family, friends, qualifications, deployments—those kinds of things. Everything you need to know about the man."

"You've gone to a lot of trouble."

"Not really. Janis Petersone existed. He was a special services operative who was killed by pirates while deployed in Somalia. Due to the secret nature of his mission, his death was covered up and his body buried at sea, something only two members of his unit know about. Both are sworn to secrecy. As far as the world is concerned, he is still alive and serving in the army."

This information stalls me for a moment. What would happen in the admittedly unlikely event I met somebody who knew Janis?

"Do I look anything like him?"

"You do now. The large file will give you plenty of photographs of the man as well as an overview of his personal traits and idiosyncrasies, accounts by people he knew and the soldiers he served alongside. But honestly, unless you plan on visiting Latvia anytime soon, nobody is likely to know."

Romano has several more chores to complete before we

head back to Eagle House late in the afternoon. On our way back, we pull up outside the apartment of the woman preparing my new identity. Romano tells me to stay in the car and is gone barely five minutes before returning. When he climbs back into the driving seat, he hands me a new burgundy red passport with the words Eiropas Savieniba across the top and Latvijas Republic beneath. Naturally, I turn to the last page to check my recent photograph.

"Guard this with your life. This is your new identity containing all of your biometric information. As we near the house, make sure you have the woollen hat on your head and your sunglasses on, and keep your head down. I want to see the reaction of Mrs Bellacci and Lorenzo when they meet you."

When we arrive at Eagle House, Mrs Bellacci must know we have returned because as we pull up, the front gate opens. Romano leads us around the outside of the building until we reach the kitchen, where he tells me to stay outside. I survey the grounds, noticing the pool cleaning pole lying on the floor that had been discarded there that morning. Did Lorenzo not work that day? Sprinklers are already working to water the grass as the sun casts deep shadows across the lawn.

"Teresa, Lorenzo," I hear Romano say from inside before he speaks something in Italian and ends with the name Janis Petersona. "Come in, Janis."

On cue, I rip off my hat and step into the kitchen to find Mrs Bellacci and Lorenzo standing warily on the other side of the table. Mrs Bellacci's face breaks into a smile, but the look on Lorenzo's face is priceless. His mouth hangs open, his eyes darting about my face and body as though he cannot believe what he sees.

"Gabriel?" he asks.

Romano is about to respond, but I pip him to the post.

"Not Gabriel. I am Janis. From Latvia," I reply, adopting a slight accent. "Do you not remember me, Enzo? We are old friends."

"Santo cielo!" says Mrs Bellacci, chuckling. "I would not recognise him. He could be Lorenzo's brother if he had one."

Lorenzo remains struck dumb until Mrs Bellacci mutters something in Italian to him. He appears to come to his senses and nods before heading out the back door, leaving us alone.

"As you can see, we have had a busy day and accomplished much," Romano says to Mrs Bellacci. "Janis should stay with Lorenzo in his quarters. As his guest. It would not be appropriate to put him into one of the rooms in the villa without the consent of Signor Redbrick, who, as we know, left us in the middle of the night a number of days ago."

"What about my things?" I ask Romano.

"While you were gone, I thoroughly cleaned out your old room. There is nothing left to link you to him. But I have kept a plastic bag of toiletries and underwear," says Mrs Bellacci. "I also have your money and gun, if that is what you are worried about. Everything else has been removed, in case anyone comes looking for you, for him."

"I see. Thank you."

"Welcome to Italy and to Eagle House, Mr Petersone," she says in Russian, still smiling as Lorenzo returns to the kitchen. "Lorenzo has a surprise for you."

Once again, Lorenzo's eyes flicker momentarily as he takes me in, but this time he seems pleased with himself as he slaps down a book onto the table and then folds his arms in triumph. Now it's my turn to be shocked. The unassuming book with an oddly dramatic title in large letters on

the cover—something about a slot machine and a broken test tube—is unmistakably an autobiography of Salvador Edward Luria. I am sure I noticed the book on the shelf, but being one of few with a dust jacket, I dismissed its significance.

"Have you checked inside?" I ask him as I reach to pick the book up.

Lorenzo appears less sure now and shakes his head as he uncrosses his arms.

"No, I found this in the same bookcase as the other you found. But on a lower shelf. I thought I would help you while you were gone. But I did not look inside because I do not think I will understand this kind of writing. So I waited for you. Is this the book you are looking for?"

I open the pages and look inside the front and back covers but find nothing remarkable. When I turn the book over and shake the pages, a small white envelope, the kind used to accompany flowers or gifts, drops out and clunks onto the table. There is something solid and metallic inside, like a coin. When I pick up and examine the front, I see a string of carefully written letters in Albert's distinctive handwriting:

ystjawdcwqlgtdsucuskwafysjsw

"What is this?" asks Mrs Bellacci, peering over my shoulder. "It is nonsense. The scribblings of a child."

"No. Never. Not with Albert. This is a code. Something I need to break."

I carefully open the envelope and tip the pouch upside down.

A bronze key clatters out onto the table.

Another mystery to solve.