

ALSO BY LORENZO CARCATERRA

A Safe Place

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THE WOLF

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THE
WOLF

A NOVEL

BALLANTINE BOOKS



NEW YORK

Preface

FLORENCE, ITALY

Summer, 2012

It was not yet noon but already humid on this mid-August Sunday. Stalls and carts lined the Piazza Santa Croce as the statue of Dante glared down at hundreds of tourists and locals. Visitors wearing cameras like jewels around their necks ordered quarter-kilos of prosciutto, salami and fresh mozzarella, each slice laid evenly across the open face of bread just removed from small portable ovens. Others asked for pizzettas covered with toppings and wrapped in wax paper.

The locals lingered, scanning the goods, preparing to buy enough to get through the early part of the week. Many had been to mass and now anticipated the family meal. Street clowns and mimes provided levity to the congested and boisterous setting.

The young man was in his early 20s, clean-shaven and dressed in casual Florentine attire: a tan jacket, cream-colored slacks and white-button down shirt. One hand hid inside the left pocket of his jacket while the other held a chocolate gelato cone, the mound of cream

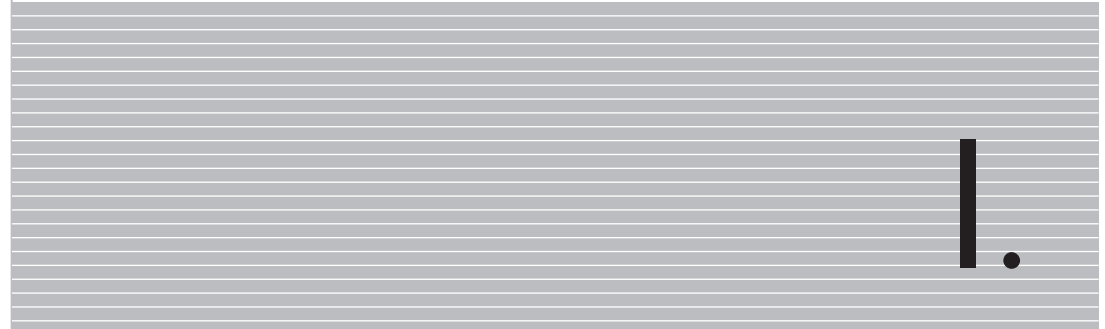
warm confines of a room filled with only a bed, a prayer mat, a nightstand, a bureau. “I wish I had the courage to do what so many others braver than I have done,” he finally said.

“What is that?”

“To give up my life,” his father said. “To surrender flesh in the name of Allah.”

Fourteen months after his father’s death, Ali Ben Bashir stood facing a crowded Piazza in one of the most beautiful and serene places in the world, across from a church where many of the giants of the Renaissance were buried. He unbuttoned the front of his starched white shirt, revealing an intricate series of wires, timers and small explosives taped across his chest. He spread his arms out, a small black box with a red button in the center clutched in his right hand. “I do this for you, dear Father,” Ali said. “I do this in your name.”

Then, head lifted to a cloudless sky, Ali Ben Bashir pressed his thumb on the red button.



“There is no crime of which I cannot conceive myself guilty.”

–JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE



LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
Spring, 2013

It should have been me.

Not Lisa.

And not my girls, that's for damn sure.

And not anyone else, not when you take a hard look at it. It was me they targeted. Me they wanted. It's me they've always wanted. But they couldn't touch me. So they reached for the ones they could get. And I let them walk right into it.

I wanted Lisa and the girls to fly on a private jet with bodyguards sitting in front and back and another team waiting on the ground. That was the way it was meant to happen. That's the way it would have happened if I had held firm. But I let myself be talked out of it.

Lisa didn't want our three kids raised in a bubble. She wanted them to grow up as normal kids leading normal lives—or as normal as they could be when you consider who I am and what I do. She had always wanted that—a normal life. We both knew going in that nor-

mal was never going to be easy, not with me around. You want safe and secure, move to a small town and marry the local grocer. But when you fall in love with a guy like me, the unthinkable comes with the vows.

I am a cautious man.

I don't trust strangers, am uneasy in large gatherings—from weddings to concerts to dinner parties of more than ten—and travel with a discreet security detail close enough to take action if the need arises. I have a carry permit and never venture out minus at least one loaded weapon. I don't adhere to a regular schedule, instead I vary everything—from workouts to the times I eat my meals to the routes I take to work sites and meetings. I am not troubled by any of these habits and, in truth, I derive comfort from knowing I'm in control of my surroundings. It allows me freedom and enables me to focus on the tasks I need to accomplish.

These habits help me excel at what I do. But they do not make me an ideal husband or father. I imposed these restrictions on my family and while *I* see them as a necessary precaution, *they* chafed at their existence. My wife detested any security outside of a home alarm. The kids wanted to be able to have sleep-overs minus background checks, go to parks and outdoor events without being in the company of armed men who made their presence known. The resentment was a cause for friction.

"Why can't we, just this one time, go on vacation like everyone else?" Lisa had asked me.

"We *are* going on a vacation like everyone else," I said. "Does it really matter how we get there?"

"The kids are not going to live your life when they grow up, Vincent," Lisa said. "They'll be out there on their own. The sooner they see what that's like, the better it will be for them. And as I recall, you went to Italy when you were a teenager and you went alone."

"Not exactly," I said. "But I get your point."

"We've never traveled as a family," Lisa said. "I don't think our kids have even seen the inside of an airport."

"They're not missing much," I said. "Long lines, bad food, lost

luggage. Am I leaving anything out?"

"I'm serious, Vincent," Lisa said, reaching for my hand and holding it gently against her side. "Let them be kids, just this once. They're so excited about this trip. I am, too."

"If I get on that plane," I said, "it might as well be a private jet. First class will be me, you, the kids and our bodyguards."

"Then don't get on the plane," Lisa said. "I'll go with the girls and you follow us later with Jack. You still have that real estate deal to close, right?"

I felt the argument sliding away. "That's right," I said.

"Get that off your plate and then you and Jack can meet us in New York," Lisa said. "Give the two of you some time together."

"It doesn't feel right to me, Lisa," I said. "At least not now. In a few years, maybe then might be a better time."

"You said you wanted a normal life for them," Lisa said. "Did you really mean that or were they just words?"

"I meant it," I said. "I don't want them to be like me in any way."

"Then normal needs to start right now," Lisa said. "With this trip."

I pulled Lisa close to me and held her in my arms. "I love you," I said. "And I'll do anything not to lose you or the kids."

"I love you even more," she whispered in my ear. "And always will."

So, going against my nature and judgment, I agreed to allow some air into my hermetically sealed world. For my kids and for Lisa. They wanted a taste of what passes for normal life, to move about freely, not be confined by my rules. And I went along with it, deluding myself into thinking that they would still be safe, they would still be there for me to hold them close.

That no harm would come to them.

That I was the only target of interest.

It was a move that should never have been made. I allowed my love for family to obscure my distrust of the world. I put them out there without the protection they needed, the safeguards required. I let them go. And I will never forgive myself for that.

over his work. Raza thought himself a gifted painter and sculptor; school administrators thought otherwise. Raza looked in the mirror and saw Michelangelo; the administrators saw a meager talent, and a brown-skinned one at that.”

“He turns his back on his own world, only to have”

“The world he wished to enter turn their back to him,” Vladimir said. “Ostracized in one; ridiculed in another—two necessary ingredients for a terrorist.”

“How good is he?”

“Working on a small stage, he’s done well,” Vladimir said. “He’s building a reputation and that will only grow as he selects higher profile targets.”

“Will he listen to you?” Alexander asked.

“None of the good ones can be expected to follow our orders,” Vladimir said. “Which would make it a waste of our time to give them any. Raza will want our money and we will want him to kill and destroy. It makes for a sound arrangement.”

“I wish there were enough time for me to see this one through to the end,” Alexander said.

“As do I, cousin,” Vladimir said. “But I will do my best in your absence.”



NEW YORK CITY

Summer, 2013

The meeting was held on the 35th floor of a downtown Manhattan office building.

The conference room table was covered with porcelain carafes, sterling silver coffee pots and crystal bowls filled with fresh fruit. Three ornate chandeliers lit the room, the glow of their bulbs gleaming off the polished table and mahogany chairs. The floor to ceiling windows were bullet-proof.

It was a landmark building whose halls were once populated by land barons and oil and steel magnates. It was a place accustomed to accommodating men of power and I knew the ones I had invited to join me would feel at ease in here, impressed by the surroundings. They saw themselves as similar to those billionaires from an earlier century, so the parallel would not be lost on them.

I had food prepared by the finest chefs from every nation that would be represented at the table—from Southern Italian delicacies