

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

EIGHTEEN

RUN

As I rush to leave, I snatch up the attacker's small red and black checked backpack. I have no time to search the man's body, but perhaps the bag contains something to identify him.

Outside Leblanc's room, a bright red light above the door flashes intermittently and emits a shrill alarm. Nobody else is in the corridor. I know I can't return the way I came past the nurse station. And the other end of the ward is also staffed at night. Security officers could approach from either direction at any moment. All fire exits have alarms fitted, and cameras are installed in the stairwells.

I need a strategy.

Fast.

Using the back of the utility knife, I break the glass of the fire alarm mounted on the wall. Instantly, deafening bells begin ringing, drowning out the security alarm. Even though I will be caught on camera, I push through the fire exit door and slam the door closed behind me. I descend the emergency stairs to the first stairwell, which I know is a

blindspot. Working furiously but efficiently, I remove the porter garb, clean the knife wound as best I can, and use the utility knife to cut a strip of the polo shirt before tying the makeshift bandage tightly around my arm. Once I've changed into scrubs, I stuff everything into my larger rucksack. Sounds of movement come from up the stairs. Grateful to have listened to Mrs Bellacci, I fix the dark wig onto my blond head before pulling up my medical mask and putting on glasses. Losing no time, I set both rucksacks over my shoulders and descend. A few flights down, I merge with a cluster of staff who burst through another exit door on their way to evacuate the building.

"It's a bloody false alarm. I'll bet you money," says a male nurse leading the charge. "Probably set off by some insomniac patient or a cleaner. And now the whole bloody ward will be awake and I'll have to rush around trying to reassure them and get them back to sleep."

"Always better to be safe than sorry," comes the female voice of someone behind him. "Where's the meeting point again?"

"Medical staff car park. I hope the fire wardens get a move on. It's bloody cold out there tonight."

On my first day, one of the team took me through the procedures for a fire drill, and I was shown the spot in the hospital car park where everyone should congregate. Security staff will know exactly where the alarm was activated. That's the first place they always check in case there might be a false alarm.

By then, I will be gone.

Adrenaline still pumps through my body as I push through the door on the ground floor into the cold night air. Everyone muddles together in confusion in the car park,

looking to the upper storeys for signs of flames, and nobody notices when I slip out of the side gate onto the main road. In the distance, I hear the wail of approaching sirens.

Leblanc telling me to run makes perfect sense. Janis has been captured on CCTV neutralising an armed and highly trained assassin. When police secure the footage of what happened in that room, they will see instantly that I am not the instigator. The problem for me is, what other government departments will gain a copy? When I return to the flat, I must pack and move on. But where to?

I had hoped that Leblanc would be conscious and I could ask her questions, even if I only received a nod or a single-word response. Is the Hartfield institute in the UK? I am sure Albert told me the author of the Winnie the Pooh stories, A A Milne, had a home in Hartfield in East Sussex. But it would have been helpful to confirm the location before I started a search. And I would have asked if Dr Maurice Leblanc mentioned on the card is the same person written about in her letter. More importantly, is he a relative and somehow involved in what happened to me?

I follow my usual route back, down a narrow alleyway, then past a small parade of unlit shops in a quiet residential side street away from the main high road. The street lights are intermittent here, and I can move freely in the shadows. My arm is throbbing. I will need to dig out the first aid kit when I get home to give the wound a thorough inspection and proper dressing. When I pull out my phone and am about to switch the device on to check for messages, something catches my eye.

Ahead of me, a car turns into the empty street. The driver puts the lights momentarily on full before switching them off entirely and bringing the vehicle to a halt. Two

silhouettes emerge, one from the driver and one from the passenger side. The phone's light illuminates the driver's face, something he switches off when he spies me.

I should have taken a different route home. Moreover, how did they know to follow me when I was wearing a disguise? No point rationalising now. My arm is still weak from the stab wound. Can I tackle both men with one arm weakened? Deciding a strategic retreat might be the best solution, I back away and begin to turn. Another figure approaches from where I have come, a phone clamped to his ear.

Three assailants.

Even in good health without an injury, taking on three combatants might be a challenge, but my mind stills anyway as I pull out the utility knife and prepare to fight.

I barely notice the roar of a motorcycle from an intersecting lane until the rider screeches around the corner, swerves the machine onto the pavement and swings a crash helmet into the side of the lone attacker's head. The man is thrown off balance, losing his footing, and drops to the pavement. When the biker brings the machine to a halt and lifts the visor, I am momentarily confused, my brain readjusting to a different kind of attack—until the eyes of Lorenzo stare back at me.

"Don't stand there. Get on," he says, tossing me the spare helmet.

As I catch the headgear and run towards the bike, putting the knife away, a shot ricochets off a lamppost. One of the men sprints towards us, holding a pistol at chest height. Lorenzo pulls a gun with a suppressor from inside the front of his leather jacket. He fires three shots past me and one at the man struggling up from the ground. I climb

on the back of the bike and clip the helmet in place. When I look up, two bodies lie on the pavement while the driver returns to the car. I grasp Lorenzo tightly around the stomach and slap his shoulder. As we speed past the parked car, he fires a shot into the front tyre before roaring us towards the main road.

The engine is too loud to converse meaningfully, but I know I must try when we cross Vauxhall Bridge heading south and in the wrong direction.

"My flat is north," I shout.

"We should not go there tonight. I'm taking us somewhere safe. You have anything important there?"

"Just clothes."

"We can collect tomorrow. But one thing to know."

"Yes."

"If you ever get yourself killed, I will kill you. Understood?" he shouts, his angry words making no sense and complete sense at the same time. For now, I store away questions I want to ask him, press my body into his back, and squeeze my thighs against his. Tonight has been eventful, and I must take this time to centre myself. Do I trust Lorenzo? Absolutely. With my whole being.

"Understood."

As we race through the main streets, my mind clears and floats to the fact that these men had singled me out. With sudden clarity, a realisation hits me.

"Stop. Pull over," I shout.

"What?"

"Pull over!"

Lorenzo pulls the bike into a side street and stops beneath a streetlamp. Instantly I jump off the bike and remove the red and black rucksack from my shoulder. I pull

out an odd assortment of items, including innocent objects such as sweet wrappers and a puzzle book. But there's also a roll of British banknotes and other significant finds. However, I find what I had suspected in a small side pocket. A mobile phone switched to silent.

I scan the pavement and notice a row of tall dustbins awaiting collection. After transferring everything else into my bag, I step away and toss the phone and rucksack into a random blue-topped recycle bin.

"How far are we from your place?" I ask.

"Fifteen minutes or so."

"Let's go."

We head into the back streets of Vauxhall until he slows the bike and drives through a dimly lit archway into a courtyard surrounded by what looks like council flats. Without a word, he parks and secures the motorcycle before removing his helmet and holding a hand out for mine. With everything stored away, he leads me to an entry door, prods in a code, and we climb four flights of stone stairs.

The flat's interior is deceptively modern and spacious, a significant step up from where I have been staying. Lorenzo holds the door open to allow me to cross the threshold before locking the door, then slams me up against the wall.

"You left me," he says before crushing our mouths together again. I return the embrace, but he must have noticed me wince with pain at the pressure of his forearm on my upper arm. When he pulls away, his eyes widen as he looks at my arm.

"What is this?"

Blood has seeped through the bandage and stained the sleeve of my scrubs. Maybe due to the pressure Lorenzo exerted or the warm air in the flat, the injury begins to throb

painfully again. He pulls me away by my other arm and leads me down the hall.

"Another attacker," I explain to his back. "In the hospital. Stabbed me when I caught him attempting to kill Leblanc."

"The same people."

"I believe so."

"Tonight I saw men hanging around outside the hospital gate. I parked my motorcycle and waited in the bus shelter across the road from the hospital to meet you after your shift. But something did not feel right about these men. And then the alarms went off. When you left the grounds and headed into an alleyway, one of the men pointed at you and began to follow. Luckily I remembered the disguise you were wearing. That's when I came after you on the bike."

Lorenzo pulls a stool from beneath the sink and makes me sit. Opening a cabinet, he pulls out scissors and removes the sleeve material.

"I wonder if they trailed me home last night."

"No, that was me. My apologies. I wanted to surprise you yesterday. But before I could, Teresa phoned me to check in and advised me to hold back and observe. As always, her advice paid off."

I hiss in a breath when he dabs a cold, damp sponge around the wound.

"Where is this other man?" asks Lorenzo. "The one who tried to kill Leblanc?"

"Unconscious. Tied up. I imagine the police will have him in custody by now."

"Good. Okay, I am going to look at this wound."

Using his fingertips, he probes the gash before grabbing a bottle of antiseptic solution and cotton swabs and using them to clean the area. I pull away from him when he

unzips a black pouch containing an array of curved needles and suture threads.

"Is that necessary?"

"You have just been cut with a knife. How can you be scared of a needle?" he asks, amused, then pulls out a large syringe of clear fluid. "This is military-grade surgical glue. Let me close the wound and bind the arm with a waterproof dressing. Then we will shower together."

After removing the rest of my shirt, he works quickly and efficiently to bandage the cut before telling me to undress and step beneath the rainfall shower. I stand with my eyes closed, head tilted back, letting the steady fall of hot water wash away the night's fatigue. When his naked body lines up against my spine, his chin lands on my right shoulder, and his hands clasp around my stomach, I allow myself to melt back into the embrace. I feel Lorenzo's arousal pressing into my backside, but I am still not ready to allow him to penetrate me.

Instead, I grab a bottle from the shower shelf and squirt conditioner into my palm. After shifting my feet apart, I position him between my upper thighs while providing generous lubrication to his cock. Catching on quickly, he rumbles with pleasure in my right ear and moves slowly in and out. There is something to be said about the non-invasive sensation of frottage. One of his hands travels over my chest and stomach before grasping my erection and pumping in time to his movements. As we move faster together, both in sync, his breathing becomes more rapid, our dance getting quicker, suds forming around my balls and drifting down my inner thighs.

Eventually—inevitably—he cries out and comes, and I am not far behind. We cling to each other and savour the

meld of bodies and the fall of water. We share a flannel to soap each other's bodies and clean ourselves off.

As I dry myself, I watch him towel himself, the shock of black locks, lean muscled body and familiar tattoos that cover half his body. I'm amazed at how quickly I feel more alive and substantial with Lorenzo in the same room. Even the throbbing of my arm has lessened. Still naked, he leads us through the flat to a small bedroom with a double bed.

"We sleep for a few hours," he says before pulling back the quilt and guiding me into the bed.

I usually eat before sleeping at this time of the night, but I know the pangs will soon fade, especially with the heat of Lorenzo's body aligned against my back. I am almost drifting off when he begins to speak.

"I rode my bike here. Left Rome Tuesday morning and arrived Wednesday. I travelled through the night. Teresa made me come and find you. Told me if I didn't she would kill me herself. Romano does not know about this. He thinks I flew from Rome yesterday. But I was going crazy. I had no way to call you and not hearing was worse than torture. And Teresa's advice was right. You were lucky to have a third eye watching over you tonight. We stay together from now on. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Good answer. Now sleep."

Lorenzo wakes me just after seven. He tosses me a pair of jeans, a tee shirt and a fleece, and I get dressed while he is in the kitchen. As I stand and finish dressing, I follow the aroma of coffee into the living area where, on a table, Lorenzo has a holder and speaker for his mobile phone hooked up to a laptop. I assume the setup secures the line and any calls he makes.

"Come. Drink some coffee. But before we take breakfast, we need to call this in."

Using his forefinger on the trackpad, he activates a call, and the voice of Doctor Romano comes down the line. They share a brief greeting in Italian before Romano asks a question.

"Is Janis with you?"

I grin at Lorenzo before speaking.

"Yes. I'm here. Thank you for sending Lorenzo to help me."

"I only sent him yesterday morning. He has made excellent progress. But now I need to hear from you. Tell me everything that happened."

I give Romano a rundown of the events since I arrived, including Leblanc recognising me, Victoria Washington in the waiting room, the gift from Leblanc and the assassin. Romano asks no question but waits for me to finish my story right up to Lorenzo riding in and rescuing me.

"Sounds to me as though you saved Leblanc's life tonight. Unfortunately, in doing so, you also put a spotlight on yourself."

"Were the men following me government agents?" I ask after a pause.

"No, Janis. That much I can tell you with confidence. During the raid, they discovered your ripped and bloody tee shirt with bullet holes next to the remains of a large fire at the back of the grounds. They found human remains in the ashes and an agent took the cloth away for examination. Since then, let's just say, things have died down concerning Gabriel Redbrick. They believe you are dead. Although once they get to see your performance tonight, caught on video, that is likely to change."

"Who do you think they were, then?"

"I cannot say for sure, but I believe they are linked to Puchinsky. We've been watching him closely. But after the press conference, the man has gone to ground. I believe he is getting desperate. But how these men knew to follow you, I cannot say."

"I can answer that. I took the attacker's backpack. He had a mobile phone tucked inside. I'm sure that's how they tracked me. But we dumped the phone on the way here."

"You had the phone Leblanc's killer brought to the room?"

"I did. I got rid of it along the way, I'm afraid. I worried they might track us here. But I kept the other contents, if that helps."

"Good work, Janis. And what did you find?"

"One moment."

I look up at Lorenzo, who nods his understanding and leaves the room.

"Lorenzo is getting my bag now. Can I ask a question? Did you send copies of the clinical trial papers we found to the daily press?"

"And to key members of the WHO. In the hope that one or both would take action."

"Is that why you think Puchinsky sent the killer to Leblanc's room?"

"To be honest, Janis, I did not believe Puchinsky would be so bold or reckless. But hunted men get desperate. But yes, I believe Puchinsky—or one of his sponsors—sent somebody to finish what they had started."

"Started? What do you mean?"

"I had it confirmed that the second clinical trial was overseen by Sylvie Leblanc assisted by Stephan Dyrovich. The information will reach the press this morning. Journalists—being who they are—are likely to make

connections and draw conclusions linking the trial, the accident and the attack on Leblanc. No doubt the police will want to question Puchinsky, as well. While you have been away, I have also been looking into the minibus driver, Bill McDonald. According to the pathologist's report, he had a rare and fatal blood disorder. Probably had three to four months to live. In addition, a substantial cash deposit had been made into his wife's account two weeks before the accident. And I could not trace the donor."

"You have solid proof of this?"

"Do you doubt my resourcefulness? But Janis, although suspicious, these things could be unrelated. Rest assured that there will be enough evidence in the public domain to stop the release of this super drug, but Puchinsky will never stand trial for murder. You do know that, don't you? He is too clever. Nothing will stick. He has made sure nothing could be traced back to him."

"Then I must—"

"No. I told you. Puchinsky will be dealt with when the time is right."

"What if he tries again? To have Leblanc killed?"

"As desperate as he is, even he would not be that crazy or stupid. After tonight she will have police protection. A guard on her room around the clock."

"Hold on one second, doctor. Lorenzo is back."

Lorenzo enters the room and hands me my rucksack. I open the flap, dig out the contents of the attacker's bag and lay everything on the table.

"There's around three thousand in cash, an architect's blueprint of the hospital, an empty vial and a blue Belarussian passport bearing the name of Dzmitryi Ganchar. The photograph is definitely the man I tackled in the room.

There's also a black metal handgun, probably manufactured in Eastern European—"

"A Makarov pistol, Russian design," says Lorenzo, picking up the weapon.

"Lorenzo, scan a copy of the passport and send that to me with the serial number on the gun. I will do what I can. Now, where do we go from here?"

"Should we return to Monticiano?" I ask.

"After tonight, I don't advise you cross any international borders. But you need to get out of London and go underground for a couple of weeks. I assume you gave the hospital your address in London?"

"I had no choice."

"Then you must not return. Janis needs to disappear. I suggest you use one of the disguises Mrs Bellacci provided and head somewhere remote. What is the address of Dr Maurice Leblanc?"

"Honeycomb Cottage in Carlisle," I respond.

"Where is Carlisle," asks Lorenzo.

"It's in the north of England. Before the border with Scotland."

"How far from here?"

"Around three hundred miles."

Romano makes a strange noise at the end of the phone, something like a muttered expletive in Italian.

"Of course," he says. "That is what she meant."

Lorenzo and I look puzzled at each other.

"What do you mean? What who meant?" I ask.

"Leblanc was not saying the word echoes. The nurse misheard her. I believe what she wanted to tell you was Ecosse. French for Scotland. And I think you know why."

A coldness runs through me, my past coming back to haunt me.

"When I lost my memory in the train crash, I was on my way to Glasgow in Scotland."

"Janis, I think you will find answers in Scotland."

"Scotland is a big country."

"Then I urge you to stop off in Carlisle on your way and see this man. Find out what he knows. But before you do that, I suggest you stay off the grid for at least two weeks. There will be a nationwide hunt for Janis. Not only the police, but those who will doubtless come to the conclusion that Gabriel is alive and dangerous. I will send you the address and access arrangement for a lodge in the north of England, where you will be safe. Stay there for now. When I am satisfied that we are out of the woods, I will contact you through Lorenzo."

Once Romano rings off, I sit back and sip on lukewarm coffee. After a few seconds, Lorenzo's phone pings with a message. He is quiet, and I notice him studying me when I look over.

"Since your accident," he asks, "have you ever taken a train to Scotland?"

"Never."

"The safe house lodge Doctor Romano sent is in a place called the Lake District. Shall I leave the bike here and we take the train? Or would you be okay on the back of my motorbike? Three hundred miles is a long way to ride as a passenger."

I do not scare. I have no need for that kind of emotion. But the thought of taking the northbound train fills me with foreboding and dread. On the other hand, riding the train might unlock hidden memories.

"Are motorbikes allowed on trains in this country?" he asks, sensing my hesitation.

"No. We need to take the bike. Doing so will not only

avoid us being spotted in public places, but will give us greater flexibility and freedom. Would you agree to us taking turns? Riding the bike?"

"Would you agree to us taking turns in the bedroom?" he answers without a pause.

I smirk at him just as my stomach growls with hunger.

"Deal. Now can we please eat."