

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

TWENTY-ONE

LEBLANC

We arrive at the new safe house around four in the afternoon to a sky as grey as the landscape. Doctor Romano must have called in a favour because the huge farmhouse on the outskirts of somewhere called Balchraggan in the north of Scotland appears neglected, bordering derelict. All the downstairs windows are boarded up. According to the car's SatNav, the house is a seven-hour drive from the Lakes, which turns into eight after a discrete comfort stop, shop and sandwich eaten in the car.

Ironically, we drove past Carlisle on our drive north, and I was tempted to ask Mrs Bellacci to drop me off, but I knew Lorenzo would protest. Besides, we needed a few days to lie low after the attack on the lodge. Although he said nothing, my guess is Romano thought the same thing, which is why he chose the remote location.

Unlike the lodge at Lake Grasmere, no supplies have been provided for our arrival, and utilities are switched off. Everything inside has a thin veneer of dust, and there are none of the lodge's modern conveniences. However, the farmhouse has seven or eight bedrooms, and when we pick

out our rooms, Lorenzo and I ensure we drop our bags in ones opposite each other. Although mine has a single bunk, he has a large double mattress on a sturdy pine frame, where I know I will lay my head that night. The rooms are cold, and the bedcovers musty with age, but they will have to suffice.

Only Mrs Bellacci is unfazed by the rudimentary facilities as though she expected nothing more. Within the hour, we have the place cleaned with lights on, water running, and a fire burning in the grate. Mrs Bellacci even manages to get the old iron stove in the kitchen to pump out heat. Another upside of having her along is that she insists on cooking for us. She pulls out her ingredients and favoured cooking utensils from among the array of specialist weaponry in the back of her car. That night, after each of us has taken turns to bathe—no shower in our highland retreat—we are treated to freshly made linguine with beef cheeks marinated in a red wine sauce. As always, she makes enough for ten and serves the meal with an unlabelled bottle of full-bodied red. After days of bland frozen meals, Lorenzo and I eat silently at the kitchen table, savouring each mouthful.

"What do you know about the minibus driver?" asks Mrs Bellacci from the kitchen sink after refusing my help to wash plates. My mind returns to Romano's call, and I mull over what he told us.

"Nothing. As much as you or anyone. He was sick and accepted money to crash the minibus. I never met him, if that's what you're asking. Why?"

"Il dottore's voice is very familiar to me and I can hear when he is holding back information. Did you not find it doubtful that the driver's wife arranged Puchinsky's death? Apart from the incident sounding too convenient—the work

of a professional—why would she care? She already had the money Puchinsky paid her husband. Why bother with retribution and run the risk of having the incident traced back to you?"

"I agree with you," I answer. Romano provided so much information during the call that I did not dwell on the circumstances surrounding Puchinsky's death. "The murder was both calculated and premeditated. Not exactly the actions of a grieving widow."

"Maybe Puchinsky really did—" begins Lorenzo.

"No," says Mrs Bellacci. "This I do not believe. There was something else at play."

"But it's no longer our problem," I say, and I am sure Romano would have agreed with me.

"Perhaps," says Mrs Bellacci. "But I dislike unsolved riddles."

I smirk down at the table. Albert and Mrs Bellacci would have gotten along well.

"What will you do?" asks Lorenzo. "When you meet Leblanc?"

I shrug while running a finger along the coarse surface of the oak table. "Find out what he knows."

"You think he will speak to you? Of course not. We both know it would be better if I come with you. Use me to break in and subdue—"

"I'm doing this alone, Lorenzo. If he refuses to speak to me, I'll think of something else."

Lorenzo mutters something in Italian, and I pick out the word stubborn, which causes Mrs Bellacci to turn from her chores and give him a piece of her mind, using his own words to describe and castigate him. I smirk at the table, pleased that I'm picking up more Italian than I had realised. Halfway through her diatribe, her phone makes a strange

sound, and she stops speaking to stare at the display. Even Lorenzo's attention is distracted by the sound.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Il dottore needs us back in Rome the day after tomorrow. We have tickets to fly out from Aberdeen airport. Our president is giving a public address to the nation which is being broadcast live. All national security agents are being recalled to help police the event and provide protection for the president."

"Does he need me, too?" I ask. Time will be tight if I am to visit Leblanc.

"He says you can sit this one out until your spoken Italian has improved. And he is aware that you have other matters to deal with. I will take you tomorrow."

That evening, Mrs Bellacci turns in first after we've locked all doors. Lorenzo and I bid her good night but remain behind. We wait until the logs in the grate burn low. Fiery embers reflect from the dark intent in his eyes. Neither utters a word because none are required. The air between us is taut with desire. He rises to close the heavy curtains, and I notice the outline of his erection against his jeans. Before he can sit down again, I take his hand and lead him out of the room and up the stairs, switching lights off as we go.

I notice that both of our bags are in his room. Did he move them, or did Mrs Bellacci? And then I see Lorenzo's lubricant dispenser sitting on one of the pillows. Barely is the door closed than he has me pushed up against the frame and is kissing me. I find pleasure in letting him control me. Tonight, he tastes of wine and smells of his unique brand of spicy Italian soap. We fumble out of our clothes and kick them onto the floor. As always, our first connection is like a wrestling match, with both trying to master the other and

wanting to connect with as much of the other's flesh as possible. Tonight, Lorenzo slows first, crouched over me, and pulls his head back so we can look at each other.

"You know what I want?"

I nod once. That's all I need to do. Seeing my response, he grabs the lube and places the dispenser beside his thighs, within easy reach.

"Then try to stay calm and let me control. Are you okay with that?"

"I am."

With a gentleness he has never shown before, he massages me from neck to midriff to upper thigh, purposely—painfully for me—avoiding my straining erection until he reaches my ankles. Once there, he lies back over me, aligning our cocks and kissing me deeply. He does this three times, but on the fourth, he settles between my legs.

Fisting the base of my cock, he glides his tongue up each side, slicking the surface wet each time, until finally taking me into his throat, the warmth wrapping around my girth. I sigh out of satisfaction when his head begins to bob up and down, but I also feel his fingers venturing between my legs. Savouring the sensations of his mouth, I close my eyes and hear the squirt of lube. Without stopping what he is doing, Lorenzo smears my ass with cool liquid before pushing a finger inside. My instinct is to reach down and stop him, but I consciously restrain myself and allow the invasion. The feelings are new, and after the initial discomfort, it is not long before I push into the finger, wanting more. He obliges, taking his time until I feel an explosive orgasm inside me begin to build in a way I have never known before. Instinctively, I clench my ass muscles around his fingers.

Lorenzo must sense the change in me, the shallower breaths and heightened arousal, because he releases my

cock, removes his fingers and lifts my legs onto his shoulders. Only then do I open my eyes, mourning the loss of warmth of his contact. His eyes are ablaze with need, and he shuffles forward until the tip of his cock touches my ass. It is all I can do to stop pulling him into me. When he does push forward, he does so painfully slowly and carefully. I know he is trying to minimise the pain, but my body is aching for him, so I wrap my legs tightly around his waist and pull him in.

I am unsure if the guttural sound of pleasure comes from him or me, but I know my body is alight with new sensations. Every so often, Lorenzo changes position, pulls both my legs onto one shoulder, and the penetration hits a different spot inside. He also changes gear frequently, using short, fast strokes, sometimes long and slow, and occasionally stopping entirely inside and kissing me deeply.

I do my best to prolong the build of pleasure, but my body has other plans. After he settles into a round of ramming hard, my orgasm becomes unstoppable. Again, he seems able to read my body and keeps going to ensure I get the best climax of my life. I am not even touching myself when my cock erupts, spurting the first load as far as my cheek. Lorenzo is not far behind me, and I am still wringing out the last of my orgasm onto my stomach when he empties his warmth inside me.

For a long time, we remain still, our bodies entwined, both of us breathing heavily, unmoving. Eventually, Lorenzo begins to pull away, to lie next to me, and only then do I catch his expression as he studies the ceiling. There is a sadness in him that I have not seen before.

"I wanted to hate you when you came to Eagle House," he says. "Everything was bearable before that. I told Mrs Bellacci that if you did not leave, then I would ask Doctor

Romano to reassign me. Of course, she scolded me, told me to stop behaving like a child. But she did not understand that you scared me, because you attracted and unbalanced me like nobody else ever has."

I ponder his words and remember how he shunned me during those early days at the villa.

"The first time I met you in the bar at Pensione Galli, I sensed an edge to you, someone raw and dangerous," I reply. "My instinct was to avoid you. But then your outdoor showering kept drawing my attention."

He snorts at that and takes my hand in his. Small gestures like this should not mean as much as they do, and once again, I marvel at the change in me.

"Do you wish I had never come to Eagle House?" I ask him.

"How can you ask me this?"

We make love again, and this time he appears calmer. After cleaning up, we settle next to each other. I feel myself drifting off but am awake again when he shifts his weight on the mattress.

"If you will not take me with you," he says, reaching to the floor. "Then take this."

At first, I think he is handing me a gun, but I still have the one from the lodge. Instead, he gives me a mobile phone and charger. I realise it's my old burner device given to me by Josh's partner. I assumed Mrs Bellacci had disposed of this after taking away my possessions the day Gabriel changed identity.

"Does it still work?"

"What use could it be if not?" he chides. "You have a full charge and a new number."

"Is yours in here?"

"It is now. You will call me if you have any difficulty."

"Yes."

When I wake early, his side of the bed is empty.

** 🐱 **

A few miles outside the village of Beaumont, a narrow lane bordered on both sides by hedgerows cuts through a sea of fields. When I spot the gate into a meadow where Mrs Bellacci can turn the car around, I ask her to drop me off. I can see the treelined track to Honeycomb Cottage not too far off. Due to the distance from the farmhouse—a good two hundred and fifty miles and four and a half hours' drive away—we agree that I will find my own way back.

Lorenzo left early to explore the area around Balchraggan that morning, bidding us both a cursory farewell. After the intensity of last night, we barely spoke over breakfast. Honestly, I am pleased he left because I feel sure he would have found a way to remain by my side. Mrs Bellacci merely rolled her eyes at his rudeness. I am sure she knows there is more between us, but on the journey down, she said nothing. As I step out of the car, I have barely closed the door before she puts the vehicle into gear and drives off.

Within minutes, the car engine fades into the distance, and I am alone with the occasional rustle of wind in the branches and the chatter of birds. This part of the world is very different to the scorched but temperate landscape of Tuscany, more wild and windswept. Alone again, I do what I do best—pull up my collar, put my head down and trudge onwards.

Not far down the track, intimidating 'keep out - electrified perimeter' and 'private property' signs begin to appear, as well as pictures with the silhouette of Doberman dogs. Eventually, I face a wire-off periphery fence and cast-iron gates set into brick columns. Cameras are mounted in plain

sight on tall metal poles, trained on the entrance. I almost imperceptibly hear the hum of electricity from the fence on either side. I notice an intercom on the wall and am about to press a button when a speaker sizzles to life.

"What do you want?" comes a gravelly voice.

I pull my hand away and stare up at one of the cameras.

"I am looking for Doctor Maurice Leblanc."

"On what business?"

"Am I speaking to Doctor Leblanc?"

"What do you want?"

Stepping back, I pull a large brown envelope from inside my jacket and hold it to the camera.

"There's urgent registered post for him," I reply.

"Drop it through the bars of the gate. I will see that he gets it."

"I can't do that, I'm afraid. The letter needs to be signed for. By the recipient."

I cannot make out the particular expletive, but immediately afterwards, the ambient noise from the other end of the connection is cut off. I wait a few seconds before lowering the envelope and placing the object back into my jacket.

"My instructions are to hand deliver the letter to the recipient," I call out. "But if Doctor Leblanc would prefer, I can return to the main depot in Carlisle and he can go there, sign for and pick it up at his own convenience."

My bluff seems to do the trick because a huff of frustration issues from the intercom.

"Come up to the house. And be quick."

A loud buzzing accompanies a clunk, and the doors swing open. I head forward and follow the trail into the grounds. I am unsure what I expected—maybe something like the ramshackle Scottish farmhouse—but certainly not

the pretty little cottage nestled in a mature garden. Even Mrs Bellacci's SatNav did not pick up the location, and I am grateful to the cheerful landlady of a pub a few villages away who gave me clear directions to find the place. She could not hold back the slight frown of distaste when I mentioned the name Honeycomb Cottage, and I can only assume Leblanc is not particularly liked by the rural community. Mrs Bellacci advised me to wear my nerdy outfit, complete with glasses, to approach the man. She also suggested using the cover of a courier to deliver an important document.

As I approach, I see that the facade with two windows on each storey appears to have had a fresh coat of paint, the smooth, clean walls in a gentle cream and the woodwork in glossed burgundy. I also notice that each window has security bars and thick black blinds pulled down inside.

When I am a few metres away, the front door opens a crack before closing again. Chains rattle, and latches slide before the door opens enough for a face to poke out. As I hurry forward, I see the resemblance to Sylvie in his eyes. If I had to guess, I would place him in his late seventies. He has dark sagging eye bags and sunken sockets reminiscent of street insomniacs I have known. Sporting an untidy yellow-white combover, he wears a crinkled olive shirt beneath a frayed mustard-coloured woollen cardigan with holes at the elbows and stains down the front. He scans the area behind me from the doorstep, his eyes darting nervously around the grounds.

"Hurry. Where do I need to sign—"

Before he can react, I take a stride forward and reach a hand out to prevent him from closing the door on me.

"Tell me what you know about the Hartfield Institute," I ask.

His gaze swings from my hand to my face then, his complexion blanching before he staggers back a step.

"Who are you—? I have nothing to tell you."

"I know Sylvie Leblanc is your niece," I say firmly, bluffing but commanding his attention. "I also know that you worked at the Hartfield Institute towards the end of the last century and were involved in a Special Operation called KW—"

"Are you insane? Keep your voice down," urges Leblanc, clearly panicked now and scanning the area behind me once again. "You never know who may be listening. How did you learn about Knight's Watch? From my niece?"

"Please," I say, and pull back my sleeve to show him the tattoo. "I need to know who I am."

Leblanc's eyes bob from my wrist to my face, his brain working wildly. When he sways slightly, I wonder if he is about to pass out, but instead of moving backwards, he grabs my wrist, bends forward, and looks closer.

"Get in here," he says, wrenching the door open wide. "Hurry."

The interior of the cottage is the antithesis of the exterior. Lit by a single table lamp near the door, the hall corridor is lined on both sides with untidy piles of documents and books in grey bindings—precariously balanced and restricting access. They also follow the steep rise of the threadbare stair carpet, like paper battlements. Musky odours of pipe tobacco hang in the air, the white paintwork nicotine-stained and patchy. I follow Leblanc down a narrow corridor towards the back of the house and am directed into a darkened room, the large window covered by a blackout blind. A doorway leads off into a small sunlit kitchen. Apart from wall-to-wall bookcases, an oversized digital television screen is attached to the wall. Leblanc

instructs me to sit in a chair at the table, strewn with papers around an ashtray piled with cigarette ends.

"You should not have come here. They have many ways to watch us these days."

I am not sure if his agitation is paranoia or common sense. I would have known if I was being spied upon by someone other than him on my way down the drive. But then again, drones are not easy to pick out these days.

"How are you alive?" I notice he has stopped pacing and is now staring at me. "They said you'd been killed on assignment."

"Who said I'd been killed?"

"The operations commanders. The year before the project was shut down. Two knights were killed during missions, they told us, Five and Seven. More of their subterfuge, I suppose. Covering their tracks. Five—you—were killed on a covert operation in Libya with a senior intelligence agent. A super yacht anchored off the coast of Tripoli owned by a known sex trafficker of young boys and an illicit arms trader. A gas tank exploded onboard. Nobody survived, according to reports. Divers from the Special Boat Service managed to recover identifiable parts of the trafficker and the agent who accompanied you, but your remains and those of many of the passengers and crew were never found. How did you escape?"

I miss his question for a moment because my mind replays the violent vision I had when I spotted a luxury yacht off the coast when I visited San Vincenzo with Lorenzo. How did I survive? I see no reason to withhold details of my retrograde amnesia and about having recollections of very few events before the train crash.

"That makes sense. You would have been on your way back to Hartfield. Knights were programmed to return

directly to base after completing a mission or in the rare event of any mishap. As ironic as it may sound, that train crash you were in saved your life."

I assume he means I was gifted with a life in the real world instead of one lived inside an institution.

"You said another of us went missing."

"Knight Seven. Not missing. A sniper got lucky in Afghanistan. I examined the repatriated corpse."

"What happened to the others?"

"Others?"

"The other knights. If I was Five and the other was Seven, there must have been more. And weren't there also pawns?"

Leblanc, who has been standing all this time, drops down into a seat.

"Retired," he says, barely a whisper.

"What does that mean?"

"Killed off. By the time any of us knew what was happening, it was too late. Orders came from and were carried out by a hardcore military contingent. But the answer to your question is that many were executed. The neophyte pawns would have been easier to deal with without much of a fight. Appalling. The knights, not so much, having been groomed into elite fighting machines. Regular soldiers might have been able to eliminate them eventually using sheer numbers but the cost would have been too high. Instead the commanders did the worse thing imaginable."

"Which was?"

"They locked them into the underground gymnasium and pitted the last six against each other. Ordered one to destroy the other. At the end, one child was left—unconscious and barely hanging onto life—for me to euthanise."

"You murdered the last of the knights."

"Not the last, it would seem. And yes, I was instructed to do so."

I say nothing but consider the magnitude of what he has just told me. Perhaps his world of paranoia is justified.

"Do not judge me, Five. Have you any idea of the pain you caused, how many lives you took and innocents you murdered as collateral damage carrying out orders? Besides, I said I was instructed. I did not say I went through with those instructions."

"Are you saying another of us is still alive?"

"I am. And some pawns, too, if what I heard is true."

I know that much to be accurate, having met Ivan.

"If only I had known what they planned earlier, I could have done more..."

A tiredness seems to weigh heavy on Leblanc's shoulders when he looks away for several moments to consider before turning to study me.

"I need coffee and a cigarette. Do you take coffee?"

I nod my acceptance, and he shuffles off into the kitchen. While I sit there, listening to the water running and cups clinking into saucers, the phone in my pocket buzzes. I pull out the device, but the number is unknown.

Unknown: I see Leblanc in his kitchen. Don't trust him. He's only concerned with his own survival. Type YES if you're reading this.

I pause momentarily, wondering who I am communicating with and who I can trust. Did Lorenzo follow me down here? Or did Mrs Bellacci remain behind? Maybe somebody else has access to his phone. And if he trusts them, then so do I. This is, after all, the phone he kept safe for me, and I'm not entirely convinced of Leblanc's trustworthiness. I type in the words 'Who is this?' and wait for

the three-dot bubble to appear on the screen. Eventually, another message pops up.

Unknown: Who I am is unimportant right now. Stay focused and leave the phone on. I'll keep watch.

Moments after I shove the phone away, Leblanc returns with a tray containing a new ashtray, milk and sugar jugs and a cafetière filled with what I assume to be coffee. He balances the tray on the table's edge and shoves a few documents onto the floor. Once he has cleared enough space, he slides the tray onto the table and pours two generous mugs of coffee.

"How do you take yours?"

"As it comes," I answer, and he seems to approve because he does not add anything to his either. He pushes a mug towards me before picking up his own and taking a gulp. By the time I have reached for my cup and savoured the aroma, he is already lighting up a cigarette using a cubed green onyx table lighter that seems to double as a paperweight.

"Can I ask? Why did you get involved in the first place?"

Leblanc thumps the paperweight down, exhales a stream of smoke into the room and then shakes his head.

"Pride. Mainly. That and a mix of gullibility and stupidity. At the time, I may not have been the leader in my field, but I was not so far from the top. Which was a constant source of frustration because I was never the first choice for any new research. So when someone comes knocking, strokes your ego and solicits your expertise in doing something pioneering, and if you're someone like me who had been passed over so many times, you jump at the chance. Hindsight is like a dead albatross around the neck."

After taking another deep drag, he stubs the barely smoked cigarette out and reaches for another.

"Maybe I should be more specific. Back then, I worked as a research specialist initially in the field of reproductive biology, artificial insemination, and, more latterly, studies into the creation of an artificial womb. It was the latter that brought me to the attention of the Hartfield sponsors and drew me to that cold, dark place. Do you really remember nothing?"

"Not a thing."

Once again, he eyes me, perhaps to judge whether he believes me. After flicking ash onto the floor, he nods once and continues.

"What we did in my eight years there was groundbreaking. Fascinating from a pure research standpoint, creating and studying life from conception to birth without the constraints of a human body coupled with the chance to design perfect human specimens. Out of multiple experiments, twenty-four fabricants—lab babies like yourself—were successfully birthed using donor sperm and eggs harvested from elite marines, the embryos grown in an artificial womb, a process known as ectogenesis. Four of the fabricants brought to full term developed defects, genetic problems or cognitive failings. Twelve simply did not meet the strict military code. We were assured they had all been released and assumed that meant integrating them into the outside world. The eight remaining became the Knight's Watch, chosen from differing ethnic backgrounds. You were groomed by the finest military specialists and educators to become highly effective assassins, emotionless killing machines. Too few of us viewed you as what you really were—twenty-four human children. The military boasted of your superhuman abilities, but they treated you as subhuman, like animals. And there could be no recourse on their part because, legally, you did not exit."

"The sixteen who did not become knights. You say they are out in the world somewhere?"

I wonder if there are many more like me living everyday lives, although, from what Ivan told me about him being smuggled out of the institute, that sounds unlikely. Leblanc shakes his head, confirming my suspicions.

"That is what we were told. But that was not the case. The reality was—very different."

"Also retired?" I venture.

"You must understand that my remit ended when the foetuses were brought to full term. After that, the military and educators took over the responsibility to raise them. Besides, soon after that, the pawn programmes were initiated. We were kept on to monitor the knights' biological progress; health checks, degenerative issues, as well as tending to any injuries."

While I am considering his words, he shuffles through a pile of documents on the table until he finds what he is looking for.

"Here's a photograph. Keep it. I am not supposed to have this anyway. I removed a copy when I was let go. I do not trust digital versions because phones can be so easily hacked."

"But they obviously let you go. You weren't worried you'd be 'retired' like the knights and pawns?"

"We had identities; families, friends and colleagues. We all had history and ancestry. And we had all been made to sign bulletproof non-disclosures and official secrets documents. Any breach could have had me thrown into prison—or worse—and I am too old for that kind of discomfort. Somebody far braver than me did, though, which is why the operation was shut down."

I take the large photo from him and look at the joyless

young kids staring into the camera, arranged like a military unit, three sitting in the front, five at the back. They each have their bare right arm raised, the fist bunched in a salute of power, each brandishing the tattoo on his or her wrist. Stern and obedient, two rows of young children with soulless eyes that had probably never laughed or loved or been loved. How many people died at the hands of these abominations? And, at the very end, how did they die? I catch myself when I pick myself out among them in the photo.

"What happened?"

"Details of the project were leaked to a member of the committee of the European Convention on Human Rights and to a couple of media sites run by amateur conspiracy theorists. Naturally, the ECHR took the information with a pinch of salt—they have idiotic and unproven theories sent to them all the time—but they had a duty to investigate. When someone forwarded me one of the conspiracy sites, I scoffed at the information like everyone else at first. But then I read such specifics about our operation that only an insider could have known, and some things I had no idea about. The site went into graphic detail about how the pawns and knights were decommissioned. Horrifying stuff. Hartfield military superiors closed ranks and, naturally, they interrogated all of us. I knew nothing, so could tell them nothing. But the article had sown the seeds of doubt in many of us—especially about our involvement—and we started to question ourselves. Within a fortnight of the leak, we had orders to shut down operations and pass any case notes to the military team. Not long after, I came here which is where I have been ever since. Effectively sixteen years under house arrest. Everything I do is monitored and I get an official visit on occasion. Not regularly. They just turn up when they want and ask me questions. I venture out

seldom, have no friends and only have guests to stay rarely. Whenever I do, I can guarantee officials will arrive a few days or a week afterwards."

"Is Sylvie Leblanc one of those who visited?"

"I have neither seen nor spoken to my niece in over ten years. She came here with a friend."

"And you told her about Hartfield."

"She—as well as a few other confidantes—is my insurance policy. If anything happens to me, she has my permission to use highly confidential documents in any way she pleases. I have no doubt my captors know what I have done, which is why I am still breathing."

"Did you know your niece was in a motorway crash recently?"

The cigarette freezes before his mouth as he eyes me.

"Don't worry. She was injured but she survived."

"Good," he says, taking a drag and puffing smoke. "That is good. Sylvie is an idealist, but she has a good heart. Did she tell you to come here?"

"She gave me your name card."

"As I said, idealist. There is nothing I can do for you, Five."

"You have already told me what I needed to know. Filled in gaps from my past."

"And what will you do now?"

"I don't know. I had considered trying to find Hartfield, to see if anything jogs my—"

A loud security alert sounds intermittently inside his house. Leblanc grabs a remote control from the table and switches on the large digital display. A gridwork of video feeds appears, one flashing red around the rim and showing two dark Landrovers turning into his drive.

"This could be routine. As I say, they check in on me

occasionally to make sure I am behaving myself. But you cannot be here. Let me go and deal with this. Stay here until they are gone. And don't touch anything. This should take no more than thirty minutes."

No sooner has Leblanc shuffled out of the room than my phone buzzes.

Unknown: They're here for you.

I look around the room and consider my escape route when the phone sounds again.

Unknown: Head to the kitchen and open the yard door. Leave it open. Go back inside and find the door that leads down to the cellar. Used to be white in colour.

As I am reading the message, I stand and follow the instructions. The bright kitchen is the only place not covered in books and papers. I notice the pretty windowed door leading out to the beautiful back garden and open this as instructed. I find two white doors inside the kitchen, one that houses a pantry but a second with stone steps leading down into darkness. I flick on the wall switch.

Unknown: Good. Now head inside and close the cellar door behind you. Go down the steps and look for an old oak bookcase. If it's still there, you can pivot this easily away from the wall. Behind is a passageway that leads to the lane at the back of the property.

My rescuer is correct. The bookcase is old and covered in dust but swivels neatly away from the wall. I am about to enter the brick-lined passage when another message pops up.

Unknown: Make sure to switch off the cellar light and close the bookcase behind you to cover your tracks. If the bookcase is no longer there, switch off the light and hide somewhere. Hopefully, they'll think you flew the coop.

I follow instructions and then use the light from my phone to head down the damp passageway. I notice then that I no longer have a signal on my phone. Eventually, the passage begins to turn and ends at a metal door bolted from the inside. I unlock the bolt and enter into daylight in a copse of woods. Up ahead, I can see a single-lane track and make my way forward. I barely hear the sound of a car approaching, the silent engine of an electric vehicle. I remain hidden in bushes until the car draws level. The passenger door flies open, and when I look inside, I see a familiar face behind the wheel.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask.

Coleman Washington, Victoria Callico's husband, leans towards me.

"Romano sent me. Get your ass in the car. Pronto. We need to get you outta here and, yep, I guess I have some explaining to do."