

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED



BRIAN LANCASTER

TWO

SOLICITOR

Ten-thirty Monday morning, I stand in the foyer of the Empire Square Building in Pimlico, studying the reflections of darkly elegant suits framed in mirrored panels as the elevator doors open. Smart, poised and predatory. Only after they glide forward as one and turn to the closing doors do I realise that I, togged out in blue jeans and jacket over a simple white crew cut sweater, with my heavy camo green rucksack slung over one shoulder, am the one person standing out—a blemish on the corporate collage.

So much for dressing inconspicuously today. With my face inches from the closing door of mirrored metal, my breath frosts the surface. I rest my forehead against the cold interior and make the mistake of scrolling down on my phone to the comments section from a news report.

Am I the only person in this world convinced we have created a society that not only tolerates but encourages stupidity? A world where swamp dwellers are empowered to voice their wild theories on a whole number of things they know nothing about or blame the faceless they or them for their own mad theories or bad decisions or shortcomings.

The type of idiot who leaves a one-star review and a vicious rant about a clothing item when they clearly ordered the wrong size or misread the description. Or those who think they are above classic works of English literature and not only leave a low rating and a damning review on a book ordering site comparing the story considered a foundation of the English novel and penned in the early nineteenth century, to fatuous contemporary shite. And worst of all, those who spout their wild baseless conspiracy theories, such as everyone in the field of medicine being a part of a massive, evil cult whose mission is to drug everyone into a zombie state before they take over the world.

And I believe they do so simply because, without having to get up off their lazy fat arses and step outside the front door, they have a voice and an audience and maybe, just maybe, some equally dumb shit might agree with them and join in the rant.

A celebrity once likened the advent of online social media to the opening of Pandora's Box, allowing some good and a whole shitload of evil into the world. Except, in this case, the sickness is in the minds of a small proportion of those who use online sites to interact with others. One of my foster parents used to tell her kids that if we had nothing worthwhile to say, we should keep our mouths shut. At the time, I thought she was being mean-spirited. Now I find myself agreeing. I remember those harsh days with mixed feelings, but I agree with her that many newly entitled generations will never appreciate that simple social and mental discipline of thinking before speaking.

One such cowardly, semi-illiterate troll called 'anonus' has responded in the comments section to an online article about the distinguished British medical professionals involved in a crash on a trip to a medical conference. The

report is not only concise but also accurate, saying they had been on their way to Brussels for the Global Healthcare Conference organised by the WHO. The accident occurred in thick fog on the M20, killing three, including the driver, while seriously injuring another. My eye is drawn to the handful of comments beneath, most sympathising, one citing a wild conspiracy theory, but the one that screamed out at me has me hyperventilating.

Anonamus: *good riddance to evil Narzi scinetists like these who get rich exploiting the sick n holding them hostage with medecines what should be free to everywun*

How dare you. How *fucking* dare you. Cowardly bastard throwing stones at the wrong people from the safety of your bedroom parapet. You didn't even know him, didn't know how hard he worked, or about the countless sleepless nights he worked himself into the ground trying to find antidotes for viruses from which a fuckwit like you could have died a very painful death. *How fucking dare you* have an opinion about someone you know nothing about. If you feel you have to take out your pathetic irritation on somebody or something, why not look to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology corporations who make shareholders rich by employing and exploiting those research scientists.

When the lift doors open on the seventh floor—not my floor—I have to step out to make space for those exiting and take a moment of respite to lean against a wall, gulp a few steadying breaths and help suppress the wave of anger. Thoughts of Albert Callico's last moments still haunt me; a gentle man and a brilliant mind cut short at only forty-five. What we had might not have been sexual, but I loved the man and would have killed anyone who tried to hurt him.

From the shoebox corridor on the thirty-seventh floor, the glass reception door to Clyde Cartwright and Partners

opens into familiar brown leather and varnished rosewood austerity. Together with the oversized floral arrangement of white irises on the reception counter, I associate the polished smell of the place with death and swallow back bile.

"Go straight through, Mr Callico. Mrs Hammond-Clyde is expecting you."

I obey the pineapple-haired Barbie behind the desk, ignoring the misnomer. A year ago, I gave up correcting people. We might have been partners of three years, but we never married. Even if we had, I would never have taken his family name. Once I am seated around the small coffee table in her office, I flash Hammond-Clyde a closed-mouthed grin in response to her obligatory greeting and dismiss the offer of something to drink with a raised palm.

"Your secretary called me Mr Callico again." I offer by way of conversation.

"Brittany means no harm." Hammond-Clyde smiles as she comes over and takes a seat across from me. "She used to think you were Dr Callico's bodyguard."

This is news to me. Albert never said anything.

"Why would she think that?"

"Your height and the fact you obviously take care of your body. And if I am going to be completely candid, you have a somewhat intimidating countenance."

The remark takes me by surprise for a moment. Did anyone else think the same thing? I notice her staring down at the rucksack resting against my leg.

"Are you heading somewhere?" she asks, one of her pencil-thin eyebrows raising.

Everything I own is in there. Or rather, everything I wanted to keep. The rest I took out in black sacks to the refuse collectors who turned up early this morning. After

using the pool one last time, I chose to slip away and avoid suffering through an insincere speech from Edward before he tossed me out. Should he choose to look—and I'm sure he will—he will find nothing of me left behind, as though I never lived there. I left my keys with Mrs Buckland and told her to tell Callico I would not be returning.

"Staying with a friend. I find being in the house too painful right now."

"Oh. I see," she says, a tenor of disappointment in her tone.

"Problem?"

"I assumed you would be heading back to Callico House from here and could hand a copy of these papers to Edward Callico. Never mind. I can always get Brittany to—"

"No, that's fine. It's on my way."

Even if Alice is home, I am not stepping another foot in that house. But I am not too petty or averse to pushing a copy into their post box and having this whole episode of my life closed off.

"Excellent. Then let us get this over and done with, Mr Redbrick." I know she is not asking permission but merely warning me not to make waves. "Roger, my husband, has taken the children to his parent's Geneva home for the last of the school holidays and I have a car waiting to take me to City Airport straight after this meeting."

Why she thinks I care about her personal arrangements is a mystery. Albert didn't either. As a spectator, on visits when I had accompanied him, we both came to despise Hammond-Clyde and her middle-class insouciance. She has no need to work because she and her husband come from wealthy families, a circumstance she weaves into the conversation at each meeting. Both were educated at expensive schools, and Mr Hammond holds the prestigious posi-

tion of senior partner in one of the country's leading accountancy firms. Today, her deference is only assumed because of my provisory association with the Callico family.

"Ah yes, here we are."

She cranes over a neat pile of papers, the gold chain attached to her designer reading glasses swaying every time she peers up at me.

"As you may know, Doctor Callico was in reasonable shape financially." I learnt very little from him about his financial status but understood he had more than enough. He refused to take any of the income I earned from my logistics job at the Gateway Charity. His single substantial asset had to be the family home, inherited upon his father's death, where we lived free of debt, thanks to his father's strict instructions and generous legacy.

"And as you must be aware by now, Mr Redbrick, the Mayfair home stays in the family and will pass to Edward Callico. And of Dr Callico's liquid assets, a sizeable proportion has been pledged to medical research organisations."

After the death of his best friend some twenty-two years ago, Albert made his intention quite clear to his ultra-conservative siblings that upon his death, he intended to bequeath most of his money to AIDS-related research organisations. Nobody questioned him, even though not all of them approved.

"Of course." As ever, she studies me coldly over the top of her glasses. "I don't really know you, Mr Redbrick, but as his partner, you are wholly within your rights to challenge these instructions, although I should point out—"

"Then you really don't know me. I have no intention of challenging anything."

"As you wish," she says, continuing to scrutinise me as though waiting to see a crack in my resolve. After a satis-

fying pause, she pulls a flimsy folder from the pile and places the document on top. "Good. Then that leaves you. Even after everything else there is still a little encouraging news. You've been left an annuity. Not excessive, but comfortable enough—"

"No," I say, cutting her off. "I don't want any Callico handout."

My friend Josh would berate me, telling me not to be so proud, but I want nothing more to do with the Callico family. A tiny knot appears uncharacteristically between Mrs Hammond-Clyde's eyebrows. Albert once referred to her as the nastiest kind of terrier where legal matters were concerned, one of the reasons he had employed her as their family solicitor.

"This annuity is Edward's late brother's express wish. Written into his will."

"And I am not blood family, as Edward Callico makes perfectly clear at every family gathering."

"But this is—"

"Can I formally decline the money?"

"Of course you can, but—"

"Then to save time and your legal fees, I would rather do so."

Once again, Mrs Hammond-Clyde narrows her eyes at me, probably aghast that anyone would turn down hard cash. I don't even want to know how much this modest amount might be. I just want to be set free from this family. I already have enough problems filling my head, worrying about what my future holds.

"As you wish." She uses a thick black biro and very loudly strikes out some of the text before placing the pen in front of me. "In which case, if you could sign where my secretary has marked, and initial where I have made the

amendments. Once signed, Mr Redbrick, this is non-reversible." She indicates Day-Glo marker notes sticking out from the page, each a vibrant colour and each containing a huge black arrow.

Hovering over the page, I make up my mind to phone Albert's sister-in-law, Alice—the one member of the Callico entourage I can stomach—and haul her out for drinks and something to eat. At the very least, she'll be able to take me out of myself; maybe we can even bitch about the Callicos and prise a smirk or two out of each other.

"So once I sign this, that's everything?"

"Yes, that's everything. As far as your late partner's estate is concerned, Mr Redbrick, everything will be finalised including our fees. Once you've signed, your association to the Callico family is concluded. Do you want to take the keys and a photocopy of the deeds to the Italian house? Or shall I have them posted to you?"

"Italian house?" I ask, looking up.

"In Monticiano? Tuscany?" She traces a finger on the page. "Casa dell'Aquila. You have become the sole owner now."

The remark catches me off-guard, and I quickly disguise the moment of surprise by concentrating on signing all the paperwork. But Mrs Hammond-Clyde has already spotted my confusion.

"I think it means House of the Eagle or Eagle House. The deeds are in joint names and the house now reverts to you. The last time I saw Dr Callico, around five months ago—you were not with him—he gave me clear instructions to remind you about the house in case anything were to happen to him. The property is not a part of his will, but he seemed to think you might have forgotten. I have a copy of the legal papers here, signed by you at least two years ago.

Not through me, I hasten to add, but unmistakably signed by you."

In the past, I witnessed documents for Albert, primarily donations to his choices of charities, ones his brother and sister would never have approved. He would painstakingly explain the circumstances and was always the first person to tell me never to endorse anything unless I knew exactly what I was signing. I vaguely remember Albert musing about needing a tangible hobby outside his research work, and his soft notion about buying an old property, a renovation project, somewhere in Europe. I also remember the couple of weekends we spent apart while he flew to meetings and took extra time out to survey prospects. Albert had never been given to bouts of whimsy, but since the original idea, I don't remember him ever mentioning the project again.

But now that I think about it, I do remember one Christmas Eve dinner, much to the rest of his family's amusement, when Edward chided him about his white elephant in Tuscany. Alice and I had been chatting at the time, and I remember us both looking up because the Callico family rarely laughed together. If they did, it was always at someone's expense. I assumed they had been talking about a bad financial investment, and by the time Albert and I turned in for the evening, both the worse for alcohol, we had fallen immediately asleep. By the morning, I had forgotten all about the remark.

"There are some pictures in the envelope, if you'd like to see them?"

My first instinct is to tell her to turn everything over to Edward. When she slides the large photographs across the table to me, I cannot help the snort that slips out. Typical Albert, the Italian house is derelict, like a bomb site. In one

large room where sunshine illuminates the internal space because of the lack of a roof, the floor has completely fallen away into what I assume to be a cellar. Weeds grow in the corners of the room, and a bird's nest sits in an empty window frame—although the past charm and grandiosity of the room is unmistakable. Another photograph is of the kitchen with one missing wall, sitting in rubble and open to the overgrown gardens beyond.

"Do I need to show any of this to Edward?" I ask. "I'm not sure he'd be happy knowing I profited in any way from the family."

"To be frank, this matter has nothing to do with him or the family. Ownership of the property automatically reverts to you. And I think you'll find that Albert already told the family about the co-ownership some time ago. But, if you prefer, you could always offer to gift this to Edward or—"

"No, I don't want to gift anything to him. But if I wanted to sell off the property, could I do that from here? From the UK?"

"Absolutely. There are plentiful estate agents in London who specialise in the sale and purchase of European properties. Many British owners are doing the same right now. A simple search on the internet will pull up countless resources."

"I see. Are the deeds in the envelope?"

"Photocopies. The originals are held by an Italian notary in Monticiano. Everything you need to know is in this envelope."

"I see."

As I place the photographs back into the envelope, I notice her pausing, bringing her manicured fingers together on the table, her features filling with sympathy.

"I know this must be a difficult time for you, Mr Redbrick—"

"Please don't."

I am beginning to despise that look people give me, knowing what has happened and who I am—like the housekeeper and other staff—a compassion in their eyes that makes me want to do or say something I might later regret. Edward has done me a favour by banning me from attending the funeral. I would not have lasted long. Had any of these people known some of the things I had to endure to survive the streets of London for three years in my late teens and early twenties, they might treat me differently.

"I was there for Albert when he needed me. He no longer does."

"Of course. I understand." From her startled expression, I can see she does not. Wrapping things up, she puts the papers together in a neat pile and rises. "Then we are done here. Would you mind waiting in the reception while Britany makes the copies you need? She can also organise a taxi for you if you so wish."

Finally, back in the corridor heading towards the lift, I inhale a deep breath largely to remove the stink of lilies from my nose. With the rucksack over my shoulder, I do not feel as liberated as I had hoped. I'd wanted to leave free from the taint of the toxic Callico family, free from everything, but the knowledge of the land in Italy is an irritation.

And then a calming idea comes to me. Perhaps I can donate the property to the Gateway Charity without too much fuss. Hand everything over to them. I make a mental note to contact the manager as soon as I have delivered the envelope to Callico House.