

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED



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EIGHT

INTRUDERS

Admittedly, I am not an avid reader, not even close. Albert encouraged me to try out some of the crime and thriller novels he favoured by authors like PD James, Ian Rankin and Ruth Rendell. I managed two or three and enjoyed them, but in the time it took me to finish one book, Albert could consume six.

Not much tries my patience, but finding a book in an oversized library, where most of the spines are either blank or embossed with barely legible gold or silver letters, is one of the most frustrating and arduous things I have ever attempted. If Albert used some kind of classification system to organise his books, it's a mystery he took to his grave. Working systematically, I take over two hours to search through one entire section, from ceiling to floor, using a library step ladder and the nearby oak writing desk. Out of a room of between twenty-five to thirty identical areas—three admittedly empty—this feels like a small accomplishment, but when sunshine floods the room from the sole window, my attention is easily diverted.

I need fresh air. I crouch down and squeeze the final

book back into place—something about germ theory—before choosing to wash up in the bedroom, then head outside and stretch my legs.

Once again, I find myself on the bedroom balcony, wiping my hands on a hand towel and surveying the scene below. I notice the long net pole Lorenzo discarded there has gone. When I head down to check, I see immediately that the swimming pool has not only been cleaned but has been done thoroughly. Did Lorenzo do this? I scrutinise the base and confirm that the pool is now beautifully spotless. Sunlight glistens invitingly from the still surface.

I can't stop the grin that emerges at the sight. Perfect. Although I would be happy to strip naked from my clothes and dive straight in, I decide—even though the grounds appear empty and while Lorenzo feels it is acceptable to shower nude—to hurry back to my room and pull on the speedos from my pack.

When I return, the sun may be glorious, but the first touch of chill water on my skin is truly life-affirming and electric, and my limbs come to life with muscle memory. Ten punishing lengths of the pools, and I am finally breathing heavily and feeling alive again, blood pumping through my veins.

For the next four days, I slip into a comfortable routine. An early morning swim is followed by breakfast on the patio, then the more arduous and tedious task of searching the library, systematically tackling the room shelf by shelf. No sign of an author called Luria. Lunch is usually a simple affair of bread, Italian cold meats, cheeses and salad, followed by fresh fruit. In the afternoon, I scout around the villa alone, trying to appear inconspicuous to see if I can find a room with a CCTV feed. But even though I find rooms of beautifully restored murals and simple furniture, I

find none with computer displays or television monitors. As I had predicted, I sit alone on the patio where Mrs Bellacci serves me dinner each evening.

Since my arrival, she has spoken to me very little, once to apologise about the pool, telling me they usually clean and treat the water a day before guests come to stay. I assume my arrival took them by surprise. When she brings me dinner, she bids me a cursory good evening and says a simple *buon appetito* when serving the food. After that, she is gone. I remember from the first evening with the doctor that she prefers to clear the table once visitors have left, and I always return to my room after I've finished eating.

Unsurprisingly, since that first evening, I have seen nothing of Lorenzo.

On Sunday, climbing the staircase to my room, I feel the mobile phone buzzing in my pocket. Once inside, I notice the space has been made up, which is not unusual, but my rucksack is no longer on the floor but on a chair. I wonder if someone has checked through my things. I ignore the suspicion for the time being and grab the phone from my bedside cabinet.

"Josh?" I ask when the call connects.

"No, it's Nishan," comes the voice, sounding slightly rattled. "Look Gabe, Josh asked me to give you call while he gets coffee, just in case what's happened means anything. I'm at the flat right now, the one where we left your phone plugged in. It was burgled overnight. They used a glass cutter on a window pane in the back door to gain entry. Drawers and wardrobes have been left open around the flat, but naturally there's nothing in them at the moment. They did swipe the brand new kettle and toaster from the kitchen top but left the flatscreen and microwave oven—which is a little odd, but does make me think it's the work of petty

thieves. I called the police this morning and let them have a nose around, gave them a list of what had been stolen for insurance purposes. The thing is, I didn't include your phone in the list, which is also gone. I honestly think it's just opportunists grabbing smaller items, but Josh insisted I call and let you know. It might be nothing, but if someone was looking for you, then maybe they traced your phone to this rental address—"

"Is there anything on the phone that could lead them out here?"

"Don't worry about that. Apart from being almost nothing on there, I installed a program that allows me to remotely kill everything on your phone. And I mean everything, including any apps and data. They won't ever be able to use it again, won't even be able to reset the device, the fuckers. I didn't activate that until I made a trace to find the last location the phone was used. Whoever stole it must have switched it off here, because the flat is the last placed shown. As soon as they turn it on, everything will be trashed. The point is that if they were looking for you, they will have easily figured out that you're not staying here. Which means they'll start looking elsewhere. And if it's anything to do with Albert's delightful family, I am sure his solicitor will have mentioned the Italian building site."

"Thanks for the head's up. Honestly, Nishan, I agree with you—"

"Hold up, hold up! Josh has just turned up. Give me a second."

"Hello, your lordship, or whatever they call you these days in Italy," comes Josh's loud and cheerful voice. Nishan has put his phone on speaker. "We're enjoying Sunday morning cinnamon lattes and cream cheese bagels from the artisan café down the road. Has he told you this place got

turned over last night? Bastards. They stole both of my prize Rolex watches—"

"Don't listen to him, Gabe. He's never owned a Rolex," says Nishan.

"Yeah, well. The insurance company don't know that, do they?"

"And how are you going to explain storing prized Rolex watches in an empty flat?"

"Trust me, I'll think of something—"

"He will, too, Nishan," I laugh. "But, you know, I agree with you that it sounds like a case of petty theft. Still, take care at your end, because if the thieves were truly targeting me, they might also have figured out that you manage the rental."

"I find that doubtful," said Nishan. "But if anyone does call and ask, I'll tell them you're an old friend who needed a place to hang for a couple of days before moving on."

"You'll tell them it's none of their fucking business," chimes in Josh.

"Look, I don't want my problems getting you guys into any trouble—"

"Bollocks! We're on your side, remember? And don't you worry your pretty face about us, Gabe," says Josh. "We can take care of ourselves. Not only is our flat set up like a bloody bank vault thanks to my lovely boyfriend, but I still know people, if you know what I mean? We're more concerned about you."

"Well, as I say, I appreciate the head's up. How are things otherwise?"

"Same old shit. This is the only bit of excitement we've had since you left. How are you doing? Are you enjoying your new role as lord of the manor?"

"Very funny. But honestly, this place is like a paradise.

Nothing for miles around and days of sunshine. I get fed three meals a days, have a huge bed to sleep in and a swimming pool all to myself. What's not to love?"

A pause falls between us, and I decide to push him to answer something that has been bugging me, before he ends the call and rejoins Nishan.

"Josh, back when we worked the bars together, did I ever give you the impression that I spoke or understood any other languages?"

"That's an odd question. Where's this coming from?"

"Just one of those funny moments. Probably nothing. I just wonder if it might have something to do with before I lost my memory."

"No, you never spoke another language in front of me. Although, there was than one time."

"What time?"

"Didn't I tell you? Maybe not, because I thought it was nothing. Something happened in the early days when we were both working late. Do you remember Polish Tommy?"

"Vaguely. So many coworkers came and went. What about him?"

"It was that first summer we worked together. We were left to clear the bar at the end of a weekday evening shift before heading off to find some food and then somewhere to bunk down for the night. I wasn't there when it happened but Tommy found a paperback stuffed down one of the bench seats left behind by someone, a well-thumbed, yellow stained-book that had seen better days. Apparently, he tossed the book to you out of curiosity and, after a brief glance at the front and back covers, you told him it was by Dick Francis, something called Longshot before reading off the blurb on the back. After that, you tossed the thing back to him, telling him to leave it in the lost property box."

"Not much of an anecdote so far—"

"Hold your horses," says Josh before his humour kicks in again. "See what I did there? Dick Francis? Hold your horses—"

"Get on with it, Josh," comes Nishan's voice.

"Alright, alright, hostile audience. Tommy came to me after the incident and asked me if I knew whether you could speak any other languages. I told him jokingly that you could barely speak English. Then he explained what had happened, showed me the cover and told me the book was a Russian translation. At the time I assumed you recognised the picture on the cover from the English version and knew the story. It never really signified. But then, as I got to know you, Gabe, other odd little things kept popping up."

"Such as?"

"Trivial stuff, and honestly, now's not the time. You've got enough to worry about. And on that note, have you found anything about Luria?" he asks.

"I mentioned the name to the doctor, without giving too much away. He thinks it's a reference to an Italian microbiologist who specialised in viruses which, given Albert's area of expertise, actually makes a lot of sense. I've been searching through the massive library here, but it's like, you know—"

"Looking for a condom in a convent?" offers Josh.

Typical Josh, to make light of the situation, and I hear Nishan chuckle down the line.

"Something like that," I say before lowering my voice. "But there is something odd. This place is riddled with exterior CCTV cameras, pretty much all around the periphery of the building. Okay, so the villa is isolated, the only dwelling at the end of a long lane, and a bit of added security is understandable, but this seems a little excessive."

"Sounds a bit kinky. Did you check your bedroom?" asks Josh. "Maybe there's some perv recording you naked in your room or the shower? Do you think you've been filmed jerking off—"

"Josh, stop it!" says Nishan, although he's laughing.

"Actually, I did check the rooms and I am fairly sure the cameras are only installed outside."

"Just in case," says Josh. "I'll keep an eye out in case you make an appearance on Chaturbate."

"Go and have your breakfast, Josh," I say. "You're having far too much fun at my expense."

"Welcome to my world," says Nishan, and I hear him having words with Josh but can't make them out. "We're waiting for an emergency glazier to turn up. I've sent him off to phone and find out when they're going to show, being Sunday and all. Before you go, though, I managed to hack into Albert's phone and find his messages from a few days before his death. The only thing that jumped out at me is the back and forth between him and someone called SLB—"

"Dr Sylvie Leblanc. The friend in the minibus with him who survived, the one who's in a coma. Actually, do you know if she's still—"

"Still in a coma? Yes, according to Alice's texts to you. Her vitals are stable but she hasn't regained consciousness."

"Sorry, what were you saying? About Albert's texts?"

"They talked about a trial of some kind. Something Leblanc was clearly unhappy about. And by trial, sounds like they meant the results of a medical trial of some new vaccine. She writes about corners being cut. Albert seems to be less convinced by her reasoning, but she says she plans to bring her concerns up with a medical watchdog overseeing the trial—"

"At the conference they were attending?" I ask.

"She didn't say how. Maybe. Do you think that has something to do with the accident?"

I can't help letting out a deep sigh. "Who knows? I'm beginning to wonder if we ever will."

"In one of Alice's text, she says the police let the family see the traffic cam footage of the accident. The driver did lose control. He was well over the speed limit in the fast lane and hit a barrier, then flipped over four or five times. A miracle no other cars were involved."

When we sign off, Nishan agrees to call me in a couple of days, or before, if there are any developments. When I put down the phone, I am more unsure than ever. Albert was definitely distracted during those last few days of his life. Did Leblanc's text messages have something to do with that? Alice said the police report stated that the driver had been well over the legal limit and even had some antidepressants in him, enough for him to easily fall asleep at the wheel. I take a deep breath and decide to do what I can to find this bloody Luria reference.

For the next couple of days, unending rainfall is accompanied but the occasional thunderstorm. Unable to swim, I spend more time searching through the library. Mrs Bellacci comes by at one point and asks me if I am looking for anything in particular. I flub a response that she seems to accept, and then I continue my search until I lose the will to live.

On both days, I manage a whole morning and a couple of hours in the afternoon before heading upstairs to take a nap. I enjoy lying there with the patio doors open, listening to the rains clattering on the tiled roof and the cool breezes they bring. At the end of the second day, I realise I am more than halfway through the book collection. I am guessing—I don't know for sure—that Albert put the books away hastily

and in no particular order, maybe expecting to come back in the future and organise them properly. Still, I find nothing on or by anyone called Luria.

At dinner on the second day, I notice the rains have stopped. There is a beautiful smell in the air of turf and lemons and other aromatic scents I cannot distinguish. Mrs Bellacci spoils me with a delicious seafood stew crammed with squid, langoustines, octopus and mussels, all served with her fresh homemade focaccia bread. I usually turn down the offer of wine, not particularly fond of drinking by myself, but decide to enjoy a glass or two of red with the meal.

When I retire to my room, allowing Mrs Bellacci to clear the table, I check my phone but find no messages or missed calls. As night falls, I pace the room, feeling restless. In the distance, I hear water falling and move to the open balcony doorway. Once again, there is Lorenzo in all his glory, showering in the buff, lit by an exterior wall lamp. Part of me wonders if he does so purposely. When he turns my way like he did before, I know I am not visible because there is no light in my room, and I am standing in the shade, but I can tell he is looking for me. Interesting.

Just after midnight, having dropped off while watching a UK news channel on my phone, I open my eyes, wide awake, and amble back onto the balcony. Lights at the bottom of the swimming pool draw my attention. The air is clear and clean tonight, and after two mornings of not swimming because of the weather, I strip out of my clothes, pull on my swimming briefs and grab a towel.

The swim is leisurely and unhurried, the water surprisingly warmer than I had anticipated, and I manage around sixteen lengths before calling it quits. The sky appears crystal clear, and I hope the rain clouds have gone and the

weather will be fine later. Morning swimming has always been my preferred routine.

I am towelling myself off when I hear footfalls behind me. I crane around to see Lorenzo approaching me. He wears long dark shorts and has just removed his tee shirt revealing his tattooed torso. Once again, he has the same arrogant expression I had witnessed.

"You race me, *sfigato*," he says, carelessly throwing his tee down onto the grass. "Twenty times. I win, you fuck off to home. Yes?"

Barely have I had time to acknowledge his words than the bastard has dived in from the end of the pool and begun swimming. I stall a moment, considering walking away like the decent English gentleman Albert wanted me to be. Instead, the competitive demon in me rises, and I decide to accept his challenge. He has already completed a length by the time I break the surface of the water, but I see already that he swims like a sprinter, fast and energetic, whereas my swims are marathons.

Ten lengths later, and we are almost neck and neck. Another eight, and I am a good half a stretch in front. Just to provoke his arrogance, I slow my pace on the final lap, then climb slowly from the pool. As I walk away across the lawn, stopping and stooping only to pick up my towel. Without turning back, I raise my fist in the air and show him my middle finger.

I am usually more alert, but I don't hear the footsteps approaching fast from behind me until too late, until Lorenzo's body impacts with mine, sending me crashing to the damp grass. He tumbles off me, and as I roll over, he launches himself on top. His technique is solid. He uses his thighs to hold me in place and grabs both of my wrists above my head. But I'm no easy mark and draw up my knees,

readying to push with my legs and thighs to unbalance him. But first, I freeze to assess his face, to evaluate his intent.

He stills, his face directly over mine. I feel the soft caress of his breath on my face coming from his exertions. His eyes are dark and unfathomable. Once again, his eyebrows scrunch together, and he lowers his body along my own, his face inches from mine. My body reacts in turn, his proximity, pressure and slick skin combining to stoke my arousal. His hair is still wet, and a drop of water begins forming on the end of his nose.

After a second, I lift my head and, with a deliberate swipe of my tongue, lick the droplet away. He recoils his head a few inches, staring at me, and then his eyes drop to my chest as he notices what's going on between my legs.

"What is this?" he says, pressing his groin into mine.

Before I can respond, two things happen simultaneously. Every light in the house and around the grounds switches off, leaving us in complete darkness. Then a familiar female voice calls out from across the lawn.

"Enzo!" Mrs Bellacci barks out from the darkness. "Intrusi. Quattro."

"Stay down." The urgent stiffening of Lorenzo's body is tangible. His warm words whisper harshly in my right ear, his face a shadow, a hand briefly placed over my mouth. "And silent."

Without making a sound, he lifts his body from mine and moves away. My eyes take a few seconds to adjust to the darkness, but in that time, Lorenzo's crouched silhouette has moved away towards the house.

I lift my head and strain to make out the sound of movement, but all I hear are the usual nighttime sounds of the breeze, cicadas and frogs. In my peripheral vision, I detect a shadowy figure slinking across the lawn from the direction

of the olive grove. A sudden flash from the back of the kitchen accompanies a dull crack, the oddly familiar sound of a shot from a suppressed firearm. A muffled groan of pain comes from the big silhouette that drops to the ground.

Although I am trying to make sense of what is happening, I instinctively feel that these armed intruders have been sent to target me. I assess the area. Thick darkness becomes tangible layers, and shades of black and grey as my awareness sharpens, making sense of the backdrop. Two more dull gunshots sound from the far side of the villa.

I'm climbing to my feet, entirely alert now, when I hear a scuffle not far from me. My night vision is improving, and I see two shapes tussling. One of them is undoubtedly the lean, muscled physique of Lorenzo. He appears to be getting the better of the other man, but then I spot another figure heading towards them, holding out an assault rifle. This time the shot is loud and raw, with no suppressor, a warning shot, I assume, because the man is not wearing night vision goggles and would not be able to aim accurately.

Instinct takes over, and I steal quickly across the grounds towards the armed intruder. Close up, he's camouflaged from head to foot in black and holds his gun out in front, steadied by both arms. I act when I notice him raise the weapon to his face, readying to fire off a shot.

I launch myself at his torso, knocking him to the floor as he fires a shot into the trees. We roll around the wet earth until I successfully wrest the gun from him and throw the weapon away from us both. A gunshot goes off behind me, but I have no time to check. I know he has no military training from the short engagement with my opponent. Back on his feet, he fights wildly in an untrained way. Seeing the opportunity, my single blow to his solar plexus

has him paralysed, winded and dropping to his knees. I could follow up with a death blow, but I want him alive to know why he has come for me. I swing a bare heel kick to the side of his head, which I know will render him unconscious. I have no idea how I know this, but he falls sideways onto the ground as I anticipate.

As I straighten up, Lorenzo's voice calls out something, and Mrs Bellacci calls back. A couple of seconds later, the lights blaze across the grounds, blinding me for a second. I find Lorenzo to my right, a firearm over his bare shoulder, standing over a body on the floor. His gaze finds mine, and he looks puzzled when he sees the figure at my feet.

"Where do you want him?" I ask, nodding to my catch.

"Outside the kitchen," he replies, pointing across the grounds.

Bizarrely, we drag the bodies by the arms across the grounds as though this is something we do regularly and line them up outside the kitchen alongside two similarly attired men. Both appear dead, one shot in the chest, the other in the head. None are dressed in ballistic body armour. When Lorenzo drops his man alongside, who is also lifeless—a broken neck, if I had to guess—he stares at me and shrugs, wondering why I am not doing the same.

"This one is alive. Unconscious. We need to tie him up and lock him away somewhere. When he gains consciousness, we can find out who he is and why he's here."

He nods once and heads into the kitchen. He returns with thick plastic cable ties and helps me to secure the man from head to foot. Once we're finished, we take him to a garden shed at the back of the kitchen and put him onto sacks stacked there. Lorenzo ensures the door is padlocked securely before returning to the kitchen.

Mrs Bellacci is already seated at the pine table. We pull

out chairs and sit together in silence. Behind her on a dresser sits a rifle with a suppressor of American design—a Remington. A silent communication goes on between her and Lorenzo. Feeling the need to confess, I am about to come clean about Albert and the message he sent me, concerned that my silence has put them both at risk when she speaks up.

"I think we need to talk openly," says Mrs Bellacci eventually. "My sincere apologies, Mr Redbrick, but there are things we have not told you. You should not have been brought into this. I will call Dr Romano and ask him to come over first thing this morning. At around six. We will share breakfast, then everything will be explained. For now, please go shower and sleep, if you can. Lorenzo and I will clean up down here."