

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

TWENTY

IVAN

Once the man has cut my bindings, he helps me to my feet before checking his gun. Even with the urgency, questions crowd my brain.

"Who are you? How do you—?"

"Later," he says as he steps past me towards the lodge. "We've not much time. Right now, you need a gun. Do you have one inside?"

"In the bedroom."

"How easy is it to get to?"

"It's not. We either need to break a window or pass through the living room. But, hang on."

I hurry to the lock-up with him following behind. I hesitate for a few breaths before keying in the code, but I reason that he could have efficiently executed me by now. I key in the code and take out another of the guns. After checking to ensure the firearm is loaded, I nod to the guy.

"Good. When we go in, stay behind me. They'll be expecting my return. When you get a clear shot, push me out of the way and take down Vlad—the man. But don't kill the woman—"

"Wouldn't it be easier if I shoot them both?"

"Five, I'm helping you and I need you to do as I say. I'll explain later, but I need Mila alive."

As we creep up the wooden steps, and before we reach the door, a distant crack pierces the stillness and accompanies the sound of a window pane shattering somewhere inside the lodge. The man does not falter a second but crashes through the door.

Inside is a mess of confusion.

From behind him, I quickly scan the room. Lorenzo is tied up and kneeling on a rug by the fireplace. His complexion is ashen, but on a cursory inspection, I see no injury. The bigger man's body is on the floor by the broken window, the remains of his head pumping blood around a mess of bone, brain, and broken glass. Standing over Lorenzo, with the cold fireplace behind her, the woman is stricken but alert. Instinctively, she jerks her gun up at the tall guy, her eyes wild. I push him out of the way and shoot her shoulder. As she recoils, she trips on the hearth, hitting her head on the mantelpiece as she falls.

While I run to Lorenzo, the tall guy rushes over to check on her.

"Stay below the window ledge," I shout to him as I kneel on the floor. "Are you hurt, Enzo?"

Lorenzo's eyes widen in disbelief. He throws his arms around me and hugs me hard, releasing a stifled gasp. The powerful emotion startles me, and I hug him back, feeling his body tremble.

"I hear shots," he whispers, and I catch the anguish in his voice. Of course. The realisation hits me hard that he thought I had been executed.

"I'm fine, baby."

"She's still breathing," says the man. "Here."

He slides a knife across the floorboards towards me. I cut the bindings as Lorenzo tilts his head back and looks up at me with relief and confusion.

"What happened?" he asks, rubbing his wrists.

"He's helping us," I say before nodding at the body on the floor. "And I think Mrs Bellacci might be making her presence known. Can you get her to stand down?"

"My phone is in the bedroom. I'll try messaging her."

"Go then. Fast and low."

While Lorenzo scrambles across the floor on all fours and heads towards the bedroom, I survey the room more carefully this time. I must secure the space in case Mrs Bellacci did not see us enter.

"We've not much time," calls the man, tending to his fallen colleague. "Mila calls in on the hour, every hour. This is a priority covert op. They'll send another team if we don't check in. I suggest we secure Mila then you'll have to do the same to me."

I head to the broken window and pull the cord to close the thick curtains. Once I'm done, I help drag the woman towards the bedroom with the twin beds where the blinds are closed. Apart from the shoulder wound, which I ensured was a clean through-and-through, she has a nasty gash on the side of her head and is spattered with fragments of blood and other body matter from her dead colleague.

"She'll recover," says the man, pushing the hair from her face. "I must say, you've got a well chosen location here. Even our drones would not have been able to find you."

"How did you find us?" I ask as he arranges the woman's body on the floor.

"Tracker on your motorbike."

"Fuck. How the hell did you manage that?"

"Mila said we got lucky," he says. I can see by how he

handles her with tenderness that there's more than a professional relationship between them. Once he's finished, he perches on the edge of a bed. "Your pal was identified by one of our operatives working around Tuscany. Spotted the two of you going into a bar in San Vincenzo. Said she parked up to take photos of you and the bike for confirmation, and once you were inside, took the initiative to plant the tracker."

I remember the trip to the coast well, an opportunity to step outside Eagle House with my new look as Janis. Had we been careless that day or just unlucky?

"How much time do we have?" I ask.

"Fifteen to twenty minutes. I suggest you leave the bike. Finding the device might take too long. Is there a car you can use?"

"Not that I know of, but we'll think of something. Let me wait for Lorenzo to finish up. He may have some ideas. Are you working undercover?"

"No."

"You're a double agent?"

"No."

"I don't understand."

"I work for the Russian foreign intelligence services. Honestly Five, had you not been here today, I would have followed orders. Either brought your friend in or taken him down. Together with the woman, he's caused us one embarrassment after another. We've got tough enough adversaries from the big players. The Kremlin views Italy as little more than a mouse. Except for those two. Three times they've shown us up and the heads of the SVR do not take kindly to that sort of upstaging. But when I saw you in the photograph? Even with the dye job, I recognised you instantly. That's why I did what I did."

"Do they about us—"

"Nobody knows a thing. That part of my life is buried. And that's the way it's going to stay."

"You said we trained together?"

"A lifetime ago. You were—are—a knight. I was only a pawn. P2 they called me, one of the poor wee buggers being groomed to eventually replace you. Bloody impossible task. They encouraged us to learn with you, to train with you, to emulate you. We considered you gods."

"At the Hartfield Institute?"

"You remember?"

"Not a thing. That's what we're trying to find out."

"Not much I can tell you. Except that Hartfield's somewhere along the remote west coast of Scotland. Until the night I left, I don't remember ever leaving the grounds, except being driven to swim in an ice cold loch. They ran the place like a military boarding school coupled with a medical facility. The last time I saw you I was eight and you were eleven. Some of us used to call you the dolphin because of the fearless way you swam through the water. But we rarely mixed. And you were often away on assignment. Do you remember any of the language instructors?"

"I told you. I don't remember anything."

"So you did. We had the same Russian teacher. Shame you don't remember, because speaking Russian was the only thing I could do better than you. A natural, our teacher called me. My last memory of the place was of her shaking me awake in the middle of the night, whispering to me that the institute was no longer safe for me and instructing me to get into the boot of her car. I always did what I was told, but I particularly trusted her. Half an hour later, I'm climbing aboard a fishing boat in the pitch black. Even in the dark, I saw a sign about a warehouse for Kishorn Port. Later that

morning, as the sun rose, I boarded a Russian cargo ship. Next thing I know, I'm taken in by a woman in the port city of Murmansk in the northwest of Russia. That's when I finally experienced a normal childhood. I was given a real name, Ivan, instead of being screamed at as a pawn. Took me almost a year to sleep through the whole night. Nobody said as much, but I get the impression our language tutor saved my life. She stayed behind and I don't know what happened to her. I didn't know what had happened to any of you."

Only as he recounts his last days at Hartfield do I recognise faint traces of a Scottish accent and word combinations favoured by the Scots. I wish we could stay and talk more. As Ivan finishes his tale, Lorenzo calls out my name, and I summon him into the room.

"I spoke to—our friend," he says, his gaze drifting between Ivan and me. He has one of the guns dangling from his right hand. I can see he's still not convinced by our rescuer, but I don't have time to explain.

"We need to get out of here," I say. "I assume she has transport. Can you get her to collect us out front?"

"What about my bike?"

"Unusable, I'm afraid."

Lorenzo thumbs a quick message before looking accusingly at Ivan again, a telltale narrowing of his eyes. I wonder if I should explain, but Lorenzo begins talking.

"Is he coming with us?"

"No," says Ivan flatly before addressing me directly. "You're on your own after this. I'll be able to explain this because Vladimir was not the brightest star in the sky, a heavy-handed nut job if you know what I mean? That's why Mila kept him with her at all times. Once you're gone, it'll not be difficult to blame this fuck-up on him. I'll tell her

Vlad didn't properly secure your hands, and you took me by surprise. But you're going to need to knock me unconscious, too. I know you can do that, Five."

Ivan stands before me, his chin up, readying himself for me to strike him.

"Wait," says Lorenzo, as his phone buzzes with a message. "Did you ask him if he remembers a doctor at the institute called Maurice Leblanc?"

"What does he look like?" asks Ivan.

"We only have a name."

"Then, no. Nobody was ever referred to by name. Only by a prefix and a number. M for military personnel, D for the medical staff and E for the educators. All except the knights, who were referred to by a single digit. But I could tell you what some of them looked like."

"Almost complete anonymity," I mutter. "An operation run entirely without names."

"Before you do what you have to, let me say this one last thing. I don't know how you got out of that place, but I believe we've been given a second chance. They used to drill into us that we were superior, but now I see that for the lie that it was. To fit in, I've had to learn things other people take for granted. Trust, vulnerability, friendship, fear, and yes, love. But Five, it's been worth every hard truth. I would never go back. Never."

I nod because I am beginning to understand the reality of his words. We have a shared experience I cannot fathom because I have no memory. But I know my feelings for Lorenzo are wholly new and confusing if I am honest with myself.

"Are there any more of us out there?" I ask.

"That I don't know, but I don't think so. I've been in the field for six years and you are the first face I've recognised.

Look, I won't be able to help you again, Five. Not without compromising my position. This is a one-off. You're on your own after this."

"I'm not on my own," I say. I stand before him, and he nods once. Somewhere in my memory, I know I must provide a double strike to the main artery on either side of his neck. But with lightning speed that even surprises me, Lorenzo steps forward and punches him in the temple. I step back as Ivan's body collapses to the floor.

"I apologise to you only," he says, shaking out his fist. "But I needed this. Otherwise, I would go crazy. Mrs Bellacci will be out front in five minutes. I packed our bags already, okay?"

"Okay."

"And Gabriel."

"Yes."

"Now, I am ready," he says before slapping my backside and moving past me out of the door.

I am not sure what kind of car I expected Mrs Bellacci to drive, but a slick black Mercedes four-wheel-drive sports car with a fabric roof would not have been even close. Then again, I did not expect to see the aristocratic-looking blonde woman sitting behind the steering wheel. Lorenzo tosses in our bags and takes the narrower back seat, letting me sit up front. Seconds later, Mrs Bellacci rips the car into gear, and I sink into the leather upholstery.

The first twenty minutes go by in silence. Only as we hit a dual lane A-road does Mrs Bellacci speak with barely suppressed anger. Everything she says is in Italian and clearly aimed at Lorenzo. I do not interrupt but watch the wing mirror to ensure we are not being tailed.

"You were reckless," she says eventually, in English for my benefit. "Swimming in plain sight. We need to call

Doctor Romano and tell him what happened. He will not be happy."

I see her prod a finger on the large display in the centre console to bring up telephone contacts.

"Wait. Is that how you think they found us?" I say, noticing Lorenzo catch my eye in the rearview mirror. "They fixed a tracking device to Lorenzo's bike. Back in Italy."

"How?" asked Mrs Bellacci, her head snapping around.

"The day I became Janis, Lorenzo and I went for a bike ride. One of their agent's spotted Lorenzo when we stopped for a coffee and planted the tracker on his bike."

Mrs Bellacci snorts. "How do you know this?"

"One of our captors told me."

"And you believe them?"

I stare at Mrs Bellacci. Her tone is castigating, and, unusually for me, I find myself rattled by the rebuke.

"Maybe a more important question to ask is why you're here?"

"The doctor asked me to keep an eye on you."

"Pull the car over," I demand, pointing ahead. We are on a long stretch of road in open country, but a picnic area on our left is a few hundred yards away. Mrs Bellacci stares at me briefly before slowing the car and stopping beneath the cover of an oak tree at the almost empty siding.

"I don't want to have this conversation while we're driving," I say, turning my full attention to Mrs Bellacci. "But do you honestly believe these people found us because we happened to be swimming in Lake Grasmere. Come on, Mrs Bellacci. They were not already here on the off-chance we might show up. We were either tracked or someone told them where we were. And there are only four people who knew our location—Lorenzo, you, Doctor Romano and me.

So unless you believe one of us is a traitor and gave our position away, there must be another, more rational explanation."

Mrs Bellacci does not look at me but nods as I speak.

"Look, I agree they must have studied our routine of swimming in the morning and taken full advantage of that to capture us. I would have done the same and I take full responsibility for that. Thankfully, Lorenzo checked in with you regularly and I had a sense you might be close."

"The lodge is covered by trees and not easy to protect from a distance."

"But you managed."

She nods once.

"You say you were helped by one of them?" she asks. "An undercover agent for who, the Americans?"

"Not an undercover spy. He is a Russian agent."

"And you are telling me this information was given freely by a loyal Russian operative?"

"He had a good reason to help me. We trained together as children. At the Hartfield Institute."

"And you believe this?"

"I do."

The news is met with silence. When I turn to Mrs Bellacci, she mutters something in Italian but does not look at me. I wait for her to translate, but she does not.

"What did she say?"

After a moment, Lorenzo's subdued voice comes from the back.

"She says your obsession with this fool's errand is putting all our lives at risk."

She has a point. Lorenzo's bike would never have been tracked, and we would not be in this situation if not for me. They're both already at risk, being hunted down by enemy

forces. Should I include them in my own dilemma, placing them in more danger than they already face? I am convinced that Albert wanted me to know about my past, and I want—no, I need—to know answers. But at what cost? The minibus crash and the quest to uncover my hidden past are my burdens to carry, mine alone.

"Go ahead and call Doctor Romano," I say.

Mrs Bellacci darts a finger out and calls a number. Romano, as always, answers after only a few rings. Romano greets Mrs Bellacci in Italian and then speaks rapidly with sentences I cannot follow.

"You are all together?" he says eventually.

"We are," I reply. "And it may be best if I'm the one to brief you on what happened at the lodge. Lorenzo and Mrs Bellacci do not have all the information. I can fill in the gaps. Then there are a few questions I have for you."

I tell them about our trip to the lodge and the morning events, going into detail about Ivan, who also spent time at the Hartfield Institute. When I finish, Romano says something in Italian, and Mrs Bellacci replies before reaching across to pull her mobile phone from the glove compartment.

"My apologies for not contacting you earlier," says Romano. "But some things have only just come to light. I agree that you must have been tracked most likely using the bike. But Teresa has a point. I understand how you might feel an affinity to this man, Janis, but remember what Dr Callico told you. Trust nobody. And I would not rely on the word of someone who has made his loyalties plain. There is a bug detecting app and attachment on Teresa's phone. To be on the safe side, I suggest you scan yourselves and your baggage. I also think you need to pay this man, Maurice Leblanc, a visit."

Mrs Bellacci demonstrates using the device by scanning herself from head to foot and then passes the device to Lorenzo, who checks our bags and himself.

"That's what Lorenzo said. I planned to head to Carlisle as soon as we had the all-clear from you. But isn't there an unofficial manhunt for me after the incident in Leblanc's ward room? We've seen nothing on the news or on police reports."

"That was one of the reasons for my absence. They'd like to speak to you but you are not a suspect. I am sure you will not be surprised to learn that the camera in the room had been disabled before the assassin entered. Only the duty nurse, the aggressor and Sylvie Leblanc saw you that evening. Sylvie's speaking better now. She told them how she woke to find the night nurse passed out on her bed and a man standing over her with a hypodermic syringe. She also explained how you saved her life, that you caught the attacker by surprise and fought him off before going for help while she sounded the alarm. And then, of course, the fire alarms went off, and everything became chaotic. Naturally, they did some digging into your background and saw that you have military experience. Most importantly, Leblanc's attacker is in their safe-keeping and the prime catch but, naturally, he is saying nothing."

Having finished, Lorenzo passes the phone to me, and I begin scanning my clothes, watching the display for any anomaly. Is there anything a person cannot do with a mobile phone these days?

"And the bodies of the men who followed me?" I ask as I finish and hand the device back to Mrs Bellacci. "The ones Lorenzo took down?"

"Interesting, too. After our call, I sent an operative to

check, but the whole area was clean. No blood and not even signs of gunfire. You said that one of the men got away."

"That's right."

"Then I can only assume they cleaned up their own mess."

"Who was behind this attack?" asks Bellacci. "Puchinsky?"

"We heard about his death on the news," I say before he can reply. "Did you have anything to do with that?"

Romano exhales a breath.

"Yes, Teresa, we believe Puchinsky is associated with the killers. And no, Janis, I did not. Had I not known about your current whereabouts, I might have asked you the same question."

"Who, then?"

"The authorities believe he took his own life, that he folded under the pressure of public scrutiny. I never met the man but I did a lot of digging into his life and, from what others tell me, the likelihood is remote."

"What about the friend he was staying with?" asks Mrs Bellacci.

"A fair enough assumption. But the person was his most trusted confidante. They'd been having a small catered dinner party for five guests, all close friends. According to the official report, Puchinsky went out onto the balcony alone to take a call and never returned. In the transcript I got hold of, they wrote that there is only one way onto the balcony, and that's through the balcony door in the living room."

"Then he must have jumped," says Lorenzo. "If he was alone, how could someone have pushed him?"

"Who catered the event?" I ask.

Romano chuckles down the phone line.

"A better question and a line of investigation that I chose to pursue more thoroughly than the police. They had a retired chef from a celebrated central London restaurant to prepare and cook the food, and a female assistant to wait the table, serve drinks and clean up. Hired separately. A little excessive for five people, but Puchinsky's friend was known for his extravagance."

"Was the female server related to Stephan Dytrovich?" I ask.

"Too obvious. A connection would soon have been made. But you are on the right track."

"The minibus driver's wife."

"Not McDonald's wife, but I found a tenuous link to her. I believe the woman server was waiting in the shadows for him to step outside. She may have even orchestrated the call—although by all accounts Puchinsky was habitually glued to his phone. And if you're wondering how she managed to get out there without being seen, let's just say that none of you would have had a problem climbing from the unused balcony in one of the guest bedrooms to the main one outside the living room. Puchinsky was indeed executed. No witnesses, no evidence—everything done cleanly. The police are still tossing up between accidental death and suicide, and we are happy to let them close their files on the case."

"If it's true, then there's a twisted irony to all this," I say. "While Puchinsky was paying someone to silence Leblanc once and for all, the wife of the minibus driver was arranging for someone to take care of him."

Everyone takes a few moments to process this information. Has justice been served? Perhaps not. Albert is still gone. But at least Puchinsky can no longer poison the world with his super vaccine.

"Did Puchinsky pay Spataro to have me killed?"

"Puchinsky would never use an amateur like Spataro."

"Then who?"

"Janis, right now is not a good—"

"Who, Doctor Romano? You know, don't you?"

The doctor takes a deep breath before answering.

"I told you I have been busy and there's more I've uncovered. Janis, the money for the attack on Eagle House came from an account owned by the Callico Corporation. Any release of funds needed to be authorised by at least one of the named trustees; Albert, Edward, Alice or Victoria. I have yet to find out which."

"Edward Callico," I reply instantly. Who else had anything to gain from my death?

"Before you jump to any conclusions, you should know that there are some unusual circumstances surrounding the job that Spataro did not see any reason to disclose."

"Such as?"

"Such as the contract terms and monies being agreed and paid for the day before the minibus crash."

My mind reels at this new information. How can that be? Is there something I have missed or been blind to? On that day, I had no knowledge of the existence of Eagle House. And the family believed the place to be derelict. The only person who knew about the renovations was Albert. And nobody but Albert could have known that I would end up there.

"You're saying that Albert was alive and well on the day the hit was originally commissioned," I hear myself say. "And we cannot automatically rule him out as the person who commissioned the hit."

"Exactly. But that does not mean—" begins Romano.

"I know what it means."

I also remember seeing Albert with an old-fashioned ledger under his arm, going to his study in Callico House to sign off payments, and laughing as he told me that the Callico bank was open for business. Everything was written down in the ledger, which was held in the wall safe behind a painting of his great-grandfather. All very archaic and Dickensian, he had joked at the time. At that moment, I realise I will need to return to that dreadful house if I am going to find the truth.

"What's the next move?" I ask.

"You cannot stay where you are. I will find you a safe house across the Scottish border. And you need to approach Doctor Maurice Leblanc in Carlisle, do you not?"

"Look, I want you to know that I am fully committed to being a part of this team, Doctor Romano. But can I ask if you have any official work for us right now?"

"Not at the moment. Why?"

"Because Mrs Bellacci made a valid point before the call. I seem to be exposing the team to unnecessary risks. Once we have settled in somewhere for a night or two, I will go and see Leblanc alone."

"No," says Lorenzo adamantly, although I notice Mrs Bellacci nodding.

"Yes, Lorenzo," I reply, twisting in my seat to look him in the face and imploring him. "I almost got you killed. And I will not allow that to happen again. There may be safety in numbers, but a person working alone draws less attention."

"Listen to him, Lorenzo," says Doctor Romano. "You know he speaks sense."

Once Mrs Bellacci has plugged in the GPS coordinates sent by Romano, she puts the car into gear, and we head off in silence, with the heat of Lorenzo's gaze burning into the back of my head.