

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

NINETEEN

GRASMERE

Before we left, there were a few things to be done. Lorenzo changed the bike plates and provided us with new motorcycle helmets. Both are a precaution. He also hit the shops early to buy me fresh clothing. I now sport a wig of dark cherry curls, which is my least favourite disguise. With the glasses, I appear distinctly nerdy. But the look is the polar opposite of edgy Janis. My new clothes include black jeans and a grey jersey tee beneath a black zipper hoodie. Thank goodness he also bought me a lightweight waterproof jacket and pants in case the weather turned bad.

We set off at nine, and before long, I realise how right he is about riding pillion. Despite being a skilled motorcyclist, nudging the speed limit and never taking risks, the winding and bumpy stretches of poorly maintained A and B roads—we purposely avoid motorways—soon becomes uncomfortable.

We have just hit an open stretch of the A1, after a brief comfort stop at a lay-by coffee van, when the heavens open. A couple of miles later, Lorenzo pulls up at a disused bus shelter, and in the musty space, we scramble into water-

proofs. On the outskirts of Doncaster, with the weather worsening, we stop for fuel and risk lunch at a diner, discussing the idea of taking a motel room for the night. Ultimately, we decide to forge on until we reach our destination—but I insist on swapping places on the bike.

Negotiating hours of relentless rain, we eventually join a narrow road skirting Lake Grasmere in Cumbria. We see barely another vehicle and not a single pedestrian for half a mile. Nobody else has braved the foul October weather. As we round a bend in the road, the bike's headlight picks out an entrance set back on the right announcing Lakeview Lodge, Private Property. I pull the machine over and keep the engine running while Lorenzo jumps off and manages the gate. Hidden from the lane by overhanging trees, a gravel path descends to a modern wood cabin. Although the windows are dead, a security light flashes to life and illuminates the parking area.

I park beneath the shelter of a lean-to that houses a chest-high storage unit of black metal set in concrete beneath the building and is probably used to store tools and gardening equipment. I make a plan to check later. While I unstrap the luggage, Lorenzo bounds up the three steps to the front porch. Romano has left instructions for us to access a safe box on the wall, and after punching in a six-digit code, Lorenzo grabs the keys from inside, opens the door and flicks on the house lights. When I enter and notice him removing his helmet, I drop the bags and follow suit.

The open-plan lodge has modern furniture and appliances but scant decor or embellishments. A compact kitchen overlooks the living and dining area. My eye is instantly drawn to the brick fireplace with an open-log fire pre-prepared with timber and fire starters.

"What do you think?" he asks, placing his headgear on the table. "Good enough?"

"Will be once we get a fire started."

"I need a hot shower first," he says. "If they have one."

"Let's have a look around. Then you can shower or bathe while I get a fire going?"

"You don't want to join me?"

I hesitate. My desire for Lorenzo's body is almost as fierce as the one to fill my belly. But I know I have him to myself for a few weeks, just the two of us with no Mrs Bellacci in a room across the hall.

"We'll have plenty of time for that. And right now I need fire and food."

We discover two decent-sized bedrooms with double beds, both recently cleaned and made up. Each has an adjoining bathroom with a shower attachment over the bath. Lorenzo selects the bedroom overlooking the lake for us, and we place our luggage on the bed.

"It is not Eagle House, but anything is good right now," says Lorenzo from the bathroom as he checks the water pressure and temperature.

"I haven't had a chance to ask. What happened back in Monticiano? Romano didn't say."

"According to Romano's sources, they sent six of their elite for us. But they stepped down long before reaching the villa. Romano told me that our head of ops believes they had drones in the air with heat-seeking equipment and smelled a rat when they discovered the place cold."

"Weren't our people in there?"

"They stationed their team and vehicles behind Pensione Galli. Wanted to spring a counter offensive from outside the grounds."

"I still have a home to go back to, then?"

"Gabriel does."

We head back to the kitchen, where someone has stocked up the fridge with fresh produce and the freezer with ready made meals. When I dig out a couple of frozen pizzas and place them next to the microwave, Lorenzo pulls a face before shrugging and nodding. But I manage to elicit a smile when I haul out a large bottle of Peroni Nastro Azzurro to show him.

While he showers, I tell him I want to search the lodge and go about looking in cupboards and drawers. By the time I've finished, I'm convinced the space is a standard holiday rental because nothing inside indicates that this is a safe house. Somebody local clearly has a key and was instructed to clean the rooms and buy a few weeks' provisions.

The last place of all, I check the metal container beneath the lean-to. The unit bears an electronic keypad rather than a standard padlock which seems odd for storing surplus lodge equipment. Having memorised Romano's access number, I unlock the door and find four black metal drawers. The topmost houses handguns and ammunition, the lower knives and other weaponry. One has two sets of car keys, which is strange because I saw no garage on our way into the grounds. I lift out two pistols and spare ammo, lock the unit up again, and take them into the house.

Lorenzo is emerging from the shower when I show him the prize. While towelling his hair dry, he simply nods while providing a half smile.

"Il dottore would not leave us unprotected," he mutters. "Put one in each of the bedside drawers."

Both showered, fed and lounging in front of the open fire, I allow myself to relax for the first time since leaving Monticiano. Lorenzo cradles my head against his chest as we stare at the flames dancing among logs in the grate.

He tells me about the military man who saved him from the streets, who had a far more rustic cabin in the remote countryside. Lorenzo rarely gives emotions away but talks of the old man with fondness. Less than six months after taking Lorenzo in, he tells me, the man found out the names of the gunmen who had assassinated Lorenzo's parents. Naturally, Lorenzo hungered for revenge, but instead of letting him loose, the old man taught him to restrain and channel his anger, to store up and use the rage only when needed. Years later, when Lorenzo was in uniform and took leave to attend the man's funeral, he learned that his parents' killers had been executed in a downtown suburb of Napoli, two blocks from where the old man lived. With that knowledge, he had travelled to Rome to find his parents' graves, to tell the news to their headstones and let them rest avenged.

"Do you ever wonder about your parents?" he asks me. "Who they were? Whether they might still be alive?"

"No," I respond bluntly because I genuinely do not.

Josh used to ask me the same thing, and could never understand why I wouldn't want to know, wouldn't want to try and find them. What if they're rich and powerful, he asked me once. I told him I didn't care. Life is linear, finite, and too short to be squandered, worrying about a past that cannot be changed. And if they had really wanted to find me, they would have done so. Why should I be the one taking the initiative?

The bar manager in Soho had adoptive parents and only made contact with his birth mother—the father had died—when he was in his late thirties. They met three times. He told me he had come to resent the time, effort and angst he had wasted searching for them.

Although Albert actively encouraged and inspired me

to solve mysteries, that is one sleeping dog he did not encourage me to wake. Strange, though. In all the time I knew Albert, he never mentioned the subject. And thinking back, that is precisely the kind of real-world mystery he would have loved. But that does make me wonder. What did Albert know? And what was the real reason he took me in? I thought he simply wanted companionship. But the more I learned, the more I believed he was protecting me.

I recall the night he turned up at the bar. I noticed him purposely hanging back until I was free to serve him. Many of the bar boys got off with customers, and I could take care of myself, so I wasn't worried about the attention. And he would not have been the first man I'd gone home with who wanted company without sex. Did he recognise the mark on my wrist? Back then, I used to wear a knock-off watch with a large face and thick faux-leather strap. But if I had to hand wash any glasses, I'd stuff the cheap timepiece in my pocket and roll up my sleeves.

"If the weather is better tomorrow, shall we swim?" asks Lorenzo.

"Where?" I ask, my mood lifting at the prospect. I am sure he made the suggestion to drag me from my thoughts.

"Isn't that a big lake down the hill?"

"Can we swim there?"

"In Italy you would not need to ask. But according to the local magazine I found in the bedroom drawer, swimming is not only allowed, but recommended. I have extra swimming shorts you can use."

"Yes, then," I answer. "After a day in the saddle, I need to stretch my muscles and burn some energy."

Lorenzo falls silent for a moment before muttering in my ear.

"How about I massage you on the bed?"

We kiss while removing each other's clothing on our way to the bedroom. Once we are naked, he instructs me to lie face down on the bedclothes, then fishes a small bottle of musk-scented oil from his wash bag. He sits over my upper thighs and splashes the liquid along my spine before rubbing firmly into the muscles with long, slow strokes. Inevitably, after touching and kissing and nipping my skin, the massage turns sensual.

My body stiffens when he delves his fingers into the ridge between my buttocks. He stops instantly, but this time I murmur for him to continue, to probe further than he ever has. He knows me well and leans down to bite on my shoulder—not too hard but enough to distract me—when his fingers push inside while his hot erection rubs along the oiled surface of my backside. The sensation is new, and after the initial burn, I am pushing back onto his fingers. All too soon, he withdraws his hand, and I wait for him to finally fuck me.

"Not today, mio amato," he whispers in my ear. "You are still not ready. But soon. Turn over."

Maybe I ought to be wary of how Lorenzo can easily manipulate me, but I happily succumb to his wishes. He oils up my straining erection and sinks down onto me. The tightness and warmth feel better every time we make love, and once he is loosened up, I take over, thrusting into him. When I see his eyes rolling back in his head as he jerks his cock, I pull his mouth down for a kiss, and his eyelids flutter open in surprise. But I pay them no heed because I need my fill of him. He comes seconds before me, shooting his hot semen onto my stomach. My hands clamp around his shoulders when I fill him. We collapse together, and I pull his body to mine, letting the sticky mess on me glue us together.

How I've lived so many years without allowing my body

to experience such carnal pleasures is a crime and I do not plan on wasting more time. With Lorenzo, I may let him take control and get his fill of me, but I am also conscious of returning the attention with as much passion. And when we climax together, it feels as though we are one person.

For the following days, we fall into a comfortable routine of swimming, lighting fires, eating and making love—and the world stops spinning.

Romano's suggestion that Sylvie's words meant Scotland has stirred something deep inside, and I find myself lying awake for hours some nights, trying to grasp at the meaning. I have a strong intuition that my journey's end is near and lies somewhere in Scotland, but like an elusive dream, I have no idea where to begin looking.

On the upside, I wake each morning to Lorenzo's warm body pressed into mine and permit myself to wallow in the happiness of his proximity. Before anything else, we head down the narrow tree-lined path that meanders from the lodge to the lake jetty. Stripping down to our swimming shorts, we dive into the mist-covered waters. Since arriving, I have ditched the wig, but, as a precaution, I always wear a black baseball cap when in the water. Lorenzo invariably mutters a few curses at the shock of cold when he surfaces, but after swimming alongside each other for a few metres, the exercise warms our bodies. We swim to the north and around the island before heading to the south, where the River Rothay joins the lake. At that time of the morning, there are no kayaks or rowing boats on the lake, but the road that hugs the east side of the lake can get busy, so we stay away from the shoreline. The swim takes over an hour and is a chilly but pleasant change from swimming lengths. We race each other freestyle back to the jetty ladder. I am always the first to climb out and wait to help him from the

water. Lorenzo then races me barefoot back to the lodge and, naturally, he wins.

Lorenzo showers first in the lodge while I put our towels and shorts into the dryer. When he's finished, I take my turn, after which he helps me to change the dressing on my wound. Each time he voices his surprise at how quickly I heal.

Like Albert, I have never been interested in television entertainment, but Lorenzo enjoys having the news on in the background while he fixes us breakfast each morning. I am tasked with tidying the bed and bathrooms, fixing the bedcovers, removing trash and, after eating meals, washing dishes. He is as amused as I am about our assumed domestic roles.

On the tenth day of our stay, I hear him call out as I make the bed.

"Gabriel. Come quickly."

I enter the kitchen to pleasant odours of toasted bread and bacon frying. Although he is at the cooker, Lorenzo's attention is fixed on the wall television. A female reporter stands in the middle of a road in London where a police cordon has been set up.

"—embattled recently with allegations of rigging a medical trial. We understand from officials that he was staying in London at the penthouse home of a friend, before planning to travel on to the WHO headquarters in Brussels to attend a tribunal. A police investigation has been opened into the cause of this tragedy. Naturally, they are unwilling to speculate and all they can tell us at the moment is that a passerby found the dead body of Professor Sergio Puchinsky on the pavement outside a residential apartment block in Holland Park. They also confirmed that Puchinsky died from injuries caused by the fall."

I stare at the screen momentarily, Romano's words returning to me.

"Doctor Romano told me Puchinsky would never stand trial."

"Let me tell you something about il dottore. His first priority is to his country and to national security which extends to those who work for him. But he is also a man of traditional Italian values. Once he considers you worthy of his friendship and trust—and your friend Albert was considered such—you become an extension of his family. And anybody foolish enough to mess with his family will pay a price."

"Does he consider me—?"

"Il dotter considers us both family. Close family."

Right now, I am grateful to have Romano on my side. Lorenzo brings over plates of food, and we sit at the table by the window, eating in comfortable silence. But I can tell by the furrow of his brow that he is mulling something over.

"I have not heard from him," he says when he notices me studying him.

"Is that normal?"

"Very rare. I have sent messages to them both. But even Mrs Bellacci is not responding. I know you do not watch the news or check the internet, but there is another thing."

I wonder if something has happened back in Italy.

"Nothing was reported about the attack on Sylvie Leblanc. Or about the men I shot on the street who followed you home. Not a thing. Usually the police would ask the public for information. I also have access to secure sites that report this kind of incident. But it is almost as if they did not take place."

Multiple reasons pop into my head, one being that the police or other intelligence services suppressed the news

until the assassin had been interrogated. The upside is that my—Janis'—face has not been released to the media. How long that will remain the case who knows? Romano, of all people, would have more information. But we must stay off the radar until we hear from him.

"He told us to go to ground for two weeks," I say. "Said he would contact us when he believes we are out of danger. I suggest we hold the faith and trust him."

Lorenzo nods once but does not meet my gaze.

"I'm here, Enzo. Right by your side."

That remark draws his beautiful dark eyes to mine and gifts me with one of his rare smiles. He reaches across the table and grabs my hand.

"I know you are. I am just not used to being inactive for so long. What time is it?"

"That was the nine o'clock news we just heard. Why?"

"We need to use this time wisely. Take my phone and call the number on the card Leblanc gave you."

I stare at him for a moment. He is right. We can still do things even if we cannot leave the lodge. I pick up his phone, dial the number and put the phone on speaker. The call is answered almost immediately.

"Who is it?" comes a deep, brusque voice with faint traces of a French accent.

"Can I speak to Dr Maurice Leblanc?"

"Who is calling?"

"My name is—Janis. Janis Redbrick."

"How did you get this number?"

"Are you Dr Leblanc—"

"How did you get this number?"

"From Sylvie."

"She—I do not know any person called Sylvie."

"Sylvie Leblanc. Isn't she a relative?"

"I told you already. I do not know of anyone by that name. Do not call here again."

The line goes dead.

"I think he knows who she is," I say after a pause. "He just doesn't want to speak to us."

"How far is Beaumont from here?"

"I'm not sure exactly. Around an hour's drive."

"Then we shall pay him a visit."

"Today?"

"Tomorrow. After breakfast."

The following day, we wake to gentle rain, tapping a rhythm on the window ledge. Lorenzo curses the weather, which seems to plague us during bike rides. He suggests we postpone our morning swim, but I argue that we will be wet anyway. Eventually, he agrees, and we brave the day.

After our swim, wearing only swimming shorts and each covered from the weather by a towel held over the head, we trace our steps back to the lodge. Lorenzo walks in front with his head down, and I spot the danger too late.

Three figures dressed in dark hats and raincoats appear behind trees. Each holds a gun at chest height. One is a woman who also carries an umbrella and seems to be in charge. She barks orders to the men that I cannot quite hear. Like me, Lorenzo is frozen to the spot. We are in the open and sitting ducks. We both look around, but there is nothing to dodge behind and nowhere to run without being shot. While the taller of the men stands several feet away with his gun trained on us, the squat but muscled one approaches.

"On your knees," he says, with a thick Eastern European accent. "Both of you."

We obey. While Lorenzo's hands are tied behind his back, the other man keeps me in his line of sight. Once Lorenzo is restrained, the shorter man does the same to me.

Were he alone, I am sure I could take him, but not with two weapons trained on me. When we are both secured, they step away. The woman addresses the taller of the men. She speaks Russian.

"Is it him?"

"Yes. He is the one."

"Does he understand Russian?"

"No. His partner, the old woman, she does. But not him."

"And the other?"

"I do not know who he is."

"You," she shouts at me in Russian. "Do you understand me?"

I continue to stare down at the dirt track.

"You, *koyzol*," she shouts again, and the squat man yanks my head up by my hair. I look puzzled at him, then at her and shrug my shoulders. I seem to remember that *koyzol* means goat in Russian, but used for a person is generally not polite.

"Take the target into the hut. I need to interrogate him before he is dispatched," she says, to the shorter man, before addressing the tall man. "Take care of the other one."

My heart wrenches when Lorenzo is dragged to his feet and pushed stumbling towards the lodge. The woman and the shorter man go with him. I am left with the remaining man, who waits for them to disappear before approaching me. He takes no chances and keeps the gun levelled at my head. I breathe evenly and keep my wits sharp, ready to take advantage of any opportunity. He stops three yards in front as though he wants a better look at my face. Without saying a word, he moves behind me while slowly screwing a suppressor onto his gun. I feel him prod a boot at my tied hands.

"What do you want with my friend? We are on holiday. You have the wrong people," I say.

Still unspeaking, he walks back and stands a few feet in front. He looks over my head to the lodge for a few seconds before removing his hat. When he peers down at me, I scramble to find more things to say to stall him, but he speaks first.

"I cannae believe it's you."

The accent is Scottish. He's a few years younger than me, but something about him seems familiar.

"I'm sorry?"

"I know who you are. And I'm not gonna shoot you. I'm here to help."

"I don't understand."

"We need to act fast. I'll fire off a couple of shots. They'll hear from the hut and will think you've been neutralised. Then I'm gonna cut your ties 'cause we need to get your pal outta there."

"Why are you helping?"

"You don't remember me, but I remember you, Five," he says as he turns the gun away and fires three successive shots into the ground. "We trained together."