

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

TWENTY-TWO

COLEMAN

No sooner is the car door closed than Coleman floors the accelerator, and the car hurtles almost silently along the country lane. All I hear is the crackle of tyres on the dried mud surface, and I barely feel the bumps in the lane. When I look back through the rear window, the road is deserted.

"I couldn't see what was coming down the drive," says Coleman. "Only heard engines. But whoever it was didn't seem to be in any kind of a hurry. Do you know how many there were?"

"Two Landrovers. Leblanc's security cameras picked them out."

"Two? Okay. Probably a routine check, then. But it's anybody's guess what that old bastard might tell them. Fortunately for us, we're under cover of trees for almost a mile while I get us out of here. After that we're plain sailing."

We are almost upon a tunnel of trees arching across the road. When I turn to look at Coleman, he appears more animated than I remember him and seems to be enjoying

himself. After a few moments of silence, he glances briefly at me.

"Come on, Gabriel. I know you must be itching to know what's going on. And for the record I am not calling you Janis. I had a cousin called Janice back in LA who was a total bitch. Anyway, let me kick things off for you. The rest of Romano's team would have been here for you, but they've been called back to Rome. I think you know that already. But Romano's keen to make sure nothing happens to his valuable asset. His words, not mine. And it seems as though I'm the next best thing, although don't expect any heroics. I am one of those rare Americans who has never held, let alone fired, a gun. But as you can see, I am pretty adept as a chauffeur behind the wheel of this space-age jalopy."

I never paid Coleman much attention back in my days at Callico House and dismissed him as entitled, ineffectual, and always in Victoria's shadow. If anything, he seemed a little sad. Most of the time when I met him, he appeared to have been drinking, if not drunk. Was that all a ploy?

"But if I were you right now," he says, probably seeing my hesitation. "I would be wondering who I can trust. Can I ask, do you have faith in the good Doctor Romano?"

I nod because I trust Lorenzo with my life, and Romano and Bellacci have always had my back.

"Alrighty, then. Let's call him up."

Coleman has his phone fixed into a holder on the dashboard, and I notice the screen open to his text messaging system. He swipes or prods a finger repeatedly at the screen, and a call sound fills the car. Once again, I recognise the calm tone of the doctor.

"Mr Washington is helping us out. Mrs Bellacci is on her way to pick up Lorenzo, but she told me she dropped you off near Leblanc's place in one piece. If I knew you

would be done so quickly, I would have asked her to park up, but Mr Washington had already volunteered to wait around and pick you up when you'd finished. I thought a familiar face might be good. How did things go? And don't worry, whatever you tell me you can share with Mr Washington."

While Romano is talking, I hear Coleman mutter. "God, I wish he wouldn't call me Mr Washington. Sounds like he's talking about my goddamn father."

I tell them about my arrival and all the things Leblanc disclosed. I see no point in filtering anything out, and although he concentrates on driving and not interrupting, I notice Coleman occasionally grimacing and shaking his head. As I finish my account of what Leblanc told me, and before I tell Romano how Coleman helped get me free, I hear Coleman mutter almost inaudibly.

"Somebody needs to burn."

When I have finished, Romano takes a few moments to process what I have told him, so I preempt what he might be about to ask.

"I haven't really had much time to think things through, but timelines make sense, and I do remember having a flashback in Tuscany of being on a burning yacht. Knowing there's another Knight out there whose memory might be intact is also encouraging."

Or is it? I only have Leblanc's word that he did not euthanise the other Knight. Maybe somebody else did. And even if they did escape, wouldn't he or she have been pursued and neutralised the same way they planned to retire me and erase any loose ends?

"I understand. For now, let me update you from this end. The police are not looking for Janis. Let us just say a few quiet words were spoken to the commissioner in confi-

dence and they no longer view you as suspicious. Moreover, the suspect has finally admitted to colluding with Puchinsky regarding the attempt on Sylvie Leblanc's life. As for her, she is recovering well. Although she is still in hospital the police have a guard on her room twenty-four-seven as well as the continued medical care which means at least two people are there day and night. Police, rather than hospital security, are monitoring any video feeds from her room. She has been quite vocal about what she calls being overprotected, especially in the light of Puchinsky's demise, but the arrangement will be temporary because she is being released next week."

"Where will she go?"

"A mutually agreed secure location for the time being. And you may be interested to know that a piece of information I received anonymously," says Romano, "provides a map reference and coordinates to the site of The Hartfield Institute. How reliable this is, I do not know, but I have sent the details to Mr Washington's phone. All that aside, something I need you to think about, Janis, is not only what your next move will be, but what you want to do with the facts you have amassed. I was going to make some suggestions, but with the information you've just provided, I want to make a few more discrete enquiries. At some point, however, I would like you back here to rejoin the rest of your team."

And there it is. That simple expression he uses so casually. Your team. Without conscious thought, I straighten in my seat. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel like I belong.

"In the meantime, Mr Washington has agreed to take you wherever you wish to go. Please check in regularly. My number is in the phone Lorenzo gave you, in case you are

separated for any reason. No doubt, once he has landed, Lorenzo will want to call you, too."

When Romano signs off, I gaze out the window at the overhanging trees and hedgerows flashing past and the slowly moving windswept fields barely visible beyond. When I turn back, I notice Coleman prodding a finger repeatedly at the display on his phone.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, continuing his task.

"Fine. A little hungry," I answer, but when I look at him, I realise that's not what he means.

"If I'd just found out I was created in a lab, raised as an experiment with no father or mother, I would be kind of freaking out right now."

"Would you? According to Leblanc, male and female donors provided my existence. Do I need to know who they are? Not really. How many thousands of people manage to live their lives never knowing the identity of their biological parents? The only thing that still frustrates me is having no memory of those early days."

Eventually, he turns and studies me briefly before concentrating on driving.

"Where are we heading?" I ask.

"Where do you want to go?"

I stare down at the photograph still in my hands.

"The Hartfield Institute."

"Check the SatNav."

When I lean over and check his phone on the dash, the satellite navigation app he has open reads Applecross as our destination. The route seems to take us back up into Scotland to a spot on the northwest coast some three hundred miles away.

"What's in Applecross?"

"According to the coordinates the good doctor sent us—

which unsurprisingly my system does not recognise—the site where the institute was built is a couple of miles northwest of Applecross. As he says, this could be a bum steer but I thought it might be worth a shot. What do you think?"

"Does this toy have enough triple-A batteries to get us that far?"

Coleman laughs aloud and relaxes a little at my joke. He seems different, more sober and alert than I ever remember him.

"This Californian-built prototype—a company I'm heavily invested in—has a full charge and can do just over a thousand miles. You are sitting in the future of electric travel, buddy. We're even working on a driverless model. So the answer to your question is, yeah, we have more than enough juice for a roundtrip. Sit back, relax and enjoy the ride."

When I recheck the route, I notice that Applecross is around eighty miles due west of the old farmhouse we stayed in last night. Coincidence? I decide to put that thought on the back burner for now.

"Any more questions?"

"How do you know Romano?"

"Guy's a piece of work. 'Mr Washington had volunteered to wait for you' he says. What he didn't say is that his message as good as ordered me to stay locally and remain on standby in case you needed me. I get the impression people don't refuse Romano. But the answer to your question is that Albert introduced me to him when I went to spec out his purchase in Monticiano. And yes, before you ask, I knew about his plans. I majored in structural engineering back in college and he wanted my opinion on how to restore the villa. But anyway, the day I got there, Albert was laughing with this distinguished looking Italian guy who spoke flaw-

less English, could charm the pants off an Ayatollah, and introduced himself as the local doctor. Only on our drive to Paris did Albert tell me a lot of truths. And one was that Romano ran one of the most highly regarded special operations teams in Italy. Honestly Gabe, I near flipped the goddamn car. Not only knowing that about Romano, but the fact that Albert knew all this and was happy to get involved. D'you know what else he said to me in the car?"

I don't, of course, so the question is moot.

"He said he hoped his family did come snooping around the place because the highly trained house staff had his permission to scare the shit out of them. He also told me the place had something to do with you and your future. But that's all he said back then, no deets."

"I didn't realise you and Albert ever spoke to each other."

"Oh, we spoke. Just not in that fucking nest of scorpions. You know that old saying that every family has one bad apple? Well Albert was the one good apple in a barrel of stinking rotten fruit. Okay, enough about me. Albert said you were pretty sharp, so how about you exercise some of those superior grey cells and tell me why you think I'm actually involved here."

Coleman is smiling as he concentrates on the road ahead.

"Sylvie Leblanc."

Coleman's smile broadens, and he nods his head.

"Go on."

"She's the catalyst. You were friends with her in college and Albert knew her through his work."

"Which is how I met Victoria. But that's another story altogether. Go on. You're doing good."

"Sylvie also knew my background, and I'm guessing

that's through her uncle who was recruited to work at Hartfield. He told me she visited him at Honeycomb Cottage with a guest which was when he gave her confidential information about the project, to be used only in the event that anything happened to him—"

"Yeah, real big fucking man, the uncle. Always looking out for himself, even if it meant putting his own niece's life in danger."

"And the fact you know where this place is and knew how to get me out of there makes me think Sylvie's guest back then was you."

"Top marks. I knew nothing about the work he'd been involved in or the documents. That must have been a conversation they had privately. But you're right. I was the guest she took with her all those years back. Old man Leblanc wanted free advice on how to renovate his beloved middle-of-nowhere cottage. That's when I got hold of the blueprints and how we discovered the old passageway in the cellar. Back in the nineteenth century, Honeycomb Cottage was used as a safe haven for political prisoners, escapees from penal institutions. Fucking ironic, wouldn't you say, that the place has become Leblanc's prison?"

"When did you find out about me?"

"Not long after you moved into Callico House. Albert told me you were special, that's all, and I helped keep the secret. He wanted someone to look out for you—unobtrusively, of course—when he wasn't around. Only when I went to see her in hospital, did Sylvie tell me everything that had happened. Which is kind of why I'm here."

Apart from Albert, the only person I ever warmed to in Callico House was Alice. Had Coleman kept his distance on purpose?

"I used to watch you swim, you know? In the basement pool."

"I know."

"You do?" he asks, turning to me briefly but then training his eyes back on the road. "Yeah, of course you do. When Albert first confided in me, I had a tough time believing—honestly, I thought you were some punk he felt sorry for and dragged off the streets—so he challenged me to go keep time while you swam. Man, you set Olympic records down there, moved through that pool like some goddamn water snake."

"Did Alice know? About me?"

"No way. Only Albert and Sylvie. And me to a much lesser degree and, even then, in strictest confidence. Albert was adamant about that. He knew you could handle yourself, but he wanted to protect you, too. I once asked him if you were wanted by the police. I remember he answered cryptically with something like, not by the police, no. Maybe I should have figured then. I felt a little sorry for him. Caught between a rock and a hard place."

"My existence wasn't the reason for the minibus crash, Coleman. I hope you know that. I overheard Victoria telling the family she thought I might have been involved somehow."

"I know exactly what happened and why. Sylvie and I remain close friends, remember? She filled me in on everything at the hospital. Retribution may be a cold comfort, but at least rough justice has been served. Hey, listen to me. I sound like the tag line to some cheap thriller movie."

"You were involved in what happened to Puchinsky?"

"You should know better than to ask those kinds of questions. What's the phrase my good lawyer friend once taught me? Oh, yeah. No comment. And the other is plausible

deniability. The less you know about that little episode, the better. But let me just say that you are not the only one who should not be fucked with, Gabriel Redbrick."

I smirk and look out the window, noticing the brighter light. We are out from the arch of trees, still bordered by hedgerows but with daylight spilling through the wind-screen and sunroof.

"It's already gone two," says Coleman, "and it's going to be a long drive, in case you want to lean back and catch some zees."

"I can't sleep."

"Okay then. Unless you need a comfort stop, I suggest we keep going until around six. I'll find us a motel for the night. We can get dinner, check in with Romano, grab a few hours sleep, then set off early tomorrow morning. How does that sound?"

I nod my agreement, and he prods his display to play soft jazz. What with the comfort of the soft leather seats and the music, I find myself loosening up, and I don't want that. I want to stay alert. After sending Lorenzo a text message to tell him I'm fine and ask how he is, I continue asking Coleman questions. He seems happy to continue answering.

"How did you become a part of the Callico household? I got the impression you disliked them almost as much as I did."

"I got to know Albert through Sylvie and, yeah, he had a bit of the British stiff upper lip shit going on but he was a good guy at heart. Much later, I met Victoria at a charity function Sylvie and Albert were hosting. Believe it or not, Victoria could be a lot more fun back then. This was when her grandfather ruled the roost. Our union was approved by both our families. Something I found out too late about

Victoria is that she gets bored very quickly with hotels, restaurants, handbags, shoes and, of course, people. And I include myself in that last category. She never said as much, but I think she saw me as a financial lifeline in case the old man left her nothing when he croaked. Victoria only really cares about herself; her wealth and her status."

I notice how quickly Coleman's mood darkens when he talks about his wife, so I decide to be diplomatic and change the topic.

"When did you find out about Eagle House?"

"Couple of years ago, when Albert showed me photos of the ruins and asked for my help. That was a secret he asked me to keep from you. I think he wanted the place to be a surprise, somewhere off the beaten track where you could both feel safe. Honestly, I got one hell of a kick out of knowing what he'd had done to the place and having his family believe he'd bought a dud. Looks like he had the last laugh."

"Not remote enough, though. Did Romano tell you that someone paid for a bunch of thugs to have me killed off. One of the Callico family."

Coleman says nothing, and when I look over at him, his expression has not changed, but he mutters a barely audible expletive.

"You know something, don't you?"

He lets out an exaggerated sigh.

"I didn't know he'd gone through with it. Albert had this crazy notion of you being a caged lion who needed to flex his claws, and I think he also wanted Romano's people to see you in action and recognise your potential. The idea was to spring this surprise attack to test you while you were there with him at the villa, to see if any of your latent skills surfaced. I told him he was insane, told him that if he

wanted you evaluated why not just get you onto one of those UK army assault courses on the Yorkshire moors. And I thought he'd bought into the idea. But I guess he went ahead and planned the whole thing. What he didn't bargain on was being killed before you'd both arrived there."

I am not sure how I feel about this new revelation. I understand why he wouldn't have wanted the British military involved. But weren't there better ways to test me? And why didn't Albert let Romano know what he had planned? Then again, I am reasonably sure the doctor's reaction would have been the same as Coleman's. Moreover, why didn't Albert warn me in his text messages? Maybe he didn't have time.

"I planned to find a way to visit you at the villa," continues Coleman. "But I wanted to stay close to Sylvie, to make sure she was okay. I did try to call you a couple of times after the funeral, but your number had been disconnected. And then, when I finally got some breathing space, Alice announced she was planning to come see you. Did anyone get hurt in the attack?"

"Only one of the four attackers survived."

"Shit. You took out three? Should I be worried right now?"

"I didn't kill them. The house staff did. But Albert was right. Something clicked in me that day and I managed to subdue the fourth. Easily and effectively. That's how I became part of Romano's team."

"So his gamble paid off?" says Coleman.

Did it? I suppose so. I wish I could talk to Albert. He used to tell me that in his line of work, the only way to really understand the efficacy of a drug that looked right on paper was to test it out in the real world on a patient. Maybe the same reasoning applied to me.

"Hey, let me give you some upbeat news. Something you won't be aware of, because it's all hush-hush right now. Edward and Victoria are selling the ancestral home, Callico House."

"I know."

Coleman's head swings to me, and the car jerks a fraction.

"How the hell would you know that?"

"Something else I overheard. Is it sold yet?"

I am not sure if Coleman expects more of an explanation but I want to know whether Victoria has succeeded in the plan I overheard in the hospital waiting room.

"Almost. After having greased some palms to change the usage of the property, they immediately got an offer from an outfit called Noble Heritage Developments. They'd had their eye on Callico House for some time. One thing I'm sure you gathered from your dealings with Albert's siblings is that they are snobs of the very worst kind. If only they'd been less greedy and impatient, they might have considered offloading the tomb to a wealthy lord or other highborn in order to maintain the heritage and appease their consciences. But a company paying top dollar and committed to preserving listed properties, even if they do pledge to use them for commercial purposes, rings all the right bells. Edward has insisted the place continues to be used for the benefit of the country club set, but his words alone mean nothing. They are not legally binding. My wife managed to get the mediocre lawyer she's been schtupping to perform the due diligence on the property company and, after following standard procedures, they ticked all the right boxes. Shame he's not that sharp and didn't dig a little deeper, to find out who the key financiers are before signing any contracts."

Coleman looks very pleased with himself.

"You're one of them?"

"Buddy, I'm all of them. And I know you of all people will approve of the next part. I'm just waiting for my lawyer to confirm completion before we start negotiations with the local authority about sharing the cost of turning the oversized place into something useful, like a YMCA or a homeless shelter. Only once that's been agreed and signed off will I begin divorce proceedings. Yeah, the property may cost me big bucks and may end up lining those entitled bastards' pockets but, with the prenup and the solid evidence I have on my dear darling wife, I expect to walk away from this marriage without spending another dime on her."

Coleman's revenge. I find myself smiling and wonder what Albert would have made of the news. And at that moment, I wish Lorenzo was here with me, wish I had his hand in mine. I check my phone, but there are no new messages.

"Enough about me," says Coleman. "Let's talk about you. At some point you have an important decision to make. Whether to spend the rest of your life like an archaeologist excavating your early life to see what you can dig up about Five. Or live the best life you can as Gabriel. Nobody else can answer that for you."

"You really think someone like me could ever lead a normal life?"

"For the record, I did not use the word normal. What the fuck is normal anyway? But you do have a choice, Gabriel."

"Do I? You think whatever government department instigated the Knight's Watch project is going to stop hunting me down?"

"Don't forget you have a powerful ally in Romano. And

he wants you very much alive. Besides, there seem to be enough people who know about your existence now that doing anything overt is likely to attract more attention. And I'm guessing that's the last thing they want. Rather than keep running, it might be time to strike a deal. More immediately, where do you want to go after we've checked out Hartfield?"

Coleman has given me too much to think about, but the answer to his last question is easy.

"Eagle House, Monticiano. I want to go home. Back to my team."

"Time to regroup? Excellent choice."

We continue on for an hour without much conversation. I have never found idle chitchat easy and have much to think about. Coleman clearly senses this and switches to a more upbeat music station. He is the one to suggest a pitstop at a cafe in a small village off the main route. We take seats at the back and sit opposite each other. After we take turns using the restroom, Coleman asks for my choice of sandwich and heads up to the counter. While he is ordering, I send another brief message to Lorenzo. Almost instantly, a message pops up on my display.

Unknown: He's okay but unable to respond. The security detail at the da Vinci airport confiscated all personal phones. They're using government-issued devices. He'll call you tomorrow.

I look up and see Coleman at the counter, chatting to a woman behind the cash register while pointing at the chalkboard menu on the wall. My thumbs flash across the display.

Who is this? Romano?

Unknown: Never mind who this is. Concentrate on the task at hand. Right now, you need closure, Gabe. At some

point, we will talk again and swap notes. I need to sign off now. Something urgent has popped up. Until then, I will continue to be here and watching out for you. 🤪📱👉🍷🍷🍷👉🍷

A chill fills me. Is that our pigpen code? What the hell. I am the only one who knows the cypher apart from Albert. I recognise some of the characters from his warning text. The emojis spell out simply:

GOODLUCK