

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED



BRIAN LANCASTER

SIX

EAGLE HOUSE

Mrs Bellacci beckons me through the gates, and I follow her into the grounds, both of us scrunching across pristine white gravel. Encased by tall hedgerows, the interior gardens have working sprinklers irrigating verdant lawns, while to my left, there stands a cluster of lemon trees. Their brightly coloured fruit speckled among the dark leaves of the branches perfumes the air. She leads me up a flight of elegant stone steps to the front entrance. Outside sturdy but unremarkable double wooden doors, she stops and glares at my feet.

"Will you take off your shoes?"

Although I have just met her, I sense she is a woman who needs to be obeyed, and her question sounds more like a command. I am unsure about the condition of my feet after travelling for the past two days and being unable to shower, but I do as she asks. Without unlacing them, I prise them off and arrange them to the right of the door.

"I come from Calabria in the south," she tells me as I follow her into the shaded reception hall where a wide wooden low-rise staircase on my right leads to upper floors.

"But I am told Casa dell'Aquila is a perfect example of historic Tuscan architecture. The house sits on two storeys with five bedrooms. There is also a small annexe with two bedrooms on the grounds, my quarters. This allows me access to the house to clean and prepare food when guests come to stay."

Doctor Romano is right about her English, which, although accented, is otherwise flawless. She pauses to straighten a hollow wooden sculpture of a globe as we head to the back of the house.

"You've already had guests?" I ask.

Underfoot, the smooth tile flooring of cold terracotta feels refreshing. My eye catches on the high reception ceiling decorated with a mix of stucco and coffered wood and the lead framed glass doors standing open at the far end of the room, allowing a cooling breeze to waft through the structure. A sturdy but stylish wooden chandelier hangs above our heads, something simple and unpretentious that Albert would most certainly have chosen. From the fixtures and furniture in the reception hall, nothing is ostentatious or overdone. Everything is understated to ensure the eye is drawn to the exquisite masonry, the restored murals and plasterwork.

"In July. The professore came for a final meeting with the building contractors and to help Enzo and me supervise the movers, make sure everything went into the right room. Of course they could not recreate the murals but they did the best they could. He brought a guest with him, a female colleague called Leblanc. They stayed for three nights only. He told me he intended to bring you here later in the year."

I am still trying to get my head around Albert keeping this place from me. I thought we shared everything with each other. Not that I had much to share. Perhaps he

genuinely wanted to impress me, which would have been totally in character. We pass a doorway on the left that appears to be an immense library with floor-to-ceiling dark oak shelves of books filling each wall, hundreds upon hundreds of them. There is also a circular staircase of black iron at one end ascending to an upper floor, as well as an ornate stone fireplace. I want to go in and investigate, but Bellacci heads out through the tall glass-panelled doors, and I feel impelled to follow. Right outside, I step out onto terracotta tiles beneath a covered terrace of simple arches and colonnades. Beyond the immaculate lawn sits a full-size swimming pool identical to the one in Callico House's basement, which beckons me like an old friend. If I had doubt of Albert's presence, this sight dissolves any.

"Did anyone tell you what happened to Albert? Professor Callico?"

She continues across the lawn around the side of the swimming pool until we reach an expansive grove of what I guess to be olive trees. I cannot help but notice a mess of dead leaves and other flora floating on the water's surface, a sure sign the unused pool has been neglected. Before we enter the olive grove, she stops and turns back to me.

"Il dottor Romano called earlier to tell me you would be coming. He also said the professore died in a car accident. What happened?"

"He was on his way to a conference with former medical colleagues. Only Ms Leblanc survived. The last I heard, she was still in a coma."

"But what happened?" she asks.

"The police believe the driver fell asleep at the wheel. They think he might still have been under the influence of alcohol from the night before. They are not treating the accident as suspicious—"

"You believe this?"

I am unsure I want to share my recent experience and suspicions with someone I have just met, so I keep my answer as innocuous as possible.

"I have no reason to think otherwise."

"*Cazzate*," she mutters, almost under her breath. With a wave of her hand, she indicates something behind me. The house from this viewpoint is stunning. Above the covered terrace, on the first floor, there is a large balcony overlooking the back of the house, a patio table and chairs are set up there, and large glass doors lead into a room, probably a bedroom. Like the rest of the house, the whole rear facade is painted in pale lemon cream and just like inside, there are beautiful design embellishments over windows or above doorways, concrete or plaster moulded symmetrical swirls and twirls painted in pristine white.

"It's beautiful," I say, but then remember the earlier words she spoke. "I'm sorry. I don't understand. What was it you said in Italian?"

"Not important. Let us go and take a seat out of the sunshine," she says, leading the way back to the covered terrace with a cast iron table and cushion-covered chairs painted in gloss white paint. "What I meant was that police in every country are often too quick to make assumptions. To get cases closed and filed away. Did you see this driver? On the morning of the accident?"

"No," I answer, resting my backpack on the floor before taking a seat. "But someone else in the house said they chatted with him. Said he seemed fine."

"Mm-hm. And they were all medical professionals, you say? Travelling together."

"That's correct. Three of them, including Albert."

"And you do not think they would have noticed some-

thing in this driver's behaviour, or at least smelled alcohol on him or in the van? Do you think the professore would have allowed the man to drive if he had suspected him of being even a little drunk?"

She is absolutely right. Albert once made us get out of a cab in the middle of nowhere because he was convinced our driver was under the influence of drink or drugs.

"Rest here a moment while I go and fetch something to drink. You must be thirsty. Do you like iced lemon tea?"

"I do. Thank you."

When she heads off towards a doorway at the end of the covered terrace, I take in my implausible surroundings. Little touches jump out at me. Blue and white mosaic tiling lines the swimming pool's perimeter, similar to those in Albert's bathroom back in London. Wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling books in the library are as close to a wet dream for Albert as he would ever get. The tasteful yet understated furniture in the entrance hall was something we both favoured. This classic Italian house reflects everything Albert would have chosen as a retirement sanctuary. After only a minute or two, Bellacci returns with a tray I suspect she had ready for my visit. After pouring us both a chilled glass of amber liquid from a large jug filled with slices of lemon and ice cubes, she retakes her seat.

"Why do you come here?"

Her tone is abrupt, but the question is actually a logical one. Once again, I do not know how much to tell her, but I cannot help the exhalation of breath that escapes me.

"I needed some time away from London. From everything. And I only recently received news about this house. I thought I would come and investigate, keep myself busy."

She nods sagely as she takes a gulp of the tea. I do the same, and only as I take the first sip do I realise how thirsty I

am, finishing the whole thirst-quenching drink. Without a word, she leans over and refills my glass.

"You will, of course, stay here." Once again, I am unsure if she is asking a question or making a statement. Her gaze scans the grounds again. "The master bedroom is ready to be used. And I will introduce you to Lorenzo when he returns."

"Who is Lorenzo?"

"My son," she says, looking back towards the kitchen. "He does work to maintain the house but mainly makes sure the grounds are kept in order."

"Groundskeeper?" I offer, and she nods.

"He does not like to speak. If you need anything, come to see me. During the day, I am usually in the kitchen." She stands from the table and beckons me. "Come now. I will show you to your room. Give you time freshen up and relax. Il dottor Romano will arrive at seven-thirty and he will want to talk to you. I will serve dinner for you both here on the verandah. Is there anything you do not eat?"

"I—no. I am grateful for anything put in front of me."

"That is good. And eight o'clock is acceptable?"

"Are you sure?"

"Mr Redbrick, this is your home now. And I am employed by the estate. Il dottor will explain more later. And the professore insisted that if you ever came here with him, you were to be made welcome. You are, after all, the co-owner. Well, the owner now."

I collect my luggage, and we move back into the coolness of the house. I follow her up the broad low rise of stairs to the first floor, where she stops before a large open door. Inside is a large four-poster bed with a white and gold embroidered bedspread. Plump white towels are laid on a leather storage bench at the end of the bed.

"This is your room. Please wander around the house freely. The only place I ask you not to go into is our private annex, where Lorenzo and I live. Professore Callico was happy with this arrangement, I hope you will be, too."

"Of course. I am grateful to have a roof over my head."

"There is a bathroom at the back of your room. I am sure you will want to shower and change. I will see you downstairs for dinner at eight."

She departs without waiting for a response, and I step into the coolness of the bedroom. Once again, the simplicity of the decor and furnishings strikes me as being very Albert. I dump my rucksack down on the leather bench and pull out a change of clothing. Only as I sift through what I packed do I realise I had cold Belgium in mind, not temperate Italy, with a woollen sweater and jeans, thick socks. Fortunately, I have a couple of polo shirts and T-shirts and a pair of chinos that are thin enough for the warmer weather. Most importantly, I pull out my wash bag and head to the bathroom.

At odds with the understated bedroom, the bathroom is a luxurious mix of light brown marble and chrome. A floor-standing bath stands opposite dual sinks, and, thank goodness, a walk-in shower has been built into the end of the room. I set the water running first before heading back into the bathroom and peeling off the clothes I have worn for the past few days. Standing in front of the mirror, I realise I need a shave.

Shaved, showered and refreshed, I tie the towel around my waist and open the balcony doors. Cool breezes ruffle the drapes and dry my damp skin, and the vague scent of lemons and wild lavender creeps into the room. After laying out a set of clean clothes on the bed, I realise I have not

checked in with Josh and Nishan and fish my phone from my trouser pocket.

Nishan answers after only two rings, with a remarkably clear line. He has put me on speaker from the echoey sound at the other end.

"Hi Gabe. Perfect timing. Josh just this minute walked in the door."

"What time is it there?"

"Six. Why?"

"Is Josh now working part-time?"

"Hoi, you cheeky sod," come Josh's voice.

"He just finished a twelve-hour shift," said Nishan. "Started at five this morning. So be nice to him. Anyway, before we let you tell us all about your adventures, all is good this end. My dad has a furnished flat across town which is currently vacant. We've stowed your mobile phone there in a charger and I pop over every day to pick up post, and to check and answer any of your texts. You've had no calls, and only a couple of people have texted. Alice, of course, to check you're fine, and someone called Tim from the charity to ask when you'll be returning to work. I think they're missing you. Anyway, I used your own wording to reply to Alice to say you're doing okay, but need this time out to regroup. And Josh told me I should tell Tim to fuck off—"

"Don't tell him that!" laughs Josh in the background.

"But I did the sensible thing and said you're not sure right now, but will let him know as soon as things settle down."

"Nice," I answer, taking the phone onto the balcony.

"Where are you staying?" asks Josh. "Please tell me you're not camping in that leaky tent of mine. Was the guest house still open?"

"Okay. You may want to sit down for this. A lot has happened."

I tell them about my travel adventures and about finding the house not only newly renovated but fully functional with live-in staff. As I absorb the beginnings of a glorious sunset across the Tuscan landscape, the moody chiaroscuro of a Rembrandt masterpiece, my attention is drawn to the sound of running water, and my gaze travels to the back of Signora Bellucci's annexe where a man is showering naked in the open air. He is lean but muscled and well-proportioned. One side of his body is covered in tattoos from his shoulder down to his foot. Is he the dubious man with the hoodie I saw in the bar at Pensione Galli? He has his back to me as he tilts his face up into the flow of water, scrubbing foam from his long black hair. When he turns around to face my way, I am transfixed when I glimpse dark chest hair and a trail of suds descending to a generous cock in a mound of black pubic hair. I assume this must be the son Mrs Bellacci mentioned. When he freezes, I wonder if he has seen me, and I step back into the shadow of the bedroom, embarrassed at my voyeurism. I realise I have faltered a moment on the phone but continue immediately. I do not want to explain the sight to Josh and Nishan otherwise I will never get them off the phone.

"I have a feeling Albert planned to use this place for holidays once he had retired. Like I told you, I never had an inkling about him buying a place abroad, let alone renovating. And despite what Josh may tell you, I do pay attention."

"Seems to me your man was pretty adept at keeping secrets," says Nishan.

Once again, Nishan nails what I am thinking. But what bugs me most of all is why. It could not be that he felt he could not trust me because we'd once had that discussion.

Nothing he ever told me would go any further. He knew that, even with me being friendly with Alice. I only confided in Josh and Nishan about his secret message because he was no longer alive, and I needed impartial help and knew they would tell nobody else. The only thing I can think of is that Albert did so because he wanted to protect me. But from what or whom? His family?

"Have you had any luck finding out what Luriabio is?" asks Nishan.

"Not really. I only arrived late this afternoon, but I'm having a chat with the local doctor over dinner. He knew Albert. Maybe he'll know more."

"Before you do that, you may be pleased to hear," say Nishan, "that my lovely boyfriend has been doing some research of his own. Over to you, Josh."

"I only google-searched, but I had a shit-ton of hits on this Russian geezer called Alexander Luria, who is credited as the father of modern neuropsychology. Yeah, I had no idea what neurophysiology is either, so listen to this." Josh is clearly reading from somewhere. *"Neuropsychologists are trained to assess and treat people who experience difficulties with memory, concentration, planning, language, reasoning, and other aspects of learning and understanding.* It's the first bit about people with memory difficulties that caught my attention because of your condition. This is a total shot in the dark but does Albert have any books there?"

"A library full of them. The room is stuffed wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling with books."

"Maybe Albert meant you to find a biography on this bloke. Again, just a thought. Ignore the idea if you think it's bullshit."

"No, no. That's brilliant. I'll check tomorrow. You think a book would have gotten him killed?"

"Maybe the two things are unrelated," says Josh. "But it's in his message. Find luriabio and maybe you'll find your answer."

I hear a deep male voice downstairs speaking Italian, one I recognise instantly as Doctor Romano. I realise I need to hurry and get dressed.

"You guys are brilliant," I say, ripping off the towel. "I wish you were here."

"Listen sunshine," comes Josh's voice. "Once this bloody malarky is over and done with, we are coming out there to claim our reward for services rendered. With a very long holiday. Capiche?"

"And you'll be more than welcome. But I've got to go now. The doctor friend has just arrived. I'll catch up with you again tomorrow and brief you then. Take care guys."