

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

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# INHERITED

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BRIAN LANCASTER

## NINE

### ALLIES

**A**s I make my way alone back to the bedroom still in my swimwear, I feel cold but, at the same time, incredibly alive and alert. Well past two in the morning, and I doubt I will sleep. But the mud caked on my knees and torso needs rinsing and a hot shower sounds like the perfect antidote.

Beneath the rainfall shower, I stand and let the water rinse the grime away. What happened downstairs has me confused. Shouldn't I be feeling traumatised at the villa walls being breached and me being targeted by four assassins? Because I don't. If anything, I taste exhilaration from the encounter, given permission to defend myself and release fighting techniques that I can only guess have been dormant for years. I am more confused at the quietly coordinated responses of the house staff, Mrs Bellacci and her son. I appreciate they might need to protect themselves this far out in the countryside, but their methods seem coldly efficient. And I am still not wholly convinced the men were targeting me. But then who? Burglars would hardly be so heavily armed. We have a lot to discuss later this morning.

Still in the cubicle, I am towelling myself dry when I hear a voice call from the bedroom.

"Gabriel?" comes Lorenzo's voice.

Although I know the owner, using my given name takes me by surprise.

"In the shower. Give me a moment."

From what I know of Lorenzo, I doubt he will do as I ask. Perhaps he'll come barging into the bathroom, dropping his clothes on the tiled floor, opening the shower's glass door and stepping inside with me. After ordering me to wash him, he will allow me to crush his body against the glass and claim him. Or perhaps that's the yearnings of a suppressed libido after a long dry period of coital activity.

He won't harm me because I know he is not the enemy. My instincts tell me that much loud and clear. And his attraction is of a wild and rugged kind, uncultured yet unaffected, his solid, muscled and raw physique more suited to the brooding figure of a highly trained street fighter. Even the thought of him gives me a semi.

I emerge into the bedroom with the towel tied around my waist to find him standing outside the door to my bedroom. His expression is as unreadable as ever. Wearing a loose black tee shirt now, there are splatters of blood still slick on one of his forearms. No doubt there is more beneath the shirt. He holds the towel I used for swimming in one hand, something he could have simply left on the end of the bed.

"I return this to you." He holds out the item to me.

"Thank you. Please come in."

He hesitates for just a second before stepping into the room. The weather is a little cooler tonight, so I have left a fresh pair of boxers and a white tee on the bed. As I twist

around to pick up my shorts from the covers, I let the bath towel drop from around my waist to the floor.

"Do you want to use the shower?" I ask as I turn to face him.

"Why? You want to watch me again?" comes his response after a moment's hesitation.

I observe him calmly as his gaze moves down my naked body, pausing a second longer to notice my slightly swollen cock. Still, his expression gives nothing away.

"After the events of tonight, I thought you might prefer the relative safety of an indoor shower," I reply as I haul on the boxers. "Rather than standing the chance of being attacked by intruders while washing."

"We also have an indoor shower." His eyes finally meet mine. "And I can take care of myself."

"You most certainly can."

As I pull on my tee shirt, he remains standing there, observing me, as though he is trying to figure something out or has more words he needs to speak. I notice his English is a lot better than I had initially thought. Or maybe he had a reason to conceal the fact.

"You swim well," he says. "You do this to stay in good health?"

"Until recently, I used to swim at least once a day. How about you? How do you manage to keep yourself looking so good?"

"You think I look good?"

"I—yes, I do."

His face softens, not a smile exactly, but a distinct relaxing of his stern features.

"I am—how do you say—manual labour. Outdoor work in the villa grounds. And in the past, I have to do many—um—physical trainings."

We stand there awkwardly. Lorenzo seems as inept at small talk as me, something else I find endearing. He rubs a hand on his tattooed forearm before giving me his full attention.

"She is not my mother, la signora Bellacci."

"I see."

"You are not surprised?"

Am I? The news does not come as a revelation. After seeing them in action tonight, even if they are not related, they are clearly a tight unit.

"You work very well together."

"Yes, we do." He hesitates, appearing to weigh up whether to tell me more. "We shall speak more later when we have breakfast with Romano."

"Are you sure you don't want to use the shower?" I ask again. "I promise to stay in the bedroom and not spy on you, however tempted I may feel."

Once again, his expression gives nothing away, but I am sure he's assessing me, wondering if he can trust me. For a moment, I wonder if I might have broken his resolve when a tiny curl forms on one side of his mouth.

"You should sleep," he says before turning away and leaving.

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No evidence of anything untoward is visible as I head towards the lights from the kitchen; no sign of any bodies having been lined up outside or any blood on the tiled floor, everything cleaned up with ruthless efficiency. I finally slept for a few hours, showered again, and considered calling Josh, but decided to find out more before speaking to him and Nishan.

Breakfast is served inside the kitchen at the long oak table. Dr Romano is already seated and sipping coffee when I join, and I sense that words have been spoken. Apart from a brief nod to me, no explanations are offered. Coffee odours pique my interest, and I help myself from the large pot Mrs Bellacci pushes my way. Warm bread rolls, preserves, fresh fruit, and some cold meats are laid out. Nothing has been cooked this morning. The table fare looks colourful, but I cannot help noticing the dull grey metal of firearms, three piled on the stone floor and one sitting at the end of the table. Nobody else pays them any heed.

We eat breakfast in silence which should seem odd considering everything that has happened, but this morning feels companionable, and my appetite is undiminished by the night's dramas. Moreover, I am in no rush for any rationalisation, content to remain patient and let them do the necessary explaining. At one point, when he has finished eating, Dr Romano stands from the table.

"I—we—owe you answers, Gabriel. Lorenzo and I will first go to check on our guest. Another of the men is still alive. I have patched him up as best I could but he will need medical treatment at a hospital after I have dealt with our conscious guest. Good that you allowed one to survive relatively unharmed. Our instructions are to erase any intruders. We will speak more when I return."

Dr Romano murmurs something in Italian to Mrs Bellacci before he heads out into the breaking light of morning with Lorenzo in tow. Mrs Bellacci begins tidying until most of the surfaces are clear.

"This is an interesting choice of weapon." I indicate the assault rifle at the end of the kitchen table.

"It is Italian—"

"I know what it is. A Beretta manufactured circa mid-

nineteen eighties. I'm just surprised they were carrying such old weapons."

"You know about rifles?" she asks.

"I know this one."

I move over to the device and, very quickly and efficiently, disassemble each of the component pieces until they are lying neatly in front of me on the table, checking each piece as I do. This firearm has not been maintained well, proving stiff to unscrew and the barrel clogged with residue. I look up to see Bellacci staring at me with mild approval.

"How do you learn to do this?" she asks.

"I don't really know. It just seemed—obvious." I know the words sound ridiculous, but the series of manoeuvres to dismantle the weapon felt as instinctive as breathing. Without responding, Mrs Bellacci smiles her approval before beginning to reassemble the rifle equally quickly. Now it's my turn to be impressed. I pick up the gun and check over her handiwork before replacing the device.

"You are remarkably adept for a housekeeper."

"Romano will tell you this soon, but Lorenzo is my colleague, not my son, and we are not menial workers. At least, that is not our principal profession. We are part of a security service, cooperating and working closely with other international agencies. I am forbidden from detailing exactly what we do, but after the end of our last assignment, we have been posted here for the past two years to stay under the—uh—"

"Radar. Yes, I understand. That begins to make a lot of sense. Why here?"

"Why do you think?"

I smile and rise to her challenge.

"Because you are miles from anywhere and that makes you almost impossible to find. Even being so far from

anywhere, someone has wired the house perimeter with countless CCTV cameras in order to be constantly vigilant to any assault, which is how you managed to alert Lorenzo to last night's intruders. How am I doing so far?"

Mrs Bellacci picks up her tablet computer from the table top and briefly shows me a patchwork of live video feeds on the display.

"Vigilance means survival in our line of work. I can check everything on here or my phone."

I still assume there is a room somewhere with equipment that records whatever the cameras capture as a backup in case there is no satellite signal. The room is undoubtedly in her lodgings or maybe even at the back of the kitchen. I wonder if the camera system was working when Albert last visited. The thought of him prompts a question.

"Professor Callico knew this, knew about you both?"

"I do not think so. Romano manages us and supervised the surveillance modifications without Professor Callico's involvement. Many of the cameras are camouflaged and only visible to the trained eye. I am surprised you detected them." She looks down at the assembled firearm in front of her. "Or perhaps not."

"Did you notice the poor maintenance of the weapon?" I ask, placing the fingers of one hand onto the barrel.

As I begin to draw my hand away, she reaches out a hand to grab my wrist.

"What is this?" she asks.

With her other hand, she points to the mark on the side of my wrist. The faded blemish, like a bruise, has been there for as long as I can remember.

"That? That is a birthmark."

"This is not a birthmark. This is ink like Lorenzo has. Show me."

I offer my wrist to Mrs Bellacci, and she puts on glasses to inspect closely. As she stretches the skin, I chance to look up as Lorenzo enters the kitchen and am almost shocked because it is the first time I have seen humour on his face. For a change, he does not turn away, and I shrug a smile.

"These two marks are joined," says Mrs Bellacci. "A symbol of the Cavallo—knight in your language—contained within a letter V, which could represent number five. What does this mean?"

"I have no idea. As I say, I always thought of this as a birthmark."

Doctor Romano enters behind Lorenzo and closes the kitchen door. Unusually for him, he is frowning and prods a finger at a chair for Lorenzo before taking his own. Before waiting for them to settle his turns on Mrs Bellacci.

"What have you told him?" he asks her, and for the first time since I arrived in the villa, I notice her flinch slightly at his assertiveness.

"A little. Not much—"

"These men did not come for either of you," said Romano, his gaze coming to rest on me. "They came for him." Doctor Romano punctuates the last word by nodding at me. "The man he brought down is the appointed head of this hastily put-together rabble. They were meant to have made this appear to be an unsuccessful burglary in which Mr Redbrick should have been an unfortunate casualty. Clearly, they were not expecting any kind of resistance. These men are worse than amateurs—what you English would call hired guns—employed by the Spataro family—"

"Sergei Spataro?" asks Lorenzo, aghast, his eyes wide.

"Yes. Our friend Sergei. This job was commissioned by an unknown but very generous sponsor from the UK. I called Sergei on the way back from the garden shed and he

is genuinely remorseful. Understandably so, because he knows what I can do if he were ever to choose to cross me. But I believe him when he says that if he had known this property was managed and protected by me, he would not only have declined the work, but would have found out more information out about the client. The point is, Mr Redbrick, that I believe it is you who needs to provide us with explanations, not the other way around."

The room falls silent, and all eyes are on me.

I tell them the whole story, about my relationship with the rest of the Callico family, about everything from the days leading up to Albert's death, including the coded message he sent me, up until my arrival at Eagle House. I even explain my condition, my retrograde amnesia, to justify my ability to perform things I cannot remember learning. I end by describing the role of my friends in the UK, keeping me up to date with developments from home.

"The question remains," says Romano. "Why are you being hunted? Why would somebody goes to these excessive lengths to have you, a civilian, eliminated? Do you know secrets about the family that could bring them down?"

"Doctor Romano, I promise you I do not. Most of the family are a little messed up, but as far as I know they're involved in nothing illicit. I thought they'd finally be happy with me gone from their lives. Maybe it has something to do with the accident. Whatever the reason, I suspect Albert knew more but kept the truth from me, which is why he told me to trust nobody and to come here to Eagle House."

"Whatever the reason," says Romano. "This has been an effective test of our defences. But I will push Spataro to find out more information about this client. No doubt they will want a report from him on the success of the operation.

Most important of all, we need to contain this breach, to make sure news does not get out."

Romano taps his upper lip as a silence falls around the table.

"I'm sorry," I say eventually. "I had no idea I would be putting you all at risk. If you can give me a few hours to pack, I can be gone by lunchtime—"

"You cannot—" begins Lorenzo, standing abruptly from the table, a mix of anger and upset on his face. His gaze turns to plead with Romano. "You cannot allow him to face this alone—"

"Calm down, Lorenzo. Gabriel is going nowhere," says Romano. "By rights, if anybody should be sent packing, it's us. This is his property, after all. But I suggest we all remain here and remain calm, and that includes you, Gabriel, at least until we find out what Professor Callico was trying to warn you about. He meant you to come here to find answers. I know you've already found more than you anticipated, but perhaps we can help each other. Mrs Bellacci tells me you are not without your usefulness and, as you witnessed last night, we are not without our own."

"Will you help me locate this book by or about Luria?"

"Ah yes. Salvador Luria," says Romano, nodding. "That was the intent behind your question then? Together we will find this book. But first of all, I need your word that what we have spoken about this morning stays between us. And I include your London friends in this pledge. Teresa and Lorenzo Bellacci are assumed names, and I would prefer that you continue to use them. This will make things more natural in case anyone visits. Our government went to great lengths to secure identities for them both."

"I understand. You have my word. What you ask makes perfect sense."

Romano says something briefly to Lorenzo and Mrs Bellacci, and whatever he has asked appears to satisfy them.

"It is agreed, then. We will help solve the mystery that Professor Callico posed for you, or at the very least find this book. But if you accept this offer, you need to stay alert and aware now that you know about us. Each one of us is considered an elite agent by our own and other friendly governments, and have joined highly successful security overseas operations in the past. Naturally, our enemies are not impressed and will stop at nothing to have us singled out and eliminated. Whatever it is you are caught up in, Gabriel, might get a lot worse with this knowledge. If you would prefer to leave, and as long as we can rely on your total discretion, then you are—"

"No. I am staying. Maybe you don't know me yet, Dr Romano, but I do not turn away from a fight. And if you are prepared to help me find answers, then I am willing to work with you."

"Excellent," says Romano, looking genuinely pleased, before pulling out his wallet and showing me an official-looking card with his photo ID. Although it's written in Italian, the heading has the words *Agenzia* and *Sicurezza Esterna*—agency and external security—which are easy enough to guess. "I believe you will make a perfect addition to the house security team. Each of us has different strengths and skills. As you witnessed last night, Mrs Bellacci's specialism is weaponry, and she's also a seasoned marksperson, arguably the best we have and certainly better than me. Lorenzo's fields are more in the physical and technological arena. There are very few locks in the modern world that he cannot open, and he is adept at getting into places most experts would write off as unreachable. Lorenzo, would you like to demonstrate?" says Romano,

tossing him a corked clay pot of vinegar from a shelf. "Highest point you can find. Teresa, bring your rifle and let's all head outside."

Morning light bathes the whole of the back facade of the villa. When Romano tells us to stop, Lorenzo keeps moving and, at a lightning pace, selects a point along the rear wall and begins to climb. He moves incredibly swiftly and effortlessly, without pausing, from one level to the next until he has scaled to the top of the villa. But he does not stop there. Moving silently up the roof to the chimney, he balances the container on top of a chimney stack. Taking a second to assess his work, he begins the descent just as smoothly until he drops without a sound onto the tiled patio.

"Mrs Bellacci," says Romano, turning to her. "If you will."

Mrs Bellacci lifts the rifle and, barely pausing, fires off a muted shot. The clay pot explodes into pieces, vinegar splashing onto the terracotta chimney. I smile and nod, and notice Lorenzo looking my way happily.

"I am more than impressed. But I have a question."

"Go on," says Romano.

"If Mrs Bellacci is the weapons expert, who cooks the amazing food? Is it delivered?"

Another first, Mrs Bellacci laughs aloud, and even Lorenzo smirks happily at me.

"None of us are limited to only one talent, Gabriel. And I have a feeling that neither are you. Mrs Bellacci is as formidable in the kitchen as she is at the rifle range. Now, I have a few calls to make and a man to take to hospital. But I think it is high time we gave you the unofficial tour of the house, including the surveillance room, the safety bunker, and the armoury."

"I can do this," offers Lorenzo, glancing over and nodding to me.

"After that, perhaps you can assist him in finding this book."

With the rifle resting in her arms, Mrs Bellacci folds her arms across her chest before addressing me directly.

"I have a question for you, Mr Redbrick." I feel sure she will never call me by my given name. "Why did you not tell me when I asked? About this book? I would have told you that many of the professor's belongings are still in boxes in one of the garages. He had not enough time to unpack everything, and insisted on waiting until he returned before arranging them all into the library."

"My apologies. As I said, his message instructed me to trust nobody. I did not ask you for help because I felt I needed to solve this mystery alone. But right now, I would welcome your help."

"So," says Romano as we all head back to the kitchen. He has a playful glint in his eye. "How is your stay at Eagle House so far, Gabriel Redbrick?"

"*Vsyo bylo zamechatelno, spasibo.*" In my brain, the words 'very pleasant thank you' form in English, but the phrase comes out in Russian.

Mrs Bellacci stops walking, her face transforming with surprise, but Romano simply tilts his head back and laughs.

"Yes indeed, my instincts rarely let me down," says Romano. "Not only do you have hidden depths, but you will indeed make a perfect addition to the team. Perhaps you can help Mrs Bellacci to practice and improve her spoken Russian in future, instead of her bothering my office assistant. Now, let's have some more coffee before I head off and let you begin your search."