

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED



BRIAN LANCASTER

SEVEN
DOCTOR ROMANO

Doctor Romano is already seated outside at the table as I step off the bottom stair and head towards the open patio doors. I notice he has changed into a navy two-piece lightweight suit and a light blue shirt. The cooler evening air clearly agrees with him, and he appears stylish and suave this evening. When he sees me approaching, he stands and lifts a hand in greeting, a formality I am sure Albert found endearing.

"Good evening, Mr Redbrick. You clean up well."

I smile. Albert had used the same expression on the rare occasion we went somewhere formal, and I'd made noises about having to shave or wear a jacket.

"Thank you. And—uh—buona sera, Doctor Romano."

Doctor Romano smiles and nods his approval at my attempt to speak words in his mother tongue.

"Please take a seat. La signora Bellacci has made us the perfect aperitif, a pitcher of Negroni. Can I pour you a glass?"

I notice two jugs on the table, one filled with still water

and another with an amber liquid filled with ice cubes and thin orange slices.

"Why not? I don't think I've had Negroni before."

Actually, I had heard about the drink coming into fashion in London bars, even if I have never sampled the aperitif before.

"Dry gin, Campari, sweet vermouth. And I believe la signora uses a combination of Prosecco and soda water. Something she picked up from her time in Milano. I find it light and refreshing."

He is right. The taste is unusual, with an odd but not unpleasant aftertaste and is cooling in the warmth of the early evening. If their intention is to relax their new guest, then the ploy is working perfectly.

"Mr Redbrick—"

"Gabriel, please. Call me Gabriel."

"Gabriel, then," said the doctor, smiling his approval. "I must offer you my sincere condolences about the loss of Dr Callico. He did not tell me much about you, but from what he did, I could tell he was not only fond but wholly invested in you. And more than that, although I do not know the intricacies of his work, I understand that he fought tirelessly to find cures for multiple lethal diseases. His death is nothing short of tragic."

"Thank you, doctor. I appreciate the sentiment."

"Now, before we eat, I need to explain a few important things to you about Casa dell'Aquila. I imagine Dr Callico would have planned to do this when you came here together, but clearly that is no longer possible. First of all, I hire and employ the house staff. They live here rent free and, as you can see, maintain the property and cater to any guests on the rare occasion they come to stay."

"I understand. Who pays their wages?"

"My agreement with Dr Callico was that he would provide their accommodation and I would take care of their financial remuneration. He also agreed that I could have guests come to stay at times throughout the year, when the place stood empty. We hold a small conference of like-minded medics twice a year and Casa dell'Aquila provides the perfect location. Dr Callico and I also had a legal *procura generale* created—our Italian version of a power of attorney—which allows me to manage a local bank account, to pay for maintenance and everything else concerning the house. Of course, as the principal owner now you can revoke any of these arrangements if you so wish—"

"No. Please, no. I'm not sure how long I will be staying."

The doctor smiles and appears satisfied with this answer.

"I am happy to hear that. Now, you will need to let myself or la signora know what time you wish to take your meals—"

"Honestly, I was not expecting to have food. I am used to fending for myself."

"La signora will expect to feed you while you stay. Shall we say seven in the morning for breakfast and midday for your lunch. Dr Callico and his guest took all their meals out here. You can always take them in your room or on the bedroom balcony if the weather is inclement. Do you take tea of coffee with your breakfast?"

"Coffee. I know Albert would have insisted on tea, but I prefer coffee. And whatever blend the locals drink will be fine."

"Perfect. Just let her know if you plan to be elsewhere during the day or in the evening."

"I will, thank you. Is there anything else I need to know while I'm here?" I ask.

"No, no. I think that is all," he says, looking down while folding his napkin. "For now."

I am unsure how I know, but he seems to be holding something important back. This is an impression, nothing concrete, but I have relied heavily on these instincts in my past. Perhaps this is a result of a cultural misalignment, something I should ignore, but my instincts tell me otherwise.

Mrs Bellacci brings over a large dish of large, thickly sliced tomatoes, black olives and soft local cheese—not burrata but similar—garnished with sweet basil and covered with a liberal coating of olive oil and black pepper. She provides plates, forks and spoons, and I wonder if the custom is to serve myself. Doctor Romano must recognise my hesitation because he takes a plate and starts to expertly scoop up the juicy contents before handing the plate to me. Once he has filled his own, we begin to eat together in companionable silence.

Flavours explode in my mouth, the tangy and juicy tomato mixing perfectly with the soft, creamy cheese. I do my best to restrain my hunger and eat slowly, but I am soon helping myself to another serving.

"Mr Redbrick," comes the voice of Mrs Bellacci, appearing at the table with the shifty-looking young man I had seen naked earlier, who stands a step behind her, staring at the ground. "This is my son, Lorenzo. He tends the grounds and helps around the house."

"Good evening, Lorenzo," I say after wiping my mouth with the napkin. He meets my gaze and nods once before frowning as though something about me offends him, a deep furrow between his thick eyebrows. A second later, his gaze swings away across the evening grounds. Although in profile he has none of the perfect features of contemporary

male beauty, there is nonetheless something innately masculine about him, a raw attractiveness. Fortunately for me, his blunt rudeness negates any further assessment. I wonder if he noticed me watching him shower earlier and has an issue with gay men. Or perhaps he has a condition that makes social interaction difficult for him—although he seemed to be doing fine socialising with the men at the pension bar earlier that day. Whatever. I return my attention to the food on my plate.

The doctor is less forgiving. He addresses Lorenzo in quick-fire Italian, his tone low and scolding, clearly rattled at the young man's rudeness. Lorenzo answers back, and a short back and forth plays out between them, with Mrs Bellacci chipping in and clearly siding with the doctor. Eventually, Lorenzo storms off across the grounds and Mrs Bellacci, who appears mortified, says a few soft words to the doctor before hurrying away herself.

"Please forgive us. Lorenzo is used to having the house and grounds to himself."

"I can understand that."

"But I reminded him that he is employed here, not a guest. He is—how is it you say in English—a little hot-headed."

"Yes, I can see that also."

"But he is loyal and hard working like his mother, which is why I employed them—"

"Doctor Romano. Honestly, I really don't care. His mother told me he doesn't like to speak much, which suits me fine."

Once we finish and I put my cutlery onto the empty plate, I notice Mrs Bellacci heading back to us, this time with an even larger dish loaded with cooked meat and pasta. Behind her, Lorenzo walks sullenly with an uncorked

bottle of red wine and a couple of glasses dangling from one hand.

"Mrs Bellacci is spoiling us tonight. If I am not mistaken, she has made us her specialty which is called Peposa Dell'Impruneta. I hope you eat meat. These are braised beef short ribs with fresh herbs served on a bed of her homemade fettuccine."

"I am not vegetarian," I reply to the doctor before turning my attention to Mrs Bellacci. "And if the smell is anything to go by, I already know I am going to enjoy this."

A grinning Mrs Bellacci serves us this time, using the same plates we used for the appetiser to load the meat and pasta, before leaving the large platter with the surplus in the middle of the table. The taste is sublime, the best food I have tasted since leaving England. As I am twirling my fork in a bed of fettuccine, I sense Lorenzo come to stand next to me, placing down an empty glass with his tattooed hand and pouring in red wine.

"My mother asks me to apologise," says Lorenzo, to the top of my head. Even though his voice carries no warmth, the deep baritone sends a sizzle to my groin. "This wine is from a local vineyard and is premium chianti. I am sure you will enjoy it with this food."

Once he finishes pouring, he remains standing there, but I say nothing. After a few moments, he moves away to serve the doctor. When I look up, he is heading back to the kitchen where Mrs Bellacci appears to be laying the table for their own meal. I wonder if I will eat alone while I remain in the villa.

"Is there anything you would like to ask me?" asks Doctor Romano after we both return to our food. "I am sure you must have questions."

There are questions I need answering, but first I need to

find out how much he already knows and more about his relationship with Albert.

"How well did you know Albert—uh—Professor Callico?"

"Well enough. I know his work was the most important aspect of his life. I also know he thought very highly of you, by the way his face transformed when he talked about you, about how much you would love this house when he eventually surprised you with a visit. Completely different to the way he looked when asked about his immediate family. Of them, he disclosed very little, which gave me the impression they were either not close or did not get along."

"That sounds about right. And you met Sylvie Leblanc when he brought her?"

"I did not, I'm afraid. I had family business in Sicily at the time. But la signora Bellacci took good care of them both."

"Do you know why she came with him? Dr Leblanc?"

"I believe they had simply been travelling together. Before coming here, they had been to speak to medical professionals at one of the main hospitals in Lombardy that had dealt with the deluge of coronavirus cases when the virus first hit our shores."

That makes sense. Even after numerous countries had begun referring to the pandemic as an endemic, Albert continued to research more effective vaccines. He cited one of his contemporaries, a medical research expert called Puchinsky, who had helped to found a new combination super vaccination providing protection against common diseases such as diphtheria and tetanus. His aim was to add an effective coronavirus vaccine to the mix. I had the impression Albert respected the intent but not the man.

"They took separate bedrooms, if that is what—"

"No, no," I reply, huffing out a laugh. "I know they were friends only in a professional capacity. I just wondered if there was more to their trip here."

"More? In what way?"

"I don't know," I reply before turning my full attention to him. "Have you heard of someone locally called Luriabio, or maybe just Luria?"

I watch his face carefully for any tell, any surprise at me mentioning the name, but there is nothing. Instead, he scratches his head and frowns in concentration.

"Luria is certainly an Italian name. Less common, I should say, and I don't know anyone who bears the name locally. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. Just a name Albert referred to—"

"Ah, then," says the doctor with a grin, "that makes perfect sense. He was probably referring to Salvador Luria, an Italian microbiologist. The man shared a Nobel Prize with two other medical contemporaries for their research into the composition of viruses."

"Would Albert have known him?"

"Luria won the award in 1969 and died in the early nineties. In the US, if I'm not mistaken. So I doubt there would have been a personal connection. But Dr Callico would undoubtedly have studied his body of work and, most likely, in great detail."

"I see." Josh had clearly been searching in the wrong place. Albert would have been more invested in the work of a microbiologist, wouldn't he? And at least I can rule out the name as a reference to someone locally.

"I thought you might want to know what there is to do locally? A young man like yourself."

"Honestly, I am grateful just to recuperate and gather my thoughts, if you know what I mean?"

"I understand completely. And as a doctor I wholly endorse this plan. To be honest, the house is like a hidden sanctuary at the end of a lane that goes nowhere. The grounds are substantial, five hectares of land, which is over twelve acres I believe. Beyond is countryside until the next farmhouse. You'd need to use another road to get there. So if it's peace and quiet you are seeking, then you could not have come to rest in a better place."

That night, I leave the patio doors wide open, a gentle breeze billowing the gossamer thin curtains. Eventually, I fall asleep in only boxers and a white tee, listening to the constant buzz of crickets and a lone owl hooting in the distance. For the first time in as long as I remember, I sleep like a baby throughout the night without waking.

Sunlight wakes me, and I am immediately tempted to head for the pool to resume my fitness routine. Until I remember the filth littering the water. When I check my phone, the time is just after six. No missed calls or messages from Josh. Out on the balcony, the day appears to promise sunshine again, and I decide to don the shorts and tee shirt he loaned me. Below me, I can hear someone laying the patio table, and I take a seat on the bedroom balcony.

The morning panorama along the horizon is lit differently from the evening before but just as beautiful. Hints of lemon and lavender waft in on gentle breezes. Idyllic, Albert would have called this—and probably did, sitting right here. But there is also something instinctive that tells me not to let down my guard, as though the allure of the natural beauty is the disguise of a deadly flower.

I wonder if the instinct is an over-exaggeration, a self-preservation hangover from my time on the streets. But then I spy tiny but telltale pencil-thin CCTV cameras on rotating mounts placed almost undetectable at the top

corners of my balcony. Intrigued, I lean back over the balustrade and study the facade at the back of the building. Similar cavities have been created in critical positions hidden beneath parts of the guttering, all housing exceptionally well-disguised cameras. Unless a person knew where to look, they would never spot them.

After stepping back into the bedroom, I stop instinctively to scrutinise the walls but am reasonably confident there are no cameras inside the room.

I head intrigued to the bathroom and do the same. Nothing. I understand that a villa at the end of the lane might need external security, but this seems a little over-cautious. Albert must have had them installed because many are integrated into the exterior masonry. More importantly, who has access to the feed from the cameras? Do I bring this up with Mrs Bellacci or Doctor Romano? Or should I keep this information to myself until I know more? I decide on the latter.

Breakfast is nice and simple. I am not sure if this is typical for Tuscany, but I know that this is what Albert would have enjoyed apart from the large cup of aromatic coffee with a small jug of hot milk. Mrs Bellacci has brought me a small basket of pastries, a glass of fresh orange juice, and a bowl of colourful fruit, including grapes, apples and strawberries. While I am eating alone, I notice Lorenzo emerge from the kitchen and walk in the direction of the olive grove.

"Excuse me, Lorenzo," I call out. "Would it be possible to have the pool cleaned today? I usually like to take a swim before breakfast."

He continues walking, staring blankly ahead, neither slowing nor acknowledging my request. I prefer to believe that he does not understand my request. I heave a sigh and

decide to seek out Mrs Bellacci later, once the sun gets too hot to sit outside. Half an hour later, once I find a lounge and recline back to enjoy the morning, Lorenzo shuffles my way, carrying a long cleaning pole with a large net attached. I sit up and am about to thank him when he stops and tosses the implement onto the ground at the foot of my lounge.

Without stopping or turning again, he spits out some words in Italian that I am sure are not civil. Does he expect me to clean the pool myself? I am not averse to manual work but don't find the gesture particularly welcoming. When I stare into the pool, there appears to be more than simply clearing the surface. From where I sit, the bottom has patches of dark algae.

A cloud passes over, and a cold shiver runs through me. When I look at the sky, I notice clouds amassing and wonder if we are due rain. I rarely let annoyance take hold of me but decide to take the matter of the pool up with Mrs Bellacci. Perhaps there is a local company that provides a cleaning service if her son cannot do the job.

On my way back to the room, I stop by the kitchen entrance and am about to call out to Mrs Bellacci when I hear her distinctive voice talking to someone. I glance through the doorway and notice she is on her mobile phone with her back to me. After hesitating a moment, I decide to come back later but in the short time I am there, something unusual grabs my attention.

She is not speaking Italian. I didn't think I was familiar with any language other than English, but my brain automatically translates the one she is using. Russian. I even know that this is not her native tongue and that her use is not only grammatically incorrect in places but highly accented. She is telling somebody that she does not know how long the guest will be staying. I assume she means me.

She then goes on to say that, no, she does not think he is a threat.

I wander off baffled, not only wondering who she is speaking to but why I can understand the meaning of her words. When I woke this morning, I hoped things might start to settle down and I could enjoy the simplicity of staying in this idyllic part of the world. Now I am not so sure. I am almost at the open doors leading into the villa when the familiar voice calls out.

"Mr Redbrick." I turn to see Mrs Bellacci standing in the kitchen doorway, putting the mobile phone away in her apron pocket. "Was there something I can help you with?"

I am bewildered for a moment but recover quickly. "I wondered if we could arrange to have the pool cleaned at some point? Is there a local company we could employ?"

"Let me check with Lorenzo," she says, and I stop myself from telling her not to waste her time with her ill tempered son. She appears to be satisfied with the interaction because she turns and heads back into the kitchen.

A blanket of cloud cover has moved to block the sun and maybe even threaten rain. I decide to head to my room and tidy up before finding something to occupy my mind, and what better way than to begin my search of the library.