

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

SIXTEEN

LONDON

Maybe I've been away too long. A little over two hours flight away and the contrast of climates could not be more striking. London's streets of monotonous rain and dark alleyways feel both familiar and alien. Have I been seduced by the sun and relative tranquillity of Monticiano? Perhaps. At least I have a clean hotel room for a few nights. The prepaid room is ten floors below the suite where my target is staying. Ironically, Callico House is within walking distance. Josh and Nishan's house is a mere thirty-minute Tube ride away.

But I won't go anywhere near either.

I manage to sleep in the armchair for a couple of hours. Not knowing whether Doctor Romano is an early riser, I head out for an early breakfast to a quiet breakfast spot tucked away down a side street behind the hotel and put off ringing him until the relatively more civilised time of six-thirty—seven-thirty central European time.

He answers his secure line after only one ring.

"Janis." The concern in his voice is palpable. "What happened? Is there a problem?"

"There is no problem," I answer. I keep my tone flat, not wanting my voice to give anything away. I want to know what he has to say. "Why would you think that?"

"You have only been in London one night."

"I wanted to report in. And to find out if you have received the file you said you'd send me."

The doctor promised to send me an official file on Sylvie Leblanc from a close contact in the French intelligence services rather than the British. Romano, too, is a shrewd strategist.

"Please concentrate on the task I set for you. Once that is completed, I will send you everything I have, but I do not want you distracted until then."

"In which case, I have an update for you. The task is done. But can I suggest that, in future, you advise your operatives not to leave their jackets with official identities in the pockets, hanging over the back of chairs in their hotel rooms. Mrs Bellacci would have torn Agent Stefano Gaultieri to shreds. Not only is his identity and security pass tucked into his wallet, but he keeps his passcodes written on the back of a business card. Not particularly professional."

Not only that, but the sloppy agent had a folded printout of an encrypted email of instructions from one Dottore Giuseppe Romano, Ispettore Superiore, Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna. I took a screenshot of the email contents on my phone and used one of the online translators to get an idea of the content. Romano had called on the agent at the last moment to fly over to England.

"You—? Have you already completed the mission? You were supposed to observe—"

"That was not the objective, merely your suggestion as a precaution. And I imagine it would be a pretty sensible one

under normal circumstances, but ultimately one I didn't need. Instead, I improvised."

Romano goes quiet at the end of the line, and I wonder what he is doing. I decide to help him out.

"I assume you're switching on the secure cam app you gave me. You'll see the cameras have been installed in each of the rooms. Although to what purpose, I have no idea."

"But how did you—? There is no way Gaultieri would have left his room unsecured before sleeping."

"He did not. As I told you, I improvised. As I am sure you know, Johanson flew the redeye in from Cape Town. When he checked in late last night, he was clearly exhausted, but not too tired to order a fresh pot of tea from room service sent to his room. Let's just say the slightly modified beverage helped him sleep a little deeper, thanks to your assistance. He will wake refreshed and oblivious to my nighttime visit. The adjoining room to his, in case you were not aware, is being redecorated and is currently vacant. Yes, I got lucky there. On the streets, I learnt to turn random opportunities like these to my advantage. But after acquiring a hotel pass key, I only had to wait a reasonable amount of time after his lights went out. After that, I performed everything in the dark. Now maybe you'll tell me why I am installing cameras into the hotel apartment of one of your agents. An assignment that, quite frankly, any one of your friends in the UK could have completed without a fuss. I find it hard to believe that you made a mistake with the intended target, Doctor Romano?"

Romano lets out an audible sigh, then chuckles. I hope he comes clean and tells me the real reason for Gaultieri—to test me.

"The only mistake I made was in underestimating you, Agent Petersone. Well done. This is not the assignment I

had in mind for Lorenzo, by the way, which was cancelled due to the man being caught and arrested at passport control in Milan. But, yes, I did want to see how well you would perform. And you have, as always, excelled."

I relax then because that is precisely what is written in the email, Romano asking Gaultieri to be in London to test someone considered a highly skilled and potentially invaluable new recruit.

"Perhaps something a little more demanding next time?"

"Noted. I took your suggestion, by the way. Command is sending a team to Eagle House this weekend to confront the aggressors. Teresa and Lorenzo have locked everything important in the strongroom and evacuated the villa. I've sent them south to a safe house until we have official word that the incursion is over. But the same goes for you, Janis. Stay in London until you hear from me again. And I don't want you going anywhere near your old friends, is that clear?"

"Of course not. What about you? What will you do?"

"I have been told to stay here. I've agreed to let our people see the security footage that we hold on the villa system. Once the combat is over and I get the green light, I will go back there with a few senior agents and let them see what we have."

I stall a moment. Surely he realises they will see footage of me on the night of the intruders. As usual, he is ahead of me.

"Don't worry. Mrs Bellacci has made modifications to the digital records. Such as the timestamp for Alice's visit being swapped with the day Spataro's men called. After that, you no longer appear in any footage. And, as you know, Mrs Bellacci is very thorough."

"Yes, I have not forgotten."

"I will send the file on Leblanc to your phone later. The attachment will be encrypted with a code."

"Which is?"

"I am sure you will work it out."

Now it's my turn to laugh.

"But you will need to handle Leblanc on your own, I'm afraid," he continues, more seriously. "My remit does not normally reach outside the borders of Italian territories and, even though we help other agencies from time to time, my influence beyond that goes only so far. Moreover, if I call in a favour to get you visitor's access to Leblanc's room right now, someone is bound to make a connection."

"Straight back to Callico House and Albert. I understand completely. They are probably watching you as eagerly as they're searching for Gabriel. I thought I would apply for menial work at the hospital, a security or porter job perhaps. That way I'll have card access to all the wards. Even the secure ones where visitors can't freely visit."

"I was going to suggest the same. That will entail a longer stay in London, which is perfect right now. You will have noticed when you entered the country that you have a settlement visa in your passport which gives Janis the right to remain and work." I did notice that and the few stamped entries in and out of the country. "And my understanding is that hospitals are always crying out for able-bodied manual workers. In the meantime, do not call this number. Wait until I contact you with an update."

"Would you like me to remove the cameras from Agent Gaultieri's room?"

A soft snort from Romano comes down the phone.

"No, he can do that himself. And I will take great pleasure telling him the job was done while he was sleeping.

Have you thought any more about what I suggested on the drive to the airport?"

Strange, really, but Doctor Romano's suggestion seems entirely rational on the surface. And yet I sensed a hesitation in his voice when he posed the idea of me removing my tattoo while I was in London. After all, it's the only remaining visual clue to my identity.

"I have. And I won't. Not yet, anyway. It's hard to explain, but it's a part of who I am."

"I understand." The thing is, I think he does.

Back at the hotel, enjoying the luxury of the bathroom, I shower, dress as Janis with glasses but without fake facial hair, and head out into the rain. First, I want to register my interest in a hospital vacancy and then look for alternative accommodation—even though I have the hotel for another few nights. I am not worried about bumping into Agent Gaultieri because he has no idea who I am, but I want to be closer to St Thomas Hospital and living in someplace more hospital-porter appropriate. Few reliable agencies deal in affordable rentals on a month-by-month basis, but I was on the street long enough to know which ones I could trust. And paying by cash always helps to sweeten the deal.

But first of all, I need to get a job. Rather than search online, I head to the hospital and see if I can apply directly. If not, I will try one of the recruitment agencies dotted around the area. If I cannot get work, I may need to rethink my plans to get into Leblanc's room.

Luck seems to be on my side because as I walk around the side of the hospital towards the main entrance, I spot a man in a black padded jacket outside a side gate into the grounds, sheltering beneath a canopy and smoking a cigarette.

"Do you work here?" I ask, adopting an accent and hoping to appear friendly.

"For my sins, yeah. Why are you asking?"

"Do you know if there are vacancies? For porters? I need work?"

"Oh, yeah?" says the man curiously, sizing me up. "You got experience?"

"A little."

"You know the work's hard and the pay's shit, don't you?"

"A job is a job."

He pauses to size me up again before stubbing the cigarette on the wall and putting the remains into his pocket.

"Come with me," he says, turning around and entering the gate.

His boss is a South Asian guy with glasses and a droopy dark moustache. Although he is a lot chunkier than me, his arms are big, and I imagine he can easily lift heavy weights. He sits me down in a small room and hands me a form. Before leaving me to write down my details, he explains that the role is temporary while one of his staff is recovering from an operation. I write in block capitals and include everything I need from the file on Janis Petersone. He returns fifteen minutes later, and I wait for him to read through before he fires questions at me, mainly about the physically demanding duties. I shrug and answer emotionlessly with a curt yes or no, the way Lorenzo drilled into me. During the forty-five minutes, he is interrupted by people three times. Eventually, after he has stated the working hours and hourly rate—which is barely minimum wage—he has one final question.

"When can you start?"

"I need to find accommodation. Is tomorrow too soon?"

A toothy smile breaks out on his face.

"Tomorrow is perfect. Do you have family with you?"

"Only me."

"Well, if you need somewhere urgent to stay and you're not too fussy, try Bettacom on Lancing Street. They cater to blue collar workers like us."

"I already have contacts."

"Fair enough. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Is there overtime?"

This time, his grin grows even bigger.

"There is always overtime. Come to the staff entrance at eight tomorrow morning. We'll take your final details and fit you out with a uniform. Then I'll arrange one of the old hands to show you the ropes."

He has a deceptively firm handshake, and while he continues to grin broadly, I nod my appreciation. By the time I leave, midday has just passed, and I decide to grab a coffee and sandwich before starting my search for somewhere to live.

Finding a place to rent—a task I thought would be easy—turns out to be problematic. The first agency I approach informs me they have nothing available for two months, so I turn around and head out. During the afternoon, similar stories are given at four more. There are other options. Before I met Albert, I knew a couple of private landlords around King's Cross station who rented shared rooms by the week. I don't like the thought of approaching them as Gabriel's friend, but I will not rule out the idea. I am ready to throw in the towel for today and head back to the hotel, grateful I had not checked out yet, when, as a final resort, I decide to try the agency my new boss recommended.

When I enter into an arrangement of empty desks and find the shop deserted, I am about to turn and leave when a

frowning Goth girl appears from the back with a cup of soup noodles in one hand. After thumping the carton down, she orders me to sit. Although she doesn't appear particularly keen to help, she pulls out a map and shows me the location of three properties on their books. One available immediately is perfect with not more than a fifteen to twenty-minute walk to the hospital. Flipping around her computer monitor, she shows me photos of a room with an adjoining bathroom and then runs through the terms. I agree to a monthly arrangement, paying a month's rent upfront and a month's deposit. I could argue the extortionate downpayment, but I am guessing she would not be the one to negotiate, and besides, I need this place. When I confirm payment in cash, she calls up someone I guess to be the landlord, who agrees to let me have the keys immediately.

By eight o'clock that night, I have parted with two thousand pounds in cash, checked out of the hotel, and moved my bag into the tiny one-bed box room. The whole space is less spacious than my walk-in wardrobe in Eagle House, but the location and anonymity are priceless.

That evening, Romano sends me the file with a hint at the password. JPPP#. He is not imaginative like Albert; the clue is simply a reference to Janis Peterson's passport number.

I lie back on the bed and scan through. The file is not much help, detailing LeBlanc's impressive academic record and brilliant medical career. I flick past long documents written entirely in French that I cannot decipher until I find a few that pique my interest.

A type-written police report in French from the turn of the century accompanies a scanned newspaper clipping about protests in the heart of Paris. From the clashes with

police, I assume the gatherings were illegal. One clipping shows protestors carrying banners with phrases like 'avortement est un droit fundamental' and 'mon corps, mon choix' which I assume to be pro-abortion. A young and angry Sylvie—circled in red on the clipping—is caught front and centre pushing away a policeman twice her size. In another, she is protesting France's participation in the invasion of Afghanistan. All public displays of dissent point to her days in medical school because there are no further police reports. After that, there are the occasional letters of praise from charitable organisations for her various voluntary work providing relief medical assistance in Indonesia following the 2004 tsunami in southeast Asia and different stints with Médecins Sans Frontières in locations such as Sudan and Libya.

I toss my phone onto the bed and stifle a yawn. Last night's operation for Romano meant I did not sleep much, and today has been hectic. I know I should sleep, except the room feels unusually cold. When I reach a hand towards the room's cast-iron radiator bedside the bed, the metal is almost too hot to touch.

After a steaming shower in the cramped, plastic cubicle, I dry off completely, throw on sleeping sweats and climb into bed. Staring at the ceiling, I feel something still out of place. Red and blue neon light from a store sign on street level bleeds past the slats of the room's white blind. Closing my eyes, I press the heel of each hand into my eye sockets to block out any light. Lorenzo's face floats into view, laughing at something I have said or done. I realise I am missing the shared body warmth and proximity to which I have become accustomed. And I know at that moment I miss Lorenzo more than I miss the Tuscan sun.

Gabriel would never have let his emotions distract him

from anything, but then Gabriel did not spend the past weeknights in Lorenzo's bed, losing himself in the man's body.

I take a deep breath and tell myself that the sooner I find out what Sylvie Leblanc knows—if she can talk at all—the sooner I can return to Monticiano and, more importantly, to Lorenzo.

With that plan crystallising in my mind, sleep finally comes.