

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

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TWENTY-THREE

HARTFIELD

Coleman finds us a motel two hour's drive from the coordinates Romano provided, somewhere that even has an electric vehicle charging point. We check in for a couple of nights rather than planning to drive straight back. After freshening up, we share a plentiful, if not particularly imaginative, meal at the restaurant attached to the motel. Mrs Bellacci has been spoiling me, another reason why I'm keen to get back to Monticiano. When I order a glass of red wine with the meal, Coleman vouches for soda water with a slice of lemon.

We share stories of our experiences in the company of the Callico family. Coleman's attempt to pepper his tales with humour does little to mask his vitriol.

"But most of all, I'm sick of being held hostage by those pompous British elites," he tells me, trying to smile. "With their passive aggressive ways, their aloofness coupled with an indirectness they pass off as good manners and breeding. Worst of all, I hate their habit of never saying what they actually mean. You know, when they ask things like 'how's the job coming along?' when what they really mean is

'haven't you fucking finished yet?' Yeah, I know there's a lot to hate about America today, but at least the people I know from back home say exactly what they mean."

I understand what he means, but every coin has two sides. Even though I didn't fit in, I appreciated Albert's companionship and never once felt trapped by him, not the way Coleman tells it. If I had wanted to, I could have—would have—walked away at any time. Coleman explains that a stipulation written into the inheritance from his grandfather was that he be happily married before the old man's demise. Normally, Coleman tells me, he wouldn't have given a damn about the money, but the alternative was unthinkable, his grandfather bequeathing everything to his favourite politician's election campaign. Coleman smirks when he tells me how he duped the generous geriatric bastard anyway, because he only managed the married part of the proviso. But the marriage also became a dungeon for him and he had to wait until his grandfather's death before he could begin to plan his escape.

The irony is not lost on me, that during the past twelve hours, we have spoken more words than in all the time we spent together at Callico House.

We turn in at eight, agreeing to meet early for breakfast. I have just finished a few important tasks before readying for bed when Lorenzo calls. Our distance has made me realise how much his voice centres and grounds me. I know I am wholly capable alone, but I feel something extra whenever I hear his voice and especially when he is beside me. Lorenzo is less emotionally contained than I and has me smiling when he complains about how much he wants to fuck me, or to be fucked by me. To lighten the mood, I tell him about the mound of fried fish and chips I had for dinner. Turns out Lorenzo is a fan of fish and chips, and

when he tells me about the simple meal Mrs Bellacci threw together, I know I would trade with him in a heartbeat.

He goes on to complain about being chosen as a part of the security detail, claims that his and Mrs Bellacci's skills are wasted. And he is probably right. Although I don't tell him, I'm sure Romano knows their presence will provide a sense of added protection and confidence. And as though the man himself has been listening in to my thoughts, an incoming call comes through from Romano. I explain to Lorenzo and he tells me to take the call because it might be urgent. As soon as I connect to Romano, I tell him I have been speaking with Lorenzo.

"I apologise for the interruption, Janis. He will be in touch with you tomorrow. Right now, though, I need to speak to you."

"Do you want me to go and wake Mr Washington?"

"There is no need."

I keep things brief, telling him about checking into the motel and our plans for the morning.

"What is the satellite coverage like?" he asks, a good question because I have been a little worried as we made our way further north.

"We have internet connection in the motel, but SatNav kept dropping out in the car."

"Be prepared for no coverage. You may want to find out if the motel has a map of the area, just in case. Don't rely on the car's navigation system."

"Understood. I'll find something on my phone and ask the front desk to print it off in the morning. If necessary, we can always stop and ask directions."

"Be careful who you speak to. You don't want to attract any unwanted attention. I know you are in a remote location, but local communities tend to be tightly knit and

friendly, but infinitely less discreet. I expect this to be a quick in and out mission. I imagine that means you'll be offline until you return. Tomorrow may be a wasted day, Janis, but stay alert and pay attention. Do you still have the handgun we issued you?"

"I do."

"Take it with you. Just as a precaution. And make sure you check in with me as soon as you're back."

"Will do. Any updates from your end?"

I can hear Romano hesitating.

"Significant. But still some loose ends. And I do not want to distract you from your task. I promise to give you more when we next speak."

"Okay, I'll call you tomorrow."

"Good luck, Janis," he says, and I am sure he is about to end the call.

"Don't forget Albert's last words to you."

He rings off before I can respond and before I remember to tell him about the cryptic message containing Albert's pigpen cypher. Maybe that is just as well because I am still not sure what it means. What could Romano do, anyway? Albert is not alive. I remember overhearing Victoria at the hospital telling someone on the phone that she had been the one called to identify Albert's body. How could she have made a mistake identifying her own brother? The idea is ludicrous. But then who sent the message because they clearly knew our code?

When I do finally sleep, I have troubled dreams of Albert standing at the edge of the pool as I surface from a punishing swim, shaking his head and urging me to remain still for a moment. In his usual calm way, he tells me that only if I let the waters calm will I discern the important pattern at the bottom of the pool. And something does

niggle in my memory, like the Scottish mountains on the way up, the peaks shrouded in mist, ones I know are there but I am just not seeing right now.

When I rise at five, I find a large envelope has been pushed beneath my door. Inside is an A-Z road atlas of the local area. No note is attached. I wrench open the room door and check outside in the parking lot, but everything is still and calm, with no sign of movement. At breakfast, I toss the gift onto the table. Coleman stares in surprise for a moment before picking up the booklet and scanning through a couple of pages.

"Good thinking, buddy. SatNav might be unreliable further north."

Clearly he did not provide the map. His response seems genuine and I answer simply.

"That's what I thought."

I have to assume Romano arranged the gift though the motel, but the map soon comes in handy when the satellite signal drops in and out, and finally dies along with all radio station signals. We drive through Applecross at seven-thirty descending into the isolated fishing village as a thick mist is drifting in from the sea. The land around this remote part of Scotland is wild and rugged, and the driving is often slow, down narrow single lanes. Coleman's electric SUV is a workhorse and handles the roads well. The tiny coastal town of Applecross flashes past in seconds, a single row of old fishing cottages keeping watch over the brooding grey ocean which is lost in fog and more like a threat this morning. Within barely a few breaths we are past the pub in the centre of the village and out the other side.

The well-maintained lane we are following for the next few miles ends at the ruins of a farmhouse and from there becomes a bumpy dirt track undulating through barren land

bordered on both sides by crumbling dry stone walling. Even the road map does not show the route. At one point the lane begins to climb steeply and I am sure I feel the SUV's wheels lose traction on the muddy surface. I turn to Coleman and notice he is frowning.

"Do we need to park up and to walk?" I ask.

"Not yet," he says, shaking his head. "This baby's designed for off-road. We don't walk unless we really have no choice."

Each hill gets progressively steeper but his car manages to tackle them. Eventually, we reach a plateau where a river on the far side runs into a large open body of water. I check and find the remote location on the map which is dotted with walking tracks but no roads. As we circumnavigate the loch a feeling of *deja-vu* surfaces, the sight eliciting an innate shiver at the chill waters.

"I know this place. I've been here before," I mutter. "I've swum in that loch. Many times. We are not far from wherever it is we're heading. I can feel it."

We do not have to go much further. When we struggle up and crest the next rise, a tall, barbed wire topped fencing held in place by solid wooden posts crosses the landscape in the distance. We drive up to metal gates blocking the lane and displaying weather-worn but still legible red and white signs with a simple warning: MOD Property - Keep Out. The gates are secured by heavy chains and secured by three bulky padlocks. Beyond the gate, the lane that heads onwards is strewn with fresh weeds. In front of the gates ample room has been carved out for errant drivers to manoeuvre a three-point-turn and head back the way they came. Coleman brings the car to halt on one side.

"Now we walk."

I nod and begin to climb out, grateful to stretch my legs

and taste fresh air. I perch my backside against the side of the car and wait for Coleman who comes to stand next to me. I wonder why he has his phone out clicking photos of the gates and the surrounding countryside.

"Romano suggested I do this. You want evidence, don't you?" he says, and I shrug in response.

I don't even need to examine the gates to know they are impassable, not without keys to the padlocks or heavy machinery. Instead, I survey the landscape, hoping flashes of memory might return.

"Aren't we conspicuous parked out here?" asks Coleman, peering around.

"Where else is there? It's all exposed ground. Besides, if anyone is keeping a lookout, they would have spotted us by now."

"Fair point. The next question is how the hell are we going to get in? I might have some bolt cutters in the back of the car. Do you want me to check?"

"No point. These padlocks are heavy duty and the chains are industrial. You'll only end up breaking your cutters."

"Shit. Any ideas? I would suggest we try burrowing under a fence, but someone told me your military has been known to lay mines around perimeter fences. Might be a crock, but I don't care to lose a limb trying to prove them wrong."

I take a few steps back and look along the line of the fence to the right. Fog is lifting in my brain. Memories are coming back. I have entered through this gate before, but it's not the only way in.

"What else do you have in the back?"

"The usual. Car jack, screwdrivers, hammer, pliers, box cutter."

"A torch?"

"Sure."

"Good. Go and fetch that, and if you have a penknife that might also come in handy."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

Coleman returns shortly after with the two items, holding them out to me. He also has a small backpack that he tells me houses water, snacks and waterproofs in case we are going to be long. The penknife is a solid multipurpose Swiss army variety while the torch is a heavy duty rubber one. Out of habit, I check to confirm there's a solid beam.

"Follow me," I say, satisfied.

I search a few hundred yards to our right, skirting clumps of thick gorse bushes hugging the fence, until I reach a post that has a barely visible white rim around the base. The sight is distantly familiar, another gentle nudge telling me that I am on the right track. I stop to check my bearings and notice Coleman has followed me, looking understandably bemused but snapping photos. Using the post as my guide, I back up five steps from the fence until I feel a metal plate beneath my trainers.

"Give me a hand," I say, kneeling to the ground. Although weeds have grown over the cover, there are two weathered rings attached and, with Coleman's help, we lift the heavy plate. A square cavity of industrial concrete is revealed. Earthen odours rise from within and a metal ladder leads down into darkness.

"There might be residual rainwater at the bottom, but it won't be deep," I tell Coleman.

I lead the way, climbing carefully down the cold, damp metal rungs using daylight to guide me, until my foot lands in shallow water. Only then, once I've taken a few steps into

the tunnel, do I turn on the torch. I hear Coleman behind me, muttering an expletive as his foot splashes into the water. The tunnel is straight and narrow, built from slabs of precast concrete. I shine the light ahead and tread forward carefully. After around five minutes, the ground begins to slope gently upwards. The tunnel ends with another set of metal rungs leading up to a metal hatch. I pass the torch to Coleman and climb to the top.

"Keep the beam on me. If my memory recall is accurate, we'll come out into an old storehouse with no windows. We'll need the light to find our way out.

When I reach the top and push, I'm relieved when the covering opens after a couple of shoves. Up until that point, everything has felt familiar, everything but emerging into daylight.

"This hatch used to be housed in the floor of a store-room," I say, partly to myself and partly to Coleman whose footsteps I hear on the rungs.

Once I've climbed out, I see what has happened. The ground is still tiled in industrial square ceramics of nondescript grey with weeds growing through the cracks, but a few random bricks are all that remains of the walls. Everything else has been knocked down and cleaned away. As I move forward to where the door would have been housed, I see further evidence of dwellings having been demolished. I sense Coleman come to stand next to me.

"Are you telling me you could have escaped this place at any time?"

"Escaped to where?" I answer. "This was the only home I would have known. According to Leblanc, whenever we went on assignment we were trained to return here."

"Fair point."

"Only the Knights were told about the tunnel. If we

needed to slip in late at night, rather than disturb security guards at the front gate, that's what we used."

Coleman walks over to a corner of the building where a shin high joint of the wall remains. After checking the bricks for stability he hops up and starts inspecting the area, snapping more photos. From my vantage point, all I can see are similar tiled areas stretching over the seven or eight football pitches upon which now-demolished buildings used to stand. The only structures still standing are a large water tower painted in sage green to blend into the landscape and a similarly camouflaged single storey arrangement of modular buildings that were used by command.

"I see it now," called Coleman, shading his eyes with a hand. "Laid out like an architect's blueprint. Over there is a regimented row of concrete floorings that probably housed buildings. And there's the outline of a small road leading through the centre. I can even see the sunken site of the gymnasium where the executions took place."

I scan the grounds briefly until my gaze settles on the last spot he has indicated, to the place I used to train ruthlessly and where my fellow Knights were allegedly pitted against each other to the death. During my update with Romano, I mentioned nothing about the gymnasium and what happened there. Until this moment, as far as I was aware, only Leblanc and myself knew the terrible truth.

"Are those office buildings over there?" asks Coleman. "The modular units still standing? Do you remember?"

Memories are flooding back. I have to close my eyes, to take a few steadying breaths to staunch them and centre myself. I focus on Romano's words. Stay alert and pay attention. Once I get my thoughts under control, I refocus on the command block.

"They were off limits. Lodgings and offices used by our instructors."

"Might be a good place to start a search," he says, jumping down.

On the way over to the building, I stop to view and absorb other sections, to help reinforce my recall, while Coleman snaps pictures. My mind begins to formulate a true picture of the camp from the remains: the dormitory where I slept, the dreary ablutions hut with the cold water showers, the mess hall with its long communal bench tables, and, of course, the gymnasium. The concrete steps that lead down into the sunken hall are now speckled with weeds, the surface of the large exercise floor full of rough grass and small bushes.

At the command building, I remember the doors used to have a card access entry system. Instructors could be identified by the red-ribboned lanyards hanging around their necks. The door we access is hanging open, the inside gloomy. When we reach the opening, Coleman steps back to take a couple more pictures and allows me to enter first.

A short corridor leads into a large area that would have been an open office space. Although the windows are painted over in a dark colour, part of the roof has collapsed and daylight provides enough illumination to inspect the room. There are no longer any desks, just empty shelving and a few overturned filing cabinets. Nothing looks familiar here and I wonder if I was ever allowed inside.

"Okay, buddy. This is as far as you go," Coleman's voice is strange, forced, his tone loud and tremulous. When I crane around, I see he has had a gun trained on me. His expression is unreadable.

"I thought you'd never handled a gun," I say, my voice calm.

"I lied. About that and a number of things."

I turn fully to confront him face on.

"Such as Albert telling you about my past? And him arranging the assault on Eagle House? That was all bullshit?"

"Correct on both counts. Edward signed for the execution of the contract. Which makes him culpable in the eyes of the law. But Sylvie did confide in me about you at the hospital. She's the one who called in the favour to help you. But I sensed there was something hickey about you the moment you showed up at the house, you and your obsession with that swimming pool. I did visit Leblanc with Sylvie all those years ago. That much is true. I guess we were all playing a game."

"Why arrange the hit on me? To take back Eagle House?"

"Hell, no. We considered his lame duck purchase in Sicily a joke. But nobody knew how much Albert had told you about the family. About past indiscretions. Victoria thought you might become a wildcard and blab to the press. To get your revenge. So let's just say we were protecting the family name."

"Was that all bullshit yesterday evening? About the British and their pompous ways? You're as much one of them as Edward."

"Don't compare me to Edward fucking Callico," says Coleman, his voice rattled but his expression calm. "Not only is he a snob, but he's impulsive to the point of recklessness. The type of businessman who takes unnecessary risks and gets a kick out of sailing too close to the wind. Callico House is not only unique but a part of the family's heritage. Victoria knows that. She's worried Edward will end up losing everything, including the family home. One sniff of a

buyer and, if he could have found a way, he would have already sold up. That's why Victoria had the likelihood of his lawyers being able to challenge the will checked out, to find out if they could force a change of use to the property. Not a chance in hell. Former Callico heads of house made sure of that, ensuring the clause was cast in stone. You know, the worst part is that my wife should have been the one to inherit the Callico estate, not Edward. Did you know she's a year older than him? But Callico tradition dictates that a male heir inherits. Even if that heir happens to be a fag, as in Albert's case."

"Or an insider trader, as in Edward's?"

Interesting. In all the time I spent in that house, I never once heard Coleman use insulting language to disparage the gay community, nor did he voice any issue with Albert or myself. And I covertly overheard many things from the old chair in the drawing room, including the urgent phone conversations Edward had when he believed the house to be empty, offering to sell copies of white papers to the highest bidder, confidential documents detailing future changes to government regulations on telephony. Moreover, I feel sure that an audited investigation into his business activities would unearth many more indiscretions. I said nothing to Albert, but I wonder now if Alice knew.

Coleman smiles. Am I finally seeing his true colours?

"Victoria was right, as always. You already know too much."

"And who would I tell? Who would believe me? I have no concrete evidence and I certainly don't have any influence."

"Yeah, but we can't run the risk that one day you might. Victoria believes that in order to maintain the Callico legacy, we need to carve out a future for the family that is

irreproachable, not one with the potential for public scandal or shame. Left to Edward and with you still in the frame, either or both of those outcomes are a certainty. Did you know that another stipulation of Callico tradition is that if anything happens to the last remaining male heir, only then will the oldest surviving female sibling become the successor."

Victoria.

"If anything happens? As in prison time for Edward?"

"As in an unfortunate accident. Edward needs to be dealt with."

"Then why are we here? Why are you pretending to help me?"

"I'm not pretending. I'm here to help you revisit your past. Because in order to get what I need, I agreed to bring you to him."

"To who?" I ask.

Coleman waves the gun at a point over my shoulder.

"To him."

I can only assume that somewhere in my early training, a warning mantra had been drummed into me, never to turn my back on a person holding a weapon of any kind, especially one that's trained on me. Even with my memory loss, the ingrained lesson served me well on the streets. But I have also been taught to listen for movement, for the approaching steps of an assailant—or in this case, the soft click of a stick on concrete and another person breathing in the dank space.

The man is old, probably in his mid to late eighties, but his features are nevertheless familiar. At first, there's a strange disconnect, the way I see a face on a news item and instantly recognise the person, but cannot connect them to the reason for their celebrity. This man is lean with a full

head of hair, which is swept back from his lined face. There is a gauntness about him and an unhealthy pallor to his skin that I know was not apparent before. He used to be as rigid as a monument, but now he has a marked stoop as though wind-battered and is propped up by a silver-tipped walking cane. The hand that holds the cane is skeletal, the skin age-blotched. Death shadows him.

"Welcome home, Five."