

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

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TWENTY-FIVE

I'M RIGHT HERE

When I surface into consciousness, night has fallen.

I need a few moments to orientate myself to my surroundings, to my bedroom in Eagle House, where the patio doors have been propped open. There must have been rain because the gentle fragrance of lemon and rosemary pervades the antiseptic odours surrounding me. The room is lit by a standing lamp in the corner and by the dimmed displays of medical devices beeping softly to my right.

But I am alive.

When I see Lorenzo asleep on a seat to my left, an overwhelming and utterly foreign emotion fills me. Part of me desires to pull him into my arms, while the other wants to observe, drink in his unique beauty and thank whoever can hear for keeping him safe. He slouches forward onto my mattress, his head next to my hand. After a quick self-inspection—I am sure I'm still whole—I reach out and run my fingers through his hair. He mumbles something unintelligible but does not wake. My right shoulder is now bandaged professionally and secured in a sling. Whatever medication they have me on has numbed any pain.

A few recent memories float back. I do not know how they got me from Scotland to Monticiano so quickly. And then I realise I have no idea how much time has passed. I can only guess Romano pulled in a few favours. I try to recall other events, but doing so fills my head with pain. Eventually, I surrender to tiredness and drift back to sleep.

The next time I awaken, the first light of dawn glows from the balcony. The chair next to my bed is empty. I assume Lorenzo has quite sensibly gone to get some rest. But then I hear movement from outside the room. Lorenzo enters carrying a tray. When he sees I am awake, he falters for a split second, his eyes widening momentarily before he gains control and strolls over.

"Mrs Bellacci made a special chicken pastina soup for you. Are you hungry?"

I realise I am and nod. He places the tray down and lifts a large mug, beginning to feed me from a spoon. I stop him with a hand on his wrist.

"You don't need to do that, Enzo. I can feed—"

"No, I want to do this. And while you eat, I will tell you what has happened."

By now, I know better than to argue. The first sip of soup brings my tastebuds to life, probably because I have eaten nothing for a while but also because I sense Mrs Bellacci's hand is in the creation.

Lorenzo tells me they had never been a part of the security detail in Rome. All this time, he and Mrs Bellacci had been told to remain at the safe house in Balchraggan in Scotland and wait for instructions. Romano, he tells me, will explain more when he arrives later in the morning. Mrs Bellacci believes that somebody very high-ranking insisted Romano's team be there but remained in hiding in case I needed help. Which meant that something big was about to

go down. When Romano eventually called to brief them, he explained Coleman's involvement. Mrs Bellacci had not been impressed. But they'd had to mobilise and ready themselves quickly because, the night before I arrived at Hartfield, they'd been given a lift in an RAF Wildcat helicopter and dropped directly into the grounds. They had already been secreted away in their water tower vantage point when the convoy of cars carrying Uncle arrived.

"The last thing I remember is you climbing the tower and giving Mrs Bellacci the rocket launcher. Did she manage to—"

"You doubt Mrs Bellacci's aim?"

I smirk, and he mirrors my amusement before his smile transforms into a puzzled frown.

"But the drone appeared to be malfunctioning anyway. It was, I believe, a prototype, and maybe had not been fully tested. I don't know. We could see the pilot struggling with the controls, ascending far too quickly. And then, as Mrs Bellacci began to take aim, they stopped moving and sat hovering in the same spot. A sitting duck, I think you call it. She couldn't miss. Everything exploded into flames. Luck was with us that day."

The news is a relief. Uncle and his samples are gone. Nobody can pursue his mad dream. Luck is not something to which I assign much faith, and I wonder if someone on board the craft had not been as loyal to the old man as he may have believed.

"How long have I been here?"

"Two days. It's Saturday morning already."

"What time?"

"It's around six. The others will be awake soon and will want to see you."

"Do we have time to—?" I begin to ask.

"Gabriel, I want to so badly. But Romano said you have to rest. Your heart might have been damaged by the poison and I have been warned that elevating your blood pressure might hurt you. Would you not rather be in full health so we can do everything without worry?"

This is a new side of Lorenzo, more cautious and less cavalier. I notice lines of worry beneath his eyes, and it dawns on me that he has been afraid for me.

"Of course. Yes."

"Besides, I can hear voices downstairs."

"Romano and Bellacci?" I ask.

"And Mr Washington, I think. Maybe your friends from London."

"Friends?"

"Josh, is it?"

I stare at him for a few seconds letting the news sink in.

"Josh is here?"

"Doctor Romano says this Josh—I have not met him yet—has been told what happened and knows that you've been injured. Romano flew him out late last night with his friend. He thought you might appreciate having them around. I am sure I can hear their English voices downstairs."

"But before you see them," comes a familiar voice from the doorway. "I would like to speak to you."

Strolling into the room. Romano is as fresh and dapper as ever and appears genuinely happy to see me. He comes over to the side of the bed and scrutinises each medical display before addressing me.

"Would you like me to leave?" asks Lorenzo.

"No, Lorenzo. It's fine. You know most of what I have to tell," says Romano before pulling a chair up to the side of

the bed. "As for you, Janis. Quick thinking telling Coleman to check your wrists. I found traces of a toxin compound similar to aconitine. When I got to you, you had acute arrhythmia and were not far from going into cardiac arrest. I managed to stabilise you pretty quickly, but you'd lost a lot of blood. How are you feeling now?"

"Tired. I'm having trouble keeping my eyes open."

"To be expected. And I have you on some heavy medication. But you are already recovering far quicker than anybody I've known. Do you feel up to me giving you a debrief?"

"Yes, please. I would like that."

"Good. First of all, I'm sorry I couldn't have the rest of your team alongside you all the way, Janis—"

"Gabriel. I'm sticking with Gabriel from now on."

Romano smiles and nods.

"As you wish. The reason I couldn't provide more direct support is because your situation was—how shall I put it—both unique and sensitive. Friendly forces were involved and, for a time anyway, I could not be seen to be directly aiding you. Which is why we helped from the shadows. But at the end there, we were all working together, to draw one of the key institute founders out from hiding without him suspecting anything. You became the perfect bait, I'm afraid, and for that I apologise."

"Lorenzo says they were shot down—"

"Mrs Bellacci does not miss, although rocket launchers are not her forte. Nobody survived. And yes, before you ask, we checked the wreckage. Everyone and everything was destroyed including the samples Mr Washington told us about."

"How did he find out I was still alive?"

"Leblanc senior. He set the whole thing up for us. They were still in contact infrequently. After the attempt on her life that you thwarted, Sylvie called him and said you might go to see him in Carlisle, and begged him to help. She also introduced Coleman to me after that episode at the hospital. Wanted him to be there to assist you. And honestly, he turned out to be the perfect aide, although he wasn't entirely happy about any of it, especially using Edward Callico as a bargaining chip. But the tradeoff, the Callico sister having her entitled brother killed to get her hands on the family inheritance and property, sat well with M2. And no, before you ask, he did not manage to keep his end of the bargain. Edward Callico is alive and well."

"I'm confused about what Coleman told me."

"He'll be up soon. I'll let him explain. But I would be inclined to discard anything he said in front of M2. The important thing is that you are alive."

"Is that really the end? He told me he'd found someone to take on his work. Someone involved in illicit cloning."

"There will always be rogue governments interested in this kind of research. And there will always be friendly agencies like ours ready to shut them down. In the meantime, here is what I have discovered about the Hartfield setup. Two retired ministers created and headed up the Knight's Watch, one of them very senior. We can put names to them now, not that you need them. The sole surviving founder, Professor Srebro, known as M2, was supposed to be living out his final days in a nursing home in Zurich, suffering from pancreatic cancer."

"At least we helped put him out of his pain," I say, but I can tell from the flash of Lorenzo's eyes that he does not find my remark amusing.

"What happened to the other one?" asks Lorenzo.

"Took his own life. A year after the institute was shut down. Apart from the fact that he would have been in his mid-nineties by now, we have solid proof of his death. But if you want to pursue this—"

"No," I say firmly. "Enough. I know there is an appetite by some to dig up and seek recompense for the sins of the past, but I agree with what Sylvie Leblanc said in her note. I need to move forward."

"He deserves to have a normal life," says Lorenzo.

"His life will never be normal, Lorenzo. But maybe together we can work something out."

"What's your opinion, Doctor Romano?" I ask. "Do you think I should stand up and bring this to the attention of the public? To make sure nothing like this ever happens again?"

"That much, you need not worry about," says Romano smiling. "The press is about to hear the very credible testimony of two institute instructors now living in South America, who have come forward despite being sworn to secrecy. Their stories are extremely compelling. Both have testified that all Knights were slain. One even has video evidence of bodies being brought out from the gymnasium. But I do have a question for you, Gabriel, if I may?"

Strange, it's unlike Romano to ask permission to ask me questions.

"Go ahead."

"I have been told by my superiors that I need to ask this without influencing you in any way. What you have been through is unspeakable. You have your own life to live now, and I imagine you feel as though you have a lot of catching up to do. My question is whether you would consider being an official part of our team—"

Despite my tiredness, I sit up at that remark.

"Yes! Of course. I already am a part of the team."

"This would be your choice, not an order. And you know there will be dangerous situations—?"

"Doctor Romano, why are you explaining? You know my answer. I consider you all my family. And I am never more alive than when we're working together."

Romano's smile seems to combine happiness with relief. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone, and swipes his thumb across the display. Somebody else has been listening in.

"Good. In which case, we need to get you back on your feet. Lorenzo has convinced me that you should have at least a month to recuperate. And I believe he already has plans to help you do so. I will wait until I have all members of my team in place before I set your next assignment."

Lorenzo is serious, nodding repeatedly, but he cannot disguise the joy in his eyes.

"Lorenzo is a good friend."

"And a tough negotiator," says Romano. "I would never normally agree to a whole month. You should remember that in case—"

"Can you never stay out of trouble?" comes a familiar voice across the room. A grinning Josh strides into my bedroom, trailed by Nishan, indifferent to our private conversation. Mrs Bellacci stands behind them in the doorway, having escorted them to my room. "And tell me. Is it my lot in life to be constantly bailing you out? If so, we need to seriously review this friendship agreement."

"How are you, Josh?" I ask, grinning.

"Darn sight better than you, by the looks of things."

He is about to launch himself onto the bed and throw

his arms around me when Lorenzo lunges from his seat and holds him back.

"Whoah, buddy," says Josh. "Hands off. I'm not the enemy. What's with this guy, Gabe?"

"He can be a little overprotective," I say. "Lorenzo, it's okay. This is Josh, my old friend."

"You must be careful with him," says Lorenzo, pushing him away. "He is still recuperating."

"Quite right," says Romano. By now, Lorenzo has released Josh, who stands back with his hands in the air. Nishan chuckles and approaches Josh, placing an arm around his shoulder.

"Sorry, everyone. We haven't seen or heard from Gabe in a while. My boyfriend can be a little over-exuberant sometimes."

I raise a hand towards Lorenzo for Josh's benefit.

"Pot, meet kettle."

Nishan laughs, and Josh thumps him on the arm. Lorenzo moves out of the way and allows them to sit at my bedside while Mrs Bellacci comes over, fusses with my pillow and smooths creases from the bedsheet before checking my temperature with a palm to my forehead like a worried mother.

"You eat the soup? Better than medicine."

"I've missed your cooking. Mrs B."

"Yes, well. You get better now. Okay? We have a lot of work to do."

After a brief final inspection, she steps away from the bed. She appears almost embarrassed at her display of affection, but I notice Lorenzo grinning in the background. Josh quickly fills the silence, telling me about him and Nishan. His voice is calming when he tells me about their regular lives and everyday problems. When he breaks the news that

Callico House has been sold to a property developer, I look at Romano, who nods his endorsement. That much of Coleman's story was true. Maybe he is a part of the sale and, if so, is set on turning the draughty place into somewhere more useable. As though on cue, Coleman strolls into the room to join the crowd and the conversation. He confirms what Josh said and explains what Romano told me about how he got involved.

"I felt supremely uncomfortable, but if you think Sylvie and Romano alone are persuasive, together they are impossible to refuse. You know I truly have never had—"

"Fired a gun before. I know. Maybe Mrs Bellacci could give you a few lessons while you're here."

"Yeah, I don't think so. I'll stick to what I'm good at, thanks."

"Coleman, is Alice complicit in any of this?"

"No. Absolutely not. And Albert really did arrange the raid on this place to test you. Although, as I say, I believe he planned on running the idea past Romano at some point. He also thought he would be here to call a stop to them, in case anything went wrong. You know, when you're up to it, I'd appreciate hearing more about those telephone calls you overheard Edward Callico making."

"I have no evidence and I would never be able to testify."

"Doesn't matter. I have no intention of taking the information to the authorities. The knowledge alone gives me enough leverage."

"Fine, maybe later tonight. What happens now?" I ask, mainly to Romano.

"Breakfast?" suggests Josh, jumping up and clapping his hands together. "I'm starving."

"That, young man, is an excellent idea," says Romano.

"And we should let Gabriel rest. Hopefully he will feel strong enough to join us tonight for dinner on the terrace."

"I would like that," I say, and although I genuinely do feel tired, I am determined to sit at the table among my friends by the evening.

I can feel my eyelids getting heavy as I watch figures trickle out of the room. Romano stands at the doorway, readying to usher them through. Lorenzo appears intent on remaining behind, but Romano waves him over before anyone, a silent communication passing between them that has Lorenzo obeying. Coleman and Mrs Bellacci follow him, and as Josh and Nishan draw level, Romano stops them to have words I cannot hear. But I know Josh's distinctive laugh, and when his and Romano's voices fade, I notice Nishan heading back into the bedroom.

"I won't keep you long. Romano thought that now you're Gabriel again, you might like your old smartphone back," Nishan says, pulling the device from his pocket with a charger.

"I thought someone had stolen it."

"They had. Petty thieves, turns out. Let's just say we managed to steal the device back. And lucky for you, this tech wizard had already made a full backup. Did you know that when you save notes on your tablet, they replicate onto your smartphone? Things like reminders, shopping lists...."

Nishan smiles as he hands over the items.

"...pigpen cyphers."

As I take the phone, my eyes flash to his.

"That was you? The one who sent the messages?"

Nishan turns to check the doorway before lowering his voice.

"With you all the way, Gabe. And can I suggest you

retire that bloody tattoo now. Leblanc had mine vanish the moment we escaped Hartfield's concentration camp."

My tiredness evaporates as the truth sinks in.

"Seven?"

"I am. I was. Funny, you seemed familiar when Josh introduced you. But then I've met people in life who have resonated in that way—although not as strongly—so I initially dismissed the notion. Put the experience down to the fact you knew Josh. You know, the way we tend to gravitate towards the same friends as our partners. Besides, I knew beyond any doubt that I was the sole surviving Knight, the first one taken down and left for dead among the carnage in the gym. And then you took that stack of Euros from Josh, the cash Albert left you, and I got a good look at the tattoo on your wrist. In that moment, I knew. Detail is my thing. I said nothing, because you were escaping to a new life and had no memory of your old. I figured the less you knew the better. What I wouldn't give to have no memory of that miserable, cold-hearted childhood."

I have the photo of the eight Knights together somewhere in my bag, a truly multicultural mix. I hadn't recognised Nishan—we were all so young then.

"But I'd be fucked if I wasn't going to do everything in my power to assist you," he continues. "Which meant keeping a watchful eye on you. As I say, detail combined with technology has always been my forte, even back then. That's how I'm hardwired. Needless to say, I was able to keep track of you via the phone I gave you, which—in case you were in any doubt—was not as dumb as I led you to believe."

Strangely, I felt someone else was with me, looking out

for me, the kind of thing Albert would have done. For a time, I actually believed the person might have been Albert.

"If I'm going to be honest, Gabe, when Josh and I phoned you in Tuscany, when you told us all about the villa discovery, your voice had changed in a subtle way. You sounded both relaxed and excited. Alive. And I was not about to ruin that. Everything happening to you seemed to be tied to the Callico family, and I knew I could handle any one of those amateurs, if and when the time came. So I chose to carry on watching from the shadows."

Nishan chuckles before continuing.

"That camera system in Eagle House is a work of art, isn't it? Almost unhackable. Almost. But that night of the raid on the villa. Fuck. Nobody could have seen that coming. My phone flashed with the system alarm when a couple of intruders appeared on your back lawn, but then my access dropped and I was booted out. Whoever put the system together must have built in a failsafe. I was blind and had no idea what the fuck had happened to you. I spent the next week calling in favours. But then Alice came to see Josh and told him she had spoken to you, said you were fine, sipping cocktails on the back lawn. A day after the raid. Didn't add up. By then, a couple of my old and trusted contacts had put me in touch with Romano. I cannot tell you how relieved I was when I found you were alive and well, and that Gabriel had been retired—in name, at least."

"Does Josh know any of this?"

"Some. Not much. You know how spirited he gets. If I'd told him someone had attempted to kill you, I think he might gone straight to Callico House and tried to torch the place, before flying here."

"I meant, does he know about you?"

"No," says Nishan decisively. "Romano does, but not

Josh. And I would rather keep things that way. I'm Nishan now, not *seven*, not *soldier*, not an automaton to be ordered around and switched off when no longer of use. I love Josh, but some things he is better off not knowing. I will always sleep with one eye open—hence the locks on our garden flat—but I will strive every day to give Josh a normal life. That much we both deserve."

"You do."

"But you getting rid of the old man has lifted a weight. We were programmed to obey that monster's commands when he used a certain phrase on each of us. That's how he triggered us to kill each other. Good job your Italian friends blew him out of the sky. All I could do was take over the computerised controls and hope dropping them from a great height would do the trick."

"You took control of the drone?"

"The drone's computerised navigation. Same with Mr Washington's car. I could have taken over the controls anytime, but I only needed access to his phone messaging system and road cam. I had feeds from Sylvie Leblanc's hospital room CCTV and her uncle's—my reluctant saviour's—security system. I told you I've been keeping a watchful eye on you. Everything these days has an element of computerisation. And you remember the London property you rented near the hospital?"

"That was yours?"

"Not mine, but my dad's. My adoptive dad. But I manage the property for him. The girl in the office was on the phone to me that day you rented the place."

"You charged me two grand for that hole?"

Nishan smirks. "If I'd charged less or said let him have it for free, you'd have smelled a rat."

This is true.

"As it happens, agreeing to hand keys over immediately, via a phone call, is unusual enough. But I knew you were in dire need. The night you set off the fire alarms, I was outside the hospital, observing Leblanc's room feed from my phone from the same bus shelter as Lorenzo. Good diversion, by the way. When Lorenzo rushed to get his motorbike, I had an idea what he had in mind, so I trailed the guy who was following you on foot. Just in case. Fortunately, neither of you needed my help taking them down. He's pretty handy with a pistol, isn't he, your man?"

"Among other things."

"I took care of the mess left behind. And alerted Romano to the number plate of the one that got away. You know, they picked the perfect spot to jump you. A total blindspot. Not a single CCTV along that parade of shops. Unheard of in this day and age, which made me think those guys knew what they were doing. It also meant the clean-up was pretty seamless. Look, I'd better go before Josh comes looking for me. But I just wanted to say I'm always here if you ever need to talk. And I have a feeling that Romano, seeing what I'm capable of, might call on me again."

"Trust me, he has a tendency to do that."

"You know, Leblanc told me my problem solving skills, firearm handling and technical savvy made up for my lesser fighting skills. Otherwise there might have only been seven Knights."

"More than made up, I would say. Thank you for everything, Nishan."

"We're brothers, Gabe. That's what we do. We look out for each other."

As the afternoon wears on, I am set on joining everyone for dinner. After getting the go-ahead from Romano, Lorenzo helps me to shower and dress. November weather

in Tuscany often drops to below ten degrees, and with the threat of rain, Mrs Bellacci decides to serve dinner in the villa dining room overlooking the pool. If I didn't know her better, I would think she had been planning the meal for weeks. The main dish, perfect for the cool weather, is a huge pot of steaming Tuscan fisherman's stew, something she announces as *cacciucco*. With a glass of wine in hand, Josh tells her the Italian word sounds like a sneeze. True to form, Mrs Bellacci ignores him. Before anyone else eats, she serves me a small bowl only and makes a point of shelling any mussels and peeling the shrimp. Josh, Nishan and Lorenzo look on, amused—they seem to have become friends since the morning meeting—but I shrug. The taste of pure heaven is more than worth the mollycoddling.

Towards the end of the meal, Romano excuses himself from the table and, after a gentle nod to Lorenzo, calls me away to help him. Intrigued, I follow him to the kitchen, where Mrs Bellacci stands with her back to the sink, overseeing a guest. Sitting at the kitchen table is a young boy, a teenager. His pale skin contrasts starkly with the explosion of raven hair. The plain white tee shirt he has on is almost the same shade as his skin and swamps him.

"This is Petey," says Romano. "While I was flying in with help, Mrs Bellacci did a quick search of the compound and found him climbing out from one of the underground cells."

The young boy has frozen in caution at the attention, his dark eyes flitting nervously from face to face. He seems alert and alive enough but is seriously malnourished and emaciated, as though a strong wind could blow him off his seat.

"A Knight?" I ask.

"One of the retired Pawns, we believe. He is a bit of a

mystery, but we think he became the subject of genetic research. Leblanc told us that most failed progeny were terminated but one or two were kept alive and used for experiments."

"The list of atrocities just keeps getting longer," I hear myself say. "And he was imprisoned there?"

"His home was there, as was yours. He would have been around two or three when everyone else left or was eliminated. Sixteen years ago. He managed to hide and has been doing so ever since."

"How the hell did he manage to survive all this time?"

"A good question, but not the right one. You were all taught to be resourceful, were you not? The institute was not fully dismantled until around five years after its closure. He would have survived on whatever he could find. And after that, plants, herbs, root vegetables, fish, the occasional rabbit. And you have fresh water in abundance in the highlands. Look, let's go down to the safe room. There's something important I need you to see, which may explain better why I think he would make a good addition to your team."

"Petey," says Mrs Bellacci, in Italian. "Finish up your food—eat everything—and then come straight down and find us, okay? I have a treat for you."

Although he does not smile, the boy's gaze softens when he listens to Mrs Bellacci. He nods before ignoring us and tucking into his soup bowl.

I remember the stairs leading down to the strongroom when Mrs Bellacci was suspicious of me but still furnished me with a weapon. We stop outside as she unlocks the door with a passcode and pushes the heavy portal inwards.

"He created his own name?" I ask as I enter behind Romano.

"No, I think Petey's a reference to his label. Probably

P33, or something similar. At that young age, I imagine it's about all he could articulate."

While I am standing in the vault, staring at the wall of security feeds, Romano switches on the overhead neon lighting while Mrs Bellacci pushes buttons on the wall keypad. Above the fizzle of lights, I hear clamps on the security door locking into place.

"Now we wait," says Romano.

"Wait for what?" I ask, noticing him and Mrs Bellacci staring at the door.

We do not have to wait long. Mrs Bellacci points to a spot in the middle of the portal where the gunmetal grey becomes lighter, almost blanching. Taking on a liquid quality, the rough surface begins to morph into the smooth contours of a humanoid shape—like the framed pin art toy Albert had on his desk—which bulges away from the door. Soundlessly, a figure steps out and stands before us, the features of Petey reconstituting before our eyes.

I stand watching the spectacle, unable to speak. Petey does not seem fazed and looks for approval from Mrs Bellacci. When I turn to her, she smiles and nods before reaching into her apron pocket to pluck out a small apricot.

"What do you think, Gabriel?" asks Romano. "A good addition to the team?"

"What just happened?"

"I believe this is how he managed to avoid detection for so many years. We still don't know how he does it, but he can temporarily dismantle the molecular structure of his body and pass through solid objects. I fear that if we officially turn him over to the authorities for testing and examination, we may lose his unique skill forever. Imagine having someone like him alongside us, where no locked door is ever an obstacle."

"Are there more like him?"

"That much, we don't know. Maybe. But he is young and is going to need a mentor, Gabriel. Are you up for the challenge?"

🐉

Six months have passed since the encounter with my dark past in Scotland. I remember everything now, much of the memories clawing back to me in nightmares. But Lorenzo is there to hold me and comfort me when that happens. I also have my new brother in adversity, Nishan, at the end of the phone to confirm details and fill in any blanks.

After seeing old friends in Eagle House, I was on my feet in a matter of days and back to total health within a week. Romano was both pleased and mystified but honoured the month recuperation time he had offered. Lorenzo took me on winter camping trips on his bike all along the west coast of Italy and down to Sicily. We also took two trips to London. Our first assignment did not happen until almost three months later, a simple security detail posting. Until then, I spent time training hard, improving my spoken and written Italian, and getting my skills and fitness back to their full potential. And, of course, taking Petey under my wing.

He regards Lorenzo and me as older brothers. His unique skill is astonishing, but as we have learned, he is not—as Josh would label it—a one-trick pony. His eyes light up when he does something to impress us, to earn our praise, which happens often. I have also noticed him filling out nicely and gaining muscle. Even when not using his particular skill, he is agile and intelligent. Scaling walls is still Lorenzo's domain, but I am now a poor third behind Petey.

Mrs Bellacci has taken to calling him *la fusione*, which I think means melting.

We look forward to having him with us on our first important assignment.

As for London, Callico House was sold, but its future use has yet to be determined. Coleman and Victoria are finally divorced. He has been spending time with Sylvie Leblanc. I met up with Alice for an overindulgent midweek brunch in the City. She and Edward are still going strong, she tells me, and she is pleased to inform me that her husband has finally seen the light, has brought her in as an official board member and is taking her advice more seriously. I wonder if Coleman might have had a hand in that. And how long the change in Edward will last is anybody's guess.

During that trip, Lorenzo accompanied me on a visit to Albert's grave. Not knowing the protocol, I left a couple of items at the foot of the headstone, a small posy of peonies, his favourite flowers, and an old book of codes and cyphers I bought from a bookstore along the Embankment. I hope Albert has finally found his peace.

Josh is back to his everyday life. I regularly hear from him and Nishan. The last message I got from our group chat was two weeks ago when they were sunning themselves in Sri Lanka. Josh texted with a photo of them both looking relaxed on a beach, together with a rambling message ending with the word:

(Bet You) Wish You Were Here.

Josh ribbed Nishan for being lazy when he replied with a simple line about their experience.

In Mirissa, relaxing in glorious heat, taking hikes everywhere, real enjoyment.

But we both know better. The hidden message using

the simplest of codes might have gone over Josh's head but not mine.

I am eager to get onto our next substantial assignment. The new team, including remote members, consists of Mrs B, Lorenzo, Petey, Nishan, Romano and myself. Romano refers to us as his *Squadra di Scacchi*, which, Lorenzo reminds me, means chess team.

And we're sitting here waiting for our next move.

****THE END****