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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



THE

Butler

FOR EVERY SECRET KEPT,
A PRICE MUST BE PAID.

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Butler

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Podium

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Prologue

In the hills above Cannes, in the heart of the French Riviera, the sun readies itself to rise. Ahead of its arrival, an orange glow rolls across the Provençal tiles like a red carpet preparing for the main event. Each house is a kilometer or more from its neighbor, and each has been built to the precise specifications of its exacting owner. Here, a stark white box; there, a honey-stone villa. An L-shape next to a U-shape next to a quartet of cottages linked by glass passages. The residences here have only two things in common: They all overlook Cannes's glittering bay, and they all are worth tens of millions of euros.

Save for their up lit entranceways and the blinking lights of state-of-the-art intruder alarms, the villas sit in darkness. A few hours ago, the film festival after-parties were in full swing; women in teetering heels and scraps of satin, men with dickey bows loose around their necks. The congratulatory bonhomie of earlier in the night

giving way to snide gossip and bad decisions fueled by envy and illicit substances.

But now even that has come to an end. The last of the parties has finally finished, and it is not yet time for the domestic staff to emerge, plastering smiles on their faces as they mix breakfast Bloody Marys for hungover guests. In a few hours, the hillside will throb with music once more, the strains of laughter drifting from villa to villa, but for now, all is quiet.

It is into this limbo that the sun is now emerging, bringing with it a heat that will by lunchtime send the villas' inhabitants in search of shade and cool, marbled floors. As it rises, the orange glow becomes more vivid until the roofs are aflame, the sky a blaze of color.

At Villa Sérénité, the morning light hits the pool—an azure oval lined with yellow-striped steamer chairs—and the water sparkles with silver. But right in the center, little more than a dark shadow against the sharp white tiles, lies a body, waiting for the dawn.

Waiting to be discovered.

One

As the taxi wound its way up the steep hillside, Baxter opened his window. The heat at the airport had been sticky and close, but up in La Californie, the rarified neighborhood to the east of Cannes, the air was fresh and breezy. All was quiet—only the chirp of cicadas and the swish of tires on the dusty track as they made their way toward Villa Sérénité.

On the seat beside Baxter was the chestnut-brown box that rarely left his side. He had bought it with the wages from his first position, over twenty-five years ago in London. The box was leather-bound (a little cracked with age, but one could say the same about Baxter) with a brass handle. Clasps top and bottom secured two doors, which when placed upright on a table would swing open to transform the box into a miniature cupboard. Therein lay Baxter's essentials. Painkillers. A cigar cutter and lighter. Small bills in multiple currencies. Shoe polish

and brushes. Glass cloths. A sewing kit. Shoelaces and collar stiffeners. Baxter's toolkit had changed little over the course of his career, although the power bank and charging cables were a comparatively new addition. For decades the leather box had accompanied him around the world, ensuring he could deliver the flawless butler service for which he was so in demand.

"*Et voilà,*" the taxi driver said as they rounded the final bend into the driveway.

Villa Sérénité was cut into the hillside, its roof almost level with the road. You would pass it without a second glance, Baxter thought, and that was the villa's secret, because as soon as you turned into the drive and swept past the curve of palm trees, it took your breath away.

One of the largest properties in the area, Villa Sérénité was traditional in style, with terra-cotta roofs punctuated by chimneys that had never seen smoke. On the second floor the long balcony sported fat white pillars and filigree railings the color of the sea. In order to take full advantage of the villa's far-reaching views, the living accommodation was on this upper floor. Beneath the balcony, arched windows framed glass doors, which slid effortlessly open from the bedrooms to the veranda. The property was encircled by a stone wall; a wrought iron gate offered a teasing glimpse of a glittering pool flanked by palm trees, drawing visitors up the path toward the main entrance to the villa.

* * *

Baxter's first clue that something was amiss was the upturned sun lounge by the pool. He righted it and smoothed the cushions, but then his attention was drawn to a window left open, white muslin curtains billowing in the breeze. Baxter felt a prickle of unease. He walked toward the house. As he drew nearer, he saw that the front door was open too. Shattered glass was spread across the marbled floor.

If Baxter were ever to be asked for a party trick (unlikely, given he rarely attended parties in any capacity other than work), he might consider reeling off the phone numbers for the emergency services in two dozen different countries. Wherever there were million-dollar properties, regrettably, there was crime.

The owner of the agency through which Baxter was employed, a Russian named Anya Kovács, had told him the caretakers—an Australian couple—would be preparing Villa Sérénité for his arrival. Had the house been broken into? The caretakers attacked?

Baxter dialed 112.

Just then, a sudden blast of music erupted from inside the villa. Baxter's tastes tended toward the classical, but even he recognized an Abba track when he heard one, and it seemed unlikely the intruders would be playing "Dancing Queen" while ransacking the place. He hung up.

“Hello?” Baxter stepped over the glass and followed the sound of the music. The house was in disarray. Damp towels lay abandoned on the floor, and dozens of dirty cups and glasses littered the surfaces. As he crossed the drawing room, something crunched beneath his tan brogue, and when he lifted his foot, he found a piece of buttered toast sticking to the sole.

The service kitchen was at the back of the house at ground level, swinging double doors separating the staff quarters from the main house. Baxter pushed open the doors with some trepidation, to be confronted with a scene which rendered him momentarily speechless.

The large oak kitchen table had been imported from Tuscany, so the house manual had said, and was very robust, which was just as well, as there were currently two people dancing on it. The woman was wearing satin shorts and a bikini top. The man was naked, and his appendage swung enthusiastically to the music.

Baxter walked briskly to the radio and snapped it off.

The couple stared at him, open-mouthed.

“Who the heck are you?” the man said.

“I could ask you the same question.” Baxter’s gaze traveled around the kitchen. It was strewn with food and dirty dishes, but was nevertheless more appropriate than the man’s nether regions, which were the eye-level alternative.

“We live here?” The woman’s voice had the same upturned inflection as her partner’s. The Australians,

Baxter realized. “I’m Elise, and this is Blake. We’re the caretakers.”

Blake jumped off the table before—much to Baxter’s relief—grabbing a towel and wrapping it around his waist. “Are you Baxter? We weren’t expecting you till Monday.”

“It *is* Monday,” Baxter said.

“Is it?” Blake looked at Elise and laughed. “Well, I’ll be blown.”

Baxter sighed. He took in the wine bottle on the counter—a 2017 Barolo that had no doubt come from the owner’s extensive cellar—and the dozen empties lined up by the back door. A book of matches was propped up against an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts and the soggy ends of hand-rolled joints. Baxter glanced at his watch and calculated how many hours he had before the arrival of this week’s guests. Then he made one of the many executive decisions he was empowered to make in his capacity as butler to the cash-rich but time-poor owners of the world’s finest residences. “Pack your belongings,” he said. “Your services are no longer required.”

Elise stared at him, dumbfounded. “But we’ve got nowhere to go!”

“You’ll be paid a week’s wages. You’ve got fifteen minutes to get off the property before I call the police.”

Blake and Elise Lawson wheel-spun their beat-up Renault Clio away from Villa Sérénité, leaving behind a trail of dust and expletives as they sped down the hill toward Cannes. Baxter watched them leave, then he walked back to the house. He was just contemplating a deep scratch in the beautiful walnut lacquer of a small side table when his phone rang.

“Is everything in order at the house?” Anya Kovács’s accent was hard to define. It was the timeless, placeless burr of boarding schools and international travel, of someone who lived everywhere and yet nowhere. It was, Baxter thought, a *rich* accent. “Alec Prescott is a longstanding client. He has high standards. You should deliver the very best Villa Sérénité has to offer.”

Baxter surveyed the chaos around him. A single sock dangled from the chandelier in the hall, and the glass balustrade around the showstopping spiral staircase was covered with sticky handprints. “Have no fear,” he said smoothly. “I have everything under control.” He stooped to pick up an abandoned apple core.

“Excellent. Ah, and Baxter?” There was a forced insouciance to Anya’s tone now, as though what she was about to say were of no importance at all, but the hairs on the back of Baxter’s neck prickled. “I need you to carry out some . . .” She paused, picking her words carefully, “*discreet inquiries* in relation to Mr. Prescott while he is at Villa Sérénité.”

Baxter contemplated the rotting apple dangling from the stem he was holding between thumb and forefinger. He had not long ago joined Ms. Kovács's agency; was this a test? No butler worth his salt would agree to spy on a client. He cleared his throat. "Shall I ask Mr. Prescott to call you when he arrives?"

"What part of 'discreet' do you not understand?" Anya's words were clipped now, sliced short by impatience. "Perhaps you would prefer me to release you from the assignment altogether? There are plenty of butlers on my books available at short notice who would be happy to—"

"Discreet," Baxter said hastily. "I understand."

Anya continued as though he hadn't spoken. "I did, after all, take you on despite the lack of references from your previous position. A position I'm led to believe you left in rather a hurry . . ."

Baxter's pulse picked up as he recalled the way he had thrown his belongings into the back of his car before sunrise. His final glance in the rearview mirror at the honey-stone Cotswolds estate of Lord and Lady Ashcombe. Anya's subtext was clear: She'd scratched Baxter's back, and now he was expected to scratch hers. His breath caught the sour, fermented smell of the apple core, making his stomach roil. "Not a problem," he said, his default response to so many clients over the years. "Consider it done."

I hope you enjoyed meeting Baxter and Red as much as I loved writing them. If you have ideas for what dastardly deeds they might face in Santorini, or suggestions for stunning (and murderous!) locations they might find themselves in after that, I'd love to hear your ideas.

You'll find me (and thousands of other like-minded readers) in my Facebook group, **Get Booked with Clare Mackintosh**, or sign up to my mailing list at claremackintosh.com to stay in touch by email.

Happy reading!

Clare Mackintosh