

# THE SARLAT QUARTET



Stephen William ROWE

## Biography:

Doctor Stephen William ROWE is a retired industrial research scientist. He is a consultant specialising in the physics of ultra-high voltage electrical arcs and electrical insulation up to several million volts.

He is a Fellow of the English IET and the French SEE and author and co-author of about a hundred scientific and conference papers.

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All his novels and compositions can be found on his website.

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This story is a work of fiction.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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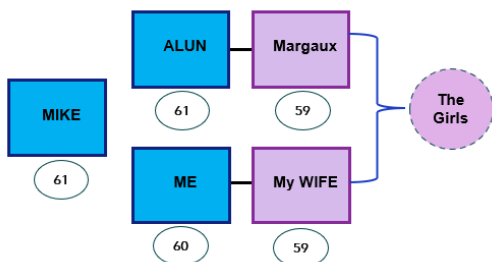
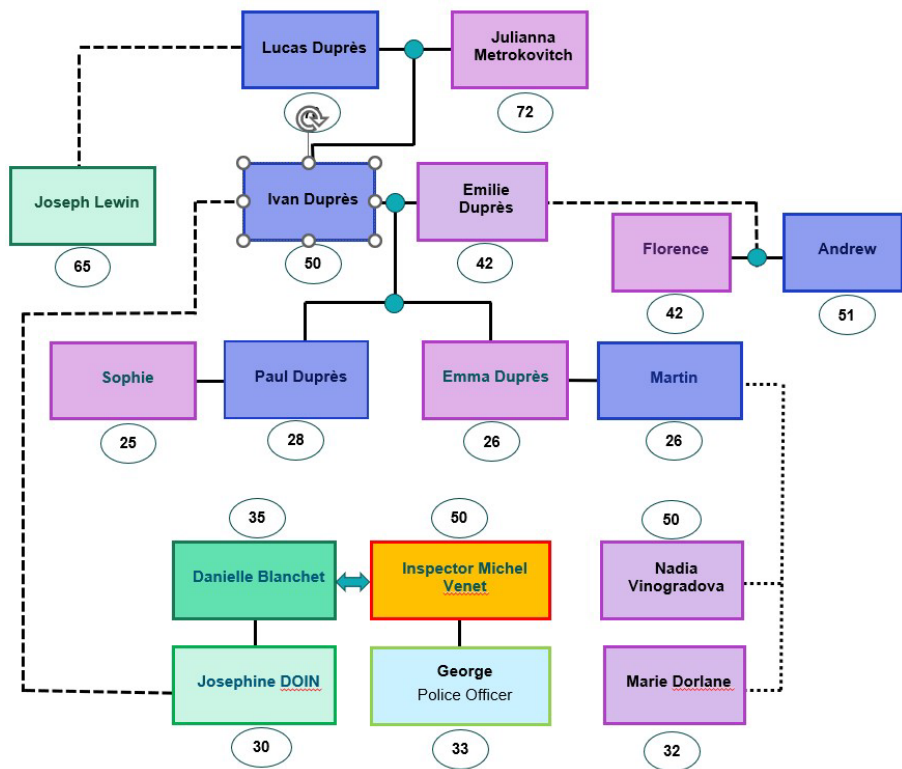
### The Stone Scenario

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## CHAPTER 1

**M**ike nodded to himself as he handed me the binoculars, 'I thought so. A body.'  
'You didn't think it, Mike,' I replied. 'You said it.'  
'I thought it too,' he grumbled.

I took the glasses and swept the cliff face. 'Ah! Yes,' I agreed. 'A woman's body. A bit on the naked side, too.'

Alun made a grab at the binoculars, 'Gimme.' He fiddled with the eyepiece a bit, then whistled. 'Oh, yes! No doubt about that. A woman, all right!'

'Agreed,' I nodded. 'The lack of clothing considerably simplifies the identification process.'

'Was,' said Mike.

'Was, what?' I frowned.

'Was a woman, now a lifeless corpse.'

'Crikey, Mike,' groaned Alun. 'Putting it like that takes all the pleasure out of the experience.'

'Lifeless corpses don't get much pleasure out of being lifeless,' said Mike.

'I was talking of my pleasure, you twit. The pleasure of goggling at her.'

'It,' said Mike.

The three of us were standing on the grassy lip of a cliff at the point where a noisy torrent rushed over it.

A hundred metres below us, about a third of the way down, the water thundered into the bowl it had hollowed out of a rocky ledge during the past million years.

The woman's body was floating in that bowl, pushed near the outer edge by the ponding waters.

Mike snatched the binoculars back, 'I wonder how long it's been there.'

'She,' I corrected.

'It,' protested Mike. 'A corpse doesn't have a sex.'

'Well,' I replied. 'This one certainly seems to.'

Alun held onto the massive boulder on which we had been sitting, leant out over the cliff edge and sniffed, 'Hasn't been there all that long. The wind is in this direction.'

'I don't agree,' frowned Mike. 'Look, the poor thing has already swollen up.'

'Swollen up!?' I frowned.

'Yes. She must have been dead quite some time, or decomposition gasses wouldn't have caused that... puffiness.'

Alun and I pulled a face, 'Lovely, Mike,' I said. 'Thanks. However, I might point out that you just call her a "thing" then a "she". So, which is it to be?'

Mike Shrugged and shook his head impatiently.

It might be helpful to the reader to point out that Mike is a bachelor of long-standing, which explains certain things.

I looked at Alun, and he shook his head sadly. 'Women are often that shape Mike,' he said. 'That's not swelling or puffiness. That's... Well, they're often that shape.'

'Not all of them, of course,' I added. 'Some are less... How can I put it...?'

'Swollen?' suggested Mike.

'That's not swollen, Mike,' sighed Alun.

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'Bloated then?'

'No, you idiot. Not bloated either,' sighed Alun.

'Is your wife puffy like that then?' asked Mike, turning to me.

I started and frowned as I involuntarily reflected on this point. Then I shook myself. 'You don't honestly imagine I'm going to tell you, Mike, do you?'

'Have it your own way. And Margaux? Your wife then, Alun?'

'I know Margaux's my wife, Mike. But thanks for reminding me.'

'Neither of us is going to give you any intimate details like that, Mike,' I said.

'Oh, come on! I won't let on.'

Alun and I sighed a mutual sigh.

'Mike,' I said. 'You may not want to, but you *always* do. You inevitably add one clever comment too many. Then Margaux will pounce, and that's that.'

Alun nodded, 'And then we get it in the ear, good and proper...'

'Oh, all right. If you have no confidence in an old friend.'

'We don't,' I sighed.

Alun nodded vigorously, 'agreed,' he said. 'One hundred per cent.'

'All right, all right,' sighed Mike. 'Let's go and see then.'

'And have a closer look?' suggested Alun.

'At the corpse,' I added.

Alun pulled a face.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'Hell! I don't know about you two, but it makes me feel a bit wobbly in the leg region.'

We nodded. Regardless of all our clowning, we were nonetheless shaken by the discovery.

Now, I'd best mention a few essential details for those who have not followed our earlier adventures. First, we talk



of our wives as "The Girls" when they are together. This saves time and gets the message across just as well.

Secondly, when the three of us are reunited, we aim at having fun. The Girls say that we revert to infancy both in behaviour and intelligence. They also declare that when together, we are more dangerous than a mega-ton of CO<sub>2</sub> is for the environment.

We naturally rebel against such unmerited insults. It's true that we might sometimes have a slight tendency to gloss over rules, regulations, and accepted practices. However, this is rarely more than is absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, stating that we revert to infancy is absolutely not justified. We simply reject a few old-fashioned conventions, that's all.

One final clarification will be helpful to the reader. The three of us took early retirement a couple of years ago.

Alun is a tall, thin man with kind eyes. He has long legs and an indecent quantity of dark hair for someone his age. Mike, on the other hand, is much shorter. He makes up for this by the broadness of his shoulders, his powerful arms and a certain roundness midway down. His round face is usually decorated by round wire-framed glasses, distracting attention from the shining expanse of his hairless head. Finally, I am situated between the two in appearance, well-tanned, blue-eyed and semi-bald. Furthermore, were I less modest, I would add that I am pretty good-looking too.

Alun took out and polished his reading glasses, unfolded the map and squinted at it. It showed our planned track as a thin dashed line zigzagging downwards across the cliff face below us and behind the waterfall. It then zigged and zagged down a hundred metres more into the forest far below. For the greater part, it remained prudently behind the sparse growth of stunted pine trees, which had

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somehow found space for their roots on the narrow ledges. At one point, however, those dashes gave way to a short, dotted passage.

Alun held out the map to me and, raising his eyebrows, pointed to this detail.

I nodded back but said nothing.

Over the years, this would by no means be the first “delicate” passage we had had to navigate. However, today, we remained silent. It’s true that usually, Mike was all for a bit of adventure and has sometimes even gotten us into hair-raising situations. However, he might resist if he knew of its existence in advance, which would spoil the day’s fun.

After all, we were particularly enthusiastic about having a closer look at that corpse... For purely scientific reasons, of course.

So, off we scrambled. Down the steep, boulder-strewn track, grasping overhanging branches or rocky outcrops wherever available.

About halfway down, we paused to take in the view of the forest spread out below us. Not a single building or road was visible as far as the eye could see.

‘Do you think the poor girl dived?’ asked Mike.

‘Dived!?’ exclaimed Alun.

‘Yes. Perhaps she tried to dive in but missed.’

‘I thought she was an “it”, Mike,’ I jeered.

‘During the diving phase, she would still have been a “she”,’ smiled Alun. ‘Becoming an “it”, shortly after her arrival at destination.’

‘Shut up, Alun,’ groaned Mike. ‘After all, we are talking about a dead woman.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Mike!’ I said. ‘Who on earth would want to dive off the side of a cliff?’

‘Alun used to jump off them,’ retorted Mike.

'I had a hang-glider attached to me, Mike,' smiled Alun.  
'That makes a big difference.'

'It takes all sorts,' I smiled back.

'But Mike,' Alun shook his head, 'Why dive off a cliff in the nude?'

'As the guy said,' smiled Mike. 'It takes all sorts...'

I sighed, 'There's one point of interest though.'

'Only one?' said Alun. 'I noticed several...'

'What on earth are you blithering about?' groaned Mike.

'Points of interest,' he smiled. 'I noticed several.' Having said this, he had the decency to shudder a little and pull a face. 'Not in good taste that,' he admitted. 'Sorry.'

'Well,' I continued ignoring this, 'When you dive in the nude...'

'I don't dive in the nude,' said Mike.

'Thank heaven for little mercies,' cried Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' said Mike.

'As I said,' I went on. 'If "one" dives in the nude, one usually takes one's clothes off before doing so.'

'Agreed,' said Alun, 'removing them on the way down takes a lot of training.'

'Shut up, Alun,' groaned Mike. 'So,' he nodded, 'she was naked before she dived. And...'

'Who said she dived, Mike?' said Alun.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'For heaven's sake, you two idiots,' he sighed. 'If she wasn't diving, what on earth would a woman be doing naked in a forest clearing in the middle of nowhere? Tell me that, smartarse.' He nodded and paused to allow this bit of wisdom to sink in.

Alun and I exchanged looks and rolled our eyes.

'Perhaps you ought to ask Margaux about that when we get back down, Mike,' I smiled. 'She might be able to shed some light on the subject.'

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'So,' I continued, 'If we might, for the moment, pass over the pre-flight period during which the clothes were discarded...'

'We can,' nodded Alun.

'Well... Where are those clothes now?'

Alun frowned. 'You're right. There were no signs of shed clothes up there in the clearing.'

'Or on the track leading to it,' I added.

Mike frowned. 'It's obvious. She made a bundle in a waterproof bag and took them with her.'

'Not an "It" yet, then?' I said.

'Shut up,' scowled Mike. 'She chunked them down to dress again at the bottom.'

Alun and I nodded at this second piece of wisdom. 'Great,' I said. 'Obvious. So, that solves everything nicely then.'

'And all will undoubtedly become clear soon,' said Alun, striding off again.

'Diving!' I laughed.

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike as he followed us along the narrow, rock-strewn track.

A little further on, Alun gave me a nod over his shoulder as we approached the tricky part. The trees stopped abruptly, and the path continued along a ledge beyond which the cliff fell two hundred metres to the dark forest below.

I returned the nod and a raised eyebrow, and we set off as if nothing out of the ordinary was occurring so as not to spook Mike. So, we strode along, leaning warily inwards towards the rock wall, our palms spread on the cold rock.

Even though we were careful to keep our eyes fixed on the track, that passage took the longest twenty seconds I have known for many years. I must have held my breath all the way.

Once across, we stopped to draw breath and wipe the beads of cold perspiration from our brows.

'Hell!' exclaimed Mike, coming up behind us. 'That was a bit on the scary side. It ought to have been marked on the map.'

'I didn't notice anything,' lied Alun.

'Let me have a look. You two are absolute dunces when it comes to map-reading,' sighed Mike.

'Well, we're across now, Mike, ' I smiled. 'You can have a look once we're back home.'

'Home!?' frowned Mike.

'Well, at the village then.'

I'll pause here to point out that Mike, Alun and I were old friends, having known each other for over forty years. We had all taken early retirement, each for a different reason...

So, banish from your minds the idea that you are reading a story about a group of young, tanned, muscular and athletic mountaineers. We may have been tanned, but sadly, we are no longer young and not all that athletic, either. Unfortunately, however, we frequently forget these basic facts in the heat of some enthusiasm or other. This forgetfulness has been known to get us into all sorts of adventures. Not surprisingly, "The Girls" usually replace the word "adventures" with "Trouble".

Although we were unaware of it, our wives, "The Girls", spotted post-retirement boredom looming on the horizon very early on. Consequently, they are now forever engineering new activities to keep that malady at bay. The present adventure belonged to the latest of these. Happily, though, this already seemed to be unfolding in a particularly interesting "Agatha-Christie"-like way.

We had all been invited to a gathering in an abandoned village. This was to celebrate the memory of the recently

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departed grandfather of my daughter's friend, Emma Duprès.

This village was in the Dordogne region of the south of France. However, more of that later.

Oh! As will soon become apparent, one of my and Alun's favourite pastimes was the invention of ridiculous stories with which to goad and annoy Mike. This, we found, spiced up life considerably.

'Come on,' called Mike, pushing past us. 'Let's have a look at that poor girl's body.'

'Corpse,' I corrected.

'Your intention is to goggle, Alun,' called Mike. 'Not to look.'

'Let's say, "observe" then,' I smiled. 'Come on, it's too hot here.'

From here on, the track widened and became relatively flat, following the contours of the cliff face.

After another hundred metres, we turned a corner and discovered the waterfall dashing down twenty metres further along.

We had to edge behind its thundering waters on slippery, slime-covered boulders. To avoid falling into the boiling waters, we grabbed onto whatever we could on the mossy cliff face. Mind you, by the time we got safely across, we were so drenched by the spray that we might just as well have waded straight through. This would have saved time, too.

Once on dry land again, we skirted the edge of the deep pool to where the lifeless body lay, buffeted by the incessant little waves.

'Do you know what I think, Mike?' said Alun.

Mike sighed, 'I don't know what you think, but I know for certain that you're about to invent some utter tripe, as usual.'

I laughed, 'Mike is getting to know you pretty well, Alun.'

'I'm getting to know you too,' groaned Mike.

'Well,' continued Alun, 'From close up, this,' he pointed, 'Looks much more like a "she" than an "it".'

'Exactly,' I nodded. 'Much more she-like than it-like, or even thing-like.'

'And,' added Alun. 'You can see that that's not swelling.'

'Or bloating,' I added.

'All right, all right,' sighed Mike, having kneeled and scrutinised the corps. 'Have it your own way.'

'Not all much evidence of decomposition bloating, seen from close to. What do you think?' he said, turning to me.

'Indeed, no.' I agreed. 'Unless, of course, all those decomposition gases have seeped out through some hidden gash.'

Mike sighed loudly. He had recently completed a Red Cross course to update his first-aid skills. However, he had not expected to need to use that knowledge under such unusual conditions.

He screwed up his eyes, quickly scanned her body for clues, and pulled a face.

Alun watched him, 'I agree, Mike,' he said. 'Her being dead removes much of the pleasure of goggling at naked women.'

'At least she won't feel embarrassed and blush.' I said, turning away to gaze back up at the cliff. 'That must have been one hell of a fall.'

'Or dive,' added Alun.

'Oh, for God's sake!' sighed Mike.

The body in question was that of a woman, probably in her late thirties. Her thick dark hair washed back and forth behind her head in the icy, crystal-clear water. This was not a slender, shapeless body but a full-curved one, much favoured by nineteenth-century painters and sculptors.

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The sort of body that makes men of our age draw in their breath and nod, remembering days of yore.

Mike bent down and carefully felt her pulse.

'Mike!' I cried. 'What on earth are you doing?'

'Best to be sure,' he replied.

'But the poor woman's head is under the water, Mike,' I said. 'She must have been dead for ages.'

'It', smiled Alun.

'Less than ages,' said Mike. 'Or she would have bloated and swollen.'

'It' would have bloated...' smiled Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' said Mike.

'We know,' I sighed. 'That you've just renewed your first-aid certification and so...'

Mike looked up, 'And so... this is what one has to do. Regardless of outward impressions.'

'You're not going to give her the old mouth-to-mouth trick!?' exclaimed Alun.

Mike pulled a face, frowned, raised his eyebrows, and rubbed his chin. 'Hmm! A bit of a dilemma that.'

'There's no dilemma at all, Mike,' said Alun. 'This one's as dead as a dodo.'

'I suspect Alun's not far from right there, Mike,' I said.

Mike leant closer and looked at the peaceful face floating slightly below the surface of the waves, 'No bubbling. No pulse. No eye movement.' he said half to himself.

'No life,' I agreed. 'Not a bubble on the horizon.'

'Dead then!' nodded Mike.

'That's it,' smiled Alun. 'We pros call that "Stone Dead".'

Mike stood and nodded sadly, 'Rather like the lady of the lake,'

'Except that this is a pond,' added Alun.

'The "thing of the Pond", then,' I smiled.



'Or "Three Pensioners and It",' grinned Alun. 'Good title for a book, that.'

'That's pure tripe,' grumbled Mike. 'Anyhow, how you two can carry on joking in the face of death absolutely astonishes me,' he said, shaking his head.

We stood in melancholy silence for some time, and then he shrugged. 'It seems all wrong.'

We nodded.

Alun opened his mouth to speak, but Mike butted in, 'No, Alun! Shut up, please.'

Alun shrugged again.

I stepped forward and inspected the body, 'All the same,' I said. 'Had she come crashing down from up there, I would have expected a bit more visible damage,' I frowned. 'She looks almost as if she had simply gone to sleep underwater.'

'Agreed,' nodded Alun. 'She doesn't look in the slightest bit damaged.'

'Internal damage doesn't show on the outside,' snorted Mike.

'Which is why it's called internal damage, I expect,' suggested Alun.

'Shut up, Alun.'

Alun raised his eyebrows at me and went on. 'I'd still have thought that diving onto a rocky ledge from one hundred metres would have damaged your outsides a tiny bit. Wouldn't you?'

'Come on, Mike,' I laughed. 'Admit you're wrong.'

Mike blew out his breath, 'All right. Perhaps she walked down the track then...'

'Or up it,' added Alun. 'From below.'

'Yes, all right, or up it. To take a dip.'

I started. 'To take a dip!?'

'That's it. It's been a hot day.'

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'Put your hand back in the water, Mike. Would you want to swim about in that? It can't be much above ten degrees Celsius.'

'It takes all sorts....' he said.

Alun shrugged, 'So, you're suggesting that she trudged all the way up here, jumped in, and the shock stopped her heart.'

'That would explain the absence of damage,' he said. 'Yes. A compelling explanation, I think.'

'Before which, she took off her clothes and hid them. That doesn't make much sense,' I shook my head doubtfully.

'Hmmm.'

'That's what I was thinking,' I said.

'Something odd here,' frowned Alun. 'If she fell or dived from up there, she'd be smashed up, at least a bit...'

'And,' I added. 'If she'd come for a dip, her clothes would still be here.'

'Unless she walked up in the nude,' suggested Alun.

'As a bet with a friend, you think?' I added.

'That's a possibility,' he smiled. 'After all, girls will be girls...'

'Anyway, I'm not certain she would look quite so peaceful after a heart attack,' said Mike.

The three of us stood looking down at the naked body, buffeted by the waves.

'Sad, isn't it,' said Mike. 'Makes me feel peculiar too.'

'Really!?' said Alun.

'I suppose she could have been shot then,' suggested Mike.

We gaped at him. 'Shot!?' cried Alun.

'Can you see any bullet holes, Mike?' I asked.

'Or any blood?' added Alun.

'Odd...' said Mike.

'Yes,' I agreed.

'Not shot then...' mumbled Mike.  
'No,' sighed Alun. 'Not shot.'  
We stood there for a moment, looking down.  
'It really does take the pleasure out of it,' sighed Alun.  
'Her being an "it". A dead "it" to whit.'

Mike stood and looked around the ledge, 'I suppose we'll have to take her down then?' he said.

The two of us gazed at him.

'What!?'

'Well, wouldn't that be the right thing to do?' he ended.

'The right thing!?' Alun spluttered. 'The right thing would be to carry this poor woman's naked body down that narrow death trap of a track?'

'Just sling her over a shoulder and trudge down?' I added.

'Well, we can hardly just leave her here.' he said.

'You mean, alone and unprotected?' mused Alun.

'You're right, Mike,' I smiled. 'She would be open to attack or of being shredded to bits by vultures and eagles.'

'That pool is probably swarming with piranhas, too,' suggested Alun. 'We'll have to get a move on then.'

'Shut up, you two,' sighed Mike as he stood, stroking his chin sadly, debating how to deal with the situation.

But happily, as sometimes occurs, before we had to debate much more about the dilemma, it was solved for us.

At this moment, we heard the unmistakable cracking sound of heavy boulders bounding down. Luckily, we had enough experience in mountain trekking to know what to do.

Don't look. Don't think. Run.

We had dashed off down the ledge and were still going fast when we heard the crash.

We slowed, shot a cautious look upward and turned.

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An amazing sight met our eyes.

A huge boulder landed smack in the middle of the pool and blasted the water outwards.

With the tons of water, the woman's body flew over the cliff edge in a graceful arc. Then, down and down it went, arms and legs flailing about as it spiralled and somersaulted earthwards.

However, as we watched, we noticed something else. We saw someone far below, striding purposely along the footpath towards the waterfall's base.

At the noise, the person looked up and, spotting the pirouetting body, screamed. A woman's scream.

She then spotted us and froze.

The body plummeted down and hit the main pool at the base with a huge splash.

'Ouch,' said Mike. 'That must have hurt...'

We looked at him in pity. 'Oh!' he said. 'Sorry.'

'Exactly,' replied Alun.

I turned the binoculars on the woman and saw that she was doing likewise.

'It's that woman from the herbal shop,' I said.

But before I could get any further, she was striding off.

'She's got her phone out. Calling the police, I suppose,' I groaned.

'Here comes trouble,' frowned Alun.

'Oh hell!' groaned Mike.

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'I suppose we had better get down and see what can be done,' said Mike.

'Done!?' exclaimed Alun.

'Oh Hell!' I sighed, 'I suspect that there's going to be some tricky explaining ahead.'

'Don't worry,' smiled Alun, 'Leave it all to me. I'll sort it out.'

'Oh god!' groaned Mike.

'As I said, Mike,' I smiled, 'Here comes trouble.'

## CHAPTER 2

I bet that gave those piranhas a bit of a surprise,' I nodded as we gazed back along the ledge.

'Don't talk rot,' grumbled Mike.

'That's asking rather a lot, Mike,' frowned Alun.

'Inhumanly so,' I agreed. 'Talking rot is ingrained in our genes, Mike. You should know that by now.'

'Talking Rot!' frowned Alun. 'I don't think I've ever encountered any of that.'

I shook my head sadly, 'I'm not surprised, Alun. Rot is so often passed over without a second look....'

Mike puffed out his cheeks, which allowed him to produce an impressively long and loud sigh, 'Sometimes you two really get on my wick.'

'Now that's interesting,' nodded Alun. 'Only sometimes, then!?'

'We're clearly not back in mid-season form yet,' I frowned.

'Or maybe we're simply losing our grip,' Alun frowned. 'Is age at last taking its inevitable toll?'

'You two lost your grip forty years ago. Your grip on reality,' muttered Mike.

'And that's why we've retained such fertile imaginations, Mike,' said Alun.

'Chock full of creativity and invention,' I added.

'Chock full of rot and drivel, you mean,' sighed Mike.

'You seem to be forgetting, Mike,' said Alun. 'That some world-shattering innovations started off as rot. Take penicillin, for example.'

'Oh, God have mercy on me!' groaned Mike, turning to gaze back along the ledge.

A huge boulder was now resting in the centre of the pool. It was mostly hidden by the spray from the waterfall, which was now cascading onto it.

'I wonder how many million years it'll take to erode that away?' mused Alun.

'It looks rather attractive now, though,' I said.

'Yes,' said Alun. 'But diving down from above is going to be tricky now, don't you think?'

'Swimming too,' I added.

Mike sighed again, 'You can't dive from anywhere else than above, Alun. You ought to have said, "Diving from up there". That would have been better, grammatically speaking.'

'Thank you, professor,' grinned Alun.

'My pleasure,' said Mike. 'I suppose we might as well get going then.'

'Yep,' smiled Alun. 'I'll work out our line of defence on the way down.'

'Oh hell!' groaned Mike. 'I'd have preferred to stay out of prison tonight.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'It'll be a pity to miss the champagne dinner. An excellent vintage, too, I believe. Some of the old man's stuff, apparently.'

'God rest his soul,' said Alun.

'Amen,' I added.

'I suppose he's up there now conducting the celestial choir,' said Alun.

'From the organ?' I suggested.

'Probably.' Nodded Alun. 'And those trumpets are going to have to watch their step now. World famous conductors,

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especially dead ones, don't take easily to having flats where there should be sharps.'

'No. And it's no use just trying to bluff by puffing up the rosy cheeks and blowing like Hell. The notes have to be the ones intended by the composer. Not just celestial Pandemonium.' I smiled.

Alun chuckled, 'I had a pandemonium when I was a kid. But it had a broken string and always played flat.'

'Shut up, you two idiots,' grumbled Mike from behind.

'Anyway,' said Alun, striding off. 'I forgot about the champagne. I'll have to be extra convincing then.'

'Oh God!' groaned Mike again.

I tapped Alun on the shoulder as we walked on. 'I've just had a really brilliant idea.'

'Oh no!' cried Mike from behind.

'However,' I continued, 'This might, at first sight, appear a little over-innovative for your liking.'

Alun grinned over his shoulder, 'Don't worry. I'm all for a bit of over-innovation in times of need.'

'Well,' I continued. 'Why not try telling the truth? I've heard it works wonders sometimes.'

'The *truth*!' gasped Alun. 'Are you mad!?'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'You know, Alun. Truth's the sort of thing you never tell. The truth is the details you avoid, which inevitably ends us in deep trouble.'

'Or, more often than not, in prison,' I added.

'I would prefer the word, "Always",' nodded Mike.

'But for heaven's sake,' moaned Alun. 'Where's all the fun if everybody goes around telling the truth all the time?'

'Agreed,' I said. 'The truth does tend to be a bit of a let-down.'

'Not where you two are concerned,' groaned Mike. 'Your truths are often barely believable.'



I looked over my shoulder at Mike, still bringing up the rear. 'I might point out that you are nearly always closely associated with the resultant adventures.'

Mike pulled a face at me, and I chuckled.

'Oh, all right,' he conceded. 'I admit that it also sometimes ends up being fun.'

Alun suddenly turned his head and grinned one of his widest grins at us over his shoulder.

'Why are you smirking at us like that, Alun?' called Mike. 'Oh, God! I fear the worst. He's had one of his inspirations.'

'Well, I just thought of a way of spicing things up a bit.'

'Don't you dare...', cried Mike. 'Think of that iced champagne.'

'I thought I might mention how we spotted a shadowy figure in the forest up there.'

'We didn't,' shouted Mike.

'I think I might have,' replied Alun.

'Now you mention it, Alun,' I said. 'I'm not sure I didn't notice something like that too.'

'Out of the corner of your eye?' suggested Alun.

'That's it. Out of the corner of my eye,' I nodded.

'A furtive shadow-like apparition?'

'Yes. Furtive and slinking stealthily through the darkened undergrowth,' I nodded.

'I knew it! So, it wasn't a dream after all!' cried Alun.

'There was not, and never have been, any shadowy figures slinking stealthily or otherwise,' groaned Mike.

'Well, I beg to differ, Mike,' called Alun. 'After all, I can now name two extremely reliable eyewitnesses, both of whom are almost certain of the fact.'

'Reliable!' exclaimed Mike. 'Ha! And I'm *almost certain* we'll end up in prison if you try that gag,' he grumbled.

'Where's your spirit of adventure, Mike?' I asked.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'I much prefer a champagne buffet to a tray of tepid prison food,' retorted Mike. 'That's what's happened to my spirit of adventure. It has evaporated.'

'Come on, Mike,' called Alun. 'This looks like being fun.'

'Oh Hell!' groaned Mike, 'I can already imagine those champagne bottles evaporating before my eyes.'

'Stiff upper lip, Mike,' cried Alun. 'One has to live a little dangerously sometimes. Have confidence.'

'I'd prefer not to, if you don't mind. It saves being disappointed. God knows what we'll do to pass away the long cold night on those stone-hard, prison-cell beds.'

'I'll invent you a bedtime story, Mike,' smiled Alun.

'Oh no!' groaned Mike. 'Anything but that.'

'I could sing a lullaby or two,' I suggested.

'You can't sing,' said Mike. 'The closest you come is...', but Alun interrupted him.

'The closest he comes to singing is the noise my broken Pandemonium made.'

'I give up,' sighed Mike.

The track was wider and well-used on this side of the waterfall. Local people often came up this way in summer to look at the falls. Very few, however, were intrepid or mad enough to attempt the tricky bit up to the cliff top.

The forest gradually engulfed us as we zigged and zagged our way down. Then, far below, we heard the growl of a powerful forestry vehicle as it navigated one of the uneven tracks. Then the noise stopped, but after a short pause, the motor roared into life again, and the sound was soon lost as the vehicle moved behind the jutting cliff wall.

'Do you know, I was wondering,' I said.

Mike sighed behind me, 'Is this going to be some more drivel?'

'That boulder,' I continued.

'Which one was that?' asked Alun.

'Our flying one.'

'Oh, that one!'

'That's it, you twit,' scowled Mike. Well, from his voice, I guessed he scowled. But being behind me, I can't be absolutely sure.

'Well,' I continued. 'The odd thing about it...'

'Was that it didn't crush you two idiots into powder,' grumbled Mike. 'I don't call that odd. I call it a shame.'

'It would have been into pulp, Mike. Not powder.' smiled Alun.

'The odd thing...' I said, ignoring this. 'Is that I can't see where it came from.'

'Above?' suggested Alun.

Mike made a gulping noise, 'Things don't often fall from below, you know.'

'I noticed that too, Mike,' grinned Alun. 'It's something to do with the forces of nature.'

'Well,' I continued. It must have come over the edge, near the stream.'

'As I said,' replied Alun. 'From above...'

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike from behind. 'Yes, it must have come down that way. Otherwise, it would have missed the pool. Stands to reason.'

'Thanks, Mike.'

'My pleasure...' he hesitated. 'So?'

'Well. Did either of you spot a huge boulder in the middle of that clearing?'

Alun stopped short, and I barged into him. 'Oh!'

'Exactly.'

'What do you mean by "Exactly"?' asked Mike.

'Well, what were you sitting on, Mike?'

'Oh, that one!'

'Yes, that huge boulder-shaped rock.'

'Oh. That one was as stable as a mountain. It wouldn't have freed itself in a thousand years.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Except that it did.'

'Maybe it was a wild boar,' said Alun.

'A what!?' cried Mike.

'A wild boar.'

Mike gazed at him wide-eyed, 'I was sitting on it, Alun. And I can certify that it was not a wild boar.'

'Perhaps he means a tame boar,' I suggested.

'Shut up. What on earth do you mean, Alun?'

'I meant, maybe a wild boar came tearing out of the forest, being chased by a hunter...'

I nodded '... and smashed straight into the rock, sending it over the edge. Is that it?'

'Exactly.'

'For heaven's sake, Alun. Can't you stop talking rot for once?' groaned Mike.

'I'm not sure. But I could always try.'

'Well, Mike. You're a boffin. So, tell us how a huge boulder frees itself from its million-year-old resting place then.'

'It got hit by lightning, I expect,' he replied.

'By lightning?'

'That's it. Lightning strikes can deposit energies of up to a million joules, you know.'

'A million joules!? Now that's interesting,' nodded Alun.

'Astonishing, too,' I added.

'A million joules would blast that boulder halfway to Spain,' smiled Mike, warming to the subject.

'Alun,' I asked. 'Did you notice any lightning?'

'Hmmm. Now that you mention it. No, not a great deal. Mind you, I might have blinked at the wrong moment.'

'I didn't see much lightning either. Any other valid scientific explanations, Mike?'

'Thawing of permafrost would probably do it,' he replied, absolutely unflustered.

'Yes, of course!' I exclaimed. 'I ought to have thought of that myself. But then again, you're the boffin.'

'That's right,' smiled Mike.

'But then again, Mike. I don't remember noticing much of that permafrost stuff up there. Did you, Alun?'

'Permafrost? No. Now that you mention it, I can't say I did. But I wasn't paying much attention at the time.'

'All the same, Mike,' I said. 'Here in the south of France, I wouldn't have said that we were in normal permafrost country,' I said. 'What do you think? After all, you're the boffin.'

'Ah!' said Mike.

'Hmmm,' said Alun.

'Exactly,' I said. 'And that boulder...'

'Or rock,' added Alun.

'Or rock. Nearly crushed the three of us.'

'The four of us,' corrected Mike.

'The "Three pensioners and It",' added Alun.

'So,' I continued. 'This boulder, or rock, magically freed itself, then shot down and nearly annihilated us all.'

'Queer that,' nodded Alun.

'The ways of the Lord...,' I quoted.

We trudged on a little in silence.

'So,' I said. 'We have one mysteriously dead and noticeably naked woman in a waterfall pool and one crashing boulder.'

'Mysteriously crashing boulder,' suggested Alun.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'Mysteriously crashing.'

'Hey!' called Mike from the rear. 'You don't think the two are somehow linked?'

We stopped, turned and gazed back at him with astonishment, 'Linked!?'

'Yes. You know,' he nodded. 'Connected.'

Alun and I sighed, 'Meaning...?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Mike pulled a face, 'You don't think that that rock was intended for us?'

I wiggled my eyebrows, 'Who knows.'

'Interesting idea, though,' called Alun. 'Someone tried to kill us! I wonder why.'

'Alun!' I cried. 'Have you, by any chance, been up to something you shouldn't have?'

'Not today. Well...' he frowned. 'I did pee behind the rhododendron bush after breakfast. Would that qualify?'

'I was thinking more like getting mixed up with international criminal gangs. Something more along those lines,' I said.

Alun frowned. 'I did buy some shoes, dirt cheap on the internet, last week.'

'For Heaven's sake, you two,' called Mike. 'Can't you be serious...?' He gazed at us for a second and continued. 'No, of course you can't.'

'But you have to admit, the thought is interesting,' said Alun. 'We find a naked body. Have a brief goggle at it, and then someone flings a huge boulder down at us.'

'A jealous husband perhaps,' I suggested.

'What if the person responsible for this didn't know we were there?' suggested Mike.

'Alun's jealous husband, you mean?' I said.

'I haven't got a husband,' cried Alun. 'Margaux would object.'

'Shut up, Alun,' grumbled Mike.

'So, the "someone" didn't know we were there!?' exclaimed Alun.

'Yes. Good thinking, Mike,' I said. 'Imagine for a moment then that the woman was deliberately thrown over the cliff.'

Mike sighed again, 'You can't throw someone without it being deliberate.'

'Thanks, Mike. I'll try to avoid making that mistake in the future.'

Mike puffed out his cheeks, 'Just trying to improve your sadly inadequate mastery of the English language.'

'Thanks, Mike. Anyway, the thrower might have thought that the body would go all the way down to the bottom where he could go and pick it up later.'

'And hand it in to get a refund?' suggested Alun.

'Shut up,' called Mike.

'Anyway,' said Alun, stopping and looking around. 'He does this, but the body gets stuck?'

'Exactly,' I nodded. 'And not having a map like us, he didn't realise he could get down on foot.'

'I get it,' said Alun. 'So, he goes and hides in the forest and thinks.'

'And that's when he meets the wild boar?'

'Oh God,' moaned Mike.

'But perhaps the wild boar wouldn't play ball. So, he has to devise the brilliant idea of blasting it out of the pool with a rock.'

'You got it, Alun,' I smiled. 'But what became of the wild boar?'

'Oh, it probably found things a bit tame, got bored and went home.'

'Ha, ha.'

Alun nodded, 'So, once he has murdered her, leaving no external signs of damage, he strips her naked, hides her clothes and throws her over the cliff. He next discovers his error but has this brilliant boulder idea which nearly kills us.'

'But works,' I nodded happily. 'Clever idea, eh!? It even explains the lurking shadowy silhouette in the forest.'

'There wasn't one, you fools!' cried Mike.

Alun and I exchanged looks, 'How on earth can you be sure of that?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Oh! I give up...' groaned Mike as we set off again.

Alun frowned as a new and better idea struck him. 'You know. That woman might have been drowned first. That would explain the absence of external damage, bullet holes, or other marks like axe cuts.'

'You mean the killer drowned her up there, then threw her over?' I asked.

'It's a possibility.'

'No, it isn't,' said Mike. 'There was no water up there.'

'Aren't you forgetting a certain bubbling torrent,' I said.

'Maybe she was drugged, chunked over and then drowned herself,' said Mike.

'You're forgetting the absence of bodily damage again,' I reminded him.

'Maybe she had taken some sort of drugs and thought she could fly the rest of the way down,' said Alun. 'Hey, now we are getting somewhere....'

'No, we're not,' groaned Mike. 'We're getting absolutely nowhere.'

'We're having fun, though,' smiled Alun.

I laughed out loud.

'Anyway, now we have one dead nude...' he continued.

'Otherwise called a "Dude",' I interrupted.

'Yes, exactly. One naked Dude, one plummeting boulder and one murderer,' smiled Alun. 'Things are definitely warming up in these parts.'

'Oh Hell!' groaned Mike.

'Now,' said Alun. 'If you two could keep quiet for a few moments, I need to think.'

'You'll need a few years, not a few moments, Alun,' scoffed Mike.

'Fear not, brave Mike,' called Alun, striding ahead. 'The solution to our troubles is already forming in my fertile brain.'



'I'd like to point out,' said Mike. 'That before your fertile brain started working, we didn't have any troubles.'

'No,' I agreed. 'Just one dead female behind us and one live but nosy female shopkeeper below. Down there. Mix these two ingredients together. Sprinkle with Alun-essence and stir well. Then you get trouble.'

'Stairwell!' cried Alun. 'What on earth have stairs got to do with it.'

'Stir well, not stairwell, you cloth-eared nit,' I sighed.

'Have you two no confid...' started Alun.

'No, we don't,' we replied in unison.

After some more zigging and zagging, the forest closed in around us, and the slope eased off. Then, after a final zag, the track levelled out, and we began to hear the roar of the falls once more.

Through the trees, we soon saw the white foaming waters flashing down.

The track climbed a gentle rise and then fell steeply to the edge of a boiling pool. Gusts of droplet-saturated wind greeted us as we entered the wide depression hollowed out by the water. We were soon drenched again. Reaching the water's edge, we stood gazing at the surface. 'Can you see it, Mike?' I asked.

'No. It's probably got trapped on the rocks behind the falls.'

We scrambled across the slippery rocks as close as possible to the rear walls and searched. However, nothing was to be seen.

'Where on earth has she gone,' shouted Mike above the noise.

'It', smiled Alun.

'Very amusing,' scowled Mike.

## The Sarlat Quartet

At this moment, a police van came into view and out stepped two policemen and the woman from the village souvenir shop.

The woman didn't resemble a seller of dried flowers and herbal brews at all. To start with, she was far too good-looking and well-dressed. She was tall, slim and sported the sort of profile more frequently seen basking on expensive yachts than behind dingy shop counters. In addition, she had masses of dark brown hair, a small nose and mouth, and big brown eyes. Her name was Danielle Blanchet.

The woman pointed, 'There they are!'

Not to be bettered in moments of difficulty, Alun jumped as if stung and pointed back, 'That's her!' he cried. 'That's the woman we saw from up there, Major.'

'What do you mean?' stuttered the woman. 'I saw *you*.'

'Oh,' smiled Alun. 'So, you thought we hadn't spotted you goggling at us through your binoculars like that, did you?'

'What on earth are you talking about?' cried the woman, flustered by the unexpected turn of events.

The official in charge turned to us,

'My name is Inspector Venet. 'This lady says she saw a body flying down from up there.'

'Oh, that!' nodded Alun. 'Yes. We saw that, too.'

'I saw you up there,' she sniffed and would no doubt have hissed "Foreigners" had she had the time.

But Alun wagged his finger at her, 'We saw you too. Down there goggling at us.'

'I was *not* goggling!'

'I think you were. With binoculars, too.'

'I heard a noise. And naturally, I looked.'

'Stared,' said Alun.

At this point, the woman glanced at the pool and started. 'Good heavens! It's gone! What have you done with it?'

'Done with what?' asked Alun, the image of youthful innocence minus most of the youth.

'The human body. I saw it flying down.'

Alun smiled, one of the smiles he used before trying to be clever. We winced as he shot her a quizzical look. 'Well, I suppose that if you saw it fly down, it probably kept straight on and flew away,' he smiled.

'What!' cried the woman, clearly flabbergasted.

But Alun turned to the police official who was obviously in charge. 'Surely, Major,' he said flatteringly. 'If it was flying, it unlikely to have been a human, is it? An eagle, perhaps?'

'Or a vulture,' I added.

Inspector Venet didn't bother to correct Alun about his title. After all, becoming a Major, if only temporarily so, always gives one's morale a little boost.

'Perhaps it wasn't a human body, after all, then,' he said, turning to the woman.

'Maybe it was a pig,' suggested the athletic-looking young officer with him.

'A Pig!?' cried the woman.

'Yes. Or something like that.'

'Interesting...' nodded Alun. 'Yes, I like it.'

'Or something like that!?' stared the Inspector.

'Yes. Something pink with four members,' the young policeman nodded, pleased with this dash of inspiration.

'Something pink with four members!?' goggled the woman.

'Yes. Definitely interesting,' murmured Alun.

'Or maybe it was one of the inflatable doll things,' added the policeman, pleased with this renewed show of innovative thinking.

'An inflatable doll thing!?' exclaimed Inspector Venet. 'What do you mean?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Yes. You know...' his voice trailed off as he wiggled his eyebrows at his chief.

'Ah!' said the latter, getting the idea but still frowning. 'And what would these three gentlemen be doing with an inflatable doll halfway up a cliff?'

The policeman shrugged, 'Well, Sir. It takes all sorts...'

We seemed to have already heard that remark several times.

'I don't believe this!' cried the woman. 'Have you all lost your senses?'

However, Inspector Venet was not listening. 'But why would they have thrown an inflated doll off the cliff?' he frowned. 'After they had finished with it?'

Alun clearly considered that it was time to stick his oar in again.

'Maybe we were trying to fly it,' he suggested.

'What!?' cried Inspector Venet.

'Maybe it was an inflatable pig,' suggested the young officer, pleased with how the investigation was progressing.

'Exactly,' nodded Alun. 'A hot-air pig.'

'A what!?' cried Inspector Venet.

'Oh God!' moaned Mike, 'Here we go. Can't you ever resit inventing drivel like that?'

Alun shrugged, 'Now you mention it. No. I don't think I can.'

'Perhaps,' I added, 'The officer thinks we were training for a Pig flying competition.'

'Shut up, you two,' sighed Mike. He then turned to Inspector Venet. 'It was a human body. A naked woman's body, to be exact. Not a pig, not an inflatable doll or an inflatable pig-balloon.'

'So, at least that's cleared up now. Thanks, Mike,' I smiled.

Inspector Venet gazed at us and sighed, 'And where pray, Is this body now?'

'Well, we saw it land in the pool,' said Mike.

'It wouldn't fly,' smiled Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' Groaned Mike.

'Well,' said the Inspector. 'Shall we go and have a look.'

We exchanged looks. 'Well,' I started, but Mike butted in.

'As this lady just said. It's gone,' he said.

'Gone!?' cried Inspector Venet.

We nodded in unison.

'When we got down here, there was no sign of the body.'

Alun smiled, and I braced myself for the intended quip he was clearly about to provide us.

'It's a pity, really.'

'Oh God!' groaned Mike.

Alun ignored this and went on. 'So, I'm afraid you won't be able to inspect her, inspector.....'

I groaned, and the young police officer grinned behind his boss's back.'

'Very amusing,' grumbled Inspector Venet. 'So, you admit then that you three gentlemen threw a woman off the cliff. That's right, is it?'

By now, Mike was almost dancing about with frustration, 'No,' he groaned. 'We did not throw anything. Her body was blasted out of the pool by a huge boulder that came crashing down and nearly pulverised us all.'

'All the same,' continued the Inspector, 'You then came rushing down to recover a body you hadn't thrown.' He gazed from one to the other of us. 'Now, why would you do that, I wonder?'

The man's assistant piped up again, 'This lady from the shop....'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Alun interrupted, 'Oh! A Shop-Girl!?' he sniffed. 'I wouldn't give much credence to a mere Shop-Girl's word.'

The woman bridled. 'I am *not* a Shop-Girl. I *own* the "Rose Sauvage".'

On hearing the name, Alun shook his head in disbelief. 'The Rose Sauvage... Ha!'

The women sighed deeply, 'The "Rose Sauvage" happens to be an upmarket Organic health and well-being emporium.'

'Great heavens!' exclaimed Alun. 'That's a bit of a mouthful.'

'I nodded, 'I wouldn't have thought people in these parts were snobbish enough to merit such a pompous name.'

The woman drew herself up and graced us with a haughty "down-the-nose" look.

'Anyway, that's what *you* say,' added Alun.

'What on earth do you mean?' she frowned, forgetting to do it down her nose this time.

'Well, what proof do we have of it?'

'Proof of what, for goodness's sake?'

'That this marvellous money-spinning emporium actually belongs to you.' He said, shooting a knowing nod at the Inspector.'

'Well! Really!' she seethed.

'Shut up, please, Alun,' groaned Mike.

'I'd have a good look at what she sells in that dark back room of hers, Major.' nodded Alun. 'I know all about these people who masquerade as law-abiding nature lovers.'

'What!' cried the woman. 'What are you accusing me of? It's... It's slanderous!'

Alun sneered at her, tapped the side of his nose, and winked knowingly.

She seethed more, rapidly approaching boiling point...

'As I was saying,' said Inspector Venet. 'This lady phoned us exactly thirty minutes ago.'

'That was nice of her,' smiled Alun. 'Just after goggling at us through binoculars of hers, then.'

'I was *not* goggling.'

'It looked very much like you were.'

'I was *not*.'

'That's what you keep saying, but....'

'Be quiet, Alun,' I said.

'In the meantime,' continued Inspector Venet. 'You had plenty of time to dispose of the proof.'

'Proof of what?' asked Mike.

'Proof of murder, of course!' cried the woman. 'And torture too, probably.'

'Of murder!?' gasped Mike. 'We haven't killed anyone.'

'In that case, why have you hidden the body?' she sneered. 'Because you had to.'

So that the marks inflicted by your torture couldn't be discovered.

'We didn't torture anyone,' cried Mike.

'So, what have you done with it?'

The young officer coughed. 'Excuse me, chief.'

'Yes, George?'

'Well, the lady said she saw the three of them up on the ledge.'

'I know that.'

'Well, it takes a good thirty minutes to get down that track. For a fit guy like me, I mean. These three are...' he hesitated and chose his words carefully. 'These three gentlemen are somewhat more mature, Sir.'

Alun and I smiled and nodded in appreciation, 'That's a very elegant way of putting it, officer,' I said. 'Thank you.'

The officer nodded back kindly. 'No good turning the knife in the wound, I always say, sir.'

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'Thank you.'

'My pleasure, Sir.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'All right, all right,' grumbled Inspector Venet. 'So, where is the body now?' he sighed. 'I don't expect she ran off.'

'Oh no,' said Mike. 'She was well and truly dead. I can assure you of that.'

'Dead as a dodo,' added Alun.

'I tested her pulse,' said Mike.

'And she wasn't bubbling at all,' finished Alun. 'Under the water, I mean. Her head was...'

'Underwater?' I suggested.

'Just so,' nodded Mike.

Inspector Venet gazed at the three of us, shaking his head sadly. 'So!'

'I think these three are off their heads, inspector,' whispered the woman. 'Of course, she was dead. They killed her. In cold blood.'

'I heard that,' said Alun. 'One day you will regret that, "Madame le Witch Doctor".'

'See, Inspector. Diabolical threats now,' she cried.

Inspector Venet sighed. 'That wasn't a threat, was it, Sir?' he asked, turning to Alun.

'Of course not, Major. Simply a normal and perfectly healthy reaction to being called a band of sex-crazed madmen.'

'I never said that!' cried the woman.

'No, Sir. Those weren't the terms used.'

'No. but that's what was implied.'

I stepped forward and got between Alun and the woman. 'I'll explain.'

Inspector Venet nodded. 'I'd be most grateful, sir.'

'Well, it's all quite simple,' interrupted Mike. 'After we had found and inspected the body. Someone threw an enormous boulder down at us from the cliff top.'

'Did what!?'

'I said I'd explain, Mike. We want to get this finished today...' and I did so. Starting from the beginning.



'Mike, of course, sulked during and after my short description of events. But some things have to be.

Once I had finished, Inspector Venet turned to his officer, 'George. Could someone do that and then get down from the top in time to drive up here and cart off the body?'

The officer shook his head decidedly, 'No way, Sir.'

'Ah!'

'Yes, Sir. He'd need fifteen minutes of hard running to get back through the forest to the main road. Then, he'd need fifteen minutes to drive across the plateau and down to the town by car. Even then, he'd need to drive back along the valley to the village and up here.' He paused. 'No. No way... Absolutely none.'

'Well, there you are then,' cried the young woman. 'These three madmen must have done it.'

'No need for abuse, madam,' said the Inspector.

'It doesn't matter, Major.' smiled Alun. 'She probably forgot to use her marijuana spread on her toast at breakfast.'

'As my assistant has just shown, madam.' Continued Inspector Venet. 'They couldn't have got down in time.'

'That's because they had an accomplice,' she nodded. 'I guessed it. Another foreigner, too, no doubt. Like the rest of that party of troublemakers....'

'I'll ask you to be a little more reserved, please,' said Inspector Venet.

The woman shrugged and pulled a face.

Anyway, this left us with a dilemma.

'I suppose the rock couldn't have slipped on its own?' asked the Inspector.

We shook our heads.

'No way,' I said.

'Hum...'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Exactly,' I replied.

Inspector Venet wandered upwind to the pool's edge to avoid getting drenched. 'And there were no signs of clothes?'

'No,' I said. 'No clothes.'

'And injuries?'

'None at all,' said Mike. 'I checked.'

'Odd! All right,' sighed Inspector Venet. 'So, where on earth has the body gone.'

The woman stepped forward and pointed, 'I don't believe a word of this ridiculous story. They've secreted it away somewhere,' she hissed.

'No, we have not,' cried Mike, getting really irritated, 'you stupid...' his voice trailed off as he mastered his temper with difficulty.

I nodded, 'As I said, on the way down, we heard the motor of some big vehicle. It came through the forest then went back around that way,' I pointed out the direction.

'Towards "Le Mollard"!?' said the young policeman.

'Hmm. That's odd!' said the Inspector. 'I'm told that no one ever takes that track since the avalanche carried the road away two years back.'

'The young Biathlon-Team lad from "Le Colline" trains over that way, Sir. He's out most mornings.'

'Maybe he saw or heard something, then.'

'Except if he was on the rifle range, Sir. He trains with protective headphones.'

'But getting a vehicle along there's impossible now,' frowned the Inspector.

'You could do it with a fully articulated forestry engine, chief. If you knew what you were about, of course.'

'Have we got a list of everyone who owns that sort of machine, George?' asked Inspector Venet.

The young officer nodded, 'I can find that out easily.'

Venet then turned to us. 'I suppose there's not much more we can do today.'

We shook our heads. The champagne dinner was still on then.

'Aren't you going to arrest them?' cried the woman. 'They're potentially dangerous murderers.'

'Murderers often are,' nodded Alun. 'Especially mad, depraved, sex-crazed ones.'

'And where are you staying, gentlemen,' asked Inspector Venet, ignoring this.

'Up at "The Colline",' I said.

'Oh!' he exclaimed. 'I see. You're part of Miss Dupré's funeral party.'

'That's it,' I smiled.

'I might have guessed,' sniffed the woman. 'That Duprès woman!'

## CHAPTER 3

**A**s soon as the officer noted our names and addresses, we headed home.

Woman! Well, none of our trio would have called Emma Duprès a woman.

'A slip of a girl, no more,' said Alun.

'No more than 25 years old,' I added. 'A mere child, in fact.'

'It only seems yesterday that she was at school with your daughter, Sally,' frowned Mike. 'That's barely twelve years ago. She's still just as pleasant and outgoing.'

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'So, I'm wondering what she did to put that dreaded shopkeeper's back up like that.'

'Well, Emma does seem to have inherited a little of her grandfather's sharp tongue,' Mike reminded us.

'Hmm, Yes,' nodded Alun. 'And a smattering of his short temper.'

'Perhaps "Madame la Shopkeeper" tried it on with her brother or, worse still, with her boyfriend,' I suggested.

Alun and Mike nodded together thoughtfully, 'Not a good move,' said Mike.

'No,' agreed Alun. 'Definitely not.'

At this moment, we emerged from under the cover of the forest. From here, our track joined the packed-earth

access ramp, which circled smoothly up the south-facing hillock.

"Home", for the coming weeks, was the place already referred to as "Le Colline" (the hill). It was, in fact, a two-story stone-built farmhouse flanked by a set of converted outbuildings constructed of the same material. The main building dated back nearly four hundred years and sat on a small, flat-topped hillock about fifty metres high, just above the level of the surrounding treetops.

The hillock had been formed several thousand years ago when a vast outcrop of the cliff had collapsed. Due to the associated land upheaval, the capricious torrent at the origin of this colossal landslide had split into three. None of them thundered with the violence of olden times, which guaranteed the cliff face's long-term stability. The branch furthest to the east now formed the waterfall we had visited earlier. This pounded into a deep pool at the base of the hillock to the west. The second branch formed a similar, albeit smaller, waterfall to the east.

Finally, the remainder of the original torrent cascaded down the cliff onto the hillock behind the farmhouse.

From here, it flowed into a deep, ice-cold, goldfish-filled pond at the centre of the circular plateau. The overflow rushed down its south-facing slope.

The three streams came together anew at the base of the hillock, feeding an old mill, now converted to produce electricity rather than flour.

Seven stone buildings formed a semicircle around the rear of the hilltop and facing the pond.

The two-story farmhouse sat between the six smaller buildings, facing due south across a sea of waving treetops. For generations, these buildings had been protected from the unrelenting onslaught of the Mediterranean sun by three ancient Umbrella Pines. These magnificent trees were still healthy and flourishing.

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The place had remained a thriving farm for hundreds of years but eventually fell into disuse. Since then, it had been gradually decaying until, one day, Emma Duprès' grandfather, Lucas, discovered and purchased the abandoned farmstead.

It was to celebrate Lucas Duprès' memory that we were gathered here, as he had specifically requested in his will.

The farm pastures, which had been wrested from the forest in the seventeenth century, still spread out from the foot of the hillock in a broad swath. They ended a kilometre away where the narrow local road between two villages separated them from the ancient and original forest.

From this point, a dusty access track wound its way northwards to the foot of the hillock, following the lazy meanders of the torrent.

It was up this track's final semi-circular portion to the hilltop that we were now trudging.

'What shall we tell "The Girls"?' said Alun, using our customary collective term for his wife, Margaux, and mine.

'What about trying the truth?' replied Mike, the confirmed bachelor of our trio.

'The trouble in this case is that they will never believe it,' I sighed.

'No,' said Mike, sighing. 'They won't... As usual, in fact!'

'So, we need to improvise something more convincing,' said Alun.

'Oh God! No, we don't,' groaned Mike. 'They won't believe anything you say, Alun. Especially if you embroider it with that rubbish about shadowy silhouettes flitting through the forest.'

'Pity that,' sighed Alun. 'I rather liked that bit. It added a bit of mystery.'

'But they wouldn't believe that anyway, Alun.' said Mike. 'Any of it, in fact.'

I nodded, 'No, especially if naked women come into it.'

'There's only the one, mind you,' I said.

'Anyway, we could always leave that bit out,' suggested Mike. 'About her being naked, I mean.'

'It, Mike,' smiled Alun.

'Mike!' I sighed, 'what is the first thing that any woman would ask?'

'How was she dressed?'

'Exactly.'

'We could always just say we didn't notice,' he said.

'If we did,' I sighed. 'Margaux would give us one of those knowing smiles and say, "Oh! So, her breasts were that big, were they?"'

Alun chuckled, 'Then Mike would fall straight into the trap by saying, "Oh, No. They weren't all that big, they were just the right..."', and she'd have you at her mercy.'

'You'd blush scarlet, stutter, and try to avoid her gaze,' I added.

'And then she'd pounce,' concluded Alun.

Mike pulled a face, 'So, the truth can't be avoided then.'

'Oh hell!' exclaimed Alun.

'My very thought,' I agreed.

'Old Lucas Duprès would have blazoned his way out of it,' sighed Alun. 'God rest his soul.'

'Amen!' said Mike.

'Mind you,' I frowned. 'I'm not sure I'd have liked to attempt blazoning anything, knowing the reputation of his wild Wife.'

'Juliana Métrokovitch!' nodded Mike. 'They say she can still punch a hole in a reinforced concrete wall at seventy.' 'With her tongue,' I added.

Now, classical music connoisseurs will have recognised these two famous names. However, that leaves most uninitiated humans out of the picture altogether.

Lucas Duprès was, in fact, a world-famous orchestra conductor. He burst onto the world stage at twenty-two as

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a virtuoso classical pianist. However, during the immediate Post-World War One period, something set him apart from other equally talented musicians. This was his thirst for reviving neglected Baroque compositions from the seventeenth century. However, he almost immediately horrified the strait-laced community by transcribing the original manuscripts by Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, and Scarlatti for solo piano. Music purists and baroque revivalists were shocked and outraged. That someone could even dream of replacing the harpsichord with the piano was, for them, worse than sacrilege. Feelings ran high, and the specialist press overflowed with furious condemnations. The ethics of such an unprecedentedly disgraceful lack of respect fuelled heated debates worldwide.

However, his agent, Joseph Lewin and his recording company CEO sat back and rubbed their hands gleefully. Free publicity on such an unprecedented scale was a boon. Sales soared, and concert dates multiplied beyond their wildest extrapolations.

The agent's bank account also swelled beyond recognition. So much so that even the man's bank manager started listening to Bach and Handel.

During this fertile period of his career, the pianist met, fell in love with, and married the beautiful young dramatic opera singer Juliana Métrokovitch.

Naturally enough, though, married life for a couple of internationally acclaimed classical music celebrities is complicated.

Concert timetables are booked years in advance, and times together must be short-lived and rare.

The proud young Diva, Métrokovitch, was, therefore, characteristically furious when she discovered she was pregnant. Casting aside medical advice, she refused to cancel the concerts booked and planned so long before.



She stubbornly insisted on travelling the globe and performing up to the ninth month. But then, fearing horrible consequences, venue organisers themselves cancelled the events.

However, no sooner was the son born and she had fully recovered, then off she went again.

Mike stopped and turned to gaze across the pastures. The dusty blue Police van was now visible in the distance, winding carefully its way back to the road.

'Who brought up the son?' he asked.

'Ivan?' I suggested.

'That's him,' said Alun. 'The beautiful Diva wasn't in the slightest interested in babies, if I remember.'

'You're telling me!' laughed Mike. 'The only person she was interested in was herself. It still is, apparently. Ivan was brought up by nurses and relatives.'

'And by expensive boarding schools followed by Cambridge University,' I nodded. 'His father kept a distant eye on him but little more. The old man was only marginally more interested in children than his wife.'

Unexpectedly, at this moment in his career, Lucas Duprès decided to turn his hand to conducting. Without warning, he turned his back on his bright future as a concert pianist and never returned to it, except on rare occasions. Admittedly, he continued to specialise in the Baroque period but was now happy to retain the harpsichord for the keyboard part. After all, he wasn't playing it.

So, things calmed down on the music critic's side.

Unsurprisingly, though, the ill-fated marriage inevitably fell to bits.

The final straw came when, during one of her frequent flights of spoilt fury, the conceited opera singer called Lucas a "Stick waving has-been". She embroidered on this

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by adding that he had obviously no longer the talent necessary to stay at the top. It was so sad, she sneered, to be reduced to earning one's living by waving a child's wand at a hoard of second-rate musicians.

Lucas replied that he considered that considerably better than "stumbling about the stage and warbling like a top-heavy, half-drunk peacock".

Predictably, separation was immediate, without either of the participants passing through the "Haughty Huff" phase.

This high-profile rift, once more, generated vast amounts of press coverage. Once more, album sales soared. Contented smiles spread anew across certain artists' agents, CEOs and bank managers' faces.

Both artists were by then very well off, especially as neither had to dip into their personal funds except on rare occasions. Travelling and hotel expenses were often paid by promoters or local organisers.

Consequently, Lucas Duprès felt no qualms about immediately drawing up a new will, disinheriting his wife and leaving everything to his son.

At the same time, he arranged for a handsome annual allowance for the boy, controlled and paid by the family solicitors, "Slote and Grump".

His wife was unaware of the changes to his will, but in any case, she had already changed her own.

As time passed, Ivan proved to be an excellent scholar and athlete and, later, almost brilliant at Cambridge. However, he seemed to go wild once out in the wide world.

He drifted from one job to another and from one unsuitable woman to another.

He spent and partied and drank and travelled and became what his father described as a complete and utter wastrel.

As we started back up the curving track, I took up the story again, 'Although in his father's opinion, Ivan was a

wastrel, he did have a short period of apparent normality, you know,' I smiled. 'That's when he married and produced the two children, Emma and Paul.'

Alun pulled a face, 'That accident was too sad for words. Being deprived of your mother by a car accident at 11 and 12 years old just shouldn't happen. Especially to such nice kids.'

'Luckily, they still had their dad and plenty of friends to help them through, including Sally,' I added. 'But then to lose their dad in their late teens was more than most would be able to take.'

'But somehow they managed,' said Alun, 'They must have been made of some pretty stern stuff.'

'Mixed genes handed down from an Eastern bloc Diva and a world-famous pianist must have something to do with it,' smiled Mike. 'The money they inherited from their dad didn't do a lot of harm either.'

'No,' I agreed. 'But there was always a bit of mystery surrounding the origins of that. Everyone was convinced Ivan had frittered away all the funds his father had ever given him.'

'Some secret source of financing from somewhere,' said Alun. 'I wonder what that was?'

'Me too,' I agreed.

'Maybe he simply didn't fritter as much as people thought,' suggested Mike.

'That might have been due to his wife's influence,' I said. 'I never met her, though.'

'Me neither,' said Mike and Alun in unison.

Old Lucas Duprès looked after them as well as he could amidst his continual globetrotting. But the sad events had abruptly changed his viewpoint, and he had accelerated his preparation for retirement. His plans now also included engineering a suitable and comfortable future for his grandchildren and their future families.'

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In fact, for many years, Lucas Duprès had been nurturing and maturing a plan, or rather a dream.

Over the years, it had gradually formed in his mind and slowly ripened and mutated. However, things came unexpectedly to a head when least he expected it.

This was during a week-long summer concert series at the “Sarlat Ancient Music Festival” in the Dordogne region of southern France. This was not very far from where the three of us now stood.

On a rare free afternoon, one of the local organisers coaxed him into accompanying him on a relaxed tramp through the ancient forests nearby. During the outing, the two men unexpectedly came upon an abandoned hamlet.

The crumbling stone-built homestead sat gazing lazily down at them from the top of the hillock we were now climbing, nestling against the foot of a three-hundred-metre-high cliff.

This cliff stretched several kilometres east and west, forming a barrier against which the forest crowded.

At the time, the place was little more than a sizeable derelict farmhouse surrounded by six crumbling stone-built cottages.

Over the years, each cottage had been added by the original farming family to supply homes to children as the farm prospered and the household grew. The ensemble now formed the semicircle facing south.

Lucas Duprès fell in love with the place instantly. This was the place he had been dreaming about for so long.

Many years before, he had, in fact, set himself the objective of one day creating a restful sanctuary for professional musicians. This was to be somewhere completely isolated from their usual haunts. A place where they could rest and recharge their depleted batteries. Somewhere where they could become ordinary human beings for a few weeks and relax.

Lucas had learned the hard way that the human brain isn't designed to be a VIP seven days a week all year round. His fans never knew how many times he came within a hairsbreadth of a complete mental breakdown.

This haven was thus to be his contribution to ensure the mental well-being of future generations of globetrotting musical virtuosos. Also, he wanted his grandchildren to become the custodians of the peaceful oasis once it was completed. Neither of them had, however, an inkling of this plan.

Following his morning recital the following day, Lucas visited the local Mayor.

The astonished man warned Lucas of the terrible state of disrepair of the buildings following ninety years of neglect.

Lucas shrugged off this warning. It was simply a question of funds, and money was not a problem.

The Mayor then pointed out the lack of electricity and water.

'Funds again,' replied Lucas. 'As I say, I have plenty of them.'

Once he had left, the Mayor typed the madman's name into his internet browser. It dutifully informed him that the famous orchestra conductor was estimated to be worth more than fifty million euros. He pulled a face and nodded. After all, if a rich man wished to invest his hard-earned riches locally, that was fine by him. It would supply more than welcome employment for some of the region's needy families. It would also and inevitably bring wealthy, money-spending visitors to the village shops.

So, just before Christmas of the same year, the hilltop farmstead became Lucas' property for a derisory sum. Just a few days later, on New Year's Eve, bathed in the pale winter sunlight, Lucas was to be found explaining his plans to a local architect.

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In January, the roof of the main building was provisionally patched up, and by early summer, the extensive ground floor and basement were entirely renovated to modern standards, and Lucas moved in.

In August, a half-mile-long trench was dug beside the narrow access road. It followed the winding torrent and would house the water supply, the drains, the electricity cables and the telephone line. This being completed, the long job of renovating the upper floor of the farmhouse and the cottages began.

Each building soon boasted a soundproofed music room with a piano at the rear, opening onto the cool cliff-side of the hillock.

The following summer, and several million euros lighter in the pocket, the job was finished.

Some of the main farmhouse's roof timbers still needed replacing, and the architect aimed to have this job completed in autumn once Lucas' first set of guests had been and gone.

However, that roof was not repaired.

Lucas' sudden death brought the work to an abrupt halt.

However, whilst his son's death was somewhat shrouded in mystery, the cause of Lucas Duprès was crystal clear. At least, that's what it seemed at the time.

He was blown to bits by the explosion of a yacht.

This occurred twenty miles off the Egyptian coast near Alexandria, and the owner's parents, the staff

and several other people were blown to bits with him.

His body was never recovered, which is hardly surprising, given the quantity of explosives employed for the job. The fact that it took the authorities two days to find the wreckage didn't help much either.

It should be pointed out that, in Jerusalem the previous weekend, he had conducted a highly controversial performance of George Frederic Handel's "Israel in

Egypt". This famous baroque oratorio tells the biblical story of how the Egyptians were punished for their hostility towards the Israelites.

The idea did not go down well with everyone, especially in neighbouring Egypt. Even though Joseph Lewin, his agent, tried his best to sway him, Lucas would not hear of calling off the concert.

The authorities blamed an obscure Egyptian fundamentalist group, but this was never proved.

A lot of haggling ensued between Lucas' insurance company and his agent. The company pointed out that terrorist attacks were not covered by the policy.

However, as nobody could prove that terrorists were involved, his death was officially declared to be due to an "accident at sea". The company executives ground their teeth because accidents at sea and by any other means of transport were explicitly *included* in the globetrotter's contract with them.

The sum was duly paid into the temporarily frozen bank account.

By this time, the now ageing Diva had added several stones to her youthful weight but had lost none of her acid-tongued scorn. She declared that Duprès had been characteristically stupid once more and deserved what he got.

Juliana Metrokovitch was not the forgiving sort.

But then again, she was unaware that she would inherit nothing. When she was eventually informed, her fury induced friends and relatives to steer well clear of her for several months.

'Did anyone ever discover what became of the Duprès Millions?' asked Mike as we neared the plateau.

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I shook my head, 'No. The several million euros he put into the renovation of this place were paid from his French bank account. Apparently, he left no debts.'

'But he was estimated to be worth well over fifty million once the insurance money was included,' said Alun. 'He can't have drunk all that away.'

'I know. But the solicitors found only a few hundred thousand euros in his accounts. Not only that, but there was no evidence of recent or unusual movements of funds or purchases or anything like that,' I frowned. 'Apparently, the specialists reviewed the Duprès' finances with his agent. That guy Joseph Lewin. Lewin took twenty per cent of everything Lucas Duprès ever earned. So, he knew exactly the sums involved.'

'And?' frowned Mike.

'He confirmed that there should have been roughly fifty million. Mind you, he didn't say where he kept his own cut, so...'

'Maybe it's still out there somewhere, hidden in a secret account,' said Mike.

'Something like that, I suppose. But as far as I've heard, he didn't leave any clue as to where it is or how to retrieve it,' I replied. 'That's the terrible thing about it. Grandad Duprès was a careful, clever and prudent man, which makes it all the odder.'

'Maybe he wasn't expecting to get blown to pieces at the time,' smiled Alun. 'I wasn't expecting to discover a naked woman's corpse today. And look what happened.'

Mike frowned, 'Imagine that it's all just the other side of the frontier in a Genevan bank. Fifty million euros just waiting to be picked up.'

'For the guy who has the code,' I nodded.

Alun pulled a face, 'for anyone who has the code.'

He paused to let this sink in, then continued. 'I wonder if he hid a clue to its whereabouts.'



'Nice idea, Alun. If not, Emma and Paul will have to sell this place. There's no way they could find the funds to replace those huge roofing beams. They are entire oak trunks, you know. Twenty of them.'

Mike frowned, 'It can't be that expensive...'

'Ah!' I pulled a face. 'But the place has just been declared a minor national monument.'

'All for the better then,' said Alun.

'No. Not in this case. It means that repairs like that can only be carried out by state-authorised specialists.'

'Like the guys working on the repairs to Notre Dame?' asked Mike.

'Exactly. Only a handful are qualified to take on the job, and naturally, they charge a fortune,' I nodded. 'Especially after the high-profile publicity coming from the Notre Dame project.'

'Can't they get a grant?' asked Mike.

'Not in this case, apparently. Ask Emma, she'll explain.'

Mike sighed, 'I wonder if that's why all these people turned up for the funeral party.'

'To repair the roof?' frowned Alun.

'No. To look for the missing millions.'

Alun and I pulled faces. We hadn't thought about that.

'Fifty million is worth making a little effort to find,' I said.

'Exactly,' frowned Alun. 'People have been known to be murdered for less...'

We stopped and looked at each other with raised eyebrows and widened eyes.

'Ah!' said Alun. 'That puts a rather different complexion on recent events, don't you think?'

We did.

## CHAPTER 4

**F**our more strides brought us to the top of the hillock and in sight of the buildings.

A rough-hewn deal table of prodigious dimensions stood in the shadows beneath the spreading Umbrella Pines.

If its weather-aged surface was anything to go by, it must have been there almost as long as the trees. One could easily imagine twenty or thirty members of the original four-generation family seated noisily at it a hundred years ago.

What caught our eye, though, was a cluster of bedewed champagne bottles and a tray of frosted glasses. Towards this, most of the assembly was converging.

Aperitif time was clearly imminent.

Alun frowned, 'Did either of you hear the sound of a copper dinner gong being beaten?'

'By a portly but eminently discrete butler, you mean?' I replied.

'Exactly. If not, some similarly irresistible force must have mysteriously summoned the congregation to the event,' nodded Alun.

Mike shook his head in dismay, 'It's because they were told what time to come, you twits.'

'Thanks, Mike,' I said. 'I didn't think of that option.'

'Yes, thanks for spoiling the spirit of the thing, Mike,' grumbled Alun. 'We were just starting to have fun. I was about to expand on this event's possible and unexpected ramifications.'

'That's why I put a stop to your ravings before you got going, you idiot.'

'Brilliant,' grumbled Alun. 'Now we're let down even by our best friend.'

'And it's not the first time,' I agreed. 'I'd be ashamed of behaving in such a callous manner myself.'

'Me too,' said Alun.

Mike puffed out his cheeks, 'Come on, you nutters, or that monumental opera singer will have guzzled down all the champagne before we even get a look in.'

Now, this was the sort of risk we would take under no circumstances. God forbid...

We nodded briefly and accelerated our pace, tablewards.

'Unbearable thirst,' quoted Alun with a rumbling voice, 'drew them, like wing-sore homing pigeons, irresistibly unto their inevitable downfall...'

"What!?" cried Mike.

'That's a quotation, Mike,' smiled Alun.

'No. That's drivelling nonsense!'

'No, Mike. It is a bonafide quotation. And a great one at that.'

'A bonafide quotation! Who do you think you're kidding?'

'As I say. It's a quotation.' Shrugged Alun. 'Your reading, although admittedly wide and deep, seems to have sadly missed at least one major masterpiece.'

'Masterpieces are always major. You ought to be more careful with your grammar, Alun,' sneered Mike.

'Perhaps,' I suggested, 'Alun would be good enough to enlighten us as to the name of this great masterpiece.'

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Alun paused, 'The name? Well. As for the name, I haven't yet decided. I was thinking of "A Well Filled Life".'

'Oh!' sighed Mike. 'Your damned Memoires again.'

'OUR, damn memoirs, lads,' said Alun.

'Alun.' grumbled Mike. 'The Girls have already explained that there's absolutely no market for rubbish like that.'

Alun shrugged again, 'I don't believe they used the word "rubbish".'

"No," Mike said. 'But the words they used implied the same thing?'

'Great Gods!' cried Alun. 'Do you really have confidence in the opinions of two totally unqualified and outrageously biased females?'

'Shush, you fool!' whispered Mike. 'They'll hear.'

I added a bit of eyebrow wiggling at Alun, and he sighed resignedly.

Readers of our earlier adventure will already know what we were still blissfully unaware of. Consequently, they will no doubt be chuckling to themselves. The truth is that "The Girl's" frequent and contemptuous dismissal of our plan to write a book about our numerous adventures was part of a dastardly and cunning ploy. This was because they had embarked on an identical project themselves. Not only that, but they had already published two volumes detailing our juiciest adventures without us ever knowing.

Both volumes had been summer bestsellers. Furthermore, the proceeds from sales had financed our series of unexpected trips around the globe. Of this, we were also blissfully unaware. At this very moment, a third and eagerly awaited sequel was in preparation. Naturally, the fact that the three buffoons they had depicted had become the laughingstock of the entire planet was carefully hidden from us.

In league with "The Girls", their publishers, to their eternal discredit, had worked hard to ensure we remained ignorant of the truth for as long as possible.

They didn't want to risk us playing up difficult and spoiling their money-spinning scheme.

Naturally enough, they also had a lot of fun in the process.

More and more of our family, friends and acquaintances had become aware of the scheme, and it must be said that it was impressive how well they managed to keep the secret.

From a distance, my wife and Margaux (the aforesaid "Girls") were making impatient gestures for us to hurry up.

Naturally enough, though, we instinctively pretended not to notice their arm-waving antics. This was certain to aggravate them considerably, and we smiled inwardly.

Such are the insignificant victories that Alun and I often have to make do with nowadays.

Some might be tempted to quote, "Little things please little minds," but they would, of course, be wrong, wouldn't they?

The doors of the various buildings were now opening one after the other, and people were emerging, blinking, from the shadowy interiors into the early evening sunlight.

Emma Duprès, Lucas' granddaughter, was already presiding over the table. With a faint smile, she turned her head to watch the Diva, her grandmother, bear down on her. She was perhaps remembering her grandfather's angry retort about the woman "stumbling about the stage like a half-drunk peacock".

Wearing a billowing light blue silk creation, she was certainly dressed like one. Perhaps the stumbling would come later, after a bottle or two of champagne...

Emma was tall and slim like her grandfather had been. She was dressed simply in dark grey shorts and a white

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tee shirt. Her long, slim legs and arms were bronze coloured and shone as if burnished. Her masses of dark shining hair, dark flashing eyes and ready smile gave her a distinctly Italian look.

As a matter of fact, this went well with her temper and her well-developed sense of humour. Much of this heritage came from her mother. Even so, we liked to think that her long acquaintance with the three of us had helped forge this quality. The humour, of course, not the temper, which was definitely inherited from her mother mixed with her grandfather's.

As with my daughter Sally, her best friend, suiters were hard-pressed to pass the test of those two traits of her character. Surprisingly, though, she had eventually found someone who seemed to sail through without ruffling a single of her feathers. A good lad.

By her side stood her brother Paul. Although just as tall, he did not fill the space as much as his sister. He, too, wore shorts, but clearly far more expensive and carefully chosen, as was his perfectly ironed pale-yellow linen short-sleeved shirt. He had a more reserved and thoughtful character and a way of listening to one with unusual attention. Even when he wasn't.

He had not spotted the Diva approach until Emma lightly touched his arm, to which he nodded briefly without lifting his head. He continued carefully filling the generously dimensioned champagne flutes he had lined up with meticulous precision.

As we drew closer, the multi-coloured apparition reached the two, spreading her arms to embrace them.

Seen from close quarters, the diva Juliana Metrokovitch was even more formidable than we had imagined.

'Now I understand what "larger than life" means,' whispered Alun under his breath.

'There's unquestionably considerably more to the woman than a simple reputation,' I smiled.

'Reminds me rather of that Opera singer in Tintin,' nodded Mike with a smile.

'Ah! Yes, of course; "La Casafiore",' chuckled Alun. 'I knew she reminded me of someone.'

I chuckled, too. 'Bianca Castafiore, yes, of course. The celebrated cantatrice. They were both regulars at the Scala de Milan, of course.'

'My dear poor children,' cried the woman, encircling Emma with her arms and squeezing her against, or rather enveloping her with her ample breasts. One could easily make two Emma's out of one of her.

'So many years! Oh dear! So many, many years. And so much pain and suffering for you two lonely and abandoned children!' she cried.

Emma's eyebrows rose, and Paul gave her a sidelong glance without raising his head from his pouring task.'

'I'm so pleased you could come Granny,' smiled Emma, somehow levering herself out of the embrace.

The woman winced at the word "Granny", but years of training enabled her to bear the terrible shock with little visible discomfiture.

Emma smiled, 'But don't worry, Grans. We are neither poor nor abandoned, I assure you.' She went on quickly before the Diva could expand on her initial theme of pity, 'Some champagne?'

'Hi, Granny,' said Paul, handing her a brimming glace. 'You'll like this. Some of the old boy's champagne.'

The Diva winced again at the hateful word "Granny" and even more so, at the mention of her late husband, Lucas.

However, a prima-donna is not to be held down long. And, after all, champagne is champagne, no matter who it once belonged to. Even more so if that disagreeable person is now dead and buried.

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She mused that it would have been a far more decent thing to do had he departed from this life ten years or so earlier. But then again, he had never been a very obliging person. Even to herself, she used the word person, rather than Man. After all, could he, in all honesty, ever call himself a Man. Less still a gentleman.

The Diva shook herself out of these pleasant thoughts and turned towards the group of guests, sipping her glass.

'My goodness!' she lifted her glass and gazed at it. 'This champagne is absolutely divine. Are you absolutely sure it was Luca's?'

'Oh yes. He must have had shares in the company. There's plenty more in the cellar,' replied Paul.

'Oh well,' I expect it was that horrible blood-sucking agent of his who recommended it to him. Lucas never had good taste.' The woman sighed. 'Not even in music...' She twirled the glass in her fingers. 'And these glasses are magnificent, too. Crystal obviously. You have excellent taste, my dear.' She paused and shook her head with a little frown, 'Did you know that the man insists on calling himself an "Impresario" rather than an artist's agent.' she sighed. 'He's such a terrible snob.'

Emma and Paul exchanged an amused look, but Emma was perfectly equal to such situations. 'But Grandma. Grandad obviously had good taste where wives were concerned.'

'No,' agreed Paul. 'There's no doubt in that respect.'

Julianna Metrokovitch laughed a haughty and Diva-like laugh, 'Well, my dears. I'm pleased that some of my discerning character has been passed on to your generation somewhere along the line.'

Paul smiled at her, 'And we are most grateful to you for that inheritance, Granny.'

The woman swelled up and smiled regally like only a true Diva can.



'Thank you, my dears. But perhaps you would care to introduce me to some of your friends, Emma.' he paused. 'After all, one must do one's bit, mustn't one. If the master of the family can't avoid getting himself blown to bits, we must do our best to retain the traditions of hospitality, mustn't we.'

Emma smiled, 'Absolutely, Grans.'

Unfortunately, the only victims within easy reach were us, and we were thus favoured with the task of taking her off Emma's hands.

Alun shot me a look, 'Shall we have a little fun?'

'You mean, spice up the proceedings?'

Alun nodded.

'Oh Hell!' groaned Mike. 'Here we go again.'

'Come on, Mike,' I smiled. 'where's your sense of humour.'

'I left it at home,' he grumbled. 'I'll leave you to it. I want to talk to Paul.'

Allun just had time to place a friendly restraining arm around his shoulder until Emma arrived with her granny.

The introductions made, the Diva cocked her head to one side, 'Didn't I overhear one of you mention, The Scala earlier?' she beamed at me, radiating benevolence and greatness. 'I'll be singing there for the New Year's Gala this Christmas. Such a lovely place, don't you think? And perfect acoustics.' Here, she paused. 'Well, perfect acoustics if one is blessed with adequate vocal capacities.' At this, she breathed in deeply to enable her to produce a vast, raptured sigh. The action swelled out the imposing appendices, encompassing her more than adequate vocal capacities. They swelled almost beyond belief.

Alun had even to take a rapid step back to avoid an embarrassing collision.

Then she caught sight of Mike, 'Oh! I didn't notice you. Have we been introduced?'

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A faint smile crossed Alun's lips, 'Many people don't notice Mike,' He nodded to the regally beaming Diva. 'It's a talent he cultivates.'

'Alun!' growled Mike.

Alun wiggled his eyebrows at us suggestively. He could never resist having a bit of fun at Mike's expense.

I admit that I often went along with him, even if it occasionally led to unexpected and sometimes undesirable results.

The Diva frowned, 'A talent he cultivates? I'm not sure I understand.'

'Not being noticed comes in handy sometimes in his line of business,' smiled Alun.

'Alun...' groaned Mike menacingly.

This was rather too odd for the Diva to grasp. 'I wouldn't like that at all,' she frowned. 'It would be suicidal to cultivate anything of the sort for a real artist.'

The term "Real Artist" was clearly intended to embrace herself and, naturally enough, very few others.

'Oh! But Mike is an artiste of sorts,' Alun nodded.

'An artist of sorts!' frowned the women.

'Alun!' whispered Mike, giving him another warning look. But Alun was enjoying himself too much by now.

Alun, one needs to understand, loves making up stories. And once onto a new bit of innovative lying, he can't be held back. This is especially true when it is at someone else's expense, preferably Mike's.

'Well, you understand, he runs a shop.'

'Oh God!' sighed Mike.

'A shop!' gaped the Diva, bristling. She bravely attempted to assimilate the horrible fact that she was sharing cocktails with a grubby shopkeeper. She shot him a questioning look, which clearly meant, "But what is such a lowly person doing here?".

'It takes all sorts,' smiled Alun. 'He has a nice little place in Paris.'

'Really!' said the Diva Haughtily, turning to leave.

'A little place on the Place Vendome,' added Alun. 'You've perhaps heard of that.'

She froze. "Place Vendome!?" She certainly had heard of it. It was the most celebrated square in the world. Home to many world-renowned jewellers.

I caught up with Alun's line of innovative lying. 'He sells diamonds,' I nodded. 'And stuff like that.'

The Diva spun back to us. Her smile was now almost as wide as her bosom, which is saying a great deal.

'A diamond merchant!?' she gasped, pursing her scarlet lips and widening her rainbow-made-up eyes.

'That's it,' nodded Alun.

'Emeralds and rubies, too,' I added.

'Good heavens!' cried the Diva. Who would have guessed!

'Exactly,' nodded Alun. 'And now you'll understand why he cultivates not being noticed.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' she smiled at Mike. 'Quite understandable, naturally... One would, wouldn't one. Very prudent.'

Why this was understandable, one could only guess. But apparently, it now was.

Mike had turned away, attempting to become even more unnoticeable and to sidle away.

Alun nodded and smiled, 'But when I say he has a shop, I ought to have said premises.'

'Premises?' she frowned.

'Well, you understand that in that line of business, one aims at avoiding extensive shop fronts,' he said.

'Does one?'

I smiled, 'Too hard to guard, you understand.'

'Ah!'

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Mike sighed one of his better and more noisy sighs, 'Is this absolutely necessary, you two?'

Alun ignored him. 'Just a single, bullet-proof door and a high security barrier; otherwise, one requires several bodyguards.'

'Naturally,' nodded the Diva.

'But,' I added. Searching for a way out of this seemingly never-ending subterfuge. 'When Alun says he "has" premises, that is not altogether correct.'

'Oh!?'

'Yes. You see, he has just sold the practice.'

'Ah!'

Clearly, a retired diamond merchant was far less attractive than an active one.

Mike glowered at us.

'Yes. Sorry about that,' said Alun. 'I was forgetting.'

'He sold the practice to one of the other locals. Chaumet,' I said. 'Nice people.'

The Divas' eyebrows rose. 'Chaumet!'

'Yes. Perhaps you know the Chaumets?'' smiled Alun, turning to the Diva. 'Charming people. N'est pas Mike?'

Mike glowered at us in silence, and I took up the story. 'He doesn't like talking about business.'

The Diva nodded and smiled, 'Quite understandable, perfectly understandable. Most of my very wealthy friends prefer to avoid talking shop.' At this, she reached out and placed a paw-like hand on Mike's forearm.

Mike smiled back at her, 'I'll just pop over and refill my glass. Would you excuse me a moment?'

With a graceful but amazingly rapid movement, the Diva extended her own empty glass to him, 'thank you,' she smiled.

Mike disappeared.

'What a charming man your friend is,' she beamed. 'I did not realise that my late husband had such agreeable and cultivated friends....'

I turned away and smothered a laugh in a cough.

When I turned back, she continued, 'And you? Are you in a similar line of business?'

Alun butted in before I could start, and she turned to look at him. I glowered and waved a fist at him, fearing the worst.

'Ah,' he said. 'Not quite the same line, but still extremely lucrative.'

'Ah!?'

'Alun...' I growled under my breath.

'He has large premises a little north of Place Vendome.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Near Pigalle.'

'Oh, God!' I sighed. 'An internationally renowned artiste is not interested in that, Alun.'

'Oh!' cried the Diva. 'On the contrary. I'm so interested to hear about Lucas' old friends.'

'I've just sold up,' I innovated to try and divert Alun. 'So, there's nothing to say. After all, the past should not be dwelt on, should it? I'm sure you'll understand.'

But Alun was having none of this. 'The place was called "The Palace".'

'The Palace?' she frowned. 'I seem to recognise the name.'

'I'm not surprised,' smiled Alun. 'Most people have. You may even have purchased some articles there.'

'Oh!'

'As I said, Alun. I've sold the place. So, let's change the subject.'

'Yes,' smiled Alun, ignoring me. 'He has decided to concentrate on Internet sales from now on. You have

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probably visited the website, too. It's called "Erotic Palace".'

'Oh, God!' I sighed.

The Diva was shocked, 'Erotic Palace!'

'One of the best erotic supply websites in Europe.'

'For God's sake, Alun!' I cried.

'Good heavens!' gasped the Diva. 'I had no idea....'

Alun nodded, 'And every bit as lucrative as selling diamonds, you know.'

'Really!' the opera singer swallowed hard and tried to compose herself. 'Well, well. I would never have guessed.'

Alun turned to me and smirked, 'Why not give Mrs. Metrokovitch one of your business cards? I believe you still use your maiden-name.'

I glowered at him, 'I haven't any on me.'

'Never mind,' he beamed at the woman. 'It's easy to remember, "Erotic Palace dot com".'

The Diva seemed to shake herself out of the state of shock, 'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Your friend seems to have filled my glass. I'll go and fetch it.' With this, she escaped.

'I'll get you for that, Alun,' I growled. 'You idiot.'

'Gave the squawking Prima Donna something to gasp about,' he laughed.

'You twat!'

'At least she'll leave you alone now.'

'She has left me alone up to now, thanks.'

'It's a pity she left. I'd have liked to tell her about your early days as an itinerant market stallholder selling faulty sex toys.'

'Brilliant!'

At this, Mike arrived carrying our bubbling glasses. 'That woman seemed disturbed about something. Oh! By the way, Alun.'

'Yes.'

'I'll get you for that diamond merchant lark.'

'Come on, Mike. Where's your sense of humour.'

'Alun told her I had a shop in the red-light area of Paris. Apparently, I now sell erotic goods on the internet.'

Mike shook his head, 'we'll have to work out something particularly embarrassing to tell her about him.'

'Embarrassing me is going to be difficult,' grinned Alun.

'We know,' I said. 'But we'll have fun in preparing it.'

'And watching her reactions.'

'Yes,' agreed Alun. 'That might be fun.'

'What if we told her he has an organic perfume company which uses horse urine for the base?' I suggested.

'Yes, nice. We could elaborate on that,' grinned Mike. 'And possibly he also makes thermal insulation panels out of dried and compressed wombat dung.'

I nodded, 'Yes. But we'll need to work on something more, too, so as to make it more embarrassing.

'Why not say that he came up with the idea during his last period in prison for shoplifting,' smiled Mike.

'Or for exhibiting himself in parks,' I suggested.

'Hum. Yes. A nice refinement.'

'Yes, we're definitely onto something there,' I nodded.

Alun lifted his glass in a toast, 'Here's to having fun, lads.'

We laughed together.

'Anyway, I'm not sure I altogether like that woman,' I admitted.

'Same here,' said Mike.

'That makes three,' said Alun.

By this time, the Opera Singer had button-holed Margaux and my Wife.

Alun brought this to our attention with an amused nod, 'shall we finish this lot and get some more champagne before the Girls can reel us in?' he suggested.

'Let's go,' I said, turning towards the table. 'Who do you want to lie to next?'

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Keeping to the opposite side of the long table from our better halves seemed an excellent strategic move. So once our glasses were replenished, we wandered over to where Emma's boyfriend, Martin, was chatting with Paul's fiancé, Sophie.

Martin was a friendly-faced, muscular young man with a tanned outdoor look, thick dark hair, and blue eyes.

That he was muscular and tanned was to be expected, given his calling.

He was, in fact, a sportsman and a member of the British Biathlon team.

Sometimes, in fact, he was the only member.

For those unfamiliar with the sport, biathlon combines cross-country skiing with rifle shooting.

Competitors chase each other around a life-endangering cross-country ski track at vertiginous speed with a heavy, high-precision rifle slung on their backs. This is done preferably at temperatures so far under zero as to be completely unheard of in the UK. After a handful of miles of this game, they throw themselves onto the frozen ground and shoot at targets so far off that they're almost invisible to the average human eye.

Then, off they go again, repeating the exercise until they are all so utterly exhausted that they only just manage to cross the finishing line before collapsing.

By then, they don't know or care whether they come first or last.

Some readers may wonder how an Englishman can get in enough training to make it worth his while turning up at the starting line. Well, clearly, the shooting part of the training is easy enough. That is as long as one can find the funds to purchase the tens of thousands of rounds of high-precision ammunition required every season. That works out at around a thousand euros a month.



As for the skiing training, well, they use skis on wheels. They're called "roller skis, " and they go dangerously fast. In this way, cross-country skiers can train almost anywhere, all year around. The only problem is stopping...

With skis on snow, one can choose between the snow plough technique or the lateral skid. But the problem with wheels on macadam is that they don't slide much.

In other words, one must know what one is doing to survive. This explains perhaps the limited size of the English team.

Martin, as already mentioned, was tanned and muscular. He was also both as tall and as slim as Emma, and the two made a perfect pair.

He had promised to show the three of us how to do roller skiing, which looked like being fun. He only suggested this because he had been primed by Emma and knew that regardless of our ages, we were in good physical condition and had experience of cross-country skiing.

'How did the training go this morning, Martin,' asked Alun, smiling.

Martin was drinking from a tall tumbler of orange juice.

'Not so good,' he replied. 'I'll have to have my rifle checked.'

'You should stop drinking so much orange juice. It's probably that that's giving you the shakes,' I joked.

'Ha! No. I tripped over it yesterday. It might need adjustment,' he frowned.

'How far did you run this morning?' asked Mike. 'I saw you heading out towards the village.'

'Oh! Twenty kilometres or so. Just an easy jog.' He sipped some more orange juice. 'Would you like to come and have a go on the shooting range tomorrow?'

We certainly would. The three of us had been secretly hoping he would invite us, but we didn't want to mess up his training schedule.

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'That would be fantastic,' I said. 'I always wanted to have a go.'

'Me too,' added Mike.

'Me too,' said Alun.

'Great,' smiled Martin. 'In a few days, I've got a rather special visitor coming too. The French women's Olympic biathlon champion, in fact.'

'An Olympic champion!? Wow!' gaped Mike.

'You can meet her too if you like. She's really nice, you'll like her. She's got a great sense of humour too.'

'Fantastic,' cried Alun. 'An Olympic champion with a sense of humour! Decidedly, this place is anything but dull...'

Martin nodded, 'She's going to give me a few tips and help me improve my shooting,' he smiled. 'She's retired from international competition now, though. To look after her young children and her husband too.'

'That must make for a hard transition,' I said. 'Competitors of that level are away from home half the year, especially during winter.'

'I'll let you know what it's like,' smiled Martin. 'When I get to retirement age,' he smiled. 'Anyway, she and her husband now run a biathlon training camp in the Vercors mountains. At Corencon, in fact. That gives them plenty to keep them busy. They do board and lodging and also training for any national team or club, and even enthusiastic amateur athletes.'

'That's not far from your place,' said Alun.

'No. Down into the valley, across Grenoble and up again via Lans en Vercors,' I nodded. 'I know it well. About an hour's drive.'

Sophie had been listening, her little head slightly to one side as if intent on not missing a word. She raised her head at us with amusement. 'Emma told me you were always game. I read all about...' At this point, Martin gave her a

sharp nudge and a frown, and she stopped short. 'Uh! Hum! Yes... I read all about your Olympic champion friend, Martin.'

'Yes. A nice girl,' said Martin, frowning while he swirled his orange juice around in the glass, making big eyes at her.

He glanced at the table where Paul was still controlling the champagne bottles. Glancing in our direction, he caught Martin's eye, who waved his hand in an exasperated gesture. Paul clearly understood the intended meaning of this and nodded back, waving to Sophie.

Sophie was a little younger than Paul, and they had been engaged for almost a year.

She was a pretty, petite, lively and amusing girl with a small almond-shaped face and thick, darkish, sun-bleached hair. She had brown eyes, a small, readily smiling mouth, and seemingly hundreds of tiny white teeth. Unlike the three other youngsters, she was neither tall nor slim. However, she made up for what she might lack in height in other quarters. She was, as Alun put it, definitely woman-shaped.

Sophie had just completed her master's degree in corporate internet marketing strategy and was now searching for a job. However, her real passion in life was singing.

She differed from most young singers her age by shunning urban pop and preferring text-driven ballads.

This music style is quite specific to France and the foundations of popular music and is termed "chanson à texte".

This style is reserved for those who love the beauty of well-turned phrases and meaningful texts.

Musical Poets, in fact.

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In Anglo-Saxon countries, we have turned our backs on text-based songs. It's almost as if modern songwriters have become embarrassed about talking of love where French writers clearly still revel in it.

Sophie also differed from others by shunning body-moulding tee shirts and buttock-hugging leggings. However, even with such staggering disadvantages, she had won several regional song contests. She had also turned her hand to songwriting.

However, she quickly realised that getting anywhere in the modern music business took a lot of work. Singing well and winning competitions was one thing, but getting a contract with a recording company was another affair. Sophie had an attractive, distinctive, and head-turning voice, which was a considerable advantage. However, she realised that more than concentrating on the covers of hit songs was needed to have a chance of being noticed. She discovered that she would need a repertoire of original songs too. That being said, she was also lucid enough to recognise that her own creations were not up to the level required.

So "Internet Marketing Strategy" would have to bring home the bacon for the moment.

She also seemed like the sort of young woman who might soon be thinking about founding a family. Paul, we knew, would be all for the idea and would certainly make a good father.

So, in practice, there were many barriers between her and a career as a professional popstar that she had not yet spotted.

Unlike the Biathlete Martin, Sophie was not into sports, despite being an excellent swimmer and a redoubtable opponent at table football. We discovered this as soon as the table to one side of the main farmhouse was uncovered and pulled over under the shadow of the trees.

She mercilessly beat the three of us with her lightning-fast wristwork.

She had told us smilingly that, in truth, the only time she ran was when the milk saucepan was boiling over.

She was a charming person to have around, and even "The Girls" approved. This, we agreed, was undoubtedly because she had made us all look foolish by thrashing us at table football.

We chatted about this and that until suddenly, we were interrupted by a loud, deep laugh.

'Oh hell!' groaned Mike, 'It's him.'

'Our friendly impresario cum artiste's agent,' chuckled Martin. 'He does take up rather a lot of space, doesn't he.'

'You're telling me!' sighed Alun. 'Almost as "bigger-than-life" as our ageing Diva, over there.'

'Yep,' replied Martin. 'Paul has obviously made the error of admitting to not having heard the guy's favourite amusing anecdotes.'

The impresario's name was Joseph Lewin. He was a big, round, knobbly-nosed man of about sixty-five years old. His rugged face was tanned by long years of drinking cocktails in the sun while his "artistes" made money for him.

He still had plenty of hair, although much of it was now white. His eyes were small and sparkling, and his ready smile was often accompanied by a loud laugh which shook his heavy, well-enveloped frame.

Admittedly, and to his credit, many of his most profitable contracts had been negotiated for his artistes whilst lounging beside some sparkling ocean or other with a glass or two of champagne. He liked to say that, with practice, one could find similar optimal negotiation conditions at any time of the year if one was willing to travel. As he skimmed off fifteen per cent of all revenue

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earned by Lucas, he was both willing and able to do any amount of travelling and drinking required.

Joseph had been the impresario of Lucas Duprès for thirty years. As such, he was known for his irrepressible bonhomie and inflexible bargaining acumen where hard money was concerned.

He managed his "artistes" as products to be marketed and sold, and he knew the market and the potential clients perfectly.

No matter the country, he knew exactly how much each venue could afford to pay and, more importantly, how much the local organiser hoped to make out of the transaction.

Above all, he knew that good champagne, sea views, and pretty assistants were essential elements to any profitable negotiation.

He was thus well known to the owners of the better modelling agencies worldwide. This explains why his "secretaries" always seemed to be so spectacular and ephemeral. What, after all, was a few hundred euros for the presence of a top-class model when contracts were frequently in the hundred thousand range?

What the models did after the negotiation was no concern of his. However, he was gratified occasionally to discover one of them popping up as wife to one of his wealthy contacts. At least such girls knew how to play the cards chance put into their hands.

However, business was business, so he kept his own hands off them. This, in turn, kept him on excellent terms with the agencies. The latter, naturally enough, took twenty per cent from their models' earnings, so everybody was happy at the end of the day.'

So here he was, the loud, large, prosperous businessman, now bearing down on us.

Sophie opened her eyes wider than would have been thought possible and rapidly made an impressively adroit exit.

'Oh, hello monsieur Lewin. Excuse me. Paul seems to be beckoning to me. See you later.'

When we turned to look in Paul's direction, he had caught sight of the movement. Quick on the uptake, he raised his hand and waved at Sophie.

She smiled back at us and skipped away.

'Hello lads,' shouted monsieur Lewin. 'How goes?'

We shook hands and smiled.

'Nice champagne this, eh boys!?' he sipped from his glass. 'As you see, my friends. I did an excellent job of training Lucas to select the best champagne.' He laughed loudly. 'The truth is that I gave him the name of my own wine merchant in Paris.'

'We nodded, sipping the champagne with more and more respect and attention.'

'I only hope he managed to negotiate the possibility of taking a bit of his cellar-full up there with him when he went.' He laughed again. 'After all, imagine all eternity without a decent glass of champagne or two a day.' He smiled. 'I can just imagine him sitting up there on the edge of a cloud looking down at us, with his legs dangling over it. An iced glass of champagne in his hand, of course.' He chuckled. 'Now that's what I call heaven. Mind you, had we gone up together, I would certainly have been able to bring the entrance committee to see things from our point of view. Even angles are open to a bit of healthy negotiation. It keeps them on their toes.'

'I bet he gets thirsty after a day of training the celestial choirs...' chuckled Alun.

'You bet!' exclaimed the man pulling a g-face. 'I wonder what percentage I could get up there?'

'You'll probably find out sooner or later,' I chuckled.

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'Better later than sooner,' he replied, 'Like Lucas, I have a cellar full of wine to get through before I'm ready to relocate.'

We all laughed.

'Anyway,' he continued. 'Nice Girl that Paul has found himself,' nodded the man.

'Sophie?' I asked.

He nodded, 'Yes. A nice voice, too.'

'Voice!?' said Mike with a frown.

'A singing voice, I mean.'

'I didn't know she sang,' he said. 'Another Diva?'

The man laughed, reached out and shook him by the shoulder. 'No. Not that style at all. Modern stuff.'

'Pop, you mean.' I asked.

'Goodness knows what it's called nowadays,' he smiled. 'They seem to invent a new name every week. I don't keep up.'

Alun nodded. 'If you're not top-notch, then invent a new style so that you can be number one in that category. Clever marketing trick that.'

I looked over at Alun. 'We could create the "Street Grump" style. We'd be top in that.' I smiled.

'Or "Flack", which, as everybody knows, is like "Street Grump" but with a much faster delivery,' suggested Alun.

'And we could do away with music entirely and call it "Green Flack". Environmentally friendly, because there would be no musicians and no lorryloads of gear to transport around the globe.'

'Yes. And we could do away with lyrics altogether. That makes it easier to rhyme and thus saves time during the composition phase. And as we all know, Time is CO2.'

'That would lead us directly to "Gutteral Flack", at which we would excel.'



The impresario chuckled, 'You guys have fertile imaginations, I see. Looked as though you were trying some of it out on our celebrated Celebrity.'

'Mike winced, 'You can't imagine the rubbish they vomited out.'

'Oh, come on, Mike,' I said. 'It was fun.'

'For you, maybe. 'He sighed. 'And only for the moment. These things have a way of ricocheting...'

The impresario nodded. 'That woman takes everything very literally. Always has. No sense of humour at all.'

'I noticed,' groaned Mike.

'Anyway,' smiled the man. 'From your description, I presume your new "Gutteral Flack" style would entail you blundering about the stage wearing un-ironed and shabby clothes, Grunting at each other.'

'We professionals prefer to call it "Flacking" at each other. But otherwise, you seem to have got the general idea,' smiled Alun.

I nodded at the impresario, 'Much money in it, do you think? After all, you are the expert.'

The man laughed and sipped his champagne. "Well. I'm not sure I would put any money up for the project.'

'We consider it to be what the French call a "Niche Market",' I said.

'That means a Kennel in English,' said Mike.

'Thanks, Mike,' I said.

'But are you sure you're not using the contraction for the word "Nichon"?' frowned Mike. 'After all, "Nichon" is the French slang for a Breast. So, knowing you, Alun, that's what you're probably on about.'

Alun jumped, 'Great heavens! I didn't know that breasts could have contractions. Decidedly, one lives and learns.'

'Women have all the fun,' I nodded.

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'But a Kennel Market!?' Now there's an exciting idea, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'I'll look into that when I have a moment.'

The Empresario shook his head in disbelief, 'You guys are crazy...'

'Thanks,' said Alun, holding out his hand to be shaken.

'Anyway,' Joseph continued. 'That girl has an interesting voice. There might be something doing for her.' He paused. 'Mind you, her piano playing is not up to it.'

He was about to give us a more detailed expert opinion when we were interrupted.

The final two members of our little gathering came over, glasses in hand.

Florence and Andrew had been the last to arrive at the farm a little earlier in the day.

The woman Florence had been the best friend of Ivan's Wife, Emilie. Emma told us that Florence was officially Paul's Godmother but had never taken any interest in him. She had met Lucas several times after Ivan's death but had never taken the trouble to contact Paul or Emma.

This was not really surprising because, firstly, she had always had an intense dislike of children. Secondly, she moved to New Zealand a year after Paul's birth.

She was a tall woman in her early forties with luxuriant dark hair. Like Sophie, she was decidedly woman-shaped. She had also been blessed with a wide, flashing film star-like smile and a magnificent figure to go with it.

Unlike Sophie, though, she did not believe in hiding from sight the ample curves that the good lord had bountifully showered on her. Naturally, therefore, Unlike Sophie, she did not shun close-fitting or body-moulding clothes.

In a word, she was the sort of woman who caused all wives to link arms with their husbands and hold on tight when she made her appearance at a party.

Her husband, Andrew, was a big man of about Fifty.

Even though he was far younger than Joseph Lewin, he looked older and in far worse physical condition. He walked with a slow and heavy tread as though carrying far more weight than he had. He had a fat, round face, a big mouth, and small, frowning blue eyes. His huge eyebrows gave him the look of someone who was perpetually frowning. To crown everything, he had a syrupy voice and slow delivery that one expected more from an old-school politician.

Finally, the quality of the material his suite was made of proclaimed him a man who made good money out of whatever activity he was involved in.

We were just about to start chatting when Emma stepped into our midst.

Emma came over to us. 'Sorry to interrupt you all.'

'No trouble, my dear,' said Joseph.

'Well,' she said, turning to Mike. 'I need your help.'

Mike immediately straightened himself and sucked in his stomach. 'Only too pleased,' he smiled. 'What can I do for you?'

'Careful, Mike,' cried Alun. 'You'll create an internal vacuum if you hold that posture too long.'

Florence made one of those highly suggestive unspoken comments through a half-smile and a squeezing together of the eyes.

When I say squeezing together, I must clarify that I don't mean bringing the two eyes closer together on a horizontal axis, which would be a considerable feat. I should have said she half-closed her eyes or something like that.

I also noticed her lean forward as if intent on giving Mike an encouraging pat on the stomach. However, she quickly and smoothly controlled the movement.

I shot a look at Alun, who had also spotted the thing. He pursed his lips at me.

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This was not the first time the three of us had encountered predators of this nature.

With men of our ages, we knew perfectly well that the objective of such manoeuvres was always something other than what we would have liked them to be for.

My wife and Margaux had often been kind enough to point this out to us. Just in case we might be tempted into some spider web or other.

As it was, she contented herself with an enigmatic smile, which would have frozen Mike to a standstill had he been watching her.

But he was intent on Emma.

Emma laughed airily, 'Well, the truth is that the man has come to check the air conditioning set up. Paul and I know nothing about that sort of thing.' she pulled a face. 'You're the tech boffin, Mike. Please go and check that he doesn't do anything he shouldn't.

'Oh. And Margaux said to tell you not to touch anything.'

'She said what!?' Alun bridled. 'Has she absolutely no confidence in us?'

Mike and I gazed sadly at him, 'Alun,' I said.

He sighed. 'Yes, yes. I know. The answer is No. No, in capital letters.'

'That's roughly the impression she gave me,' chuckled Emma. 'She said, "Just tell them they can talk as much as they like, as long as they keep their hands in their pockets".'

Alun looked up and turned to look across the table to where my wife and Margaux stood.

They waved their hands and smiled what we thought were somewhat exaggerated smiles.

'I really don't know why I put up with continual slighting comments like this,' sighed Alun.

'Emma smiled, 'Love, probably.'

Alun shrugged, lifted his eyes skywards and sighed.

‘Anyway. Fear not, fair damsel,’ he cried. ‘Heedless of the slings and poisoned arrows and in the face of any doubting or danger, we will, notwithstanding, to the breach go forth... Or at least, something like that.’

With this, we took our leave and bravely went forth.

Well, to be more precise, I was last, and so went third.

Anyway, Led by Mike, still sadly swollen in the head, we headed down the hill towards the mill house.

## CHAPTER 5

**W**hen Lucas discovered the abandoned farm, he was particularly enthusiastic about the old flour mill.

This ancient stone-built structure stood at the base of the hillock, overlooked by the farm buildings. It was located at the point where the three branches of the original torrent joined together.

In olden times, the fast-flowing water powered a set of grindstones, permitting the farm to produce flour from the cereals it cultivated. The owner also ground the grain for neighbouring farms and had done so for centuries.

Regardless of inter-family rivalries, such differences were temporarily set aside in those times to ensure the entire community's survival.

His quick mind immediately saw the potential of the derelict structure.

As soon as he was in legal possession of the farm, he called in an electrical engineering friend.

While the architects prepared the house renovation plans, the two friends set to work on the water wheel. They started by disconnecting the drive axle from the grinding stones. They then attached it to an old dynamo to supply the site with free electricity until the local authorities had installed the new electricity line. Lucas knew this would take longer than usual because he had insisted on having

the line buried. His idea was to have a single trench dug from the main road. This would house the electricity, the water supply, the drains, the telephone cable, and/or optical fibre and not spoil the view.

Admittedly, Lucas' homemade electricity could have been more constant and precise in voltage. However, even though it fluctuated, it was sufficient for lighting and domestic appliances.

The top priority of the overall scheme was to ensure the comfort of his virtuoso musician visitors. To ensure this, he intended to install air conditioning in each of the houses. He knew only too well how hot it gets in southern France in summer. His experience of sleepless nights in overheated

dwelling in that region convinced him that such conditions were not optimal for restoring overworked classical musicians' physical and mental tissues.

So while the place was dug up, all piping for this would go underground, too.

Luckily, one of his oldest friends was a professor of hydro-thermal research at the University of Sophia-Antipolis, near Antibes.

The two got together and had a good deal of fun designing a cunning system using the ice-cold torrent water to cool an oversized heat exchanger immersed in the mill pond. In mid-summer, this system could cool the ambient air to about fifteen degrees centigrade.

They also used the water wheel to operate an oversized ventilation pump, which blew the cooled air through a series of insulated underground pipes to each house on the hill.

This allowed them to maintain the temperature in the living and sleeping quarters of the farm at about twenty-three degrees. This temperature could be maintained

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even in the middle of summer when the outside temperature reached thirty-seven degrees centigrade.

The two men were particularly proud of their installation and published several scientific papers. However, the undeniable advantage of their system was that it cost absolutely nothing to operate.

Not only that, but it could also run in emergency mode on its own electricity.

During the first year, many specialists came to study the system, which was so elegant and so simple. It was also almost silent, except for the noise of cascading water.

One only needed a big ice-cold pond and a reliable torrent.

An added advantage of their system was that it could also dry the air.

To harness this property, they added a secondary set-up to send dried air through the basement area of all the houses. This enabled them to limit the ingress of humidity leaking up from the torrent's bed.

The van from the local company responsible for the installation's upkeep was parked by the old mill house.

At the back, an overalled man in his late forties was lifting out his toolbox as we approached.

'The patronne asked us to come and see if we could be useful,' said Mike.

'For some strange reason, she seemed to have confidence in our technical expertise,' added Alun.

The man laughed. 'I'll show you how the thing works if you're interested. A very clever set-up, really.'

'Yes. She told us that. I'd like to have a look,' said Mike enthusiastically.'

'Thinking of installing something similar in your fishpond, Mike?' I joked.



'You could install the circulation pump in the sewer. That always has a good regular flow of fluids to keep it turning.'

'Not much need of cooling, though. I chuckled. 'Where he lives, I mean.'

'No, that's true,' smiled Alun.

Mike ignored us and followed the man through the iron door in the thick stone wall.

'This thing never goes wrong,' said the repair man. 'The biggest job is lifting the heat exchangers out of the water and cleaning out any weeds and mud once a year. That's what the little crane by the pond is for.'

'Big, is it?' asked Mike.

'Big! You're telling me. Four metres by four.' he smiled at our astonishment. 'Hey, you don't get something for nothing. The main job is keeping the bearings and gearwheels well-greased and checking the backup system.'

'Backup?' frowned Mike.

'Yep. The year after it was finished, those two crazy guys added a secondary pump for the drying circuit. He said he didn't want the place getting damp if the main pump failed.'

We exchanged looks. 'I suppose he planned on having a cellar full of vintage wine that he didn't want ruined,' I said.

The Man laughed, 'Wine!? Are you joking? That guy didn't drink,' he nodded. 'Neither did his musical pals.'

'Really!' This astonished us, 'Are you sure?' asked Alun with a frown.

'I got it from the horse's mouth.'

The three of us frowned.

'Oh yes!' he laughed, seeing this. 'My father-in-law owns the local supermarket. The guy bought all his food supplies from there. Apparently, he never bought a single bottle of wine.'

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While the man was rummaging in his tool case, we frowned at each other, having only just tested the seemingly unlimited supply of champagne. This had appeared as if by magic from the cellar and certainly didn't back up the idea that Lucas Duprès had been a teetotaler.

'Maybe he only drunk vint...' Mike started, but I secretly held my hand and glared at him to stop him.

'Maybe he only drank lemonade or something like that,' I finished.

'Yeh. Something like that,' said the man. 'I suppose those musical virtuosos don't get that good by being drunk half the time.'

'No,' agreed Alun, 'You're probably right'.

'Stange life, eh!' he sniffed. 'Not for me, though.'

'Me neither,' said Alun.

'See here,' said the man, turning to Mike. 'This electric backup pump starts automatically if the water-driven one ever stops for some reason. The clever bit is this.' He pointed to a system of heavily greased cogs. 'If the torrent is still flowing normally, then the water-driven dynamo supplies the electricity. That runs the secondary ventilator over there. It also supplies a flashing lamp on the roof. We go past here on the main road several times a day, so we can easily see when there's a problem and come up.'

'Cunning and simple,' I said. 'And what if the torrent stops or the water inlet gets blocked?'

'Then the system switches over to the mains electricity. And that starts a big blue light flashing.'

We nodded. 'And you come up and unblock the channel.'

'Exactly,' he nodded, 'But nothing ever goes wrong. Anyway, we check the whole backup system once a year.'

We nodded.

'Look over there. See those thermometers?'

We nodded.

'The left-hand one is the temperature of the ambient air input to the exchanger, and the right-hand one is the temperature of the air output to the houses.'

The input temperature dial indicated twenty-eight degrees, and the output one marked fifteen.

'See,' he smiled. 'It works like a dream.'

'Brilliant,' Mike said.

'And all for free,' nodded the man. 'Brilliant, eh! The air warms up a bit on the way up, of course. Even so, they can keep the rooms and twenty-three or four all summer.'

'Very clever,' agreed Mike.

We followed the man back outside once he had finished slapping a bucket full of grease on the bearings and cogs. 'One wonders where all that grease goes,' he shrugged.

We then witnessed the lifting of the enormous heat exchanger and its cleaning with a powerful water jet.

'In spring, we give it a once over with a metal brush to remove all the stuff that settles during winter. A long, cold and wet job,' he paused. 'But I suppose we have to do something for our money. Anyway, there are fish in this pond, too, so we rarely go home empty-handed.'

When he was finished, we thanked him for his explanations and made our way back up the hill as he drove away.

Mike was frowning, 'A clever system that.'

'Yep,' said Alun. 'But one hell of a lot of gear to keep an empty wine cellar cool and dry, don't you think?'

'Exactly what I was thinking,' I said.

'I presume he didn't buy wine from the shop because it wasn't up to his standards,' mused Alun.

'I was thinking that too,' I added, then stopped and turned to them. 'But I was also thinking something else. I wiggled my eyebrows.'

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'Oh, come on!' groaned Mike. 'Let's have it clever guts.'

Well, don't you think it odd to go to so much trouble for a few bottles of wine?'

'Nice champagne, though. But yes.'

'And...' I paused, 'He left none of his well-earned millions. They seem to have disappeared, don't they.'

'So,' sighed Mike. 'He spent them all commissioning his revolutionary air-conditioning system. Is that it?'

'Ah! yes. Of course. The research and design and prototyping and all that...' started Alun.

'NO,' I interrupted. 'You're on the wrong track altogether.'

'Oh!?'

'Yes. I wondered if clever old Lucas might have converted his fortune into gold.'

'Gold!?' frowned Mike. 'Gold doesn't have to be kept cool and dry.'

'I'm thinking about liquid gold.'

'What!' cried Mike. 'Have you any idea at what temperature gold melts? One thousand and sixty degrees C. You need to heat it, not cool it.'

'Not real gold, Mike,' I sighed.

'Not real gold!?' he stammered.

'Oh Hell, Mike. I'm talking about fine vintage wines. The sort of stuff that sells for thousands and thousands of euros a bottle. Some vintage wines go for more than thirty thousand euros a bottle. Chateau Romanee-Conti, for example.'

'How much!?'

'You heard Mike. Ten thousand euros.'

'Thirty thousand for a single bottle of wine!' stammered Mike.

'It's Romanee-Conti, not Chateau Romanee-Conti said Alun, nodding slowly. 'But anyway. So, you're saying that he might have purchased a cellar full of priceless wine,' he

paused and smiled, shaking his head slowly. 'The cunning swine!'

'Exactly, Alun,' I said. 'And like that, his fortune might be sitting here right under everybody's noses.'

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Mike. 'Nobody would ever guess. They'd go rooting around expecting to find piles of gold ingots hidden behind the wine racks when, all along, they were drinking his fortune every day. Incredible.'

I nodded. 'Brilliant, eh!'

'And no doubt his impresario's wine merchant supplied the stuff,' smiled Alun.

'Do you think that guy Joseph guessed?' said Mike.

'Maybe that's why he's here,' I said.

'Not to get his hands on it!? You don't think he'd do that?' frowned Mike.

'I wouldn't put it past him,' I said. 'He might even have helped select the stuff. In which case, he would know exactly what it is worth.'

Alun smiled slowly and shook his head sadly. 'The clever swine. And then he could offer to help the poor children by taking the whole lot of their hands for a generous sum.'

'A few per cent of the true value, of course.' I agreed.

'Wait a mo, you idiots,' cried Mike. 'We don't even know if there is a single bottle of decent wine down there Yet.'

'Hum. Yes, maybe.' I frowned. 'But that red wine last night was pretty incredible.'

'Exactly, Mike. Certainly not village supermarket stuff.' agreed Alun.

'Maybe,' agreed Mike. 'Yes. Definitely decent juice.'

Alun then slapped me heartily on the shoulder. 'Anyway. Well done. Brilliant idea. Let's get up there and share the news.'

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We started back up the hill to where Paul and Emma were clearing away the empties.

Everyone else had stumbled back to doze off the champagne before the late evening meal.

I explained my idea to them and its reasoning, and they stood stunned for some moments.

'So,' I said excitedly. 'Shall we go and check the theory?'

'It's probably another of his stupid ideas,' said Mike. 'This will be about the four hundredth I've heard, Sodon't get unduly enthusiastic.'

Paul gazed at us, 'But I don't know anything about expensive vintage wines.'

'Me neither,' said Emma.

'Neither do we,' I smiled, 'except that they're expensive.'

'So? grumbled Mike. 'Where does that leave us?'

'But Mike.' I smiled, 'My little laptop knows everything there is to know about vintage wines. Shall we go?'

As we walked past the pond, Emma was typing into her phone. 'Heavens!' she cried, stopping short, holding up one of the empty champagne bottles. 'I checked this.' She gulped. 'This stuff sells for two hundred and fifty euros a bottle.'

'Great gods!' gasped Paul. 'We just got through about two thousand euros worth of bubbly in an hour, then.'

I nodded, 'My wild idea might just have an element of truth in it after all. Come on.'

Alun paused. 'Do you know? I think it might be a wise move to alert the Girls.'

'Ah!' I said, 'Yes, wise move.' You go, Alun. But another wise move would be to keep all this from the others for the moment. You never know.'

The five of us exchanged looks. 'Ok,' said Emma. 'Yes, a prudent move.'

As usual, the key to the cellar was dangling on its frayed string beside the door.

'I'd keep that in your pocket from now on if I were you,' I said. 'At least if we find anything interesting.'

Paul nodded and opened the door, which swung open smoothly on well-greased hinges.

The old, worn, creaking oak staircase had been replaced by a solid stone-built one since Lucas had purchased it.

Emma flicked a switch, and a soft yellow light filled the room.

At the bottom of the steps, against the right-hand wall, wooden cases of wine were staked, head high.

Each column was labelled by a wooden panel fixed to the stone wall.

Mike stepped down, 'pretty dry down here.'

'Cold too,' I added.

'Yes. That cunning system of his works, then.'

I frowned. 'Works even better than I would have expected.'

We tramped down the steps and stood together on the dry flagstone floor, gazing around the low arched-roofed cellar.

The stacks of wine cases were labelled "Champagne", "Bordeaux", "Bourgogne", "Loire", and "Cote du Rhone". Nearest to the door was a double stack marked "Rosé".

Above these panels was a longer one marked "Everyday Wine". Behind us and above the racks, similar panels indicated the wines surmounted by a red-painted panel marked "Reserve".

'Great gods,' cried Alun. 'There must be hundreds of bottles down there.'

'Five hundred in the racks, to be exact, Alun.' said Mike. 'Plus, all the boxed stuff. About six hundred more.'

'How on earth can you know that?'

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'Because Alun. As far as I know, the multiplication tables of our youth still work,' He grinned. 'Each rack has five columns and twenty rows. Which gives...'

'One hundred. Thanks, Mike.'

'And there are five racks. Which gives...'

'Five hundred bottles. Good heavens,' said Emma. 'I never thought about it before.'

'That, one hundred times five makes five hundred?' frowned Mike.

'Hilarious, Mike,' smiled Emma.

'He was being serious, Emma,' smiled Alun.

Mike pretended not to hear, which was his usual way of dealing with such situations. Then he went on.

'And the cases contain six bottles each, and there are ten in each stack, and there are...' he counted. Ten stacks. Which makes?'

'Six hundred!' gasped Paul.

Mike nodded. 'I have a science-oriented brain. So, I notice that sort of thing instinctively.'

Alun groaned, 'Oh, leave off, Mike.'

Mike sighed. 'Whereas Alun here has a sex-orientated brain, so he instinctively notices Breasts.'

'And Buttocks,' I added.

'Show him any Mediterranean beach, and within seconds, he can tell you exactly how many breasts and buttocks there are on it,' I chuckled.

'Then we divide by two to get the number of females in the visible stretch?' added Mike.

'I instinctively know when to give you a clip on the ear,' grumbled Alun, making a quick move.

But Mike, who was expecting this, was off the mark faster this time.

'That double stack of boxes over there is all champagne, and it looks like the same as the stuff we had earlier. So, Alun, how much would that lot be worth... How



much?' He paused and went on. 'It would be worth about thirty thousand euros...'

'What!?' Cried Emma and Paul simultaneously.

'Not bad for "Everyday" bubbly,' I said.

'How much!?' Another female voice came from the top of the steps.

Margaux and my wife had arrived.

'For heaven's sake, keep your voices down,' I whispered. Could one of you lock the front door? We wouldn't want anyone barging in for the moment.'

A few moments later, we heard the front door shut and the key turn with a rusty grinding noise.

'But as I said, "*IF* it was the same as the stuff we drank", he paused and smiled at us. 'But that panel above the racks says "reserve", and it no doubt holds something quite different.'

'Ah!' said Emma.

'Exactly, what I was thinking,' added Paul.

'And now to work,' said Mike, taking things in hand. 'Pass me over the laptop, Paul. I'll make a spreadsheet. And Emma, you can check the values on the internet using your phone. You'll need to sit at the top of the steps because the Wi-Fi doesn't get down here.'

We pulled out the old round metal table, and Mike dusted it off, sat down and opened the computer.

'Right,' he said. 'Now Alun. We'll do the boxed stuff first, I think. Then, we'll start at the bottom of Rack number one. Take out each bottle and read out the name and year.'

'Right ho.'

'Then show it to Margaux, who can call the name up to Emma. Then, count the number of identical bottles. Emma, once you've found the value, call it down. Has everybody got that?'

'Yes, professor,' smiled my wife.

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'This is going to be a bit long,' he nodded at us, 'But I suspect it will be worth it.'

We smiled at each other and rubbed our hands in enthusiasm.

Mike messed about with the spreadsheet software for a few moments and then said, 'OK. Shoot.'

Well, the champagne was, as Mike had said, the same as we had drunk earlier.

The rest went quickly because Lucas had chosen a single wine and vintage for each type.

Although the wines had clearly been carefully selected, it was clear that Lucas had also aimed at a specific price range for his "everyday" wine. They all lay in a price range between two hundred and three hundred euros per bottle.

At one point, Alun stopped and looked over at us. 'Do you know what I was thinking about?'

'Breasts?' said Mike.

Emma and Paul burst into laughter.

'Shut up, Mike.'

'He was thinking about Beer,' called My wife from upstairs. 'I'd guess he was calculating how many glasses of beer you could buy for one of these bottles.'

'How on earth did you know that!?' cried Alun.

'How long have we known each other, Alun?' called my wife.

'Very amusing,' grumbled Alun. 'Well, you could get nearly sixty pints of draught beer for each of these bottles.'

'Sixty!?' said Mike.

'Simple arithmetic, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'A little more than four euros a pint and about two hundred and fifty euros for these bottles...'

'OK, ok,' said Mike. 'I got it. How about getting on with the job. Let's get started with the "reserve" racks.'

Alun crossed the narrow cellar, pulled out the first dusty bottle and wiped the label clean with his handkerchief.

'Domaine Leroy Les Combottes, Gevrey-Chambertin Premier Cru, 2015,'

Mike typed as Margaux called up to Emma.

There was a gasping noise. 'Did you say 2015?'

'Yes, 2015.'

'And Leroy Les Combottes?'

'Yes.'

'Red?'

'Yes.'

'Oh my god!'

'What's wrong,' called Margaux.

'Five thousand three hundred and twenty-three euros!'

'How much!?' we all echoed.

Alun called over, 'There are two of these.'

'Oh,' said Mike. 'Hold on a moment. Before we continue, there's just one more important point.'

'Just the one, Mike,' chuckled Alun.

'Yes. If the rest of this wine is the same quality, we ought to handle the bottles rather more carefully.'

'With respect,' I added.

'Oh! I hadn't thought of that,' said Alun, pulling a face.

Mike nodded. 'I noticed that. So, whatever you do, don't shake the stuff. Pull each bottle out slowly, and whatever you do, don't tilt it off the horizontal,'

Emma frowned, 'why ever not,'

'Because we don't want the sediment to get shaken up. It takes months to settle again.'

I nodded, 'And that's why the bottles are always laid out with the labels upmost. So, the bottle does not need to be rotated to see what it is.'

Paul shook his head slowly. 'You know. I never thought about that. Cunning.'

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'Right,' called Mike. 'Next. Come on. We haven't got all night.'

Margaux shivered. 'It's freezing down here. I'm not spending half the night in sub-zero temperatures.'

'Hardly sub-zero,' said Mike. 'What do you expect? After all, this is an underground, stone-built cellar.'

'Designed specifically to stay cool,' I added.

My wife wandered over to an enormous thermometer hanging on the wall. 'Twelve degrees,' she called. 'I'll bring you some blankets, or you'll all catch your deaths...'

Alun smiled. 'I haven't heard that expression since my gran used to grumble at us for playing in the snow without gloves.'

'Well, you made it through all the same,' I chuckled.

Mike was typing on the laptop keyboard. He looked up and said, 'Twelve degrees is perfect for storing wine. His set-up seems to work, then.'

I frowned, but just as an idea tickled at the back of my mind, we heard steps on the floor above.

Margaux came down with some warm blankets, which we draped ourselves with

The next up was A saint Emilion "Cheval Blanc 2009.

'One thousand one hundred and six euros,' called Emma. Good heavens. Are they all like that?'

Alun counted, 'twenty of those. Great gods!'

'Next, Alun, please,' called Mike.

'Petrus, Pomerol, 2015,' he called.

'Three thousand and eighty euros,' called down Emma. 'My head is starting to throb.'

We slugged on at the task for more than an hour while Mike diligently filled in the lengthening spreadsheet. He made backups when we finished each new rack. "Just in case", as he put it.

There were not many such huge surprises as the first, but most of the bottles we added to the list were well above the thousand-euro mark.'

There were admittedly a few more gasps, especially when we were working through the white wines. The biggest gasps were when we discovered six bottles of "Domaine de la Romanee-Conti" "Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru", Cote de Beaune, valued at nine thousand five hundred euros per bottle.

However, all good things eventually come to an end. Emotionally exhausted, we replaced the final bottle in its resting place.

There had been something almost frightening about the whole dreamlike experience.

Emma was holding her head between her hands and had squeezed her eyes tight shut as the silence fell upon the cool cellar.

Paul rocked gently back and forth on his heels, and even Allun looked drawn and tired. My wife and Margaux stood at the top of the stone stairs, gazing down at us. I had been checking each bottle over Alun's shoulder, and my back was aching. But above all, my feet were freezing.

The only movement in the cellar came from Mike. He was messing about with the laptop. We did not interrupt him because he was clearly concentrating on the task at hand.

'I'll do a double backup before we go any further,' he said, and we left him to it. He then took out the USB key he always carried on his keyring and made an extra backup copy of the file.

He then leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh. 'Done,' he said.

I don't know why, but simultaneously, we started clapping in a thunder of echoing applause and cheering.

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What we were applauding. We didn't know. It just seemed to be the natural thing to do. This broke the spell and brought us back down to earth.

Mike stretched his shoulders back and blew out his cheeks. 'And now, ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'Shall we ask our little friend here if it wouldn't mind adding up these columns and supplying us with the total? He looked around the circle of faces.

'Ready when you are, Mike,' called Margaux.

'Ready, Emma?'

She nodded, and he hit the key.

'Oh dear,' he said, then leaned forward and frowned, nodding. 'Ah ha! Now that's Interesting...'

'Come on, you twit, Mike.' Cried my wife. 'Give us the result, or we'll all die of heart failure.'

Mike looked up at us from the screen, 'Well, unless I have made a mistake somewhere, those boxed "everyday" wines over there are worth...' he paused.

'Get on with it, you devil,' cried Margaux.

'They're worth one hundred and forty-eight thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven euros.'

Silence fell.

We looked at each other, nobody finding words to describe the shock this had given us.

'How much!?' cried Paul.

Mike held up his hand for silence. He smiled, 'Plus...' and paused again for effect, then continued, 'The "Reserve", of course.'

'Mike!' growled Margaux. 'Get on with it. We aren't doing a Hollywood drama.'

Well, the "Reserve" wine comes out at the pleasant total, give or take a few euros...'

'Mike...!' growled Margaux again.

'Well, all right. Are you all ready?'

My wife made a clutching tiger-like gesture with her red varnished fingernails.

The total comes to the incredible Seven hundred and fifty-seven thousand, four hundred and seven little euros.

'Great balls of fire,' cried Emma, coming out of her dreamlike state, her eyes as round as saucers.

'That makes a grand total of nine hundred and five thousand eight hundred and thirty-four euros.'

Then there was a commotion of voices and a clapping of hands on shoulders

Alun was gazing at his hands, which were now trembling slightly, 'Do you realise, you lot, that I've just handled nearly a million euros of vintage wine? Great God almighty.'

Emma gasped, 'Oh God Yes!... Nearly a million euros. Just sitting down here unguarded under everybody's noses.'

I laughed out loud, 'And when I think that the repair man told us that the entire village is convinced that Lucas and all his musician pals were teetotallers.'

Paul spluttered, 'And where on earth did they get that idea from.'

'Because Luca never purchased a single bottle of wine or alcohol from the local supermarket,' I chuckled. 'I wonder why...'

We all laughed heartily.

'Great Gods cried Emma. I just don't believe it. Nearly a million euros of wine.'

This exchange of astonished comments went on for some time until Paul held up his hand. 'I don't know about you lot. But I need a drink.'

'Me too,' cried Alun.

'Ditto,' I added.

'And, what's more, I need to warm up my feet,' I added.

'Me too,' said Mike.'

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'Ditto,' added Alun. 'Brrr, It's damn cold down here.'

'And we're not built like vintage wines. They thrive on such conditions,' laughed Alun.

'They also thrive on the conditions inside my mouth,' I added.

'There's still about a thousand euros worth of cheap "everyday" champagne in the fridge, laughed Emma. Let's go and celebrate.'

Mike switched off the computer, and we climbed the stairs back to the sitting room, our faces still flushed with excitement.

Paul locked the cellar door, and Alun double-checked it.

'I'm pleased there are four of us living within a few metres of this door. Can you imagine if...'

'Don't imagine,' I said. 'Or you'll never sleep again. We'll sort out what to do about it tomorrow.'

Then Margaux gazed at me across the table, which was rapidly filling with bubbling glasses. 'That was one of the most brilliant bits of deduction that I have ever heard of.'

My wife nodded and gave me a big kiss on the cheek. 'Agreed. Absolutely incredible.'

I blushed to the roots of my hair, which was admittedly not much of an exploit seeing the scarcity of the stuff.'

'Here's to the genius,' called Emma from the fridge. 'A million-dollar man, in Fact.'

'Here, here,' came the call from the congregation.

'Well,' frowned Mike. 'To be exact. As the present exchange rate is between the euro and dollar...'

Margaux rushed over and grabbed Mike around the neck, 'do I strangle him now or after the champagne?'

We all laughed and lifted our glasses, 'To the future,' I called.

'To the future,' echoed the six others.



'This will pay for all the repairs to the roof and all the other stuff that needs doing. The extra insulation and maybe even triple glazing too....' sighed Emma.

'How can we ever thank you enough she added, hugging me and kissing my forehead.

'Well,' I smiled,' you could remember to invite us all frequently. And make sure to keep a bit of this everyday rubbish.'

We all laughed and lifted our glasses, which sparkled in the mellow light thrown by the standard lamp in the corner.

'Mmm!' My wife frowned and went over to the cupboard.

We followed her with our heads.

She opened the door and took out one of the glasses nearer the back.

She came over and held the glass up to the light.

She nodded and handed it to Margaux, who nodded too.

'Emma.'

'Yes,'

'I wouldn't put these glasses in the washing up machine if I were you.'

Emma frowned. 'Why not?'

My wife set the glass down in front of her, 'I wouldn't be surprised if these glasses were worth as much as this champagne.'

Emma gasped, and Paul stood up and took the glass.

'This is extremely fine handmade crystal,' continued my wife. There must be at least two thousand euros worth of glassware on the table at the moment.' she paused, and all the glasses in that cupboard seem to me to be the same quality.'

'Great Gods,' gasped Emma. 'we're surrounded by riches. Where will all this end.'

'There must be, not far off, a hundred thousand euros of glassware in that cupboard.'

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'Good heavens!' cried my wife, 'We ought to look at the rest of the tableware. I suspect that Lucas has left you more surprises there, too.'

Well, he had.

After we had finished our tour of the cupboards and draws, we sat down together and opened another bottle of "everyday".

'Do you know what I think?' said Mike.

We looked at him.

'I guess that if all this, minus the "everyday" rubbish, is put up to auction. Then you'll come out of it with roughly nine hundred thousand.' We gaped at him. 'I'm assuming that you'll not be able to sell the wine at its shop price, and of course, you'll have to pay the auctioneers fees. But well, whose grumbling?'

'Not me,' said Emma.

'Nor me,' added Paul.

'So,' said Mike, taking things firmly in hand in a way that somewhat surprised us, 'Tomorrow I'll call Sotheby's Paris offices.' He looked over at Emma, 'Unless you prefer Christie's.'

Emma indicated that she didn't.

'Good.' He nodded. 'They'll send an expert down to make a detailed evaluation. I'll send him our list, and I'll be surprised if they don't come down immediately.'

We can take photos of the glass and tableware and send that too.'

'Fantastic, Mike,' said Paul. 'That sounds great. I must say I'm somewhat out of my depth with all this.'

Mike nodded, 'They'll be able to help us get this lot into a safe place too. These guys know all about that sort of thing. I guess that we will be able to breathe freely again by the end of the week.'

We all nodded.

'But until then... Not a word about this to anyone not in this room now.'

'Not even Martin and Sophie?' asked Emma.

'Can you be certain they won't accidentally spill the beans?' asked Mike.

'I think so,' said Emma.

'Well, think carefully before. It's rather a heavy load to bear.' Mike pulled a face. 'Do as you feel best.'

Paul frowned, 'But surely the others will twig it when some haughty Southerby's expert turns up, silk-suited and be-tied.'

Mike nodded. 'I'll have a quiet word with them about that. I suspect that they're used to that sort of situation, too.'

'Ask them if they have a "jeans and tee-shirt" option,' smiled Emma.

'I'm sure they do,' replied Mike, quite seriously. They get about twelve per cent of the sales price, which will work out at about one hundred and fifty thousand euros. That's worth a few concessions, I think. Especially as we've done the longest part of the job for them...'

## CHAPTER 6

It slipped your mind!!!

My Wife and Margaux were gaping at us across the breakfast table.

We had just finished explaining the unusual events of the previous afternoon. About the discovery and the aerial acrobatics of a certain naked woman's corpse, followed by its disappearance.

Most of the other listeners had drifted away in various levels of stunned silence.

Only "The Girls" remained, along with Paul, Emma and Sophie.

Martin had pleaded training, and we had then seen him shoot past the window in his green tracksuit. We weren't expecting to see him again before midday.

'But, for goodness' sake!' cried Margaux. 'How on earth could any normally constituted human being forget to mention something so important.'

'Margaux...' said my wife softly, pulling a face.

Margaux sighed and blew out her cheeks. 'Of course. Why I say such stupid things sometimes, I really don't know. No. These three have nothing at all in common with normally constituted human beings.'

'It is odd that such an obvious fact just "slipped your mind",' smiled Alun. 'It's quite astonishing the sort of things which can slip one's mind, don't you think.'

Mike and I nodded in agreement.

'Astonishing,' I said.

'No. But come on... I mean, really!' cried Emma, 'Surely that sort of thing would stick right at the front of your conscious mind. You couldn't just forget it.'

'Emma,' smiled my wife. 'I ought to have pointed out earlier that these three gentlemen only have half a conscious mind between them.'

'And much of the time,' added Margaux, 'Its battery is flat.'

Paul, Emma and Sophie spluttered with laughter. It would take them a little time to get used to the style and rules of our little family discussions.

'Very amusing,' I said.

'It must have been the excitement of yesterday evening's discovery in the wine cellar,' retorted Alun.

'Or perhaps the four bottles of celebration champagne,' said my wife.

Mike frowned, 'Plus, the two glasses we had each before we went off to help the repair man.'

'Which resulted in me having an incredibly valuable idea. An idea that has since permanently altered the lives of these poor, starving and abandoned children.'

'I believe it was three glasses,' said Alun. 'Not two.'

'Yes,' I nodded. 'I do believe you're right.'

'Great Gods,' cried Margaux, 'You three must have guzzled down a thousand euros worth of champagne between you in a single evening.'

We exchanged astonished looks.

'A year's worth of beer!' exclaimed Alun.

'Nearer to a month's supply for you three,' grumbled Margaux.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Well, well.' I gasped. 'I would never have thought that would ever happen.'

'And that probably explains why none of us has even the slightest headache or hangover this morning,' nodded Alun.

'Yes,' I laughed. That's clearly an important observation, Alun. We'll have to revise our drinking habits, lads.'

'Next lifetime,' grumbled Margaux. 'But yes. I see what you mean.'

'That's why very wealthy people get away with so much guzzling,' said Alun.

'I'm not sure one calls it "guzzling" at a thousand euros a bottle.' I added.

'Yes,' said Alun. 'There must be a special word for it.'

'Oh God!' cried Mike, 'They're off again... Stop them before it's too late, Margaux. Please.'

'What about "savouring"? That sounds about right.' I suggested. 'Suave and sophisticated, I think.'

'Hmm, yes. Or possibly "relishing",' suggested Alun.

'Shut up, you two,' said Margaux, coming to Mike's help. 'It would be "wallowing" in your cases.'

We pulled faces at each other and pushed back our chairs noisily.

I didn't appreciate the indirect reference. 'Hippopotamus wallow,' I said. 'In mud. I can't see any connection with the present case.'

'And where do you think you're going?' asked my wife, trying to catch my eye.

However, I was far too experienced to allow her to do that. All the same, I was forced to reply, if only by correction. 'Going? Well...' I cast about for some convincing lie.

However, for once, Mike came to my rescue, 'We thought we had best go and check the ventilation pumps,' he said, suddenly waking up from daydreaming.

Alun nodded enthusiastically, 'Yes. That guy asked us to keep a close eye on the grease level. He said the whole place could go up in flames if the level suddenly became inadequate.'

My wife frowned at him, 'If the level became "suddenly inadequate"?'

Allun nodded, 'Well, at least that's what Mike said.'

'I said what?!' cried Mike.

'When adequate in grease, pumps never cease.' smiled Alun. 'Mike is always reminding us of that.'

'His guiding principle,' I nodded.

'What a lot of bilge,' groaned Mike.

Then, without warning, an idea struck me. It had been tickling at the back of my mind for some time. I frowned.

'Some other small detail you forgot to tell us?' said my wife, observing this. 'Something else which just "slipped your mind"?'

'Perhaps you bumped into the French president in the village,' smiled Margaux.

'Or maybe you accidentally blew up the police station with smuggled dynamite?' added my wife.

'No.' I frowned. 'Not this time. I was just wondering.'

'Were you now?' she replied. 'Well, don't let us interrupt you.'

'Wonder on,' said Margaux.

'Well, it was twelve degrees down in that cellar.'

'We know that,' said my wife. 'I read the thermometer. Remember?'

Mike was frowning at me, clearly exploring the same avenue of thought as me. 'Ah! Yes. Interesting that.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Margaux sighed, 'Well, I'm pleased you two have discovered something a little more interesting than a dead body.'

'A corpse,' corrected Mike.

'Thanks, Mike,' said Margaux. 'Much obliged for the clarification.'

'My pleasure.'

'A naked corpse,' added Alun.

'Thanks again, Alun.'

'Best to get things clear.'

'Anyway,' I said, 'That place didn't need cooling or drying, did it.'

'No,' agreed Mike, 'I'd say it was a perfect natural wine cellar. Like they made them in the old days.'

'When they knew about wine cellars,' added Alun.

Mike sighed, 'It wasn't *"like"* they made them in the old days', He paused. 'It was made in the old days.'

Margaux sighed. 'SO?'

I pulled a face. 'So, I suppose the extra cooling and air-drying system must just serve to keep the foundations dry and avoid rising damp.'

My wife laughed and shook her head with amusement. 'So, your brilliant idea, which led us to discover the wine, was wrong all along.'

I chuckled, 'It's possible. But thank heavens, I was wrong. Eh!'

Margaux pulled a Face. 'Yes. Just Imagine. These poor abandoned children would go on and on struggling to make ends meet, while all the time they were sitting on a gold mine.'

'They would have ended up having to sell the place.' cried my wife.

Alun clapped me on the shoulder, 'I recommend you keep having wrong ideas like that. They seem to pay off well.'



We all laughed.

'All the same,' I frowned, 'I still think it's a lot of trouble to go to for nothing.'

'Come on,' said Alun. 'The guys were obviously having fun. The two of them probably couldn't resist the temptation of proving that they could do it.'

I nodded, 'Yes. You're probably right. An odd chap really, that Lucas.'

'A chap who had excellent taste in wines...' added Mike. 'All the same, I was wondering...' he pursed his lips.

'Again!?' said Margaux.

'Well, Emma and Paul seem exceedingly happy with the find, but...'

'Come on, Mike, spit it out.' sighed my wife.

'Well, after all, it's just a drop in the ocean, isn't it.'

'Sorry?' said Margaux.

'Well, I mean, where is the rest.' He paused to let this sink in. 'After all, he was supposed to be worth millions.'

'Tens of millions, in fact, Mike' I added. 'At least that's what his impresario told us.'

'And that guy should know,' said Alun. 'After all, he skimmed off twenty per cent of Lucas' income.'

'So, multiply by five, and there you are,' smiled Mike.

'What would you recommend I multiply by five, Mike?' said my wife.

Mike was not to be drawn as easily as that, and he just shrugged. 'Unless he indulged in astronomically expensive women, I would still be looking for several tens of millions of Euros. Not just a few paltry hundred thousand...'

Alun and I nodded, 'I wonder what he did with it then,' I said.

'If you are right,' said Margaux. 'He probably put it in a Swiss bank account. Somewhere secure.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Maybe. But surely, in that case, he would have passed on the information somehow. He would have left instructions with the solicitor,' I said.

'Which is why the solicitor has recently moved to the Bahamas,' smiled Alun.

'He has not moved anywhere,' sighed my wife. 'He's still here.'

'And by the look of the state of his shoe heels and shirt collars, he hasn't been splashing any ill-earned money about much,' added Margaux.

'A careful and cunning guy,' said Alun. 'I approve.'

'No,' said Mike. 'Lucas was too careful. He would have left a sealed envelope with the bank details.'

'Or...' I paused and smiled a knowing smile. 'Or, unless he hid the bank account details somewhere here.'

'In which case,' said Margaux. 'Let's hope he left a clue as to where to find the information about where to find the money.'

'Let's hope,' agreed my wife. 'Because if we have to put all our hopes on clever pants here, having another of his strokes of genius, it seems a bit risky.'

I nodded. 'I'll do my best, of course. But I'd like to point out that recent experience strongly points to the fact that my strokes of genius flow better and faster when sufficiently lubricated with expensive champagne.'

'Mine too,' said Alun.

'And mine,' added Mike.

'To me,' I nodded, 'expensive champagne is like good quality grease is to a dry ventilation pump axle. But notice, if you would please, the term "sufficiently". Sufficiency is the key to success in such matters.'

Paul and Emma laughed, 'You never lose an occasion of putting the message across, do you?'

Alun chuckled. 'We're only thinking about your futures. Please remember that.'

'Keep that in mind at all times,' I added, 'Regardless of what you might hear from certain other biased sources.'

Alun nodded. 'Biased sources should be avoided at all costs. And some of the worst are those cleverly posing as confidants.'

'And we *are* Gentlemen. Gentlemen like us always keep their promises, no matter what terrible ordeals they must go through to honour them. Gentlemen do, don't they?' I added.

'They certainly do,' cried Alun, with feeling. 'Where would the world be if true gentlemen no longer kept their promises.'

'Especially when members of the gentle sex are involved,' I nodded.

'Exactly,' smiled Alun.

The three younger members of our little group laughed.

'Don't worry,' sighed Margaux. 'One eventually gets used to them after a while.'

'However, that "while" generally takes ten years or so,' added my wife.

'Anyway,' continued Margaux, 'When are we leaving?'

'Leaving!' cried Alun and myself in unison. 'Things are only just starting to warm up here.'

'You idiots!' she sighed. 'When are you taking us to see the site of the crime?'

We relaxed.

'Oh, that! We could go tomorrow afternoon,' I suggested. 'Or the day after.'

Margaux shook her head sadly, 'I meant, do we go before or after you brush your teeth.'

'What!' I gasped. 'You mean, now!?''

I opened my eyes wide with astonishment. 'That's a stiff climb, you know. It'll take ages to get up that track.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Three and a half hours,' lied Alun, nodding and affecting a concerned husband's face. 'And with the sun beating down directly on us all the way up.'

'If we make it alive,' I added. 'The track is horribly dangerous in those narrow vertiginous passages.'

'The ones without a single handhold?' suggested Alun.

'Yes. Those are the ones.'

My wife started drumming her fingers ominously on the table. 'You didn't think for an instant that we were going to walk, did you?'

'I exchanged another astonished look with Alun, 'Oh no!' I gasped. 'I am not under any circumstances going to carry you.'

'Nor me,' cried Alun. 'No way!'

Margaux sighed. 'In a car, you twit!' she groaned.

'Oh!' sighed Alun. 'Ah. I see.'

'Wouldn't that be considered tampering with the crime scene?' asked Mike.

'Be quiet, Mike,' scowled Margaux. 'We won't tamper. We will just look.'

Mike did not seem convinced. 'Well, if you don't mind, I'll just stay here and read a bit.'

'You will not,' said Margaux. 'We'll need you to confirm all the rubbish these two will try to palm off on us.'

'No. But really!' groaned Mike.

'Mike!' said my wife, fixing him with a stern gaze. 'Do you, or do you not, want to be invited for Christmas again?'

Mike frowned, and his eyes took on saucer-like dimensions. He was obviously weighing up the advantages and inconveniences of this. Also he was no doubt pondering on the catastrophic adventures which we had gone through during the previous two Christmas holidays.

It might, he was thinking, be wise to stay at home and have a quiet Christmas turkey with his aunt.

However, a slow quivering of his lips, followed by a small smile, indicated that he was remembering that all in all, it had been good fun. And that the food had been excellent.

'Oh, all right,' he sighed. 'Where will it be this time?'

'Back at Yeovil.'

'OK,' said Mike, smiling. 'Great. I'm on then.'

'Good,' smiled my wife. 'You four men can go together, and we girls will follow in Emma's car.'

I dug out the ordnance survey map from the draw under the table, and we spread it out.

'Hey, Paul!' I asked. 'Do you know the lay of the land?'

'Sorry,' he shook his head. 'I'm not one for hiking down here. It's too hot for me.'

After some animated argument, we eventually selected an easy track across the forest atop the cliff. It ran from the top road to the cliff edge.

Alun sniffed and turned to "The Girls". 'It's only about an hour and a half, he lied. It's a stiff climb, though. Not a spot of shadow either. That all right for you?'

My wife turned to Mike, 'How much, Mike?'

Mike sighed, 'twenty minutes.'

'And flat, of course?' asked Margaux.

Mike sighed again. 'Pretty much so.'

'Thank you, Mike. And through the shady forest, I expect...'

Mike pulled a face, 'Looks like it.'

'Well,' said Margaux. 'Are you going to brush those teeth or not?'

Twenty minutes later, our convoy drove through the village and followed the narrow, winding road up onto the plateau. From here, it took us via a long, straight stretch of tarmac through the pine forest.

## The Sarlat Quartet

Mike kept his eye on the map and eventually called us to a halt in a clearing half-filled with stacks of felled timber.

The Girls parked beside us, and the eight of us set off together.

'The track starts over there somewhere at the back of the clearing,' he said. 'It joins the one we took yesterday.'

Striding ahead, Alun turned his head, 'I suppose you Girls have nothing against a wild boar or two, do you?'

'Be quiet,' called Margaux. 'Just don't get us lost.'

'Oh, don't worry about getting lost,' he called back. 'That traitor, Mike, will keep you on the right track.'

'That's not very kind, Alun,' called my wife. 'After all, he's the one who's going to help you find your way back home on foot. If you don't hold your tongue, that is.'

'Very amusing.'

Mike and I exchanged worried looks. We were not so sure that this had simply been an idle threat.'

After a leisurely walk on springy mossy ground, we came abruptly out of the forest onto the cliff-top track. The view was even more impressive than the previous day due to the lack of early morning mist. The two larger towns were hidden behind the curve of the plateau and its tall forest cover. Thus, even from our vantage point so high up, the only proof of human existence was the spires of churches showing here and there in the distance, marking the location of the villages.

We led the little group along the track and, after a few minutes, reached the small clearing where the discovery had occurred.

'Here we are,' I said. 'The huge boulder that nearly squashed us was over there,' I pointed.

'At the centre of the restricted crime scene,' added Mike.

'Mike...' sighed my wife. 'I said we wouldn't touch anything.'

'You already are,' he replied. 'You're trampling out of existence, numerous essential clues as to the murderer's identity.'

'No one said she was murdered,' said Margaux. 'Unless that was an unhappy slip-up on your behalf, and you know more than you're telling.'

'OK,' said Mike. 'She slipped and fell over.'

'But tripped on the huge million-year-old boulder, which took twenty minutes to follow her down,' added Alun. 'A slow-motion trick.'

'After accidentally attaching all her clothes to a hot air balloon, which carried them away,' I said.

'Never to be seen again,' smiled Alun.

'Sadly enough, that sort of thing happens only too often nowadays,' I nodded.

Margaux shrugged, 'shall we have a look then?'

'Let me go first,' called Alun.

'Why?' said Margaux.

'Because we don't know if the cliff edge has been fragilised by that boulder tumbling over it,' he said. 'We wouldn't want another four female corpses clogging up that pool, would we.'

Margaux and my wife exchanged a glance and a sigh, 'In that case, we'll look down from over there, then,' said my wife, pointing to a flat grassy portion someway over to our right.'

Alun shrugged, 'Have your own way. But don't say I didn't warn you.'

'We won't,' said Margaux.

'In any case, you won't be able to,' He replied. 'Corpses don't sing..'

'What!' cried Margaux. 'More drivel?'

'No. That just happens to be the title of my next major masterpiece of literary creation.'

'Corpses Don't Sing,' I said. 'I like it.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Alun!' cried Mike. 'How many times do I have to explain, Alun...'

'Yes,' I said. 'Please watch your grammar, Alun. Masterpieces are always major. We already told you.'

'I already told him. Not WE.' grumbled Mike.

'Are you sure?'

'Be quiet, you lot,' groaned my wife. 'Come on, let's have a look.'

'All the same,' said Mike. 'It'd be wise to lie down to look over the edge. After all, it's extremely steep.'

He got on his knees, crept to the edge, and lay down before wriggling forward to get his head clear. 'Do the same, and you'll all be OK. I wouldn't like any of you to have an accident.'

Margaux and my wife exchanged glances and smiled. My wife pulled an amused look at Margaux. 'That's OK, Mike. Your wish is our command.'

Alun grumbled, 'He's only thinking about his Christmas dinner.'

'Not only,' I laughed.

A few moments later, eight heads popped out above the cliff edge.

'Good heavens,' gasped my wife. 'I see what you mean about it being steep, Mike.'

'I told you so,' he smiled. 'We three are used to this sort of thing.'

Alun sighed a long, sad sigh, 'You know, if I had a new hang glider, this would be a great take-off site.'

'You are not having a new hang glider, Alun.' called Margaux.'

'I could get another second-hand one for next to nothing,' he grumbled. 'I'd just have to repair it a bit.'

I smiled and chuckled, 'And after all, we can almost see the hospital from here. I believe they have excellent repairmen there.'



My wife swivelled her head to look at Margaux, 'How much would a second-hand husband cost down here? A decent one, I mean, not one requiring too much repair work.'

'Oh, you don't buy them in France,' smiled Margaux. 'You get them through the social security services. Mind you, if you want a decent looking one, you'd have to go private.'

'Or you could have a look at the local tip.'

Alun sighed, 'I'll get a helicopter then. A bit more expensive but safer.'

I smiled, 'Some time ago, if you remember, we suggested purchasing a hot air balloon. Now those are extremely safe.'

Mike blew out his cheeks. Can't you two shut up for five minutes? Look,' he pointed. 'See the pool down there. That's where we saw the body,' he said. 'But at the time, that huge boulder in the middle of it was up here, over there.'

'And it blasted the body right out,' said Alun.

'Whew!' cried my wife. 'I'm not surprised.'

'We heard the noise of it coming loose and dashed off down the track,' I said.

'Like well-greased hares,' added Alun, swivelling his head to look at the Girls, 'That's why you should always have confidence in us. We have a seventh sense about when it's better to be elsewhere, quickly.'

'It has proved to be an extremely useful sense to be blessed with on several occasions in the past,' I added.

'Which is why we are still here, brightening up your lives, day after day,' smiled Alun.

'Hum...' said Margaux.

'Anyway,' I continued. 'The body flew out and landed in the pool at the base of the cliff. You can just see it from here.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Everybody craned their necks out a little further to get a look.

I then pointed a little to the right. 'Look over there. Can you see that clearing? That's where Martin has been allowed to set up his rifle range.'

Everybody followed my directions.

'That long outcrop of rocks at the back means no one can accidentally wander into the line of fire.'

My wife frowned, 'He doesn't use live ammunition!?''

Alun choked, 'Of course, he uses live ammunition. How do you expect him to knock down targets without bullets.'

'But that's dangerous!' cried Margaux.

'Of course, it's dangerous.' I sighed. 'That's why he has had to get special authorisation and drape kilometres of that red and white tape all around the clearing.'

'And stick up "danger" notices,' added Mike.

'Good heavens!' cried Margaux. 'I never thought they did it like that. They're real bullets then.'

'Margaux,' I said, 'have you ever heard of false bullets?'

She raised her eyebrows, 'I mean that you could kill something with those rifles he has, then...'

There was a moment of silence while we thought about this.

Alun and I were both working on clever and cutting retorts to this when we spotted movement on the path leading from the farm to the pool.

'Hello!' I said. 'Looks like that woman, what's-her-name.'

Emma called over from beyond my wife, 'Florence. She was mummy's friend.' she said. 'Mind you, she emigrated while we were still tiny.'

'Yeh,' said Paul. 'Seems OK, though.'

We watched as she approached with long strides. Mike took out his binoculars and gazed down at her. 'Yes, that's her all right.'

He paused, then said, 'Hello! Now, what is she up to?'

'Let's have a look, Mike,' said Alun.

Mike passed the glasses over, and Alun refocused them. 'Oh!' he gasped. 'She's undressing.'

'Let me see,' I called.

'Wait a minute,' said Alun. 'Great gods, look at those...'

'Give me those,' cried Margaux.

'Me first,' I said, snatching them from Alun. 'Wow! Now that's worth seeing. What a body... One doesn't see things like that every day.'

My wife, who had rolled over, grabbed the binoculars from me. 'Down, Fido,' she said. 'You can have a nice meaty bone later?'

'Hey!' I cried.

She focused on the binoculars. 'This sort of thing is bad for your blood pressure,' she paused, 'Hmm. Well, I do see what you mean though. Not bad. Not bad at all. Though I have seen as good, far closer to home.'

'I haven't got problems with my blood pressure,' I cried.

'That's because I keep such sights hidden from you as much as possible.'

I tutted, 'Come on. After all, I need to know what the danger is.'

She focussed the binoculars a bit more and whistled. 'Oh yes! Dangerous material there. No wonder her husband looked tired this morning.'

She turned to Margaux, 'here look. I wonder what she's up to.'

Margaux looked down and nodded. 'One must admit that the woman is well equipped. Great gods!'

'What!' we called.

'She's getting into the pool. She must be completely crazy. That water must be freezing.'

'That's no doubt how she keeps those buttocks so firm, I suppose,' I sighed.

'And how,' pray. Do you know she has firm buttocks?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'And the bits up front, too,' added Mike.

'How on earth do you know that, Mike,' cried my wife.

'Well. For heaven's sake,' sighed Mike. 'We have eyes, haven't we? That sort of thing stands out like a sore thumb.'

The other seven of us cast each other looks. Mike tended to say amazingly accurate things sometimes. Often by accident, but all the same...

'Like a sore thumb,' repeated Margaux. 'Is that what you said, Mike?'

Mike blushed, 'Well, of 'course I didn't mean... Anyway, the water must be freezing cold.' he continued. 'No more than ten or twelve degrees, I'd guess. That would explain the tightness of the buttock skin and...'

I snatched back the binoculars. 'For goodness's sake, Mike.'

Margaux smiled, 'Anyway, it's not surprising that she can get away without wearing a Bra...'

'Hey!' I exclaimed, 'I've not seen her without a bra except now.'

'That's because she's not hunting when you're around.'

'That's true,' I said, 'Not yet, of course, although that may come.'

'Wishful thinking,' laughed Margaux. 'You obviously haven't looked in a mirror recently?'

'I wonder what her game is, though?' mused Paul.

I frowned. 'I hope she's not going to try and do a "lady of the lake" act.'

'One a week is enough for me,' said Alun.

'Do you think she is a nymphomaniac?' asked Paul.

Sophie shook his head, 'I don't think so. I had a friend who was a nympho.'

'I'm pleased to hear you had some nice friends before I met you,' sniffed Paul.

'Oh, she's still my friend. Well, she couldn't help herself.'

'I'm so sorry for her,' said Paul.

'What I mean is that she couldn't hide it. It sort of oozed out of her.

'I didn't know nymphomania caused oozing,' frowned Mike.

Sophie shot Mike a sideways look and went on. 'And anyway, she couldn't keep herself from eyeing men's...'

'Thank you.' I butted in, 'We can guess what she was always eyeing. Perhaps you'd like to introduce us to her someday.'

'I already said "Down Fido" called my wife. Anyway, that woman is not a Nympho.'

'Thanks for your informed expertise. And how many other Nymphomaniacs are there, hidden in your dark past, Sophie?'

'Oh. Only the one. They're not very faithful on the whole, though, you know.'

During this little domestic exchange, I had captured the binoculars and had wormed back to the cliff edge.

'I wonder when she'll start going blue?' I smiled.

'I do Sohope you're enjoying the show,' grumbled my wife.

'You wouldn't want to look? This is man's stuff.'

'Give me those damn binoculars.'

'A lot of women pay fortunes to get equipped like that,' smiled Alun.

'Well,' My wife poked my shoulder hard, 'You are not getting those. I'll see to that. I'll tell her you're a homo.'

Margaux laughed, 'Don't bother. A woman like that can smell a gay a mile off.'

Mike leant back of the grassy lip of the cliff top. 'I was just wondering.'

'About what this time?' sighed my wife.

'Well, why go and get yourself covered in icicles like that? They'll be hanging off her...'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'For God's sake, Mike!' cried Margaux.

'Agreed,' smiled Paul, 'I wouldn't have taken her for a lover of natural experiences like that, though.'

My wife was leaning over the edge, scanning the countryside. 'Ah ha! And here, my dear Watson, if I am not mistaken, is her client now.'

With this, she pointed to the far side of the little wood.

Along this, someone was running hard. We recognised Martin's gaudy green running shirt. He was on his way back from his morning training session.

The track would take him directly past the foot of the waterfall, where destiny was preparing to pounce on its innocent and unexpected prey.

Emma was amazed, 'That's Martin! My god, the brazen hussy!'

'Interesting, eh?' I said.

'She asked him about his training runs,' nodded Emma. 'I heard her at breakfast. And I bet she followed him to find the ideal pitch. Makes me mad with disgust. Go on, Paul, shout out Soshe knows someone's watching.'

'Too late. Here we go...' Said Alun.

Martin came running down the little wooded slope, out of the trees and appeared beside the pool.

Amazingly, though, he did not slow his stride for a fraction as he approached.

Florence went into a fake "confused and embarrassed" acting mode. She moved one hand to cover her lower quarters and another to the upper reaches. However, this was done so slowly that it almost appeared to be a slow-motion film.

But whatever she had been hoping for as a reaction, she was disappointed. Martin did not stop. He did not gape at her while pretending to chat in a friendly way about the temperature of the water, as many would have done. No. He waved an arm, shouted a greeting, dashed across the

clearing, and then accelerated up the zigzag track to the top of the hillock and the houses.

But, once out of sight of the pond, he did a most unexpected thing. He stopped short and waved his hands about in the typical French manner of astonishment, then doubled up and burst into laughter.

As we watched, he hoisted himself upright with difficulty, shook his head, and ran off towards the house.

We looked back at the pool, where Florence was already getting back into her clothes.

Margaux laughed, accompanied by my wife and Emma.

'Ah well!' chuckled Emma, 'You can't win every time. That's my boy.'

'No,' laughed my wife, 'I wouldn't like to be in her husband's shoes when she gets home.'

'I'd recommend a hot shower and a cup of hot chocolate,' I said. 'Followed by a brisk rub-down.'

'And luckily for her,' my wife said. 'You'll be at hand to do that rubbing.' She shook her head. 'Forget it.'

'She's putting her Bra on this time.' called Paul.

I shook my head, 'A bit of a failure that,' I laughed. 'I'm proud of Martin though. Not many men could have carried that off.'

Emma laughed. 'Me too, me too. But what a horrible predatory woman!'

My wife looked at Margaux. 'I wonder what she's up to?'

'Hunting?' I suggested.

'No. I don't think so.'

'My wife nodded. 'No. odd that.'

'Reassuring though.' smiled Emma.

'Oh yes,' smiled Margaux. 'Definitely so. Martin has passed the trial with flying colours.'

Emma smiled. 'He has strong principals. It goes with his ideals of honour and sporting values.'

'No, Emma,' smiled my wife.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Sorry?'

'It's not anything about values or principals.'

'No?'

'It's simply to do with love.'

Emma blushed, 'Oh!'

Margaux smiled one of her sneaky smiles, 'Our husbands would have done exactly the same thing.'

'We would?' frowned Alun.

'Neither of you would ever look at another woman unless you were absolutely forced to, would you?'

'Like today,' said my wife. 'If we hadn't forced you to take the binoculars, you would have wandered off to watch the rabbits and the little birdies, wouldn't you?'

'I'll have to think this one through,' said Alun.

'Anyway,' I said. 'Why do you think she did that?'

Margaux sighed, 'I expect she is after something.'

'I think we all guessed that,' I sighed.

'But I have the impression that what she is most likely after is information,' she nodded.

'Information,' I said. 'I've got plenty of that I could let her in on. If she asked nicely.'

My wife scowled at me.

'Anyway,' I added. 'There are surely less dramatic ways of getting information than freezing off your...' I hesitated. 'Freezing off your toes.'

My wife shot Margaux a look, 'Pillow Confidences!?' she said.

'Pillow confidences!?' cried Emma.

'The oldest trick in the book,' smiled Margaux. 'In the olden times, it was considered a pivotal element of any well-structured negotiation strategy.'

Emma gaped at her brother, Paul, 'For heaven's sake!' she cried. 'What sort of information can she be looking for, which merits such devious methods.'

'Tortuous methods,' I smiled, 'As in torture...'



Alun smirked, 'Well If you think it's important, I'm willing to sacrifice my well-conserved honour to get to the bottom of this mystery.'

'Now, why does that not surprise me?' smiled my wife.

Margaux sighed. 'I expect it has something to do with money.'

'Something to do with a few meagre tens of millions of euros would fit the bill rather well, I think,' suggested my wife.

Paul shook his head in astonishment, 'But that woman hardly knows us.'

'Not only that,' added Emma, 'but Martin knows virtually nothing about Grandad or his money.'

'But she doesn't know that does she,' I said.

Emma frowned, 'I don't like it at all.'

'Really!?' said Margaux. 'Well, don't worry, we'll find an elegant way of warning her off.'

My wife nodded slowly, 'without her even realising it.' she said.

'Maybe we ought to divert her attention,' added Margaux, looking pointedly at Mike.

'Mike,' smiled my wife. 'Are you any good at pillow confidences?'

Alun and I jumped. 'Hey! Why him?'

My wife leaned over and put her hand on my shoulder, 'You might not have noticed, but Mike happens to be the only unattached male around here.'

'What's that got to do with anything,' I retorted.

'Try and touch that woman, and you'll find out,' grinned my wife.

'Ha, ha,'

However, Mike shook his head sadly. 'Have you seen that down there!?' he groaned. 'Confidences are one thing, but the preambles to them are quite another kettle of fish after sixty.'

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I lifted myself up on my elbow, 'All right, all right, Mike,' I sighed, 'I'll do it.'

'No, you won't,' sighed my wife. 'Forget it.'

Alun and I gazed at Mike, 'Mike, do you realise what you are turning your back on? This is the chance of a lifetime, including full blessings from all females present. Remember that girl in the hotel in Mexico City? The one in the tight emerald-green dress?' I said. 'You didn't turn your back on her, did you.'

'Ah! The emerald-green dress!' a happy smile decorated his face for an instant. 'But that was a personal gift of thanks from the hotel manager. And she was a professional, too. That's not at all the same thing.'

'We'll think of something else then. Have no fear, Emma,' laughed my wife. 'Martin's honour will be protected at all costs. We'll head her off in some way or another.'

'Oh!' cried Margaux. 'But aren't we forgetting something, Mike?'

Mike frowned. 'I don't think so.'

'Think carefully. Drag your memory back. About an hour or so.'

Mike frowned and shook his head. 'No. I can't see anything I've forgotten.'

'Something to do with Christmas? Wasn't there some discussion about next Christmas earlier?' she said, rolling over onto her side and looking at my wife.

Had Mike been standing at that moment, he would have staggered. However, he could not manage this while lying on the edge of a precipitous cliff. 'Great Gods!' he cried. 'This is downright blackmail!'

My wife chuckled. 'No, Mike. This is simply an example of traditional, old-school negotiation. We have something you want, and you have something we need.' she smiled. 'It's just a question of exchanging them.'

'And not a euro of money involved.' nodded my wife. 'A classical win-win situation.'

Mike squirmed visibly. 'But I'm sixty-one and a third.' he cried. 'I've forgotten all about that sort of thing.'

'You remembered fast enough in Mexico,' smiled Margaux. 'At least that's what your smirking smile seemed to imply.'

Mike sighed, 'I already told you. She was a professional. It's not the same thing.'

'If it's any consolation, Mike,' said Margaux. 'I have a distinct impression that that woman, Laurence, may have studied at a similar school as your Mexican professional.'

'But I say!' groaned Mike.

'Great,' smiled Margaux, 'We knew you wouldn't let these poor abandoned children down, Mike.'

'Oh! All right.' he groaned.

'You'll never regret this act of kindness,' smiled my wife.

Mike turned over on his side and gazed at her, 'Oh yes, I will.' he sighed, 'Those two idiots will goad me with it for years to come.'

Alun and I exchanged astonished glances, 'Mike! Who do you take us for?'

Mike sighed.

## CHAPTER 7

Arriving back home, we found the place unusually quiet. Martin had already finished his frugal mid-day meal and was out in the shed making adjustments to the spare stock of his rifle.

Our opera singer Julianna Metrokovitch and the Impresario Joseph Lewin had driven to dine at a restaurant one of Joseph's old friends owned.

Finally, our frozen "Water Nymph", Florence and her husband, Andrew, had decided to visit Josephine Baker's chateau, "Les Milandes", overlooking the river Dordogne.

Neither of them was enthusiastic about architecture, but Florence wanted to be elsewhere at lunchtime that day. This would give her fertile mind time to work out the next step, the first and most obvious move having been met with apparent failure. What better place to ponder on the subject than at the home of one of the previous centuries' most scandalous celebrities.

That being said, Florence had considerable experience with the finer aspects of seduction. To start with, she knew that although desire was a powerful driving force, in some cases, it needed a little time to take full effect.

Her husband shrugged when she explained her unsuccessful morning in the freezing cold water. 'What if he's a homo?' he said. 'He wouldn't be the first homo to have a girlfriend. Maybe she's a lesbian too.'

Florence had laughed lightly, 'No way, Andy. Don't talk rot.' she said. 'A gay would have stopped and chatted. This guy deliberately didn't stop. He saw I was stark naked but carried on as if I was just picking flowers.'

'Maybe he is simply too much in love.'

'Oh, come on, Andy...' she sighed. 'Have you seen me naked!?'

Andrew permitted himself a slight movement of his eyebrows. He knew she would not give up easily.

He expected her next move would be the age-old trick of *accidentally* brushing against Martin, wearing her special man-hunting perfume. She would ensure that he was fully aware of the warmth and firmness of her bosom during that brushing.

Anyone who resisted this second phase needed to be approached using radically different techniques.

In all events, she would play her hand carefully to avoid triggering the wrath of the young man's girlfriend, Emma.

That could lead to the two being asked to leave, thus considerably complicating things.

Time would tell, and anyway, the ends fully justified the means.

Julianne Metrokovitch and Joseph Lewin were more or less addicted to good food. The cunning Joseph knew that on learning the identity and reputation of his guest, the owner would make sure they had the very best table. This table would be strategically positioned so that anyone entering the establishment would immediately be aware of the presence of an exceptional personage. The staff would be primed with instructions to fawn on the

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Diva, as she had been accustomed to during her active career.

This sort of theatrical stage setting is part of the fine art of managing a highly respected establishment.

Long experience of such situations had taught Joseph that he would be expected to foot the bill. His old friend knew this too and, consequently, would ensure the wine waiter only proposed wines from the lower end of the price range.

Naturally enough, Joseph never invited people to dine without a good reason. Unsurprisingly, such reasons were inevitably financial.

The Diva was no less an experienced professional, having many thousand free meals under her capacious belt. At present, she did not know what Joseph was after, but she knew without a shadow of a doubt that money would be involved somewhere along the line. She presumed it must have something to do with Lucas' missing millions.

In this respect, she wondered what he knew. Above all, she hoped that he was not thinking along the same lines as her. Whatever the case, she guessed that she would know, one way or another, by the end of the meal.

It should be noted that, at this moment, our Diva would more than welcome a little financial input. On the other hand, no matter what Joseph attempted to tempt her with, financial outlay of any nature whatsoever was totally out of the question.

So, the two old hands, who had known each other for nearly forty years, sat down to an excellent meal. Each had his tactics and possible concessions perfectly clear in their minds. In this way, they could both relax and enjoy the superb food until negotiation time.

So, it was that, in the farmhouse, our little group of adventurers sat down to a peaceful and extremely well-appointed buffet lunch.

Alun had suggested that, as we were not too numerous, we might indulge in a few bottles of Bourgogne red. 'Not the reserve, of course,' he had added, 'Just that cheap boxed stuff.'

I laughed. 'You mean that stuff at a couple of hundred euros a bottle?'

'One has to suffer these little inconveniences sometimes,' he chuckled. 'Times are hard.'

Margaux sighed, 'another five hundred euros down the drain.'

'The drain says thanks,' I said.

An hour later, we had seated ourselves under the umbrella pines with our coffee when a head came into view. This was followed by a body belonging to the police constable.

Emma rose and went over to him.

After a few words, she nodded and came back to us. 'Apparently, they've found the body. They'd like your three to go down to identify it.'

'Her,' I said.

'It,' frowned Mike. 'A corpse doesn't have sex. I already told you that.'

'Mike!' cried Margaux. 'Are you sure that's exactly what you meant? We already had "Corpses Don't Sing" from Alun, but this is quite another kettle of fish, as you put it earlier.'

Mike frowned, 'Ah, yes! I see what you mean. Ha, ha...'

I was about to reply something very clever when my wife caught my eye and shook her head.

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'You had better get going straight away,' she said. 'You can entertain us with your intellectual witticisms later. Off you go. Corpses don't wait.'

'Yes, get a move on,' said Margaux. 'They tell me decomposed human flesh gives off an altogether revolting smell.'

'Thanks for the warning,' smiled Alun.

On the way down the track to the cars, the officer, George, explained that the body had been found at the base of the cliff, a hundred meters east of the waterfall pond.

The inspector wanted us to go with them to identify the body. He didn't yet understand why the body had been moved. Furthermore, it had been severely damaged during its second fall.

Alun, Mike and I thus followed the police car to the nearby town for the formal identification.

When we arrived, Inspector Venet was waiting at the door. 'Thanks for coming so promptly,' he said. 'I'm afraid this is not very nice to see. If you find that sort of thing difficult to look at, you can stay outside.' He frowned. 'As, long as one of you three can identify the body, that'll be fine.'

We exchanged glances and nodded at each other. 'That'll be OK, inspector,' I said. 'Is the face recognisable?'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'But the back of the head is smashed in.'

Mike pulled a face.

'But don't worry, sir,' he said. 'We've laid her on her back, Soyou won't have to look at that part.'

'OK,' said Alun.

The inspector nodded, 'Follow me then, please.'

The three of us pulled somewhat unsure faces at each other and followed him inside.'



We discovered the body lying on a stainless-steel surface at the far end of a long, white-painted room.

For the moment, it was covered with a sheet.

We approached, and the inspector said, 'Can I uncover the face, gentlemen? She has been cleaned up nicely, so it's not gory or anything like that.'

'Go ahead,' said Alun.

The attendant slid the sheet back to uncover the head and shoulders.

The three of us gazed down at the white lifeless face and exchanged looks. We nodded at each other.

'Can you uncover the rest, Inspector? If it's not too horrible to see,' I said.

'As I said. She was badly smashed up. Arms and legs fractured. But we tidied her up.' he nodded to the attendant, who withdrew the sheet.

We looked down and then nodded to each other.

'Well,' I said. 'I think that we all agree,' I said, looking at Mike and Alun, who nodded in agreement.

'Ah!' nodded Inspector Venet, 'That's got that sorted out at least.'

'I don't think so,' smiled Alun.

'Sorry!?' frowned the inspector.

'Well, Inspector,' I said. 'All three of us are absolutely certain of one thing.'

'Yes?' he said a little impatiently.

'This is absolutely NOT the same woman.'

'What!' he gasped. 'Not the same women!?'

We shook our heads in unison, 'No. Definitely not.' said Mike. 'Different altogether.'

I nodded, 'different colour of hair, and short, in this case, but long on our woman.'

'And altogether a different shape of face. Ours was rather rounded, whilst this one is narrow and sharp.'

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Alun nodded. 'And above all, our body was much more "womanly", if you see what I mean. More up here.' He indicated the breast region. 'And wider hips too.'

'No, this one is more athletic in build,' I said. 'Thin and muscular.'

The inspector smiled, 'I see. If I understand correctly, your corpse was far superior to mine.'

'Oh yes,' said Alun, 'Much better, but this one is more of a sportswoman. Older, too.'

The inspector frowned. 'Well, here's a nice mystery. I don't doubt your identification, of course. After all, there are three of you. Each of you probably spotted different details, which makes your evaluation highly convincing. Thank you.'

Mike frowned, 'And why would our evaluation be anything other than convincing, Inspector?'

'Well, one has to consider all aspects and look at the case from all angles. I'm sure you all agree.'

'Naturally,' Alun shrugged.

'By the way,' asked the inspector, 'You weren't by any chance up on the cliff again today, were you?'

We exchanged looks, and I pulled a face, 'Well. Strange as it might seem. Yes, we were.'

The inspector blinked, 'You were!?'

'Well, Emma Duprès asked us to show her where we found the body...'

'Ah!' said the inspector.

'There were eight of us,' said Mike, immediately clarifying this point. 'We three, and Paul Duprès. Then there were Emma Duprès and Sophie and the wives of these two gentlemen. We went in two separate cars.'

'And the family name of this, Sophie?' asked the inspector.

'We exchanged looks and pulled faces.'

'I can't remember being told,' said Mike.

'All I know is that she studies marketing, plays the piano and sings.'

'She composes songs too,' added Alun. 'Not bad...'

'And you all remained together all the time?' asked the inspector. 'Nobody wandered off.'

'And killed this woman, then threw her over the cliff?' I suggested.

'Well...' said the inspector.

'One has to consider all the aspects of the situation. That's it, isn't it, Inspector,' smiled Alun.

'Exactly.'

'Oh yes,' said Mike quickly. 'And before you ask, what's more, there was no sign of anyone else up there. And no parked cars either.'

The inspector frowned, 'When you say, "yes"?' he asked.

'I mean, No, of course,' sighed Mike. 'I meant, yes, we all stayed in sight of each other all the time. We were lying flat on the lip of the cliff. It seemed a bit too risky to stand.'

I nodded in agreement. 'And there was nobody near the upper pool where we found our body either. Or on the track leading to it. We had a birds eye view of all that region of the cliff face.'

'She could have fallen over earlier,' I said. 'Or just after we left.'

'Hm,' said the inspector. 'Can you tell me exactly when that was?' he asked.

We pulled faces. 'I have no idea,' I said. 'Between ten and eleven, I should say.'

'Can't you be more precise?' he asked.

'Sorry,' I said. 'One of the others will probably have a better idea.'

'Margaux will know,' said Mike. 'His wife,' he added, pointing at Alun.

'Exactly,' said Alun. 'She notices details like that.'

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The inspector nodded, 'So, now we have two dead women.'

'It seems so,' I agreed.

'And on both occasions, you three were close at hand.'

'That's unfortunately the case, Inspector,' said Mike.

'Hm,' said the inspector.

'But,' added Mike. 'There is a big difference, in this case.'

'Ah! And what is that?'

Mike shook his head, 'Well, for goodness' sake, isn't that clear? After all, it jumps out at you.'

The inspector was clearly at a complete loss.

I took pity on him, 'Well, inspector, this one is fully dressed.'

'That's true,' nodded the inspector. 'But dead all the same.'

'Agreed,' nodded Alun. 'No doubt there. Would you like to double-check for us, Mike? After all, you have updated your first aid skills now.'

'Shut up, Alun,' said Mike.

'And these clothes,' said the inspector, 'conceal a little surprise.'

Alun smiled one of wry smiles, 'Do you know, inspector,' he said. 'We are all old and experienced enough to have seen quite a few such little surprises in our time.'

'Not like this one,' said the inspector. 'At least, I hope not. Take a look.'

At this, he pulled open her shirt front, which had been closed across her small breasts.

'Oh Hell!' cried Mike.

The inspector allowed himself a little smile as he observed our astonished faces.

'I told you it was a surprise.'

Her chest was tattooed with fine lacelike images. However, what caught the attention was not the tattoos. It was the presence in the middle of two neat bullet holes.

'Great gods!' cried Alun. 'She's been shot.'

'Twice,' added Mike.

'Hell!' I exclaimed. 'What on earth is going on around here?'

The inspector smiled at us. 'Well, at least,' he said, 'I don't think any of you three shot her if I go by your reactions.'

We glanced at each other, 'Because we were suspects?' cried Mike.

'Well,' he replied. 'To be completely honest. You still are.' he paused, observing our astonished looks. 'We do have two bodies, you know.'

'But for goodness's sake. What on earth would we go around murdering women for?' cried Mike. 'I mean, I never murdered a woman in my life.'

'Men then, perhaps?' smiled the inspector.'

'Of course not,' he cried with a shocked look. 'For heaven's sake!'

'Mike,' I said, 'you once set fire to your aunt.'

'That was an accident. I put her out almost immediately.'

'With champagne, if my memory is correct,' I put in.

Mike nodded, a small smile crossing his lips, 'Oh yes! I remember now. That was rather good fun. And that video we took still gets hundreds of likes every month.'

The inspector gazed at us with a frown,

'Perhaps you'd like him to tell you the full story of that adventure?' I ventured.

'With pleasure? You see. I had just won a contest for building a scale model of the Eiffel Tower, and...'

'Perhaps another time, sir,' interrupted the inspector. 'I have a murder to solve.'

'Two,' I corrected.

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'They might both be accidents,' suggested Mike.

We turned and gaped at him, 'Oh, all right. I admit it must be difficult to shoot oneself in the heart twice.'

The inspector nodded slowly, 'Are you familiar with gun wounds, gentlemen?' he asked.

We shook our heads.

'Well, the interesting thing about these wounds,' he prodded the woman's skin with his index finger. 'Is that these two fellows were done with 0.22 bullets.'

'Really!' I said, not having the slightest clue as to where this was leading.

'And it just so happens that someone in your little community has a gun which shoots such bullets.'

'The Diva?' said Alun.

'What?'

'The opera singer. Juliana Metrokowitch. I bet she's got a gun.'

'You do?' frowned the inspector.

Alun nodded.

'But you don't know?'

Alun glanced down and sighed. 'Well, no. I happened to be looking through her handbag. But I didn't find it. She probably hid it in her bedroom.'

The inspector looked as though he was losing contact with reality.

Well, he did have a good excuse, of course. He did not yet have a great deal of experience of us. Not like Margaux and my wife, who were both used to all sorts of odd things happening when we were in the neighbourhood.'

'And why were you going through her bag, sir?' he frowned.

'Well, I suspected her of being a spy or something like that.' I smiled.

The man's wide-opened eyes indicated that he was having difficulty assimilating things again.

Alun had pity on the man. 'You see, I wanted to check that the woman was what and who she declared herself to be. In other words, that she really was Emma and Paul's grandmother.'

'And you didn't think she was?'

Alun shrugged. 'Well, she seemed a bit too larger-than-life to believe.'

'You didn't tell us you did that, Alun,' said Mike.

'And have you grass on me to The Girls?' he said, 'Are you kidding?'

'Anyway, I didn't find anything worth talking about.'

'No personal papers, then or highly compromising documents written in code?' I asked.

'A passport.' he replied.

'With her name on it, I suppose,' I said.

'Yeh. But it could easily be a forgery. After all, she has one hell of a foreign accent.'

'Perhaps that's because she IS foreign. Russian, in fact.'

'The passport could be forged, I told you.'

'So she might be Chinese then,' I suggested. 'A Chinese secret agent with a gun hidden under the gossamer thin underclothes in her bedroom draw, perhaps.'

'Well,' said Alun 'Perhaps not Chinese. The accent isn't Chinese.'

'Neither is her face, you nit!' exclaimed Mike. 'And the accent IS Russian.'

'Or at least from around those parts,' I said.

Mike nodded.

The inspector smiled and shook his head slightly, 'You three have pretty pronounced accents too, you know. But I didn't immediately jump to the conclusion that you were spies.'

'Accents!?' I cried. 'Us.'

'On the other hand,' said Alun. 'You, yes. A terrible one.'

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'That's because he's a foreigner,' I added.

We laughed together at this, and Alun went on.

'Well, perhaps not so much a spy, but more like someone impersonating her grandmother,' he nodded. 'For undeclared and no doubt devious motives.'

'Might still be a spy, too,' frowned Mike.

'That's true,' agreed Alun.

'But you don't have any proof that she has a gun,' I said.

'No. But I bet you'd find something incriminating if you went through her things.'

'Well,' said the inspector, sighing and trying to return to facts. 'You may not know it, but 0.22 bullets are also used by high-precision rifles.'

'Really?' said Alun. 'So?'

The inspector gazed at him. 'I'm talking about the sort of high-precision rifles used by Biathlon athletes.'

'Ah!' I exclaimed.

'Oh!' exclaimed Mike.

'Hum!' added Alun. 'Could be a hunter, too. There are loads of them around here.'

Hunters don't use 0.22 bullets. They use 0.3 or bigger for wild boar...

At this moment, the door opened. Who should appear on the scene but the aforesaid Biathlon Athlete, complete with his rifle, in its carrying case.

'You wanted to see me, inspector.' Then, suddenly he caught sight of the corpse, 'My god!' he cried 'Natasha!'

He rushed forward and stared down at her, 'My god! She's dead.' he closed his eyes and shook his head as if to dispel a dream. 'What on earth is she doing here? What the devil has happened to her.'

The inspector was frowning. 'You know this woman!?'

'Of course, I know her. She's the shooting coach of the men's biathlon team.'



'The English team?' asked the inspector.

'No. Of course not.' said Martin, 'The Russian team.'

'The Russian team!' But what on earth is the woman doing here,' I cried.

'Getting killed,' said Mike.

The inspector stepped forward and pulled open her top again, 'getting shot, to be precise,' he said, watching Martin's face closely.

Martin's eyes open wider than one would have thought possible. He stepped forward and reached out his hand to touch the woman's skin.

Inspector Venet caught his wrist before he could do so.

'Sorry,' said Martin. 'What on earth is going on around here?' he cried.

'I would truly like to know,' replied the inspector. 'Perhaps you could start by telling us exactly who this is.'

'I told you. She's head of the shooting section of the Russian biathlon training team. Her name's Natasha.'

'And her family name,'

Martin pulled a face, 'Family name? Now let me think...'

'A Russian name, perhaps?' suggested Alun.

'Something to do with wine,' he said. 'Something with an odd Italian feel, if I remember correctly.' he paused. 'Vino something, I think.' said Martin. 'Vinogradova. Yes, that's it, Natasha Vinogradova.'

'That makes two Russians,' said Alun. 'One of whom has been shot, whilst the other is suspected of having a gun.'

'Julianna Metrokovitch has a gun!?' cried Martin.

The inspector held up his hand, 'Please, sir,' he said, turning to Alun. 'For your own reasons, you and only you suspect she has a gun. However, there's no reason to believe anything of the sort.'

'Why does he suspect that?' asked Martin.

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'Because she's Russian,' I said. 'And an Opera Singer,' I paused. 'It's obvious, isn't it. At least in Alun's mind,' I paused. 'And, of course, a spy too, which goes without saying.'

'But...' said Martin. 'Natasha is dead. For heaven's sake. Who on earth would want to shoot her?'

'Maybe she *was* a spy,' I smiled.

Inspector Venet turned back to Martin, 'And you have no idea why this Russian lady should be here?'

'In the middle of nowhere. you mean?' I added.

'Seems a bit odd, you'll admit,' he replied.

'Spying,' smiled Alun.

'Well,' said Martin. 'You see, at the end of last season, she made me a proposition.'

'Naughty girl!' smiled Alun. 'She's old enough to be your mother.'

'She knew I had to train on my own due to lack of funds. She said I could go and train with the Russian team,' he said.

'In Russia?' asked the inspector.

'Naturally,' replied Martin. 'They have an excellent facility and, above all, no lack of ammunition.' he glanced over at us. 'And you know how much that costs.'

We nodded.

'Expensive, is it?' asked Venet.

'Tens of thousands of euros every season,' sighed Martin. 'I have to spend weeks and weeks getting sponsors every year. Otherwise, it's just not feasible.' he paused. 'And one has to admit that cross-country skiing is not a traditional British sport. Biathlon, even less so.'

'But even so.' said the inspector. 'You didn't take up the offer.'

Martin allowed himself a sly smile. 'Well, you see, her proposition was not as innocent as all that.'

'That's what I said earlier,' smiled Alun. 'Naughty Russian girls are notorious for that sort of thing.'

'Shut up, Alun,' groaned Mike.

Alun ignored this. 'I bet her true aim was, once in her homeland, to lure you into overindulging in extremely physically demanding nocturnal activities to the detriment of training. This was planned to wear your body out and drain you of your motivation.'

Martin shook his head. 'You see, I'm much better on the shooting range than any of the Russian team. I beat them at every competition, in fact. On the other hand, they are faster than me on skis.'

'So, it was a win-win arrangement,' said the inspector.'

'On the surface,' replied Martin, 'Had the proposition come from the Norwegians, I would have taken it up. I get on well with those guys. And the Swedes too. Really friendly. But the Russians...'

'A bit on the reserved side,' I suggested.

'Yeh. And... Well, it's Russia, too, isn't it? Add to that the fact that their training camps are in the middle of nowhere. And no four-star luxury hotels for lodgings, if you see what I mean.'

Mike, Alun and I had visited Russia and numerous other former soviet states. We were thus aware of the comfort of lodgings to be expected in out-of-the-way locations.

'My idea was that she wanted to use me to improve her team's shooting but intended to avoid me having access to any of their little skiing training secrets.'

The inspector nodded, 'So, she may very well have come over here to learn about your training tricks without you knowing.'

Martin nodded, 'That's possible.'

'I told you she was a spy,' smiled Alun. 'That's what spies do.'

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Inspector Venet turned to gaze at Martin, 'And that's why you shot her.'

Martin leapt, 'Shot her!' he cried. 'Are you mad!?'

'After all,' he said. 'If all the Russian team beat you all the time... Well, you'd go tumbling down in the results table, wouldn't you.'

'Maybe.'

'And then your sponsors would hear of it and clam up. You'd no longer be able to afford the ammunition to train or the travel and lodging,' said Inspector Venet. 'Then, in no time at all, you would be out of a job,' he said. 'What do you say about that scenario, Sir?'

Martin frowned, 'It's possible. But would anyone kill a woman for that? I mean, really?'

The inspector pulled a face, 'You'd be surprised what people will kill for, Sir.'

I frowned, 'I wouldn't have thought you got much experience of that sort of thing down here.'

'I have not always worked here, far from it. In fact, I'm relatively new to the region.'

Alun shot me a look. This look said, "Ah! The guy has made some terrible blunder somewhere and has been "promoted" out of the way to cool his heels."

I nodded back at him. "Interesting that," I thought.

'But,' said Inspector Venet slowly. 'Under the circumstances, you must admit that you would be the obvious culprit, wouldn't you?'

'I wouldn't have given you all that information if I was, would I,' cried Martin. 'After all, I'm the only one who knew about it.'

'I doubt that very much,' said Venet. 'In Russia, people don't go around making important decisions of their own account. Someone gave her the go-ahead. That's how it works over there.'

'Over here too,' I said.

'Even more so in Russia,' smiled the inspector. 'It certainly went up at least to her boss's boss. And to get that far, heaven only knows how many other people got to hear about it. After all, it wouldn't be classified information, would it.'

'You seem to know a lot about Russia,' I said.

He shrugged, 'You get to learn a lot in the force by keeping your ears and eyes open.'

'So, one of these many others might have had a good reason to get the woman out of the way,' I suggested.

'And spotted the ideal way of doing it without anyone knowing,' smiled Alun. 'That lets Martin off then.'

The inspector sighed and gave us a look. 'No. No more than it does you three.'

'What!?' exclaimed Mike, who had been studying the bullet wounds from close to.

'People kill each other all the time over there,' said Alun. 'It's part of the standard promotion strategy, right?'

The inspector sighed, 'Try to get through Russian customs with a gun. If you make it, please let me know.' he chuckled. 'Then get into France with it, especially if you're Russian.'

'Who said this person was Russian,' I said.

'True,' he agreed.

'Or maybe he hired someone over here to do the job,' added Alun.

'True, too.'

'But what about the other woman?' said Mike.

'Well, sir,' said the inspector. 'The trouble is that we don't know who she was.'

'Why don't we do an identikit thing?' asked Mike.

The inspector nodded, 'That was what I intended to ask you to help me with. But we'll have to go over to Sarlat. The local expert has his office there.'

'No problem,' said Alun.

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'Great,' smiled Mike with enthusiasm. 'I always wanted to have a go at that. We can each do it separately and then see if our three pictures look anything like the same person. That'll be fun.'

Alun smiled one of his sly smiles, 'I suppose we'll have to do the whole body, won't we, Inspector?'

'No sir. Just the face for the time being.'

'Pity that,' sighed Alun.

'And in the meantime,' I said. 'We all remain potential murderers in your book,'

'I'm afraid so.'

'But you're not afraid of being in a closed room with four murderers, one of whom is armed with a rifle?'

'No, sir,' smiled the inspector. 'Let's say you remain suspects for the time being until I feel that the evidence accumulated against your involvement is enough.'

'Great,' said Alun.

'The girls will absolutely adore this.'

'You bet,' smirked Mike.

'While we are over there, we'll have the riffle inspected,' said the inspector. 'It'll be a quick enough job to compare the markings on the bullets from it with those we have recovered from this body.' He glanced at Martin. 'You've no objection to that, I suppose?'

Martin shook his head, 'I shot the woman with my spare...' he joked. 'Maybe I should come with you. Who knows, maybe I'll recognise their Identikit pictures to be another of my Biathlon pals.'

Inspector Venet nodded, 'Let's be on our way then.'

As we were getting into the cars, he turned, 'George here checked up on the owners of forestry vehicles.'

The sort of thing that could get along the old track to the waterfall.'

'And carry off our corpse?' I said.

'Exactly. Nothing going there. Everyone has an alibi.'

'Except Gregory Forbes, sir.' said the officer.

'No. But he's on holiday in Spain, and his place is locked and chained.'

'Someone from further afield then, 'I said.

'Possibly,' Venet frowned. 'But imagine trying to smuggle in a machine like that without being noticed.' He paused. 'And nobody noticed.'

'Odd that,' I said.

'Exactly,' nodded the inspector.

## CHAPTER 8

Sarlat, or more precisely "Sarlat-La-Canada", is an ancient stone-built medieval French town in the Dordogne region of France. Miraculously, the place has managed to maintain much of the character of its origins. That is, if one does not stray too far from its centre. In summer, its narrow roads are filled with tourists, which is how we found it. At night, it is also a relaxing and agreeable place to spend a few hours wandering around, watching the never-ending variety of street entertainment.

Disappointingly, the "commissariat" was outside the old city boundaries on the main road.

Mike was kind enough to remind us that, 'In any case, we're here for work, not play.'

On entering the building, we were led to a waiting room. One after the other, we were invited to follow a policewoman in charge of the identikit work. We had an interesting time constructing our "likenesses", uninfluenced by the others, but this took longer than we expected.

Once we had finished, we were brought together again in a meeting room where our three pictures were laid side by side. Incredible as it might seem, although subtly different, the three faces were similar.



The woman in charge of this part of operations then led us through a criticism of each image, which we discussed together. Taking each of them separately, we discussed details and agreed on mutually accepted points.

Finally, the policewoman modified the three images and laid them side by side. Surprisingly, the three now resembled each other like three sisters.

'Well done,' she said. 'Now that's what I call a good job.' he smiled. 'If we can't identify the woman with one of these, she must have come from another planet.'

During all this, the Inspector remained confined in conference with one of his colleagues, So, Martin was allowed in unaccompanied.

'Do you recognise any of these likenesses, Sir,' asked the woman.

Mike came closer and stared down at the series of pictures that had now been printed out.

After a few seconds, he shook his head. 'No. I don't know anyone at all who looks like that.' He picked up one of the pictures and crossed over to the window. 'At least no one in my circle of friends and acquaintances.' he frowned. 'But it does seem vaguely familiar, all the same.'

Alun smiled to himself, 'Maybe she had grown a beard when you met her.'

The officer chuckled, 'One moment, sir,' she said. 'Let's try a few things. Come and have a look. With this software, I can add glasses, a hat of some sort or a scarf. Want to try that?'

'OK,' nodded Martin. 'You never know.'

The woman tried out several sorts of hats, but this didn't produce any sign of recognition. She then tried adding glasses with the same result. Finally, she suggested trying dark glasses.

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'You can have Dior or any other brand if you like.' she smiled. 'I'll start with some basic shapes, though. Sometimes hiding the eyes is a good way of allowing the mind's eye to do a better job.'

Almost immediately, Martin stiffened. 'Hmm,' he said. 'Yes. I have seen a face like that before.'

'Great! You see how such a subtle modification changes everything for our memory,' she said. 'Now, with big round glasses like these, you often find that many women like to wear wide-brimmed, rather floppy hats like this,' She clicked on her choice in the application sidebar.'

'Ah!' gasped Martin. 'Yes. I have definitely seen that face before.'

'Brilliant,' she said. 'So, who is it?'

Martin pulled a face. 'I have absolutely no idea.'

'No idea!?' cried Alun.

'Someone you have seen recently, though?' asked the woman.

Martin considered this point. 'Yes. At least, I think so. But where?'

'When you say recently,' she asked. 'You mean, in the last few weeks?'

Martin nodded, 'But that hair doesn't seem right.'

'Wait a minute,' said the woman, tapping away on his computer keyboard. 'Some of us tie our hair up when it's hot, like during the last few weeks. To keep it off their necks, you see.' She clicked a few option buttons. 'What about this, Sir.'

Martin nodded, 'Ah, yes! That's it. I have seen that woman sometime recently. But where?'

'If it was somewhere like here in Sarlat,' I said. 'That won't get us very far. Hundreds of thousands of women must come through here every week.'

'Very true, Sir,' said the officer. 'But it's rare to remember someone's face without seeing them several times.'

'Ah, yes,' I said.

'Unless the person was sitting at a neighbouring table, during a long meal. or next to you on a beach or something like that,' suggested Mike.

'That's perfectly true, sir,' she agreed. 'But even that would be a good lead. It means we would know where to start putting up the picture and asking people to come forward and identify the woman.'

'But surely, officer,' said Mike. 'Someone would have come forward to declare a missing person by now.'

'Not if she was holidaying or travelling alone,' she replied.

'Yes, of course,' I nodded.

'And one does tend to notice people dining on their own more than groups,' added Mike.

'True too, sir.'

However, Martin cast all hopes of this down, 'Sorry all. But since I got down here, I haven't been out much. And even when I did, I hardly ever go further than the village shops.'

'Perhaps when you were travelling down on the train then,' I suggested.

'Ah!' he said. 'Yes, that's a possibility.'

'You know what,' said the woman. 'The best thing is for me to give you a print-out. That'll give your subconscious mind time to work on it. That often does the trick.'

'Like Hercules Poirot's "little grey cells", I chuckled.

'Exactly,' said Alun. 'We'll show it to the others too. One never knows.'

As the printer started to churn out the pages, the door opened, and Inspector Venet entered accompanied by

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the officer, George. 'Having any luck?' he called across the room.

'Not bad at all, Inspector,' said the woman. 'Come and have a look.'

The man smiled at us, 'Thanks, gentlemen. Now let's have a...'. At this point, he caught sight of the screen and froze. 'Good heavens!' he gasped.

He spun round and gazed at us, frowning. 'Are you sure this is the woman you found?'

Mike stepped forward, 'Well, in our case, she was more like this,' He handed Venet one of our series of "identikit" pictures.

The man's eyes opened wide with surprise, 'Ah!'

'But Martin recognises someone with dark glasses and a hat, like on the PC screen,' added Alun.

The Inspector turned away from us, walked over to the window and gazed down at the passing traffic. 'Well, well. This puts a quite different complexion on the affair.'

'You know this woman,' asked the woman.

'I'm afraid we do,' he sighed, looking at George. 'Only too well, don't we, George.'

George nodded.

'You do?' cried Martin.

'So, do you, Sir,' said the Inspector. 'At least you have certainly seen her recently.'

'Have I?'

'Oh yes. There's little doubt about that.'

At this moment, there was a knock on the door, and another officer looked in. 'The lady has arrived, Sir. Shall I show her in?'

The Inspector nodded. 'Oh well!' he sighed. 'I wasn't expecting this. It's extremely worrying.'

At this point, the door opened.

To our astonishment, who should enter but Danielle Blanchet, the owner of the health and well-being shop?

The woman scowled at us, 'What on earth are these fools doing here.'

'Hey!' cried Alun. 'One moment, if you please.'

Then suddenly, the woman caught sight of the screen, 'Oh my God!' she cried. 'Not Josephine!'

Martin gasped, 'So, that's who she was! Your aunt.'

There followed a period of confusion during which everybody tried to talk simultaneously.

During this noisy interlude, Inspector Venet remained looking out of the window and frowning.

As the noise gradually ebbed, he turned and came back to us.

George was staring down at Danielle, a concerned frown covering his brow. He knelt beside her, laid a comforting hand on her forearm, and smiled briefly. 'I'm sorry, Danielle,' he said.

She looked into his eyes, shaking her head sadly, 'It's too, too sad,' she sighed, clasping her hand over his. 'How is it possible?'

Inspector Venet turned his attention away from the couple, gazed at us and sighed. 'This is all very unfortunate, gentlemen. I'm very sorry you should have become involved in all this.'

'Not as sorry as this poor woman,' I pointed at the seated figure.

The Inspector nodded. 'I believe a little explanation is in order.'

'I think So, too,' said Martin.

'But I'm afraid you'll have to make do with the basics,' he said. 'The rest is classified.'

'Classified!' cried Alun.

'Classified,' he nodded. 'What I'm about to tell you must not go further. Is that understood?'

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I gazed at him incredulously, 'Inspector!' I gasped. 'You don't know our wives. They'll wheedle the truth out of Mike before you can say... Well, almost immediately.'

'All right. I'll have to have to have a word with them too.'

'So?' said Alun.

'Well, this unfortunate woman was called Josephine Doin. In truth, she was not Danielle's aunt or anyone else's aunt.'

Danielle Blanchet nodded in agreement and sighed again.

The Inspector continued, 'She was in grave danger and was placed here, with Josephine, to protect her.'

'Who was she being protected from?' asked Martin.

'You don't want to know that gentlemen. And in any case, as I said, it is classified information.'

'But...' started Alun.

Inspector Venet held up his hand to stop Alun.

'Most importantly for you, if I were to answer that question, the four of you would need protection, too. I presume you'd prefer to avoid that.'

We nodded our heads vigorously. We didn't have the slightest desire to be included in the statistics for the number of deaths in the village this year.

'She was to stay here until certain issues were cleared up,' continued Inspector Venet. 'She was heavily disguised, and that's why you three did not make the link.'

'But why was she naked,' asked Mike.

'Ah well,' sighed the Inspector. 'I suppose any young sun-loving woman would go wild after being swathed in thick, shapeless trousers and pullovers in mid-summer for months.'

Danielle shook her head sadly, 'She thought she was perfectly safe up there. So, did I.'

'We had no idea that her whereabouts could have been discovered. It seemed impossible,' he sighed again. 'But I believe I can see how they worked it out now. A terrible accident, in fact, I think.'

'Yes?' said Martin.

'Classified again, I'm afraid.'

'But,' frowned Martin. 'Aren't we in danger ourselves now?'

The Inspector shook his head, 'Oh no. These guys have far more important things to do.'

'Are you sure of that?' I asked.

'Yes,' he allowed himself a small smile. 'They will certainly have done their research thoroughly and will have known that none of those in your group were connected with her in any way. These people are professional and extremely thorough. They have too much to lose by making silly errors.'

'But what about the body?' I asked.

'Oh! I doubt we'll ever find it,' he said resignedly. 'As I said, these people are very thorough. There won't be a shred of evidence left.'

Mike was frowning, 'But we still have our second corpse.'

'Second corpse!' cried Danielle.

'Not one of ours, Danielle,' said the Inspector. 'I'll explain later.'

Alun gazed down at the seated woman, 'So, your shop is a front, I suppose. A sort of safe house.'

'It was,' she said sadly, gazing up at the Inspector. 'Now it's just a shop again.'

'And that,' glowered the Inspector. 'Is highly classified information, too. If any of you were to let that out, you might very well regret it. My boss's boss sometimes gets nervous about things like that.'

'Is that a veiled threat?' glowered Alun.

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'Not much veiling around here,' I said. 'It means deciding what's best for us, Alun. No more. So, climb down off your high horse.'

'In the meantime,' said the Inspector. 'We ought to look into this second death. I suggest that on the way back, we stop off and have a look at the place where she fell. It's directly behind your riffle range, Sir.'

'Ah!' said Martin. 'I understand better now.'

'I thought you might,' smiled the Inspector. 'Shall we go?'

The drive back took about half an hour.

We parked the two cars at the end of the rough stone track, close to Martin's shooting range.

The Inspector then led us along a track through the forest and pushed his way through the undergrowth to the foot of the cliff. 'We're about a hundred metres from the pool where the other body landed,' he said, pointing along the rock face.

We looked up, and Martin nodded, 'We must be virtually directly under the hermit's cave.'

'Hermit's cave?' frowned the Inspector.

'That's what the locals call it. Apparently, back in medieval times, a hermit lived up there. It's only a short way down the track from the pool up there where you initially found the body.'

'Before it decided to have a go at hang gliding,' smiled Alun.

We exchanged looks, and Mike frowned, 'we didn't see any caves on the way down.'

Martin smiled, 'That's because you were coming down the track. I discovered it because I run up it.'

'And we tend to watch our feet rather carefully on tracks like that,' I added.



Martin nodded, 'Me too. Anyway, there's a narrow track leading back up, twenty metres or so, on the downhill side of the pool,' said Martin.

'We didn't see that either.'

'No, you wouldn't. That's because it is hidden by a tree and goes up steeply in the opposite direction. It's perfectly visible when you climb the track but not when you go down.'

'Got it,' I said.

Martin smiled. 'I run up as far as the cave once a week for training. Then I jog back down.'

'A tough run,' nodded George, who had now joined us.

'Yep. Even for me,' he smiled. 'But excellent as a high-intensity session.'

Alun pulled a face. 'You're telling me... And how long does it take to get up there?'

'Oh,' he considered this point. 'About seventeen minutes up and twelve down, I suppose. Give or take thirty seconds.'

'Hells bells!' I exclaimed. 'It would take me more than three times that.'

'Yeh! But then again, you're more than three times my age, aren't you,' he said with a laugh and a friendly smile.

I clapped him on the shoulder, 'Thanks, Martin. That's good for the morale of the troops.'

The Inspector shook his head with a little laugh.

'Anyway, gentlemen, after that little pep talk, how about having a look at your rifle range while we're here?'

'My pleasure, Inspector,' said Martin, striding off at what he clearly assumed to be a relaxed pace.

'Hey, Martin!' I called. 'We're not training for the Olympics, you know.'

'He turned his head and laughed, 'Just follow the path. You can't miss it. Straight ahead.'

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About a hundred metres further on, we ducked under one of the red and white safety ribbons, past a "danger live ammunition trials" panel and out onto a wide strip of mowed field.

At one end, an oversized green rubber mat had been laid on the grass to mark the shooting position.

George had brought back Martin's rifle in its case and now handed it to him. 'Absolutely no similarity with the bullets recovered from the corpse, Sir,' he said, turning to the Inspector.

'I didn't think there would be,' he said. 'I had to check anyway.'

We turned to look down the range.

'Great gods!' I cried, discovering how far off the targets were. 'I can hardly make out the markings from here. How on earth do you do it, Martin?'

Martin smiled, 'These riffles have a sighting telescope. Otherwise, it would be more a question of luck than skill.'

He set the case down on the mat and opened it. He lifted the rifle out and checked that there was no ammunition in it.

'I already did that, Sir,' said George.

'I always double-check,' replied Martin. You probably didn't know, but in some of our competitions, there are more than a hundred male and as many female competitors in the waiting area. Plus, all the staff. And then we sometimes have twenty or thirty thousand spectators within thirty metres of the guns.

So, you're talking about several hundred rifles all told, including the spares. If one of those went off accidentally, the probability of wounding or killing someone is much too high to contemplate. That's why we all double and triple-check. Sometimes, we're so careful that we forget to load the chargers. Then, when we get to the shooting range, well. We have to wait until an official brings us out a

charger. That means we can lose thirty seconds. Unless you're a world champion, that's the end of your chances of winning.'

He handed me the rifle?' here, have a look.'

I held up the rifle, which was considerably heavier than I expected.

I squinted through the range-finder.

'Why are you pointing in the wrong direction?' called Alun.

'I took my eye from the sight. 'Ah! Yes, I see,' I said. 'Or rather, I don't see.'

Martin chuckled, 'It takes years to get it about right. Here,' he said. 'I'll hold the end of the rifle to stabilise it, and you can sight.'

Well, we all tried this out, and all managed to see the target occasionally, but only sometimes. Even so, we realised that being able to see and knock down five separate targets four times per competition after skiing around a challenging cross-country track merited our respect.

Martin smiled at us, 'And we biathlon idiots have to do that after chasing each other around four kilometres of cross-country ski track five times.' he paused. 'And the local organisation committees consider it a point of honour to include a maximum of inhumanly steep climbs in the track. They follow these with vertiginous downhill sections with right-angle turns at the bottom.'

The Inspector sniffed, and we all glanced at him, 'Just for my information, Sir. How far can a .22 rifle bullet go?'

Martin thought about this for a moment, 'three hundred metres perhaps. Mind you, you could get as far as a kilometre with a big cartridge.'

'A kilometre!' I cried, 'Wow!'

'It wouldn't hurt much at that distance, using the sort of cartridge I use. It would probably still sting a bit.' He

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paused. 'At three hundred metres, though, it might go through several centimetres of wood.'

'You wouldn't want to be on the wrong end of a bullet then?' I said.

Martin shrugged, 'Good hunters can kill rabbits at 150 metres.'

'But you don't get sighting shots with a rabbit...' smiled the Inspector.

Martin laughed out loud, 'No, they seem to get the idea pretty quick.'

The Inspector gazed up at the cliff. 'Do you think you could hit a target that size on the cliff top from here?'

He sized up the distance, '250 to 300m... A very long shot.'

'But not impossible for a crack shot?'

'Wow! That's a big challenge. You'd need a lot of luck and absolutely no wind. And shooting upwards from the standing position... I wouldn't bet any money on it... Or my career...'

'But,' continued the Inspector. 'What if you stabilised the rifle on a stand?'

'Inspector!' cried Martin. 'Let's be serious for a moment. That woman had two closely spaced hits.' he paused. 'That would be expected performance from a trained man at fifty metres. It would be absolutely spectacular at five times that.'

The Inspector shrugged. 'OK. But what about if the woman was lower down, near the cave, for example?'

'That's still two or three times my normal distance. Marginally lower and closer, but I still wouldn't bet a fortune on that, either. Remember, there are two bullets.'

'You couldn't guarantee hitting a bull's eye from here then.'

'That's a long way for a small bullet. Maybe if I had a few sighting shots. That would allow me to adjust the sights. No guarantee, though.'

'How do you know there weren't sighting shots?' said Mike.

We all looked at him, and he shrugged, 'After all, if no one heard a single shot, why hear three?'

Martin shook his head, 'The first one would have come near. The woman would have heard it and reacted instinctively,' He pulled a face. 'No, you'd only have one shot. Not two grouped like that.'

The police constable coughed, 'No one said the shot had to come from down here, though, did they.'

We all looked at him.

'Well,' he looked around at us. 'I mean, just because we know there is a guy down here training with a 0.22 rifle every morning, we assume the shot came from here.'

The Inspector nodded, 'good observation.'

The constable went on. The murderer could have been up there. It could even have been done with a small self-defence handgun, from quite close up.'

Mike nodded, 'Yes. But not too close, or there would have been smells of powder.'

'Yes. Or burn marks,' said the constable.

The Inspector frowned, 'If the shots had come from much closer, would they make the same sort of wounds?'

Martin pulled a face, 'I've no idea. I haven't shot all that many people recently. That sort of gun doesn't even use the same cartridges as mine.'

I shrugged, 'But once more, we are perhaps jumping to conclusions.'

'Sorry?' replied Venet.

'I mean, we are assuming that she died up there and fell down, causing the damage we observed.'

Inspector Venet nodded, 'Ah! Yes. Good thinking.'

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I went on. 'This could be a setup job. A trick to draw our attention away from a line of thought which might lead us somewhere entirely different.'

Mike clapped his hands, 'Brilliant, Doctor Watson. So, in fact, the woman was shot at police headquarters by the constable here. Then Inspector Venet, who is, in reality, this young man's true father, covers up for him by smashing up the body with a sledgehammer. Finally, the two of them plant the body here and try to incriminate Martin.' He smiled. 'Is that the idea?'

Alun chuckled, 'I'll have to work that into my next major masterpiece of literary genius.'

George laughed, 'One learns something new every day. Or so they say.'

Inspector Venet sighed, 'Shall we go up and have a look at that cave then.'

'To see if the hermit is still there?' suggested Alun.

I looked over at Martin, 'OK. But I'm not going up running.'

'Me neither,' said Venet.

To our surprise, the slope of the upward path seemed far steeper than when we had walked down a few days earlier. But regardless of our expectations, we did, in fact, reach the top alive.

Even so, we were perspiring heavily and entirely out of breath.

On the other hand, Martin chatted on happily all the way up and almost nonstop. For once, he didn't have much verbal competition from us.

'Don't you ever get out of breath,' grumbled Alun.

He laughed, 'When I do this track running hard, yes,' he replied. 'But there's never anyone around to witness me gasping like a fish out of water when I arrive.'

From this direction, the fork in the track was obvious. It led upwards almost parallel to the main track, then bent back on itself, climbing gently.

Martin led us off the main track and up a short set of steps cut into the rocks. These climbed behind the tree which had hidden it from us on our way down.

'This track carries on right to the top,' he said. 'I went up once to see where it arrives. It's virtually invisible from the cliff top because the last section is very steep.' He paused. 'There's even a cable fixed to the rocks to help you up the last ten metres.'

'A bit scary?' suggested Alun.

Martin nodded. 'But far worse coming down because you can see exactly why they put the cable there in the first place. I went back down the other way,' he said, pulling a face.

I chuckled, 'We've been in a few places like that over the years, haven't we, Alun.'

'Yes... And more often than not, that was because Mike said he had spotted a great shortcut on the map.'

I nodded, 'or he knew a far more scenic route.'

Mike bridled, 'Oh, come on. We're all still alive, aren't we.'

'Only just,' said Alun. 'I can't count the kilos I've lost during some of those shortcuts.'

'Well, you ought to thank me for that, Alun. Imagine... You're already overweight, I believe. But just think how grossly obese you'd be today if I hadn't given nature a helping hand and kept you in trim.'

Everybody burst out laughing.

'Overweight!?' are you mad, Mike? 'I'm hardly more than skin and bones!'

'That skin must be extraordinarily thick then,' smiled Mike. 'Especially around the mid-riff. Where it bulges out.'

We all laughed again.

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'Shut up, Mike,' grumbled Alun. 'Or I'll tell Margaux you criticised her Christmas cooking.' He smiled. 'Get the idea?'

Mike shrugged and set off up the track.

This part was wide enough for two people to walk abreast. However, the vertiginous fall beyond the edge did not encourage this much. We thus carried on in single file until, turning a corner, we came on a broad platform.

'Here we are,' said Martin. 'The "Hermit's cave".'

We gathered around the dark entrance of the deep cave.

'Legend,' said the officer, a local man, 'says that in olden times, the three waterfalls didn't exist. In those days, the torrent went underground and came back out through this cave entrance.'

We nodded, and he went on.

'Specialists from the university came over and studied the site. They confirmed that, and also that a shift in the land had blocked the entrance shaft on the plateau in medieval times. That diverted the torrent So, that it flowed across the top and came down behind where the farm now is. Then, many years later, this torrent triggered off a huge landslip, bringing down millions of tons of rock. That's what formed the hillock on which the farm was later built.'

I nodded, 'And I suppose the Hermit spotted a nice new and, above all, vacant cave and moved in.'

Mike grumbled, 'The man wouldn't have been a hermit until after he had moved in, would he?' He said. 'Stands to reason.'

'A pre-hermit, then?' I suggested.

'They call the "aspirant Hermits" here in France,' added Alun.

'Or "novice" hermits,' I said.

But Alun unexpectedly clapped his hands, 'I've got it!' he exclaimed. 'I now believe our hermit was, and always



had been, a hermit.' he said. 'He had no doubt put on a bit of weight, had shed his previous cave and was moving into a roomier one.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'That explains everything.'

'Anyway,' said George, ignoring this. 'That was hundreds of years before the farm was built, so who knows.'

Mike had been prowling around with the Inspector, 'someone has been up here recently, look,' he said.

We gathered around. There were footprints on the soft ground near the edge of the cliff.

'Running shoes,' said Martin. 'Salomon trail-running shoes, to be exact. Women's too.'

'How on earth do you know that?' said Alun.

'Because they have a distinctive pattern of anti-slip lugs designed specifically for mountain track running, and above all, because I have some, too. Designed in the Alps, in fact.'

The Inspector turned to the officer, 'Was that woman wearing something like that, George?'

He nodded, 'Orange and mauve tops and black soles, Sir.'

'Heavens,' I gasped. 'What a memory.'

'That's because I thought I'd get a pair like those,' he chuckled.

'Great shoes,' nodded Martin. 'Fantastically stable and, above all, unbeatable on wet rocks. Vibram soles, you see.'

The Inspector took out his telephone and took some photos.

Mike called us, 'Some other prints over here. Men's boots this time. Big ones.'

We walked over to the cave entrance. A profusion of prints from the same boots indicated that the person hadn't simply been passing through.

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George extracted a powerful torch attached to his belt and shone it into the cave. The ground under the overhang of rock was bone dry and dusty. This also was covered with boot mark. These were duly photographed, too.

About three metres inside stood a massive rock. Its edges were surprisingly smooth and rounded.

'I guess that's what a million years of erosion from a gushing torrent does,' nodded Mike. 'I bet it's even smoother on the upstream side. That'll have been directly in the blast of the water,' He smiled. 'Did you know that more than half the erosion is caused by the bits of sand and rock transported by the water?'

'I had never thought about that,' said Martin. 'Interesting...'

'For heaven's sake, Martin,' cried Alun. 'Don't encourage the man. He'll never leave you a moment's rest if you go on like that.'

'Wait a minute, called Mike,' who wasn't listening. 'Someone's been camping here.'

The Inspector and the officer moved quickly around the rock and played the torch around the surface.

A campfire had been built against the smooth rear side of the rock, and the blackening on the rock showed that it had been used frequently.

'Nicely hidden from outside,' nodded the Inspector. 'An excellent hideout. Hmmm. So, it looks like that woman was up here at some time.'

'And took the direct route, back down,' said Martin. 'We are almost directly above the place where you found her.'

'So, the guy in the boots shot her, and over she went,' I suggested.

'Let's not jump to concussions,' said the Inspector.

The rest of us raised our eyebrows, and one or two pouted.

He shook his head, 'All right, all right!' he cried. 'It does look like a strong possibility.'

I returned to the cliff's edge, 'She would have had a perfect view of your rifle range from up here, look.'

Martin nodded, 'Yes. And almost all of my running track.'

'I expect she was spying on you to see if you had any special training tactics that could explain why you are so good at shooting,' I said, gazing down at the range.

George came over, 'But one thing is certain though.'

'Is it?' said Inspector Venet.

'Yes. It was not her who was camping up here.'

'And how do you know that?'

'Because her clothes were well-ironed, she was clean, her hair well brushed, and above all, she did not smell of wood smoke.'

The Inspector nodded in appreciation. 'Excellent observation, George. Good thinking, Bravo.'

The officer shrugged, 'Obvious...' he smiled, 'But what was the other guy doing here, and why did he shoot here.'

'Twice.' I added.

'Wasn't taking any risks,' said George, 'Clearly.'

'Could he have been spying on Martin too?' I asked.

Martin pulled a face, 'Surely my fame is not quite on that sort of scale!'

'No, it seems odd,' said the Inspector, frowning.

Mike was chewing his lip and gazing out across the forest. 'Mind you,' he said. 'You've also got an incredible view of the farm and the hilltop from here. With a pair of binoculars, you could see all the coming and going perfectly,' he nodded. 'If you wanted to keep tabs on everybody, you couldn't find a better place.'

We glanced at each other, nodding slightly.

'I wonder who would want to do that,' said the Inspector.

'And, why?' added George.

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'Money?' I said.

'Money!?' asked the Inspector.

'Just a thought,' I frowned. 'I suppose you know that the old Lucas Duprès was supposed to have a fortune that amounted to several tens of millions of Euros.'

'Really!?' gasped the Inspector. 'But he left virtually nothing in his will.'

Alun nodded, 'Not even enough to have the roof repaired.'

'Ah! I see.' Inspector Venet frowned. 'So you think someone might believe the remainder was hidden here, someone?'

The officer nodded. 'And is keeping an eye out in case anyone finds something?'

I shrugged, 'Well. It's an idea.'

'But why go and shoot that woman?' cried Martin. 'The poor thing could only have been searching for a secret that doesn't even exist. It's just that I have an extremely steady hand, excellent eyesight and strong arms to hold the rifle.'

'I don't expect she thought she was liable to get shot,' said Alun.

'Maybe the woman accidentally stumbled on the guy's hideout and came on him unexpectedly. He probably reacted instinctively without thinking,' suggested Alun.

'Only a professional killer would react like that,' frowned the Inspector.

'Like the person who killed the other woman?' I said.

Inspector Venet frowned. 'This is all a bit too much,' he paused. 'I don't believe those guys would hang about once they had done what they came for.' He scratched his head and gazed down at the farm roof. 'Once they had killed Josephine Doin and had disposed of the evidence, they would normally have got out of here fast. No, there's something else going on.'

'I'd say several things,' I said. 'Three at least.'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'One murder of "classified" nature. One Biathlon spy and one Fortune hunter lookout.' he smiled. 'At least that's the impression It gives.'

I chuckled, 'Just the tiniest touch of "jumping to conclusions" Inspector.'

'Yes,' he smiled. 'I noticed that, but nonetheless worthy of interest as a starting point for our investigations?'

The officer nodded. 'If that's what actually happened, he'll have cleaned the place of incriminating evidence, but I'll come back up with a team, just in case they spot something.'

'Like footprints?' I smiled.

The Inspector frowned, 'Yes. It's extremely odd that the guy didn't clean those too.'

'Because he probably knew they didn't matter, Sir,' said the officer. 'They must have been special boots, then. Not his normal size.'

'If that's the case, this is definitely a pro. A good one, and a dangerous one too.' agreed the Inspector.

Mike gave me an odd look, 'When's the first train out of this place?' he said. 'It is getting a little too hot for comfort around here.'

'If that guy has any sense, he'll be well away from here by now,' said the Inspector. 'He'll also be cursing like hell for having had to mess things up like that.'

'Unless he's not a free agent. Someone after some easy money, but a hired pro,' added the officer.

'In which case, he'll not stray too far. Eh, George?' replied Inspector Venet.

'Brilliant,' groaned Mike.

'But one thing is certain. He won't come anywhere near this cave again,' said the Inspector, perhaps more to reassure us than anything else.

I shrugged, 'He or She...'

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The other nodded, and the Inspector smiled briefly, 'No, that can't be ruled out either. A professional female murderer, wearing men's boots. Hmm. Yes, an excellent coverup.'

'Could be our opera singer, Julianna Metrokovitch, then,' smiled Mike.

'I already told you that she was a spy. And,' he continued, 'I told you she probably has a gun hidden away.'

The Inspector shook his head and smiled. 'I'll look into it... And, George, I'd like you to check up on her; no doubt, extensive criminal record.'

Saying this, he turned and gazed across the rock face, 'Shall we look at that pool of yours while we are here?'

We nodded and started off back down the track.

When we reached the pool, the others were astounded by the size of the enormous boulder now sitting in its centre.

'Great gods,' cried Martin. 'Now I understand why the body flew out over the edge when the rock landed in it. I expected something much smaller.'

'Yes. Massive. But how on earth did that get dislodged,' frowned the Inspector.

'A wild boar?' suggested Alun.

'Let's go and have a look,' I suggested. 'It's not far up from here.'

'Not far,' scowled Mike. 'But pretty scary.'

'Only if you look down,' said Alun.

'I'll be looking down all the time,' I said. 'At my feet.'

The Inspector smiled. 'Martin?'

'Yes.'

'You young ones. Could the two of you jog down and bring the cars up to the plateau. We'll meet you up there to drive back down together.'

Martin nodded, and the two jogged off together, clearly looking forward to enjoying an easy and agreeable downhill run. In working hours too, for George.

'I bet you a hundred euros; those two are going to try and race each other to the cars,' I smiled. 'I saw how their eyes lit up when you suggested in Inspector.'

'George is going to have a big struggle then. After all, he's up against a professional athlete.'

'Good for the morale, though,' I said. 'Not everyone has the chance to run with a world-class athlete.'

'I just hope he'll still be able to walk tomorrow,' laughed the Inspector. 'We have plenty on our plates.'

We laughed together and set off to circumnavigate the pool without being drenched by the spray of ice-cold water.

Surprisingly, the passage which had been so scary on our downward trek was much less so going up. This was because we were now looking upwards and away from the chasm that fell away to our right.

Once at the top, I led the Inspector to where the rock had been.

Almost at the same time, Martin and George came jogging easily out of the forest.

The officer seemed quite alive for the moment. 'He nearly beat me to the car,' laughed Martin. 'He put on an unexpectedly fast sprint down the last leg of the track.'

'I tripped up,' groaned George, 'otherwise...'

Martin laughed. 'Pretty good, seeing that he's wearing boots.' he nodded. 'We'll have to go out together when you're free. With decent running gear, though.'

'Great,' smiled George, clearly embarrassed by the proposition from a professional athlete.

'Back to work, gentlemen,' smiled Inspector Venet. 'Let's have a closer look.'

George got down on his knees. 'See these marks, Sir.'  
We all gazed down.

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'Big crowbar marks. That's how it was done,' He crawled across the grass to the other side of the indentation left by the boulder. 'There must have been at least two people, Sir. It would have been impossible to move on your own, even by a strong man.'

Mike was scanning the ground behind him, 'And there are plenty of boot prints too. Look.'

The Inspector took a photo from one side and then went to the far side. 'Yes, two sets of different boots. Look.' He placed his phone, with the photo visible on the ground beside the second set of prints. There was no similarity, but both were big, heavy boots.

'Two guys then,' said Alun. 'Big guys.'

'Two big murderers,' groaned Mike.

'Three Mike.' I corrected. 'This place is getting pretty hot, don't you think?'

'Yep,' agreed Alun, 'It's warming up nicely.'

'Do you know? I expect the guys didn't know we were here at all. They were trying to make the whole thing look like an accident,' I said.

'Ah,' smiled Alun. 'Yes. Our innocent little mermaid sits sunning herself on the rock....'

'Naked,' I added.

'Naked and Sunning herself. Yes, Exactly,' nodded Alun. 'When unhappily, the rock dislodges itself, and over she goes.'

'Followed by the rock,' I added.

'Yes. A terrible, unpredictable and tragic accident,' agreed Alun.

'Except that the rock took a long time to become unstable and topple over to join her,' I added.

'Yep. Odd that...'

'Except we happened to be down there when it came down,' said Alun.



'And except that we just happened to have been sitting on that rock twenty minutes earlier and saw the body,' said Mike. 'And that rock didn't seem very wobbly, did it?'

'No. No detectable wobbliness,' agreed Alun.

The Inspector nodded. 'So, if your reasoning is correct. You must have come onto the scene after the women fell.'

'Or was pushed.' I added.

'Well, in any case, between that moment and when the men returned with their crowbars.'

Mike gasped, 'My god!' he cried. 'What would have happened if we had still been in sight when those murderers came back.'

We all exchanged horrified looks.

'I guess you were pretty lucky there,' said George, pulling a face.

'Hells bells!' exclaimed Alun.

## Chapter 9

**W**e stood transfixed for several seconds, exchanging astonished looks.

The Girls did not object to Alun's suggestion for some unknown and no doubt devious reason. Although unexpected and, therefore, ominous, we knew when not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Thus, carrying our brimming and bedewed glasses, we swiftly removed ourselves from their presence and slipped outside. Also being experienced in the unpredictability of such matters, we removed ourselves from both line-of-sight and earshot.

Setting our precious cargo down in the shade of the umbrella pines, we sat at the table, looking forward to a quiet half-hour. We did this with a soft, collective sigh.

High above us, the umbrella pines also sighed, emphasising the tranquillity of the unexpected moment.

Naturally enough, and like all experienced married men, we sat with our backs resolutely turned to the houses. In this way, when "The Girls" eventually realised their error and beckoned us home, we would not be able to see. We could also convincingly affect not to hear, even if they shouted. This would allow us several extra gulps of cold beer, whatever catastrophe the near future might hold for us.

As I say, we have considerable experience with events of this nature, as those who have read our earlier adventures will already know.

Consequently, the fact that the Girls simply nodded and went on chatting was distinctly disturbing.

We had little doubt that they had spotted the iced refill cans we were trying to hide, and this made it even more suspicious.

'I wonder what they're up to,' frowned Alun.

'Hum. Yes,' I replied.

'How's that?' asked Mike, who was gazing up at the tree canopy and had not been listening as usual.

'The Girls, Mike. They didn't object,' said Alun.

'No. They didn't,' nodded Mike. 'I noticed.'

'So, Mike. That means that they're up to something,' I leant forward. 'That's what it implies.'

'I wasn't considering implications,' he replied. 'I was thinking about my beer.'

Alun nodded. 'They wanted us out of the way, Mike. For some ominous reason.'

'Oh, come on, you two. You're too suspicious,' Mike smiled. 'Just relax.'

'I wish I could,' said Alun.

'As the Girls have often said, a little of us goes a very long way,' replied Mike. 'They had probably just needed to erase the effects of the last dose.'

'Wishful thinking, Mike,' frowned Alun.

'Mike,' I sighed. 'Totally unmerited benevolence on behalf of the Girls is always bad news. It inevitably comes just before some highly unpleasant task that has been secretly planned for us. You should know that by now.'

Alun nodded, 'It's like rowing happily across a smooth, tranquil pool of crystal-clear water, unaware that we are approaching the lip of a vertiginous waterfall.'

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Mike pulled a face, 'Just for once, why not just enjoy the moment,' He glanced up at us. 'As the song goes, "what will be, will be"...' he warbled.

I nodded, 'Good advice, Mike.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Alun, raising his glass. 'But only if you promise not to do that again.'

'Do What?'

'Make that horrible noise.'

'I was singing.'

'Great Gods!' cried Alun. 'Is that what it was?'

'Shut up, Alun.' sighed Mike.

'Well, avoid doing it out here, please,' I said. 'You'll scare the ducks off.'

'You shut up too,' grumbled Mike. 'Let me drink in peace without adding any more of your ludicrous comments.'

Mike and I pulled faces at each other.

'A bit touchy today,' I smiled.

'Shut up.'

There was, in fact, a simple reason explaining why the girls had been paying less attention to our requests than they usually would. It was because they had "accidentally" overheard someone else's telephone conversation. Given the highly unusual contents of the one-ended exchange, they now wanted to privately discuss what they had heard.

Oblivious of this and its terrible consequences, we followed Mike's wise advice and settled down, gazing across the tranquil pond. Not a single vertiginous waterfall was to be seen or heard. At least not at that moment in time...

Now, calling it a pond is inaccurate. The term inevitably conjures up the image of the sort of muddy oversized puddle one often sees depicted in seventeenth-century paintings of farmyards. Our pond was on a far more majestic scale. To start with, it was not muddy. Furthermore, even though it was in the forecourt of an

ancient farmhouse, it was of impressive dimensions. It was roughly oval and must measure about thirty metres long by twenty wide. At its centre stood a small island overflowing with rushes and something which looked like yellow irises.

The few ducks swimming lazily here and there completed the tranquil scene, which struck us as perfect for a relaxed beer.

Sadly, though, Alun, Mike and I were not destined to be allowed as much tranquillity as we felt we deserved.

We had hardly had time to settle down when we were distracted from our reverent appreciation of the first sips of beer.

'Oh no!' groaned Mike.

I turned my head slightly to see what had caused this cry of despair.

'Oh hell!' I groaned. 'What-will-be-will-be seems to be a bit too fast arriving today.'

'And not even from the expected quarter,' added Alun, avoiding glancing in the direction of the Girl's door, just in case.

The Diva, Juliana Metrokovitch, had bustled out of her front door to our right and was now making straight for us.

'Can't a man have a quiet beer even here in the middle of nowhere?' sighed Alun.

Mike, as usual, looked on the bright side.

'She's probably only going for a swim.'

We turned and gaped at him.

'Going for a swim!?' I gasped.

'Yes. In the pond, probably.'

'In the pond?' exclaimed Alun.

'Probably.'

'Don't talk rot, Mike. That water temperature can't be much over ten degrees C.'

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'She probably wants to firm up her buttocks with a bit of underwater exercise,' continued Mike. 'Apparently, that works wonders.'

'Wonders, possibly,' smiled Alun. 'But not miracles,' he added, chuckling.

'Taking the relative volumes of the pond and her body into account,' smiled Mike. 'If she does go in, I'd estimate that the pond temperature will rise several degrees.'

I almost choked on my mouthful of beer, causing an outburst of spluttering and coughing.

By then, the Diva was bearing down on us.

'Oh dear. Are you all right?' She cooed, frowning down at me, her vast bosom heaving. 'Perhaps I should do the Heimlich manoeuvre.'

I shook my head vigorously and waved my hand. Unfortunately, this was still clutching my glass of beer, which slopped liberally onto Mike's lap.

The latter leapt up, forgetting that he was seated on the heavy bench, banging his knees on the massive tabletop. He tumbled over backwards, beer glass in hand, which naturally enough emptied itself onto his face. 'Are you stark raving bonkers, you idiot,' he cried, flailing about. 'Give me a hand up, Alun, don't just stand there giggling.'

Unfortunately, though, Alun had already spotted a lark. Turning to the Diva, he nodded, 'Heimlich? Yes, that might be worth trying. We wouldn't want him pegging out on us, would we?'

'No,' she replied, moving quickly around the table, her vast bosom heaving closer and closer. 'One should act swiftly and firmly in such situations.'

I waved my hands about, gasping, but could not get a single word out. I could already imagine myself being engulfed in that seemingly bottomless cleavage, never to be seen again. Like an intergalactic black hole, once under the influence of its irresistible pull, nothing can escape, not

even light. I would be crushed out of existence by the extraordinary forces that nothing in the universe can experience and return to tell the tale.

'Quickly. Quickly,' Cried the Diva. 'Not a second to lose.'

As she reached out her flabby pink arms, I stumbled to my feet and turned to make a run for it. However, I almost immediately tripped on something which felt oddly like Alun's foot.

I went face down on the grass and grunted as my stomach came into contact with a wooden croquet ball that had been left there earlier in the day.

'Oh hell!' I exclaimed through my coughing.

'Brilliant!' chuckled Alun. 'That seems to have done the trick nicely. Thank you for offering anyway, Missus Metrokovitch.'

I got to my feet, red-faced from coughing. 'Did you trip me up, Alun, you idiot?'

'No. I just saved your life,' he nodded.

I sneered at him and was on the point of adding a few of Mike's choicest nautical insults for good measure when I remembered that we had feminine company. I could readily imagine that an internationally famous opera singer might take offence to verbal filth. So, I held my tongue. I did this literally and figuratively because I had bitten it on falling.

When I removed my hand, there was a smear of blood on my fingers. 'See what you've done, you twit.'

'One can't make omelettes without breaking eggs. You know that.'

'What!?'

'Anyway,' continued Alun, 'Missus Metrokovitch would have saved you had my timely intervention not given entire satisfaction, which I might mention it did.'

'I didn't need saving, you brainless ...' Once again, I avoided letting out a string of salty insults. In their place, I

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pulled a face at Alun, sat heavily on the bench and took a gulp of beer. This set me off coughing again.

The Diva looked down at me, shaking her head. 'Beer is bad for the health, you know. I only ever drink champagne...' she hesitated, then added, 'Or fine vintage wines.'

'This is fine vintage beer,' I retorted.

The Diva frowned, 'Vintage beer! really!?'

I sighed, 'No. I was joking.'

She frowned down at me. Joking was obviously not part of an opera singer's essential skillset, or her genetic makeup for that matter.

With a rapid blink of incomprehension, she whirled round and fixed Mike with her stern, headmistress-like gaze. 'It's you I came to see.'

'Me!?' said Mike while wringing beer from his hair.

She glanced down at his sodden lap and pulled a face.

Mike followed her gaze and let out a long, sad sigh. 'Oh, hell's bells! Look what you've done, you twit.'

'It was an accident, Mike,' I replied with a wry smile.

He shook his head and sighed heavily again. 'I'm sorry, missus Metrokovitch. I expect that world-famous opera singers don't have to put up with the presence of clumsy fools like these two.'

The Diva frowned, glanced at Alun and me and wagged her head from side to side, 'Well, even I cannot avoid clumsy fools altogether,' she hesitated. 'I suppose that there must be something wrong with their genes.'

'Yes, you're probably right,' sneered Mike. 'Deformed and mutated genes.'

Alun nodded, 'That's an interesting thought, Mike. I wonder if there is a specific clumsiness gene?'

I pursed my lips, 'I expect that nature either knits in a clumsiness gene or a big-headedness gene, but not both,' I suggested. 'Which one do you have, Mike?'



Mike sighed and turned back to the woman. 'What can I do for you, madam?'

She beamed, 'Well, you have inestimable knowledge and expertise that I would like to call upon.'

Mike nodded, smiling and swelling up, just like one of those peculiar exotic fishes which blow themselves up like semi-transparent footballs. It is worth underlining here that he did these three things simultaneously, which is certainly a performance worth mentioning.

'Well, that's true,' he beamed back. 'I do have wide and deep knowledge of many and varied things.'

Alun and I gazed at each other and looked skywards with sighs of exasperation.

The Diva, however, appeared to consider this way of replying perfectly normal. Consequently, she nodded and smiled back encouragingly. She would have responded in an identical manner had a reporter asked her about her prodigious vocal mastery.

'As you're a respected expert on priceless jewellery,' she said. 'I'd value your opinion on a ring. It was a present from an admirer.'

Opening her Chanel shoulder bag, which appeared far too small for her voluminous body, she fished out a small red velvet-covered box. Snapping it open, she withdrew a sizeable sparkling ring. She gazed at it fondly for a moment and then held it out to Mike.

Mike stared at it, gulped deeply and shot us a panicky look, which clearly meant "Help!".

However, sensing a bit of fun, we simply pulled faces at him behind the Diva's back as his eyes got bigger and bigger.

His courage, which had been trying to avoid notice in his boots, eventually gave up the struggle and came surging back to the rescue of its master. Mike smiled a bright, expert-like smile and reverently took the ring from

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her. He lifted it high and held it up to the sunlight, where it sparkled and flashed. He then twiddled it about in his fingers, humming quietly to himself, exactly as he had seen people do in films. He also added a bit of slow nodding and a gentle pursing of the lips. He hadn't the slightest idea why people did such things. However, he knew it was expected of one when one was an expert in such matters.

Alun and I exchanged looks. We had to admit that the performance was convincing.

'So? What do you think, monsieur expert?' said Alun.

The Diva's eyes flicked from the ring to Mike's face and back again. At the same time, Mike continued to nod, secretly searching desperately for some sort of inspiration. Then he smiled and gazed at the Diva.

'Ah!' sighed Mike. 'You're an opera singer.' he paused.

'Of course!' replied the woman.

'So... This might well be Nibelung's Ring,' he gazed up and smiled a knowing, expert-like smile at her.

To our surprise, the Diva started, frowned, and finally beamed at Mike. 'So!' she exclaimed. 'Not only are you a famous jewel expert, but also a highly cultivated music lover, I see.'

'One does one's best to maintain a certain level....' replied Mike, swelling up a little more, rapidly approaching bursting point.

Alun frowned at Mike, trying to work out what he was babbling on about.

Mike, noticing this, shook his head in mock pity.

'Alun. You surely remember... Wagner. The Ring.'

Alun frowned.

'In Romania last year,' continued Mike. 'The Girls wanted to take us to see Wagner's Ring.'

Alun and I exchanged looks, as the memory of that adventure came back to us. 'Oh! Yesss... A close escape that.'

'But you didn't attend?!' frowned the Diva. 'Why was that?'

Alun hummed and haad, trying to invent something convincing rather than the truth, which she would never believe.

But the woman's face lit up before he could work out a credible lie. 'Yes. Of course. I see. Last year... Romania. Oh dear! Oh dear! That terrible woman.' She swelled up her vast bosom and allowed it to collapse in a long operatic sigh, which caused the ducks to hide their heads under the pond's surface. 'That imposter! She was making such a catastrophic farce out of *MY* favourite role.' She shook her head. 'And naturally, you would never waste valuable time on such a disgraceful performance.' She nodded approval, beaming more and more. 'Catastrophic! My goodness! Times have changed.' she turned and gave us a sad nod. 'In my days, that imposter would have been kept firmly in her place,' She nodded. 'In the chorus line.'

'In the back row,' nodded Mike, warming to the subject. 'That is why I refused to allow my friends to be drawn into such a terrible experience.'

Alun and I smiled back wanly, not knowing how to respond to this.

Well, we didn't need to, did we, because the Diva hadn't finished.

'What is more,' she said, 'what self-respecting opera singer would even *dream* of singing Wagner at the Romanian National... Really! The very thought of it...'

Alun leant over and whispered. 'Do I detect just the slightest touch of jealousy in the air?'

I nodded and whispered back, 'Must have been pretty good... "That Woman".'

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Alun nodded back. 'And a good looker too, I suspect.'

The truth was that our adventures in Romania had been both unexpected and memorable. Although we had effectively avoided a four-hour dose of Wagner on hard wooden chairs, this had not been without inevitable negative consequences or undesirable side effects.

The events which befell us landed us in a police cell for the night. Well, twice, in fact, but not the same night or for the same reason.

On the first occasion, Alun and I were accused of throwing Mike off the balcony of our upper-story hotel balcony. Our case was considerably aggravated because we were also accused of passing this off as a religious miracle.

The second time was due to a simple misunderstanding. For some reason, a couple of police officers got it into their heads that we were in league with a trio of Russian bank robbers. What made our case worse was that this misunderstanding somehow led the officers to believe we were about to blow up a hydroelectric dam. They thought we wanted to do this to permit the robbers to make good their escape. Alun's fertile imagination and aversion to things such as telling the simple truth had fuelled much of these misunderstandings.

The Girls had never allowed us to forget these events, as many other similar ones.

Mike went on, 'Come on, you two. You must remember the story. In "The Ring", that devilish Nibelung dwarf, Alberich, sneaks down to the Rhine and steals magic gold from the Rhine maidens. Using this, he forges a magic ring.'

Alun shrugged. 'Well, one would, wouldn't one.'

Mike ignored this, 'This ring gave the wearer the power to rule over the entire world.'

He looked over at us, 'following?'

'Yes, professor,' I nodded. 'Do you think that there might be a drop or two of magic gold at the bottom of this pond? That sort of all-embracing power would come in handy at the moment.' With this remark, I shot Alun what I felt must be a withering look. However, it may have fallen short of the mark and have come over as a dastardly sneer. Who knows?

The Diva screwed up her nose a little at this, but Mike went on, 'The Gods didn't much appreciate the idea of such a powerful tool being in the hands of anyone else than themselves. Let alone a dwarf. So, they steal it,' He paused for breath and nodded, but I butted in.

'In those days, the morals of Gods were not what one would have hoped for.'

Mike ignored this, 'From then onwards, the action gets really complicated, with Gods and Giants and mortal kings and Valkeries getting up to all sorts of tricks. If that wasn't enough, and because every personage in the opera has sons and daughters and wives and... Well, after a while, one gives up trying to follow.'

The Diva nodded approvingly, 'Exactly. Excellent. Well done. Well, well! We'll have plenty to talk about after all.' She beamed a bit more and sighed. 'A cultivated man in this deserted place. What an immense stroke of luck!'

Mike smiled condescendingly, 'One does one's best to give satisfaction.'

'Oh god,' I whispered to Alun, who nodded and pulled a face. 'We now have Jeeves in our presence.'

'Naturally,' the Diva smiled. 'I have sung "Der Ring des Nibelungen" numerous times.' She rolled the title around her mouth as though she was tasting one of her preferred and extremely expensive "fine vintage wines". 'Naturally enough, my "Brünnhilde" is still considered one of the best of all time.' She nodded happily as if hearing once more

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the thunderous applause echoing around the Scala at Milan and seeing the huge bouquets of flowers showering onto the stage at her feet. She smiled again ...' You no doubt have one of my recordings in your collections.' She smiled. 'Most discerning music lovers do.'

'Yes, I certainly,' agreed Mike. 'Several versions, probably.'

She beamed with pleasure, and Mike went on.

'But it is not often in these hectic times that one can find sufficient time to listen.... Twelve hours in total, I think.

'Fourteen.' Said the diva. 'Exhausting! Especially when one is called on to sing the entire cycle. Four evening concerts in all. Devastating.'

'I can perfectly understand that.' Replied the exceptionally cultivated Mike.

'Alun whispered, 'Thank heavens we refused to go.'

I nodded. 'Just imagine. Fourteen hours!'

'Mind you,' Alun pulled a face, 'It would have saved us a certain amount of unpleasantness with the police.'

'It was probably worth it, all the same,' I said.

'Hmmm,' replied Alun.

Meanwhile, during this exchange between highly cultivated people, Mike was desperately searching for a way out of his delicate predicament.

He shot Alun and me a pleading look again, but Alun only smiled and wiggled his eyebrows.

Mike sighed, 'Oh, God!'

'Sorry?' said the Diva.

'Oh, nothing.'

'So, what is your expert opinion?'

'Well...' his voice trailed off as he stood staring, wide-eyed, at the sparkling ring, as if hypnotised by it.

'Well, Mike?' called Alun.

'Hum!'

'Yes?'

Mike's first diversional attempt was a rather lame, 'It's a shame, really.'

'Oh!' said the Diva, visibly very concerned.

'Yes. I haven't got my special jeweller's magnifying glass.'

The Diva relaxed.

'It would only be possible to make an evaluation if I had the proper tools. I hope you understand.'

'Oh dear.' said the Diva. 'I was counting on your advice so much...'

Alun was not for letting Mike off the hook as easily as that. 'But Mike.' he smiled one of his bright, encouraging smiles. 'Don't be distressed, Missus Metrokovitch; Mike always forgets that my folding geologist's magnifying glass is always with me when we go hiking together.' He rooted about in his pocket. 'Here,' he said, handing it to the scowling Mike.

'You're a geologist then?' she said, looking him over with interest.'

'Well. One doesn't like to boast, does one? All the same, my name and reputation are indeed well-known in certain quarters worldwide.'

He did not feel it worth mentioning that the quarters in question were mainly associated with the world's police forces.

The Diva stepped a little closer to Mike and lowered her voice, 'I've often thought of having it valued. It's not insured, you see.'

'Not insured!' gasped Mike!?'

The Diva seemed to hesitate. 'Well, it is a rather delicate matter...' she paused.

'Stolen, you mean?' suggested Alun.

The Diva bridled, 'Good heavens No. Stollen! What an idea!'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'These things apparently sometimes happen with valuable jewels,' I added.

The Diva unbridled herself a little. Happily, this was just enough to permit her to fill the vast volume of her lungs again. 'No. You see, the gentleman who was gallant enough to make me the present was adamant that the present should remain a secret between us. A mark of his profound respect to an exceptional artist.'

Alun gasped, 'And he actually said that?'

The Diva spun around to him, her bosom taking several seconds to catch up with the rest of her body. She nodded as the aforesaid mass oscillated around its stable resting position. 'He said much, much more. Such a charming, cultivated and affectionate man. Extremely wealthy men often are, don't you find? So cultivated and respectful.'

'Obviously not an Englishman, then,' smiled Alun.

'No, not an Englishman,' replied the Diva, missing the intended joke.

'A foreigner then,' continued Alun.

'Aren't we all foreigners to someone?' added the exceptionally cultivated Mike.

'Very well said,' beamed the Diva, 'Exactly. Well, in this case, the gentleman was...' she paused for effect and glanced at us to see our reactions. 'A member of a certain Arabian royal family, in fact.'

'Do such things really happen?' I asked. 'I mean outside romance novels.'

'Oh, yes.' Cooed the Diva. 'At least when one is an exceptionally talented artist.'

'Ah!' nodded Alun. 'A married man,' he added sotto-voce...

The Diva pretended not to hear this and turned back to Mike with a regal sweep of her arms, followed closely by her bosom.



'He asked me not to publicise the present or to wear the ring in public. Only when we meet in private.'

'A mark of his unfaltering respect,' I said, biting my lip.

'Exactly.'

Alun leant over to me, 'I bet the guy's wife and family would come after her blood if they knew.'

'His wives...' I corrected.

'Or harem.'

'Do they still have those, or do they simply sub-contract?'

Alun nodded. 'I'm not sure. Let's have some fun, shall we?' he chuckled.

'Alun!' I shot him a warning look. However, Alun looked away. It was hard to stop him when he was in a trouble-making mood.

'Come on, Mike,' he called. 'Let's have your expert opinion. Speak up.'

Mike puffed out his cheeks and screwed up his eyes as he pretended to scrutinise the ring through the minute magnifying glass. 'Well!' He faltered. 'I really wouldn't like to say.'

'Come on, Mike,' I added.

Alun leant forward and sharply drew in his breath. 'Ah! Yes... I see!' He raised his eyebrows and pulled a face.

'What is it?' said the Diva, turning to him.

'Yes. A bit embarrassing,' he added.

'Please?' frowned the Diva, turning back to the now flustered expert, who was doing his utmost to vanish with a puff into thin air.

'Well,' attempted Mike. 'One can't be at all certain in the absence of the proper instruments. I'm sure you'll understand that I would consider it a professional fault to give an expert opinion under the circumstances.'

The Diva frowned again, stepping towards him. 'What are you trying to say?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Mike gazed at us for help, and Alun took pity on him. 'Well. It's unfortunately as clear as day.'

'What is?'

Alun pretended to be embarrassed and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Well, this object is totally worthless. That's why Mike is so embarrassed.'

The Diva gasped and looked at Mike with wide eyes. 'Worthless!?'

'No, no,' he gasped. 'At this stage, we really should request a second opinion. One from someone with the proper instruments.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'Come on, Mike, you owe this lady the truth. We've been around you long enough to glean the basics,' he sighed. 'Just observe that pale, lifeless shine the thing produces when the sun hits it. Would you expect that from a true gem?'

The Diva reached out and took the ring, holding it up and scrutinising it.

'Little better than stage jewellery, in fact,' added Alun.

'What!' cried the Diva. 'Worthless!? Stage jewellery!?'

'Alun!' I cried. 'don't you think you're pushing that a little too far?'

He understood exactly what I meant by this but was enjoying himself far too much to hold back his creative mind.

An assiduous reader of our previous adventures will remember the inextricable situations that Alun has got us into when his creative mind gets the better of his consciousness. If he is ever entirely conscious, that is.

He smiled, 'Well, not entirely worthless, of course. One could probably find better on the local market stalls for twenty euros or so. So, that's something.'

Mike rubbed his hands together as if the ring had been burning a hole in his hand and made another attempt to evaporate. 'Well, I think you ought to get a second opinion.'

As I say without proper instruments...' he flailed about for ideas, 'And of course, my eyesight is not as good as it was.'

Coming to his aid, I smiled, 'That's why he sold out to Chaumet. Nice guy.'

'Eyesight?' cried the Diva.

'Mike didn't like to mention it, which is natural enough, I suppose,' I added. 'But he has, in fact, become totally colour blind too.'

The Diva gazed at Mike with astonishment.

'A rare but oh-so-sad condition,' I added. 'It comes from the intense nuclear radiation emitted by priceless gems when lit by powerful jewellers' lamps.'

'Good heavens,' cried the Diva. 'Nuclear radiation!'

I nodded, 'And the worst of it is that the radiation is focused directly onto the retina by their magnifying glasses.' I paused.

Alun seemed to be enjoying this new topic and nodded in agreement, 'horribly painful,' he said.

'Exactly. It blasts huge holes right through the little colour receptors. Excruciatingly painful,' I added.

'Or "douleureuse", as the French put it,' put in Alun.

'But the terrible thing,' I said. 'Is that this disables many blue receptors. And as everyone knows, the blue ones are essential in evaluating priceless gems.'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed the Diva. 'I'm so sorry. I had no idea.'

Mike nodded sadly, 'Well, at least I can still enjoy opera.'

The Diva nodded solemnly, 'What an enormous consolation that must be to you.'

'It is indeed. So, one must soldier on and make the best of things.'

'I understand, I understand,' nodded the woman. 'So sad.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

I smiled, 'Well, the other consolation is that Old Monsieur Chaumet gave him fifty million euros for the business.' I nodded. 'That helped him a little as well, as consolations go.'

'Yes. I expect it did.' she added. 'But can mere money compensate for the loss of such an exceptional talent?'

'So,' said Mike, 'You understand why...'

'Come on, Mike,' interrupted Alun. 'Everyone can see as well as I can that this is a fake.'

Mike pulled an exasperated face, which the Diva saw.

'I see!' she gasped. 'You are trying to be kind to me.'

'No, no,' cried Mike. 'I'm no sort of expert. Never have been. 'Get a second opinion.'

'Ha!' cried the Diva.

'No. Honestly. All that is just a pack of lies. Alun made it all up. Get another evaluation, please...'

The woman looked at Mike with sadness. 'Such profound humanity and sensitivity... Thank you.' Her bosom was heaving increasingly, and her cheeks were flushed, a "fine vintage red wine" colour. She glared down at the ring and then shook her head angrily. Then suddenly she breathed "Soto Voce", 'That dirty scoundrel! That grubby, groping psychopathic...'

Alun and I raised eyebrows at each other and quickly stepped back, sensing an imminent explosion. She went on, 'When I think of his flabby lifeless grinning face and his damp, oily hands grubbing all over me. He must be laughing still, the...'. And here she went off into a string of insults we would never have thought could be part of a diva's vocabulary. 'All that for a twenty-euro ring!' She laughed a loud, theatrical stage laugh, violently shaking various parts of her voluminous frame. 'And he implied that it was worth millions...Ha!' Here, she emitted a sound which sounded like "Bah!" But nobody does that

nowadays, do they? So, it must have been something else.

'It's never wise to unreservedly trust a foreigner,' I said.

Alun made a ticking noise with his tongue, 'But did he ever actually state its true value or just imply it?'

'No. He did not...' At this, she glowered and shook her clenched fist at the memory of the man that had clearly sprung up in her withering mind's eye. Then, swinging back her arm, she took aim and threw the sparkling ring far out into the pond with all her strength.

'Don't!' cried Mike, leaping forward. But it was too late. 'You should have waited for a second opinion. Oh my god! What have you done?'

But the Diva didn't hear and was already storming away, 'The disgusting groping, flabby, sticky-handed...' The final words were lost in a whirlwind of the juiciest insults we had heard since Mike forced us into being his crew in a catastrophic catamaran regatta.

The interested reader can learn about that epic episode of our past elsewhere.

Anyway, a few instants later, there was a tiny plop as the ring hit the surface, several meters out. Thereafter, the only reminder of the ring's existence was a series of expanding circles on the pond's surface.

As the Diva disappeared in the direction of her house in a flurry of blue silk taffeta, Mike turned to us, 'You crazy idiots! That ring might have been worth millions.'

Alun chuckled, 'I doubt it. You don't really believe that any self-respecting Arab prince would give away million-euro rings for a fondle or two, do you? Those guys know the value of things better than you and I.'

Mike shook his head in despair. 'You idiots;'

'Anyway', said Alun. 'That was good fun.'

'No, it wasn't,' groaned Mike. 'That was acutely embarrassing.' He sighed, 'Now what?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'We finish our beer,' I suggested.

'Uninterrupted,' added Alun. 'She should have known better than to disturb a man with his beer.'

'Great Heavens!' cried Mike, 'You brainless twits.'

We had hardly seated ourselves, and the first gulps of beer were still only halfway to our stomachs when we became aware of a disturbance.

'Don't turn,' warned Alun.

We froze, 'Oh Hell!' I groaned, 'What now?'

The disturbance continued to approach, and we continued to pretend to be deep in an involved discussion. This required us to lean together and gradually increase the volume of our voices to avoid having to admit to hearing the calls from behind us.

Then, there was an abrupt lull in the approaching disturbance followed by a loud 'Hey!'

This time, we were forced to react.

Alun pretended to be startled and jumped up. Being a highly experienced husband, he carefully put his glass down before doing so. 'Good grief!' he cried, turning, 'what in the name of... Oh! It's you. What on earth are you doing creeping up on us like that and shouting.'

Mike and I turned too and gazed wide-eyed and entirely innocent-looking. At least, that's what we imagined we looked like.

Margaux and my wife stood some distance away, glaring at us, hands set firmly and defiantly on their hips.

'You don't honestly imagine we believe you didn't hear us, do you?' said Margaux.

The three of us frowned and exchanged astonished looks, which we imagined would appear reasonably convincing. After all, it wasn't as if this was our first use of such diversional tactics.

'Of course, they don't,' added my wife, shaking her head.

Margaux stomped closer, 'What in the name of God, were you doing with that woman?'

'Woman!?' I frowned.

'Missus Juliana Metrokovitch. She is a woman, I believe,' sneered Margaux. 'What were you doing with her?'

'I didn't lay a hand on her,' cried Alun.

'Me neither,' I added.

'Nor me,' said Mike.

My wife scowled, 'You must have upset her in some way by the look on her face as she slammed her front door.'

'Oh yes,' smiled Alun. 'She did seem a tad annoyed when she departed.'

'When she departed?' nodded my wife, 'But not before.'

'Well,' agreed Alun. 'Perhaps slightly before, too.'

'So, we were just wondering,' snorted Margaux, 'what might have been the cause of this momentary anger. In other words, what on earth have you done now, you three twits.'

'That's not a nice way to treat docile, loving husbands,' I said.

'Undocile twits and friend,' countered my wife.

'Well! Really!' cried Alun. 'Don't you have the slightest spark of confidence...'

'No, we don't,' interrupted Margaux, 'not even a damp squib of a spark.'

'A squib of a spark!?' exclaimed Alun.

'Shut up, Alun! What did you do to that woman?' asked my wife.

'She is a bulldozer, not a woman,' sneered Alun.

'So, what did you do to make the bulldozer angry?'

I affected a deep furrowed frown, then nodded comprehendingly. 'Oh, I see! No, no, I believe you are getting confused.'

'Are we now?' said Margaux. 'Confused.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Exactly.'

'Well, well!'

'Yes. An understandable confusion, too,' added Alun.

'Well, thank heavens we've got that cleared up,' said my wife, turning to Margaux, who put her hands back on her hips rather menacingly.

Then, unexpectedly, she made a lightning-fast movement and grabbed our beer refill cans. In less than a second, they were confiscated.

'Hey!' cried Alun. 'That's our beer.'

'Was your beer.'

'Oh, come on,' groaned Alun.

Margaux swivelled on her heel and glared at Mike, 'Mike?'

Mike had been testing his ability to evaporate again. However, he had apparently still not mastered the trick because there he was, still there.

There remains the possibility that he had transiently pulled off the trick but had not known how to avoid recondensation.

'Hello,' he replied.

My wife also turned and scowled at the poor man, 'Perhaps the train of recent events is a little clearer in your powerful mind than in those of these two drunks.'

'Drunks!' I cried.

'On half a glass of beer!?' added Alun.

Margaux stepped towards Mike, who was firmly stuck between the heavy bench and the table. 'Mike. Why is your hair soaking wet?'

'He washed it,' volunteered Alun.

'He washed his hair!?' frowned my wife.

'In the pond,' I added, not knowing why I felt it necessary to add anything at this point.

Margaux nodded, 'Yes, of course. In the pond. And that's what made Mrs Metrokovitch so angry, I suppose.'



'Oh no,' smiled Mike. 'That was because of the Arab prince.'

'Good heavens!' Margaux feigned astonishment. 'And where is he now? This Arab Prince.'

Mike pulled an astonished face, 'I haven't the slightest idea.'

'Did he drown, do you think?' asked my wife.

'Drown!?' frowned Mike.

'You know. Sunk in the water and ceased to breathe.'

'I honestly wouldn't know,' replied Mike, frowning. 'I imagine he is still perfectly all right.'

'At the bottom of the pond?' asked Margaux.

'Pond!?' said Mike. 'What pond?'

'This pond, Mike. This pond.' growled Margaux, pointing.

Mike was dumbfounded, 'But why on earth would he have been here in this pond?'

Margaux and my wife sighed and made menacing gestures with clenching hands. 'Because you just said he was here.'

'I did not.'

'Well, where is he?'

'I said, I don't know. I have never met him.'

'Mike!' growled Margaux. 'You just said that it was an Arab prince who got that woman so angry.'

'Oh yes. That's true.' nodded Mike.

'So, where is he then?'

'Probably watching football somewhere,' added Alun. 'They do a lot of that, apparently.'

'Or possibly spending a relaxing moment or two in his harem.' I suggested.

'Which one was that?' asked Alun.

'I was wondering the same thing, Alun,' I replied. 'I really can't say.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Will you two shut up,' groaned my wife. 'How much beer have they had?'

Margaux sighed and turned to Mike. 'Mike!'

'Yes.'

'Would you step over here for a moment.'

'Oh yes. naturally.'

Mike stood and stepped over the bench to turn to them.

'What on earth!' exclaimed Margaux, staring at his drenched trouser lap.

'Mike!' cried my wife. 'What have you done!?''

Mike glanced down, 'Oh No.' he gasped. That wasn't me.'

'Wasn't you,' cried Margaux.

'No. That was him,' he cried, pointing at me.

'You!?' shouted my wife. 'You urinated on Mike!?''

'It was the beer,' I cried. 'It was an accident,'

'My God!' cried Margaux, 'Not only senile but impotent now.'

My wife shook her head sadly, 'Straight to the doctor as soon as we get home.'

'His bladder must have swollen up like a football with all those litres of beer they've been guzzling all day.' said Margaux.

'I've only had one glass this afternoon.' I groaned.

'And you couldn't even hold that in?' said my wife.

'Things are far worse than I suspected.'

'For heaven's sake! I tripped up.' I cried.

'That's no excuse for urinating on your friend. You should be ashamed of yourself.' sighed Margaux.

'Oh God,' I gasped. 'Alun tripped me up, and I upset my glass over Mike's lap.'

Mike nodded. 'That's how it happened.'

The Girls exchanged pitying looks.

'You're not just saying that to save your best friend's feelings, are you, Mike?' asked my wife.

'No, no. That's exactly what happened,' he smiled. 'Alun tripped him up so that Mrs Metrokovitch wouldn't have to give him the Heimlich procedure. Then he drenched me with beer and landed on a wooden ball. That's all.' he smiled. 'Simple, really.'

The Girls exchanged more looks.

'Simple,' said Margaux.

'Yes.'

There was a pause, during which the Girls seemed to ponder something. Well, that's what it looked like, with the pursing of lips and so on. Then they turned back to Alun.

'There's just a single point that escapes us still.'

'Just the one?' asked Alun.

'We'll start with just one.'

'OK,' smiled Alun.

'Who do you three idiots take us for? A couple of brainless lunatics or what?'

'Sorry?'

'Where is this Arab prince, and why was the woman so worked up.' said Margaux in a sinister hissing voice.

Mike blinked. 'It was because of the ring he gave her.'

My wife started and gazed at me, 'You gave her a ring? What ring? In exchange for a warm and friendly Heimlich squeeze or two.'

'Great gods! No.' I exclaimed.

'Did you, or did you not, give her a ring?' asked Margaux.

'No. Of course, I didn't. It was the Arab Prince.'

The Girls snorted in unison.

'How did he do that when you just said he was nestling down in his harem.'

'Or watching football,' added Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' hissed Margaux.

'Oh, All right. If you really want me to.'

'Enough!' hissed Margaux.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Allow me to explain, ' I said.

'No,' said Margaux. 'Mike. Come here.'

Mike had still not evaporated, so he was forced to do as requested.

'Your hair smells of beer, Mike,' frowned my wife. Then she quickly held up her hand, 'No, please don't explain. We don't want to know.'

Mike pulled a face.

'Well, Mike?' said Margaux.

'Well, it's all quite simple,' he started.

'Naturally,' nodded my wife. 'As usual, when you three get together.'

'Oh, come on!' groaned Alun.

'Quiet!' said Margaux.

'Mike?'

'Well, the woman got extremely angry with the Arab Prince, whom she suspected of having palmed her off with a fake diamond ring.'

My wife blew out her cheeks and sighed loudly, 'Mike. There was no Arab Prince in the vicinity. You just said that.'

'He did it years ago,' smiled Mike.

'Oh, hell!' cried Margaux. 'I'm getting a headache.'

'Why on earth would he have done that?' frowned my wife.

Mike smiled, 'To ensure her favourable disposition and enable him to...'

'OK, OK, Mike, we get it. No need to explain.'

Mike shrugged, 'as you wish.'

Margaux was glancing from one of us to the other with a concerned frown deepening on her brow. 'Excuse me for my innocence.' She said quietly. 'But would someone like to tell us WHY this woman came to suspect that the ring was a fake?'

Alun and I exchanged looks and willed Mike to become instantly dumb.

It didn't work.

'It's because that twit Alun told her it was costume jewellery.' He blurted out.

'Hey, who's the expert?' cried Alun. 'Me or you?'

'Expert!' cried my wife.

'That twit also told her I was a precious gem expert and that I had premises on the Vendome Square in Paris...'

There was a brief silence.

Then, there was less than silence. 'You did what!?' cried Margaux.

Once more, Margaux and my wife exchanged astonished gasps.

'You told her what?' repeated my wife.

'Oh! I expect it must have just sipped out,' Alun pulled a face. 'I don't really remember now.'

'You don't remember?' whispered Margaux.

'Well. I might have mentioned something like that.'

'But for heaven's sake! Why.'

'Well. In fact, I had this sort of inspiration, you see...'

'Oh, hells' bells!' groaned Margaux, 'Not one of your inspirations. Was there more?'

'I don't completely remember now.'

I smiled, 'Well, he also told her I have a world-renowned online sex toys shop.' I said, shooting Alun another withering look. 'Would that count as "more"?'

'Well, well.' said my wife. 'Nice.'

'So,' Margaux smiled, 'Just for fun, you told her that the diamond ring in her possession was a fake. Is that correct?'

'That's about it,' agreed Mike.

'And she then went berserk with anger.'

'Exactly.'

'Well, at least that's nice and clear.' smiled my wife.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Yes,' Mike smiled back, which was a dangerous thing to do.

'Well, I must say, I'm pleased you had some fun.'

'No,' cried Mike, 'It was acutely embarrassing.'

'I meant for these two.'

We pulled faces and tried to look as downcast as possible.

'I trust there's no more.' said Margaux.

We looked at each other and pulled faces.

Margaux gasped, 'Oh no!'

'What more is there?' sighed my wife.

'Well...' I started, but Mike butted in.

'The idiots told her she could get a better one on the market for ten euros...'

'I said twenty, Mike.'

'And as the Arab Prince had apparently told her it was worth millions, she got furious.' added Mike.

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Margaux. 'Now I understand.'

Mike nodded. 'I told you it was simple enough.'

'That's true, Mike. You did,' said my wife, not altogether convincingly.

Mike nodded. 'And that's why she threw the ring out into the middle of the pond.'

The two women gasped and gazed at each other in silence for what seemed hours. Then, turning to us, they sighed.

'Have you any idea what you've done?' said Margaux, a little too quietly for comfort.

We pulled faces.

'I pleaded with her to get a second opinion,' said Mike.

'Because of his colour blindness,' I added.

'Oh God!' groaned Margaux.

'Shall we tell them?' my wife said to Margaux.

Margaux sighed. 'I suppose it can't be avoided now.'

'What can't?' asked Alun.

'Sit down.' ordered my wife, pointing to the table.

'Can we have our beer back?' asked Alun.

'No, you can't. We're having it.

'Oh, come on!'

'Be quiet.'

Margaux handed my wife one of the bedewed cans, and they opened them and took deep pulls as we looked on.

My wife rolled the remaining can towards Mike.

'Now listen, you band of idiots,' she said.

We did our best to look alert, while in reality, we were closely observing Mike to see if he would do the right thing and share the beer.

'Hey!' called Margaux. 'Pay attention.'

We paid attention.

'Well, just before you did your little spot of good deeds, we overheard Mrs Metrokovitch on the phone.'

'Her side window was open, and so was ours,' added my wife.

'Naturally, we heard her quite clearly. She was talking to someone. This someone was clearly not happy with how things were panning out.'

We sat up. This looked interesting. Someone who was unhappy with a Diva and was ready to tell her this must be a courageous person.

Margaux went on. 'We heard her say that she knew only too well how much she owed the person.'

'It was a "you", so it could be a man or a woman.' added my wife.

Then she said, "You know perfectly that I haven't the funds available. I was tricked. You know that."

'Then there was a long silence followed by, "An alternative. What on earth do you mean by that?"

'Then, "A mission! What sort of mission."

then she said. 'How could I do that? I don't even know the woman.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

then, 'Yes, yes. You know perfectly that I have no choice in the matter. What exactly do you need to know?

There was another long pause, then she said. "So, you have someone watching me already. You people are absolutely without scruples.'

Then she said, 'I'm pleased you find that amusing. And who pray is your little spy down here.'

Another pause, "WHO! Good heavens!

We sat even more up and almost forgot to watch Mike and his beer, but not completely.

My wife nodded, 'Strange, isn't it. I wonder what the "it" might be. But then it became clearer.'

Margaux leaned forward and fixed us with her gaze, 'Now boys, listen carefully because this part will be of particular interest to you.'

She sat back, and my wife took up the story, 'She then said that if worse came to the worst, she would sell her diamond and emerald ring and pay off the debt.'

'Oops!' said Alun.

'Exactly,' said Margaux, glaring at him, 'You twit.'

Alun pulled a face.

My wife nodded, 'Then things became even clearer. She said that she'd learnt her lesson and that she'd never ever visit any sort of gambling house again. Interesting, isn't it.'

Margaux sat forward again, took a sip from the can and glared at us. 'Then she got very animated at something that came over the line and said that it wasn't necessary for "them" to come and that she would find it herself.'

My wife nodded. 'So, now we have an "it" and a "them"'. she smiled. 'Getting distinctly interesting. eh?'

Mike cracked open his can and swigged some down, 'So, she came rushing out to ask me to confirm things and value her ring to make sure she could sell it to get off the hook. And this nitwit messed the whole plan up.'



'Quick thinking, Mike.' smiled Margaux.

The evening was nearly on us as we sat there, gradually assimilating the catastrophic situation.

'So,' smiled my wife, that is why, as soon as it's dark. You three are going in there to get the ring back.'

'What!?' cried Alun.

'And then you will take it back to Mrs. Metrokovitch.'

'What!?' I added.

'And you will make up whatever excuse you like, but you will make it clear that the ring is NOT a fake.'

'BUT!' moaned Alun. 'That water is freezing cold. We'll die.'

Margaux smiled one of her unpleasant smiles. 'No, Alun. It's not "we" who will die, but You.'

'Oh, come on. I mean, really!'

'Yes, really. As soon as it is dark, you. and that means Alun. Will get in there and retrieve the ring.'

'But it could be anywhere. It might take all night.'

'That's your problem.'

'It could be impossible to locate the place where it fell.'

Mike shook his head, 'No, no.' he smiled. 'I know exactly where it fell. I was watching.'

Margaux smiled, 'Well done Mike.'

'You see, I lined up the impact point with the tree trunk over there and then took a step or two to the left and lined it up with the other one there,' He pointed. So, we just have to mark the intersection of the two lines and bobs-your-uncle.

'Brilliant, Mike.' said Margaux. 'And you are certain of this, are you?'

'Absolutely.' smiled Mike. 'One hundred per cent. My brain is always alert, even in the most distressing moments. He swelled up as usual when he was showing off, but for once, we didn't dare to take him to task for it.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'So, there you are. It will be dark in an hour, and we want that ring back with its owner before bedtime,' Margaux glared at us. 'Got it?'

We nodded.

'While you're waiting for complete darkness,' said my wife. 'Start working out the best lies to fit into your excuses.' she laughed. 'That shouldn't tax your fertile little grey cells much.'

'You'd do well to do your plotting before your little swim,' added Margaux. 'Those grey cells might not function as well if you die of cold.'

'Ha, ha!' said Alun.

At this, the Girls got up and turned to leave.

'Hey!' called Alun. 'Our beer.'

'Oh, sorry,' said Margaux, turning. She leaned over the table, unexpectedly snatched our two glasses, and swept them off as she disappeared toward the house.

'Oh Hell!' groaned Alun.

'You twits!' sighed Mike.



## Chapter 10

**T**ime to put your swimming trunks on, Alun.' I said, trying hard to suppress a chuckle.

Alun pulled a face, 'I suppose you think that's funny. Just touch that water. Go on.'

'Come on, Alun,' said Mike. 'It's no worse than having a tooth pulled. It's only painful for the first hour or two.'

'Very funny,' said Alun, blowing out his cheeks.

'You're forgetting that we're in the south of France, Alun,' I said. 'That water is certainly several degrees warmer than the English Channel. I bet it's at least twenty degrees.'

'Oh yes!' grumbled Alun. 'Twenty degrees Fahrenheit.'

'In that case, it would be frozen solid,' said Mike.

'And you could walk out there and pick it up where it was lying,' I added.

'She wouldn't have thrown it, in that case,' said Alun.

'Seeing how angry she was, I think she would have still felt the gesture was worth doing,' I said.

'Letting off steam,' nodded Alun. 'You're probably right, there.'

Mike smirked, 'In any case, you'll be in and out again within seconds. Before you can say "Bob's-your-Uncle" too,' he paused. 'In any case, the temperature won't have had time to penetrate more than a millimetre or two into your skin.'

'All my nerves happen to be grouped inside those first two millimetres of skin, Mike,' groaned Alun.

'Don't worry. You'll warm back up again almost immediately once you're out,' I said.

'Not if my heart has stopped. Which it probably will have done.'

'Don't be stupid, Alun.' I sighed. 'If the worst comes to the worst, you're forgetting that we'll be at hand.'

'That's what's worrying me to tell you the truth,' he sighed. 'And if either of you take a video to put on Instagram, I'll skin you.'

'I could get your heart back into action in a jiffy,' smiled Mike. 'No problem there.'

'Oh yes!?'

'Have you already forgotten that I've just completed my yearly First-Aid update course, Alun,' said Mike.

'And that's supposed to be reassuring?' Alun frowned. 'By the way, remind me how many hearts you've re-started this year?'

'Well, this year... Not all that many. But at least I know how to do it.'

'In theory.' I suggested.

'Well, in practice too,' replied Mike. 'We practised on dummies.'

I smiled, 'So, Alun was there, was he? Who were the other ones?'

'You didn't make much headway with our "lady-of-the-pond" up there, Mike,' grumbled Alun.

'She was already much too dead, Alun,' frowned Mike. 'If the heart has stopped pumping for too long, the brain runs out of oxygen. And as you both know, if there's no oxygen, then the brain stops for good, and that's that.'

I nodded, 'We're lucky then, Mike. Alun's brain stopped years ago.'

'Shut up,' said Alun, shaking his head.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Hey, Alun!' I cried. 'Be careful. If you go on shaking your head so vigorously, you might start up your brain again. Then where would we be?'

'Very Funny.'

Mike sighed. 'Anyway, we practised on very lifelike dummies. They're stuffed chock full of electronic wizardry.'

'Did they have nice big squishy breasts, Mike?' I asked. 'To practice on, I mean.'

'For heaven's sake, don't you ever think about anything else than breasts?'

'I must admit that sometimes I think about other bits, too. And naturally enough, I think about beer,' I paused, then added, 'And wine, of course.'

Mike gazed at me and frowned. 'Do you know? I don't rightly remember if the dummies were female or male.'

'But you do remember them being full of electronics,' I said. 'And you didn't even see inside.'

'Well, that's what stuck in my memory.'

'But you must have practised that oral stuff too,' I said.

'Oral stuff!' exclaimed Mike.

'That "kiss of death" lark. You know.'

'I suppose you're referring to the resuscitation procedure,' sighed Mike. I was pleased because I had almost got him riled.

'That's it,' I smiled. 'Well, are you allowed to use your tongue?'

'Shut up, you twit!' cried Mike. 'Stop talking utter rubbish.'

'Whatever you say, Mike,' I smiled, 'After a minute or two of that chest-pumping business, I, for one, would remember if I had been doing so on squishy lifelike breasts or not.'

'Does your wife know you're a sex-crazed pervert?' sneered Mike.

'If she knew that enticing me to do regular First-aid training required no more than adding a few lumps of silicon to the dummies, she'd jump at it.' I smiled.

'This is all very interesting, Mike,' sighed Alun. 'But I'd like to point out that I am not stuffed with electronic wizardry. Just flesh and bone and stuff like that.'

Mike sighed a long, loud sigh, 'The electronic wizardry in question is there to simulate to perfection the internal workings of all that flesh and bone and stuff, Alun. That's why it's there.' he paused. 'These dummies cost a small fortune.'

'So, it's in my interests to do my best to perform as far as possible like one then,' sneered Alun. 'What if my innards don't know they should behave like your electronic dummies?'

'Oh! Well, then you just die.' said Mike. 'You can't have everything. I mean, you can't expect the instructors to deliberately stop one of the student's hearts just so that the others can practice getting them going again.'

I laughed to myself, 'I can just imagine the scene. "Now gather around everyone; we're going to take turns having our hearts stopped. Who wants to go first?" great.'

Mike shook his head, 'No one's going to have his heart stopped by that water, Alun.'

'Then you go in.'

'Oh no. You're the one responsible for this mess. It's your sentence.'

'I'll tell you what,' I said. 'I saw an old set of rubber waders in the shed. They'll protect you up to above waist level.'

Alun nodded. 'At least my legs won't freeze, at least not straight away.'

'Or your little wiggly friend either, Alun.' I added.

'You can put a tight jumper on the top, too. That will insulate you.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Put a jumper on his wiggly friend?' I gasped. 'More like part of a pair of rubber gloves.'

'Woollen gloves would be preferable,' said Mike.

'Shut up, you two.'

'Come on, let's go and hunt out the equipment and get this thing done.' I said, getting up from the bench. The sooner it's done, the sooner we can locate a bottle of wine and forget.'

'I won't need to forget if I'm dead,' groaned Alun.

'And if you don't retrieve the ring, we will never be allowed to forget. Ever,' I said. 'No matter how much wine is involved. The Girls will always be there to remind us.'

Alun pulled a face, 'Oh hell! Why, oh why, was I born such an ingenious and creative genius?'

'Why indeed?' I nodded. 'Let's go.'

The shed was in darkness, behind the main building and up against the cliff wall. Inside, it was darker still.

'How did you know there were waders in here?' asked Alun.

'Oh. I was just sniffing around. Seeing if there weren't a few more naked corpses lying about.'

'Maybe the waders are used to fishing them out of the ponds. One wouldn't want them blocking the outlet channels.' suggested Mike.

Alun sighed, 'Turn on your torch. Let's find these damn waders and get on with it.'

'Torch!?' I exclaimed.

'Don't tell me you haven't brought one!'

'Oh, I brought one, all right,' I smiled.

'Well, turn it on then.'

'I haven't got it.'

'You just said you did.'

'No, I said I brought one.'

'Well, where is it then?'

'In the car.'



Alun sighed again, 'Well, what about going and fetching it then.'

'Oh! All right. If you insist. It might take a while, though.'

'You said it was in the car.'

'I did. But the car is with the Girls, and the Girls are at the village shop.'

'Brilliant! So?'

'So, you just have to take the waders off the hook behind the door to your left. And then, as Mike often says, Bobs-you're-uncle,' I said.

'Well, why didn't you say that earlier, you nit,' grumbled Alun.

He scuffled about a bit, and then there was a crash and a series of oaths.

'Mind the flowerpots, Alun. There's a load of them just behind the door, too. I spotted them earlier.'

'Thanks a lot,' grumbled Alun.

'Take the gumboots while you're about it, Alun,' I said.

'They're just behind the flowerpot. Beside the...'

Suddenly, Alun cried out, 'Great Gods! What's this muck.'

'The boots are beside a big pot of pruner's wound-paint stuff. It looks and smells like tar mixed with freshly gathered dog manure.'

'Brilliant!' groaned Alun. 'I stuck my hand right in it.'

We heard Mike chuckling. 'In the old days,' he said. 'Professional gardeners never went pruning without a bucket full. In case they wounded themselves, you see. Much cheaper than sticking plaster and better in the rain.'

'Shut up, Mike,' said Alun.

Mike felt it necessary to clarify, 'It's for the pruner's wounds, you see... Pruners wound paint. Ha, ha.'

'Well, well,' Alun sighed. 'Really! Well, thanks for explaining, Mike.'

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Mike chuckled again. 'Anyway, that'll waterproof your hand and wrist, Alun. It'll protect it from the cold.'

'Great. Come here, Mike. Let's shake on that...' Then he groaned. 'My watch, too. Oh Hell. It'll take ages to clean that.'

'Not your good old Rolex?' I chuckled.

'No. The new one... This one cost me nearly fifty euros.'

Eventually, we gathered up everything and made our way back to the pond. Mike and I were careful to maintain a respectful distance between us and Alun's tar-covered hand.

'I've got an idea, Alun.' smiled Mike, shooting me a look.

'Keep it to yourself,' sighed Alun.

He started donning the waders, hindered somewhat by his supper-tacky hand. The string of curses indicated that, happily, the mess had not gummed his lips together. Then Mike piped up. 'How is he going to find the ring at the bottom of that pond, in the dark?'

'I hadn't thought about that.' said Alun. 'Let's give up, shall we.'

'I've got a brilliant idea, Alun.' smiled Mike, shooting me a look.

'Keep it to yourself,' sighed Alun.

'Well, as you asked. That tar stuff catches fire pretty easily.'

'That's not an idea, Mike,' I said, 'It's a statement.

'And tar burns, even under water too.' He continued. 'So, if Alun lights his hand, he can use it like a flaming torch to guide him.'

'Giving up is easier,' said Alun. 'I much prefer that option.'

'No, we shall not, Alun,' I said. 'I'm going to get you my trail-runners headlamp. It's in the bedroom.'

Alun nearly choked, 'Since when did you take up trail running? 'Come on!'

'Do you want it or not?'

'It'll never work underwater,' said Mike.

'Yes, it will, Mike. It's one hundred per cent waterproof.  
We trail runners nearly always run in the rain.'

'We trail runners!' laughed Mike.

'Want it or not, Alun?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. Then I'll just trail-run over to the house to get it,'  
and off I trailed.

A few minutes later, Alun was dressed and equipped for the adventure. He lifted his hand to turn on the LED headlamp, 'Stop!' I cried, grasping his arm and removing the tarred hand from danger's way. 'I'll turn it on if you don't mind.'

Suddenly, a brilliant beam of white light burst over the pond's surface.

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Alun. 'That's what I call a powerful lamp.'

'We experienced trail-runners need all the light we can get, Alun. We run very fast, you know,' I said.

'Pull the other one,' chuckled Alun. 'At your age, I bet you can hardly give a slug a run for its money...'

We all laughed.

'Come on, Alun,' said Mike. 'In you go.'

'Are you ready with the heart massage?'

'All ready and primed.'

'And I've already set up the emergency ambulance phone number on my cell phone,' I added. 'So, let's do it.'

'One moment,' whispered Alun. 'Do you have your smartphone with you?'

'Of course I do,' I replied.

'You Twit. So, why didn't you turn on the torch function when we were falling about in that damn shed?'

'It was you who were falling about, Alun. Not us. Anyway, I thought it would be more fun like that.'

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'Come here,' gurgled Alun.'

'Go and get that ring, Alun,' sighed Mike. 'We don't want to stay here all night.'

There was a grumbling noise from Alun, and we moved towards the pond's edge.

'How do we do this, then, Mike?' I asked.

'Well, you stand here and make a line of sight between this chair arm and that tree trunk,' He pointed, and I nodded.

'Got It.'

'Good. And I'll guide you from over there towards the other one. I'll guide Alun out following my line of sight. Then, as soon as he crosses yours. You call "stop".'

'Perhaps I'd best whisper "stop" than call it,' I suggested.

'Yes. Good idea. But whisper loudly.'

'OK,' I nodded. 'That's simple enough.'

'Then Alun just bends down, retrieves the ring, and comes back.'

'Wades back,' I suggested. 'It's best to be precise in these things.'

'Exactly,' agreed Mike. 'Wades, it is then.'

'Well,' sighed Alun. 'If you two have finished...'

'Yes. Ready then?' whispered Mike.

'So, it's as simple as that, then?' said Alun.

'Yep. as simple as Bobs-your-uncle.'

'So, that guy's still around, is he?'

'Who's that?'

'Bob.'

'Shut up. Go on, Alun. Be brave.'

There was another set of grumbling, and Alun started to step gingerly into the shallow water.

'It gets deeper as you go out, Alun,' whispered Mike.

'Really! Good heavens! Who would have thought that?' whispered Alun.

Well, one step further proved Mike right. The water rose above the top of his boots, 'Oh hell!' whispered Alun.

'Nice and warm?' I called Soto-Voce.

'Grrr,' replied Alun.

'Keep going straight, Alun.' whispered Mike. 'Aim for that clump of rhododendrons.'

'Rhododendrons? It's pitch black. Which are the rhododendrons?'

Mike sighed, 'The clump, next to the rose bush, you idiot!'

'Come out here and show me, Mike.'

Mike sighed, 'All right. Head for the light in the girl's window.'

'Got it,' whispered Alun.

In a few more steps, Alun was almost in line with my sighting mark. 'Stop,' I whispered. And Alun stopped.

'Perfect,' whispered Mike. 'Great.'

'No,' I replied. 'I was just testing Alun's response time.'

'Prat,' said Alun.

'Just another short step or two,' I whispered. 'One at a time.'

'You know,' called Alun. 'It's odd.'

'What is?'

'Well, the pond bottom is not spongy at all.'

'That's good news,' called Mike.

The water was still well below the top of the waders and just about at the level of Alun's waist, had he still had one.

'I have the impression that the bottom is stone-surfaced or bricked. Hardly any mud at all,' he whispered.

'Better still,' called Mike. 'Now, one step at a time.'

'Stop!' I called. 'Hold on a jiffy.' I closed one eye and squinted. 'No. One step more.'

'OK,' replied Alun.

He took the required step and instantly disappeared from sight.

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'Great Gods!' Cried Mike, under his breath, dashing to the water's edge.

Several seconds passed, and then Alun suddenly resurfaced, spluttering.

'Bloody hell!' he gasped. 'What on earth is that?'

'You tell us, Alun,' I called.

'There's a ledge, and then the pond floor drops goodness knows how far.'

'Brilliant!' groaned Mike. 'Just where the blasted ring fell. Great!'

'It's all stone lined. Like a reservoir,' Called Alun. 'And I can now confirm that the water out here is not Mediterranean Sea temperature.'

'But there's one consolation,' I called.

'Which is?' replied Alun.

'Well, your heart didn't stop.'

'No,' said Mike. 'I told you you needn't worry.'

'Great,' called Alun.

'The Old man, Lucas, must have had the pond dug out to create a water reservoir,' I suggested.

'Why?' called back Alun, still treading water.

'In case of fires, I guess. That would explain the big old hand-operated fire pump behind the shed.'

'Behind the shed?' called Alun.

'I told you I'd been sniffing around.'

Mike was getting impatient, 'Dive down and see how deep it is Alun.' called Mike.

'Why?'

'Just to get our bearings.'

'If I go down again, it's to look for that cursed ring,' he whispered.

'The *Nibelung* dwarf's ring was not cursed, Alun. It was just an extra powerful magic ring,' replied Mike.

'If you don't shut up, Mike. I'll make your ears ring as if by magic...'

'Come on, Alun, 'I called. 'don't stir up the mud, or you'll never find the thing.'

'The water's nearly three meters deep here. What's more, it slopes down steeply towards the centre. Must be really deep out there,' he pointed towards the little island.

I frowned, 'odd that.'

'What?' called Mike.

'That'll wait. Come on, Alun. Take a deep breath and go straight down from where you are. Follow the stone wall.'

Alun nodded, modified the angle of the headlamp a little, took a deep breath and disappeared once more. About ten seconds later, he reappeared. he waved his hands. 'Seen it,' he called. 'It's right at the base of the wall. Here we go again.' With this, he took another deep breath and dived.

We waited and waited. After ten seconds, I called Mike. 'What's he up to?'

However, suddenly, he was there again. 'Got It!' he exclaimed, waving his hand in the air.

Then his head slid under the water, and he returned, spluttering for breath.

'Oh god!' He cried. 'I've dropped the damn thing.'

My heart sank, 'Oh hell!' I exclaimed.

We could hear Alun swearing under his breath. Then he took another deep breath and disappeared anew.

It took another two dives before Alun finally retrieved the ring again.

When he did, Mike called out, 'Put it on your finger, Alun. And close your hand around it. For God's sake, don't drop it again.'

Alun obeyed and then levered himself back onto the ledge of what we now knew to be a deep, water reservoir.

'At least now we know why it stays as cold, even in mid-summer,' nodded Mike as Alun waded towards land. 'There must be millions of litres of water.'

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'Enough to put out any number of chimney fires,' I added.

'Only if that damn hand pump works,' said Alun as he stepped out of the water.

'We ought to give it a try tomorrow,' I suggested. 'Better to be safe than sorry.'

Alun nodded, 'Yes. That might be fun.'

'Oh hell, No!' groaned Mike. 'All our most complicated and troublesome adventures started life with the idea of something being Fun.'

We exchanged looks. Mike was, of course, perfectly right.'

'It's odd though,' I said.

'What's odd?' said Mike.

'That island.' I pointed.

'It's bad manners to point,' said Mike. 'You know that.'

'That island roughly in the middle of the pond, in the general direction of nor-nor-west,' I sighed.

'Oh! "That" island,' joked Alun. 'Well, what's odd about it. Oh. By the way. These wader boots keep you really warm. Brilliant. I'll have to get some.'

'What on earth do you need waders for, Alun?' I asked.

'Oh, one never knows when they'll come in handy. Like today. A good example, eh...' he smiled.

'I suppose you'll get them second-hand,' said Mike.

'Heavens no!' I laughed, 'He'll get them from the local Tip. As usual.'

We all laughed.

'And what's odd with the island?' asked Alun.

'Well, according to you, the water must be at least five meters deep out there,' I said.

'Yep. As a rough guess. So?'

'So, how come rushes and iris are growing in the earth suspended five metres above the pond floor?'



'It might be the tip of an underground volcano,' suggested Alun.

Mike made a snuffling noise, 'They're floating, you ignoramus.' he whispered. 'That's how they do it. A floating basket.'

'A damned big basket, Mike,' said Alun frowning. It must be at least three meters across. That would weigh tons.'

Mike sniffed, 'Hmmm!'

'And,' I added, 'Even if it was chained in place, one would expect it to drift about a bit.'

'Yes,' agreed Alun. 'One would. Odd that.'

'Exactly,' I said.

'We ought to go out and have a look,' muttered Alun.

'Yes,' said Mike. 'Off you go then.'

Alun shook his head. 'Are you mad, Mike? Swim all the way out there with these boots and waders. Do you want me dead?'

'I was pondering the point,' smiled Mike. 'But no, stay with us.'

'Thanks, Mike. I will.'

'Good. Now, just slip out of your clothes and swim out there. You're a good swimmer. You always said so.'

'Mike,' I sighed, 'You know as well as us that you're by far the best swimmer of the three of us. You go.'

Mike stepped forward and gazed out at the tiny rush-covered island. 'For goodness's sake. Alun's already wet. It stands to reason that he should go. Anyway, we've got the ring, so let's call it a day.'

'Are you going in, or do I throw you in, fully dressed, Mike,' growled Alun.

'Are you two mad!? I might drown out there in the middle of the night.'

Alun took a step forward, 'I might have drowned easily enough, but that didn't seem to worry you much.'

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'The ring business was your fault, Alun. That's finished now. So, come on, let's go and give the thing back and have some hot spiced wine.'

'Alun raised his tar-smeared hand, 'If you don't go, Mike. I'll rub this dog-dung-smelling mess all over your lovely hair.'

Mike blew out his cheeks and swore, 'You guys are the worst friends I have ever had.'

'The only ones you ever had,' I laughed.

'All right. That too,' agreed Mike.

'Come on, Mike,' said Alun. 'Strip off. You can put your clothes back on, nice and dry when you return.'...

'If he gets back,' I added. 'Who knows what horrible beasts are waiting for him on that desert Island yonder.'

'Who indeed...' whispered Alun. 'He will need all of his legendary courage to confront the horrors hidden there for so many centuries on that accursed and damned island.'

'All right, all right,' Mike pulled a resigned face. 'I'll go.'

'Great,' said Alun.

'But let's get it done quick. I need to eat.'

'And drink?'

'Yes, and drink.'

Mike stripped down to his pants and stepped towards the water.

'Those pants will weigh you down, Mike,' said Alun.

'And drag you down to your death into the deeps beyond belief,' I added.

'You two get on my wick,' groaned Mike, slipping off his striped cotton pants.'

'Thanks, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'Your lovely pink bottom is so shiny that it lights up the entire pond.'

'Shut up, Alun,' sighed Mike, stepping into the water. 'Hey!' he said, turning, 'This water is damn cold.'

'Really!' said Alun.

At this, he shoved Mike, causing him to fall headlong into the pond. Mike came up gasping and cursing under his breath.

'Above all, Mike,' called Alun, 'Remember that whatever happens. We're here.'

I threw him out my Trail-runners headlamp, which he grasped. 'You'll need this.'

'Damn you both,' whispered Mike, striking out with an impressive crawl stroke.

'Mike swims well, doesn't he?' I said.

'He does,' agreed Alun.

It took Mike less than ten seconds to reach the island. When he did, he spent some time feeling around the edges with his hands. He then dived down and reappeared some little way off to the right.

He grasped some overhanging rushes and turned to us. With his arms, he made signals that indicated that the island was not floating but was built on a pillar. Using a knocking gesture, he communicated that the aforesaid pillar was rock hard.

'Must have been built up from the bottom when they did the other job.' said Alun.

'But Why do such an odd thing?' I asked.

Alun shrugged.

Mike had now levered himself up onto the rush-covered surface and stepped inland, so to speak.

He turned on the headlamp and, holding it in his hand like a torch, wandered to and fro for some time.

After a moment, he disappeared, and then we heard a low metallic sound, not unlike an old-fashioned dinner gong.

We exchanged astonished glances.

Then Mike reappeared.

He waved his arms about, and in the end, we got the idea. He had found some sort of trapdoor. A few more bits

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of arm waving, and we understood that this trapdoor was unopenable. Finally, a last bit of hand waving, and we got the message. The trapdoor was padlocked.

With this, Mike let himself back into the water and struck out towards us.

In next to no time, he was back with us.

As soon as he was out of the water and shivering, I handed him my cotton sweatshirt. I was now naked from the waist up, but the night was warm.

'Rub yourself down, Mike. Then get back into your dry clothes,' I said.

At the exact moment, a wide beam of blinding light lit the three of us up.

'Who goes there!' called a deep voice.

'Oh Hell!' cried Alun. 'The accursed impresario.'

This was followed by a growing commotion of calling voices as people emerged from the surrounding houses.

'Oh God!' groaned the stark-naked Mike.

Then, there was a silence as the group of dark shapes approached and encircled us.

'The silence was suddenly broken by what was clearly Margaux's Voice.

'In the name of the heavens, Mike. What on earth are you doing stark naked.'

I thought I heard stifled laughter from the younger contingent coming from behind the light.

Then the rubber booted and weed-covered wader-clad Alun lifted his hands to shield his eyes from the light, the tarred one dripping mud.

Suddenly, another powerful and distinctive Diva-like voice cried out, 'My Ring!'

We all gazed at Alun's raised beringed hand.

'Oh hell!' he groaned.



## Chapter 11

**M**argaux and my wife were highly convincing. In next to no time and with disarming ease, they had clarified the situation and irretrievably ruined our reputations.

Taking Mrs Metrokovitch aside, they had explained that we were best described as a band of utter imbeciles.

The word "brainless" and several related terms were also sprinkled about, but not perhaps, in the opening sentences.

We would have preferred to be described as a group of creative and fun-loving athletes, but we thought better than to interrupt them at that juncture.

"The Girls" then made it crystal clear that Mike was not, and never had been, a renowned jewel expert and that I did *not* own a sex toy shop and website.

I admit that I felt better for getting that point cleared up.

They went on to clarify the fact that Mike was not colour-blind but, on the contrary, had excellent eyesight.

In doing all this, they employed remarks about our mental health and moral values that we considered to be inappropriate and unnecessarily wounding.

Such was the case, in fact, that at one point, Alun felt it time to point out that "sadly, misunderstandings sometimes occur".

Margaux simply glowered at him in silence for several seconds. After this, he pursed his lips and remained silent for the rest of our trial.

All in all, though, while not entirely unblemished, we came out of it freed of any lingering doubts concerning our motives and actions.

The Girls concluded by adding that Mike was correct in recommending an expert opinion. My wife said that, in her opinion, the ring was worth a small fortune.

This visibly boosted the Diva's morale, and she eventually swept off bedward in an altogether better mood with a regal swish of silk dress.

A short time later, we heard the unmistakable sound of a champagne cork popping from behind her closed door. So, her bedtime was to be delayed.

Oh Well... That's life, I suppose.

Mike, however, was still unhappy. He had not appreciated the comment made by Florence, the water nymph.

On observing the lower reaches of the naked and soaked Mike, the worldly and well-shaped woman exclaimed loudly: "Good heavens! I hadn't realised that the pond water was quite *that* cold..."

Mike had taken this to heart and had sulked for a good part of the remainder of the evening.

On the positive side, though, we were able to supply the present hamlet owners, Emma and Paul, with some fascinating new information.

We did this over a pleasant late meal in the farmhouse.

Those who know us well understand that complications, such as those that occurred earlier, rarely weigh the three of us down long. True to form, we were already in good spirits.

Perhaps Mike was still a bit sulky, but he would survive.

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Emma, Paul, and everyone else were astonished by what we had discovered concerning the pond and the island.

I had discovered an old dingy behind a pile of logs at the rear of one of the houses and suggested we get it out the following morning and see what more we could discover.

As I often say, sniffing about amongst other people's belongings has certain advantages.

It was further agreed that it would be a good idea to drag out the old fire pump and put it through its paces.

'One never knows when it might come in handy,' I said. 'So, it's worth checking that the thing works properly before it's actually needed.'

Emma chuckled to herself, 'Exactly. Especially because it's likely to be time-consuming, herding together the fire brigade from the various bistros and getting them up here. The place would probably burn to the ground before they got the fire engine out.'

By the end of the meal, priceless wine aiding, even Mike was looking happy again. He might have drunk a bit over his budget in terms of euros, but that's understandable, given the circumstances. After all, not even the finest of us males look our very best after an ice-cold dip, do we?

The following morning, before joining the others for breakfast, Alun, Mike and I dragged the old rowing boat out and set it afloat in the pond.

Mike, the sailor of our group, declared that it had been out of the water a long time, and the wood planks would have dried and perhaps shrunk. If this were the case, it would leak, and he declared that he would prefer to discover this before getting into it.

'If I can avoid a second dip in that frozen water, I'd be more than happy....' he added.



I was on the point of making one of my clever remarks about the effects of cold water on the average male, but I held my tongue. Turning the dagger in the wound is definitely not gentlemanly. I chose to save the comment and use it to better effect at a more appropriate moment.

We left the dingy bobbing at the pond's edge and went around to the back of the shed to drag out the old fire pump.

Once out of the shadow and bathed in sunlight, it looked old, a bit sad and above all, distressing rusty. Noting this, we pulled dubitative faces at each other. Furthermore, as we pulled it across the grass to the pond's edge, the wheels squeaked disturbingly, but beggars can't be choosers.

This done, we unwound the hose and laid it out across the grass like an enormous ageing boa constrictor. Even so, it appeared to be in better condition than would have been expected after so many years in storage. Finally, Mike emptied a bucket with water into the pump's rusty priming hole.

Then, satisfied with our preparations, we set off towards the farmhouse, through the open door of which enticing smells of coffee and toast were now flowing.

Paul was just finishing explaining about the repairs that were deemed necessary to the roof. As we entered, there were murmurs as he mentioned the estimated cost.

Florence's husband, Andrew, nodded, 'Yes, I noticed that the roof was in bad repair. I wouldn't have thought the job would cost so much, though.'

I noticed his wife flash him a warning look, which made him stop abruptly in what he was about to add.

After a short pause, he added, 'Yes, I saw that when I was looking up from around the back of the place.' he paused again and glanced at Florence. 'I went to have a look at that famous pump.'

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Florence gave him a barely perceptible nod, and he seemed to relax.

Emma smiled a sad little smile, 'I really don't know how we will manage to find the funds. But either we have to have the job done, or we'll have to sell the place.'

There were more murmurs all around.

I leant over and whispered to Alun, 'That was a nice bit of diversional tactics.'

'Yes. The "poor penniless abandoned children",' he replied.

Keeping the existence of a cellar-full of priceless wine a secret looked like being more manageable than we had expected.

Joseph Lewin had finished his toast, got to his feet, and was now wandering around the room sipping his coffee. He stopped in front of one of the three paintings on the back wall. They were pleasingly lit by warm leaf-dappled light, the sun still low enough in the sky to come through the windows. 'You know,' he said, half-turning his head. 'There might be a solution to your predicament.'

'Ah!?' said Emma.

'These paintings,' he indicated with a quick movement of his heavy chin, 'They're quite good, you know.'

'Really!?' said Paul. 'Worth something, you think?'

Joseph nodded, 'Possibly.'

'Really!' cried the Diva, rising and going over to gaze up at the paintings.

'How much did you say you needed?' said Joseph. 'A hundred thousand,' he shrugged. 'Is that all?'

We all started.

'All?' cried The Diva. 'Where on earth could the poor children find a hundred thousand euros? They can hardly pay for the repairs to the water pipes as it is.'

The Impresario smiled, 'You could start by selling a few of these.' He waved his hand at the paintings.

'I'd say you could get more than half that for them,' he said, 'A least that.'

'What!?' cried Emma.

The man frowned, 'You know very little about your grandfather's tastes, I see. And even less about art.' He smiled and stepped up to the wall.

'This one, for example. It's an original oil, late eighteenth century, I would guess. Not in the Constable or Turner class, but this might fetch ten thousand euros in auction, maybe more if a collector was interested in the artist.'

We all rose and crowded around to get a closer look, 'Several thousand!?' muttered Paul.

'Or more. And this one.' He pointed a little higher on the wall to our left. 'That one would bring in almost as much. Probably more.'

'Good heavens,' cried Emma. 'I had no idea.'

'Well,' chuckled Joseph. 'You don't really think your Grandad squandered away all his earnings, do you.'

Paul raised his eyebrows, and the slightest of smiles crossed his lips.

Joseph continued, 'You don't honestly think he put all his money into this cluster of ruined buildings. Anyway, he told me at the time that he got this abandoned place for next to nothing.'

We looked at each other with amazement.

'Well, this changes everything,' said Emma, smiling knowingly at Margaux.

Mike pulled a face and squinted up at the painting. 'I suppose these are all insured...'

This sloshed cold water over the proceedings.

'Insured!?' Emma cried. 'I have no idea.'

I looked over at her, 'And this place? I mean all these buildings. I hope it's all insured...'

Paul frowned. 'I'd better go and have a chat with the solicitor. You never know.'

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Then Joseph smiled, 'I think there are some other nice paintings in the bedrooms too.' Here, he paused and hesitated. 'I remember Lucas saying he kept his preferred ones up there.'

I nodded to myself and shot a look at Alun. He, too, had noticed the hesitation.

He stepped over to me and whispered, 'The man seems particularly interested in these paintings. I wonder...'

I nodded, 'Me too.'

Then Joseph added something which clinched the affaire for us.

'I'll tell you what I'll do,' he beamed at Emma and Paul. 'If you like, I'll take the paintings up to Paris with me and have them valued... Who knows. Maybe they'd bring in enough to repair the roof.' He paused and made a show of looking at his watch. 'I had planned to pop up for the day tomorrow anyway.'

'That would be fantastic?' cried Emma.

'Wouldn't it?' agreed Paul.

Things were moving too fast and too smoothly for my liking. I shot Alun a look. 'Oh!' I said, smiling. 'No need to go all the way to Paris for that.'

Everyone stopped talking and gazed at me. My wife gave me one of her particularly stern, and warning frowns.

Alun was watching me and nodded slowly in approval.

'If you had told me about these paintings earlier, the thing would have been already sorted out.'

'Sorry?' said Joseph, clearly searching for a way out.

'Yes,' I said. 'One of my old pals is on holiday over in t. He used to be employed by Sotheby's as an expert consultant. Specialised in paintings. Oil and watercolours. I'll give him a call. I'm sure he'll be delighted to drop around, especially if he knows there's iced champagne on the menu.'

Alun smiled, 'That wouldn't be Jules Mennard, would it?' he improvised.

'The very same,' I nodded. 'What Jules doesn't know about paintings wouldn't fill the back of a postage stamp...' I laughed.

'And he'd come over, would he?' asked Emma. 'What about his fee, though?'

'Joseph spotted a way out and jumped at the occasion, 'Oh heavens yes!' he cried. 'These expert consultants charge the absolute earth for valuing stuff. I, on the other hand, can get it done for free.'

I smiled a slow, knowing smile. 'Jules Mennard,' I said, 'just happens to owe me a big favour. He'll do it for free.'

'If the champagne flows sufficiently,' added Alun.

'Exactly,' I agreed.

Joseph was annoyed but could see no way out of the situation.

'Shall I call him Emma?' I said before the man could work out some clever alternative strategy.

'Would you?' she smiled. 'Wouldn't it be lovely if these were really worth something?'

'Fantastic,' agreed Paul.

'Great,' I smiled. 'I'll go and get my phone and call him right away.'

'Exactly,' said Alun. 'Strike while the iron is still hot. It would be too bad if he got bored and shot off home before we could give him something to get his teeth into.'

I nodded, 'Come on, Mike,' I smiled, 'and we can check the dingy doesn't leak at the same time.'

Joseph did his best to hide his discomposure, but we could see he was angry. His little manoeuvre had not panned out as he had hoped. 'I hope at least this friend of yours knows what he's talking about.'

'Oh, he does,' I smiled.

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He snorted angrily, 'It would be a pity to waste time when I could just as easily take them up tomorrow.'

'He's as hot as they come,' I smiled. 'And moreover, his coming here would save having to organise packing and transport too.'

Joseph pulled a face which was as close to a sneer as one could get without actually sneering and turned to put his coffee cup back on the table.

I Gave Alun a quick look, and the three of us exited. I left them and jogged to our house to bring out my phone.

A few moments later, I joined Mike and Alun at the pond's edge.

The dingy was as dry as a bone inside.

'Brilliant!' nodded Mike. 'Those guys knew how to make boats in the old days.' he paused. 'But what was all that crap about paintings? And who is this chap, Jules Mennard.'

'Oh!' I smiled, 'Jules Mennard doesn't exist.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' sighed Mike.

Alun gazed at Mike and shook his head sadly, 'That guy, Joseph Lewin, was up to something about those paintings.'

'Up to something?' frowned Mike.

'Yes,' I said. 'It stuck out like a sore thumb.'

'Not one that had spent too much time in this cold water, like...'

'Shut up, Alun,' grumbled Mike.

I nodded, 'The guy either knew exactly how much these paintings were worth or...'

Mike interrupted, 'You mean he was going to con the Kids out of a small fortune?'

'That's the impression I got.'

Alun gave me a look, 'you said the "either" bit, but we didn't get the "or" part.'

I smiled, 'Yes. That's the interesting bit, in fact.'

'Great,' sighed Mike. 'And this interesting bit, you're going to keep it to yourself, are you?'

'Do you remember when we were talking about Old Lucas' fortune?' I said.

'No! He had a fortune, did he?' sighed Mike.

'Well,' I said. 'One idea we discussed was that he might have put his tens of millions into a secret bank account somewhere like Switzerland,'

'So?'

'And we decided he would not have done this without leaving a clue to its whereabouts. Didn't we?'

'Allun laughed, 'Ah, I see what you're getting at.'

'I don't,' grumbled Mike.

'Well,' I said. 'What if Lucas marked the bank account details on the backs of those paintings.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Mike. 'Yes, cunning. That would be just like him.'

'Not just on one of them, which would make it too easy to be discovered accidentally,' I said. 'But a bit of the information on each one.'

Alun chuckled, 'So, the paintings might still be worth a bit of pocket money. But nothing like the value of the information marked on them. Yes, Brilliant.'

'But!' frowned Mike. 'How on earth did that guy Joseph come to discover that?'

Alun tutted, 'Mike. That guy is a specialist in making money out of others. He lives and sleeps and breathes money. Not only that, but he also knew Lucas intimately for thirty years.'

'Hmm,' said Mike.

'In any case,' I said. 'Those paintings are not going to be placed in his hands.'

'There's just a small problem, though,' said Alun. 'You don't have a pal who's an art expert.'

'Not yet. I'm just going to phone one, though.'

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The two frowned at me.

'I'm going to phone the people at the auction house. I'll ask them to send another expert down when they come to value the wine. If they're worth a lot. We'll get them to take them up in the lorry with the wine.'

Alun chuckled. 'Good thinking. But make sure that everyone, and especially Joseph, sees you phoning. It must be convincing.'

'Don't worry about me being convincing. I'm a born actor,' I laughed.

'That's the first I ever heard about that hidden talent,' shrugged Mike.

'Talking about hidden talents...' started Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' grumbled Mike.

I shrugged and then produced some of my best theatrical over-acting. I windmilled my free arm about and laughed over loudly into the phone so that my voice would be perfectly audible inside the main house.

This being done, we walked briskly back to the house.

'Emma,' I called, considerably louder than necessary. 'Jules was really enchanted, as I expected. He'll come over in a day or two. As I guessed, he was getting a bit bored. The mention of iced champagne helped, too.'

Oh! That's lovely,' she cried.

'Just one thing,' I added.

'Yes?'

'He asked me to take photos of each painting and the signatures separately,' I lied. 'He wants me to send them to him straight away this morning. Like that, he said he can start having a look this afternoon.'

Joseph was scowling in the background. He appeared to be muttering angrily to himself but said nothing.

Alun nodded, 'You said he wanted the backs photographed too,' he added.

'That too,' I said.



The photos would be sent directly to the auction house expert the same morning.

We would have to ensure everybody was out of the way when the auction house experts came in their lorry. To guarantee this, we intended to use the visit of the biathlon Olympic champion to lure everyone away from the hillock and over to the firing range.

Martin would make sure each of our visitors was given the chance to have a go at shooting, and we would prime the Girls to make sure nobody left before the "all clear" message was sent by Paul.

Needless to say, as soon as the Girls had managed to get us out into the open, I had to explain everything amid showers of sighs and criticisms. However, in the end, they had to accept that I *might* have been right to react as I had. They naturally stressed the word "Might".

At the end of their question-and-answer session, Margaux sighed, 'Well! What are you three waiting for?' So, off we went.

An hour later, we had finished our inspection and photographs of the twenty or so pictures distributed amongst the houses.

None of us had the slightest idea whether any of them were worth a hundred euros or hundreds of thousands. However, while photographing, we carefully examined the backs of them and the frames in detail.

We didn't find the slightest trace of any hidden information or codes which might help locate the hidden bank accounts. All the same, we paid particular attention to the backing of the frames and to the integrity of the sealing... We also took photos of these for reference purposes.

This task was completed; we sat down with Paul and transferred the photos to his computer. From there, I

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transferred them to my cloud storage, and the links to this were next forwarded to our contact at the auction house.

We found it necessary to confide in Paul about our plan, but this was just one more secret, which we were confident he could keep to himself.

I rubbed my hands together, satisfied with the early morning's work, 'One more task satisfactorily completed,' I smiled. 'But now for another mystery.'

'Another mystery!?' cried Paul. 'Will this never end?'

'I smiled, 'Not quite yet, I fear.'

'Now what?' groaned Mike.

'Well,' I said. 'That chap Andrew said he knew the roof was in bad repair.'

'It is,' said Mike.

'How did he know?'

Mike sighed, 'He told us. He saw it from the back of the house.'

I smiled. 'Exactly.'

'So,' Mike repeated.

'Come and see.'

I led them around to the back of the house.

'What can you see?'

Mike, Alun and Paul gazed up.

'Ah!'

'Exactly,' I said. 'Nothing but the underside of the overhanging tiles of the eaves.'

Alun frowned, 'Perhaps from over there against the cliff, then.'

'Go and have a look.'

They walked over and gazed up. The results were virtually identical. So, they came back, frowning.

'Ah! I see what you mean,' said Paul.

'As I said earlier. How did he know?'

'Maybe he went up into the loft,' suggested Alun.

'You can't get up without a ladder,' replied Paul.

'So, he went and got one. That's all,' said Mike.

'Well, the only one high enough is down in the millhouse,' said Paul. 'He would hardly have risked going down there and carrying it up the track in full view of everybody.'

'Exactly.' I smiled.

Paul frowned. 'Anyway, why would he want to go and look in the loft?'

I smiled, 'Well, we three have noticed that people seem to do odd things around here.'

'Must be the Mediterranean air that does that,' suggested Alun.

Mike sighed noisily, 'So, are you going to tell us or not?'

I smiled at him benevolently, 'Well, the only place he could have seen the roof from was up there.' I turned and pointed to the cliff top. 'Near the cave, or right at the top near "Rock Leap Glade".'

There was a silence.

'Great gods!' cried Alun.

'That's exactly what I was thinking too,' I said.

Alun nodded, 'It might be worth having a little chat with Inspector Venet this afternoon.'

'Agreed,' I said.

'I wonder what those two are up to, though,' said Alun.

'You think Florence is involved?' said Paul.

'You didn't see the look she gave him when he said his bit,' I smiled. 'If looks could kill...'

'So?' he said.

'We keep our eyes open and our wits about us,' I said.

'That sounds a rather old-fashioned way of putting it,' smiled Alun. 'But sound advice all the same.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'But then again, I am a bit old-fashioned.'

Mike chuckled, 'Well, there's one consolation.'

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I sighed, 'All right, Mike, let's have the clever remark.'

'Well, it's lucky that having your wits about you two is likely to go unnoticed by our enemies. After all, they don't take up much room, do they.'

'Ha, ha,' said Alun, 'A bit like your little...'

'Alun!' I cried. 'Remember, we are gentlemen, after all.'

Alun grunted, and Mike smirked.

A second look at the boat confirmed that it was still not leaking.

'OK,' said Mike, 'All we need now are oars.'

'Mike!' I exclaimed, 'Can't you think about anything else but sex.'

'Shut up, you twit,' he groaned. 'I said Oars, not whores, you idiot.'

'Oh, Oars! I see,' I said. 'The things one rows with?'

'Correct.'

'Great.'

'So, where are they?'

'No idea,' I shrugged, 'you asked for a boat. I got you a boat. There was no mention of oars.'

Mike sighed again, 'If there's a rowing boat, there must be oars somewhere.'

'They may have been used to prop up the sagging beams in the loft,' suggested Alun.

'Or just be lying on the ground where you found the boat,' grumbled Mike.

'That's a possibility, Mike,' I said. 'Would you like me to go and look?'

'No, don't bother. Just whistle for them. They'll make their own way down here.'

With this, he stumped off to search them out.

'Did you see any oars?' asked Alun.

'Of course I did. But the exercise will do him good.'

We chuckled but almost immediately saw Mike reappear from behind the stone building, carrying a pair of sun and rain-bleached oars under his arm.'

'A bit of woodworm, but otherwise, they're in perfect condition,' he smiled.

'There's nothing better than a nice bit of woodworm,' said Alun. 'To bring out the best in an oar.'

'You disgust me, Alun,' sighed Mike.

'Perfect,' Alun clapped his hands together and smiled. 'My day is made. Well, at least this part of it.'

'Oh, you get on my....' cried Mike.

'On your what?' Mike. 'Not your wick by any chance?'

'Shut up, Alun and let's get moving. We haven't got all day, you know.'

Mike held the little rowing boat steady, and Alun and I stepped in and sat down. By now, everyone else had gathered by the pond to witness the proceedings.

'I'll row these two over first,' said Mike, 'Then I'll come back for you, Paul.'

With this, he pushed off with an oar, and in a couple of expert strokes, we bumped up against the tiny island.

'I wish I could row like that,' said Alun.

'You'd need a brain first,' sniffed Mike.

Alun shrugged and clambered out, then holding the boat steady, I followed him. Mike pushed off again, and when he returned with Paul, they found us standing and staring down at the trapdoor.

'Look,' pointed Alun. 'The padlock has been cut off.'

'What!' exclaimed Mike. 'It was perfectly fastened yesterday.'

'But someone has been out here since,' I said.

'Someone with a heavy-duty bolt cutter,' added Alun.

'But!' exclaimed Paul. 'Who and Why?'

'Clearly, someone wanted to know what was inside,' said Mike. 'Urgently.'

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'And that someone must have learnt of the existence of this place very recently. Otherwise, it would have been an incredible coincidence,' I added.

'Too incredible to be true,' agreed Alun.

Mike had wandered off and was searching in the rushes, 'Ah ha!' he cried. 'Look what I've found.'

He dragged free of the tangled undergrowth, a coil of wet rope with a pair of heavy-duty bolt cutters attached to one end and a big iron hook to the other.

He smiled at us, 'Do you know what this means?' he said.

'That you've found some rope and bolt cutters,' smiled Alun.

'It means that the person who did this swam over with the rope and then dragged these cutters across with the rope. They must have been too heavy to swim over with.'

'So, we're looking for a wet person who can't swim with one arm.' I smiled. 'Is that it, Mike?'

'I'm not looking for anyone, you twit.' He grumbled, 'I'm just clarifying how it was done.'

'Great,' said Alun, 'That helps a lot.'

'Shall we look inside,' said Paul. 'Mind you, I presume that whatever was in there has gone now. At least if it was something of any value.'

We lifted the heavy metal trapdoor and let it fall backwards with a clang.

We gazed into a gaping black hole.

'Hell,' cried Alun. 'The thing goes all the way down.'

Paul lit his big torch, and we all knelt to get a look.

We had assumed that the pillar we were standing on was solid stone. We had thus been expecting to find a shallow hole under the trapdoor containing the piping and stopcocks for the little fountain. And the secret treasure, of course. Instead, we found a surprisingly deep stone-lined chimney-like cylinder. This must have been somewhere

between five and ten metres deep. Far below us, the torchlight reflected off a mirror-like surface of water.

Mike frowned, 'Why on earth did old Lucas go to the trouble of doing this?'

We pulled faces at each other.

An iron ladder was sealed into the wall, leading down and disappearing under the water.

'I'll go down and have a look,' I said. 'You never know.'

'Mike frowned. 'Wait a minute. Even though you are completely expendable, I'd prefer to take some rudimentary precautions. We have no idea how deep that water is. We wouldn't want you drowning.'

'Wouldn't we?' said Alun with a chuckle.

I smiled. 'What he means is that he would like to avoid having to go down there into the ice-cold water to retrieve my body.'

'Well thought out, Mike,' said Alun.

Mike dragged over the coil of wet rope and lopped it around my waist. He then made some complicated nautical loops and knots, and I soon found myself securely attached to the rope.

'In case of emergency, we can haul you up between the three of us,' he nodded while giving a final testing tug to the knots.

'If we don't meet again,' I smiled. 'Tell my wife to give you my collection of dinky toys as a souvenir, Mike.'

'You don't have a collection of anything,' shrugged Mike.

'Well, my favourite parrot, then.'

'Shut up and get on with it,' scowled Mike.

Alun smiled, 'Shut up and get on with it, shut up and get on with it, shut up and...'

'For god's sake!' cried Mike.

'Yes, I know,' said Alun. 'Shut up and get on with it... I'm his favourite parrot, you see...'

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Mike sighed, 'Please, Almighty God, save me from these idiots.'

Paul handed me the torch, which I slipped behind my belt, and they gave me a hand over the edge.

Surprisingly, the inside walls, as well as the ladder rungs, were bone-dry.

'How come there's so little water in here?' I called up. 'The walls are perfectly dry.'

'It must leak down at the bottom somewhere then, called back Paul.'

But Mike and Alun, who were experienced men, frowned.

'Yes. Odd that.' called Mike.

'What's odd about it?' asked Paul.

'Because, if there were a leak, which we would have expected, the water should have kept coming through it until it reached the level of the pond outside,' said Mike.

'Hydraulic Equilibrium,' added Alun, 'That's what we experts call it.'

'Ah,' said Paul. 'Yes, that's odd.'

During this exchange, I had nearly reached the surface of the water. 'That's basic physics for you, Paul,' I called up. 'Understanding basic physics has got the three of out of many a tight fix, hasn't it, Alun.'

'You're telling me!' laughed Alun.

At this moment, each of us was no doubt thinking about a completely different adventure from our past. However, they certainly resembled each other by being situations in which our lives had hung on finding a quick solution to some dramatic situation or other.

As my feet reached the water level, I stopped and called back. 'My guess is that somehow, he managed to make this place completely watertight. One hell of an exploit, but he managed it.'

'And the water then?' shouted Paul.



'He put it here,' I called.

Mike and Alun gasped. 'Of course! Clever.'

Paul gazed at the two smiling men, 'What on earth are you two so happy about?'

'He means that the water was put there on purpose. It was put there to hide, whatever he had that needed hiding,' smiled Alun.

'Something that doesn't mind being emerged in water. Not like oil paintings, bottles of wine, or bank notes,' smiled Mike. 'Any ideas, Paul?'

Paul frowned and gazed at Mike uncomprehendingly.

'Let me give you a clue then. Can you think of anything that doesn't mind getting wet, that is very heavy and shines yellow,' chuckled Alun.

Paul's eyes opened wide, 'You mean Gold!'

Alun and Mike nodded slowly.

Standing on the lowest rung above the water, I played the torch over the surface, 'There's something under the water. A sort of pedestal,' I called. 'It must be at least two metres under the surface. Wait a minute. Yes. There's something sitting on the pedestal. Hold on a mo. I'll wait for the water surface to settle down for a clear look.'

After about a minute, the ripples I had set off ceased, and I could see clearly down to the bottom. 'There's a sort of chest sitting on a low pedestal.'

At the top, Mike and Alun clapped. 'Great! So, the guy who opened the trapdoor didn't get what he was after then. That Lucas was a damn cunning old soul. Multiple precautions, which seem to have worked admirably.

Then suddenly I gasped and nearly let go of the ladder, 'The cunning old...' I cried. 'That's what he kept that rusty old water pump for.'

Alun whistled, 'Great gods,' he exclaimed. 'So, he intended it all along as a way of emptying the water to get to his hidden treasure, whatever it is.'

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'One thing is certain,' I said, working my way back up. 'That chest is too big to be filled with diamonds. If it were, there would be billions of euros worth in it, not a few measly millions.'

Mike was frowning down the hole. 'There's something else odd,' he said.

'Something else!' cried the disorientated Paul.

'Yes. Where is the pump for the fountain?' he nodded. 'It should have been in here.'

'No sign of any sort of pump down there,' I called.

'I wonder how that works then,' he said.

'We'll sort that out later,' I said as they helped me back out of the trapdoor. 'Let's see how we can organise things to get that pump connected.'

We rowed back to the "mainland" and relayed everything we had discovered to everybody.

The fact that there was a chest underwater, at the bottom of an unsuspected ten-metre-deep chimney-like structure, astonished everybody.

'But what on earth could be in that chest,' exclaimed the Diva.

'Something that doesn't mind being stored underwater for years.' I repeated. 'But we'll know once we have pumped the place dry.'

'Probably full of bricks,' grumbled Andrew, taking out his phone. 'That guy seems to be playing tricks on us.'

He made an impatient movement with his head and wandered away, tapping away at his phone.

'He doesn't seem to be very enthusiastic,' said Emma. 'I'm almost dying of it. Come on, let's get to work.'

'First things first,' said Alun. 'First, let's get the pump primed and working, then we'll work out how to couple it all together. It's far too heavy to take out there.'

I smiled, 'There's a big coil of fire hose down in the mill house.'

Alun and Mike exchanged looks, 'We didn't see any.'

'It was in the far corner behind the backup generator.'

'Only you would have spotted that,' said Alun.

'Lucky that looking in dark corners is one of my specialities.' I replied. 'First the boat, then the pump and finally the hose.'

Paul nodded thoughtfully, 'And all here ready and waiting to be called into use.'

'Cunning devil, that Lucas,' I said.

'You're telling me!' exclaimed Alun.

Martin had just come jogging back from his training session, and Paul called him over, 'If you're not too tired, can you give me a hand to bring up something from the Millhouse.'

Martin nodded, and they set off down the track, Paul filling him in on the latest discoveries as they went.

Alun dragged over the old suction hose and dropped its end into the pond while I screwed on the output hose.

'Here we go,' called Alun, 'grabbing hold of one end of the pump handle.'

I grabbed the other while Mike held the hose.

We worked the pump handle up and down, sea-sawing slowly. There was a squeaking noise like chalk on a blackboard, but nothing came out of the hose.

'Can't be properly primed,' said Mike. 'Let's give her another bucket or two of water.'

We sloshed in two bucket-fulls of water in the priming reservoir, then set to work again. Suddenly, we felt a strong resistance, 'Here she blows,' I called.

Mike turned his head to reply, still holding the hose, 'What?'

'I said, here she...'

The hose suddenly writhed violently in his hand, freed itself, and flew into the air, spaying a powerful jet of water as it squirmed and writhed.

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Mike dived on the thing and grabbed it, pointing it back into the pond.

At the same time, a woman's cry came from behind him.

We all whirled around and were rewarded with the spectacle of Florence, soaked from head to foot. Her white linen trousers clung to her shapely legs. The material, having been rendered semi-transparent by the water, showed that she had somehow forgotten to put on her underclothes.

Her white tee shirt was also plastered to her and clung tightly, moulding around her breasts. These were now exhibiting the characteristic effects of immersion in ice-cold water.

'Wow!' I whispered to Alun.

He wiggled his eyebrows, but we said no more, the Girls being within easy hearing distance.

Mike, seeing this, spotted the chance of getting his own back at the woman for her slighting remark.

'Ah Ha!' he cried, 'Who would have thought the water was quite *that* cold...'

Everybody looked at Mike with astonished gazes and then back at the semi-transparently attired Florence.

As always perfectly aware of how she now looked, Florence ensured that everyone had ample time to get a good look at what she had on offer.

'I see, it is a "no Bra" day today,' smiled my wife. 'Look away, Alun. You too,' she said to me.

'Mike,' I whispered. 'If that was supposed to be a cutting remark, I'm afraid it was a complete and utter failure.'

'Yep.' said Alun, 'But great free publicity for Florence's silhouette, as they used to call it.'

Mike's eyebrows did a quick jump or two, and he favoured us with a wry smile. 'Did anyone think of getting a picture?'

Alun shrugged, 'As a matter of fact... I just happened to be taking a video of the event for posterity... And possibly for your YouTube page.'

'Well done, Alun,' I smiled. 'We'll have a copy of that each then, please.' I then turned to Mike. 'By any chance. Were the first-aid training dummies you used to practice on that shape,' I asked. 'If so, I'm signing up straight away...'

'Hey,' whispered Alun, 'look up there,' he indicated the direction of the cliff with a quick movement of his chin.

We followed his directions and almost immediately saw a flash of light, then another.

'There's someone up there,' said Alun. 'Near that cave.'

'And that someone is watching us through binoculars,' added Mike.

'Odd that,' I said. 'As I said earlier, we need to keep our wits about us, don't you think.'

Mike and Alun nodded.

After a little more bosom and buttock display, Florence, the task satisfactorily completed, undulated off to change clothes. During this exit phase, we were graced with an excellent show of firm buttock wiggling as it retreated towards the house.

'That brings colour back to one's cheeks,' smiled Alun.

'Sorry?' called Margaux.

'Nothing. Nothing dearest...'

During all this, Florence's husband, Andrew, observed the scene from some little way off but made no sign of rushing over to rescue his damsel in distress. He simply looked up from his phone and then continued typing.

'That man doesn't seem the overly worrying sort,' commented Alun.

I nodded, 'No. They seem to operate more like a team than a married couple.'

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'Yes,' agreed Alun. 'Each has a specific role to play, and each avoids cramping the other's style.'

'Interesting, that,' said Mike.

At this moment, Paul and Martin came back into view carrying a big coil of heavy-duty fire hose between them.

Now that we had realised the extent of Lucas' preparations, we were not surprised to discover that the hose was equipped with just the right connector for the pump.

Even though liberally dust-encrusted, the brass parts slid together without difficulty.

We then towed the free end of the pipe out to the island with the boat and lowered it down through the trap door.

Paul and Martin were given the job of operating the pump while we kept an eye on the water level.

Out on the island, Mike attached me with the rope again, and I went down the ladder.

'When the water gets to the level of the chest,' called Mike, 'I'll let down the other end of the rope. If you can reach the handle of the chest, attach it to the rope, and we'll haul it up.'

'OK,' I nodded, disappearing into the darkness.

Mike called over to Paul, 'OK. Start pumping.'

There was a gurgling noise from the pipe, and after thirty seconds, water started gushing out of the pump outlet hose into the pond.

The two boys worked hard at it and soon, even Martin was perspiring.

The water level started to fall, but it took nearly half an hour before it fell the two metres required to reach the level of the top of the chest.

I leant out, holding onto the ladder with one arm. The water was only about a metre deep now, so I knew the risk was negligible.

I just managed to get hold of the handle and gave it a tug.

Nothing happened.

'Hey! Up there,' I called. 'The thing won't budge. Either it's extremely heavy, which would be excellent news, or it is fixed down somehow.'

'Can't you see anything?' called Alun.

'Hold on. I'll get the torch out.'

I extracted the heavy torch and leaned back out again to get a better look. 'Ah!' I said to myself. Then, turning my head, I called up. 'The chest is held down by a chain over it. It's got a padlock fixing to a ring on that pedestal.'

Mike called back, 'Do you think you could reach it with the bolt cutters...' He paused. 'No. You'd need both your arms. Jump down into the water then.'

'Are you kidding, Mike?' I called. 'This water is even colder than the pond. Tell the boys to start pumping again. They've had a nice rest now.'

'OK,' said Mike.

'Oh! Alun,' I called, 'Go and bring me over the pair of gumboots that you'll find behind the shed door. Just behind the pile of forks and hoes.'

'I'm not going to ask how you know that,' called Alun.

I laughed. 'This is one more proof of Old Lucas' exceptional precautions. He wanted to avoid anyone getting to the chest without removing the water. I bet he guessed that someone would try to use a rope and a hook to get it.'

'Which explains why the hook is fixed to the rope,' exclaimed Mike.

'That Lucas was a damn cunning guy!' added Alun.

Mike and Alun left me and rowed back to the mainland.

Alun explained what we had found and said I wanted the gumboots. 'They're In the shed, behind the door to the left, according to him,' he laughed.

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Paul and Emma laughed, too.

'But how on earth can he know that?' exclaimed Julianna Metrokovitch.

Alun smiled at her, 'He notices things,' he said. 'Even the most insignificant detail remains fixed in his memory.'

'Comes in surprisingly useful sometimes,' said Mike. 'A bit annoying, but often useful all the same.'

Andrew had returned from texting and, hearing this, shot a sharp look at Alun.

He did not miss this involuntary reaction, nor did Mike, who indicated this with a slight movement of his chin.

When they returned to the island, most of the pedestal was now uncovered, and only twenty centimetres or so of water remained at the base of the chimney.

I slipped on the boots and climbed back down, the bolt cutters hooked over my shoulder.

I stepped off the ladder's bottom rung and moved with prudence towards the pedestal. Having discovered to which lengths Lucas had gone to protect the chest, I wanted to avoid falling into some final unexpected trap.

Surprisingly, I did not fall down a bottomless pit, and no razor-sharp blades shot out of the walls to pierce me through as I stepped forward.

I lifted the bolt cutters and, applying all my strength, snapped the padlock off.

I tried the chest, but it was locked, so I attached it to the hook Mike lowered.

'It's pretty heavy,' I called.

'OK,' called Alun, 'Step back against the wall. Just in case it falls.'

I moved back against the wall and stood on the narrow circle of bricks which circled the chimney, just under the water level.



This was a little unstable, and I tripped and toppled onto my knees. Freezing water duly flowed into my gumboots, 'Damn it!' I cried.

'What's up?' called Alun.

'I tripped. I can now confirm that the water down here *is* freezing. Can I come up?'

'Wait till we lift the chest free.'

There was a grating noise, and then Mike's head appeared high above me. 'OK. Come on. We'll try and get this thing open on dry land.'

When I reached the top, they had already dragged the chest over to the boat.

'Hold her steady,' said Mike, 'While we load the chest in.'

'Will the boat carry us all?' I frowned.

'Of course, it will,' sighed Mike impatiently. 'Come on'.

As soon as we landed, everybody crowded around us as Paul and Martin lifted the chest out and sat it on the table under the umbrella pines.

It was an old, rusted iron chest about the size of an A4 sheet of paper and roughly the same height. It was closed by another padlock.

'More work for the trusty old bolt cutters,' I said, handing them to Martin. 'Your turn.'

Martin leaned forward and snapped through the metal with a quick, easy movement. The padlock bounced across the table with a dull clunk.

Then everybody leaned breathlessly forward as Emma reached forward to lift the lid.

Inside, we discovered a dark mass, which, on inspection, turned out to be oil cloth.

She lifted this delicately, and below it gleamed a layer of glowing gold.

Everybody gasped.

'Great heavens!' exclaimed the Diva.

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Emma dipped her slender hand in and withdrew one of the shining bars. She twisted it around in the sun, where it gleamed and shone.

All the rest of us remained silent. The astonishment of our discovery had somehow glued our tongues...

Emma nodded slowly, 'It's marked "Royal Mint 1kg",' she said.

Mike smiled, 'Ah ha! So, by present rates, you're holding about fifty-two thousand euros worth of gold,' he said. 'How many are there?'

Paul approached and looked down, 'Fourteen... Fifteen... twenty.' he nodded.

Mike did a quick mental calculation, 'One million and forty thousand euros,' he said. 'Nice haul.'

"How Much!" exclaimed several people simultaneously.

Florence pulled an astonished face, 'Good heavens!'

I glanced at her and was surprised to find a frown of disappointment on her face.

On the other hand, Joseph Lewin chuckled, 'Quite enough, I think. You won't have to bother about selling the paintings to pay for the roof repairs, after all, I mean,' he said.

After gazing down into the chest with the rest of us, Andrew and Florence had moved away from the table. Andrew was texting again. I was observing him carefully at this moment. I noticed him look up sharply and give our Diva, Julianna Metrocovitch, an enigmatic look, which he quickly erased before smiling back at us.

That smile seemed artificial, and I shot Alun a furtive look.

However, almost immediately and without warning, with a throaty roar, a huge dust-covered four-wheel drive truck came bounding out of the forest and surged up the hillside.

It skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust, and two heavily built men jumped out.

We all froze. They were pointing machine guns at us and fixing us through dark glasses. They quickly advanced threateningly on us, gesturing with their gun barrels for us to move away from the chest.

Martin called, 'Don't try anything, anyone. We wouldn't stand a chance against those guns.'

We obediently herded together away from the table and looked on in disbelief as one of them lifted the chest and loaded it in the truck.

The other then backed away, still without a word and jumped into the cabin while the other covered us with his gun.

Then, with another roar, the truck skidded around and disappeared back down the slope and into the forest.

As they disappeared, Emma shrugged, 'Oh well. There goes the new roof, then,' she groaned.

'There are still the paintings,' I said.

The impresario shook his head sadly. 'My poor children...

We said nothing but gave Emma an encouraging nod.'

'She smiled back with a little chuckle. 'Oh well! Never mind? We'll manage somehow.'

'I'll call inspector Venet,' said Paul.

'He'll enjoy this,' I added.

'Well, at least that was fun while it lasted,' smiled Alun.

'Fun!?' exclaimed Margaux. 'Can't you be serious, for just once in your life,' she grumbled.

'I'll try next time,' he replied.

## Chapter 12

**T**he following morning was as bright and sunny as ever. This made it even harder to believe that the previous day, we had been robbed by machine-gun-carrying thugs.

It was cruel to think that we had discovered hidden gold worth eight hundred thousand euros only to lose it minutes later.

As we sat at the table under the Umbrella pines, Alun frowned. 'Well, Lads,' he sighed. 'Even though we did the right thing and kept our wits about us, it didn't help much, did it?'

'Next time, we'd be wise to leave them in the bedroom,' I said.

'Well, someone clearly had sharper wits than ours yesterday,' scowled Mike.

The previous afternoon had been entirely occupied by explaining to the police what had happened and attempting to describe the criminals.

There were thirteen of us, so this took a long time.

'Thirteen!' exclaimed Alun. 'It's not surprising we are having so much trouble here. Did you realise that all the bad luck we're having is because of your presence here, Mike?'

Mike made an extremely juicy nautical remark, which made the yellow irises blush red. He accompanied this

with a rather ungentlemanly gesture, too. Alun and I were almost shocked, but not quite, because we had expected it.

'I think we should also count the spirit of old Lucas Dupès,' I smiled. 'That makes fourteen. Oofff!'

'And those two thugs,' added Mike. 'Which makes sixteen.'

'And the woman from the shop. Which makes seventeen,' I said.

'You're forgetting two corpses,' added Mike. 'Which make nineteen.'

'Corpses don't count, Mike,' frowned Alun.

'They don't talk at all, let alone count, Mike,' I smiled.

'If spirits of long dead and buried Lucas counts, then the spirits of freshly dead women do too,' he grumbled. 'They are probably looking on as we speak.'

'It's your fault anyway,' chuckled Alun.

Inspector Venet had been particularly interested when we told him of our impression of being observed from the area of the cave.

'I wonder if that Biathlon coach didn't walk straight into some sort of observation camp,' he said.

'They might have jumped to the conclusion that she was after the same thing as them,' I suggested.

'And acted accordingly,' added Mike.

'Which implies,' I said. 'That the two murders are completely unconnected.'

'Exactly,' nodded Venet. 'And that makes things much easier to understand.'

'An incredible coincidence, though,' said Alun.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'It very much looks like it. Incredible as it might seem.'

Mike pulled a face, 'When I think that we've been sitting here with two teams of murderers wandering about, just

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waiting for the right moment to strike,' he said. 'It makes my skin creep...'

'You're telling me!' I exclaimed. 'Now,' I smiled. 'I'd be grateful if someone could remind me... Who was it that said that the guys who did the murdering up at the cave would never return and would be far away by now?'

Inspector Venet groaned, 'Yes. Sorry about that, gentlemen. But at the time, I was assuming that only murder was intended. I couldn't know that hidden gold was on the agenda.'

'And to think those guys were just sitting up there watching and waiting for us to find the stuff for them,' I sighed. 'It makes my blood boil.'

'Yes,' grumbled Alun. 'All those brilliant bits of innovative reasoning, entirely wasted.'

'Not for them,' I said.

The Inspector frowned, 'but, all the same, I feel a link is missing somewhere.'

'A missing link?' said Mike.

'Yes. How on earth could those men have known that gold was hidden somewhere around here?'

'I expect they must have discovered that Lucas left virtually nothing of his fortune behind. They must have reasoned that he had hidden it from the taxmen somewhere,' I said.

'Possibly,' said the Inspector. 'Gold does have a particularly strong attractive force.'

Mike frowned, 'Those two gunmen didn't give me the impression of being favoured with extra-high intellectual capacities,' he said. 'I have a suspicion they didn't even speak the language.'

'Which is why they didn't utter a word,' said Alun.

'More like hired heavies?' asked the Inspector.

'Yes. Mercenaries. That's the impression I got,' said Mike.

'Not more Russians, surely,' I gasped. 'We already have one extra-large Diva and one muscular Biathlon coach.'

'A dead Biathlon coach,' corrected Mike.

'But,' smiled Alun. 'I expect the inspector will tell us that we can breathe freely again because they're certainly far away from here by now.'

'Back in Russia,' I added.

'Well, if they've now got what they came for. I certainly would be well away by now,' he replied.

'If they are really hired gunmen,' I said. 'Then someone put them up to it.'

'That's what hired gunmen do, you twit,' sighed Mike. 'They're hired by someone.'

'Yes,' said Alun, ignoring Mike. 'Someone who knew about Lucas and his missing millions. Someone who had brains and had worked things out.'

'Missing tens of millions,' I corrected.

'Well, to start with,' smiled Alun. 'Here on-site, you have thirteen suspects.'

Inspector Venet looked up and said, 'Oh! Thirteen?'

Alun nodded.

'Yep. Thirteen. You're not superstitious, are you?'

He shook his head, 'It will be good for the story when the novel comes out, though.'

'Ah!' I said. 'Now that's an interesting idea.'

'One we would do best to keep from "The Girls", though,' nodded Alun.

Mike shook his head in despair, 'You don't honestly believe that you can keep a secret from those two, do you?'

I exchanged a look with Alun, 'We could try.'

The Inspector was frowning at us, 'Why would you want to keep it a secret from your wives?'

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Alun sighed, 'Inspector. Whenever we suggest writing our memoirs, they laugh us out of the house. They say there's no market for such rubbish.'

'But,' I added, 'If you only knew of a fraction of the strange adventures we had had over the years, you'd realise that they are just jealous.'

'Maybe they just want to preserve their privacy,' suggested Venet.

Alun shook his head and sighed, 'If only that were true...'

'Anyway,' I said, 'To the thirteen on-site suspects, you can add your friend from the health food shop and yourself, Inspector Venet.'

'Our Diva needs money,' said Mike. 'Badly, apparently.'

'Is that true?' the Inspector sat up.

'Forget it, Mike,' I said. 'That woman is perhaps a little conceited but certainly not a hirer of hitmen. And you're forgetting. That ring of hers is probably worth more than twice as much as the gold that was hijacked yesterday.'

Inspector Venet nodded, 'No. Not the type at all. At least that's my impression.'

'My wife overheard her telephone conversation,' said Alun. 'It appears that she has a gambling debt to honour.'

'And needs to sell the ring to pay up,' I added.

The Inspector shook his head sadly, 'How, at that age, can intelligent people still be crazy enough to gamble... I'll never understand.'

'It can't be easy, having been a world-famous public figure,' I said. 'And then ceasing to be one.'

'No,' agreed the Inspector. 'She must have fallen prey to some unscrupulous confidence trickster who imagined she had more funds available than she does. Oh well.'

'That only leaves twelve candidates on-site then,' I smiled. 'An easy job.'

The Inspector nodded, 'could be almost anyone, really.'



Mike frowned. 'We think that Joseph Lewin, who incidentally was Lucas Duprès' Impresario for many years, is after the paintings hung on the walls,' he said. 'We think he may know that some of them are worth much more than anyone imagines.'

'Or,' I added, 'That he thinks that they conceal a clue to where the old boy hid his millions.'

'An interesting theory,' said Venet.

'Shall we tell him?' I asked, looking from Mike to Alun.

'Tell me what?'

'Well,' said Alun. 'We intend to avoid taking any more risks with potentially valuable articles.'

'A wise precaution,' nodded the Inspector.

And so it was, that we explained our discovery of the cellar full of priceless wine. We also detailed our plan to have the entire stock and the paintings removed by the auction house to its high-security storage.

He was impressed and agreed that it was indeed an excellent idea. All the same, he said it would be wise for him to send some well-primed and armed agents to stand by. Finally, he suggested that as an added precaution, he would organise for the lorry to be escorted until they reached the Paris Motorway to ensure that no one was tailing them.'

In any case, Paul had organised insurance during transport based on the value estimated by the auction house.

Finally, the Inspector informed us that two armed men had been stationed at the cave lookout for a few days, just in case.

Just as he was leaving, I remembered something. 'Oh! That guy Andrew said something odd the other day.'

'Ah!'

'Yes. He said he had seen that the roof needed repairing,' I said.

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'So?' frowned the Inspector.

'Well, you can't see the roof from down here, can you,' said Alun.

The Inspector nodded, 'But from up there...'

'Exactly,' said Alun.

'Well, well,' said the Inspector. Interesting that.'

'That's what we thought.'

'How far do you have to get up to be able to see the roof?' asked the Inspector.

'Oh. Not very high, in fact. You need to get above the level of the trees, though. And as you discovered yourself, the first bit is very steep. Especially difficult to climb for a man out of condition, as he clearly is,' I said.

'And by car to the top is an easy trip.' added Mike.

'Yes,' said the Inspector. 'Definitely interesting.'

'Maybe you could see what you can find out about him,' I said.

'It'll be done tomorrow morning.' smiled the Inspector. 'Keep your ears and eyes open in the meantime.'

'They are always open,' chuckled Alun.

We went to bed that night, reassured that we would be reasonably well protected the following day. Even more so, because nobody outside our little closed community knew about the wine. And less still about the imminent arrival of the auction-house men.

The morning of our cunning bit of subterfuge dawned bright and sunny and we woke full of enthusiasm.

As soon as everyone had finished breakfast, we would walk over to the shooting range to meet the Olympic biathlon champion.

Once we were gone, Paul would call the auction house team, who had put up at the village hotel the night before.

The idea was to give them time to clear the wine cellar and any paintings they considered valuable enough and be away before we returned for the midday meal.

The plan worked like clockwork.

The weather was perfect, the Olympic champion was charming, and the morning flew past quickly.

Even our favourite Diva had several turns at shooting both from the lying position and the standing one. She was encouraged by the champion, who clearly knew how to put potential customers in her pocket.

To Mike's annoyance, though, the best shot of our group turned out to be Florence, who once more had donned a bosom-moulding tee-shirt.

'You have a remarkably steady hand,' smiled Marie Dorlain, the Olympic champion.

'A steady hand and a steady mind, too. Under all circumstances,' replied the Florence coolly. 'I only fix myself objectives I know I can attain, and then I don't let anything deflect me from the objective.'

There was not much in the way of clever retorts we could find to reply to this, so we let it go. It did not occur to us to challenge the truth of this statement either.

Alun pulled a face at me and whispered, 'I wouldn't like to have Florence as an enemy, would you?'

I shook my head, 'No. Cold and calculating,' I said.

'I'm not surprised now that she was ready to freeze her buttocks solid in that waterfall to fish for Martin.'

'We already guessed that pillow talk was her objective,' frowned Mike. 'But I wonder what information she was after.'

'Anyway,' whispered Alun. 'She's the only one here I can imagine hiring Russian mercenaries.'

'Except that, if that was the case, and she has now got what she came for, why is she still here?' I replied.

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'You know,' said Mike. 'I'm pleased Inspector Venet sent over some men this morning.'

'You're telling me!' I said.

A little later, Paul sent me an "All Clear" text message.

The three of us sighed a sigh of relief and nodded an "ALL OK" signal to Emma. The girl puffed out her cheeks and then smiled back at us.

As we walked back to the hillock for our mid-day meal, Mike turned to us. 'How on earth does it work?'

'How does what work?' said Alun.

'The fountain.'

'Simple Mike. Water goes in one end and comes out the other.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'You need a pump to pressurise the water, you understand.'

'So?'

'Well, there wasn't one, was there.'

'No,' agreed Alun. 'There wasn't.'

'So, how does it work then?'

'I don't know.'

'I know you don't know, you idiot. But I would like to understand.'

'Well,' I said, 'It's a piddly fountain anyway. It wouldn't need a pump to dribble like a baby like it's doing.'

'Then why go to the expense of putting a complicated nozzle like that on it? Why add a fountain at all, in that case?' he frowned.

'What's so complicated about the nozzle?' asked Alun.

'Don't you ever notice anything, Alun?' he replied.

'I'm not what you'd call a "nozzle man",' he smiled. 'To each man his speciality, Mike.'

'It's nice to know that we have a nozzle expert on hand,' I said. 'One never knows when one will need one.'

Mike ignored us and went on unperturbed, 'It looks like one of those things they have at Versailles,' he nodded.

We shrugged, 'Maybe the supply pipe is simply blocked then,' said Alun.

'Possibly. Let's go and have a closer look then, shall we?' said Mike.

'OK. But after eating, though,' I said.

'Exactly. Best to bolster up the little grey cells before putting them to work,' said Alun.

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'Even so, it would be wise to start them off easily. One wouldn't want to tear a grey cell, would one?'

'One certainly would not,' agreed Alun. 'At our ages, that can be very painful.'

'And they take an age to heal too,' I said. 'Once you're over sixty. Or so they say.'

'You two are unlikely to over-stress your grey cells,' groaned Mike. 'Except when you're thinking about naked women.'

'Poor little blighters!' sighed Alun.

'What?' I asked, 'Naked women?'

'No. Mike's little grey cells. They must be terribly out of condition if he doesn't think about naked women regularly.'

'Seeing them is best. But thinking about them keeps the little devils in reasonable trim,' I added.

Do you know what I think?' Said Mike, ignoring us completely.

'No. But you're going to tell us.'

'Exactly,' smiled Mike. 'I'm wondering if that guy Lucas and his professor pal haven't invented another of their innovative installations. To use the waterfall, for example.'

'Maybe, Mike. And I promise we'll have a good look after visiting the feeding trough,' smiled Alun.

'And warming up the little grey cells,' I said.

'You two get on my wick,' groaned Mike.

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'All is not lost yet then,' chuckled Alun.

During the meal, Paul did a bit of lying.

He told everybody that our art expert friend had come over unexpectedly during the morning. The man had been nearby and had dropped in on his way past. Paul said that after a good deal of double-checking, the man had suggested that he take several of the paintings to be put on sale at an auction house.

Joseph was visibly annoyed. 'I hope the man gave you a receipt. What if he stole them?'

'We know where he lives,' I said. 'And he has his reputation to defend.'

'Reputation comes after riches,' snorted Joseph.

Paul smiled, 'In fact, he brought a friend from the auction house along with him,' he mentioned the esteemed Parisian company here. 'And they supplied the official receipt. Look.'

He handed Joseph the thick, impressive-looking crested notepaper. 'Seems in order,' he grumbled unhappily.

Paul continued. 'Apparently, the photos left little room for doubt. He also knew that a major sale was coming up and said it would be a pity to miss the chance.'

'Of getting a quick sale?' I suggested.

Paul nodded, 'So, he sent the photos to his pal, who came over straight away.'

'Not surprising,' grumbled Joseph. 'Seeing the commission those guys get.'

I chuckled, 'I expect they take about the same as a musician's impresario. What do you think?'

'Very amusing,' frowned Joseph.

'Anyway,' continued Paul, telling the truth now. 'Several big collectors and investors are slated to be present. The guy thinks that will drive the prices up.'

'A pity to miss the chance, then,' I said.

'That's what he said.' smiled Paul.

With the meal we had some excellent red wine. 'Nice taste this,' I smiled.

'Yep,' agreed Alun. 'I think I'll get a few cases in when we get home.'

'In your dreams...' scowled Margaux.

We all chuckled, but only about half those present saw the joke.

After coffee, Mike, Alun and I wandered over to gaze at the fountain. Mike's idea that Lucas might have connected it to the waterfall seemed a distinct possibility.

From the base of it, behind the farmhouse, a bubbling stream flowed rapidly across the forecourt into the pond. We got down on our hands and knees and studied the place where this gushed over the lip.

'I can see a big pipe down there,' said Mike. 'It looks as though it heads straight for the fountain.'

I scabbled about amongst the rocks at the bottom of the ice-cold stream, 'Ah!' I called. 'Found it.'

A big black iron pipe had been buried under the loose stones on the stream bed. 'It must follow the stream up to the waterfall's base,' I said.

'Let's get a closer view,' smiled Mike. 'I told you those guys must have invented something cunning, didn't I?'

We followed the stream to behind the farmhouse and came on a large square manhole cover.

'I wondered what that was for,' I said. 'I spotted it the other day.'

'While you were sniffing around?' suggested Mike.

'Yep. Finding a boat and a fire pump. Stuff like that...'

'And looking for whores. Or was it oars?' smiled Alun.

Mike was observing the waterfall with half-closed eyes; 'Ah ha!' he exclaimed. 'Look. That's how the devils did it.'

He pointed up. 'See the pipe behind the falling water?'

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After a few seconds, we spotted what he was indicating. Two big black pipes had been fixed to the cliff wall and reached high above us. The pipes flared open at their tops to form funnels, some thirty centimetres in diameter.

Mike chuckled, 'Now that's clever. Ultra-simple, but clever all the same.'

We gazed at him.

'It's a gravity fountain, of course,' he said. 'You know what that is, I suppose?'

'Got it!' I exclaimed. 'Those pipes collect the water up there, and the weight of water blasts it out of the nozzle.'

'Except that it doesn't blast much at the moment,' added Alun. 'Pipe blocked, perhaps. As I said earlier.'

'Let's have a look in that manhole,' said Mike, getting down on his knees. 'Normally, given the height of those pipes. The fountain ought to be able to go up tens of metres.'

We grabbed the edges of the steel plate and heaved it up. Inside, we found the two black downpipes connected to hefty-looking stop-cock valves. Directly after the valves came two large iron boxes with bolted lids.

'I bet those are filters,' nodded Mike. 'And I bet you they're filled with stones and sand.'

'I'm not taking bets today,' I smiled.

'In other words,' smiled Alun, 'The pipes are blocked. As I said.'

'We'll need a big spanner to open these,' said Mike.

'In the top drawer of the bench in the shed,' I smiled. 'I'll get it, shall I?'

Alun sighed.

'Back in a mo.,' I called as I sauntered off.

'We'll have to turn off the stopcock, before opening the cage,' said Mike. 'I wouldn't want to get blasted across the forest by all that water,' He nodded. 'There must be at least a ton and a half of water in those pipes.'



'Which one?' asked Alun. 'Both? Or each?'

'Each,' said Mike. 'that's one thousand five hundred kilos for you two uneducated twits.'

'Thanks, Mike,' I said, arriving at this moment.

'My pleasure.'

I got down into the manhole and got to work. Needless to say, the bolts were rusted solid.

'Why don't you go and get that bottle of "Rustol", smiled Alun.

'The one on the shelf, you mean?' I smiled.

'That's the one,' he chuckled.

Ten minutes and a good deal of perspiration and swearing later, we had the bolts off. We then levered the covers off.

'As I expected,' cried Mike. 'Chock-full of stones and sand.'

'I brought the trowel,' I laughed, passing it to him.

We changed places, and he emptied the material which had been blocking the water flow for years. With this done, we bolted the covers firmly back in place.

'Given the weight of water above us, it's not surprising that those filter boxes are so thick and the bolts are so big,' I said.

Alun nodded, 'And I bet the nozzle has to be bolted on pretty well too.'

Mike smiled. 'It looks like those two maniacs knew what they were doing.'

I frowned and looked over at Alun. 'You know. I would really like to have got to know Lucas and his pal. They sound as though they were good fun to be with.'

'You're telling me!' smiled Alun.

'Dangerous, you mean,' scowled Mike. 'Well, here goes,' he said, turning the first stop cock.

Nothing happened.

'Wrong one then,' smiled Alun.

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'Yes, I wonder what that one supplies,' I frowned.

Mike opened the other, and we stood to look down at the pond.

At first, nothing more than a bit of spurting was observable.

'Air in the pipeline,' nodded Mike.

Then, gradually, the water started to spray, fanning out elegantly in a multi-jet circular pattern. The spray rose higher and higher, quickly reaching three or four metres in height. It soon spread halfway across the pond in a majestic, inverted-cup shape.

'Brilliant,' cried Mike. 'Look at that!'

The fountain continued to rise more slowly now, but suddenly, there was a loud cracking noise. The following second, the nozzle freed itself from its fixings and was hurled into the sky by a powerful jet. The Jet must have reached ten metres and cascaded back into the pond. On the other hand, the nozzle did not fall back. It shot skywards and landed with a bang on the tiled farmhouse roof. From here, it bounced down and eventually lodged itself in the guttering.

At the same time, the front door flew open, and Paul, Emma, Sophie and Martin shot out, followed by our wives.

'What is the name of...?' Cried Paul. Then, catching sight of the tall water column, 'Wow!'

'We repaired the fountain,' called Mike.

'Great gods!' exclaimed Margaux.

'Nice, eh!?' I added.

They tramped towards us, gazing up at the impressive height of the fountain.

'Is it supposed to be like that?' asked my wife.

We shuffled about a bit, 'Well, not exactly,' I said.

'Just a bit different,' added Alun.

'What have you fools done?' groaned Margaux.

'Well,' started Alun.

Margaux held up her hand, 'I'd prefer to hear it from Mike,' she said. 'I'm more likely to understand that way,' she pauses. 'And much more likely to believe, too.'

'Well, you see...' he said.

'Yep,' said my wife. 'We can see.'

'Well, the nozzle structure must have become rusted, and the fixing bolts rusted and fragilised,' he said. 'Once we cleared the filter boxes of sand and stuff, the pressure must have been too much. It blasted the nozzle right off.' He smiled. 'The nozzle splits the water into twenty or so individual jets forming an elegant...'

'OK, Mike. We get it,' sighed Margaux

'And where is this famous nozzle now, Mike?' asked my wife.

Mike pointed to the roof, where the large metallic part was visible, half in and half out of the gutter.

Margaux looked up at this and then at us, 'Well?'

'Yes?' smiled Alun.

'It must have been gorgeous with the nozzle on,' she said.

'It was,' agreed Mike.

'Well, go and get it down then,' she said, spinning on her heel and heading back to the farmhouse.

Emma stepped forward and tapped Mike on the shoulder, 'Thanks, you three.'

'Yes,' added Paul. 'We often wondered why it was such a weedy thing.'

'We'll show you how it works if you like,' I said.

'When you've retrieved the nozzle,' nodded my wife. 'Off you go...'

She, too, turned on her heel and followed Margaux.

'Wives!' groaned Alun.

'God bless their souls,' I added.

'Yeh!' exclaimed Alun. 'You said it!'

We gazed up at the roof.

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'How on earth are we going to get that down,' sighed Alun. 'It's much too high for a ladder.'

'Well,' smiled Mike. 'We simply get into the loft, take a few tiles off, and Bob's your uncle. Simple.'

'I'm not having any more of your "bobs your uncle" ideas, Mike. They always turn out to be extremely dangerous.'

'Oh! Of course... If you're frightened.'

'Prudent is what I call it,' said Alun.

'Realistic,' I added.

'All right, all right, I'll do it.' Mike shook his head sadly. 'I thought I could count on my friends to lend a helping hand in times of trouble.'

'I really don't know where you get ideas like that from, Mike,' I frowned.

'Beats me,' said Alun.

Paul laughed, went down to the mill house, and returned dragging a tall wooden ladder.

'Do you mind if I count the woodworm holes, before we use it,' smiled Alun.

'Don't be stupid, Alun.' said Mike. 'It looks as strong as Oak,'

'Well, you go first then.'

Mike sighed and set off towards the house, followed by a smiling Paul. The boy was starting to get used to being around us. He also was starting to appreciate the odd things that happened when we were in the neighbourhood.

He leant the ladder against the upstairs wall, and Mike went up. We noticed with a smile that he was prudently placing his feet near the outside edges of each rung.

He pushed open the hatch and slid it to one side. Paul had given him the big torch, which he had lit before stepping up.

'Oh Mike,' I called up.

'Yes.'

'I don't know if you noticed, but the overhang of the gables is pretty wide.'

'Of course, I noticed. About two metres, I'd guess. It's to keep the sun off the walls.'

'Exactly.'

'So?'

'Well, you might also have noticed that the guttering is fixed onto the far edge of that overhang.'

'Of course it is, you nitwit,' he grumbled. 'Who do you take me for? What of it?'

'Well,' I said. 'Assuming you can remove some tiles at about floor level up there, you'll be two or three metres away from the guttering, won't you.'

There was a short silence.

'Ah... Yes, I see.'

'I thought you would,' I chuckled. 'I believe your arms are somewhat shorter than that.'

'So, you'll have to let me down on a rope then,' he said. 'The rope on the island will do fine.'

'I'll get it,' said Paul. 'You three get up and see if the tiles will come off.'

Alun looked at him sadly, shaking his head. 'Paul! You don't know us well enough yet. Otherwise, you wouldn't have said that.'

'Sorry?'

'The question is not whether the tiles will come off or not. The question is, will they go back on again once removed.'

Paul laughed out loud and slapped his thigh. 'Well, do your best. I'll get the rope.'

A short time later, Mike had done another of his clever bits of rope work and had firmly attached himself to it. We had unhooked one of the tiles from the inside and then widened the opening to a Mike-size hole. Peering out was a daunting experience.

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'Better you than I,' I said. 'That looks extremely dangerous.'

'It IS extremely dangerous,' said Mike. 'And that is why we are going to be extra careful.'

'We are?'

'YOU are.'

He took the free end of the rope and wound it twice around the healthiest-looking oak beam.

The ones that needed changing were only too obvious, some already sagging under the roof's weight.

'You let me down ten centimetres at a time,' he said. 'I'll tell you when to ease off the tension. But as an extra precaution, I'm going to make a knot so that the rope can't slip more than three metres.'

This done, he scrambled on hands and knees and stuck his head out of the hole.

'Oh, Well!' he sighed. 'Here goes.'

The two of us held onto the rope.

'OK, ease off ten centimetres,' he called, 'Now.'

We let the rope slip slowly and smoothly between our hands.

'OK,' he called again. 'Ten More.'

'How's it feel, Mike,' I called.

'Great,' he said. 'Just don't let go. I have absolute confidence in my knots.'

'But not in the knot-heads who are holding the other end.'

'You've got it,' called Mike. 'Careful now. Ten more, please.'

We let him down a bit more.

'Oh!' he called. 'I've got a splendid view directly into Florence's bedroom. Let's hope she decides to change her clothes.'

'She doesn't wear much anyway, so it won't last very long,' said Alun.

'Long enough,' said Mike.

A minute later, Mike called us to stop. 'I'm OK. I've got it. Start pulling me back up.'

His feet had just come into view when he called, 'Stop. Florence has just come into view. Hey! Hold tight, for God's sake. OK, Pull me up. I think we can still see through the tiles. It would be a pity for you to miss the show.'

'Mike!' I exclaimed, 'You're a friend.'

Mike entered the loft backwards, and as soon as he was inside, we crowded around the gap in the tiles.

As we watched, Florence moved to the window and looked down at the forecourt. We ducked out of view and then peeped out again. She had turned sideways, then, with a quick, practised movement, slipped off her top and then her linen trousers.

'Great gods!' breathed Mike. 'That is what I call a body.'

'You're telling me!' sighed Alun. 'Better than seen through binoculars.'

To our surprise, she put on her underclothes, followed by a pair of heavy beige hiking trousers and a matching thick cotton shirt.

She then pulled into view a tall rucksack and started loading it with clothes.

'Off for a bit of hiking,' smiled Alun. 'Anyone interested in accompanying her?'

'Hold on!' called Mike. 'What's this?'

Florence had sat down at the small table in front of the window. Then, to our amazement, she bent down and placed something we were not expecting on the top. A gun. A big handgun.

'Christ!' exclaimed Mike. 'What the hell!'

Oblivious of our presence and with practised ease, she dismantled the gun and then started to painstakingly clean and oil it. This being done, she put it back together with dextrous and experienced precision and finally filled the

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charger from a box. Finally, she slipped the gun into the large side pocket of the rucksack, then zipped it closed. After this, she sat it on the bed, pulled on a pair of hiking boots, and slapped a wide-brimmed hat over her hair.

'What the hell!' exclaimed Alun.

'Not surprising that her shooting on the range was so good,' said Mike.

'No,' I agreed. 'We had better go and tell Inspector Venet straight away.'

'You're telling me!' said Mike. 'And fast. Where is she off to, do you think?'

'No idea. But I'm not going with her. Even if she strips naked,' I said.

'Me neither,' said Alun.

Mike chewed his lip. 'Look. You two go straight away and tell the Inspector. I'll put the tiles back. If ever she spots the hole, she'll be up here with that gun like a shot.'

'But Mike!' I cried.

'You go down and take the ladder with you. I'll close the hatch.'

'Got it!' said Alun. 'And we prop the ladder against her front wall, is it?'

'Get on with it, you nit,' he said. 'Wait a minute, what's this?'

A thick spiral of black smoke was now rising through the trees. 'Something's on fire down in the village,' called Mike.

'What now!?' I cried.

We rushed down the ladder, carried it to the back of the farmhouse, and then ran down the slope to our car.

In five minutes, we were in the village.

The place was seething with people, and the fire brigade was there, pumping water into the health food shop.

'Christ!' cried Alun.



We found the Inspector amongst the people there and told him our story. Alun also told him that we spotted Andrew using his phone just after we had opened the chest and only a few minutes before the gunmen made their appearance.

He called over his men, who dashed off to their cars.

There were six of them, and they quickly and silently surrounded the building where we had seen Florence.

The Inspector and the officer, George, crept over to the door and tried the handle. The door swung open.

Venet called out, with no effect, then the two suddenly dashed in, guns drawn.

A few moments later, they reappeared and waved us over.

'Have a look at this,' he said, his face clouded.

On the floor beside the open back windows stood Andrew's and Florence's packed and closed suitcases, ready to be hoisted out.

On the floor beside these lay Andrew.

His head was surrounded by a pool of blood.'

'Great Gods!' I cried. 'What's happened?

'Christ! That woman...' gasped Alun.

'She's gone with her rucksack,' I said. 'We saw her packing it from up there on the roof.

'Damn it!' cried the Inspector. 'She must have got away down the back of the hill and into the forest.'

'Even if someone saw, he wouldn't have recognised her. She was dressed up like Indiana Jones. Hat and all?'

'I bet she'd set up a meeting with those two gunmen somewhere.' said Alun.

'And didn't want to share the gold,' nodded Mike.

'God in heaven,' I cried. 'Who is that woman!?''

The Inspector told his men to call in the specialists, 'I wouldn't want to be in those two guys' shoes,' he said.

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'If they're pros, they must know they're walking on thin ice.' said George. 'They'll keep their wits about them.'

Mike, Alun and I exchanged doubtful glances.

'Three down. Three to go,' I said.



## CHAPTER 13

**A**s would be expected, this latest event sent a shock wave through our little community. Dead bodies in a nearby forest were one thing, but a murder next door was quite another.

The worst affected seemed to be Julianna Metrokovitch, who turned deathly white and had to be assisted to a chair.

My wife promptly gave her a glass of potent local pear cordial, instantly bringing the colour back to her cheeks. It also gave her a big surprise when she took an overly courageous gulp of the liquid. Since then, I have never seen anyone come as close to spontaneous combustion as that opera singer. Happily, though, that is the sort of mistake one makes only once in a lifetime. Luckily, cordial at fifty-five per cent proof is not generally available.

We explained everything we had witnessed as soon as we had let Mike back down from the loft.

By tacit and unspoken agreement, we prudently left the bit about Florence stripping naked out of the story. We knew that our wives would spot the unmistakable gleam in our eyes if we told that bit.

When I think about it, though, not many people have the chance to see a cold-blooded and beautiful murderer in the nude and have lived to tell the tale.

In any case, we had no intention of telling that tale, even if its memory would undoubtedly stay with us for a long time.

During all this, Sophie had been trying out some of her original songs to Joseph. They had been so absorbed by their heated discussion that they had not even been aware of the arrival of the police.

Both were shocked, but it was pretty clear that as soon as they could do so, their main objective was to get back to it. What would come of their debate as concerns openings for Sophie in the musical industry remained to be seen. It went without saying that the job of an impresario is to make money. So, twenty per cent of next-to-nothing was not the sort of contract on which he was likely to waste his time.

Emma, who had been milling about by the table, shook her head with disbelief, 'How on earth could a woman murder her own husband for a few gold bars! I just can't believe it!'

'She apparently set his market value at significantly less than one million euros,' said Alun.

'Who said he was her husband?' I replied. 'Apart from her?' I paused. 'He could have simply been an associate in crime.'

Inspector Venet nodded, 'That's very possible. We checked up on them both yesterday.'

'And?' I asked.

'We found no trace whatsoever of either of them. Neither in our files nor ID databases or Passport services.'

'So, they may not even be Dad's old friends at all,' said Paul.

The Inspector shrugged, 'Do you know,' he said. 'I have a feeling that the woman knew your dad all right. I don't know under which name, but I have a feeling all the same.'

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‘Nothing to do with that naked woman we discovered?’ I asked.

The man couldn’t discuss this point without showing his hand, so he simply shrugged, ‘No,’ he said. ‘I think that’s highly improbable.’

In truth, he was thinking exactly the opposite for reasons that we were yet to discover. In fact, this point was causing him and his superiors a good deal of concern. But after all, fitting together bits of puzzle, which initially seemed to belong to different pictures, was all part of the job. However, it took time and patience, and it appeared that, at the moment, they were permitted neither of these luxuries. However, even as he spoke, a new and unexpected line of thought formed in his mind. He would have appreciated trying this out on the three of us because he had realised that we had quick minds and unconventional ways of looking at facts.

Maybe later.

Emma frowned, ‘Why on earth did she take off like that? Without warning.’

Paul frowned. ‘I may be able to answer that.’

Venet looked at him, ‘Yes?’

‘Well, when the auction house chap came over, we went round the houses, checking the paintings.’

Venet nodded, ‘I see.’

‘And we removed a painting from the wall in their sitting room and another from the front bedroom.’

I nodded, ‘So, you think she noticed that and panicked? Thought that you might have chanced on something incriminating while you were doing it?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Like her gun,’ I suggested.

‘More likely to be ID papers or something like that with their real names on them?’ added Mike.

'Yes, that's a distinct possibility.' said the Inspector. 'So, they decided it was time to bail out before trouble knocked at her door.'

'God! That inhuman woman!' cried Julianne Metrokovitch. 'She allowed the poor man to pack his suitcase while all the time she was preparing to kill him.' she paused. 'What did she kill him with?' she asked.

'A rusty old hammer,' said the Inspector. 'Probably got it from the shed.'

'Second draw down on the left,' I said. 'A heavy claw-hammer. They don't make them like that nowadays.'

'Jesus!' cried Paul, 'What would have happened if she had walked in while we were going around the place!?'

'Great Gods!' cried Sophie and clasped Paul to her tightly.

'Best not to dwell on that,' smiled the Inspector.

'She must have struck him very hard,' said Julianna. 'Would a woman have been capable of that, Inspector?'

'Have you seen her biceps and those shoulders,' said Mike.

'I wouldn't like to try getting a punch from her?' I added.

'Or a hammer stroke,' smiled my wife. 'Apparently, she's not only a good shot with a rifle.'

'She said herself that she had a steady hand,' said Margaux.

'And a steady mind, too,' added Mike.

'Ice-cold,' I added.

'Yes. It makes my skin creep, knowing we've been all chatting to a cold-blooded murderer for days,' shivered Sophie, pulling a face.

The Diva got to her feet. 'Do you think you'll catch her, Inspector?'

Venet, too, pulled a face. 'If she is as professional as it seems, that's open to question. If she had been planning

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this action for a long time, she will have prepared an excellent backup plan for all unexpected situations.'

'And I expect that the gun is part of the final fallback...' I said.

Mike frowned, 'But all the same, stealing a few bars of gold is one thing. I would have thought that a pro would want to avoid murder like the pest.' he paused. 'I'm not sure you'd even get a significant prison sentence for theft. But you'd be sure to get life for murder.'

'Yes,' agreed Venet. 'There is more to this than meets the eye.'

'But,' smiled Alun, 'You're going to tell us that we can sleep soundly because she is far, far away by now.'

Venet laughed, 'My two men are still stationed up there, by the cave. They can see everything that goes on down here. If they call us on the talky-walky, we'll be up here in less than a minute.'

Alun nodded, 'Remind me, Inspector. How long does it take to kill someone with a hammer? More or less than a minute?'

'Oh!' cried the Diva. 'Stop. Please!'

'And I suppose your men up there have eyesight like owls, for the night watch, I mean,' I added with a smile.

The officer, who had been following this exchange, turned to his superior. 'It might be a good idea if I camp in the spare house tonight, Sir.'

'Good idea,' smiled Venet. 'Would you feel happier like that, madam?' he asked the Diva.

'That would be wonderful, Inspector. Thank you.' Then, an idea seems to strike her. 'Perhaps it would be more convenient for the officer to camp in my house.'

The officer made big, worried eyes at his superior.

'Well, that's very kind of you to propose it, madam,' smiled Venet. 'But the one now empty is more central, isn't it.'



'It certainly is,' sighed George with relief.

'That's settled then. Would you care to share our evening meal with us, officer?' said Emma, relieved by this new arrangement.

We caught the man's eye and nodded vigorously.

He smiled back, 'That would be perfect,' he said.

'More perfect than you think,' chuckled Alun, wondering which wine we would have the honour of sampling that evening.

At this moment, I spotted a police ambulance turning off the main road to head up the track towards the farm. It was closely followed by the post office van.

The two slowed at the base of the hillock, then climbed the rough gravel track, coming to a halt in front of the Farmhouse. Venet nodded to the officer, and they went off to assist in the removal of Andrew's body.

The post office van reversed, turned, and stopped, the engine still running. The door shot open, and the driver jumped out and strode over to us. 'A package for Miss E Duprès,' he said.

'That's me,' said Emma, extending her hand.

A thick A4 manilla envelope changed hands. 'Please sign here, madam.' said the postman passing over a computer tablet, 'Sign inside the box with your finger, please.'

With this done, he returned to the van and sped off down the track in a spray of stones.

Emma turned the heavy envelope over in her hands, 'More from the solicitor,' she sighed. 'More papers to sign, no doubt.'

'It might contain the address of Lucas' secret Swiss bank account,' I smiled. 'So, don't burn it, just in case.'

She shrugged and smiled at me. 'More likely to be another bill.'

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'A big bill, in that case. If the thickness is anything to go by, that is,' said Margaux. 'But don't worry. Mike will pay.'

Mike leapt to his feet as if he had been stung, 'What!?'

'She was joking, Mike,' laughed Emma, turning and starting off towards the house. 'I'll see you all later.'

I shot Alun a look.

'Perhaps we ought to go and see if there's anything we can do to help about that woman's shop,' I said.

My wife, who had now heard all about her true identity, nodded. 'Tell her we can make room for her in our spare bedroom if necessary.'

'Will do,' I said.

'I wonder if that fire was accidental,' she added.

Alun, Mike and I exchanged astonished looks, 'I honestly doubt it,' I said. 'That would be just one big coincidence too many, don't you think?'

'I'm not sure what I think,' she replied.

'Well, Luckily, it seems that those guys are less professional when it comes to burning places down than where murder is concerned,' said Alun.

'I wonder why they did it?' frowned Margaux.

'If the shop owner was the target,' I said. 'She would certainly be dead by now. So, perhaps their objective was to ensure that if the dead woman had hidden any incriminating documents, they were destroyed.'

'Exactly,' nodded Alun. 'Easier than tearing the place apart brick by brick.'

Sophie had by now departed with Joseph to take up their musical discussions. Seeing this, Paul lowered his voice, 'But if they realise their plan failed, they may still be around here somewhere.'

We pulled faces. 'Best to keep that to ourselves for the moment, I said.'

My wife nodded. 'Go and see what you can do down there then.'

Being highly experienced married men, we were out of earshot before they even had time to reflect upon the words they had pronounced.

After quickly crossing the forecourt and jumping the stream, we jogged down the dirt track and into the scrubby cork-oak forest to the east. At the base of the hillock, we picked up the ancient way, which wound through the spreading trees to the village and eased our pace. According to the locals, this track dates back hundreds of years to the farm's origins. Its twists and turns circled several massive boulders that had come down from the cliff over the centuries. The forest was still older and had survived devastating storms and lightning-triggered forest fires. We had learnt that the Cork-Oak's rugged, thick, spongy bark provides remarkable protection against fire except when its bark is stripped for use. This action leaves the trunks smooth and reddish-coloured. Above all, it makes them vulnerable to fire until the bark grows sufficiently thick again. For this reason, farmers only strip a few well-separated trees each year because it takes upwards of six years for them to recover their natural resistance to fire.

Amongst her numerous activities, Danielle Blanchet, the owner of the "Rose Sauvage" health and wellbeing shop, gathered cork from these trees.

With this, she manufactured useless articles for which tourists were willing to pay ridiculous prices.

Other than this, today, the trees were left untouched.

It took us twenty minutes to reach the village, and when we arrived, we were surprised to find the shop open as usual and clearly undamaged.

Alun popped his head around the door and called, 'Hello. Anyone home.'

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'One moment, please,' came a distant reply. There was a noise of something being dragged across a stone floor at the back of the shop, and then, the women appeared.

On spotting us, her face fell disappointedly, 'Oh, it's your three?'

Now, Alun, Mike and I are used to being addressed this way by our wives, so we were not unduly taken aback. Furthermore, our wives usually added something else like, "At last!" or "Is It?" appended by any number of slighting remarks. So, we simply smiled back.

'Yes,' said Alun. 'Us.'

'The three of us,' I added.

'We wondered if you needed any help,' said Mike.

'So, we popped down,' added Alun.

The women gazed at us, 'So, your wives told you to come, did they?'

Again, we are too used to being talked to like this to take any notice.

'Can we be of any use?' asked Mike.

The woman paused. She was clearly about to deliver one of those very clever jibes which makes a married man's life so enjoyable. However, somehow, she resisted the temptation, and we applauded this.

'Bravo!' smiled Alun. 'Now, our wives would never have been able to resist such an opening.'

'Yes,' I chuckled. 'You show a remarkable capacity for self-restraint. Well done.'

'But,' added Alun. 'You'll need to eliminate that tendency if ever you plan on marrying.'

'But don't worry, my wife and Margaux will be able to help you over that hurdle when the time comes,' I smiled. 'They are highly experienced practitioners.'

She could not resist laughing at this and shook her head with amusement. 'Sorry, boys. No marriages on the

horizon,' she paused. 'Things are a bit hectic here at the moment, I'm afraid.'

'We noticed. What with one murder and another...' I replied.

'But, honestly, can we help? Is there much damage to repair? Surly we can clear something or other,' said Alun.

'And make a nice mess somewhere else,' added Mike.

She smiled back. 'In fact, there's not much damage at all. Someone set fire to the pile of empty cardboard boxes filled with polystyrene I'd piled up against the back wall.'

We nodded.

'I was lucky,' she continued. 'That mixture burns fast but makes a lot of Black smoke.'

'Lucky!?' I asked.

'Yes. Three fire brigade men were drinking on the café terrasse just across the square. They spotted the smoke immediately. Two dashed over with handheld extinguishers while the other brought the fire engine around.' She smiled. 'The fire was under control within minutes, and before it could cause serious damage to the building.'

We pulled faces, 'That was a hell of a bit of luck,' said Alun.

She nodded. 'All the same, there are still a lot of fumes hanging about. Especially upstairs. The fire brigade chief says it's wiser not to sleep in the house for a few days. He said that those fumes can be highly toxic.'

She moved around the counter and pushed the door open a little wider. 'He recommends leaving all the doors and windows open for a few days. And at night to leave the upstairs windows open.'

Mike nodded, 'Fear not. For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,' he chanted.

'Well, that's nice,' she smiled.

'In other words,' I translated. 'Our wives invite you to use the spare bedroom in their house for a few nights.'

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'Ah!' she laughed, 'These are truly "good tidings of great joy".' And then looking from one of us to the other, she added. 'And I presume that you are no other than the original "Three Wise Men".'

I smiled, 'I fear there are few wiser in these parts of the kingdom, Milady.'

'So, just pack some essentials and pop up when you're ready,' said Alun.

'Thanks very much.'

'And don't forget the frankincense and myrrh,' I said.

'And naturally the gold,' smiled Alun, treating us to one of his wry smiles. 'We're clean out of gold at the moment...'

'Do you think it was the same guys who killed the girl?' asked Mike.

She nodded. 'We hope they assume she was just a lodger here and that I know nothing about her.'

'But you're not entirely certain?' asked Mike.

'Not one hundred per cent,' she sighed. 'But they no doubt wanted to cover possibilities of her having left some documents which might incriminate them.'

'They failed there.' Said Mike.

'What if they suspect she told you whatever secret she knew?' Asked Alun.

'I doubt that I'd still be alive,' she shuddered.

'So, that's one more good reason to sleep up there for a few days.' I added.

'And to make you feel even safer, your friend George, the officer, is staying with us tonight.'

Her face brightened, 'Oh really!?'

We exchanged looks. Definitely a bit of romance in the air here, we thought.

During this Mike was fiddling about with some small objects on a shelf. 'Mike!' I called. 'Leave those things alone.'

'Why,'

"Because they're valuable."

'So?'

'And you're about to drop it.'

Mike sighed and carefully placed the object back in its place. He turned, and naturally, his sleeve caught the edge of the shelf, and the whole lot started to topple over. We dashed up just in time and held it in place. We then eased it carefully back to a stable position and breathed again.

Then, with a crash, the little object Mike had been fiddling with fell and smashed onto the tiles.

'Oops,' he said.

The women laughed. 'Now, I'm gradually coming to believe that the stories I've heard about you three are true.'

'I'm terribly sorry,' said Mike.

'Don't be,' she smiled. 'I sell those things for twenty-five euros, but they only cost me fifty centimes to make...'

'Solid business sense,' said Alun.

'I leave them in the back garden in the rain all winter. It makes them appear far more authentic, and that "natural processing procedure" costs nothing,' she smiled.

'But twenty-five euros...' frowned Mike.

'I started by pricing them at five euros but sold none. Then I put it up to twenty-five, and now I sell about a hundred a year...'

We all laughed.

She picked up an irregularly shaped cork beer mat from the pile beside her.

'Look at this,' she handed it to me. 'I used to cut nice square ones from the cork-oak bark gathered from the forest,' she smiled. 'I sold a few sets of ten a year at ten euros. Then I decided to tear bits off them and put a label, 'Hand-cut - From protected two-hundred-year-old trees,' She laughed to herself. 'I put the price up to thirty euros and reduced the number from ten per set, to five. Now, I sell about a hundred sets every year.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Alun nodded, 'People like to feel that they are being cheated properly,' he said. 'It is considered an essential element of any truly memorable holiday in the south of France.'

Mike was moving towards another shelf, 'Mike!' I called. He drew back his hand and turned to the woman, 'Did you meet Lucas Duprès when he was renovating the place?' He asked.

She smiled, 'Oh yes,' then she hesitated. 'But please call me Danielle.'

'So, you knew him then, Danielle,' I said.

'Oh, yes. He came down here often,' she said. 'For lessons with my group.'

'Your group?' I said.

'Yes. My candle-making group. He also attended the glass-blowing lessons.'

'Glassblowing!?' gasped Mike.

Danielle laughed. 'Oh, I don't do the glass-blowing part myself. I have a friend who specialises in horribly gaudy glasswork for tourists. But he's really a virtuoso at making magnificent drinking glasses. But no one can afford them.' She smiled, 'Except Lucas Duprès, that is. He ordered an entire set. You've probably been using them without knowing. If you look, you'll find the special blue glass crest he had added. It's got "LD" marked on it, blood-red on blue.'

'Ah!' nodded Mike. 'So, that's where they came from. Alun's wife spotted that they were something extra special the other day.'

I frowned, 'But Candles! What on earth did the man want to make candles for?'

She shrugged, 'He seemed to be getting interested in all those traditional crafts. He was an extremely fast learner, too.'

'You didn't know his son, Ivan, did you?' asked Alun.



At this, she shot him a quick questioning look, 'No. I didn't know him at all.'

'And you taught him to make candles?' I said.

'Oh Yes. he became very good at it. He enjoyed practical activities like that.'

We nodded, and she went on. 'He planned to make personalised candles to decorate the houses up there. He came here often, and he became very good at it. He even set up a small workshop in the basement at the farm.'

'That's gone now,' smiled Alun.

'But there are already plenty of big candles up there,' I said.

Danielle smiled at me. 'Good, aren't they.'

'You don't mean to say they're his hand-made one!?' I gasped.

'I told you he learned fast.'

'But they are professionally finished, crested candles!' Said Mike.

Danielle smiled again. 'Those big black candles are one hundred per cent his own work. He aimed at making enough to be able to give one to each of his visitors as a souvenir.'

'That seems a little out of character, don't you think?' said Alun.

'Retiring from a successful international career is a bit "out-of-character" too,' she answered.

'So, maybe he was an "out-of-character" sort of person then,' said Alun.

'I taught him how to make traditional beeswax candles by repeatedly dipping a wick into hot wax,' she said. 'He wanted to learn only the traditional method.'

That must be incredibly time-consuming...'

'He was in no hurry. He said time was on his side,' she sighed. 'But apparently it wasn't.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Alun nodded, 'We know he was not only a good conductor but also a man with ideas.'

'But you see, he wanted them to burn for a long time, so I suggested big, dipped Beeswax pillar candles. They can burn continuously for two hundred hours. He set up an arrangement with ten pots of wax and a few broom handles. That enabled him to make thirty big at a time.'

'Brilliant, but time-consuming all the same,' I said. 'And those are the ones on the mantle pieces of each house up there?'

'Yes, that's right. Those big shiny black ones.'

'Must have taken all day. You'd need to dip them hundreds of times.' Mike frowned. 'And to get them cylindrical, you'd need to reverse the dipping direction every few dips. Otherwise, they'd come out conical.'

'Thanks, professor,' said Alun.

'I thought you might be interested,' he smiled. 'Just think how long it must take to make those huge ones for churches.'

'They're often poured wax rather than dipped,' said Danielle. 'Cheaper, you see. Churches in rural locations are not as rich as they used to be, you know.'

'And where do they get the black wax from Mike,' smiled Alun.

'I believe they use Bald Peruvian-Mountain bees,' I said, laughing.

'Yes,' agreed Alun, nodding. 'You're right there. Then, they mature the wax by ageing it on a bed of goat-urine humidified Llama pats.'

'And that makes it turn jet black, Mike,' I smiled.

Are you sure they weren't Alpacas?' said Alun.

'Don't talk rot, you two,' groaned Mike. 'It's just special black candle varnish.'

'I believe that's what they call it here in Europe,' I said. 'But in reality, it's wax, matured under dried Llama pats, Mike.'

'They wouldn't be able to market it otherwise,' added Alun.

'And You'd have the league for the protection of animal excrement down on you like a ton of bricks,' I said.

'They'd accuse you of doing the opposite of the force-feeding of geese the French do to get Foie-Gras.' nodded Alun.

'You mean force-patting.'

'Exactly,' smiled Alun.

'How do they do it nowadays, Alun?' I asked.

'Easy,' he smiled. 'You take one ripe llama and a couple of oak planks...'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' groaned Mike. 'Shut up, you two idiots.'

Danielle was gazing at us with wide eyes. 'Are they always like this?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'It's odd,' I sighed. 'But the truth is that Mike does not always seem able to appreciate fully the finesse of our wit.'

'I wonder why that is?' said Danielle.

'One of the mysteries of life,' said Alun. 'Another of those mysteries is why Lucas should go to all that trouble for a few candles, which will probably never be used anyway. You already sell big ones yourself.'

She nodded, 'But he seemed to me to be just the sort of man who liked going to trouble. Even for small things.'

'That's true,' replied Mike. 'Perhaps that's the spirit which makes the difference between a good orchestral conductor and a great one.'

'Yes,' agreed Danielle. 'And a virtuoso pianist too,' she paused. 'Did you ever hear him play?'

'Before our time,' I laughed.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Well, I had the luck often to hear him practising up at the farm,' she smiled, 'It was blissful... That was during the period when the pianos were being delivered and tuned. He played Bach's Fugues.' Her eyes took on a dreamy look. 'Until then, I hadn't understood what "virtuoso" meant. I associated it with playing very fast or extremely complicated pieces, which nobody likes to hear but applauds because they're so horribly difficult to execute.'

'I have several of his early recordings,' said Mike. 'Yes. Wonderful.'

'Do you know,' she continued. 'On some summer evenings, when his guests were there for a well-earned rest, they often played together. They'd drag the Farmhouse Grand over to the doorway. Then the others would sit outside and play until they couldn't see the music anymore,' Danielle sighed. 'I would creep up and sit with my back against the umbrella Pine and listen. My own personal concert series by planetary virtuosos... It was the most incredible experience of my life.'

'Yes, it must have been incredible,' I said.

She nodded dreamily. 'When they had finished, they laughed together, and Lucas would bring out some of his famous champagne, and they would cheer and chat like any normal human being would.'

'Except that they were not,' I smiled.

'No,' she said. 'And I then understood why he had conceived of this place. Somewhere where classical music stars could relax with like-minded friends, let their hair down, and enjoy life like normal people.'

'A secret place, with no newspaper reporters or photographers or music critics or camp followers or snobs, in a radius of twenty miles,' I added. 'Yes. It was certainly a brilliant idea. 'Let's hope that Emma and Paul can find a way to make this place live on and honour Lucas' plan.'

We chatted a little more and then took our leave.

'We'll see you at about half six to seven then,' called Alun.

'OK, or just after, if I have someone in the shop,' she replied.

'Don't make it too late, or the champagne will be warm,' I Laughed.

After the midday meal, the three of us went for a walk through the forest to the west of the farm. The sun was beating down with true Mediterranean force, but the track ran along the foot of the cliff, shaded by tall trees which had grown here. It went up and down following the age-old scree slopes and gradually curving north-westwards. We were soon out of sight of the farm.

Our path passed several abandoned barns, which were vast, ancient wood-built structures. They were all in remarkable condition despite being abandoned for many years.

The tiled roofs were in excellent condition, as were the wooden plank walls. No doubt, the dry atmosphere and the intelligent choice of tree essence had contributed to them having neither rotted nor been attacked by insects.

'I wonder how old these places are?' said Mike as we paused before a particularly interestingly formed one.

We pulled open one of the barn doors and stepped into the cathedral-sized interior.

'Look at those beams!' exclaimed Alun. 'Entire trees, each one.'

'Oak,' nodded Mike. 'The rest of the structure, too,' he added. 'Solid.'

'Down here, those roofs don't have to support metres of snow in winter either.' I said, gazing appreciatively around.

'I wonder who these places belong to,' I frowned.

'Thinking of buying one?' smiled Alun.

I glanced at the two of them. 'Well, it would certainly be good fun renovating a place like this, don't you think?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Mike and Alun gazed at me open-mouthed as they considered this point.

'Ah!' said Mike.

'Hmm,' added Alun.

'I wonder how much a place like this would cost?' I said.

We stood on the bone-dry, packed-earth floor, gazing around the vast space.

'A big job,' said Alun.

'Yep,' smiled Mike. 'Big.'

'Fun too,' I said.

'Yes,' nodded Alun. 'Fun...'

'The foundations look pretty solid,' said Mike, poking around in the centuries-old straw, which was still strewn here and there.

'You'd need to get electricity up here, though. And water, too,' I frowned.

'If old Lucas could do it, so could we,' smiled Alun.

'But Lucas had tens of millions at his disposal,' I countered.

'And you haven't!?' cried Mike. 'I'm disappointed.'

'I'm expecting an unexpected windfall any day now,' I chuckled.

'Me too,' said Alun.

'And there was that stream we just crossed,' I said. 'So, watering the vegetables will be no problem.'

'No, the problem will not be with vegetables,' smiled Mike.

'With flowers?' asked Alun.

'No,' he smiled. 'With wives.'

We burst out laughing.

'Come on, lads. Let's get the lie of the land. We can bring the subject up tonight.'

Alun held up a finger, 'Not before the first two bottles of wine, though.'

'Naturally,' I said. 'Neglect proper lubrication, and the mechanism ceases up instantly.'

'Or even faster,' said Alun.

Mike took off his rucksack and fished out the ordnance survey map.

We spread this out on the dry earth and got down on hands and knees to locate our position. Mike found the spot, and we squinted down at the map.

We realised that we were only about a kilometre from the farm and that a rough track ran from the bottom of the plot, about three hundred metres through the forest to the main road. In fact, this barn was only about a hundred metres to the west of Martin's shooting range.

'Who would know this place was here,' I said.

'The man who built it, perhaps,' said Mike.

'He's been dead for a century or two,' replied Alun. 'I wonder who owns it now?'

Mike was tracing the track with his finger, 'There's another barn behind those trees at the end of the track. We can go back that way and see what state the track's in.' We nodded.

'It'll have to come up, though, when we have the water pipes and drains put in.'

'And the fibre optic for the internet,' I laughed.

While Mike folded up the map, I took a series of photos to show "The Girls" when the time came. Then we set off.

'There's another track across the forest from the place down there. It runs behind the outcrop behind the shooting range and ends up by the waterfall.' said Mike as he slipped the map away.

I shot a look at Alun. 'Maybe our first body took that route out,' I said.

'We can go back that way then,' said Alun.

We clambered through some blackberry bushes and eventually struck the track Mike had spotted on the map.

## The Sarlat Quartet

Fifty metres further on, down a slight slope, we found the second barn. It was much smaller but in an equally good state of repair.

It stood at a fork in the way. In front of us, the track ran down towards the main road, and to our left, it went towards the waterfall. We had decided to call this the "Nymphs Pool" on the strength of having already observed two naked beauties there. 'Two so far,' said Alun.

I wandered over to the barn and pushed the heavy oak double doors. I had to put all my weight against them. 'A spot of grease wouldn't do any harm here,' I said, panting.

The door gradually swung open, and a wide shaft of light lit the interior.

'Oh!' exclaimed Alun, stepping in. 'What have we here?'

A huge articulated forest tractor stood in the middle of the empty space.

'Well, well, well!' exclaimed Mike. 'I wonder who left this here?'

We exchanged looks.

'Hmm,' I said. 'I suspect that our Inspector would be interested in this. I wonder who it belongs to.'

'I bet it belongs to the guy who is away on holiday,' added Mike. 'Those guys could have stolen it and used it to get the body over from the waterfall to a waiting car. Then off down the track and away on the main road.'

'Well done, Mike. I think you've got it,' said Alun.

'And the owner could go on looking for the machine for a long time if he didn't chance on it, like us,' I said.

'What makes you think I chanced on it,' said Mike. 'I had already thought the thing through. I just needed to verify my reasoning.'

'Good old Hercules Poirot,' I laughed.

Well, Inspector Venet WAS interested. And it turned out that our analysis was perfectly correct.



'Well, at least we have cleared up that part of the mystery.' he said. 'Thanks.'

'Our pleasure,' Smiled Alun.

## CHAPTER 14

**T**hat evening, there were thirteen of us at the table again.  
The departed Andrew and his murderous wife had been replaced by Danielle and Police Officer George.

'We'll really have to do something about this,' laughed Emma. 'Luckily, none of us is superstitious.'

'What is there to be superstitious about?' I asked. 'A couple of accidents, one due to tripping and falling over the cliff, another due to a woman accidentally shooting herself twice, then falling over the same cliff. And then a man was beaten to death with a hammer. That's all, in fact. Absolutely nothing to get superstitious about.'

Margaux smiled. 'But your counting is wrong, Emma' she said. 'We only count a half for these three together. They might eat like six and drink like twelve men; intellectually, they count for a half or at the most for One.'

We shook our heads sadly. 'It wasn't worth the trouble talking to people like that.'

'I'll add the "poor man's plate", said Danielle. 'My mother always did that when we were thirteen. It's a tradition to add an extra plate in case a homeless beggar stops by. Especially in winter.'

'Good idea smiled Emma, setting out the extra place. Do gentlemen of that sort prefer white wine or red?'

'Invariably red,' laughed Danielle.

'Well, I feel better now,' sighed Julianna Metrokovitch. 'And I invariably prefer white. Except when it is excellent, like here.'

Emma turned to George, standing awkwardly, unsure how to behave, 'Perhaps you'd like to sit beside Danielle. You already know each other, I think.'

The officer smiled sheepishly and nodded.

Danielle quickly looked at Emma, who gave her a quick smile.'

My wife glanced over at me and nodded, then smiled at Margaux. There was very clearly romance in the air here. One could count on the Girls to ensure that if this proved to be the case, they would ensure that the wheels of love were coaxed into action.

Margaux then sent an eye signal to Alun.

This meant, 'If you mess this occasion up for them...'

The rest went without saying.

Emma looked over at the impresario as soon as we were all seated and served.

'Do you know what was in that big envelope, Joseph?'

'No.'

'It contains a lot of sheet music.'

'Really?'

'It also contained an envelope addressed to Inspector Venet. By name. Odd that, I thought.'

George smiled, 'I think they met once or twice.'

'I'm certain of it,' said Dannielle, turning to him and smiling encouragingly, 'They had a drink at the cafe together several times. It's just across the road from my shop, so I could hardly miss them, could I.'

'And the sheet music,' asked Joseph, slightly impatiently. 'What was it?'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'It seems to be a composition by my grandfather.'

'A composition by Lucas! He finished it then.'

'You knew about it?'

'Of course. I'd been encouraging him to finish it for years. He kept putting it off. Because of the time taken up by renovating this place, in fact.'

'So, you'd be interested to see it?' she smiled.

'Of course. I prepared the ground with the publishers years ago,' he paused. 'The contract was already drawn up and waiting to be signed.'

Our local Diva laughed, 'The contract providing you with fifteen per cent, I suppose.'

Joseph sneered at her, 'Ten per cent for music publishing, Julianna. You ought to know that.'

Emma nodded, 'It is apparently written for the "Quartet". Know them?'

Joseph pulled a face, 'No. Never heard of them.'

'The Salat Quartet!?' said Julianna. 'No. I've never heard of them either.' She frowned. 'That's the main town near here, isn't it?'

'Yes,' replied Emma. 'But I know nothing about the classical music community down here.'

Joseph frowned again, 'But Lucas would hardly dedicate his composition to an unknown musical ensemble.'

'Unless he intended to form the quartet here, amongst his visitors,' suggested Paul.

Joseph brightened. 'Yes. Now that sounds like Luca. Sounds like him down to the ground,' He paused. 'Yes. A one-off performance with his top world-class visitors.' he chuckled. 'I can just imagine him planning a secret recording. The recording engineers would have no idea that they were recording some of the world's finest musicians,' he shook his head in amusement. 'And then release it suddenly to an unexpected world. Ha, ha, ha.'

Joseph clearly found this highly amusing. 'And I bet he planned to siphon the funds back into this place.'

Julianna Metrokovitch was nodding, too. 'Yes, Joseph. I think you are right. Typical of Lucas' twisted mind.'

We all laughed at this and sipped our delicious wine.

'We'll get it out tomorrow, and we'll have a look then,' said Emma. 'If it's any good, we'll consider what to do with it.'

'I still have the contract somewhere,' said Joseph.

'Why am I not surprised,' said Julianna.

'Business is business,' said the impresario.

He sipped some wine and looked at Sophie, chatting happily with Paul.

'Oh! And talking of business. I have a pleasant little announcement to make.'

'Oh! Lovely,' smiled the Diva. 'You're leaving?'

We all laughed.

'Nice one, Julianna,' he chuckled. 'It's nice to see that your tongue has not lost the sharp edge of your youth, even if...'

Julianna interrupted, 'All right, all right, let us call a truce.'

We laughed again.

'Well,' she asked, gazing at him with a wry smile. The woman was clearly beginning to relax and enjoy herself in the company of like-minded people, regardless of murders springing up like daffodils in the spring.

'Well,' he started again, 'I have come to an interesting agreement with this young lady,' here, he pointed to Sophie.

We all gazed at her in astonishment.

Joseph was clearly pleased with the effect of his announcement.

'I am to become her manager and or Impresario.'

Julianna chuckled, 'her "minus fifteen per cent".'

## The Sarlat Quartet

Joseph ignored this, 'I am about to strike out into a new area. Modern variety. And Sophie is to be my first artist.'

'God save her soul!' cried Julianna. 'The poor, poor girl!'

'I have discovered that she has a charming modern voice. It has a distinctive character that makes it immediately recognisable.'

Sophie was blushing and obviously not used to being at the centre of things.

'Unfortunately, her own compositions are not good enough.' he said.

'Aren't you being a bit hard, there, Joseph?' said my wife.

He shook his head. 'No, my dear. If one wants to avoid failure, one has to get these things clear at the outset. Which is what I intend to do.' he paused. No, her potential is in her voice, not her compositions.'

Sophie looked over at my wife. 'No. He's perfectly right, you know. I realise that myself. My songs might be pretty things, but they are definitely what they used to call "B-side" songs.

'Not a single hit amongst the lot,' said the hard-headed impresario. 'Sophie has a good voice, but there's a lot of work to do on it.'

Sophie nodded in agreement.

Julianna frowned. 'Have you got a vocal coach in mind? Someone I know.'

Joseph shrugged. 'I was thinking of you, actually.'

The woman's eyes opened wide, 'Me!?' she exclaimed.

Sophie jumped to her feet, 'Oh! How lovely! Wouldn't that be marvellous, Paul?'

Paul nodded his head gravely.

'Good heavens!' cried Julianna, 'Whatever next! I'm far too old for that sort of thing,'

'I'd pay well,' smiled Joseph.

'You old...' Julianna shook her head. 'You knew I wouldn't be able to resist, didn't you?'

'I did,' he smiled. 'So, that's settled then. One internationally respected manager and one world-renowned opera singer as a vocal coach. We can't go wrong.'

'Except, we haven't got any songs,' said Sophie.

Joseph looked at her and shook his head sadly, 'You don't imagine that that will be a problem, do you? In a few days, I'll have the best songwriter in France on the job.' he paused. 'We'll start in France and French-speaking countries. If things go well, we'll think about branching out into English. You do sing English perfectly, I suppose.'

'Yes.'

'Perfect', he nodded.

'And,' said Sophie. 'If things don't go well, then I'll simply take up my search for a job in digital marketing.'

Joseph nodded. 'We'll give ourselves a good year, then sit back and consider things.'

Emma clapped, and we all gave Sophie a loud round of applause. 'And when do you start?'

'As soon as I get back to London.' he said.

'And get the contract written up,' laughed Julianna, clearly overjoyed with the turn things had taken.

Paul rose to his feet. This merits a toast. But with a glass of champagne.

'Or two,' called Alun.

Emma went in too, and returned carrying three of Lucas' big black candles.

'And,' she said, 'We must have candlelight too.'

Danielle smiled. 'I helped him make those. I'm sure he'd have loved to know that they were being lit for a good occasion.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

A few minutes later, the champagne had been poured, the candles lit, and we were happily chatting about the future and the past.

Joseph explained his ideas for setting Sophie off in a musical career. He had the contacts, knew the right people and, above all, knew how to persuade the best people to work with him. He knew what everything cost and how much had to be put up front and how. He astonished us with the depth of his knowledge of how the musical world functioned and how important it was to get the major radio programmers in one's pocket.

Daniel regaled everyone with her memories of teaching Lucas the candle-making tricks and amusing stories about the glass-blowing adventures. She held up one of the glasses made by the glassblower and smiled.

I shot a look at Alun. And he nodded back.

This seemed to be the perfect moment to broach the subject of the barn.

We explained that we had discovered an abandoned barn that was simply crying out to be renovated.

'An absolutely magnificent structure in an ideal situation,' I said.

'Where was this,' asked Martin. 'If it's on a track somewhere, I've been past it.'

'You go past so fast,' smiled Emma. 'It probably only registered on your brain as a blurred mass.'

We laughed, and Mike spread out the map, holding down the corner with three of the candles.

He pointed out the place on the map.

'Oh, yes,' smiled Martin. 'I know the place. Huge oak beamed place,' he chuckled. 'I had to stop off there the other day for technical reasons,' he wiggled his eyebrows at us.

'How much would a place like that sell for?'



Emma smiled across at her brother. 'What would you say, Paul.'

Paul shrugged and pursed his lips, 'difficult to say, really. It's in excellent condition, you say.'

'Yes,' said Mike, 'perfect, in fact.'

'Well,' Paul made a tutting sound. 'That puts the price up, of course.'

'Always does,' added Emma.

'And it also has a decent track leading up from the main road.'

'Yes,' said Mike, 'Look,' he pointed it out to Paul on the map.

'Bad news, too,' he sighed. 'That'll put the price up too.'

'Nothing comes cheap around here nowadays,' sighed Emma, raising her eyebrows.

Paul bent over the map, 'It looks as though there is quite a lot of land associated with the barn.' He bent closer. 'I'd say at least a thousand square metres.'

We pulled unhappy frowns.

'And that puts the price up even more,' I said.

'But, then again,' continued Paul, 'There's no water supply, drains, or electricity. That brings the price down again.'

'And the telephone,' said Alun.

'Yes, that too,' smiled Paul. 'And the land is probably agricultural and thus non-constructible.' He looked up. 'And that brings the price down again.'

'So, what do you think?' I asked. 'Above a hundred thousand?'

'Good heavens, no!' exclaimed Emma. 'Where have you been living?'

'Well!' exclaimed Mike. 'Let's have the verdict...'

Emma glanced over at Paul. He shrugged and held up three fingers to her, and she nodded.

'Three hundred thousand euros!' I exploded.

## The Sarlat Quartet

Paul and Emma burst into laughter.

'No, not three hundred thousand. Three thousand.'

'What!' exclaimed Alun. 'Are you mad!?''

'Oh no,' laughed Emma. 'We know the owners well. They'd be only too happy to get that place off their hands as soon as possible.'

'Three or four thousand is the cost of getting it through the solicitor. Plus, a thousand euros or two for costs.'

'That's fantastic!' cried Alun. 'And you know these people well?'

'Very well,' smiled Paul.

'You've met them too,' said Emma.

We frowned, and they burst into laughter.

'We're the owners. In other words, us. Paul and Emma Duprès.'

'Great gods!' cried Alun.

'Hells bells,' I added.

'Holy mosses,' said Mike.

'Hold your horses,' called my wife.

'Ah!' I moaned. 'We have reached the Achilles' heel of the project.'

'Before you even think about this ridiculous idea of creating a blissful holiday home in a secluded situation in the middle of a forest in the south of France...' started Margaux.

'You take us to see it,' laughed my wife.

A ripple of laughter went around the table, and glasses were raised in toast.

'To the barn,' cried Sophie.

'To renovation,' added Martin.

'To the future,' laughed Emma.

The truth is that "The Girls" were beginning to run low on future adventures to cast before us. They knew too well that keeping boredom at bay remained as ever the key to their happiness.

Indeed, they were still working on a third book based on our adventures. But they were now looking ahead to the future.

Investing a few tens of thousands from the ample revenue provided by the first two books was, they thought, an excellent investment. Moreover, they could easily imagine all the messes we would likely get into during such a massive project. Messes, which come out nicely in volume four of their secret writings.

Their fertile minds had also worked out that adequate comfort was near at hand and that if the project did go ahead, they could find it with Emma.

My wife and Margaux exchanged looks, nods, and smiles.

Yes. this project was definitely a goer.

All the same, they would feign considerable and entirely unreasonable opposition. Otherwise, where was the fun of it?

After about half an hour more, one of the candles suddenly flared up...

The wax started to melt extremely fast, and I jumped up to blow it out.

As I leaned forward, I noticed something odd, 'hello! What's this?' I picked up the candle and laughed out loud, 'Oh, the cunning devil!'

Everybody stared at me. 'Look,' I handed the candle to Emma. 'The cunning devil.'

Something was embedded in the cooling wax glinting in the candlelight.

'What is it,' she frowned.

Mike leaned forward and laughed, 'Ha! Diamonds. That's what it is. Diamonds...'

I took my knife and dug into the soft wax. The knife came back out carrying four wax-covered diamonds.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Greats Gods!' cried Paul. 'What in the name of...!' he faltered.

My wife stood and came around the table to where we were sitting. 'So, that was what the candle-making business was all about.' She laughed. 'The old devil! First, the wine. Then the paintings and now the candles. Let me see.'

The Diva had also come around to get a closer look. 'I know a thing or two about diamonds.' She shot Mike a scowl and then laughed.

The two women scrutinised the stones. 'Not Arab-prince sized, but very nice all the same, don't you think,' said my wife.

Julianna took one and held it up, 'A little under three carats, I think,' she said.

'Yes. Obviously near perfect, too. What do you think?' said my wife.

'I didn't know you were a diamond expert,' I said.

'I did a lot of research on the internet for Julianna,' she said. 'Taking into account the size of these stones, I suspect they're worth somewhere between a hundred and two hundred thousand euros!'

A gasp of astonishment went around the table.

'So, much for four small diamonds?!' gasped Sophie.

'Not for four, ' said Julianna. 'Each...' Silence fell.

Then suddenly, one of the other candles Flared up.

'Great gods!' cried Emma.

Then, gradually, the hugeness of the thing struck us.

'How many of these are there?' asked Alun.

'Two in each house and these six.' said Paul.

'Hells bells!'

One of the other candles flared up. 'Oh god!' cried Sophie. 'I don't believe it!'

'Maybe this is what that horrible woman was after,' said Martin.

'If she had been after diamonds and knew what she was about, ' said Julianna, 'She would have spotted mine. It would have been worth more than that gold.'

Paul had dug out another four from one of the candles, and Joseph handed him the four he had extracted himself.

Then, the fourth flared up.

'Believe it or not, that makes somewhere between a million and a million and a half euros worth of diamond.' Said Mike.

'So far,' I added. 'Let's bring out the others.'

'We're surely not going to wait for them all to burn down,' said Julianna, who was already thinking about bedtime.

'No,' I said. 'I'll go and get a hammer and a chisel, and we'll split them open.'

Emma cleared the table of glasses and plates while I was away, and the candles were there waiting when I returned.

I wound the first in a cotton napkin and placed it on the table. I gave it a good whack with the little sledgehammer, and the thing split into fragments.

I opened it, and there at its centre was a screw of black paper. I handed it to Emma, who untwisted it and put the four little stones into her palm.

This time, there was no doubt as to their nature. The stones shone and sparkled in the candlelight, perfect and magnificent.

It took us half an hour to extract the contents of the other candles, and then we poured all the stones into a tall glass pill box.

'How many are there?' I asked.

Paul raised his eyebrows at me and gulped, 'Eighty.'

'Eighty!' I gasped.

'Yes. Eighty.'

Mike was doing a rapid mental calculation.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Let's say a lower limit of one hundred thousand euros per stone that gives,' he paused, 'that gives eight million euros. The upper limit would be about sixteen million...'

We all sat there in a trance-like state.

'Let's call it ten million, for the sake of simplicity,' he nodded.

'I'll call it a fortune if you don't mind', I said.

'Yes. That covers it nicely.' agreed Alun.

'Now what?' asked Paul.

'We call in the police,' said Mike.

'The police are already here,' smiled George. 'But I'll call my colleagues up at the cave and ask them to keep an extra careful lookout.'

'Could you call up the inspector too?' asked Emma.

'Call him on his personnel phone at eleven thirty!?' gasped George. Then he caught Danielle's eye. 'It'll cost me my annual rise, but anyway.'

Danielle smiled up at him with a disarmingly tender look. A look that would melt a candle and, above all, any police officer who might already be head over heels in love with the sender of that smile.

He wandered off to the side of the pond but soon returned.

'The inspector isn't here. He was called to Marseilles urgently, ' he shot me a knowing look. 'He'll be back at seven thirty a.m. and will come straight up.'

He looked at Martin, 'You've got your rifles, sir?'

'What does he need them for,' cried Julianna.

'Just in case, madam.' he said. 'Ten million euros is rather a lot of money.'

'OK, said Martin. The two of us will guard the house with the diamond. Nobody is going to steal those.' he set his jaw. 'A few bars of gold is enough.'

To bed everybody then

'Well, needless to say, sleep was not easy to find that night...

## Chapter 15

Unsurprisingly, we couldn't sleep. Neither, for that matter, could anyone else. In the other houses, people lay awake, thinking and turning over the evening's incredible events and those of the preceding few days.

First of all, we had discovered the store of priceless vintage wines. After this, we found the valuable paintings, then the gold bars, and to cap it all, ten million euros worth of diamonds.

Emma and Paul's troubles were obviously now over, and the future of this little musician's haven was at last secure. Well, it would be secure once those diamonds were in safekeeping.

In each house, people were running the situation over and over in their minds, discussing them in whispers as they lay together in the dark.

Some were listening, and all were alert, straining to catch any unusual sounds.

All, that is, except Alun.

'You know what I think?' he said.

'No. And I don't care,' grumbled Mike. 'It will certainly have something to do with breasts...'

'Or some other part of a naked woman,' I added.

'No. No breasts and no naked women, this time.'

'Then the only alternative is beer or wine,' I said.



'Wrong again, clever.'

'So?' said Mike.

'Well, it seems a lot of trouble to go to.'

I shot a look at Mike, 'Does it?'

'Yes.'

'Well. Now that we have that cleared up, shall we try to get some sleep?'

'I can't sleep.'

'Well, think about naked women,' said Mike. 'If that keeps you from talking all night.'

'Don't you want to hear all about it then?' said Alun.

'All about what?' sighed Mike.

'About my thoughts.'

'We don't want anything to do with those things, Alun,' I called across the darkened room. 'Much too worrying for innocent youngsters like us.'

'All the same, I thought it very odd,' he continued.

'Did you?' groaned Mike.

'Yes.'

'Good. That's another point cleared up and out of the way.' said Mike. 'Night, night, all.'

'It seemed a lot of trouble to go to.'

I sighed. 'What was?'

'Well, consider it for a moment.'

'We are all ears.' said Mike. 'Apparently you can't sleep.'

'Well, to start with. Do you realise all the work that must have gone into digging that pond so deep and then surfacing it with stone blocks? And then think of the cost.'

'But money was not a problem for old Lucas, was it,' I replied.

'No. But then think of the extra investment needed to design and build that central column. And ensure that it was completely watertight too...'

'Yes,' I said. 'But we now know why, don't we.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Come on, lads!' he exclaimed. 'To hide a handful of one-kilo gold bars!'

'A few bars of Gold!' exclaimed Mike. 'There was million euros worth.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'Was a million euros worth.'

Mike nodded, 'Yeh. Was...'

'Don't you see?' said Alun. 'Those one-kilo bars measure less than ten centimetres by four by two high. You could pack all of them into a space the size of a sheet of A4 writing paper,' he paused. 'Think about it.'

We Did.

'So?' I asked.

'So, you wouldn't need to go to so much trouble. He could have used any small fissure in the cliff wall or made a false bottom to a draw.'

'Ah!' I said, 'I see what you mean. A very heavy draw though.'

Mike nodded, 'He could simply have built them into a bit of false wall. In the sitting room fireplace, for example.'

'Or in the cellar,' I suggested.

'Or almost anywhere,' said Alun. 'So, why go to all that trouble for just a few bars?' he frowned. 'The whole plan seems out of proportion.'

I thought about this. 'And it does seem odd, too, that even though the gold was worth a million...'

Mike butted in. 'Oh! Yes, I see. When the old boy was worth Thirty million or more.'

'Minus ten million, for the diamonds,' I added.

Alun smiled and nodded, 'So, now you see what I found odd.'

'You mean that this was just some sort of decoy?' I said.

'Exactly. Now you see why I was thinking about this rather than filling my mind with the pleasant images of naked women.'

'At present, I seem to see mainly naked corpses,' said Mike.

I pushed myself up on my elbow. 'And the rest of those remaining millions are, in fact, hidden somewhere else?'

'Right again,' said Alun.

Then suddenly, an idea struck me, 'Or in the same place.'

I heard Alun and Mike take in their breath sharply.

'Yes, of course!' gasped Alun. 'That makes everything fit in place. Otherwise, why go to so much expense to create such an elaborate decoy.'

'Hell!' cried Mike. 'But there was absolutely nothing else at the bottom of that tower.'

'Except for a brick pedestal!' I exclaimed.

Alun smiled. 'Yes. The pedestal. And of course...' he paused. 'The walls and the floor, too...'

'Great gods!' cried Mike. 'Of course... The whole lot must be concealed down there.'

'Exactly,' said Alun. 'No other explanation is possible.'

'We'll have to go back down and take a closer look tomorrow morning,' I said.

I heard Mike sigh, 'And now I can't even think about naked corpses. Thanks, Alun.'

'See you in the morning,' called Alun. 'Now that I've got all that off my chest, I'll be able to get a good night's sleep.'

'Brilliant,' I said. 'I'm overjoyed for you.'

Mike grumbled, 'Well, it's just gone half past four. It'll be starting to get light in an hour and a half.'

'Better than nothing,' called Alun.

As it happened, Alun did not drop off to sleep as he intended. Even as we heard him plumping up his pillow, a noise outside made us start and sit up.

It was a dull metallic clang.

'Hey!' cried Mike. 'That's the trapdoor on the island.'

He leapt from his bed, and we followed him to the window.

## The Sarlat Quartet

We had hardly got there when an incredible blast of noise split the silence of the night. A burst of machine-gun fire flashed out from somewhere near the pond, lighting the darkened forecourt with spurts of flame.

We threw ourselves to the ground and scrambled away from the window.

'Hell!' Cried Mike. 'Those guys must have been spying on us when we found the diamonds.'

'Must have been just waiting, out of sight in the forest again.'

Or on the cliff track.' I added.

'God in heavens!' I hope Martin will keep his head and the officer too.' said Alun. 'They can't do anything against a machine gun?'

'You're forgetting that Martin is an elite crack shot,' I said.

'He shoots fast and rarely misses.'

'If he can see what he's aiming at,' said Mike. 'But with a machine gun, you don't need to see. You just spray the entire area with fire.'

'Hells bells!' I groaned.

'Suddenly, there was another burst of machine gun fire, but this time from off to our right. This was followed by a loud yell from the left.'

'What, in the name of God, is happening?' cried Alun, creeping back to the window and hoisting himself.

'Suddenly, several more bursts of fire rang out.

'Someone is shooting from the island,' called Alun. Come and see. He's not shooting in this direction at all.'

We joined Alun, our eyes just above the level of the windowsill.

Another exchange of machine-gun fire lit the night.

'There's someone on the island exchanging fire with someone behind the umbrella pines.'

Then, there was another burst, and we ducked.

'There's someone else behind the table. Two gangs, then. Christ!'

We saw a shadow rise slowly from behind the table, but almost immediately, a burst from the island hit him. He cried out and fell over backwards.

Almost at the same time, a long burst shot out from behind the tree.

The shooter had sighted the origin of the firing from the island and did not miss his target. There was another yell and then silence.

Several seconds passed without a second. Then we heard a single gunshot, followed by the sound of someone running fast down the hill.

Then total silence fell.

We remained where we were, not daring to rise in case some trigger-happy gunman was still out there.

A minute later, we heard a call from below.

'Is everybody OK? Anyone hurt?'

It was Officer George's voice.

Windows opened all around the forecourt.

'All OK here,' We called, 'And here, came Paul's voice.

'Same here,' we sighed upon hearing Margaux, then Julianna, then Joseph, and finally Emma.

'Stay where you are, everyone. Reinforcements are on the way. Don't go out until they have checked it's safe. Keep the lights off till then, please. Just in case.'

We sat on our beds and whistled, 'What in the name of God was all that about?'

'Well, to start with,' said Mike. 'Someone must have made the same assumptions as Alun about the Gold.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'The guys on the island wanted to get the rest and get out.'

'That must have been Florence and her hired mercenaries,' said Alun.

'Seems likely,' said Mike.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'But who were the others?' I asked.

'Maybe some other group, after the same thing,' said Mike.

'Or guys after the diamonds,' said Alun.

'And they got in each other's way,' I said. 'Hell, what a mess.'

'OR,' said Mike with emphasis, 'They had come to eliminate Danielle.'

'Hells Bells!' cried Alun. 'Yes. That fits together. What a cock up!'

'You're telling me.'

'And,' I said. 'I bet that that woman Florence is still out there somewhere, gloating over her gold.'

It was daylight when we heard the noise of heavy military vehicles rumbling off the main road, then twenty minutes more before George made the "All-Clear" call.

We were all dressed by then and trouped outside.

Emma rushed to Martin, and they clasped each other in their arms.

Then, to our surprise, Danielle ran over to George, and he folded his arms around her.

We looked on and smiled.

'Bravo!' cried Paul, seeing this. We all clapped our hands, causing the poor couple to blush scarlet.

Well, the night's drama had brought with it at least one silver lining.

They smiled at each other, and we all turned away to leave them to it.

Inspector Venet looked on from across the forecourt and smiled. 'What a night!' he called. 'I just have to turn my back for a few hours and look what happens!'

We all laughed nervously.

It was odd to be laughing while two bodies were spread out on the island, one beside the table and another just visible behind the tree trunk.

'Four more bodies,' sighed Emma.

Venet pulled a face, 'Five, in fact.'

'Five?'

'That woman Florence is behind this, I bet,' groaned Julianna, her hair a little out of place.

'WAS is a more appropriate word, madame,' said Venet.

'Was?'

'We found her in the mill pond.'

'Shot?' asked Paul.

'No. Drowned.' he said. 'Someone tied her up and threw her it. Unfortunately,' He gave a wry smile. 'It appears her necklace was too heavy for swimming.'

'How horrible!' cried the Diva.

'She was a pretty horrible woman,' said my wife.

The Inspector nodded and stepped forward, 'And here is her necklace.'

He handed Emma a heavy hessian bag, 'Have a look.'

Emma loosened the dripping drawstring and peered into the bag.

She burst out with a nervous laugh. 'My god! Look.'

She put it in her hand and drew out a shining gold bar.

'Killed by her ill-gotten gains,' said Joseph. 'Who would have thought.'

'But inspector,' cried Sophie, 'Who on earth could have done that?'

Venet shot a look at Danielle, who was by now nestling in George's arms, 'Someone who is after far, far more than a few tens of millions of euros. Someone who counts in billions rather than millions.'

I gazed at him, 'And, of course, the rest is classified information,' I suggested.

Venet smiled, 'Exactly. Sorry about that.'

'But there's one consolation though, Inspector,' added Alun.

'Is there?' replied Venet.

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Yes. Because you're going to assure us that that guy is far, far away by now, aren't you?'

Venet shook his head with repressed mirth, 'Well. How can I put this...'

'Don't bother,' I said. 'Let's get this mess cleaned up.'

'Have you any idea how to get that rowing boat back here from the island?' asked the Inspector.

We looked at Mike, who shook his head vigorously, 'No way!' he cried. 'I'm not swimming.'

'Come on, Mike,' I smiled. 'You must have a clever idea.'

He gave a short shake of his head, 'Of course, I've got an idea. Get me a length of rope and a grappling hook.'

'A grappling Hook!?' we gaped at him.

'Yes, a grappling hook.' he sighed. 'You know. A hook for grappling.'

'Ah yes,' cried Alun. 'What am I thinking of!' Then turning to me, 'Could you lend me your grappling hook. I left mine in my other suit.'

Mike sighed. 'You get on my wick. All right, get me something heavy I can tie to the rope and throw out.'

'We have plenty of spare bodies. Would one of those do?' said Alun.

'Oh god!' exclaimed Mike.

'That hand-held sledgehammer should do the job,' I said.

Mike nodded, 'And the rope?'

'In the shed,' I said. 'I'll get it.'

Mike weighed the hammer in his hand, 'A bit heavy, this. I don't want it to go through the bottom.'

Emma came forward, 'How about a kilo of gold in a hessian bag?'

Mike nodded, 'excellent. Just what the doctor ordered.'

I handed him the coil of rope, and he made one of his magic knots.

Then, after sighting the position of the little boat, he swung the hessian bag and sent it flying through the air.



To our astonishment, it fell with a muffled clunk smack in the middle of the boat.

Mike rubbed his hands together, 'A seaman never loses the knack of landing a grappling hook. Even if it's made of gold. Saves lives.'

'Those gunmen could have used a few, then,' I said.

The Inspector came over to us as Mike carefully pulled in the rope and floated the boat towards our side of the pond.

'Those men out there were no doubt your earlier visitors. They'll be riddled with bullet holes. There'll also be a lot of blood about, so my men had better go first.' We nodded.

'The man behind the table took five or six bullets in the chest. A lot of blood there, too. We'll clean that up. But the one behind the tree only got hit by a single bullet, even though there are a good number lodged in the tree trunk.'

We looked at him, and it was clear that he was holding back something. 'And?' asked Alun.

'The bullet hole is in the back of his head.'

'Ah!' said Alun.

'We heard someone running down the hill after the last shot,' said Mike. 'Who was it, do you think?'

Venet nodded, 'I think we'll find that the bullet comes from Florence's gun.'

'Yes!?' I said. 'Clean up and get out fast.'

'It looks as though the guys on dry land were not hers. She must have been waiting in the background when they attacked.'

'And she did what she could, then made a run for it,' suggested Mike.

'But,' I sighed. 'There was someone else waiting in the background of the background.'

'Looks like it,' nodded Venet. 'Someone who was not very happy with how things were panning out.'

'And the woman ran straight into his outstretched arms,' I said, 'Like Danielle into Georges...'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'Luckily, George isn't given to killing women much,' laughed Venet.

'Do you think they were here to kill Danielle?' asked Mike. Venet nodded, 'looks like it. They also ransacked the shop during the night. They tore the place to bits. Maybe they found something. Who knows. Then they came up here to finish the job.'

Suddenly, I remembered something. 'Oh! Emma has an envelope for you. Apparently, it's from Lucas Duprès.'

Venet stiffened, 'For me! From Lucas?' his eyes open wide. 'This may be extremely important. Where is it?'

'Emma has it in the sitting room, I think.'

'I'd better take a look straight away,' he said.

He called over two men and detailed them to collect the bodies and guns.'

'Can we go over when they've done that?' asked Mike.

Venet nodded and strode off to where Emma was standing, chatting with Paul and Sophie. They walked to the house and disappeared into the dark interior.

A few minutes later, Venet came rushing out, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He was talking quickly on his phone at the same time. He leapt into his car and sped off down the track in a cloud of dust.

'I have the impression that there was something pretty hot in that envelope,' said Alun.

'You're telling me.' I laughed. 'I hope there aren't too many speed cameras on that main road.'

Venet turned off towards Sarlat, not towards the village.

Emma came over to us. 'The Inspector was half crazy when he discovered the contents in that envelope. Apparently, it was a load of documents that Dad had sent Grandad for safekeeping.'

We gazed at her, 'What has your dad got to do with all this?' I asked.

'Apparently everything,' she sighed. 'Apparently, too, these men were also behind Dad's death. It seems dad was not exactly what we thought he was.' A sad look came into her eyes. 'My guess is that he was working for the Secret Service in some way.'

'And why did Venet take off like that,' asked Mike.

'Because the documents contained the proof, the Inspector needs to pin down some huge criminal syndicate. He says if he acts fast, He'll catch them before this latest catastrophic event gets known to the chiefs.'

'And that will let Danielle off the hook,' I said.

'Exactly. Thank God.'

'Are you going to tell her?'

'Emma nodded. 'A bit of good news would do them both good,' she smiled. 'It would be a pity to spoil their first moments together, don't you think?'

We nodded, 'Off you go then,' I said.

'After that, the police are going to escort us to the Bank de France at Salat, ' she said. 'So, that we can put the diamonds in a vault there.'

'And then we can relax.' I suggested.

'And the search is on for Florence's killer. Roadblocks are already in place,' said Emma.

Mike shook his head. 'It'll be difficult to pin all that on anyone without proof.'

Emma smiled. 'Oh!' she smiled an enigmatic smile.

'Perhaps easier than you think.'

'Are you by any chance holding something back, Emma?' I said.

'Well, they'll be looking for someone with three one-kilo gold bars in his possession.'

We laughed, 'The idiot!' I exclaimed.

'Yes,' nodded Emma. 'Greed has an irresistible pull on some people. The serial numbers on the bars will be proof they came from the same set.'

## The Sarlat Quartet

'The proverbial "smoking gun",' I said.

At this moment, the policemen started to offload the bodies from the boat, so we moved away to let them get on with the grizzly task.



## Chapter 16

**B**y about half past ten that morning, the police had finished their work and had cleared up any traces of the gunfight and the deaths. All traces, that is, except for the dozen or so bullets embedded deep in the bark of the umbrella pine and in the table legs.

Paul had just left with a heavy police escort to place the diamonds and the remaining gold bars in the bank vault.

By then, we had explained our ideas to everyone and were enthusiastic to get on with our search.

The three of us took the little boat over to the island, trying to avoid looking at the blood smeared on the wood at the bottom. These would undoubtedly take a long time to disappear and remain a visible memory of that fateful night.

Alun strode over to the hatch and shone his torch down. 'Hell!' he cried. 'The thing is filling with water.'

We rushed over and gazed down.

The water level was well over the tip of the pedestal, and water was gushing from its demolished top surface.

'Great Gods!' I cried. 'Another of Old Lucas' traps.'

Mike groaned. 'We should have guessed. It was far too obvious to be true.'

'Another decoy,' said Alun. 'The cunning devil.'

'What's to be done?' said Alun.

'Of course!' exclaimed Mike. 'That's it.'

'What is "it",' I asked.

'The other stopcock, of course.' He nodded. 'That's why there were two. Come on. Quick, or the whole place will fill up.'

Mike and I scrambled into the boat, and Mike propelled us to dry land. I dashed ahead of him and dragged open the trap door behind the house. Jumping down into the hole, I put all my strength into turning the rusty handle until it came up against its stop.

We jogged back down to the edge of the pond.

'It's stopped coming in. Well done,' called Alun.

I looked at Mike. 'We'll have to pump it dry again,' I said, pulling a face.

'Yep,' he said. 'I'll carry out the hose while you get Martin and bring the pump back down.'

I nodded and walked briskly to the house to call the young biathlete.

After dragging the old fire pump down and coupling the hoses, we started the long process for the second time.

The three of us took it in turns. On the other side of the pump, Martin proved that thirty-five years less and a world-class athlete's training made a significant difference in performance.

While resting, one hour into the job, I turned to Mike.

'Do you remember I fell over down there while you were hauling up that chest?' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'They heard you yell all the way to Paris.'

'I was standing up against the wall on a ring of bricks.'

'So,'

'I fell over because one of them came loose. I lost my balance.'

'You'd had too much champagne, no doubt,' smiled Mike.

## The Sarlat Quartet

I shook my head at him. 'Idiot. No, I don't think those bricks are fixed at all,'

'Not Fixed?'

'I don't think they're part of the structure. I think that's where he hid the rest of the gold.'

Alun was puffing, 'Your turn, Mike.' he called. 'I heard that,' he said, letting go of the pump arm.

We had posted Sophie on the island to keep us updated as to the level of water.

'How is it going, Sophie?' I called.

'Another ten centimeters, that's all.'

'Come on,' I called, 'I'm going down now. Ten centimeters must be under the level of that circle of bricks. I want to check my theory straight away.'

Mike rowed Alun and Me across and then went back for Martin.

They helped me through the trapdoor and went rapidly down the ladder.

The top of the pedestal had been smashed in with a sledgehammer. Its handle was still protruding from the hole it had made.

I could clearly see the opening of the big black pipe directly against where the top had been.

The ever-cunning Lucas had arranged things so that the pipe would become unsealed if the pedestal was broken into.

The man down there must have had one hell of a surprise when a giant waterspout blasted out.

He had undoubtedly dashed back up the ladder as fast as he could. He had probably collided with the trapdoor, which had fallen back with the clang we had heard.

At this very moment, luck had it that the second group of gunmen must have been heading towards the house where Danielle was hiding.

What happened next was now only too clear to us.



I reached the bottom and stepped off the lower rung into the cold water.

The raised ring of bricks was precisely as I remembered.

I strode over and laid my hand on the closest brick.

It was not cemented.

I managed to get my fingers under the outer edge and lifted it.

It came free after some coaxing, and I laid it on the floor beside me.

A wave of disappointment filled me.

The space below was filled with sand.

'Oh hell!' I called up.

'What?' called Mike.

'There's just sand in here.'

'Sand!?'

'Yes, sand.'

Alun shouted back, 'Don't be stupid. No one would go to the trouble of filling that with sand!'

'Another of mad Lucas' tricks,' I called.

'No,' called Alun. 'I don't believe it this time. Look under the sand.'

I pulled off several other bricks to give myself room. Then I scooped up the sand and threw it behind me into the water.

I worked at this for a few moments, then suddenly my fingers touched something cold and hard.'

'Hell!' I called. 'there's something under the sand.'

I scrabbled about a bit more and suddenly cried out. 'Eureka!' I struck gold.'

This was absolutely crazy.

Sitting at the bottom of the cavity, I discovered the ends of two gold bars. They were separated by a short space of sand.

## The Sarlat Quartet

But these were not the same bars as found in the chest. These were full-sized ingots. I managed to get my fingers around the top of the first one and pulled.

'Great gods!' I called. 'These ones are huge. They weigh a ton.'

I put all my strength into the task and eventually hauled one out of the cavity.

It must have weighed ten kilos or more.

I got to my feet and lifted the thing for the others to see. 'Look,' I called up.

Alun shone his powerful torch down, and a series of gasps and oaths followed.

'hell's bells,' cried Mike. 'That's a full-sized "Delivery Bar". They're worth at least six hundred thousand euros each.'

'How much!' cried Sophie. 'Good God! The same value as all those ones from the chest together?'

'Yes,' said Mike. 'Ten to twelve and a half kilos each.'

'My God!' exclaimed Martin. 'How many are there?'

'Hold on,' I said. 'I'll check on the other side of the place.'

I waded to the other side, oblivious to the numbing cold of the water on my hands and soaked trousers. I pulled free a few more bricks and emptied the sand. 'Same here.' I called. Then I went halfway around and tried again with the same results. 'It looks as though there's a complete ring of the things,' I called.

'Wait a mo.,' called Mike, 'I'll do a quick estimate. What's the diameter?'

'I stepped across, 'three steps. About three meters then.'

A few seconds later, he called. 'I think there must be about thirty bars in that ring. Give or take one or two.'

He paused again, 'Wow!' he said, 'That comes to...

Hold on. I'll double-check that.' there was more silence, during which no one spoke.

'Yep,' he said. 'That totals at about eighteen million euros... Give or take a few hundred thousand.'

'How much!' I gasped.

'About the same as the diamonds,' called Mike. 'Odd coincidence, don't you think?'

'If it's a coincidence,' said Alun.

'That's what I was implying, you twit.' sighed Mike.

'Martin?' I called.

'Yes.'

'It would be wise if you went and asked George to bring up some reinforcements again to guard this while we get it all up.'

He disappeared, and I heard a splash.

Alun called down, 'he didn't wait for the boat,' he laughed. 'We'll go and get a bucket to haul them up.'

'OK. And while you're about it. Tell Our Diva that we've found the original "Ring of the Nibelung".'

'Do you by any chance feel like one of Wagner's three "Rihnemaidens",' chuckled Alun from above.

'Well, to tell the truth, not at the moment. I feel mainly frozen, so hurry up with the bucket.'

It took us the rest of the morning to bring up the nearly two hundred and fifty kilos of gold bar from the bottom.

They were transferred five at a time in the dingy, to a waiting bullet-proof security van, which had been driven up to the verge of the pond.

As soon as the last gold ingot was on board, the van was escorted off to Sarlat.

Paul had been warned of the news and had stayed at the bank to make the arrangements and ensure the safe arrival and storage.

This done, we let ourselves down onto the bench behind the table.

'Do you think we can relax now?' I sighed.

'I could do with a glass of beer, too,' said Alun.

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'Me too,' added Mike.

'Premium quality Vintage Champagne is great, but you can't beat beer for some occasions,' I said.

Margaux, who had been standing by surveying our morning's activities with my wife, nodded. 'For once, we have no objections.'

'No,' said my wife. 'That clever bit of detection was,' and here she paused. 'I would not normally admit to this. But it was brilliant.' With this, she bent down and gave me a big kiss.'

'Hey!' I cried. 'Not in public. After all, there are children present.'

Sophie and Emma laughed.

'Cold beer all around then,' said Margaux, heading for the kitchen.

By the time the mid-day meal was ready, Paul had returned from Sarlat with official receipts for the gold and the Diamonds.

The process had dragged on slowly until the bank's regional director had been called in.

The more experienced man made several telephone calls, but the final one, to Inspector Venet, clinched the affair.

The announcement of his name had a remarkable effect on smoothing things along.

Our calm inspector seemed to have a much longer arm than we expected.

Apparently, the local solicitor had supplied the bank and the police with the name of a colleague in Paris.

The head of this well-known company confirmed having been mandated by Lucas Duprès to hold the receipts for his purchases of both gold and Diamonds.

He e-mailed full receipts containing the serial numbers of all the gold bars, their origins, and the origin and purchase value of the diamonds.

'So,' smiled Paul. 'It looks like we are now officially the owners of both the gold and the Diamonds.'

Emma fell back against the back of her chair, 'So, the poor, abandoned and parentless children are now nearly thirty million euros richer than yesterday morning.'

'Give or take a million,' smiled Mike.

She gave a little shake of her head, 'Oh, Grandad!' she sighed. 'You devil!'

My wife came over and laid her hand gently on the girl's shoulder. 'It'll all seem more real on a full stomach,' she smiled.

'And after a few glasses of "everyday" wine,' I laughed.

The meal took much longer than usual because we all had something to say about what had happened.

Officer George had been instructed to stay with us until further notice, and this seemed to annoy neither him nor Danielle.

When we eventually reached time for coffee, my watch indicated half past two.

Joseph was a little pinker about the cheeks than usual, and even Julianna was clearly in high spirits and relaxed.

Joseph leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. 'Perhaps we ought to have a look at your famous sheet music now, Emma,' He smiled. 'Unless you're worried there will be even more hidden treasure in it.'

Emma laughed and said, 'I'll get it.'

She returned and handed a thick sheaf of sheet music to him.'

Sophie was sitting at his right hand and leaned over. 'That's odd,' she said.

'Odd!?' frowned Joseph.

'Yes. A string quartette has two violins, a viola and a cello,' she said.

'Naturally,' sighed Julianna. 'That's why it's called a quartette,' a wry smile crossed her face. 'But of course,

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Joseph always has difficulty with numbers not followed by a dollar or euro sign.'

Joseph sighed but said nothing for once.

Sophie gave the woman a disarming smile. 'But in that case, you'll admit that it's rather strange that there are five staves rather than four.'

Julianna stood and came to look over Joseph's shoulder.

'Yes. Very odd,' then she brightened. 'But look. The extra staff is noted, "facultative", in French, and marked for "Cello 2".' She nodded. 'He must have had an idea of extending it as a quintette.'

'It's annotated "Sotto Voce" too,' frowned Sophie. 'In other words "barely audible" and also "pp", which means Pianissimo or very soft, and finally, "staccato", which means detached or highly separated... All this is extremely odd !!!'

Julianna was frowning, 'This is typical of Lucas. One more of his ridiculous, childish tricks, I suppose.

I laughed, 'Attention, ladies and gentlemen! The last few ridiculous plans have been worth tens of millions of euros. So, let's keep an open mind.'

'Let me have a look,' grumbled Julianna. 'After all, I am a professional musician.'

'Not a quartette player, though,' replied Joseph.

'Maybe not. But an infinitely better musician than you.'

'Thanks...'

Julianna's face softened slightly, 'When it comes to reading or should I say, "composing", balance sheets, you're no doubt a virtuoso, but when it's sheet music.... Well!'

'I'm surprised you didn't add the word "falsifying" to my list of my balance sheet talents?'

The Diva almost smiled, 'That goes without saying. After all, you are a professional, aren't you.'

'Part of the job, you mean.'

'Precisely,'

I chuckled, 'Perhaps you think of it simply as your personal "interpretation of the accounts" Just as a virtuoso musician interprets a composition.'

Joseph smiled and shook his head. 'That's exactly as I see it. And Julianna, remember, I'm always at your service should you need help optimising your finances.'

'I can manage perfectly well on my own,' she sighed.

'Ah!' Joseph pulled a face, 'That wasn't what I heard.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing. I just heard a little bird whispering.'

The Diva shot him a withering look, 'If I ever need help, I'll turn to a professional, not to a has-been.'

'Oooh,' chuckled Joseph, 'I'm pleased to see that time has not blunted that sharp tongue of yours, Julianna Metrokovitch. But this old "has-been" still has a few tricks left up his sleeve. They help me maintain a nice flow of funds into my bulging bank account.'

I laughed, 'A talent which comes in useful from time to time.'

Julianna drew herself up, 'I'd like to remind you all that Classical music,' she paused. 'By that, I mean real music. It is not about money.'

'Since when?' chuckled Joseph. 'That must have been before my time. Anyway, tell us about this music. Is it any good?'

The Diva shot Joseph a scornful look. 'Please be quiet, just for a few seconds, if that's possible.'

She took the sheet music and sat back. She scanned rapidly the lines, turning the pages and nodding slowly, her eyes half closed. 'Mmme,' she said. 'Oh yes... Lovely.'

I was watching her carefully. The woman was obviously able to almost taste the music as she went.

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'Mmme,' she repeated and nodded again. 'Oh yes. This is lovely. I absolutely hate to have to say this, but it is excellent. I didn't know the old idiot had it in him.'

'It was probably all that pining away for you, during those long years that enabled him to produce this,' smiled Joseph.

Julianna demonstrated her almost total lack of a sense of humor by nodding and replying, 'You may very well be right there, Joseph. That seems perfectly possible. The poor man.'

We all exchanged looks but somehow managed to resist bursting into laughter.

Alun smiled across the table at her, 'To me, watching you react to that music, it seems that the effect on you is similar to the effect that a first sip of beer has on us after a hot day at work.'

The Diva gazed at him with imperial solicitude. 'That may be true,' she nodded regally, not understanding the sense of my remark.

Joseph glanced at Julianna, 'but what about the extra part?'

She gazed at him, 'I thought you were going to ask me if there was money in this?'

Joseph shook his head in amazement, 'Julianna! For goodness's sake! Of course, there's money in it. It's simply a case of knowing how to market the thing properly.'

'And, of course, you know how,' she said.

'Naturally. First, I think the idea of the "Quartet" being recorded for the first time here, and by a few of Lucas' old virtuoso, friends, would be just what the doctor ordered,' He smiled at her. 'Add to this, the fact that it will be recorded in the presence of his past wife and lifelong muse...' He chuckled. 'What do you think about that for marketing acumen, Julianna?'



Julianna did something that she rarely did. She laughed. 'You cunning old devil, Joseph!'

'It would certainly generate a burst of new sales for all your recordings, as the young generation newly discovers a living legend, the great Julianna Metrokovitch,' he smiled. 'If I'm not mistaken, of course.'

Emma laid a hand on Joseph's arm, 'But what is all the mystery about the extra part?'

'Ah!' said the Diva. 'That is certainly another of Luca's little jokes.'

'A joke.' said Joseph. 'Let me see.'

'So, you can read music now, can you?' smiled Julianna.

'No, but young Sophie here plays the piano.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Joseph.' said Julianna. 'I'll sing it to you. As you'll see. It is not music at all.'

I looked over her shoulder at the extra part, 'that's more than odd,' I said. 'All the notes are the same.'

The Diva sighed, 'I told you it was some sort of crazy Joke. Listen.'

With this, she started to sing the notes as they were written.

Mike had wandered off to the pond's edge, but he turned his head sharply, 'What's that?'

'We call that singing, Mike,' I said.

'You're singing "S-O-S" then,' he said. 'That's Morse Code.'

Emma and Paul started, 'What!' they cried together.

'Morse Code,' repeated Mike. 'She is singing Morse Code for S-O-S over and over again.'

Julianna stopped, 'Ah!' she said. 'It changes after the first page.' she turned to Mike. 'What do you mean by Morse Code? Surely, that was abandoned years and years ago.'

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Emma stood and came over to her. 'This is a message,' she said.

'A what!?' said Joseph.

'Yes. It's without a doubt a message from Grandad to us,' added Paul. 'There's no doubt about it at all,' he nodded, putting his arm around his sister's shoulder.

Emma smiled. 'When we were children, he more or less forced us to learn Morse Code.'

'Forced you to learn Morse Code!' exclaimed Julianna. 'Clearly, the man was already quite mad.'

Emma laughed. 'No, not at all; it was all fun, really. You see, he sent us birthday and Christmas presents every year,' she smiled.

'But what on earth has that got to do with Morse Code?' sighed the Diva, becoming impatient.

'The presents were hidden by Aunt, and we had to find them. But the house and garden were huge.'

'I still don't see...'

Paul took up the subject, 'Grandad always sent us a set of clues as to how to find them.'

'For goodness's sake, I can't for the life of me see where all this is leading,' said Julianna.

'Well,' smiled Paul. 'The clues were always given in Morse Code...'

A silence fell as we considered this.

Then Joseph shook his head with disbelief, 'I'm having doubts about Lucas' sanity myself, now.'

'Emma smiled. 'If we could not decipher the message and then solve the clues, we couldn't have our presents. That was the instruction he gave Aunt, and she was always very strict about it.'

'Great heavens!' exclaimed Sophie.

'A monster!' cried Julianna.

'Grandad said in his letters that being able to read Morse Code was important. He said that it would come in very useful one day,'

'So,' said Paul, 'We learnt it. Otherwise, no presents.'

'And,' added Emma. 'I bet he already had this final trick in mind all the time. He was preparing us for it,' she smiled. 'I don't know what the message contains, but it must be important.'

Paul nodded, 'We had best get to work straight away. Sophie, if you play on the piano, bar by bar, Emma and I will note it down and decipher.'

Sophie nodded.

'Let's go then,' said Paul, and the three set off to the farmhouse and the piano there.

The job took them the best part of an hour and a half, and it was nearly five o'clock when they called us together again.

They now had several pages of text and were smiling happily.

'Interesting?' said Joseph.

Emma laughed. Oh yes. Extremely interesting.' She turned to Paul, 'I'll tell them, shall I?'

Paul nodded.

'Well....this is what the message contained. We added 'And's" and "The's" because he left many of these out to save space.

The first bit is as follows: "Dear Emma and Paul. If the solicitor has given you this, it is because I am no longer of this world. I also gave him instructions only to pass it on when certain conditions had been fulfilled. This is apparently now the case.' She paused. 'You see. As I guessed. A message for Paul and I.'

She smiled and then looked back at the page she was holding. "As you will have discovered," she continued. "I emptied my bank accounts. I secreted away my fortune

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when I felt things were becoming dangerous. This is all linked to the reason for which your father died.

He was, in truth, killed. He died for his country "in the line of action," as the saying goes. Unfortunately, I cannot disclose any information about this as it is covered by the "National Secrets Act", or whatever they call it."

"I have also left documents sent to me by your father before he died for Inspector Venet. The inspector may or may not be able to clarify some points of detail once he has acted decisively on the contents of the documents. He will however be able to explain the authentic details of my own removal from this world. I hope that the method will not be too painful." Emma paused to take a deep breath. Then she went on.

"Now to practical details. You will both be happy to know that I do not intend to set a series of complicated clues this time. All that was to make sure that you were equipped to decipher this message when it eventually arrived.

My fortune has been divided into several segments, each hidden in my musician's haven. As there are seven houses in all, I would ask the two of you to baptise the ensemble "The Sarlat Septet", or perhaps more simply "The Septet". Both have a nice musical feel.

The Quartet itself, is something entirely different, as you will discover later."

Emma paused and turned to the second page of their text.

'Interesting, isn't it.' she nodded. Very "Agatha Christie", don't you think. And it gets more and more surprising as we go on.'

'Well, go on then,' cried Joseph.

Emma stretched her shoulders back and started the second page.

"I thought it was just possible that someone might accidentally stumble on one of these hidden parts of my fortune. I thus made sure that each part of it was hidden in different ways so that it would be extremely unlikely for anyone to discover a second hiding place accidentally or by trying to reason it out.

So, the smallest part was one which would supply a minimal but helpful amount of funds where it sold. This is a large set of handmade glassware. Made specifically for me by a world-class master glassblower. "

Emma paused, 'Thanks to you, Margaux, for discovering that for us.'

Margaux nodded.

Emma went on. "The second segment is the cellar full of premium quality vintage wines. I particularly enjoyed this idea. The thought that a small fortune was sitting there in full view gave me occasion to chuckle frequently. No one would spot it. I hope you will be able to taste some of it for me. But remember to put the rest up for auction. That should bring in a nice sum. I suspect you may be able to obtain more than half a million euros for this.

Emma smiled at Me. 'A round of thanks to the three musketeers for finding that.'

We bowed, and she continued.

"Now we come to the more significant segments. I purchased diamonds from one of the world's most reputable merchants. They were purchased indirectly for me through my solicitor in Paris. I wanted to avoid any possibility of someone discovering the existence of the transaction and thus setting out to find them.

Once again, I enjoyed finding a hiding place for them. The idea came when I visited the village shop held by the charming woman Danielle Blanchet."

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Emma smiled at Danielle. 'Lucky for George that Grandad was over seventy at the time, I think...'

We all laughed, and Emma continued.

"She was showing me how she made her candles, and the idea struck me. So, I decided to make my own and place the diamonds inside them.

You might say this was dangerous because anyone might light one, which would be the end of it. However, the place was always locked up except when I was present. I took the precaution of telling all my visitors that the Candles were for decoration only and should not be lit. I also keep a cautious eye on things. You will now find these candles on the mantle pieces of each house. The big black cylindrical ones with a shiny finish. I purchased eighty diamonds worth about twelve million euros. A nice sum with which to live very comfortably, even when divided between the two of you, I think."

Emma smiled, 'Well, I suppose we can thank Sophie for that discovery.'

'Me!?' cried Sophie. 'I had nothing to do with it.'

'Oh yes, you did,' said Paul, kissing her. 'If you hadn't had an excellent singing voice and the potential to make Joseph even richer than he already is, then he wouldn't have offered to look after your future as a singer. As it was, he did, and we HAD to celebrate, and the candles were part of the celebration, weren't they.'

Sophie laughed. 'Do I get a cut then?'

'If you marry me,' He smiled. 'Yes.'

Sophie Gaspd and blushed scarlet. 'Marry You!? Are you proposing?'

My wife laughed; if that's not a public proposition, I don't know what is.'

'So,' said Paul, kneeling. 'Will you marry a poor man, Sophie? Will you have me for husband?'

She dropped to her knees, threw her arms around him and kissed him on the lips, 'of course I will.'

We all cheered and clapped. 'Bravo,' I cried.

Sophie hugged Paul, 'This isn't a trick to stop me from becoming a work famous singer, is it? It's not because you're jealous, is it?'

Paul rolled over on the ground and stretched out his arms and legs. 'I promise,' he said.

We all smiled down at the happy couple.

Emma shook her head, 'We haven't finished yet. No more romantic interruptions for the moment, please. We will have champagne Later. She looked back down and turned to a new page.

"Hiding the fourth segment of my fortune gave me a great deal of fun..."

Here, he explained how he had used the fact that they had decided to deepen the pond and use it as a water source in case of fire. He explained about the decoy and the various traps he had set. It showed that Mike, Alun and I had been right in our analysis.

We had been lucky. Had it not been for our ridiculous idea about telling Julianna that Mike was a jewel expert, she would not have thrown it away.

We would not have had to go to retrieve it and would not have discovered it was so unexpectedly deep.

We would not have then wondered about how the island could exist so far above the bottom of the island.

Emma turned to us, 'Thanks once more go to the three musketeers and, above all, to their completely ridiculous and unrestrained senses of humour.'

'It is now at last clear to everybody,' said Alun. 'That our humour and repartee is worth its weight in gold...'

Everybody burst into laughter and cheered.

Paul looked at Joseph, 'Time to get them on the stage, don't you think?'

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Joseph pulled a Face. 'I'm in this for money, not for collecting lawsuits. Sorry, lads. But it's no.'

There was more laughter.

'But,' said Emma. 'There's more.'

We gazed at her. 'More?'

'Yes. Shall I go on?'

'For heaven's sake, quickly. I can't stand much more of this,' sighed Julianna.

'Well, this part is about the quartet.'

'The composition?' asked Joseph.

'Well, not exactly,' smiled Paul. 'You'll see.'

Emma smiled too, 'Here goes then.'

"You will have by now discovered my composition into which I have secreted this message. This is, in truth, the first of a series of pieces I have composed over the last ten years. My impresario, Joseph Lewin, has been chasing me up for ages, thinking I have just been putting off the work in favour of other pursuits. I have not."

'The damn, double-crossing devil!' cried Joseph.

'Schuss,' said Julianna, with a chuckle.

"I have, in fact, completed twelve compositions, five of which are for Quartet and the others for full orchestra and choir. I believe they are all quite good. So, the fifth segment of my fortune is more potential than concrete. However, any revenue from them can only exist once they have been recorded and performed. Therefore, this part cannot be stolen, no matter how clever a thief might be. The manuscript will only be handed over when my local solicitor sends a message to my Parisian one. He will only send that message when asked by both of you, or by one, if proof of the death of the other exists."

'Incredible!' Cried Joseph.

'The cunning devil,' said Julianna.

'And now for the final secret,' smiled Emma.

'There's more!?' exclaimed Margaux.



Emma nodded, 'and this is the "bouquet finale".'

"The final segment of my fortune is to remain a secret until it is found. It will also explain some of the peculiarities of my installations.

Please follow the following instructions to the letter.

In the cellar, beside the vintage wine racks, you will find a pile of empty bottles, to which I hope you have added several more since I took my leave. These are piled up in the narrow space under the concrete stairs leading down from the main room.

Remove these bottles. In the dark behind, you will find a third-height door hidden behind them and invisible to anyone. You will find a ventilation grid at head height, which seemingly supplies cooled air to the cellar.

Open the door with the key nailed out of sight behind the cellar door. If it is missing, break the door open. On the wall directly to your left, you will feel a light switch.

Turn it on.

Well, that is that.

I hope some of these segments of my fortune are left undiscovered and that the two of you will be able to enjoy life. I also hope you will maintain, as I planned, this haven for overworked and over-stressed concert musicians. The funds should be more than enough to make any repairs required and pay for upkeep and everything else.

One last point, however. I also placed a sum of two million euros in a special bank account. The details of that bank account have been placed with my solicitor in Paris. They have been set aside for someone who has never seemed to learn how to look after money. Please pass the name of the solicitor on to my untamed Muse, Julianna Metrokovitch.

That is all.

God bless all your souls.

Grandad Lucas"

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Silence fell.

We gazed over at Julianna.

She had turned away and was clearly sobbing.

My wife made a gesture with her head. 'Let's go and discover this final surprise, shall we?'

We left Julianna sitting, gazing across the pond, her lined cheeks streaked with tears.

We tramped into the main house and down into the now half-empty cellar. I levered the key from the top of the rear side of the door and then followed the others down.

The empty bottles were handed back, and we made a chain to store them against the wall at the other end of the cellar.

Soon, the top of the low door came into sight. It was a heavy oak structure. The key groaned in the lock, but Martin had more than enough strength in his hands to turn it.

He pulled the door open on squeaking hinges, and a gush of cool, dry air met us.

He knelt and, on all fours, moved forward.

'Can you feel the switch?' called Paul.

'Hold on. Ah yes! Got it.'

There was a burst of light, and Martin scrambled in and disappeared from sight.

'Great Gods!' he exclaimed. 'Who would ever have thought... Come on in quick. There is bags of room in here. Good heavens above!'

We all scrambled through on hands and knees and stood in the brightly lit place.

Everybody caught their breaths.

The place was bigger than the wine cellar and impeccably clean. A cool breeze was blowing.

Along the long side of the room were four man-sized glass cabinets, each with a flexible tube linking it to an air distribution unit on the wall.

But inside each cabinet was the real surprise.

'The Quartet!' cried Joseph, stepping forward. 'My God! So, that was it. A real string quartet.'

We all gathered around and gazed through the spotless glass.

Inside each cabinet stood a magnificent instrument. Two violins, one alto and one cello.

The quality of the instruments was evident at first sight. What clinched the affair, however, were the large gold embellished cards in each case.

Here stood four priceless Stradivarius instruments.

'My God!' cried Julianna, who had now joined us.

'So, these were the instruments intended for the first performance. There can be none finer on the planet.' She gazed in amazement at the beautiful workmanship.

'These must be worth millions of euros each.'

My jaw dropped, 'How much!'

'Millions,' she repeated, 'Perhaps even ten million.'

Alun and Mike had gone over to where the air supply system was installed.

'And this was why he had all that complicated cooling and drying equipment down in the Milhouse,' said Mike.

'And why he had those failsafe backup systems installed, plus the otherwise incomprehensible maintenance contract,' smiled Alun.

'Of course!' I cried. 'He was thinking more of the comfort and well-being of these rather special and valuable guests,' I laughed. 'Keeping us humans comfortable and cool in summer was simply an afterthought. An excuse. A cunning disguise to hide the true reason for the existence of all that equipment.'

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Mike was wandering about. 'That wall will have to come out,' he said.

Paul shook his head. 'Those instruments are best where they are for the moment.

'Yes,' said Emma. 'We have nowhere better to store them. And where better to guard them until we can have them placed in safekeeping.'

'Until I am ready to record the " Quartet",' smiled Joseph.

We all laughed.

Paul smiled. 'I don't know about you lot,' he said. 'But I could do with a drop of champagne.

We all agreed that the time was ripe for a little celebration.

'We'll have to do without candles this time,' laughed Emma.



## CHAPTER 17

Several days elapsed before we next saw Inspector Venet. However, the day following the deciphering of the manuscript, he sent a message via George. This informed us that Florence's murderer had been apprehended.

No one knew what he looked like, so the customs officials were alerted for someone with three one-kilo gold bars.

They were lucky.

During a "routine" check, they discovered them at the bottom of the windscreen washer fluid reservoir, a place often used for smuggling drugs. They left them untouched.

When the man returned from passport control, he was waved through and boarded the ferry.

His identity and photo were immediately made available to the Tunis secret service and the equivalent French and English teams.

The bar serial numbers would leave no doubt about their origins and, thus, to the man's offences.

Venet flew directly to Tunis and met his men from the ferry. They tailed him to his destination.

The man booked into the Four Seasons hotel and almost immediately sneaked out via the service entrance at the rear.

From nearby, he took a bus to the city's outskirts, then hailed a taxi to an exclusive residential area. He was dropped off and entered the home of a highly wealthy and much-feared man.

An experienced team of men had been stationed here immediately after the identity of the murderer had been sent to Tunis. A joint raid was set in motion minutes after the man's arrival, with local men assisted by French and British agents.

Nothing of what happened in the closed space of the luxurious home filtered out into the local press. But several people were arrested and charged, and a van full of documents and computers was seized.

Venet sent a photo and asked Julianna to identify in writing the man whom he also suspected of being the person blackmailing her. He was well known for using fixed gambling games to snare people he wanted to use for one purpose or another.

Julianna duly confirmed the man's identity and was informed she could stop worrying about him. He had been charged with murder and the organisation of several others. He was thus unlikely to be released from prison in the next twenty-five years.

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'I'll be ninety-seven then, so who cares,' she said to George with a wry smile.

During the following days, Joseph was not idle. He first employed his finance acumen to arrange for the gold bars to be converted into "real money", as he put it. He managed this without the gold even leaving its resting place in the bank. The funds were then divided into two and placed in bank accounts specially created for this purpose. Considering the sums involved, the regional manager handled this personally, accelerating the process beyond hope.

Joseph then applied the same shrewdness and persuasiveness to the case of the diamonds. An expert was dispatched by a famous Parisian dealer. Once more, the purchase was agreed upon and sealed within the safety of the bank vaults.

The funds derived were also transferred directly to Emma and Paul's new bank accounts, which had become the pride of the bank branch holding them.

The same company was also particularly interested in Julianna's ring. The woman now felt nervous about owning a multi-million-euro ring. Following Joseph's insightful advice, the company president contacted the person who had originally given Julianna the present. Joseph had discovered that the man had since risen to the top of his illustrious family due to the untimely demise of several close relatives. As a consequence, He was particularly anxious to avoid any of his youthful indiscretions coming to light. A private arrangement was speedily come to, the conditions of which neither Julianna nor the Parisian company had much to complain.



Julianna thus once more found herself in a position to live in the sort of luxury a Diva is used to.

The two then turned their attention to the priceless collection of musical instruments still hidden in the wine cellar. Juliana was able to supply the names of several musical foundations likely to be interested in adding the "Sarat Quartet" to their collections.

Due to the remarkable nature of the discovery, experts came swarming to the cellar. The authentication certificates having been supplied by the Parisian solicitor; a purchase was agreed upon with unprecedented speed.

Being an experienced negotiator Joseph included an unusual clause in the sales contract. The four instruments were to be made available for the first performance and recording of Lucas Duprè's "Masterpieces" as he was already marketing them.

At his request, Julianna contacted some of her internationally renowned friends. These were members of the world's élite string quartet players. All were highly enthusiastic and were sent copies of the manuscripts in preparation for the "world première" of the works.

Informed of this, Lucas Duprè's record company jumped at the chance to have sole music rights. Naturally enough, too, Joseph engineered himself a pivotal role in the marketing of Lucas Duprè's "Musical Estate", as he called it. This would ensure a comfortable income on top of everything else. On top of this, he used this strong bargaining position to obtain the astonished Sophie, an opening in the form of a recording contract. Needless to say, he was to remain her manager (any extra twenty per cent cuts were always welcome to a man like Joseph).

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The Inspector arrived back at the farm in the early evening of the third day. He looked tired but no longer harassed.

We welcomed him with smiles and handshakes.

'I hope you are off-duty Inspector,' said Emma.

He nodded, 'I don't seem to have any specific on-duty or off-duty periods these days,' he said.

'Good,' She chuckled. 'I'll bring out the champagne then.'

'I could certainly do with a drink,' he replied.

We sat around the now bullet-hole-decorated table under the sighing branches of the bullet-embroidered umbrella pines. Sophie, Joseph and Julianna were to join us in a few moments.

From across the forecourt, odd noises occasionally floated out to us. Our Diva had immediately taken her role as vocal coach to a future pop star in earnest. She had already set to work on the girl's sadly undisciplined vocal cords. She insisted that the girl apply herself seriously to bringing them to heel and was unmovable on this point.

Paul filled our glasses just as the musical trio appeared from their coaching session.

'Is Emma allowed to drink champagne?' Paul frowned. 'Or is all alcohol now prohibited until she becomes a fully-fledged star?'

'Joseph laughed loudly. 'I think we might make an exception. What do you think, Coach?'

'Just as long as she keeps working,' she smiled. 'But I reserve the right to revise my position at any moment should I feel the need to apply incentive measures. As Madame De Pompadour said in 1750, *"Champagne is the only wine that leaves a woman beautiful after drinking it."*

'I laughed. 'Clearly, a woman who knew all about drinking. Didn't she have anything in a similar vein about men?'

'A lady,' said Julianna. 'Not a mere woman.'

'Oh, sorry,' I nodded.

Joseph raised his glass, 'Remember what Oscar Wilde said, "Only the truly unimaginative fail to find a reason for drinking champagne". So, here's to Oscar.

We all raised our glasses.

'To Oscar,' we cried.

Inspector Venet drank his glass, then surprisingly held it out for a refill, 'I'm going to need this before attempting to explain everything. You too, I think. If not straight away, certainly after.'

We frowned at him.

'I think I had better follow the inspector's recommendations,' I said. 'Now AND after.'

'I'm feeling a little fragile too,' said Alun, extending his glass towards the bottle holding Paul.

'Well,' started the Inspector. 'I'm afraid I am not permitted to give you full details or names.'

'State secrets again,' said my wife.

Venet nodded.

'But I can tell you that...' He explained the actions of the last few days in Tunisia.

'As for the reasons behind all these murders. Money, of course. Billions. All I can tell you is that it involves the blackmailing of a Korean arms manufacturer. The ruthless Tunisian, now under lock and key, came into the position

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of information concerning illegitimacy in the family background. I can say no more.

Added to this comes a devastating plan to turn Norway, Finland, and Denmark against each other and thus break down regional allegiance. I'm afraid I can't go further into that, either. The British, Norwegian, Swedish and Saudi royal families were to be caught up in this and manipulated.' He looked around at us all. I cannot force you to hold your tongues, but it might prove unhealthy not to do so. You see, there may remain a few "loose ends" about which we are unaware.'

We gazed at him.

'Good,' he smiled. 'That's got that bit clear.' he sipped some champagne. 'You'll really have to give me the name of this. It's wonderful.'

Emma pulled a face, 'If you insist.'

Venet went on, looking at Emma. 'Now to your father and grandfather and to Josephine Doin, Our first corpse.'

We looked at each other, and he continued. 'Your father was widely taken to be a wastrel. A spendthrift and hard-drinking womaniser...'

Emma shot to her feet, 'Inspector! Really!'

Venet smiled, 'I said he was *considered* by many to be that. I didn't say he *was*.'

Emma sat down again, 'So?'

'He was also thought by many who count in this little affair to be a master con man.' He paused and held up a hand to ward off Emma's exasperation. 'In reality, he was none of these. He was, in fact, an agent working for the British secret services. You don't need to know which.'

He smiled at our astonished faces. 'It gets worse. So, hold on tight.'

He sipped some more champagne with an appreciative nod. 'The woman who was staying with Dannielle, who you

now know as Josephine Doin, was,' he paused. 'Now, how can I put this? She was your father's secretary.'

'You mean his mistress, I suppose,' said Paul.

'Well, she did assist him with some secretarial duties,' said Venet.'

'I see,' said Emma. 'Well, I suppose mummy had been dead for a very long time, so the thing is understandable.'

Venet smiled, 'I can assure you; the thing is far from understandable for you at present,' he paused again.

'Well, your father eventually uncovered the plot and many names involved. But he made a mistake. He came across a real con man. The one you have had the experience of, Madam,' he said, turning to Julianna. 'Somehow, however, this man discovered that Ivan was trying to get close to our wealthy Tunisian. He informed the latter, who feared that your father was about to attempt to blackmail him with the details of their plans.'

'Oh God!' cried Emma. 'Poor dad.'

'There was far too much at stake for them to take any risks, so our conman come murderer was sent to eliminate him. He was a man who never failed, as you witnessed here.'

Paul gasped, 'So, his death was not an accident after all.'

'No,' admitted Venet. 'Sorry about that, but we could not permit those guys to guess that the secret services were involved.'

'Great gods!' cried Alun. 'This is like living in an espionage film.'

Venet shrugged, 'Well, naturally enough,' he continued, 'People like that don't like taking risks. So, they sent someone to deal with Josephine Doin. They already knew the two were lovers and thought your father would have mentioned his upcoming con manoeuvre to her. She might even be part of Ivan's plan. Naturally enough, she knew

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absolutely everything. We had no choice but to get her out quickly and make her disappear.'

Danielle smiled, 'And so she came to stay with me.'

Venet nodded again. 'When they couldn't find her, they got very worried. They thought it wise to temporarily shut down the operation until things blew over. They wanted to ensure Josephine would not take up where Ivan had left off. They also wanted to know if she had passed anything incriminating on to a third person.' Once more, he paused and sipped some champagne.

'But...' suggested Margaux...

Paul sighed. 'The BUT, is that someone learnt about his father, your Grandad. The conman was sent to Egypt, where Duprès would give his highly controversial concert. He engineered a meeting with him, but the old man was in a bad mood and sent him packing. Or rather, the bodyguards at his disposal had done that for him.'

'Bodyguards!' cried Emma. 'Why bodyguards?'

'Because the Egyptian government didn't want a world-class conductor to be cut into little bits by crowds of maddened people opposed to the concert. After all, it was tantamount to provocation.'

We nodded. We had all heard about that famous concert.

'The result of the rough treatment, supplied by the bodyguards, incorrectly convinced our Tunisian ruffian that your grandfather had something up his sleeve. Something which might be fatal to his plan.'

Paul frowned. 'But surely Grandad was killed by a group of fundamentalist fanatics.'

Venet pulled a face. 'Sorry again. That was the official position. We needed them to think we had no inkling about what was really behind the death. After the concert, Lucas Duprès was invited on board the luxury private yacht of an extremely wealthy Korean businessman.'

'Oh no!' cried Emma.

'Exactly,' nodded Venet. 'He was gone before we could do anything to warn him.'

The Korean man's parents and some of his family was already on board, and he was to join them by helicopter that evening.'

Paul gapped at him. 'But everybody was killed in the explosion!?'

Venet nodded again. 'When the helicopter touched down on the Yacht, it exploded, and all hands were lost.'

'My god!' exclaimed my wife, 'and the Korean?'

'Had never left his home. He had a watertight alibi and clearly no reason whatsoever to do anything of the sort.'

'So, it was put down conveniently to religious fanaticism,' said Paul.

'Yes.'

Emma was frowning, 'But. Inspector Venet.' she said. 'Why didn't they come after us then. I would have thought tidying up loose ends was one of their priorities.'

At this, the Inspector surprised us all by laughing and producing a wide smile.

'Ah!' he chuckled. 'That was one of my rather clever tricks.'

I sighed, 'Come on, Inspector. We're all ears, you know. No more champagne unless you come clean.'

'Well, it's quite simple, really.'

'Pleased to hear it,' said Emma.

'Well, you see. You simply do not exist.'

We all gaped at him.

'Don't exist!'

'You see, very early on in his secret career. Your father and I decided it would be safer if he had no children. He decided it would be better if he was thought to be single. An ageing unmarried con man with a...' Here, he hesitated. 'With a secretary. Suited the personage he was playing.'

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Venet rubbed his chin. 'So, we erased all available data about the birth of the two of you. The British services were very helpful in that respect.'

'But we regularly received letters and presents from Dad and Grandad.'

'Oh! That was easy to arrange. The letters went to a certain member of his entourage. They were sent on from there.'

'A member of their entourage!' exclaimed both Emma and Paul.

There was a slight movement in our midst, and Joseph raised his hand, 'Guilty, I'm afraid, ' he said.

'Joseph!' cried Emma. 'You knew of this all along?'

'Oh no!' he exclaimed. 'I only knew that for some reason, the two of them thought it wise to use what the French call a "poste restante".'

'But you must have wondered why!' said Paul.

'Your grandad said that he thought it better... I guessed that he had a good reason. Also, I knew he would not tell me the reason. So, all the letters and presents came through me or my secretary.'

'Great gods!' exclaimed Paul.

'And that is why they had no idea of your existence.'

Emma frowned. 'Good heavens! Thank God they took those precautions, or I might not be here drinking the divine bubbling fluid with you.'

Venet nodded.

'But how on earth did they find this place then?' asked Paul.

Venet sighed. 'Because they were keeping tabs on the only remaining person they knew to have known your Grandpa. Julianna Metrokovitch.'

Julianna Gasped.

Venet nodded at her. 'That's why they took the trouble of tricking you to get into debt. They had discovered that



there was to be a funeral party. They hoped that your father's "Secretary" might possibly make an appearance. They thought she might do this in case anything was left to her in the will. So, they followed you here.'

'And to their astonishment. Here she was,' I said.

'Exactly. A sitting target. A terrible development which we had not seen coming.

'But,' he said. 'Things went wrong. They didn't realise she had taken to nude sunbathing atop a cliff. They intended simply to shoot her and then to make her disappear discreetly. But it looks like she was startled by the sudden appearance of the armed men and fell over the cliff's edge.

So, to make it look like an accident, they levered the rock over.'

'But we must have come on the scene just then,' said Mike.

'Exactly,' nodded Venet, 'And luckily for you three, you had already started off down that track before they returned with the crowbars to lever the boulder over.'

'I shook my head sadly. 'Incredible. And they didn't realise that we had been and gone, in between time.'

'No. I presume that when they saw the body blasted out of the pool and shot down. They phoned some accomplice who quickly picked up the body. They then took the clothes, thinking they had committed a perfect crime.'

'Unaware,' smiled Danielle, that several people had seen the body both before and during its flight.'

Exactly.

'But they had to be sure the woman had not left any compromising documents behind her.'

'Hence,' I said, 'the attempted fire.'

'Yes. An inexcusable failure for professionals,' said Venet. 'I still can't understand why they didn't just fill the place with petrol and throw in a match.'

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'Anyway,' he said. 'We think they told their boss what had happened, and this man decided Josephine might have talked to Danielle.'

'So, he tried to scare Julianna into tricking Danielle to confide in her and to tell her anything she knew.'

Julianna shook her head, 'He didn't try to scare me. He DID scare me. At first, he told me I must pay up rapidly, or he would send some mercenaries to come and have a chat with me,' she sighed. 'Then he suggested that instead of paying, I could fulfil a mission for them instead.'

'The Inspector nodded. 'Yes. She was to make friends with Danielle and extract as much information as possible from her about the dead woman.'

A day later, he put extra pressure on Julianna by saying he had someone watching her who would DEAL with her if she didn't come up with results quickly.'

Julianna nodded. 'The person was Andrew.'

We all gasped.

'Andrew!?' cried Emma.

'Yes. He was working both for Florence AND the others.'

'But,' continued Venet, 'Florence somehow discovered that Andrew was working for someone else. She naturally assumed he was preparing to double-cross her about the gold.' he paused. So, she killed him.'

'At that moment,' said Julianna. 'I was scared stiff and decided to tell Inspector Venet.'

'Which is why I arranged things so that Danielle would stay at the Farm.'

Margaux frowned. 'I thought that was our idea.'

Inspector Venet shrugged, 'We both had the same idea, so that was a good move anyway.'

'And the Russian Biathlon coach was in the wrong place at the wrong time,' groaned Martin.'

'Exactly,' nodded Venet. 'But rest assured, the Russians don't like that sort of thing happening to their star sports trainers. Excelling in sport is a major part of their public relations drive.'

We looked at him frowning.

He smiled, 'We have supplied our opposite numbers with full details of the affair. Well, as complete as they need.' he smiled and sipped his champagne. 'It seems they are tidying up a few loose ends we do not have ready access to.'

'Cross-continent cooperation,' I suggested.

'Yes. I believe that their services are rather efficient in that respect. Especially if the law enforcement service in the nations where the operations are to be carried out happen to be looking the other way at the time.'

'That could never happen in France,' said my wife.

'Heavens no!' exclaimed Venet. Then he smiled. 'I seem to be out of champagne again.'

I smiled, 'And to close the chapter, remember that Ernest Hemmingway, always a very prudent man, used to warn visitors, "Too much of anything is bad, but too much Champagne is just right".'

## Chapter 18 - Epilogue

Once more, we are all united under the sighing Umbrella pines at the heavy table.

The fountain cascades into the pond, sending complex patterns of overlapping ripples towards us.

Our glasses are once more brimming with bubbling champagne.

We have just returned from the village church and are toasting Paul and Sophie, who have now become Mr and Mrs Duprès.

To add to the celebration, George has just informed us that he has proposed to Danielle, and she has accepted. Their marriage will be held next July, and we are all invited.

The probability of us missing this is negligible for several reasons.

The most obvious of these is that Mike, Alun and I will be at work on our new barn renovation project by then. The sale, for a few thousand euros, was concluded the week after Inspector Venet's expedition to Tunis. Since then, we have been having enormous fun planning things.

Alun suggested we write a book about the process, but Margaux threw cold water on the project. She said exactly the same thing as she had said about our earlier book-writing propositions: "There's no market for boring rubbish like that".

Oh well, that's life. The renovation project is incredible fun, anyway.

The roof of the main house has at last been repaired. State-authorised carpenters from Paris have replaced the monumental, damaged oak beams at unbelievable cost. The team came down directly after finishing their work on the Notre Dame Cathedral. This lends the place a slightly religious feel.

Emma plans to reopen "Le Septuor" in March. She has already sent invitations to those harassed musicians on a long list our Diva Julianna Metrokovitch prepared. The woman was chatting to my wife and laughing over some joke. She often laughed now and was quite at home in our multi-generational group.

By now, many of you will have heard extracts from the world premiere of the newly discovered and posthumous masterpiece by Lucas Duprès. Some of you may even have purchased the CD recorded at t. Joseph Lewin would undoubtedly thank you for this. The man is now putting the finishing touches to the contracts about recording Lucas' orchestral pieces. This is taking longer than the recording company would have liked because he insists it is recorded only by a French orchestra and a British choir.

The record company pointed out that using a Yugoslavian ensemble would be far cheaper.

Joseph simply shook his head and said, "No Way..."

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You may also hear the name "Sophie D" on the radio if you are part of the younger generation. Her first song made its debut in November.

It's pleasant enough to me, but Joseph is waiting to see how the song does in the charts before deciding to start recording the Album and planning the marketing campaign.

He is having great fun discovering the specific tricks of the modern music trade. Then again, he is entirely at ease when it comes to negotiation.....

Julianne has done an excellent job taming Sophie's wayward, undisciplined vocal cords. Even Sophie admits that she would never have guessed what notes she could now reach and how smoothly she could reach the others.

Emma and Martin seemed happy to let life slip by as it was. There was no mention of marriage for the moment because each was so taken up with their personal projects.

Martin produced his best result yet in the biathlon championship in early December. He came in second in the mass start at Oestersund against extremely tough competition from the Norwegians.

He was absent almost all winter, travelling from one county to another, but at the end of March, he'd be back again. We suspected that he was waiting for this moment to broach the subject of matrimony with Emma.

Inspector Venet had managed to free himself for a few days. He was chatting animatedly with my wife at the far end of the table.

He had been promoted and was now based at Bordeaux. He seemed happy with life, and that's the most important thing.

He was disappointed he could not purchase the few cases of champagne he had planned for Christmas. When he discovered how expensive it was, he almost choked on it, but not quite.

Since summer, Emma and Paul had refilled the now-empty half of the wine cellar with more "everyday" wine. They each had nearly twenty million euros in their bank accounts, so they felt their Grandad would not have appreciated them questioning his choices. They thus asked the company who had stocked the cellar to complete it with the same "stuff".

Christmas had now appeared on the horizon. Mike, my wife and I had been invited to spend the holiday with Alun and Margaux in Yeovil.

Alun's two daughters and our two would be present, accompanied by their men.

As usual, it looked like being good fun. A tight fit, but one can't have everything. Can one?

Paul and Emma had wandered off to bring out the entrée and were nodding to each other.

Paul stood at the head of the table.

'We just had an idea.'

'No murders or hidden gems involved, I hope,' I said.

He smiled. 'No. We were just thinking, he started the paused...

Emma shook her head and sighed. 'What he's taking so long about is that we thought it would be a fantastic idea if we organised Christmas here this year.' She smiled and looked around the table. 'What about it?'

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I looked at Alun, and we both looked towards our respective wives. They were frowning. Then Paul went on.

'There's plenty of room for all you daughters and their men, too.'

Emma added, 'And Joseph and Julianna can have their usual houses,' she smiled.

'And Inspector, there's a spare bedroom in my place,' said Joseph. Mind you, they tell me I snore.'

Venet laughed, 'Me too.'

'Well?' said Emma, clapping her hands.

Alun, Mike and I waited, our breaths held.

Margaux looked at my wife, and they frowned over at us.

'You'll have to go easy on the beer though.,' scowled Margaux.

'Youpeeee!' we cried in unison. 'Brilliant.'

## The End

### Author's Note:

If you've enjoyed this book, you'll find the follow-up adventures in "**The Dordogne Rennovation Project**".

You will also enjoy the two "**Three men in a Panic**" books, which describe the amusing adventures of the three main characters of the Sarlat Quartet.

Let me if you've enjoyed my books:  
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