

The Dordogne Renovation Project



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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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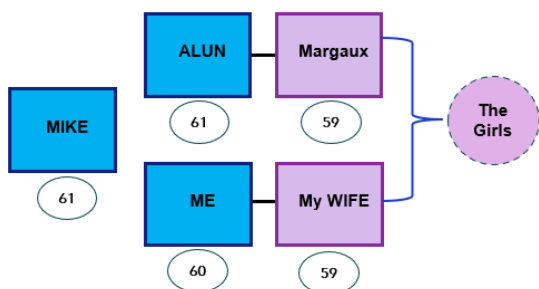
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CHAPTER 1

Lit by the last slanting rays of daylight, the ancient barn stood out, vast and impressive, against the darkening cliff wall.

Mike, Alun and I gazed up at it from the bottom of the field and smiled.

'This is going to be fun,' said Alun.

'Yep,' I agreed.

Just back from signing the official papers, this long-abandoned building, hidden away in a Dordogne forest, was now ours.

During the legal proceedings, our wives, "The Girls," unfairly referred to our purchase as "a disintegrating ruin."

We countered by reminding them of the curate's egg. Parts of it, we assured them, are perfectly sound.

Although we were in our early sixties, the magnitude of the task hadn't deterred us in the slightest. On the contrary, a large-scale renovation

project in France struck us as an ideal early retirement job.

Furthermore, a warming thought had lifted our indomitable spirits even higher. This was the realisation that this balmy April evening in the Perigord Noir region would be the first of many before the project was completed.

The following day, we planned to clear out the inside with the help of a neighbouring farmer and his tractor. We had enlisted his help in exchange for the enormous pile of ancient straw bales filling the far end of the place. True to type, the seventy-year-old farmer was ready to accept anything if it was free. Moreover, a year's worth of winter feed for his cows came high on his list of bargains, especially when it was already cut, dried, and baled. His name was Antoine Buisson.

The deal was clinched within seconds when Alun mentioned we were considering burning the stuff.

This job was the first step in the great renovation project. Once the place was cleared, we'd invite the architect from nearby Sarlat and begin serious planning.

On our way back from signing the sales documents, my wife tried to dampen our youthful enthusiasm by saying, "Once the place is cleared out, all you'll be able to see is the magnitude of the mistake you've made".

Alun's wife, Margaux, smiled and added, 'In any case, I've taken the precaution of reserving a hospital

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bed for the month. That should be enough to be going on with.'

'Just the one?' smirked my wife.

'They can share if needs be,' said Margaux.

'Naturally,' said my wife, 'Anyway, by then, they'll have given up. Good precaution all the same, Margaux.'

We shrugged this off with a casual "Ha, ha!". In any case, we knew perfectly well that if The Girls had been against the project, we would never have been allowed within arm's length of the solicitor's "Mont Blanc" fountain pen.

The truth is that The Girls had a hidden agenda of which we were unaware, but more of that later.

Incidentally, Alun had recently purchased a new and distinctly impressive gold Rolex watch. He naturally made sure this slipped into view as he stretched out his long arm to sign the papers. The solicitor noticed it with an appreciative nod. No doubt the man would have been even more impressed had he known that Alun had forked out nearly twenty-five pounds for it. A bargain, Alun had said. His previous one had cost almost double that sum but had been engulfed by choppy seas in the English Channel the year before.

So, standing there, post-signature, in the warm evening breeze, Mike sighed, 'This is just what the doctor ordered.'

'Or would have done, had we asked,' nodded Alun.

I shook my head, 'Aren't you forgetting that yours are English?'

'Our entire bodies are English,' said Alun. 'Not just our...'

'We get it, Alun,' interrupted Mike with an exasperated groan.

'I was talking about your doctors,' I said. 'English doctors are more likely to suggest taking up watercolour painting.'

'And laying off the beer, of course,' added Alun.

'You're right there,' said Mike. 'Modern doctors seem to derive perverted pleasures from recommending that one immediately stop enjoying life once one retires.'

Alun shrugged, 'I've found that blatant lying is always extremely helpful in that respect.'

Mike shook his head and sighed, 'You're lucky though.'

'Lucky?'

'Well, you've had a lot of practice with blatant lying.'

'Only when the situation in hand calls for quick thinking and decisive action,' smiled Alun.

'As I said,' said Mike. 'You've had a lot of practice.'

'Just harmless white lies where doctors are involved, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'I just say the exact opposite of what the man is expecting to hear. For example, "No, I don't smoke cigars. No, I never drink alcohol. Yes, I do sport every day. Yes, I eat vegetables twice a day. No, I never ever eat fatty foods." That recipe gets me through my annual check-up with all flags flying.'

'A litre a day, and keep the doctor at bay,' I smiled. 'According to old Antoine Buisson, that's the formula for a peaceful life.'

'And he was thinking in terms of litres of wine, too,' said Alun. 'Not water or even watery beer.'

'Or, more probably, homemade plum brandy,' I suggested. 'Sixty per cent proof.'

'Anyway, rustic chaps like that only go to see the doctor when they can't sew their thumbs back on themselves,' said Alun. 'Thumbs or something like that.'

'And then only when they can't see clearly enough to thread the needle due to those litres of brandy,' chuckled Mike.

'Probably,' I smiled. 'Now, when I go, my French doctor only smiles, says, "Everything OK?" and then asks if I watched the rugby match on T.V. We get on very well.'

'But surely he draws his breath in sharply when he weighs you and clicks his tongue when he measures your blood pressure?' asked Mike. 'Mine does. Then he sighs and shakes his head sadly.'

'Yours is English, Mike. No. Mine simply notes things on his laptop and nods. We also talk about cross-country skiing and biathlon. As I say, we get on very well.'

'I'll really have to get one of those,' said Mike.

'One of what?' asked Alun. 'A laptop?'

'No. A French doctor.'

We laughed happily.

'We'll probably need one a few times before we finish this job,' I smiled. 'Knowing the sort of disasters that'll inevitably beset the project.'

'We'll get to know him pretty well then,' chuckled Mike.

'A stitch in time... As the saying goes,' smiled Alun.

'Yes?' frowned Mike.

'Hell!' gasped Alun. 'I must be getting rusty. The clever ending of that didn't spring immediately into my agile and fertile mind as it ought to have.'

'You've probably allowed your blood alcohol level to drop too low,' I said. 'Mike's old man warned us to be careful about that.'

The sun was sedately sliding behind the cliff's jutting outcrop, and shadows now engulfed the barn at its foot. As it had been doing for millions of years, the three-hundred-metre-high escarpment would soon spread its shadow far across the forest.

'We'd best be getting back,' I said.

'Yes. Or the champagne will be...' started Mike.

'Finished,' interrupted Alun. 'Let's get going.'

Risks of this nature could always be counted on to get us moving promptly. Consequently, we strode out manfully along the uneven, rocky track; three men animated by a noble cause.

We were staying with our young friends Emma Duprès and her brother Paul near Sarlat at "The Septet." The two had inherited the place from their grandfather, Lucas Duprès, the world-famous Pianist and orchestra conductor, following his death, and that of their father.

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Lucas had been killed in the explosion of a friend's yacht. The blast had officially been engineered by Egyptian terrorists. In truth, however, things were more complex. For some time, his son, Ivan, had been investigating an occult criminal network. He had uncovered proof incriminating someone and had passed the documents on to Lucas for safekeeping. Both Lucas and his son died as a direct consequence of this. This done, the gang sent a team of hitmen to Sarlat to "clean up loose ends".

Luckily, their plan went completely wrong, and they were killed by a rival gang who were after something totally different: gold ingots.

An improvised team, led by our friend Inspector Venet and local police, followed the trail back to Tunisia and eventually tracked down and imprisoned the leader of the gang.

However, the two young people were sadly doubly orphaned.

The Septet is an ancient stone-built farmhouse flanked by six cottages constructed along similar lines, hence its name. These buildings sit on the flat top of a small hillock, snuggling up against the cliff and just above the level of the surrounding forest of cork oak trees.

For several centuries, this ancient farmstead has been protected from the unrelenting blast of the Mediterranean sun by three equally ancient umbrella pines.

These also cast welcome shadows over the large pond and the enormous weather-beaten deal table beside it.

It was towards this table that we were headed, or more precisely towards the bedewed bottles of champagne which should by now be adorning it.

When they inherited "The Septet," Emma and Paul discovered that they had also inherited a vast wine cellar overflowing with priceless vintage wines and champagnes. Astonishingly, some of the bottles were worth over twenty thousand euros each, and the whole was valued at almost a million euros. Emma had sensibly had all the really top-notch bottles sold at an Auction in Paris. However, all those under the hundred euro per bottle mark were kept for "everyday" use. This left nearly six hundred bottles of excellent wine, making staying with them a particularly enjoyable experience.

Mulling this over in our minds, we trudged up the rough track which wound across the hillside. However, as we breasted the top, my wife spotted us and beckoned with an annoyed wave of her arm. At her side, Alun's wife, Margot, was scowling in our direction.

Immediately, and with the ease of seasoned professionals, we fell into deep conversation and pretended not to notice.

'Do you know,' I said. 'I believe we might be just a tad late.'

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'Looks like it,' said Alun. 'Let's talk to Emma. That'll give us time to work out a credible excuse.'

'Alun!' cried Mike. 'We don't need an excuse. We simply have to say we went to look at the barn.'

'For heaven's sake, Mike!' gasped Alun. 'How often do I have to tell you? If everyone goes about telling the truth all the time, civilisation as we know it will entirely collapse.'

'Not only that,' I added. 'But constantly striving to avoid the truth exercises the little grey cells, and that promotes creativity and innovation.'

'And where would we three be,' nodded Alun. 'Without creativity and innovation?'

'Not in prison, to start with,' grumbled Mike. 'That's where your creativity and innovation usually get us.'

'Not always,' shrugged Alun, frowning slightly. 'I distinctly remember several times we got off with a warning.'

'Stern warnings, in fact,' said Mike. 'And heavy fines.'

'Or generous donations to the police Christmas party fund,' I added.

Alun shrugged again. 'Well, I'm too old now to change.'

'Not too old for prison, though,' smiled Mike.

I laughed, 'Well, we'll meet you halfway, Mike. Let's say that the car broke down.'

'You twit!' cried Mike. 'We were on foot.'

'Because the car broke down, Mike. Have you already forgotten?'

'Oh hell!' groaned Mike. 'I give up.'

As we approached, Emma turned and smiled. She wiggled the champagne bottle she was holding. 'Ah ha! I see that the three musketeers are back from the crusades.'

'That's us,' said Alun. 'By the way, have you spotted any damsels in distress needful of a bit of rescuing?'

Emma furrowed her tanned brow and pursed her lips prettily, 'I did notice one in the village post office, but the distress seemed linked to complications with her dentures. Does that count?'

I shook my head. 'We specialise in breathtakingly beautiful young maidens imprisoned by mad and horribly deformed guardians in forbidding grey castle turrets.'

Emma nodded, 'Ah! I see. No. I can't say I've encountered any of those this week. I'll keep an eye open, though.'

'What's the world coming to!?' groaned Alun.

I shook my head sadly, 'What will become of us if dastardliness and deviousness become things of the past?'

'Oh well,' sighed Alun. 'We'll have to drown our disappointment in expensive champagne.'

'Again,' added Mike.

'That's life,' smiled Emma, filling out glasses with bubbly.

'We've just been over to see the barn,' I said after sipping some of the delicious beverage.

'And?'

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'Not a single body in view,' sighed Alun.

'Corpse,' corrected Mike, always one for grammatical precision.

'But then again, we didn't look under the floorboards,' said Alun.

'There aren't any floorboards, you idiot,' said Mike. 'It's a packed earth floor.'

'And not a single blood-curdling scream on the horizon.' I added.

'Or a fresh bloodstained floorboard,' nodded Alun.

'Freshly bloodstained,' corrected Mike. 'And as I said, there aren't any floorboards.'

'Their might have been a hundred years ago.'

'There were not, Alun,' sighed Mike.

'No corpses,' smiled Emma. 'That makes a change.'

We nodded.

'How's business?' I asked.

'It's not a business,' grumbled Mike. 'It's a foundation.'

Alun shrugged, 'Same difference.'

Mike sighed, 'For heaven's sake, Alun! A business is for making money. A foundation is about giving it away. That's not quite the same thing. I think even you'll admit that.'

'I'll admit to nothing other than to my name and number, even under torture,' chuckled Alun.

'All right,' I said. 'I'll start again, shall I?' I paused. 'How are things, Emma? Is that all right, Mike?'

Emma smiled. 'You three haven't changed much.'

'We are slowly but surely maturing into better and more worthy musketeers,' said Alun.

The young woman smiled again, 'Well... To answer your question, even though this was our opening season, everything went perfectly. The place has been full to capacity with impressively well-known musicians. It's been a fantastic experience. Just like Grandad planned, I think.' She sipped her champagne. 'Most of them stay about two weeks, but it usually takes them a few days to unwind and start relaxing.'

'I bet the free vintage wine and champagne help in that respect,' smiled Alun.

She nodded, 'Most people want to come back again next year, but we've had so many requests we've had to draw up a waiting list.'

'It's not surprising,' I said. 'I don't know many places where you get free holidays with bed and board thrown in too.'

'No. But that was what Grandad wanted to do with his money. He wanted to create a haven for overworked and overstressed globe-trotting concert musicians. A place where they could stop being a V.I.P. twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Somewhere they can relax and enjoy being themselves with like-minded people.'

'What about the finances?' I asked.

Emma shrugged. 'Paul deals with that. We put about twenty per cent of Grandad's money into a special foundation account. The income from that covers the costs of everything, including the salaries

of the lady who does the cooking, the woman who does the cleaning, and the daily help. And, of course, the food and...' She paused. 'And well. It pays for everything.'

'Your brother's pretty hot stuff when it comes to finance and that sort of thing,' said Alun.

'Yes. But I run the day-to-day stuff.'

Mike frowned. 'So, you put nearly seven million euros in the foundation. That would get you a very healthy interest rate. Even if Paul chose an ultra-safe investment strategy, that would bring in several hundred thousand euros annually.'

Emma shrugged and smiled, 'I've no idea. I know it covers everything, though. In any case, the place is a huge success.'

'So old Lucas must be sitting happily up there dangling his legs over the edge of a fluffy cloud, smiling down contentedly,' I said.

'I wonder what they get to drink up there?' frowned Alun.

Emma smiled. 'More champagne?'

Before the words had left her lips, our three glasses had clinked together under her nose.

She laughed and filled them to the brims.