

# The Dordogne Renovation Project



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 of the French SEE and author and co-author of about a hundred scientific and conference papers.

An accomplished musician, Dr Rowe is also a prolific songwriter and composer, having collaborated with many excellent singers.

Born in the UK, he now lives in the French Alps, near Grenoble.

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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Novels by Stephen William ROWE

Bait

Hate

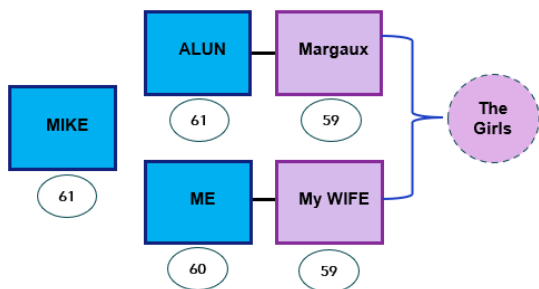
Agent Vx

Three Men in a Panic Vol 1

Three Men in a Panic Vol 2

The Stone Scenario

The Salat Quartet



## 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.'

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'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.

## CHAPTER 2

**T**he next day, after breakfast, we set off with "The Girls" quite early to see the barn.

To avoid any possible confusion, remember that this story takes place in the south of France. So "early morning" means slightly before ten o'clock. On the other hand, "The Crack Of Dawn" means anything before eight o'clock.

We took the rough track that followed the base of the cliff because, at this time of day, it was protected from the sun by trees that crowded up against it.

Then, fording the tiny stream, we dropped down through the trees and came out into the field just behind the barn.

Alun strode ahead and dragged the heavy, arched oak barn doors, allowing the early rays of the sun to penetrate deep into the long cathedral-like structure.

The five of us stood in the waggon-wide doorway gazing into the vast space.

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The first thing that caught the eye was the impressive network of massive crisscrossing beams that held up the tall, terracotta-tiled roof. Most of these were entire tree trunks measuring ten metres in length.

This massif framework was supported by equally impressive vertical beams placed every three metres or so and set on concrete foundation piles.

The sidewalls were constructed of rough-hewn sun and rain-weathered planks, clearly sawn from entire trees. They were all about four metres long, and sunlight filtered through the interstices between them, creating a patchwork of light on the dry, straw-littered ground.

Margaux shook her head sadly, 'And you three madmen honestly believe you can transform this...' she paused to choose the right word, 'This *thing* into an environment habitable by human beings?'

My wife nodded, 'A place where the rain and wind and generally speaking the weather remains essentially outside.'

Margaux spotted something scurrying across the packed earth floor in the dark depths. 'And where wildlife keeps to the fields and hedgerows.'

My wife nudged at a pile of droppings with her sandal toe and gazed up at the beams, 'Including bats...'

'Bats!?' cried Margaux, cringing back and clutching her friend's arm.

My wife pointed at the piles of droppings at several places, 'Hundreds of them in here, I'd say.'

I shrugged, 'That just goes to show that the place is dry, well ventilated and generally healthy.'

'We don't mind the dry part, but we'll do without the present level of ventilation,' said Margaux.

A squirrel suddenly appeared, high up on one of the beams and gazed down at us, its tiny head on one side. It decided that we posed no immediate risk, hopped and bounced happily along the beam, and then disappeared through a gap in the boards.

'We can do without sharing the place with a good proportion of the local wildlife species, too....'

'Yes,' adds Margaux. 'We want comfort,'

'Exactly', said my wife ', 'we don't want to feel like we are living in a mountaineer's alpine refuge dormitory.'

'Remember, we want showers and kitchens,' said my wife

'Cooking on a cooker, not a campfire,' said Margaux

'Sinks With running water, hot *and* cold.' added my wife

'And real toilets. Not an atrociously smelly hole at the bottom of the field,'

'And bedrooms.

'With windows'

'And stairs, not rickety ladders.'

'And a lovely wood-burning fire.'

'And tiled floors.'

'And perhaps a front door.'

'Which closes and locks.'

'Good grief!' cried Alun. 'This isn't Monté Carlo, you know.'

'We're not asking for luxury, just basic comfort.' shrugged Margaux

'But really!' I gasped. 'Do you realise the scale of what you're requesting? That sort of thing will cost fifty thousand euros at least.'

My wife spluttered, 'Are you mad!? Where were you born? Have you no idea what things cost?'

Margaux shook her head sadly, 'I'd guess a hundred and fifty thousand,' she said. 'If you do the finishing yourselves.'

We groaned. 'It's off then!' said Alun dejectedly.

'What!' cried Margaux.

'Too expensive.' I said.

The two women exchanged looks. 'Pray, remind us how much you paid Emma and Paul for this place,' said Margaux.

The truth is that when the two young people inherited the "Septet" and the surrounding forests from their grandfather, they also inherited an enormous fortune.

The world-famous pianist and orchestra conductor had piled up nearly fifty million euros.

So when we chanced on the forgotten barn during one of our numerous walks, they were more than grateful for someone to take it off their already over-full hands.

The result was that it cost us only the price of the legal fees, which is to say a few thousand euros.

My wife nodded at us, 'A hundred and fifty thousand is peanuts. It'll be worth four times that when it's finished.'

Margaux chuckled, '*IF* it's finished.'

At this moment, there was an ominous grating sound from above us. Then, suddenly, the arched door frame parted company with the surrounding stonework and crashed to the ground, swinging over and behind us.

My wife closed her eyes and sighed dramatically while Margaux coughed in the rising cloud of dust.

'You might start by putting that back before the whole place collapses like a pack of cards.'

'Will do,' smiled Alun.

Getting the massive barn door back into place was more of a job than we had bargained for.

To start with, it was considerably bigger than it had seemed when in its allotted position. It was also far heavier. Even so, we struggled bravely, as true men and brave should and put our shoulders to the task. However, after an extended period of grunting, perspiring and swearing, we were forced to admit that our magnificently powerful bodies were somewhat unequal to the job.

Luckily, at this moment, a cloud of thick black, foul-smelling smoke announced the arrival of the farmer, Antoine Buisson, on his tractor. (Antoine was not the source of these emissions but his tractor.)

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Naturally enough, we avoided mentioning that we had already tried and had been defeated. A man like that would not understand.

So we dragged out some ancient planks and laid them across the tractor's hay bale forks. We climbed onto them and stood unsteadily on this makeshift platform while he lifted us and the door frame.

After a second period of grunting, perspiring, and cursing, we managed to get the frame back into position. Mike then held it steady while Alun and I jammed it firmly in place with wooden wedges.

Then we discovered we had trapped Mike's hand and had to lever it off again to free him.

As we did so, he shouted, 'Oh hell! Attention! Careful! Watch out...'

We saw the frame topple outwards again, falling almost as if filmed in slow motion. We made a desperate grab at it, but the thing was far too heavy. It came crashing down and landed on the end of the planks we were standing on. Alun's end shot upwards while mine went down. I followed the planks down into a cosy clump of stinging nettles while Alun took an upward trajectory.

I leapt up like a thing possessed and, bending double, set off like a bloodhound searching for dock leaves.

'Help!' cried Alun, now dangling from a beam a good four meters above me.

'Help!' cried Mike, hanging onto the part of the doorframe that had remained aloft.



'Oh hell!' I shouted. 'What on earth are you two doing up there?'

I gave up my search for pain relief and dragged the planks back onto the tractor's forks.

'Quick!' shouted Alun. 'I can't hold on much longer.'

'Me neither,' added Mike.

Antoine revved up the tractor and raised the makeshift platform amid more clouds of richly perfumed foul black smoke. I first retrieved Mike and then carried on up. However, the platform couldn't reach Alun's level, so Mike and I grabbed a leg each and eased him back down onto it.

'Hell!' he gasped. 'That was a bit unexpected.'

'Alun, the human cannonball,' chuckled Mike.

I nodded. 'It gets the old adrenaline flowing nicely,' I smiled, rubbing at the angry red patches on my arms.

'You ought not to scratch yourself like that,' said Mike. 'It'll go septic and fester.'

'And fall off,' added Alun.

I sneered, 'Anyone got a dock-leaf?'

Alun turned to Mike, 'You're the boy scout, Mike. Come on, hand them over.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'Sorry. I left them in the bathroom with my tick-removal kit. I've only got my tool for amputating crushed and/or gangrened limbs on me today.'

'That's handy,' smiled Alun.

The old farmer gazed up at us thoughtfully, bringing us smoothly down again.

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'I had to amputate a leg once,' he nodded thoughtfully.

Alun gazed at him, startled but clearly impressed, 'You sewed it back on nicely, I see. You don't even limp.'

'No...' he chuckled. 'Not mine. My dog's. Last year it was.'

'It went septic, like this guy's arm, did it?' said Alun.

'My arm's not septic,' I replied.

'Not yet. That'll start surreptitiously during the dark, silent hours, deep in the night, without your realising. Then tomorrow morning, it'll be swollen like a dead cow's belly and oozing puss all over the place like a volcanic eruption.'

'No, it won't, you twit. That was a bed of stinging nettles, not a nest of scorpions and poisonous snakes,' I sighed.

'How do you know? You'd better check that out for him, Mike.'

'Why me?' cried Mike.

'Because the world can't do without me, should the place be invested with deadly poisonous things.'

'And it can do without me, can it?' said Mike.

'It'll have to be brave, but it'll survive.'

'For goodness's sake!' I exclaimed, then turned back to Antoine. 'What were you saying about your dog?'

The man shook his head, 'The stupid thing got its leg caught in one of my rabbit snares.'

'Rabbit snares!' exclaimed Mike. 'Aren't those against the law nowadays?'

'It was on private land,' replied Antoine, knocking a cigarette out of the paper packet and lighting the stinking thing.

'Are there that many rabbits on your land then?' I asked.

'Oh, it wasn't my land. Someone else's. Private though. Same thing.'

We were not sure the police would see the situation from the same perspective, but we let it go.

'In the UK, we call that poaching,' said Mike.

The man shrugged, 'It was an accident. I lost my bearings in the dark, you understand.'

'You were just walking the dog after dinner in the dark,' I suggested.'

'That's it.'

'And I expect you were in deep thought about some important problem you had to solve, and took a wrong turn?' I added

'These things happen,' nodded Alun.

'That must have hurt,' said Mike.

'Losing my bearings? No.'

'No, the dog.'

'That dog never lost its bearings once in its entire life.'

Mike sighed, 'I mean, it must have hurt your dog, having his leg amputated.'

'Ah!' Antoine shook his head, 'No. He didn't feel a thing.'

'No!?' exclaimed Mike.

'No. I soaked his food in plum brandy. He went to sleep and stayed out all afternoon.'

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'What about sterilisation?' asked Mike.

'It was his leg that went septic. He didn't need to be sterilised.'

'I meant sterilisation of the wound.'

'Oh, I see what you mean! I just dipped the stump in hot brandy, then set a match to it.' he nodded. 'No germs could resist that. Cauterised the wound nicely, too.'

'Hell!' cried Alun. 'I bet the RSPCA would go wild if they learned about that.'

The old man shrugged, 'Private premises, private dog, private business.'

Mike pulled a face, 'And how is the fellow getting on now?'

The farmer shrugged, 'Not so well. He died three days later.'

We eventually got the frame and doors back into place again and hammered home the wedges. However, This time, we took the precaution of adding sturdy wooden props on each side.

We then stood back and looked up.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' said Alun, 'but I'm not sure the Girls would have appreciated a second close encounter with death by crushing.'

'No,' I agreed. 'That may have rendered future relations a little on the cool side.'

'Cooler,' added Mike.

'One couldn't get cooler without icicles forming, Mike,' I smiled.

'Ah! Now that reminds me of something particularly interesting,' he said.

'Another time, Mike,' I said. 'We've work to do.'

But as usual, he ignored me.

'Did you know,' he frowned, 'That frost forming on cold windows does so by preferential condensation of water molecules onto the tips of the growing frost crystals.'

'Really!?' Said Alun. 'Now that's extremely useful here in the south of France.'

Mike ignored this. 'If that weren't the case, frost would form as a uniform sheet across the glass surface rather than forming beautiful, intricately branched figures. Incredible, really.'

'Boring would be a better choice of word,' said Alun.

Mike went on unperturbed, 'The reason for this remarkable phenomenon is still not fully understood.'

I smiled wryly, 'That's the scientific way of saying, "We haven't the faintest clue".'

Mike went on, 'But we *do* know that water molecules in the air close to the windowpane condense faster onto the growing tip of the crystal than onto the glass surface immediately beside it.'

Alun nodded, 'The icy tip sort of hijacks any water molecules around. Using the laws of nature.' He smiled, 'The long arm of the law, in fact.'

'Ha, ha!' I chuckled.

I knew that when Mike got going, the only way to stop him was to offer him beer or wine. In the

absence of these, one had to deflect him onto some other subject.

'Why doesn't steam condense onto a window pane in the same way then, Mike?' I said.

'Making steam crystals, you mean? Yes, Interesting idea.'

'So?'

'Because of surface tension, of course.'

'Surface tension?'

'Yep. And. Well, there are millions of droplet germination points on a windowpane, aren't there,' he smiled at us, and we groaned.

'Naturally,' I said. 'Everybody knows that.'

'We don't need to know any more, Mike,' said Alun.

'Yes, you do. Well, as soon as there are enough condensed water molecules on the glass, surface tension drags them together and makes it contract into a spherical shape. That draws in all the water around it, and, hey presto, you've got a single isolated drop on a dry surface. Millions of droplets, in fact. Then they grow and coalesce and...'

OK, Mike, I said. We've got it.'

'Interesting, eh!?' smiled Mike.

'Incredible,' said Alun.

Mike nodded again, 'Did you know that...'

'Shut up, Mike,' said Alun.

'Never mind, Mike,' I said soothingly. 'Let's get on with shifting that straw.'

'Hay,' corrected Mike.

'Yes, Mike?' said Alun. 'You wish to attract my Attention?'

'Oh, for God's sake. I said Hay, not Hey. Hay, H.A.Y., is essentially dry grass, whereas straw is the stalks of grain-bearing crops like...'

'Shut up, Mike,' sighed Alun. 'and come and lend a hand'

We gingerly hauled open the barn doors, keeping a careful eye on the frame as we did so.

While we did this, Antoine uncoupled the open-sided trailer with a good deal of hammering of the coupling pin then he drove the rusty tractor into the cool interior, leaving a trail of thick black smoke.

'What on earth does that thing run on?' said Alun, 'Roofing tar?'

For an answer, the old man simply tapped the side of his nose with a knowing nod. Whatever it was, it was obviously illegal. It was undoubtedly bad for the environment, the planet, and the entire universe. In his defence, the man may even have said it was good for the economy and employment because it provided employment to thousands of people to clean up the mess it caused.

The bales were piled high in the hay loft and the ground beneath it.

'We'll start with that lot up there,' he nodded. 'Two of you can get up there and bring the bales forward from the back so I can get the forks into them. The other can jump up on the trailer outside and help stack them properly.'

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Mike nodded, 'Ah! If you need something done properly, I'd better do it, hadn't I.' With this, he pulled his hat on and went outside.

Alun and I sighed. Mike was like that...

I unhooked an ancient triangular-shaped fruit-pickers ladder from a peg on the plank wall and dragged it over.

As I leant it against the beam supporting the hay loft, Alun gave it a doubtful look, 'I wonder what wood-to-woodworm ratio this thing prides itself with. Fifty/Fifty?'

'Oh, come on, Alun,' I smiled. 'This is as solid as it comes. There no woodworm in this.'

'Naturally, because they've finished everything edible inside those rungs and moved onto lush pastures a hundred years ago by the look of it.' He pulled a face. 'So, there's now fifty per cent wood and fifty per cent empty holes.'

Mike had been listening from the doorway, 'Holes are always empty, Alun. That's how they are defined.'

'Well, if it's so solid, up you go,' he said.

I sighed and climbed up onto the loft. Regardless of my affirmations, my grip on the rungs above me was considerably tighter than usual, and I was careful to place my feet at the outside edges of the rungs. However, I got to the top unscathed. 'See,' I called. 'Solid as a rock.'

Alun followed me up, and we stood against the tall wall of bales. 'There must be hundreds of these,' he said. 'This job is going to take heaven knows how many trips with the tractor.'



I shrugged, 'Remember that this is the first step in a lofty project.'

We worked for about an hour, clearing a couple of metres of floorboard. Then, while Antoine carried this load off to his own barn, we sat on the beam at the loft's edge and dangled our legs.

'It's dusty work. We should have thought about bringing some beer with us,' grumbled Alun as we sat, gazing out through the open barn doors.

'We'll bring some back down with us after the midday feeding trough,' I said.

He nodded, 'I'm damn thirsty though. I think I'll go up to the spring and drink some water. Coming?'

I nodded, 'And risk the rotten ladder? Twice?'

'You're going first, remember.'

'Are you sure it's drinkable?' I frowned.

'All spring water is drinkable,' he replied. 'The rain falls on the plateau up there, and the water seeps through millions of tons of earth, gravel, and sand. That filters out everything, and it ends up perfectly pure.'

'What if there's a herd of cows up there, urinating and pooping into the same earth all day long?' I said. 'That filters down, too. And you can also add the digestion by-products of foxes, badgers, wild boar and rabbits.'

Alun shook his head, 'The water coming out today probably fell as rain up there a hundred years ago. It took all that time to filter down to this level.'

'There were probably hundreds of cows up there in those days too. So, you'll just be drinking vintage cow

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urine instead of modern stuff. Stronger in those days, too, vintage germs and all.'

'Minus the antibiotics and chemicals, though,' smiled Alun.

We tramped up the track through the bushes to the foot of the cliff, and he knelt beside the bubbling spring. 'Look at it. It's crystal clear. Did you ever see anything polluted look as pure as this?' He cupped his hands together and scooped some up to his mouth, slurping it noisily.

'Hydrochloric acid is colourless and crystal clear too. That doesn't make it drinkable,' I said.

'Tastes perfect to me.'

I shrugged and knelt beside him, 'If anything happens to me,' I said. 'You can have my collection of Dinky Toys to remember me by.'

'You don't have a collection of Dinky Toys,' said Alun.'

'It's the thought that counts, Alun,' I smiled. 'Oh well! Here goes.'

Surprisingly, I didn't drop dead, at least not immediately. 'It looks like I might get in one last meal then,' I chuckled.

After a little more slurping, Alun got to his feet, 'You should have more confidence in me. After all, I *am* your best friend.'

'Alun!' I exclaimed. 'Having confidence in you has often ended the three of us in inextricable situations, in prison, or both. That's why I'm now working with my psychiatrist on becoming less susceptible to such

dangerous, impulsive sorts of behaviour. She says my progress is encouraging.'

Alun shrugged. 'I can hear the tractor returning. Let's get back.'

'If I'm not dead before we get there,' I smiled.

In another hour, we had emptied all but the last row of bales, which stood against the wall planking at the back of the loft.

Alun clambered up on the lowest bale, stretched his long arms behind the top, and pulled it forward. It slid to the floor, giving him easy access to the next one. He carried on like this, working along the columns while I dragged the bales across to the edge of the loft. From here, Antoine lifted them down. The top row finished; Alun jumped down.

However, there was an ominous cracking, and with a cry, he went straight through the rotten floorboards. His downward flight was abruptly arrested, with half of him above and the other half below the floor.

'Great Gods!' he exclaimed. 'Thank the lord that there are bales below, too, or I'd have gone crashing down onto the floor.'

He hung there for a few seconds, gazing across at me, half in and half out of the hole. 'Aren't you going to come and help me up?' he said.

I shook my head, 'You've just discovered where those woodworms migrated to after vacating the ladder rungs. I prefer not to explore the lateral extent of their new homeland.'

'So you're going to leave me stuck here?'

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'You're not stuck, Alun; you're just too lazy to lever yourself up.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'You disappoint me.'

'These things happen,' I smiled.

Grumbling something about friends in need, he worked his arms up between the planks and was just getting ready to heave when he started to wobble wildly.

'Oh hell!' he cried. 'The bale's sliding over,' and with this, he disappeared. This disappearance was closely followed by a clunking sound, not unlike that of a heavy body landing on a solid wooden plank.

'Arrrgggh!' came a muffled cry.

'Are you OK, Alun?' I called.

'Brilliant.' he shouted. 'Who put these planks here?'

'Not me.'

'Well, how am I going to get out of here?'

'Can't you just climb up the bales?'

'No. The stuff just pulls out. Can't you let me down a rope?'

'Did he say "please"?' asked Mike.

'Go and see if that guy has any rope, Mike.' I called.

'If Alun was just a tiny bit more careful,' grumbled Mike. 'We wouldn't have to waste time, saving his life every five minutes,' he grumbled, then went outside to where Antoine was simultaneously polluting the atmosphere with his cigarettes and the stinging nettles with his... Well, he was watering them.

They came back carrying a stout rope, climbed up and looked at the hole in the boards. 'We'd best

widen that a bit first. Have you got a crowbar?' Mike asked Antoine.

'Crowbar!?' What do you want a crowbar for? Have you seen the state of those boards?' With this, he stepped forward, lifted his leg and crashed his heavily booted foot onto the board.

It gave way with a cracking and splintering of rotten wood.

However, not only his boot went through the plank. It was followed by an entire, stockily built farmer. Like Alun, the man initially landed on a bale just below the floor. Then the bale slid sideways, followed by the man.

From further below came a cry, 'What the hell!'

This was followed by a good deal of swearing in both English and French.

After a while, things calmed down, and Mike and I lay on the floor and crawled carefully across the dusty floor until we could look down through the gaping hole.

Two upturned faces returned our stares.

The men were standing in a narrow, empty corridor between the rearmost piles of bales and the barn's rear plank wall.

The farmer was frowning, 'Odd that. Now, why didn't they pile the stuff right up against the wall?'

Mike looked down, 'To allow air to circulate, or something like that?'

'No,' he replied, 'More than enough air comes in between the planks.'

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'Maybe there's another passage along the side, too. If there is, you'll be back out in a jiffy.'

'OK. Chuck me down your phone, Mike,' called Alun.

'Who do you want to call? Your priest?'

'Shut Up. I need a light. You might have noticed that it's pitch black down here.'

'Use your own phone then.'

There was a short silence. 'Ah! I didn't think of that.'

'You twit, Alun. That reminds me of when we nearly got blown to bits by a gas explosion inside that dustbin thing because of the phone battery.'

'Don't remind me,' I said.

There was a burst of light and sounds of shuffling.

'Wait a minute,' came Antoine's gruff voice. 'What have we here?'

'Looks like a passage through the centre,' replied Alun from below.

'Well, go on then,' I called. 'It'll probably lead out to the front.'

'There's only room to edge down it sideways,' called Alun. 'I'll go along and see how far it goes.'

There followed a longish period of silence during which we could follow his progress by the torchlight filtering up through the floorboards.

Then, suddenly, Alun cried, 'Wow!'

'What is it, Alun?' called Mike.

'There's something in here. Right in the middle of the pile. Looks like a car. No, a van.'

'A car!' we exclaimed.

'Great gods! No,' called Alun. 'It's some damn great armoured vehicle. Hell! It's got German army markings on it.'

'What, in the name of !? ...' I started.

'Wait a moment. I can see light ahead,' called Alun.

'That'll probably be the Frankfurt Central Underground Station,' I chuckled.

Ignoring this, he continued, 'Come down from the loft, you twits, and pull out the first pile of bales. Roughly in the middle.'

We exchanged looks, then cautiously wormed our way back onto more reliable-looking boards, got to our feet, and climbed down the ladder. We pulled out four or five bales and suddenly spotted the light from the torch.

'We can see where you are, Alun,' I called. 'If you push the topmost bale in front of you, we'll pull it.'

Before we had time to start, the top bale flew down, landing heavily on Mike.

'You idiot!' he cried. 'I didn't say "go",'

We heaved the next one out and exposed Alun's head. In a few seconds more, we dragged out the lower bales, and he stepped out into the fresh air, followed by Antoine.

'There's a damn great armoured car hidden inside that pile of bales,' he exclaimed. 'Come and have a look.'

Mike was first in; 'Great Gods!' he called back. 'It's a World War Two armoured personnel carrier. What in heaven's name is that thing doing in here?'

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I smiled, 'I wouldn't mind betting that someone put it there, Mike.'

'Deliberately, too,' added Alun.

'Very amusing.'

'But anyway. Why would someone want to hide a thing like that?' frowned Alun. 'In the middle of nowhere?'

Antoine sniffed. He would have lit one of his foul-smelling cigarettes if we hadn't been in such close proximity to about a hundred tons of highly inflammable material. 'This wasn't the middle of nowhere during the last war,' he said. 'The main town, Sarlat that is, was occupied by the German army from 1942 to 1944. The Gestapo even set up a base in one of the Hotels.'

'Really?!' I said.

'But...' he tapped his nose knowingly. 'Those guys didn't realise that hereabouts, the terrain is exactly the sort that resistance fighters love. Full of forests and cliffs and grottos and abandoned barns like this one. My dad was one of them and used to sleep in places like this. He told me there's also a network of hidden galleries under the cliff somewhere, where they hid sometimes. I've never discovered where the entrance is, though.'

'But that doesn't explain the presence of a German vehicle hidden in the place today,' said Alun.

'Maybe they had set a trap and were waiting for the resistance battalion to settle in for the night,' he shrugged.



'That would have been a nasty surprise for them,' I said.

'Yep.'

'But they're still waiting for them to turn up eighty or so years later...' I smiled. 'A long wait.'

Antoine chuckled, 'There were more than twenty thousand German soldiers and fifteen hundred armoured vehicles in the area. And then, without warning and almost overnight, they all left for Normandy in June nineteen forty-four.'

'And this one got left behind,' I said. 'Forgotten.'

'Yes. Odd that!'

'Hmm,' Mike said, scraping about in the haystack. 'I've found the door, but it's padlocked.'

'Odder still,' I said.

'Come on,' said Antoine, 'Let's get all this stuff out of the way so we can get a good look. It's not likely to go away.'

We nodded and got back to work.

It took us another hour and a half and two trailer loads to shift the hay. When it was, there, in the middle of the barn, stood an armoured vehicle in almost perfect condition.

It was a low-profile vehicle about six metres long by two metres wide. The doors on both sides were secured by impressive heavy-duty padlocks.

'I wonder why it's locked up like that. Maybe there are dozens of bodies inside,' I frowned.

'Skeletons by now,' said Mike helpfully.

'Thanks, Mike,'

'My pleasure.'

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Alun nodded, 'Perhaps the resistance fighters twigged to the intended trap, then crept up and padlocked them inside.'

'Then why didn't they just drive away?' said Mike.

'They'd run out of petrol, I expect,' suggested Alun.

'That's why.'

'That's not very likely.'

'Maybe the resistance guys drilled a hole in the petrol tank, then as soon as it was empty, they did the door padlocking trick,' he said.

'They drilled through five centimetres of hardened steel without the guys inside hearing?' sighed Mike.

'That's because the German soldiers were listening to a record of Marlene Dittich's songs,' he countered.

'And singing along with it to while away the long hours of waiting,' I added.

'What a lot of crap you two spew forth,' groaned Mike.

Antoine shrugged, 'So let's have a look, shall we?'

From his tractor, he dragged a massive crowbar. The gigantic thing was nearly two metres long and five centimetres in diameter.

'Give me a hand,' he called to Alun. 'This thing weighs a ton, and I'm no longer twenty years old.'

The two lifted it, jammed the pointed end into the padlock shackle and put their joint weight on it. There was a creaking and tearing noise, and suddenly, the two toppled to the ground on top of each other, Alun on top this time.

The padlock had held, but the door fixing had not.

The hundred-year-old rivets holding them to the armoured door had snapped clean off.

We heaved at the handle on the massive door, but it was rusted solid and wouldn't budge. Once more, Alun and the farmer applied the crowbar and levered it open, centimetre by centimetre. Then suddenly, it swung free, sending Mike sprawling onto the hay-strewn floor.

'Great Gods,' he gasped, rubbing his shoulder, 'That must weigh a ton.'

I nodded, 'I guess that ten centimetres of armour plating weighs slightly more than a modern car door.'

Surprisingly, as we stepped forward, the nauseabound stench of rotted bodies did not waft out to meet us, which was appreciable.

We exchanged looks, and Alun wiggled his eyebrows, 'Let's see what we have then.'

'Me first,' said Mike.'

'Why you? After all, I found it.'

'But as you said earlier, Alun, the world can't do without you but will survive without me.'

'Yes, But...'

'So, if the thing is filled with poisonous gas or deadly snakes and scorpions... Well, I'll be doing my bit for the future of humanity by preserving your life.'

'Yes, but...'

I nodded, 'Good thinking, Mike. A very courageous thing to do. It does you credit.'

'Thanks,' smiled Mike. 'Here goes, then. Wish me luck.'

'No,' grumbled Alun, 'I found it.'

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Mike patted him on the shoulder, 'Think of your wife and children, Alun. Remind yourself that I am doing this as much for them as for the rest of humanity.'

Alun made an ungentlemanly gesture towards Mike as he clambered into the darkened shell.

'Great Gods! What's all this?' cried Mike.

'Boa Constrictors?' I called back.

'Shut up. No, the place is full of packages. Stuff wrapped up in waterproof waxed cloth or something like that.'

'Let me see,' cried Alun.

'Come in, all of you.' called Mike. 'There's plenty of room.'

We clambered into the musty space, playing our phone torches around the place.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Alun. 'What is all this stuff?'

The vehicle was packed three or four metres deep with dark multi-shaped packages, neatly aligned one behind the other.

I smiled one of my best, knowing smiles, 'D'you know what I think? I bet one of those German officers hid something a tad illegal here before leaving for Normandy. I also wager he intended to come back and collect it later.'

The old farmer chuckled, 'But something went wrong with the plan.'

'Yep,' smiled Alun. 'And as Burns wrote,

"In proving foresight may be vain;

The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men

Gang aft agley,  
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promis'd joy!"

I nodded, 'Well, this plan certainly Ganged Agley.'  
Mike nodded, 'Perhaps I ought to translate that for our French friend,' he said.

'He got the drift of it, Mike,' said Alun quickly.  
'What's that smell?'

Thus, Mike was successfully diverted from embarking on what was likely to be a long, drawn-out monologue. 'I think it must be linseed oil,' he frowned.

'Or Alun's poisonous gasses,' I suggested.

He pulled a face, leant forward and sniffed one of the packages. 'Yes. As I thought, Linseed-oil waxed cloth. That's what this stuff is,' he smiled happily.

'Mike, you twit,' groaned Alun. 'It's what's inside that's interesting. Not the packaging.'

'No!? There, I beg to differ, Alun. Someone took a great deal of trouble about this packaging...'

'So?'

'So, it means there's something worthy of those precautions inside.'

'Something valuable,' I added.

'Yep.'

'All right, all right. Slide that big one along here,' Alun grumbled.

'Do you know? I have a distinct impression that this is a painting,' I said.

'Or perhaps simply a picture frame,' said Mike.  
'Maybe our unlucky officer collected picture frames.'

'Are you mad, Mike!?' said Alun.

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'Just an idea, Alun.' said Mike. 'One should always explore all possibilities.'

'I agree,' nodded Alun. 'I was just exploring the option of locking you inside this place and losing the key.'

I climbed down from the vehicle with the large package and laid it carefully on a bale of straw.

We unwound the multiple layers of waxed cloth and let it fall back.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike.

'Great Gods!' I added.

'Hells bells!' cried Alun.

Lying before us was a magnificent oil painting in a heavy gilt frame.

The farmer leant forward. 'That's a painting,' he said, clearly pleased with his rapid appraisal of the situation.

We exchanged looks but said nothing to spoil his moment of glory.

However, he then stretched out his stubby, gnarled, and grimy finger. Mike caught his wrist with lightning speed, 'For heaven's sake! Don't touch it. It might be worth a fortune. Millions of euros. Who knows?'

The man drew back his hand sharply, awed by Mike's statement.

'Do you realise how many tractors you can buy for a million?' he exclaimed.

'I said Millions, not a million.' said Mike.

'Great Gods!' he gasped.

'Looks like our unlucky officer was unluckier than we initially thought,' I said.

'Yeh. You're telling me!' said Alun. 'So now what? Does this stuff belong to us?'

Mike frowned and pulled a face. 'No, I don't think so. In France, this sort of thing usually belongs to the state. Like treasure-trove. Otherwise, it belongs to the people from whom it was stolen.'

'It might have come from the local museums and national art galleries. In that case, I've no idea.'

'So,' I said.

'We'll ask,' said Mike.

'I think this is something for our good friend Inspector Venet.' I said.

Alun nodded, 'Emily has his new number. I heard her mention it at breakfast. Let's get back and take this with us,' said Alun.

Mike smiled, 'He'll be relieved to know that there are no murders involved this time,' he said.

While I was wrapping up the picture again, the old farmer dragged over his heavy trailer and blocked it against the door. He then drove his tractor as close as possible to the other side to prevent anyone from getting in via the other door.

Then, I lifted the painting, and we set off for the Septet.

## CHAPTER 3

**W**hen we arrived back at The Septet, the table was set, and it was getting on for one o'clock.

I set the picture down on the unused end by the pond and carefully unwrapped it.

Emma had phoned Inspector Venet, who agreed to drive over from Bordeaux that evening. In the meantime, our friend George had come up from the local police station to examine what we had found and report back to him.

Both men had participated in catching Lucas Duprès' murderers, and we knew them well and trusted them implicitly.

George had arrived and was standing by the pond, talking to Emma and Paul. However, the gentle splashing of the fountain rendered their words inaudible to us.

Emma's boyfriend, Martin, and Paul's young wife, Sophie, were absent.



Martin was in Norway, training for the coming winter's biathlon championships. He is a member of the British biathlete team—sometimes, in fact, he is the only member—and spends a lot of time away from home.

For those unfamiliar with the sport, Biathlon combines cross-country skiing with rifle shooting. It's an extremely demanding sport combining high-intensity physical exertion and precision target shooting.

Before daybreak, Sophie had left the Septet for a photo shoot at Marseille. This was to prepare material for the publicity campaign planned for her upcoming debut album.

The man now striding towards us was Joseph Lewin, and he was responsible for discovering the young woman's talent as a pop singer. He had been Lucas Duprès' agent/manager until the celebrity's death. He had immediately set about employing his abilities and experience to give her a good push in the right direction. On this trip, Sophie was accompanied by the famous opera singer Julianna Metrokowitch, who had been Lucas Duprès' wife until their spectacular divorce. The woman was now acting as Sophie's vocal coach and had already worked miracles on the girl's wayward and undisciplined vocal cords.

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If the truth were told, both Joseph, at sixty-five, and Julianna, at seventy-two, were enjoying this new project immensely.

As the members of our little community gathered around us, Mike looked down the table to the part set for the meal. 'I see we're having that Côte du Rhone today,' he smiled. Mmm.'

We nodded approval.

Margaux stepped over and looked down at the painting. 'Where did you steal that from?' she sighed.

Alun bridled immediately, 'We did *not* steal it. We found it.'

'Oh yes. Of course! You found it... You found a valuable eighteenth-century oil painting!'

'Eighteenth century!?' cried Mike.

'It certainly gives one that impression. So you just stumbled on it, did you?'

'Yes.'

'Ah! And where might you have stumbled on this work of art?'

My wife frowned, 'Are you sure you want to ask that question, Margaux?'

'You mean that the meal might go cold before they had finished reeling out the ridiculously unconvincing lie they have constructed?'

'It did cross my mind, yes. But I suppose we'll have to hear it.' she sighed. 'All right. Where did you find it?'

'In a German World War Two troop carrier,'  
nodded Alun.

'Where else!' sighed my wife. 'Of course.'

'Well, at least that has got that point cleared up  
nicely,' smiled Margaux. 'It's perfectly obvious once  
one has thought about it.'

'We found it in an old van sort of thing,' I said in  
an attempt to clarify things a little.'

'An old van thing?' sighed Margaux.

'That's it.'

'And this "Old Van Thing", I suppose you found  
that too.'

'That's it,' smiled Mike.

We nodded, 'Hidden in the middle of the pile of  
hay bales,' added Mike.

'In the barn,' smiled Alun. 'Incredible, eh?'

Margaux sighed and looked from one to the other  
of the little group. 'Is that the best word? Somehow,  
I feel that the word "Unbelievable" would be better.  
That's because I don't believe a single word of this  
rubbish.'

'No! But really!' cried Mike. 'It's true. We found  
this damn great lorry thing hidden in the middle of  
the bales of hay,'

'Hay or straw, Mike?' said Alun with a little smile.

'We discovered it because Alun fell through the  
rotten floorboards,' I said. 'And nearly brained  
himself on it.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Margaux. 'Now that, I *can* believe.'

'It was all padlocked up,' said Mike. 'And when we broke open the doors, we discovered it was full of packages like this one.'

Emma laughed one of her light tinkling laughs, put her arm around Mike's shoulder and hugged him. 'You know, it doesn't surprise me at all. It's just the sort of thing you three musketeers *would* discover, right?

My wife pulled a face and shrugged, 'I suppose you're right. If it were ordained to happen to someone, it would *have* to be to these three.'

'And there are other packages like this one?' asked the officer, George.

'Probably a hundred or more,' I said.

'A hundred!?' he exclaimed.

'We didn't actually count them,' said Mike. 'But there are a great many.'

My wife smiled, 'Ah! You didn't count them. So let's settle for more than five but less than ten, shall we?'

'No, we shan't,' grumbled Alun, 'More than fifty and less than a thousand. Some of them are very small.'

Margaux smiled, 'And perhaps the bigger ones count for ten each, do they?'

Alun made an impatient movement with his chin. 'Why you women never have confidence in what we say amazes me.'

My wife smiled, 'What should amaze you is that sometimes we actually *do* believe you.'

'Ha, ha!'

Joseph gazed down at the painting and ran his finger over the gilt frame. 'But what on earth was the thing doing there?' he asked.

We explained what the farmer, Antoine Buisson, had told us about the period of German occupation and the resistance fighters, then added the possible explanations we had explored.

Joseph frowned and passed his big hands over his nicely rounded stomach, 'Looting,' he nodded. 'There was a hell of a lot of that going on. Many works of art were stolen or "forcibly purchased" at the time. Tens of thousands of them were recovered after the armistice and restored to their rightful owners. But even today, more than twenty thousand have yet to be claimed. They are still sitting there in the national gallery basement.'

'I'll claim them if it would help at all,' smiled Alun. 'A couple of Di-Vinci sketches and a Turner or two would look nice in the barn when it's finished.'

'We'd have room for a few of those huge still life paintings too,' said Mike. 'For once, the walls would be high enough, and I rather like that sort of thing.'

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'This one looks pretty good to me,' frowned Joseph. Then, turning to me, he added, 'Why don't you ask that Sotheby's expert friend of yours over? Is he still down here on holiday.'

I gazed at him in astonishment, 'My Sotheby's expert friend!?'

'Yes. The chap you called over last year to value Lucas' paintings. The ones that went up to auction in Paris.'

'Ah!' I said, shooting a worried look at Alun, who raised his eyebrows.

Alun chuckled, 'As Sancho Panza said to Don Quixote, "The truth, like olive oil in wine, always finally comes to the surface".'

Mike groaned, 'It was water and not wine, Alun. And there was definitely no mention of olives. Just oil.'

'Same thing,' smiled Alun.

Margaux smiled sneakily, 'If it's the same thing, Alun, then you won't mind having water with your meal instead of Côte du Rhone.'

'Wait a minute!' cried Alun.

We all laughed.

'So. What about your expert pal then?' said Joseph.

'Ah, yes! My art expert friend.'

Mike shook his head in pity. 'That friend never existed. He made him up, Joseph.'

'What!' exclaimed Joseph. 'But he came over and took all the paintings to Paris.'

I hesitated. 'Well, it wasn't exactly like that...'

'You didn't steal them!?' he exclaimed.

'No, I did not. Emma's bank account will prove that.'

Emma laughed gaily, 'It's all quite simple, really.'

'Is it,' frowned Joseph. 'You mean that something to do with these three can be simple!?'

She laughed, 'Well, the three musketeers here suspected you of planning to cheat us out of the most valuable ones,' she said with a little toss of her head.

'What!' he exclaimed.

I sighed, 'Well, you were acting pretty oddly, and at the time, we hardly knew you, did we? We thought you might be one of those cunning con men.'

'Great gods!' gasped Joseph.

'So, in reality, I directly contacted Sotheby's and sent those photos of each picture we took to their expert.'

Paul laughed happily, 'And they sent down a lorry and a staff of experts and carried the lot off while you were all trying out biathlon rifles with Martin,' He smiled. 'The whole thing worked like a charm.'

Joseph shook his head and chuckled, 'Well, I'll be damned.'

'Cunning, eh!' said Alun.

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Joseph nodded, 'But I hope you know and trust me a little better now.'

'Oh yes,' cried Margaux. 'We were all in it together, you know.'

The man gazed at me, 'But you still have those contacts?'

'Oh yes. Of course.'

'So?'

I frowned, then nodded, 'Ah! Yes. Of course. I'll send him a photo straight away. He might be able to tell us something about it.'

'Exactly. And that would point us in the right direction for the rest of what's still hidden in that vehicle,' he smiled.

I fished out my phone and took a series of photos, including the signature and the notes pencilled on the back. I sent these off with a suitable message explaining our discovery, and after wrapping the package again, we sat down for the meal.

Apparently, top Sotheby experts don't take extended lunch breaks. In fact, we had barely finished our second bottle of wine when my phone pinged.

'The guy wants me to call back,' I said.

'Go on then. Your desert can wait,' said my wife.

I called back the number, and after a few welcoming words, I listened. After a few minutes, I replied that Inspector Venet, who he knew already,



was coming and would take the other articles into safekeeping. I thanked the man and hung up.

'What did he say, man,' cried Alun. 'Come on. Out with it.'

I nodded. 'Well, this picture seems well known and extremely valuable, maybe half a million.'

'Great gods!' exclaimed Joseph.

'Yes. He says it is part of a large hoard of valuable pieces of art stolen from the region's art galleries during the occupation. Many other pieces came from the collections owned by the region's rich families.'

'I told you,' nodded Joseph, 'Looting.'

I nodded back, 'He says that recent estimates put the value of the missing hoard at close to one hundred million euros.'

'A hundred million!' gasped Emma. 'Well, the musketeers have brought home the beans this time!'

Alun was frowning, 'D'you know. I think we'd do best to keep our voices down a little. You never know who might be listening.'

We exchanged looks.

George was also frowning. He got to his feet. 'I'll get some men up there straight away. Let's not take any chances.'

'I'd tell them to go armed if I were you,' said Paul. 'I wouldn't expect the sort of people interested in getting their hands on a hundred million euros worth

of stolen goods to turn up with their hands in their pockets.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'They might have slightly fewer scruples than us. And more guns, too.'

'Have you got guns then?' frowned George.

'No.'

He frowned, 'Ah! Yes. I see what you mean. But at least the stuff is well confined in your famous troop transport vehicle. That'll make it easier to protect.'

'And to steal,' smiled Mike.

I shook my head. 'No. You've got the wrong end of the stick,' Everyone turned to me. 'The Southeby guy said that the stuff looted comprised thousands of articles.'

My wife pulled a face, 'So your armoured Van thing contains only a small fraction of the total,'

'That's what he thinks.'

'So where is the rest?' she said.

I shrugged. 'Hidden somewhere, apparently.'

'Near here?'

I wiggled my eyebrows.

George nodded, 'Got it. I'll see you all later when Inspector Venet arrives.'

With this, he strode off.

Joseph grimaced, 'Do you know what I think?' he paused. 'I think that this smells of trouble.'

## CHAPTER 4

**A**s everyone was enthusiastic about seeing the mysterious World War II vehicle and its priceless cargo, we hurried through clearing the table and washing up. We then set off in single file along the narrow track at the foot of the cliff. The girls were up front, followed by Emma, Paul, and Joseph, and we three closed the procession.

Margaux turned and called over her shoulder, 'One day, I'd appreciate it if someone could explain why this sort of thing is always happening to you three. Why you? Why not someone else, someone we have never heard of and never will?'

Alun shrugged and shouted, 'It's simply because it is our destiny, Margaux. We were created to discover things. One morning, the chap up there in the clouds gazed down on the multitudinous hosts below and frowned. "Is anyone worthy of this heavy responsibility?" he sighed.'

I nodded and took up the story, 'Luckily, the lad with long hair, sitting to his right, smiled and pointed,

"Cast thy eye in that direction, Pops. Those three over there look promising material. One could do far worse,".'

Alun smiled, 'Divine Destiny. It's as simple as that. These things are ordained,' he paused, nodding resignedly. 'We were singled out from all humanity for the task, and nothing can undo what has been ordained, can it?'

My wife made a puffing noise that did not seem to indicate enthusiastic acceptance of these facts. She sighed, 'And those two poor souls up there must still be gnawing their knuckles with regret.'

Mike smiled, 'Over the years, we do seem to have had a little more than our fair share of unusual adventures.'

Margaux spluttered, 'I prefer to use the word "catastrophes" rather than "adventures" and I'd replace the phrase; "a little" with "infinitely".'

Alun and I shrugged, 'There's nothing we can do about it, Margaux,' I said. 'I'm sorry, but one can't simply un-ordain celestial decisions of such colossal magnitude.'

At this moment, we reached the little freshwater spring.

I called out to those ahead of us, 'Ford the stream, then cut down through the undergrowth to your left.'

'You mean through that unpassable wall of brambles?' said Margaux.

I smiled at Alun over my shoulder, then called, 'I'll call up to the boss and ask if he could see his way to doing a bit of "parting of the brambles".'

Alun chuckled under his breath and said, 'Mind you, they don't use that trick often, so they might be a bit rusty. Alternatively, you could try following the path that circumnavigates the brambles. That might help, too.'

'Shut up, you twit,' she sighed.

A little further on, we came out from under the cover of the trees into the overgrown field surrounding the barn. George and his colleagues were chatting to the farmer, Antoine Buisson, by the open barn doors, and as we appeared, he waved over at us.

'Shall we have a quick look?' he said. 'Then we can load the stuff into the vans.' He paused, 'Inspector Venet thinks it would be best to take it all over to headquarters in Sarlat. He says it would be safer there.'

'Agreed,' I nodded. 'We wouldn't want your nice little police station here to be ransacked by a horde of ruthless mercenaries armed to the teeth with machine guns.'

'No,' frowned George. 'I had enough of that last year.'

'But that's unlikely, isn't it,' said Emma, frowning. 'After all, nobody else knows of the existence of all this, do they.'

'Cliffs have ears,' smiled Alun.

The girl pulled a face, 'Yes, you're right. No need to tempt the devil.'

My wife frowned in turn, 'But I thought you three were in the good books of the "Guy in the Clouds". If so, he isn't likely to allow any harm to come to you, right?

'He's got a lot on his plate at present,' I said, nodding thoughtfully.

'But isn't he omnipresent?' asked Margaux.

I shook my head sadly, 'Yes and no. Remember, he's not as young as he was. Naturally, he has a little more trouble flashing around the universe than when he was young.'

'Happens to all of us,' added Alun.

Mike was standing in the open barn doorway. He sighed, 'I think he must have had a great deal on his plate when creating you two. Otherwise, he would have done the job properly instead of completely botching it. Anyway, once you've finished your pointless and time-wasting tripe, we could perhaps get on with the job?'

Alun and I exchanged disappointed looks. Mike was a terrible spoilsport sometimes. We had warned him against this tendency of allowing seriousness to get the better of him, but he heeded us not.

Joseph walked into the barn and stopped short, 'Great heavens!' he cried. 'It's huge!'

'We told you it was big,' I said.

'And you say it was completely hidden inside the pile of hay bales?'

'Yep. They were piled up five deep all the way around it. It was invisible from the outside.'

Antoine clumped over and started fiddling with his tractor engine. After a while, he seemed satisfied with the quality of the black smoke it was belching. He then drove it around, attached the trailer, and hauled it away to free up the unpadlocked vehicle door.

As he did, Paul wandered over and tugged at the unopened padlock. 'So all this has been here since before the end of the war.' He pulled a face. 'More than eighty years... Incredible!'

Margaux and my wife groaned as the tractor filled the place with even more foul-smelling smoke.

'What on earth does he run that thing on?' cried my wife.

I laughed, 'He wouldn't tell us. However, we believe he distils a mixture of fermented pig and horse urine and then spikes it with a dash of more noble material from his septic tank.'

Joseph frowned at us, chuckling, 'If I didn't know you better now, I'd be tempted to believe that.'

Alun smiled, 'The Nassa tried it in rocket engines, but it punched a hole in the ozone layer and let in huge quantities of intergalactic vacuum.'

'What!' gasped Mike. 'Don't you know anything at all about physics, Alun?'

Alun shrugged, 'Well...'

'You can't "let in" a vacuum.'

'Why not?'

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'Because, by definition, vacuum is the lack of substance. In other words, it's nothing.'

'That's nice,' said Alun. 'Very pure then. Like our spring water.'

'No. Not like spring water, you idiot,' he sighed. 'Water is an assembly of molecules, in other words...'

I interrupted, 'In layman's language, water being made of molecules is *something*, whereas vacuum, not having molecules, is NOT something, and thus, nothing.'

'Exactly.'

I nodded. 'And you can't let "nothing" in. Is that the idea, Mike?'

'Naturally,' he sighed. 'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'To a world-class boffin like you, Mike, it would be,' smiled Alun. 'But to normal humans like us...'

Margaux spluttered, 'Normal!... Humans!...' she shook her head. 'Who are you trying to kid?'

Mike sighed again, stepped over, and heaved open the heavy door, 'Come on, Margaux, have a look.'

He climbed up and disappeared inside.

My wife and Margaux, followed by Emma, were first inside.

'Heavens!' exclaimed Emma. 'The thing is full of packages!'

'We told you it was,' I called from outside.

Alun shook his head sadly, 'Will they ever get used to trusting us.' he sighed.



'Heaven forbid!' cried Margaux. 'Are you mad!'  
'Do you see what we have to put up with,' I said,  
turning to Paul and Joseph.

The two men chuckled.

'Oh well,' smiled Joseph, 'We all have our crosses  
to bear.'

My wife stuck her head out through the doorway,  
'Shall we have a look at some of these before  
they're carried off?'

I nodded, and she pushed a smallish but  
surprisingly heavy package across the vehicle floor  
to me. I carried it over to the makeshift platform on  
the tractor forks and set it down with a plonk.

The girls climbed down with a few more packages  
and let Paul, Joseph and George get in.

'This looks and feels like a small statue,' I said.  
'Heavy, though. Probably solid marble.'

'Open it then,' said Margaux. 'We don't have X-ray  
eyes, you know.'

I unwound the multiple layers of wax cloth but  
gaped as I undid the last turn. 'Hells bells!'

We all gathered around and stared, open-  
mouthed.

Standing on the dusty old planks was a small  
statue of a chubby angel. It measured about thirty  
centimetres high and gleamed in the sun's rays.  
However, it was not made of marble or granite. It  
was made of solid gold.

'Great Gods!' cried Joseph, jumping down and  
striding over. He lifted it and weighed it in his hands.

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'This must weigh at least twenty kilos,' he gasped, plonking it down again.

Mike nodded and did one of his lightning-fast mental calculations: 'That means it would be worth about one point five million euros in gold alone,' he nodded respectfully, 'But it's a work of art too, so...'

George and his officers came over and gasped. However, they quickly frowned and glanced worriedly out through the barn doors.

Alun chuckled, 'I thought Angles didn't have sex.'

'Of course not,' I replied. 'It's against the rules.'

He ignored me, 'Well, this one has sex. Admittedly, a small one, but all the same...'

'That's not...' started Mike. 'Oh, I give up!'

'The sooner all these packages are in safekeeping at headquarters, the better,' said George with a worried look.

I glanced at them and pursed my lips, 'And you intend to drive this multi-million euro cargo over to Sarlat, do you? To Sarlat, through the forest and along all those nice deserted winding lanes?' I said. 'Not very prudent.'

George pulled a face, 'No. I'll call and get them to send a couple of escort cars. If anyone gets wind of this...'

'Exactly,' said Alun.

After this, we set up a (human) chain and, passing the packages from hand to hand, offloaded them into the rear loader attachment on the tractor. Some smaller ones were unexpectedly heavy,

making us even more uncomfortable about our exposed position.

Antoine drove each new load down to the three police vans waiting on the track, and two of the armed officers remained to stand guard.

My phone rang while the tractor was on its way down the field for the third time. I listened and nodded, 'OK,' I said, 'When? Oh! He's on his way now!'

I listened a little longer, then replied, 'Thanks a lot. And you'll send someone down to the Police headquarters at Sarlat? Perfect.'

I hung up and looked around the group of interested faces. 'That was our friend from Sotheby's. He contacted the people mandated to investigate the origins of valuables stolen during the war. One of their specialists is in the region today. The guy decided to come over straight away. This afternoon, in fact. He's called Daniel if anyone is interested.'

Nobody was.

We worked for another half hour, and as we were offloading the last packages into the tractor back-loader, George called out from outside.

'Someone coming along the track,' His voice sounded nervous. 'Two people, in fact.'

I nodded to Antoine, who put his tractor into gear and sped out of the barn and down the sloping field.

We then tramped outside to see who the unexpected visitors were.

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A tall figure appeared through the undergrowth—a well-dressed woman with short dark hair. She was followed closely by a short, round man in his early sixties.

Furthermore, as they approached, it became evident that not only was the woman tall but also distinctly glamorous and particularly curvaceous. The man panting along behind her was no less curvaceous but in entirely different places. The overall effect was, however, much less appealing to the eye. He was also bald, bespectacled, and perspiring, which didn't help much.

It was clear which of the two was in charge. When she reached the barn, she stopped and looked around our little group, trying to determine who was in charge.

Joseph stepped forward, 'Can I help you?'

She nodded and held out her hand, 'My name's Danielle Arnaud, and this is Monsieur Douanier. Our department received a call from Sotheby's. I think he phoned to let you know we were on our way.'

We all relaxed. Not murderous mercenaries, then. That was a relief.

I moved towards Joseph. 'I'm sorry. We were expecting a man.'

She laughed, 'Yes. Daniel and Danielle sound the same over the phone. But as you can see, I am not male.'

It would have been impossible to make such a mistake without being blind.

However, we had had dealings with glamorous, curvaceous women before.

The last of these had turned out to be a ruthless murderer. Her name had been Florence, and to our certain knowledge, she had killed at least two men. Unfortunately for her, though, she had ended up at the bottom of the Septet mill pond after crossing arms with the mercenaries sent to "tidy up loose ends"...

Our previous stay in the region had been rather full of excitement.

From the direction of the access track, we heard the noise of cars arriving, followed by the slamming of numerous doors.

'The escort,' nodded George. 'We can relax a bit now.'

'Escort!?' exclaimed the woman, Danielle, frowning. 'Relax!?'

Joseph chuckled, 'I see your boss didn't give you quite all the information.'

'He told me you had discovered a few articles which might belong to things stolen during the last war.'

'That's roughly correct,' smiled Joseph. 'It's just the words "a few" which might lead to confusion.'

'Confusion!?' she screwed up her eyes and gazed from one of us to the other.

The little fat man decided things needed clarification. 'They mean that we might not understand the facts clearly and fully, given the terms used to communicate the information.'

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The woman turned to him and blinked, shaking her head slightly as if to clear away cobwebs. 'You what!?'

'Come with me,' said Joseph, and led her through the barn doors.

'Great Heavens!' she exclaimed.

'Yes.' agreed Joseph. 'And that was filled to overflowing with waxcloth-covered packages. Not "a few", but several hundred, some of which appear to be solid gold.'

The two newcomers gasped.

'Hence the escort.'

'Ah!'

'Exactly. The painting we called up Sotherbys about was valued at over five hundred thousand euros.'

At this moment, George exclaimed, 'Oh hell!'

'What is it?' I asked.

Three policemen had appeared at the bottom of the field and were striding towards us. Two had machine guns over their shoulders.

George grimaced, 'It's the big boss. Big as in huge. Commissionaire Divisionnaire, Fournier. Chief superintendent in your country.'

The woman opened her big eyes wider than one would have expected possible. Then, realising that here was a man of some substance, she straightened herself and brought her curvature forward and up.'

The chief Inspector strode up and glanced around us.

George stepped forward and saluted respectfully. 'These are the people who found the stash, Sir,' He said, pointing us out.

'Good. Well done, everyone, ' he said. Then, turning to Danielle and her assistant, he frowned and said brusquely, 'And who are these two?'

The woman stepped forward and explained her presence.

He nodded curtly, 'Papers, please.'

'I'm sorry!?' she said, taken aback.

'Your papers, please. I'll need proof of your identities.'

'But!'

'Papers, please,' he repeated.

The woman was obviously not used to being treated this way. Her ample curves, no doubt, usually smoothed her path through situations like this.

Even so, the two exchanged looks, then reluctantly searched their pockets and handed over their papers.

The chief inspector handed them straight to one of his men without examining them and said, 'Check these on the car computer.'

The man strode off.

The woman bridled, and I noticed wry and satisfied smiles widening across my wife's and Margaux's faces. They enjoyed seeing women of the sort put firmly in their places.

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'But really!' she said.

However, the chief had already set off towards the barn. He stopped short when he spotted the colossal vehicle. 'Ah, Ha! So that's it, is it? A World War Two command and troop carrier! Well, well, well!' He strode forward, leaving the woman muttering in the background, and jumped up through the open door.

Joseph, who had taken things in hand, climbed up after him. 'The rear was overflowing with waxcloth-enveloped packages,' he said.

The commissioner nodded. 'Yes. I saw them in the vans. And if I understand correctly, if your friends hadn't purchased this place for a renovation project, it might have remained hidden for another eighty years.'

'Exactly Commissaire Divisionnaire,' said Joseph, knowing how some police officials appreciate being addressed with their correct titles.'

'We'll have to get this vehicle into safe keeping too. I'll send the military guys over.'

Joseph nodded. 'It might very well still work,' he said. In that case, they could drive it away.'

The commissioner nodded, 'Very probably, but they'll know how to deal with it. Not my responsibility, though.'

The two men got back out and were turning when a blinding flash of light startled them.

'What the hell!?' shouted the man. Then, he called out, spotting a man pointing a camera at us. 'Stop that man.'



However, he needn't have spoken. George and the machine-gun-armed officer had already apprehended the man.

The man with the camera blinked, seeing the guns pointed at him. He took a step backwards. 'Press!' he shouted. He made an involuntary movement with his hand towards his breast pocket to retrieve his papers. However, he immediately froze, seeing two guns levelled in his direction. 'Press...' he repeated rather more lamely this time. 'La Figaro.'

'Get his papers,' said the Commissionaire Divisionnaire. Keep your hands up for the moment. I can do without accidents just before my promotion goes through.'

'No,' nodded the rather shocked man. 'In my left-hand inner pocket,'

The officer retrieved his wallet and handed it to his chief. The man extracted the ID and press cards and handed them to the officer. 'We'll check these on the way back.'

He looked around at us. 'I'll be going now. Thank you very much for your help,' he said. Then he turned to Danielle and her assistant. 'You can pick up your papers from the police station in Sartlat.'

'But!' said the woman.

'You won't be needing them this afternoon. You weren't planning on leaving the region, were you?'

'No. But...'

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'If everything is in order, you can pick them up in an hour. And I'll want to know where you're staying.'

With this, he turned to the newspaper reporter. 'And you,' he said, 'will come with us. You'll need to explain how you happened along, just at the right moment.'

He then strode off, followed by the pressman, followed in turn by the armed guard.

A few moments later, there was a chorus of car doors slamming. This was followed by engines starting up and then the sound of a convoy moving off down the rough track.

The visibly highly annoyed woman and her assistant strode quickly away the way they came to drive over to the police headquarters and recover their papers. At least, that's what we thought they intended. In truth, they had other plans.

'Well,' smiled Alun. 'That's one thing done.'

Mike, Alun and I closed the heavy barn doors, and then we all set off back to the Septet.

Paul smiled. 'That was all a bit unexpected.'

Margaux shook her head, a wry smile on her lips, 'No, it wasn't. That's exactly the sort of thing that *IS* to be expected when these three are in the vicinity.'

Everyone laughed as we crossed the little stream and took the cliff track.

'I suppose we had better take the painting over, too,' I said. 'Where did you put it, Paul?'

'I locked it in the basement,' he said. 'Not the first valuable thing that's been hidden down there.'

'No,' I laughed.

A quarter of an hour later, we breasted the lip of the hillock on which the Septet stood. As we did so, a car door opened, and a well-dressed woman stepped out. She was a smiling, middle-aged woman with a mass of long, dark, wavy hair which fell over her shoulders. She was impeccably dressed in a well-cut trouser suit. From the opposite side of the car, a tall, thin man emerged, stroking his grey beard as he did so.

As the woman approached us, he stayed where he was, gazing with appreciation at the main farmhouse.

Joseph stepped forward and smiled.

She nodded and held out her hand, 'My name's Danielle Arnaud, and this is Monsieur Douanier. Our department received a call from experts at Sotheby's...'

'Oh hell!' cried Paul, dashing toward the front door. He grabbed the key, unlocked the cellar door and disappeared.

From below came a cry. 'Oh God! It's gone.'

## CHAPTER 5

Paul closed and relocked the cellar door, then came slowly back outside. 'Who the hell stole that?' he groaned. 'no one knew we had found anything.'

Margaux shook her head in annoyance, 'Above all, who could have guessed we had hidden a painting that no one knew about in a wine cellar that few knew existed?'

'Or that the key was hanging on a hook beside the aforesaid cellar door...' I added with a slight smile.

'As you said earlier,' added Emma. 'Cliffs have ears. They seem to have eyes, too.'

Involuntarily, we all glanced up at the top of the cliff.

This was from where, the previous year, mercenaries who had been sent to "clear up loose ends" had studied the comings and goings at the farmhouse.

'One moment, please,' said Joseph, stepping forward and gazing down at Mrs Arnaud, 'How do

we know that you are the real Danielle Arnaud and Monsieur Douanier as you declare?’

The woman blinked, ‘Of course we are! For goodness sake! Who else could we be? We’ll show you our papers.’

‘They could be forgeries,’ he replied curtly. ‘After all, the other Danielle Arnaud didn’t hesitate to hand her papers to the police, did she? Maybe she had a clear conscience.’

‘They were obviously forged because I am the real Danielle Arnaud.’

‘And I’m the real Monsieur Fournier,’ added the tall, thin man with the beard.’ He paused, then added, ‘Did the other man have a beard?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘There you are then.’

‘Where are we?’ I asked.

‘Well, if he didn’t have a beard, he could hardly be me, could he? I’ve always had one.’

I smiled, ‘You were born with it, then? That’s rare.’

‘No. What I mean is that I’ve had a beard for ages. At least twenty years.’

The woman shook her head at him, ‘Pierre!’

‘Yes.’

‘These people need more proof than your gentlemanly word.’ She paused, then turned to Joseph. ‘If you saw our portraits on the official departmental website. Would that be sufficient?’

‘Good idea,’ said Pierre Douanier.

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'Joseph frowned, 'How do we know that the website is not a fake, too?'

'Because you can phone your friend from Sotheby's and ask him to give you the exact address and the detailed spelling,' she said.

'OK,' I said. 'I'll contact him straight away.'

I took out my phone and dialled the number.

Joseph nodded. 'But while we are checking that. Do you mind if we have a look in your car boot?'

'In the car boot!' cried the woman.

'That's it. Remember that an extremely valuable painting has just disappeared. And if you are the real Danielle Arnaud and Pierre Fournier, as you declare... We'd be unlikely to find the missing oil painting in there, would we?'

The woman stared at Joseph, open-mouthed, 'Well, I never!'

'Shall we have a look then?' said Joseph, stepping towards the car.

I must admit that we were all impressed by the atmosphere of unwavering authority that Joseph had conjured up.

The woman let her hands drop resignedly, 'Oh, all right. If you must.'

'It would be best, don't you think?' smiled Joseph.

Angrily, she rummaged in her bag, took the keys, pointed them at the car and beeped it open. 'There you are. Go ahead then.'

Alun and Mike strode over and lifted the boot. 'Nothing here,' called Alun.

He then opened the doors and checked inside. 'Nor here.'

Finally, he leaned into the car and opened the bonnet. Mike lifted it and gazed in, 'One big car engine. Zero paintings,' he said.

By this time, I had a text message reply from Sotheby's with a weblink. I followed this and up popped the portrait of Madame Danielle Arnaud, head of the department, etc.

I showed this to Joseph, who nodded. 'That's all right then,' he paused. 'My excuses, Madam. But someone has just stolen an extremely valuable painting. It could have been one of you two, couldn't it.'

The woman smiled. 'I understand. No offence taken.'

'So,' frowned Alun. 'The extremely curvaceous version of Missus Arnaud was a false Missus Arnaud then.'

'Curvaceous!?' frowned the real owner of the name.

My wife sighed and stepped forward, 'He means that she had big breasts and that these fools couldn't stop goggling at them.'

'I was not goggling at all. Just observing,' said Alun.

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'Hardly observing, Alun.' I added. 'Perhaps noticing, no more than that.'

'Yes,' he smiled. 'Noticing.'

Margaux sneered, 'Noticing, with your eyes bulging out of your heads.'

'No, that's a slanderous lie,' cried Alun.

'Oh, all right. Starting out of your head, then...'

Joseph smiled at the woman and her assistant, who seemed a little lost. 'One gets used to them after a while,' he said.

The woman pulled a doubtful face. 'Now that we have clarified our identities, perhaps someone could explain what you actually found. After all, we are completely in the dark for the moment.'

We stepped over to the vast deal table by the pond and sat down.

Emma went inside and returned with a tray full of glasses and aperitif doings and then served everyone.

After this, we set about explaining what we had discovered.

Danielle and Pierre were insistent about knowing the precise number of packages we had found.

'From what you say,' said Pierre, stroking his pepper and salt beard, 'The packages you found stored inside that vehicle must have been the part prepared for immediate delivery.'

I frowned, 'What do you mean by that?'



'Well, the quantity you describe can only be a small part of the total. About a quarter, I'd guess.'

He glanced at Danielle, who nodded in agreement.

'The officer in charge had probably been instructed to transport that load to the train station to be shipped to Germany,' He took a sip of his wine and made an appreciative nod.

'When the unexpected and urgent orders to move up to Normandy came, the guy hid it as best as he could, intending to return later.'

'He did an excellent job,' I said.

'Yes. So the question is... Where are the missing three quarters?'

We gazed at each other.

Alun frowned, 'You mean that somewhere around here, they hid three times more?'

'Exactly,' said Danielle.

'The same quality?'

'Yes. Probably.'

'So you suspect that somewhere in the region, someone hid a huge quantity of almost priceless works of art?'

'Not exactly priceless,' said Pierre. 'Because we know exactly what was stolen.'

'Yes!' we looked at him with bated breath.

'Valued somewhat over a few hundred million euros.' he nodded.

'A few hundred million euros!' gasped Margaux.

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'Roughly,' smiled Pierre. 'Worth taking pains about looking for, I think.'

I pulled a face, 'Worth getting some excellent forged ID papers for.'

'Yes,' said Danielle, 'And hiring the best operatives to access it.'

'Operatives without too many scruples?' I suggested.

Margaux chuckled, 'Curvaceousness being thrown in as a distinctly advantageous extra... When men are to be dealt with.'

Regardless of the seriousness of the situation, we all burst out laughing, albeit a little nervously.

I frowned again, 'But where on earth could all that stuff have been hidden so that it hasn't been found in eighty years?'

'Another deserted barn,' suggested Mike.

Danielle shook her head. 'No. They must have had a main storage site somewhere in the region. Somewhere where no one would think of looking.'

Mike nodded. 'Like in the basement of the police headquarters?'

Danielle smiled, 'Yes. Somewhere like that.'

'Or the town hall archives or the hospital basement.' I added.

'Or the main museum archives, that would be absolutely perfect,' said Alun

Pierre smiled, 'Yes. Exactly. But most of those places have already been searched. However, having pulled a blank, we assumed the main part had already been shifted out of the country. However, I guess we'll have to think again.'

'Mike pulled a face and nodded, 'If I were those guys, I'd have walled off part of some building or other and stored the stuff behind it. Then I'd have ensured that no one who knew the wall hadn't always been there was eliminated.'

Danielle nodded and smiled. 'Excellent thinking. Yes. I believe that is exactly the sort of thing that could have been done.' She paused. 'As I said, we'd do well to start from the beginning.'

We discussed this idea a little more, and then the two said they ought to be getting to Sarlat, where they had booked a hotel. They said they would visit the police headquarters the following morning and start documenting our findings. Once this had been done, the search for the remaining three quarters would be reactivated.

We wished them luck and offered any help we could supply.

Once they had left, we set the table for the evening meal.

Emma and Julianna Metrokovitch would not be back until after midnight, and as the evenings were still cool, we headed for bed relatively early.

## The Dordogne Renovation Project

The following morning at breakfast, Sophie and Julianna Metrokovitch were full of their photoshoot experience. They brought out a laptop and illustrated the various phases of the day with vast numbers of photos. Given the quality of these, it was clear that the team Joseph had chosen for the job knew what they were doing and had produced some incredible images. They promised to be even more impressive once they had passed through the hands of the Photoshop wizard.

During the afternoon, they met the songwriter Joseph had employed to prepare the songs for Sophie's debut album. Both women were head over heels in love with what he had played them. Joseph, however, said he reserved his opinion until he had heard them himself.

'At this game,' he said. 'You don't get second chances. I want to ensure we have at least two top-ten songs.'

'Aren't you being a bit over cautious?' said Julianna.

'No, I don't. Do you realise the effort and money required to convince the major radios to give us a decent amount of airplay?' He looked around at us.

'But surely,' I said, 'If the songs are good, they'll play them.'

Joseph shook his head. 'You're a hundred per cent wrong! You need to understand that every twenty-four hours of radio time is split up into slots

of about three minutes. And each and every slot is presently full.'

'So?' said Julianna.

'So, to add a new song four or five times a day, the program manager has to remove four or five other songs. But the people who own those songs don't want them to be removed.'

'Normal,' I nodded.

'Especially if they have invested a lot of time and money in getting them on in the first place, like I will.'

I smiled, 'And I expect that if most prime time slots are taken up by material from the major international record companies, things get a bit complicated.'

'You're telling me!' nodded Joseph. 'So the guy who decides wants to be sure that any new material will attract and hold listeners. If it doesn't, people will switch channels, negatively affecting the impact of any advertising campaigns aired after the new song. That means they'll lose advertising customers, and those guys don't like that.'

I nodded, 'So if the song is a flop, getting another one on is going to be nigh on impossible.'

'You got it,' said Joseph. 'I'll have weeks of travelling around the country, "wining and dining" people and negotiating terms with national, regional and local radio stations. So I want to ensure we're onto a winner before I start.'

## The Dordogne Renovation Project

'Now I understand why you want to hear the demos first,' I said.

'I'll put a top-notch music arranger on the songs and get in the best pro session musicians available. But you can't make a silk purse out of a sow ear, no matter how much money you pour into it.'

'What if you think the songs aren't up to level?' asked my wife.

Joseph shrugged, 'I get another songwriter in. The worst thing one could do would be to rush things. I may very well upset a few people, but I'm not risking messing up Sophie's chance of making a success.'

Sophie followed the discussion, her chin propped up on her cupped palms. 'But I thought the songs were really nice. And the guy was so enthusiastic...'

'They all are, Sophie,' smiled Joseph. 'Always. No matter the real quality of the work they're presenting, That's how it is. But, one must avoid getting caught up in a songwriter's natural enthusiasm. That's extremely dangerous and leads to resounding failures.'

We gazed at him, and he went on.

'I'm not in this to make some songwriter or other happy. I'm not investing time and money for the fun of it. I'm doing this so that Sophie gets a good start.'

I pulled a face, 'I suppose you're right.'

'I am.'

'Well!' sighed Julianna, 'That took the wind out of our sails a bit.'

'Sorry,' smiled Joseph. But we have to do this professionally. There's no place for sentiment and no place for errors, either. If we get it right, the radio channels will promote Sophie. Then, the big record companies will hear her and propose a contract. And that's what we are aiming for.'

'But, in that case, won't you lose out?' said Margaux.

Joseph smiled slyly, 'Don't you worry about me, Margaux. I always manage to land on my feet.' He chuckled. 'Remember, I am still Sophie's manager whatever happens.'

I laughed, 'And artist agents and managers are not classified as among the poorest men on earth.'

'Oh, Well! We scrape by,' he smiled. 'And I'll only be taking twenty per cent this time.'

'But if the project fails, you lose all your investment.'

'Correct. And that's why it will not be allowed to fail.'

Julianna shrugged her massive shoulders, which set her ample opera singer's bosom bouncing and swaying. 'So why not tell us about yesterday's adventures now you've ruined our enthusiasm?'

From here on, music was temporarily put to one side as we explained what had happened.

## The Dordogne Renovation Project

Then, a little later, as we were finishing breakfast, we heard a car stop at the base of the hillock and a door slam. A few moments later, a man's head came bobbing into view above the edge of the plateau. The rest of him gradually became visible as he strode up the track. Spotting us, he waved and walked towards us.

Mike frowned, 'That's the press photographer from yesterday.'

'He's not in prison, then. So that's a good sign,' I said. 'It means he's not in league with the false Danielle and Pierre.'

'Or possibly just cleverer than them,' said Margaux. 'I wonder what he wants?'



## CHAPTER 6

**T**he press photographer strode over to us and smiled. 'Good fun yesterday, eh?' he said. 'As you see, I got away safely,' He laughed. 'If we had been in Turkey, for example, it would have been another matter,' he nodded, 'Caught taking illegal photos of classified military equipment and installations.'

Alun, Mike, and I nodded vigorously in agreement. In the past, we had had a number of dealings with police forces of that sort. These had led to us spending several nights in damp prison cells, all because of slight misunderstandings. In most cases, these misunderstandings had arisen from Alun using his imagination to explain a perfectly simple situation.

The man was not at all what I imagined a press photographer would look like.

He was short and a little plump, with a head of tightly curled dark hair. It's true this gave him a slightly arty look, but his rather squat body and

square shoulders seemed more in phase with a small rugby player than an artistic type. In any case, the man appeared to be in good humour, and the creases around his blue eyes pointed to a man who laughed frequently. Hopefully, not at his own jokes.

Joseph took a sip of his coffee and gazed up at the man with his new-found authoritative look, 'I know that times have changed, but even in these modern days, I believe people still have names.'

'Oh yes... Sorry.' The man was taken aback by Joseph's curt request. 'My name's Gerard Keiffer.'

Joseph nodded, 'And you work for The Figaro?'

'That's right.'

'And I presume you have proof of that.'

The man frowned, 'The police checked my credentials.'

'Possibly, but we weren't there and thus can't know that, can we.'

'Why on earth should I lie about my identity?' cried the man, frowning.

Alun turned in his chair, 'For the same reason as the glamorous woman you met yesterday. Her assistant, too. They lied about their identities, and apparently, they both had forged ID cards too.'

'Really!?'

'Yes.' I said. 'And they also stole an extremely valuable painting from us.'

'Really!?' The man's blue eyes opened wide and sparkled with interest. 'Ah, ha! I can feel a really nice story forming itself here.'

Mike had been messing about trying to make an origami-like bird with his napkin, 'Kieffer!?' he frowned. 'That's German, isn't it? The tank in the barn is German, too,' he paused. 'Odd coincidence that.'

'Everyone turned their gazes on the rather uncomfortable man.'

'It's not a German name,' he said. 'My family comes from Alsace. A little village not far from Mulhouse.'

'Ah! Really!' said Mike, in a notably unconvinced manner.

At this moment, George appeared, emerging from the forest along the track from the village. He was accompanied by Inspector Venet, who had arrived late the previous night.

Spotting the man, he nodded. 'Your not one to allow the grass grow under your feet, are you,' he smiled.

'No, Sir. You don't get major scoops by sitting, drinking coffee and discussing politics in the café with the lads. Once news of this affair gets out, the place will be crawling with reporters. I want to get my copy in first.'

'Ah!' Inspector Venet paused. 'That's a point we'll have to discuss.'

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'Sorry,'

'Well. I've just had the big boss, The  
Commissionaire Divisionnaire, on the phone.'

'And?'

Joseph interrupted, 'Inspector Venet?'

'Yes.'

'Before we proceed further, can we assume that  
this person is who and what he declares himself to  
be?'

'Yes. We checked up with the Figaro. He's a  
bona-fide member of the Figaro staff. Quite a well-  
known photographer, in fact. On holiday, though.'

'We're rarely entirely on holiday,' said Gerard  
Keiffer.

'Well, that's one thing cleared up,' said Joseph.

Mike perked up, 'But how come you turned up just  
at that critical moment?'

'Critical!?'

Joseph scowled, 'Would you please explain,  
please?'

The man shrugged, 'It's just a good reporter's  
luck. I was sitting at a café near the police station,  
waiting for a friend, when there was a bit of a  
commotion.' He smiled, 'In my job, commotions  
often lead to a good copy or a juicy story. Anyway, a  
group of armed officers came rushing out of a side  
door and dived into two cars. I was on my motorbike  
and after them before you could say...'

'Buttock?' suggested Alun.

The man laughed and continued, 'I followed them at a respectable distance, then sneaked up... '

'And got caught,' I smiled. 'You'll have to work on that part if you want to clinch the deal of the century and land the Big One,'

'And reel in the big blond,' suggested Alun.

Margaux gazed at her husband with something verging on pity, 'Why, oh why, do we always end up with Big Blonds.'

Alun shrugged, 'That's what makes the world spin around.'

'Hand me that breadboard, Emma,' she said. 'I'm going to see if I can make Alun's head spin around a little.'

The reporter looked back at Inspector Venet, 'You said the Commissioner called.'

'Yes,' he hesitated. 'A spot of admin trouble has come up. He says you'll understand, though.'

'That sounds like bad news in preparation. I'm not going to be thrown into jail, am I?'

'I don't think so. No. Well, at least not today. But... ' Venet hesitated, clearly searching for the right way of proceeding.

'I don't like long "Buts" like that,' smiled Gerard, then suddenly he frowned. 'Wait a minute! What's so special about that old military van in the barn?'

Alun pursed his lips and wiggled his eyebrows.'

## The Dordogne Renovation Project

'Ah!' nodded the newspaper reporter, 'I ought to have spotted that. I thought it was odd, being there in the middle of nowhere.'

'That's what the Commissaire Divisionnaire called about,' he paused. 'I'll explain.'

'I wish you would,' said Gerard.

'But...'

'Ah! that long "but" again. I don't like the way this discussion is shaping.'

Alun smiled, 'We cultivated, literary-savvy wallahs call that a "Trailing" But,' he paused, 'Nasty things; trailing Buts.'

I chuckled, 'or perhaps a "Damocles" but.'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'Brilliant! I like that. A "Damocles But". A Democlesian but.'

'But, please note,' I added. 'I'm not referring to one of those American butts. The ones with two "t"s,'

'Heaven forbid,' gasped Alun. 'The Great American Butt.'

I smiled, 'One certainly wouldn't want a huge Democlesian Butt hanging over one, would one?'

'One certainly would not,' replied Alun.

By now, we appeared to have lost the French members of our little group, so Mike helped out, 'These two idiots are referring to the American slang word "Butt", which is simply an abbreviated version of the British, Buttock.'

I nodded, 'And could there be anything purer and more refined than a good old British Buttock?'

'Kingdoms have fallen for less,' said Alun.

'Even so,' I frowned, 'Shortening a British buttock oughtn't be allowed. After all, without full and ample British buttocks, where would the world be today?'

Alun nodded, 'Agreed. To start with, America wouldn't exist. And therefore, there wouldn't be any Americans. And thus, there would have been no messing around with British buttocks.'

'Exactly!' I cried. 'No buttock truncation.'

'Rule Britannia!' cried Alun

'Rule Britannia,' I repeated.

Then, together, and in a single great British voice, 'Rule Britannia,' we sang at the top of our voices.

'Shut up, you fools,' said Margaux.

Alun and I exchanged looks, 'Oh, all right.'

Inspector Venet had been following this stimulating and witty exchange with a certain amount of detachment. He was clearly getting used to us. The reporter seemed to have gone into "pause" mode if his blank face was anything to go by.

'So, Inspector Venet?' I said. 'The Commissionaire Divisionnaire said...?'

Inspector Venet woke up. 'Ah! Yes. Well! Let's start from the beginning, shall we.'

Alun frowned, 'Before the dinosaurs or after?'

'Margaux threw a bit of baguette at him, 'shut up, Alun.'

After taking a few deep breaths, Inspector Venet explained the full extent of our discovery and its implications.

'Great Gods!' exclaimed the reporter. 'I did well to hang around that café yesterday. What a scoop!'

Inspector Venet nodded, 'And that's where we have a small problem. We have several hundred million euros worth of stolen works of art probably hidden somewhere in the region. We have assumed they are probably stored in a single location, but that may not be correct.'

I nodded, 'I see. And if this fact were brought to the attention of the public...'

'Exactly,' said Inspector Venet, 'The place would be awash with treasure hunters.'

Alun pulled a face, 'The idea of getting one's hands on stuff worth a few hundred million euros might also draw in some people somewhat less scrupulous than the average person.'

'That too,' said Inspector Venet. 'So we need to be permitted to carry out our research without being hampered by thousands of treasure hunters.'

The reporter scowled. 'Do I get the impression that the long arm of the law intends to suppress information?'

Inspector Venet sighed, 'We already seem to have at least one group on the track, and they turned up unexpectedly quickly. How they got onto it, we don't know.'



I smiled, 'The fact that they had forged papers seems to indicate that they are far from amateurs.'

'And didn't just Chance by,' said Alun.

'So?' said the pressman.

'Well, the commissionaire says he would appreciate your cooperation.'

'My cooperation?'

'That's right.'

'In exchange for not being thrown into a dark and dripping dungeon, with only bread and water for sustenance?'

Inspector Venet smiled, 'I should point out that the commissionaire divisionnaire is on the eve of his ultimate promotion. It's not the best moment to be accused of messing with the press.'

'Ah!' smiled Gérard. 'A man who knows which side his bread is buttered on.'

Inspector Venet nodded. 'He says that if you agree to help us, he will allow you to participate in the investigations. Once we have the situation cleared up, you can have the scoop.'

'A hundred million euros worth of scoop,' said Alun. 'That's worth a bit of negotiation.'

'A bit of information suppression, you mean,' frowned Gerard. 'Could this "proposition" be set down under the heading of bribery, I wonder?'

Inspector Venet shrugged, 'Sounds like an interesting arrangement if you ask me. First, you get to follow us around the place without having to

sneak and hide. Then you get the chance to break the discovery to the entire world with a host of details and photos, long before any of your competitors get a whiff of the existence of the subject.'

I smiled, 'And after that, maybe not only the Commissionnaire will get a big promotion package.'

Alun nodded, 'And nowadays, promotion packages are not to be sniffed at.'

'Promotion brings all sorts of advantages with it,' I added. 'Huge salary rise, more holidays, All the top assignments...'

'And,' smiled my wife, 'Had I not been present, Alun would have added that you also get the big blond.'

We all laughed, and Gerard sighed a resigned sigh. 'I have the distinct impression that everyone is against me and that suppression of information has won the day...'

'Perfect,' chuckled Inspector Venet. 'I'll tell the Commissionnaire Divissionaire, as soon as the papers are signed.'

'Papers!?' cried the photographer.

'Here,' George handed him a single sheet of A4. 'A standard non-disclosure agreement.'

Gerard sighed and took the pen which was extended to him.'

'Does that commissionnaire man have a real name?' I asked.

George had been standing listening all through this and smiled, 'I don't think so. Except perhaps for Sir.'

Gerard smiled, 'And I have your promise that I'll have full authorisation to take all the photos I want?'

'Yes.'

'And I'll be allowed to publish what I think would interest readers of La Figaro?'

Margaux chuckled, 'I guess that depends on whether the publication comes before or after our commissionaire's promotion.'

This sent another round of laughter around the table.

I looked across the table, 'Inspector Venet?'

'Yes.'

'Have you any idea how that woman and her assistant got on to what we'd discovered?'

He nodded, 'We wondered about that, but the experts, the real ones who came yesterday, didn't seem surprised.'

'Danielle Arnaud and Pierre Douanier?'

'That's them. They think several people have been searching for clues for years.'

'Really!?' exclaimed the reporter. 'Can I quote that?'

'Yes, when the time comes,' said Inspector Venet before continuing. 'They say that the existence of the treasure may have been passed on from one or

several of the soldiers involved at the time. That sort of thing gets talked about.'

Alun nodded, 'Old soldiers reminiscing to their children about their wartime experiences. And then the children grow up and think that a hundred million euros or two would round off the monthly pay packet nicely.'

Joseph frowned, 'Or finance a nice big terrorist attack.'

'Exactly,' said Inspector Venet. 'Having the treasure stolen for personal enrichment is... How can I put it?'

'Inconvenient?' I suggested.

'Enraging?' said Alun.

'Yes. After all,' said Inspector Venet. 'The original owners lost almost all they had during the war. Many of the offspring can no longer maintain the homes their parents left them. So getting back some of the family's original wealth would be more than welcome.'

'But,' I suggested, 'Allowing it to fall into the wrong hand would be very dangerous.'

'That's what we are worried about,' nodded Inspector Venet. 'There are some very unpleasant people out there. People with extremely radical ideas.'

'So how do we proceed?' asked Gerard.

George looked over at the inspector. The latter nodded him to proceed.

'Well,' he said. 'Tomorrow, we'll start by reviewing the potential hiding places previously investigated. Based on the ideas you put forward yesterday, we'll check out the basements and archives of all the official buildings in Sarlat.'

Alun chuckled, 'So the three old musketeer's ideas look like bringing home the bacon once more.'

'You can keep any bacon we find,' I said. 'I'll have the gold statues.'

George smiled, 'It'll be a big job. Weeks probably.'

First, we have to find the original drawings of the buildings. Then, we'll have to employ an architectural assessor with all his surveying gear. We'll need to compare the dimensions on the plans with their on-site measurements.

'To see if anything has been walled off since the places were built,' I nodded.

'Exactly,' said George.

'Oh!' said Mike, rubbing his hands together with glee. 'This is really going to be fun.'

'Yep,' I said.

Joseph scratched his neck and nodded, 'Perhaps that architect ought to start by taking exact measurements of the barn and the surroundings,' he said. 'One never knows, does one.'

Inspector Venet looked at the man sharply, 'Got an idea, have you?'

'No. I just thought it might be a wise precaution.'

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'Did you, now?' he said. 'It wouldn't be anything to do with getting the place surveyed free of charge, was it?'

'Heaven Forbid!' said Joseph.

'Oh well,' sighed the inspector. 'It's coming out of the ministry's pocket, not mine.'

Gerard rubbed his hands together enthusiastically, 'When do we start then.'

'Tomorrow morning. Nine-O-Clock at the town hall.'

We all nodded, 'We'll be there.'

## CHAPTER 7

**M**ike, Alun and I hurried uncharacteristically through our breakfasts.

Had my wife been paying attention she would have said that we'd gobbled through them and Margaux that we had been slobbering like ill-brought-up pigs. Luckily, however, they were listening to Sophie's photo-shoot adventures and didn't notice.

The truth is that we were bubbling over with enthusiasm about having a new look at the barn now that it was almost empty.

As we pushed back our chairs, my wife shook her head. 'Don't scrape your chairs, children. Just like kids on Christmas morning,' she laughed. 'Playing with new toys always takes precedence over proper digestion.'

I shrugged, 'It's not every day that one buys a barn.'

'A ruin, you mean,' said Margaux.

'Great oaks from tiny acorns grow,' quoted Alun.

Mike frowned, 'He means; "just wait and see".'

My wife sighed, 'Anyway, while we're waiting to see, which incidentally might take a little time, it'll keep you out of the pubs.'

'And the brothels,' added Margaux.

Alun shot me a look, 'I didn't know there were any brothels around here. Did you?'

I shook my head, 'One lives and learns.'

'One certainly does.'

Mike chuckled, 'That's the only known place where you can contract Covid and Aids simultaneously. And at no extra charge.'

'These are French establishments, Mike,' said Alun. 'Everything is clean and as pure as the driven snow.'

'Oh yeh!?' shrugged Mike. 'Who said snow can't get infected with COVID and Aids?'

'We're talking about French snow, Mike,' smiled Alun.

'The summit of purity and pristinity,' I added.

'They're not like those abject sleazy hovels leading off the reeking, urine-impregnated, narrow back streets deep in the docks at Lyme Regis, Mike,' sneered Alun.

Mike blinked. 'What on earth are you twattling on about, Alun!' he cried. 'There aren't any docks at Lyme Regis. I live there. Remember?'

'That's because they had to close them down,' replied Alun. 'Due to all the deaths caused by Coronoids,' he nodded. 'That was before your time, of course.'



'Coronaids!?' gasped Mike. 'What on earth!'

'That's exactly the same reaction the surgeon-general had when he discovered the nests of insalubrious fornication down there.'

'Is that why he closed down the docks, Alun?' I asked.

'Exactly.'

'What a load of crap!' cried Mike.

The same thing happened at Yeovil, I believe,' I said.

'For God's sake!' cried Mike, 'Yeovil is miles and miles from the sea.'

'These things spread fast, Mike.' said Alun.

'Docks, you mean?' I asked.

'Exactly. Look at New Deli.'

'What!?' groaned Mike. 'Don't talk rot, Alun.' 'New Deli is more than a thousand kilometres from the sea.'

'It is now,' nodded Alun.

'And Yeovil never had a maritime port either.'

'I didn't say it was a Maritime port, Mike. And remind me, is it you or I who lives in Yeovil?'

'At least I can agree to that,' replied Mike. 'But I hear on the grapevine that the mayor has got up a petition to have you forcibly relocated in Iceland.'

Alun nodded. 'Ah! Iceland would be fun.'

'Not for very long,' I frowned.

Alun nodded, 'No, you're right there.' He pulled a face, 'And what's more, there are docks all over the place up there.'

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I chuckled, 'Do you know what flourishes on the ruins of demolished maritime ports?'

'Dock Leaves?' smiled Alun. 'Yes, I Like it...'

'Margaux sighed, 'Are you idiots going or not?'

Alun looked at them quizzically. 'Would we, by any chance, be disturbing your tranquillity?' he asked.

'You would, ' said my wife. 'So, if you'd like to avoid being struck by a flying saucer, please depart promptly.'

'And in silence,' added Margaux.

I shrugged and turned to the photographer, Gérard. 'We're going over to the barn now. If you're free, you can come with us and get some photos.'

He nodded, 'I'll drive you if you like.'

I shook my head. 'We'll go on foot; it's not far. Anyway, we want to have a look at the storage barn on the way.'

The man nodded, 'OK. I'll fetch my gear.'

He disappeared down the hillock, and by the time we had taken our cups inside and rinsed them, he was back, a black carry-all slung over his broad shoulder.

'We took some photos before shifting the hay,' said Alun. 'You'll be able to do a "Before and After" set if you want.'

'Brilliant!' smiled Gerard. 'That'll make a fantastic opening.'

'We took them at about the same time of day, too,' added Mike. 'So, the lighting will be almost

identical. Early on, the sun's low enough to reach the back. Otherwise, it's on the shadowy side in there.

'Great,' he replied. 'What was that about a storage barn? I suppose there wouldn't be another load of hidden treasure in there, would there?'

We exchanged looks and shrugged, 'Well, last year, we discovered a huge articulated forestry tractor inside. Some hired mercenaries stole it and hid it in there.'

'Really!'

'Yes,' I smiled. 'We'll tell you all about that another day. Anyway, the thing has been returned to its owner now. We've never seen the place empty, so who knows what we'll discover.'

'A clandestine brothel, perhaps,' suggested Alun.

'Or a cesspit,' added Mike.

Alun strode ahead and shouted over his shoulder, 'It's much smaller than the main barn. A bit bigger than a double garage, I suppose.'

'Much taller, though,' I said.

'Oh yeh. Much taller. Like a small house, I suppose,' agreed Mike.

Alun sighed, 'Mike. It's exactly like a small house. I'd say it was even bigger than many British homes.'

'If you say so,' shrugged Mike.

'Try and get one of those articulated forest machines in your front room, Mike, and you'll see what I mean,' I said.

Mike shrugged again and strode on, 'Maybe.'

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George had accompanied us and was to meet Inspector Venet at the barn. 'You know that farmer who was helping you yesterday?' he said.

We nodded, 'Nice chap. Damn strong, too,' said Alun.

'Well, a couple of years ago, he found something peculiar at the back of his barn, too, ' continued George.

'A brothel?' asked Alun.

George ignored this, 'He was digging out the ancient part, originally penned off for sheep, and found some skeletons.'

"Skeletons!' We exclaimed.

'Of prostitutes, probably,' added Alun.

'There was quite a stir about it.'

'I'll bet!' said Alun. 'Dead pros are always bad news.'

'We had to call in the homicide guys from Bordeaux.'

'Someone murdered?' I asked.

Mike sighed, 'He said skeletons, with an "s" at the end, not a single skeleton.'

'Thanks, Mike,' I said.

George went on, 'Well, it turned out that they date from well before the war. At the end of the day, we had to do a carbon dating on the bones.'

The photographer pulled a face, 'I can feel another nice story in the making here. So, what happened?'

'The dating showed the skeletons to date back much further.'

'The First World War then?' I asked.

'No. Even further eighteen fifty or thereabout.'

'Oh!' I exclaimed. 'Did they find out who the bodies belonged to?'

Mike frowned, 'Skeletons are not bodies.'

'Thanks, Mike,' I sighed. 'I'll try to remember that.'

George smiled at me. 'So, we had to get the Archaeology experts and anthropologists down from Paris.'

'I bet that slowed down digging out the place,' I said.

'You bet. Your friend was wild about it. The guys fenced off the place and dug the whole inside area out. They went down nearly three meters and had to shore up the walls because they went lower than the foundations.'

'What did they find?' I asked.

'A couple more skeletons. But at the end of the day, they decided they must have belonged to some sort of outcasts or criminals.'

'In other words, ' I said. 'Of no interest.'

'That's what it comes down to. Of "no particular historical value", is how they termed it,' George smiled. 'He's still got a box full of the bones.'

Joseph had been listening carefully. 'He's still got them, has he? That's interesting.'

I shot him a look as he continued.

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'I suppose the archaeologists had to fill the hole again,' he added.

George nodded. 'Not only that. They had to pour in reinforced concrete foundations before they refilled the hole. Otherwise, the barn would have collapsed due to subsidence at the first really big storm.'

Joseph nodded slowly, 'Interesting. And you say he still has the skeletons.'

'Not everything. Just the bits which weren't part of a complete skeleton,' he nodded. 'Quite a lot all the same.'

'I'd be interested in having a look at them,' frowned Joseph.

Alun gazed at Joseph, 'I didn't know you were interested in archaeological remains.'

The man shrugged, 'I'm interested in all sorts of things. One never knows when something will come in useful.'

Alun shot me a quizzical look, and I frowned back at him. What, we wondered, was going through Joseph's mind?

At this moment, the rough track turned a corner, and the storage barn came into view.

'Ah! I see,' said Gerard. 'Yes, a good-sized place all the same.'

'Small-house sized, in fact,' I chuckled.

'All right, all right,' sighed Mike. 'Have it your own way.'

'And this barn belongs to you too, does it?' asked Joseph.

'Yep.' said Alun. 'That and the big field that leads up to the main barn.'

I nodded, 'And a bit of the forest on each side, too. Right up to the base of the cliff.'

'The freshwater spring, too,' added Mike.

Joseph nodded, 'And you purchased all that for next to nothing!'

'Yep,' smiled Alun.

Mike sighed, 'Well, after all, it's worth next to nothing, isn't it?' he said.

'For the moment,' I retorted. 'When we're finished, it'll be worth a fortune.'

Gerard nodded, 'You guys seem to have been in the right place at the right time?'

'You bet.' said Alun. 'And we got a World War Two vehicle full of priceless stolen treasure thrown in for free, too.'

'A real bargain,' I added, laughing, 'If you're keen on that sort of thing, of course.'

'One can have too much of priceless treasures, though,' smiled Alun.

I nodded, 'They bring certain negative vibes with them.'

'Not to mention undesirable characters,' frowned Alun.

When we reached the barn, Mike and I grabbed a door each and heaved them open.'

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'Oh!' gasped Alun, 'Now, what have we here?'

The early sun's rays lit the inside of the building, illuminating a small green tractor standing in the middle of the space. It was barely shoulder height, with a rusty exhaust pipe extending above the driver's seat. The tyres were caked with ancient dry mud but looked barely worn at all.

Mike strode over, 'Yes. Nice. This will come in handy.'

He wandered around it and tapped the fuel tank. 'Half full still. Brilliant! I wonder how long it's been here.'

'Years and years, if the quantity of bird droppings on the bonnet is anything to go by,' smiled Alun.

'Bat droppings, too,' I added, gazing up at the roof beams to see if I could locate any of the creatures.

'What's the flat thing attached to the back?' asked Joseph.

'That's a brush mower attachment,' nodded Mike. 'At least that's what I think it's called. They use them for clearing the uncultivated ground of weeds and...'

I interrupted, 'It's used to slash to pieces anything dead or alive that comes within reach of its blades.'

'Like a huge "metal-blade strimmer"?' asked Joseph.

We gazed at him with surprise, 'I wouldn't have thought you'd even have heard of that word, Joseph,' I said.

'That's me,' he smiled. 'Full of surprises.'



Mike had disappeared and was rummaging around behind the tractor. 'Hey. There's another load of straw bales here!'

'More!?' I cried. 'We'll have to get our friend over again. No sign of world-war two tanks or anything like that?'

'A helicopter would be fun,' said Alun.

'I'll have a look,' called Mike, taking me seriously as usual.

'I was joking, Mike.'

'I'll have a look anyway. You never know.'

There was a noise of scraping and scuffling, and Mike's head became visible above the tractor. He clambered from bale to bale and eventually reached the top, slightly above our heads and peered behind.

'Ah ha!' he cried. 'Now, what have we here?'

'Oh hell!' groaned Alun. 'Not more unexpected discoveries!'

'There's something behind these bales. 'Not very big, though.'

'Smaller than a small house?' I asked.

'Shut up and come and have a look for yourselves?'

We circumnavigated the little green tractor and clambered up after him.

Below us, behind the piles of bales and against the barn's back wall, was something covered with a dusty old, bird-dropping caked tarpaulin sheet.

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'Not a tank, then,' I said. 'Unless it's a very small one.'

'Not a helicopter either?' said Alun.

'No, Alun. They don't make small helicopters. It looks like a small car or something like that,' Mike said.

Alun frowned, 'Why don't they make small helicopters, Mike?'

'Shut up, Alun?'

'It might just be a trailer or some other agricultural machine.' I suggested. 'One of those things for making hay bales, for example.'

'Yeh. That's possible,' agreed Mike. 'I'll go down and get the tarpaulin off.'

He swung his feet over the top and let himself slide down the bales to floor level.

As we should have expected, his foot went straight into an old, empty paint can.

'Oh hell!' he cried, toppling backwards into the hay. 'Who put that damn thing there?' he grumbled.

'One of those skeletons, probably,' chuckled Alun. 'Playful chaps, skeletons.'

'That wasn't the same barn, you twit,'

'They left it there before they were skeletons, Mike. You probably just put your foot in their war paint tin. They were highwaymen, you know.'

'Shut up. For heaven's sake, Alun. Highwaymen didn't paint their faces.'

'How do you know?'

'I give in!' he groaned.

He stepped over and struck a curved portion of the fabric with his knuckle.

There was a hollow metallic clang from underneath.

'Ah ha!' he cried. 'That sounds distinctly like a car bonnet.'

'Yes.' said Gerard. 'I'd go even further. I'd say that it sounds distinctly like an old Citroën car bonnet.'

'A Citroën!?' I exclaimed.

'Yep. My dad had several. A Citroën 2CV. Would anyone like to place a bet?'

Mike grabbed the tarpaulin and dragged it back with all his strength. However, the job did not require that impressive amount of power. It slipped off with hardly any resistance, and he went sprawling backwards on the ground again.

'Oh hell, he groaned, getting to his feet and rubbing the back of his head. 'Oooh! Now, what have we here?'

We gazed down onto the canvas roofed top of an ancient 2CV.

'I told you,' Laughed Gerard. 'I would have recognised that tin-can clanging bonnet sound anywhere. Only vintage Citroens can clang like that.'

'What is it doing here?' said Mike, stepping closer.

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'But,' said Gerard with repressed enthusiasm, 'This is something rather special too.'

'Ah,!'

'Yes. I'm coming down to get a closer look.'

He slid down, avoiding the paint tin, and tapped the bonnet affectionately. 'This,' he said. 'Is a rather special machine.' he looked up at us. 'This is a rare four-wheel drive version of the 2CV.'

We nodded, doing our very best to convey suitable interest and surprise.

'It's called the 2CV Sahara and dates back to nineteen sixty or thereabouts.' he said. 'Come down, and I'll show you something you'll never have seen.'

We got down without too much trouble and gathered around the man. I have to admit that we were not particularly interested, but the man seemed so enthusiastic that we didn't want to thwart him.

He leant through the open window and fiddled about until we heard a clang.

He returned to the front and lifted the bonnet.

Alun leant forward, 'Eh voila! A car engine,' he said. 'That always comes in handy in a car.'

Gerard smiled, 'Now come and have a look at the back,'

We followed him, and he fiddled with the rusty boot handle, 'Everybody ready?'

We nodded.

'Any guesses as to what's in here.'

'A tire?' I suggested.

'The tyre was bolted to the bonnet,' said Mike.

'No, not a tyre,' Gerard smiled and lifted the boot cover.

'Great gods!' cried Mike, 'What in heaven's name...'

Sitting in the place where the spare tyre should have been, there was another engine.

We all gaped while Gerard burst into a loud laugh. 'As I said, this is a four-wheel-drive car. But this one has two motors.'

We gazed in disbelief.

Gerard nodded, 'There's one motor for the front wheels and another independent one for the back axle. It also has two gearboxes and transmissions and two petrol tanks.

'That's incredible!' I gasped.

'Only the French could do that,' said Alun

Mike grinned, 'And they've started doing it again with some of the electric cars. "Dual motor" they call them. Nothing new under the sun...'

The man nodded and led us back towards the front. 'Now look inside,' he smiled happily.

We stepped over and gazed through the window.

'You see,' he said, pointing. 'Two starter buttons and two chokes.'

'But only one gearstick,' added Alun.

'Yep. That operates both transmissions simultaneously.'

'Brilliant!' said Alun.

'Yep. Now look here,' he stepped back and pointed at the lower part of the door. Protruding through the metalwork was the petrol cap. 'The two petrol tanks are directly under the driver's and passenger's seats, and each is filled separately. There's no room in the boot, so they had to put them somewhere, didn't they.'

Alun gulped, 'And to think that in those days, the guys always drove around endlessly smoking Gauloises cigarettes!'

Mike smiled, 'Not a good idea to forget to replace the petrol cap, then to drop your cigarette butt out of the window...'

'And so, the only place left for the spare tyre was on the bonnet,' said Alun, twanging the cracked leather straps which held it in place.

Gerard nodded, 'This version of the 2CV had fantastic off-road capability, but at twice the price of the standard 2CV, they didn't sell many. Excellent for farmers, but too expensive. If my memory is right, they made less than a thousand. Even so, the Swiss Post office used a good number of them as delivery vehicles in the snowy regions.'

Mike nodded, 'Yes, I can understand that. A light, narrow-tired four-wheel-drive car would be great on snow-covered roads.'

'Must be highly collectable,' said Joseph.

'You bet!' Replied Gerard. 'I'll give you fifty euros for it. Cash.'

We all laughed.

'I wonder if it still works?' I frowned.

Mike shook his head. 'You'd need to be careful. The engine will probably have rusted and seized up,' he nodded. 'You'd need to dismantle and grease everything before turning the engine over.'

I smiled, 'The engines, Mike. With an "s" at the end. Not an engine

'Very amusing,' he said.

Alun nodded, 'We could ask the chap at the garage to have a look at it. 'It would be a fantastic thing to have to run about in up here. Straight across the field and along the rocky tracks and all.'

The three of us exchanged enthusiastic looks. Yes, that would definitely be good fun.

'We can ask him up to have a look this afternoon,' said Mike.

We nodded.

'But,' said Alun. 'The tractor should be all right, shouldn't it.'

Mike frowned, then shrugged, 'Yep. I expect that should be OK.'

'Shall we have a go then?' I suggested.

Joseph sighed, 'I thought you three were extra keen to have a look at the main barn.'

'Ah!' I said.

'We got a bit sidetracked,' added Alun.

'As usual,' sighed Mike.

Joseph turned to us as we closed the barn doors, 'While you're showing off your new barn to this gentleman,' he smiled. 'If you like, I'll wander over and see if your farmer friend can come and clear the

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hay out. With a bit of luck, he'll also be able to get the tractor going and move it. Like that, this afternoon, the garage mechanic can take the car away if he thinks it's worth the trouble.'

'Yes, brilliant,' said Alun. 'Do you know the way?'

Joseph nodded. 'Down this track, right at the fork and then follow your nose...'

We laughed and set off in opposite directions.

We followed the rough track towards the bottom of the field. 'George nodded, 'That 2CV could get up here easily,' he said. 'Do you know that they set the bar extremely high when they were planning the initial 2CV design? One of the prototype tests was to transport a basket full of eggs across a ploughed field without breaking any.

'Really!?' I said.

'Yes. In fact, the very first version didn't even have seats, but sorts of hammocks suspended from the roof.'

'Not very stable,' Smiled Alun, 'I'd get seasick.'

'Yes. But you see,' he continued. 'The marketing idea was to make a car for farmers and their families, so it had to be as cheap as possible. They sold more than five million of them.'

Mike nodded, 'But the four-wheel drive version was a flop?'

'A mega-flop,' smiled Gerard.

At this point, we left the track, jumped a small stream, and clambered up a steep slope onto the lower part of our field.



As we appeared, we spotted movement near the barn.

'Hey! What's this?' cried Alun, starting off.

One of the barn doors was ajar, and out of it, two figures appeared. Spotting us, they sprinted off into the forest and disappeared down the path along the cliff base. George was the best runner by far, but the two people had disappeared by the time he reached the barn. A few moments later, we heard a motorbike engine start and rapidly fade as it followed the wider track behind the outcrop.

We caught up with George, who was still breathing hard from the uphill sprint. 'I wonder who that was?' he said.

'One thing's for sure,' I said. 'Given the speed they took off at, it wasn't that short fat fellow who was passing himself off as Pierre Douanier.'

'No,' said George, 'Two well-trained men.'

'Or women,' suggested Alun.

George frowned. 'I don't think so. They looked too heavy to be women.'

'Heavy women, then,' said Alun.

George shook his head, 'Heavy women don't move like that.'

'Not our glamorous fake Danielle Arnaud, then,' I said.

George shook his head, 'She didn't strike me as being athletically built.'

Alun shrugged, 'Perhaps we should have a closer look next time. Just in case.'

'Unless she carries a gun,' frowned Mike. 'A Woman who carries forged ID papers and passports and is perfectly at ease brazenly lying to armed policemen seems a good candidate for that sort of thing.'

'Hmm,' said Alun. 'In which case, I'll make do with having a closer look from a safe distance.'

'Bullets go a long way, Alun. You know that.'

'OK, we'll put off the closer look for the moment then.'

Gerard rubbed his hands together gleefully, 'This story is coming along really nicely. For once, I'll have plenty of time to write up the copy, too. If I play my hand right, it'll also make a good TV documentary.'

As we turned towards the barn doors, Inspector Venet arrived on foot. George explained what had happened.

'I wonder who that was?'

'Whoever it was, they must have been a bit disappointed to find the treasure gone', I said.

'Yes,' Venet frowned. 'But it means that at least two sets of people are already active. That's not good news for the rest of our job,' he paused. 'Remember, we haven't found the other three quarters yet and have no idea where it is.'

I was standing a little aside from the others, and suddenly something caught my eye.

'Oh Ho!' I whispered. 'We're being observed from up there on the cliff. Someone with field glasses. I saw them flashing in the sunlight.'

Everybody moved beside me and looked up. there was another flash followed by a slight movement, high up on a ledge where we had discovered a deep cave the previous year;

'In the cave?' nodded George.

'Looks like it,' said Alun.

'Our glamorous female friend, perhaps,' I said.

'Let's hope so,' said Venet.

Gerard was fitting an expensive-looking Lens to his camera before getting on with the job. He turned to the inspector and asked, 'Why do you say that, inspector?'

Venet smiled, 'Because otherwise, it implies that we have three groups of treasure hunters on our tails instead of two.'

## Chapter 8

**G**erard had barely finished taking his photos of the now empty insides of the vehicle, when George called us.

'Here come the troops,' he said. 'Hurry up with your photos because I think the military people have arrived to collect their new toy.'

We stepped through the barn doors to see a huge four-wheel-drive army truck bumping up across the field towards us. Its hooped canvas roof shook wildly as the vehicle juddered to a halt. Then the doors swung open, and three men in combat uniforms jumped down and looked up at the barn.

Inspector Venet glanced at us. 'I'll deal with this, shall I?'

We nodded, and he made his way towards them.

A good deal of saluting, nodding, and hand-shaking followed, and then the four turned and came up to the barn.

'Ah Ha!' cried the one who was obviously in charge as he caught sight of the vehicle. 'Well, well, well! What have we here?'

The men nodded to us briefly as they strode inside. We were obviously totally insignificant in their eyes.

Venet gave us an apologetic shrug and followed them.

'These are the three gentlemen who discovered the vehicle,' he said, signalling us to the chief, as they passed us.

The chief condescended to give us a second nod before turning back to one of his men, 'Get the fuel and let's see if the old girl has any guts left.'

For these men, stripping down and greasing an ageing motor was not an option. Either the thing worked straight away as it should, or it didn't.

The third soldier jumped in and opened the bonnet, revealing a motor almost as big as the whole of our 2CV. He nodded an OK to his superior, and the third man upended a jerrycan of fuel into the reservoir.

He then dragged over an unexpectedly long set of jumper leads from the truck and connected them to the battery.

The other then climbed back into the cab and pushed the starter. There was a shudder, and a roar, a burst of black smoke, and the machine burst to life.

Paying no attention to us, the man in charge waved his arm, and the huge thing jumped forward and roared slowly out of the barn and onto the field.

The officer exchanged a few words with Venet, saluted to us and jumped back into his truck.

Then, with no further ado, off they went, down the field onto the track and disappeared, leaving deep furrows in the uncut grass and weeds.

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Mike, Alun and I gazed after them, a little stunned. We had discovered a WW2 German troop transport vehicle, and these three guys had just come and taken it away without a single word of thanks.

Venet looked at us and shrugged, 'Sorry lads,' he said. 'It would probably be the same thing in the UK. Military officers are like that sometimes.'

Although we agreed in principle, Mike pointed out that we hadn't had all that many German vehicles on our side of the channel.

Alun smiled, 'Did you know that while we call it the English Chanel, the French call it La Manche, "The Sleeve"? Not even the French Sleeve, which would have been understandable. Just THE Sleeve.' He shrugged. 'Odd that!

'Like something an old French peasant would wipe his nose on after a good spit,' I suggested.

Alun frowned, 'Why not call it "The Trouser leg"? or "The Tie"? They're more or less the same shape, after all?'

'French peasants didn't wear ties in those days,' I said.

'Or trousers,' added Alun. 'Apparently, they took them off so frequently for reproductive reasons that they wore kilts instead.'

Mike sighed, 'What a lot of bilge you two talk.'

I ignored this and continued, 'Exactly, Alun,' I said. 'Or better still, they could have called it "The Sock".'

He smiled and nodded back, 'Yes. Now, that would be far better. Then they'd have been able to sneer

and call it 'The Smelly English Sock. That would have gone down well with the peasants.'

I chuckled, 'And knowing the imaginative minds of those rustic guys, they would soon have modified that to "The Stench."

'Yes. Just imagine being shipwrecked, "Lost with all hands in the Stench",' smiled Alun.

'Yes, a pity.' I said. 'It just shows that the French lack a little something when it comes to innovation and creativity.'

'In other respects, they're pretty hot, though,' said Alun.

'Yep,' I agreed. 'Wine and brothels readily jump to mind.'

Mike sighed loudly, 'When you two idiots have finished talking rubbish, maybe we could get on with things.'

I gazed at Alun and frowned, 'Get on with what things, Mike?'

Mike appeared unprepared for this, 'Ah! Well... Well, what we were going to do, of course.'

'Which was?' said Alun.

'Taking photos of you three standing in front of the Barn?' suggested Gérard, who had been following our discussion with amusement, 'Was that it?'

'Yes,' nodded Mike. 'That was it.'

'I got some lovely shots of the tank thing driving out, with you three standing gaping open-mouthed by the doors,' he said. 'I can already see the caption, "Three Brave Brits wave goodbye to a fortune,' he chuckled.

'It shows bad breeding to laugh at one's own jokes,' smiled Alun.

'OK. But let's get a few shots before the sun gets too high. Then you can clear up that pile of hay they left under the tank.'

'It wasn't a tank; it was a...' started Mike.

'OK, Mike,' I said. 'A World War Two armoured personnel transport vehicle.'

Gérard shook his head, 'That's far too many words for a newspaper caption. One word is the absolute maximum. Tank, or truck or...'

'What about "Thing",' I suggested. 'That's just one word.'

'Or, "it". That's even shorter,' said Alun. 'Then you can do "Three Brits and It".'

Mike shook his head in pity, 'You two really get on my wick sometimes.'

'I seem to have said this before,' I said. 'But only sometimes?'

'What on earth do you mean?' frowned Mike.

'We only get on your wick, "sometimes". That astonishes me, Mike.'

'Me too,' said Alun. 'We must be getting old. Losing our good old mid-season form.'

'Shut up.'

We did as requested and posed against the half-closed barn doors, grinning stupidly, while Gérard clicked away with his camera.

Gerard looked up and pulled a face, 'Let's try a few without those grinning death masks, shall we?'

'That was smiling,' said Alun.



'Well, without smiling, then,' he said.

Once we had finished this, we grabbed a couple of rakes and stepped back inside to clear away the hay in readiness for the architects' visit.

Inspector Venet stopped us as we passed.

'I have an idea as to who might have been responsible for those uninvited visitors we saw earlier.'

'Ah!' said Alun. 'Not blood-thirsty international criminals again, I hope.'

Venet shrugged. 'We've had our eye on someone who has been sniffing around in the area for some time. A German, about your age, in fact. He's spent all summer in the region several years running.'

'There are worse places to spend summer in,' I said.

'Well, this man has been questioning older members of village communities around Sarlat. He tells them he's preparing the background material for a book about the last war.'

'And is he?' I asked.

'We don't think so.'

'So what is he doing?' asked Alun.

Mike sighed an exasperated sigh, 'He's after the treasure, you idiots. What else?'

Venet nodded, 'That seems probable. Remember, the fact that large numbers of works of art were stolen is common knowledge. Also, the fact that a good proportion has never been accounted for, is no secret either.'

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'And you think this guy has guessed that some of it may have been hidden around here?' I asked.

Venet nodded, 'Yes. He may have heard a story from his father or a relative, reminiscing about their war adventures.'

'Do you think he knows how much the stuff is worth?' I asked.

'That information has never been made public. Even so, anyone with a bit of spare time and a minimum of intelligence could dig out enough information to get a rough idea,' he said.

'And,' said Alun. 'A rough idea would be enough. Plus or minus fifty million euros still make a nice sum.'

'Worth spending a few sunny holidays in the Dordogne hunting for it,' I agreed.

'Exactly.'

'And with that sort of money in the balance, one wouldn't hesitate to hire the right sort of "assistants" to find it,' suggested Alun.

'So we're back to ruthless, blood-thirsty mercenaries again,' I pulled a face.

Venet nodded. 'People have been murdered for a hundred times less.'

'Brilliant!' groaned Mike. 'And I thought we were going to have a nice relaxing time renovating our barn.'

Venet smiled, 'Well, you can probably relax. Your lot is safely out of the way now. What's more, I presume he now knows that for a fact.'

'What if these guys assume that the other two or three hundred million euros worth is around here too,' frowned Mike.

'I don't think they will,' said Venet. 'I think they'll be following the same line of thought as us.'

'That there's a storage place somewhere in Sarlat? Because the place was occupied for so long?' I asked.

Venet nodded, 'And that is going to make our job a little more tricky.'

'Tricky is not the word I'd choose,' said Alun. 'Dangerous, would be a lot closer to the mark.'

'That too,' said Venet. 'We'll have to watch our backs.'

'Given the sums involved, one could afford the very best professionals and the most ruthless of "research teams",' I said.

'I know,' said the inspector. 'But the advantage in this case is that those sorts of guys stand out a bit in a touristic place like this.'

'Agreed,' I said. 'They wouldn't blend smoothly into the background.'

'Especially carrying machine guns slung over their shoulders,' smiled Alun.

Mike sighed again, 'And this German writer guy. Is he down here this year?'

'Yes. He's staying smack in the centre of Sarlat.' He paused, 'At the Plaza Madeleine. The best hotel place around here. Expensive too.'

'From where he can keep an eye on any unusual activity,' said Alun.

Gérard smiled, 'He just has to relax on the terrasse of one of the cafés on the main square, drinking beer and watching.'

'Like you,' smiled Venet.

'Yep,' he laughed. 'In which case, a good idea would be to do the same thing.'

'Sorry!'

I smiled, 'He means station men to sit and watch to see if they can spot someone unusually interested in the comings and goings of people like you.'

'Ah, yes! Good idea.'

'And I wager that volunteers will not be too thin on the ground,' I laughed.

'Yeh,' smiled Gérard, 'Being paid to sit around drinking beer all day does have a certain appeal.'

'You would have to change the men every couple of hours, though,' I said. 'Or they'll end up drunk.'

The inspector laughed, 'I can see that, at least, that part of the plan won't be difficult to organise.'

'Do you know what this German looks like?' asked Joseph, who had just arrived.

'Oh yes,' he smiled. The old people he interviewed might be getting on a bit, but some are pretty tech-savvy. We've several different photos taken by them using their telephones. I'll send you one in case our German friend turns up.'

'Great!' sighed Mike. 'As you say, we can all relax and enjoy life now...'

Venet became serious and gave us all a stern look, 'But whatever you do... No one must breathe a word about your idea about walled-up basements or anything like that. Not to anyone outside our little community.'

We nodded eagerly like school children being lectured to by a heavy-handed mistress.

'Yes sir...' said Gérard.

Inspector Venet turned to George, 'Time we were getting on.' Then he turned to us, 'Tomorrow morning, if you can come over to HQ, we'll start going through possible hiding places with the architect.'

'We'll be there,' said Alun.

'Am I invited?' asked Gérard.

Venet nodded.

As they tramped down the field, treading in the tracks crushed in the grass by the two vehicles, Joseph turned to us, 'I saw your farmer friend, Antoine. He drove back with me. He got your tractor going with no problem.'

'Brilliant,' I smiled. 'And the hay?'

'He dragged it to one side so the garage mechanic could get at the 2CV. He'll come and collect the bales tomorrow.' Joseph nodded. 'He says, thanks.'

'Brilliant.' said Alun. 'I wonder what the garage chap will have to say. That car will be great getting back and forth from the DIY centre and up across this field.'

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We lifted our rakes and stepped over to the pile of loose hay that had accumulated under the colossal machine. I let the rake head fall at its centre and heaved the top load off. I then dragged this outside and sent it sailing across the field. Alun did the same, and then we returned for a second load. This time, however, I felt an unexpected amount of resistance. I gave a good tug and tumbled over backwards onto the hard-packed earth.

'Great gods!' cried Mike. 'What now!?'

We stepped forward and gazed down.

'Oh hell,' I gasped.

Lying on the dry earth was a human skull.

Gérard already had his camera trained on the thing and was clicking away furiously. 'And who said things were getting a bit dull here?'

'No one said that,' replied Mike. 'It never gets dull when these two idiots are around.'

Alun knelt by the pile of hay and started pulling it away, hand-full by hand-full.

I struggled over and did the same.

Then, together, we lifted a final large pile of hay and tossed it to one side, then stopped and stared.

There, on the ground where the vehicle had been, lay four skeletons. The tattered remains of their clothes left no doubt as to their identities.

'German soldiers!' groaned Mike. 'All we needed!'

Alun leant closer, 'German soldiers with bullet holes in their heads.'

'Oh God!' groaned Mike. 'I suppose we'll have to call the police back again.'

I took out my phone and called Inspector Venet, who was just climbing into his car. 'He'll be back straight away,' I said.

'Why didn't you tell him what we had found?' asked Mike.

'I thought he'd appreciate the surprise,' I chuckled.

Alun got up and frowned, 'So now we know why no one knew where this part of the treasure was hidden.' 'Yes,' I agreed. 'The guy in charge covered his tracks nicely.'

Mike raised his eyebrows, 'Not someone who was all that keen on sharing, then,' he paused. 'But there's one consolation though.'

'A consolation,' said Gérard.

'Yes. The swine got a good British bullet in him in Normandy before he could sneak off to recover his ill-gotten gains.'

Alun nodded, 'Yes. I suppose there's that.'

At this moment, George and Inspector Venet arrived on the scene.

'Now, what have you found!?' sighed Venet, striding over. 'Oh God!'

## Chapter 9

**M**ike gazed lazily out across the pond from his seat and sighed. We were sitting together at the table beneath the Spreading branches of the three ancient Umbrella Pines. He gave an appreciative nod, 'We did a good job on that fountain,' he said as we followed his gaze.

An inverted cup of twenty water jets rose majestically from the little island at the centre of the pond before falling back, encircling it with a splashing ring of water.

We had repaired this pleasant water feature the previous year after discovering that it was, in fact, a cunningly disguised gravity fountain. The water supplying it was captured high up on the cliff, inside the waterfall, which cascaded down onto the little plateau.

When Lucas Duprès purchased the place, he and his university professor friend had amused



themselves by spending a summer designing and building a pumpless fountain.

The splashing of this water added to the ambient tranquillity of the place as we sat patiently waiting for our midday meal. The cook was preparing it with her customary attention to detail and lack of precipitation in the ancient farm building at the centre of the Septet plateau.

Alun reminded us that such patience comes easily when one has a glass of iced white wine on the table before one. Two more bottles bobbing lazily in the ice-cold water of the pond added to the unreserved acceptance of the wait.

'Do you remember what you were telling us about frost crystal formation and electrostatic forces the other day, Mike?' smiled Alun.

'Of course I remember.'

'Well I've been thinking about it,' Alun frowned.

'Oh God!' exclaimed Mike. 'Now, what rot are you going to invent.'

'Well,' nodded Alun. 'The mystery about frost crystal growth is all about sex, Mike. Molecular sex, that is.'

I nodded, 'Like Atomic fornication, you mean?'

Alun nodded in agreement, 'Exactly. I have a theory about it, which I'm about to publish in Nature magazine.'

'Molecular sex!' gasped Mike. 'What ridiculous bilge are you making up now?'

'The basic moving force of the universe, Mike. That's what I'm talking about.'

'For heaven's sake! Shut up.'

'So, mister clever dick. What makes negatives attract positives? Tell me that.'

'Electrostatic forces. That's what attracts them.'

Alun sighed and shook his head sadly, 'Mike. All that is due to one huge misunderstanding. It all began back in the sixteen-hundreds. Sixteen hundred and forty-four, I believe.'

'Shut up, no twit,' groaned Mike.

'As you know, in those days,' continued Alun. 'Scientists, or philosophers as they were called back then, had to be very careful.'

Mike sighed, 'Because they had idiots like you two back in those days, too, did they?'

'If you couldn't work God's omnipresence into the justification for your experimentation, then you were liable to be promptly separated from your head. That made any future messing about with test tubes a delicate matter.'

I frowned, 'This is extremely informative, Alun.'

'No, it isn't,' groaned Mike. 'It's pure unadulterated hogwash.'

'Jealousy doesn't suit you, Mike,' I said.

'Agreed,' said Alun. 'It's embarrassing me, in fact.'

'Oh God!' said Mike.

'Well, one day, Charles the First's favourite philosopher, Bill, was preparing the afternoon's science show about forces between charged objects.'

Mike sighed. 'Now what?'

'As you know, Mike, in those days, they charged up a rod of amber by rubbing it with fur, after which it attracted bits of silk, etc.,' he nodded. 'A bit like cricket bowlers, when they charge up the ball by rubbing it in their groin.'

'What on earth are you driving about, you idiot?' cried Mike.

'That's how they give it that extra, magic bit of glutamatical spin, Mike. Electric charge.'

'Oh god!' sighed Mike. 'Glutamate is a junk-food additive.'

'Not back in sixteen hundred and something, Mike.'

Mike shook his head and clapped his hands over his eyes.

'Anyway,' continued Alun. 'The guy had just picked up a freshly dead cat he had noticed in a corner, had sat down with it on his lap and was vigorously rubbing the amber rod on in.'

'Was he,' groaned Mike. 'How interesting.'

Alun smiled. 'Isn't it? Well, at that very moment, who should pop in but the King. And who was he accompanied by? His unpleasant religious advisor, "Gilbert Groth of Willham".'

'Who!?' exclaimed Mike. 'That guy's a figment of your crazed mind.'

I smiled, 'Ah! One can just imagine the scene.'

Alun nodded, 'One can.'

'Tricky situation,'

'What a load of crap!' groaned Mike.

'Luckily, as everyone knows, King Charlie was one of the lads and pretty quick-witted. He had tried many

things, but not cat fur. On the other hand, Groth of Willham was not one of the Lads, at least not in public. He glowered menacingly. "What prey art thou about?" crieth he,' Alun nodded and took a deep breath. 'The King smiled, "Thou surely looketh ecstatic. Can I try that, too?" The religious Johnny hadn't been listening properly, and he got the wrong end of the stick or, rather, the rod. "Sex in the Attic!" he cried. "It is a scurvy lie. I was attending to an important religious formality." The philosopher knew that quick thinking would be necessary at this juncture to avoid being separated from his head, so he improvised.'

'I knew it!' cried Mike. 'As I guessed. He was one of your ancestors then.'

Alun ignored this and continued with his historically almost accurate story. "'Quite so, your majesty. In my very small way, I am attempting to illustrate the almighty Lord's law of electric attraction. This illustration is called Electra's Traction."

Groth turned his gaze Godwards and groaned, "No one's going to swallow that rubbish." However, the King was not one to be dictated to, "Yeh! Like it,' he said. 'Why not call it "Electra's Tactics"?''

'Perfect! Your Majesty. Magnificent!' cried the philosopher, clapping his hands and shooting a triumphant look at the scowling Groth.

'And that's where it all began... Electra's Tactics soon became "Electrostatics", and there you are...

Mike groaned again, 'Lord, have pity on we poor mortals. Why hast thou burdened us so with this idiot?' He groaned.

Inspector Venet was standing some way off, near the pond's far end, phoning about our discovery. After a while, he put his phone away and came to sit with us.

'Did you manage to get things cleared up?' I asked.

He nodded. 'It's complicated, but I sorted things out.'

'Whose pigeon is it then?' asked Joseph.

'That's what's complicated,' he smiled. 'It depends on when the skeletons date and the cause of death. The National Archaeology Services are responsible if they date from before the First World War. If they date after that and there is proof of foul play, it's a police job. Finally, if the remains can be shown to be of military personnel, then it's the army's job. In that case, it's their job to ensure the remains are returned to the family, regardless of the country involved. In this case, Germany.'

We nodded, and I said, 'I would have thought that four skeletons with bullet holes in their heads leant rather heavily towards indicating foul play.'

Venet nodded, 'I told you it was complicated. But the indications are that those bullets were German. They may still be inside the skulls, in which case the proof will be conclusive. Anyway, the army has decided to take over.' He sipped his white wine from the dew-covered glass and smiled. 'Lovely wine this,' he then went on. 'The army has the responsibility of

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collecting the skeletons and sending them to their German colleagues.'

I frowned, 'And then the German guys have the task of trying to work out who they were and to ensure a decent burial.'

'Yes. And that will take time because their IDs have been removed.'

Mike sighed, 'How long will this hold things up for?'

'No time at all,' smiled the inspector. 'They'll come over this afternoon. It'll be the same men who collected the vehicle this morning.'

'Great,' I said. 'Ah! Here comes the feeding trough.'

After lunch, Alun, Mike and I, accompanied by Gérard and his photographer's bag, set off for the barn. Joseph said he had to sort out some details about the songs for Sophie's album but would join us later with the garage mechanic.

The army contingent was to arrive in the early afternoon, and we were also expecting the local architect. The man had kindly proposed to come and look at the place before we all got sidetracked by our search for hidden treasure. He told us he preferred to get a clear idea of the scale of the work involved as early as possible.

But before they arrived, we planned to deal with two jobs which needed doing and could be dealt with quickly.

The first was to reseal a few of the roofing tiles that had slipped over the years and replace some that were cracked. The second was to seal the barn doorframe in place solidly before it fell out again.

For the latter, we purchased a couple of bags of fast-setting cement mix for the job and had it delivered directly.

Mike smiled, 'I prefer those guys to carry fifty kilos of cement up that slope then do it myself.'

'When we've got the 2CV going, our troubles will be over,' said Alun.

Mike shrugged, 'Those troubles will be over, yes. But I'm certain you two will be able to conjure up a seemingly infinite supply of alternative and better troubles.'

'We'll do what we can to keep Boredom at arm's length, Mike,' I said. 'Never fear.'

Mike pulled a face, 'I always fear,' he replied. 'That's why I'm still alive after all these years shared with you two maniacs.'

'Is that entirely fair, Mike?' cried Alun.

'I glanced at him, frowned, then sighed, 'Oh all right... Yes, I suppose it's as fair as we can get. But I'm not altogether happy with the word maniacs, though.'

'All right,' smiled Mike. 'I, too, can make concessions. If you like, I'll change the word maniacs to brainless idiots. Would that be better?'

'That's more Mike-like,' I laughed.

'In that case, come and give me a hand with the ladder,' he said.

'Which ladder was that, Mike?'

'The one I'm going to use to get all the way up onto that damn roof with.'

'As I said. Which ladder?'

'The one hung all along the back wall of the barn.'

'I didn't see a ladder,' said Alun.

Mike shrugged, 'It's behind that bed of nettles you tried swimming in the other day.'

We stepped around to the shadowy side of the barn, and he pointed. Glancing up, we discovered an impressive old wooden ladder supported by metal hooks stretching more than halfway along the side wall. It was a remarkable, solidly built object measuring at least six metres long. However, at the same time, it gave the distinct impression of being distressingly old.

'Are you really going to climb up there on that?' I asked. 'It looks a bit on the old side.'

'Nice bit of wood-worm decoration, too,' added Alun.

Mike frowned, 'Look at the diameter of the rungs. They don't make them solid like that anymore.'

'No. because no one could lift them,' I said.

'But there are three of us.'

'Four,' added Gérard.

'Yes, Four,' nodded Mike.

'Great!' I said. 'One to climb up and fall down again, and three to carry the body to the cemetery.'

'Very amusing.'

We circumnavigated the waving, beckoning clumps of stinging nettles and managed to unhook the ladder.

'Hell!' groaned Alun. 'This thing weighs a ton.'

'Stinging nettles are incredible things, you know...' started Mike.



'No, they're not,' said Alun.

'I bet you don't know...'

'We don't need to know, Mike,' interrupted Alun.

Mike went on regardless, 'Don't you find it astonishing that even if you only brush against a leaf lightly, it stings.'

'I didn't "Lightly brush" against them, Mike. I came crashing down and crushed them with all the weight of my body.'

'And that's an impressive weight, too,' said Alun.

'Shut up,' I scowled.

'So how come only the lightest brush against it delivers a potent sting,' continued Mike.

'As Alun said, Mike. We don't need to know,' I said.

'Don't *want* to know,' corrected Alun.

'Well,' continued Mike, 'the minute hairs covering the leaf and stems are hollow and are filled with formic acid and histamines.'

'Fantastic,' groaned Alun. 'Let's get going.'

'And those hairs are astonishingly sharp with extremely fragile pure silica tips.'

'I knew it!' sighed Alun.

'And those silica tips break off, even if you hardly touch them, leaving razor-sharp jagged edges.'

I sighed and shook my head sadly at Alun, who blew out his cheeks, 'All right, Mike. Get on with it. We haven't got all day.'

'Well, once the tip's broken, the acid mixture inside the tubes flows out onto your skin and into the tiny scratches the jagged broken tips inflict.'

I nodded, 'And it stings.'

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'Yep.'

'Brilliant.' said Alun. 'One lives and learns.'

I nodded, 'Especially when one is lucky enough to have a world-class boffin like Mike as a pal.'

'Yeh,' said Alun with a sigh. 'Can we get on now, Mike?'

'So next time you get stung by a nettle, remember that.' smiled Mike.

'It'll be too late then, won't it,' grumbled Alun.

'Ants have the same acid in their saliva, you know...' started Mike.

'Sut up, Mike.'

Stumbling through the undergrowth, we carried the ladder back from the wall. Then, with some difficulty, we lifted it and propped it against the roof's overhang.

'The weight of that thing will probably make the whole place collapse,' gasped Alun. 'Hell! That's heavy.'

Mike shrugged, 'As I said, they don't make them like that anymore. They must have needed several trees to make it,' he said. 'Lovely bit of work there, caressing the ten-centimetre-thick sides.'

'What's lovely about it,' grumbled Alun. 'It's just a ladder.'

Mike shook his head impatiently, 'Ladder-making was an important skill in the old days. You couldn't do anything if you didn't have good ladders.'

'Like falling off and killing yourself?' said Alun.

'They used thick Norwegian Spruce poles for the sides...'

I interrupted him, 'Do you mean unintelligent but nevertheless well-dressed Polish immigrants from Norway?'

He sighed, and Alun sniggered. 'No, I don't. They used poles made of Norwegian Spruce for the side rails and Oak or Ash for the rungs. And...' he paused. 'And I bet you didn't know that Norwegian Spruce grows with a corkscrew twist.'

'Incredible!' gasped Alun. 'What a mine of useful information you are, Mike!'

'Which means,' continued Mike, ignoring Alun, 'that when you plane the sides, you need to plane *up* the pole on the right-hand side and *down* the pole on the left-hand side.'

'Incredible, Mike,' I smiled. 'Up you go then.'

'I'll need a rope,' said Mike.

'No need, Mike,' I smiled. 'Just throw yourself off. Hanging oneself is just not done nowadays. In educated circles, that is.'

'I'll knock your head in educated circles if you don't shut up,' grumbled Mike.

'A rope then?'

'Yes.'

'Right.' I said. 'There's one hanging on the back of the barn door. It looks even older than the ladder. But don't worry. They knew how to make ropes back in those days. They made them from deceased ladder-makers intestines.'

'Shut up and get it, you twit,' said Mike.

As readers of our previous adventure will know, Mike was a keen sailor. Consequently, he knew a

rope when he saw one. He also knew all about knots; the more complicated, the better. Finally, and worst of all, he couldn't resist showing off this knowledge to unexpected and innocent bystanders.

Luckily, however, we were far from innocent and unexpected and adroitly deflected him before he could get started. He thus grumbled about simply aiming to explain the clever tricks he was going to employ to attach himself to whatever he intended to attach himself to.

'While you are getting on with the tiles,' said Alun. 'We'll get the other ladder out and reseal the door frame.'

With this, Mike shouldered the coil of ancient brown rope and climbed carefully up the ladder.

He removed a few tiles to give himself a foothold, then disappeared above us.

'That was a close shave,' said Alun. 'With me, a few knots go a long way.'

'Me too,' I laughed.

Gérard had wandered down to the lower end of the field and was standing on the edge of the slope that dropped to the track below. He seemed intent on taking photos of the barn silhouetted against the rock wall behind it with the afternoon sun full on it.

We got out an old metal bucket and split open the first bag of the fast-set cement.

While I was getting the ladder into position, Alun put a few trowelfuls of the mixture into the bucket and strode off to the spring to add water.

A few minutes later, he reappeared, mixing the bucket's contents vigorously as he walked.

'Hold the ladder while I go up,' he said.

'Will do.'

Alun reached the top and took out the trowel from his back pocket. He dug it into the bucket and cursed. 'Damn it!' he grumbled. 'The stuff has already set.'

'You probably didn't put enough water in the mix, Alun.'

He cursed and climbed back down. We then spent ten minutes removing the block of hot cement from the bucket.

'I'll put a little less mix and a bit more water,' he said. And off he went again.

Shortly after, he appeared, striding rapidly back down through the bushes.

He clambered quickly up the ladder, cursed and came back down again to take the trowel. Up he went again.

'Oh, damn it!' he cried. 'The stuff's set again; blast it. What is this rubbish you bought?'

'You bought it, Alun,' I reminded him. 'Not me.'

'Nor I,' came Mike's voice from above.

'Go to hell, Mike,' grumbled Alun.

'I heard that,' floated back the celestial voice.

I took pity on Alun, 'Look. I'll go up and get a bucket full of water so we can mix the stuff down here. Then you can get up there quick before the stuff gets too hard.'

'Good idea,' said Alun.

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'That took you a while to work out,' came Mike's voice.

'Shut up, Mike.'

I located another, albeit rustier, bucket and took it to the spring, returning with it brimming with ice-cold water.

During this time, Alun had banged knocked most of the hardened stuff out of the bucket, and its diameter was now considerably smaller than it had been at the outset.

Alun carefully mixed a new lot of cement and dashed up the ladder.

Just as he reached the top, there was a roar, and the canvas-covered army lorry came into view, bouncing up towards us across the field.

Alun started and grabbed at the ladder to stabilise himself. The bucket slipped from his grip, and I had just enough time to leap back to avoid being knocked senseless by the speeding missile.

The only problem was that I leapt directly into my favourite clump of stinging nettles. I leapt back out again, considerably faster than I had leapt in. 'Great, stinking balles of compost!' I cried.

'What!?' came Mike's voice from above. Followed by the appearance of his astonished face. 'Ah!' he added on seeing what had occurred. 'See what I mean. One simply has to brush ever so lightly and...'

'Shut up, you blithering twit, Mike,' I cried, hopping up and down, rubbing my legs.

'That's why farmers never wear shorts, you know. Nettles and snakes...'

'Shut up,'  
'And ticks, too, of course.'  
'Grrr,'  
'Sorry?'

I grabbed a dock leaf growing in the shadow up against the back wall, crushed it, and rubbed the affected zone with the wet stuff.

I don't know whether this does any good. Anyway, at least it distracts one from the pain during those critical initial moments.

Naturally enough, by the time Alun recovered the bucket, the mixture had hardened for the third time.

'Damn this!' he grumbled and stabbed at the rapidly hardening stuff with the trowel.

'Damn and blast,' he cried as his trowel went right through the bottom of the bucket.

We exchanged glances and scowled as the three army representatives came into sight, having parked the lorry against the side wall. The youngest of the three nodded. 'That's why we always wear trousers,' He smiled. 'Nettles and snakes,'

'And mosquitos', added his friend.

'Great,' I said.

'I told you,' called Mike from above.

'Shut up, Mike.'

'What? Oh hell!'

We heard the distinctive cracking noise of breaking wood, followed by an ominous scraping noise of heavy tiles sliding on tiles.

'Attention below!' shouted Mike. 'The fury of the lord cometh upon thee!'

'He means DANGER,' I shouted, quickly vacating the immediate vicinity.

The scraping noise accelerated and was followed by a brief silence. Then, the sounds of something crashing on metal and glass breaking filled the air.

The three men dashed back around the barn to their lorry. Mike's pile of replacement tiles had landed smack on the vehicle's bonnet and windscreen. Nothing was left of the windscreen, and the bonnet was now a mass of dented metalwork.

'Great balls of...!' started the officer. Gazing at the damage.

'Anyone hurt?' called Mike. 'Oh hell! Mind out!'

There was another scraping noise, and the three men dashed away from the lorry.

This second pile of tiles came crashing down through the smashed windscreen onto the dashboard. There was a noise of shattering glass again as the tiles did their best to demolish the more technical part of the lorry.

There was a short silence, and then Mike cried, 'Oh hell!'

There was a sliding noise, and Mike shot into view above the lorry. He grabbed desperately at the overhanging tiles and abruptly stopped as the safety rope took his weight.

'Help!' he cried.

'Quick,' I shouted, 'Let's get the ladder.'

We rushed to the back of the barn, heaved the heavy ladder around and set it up beside Mike.



'Whew!' He called. 'That was a close one,' he said as he got his feet on the ladder rungs. He looked down at us with a pleased look on his face. 'They don't make rope like this nowadays.'

He clambered up a couple of rungs to give the rope some slack and undid his magic knots. Then he climbed down and stood beside the astonished officer.

'Just look at that!' said Mike.

The soldiers did just that and gazed at the remains of the lorry.

'Incredible, continued Mike, retrieving one of the tiles. 'Not a single one broken. Incredible! They certainly knew how to make tiles back in those days.'

The officer gazed at Mike, clearly at a loss for what to reply. However, one of his men saved the day.

'I'll make sure she still works, shall I?'

The officer nodded, and the man climbed up into the cab.

He handed out half a dozen unbroken tiles to Mike, who stacked them beside the wooden wall.

The lorry burst into life, and the driver smiled down at Mike, 'They certainly knew how to make lorries too, back in the old days,' he chuckled. 'Shall I back her round to the barn door, sir?'

The officer nodded.

With the ease of an experienced lorry driver, the man manoeuvred the lorry so that it was directly in front of the double doors.

'Hold on,' called Alun. 'I'll get the ladder out of the way, then you can back it right inside?'

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The driver nodded, and Alun grabbed the ladder and dragged it to one side. He then stood back as the driver engaged gears.

However, before the lorry could move, Alun shouted, 'Oh hell!... Watch out.'

The driver was out of his seat and had rolled away across the field before you could bat an eyelid.

Then, the vast oak doorframe slowly parted company with the stonework surrounding it. Accompanied by the massive doors, it came crashing down on the canvas-hooped back of the lorry.

There was a crunching and crashing noise as this hit the back of the lorry. The hoops buckled under the weight, and the back of the lorry was crushed flat.

The lorry bounced up and down on its suspension for a few seconds, then silence fell.

'Oops!' said Alun.

The officer stepped over and gazed, open-mouthed, at the wrecked vehicle. He shook his head in disbelief.

Mike, however, nodded appreciatively, 'Just look at that?' he smiled. 'Not a scratch. They certainly knew how to make doors in those days...'

## Chapter 10

**G**érard came running up from the bottom of the field, and we stood gazing at the wrecked vehicle together.

Not one to miss a good chance, he stepped back and started taking photos. 'This is going to look great,' he smiled. 'I've decided that from now on, I'm going to give up sitting around waiting for things to happen. I'll just follow you three around.'

Mike shrugged, 'Be it on your own head,' he said, pulling a face. 'Things get a little dangerous at times. At best, these two mess things up and only get us into excruciatingly embarrassing situations. More often than not, though, we end up in prison.'

'Sounds like fun,' smiled Gérard.

'When you're not on the receiving end,' Mike shrugged again. 'Which is often my case.'

'Simply an innocent bystander!' I suggested. 'Poor old Mike!'

'Not so much of the *old*, if you please,' he grumbled.

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The driver raised his eyebrows at his superior officer, then leaned in through the open vehicle door and turned off the motor.

The officer sighed, 'The "commandant" will never believe us... Never. Piles of roofing tiles smashing straight through the windscreen and on the bonnet, then a huge barn door demolishing the rear...'

The two soldiers pulled faces and, shaking their heads, agreed with him.

'How on earth are we going to get that door back up?' continued the officer.

'We'll ask the guy who helped last time,' I said. 'He has a forklift attachment on his tractor.'

'Last time!?'

'Well...' smiled Alun.

'Stop him, somebody!' moaned Mike. 'He's about to invent some more of his ridiculous gibberish.'

The officer glanced at me, and I shrugged. 'It does seem to have a certain tendency of leaving its allotted position,' I said.

'That's because of gravitational waves,' nodded Alun.

'What!' cried Mike. 'More gibberish, as I expected.'

'Gravitational waves, Mike.'

'I heard. I'm not deaf, you twit. What have gravitational waves got to do with anything?'

'I was about to ask the same thing,' said the officer, frowning.

Alun sighed, as an old schoolmistress must sometimes do after explaining for the umpteenth time that tough is not spelt tuf, 'As you all know,' he said

with a tired voice. 'Gravity's role in the universe is to make things as flat as possible.'

Mike shook his head, 'No, Alun. As spherical as possible. On a planetary scale, that is.'

Alun smiled, 'Thank you, Mike. In other words, gravity is there to make things fall down.'

'I can agree with that, if you remove the word *down*,' nodded Mike. 'But not with the bullswash that you're about to invent.'

'Bull's wash!?' I cried.

'A cross between eyewash and bull...'

'OK, I get it, Mike,' I interrupted.

'Well,' continued Alun. 'Even when one fixes things properly, and they appear good and solid, gravitational waves make the thing vibrate to and fro extremely slowly. This vibration gradually fragilises our perfectly well-designed fixings without us even noticing. And then, without warning, down it comes.'

'Making things flatter?' I suggested.

'Or more spherical, from the interplanetary standpoint,' said Alun.

Mike sighed, 'What he means, is that he made a botch job of fixing it last time. So, at the slightest problem, the frame fell over.'

'That's simply your short-sighted view of things, Mike. I was looking at it from a wider, more astrophysical perspective?'

'What a load of crap!' groaned Mike. 'I warned you not to take any notice,' he said, turning to the others

who were following this little exchange with frown-lined brows.

'Anyway, there's nothing new about gravitational waves,' said Alun with a wry smile. 'They already understood all about it back in biblical times.'

'What!' cried Mike.

'Cast your minds back to your ancient religious education classes at school, Mike. In Isaiah 40, verse something or other, we read, "Every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain," he quoted. From that alone, it is obvious to any sane, thinking man that "he on high" used gravitational waves to do the hard work while he was occupied with creating life on some other far-off exo-planet.

'Oh hell!' sighed Mike. 'What utter tripe.'

'I remember now, that's part of the text used for Handel's Messiah,' I said.

'Exactly. Unfortunately, they didn't have copyright laws back in those days,' sighed Alun, 'otherwise old Isiah would be absolutely rolling in it today.'

'He's been dead for more than two thousand seven hundred years, you idiots.' gasped Mike.

'His offspring and descendants would be rich then,' nodded Alun. 'Including you perhaps, Mike'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'Let's return to gravity if you don't mind. Remind me, though, Alun. Who's the scientifically minded member of our little trio?'

'You are, of course, Mike,' smiled Alun.

'So, not to put too finer a point on it, you don't know what you're talking about.

Alun pulled a face, 'That depends. Sometimes I do, and other times, less so.'

'Do you know what gravity is? I mean, what pulls things down, as you so eloquently put it?'

Alun shrugged, 'But you do...'

Mike shook his head, 'No. In fact, nobody knows what it is, not even the best scientific brains in the world.'

'I thought that was you,' said Alun.

Mike ignored this, 'All we know is that heavy masses pull each other together. The bigger the mass, the stronger the force.'

Alun smiled, 'So when I feel the irresistible urge to punch you, Mike, in reality, it's entirely due to gravity. It has nothing whatsoever to do with emotions. It's simply the mass of your huge bulging brain, brimming over with mass, that's irresistibly tugging at my small but firm fist.'

'Shut up. However, we've devised equations that permit us to calculate the effects of gravity with great precision.'

I nodded, 'But we don't know what does it. Is that it, Mike?'

'Exactly. But when you think about it...'

'I don't think about it,' interrupted Alun.

Mike sighed, 'But when any normal human being thinks about it, a mass is just an assembly of atoms, isn't it?'

Alun sighed. 'I don't really care. Is there much more of this?'

Furthermore,' continued Mike, 'Atoms are just assemblages of subatomic particles, aren't they?'

'Like you and I are just an assemblage of cells,' said Alun.

Mike looked at Alun with respect. 'That's rather good, Alun. Yes, indeed.'

'Thanks. I suppose you're talking about protons and neutrons.'

'No smaller than that. Protons and Neutrons are, in fact, both made up of three smaller particles.'

'The famous quarks?' I said.

Alun smirked, 'You get a lot of those from high-class ducks. They go; quark, quark, quark.'

Mike sighed and shook his head sadly, 'Shut up, Alun. Anyway... So, a mass is simply a huge agglomeration of Quarks, isn't it.'

'I was about to say as much,' said Alun, raising his eyebrows at the others. 'So where does that get us?'

'Well!' Mike paused for effect. 'My theory is that gravity is entirely due to quarks. The more quarks you have in a given volume, the greater the attractive force on other groups of quarks.'

I nodded. 'And of course, we know exactly what causes quarks to attract each other, do we?'

Mike shook his head, 'Oh No. We have absolutely no idea at all.'

'Brilliant!' cried Alun. 'That has brought us all much closer to understanding the forces governing the universe. Thanks, Mike.'

'You're welcome,' smiled Mike.



I shrugged. 'I must admit that I find it profoundly reassuring and comforting to have a boffin as a friend. It helps dissipate doubts and dispel misunderstandings.'

'Yes,' Alun agreed. 'It enables one to replace one's laughable misunderstandings with someone else's. It's very comforting.'

I nodded and took out my phone. 'Well. Now that we've cleared all that up, I'll call our pal and ask him to bring his tractor over,' I said.

I chatted on the phone for a few moments and explained the situation.

'He'll be over directly,' I said, pocketing my phone.

The officer nodded, 'In the meantime, we'll prepare the skeletons.'

'Without smashing them to dust,' chuckled Gérard.

To our surprise, one of the soldiers climbed up into the cabin and handed down several stretchers from the shadowy recesses behind the seats.

Noticing our surprise, the officer nodded. 'We could hardly pile the bones into a cardboard box, could we? We'll lay each one out as naturally as possible.'

I reflected that that was precisely what I would have done myself. One box per skeleton. But then again, I'm not an army officer.

A few moments later, we heard the unhealthy grating noise of Antoine's aged tractor and soon spotted the plume of black smoke. He turned off our rough track towards us and trundled up the field. Spotting the ruined lorry, his eyes opened wider than

I would have thought possible. 'Great heavens! What have you lot been up to this time?'

'Just a spot of DIY work,' smiled Alun.

Then, the farmer spotted the officer and nodded. 'Hello there, Capitan,' he smiled. 'The commandant is going to love this.'

The officer pulled a face.

'Don't worry, though. If you ask these three gentlemen, they'll certainly be able to suggest a convincing lie. Apparently, they're pretty good at that sort of thing.'

Alun nodded, 'It's true that we've had quite a lot of experience getting ourselves out of difficult situations. I'll see what I can think up.'

Mike groaned. 'Whatever you do, don't listen to him, Capitan. His ideas have ended us up in prison more times than I care to remember.'

Antoine stepped over the wreckage into the barn and gazed down. 'Skeletons!' he cried.

'Only four,' smiled Alun. 'We were hoping for more, but one has to put up with these small inconveniences.'

I explained the discovery and our conclusions to him.

'Nice guy, that German,' he said.

We nodded in agreement.

'And you, Capitan... You came over to pick them up?'

The man nodded.

'But you hadn't counted on being assisted by these three gentlemen...'

'No,' he pulled a face. 'I didn't take that into account. I'll avoid making the same mistake again.'

Antoine turned slowly and looked up at the stonework above where the door frame fitted. He then turned and looked up at the roofing beams and nodded to himself.

'Right,' he said decidedly. 'Here's what we'll do. You lads, drag me over two of the long planks stacked over there.'

We followed the man's pointed finger. 'Bring me two of the longest. When I've lifted the doors, we'll bolt one of the planks across the frame at the top so that it extends out across the stonework on each side. That will stop the thing falling outwards again.'

We nodded.

Antoine went on, 'Then we'll bolt the second plank to that cross beam up there and nail the other end to the first plank,' he paused to make sure we were following. 'That will stop the frame falling inwards.'

'Got it,' smiled Mike.

I might point out here that being called "lads" did our morale an enormous amount of good. It boosted our enthusiasm sky-high, and we threw ourselves into the task like whip-chord muscled twenty-year-olds. We would no doubt pay for this later. However, as Alun was apt to say, we could always drown our sorrow in wine.

Antoine rubbed his work-roughened hands together, 'That'll keep the thing in place for at least a hundred years.'

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'Just enough time for us to finish this renovation job,' grumbled Mike.

'Ha, ha,' said Alun. 'Beware of gravitational waves, all the same.'

The old man turned to Alun and said, 'You can seal it with concrete if you like, but that can wait.'

'Yes,' said Alun, 'That can wait till someone else does it.'

Mike smiled, 'It can wait until someone reads the instructions on the bag of cement properly before starting.'

'Very amusing,' sneered Alun.

Getting the doors back into place and securing them took us the best part of an hour. However, once done, the finished job looked convincingly solid.'

'Nice job that,' I said. 'Thanks.'

Antoine shrugged; 'Easy enough when you know what to do and have the right gear.'

The army driver then backed the lorry into the barn, carefully avoiding the framework. Under the ruined canvas cover, there was just enough space to slide the stretchers. The men had laid each skeleton out on a separate one, which they then lifted and slid carefully into the available space.

Then, after farewells, they drove down the field as slowly as possible, doing their very best to avoid the bigger obstacles.

Mike turned to Alun and asked, 'Why on earth do you have to make up such a load of gibberish, Alun?'

Alun shrugged, 'These things just spring out of the infinity of the universe with no warning. It's what we

call divine inspiration, Mike. Very, very few are blessed with the ability to do that.'

Mike sighed, but Alun went on. 'I have the remarkable ability of being able to create something wonderful from absolutely nothing. To be able to...'

'Oh, shut up, Alun, for heaven's sake,' groaned Mike. 'Please.'

As Antoine drove off, we spotted Joseph accompanied by another man.

They were walking up from the direction of the storage barn.

We started swinging the heavy doors closed, but Joseph called, 'Hold on a moment.'

The two men came over.

'This is Monsieur Vial. The architect. He was the man responsible for the work at the Septet.'

The man was thin and tall, with a suntanned face, dark eyes, and a shock of tightly curly brown hair. He was wearing beige linen trousers and an open-neck short-sleeved tee shirt. He smiled at us. 'Ah, ha!' he said, looking past us. 'So, this is the project, is it?'

We nodded.

Joseph added, 'Mr Vial is the man we will work with on the job for inspector Venet.'

'That's going to be interesting too,' smiled the man.

He then pursed his lips and carefully scrutinised the barn. 'It looks to be in good condition. It's been abandoned for a long time, I believe. What does the internal structure look like?'

'It looks OK to us, but then you're the expert,' I said.

He stepped through the open doors and gazed up. 'Yes. Good solid stuff, these barns.' He nodded to himself. 'Those beams look perfect from here.'

'The floorboards on the hay loft are more or less dead,' said Alun.

'That's to be expected,' said the man. 'Let's have a look at the foundation piles, shall we? That's the key factor in these ancient places. If those are OK and the wood is sound, we're onto a winner.'

He walked over, picking up a rake as he went. He then carefully scraped the ground clear at the base of each support pillar, going methodically around the building. After doing this, he nodded and smiled encouragingly at us, returned to the centre of the space and gazed back up at the roof.

'The tiles are perfect,' he said.

'I replaced a few cracked ones,' said Mike.

The man nodded. 'It looks good to me. Nothing obvious wrong with the place. A good buy, in fact. The rest is simply a question of money.' He glanced at us to see how we would react.

Joseph smiled at Monsieur Vial, 'Their wives apparently have a firm hold on the purse strings.'

Vial smiled, 'Normal. There's nothing unusual about that. But it depends on how big that purse is.'

Joseph nodded, 'I've been led to believe that their pocket money for the project will be a few hundred thousand euros. Maybe two hundred thousand.'

The architect gave us an appraising glance. He decided that we did not belong to the category of clients who would insist on gold-plated taps and

luxury fittings. 'That should be enough,' he paused. 'I mean that with that, we should be able to make something nice out of this.'

Mike, Alun and I smiled and let out a sigh of relief. 'Great,' said Alun.

'We'll need to put down proper foundations to start with,' said Vial. 'And build a decent cavity wall all the way around. And don't forget; we'll have to retain the original wooden boarding on the outside.' He glanced at Alun. 'That's part of the rules for places like this.'

Alun frowned, and Vial continued, 'The finished job must retain the main features of the original barn. And anyway,' he continued, 'Wood's fantastic stuff for insulating the brickwork and blocking the sun from heating it up to boiling point.' He paused. 'You can't have vast panoramic glazed windows either.' He added, 'But you wouldn't want those down here anyway. Not in summer, at least.'

I nodded, 'I suppose the aim in these parts is to minimise heat penetration.'

'Yes. I always say, first calculate how much insulation you need, then double the figure. That's not where the money goes, so why skimp?'

Alun, Mike and I exchanged looks. Vial was decidedly a man who looked at things from the same angle as us.

'You know,' I said. 'I have the impression that we're going to get on well together.'

'Good.' he said, 'We'll have fun, too.'

The three of us nodded happily.

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Joseph chuckled, 'Oh! By the way. The chap from the garage came up and looked at the old 2CV.'

'Ah!' said Alun. 'What did he have to say?'

'He loves the idea.'

'Fantastic.'

'He brought up the trailer and took the car back to the village. He'd never seen one of those four-wheel drive versions with double engines, so he's very keen.'

'Even better,' I said.

Mind you, I had to authorise him to post the photos and videos of his renovation work on his social media pages. He says this sort of project will get him hundreds and possibly thousands of new followers, especially from the ancient Citroën enthusiasts.'

Mike smiled and nodded, 'And that'll boost his reputation and bring in a good number of new customers, too.'

Alun frowned, 'We should have charged him for the privilege of doing the job rather than pay him.'

Joseph laughed, 'Come on, you three. You'll be getting an incredible little car almost for free. He'll probably only charge you four or five hundred euros for the job.'

'Any idea of how long it'll take him?' I asked.

'About a week. He says the previous owner knew what he was about. Apparently, he used the old, old trick of filling the cylinders with oil to prevent them from rusting. The mechanic is convinced that because of that the motors will be OK. On the other hand, the wiring will need careful checking because



the insulation of that old stuff often falls to bits. You wouldn't want the thing to catch fire because of a short circuit. That's what will take the longest to do, especially if he has to replace some of the long cable runs.

During this conversation, the architect wandered over to the back of the barn and checked the boarding.

We went over to him. He turned and nodded. 'We'll have to dig a good way down to create decent foundations. While we're about it, you don't want a basement or anything, do you?'

We exchanged looks.

'Well, we wouldn't mind a wine cellar,' said Alun.

The architect nodded. 'You might as well dig the place out while the machines are here.'

'Won't that cost a fortune?' asked Mike.

Vial shrugged, 'Less than if you did it after we'd finished. Anyway, I'll calculate the extra cost, then you can decide.' He looked at us. 'I'd do it if I was the owner.'

'As you said earlier,' I said. 'It's all just a question of money.'

With his boot, the man scraped away some straw covering the packed earth ground and smiled, 'Let's hope we don't uncover any buried skeletons, like your farmer friend. We wouldn't be allowed to touch the place until the specialists had finished. That'd slow the work down terribly.'

Joseph frowned, and we followed his gaze. 'There's something odd sticking up in that straw

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behind the door over there. I wonder what it is,' he said.

He strode over and pulled back the loose stalks, then stood and gazed at us, his mouth slightly open.

'Something interesting, Joseph?' said Alun.

Joseph raised his eyebrows, 'You wouldn't want to know.' he said.

The architect strode over, looked down and blew out his cheeks, 'Damn it!' he blew out his breath.

'Human bones!'

## Chapter 11

**M**ike, Alun and I looked down at the stub of bone protruding from the dry earth. Alun frowned, 'It's probably a bear's bone,' he said. 'There were loads of bears around here in the old days. In any case, it's certainly not human.'

'A bear!?' gasped Mike.

'Not only that, Mike, but this is a big male's left leg bone.'

'A bear's left leg bone!?'

'That's it. It's obvious when you've got a little experience. But I'll let you into the secret. I know this because it's worn down on the left side.'

Mike opened his eyes wide, 'Well, where on earth would you expect a bear to wear its left leg? Up on its right shoulder?'

'That's very funny, Mike,' said Alun.

Mike shrugged, 'Anyway, since when were you to be able to recognise a bear's bone?'

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'For your information, Mike, I did a survival course on that very subject last winter at Yeovil Cultural Centre.'

'I don't believe a word of it!' cried Mike.

'Have it your way, Mike. But if this were a human bone, which of course it isn't, then it would hold up our renovation project for years.'

I nodded, 'So in this survival course of yours, Alun, you learned to recognise dead bear's bones, did you?'

'Yes, I did. In the tracking classes.'

'You learnt to track dead bears?'

'And wolves,' said Alun.

'Dead Bears and dead wolves!?'

'Naturally. Tracking live ones is far too dangerous for first-year students.'

'Of course,' I said. 'I hadn't thought of that aspect. But you'll be learning the dangerous bit soon, will you?' I said.

'For that part, we were going to northwest Canada, but I had to come here instead.'

'That's a pity, Alun,' I said. 'Those skills would have come in handy.'

He shrugged, 'You can't have your bone and gnaw it. And anyway, I would never have let my best friends down.'

'That's a pity, Alun.' said Mike. 'It would have been a breath of fresh air.'

'Thanks, Mike.'

'But I can't help it being a human bone, can I?'

'It isn't a human bone, Mike,' he said. 'It's either from an adult bear or perhaps a horse.'

'A bit small for a horse,' said the architect.

'I agree,' added Joseph.

'A small horse, of course. That's obvious,' replied Alun.

'Is it?' frowned Joseph.

'Naturally. They only had small ones in those days. They were stunted due to malnutrition.'

'What!?' cried Mike.

'Which days were those?' I asked, an expectant smile spreading across my face.

Alun scowled at me. He then transferred his gaze back to Joseph before adding. 'In the years following the Black Death, of course.'

'I suppose you're referring to the bubonic plague,' sighed Mike. 'However, that was in the fourteenth century, Alun. Are you implying that this bone has been sticking out of the ground for six hundred years?'

Alun sneered, 'Who knows? Mind you, perhaps it was the typhoid epidemic. I can't rightly remember. Anyway, whatever it was, it led to hoards of dead farmers, which caused a catastrophic drop in food production and thus directly to horse stunting.'

'Horse stunting! Now that's really sad,' said Mike with a sneer.

'It's not so sad as you imagine, Mike. Because the people got stunted, too. So, the horses ended up just the right size for them.'

Mike shook his head and pulled a face, 'You ridiculous idiot, Alun!'

'But.' I smiled, 'I presume all this was later than the reintroduction of bears. That should give us an idea as to the date.'

'They didn't reintroduce bears,' said Alun. 'They were already here and have been since biblical times.'

'Brown bears, were they?' asked Vial with a wry smile.

Alun shrugged, 'Oh, all sorts of colour, I believe. Nothing definite.'

'Due to interbreeding?' I suggested.

'With stunted horses, perhaps,' scowled Mike.

'I wasn't about at the time,' said Alun.

'But surely they must have touched on that point during your survival course, Alun,' I smiled.

'Possibly, but I would have been embarrassed if they had and would have blocked up my ears.'

'What a lot of crap!' sighed Mike.

I frowned, 'But if this was a bear, why was it big and not stunted by malnutrition like the horses and humans?'

Alun smiled, 'Because the stunted horses and undernourished humans couldn't run very fast. Bears got plenty to eat.'

'I give up!' groaned Mike.

'In the meantime,' grumbled Alun, 'if our friend Joseph here had held his tongue or had looked the other way, I would not have to be searching for excuses.'

Joseph shook his head. 'Sorry, lads. It's my duty to humanity. This might be one of the major archaeological discoveries of the century. Who knows?'

The architect smiled, 'The probability of this being anything but a fluke is tiny. And anyway, the Paris experts will have to pay for digging the things up, won't they.'

'I suppose so,' grumbled Alun.

'And we'll have needed to dig down there to get the new foundations in, wouldn't we?'

'Yes, but that'll hold things up for ages,' I said. 'Imagine what will happen if they discover a hidden underground cave with stone-age paintings. That'll be the end of our little renovation project.'

Vial laughed, 'I doubt that will happen. Anyway, we won't be ready to do any work here until we've finished the plans and had them approved by the authorities.'

'Meaning?' I asked.

'Two months.'

'Two months!?' we cried in unison.

The man smiled. 'That'll leave us plenty of time before the bad weather comes.'

'Bad weather!?' exclaimed Mike. 'Do they allow that down here? I thought it was against the law.'

Vial chuckled. 'If we don't run into problems...' he began.

'Like discovering underground caverns,' I suggested.

'We ought to have the walls up by the end of summer,' he finished.

Alun shrugged.

'Anyway,' said Joseph. 'We've got other matters to deal with for the moment, such as finding a few hundred million euros worth of plunder.'

The architect rubbed his hands. 'Yes. We'd better get over to HQ.' He paused. 'And as we'll be working together quite a bit, why not use my Christian name; André.'

We nodded in agreement, 'So from now on,' I smiled. 'Monsieur André Vial, is an honorary member of the Musketeers, along with our personal biographer and photographer, Monsieur Gérard Kieffer.'

When we arrived at the Sarlat police station, the art experts Danielle Arnaud and Pierre Douanier were waiting for us.

Joseph had remained behind. He was taking Sophie and Julianna Metrokovitch to visit a new songwriter. They were off to listen to the latest set of songs which the man had prepared for Sophie's debut album.

Inspector Venet came out to the reception desk and led us to a large conference room. At its centre was a long polished mahogany table, on which several piles of folders were waiting for us.

Venet smiled, 'Over to you, André. I've got the documents you requested,' he said, pointing to the documents.



André nodded. He picked out a large-scale map of Sarlat and clipped it onto the paper board.

'I've made a list of possible buildings,' he said. 'Due to the land's configuration around Sarlat, only a few of the ancient buildings have what could be classified as basements, of sufficient dimensions. There's the "Manoir de Gisson," and the Ancient Convent of the Order of Notre Dame. Then there's the "Tribunal", the county court for you, and finally, I added to this the Hotel Madeleine, now called the Plaza Madeleine. It's the oldest hotel in Sarlat and dates back to eighteen thirty.' He paused, 'I'd like to start our search there.'

Inspector Venet smiled, 'That's where our treasure hunter from Germany is staying.'

'Is it? An expensive place,' nodded Vial. 'Four stars nowadays. And they have just acquired the buildings behind it for an extension project.'

'Yes,' nodded Venet. 'I heard about that. The old primary school. That's pretty old too.'

Alun and I were looking at the town plan, 'Can you point out the places, André?'

André stretched his hand and tapped the plan: 'The Hotel Madeleine is up here at the northern end of the old town. It was built close to the passage through the fortified walls, which no longer exist. The Manoir de Gisson is smack in the middle of the old town next to the "Place de la Liberté". It's a fascinating building, as you'll see.

Both the Convent and the Tribunal are just outside the old centre. The first is here,' he tapped

the plan. 'To the east. Just outside the original location of the old walls. And finally, the tribunal is here at the southern end of the town. Again, just outside the original fortifications.'

We took all this in.

I measured off the distances with my hand, 'All within less than a hundred and fifty metres of each other.'

André nodded, 'Yes, old Sarlat, is a small place.'

'But big enough to hide several hundred million euros worth of plundered works of art in,' added Alun.

André laughed, 'More than enough. I selected these buildings after studying the original plans from the town archives. They all have the potential to conceal hidden walled-off areas.'

'So, how do we go about this, André?' asked Inspector Venet.

'We measure the places and compare our dimensions with those on the plans.'

I pulled a face, 'That's going to take ages!'

André shrugged, 'A few hours each, for the Hotel and the Manoir de Gisson. Perhaps all day for the Convent and the Tribunal.'

Alun and I puffed out our cheeks.

André smiled, 'We might strike lucky at the start because I plan to begin with the most likely places. Anyway,' he chuckled. 'A few days for a few hundred million euros is a good return on investment.'

'Unfortunately, none of those euros will be coming our way, André,' I said.

'No. But the honour of being the discoverers, the publicity and the celebrity will be ours to keep,' he said.

Inspector Venet chuckled, 'And naturally enough, you wouldn't refuse an invitation to appear on national TV to describe the discovery.'

André smiled, 'One has to put up with certain of these disagreeable tasks in the name of science.'

'And,' I added, 'The tiresomeness and inconvenience of having one's company name spread all over the national newspapers wouldn't harm its reputation either, would it?'

'Times are hard,' he smiled. 'One shouldn't shun a bit of free advertising.'

'So where do we start?' said Mike turning back from scrutinising the map.

'The Hotel. That's the easiest,' replied André, scooping up the corresponding folder. After that, we can walk down to the "Manoir de Gisson" if we have time.

Three police cars were waiting for us in the forecourt, and we covered the short distance to the hotel in only a few minutes. From here, we would walk down to the Manoir and then back to the police HQ via the old town.

The entrance to the Plaza Madeleine was impressive, in keeping with the establishment's four-star classification.

The manager, an impeccably dressed and made-up woman, met us in the opulent but cosy reception area. She had the easy manner of someone perfectly at ease dealing with customers for whom money was of secondary importance, coming after comfort and quality.

She greeted us smoothly and smilingly.

Inspector Venet introduced himself.

'Yes,' replied the woman with a broad, carmine-lipped smile, 'I received a call from the chief superintendent. He said you wanted to take another look around the place.'

Venet stiffened at the word "another", but that was all. 'Yes, madam. When did the other team come?'

We gazed at him with astonished faces, but he shot us a silencing frown as the woman turned to her assistant behind the desk.

'Which day was it, Kathleen?' she asked.

'Thursday, Madam.'

'Ah!' said Venet. 'Yes, of course. Well, we need to check up on a few details. I hope that won't cause you too much trouble, madam.'

'Oh no, Inspector. The Chief Inspector asked me to provide you with all the help I could. He seemed annoyed that he had not been informed about your first visit, though.'

'Oh dear!' sighed Venet. 'I fear someone will get the sharp edge of his tongue. Not me I hope.'

The woman laughed a nice, smooth, high-class laugh. 'Katheleen will accompany you, but if you

need to enter any bedrooms... Please remember, our customers pay a lot for comfort and privacy and can be a little...' she paused.

'I understand,' smiled Venet. 'Can we start with the basement area, Kathleen?'

'Certainly, inspector,' said the young woman.

He smiled back, 'I'll just have a talk with my team before we start if you don't mind.'

The owner nodded. 'I'll leave you to get on with your work then, Inspector. Please ask Kathleen to call me if you need anything.'

With this, she slid away and disappeared through a concealed door into what was obviously her comfortably furnished, air-conditioned office.

Venet took us into the bar area, which was empty at this hour and far enough away to be out of hearing distance.

'What the hell...!' said Gérard.

'It looks like someone wanted to get a look before us,' the inspector frowned. 'I expect our German friend was behind this?'

'While we're here, perhaps we could have a discreet look around his room,' suggested Alun.

Venet shook his head, 'That's not our job, Alun. We're not the Secret Service. The Chief would go through the roof if he got wind of anything like that.'

'Especially just as his long dreamt of promotion is going through the final vetting phase?' I suggested.

'Exactly. I'm going to have trouble about this anyway.'

'Is it worth going around the place?' said Gérard. 'If these guys have done their job properly, the stuff will be gone by now.'

Venet smiled. 'I doubt that very much. Do you honestly think someone could sneak into a place like this and carry off hundreds of packages without the Manager being alerted?' he paused. 'No. No way. Either they found nothing, or they did but haven't found a way of removing it yet.'

We nodded...

'Or they don't know where to look,' suggested Mike. 'Without the original plans, there's no way of knowing if a wall has been added somewhere.'

Venet shrugged, 'They're unlikely to have come in, parading as police investigators unless they had some guidelines.'

'Well, ' said Alun. 'Maybe they have an architect tagging along. And even if they couldn't get the plans from the archives, maybe they could have got them from the owners.'

Mike nodded, 'If I were that German guy, I'd pretend to be really interested in the history of the place. Being a regular long-term paying visitor, they would have wanted to keep him as happy as possible.'

André smiled as he took out his camera and glanced at the lens. 'If it were me, I'd have chatted to the builders who did the renovation work. Those guys would have been certain to have the plans. Professional guys working on a premium job like

this wouldn't risk touching the structure without knowing exactly what was behind the plaster.'

The Inspector nodded. 'Yes. You're probably right. We'd best go on as planned. Come on. Where do we start, Gerard?'

Gerard lay the plan on the billiards table, and the eight of us gathered around it.

'The best way of doing this is for me to go along the corridor, here,' he pointed. 'I'll make the measurements with my ultrasonic metre, and I'll call them to you, Mike.'

Mike nodded, 'OK. If you want a job done properly...'

'We know, Mike,' groaned Alun, 'Ask you to do it.'

Gérard ignored this and continued, 'We won't bother with any differences less than twenty centimetres. We're looking for a large space that has been walled off, or a doorway that has disappeared.'

The inspector turned to Danielle and Pierre, 'There won't be anything for you to do for the time being. I suggest you walk down and have a wander around at the next place, "The Manoir de Gisson". That'll give you time to get the lay of the land, so to speak. I'll phone you if we discover anything. If we do, we'll have to get authorisation to get our builders in and knock the walls down. That'll take time.'

Gerard smiled, 'You're going to find the Manoir extremely interesting, I think. There are all sorts of unexpected surprises in that place. It's well worth the trip, as they say.'

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Danielle nodded, and the two art experts wandered off.

Kathleen showed the way, and we entered the regions normally closed to the hotel customers.

As we went, Gerard stopped occasionally to make a measurement. He called these to Mike, who called back the dimensions on the plan.

The job only took us about an hour.

At the end of this, Gérard pulled a face, 'I would have betted that if that treasure was hidden, then it would have been down here.'

I glanced at him, 'What if they completely walled up one of the bedroom doors? Then you'd only need to replaster the corresponding wall, and no one would ever know a room was hidden behind it.'

'Good thinking.' He nodded. 'Now, all these rooms are pretty standard, except for the suites, so I think I can spot anything odd without doing the measurements. Keep an eye open for missing cupboards and such-like, though.'

'So,' said Mike, 'We start by checking that all the doors are where they ought to be?'

'Exactly. That's going to be a quick job. Come on.'

The rest of the job took another hour, after which we trouped back to the bar.

'Nothing here, then,' smiled Gerard. 'Pity. Well, on to the Manoir de Gisson then.'

We thanked Kathleen for her help, and then Venet knocked on the office door and spoke with the manager for a few minutes.



I must admit that I was a little disappointed. I would have liked to discover something unusual. 'Not even a hidden wine cellar or a cannabis growing room,' I sighed.

Gerard smiled. 'You're going to like the next place. A real rabbit warren. It's full to overflowing with period character.'

'I'd prefer it to overflow with plundered works of art,' I said.

'Perhaps it will be,' he chuckled.

We walked across the big "square du Huit Mai" and into the pedestrian area of the old town via the Rue de la Paix and the Rue des Consuls.

Then, shortly after, we came to a halt in front of a tall ancient building made of honey-coloured stone. It was an impressive three-story place with two wings connected by a central hexagonal tower.

To our left stood an arched stone entrance. Beside this, and above an ancient wisteria-covered wall, we could see a railed terrace of impressive dimensions. A second, smaller but equally heavy oak door was set in the base of the central tower.

Gerard nodded. 'This place doesn't have a proper underground basement, but the ground floor serves as one, as you'll see. The tower over there houses a magnificent fifteenth-century helicoidal stone staircase. That's what links the two wings and the different floors together.' He leant over and rubbed the stone wall affectionately. 'The place has been furnished with period objects and is said to look

almost identical to what it did at the height of its glory. I think you'll like it.'

Mike gazed up, 'And those tiny windows right at the top are the servant's quarters, I suppose.'

'Yes,' said Gérard. 'On the first floor, leading off the terrace, we have the big dining room, called the "Salle d'Honneur", and the Kitchen. On the other side of the tower, you have a sitting room and a smoking room.'

Then, on the floor above, you have the Main sitting room, to the left of the staircase. The original Consul's office and the master's bedroom are on the right-hand side.

Inspector Venet nodded, 'The place is officially closed today, so we won't be disturbed by visitors milling about.'

He pushed open the heavy door and called out, 'Hello there!'

'Coming,' came an echoing reply from some distant place. As we followed Venet into the cool, darkened space, we heard approaching footsteps on the cold stone floor. They stopped, and we heard a click as the person switched on the lighting.

For a moment, we were blinded by the bright lights and screwed up our eyes. When we got used to the light, we found ourselves in a broad stone-walled room that appeared to have been set out as a museum.

'Good morning, gentlemen. Welcome to the Manoir de Gisson. Your two friends are upstairs enjoying a nice quiet visit.' He paused and gazed at

Gerard. 'Here to do a bit of surveying, I believe,' he said.

Gerard nodded, and the man smiled, 'Will you need me? If not, I've got plenty to do. You'll find me in the office,' he smiled. 'I'll leave you to it then.'

With this, he disappeared through a stone archway on our right, and we heard his footsteps clicking away into the distance.

Gerard took out the plans and handed Mike the one corresponding to this floor. 'This part has been converted into what nobles used to call their "cabinet de curiosités". I believe they're called the same thing in English, but I'm not certain they had one here in those days. All the same, it's the sort of thing most very wealthy men liked to have. More to show off their rank than their eclectic scientific interests.'

'Interesting stuff anyway,' said Alun, gazing into a glass-topped cabinet at a sabre-toothed-tiger skull.

'Yes, some interesting stuff, mostly brought back by explorers and navigators in the seventeenth century,' said Gérard. Then, turning to Mike, he added, 'In this part, I want to check that none of the original stone alcoves have been partially or totally walled off. It would have had to be done by a professional stone mason, but there was no shortage of those during the last war.'

We started once more the long process of measurement taking. While Mike and Gérard got on with the job, Alun and I wandered about the place gazing at the exhibits. There were hundreds and

hundreds of objects, all more unexpected than the others. At one point, we came across a massive ancient stock in which minor criminals were undoubtedly exhibited on the main square as a warning to the more law-abiding citizens.

There were African masks, American Indian headdresses, fossils and seashells galore, a rhinoceros horn, and an enormous spiral-shaped elephant tusk. Between the more impressive exhibits, hundreds of small fascinating objects collected from all over the planet had been strategically placed.

All in all, the arched roofed rooms made a cool and highly agreeable place to visit.

After about half an hour, Mike approached us, 'Nothing doing down here,' he said. 'Gérard is a bit disappointed. He thought that this was the most likely spot.'

'Interesting place this, Mike,' I said.

'I can see that. I'll have to come back another day when there are no more treasures to hunt out. Anyway, come on. We're doing the first floor next.'

We took the ancient stone spiral staircase and came out into the kitchen area. This had been renovated and filled with period objects. Gérard did not even take measurements here. His architect's eye compass quickly convinced him that this and the magnificently restored dining room overflowing with massive, dark wood furniture, were exactly as indicated on the plans. He rapidly came to the same

conclusion concerning the two other rooms on this floor; the small sitting room and the smoking room.

'I wasn't expecting much here,' he said. 'Unless they had walled off the smoking room, which would have been about the right size. Let's check the next floor, but the only obvious possibility is the walling off of part of the bedroom,' He shrugged. 'I've not much hope, but let's take a look anyway.'

We climbed the stone staircase and passed through the "Madam's Boudoir" into the Main sitting room, "Le Grand Salon".

Strangely, this sitting room contained a four-poster bed as part of the furnishing.

'Isn't that odd?' I asked Gérard.

'What?'

'Well having a bed smack in the middle of the sitting room.'

Alun smiled, 'The host's conversation was perhaps not quite as lively as ours.'

'Lively, is not the word,' said Mike. 'Pointless and ridiculous would be closer to the mark.'

'There is no room in our sitting room at home for a bed, Mike. So, I consider it my duty to spice up the discussion, or you'd have to go home early each time you visit us.'

'And miss the after-dinner Armagnac,' I said.

Mike pulled a face. He was probably remembering a particular incident the previous Christmas. Somehow, we accidentally set fire to a playing field. This happened after we were forced to secretly wash a cooked Christmas turkey we had

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dropped, before confronting the Girls with it. We did this with a bottle of vintage Armagnac we had just purchased, but Alun decided we could also flambé it. Anyway, that's another story.

Gérard quickly checked the plans and shook his head. 'Nothing here either.' He then frowned, 'I'd better check up the chimney. You'd be surprised just how much room there is inside these ancient ones. And they go right to the top of the building.

He got down on his knees and twisted his head to look upwards. 'I can see the light up there,' He pulled a face. 'Pity.'

'We didn't check the kitchen chimney, ' said Mike. 'That's even bigger. I'll go and check that shall I?'

Gerard nodded, 'We'll check the other rooms on this floor. Then our last hope is the servant's room and the attic.'

We were soon back on the stairs again and Mike joined us and gave us a shake of the head.

As expected the servant's quarters were small, and it was obvious that nothing could have been hidden in them. The bedroom on the right-hand side of the stairs had a door that opened into an attic. This had been artistically filled with a large variety of objects from the period—the sort of objects that might have been discarded during the growth of a wealthy family.

Gerard consulted the plan and shook his head, 'Nothing here,' he sighed. 'Ah well.'

The room on the left-hand side of the stairhead was identical, except that it did not have an attic

attached to it. Gerard sighed. 'Oh well. Next stop, the convent.'

As he turned to take the stairs down, Mike frowned. 'Hold on, Gerard.'

The man stopped, 'Yes.'

Mike handed him the plan, 'Both sides should be identical,' he said, excitement burning in his eyes. 'There ought to be an attic or storage room here too.'

Gérard grabbed the plan and cried out, 'Hell! And I missed the damn thing. I was so convinced that there was nothing here... Thanks, Mike.'

The two men made some measurements and compared them with the plan.

'Great gods!' cried Gerard as Inspector Venet came over to take a closer look.

I stepped over to the wall and tapped it with my knuckle. It was solid stone. I went right along the wall, testing it as I went. 'Solid stone all the way along.'

Gerard laid the plan on the floor and squinted at it. 'The entrance door ought to have been just here,' he said, stepping up to the wall.

After making a few measurements, he took a big carpenter's pencil from his pocket and marked the two sides of the missing doorway.

By now, we were all very excited. Alun shot us a look, stepped forward, lifted his leg, and vigorously kicked the wall. The only thing that happened was that he toppled backwards onto the hard floor.

'Hell's bells!' he cried.

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At the exact moment, we heard a crash on the staircase below, followed by the sound of heavy boots running up the stone staircase.

'What, in the name of !' cried Venet, starting for the door. However, before he got there, he leapt smartly back.

We turned to see four big, armed men confronting us. The barrels of four machine guns were trained on us as two more men reached the stairhead.

Two of the men stepped inside and, without a word, gestured menacingly at us to leave the room.

We were herded into the room on the other side. As we passed, we saw the two last men carrying sledgehammers and a heavy, four-handed battering ram.

The men gestured for us to move to the far end of the bedroom and into the attic space beyond. Then two of them took guard, just inside the bedroom door.

None of them said a word.

Then, from the other room came a crashing noise as the two biggest men went to work on the wall with the sledgehammers. After less than thirty seconds, we heard a cheer and a crashing noise as the wall caved in. Then we saw a seventh dark-clad man slip past, carefully shielding his face from us.

There was a burst light as a portable floodlight was turned on.

For a few moments, there was silence, punctuated by a metallic rattling sound, as if



someone was rummaging through a pile of metal parts.

Then, as suddenly as it had all begun, there was a whistle, and the men disappeared and dashed down the stone staircase. Silence fell.

I moved to step out onto the landing, but Inspector Venet grabbed my arm and held me back. He shook his head, picked up a pillow from the floor and tossed it out through the open door.

The silence was split by a deafening roar of machine gun fire, and I leapt back.

Immediately after this, we heard the sound of a pair of heavy boots clattering down the stone stairs, and then silence fell again.

I blew out my cheeks and opened my eyes as wide as saucers.

I mimed "thanks", to Venet, who nodded back.

He then picked up a second cushion and tossed it out.

This time there was no blast of machine gun fire.

He crept over to the doorway, but instead of looking out, he shoved an antique chair so that it fell out onto the landing with a clattering noise.

Nothing happened.

'They're gone,' he nodded. 'Whoever they were.'

'God in heaven!' cried André. 'What's all this stuff with machine-gun-carrying thugs?'

'Oh, that's just part of being around us,' I said.

'After all, that's what you wanted, wasn't it?'

'I don't want to get shot to bits,' he gasped, looking a little white.

Gerard was sitting on a chair, wide-eyed and frightened. 'Christ! What on earth was all that about?'

Inspector Venet shook his head. 'That was about two hundred million euros of treasure,' he shook his head. 'What a damn idiot I've been. I ought to have guessed that our activity would be under surveillance.'

'But it was the surveyor who was under surveillance,' said Alun, glancing at Gérard and wiggling his eyebrows.

'We could all have been killed,' moaned Gerard. 'My God!'

Venet shook his head, 'No. These guys are after treasure. They don't want the entire French police force on their tails for multiple murders.'

Mike frowned. 'But why did they all disappear again?'

'We're just about to discover that,' said Venet.

'That hidden space clearly does not contain what these men were looking for.'

'So, let's see,' I said. 'You first, Mike.'

Mike made an unpleasant gesture, 'Who do you take me for? A suicide candidate?'

'I'll go,' said André, striding forward. 'They've gone. That gun blast was to keep us in place and ensure they had time to make a clean getaway.'

He dashed out and across the landing into the room opposite.

There was no blast of machine gun fire, so we followed him, albeit in a more leisurely, gentlemanly manner.

The wall we had marked had been smashed down, and a gaping hole marked the opening.

'Hell!' gasped Alun. 'Those two guys with the sledgehammers must have been damn strong!'

'You're telling me,' said Gérard. 'That stone wall was made to last.'

I took out my phone and stepped over to the gap. I switched it on the torch app, and we all gathered around the opening.

Inside, along the walls, were stacks of boxes, and at the far end of the room, carefully arranged, were hundreds of machine guns and handguns.

The boxes were marked "ammunition".

Venet burst out laughing, 'Well, well, well!' he cried.

'What on earth is this,' cried André, pulling out his camera.

'This,' said Venet. 'Must have been the resistance fighters' arms store. Probably in preparation for the final offensive they never needed to make.'

I nodded, 'And hidden right under the German's noses, smack in the middle of their headquarters!'

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

We looked at him.

'We ought to be a little more careful next time...'

At this moment, we heard a noise behind us and whirled around. Danielle Arnaud and Pierre

Douanier were standing in the doorway, looking an awful colour.

'What in the name of God was all that? We saw armed men rushing up the stairs, and we hid in the sitting room. Is anyone injured?'

I shook my head, 'Apparently, the other team looking for the treasure has different methods to ours.'

'But they shot at you!'

Venet shook his head, 'No. That was just to keep us out of the way while they made good their escape.'

'Without taking their treasure with them?' cried Pierre.

We stepped aside for them to see, 'Have a look at the treasure,' smiled Alun.

There was more noise behind us, and the man who had let us in appeared.

'My God!' he cried. 'What have you done!?''

He, too, stepped forward, and the three stopped short.

'What in heaven's name...!' exclaimed the man.

Gérard pursed his lips, 'We think this was a secret arms store made by resistance fighters during the last war,' he said. Then, smiling, he added., 'It'll make a nice additional exhibit, don't you think?'

## Chapter 12

**W**e left the Manoir de Gisson in better spirits than we had entered. Admittedly, we had not found the plundered treasure. However, we had undoubtedly discovered something unexpected and of historical value for the town.

Our newspaper reporter, Gérard, was happy. This was because he had been authorised to publish an article on the discovery. Any mention of the real reasons for the surveying job was to be suppressed and replaced by a version based on the inquisitiveness and professional intuition of our architect, André. Needless to say, this would be good publicity for his business, and the story would have leaked out quickly anyway. For his part, the mayor of Sarlat was enchanted. He was enthusiastic about all the free publicity about Sarlat that would be splashed across the nation's news media. The news would break just as the summer tourist season got

underway. He knew by experience that the number of tickets sold for the Manoir Visit would soar to unprecedented levels, and the management could now look forward to a record year.

Happily, the manager of the manoir had not seen the armed men, so for him, we were just over-enthusiastic and reckless fools. The chief inspector had called the man personally and had confirmed his authorisation, adding a convincing story about concerns about terrorist threats. The mayor had been informed about our activities well in advance. He was primed to back up any lies that the authorities felt necessary.

As for us, well, we had now been given an excellent demonstration of the style of competition we were up against.

'Do you think that seventh guy was your German treasure hunter, Inspector?' asked Alun.

Venet shrugged, 'That's possible because when I phoned the hotel earlier, they told me he checked out and left shortly after our visit.'

'That's suggestive,' I said.

'I wonder how they got onto us,' said Gérard.

'I wouldn't be surprised if these three weren't being trailed since the discovery at the barn,' said Venet, looking at Alun, Mike and me.

'We didn't notice anything,' I said.

Venet allowed himself a little chuckle, 'Two hundred million euros is worth employing the very best professional for.'

'Yes,' I replied. 'So, it isn't worth us trying to outsmart them then.'

'No,' agreed Venet, shaking his head. 'That would be a waste of time and energy.'

'Might be good fun though,' smiled Alun. 'Just trying.'

'And what about that couple who were impersonating Danielle and Pierre?' asked André.

Venet shrugged, 'I have a feeling that they're independent of this armed gang.'

'They might have a similar set-up waiting in the wings,' I said.

'Yep,' nodded Venet. 'We'll be careful from now on.'

We sauntered slowly back through the narrow, shady roads toward the police station. On the way, we first passed the fourteenth-century town hall, then the magnificent Cathedral Saint-Sacerdos, which dates back to the twelfth century. Gérard asked us to make a short detour into a garden just behind this massive building. He wanted to check out a peculiar cylindrical tower with a steep conical roof. This is called the "Lantern des Morts", the dead man's lantern, and he wanted to make sure there was nothing worth investigating inside.

There wasn't, so we continued our winding way back to where our cars were parked near the police station.

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A few hours later, we were once more gathered around the massive table under the Umbrella pines.

We had just finished explaining our discovery and were sipping iced white wine of exceptional quality.

'You found what!?' cried Margaux.

My wife opened her arms in an exasperated gesture, 'Can't you three just stop discovering things for once?' She shook her head sadly. 'First a second world war tank...'

'An armed personnel carrier, to be exact,' interrupted Mike.

'Be quiet, Mike,' said Margaux.

Mike sighed, 'I feel that it's always best to give things their correct designation whenever possible.'

Margaux scowled at him.

My wife took up the thread of her comment, 'First, you find this armoured thing, then, a pre-war Citroen...'

'And a tractor,' added Mike. 'A small green one.'

'In working order, with a mower attachment...' added Alun.

'Mike!' warned Margaux. 'And you too, Alun.'

'Then some ancient human remains...'

'Probably medieval bear's bones,' said Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' said his wife.

'And now. To cap it all, you find a secret room full of wartime machine guns.' My wife let her forearms fall to the heavy deal table around which we were sitting, waiting for the meal.

'It was Mike who actually spotted the location,' said Alun.



'You are all accessories to the crime,' replied Margaux.

We did a collective shrug, 'These things happen,' smiled Alun.

'Only to you three,' said my wife.

'It was André's idea. He had the plans,' said Alun.

'But you three put the idea into his head in the first place.'

Alun grumbled, 'We can hardly be held responsible for the fact that collectively, we have a predisposition for exceptionally innovative and creative thinking.'

I nodded, 'There's little we can do about that, is there? It's our destiny. The Lord has seen fit to bless us with...'

'Oh! For heaven's sake, be quiet!' groaned Margaux.

We gave another collective shrug and decided that this was as good a time as any other to do a bit of wine sipping. As we did so, we shot each other glances and smiles as we raised our glasses.

'What are you three smirking about?' asked my wife.

'Nothing,' I said.

Margaux narrowed her eyes, 'And, for all your predispositions for exceptionally innovative and creative thinking, you didn't plan for a visit from an army of armed thugs.'

'It wasn't an army,' said Mike. 'There were only six.'

'Seven,' added Alun.

'Tough looking guys, too,' I said. 'And strange as it might seem, all of them were dumb.'

'What!?' cried Margaux.

'Well, as no one said a word, we assumed they were either dumb or had had their tongues cut out.'

'What!?' groaned my wife.

Mike nodded, 'They were probably members of an obscure Nepalese religious order. No doubt sent by the holy father across many continents to recover their precious ancient relic.'

'Yes,' added Alun. 'An ancient relic charged with unthought-of occult powers.'

Margaux's eyes opened like saucers.

My wife shook her head sadly, 'Maybe they'd simply been told to hold their tongs.'

'Oh no,' said Mike. 'You need both hands for a machine gun...'

'Oh God!' groaned Margaux.

'They looked like Bulgarians to me,' said Alun.

Mike frowned, 'Bulgaria is nowhere near Nepal, Alun.'

At this moment, Joseph came striding towards us with Julianna Metrokovitch and Sophie in tow.

My wife spotted a way of putting an end to our little dialogue. 'How did things go with your new songwriter, Joseph?'

The man sat down heavily and blew out his cheeks. 'I honestly don't know what the world's coming to,' he sighed. 'Not a single decent song.'

'Oh, come on, Joseph!' cried Julianna, 'I liked some of them. So did Sophie.'

'It's the public who has to like them, not you two.' Joseph frowned. 'The public doesn't have the refined

taste and the musical ear of an internationally acclaimed opera singer like you, Julianna.'

Joseph was a wily old pro who knew precisely how to manipulate artists and get them to accept his points of view.

It worked perfectly, as he knew it would. Julianna nodded. 'Perhaps you're right. But it's a pity for the poor boy.'

'He's not a poor boy,' scowled Joseph. 'He's a poor songwriter. One who has just wasted my afternoon for me.'

'Joseph!' cried Sophie. 'Really!'

Joseph ignored this, 'I'll have to go up to Paris and see some of my old pals,' he sighed. 'We'll have to pay through the nose for a few decent songs, but what else can we do if there's no originality outside Paris? We can pad out the album with a few of these local guys' stuff. At least that'll keep you two satisfied, too, I suppose...'

He let this comment fade into the ambient silence. He then spotted the bedewed bottle of white wine. 'I think we deserve a little of that if you've no objection, Emma.'

Emma smiled. She was now perfectly used to Joseph's periods of professional grumbling. She also knew that he was doing all this to ensure that Sophie had as good a chance of becoming a pro singer as he could offer her. After all, he was putting his own money behind the girl who had only recently married Paul, Emma's older brother. She also knew Joseph

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wouldn't rest until he had done everything in his power to maximise the chances of success.

Joseph had been Emma's grandfather's lifelong agent and impresario. During this period, he had learnt all there was to know about the music business. He also knew everyone who could help him succeed in this project, his last one before retirement.

However, as he had already told Sophie, the modern music industry is about making money for the record companies. No one will risk investing hard cash in uncertain projects and, above all, risk losing it.

We continued discussing this for a few moments, and then Joseph seemed to remember something.

'Ah! By the way,' He looked at me. 'I phoned up some pals of mine.' He smiled. 'I managed to shake things up a bit.'

'What things?' I asked warily.

'Well, I put a word in the right ear. So, the outcome is that the,' he paused, searching for a word. He shook his head, 'Can't remember the name. The bone experts will be coming over from Bordeaux tomorrow morning.'

Mike nodded, 'The Biological Anthropologists, you mean?'

'Yes, that's it. They've already reserved a digger, small enough to get through the Barn door. It'll be here this evening, ready for an early start.'

'How did you work that, Joseph?' smiled my wife.

'Oh. Well, you know...' he said evasively.

'No, we don't, Joseph,' said my wife.

'Well, the man in charge of that sort of thing..' he started.

'In charge of Biological Anthropology?' asked Mike.

'Yes. Well, the chief and his wife were huge fans of Emma's grandad's music. Over the years, I engineered them a few free tickets to otherwise booked-out concerts. I liked them both, so it wasn't just a long-term investment.'

'And the man is still working; shouldn't he have retired now?' said Margaux.

'He is still only sixty-five!' exclaimed Joseph. 'The same age as me. Young chap,' he laughed. 'Anyway, he pulled a few strings and will make sure the job is done without undue delay.'

'You mean immediately,' smiled my wife.

'Exactly. I explained that we wanted to avoid holding up the renovation project,' Joseph smiled. 'I also promised to send him a full set of Lucas Duprès' early piano recordings. They're almost impossible to find nowadays. It'll be one of the few remaining and extremely rare, signed sets, too.'

I pulled an astonished face, 'Those must be worth a fortune.'

Joseph shrugged, 'Yes. But mind you, luckily, I put aside a good number of those rare unfindable signed sets a few years ago. They come in very handy from time to time.'

We all burst out laughing, 'You old devil!' cried our Diva, Julianna.

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'I've got a few unfindable and rare editions of your early recordings, too, Julianna. Unfortunately, they're not signed.'

Julianna shook her head and laughed, her massive opera singer's bosom shaking in sympathy. 'Not signed... You mean, not signed Yet. Is that it?' she laughed. 'That small detail can be solved quite easily,' she smiled. 'We will need to negotiate terms, though.'

We all knew Julianna Metrocovitch no longer needed extra funds. Even though Lucas Duprès and she had divorced when they were still young, Lucas had left her a large sum of money in his will. He knew that, unlike his agent Joseph, Julianna had no head for money matters. Thus, he made provisions in case she wasted away all the money she was making, which is precisely what she did.

The following day, Gerard, our personal biographer and photographer, joined us as we were finishing breakfast.

André had called him to let him know that we would have to put off investigating the Convent and the Tribunal building for a day. Inspector Venet wanted time to organise a reliable security set-up for us.

Before we started hunting again, he needed armed guards trained for this sort of action, not local policemen.

In fact he needed quite a few men because some would be posted outside the building entrances and others inside while we worked. They would have to

come over from Bordeaux, and organising this took time.

As we sat discussing this, Gérard cocked his head to one side, 'Ah!' he said. 'That sounds very much like an old 2CV.'

We listened attentively. There was undoubtedly a highly "vintage" note to the engine and the rattling sound that was approaching.

Then, without warning, the car bonnet appeared, leaping over the lip of the hillock, nowhere near the road.

The ancient vehicle rattled and shook its way across the plateau and came to a halt next to the pond. The garage mechanic jumped out in grease-marked blue overalls and beamed at us.

'Here she is, Lads,' he called, laughing. 'Brilliant! Really brilliant. I drove her across the fields, through the forest and straight up this hill. She drives as if it had caterpillar tracks instead of tyres.'

Alun, Mike, and I jumped up and rushed over to inspect the machine, which was ticking over and rattling happily.

'That was quick,' I said. 'I thought you'd have to strip her down completely.'

The mechanic shook his head. 'No. The guy left it in impeccable condition. I just had to flush out all the oil he had filled the cylinders and carburettor with. The electrics are all OK, and I just had to change the battery and spark plugs,' he nodded. 'I also took the precaution of flushing out the two petrol tanks and the piping, but both engines started almost immediately.'

'What about the steering and the brakes?' asked Mike.

'No problem there. The guy must have used gallons of grease on them before putting the car in storage under that tarpaulin in that barn. In a way, the car has been sitting there, waiting quietly inside a cocoon of grease for someone to come along and find it.'

'That's brilliant,' cried Alun enthusiastically. 'What about the insurance and other papers?'

'Shouldn't be any trouble,' said the man. 'Might take a few weeks, but in the meantime, you can still use it to run about in, as long as you stay on private land. That's why I came cross-country. As I said, this is a brilliant little thing, especially with those two separate engines. It keeps weight on both axles. You could almost drive it up a wall.'

My wife had come over and was listening with a wry smile. 'Oh dear!' she sighed. 'These three already drive me up the wall without any mechanical assistance. What on earth will it be like now?'

We all laughed, and the mechanic beckoned to us. 'Come on. Let's try her out down the track. I'll start, then you can take turns on the way back.'

I turned to my wife, 'Coming?'

She gaped at me, 'Are you completely mad!?''

I won't explain how that little trip went except that it was enormous fun. The little thing bounced along, rattling happily, and went straight up any reasonable slope we pointed it at.



We drove all the way to our barn, then circled the unmown field, and finally headed back up along the rock-strewn track. To end the trip, we sped up the side of the hillock and bounded back onto the plateau in front of the Septet just as Joseph came out of the house.

'Good god!' he exclaimed. 'You didn't actually manage to repair that thing?'

'I did,' replied the mechanic with pride.

'Want to come for a spin?' asked Alun.

Joseph gazed at the machine and shook his head, 'No thanks. I'd prefer to stay out of the hospital today. Anyway, the experts should be arriving in half an hour or so. I'll walk.'

'Well, not us,' smiled Alun.

We nodded in agreement.

'Let us know how much we owe you,' I said, smiling at the mechanic.

'Will do,' he said. 'Brilliant machine you have there. I really enjoyed messing about with such a rare thing. The photos will be on my website and Instagram tomorrow.' He smiled. 'Well, I'd better be getting back. Drive carefully, and remember, stay off the roads until you've got the papers straightened out.'

He strode off and left us gazing at our new toy.

Margaux came over, stood by my wife, and shook her head sadly, 'Heaven knows what trouble these idiots are going to get into with that contraption?'

We started to remonstrate, but she held up her hand to silence us. 'Just make an effort to stay out of

prison and hospital. That's all we ask. The rest...' she paused. 'We don't want to know.'

We sighed

'Have you absolutely no confidence in us?' I cried.

The two women exchanged astonished looks, then, shaking their heads sadly, turned away and returned indoors without a word.

Joseph chuckled, 'I suspect that means no.'

'Naturally,' I shrugged. 'I only ever ask the question as a matter of form. It does them good to feel that they've put one over on us, you see.'

The man gazed at me, 'I'm not certain I completely believe you, but never mind.'

'Don't worry, Joseph,' said Alun. 'We're quite used to not being believed. Believe me!'

'We have a great deal of experience, you see,' I added.

Mike sighed, 'A great deal of experience of spewing forth utter rubbish, non-stop, too.'

'That wasn't very kind, Mike,' I said.

'No. It wasn't supposed to be kind or unkind. I was simply stating a well-documented fact.'

Joseph nodded a noncommittal nod, 'Be that as it may,' he said. 'I'll have to get over to the barn and sort things out with my old friend.' he paused. 'That is if you want this job sorted out quickly.'

We nodded and did everything we could to speed him on his way.

'It would be quicker if we drove you over in the old 2CV Sahara,' I said.

'No, it wouldn't,' said Mike.

'I'll walk,' said Joseph.

After he had disappeared into the cork-oak forest, we opened the car bonnet. We gazed at the now almost sparkingly clean engine. We prodded here and there, then let the bonnet clang closed with that typical 2CV clang. The clang, that can be heard and recognised by any other old 2CV owner and enthusiast within a ten-kilometre radius. Hearing it, he will pause in whatever he or she is doing to nod and smile happily. No matter what terrible natural catastrophes occur, whichever trade unions strike, or what mistakes governments make, they know there will always be an old 2CV to fall back on.

We opened the boot and gazed at the second engine, then let this clang closed too.

The front door of the main farmhouse opened, and the Girls poked their heads out. 'Do you have to make that awful racket?' called my wife. 'Can't you go and play somewhere else?'

Alun sneered back, and we clambered into the machine and turned it down the side of the hillock.

There is something incredibly exhilarating about deliberately ignoring the presence of things like roads. It brings a perfume of adventure to even the simplest of things, like travelling one kilometre to the barn. The jolting, bouncing, and wobbling of an old 2CV on a rough forest track is enough to bring the colour back to the cheeks of even the dullest human.

'Youpee!' we cried as we shot down the slope at a breath-taking twenty kilometres an hour.

When eventually we bounced back out of the forest and up across the field, we found the barn doors wide open and a mini-digger trundling slowly inside.

Joseph stood talking with three men while a fourth in overalls leaned on a spade a few metres off, observing them through cigarette smoke.

The older of the three was turning the bone Joseph had found over in his hand while scrutinising it through a magnifying glass.

Joseph was listening to him and nodding to whatever he was saying. He turned and pointed at something near the side wall, and the others went over and got down on their knees.

As we approached, we saw that they had already dug a deep trench on one side of the barn door. It was about two metres wide and four metres long. Joseph spotted us and beckoned us over.

'There seems to be something under the earth here,' he smiled. 'They're going to have to dig down here, too.'

Joseph's friend was in his late sixties with a fine head of silver-grey hair. He had a deep brown suntanned face, and his forearms and legs were the same colour. Here was a man who was more often on site, excavating, than sitting behind his office desk. His blue eyes smiled at us as he shook our hands.

'Sorry about this hold-up, Lads. Joseph told me about your renovation project, so we'll try to get this done as quickly as possible,' he nodded. 'Oh! And I heard about your fantastic discovery under the hay.'

Now that was really something! I would have loved to have a look,' he scratched his ear. 'I hear it's all a bit hush-hush for the moment. Well, anyway, let's get on with the job.'

He called the digger driver over and indicated where he wanted the man to make a new trench.

The man pulled a face and shook his head. 'If we do it that way, we'll end up in trouble.'

'What do you suggest, then?' asked Joseph.

'Well, these guys are going to have to dig the place out anyway, So why not start at the back there,' he pointed into the darkness, 'And work back towards the entrance. That way, I can load the earth into the lorry as we go, and that can be dumped at the bottom of the field.'

The three experts nodded, 'Is that OK for you, gentlemen?' asked Joseph's friend.

'As long as the barn doesn't collapse,' said Joseph, speaking for us, 'That's OK.'

The driver beckoned to his assistant with the spade, and the man strolled out and jumped into the waiting lorry. First, he tipped it up and offloaded a tall pile of thick planks they had brought with them. These were for shoring up the sides of the excavated parts and creating any required formwork for the concrete.

Joseph turned back to us, 'This is going to be a long job. We may get it finished tomorrow if we don't come across anything requiring too much delicate spadework.'

## The Dordogne Renovation Project

We nodded, 'What you mean is, "Go and play with your new toy". Is that it, Joseph?' I smiled.

'Unless you enjoy watching others work.'

As Joseph turned back to his friend, the first lorry load of bone-dry earth was already on its way to the bottom of the field.

'I know something useful we can do while they're at this,' said Mike.

'Oh no!' groaned Alun.

Joseph chuckled and walked back towards his friend, now standing at the bottom of the growing trench. He and his two assistants followed the digger's bucket with their eyes as it cut cautiously into the soil.

I glanced at Mike as we walked back out of the barn into the sunlight, 'What's this useful job you have in mind?'

'Well,' he said. 'We agreed the other day that we'd be able to grow vegetables and stuff like that, didn't we.'

'I can't remember what the "stuff like that" included,' said Alun. 'Cannabis?'

'No, you twit. Not cannabis. You remember, Margaux made a list of all sorts of things we could grow.'

I looked at Mike, 'I don't remember the word "could", Mike. I think it is more likely to have been a "must".'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'The word, Must, sounds more in character. I vaguely remember something tiresome about digging.'

'Yes. And I remember thinking that such a project would entail unwanted physical activity on a daily basis,' I added.

'Unless we subcontract out to Mike,' suggested Alun. 'He's a boffin, and boffins know how to deal with "stuff like that".'

'And the daily exercise will do him no end of good,' I added. 'Keep his little grey cells leaping and gambolling about like newborn lambs.'

Mike sighed. 'So those plants and things need watering, don't they.'

'Perfectly correct, Mike,' I nodded appreciatively. 'See, Alun. A boffin is something one can always count on in times of stress.'

'And to do that,' smiled Mike. 'One needs water.'

'Right again, Mike.' said Alun. 'I see you've been reading up on the topic.'

'He's a boffin,' I said. 'That's what boffins do. They read stuff up.'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'Then they bore one to tears going on and on about it for days on end.'

'Until they find a new pet subject to read up,' I added.

'To ensure a regular flow of boredom,' nodded Alun.

'That's what boffins do, Alun,' I said.

'So, we need water, do we?' said Alun.

'Shut up, Alun. What I mean is that to get water, we're going to be ordered to traipse up and down to that tiny spring up there every day, aren't we.'

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We thought about this point. Mike had clearly put his finger on an important point.

'We could use tap water once it's been installed.' said Alun.

Mike shook his head. 'Are you mad!? They'll say that's a waste of natural resources when one can have it for free.'

We nodded. No. There was no doubt about how this would pan out. It would pan out by us spending half our time dragging up and down the field in the blazing summer sun, with watering cans.

'So, I have an idea,' smiled Mike.

Now that we had a clear idea of the looming danger, we were all ears.

'Let's have it then, Mike,' I said.

'A good idea, I hope,' smiled Alun, preparing to be sarcastic.

'Well, it's all straightforward. What we need is a big pond next to where the vegetables will be planted,' he nodded.

'Vegetables and "stuff like that",' I corrected.

'Yes. And stuff like that,' agreed Mike.

'But,' said Alun. 'For the moment, we seem to lack a pond?'

'I noticed that too, Alun,' I said.

Mike sighed. 'In there,' he turned and pointed towards the barn. 'Is a man with a digger and another with a lorry.'

'Correct,' I said.

'And a man with a digger can dig holes. And a man with a lorry can carry earth away.'



'It's amazing,' I smiled, 'how a boffin always spots these things before everyone else.'

'Quick on the uptake, these chaps with an excess of grey cells,' agreed Alun.

'Did you know, Alun, that, unlike snakes,' I said, 'Which regularly shed their skins, a boffin never sheds his little grey cells.'

'Of course not! They hoard them up until the internal pressure inside their skulls virtually cracks them open,' added Alun.

'Incredible!'

'Yes. Anyway, we get you, Mike,' said Alun. 'So, we ask him to produce the presently missing pond.'

'Correct,' smiled Mike.

'It won't be a pond, Alun. It will be a big dry hole,' I said.

'Which we will then fill with water,' smiled Mike.

Alun nodded, 'From the spring. Is that it, Mike?'

'Exactly.'

'And,' I smiled. 'That will only take about a hundred years,' I sighed. 'Have you seen that thing? It produces about a litre per day.'

Alun turned to Mike, 'What's one litre, times three-hundred and sixty-five days, times a hundred years, Mike?'

'Thirty-six cubic metres,' Then Mike smiled a knowing smile. 'And that is what I said we could do that would be useful.'

'What?' I asked, raising my eyebrows.

'We go and deal with the spring.'

'We deal with the spring!?' said Alun.

'Yes,' smiled Mike. 'We go and see if we can widen the spring and coax it into producing more water.'

'But what if that's all it can produce,' I said.

Mike shrugged, 'Look at that cliff.'

We turned and gazed up at the wall of rock towering above us.

'That's several hundred metres high,' he said. 'I bet there are millions of cubic metres of spring water somewhere behind that.'

'We don't need millions of cubic metres of water, Mike. I think it's preferable that if there really is, then it stays where it is,' said Alun.

'Unless Mike is planning a million-cubic metre pond,' I said.

'I hadn't thought of that,' replied Alun. 'But one wouldn't want it to come out all at once, would one.'

'No,' I agreed, 'One wouldn't. That would wash half the village away.'

Mike sighed, 'All I am suggesting is that we go and see if we can coax a better flow from that spring,' he paused. 'Our spring.'

'Not a million litres a day then?' I said.

'NO, you twit. Not a million litres a day.'

'Oh, in that case, let's go and have a look then.'

Mike sighed again, 'You two...'

I interrupted, 'Get on your wick? Is that it?'

He sighed again. 'Go and bring up that big crowbar and the spades.'

'So that we can do a bit of spring coaxing,' smiled Alun. 'I'll spring into action, shall I?'

A few moments later, we stood gazing down at the tiny spring, which was bubbling and gurgling prettily.

We handed the heavy iron crowbar to Mike, and he stepped closer. He inserted the pointed end into the hole from which the water was bubbling and spat professionally on his hands. He then worked it back and forth, gradually loosening the small rock beside it.

'Come and lend a hand, Alun,' he called.

The two of them got hold of the end of the bar and heaved. The boulder moved only slightly, so I stepped over and grabbed the bar too.

'One, two, three. Heave,' cried Mike.

We heaved, and the boulder shot out of its place and disappeared into the undergrowth. At the same time, the three of us toppled backwards into the ice-cold stream.

Mike jumped to his feet and gazed happily at the spring. Water was now gushing out merrily and splashing down the small bed of the stream.

'I told you,' smiled Mike. 'Come on. Let's see if we can make the hole a bit wider.'

'Isn't that wide enough as it is, Mike?' said Alun. 'We've already improved the flow by a factor of ten. That should be enough.'

'Oh, come on,' called Mike, wiping mud off his forehead and spreading it across his face. 'While we're about it, let's see what she is capable of.'

Alun and I exchanged looks. Mike almost invariably got carried away with things if they worked as he said they would.

'Remember, Mike,' I said. 'We stop when we reach a million litres a day.'

He jammed the crowbar against a large boulder near the entrance and levered it. It moved slightly, so once more, we gathered around and put our grouped strength to the test. After some perspiring, the bolder began to rock slightly, then dislodged itself and rolled onto Mike's foot.

'Oh hell,' he cried. 'Quick, help me get this thing off. My foot is trapped.'

There was a gurgling noise followed by a muted shriek. This had nothing to do with the spring. Alun had fallen over backwards and was lying on the ground, laughing to split his sides.

'You damn idiot!' cried Mike.

I jumped into the gushing water, grabbed one of the spades and jammed it under the boulder. I levered it up, and Mike, his foot freed, fell over on top of Alun.

'Shut up, you twit,' he grumbled. 'Oh! Great heavens!'

He jumped up, and we stood gazing at our handwork.

The tiny spring had transformed itself into a gushing torrent of quite respectable size. It was already clearing a wide passage for itself down the dry bed, designed for a trickle rather than what we had now created.

It was not only clearing a passage but was also widening its own opening.

'Oops!' said Mike, gazing at the growing opening.

'I think you mentioned millions of cubic metres, Mike,' I said.

'Oh!' he frowned, then nodded. 'I think it will be OK.'

'Do you?'

'Well, I can't be absolutely certain, but...'

Alun managed to get to his feet. 'Great Gods!' he cried. 'This is what I call a spring. I wonder if we could bottle the stuff and call it "Septet Water".

The flow seemed to have stabilised, held in place by several huge boulders blocked against the cliff base.

'Mike?' I asked.

'Yep.'

'Where does this water go?'

Mike gazed at me, 'Hum..'

'Exactly.'

'Perhaps we ought to follow it down. Just in case.'

'Yes. Just in case it is now flowing through somebody's front door.'

'Oops.' he said. 'I hadn't thought of that aspect of the plan.'

'Odd, that,' I said. 'Come on.'

We set off down the slope through the forest, doing our best to stay as close as possible to the sound of the stream, which had now become a small but happy torrent.

When it emerged from the tree cover, it immediately dived through some brambles at the bottom of our field and then through a stand of oak trees.

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On the far side of this, it leapt into a ditch surrounding a big ploughed field. From here, we could see all the way across to the main road, beside which ran a deep ditch. This ditch carried the water from the waterfalls coming off the clifftop behind the Septet.

We sighed a sigh of relief.

'Thank God for that,' sighed Alun.

Mike wiped his forehead. 'You're telling me,' He blew out his cheeks. So now we have our water supply. Phase one of the plan has succeeded admirably, thanks to your distinguished servant.'

'Are boffins always as modest as this?' asked Alun.

'I believe some are even more so,' I smiled.

Mike ignored this. 'Let's get back and have a chat with that digger driver. I'll tell him what we want him to do.'

'What YOU, want him to do, Mike.' I said. 'This is your plan.'

'Getting cold feet, are we?' he sneered. 'I wouldn't have expected that from such fearless adventurers as you two.'

Alun sighed, 'My solution to this problem would have been the opposite of yours, Mike.'

'The opposite!?'

'My objective is not to have to drag up and down with buckets full of water,'

'Day in, day out?' I suggested.

'Yes.'

'So, what would your "opposite" solution be, clever pants?'

I would have removed the source of the problem by making it undesirable to plant any vegetables.'

'Undesirable!?' frowned Mike.

'Well. Let's say unadvisable.'

'Unadvisable?'

'Yes. If the ground was too dry, nothing would grow, would it?'

'But it won't be too dry.'

'It would be if I had concreted up that damn spring. No water. No vegetables.'

Mike groaned, 'shut up, Alun. I'll go and see that guy.'

Well, he did, and apparently, he struck a deal that would cost next to nothing. Well, at least that's what Mike said. In any case, we would ensure he was the one to broach the subject of unbudgeted funds with The Girls.

## Chapter 13

**H**aving a well-known police inspector as an ally has certain advantages. Such advantages are considerably amplified if one is also working on a case of national importance for that inspector's chief. Finally, should such a case coincide with the eve of that chief's long dreamt of promotion... Well, I'll leave you to imagine.

Therefore, the stars being so well aligned, obtaining the official papers for our ancient 2CV Sahara was dizzyingly rapid.

In next to no time, the department responsible unearthed the original car ID papers, made a copy, and gave it to Venet. Then, once the insurance company manager realised who was behind the request, he fell over himself with enthusiasm. The necessary papers were immediately prepared and sent via express courier.

The garage mechanic provided the French equivalent of the MOT, so everything was perfectly



shipshape, or rather car-shaped, within twenty-four hours.

Even so, Mike and I, followed grudgingly by Alun, agreed that even though the paperwork was in order, taking our old car for a spin on the motorway might be tempting the Devil a little. However, for running about the village it would be perfect, or, as the French say, "she" would.

We had just finished breakfast at the Septet and were seated with our legs stretched out under the massive deal table beneath the spreading umbrella pines. While we lazily discussed the day's projects, we gazed contentedly across the big pond and the little island at its centre.

The pond was far, far deeper than its appearance led most people to assume. What's more, the island was, in reality, a hollow cylindrical stone tower built up from the base ten metres below. We were unlikely to forget what we had discovered at the bottom of that chimney-like structure. The events that this sparked are fully described in *The Sarlat Quartet*.

I nodded to Mike and Alun, who, like me, were probably reliving those hardly believable events. 'This afternoon, fellow musketeers,' I said. 'We're off on a new and perilous adventure. We continue our surveying project with André at Sarlat.'

'Where do we start?' asked Alun.

'He wants to start with the Law Courts, the ancient "tribunal," and then move on to the Convent de Notre Dame.'

Alun nodded, 'OK.'

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These were the last two buildings on the architect's list of possible hiding places for a voluminous treasure. He had made it clear that if the plundered works of art were not found in those buildings, we would have to think again. From the outset, we had agreed to base our search on the assumption that the entire store would have been grouped in a single well-disguised location. However, if we drew a blank today, we would have to accept that the treasure might have been split up. In that case, the number of possible hiding places would be far greater. We would have to visit dozens of private and public buildings, and the project would transform into a lengthy and time-consuming task.

André had shrugged at this, 'Two hundred million euros worth of works of art is well worth a few weeks' easy work, don't you think?'

I smiled at him, 'Especially when one is being paid handsomely to do that easy work.'

'Well,' he said. 'There is that too, of course.'

But before we started the afternoon's job, we intended to spend the morning at the barn, watching the end of the excavation job.

'Fancy coming with us in the car today, Joseph?' I asked.

The man shook his head, 'I'll walk. I need to think about my project for Sophie's album.'

'You can do that in the car,' said Mike.

'No, I can't.' he frowned. 'In that car, I'll have to spend the trip concentrating on saving my skin at each boulder.'

'That's not a very courageous attitude, Joseph,' said Alun.

'I'm courageous enough when it comes to money matters but less so where my life is concerned,' he chuckled. 'I can do without the exhilaration of endeavouring to outsmart the cloaked skeleton with the scythe.'

We shrugged and took our cups and plates inside to wash.

We had been highly suspicious of Joseph at first encounter, but had now grown to appreciate him. At the time, we had wrongly assumed his presence at Old Lucas' funeral was an excuse to get his hand on his collection of valuable paintings. This assumption proved to be incorrect. However, we now knew that had the occasion presented itself, he would have seized it without hesitation. After all, "one should never look a gift horse in the mouth", he would no doubt have said.

The work at the barn was progressing much faster than we had expected. By the time we got there, the men had dug out more than three-quarters of the surface down nearly three metres. This had created an impressive swimming-sized hole, where the packed earth floor had been.

Apparently, they had uncovered several more bones, which had been taken off for analysis.

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Today, two more men had joined the team and were already at work shoring up the barn's support beams with sturdy iron poles. As a result, the crisscrossing network of poles and beams made the place resemble the roof of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

Joseph nodded to us as we arrived. 'There's a possibility of a big thunderstorm tonight,' he said. 'They don't want to risk the existing foundation piles being washed away.'

'Well, if there is, we'll come over,' said Mike, rubbing his hands together in anticipation, 'I'm interested to see how our modified spring reacts.'

Joseph nodded, 'As soon as they've finished shoring the structure, they'll set up the formwork around the dug-out region and lay the steel reinforcing elements. Then, if all goes well, they'll pour the new concrete foundations tomorrow.'

'Fantastic!' I nodded. 'Like that, we'll have a packed-earth basement the size of the entire barn,'

'All for nothing,' added Mike.

'Yes,' smiled Alun. 'We'll be able to get a decent amount of wine stored in that.'

'You're telling me!' chuckled Mike.

We watched the digger at work for a few moments in silence, and then Alun frowned, 'How are they going to get the digger out of that hole when they've finished?'

Joseph pointed at the ground on which we were standing, 'The operator says he'll dig a ramp up and

out through the barn doorway. They'll concrete that in, too, so it'll make a nice solid terrace out front.'

Mike frowned, 'Brilliant, but how on earth do they get the concrete up here? They can hardly drive the ready-mix lorries up across the field.'

'We could mow it with our new tractor,' I said. 'That might make things easier.'

Joseph shook his head, 'Apparently, the track is too narrow, and where it is wide enough, there are too many boulders and deep ruts.'

We nodded, 'Yeh, a bit on the narrow side,' agreed Mike. 'Unless you have a military-grade four-wheel drive truck.'

'Or a tank,' added Aun, who then turned and sauntered over to where the lorry stood. He chatted to the driver for a few moments, then came back.

'Apparently, they'll use a special pump and pipe it up the slope. They're renting it from the only company with a powerful enough one. It's being sent over from Bordeaux tonight. Costs a small fortune, apparently.'

Joseph nodded. 'It's a good job we found those buried bones then,' he said, smiling one of his enigmatic smiles. 'Otherwise, the job would have burned a big hole in your project budget.'

'Yeh,' said Mike. 'Who would have expected that!?'

Joseph shrugged, 'It's not the first time,' he said. 'Remember, our farmer friend. He found some in his barn, too.'

We nodded.

'We're clearly in bone country,' I said.

'Skeleton country, too,' added Mike.

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'Did he find them before or after he set fire to his dog?' asked Alun.

'He amputated it, Alun.' said Mike. 'He only set fire to its stump.'

'With homemade brandy,' smiled Alun. 'I wonder what burning flesh mixed with flaming brandy smells like?'

'We can try it on your foot and see, Alun,' I smiled. 'If you're really interested, that is.'

'It probably smells like Christmas turkey in flaming Armagnac,' laughed Mike. 'And we know exactly what that smells like, don't we.'

'Yes.' I nodded. 'At the time, though, it smelt more of trouble than of anything else.'

Although we were unaware of it, our wives, "The Girls," had published many of our earlier adventures, including the one mentioned.

They had, however, kept the existence of their two books of stories a secret from us and had made a good deal of money out of the project.

The funds for our renovation project were, in fact, being drawn from these ill-gotten gains, but of course, we had no idea of this.

The Girls' publishers had even provided a generous advance. Once the literary agent had discovered that our renovation project was to be the subject of their next book, they knew they were on to a winner. Having read and edited the text of our earlier adventures, they had no doubt that numerous disasters would accompany the project. This was precisely what readers of the earlier volumes were

clamouring for, so money was not a problem. They knew instinctively that the new book would sell like hotcakes.

Blissfully ignorant of all this deceit and dissimulation, we arrived at Sarlat just before midday. Our photographer friend Gérard drove us, and we partook of a relaxed meal on a shaded terrace near the centuries-old town hall.

We then sauntered down the “rue de la liberté”, past the front of the Cathedral and on down to the Tribunal buildings.

On arrival, we were amazed at the security set-up Inspector Venet had organised. He was accompanied by six armed guards in full combat dress with bullet-proof jackets and machine guns at the ready.

They also had handguns and sheaf knives on their belts and talk-walkies attached to their shoulder straps.

Inspector Venet nodded to us, ‘I’m ready when you are,’ he said. ‘I’ve positioned two other guards on each side of the building. They’ll keep an eye on the side entrances and avoid anyone using the windows to sneak in. Three will stay here by the main entrance, and the others will come with us inside.’

André smiled, ‘That should keep us safe.’

‘Unless the guys are already inside,’ shrugged Mike, always ready to point out the weak points in anyone else’s ideas.

‘No one knew we would be coming here, Mike,’ Venet replied. ‘Even the guards don’t really know

where they are and weren't told anyway. They're not from the region either.'

'Good thinking,' I said, smiling. 'Are Danielle Arnaud and Pierre Douanier coming with us?'

'Our art experts?' said Venet. 'They'll be with us later. The guards have their ID information and will check them before letting them pass.'

André was standing talking to one of the guards, several thick folders under his arm. He turned, waved to us, and then climbed the broad steps to greet us. 'Off we go again, then,' he nodded. 'Shall we start, inspector?'

Venet nodded, and at a curt word from their superior officer, the guards strode to take up their allotted positions.

André led the way into the building. 'Will you do the honours again, Mike?' he said, holding the plan out towards him.'

Mike nodded, 'If you want something done properly...'

'Shut up, Mike!' cried Alun. 'You've already done that one a hundred times this week.'

Mike shrugged and put on a pained expression.

'Just get on with it, Mike,' I sighed.

André led us down to the basement area, the guards taking up position on both sides of our little group and looking convincingly menacing.

As on the previous occasions, André and Mike worked slowly along the basement, the one calling out his measurements and the other replying with an



OK. The other four of us trailed behind them with nothing to do. Unfortunately, unlike the Manoir de Gisson, there was nothing interesting to see, so the time weighed heavily on us.

Happily for us, the basement job was finished within three-quarters of an hour, and nothing out of order was found. André pulled a disappointed face and led us upstairs. 'That was the most likely place,' he confided. 'An extra wall or partition is unlikely to have been noticed down here. What's more, there's hardly anyone alive today who ever went down there, you see,' he shrugged. 'The few that are still in the land of the living are now either in retirement homes or can't get about.'

Checking the rest of the building was more of a formality than anything else. In most cases, a quick visual check was all that the experienced eye of the architect required.

So, in about an hour and a half, we had eliminated the third of our four potential hiding places.

Venet called his men together, and we returned to the waiting cars.

As we seated ourselves, André sighed, 'The Convent buildings are our last real chance,' he said. 'The place dates back to sixteen twenty-four or thereabouts. Four hundred years old, almost to the day. It's a huge old place with two wings. The main wing has four stories with over a hundred rooms. Then there's the attic area with ten or twelve rooms.'

'That's going to take hours,' sighed Alun.

André shook his head, 'No, most of it will be straightforward. All the rooms are basic geometric shapes. A quick look at the plan should be sufficient. But I'm once more counting on the basement area.' He paused. 'For all the buildings I chose, modifications could have been made in the basements without anybody being aware of what was going on.'

'Yep,' said Mike. 'Same thing for the attics, as we discovered at the Manoir Gisson.'

'Exactly,' said André. 'A point of interest here is that one of the two wings of the convent was converted into a school for young ladies.'

'Recently?' I asked.

'Heavens no!' laughed André. 'In seventeen seventy-eight.'

'Not yesterday then,' I chuckled.

'Not exactly, no. At its foundation in sixteen hundred and eight, the role of the Order of Notre Dame was to educate young girls in such a manner as to keep them hostile to protestant ideas. They converted the second wing to create what we French call a "pensionnat," a private boarding school.'

We nodded,

'Like Roedean School in the UK,' I said. 'But that's almost a startup in comparison. It opened in 1885.'

André nodded. 'I presume the order's objective remained the same. Ensure that the élite classes remain catholic by conditioning and influencing future generations of mothers...'

'Does the order of Notre Dame still exist?' I asked.

This time, Inspector Venet replied, 'I don't think so, but I'm not certain. But what I do know is that the buildings were used as the gendarmerie from the late seventeen hundreds onward,' He said. 'I'm not sure what became of the original order.'

'Closed due to lack of funds, perhaps, or maybe they failed in their mission?' said Alun.

'I've no idea,' shrugged André. 'You'd have to ask the "service du patrimoine".'

'Anyway,' said Mike. 'We have more than two hundred rooms to check, then two basements and two attics.'

André shrugged, 'As I said, the rooms should be easy to check.'

'But,' I smiled. 'We are going to start with the basements, I hope.'

'Exactly,' he nodded. 'I want to finish that part today, even if we have to work late. The rest can wait until tomorrow.'

'Two hundred rooms and two attics for tomorrow, then,' I chuckled. 'Unless we strike lucky today.'

André smiled and nodded as the cars drew up and parked in front of the imposing L-shaped mass of the honey-coloured, stone-built Convent.

We tumbled out of the cars and assembled in front of the main entrance.

Once more, Venet gave his instructions, and the armed guards moved off to take up their positions.

Mike opened the plan he was handed, and we crossed a room and then down a heavily eroded stone staircase.

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At the bottom, Mike called to André, 'Where are we on the plan?'

André stepped over and pointed. 'Here. At the bottom of this set of stairs.'

'Are you sure? This seems to be the other wing of the building.'

André took the plan and checked the reference. 'No. This is OK. Let's start.'

Mike shook his head and rotated the plan in his hands. 'Hold on. Ah! OK.' He pulled a doubtful face as the two men started their job.

After checking several alcoves and rooms, Mike frowned and turned back.

'Something up?' I asked.

Mike pulled a face, 'Look, André,' He said, holding out the plan.

André came over, 'Yes.'

Mike pointed to the plan. 'We came down these stairs and turned right, OK?'

'It would have been difficult to turn left,' I said. 'The corridor starts there.'

Mike shook his head, 'Not on the plan. The corridor goes right AND left,' He nodded. 'Either this is not the right plan or...'

André grabbed the plan, and we gathered around.

'Hell's bells!' he exclaimed and strode off back to the base of the staircase.

At the same moment, Inspector Venet's phone rang, 'OK.' He replied. 'Have you double-checked their IDs?' there was a pause. 'OK, tell them we are in the basement.'

He turned to us, 'Our art experts seem to have a flair for knowing when to turn up.'

We gathered around the space at the bottom of the staircase and looked at the plan Mike had now spread out on the floor.

'Let's check our orientation,' said Mike. 'We came in through the main entrance here, right?'

'Yes,'

'Then we crossed the hall, came along this corridor here,' he traced our earlier progress with his finger.

'Yep,' I said.

'Then we came down this staircase.'

'No doubt there,' agreed André.

'So we should have been able to turn right OR left.'

We exchanged looks. This was too good to be true. Had we discovered the walled-off place so easily?

'On the plan, there should be a short corridor and two big rooms.'

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Alun. 'Who would ever guess.'

'Nobody,' nodded André. 'Yes, there's a huge space available.'

Alun stepped up and thumped the wall with his fist. 'Solid,' He smiled. 'Nice bit of masonry work.'

Inspector Venet nodded, 'I'll go up and bring down the tools from the van. You lot wait here, please. There's no use in taking unnecessary risks.'

Alun smiled, 'I'm not sure that wall will go away, but we'll guard it all the same.'

Venet disappeared up the stairs with one of the guards, and we sat on the cold stone steps waiting.

After five minutes or so, my phone rang.

'Hello? Oh, hello, Danielle. We were wondering where you had got to.' I smiled at Alun. Then my face dropped. 'What!? What do you mean, when do we want you to come?' I gasped. 'Where are you?'

There was a pause.

'At your hotel!? Oh god! No, we didn't leave a message for you...'

At this same instant, there was a commotion in the room above us, followed by the sound of heavy steps on the stone.

'Get back,' growled a deep voice.

Then, from the other side of the corridor came another voice, 'And drop that gun you, if you want to live.'

This was directed at the guard who had started to move towards us, leaving his back unprotected.

The police guard lowered his machine gun and placed it on the ground at his feet.

'On your knees,' came the first voice again. All of you. And get back down the corridor towards my friend. He'll shoot if you try anything. So don't.'

There was a clattering noise, and Venet came into view with his assistant, carrying all the tools, closely followed by two other heavily armed men.

'Drop the tools and get down the corridor with your friends. Quick.' He motioned with his machine gun.

'If you try anything, you're all dead. Got it? Good.'

We had expected to find ourselves in the presence of our German friend but were not much surprised when four more armed men came down, followed by

our false art experts. The woman smiled at us. 'We meet again. And thank you so much for finding this for us.'

The short, fat man with her nodded, 'So good of you. I appreciated it.'

'Sod,' whispered Alun.

'How on earth did you get those men past the guards?' I asked.

'We didn't,' said the woman with a superior smile. 'We let them in via the connecting door in the attic between the two wings.'

The man with her nodded, 'You're not the only ones who can read plans, you know.'

'Hey, you!' cried one of the gunmen, looking at me. 'Put that phone down. Slide it over here.'

I did so, and he lifted his heavy booted foot and smashed it to bits. 'Don't try anything like that, any of you.'

Two of the heavily built men picked up the pickaxes and started smashing at the wall.

They soon removed the mortar between a few of the big blocks of stone and then got to work with a crowbar. The combined strength and weight of the two big men gradually eased the block out, and it fell with a thud on the stone floor.

That done, it was a quick job for the strong men to knock out enough of the adjoining blocks to form a narrow passage.

The woman slipped through carrying a big searchlight as soon as this was wide enough.

'You two keep at it while I take a look. When I give you the word, call the others to bring the van around to the front. At the same time, tell the men in the entrance hall to neutralise the guards outside.'

She disappeared, followed by the false Pierre Douanier.

The two men went to work again and rolled the blocks to one side of the now visible missing corridor.

We could see the searchlight flashing about in the distance as the two treasure hunters moved about in the distance.

Then, without warning, they appeared and beckoned over one of the men.

They had a whispered and animated discussion, then the three disappeared again.

A few moments later, the three came striding back.

The armed man glowered at us, 'If any of you so much as move, you're dead.'

The false Danielle and Pierre disappeared up the stairs, and the armed men backed up the stairs behind them.

Then, there was a heavy thud as they closed and locked the door to the stairway. Followed by a similar noise from the opposite end of the corridor.

'What the hell!' cried André, starting to get to his feet.

'Venet grabbed him and dragged him back down.

'Not so fast.' He crept along the corridor on his hands and knees and carefully glanced up the stairs.

'They're gone,' He called, rising to his feet.



As we stood, there was a new commotion at the top of the stairs, and we all dived for cover through the broken-down wall.

There was a crash and a shout from above.

'Don't move anyone, or we'll shoot.'

'Great Gods!' cried André. 'What now!?'

From above, a shout came, 'Police. We have the building surrounded. Come out with your hands in the air.'

Inspector Venet chuckled, 'Better late than never,' he said, then called. 'It's me. Inspector Venet. The others have made a run for it. They went out via the attic. If you get someone round the other side, you might still catch them.'

There was a pause, and we heard the voice give some orders, then it said, 'Come out and show yourselves. Hands in the air, one at a time. I'm not taking any risks.'

We were soon back up in the entrance hall.

'How on earth did you get here!?' asked Venet.

The officer in charge smiled and pointed. 'This lady called us,'

We turned and saw the real Danielle and Pierre standing near the door.

'You left your phone on,' she said, looking at me. 'We heard what was happening and phoned the police.'

'Brilliant!' cried Alun.

A policeman appeared, running up the steps from outside. 'Too late, sir,' he said. 'They had cars waiting.'

Venet shook his head. 'We won't find them.' He sighed. 'If those two false art experts managed to hide with those guys so well, they certainly have a contingency plan and a handy and carefully chosen hideout.'

André was frowning, 'But why did they leave so quickly?'

'I fear,' said Venet, 'That they did not find what they came for.'

We all pulled faces. 'Not again!'

'Well,' I said. 'I'm going to see what they *did* find. Coming?'

With this, I led the way back down the stairs and through the broken-down wall. I picked up the searchlight the others had left behind and moved down the corridor.

I turned into the room to my left and stopped short. 'Oh my God!'

The others moved up behind me.

There were stifled cries from everyone.

The stone floor of the large room was littered with skeletons.

There were dozens of them, maybe a hundred in all, their rotting clothes draped limply across them.

'God in heaven!' cried Pierre, doing his best to support Danielle, who was half fainting.

Gérard quickly set about photographing the horrible scene as soon as Inspector Venet nodded his authorisation.

'Remember that all your photos stay confidential for the moment. That was our agreement,' he said.

'Yes, Of course.'

I quickly moved across the corridor and shone the light into the other room. It was filled with almost as many skeletons.

'My God!' groaned Venet. 'So that's where all the missing resistance fighters disappeared to. Murdered and walled up.'

This time, Dannielle fainted completely.

## Chapter 14

**W**hy go to the trouble,' frowned Andrè, 'of walling up all those poor men's bodies? It seems odd. Out of character too.'

Gérard shrugged, 'The man in charge here obviously didn't want the bodies discovered,' He said. 'My guess is that they bore too obvious signs of torture.'

André shrugged, 'They could have easily dug a big trench and thrown them in it.'

'But then, someone could have seen them at it,' said Alun. 'Maybe that's what they wanted to avoid.'

'Yes,' nodded the Inspector. 'Even commanding officers had orders as to what they could and couldn't do. I'd guess what they had done here to these men was not in line with those orders.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'And so the man in charge here wanted this bit of horror kept a secret from his superiors.'

We nodded.

We were now assembled around the huge table at The Septet, in the shade of the Umbrella Pines.

'Well,' I said. 'As far as finding the missing works of art, we drew another blank. Now what?'

My wife shot a look at Margaux and then gazed across the table at me, 'Whatever the next step is, I wonder if you could try to avoid attracting the attention of any more international gangs of criminals.'

'Yes,' added Margaux. 'It would make life a little less stressful.'

Alun smiled, 'Less interesting though.'

'Les dangerous, too' said Mike.

'Mind you,' I said, glancing at Alun, 'We could write the story up. It would make a good book...'

The Girls glanced sharply at each other.

Margaux shook her head sadly, 'No one would be interested in that. And what's more, none of you have any talent at writing.'

Alun bridled, 'What a lot of rubbish. How on earth could you know I have no talent as a writer? I might be the next Nobel prize of literature.'

'How do I know you have no talent as a writer?' she replied, her head on one side.

'Yes. I feel that I'm absolutely overflowing with inspiration.'

'Inspiration!? Maybe. Talent? Absolutely no way.'

'How on earth can you say that?' cried Alun.

'Because, my dearest husband...' She paused, 'Sorry. My Dear husband. Happily, I only have the one.' she smiled one of her knowing smiles, 'I know you have no talent because I happen to have kept all your youthful love letters.'

With this statement, she nodded at him.

'Oh God!' exclaimed Alun, wincing at the thought.

'Perhaps you'd like me to run through one or two to illustrate my point?' She smiled again.

Allun pulled a face and Margaux continued. 'They are, as you say, full of inspiration, I agree. They are also absolutely overflowing...'

'I told you!' exclaimed Alun.

Margaux sighed. 'They are absolutely overflowing with spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and structural shortcomings.'

'But,' frowned my wife, 'I presume the general idea came across clearly enough, or you wouldn't be here together now.'

'Oh yes,' she smiled. 'But most of the book-reading public prefers a little more than hundreds of pages of general ideas.'

'Very amusing,' grumbled Alun.

'And anyway,' said my wife, 'Gérard, here will be publishing a series of articles with photos describing the entire adventure.'

The man nodded, 'As soon as I've had the authorisation from up on top.'

'So you see, you'd be wasting your time doubly. First, it would take you several years to write. Then it would take several more to correct the manuscript,

and by that time, no one would be interested anymore.'

Alun pulled a face, 'You two really know how to take the wind of enthusiasm out of a poor man's sail. Do you want us to die of boredom?'

A chuckle went around the table.

'That is pretty unlikely,' laughed Inspector Venet. 'Boredom anywhere around you three must be a very rare commodity.'

By this time, it was nearly four o'clock, and the expected clouds were beginning to gather.

Mike glanced at me, 'Why don't we go and try out the tractor? We could see if the mower attachment will work on the scrub and brambles in the field.'

We immediately forgot about the book writing project.

Because here was a potentially fun project.

'Great idea, Mike,' said Alun and we tramped off to the 2CV Sahara and rattled and bounced off towards the barn.

The others watched us go with an occasional shake of a head.

Gérard leant slowly forward and fixed my wife with his gaze. 'I didn't like to ask earlier, but you wouldn't, by any chance be...'

She smiled and shot Margaux a smile, 'Yes, we would.'

'You wrote both those books full of crazy adventures then?'

'That's us,' Added my wife.

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'And the three buffoons wouldn't by any chance be Alun, Mike and your Husband.'

This obtained another nod, 'They would. But I expect they would prefer to be labelled differently.'

Gérard chuckled, 'And they are not aware of the existence of those best sellers.'

'They are not.' This was added by Inspector Venet. 'I find it very difficult sometimes to avoid tripping up, but somehow or other, the secret has been kept.'

'And if I'm not wrong, you are planning,' continued Gérard. 'to produce another best-seller from the present adventures. Is that right?'

'We have just completed chapter nine,' smiled Margaux. 'The publishers are already editing them. They want to publish for the Christmas present-hunting season.'

Gérard leant back and burst out laughing, 'Well inspector, we'll have to be extra careful to ensure they don't get damaged during the rest of this...' he paused, searching for the right word.

My wife smiled, 'This "Quest"?''

'Yes. A good word.'

'Hum! Yes,' said Margaux, and a possible title for the book.'

Under the gathering clouds, we parked by our storage barn and dragged open the heavy doors. Once inside, Mike started up the little green tractor.

The thing rattled in sympathy with the 2CV, and one could hear that the two were built along the same rural French lines.



Mike jumped up into the driver's seat and noisily crunched the gears into place.

The little machine bounded forward with zeal, just missing the doors and chugged and crunched its way happily up the rutted track.

Alun and I followed in the 2CV, which we parked on the top of the huge pile of earth extracted from the barn.

The excavator operator had used his machine to pack the earth down hard so the lorry could drive up onto it to offload each new load. In this way, all across the bottom of our field, we now had a two-metre high ridge with a broad flat top.

The man had then spread the piles of bits of straw and hay which had covered the barn floor after we had shifted the bales of hay and straw over the bare earth.

'There must be millions of seeds in that lot,' he had added. 'By next spring, the whole place will be covered with vegetation.'

'And weeds,' said Mike.

'Same thing,' chuckled the man. 'Weeds are vegetation.'

We made our way down into the long grass and helped Mike couple the mower attachment to the drive shaft.

'Stand well back,' frowned Mike. 'I've no idea what this thing will find under the brush and brambles.'

'More skeletons, probably,' I said with a chuckle.

'There won't be much left that's identifiable as such once these blades have found it, though,' said Mike.

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'I've had enough skeletons for the moment, Mike,' said Alun, raising his eyebrows. 'Off you go.'

I nodded in agreement, 'We'll turn a blind eye to any skeleton fragments while you drive.'

'Well, go and turn a blind eye from up on the ridge. If this thing shoots stones out as I suspect it will, then we'll have four blind eyes to our credit.'

We did as instructed, and Mike slowly lowered the mower attachment.

There was a shuddering and groaning noise, then the motor eased, and the blades began to wane unmusically. He let in a gear, and the tractor juddered slowly forward.

We were amazed. Behind it, it left a swath of flat green as if the brambles and thick tufts of grass had never existed.

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Alun. 'That's one hell of a mower!'

We leaned against the 2CV and watched Mike go up and down the field, reducing the unruly vegetation into a smooth green space.

A strong and pleasant smell of mixed crushed vegetation filled the air. From time to time, some small animals could be seen dashing from the undergrowth to the safety of the surrounding forest.

Occasionally, a loud crash indicated that the blades had met something a little more consequential than Blackberry roots.

'One skeleton less,' smiled Alun.

'Or perhaps one priceless work of art less,' I added.

Alun shrugged. 'Can't be helped,' he said.

Amazingly, it took Mike hardly half an hour to clear the entire field, then he turned the tractor and came back down to where we were looking down on him.

'This is one hell of a mower,' he called. 'I wonder if there's anything else that needs mowing.'

Well, nature then took a hand, having clearly decided that enough was enough.

With a loud bang and a blinding flash, the skies opened and down came the predicted rain. It did not "droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath", though. It came down like a solid wall of water. It was as if one had suddenly found oneself at the centre of a waterfall.

Alun and I dived into the car, and Mike, instantly drenched, turned the tractor and headed it back to the storage barn.

We drove both the tractor and the car inside and went and stood at the doors.

Mike was drenched from head to foot and stood dripping but happy. 'Now that's what I call a bit of rain. It'll wash all the dust and bits off the stuff I've just cut. It'll look lovely tomorrow.'

'For The Girls to inspect,' I said.

'Yep.' Nodded Alun. 'That'll get us good marks. Well done, Mike.'

Mike frowned, 'I'm not responsible for the rain.'

'For the mowing, you idiot,' shouted Alun over the increasing noise of rain pounding on the barn roof.'

'Oh yeh. A good machine that.' He smiled. 'Free too.'

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In the few minutes of rain, the track had transformed itself into a small torrent which went splashing happily past, down the slope, becoming browner and browner every second.

'Hey!' shouted Mike. 'Let's go and have a look at the spring.'

'Let's take the car up,' I said. 'I bet it will get up across the mowed field as easy as anything. The four-wheel drive versions were made just for that sort of thing, after all.'

'Great!' shouted Alun. 'I'll drive.'

Mike got between Alun and the car, 'No, you won't. I want to live.'

'I'll do it,' I said, jumping in. 'Come on.'

We bumped and bounded up the water-logged track, then up across the field. We felt the four wheels skidding occasionally, but the little car valiantly gripped the wet grassy surface and pulled and pushed itself up to the top.

We parked it close in, on the protected side of the barn and made a dash for the shelter of the main barn.

Water was cascading off the tilled roof and, luckily, running off down the slope towards the barrier formed by the newly created ridge. It had already formed a deep pond there, that was now overflowing and emptying itself onto the track.

The entire inside of the barn had now been boarded up and ready for the cement delivery the following day.

The reinforcing ironwork had been added everywhere except in the section directly in front of the barn doors.

Mike crept along under the overhang, then made a dash into the forest and up towards cliff foot and our spring.

We followed more slowly. After all, we reasoned, it was clear that we would be drenched to the bone, speed or not.

When we reached the spring, Mike was standing nearby nodding happily, 'Just look at that,' he shouted above the noise of the torrents of rain falling on the leaves above us.

The spring was no longer a tranquil splashing thing but a daredevil torrent tearing its way down through the undergrowth. It was carving for itself a deep trench down the slope and sending small boulders bumping down the once-dry space.

It was also gradually widening the opening from which it came out from under the cliff and gaining power as it did so.

'Great Gods,' shouted Alun, 'this is one hell of a torrent. I hope it doesn't end up in someone's garden.'

Then, as we stood watching the fury of the water, one of the giant boulders by the cliff face shifted slightly as the torrent carried away the soil under it. Then, I leapt back, just in time, as it toppled over and crashed into the undergrowth. The water came gushing out with renewed force and dislodged another boulder, which rolled down to join the first.

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However, this blocked the existing channel, and water immediately piled up behind this barrier. Within seconds, it found a new exit to the left and dashed off in a new direction.

'Greats hells bells' cried Mike. 'It's heading towards the barn.'

'Oh no!' I cried, and we dashed off through the downpour, back down the now slippery track.

The torrent rushed down the smooth mown field and headed straight towards the rear of the barn. It hit the back wall, rushed under the wooden planks, and quickly washed away the earth to form a deep entrance channel.

We stood transfixed as the furious boiling torrent dived into our barn and started to fill the newly dug-out space with water.

'Oh hell!' shouted Mike.

We rushed to the front and gazed through the open barn doors.

There was nothing we could do.

The rain came pouring down with renewed force, and we stood dripping as the deep excavated space transformed itself gradually into a vast covered swimming pool.

'Oh bloody hell! Cried Alun. Then, turning and gazing through the sheets of rain to the bottom of the field, he froze. 'What in the name of God...!'

Mike and I spun around and followed his pointing finger.

'Oh God!' cried Mike. 'Now what!?'

Out of the trees to our right surged a sort of black river heading straight up the slope towards us.

'Hells bells,' shouted Alun, 'Wild boar. They're headed straight for us.'

There must have been at least twenty of the beasts. Above all, they were running at top speed straight towards the barn through the downpour.

At their head ran a massive brute which must have weighed two hundred kilos or more. Behind it came a line of smaller but equally massive animals, followed by dozens of young yearlings. We could hear them snorting as they rushed up the soaked field.

They were going so fast that running to safety was impossible.

Then something incredible happened.

Mike rushed out into the middle of the field, shrieking and waving his hands about like a windmill gone mad.

He dashed straight towards them like a madman.

Then, almost as unexpectedly, the big male wheeled left and went speeding off up the hill towards the forest.

Mike went after them, shrieking and waving his arms as he went. The youngsters put on a burst of speed and overtook their elders amid a cacophony of snorting and thundering hooves.

The black, foul-smelling river rushed into the forest, and Mike stopped at the edge of the field.

We ran up beside him as he panted and wiped his forehead.

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'That showed them who's boss around here,' He smiled.

Alun and I exchanged amazed looks.

'That was completely crazy, Mike. They might have trampled you to death,' I said.

'Pfff,' he blew out his cheeks. 'No way. I'm not going to let a few black pigs scare me.'

I shot another look at Alun, who raised his eyebrows.

But before he had time to comment, Mike was off again.

'Come on, you two. Where on earth have they gone to?'

'They've gone home, Mike,' I said. 'Let's go home too.'

'And get dried,' added Alun.

Mike paid no attention and strode off, 'They can't just have disappeared up the cliff face, can they? Come on, they might show us a secret track up to the cliff-top.'

He strode into the forest, and we followed.

The path was easy to follow because the undergrowth had been smashed and trampled by the herd. We followed the track, but it suddenly reached the base of the cliff and disappeared.

'They must have taken off along the rock path,' suggested Alun. 'We would have heard them if they had turned right, along behind the barn.'

So, I said.

'They went left. Come on.'



We followed Mike, who had suddenly transformed himself into a fearless wild boar tracker. We stumbled along, pushing through the undergrowth that grew up against the cliff wall.

There was nothing visible, but Mike went on. Then suddenly, he stopped and held up his hand to us.

'Look,' he said, pointing ahead.

We looked but could see nothing.

'Look at the leaves;'

'What about them?'

'They're moving,' He nodded.

'Let's get out of here fast then. Those beasts must be waiting to ambush us and will certainly charge us.'

Mike shook his head, 'That's wind, Not wild boars. Come on.'

'Wild boars have wind too, do they?' asked Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' he said.

'There's plenty of wind without going over there to see more,' replied Alun.

'You twit, Alun.' He said. 'The wind is coming from behind those bushes.'

'A cave!' I exclaimed.

'Not a cave. The exit of some sort of underground gallery. Probably goes right to the top. A dried-out spring perhaps.'

'So,' said Alun.

'So that's where the damn beasts have gone,' he called. 'come on.'

'What if they come back.'

Mike shook his head. 'I have a feeling that that entrance may hide a deep cave? A really deep one.'

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He pushed his way behind the dense bushes, slipping between their ancient branches and the cliff face.

We followed and came to a halt behind him. We found ourselves before a man-height opening about a metre wide. A strong, cold wind was blowing out of it, and this was what was animating the leaves.

'Listen,' said Mike. 'What can you hear?'

I strained my ears, 'Nothing.'

'Exactly. If the wild boar were near at hand, we'd hear them grunting. '

'We'd smell them too,' I said.

'Yep. So that means that this place is very deep.' He nodded. 'And the wind is icy, so the air has been cooled. That indicates it's come a long way in a cold environment.'

'Got it,' said Alun.

We stood gazing into the pitch-black hole.

I looked at Mike, 'I'm not going in there without a torch.'

He pulled a face and sighed, 'Oh, all right. We'll go and get one.'

'No, we won't, Mike,' said Alun. 'It will wait till daylight. I've had enough for one day.'

'Me too,' I added, 'Come on, Mike. The cave won't go away in the night.'

'But the wild boars might. And that's good news,' added Alun.

After a little more discussion, we managed to get Mike away. Passing the barn, which was now half full

of water, we sighed, then made our soaked way back to the car and then home.  
The Girls were going to absolutely love hearing about this...

## Chapter 15

**T**he sun was just disappearing behind the cliff as we sat down to a well-earned aperitif. The three of us had showered and changed into dry clothes. Now, with bedewed glasses clutched firmly in our hands, we felt equal to any amount of The Girl's searching cross-examination.

We were assembled around the table in the farmhouse because the rain had only just ceased. The flash storm had passed on and was now delighting some other locality with its presence. Even so, the majestic Umbrella Pines would continue dripping onto the outside table for some time, so we were better off inside.

'Those men were right about the storm,' I smiled at Joseph.

'I noticed,' he nodded.

'They were right about the importance of shoring up the place too,' added Alun.

'Really? The rain got in, did it.'

'No. Not the rain,' smiled Mike.

'Not the rain?' frowned my wife. 'I presume you are going to expand on that, Mike.'

'He might,' I said, 'Or then again, he might not. Who knows.'

Margaux shook her head and sighed, 'Mike.'

'Yes.'

'Expand, please.'

'I'm doing my best, but I'll need a good deal more wine before I can expand appreciably,' he smiled.

'Mike...' she scowled.

'Oh, all right,' he grumbled, 'I rather thought that was quite an amusing quip.'

'Did you?'

'Oh, all right. Well,' he paused. 'The rain didn't get in, but the stream did.'

'What!?' frowned my wife. 'What stream?'

'The little one by the cliff, of course.'

'That tiny thing. That's not likely to much harm.'

Said Margaux, raising her eyebrows.

We exchanged glances, and Mike pulled a face.

My wife spotted this and glowered at Mike, 'Now what? What have you three been up to?'

Alun smiled a sweet, innocent smile, 'Mike had one of his bright ideas...'

'One of his more brilliant ones,' I added.

'Oh no!' gasped Margaux. 'What have you done?'

Mike shrugged, 'I just widened it a bit. The aim was to produce a big enough flow to allow the watering of the vegetables and flowers and stuff like that.'

'And stuff like that!?' frowned Margaux.

'That's it,' nodded Mike.

'And you managed to improve the flow, did you?'

'Of yes,' he smiled, 'Impressively so.' He said, obviously pleased with himself. 'Even if I do say so myself. We'll show you tomorrow if you're interested.'

'That's nice.' Said my wife. 'Plenty of water then?'

'Oh yes,' smiled Mike. 'More than enough.'

'And if I've understood correctly, this impressively improved stream, then felt it desirable to change course and visit the barn.'

'That's it,' nodded Mike happily. 'Exactly.'

I pulled a face, 'I'm not altogether certain that the word "stream" fits all that well now, though.'

'Meaning?' said Margaux.

'Well, "torrent", would be a more appropriate choice of word.'

'Torrent!?' gasped my wife.

I shrugged, 'You see, although Mike had widened the opening just a bit, the spring seemed unsatisfied with his efforts and widened itself more. Quite a bit more, in fact.'

'Oh God!' cried my wife. 'So now we have a torrent.'

'Mike nodded. 'Impressive one, too,' he added.

'You already said that, Mike,' frowned Margaux.

'And we have a barn full of water, too,' I smiled.

'An Olympic swimming pool instead of a basement, to be exact,' added Alun.

'I don't believe it!' gasped Margaux. Then, shooting a look at my wife, shook her head irritably. 'What am I saying? Of course, I believe it.'

Mike smiled, 'Don't worry. We'll sort it all out tomorrow.'

'You will?' said my wife.

'Yep. We just have to knock out the boards near the entrance, and Bob's your uncle.'

'Is he?' sighed Margaux. 'That's news to me.'

'Once the boards are removed, the thing will empty itself.'

'Brilliant!' sighed Margaux again.

I looked up, sipping my aperitif, 'But we're forgetting the wild boars.'

'The barn's full of wild boars too!?' exclaimed Margaux. 'I didn't know wild boars liked swimming.'

'No. Not in the barn,' smiled Mike. 'In the cave.'

'The cave!?' gasped my wife. 'Where did a cave come from.'

'It didn't come from anywhere,' frowned Mike. 'It's obviously always been there.'

The two women scowled at Mike.

'That was supposed to be another clever quip,' he replied.

There were two more sighs, 'Would you care to expand on that, Mike.' Then, quickly, she held up her hand to stop him. 'No, Mike. No more quips, please.'

Mike pulled a disappointed face, 'Oh, all right.'

I smiled. 'We were attacked by a herd of wild boars, and Mike saved our lives,' I said.

'Yes.' Added Alun. 'It was amazing. He just shooed them away. Like a pack of naughty children.'

'He did what!?' exclaimed my wife.

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'In fact, he rushed them,' I said. 'It was awe-inspiring. He ran straight at the huge male waving his arms and screaming, and he frightened the brute away.'

'Wild boars don't have arms to wave,' smiled My wife. 'And I thought they snorted rather than screamed.'

'It was Mike who did the arm waving and screaming,' said Alun. 'Anyway, that's how we found the hidden cave.'

The girls gazed at Joseph for some sort of moral support, but the man seemed just as lost as they were.

I felt that I had better clarify things. 'Mike chased the herd, yelling and waving, and we followed him.'

Margaux smiled a wry smile, 'At a safe distance.'

'Mike runs surprisingly fast,' I said. 'Especially when he's after his prey,' I paused, shaking my head sadly. 'We just couldn't keep up.'

'What a pity,' said my wife. 'That must have been distressing. And what, prey, would have happened if those beasts had doubled back on you?'

'Mike would have defended us,' Smiled Alun.

'And anyway,' I added. 'We'd have been running downhill, and we run much faster downhill than Mike.'

'Anyway, they didn't double back, and that's how we found the cave,' finished Mike. 'It's behind loads of thick bushes at the bottom of the cliff wall. Barely a hundred metres from the barn, in fact.'



'You didn't spot another little stream which could have done with a bit of widening while you were there, did you?' Said my wife.

Mike shook his head, 'No. No streams.'

'Well, that's a blessing.'

'But the tunnel we discovered is very big,' he said. 'What's more, I suspect it's the entrance to some sort of underground network of galleries. It probably goes right up the top of the cliff somewhere. We can go and search...'

'And this cave is full of wild boar, is it?' said Margaux.

Mike nodded, 'That must be where they sleep.'

'Their nesting site,' smiled Alun.

'Their breeding grounds,' I added.

'Their hibernation grotto...' said Alun.

'Their...'

'Be quiet, you idiots,' groaned Margaux.

Mike held out his glass to Emma, who had been following this exchange with Sophie and Julianna from the far end of the table.

She passed the bottle down the table, and Joseph did the honours.

'We're going back tomorrow morning to have a look with the big searchlights,' smiled Mike enthusiastically. 'You can come if you like.'

'Once you've emptied the million cubic metres of water from the barn,' glowered Margaux.

'Yes, yes.' He added quickly. 'Naturally. But it's two thousand five-hundred cubic metres, to be exact, not a million,' he said. 'I calculated it.'

'Ah, really?' nodded Margaux, 'Well, that's much better.'

'But honestly,' nodded Alun, 'You should have seen those wild boars, though!' he exclaimed. 'Really huge fearful beasts. Dirty black, grunting foul-smelling things.'

'Kindred souls, then,' said Margaux.

'Oh, come on!' exclaimed Mike, 'Hardly.'

'I was joking, Mike,'

'Ah! Yes, of course.'

'So,' smiled my wife, 'You first widened the stream into a torrent, deflected it and filled up the barn with water. Then you shooed away a herd of maddened wild boar and chased them into an unknown cave under the cliff. Have I got that right?'

Mike nodded and smiled, 'In a nutshell. Could I have another refill, please?'

Emma went over to the vast old cupboard, pulled open a draw and extracted a well-thumbed ordonnance survey map of the region. She spread it out on the table. 'Can you show us where this cave is, Mike?'

We stood and leant over it.

'It must be somewhere about here,' said Mike, pointing.

'There's no indication of a cave or anything like that,' I said.

'No,' agreed Mike. 'Odd that.'

'Totally uncharted territory, then, ' I smiled. 'This feels like the beginning of an exciting new adventure.'

'Oh no!' groaned my wife.

Margaux frowned, 'You didn't by any chance get butted on the head by those wild boars, did you?'

'All three of us!?' gasped Alun. 'Have you absolutely no confidence in us?'

The Girls shook their heads sadly and sighed, 'What an odd question,' said my wife.

The following morning, at the crack of dawn, we set off in the 2CV, complete with big battery-powered search lamps. When I say the crack of dawn, I mean, of course, roughly ten o'clock.

The workmen would be arriving a little later because the concrete delivery was planned for mid-afternoon.

When we arrived, the barn was brimming over with water, and the torrent had now turned back into a bubbling brook-sized affair.

The overflow was running out between the barn doors and had dug itself a channel down the mowed field to the ridge of earth at the bottom of the field.

Mike gazed at this, 'That would be the perfect spot for our new pond,' he said.

'Our new pond!?' I exclaimed.

'Yes. The one we'll use to water the vegetables and flowers with.'

'Oh, that pond!' I nodded, 'I'm not sure the Girls will appreciate having a stream running through their sitting room, though.'

'An interesting and unusual feature, though,' smiled Alun.

'A conversation piece?' I suggested.

'Exactly.'

'I'll get the chap with the excavator to dig a new channel from the cliff down to there,' said Mike.

'A good deep one,' I said.

'With a nice solid bridge across it,' added Alun.

We stood looking across the surface of the swimming pool.

'That will make one hell of a wave when it goes down the slope. I wouldn't like to get in its way,' said Alun.

I raised my eyebrows, 'No. We'd best park the car on the top of the ridge, just in case,' I said.

Mike and Alun nodded. We knew the probability of the car getting in the way was extremely low. Still, we also knew by experience that the laws of probability didn't work particularly well where we three were concerned. What's more, we had come to appreciate that car.

So, I drove the 2CV up onto the ridge out of harm's way and unloaded the Lamps.

As I tramped back up the field, Antoine Buisson arrived in his tractor, with the photographer, Gérard, in the passenger seat. I jumped onto the steps, and he drove me up to the top end of the field.

'Go right up to the top,' I shouted, pointing to the like of trees. 'It might be dangerous to leave it lower down.'

He frowned at me, 'Dangerous?'

When we showed him the catastrophe and explained what had happened, he nodded. 'There's

rarely a dull moment when you three are around, eh? And what are the lamps for?'

Again, we explained, and he nodded slowly while taking this in. 'A cave, you say. Ah ha! Now that's interesting. Very interesting. I never heard anything about caves around here. A bit further along, yes. But not this side of the waterfalls. Are you sure it's not just an overhang?'

Mike shook his head. 'No. There's a cold wind blowing out of it. That indicates it's deep and long and has an exit somewhere. It's probably up there,' he pointed.

Antoine nodded. 'Yes. That's possible.'

'Shall we have a look?'

The old farmer stepped up and opened the tractor door. His little black-and-white dog bounded down, a fluorescent ball in its mouth.

He wagged his tail, dropped the ball at my feet and gazed up at me.

I gazed down at the transparent rubber ball, now flashing red, blue and yellow and making an odd tinkling noise.

Antoine shook his head, 'The silly dog loves that ball. The great thing about it is that I can lob it out of the window and across the field in the middle of the night, and he'll go rushing after it.

I picked up the ball and rolled it down the slope, and off he went.

Mike led the way up through the cork oaks to where the thick bushes crowded in against the cliff wall.

We eased ourselves between the aged branches and ducked under the rock into the opening.

Mike fumbled about with his lamp, and suddenly, we were all blinded.

'Hell, Mike!' I cried. 'Turn that damn thing away, you idiot.'

'Oops! Sorry.'

He turned and swept it around.

'Wow!' I cried. 'That is some tunnel!'

The entrance was the narrowest part, and a wide, smooth-walled tunnel ran off into the distance. It was about three paces wide and three metres high.

Gérard stepped forward and took a few photos. 'A good reporter starts from the beginning,' he said.

'This must have been the path of a big torrent in olden times,' said Mike. 'Otherwise, the walls wouldn't have been smooth like this. I wonder where the water went?'

I glanced at him, 'Do you know Mike? I have an idea.'

He shook his head, 'No. Not our stream. This must have carried much, much more water, probably for millions of years.'

'It might have been the old path of the torrent that feeds the three waterfalls behind the Septet,' I suggested.

Alun and Mike nodded. 'Yes. That's probably it,' he said. You remember they told us that part of the water came out of that other cave up on the cliff face in the olden times.'

'Great,' said Alun. 'So, what about investigating a bit.'

I turned on my lamp, and Alun did the same.

The place was lit as if in bright daylight, and the five of us tramped on. The dog went bounding ahead, happily sniffing.

'He's already got the scent of those wild boars,' I said.

Antoine frowned and called the dog, who immediately obeyed and sat by his feet. 'I don't want him disturbing those brutes,' he said. 'If they came charging down here, there's no way we could escape. The whole herd would trample straight over us.' he nodded. 'I have no particular desire to be trampled to death by several thousand kilos of wild boar.'

'Me neither,' I added. 'That makes a hell of a lot of hooves.'

We worked our way deeper and deeper along the tunnel until we came to a branch. Ahead, the main tunnel continued, curving gradually to the left. On our right, a second tunnel led into darkness.

Mike stopped and held up his hand. 'Feel that?' he asked.

We gazed at him, and he smiled. 'The wind is coming down that tunnel in front of us. Now move over here.'

We stepped into the right-hand branch. 'No wind here,' he said. Then he clapped his hands and waited. After a few seconds, a deep, booming, echoing sound came back to us from our right.

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'There's a big cavern down there. And the other tunnel must go on for kilometres. There's still no echo coming back.'

'Let's have a look, then,' I said enthusiastically. 'What if we've uncovered a prehistoric cave with wall paintings and stuff like that? We'll become world famous.'

The five of us exchanged smiles.

'More likely to be full of skeletons,' said Alun. 'That's what we generally seem to turn up nowadays.'

We chuckled together and set off as soon as Gérard had taken a few more photos.

The tunnel was lower here, and we had to bow our heads slightly to avoid the roof.

'See how the walls and roof are much rougher here,' said Mike. 'This was clearly not a path for part of the torrent.'

Then, quite unexpectedly, the tunnel widened, and we entered a vast, echoing space.

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Alun.

'Wow!' cried Gérard. 'Who would ever have guessed!'

We played our lamps around the place in wonder.

The cavern was roughly circular and at least fifty metres in diameter. The roof arched high above us, and far above, we could see bats—thousands of them—swaying peacefully in the shadows. The rough ground was bone dry.

At the cave's far end, there seemed to be the entrance to a secondary chamber.



What attracted our attention, though, was that ledges seemed to have been carved into the rock walls, just above man height. But above all, above these ledges, was an almost continuous frieze of rudimentary paintings.

'Great gods!' exclaimed Alun. 'I don't believe it. We HAVE discovered a stone age grotto full of wall paintings.'

We stood transfixed, gazing at the hundreds of multicoloured renditions of animals, hunting scenes and the like.

'This is amazing,' cried Mike, his eyes alight with pleasure. 'Let's get back and call up someone.'

'Wait a moment, Mike,' I said. 'Let's finish our tour first. If this place is what it seems to be, it will most likely be off-limits for years.'

Gérard nodded, 'Let me get some good photos and videos and have a good look around while we can.'

Mike saw the reason for this and nodded. 'I wonder what's in the second cave.'

'Sleeping quarters, perhaps,' I said.

'I hope not for wild boar,' added Alun.

We exchanged looks. 'It might be prudent not to get between the exit of that place and the tunnel,' said Antoine.

'Or to barge into their bed chamber uninvited,' smiled Gérard.

Feeling this was a wise precaution, we worked our way cautiously around the wonderous painted cavern. We thus came on the secondary one along

the far wall. Alun picked up a small rock and was about to toss it into the darkened space.

We flattened ourselves against the walls, but Mike pointed up to the ledge behind us, and we hauled ourselves up, out of reach of any snorting boars.

Alun drew back his arm and threw the rock into the dark. We heard it bounce across the rock floor and waited.

We waited with bated breath, but nothing black, furious and smelly came surging out of the space.

We waited for a few moments, then let ourselves down onto the rock floor again.

We entered the cave, which was both smaller and lower but pulled up short.

'Great balls of fire!' gasped Alun.

'Great gods!' I added.

'Bloody hell!' said Mike.

As in the main cave, the space was surrounded by a wide ledge along the rock wall.

However, in this case, this shelf-like ledge was not empty.

It was stacked high with oilcloth-covered parcels of all sizes.

'The secret storage hideout!' gasped Mike. 'So, this is where they were hidden.'

'And,' I said, 'that's why the troop carrier vehicle was parked in our barn. It must have just been loaded and was ready to go.'

Our farmer friend gazed open-mouthed, 'So this is several million euros' worth of stolen works of art.'

And they've been sitting here waiting since nineteen forty-something.'

'Two hundred million euros' worth,' I corrected.

'Great gods!' he gasped.

Mike stepped up to the rock wall and ran his hands over the packages. 'Incredible! Just waiting here,' he shook his head in disbelief. 'And if it hadn't been for being attacked by those wild boars, they might have stayed there till the end of time.'

We fell silent while we turned this over in our minds.

'One thing's for sure now, though,' I said.

'What's that?' asked Mike.

'Well, as we know, the laws of probability do not count where we are concerned.'

'No,' agreed Alun. 'That clear.'

'So, let's take some photos and then get this information to the right place as quickly as possible.' said Gérard. 'This place has got to be guarded as soon as possible.'

We took as many photos and videos as we thought necessary, then headed back towards the entrance.

As we started back down the tunnel, which linked us to the main exit tunnel, we heard a commotion and, what's more, voices.

Then, a female voice loudly and clearly echoed around the walls.

'You can come out now, gentlemen,' came the voice. 'Thank you once more for indicating the hiding place.'

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'Oh hell!' I whispered, 'It's that fake art expert again.'

The voice came again, 'As you know, my assistants are armed, and it would be a great pity for them to have to use those arms, don't you think?'

We had already switched off our lights.

'I have a terrible impression,' I whispered. 'Those guys will use their arms anyway. That woman won't want any news of this find getting out.'

'You mean they're going to murder us,' whispered Antoine.

'I'm afraid so. If they find us, that is.'

The farmer clapped his hand over his dog's mouth, 'Quiet you,'

There was a pause, then he whispered, 'I've got an idea. If we can get them to go down the other tunnel, then we can sneak back out behind them.'

'How do we do that?' said Alun.

'I'll do it,' volunteered Mike. 'I'll run down that tunnel with my lamp, and as soon as they're well past the fork, I'll hide, and you can get out and go and get help.'

'Wow! Mike!' I gasped. 'That's damn brave.'

Antoine whispered, 'No need for that. He'll do it,' he said, pointing at his little dog. 'Come on.'

He led us along the wall, feeling our way until we reached the fork. Then he stopped and shouted, 'Come and get us, you stupid cow,' he paused. 'If you dare. We're armed, too. With hunting rifles.'

A long silence followed, followed by a voice now sporting a steel edge. 'What did you call me?'

'I called you a stupid fat, smelly cow.'

'And you think I believe you're armed?'

'Come and find out fatty.'

'Right!' came the reply. 'Go and mow that crowd of imbeciles down. No witnesses. I want no witnesses. Got that?' She screamed.

'I believe you may have slightly hurt her feelings,' I whispered.

The farmer chuckled, 'Now watch this.' He had attached a headband light around his little dog's neck and turned it on.

Shortly after, we saw the lights coming towards us. Then, at a critical moment, the man took the little rubber ball out of his pocket and hurled it down the dark tunnel. The thing bounced and began to flash as it disappeared into the distance. Then he let go of the dog.

Immediately, the little animal shot off after the ball, the light around his neck leaping about as he advanced. We dived back into the dark, flattening ourselves against the wall, and waited.

The spot of light spun away, and suddenly, the armed men appeared, dashed after it, and shot after the light down the tunnel.

We were just getting ready to make a dash for the exit when the woman and her assistant dashed past our hideout after her men.

However, then something unexpected happened.

In the distance, there was a huge commotion, and the air was immediately filled with cries of alarm.

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Seconds later, the whole group of men, preceded by the woman, running swiftly, shot back past us towards the entrance.

Following closely on their tail came first the short round man, puffing and hot, then the dog, his flashing ball firmly held in his mouth. Then, with a great stamping of hooves and snorting, the herd of furious, snorting wild-boars shot past, closing in on the men. The dog dived sideways into the farmer's arms, and the boars disappeared, leaving a cloud of dust and a stench strong enough to scour a frying pan.

'Great gods!' cried Mike. 'Saved by the boar.'

'The Boar War.' said Alun.

'Ha ha. Brilliant,' I laughed.

We waited for a few moments, and then, slowly and carefully, we began to follow.

However, before we had gone more than a few metres, all hell broke loose.

There was a burst of machine gun fire, then another, and then, the air was full of fire and counterfire.

We threw ourselves back into the side tunnel and tumbled against the wall.

'Now what!?' cried Alun.

'Keep your voice down. There may be someone still inside,' I whispered.

'Not with those wild boars behind them,' replied Mike

'I have the impression that other gang of thugs must have picked up the same track, ' said Alun. 'They must be shooting at each other.'

'Oh God!' groaned Antoine. 'Looks like we're going to have to repeat that trick with the ball again.'

'If there's anyone left alive.'

But then came an unmistakable addition to the noise. The wailing of police sirens.

Seconds later, the guns stopped, and silence fell.

'They're all making a run for it,' whispered Mike. 'Come on,'

We stumbled through the darkness as quickly as possible towards the light at the end of the tunnel.

Near the entrance, we had to step over a body and then another. The second was the body of a short, round man.

Alun nodded down at the unanimated shape, 'you got what was coming to you,'

'Come on,' I said. 'And be careful.'

Gérard got some photos of the dead men, and we started to make our way through the trees.

We approached the forest's edge and spotted men running in all directions.

A good number were headed towards an outsized, four-wheel-drive vehicle parked in the middle of the field. Others were running toward the track, and a few had chosen to head up the track toward the septet.

'Quick,' cried Antoine. 'We'll stop those murderers.'

'How,' called Alun.

'You'll see,'

The man dashed to his tractor and started it up.

He then drove straight at the barn entrance and crashed the vehicle into the wood framework, holding back the water.

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He just had time to back away before the last plank gave way, and a massive wave of water surged out.

The fleeing gunmen had clambered into their car and were backing it around.

Then they saw the wall of water bearing down on them. One opened the door to jump clear, but it was too late.

A thousand tons of water hit the machine, lifted it, and then rolled it down the slope, filling it with ice-cold water as it did.

The people who had managed to get onto the track were speeding down to the waiting car.

But then something incredible happened. The wall of water reached the bottom of the field and the ridge of the earth and rushed up it unimpeded.

It reached the top where the 2CV was standing and lifted the poor thing into the air, hurling it over the ridge. There was a crashing noise, and shouting and screaming came from beyond the ridge and out of sight.

Then, the police came rushing up the road while other vehicles arrived from the upper track.

Heavily armed officers in combat suits leapt from the cars and sprinted after the escaping thugs.

The huge four-wheel-drive truck had come to a halt against the ridge. It was full of water, and we could see several people struggling wildly inside, trapped and drowning.

Antoine grabbed a rusty sledgehammer from his tractor cabin, ran over and heaved it at the windscreen.



The glass shattered into a million fragments, and a wave of water gushed out, followed by three spluttering men.

A fourth was visible in the back seat, and I leapt up, dragged open the door, and dropped inside.

The man had been knocked senseless by the rolling of the car and had a nasty gash on his forehead which was bleeding profusely.

'Give me a hand, Alun.' I shouted, and together we hauled the inert body up and out through the door.

We lay him on the soaked grass, and almost at once, a military doctor was at his side.

The others were handcuffed and led off towards waiting vans, and other handcuffed men appeared from time to time from the forest and the track, followed by the special forces men.

We followed the policemen out onto the track and, at once, discovered what had become of our 2CV.

It was lying upside down, on its demolished canvas roof, on top of the thug's getaway vehicle.

Beside it, we spotted Inspector Venet standing, looking down at a woman lying at his feet.

A military doctor was already at work on her/

Vennet beckoned to us, and we walked down the track towards him.

We didn't have much difficulty guessing who this was. However, this time, she was grimacing white-faced as the doctor got on with his work. The unnatural angle of her leg left little doubt as to the damage done.

Alun nodded at her and smiled encouragingly, 'Was it be any chance, you who broke our car?'

She clenched her teeth, 'Who was it who called me a fat cow?' she growled. 'You?'

Antoine stepped forward and smiled down at her, 'No. That was me. But you are forgetting,' he paused, 'I called you a stupid, fat, smelly cow. Do you remember now?'

The woman pulled a face and hissed, 'I'll get even with you, you dirty bastard.'

Antoine smiled back, 'Strong words, for a lady.'

'You'll regret that. I'll make you pay for insulting me.'

The old farmer shrugged, 'I beg to differ, madam. You see, by the time you get out of prison, I very much doubt whether I'll still be in the land of the living. Thirty years is a long time.'

The woman snarled, then cried out as the doctor moved her slightly.'

'Well,' smiled the farmer. 'Look after yourself.'

## Chapter 16

**T**hat evening we were once more assembled around the deal table under the spreading umbrella pines.

Our local cook was preparing a succulent celebration meal for us, the delicious smell already wafting across the still surface of the big pond.

Emma was sitting at one end of the table and her brother, Paul, at the other. My wife and Margaux were on each side of her, then came Joseph and Sophie; facing each other. Our favourite opera singer-cum vocal coach, Juliana Metrokovitch, sat beside her pupil. Inspector Venet had taken a place beside Joseph, then came Mike, Alun, Antoine, the farmer and myself.

The two art experts, Danielle Arnaud and Pierre Douanier had taken up their quarters in the vast, echoing cavern. They were up to their ears in works of art and would work late into the night for several

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days, guarded by an impressive security arrangement. Gérard had volunteered to stay with them to act as official photographer.

He had taken an impressive amount of gear with him, including enough lighting equipment for a film set. When not helping catalogue the thousands of valuable objects, he would make a detailed photo and video study of the wall paintings for the local authorities. Paid, of course.

The eleven of us had already partaken of several glasses of iced champagne while we explained the day's events to our astonished audience.

Gérard had taken some incredible photos of our discovery in the cavern, which left little doubt as to the importance of the find. Copies of these were still circulating around the table. He had also done a remarkable job of photojournalism concerning the attack on us.

He'd started with a breathtaking photo of the herd of wild boar dashing past and followed up with photos of the bodies at the end of the tunnel.

Then, there were shots of armed thugs running in all directions, chased by the police.

He had magnificent shots of the wall of water hitting the thug's vehicle. However, the masterpiece was a series of photos showing our 2CV being lifted off the ridge by the wave and flying through the air.

Now that the treasure had at long last been located and secured, he had been given authorisation to publish.

'This will set me up for years,' he smiled. 'Ten at the very least. My agent already has requests from every major newspaper on the planet.'

He had undoubtedly not wasted his time, following us around the countryside.

'So,' smiled Joseph. 'The wild boars showed you the way to the treasure, then they protected it, and you four against hordes of murderous thieves,' He paused. 'That has all the makings of a good book.' Here, he stopped and glanced at Margaux and then at my wife.

The two gave him an almost indiscernible nod, to which he smiled. 'But,' he continued. 'This treasure is on land owned by you lads, isn't it.'

'Yes,' I said. 'It is.'

'So, who does it belong to, inspector? Is this like Treasure trove?'

Inspector Venet frowned. 'Ah! Well, there's an interesting question.' He paused to think about this, sipping some champagne as he did. 'Well, I suppose that if the original owners have died and have left no descendants, then the objects concerned would belong to the state. I think the finders would receive a cut, which could amount to fifty per cent. I'd need to check that, though.'

'And the rest?' said Joseph.

'It would belong to the descendants of the original owners. Each piece remains stolen goods, even if they have remained hidden for about eighty years on someone else's property.'

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Alun nodded slowly, 'Fifty per cent of two hundred million euros is a nice round sum.'

'I'd even be prepared to settle for a ten per cent 'good-will' payment,' I said.

'Yep,' smiled Mike, 'We'd make do with Twenty million euros.'

Everybody laughed, 'Even one per cent would be a huge sum,' said the framer. 'It would cover everything you'd need for your renovation project and leave plenty over for furnishing,' He nodded at us. 'What would one need more for?' he paused. 'At our ages, I mean.'

We scowled at him, 'Less of that, "At our ages", if you please, cried Alun, and everybody broke into laughter.

All the same, the man was perfectly right.

I shrugged, 'We'll take whatever comes our way,' I said.

'Except if that happens to be another herd of wild boars,' chuckled Alun.

'And we'll say thank you for it,' I added.

'My God!' cried Margaux, 'They are becoming adults at last.'

'That's awful news,' smiled my wife.

Our friendly farmer smiled along the long table at Emma, 'This champagne is nice,' he said. 'But if you had a little drop of red wine...'

Emma jumped to her feet and glanced at me, 'I think we might just have a bottle or two left,' she smiled. 'I'll go and look unless one of you three would be kind enough too...'

We were on our feet before you could say Jeronimo. 'Have no fear, demoiselle; we three brave and valiant knights will go forth and undertake this perilous quest for you,' I cried.

She nodded, and off we went, smiling, to choose among the thousands of bottles of priceless wine in the cellar. It was a truly perilous mission, but we hoped it would be crowned with success for our lady.

The following day, the field surrounding our barn was swimming with people, vans, and police cars, but notably, no press teams.

A pot-holer team had been sent in to study the main gallery. It had already turned up another unexpected find.

The gallery joined a second wider one nearly a kilometre deeper under the cliff. The wider one went deeper still and then entered a small cavern. From here, the tunnel went straight up, almost vertically, and it was through this opening that the wind was blowing.

They had sent a team up to the plateau, and two men were even now, carefully ascending the chimney.

They had also discovered that the continuation of the main gallery curved outwards and eventually came out of the cliff face hidden behind a huge, bush-covered rock. This was only a hundred yards from our farmer friend, Antoine Buisson's barn and thus on his property.

The local mayor had been into the grotto and came out rubbing his hands and smiling so much that we were concerned that he might split his face in half.

'This is incredible,' he cried, clapping us all on the shoulders. 'I don't know how to thank you.'

'One can always fall back on hard cash,' joked Antoine.

The mayor laughed, but his thoughts were clearly far away. 'This will bring in thousands of tourists,' he cried. 'Tens of thousands. Just think of it.'

We did just that. 'Tens of thousands of tourists traipsing in front of our quiet home!' I cried. 'Oh no!'

The mayor's brow clouded over for an instant.

'Oh Dear!' he groaned. 'I'm so sorry. I really don't know how we can avoid...'

Antoine shoved the mayor and old friend and punched the man's shoulder playfully. 'Tens of thousands, you say.'

'At the least.'

'But there's no need for those tourists to disturb these gentlemen,' he said.

'I can't see how...' stared the mayor.

'You never could see anything that wasn't stuck right in front of your nose.' Laughed Antoine.

The mayor bridled, but Antoine went on.

'There are two entrances to that grotto, and one of them is far away from here, isn't it. In a position that would not cause any disturbance.'

The mayor frowned, then his face brightened, and he chuckled, 'And that entrance just happens to be on your land. Now, isn't that a shame?'



Antoine shrugged. 'One has to put up with small inconveniences for the good of humanity.'

'You are so public-spirited,' said the mayor. 'An example to others.'

'I do my best,' smiled Antoine. 'Now,' he added, becoming business-like, 'I am willing to go further. If the terms were right, I could set aside one of my prime fields as a parking lot. Not only that,' he added, 'I am ready to invest my hard-earned money to renovate my barn and turn it into an information bureau and refreshment site. Finally, I am willing to clear a track from the parking, through the forest to the tunnel entrance.'

The mayor shook his head and chuckled, 'And that track might pass close to your barn.'

Antoine smiled, 'I hadn't thought of that, but as you suggested it... Yes, I could arrange that too.'

The mayor frowned, 'But you mention terms. What sort of terms?'

'I have exclusive rights to parking and the refreshment and information bureau management.'

'How did I guess?' smiled the mayor.

'Do you agree?' said Antoine.

'Oh, I can't see why not,'

'Does that mean yes or no?'

'It means Yes,' said the mayor, clapping the old farmer on the shoulder.

Antoine nodded, 'That's agreed then. We'll get that down in writing tomorrow.' he smiled. 'Oh, by the way, I took the precaution of recording our agreement on my phone. Just so we don't forget.'

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The mayor laughed, 'You were never one to let grass grow under your feet.'

'No. And, of course, I have several witnesses, should your memory fail you.'

The mayor laughed. 'Anyway, this will be a huge breath of fresh air for the entire region. Tourism will flourish.' he paused. 'But we'll need a name for this place.'

He gazed around the little group. 'Normally, these places are named after the discoverers. We could call it the "Grotto des Anglais". That has a nice international flavour.'

Alun frowned, 'That might not go down altogether well with locals.'

'We could hardly call it the "Grotto des Germans."'

I smiled, 'Why not call it "La Grotte des Musketeers".'

The mayor nodded, turning this over in his mind, 'Yes. I like it... "La Grotte de Musketeers". Yes, I rather like the sound of that.'

## Chapter 17

**D**during the day following the discovery, the foundations for our barn were completed. Mike also coaxed the team to dig us a new channel for the stream-cum-torrent. They also dug us a big pond at the bottom of the field, into which the water was now flowing.

The plundered works of art had now been removed from the cave and had been transported to Paris for safekeeping in the basements of the Louvre. A good number had already been returned to the region's museum collections from which they were taken, but hundreds of others remained. For these, the long task of confirming ownership was to be undertaken by our art expert friends, Danielle Arnaud and Pierre Douanier.

We hadn't seen our neighbouring farmer friend, Antoine, for several days. As the local Mayor had said, he was not a man to allow grass to grow under his feet. He started by borrowing our little green tractor and mowed flat his big field, which was

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slated to become the car park for the future “Grotte de Musketeers”. He then widened the entrance track to it and created a separate exit route down to the main Sarlat road. He also created a footpath up through the forest to the tunnel entrance, ensuring it passed in front of his barn.

All in all, things were humming along nicely for him.

The garage mechanic had managed to straighten the deformed structure of the 2CV roof, but the fabric had been torn beyond repair. However, the local seamstress has made us a replacement cover with heavyweight awning fabric. The finished job was even stronger than the original and infinitely more impressive, being striped bright yellow and red.

Sophie’s debut album had at long last been finished, and Joseph had sent her off to Marseilles with Julianna Metrokovitch. They were to do a final photo shoot for the promotional material with the record company team.

He had got some of his big-name songwriter friends to compose enough songs for the CD and was happy that one or two might make the charts.

As concerns our own renovation project, all that remained to be done was to get on with the job. However, in the meantime, The Girls had extended their list of requirements. We realised that this would entail a great deal more work than we initially planned for.

The detail which finally put the nail in the coffin, so to speak, was that we had not for a single instant considered that the finished job would be expected to "look nice". After all, a wall is a wall, and a floor is a floor, even if those elements aren't quite straight or flat.

Luckily for us, once the ownership of the first few hundred works of art had been sorted out, we found ourselves, if not overflowing with funds, at least comfortable financially.

We thus decided it a sagacious move to subcontract the complicated tasks to those who's job it was to make straight walls and flat floors.

Mike, Alun and I agreed that overseeing the renovation job gave us the advantage of being able to criticise the work of others. We smiled happily at the idea that others could thus be held responsible for whatever future catastrophes would occur, as indeed they must.

In the end, we managed to get most of the barn shipshape, and above all, we got a nod of approval from The Girls.

So, in mid-summer of that year, we were sitting once more on the terrace under the umbrella pines at the Septet following the final day of screwing furniture together.

Emma put down the national newspaper she was reading and looked up, 'Gérard's series of articles is really brilliant', she said. 'If that doesn't put "La Gotte des Musketeers" on the map, nothing will.' She paused, 'I see that that horrible woman got

twenty-five years,' she pulled a face. 'Best to have her locked up than roaming around here.'

We nodded.

'But,' she continued, 'The German treasure hunter got off with five. They couldn't pin enough on him. A cunning man.'

'Cunning, maybe,' I chuckled. 'But unfortunately for him, completely out of his league when up against the "Sarla Musketeers".'

We all laughed happily, and the inevitable chilled white wine was handed around the table.

'I still think we could write all this up as a book,' said Alun.

Margaux shook her head, 'As I said the other day, you have no talent in that direction.'

'Yes, I do, and so does he,' he said, pointing in my direction.

'Do I!?' I exclaimed.

'Of course you do.'

'Oh! Well, if you say so.'

'Alun,' scowled Margaux. 'Do you want me to dig out your ancient love letters and pass them around?'

'Oh, all right!' grumbled Alun, 'have it your own way. But you're missing out on making a small fortune,' he sighed.

'I don't like small fortunes, dearest husband,' she replied. 'I'm only interested in really whopping big ones.'

My wife lent over and put her hand on Alun's shoulder, 'You can start writing when you eventually retire.'

Alun, Mike and I gazed at her with surprise.

'We ARE retired,' I said.

She smiled, 'I meant when you retire from having incredible adventures.'

We all laughed, and the three of us nodded in appreciation of this gem of insight.

'By that time, we'll be too old to even hold a pencil,' I laughed. 'Let alone write.'

Alun nodded, 'We'd need to get a secretary in to help us then,' he smiled.

'A young one would be wisest,' I added. 'They have more up-to-date skills.'

'They don't call them secretaries nowadays,' said Mike.

'But they do the same job?'

'Oh yes. They do the same things but charge you more.'

Margaux scowled at us, 'And I can just guess what unusual selection criteria you would include in the job profile.'

Alun nodded, 'Yes indeed. The girls' profile would certainly crop up in the job description..'

We all laughed.

A big box had just been delivered to Joseph from his anthropologist friends. It contained all the bits and pieces of skeletons dug up during the barn excavation.

This was now sitting on the table beside him.

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'Apparently, these are of no particular value,' he sighed.

I nodded, 'Maybe. But we got a reinforced cellar for free out of them.'

'Yes,' he smiled an enigmatic smile. 'I suppose there's that,' he chuckled.

At this point, Joseph got to his feet, lifted the box of bones and rattled it. 'Time to give these back, then.'

We started and gazed at him in astonishment.

'Give them back!?' I cried.

He smiled down at us. To our farmer friend Antoine. They're part of his collection.'

We stared at him with wide eyes.

'You mean...?' started my wife. 'You planted them?'

Joseph shrugged.

There was a moment of silence, and then we simultaneously burst out into peals of loud, uncontrollable laughter.

'You devil!' cried Margaux.

Joseph shrugged again, 'One does one's best.'

## The End