

A Cyclist's Guide Mystery



A
CYCLIST'S GUIDE
to **CRIME &**
CROISSANTS

ANN CLAIRE

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For Eric, who invited me to meet him in France

Prologue

Last year, if you'd asked me what I'd be doing in 365 days' time, I know what I'd have said: the usual.

Isn't that the case for most of us? We chug along on routines as solid as train tracks. If we're lucky, we get a few notable events, the sort online pollsters and grandmothers take odds on.

In the next year, how likely are you to get married, have a baby, send a child to college, purchase a new home, major appliance, double-glazed windows, take a cruise, visit the Wisconsin Dells?

For me last year at this time? Unlikely down the line. I had nothing big planned. I was predictable, and everyone knew it. My high school class crowned me Most Predictable. Not Miss or Ms. Predictable, either. I, Sadie Greene, swept the category. I can tell myself it's because I'm good with statistics, but I know. Math doesn't win that sort of recognition, even backhanded.

Here's what I would have predicted for a workday in early June.

My alarm would ring at six a.m. in Elm Park, Illinois. That's in "greater" Chicago. Greater, in this case, meaning a seventy-five-minute expressway slog to actual Chicago. I'd open my blinds to a weary maple and the distant backside of a billboard aimed at people going places. I'd be alone and fine with that.

Al Weston and I were breaking up last year. A tectonic breakup, but not the dramatic kind. No San Andreas crushing of hearts or personal property for Al and me. Our parting was incremental, like continental drift propelled by deep underlying forces of ho-hum and little in common beyond our workplace.

Single and fine with it, I'd dress in office wear only my colleagues would see, make coffee, drink coffee, eat cereal, brush my teeth, and cycle 3.7 miles to Appleton Financial, where I'd settle into my cubicle for a day of financial thrills. I'm exaggerating the thrills. However, I was good at my job. Very good. I may have held the Midwest land-speed record for actuarial calculations, but, again, who recognizes these things?

On a fine June day, my friend Gemma might come by and lure me out to lunch. We'd snag a patio table at our favorite Italian place. Red-checked tablecloths. Umbrellas tilted for an indecisive mix of sun and shade. Joking about Bellinis, then ordering iced tea and the daily special.

Gemma Gooding, my best friend since toddlerhood, chiding, *All you do is work, Sadie! Remember to live!* No, I wouldn't have predicted that last bit. Way too dramatic for a weekday lunch and midrange Italian, right?

But Gemma did say those words four days later. *Those exact words.* I'll always remember. She stopped by my office, bike helmet dangling from her wrist—metallic green to match her bike. I hunched over a report I've since forgotten or blocked out. The weather was perfect for cycling, our shared passion. When I had time.

I can still hear her exasperation. *Come on, Sadie! It's gorgeous! You'll never get this day back.*

Gem was right about that. I won't get that day back, and I'll always regret it.

I kept working, those 361 days ago. My boss, Dom Appleton, depended on me, overtime superhero! He depended on me caving to his self-made crises, more like it. But I didn't see that then. I also failed to recognize what was truly indispensable: Gem, to me.

My best friend rode away and never came back.

The hit-and-run driver who killed her never came forward.

I'll never get a second chance.

Never, never, never.

That awful day is why I'm here, in a place I didn't know existed last year. Sans-Souci-sur-Mer is a postcard-pretty village nestled between sea and vineyards at the southernmost edge of France, a hop, skip, and a spin from the Spanish border. I'm not just visiting, either. I'm a resident and proud owner of Oui Cycle, the best little cycling tour company in Sans-Souci.

Last year, sinking in grief, I clung to Gem's final words: *Remember to live.* Without my best friend, I didn't know how. Then I got a sign. More specifically, I was doom scrolling on my phone when words caught my eye. *Cyclist Wanted.* A couple in France was retiring from their beloved bike touring business. They were taking offers for new ownership, monetary bids but also pitches for passion. They'd only sell to just the right person. Me, as it turned out, but only if I took a most unlike-me plunge.

I plunged. I ditched my sensible job and safe routine. I sank all my savings into a sight-unseen bicycle business. Now I'm solo-riding a dream meant for two. Gem and I used to fantasize about starting our own cycling business, a dream sparked by a glorious gap year working as tour guides in Provence. Honestly? I never thought we'd *actually* do it.

That's the scary thing about life. You can plot and plan and make meticulous spreadsheets (if you're me), but life can bump off course in a moment. A year ago, I had no idea I'd be halfway around the world, cycling for a living. Something else I'd never predict? I'm about to roll into serious—as in murderous—trouble.

STAGE 1—

Spinning by the Sea

Chapter 1

Day 1, Thursday Welcome to Sans-Souci-sur-Mer! Sans-souci means without cares, which is how we hope you'll feel on our nine-day Secret Southern France tour. On this first afternoon together, let's get to know each other and lovely Sans-Souci!

Dom Appleton doesn't like croissants.

Frankly, I'm shocked but glad to know. Knowledge is the bedrock of effective tour guiding. Now I won't flaunt my unofficial motto around Dom. *Oui Cycle, we stop for croissants!* Most of my guests appreciate that sentiment (and croissants). It tells them what sort of tour they've joined—one that celebrates France, joie de vivre, and proper fortification.

But here's a rule of tour guiding. Of life too. You can't please everyone, even if you're a croissant.

"Can't stand 'em," says Dom, adding a "no offense" which suggests he's delighted to do just that.

Dom is offering this pastry opinion to the seven other members of my newest tour group. We stand outside the bike barn, a solid stone and stucco structure which for centuries housed horsepower on four hooves. Sun bakes the patio slate. The Mediterranean sparkles lazily in the distance. Monsieur Minou, the neighborhood tabby, lounges on a red tile roof. All down the lane, colorful shutters are drawn. It's midafternoon in the South of France. Locals are enjoying their *sieste*.

Nine months into my expat life, I'm learning to love a good nap. Not today. My guests are eager for a spin, which we'll take right after introductions.

They're an international group. Twin sisters, Philomena and Constance, have come down from northern Scotland to ride into their fifth decade on a tandem bike. They have exuberant red curls, sturdy builds, and a vow to devour every croissant they lay hands on. Women after my own heart!

Manfred, a self-described digital nomad, hails from Germany. He's brought his own bike, a steel-framed single speed. He and the bike look

alike—tall, sleek, and silver-streaked. If he has a pet, I'll bet it's a greyhound or Abyssinian cat.

Then there's Nigel Fox. Yes, *the* Nigel Fox from Out Foxed, the famous/infamous travel review site. When his London office called last month, requesting a comped tour and discretion, I thought I was being punked. What critic pre-announces his arrival?

A travel-writer friend reassured me. *That's how it's done*, she said. *No one pays expenses these days unless you're Rick Steves*. Even then, good luck, Rick! The modern freelancer balances the free and discounted against potential returns. The recovering actuary in me understands that. Risk versus rewards.

You get nowhere if you spin your wheels on what could go wrong. New me took the risk. A big one. Nigel's reviews come in two extremes: Rave or Rubbish. A rave could put little Oui Cycle on the map. A rubbish rating could puncture my dreams.

I sneak a glance at Nigel. He doesn't *look* all that scary in his puffy-hipped jodhpurs, tweed-mimicking Lycra, and walrus-tusk mustache. Looks can be deceiving. In the two hours I've known Nigel, I've deduced that his facial hair functions as a mood avatar. Current mood: pursed displeasure. I pray it's a fleeting critique of Dom's croissant complaints.

Which brings me to my American guests. Dom and Judith Appleton, their son Lance, and Lance's girlfriend, Lexi Conners.

I know the Appletons as well as my own family, maybe better. As a kid, I lived in their backyard cottage, Mom and me in the dollhouse version of their inflated Tudor. The *carriage house*, Mom would correct. *A rented garage*. Fine, okay, but the Appletons always welcomed me in.

Judith collected me from kindergarten and grade school when Mom was busy juggling jobs and boyfriends. Dom taught Lance and me to ride bikes. Well, he hired an instructor. In the Appleton world, that counts as hands-on involvement. Dom also gave me my first "real" job at his company, Appleton Financial.

And Lance? Lance is the pesky, protective brother I never had. A big brother by thirteen days. He's freshly thirty, just like me.

I desperately want to impress them too. This tour is my chance to show them the glories of cycling and France—and to prove I made the right move ditching my job and moving halfway around the world.

That's all. Just an entire country, cycling, my business, and major life decisions. *No pressures riding along on this tour!*

I still can't believe they've come all this way. My head feels airy, like I'm witnessing the surreal. The Appletons, here on my patio in Sans-Souci. Dom in head-to-toe Spandex!

"It's the flakes," Dom's saying. He wipes imaginary buttery goodness on his off-white bike shorts.

Flakes? That's his beef with croissants?

I won't judge. Everyone spins their own way, I always say. I'm not dissing Dom's Spandex, either. I firmly believe that everyone can—and should—embrace comfortable stretchy fabrics.

It's the color. Off-white in sports gear is never as opaque as the wearer wants to believe, especially if sweat, puddles, and buttery goodness get involved.

Lance snorts, ruffling his lazy mop of sandy-brown locks. "Any French food you do like, Dad?"

Classic Lance move. The setup.

Dom rubs an ample belly, pondering whether France—*France!*—has any cuisine he might enjoy.

"French fries," he says, drawing out the words. "Do they make 'em over here?"

Judith issues an indulgent smile, Lexi a polite giggle. Nigel's mustache bristles.

I step in before Dom can say more. "We have lots of wonderful meals lined up," I tell the group. "Something for everyone. Wine tastings, private dinners, picnics, and loads of fortifying bakery stops."

The sisters clap.

I grin and roll on to our itinerary. "Today is our prologue. Like in the Tour de France, we'll start with a short opening spin." Distance, however, is where any similarity to France's biggest bike race ends. "No first-day time trials or competition for us," I stress. "We're here for fun and relaxation."

Nigel huffs.

I firm my smile and ignore the grumbling critic. "We'll spend two nights in lovely Sans-Souci so you can settle in. Then we strike out. We'll cycle from the sea, all the way to the high Pyrenees Mountains."

Finally, I emphasize the best part of cycle touring, for guests at least. My crew and I handle the tedious bits. We lug the luggage, wrangle

reservations, and juggle logistics. “All you have to do is pedal and enjoy,” I’m saying, when Dom interrupts.

“Yeah, but back to croissants,” he says, a man of the last word and more on top. “Where are you supposed to butter them? And try fitting them in a toaster, am I right?”

Hopefully enjoy, I mentally amend.

I take stock of the group. We’ll be like a little family for the next nine days. That can be wonderful and enriching. Or dysfunction on wheels.

The sisters coo at the stretching cat. Manfred gazes serenely out to sea. Lexi maneuvers Lance into a selfie, tickling him for a goofy smile. Judith photographs their photo.

They seem happy. Dom, however—I fear he’ll be tough to please.

And then there’s Nigel Fox. With a jolt, I realize he’s ambling toward the east edge of the patio. Closer to the breathtaking sea view but also a scene I don’t want him to see.

I clap my hands so sharply that Lexi startles.

“Let’s ride!” I call out, pitching my tone to bright and cheery. “Everyone to their bikes!”

Nigel stalls, nose wrinkling, mustache wagging.

Has he caught a whiff of aerosol paint? Or maybe he senses foul trouble. For the past few weeks, I’ve been battling a vandal. By battling, I mean losing the fight and scrambling to clean up the damages.

The usual questions stress-sprint through my head. *Why? Why me? Why Oui Cycle? Why only Oui Cycle?* According to the village police chief, no one else in Sans-Souci has reported vandal problems.

Oh, but not to worry, the chief assures me. He has a theory. *The bored teenager. A universal problem, non, Madame?*

No. No, I do not agree.

What teen dislikes bikes? Even if they do, why go out of their way to target my tour business? The initial damage was relatively minor. Broken flower pots. A smashed mailbox. Then there was the rock through my window in the middle of the night. The red paint dripped over my wall. The break-in at the bike barn and the gory aftermath of slashed seats, cut cables, and severed chains. And last night, another graffiti threat, scrawled across the east wall of the barn and my new so-called security cameras. The vile message is still visible under the slapdash cover-up I attempted this morning, before running out of paint and time.

Nigel's nose twitches. I hold my breath. Threats aren't a good look for a business centered on fun, health, and relaxation.

Nigel preens his fluffy tusks, then turns on pale leather sneakers and rejoins the group at our waiting rides.

I exhale in relief. In all other aspects of this tour, I'm prepared. Okay, overprepared. Tipping toward obsessive, my staff might say. The bikes gleam in fresh polish and wax. Routes are plotted down to the minute and meter. I've triple-confirmed reservations, stalked the weather forecasts, stuffed my flowerboxes with blooming annuals, and dusted the high eaves of the bike barn, replacing centuries-old cobwebs with twinkling string lights.

I want everything to be just right.

It won't be, I remind myself. That is the number-one rule of tour guiding: No tour will ever go entirely to plan. There are too many uncontrollables. Stray pebbles. Bounding sheep. Loose dogs. Erratic drivers. Wind, rain, hail. Spontaneous French vacation schedules. A vandal, striking at the worst possible time.

I square my shoulders and focus on my group and all the positives. It's a lovely June afternoon in southern France. My friends are here, old and new. With any luck, no one will find out about my human-sized rat problem, and we can outride any trouble.

Cyclist's log

Day 1 recap

Hey, Gem! I'll write directly to you during this tour so you won't miss a turn. Oh, I wish you were here. You are—always riding with me—but I mean really here to witness the rarest of sights. The Appletons on vacation!

Judith gave me a big hug the moment they arrived. I've missed her! She wants to have a proper tea and catch up. Dom wants a "serious talk." Tea, I'd love. A talk? He did come all this way, so I'll have to listen.

I promised them the free afternoon I built into Tuesday. I was going to devote that time to you. One year since . . .

Nope, sorry! I won't go there. No tears marring these pages!

This'll stop my soppiness: Dom! I swear, nothing pleases him. He's complained about the sun (too bright), the sea (thought it would be bigger), the food (subpar French fries). Judith apologized when we were alone. Jet lag, she said. He's out of his comfort zone. He's been stressed this year.

I understand all of those. But still. He's on vacation in France! A few long rides will wear down his edginess, right? I'm a guide on a mission. He will enjoy this tour if it kills me!

Speaking of critics, remember how I promised Nigel Fox's office that I'd keep his identity a secret? Why did I bother? All through dinner he dropped hints about who he is. Tour inquisitor. Professor of rubbish. A raver of exquisite taste.

Philomena and Constance—they go by Philly and Conny—might have caught on to him. They rated every course of our meal. All raves.

The hotel chef made us a special menu, and we dined on a patio by the sea. Rustling palms, swishing waves, crimson sunset . . . Judith raved about dessert. Crème catalane, the

local take on crème brûlée. Remember when we made crème brûlée on that snow day? What were we, fourteen? That was my first taste of France—from Judith’s Julia Child cookbook! You were fearless with the torch.

You’ll want to know about Lance. He showed up in plaid Bermuda shorts and a clashing tropical shirt. He and Lexi must be serious if she’s tolerating that fashion statement and joining a family vacation. You don’t mind, right? You and Lance were broken up when . . .

Ack! There I go again! The one-year anniversary is getting to me. That and seeing the Appletons and Lexi.

Lexi’s fitness training has reached influencer level. I checked out her Instagram. She has 367,936 followers and is an “ambassador” for VitalaGreen. That’s a sports drink promising everything—energy, clear thoughts, great skin, all your dreams coming true? It looks like pond algae. She gave me some samples, so I’ll have to try it.

Makes me wish I could show off a toned cycling body. New me, new life, new ripped quads! Alas, all those croissants. Whatever. Priorities! I live in France!

I still can’t believe they’re all here. I must make this tour a good one.

Which means I need sleep. Goodnight and don’t let the vandal strike!

XOXO

PS: Judith worries about my cottage. The beams bow. They’re seventeenth-century and still standing, I assured her. Imminent collapse, she’s likely thinking. Before they arrived, I entertained silly fantasies. Judith, gushing about my cute cottage. Dom, praising my great deal—a business, inventory, a barn and a home and wonderful colleagues too!

Lexi called me amazing and brave. Thank you, Lexi!

You’d love my cottage, Gem. Moroccan tiles like carpets. Foot-thick windowsills. Shutters that actually shut! And these beautiful saggy beams—think what they’ve seen.

Chapter 2

Day 2, Friday Our first full day in the saddle! Today, we'll explore the vineyard tapestry that surrounds us. The views are truly breathtaking—as are the hills! Get ready to pedal. We'll reward ourselves with a gourmet picnic at a winery.

Church bells clang the quarter hour. I wince. I've broken a cardinal rule of tour guiding. Depart on time, especially on the first day.

"He'll be here," says Judith, crisp as the morning air. She stands beside me, staring down the cobbled lane. Doves coo in the lemon tree. Golden rays burn off the dew. Villagers stroll toward the market. Dom is late.

"He needed Deborah to round up some figures." Judith strangle-grips the peach scarf she's paired with a floaty floral tunic and sky-blue capri leggings, an ensemble fit for cycling and popping into cafés. "Deborah can be so pokey."

Deborah is Dom's long-time assistant. His work wife, Dom will joke, which doesn't endear her to Judith. Devoted Deborah comes in early, stays late, and plunges into thankless tasks like organizing office retreats, potluck Tuesday, Dom's tee times, and obligatory birthday celebrations.

Deborah would enjoy a cycling vacation in France, I think. *She'd* appreciate croissants and show up on time. No, she'd be early, bearing croissants.

"He knows it's three a.m. in Illinois?" I check my watch. Nine-sixteen, meaning it's three-sixteen in Elm Park.

Judith sniffs. "Deborah installed an app. She gets an alert when Dom emails her."

No vacations for Deborah, then. I tear my gaze from the empty lane and check on the rest of the group.

Lexi twists into yoga poses, arm stretched to the sky, blonde ponytail bobbing. A clear flask of VitalaGreen poses on the stone wall behind her. Lance and her cell phone look on. Lexi's shooting a video for her social media channels. The second one of the morning, she told me. Her followers demand content.

Just down the wall and hopefully out of Lexi's video frame, Philly and Conny lay out supplies to be packed in their paniers. Paper maps, snacks, emergency baguette, rain jackets, sun hats, utility tools, and a corkscrew. They're so prepared. I approve!

Manfred seems to have glided off again, which is worrisome. Corralling tour guests can be like arranging cats for a portrait. You get some in place, and others scamper off.

I scan for Nigel and spot a flash of silver in the deep shade of the fig tree. There's a bench there, half-gobbled by the ancient trunk and grasping limbs. The glint flicks fast. He must be writing in his notebook again. He had it out all through dinner last night. *Furiously writing? Ranting about every minute I delay our departure?*

I turn back to Judith. "I need to get moving."

"We can't *leave* Dom." Her fists tighten around her scarf. "He's been under a lot of stress. He *needs* this vacation, Sadie. Even he agreed that it was important."

Yet not important enough to show up on time.

"Leave him, leave him." For a second, I fear my thoughts have acquired a voice. But no, it's Lance. He circles us, balancing on his pedals.

"Come on, Sadie," Lance goads. "You did it before. Quit the company, left Dad in the lurch. Any regrets there, eh?"

He catches my smile before I can hide it. Nope, no regrets, although turning in my resignation was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Two things kept me strong.

One, I'd already signed the purchase papers for Oui Cycle.

Two, a memory of Gemma, justifying one of her many job jumps: *Just because you're good at something doesn't mean you have to do it.*

I was a good accountant and actuary. Numbers suit me. They're understandable, predictable. You know what they're going to do, unlike people. I hope I'm a good tour guide. I'm still learning the ropes, but I certainly have more fun. *Usually.*

"Lance, be nice," Judith says.

Lance winks at me.

"Be nice," I say, grinning back.

As a teen, Lance kept track of his mom's *be nices*, like a punch card at the sandwich shop. When he got a dozen nices, he'd treat himself to something naughty. "Borrowing" Dom's BMW. Drag-racing it on

backroads. Helping himself to Dom's best bourbon. Skipping school for an adventure in the city.

"Your father has a company to run," Judith continues, now sticking up for Dom's overwork habit. "*On his own.*"

Ouch! Was that a stab at Lance or me? Lance rolls his eyes so hard his body and bicycle follow. He spins across the patio to bike-bomb Lexi's video.

Another cyclist takes his place. Nadiya Zaliskaya, my co-guide, brakes and rests one high-top sneaker on the patio slate, the other on a pedal. A light breeze flutters her hair, wheat blonde and sky blue, the colors of her native Ukraine.

"It is late," she announces baldly. "Late on the first day is not good."

No, it is not. The first day is special, a promise to our guests. We of Oui Cycle respect their time.

"He *will* be here," Judith insists.

"Yes," says Nadiya. "Yes, he will. I shall collect him, Mrs. Appleton. I will bring him to you."

Judith's resolve falters. "Maybe I should go get him. Dom can be a grumbly bear in the morning."

Then I'd have another missing rider.

"I'll go," I say, immediately regretting the words. If work is involved, Dom will tangle me in complaints. Not only did I quit, but my new business has gotten him on this tour.

"No," Nadiya says. "I shall go. It will be quicker."

Sun shines off her gold helmet. Her hair glows like stained glass. Her stance puts me in mind of a brave warrior heading into battle: Joan of Arc, if Joan got into cycling and updated her wardrobe to high-tops, bike shorts, and oversized t-shirts emblazoned with a Ukrainian folk-punk band.

Nadiya turns her warrior look to Judith. I wonder if Judith is imagining what I am: an iron-willed twenty-something taking charge of Dom.

Judith gives a tight smile. "Fine." She starts to thank Nadiya, but my co-guide is already bumping down the cobbles.

As if on cue, Manfred glides back. I ring my bike bell, and nervous excitement flutters, like the first day of school. My riders gather.

I warm up with the basics. "It would be great if we stuck together, but feel free to go at your own pace. You can't get lost."

They *could* get lost, but they'd have to work at it. I remind them of their paper maps and the navigation devices clipped to their handlebars. "The navigators are basic. They won't measure your vital signs or map your workout, but they'll show you where you are."

Most of the group nods agreeably. Nigel's head dips as if weighted by tedium. *Yeah, yeah, I know.* We went over this yesterday, when Nigel opined that a toddler could work our "remedial" technology.

Whatever. Staying on course is important. Since Dom isn't here, I add, "And you all know how to input stops or change destinations if you need, say, a croissant boost?"

Chuckles from the group (minus Nigel) and hardy *ayes* from Philly and Conny.

I slide onto my seat and sing out my favorite words. "Let's ride!"

Philly and Conny cheer. Nigel sighs, tucks away the notebook, and swings a camera across his chest on a stretchy strap. Manfred, Lexi, and Lance circle like racehorses at the gates. Judith gives the empty lane a final frown.

I lead us out of town on quiet back roads. Cozy village homes, tucked shoulder-to-shoulder, give way to country cottages with wider gardens. A pompous rooster struts alongside us. The local librarian pokes out from behind her laundry line to wish us good luck.

Bon courage, mesdames et messieurs!

Merci, Madame, we call back. Cycling works its magic. With every turn, my tension floats away and joy spins in. We're sailing through a moving landscape painting.

Lance speeds by and misses a turn. I yell a correction.

An electric whir approaches. Nigel passes on our new e-bike, posture upright, reminding me of the puffed-up rooster.

In my ideal tour world, one guide would lead and another, the sweeper, would bring up the rear. But some riders are pointer hounds. They need to be out front. Others prefer the back of the pack, where they can stop and rest or take photos whenever they like.

I stay with the main group. Lexi rides with Judith, who's also chosen an e-bike, lemon yellow with a basket specially designed to hold baguettes. Judith looks sunnier already.

Manfred pedals surprisingly serenely behind us. Conny and Philly praise every bonnie garden.

Up ahead, Lance and Nigel have stopped at the sign marking the edge of Sans-Souci. The vintage landmark features hand-painted images of the region: grapes, a sailboat, a waving octopus, and—my favorite—two cyclists modeled after the couple who chose me to take over their beloved bike business, Bea and Bernard. On the sign—as in life—they’re holding hands and laughing. In between the images is SANS-SOUCI, translated into two dozen languages, including a prominent English NO WORRIES.

I usually stop here for a group photo. Given our delayed departure, I wasn’t going to, but since my most eager riders are waiting . . .

Lance cocks his head. Nigel snaps photos like the sign is a fashion model. My heart soars. *He’s having fun!*

I imagine my rating soaring to Rave. Then I register the slashes of dripping, oozing red.

I grip my brakes so hard, my bike bucks. Conny and Philly swerve around me. I want to turn, to gather my riders and flee. It’s too late.

This morning, I checked all around the barn, my cottage, and Bea and Bernard’s rambling home next door. Finding no fresh vandalism, I’d allowed myself to imagine good fortune. Maybe, I’d thought, the saboteur had grown repentant or bored or moved on.

“You see this?” Lance says, when we pull up to the obvious horror. “What’s it say: DEAD BIKES?”

Lance arrived claiming to speak all of two phrases in French—*Ooh là là* and *mucho vino, por favor*. Yes, I know, the second isn’t even French. He’s not spot on with this translation, either, but I won’t clarify: DEATH TO CYCLISTS.

“Not very nice, is it?” says Philly.

“Right rude,” says Conny.

“To truly live is to dance with the Grim Reaper,” Manfred says, nodding pensively at the sign.

“Sadie!” Judith exclaims. “Is someone threatening you? Oh, I *knew* this bike business was dangerous!”

“No!” I protest against billboard-sized evidence to the contrary.

Judith shakes her head. The sisters tut. Nigel snaps photos. Manfred ponders the sky.

I employ my look-over-there move, well known to parents passing cotton-candy stalls and dog walkers approaching forests of squirrels.

I point up the road. “Onward! We have extraordinary views coming up.”

Lance sprints off. *And misses the turn.* I yell to him—so much for quiet country roads. He doesn't hear or doesn't care. Lexi gives chase.

"Great," I exclaim, brittle bright, like a cheerleader for the losing team. "Let's keep going!" I assure myself that Lexi will catch up to Lance and reel him back on track. I start off. Usually, a group will follow. Except there's nowhere to go. Nigel has angled his bike across the narrow lane.

"Interesting," he says. "Who doesn't like your business, Miss Greene?"

"Kids," I say, then verbally backpedal. That sounds as if kindergarteners know something awful about me. "Kids like me." *I hope.* "It's just teenagers. Bored teens. That's what the police say, and—"

"The police?" Nigel asks, mustache quivering. "This is not your first threat? Should we be worried?"

I am! But the vandal is a coward, hiding behind a paint can. If I thought my guests were in danger, I'd call off the tour.

"This?" I say, feigning incomprehension. "No, no, this is teenage ennui, that's all. The police aren't worried." The last part is sadly true.

I clasp my hands and gear up my cheery enticements. "Onward! Fantastic views coming up."

Nigel raises his camera. Too late, I realize I'm framed red-faced in front of the gory sign.

Nigel raises his own sharp-toothed grin. "Indeed, a most extraordinary view."

Chapter 3

Day 2, Friday Wine isn't the only star of our region. Cork oaks and olive groves have shaped local life for thousands of years. Fun fact: the oldest known olive tree in France is over two thousand years old!

By noon, my mental spreadsheet overflows with positives. Sure, Lance kept sprinting off the wrong way and Nigel surged ahead, obsessed with arriving first. But we also stopped for gorgeous vistas. We met fellow cyclists, plein air painters, and friendly donkeys. We toured botanical gardens, strolling under towering date palms, marveling at ancient olive trees, and learning how cork is made. Spoiler: the cork in your wine bottle is bark, peeled from oaks that regrow their spongy skin in less than a year.

Now we're touring a hilltop vineyard before a gourmet picnic lunch.

Part of me wants to whisper—bellow—the obvious to Judith, who questioned my big move. *This, Judith. This is why I love my new job. This is why I took the leap.*

But that might seem rude and/or braggy. Plus there's the pesky problem of her absent husband. Judith keeps watching the empty gravel drive. I discreetly check my phone. No missed texts from Nadiya.

I tune back in to our temporary tour guide, the vineyard owner, a gnomish octogenarian in green Wellingtons and a red beret. Monsieur Labelle is telling us how his family still uses mules to tend the steep, rocky land. His grandson, who has graced two months of a hunky vintner's calendar, translates. My group is entranced. Even Nigel has put away his notebook.

Monsieur gestures to the landscape. Neat lines of vines curve along the hills, outlined in stacked stone walls. Vines as far as the eye can see, as if Escher had gotten into agriculture.

I'm lost in the mesmerizing patterns when I hear Monsieur utter my favorite line. "*Mesdames et Messieurs*, I invite you to our humble cellars for your picnic."

His "humble cellars" are a vast centuries-old warehouse and barrel room. Thick stone walls soar to exposed beams. Inside, the air is cool and

perfumed with musky scents of fermenting grapes, aging in oak barrels.

Judith wrinkles her nose as we step through the sliding doors. “We could get drunk just breathing.”

“Hope springs,” declares Conny. Her sister giggles. They gasp, then clap for the picnic spread, laid out on a long table. Platters of cured and grilled meats, baskets of baguettes, heaping bowls of salads, and enough cheeses to fill a market stall.

I beam at the picnic chefs, Bea and Bernard, the couple who made my bike-tours dream come true. The day we transferred Oui Cycle ownership, they almost stopped my heart. We signed the contracts remotely. On a Zoom screen, sitting in a nondescript notary office, Bea held her pen over the stack of paperwork. She hesitated. She whispered to Bernard, and they ducked off screen. I sweated. I’d already quit my job, sold my apartment, given away my furniture, and told everyone I knew. More than that, I wanted this so, so much.

They returned with a request.

They want more money, the lawyer helping me whispered. I didn’t have any more.

Bea looked embarrassed. We’re in our seventies, she said. Full-time touring was getting to be too much. But they didn’t want to retire totally. Perhaps, just maybe, they could still help out?

Could they ever!

I’m beyond grateful. They have contacts everywhere and know all the best routes. They’re also wonderful people. Bea’s my model for the good expat life. She was born in Bermuda, raised in the English Cotswolds, and fell in love with Bernard and cycling in Provence. Bea makes juggling multiple homelands seem easy and, best of all, joyful. I haven’t told her about the role modeling. That seems like too much pressure. Plus I want to prove that I’m a worthy new owner of Oui Cycle.

When my group is settled and passing around the vineyard’s award-winning Syrah blend, I catch Bea’s eye. She nods toward the open double doors, bright as otherworldly portals. We step out and stop under the shade of a gnarled olive tree.

“Splendid day to ride,” says Bea.

Bea says this about pretty much any weather short of lightning, hail, dust storm, or locusts. She’s right. Any day we can ride is a good day.

Which is why I feel like such a downer. “Did you see the Sans-Souci sign?”

Bea pats her pixie-cut curls, alabaster against tawny skin. Her well-etched laugh lines plunge into a rare frown.

There’s my answer.

“Such a shame,” Bea says. “Why attack something nice? The chief was going to cover it with a tarp. Hopefully it can be restored.”

I fear the sign is beyond repair. I’m about to report my missing-guest problem when a bike bell chimes. Seconds later, Nadiya appears, sprinting up the final hill. A few meters out, she swings a leg over her seat and glides up on one pedal.

Behind her, the lane is empty except for her dust.

“Your Mr. Appleton will be here,” Nadiya says curtly. She unclips her helmet, and her golden hair flares. She has that warrior look on again. Not a happy warrior, either.

“Is everything okay?” I ask. Clearly, it’s not.

Nadiya raises her chin defiantly. “It is not my fault he crashed into the ditch. He lost control because he was waving his arm at me. I did not make him do that.”

I mentally kick myself. I should have retrieved Dom.

Nadiya is saying that he’s fine. “No injury, except to ego.”

Bea pats Nadiya’s arm. “Come have some lunch, pet. Bernard has our picnic set up out back.” Bea raises an eyebrow at me. “May I kidnap your guide, Sadie?”

“Of course!” *I wish she’d take me too.*

My stomach rumbles, but I wait outside. Ten long minutes slog by before I spot Dom pushing his bike. He sees me, gets back on, and labors up the last stretch.

“That girl is fired,” he huffs from several yards out.

Girl? Fired? I remind myself that Dom is a client. A client who’s stuck to his pedals, it appears, as Dom wobbles, cursing at his feet. He went all in for gear, I’ll give him that. Lycra, fingerless gloves, aerodynamic helmet, and fancy clip-in shoes.

“Are you okay?” I ask, vague enough to cover ditches, moods, and footwear.

“Fine,” he snaps. “Your so-called guide failed to point out a dangerous curve.”

In a move that sends sympathy pain to my knee, he wrenches his right foot free. The left sticks. He and the bike tip. I reach out a steadying hand and brace myself. Dom has at least five inches on me and probably a good hundred pounds or more.

To my relief, he yanks his foot from the shoe. From his nose to his ears, he's as red as the Syrah blend.

"I told that Na—Natasha—what's her name?" He pries off the shoe and nearly tips again stuffing it over his soggy sock.

"Nadiya?"

Rusty mud smears his right hip.

"Her! I told her she's fired and you'll back me up. Where is she? I want to be here when you do it."

It's probably good that I'm too appalled to speak.

"Hard to find good help. I know all about that," Dom says, chummy now and rolling his bike toward the picnic. "Give up playing around on bikes, and come back to work for me, Sadie. You can have Lance's office. I need someone trustworthy. Someone who steps up to responsibility. You."

In my previous life, such praise might have swept me up. Now indignation swirls—for Nadiya, for my authority, for "playing around on bikes"?! For Lance too. I hope he didn't overhear that. Granted, Lance isn't the most diligent worker, but he likes his office and clout-heavy title of Chief Growth Director. Translation: Lance chums up to potential clients. He networks, goes to parties, and plays a lot of golf.

"Think about it," Dom says. "We need to have that serious talk later."

He thrusts his bike at me like I'm the valet. Which, to be fair, I am, along with guide, curator of life-changing experiences, cheerleader of hilly climbs, keeper of spreadsheets and timetables, and a lot more.

I watch him stomp off. Correction: waddle off. The shoes make him walk like a goose with his high heels on backward. I hesitate just outside the cellars, debating whether to rejoin the lunch or check on Nadiya.

Lance's laugh booms out. "Hey, old man, you finally caught up. What happened to your shorts? Take a tumble chasing after that Russian gal?"

Ukrainian. I'm glad Nadiya didn't hear that.

Judith tuts. "Oh, Dom, we're on vacation. Ride an e-bike. I'm having the most wonderful time on mine."

"Have mine," Nigel says. "I have no need of artificial boost. I am merely testing the monstrosity for my . . . critical assessments."

One of the sisters suggests that Nigel should be *enjoying* the tour instead of *assessing*. “You can’t spell assessment without—”

Dom huffs that he doesn’t need an e-bike. “I’m not about to cheat with a battery bike.”

I’m steeling myself to break up a bike fight, when Manfred calmly inquires about grape varietals and fermentation times. *Thank you, Manfred!* I would have smothered high tempers in a deluge of schedule particulars. Monsieur Labelle will flood them with details of Syrah, Grenache, Carignan, and Mourvedre. A contented clink of cutlery and glasses resumes. I slip around the back, past oak barrels and a Great Pyrenees snoring in the sun.

The Oui Cycle van sits in the gravel turnaround, cartoon-bug cute with its round headlamps, protruding mirrors, and two-toned paint. Red on the bottom, cream on top. The matching awning is extended. Bernard, Bea, and Nadiya sit underneath the canopy in low-slung chairs, heads in the shade, legs extended into the sun.

They’re sipping Orangina from dimpled glass bottles. Paper-wrapped baguette sandwiches rest in their laps. An open bag of Camembert-flavored potato chips beckons from a folding table.

Bernard issues warm *bonjours*. Bea waves to an empty chair.

I sink in. “So,” I say. I hate to spoil the mood, but I need to know.

Nadiya snorts and glugs her soda.

Bernard, ever chivalrous, hands me the bag of chips. He strokes his white beard and recrosses long legs. He’s dressed in his usual uniform: bike shorts and a cycling jersey, topped with a linen jacket and dapper straw cap. “Our Nadiya put the lid on a bully,” he says happily.

I help myself to a potato chip. *Yum!* I scoop out a handful. The bag assures me I’m doing a good deed by supporting small Breton potato farmers.

“Put her foot down,” Bea affirms. “And rightfully so, love.”

“*Exactement*,” agrees Bernard.

I raise my eyebrows to Nadiya.

“I improvise,” she says with a shrug. “Your Mr. Appleton will not leave the Wi-Fi. He says that I am being a pest. A nag. I had to look that up.”

“Sorry,” I say. I know I didn’t utter that insult, but I am the reason Dom is here.

Nadiya rolls on. “He says he must stay with Wi-Fi because. . .” She throws up her palms. “Something about his phone and highways and robberies?”

I could translate that Dom is stingy and won’t pay for an international phone plan. Thus his and Judith’s phones are glorified cameras unless in range of accessible Wi-Fi.

I dust Camembert powder from my fingers and explain highway robbery. Then I ask, “How’d you get him out the door?”

Nadiya makes a tugging gesture. “I take away the Wi-Fi. Voilà.”

“Thinking on her feet, our lass,” Bea says. She reads my perplexed frown and explains. “Nadiya asked Madame Laurent to unplug the modem.”

Nadiya nods. “Yes, yes. Madame Laurent is very kind, very understanding. All the other guests, they were out enjoying France.”

Kind and understanding? The Madame Laurent I know could freeze the Mediterranean in a single glare.

Nadiya is saying, “Mr. Appleton yells that I ruined his numbers and emails. What are numbers when he should be with his family? Do you know what I would give to be bicycling with my family?”

Chatty crickets and the breeze fall silent.

I think of my pain at losing Gem and multiply it by a number I can’t calculate. Nadiya lost her home in the war. Much of her town and several family members too. She didn’t come here to live a dream. She fled a nightmare.

She flicks a dismissive hand. “Finally, he gets on his bike, but still he complains. He is waving a rude gesture when he misses a turn and rolls into the ditch. My fault, he says. He says he will tell you to fire me and you will listen to him.” Worry flickers across her face.

Bea looks stormy enough to sink ships. She and Bernard hired my main crew, Nadiya and our tech/mechanic/fix-it guy, Jordi. As Bea explained, they looked not only for skills but also soul. They particularly sought those who might benefit from the joys of cycling.

Nadiya’s need was clear. Jordi’s background is a bit more—well, let’s say complex. Okay, he has a criminal record. That worried me at first but not anymore.

I suspect I’m also one of their good deeds. When I submitted a bid for Oui Cycle, I offered what I thought was a solid price and experience. I talked up my work with numbers and the year Gem and I spent as tour

guides in Provence. Then there was the essay question. The key to it all: *Why do you want to lead bike tours? Where could Oui Cycle take you?*

I wrote that late at night, an essay version of an after-midnight text to an ex. You say what you mean, even if you wither with chagrin in the morning.

I talked about wanting to live out a dream, for myself and for Gem. I was about to be thirty, an age when I should be practical and settling down, attending to the expected mile markers. Kids, a mortgage, dining sets, college funds, retirement. Fantasy jobs could wait until . . . when? Retirement? Winning a lottery? That had been too late for Gem.

I had nothing to lose, and I predicted I'd never hear back. The more I think about it, I'm really bad at predictions.

Nadiya swipes a hand under her eyes.

"Dom's not the boss here," I say firmly. "I'll talk to him."

Nadiya shrugs, her tough shell back in place. "Do not bother. I am fine."

I grin. "You really unplugged him? That's what he needs."

Nadiya nods solemnly. "*Oui*, the man should be unplugged."

Her words sound dark. I tell myself it's a rare mistranslation by a woman who speaks at least four languages fluently. I'm not going to correct her. I routinely speak in plurals when I can't remember the genders of French nouns.

Plus I need to get back to my group. I'm extracting myself from the folding chair when a clatter makes us all turn.

"Oops, don't mind my blundering."

Conny—or is that Philly?—steps from the dim of the warehouse, righting a barrel stave as she does.

Oops, indeed. I hope she didn't overhear us complaining about another guest.

My cheeks flare. "I was just coming to check on you all. We have dessert. Tarts, cookies, coffee."

"Aye, brilliant! All the more for the rest of us, then."

It's Philly, I determine. She has slightly curlier curls and a freckle by her right eyebrow. Her words register. "Rest of you? What do you mean?"

Conny appears behind her. "We've lost a good part of our men. Or, I should say, the troublesome part. Dom and the fox. They've set off racing. The young Appleton went too."

"Racing where?" I ask, picturing my carefully honed schedule flying away with them.

The sisters shrug. Conny answers. “Reckon they don’t know.”
Philly laughs and winks in Nadiya’s direction. “Nor do we care, do we?”

Cyclist's log

Day 2 recap

Hey Gem, it's almost midnight. I'll be quick so I don't turn into a pumpkin. I'm just back from a party. Lights, bubbles, dancing. Are you imagining a rave on Ibiza? Ha! No, not my speed.

Professional troubadours—friends of Bea and Bernard's—stopped by on their way to a folk music festival. Troubadours! Bea and Bernard know everyone. Before I knew it, it was a block party, then a village party. My tour group joined in too. Maybe this will convince Judith I'm not all alone here? Or maybe a village bash was a step too far.

“Do you get any privacy?” she asked.

Valid question. All the locals wanted to know about “my” vandal.

Who has it in for you, Madame? Who have you mortally offended? What theories do you formulate? None. I have nothing. I'm no Inspector Maigret or Poirot! I'm a tour guide!

If I think of the vandal, I'll never sleep. Can I vent about the day's other troubles instead?

Dom delayed our departure this morning. Late on the first day! He was rude to Nadiya too and crashed into a ditch. I overheard her telling Jordi, saying she'll run away with the troubadours. She won't. She's too sweet on Jordi, I suspect.

But what is up with Dom? He can be brusque, we know that. But I've never seen him so edgy and downright rude. Overwork? Jet lag? He had plenty of energy to race off during lunch. He and Nigel were trying to one-up each other. Lance went along because, you know, Lance. He has to get in on trouble.

The rest of us enjoyed tarts and butter cookies for dessert. Conny and Philly raved about the quality of the pastry.

They'd know. They used to run a tearoom, they said. Made all their own scones, biscuits, and baps. Too bad they're not critiquing this tour!

Things went downhill fast after lunch, literally and figuratively. The sisters were speeding down to Banyuls-sur-Mer when they got double flats. I was ready to blame the gravel road, but no. Tacks! Two tacks in their front wheel, one in the back. You know what I'm thinking. Am I getting paranoid?

I had a repair kit and fixed them up. They deemed me a "bicycle goddess." I was still glowing when we came across more trouble.

Nigel was in a ditch, along with my brand-new e-bike. The battery had caught fire. He threw it in the mud to put it out. It was still smoldering. Now you really know what I'm thinking. Sabotage?

That battery will cost a lot to replace, but not as much as Nigel's discontent. He's going to ride a road bike tomorrow so—as he so loudly said—my Frankenstein bike doesn't kill him. He made a show of selecting a red bike just like Dom's.

Speaking of Dom, he and Lance went missing for three hours. Three hours and thirteen minutes! Want to guess where they were?

Chapter 4

Day 3, Saturday Today we strike out on the open road! Our first stop is the Parc de Paulilles with its picturesque gardens, secluded beaches, and explosive history—this peaceful site was once a dynamite factory.

Blackbirds belt out a heavy-metal opera in the linden tree. Wind rushes by, as full-throated as the birds. Lance holds his head and groans.

“It’s your own fault,” Lexi chides affectionately. “Wine on top of all those beers with your dad.”

Lance manages a lopsided grin. “Dad and I were practicing our French. *Dos beers, s’il vous plait.*”

Lexi and I share eye rolls. Hers suggests Lance is as cute as a puppy chewing piano legs. Mine feigns that I wasn’t seriously stressed out when Lance and Dom went missing yesterday afternoon.

“Here.” She thrusts a bottle of VitalaGreen at Lance. “Electrolytes and vitamins.”

Lance dutifully glugs. “*Mmm, sweet salty feet.*”

He’s spot-on with those tasting notes. I tried some last night. However, I can think of worse and am not above grossing Lance out right now.

“There was a Tour de France rider in the 1950s who’d start his day with twenty egg yolks mixed with sugar,” I say. “Want me to fix you up some?”

Tour riders of yore also indulged in copious amounts of booze, red meat for breakfast, and cigarettes to open the lungs. Then there was the legendary Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx, who believed in the power of pastries. Now that I can get behind.

Lance, grimacing, hands an admirably empty bottle back to Lexi. She bounces off to the bike barn to refill at the water cooler.

I waggle a finger at Lance. “Don’t get lost today.”

“You sound like Mom,” he says.

“Like a nice woman who just wants a pleasant vacation with her family?”

“Touché,” Lance says. “See? I’m fluent.”

The blackbirds fly off, en masse and yelling like they’re late for another concert. I check my numbers—of riders and the time. It’s 8:45. Lexi

dragged Lance up extra early to shoot some video. Conny and Philly just arrived and are sorting their packs. Nigel lurks under the fig tree, recording his epic. Manfred glided by earlier. Nadiya is napping, flat out on the wall. We just need Judith and Dom.

I turn back to Lance. Now's my chance to ask. "How did Judith get you all on a vacation—abroad, no less?"

Lance smooths his hibiscus-print tourist shirt. "Paid for my ticket."

I roll my eyes. "You know what I mean. Your dad, cycling?"

A shrug. "Mom put her foot down. Dad's been overworking more than ever. Stressed at home. Mom's after him to retire, which is ridiculous. Can you imagine them at home all day or RVing? They'd kill each other. Plus, you know, Mom wanted to see you."

Aw. I'm wrapped in the warm fuzzies until Lance adds, "And she didn't want you to be alone for the anniversary."

The anniversary. The words land like punches. One year since my best friend rode off alone. "Judith remembered? She didn't say when she booked."

Lance scoffs, but offense edges his words. "You think you're the only one who cared about Gem?"

"No," I stammer. "No, of course not. I didn't mean . . ."

"'Cause I'm like ten of Gem's ex-boyfriends in one here," Lance says, slipping back to joshing mode.

I know he cares. Gem and Lance dated on and off since high school and always stayed friends in between. But I thought that Lance would do that Lance thing: hide his pain, hold it inside.

It's like he can read my mind. "I almost passed on this trip. I mean, I want to remember Gem, but on a *family vacation*? Plus Dad's really been on my case lately."

Lexi emerges from the barn with three fresh bottles of pond froth.

"I figured Lex would enjoy it too," Lance says. "Major boyfriend points—an exercise vacation is Lexi's *thing*." Then he elbows me. "'Course I had to check on you too—see what this crazy bike infatuation is all about."

Lexi rejoins us.

"What are you two talking about?" she asks, handing a bottle to Lance. "You looked so serious."

Lance swerves away from the serious part—Gem and the anniversary. "I was apologizing to Sadie for going AWOL yesterday."

Oh, was he now? Funny how I never heard “sorry.” “Should I accept this apology?” I ask Lexi. “Did you?”

She smiles and stretches a limber arm. “Eventually. He did properly suffer.”

Lance rubs his temples. “Dad griped about how that guide of yours led him into a ditch, Sadie. The bar had only rugby on TV. In French!”

“Nadiya didn’t—” I start.

“I know,” Lance says, holding up a palm. “It was his own fault. Want the irony? He then got after me about responsibility. *It’s time—own up to your mistakes. Man up. Grow up. Blah, blah, blah, responsibility.*”

Lexi rubs his shoulder and murmurs sympathetically.

I guess she’s already heard all this.

Lance huffs. “It’s like he wanted to rehash every screwup I’ve ever made. That time I got suspended. Every ding to his precious cars. *You know what you did, son.*”

“You did drown his convertible in front of, what, four dozen witnesses?” Lexi winks at me.

“We were seventeen!” Lance protests.

Lexi and I share another eye roll, this time united in our sentiment.

“That’s your excuse?” I tease, remembering the night. Lance picked Gem and me up in Dom’s shiny red convertible for a party out at a lake. Bored with raucous guys and flirty girls, Gem and I doubled up in a one-person kayak, from which we had a moonlit view of the convertible’s slow-motion dive, rolling down an embankment when the football team leaned on it too hard.

Lance grins. “That was the parking brake’s fault. Anyway, there wasn’t a mark on the car. Unlike, apparently, his current baby. He parks at the country club. What’s he expect? Some golf-cart granny sideswipes his grill, and he wants *me* to apologize?”

Lexi squeezes his elbow. “Well, it looks like you get a reprieve this morning, babe.”

I follow her gaze. Déjà vu. Judith strides up the cobbled lane. Alone.

* * *

My tour group and Nadiya have left without me. I’m off to deal with a man who refuses to have fun. Of course I must stop for a croissant. I step

inside my favorite bakery and breathe in buttery, sugary, fresh-baked aromatherapy. The baker, Madame Pinot, smiles at me knowingly.

“Bonjour, Madame Greene,” she says, smoothing her immaculate white apron. “The winds this morning, they put the nerves on edge, do they not?”

Not only the winds. We chat about the forecast and an unsettling chance of high gusts. Madame asks about my route.

“Beautiful, but too many kilometers for me.” She puffs her cheeks before exhaling in a gust. “Your riders are *très en-thousiastes*. Such early risers too. You keep bakers’ hours.”

I was up at five in the morning to check the grounds, the barn, and the route out of town. No vandalism that I could see. I don’t dare feel smug. That was my mistake yesterday.

Madame glances to the wall, where a clock marks the time in pastries. Half past profiterole o’clock. Then she gasps. “But why are *you* here, Madame? You usually leave at nine, *non*? Tell me there is not more trouble!”

“No, no,” I rush to assure her. “Just a tardy guest. A man who doesn’t know how to vacation.”

“*Inconceivable*,” says Madame, who takes the entire month of August off, along with commendable (but lamentable for me) breaks for Easter, Christmas, New Year’s, saints’ days, Sundays, Mondays, and randomly whenever she wants.

“Inconceivable,” I agree and request a fortifying *pain au chocolat* and two croissants for the road. I might as well set a high goal for the day. Out in the fresh French air, maybe Dom will try one.

If not? Still a win. I’ll have two croissants.

* * *

I wipe a smudge of melty chocolate on my bike shorts (chocolate: yet another reason to wear dark Spandex) as I step inside the Hôtel Topaze.

The Topaze gleams in art deco glitz. Polished brass. Swirly pink marble. Flashes of blue from its namesake mineral. I pass by potted palms and a marble woman forever pouring water into a burbling fountain. My sneakers squeak on the way to reception and Madame Laurent, the hotel’s owner.

I’ll confess, Madame intimidates me. Whenever she sees me, she assumes one of two looks. One, like she’s on the verge of a sneeze brought

on by an allergy to me. Two, an icy stare that might freeze me into a fountain statue.

Yet Nadiya thinks Madame Laurent is all sunshine and helpfulness. Madame dropped by our impromptu troubadour party last night too. I spotted her chatting with Bernard by the bike barn. Also pointing to my pretty string lights and scowling as if I'd hung rotten mackerel from the beams.

I wave—too enthusiastically—and issue an overly cheery *bonjour*.

Madame's eyes drop to a mountain of luggage piled by her desk.

My luggage. Not mine personally, but my responsibility. Once everyone (Dom!) is checked out, Jordi will collect the bags and transport them to tonight's hotel.

I issue a slew of apologies and accompanying gestures of dismay. In my time in France, I've developed a theory. Namely, it's impossible to go overboard on mimed emotions. I puff my cheeks, hold up my palms, and ruffle my lips on a heavy exhale.

Madame Laurent is unmoved.

Why does she dislike me? I've wondered if it's my cycling attire. Once she informed me that fashion is a common courtesy, its opposite an affront to elegance.

Is it because I'm a foreigner? But she apparently adores Nadiya and Bea. Perhaps she dislikes Americans? Our oversized voices and luggage?

Or is it me as the new owner of Oui Cycle?

One of Madame's maids told me—in strictest confidence—that Madame's son made a bid for Oui Cycle. I asked Bea, but she'd only say that my application shone above all others.

"Jordi will be by soon to remove the luggage," I say, flashing an anxiety smile so bright Madame lowers her eyelids.

I'll apologize to Jordi too, but he'll wave it off. Jordi is a rugby player. Apparently, that means any hardship qualifies as training. Regardless, I do encourage my guests to pack light. Less to pack and potentially misplace, I tell them. Manfred brought a single sleek carry-on—he also matches his luggage. Nigel has two small tweed cases. Conny and Philly brought extra bags for their further travels to Greece. I'm storing them. The Appletons and Lexi, however . . .

Judith and Lexi must have gone shopping at Designer Cargo Containers-R-Us. Their massive hard-shell cases bulge at the zippers. Smaller versions

cluster round like a litter.

“There will be more,” Madame says. “Monsieur lingers in his suite.”

A weary sigh escapes me, desultory and filled with defeat.

In this, Madame delights. Smiling, clasping her hands, she urges me upstairs to a room number I already know. I paid extra for Dom and Judith to get a suite with a sea view.

I knock.

“No room service,” Dom grumbles. Then, seeming to remember he’s in France. “No, “No, *merci.*”

That’s my line. No mercy, Dom! You’ll enjoy today!

I tap again. “Dom? It’s Sadie.”

More grumbling before the door whips open. Any hope that Dom is ready to ride spins away. He wears striped pajamas, a fluffy bathrobe, and a sour expression. A suitcase lies open on the bed. Heavy drapes cover the glass doors and sea view.

“Good,” he says. “You can help. There’s a problem with the Ortiz account. You remember the Ortiz account?”

I do, of course. A sour taste rises in my throat. That’s the report I was working on last year while Gemma cycled off alone.

Anger pushes past the sorrow. At myself but also at Dom. Didn’t he learn anything from that day?

I step around him, march across the room, and whip open the curtains.

He squints. When he speaks, it’s overenunciated and slow, as if I might have forgotten English along with Appleton Financial. “The Ortiz account, Sadie. Our main account.” He turns the screen toward me. “What do you make of this?”

I think of Nadiya’s tactic. I could unplug the laptop. Toss it off the balcony? That would be littering and surely against the rules of tour-guide good conduct.

Plus I am curious. I cross the room and lean in to read. The email came in at 4:46 this morning from Vanessa-Ortiz1967—Vanessa, the all-business half of a husband-and-wife global food-science conglomeration. It’s short and terse. Irregularities are mentioned but unspecified. Rarely does anyone reach out to report irregular amounts of joy and contentment. I see why Dom’s worried.

Behind me, Dom paces.

The closing stresses that Vanessa wants to deal with Dom and only Dom.

So he can't delegate. He also can't call, at least not right now. "It's the middle of her night," I remind him. "She doesn't like to be woken up." Better to wake a hibernating mama grizzly. I learned this the hard way by once calling her before nine a.m.

Dom continues to pace. I hope no one's trying to sleep in the room below.

"You can call from the hotel in Collioure," I say. "They'll have Wi-Fi there, and it will be a decent hour when we arrive."

A huff.

"You could ride in the van to Collioure," I offer.

He snorts. "And let that pompous little Englishman think he got the better of me? Ridiculous mustache."

Competition can have its advantages.

"You'll feel better after a ride," I promise. "I'll just wait downstairs, and we can go tog—"

"No!" Dom holds up a palm. "I don't need another babysitter. I'm a grown man. I can ride a bike and follow your navigator. I need some time to think. Alone."

Field generals must pick their battles. So must tour guides. I don't like the idea of Dom riding alone, but I understand. After Gem's death, solo rides were my preferred therapy.

Down in the lobby, I shake off a chill I attribute to Madame Laurent's icy gaze. Dom will be fine, I assure myself. All he has to do is follow the directions.

Chapter 5

Day 3, Saturday Our literal high point today is Cap Béar, with its stunning views and historic lighthouse. Take time to explore the cape, but if you're afraid of heights, don't look down!

Three hours and several minutes later, the world sways beneath me. We're lunching on *L'Insubmersible III*. A yacht, according to its owner. A stretch, I think. *L'Insubmersible III* started life as a fishing vessel. A trap door groans under my feet, the entrance to a hold that used to teem with hauls of mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and sea bass.

I can still smell their ghostly fishy presence. Or maybe that's the anchovies, a star of our lunch and the region. Manfred and the sisters are in anchovy heaven. I'm overjoyed to have everyone—*almost* everyone—contained in one place.

I caught up with my group at our first big stop, a former dynamite factory repurposed as a nature reserve and museum. Nadiya's nerves looked blown to pieces. I soon saw why. For such a small group, they managed to scatter every which way and disappear in seconds.

I decide to blame the restless wind.

A gust bangs into our boat. Lexi sucks in a breath.

"Sorry," she says. "I don't have a good sea stomach."

"I got the cure, babe," says Lance. This sounds good-boyfriend solicitous until he grabs a prawn the size of a teenage lobster—eyes, antennae, and loads of legs—and waggles it in her direction.

Maybe it actually does help. Lexi perks up to give him an affectionate punch. "I'm glad we're inside and moored," she says as the boat rocks.

Usually, my groups dine on the deck while sailing along the sea cliffs. Today's wind would blow paella from our forks. The captain seated us below deck around a roulette table covered by plexiglass and a red-and-gold Catalan tablecloth. Nautical décor, thick as barnacles, clings to whitewashed walls. There are conch shells as big as bike seats, glass fishing floats wrapped in nets, spears, hooks, and a taxidermy swordfish aimed ominously at Nigel.

“Moored,” Nigel repeats dryly. “Indeed.”

Philly covers her mouth and whispers something to Conny. They shoot pointed looks and snickers toward the swordfish.

Nigel rakes a serving spoon over the paella to sieve off more than his share of the seafood and sausage. “Lunch aboard a boat going nowhere. We may as well dine at a real restaurant. On land.”

“Aye, mateys, I’ll set sail whenever you’re ready.” This is our captain, Maeve O’Donovan. She has wiry white hair, sun-leathered skin, and hails from Ireland. She’s also a long-time friend of Bea, a longer-time expat, and—I’m not making this up—goes around with a parrot on her shoulder.

The parrot is gray with red-ringed eyes and a penchant for cursing, which it’s doing now in German.

“*Prost*,” says Manfred, raising his glass of mineral water to the bird.

Judith puts down her fork and knife with a clatter. “We can’t leave. We’re waiting for Dom.”

Nigel’s mustache waggles his displeasure.

“And waiting for the winds to die down,” I add. Nigel can’t blame me or Dom for Mother Nature. Well, he could . . . “It’s no fun eating in a gale,” I add.

“Sounds invigorating,” says Manfred. “There is no such thing as inclement weather. Only the poorly prepared in dress and mentality.”

The sisters robustly agree. They and Manfred have formed a little gang of the well-prepared, weather-hardy, and anchovy-loving.

The boat pitches. Lexi gives another nervous giggle and grips her VitalaGreen like it’s a life raft.

“The *tramuntana*,” Captain Maeve intones. “That’s what the Catalans call this wind. A mountain wind. Fierce. You know what they say about it?”

“Can’t be good,” Philly says merrily.

“Ill wind?” suggests Conny. “Is it cursed?”

“Aye!” crows Maeve. “This is the wind that drives men and horses mad.”

“No worries for us then,” Conny declares. “Lady cyclists should be safe.”

Lexi gives a nervous giggle.

Maeve and the parrot cackle. “Not to worry, ye of Sans-Souci. Nothing sinks the *Insubmersible III*.”

“What happened to *Insubmersibles I* and *II*, pray tell?” asks Nigel.

That’s actually a good question.

Our captain guffaws, winks, and leaves it ominously at that. Then she launches into sea tales: temptresses luring sailors to their deaths, fabled cities under the depths, rough seas sending men and wine barrels overboard.

“We’ve seen it all,” she says, “but we haven’t lost anyone yet.”

At that, my stomach lurches.

I lean toward Judith. “I’m going out to find Dom.”

“No,” Judith says, and I think I feel her foot stomp. Either that or ghost fish are slapping beneath my sneakers. “I spent too much of my ride today doubling back to look for Don. If work is more important to him, so be it. Sit and enjoy your lunch, Sadie.”

I won’t enjoy it if I keep worrying about Dom. He should be here by now. I push back my seat and wobble to my feet.

“Leaving so soon?” Nigel asks with a smirk.

I plaster on my brightest smile. “Just going to, ah, check on a few things.”

“Leaving us to bob in place?” Nigel asks. “Weren’t we promised thrilling seabirds and cliffs?”

He lands disdain on “thrilling,” but Philly and Conny perk up.

“We do adore seabirds,” Philly says.

She must if she’s siding with Nigel.

“Their nests,” Conny chimes in eagerly. “On the cliffs?”

“The winds,” I counter.

“A wee breeze,” says Maeve. “Those birds will be staying put on their nests if they know what’s good for ’em.”

Delighted chirping from the sisters. A “fine weather” affirmation from Manfred.

“Okay,” I relent, after more assurances from Maeve. They will be entertained and—best of all—contained. I’ll find Dom, get him a quick bakery lunch, and we’ll all ride on together.

“Anyone want to come on land?” I ask. “Judith? Lexi? Port-Vendres has some lovely streets and shops.”

Judith remains firm. “I want to look at birds. We should *all* see these birds.”

Lexi nods weakly. “Unless you need help, Sadie?”

I’m tempted to say I do and save her from her stick-by-your-man seasick devotion. She’s gripping Lance’s elbow, though, suggesting I’d have to pry her away.

Back on land, I spot Nadiya on a bench down the pier. She volunteered to look out for Dom, but I think she mostly wanted some time on her own. She's sharing bakery pizza slices with a throng of gulls and pigeons.

I unlock my bike from the rack filled with our rides. Worry prickles, and I scan the seafront. Would the vandal follow us here, to a busy pier?

A fog horn vibrates through my chest. A motor chugs.

Nadiya waves to the *Insubmersible*.

"Your Mr. Appleton missed lunch," she observes when I reach her. "It is a good lesson."

"We need to find him," I say.

Nadiya sighs. "He left the hotel at 10:47. Madame Laurent called Jordi, who called me. He should be here. Can he not follow directions?"

Can isn't the question. *Will he?*

Years ago, when I was about ten, Judith found out that I'd never left Illinois and invited me on an Appleton family vacation to Wisconsin. Dom was looking at lakeside cottages as potential investment properties. I recall circling a lake—and a tempting frozen custard shop—four times seeking a FOR SALE BY OWNER cabin that turned out to be on another lake. Dom refused to ask for directions or the name of a major water body.

I mentally kick myself. I should have hidden outside his hotel and followed him.

"Can you search the longer route?" I ask Nadiya. Each day, I offer extra miles for serious riders. Lexi did that route today. She'd lost track of Lance and thought he might be out there. Of course he was somewhere on a wrong route.

Nadiya smiles, rightfully understanding that the French Riviera will freeze over before Dom Appleton chooses the long way.

We ride the first few blocks together, then Nadiya turns off, heading for hilly vineyards. I channel frustrations and worries into leg power. I'm gulping air by the time I reach the headlands. The cape—Cap Béar—is high and open, punctuated by a landmark lighthouse in pink stone. I cycle toward its red cap and stop at the low surrounding wall, leaning on it for balance as the wind howls through my helmet vents.

No Dom. Did I honestly expect him to be here sightseeing? No, of course not. Okay, maybe a little. Because if he's not here, where is he? If he did check the map, he'd see that the lighthouse is an out-and-back diversion. He

could be on the main road now, cresting the hill and on his way to an empty dock.

I wish I could call him. Then I realize I can call someone who will read maps. Jordi, my tech-guy/mechanic answers on the first ring with a cheery *allô*.

My manners fly away. “Jordi! Can you trace an individual navigation device?”

Yes, if he pairs the device number with the correct bike, but only if the device is turned on and there is reception.

And on Jordi goes, merging into a favorite topic: digital privacy.

A bit ironic, given that Jordi is a former—*oh, I dearly hope former*—hacker, a Robin Hood of code known for pranking hypocritical corporations.

“Sorry, but you can try to locate it?” I interrupt. “If the device is on? I need to find Dom Appleton.”

A huff as gusty as the wind. “*Oui*. If *you* want to find him.”

“I do,” I assure him. Jordi snorts. Keys clack. He’s typing an epic, like Nigel and his notes or an airline check-in agent.

A family tromps up a nearby trail from the sea. Parents pushing against the wind. Two little boys, battling with invisible swords.

Jordi returns to my ear. “You’re at the lighthouse? He is there.”

“No.” I look around again. Boys with swords. Gulls riding currents like rollercoasters. No Dom.

More typing. “North, then. Just a little.”

I put the phone on speaker, snap it into the holster on my handlebars, and pedal slowly. Behind me, the two boys scream.

“He’s not here,” I insist.

“The navigator is,” Jordi says. “Did it fall off?”

If the wind weren’t so strong, I’d release a handle and smack my forehead. Of course! That would explain everything. Why Dom isn’t here. Also why he didn’t show up for the boat.

If he lost—or tossed—the navigator, he’d be free of all nagging directions. He’s probably sniffed out another café or bar. I picture him critiquing the fries while Nadiya and I are out scouring the hills and headlands.

I thank Jordi and am about to hang up when I notice a dirt path leading down the cliffs. Vaguely, I remember a historical site down there. A bunker,

I think, from one war or another. It's not on my itinerary because it's long been under restoration and, well, it's an old bunker. Not exactly a sparking-joy stop.

As I approach, I spot fresh tracks, thin like a bike's wheel.

Not Dom, surely. A thrill-seeker mountain biker. A kid.

Dread swirls. I tell myself it's that maddening wind.

"Jordi? Will you stay on the line?" I want someone with me.

The path is steep, curled against the edge of the cliff. I dismount, stuff the phone in a side pocket of my shorts, and lay my bike on wind-whipped grasses. A few yards down, two posts stand to either side of the path. Beyond, the track turns so sharply it disappears.

The tire marks don't turn. They dig into the gravel, aimed at a shrub with pretty white flowers and a broken branch. The branch dangles like a wounded wing.

I focus on the flowers. Rounded petals, like a kid would draw. Frilly yellow centers. A bee buzzing around, legs gold-dusted in pollen.

I should know the name of these flowers.

A good tour guide knows the names of all the flowers and the birds and insects and . . .

I step off the path, telling myself there will be nothing to see. Two steps in, the land gives way just beyond. I inch as close as I dare and peer down. Far below, rocks jut up as if reaching for me, dark with the waves.

A ghostly voice floats in. Jordi. It sounds like he's yelling in a whisper.

You are there! On top of it!

I squeeze my eyes closed and will the scene to change when I open them again.

It doesn't.

Jordi's right. I am above the navigator. Some forty feet down, a red bike lies crumpled on the rocks. Other colors flash: off-white Spandex with bits of neon-green, red, and pale skin.

Dom!

I stumble back, the world swirling. *A good guide doesn't lose a rider!*

Chapter 6

Day 3, Saturday Rosy cliffs and turquoise waters. We're exploring the Côte de Vermillion today. The Vermilion Coast takes its name from the reddish hue of the rocks.

Nadiya crests the horizon, sprinting, bike swinging beneath her. Sirens blare. Flashing blue lights gain on her fast.

I urge Nadiya on, like she's the breakout rider in a final sprint, the underdog.

The air vibrates with horns. Nadiya veers off the road. I cringe and push myself unsteadily to my feet. I'd been sitting—slumped more like it—on prickly grass. My hands are scuffed with grit and splinters.

I tried to reach Dom. For all I know, he could be clinging to life.

I tried to scootch down a rocky jut to the cliff. Pebbles tumbled, taunting that I could be next. I backtracked then, jogging down the path. Hairpins led to the bunker, away from Dom. From there I could see that Dom was cut off. He'd landed on his own private island.

I couldn't reach him.

I gave up.

I left Dom behind. Left him to ride on his own—like Gem—and now he's—

I squeeze my eyes closed, but it's like the vandal has spraypainted my eyelids. *Mort.*

“Madame?” A male voice, gentle but urgent in a single word.

My eyes pop open. A policeman stands before me. A gendarme, I correct, reading the large blue letters printed across the nearby hatchback.

Law enforcement in France is another category of knowledge I've yet to study. I know the basics. Villages and towns have a municipal force. The Police Nationale patrol large cities. The gendarmes, a branch of the military, handle crimes in rural areas.

I won't figure out the intricacies today. I take in the man, instead. He's a little older than me, I think. Late thirties? I'm bad with guessing ages between toddlerhood and one hundred. His hair is dark, the sides close

cropped with waves on top. Stubble on his chin. He wears a linen jacket, parchment pale, over a white t-shirt and jeans, both well fitted. The linen looks perfectly pressed. Immaculate, unlike my dusty and scuffed Spandex.

That makes me think of Dom with his wet shoes and muddy shorts yesterday. I grip my knees and try to remember how to breathe.

“Are you wounded?” Eyes, deep brown, melty with concern, land on my scuffed palms.

“*Non, non.*” I straighten but tuck my palms to my stomach.

He rattles off an introduction in rapid French. He’s Jacques Laurent from *Brigade de Recherches de la Gendarmerie des Pyrénées-Orientales* and . . .

My French is pretty good these days—for the subjects I know and most care about. Those include cycling, regional landmarks, small talk, cute animals, pastry, food in general, weather, bike parts, major cycling races, and roof-tile repair (regrettably). But police formalities?

Bafflement has me mutely shaking my head.

“Madame? Miss?” he says gently. “You speak English, I think?”

“Yes. *Oui.*” I wonder what gave me away as a foreigner. For once, I wasn’t smiling too brightly, which Bea tells me is a dead giveaway.

He starts over in an accent that gives me a double take. British, like he’s just popped over on a double-decker bus. “I am Jacques Laurent from the investigation unit for this department. I was driving over the Cape when I heard a call for assistance.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“The call came from the cycling shop in Sans-Souci,” he prompts. “That would be *Oui Cycle*? You are the proprietress, Ms. Greene?”

“Yes, I’m Sadie Greene.” Am I that famous? Infamous? Sadie Greene, trouble-bringer of Sans-Souci?

Then I work out that Jordi must have provided details. He summoned emergency services so I could scramble around cliffs, failing to reach Dom. Also because he likely realized my French was faltering under duress.

“A rider has been gravely wounded?” Laurent asks.

Hope flickers. Gravely doesn’t necessarily mean in the grave. “We need to get down to him quickly,” I say. “I couldn’t reach him, but—”

“Medics are rushing to him now,” Laurent says, with a calmness that grates like road grit on skin. “I am here to understand what happened. You can greatly help with that.”

“But I don’t know!” I blurt, palms to the sky. “I don’t know *how* this happened.”

I left him, that’s how. I left him to ride alone.

More soothing prompts have me telling him about Dom leaving late and then not appearing for lunch.

“He must have turned the wrong way.” I point to the wounded shrub and start toward it. “I can show you—”

A hand blocks me.

“Madame Greene, *s’il vous plait*, wait here.”

I’m okay with that order. I don’t want that sight again, not that I’ll ever be able to forget. Belatedly, I call cautions after Detective Laurent about the cliff, the sea, falling, the obvious.

He peers down, hands on his hips, jacket flapping like a South of France superhero.

I brace myself on the rusted gatepost. If only a gate had been here. A crash into metal would have hurt, but less than sailing off a cliff.

I grip my knees again. That’s when I see the shimmer of silver. A wire twines through the wind-toughened grass. I trace it to my post, then spot another glint. A similar wire curls to the opposite post. Stretched tight, they’d probably just meet in the middle of the path. Like they’ve been snipped in half.

Or broken by a speeding front wheel?

The detective returns with a headshake that tells me too much. “The paramedics have reached the gentleman. I am very sorry to report that he is deceased.”

I reach for the post, miss, and nearly topple.

Laurent murmurs apologies and repeats his claim that I can be a great help. *Right!*

“Tell me about the gentleman,” he says. “He was an experienced cyclist?”

“No. He rated himself as skilled on my information sheets, but I don’t think he’s ridden much.” I’ve had guests who haven’t ridden a bike since grade school. They were fine.

He turns to face the wind. “A day like this, the winds, the cliffs. For an inexperienced cyclist, a vacationer seeing only fun and beautiful vistas, it can become a tragic mix. A terrible accident, *peut-être?*”

Perhaps?

Perhaps not.

For one, Dom was far from a giddy vacationer.

And two. “Look,” I say, pointing to the first wire and then the other.

Laurent frowns for long moments. He takes in the shrub, the tracks, the trajectory. When he turns back to me, those melty brown eyes have hardened.

“You have had troubles recently,” he says. Not a question.

I wonder how he knows. He’s a serious-crimes detective. My vandalism reports wouldn’t have reached his office. Then, however, I picture gossip pinballing from neighbor to neighbor, from shopkeepers to strangers, to other villages, to the edge of the department and beyond. I nod.

“Your tour guest, you say he was cycling on his own?”

I study my shoes. I can’t meet his eyes. What will I see there? Judgment? Pity? Disgust?

“He had work he wanted to finish,” I say, hating the pleading in my voice. “We provide maps and navigation devices. He said . . .” I cut myself off. “I should have been with him.”

His tone softens. “No, no, Madame. You mustn’t blame yourself. This path was part of your route?”

“No! My route took us to the lighthouse, but we stayed on the main road. He shouldn’t have been here.”

“Clearly,” Laurent says somberly. “And these wires you have found? What do you know about them?”

I issue what is probably my best French shrug ever. Pure incomprehension, laced with horror.

He reacts as if I’ve said volumes. Cheeks puff. Lips ruffle. Shoulders slump.

“What do *you* think?” I ask. He’s the professional. I want him to declare an accident. The wind did it! Only the wind is to blame!

“I think,” he says slowly. “That I must cancel my lunch with the *commissaire*.”

Great, now I’m also responsible for ruining a Frenchman’s important-sounding lunch.

“And then,” he says, “I shall call for the *techniciens d’investigation criminelle*, and we shall reconstruct the chain of events. Do not fear, Madame, we will uncover the truth.”

That should fill me with comfort. Crime techs on the case! A detective boldly forgoing lunch!

Fear and dread press in. Out at sea, a foghorn sounds. The *Insubmersible*? I think I see her blue hull peeking around the cliffs. Small figures clump on the deck. Waving? Do they see me, the flashing lights?

I raise my arm halfway, then spot a more likely target of their greetings. A motorboat, small and black, skips across the water at high speed.

I lower my hand. My stomach and heart are already somewhere near my socks. How will I tell Judith and Lance?

Dom was here because of me. I am responsible for his death.

Chapter 7

Day 3, Saturday Are you rested up from our lunchtime cruise? Let's push on to one of the loveliest towns on the coast, Collioure, where you'll have time to stroll the art-filled streets before dinner.

When I told Dom I was moving to France, he railed and roared. I was being financially irresponsible, he said. I was throwing away my education, my career. I was acting like an "overly emotional woman."

That sure sparked some emotion!

Judith invited me to tea at their country club. Tea at the club with Judith marked many of my milestones. The flute solo in middle school, which I managed to survive without fainting (although not without missing notes and tripping on a step). High school graduation with honors (and that dubious title of Most Predictable). The August Gem and I returned from France after our gap year. I knew what I *wanted* to do—stay in France, explore Europe, work like mad doing anything (but preferably cycling) so I could stay.

Practicality waited for me, along with a scholarship to a good university right next door in Chicago. The scholarship covered full tuition but no room and board, so I was back in my old bedroom in the carriage house, commuting. Judith was more pleased than Mom. *How wonderful! So practical, and I'll have you close!*

Then another graduation. More honors and a degree. My first "real" job (cycle touring didn't count to anyone but Gem and me), junior actuary at Appleton Financial.

So I figured Judith was taking me out to celebrate my big life decision with Darjeeling and tiny dry cakes.

I was wrong. Not about the tea or the club's baking, but about the tenor. Judith wanted to sway my decision.

Her opener: "You'll be so far from home."

There was no refuting geography. France and Elm Park are far apart. But we live in an age of planes, email, Facebook, and Skype. Postcards. Good old-fashioned hand-printed letters! *Not that I've written any.*

“You’ll be all alone,” Judith persisted, squeezing my hands over cake crumbs. “You won’t have your family, your friends, your childhood home and bedroom.”

She was misty-eyed.

I reminded her that Mom moved out of my childhood carriage house as soon as I graduated college. Downsizing, Mom called it. Moving in with a boyfriend, more accurately. Lance then took over the cottage tucked behind his parents’ garage. He’d transformed my former bedroom to a Chicago sports shrine until Lexi started staying over and redecorated.

As for friends . . . “I’ll make new friends,” I assured Judith.

Now, sitting on the back bumper of a French ambulance, I realize how lax I’ve been on the friend front. No, I’ve been busy. I have a new business and home to establish. I’ve been having fun exploring, getting my bearings, and—

I cut off my own excuses. It’s more than that. Making friends isn’t that easy, especially as an adult. Or is it just me?

Lexi’s probably attracted dozens, if not thousands, of local followers in her few days here. If she were sitting on this bumper, all she’d have to do was post a sad selfie and people would rush to her with hugs and, I don’t know, soothing smoothies? She has more friends than she literally knows.

I had Gem. Why seek out others when you have the best? For the millionth/billionth time, I wish she was here.

Nadiya has been on the phone since Laurent left. First she called Jordi. She walked a few yards away to make that call, speaking in fast, hushed French. Then she rang Bea and Bernard. Now she’s speaking in animated and suitably emotional Ukrainian.

She handed me the phone when Bea was on the line. Bea cooed sympathy. Bernard, in the background, repeated the sentiment in French.

I appreciated that. I *needed* that! But it also made me ache. Other than my Oui Cycle coworkers—friends, I like to think—I have no one to call here.

Judith was right!

The worst of it is, I want to call Judith. I can’t, and not just because Dom cheaped out on an international phone plan. I’m a coward, afraid of breaking this most awful news.

A coward with a temporary reprieve. Laurent asked us to refrain from contacting the tour group. Not until he has organized the various

responders, he said, and made a few calls.

Everyone has someone to call.

I could call Mom!

I chase away the idea as soon as it forms. That would not be a comfort. Mom will be getting ready for work. What's-his-name will be there. Okay, his name is Myron S. Cox, Jr.—Myron Cox the Second, Mom insists, as if “the second” will turn out better than “junior.”

She'll be running late, rushing around the house looking for stuff. Keys, never where they should be. A matching shoe. The summer sweater she must have put down *somewhere*.

Me, calling from a world away, won't help her day or mine.

Also I know what she'd be thinking, if not saying.

Sadie, what have I told you about bothering the Appletons?

Answer: Don't bother the Appletons.

When I was young, Mom worried I spent too much time at their house.

Sadie, don't bother Lance. It's his bike/birthday/pool/ party, not yours. Sadie, stop bothering Judith. I know she invited you, but you shouldn't be such a bother.

I've more than bothered them now.

I add Mom to my list of people I dread to tell.

Nadiya hangs up and tucks her phone in a stretchy pocket on her thigh.

“Sorry,” she says. “I needed to tell someone. Several someones. Are you okay?”

“I don't know,” I say honestly.

“Yeah,” she says, swinging her legs. “Me too. That was my sister, the one in Poland. She says we must be careful around foreign police. Me, even you. We think we know France, but do we know French police? No.”

Nadiya tips up her water bottle, finishing off the last drop. Our ambulance is parked at an angle, a door half-closed against the wind. I feel like we're not facing anything straight on—the sea, the lighthouse, the wind, the other emergency vehicles, the truth.

Nadiya's right, though. Beyond novels and TV, I know next to nothing about French law enforcement. My only police experience before this was in Elm Park. The officer investigating Gem's death offered hope as the best course of action.

Let's hope a witness comes forward. Let's hope someone tries to fix a bumper with a scuff of that custom palm-green paint on it. Let's hope a

repair shop remembers to call us.

Yeah, that worked out.

I try to summon optimism. “Detective Laurent seems dedicated.”

“But *why* does he think this is his business?” Nadiya says. “A man has an accident on a bike. It is terrible, awful, but it happens. Perhaps this detective sees crime everywhere. Crime is in—how do you say? In his nature?”

Like seeing vandals is in my nature.

“Have you ever been down that path?” I ask, bobbing my head backward toward the fatal track.

“Of course,” Nadiya says, like I’ve asked if she’s ever visited a bakery or breathed air.

I wait for more.

She shrugs. “Last year. We did a special tour for people who like military things.” Her lip curls. “Too many wars and forts and plaques for destroyed villages and no plaques anywhere for the refugees and the dead.”

She takes her phone back out. “I can show you.” The wind whips her hair. She scrapes back blue tips and brings up YouTube.

“There is video,” she says. “A tour member made video of everything. You want to see the fort?”

“The turnoff to the path, if possible,” I say.

Nadiya jabs *PLAY*. There on the little screen is Bea in ankle-length leggings and a floaty tunic that brushes her knees. I lean close but can hear only amplified wind.

“She’s saying to be careful,” Nadiya says. “It was windy like today. We made everyone walk their bikes.”

I reach over, press *PAUSE*, and study the background. Different flowers, thicker clouds, rusty posts. No gate, no wire.

Nadiya says, “I like today’s stops better. Or I did before this. The lighthouse, gardens . . . More croissants.”

I remember my two croissants, probably smooshed in my side pack when I laid down my bike.

I never got Dom to try a real French croissant.

Nadiya breaks into my spiraling self-recriminations. “Why do you ask? What does it matter if *I* have been there?”

I tell her about the wire and voice my speculations. “Maybe it was already broken? But what if it wasn’t? What if it was there to hurt a cyclist or runner?”

This is *not* me being paranoid. This is scary reality. All cyclists have heard or read or experienced horror stories of tripwires on trails and bike paths laced with broken glass. Some people, for reasons I cannot fathom, have it in for cyclists.

“No,” says Nadiya resolutely. “No, it cannot be the vandal. Is that what you are thinking, Sadie?”

I admit that I am.

“No, no, most definitely no,” insists Nadiya. “How would the vandal know that Mr. Appleton would take that route?” Her tone is forceful, like she’s bullying me and the universe to agree. Herself too.

I am more than happy to. “Yes, good point.”

Nadiya then contradicts herself. “Unless Mr. Appleton, he enjoyed conflict? Military conflict? Someone who knows him could guess he would seek out the fort?”

Dom enjoyed a good argument. I’d never noticed him interested in history, military or otherwise.

Nadiya’s phone chirps. She answers in Ukrainian, and the conversation immediately swings into high-paced emotion.

I take in our view: a sliver of the lighthouse; a gendarme van, the back doors open. Four men in uniform—navy pants, sea-blue shirts, triangular caps—are sharing a steaming beverage from a thermos.

Espresso, I guess, based on the mini cups. They’re big men, belts encrusted with weapons. With the tiny cups, it looks like they’re playing dollhouse tea.

I take in this image until Laurent crests the trail up from the beach. He’s followed by a clutch of EMTs and a woman in a wetsuit.

Wetsuit Woman veers off toward the espresso bar.

Nadiya ends her call, and we slide off the end of the ambulance, doing the inelegant cyclist tug-down of Spandex.

“*Mesdames*,” Laurent says. “I apologize for making you wait. If you have more minutes, I have a few more questions.”

I have a question for him first. “We want to help, but when can we tell his family? His wife and son should know, and Nadiya and I need to get them and the rest of the group to Collioure.”

It seems wrong to ride on, but we have to stay *somewhere*. Rooms are booked and waiting. So is an exceedingly charming tourist town, which will hopefully distract the others.

“Ah, you have anticipated my questions,” Laurent says, smoothly navigating around an answer. “I will need to speak with your riders and employees. First, the family. Where are they?”

Nadiya holds a hand to her brow and squints out toward shimmery scales of restless waves.

“On a yacht,” I say. “They’re viewing cliffs and nesting birds.” I’m about to say they’re all safe and sound—more an assurance to myself than Laurent—when my phone rings.

The Caller ID flashes a little round image of a red-eyed bird.

“It’s the captain,” I say.

Maeve must have spotted the emergency activity. “What do I tell her?” I stare at the phone as if it might reach out and bite. “Judith should hear first.”

“Please, allow me to handle that,” Laurent says. “For now, see why Madame Captain is calling.” He nods to the phone, prompting me to answer.

I’m all for continued denial. I take a breath. “*Bonjour, Captain Ma—*”

Maeve is already talking. “Now, Sadie, I don’t want you to worry. All is grand here. Grand as can be.”

“What?” I ask. “Grand? No, Maeve.”

Laurent has edged so close I can smell his aftershave and soap. I think I recognize the soap brand, Le Petit Marseillais, a supermarket staple I carried home like a treasure from my first visit to France. I kept a bar in my sweater drawer and felt nostalgic.

Maeve is speaking again, rollicking jolly, but her words don’t match her tone. “Aye, your lad is absolutely fine. Right as rain. Right as the wind, I should say.” A laugh and a cackle.

“He’s not.” I shrug to a perplexed Laurent. Nadiya has wandered closer to the cliff edge. I want to yank her back. “He’s . . .”

Laurent waggles a finger.

I go for vague. “Captain, things are not okay.”

Cursing sounds on her end. From the parrot but also in posh British English. Nigel?

My stomach does a high dive. “Maeve, what’s happened?”

“Since you ask, there was a wee wave and some of your lassies tripped and a gentleman toppled a bit overboard.”

“A bit?” Wasn’t overboard pretty definite? Like pregnancy or death?

“You’re right. Your man took a full dunk in our fine sea, but good fortune abounds on the *Insubmersible III*! The commandos from Collioure were out running training exercises. They were more than happy to rescue him. Good luck. Good lads! A win for all, I’d say. Your ladies were entertained, and your gentleman who went overboard—well, he had been grouching on that he wanted excitement.”

I recall the speed boat bumping across the water. I mentally fill it with an elite team of special ops marines. The commandos are part of the navy. They have a base in Collioure, amid the cute shops selling art and anchovy trinkets. There’s a multilingual information sign down by the water describing their many duties, one of which is HARASSING THE ENEMY. I always think of Gem when I read that. She’d get a giggle.

Maeve is chuckling about wetsuits and biceps. “Luck of the Irish, them being out when they were!”

Some luck. I bet I know who fell overboard, because that would be just my luck.

“It was Mr. Fox?” I ask.

Background curses confirm before Maeve can. The parrot joins in, cackling, “Rubbish, rubbish!”

Captain Maeve cackles too. “He’s a feisty chap, all right. Taught the bird some new words. We’re keeping him warm. I bundled him in one of my spare woolly jumpers. I’ll have ’em all back to Port-Vendres in a flash, all right and ready to ride.”

My temple thumps. I have to tell her. But Laurent said not to. He’s holding out a hand. I thrust my phone into it.

He and Maeve switch to French. I hear “accident,” “unfortunate,” “tragic,” and “please permit me to break the news, if you will.” Captain Maeve is to return to the harbor, where Laurent will be waiting.

I’ll be there too, although I dread it more than anything.

Cyclist's log

Day 3 recap

Gem, I'll say it straight out. Dom is dead. I won't tell you the details. You shouldn't have that image. I wish I didn't.

We're at the hotel in Collioure. It all seems unreal, to be in such a beautiful place on an awful day. I'm up in my room on the third floor. I have a sliver view of the famous tower on the bay.

The windows were open, but I just had to get up and shut them. There are no screens, so moths were coming in. Too much happy noise as well. Laughter, chatting, a guitarist down on the beach. It's 10:47. The sun set around 9:30, so it seems early and late all at once.

We got here in time for dinner. Look at me, holding to the schedule! We had to eat, right? The world spins, life goes on. That's what I find most shocking.

The police kept us on the boat for almost two hours, not that we were any help. No one saw Dom after he picked up his bike from Jordi. Everyone was everywhere except somewhere helpful.

Captain Maeve offered up liquid consolation: rum, whiskey, Banyuls, tea, rousquilles. The last are cookies. Do you know them? I don't think we had them in Provence. They look like little powdered donuts, except they're biscuity, sugar-glazed, and flavored with anise or lemon. Why am I going on about cookies, you ask? Because Judith did too. She raved. She demanded the recipe. This right after Detective Laurent informed her of Dom's death.

She's in shock. That's the only explanation. I made sure the detective understood that.

But Dom . . . I have no explanation for what happened. Why was he on that path? Furiously pedaling? I'm sure he

was angry. At me, work, that email, cycling up gorgeous hills.

Judith's down in the hotel bar right now. See what I mean about shock? She refused my offer to sit with her. Said I look exhausted. True. I know the meaning of shattered now.

I can't help thinking that Judith doesn't want me there. Does she blame me? I blame me!

I'm staying up anyway. I asked the bartender to text me if she's still there at closing.

I worry about Lance too. He swiped away tears when he heard, and you know Lance—that's big emotion. He all-out wept for you, Gem. I never told you that.

The detective was gentle and sympathetic. Still, I found some of his questions pretty shocking.

Madame Appleton, was your husband depressed? Did he ever express thoughts of harming himself?

Dom, hurt himself? I'm afraid I laughed. Not a jolly laugh. An anxiety outburst. Judith slapped my back, thinking I was choking.

Laurent repeated the question. Judith thought for a long time, then said, "He has been awfully stressed."

Then Laurent: Madame, did anyone have ill feelings toward your husband?

Judith issued a strenuous no.

I agreed. No need to mention minor tour squabbles.

Lance guffawed at both questions, so I didn't feel as bad about my snort.

Dom would never hurt himself. I'm sure of that. No one would have reason to hurt him, either.

Unless . . .

Gem, hear me out. What if Dom drew the unlucky straw? The unlucky bike. I mean, what if the vandal struck a random bike? Manufactured a wheel malfunction? Frayed the brakes?

A serious crime squad will be looking for "my" vandal now. I'm not doubting their talents, but what if they can't figure out what happened? Where would that leave Judith?

Rhetorical question. I know where. Limbo. Purgatory. Like me, always wondering what happened to you.

I can't let that happen!

Yeah, listen to me. I said that about you, Gem. I rode all around Elm Park, street by street, looking for green paint on bumpers. A lot of good that did.

I shouldn't go down that path. I'll tell you about Nigel instead. He fell off the boat! On any other tour day, that would be my headlining disaster.

Conny (the clumsy twin, she claims) tripped on a rope. She stumbled into Philly (the off-balance one). They both crashed into Nigel, who was leaning too far over the railing and hogging the binoculars.

He wasn't even looking at nesting birds, they say. He was aiming too low, then too high.

What was he looking at, if not birds?

Sunbathers, the sisters speculated—he's the type to ogle. But with the winds we had today? Hardly a day to sit out on the sand.

Here's the good news: he wasn't hurt. He sure can't say he was bored! Oh, and does this count as good luck or bad? The commandos who rescued him also fished out his notebook. He writes in waterproof ink, he made sure to tell me. All his critical notes will be preserved.

It hardly matters. This tour is sunk. I know it's beyond awful to think when Dom is dead, but I'm afraid Oui Cycle could be too.

STAGE 2—

Pedaling the Plains

Chapter 8

Day 4, Sunday Today we bid the coast adieu and strike out for the sunbaked plains. A tapestry of vineyards, orchards, and medieval hilltop villages awaits us.

Today was meant to be different. Stage Two, when we head inland, to medieval castles, bustling markets, and stunning mountain backdrops.

The revised Stage Two? I'm a rider down, and I don't know what I'll do.

At the first fuzzy light of dawn, I give up on sleep. Well, what little sleep I had. My tossing and turning could have been measured in miles. When I did drift off, my dreams plunged into nightmares.

I splash my face with water, don "civilian" clothes (as in not Spandex), and avoid the pitchy antique elevator in favor of the back stairs. An eerie silence blankets the hotel, like everyone tiptoed out last night without telling me. On the ground floor, the soft clink of pans lets me know I'm not alone. I am too early for breakfast, though, and—alas—for coffee. A velvet cord ropes off the bar, which transforms to the breakfast lounge during the morning. I peek in, half expecting to find Judith back in her seat.

She let me escort her upstairs last night, after I joined her and an exceedingly patient bartender for a nightcap. We sipped sweet Banyuls wine. I paid her tab, forced a gauche American-hefty tip on the bartender, and hauled her off to bed.

She still hadn't cried, she said.

Shock, I told her, and she agreed it certainly was that.

I make my way through an empty lobby. Outside, the sky blushes pink, and the ocean is glassy calm. Bakeries will open soon, but most don't offer coffee. Here is an expat woe that gets me absolutely no sympathy from friends back home.

Oh, so you have to go to a bakery and then a café when you're visiting adorable French villages? Tiniest violins, Sadie!

Yeah, yeah, poor me, but this morning, I desperately need caffeine clarity.

The beach, the sunrise, and the soft sea will have to do. By mid-morning, the beach will throng with tourists. Even now, I'm not alone. A sea kayaker

cuts through the still water. An elderly man in a straw hat walks a creaky poodle. A figure sits cross-legged on the sand, palms up. It's Lexi. I can tell by her ponytail and perfect posture.

I hate to interrupt, but I want to know how Lance is doing. She might have a better idea than he does.

I call her name from a few yards out. She rises like a slow-motion ballerina straight from her cross-legged sit.

"Oh, Sadie," she says, and folds me into a hug. "How are you?"

I murmur a fib that I'm okay, but tears prickle. It's nice of her to ask. Lexi and I have always been friendly. Are we actual friends? I think so. We met in fifth grade, when she was the new girl and Gem and I invited her to our lunch table. She quickly soared past us on the social ladder. As adults, we chat whenever we run into each other, which is usually via Lance. We always *say* we'll do coffee, but it took France to get us together.

When she releases me, we're both swiping away tears, fibbing that we're okay.

"And Lance?" I ask. "How's he holding up?"

Lexi shakes her head sadly. "I made him go out for a walk with me last night. It was so peaceful after dark. We sat by the water and watched the reflections. It's beautiful, you know."

Oh, I know. I'd imagined Lance and Lexi enjoying a romantic evening here.

She etches a curve in the sand with her sandal. "Lance feels bad about how he and Dom left things. I told him, *Dom encouraged you to be your best because he loved you so much!* I saw that. Living in the cottage, I've seen what a great father Dom is!" She scuffs out her sand drawing. "Was."

"He was," I agree. "He taught Lance and me to ride bikes." I leave out the detail of hiring a high-schooler to do the teaching.

Lexi sniffs. "That's so Dom!"

Yep. It was. Both the life-changing and the outsourcing. Tears threaten to erupt. "I'll find you a place to stay," I blurt. "A rental house or hotel, whatever works better for you all."

Lexi frowns. Understandable. I've already made a mess of this.

"But aren't we going to a kind of chateau today?" Her ponytail bobs in confusion.

I almost correct her. A *mas*, a country home. Except surely Judith and Lance won't want to keep going.

I say, “I mean, a quiet place for Lance and Judith. You too. They’ll need to make arrangements for, ah, Dom to get home. There will be paperwork. I’ll help.”

Lexi has no idea of the horrors of French bureaucracy and paperwork. Entire books have been written on the power of French notaries alone.

“Oh,” Lexi says. “Right. Okay.”

I forge on. “The detective told me that he’d probably have more questions. He mentioned the medical examiner too. As I told Judith last night, I’m sure they’ll work as quickly as they can.”

I’m not sure, but an American visitor dying in a prime tourist locale will probably spur action.

Her brow wrinkles. “But it was a horrible accident, right? What more does the detective want to know?”

I shake my head as if baffled, but I’m thinking about the wire.

Suddenly Lexi gasps. “That threatening sign!” She grabs my left funny bone and squeezes. “The one Lance read to us about death. You don’t think it has anything to do with this, do you?”

“I hope not,” I say. *Oh, I hope not.* If this is the vandal, then I am to blame for guiding my riders into danger.

Lexi’s gaze shifts over my shoulder. She raises her arm and waves.

I turn. There is our hotel, creamy yellow with sage green shutters, separated from the beach by a little plaza and palm trees. Judith stands on its steps in another floaty and floral tunic. She wouldn’t have packed a black mourning suit for a summer trip to southern France.

We start toward each other and meet in the little plaza. Stretchy capris poke from below Judith’s hemline. She’s wearing dark sunglasses and holding a bike helmet. The glasses make sense for a bright morning and sorrow-strained eyes. But a helmet?

“Judith,” I say, hoping my tone conveys warmth, sorrow, rallying affirmations.

“Sadie, darling!” She sweeps me into a hug.

I hug her back gratefully, breathing in her familiar perfume. She hasn’t banished me! *Yet.*

“I’m glad I found you,” Judith says. “I need my bicycle. The young man at reception said no one was allowed to touch the bikes except you. At least, I think that’s what he tried to tell me. Lots of finger wagging and *non, non,*

non, Madame. I tried to tell him it was fine, that I'm a friend of the owner. He didn't understand."

I'm not sure I understand. "Ah, why do you want your bike?"

Judith gives me a there-there look, as if *she's* pitying *me*. "Sadie, dear, you of anyone should understand. Isn't that why you're here in France? Cycling away from your pain?"

Running away is how she'd put it once, trying to sway my decision.

Judith nods as if that's settled and continues briskly. "My mother always said, hard work chases away the devil. I won't sit here and let sorrow take up residence on my shoulder. I need to *do* something."

Her glasses are so dark, I can't read her eyes, but her voice is firm.

Lexi eagerly agrees. "You're so right, Judith! I teach a dance aerobics class for PTSD survivors. Our motto is *hip-hop that pain away*." She reaches for Judith's hand. "Judith, you should join when we get back home."

Right, I'm thinking. I can see Judith bicycling. That might count as "work" on a bicycling tour. But dancing? No way.

Then I register that Lexi and Judith are hugging and agreeing that Judith will also join Lexi for jazzercise and tai chi.

"Fabulous for regaining balance," Lexi says solemnly. "Like cycling."

That's my cue. "I'll go get your bike."

"Oh!" Lexi raises her hand like an eager student. "Can I get mine too? Judith, may I join you?"

Judith says she would adore that. An unseemly feeling washes over me. Envy that Lexi and Judith are so close? That Lexi can be Judith's daughter next door now? I'm the one who left, I remind myself. I'm also grateful. Lexi will keep a close eye on Judith, and a ride will do them both good.

I jog back to the hotel, where the desk clerk looks like a kid playing dress-up in a too-big suit. He puffs his chest and squares his shoulders.

"Madame Greene! As you warned us. Someone came for your bikes. I turned her away!" He makes a shooing gesture.

Okay, maybe I went a bit extreme with my *no one touches the bikes* directive. I praise him as if he's slain a dragon. He blushes and hands me the key to the storage room down the hall. It holds the usual hotel odds and ends: window fans, vats of cleaning supplies, two suitcases encased in protective film. I catch myself thinking that sarcophagus wrapping is an extreme antitheft measure.

I extract Judith's yellow e-bike and Lexi's road bike in olive green, like Gem's old ride. Lexi's pink helmet dangles from her handlebars. Squeezed between them is a bike that makes my stomach flip. A road bike painted in red somewhere between hibiscus, maraschino cherry, and blood.

Dom's bike!

Except, I realize, this is Nigel's, the look-alike he selected to show up Dom.

A thought buzzes like a bee in a bike helmet. What if Nigel took Dom's bike yesterday morning, either by accident or petty competition? He and Dom are around the same height, meaning similar seat positions. Dom also ditched his cleated shoes, and Jordi reinstalled regular flat pedals on his bike. Summation: the bikes would have looked alike.

I don't know whether the bike Dom was riding was vandalized, but if it was . . . Nigel, a caustic critic, would have more enemies than a businessman far from home.

Or was it random sabotage? If Nigel had taken the vandalized bike, he might have broken down on a flat, safe road. He would have been irritated, nothing more. Could a single bike choice have made the difference between vexation and death?

And what if I'd waited? What if I'd checked the bikes?

I sigh and wheel out the bikes, ignoring the sting of the pedal nipping at my calves.

What ifs will drive you mad. I know this all too well. They'll spin forever and never change a thing.

Chapter 9

Day 4, Sunday Sunrise in Collioure brings out the town's glorious colors. Fun fact: to maintain the local color, residents are prohibited from painting their homes in white or black.

After Lexi and Judith ride off, I ponder my next move. Immediately, there's no question. I need a croissant.

Back in Illinois, I'd take any croissant, even the gas station variety, pale as the dodgy chicken salad inside. Now I can be picky. I have criteria. A lot of criteria. Also a spreadsheet, where I rate bakeries and their goodies on a one-to-ten scale. Very basically, there are four features I look for in a croissant.

- (1) Golden exterior. I want my croissant as tanned as a sunworshipper from Saint-Tropez.
- (2) Layers and lots of them. Did you know, a standard number is 649 layers? There's an equation to calculate rolls and folds, but in croissants, I'm not beholden to the numbers. Bliss can be had at less than five hundred layers. I've done the research.
- (3) Contrast. My ideal croissant has shatteringly crispy outer layers and a soft, squashy inner core.
- (4) Butter. Butter provides the steamy magic that makes croissants puff. It's also why I'll never have Lexi-level abs.

I let my feet carry me to my favorite bakery, tucked on a small back street. The exterior boasts Victorian framing painted in red and gold. The interior is barely large enough for two, and the baker can be crusty until he gets to know you. I'm pleased to say that I now get two *bonjours*, and he remembers my name.

As I get close, I pick up speed, like a Tour de France rider in sight of the finish line. I'm practically lunging for the brass door handle, when I realize a hand is already on it.

"*Bonjour*, Madame Greene."

I startle and stall in the doorway. Detective Jacques Laurent wears another immaculate linen jacket, this time in dusky morning blue. He's clean shaven, which brings out a dimple. He's smiling, which has me noticing his enviable eyelashes.

Questions snowball to the point where I'm speechless. What has he found out? Why is he here, casually holding bakery doors when he should be out investigating Dom's death and my vandal? What should I do today? Cycle on? Lock my riders in the hotel? Could I grab him by the lapels and beg him to reassure me?

I remember to say *bonjour*.

He does too, this time to an elderly woman. She's approaching at speed, buffered with two straw bags and a tapping cane.

I step back and issue greetings. Laurent urges her to please, go ahead. As if she wouldn't have barreled through, and rightfully so.

"I am glad to see you," Laurent says, when she and the bags have made it in. "I was planning to visit your hotel at an appropriate hour. There have been developments."

My insides flip. "Good or bad developments?"

We have time for him to tell me, I figure. At Madame's first step inside, she and the baker began dramatizing the weather like a French soap opera.

Yesterday's wind stole my husband's undergarments, Monsieur! Directly under my gaze!

I comprehend, Madame. The wind devastated my nerves. Did you hear? It pushed an American off the cliffs.

Ah, Monsieur, oui, oui. But was that the wind or malice? I heard that the police . . .

Laurent gently draws the door closed. He turns the question back on me. "How would *you* judge good or bad?"

I'm glad he asked! I have an answer for this. "You've captured the vandal, and my friend died of natural causes, which is terribly tragic but no one is at fault."

The detective dips his head. "I am afraid I shall disappoint on numerous fronts, Madame."

"It was a long shot," I admit.

"I do have some information," he says. "Something to show you, as well. First, you should enjoy your *petit déjeuner*. Something sweet, I might suggest?"

To sweeten a blow? He looks somber. The dimple has disappeared. I fear worse news, but at least I have deduced something good. The detective has excellent taste in bakeries.

* * *

We take crinkly bakery bags to a bench overlooking the sea and a local landmark, the Chapel of St. Vincent of Collioure. Vincent's saintly deeds are unclear. His punishments are recalled in gory detail, and now that I think of them, I might have preferred a bench with a nice view of dumpsters and seagull droppings. As a final torment Vincent was tossed from high cliffs onto the rocks.

Too close, Vincent, too close.

I tear off the crackly end of my croissant and turn to a comforting mental exercise. Tour-guide trivia. Vincent saw this bay in the fourth century A.D.—mind boggling in my American sense of time. His chapel, built on a tiny island now connected by a promenade, dates from 1600-something. Also pretty unfathomable.

Beside me, Laurent makes efficient work of his croissant. His fingers bear nary a shard. His white t-shirt is miraculously unblemished by butter.

Meanwhile, a pigeon eyes my blouse like it's a buffet.

I attempt to discreetly brush myself off. The pigeon—and suddenly ten of his best frenemies—make way too big a deal about this.

“Your tour guests,” Laurent says, politely ignoring my swarm of birds. “They are fine this morning?”

My stomach tightens.

I don't know. I didn't tuck them in or do a bed check. And what about Judith and Lexi, pedaling off to . . . where? I don't know. I doubt they do either. My knee jiggles. I suddenly want to get back to the hotel and check.

Laurent must sense my anxiety. He produces a phone from an inner pocket. “Before I show you what I have, I should ask. Do you know how investigations proceed in France?”

“Do Inspector Maigret novels count?”

“Everything counts,” he says.

As a tallier of details, such words could melt my heart. I remind myself of Nadiya's cautions. I am a foreigner in a foreign police system.

“Basically,” Laurent says, “My job is to reconstruct the events, to write up who was where, who did what, what type of crime was committed. Then I hand the report to a judge, and it is out of my hands.”

I latch onto a key phrase. “So is there a crime?”

He gazes out to sea. Gulls soar. A sailor sets out in a traditional wooden fishing boat painted in bright primary colors—blue, red, and yellow.

The boat is almost beyond the bay when Laurent answers. “Perhaps.”

Perhaps is not a satisfying answer. I wriggle on the bench, even more eager to get back to the hotel and my guests.

Laurent taps his phone and hands it to me. “Does this look familiar?”

The phone is warm from his pocket. The screen shows a map.

“*Oui*,” I say. Then, “*Non!*”

I squint close. There’s the lighthouse, marked like a chess-piece rook. There’s our route, outlined in sea blue, shaped like the loopy end of a needle.

But something is wrong. Very wrong.

“Why is this track highlighted,” I ask. “Did you add it?” It’s the deadly spur Dom went down.

“Not me, Madame,” he says, all mild innocence, palms raised.

“Who did, then?”

“That is another key question.”

A seagull blurs into the sun. The rowboat is getting smaller and smaller. I grasp for clarity. “*Where* did you get this?”

He smiles. “A crumb of good fortune amid the bad. Monsieur Appleton’s navigation device survived the crash. It is a key to understanding, I think.”

But it’s not. It’s incomprehensible. I trace my route with my finger. “This is where he should have been. This road, up and back.”

“How do you explain the deviation?”

I don’t. “Maybe Dom tried to reroute?”

A raised eyebrow. “Why would he do that?”

Because he wanted a faster way down? I shudder, causing croissant-crumbs of hope among the pigeons.

“By mistake?” I suggest. “You can alter the route if you press the screen long enough and move it with your finger.” I picture Dom, jabbing and stabbing at the device. “But our guests know that. We teach them how to use the navigators.”

Laurent gazes out to sea.

I clench the last of my croissant and swallow hard. “Or maybe someone else changed it.” *Someone like the vandal!* “Once a route is programmed in, it’s easy to add a stop or new destination on the device.”

“Is it now?” Laurent says, his eyes are intent and back on me. “Let’s imagine someone else was involved. Your employees have access to your equipment. How did they feel about Monsieur Appleton?”

My employees? That’s not the direction I was heading. “Dom was a client, a guest. My colleagues barely knew him.” Except to know that they didn’t like him.

“I see.” Laurent’s tone suggests he knows otherwise. “They had no unpleasant interactions? No hostilities?”

Yep, he knows. “Dom could be assertive,” I say carefully. “Opinionated, sometimes gruff. My employees are professionals who politely deal with all kinds of guests.”

“And your employee, Jordi Vollant?” Laurent asks. “Tell me about him.”

“Jordi is a fabulous mechanic. He’s honest and devoted and—”

“He inputs the daily routes into your navigation devices?”

I know where this is heading. “Yes, he does, but—”

“You are aware he has a criminal record? Tampering with computers? Digital mischief?”

“*Ethical* hacking,” I specify, a distinction unlikely to impress an officer of the law. “He doesn’t do that anymore. He’s devoted to Oui Cycle. Bea and Bernard gave him a second chance.”

Laurent makes an ambiguous *mmm* sound.

“You do know I have a vandal problem?” I ask. “If you’re reconstructing crimes, you need to start there.” To get him started, I launch into a recitation of the most recent troubles: flat tires, tacks, Nigel’s smoking battery, and the paint-slashed sign leading out of town.

“I’m keeping a record,” I add. “A detailed spreadsheet. I can send it to you.”

“I would very much like to see your spreadsheet,” Laurent says.

Has a man ever told me that? Maybe Al, my ex, but that would have been purely accounting-related.

“Why?” Laurent asks, and for a moment, I think he’s talking about my spreadsheet. “Why is a saboteur targeting you and your bikes?”

Good question! “I have no idea.”

“You have enemies?”

I snort. “No! I only moved here nine months ago. I run a tiny business that’s about happiness and personal challenge. Honestly, I’m not interesting enough to have enemies.”

I wasn’t fishing for a compliment, far from it. That’s simply the truth. I’m Sadie Greene, Most Predictable (with one big move-to-France exception).

“I doubt that,” Laurent says.

Was that a wink?

It’s gone in a flash. His expression hardens. “This vandal, how would they—or anyone—access your navigators? Where do you keep them?”

Around us, the town is waking up. A small dog charges seabirds twice his size. The birds cackle and taunt. A shopkeeper rolls up the metal grate of his newsstand. In the little plaza, a group of men are gathering for pétanque, the local version of bocce ball.

I explain that my guests turn in their navigators each night. “Otherwise, they’re too easy to forget. Jordi programs in the route the night before and clips them on the bikes, ready to go the next morning.”

He nods. “And the devices regrettably do not record rides? For their personal information? For confirming where they were?”

I shake my head. Regrettably not. I’ve thought about investing in modern, high-tech navigators, but part of the joy of Oui Cycle is being offline, detaching.

I register that Laurent is asking me about the night before last. “Could the alleged vandal have accessed your bikes then?”

I might quibble with “alleged,” but my mind is playing back the troubadour party in jerky frames. A lot of people stopped by. Friends, neighbors, troubadours, strangers. Was the vandal among them?

“We had a small spontaneous gathering the other night,” I admit. “Friends of the original owners stopped by. I opened up the bike barn. A lot of people were there.”

At the time it had seemed right, showing off the barn and its pretty lights.

Laurent crosses his legs and extends an arm across the back of the bench, opposite me.

He turns to me and smiles. “I know. I was among your guests.”

“You were?” The words fall out, rudely incredulous. But really, what!?

His deep brown eyes twinkle. “Briefly.” He pats a hand to his linen-covered heart. “I see I failed to make an impression.”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” I’m surprised. And why is he mentioning this only now? I suppose a potential crime scene wouldn’t have been the place for social pleasantries, but he might have found a way. *Hey, nice to see you. I was at your party the other night.*

“You were with your guests,” he says. “Down by your cottage, arranging a modem, I think? I regret I failed to introduce myself. I believe I would have met Monsieur Appleton as well?”

“Dom wanted to use my Wi-Fi,” I say shakily. I’d perched my modem in the window so he’d have optimal coverage. I was a bit put out, to be honest. Okay, a lot put out. I didn’t even tell my journal because I knew I’d stew. The only reason Dom attended was because he hoped I had better Wi-Fi than his hotel.

“Why were *you* there?” I ask and immediately rephrase. “I’m glad you were! Do you live Sans-Souci?”

He names a street and cottage behind the gendarmerie barracks on the edge of town. The barracks itself is a grim two-story cement structure with rust stains on its cement walls and bars on the lower windows. I’ve ridden by it many times and thought *Why? Why build something so aggressively ugly in such a pretty place? In any place?*

I can’t picture a cottage, but I hope it’s nicer. It has to be.

He’s saying, “Boisterous evening. Singing, dancing. Very pleasant.”

Suddenly it occurs to me. Was he there as a curious neighbor or a cop?

“Did someone call in a complaint? The music stopped by 10:30.”

“Not that I know of. I was there because . . .” He recrosses his legs. “Well, I’d say I was dragged to your party, but that would sound rude.”

“It would,” I agree. “Who dragged you?” More importantly, why did he need to be dragged?

And is he blushing, or is that the sunrise?

“My mother,” he says, almost mumbling. “You know her, I believe. Nicole Laurent from the Hôtel Topaze.”

Madame Laurent? I knew they shared a surname, but Laurent is quite common. Not to the level of Browns, Jones, and Martinezes in the US, or Martin in France, but I wouldn’t have assumed that every Laurent was related. I sure wouldn’t have thought of him as Madame Laurent’s son.

I blatantly stare at the detective, looking for similarities in looks or demeanor. All I see is a key difference: he has smile lines. She has frown lines, especially when I’m around.

Those aren't the lines that matter most. "Do you have any brothers?" I ask.

"Non. Why?"

"Just wondering." If he's Madame's only son, he must have made the bid for Oui Cycle. A chill brushes by my neck. A son's failed bid may explain why Madame has it in for me. What if Detective Laurent does too and is better at hiding it?

Chapter 10

Day 4, Sunday Collioure’s beauty inspired the Fauvists—the wild beasts. Not to worry. We’re in no danger. Fauvism was an avant-garde painting movement of vivid colors and undisguised brushstrokes. Among the founders was Henri Matisse, who visited these streets in 1905.

Newspaper rustles amid the soft morning bustle of the hotel lobby. Nadiya peers over *L’Indépendant* as the front doors swing shut on a departing Detective Laurent.

If Nadiya thought the newspaper made her invisible, she’s mistaken. I spotted her earlier, when I left Laurent in the storage room and went out to retrieve coffees. The bike shorts were a giveaway, as was her blue and gold hair. Also the young desk clerk shooting her covert glances as blatant as a bullhorn.

Nadiya rises from a red velvet club chair tucked behind a potted fern.

“What did the policeman want?” she demands. “You were in there too long.”

Sun streams through the tall windows. At the front desk, British tourists interrogate the clerk about train schedules. A young family studies a rack of tourism literature. A woman stares at her phone. Everyone *seems* occupied, but I don’t want to be overheard. Hotels, villages, and bike tours—they’re all rife with gossip.

I nod toward the doors. Nadiya follows me out. We pick a bench under two palm trees and dust away tree pollen and bakery crumbs. I tell her about the mystery of Dom’s navigation map.

“Impossible!” Nadiya declares, so loudly a pigeon flies off, cooing complaints.

Yet possible. “I saw it,” I assure her. “The detective had a photo on his phone.”

Under our bench, hard-packed soil is worn to divots. Nadiya scuffs her sneakers along the tracks. “How do we know the policeman did not make the map himself? To trick you.”

I picture Laurent's kind eyes. Then I remind myself he's Madame Laurent's son, and that he hasn't revealed he's quite familiar with my business. He must be, if he made a bid for it. I'm the one who bid blind from an ocean away.

Nadiya is telling me that lying happens all the time on *Law and Order*. "It's the same anywhere. The police deceive you."

"*Law and Order* isn't real," I point out. Then I allow myself a grin and a memory. "I learned French from that show. My friend and I worked in Provence for a year. Real French TV was too difficult, so we watched *Law and Order* in dubbed French."

Detective Stabler speaking French is one of the world's true delights. We also watched a lot of *Baywatch*. In theory I should be well prepared for French water rescues and crime.

In reality? A tour member is dead. Another was plucked from the sea but not by me.

Nadiya smiles. "I studied English that way too. We watched satellite TV at university." She sings the show's theme music. *Dum, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum.* "Also *Inspector Morse*."

"We're all set, then," I say.

She snorts. "All set to solve the crime."

My turn to scoff, although secretly I'm thinking maybe we could. I allow myself a heroic fantasy of the Oui Cycle crew taking down the culprit. Wrapping him up in bike chains? Rolling him to the gendarmerie?

If only . . . I return to reality and our too-real crime. "I don't think Laurent's lying. Not about the navigator, at least. Dom turned down that path. There's no logical explanation for him to do so otherwise. Laurent checked the other navigators to see if they showed the correct route. That's what we were doing just now."

"And?" Nadiya says. "They are all correct? Jordi would make sure of that. He is a trustworthy man. No one can say otherwise."

Laurent could, but I'm with Nadiya on this. I trust Jordi. "Those routes were fine," I confirm.

"Voilà," Nadiya says in a case-closed tone. "Mr. Appleton must have changed the map himself. If he jabbed the screen in irritation, he could even do it by accident."

"That was my first thought," I agree. "Or that he was looking for another route."

I think again of Laurent's question to Judith. *Did your husband ever express thoughts of harming himself?* I know people hide silent pain. I also know Dom. I can't see him leaving an ambiguous map as his final message. Dom liked to rant.

"So?" Nadiya demands. "The policeman is suspicious. What does this mean for us? Does he make us stop?"

Part of me wishes Laurent had issued such an order. *Don't go anywhere, Madame. You must stay in Collioure and vacation by the sea.* "He said to be careful. To leave the investigating to him."

Pfft! Nadiya scares another pigeon. "That is what the television cops say. I bet he watches *Law and Order* too. He is repeating their lines. But also it is good. We are always careful. If we are extra careful, we can go on?"

I stare at the sea, so peaceful today it's almost mocking. "The detective will likely have more questions. He wants everyone to stay available, in France and in this department if possible."

Nadiya clasps her hands. "Even better news. Our tour stays in the Department of the Pyrénées-Orientales, the most beautiful department in all of France. See? Finally, we have good luck." She shifts as if to leave. "Let us join the group for breakfast. You will tell them. They will want to ride, power away all the bad feelings."

"Nadiya," I say gently but firmly. "I was undecided this morning. I thought maybe I could send part of the group on, with you guiding. That I would stay with my American friends. But now, with the discovery of the map, we can't go on. Not if there's any chance our guests—or my crew—are in danger."

She stares at me, stony faced.

I rattle on. "I'm sorry. Really, truly sorry. We'll tell everyone at breakfast. We can arrange accommodations and full refunds and—"

"This is what you want, Sadie?" Nadiya interrupts. She jiggles her knees. Our bench vibrates, or maybe that's my nerves. "Giving up? Hiding where—in hotels? In Sans-Souci with the vandal?"

I want to know what happened to Dom. I want to catch who did this. If it's the vandal, I want to ride on and show them they didn't win, that we're not scared.

Except I am scared. I'm scared for my riders and my crew. I'm scared for Oui Cycle.

"It's not at all what I want," I admit. "But I don't see any other way."

* * *

Nadiya and I return to the hotel in grim silence. The manager intercepts us.

“I’ve seated your group on the patio,” she says. She has hair the color of a radioactive carrot and the demeanor of a nervous sparrow. The hair I’d noticed before. The nerves seem fresh.

“Lovely weather,” she enthuses. “Perfect for you to ride along.”

As in pack up our ill fortune and sad vibes and get out of her hotel? I can’t say I blame her.

“So refreshing to start the day outdoors,” she continues. “I thought you’d enjoy the privacy out here.” She leaves Nadiya and me at the glass doors to a back patio. I pause, hoping to get a read on the group’s mood. The prettiness of the patio distracts me. Why haven’t we gotten to enjoy this before?

Tile mosaics decorate the stucco walls. Cast-iron bistro tables gleam in glossy sea blue, shaded by banana and palm trees like fringed umbrellas.

Nigel sits alone, espresso cup raised. His chair is angled for a view of the door and the others. As soon as he spots me, he puts down the cup and starts writing like he wants me to witness his critiquing.

Manfred, Philly, and Conny share a table under a banana tree. They’re tucking into what appears to be a French take on the full English breakfast. Squat sausages, so dark they’re nearly black. Rolled omelets. A scattering of berries. Between them are baskets of croissants, pots of jam, and two *cafetières*, which in my head I still call French presses.

The sisters wish me good day. Manfred offers a hearty *guten Morgen*.

I reciprocate and steel myself for the Appleton table. Lance, looking too tall for his dainty café chair, scrolls on his phone, eyes on the screen as if it’s his shield. Lexi picks at a bowl of fruit. Beside her Judith sits straight-backed, an untouched croissant on her plate. She beckons me to join them.

“You must be starving,” Judith says and pushes a basket of pastry my way.

“I had a croissant earlier,” I say.

Judith unknowingly utters my go-to rationale for pastry indulgence. “They’re so light and airy, though. Have another. You too, Nadiya. You’re too slender, dear.” Judith rises and pulls out two chairs.

Nadiya obediently sits.

I remain standing. After I get the words out, I can wallow in croissants. “I have something I need to tell you all,” I say and swallow hard.

“We do too,” Judith declares. There’s a murmur of assent from the group. “We’ve voted!”

“Voted?” I repeat.

“Two votes, actually,” Judith says. “One.” She holds up an index finger. Her spine is straight, her chin raised. I know this look. It’s Judith in committee-leading mode, a force to be obeyed. I lower myself to a seat beside Nadiya. I’ll let Judith have her say. She certainly deserves that.

“We need some extra time here,” Judith says. “We can’t leave Collioure yet.”

I nod solemnly. She’s going to make this easy for me. As easy as a devastating blow can be.

“I feel responsible,” Judith is saying.

I snap back to attention. “What? Responsible for what?”

She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “Everyone missed their chance to tour this charming town because, well . . .”

There’s a murmur of protest from the group. Everyone except Nigel agrees that it’s certainly not Judith’s fault. Nigel grumbles about tumbling into the sea. Conny and Philly shush him.

Judith holds up a silencing hand. “But you all would *like* to explore the town? You said so earlier. I would too.”

“We have your back, luv!” exclaims Conny. “If you want to stay, so do we.”

I’m already rehearsing how I’ll plead with the hotel manager for an extra night’s stay. She won’t like it, but I can pay extra. Double. I can promise we’ll eat out. *Maybe I could book online. The automatic system wouldn’t know it’s me.*

“Good,” says Judith. “That’s settled. We’ll stay until eleven. Noon at the latest.”

Noon? The police won’t have settled their lunching plans by noon, let alone unraveled a mystery.

“Judith—” I start to stay.

She raises another finger and her voice.

“Two,” she says. “We’re going on.”

The sisters clink teaspoons to coffee cups. Lexi pats her heart, then reaches for Judith’s hand and grips it.

“On to?” Maybe it was the delayed coffee this morning, my lack of sleep, the shock, PTSD? Her words and numbers are not adding up. Then it hits me. Judith is efficient. I bet she’s already booked their flights. I can get them to the airport, a train, a—

“On to Castle—what’s it called?” Judith waves a bothered hand.

“Castelnou,” offers Lexi with perfect pronunciation. “Is that right, Sadie?”

“Yes,” I say, “but—”

“Good,” proclaims Judith. “Then it’s settled.”

I’ve let this go too far. I stand, take a deep breath, and launch into heartfelt apologies.

“What are you saying?” Philly asks. “We’re all *sorry*. Properly grief-stricken.”

Heads bob. Nigel’s mustache twitches. I get the feeling he’s not properly sorry. He might even be enjoying this.

I try again. “Given yesterday’s tragedy, I’ve decided we must stop the tour. Oui Cycle will provide full refunds. The police request we stay available, but I can book you into accommodations anywhere in the department. Free, of course, and—”

My words are overridden by huffing in international accents.

A *pish* and a *right nonsense* from the sisters. German mutterings from Manfred. A oh-no-no-no from Lexi, and, from Nigel—the one rider who didn’t pay—a loud complaint that they’d “paid good money for this tour.”

I hadn’t wanted to spell it out, but I see I must. “Detective Laurent said that they are investigating all angles, including foul play. For your safety—”

More scoffing. I get ready to duck in case baked goods are tossed.

“Sadie,” Judith says. “You’re trying to protect us. That’s kind, but Lance and I won’t leave this country until we can take our Dom home.”

She looks to Lance.

Lexi nudges him. His lips press into a grim line. He gives me a shrug I read as *I can’t stop this*.

Judith says, “We *must* keep cycling. I felt so much better after Lexi and I tootled around this morning. Better than moping in that bar last night or in my room, alone. We’ve talked this through as a group and we all agree.”

More bobbing heads. Lexi thumps her heart.

Judith continues, “We don’t know what terrible circumstances led to Dom’s accident. We must hope the police can bring us answers.”

Ah, hope, I think grimly. We might be waiting a long time.

“I do know something for certain,” Judith says, eyes glassy.

“Oh, Judith,” I say, thinking she’s finally going to release her tears.

Her voice quavers. “I know what Dom would want. He’d want us to go on. We must ride on. For Dom!”

Fists bang tabletops. Cups rattle. Banana fronds quiver. A rallying cry fills the courtyard—*for Dom!*—as Nigel snaps my photo in gape-mouthed shock.

Chapter 11

Day 4, Sunday Today we set out for the rolling plains, but we'll have to ride uphill to get there. Enjoy the vineyard views as we wind our way out of Collioure.

Everyone scatters after breakfast. Conny and Philly let me know their planned itinerary, which I appreciate until they also give the reason.

“In case a killer comes after us, you'll know where to look for our bodies,” Conny said.

Philly gave me search parameters, which pretty much covered the whole town. They'd visit martyred St. Vincent's chapel, the summer palace of the kings of Mallorca, and Petit Montmartre, a stretch of stone artists' cottages trimmed in royal blue.

“We'll take photos,” Conny laughed. “That way, if you find our camera, you'll know where we've been.”

Lexi and Judith will be on foot. Lexi aims to treat Judith to “retail therapy,” namely admiring (and buying) cute French items from cute French shops.

Manfred will also fill bags and bags—with anchovies! He declares this with a giddy, guilty delight and adds that he's pleased with our plan to continue riding. “To live is to laugh at death's shovel.”

Nigel has set off on his bike to parts unspecified. I hope he isn't riding all the way to Castelnou. Although that would make for an easier day for the rest of us.

That leaves Lance. I spot him on the bench where Nadiya and I chatted earlier. He sits with his elbows on his knees, watching the beret-topped men play pétanque. Metal balls clonk. The men assess their next moves with the intensity of chess players.

“Hey,” I say, taking a seat next to him.

Lance has a granola bar. Pigeons have taken note and strut before him like beauty queens, chests out, iridescent feathers rippling. They really are gorgeous birds.

“Hey,” he replies and tosses a chunk of granola.

I tilt my head to read the packaging. English, boasting of mega amounts of protein, fiber, and vigor. Probably something Lexi packed from home. The pigeons won't know what hit them.

"You okay?" I ask.

He shrugs. Lance isn't a share-your-feelings kind of guy.

We watch the birds, and I ponder a polite way to ask. Finally, I give up and just say it. "*What Dom would have wanted?*"

Lance snorts. "We needed a laugh, right?"

We still do. Although I am privately thrilled—and utterly terrified—that everyone wants to ride on.

Lance says, "Dad didn't care about bicycling or France. Sorry, Sadie. But he was doing this for Mom and you, so why not go on? Maybe it is what he wanted."

"He was here to be with his family," I say. "For you."

Lance snorts, but then brightens. "We should do something, shouldn't we? A wake? How about we stop at a pub, raise a beer for the old man? What do you call pubs here?"

"Pub," I say. "Bar, bistro, brasserie, vin bar, club . . ."

Lance digs today's itinerary from his pocket and scans the crumpled page.

I'm touched he has it with him. He jabs a finger at a stop midday.

"Sweet! Another winery! Good job, Sadie. I see why you wanted this gig. Better than the office life. Some of us have to work the nine to five."

Was that an attempt at a laugh?

As I remember Lance's workday, it starts around the brunching hour. He then takes a coffee break, announces an early lunch, enjoys a lunch so long and leisurely he might be French, and leaves the office before five.

On the other hand, Lance handles jobs I sure wouldn't want. Hobnobbing. Business parties. Golf-course schmoozing. No wonder he's in late and leaving early.

My office thoughts turn to my ex. Dear, boring Al Weston. I wonder if he's found a new girlfriend. I wonder if he knows about Dom. Then it occurs to me.

"Deborah!" I exclaim. "Has anyone told her?"

I'm about to spring up and call Dom's assistant. Then I calculate the time. She'll be asleep, unless she's sitting by her laptop, waiting for Dom's email alarm and latest missive.

Lance snorts. “Dad’s work wife? She’ll know. She’ll have sensed a shift in the universe or set an alarm.”

“Be nice,” I say.

“Check.” He mimes a mark on the *Lance, be nice* tally. “Seriously, Mom probably sent an email. She had Lex and me help her get onto Dad’s laptop last night. Deborah’s fine. Anyway, that’s not my job.”

Maybe it is.

“Someone’s in charge of Appleton Financial,” I say gently. “Oldest son? Only child? I’d say it’s you. Unless it’s your mom?”

“Like she ever worked there?” Lance straightens. Over at the pétanque match, the would-be winning ball gets knocked out of the match.

I tell him about yesterday’s email. “From Vanessa Ortiz. She mentioned irregularities. You should check.”

He crumples the rest of the fiber bar, tossing noggin-knocking chunks at the birds. “The fact that you know about Vanessa Ortiz and I don’t just confirms it. Dad trusted you more than me.” He gives a rueful laugh. “He probably left the company to you.”

“No!” *No! I don’t want it!*

He’s still talking. “You know how I said it was Mom, putting her foot down that got him on this vacation? Sure, that’s true, but he also wanted *you* to come back to work for him. He’s been holding that over me since you left. ‘I can’t retire until I have someone responsible, accountable, reliable to take over.’ *You* quit and left the country, Sadie. I stuck with it, and I still couldn’t meet his standards.”

I look away, afraid he can read my memories. Dom, offering me Lance’s office.

“Lance,” I say, not sure what to say next. A comforting fib?

“It doesn’t matter now,” he says, rising so abruptly the birds scatter. “I’ll have to step up, won’t I? Dad’s getting what he wanted.”

* * *

My guests might think it’s no big deal to leave an hour or three later. Sure, why not? We’re on vacation!

They’re on vacation.

For me, changing a single item on the itinerary is like attempting to reach a tiny box you’ve packed at the back of a moving van. Everything has to be

moved, reshuffled, and then squeezed back in place.

I call Jordi first. He and the Oui Cycle van will follow along with us for the rest of the trip. We'll be far enough from home that returning to Sans-Souci each night wouldn't make sense for him. Plus the van is technically a support and gear van—SAG van, in tour-guide parlance. It's there to offer lifts if legs get weary or fixes if tacks attack our wheels again.

Jordi picks up with a wary *allô*.

"Hello, Jordi!" I enthuse. "We're going to be late getting out of the hotel in Collioure. Probably two or three hours delayed getting to Castelnou."

Silence, then an exhale that sounds like relief.

"Okay," he says. "Good, good. Nadiya said you were going on. I'm glad you haven't changed your mind."

I could spill my doubts and worries, but I'm supposed to be the boss. I keep up a perky front and ask him if everything's okay at home.

"All fine. All good. No worries at all."

Something about his insistence makes me suspect the opposite. "Have the police been by?"

Jordi huffs. "Last night. They tried to embarrass me after rugby practice, hinting I sabotaged Mr. Appleton's navigator. What is this ridiculousness?"

I make soothing sounds.

"Detective Laurent spoke with me this morning too," I tell him so he won't feel singled out. "He asked about the troubadour party. Did you know he was there?"

A snort. "Police are always nosing around. Myself, I was dancing and enjoying as one should."

He was dancing with Nadiya. That's more affirmation to my mind. He wouldn't miss a moment with Nadiya to mess around with Dom's navigator.

A devil plunks down on my shoulder. *Unless he thought he was defending Nadiya, getting back at Dom, playing a prank, like the cyberpranks that went too far and got him arrested.*

I chase the thought away. "Did you notice anyone poking around the bike barn?"

Jordi proudly repeats that he was dancing. A pause for a wistful sigh, then, "Yes, many people admired the barn and the bikes. I made sure everything was locked up at the end of the night. Don't let that Laurent suggest otherwise."

I murmur *of course, of course*.

Jordi is saying he has witnesses to confirm his security. “I had just locked up when the Scottish ladies asked to go inside. They misplaced a cardigan and thought it was with their paniers. Of course I obliged. Such polite ladies, and the Scots are good rugby players.”

One sister scoured their bags, Jordi reports. The other waited outside, quizzing Jordi about garden plants.

“What is this plant? What is that flower? And that one?” Jordi recounts. “I know only the geranium and the mountain gentian. Otherwise, no. Plants are not for me.”

“We can’t know it all,” I say, as much to myself as Jordi. No guide can know everything, and there will *always* be a guest interested in the very thing you have no idea about. Last tour, a guest revealed my dismal knowledge of soccer players. Another wanted to know about untranslatable offal and aqueducts.

After I hang up with Jordi, I call Detective Laurent. The number on his card connects to his office, where the reception desk picks up. He’s not in, so I have to explain the message I wish to leave. Yes, I am contacting the major crimes unit to let their detective know I’ll be bicycling.

Next I call Bea. Her voice mail answers, as cheery as she is. I leave another message, which I hope doesn’t sound too stunned or too giddy.

Then I steel myself for the cascade of rescheduling. I cancel our lunch reservation with effusive apologies, then order to-go sandwiches and other picnic snacks. Eating on the road will help claw back some lost time. I rearrange our winery tour for a later hour—also with many apologies—and let the owner of the country home know of our delayed arrival.

“We had an accident,” I say vaguely.

She assures me that she’ll be waiting with cold drinks, a hot tub, and a pool.

Oh, I yearn for that hot tub.

By the time I’ve picked up lunch and overloaded Nadiya’s and my bikes, I want to sprawl out on the beach for a four-hour nap. I’m spent, and the day hasn’t even started. I have forty-seven kilometers, a picnic, several villages, and a winery stop before we reach Castelnou.

Chapter 12

Day Four, Sunday Cycling burns a lot of energy, so be sure to pack snacks. Fun fact: Tour de France riders burn some 120,000 calories during the twenty-one-day tour. That works out to over five hundred croissants!

By noon we're ready to go. Almost.

I return to the hotel lobby to find Conny and Philly sharing a *pain au raisin*. Judith and Lexi are stacking shopping bags beside the mountain of luggage awaiting Jordi's pickup. The hotel manager—unlike Madame Laurent—looks on with undisguised delight.

Manfred arrives and adds three bags to the stack. Paper handles strain. Glass clanks.

"These bags contain pure delight," he says. "Anchovy treats, for later. Sadie, please leave word with your luggage man to handle with great and delicate care."

Anchovies in oil, packed in glass? Manfred's treasures should come with hazardous spill warnings. I acquire a sticky note from our enthusiastic manager and slap it on one of Manfred's bags. Outside, Judith is waiting by her bike, ready to ride. The others assemble—all except Lance.

"I'll get him," Lexi says. "He said something about making a phone call and disappeared." She jogs back to the hotel.

The son becomes his father, I think, as we wait a long ten minutes. When Lance emerges, he's still on the phone.

"Using the phone while cycling is a moving vehicle violation," I say, pitching my tone to joking.

He rolls his eyes. "Life's more fun when you don't follow every rule, Sadie." But he puts his phone away. Probably because he was done with the call.

Finally, we're all on our bikes and ready to ride.

"Who's ready for some hills?" I ask. "After we crest the coastal headlands, we'll turn inland for some long smooth stretches with charming villages in between."

"Looking forward to it," says Nigel.

A positive sentiment from Nigel? I sense a setup.

And, indeed . . .

“On the plains, I cannot be tossed into the sea by bumblers.” He narrows his eyes at the sisters.

They grin, as if they’re the foxes. Foxes who’ve just raided the henhouse.

Time to get moving! I ring my bike bell. Once, twice, and then we’re a chorus of cheerful *bring-brings* and *ding-dings*. Gratitude fills my lungs as I once again sing out, “Let’s ride!”

My energy surges back as we make our way out of town. Maybe it was the extra-large crème café. Or the double shot of Lexi’s *VitalaGreen*.

But it’s more than that. I feel like we’re making a statement. We’re pressing the boundaries of what’s expected. No solemn mourning for us. No hiding away behind dark veils and shuttered windows. No cowering from a criminal. My riders have chosen the restorative power of cycling.

In my mind, we’re flying down the highways.

Reality is a bit different. In reality, our escape is a thigh-burning slog up the hill that goes on forever. Seriously, forever, with enough twists and turns to quadruple infinity. We’re also moving so slowly that an ancient man with a staff and basket of grapevine cuttings on his hunched back just passed me on foot.

No matter. He was as merry as a vineyard elf and wished me a fine ride. Birds sing, a donkey greets us with a yodeling bray, and the sea makes peekaboo appearances. We’re heading for the historic village of Elne, where we’ll enjoy the picnic that has my bike handling like an overloaded barge.

A van passes me—too close, too fast—sucking me into its air vacuum. My wheels wobble. Panic makes me jerk my handlebars to the right, like a driver doing all the wrong things on ice. Adrenaline races through me. *I’m going to fall!* Not just fall, topple into speeding metal, bare skin and Spandex scraping across pavement.

The van whooshes by. My wheels bump over gravel and then, thank goodness, back onto the empty lane. Sour fear still clings to my throat. I chase it back with a sip from my water bottle and turn my thoughts to nice, meditative numbers.

I count pedal strokes in a one-two-one-two rhythm, matching mine to Conny and Philly’s up ahead. I’m bringing up the rear of our little convoy. No one will get left behind on this leg of the trip!

And there my mind goes again, sucked into the dark-thoughts vacuum.

The sisters round a bend. I hear a cry of *och!* that has me pedaling hard until I too turn the corner.

“Corker of a hill you have us on, Sadie,” Philly calls back. “How long’s it go on?”

The road winds up and up in a corkscrew twist.

“A little while longer,” I say, through gulps of air. A long while at the rate we’re going.

“Smashing!” declares Conny, and they pick up pace. “A challenge!”

I grin, which is also a good mask for a gasping-for-air grimace. Eventually, the road levels out on a lazy crest. Conny and Philly pull off for photographs. I roll up and lean my bike against an apricot tree, bejeweled in fruit.

“I’ll take your picture,” I offer. “Say cheese!”

They laugh out the names of cheeses. “Camembert, Comté, *bleu!*”

“Good to be out on the road,” Conny says, when we’ve done a round of silly selfies.

“I’m glad you wanted to keep riding,” I say. “I hope it will be therapeutic for us all.”

“That it shall,” says Philly. “You couldn’t have stopped us anyway. If you’d bailed, we were planning to keep going. We’re on a journey. This tour is our first step to the new us. You’re doing important work here, Sadie.”

I could get misty-eyed at that. I tell myself it’s sweat and sunblock and rub a finger under my eyes.

“To think we almost changed our reservations when we heard Oui Cycle was under foreign management,” Philly says. She shakes her head at me, the foreign management.

So much for misty-eyed, except now I do have sunblock in my eye.

“A touch of good luck we missed the refund period,” Conny says. “This tour is affirming.”

Philly chuckles. “We’re getting our own back.”

I’m all for affirmation. But why do I feel they’re having a separate sister conversation on the side? Probably because of the winking and chuckling.

“Just look at our Judith,” says Conny. “Carrying on. That’s a strong woman. She’ll get through this.”

In the distance, Judith speeds down the hill. She’s color and movement, like a butterfly. I mentally zoom in and picture her fluttering tunic and

whipping scarf.

Fear taps on my shoulder. *You should have warned her about loose fabric tangling in spokes.*

“A role model, our Judy,” says Philly.

The sisters issue a heave-ho. Judith is a role model, I think, wrangling my bike to a tenuous balance. I remember something too. The dark days after Gem’s death. I holed up in my apartment for a week, curtains closed to the summer days. At the end of the week, Judith came by. She flung open the curtains, opened every window, and ordered me to take a walk with her. Fresh air did me a world of good. I hope it will help her now.

I inch my bike up to the road, where we wait for a line of cars to pass. A wheezing Deux Chevaux convertible leads the pack. The drivers give us a happy honk and wave. An angry blare comes from the back.

“Is it true?” Conny asks, peering beyond me to watch the cars. “Was that bike sabotaged? The bike Judith’s husband was riding? Bad luck there.”

Her sister shivers.

I gape at them. “Where did you hear that?”

“Aha, confirmation!” says Philly. “We heard it on the wind, Sadie. On the wind!” The final car passes. The sisters follow.

My bike’s too picnic-heavy to speed. They’re pulling away fast, but their words float back to me.

“A pity, a true pity,” one says. Philly, I think. “Wrong man, wrong bike.”

“Right bike, wrong man?” the other says.

We sail downhill, power up inclines, and glide along the flats. All the way, my thoughts twist more than the road.

How did they know about the sabotage? What did they mean by the wrong man? Did they really need a cardigan from the bike barn the night before Dom’s death?

I’m so in my own head that I’m startled when I catch up to them. They’ve stopped at the sign announcing the small town of Elne.

“Ah, here we are,” I say, making like I was tuned in all along. These days, Elne could be mistaken for just another sleepy bedroom community. Some two thousand years ago, it was the place to be. Hannibal, with his army and war elephants, pitched camp here on their way to the Alps and wishful conquering of Rome. I’ll do the same, only with a picnic lunch and no conquering, aside from hills and baguette sandwiches.

Philly points down the road. “Will you look at that,” she says. “They got him.”

Conny inhales. “The universe balances out eventually. It surely does.”

I could ponder time, the millennia, the armies, elephants, carriages, boots, hooves, and bicycles that have come this way, and the sun-baked stones and green hills that have stood by and witnessed them all.

I *could*, but I’m stalled, gawping at flashing blue lights. A gendarme hatchback has pulled over a cyclist. A jodhpur-clad man on my surviving red bike. The man who will surely be writing the most cutting rubbish review of all time.

“Nigel Fox,” Philly says. “Question is, what’d they nab him for?”

Chapter 13

Day 4, Sunday Have you noticed two languages on town markers? The second is Catalan. We're cycling across the Department of the Pyrénées-Orientales, also known as French Catalonia. This is the northern extension of the vibrant Catalan region of northeast Spain with its distinctive language, culture, and history.

My heart thuds as if I've crested the tallest Pyrenean peak. I power ahead of the sisters, then have to brake too hard as I close in on the flashing vehicle.

A familiar figure steps onto the pavement, holding up a hand signaling halt.

"Whoa," says Detective Jacques Laurent when I skid to an ungraceful stop. "I don't want to give you two tickets for speeding."

"Speeding?" I splutter.

"Speeding!" Conny and Philly exclaim in unison. They jerk to a stop with muttered curses.

A few meters away, Nigel stands beside his bike, looking. . . It takes me a moment to interpret that look. Smug. Happy! No, delighted.

A uniformed officer steps up to join Laurent. They share a look and raise a shrug, each raising a single shoulder, as if lifting both would be too much effort.

"Speeding," repeats the uniformed officer, who introduces himself as Officer Jolie. He's older than Laurent, with a belly that strains his blue button-down, a red nose, and a jolly chuckle. "In a special work zone, no less," he adds, still just as happy.

Laurent is a veritable mime of overacted disappointment. "Doubled fines in a work zone. The speed limit is twenty kilometers per hour. In miles, that's—"

"Twelve," I say. Twelve point four, but rounding won't help my case.

"Monsieur was radar-clocked at . . ." Laurent looks to Officer Jolie.

"Fifty-six kilometers per hour," he says merrily.

This time, Laurent waits for me to calculate. I know it's fast, as Nigel himself is now pointing out.

"At home, that's thirty-five miles per hour," Nigel says. "Hardly an effort or a hazard." He uncorks his coppery metal water bottle and swigs.

"I'll pay any fines, officers," I say through clenched teeth. Officer Jolie deems that very nice. Nigel practically glows with self-satisfaction.

I turn to Laurent. "Funny place to find you."

Shouldn't he be out investigating the question of crime or no crime?

Laurent and Officer Jolie lift another two-man shrug.

"Almost as if you were waiting for us," I say.

Laurent smiles. "Guilty."

His colleague chuckles. "Shall I write him a ticket, so we can get on and nab a patio seat?"

"A caution," Laurent says. "Quicker. A fine day like this, the patio will fill up."

Nigel's mustache quivers. "A caution. Finally, a worthy memento of this uneventful tour."

Uneventful? Aside from a tragedy and Nigel himself falling into the sea, he's been treated to stunning scenery, fabulous food, had all his lodging and itineraries meticulously arranged . . .

Nigel and Officer Jolie step to one side. The sisters, still grumbling, roll on to join the others under the shade of a stubby-armed plane tree.

I hold my bike in front of me like a shield. I'm in my usual work uniform. Lycra shorts with extra padding in the derriere. A quarter-zip top that feels especially clingy with sweat. A helmet I've unclipped but kept on to save Laurent the fright of wind-whipped, helmet-crushed hair.

These are my comfort clothes, but suddenly I'm very aware I'm standing on the side of the road in front of a flashing hatchback and a well-dressed detective. A Vespa zips by. A small van slows to a rubbernecking crawl, then stops.

I recognize the van for its heavenly cheese perfume and the driver for her sleek silver hair and keen green eyes. Madame Héroux, the cheese lady, travels to all the local markets, where she's sought out for her superbly aged *fromages* and fresh gossip. I consider hiding behind my helmet or dropping and rolling into a ditch. It's too late.

"*Bonjour*, Madame Greene," she calls out the open window. "*Tout va bien?*"

No, everything is not okay. I smile, wave, and lie that all is well.

She raises a skeptical eyebrow at me, then Laurent.

He, thank goodness, turns her attention to cheese. Talk turns downright seductive as they discuss a Comté he purchased last week. The sweet and the savory dance on the palate like a caramelized kiss on the first day of autumn, Laurent rhapsodizes. Like sweet clouds of fresh butter and a rendezvous in a hazelnut forest, opines Madame.

Yeesh! My cheeks warm, and I turn away to check on my group. Conny and Philly wave. They're sharing what looks like a bag of chips and watching the police activity with undisguised delight. Lexi and Judith are more serene. They face the sun, arms upraised in a yoga pose. Lance—the new Dom—stares at his phone. Manfred has glided off. Where does he go? Nadiya stands astride her bike, fists on hips, a picture of indignant.

I register that Laurent and Madame Héroux are saying their goodbyes, with promises to meet over a wedge of rare *bleu* she expects in from the Savory. Her attention snaps back to me. "Ride safely, Madame Greene. I am on my way to Sans-Souci. I will tell Bernard and Bea that I have seen you in fine police company."

She'll tell everyone else too, I fear.

When she chugs off, I turn to Laurent. "What are you doing here?"

He smiles. "I got your message. I should say, I was informed that my potential witnesses were fleeing on bikes."

"That is *not* the message I left."

To this, he offers a two-shoulder shrug. "Our receptionist does not enjoy speaking on the telephone or relaying messages."

I can sympathize with that. I could also help her out and encourage a new line of work.

"I was surprised," Laurent is saying. "Last we spoke, I understood that you would be halting your tour."

"You didn't forbid us from going on," I point out. "You said we could help by being available for questions and staying in the department. We're doing that."

Palms to the sky. "I did say those things. I am merely surprised that you're all going on. Mrs. Appleton and the younger Mr. Appleton in particular."

How to explain? "The group voted," I say. "We're riding in Dom's honor. For Judith and Lance too. Cycling can be therapeutic. Do you cycle,

detective?”

“*Un peu.*” A little. He brings his index and thumb a millimeter from touching.

I guess that’s a fib. Modest or something else? He did want to buy Oui Cycle.

“I can understand,” Laurent continues. “Cycling is action when it feels like there is nothing else you can do.”

I nod enthusiastically. “Yes! That’s Judith’s philosophy. She needs movement to take her mind off the sorrow and shock.”

But he still hasn’t answered my initial question. I give my best tour-guide sweeping gesture to this particular spot, a nondescript side road leading into Elne. “How did you know we’d be here?”

“I inspected your navigators, did I not?” He smiles. “I am a detective. I was nearby when I heard of your message. I thought I would come out and witness your group in action.”

And catch one of us speeding? Surely he couldn’t have expected that.

I wouldn’t have. On the Oui Cycle survey under “cycling experience,” Nigel listed himself as an “average” cyclist.

What an odd fib. Nigel can clearly ride. He’s always out ahead. He’s also an inveterate braggart. Why would he hold back?

Laurent smiles. “There’s also an unexpectedly fine restaurant in Elne. So, I suggested to my colleague that we wait here for you. My colleague, he is a gourmand.”

Officer Jolie is back in the hatchback, peeling the casing off a round of cured sausage.

“I better let you get to lunch,” I say. Hint, hint. I need to get my group to our picnic at a cathedral.

I make leaving motions, clicking on my helmet, firming my hold on my handlebars.

“Thanks for not giving Nigel a ticket,” I add.

“This time he gets away with it,” Laurent says. He’s stern-faced, which I think is a bit much for bike speeding in Elne. “Please,” he adds. “I did say you could ride on, but I also asked that you be cautious.”

“We’ll watch the speed limit,” I promise and start to wheel my bike away.

“Madame Greene,” he says. “I don’t mean speeding. I intended to inform you formally later, but since we find ourselves here . . .” He gestures to the

scraggly roadside scene. Cigarette butts on gravel, a gloriously blooming oleander, blue sky, a crushed Orangina can, a flyer with a picture of a circus elephant, tumbling down the road in the breeze. What would Hannibal think of this place now?

Laurent says, “The chief medical examiner is with Mr. Appleton as we speak. I expect to have her full report late this afternoon. However, I already have a preliminary report from the crime scene analysts. It appears that the front wheel of Monsieur’s bicycle made contact with the wire you discovered. We speculate that he lost control. With the drop-off to the sea, so close and precipitous, well . . .”

He lets me imagine the rest. Unfortunately, I do.

Laurent continues. “I spoke with a maintenance crew that services the lighthouse. The wire did not belong there and must have been placed within the last few days. Given the map on the deceased’s navigator, the wire, and the prior crimes at your establishment, I am treating this as a suspicious and serious crime and will be investigating accordingly.”

“Suspicious,” I repeat. “As in murder?”

He does that nonanswer swerve again. “Please, be wary, Madame. If you think of anything—see anything—contact me immediately.”

He hands me a card with a number penned in at the top. “My direct cell number.”

His gaze drifts over my shoulder. I turn and take in my group. Judith and Lexi are stretching their calves. Lance paces a few yards away, phone to his ear, the other hand making an impatient gesture.

“Often,” Laurent says mildly, “victims know their killer. They’re often *close* to their killer, intimate even. Family members, spouses, close companions, coworkers. Persons with access, motive . . .”

“I know the Appletons,” I say. “They don’t kill each other.”

The smallest of shrugs from Laurent. “With every murderer, there is a first time.”

I can’t argue with that logic, but there’s still a more likely suspect. “Remember my vandal?” I ask, wincing—now I’m referring to this creep as mine. “Have you found any witnesses? Home security footage? Fingerprints on paint cans?”

He smiles. “My team scours Sans-Souci for paint cans as we speak.”

I would hope so! Although I think he’s having me on for telling him how to do his job.

“Right,” he says crisply and turns toward the hatchback, where Officer Jolie has raised a bottle of what I hope is only fruit juice. “Au revoir. I will be speaking with you all soon.”

His tone is light, yet I take it as a threat. Officer Jolie calls out, “*Bon courage, Madame.*”

Good luck, he means, but my ears hear only courage. I’ll need courage to get through the rest of this day, not to mention this stage. Stage Two, twice revised: the stage in which I’ve rolled into a murder investigation.

Chapter 14

Day 4, Sunday This afternoon, we ride to Thuir, a town renowned for its famous aperitif, Byrrh. Thuir and Byrrh rhyme with beer or pier (kind of, then roll some throaty French consonants). We can practice pronunciation as we tour the Byrrh production facility and see the world's biggest . . . Let's save that surprise for later!

The small town of Thuir boasts medieval walls, cobbled streets, farmers' markets, and summer festivals in which giant papier mâché dolls dance. All of those are certainly worth seeing, but I'm here for Thuir's main attraction. A feature no other town in France—no, the world—can equal: Byrrh.

Byrrh is a sweet red wine flavored with herbs, coffee, cocoa, and a dash of bitter quinine. It's tasty and made only in Thuir, but that's not my main draw. I'm here for a barrel. Specifically, the largest oak wine vat in the world.

I know, I know—world's biggest, smallest, tallest, shortest, hairiest, cheesiest . . . These can be gimmicks designed to draw in tourists. Such tourists would include me. I adore a superlative!

We roll up to the Byrrh cellars hours delayed from my original schedule.

But we're here. That's what counts. We're all mostly together too.

Nigel is absent. I assure myself that I needn't worry. He's too much of a thorn in my side to go truly missing. As I see it, there are three places he could be.

(1) Speeding to our lodging in Castelnou and ignoring my perky but way-too-obvious **Just checking in** texts.

(2) Wallowing in a jail cell after breaking another speed limit and thus unable to answer my texts.

(3) Luxuriating over a multicourse lunch at a gourmet restaurant, ignoring the aforementioned texts, and sneering at the emoji I added. I regret the smiley face, but there are no take-backs in texts.

I'm banking on option three. Nigel refused my "boring" picnic and took himself out to lunch. Gem will be hearing all about Nigel later.

For the moment, Nadiya is outside, waiting for Nigel and talking on her phone. The rest of the group and I are waiting in the Byrrh offices. The receptionist has hustled to the back to find *someone* who can conduct our English-language tour.

I suggested that *I* could translate. I said so in what I thought was pretty good French.

"*Non, non, Madame,*" she'd said, aghast. "You paid for the comprehensive tour, and this is a highly technical tour."

I persisted. We could use their handheld devices that offer taped recordings in English and German too. It was my fault for arriving late, I said, with facial expressions I hoped conveyed great disappointment with myself.

Another gasp of aghast. Madame assured me that their guide was most eager to practice her English.

We've barely had time to mill around the lobby when she returns.

"Voilà!" she announces triumphantly. "Gabrielle shall be delighted to guide you."

Gabrielle personifies every opposite of delighted: bored, unamused, disdainful, a touch hostile. She's all of five feet with goth-black choppy hair, paint-spattered sneakers, a frown, and a girl-fighter anime t-shirt. She's also young. High-school age, I guess?

"*Delighted,*" the receptionist repeats.

"Delighted," Gabrielle says, dry as a drought. She sighs, bends her elbow, and raises a fist as if holding an invisible tour-guide flag. "*Allez.* We begin."

Everyone falls in line. Even Lance puts away his phone. Not for the first time, I consider getting a flag. Too trite? Yet they do seem to command tour-guide respect.

We step into the grand hall.

Judith draws a breath. "It's like a cathedral," she whispers.

"Amen!" say Conny and Philly in unison.

Gabrielle holds the invisible flag higher. "You are fortunate to see the work of Gustave Eiffel."

"Who?" whispers Judith.

"The architect of Eiffel Tower fame," I say.

“I’ve always wanted to see the Eiffel Tower,” says Judith.

“This is better than that tower,” declares Conny. “Too many crowds there.”

“Much better,” agrees Philly. “Nice and serene and all the right people *not* here.”

Someone like a certain absent critic? I secretly agree. *It is more serene without Nigel.*

“Intriguing,” says Manfred. “Yes, this is far preferable to Eiffel’s tower. Obscure. Hidden.”

Gabrielle has gone ahead, so I say, “Byrrh was so popular in the early 1900s that a train line was built to the factory to ship it out. This is the old station.”

Gabrielle clears her throat, so loudly it echoes. We hurry to catch up. We walk through a vast temple to cooperage. Vats like megaliths tower above our heads.

“A large oak barrel,” says Gabrielle. She waves her invisible flag. “Another. Large and oak.”

Her English is good. Her enthusiasm is decidedly lacking, but the massive vats and Eiffel make up for that. However, there is one slight problem. Okay, a pretty big tour-guiding flaw. Young Gabrielle plays fast and loose with facts.

“Byrrh contains the bark of the chinchona tree from which medicine—*la quinine*—is made,” she’s saying. “Also coffee, bitter orange, cocoa, and . . .” She waves a bothered hand. “Other stuff.”

Good so far.

“All our favorite things,” says Conny enthusiastically.

Gabrielle agrees. “The skin of the chinchona tree was used by the Aztec of Mexico to treat diseases and was taken by the pope who discovered the cure for malaria.” She rattles this off defiantly, as if daring corrections.

I ache to intervene, but correcting another guide is tricky territory. *I’d* want someone to correct me if I were off-base. Gabrielle’s come-at-me stance suggests she does not. She’s holding her flag-fist like she would love the opportunity to swing it.

“The, ah, Quechua of Bolivia and Peru?” I suggest pleasantly. “How fascinating.”

“Sure,” says Gabrielle and introduces another barrel. “Everyone loves Byrrh. Long ago, before World War II, it was the most popular drink in all

of France. All of the world.”

Maybe not *that* popular, but definitely huge in France. I tell myself my group is soaking in the ambience and probably barely hearing the details. Lexi holds up her green drink and a bright smile while Lance films her. Judith appears to be taking artsy angled shots of the rafters. She’s seriously throwing herself into the “work” of touring. The sisters lean over velvet-ribbon barriers to peek at the off-limits section. Only Manfred is nodding dutifully, a quirk lifting one lip.

I mentally correct the record for my own satisfaction. Jesuits carried the bark of the chinchona tree back to Rome in the 1600s. Swamps ringed the city. Malaria had claimed popes and Romans alike. Quinine wasn’t isolated until the early 1800s—right here in France!

I know this from previous tours as well as the modern tour guide’s constant sidekick, Google.

In a gap in Gabrielle’s “and here is a vat” presentation, I wiggle in some details. “Like Gabrielle says, Byrrh contains that bark used to make quinine. The sweetness of the wine offsets its bitter qualities. Wasn’t it marketed as a tonic, Gabrielle?”

“*Oui, oui,*” she agrees. “Pharmacists agreed. The bitterness cures all.”

Pharmacists actually sued Byrrh for its outrageous curative claims. Byrrh marketers rebranded from curative elixir to aperitif, and everyone was happier.

Gabrielle says, “It was at first called Hygiene Wine, but that is not so appetizing, so they picked some random letters and, voilà, we have Byrrh.”

Crazily enough, that last part might actually be true. Byrrh was developed by two brothers named Violet. Despite their creativity on the beverage front, they had no spark for naming. Legend has it, bolts of lettered fabric were stacked in their office. They needed a name, so they simply took the letters as they lay.

Gabrielle rolls even further off the usual script and tells us about the last person to be executed in Thuir. Suddenly enthusiasm sparkles. “A wife poisoned her husband and was caught out! You will always be caught in Thuir and then, justice!” She makes a series of unsettling execution gestures.

“Oh dear,” Judith says.

Oh dear, indeed. I step in with another prompt. “And what do we have here?” I say, like a game-show hostess presenting a prize. A sectional sofa,

three nights in the Costa del Sol, the world's largest oak barrel.

We've entered the inner shrine. Gabrielle lifts a wan wave toward the massive vat bathed in violet light. "This is what you wait to see all your life," she deadpans. "The largest oak vat."

She then rattles off shockingly precise measurements, including volume (a mindboggling 1.2 million liters) and the exact length of steel batting wrapped around the circumference, which she calculates with apparent bored ease.

Well done, Gabrielle. I catch her eye and give a nod. She winks.

I have to smile. Gem would absolutely adore Gabrielle and her fact-defying performance, and she'd love this gigantic vat.

If Gem were here, we'd take selfies. In every shot, she'd be doing something silly. Jazzy fingers, peace signs, thumbs up, a goofy face. Do I have a photo of her where she's not looking a touch naughty, like life's a joke and she's my key to getting in on it?

Caught up in happy memories, I'm about to suggest we take a group photo. Then it occurs to me. A group photo would only highlight who's missing. Most tragically, Dom.

"Dom would love this," Judith says, sighing at the vat in apparent awe.

She might be right there. Dom decorated his basement man cave (also known as the Appleton family rec room/ theater) in wine barrels.

"What a magnificent sight," Judith continues. "We need a photo!"

Judith gathers Lance and Lexi to either side of her. "Sadie, dear, you," she says, waving me to her. "You're family."

Up until now, I've been too shocked, stressed, and overworked for tears. I pinch my palm hard to keep back the welling prickles. Judith's been working so hard to carry on. She doesn't need me pulling a grim, weepy face.

"I shall photograph you," says Manfred. He takes Judith's proffered phone and waits until we line up. "Say *Käse*."

"Say what?" says Judith.

"*Käsekuchen*, cheesecake!" Manfred says. "Cheesy. Fromage! Smiles!"

I'm squished between Judith and Lance, and my smile chases away the tears. Conny and Philly want their photo next, then one of all of us. We enlist Gabrielle.

"Delight with the world's largest vat," Gabrielle says, holding cell phones at skewed angles. "Always remember Byrrh. Now walk around. Do what

you like. Think of many questions. Find my aunt at reception. Ask her all things.” She gives a curt bow before striding off.

Ah, a niece, drafted into unwelcome tour guiding? Doing her best never to be enlisted again?

Not everyone dreams of being a guide. Maybe Gabrielle, with her quick calculations, yearns for a career in accountancy. There are odder jobs to dream about.

Most of my group scatters. Manfred glides up to me. “Gabrielle was exquisite.”

That’s one word for her. “Yes,” I say. “Her information was a little . . .” I debate how to say stunningly off-base.

“Fanciful,” he says, with a wink of a pale gray eye. “A bold performance. You are also bold, Ms. Greene, continuing our tour. I applaud your stamina.”

He issues a single clap that echoes in the rafters, then glides off to enjoy another unexpected perk offered by our guide—unsupervised admiration of the barrel room.

I savor the applause and the compliment.

Unless it’s not a compliment, and he was comparing me to Gabrielle. Am I boldly leading my group down a misguided path? A dangerous path?

Laurent’s words of caution swirl in my head. I linger among the great oak vats until I realize I’m not alone. A man’s voice comes from the row of vats beyond the velvet ribbon.

Lance.

I step so close the ribbon strains at my waist. I lean my head farther over.

I’m not spying. I’m only waiting for Lance so he doesn’t feel left behind. *I will not leave another Appleton behind!*

I spin more rationales. I’m being helpful. Lance could require assistance with international dialing. Country codes can get confusing and—

Okay, I’m also snooping. But it’s Lance. I’m the pesky little pseudosister. It’s my duty to snoop!

He’s whispering. It sounds like he’s talking about work.

Who whispers about accounting? Unless it’s about numbers that shouldn’t be.

Or inheritance of a company? I’m glad it’s me listening in and not Laurent.

“Well, *someone* has to be in charge, Deborah,” Lance says in a whisper approaching a hiss. “No, not of *payroll*. Of the company. My father’s company.”

The words are tight, as if squeezed through clenched teeth.

A sigh. “Yeah, well, I’m his son, and I have the highest title now that he’s gone.”

So he does want the company. Of course he does. Lance has put in years of work at Appleton Financial. It bears his family name. It’s worth a lot of money.

Lance is no longer speaking in a whisper. His words bounce around the vats. “What? *Her?*”

Her? I realize I’m holding my breath when my head gets airy. Or maybe it’s those words. I replay what Lance told me earlier, back in Collioure. *Dad would rather give the company to you.* Dom wouldn’t have, I assure myself.

“She won’t be happy, you know,” Lance says. “I’ll call the lawyers. No, Deborah, please, let me. Yes, I’m aware I’m in France.”

You know who’s not aware of her surroundings? Me. I fail to register footsteps approaching until they’re almost beside me, only a gigantic vat or two between us. If Lance keeps walking, he’ll pop out and find me obviously eavesdropping.

I debate my options.

- (1) Pretend I’m just now walking in, checking the room.
- (2) Feign my own phone conversation.
- (3) Return to the world’s biggest oak barrel and circle it with awe.

Options one and two would require acting. I’m a lousy actor and worse liar. Lance would see right through me.

Option three? No acting required there—I adore that vat! Plus Lance will readily believe I’m caught up in barrel gazing. Or, more likely, Lance will believe in his hiding abilities, as if out of sight means his voice is on mute.

I jog on tiptoes, which after a day in the saddle makes various muscles complain. Anxiety leaves me breathing too fast, heart thudding. Perfect—I’ll look enraptured. I’m circling the barrel like a penitent when I hear a click.

My head snaps around, giving Nigel Fox the worst angle of my sneaky, startled look.

He laughs, a lilting *he, he, ha, ha, ha*. “Snooping, Ms. Greene? Is that how you treat your guests?”

“Just making sure everyone’s accounted for!” I say with an enthusiasm that he and his mustache see right through. I forge on in more falsehoods. “I’m so glad you’ve made it here. How was your lunch?”

“Delicious. A feast, far exceeding any picnic.” His smile suggests that his dessert is catching me snooping. “Ah, Mr. Appleton.” He turns his camera on Lance. “Ms. Greene was just *listening* for you.”

Lance frowns, then employs his favorite deflection technique: joshing. He elbows me. “No wonder you moved here, Sadie. World’s biggest wine barrel? Illinois can’t compete with that.”

“You’re onto me!” We’re both full of it. Smiling. Joking. Taut as the miles of metal binding the barrels. “Let’s go see the vintage posters,” I say in my best tour-guide-announces-treat voice.

“Yes, we shall *spy* on posters,” Nigel says.

He caught me red-handed. Red-eared? It’s not until later, when we’re back on our bikes, that I think about what that means. Nigel Fox must have been snooping too.

How much did he hear of Lance’s conversation? More importantly, how will he misinterpret it?

Chapter 15

Day 4, Sunday Home base for tonight is Castelnou, which means new castle. Not so new anymore. The first time the castle atop the hill had that new-stone smell was back in the tenth century.

So close to that cool pool, so blocked in a tourist pileup. My group and I reach Castelnou, only to find the castle gates blocked by a massive group of Italian tourists.

No matter, I assure the part of my brain whining *pool, pool, pool*. We're here. We're hydrating, wiping sweat from our brows, and congratulating ourselves on a good ride.

The Italians are lining up for photos, shifting and jostling. I fall into an automatic habit: counting heads, a tour-guide game of whack-a-mole. They're swapping spots, photobombing, tying shoes, arranging backpacks.

I'm up to forty-two when I force myself to give up. I'm starting to feel vicarious panic for their polo-shirted guides, of whom I count only two. Here I've been having trouble keeping my small group together. Or not keeping them together. After Thuir, Nigel sped off again. Lance did as well.

I think Lexi's a bit vexed about Lance's disappearances, not that she'll admit it.

He needs time to process on his own, she told me, when I checked in with her on the road. *I understand*.

He does need time. But he could also spare his girlfriend—and his tour guide!—a lot of worry by letting us know where he'll be.

"What a pretty place," Judith says, interrupting my drifting thoughts. "So many stones."

Thank you, Judith! She's just given me a lead in. "This is a special place," I say in my tour-guide tone. "It's one of *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France*—most beautiful villages in France. The designation is awarded to small rural villages. Castelnou has only 350-some residents, but it's renowned for its history and now for its art, shops, and scenic setting."

Judith and Lexi brighten at the mention of shops.

Conny and Philly opine that a town of 350 sounds just the right size. “But how many tourists each day?”

“A lot,” is the only number I can give. There are forty-two or more Italians at this single spot, and we’re not even in the high season yet.

The Italians and their guides finally squeeze through and troop off toward bus parking. The guide bringing up the rear strains on tiptoes, finger tapping and pointing as she tries to count heads.

Good luck! I give thanks I’m not a bus tour guide.

“We should push our bikes through the main village,” I advise. “It’s a pedestrian village with narrow streets. Once we’re through, we can ride the short distance to our *mas*. We’ll have the main house and pool to ourselves.”

There’s a cheer for the pool. I’m glad I held off giving them my history talk. A good guide knows when to stop.

We enter town like cowpokes after a long day in the saddle. Stiff gaits, leaning into our bikes as we push them up the cobbled lanes, weaving around clumps of tourists. I like to think we’re an inspiring sight, sweat-stained, Spandex-clad road conquerors who came all the way from the sea.

We have conquered more than hills and highways. Sorrow, shock, fear—we haven’t banished them, but we’ve put them in their place, at least for a few hours.

We ride the last half-mile triumphantly, Nadiya leading us through iron gates to a sprawling country home with parklike gardens. Grassy paths lead to flower beds, water features, and views of the old town, ancient castle, and forested hills.

My group exclaims about the pretty house and settings. I want to cheer when I spot the Oui Cycle van.

The van means several good things. Jordi is fine and has not been stopped by Detective Laurent. Also luggage will be here. That will mean contented guests who can occupy themselves before dinner. Not to mention a change of clothes. As much as I adore Spandex, there’s nothing better than a shower and loose cotton at the end of a long day. Or a dip in the pool, but my relaxation will have to wait. Just because we’ve arrived doesn’t mean my day is over. Far from it. I’m on duty until everyone goes to bed and even then, I’m on call.

It’s worth it, though, to stay in places like this and cycle through France for a living.

I spot Jordi by the van, along with our hostess, Madame Odette, who lives in a cozy cottage behind the main house. Madame hustles to greet us.

“Wonderful! You’re here,” she says, with an enthusiasm that fires my suspicions. Madame typically has a Frenchwoman’s cool reserve. Pleasant but by no means intrusive or running to welcome guests.

“I have your first arrival out by the pool,” she says. “He’s enjoying a cool drink. Let me get you all out there.”

“Are there two early arrivals? I ask.

“Is Lance here?” Lexi asks simultaneously.

“A Monsieur Fox arrived quite early,” Madame says with a frown. She switches back to beverages. “Refreshing juice? Tea? Perrier? Kir royales? Byrrh? Aperol spritz?”

She’s really adamant to get us out back and drinking.

“Then, with a minor respite, your luggage shall join you,” Madame says, before returning to her offerings. “Suze? Banyuls? Chilled white wine? Very delicious.”

I glance toward the van. Minor respite? Nadiya has joined Jordi. He’s opened the back panels. She sticks her head in and jerks back, hand slapped to her nose.

My stomach tangles like knotted gears. I cover with over enthusiasm. “Wonderful, thank you so much, Madame Odette! Everyone, please follow Madame to the relaxing patio.”

“But where’s Lance?” Lexi asks, brow furrowing. “I thought he’d be here.”

“I’d like my bathing suit,” Judith says. “And my sun hat.”

The sisters concur. “Or else we go swimming in our birthday suits!”

I glance toward the van. Nadiya stares in the back like a firefighter about to enter an inferno. Jordi stands a few feet away looking muscular and worried.

Madame Odette holds her arms wide, a shepherdess herding my little group to her pretty back garden. I picture patio chairs with soft cushions, perfect for reading. The hammock, swinging under the apple trees. All those cool drinks. I’d go for a kir royale—sweet black currant cordial in bubbly champagne or prosecco.

My wistful sigh comes out as a groan.

Madame shoots me a look I recognize. Not half an hour ago, I issued such a look to the Italian bus-tour guides. Sympathy mixed with *thank*

goodness I'm not you.

She herds the group away.

I steel myself. Time to find out. I take a deep breath and nearly gag. What is that smell? We're atop a hill set in a dry plain, yet it reeks like a beach after a mass fish die-off.

A few yards out, I slap a hand over my nose.

"Anchois," Jordi says dismally.

Anchovies.

"Many, many anchovies," Nadiya says. "In garlic and oil and hot pepper, on everything: baggage, equipment, walls, and floor!" She holds out oily hands with a look of horror.

I hand her a travel-sized container of hand sanitizer that hasn't a chance of solving this. Then I shoot another silent question to Jordi. *How? How did this happen?*

Jordi isn't a tall man. More accurately, he borders on short, but he's big, as in all muscle. In silhouette, his neck and head would merge in girth. His deltoids are mini-mountains, capable of lifting boulders—or two e-bikes, which I've seen him do.

Jordi scratches his buzz cut. Heaven forbid his head enjoy any padding while crashing into other rugby players.

"I don't know what happened," he says, as bewildered as a kid with a riddle. "I followed your instructions. I packed the anchovy jars very carefully. The bags I placed in a cooler, so they could not even rattle. Also because it is hot."

A breeze as warm as anchovy-scented breath blows by. My stomach turns.

"Glass is everywhere," Nadiya says. "Everywhere but inside the cooler."

I want to see this disaster even less than I want to smell it. But I must. I'm the boss, the one with the business spiraling down the drain.

I pinch my nose, stick my head inside, and cringe so hard I forget to keep my nostrils clamped down. Nadiya is right. An anchovy tornado struck the van.

Behind me, Jordi is stressing his careful driving. "I drove the exact speed limit, which caused much anger on the road. Honking, tailgating, rude gestures. Do I care? No. Do I speed? Never! Not even after the police delayed me and made me late for lunch."

I stagger away from the van, desperately seeking clean air. I spot a rosebush bursting with frothy pink blooms. I stick my nose in and inhale the floral perfume. Floral fish—the stench is lodged in my olfactory system.

“Delayed you?” I ask.

Laurent detained Jordi at the hotel. “Asking the same questions over and over. Jacques Laurent, saint of virtue.”

“You two know each other?” I ask. “From before this?”

Jordi snorts as if clearing out a fishy stench.

Okay. I shift conversational gears. “How long were you stopped for lunch?”

“Very short,” says Jordi defensively.

Which for a Frenchman could mean an hour.

Jordi is estimating. “An hour and a half?” He makes a pinching gesture. “Maybe a little bit more?”

So probably two hours.

He dined with a rugby pal. “At that café outside Thuir. You know, the place with the awnings and the outdoor seating.”

That hardly narrows it down, but I nod. I’d probably recognize it if he described the menu. I’ve studied every establishment along this route.

Instead Jordi is telling me what rugby position his friend plays. At least, I think that’s what he’s talking about. I’m not up on those terms in any language, but I hear the word *mêlée* and that seems right for rugby and the present circumstances.

“He will travel to Alsace to see family. While he is there, he will pick up the bicycle I wish to buy,” Jordi says.

“Ah, this is wonderful,” says Nadiya, fanning her nose. “I want to ride it.”

“We all shall ride it,” declares Jordi and describes a true antique, a dinosaur among bikes. No pedals, no gears or brakes. When Jordi gets into something, he goes all in. Lately he’s been fixing up old bikes.

In the prototype bikes, you sat on the seat and walked the bike along. Until you hit a downhill. Then you were lucky if a haystack or mucky ditch broke your plummet, rather than a pedestrian or speeding horse carriage.

Jordi chats happily about the specifics. When he pauses for breath, I break in. “Sounds like a fabulous bike. And where was the van while you were having lunch?”

Jordi throws up his palms. “Nice and safe in the village parking lot. Nothing happens in Thuir. Very quiet. Calm. You don’t think . . .”

We aim three frowns at the van.

I say it. “I don’t think those anchovies broke out on their own.”

Chapter 16

Day 4, Sunday Lounge by the pool. Put your feet up. Indulge in a good book. Stroll the town. Our goal for this afternoon is to relax.

An hour and a half later, the fish are overbaked, and a young gendarme is staggering out of the van.

I made use of Laurent's private number. He, in turn, called for the nearest crime-scene tech, who was apparently this poor guy. He looks about eighteen and is a sickly shade of pale green.

I feel for him. "There's a nice-smelling rose over there," I say, pointing to a thorny profusion of blooms. "When can I have the van cleaned?"

He sticks his nose in the flowers. "It's all yours. I've done what I can."

"You've checked for fingerprints?" I ask. "Do you want to collect shards?" *Take it all away for evidence and bring it back sparkling clean?*

A speck of blood beads on his cheek when he emerges and repeats, "I did what I could. You may do . . . whatever you can do."

Manfred has been looking on, as if gazing into an abyss. "My anchovies, once so exquisite."

My business, once rolling along fine. My guests' luggage, once unsullied by fish.

"That is life," Nadiya says. She's elbow deep in a bucket of sudsy water. The technician processed the suitcases first. Nadiya has been attempting to clean the hard-shells. She squeezes out a rag. "Tragedy is always in our path."

"Nietzsche." Manfred says reverently. "Nietzsche would agree with you, Frau Zaliskaya. You are wise to put me in perspective. I feel infinitely better."

Nadiya frowns, and I guess she wasn't thinking of Nietzsche. She rolls with it like the experienced cyclist she is. "Sure. *Ja*. I know this very well. War, peace, anchovies . . ."

"Anchovies that Oui Cycle will replace," I hurry to add, lest we dive into nihilism. "I've already contacted my colleagues, Bea and Bernard. They'll go to Collioure tomorrow when the shop opens and replace your jars and

then some. They'll store everything safely in Sans-Souci, awaiting your arrival."

The crime tech shudders, grabs his bags, and hustles away.

"Thank you!" I call after him.

"Most impressive to witness your specialized skill," Manfred adds, which gets at least a wave from the unfortunate tech. Manfred gives one more forlorn look into the van and announces he shall enjoy the pool. "Most kind of our hostess to offer suits. Swimming is what Nietzsche would recommend." He glides off.

If only all guests could be so graceful and understanding. I steel myself for the nonphilosophical guest. Nigel has been watching from a few yards away. With the crime tech gone, he joins us.

"I have something to complain about," he says. "And I am not so easily pushed aside with German ponderings."

As much as I hate to admit it, he does have a legitimate gripe. Both of his tweedy-coated suitcases reek of oily fish. There is a silver lining, though. Or a literal plastic lining. Nigel Fox, travel pro that he is, packs in space-saving airlock plastic bags—the as-seen-on-TV sort. Call me a convert now.

"I do apologize," I say, once again. "Jordi will take your cases to the dry cleaner as soon as we separate out all the luggage. Again, I'm very sorry for this *temporary* inconvenience."

How many apologies am I up to by now? I've lost track.

Broadly, there are two schools of tour-guiding thought regarding apologies.

School One: Never apologize unless you are blatantly responsible and everyone saw you do it. Even then, consider deflection or minor bribery (as in a box of macarons or a surprise stop at a spa).

School Two: Apologize for anything and everything that upsets a guest, even events you have no personal control over. The rotation of the earth. The operating hours of boulangeries. The attentiveness of French waiters.

Of course, like most things, the sweet spot is somewhere in the middle and depends on circumstances and personalities. Also like most things, there's slippery-slope potential. Now that I've unleashed fervent apologies, where will I stop?

I set Nigel's empty cases off to one side. Philly's case is also soaked through, and the fish oil has saturated her clothes. Luckily, Conny's bag was okay, and they decided they could simply wash out Philly's bathing suit.

No harm, no foul, they'd said. Oof! But there's a whole lotta foul!

They're by the pool with cool drinks. Nigel could be there too. Instead, he's here, hovering over me, vibrating displeasure.

I look up again and face the disapproving mustache.

"The cleaner said she's dealt with fishier problems than this," I say, amping up a smile. "She'll have your bags better than new and ready by tomorrow."

The dry cleaner has incentive. I'm paying a premium emergency rate plus an extreme-smell surcharge.

My smile aches from the effort of forcing it upright. I slog on with bright assurances. "Jordi will collect your bags tomorrow afternoon, and they'll be waiting at our lovely lodging in Vernet-les-Bains."

In the relative scheme of things, smelly luggage isn't a huge deal. Certainly not life and death, but I won't be pointing that out.

"You will collect them?" Nigel asks. "Then drive them around so they can be fouled by more fish?"

"I'm sure it won't happen again." I've just broken another tour-guide rule. Never make promises about things you can't control. Given all that's happened, I wouldn't be surprised if it rained down fishes tomorrow. Stormy flareups *are* in the forecast.

My smile has dipped.

Nigel's smile grows, like a flower blooming in my discomfort. "Fine. I'll expect my remaining pristine belongings in my room. Please ensure that you do not anoint my storage bags with fish oil."

Nadiya mutters something in Ukrainian as he goes.

Jordi—outfitted in a rubber apron, rubber boots, and rubber gloves up to his neck—comes around the side of the van. Madame Odette has impressive supplies.

"Is that man giving you trouble, Nadiya?" he asks, debunking the myth that everything sounds romantic in French. He looks ready to lay down a rugby tackle.

"*Shhh.*" Nadiya holds up a shushing finger but then wrinkles her nose, either at the fishy proximity or thoughts of Nigel. "Remember who he is, Jordi: *Monsieur le critique.*" She switches to English. "Mister who feels too important about himself."

"Rubbish," says Jordi with a wonderful French roll to his "r."

“Rubbish” is exactly the review I expect and, at this point, pretty much deserve. Fair play, Nigel. I run a drying cloth over one of the massive cases, haul it off to one side, and start on another.

“Yoo-hoo.”

Jordi, the big scaredy cat, jumps.

I look up to see Philly, poking out from behind a hibiscus. She’s perfectly camouflaged in a flowered bathing suit and wildly clashing wrap.

Philly wants to know if there’s time for a nap before dinner. “The schedule hasn’t changed, has it? Judith thought we were eating late.”

“Eight o’clock,” I say. Way late by suburban Illinois standards. For Germans too, I think, as well as many Brits. For French restaurants, it’s the early-bird reservation. Practically the breakfast hour for late-night-dining Catalans on Barcelona time.

“That was the only reservation time for a group our size,” I say. “We can have nibbles soon. We’ll gather in the garden around 7:45 and walk down together.”

I rise from a suitcase-polishing squat. My back twangs, tight from our ride and the various stresses. Maybe I could squeeze in a nap . . . *Ha!* “I’ll confirm with everyone,” I say.

“Leave it to me,” Philly offers. “I’ll tell whoever’s at the pool. But first, I’m searching for Conny’s toiletry bag. We need a gallon or so of sunblock.” She kicks out a pale leg like a burlesque dancer.

I celebrate a small bit of good fortune when she locates a rubbery case in the fish-free pile of luggage and heads back to the pool, whistling happily.

“That is the lady who searched for her cardigan after the dance,” Jordi says, dipping his chin in the direction of departing Philly. He touches a spot above his right eye, where her distinctive freckle is.

“Did you tell Laurent about that?” I ask.

Jordi did. “She can say that I locked the barn, nice and safe. She is my alibi. How do you say that in English, alibi?”

“Alibi,” I say, thinking I could make “fluent” Lance a list of French-English homonyms. Except *alibi* isn’t the right word. Philly can say she saw Jordi lock up, but he has the keys and codes to the barn. And anyone could have slipped in and messed with the bikes during the party.

I think again about Conny and Philly, asking if Dom’s bike had been sabotaged. Laurent told me. I only told my crew.

But then why make themselves look suspicious by returning for the cardigan and mentioning the sabotage? Being too obvious, I decide, is their alibi.

Nadiya squeezes out the soapy cloth and sits back on her heels. “If the vandal did this, how did he know where our van would be, our route, where we stop? How can he be so many places and we don’t see him?”

She frowns toward a grove of gently clacking giant bamboo.

I usually find the sound soothing. Now I take in the grounds with a suspicious eye. The dense hedging, the curves in the flower gardens—so many places for a vandal to lurk.

“We’ve done this tour a few times,” I say, eyeing the clonking bamboo. “It’s not like the route is secret. Previous guests posted social-media photos.”

“YouTube videos too,” Nadiya interjects darkly. “But our schedule is way off today.”

Beyond off. The vandal would have to tail us. Could they manage without us noticing?

I suppose it wouldn’t be so hard. Anyone in a relatively nondescript car could drive by, and I wouldn’t notice. Baked goods, cute animals, and distance markers—those I look out for. But cars? Not unless they’re vintage Citroëns with Bea and Bernard at the wheel.

“It is creepy,” says Nadiya.

A new level of creepy, I think. Way beyond bored teen with spray paint.

Then I hear it. Something moving in the dense hedge surrounding the property. A rustling. Breathing? Heavy breathing?

Nadiya hears it too. She grabs a mop and holds it double-fisted like a medieval broadsword.

I look for my own defense. A bucket of soapy, fishy water will have to do. Jordi and his tackling techniques would be even better, but he’s clomping around in the van, oblivious.

I hold up a shushing finger. Nadiya does the same with her mop. I picture us taking the vandal down. Bucket to the head. Mop to the ankles. Jordi could get in late and hold him down.

Pale fingers part the greenery.

I catch Nadiya’s eye and mouth a countdown. *One. Two. Thr—*

“Sadie? You over there?”

The voice makes me want to scream—in frustration!

“Lance! Where have you been?” I put down the bucket.

Nadiya, looking disappointed, lowers her mop.

Jordi is still in the van, humming obliviously.

Lance chuckles from beyond the hedge. “Did I scare you?”

“No.” That came out too fast, too sulky, too clearly a lie.

More happy chuckles. He’s a guest, I remind myself. He’s my pesky, annoying, almost big brother, but he’s also a guest of Oui Cycle and I cannot chastise a guest.

“Yes,” I admit because he knows me too well. “But for good reason. Get over here. I have something to tell you.”

Earlier I’d filled Nadiya and Jordi in on Laurent’s “developments.” The medical examiner, the wire, and Laurent, the big-case detective, officially on the job.

Lance should know too. He should also be aware that he and Judith are at the top of Laurent’s suspect list by default—and more readily accessible than an unknown vandal.

Lance saunters across the lawn, wheeling his bike in defiance of the cobblestone path a few feet away. His helmet dangles from a handlebar. He wears a sloppy grin, black bike tights, and a button-down tropical-print shirt so bright he clashes with the hibiscus.

He wrinkles his nose. “What stinks?”

“A lot,” I say. *A lot more than fish.*

Chapter 17

Day 4, Sunday Our restaurant for this evening features Catalan fare, renowned for melding flavors of the sea, plains, and mountains. Those are the tasting notes for our tour too.

We dine on a patio with a timeless view. Oak forests, golden in the evening sun, dot gumdrop hills that seem to stretch forever. Except we know exactly how far they bump down to the sea. We rode it all.

Our restaurant is a hidden gem. If by hidden, you mean tucked behind ancient fortifications and lauded online with hushed five-star reviews, many ending in versions of “*shhh*, don’t tell anyone.” I’m pleased to have snagged the perfect patio table for nine. Nine had included Dom, but Jordi agreed to fill his seat.

Jordi is an introvert, comfortable with groups only if they involve crashing into each other for a rugby ball.

But Nadiya asked him, and so here he is, spiffed and polished. Head freshly buzzed. Aftershave, splashed on in waves, cheeks aflush. He’s even wearing a shirt with a collar, albeit in red and gold stripes, the rugby team colors of our nearest big city, Perpignan.

I’m glad he’s joined us. I’m even more excited for a sit-down meal, emphasis on *sitting*. My only break this evening was to duck into my room, where I savored every second of a rapid shower, journal-vented to Gem, and zoned out for a few blissful minutes with my favorite French game show, *Des chiffres et des lettres*. That’s *Numbers and Letters*, the world’s best game show. As the name suggests, it involves word challenges—spelling, finding words from random letters—and math. Math, on TV!

The best part is when contestants are given a target number and six random numbers to multiply, divide, add, or subtract to reach that target. I told Mom about it once (okay, more than once). She said the very idea made her want to scream. Scream with joy?

A spoken number breezes into my mathematical musings.

“Zero kilometers,” our server is saying. “That is our goal.”

I blink back to the present and my translator role. She means they source their ingredients as locally as possible. As proof of my giddy exhaustion, the figure suddenly sounds ominous. I picture the chef, cleaver in hand, scoping us out, selecting the most exhausted (me!) of the herd for his charcuterie platters.

I rally and say, “They, ah, strive to get as many ingredients as possible from right here in Castelnou and neighboring villages.”

“Our pantry is everything you see,” the server says in dramatic English, sweeping her hand to encompass our table.

I shiver and blame the sun, ducking behind a cloud.

She returns to rapid French, and I attempt simultaneous translation, something about the “soil of history upon which our salads grew.”

The ham was cured a few houses away. Cheeses were made in the valley, with milk from happy cows, sheep, and goats. The honey came from “over there.” She points in the vague direction of the neighboring hill.

“And anchovies and mussels fresh today from our sea.” She gazes east.

I never want to see—or smell—another anchovy again.

Manfred perks up. “From Collioure?”

Our server confirms their origin. Only this morning, she assures us, those mussels were clinging to their traps in the sea. “Only the finest. The freshest.”

I swear, Manfred is misty-eyed. “All is good in this moment. We live in the now, my friends, here in the homeland of Proust.” He lifts a glass of sparkling mineral water for a toast. “*Prost*,” he says, grinning at the wordplay.

“*Prost* to Proust,” Nadiya repeats, clinking wine glasses with a blushing Jordi to her right and grinning Lance to her left.

“Valentin Louis Georges Eugène Marcel Proust,” Nigel says.

I’m impressed both by Proust’s many names and by Nigel’s ability to list them.

“You know he spent most of his life in bed?” Nigel sniffs, dismissing France’s literary hero. “He wrote of bicycles, but what did he actually *know*? He was nothing but a pretender.”

“What do *you* know?” retorts Philly.

“What do *I* know?” Nigel repeats, walrus tusks waggling. He taps the end of his nose, as if he’s in on a secret. “I see everything that goes on in this

tour. I know who's playing games and making mischief." He looks around the table, smirking at everyone in turn. "Making murder?"

"Oh!" Judith gasps. "Mr. Fox, be *nice!*"

Lance catches my eye and mimes a checkmark.

Philly and Conny snort in unison.

The server launches into the story of the soup du jour. A gazpacho, all ingredients listed right down to the local spring water that nourished the heirloom tomatoes. I could hug her.

Nigel, momentarily defused, turns his attention to snagging the best appetizers. Manfred and the sisters lay claim to an anchovy platter that arrives compliments of the chef.

I assist with translation of both the menu and dishes already on the table. Judith—staying true to the hard work of being a tourist—wants to try everything from wild boar pâté to smoked anchovies dolloped with beads of roe.

Lance is making Lexi laugh—making her squeamish about boar bits, but it's still nice to see. I felt like I'd sucker-punched him when I told him about Laurent's investigation earlier. I didn't say "murder." That still sounds too brutal. "Foul play," I said, but I could tell he understood.

He also said—without me asking—that he'd called Deborah earlier. "To check that everything's okay at the office."

"And is it?" I'd asked.

"Fine," he said. "Everything's fine. Deborah's going to organize a remembrance lunch when we get back. She's going overboard, of course."

That sounds like Deborah. And bottling up emotions and problems is very much Lance.

I'd then tried to maneuver into the conversation I'd heard, without admitting to eavesdropping. "So who's in charge?" I'd asked.

A guffaw. "Deborah. She's always in charge. She's doing a fancy cake for the remembrance but getting platters in from that Italian place you like. She said you're invited."

Deflection. Total Lance.

"Did you ask about the Ortiz account?" I asked.

Lance had not. "Dad probably overreacted. You know how overly emotional he'd get."

He'd given me a friendly elbow jab at that last bit. Back when I made my big decision, I'd told Lance about his dad deeming me overly emotional. I

couldn't rouse an obligatory smile at his joshing, though. The idea that Dom was stressing needlessly makes his death even sadder. If Dom had just ditched work and ridden with the group, he'd probably be with us now.

Lance never had the workaholic problem. Last year, when I turned Gem down, she'd called Lance. They were going to meet up at the County Fair that evening, a tradition since we were kids. I'll forever wonder if she would have called to invite me along too. It wasn't a date. Lance and Lexi were practically living together then in the redecorated carriage house. It was just for fun. Friends having fun.

Our meals arrive, dragging me away from my ruminations. We toast. *Cheers, santé, prost, here's to us and those who are absent.*

I've ordered one of my top-five French comfort foods. Duck confit, as I explain to Judith, is duck slowly roasted in duck fat. Mine comes with potatoes crisped in more duck fat and haricot verts, plucked from a garden two houses away.

Green beans, Judith translates, and accepts my offer of a bite of everything.

I'm about to tuck into my ducky delights when the server returns. She leans in, her expression so serious, I grip my knife and fork like life rafts. *What now?*

She starts with a formal *excusez-moi, Madame*, adds a bleak *désolée*, and then switches to English, which puts me further on edge. She wants to make sure I understand, although I thought I'd done a fair job of translating earlier.

"I am sorry," she repeats. "Madame, you are requested in the lobby. You have a caller, a gentleman." She casts a desolate look at my duck and crispy potatoes.

I relax. She must be mistaken about a nuance of translation and about me abandoning this meal, even for a moment.

"A call?" I ask. Laurent said he'd phone when the crime tech finished his report on my van vandalism. I love my van, but is the report interrupt-dinner important? *No*. I return the server's apologies, stressing that *I'm* sorry for disturbing her.

"Could you please tell the gentleman that I'll call him back later?" I ask, vaguely wondering why Laurent called the restaurant. Showing off his detection skills? Reminding me that he's keeping track of us? Irritated that I have my phone on mute?

Worry flutters in my middle.

The server shakes her head. “*Non*, Madame, you misunderstand. The gentleman is here, how do you say? In flesh?” She smiles. “A handsome gendarme? He needs you most urgently.”

* * *

I make my way through the restaurant. The building is ancient and thus big on stone. Stone walls. Stone floors. Beams centuries older than mine, sagging but still holding firm.

I try to imagine all it has seen. Things I can’t imagine and a lot that I probably could. Love, life, death, happiness, and day-to-day getting by.

It’s good perspective, but my stomach still flips at the sight of Jacques Laurent.

He stands in the entry lobby, inspecting the menu and, yes, looking handsome. Dark jeans, form-fitting t-shirt (in a rather daring peach), and another immaculate linen jacket in an evening shade of dusky blue.

“Fine choice of restaurant,” he says. “This sausage, most intriguing. And *ris de veau*, my, my.” He purses his lips as if he might give the menu a kiss.

I have no idea what that is. I was just glad when no one in my group asked for a translation.

The server bats her eyelashes at the detective. She’s about Nadiya’s age, I guess. Mid-twenties and objectively gorgeous. Long dark hair. A tight black work uniform that isn’t sweaty Spandex, cinched in by a clean white apron.

The detective remains firm in his focus. “The *ris de veau*, how do you serve it?”

She rapturously describes the origins of the *veau*. That I know—veal, which I usually feel too guilty to eat. *Says the woman yearning to return to duck braised in its own fat!*

The server has moved on to mushrooms, harvested with care from the forests practically under our feet.

My thoughts have drifted back to my meal when incongruous words seep in.

“You will be joining the party, Monsieur?”

Joining the party? Our party? Our table?

I open my mouth, ready to say something along the lines of, *I’m sure the detective is too busy solving crimes.*

At the very same moment Laurent says, “*Oui.*”

“*Oui,*” I repeat as the server guides us through the ancient stones toward the golden glow of the patio.

His brown eyes twinkle in the dim sconce lighting. “*Oui.* I would like to get to know you all better, and—”

I raise a palm. “Hold on. You are not allowed to interrogate my guests at the dinner table.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he says smoothly. “But I am curious about this blatant attack on your van, Madame Greene. You suggest your vandal could also be the killer. Why, then, be so reckless?”

“Please, call me Sadie,” I say, since I have no answer about the vandal. “Enough with the Madame Greene. I have just invited you to dinner.”

“Ah, delightful. *Merci beaucoup,* Sadie.”

I wait for the invitation to call him Jacques. None comes.

“And what do your friends call you?” I ask. “Jacques?”

His shrug is apologetic. “I’m afraid my friends call me Laurent. My mother calls me Jacques.”

That makes it easier. I’m sure not his mother, and I haven’t yet decided if he’s a friend or foe.

We hover just inside the restaurant while the server adds a place setting. Apparently, she’s giving Detective Laurent the head of the table. All the better for him to watch us.

“Why did you drive up here?” I ask. “Just because of the anchovies? Jordi already took the van to the cleaners. You’re lucky you missed the stench.” If I breathe too deeply, I still smell fish.

“So I hear,” he says. “That crime tech may never forgive me. And the anchovies—from Anchois Roque? They are the best producer in Collioure.” His sorrowful expression reminds me of Manfred.

I’m pleased he’s taking the crime seriously. I’m glad he’s on the case.

However, when we step onto the patio, it’s clear that not everyone wants dinner with a detective.

Judith gasps and drops a mussel. “Detective, why are you here? Has something happened? Have you found out what happened to Dom?”

“He thinks we killed Dad, Mom,” Lance says.

“Lance!” Judith cries.

I wait for the *be nice*, but Judith is waiting for Laurent’s answer.

“Probably came to harass me,” Jordi says in belligerent French.

Nadiya huffs.

Nigel suggests that Laurent should shut down this “dangerous tour.”

“Shut down you,” Conny mutters.

Only Manfred smiles. “Detective, you have come to investigate the tragedy of my anchovies?” He points to his meal, which includes wild-boar sausages and a special side. “Before you do, may I recommend the potato and anchovy gratin?”

“You may,” says Laurent, “That is why I am here. To enjoy the delicacies.”

He smiles, but his eyes are sharp as he assesses each member of my group. “And to get to know you all better.”

Translation: to suspect everyone.

Cyclist's log

Day 4 recap

Gem, I need your help with something. A key question. The key question: Are we dealing with multiple criminals? Put another way, could a nice, happy cycling tour company attract two criminals in the month of June?

Seems unlikely, doesn't it? But so does the alternative. Would a cowardly, petty vandal escalate so quickly to murder and burglary, with anchovy chaos in between?

Don't worry, I won't spew about anchovies again, but did you catch that? I'm sure you did. Yep, tonight's breaking news: fresh crime! Burglary.

We discovered the robbery after dinner. Laurent walked back from the restaurant with us. He wanted to pick up Dom's laptop. That's why he drove all the way up here. He wanted more of his techs to inspect Dom's digital activity. "There will be fingerprints in his electronic path," Laurent said dramatically. He eyed Jordi.

Jordi didn't help himself by muttering that he wouldn't leave tracks.

There must be a history between those two.

Judith was happy to hand over the laptop. She's concentrating on recovering, she said. Good attitude!

I think Laurent had expected her to resist. Maybe he even wanted that. He could have stabbed a finger in the air and declared, "What do you have to hide, Madame?"

You can guess where this is going. Judith couldn't find the laptop. We checked their luggage, thinking it got misplaced. That's when we discovered the robberies. Lexi and Judith are missing jewelry.

Lexi is missing an heirloom ring! Confession: I was being an awful person and thinking why, why, why would you travel with heirlooms? Then Lexi said the ring belonged to

her globe-traveling great-aunt. Lexi's a nervous flyer and thought the ring would bring her luck.

I'm awful and appropriately chastened.

Lance told Lexi that her prescription nerve pills work way better than any ring.

Judith is missing a charm bracelet, the expensive kind with silver bangles. She didn't sound as sentimental, even though Dom had gotten her the charms for birthdays.

"I once told Dom I liked them. He always remembered," she said. "Every birthday."

She shook her head like she might have liked another gift once in a while. I understand that. Remember when I told Al that I liked Munster cheese? He kept bringing me the US variety, creamy and nice but mostly tasteless. I'd meant the ultra-stinky "real" Munster you and I had on our Christmas trip to Alsace. Al was so pleased, and then it went on too long for me to correct him. Dear Al.

Back to the robbery. It gets worse: Nigel is also missing something important. The notebook the commandos heroically fished from the sea. Is he that famous that someone would want it?

Or was it something he wrote? Nigel refused to tell Laurent what he'd been writing. My intimate insights, Detective. No one sees my meditations until I serve them up to the world.

Ugh.

He then butchered Ozymandias: Look at my words, ye cyclist, and despair.

Pompous little man.

When Nigel left, I spelled out my mistaken-bike-identity theory to Laurent. Nigel was riding the same kind of bike as Dom. "You can see how he'd make enemies," I said.

"You would be among those enemies?" Laurent countered.

I don't think he meant it as rude. Just obvious.

I gave him what I hope translated as an oh-come-on look. "Would I kill my own business?"

French noncommittal shrug and lip ruffling from Laurent.

I get it, suspicion is in his job description. Mine too, apparently. Back to my original question. How many criminals? A vandal plus an enemy of Nigel Fox? Someone who followed Nigel here?

Laurent was optimistic about returning the jewelry. They're distinctive pieces. He got in his dramatic line too. I knew he had it in him.

Mesdames, my officers will probe every corner of the Department of the Pyrénées-Orientales for your precious goods!

He wasn't so upbeat about the laptop. He must be kicking himself for not collecting it earlier.

The good news is that we're safe tonight. Two uniformed gendarmes are in a van just outside the gates. A van with blue and white stripes and GENDARMERIE written across it in big reflective letters.

Madame Odette isn't happy about that. It does take away from her relaxing country-home atmosphere.

I did learn some things. Ris de veau are sweetbreads, as in an organ. The thymus. Whoever came up with "sweetbreads" is a marketing genius.

Also, Laurent's father is British—an Oxford don, no less. Philly and Conny found that out in the cleverest way possible. They outright asked.

Where'd you get that fine London accent, Inspector?

The sisters know Oxford. Their niece studies there. They and Laurent chatted about tea shops and pubs. According to the sisters, there's a tea shop in Oxford with the UK's best clotted cream.

Laurent hadn't been but made a note. I like that. Positive check for Jacques Laurent.

The sisters asked Nigel if he'd been there. London's not too far away. He replied that clotted cream is a dish for children and old women.

The odd thing? The sisters smiled at the insult.

"Aye, we thought so," Philly said.

*“Don’t know as much as you think, do you?” Conny said.
To which Nigel blustered that he knew more than any of
us.*

*“You should be careful not to cross me,” he said, which
made my neck prickle.*

*Remember how I was seeing vandals everywhere? Well,
now it’s potential murderers. If Nigel’s a killer, it would be
for no logical reason other than to win and be mean.*

*I wouldn’t want Laurent’s job, peering into dark places
and murky souls. No wonder he put in a bid for Oui Cycle.*

How badly did he want it?

In Law and Order I’d whisper, Bad enough to kill for?

Now I really am suspecting everyone.

*Thanks for letting me talk this through with you, Gem. The
crimes must be connected, but how? Why? Vandal, saboteur,
killer, thief . . .*

Chapter 18

Day 5, Monday Good morning, Oui Cyclists! After breakfast, we'll explore the castle before striking out for another Most Beautiful Village of France, Eus. Expect charming villages and lovely landscapes on our leisurely ride of 32 kilometers—that's 19.88 miles.

The next morning, the songbirds and I wake before dawn. I tiptoe downstairs, make coffee in a divine Mr. Coffee, and head outside with two steaming mugs in hand, creamer and sugar packets in my pocket.

Can green be a smell? A feel? Clouds rolled in late last night, bringing rain and lingering in fog that veils the valley below. Hilltops poke out like islands. I stroll toward the front gate, wondering if this is how it felt in medieval times. Each hilltop town, separate and watchful for marauders.

And vandals and killers and thieves.

I slept easier knowing we had gendarme protection. I'm so grateful that I'm bringing the night-watch officers coffee before I've even had my own cup.

As I approach their van, I see they're asleep. Cheeks pressed to window glass, mouths hanging open. I stop and debate. Should I tap on a window and risk scaring sleeping men with guns? On the other hand, I do have coffee. *I'd* want coffee after a long night in the van.

I'm still pondering when a scream slices the morning quiet.

I jolt so violently, I spill half the coffee onto my hands, knees, and flip-flopped feet.

That's okay, though. Now the gendarmes don't need a caffeine boost. They wake instantly and leap out of the van, hands on weapons. Suspicious frowns land on me.

I half-raise my coffee mugs.

"Madame!" the taller one declares. "Why did you yell? Are you injured?" He takes in my dripping hands and recoils.

The other—shorter, stockier, face of an anxious pug—scans the grounds.

I do too. Who screamed? "That wasn't me," I tell them and point, spilling more coffee in the process. "It came from over there, I think. By the pool."

They're already running that way. I should race after them. But they're the pros. They're armed. I'm hindered by two less-than-half-full mugs. I gulp coffee from each, two-handed like a serious drinker. Justifiable, I tell myself. If the day is starting out with a scream, I need caffeine.

Laughter comes from the other side of the oleander hedge ringing the pool. I make my way there and find Lexi wrapping a filmy coverup over a hot-pink sports bra. She's wearing full makeup, the kind designed to look like she's not wearing makeup. Since becoming a tour guide, I've mastered that technique by *not* wearing makeup.

The officers have stopped, seemingly stunned by the blonde vision they've awoken to. Lexi lets down her hair, fluffs it, arches her back, and reties her ponytail.

Meanwhile, Lance treads water in the deep end. That might be normal enough, except he's in a bathrobe. A nice, fluffy bathrobe that Madame Odette likely does not intend for swimming.

Lance shoots me an aw-shucks grin.

"My bad," he says. "Hey, officers! Sorry! Sorry, Sadie! Just having a bit of fun with my sweetie here."

Lexi swings her ponytail, thrusts fists to her hips, *and . . . chews him out?* Right! No, she waggles a manicured finger and gives him a you-naughty-boy-you're-so-sweet smile.

"Lance, you scared me, sneaking up like that!" She pouts. "You ruined my sun salutations."

"Nah, you'll go viral with that video," Lance says. "That elbow move and kick you did? Probably took out my appendix."

"Ooh!" Lexi gives a little squeal. "My video." She trots to a nearby lounge, where her phone sits, red eye blinking. She taps. The scream replays on low volume. She murmurs about editing.

Lance has flipped on his back and is doing a leisurely backstroke.

The taller gendarme clears his throat. "Ah," he says. "I do not speak, ahh . . . not very well, *anglais?*"

Oh! I need to explain! I offer what I hope is my most glowing and apologetic French. What I'm apologizing for, I'm not sure. "It's a misunderstanding," I say. That seems to cover it.

"He, ah, attacks her?" the officer says, warming up to his English.

"He did attack me!" Lexi says. "Naughty boy! Ooh, Sadie, is that coffee? I could kill for a coffee!"

“I mostly drank it,” I admit. *And spilled it.*

Lexi raises a perfect eyebrow at the two mugs.

“We can get more,” I say. “I made a full pot in the kitchen. You can tell me what happened.”

Lance paddles over. “Nothing to tell. I sneaked in for a kiss, that’s all. Woke up early. Rolled over and once again found my bed empty.”

He faux pouts.

Lexi coos as if he’s a wounded baby bird.

Good grief, I need more coffee. I turn to the officers, who surely need some too.

“*Bisous*,” the short one says to me. “Kissing. Yes, yes. We understand.”

Lexi bestows her most beaming smile on them. “Thank you, officers. Thank you for coming to my rescue. You’re my heroes.” She turns to me. “Sadie, can you tell them that?”

From the blushes on their cheeks, I think they already know.

* * *

Turns out a scream is a good way to get a group up and ready. With two hours until our checkout, we have ample time to visit the castle, then return to freshen up before the first leg of our ride.

Madame Odette clearly had hopes of an earlier departure. “You’ll want to get on the road,” she says as I help her set out breakfast. Fresh croissants and baguettes, marmalade she made with fruit from her own trees, and espresso so thick it is practically pudding.

“Looks like stormy weather,” she continues, frowning hopefully to the west, the direction we’re ultimately heading.

I’m not sure how she can tell. Fog still hovers over the high peaks. The forecast—which I check obsessively—suggests a 50 percent chance of scattered showers and thunderstorms.

Glass half full or half empty?

Half-full, I decide. Dodging bad weather is part of my job, but so is showing off a castle, and this one has some good stories.

An hour later, we stand before it.

“Quite the pile,” Lance jokes, gazing up at the parapets. “Pile of rocks.”

It’s official—he’s making dad jokes. Lexi and Judith chuckle obligingly.

I fast-forward through the castle's centuries of history, starting with the viscount who built it in the tenth century. I rattle off battles because that's what history expects. I note changes in ownership, both of the castle and of the region. I linger a little longer on major home disasters and repairs. The castle could have its own fix-up and flip reality show. Then I reach my favorite resident.

"A famous American—a Midwesterner—lived here," I announce to sounds of interest from Lexi and Judith.

Nigel snorts. "Americans. Think they can buy up everything."

Says a son of the British Empire? I keep smiling.

Conny channels my desired retort. "Hush up, Foxy. Sadie is telling us a story."

I smile brighter and say, "Amy Elizabeth 'Betty' Thorpe was born in Minnesota in 1910. Born restless, she'd later say. From a young age, she craved excitement, travel, fear, anything!"

I so get that. Except for the fear part. I could do without that. But yearning to see beyond Minneapolis or Elm Park—that I understand.

"Sounds like someone we know," Lance says, grinning at me.

Judith sighs. "I didn't see it coming."

If she's talking about my gap year abroad, no one did. Everyone assumed I was hoarding my high-school summer-job money for college tuition. Good, practical Sadie.

Betty took a more adventurous course. "She covered an unwed pregnancy by marrying a man who worked for the British Embassy," I tell my group. Betty surely imagined international travel, swish parties, and intrigue. In reality, Arthur was dull. Even travel failed to make him sparkle.

At this point in the story, I mentally affirm my parting from Al Weston. It never would have worked out. One of us (me) would have been unhappy.

"Betty's luck turned with World War II," I say. "She signed on as a secret agent, working with MI6. Her code name was Cynthia, and she was one of the most important spies in the game."

"She had a certain talent," I add. "Seduction." Betty/Cynthia didn't pioneer the honey trap, but she sure enjoyed it. As she'd wickedly tell anyone.

"Good for her!" Philly cackles. "That's the key to work—do what you love no matter what anyone says about you."

Conny turns to me. “And don’t let bullies decide your course.” She and her sister nod as if compelling me to agree.

I oblige.

“Sop,” mutters Nigel. “Be the best. Then you’ve achieved something. Win at all costs or you’re a loser.”

The sisters scan the grounds as if seeking a parapet from which to fling him.

“Betty would agree with you about winning,” I say. My agreement makes Nigel frown. “She was among the best spies in the war effort.”

Betty wouldn’t need me to stand up for her. She’d crush a man like Nigel. I smile at the thought and tell them how she seduced a French newspaper man and enlisted him in the Resistance.

“It wasn’t all noble,” I add, because I try not to gloss over the bad parts in my tour talks. “Her new man was married. His wife—eventually ex-wife—blew Betty’s cover. Betty had to retire. She and the former newspaper man moved here.” I wave, open-palmed, to the castle.

A castle in the South of France. War over. No more infiltrating Nazis. I would have been beyond giddy. Betty, not so much.

“To this very castle?” Judith says. She seems awed. I understand. It’s hard to relate to all those centuries of nobles and generals, but a Midwestern gal getting her castle? That’s a story to get behind.

“Aw, her happy ending,” says Lexi, patting her heart.

“Yes,” I say, carefully. “She and her husband had a lot of good years here.”

But Betty missed the excitement. She was bored.

I say, “She’s still here, in fact. She’s buried on the grounds under her favorite cedar.”

More *awws* from Lexi.

I decide not to add the details. What matters is how you lived, not how you die, right? Throat cancer struck down the great spy. Her husband died here too, ingloriously. His electric blanket caught fire, killing him and burning down much of the castle yet again.

You never know what’s going to get you.

But that’s a life lesson too—you can’t worry about it all.

As we’re touring the castle, the clouds issue an ominous rumble.

It occurs to me that castles rarely offer happy endings.

Also? I should have taken Madame Odette’s hint and gotten on the road.

Chapter 19

Day 5, Monday Onward to Eus, one of the sunniest and most beautiful villages in France! Admire the orchards as we pedal country lanes under the watchful gaze of Mount Canigou, the sacred mountain of the Catalans.

“Sunniest village in France.” Nigel sniffs dismissively. He has me cornered in a castle. The shell of a castle, I should say. Stone walls are all that remain of the thirteenth-century structure. That and the view. A panoramic patchwork of orchards, gardens, and vineyards extends before us. In the backdrop, the iconic mountain looks even more dramatic under bruise-dark clouds.

A raindrop falls on the packed earth, so big it makes a splat.

“Rubbish,” Nigel says, frowning from the clouds to me.

I bite back a sigh and a retort. If I could control the weather, I’d be the most famous and sought-after cycling guide in France. Villagers would gather to cheer my arrival. Instead I’m leading the tour of everything that can go wrong.

I summon false optimism. “Hopefully it’ll pass us by. If it rains up in the valley, everything will be lovely and fresh for the last leg of our ride. Smell the ions?”

I inhale. The air has a zingy, dangerous scent.

We had lunch on the village plaza earlier, surrounded by stone homes decked out in flowerpots and that fabulous view. Our waitress had looked to the sky with glee. They hadn’t had a good, soaking rain in ages, she said. Only the sprinkle last night.

“The locals will be happy,” I continue.

Nigel wrinkles his nose. “Rain after drought means slippery roads.”

I hate that he’s right. Oil builds up on roads during hot, dry spells. Add water, and bike tires feel like they’re skates on butter.

“We have good all-weather tires and new brake pads,” I counter, as if we’re in a jousting match.

Nigel smiles. “Oil slicks are the safest part of this tour. I, for one, shall not be standing here waiting for the next disaster.”

For a moment, real optimism blossoms. Not waiting around? He's leaving? For good? That would be bad news for my review, but let's face it, that's already rubbish. The good news would be no more complaining critic.

I squelch a smile, which is easy when Nigel says, "I shall enjoy having the hot spring to myself while you lead the group into a storm."

Of course. He's speeding on to our next hotel. How predictable, Nigel. "Okay, great!" I lie. "I'll call ahead and let the hotel know you'll be early. We'll all be leaving soon if you want to wait a few minutes."

I told everyone to meet back at the castle. They can't get lost if they keep walking upward. I check my watch. "We'll be gathering in thirteen minutes."

"I can be halfway to therapeutic waters by then," Nigel says.

Please! The distance is pretty short—only about ten and a half miles—but much of it is uphill.

Although he is fast. Surprisingly fast.

Suspiciously fast?

"You have a lot of cycling experience," I say.

Another smile. "More than you, I would estimate. I could run a *worthy* tour. We would not lallygag around in towns that have had their day. We would ride!"

With that, he huffs and strides off, leaving me leaning against the window opening in the stone.

"What an awful man." Lexi has been gazing out the next opening over. She approaches with a sympathetic head shake, her green drink, and her phone-tripod combo.

I allow myself a smile and a transparent euphemism. "He's a *challenging* guest."

She nods knowingly. "Totally. Some people refuse to tap their positivity endorphins."

Yep, if only more people tapped into positivity. If they did, there wouldn't be so many fortified castles and battlements to visit, and I'd be fine with that.

"Do you get sour types in your fitness classes?" I ask. "Or is everyone chill?"

Lexi shudders. "Oh no. Even in yoga and meditation, there's all sorts of competition. Who can look most serene, who can hold the strength poses longest. It's a beauty contest too." She rolls her eyes.

I become aware that my padded bike shorts are bunched up. I resist tugging.

“Last month,” Lexi says, “I had two women who would *not* stop talking about their Botox procedures during silent meditation. I *hate* being the bad guy, but I had to ask them to enjoy the silence. They huffed out and left the class, like I was being unreasonable.”

“I know the feeling,” I say. It feels good, venting to a friend.

We chat about more problem clients.

“But your job is amazing!” Lexi says. “I’m so happy for you, Sadie. You have your dream. You’re soooo brave!”

My cheeks warm, despite the air temperature plummeting with the storm. “I don’t know about brave, but it is a dream,” I admit.

I hope I can keep it tips on my tongue. I bite it back, as if saying the fear might make it real.

“You have yours too,” I say.

“I do. Total dream,” Lexi says. She’s no longer looking at the view, but over my shoulder. I turn and see Lance, texting over by an inner wall.

“He’s a great guy, isn’t he?” she says. “You’ve been friends forever, right?”

“He’s like my big bro,” I say. “You two make a great couple. You’re good for him.”

“Aw, Sadie, you’re the sweetest!” Lexi squishes me into a hug. “Don’t let that awful little man bully you. It’s not your fault what happened to poor Dom.”

Her eyes go glassy. She looks upward to fend off tears. “Sorry! I’ll ruin my mascara before the rain does. When are we scheduled to leave? I want to get a few more photos.”

“Five minutes,” I say. Then add, “With a fifteen-minute buffer, but don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Our secret.” Lexi bounds off, looping her arm through Lance’s and dragging him along.

I look around. Nadiya is back. She joins me at the view.

“Beautiful but no good to ride,” she says with her usual realism.

“I know. What do you think? Do we make a run for it?” By run, I mean cycle as fast as we can. Manfred, Lance, and Lexi could sprint. Judith has her e-bike and the battery boost. Conny and Philly? They seem to like bad weather. I could stay back with them.

Nadiya frowns. “The storm is close.”

All my weather apps insist there’s a 50 percent chance of rain with potentially severe thunderstorms. That means a 50 percent chance of *not* dangerous and deadly.

I consider my options for the umpteenth time.

“Has Jordi gotten the van back?” I ask. “He can take the guests up to the hotel, then come back for us and the bikes.” We could shelter in a café or the ancient stone tunnel leading from the castle down to town. It could be cozy.

Or claustrophobic, dark, and scary.

Nadiya shakes her head. “Jordi just called the detailing shop. The anchovies are very powerful. It is taking much time, with the luggage too. Much longer than expected.”

More time will mean costlier than expected too. Also no SAG van support.

This is one of the biggest and most obvious challenges of bicycle tours. You can find yourself far from where you want to be in weather you’d rather not, well, weather.

“We could wait,” I mull.

“Cafés will close,” Nadiya says. “Everything will close. It’s Monday. It’s afternoon.” She taps an imaginary watch.

She’s right. Eus is renowned for its beauty. The cobbled lanes, curling up the hill. The village stacked like a layer cake. However, it doesn’t offer much by way of shops that could shelter a group. The tunnel and a small bus stop by the public restrooms would be our best shelters. We could be here all afternoon.

On the other hand, if we take a chance, we could get to Vernet-les-Bains and its soothing hot springs in about an hour and a half.

I balance distance, time, and risk. I calculate in a personal reason too. Or should I say a questionable personal decision?

I’ve agreed to meet Laurent this afternoon to put in a call to the US. Specifically, to Vanessa Ortiz to ask about her email to Dom. Last night, Laurent made this sound reasonable. A friendly call, unofficial.

Now the idea makes me as uneasy as the weather.

For one, I might be late. I loathe being late. Second, there’s the icky feeling that I’m going behind Judith’s and Lance’s backs.

“No need to tell the Appletons,” said Laurent. Then he came out and asked me *not* to tell them.

I reassure myself. The call will prove that the email meant nothing. Vanessa can sound gruff, but it was probably some mistake in the data, a dull question about carryovers. By clearing that up, I’ll be guiding Laurent toward his true avenue of inquiries.

I frown at the sky. If we hide, it won’t rain a drop. My riders will be bored, tired, potentially grumpy. If we risk it?

Every move is a risk.

I sigh. There are things you can control in life and cycling tours. There are so many more you can’t. “Okay, let’s try to get to Vernet and hope the storm holds off.”

“Hope and try,” repeats Nadiya. “It is all anyone can do.”

This philosophy summons Manfred. He strolls around a rock wall, looking nightclub-worthy cool in black Lycra shorts. His matching jersey has an extraneous zipper on one shoulder, and he’s wearing sunglasses. He turns them to the clouds.

“We might be in for some bad weather,” I say, stating the obvious.

“There is no such thing as bad weather,” Manfred replies. “Weather is weather. Only our attitude can be bad—and our clothing choices.”

In theory, I agree. Good and bad are human constructs.

A raindrop the size of a grape lands on my nose. In reality? I know bad weather when I feel it.

Chapter 20

Day 5, Monday On to Vernet! The uphill climb is a challenge but think about what awaits us: therapeutic waters.

Our destination, pretty Vernet-les-Bains with its natural hot springs, is sixteen kilometers from Eus. In miles, just less than ten miles. On foot, ten miles would qualify as a good hike. Back home, ten miles in a car, crossing tangles of traffic, would make me moan and groan and reconsider leaving the house.

But on a bike? I won't say ten miles is easy—especially with our final uphill slog—but it's doable in under an hour, a ride that feels like an accomplishment but doesn't take all day.

Back at our rides, I outline the route. As my closer I say, "And even if it starts to sprinkle again, what's our motto, Manfred?"

Manfred is adjusting his helmet. It's vintage in style, round on top like a silver beetle with leather straps. He clicks the clasps and says, totally straight-faced, "There is no such thing as bad weather."

"Hear, hear!" the sisters cheer. They've donned rain slickers. They are prepared for every contingency.

Lexi issues a fitness-trainer rallying cry. "Let's do this, team! You're all amazing!"

Bike bells chime, and we're off.

I lead, taking extra care in case of slick pavement or drivers whipping around the narrow hairpin turns like they're Formula One racers. In my heightened awareness, it takes me a good half-mile to tally what's happening. No tires slip. A van politely waits for us to cross a one-lane bridge. A couple wave from their garden. A dog the size of a bear runs down its driveway to wag its tail.

Good luck?

I hardly dare hope for fear of jinxing it.

The sun peeks through as we spin past orchards of peaches and almonds, pruned like bonsai. When we approach the roundabout on the main road, I'm feeling good. Smug, even. After this brief zone of busy shopping

centers, we'll turn off onto a rural road. From there, we're practically home free. I will have clocked in a day without troubles. A day when everything went mostly according to plan.

"Roundabout coming," I call back to my riders. "Follow me. We'll take the center of the lane."

My instructions filter back through the line, like kids playing a game of telephone. They know what to do. We've gone through roundabouts before. This one is long and spoked with busy entrances and exits, the riskiest points for riders and drivers.

I slow to time my entrance. A hatchback speeds past, then a tow truck gobbling up both lanes like it's gunning for business. I spot a clearing, take a deep breath, and pedal into the center of the right-hand lane. Claiming the center means that cars will have to pass on the left. Or they can simply be polite and wait behind us.

Not all will be polite. Sadly, very few. Bikes claiming a lane can spark instant eruptions of anger.

As I'm thinking this, a BMW surges by on the left. We pass an exit and an on-ramp. The next exit will be ours.

I extend my right arm, the easiest and most understandable signal of a turn. Relief surges through me. Premature relief. I'm about to turn, when the clouds open up like an exploded reservoir. Rain falls in blinding sheets. Cold rain laced with angry pellets of hail.

If I exit now, we'll be stuck out on the open road. Miles of dangerous roads where rain-blinded drivers can't see us and puddling water could hydroplane our tires.

I have to make a decision, fast.

I ride past the exit.

Now to make sure my group follows me and the blinking red light on the back of my bike. My wheels skip over water. I want to check over my shoulder but feel too unstable. If I fall, it's not only my skin in danger. The rest of my group could go down like dominoes.

On a curve, I risk a quick peek. Through the blur of rain, I spot Lexi's pink top. She's a few meters back with a rider on her left side, protectively buffering her from the inner lane. Lance, I think. He *is* a good guy.

Finally, I've made it around, back to the first exit we passed. I signal a turn, and this time we take it. The mucky trash-littered berm where I pull to a stop feels like the most beautiful place on this tour.

Lexi is soon beside me, then Lance and Judith. Conny and Philly roll down the exit next, arms raised in a rude gesture to a truck, faces lit up with laughter.

“What a ride!” Conny exclaims. “We showed that circle.”

With such a small group, I don’t need to count. I do anyway. It’s a comfort. One number leads to the next and then, logically, the final total.

One, two, three, four, five.

My numbers aren’t adding up. I need seven. “Where are Manfred and Nadiya?” I yell to make myself heard over a clap of thunder. The world flashes. Lexi yelps and shivers into Lance.

The nearest refuge is the French version of a big box grocery store.

“Go to the Super U!” I yell. “Get under cover.”

Judith tuts. “We’ll wait with you, Sadie. We’re not leaving you.”

Thunder booms. Lexi cowers.

“Mom,” Lance says. “It’s not safe. Come with us. I’m taking Lexi to cover. You know she doesn’t like storms and traffic now.”

A memory strikes me. Lexi was in a traffic accident a couple weeks before Gem’s hit-and-run. There was a rainstorm pileup on the expressway and a distracted driver behind her. Lexi was physically fine, but her car and nerves were pretty busted up. Gem and I visited her at the carriage house and brought her a basket of smoothie ingredients.

“Please,” I say to them all. “Go inside the store so I know you’re safe. The rest of us will be right there.”

I hope.

Thunder rumbles through me. Lexi squeals as they ride off. The sisters crow with glee, rain ponchos flapping. Judith pedals serenely behind them.

I wait, flinching with each clap of thunder and arguing with myself. Should I ride back out to the circle? I picture us circling and circling, forever missing each other. But what if something is wrong? What if they’ve made the wrong turn? *What if a car runs them off the road? What if*
...

The sky flashes, and I spot silver coming around the bend. Manfred dances on his pedals. Nadiya is a bike’s length behind. They glide down the ramp.

Manfred is smiling, but not his placid, philosophical smile. He’s grinning like a kid.

“This,” he says, as the rain pelts down, “This is most invigorating weather.”

Nadiya is laughing too. Rain drips from her face. The blue tips of her hair look like waterfalls. “We are alive,” she proclaims.

Thank goodness! But they scared me half to death.

* * *

The Arctic is warmer than the Super U on a June day.

Only Philly and Conny are mostly dry. They remove ponchos and helmets to reveal a second layer of raincoats and bathing caps.

“Always be prepared, that’s our motto,” says Philly, fluffing her red curls.

Her sister shows off their shoes. “Boat shoes, the real kind. All rubber. We’ll squeak, but we’re dry.”

Lexi is visibly shivering. Manfred remains outside under the awning, admiring the deluge through sunglasses.

“They have everything here,” I say. “Including a small clothing section. We can dry off and change in the restrooms. Who wants a fresh t-shirt, compliments of Oui Cycle?”

“Shopping?” Lance says. “No thanks. I won’t melt.” He grins at Lexi. “Go wild, babe. Buy out the store. You’ll feel better.”

“I’m fine,” Lexi insists, but her fingers shake and her teeth are rattling.

The automatic doors part for Lance. Warm, humid air sweeps in, heightening the chill. The sky is as dark as night.

I turn to the others. “Let’s shop.”

Twenty minutes later, rain still pelts the roof.

Fine, I tell myself. The clouds can have their say. I still have time to make my meeting with Laurent. Plus I’m helping cure the regional drought. Best of all, we women of the tour sport new matching t-shirts. Red with gold piping and an image of a grinning donkey on the front. I got to squeeze in some tour-guide info. The donkey, I explained, is a Catalan symbol.

“Everyone will see us coming,” Nadiya says. “We are bright.”

“We’re *amazing!*” Lexi says, and I’m relieved she has her verve back. She holds her camera at arm’s length. “Let’s get a selfie, girls. Say ‘awesome!’ ” We squish together. She angles the phone so we’re all looking up.

We giggle through some more silly poses. Sure, we're giving ourselves away as tourists. We're acting goofy and loud in a supermarket. But, as Manfred said, we're alive! Why not have fun?

"Beautiful ladies, shall I take your photograph?"

A male voice.

I'm about to retract my live-it-up sentiment, fearing we've attracted unwanted attention. Then, however, the voice registers. I turn to see a grinning friend in a mud-splattered cycling kit.

"Philippe!" I beam.

Philippe Duvall is sixty-eight, which I know from the published results of local cycling races. Decades ago, he was a pro rider. He rode the grand tours: the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia, the Vuelta a España, the dreaded cobblestones of Belgium. Safe to say, I'm in awe. He's also one of the humblest and sweetest guys around.

We air kiss, and I introduce him to the group, sliding in a mention of his Tour de France.

Everyone knows to be impressed by the Tour. Judith, Lexi, and the sisters are appropriately starstruck. Nadiya gets three breezy kisses from Philippe. She rides with Philippe's training group. They power up the tallest mountains with no stops for croissants.

I hear the telltale *click clack* of cleated shoes and spot his group—a flock of elite cyclists, all muscle, not an ounce of body fat. Red shopping baskets dangle from their arms, filled with wine bottles and tubes of Pringles. This is where elite cyclists, tour cyclers, and Tour de France sofa viewers overlap—we can all justify salty snacks.

When I turn back, I notice an angry road burn above Philippe's knee and a rip in his shorts below his hip.

"You're hurt!" I exclaim. "What happened?"

Philippe looks bashful, and I worry that I've stuck a wet shoe in my mouth. Far be it for me to point out a pro's tumble.

"An old man's vanity," he says. To Nadiya, he says, "Red Bib is back."

Nadiya gasps. "He's on the road today?" She looks toward the front doors, the view obscured by pounding water. "I must see him!"

"Never fear. You'll see him," Philippe says. "He's like a hornet in the helmet. Painful and difficult to evict."

To the rest of us, he explains, "A summer resident, or so we speculate. A cyclist we call Red Bib. A red bib number is awarded to the most

aggressive rider in the Tour de France, you see.”

“Who is he?” I ask. “A pro?”

Philippe shrugs. “That is the mystery. Lately, he rides before dawn, only stopping to taunt. That is why I was surprised this afternoon. He passed my group coming down from Olette. He must have ridden far into the mountains. He challenged me to descend. My own pride stung me. I lost control. I was lucky I only skidded into a stone barrier.”

I cringe, glad our wheels won’t be touching that road. Even if I had the legs to climb it, I wouldn’t have the nerve. Think corkscrew twists and turns on a two-way alpine speedway barely wide enough for cars.

We will ride the high plateau, but we’ll take a scenic train to get there. We’re cycling for fun, not aggression and unnecessary suffering.

“Bully of the mountains, that’s who he is,” huffs Nadiya. “If I meet him, I want to conquer him.”

“That’s how he lures you in, my friend,” says Philippe, glancing at his scuffed thigh with both warning and chagrin. “Prodding at your weak points. Taunting you to do your own harm. I should take lessons from Oui Cycle. Bicycling is for enjoyment. Speaking of which, shall I take your photo, lovely ladies?”

I hand him my phone. We blush for the camera, arms looped around each other.

“Beautiful,” Philippe says, after he’s taken several shots. “I hope to see you on a ride soon, Nadiya. You too, Sadie. You must join us when you are not hard at work.”

Being a gentleman and a cyclist, he says the last without snark. He knows that touring is hard work. But me ride with them? Nadiya can keep up. She’s tough and lean, where I’m croissant-padded and easily distracted by vistas and bakeries. Would I want to ride with such a hard-pushing crew?

Who am I kidding? I’d love to give it a go!

“I’d adore that,” I tell Philippe. He leaves with cheek kisses all around.

“What a nice man,” Judith says. “This rainstorm is actually good luck, isn’t it? We have these wonderful matching shirts, we got to meet your friend, and we get to see a French grocery. Sadie, will you show me the sights here? Something *très* French.”

Très French? I know just the thing. After agreeing that we’ll all meet at the front when we hear the rain stop, I lead Judith toward the aisle that always gives me that pinch-me-I-live-in-France feeling.

“Let me guess,” Judith says. “Wine?”

“That’s always good, but no.”

“The butcher? Bread!”

“Also amazing, but nope. I bet it’ll surprise you.”

I’m sure it’ll knock her sandals off.

Chapter 21

Day 5, Monday, revised afternoon itinerary Let's make the most of our rain delay and explore new culinary territory!

“Yogurt?” Judith asks, skepticism obvious.

Yogurt. I give her a minute to take it in.

“Oh, my.” She's beginning to compute. “This whole aisle is for yogurt?”

The Super-U is like the name implies: big. The aisles are massive, and this one is devoted primarily to cultured dairy. I may swoon over croissants and baguettes, wine and cheese, but yogurt just might be France's national food.

“And some other goodies mixed in,” I say, giving my best tour-guide palm wave to the mousses and puddings hanging out with the probiotics and thus—to my mind—healthy by association. “Yogurt is often served as a light dessert in France. It's eaten with pretty much any meal.”

“Incredible,” says Judith. “When did this happen?”

Judith is the best! She's handing me tour-guide candy, namely a chance to relay geeky facts.

“The year 1542,” I say and revel in Judith's response. What is her expression? Sheer joy at having the exact date? Sure, I'll go with that.

I keep rolling. “King François the First had digestion issues that his doctors couldn't cure. Someone suggested yogurt. They brought some in from the Ottomans, and a national love for yogurt was born.”

“Who knew?” says Judith.

Tour guides and dairy history geeks.

Judith inspects a chestnut mousse.

“It's delicious,” I say encouragingly. “We have an 8:30 dinner reservation tonight. You might want a snack.”

Judith places the carton in her basket, then looks around so furtively, the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. Is someone watching? The vandal?

I scan the fluorescently bright expanse. An elderly woman with a pull basket is decimating the supply of apricot yogurts. I can't see her spray-painting my bike barn or wreaking anchovy havoc. She must realize I'm

assessing her. She glances our way, narrows her eyes, and seizes the last cartons of apricot. No remorse. In fact, she looks pleased.

Lesson received. Laurent suspects everyone, and I should too.

Judith's hand hovers over her mousse as if she's having second thoughts.

"Lexi did lots of research so we could fit in over here," Judith says. "She read magazines and blogs, watched videos, studied the language—there's so much to learn!"

There is. I don't see how this applies to mousse. Chestnut mousse, no less. Nuts are healthy.

Judith leans closer and whispers. "Lexi says that snacking is a no-no."

I'm pretty sure that's true in most corners of Lexi's fitness universe, unless her green drink is involved.

"Chestnut mousse is never wrong." I say this with conviction because, one, it's true, and two, in my book, airy foods can be eaten without guilt.

I do commend Lexi's research. I get the urge to fit in, too. I am the prey of those online click-bait lists. You know the kind.

750 Things Never to Do in Paris!

Two Million Ways to Blare Tourist!

Fatal French Faux Pas to Fix Tout de Suite (Or as Lance would say, toot sweet.)

As much as I hate to admit it, Lexi's kind of right about snacks. "There's a way around it," I tell Judith. "*L'apéro.*"

I explain that the *apéro* is a sort of happy hour. Light drinks, nibbles, hanging out with friends. A little something to whet your appetite.

"Also," I add, "we will have just ridden uphill in the rain. Snacking is necessary for athletes such as ourselves."

Plus Judith has lost her husband. That should go without saying. I sure won't jab at that wound. Judith can do whatever she pleases.

She smiles, keeps the mousse, and moves on toward the butter section. "France is a lovely country. So wonderful to *visit.*"

I'm butter-gazing and thus miss her emphasis.

"I hope you'll come back someday," I say. I'd love to guide Judith to other regions. I'm picturing a leisurely bike and barge tour, crossing the country on the Canal de Midi. Or a ride through the half-timbered fairy-tale villages of Alsace-Lorraine. Oh, or Basque country. We could stop for *gâteau Basque*, the famous cherry- and cream-filled cakes.

“I *will*,” says Judith and puts a hand on my arm. “We could come together, Sadie. A *visit* is so nice. All the fun, none of the work and stress.”

I snap out of dreams of a cake-centered tour. “What?”

Judith turns to face me. “I’m being too oblique. Sadie, I want you to come home and work for me. *With me at Appleton Financial.*” She gives a brisk nod as if I’ve agreed with her.

“I, ah . . .” As I guide, I’ll admit when I don’t know the answer. I know this answer—no way!—but I don’t want to say it. My mind churns.

Churning! That’s it. I could deflect with butter facts. Judith, did you know? French law requires 82 percent buttercream, 2 percent more than the US. A critical and delicious difference!

Judith’s smile hardens.

Butter won’t fix this. I have to say something. I summon manners. “That’s very kind of you, Judith.”

It is, I tell myself. Or is it? She’s just discounted my whole dream job, my business, my biggest life decision.

Hail rattles the roof like a million nails. The lights flicker.

“Appleton Financial needs you,” Judith says. “Dom always said you were his protégé. He had big plans for you, Sadie. He was going to ask you to come back. That’s one of the reasons he agreed to this vacation. Now I’m in charge, and I need you even more.”

His protégé. My heart swells, which makes the pain even bigger. He was here for me. I’m the reason he was on that bike, hurtling over a cliff.

Then Judith’s other words sink in. I blink at her. “You’re in charge?”

“*Her*,” *Lance said when he was on the phone with Deborah, the word laced with incredulity and disgust. “She won’t be happy.”*

Judith is firming her shoulders. “I should think I am in charge. My inheritance from my grandmother went into founding Appleton Financial. I stood by Dom all these years. You can choose your title, Sadie. Chief actuary? CFO? I’ll need someone with your passion for numbers.”

I like numbers. You always know what they’re up to. However, I’ve already chosen my title: Proprietress and Chief Guide of Oui Cycle.

“I’m honored,” I say, delaying. Shoppers pass by us, carts filled with everyday items, oblivious to the emotional bomb Judith has just handed me. I decide to defuse it with honesty. “A year ago, I would have jumped at the chance,” I tell Judith. “But I love my new life. Gem and I dreamed of running our own cycling business. I’m doing it for both of us.”

“My dear,” says Judith, looking around again. “I know you like cycling, and I know why you’re trying to make amends to Gem. I understand now more than ever.” She takes in the aisle, which now seems stark to me in its industrial lighting.

“I can imagine running off to a beach,” Judith says. “A lake, more like it. I always wanted a lake cottage in the woods.”

I’m about to say she could do just that when she shakes her head. “You can only hide away for so long. Then you must get back to your real world, real work. Sadie, I’m asking you to be honest with yourself. You’re operating on a thin margin already, I suspect. These troubles, these terrible crimes—can Oui Cycle survive them? Can you?”

I take a step back. Judith is coming at me with a one-two punch: motherly concern and financial logic. She’s backed me into the ice-cream chest. My palms land on the frosty edge. I pry them away but am left with a sticky numb feeling.

“At your age,” Judith says. “You should be building your nest egg, settling down, having a family. I saw Al the other day. He asked about you. Such a kind man.”

And like that, the spell breaks.

At my age?! I lost count of how many people said that to me last year. Friends, family, colleagues, distant acquaintances, strangers.

You’re moving to *France*? How brave—at your age!

Bike touring—at your age?

You’re breaking up with a steady, dependable boyfriend—at your age? Some would then add the ticktock of my biological clock, as if I’m a tragic spinster in a Jane Austen novel, destined for a barren life of bicycling.

I’m thirty. I haven’t expired.

A gasp saves me from blurting something too blunt. Lexi rounds the corner, shopping basket on one elbow, Lance on the other. She stops and ogles, taking in yogurt Elysium.

“O! M! G!” she squeals.

She drops Lance’s arm and reaches for her cell phone. “I’m *never* leaving here.”

“Great, now I’ll lose you to France too,” Lance jokes. “First Sadie, now my girlfriend.”

“Not if I have my way,” Judith announces crisply. “I think I’d like to see the baking aisle. Sadie, will you join me?”

She's asking for more than an escort to the cake mixes.

"It's right over there," I say, overly bright. "Next aisle. There are cookies too!"

Judith nods. "Think about it." She picks up the chestnut mousse and inspects it once again. "This expires soon."

"What was that about?" Lance asks when his mother has rounded the corner. "Think about what?"

His mother, assuming charge of their family company, asking me to name my title. Letting me know her offer won't last forever? I can't tell Lance any of that. This is for him and Judith to discuss.

I'm again saved by Lexi. She's taking a video, a wide sweeping shot of the aisle with herself voicing over. *Oh my gosh, everyone, look where I am! Forget the Eiffel Tower. This. Is. Amazing!*

"I was showing your mom the yogurt," I whisper and hold up a shushing finger.

He rolls his eyes.

I reassure myself that I'm not *really* lying by omission to Lance. I was showing off the yogurt. The rest of the conversation won't affect him because I know my answer to Judith's offer. No, no, *non, merci!*

We wander the aisles and stock up on snacks. The rain lets up, but doubts pound louder than any hail. What if Judith is right? Oui Cycle is in trouble. Gambling on my dream could leave me with nothing.

Chapter 22

Day 5, Monday Welcome to our home for the night, charming Vernet-les-Bains. This leafy village is a park within a park. Not only does the village lie within the Pyrénées Catalanes Regional Nature Park, it is also an “Arboretum Village,” the first in France.

We ride into Vernet-les-Bains with rain jackets flapping and mud speckling our ankles, calves, backsides, and pretty much everywhere. I pull off the road so we can take in the view and catch our breath.

“Like a postcard,” Judith breathes, and we all agree.

The old village rises like a layer cake, topped with a church and castle turrets. Red tile roofs are glossy with rain. Birdsong serenades us. And the backdrop—I soak it in as cell-phone cameras click. The great Canigou watches over the village, its rocky peak appearing to float above veils of mist.

I could have laden on tour-guide tidbits: the height of the mountain; the number of tree species and notable specimens, including what might just be the finest tulip tree in all of France. I let the camera clicks turn to contented sighs and admiration before we get back on our bikes for the short ride to our inn.

“Gorgeous,” Judith declares when we arrive. L’Auberge de la Rose, a converted Beaux-Arts mansion, lives up to its name. Rose vines as thick as my arm climb the dusky pink plaster, offset by sage green shutters, and ironwork trim.

“Sure, but what’s that smell?” Lance wrinkles his nose. “Rotten eggs?”

He turns his twitching nose to Lexi. “You need a bath, babe.”

“Lance!” Lexi chides, and for once she seems truly offended.

Okay, I think. He asked for it: tour-guide details, coming up.

“We’ll all smell like sulfur soon,” I say. “Vernet is famous as a thermal spa. What you’re smelling are the hot spring waters, the baths, or *bains*, in Vernet-les-Bains. There’s sulfur in the water, which gives it a soft, silky quality. Your skin will feel amazing.”

Lexi lights up at “amazing.” “Do we have time for a dip before dinner?”

We do, but now I kick myself for bringing up the baths. Jordi still hasn't arrived with the van and the luggage. I know for sure because he would have had to pass us on the way here.

I plaster on a smile I hope says *everything is under control*.

"Let me check us in," I say. "Then I'll call over to the spa. Our luggage and the van are getting extra clean, but I bet the spa has some suits to rent."

Lexi frowns. "Rented suits? Like rented bowling shoes?"

Lance nudges her. "Skinny dip?"

"We're in!" crows Philly, with Conny as her chorus. "We've been aiming to dip nekkid since that last town."

"Nature prefers the natural and wild," Manfred says.

Perhaps, but this particular spa prefers bathing suits. It also attracts a certain set of, let's say, more mature clients. Mature as in elderly visitors who come for the curative properties of the waters. I can't be responsible for heart palpitations brought on by skinny-dipping cyclists.

"I'm sure the spa will loan us some pristine suits," I say. I'm not at all sure, but the threat of skinny dipping might spur them on, and I have seen bathers wearing suits inscribed with the spa's logo.

"It's fine," Lexi says in a tone that means just the opposite. "I'll take a nice shower instead. Then I need to post some content. Like the amazing yogurt aisle!"

I leave them making their plans and hurry into the hotel.

The ornate lobby has its own arboretum of potted ferns, palms, lemon trees, and orchids. I breathe in the perfume of green scents, flowers, and coffee. From previous visits, I know there's a pod coffee maker in the sunroom/library just off reception.

I'm already anticipating a visit to the machine when foliage ruffles. A fern the size of a wine barrel huffs.

If only it were just a disapproving fern.

"Finally. You took your time." Nigel rises from an armchair facing the door. His mustache is dry and preened. His clothes, however, are mud-speckled and damp.

"Oh!" I say, beaming with false delight. "Nigel! Wonderful, you're here! Did you avoid the weather?"

He sniffs.

"Monsieur Fox?" a young hotel clerk appears, clicking across colorful tiles in slim cropped slacks, a gauzy mint blouse, and kitten heels. "Your

room key, Monsieur. Room 201, enjoying a view of the mountains and village. We do apologize for your wait.”

Nigel sniffs. “It is my guide who made me wait, Mademoiselle Chloe.” He turns to me. “At least you are in time to bring up the rest of my luggage.” He lifts a bag, a bike pack that converts to a shoulder bag.

His eyes glint. He *knows* I can’t bring his suitcases. If he’s here waiting for his key, he’ll also know our van hasn’t arrived.

My smile feels as tight as squeezed brake lines. “Jordi will be arriving with all the clean luggage soon. He’ll deliver your bags to your room.”

His mustache curls up in disapproving delight. He turns to the clerk. “Be careful around this woman, Mademoiselle. She attracts criminal elements. At every turn of our wheels, we are threatened. One of our members has been cruelly murdered. Now we suffer without our luggage.”

“*Oui, Monsieur,*” Chloe says smoothly. “You will enjoy *l’apéro* with us. At six, we will be serving light nibbles on our patio.”

I silently applaud Chloe’s elegant deflection. My smile risks becoming too pleased. I crank it down before Nigel notices. “Aperitifs,” I say, clapping my hands. “Lovely! Everyone will enjoy that.”

Nigel huffs and stomps off.

Chloe lifts her eyebrows to me. At first, I think we’re sharing a moment of tourism-pro camaraderie. *Oh, those difficult guests.*

If only she knew! In fact, she *should* know. I’m about to warn her of Nigel’s Rant/Rubbish ratings when I register that her gaze has glided over my shoulder. A warm gaze. No, more than warm. Smoldering.

I know someone who could spark smoldering, I think.

Then I remember that someone. And our meeting. *Our meeting! I’m late!* How could I have forgotten?

Rhetorical question. I know how. I had other things on my mind, like an unwanted job offer, staying alive on the road, delayed luggage, and Nigel Fox. Beauty, too. The scenery around here is distracting.

I turn to see Detective Laurent leaning against the door frame. He holds a tiny cup and could be auditioning to take over George Clooney’s role in those Nespresso commercials.

He raises the cup. “Right on time.”

I check my watch. “Sorry! I’m not on time. I’m seventeen minutes late!” This doesn’t sound like a lot, but I’d planned to be hours early.

“That is exactly on time for the South of France. You’re a local.”

My cheeks warm at the compliment. Then I go and deflate it with explanations. “We had to take cover. We encountered a big rainstorm.”

“I see that.” His eyes skim over me.

I fight the urge to hide behind the fern. My hair has been helmet crushed, rain soaked, and wind whipped. I’m gritty from my eyebrows to my ankles and wearing a donkey-themed t-shirt long enough to be a nightgown.

In short, I’m a mess. I’m also way behind my schedule and have road-weary guests in need of their luggage and swimsuits. But most of all? I’m not sure I’m making the right move calling Vanessa Ortiz.

The detective already considered Lance and Judith as prime suspects. What if that email only heightens his misperceptions?

I could refuse. Surely the French police can’t compel me to make helpful international phone calls.

But I want to know about the email too. I can’t let Dom’s death go unsolved because I’m scared of what we might find.

* * *

“Your guests are settled?” Laurent asks. We’re in my hotel room. There are faded pink flowers on the wallpaper, high ceilings with ornate crown moldings, a bed with a temptingly puffy duvet and enough pillows to hide under. And a detective investigating a suspicious death, seated at a tiny round table in front of tall windows.

Breeze flutters lace curtains. Laurent leans back in a chair better suited for a Victorian lady composing correspondence. He has a pen and a notebook.

My give-me-fifteen-minutes request turned into forty minutes during which I distributed room keys, stashed bikes, worked out Wi-Fi and remote-control confusions, booked a mineral mud treatment at the spa for Judith, and rented bathing suits and soaking times for Manfred, Philly, and Conny.

“They’re settled for now,” I say, joining Laurent at the table. Our legs face the room or our knees would bump. I exhale, then savor a sip of the full-force double espresso I’ve brought up from the sunroom. Usually, I’d shy away from caffeine in the afternoon, but I need a boost.

“I don’t know how you do it,” he says, recrossing his legs. His jacket is neatly folded over the back of his chair. “Dealing with vacationers all day.”

I have to laugh. “*Vacationers* intimidate you? You deal with criminals.”

He shrugs. “Criminals don’t require me to entertain them. They are not so demanding.”

Then why did he want Oui Cycle?

Now is not the time to ask. Laurent is prepping me to call Vanessa.

“I wish to know about the email she sent. That, with the theft of Mr. Appleton’s laptop, bothers me. If you could ask her why she sent it? Then, if she’s willing, I have further questions.”

I finish my espresso. “I want to know about those irregularities too, but you realize, it’s probably nothing. A miscalculation or misunderstanding.”

“That will be helpful too,” he says. “Much of my job is eliminating what isn’t important. Then I can hone in on what is.”

Methodical. I like that. Vanessa’s office number is still in my contacts. I dial it in, prefaced by international codes, and cross my fingers that Vanessa will pick up.

The phone bleeps as if connecting to an invisible switchboard operator. I count the rings. One, two, seven—and then a click, about to go to voice mail. I can’t ask Vanessa to call me in France. My finger hovers over the DISCONNECT icon.

“*Bonjour!*” Vanessa turns the word into twangy syllables.

I yank my finger away. Laurent leans in so we’re practically ear to ear, elbow resting on the little table.

“Vanessa?” I ask, which is silly. I’ve just called her.

“Sadie! Were you thrown off by my perfect accent?” she asks in a truly terrible faux-French accent.

I laugh. “*Oui*. How are you, Vanessa? I’m sorry to call out of the blue.” I hope she didn’t run for the phone. She sounds slightly out of breath.

“I’m better than you, I hear. Even if I am resigned to plodding on this treadmill desk day after day.”

Better than me. “You heard about Dom?” I watch lacy shadows flicker on the far wall. The sun and clouds are dancing. Birdsong floats in.

“Heard? Everyone in Elm Park has heard. I’m sorry about Dom, truly. He was a good man. Does this mean you’re coming back on board? Can’t say I’m surprised. Can’t be big money in bicycles. What’s your profit margin?”

I rub my forehead, pressing down a stress thump and shielding myself from Laurent’s cop gaze. Is he adding me to his suspect list? Who am I kidding? I’m already there. He suspects everyone.

“No,” I say firmly. “That’s not why I’m calling, Vanessa. I’m here with a French investigator, a detective.”

Her suggestive *ooh* is so loud I have to move the phone away from my ear. “What are we talking here? Inspector Clouseau or Officer Ooh la la?”

Now I really don’t dare look at Laurent. Good thing, because he’s leaning closer, lips to the phone and thus my ear. He smells of soap, coffee, and mountain air.

“I am Jacques Laurent, Madame,” he says, then reels off his title and missive to investigate serious crimes in the eastern Pyrenees.

There’s silence on the other end, then an *oops*, followed by *ooh la la*.

Laurent sits back, looking amused.

I mouth *sorry* and try to get Vanessa onto business. “We’re hoping you can clear up a small detail. The email you sent to Dom the other day, could you tell me—”

“What email?” There’s a clatter in the background and Vanessa cursing. “Sorry. Cat jumped on my treadmill desk. What email?”

What email?

Laurent leans back in. “Ms. Ortiz, you sent an email to Mr. Appleton. He received it early Saturday morning and the contents concerned him.”

A snort bounces from Illinois to space and down to this elegant old hotel in the Pyrenees. “Email? To Dom? I’ve been out of town for four days. Door County. You been there? It’s pretty. No southern France, I suspect, but good enough I wasn’t sending emails to my financial adviser. I got back last night, and now you’re telling me there’s a problem with my accounts?”

She’s breathing heavier.

I jump in. “I saw the email. You said—”

This time, it’s a mechanical huff. The treadmill, I guess, groaning to a halt.

“Listen,” Vanessa says. “I didn’t send Dom an email. Al is handling my accounts. Sweet guy, good with figures, but he’s no *ooh la la*. I see why you ditched him, Sadie.”

My cheeks burn. I feel Laurent’s gaze without looking. “The email appeared to come from your personal account,” I say, trying to guide her back to business.

“My personal account? You mean Vanadoo at Hotmail?”

Is she having me on? I don’t dare ask. Vanessa is one of those people who likes to joke up until the point when suddenly you’re laughing and

she's offended. I close my eyes and picture the email. "Ah, no. Vanessa Ortiz 1967, I think?"

"Sixty-seven? How old do you think I am, Sadie? I was born in 1971, not that you need to know that. Are you saying I need to Botox harder?"

There it is. Instant level-eleven offense by the woman who was just *ooh la la*-ing an officer of the law. "No, no, of course not! Sorry! I didn't know your personal address. I just saw your name and assumed . . ."

"Well, you assumed wrong. Now I see why you're concerned. Is someone impersonating me? Are my accounts secure?"

Laurent leans forward again. "Madame, this is crucial. You confirm you have had no irregularities with your accounts?"

Another huff through space, loud enough to make Laurent sit back.

"No. No irregularities until *this* call. I have to go. I need to contact your dependable ex, Sadie."

A click reverberates. I study the wallpaper with its faded pink roses.

Laurent leans back until his chair creaks.

"So," he says, drawing out the word. "Our call produces more questions than answers. It also makes me wonder. Why did you leave your job in the US, Ms. Greene?"

I'm back to Ms. Greene? After we've just been so cozily sharing a phone call? I sigh and give him the abbreviated version. "I wanted something new in my life. My best friend died in a cycling accident, a hit-and-run, and . . ."

"And you bought a cycling tour company?" He doesn't bother masking his incredulity. "That's . . ."

I wait for some synonym of "foolish" or "ghoulish." Or will he too go for "at your age?"

"That's brave," he says.

I should be glowing at the compliment. But was it brave? I'm not so sure at the moment. Judith accused me of running away. I register Laurent asking when the accident happened.

I don't hesitate. "Tomorrow will mark one year. That's partly why the Appletons are here. Maybe the main reason. Lance, Gem, and I grew up together. Gem was my friend. She and Lance dated and—." I cut myself off before I ramble on and on.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Your new life—is it what you hoped for? *Oui Cycle?* France?"

“All and more!” I gush, then close my eyes. “Until the vandalism started. And Dom’s death.” It’s a nightmare.

“I am sorry about that too,” Laurent says. He taps the pen against his notebook. “I need access to Mr. Appleton’s email. Mrs. Appleton told me that she does not know her husband’s email password. Is that true, do you think?”

I shrug. “If Judith says so. She doesn’t get involved in the day-to-day business at Appleton Financial.”

Yet she’s claiming the business, meaning she’ll hear about my call to Vanessa. Al is probably getting an earful right now. I imagine Vanessa exaggerating my problems.

Sadie called me, Al. She sounded desperate. Desperate! She was with the police, making up stories about my email and age! Can you guess my age?

Laurent studies the ceiling, a finger and thumb rubbing his chin.

A crack meanders across the plaster. You look too closely, there are cracks all over.

When I turn back, Laurent is smiling. “This affair becomes more and more interesting.”

At least someone is having fun.

“You enjoy your job?” I ask.

“I do. I don’t like the crime, but I like sorting out what has happened.”

I decide to go for it. “I heard that you put in a bid for Oui Cycle.”

His dimple winks from under his stubble. “And where did you hear that?”

“I can’t reveal my sources,” I joke. Except it’s not a joke. My source—his mother’s maid—swore me to secrecy. She’s afraid of Madame Laurent, and I don’t blame her.

“Fair enough,” he says. “I’ll tell you because I already had to confess to Bea and Bernard. However, I hope you will hold it in your confidence. It is slightly—more than slightly—embarrassing.”

“Okay.” I’m intrigued. “Off the record.”

He studies the table, his hands, the pen, the ceiling. “My mother wrote that application and sent it in my name. She considers policing too dangerous, too coarse, too inelegant.”

I’m gaping, then grinning. “Oh, thank goodness!”

A pink-cheeked detective frowns at me. “*Quoi?* What do you mean, thank goodness? I have just told you my mother forged my identity and

attempted to manipulate my career.”

“I thought you might hold Oui Cycle against me.”

He snorts. “Even if Bernard and Bea had believed my mother’s blatant lies, I wouldn’t have stood a chance. You have passion. That’s what Oui Cycle was built on. Me, I enjoy cycling, but alone or with friends. With strangers and their demands? *Non, non, non.*”

I could tell him about the thrill of sharing the joys of cycling, of France, of stopping for croissants, and more.

His phone rings. He answers with a bounce in his voice. “Laurent speaking.” As he listens, a frown forms like a storm.

I pretend to admire the wallpaper. My ear is turned his way but all I can make out from the other end is bubbly, ebullient French.

“What? Where? Who?” Laurent stands, shrugging on his jacket. “Right. I’m leaving Vernet immediately. No questioning the suspect until I arrive. I’ll be an hour and a half, tops. Keep him simmering.”

He’s halfway to the door, shoving the phone into a pocket, straightening his jacket.

“Hey! What’s happened?” I demand.

He pauses at the threshold.

Giggles filter in from the hallway. Conny and Philly, tittering. *Oh, detective! Visiting our Miss Sadie?*

Mesdames, he says politely. “Enjoy your bathing.”

More giggles and departing footsteps. Laurent turns back to me and sighs. “That was the chief of police from Sans-Souci. He apprehended a vandal near your property, literally red-handed from spray paint. Your colleagues, Bea and Bernard, caught him in the act.”

My heart races. *They caught him!* This could be it. I’ll finally understand who has it in for me, who hurt Dom. “Who is it?”

“A teenager,” Laurent says.

My elation deflates like a punctured tire. The bored teenager, like the chief initially proposed?

“No!” I protest. “Would a teenager reprogram my navigator? Follow my van to another town? Rob an inn? Take a notebook and laptop?”

Laurent looks grim. “I shall be sure to ask him. Until we know, Sadie, please, remain cautious. Keep your group close.”

He doesn’t have to tell me that. I lock the door behind the detective and consider a fresh scare. I’d worried that a culprit would never be caught. But

what if the wrong person takes the blame?

Chapter 23

Day 5, Monday Tonight we will dine in notable company. The famed Mount Canigou rises behind us. Watch for the evening light show, the alpenglow, as the sun sets. In a few weeks, real fire will blaze on the peak. The “Flame of Canigou” celebration marks the summer solstice and the Feast of St. John. Shall we stay on and dance around the bonfires?

I couldn't ask for a more perfect evening. The clouds have stuck around to apologize for their earlier misbehavior. They're ablaze in color. Ripe peach. Dusty plum. Sunbeams like glowing brush strokes, and mountains fading in ombré blues into the distance.

We're dining on the patio of La Belle Époque, a bistro perched at the top of the village. Terracotta roofs fan out below us. Swallows dip and dive. Frogs sing. The breeze carries scents of roses and dining delights.

Yep, it's gorgeous. A painting, a living postcard, pretty much any tourist's vision of a French village.

So, of course, something is wrong.

I check my watch even though the church bells above us have just clanged out another quarter hour.

“I'm sure Lance will be here soon,” Lexi says. “He promised he'd be right back.”

Déjà vu dances up my spine. *A delayed Appleton. An Appleton who made promises.*

“He didn't say where he was going?” Judith asks for what might be the third or thirteen-hundredth time. It doesn't matter how many times she asks. Lexi doesn't have an answer.

“He just said he needed to do something,” Lexi says. “He said he'd be back soon. It's fine.”

It's not fine. She's forgone her healthy green drink for wine.

According to Lexi, Lance got a call that he took outside. That was hours ago. He hasn't returned or answered her calls.

“And you couldn't tell who was calling him?” Judith asks.

“Someone from home? I don’t know. He said ‘hello,’ but I guess French people understand that too.” Lexi raises her glass, finds it less than half full, and lowers it. “I’m sorry, Judith. I should have asked him. I’ve been getting up too early with jet lag. I was taking a power nap.”

Down the table, Nigel mutters that napping and power do not go together.

“It’s powerful if the lady says it is,” Philly retorts. “You want us to call him, luv? Give him a little talking to about making his sweetheart worry?”

“I could text him,” I offer. “I’d chew him out too.” I smile, trying to lighten the mood.

Lexi shakes her head and drains her wine. “It’s just Lance being Lance. He probably has his phone on mute again. He gets caught up in his own things and forgets the time.”

Judith tsks. “Like his father that way.”

A swallow sails by, so low that Lexi jerks back.

“Nadiya’s at the hotel,” I say again, trying to offer some action, even if it’s Nadiya waiting. “She’ll tell him where we are if he goes back there first.”

Lance should have the schedule, which gives the time and location of dinner. But schedules and maps are mere suggestions for Lance. He really is so like his father.

My stomach tightens.

Nope! I can’t think that. He’s not like Dom in one, big, vital, alive way. Lance is absolutely fine. He’s just late. Forty-seven minutes late. To dinner. Lance is late for many things, but usually not meals.

I tap out another text message: **Call me!**

“We won’t worry,” Judith declares, as if that settles it. “Our appetizer platter is getting cold. Lexi, Sadie, please eat. Help yourselves.”

She slides a wooden board toward Lexi, who holds up a palm. Judith reverses and pushes the board my way. On it are culinary wonders almost too pretty to eat: golden phyllo, spirals of roasted vegetables, and more anchovies curled in rosettes.

I snag a roll of phyllo. The interior is a mystery I can’t wait to solve. The bistro’s owner/chef, Chef Aban, hails from Ghana and is an artist of colors, textures, and flavors.

I nibble an end, which shatters in flakes. *It’s the flakes*, I hear Dom say. The interior is green and cheesy and delicious. Goat cheese and fava beans?

Chef Aban described each piece in detail when he delivered the platter, an on-the-house treat for my return business.

Under normal circumstances, I would have basked in the gift and the foodie details. I was too distracted by Lance's absence.

"Judith is right," Nigel says, reaching for two of the phyllo wonders. "We should not worry. He is a grown lad. What's the worst that can happen? On this tour, *mmm?*" He shoots me a foxy smile.

Déjà vu surfs across my stomach on crashing waves. I put down the phyllo. When Lance arrives, I *will* chew him out. Right after I hug him.

"Since he'll be here soon, I'll order for him," Judith says. She again picks up her menu, which she's been studying as if there will be an exam. Distracting herself, I think, or maybe she's simply enjoying the pleasant puzzle of what to choose. The bistro offers prix fixe menus. A set of three courses, three choices each. Judith has the English version of the menu.

Judith smiles. "I think I'll have the lawyer salad."

Avocat can be a lawyer or an avocado in French, as I translated to Judith's delight earlier. "And the monkfish with the garlic scum. That will be something to tell the ladies at my club."

"Garlic *foam*," Nigel translates. He sniffs dismissively. "Foam is so early 2000s."

"And Lance will get the beef cheeks," Judith says, ignoring him. "I've never had those. This way I get to try both. And for dessert . . . Oh look, there's that lovely *crème catalane*." She looks up and smiles at me. "You promise it's a health food, Sadie?"

"Absolutely," I assure her. "Just as creamy and delicious as *crème brûlée* but without the actual cream."

Judith seems ready to accept all my dessert fibs tonight. For instance, the chocolate mousse will have no calories because it's so airy.

"I'll get one of each, then," she declares and waves to our server, who expertly looks right through us, pivots, and disappears back into the restaurant.

"Well!" Judith says. "I'm ready when he comes back around. We won't wait any longer to order."

"No, we won't," says Nigel, who's decimated most of the appetizer nibbles. "Some of us didn't gorge on supermarket rubbish."

"No rubbish for us," Philly retorts. "That was a fine stop, Sadie. You, Mr. Fox, missed out. We bought some real Scottish oat cakes. World's finest

food, after scones. We know how you love scones.”

“Can’t stand them,” Nigel grumbles. “Floury clods.”

The sisters share a look, then Conny flashes open her cardigan to reveal her t-shirt. “Some of us got team uniforms, too. Sadie, there’s an idea! Oui Cycle should have gear. Matching tops. Ponchos?”

“Compression knee socks. Now those would be grand,” says Philly.

This cheers Lexi up. “Compression socks are *amazing*! My fitness clients swear by them.”

“Striped socks, with little Catalan donkeys?” Philly says.

“Donkeys on a bike?” I suggest. That would be cute.

“I would wear those,” says Manfred. He stretches out long legs, clad in knee-length black Lycra.

I have to smile at that image. Manfred in striped donkey socks? I do have to get some and send him a pair.

“At least we’d have *some* fresh clothing, then.” Nigel is determined to get the last snipe.

Yes, there is the other problem marring my sunset evening. Jordi is finally on his way with the van. However, he didn’t arrive before we left for dinner.

“Sadie has everything under control,” Lexi says.

I shoot her an appreciative smile. What a wonderful exaggeration.

Nigel snorts. “Under control? Miss, your boyfriend is missing. We are down a member. I, myself, almost perished in the sea and have been robbed of my irreplaceable journal, and now—now our guide has once again placed our belongings in the hands of her *criminal* mechanic.”

The waiter chooses this moment to approach the table. He takes in the stunned expressions, turns heel, and once again disappears.

Nigel twirls his mustache.

“Criminal?” Judith looks up from the menu. “That nice man with all the muscles and tattoos?”

“Ah, no,” I stammer.

“No?” says Nigel. “You do not call a convicted *felon* a criminal? A man who has spent time in prison?”

“Sadie?” Judith slaps down the menu. “Is this true? You have a felon on your team?”

I attempt to deflect. “Jordi is a good, trustworthy man. He is not involved in these crimes. In fact, the police are interviewing a suspect right now.”

“Right on!” crows Conny. “They caught him? Is that what you and the handsome detective were discussing in your room?”

Lexi gasps. “They did? They caught the person who . . . you know . . .” She shoots a glance toward Judith.

Who killed Dom?

“And you’re only telling us now?” Nigel asks. “What else don’t we know?”

“They aren’t sure,” I say, backpedaling.

“Nothing is ever certain,” Manfred says. “But this sounds like good news. We should toast.”

Nigel scoffs. “Let’s not get our hopes up. These country police are hacks. We are on a rolling crime spree, my friends. Another member is presently missing, and what is our guide doing? Enjoying her feast while we are plucked off, one by one.”

I resist the urge to kick Nigel under the table. Mostly because I can’t reach him.

“Lance is *fine*,” Judith says. “None of this is Sadie’s fault!”

Unless it is.

Lexi is gripping a hunk of baguette. She usually avoids carbs.

Manfred serenely spears a blood sausage.

The sisters huddle in whispers.

Nigel bemoans that we lack proper dinner clothes.

I take in the table. We don’t look *that* bad. From the waist up, Philly and Conny are dinner-presentable in cardigans. Judith wears my rain jacket. The soft apricot color suits her. Lexi looks amazing (of course) in a zip-up jacket, and Manfred is dignified in all black. Everyone had spare shorts or leggings in their bike bags.

I take some credit for that. I stress the possibility of Spandex wardrobe malfunctions in my pre-packing list.

Chef Aban was more than understanding when I explained our appearance. He tugged at his own draw-cord pants and declared us best dressed of the evening. We and our stretchy pants were prepared for serious eating.

ALWAYS PREPARED TO DINE! That could be a motto of my tours, I think. I could put it on a t-shirt along with OUI CYCLE—WE STOP FOR CROISSANTS.

If I still have a business.

The server, thank goodness, interrupts my doom spiral. He takes our orders and refills our wine. I turn to Nigel, determined to shift him to a happier topic.

“How was your ride up here? We met some pros taking shelter at the grocery. Even they said the conditions were difficult.” I figure Nigel will like the opportunity to boast.

“I had no such trouble,” he says. “They must be amateurs, these supposed pros. Pretenders.”

The sisters scoff.

“You’d know about that, wouldn’t you, Foxy?” Conny says.

“Pretender,” Philly says in a stage whisper loud enough to reach the peaks.

Nigel retaliates by reaching for the last phyllo roll. Conny is faster. She aims a fork and stabs it out from under him, narrowly missing his fingers.

Nigel, defeated, slaps open a new notebook and scribbles so furiously his pen sounds like claws on slate.

Philly nudges me. “Don’t worry about him,” she says and winks. “He’s outfoxed.”

So they do know about his blog, his rants and rubbish. I smile to show I’m in on her hint. But now a new worry nibbles. *Why* do they know this? And is *that* why they dislike him so?

Chapter 24

Day 5, Monday This evening, let's stretch our legs with a stroll to the top of the village. During dinner, we'll savor delectable views of the sunset and mountains we're about to climb.

The sky flares in tangerine, gold, and radiant grays as Lexi leans across the table to whisper to Judith. "They don't do doggie bags in France."

Judith is gathering two dinner plates, each a third eaten. "I won't waste food," she says. "That's the Midwesterner in me, and we must save some for Lance. He's sure to be hungry." She pats her belly. "I would have eaten every bit, but I have to save room for my *two* desserts."

Judith has had three glasses of wine. I've been counting. Not because I'm judging. No, no. But I am the guide who has to get her safely back down a steep cobbled lane.

Lexi's furrow deepens, whether from cultural protocols, Judith's boozy boldness, or Lance's continued absence. Probably all of the above.

Judith rummages through her purse and produces two clear Ziploc bags, gallon size.

"We won't have to tell the waiter," she says. "Lexi, dear, you gave me the hint when we were packing, remember? Ziplocs are good for everything, you said. I appreciate your warning about the lack of doggie bags too. Sadie? You'll ask the hotel if they have a refrigerator I can use?"

Horror flashes over Lexi's face, but she's a pro at positivity. She's also sweet on Judith's only son and wise in picking her battles. "Awesome idea, Judith," she exclaims with less vigor than usual.

"When in France," says Judith. She shakes a bag so that it maws open under a plate. Her words make no sense, but we all agree anyway, Manfred somberly nodding as if Nietzsche himself has spoken.

Judith slides her meals into their respective plastic sheaths. Servers arrive to whisk away our dinner plates and deposit divine desserts.

I'm about to dig in when Judith leans over and pats my knee. Correction, she grips my knee, like a bad date. Trepidation squeezes from inside.

I freeze, suddenly sure she's going to bring up her job offer in front of everyone, her generosity served up for all to see. I'll be forced to answer.

I coach myself. I'll simply say *I'll think about it*. And I'll thank her. Must remember to thank her profusely.

Easy!

No, not easy. Judith will press.

I make plans for deflection. A controversial topic? Brexit? French vs. US health-care systems. Whether croissants from pre-made factory dough should be marketed as "artisanal." I have strong thoughts on this.

"I have an important request," Judith says. She squeezes harder. "Sadie, I need you to help me."

Scottish independence—Conny and Philly must have feelings on that. Church and state. Blood doping among pro cyclists. This year's Tour de France route. Will a French rider ever win again? Look at that view!

"Sadie, I need you to help me polish off these desserts," Judith says. She gestures to the dishes lined up before her. "Will you do that for me, Sadie?"

Oh, she's good. Soft touch, ruthless strike. She knows she has me thinking about her offer.

"I'll do what I can," I say. "But I have my own dessert."

I wave a palm to my *îles flottantes*, fluffy meringue islands floating in crème anglaise custard sauce. We're sprint cycling, I think, only with desserts and words. In sprint cycling, two to four cyclists face off on steeply slanted tracks. They start slow, watching each other, trying to force the other to make a fatal move. At times, they almost stop, balancing out of the saddle, teasing, waiting. Then, as sudden as provoked hornets, they activate, and the all-out sprint begins.

Judith whaps a spoon on her *crème catalane*. The burnt-sugar topping cracks.

"Delicious," she says. "We should make this at home. How about for this Thanksgiving?" She holds my gaze. I'm about to drop eye contact first when Lexi claps her hands.

For a moment, I think she's breaking up our nonverbal joust.

"Lance!" she cries. Her tone hovers between *oh, thank goodness* and *you're in trouble, mister*.

"Lance!" Judith echoes. "Where have you been? You *must* be more responsible. You worried us all."

He's still worrying me. Lance stands at the end of the table, between Manfred and Lexi. His face is red and damp with sweat.

"I *am* taking responsibility," Lance says.

The table has fallen silent. Spoons hover between plates and mouths. Even Manfred has paused in his meditative takedown of his after-dinner cheese board. I have abandoned a bite of meringue.

A shiver runs through me. Lance has a look I've only seen on him once before. He and I and Gem were inner-tubing on a river. She got caught in a strainer, a log across the water, the current sucking her under. Lance pulled her out, but afterward he'd looked terrified.

That's the look. Fear. His hands are trembling.

I replay his words. *I am taking responsibility*. For what?

Nigel, keenly attuned to trouble, draws out his camera. I want to slap it from his hands.

"Hon?" Lexi says. "What's wrong?"

"Lance," his mother says. "Please sit. The rest of us are trying to enjoy our desserts. Look, I ordered you mousse."

Lance shakes his head. "There's something I need to say first."

Like the rest of us, he's in cycling gear. Mud-splattered shorts. Shoes sans wet socks. A ridiculous donkey shirt—Lexi got him a large that's strangely small in the arms and long as a miniskirt. He scrapes back his hair. For once, it doesn't flop lazily back.

Lexi grabs for his hand. "Lance, honey, sweetie, you don't have to tell us anything."

I freeze. She's thinking what I am. What Laurent would.

He drops to his knees on the damp slate, gripping her hand like she's his life raft.

There are three other tables on the terrace. All the diners are staring at us. The peepers and crickets have gone silent. Overhead, swallows still dip and swoop, dodging the bats that have joined the evening hunt.

"Lexi," he says, throat clogged with emotion. He fumbles, rummaging under the too-long shirt. "This isn't how I imagined it, so you'll have to forgive me."

I brace myself so hard that I miss what he says next, but Lexi is weeping. Hands over her mouth, cheeks wet, voice choked.

"I will!" she cries. "I will. Of course I'll marry you!"

Words bubble by. Translations at other tables. French. Dutch, I think. Then cheers and clapping and the universal joy of being part of a big moment. Within a minute, Chef Aban is rushing in, bearing bottles and smiles. There's the distinctive pop of champagne corks and more cheering.

Lance makes the rounds, pouring bubbly into flutes, accepting handshakes and felicitations from friends, family, and strangers. Judith is wiping her eyes. Lexi has gone from happy sobbing to filming the glittering ring on her finger.

Lance makes his way around to me.

"Congratulations," I say.

Lance, committing. This is huge. I squeeze him into a hug. "I'm so happy for you."

He squeezes back. "I had to, didn't I? After you almost beat me to the altar last year."

I release him. "*Shhh!* That was never an *almost*. You sure know how to ruin a sentimental moment, don't you?"

"Heartbreaker," he chuckles, happy to oblige.

"Be nice!"

He grins and tallies a checkmark.

I've admitted that Al and I were drifting apart before I left for France. But I couldn't be a jerk and drift all the way out of the country without saying something, without making it definitive and official. I invited Al to the Italian restaurant. We were well into the breadsticks when I gathered my courage and said, "You know I'm moving to France."

He interrupted with, "I'm going to get around to this someday so it might as well be now. Want to get married?"

We had a whole meal to sit through after that. I'd ordered my usual, lasagna, which took forever in the kitchen, like they were growing the wheat and building a fire.

I told Al no.

Mom would have had me accept. Grab the offer on the table, that's Mom's motto. Judith would have pointed to all Al's good points, of which there are many. Good job in a good company. Devoted to you. Gem would have let me moan about how I'm an awful, terrible person. Then she'd say I did the right thing. Get over yourself, Sadie. This is *your* life.

I'd needed someone to tell me that, so I told Lance.

'Course you did the right thing, he'd said. Al's boring as a golf tee. You're not.

That might be the sweetest thing he'd ever said to me.

I love Lance to bits, so I punch him in the arm. "You're forgiven for now, but where were you? Off gathering your courage at a bar?"

He grins. "Had to get a ring, didn't I? If it was Gem, I could tie a flower around her finger, but Lexi? I needed some bling."

I'm stuck on Gem. Had Lance considered proposing? What would she have said? I don't know, and that bothers me.

I blink back to the present. "You got a ring?" I marvel. Not about needing a ring. He's totally right. Lexi needs a ring. She'd put on a brave smile for a ringless proposal, but Lance would spend forever making it up to her. A do-over with the Hope Diamond on some sparkling Caribbean island under the perfect sunset? Even then, you can't do-over a once-in-a-lifetime.

No, my shock is that Lance—with his basically nonexistent French—found a jewelry shop, slipped away, located the shop, got in during limited afternoon opening hours in rural southern France, communicated with the jeweler . . .

Talk about determination!

"How?" I ask, shaking my head.

Lance gives me his lopsided grin. "What do you mean how? You think it's that hard to *parlez-vous* French?"

For Lance? *Absolument!*

He checks over his shoulder. Lexi is on her phone, beaming so hard she might split her face. She's calling home, I'm sure. Her mom and her little half-sisters.

Guilt twinges. I never told Mom about Al's proposal. Mom carries a mental Rolodex of critiques. I didn't want it forever filed there. Worse, though? I *still* haven't told her about Dom. I'll tell her tonight, I swear. I'll email. Then tomorrow I'll send her a postcard: real mail, sent for an occasion other than death. Something nice to stick on the fridge. And she can tell me that she has so many nice photos of France, she never has to visit.

"I called a rideshare," Lance is saying. "Cool guy named Muhammad. I showed him the address of a jeweler I found on Google. He knew it. Said it was the best place to go."

Lance always stumbles into good luck. “So where was this jeweler?” I ask. “Where’d you manage to give us the slip?”

Lance grins. He’s always loved being sneaky. “That town with the big wine vat. Man, it was hard to ditch you guys. I kept trying to get out ahead, and Lex kept catching up. That’s what I get for dating a fitness trainer.”

“You could have told me,” I say. “I could have helped.”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, Sadie, but you’re an awful liar. You’d sit there smirking or trying to get the timing right.”

“You got the timing just right,” I admit. “Even if you did make us worry.”

Lance shrugged, unconcerned. Golden rays beam across the sky. The server is bringing over more bubbly, compliments of a table of cheerful Danes.

Lance grins and gives a thumbs-up to the Danes, who stop to issue hearty congratulations on their way out.

Come to Denmark, they urge.

“Quick marriage capital of Europe,” one says. “No long paperwork, no classes with priests.” He snaps his fingers.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Lance nudges me. “Can we ride there?”

“We could. It’d take a while.”

When the Danes leave, I return to the ring purchase. “How did you know the ring would fit? It looks perfect.”

Lance gives another look I recognize. His *puppy who’s chewed the drywall and an electrical cord* look.

“What’d you do?” I ask.

He looks over my shoulder now. “I sort of *borrowed* one of Lexi’s rings to get the right size.”

“Wait,” I say, drawing out the word and an inconceivable thought. “She’s missing a ring, her aunt’s heirloom ring.”

Puppy-dog who’s ruined all your shoes eyes.

“Lance! You stole it?” I blurt. “But why the bracelet—”

“No!” he whispers. “*Shhh*. That wasn’t me. I just took the ring. I didn’t think she’d even notice. She only wears it on planes. I didn’t think we’d get *robbed*. And it’s not like I could tell the cops and ruin the surprise by getting arrested. I’ll tell that detective. She’ll get that ring back too. She’ll be even happier.”

Laurent won’t be happy.

“*When* did you do this?” I asked.

Lance puffs his cheeks, blows out a breath. A mountain breeze whispers by.

“The timing’s important,” I say. “You *have* to tell Laurent.”

Another sigh. “I will. You know he’s going to make a big deal about it. It was the day Dad died, that evening. Lexi and I got back from walking around town, and I don’t know; it’s like I woke up. It was time to take charge of my life, get what I want. No more waiting. I almost proposed right there on the beach. Pretty spot.”

So Collioure worked its romantic magic.

Lance says, “We’re not kids anymore, Sadie. We can’t mess around all day, ride bikes, play golf, go to parties. I need to get going on life. But I still screwed up, didn’t I? I should’ve just traced the ring’s size. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“You didn’t screw up,” I say gently. This is his night. He should have no regrets. “Look at Lexi. She’s over the moon. Now get over there with your fiancée.”

He returns to Lexi. I join the cell-phone paparazzi, snapping photos of the happy couple.

The sun sets in rosy reds. Far across the valley, the firefly lights of remote villages sparkle. Happy sounds fill the night. Laughter and chatter, glassware and courting crickets. In this moment, everything is perfect.

Cyclist's log

Day 5 recap

Gem, huge news tonight! Good news, no less—Lance proposed!!!

I know! There aren't enough exclamation points! Did you ever think it would happen? I sure didn't. But everything can change overnight, can't it?

Lexi said yes, but you'll have guessed that.

We threw them a spontaneous engagement party at the casino. Yep, a casino. It dates from the 1880s. (As I, of course, informed everyone—the tour guide is always on duty!) The building is ornate Beaux-Arts straight out of a period drama. (I also discussed Beaux-Arts with anyone who cared to hear. Manfred was appreciative.)

We all went. Nigel left early, but I stayed until they kicked us out at 11:59. There's a tour first: closing down a casino.

Nadiya and Jordi danced the night away. Jordi can do all the classics: waltz, two-step, flapper styles I can't name. Once again I'm reminded to never judge a man by his team jerseys.

A band was playing old-timey café music. They did the perfect song for us: "La Bicyclette" by Yves Montand—I'm recording it here so I don't forget. It's all about the joys of cycling. Freedom, exploration, summer days, young love, simple pleasures. It's my new official song of Oui Cycle.

So, despite some setbacks, it was a pretty fabulous day. Judith was weeping all sorts of tears—sad tears that Dom is missing Lance's big commitment, happy tears, giddy tears.

In other news, Bea and Bernard nabbed a vandal! Before you get too excited, I'm reserving judgment about whether he's the vandal, the supercriminal, the killer.

Here's how it went down: Bea and Bernard were hosting the chief of police. They were enjoying his homemade eau-

de-vie de cerise when they heard a noise by the bike barn. Voilà! A vandal, paint canister in hand!

He's just a teenager. Fifteen. Bea said he was crying when the chief took him away. His buddies dared him to do it, he said.

I checked my phone all evening, hoping Laurent would text. I almost texted him just now: Call me anytime!

Too desperate, right? Too needy? I stopped myself.

I did call someone before writing to you. Will I cringe about this in the morning? I called Al.

Dear Al. He sounded wary when he answered. Who knows what eleven digits of international calling came up as on his Caller ID. Or maybe he knew it was me.

I still feel bad about Al. He's a good, decent guy who answers the phone no matter what. We chitchatted about weather, his mom, my mom, the Cubs (I listened). He asked if I was coming home.

I am home!

I didn't say that. Too rude. Too sad—he sounded so hopeful. I swerved to my reason for calling. The email Vanessa denied sending. Al has access to Dom's work email. He sends out those quarterly newsletters in Dom's name.

I asked if he could forward me the email, to help the police.

"Mrs. Ortiz said you were with the police," he said. "Are you okay? You're not a suspect, are you?"

I told him I was helping with inquiries—just what any suspect would say on Law and Order. Anyway, Al logged in, nice and easy. But get this: no email from Vanessa. Even stranger—Dom's trash folder was empty.

Did Dom ever empty the trash, real or electronic? I don't think so. Al's going to ask Deborah, but she's not one for electronic anything.

What does it mean?

Laurent will be interested, unless he's out on the town, celebrating a closed case. Then who cares about a missing email, right?

I should hope he's celebrating. Then Judith would have an answer. An answer that would anger her—such a needless, cruel tragedy—but an answer all the same. She'd have closure.

I'd have closure too, at least about Dom.

Except I don't believe a kid did this. There's something else that's bothering me too: Philly, Conny, and Nigel Fox. I found Philly and Conny in the gardens outside the casino. They were trying to hug a sequoia. I joined them. We held fingertips but still couldn't close a hug around the trunk.

I figured it was as good a time as any, so I asked, "What is up with you and Nigel Fox? You know him from before, don't you?"

They dropped my hands like I'd scalded them and insisted we go someplace private. We ended up deep in the park, hidden behind a camellia in the dark.

Get this. They claim that our Nigel Fox isn't Nigel Fox.

*It's convoluted, but basically they say he can't be the reviewer from *Out Foxed* because the *Out Foxed* reviewer would have known about the best clotted cream in Oxford. Not just known it but raved about it. Moreover, the *Out Foxed* reviewer adores scones, which Nigel, again, professed to detest.*

*I had to disappoint them. I've seen his passport. It says Nigel Fox. Madame Laurent of the *Hôtel Topaze* requires passports. The police will have checked too.*

When I told the sisters, they seemed even more ticked off.

So he was lying simply to insult us? Toying with us like a cat and wounded birds?

Or he's lying about something else.

I have an idea bubbling. It's probably the champagne talking. I'm not even going to write it down yet. I'll sleep on it and let you know tomorrow.

Tomorrow . . . It'll be one year tomorrow, Gem. An entire trip around the sun without you. I wish more than anything you'd drop by and ask me to go riding again.

Chapter 25

Day 6, Tuesday The castle atop Vernet is privately owned these days. Imagine a home that is literally your castle! With foundations dating back to the twelfth century.

The next morning, fog as heavy as wet wool cloaks the village. I'm up too early again, this time before the sun. Church bells clang out five a.m. as I cross the central plaza. I'm alone except for teasing aromas of buttery baked goods and a tabby slinking low across my path.

The bakers won't offer their treats for at least another hour, so I continue on, weaving up cobbled lanes too narrow for cars. Streetlamps cast puddles of fuzzy yellow. The bells go back to bed, and silence settles in, except for my footsteps and puffing lungs.

Cozy, I think. Atmospheric.

Kind of eerie.

As soon as I think the last, I hear it. Skittering. Claws on pavement, coming at me fast in the dusky dark.

I freeze, heart pounding.

What now? Has my tour devolved into a horror flick?

I tiptoe around the corner. The lane is empty, but the sound is still coming. Only when I look down, do I spot the nocturnal creature. A hedgehog, plump and spiny, skids to an all-claw stop a few yards away and stares at me, eyes as round as black currants, nose twitching.

"Hey," I whisper. "Hi, little guy." I've only seen a few hedgehogs in the wild, if I can call the upper reaches of a French village wild.

More nose twitching before he takes off like a windup toy.

I pick and choose my signs. Four-leaf clovers do nothing for me. I can't get into star alignments or planets. They're all too far away. But this? I'll take a hedgehog as a good sign, especially on this day.

One year since, I think to Gem. I imagine her laughing: *And you're seeing hedgehogs as signs? You're losing it, Sadie.*

Maybe, but that hedgehog has lifted my spirits. Buoyed, I continue upward, above the fog slumbering in the river valley. A bench stands

outside the church. I wipe dew from the planks and sit.

Craggy mountains are taking form in the morning twilight, black against the deepest blue. A single tower rises in the trees, part of the secluded abbey we'll visit later this morning.

Unless my theory changes everything.

I came up here to think, to have some quiet time to remember Gem but also to reconsider my theory. Last night, I blamed it on the bubbly. Wait until morning, I told myself. See what you think then.

The theory is just as outlandish in dim dawn, yet I can't let it go.

I mull until the sky shifts to misty silver. Lights pop on in windows. Roosters crow, and headlights wind down the mountain road. I look for my hedgehog friend as I stroll back to the square. He's gone, but there's fresh good fortune. My favorite bakery has just opened. Also good? The young clerk doesn't seem to know me or my reputation as a rolling crime spree.

I purchase a plain croissant, an almond croissant, and a raisin snail, croissant dough wrapped around pastry cream and plump raisins.

I'll let Nadiya pick her favorite and hope that a bakery treat makes up for my early morning intrusion.

The hotel is still silent when I return. I take the stairs, tiptoe down a creaking carpeted hall, and tap gently on a door across the hall from mine.

It's too early. I'm being what I said I'd never be, the demanding, all-hours boss. Except, I have brought baked goods, and if I'm right, there's no time to lose. My guests and Oui Cycle could be in danger.

I wait, bouncing in my sandals, listening hard but hearing no sound from inside.

I tap again and whisper into the keyhole. "Nadiya? Are you awake?"

The door swings open, with my nose still at the knob.

Jordi stands before me, wearing nothing but boxer shorts (in Perpignan rugby colors, I can't fail but notice) and a groggy frown.

I've solved one minor mystery. My primary employees are sweet on each other. And I've just rudely intruded.

I back away. "Sorry! I didn't mean to . . ."

Nadiya pokes her head around the door. Her hair is wet, her eyes wide. She's wrapped in a hotel robe of fluffy white with the sash pulled tight.

"Sadie, what is it? What has happened? Not another problem?" Her eyes light on the bag in my hands. "You brought us breakfast. How sweet! Jordi, how sweet, yes?"

Jordi's blinking like a bear roused from hibernation. He's not a morning guy. Getting to our usual nine a.m. departures proved a difficult stretch for him, which is why I now have him set up the bikes and navigators the night before.

He grunts what might be an affirmative to Nadiya. Or it's all he can manage.

"Sorry!" I whisper again, this time to Nadiya. "I'm really sorry to interrupt."

"No interrupting," Nadiya says. "Jordi stayed because everyone is too happy."

I must betray my confusion.

Nadiya tugs at Jordi's elbow, moving him aside and ushering me in. "Last night, it was all love, dancing, and singing, the criminal caught. It was—how do you say?—too good to be good?"

"Too good to be true," I say, handing her the bakery bag. "That's why I'm here. Do you have Philippe's number?"

"Philippe?" Nadiya shuts the door behind me. "Philippe the cyclist? What does he have to do with too good to be true?"

The windows are cracked, and the cool scent of misty river air and jasmine flows in. As in my room, a small table sits in front of the windows. Nadiya sets the bakery bag on it and waves for me to sit. Jordi shuffles off, mumbling about a shower.

Nadiya sees me obviously *not* looking. "Jordi is sweet," she says. "He might not look it."

Oh, he does. Under those tattooed muscles and rugby talk, Jordi Volland is a teddy bear. "He's a good man."

Nadiya nods seriously. "So is Philippe. Why do you want him? He can have nothing to do with our troubles."

I push the bakery bag her way. She peeks in, and her face lights up. "Jordi loves almond croissants. I can have the snail?"

I pat myself on the back for a good selection. Also, because my bakery greed worked out this time. I'd ordered an extra pastry because I couldn't decide.

I sink into a proffered chair and say, "I want to ask him about that cyclist who's been challenging him and his group."

Nadiya's hand hovers over the snail. "Red Bib?"

“Red Bib,” I confirm. The most aggressive rider. A rider who’ll do anything to win. I have the queasy, crazy feeling I’ve already met him.

* * *

At five minutes to nine, I start to get worried.

Okay, I started to worry many minutes ago. The sun is burning away the fog. Jordi has gone back to bed. Eight bikes are lined up. One bike is missing. So are all my cyclists.

“Too much partying,” Nadiya says, reading my anxiety. “Too much fun. Maybe they will sleep all day.”

I hope not. I have all sorts of fun lined up. This morning, we’ll cycle a few miles up the valley to the next village, the true end of the road. From there, I’ll highly recommend that we leave our bikes at a café and hike the steep mountain track to the Benedictine abbey on the flanks of the Canigou.

After a tour of the abbey, my riders will have all afternoon to explore on their own before we roll downhill to catch a train up to the high plateau. The day is short on structured pedaling but big on sights and adventure.

Lots of flex time in the schedule, I remind myself. We don’t have to start on the dot. Still, the missing bike has me worried.

I’m pacing, Nadiya is yawning, and the church bells are chiming nine when Manfred strolls up.

“I have enjoyed a most megalithic morning,” he informs us.

“Ah, yes?” says Nadiya.

This is what Nadiya says when she doesn’t understand, a far wiser response than my instinct to nod agreeably.

In this case, I think I know what Manfred means. “You visited the dolmen?” I ask. There’s a miniature Stonehenge-like feature up on a nearby ridge. Three flat boulders, tipped upright and capped by another flat boulder. I hiked up to visit last time I brought a tour here. I gazed at the rocks, tried to imagine the people who built it, the how, the *why*. Ceremonial, celestial, a grave?

“Most inspiring,” Manfred says. “To think of all the life, all the death, that has happened here under our feet.”

He stares down, seemingly seeing beyond his black sneakers.

Conny and Philly arrive with greetings and two bags of bakery goodies.

“We hit four bakeries,” Conny says.

“Four!” her sister stresses. “What a fine village! We got croissants and biscuits from each. When we reach our divine destination, we’ll do a taste test.”

Cookies and croissants. That sounds divine to me.

At five minutes past, I’m about to go inside and check on my American friends when Judith and Lexi step out, chatting so animatedly, they almost pass by our little convoy of bikes.

“*Bonjour!*” I trill.

They look up and acknowledge me dreamily.

“What do you think, Sadie?” Lexi asks. “Lavender or apricot?”

“Ah, for what? Macarons?” I ask.

Lexi claps her hands. “Oh, that’s brilliant! We’ll match macarons to the bridesmaids’ dresses. Sadie, you’re a genius!”

Wedding planning. I might as well resign myself and my tour-stop talks to secondary status.

“Those pretty sandwich cookies that aren’t macaroons?” Judith asks. “I’ve never tried one, but they look very nice.”

And I’m back to relevance!

“We’ll rectify that,” I say, to Lexi’s firm agreement. “The shells are almond-flour meringues. The filling is usually a butter cream. You’ll love them.”

“Perfect for a wedding,” Lexi says, returning to dreamy. “I could have little bitty ones all around the cake.”

I hate to pierce her bubble, but her future groom is again missing. I’m about to inquire about Lance when he strolls out.

To my minor shock, he’s not clashing. His shorts are plain beige, his shirt an innocuous blue polo. If I didn’t know better, I’d say Lexi took him shopping after midnight. His eyes, however, are underlined in dark half-moon circles. Did they get any sleep?

Still, he manages a grin and a goad. “What’s the delay?”

I roll my eyes. “That would be you.”

He looks pleased. “I’m not last, though, am I?”

True. Nigel isn’t here. Nor is his bike. I imagine two places he might be. One: waiting for us at the Abbey, preparing to mock anyone on foot.

Cycling up there is possible, but grueling. The road is seriously steep and twisty. The eleventh-century founders had seclusion, serenity, and minimizing marauding on their minds when they picked a location.

Two: Nigel might be grinding his way up the more massive mountain to reach our destination for this evening. That route would take a good three and a half hours on a bike. Not *that* long until you factor in the relentless uphill grade and traffic dangers.

“I’ll text Nigel,” I say. “Let him know we’ve started out.”

Lance snorts. “Why bother? Doesn’t he see and know all?”

Lexi laughs. “And takes notes. Sadie, are you sure you want to tell him where we’re going?”

“I’m not sure I do,” I say, concentrating on my phone, tapping out a perky message ending with **See you soon!** and a smiley emoji that will make him sneer.

We take to our bikes, ringing our bells as we pass out of town.

My mental wheels spin.

There’s a third option. Nigel Fox somehow got wind of my suspicions and hightailed it out of town—on my Oui Cycle bike!

Chapter 26

Day 6, Tuesday Today we visit one of the most famous sites in the region, the Abbey of Saint Martin du Canigou. The abbey recently celebrated its one thousandth birthday! The path is steep, and it's no sin to walk.

So many feet have trod this path, twining up the mountain. Back in the eleventh century, the abbey's sponsor, Count Guifred of Cerdagne, hiked up to dig his own grave. Tourists flock here now, drawn by the abbey and the stunning mountain backdrop. The faithful arrive too. The site is still a working Benedictine community.

If anyone was around, I'd treat them to the Count Guifred trivia. Although maybe it's just as well I'm alone. This is not the tour to be mentioning graves.

Manfred cycled up. I'm impressed. Judith rode too, her e-bike cranked to its highest power. I worried about the drop-offs and hairpin curves, but she promised to keep to the inside lane. Conny and Philly also charged ahead but on foot. Their power came from the incentive of a croissant taste test at the top.

Nadiya stayed at the hotel to confirm reservations. She's hopefully enjoying some quiet time with Jordi, too, after I crashed their romantic morning.

Lance and Lexi are hiking up behind me. They keep stopping for smoochy selfies and videos.

Nigel has not yet appeared, which has me on edge.

Thus it is that I'm alone in the forest when I spot what could be a hallucination. A few yards away, an antelope-like animal stands on a boulder as if posing. I stop and blink. Could it be? I'm pretty sure it's an izard, a Pyrenean chamois. They're shy and rare to see. Close-set horns curl back from the little creature's forehead, putting me in mind of a unicorn.

I wish someone was here with me. Someone to share the moment. Someone to tell me I'm not seeing things! Here I'd thought a common hedgehog was good luck . . .

Then I realize I do have someone: Gem. Is this another sign that she's at my side today? I know what Gem would say—*OMG, Sadie, stop with the sappiness!* Whatever. I'm alone in a sacred forest with a special creature. I can let some emotions flow. I'm wiping away tears and staring at the chamois—who's chewing a beech leaf and ignoring the crazy, weeping woman—when a cyclist rounds the bend.

Philippe Duvall is too much of a gentleman to call me out on weeping in a forest. At the same time, he's too polite to ignore my emotional overflow. He pulls up, unclips his cleats, and offers me a bottle.

“*Ça va, Sadie? Eau de coco?*”

I like coconut water as much as any cyclist craving natural electrolytes, but I can't take his hydration. Besides, I have water in my backpack and a flask of Lexi's VitalaGreen. I swipe my cheeks, offer a *non, merci*, and point into the trees.

The chamois has hopped to a higher rock, where it perches looking even more like a magical being out of a Miyazaki film. *Gem loved Miyazaki. It is a sign!*

I hold my breath. When Philippe sucks in his, I'm convinced I'm not seeing things.

“*Magnifique,*” he whispers. We stand for long minutes, all three of us. Then the chamois strolls off into the forest. Totally Miyazaki. Totally Gem.

“*Pardon, sorry,*” I say to Philippe. “I didn't mean for you to cycle all the way up here.”

Nadiya showed me her text. She asked Philippe to call or text me as soon as convenient. Cycling to the end of the road and up a mountain cannot be convenient.

Philippe flicks his hand. “I was coming this way.” He tells me about his workout plan—after this, he'll “just” do a hundred miles or so at the highest altitudes around.

I'm thinking I should reconsider my desire to ride with his group.

Philippe chuckles. “Since I am in the neighborhood, I say to myself, I will warm up and find Sadie. I encountered a kissing couple who said you were up ahead. Touring is romance.”

He rests on his bike seat, one foot planted, the other on the pedal, his face barely dewy from the uphill effort. He cracks the bottle of coconut water and continues.

“Now I must know. Why do you ask me for a description of our *friend*, the aggressive Red Bib?”

Why? Because I have a wild imagination? Because I’m grasping for closure? Half of me hopes I’m wrong. The other half, well . . . If I’m right, I may have cracked the case!

I take out my phone and find a picture Bea snapped for me on the first afternoon of the tour. My group, all together, lined up in front of the bike barn. I’m between Judith and Lance. We’re all smiling. Dom’s on the other side of Judith. His mouth is a flat line, as if foreboding how his tour would end.

I shiver and point to the man who’s positioned himself front and center. “Is that him? The Red Bib?”

Philippe takes my phone and squints close. “*Non*,” he says promptly and definitively.

My hopes tumble. Of course it was a foolish idea. Ridiculous! And I’ve dragged Philippe up a mountain to confirm my folly. At least he saw the chamois.

“No,” Philippe says, drawing out the word. “No, it cannot be. Impossible.”

I tell myself I’m relieved. Maybe that spray-painting teenager really was behind it all. He burst into tears because he knew he’d done a terrible thing.

Philippe is still staring at the little picture. He magnifies it with two fingers. He tilts the phone, then his head, as if to see other angles. “What is that *atrocious* on his face? I see him in the eyes. The intensity. The aggression. But what is that ridiculous mustache? Why is he taking your tour?”

* * *

I speed-walk the rest of the snaking path to the abbey. Correction: speed-slog, with panting.

My urgency seems silly when I emerge at the clearing. Trees frame the sky. The stone abbey sits quietly, as it has for centuries. The campanile—the bell tower—dwarfs the curvy Romanesque nave. Stone steps lead up to doorways, teasingly closed to visitors. Irises and poppies bring a cottagey feel to the front garden. So do two stout, redheaded sisters in brightly colored Spandex sitting on a low stone wall.

“We have a winner!” Philly declares.

For a second, I think they mean me. Hardly the winner. A stitch jabs at my side. For someone who cycles for a living, I’m in embarrassingly poor mountain-trekking shape. I press at the stitch, siphon air through my teeth, and work out that they’re talking pastry, typically one of my top-ten subjects.

Oh, who am I kidding? Croissants are always among my top-five topics, except right now I need to locate Nigel Fox.

Conny holds up the golden end of a croissant. Her sister does the same. They bump pastries as if clinking wine glasses.

“*Santé!*” they chime in unison. *To your health.*

“Now which bakery was this one from?” Philly asks after they’ve chewed in eye-drooping bliss.

“We’ll have to do the test over,” laughs Conny. “Good thing we have a free afternoon.”

“Have you seen Nigel?” I ask, aiming for a casual, unworried, no-hurry tone.

The sisters issue matching *tuts*.

“He’s gone and done something, hasn’t he?” Philly says.

“Must be something awful,” Conny agrees. “Have we ever seen Sadie not caring a wink about glorious croissants?”

I’ve given myself away. Nigel did too, yet I missed it. There was the day he broke the speed limit in Thuir. His avid interest in the vandalized Sans-Souci sign. His unabashed delight at all my troubles.

“You have to admit, it’s nicer without him,” Philly says. She slides off the stone wall, brushing croissant shards from her front and moss off her backside.

I think of Dom and his distaste for buttery flakes. *Oh, Dom! I’m sorry!* If I’m right, then his death is because of me and my new business.

I scan the grounds. A gardener in tan coveralls meditatively rakes the forest. A woodpecker drums on a dead tree. The air smells tantalizingly of coffee and cinnamon rolls. I wonder again if I’m hallucinating.

I snap myself back to the immediate problem of locating my riders. “Have you seen Judith and Manfred?” I ask the sisters.

They point to two bikes neatly tucked in a rack by discreet restrooms.

“Manfred escorted our Judith up that hiking trail for a bird’s-eye view of the abbey,” Philly says. “Now there’s a gentleman. Too bad he’s ten years

her junior.”

The sisters launch a debate about the merits/demerits of younger men.

Lexi’s giggles float up the trail. Good. She and Lance are happy and accounted for. I count my blessings and accompany the sisters on to the abbey. You can’t tell from the approach, but the abbey perches on the edge of a precipice. Manfred and Judith will be enjoying the stunning sight.

I encourage Conny and Philly to go check it out too.

“You can see the whole setting,” I say. “Including the cloister garden. We’ll have our private tour inside in about half an hour. How about I let you explore until then?”

The sisters share a meaningful glance.

“Something big is up,” Conny says. “Any other day, you’d be rattling off the age of stones. Tell us, what’s he done?”

“Nothing,” I say, and then feel bad lying. “Nothing for sure, yet.”

They make dire sounds. “Be careful around that one,” Philly says. “Don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

They chug off up the rocky trail to the overlook. Lance and Lexi head that way too, hand in hand.

Philippe will be down the hill by now, speeding to Vernet to find Nadiya, Jordi, and hopefully Nigel Fox, AKA the Red Bib.

I get out my phone. Nadiya answers with what I assume is Ukrainian cursing with Nigel’s name sprinkled in.

“Philippe told you?” I ask.

“I cannot believe it!” Nadiya says. “He is a rat. A rat amongst us! Destroying nice things, attacking our business, our riders. Why?”

“We don’t know anything for sure,” I say. “I’m going to call Laurent. You’ll let me know if Nigel returns?”

She assures me she will.

“If he does, don’t let on that we suspect,” I say.

Nadiya sniffs. “I will not. I will have to hide Jordi from him, though. Jordi is a very bad liar.”

Another good point in Jordi’s column, I think as I dial Laurent. I watch fog curl around the bell tower as his phone reaches eight rings. If I have to leave a message, what will I say?

Call me? No, not urgent enough.

Call me now, I know the killer is and he’s getting away?

“Allô?”

It takes me a moment to register that it's the man, not a machine.

"It's me," I say. "Sadie, from Oui Cycle."

"*Oui*," he says, sounding amused. "I cannot speak long. I have just stepped out of the interview room. We are charging the teenager with an act of vandalism on the bridge. The chief and the *commissaire* say it is only a matter of time before he confesses to your crimes."

"Do you think that's true?"

He lowers his voice. "I doubt it very much. He knows nothing of bikes."

Poor kid. "If only he'd had a bike. He might have developed better hobbies."

"Ah, that is exactly what your friend Bea maintains. She recommends probational bicycling. She also accused me of 'harassing' a minor. But she and Bernard are the ones who caught him."

We all have regrets. I sure do.

"I'll report back when I learn more," Laurent says. "I must go and—"

"No! You have to get up here!" I blurt. "I found out something about Nigel Fox."

"Yes? Your speedy critic?"

"Yes, him," I say. "He's been lying!"

Two nuns stroll my way, habits in earthy brown billowing over sensible shoes. I stop pacing and attempt to look peaceful and meditative. Or at least not jumpy and ranting about crimes.

As soon as they've passed, I whisper, "He's a really good cyclist. On his information forms for the tour, he said he was average."

"He did break the speed limits of Thuir," Laurent says patiently. "But lying on information forms for a cycling tour—that is not a serious crime."

I start up my pacing. "No, I mean, he's *really* good. He's been challenging other cyclists, former pros—and beating them. He's been in the area for a lot longer than my tour, too." I pause before dropping my biggest revelation, not only for emphasis but also to breathe. "He was here when my vandalism started."

The silence on the other end is worthy of a Trappist monastery. Then I hear what sounds like pages flipping and a pen tapping.

Laurent says, "According to statements, Nigel Fox arrived by train to Sans-Souci the day before your tour began. You collected him from the station."

“Yes. I did.” I recall what Nigel said. *We will have a good time, Ms. Greene.* Mustache wagging, emphasis on “good.” At the time, I was still hoping for rave-worthy fun. Now I hear it in the pitch of a cartoon villain.

I resume my pacing. On a turn back toward the abbey, I see my group, all present and early and watching me.

I wave in a cheery lie and raise an index finger to signal I’ll be right there.

“I have to go,” I tell Laurent. “We’re about to tour an abbey.”

“And I’m about to charge a teenager with serious crimes. What more do you have?”

Put that way, the thousand-year-old abbey can wait. I explain Philippe and the pugnacious cyclist who’s been challenging his riding group. “Philippe says this guy won’t give his real name. It’s always some obviously fake name—a British celebrity like Paul Hollywood, Graham Norton, the Duke Edinburgh . . . He then mocks any French rider who gets taken in by his fib.”

“I know Philippe,” Laurent muses. “Good man. Good rider. How sure is he that Fox is the same guy?”

“Seventy-eight percent.” I gaze into the beech trees as Laurent ponders the number.

“Why seventy-eight?” he asks.

I smile. Philippe is a man after my own numerical heart. “He had a complex calculation, but basically, he’d need to see various leg muscles and his cycling style. The face is throwing him off. The eyes match, but Philippe’s guy doesn’t have a mustache. What if it’s a fake?”

What if it’s not? An image flashes of me triumphantly tugging on Nigel’s walrus tusks and finding them real! I’d sure be famous then. *Oui Cycle* would get the most devastating review ever. So absurdly bad, I might attract big business in tragedy tourists. The ghoulish types who visit things like tsunami zones, nuclear-waste sites, and serial killers’ childhood homes.

More silence on the other end. Laurent must be calculating. “Okay. The teenager can wait. It’ll do him good. Where is Mr. Fox now? I’ll drive up and speak with him.”

“That’s another problem. His bike is gone. So is he.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Footsteps on the other end, a door slamming. “If you see him, do not reveal what you suspect.”

Oh, I won’t, but if Nigel is gone, I’m afraid it’s already too late.

Chapter 27

Day 6, Tuesday Choices, choices . . . Here are some options for our free afternoon. Enjoy a well-earned soak in the hot-spring spa. If you'd rather cool off, the icy waters of the Cascade des Anglais are just a short hike away. For a scenic spin, set your navigators for the route to the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa. If you've been to New York City, you may have already seen part of this twelfth-century abbey, reconstructed stone by stone as the Cloisters Museum.

A nun with a lead foot gives me a ride down the mountain to my bike.

She's silent. I'm praying with every hairpin, cliffside curve she careens down, blithely grinding gears in a rattling vintage Jeep. When we survive—and she's serenely wished me a blessed day—I leap on my bike and ride like she drove. Recklessly.

It's all downhill back to Vernet-les-Bains. I cut corners, forgo the brakes, and stomp on my pedals.

Laurent must drive like the ride-sharing nun. We reach Vernet-les-Bains at the same time. When I say the same time, I mean exactly. His hatchback and my bike converge on a small traffic circle decorated in petunias and geraniums, a scenic spot for a collision.

We slam on our brakes, then waste moments on mimed politeness. *You go. No, you go.* Finally, he goes because it's a lot easier to tap the gas than set off from a dead stop in high gear.

We meet up again in the small parking lot behind my hotel. Laurent parks by a fountain designed to look like a natural grotto. Or maybe it is real. Caves dot the town, some dripping with natural springs, others blasted from the cliffs by long-past miners. A frog leaps into the pool with a splat. Moss drips. The dark water seems bottomless but is probably only a few inches deep.

Laurent forgoes the usual greetings. Something else is different about him too. It takes me a moment to figure out what.

He's rumped.

Wrinkles in his linen suggest shoved-up sleeves. His stubble is beyond last night's five o'clock and this morning's too. He looks tired, yet his brown eyes flash with excitement.

"I had my deputy check Nigel Fox's passport records," he says. "He entered Italy a month ago."

Coming from London, Nigel would go through passport control to get into the European Union. Once inside, borders are open.

"He could have easily come over to France by train or car," Laurent is saying.

"By boat or bicycle," I add, picturing Nigel charging across the Alps, as determined as Hannibal and his war elephants.

"We'll ask him when we find him. I issued an alert. If he's on the roads, someone will see him." Laurent notices his wrinkled sleeve and frowns.

"Until then?" I ask.

"I will check his room. See if he's taken his luggage."

"I'll come—" *With you*, I'm about to say.

Laurent holds up a hand. "If there is evidence, I can't have you in there." He's already heading for the hotel.

I jog after him. "The room's in my company's name. I can grant you access."

Silly me. Laurent has that covered with a melting smile to Chloe at the desk.

She's escorting him up personally in a matter of minutes. I'm left in the lobby with the ferns and palms and a small dog that emerges from behind reception to raise a lip and bare a fang.

"Aren't you cute?" I say in baby talk.

Grrrr.

Still cute, but I can take a hint. I'm not wanted here. But where can I go? We've checked out, so I can't return to my room to flip TV channels or hide under the covers.

I sigh, head for the exit (the dog gives a bark of triumph), and text Nadiya, letting her know that Laurent is here. I'm about to follow up and ask if she and Jordi would like to get lunch when my phone buzzes with her reply. A thumbs-up and a message. She and Jordi are having a picnic at the top of the village. She offers to hurry down.

I will *not* be the boss who interrupts a romantic picnic. Besides, if there's nothing for me to do, there's even less requiring three people.

I order Nadiya to enjoy her picnic.

I'm on my own. For a moment, I regret scheduling in so much free time.

Then I chide myself. For goodness' sake, I'm in France! I'm in a gorgeous spa town and can certainly find ways to entertain myself. Like taking that ride I'd planned in honor of Gemma.

I'll just go for a short ride, in case Laurent or my cyclists need me.

"You and me," I tell my bike, patting her handlebars. We set out. Flower boxes decorate the bridges. Cats watch from balconies. An elderly couple on a bench wave, and I wave back. I pass by plane trees with their pretty splotchy bark, past a small supermarket Judith would enjoy, and onward out of town.

This part of the road is tricky for cyclists. It's narrow, especially on a bridge that cuts over a river. The bridge has barriers, which is good. But they pinch cyclists and life-risking pedestrians into the road. Not good.

Once again, my best course is to claim the full lane. That's my right, but tell that to the guy behind me. A white-paneled van hovers inches from my back wheel. What's he want me to do? Throw myself over the barrier so he can speed?

I grip my handlebars and will my wheels to hold steady over skid marks and shards of plastic. The shards reflect back like blood-red diamonds. *Like reflectors on the back of a bike.*

I want to slow and look, but the van driver buzzes like a harassed hornet. He edges into the opposite lane as another car speeds around the bend, heading uphill. Horns blare.

Probably just a fender bender, I tell myself. One car bumping another. No business of mine. The angry driver surges past inches from my side. Shaken, I ride on until the next village, where desperate efforts to slow traffic have produced an obstacle course. Speed bumps rattle my teeth. In-lane barriers narrow the road to a single lane, forcing drivers—and cyclists—to take turns passing. Or play vehicular roulette to see who dares squeeze by first. A bus is roaring up the mountain. A delivery van is approaching fast behind me. I don't want to be caught between them. I skid off into a driveway to chide my nerves. *Stop it! You're out for a ride. You're supposed to be contemplating Gem and life and landscapes.*

All I can think of are those skid marks and the shattered red.

I turn around and power back up the hill. On the bridge, I make a move that would have me cringing if a guest did it. I swerve across to the wrong

side of the road, dismount, and walk my bike along the edge, not caring when the pedal nips my ankle.

As I walk, I repeat a mantra. *Nothing to worry about. Nothing to see. Nothing to do with me.*

When I reach the skid marks and scattered red, I look over the ledge and smile. The mantra worked! I see nothing except green leaves, yellow broom flowers, and flashes of mountain water, rolling over rocks.

Cars zip by. A camper van swerves dangerously to avoid me. Others don't move a centimeter, including a camper van that barrels by like a world-destroying comet with Netherlands plates.

So many campers, I think, then wonder if that makes me a local. Can I, the expat and guide of tourists, complain about *all these tourists*?

I decide to turn around and get back to my ride, but there's too much traffic. Suddenly the road to Vernet-les-Bains is the place to be. While I wait, I glance again over the edge, expecting to admire more flowers. That's when I see it. A flash of red in the yellow. The black curve of a wheel. A silver sprig of spokes. Tan jodhpurs.

I can't remember how I got back across the road or on my bike. I know that by the time I reach Vernet, I'm gasping for breath. I pull over in the small supermarket parking lot and dial Laurent's number with a shaking finger.

Laurent answers on the fifth ring. "Sadie, I'm about done here. Fox didn't pack his suitcases. It makes me think he's still nearby. We'll look for his bike."

"I'm afraid I found the bike." I grip my brakes even though I've come to a stop.

I fear I've found Nigel too.

STAGE 3—

To the Mountains!

Chapter 28

Day 6, Tuesday Want more ideas for our free afternoon? Relax like a local at a sidewalk café. For fizzy refreshment, how about a Perrier menthe, sparkling water with mint syrup? Rest up, because later we embark on our third stage, onward and upward to the high Pyrenees.

An activity I definitely do *not* recommend for a free afternoon: pace in a supermarket parking lot, waiting for confirmation that another member of your tour is dead.

I've lost track of how long I've been waiting. That realization brings a shocked halt to my pacing. I attempt to reverse calculate. How long?

Long enough to be chatted up by Germans on Harleys (*non, merci*, I don't want a ride to Andorra to enjoy gambling and duty-free cigarettes). To help an American tourist access the locked shopping carts (insert a Euro, keep the chit to get your money back). To discuss the weather with a Spanish truck driver (nice if you like fog, which we agreed we do). To buy a bag of fromage-flavored potato chips and eat the entire bag. (I know, no snacking in France, and I shouldn't turn to chips for comfort. Desperate times. Plus it was a tiny bag). To assure a nice woman and her mini-poodle that I am okay.

As must be clear to even a giddy dog, I am not okay. I've also been waiting a long time. An entire fleet of gendarme vehicles has arrived, along with an ambulance, a fire truck, and flocks of gawkers.

Finally, a man in a rumpled linen jacket strides through the fray.

The shake of Laurent's head confirms what I already know. No afternoon pick-me-up will help Nigel Fox now.

"I'm sorry," Laurent says.

I am too. I can't say I liked Nigel, but I certainly didn't want him dead.

"This wasn't an accident," I say, inching away from the shopping-cart corral where the American has triumphantly retrieved her Euro. She mouths a happy *thank you* before noticing the road blockade of flashing emergency vehicles and scooting away.

Laurent is saying he'll have to wait for the crime scene technicians and medical examiner and—

“You saw the skid marks,” I interrupt.

He did, and he looks appropriately grim. “I’ll take you back to the hotel. You’ve had a shock. You should rest, perhaps lie down.”

That firms my resolve. I can still walk a few blocks across the village!

“Thanks,” I say, “but I’ll be fine. Anyway, we checked out. We have a reservation on the Petit Train Jaune this evening and . . .” My words drop off.

How can I keep on with this tour with two riders dead? No, not *just* dead. Killed under suspicious circumstances. In my head, I hear Gem, chiding. *Say the truth, Sadie—they were murdered.*

“About your tour group,” Laurent says. “I will need to interview each of you. While I cannot compel you to stay in town, I would ask that you remain long enough to assist me with my investigations.”

He sounds formal and stiff. Are we all back to being suspects?

“Please?” he adds.

How can I say no to a *please*? Besides, I really don’t have a choice. I need the culprit caught more than he does. “We’ll stay as long as necessary,” I add.

That sends a fresh but familiar panic up my middle. *So many reservations to change.* At least I’ll have a distraction.

I reach for my bike and start to wheel her away. I’m wobbly on two feet. No way should I ride.

Laurent falls into step beside me. “Walking? Good, I’ll accompany you.”

A chivalrous gesture? Perhaps.

All business? More likely, especially when Laurent says, “Did anyone on your tour dislike Mr. Fox? Anyone other than you? I understand he was planning to write quite a hostile review?”

I could act affronted, insulted, indignant. *Was he? I can’t know that. Why would I care? A single review on a blog? Pfft!*

I sigh. “Do you suspect *me*?”

I look to him, expecting a wry smirk. His face is as stony as the mountains.

“I must suspect everyone.”

I must too. But should I suspect my riders? Nigel was run off the road by a vehicle. We’re on bikes.

“It *could* have been a drunk driver,” I say. “Or a distracted driver or reckless driver, a tragic mistake. We can hope someone turns up.” Just what the police told me after Gem’s accident. Look how well that worked out.

“I do not sit around and hope,” Laurent says crisply.

“I don’t either,” I say.

Now he raises a grim smile. “I never thought you would.”

* * *

Back at the hotel, Chloe sits behind the reception desk, reading a book.

I read the title: Camus’s *The Stranger*.

There’s something nontragic for my journal. A sighting of a French person reading Camus, live and in action.

She looks up and pushes back dark-rimmed glasses of the sultry-librarian variety. “Ah, officer, you return. Madame, have you located your missing cyclist?”

I look to Laurent. *What does he want me to say?*

“Regrettably,” he says and launches into a vague but sorrowful explanation of a “tragic incident.”

Chloe lays down Camus and touches her chest. “*Mon Dieu!* Madame! Is this not the second death on your tour?”

I wish she didn’t know that count. If we can’t make our train this evening, we need a place to stay. Here, preferably.

“You will be in a hurry to leave,” she says, as if reading my thoughts.

“About that—” I start.

“Good news,” Chloe interrupts. “We have also located your keys. There will be no delays in your departure. Voilà!” She holds a keyring in her fingertips, as I might hold an anchovy-smearred shard of glass.

“What keys?” I ask. Maybe I *am* in shock. None of this is connecting.

“The keys to your van, of course. The keys your driver lost.” She extends her arm. I’m afraid if I don’t take them, she’ll let them drop.

I hold out my palm. These are Jordi’s keys. I recognize the rugby-ball keychain.

Chloe is saying the chambermaid found them in the hallway. She winks at me. “I suppose he was distracted, running around at night with his pretty coworker. This hotel is such a romantic place.” She smolders at Laurent.

I jingle the keys and am about to ask if she's seen Jordi when he bursts in.

Jordin spots the keys and puffs out an exhale. "Ouf! Where were they?"

Chloe repeats the tale of discovery, along with the innuendo. "You had a busy night, Monsieur?"

Jordi's cheeks go as red as cherries. "Sorry," he murmurs to me. "I'll pack up." He reaches for a suitcase.

"Wait," I say. "There's been a problem."

"A tragedy," Chloe offers unhelpfully. "You will want to pack and leave quickly. Very unfortunate."

"Tragedy?" Jordi scratches at the peach fuzz that stands in for his hair. "No, it's not that bad. I can repair the headlamp, and the bumper is merely blemished. Also, perhaps, a little dented, but it can be fixed."

He grips the keys so hard his knuckles whiten. "I'm sorry, boss. I don't know how it happened. Someone being careless in the parking lot? A camping van?"

"Show me," Laurent says.

Jordi looks mutinous. "It's just a scuff. We don't need you poking into our business. Why are you here? You caught the vandal, did you not? A kid?"

Laurent's smile is dangerously easy. "I'd like to see this damage. Shall we?" He nods to the door.

His tone is warm, welcoming, like we're off for some pleasant sightseeing. Chloe abandons Camus and follows us.

Trepidation rolls up my spine. *Lost keys. Damaged van. Nigel forced over a bridge.*

"Jordi," I say. "When did you last check on the van? Before this?"

He shrugs. "Last night. After I took out the luggage. Then there was dinner and the party and dancing."

His smile fades. "Then this morning, I could not find the keys. I thought I might have dropped them outside when I was hurrying to get the luggage to the rooms. I did not want any more complaints, especially by our *favorite* critic."

"You wouldn't want that," Laurent says, way too agreeably.

Back in the parking lot, the grotto drips, a frog sings, and Nadiya crouches by the front bumper, aggressively rubbing it with a rag.

“*Madame, non!*” Laurent drops his pleasant, casual guy act. “Stop what you are doing, immediately!”

Nadiya sits back on her heels. “Why stop? It is coming off. Red paint, like another vandal. Did you catch the wrong person, detective?”

I steady myself on the hood and stare at the spot. Red paint, mashed into a dent. My head spins.

Laurent is suddenly beside me, offering me an arm. “Sadie, please sit. You have had shocks.”

A bench faces the grotto water feature, denying the unsightliness of the pavement. The dribbly waterfall sounds like a roar. Like the blood whooshing around my head.

The Oui Cycle van—my van—hit Nigel. I don’t need paint analysis or crime techs. I know.

Laurent knows it too. “Jordi Vollant,” he says. “We must talk.”

“There are coffee and pastries in the sunroom,” Chloe offers.

Oh, sure, when Laurent’s involved, she’s all sunshine and welcomes.

Laurent glances to me. His jaw is stiff, his lips pressed firm in a downward turn. Like he’s sorry for what he’s about to say.

“It will be best if we speak at the gendarmerie.” He reaches a hand toward Jordi.

Jordi wrenches back. “What if I don’t want to?”

Nadiya leaps up and places herself in front of him. “He does not want to. It is just a van. Sadie, you are not pressing charges, are you? You know Jordi is a careful driver.”

“Something awful has happened,” I say. “Nigel Fox has been killed.”

Laurent frowns. Maybe he wanted to keep that information close, to trip up Jordi. I won’t have that.

Nadiya backs into Jordi, holding out her arms protectively.

I barrel on. “Nigel’s bike went over a bridge. It appears he was hit by a vehicle.”

The clerk snaps her fingers. “Ah! The tension is explained! Your van did it! He is the driver of the van. Detective, you have done fine work.”

“No! I didn’t drive the van into anyone,” Jordi protests. He steps out from behind Nadiya, turning pleading eyes to her, then me. “You must believe me.”

“I do! I am his alibi,” Nadiya says. “Come, Jordi, we will explain to this *flic*.”

Laurent—the *flic*, the cop—smiles and waves an open palm toward the main village. “The gendarmerie is just two blocks. Shall we walk?”

Nadiya stomps off with determination. Jordi shuffles behind her, broad shoulders hunched.

Chloe turns to me. “That is settled, then. You will be checking out?”

Chapter 29

Day 6, Tuesday Revised itinerary: a tour detour. An extra night in Vernettes-Bains means more opportunities to explore!

“The inn cannot accommodate you. *Je suis désolée*, Madame. I am very sorry.”

Chloe looks not at all sorry, and I’d bet my beloved bike that L’Auberge de la Rose is *not* fully occupied. Last night, the entire floor over ours seemed empty.

“We only need six rooms,” I say, pleadingly. I really, really don’t want to lug suitcases to another hotel.

“*Non*,” she says without bothering to check her register. “*Impossible*.”

“Five rooms? Four?” Jordi, Nadiya, and I could find something elsewhere. We travel light. *If Jordi is free . . .*

Chloe smiles, tight-lipped.

Okay. I get it. I gather the tatters of my dignity and thank her profusely. “If I could leave the luggage for a few—”

She inclines her head. “Ah, regrettably, unfortunately, *non*.”

I have no more dignity to gather, so I heft Judith’s suitcase to the door. What did she pack? Bricks? Dictionaries? Lead? I lug Lexi’s case next and then their litter of carry-ons.

All the while, Chloe appears to be immersed in Camus. I try to remember the plot. Wasn’t there a murder? A killing for no apparent reason? I’m carrying out the final two bags, Manfred’s blessedly light sleek silver cases, when Chloe looks up.

“That is all?”

I may have pulled a rotator cuff hefting Judith’s case, but yep, that’s all. Guilt jabs more painfully than the shoulder twinge. I shouldn’t be complaining about suitcases. I have two fewer. Laurent had sent a deputy over to retrieve Nigel’s.

“Very good,” says Chloe. “You will give us a five-star TripAdvisor review? I trust our accommodations far exceed your standards.”

Seeing as how I've lost two of my guests, I'd say their standards definitely exceed mine. I force a smile. "Of course."

She turns back to *The Stranger*. I'm about to wither out the door when it occurs to me that maybe she can help.

"Do you stay overnight here?" I ask.

She turns a page with deliberate slowness before she answers. "*Oui*. I have an apartment in the back. My *grand-mère* is the owner. Literally, all the time, I am here. Always here." She puffs a weary breath.

"Did you happen to hear anything last night? The van, leaving?"

She sniffs disdainfully. "*Non*. I sleep through all disturbances, like your party returning at midnight."

Which tells me she heard us. I think back. Nigel left early, but the rest of us returned together—everyone chatting and giggling, me worrying that we were too loud but not wanting to be the downer.

"Sorry if we woke you," I say.

She claims she was still awake. "But then I am woken too early. Before five, the sound that puts me on alert. The sound of stealth, like a mouse or a rat. Footsteps on the stairs." She narrows her eyes. "Do you think it was the killer?"

"That might have been me," I admit. "I couldn't sleep. I was trying to be quiet."

"*You* woke everyone, then. So many footsteps after that. Out the front, out the back, doors slamming."

I wince. "Sorry!" I try to pin her down on how many pairs of feet, when, from what rooms, but she says she put in earplugs and then heard only muffled irritants.

"People come to hotels to sleep," she says. "Why does no one besides hoteliers understand this?"

I make sympathetic sounds. In my experience, there are two types of hotel guests. Those who bellow in hallways, rattle their luggage carts, turn their TVs to all-night sports (or worse) at top volume, and wear clogs and cowbells on their incessantly pacing feet to entertain those on the floor below.

Then there are the hotel guests who mute their TV, speak in whispers, and quietly wish they could yell at the upstairs cloggers and hallway talkers.

I could broadly extend this generalization to humanity in general.

Chloe says, “I have told my grandmother I am moving to the third floor and installing many locks. One day, I will move farther. I will go to Paris, Geneva, Prague . . .” She sighs and picks up her book with the resignation of someone stuck in a place that seems like paradise to me.

Back outside, I shift the mountain of luggage away from the steps. I need to change reservations and find us a place to stay. Instead, I mull the timeline.

I went out before five. The bikes were stashed in a back room, the key to which hangs prominently behind the reception desk. L’Auberge de la Rose still has old-fashioned slots where room keys can be left when guests go out.

Nigel could have easily accessed his bike. Did I wake him? And someone else? Maybe one of my cyclists or another hotel guest saw something?

A breeze rolls down the mountains, raising a shiver up my arms. *Saw something or did something, like steal my van to kill a man on a red bike.*

* * *

Here’s another generalization about well-mannered people. They’ll say the expected polite things when informed of a death. Usually.

Later that afternoon, when my remaining cyclists return, I clasp my hands, assume a somber expression, and tell them about Nigel’s “passing.” We’ve gathered in front of our hotel. Correction: our former hotel. Everyone is on time, not that we have anywhere to go.

“It looks like a hit and run,” I say. “The police are actively investigating. Skid marks on the road suggest the driver may have aimed for him.”

Everyone falls silent. Stunned? Shocked? Waiting for someone else to make the first statement?

Philly takes the lead. “Aye, well, that man stirred up anger.”

Her sister chimes in. “A right and terrible shame, of course, but Philly speaks the truth.”

Okay, that wasn’t the usual trite politeness, but at least they’re being honest.

“Rest his soul,” Conny adds as an afterthought.

Judith pats her heart somberly. “Bike touring is such a *risky* profession.” She shoots me a pointed look. *Take my job offer!*

Manfred shakes his head as if sorrowful.

I nod encouragingly. Here comes a good, expected platitude.

“To live is to die,” he intones. “We all cycle to the void one day.”

Or not.

“Shame,” says Lance. “He seemed like an okay guy.”

That’s better! Although, *an okay guy*? Lance is either fibbing or no judge of character.

Lexi gasps. “How awful!”

Thank you, Lexi! “It is awful,” I agree.

Lexi’s brow wrinkles. I’m afraid she’s imagining a faceless killer mowing down cyclists. She points. “Sadie? Why is our luggage in the parking lot?”

I should be grateful. I am! She’s not focusing on vehicular homicide, and she’s provided me with an opening for more bad news.

“Given the awful events,” I say, “I thought it would be best if we stayed here another night to, ah, reflect and regroup.”

“Reflect?” demands Conny. “Is that a euphemism for stopping our tour? If anything, we should hightail it out of town. And weren’t we promised a visit to a ham and sausage emporium tomorrow? We could reflect there.”

“We could,” says Manfred. “No, we *should*.”

“But our luggage,” Lexi persists. “Why is it sitting on the dirty pavement? Sadie, where is the van and the nice man who drives it? Could he take us somewhere safe?”

My mental wheels spin. “There’s been a bit of an accident with the van.”

“An accident?” Judith gasps. “Oh, Sadie!”

I can’t very well tell her that my van is a killer. I switch lanes. “The luggage is out because we’ll move to another fabulous establishment to get a true taste of Vernet.”

Just as soon as I find a place that hasn’t heard of my tour of troubles.

“That sounds nice,” Judith says. “It’s a lovely little town, but what should we *do* now?”

People take guided tours for various reasons. They enjoy camaraderie. They don’t want to navigate routes and reservations in a foreign country. They relish a break from having to make all the decisions. They find it relaxing to be told what to do and when to do it.

I clasp my hands as if this is all a fun opportunity. “We have lots of options,” I say and am about to suggest the spa or a café when a too-familiar official hatchback pulls up.

Laurent and Nadiya get out.

My guide looks as stormy as yesterday's weather. Laurent's expression could melt butter on a glacier. So this is what he looks like when he's happy.

"*Bonjour*, my friends," he says. "How fortunate to find you gathered and not cycling off in all directions."

"We're trying to figure out what to do," Judith says.

Laurent beams. "I have the answer, Madame. You can all accompany me to the station and provide statements."

Unsurprisingly, no one jumps at the opportunity to visit a grim police barracks on a fine June afternoon in France.

"You do wish to assist?" Laurent asks. "*Two* of your compatriots have—"

"We do!" I interrupt before he can state the awful truth.

I turn to my group. "The gendarmerie is only a few blocks from here, and there's a pleasant walking path by the river."

Laurent's lip quirks. "I'll lead the way," he says, raising a hand as if he too has an imaginary tour flag.

My group falls in line. I stay back to talk to Nadiya.

"Are you okay? Is Jordi?"

She bites her lower lip. "No, Jordi is not okay. He's in trouble. They asked me many times if he was with me all night. Every time, I say yes, yes, he was. We had a beautiful night together."

Good. Against all odds, romance is flourishing on this tour.

Nadiya kicks at pebbles.

Not good.

"Jordi is too honest." She takes aim at a pine cone big enough to cause concussions. "I am a very good sleeper. I said he did not leave. I did not think he did. But then he admits he went for a walk in the night. He enjoys the solitude in the dark. We both look bad. Me, a liar. Him, a killer, but he did not run over Mr. Fox. He would not. You believe me? You believe in Jordi?"

Logic says I should not. Not entirely, at least. I go with my heart. "I do."

But how can I prove it?

Chapter 30

Day 6, Tuesday Revised itinerary: Let's put Vernet-les-Bains' curative waters to the test. The spas have attracted famous devotees. In the early 1900s, Rudyard Kipling and his wife Caroline stayed for the healing waters. The author wasn't entirely complimentary. In a letter to a friend back home, he complained about the sulfurous stink.

By six that evening, we're soaking in slick thermal waters. My problems are far from cured, but it sure feels good.

I found us rooms over the spa. Bonus: unlimited soaking time. Lance and Lexi are cozied up in a small outdoor bath. The rest of us are indoors in an Olympic-sized pool that looks like your average YMCA model. Lines under the surface mark out lanes. The tile has a crackle glaze in retro turquoise. Steam fogs three walls of windows. The water, air, and mood feel slippery.

I tread in the deep end. Judith rests on a wall a few feet away, arms extended across the tiles, feet floating before her. Pedicured toes rise above the water, rosy pink like her cheeks.

"It's a relief," Judith says. "I know you and Nadiya are upset, Sadie. I'm sorry for that, truly. It must be a shock to discover that someone you know isn't who you think they are."

At first, I think she's talking about Nigel. That mustache—so ridiculously, cartoonishly blatant that I didn't see it. How he must have laughed at us—at me—each time he dressed himself up.

Judith's words waft in on the steam. "I'll work to forgive Jordi. Maybe not yet but eventually."

Jordi. That's who she thinks isn't who he seems. She saw a nice guy. Nadiya and I still do. So do Bea and Bernard. The police see his past and his criminal record. That and opportunity. Motive too, if they stick to the theory that he played a prank-gone-deadly on Dom and Nigel saw.

Judith wiggles her toes. "Dom would be pleased with the arrest. Detective Laurent told me that the accused often confess in France. That's not like our legal system, is it? Even those caught in the act pretend they're innocent. Dom liked for people to take responsibility."

I paddle to the wall. A tile is chipped, revealing the terracotta red clay underneath. “Dom was after Lance to take responsibility,” I say, hanging on with my fingertips. “The other day, when they disappeared to the pub together, Lance said Dom was dredging up all sorts of old wrongs.”

Judith says, “Yes, I heard about that. Dom has been—*had* been—prickly lately. I apologized to Lance. I think it was my fault that Dom was upset about the car. *I* dinged his passenger door last month in the garage. I kept meaning to get it fixed but never found the time.”

“You didn’t tell him?” I ask.

“Oh, Dom would have made a big fuss over nothing. I should have known he’d notice. He probably photographed it for his records and was stewing, blaming it on Lance. Silly man. He loved to keep records, didn’t he? Spreadsheets, lists . . .” She shakes her head as if order and tallying are unfathomable.

Then she smiles. “You kids got into adventures, didn’t you? Do you remember when you, Lance, and Gemma skipped school and took the bus into Chicago? That was so unlike you, Sadie.”

Lance Appleton’s Day Off, Lance had called it, modeling our day on the movie. At sixteen, that was the most terrifying thing I’d ever done. Also one of the best days ever! Followed by most mortifying when we arrived back to find Dom waiting for us, camped out in a lounge chair on their lawn.

Lance had been grounded until he admitted that he was responsible for goading Gem and me into bad behavior. Gem’s parents got her museum passes and encouraged more independent exploration. My mom fussed that I’d bothered the Appletons. The skipping school part, she was okay with.

Might as well get your fun in before you’re stuck working your life away. Mom’s advice isn’t the uplifting kind you embroider on pillows.

I push away from the wall and tread in place. I’m simultaneously exhausted and wired.

“Ahh.” Judith exhales. “These waters are the cure. I hadn’t realized how tight my shoulders were.” She sinks lower.

I don’t want to burst her relaxation, but I have to say something. “What if Jordi didn’t do it?”

“The police say he did.” Judith leans her head back.

“He was having a romantic night with Nadiya,” I say. “New love. You don’t interrupt a night like that to go out and run someone over.” I’d made

the same point to Laurent.

Passion, Laurent had countered. *The heart can ignite desperate and dangerous impulses.*

He'd sounded passionate saying those words. I might be blushing now just thinking about it. I sink under the hot water. When I emerge, the air feels cooler.

Judith makes a dismissive sound. "It's like I said. We can't truly know people, especially when it comes to love."

"How devastatingly true." This from Manfred, who glides in on a leisurely backstroke. "We did not know Mr. Fox. Do we even know ourselves?"

"Absolutely correct, Manfred," says Judith.

Manfred paddles in place. "Sadly, Madame, there are also no absolutes besides death. Even then, what do we know? Death is the greatest of mysteries." He does a dolphin-worthy flip and floats away.

"Well, he's wrong there." Judith inspects her pool-wrinkled fingers. "I *absolutely* need a manicure. And, Sadie, I tried to be gentle earlier, but, dear, your business is *absolutely* in trouble. You've suffered two terrible tragedies, and word will get out. Did you see those reporters outside the police station?"

Did I see them? She *absolutely* knows I did. Judith and I were leaving the gendarmerie when a Perpignan TV reporter and her cameraman raced at us. One death was cause for a mention in the local news. *Two* deaths—two *suspicious* deaths—on the same cycling tour had them speeding up the valley.

That little flurry caught the eye of a British tabloid writer who—just my luck—was renting a vacation home across the street from the gendarmerie. He grabbed his camera and ran over in flip-flops and bathing trunks.

Judith stepped in front of me. A brave gesture, I thought, like a mother antelope protecting her calf. Then, however, Judith's helpful nature took over. She doled out our full names and Oui Cycle's too. She informed that tabloid reporter that a British national was dead. She might as well have dunked a bleeding limb in shark-infested waters.

"Murdered," she added. "The murdered man wrote a blog called . . . Sadie, what was it?"

I'd been trying to discreetly tug her away. Anywhere else would have done. Back into the cement-block misery of the gendarmerie. Deep in the

thorny embrace of a rose bush.

Judith had resisted. “Out Foxed! That’s the name. Do you know it?”

Oh, they knew it. I’ll be famous. Infamous. My sigh mixes with the sulfur-sticky steam. Something occurs to me. “Judith, how did you know that Nigel wrote Out Foxed?”

Judith nods to the other side of the pool, where Conny and Philly are gathering pool noodles. “The sisters told me. We were discussing what an unpleasant man he was. Why would he sign up for a tour when it was clear he didn’t like to cycle?”

He did like cycling, more intensely than my relaxing tour. I have a theory about what he was up to. I won’t share it with chatty Judith.

Judith is saying, “The detective asked me whether I read that blog. I said it didn’t sound like my style, unless it has recipes, which he said it does not.”

I sink to chin level, thinking about Nigel. He’s going to win. Thanks to his death, my business will be widely, famously, and flamingly trashed.

“My offer stands, Sadie.” Judith releases the wall, pushes off, and floats away in a serene belly crawl.

I’m dismally treading water when Philly and Conny ride up on pool noodles. The ends rear up in front and back like misbehaving merry-go-round horses.

“Sadie,” says Conny, draping my name in sympathy. “Don’t you worry. Time washes away all troubles.”

“As does spa water,” says Philly. “I’m happy we stayed the extra night. These waters are a balm to the soul.”

I’m glad they’re pleased. If this is my final tour, I should make these last few days the best I can. I kick to keep myself up, a good reminder that I’m not sunk yet.

“You caught on pretty quickly that Nigel was a critic,” I say. “How’d you know?”

“Easy,” says Philly. “He sat there penning ‘rubbish’ in big title letters right in front of us. Hard not to see that if you had the misfortune of sitting next to him.”

I wish now that I had. I’d kept my distance.

Conny is talking about all his hints. “Professor of rubbish, inquisitor, raver—he says those things on his little blog.”

“So you’re fans of Out Foxed?” I ask.

They splutter so loudly that Manfred looks back from his backstroke.

“Fans of that nastiness? The very opposite,” splutters Philly. “We’re anti-fans. Why, we’ll go out of our way to visit a ‘rubbish’ establishment and give our own rave review.”

“That’s nice of you,” I say. *Nice but oddly extreme.*

“Only doing what’s decent,” Conny says. “Your lad Jordi seems like a nice person too, on the whole. We’re not condoning what he did, but we sympathize. A man like Nigel drives one to anger.”

“Jordi *is* nice,” I say. “He wouldn’t have hurt Nigel.”

“No?” Conny says. “You didn’t see him grab Nigel by the collar then, did you?”

“What? When?” I forget to tread, sink, then flounder back up.

“At the engagement party,” Philly says. “Nigel was poking and sniping about Jordi’s criminal record. If Miss Nadiya hadn’t stepped in, who knows what might have happened?”

“Why, we know, don’t we?” says Conny. “Jordi could’ve erupted in a murderous rage. Don’t worry, Sadie. We told the handsome detective all of this. We said, ‘Nigel Fox brought this on himself.’ ”

With that, they gallop off in splashing slow motion.

I cling to the wall. A fogged clock shows we have two hours and thirteen minutes until dinner. In other circumstances, I might indulge in a siesta.

I won’t be napping. I have a theory to investigate, and I’m scared I might be right.

Cyclist's log
Day 6 recap

Hey, Gem. You know I wanted to devote this day to you. I did light a candle. Yeah, yeah, you never appreciated gift candles, but I lit this one at an ancient abbey. It flickered when the other flames stood still.

I went riding in your honor too. That sure didn't go according to plan. I discovered a deadly hit-and-run. Of all the days!

It was Nigel. Before I found him, I'd been thinking the worst of him. Con man. Bully. Potential vandal, killer, and/or thief. Ridiculous mustache!

My van is the killer. My sweet van! Remember how Mom thought her Subaru had a taste for blood after it hit a chipmunk? I can't tell her about the van.

Laurent's waiting for lab analyses, but we both know. The evidence is clear. Red paint, scratched bumper, an awful dent.

Last year, I scoured Elm Park for just such evidence. Chicago too. The expressway, driveways, everywhere! I was so sure I'd crack the case. I could picture it—heroic me, cycling by, spotting your metallic palm-leaf paint on a bumper. I'd bring you justice even if it was too late.

Do you think the police get a rush when they arrest someone? They must, but I think they got the wrong man. Poor Jordi—they've suspected him from the start. The van was the last straw. Or, as the French say, the final drop that makes the vase overflow.

My vase is flooding over!

Laurent ticked off the damning points.

(1) Jordi has a criminal record.

(2) Jordi's previous crimes were hacking "pranks."

(3) Jordi disliked Dom for insulting Nadiya. “It’s always love,” said Laurent—biggest motive there is.

(4) Laurent’s theory is that Nigel—the man who claimed to see all—actually saw something. Jordi had to silence him. He used Nadiya as an alibi.

(5) Jordi’s fingerprints are on the van keys. “Of course,” I said. “He’s my driver!” “Only Jordi’s prints,” Laurent countered.

Two can play at tallying. I could have made Laurent a spreadsheet, but I stuck to bullet points.

(1) Jordi admitted to going out last night. He wasn’t using anyone as an alibi. “He’s throwing us off track,” Laurent countered. “Reverse logic.” I said that seemed illogical. “That’s the point,” Laurent said. We could have circled around that roundabout for days.

(2) Jordi lost the van keys. Or they were stolen. A thief would have had lots of opportunities. Last Jordi knew, he had them in a jacket pocket. A jacket that was on the back of his chair all night when he was dancing. Laurent: Laziest criminal ploy in the books. Pretend something was lost or stolen.

(3) Sending Dom over a cliff isn’t a gag joke. “Why not send him to Spain or up a mountain?” I said. Laurent granted that Spain would have been a good prank.

(4) My best point: Jordi is a nice guy who’s devoted to Oui Cycle, Nadiya, Bea and Bernard, and rugby, none of which he’d mess up by killing anyone. I’d hope he likes me well enough not to crash my business. Laurent says nice people commit crimes too.

I didn’t convince him.

You know what’s awful? I hardly dare write this because I’m sharing a double room with Nadiya tonight. She’s asleep, and I don’t want her to sense my treachery. For these pages only? Laurent made some decent points.

But I do believe in Jordi. I do!

I so wanted Nigel to be the one to blame. This morning, I really thought I’d solved the case!

Speaking of Nigel, before dinner, I spent two nauseating hours skimming Out Foxed reviews. The “Rubbish” reviews, because no one gets murderous about raving praise.

In August 2014, Out Foxed reviewed a tearoom in Aberdeen called the Twin Sisters. Total “rubbish” takedown of their scones. I mean, brutal. Blood everywhere. He even eviscerated the teapots. Squat. Lacking verve. Drippy pours.

Aberdeen is near where Philly and Conny live now. They mentioned owning a tearoom in a nearby city. They said it made them experts on baked goods.

Scotland must have loads of tearooms. All that chilly weather and tromping on moors. But how many are run by twin sisters and get rubbish reviews?

I asked them outright when we were walking back from dinner. “Did Nigel Fox review your bakery?”

I won’t lie. I was scared. What if they were the killers?

They laughed. Merry guffaws.

Sadie, lass, are you accusing us of murder? That was Philly. They both clapped like kids at Disney World or me visiting a Pierre Hermé patisserie.

Conny thanked me for considering them so capable and decisive.

So that was a “yes” to the tea-shop ownership? But murder? They were too giddy to answer. Reverse tactics, as Laurent might say?

Nadiya’s snoring.

I should try to sleep too. We have early train reservations tomorrow. We voted at dinner. My guests think the killer is caught, and thus the tour should go on.

What if the killer hasn’t been caught? That’s why I want to go on. If this group disbands and scatters, so could the truth.

Chapter 31

Day 7, Wednesday Rest up, Oui Cyclists. Tomorrow we have an early morning reservation on the Petit Train Jaune, the famous narrow-gauge line running from Villefranche-de-Conflent to the Spanish border.

Ringling jolts me upright in my bed. I throw off the too-warm duvet and fumble for the nightstand. My phone falls to the floor in a clatter.

Nadiya snores on. She's no nighttime alibi, that's for sure.

I stretch until almost falling from my bed, palm patting planks. "Hello?" I whisper, wrenching myself back to prone.

"What time is it?" asks the voice on the other end.

I blurrily wonder if this is a variant on my recurring stress dreams. My two most common nightmares involve studying and luggage. Studying: I'm back in college. It's finals day, but I've forgotten to attend the class. Luggage: I'm urgently but forever packing, all the while knowing I'm sure to miss a plane, train, or departing tour group.

"Hello? Sadie? Did I wake you?"

Al?

Al!

"Al?" I manage to repeat to my ex.

"I woke you," Al says and then, "Oh." His *oh* sounds grim. Like he's calculated time zones?

I lie back and await an apology.

"You're in one of those countries where they nap all afternoon, aren't you?" Al says disapprovingly. "Doesn't that waste a lot of the day?"

"No!" I blurt before remembering I have a roommate. "I mean, yes, people do enjoy restorative rests. But, Al, it's two in the *morning* here."

"Oh, okay." Al sounds skeptical, like he doesn't trust anything I say.

"Is everything okay?"

A sigh. "Can you give Lance a message? His phone's off. I figured you're with him."

Not at two in the morning!

I owe Al, I remind myself. Be nice. “Happy to!” I lie. “What’s the message?”

“I missed his call.” Al sounds petulant. “He called at 10:30 last night. My 10:30. Left a message. I turn my phone off at ten.”

“Good policy.” When I’m not responsible for tour groups, I do the same.

“Sure. Yeah. Can you tell him the company card isn’t working because Visa flagged the account? We think someone might’ve gotten ahold of the number. Foreign countries, you know. Can’t be too careful.”

“Ah, okay. We are in France. It’s quite safe.”

Except on this tour.

Al continues as if I haven’t spoken. “It was maxed out the other day at some place called . . .” Al pauses. I can hear a fretful frown in his silence.

“*Lant tier des gems.*” Al sounds out each syllable with flat Midwestern enunciation.

I run the sounds through my head a couple of times, adding French intonations with each round. “L’Atelier des Gemmes?” I suggest. A workshop of gems. The jewelers?

“If you say so. In some place called Thuu-Ir? Thuir? What sort of name is that? If it was Lance, what was he buying? Deborah needs receipts.”

I can’t steal Lance’s engagement announcement thunder.

I also shouldn’t mention happy wedding plans to Al.

“I’ll let him know,” I say. “Thanks. Great to talk with you again. Everything else good there?”

Al releases a heavy sigh. Muggy weather is giving him a headache. The Cubs aren’t doing well. He gives me a play-by-play of their last defeat: balls, swings, misses, iffy umpire calls, the lot.

Al is a mist of chamomile and melatonin. My eyes droop.

“Okay,” he blurts, jolting me awake. “Gotta go. Talk to you later.”

He hangs up. On the other side of double nightstands, Nadiya rolls over. “What was that?” she mumbles. “Is something wrong? Jordi?”

“No, no,” I soothe. “Sorry, go back to sleep.”

She sighs and rolls over. Deep breathing resumes within moments.

I lie awake, thinking about Lance, a glittery ring, and the company card. What did he tell me that night he got engaged? It was time to take charge of his life?

By taking charge of the company funds?

Dom wouldn’t have liked that, but Dom is dead.

When I finally drift off, it's just in time for my alarm to blare.

* * *

To my riders the day looks like this: Rise and enjoy an early breakfast buffet. Assemble at our waiting bikes and roll downhill to the walled village of Villefranche-de-Conflent to meet our train. Sit back and relax.

My morning looks a bit different.

I bolt out of bed on too little sleep and face a stress dream turned reality: I failed to pack last night. I stuff sweaty Spandex, unmatched socks, and a damp, sulfur-scented bathing suit into my suitcase. Then I dislodge everything to locate a windbreaker at the bottom. I repeat this step again for sunblock and an errant sock.

I skip breakfast to set up the bikes with Nadiya. We both lament the absence of Jordi. I call Bea to make sure she and Bernard truly don't mind driving the hour and a half up here in a van borrowed from a florist friend. My cute Oui Cycle van languishes in a police evidence lot.

"More than delighted," says Bea, so cheerily that I know she's worried.

"Bernard and I *adore* the mountains," she continues. "You've chosen our favorite inn."

Which is when I realize that I've forgotten to book them a room for tonight. When I call the hotel, they inform me that the last regular room was just booked. Only the honeymoon suite is available. I splurge and book it, because why not? They're forever honeymooners, and I dearly owe them.

Then it's time to corral a herd of cats onto their bikes. No, scratch that. Cats would be easier to assemble. Manfred is early, disappears, and reappears right on time. He's the star of the morning. The sisters are seven minutes late, having trotted off to stock up on bakery treats. Lexi decamps to the park to film herself stretching and enjoying *VitalaGreen*. Her followers are clamoring for content!

I enlist Lance to retrieve his fiancée. First, I have to rouse him from a flat-out nap on a bench, where he's hindering the stall setup of a traveling wine salesman and drawing askance looks from early-morning spa goers.

Once we're all together, I lead the way on the only road out of town.

Over the skid marks, past the happy yellow of crime-scene tape fluttering on the bridge.

I ignore a bellow from Philly—or is that Conny? *Is that where he died?*

I try not to flinch with every passing car, van, RV, and moped.

When we arrive at the train station, I could kiss the station agent. I don't, because that would be inappropriate and I've been working hard to appear calm and carefree. Also because I can't relax yet.

We're right on time, which in train terms can mean nerve-racking seconds to locate your ambiguously marked car, leap on, and pray you're heading in the right direction. This process is exponentially more terrifying when leading a herd of people with conflicting ambitions like finding restrooms (always miles away or occupied), buying a snack, or photographing the engine plus the caboose.

Recently I met a guide who'd had five tour members get on the wrong train in Barcelona. Three got out to get lost in the city. Two others ended up in Galicia. That's on the other side of Spain—a whole day's travel away.

In the small town of Villefranche, the platforms are out in the open and all at ground level. The Little Yellow Train only goes one way: up the mountain and back down to this station. The timetable is a bit more flexible too. However, I still feel the urgency to get us onboard, snag good seats, and claim space to stash our bikes.

"Leave your bikes with me," I say to the group. "Is everyone good with the open wagon? We'll get the best views, and it's gorgeous weather."

If the weather is anything to go by, my luck has turned. The only clouds are puffy lambs far to the east. They'll burn off with the sun.

My group is all for the open-air carriage.

"Grab your coats just in case," I say, "Water, sunblock, hats, cameras, snacks . . . There's no changing cabs in the Yellow Train until it stops at a station."

Most of the wagons are as antique as the train. They hook together like a kid's toy in a short line of seven carriages.

Judith leans her bike against a post. "Save a seat for me?" I ask her.

"Absolutely, dear. Oh, wait! My purse. I don't want to leave that on the bike."

The Little Yellow Train is as cute as its name. It stops in tiny villages, the domains of elderly residents, back-to-the-land farmers, and second-home expats. Hardly hotbeds of crime. But then neither was the inn where our luggage was ransacked.

"Always a good idea to hang on to your purse and passport," I say. Which reminds me I need to relay Al's message to Lance.

I should get Lance alone first. I doubt he'd want Lexi to know that he bought her ring with company funds. She's currently attached to Lance's elbow like a lovestruck lamprey. The sisters and their bakery bags hustle onboard next, followed by Manfred, who wears riding goggles and commends the "brisk open air."

Automatically, I start a head count. I stop myself. No need to rub in our dwindled numbers. Plus I have bikes to deal with.

Bikes come alive when faced with train storage, and not in a good way. Imagine stuffing a resistant octopus into a shoebox. Placid gears, handlebars, chains, and pedals lash out and grasp. To add to the fun, other passengers will invariably linger in the storage area, chatting on their phones or taking up space for no apparent reason other than to scowl at a cyclist wrestling bikes.

Then there are other cyclists. Train storage is the one place where I dread encountering my cycling kin. There's only so much space. If I take it all, I feel guilty. If other cyclists get there first, I have no place for my bikes.

The latter is a horror I can't think about. If Jordi and the van were here, I wouldn't have to worry. He'd take the bikes. I glance nervously down the platform. Parents with a toddler head for a closed wagon. Wise move. A cluster of elderly Catalan speakers with massive picnic baskets follow them in.

No competing cyclists so far.

A bell rings. A recorded female voice garbles pleasantly over the loudspeaker. I need to get a move on. Yet for a moment, I remain frozen. Where to start? With Judith's heavy e-bike? Philly and Conny's lengthy tandem ride? Usually, Nadiya is with me, and we heft bikes like well-oiled gears. She's back in Vernet, waiting with the luggage for Bea and Bernard.

I muscle Judith's bike over the gap. I'm squeezing in alongside the bike when I spot a wheel rolling down the enclosed carriage. Another cyclist, making for my storage area! I could push ahead, but that would be rude, considering I have so many bikes. I wheel back. The man wears a navy-blue cycling kit and easily swings his front wheel up on the hook. He's fit, I can't help noting. Great legs. A serious cyclist.

I'm caught looking—then gaping—when he turns.

"*Bonjour,*" says Detective Jacques Laurent.

"What?" I stammer. "What are you . . . ?" What is he doing? Taking a celebratory cycling vacation? This case can't be closed! Not to my

satisfaction.

He raises an eyebrow and a smile.

The announcement lady makes another statement, mellifluous and incoherent.

Or maybe my mind is garbled. I glance down the platform. A sign warns of fatal electrocution on the third rail. The conductor steps from the lead carriage and makes a two-handed brushing motion my way. *Get onboard!*

“I have to get these bikes in,” I say with rightful panic.

The man responsible for detaining my van driver and thus gearing up my stress nods briskly. He takes Judith’s bike and swings it up beside his. I wheel in the rest. Under Laurent’s control, the whirling wheels and pedals barely protest. The train makes a cute *toot toot*. The conductor blows his whistle. The bikes are in. I’m still standing on the platform.

“*Allez!*” *Hurry!* Laurent reaches out his hand.

Instinctively, I take hold. He tugs me in, and I’m laughing with relief until I realize what I’ve done.

The train jerks forward like a creaky caterpillar. That’s good. What’s bad? I’m separated from my group. Swaying with the train, I make my way down the length of the carriage. The back door opens to a small viewing platform. My group is in the open wagon just beyond.

The sisters cheer when they see me.

“Sadie, make a leap for it,” Lance yells. “We’ll catch you!”

“Sadie, be careful!” Judith counters. “Don’t take risks!”

The train chugs along at easy jogging pace, gathering energy for the long mountain slope.

I should be with my group, pointing out features. *Look behind us, I’d say. Admire the thirteenth-century ramparts, some of the best preserved in France. Note the twenty-six towers and the fort on the hill which we’ll visit on our return trip.*

I could yell this across the rattling gap. I’m guessing the other passengers on the open-air wagon wouldn’t appreciate bellowed English.

“I’ll come over at the next stop,” I call.

Lexi shoots me a two-thumbs-up. Manfred gazes serenely at the sky. The rest frown over my shoulder. I can guess what—who—has their attention.

Laurent steps beside me and waves. “This has worked out well,” he says. “Now we have time to talk.”

I suppose there’s that. I do have things to tell him.

We make our way back through the carriage. The elderly Catalans are already dipping into their picnics. Tourists plaster noses and cameras to the windows. The toddler howls. I shoot his mother a sympathetic smile but half wish I could join the kid in screaming out frustrations.

Laurent and I end up in the train's no man's land beside our bikes.

"Why are you here?" I ask. "You can't be vacationing. This case is *not* solved."

He smiles and waves with an open palm like a pro tour guide. Maybe his mother was onto something when she tried to sign him up.

"What if I say I am here to enjoy the spectacular nature, the mountain air, the history of the railroad?"

I fold my arms across my chest. "I wouldn't believe you."

He gazes over my shoulder. Green pastures pass by. Brown and white cows. Oak forests and rocky crags. "I have some doubts," he says. "I don't like doubts."

"I have more than *some* doubts. Jordi wouldn't send a man over a cliff."

Laurent makes a noncommittal noise and murmurs that *feelings* aren't evidence.

I can't argue with that. "So what are your doubts?" I ask.

"Two things," he says, fingers held up in a V, like a somber selfie-stick tourist flashing a peace sign.

I like enumeration. I urge him to go on.

"One," he says, as the train chugs by pale rock cliffs. "Your theory of the two red bicycles. Mr. Fox was the intended target all along. Mr. Appleton rode the bike with the sabotaged navigator by mistake."

I nod. I like this theory and not just because I came up with it. In that case, the culprit could be a shadowy stranger, stalking my tour. Not my friends, guests, or crew. Not entirely my fault, except for inviting Nigel Fox to join this tour. I stress the stranger potential to Laurent.

"The nefarious stranger," he says. "Always popular with the friends and family of suspects. Less so with the police. The invisible tends to be difficult to detect."

"Not for your specialized crime unit!" I enthuse. "And your second point?"

"The email you saw," Laurent says. "I don't like it or its timing."

My stomach clenches. I don't either, particularly because that avenue leads to those closest to Dom.

Laurent continues. “You and Mr. Appleton assumed it was from his most important client. The client says it was not her. Who sent it? Why? Why was the laptop stolen?”

Behind Laurent, the bikes wobble and clack, like tethered horses chomping for action.

Laurent is saying, “I need to see that email. For my own satisfaction that we have the right man. If you will help me again, we’ll call your former office.”

I bite my lip, hoping he won’t be upset that I sped ahead without him. “I already did that. The night you were interrogating that teenager in Sans-Souci, I called a friend at Appleton Financial.”

Laurent’s face goes neutral, like a canvas waiting to see what emotion will splash across it.

I hurry on. “This friend has access to Dom’s email. I asked him to check and send me the message. It wasn’t there. Dom’s email trash had been emptied too. Dom wasn’t tidy with his email.”

Laurent rubs his chin. Pensive is the expression he’s chosen, along with a touch of vexed. “And you’re just telling me this now because . . .”

“Because you and your colleagues thought you’d solved the case by arresting that kid.”

A knowing smile. “And then *you* thought you’d solved the case by unveiling Nigel Fox.”

Fair. I was ready to do a victory spin until I found Nigel’s body.

“I found out something else, too.” I tell him about Twin Sisters Tearoom in Aberdeen and the harshly reviewed scones. “The bakery shut not long after that. Out Foxed ‘fans’ went there solely to mock the scones and post their own bad reviews.”

The train rocks beneath me. I grip a bar to stay upright.

“I see I’ve been lax in my investigations.” Laurent’s gaze drifts over my shoulder. I turn to watch a village go by on the other side of the valley: neat gardens, overgrown terraces. Old stone homes look like they’ve grown from the slope. Laundry, arranged by length, flutters on a line.

“I don’t know if that was Conny and Philly’s tearoom, and I’m not saying they did anything,” I stress. “My bigger point is that Nigel Fox surely made a lot of enemies with his reviews and behavior.”

Before Laurent can say it, I do. “Yes, yes, I was about to be his rubbish-review masterpiece. I didn’t kill him.”

The train rattles. He puffs his cheeks, exhales. “I hope not. I would like to think I’m not wrong about everything.”

* * *

“Why is *he* here?” Philly whispers. “The copper?”

“To look good in tights,” her sister giggles.

Laurent and I switched wagons at the first station. The picnickers had requested a stop.

Laurent greeted the group with pleasantries and took a seat in the back. Now he’s apparently engrossed in the landscape. I’m not buying the act. He chose the perfect seat to observe us.

“He says he’s here to enjoy nature and the mountain air,” I say, repeating what he suggested I tell the group. *No need to spoil their ride and make them nervous.*

Nervous how, I wonder. Nervous about the presence of a cop if anyone’s feeling guilty? Nervous that a killer might still be on the loose?

I scan our carriage. Two young women speaking what I think is Mandarin smile for cheek-to-cheek, peace-sign selfies. Five Germans decked out for hiking (sun hats, backpacks, walking poles, hiking boots, water canisters, and wooly knee socks) have struck up an animated conversation with Manfred. There’s lots of head bobbing and *ja, ja* affirmations. An elderly woman, flanked by shopping bags overflowing with leafy greens, commands a row.

None of them look like a murderous stalker. But that’s surely how the best criminals operate. Nigel’s over-the-top critiques and mustache blinded me to his true motives. I have an inkling of what he was up to. I’m glad Bea and Bernard will be with us tonight. I want to talk to them before I tell Laurent my suspicions.

“So the detective is taking a day off?” Judith says. “Does that mean he’s finished with his investigations?”

I offer what I hope is a French shrug expressing that all is unknowable.

“Thank goodness!” declares Lexi. She twists and waggles her fingers toward the back of the carriage. The Germans wave. Laurent looks up with an exaggerated *who, me?* expression. Lexi ushers the detective to join us.

He makes his way up the carriage, politely greeting the other riders. “*Merci,*” he says as he settles into the row across from Judith and me. “I

didn't wish to intrude."

Oh, yes, he did. But I'm glad for it.

"You're our hero!" Lexi declares. "You solved the case! We can finally ride without fear."

"I have made *some* progress," Laurent says carefully. "There is still much to reconstruct."

"The French do take a lot of vacations," Judith says, brow furrowing. She brightens quickly. "Sadie, I promise to match your French vacation days when you return."

When? There's a new tactic. I have to put the brakes on her generosity. "Judith," I say, "I'm so grateful for your offer, but I love my job here."

Laurent eyes me quizzically.

"Judith kindly offered me my old job back," I explain.

"No," Judith corrects. "I offered Sadie a prestigious job of her choosing. You could have Dom's office if you like."

Lance's throat clearing goes ignored, except by me.

I mouth *no* his way. Lance is too busy glowering to notice. Lexi pats his knee and attempts a distraction move.

Oh, look at that abandoned church! Isn't that amazing?

This might have worked, except the Little Yellow Train plunges into a tunnel.

Lexi squeals in the darkness. I pray we'll emerge in a happy, tourist-y mood on the other side.

When we rattle into the light, Judith rummages in her prodigious purse.

"I'm sorry, Sadie," she says. "I am. Cycling is fun. You've opened my eyes to that, which is why I feel I must also help you see the truth. Your business is no longer viable. I can offer you a good salary, vacations, retirement . . . Dear Al misses you so much too. He's pining!"

Lance huffs.

Judith drops a newspaper on my lap. I'd rather pet a viper, but I have to grab the pages to keep them from fluttering off. I will not be responsible for littering the bucolic countryside.

It's a British tabloid, a publication in which alien abductions and royalty can share the front page with partying politicians, dieting stars, horrific crimes—and me.

CYCLE OF DEATH screams the headline.

An unflattering photo collage shows me grimacing behind my hand at the gendarmerie. Not a good look. The Oui Cycle van fills another frame. It looks as cute as ever—except it’s linking Oui Cycle to a double-homicide story. Then there’s Nigel, sans mustache and still looking officious, ridiculous, and peeved.

Eminent London writer and critic, second victim of two-wheeling murder spree in French countryside, the caption reads. Shall Oui Cycle? Non, non, non!

“Two murders,” Judith says. She purses her lips, shakes her head, and attempts to look sorry that she’s had to present this number.

I open my mouth to protest. The problem is that she could be right. At least for the immediate few months or years or—when? Last night, Bea told me that my next group had called to cancel. Bea had tried to put a positive spin on it. *You’ll have time to rest and recuperate. We can repaint the barn. Or explore. Have you seen much of Andorra?*

Andorra! I could run away to a remote mountain principality. But, no, they get tabloids there.

“Your own employee committed the crimes,” Judith continues, hammering more nails into my business’s coffin.

I stare down at the tabloid.

“There were French versions too,” Judith says. “American papers will pick up the story as well. You could have trouble finding another job.”

Lance rolls his eyes. “Mom, Sadie doesn’t need you directing her life.”

I shoot him a grateful look. *Thanks, big brother!*

Until, in Lance fashion, he makes it all about him. “With

“I should make the hiring decisions,” he declares. “With Dad gone, I have the top title, and I should get his office too.”

“Oh, Lance,” Judith says in a tonal equivalent to a patronizing pat on the head. “You have a lot on your plate with business relations, and I do believe I have a majority of ownership shares now.”

Lance rises as if he’s going to stomp off.

Lexi tugs him back down. Good thing, because we’re about to rattle over a bridge some twenty-four stories over a river.

I look around the carriage. Conny and Philly are sharing a bag of chips, munching like they’re enjoying popcorn at a movie. The Germans are determinedly watching the landscape. The lady with the bags of greens has

huddled them closer. And Laurent is looking way too interested in this family tiff.

Lance sits, muttering that the company should be his.

The little train wobbles, mirroring my spirit.

Then an elegant finger appears in my line of sight.

Manfred is pointing to the bridge. “Sadie, what is that extraordinary architectural wonder? Can you tell us *all* about it?”

His countrymen agree like a German chorus.

I could hug them all.

Instead I raise my tour-guide smile. I stand, bracing myself between the seats. “Pont Gisclard,” I say, waving an open palm. “The first metal railway bridge in France, built between 1905 and 1909, rising eighty meters above the Têt River . . .”

I barrel on, unleashing my inner data geek. I outline the line’s nineteen tunnels, four viaducts, two major bridges, twenty-two stations, and sixty-three kilometers of line. I point out historic churches clinging to ridges, villages nestled far below us, and the long-deserted farm terraces and tumbledown shepherds’ huts.

In other words, I leave no space for arguing, bickering, or sulking.

By the time we reach Mont Louis—named for the citadel financed by Louis XIV in 1679 to fend off Spanish invasions—I feel like I’ve finished a race. Invigorated but spent to the point where my muscles twitch.

“Oui Cyclists, this is our stop,” I announce as upscale alpine suburbia comes into view. The Sun King’s grand citadel stands powerless against invasions of second-home owners, expats, and tourists. I take a moment to catch my breath and think of Louis XIV, turning in his various graves (his body, entrails, and heart were buried separately, but that’s for another tour).

The Germans rise and clap.

“Most informative and entertaining,” declares Manfred .

I blush and position myself at the exit gate. While my cyclists leisurely gather their things, I need to race to the next carriage and retrieve our bikes.

Laurent jogs after me.

“That was interesting,” he says as we wait for a couple wrestling a stroller out the door.

“The part about the viaducts?” I ask. The stroller clears, and I launch myself in to heft the bikes. I don’t want him to think I can’t handle my own equipment.

“Most certainly,” Laurent says. “I never knew the architects, heights, and dates, and this is my own home region.”

Is he mocking me? But when I heave down the tandem bike and hand it off to him, he seems sincere.

“Also,” he says, “the family tension.”

“That?” I grab the final bike. His. A heavy-duty mountain bike, I note, picturing him scaling rock faces, hopping down boulders. “That’s everyday Appleton.”

Chapter 32

Day 7, Wednesday Welcome to Cerdagne! This region, spanning France and Spain, boasts stunning scenery: alpine meadows, snow-capped peaks, and picturesque villages. We'll get a taste of these wonders as we cycle to our first stop, a famous food shop, to pick up our picnic.

The Charcuterie Catalan Bonzom is a destination, renowned for its regional delicacies: forest honey, craft beers and local wines, Spanish *gigante* beans, small-farm cheeses, and artisanal vinegars. And meats—lots and lots of cured meats, many in cured, whole-leg form, dangling from the ceiling.

Lexi—who deems herself a mostly vegetarian “health-a-tarian”—takes one peek inside, raises up a palm, and announces she needs to check her Instagram. “I have so many engagement congratulations to catch up on. Everyone loves my ring!”

She holds it up, admiring the sparkles under the high-alpine sun. “Find me something good?” she asks Lance. “Do they have salads? Bread, cheese?”

“Leg of ham?” he suggests. “Hog flank?”

“They have all sorts of prepared salads,” I assure her. “We'll get you something fabulous.”

I feel bad this stop isn't great for Lexi, but she'll have fun with her social-media followers. Plus her absence gives me a chance to speak with Lance.

The rest of the group is admiring the deli offerings. Manfred gazes up at the ceiling of hams and sausages as if enraptured. I'll tip him off about the downstairs viewing before we go, unless he's drawn there by instinct.

I nudge Lance. “Come downstairs and look at the hams with me?”

“Come see my hams?” Lance rakes his hair and lets it flop. “Is that a local come-on?”

“Probably.” I laugh and lead the way.

“Whoa,” Lance says as we approach a glassed-off wall of hams.

“This is just a few,” I tell him. Bonzom has a separate facility where they dry some fifteen hundred hams, but we'll skip that in favor of cycling off

with our picnic.

As he studies hams, I say. “Al called me. He woke me up.”

“Aw, Al . . . He is pining. Woke you up to his charms, did he? Murmur sweet loss calculations?”

I ignore that. “You used the company credit card to buy the ring?”

Lance shrugs. “Yeah, so what? Dad paid for his and Mom’s club membership with that card. Wrote it off as expenses. I use the card when I travel.”

I remind myself that I am not in charge of Appleton Financial company-card ethics. “Well, you need to call Al if you want the card unfrozen. Don’t blame me. I’m just the messenger.”

“Don’t kill the messenger,” Lance mutters.

His words, combined with a sharp clap, make me jump.

Manfred stands at the top of the stairs, hands clasped. “What a magnificent space!”

He glides down the stairs as if tugged by the hams. He’s not alone. Laurent stands a few steps up, presumably studying the shop’s framed reviews and accolades.

Did he overhear? I almost hope he did, because I don’t want to be the one who rats out my almost big brother.

* * *

Later, after a fabulous picnic, I look out over the Pyrenees and wonder if I’ve found the Holy Grail of tour guiding. Here, near the end of the tour—possibly near the end of my ride with Oui Cycle—I might have discovered the key to a smooth-rolling day. Pack a policeman.

With Laurent on the ride, everyone, including the weather, is on their best behavior. Even Nadiya, who met us outside the market after getting dropped off by Bea and Bernard, came around when I told her why Laurent was here.

“It’s about time he had doubts,” Nadiya said. “Who is he suspecting?”

“Probably everyone,” I admitted.

“Wise,” she said.

However, there is a problem. Everything is going so smoothly, I worry Laurent will lose his suspicious verve.

As evidence, the detective is currently lying on his back in the grass outside the thirteenth-century Chapel of Sainte Marie de Belloch. Bea and Bernard lie beside him on a tablecloth-turned-blanket, gazing up at puffy cumuli stacked high as castles. Bea and Bernard drove to meet us here in the charming town of Dorres, where we visited the ancient church with its cool, dark silence and single votive candle flickering down to the last wax.

Lexi, Lance, and Judith are off exploring the pretty village.

The sisters sit higher up the hill, sketching the church and vast mountain views in charcoal pencil. They're so prepared!

Manfred has hiked off. *A small walk to digest.* He's probably in the next village or all the way to Spain.

I join the cloud gazers, sinking to sit cross-legged beside Laurent. A picnic basket and rock block the spot on the other side of Bernard.

Beyond us, the valley stretches out in a patchwork of green, dotted with bright yellow puffs of broom flowers.

"Ah, Sadie, love," Bea says. "Young Laurent was just telling us about Nigel Fox."

Laurent smiles. "Young? But, yes, I spoke with some cyclist friends who reported an aggressive man of British demeanor in the area—especially up here in the mountains. There were sightings at least two weeks prior to this tour." Laurent has an ankle crossed over a knee, hands behind his head, elbows out.

"Voilà," declares Bernard. "We have unmasked the true saboteur."

"The teenage lad in Sans-Souci was misguided," Bea says.

Laurent murmurs that the young lad had "redecorated" every bridge in town. "He freely admitted to artistic indiscretions."

Bea ignores this. "He needs an outlet for his creativity. I suggested he could do some work around the bike shop in exchange for cycling time. Do the barn rafters need more cleaning, Sadie?"

I run my hand over the grass. "I have the rafters pretty clean." That's my legacy. Clean rafters. That and two murders in a single tour.

"I do need to repaint the east wall," I say, thinking of Nigel's vile words lurking under the paint. "Maybe re-plaster."

"Just the ticket," says Bea.

Laurent lulls his head toward Bea. "You said you had something to tell me. Something Sadie asked you?"

Bea sits up, dusting a blue flower petal from her hair. She turns to me. “We think you’re right, Sadie. Nigel Fox might have applied to buy Oui Cycle. He didn’t call himself Nigel Fox, though.”

Laurent sits up. “What did he call himself?”

“N. Renard,” says Bernard. He has a blade of grass in his teeth, like a dapper Provençal farmer.

Renard means fox in French. My heartbeat quickens.

“We rejected his application without reservation,” Bea said. “Though he did make the highest monetary bid.”

The citadel clouds roll overhead. Shadow and sunlight dance on the meadows. I think how lucky I was that they chose me.

How unlucky they are! Look what I’ve brought!

“What put you off?” Laurent asks. “Did his mother apply in his name?”

Bea chuckles. “Better that she had. No, I shouldn’t say that—she could be as competitive and full of herself as he was. He proposed to turn Oui Cycle into a training camp for elite cyclists. It sounded grueling to the point of cruel. Not at all fun. Nothing like the spirit of Oui Cycle.”

“So, what?” I ask. “He returned to punish me? To try to kill the business he wanted?”

I think about Philippe. He hadn’t asked to compete with the aggressive visitor. Nigel targeted him.

“Some people are too competitive for anyone’s good,” says Bea. “We always selected good people for Oui Cycle. Like Sadie. Like Jordi Volland.”

Hint, hint.

Laurent murmurs about reconstructing actions and motivations.

I’m not the only one who’s predictable around here.

“All peaceful at the moment,” Laurent adds. He leans back, resting on his elbows.

A lazy breeze wafts by, dipped in the perfume of wildflowers and alpine meadows. Far in the distance, cowbells clonk.

Too peaceful, I think. If the killer remains quiet, suspicion will simmer around Jordi. Witnesses and evidence will scatter. I lie back, watch the clouds sail by, and ponder bike tours and investigations.

On the surface, they seem worlds apart. But are they? Both involve connecting moving parts, pushing forward one pedal stroke or clue at a time.

There's something else touring and detecting must share too. Luck. I wonder if Laurent would admit to that?

Luck sure hasn't been riding at my side during this tour. Maybe it's time for me to grab the handlebars and steer into its path.

Chapter 33

Day 7, Wednesday This afternoon, we ride across another country! No worries—the winding route to our inn is only twenty-five kilometers. In the middle, we’ll roll through Llivia, a tiny Spanish enclave surrounded by France.

We’re standing on Spanish ground when the clouds issue their first warning, a rumble far to the west. I’ve been explaining how Llivia, a Spanish territory of less than five square miles, found itself surrounded by France.

The Romans played a part. So did the Moors. Then a three-decades’ war broke out between France and Spain. A treaty in 1659 should have settled things, except for a wording technicality. “Villages on the north side of the Pyrenees went to France,” I explain. “But Llivia was technically a *villa*, a town, and stayed a Spanish island.”

“Words’ll get you,” declares Conny.

Her sister chuckles. “Someone on the French side failed to read the fine print. Bet they felt foolish. Wonder if they kept their head?”

Manfred casts a philosophical gaze on the golden-stone buildings. “They mistake the *X* for a *U*, as the saying goes.”

The English speakers work that out. Manfred teaches Nadiya the German. I think of Nigel. I saw his true character all along—critical, competitive, delighting in my troubles. That blinded me to his hidden motives.

“But how do they all get along?” Judith says, and I tune back in. “The Spanish people who live here and their French neighbors?”

Some tour guides would boldly make up an answer. Others would deflect and change the topic. I admit I haven’t had the chance to find out, but I’d love to. If Bea and Bernard were here, I’d ask them. They’ve driven on to our inn.

Laurent, who’d been staring down the sky like it’s a suspect, answers. “I have a cousin who lives up here. She’d say she feels more Catalan than either Spanish or French. There are still some international squabbles.”

He smiles. “Like the great Stop Sign War of the 1970s. The French installed a stop sign that enraged the Spanish, who kept tearing it down.”

“Just like home, then,” Judith says, nodding to Lexi. “Lexi and I have been lobbying Elm Park to put in speed bumps. You’d think we were asking for spikes in the road.”

That makes me think of Nigel too. Those tacks that punctured Philly and Conny’s tires. Nigel could have done that. He, Dom, and Lance left the vineyard lunch early. He could also have meddled with his own battery to look like a victim.

It was him! I think. It was all him! He’s the perfect culprit.

My stomach clenches. Except he’s dead. He didn’t run himself over that barrier.

Lexi clicks her tongue. “It doesn’t hurt drivers to slow down. I got rammed by a speeder last year. Thank goodness I was in a car and not on a bike. I might have been killed!”

The clouds rumble ominously. I take their hint. “Maybe we’d better speed,” I say. We roll on through sleepy villages, green pastures, walls sprouting wildflowers, fairy-tale wooden chalets, and friendly farm animals—all against the dramatic backdrop of the cloud-fringed Pyrenees.

The weather holds off, so we stop for photo ops. Cute goats bounce along beside us in their pasture. A dog snarls at our wheels for the length of his yard. All bark and no bite. The storm clouds mutter to themselves but keep their distance.

We’re going to make it, I think. We’ve outrun trouble, at least this time.

My mother would warn that optimism draws trouble’s eye. Perhaps I should listen to Mom more often.

We’re in the homestretch, only two miles to go, when the sprinkles begin. They’re refreshing at first. Behind me, Conny and Philly revel—*feels like home!*

We can still make it. I pedal harder, willing my small flock to follow.

A mile from our inn, the sky opens up. Hail measurable in vegetables—peas, beans, and cherry tomatoes—pelts our helmets. We’re surrounded by fields. No big-box supermarket to save us here. Not even a sheltering oak tree.

“We’re almost there,” I call back, not sure if anyone can hear. When we make it to the inn, drenched, shivering, and huddling under dripping patio umbrellas, I brace myself for complaints.

The ghost of Nigel plays in my head. *Rubbish tour, rubbish weather!*

Instead, happy whoops surround me. Hands slap in high fives. Laurent and Manfred bump fists. Lexi tugs Lance and Judith into a grinning selfie. The sisters fluff ice from their curls. I brush slush and road grit from my cheeks and delight in telling the group that their dry luggage and warm drinks await them.

They head inside, leaving me with Laurent.

“Come in and warm up with us,” I tell the detective. “When the storm lets up, I’ll get the van and drive you to the train station. Unless you’re staying with your cousin? I can take you there.” I’d like to meet a resident of Llívia.

The grin morphs to a sly smile. “Thank you for the offer, but I have a hotel for the evening. In fact, I’m already here.”

Coincidence? I doubt that. I bet I also know who booked the last reasonably priced room.

* * *

“What do we do now?” Nadiya asks, narrowed eyes scanning the storeroom as if it might be hiding answers.

It’s just me and her, stone walls, beams that look like they’ve been sagging here forever, and a washing machine, flashing lights and thumping like it’s about to launch into space. We’re staying in an old farmhouse tonight. Our bikes will sleep in the stables-turned-storeroom. A mountain river rollicks beyond the backyard, and there’s a thermal spa next door with outdoor soaking pools. Hopefully Manfred is in one of those pools. He dashed over, hoping to enjoy the chill of rain and wind.

I survey our bikes. We wiped them off as best we could, but they’re still streaked with mud. “Let’s let them dry overnight,” I say. “We can dust them off tomorrow morning.”

Jordi would be appalled. But dirty bikes aren’t his main concern at the moment.

“Noooo.” Nadiya stretches the word in exasperation. “I’m not talking about bikes. How do we find our killer? Because of your friend the detective, everyone will be too good. If someone here knows something, *did something*, then we need them to talk or yell or attack one another. This is a disaster!” She throws up her palms. “You know what I mean.”

I do. “Laurent says he’ll stay up in his room until dinner, unless we call for him.”

Nadiya switches tack. “What? He is resting. He should work without sleep or peace until he clears Jordi. How lazy, how—”

I hold an index finger to shushing lips, check no one’s outside the heavy oak door, and ease it shut. “I asked him to keep out of sight.”

Nadiya breaks into a smile. “You sent the detective to his room? What did he say to that?”

I lean the tandem bike against the others. A damp chill radiates from the stones. “He pretended to be offended,” I say.

Nadiya’s smile broadens. “He should be. You are doing his work.”

“He said he has calls to make,” I told her. He wouldn’t reveal any names. “He also said to be careful.”

He’d said more than that when I told him my plan.

Nadiya outright beams. “Be careful, he says? What will we do, something dangerous? That is very good.”

I’m not sure I want to tell Nadiya. I can’t be responsible for getting another member of this tour hurt.

“What?” she insists. “I need to help. For Jordi, for Oui Cycle and Bea and Bernard. For you. You are my family.”

I touch my heart.

“No time for sentiment,” Nadiya says, thrusting fists to her hips. “We need action. We must, how do you say? Scare out the fox?” She frowns. “If there is another fox. But of course there is! There is always another fox.”

She and Mom would get along smashingly.

“We’re going to go to the *apéro* hour,” I say.

“Okay, yes. They do a very good *apéro* here. We need our energy. And then?” Nadiya flicks her hand in a get-on-with-it gesture. The washing machine amps up its thumps.

“Ah, that’s pretty much it,” I say.

Nadiya raises an eyebrow.

There are so many ways my plan could go wrong, least of which is me looking like an absolute fool.

I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant. “I’ll bring up the crimes and then . . . Maybe I’ll accuse some folks of murder and see what they say.”

That last part is definitely a crime against good tour-guide conduct.

Nadiya appears to agree. She's shaking her head vigorously in the negative.

I rush to rationalize. "Not that I think they're all killers—or that any of us are—but we've been together this whole tour. Someone must have seen something. If we shake up how we think about it, then—"

"No, no," says Nadiya. "You accuse them of *double* murder. The truth is always more shocking. I will watch their faces. Sadie, I have your back."

Chapter 34

Day 7, Wednesday Our home this evening is the village of Llo, a showcase of traditional alpine architecture. Stone homes, slate roofs, wooden balconies, and vast mountain views. Stretch out your cycling legs and enjoy a relaxing stroll.

Manfred is pink-cheeked when we meet up for aperitifs.

“You soaked all this time?” Judith asks. “In the rain? You must have gotten wet.”

Manfred appears baffled. “But, Madame, the hot spring water was also wet.”

“Well, it’s certainly cozier in here,” Judith declares.

“My favorite room in the inn,” says Bea, who’s sharing a love seat with Bernard.

My favorite too. Stone walls arch into a rounded ceiling. French doors (or, as the French would say, window doors) open to the back patio fringed in ferns taller than my handlebars.

Inside, the table is just as dreamy. There are Spanish croquettes, olives marinated with herbs and orange peel, and a truly rewarding selection of cheeses.

“Nice to let our guard down,” says Judith, helping herself to a croquette. “To feel more at peace.”

The doors are cracked, letting in a liquid symphony of the rushing river and raindrops. Nadiya stands by the garden doors holding a plate of crudités. *My cover*, she called them. She raises a carrot stick and waggles it in my direction.

I know, I know. Dear Judith has given me the perfect opening. She can finally relax, enjoy—and I need to take that away.

“We can’t relax,” I say, forcing myself to be direct. Hedging won’t do. *Maybe possibly one of you might have killed Nigel? And Dom too? Want to tell me about it? No hard feelings?*

Judith blinks. “We can’t?”

“Oh! Are we going out for another ride?” Lexi asks. “It’s gorgeous here!”

“Jordi did not kill anyone,” Nadiya says. “That is what Sadie is saying. She has proof. A killer is on the loose.”

Okay, that’s direct. And reckless. Also a lie. I have scattered pieces, like a road map torn to shreds, flung from a speeding bike.

Judith steps back as if I’ve slapped her. “Sadie!” she says, tone laced with admonishment. “The police have their man. Let’s not bother them.”

Don’t bother the Appletons, I hear my mother chanting. *Don’t bother the French police*.

“There are things that don’t align,” I say.

“Oh, but they do, Sadie,” Judith says. “The police explained to Lance and me. Your employee, Jordi, was upset with Dom and played a prank that got out of hand. It’s not your fault. Or yours either, Nadiya. We can still love someone while disapproving of their actions.”

The earlier thunderclouds have nothing on Nadiya’s expression.

Judith carries on. “That critic, Mr. Fox, must have seen what happened. He was always watching, wasn’t he? And writing in that notebook.”

“Which is now missing,” I say. “Along with Dom’s laptop and your bracelet, Judith.”

“And Lexi’s heirloom ring,” Judith adds.

Lexi flushes and shoots a look to Lance.

“Lexi’s ring isn’t missing,” Lance says with a sigh. “I took it to the jeweler so he could size the engagement bling correctly.”

Lexi beams. “It’s perfect! And I have my old ring back too, safe in our room, so it’s even better.” She holds out her diamond and gazes into the sparkle.

Judith frowns. “But my bracelet and Dom’s computer. Why would you take those, Lance?”

“I didn’t, Mom,” Lance snaps. “Don’t be like Dad. *Let’s blame Lance. Make Lance apologize for everything he’s ever done and didn’t do.*”

“Lance!” Judith says.

I wait for a *be nice*.

Lance doesn’t give Judith the chance. “How about we get back on track? Sadie, your mechanic got hotheaded.” He swings to point at Nadiya. “Or you both did. Hey, I get it. Dad could be a bully. Sadie, you know that. He thought he could bully you into going back to work for him. Did he dangle a carrot? Plum title? My office?”

My blush gives me away.

“Ohhh,” croons Conny. “Money, jealousy. Motives abound.” She and Philly are munching through the croquettes.

I steel myself. “You had motives too,” I remind the sisters.

“No, we didn’t,” Philly protests. “We found Dom a touch irritating—no offense, Judith—but if we went around knocking off the irritating, we’d have no time to enjoy croquettes.”

“Or croissants,” her sister says.

“How about scones?” I ask. “You owned the Twin Sisters Tearoom in Aberdeen.” I’m bluffing, feigning boldness, like cycling mid-lane in a traffic circle, knowing I could be run over by a truck or the truth.

I forge on. “Out Foxed published a devastating review of your scones and tearoom. More bad reviews followed. You had to close your dream shop.”

This time, the sisters raise their croquettes to me.

“Clever of you to work that out,” Conny says.

Philly agrees. “Shows you pay attention. That awful man couldn’t even remember his own reviews. Inconsiderate, considering the damage he did.”

They’ll give Oui Cycle rave reviews, they assure me.

After what I have to say next? Maybe not, but my rave ship has sailed. “You shoved Nigel off the yacht on purpose.”

The sisters shrug in unison.

“Debatable,” says Conny. “The sea was choppy that day.”

“And he was leaning so far over,” says Philly. “As if he was temptin’ us. I really did lose my balance. It all turned out fine. He bobbed up like flotsam, and we got to meet commandos.”

I salvage my thoughts while the others commend the commandos.

“You have more to say, luv?” asks Philly. She nudges her sister. “We are thrillingly diabolical.”

Maybe they are. Their joviality is throwing me off. “Philly was the last person in the bike barn the night before Dom’s, ah, accident,” I say. “Conny, you stayed outside to question Jordi about flowers.”

The sisters smile and nod. “Exactly so,” says Philly. “I collected my sweater.”

“And I have a keen interest in botany,” says Conny.

“You didn’t alter a navigator on a red bike?” I ask. “You knew it had been sabotaged, but the police were keeping that quiet. I knew, but I only told my crew.”

Philly grins. “And we overheard Miss Nadiya calling her beau.”

“That’s not all we heard,” says Conny. “Excuse us for bringing it up, Nadiya, but you wanted to unplug Dom Appleton. We heard *that* at the winery. Speaking of which . . .”

She hands me an oversized wine glass and pours to nearly sloshing over.

It would be rude not to taste, I tell myself. I take a sip, then another.

“I meant his Wi-Fi,” Nadiya protests. “I unplugged the modem so he could enjoy his family.”

The sisters shoot her *oh-come-on* looks.

Nadiya shrugs. “Fine, yes, I was not happy with him. He threatened to have me fired, evicted from my home.” She mutters something in Ukrainian.

Manfred nods agreeably. “*Tak, tak*. No more blood should be shed. That is understandable.”

Does *he* understand Ukrainian? I’m thinking there’s a lot I don’t know about Manfred. In fact, what do I know? He’s a skilled cyclist, a digital nomad, a fan of sausages and philosophy, always on time but also often absent. He could easily slip away to alter a navigator.

I down more of my wine, grimly aware that I’m only stirring up more suspicions.

“Who else can we suspect?” Conny asks. “Judith? Lance? You’re the family members of the first casualty. We have to suspect you.”

Nadiya brightens. “Exactly. It is always the wife or the girlfriend or the son.”

“Dom didn’t have a *girlfriend*,” Judith tuts.

Lance mutters *work wife* under his breath.

No way! Deborah? Lance waggles an eyebrow at me. I hope he’s joking. He isn’t when he turns back to his mother.

“I don’t inherit a company, unlike Mom here,” he says, sour as vinegar. “Even though you’ve never worked there a day in your life.”

“Don’t work there?” Judith firms her shoulders. “I do more than you think, Lance. I know you used the company credit card. Al called and told me. Such a nice man.”

“Al!” My ex’s name pops out along with a thought. “Lance, you called Al at 10:30 at night, his time. That’s 5:30 in the morning here. You were up early the morning Nigel died. Did you—” *See him*, I intended to ask.

“Kill him?” Lance asks bluntly. “Seriously, what is this, gang up on Lance hour? No, I didn’t kill him, Sadie. And Mom, I made a one-time

purchase on the company card. It's not like I'm getting engaged every day. My personal card wouldn't cover it."

Because he'd run up charges there too? How badly does Lance need money?

Lexi draws a protective hand over her ring. "It's okay, hon," she whispers.

From her frown, I'm guessing this is the first time she's heard her ring is company property.

"It isn't okay," Lance snaps. "I agreed to come on this trip because Dad wanted closure. I thought he meant Gemma's death. I didn't know that he meant me, apologizing for all my wrongs. Well, I *have* closure now." His voice softens. "I have my love."

He loops his arm around Lexi, kisses her head. She snuggles up so close they could cocoon together.

I imagine Gem, faux-gagging at the spun-sugar sweetness.

Conny and Philly are whisper-speculating—none too quietly—about the prior death.

Judith explains. "It was a tragic cycling accident."

A murder, I mentally correct.

"We all loved Gemma," Judith continues. "She was like a daughter to me, like Sadie. We all came for the one-year anniversary. To support Sadie."

She emphasizes the last words. Lance snorts. I feel my cheeks warm. Look how I've reciprocated their kindness. Dom is dead, and I've turned *l'apéro* into the accusation hour.

I wanted a confession. I might as well offer my own. "I should have been with Gemma that day. She came by the office, but I thought I was too busy. I wasn't. I was the only one there. I could have left for a bike ride. She was my best friend."

"Mine too," Lance says. "Want to talk about guilt? She was cycling to meet me. When she didn't show up, I should have gone looking for her."

"Hey, now," Lexi says. "You couldn't have known. Gemma texted me too. My car was in the shop, so I was stuck at the house." She gives Lance an affectionate faux punch on the arm. "And *you* had your phone on mute again so you couldn't pick me up."

Lance gives her that endearing naughty-puppy look. "I don't text and drive. Remember? You made me promise after that texter rear-ended you."

Suddenly, I'm back in that awful day.

Words wheel by like speeding vehicles.

Judith is saying she had to make Dom promise to shut off the touchscreen in his new car. *He was so distracted by it. It showed the stock report and the weather.*

My mind wheels around Dom and his cars. Judith dinging his door and Lance getting the blame. Times, places, and faces roller-coaster by. Nigel, in disguise as himself. Manfred with his *X*'s and *U*'s. Conny bending Jordi's ear about botany. Our ride through Llivia and a misinterpretation that left a floating island of Spain.

"Sadie?" Lexi's voice, concerned, brings me out of my spinning thoughts. "You okay?"

I blink at the room. Everyone's raising a glass. Even Bernard has awoken and is holding Bea's glass with her.

"We're toasting to Dom," Lexi says. "And to Gemma. To Nigel too."

Judith's eyes are glassy. "Very nice of you dear. Thank you."

Glasses clink, mine among them, but I can't find my place in the ensuing small talk and brittle joviality.

I put down my wine glass. I should eat something, but the thought makes my stomach clench.

I know what will help. I head for the door.

Nadiya intercepts me. "You thought of something, Sadie. I read it on your face. Are you going to the detective?"

I shake my head. "I need to think. I'm going for a ride."

"I'll come with you," Nadiya is in cycling gear. Or, rather, always in uniform in her Lycra leggings and a band t-shirt.

"You stay here," I say, forcing a smile. "Be my ears? I need to be on my own."

Earlier, I'd changed into "civilian" dry clothes. While I'm certainly not one to insist on sports-specific gear, I don't want to ride into a misty evening in my favorite drapery peasant top and my only pair of mostly unwrinkled ankle pants.

I hurry upstairs, where disorientation grips me. The hotel looks small from the outside. Inside, it rambles in a maze of additions. Stairways lead up three steps, turn ninety degrees, and go down again. In what I hope is my hallway, I pass a room with light seeping under the door. Laurent's voice comes through in a muffled cadence of English.

I could wait until he's off the phone. Knock on his door. And say what? That I'm tipsy from Syrah and woozier from roller-coaster thoughts?

No. Better to ride.

By the time I change and get downstairs, a kettle is whistling. Bea is fixing tea. Lexi carries a tray of clinking cups. "Stay and have some tea, Sadie," she says. "It's peppermint."

I should offset the wine, but I don't want to wait. "No, thanks. When I get back, it'll be my reward."

"VitalaGreen?" Lexi offers. "Hydration is life!"

I'm glad she's holding the tray and can't press powdered pond water on me. I make my escape, hustling down the hall, waving to a frowning Nadiya, who stands sentry at the door to the lounge.

"Your bike waits outside," she calls after me. "All ready!"

I step out to misty green. Peaks poke from the clouds. Peepers and crickets serenade. I gulp chilled water, lemony sour, from the full bottle in my holder—*thank you, Nadiya!* She must have squeezed in a whole fruit. That's good. I need all the clarity I can get. I drink some more. Then I click on my helmet, press on the pedals, and will cycling to work its magic.

Chapter 35

Day 7, Wednesday Early evening is a lovely time to ride. Enjoy the peace, the golden hours, and the setting sun. Be sure to plan, though. Pack a lamp in case you're caught out after dark. Most importantly, let someone know your route.

I have no plan other than pedaling forward. I power away from our inn, weave through the village, and turn up a narrow road. A woman pruning her rosebushes wishes me good evening. I manage a *bonsoir* and pedal on until I'm high above the village and a dizzying collage. Slate roofs, dark and gleaming after the rain. Puffy treetops and wavy-grass pastures. A rocky drop-off that has me swerving across the narrow lane before overcorrecting to avoid a ditch, filled to roiling like a miniature river.

My head swirls with what feels like vertigo. I drink more of the lemony water and think of the spreadsheet I started for the vandal.

The crimes began weeks before this tour. I never guessed the vandal could be one of my new guests. The timeline didn't add up until we uncovered Nigel.

But what if the timeline goes farther back than that?

I slow. The road is steep, but it's not my legs or lungs. I feel off-balance, woozy. I force myself to keep going, both with the ride and an unthinkable scenario.

There was an earlier crime. A year ago, a driver—a killer—ran into Gem.

Dom wanted closure, Lance said. He wanted Lance to *take responsibility, own up to his mistakes*. He went on about his car. What had Lance said? He thought someone must have swiped Dom's grill at the club? Dom blamed Lance.

But what if Dom's car ran into something? A bike? *Gem*?

The thought throws me so off-balance, I wobble to a stop. Gnarled oak limbs arch over the road like a fairy-tale forest. They cast shadows, making it seem as if I've ridden all the way to dusk.

I drink more water and summon the terrible day I've tried to block out.

It was this time of night. I was back at my apartment, flipping through Netflix. Gem's mom called, sobbing so hard I couldn't understand. I couldn't comprehend.

I jumped in my car and raced to the Appletons'. I needed someone to tell me it wasn't real. Lance was home—my old home in the carriage house. He and Lexi were watching a rom-com.

I'd been too shocked to cry yet. Lance opened the door, joking, feigning hurt. He'd been stood up at the fair. He hadn't heard yet. He'd had his phone off.

And suddenly, I know. I can't swerve from the horrifying thought.

I'm afraid I also know why I feel so drugged.

Because I am?

Nadiya didn't say that *she* filled my water bottle. She only reported that my bike was waiting for me.

I fumble for my phone. In a horror movie, the phone would leap from my grip and pitch itself over the cliff gaping through the trees.

The phone stays obediently in my hand.

The other horror scenario? No reception, which is the case. I'm deep in the countryside under heavy, dripping limbs. I type a name to Nadiya anyway. She'll know what I mean. I hit SEND and pray the text will squeak through once I reach a clearing.

I'm bumping back down the road as fast as I dare in my dizzy state when a headlamp glows through the dim. For a moment, I'm buoyed. My message got through! Backup is here.

Then I calculate. Not even Nadiya could ride that fast.

I'd miscalculated something else too. I'd pictured Dom's killer sneaking into the bike barn during the troubadour party, hidden by darkness and dancing and strangers. I'd been caught up in the wrong details. Jordi, locking the barn. Conny and Philly, distracting him with flowers and cardigans.

I failed to consider the following morning.

Under bright sunny light, Lance and I talked. Lexi went to the bike barn to replenish her water bottles. And to reprogram Dom's navigator?

I force my mind back a year. Dom was playing golf the day I worked and Gemma died. He always walked to the course. It was only a block away. His car would have been in the garage.

Judith was out of town that day.

Lance was hanging out with his buddies.

Lexi's car was in the shop. She'd been rear-ended by the distracted driver and had practically moved in with Lance by then. Into my childhood home, the old carriage house behind Judith and Dom's house with its attached garage. She'd know that Judith kept a key to the main house under a flowerpot. We'd all used it since we were kids.

Which is also how long Lexi had fawned over Lance.

Gemma texted me, she'd said tonight.

Gemma—Lance's ex but forever flame, the love he always reunited with—texting Lexi, inviting her to a night at the fair. Gemma, being her kind, fun-loving, generous self.

Lance had his phone on mute, Lexi said. She had to stay home.

But did she? She could have "borrowed" Dom's car. Lance so often did.

She's a few yards away now. I raise an arm, feigning a friendly wave that comes off like *stay back*.

"Lexi!" I call out. My voice sounds weirdly strained and slurred. "Hey, great night to ride, isn't it?"

I try to smile.

She doesn't bother. "Sadie." She skids across the path, blocking my way. "You know, don't you? I could tell back at the inn. You were calculating. You zoned out like you were doing math."

"What?" I fib. "Math? You mean our route? We have a beauty tomorrow. I was calculating the mileage."

Lexi shakes her head. "You know," she repeats coldly. "But you don't know, actually. It was an accident, and there's no proof now. Don't even think about telling Lance. You'd break his heart. He's happy! Didn't you hear him? He's moved on. *We've moved on.*"

She holds out her ring. Even in the gloom, it glistens. "We're getting *married*, Sadie. I'm planning a wedding!"

I've made a mistake coming out alone, not talking to Laurent. At least my bike and I are on the safe side of the road. The ditch side, not the drop-off. *She can't throw me off a cliff.*

Lexi dismounts and lets her bike drop to the road.

I wince for the frame and myself. She steps closer. I inch back until icy water seeps into my shoe.

"It's okay," Lexi's voice has turned sweet, which freaks me out more. "You feel relaxed, right? Those pills are amazing! I couldn't fly without

them.”

Water grips my ankle. Ice reaches my heart. It seems fitting that I’m alone. Like Gem. Like Dom and Nigel.

You’ll be alone, so far from friends, Judith said when I told her I was moving here. She was right.

Lexi grabs my handlebars. “Why don’t you lie down, Sadie. Relax. Let the water help you.”

Too late, I realize I’m not on the safe side of this road.

“You were so worked up,” she’s saying. “Everyone saw it. You asked for some of my pills to help your nerves. I didn’t know you’d take so many.”

She’s pressing me down, using my bike against me. My knees buckle. Gears bite into my skin. She has fitness training on her side and that awful pond juice vitality. Plus desperation. That’s her wicked superpower.

I yell *no* and her name, but I’m in the ditch now. Relentless icy water pounds over my shoulders and laps at my chin.

Then I hear my name, faint through the trees.

Lexi spins, her face twisted. I struggle up, grasping at a sapling.

Bike lamps bobble up the road. A horn blasts. Far away through the trees, I spot headlights. A van? Bea and Bernard?

Nadiya comes into view first, yelling words I can’t understand but do.

A male voice booms behind her. “Police! Step away!”

And another, with a German accent. “*Halt! Stop! Release our guide!*”

I don’t wait to see if Lexi will listen. I force my muscles to crawl from their prescription-induced blur. I lunge for my bike, struggle onto the saddle, and pedal toward the safety of my friends.

Chapter 36

Day 8, Thursday Revised itinerary: rest and recovery.

“I can’t drink any more coffee.” Have I ever uttered such heretical words? I push the mug away.

“You must.” Nadiya shoves the latest earthenware vat back into my hand. “The doctor prescribed it.” She snaps her fingers above my nose, as if that will pluck me from my fog.

I’m in a haze, a daze. I’m in the sunny breakfast room of our inn. The table is laid with a sunflower tablecloth, baskets of bread and pastries, sausages, ham, boiled eggs, and carafes of coffee.

No more coffee.

A French doctor did, indeed, prescribe coffee to counteract the sedative Lexi mixed into my water. Anti-anxiety pills, a far bigger dose than she used for her fear of flying.

Icy fear washes over me. Some anti-anxiety meds!

“Sausage?” Manfred asks. “They’re invigorating. Ah, but you will like this more. Croissant?” He slides a breadbasket across the table.

All of breakfast is lined up before me. All eyes are on me too. Bea and Bernard, Nadiya, Manfred, and Conny and Philly watch as if my response will predict my recovery.

I have to smile. “I’d love a croissant.”

Bea exhales. Bernard pats her hand and beams at me.

“You had us worried,” Bea says.

“Right worried,” Conny confirms. “You should’ve seen that lot tear out of here when Nadiya got your text.”

Lex di was all I managed to write, but Nadiya—genius of interpretation—figured it out. When they’d found Lexi’s bike missing, they’d set out. The lady pruning her rose bushes sent them up the right road.

A sniffle at the door makes everyone turn. Judith steps hesitantly into the breakfast room. Her eyes are red-streaked and dark-shadowed. Lance hovers behind her, looking worse than I feel.

There's a flurry of polite, anxious chair shuffling. Lance and Judith sit across from me, and the breakfast array is shoved before them. I give Lance my untouched mug.

He stares into it.

Laurent summoned local gendarmes to take Lexi away last night. The detective went along with them. Lexi had called for Lance to come with her, to help her. He'd stayed rooted.

"Dad thought *I* hurt Gem," Lance says, leaning his forehead on his hand. "How could he think that?"

"Dom and his cars," Judith says. "He saw every scuff and ding and magnified it in his mind. You were borrowing Dom's car when Lexi needed yours, remember? But, honey, even if he blamed you, he kept quiet because he loved you so much! He got the car fixed and never said anything to anyone."

I push the basket of pastries closer to Lance. This is a pain no croissant can fix, but it can't hurt.

"Why?" Lance asks, shaking his head. He takes a croissant and crushes one end. "Why did Lexi hurt Dad?"

"I think he wanted to tell someone," I say. "It must have been a heavy secret to keep to himself. The day you all arrived in France, he told me that we needed to have a serious talk."

Manfred tuts. "He would make Sadie carry the burden, like a punishment from mythology?" He murmurs about Atlas, cursed with holding up the world.

"More like Dad outsourcing and delegating again," Lance says bitterly. "He probably thought he could hand it off to you and move on, Sadie. Question is, what did he think you'd do? Keep the secret? Was he trying to buy your silence with a corner office and a massive salary?" He scoffs. "Or would you have tossed me to the Illinois police?"

"No! Of course not!" I protest, but my head is spinning. *What would I have done? I desperately wanted justice for Gem. But she wouldn't have wanted Lance's life destroyed over an accident, which was the only way that Lance would make sense as the culprit. He'd never have intentionally hurt her.*

Then, suddenly, a corner of my mental fog clears. "I wouldn't have had to turn you in," I tell Lance. "If Dom had opened up—if he'd just *talked* to

you or me—we would have worked out that it couldn't have been you driving his car that day. Then, if it wasn't you . . .”

“Lexi.” Lance twists the blameless croissant. “Nigel must have seen her mess with Dad’s navigator.”

“Maybe not. That man was a braggart,” Philly says. “A fake know-it-all. I bet he didn’t see a thing. That came back to bite him, didn’t it?”

Lance shakes his head. “She killed him for nothing? The night we got engaged, she was planning to kill a man? How’d she know where he’d be?”

“Red Bib,” says Nadiya ominously.

I explain. “We heard from cyclist friends that Nigel— who they called the aggressive Red Bib—went out for predawn rides. He probably wanted his ‘real’ workouts before our leisurely tour ride.”

“Lexi was getting up too early from jet lag and doing her videos,” Lance says.

“It would be easy to steal Jordi’s keys,” Nadiya adds. “He is too trusting. They were in his jacket pocket. He left the jacket on his chair when we danced all night. He was a good—what is the saying? A goat?”

“Scapegoat,” I say. “He has a record. He didn’t like Dom.”

Conny reaches for a croissant. “We did our part diluting suspicion from Jordi. Did you really suspect us of targeting Nigel Fox, Sadie?”

My cheeks flare. “Yeah, I did.”

“Smashing,” declares Philly. She reaches across the table and squeezes Lance’s hands. “You’ll pedal through this, son. At least you didn’t marry her, eh?”

Lance manages a smile-grimace. “I always thought I’d marry Gem. You know, Sadie, Gem was going to call you that day, make you ditch work and join us at the fair. When she didn’t show, I figured you two were off having fun.”

A tour guide shouldn’t weep in front of her guests. Extenuating circumstances!

I go over to hug Lance. Judith wraps her arms around us both.

“All this time, I worried that Gem went to her death mad at me,” I confess.

“*Och!* You’ll have us all leaking,” Conny says, swiping at tears.

Manfred rises and slides open the glass doors. A dove coos. The river sings a fluid symphony. Sun dapples the dewdrops, and the mountain air is refreshingly cool.

“Fine weather,” he observes.

“Good day for cycling,” I murmur.

“Every day is,” Bea says.

Judith snuffles. “How long do we have before that nice Jordi comes to pick us up?”

Nadiya beams. “Jordi will bring the van around noon.” Her eyes hold a twinkle. “Sadie is right. It is a very good day for cycling.”

Lance pushes back his chair. “What are we waiting for, then? Where to, Sadie?”

I smile gratefully at my friends, old and new. “Wherever our wheels want to take us.”

Chapter 37

Day 9, Friday Going home.

The following day, I stand in the Perpignan train station with the remains of my tour. Conny and Philly are off to the Greek leg of their vacation.

“Greece has a lot to live up to after this level of excitement,” Conny says.

“Maybe a volcano will erupt,” Philly suggests, sounding hopeful.

I wish them calm seas and relaxation—and a volcano, if that’s what they want.

“We do. We’re in for adventure,” Philly says. “When we get home, we’re starting up our tearoom again, new and revised.”

“With far better baked goods,” Conny said. “Nigel Fox was awful, but it pains me to admit that he was somewhat right. Our former scones weren’t like these French goodies.”

I promise I’ll come visit.

Manfred assesses the station, which has the air of a faded shopping mall. There’s a wide hallway with too little seating, a cramped convenience shop, and escalators that are often stalled. “Far less impressive than the Eiffel station in Thuir,” he says.

I grin. “Ah, but this is a special place too.” We have a few minutes before their trains arrive. Just enough time for some final tour-guide trivia.

“Salvador Dalí had a vision here and declared this station the center of the universe,” I say. “He made a painting. It’s in Museum Ludwig now.”

“In Germany? I shall go.” Manfred shakes my hand, vigorously, and declares that he had an extraordinary time.

That’s one way of putting it.

When it comes time to say goodbye to Lance and Judith, more tears flow.

“Our job offer still stands,” Judith says, nodding to include Lance.

“Anytime you fall off the bicycle gig, Sadie,” Lance says.

I thank them, but I know my answer. *Non, merci.*

After waving off their train, I find my Oui Cycle family waiting in the van across the street. Jordi is at the wheel. Nadiya sits up front. Bea and Bernard share the bench seat. They scooch over to give me room.

“Home?” Jordi asks.

“Home,” I say, and off we go, winding through the vineyards with the sea at our side, home to Sans-Souci.

Cyclist's log
June 14, five days later

Happy Bastille Day!

Gem, sorry I haven't been writing as much. You feel at peace now, right? Because I'm not bugging you? Because we caught her!

I couldn't have done it without you.

It's been the talk of Sans-Souci. The talk of France. When we got back, tabloid reporters and a TV crew were camped out on my doorstep. Locals have been incredibly understanding, choosing to see it as positive publicity. Their neighbor, the cycling detective.

Hardly! I missed so many clues! Madame Pinot the baker gave me one. She told me my group kept baker's hours. Her baker's hours start around four in the morning. I went back the other day and asked her who she'd seen.

Lexi, going out on a predawn ride the day Dom died. Going to set her wire trap!

My bikes were locked in the barn. Lexi must have borrowed one from the hotel. Laurent shuddered at that. His mother's bike, involved in a crime. At least that bike didn't kill someone like my van did.

Nadiya told me how Lexi would have known where to set the trap. Oui Cycle did a military-themed tour last year. A guest filmed every step. According to Judith, Lexi did a ton of pre-departure research. Watched every video she could.

I rewatched the lighthouse video. There was Bea, warning everyone to be careful. "So easy to go over the edge," she said.

There's a little grocery and supplies shop in Sans-Souci. Lexi bought postcards there. She could have pocketed a spool of silvery wire. No one would suspect her.

Laurent is still tallying up the other crimes. His colleagues found surveillance images of Nigel in Thuir, near where Jordi parked the van during lunch. That's probably when Nigel broke in and wreaked—reeked?!—the anchovy damage.

Two crimes in one day! Two criminals!

We think Lexi swiped the laptop and Nigel's notes at the hotel in Collioure. Another instance when I was right there! I even told you about it, Gem. Lexi went back into the hotel to retrieve Lance. She probably took a detour to rifle the luggage.

She took Nigel's notes, worrying he'd written about her.

She needed Dom's laptop so she could erase the fake email with Vanessa Ortiz's name. Lexi knew how important the Ortiz account was. She knew Vanessa too—Lexi was Vanessa's personal trainer.

Did she know about Dom's folder of car-damage photos? Maybe she spotted it the night before when she helped Judith get onto the laptop. She must have seen something, because she taunted me that the evidence was gone.

Ha! It's not! Laurent's tech guys discovered that Dom had cloud storage for his photos. I should ask Al if he set that up. Maybe the computer did it on its own. Foreboding that it might one day be tossed in a foreign dumpster?

The fake email, though . . . That really disturbs me. Lexi knew it would delay Dom. She wanted to separate him from the group. Easier to die alone.

I want to believe that your death was an accident, Gem, like Lexi claimed. She would have been hurrying, racing to Lance. Maybe she didn't see you. Or maybe she did. Did she think she'd just sideswipe you? Take you out for the evening? Take you out forever? Your bike was awfully crumpled.

She left you there. She turned around, drove home, put the car in the garage, and pretended she'd never gone out. Cold!

I need to end on a happier note, don't I? Here's something nice, as Judith would say. Laurent said we make a good investigative team. He invited me to lunch with the

commissaire so I could receive official praise. I passed. He can take the credit, I told him. I've had enough of investigations, thank you very much!

I did invite him on a ride. Look at me, acting on my make-new-friends vow. We're going this weekend. Have to squeeze it in before my next tour. We're booking up fast! Nigel didn't get his way after all.

Speaking of Nigel, get this—Laurent put in some calls to London and discovered that Nigel Fox outsourced most of his reviews. He paid by the most outlandish rubbish rants and rare raves. That's why he didn't remember Conny and Philly's scones or the clotted cream he supposedly loved in Oxford.

I'm sure he would have written the Oui Cycle review personally. Glad we dodged that!

Someone did pen a viral review, though, and I couldn't be happier.

Bea found it this morning—a glowing review by Manfred Bruckheimer, picked up by German, English, and French papers.

Manfred, data analyst and covert travel reviewer! Now there's a dream job!

“The most thrilling cycling tour in Europe,” he wrote. All of Europe! He praised my details, the itineraries, the “fortitude and bravery to keep on with cycling and life,” and all the croissants.

It's the last line that I love most. “Oui Cycle is, indeed, the best little bike tour company in Sans-Souci.”

Our dream rolls on, Gem!

XOXO

Recipe

Crème catalane

Also known as *crema catalana* if you're in Spain or Catalunya, *crème catalane* is one of Europe's oldest desserts, an everlasting favorite! Other perks? Compared to its culinary cousin, *crème brûlée*, *crème catalane* is quick and easy to prepare with no need for a long water bath in the oven. It's also made with milk instead of cream—practically a health food, as Sadie would say. Traditionally, *crème catalane* is served on March 19, St. Joseph's Day, but it's suitable for any occasion, from an elegant dinner to a picnic on the patio after a long day of cycling.

Equipment

Four to five 4-oz ramekins (depending on desired custard thickness), sauce pan, fine-mesh sieve, mixing bowl

Ingredients

2.5 cups milk, preferably whole or two percent but any kind will work
1 tablespoon orange and/or lemon zest (a combination of both is tasty)
1 cinnamon stick
2 tablespoons cornstarch
5 egg yolks
½ cup sugar
⅛ teaspoon salt

Preparation

Add milk to a saucepan. Bring to a simmer. Stir in zest and cinnamon. Remove from heat and let the flavors infuse for 15 to 20 minutes.

In a separate bowl, mix the egg yolks, cornstarch, and sugar until smooth.

When the milk has infused and cooled to warm or room temperature, pass it through a fine-mesh sieve into the bowl with the egg mixture. Whisk to blend. Return the mixture to the pan. Heat, stirring constantly for about 7–10 minutes or until the mixture bubbles and thickens.

Remove from heat. Divide equally among your ramekins. Let cool to room temperature, then chill in the refrigerator (covered in plastic wrap) for at least 4 hours or overnight. The custards can be made several days ahead.

When ready to serve, remove the ramekins from the fridge. Traditionally, the custard is served cold under the hot burnt-sugar top, but you can warm the custards before caramelizing if you prefer.

There are several routes to the crunchy candy topping. The most direct is to fire up your kitchen torch. First, sprinkle each custard with about 2 teaspoons of sugar (or more depending on the width of your ramekins). Cover the surface thinly and evenly. Caramelize! Start at the middle and move your flame all around until the sugar is melted and golden.

No torch? No worries—you still have options.

Option 1: Do you have a gas burner and a metal spoon you're willing to sacrifice as your *crème catalane* iron? (Hardly a sacrifice if this means you'll make more *crème catalane*.) Sprinkle the custards with sugar as described above. If possible, bend your spoon into a ladle shape. Turn a burner on high, and hold the bottom of the spoon in the flame for several minutes. Sadie would advise using an oven mitt. When hot, press the spoon gently over the sugared custard, being wary of possible flareups. Savor the scent of burnt sugar. Rinse the spoon under cool water prior to each reheating.

Option 2: The no-flames approach. For this route, you'll make a quick caramel on the stovetop. Heat 4 tablespoons of sugar, 2 tablespoons of water, and a drop of honey (about 1/4 teaspoon) in a sauce pan over medium heat. As with other caramels, you can stir to initially combine the ingredients, but after that, no stirring allowed. Another Sadie caution: do not walk away! The sugar will melt and bubble. When it turns a light to golden amber, remove from heat and carefully pour a small amount (about a tablespoon) over one of the custards. Working quickly or with a helper, swirl the ramekin to coat the top of the custard. Repeat with the other ramekins. Try to get as thin a layer as possible. Soak your pan in water and the glassy hardened caramel will melt away.

With any of the approaches, allow the burnt sugar to cool for a minute or two, then tap a spoon across the top. Bon appétit!

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Fittingly, I have a bicycle tour to thank for this book. My editor, Wendy McCurdy, went on a cycling tour. While pedaling the rolling hills of Vermont, talk turned—as every mystery lover dreams it will—to murder. Namely, Wendy’s guide suggested that a bike tour would make a delightful setting for a rolling mystery.

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A Cyclist's Guide Mystery





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