



Georgia & Patricia

A Camino Child Novella

BRIEN CROTHERS

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Europe, 1982

MOTHER'S WORDS clash with lapping waves and the smell of the sea.

As I come to, I force my sleep-encrusted eyelids to open. Lying a few feet away, my older sister Georgia squirms in her sleeping bag and then scrunches into the fetal position, still asleep. A dawning sky the color of the steel-gray sand beneath us illuminates the Mediterranean Sea and our private expanse of beach. The moist salt air dampens our few possessions, but not my eyes and their sticky lids.

Slowly, I remember where we are and how, between us, we have only a few *francs* and summer rail passes that do us no good here. Behind me—I'm not sure how far—is the tiny seaside town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. To make a quick escape yesterday, we cut our stay in Marseille short and hitched a ride out of town. Our loosely considered three-day exploration of the French port city was an experience I hope is the last of its kind. Four Italian boys, also in their late teens and early twenties, would not leave my sister and me alone, pestering and stalking us both days we were there. They followed us about the city, bunked as closely to our room as possible at the youth hostel, and too often corralled us in a nearby bar or café.

Like a favorite song that will not let you go, our mother's cautioning became a chant playing over and over in my mind: "You be careful. Boys only want one thing. You know exactly what I mean, Patricia." We—Georgia, Mother, and I—had been sitting at the kitchen table. Aromas of brewing coffee—my only vice and passion—pies baking in the oven, and the smell of cigarette smoke

radiating from my sister's cotton dress colored the darkness of my mother's warning.

The coffee pot finished its magic, and as Mother came to the table to fill our cups, she froze. The pot hung in mid-air. Her eyes in a distant, blank stare. That is when she dropped the bomb.

"Your father left us when you girls were young, and I was pregnant with your little sister. He went off to Europe. Like you want to do, Patricia. We never heard from him again."

Georgia sat straight up. I forgot about the coffee, though it remained there in front of my face. "What are you saying, Mom?" asked Georgia as she moved closer. She flushed a deep red, and every muscle seemed tense, strained and tight. "You never told me this. What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. I'm talking about nothing. And no one," said Mother.

"This is bullshit; who gives a damn about him anyway?" Georgia blurted out, and then flew out of the room faster than a bird escaping the claws of a cat.

I cowered as she flew past me, sure she was going to hit something—or someone.

Mother stood still, her eyes regaining focus. "Maddy, my friend next door, said your father went to France, talking about a pilgrimage none of us had ever heard of. The *Camino de Santiago*, or something like that. Doesn't matter. He's gone; it's been years now. We don't need him, never did." Sluggishly, she remembered the coffee and started pouring, seeming oblivious to Georgia having stormed off.

I sat in my seat, a warm cup of goodness finally in my hands, and started asking questions, but any attempt to get more from her about my father was useless. Mother would say nothing more about him or his sudden exodus.

Georgia stormed back into the kitchen to collect her coffee cup.

Mother changed topics: “We will need to talk to Dr. Franzen about getting you on the pill, Patricia.”

“Mother!” Aghast, the word had skated from my mouth.

“Your turn for *the talk*,” said Georgia as she sipped her coffee, and then she was off to her room again.

After a few moments, my shape-shifting mother removed the pies from the oven, set them on cooling racks, picked up her coffee cup, and left me sitting there in amazement over her sudden revelation. Slowly, it penetrated that she had resigned to letting me go to Europe this summer—and that in all these years, we didn’t know shit about our father.

Eventually, we had *the talk* and went to see our family doctor. “One of life’s hurdles,” Mother had said.

Yesterday, when we left Marseille, crammed in the back seat of a squat Peugeot, we had no idea where we were going, nor did we care. Perspiring in the close confines of the car, a persistent chattering of French words emanating from the couple in the front seat, and the *Provençal* countryside of southern France streaming by are all I can remember. Getaway, our only mission; Mother, my mental companion.

Georgia had flirted with those Italians and smoked their thin brown cigarettes in the beginning. She later confessed, “Never before have I met such complete asses.” She wasn’t sharing a character judgment about them that I had not already understood. Yet, you see, my big sister has “been there and done that.” This is her third trip to Europe and fifth world adventure. I envy those experiences, having come with her to learn, spend some time away from home, and grow.

As I lie in my sleeping bag watching the sea in its morning exercise of ripple and swirl, I cannot help but imagine the experiences she has had, the boys she has met. Nice ones, cute ones, rich ones, and poor ones. At home, she always talked about the beautiful churches and grand old cathedrals, the magnificent architec-

ture of Europe. She goes all googly-eyed as we walk through European cathedrals so large they could hold every person from our hometown. But now I know her better than that. I know that men hold an even higher ranking.

Once more, Georgia wriggles and then yawns as she twists around to gaze at me, the thin sleeping bag still pulled up tight around her slender and perfect, yet very pink, face. “How many *francs* do we have left?” she asks. Georgia looks at money concerns as a hindrance, a burden against a good time.

“Until we can cash some traveler’s checks, we have enough for a coffee and a croissant. One of each, not two.” I can see her shoulders shrug inside the bag as though such trivialities deserve no further thought.

After a few quiet moments, she starts pulling on faded jeans and her favorite baby-blue peasant blouse, ties her hair back with a bright ribbon, and slips the rest of her long legs from her bag, colorful and as beautiful as a butterfly emerging from a drab green cocoon. She stuffs the sleeping bag into her backpack and stands, lights a cigarette I had not seen before now, and lifts her pack by a strap. “Let’s go find that croissant you were talking about.”

* * *

WE FIND a café across the street from a small marina. Tiny skiffs, not-much-larger fishing boats, and a few colorful sailing yachts bobble side by side. Their thin rigging and silvery hardware clatter an anxious rhythm on masts, like horses whickering and stamping in a paddock before a race. I smell coffee and, as if on wheels, am drawn away from the scene and toward the café entrance.

Despite the early hours, the tiny restaurant is packed with men standing and sitting—each competing for the last word. A sad-faced woman in a cotton dress serves espressos and pastries to a clamoring, discourteous crowd of smelly fishermen. Nothing

seems to be less than a hundred years old in this boxy, sardine can of an environment. The woman's dress once had a vibrant print of flowers, or perhaps birds. The pattern is now faded, the fabric stained.

The tableau of fishermen is worthy of a painting. Their clothing, jackets, and caps are threadbare and worn from a hard life at sea. Not a freshly shaved face among them. Wandering threads of cigarette smoke rise in wavering patterns created by the men's conversations. Some seem angry, others laugh, a few talk politics—their sternness of principal emphatic. This is the sort of thing I came to Europe to explore: Are these men poor? Is their appearance an unspoken standard of equality, a uniform? I have these and other odd questions about different cultures.

Although Georgia and I are about as obvious as a pair of space aliens, the proprietress takes forever to find us where we have scrunched up to a corner table the size of a dinner plate. I avoid skirmishes if at all possible, and the woman seems loaded with animosity. She bounces through the men like an ox on drugs, wiping a table here, picking up cups there, and finally breaking through the crowd right in front of us.

Over the loud prattle of the men, briefly looking up from her journaling, Georgia shouts, "Coffee and a croissant for my sister and a plate of fried herring for *moi, s'il vous plaît.*" I blanch and look away, pretending to search my pack for something or another. After a long pause, the woman leaves our table. She must have understood our order and accepted my sister's bravado as assurance that we have more money than God.

"Jesus, Georgia. What are you doing? Have you been hiding money away, perhaps *francs* I didn't know you have? We have?" She stores her journal in her backpack, sits there quietly, and watches the men nearby, smiling on occasion and even winking to an admirer. He is younger than the others, though old enough to be our wayward father. I know damn well she doesn't have any

more *francs*, but she spends like there is no tomorrow. If there is an acceptable house wine served from a vat, she will order a bottle of the best from the wine list. And I don't like wine. She drinks too much, smokes too much, and flirts too much.

"Not to worry, Sis. We'll work it out or work it off." She doesn't look at me but is still scanning the crowd of men with a cutesy smile plastered on her face. No doubt she's hunting for a younger one. "Just enjoy your meal and take in the scene. Isn't it grand, Patricia? All these men with their stories, the quaint boats in the marina, the Mediterranean beyond. Makes you feel alive, doesn't it?"

I notice that pink hue to her skin once more. Georgia can take sunlight about as well as a herring handles a frying pan, blistering before too long. Yesterday afternoon, while drinking a few horrid, bitter beers we bought in the marina shop, we sat on the beach out beyond the village—a place Georgia had picked out for us to spend the night. The warm sand, alcohol, bright sunlight, and Georgia's commentary barely dulled my concerns for sleeping on the beach. I was certain we'd end up thrown in jail or set upon by sexual deviants—perhaps the Italians. None of that fazed my sister. She went on and on, describing scenes from previous visits to the Mediterranean shore.

I must admit, my sister, for all her faults, is an expert at geography. I doubt she ever took a class—for certain nothing more than the basics. But now that she is a regular traveler on the backpacker's circuit, Georgia knows more about countries and churches and cultures than anyone else I know. She can scan a bus terminal or a train station and immediately understand what is going where and when. Also, and as quickly, she'll determine the net worth and adventurous nature of a boy at ten paces. It makes her feel alive.

Makes me feel about to burst into tears sometimes. Since we arrived in Europe a week ago, my sister and I have been constantly on the move. From train, to bus, to hostel, to museum, to café or

bar, to tourist office in a flow of never-ending madness. I want to slow down. And I would like a real bed in a private room, a bank to cash some traveler's checks, a shower (or better yet, a bath), a good meal, and my goddamn coffee and croissant, in no particular freaking order. I wouldn't mind calling Mother, either—though not this very minute. That would be a bad idea. I would whine about Georgia always frittering away our cash and then tell Mom about the Italian boys, a conversation that would go especially off course. I might even start bawling my eyes out.

I've been dwelling in my own mind for so long that when the woman comes with our food, I realize that most of the fishermen have gone. The room is peaceful, and there is breathable air for a delightful change. The brilliant fragrance of fresh ground coffee beans grabs me. She slams down our breakfasts with no hint of pleasantries. Thick dark brown liquid from the gods slops over the lip of the cup as she bangs it down on my side of the tiny table. Georgia, nonplussed, forms a polite smile for the woman and says *merci* with the tone of a happy cat, if it spoke French. Little does the poor woman know.

* * *

THE SOUR OLD lady's name is Margarite. She makes us work until noon, shooing us out only when her tourist trade starts showing up for lunch. We have scoured the kitchen floors and cleaned out the grease trap. Georgia wanted me to do that. One look at the grunge, the smell of a rotten carcass rising, and the words came flying out: "Are you out of your mind? Ordering more than we could pay for was your idea, Sis!"

She finally gave in, but it was a close one. I hate conflict; she knows that. Margarite was about to burst out in a storm that would crash down on us both like a hammer when Georgia relented. "I got this," she said in the end, with a gleeful spirit. "This

pit will shine like a chrome bumper when I'm done." My sister can turn it on like a snake charmer when she wants to. This is what gets me, though: it always works for her. Always. I had feared jail time or a beating. Not Georgia. She turns up a dial of charisma or coquettishness to exactly what is needed to charm the foe blocking the way to her next adventure. I marvel at this scene every time, wishing I could be like that but knowing I couldn't live with myself if I were.

In front of the café, we now stand in the baking afternoon sun. I hoist my backpack to my shoulders and state what must be our priority issue: "We need to find a bank, Sis." I use the same tone as before. I'm still upset. Why shouldn't I be? "And, from what I have been able to find out, there isn't one here in la-Mer. Can you believe that? No damn bank."

Georgia boosts her pack high and snaps the waist belt and chest strap buckles, all the time glaring at me like she would just as soon leave my ass right here by the Med. Which would suit me fine—if I had some cash.

"We'll find one, little sister. What say we hitch a ride to Arles? It sounds like a nice city, and it's not far from here. It is right on the Rhone River. Arles is much bigger than this little fishing village and has a cathedral in the center of town." She pronounces the city name in a seamless combination of the two letters *R* and *L*. I wonder if she is correct.

"Arles is where the Via Tolosana begins. Starts right from the plaza in front of the Church of St. Trophime. The Via is one of the routes of a pilgrimage to Santiago, in Spain. Christian pilgrims walk the Tolosana west through France and then the Camino de Santiago all of the way across Spain to the cathedral of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela."

My big sister, the tour guide. And how the hell does she know about this Camino de Santiago thing? I'm confused, and still angry with her over this morning's, what she would call, "adventure."

“Georgia, how do you know about the Camino de Santiago? And they? They who? Did our father walk that path? Would he have?”

“What are you talking about, Patricia?”

“Who the hell walks across the south of France and into Spain, and then walks all the way across another damn country? Walk, mind you.”

“Forget that. What are you saying about our father?”

I’m thinking about these details for the first time in weeks. “Would his anger about Vietnam have carried him here, or to Spain, to walk it off? Is he still walking, still hurting? Is he still in Europe, for that matter?” Very slowly—by the response I’m getting from my sister—I realize she doesn’t know any of this.

“What are you going on about, Patricia?”

“Oh, sorry. You weren’t there, you stormed out of the kitchen. You didn’t hear Mother say he had been talking about walking some pilgrim route.”

“Are you serious?” she says in a deep growl. Georgia is suddenly pissed. About what I’m not sure: that I know something she doesn’t; that Mother didn’t tell her about him; that he got here first? I don’t know which, or if it’s not all the above. The storm is still rising behind those pretty eyes. “Who the hell cares what he did?” She stands there in thought for a moment, seething, and then softens in consideration. “Maybe I will walk that ancient Camino path, too, one day.”

“You go ahead. I’ll take a train and meet you there.” I deliver the words like this is a foregone conclusion, that we have finally set an actual plan into motion.

Georgia chuckles at the notion, seeming to believe I could never manage on my own. I asked to join her on this trip, this adventure of hers, to learn the ropes, to have some of my own experiences. It has taken me less than a week to learn all that I needed to know. She hops around from one snap decision to the

next hair-brained idea and thinks I can't figure out how to make my own way through Europe. Pfft. I could—and I'd start with a plan of some kind, any kind.

She is taller than I am and has moved closer to me, looking down on me to make me feel smaller, less in control. Georgia is long and lean with waves of hair the color of liquid gold. People say she could be one of *Charlie's Angels*. That flattering remark opens doors and gives her a confidence I will never have—confidence enough to walk across whole countries.

I'm no slouch, but I am not Georgia, as our little sister, Tilly, likes to point out. But Tilly fools no one. The shortest, roundest of us three sisters, she has as much motivation as a sloth and the brains of a gnat. So, she attacks, knocks others down. Tilly is about as likely to leave home as a brick is to leave its fireplace.

But they are my sisters. "Seriously. If you want to take off walking, go for it. Thanks for getting me here and helping me to start out. But I can manage on my own from here."

"Mom would kick my ass if I left you here beside the Petite Rhone," says Georgia with the tiniest touch of remorse and capitulation. She has backed away. I've never seen this side of my big sister. Mother must have given her a talking to before we left home, one I was not witness to. That thought pisses me off. I'm eighteen now. I can handle things on my own. "Come on. Let's hitch a ride and find you a bank, dear sister."

As we walk along the main street to the center of la-Mer, I drift back two months ago and to our kitchen at home. Long before we ever got to the subject of our father, Mother resisted any such notion of my going to Europe this summer. "Patricia, you have not yet graduated from high school or made your choice of college, and you're talking about spending months abroad." Georgia sat on a stool at the bar with an I-don't-give-a-shit-either-way look on her face. She had promised to help me with Mother. I glared at her

and tilted my head. She knew damn well what I was looking for. But she left it to me.

Still considering today's options, but not really, I snap the buckles of my backpack and follow Georgia to where we were dropped off yesterday. Two *Romani* women stand at a corner scanning a chain of tourists unloading from a rusting bus with *Pan-Europe* painted on its sides. They appear to be elderly American couples. Georgia instinctually skirts behind the bus, avoiding the chatting gray-haired gringos and the wily gypsy women.

In two minutes, Georgia has flagged down a carload of young French people who are driving to Arles. I had dreamed of going on a backpacking trip through Europe with my big sister since forever. Now, though, I'm crammed into the backseat of another car with sweating people smelling of old cheese, sweet wine, and cologne, who speak a language I never bothered to study, and I'm mad. I want off at the next train station. I'll take the next train going . . . anywhere.

I know better, though. Mother would kick my ass, too.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, and with no notice or fanfare, the troop drops us off by the river in Arles. As the car pulls away from the curb, I can hear a new wave of laughter and liveliness erupt from the car. "They're going to a big party somewhere. That's about all I could make out," says Georgia in response.

I couldn't care less. We are out of the car, and I can breathe once more. I'm still perspiring. I'd say I'm sweating like a pig, but Mother would smack me if I ever said that in her presence. "Ladies perspire," she says. Bullshit—I'm sweating.

The slightest breeze carrying a smidge of coolness comes up from the river and ruffles the leaves of young shade trees that line

the street. I lift my arms and let my pack fall over and settle onto the sidewalk. There is the street, the curb where our erstwhile taxi has left us, a wide sidewalk, a tall stone wall, and then the Rhone— dark gray-green in color and full, tight against one side of the city. Tiny boats crawl up stream, barely overcoming the current of millions of gallons headed to the sea. A tourist ferry saunters south toward Marseille with energetic people talking and taking pictures of the city as they pass. Small freighters float at moor farther upstream.

“Let’s find that cathedral I told you about. It’s not far from here,” says my sister, the tour guide. “And, not far from there is a Roman arena where gladiators once fought.” How she knows all this I wonder. She has a guidebook in her pack. I saw it once upon a time. But she never refers to it, never combs its pages. It’s as if she soaks up the information by osmosis; it flows from the pages through her backpack and into her back, and then it works its way up her spine and to her brain.

“What about a bank, Georgia? We need cash, more *francs*.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll find one along the way. Keep an eye out, Sis. Before you know it, there one will be,” says my sister with all the assuredness one could possibly possess. “You’ll see.”

* * *

BY LATE AFTERNOON, we have found a bank to exchange our dollars for *francs*, visited the cathedral, toured the Roman gladiator arena from top to bottom, and seen several other majestic sights of the city. We discovered that the artist Van Gogh lived here for a while in the late 1800s and there’s talk of building a museum in his honor. I’ve never been much for art, but the locals seemed thrilled by the idea. The arena had steep stairs and was sweltering, the air stagnant and lacked oxygen. The old church was musty, dark and foreboding. Georgia made a point of showing me a few markings for the Via Tolosana, one of the

Camino paths, as it made its way from the church and out of the city.

And we now have *francs* in our pockets—even more in a money belt resting on my hips. Georgia has gone off with some boy she had chatted up. His brother, so the boy says in halting English, runs a youth hostel not far from here. For me, though, I am done, at least for a few quiet moments. I'm sticky from sweat and mentally drained.

Within two days of arriving in France, I had decided that street-side cafés were the true symbol of a civilized culture. I find one close to where Georgia and her latest servant have abandoned me. I adore these quaint establishments. I simply sit down and wait for a tall, handsome man dressed in black and white to come take my order. “Espresso, *s'il vous plaît*.” Then off he goes to brew God's nectar—just for me. I can sit for hours and watch the world go by. I have never been one to sit (though Mother only ever finds me sitting after I have stopped for a two-second break from housecleaning). Sitting street-side at a café in Europe and watching people, though, I will while away the time like there is nothing but tomorrows. It's like sitting on a cloud in heaven while viewing the proceedings below and beyond.

Georgia is welcome to flutter off to who-knows-where doing who-knows-what. I'm quite satisfied to stay right here taking tiny sips of liquid coffee bean until she returns with word of where we will spend the night. That thought, and a rush of caffeine to my brain, gives me sudden pause. Where *will* we spend the night? With my big sister, you never know. It could be a lovely boutique hotel, a raucous youth hostel, a lonely beach, or some boy's house, where he lives with his ancient and incredibly spooky grandmother. I'm serious. You never know. I should have gone with them. *Shit*.

Georgia rounds the corner hanging on the arm of a young man. This, I guess, is the brother, the proprietor of the youth hostel. He is tall and olive skinned, his luscious dark brown curls bouncing as

he walks beside my sister. He looks on her with desire, often laughing up a little storm at something she has said. Is he caught in her web? Is she smitten? Or are they acting? Is this her act—the one she does so very well?

Regardless, my sister has found us a place for the night. I will shower. Twice—if there is hot water. Then I'll settle in for a quiet night. Georgia can go, do, enjoy whatever she likes.

* * *

THE RHONE AUBERGE is a clean hostel. Well, cleanish, Mother would say. Quiet, too. This morning, Georgia is nowhere to be seen. I have returned with coffee for Guillaume, the younger brother, and me from a café he had recommended. He stops occasionally for a sip and an “ah” of satisfaction before getting on with his work. He is busy providing suggestions to other people about my age and seeing them off to their day. He moves with an ungainly grace as he does the work his older brother must have assigned to him earlier. I haven't seen the older brother, Ferdi, or my sister yet this morning. Last night, she had planted herself in a bunk well across the room from mine. I found this odd but was quite happy with the distance.

As I drink the thin Americano, which is just a big cup of coffee, weaker than what the French will ever drink, I watch as Guillaume continues his chores. The small courtyard where I sit has a few tiny tables and some rickety chairs woven into a hodgepodge of ferns, banana trees, and lilacs. The bright yellow and green interior walls provide the perfect backdrop for these plants and this space. I find the scene wakes me as much as the caffeine creeping into my bloodstream. I'll order an espresso next time.

Guillaume returns to the front desk with an armload of linens to fold. The fragrances of lilac blossoms, coffee, and fresh laundry fill me with a sense of home and wanderlust all at the same time. It

is so peaceful and welcoming that I feel about to weep from delight. This is the pace at which life should be lived.

With no idea how long I have been here, nor how deep into my daydreaming I have sunk, I suddenly realize that Georgia is at my side, her leather-bound journal in hand. She has a relaxed, almost dopey look about her. Her hair is a mess, and her blouse is tucked into her jeans on one side. “Hello, Sis,” she murmurs. I’m about to ask where she has been. But then I realize I don’t want to know. What she does is none of my business. I only hope she honors that sentiment for me one day.

While scribbling in her diary she says, “Ferdie is going to show me some more of the city, some of the less touristy places. Can you find something to do today, Sis? Do you mind?” She doesn’t give a damn if I care or what I’ll do to fill my time. I want to kick her in the shins—but then she might stay.

Ferdie appears and collects Georgia. Without a response from me, or wanting one, they head for the front door and titter their way out into the small riverside city. Guillaume comes for another quick sip of his espresso, and then thinking better of it, sits beside me like we are best buddies. “Sorry about that,” I say.

“Not to worry, Miss Patricia. My brother, he tell me do this, do that, and he is gone. Is good for me.” He has said my name with that lovely French accent that causes me to fidget. “Ferdie, he no come back till late. I do enough for he to pay me,” says Guillaume. I suddenly appreciate this young man even more. He is cute, too.

“I’ll give you a hand,” I say without first considering. “If you don’t mind the help, I mean.”

He thinks about this for a long moment, then says, “I make you a meal later. Is okay?” I let his words soak in while I realize that, in a few short years, Guillaume will be just as handsome as his brother, maybe even more so. He is younger than I am—sixteen at most—but he has stirred up some awkward sensations below my

waistline. Mother would not be pleased. Thank goodness she's not here.

"This sounds like a wonderful plan, a good day, Guillaume," I reply. Staying here inside these walls and away from the flow of humanity outside for a whole day seems like heaven. Everyone else will be out most of the day, probably sightseeing or gadding about like butterflies on an indecisive wind. Who knows where Georgia and Ferdi will go or what they will do? I don't care. "When I have finished with my coffee, where should I start?"

* * *

THE DAY GOES EXACTLY as I had hoped: a nice slow pace for me to stop and enjoy the fragrance of lilacs as I pass through the courtyard. Everything is peaceful and quiet. The two of us are together for most of the day. I feel no stress, start where Guillaume suggests, and end where I want. Plus, there is pleasant conversation with him over a simple lunch of mixed greens, cheese, and a baguette from a shop around the corner.

When Georgia and Ferdi return in the late afternoon, we—Guillaume and I—are right where they had left us this morning. I hope she thinks I have not moved all day, and I will not rob her of that notion. Georgia looks tired, her usual perky personality dragging behind her a half pace. Ferdi is all business, glaring at Guillaume as he enters the garden. Guillaume grins and tilts his head toward me. "He think I do nothing all this day. Ha."

Ferdi half drags Guillaume to the tiny office behind the front desk. I can hear hushed words in terse-toned French without the lovely, usually romantic, and lyrical qualities of the language. After a few tense moments, Guillaume comes out first, a thin smile on his pretty face. I say pretty—he is still a boy. But one day . . . He leads Ferdi through the building, pointing out everything that has

been done—more than Ferdi had told his little brother to have completed.

I'm covertly watching these proceedings and have forgotten about Georgia. She is gone, upstairs, I assume. Ferdi and Guillaume return. The young brother retakes his seat beside me. Ferdi is looking around. "Where did Georgy go to?"

Georgy? Oh, God, don't tell me this beautiful man made that horrible mistake. "I guess she went upstairs. You know, she doesn't like being called by anything other than Georgia, right?" His head spins to me. His eyes say it all: he had no idea, and that has cost him dearly.

"She . . . she no say. But I understand . . . now." I can see him replaying that moment, that precise instant when he stepped off the cliff of my sister's affections. I suspect we will be leaving Arles in the morning. Another escape.

* * *

THE TRAIN STATION, Gare d'Arles, is a short walk from the hostel. The building is sad, plain, and functional. There is no café. Georgia told me there would be coffee. She had wanted to leave the *auberge* before Ferdi could find her and make a scene or something. I had just enough time to say goodbye to Guillaume, give him a tight hug, and kiss him lightly on both cheeks. *I am so very French.*

"Where are we going, Big Sis?" I say with as much contempt as I can muster so early in the morning (or ever).

"Avignon. You little shit, we've missed the train. Why did you have to drag your feet back there? Dammit." She again looks up at the train schedule posted on the wall. Very few other people are milling about. Snippets of conversations I do not understand coil through announcements in French and English coming from rattling, squawky speakers above. "Oh well, there's another in forty-five minutes."

“Good, suits me fine. I’m going to find a café, buy an espresso. Don’t worry . . .” Because I doubt that she will. “I’ll be back in plenty of time for the next train.”

“Get me one, too, will you? I’ll be right out there.” She points to a bench outside in the morning sun and draws her journal from its sacred pouch on one side of her backpack.

I return from my search for God’s amazing brown elixir. My sister is still sitting where I left her. She seems in deep contemplation. “Here you go, Sis. There was a café just around the corner. The fresh ground coffee beans smelled so good that I asked for doubles.”

“Oh, sweet. Thanks.” She carefully takes the cup I offer to her. “What you said about our father, did Mom tell you that?”

“About walking that pilgrimage you mentioned?”

“Yeah. What did she say, exactly?”

“It wasn’t all from her; it was Mother’s friend, Maddy, too. And I didn’t think you were at all interested in him, or his story.”

“Well, we don’t know *his* story, now do we?” Ah, the petulant Georgia; she’s acting just like our sister Tilly at this moment.

“What Mother said after you left the kitchen that morning suggested that Maddy knew more about Father, but she wouldn’t elaborate. So, I went next door to see Maddy. That morning, you know. When Mother dropped that bomb on us, and then clammed up so tight,” I say as I take a seat beside her on the bench.

“Well?” she says with a get-on-with-it tone.

“Maddy told me what she knew: how our father came home from the war very angry, that he couldn’t cope with living in America, that he and Mother fought a lot—though not enough to keep us from having Tilly for our nasty little sister,” I add. “She even told me of an article in our local paper about him coming home the town hero. I went to the library to find a copy. I saw his picture from that day he got home. You could see it right there in that grainy black-and-white photo: him trying hard on the surface

to be the hero but lots of anger just under that. Maddy said it was what he learned about the war when he got home and how they were treated at the airport in San Diego. People spat on them, for God's sake."

"Jesus, Pat. Why haven't you told me any of this before now?"

"Like I said, you didn't seem interested."

"It's not that. It hurt when he left. I thought it was my fault. Eventually, I guess, I realized that wasn't true. But I was still angry that a father would do that to his child, to his children. You didn't really know him, but I did. Well, in a small way."

"So, you sort of put him out of your mind then?" I ask, truly curious.

"Yeah. I didn't want anything to do with him, and still don't. It's the Camino de Santiago, though. I'm interested in that history. But his history may include the Camino. I don't know what it all means."

I reach out and lightly grasp her hand. We intertwine our fingers for a moment. It's a sweet moment but won't last.

"Doesn't really matter right now. We have a train to catch." Georgia chirps, conversation now over.

She grabs her pack and heads for the door into the station. I pick up my things and follow her. She amazes me, my sister does. Sometimes I think she is so simple—adventure and men all that are on her mind. And then she exposes her true self, her complicated mix of fun-loving free spirit and anger and denial.

* * *

WE BOARD THE NEXT TRAIN, and it trundles and sways out of the station. The long machine labors to make way, accelerating so slowly that I worry we may never speed up.

As the countryside and Rhone stream past, she's doing it again: "We can visit the Palais des Papes, the Popes' Palace, a famous

bridge called Pont San . . . something, and the plaza. There's lots of amazing architecture on and around the town's main square."

There are two San Tropez-tanned girls in the seats ahead of us. In unison, they spin around and rise to lean on their seatbacks. "It's called Pont Saint-Bénézet," the older of the two says. "Or Pont d'Avignon," the younger one says. They turn to each other and grin like it's an old family joke or something.

"Yeah, that's it. I couldn't remember the name exactly. Are you guys getting off the train at Avignon?" asks Georgia. They are. The older one, Juliette, starts right into conversation with my sister like they are longtime pals who haven't seen each other in a while.

The younger, Persephone, talks with me. Only two feet away, Georgia and Juliette might as well be on another planet. Persephone and I are exploring where each of us is from, what I have seen and done in my time in France, and what my sister and I plan to do next. The sisters are originally from Nice, and each went to school in Switzerland to learn English and take their secondary courses. Juliette will graduate from university soon, and Persephone will start her first semester next year.

Twenty-five short minutes later, today's train trip is at an end. We are inside the Avignon train station. It is bigger than Gare d'Arles and as homely. The same—sounds like the very same—faceless voice blares from the public announcement system. The train chuffs out of the station, keeping the best it can to a tight schedule. Persephone, Juliette, Georgia, and I wade through the crowds, heading toward the exit. "You two should stay with us," says Juliette. She looks to Persephone, and they seem to agree on this proposal. They turn to us as we all stop in the middle of the lobby, where people wander past at various paces and diverse courses.

"Where?" Georgia asks the obvious question. "Do you have a place to stay here or nearby?" The two sisters begin to giggle.

Their arrow-straight, dark brown hair waves in harmony as they shake their heads.

“No. Not here. We have a place to stay near Lourmarin. It is not far. We will visit friends here in Avignon, do some shopping, and then go to Lourmarin later today. You could meet us there. There are many rooms—and a pool for swimming. We will stay for a few weeks, Persephone and me. You should come stay with us,” says Juliette while Persephone nods her head in agreement.

“How much is it? How many *francs* per night, I mean?” I ask the question most on my mind. Georgia frowns at me. See, she never wants the question of money to get in the way of a good time, even if you have no idea what your time will be like.

“Oh, no, no. You not pay,” says Persephone. “It is our parent’s home. Their getaway place, you Americans might call it. They are in Egypt for the next month. We have time from end of school year to when they return. It is all for us—and friends, of course.”

* * *

GEORGIA SQUEALS in delight after Persephone and Juliette leave to complete their errands. “This is going to be great, Pat. Simply amazing.” Acting as if she has received an invitation from the Queen, Georgia is excitedly waving the directions that Juliette had penned onto a napkin. I hope it is all that my sister is imagining, but I fear our destination may be a house of horrors, an open field in the middle of nowhere, or . . . who the hell knows for sure?

My big sister can read minds, too, you know. She is circling me in slow motion and probing my thoughts. “Look, we’ll check out the sights here in Avignon, buy some wine and cheese to be polite, and catch a cab to this place.” Again, she’s waving that damn napkin. “If there’s nothing there, or we don’t like the vibe, we can have the driver bring us right back here.” She sees my anger brewing, but it’s as weak as an Americano coffee. “While we’re

exploring the city, we'll look for a backup, okay? A nice boutique hotel if you like."

Knowing that I'm mad at my sister for no real reason and that the place could be as nice as the sisters have indicated, I take a deep breath, release, and hope for the best. "Shall we start with the Popes' pleasure palace or the fancy bridge with two names?"

At my insistence, and in no rush, we stroll from Gare d'Avignon into the center of the old city. "Let's find a café and make a plan for our day here," I say with little hope of my sister the leopardess ever changing her spots. However, sometimes, she can blow your mind.

"Sure, sounds cool. I could use something to eat." I stumble on a dip in the sidewalk. Georgia turns to face me. "What?" I catch up, not saying a word. I don't want to give her any excuse to change her mind.

After a short distance, we are inside the city walls, past the ramparts. Ahead is a café. We spot it at the same time. Without a word, we stride toward the smell of fresh croissants. I didn't know I was so hungry, but my mouth is suddenly watering.

We give our order to a spry older woman the age of our grandmother when she died from a heart attack last year. Georgia starts digging through her backpack, going deeper and deeper. Several minutes and two hands full of curse words later, she pulls out the guidebook she has carried from home. "Here it is," she says with delight and then hands it to me. "Make us a plan, my little sister."

Happy with the chance, I flip the pages to "Avignon," and search for a what-to-see section, a highlights page. Just as happily, I dive into the freshest croissant ever placed in my presence. The smell of butter injecting itself into my olfactory nerves stirs as much dopamine as a good . . . well, a good something. Georgia ignores my search and my baker's delight and watches men rushing off to

work and women pushing strollers and guiding toddlers this way and that along the busy street.

In a few short minutes, I've scratched a pencil line along a route on a little map of Avignon's city center, circling a few special places: the Palais des Papes, the basilica, the bridge with two names, and some others. I have even found a market where we can shop before leaving for Lourmarin this evening. God, I hope that works out.

"I'd love another croissant," I say with no real emotion. That's not really what I want. I've never had this feeling before, but I'd like to duck into the kitchen and see how they make them, how they fold ingredients together into flakey marvels of butterdom. I want to know what temperature the butter is and the grind of the flour, the setting of the oven, and how long it takes for the pastries to arrive at that perfect golden-brown deliciousness.

"You know what I'd love? I'd love to know where our bastard father is right now," Georgia says, as she scans a trio of older men passing by. "Wouldn't you like to connect those dots, Sis? I just might tell him what I think of him."

My mouth dries up. "I didn't think you were interested in what had happened to him, where he went."

"Did Maddy say which route he planned to take? Was he going straight to Spain when he left the US?" my sister asks as she continues to watch people going about their business.

"She said he was going to France and that he may have gone to Spain from there. That's all she knew, all that I know, Georgia."

"Curious, though, don't you think?"

I grunt a response. She doesn't react, which suits me fine. I don't know more, and if I'm honest with myself, I don't want to care. Initially, after Mother delivered her surprise, I was interested. I did some digging. But now . . .

Now, there are things I would rather think about: Every time

we enter a café or restaurant, I home in on the spicy, burned aromas of freshly brewed coffee. Right now, though, a fresh baked something is taking over my senses. How do they make it all smell so damn good? At home I bake pies with our mother all the time. We bake them and she sells them to friends and neighbors for extra money. I love that time with her, and the results. There is nothing prettier in this world than a freshly baked apple pie, its crust flakey and perfectly brown on top. The thought gives me goosebumps.

* * *

I'M tired from our day in Avignon, Georgia is fast asleep, and once more, the countryside is skimming past a grimy car window. It's mostly dark-green vineyards and small mountain ranges of gray stone and the occasional farmhouse or villa. Our driver points out thunder clouds further east and says, "Ils se dirigent vers l'Italie." I know that Italy is to the east of us and hope that he means those dark clouds are going toward that country, not coming from there. I nod my head and then return to the window, drowsy from the heat and another day of touring museums and castles and palaces.

I love it, don't get me wrong. A change would delight, though. Fears seep in again. What will we find—if anything—at the destination our taxi is heading toward? The scenery is beautiful, but as I count farmhouses, I drift into slumber.

"Hey, wake up, sleepy head. We're here," says Georgia. As he holds the door for me, the cab driver has his threadbare cap off and is rubbing thin fingers across his bald head, looking intently at something. Georgia is unloading our backpacks from the back seat. Squinting my eyes, still in a daze, I step out of the car, first inspecting what my sister is doing and then turning to see what has the driver's rapt attention.

"It's an actual villa, Sis," says Georgia. "See, I told you it would

be great.” She sets the bag of wine and cheese at my feet, takes some *francs* from my pocket, and pays the cabby.

“C’est un château, mademoiselle,” he says. “Château Satariagn.” The man points to a lichen-coated stone sign, with those words chiseled deep, set into a tall, stacked-stone wall. Thick green ivy coats the wall in both directions.

My senses are returning, emerging from a thick haze of apathy. As I start to come around, I begin looking for a bell or a phone box when I hear them. Persephone and Juliette are running down the lane toward us and the massive ornate iron gates between us. “You came!” cries Persephone. Both girls are in bright blue swimsuits with tiny Swiss flags above one breast. Where they have come from, I cannot tell. All we can see through the gate is a long gravel drive, which leads up and over a rise, with tall trees and perfectly trimmed shrubs and hedges on either side.

* * *

AT A FRENZIED SPEED, we have moved through lugging our stuff to the main house (there are three more houses, we are told), showered, and changed, and now we float lazily in a pool as big as our entire home in California. Juliette and Georgia are giggling and sipping on light, peach-colored wine at the far end of the pool. Persephone and I, our arms folded over the pool’s coping and our legs floating and kicking, chat at the end near the pool house. She is telling me something, but I’m lost in the swiftness at which life can move in one direction or another.

“Maria always has supper ready after sunset, and François, the boy I told you about, he comes later. He will bring his friends. They play music together,” Persephone says. I realize I’ve missed a few things.

“Tell me more about François. You said . . .” Hoping she doesn’t know that I have tuned her out, I reach for my wine and take a tiny

sip. I don't drink much wine, but the pink, silky-smooth liquid is refreshing on a hot day. Persephone does a little spin and dunks her head below the water to come up slowly like a swimsuit model.

"He is our cousin," she sputters through water streaming down her face. "Is that the correct word, *cousin*, like the French word?" She says it as an exaggerated *co-zin*. "Son of our uncle, yes?" I nod, and she continues. "He has friends in a folk band. They will start on a summer tour next week. They come tonight to play for us and spend the night. It is always such good fun." Well, yes, I did miss a bit, quite a bit.

"Can we help Maria with . . . supper?" I ask dumbly. It is clear I have missed something there, too. Persephone stops and looks at me quizzically. I hear my sister and Juliette laughing with joy as they swim in our direction with their pewter goblets held high.

"Non. No. Maria would never allow that. She is our . . . you call her . . . housekeeper, yes? She has been with the family since my grandparents were younger. She and Fran, the gardener, they are happy couple, Mama says. You will love them both."

"Ah, I'm sorry. It is a lot to take in. Only a short while ago, I was sweating—I mean perspiring—in a hot taxicab listening to my sister snore. Now . . ." I lift my head and look down the length of the massive pool and toward the main house peering at us over a hedge, as if it is looking down on us from afar like a guardian. "Now, I am here in this grand slice of heaven, wondering how it has all happened so fast." What I don't say is that I'm also wondering what it must be like to live this life. Provence in the summer. Switzerland and skiing in the winter. Who knows where in between? Maybe Egypt and the rest of Africa, or off to the Orient.

"Can you tell me about your name? It is so beautiful, but Persephone, where does that come from?" I ask because I have been curious since we met on the train to Avignon.

“It is the name of my mother’s aunt.” She says “aunt” like a British queen—haughty and drawn out. “Mother’s rich auntie.”

She has said this with all seriousness, and I almost drop my glass. It’s more of a goblet, for sure, and would sink straight to the bottom of the pool, wasting the goodness inside. I may end up liking this wine as much as French-made espressos and their tantalizing croissants. “I’m sorry. Your mother’s *rich* auntie?”

“It is a family secret. No, a family joke. Auntie Persephone is Mama’s aunt on her mother’s side, and she has had three husbands, all very wealthy and all very dead now. They say that I am second daughter, and Auntie Persephone is second daughter, so we are same. As it turns out, we like each other very much. She bought me a new automobile last month. It is a Citroen 2CV and is a beautiful bright red. You and I can go for a drive in it while you are here.”

“. . . such a jackass.” I hear Georgia say. We have obviously missed the beginning.

“Jackass?” asks Juliette.

“Oh, yeah, uh, a donkey,” says Georgia. “He was a jackass, a donkey. No fun at all.”

Georgia and Juliette splash water in our direction as they sidle up to us. “We’re going to play croquet. Want to join us?” asks Juliette. “I will get another bottle of wine and meet you all in the garden.”

As they leave the pool, Persephone and I shrug our shoulders in unison, climb the wide staircase out of the pool, and then make for the garden.

* * *

FRANÇOIS ARRIVES EARLY, emerging along a walkway from the manor. He is gorgeous, tall, and dark. I look about for a nonexistent robe or towel. We—four giggling girls—are still in our bathing

suits and chasing croquet balls about with big wooden mallets. The remnants of our latest bottle of wine chills in a silver ice bucket in the middle of the vast lawn bordered by impossibly tall, squarely cut hedges.

“Cousin François,” shriek the sisters together as they run up to hug him. Georgia slides closer to me, staring at him. She has got that look in her eyes.

“Isn’t he just . . .?” Georgia starts but then cannot continue to speak. *Oh brother.*

The word *charismatic* comes to mind after two minutes of listening to him talk to his cousins in French and to Georgia and me in bits of beautifully accented English. If he fails as a musician, he can no doubt find something else to do, like take up male modeling, be a spokesman for any product on the market, be my husband. But my sister already has her eyes on him—and takes aim.

Georgia, Juliette, and François, chattering and carrying on, walk toward a side entrance of the main hall. Persephone says, “We should go get cleaned up. Maria will have a little—how do you say, a snack?—ready for us in the kitchen. She always takes such good care of us.”

I follow along, still wishing I had a bathrobe. As I ponder how exposed I feel, it hits me that I have very few options for evening wear. “What should we wear, Persephone?” Quick as can be, I feel very inadequate, unprepared, and well out of my element. “I only have a simple dress and one nice pair of linen slacks and a peasant blouse in my pack.” It now seems ridiculous to be living out of a backpack. This was never part of the plan. Well, my plan. As usual, it doesn’t seem to intimidate my sister one damn bit.

“No need to worry. What you have will be fine, or you can go through my things. We are about the same size.” She squeezes up to me and locks one arm with mine. “We are sisters now.”

I like the thought of the two of us being sisters—not so I can

live this life, but because we are so much more alike than Georgia and I. “Juliette and Georgia can be sisters, too. They seem as content as we are.” Persephone giggles at the thought and nods her head. “But what will we do with poor François and his band?” I ask as I burst out laughing. Persephone follows suit, and we are about to roll on the grass in hysterics when we realize the other three have stopped and are looking at us with questioning smiles blooming on their faces.

* * *

WE ENTER THE DINING ROOM. I feel under dressed for our surroundings. Other useless doubts ping about in my mind. On Juliette’s directive, François sits at the head of the implausibly long table. Maria fills a wine glass for him. The five of us are seated at one end of the table: Persephone and I on one side, Juliette and Georgia opposite of us, and François at the head. If it were a teeter totter, the other end of the table would be crammed up into the next level of the mansion. We use but a few of the two dozen or more elegantly tapestried and carved chairs. Nearly everything, from wall paneling to table, chairs, sideboard, window frame, and doors are made of such darkly oiled wood that it looks like ebony. I have seen one small piece of ebony in my life. This color is very close. And it’s everywhere I look, except in my wine glass, which I am, as politely as possible, avoiding. It is half full of a dark red Burgundy, which is delicious by the way.

“A toast,” says François as he holds up his crystal glass, nearly full to the brim. “A toast to me and my four lovely companions this evening.” Georgia swoons. I swear she does.

I am satiated beyond belief and a bit tipsy from more toasting to all manner of worthy subjects when the cheese platter arrives. I groan too loudly, and the others laugh at me. “I couldn’t. Not another bite of anything.”

Maria sets the platter in the center of our quintet and leans into François to whisper something to him. He nods and thanks her. Then he stands as gracefully as a swan and says, “My friends, they have arrived. I will help them set up on the patio. We should be ready for music in twenty minutes, yes?”

We nod in agreement with whatever it is this gorgeous man has said. Juliette and Persephone look as awestruck as my sister and I do. Are they distant cousins with François, far enough removed for . . .? No, I happily remember the family tree.

The warm, motionless air is sticky but not overwhelming. It soaks in and soothes a slight sunburn on my shoulders. The music pacifies any remaining resistance in my inner voice. François is strumming an eight-string rosewood guitar as if he is making love to it. An older, bearded fellow draws his bow across a cello in smooth rhythmic fashion, while a petite woman with a bob of thick black hair is playing a silver flute. Both instruments add layers that complement, but in no way overtake, the dazzling verve of the guitar. People will pay to enjoy the obvious talent and charm that François exudes when this trio travels about the country this summer. He is fantastic. I know because I am a fan. Or am I love-struck?

* * *

MARIA HAS LEFT US, her day finally coming to an end. The musicians are putting away their instruments, and we four are standing, barely, and swaying to the tunes swirling in our heads. “We should go for a swim,” says Juliette out of the blue. There is quick agreement, and I turn toward the house.

“Where are you going?” asks Persephone.

“To get into my bathing suit,” I reply but quickly realize I’m not exactly going to like the words I will hear next.

“No need. It is dark. When it is this late, we go *sans vêtements*,

without clothes. It is rather dark at the pool. You will see, no problem.” She twists her arm into mine like before, and I, with much hesitation, follow along. François and the others say they will join us after loading their things into the van.

Oh God. Oh God. What would Mother think? She is thousands of miles away. Thank God.

Georgia and Juliette are already stripped down and jumping into the water when we follow a path through a gap in the hedge that surrounds the pool. It is dark here but not enough for my sensibilities, if I have any left. I am in a Burgundy- and port-induced haze. Following Persephone’s lead, I undress. Then, as quickly as possible on unsteady legs, I take the steps down into the blue water. A tiny light at one end gives an ethereal hue to the shimmering surface of the water.

The cool liquid soothes everything: the burned skin, woozy brainwaves, and my sensibilities. *I can do this.*

That transient thought is shooed away when I hear François and the others coming our way. I can hardly believe my eyes, but they are already naked, clothes in their arms, and they are running and laughing with wildness. Their clothes go into a pile, and they jump in with us, François closest to me.

“Très bon, non?” he says to me, the image of a few seconds ago heedlessly dancing in my mind’s eye.

“Yes,” I say, shy as a little girl. The others might as well be back in the dining room. I don’t see or hear any of them. François is looking at me, talking to me, and standing close to me. As difficult as it is, I keep my blurry vision on his face, trying to sketch his high cheekbones, square jawline, deep dimple, and soulful eyes onto a mental parchment in my mind.

Before I can finish—like I would ever want to complete such a pleasing activity—the rest of our little party has approached us. They are splashing water at each other and now at the two of us. The spell is broken. No, cracked, not broken. I tire, my floundering

legs no longer able to keep me afloat. As our cadre frolics about, I slide to the side of the pool and raise one arm to hold myself still, to take a break from the effort. Slowly, all too slowly, I realize one breast is above the waterline. Danny, the bearded cello player is staring at me. Well, not me, but it.

No one else has seen my faux pas or the lecherous leer. I am uncomfortable. But a ball comes at me, and I strike it down. Then another. I turn from Danny and swim toward François, as he takes in the entire scene. There are several balls, of different sizes, that have come from who knows where, now in flight or skittering across the water in a frenzied game of water dodgeball.

I have the weirdest image flash through my mind as I consider the various body parts flopping about under the surface of the water during the mayhem of this impromptu game. Danny throws a ball at me from the shallow end of the pool and then stands there, looking at me. François steps closer to him and says something I cannot hear over the shouts and laughter from the others.

During the rest of the game, if one can call it that, as it has no objective other than to be fun, I notice that François keeps a respectable social distance and is always between Danny and me. The round, hairy-chested man is quite drunk and maybe because of what François had said, he stays in the shallow water. As the silliness subsides, I float and kick farther away from the diving board and the underwater light.

* * *

I AM the last to rise above its reflective surface and leave the pool, and the quickest to pull my black polyester dress over my head, tugging ineffectively. With water streaming from head to toe, I try to bring the dress down past my hips, but it stutters on my skin. Persephone is already dressed and waiting for me. Georgia and Juliette bookend François, who is herding Danny and the girl band

member through the darkness and toward the house. I can't remember her name.

"What a fun day, yes?" says Persephone. I feel the yawn she is stifling.

"Yes," is all I can say while doing the actual yawning.

Persephone and I exit the hedge surrounding the pool area. Across the wide garden, with its many shorter hedges and color-laden flower beds, the rest of our party is near the side entrance to the house. Everyone has stopped there. It looks like Danny is arguing with François. As we near, Danny staggers off into the house. We come closer. François says, "He wants a brandy, a large one to help him sleep." We all chuckle, figuring he'll have no problem once he lies down. François asks what's-her-name to see Danny up to his room. We are all on the third floor, a bedroom each. Juliette said earlier that there are sixteen bedrooms in the main house alone.

We are again five. Juliette suggests a bite to eat, and we follow her to the kitchen. The fragrance of garlic tickles my fatigue and my stomach. Full to the brim a short while ago, it grumbles with want. I'd also like an espresso but know better. Finding a rope of garlic hanging by the stove, I finger it with desirous intent. Georgia is at my side. "Are you having fun?"

There is a tone in her voice. "Would it be all right if I were?" There is something there, something new, in her eyes. Is she playing, or is she upset about something she thinks I've done? She walks away. I let it go and sit down at the large table in the center of the room. The wood shows an age, a wear from decades of use. But it is so clean, even our mother could not find fault.

François, a tiny sandwich in his flawless hands, comes to sit beside me. I see Georgia glaring at me. I give her a "what" look, and she turns away, pissed at me. Now, I know what I haven't done. François and I chat about nothing as he nibbles on his midnight snack.

Persephone yawns this time, and we finally say our good nights. At the third floor, Persephone rushes off to her room. I think she's going to be sick, but she warns me off, saying she'll be fine.

As if in a horror movie, I wander off through the maze of dimly lit hallways, trying to remember the way to my room. I round a corner and remember that my room is the one in the inside corner of the west wing where it abuts with the main structure. Why or how I remember all this, I have no idea, but it helps me to mark where the door to my room should be. One more corner and there it is—so is Danny the cello player.

Hoping he is seeking a bathroom, or that brandy he wanted, I attempt to slide past him, and to my door just behind him. Quicker than I'd have thought possible, he pins me to the doorframe, pushing his bulk against me. Fast as a striking snake, he is lifting my dress with one hand and groping a breast with the other. I push on his chest with both palms, but he is immovable. His tangled beard rubs the side of my face with his hot, vulgar breath in my ear. He says nothing as I struggle. Another weird thought pops into my muddled brain: I've never actually heard the man speak. He is finding his way to bare skin.

Suddenly, he is off me. He stumbles away and groans. François gives him a shove down the hall and away from us. He says something to Danny in a subdued shout of French words, and then louder, "You are a pig." Danny wobbles away, bounces off one wall, and then slides from the opposite one before turning a corner and disappearing.

François turns back to find me sitting on my heels, supported by the wall, stunned. I clamp down on a whimper blooming in my throat.

"Are you good? Are you . . . okay?" he asks as he reaches for my hands and helps me up.

"I guess. Thank you. He is such a creep."

“He is drunk and will not remember a thing come the morning.”

“That does not make it right, François,” I manage to say in an indignant tone, my heart still pounding like a racehorse. I dab my eyes with a sleeve.

“No. You are true. I should go get him. Take him back to the pool and flog him as he tries his best to stand on the diving board,” François says with a growing smile. That damn smile. That charisma. That charm, allure, attractiveness, whatever it is. I’ve forgotten why we are here, here in this hallway, what we were doing. “You are right, though,” he says.

“He needs to know what he has done,” I say, though not sure why. I know why Danny should know, but not why I am speaking.

“We will set him to rights in the morning. He will be shocked. But he must know how you feel and what he has done.”

“Thank you, François. He did not hurt me, just scared me. But he must never try that again. Not with anyone.”

“Yes, of course,” François says more quietly than before. The subject is complete. “Is this your room?”

I nod yes. Then he says good night to me again and turns to leave. I catch his arm and look up into his dark eyes. I want one more look. The dim light of a distant sconce circles his head like a halo. Dark curls drape the sides of his lovely face, falling over the sharp lines of his jawbone.

He slips closer and looks down on me, deep into my soul, but doesn’t touch me. The smell of him intoxicates me further. I grip his arm tighter and with the other hand reach up to palm his face. He raises his arms and takes my face between his soft hands. He waits there.

I don’t let it last; standing on tiptoes, I push up and kiss him. He responds, kissing me with a delicate ravenousness.

His arms are now around my waist, and we are pulled together, pressed tight head to toe. I reach behind me and search for the

brass doorknob I know is there. Without missing a move in the moist kisses and our entangled tongues, I feel the lavish decorative texture of the brass in my grip. I give the knob a spin, and we fall into the dark room. François, deft as a magician, closes the door with a toe, and we grope for each other and the bed.

* * *

I AM WOKEN by a light hammering sound, a dull thunk thunk of wood on wood. A bright sliver of light beams past a thick curtain, casting a thin line across the floor. François is gone, which is best but just as disappointing. Slipping up onto the deep padding and silkiness of the headboard, I sense a headache blossoming and my vision is a little blurry.

Pulling up the sheet to cover myself, I remember last night, his warm tenderness. I cannot say he was my first, but he was my best first.

Having no concept of the time of day, I move from the bed wrapped in a sheet and make my way to the window to open the curtain. The sunlight stuns me, and I step back to let my eyes adjust and my head stop spinning. When I recover, I part the fine white gossamer fabric of the sheer drapes to see Danny staring back at me. No, it's not him. It's an older man. This must be Fran, Maria's husband. He is making repairs to a window frame on the opposite side of this inside corner of the house. He is standing on an incredibly tall ladder, looking over his shoulder at me with an apologetic look on his face.

I smile shyly and reclose the shade.

The sight of the older man brings back thoughts of our father and the conversations Georgia and I have had. We have been distracted. Which I think is good. But is Georgia still thinking about him, still thinking about the Camino de Santiago? I let the thought slip away. What time is it?

Bathed, dressed, and feeling better, though a touch hungry, I go downstairs and face everyone. Georgia will still be mad. I hope she does not know my secret. I will never drink again. But François, I could have him for every meal of the day. Then it comes to me: he and the rest of his trio are leaving today. That thought blends horribly with the slight hangover swimming in my head.

At the bottom of the stairs, I'm not sure where everyone might be. I wander past the entrance to a library, where tall shelves are stuffed with ancient books and a thick smell of leather with a hint of vanilla soothe my mind but set my stomach on end.

I pass the parlor—or is it a drawing room?—and hear voices coming from the direction of what might be the kitchen. I follow the sounds of light laughter and conversation. There, too, is the pull of fresh ground coffee beans from the goddess. I stop at the doorway and see that everyone is here except Danny. Thank goodness. Georgia and Juliette are talking with Maria by the stove. She is stirring a large pot of steaming liquid. François and what's-her-name stand in front of an espresso machine as he toys with the mechanisms. My spirits lift at the sight. The sight of him, or the espresso, I am uncertain. They hold near equal power over my emotions.

Maria sees me first. She gives a narrow smile and a nod in greeting as she continues to stir the pot. I walk toward the table, hoping to sit and gather myself before whatever comes next. To slurp coffee, that's what I want. Well, that's what I need. I want something else. Before I arrive at my chosen perch, François is in front of me. He's shaven, dressed in comfortable travel clothes, and smells divine. With soft tenderness, he takes me in his arms and hugs me. Then he places a long kiss on one cheek before saying, "You want espresso, yes?"

Well, there goes the notion of secret keeping. "Yes. I would love a cup. Thank you." He steps away and returns to the machine. Georgia is staring at me. I attempt to sit down—before I fall from a

weak stance on wobbly legs—and see the look in her eyes. It is somewhere between jealousy and admiration, I surmise. She gives me a weak smile and simple nod. Phew! That could have gone much worse.

A drawn-out moan draws everyone's attention back to the doorway. It's Danny. He is leaning against the doorframe, rubbing his head with one hand and holding the other hand tight to his belly. Like a shot, François passes me and takes Danny by one arm, leading him away. Off to the pool and the diving board?

What's-her-name places a steaming cup of espresso in front of me. I smile and thank her profusely. Georgia comes to sit down beside me. "Did you have fun last night?" she says with a questioning, teasing tone. "Mom would not be pleased, you know." My sister can be a real pain sometimes. But right now, I'm feeling closer to her than ever before. The plan was to have experiences in Europe with her, to learn, to gain independence. Boys were not part of my plans. Then there was François.

* * *

AN UNRELENTING SCREECH of ten thousand cicadas buzzing, the scents of lavender and rose, and warm air rising above the French landscape all flow through the tiny car and tousle my hair. I sit in a dazed melancholy. That sad feeling draws me back to last night's uncomfortable scene and memories of François.

A warm tear had streamed down my face as I watched him wave a soft goodbye to me. His van pulled away from the house and went over the rise toward the iron gates and the exit from the estate. I don't expect to ever see him again. As Georgia had said, "Isn't he just . . .?"

I push up in the seat and bring myself to the present. Persephone is pushing the little red Citroen to its limits. Vineyards and lavender fields fly past. "Those are the Alpilles over there. The

little Alps,” she hollers over the rush of wind and indescribably loud cicada song, pointing off into the distance. “That area is now a park, a preserve. There are hiking trails and wonderful views from the peaks.” They are rather small Alps, indeed. Spires of limestone poke above green hillsides that rise above lush valleys and quaint villages.

Persephone slows the car as we enter the twisting, narrow streets of one such village. “It is so beautiful here. You must never tire of this,” I say. She snaps the car to the right and pulls into a parking spot the size of my chest of drawers back home. She sets the handbrake.

“We go shopping now. Maria asks that we pick up some fresh salmon for tonight. I would like to get some tapenades, too, for you and Georgia to try. In this village, they make the best in all Provence.” She sees the look on my face. “It’s a mixture of chopped olives and capers and other ingredients. You eat it on crackers like caviar. You will love it. The shops here have many different blends.”

I nod my head and climb from the shiny new Citroen. The simple lines and unpretentious functionality of the automobile remind me of images from World War II for some reason. Its design might be a holdover. Her auntie could have bought Persephone any car, I suppose. Why this one, though it seems such a perfect fit for this part of the world? And what is it like to eat caviar?

Persephone has empty bags in one hand and a small clutch in the other. On a slight breeze, I catch the fragrances of fresh baked breads and olive oil. Somewhere in there, I hope for a hint of coffee and steamed milk. A short distance away, we enter a tiny market, and Persephone goes to work. If I’m properly reading the gestures emanating from both her and the market owner, they are negotiating for the salmon fillets she would prefer and their price. They seem almost angry with each other right up to the moment

when the deal is struck. Then it is all smiles and “*bon*” and “*bien*” beaming from them both. Must be the custom here. I’d never be any good at that.

We venture through the streets and alleys with Persephone leading the way to her favorite shop for tapenades. We find the shop at a tight corner where little cars must navigate a narrow passage among stone structures, parked cars, pedestrians, and hand carts. I enter the angular building and discover a new world of possibilities. Tubs of olives, a vast array of olive oils and vinegars, and wooden bowls containing tapenades in various colors flood shelves down the length of the building. The walls diverge at the angle of the streets outside and extend into the depths of the semi-lit space. The magnificent aroma is a mixture of heavenly vapors.

“You can sample any that look appealing to you. I let you choose,” says Persephone. I am struck with an overwhelming assortment of choices.

“Where do I start? It would be impossible to try them all.” I’ve lost focus both in visual and mental capacities.

“I will get you started. These are olive tapenades here. Further down are those from sundried tomatoes and peppers. Try a few. You will love them all. We should get, say, one-quarter kilo of two or three. On this shelf are pesto and marinara sauces.” She leans into me and says, “We don’t need sauces. Maria’s are much better.”

Persephone strolls away, leaving me to decide. I slip from one tempting bowl to another, occasionally lifting a sample to my tongue with a tiny new wooden pallet. Each one livens my tongue. Some are sweet, others have a bite. Only the pickle relish Mother puts up each summer has ever tasted so good.

I have a short list in mind when Persephone returns to my side. She has a couple other items in hand. “Made your choices?”

“Down to these,” I say as I point out the five on my mental list. She nods and make a comment here and there.

“Let’s take this one and the one at the end,” she says as she points to our final selections. Then she asks the best question of the day, “Are you ready for an espresso?”

After stopping at a café for a spirit-lifting espresso, we return to the Citroen. Persephone winds the steering wheel back and forth as she snakes her way out of the village and back onto thin country lanes. In no time at all, we are back to breakneck speeds, the countryside flying by.

“We will stop at a friend’s vineyard and get a case or two of vin rosé. We all seem to like it very much.” I nod my head in agreement but remember the headache I suffered this morning. However, it could not possibly measure up to that of last night’s hairy cello player.

As Persephone drives beyond the main house and maneuvers toward the back entrance, Georgia and Juliette are rushing off, running for the pool with beach towels and a bottle of pink liquid in hand. Fran is following at a slow pace with the silver ice bucket in front of him. He gives us a pleased smile. Persephone pulls the car to a stop and sets the brake. “We’ll unload our things and then join them. I could use a cooling off. How about you, Patricia?”

I nod in agreement and say, “You can call me Pat, if you like. It’s an American thing to shorten names, I know. But you are welcome to if you want.” I don’t usually tell people they can call me by my nickname. But I’m in such a dreamy calm right now that this proposal seems perfect.

* * *

THE GLEAMING red 2CV is leaving us behind with Juliette and Persephone waving as they go. We may see them again in London at the end of our adventure. Gare d’Avignon is no more attractive than five days ago when we arrived here from Arles. The hustle and bustle of the place is a stark contrast to our time at the

château. I will never forget that delicious slice of my life. Not once did I expect such an amazing experience as afforded us by our new friends. Nor did I plan to meet and enjoy one very handsome François.

I set the thought of him aside, folding him into an imaginary silk hanky in my mind. Georgia has a plan—almost unheard of, but true.

Never having lost her talent while we lounged by the pool, tanning and sipping vin rosé, she has done it again. Before I even pick up my backpack, she scours the train schedules and has set us on course to our next destination. “The train to Bram leaves in thirty minutes. Let’s get our tickets,” says Georgia. She points out the ticket booth and rail agent at the far end of the building, and off we go.

I wanted to go to Toulouse and then work our way toward the Loire Valley and Paris. But Georgia wants us to make our way to Andorra, a tiny country I had never heard of before this morning. From there, she intends to explore the Pyrenees as we prance south to somewhere in Spain. For my big sister, this is a solid plan.

I’m still curious if she is considering the whereabouts of our father. Does she think she can find him, or that she’ll magically run into him along her path?

With tickets in hand, we wait for our train. “How long are we staying in Andorra, Georgia?” I’d like to know because we need a few things. And well, Georgia needs more sunscreen. She is now a deep shade of pink. She gets red; I get tan. Does Tilly do something in between?

Georgia turns to look at me. “Have you thought more about him, Sis?” Again, she’s reading my mind. “About our father, I mean. Was the man I knew the father to all three of us? We’re so very different—you, Tilly, and me.” She settles onto her backpack where it leans against the wall trackside.

“I trust Mother, though she hasn’t told us much.”

“She didn’t tell us shit,” declares Georgia.

Only Georgia remembers the man we girls think of as our father. Yet, we are so different in build, skin tone, hair color, even (or especially) in our personalities. “She wouldn’t lie to us. Sure, she won’t tell us anymore, but she wouldn’t lie to us. She would not make up a story about him traipsing off to Europe.”

“No, I suppose not,” responds Georgia.

“In that newspaper photo I told you about, I see each of us in him. I have that grainy black and white in my brain. It is the only image I have of him. He was powerfully built, young, and handsome. Did you see that in him too, Sis?”

“I suppose,” she says from under the denim jacket she has thrown over her head to block out the daylight. “Would be nice to get to know him now, though. Learn his story.”

“Maybe.”

Georgia turns to her side, toward me, but still under the jacket. “He was never happy, you know. I have no memory of him ever smiling or laughing.”

“Do you remember other things?”

“Not much. Just hazy scenes—memories of a five-year-old. I remember feeling happy to see him when he came home from work. Sometimes, he would pick me up and carry me into the kitchen to see Mom. He would kiss her on the head—he so much taller than her. They would talk. Mostly Mom talking. I remember how she always seemed to try so hard to make him happy. But he never was.”

I hear what my sister is saying. Her words are as clear to me as they are to her. But they are like a movie playing in the other room, one I have no interest in watching. It seems odd, but I’m now the one who doesn’t care about him at all, the one who wants to storm out of the room.

* * *

GEORGIA FLAGS down a car at the edge of the little town of Bram, a short walk from the tiny train station. No surprise, they are two young men, perhaps a year or two older than my big sister, the scruffy, cigarette-smoking type she gravitates to on occasion.

She immediately turns on the charm, and we hit the road, backpacks piled between us in the back seat. They speak a smattering of English, and Georgia moves right into her natural routine of a pretty American girl meets a desirable Frenchman. Or Frenchmen, in this case. I have no idea what she sees in either of them.

“Is Andorra very nice?” she asks the one in the passenger seat.

“Ah, yes, very nice. *Bonita*. Pretty, like you,” the guy says and looks to his partner. They share odd grins. *Oh, brother*.

I fade into the corner, sweltering again in the summer heat, head against the window frame, wind blowing lazily through the vehicle. Even early in the morning, it’s already quite warm in Bram, and I’m upset at Georgia—again. She and the untidy fellows in the front seat are doing their best to flirt and gab. I slip away and daydream, eventually imagining François meeting us at the border and taking charge of our tour. He will find us the perfect boutique hotel, a room for Georgia, a room for him and me, and a fine restaurant with chilled white wine and lovely salads.

With reluctance, I return from my fantasy world as a feeling of cooler air soothes my senses. We have to stop at the border crossing with Andorra. Georgia hasn’t released her coquettish flare, but I notice the guys get quiet. A broad-shouldered border guard waves us to a stop, his rifle cradled in one arm. He asks for our passports. With the four little booklets in hand, he directs the driver to pull our vehicle into a parking spot nearby.

Another guard tells us to get out and herds our group into a cement block single-story building. Looking over my shoulder and out of a narrow window, I can see a crew of men in coveralls

descend upon the car and begin going through it and our things. My skin goes clammy.

For an hour, our interrogation continues in separate rooms. A junior officer in a frumpy uniform comes in. Using a terse tone, he asks a question or two, and then leaves, only to return several minutes later and asks more questions about who we are and where we are going, before exiting again.

When he comes back, I say, "Where is my sister? I demand to see my sister, to know that she is all right." My words bounce around the room. He ignores me and asks the same damn questions as before. With the exact same answers from me, he leaves.

My wristwatch ticks away the time, slow as a cow's tail swiping at flies.

When we all emerge from our little interrogation rooms and I look out to the car, everything seems okay. I had expected that the search crew had stripped it down to its last nut and bolt. The man who was asking all the questions speaks with a tall man, a superior I assume, in a dark corner. The first man then collects our passports and brings them to us. We are free to enter the country. The driver and his friend exchange a glance. There is a ton of relief in that one little look.

In moments, we are back on the road.

As we near the capital city, I ask the guys where they are from, where they are going. They are evasive and tense. Georgia is glaring at me and telling them to ignore me.

I still want to know more. "Are you guys staying in la Vella?" There is no reply.

We finally arrive in la Vella, the capitol. The men have a delivery to make, they say. I ask, "A delivery of what?" Georgia glares at me again. I can tell she's in an adventurous mood, and that always worries me. She wants to ride along, see what the guys are up to.

"Georgia, I want out. Here."

With the ceremony of a pin drop, they let me out with my backpack at the central plaza. Georgia says they will be back shortly, though I can tell that she has no idea just how soon.

Two hours have gone by. Hours of self-absorbed fretting I will never get back. By now, I know every inch of my surroundings. As a distraction, I start making up stories about the people walking past.

Andorra la Vella, the capital of Andorra, is lively and small. Georgia had made up our plans. She wanted to see the mountains and maybe go into Spain. A *maybe* in the rare event of my sister making a travel plan seemed fine with her. And I suppose that it is fine. We are rubbing off on each other. Yet, that is not the problem right now.

It is cooler here, the espresso as good, and there is a *chocolatier* across the narrow plaza from where I sit people watching. Most folks speak *Catalan*, but a few years of high school Spanish is more helpful here than my piss-poor French was in France.

“¿Señorita, hablas español?” asks the waiter who brought my coffee earlier.

“No muy bien, Señor.”

“Ah, you are American, no?”

“Sí. Yes. I’m from California.”

“Then you are new here, no? Is this your first time to Andorra?” he asks as he snatches a chair, briskly pulls it back, and sits at my table. The place is busy, but I guess he has time to sit and chat.

“Yes. We arrived this morning, my sister and I.” Something is not right about him, this man sitting at my table. “She is checking on a hotel room for us. She should be back any moment.” I don’t know why he makes me nervous, and I don’t know why he’s sitting with me. He is older, but handsome, dressed in usual café-waiter fashion, and is familiar looking. He is powerful and fit, dressed in a black vest over a crisp white shirt. Even wears a black bowtie under his angular jaw and the subtle chin dimple. I think I have

seen him before. Recently. Not sometime in my past, but here, here in Europe. Though, perhaps not. I cannot be sure.

“Ah, there are many fine hotels near here. She, your sister, will have no problem finding one for you pretty ladies.” Or maybe he is on the tourist commission. I wish Georgia were here. She has taught me about bus and train travel, how to order meals, to ask if the fish is fresh, and how to find a place for the night. But she is so much better at handling people, a characteristic I’m not sure can be acquired. She makes it look so easy.

“How long will you and your sister stay with us here in the mountains of our lovely country?” he asks.

Lost in thought, I nearly miss his question. “Oh. Uh. A day or so. We haven’t yet decided to return to France or go into Spain, or when,” I reply. We have not even discussed the subject. At least that part is true.

“Do you like chocolate, *señorita*?” he asks and then points over his right shoulder and turns in that direction. The chocolatier’s shop is over his left shoulder. He realizes his mistake and turns the other direction. “It is the best chocolate in all Andorra. They know me. I can have good price for you.”

Looking at my watch, I see that both hands have swept past twelve. Well, Georgia, it’s a good thing we got an early start this morning. But so much has already happened today.

As though I have summoned her from thin air, my sister is walking across the plaza with her backpack shouldered and its buckles undone and their straps hanging loose. Her curls of gold are flat, and her bangs, now sodden drapes, stick to and cover her face like a veil. She ducks under a branch of a shade tree thick with leaves and enters the seating area, where I am with my visitor.

She’s no longer in an adventurous mood, or prissy, or even thinking of a smile. She’s pissed. “Where have you been?” I say, though fearful of heavy reprisal.

“They told me to get out of the car miles from here. I had to

walk back. Stinking damn bastards.” She flops down into the chair where . . . he is gone. The waiter left without my knowing, without a word. “Order me a Coke, Sis? I’m dying here,” Georgia demands.

I’m already looking for my waiter but don’t see him. Another one, a harried young fellow, passes by, and I request a Coke for my sister. Over Georgia’s shoulder, I see the older waiter. He is talking with a policeman or some kind of officer and removing his tie. He looks so damn familiar.

The two men are on the sidewalk but still in the shade. “Sis, do you see the man over there, the one talking with that officer?”

Georgia turns slowly, perturbed by my need. “Yeah, what about him?” she says as she turns back to me.

“Does he look familiar to you?”

“Jesus, Pat.” She spins back and takes a longer look. She leans in, peering hard. “Yeah, that’s the guy from the border. The one who had our passports. He was in the corner, away from us.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s him. I remember thinking that he looked like father. Strong looking with sharp features like him, I mean.”

The man stuffs the necktie into a vest pocket, and he and the officer walk away, down the sidewalk and then out into the sunlight, crossing the plaza.

“What’s going on?” she asks, as if I have any damn clue.

“No idea. But he was right there in that same seat just two minutes ago, talking with me and dressed as a waiter. Even took my order and brought out my espresso. I’m confused right now and not too sure I like this little country of yours.”

“It’s not the country’s fault. Those assholes were up to something. I bet that guy is a cop or whatever, maybe looking for them,” Georgia says as the same thoughts percolate into my mind. “After we dropped you off here, I started wondering what those two were up to and thinking I should have stayed with you. I got to asking questions too.”

“Where did you go?” I ask, numb with concern for what trouble she may have been in, what we might have been involved with.

* * *

BEFORE GEORGIA CAN FINISH her retelling, the cop-waiter-whatever is back. As silent as a mouse, he is at our table, pulling up a chair to join us. The vest is now off, resting over an arm. He folds the clothing accessory, lays it over a knee, and absently presses it flat with one hand. From his chair, he appraises my sister and then turns to me. “This is your sister, no?”

“Yes, she is. But who are you?” I want to say, who the *hell* are you? But I hold back any hazardous tone. Meaning hazardous to my freedom, I worry.

He stalls for a moment, assessing us both. “I am Captain Blumeau, head of the Federal Drugs Task Force in this district. You have lied to me, yes?”

“Lied to you. What do you mean?” blurts out Georgia. If steam ever blew out of someone’s ears, this would be the time. She is about to burst with indignation, confusion, fear, relief . . .

“Sis. Sis. Georgia.” She finally looks away from the man and toward me.

“What?”

“He is talking about earlier. I did fib. I told him you were looking for a hotel room for the night.” Now, I can’t even remember why I did that. Oh yeah. “You lied, too, didn’t you? You are no damn waiter.” Now I’m the one who is about to erupt.

“This is true, *señorita*. Shall we start again, the three of us?” he asks as he scans our reactions, obviously looking to ease matters a bit. We both nod in reluctant agreement. “My men have apprehended the two young men you were unfortunate enough to have crossed the border with. We captured them near Spain trying to

cross another border with contraband sewn into the seats of their automobile.”

“Jesus H,” says Georgia as the color drains from her face. Even her once pink sunburn has faded into the blanched skin tone. She is not only bedraggled; she looks like a seated dead woman, lifeless well before her time.

I sit up. “I am sorry, Captain. We are sorry. We had no idea. Honestly, we did not know. We only met them this morning when we hitched a ride in France. At Bram.” I am blathering and cannot stop myself. “Georgia, my sister here, she didn’t know. Those assholes dropped her outside of the city. Made her walk all the way back to here, to me.”

He holds up a hand to quell my flood of nonsense. “I do believe you, Miss . . .?”

“Uh, Patricia. And this is Georgia . . . but you already know that. What are you playing at? We saw you at the border. I could not place you. But Georgia did. She knew. She knows.”

“What are you—” Georgia starts.

He’s holding up his hand again, long fingers reaching toward the tree branches above. “I am most sorry, ladies. I was sure you were in no way involved, but my department had to make certain.” He scans our reactions once more, reading us, still assessing our guilt or innocence. “Those men are not Andorran. They are not my countrymen. However, they will go to spend much time in our *lovely* prison.”

“What were they smuggling?” asks Georgia. “Don’t most drugs come north into Europe—through Spain?” How the hell does she know these things, I wonder.

“You are correct,” says the captain as he eyes her once more. “That is why I dealt . . . is that right . . . dealt with them?”

I nod in agreement with his word choice, and he continues.

“That was our problem at first. This is a worsening pattern. Cocaine and heroin are brought in from Africa. North, as you say.

But now we must watch for manufactured drugs coming from Canada and the US, entering at English and French ports. These men spread such terrible things throughout Europe.”

Relief is slow. Georgia’s color returns as slowly as a sea tide. She has slumped farther into the seat, deflated. I settle back, probably looking the same, certainly feeling that way. The captain waves over the young waiter, hands him the black vest, and demands something in rapid-fire *Catalan*. The busy young man rushes off.

Georgia sits up and says, “We had no idea, Captain. Simply no idea.” I nod my head, loose as a bobblehead doll. “We were only hitching a ride here.” Her color is better, and she finally swipes the drooping hairs away from her face with flips of her delicate fingers. She smiles a growing smile. The snake charmer awakens.

“José will bring you waters and colas. They are on me, *señoritas*. Please take my advice, though. Use the bus when you leave us, after your visit. Yes?”

We both smile. “Of course, Captain,” says Georgia as sweet as lemon pie. She has had her little adventure, survived it (save for the long walk in the sun), and we are free to go. “Can you recommend a hotel, Captain?”

I can see that this man knows my sister’s type. And he is not about to play. “Buenos dias, *señoritas*. Vaya con Dios.” He stands, returns his chair to its proper table, and marches off.

“Well.” Georgia frowns at his departure, but she gets over it quickly.

We watch the man stride across the plaza. Georgia straightens and turns to me. “Once we get a room and a bath, let’s visit the Sant Esteve church. It’s not far from here. I don’t want to walk much more today.”

Anger takes on a mind of its own and pulls me across the table and closer to her. “I would be happy to slap the shit out of you right now, dear sister.” I glare at her, and she backs down. I know

that she had her fun and lived. She knows I'm done with that kind of crap.

José brings our drinks and leaves before we can thank him. "Tell you what, Patricia, when we're done here, let's find that hotel room. I'll pay for the night." Since our pot of money for this trip is commingled and most of it on loan from our mother, this "I'll pay" routine has become a little joke between us.

Appreciating that she is lightening the mood, I say, "All right, Sis. You do that. But I get the bathtub first." She nods in agreement and sits back, a look of reflection in her eyes.

* * *

AS THE BUS leaves the border crossing and ventures into Spain, I look out the back window, happy to see the little country of Andorra fading away. Mid-morning sunlight pours through haze-coated glass, and noisy fans blow thick air tainted with diesel fumes and perspiration about the long cabin. Behind us is a fine little country. Sant Esteve was a pretty church with beautiful stained-glass windows, and the chocolate was the best I've had anywhere. One thing seems certain, though: I cannot imagine ever returning.

Reworking her "maybe" plan, Georgia has decided we will take this bus south to Barcelona and then a train to Pamplona. If we hurry, we may see the running of the bulls. I'm about as thrilled as a fourteen-year-old girl on her wedding day.

"Wait until you try the tapas in Barcelona, Patricia. People say they are the best in all Spain." Georgia's slumped in her seat, eyes closed, and arms crossed. "There's this amazing cathedral they have been building for a hundred years, with many more years to go, I understand. There are gardens and wonderful architecture, most notably by Anton Gaudi. Oh, and there's La Rambla, one of the main shopping streets. We can do all the window shopping we

meant to do in Andorra. There are clubs and, I'll bet, many people our age." She means boys.

* * *

SINCE THAT DAY, it has been a whirlwind few weeks of churches, tapas, vino, dancing into the wee hours, beaches, cute Spanish men, wide open sun-parched plains, and bulls.

Barcelona was a city with amazing foods and wines and the grand architecture of Anton Gaudi. Our first full day there, we hired a woman tour guide to show us some of the many sights of the city and teach us about Gaudi and his work.

Then it was three very long days of being out all night, dancing, drinking way too much wine, flirting (I'm now getting the hang of that sport), and waking very late in the day. I've learned quickly that this is the schedule of the Spanish, especially the young city dwellers.

Our last day there, we hitched a ride (thought I never would again, but I let Georgia talk me into it) with an older British couple, and we drove into the hills to a mountain-top monastery called Montserrat. The highlight of that day was speaking English most of the time, even if it was "The Queen's English," as the gentleman, Thomas, was happy to point out to us.

It took a week to cross the country from Barcelona and arrive in Pamplona. We would ride along by train for a few hours and then disembark into a town or small city to stay the night and visit the church. There's always a church. This passage was a mixture of sleeping, exploring the old towns and narrow streets with tiny shops, and watching the countryside flow past. The interior of Spain looked like our California in summer, one shade of golden or russet brown after another.

Pamplona was god-awful hot. We caught a glimpse of running bulls and male mayhem. Afterward, Georgia went off with one of

the young men in his white and red *San Fermin* costume. Like choosing a lobster from a tank for her dinner, she picked one from the crowd. We did not see each other until late the next morning.

She walked into the café next to our hostel quite hungover. Her dress was wrinkled, and her hair was a frightful mess. A lit cigarette drooped from her lips. I will not let her live that one down. Mother would not be happy.

As I waited for her to recover, one thing occurred to me: I have learned that I want to come back to Spain. There is so much history. The people are kind, and the pace of life is more my style, save for during the nine-day festival of *Sanfermines*.

Georgia wants to come back, too. She informs me of this while we are waiting for a bus to the north coast. Our time is getting short, and we still want to visit England during our last week or two. "A route of the Camino de Santiago passes through Pamplona," says my sister.

"Yeah?"

"I will walk that trail one day. You know, get ready, pack the right gear, come back, and walk across Spain to Santiago. That means Saint James in Spanish, Santiago does." She's curled up against her pack, distant with thought.

"I'd like to come back someday, too," I say in reply. "Not to walk across anything, you understand. You know what else I'd like, Sis?" I look to her. She hasn't moved. "I'd like to have daughters."

Georgia opens her eyes. "With François, perhaps?" she says with a teasing tone in her voice.

"No." Though the thought does appeal. "I did like him. He was kind and gentle."

"And a good lover?"

"And a good lover," I say before catching myself.

She smiles up at me. "Mom would not be happy."

We smile at each other, our sisterly closeness once again thick

in the space between us. Unspoken words cement a conspiratorial, hush-hush agreement.

Our bus pulls up. The driver changes the destination placard to say Bilbao. We board, store our packs, and take our seats.

* * *

GEORGIA WENT for coffee a half an hour ago. My head is pounding.

However, the north coast of Spain is a refreshing green with temperatures at least twenty degrees cooler than the thirsty inland plains. We are no longer on any sort of gringo tour route, either; almost no one speaks English. Many in Bilbao speak *Vasco*, the Basque language. It was a pretty city but large and noisy—industrial in places.

We are in Santander now, waiting for a bloody awful ferry to take us to England. I say “bloody awful” because I’m not looking forward to twenty-four hours on a rocking boat with nothing to see but water—and because we spent the last night out with two British soldiers on leave in Spain. Every sentence either of them uttered contained “bloody” this or “bloody awful” that. They had just returned from a battle of some sort in the Falkland Islands, wherever the hell that is. Georgia seemed to know. But, of course, she did.

Where the hell is Georgia, anyway? With no reason to stay sitting, and with the ferry’s departure being an hour away, I grab my pack and go in search of my lost sister or that elusive cup of steaming brown deliciousness.

I find her in a café overlooking the harbor. She is talking with a gypsy woman. No, she’s not Romani, just dressed as though. By her accent, I’d guess she is a Bohemian American, a hippy chick.

“Pat, hey, this is Cielo.”

Well, of course it is, I almost groan out loud. I spy a third cup—going to waste. “Is that my coffee?”

“Yeah, yeah. Have a seat. Cielo is going to walk the Camino de Santiago. She’s been telling me all about her plans to walk to Santiago from Pamplona.

My sister is ignoring my anger, but Cielo is very aware. “I am sorry, Pat? We got talking and have let your coffee go cold.”

“It’s Patricia,” I say, too curtly. Then I pick up the cup to feel that it’s as cold as a fisherman’s boot. “I’ll go get another.” I stomp away with no plans to return.

* * *

I’M on my second *café con leche*, which is actually my third, I suppose, when the ferry leaves the terminal and plies its way out of Bahia de Santander. Georgia is seated beside me, and our backpacks are piled against the bulkhead under a salt-coated window. This is going to be a long ride.

“So, Pat, Cielo was telling me about the Camino. She taught me a lot that I didn’t know.” Now there’s a shocker: my sister doesn’t know everything. “She said there are hostels—they are called *albergues*—along the way that only pilgrims can stay the night in super cheap. You must have a credential from the church to sleep in those places. Sometimes, they are even in churches and such. Like monasteries, you know?”

I slump down farther into the seat. “Are you going to walk across Spain, Georgia, try to find our bastard of a father?”

She gets a serious look on her face and sets her journal on the backpacks. “No, Pat, I am not. I don’t think so. How could I find him, anyway? We have so little information, so little to go on.” She twists, gives a little grunt, and settles into her seat to match my posture. Our shoulders touch, and she leans in close. “The Camino does seem to be calling me, though. That ancient pilgrimage has come up many times in the last few weeks.”

“What was it that drew him to the Camino, to Spain, do you suppose?” I ask.

“Like you said before, Pat. He was hurting.”

“I know.” And I do. I think I do. But I don’t know him, don’t remember him. I have no feelings for the man. “I have this worthless picture of our father in my head. But there are no real emotions—other than negative—attached to him.”

Georgia drops her head onto my shoulder. “I would like to meet him, know that he is alive and well. The odds of that are so small I can’t possibly think about them. The Camino de Santiago, though, that I can ponder for a while. Sure, I’ve never done anything like that, but there are so many beautiful churches, old Roman bridges, and . . .”

I nod my not-entirely-delighted head and drift away on my sister’s words. A long boat ride indeed.

* * *

MY HEAD BANGS against the steel windowsill. I haven’t a clue how many hours it has been. Huge whitecaps fill my sight clear to the horizon. The ferry rocks and wobbles, groaning its way up a swell before puttering and throbbing its way down the other side. Georgia is puffing away on a cigarette. A long ash is hanging precariously, about to drop into her lap. She’s oblivious to this fact, as always.

My stomach feels like the sea looks: churning, angry, and gray-green. “Georgia, let me out.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?” she asks and then looks at my face. Her reaction tells me all that I need to know. *Bloody awful.*

Returning, I see that she has taken the window seat. “I thought you had better sit on the outside,” says my seafaring sibling. She’s about to light another cigarette but thinks better of it when she sees the response on my face, the one which started in my guts.

"You going to be okay?" Georgia asks.

"Do I have a choice? Give me some Spanish *pesetas*, would you. I need to buy something to put in my stomach. Something salty and crunchy."

* * *

It's dark when I wake for the fourth or fifth round of vomiting. Well, retching. There's been nothing in my stomach for hours now. I'm huddled against our packs under the window, a draft of cool air flowing over the back of my neck, not quite soothing, but helpful.

Georgia is seated beside me reading a book. "Where'd you get that?" I ask abruptly.

"Oh, hey, you're awake." She sees the look in my eyes.

After a false alarm, I make a swaying, wobbling trek back to our seats and flop down beside Georgia.

"What is that, the book?" I ask as I point a weak finger at it.

"I found it in the lending library. It's a guidebook of sorts for the Camino de Santiago. It was right there on the shelf. And translated to English. A coincidence, Sis? I think not."

Slumping down and laying my head back, I say, "Tell me about it."

"Well, it's called *El Camino de Santiago*, and was written by Don Elias Valiña, a parish priest from one of the villages along the Way."

If anything, the seas are worse than ever. I'm feeling so helpless. "Tell me about the Camino. What it's like to walk across Spain."

"Uh, okay."

She is scanning me. My eyes are closed, but I know.

"The path which this priest describes starts in France, on the other side of the Pyrenees. It takes two days to climb over the mountains, then . . ."

Not exactly zoning out, I can't say that I catch her every word. There are mountains, then rivers, and valleys on the way to Pamplona before beginning to cross the plains of Spain. She called them something else, but my brain said, "Plains of Spain." They sound vast and, this time of year, very hot. And dry and flat—anything but a rocking, wobbling, twisting crate on the open sea.

"There isn't much detail about the *Meseta*." That's what she called the plains. "But when the priest gets closer to his village, there is much more description and detail," Georgia drones on. Of course, that's not fair. She seems excited by every passage she reads aloud or detail she shares. It's when the words enter my head that they seem to murmur into my thoughts, like vanilla being stirred into a thick batter, swirling, leaving traces to blend into the mix.

Minutes or hours have gone by. I'm not sure which. It had been dark; now it is light—and I want coffee. It could be a thin Americano, a thick espresso, a . . . oh, hell, I don't care. Any brown liquid with the smell of ground coffee beans would do.

Georgia is asking me something. "What?" Opening eyes, planting feet on floor, sitting up—it all takes effort. Yet, for the first time in hours, or days even, I'm feeling better.

"We must be in the English Channel. The water is smoother. Does that help?" she asks, sounding like our mother. The caring, her rare showing of compassion, overwhelms me. A tear forms as I realize our tortuous passage to England may have an end to it.

* * *

A HORRIBLE TASTING *café con leche* on the ferry did give a boost. The large mug of dark brown greatness in my hands right now feeds life back into mind, body, and especially soul. I'm leaning over the mug, hands wrapping around the smooth ceramic base, coveting the warmth. My nose is embarrassingly close to dipping inside the

mug's wide mouth. A light rain is falling from scattered clouds outside the small restaurant Georgia found shortly after disembarking the ferry. On a soft breeze, flags flap about along the waterfront.

Once inside the channel, though I did feel better, my life did not restart until that first step onto heavenly earth. A firm connection with solid ground quelled the last traces of seasickness. Extraordinarily, within moments of hitting shore, the horrible hours at sea seemed like a distant memory.

"Well, Patricia, it is your turn to make our plans. We have a week until the flight home, and if we plan it right, we can spend a day or two with Juliette and Persephone in London before we leave."

"Do you have a guidebook in your backpack?" I ask while knowing the answer is no.

"Ask around. See that old couple over there?" she asks and nods in their direction, her golden curls flat, yet still perky enough, to bobble. "They look like tourists. They'll have some ideas. I'm sure they'd love to help a lost American girl."

Her motherly ways are gone. She got me to land, to England. Now it's on me. "After I have finished my coffee," I say.

* * *

EXCITED TO HELP, the couple sat me down, and we got right to the matter. Once I had settled on exploring village life, avoiding any cities on our path to London, the old gentleman began tracing a line, sketching out a route Georgia and I could follow by bus. We talked for a while about which villages contained the best examples of country life, where the best fish and chips could be found, and how far out of our way the White Cliffs of Dover might be. The couple even got into a good-natured argument about how long of a detour that would be, both in terms of miles and in time.

Now, I have a plan. Nearing Georgia and our table, at the sudden whiff of fried foods, I feel my stomach give a turn. The scent is a profuse fusion of butter, oil, and pork fat. I am quick to home in on the source and survey a large plate freshly placed in front of an elderly man. He's seated at the table beside us in his wool suit and a necktie so tight that flaps of skin protrude over his collar. I pull my seat closer to my sister, sit down, and whisper, "What in the name of God is that?"

She gives a halfhearted glance over her shoulder and replies, "That, my dear sister, is a fry-up, also known as a full English breakfast, replete with fried eggs, sausages, bacon, tomatoes, beans, fried bread, and in this case, white pudding."

"White pudding? What the hell is that?" I hiss.

"A sort of bloodwurst, but made with fat." She must see the look in my eyes. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

I pull my eyes from the disgusting mass of food on the man's plate. My stomach still feels as if it's just below my chin. Though my spirits were high after leaving the boat, and I am happily resting on firm, unwavering soil, my innards feel bruised from the retching and are again a bit queasy.

"So, where are we off to now, Patricia?"

"Since that kind couple is near the end of their holiday, they gave me this tourist map of the south coast," I say as I unfold the thick paper before her. "And because they said there is a 'wonderful bus system in these parts,' we can track along this route." I point out the penciled path the gentleman had laid out through various villages and towns all the way to Dover. "From Dover, it's a short train trip into London." Now, who's the tour guide, eh?

Sensing no hesitation from my elder sibling, I continue to lay out my plans.

At the bus terminal in Plymouth, the woman selling tickets gives me a booklet with their schedules. Georgia and I scan the booklet, compare it to our map, and select a tiny village called

Ashburton for our day's destination. "I only hope there is lodging," I say to Georgia.

She sits up, looks around, and then wanders off. In a few moments, she is back. "The ticket lady says there might be a pub with a few rooms. Many of the villages have such establishments."

"Then it's settled," I say, feeling very much like a veteran traveler.

* * *

THE TRAIN from Dover might have been the most boring ninety minutes of my entire life. Or perhaps, I'm overdone, ready to go home. I want to see my mother and even my troublesome little sister, Tilly. And I want to bake pies, lots of pies, and flakey, brown croissants. I can almost imagine myself in a baker's kitchen assembling pies and sipping on coffee for the rest of my life.

Georgia returns from the bar car with two cups of steaming hot tea. "When we get into the city, it's not far from the train station to St. Paul's Cathedral. Then it's a short walk to the flat owned by Juliette and Persephone's parents," says Georgia.

The thought of catching up with our French friends lifts my spirits. I am back at the poolside at Château Satariagn and to sweet François. I can feel the sun on my back, hear his guitar playing with my emotions, and sense the tingle of vin rosé on my tongue.

Our train rocks through a tight bend in the tracks. The taste of black tea replaces the memory of French wine. It's a sunny day, warm by English standards, yet I see whitecaps roaming their way up the River Thames toward London and know there will be no swimming pool at our friend's London home or sunbathing any time soon.

"First stop, St. Paul's, Patricia." She is almost giddy about our next exploration. "I've wanted to visit that cathedral forever."

My sister is to religion as a tuna is to mountain climbing, yet she has a thing for churches and cathedrals.

“Why do you like those places so much?”

“It’s all the inspiration without the spirit,” she says. “They are symbols of what humankind can create. Imagine the piety, the fundraising, the politics, the incredible physical effort it must have taken to build those astonishing edifices.”

Astonishing edifices? Jesus, what a *nutter* (a word I have learned the Brits like to use). I’m certain that she will not be happy until she has visited every cathedral in Europe. God, how many must there be?

* * *

“THEIR PLACE IS right on the bloody Thames, Pat,” my sister coos in an adopted Cockney accent as we walk up to a tall white building with its glossy black lacquer door. “You sure this is the address the girls gave to us?”

I hand over the slip, which has been folded and resting among the pages of my passport since the day Persephone gave it to me weeks ago. I’m tired and can’t wait to see our friends, but am ready to strangle Georgia. It has been a long day. She had insisted we rise early and see the White Cliffs at sunrise. Then it was a quick breakfast before catching a crowded commuter train into the city only to hike to St. Paul’s and take an organized tour— costing an arm and a leg—before trekking toward Temple Gardens to find this address.

“We could have accepted Juliette’s offer of a ride, you know,” I say in response, with the intended curt tone.

“Oh, you’ll live. Before long you will have your feet up and a gin and tonic in your hand.”

I don’t like gin, and she knows it. But she’s right. It always works out. At the end of the day, we seem to be comfortable and

happy— save for that one morning on the beach near a tiny seaside village we called La-Mer.

The huge door opens, and a true English butler stands before us. I am frozen in recognition of a role I have seen many times in movies but never thought was real. I also recognize the squealing voices bearing down on him from within. He slips aside just in time for Persephone and Juliette to burst past. They immediately hug us and start asking about our journey since last we saw them.

“You must tell about it all,” chirps Juliette as she guides Georgia inside. Persephone hooks my arm in that familiar way and directs me past the tall, stoic butler.

I’m looking up at him as we pass. “This is James, our butler,” says Persephone, who then starts to giggle. “No, his name is Harold. Harold, this is my good friend Patricia.” He delivers a courteous nod, and we walk to an elevator where Georgia and Juliette are waiting. “Our parents are on the veranda ready to meet you. Later, Father wants to take us all to dinner.”

After meeting the girls’ parents and getting cleaned up, the six of us are driven to the Ritz Carlton for dinner. English meals are earlier in the evening than in Spain, and my system is still struggling to adjust. The parents order gin on the rocks and both sip delicately at the clear liquid. Before going to visit with friends at a long, gleaming wooden bar, their father orders a bottle of the girls’ favorite Italian *prosecco*. Georgia and I gaze about our ornate surroundings while going slow on the sparkling wine.

Dinner is course after course, but I never feel as if I’m overeating. Hours flow by as a crab dish, then a main dish of seabass, followed by chocolate soufflé arrive in front of me one after another. Each dish is delivered with a graceful flourish—a stark contrast to the brusque style of the sour woman in that café by the Med. That was weeks ago, yet that end of the chain that is my memory links precisely with this gorgeous end to our journey.

Decadence is wonderful. It’s like a destination you like to visit.

But living there would be too much for me. Life at a reasonable pace, doing what I love, and under as much control as I can hope for, seems something to look forward to. But an occasional visit to a château or a restaurant like this definitely has its appeal.

* * *

I CAN NO LONGER TELL you what I expected during those days I argued my case to come to Europe with my sister. Mother would not be happy with many of our episodes, events she will not learn about until she is too old to care. She would be happy with the rest, though: that Georgia and I avoided killing each other; that we are closer than ever; that we saw and learned a lot about churches and history and life; that we danced until dawn in Barcelona; and that we had fried herrings on the Mediterranean Sea and fish and chips by the English Channel.

Right now, though, I want to be home with my mother in our kitchen. I want to grin at her when she rolls her eyes at one of Tilly's latest protestations. Georgia is again writing in her journal. Occasionally, she looks away in thought or scans the arrivals/departure board at Heathrow airport.

"Patricia, dear sister of mine?"

"Yes."

"I'm not returning home with you," Georgia says with a matter-of-fact tone in her voice.

"What? What are you talking about?" But it hits me. "You are going back to Spain, aren't you? Going in search of our father."

Slowly, Georgia turns to me. She closes her diary and ties the strap that secures its pages. "Maybe. Though that's not very likely. Maybe I can catch up with Cielo or meet other pilgrims like her along the way."

* * *

BRIEN CROTHERS

THE ENGINES WHOOSH and the plane turns to a runway pointing west, toward home. I already miss my big sister. Before she returns to California, she plans to walk across Spain. Walk, mind you. The Camino called to her one too many times. She says her trek is to see the churches and monasteries, to meet people. I know it's to meet men too—and, she hopes, to maybe come across one slightly aging Vietnam veteran.

END