

# Car Wheels on a Gravel Drive

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Car Wheels on a Gravel Drive

stephen goldenberg

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To Sue for sharing many Aveyron adventures      ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Goldenberg studied Law at Oxford University and, subsequently, enjoyed a career as an English and Media Studies teacher in London schools. He has previously published books and articles on English teaching and broadcast on educational issues on television and radio. He has published two previous novels – Stony Ground and The Lying Game (Matador). He is now living in London and the Aveyron in South-west France.

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## [EPILOGUE](#) 1

It was the sound of car wheels crunching down his gravel driveway that woke him up that morning. He opened his eyes only to close them again to keep out the glare of sunlight flooding through his unshaded window. Who could be visiting them at this hour of the morning? He glanced over at the digital clock on the bedside table. Ten-thirty. Okay – not as early as he'd thought – but then, who would be paying them a visit at any hour of the morning – or for that matter, afternoon or evening?

Still half asleep, he stretched out and instinctively snaked his arm over to the other side of the bed only for his hand to paddle around in the empty space where Julia's warm comforting body should have been. It took a couple of seconds for him to register why she wasn't there before he turned away from the empty half of the bed and thumped his pillow in frustration. He knew he was being

stupid. She'd only been gone for three days but how long should he expect this to continue? In a month's time, six months, a year, would he still be suffering this start-of-the-day amnesia?

He'd always been an early riser but, for the past few days, he'd found it hard to get out of bed much before midday. Maybe his problem was that he didn't have any reason to get himself out of bed first thing in the morning. No regular job to go to, no vital chores that needed doing round the house. He made a mental note – his first step on the road to recovery must be to establish a solid daily routine and then stick to it. Keep yourself occupied – wasn't that the advice that was always given to the bereaved to aid their recovery? Okay, Julia wasn't dead but, as far as their relationship was concerned, she may as well have been.

The sound of car wheels had stopped to be closely followed by the opening and closing of the doors and the crunch of footsteps approaching the house.

\*

Gilles Montfort was nervous. This was the most serious investigation he had ever been assigned to. He had only been chosen for it the previous day because his superiors deemed him to be the most proficient English speaker in the department. For most of the slow drive down from Aurillac that morning, he had been running through in his head the English phrases he might need to use. He had had little opportunity to use his English in the past couple of years. The only professional occasion had been a year ago when he had acted as translator for two young English building workers who had stolen and crashed a motorcycle after a drinking binge.

The closer he got to his destination the less confident he felt. It was not only that he had to speak English but also the delicacy of what he had to talk about that concerned him. It could be embarrassing, not to say hurtful, if he were unwittingly to use inappropriate words or phrases. Elodie, the female officer who was accompanying him, was no help. She had some English but he had quickly ascertained that it was too limited for her to act as a guinea pig for him during the journey. She'd been sent along as a silent partner. His boss felt that a female presence would have a calming effect in such an awkward situation.

For the same reason, it was felt appropriate for them to wear their own clothes rather than appear in uniform. Maybe it would have a calming effect on the Englishman, but it hadn't helped Gilles to relax. He liked his uniform. He liked not having to think about what to put on in the morning. He liked the fact that everybody knew automatically who and what he was whereas, this morning, the first thing he would have to do was wave his identity card and explain. It wasn't even as if he had been able to dress in the comfortable casual gear he usually wore when he was off duty. In the circumstances, he'd decided that his dark suit, white shirt and sober tie were more appropriate – clothes he hadn't worn since his cousin's wedding over a year ago.

He hadn't been to this part of the Aveyron before but he immediately recognised the old stone-built house with its pigeonier, its powder blue shutters and its barn converted into additional accommodation, as typical of the kind of property bought up by the British, Dutch and Germans looking for rural French houses they could convert into smart holiday or retirement homes. He wasn't sure what to feel about this. Some of his colleagues were vociferous in their disapproval claiming that it put up property prices beyond the reach of young French couples and made it difficult for the older generation of Aveyronnais who had moved away to work in the cities to be able to afford to come back and spend their retirement in their patrimonial area. On the

other hand, it was a boost to the local economy and had rescued many old village and rural houses that would otherwise be crumbling ruins.

He walked up the worn pitted stone steps to the front door, grasped hold of the identity card hanging from a lariat round his neck and turned his head to check that Elodie was ready before rapping on the frosted-glass panel.

\*

Jeremy studied the black Citroën in the driveway from the bedroom window and caught a glimpse of the two people walking up the steps to the house. He didn't recognise them. They were youngish, mid-thirties, and smartly dressed. His first thought was that they had seen one of the signs on the road into the village advertising the gîte, but the car had a French registration and it was very rare that they rented to anyone other than the English or Dutch and then it was almost always through the internet. His second thought was that they were trying to sell him something, although that was unlikely – in the few years they had lived there he couldn't remember them ever being visited by door-to-door salesmen. His third thought was that he would ignore them and go back to bed. Whoever they were, he was in no mood to speak to them. But he changed his mind. It was so unusual to have visitors that he was intrigued. If it turned out to be something trivial, he'd get rid of them. He slipped on his dressing-gown, descended the spiral staircase and crossed the open-plan living room to the front door.

"Monsieur Halliday?" The man held out a plastic card attached to a red lead round his neck. Jeremy didn't look at it but stared instead at the man's dark grey suit and short black hair, neatly combed and gelled. The woman was also conservatively dressed in a dark blue jacket, white blouse and black skirt. Their appearance triggered a memory from six months ago when they'd been visited by a family of Jehova's Witnesses. Before he could formulate in his head the French for "I'm sorry but I'm not interested", the young man started to speak in French-accented English.

"We are sorry to disturb you but we are police and we have a serious matter to speak about with you. May we come in?"

Jeremy continued to stare at them as if he didn't understand. He'd prepared himself for the fact that he might not understand as he'd expected them to speak in French. His French was improving but he was still far from fluent and found it especially difficult to tune in to a conversation when he wasn't sure of the likely subject-matter.

The policeman looked uncomfortable, still holding out his identity card, as he stood waiting for a response, thinking of what else to say.

Jeremy finally found his voice. "Of course. Come in."

He ushered them over to the far side of the room behind the open staircase where there was a sofa and two armchairs.

As they made themselves comfortable in the armchairs, he tried to guess what their visit might be about. Probably something to do with some element of the interminable French bureaucracy – some official form that he and Julia had forgotten to fill out or some local tax they had failed to pay. But as he sat on the sofa waiting for them to explain, he remembered that the young gendarme had referred to a 'serious matter'. Vendillac wasn't exactly a crime hotspot and he hadn't heard of anything happening in the village but then he had been closeted away for the past

few days and hadn't seen or spoken to anybody.

"Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Water?" He was gasping for a coffee.

"No. It's okay, thank you."

"Non, merci," the young woman muttered.

Jeremy adjusted his dressing-gown, draping the folds over his bare legs. He pictured how he must look to these scrubbed up, immaculately turned out young police officers. His bare grubby feet. His shabby blue towelling robe with the large yellow patch where he'd spilt bleach on it. His unwashed greasy hair sticking out at all angles. His stubbly face – it must have been four or five days since he'd shaved. A decidedly shifty person is what he must look like – a criminal – a rapist or a child-molester. That last thought sent a chill through him, bringing back uncomfortable memories of the last time he'd spoken to police.

"If what you want to talk to me about is going to take some time, maybe I could quickly get washed and dressed. I've only just woken up. I was working until very late last night," Jeremy lied.

"It won't take too long," Gilles said. He didn't want to sit round waiting for the Englishman to get dressed. It would only increase his nervousness and ratchet up his discomfort.

"It's about your wife, Madame Julia.....Won.....Wonrit." He had difficulty pronouncing the surname. He kicked himself for not checking on it before they left the station. He paused. This was the difficult bit. He took a second to study Jeremy Halliday's face for any sign that he knew what was coming but it only registered curiosity.

"She's not actually my wife," Jeremy corrected him. "We are partners but we're not married."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry." He paused. "I'm afraid it's bad news. It's not easy to say. Your...partner's..... Her body has been found in her car north of here. In the hills near Aurillac."

Jeremy's expression didn't change. It was as if he hadn't heard or didn't understand. Slowly, the policeman's use of the word 'body' registered in his brain.

"I'm sorry but I don't understand....." He was holding his breath as he waited for the officer to explain.

"Yes. I'm very sorry to have to tell you such news. She was found in her car yesterday afternoon. The car had been put on fire and it take us time to identify the body."

Jeremy shook his head vigorously. "A body? A dead body? There must be some mistake then. It must be somebody else. It can't be Julia."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Halliday? When did you last see your wife...partner?"

"Three days ago. She left here to travel back to England. She was going to stay with her sister. She'll be there by now." He spoke confidently as if his words would instantly clear up this misunderstanding.

"You know she is in England?" Gilles said. "You have talked to her?"

"Well, no. Not exactly." Jeremy thought about the number of occasions over the past few days when he'd been tempted to pick up the phone and dial her mobile but had decided it was best to wait.

"So you do not know she arrived in England." The gendarme's voice was slow and gentle. It was understandable that the man didn't want to believe that his partner was dead. It was his unpleasant task to make him realise the truth but he was trying to do it tactfully.

"Sorry. Where did you say the body was found?" Jeremy's head was clearing and he was starting to see evidence that the police must have got it wrong.

"Near Aurillac. You know where is Aurillac?"

"Yes, I know it. It's north-east of here. That's why it must be a mistake. That's not the road back to England. Not the route we take anyway."

Gilles realised with a growing sense of unease that there was a limit to how considerate he could be. In as gentle a way as possible he needed to make Monsieur Halliday come to terms with the reality of the situation.

"Mr. Halliday. Let me explain more what we have found. A French family walking in the hills near Aurillac found a burnt car at the side of the path. At first they just think how horrible that people dump a old car in beautiful countryside and they go to carry on walking but one of them see something in the car and go over to it. There is a body in the driver seat. They call the police. To make it short, the body and the car are not fully burnt. The car is a dark blue Volkswagen Golf, registration plate LTO 4ZYN. Is that Madame Julia's car?"

Jeremy stared at the gendarme as if he needed time to think about it.

"Yes, that's her car."

"Okay. The car was very full with cases and boxes. Of course, most of it was burnt in the fire but there were things in the back which were not much damaged. Some of them were documents.....papers which identified a Miss Julia Wonrit."

"It's Wainwright...W-A-I-N-W-R-I-G-H-T.....Julia Wain...wright." Jeremy corrected him as if enunciating Julia's name correctly would confirm her as a living breathing person rather than this other, dead Julia – this Miss Wonrit – who was clearly somebody else.

"Again, Mr. Halliday, I'm sorry to say it but our investigation team now confirms with medical records in England that the body is most certain to be Miss.....Wain-wright." He pronounced the name with exaggerated care. "Of course there are more tests to do on the body – to find the cause of death."

Jeremy stared uncomprehendingly at the gendarme and then shifted his gaze to the young woman. She stared back impassively.

"I'm sorry but I just don't understand. It doesn't make any sense. I mean why would she.....where was she.....?" His brain couldn't formulate the words he wanted to say. And then, whatever it was he had wanted to say, slipped away. He looked up at the ceiling focussing on a large cobweb hanging from one of the oak beams.

"I know how difficult this must be for you." As he was speaking, Gilles realised he had very little

idea how difficult it was. "We need to ask you much more questions but it's not necessary to ask them all now. You need some time to recover yourself." He paused while Jeremy lowered his gaze and looked at the Frenchman. "But I would like to ask you one more question. What was the reason for Madame Wainwright's visit to England?"

"She was going to visit her sister mainly, but also on business. She's a designer – a fashion designer." Jeremy answered automatically without pausing to consider whether he should be telling this policeman the truth. After all, it wasn't entirely a lie – it just wasn't the full truth.

"Was it going to be a long visit? I ask this because her car was very full of things. A lot of clothes, books, papers."

This time he did pause and consider whether to tell the full truth but decided against it. He needed more time to think things through. Despite everything the gendarme was telling him, he knew this must be a mistake. A case of mistaken identity. Julia couldn't be dead.

"It was probably going to be quite a long stay. She had a lot of business to do. She sells her designer stuff to shops and stores. She'd be doing a lot of travelling around." Jeremy looked at the gendarme trying to ascertain whether he believed him. There was no sign one way or the other. "Anyway, Julia never travels light. I always complain to her when we go anywhere that she's packing far too much stuff. Unlike me. I'm the opposite. An overnight bag with some clean underwear and a toothbrush does me." He smiled at the gendarmes and they both squeezed out a faint smile in return.

"I won't ask you any more questions for now but I have to tell you what will happen next in the investigation," Gilles Montfort said.

Jeremy nodded. He was still feeling uncomfortable about not telling the whole truth but he decided to wait and hear what the gendarme had to say.

"The judge who is in charge of the investigation – Judge Bouchon – need to ask you some more questions. If you feel okay to do it, he would like to interview you at three o'clock this afternoon at Villefranche gendarmerie. We can send a car to bring you if you wish."

"No. That's fine. I'm sure I'll be up to it. Might as well get it over with. I have shopping to do in Villefranche anyway. I can drive myself."

Gilles realised that the full import of what he had told the Englishman was still not registering. He was talking as if this was all part of a routine day's activity. A quick trip to the shops and then an interview with a judge about his partner's mysterious death.

"Bon. One more thing. In about half hour, our research team will arrive here to make a investigation of the house....."

Jeremy held up his hand as if directing traffic. "Sorry. It's taking me a while to get my head round this. I don't want to sound stupid but are you saying this is like...a murder investigation? You think Julia was murdered?"

Gilles took a deep breath. "We don't know for sure until we have full results of the examination of the body but, of course, it is a suspicious death. It is very likely there has been a crime."

Jeremy's mind was racing. He was struggling to take it all in. He was still half hanging on to the belief that it was all a mistake – the body must be somebody else. The only thing he felt certain

about was that it was not the right time to tell them that Julia had left him.

“Does that mean I’m a suspect?” He forced the words out accompanied by a twisted grin.

“There are standard investigations that must be done with this kind of death, Monsieur Halliday. That is why the team will search the house. No-one is suspect until we know how Miss Wainwright died.”

Gilles paused, while Jeremy stared blankly into space, looked across at Elodie and then started to rise from the sofa. Jeremy snapped out of his reverie and stood up with him.

“There is someone who can be with you – help you? A friend in the village?” It was Elodie’s soft voice speaking. Both the men turned towards her as if surprised to find there was someone else in the room with them.

“Merci, Elodie,” Gilles said. “Elodie is right. This is a very difficult time for you. Maybe there is someone near who can come to be with you? We could go and ask them for you.”

“No. I’ll be alright. Don’t worry.”

He had got to know some people in the village but there was no-one he was that close to. Anyway, he felt he needed time on his own to think things through. The last thing he wanted was to have to discuss it all with somebody and then the whole situation becoming gossip around the village. Of course, it would be that soon enough anyway.

As they crossed the room and reached the front door, Gilles turned back towards Jeremy.

“Je suis désolé. One last thing, Monsieur Halliday. You said Miss Wainwright was visiting her sister in England.” He took a small black notebook out of his jacket pocket and flipped over a few pages. “Is that Miss.....” He paused taking care again to find the correct pronunciation. “Hattie Wainwright? Her address is in Brighton?”

“Yes, that’s right. Hattie. That’s Julia’s sister.”

“Bon. We will need to speak to Miss Hattie. Would you like that we contact her first and tell her about her sister’s death or maybe you would like to tell her yourself?”

Jeremy stood still and took several seconds to think about what the gendarme was saying. Suddenly, there was a stampede of consequences from Julia’s death crashing round in his brain. Having to tell people was one of them.

“It’s okay. I’ll phone her.”

“I’m sorry to ask it. I know how difficult it will be but, if you could do it soon and let us know this afternoon because we do need to talk to her.”

“Yes. I’ll do it straight away.” He tried to sound confident and in control. He knew that, once he phoned people and told them Julia was dead, it would mean he could no longer pretend to himself that the body in the car couldn’t be her. It was tempting to leave it up to the police to phone Hattie but he knew he would have to do it. Hattie wasn’t his biggest fan. Since the trouble he’d been in back in London, Hattie had tried to persuade Julia to leave him. She must have been delighted when Julia told her she was finally doing it.

“Does she have other family? Her parents?” The gendarme said.

“No. There’s only her sister. Both her parents are dead.”

“Okay, Monsieur Halliday. We must go. We are so sorry to bring you such bad news.” He held out his hand and Jeremy stared down at it for a moment before limply shaking it. He went through the same ritual with Elodie and then the two gendarmes turned and walked down the steps.

## 2

Jeremy sat in the wicker chair by the window and watched the Citroën spray gravel down the driveway as it sped off on to the road.

Twenty minutes later he was still sat staring out the window when a dark blue police van pulled up outside the house. He had to check his watch before he realised how long he’d been sitting there trying to clear the miasma wafting around inside his head. He still hadn’t washed or dressed.

Two men and two women introduced themselves and he showed them quickly round the house. The older of the men, tall and thin with a grey moustache and mostly light brown short hair flecked with grey, explained briefly, and in good English, what the team needed to do. Jeremy didn’t take in much of what he was saying. When the policeman had finished, Jeremy said that, if they could manage without him, he would be in the bathroom taking a shower and getting dressed.

He stood under the scalding water for a long time hoping it would refresh his mind as well as his body, his tranquillity disturbed only by the occasional noises of cupboard doors and drawers being opened and closed in the nearby bedrooms.

Once he’d shaved and dried and brushed his hair, he studied his clean cut boyish face in the mirror. Could anyone think that this was the face of a murderer? He didn’t think so. He put on a t-shirt and a pair of jeans and slipped into his moccasins. He felt much more human. He couldn’t think what to do next. He didn’t feel like eating anything and he couldn’t face up to phoning Hattie. He made himself a cup of coffee and, while he sat at the kitchen table drinking it, he studied his French road atlas. It was as he remembered it when the gendarmes had mentioned Aurillac. It was on the edge of the Cantal region heading up towards the Massif Central. He tried to trace a route on the atlas from there through central France to the Channel Tunnel but, unless Julia had intended to make a very slow, meandering, picturesque journey back, it seemed a strange route to choose. Maybe she’d been having second thoughts about leaving him and was just driving around trying to make up her mind.

His thoughts were interrupted by the man with the grey moustache.

“Excusez moi, monsieur. The grange over there –” he pointed towards the window – “this is your property also?”

“Yes, but we don’t live in it. It was converted into a gîte – for holiday rentals. There’s nobody staying at the moment. The season hasn’t got going yet.”

“Is it closed? Do you have a key?”

“Yes – but, as I said, there’s nothing in it. Well, there’s obviously furniture and stuff but it’s just for renting to holidaymakers.”

“We would like to examine it,” the officer persisted. “If you have the key?”

Jeremy scraped his chair back and crossed over to a drawer in the kitchen island unit which held all their house keys.

“Sorry to make more trouble for you,” the officer said as Jeremy rummaged through the drawer, “but the silver Renault Estate outside. Is this your car because we need to examine that also?”

Jeremy retrieved the keys to the gîte, took his car keys out of his jean’s pocket and handed them to the officer. Despite the assurances of the young gendarme earlier, the presence of these crime investigations officers sifting through his belongings with their white-plastic gloved hands made him feel every inch the murder suspect. Perhaps, in some strange way, he deserved their suspicions. That very morning he remembered thinking about Julia’s loss as a bereavement. And then, if he tracked back to his angry feelings immediately after she’d driven away, hadn’t he wished her dead, even if only for an instant? Even if he hadn’t, he definitely remembered fantasising about her being in a car crash on the long drive back. Julia wasn’t a very good driver. She drove too fast and he was always complaining to her that she tailgated other vehicles on the motorway. He usually drove on the long journeys to and from England. When she went back on her own, for business, she normally flew. This would have been her first time driving alone all that way.

He swallowed a final mouthful of coffee and then forced himself out of the chair and across the sitting room to the telephone. He couldn’t delay any longer. He had to phone Hattie. He left the number ringing for about twenty seconds and just as he was about to put the phone down with relief, it was picked up. It wasn’t Hattie, it was her partner, John.

“Hi, John. It’s Jeremy – phoning from France.”

“Jeremy. How’re you doing? Whoops. Sorry. Silly question. Look mate, I was really sorry to hear about you and Julia. How are you bearing up?”

Jeremy was relieved to hear John’s cheerful estuary accent. They had always got on well together forming a partners’ defensive bond against two such close conspiratorial sisters.

“I’m fine, John.” It was a stupid thing to say. Of course he wasn’t fine. “Is Hattie there? I need to speak to her.”

“No, she’s not. She’s at work. In fact, you’re lucky to catch me. I’ve taken a day off. I’m working from home.”

“Okay. I’ll try her on her mobile. I think I’ve got the number.”

“You can try but you won’t get hold of her, mate. She’s out on casework. She always keeps it switched off when she’s on her calls.” There was a pause. “Look, if it’s about Julia, I think you might be wasting your time talking to Hattie. You know how she feels about you and Julia. I’ve tried to put in a good word for you but it doesn’t do any good. I hate to say it but she thinks Julia’s doing the right thing. Come to her senses at last.”

Jeremy felt tears prickling in the corners of his eyes. It was a relief not to have to talk to Hattie and it was good to hear John’s sympathetic and supportive voice. He needed to unburden himself – tell someone what had happened – and it would be so much better if that person was John.

“It is about Julia, but it’s not what you think.” He paused and took a deep breath. “There’s no easy way to say this, John. Julia’s dead.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Sorry Jeremy. Did I hear you right? Did you say that Julia’s dead?”

Maybe this wasn’t any easier than if it had been Hattie on the phone, Jeremy thought.

“Yes. She’s dead.” He knew he should say more but he waited for it to sink in.

“How? What happened?” John spluttered. “Was it a car accident? She was on her way here, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. She set out on Monday morning. They found her body in the car yesterday.”

“Oh my god! So what happened? A crash on the motorway?”

“No.” He didn’t want to go through it all with John. He just wanted to end the phone call as quickly as possible. “They’re still looking into the exact cause of death. The gendarmes told me the news this morning and I’ve got to go into town this afternoon to speak to a magistrate. I guess I’ll find out more then.”

“But – I don’t understand.” Jeremy could picture John’s confused expression. “If it wasn’t a car accident then what was it?”

“John, I can’t really go into it all now. The important thing is that you get hold of Hattie as soon as you can and tell her what’s happened. The police need to contact her to ask her some questions and I told them I’d let her know about Julia first. I thought it was better she didn’t hear it from the police.”

“Yes, I understand that. But she’s going to be asking me the same questions I’m asking you. I’m going to feel a bit inadequate to say the least when I can’t give her even basic details.”

“I know, John. You’re both going to be just as confused as I am. All that you can tell her is that I hope I’ll know more by this evening so I can speak to her then. Also, when the police contact her I’m sure they’ll be able to tell her more.”

“Okay. If that’s all you know.” He sounded doubtful. “I’ll ring her office and find out exactly where she is this afternoon and I’ll leave messages for her to contact me urgently.”

“Can I just ask you something?” Jeremy said. “When were you expecting Julia to arrive at your place?”

“I’m not a hundred per cent sure. Hattie made all the arrangements. I think it was sometime this weekend.”

“Right. I’d better ring off now.” The officer with the grey moustache had appeared in the doorway clutching a sheath of papers. Jeremy was about to tell John that he had to go because a forensic team were searching the house but he stopped himself, realising that, if he told him that, it would be difficult not to also have to explain all the other things he knew about Julia’s death which he had so far avoided talking about.

“Alright. Christ! I started off this conversation saying I was sorry to hear about you and Julia but I’m even sorrier now mate. I don’t know what else to say. This is awful. Hattie’s going to be devastated. Anyway, you just try and keep your pecker up. I’ll speak to you soon.”

John had started out as a working class London lad running an East End market stall selling children's clothes before rapidly working his way up to where he was now – the owner of a chain of clothes stores married to the very middle class Hattie. And yet, he retained his old market stallholder's chirpiness.

The officer was still hovering by the door as Jeremy put the phone down.

"We are finished, Monsieur Halliday. We need to take some things away for more examination so I need you to sign papers for them."

He walked across to the table, put the papers down and removed a pen from his jacket pocket. Jeremy walked over and stared down at the printed forms. There were two of them with large boxes in the middle filled with handwritten scrawl. The French officer pointed to the hand-written section.

"We take some clothes we find in a basket near the wash machine." He beckoned across to a young blond-haired officer who had appeared in the doorway. He came across to the table carrying a blue plastic box, put it down and snapped off the lid. The older officer pulled out a pair of Jeremy's jeans, a t-shirt and two pairs of underpants. "Are these yours, Monsieur Halliday?"

"Yes." All three men stared at the soiled clothes as if they were antiquities discovered in an archaeological excavation.

"There are also these – which I guess are your wife's? We found them in a cupboard in the bedroom."

On cue, the young officer replaced Jeremy's clothes and held up in their place a pair of mud-spattered slacks and a faded pink sweat-shirt.

"Yes, they're Julia's gardening clothes."

"We also take the ordinateur – sorry, the computer, from the office downstairs."

"Oh no. That doesn't belong to Julia. That's my laptop. Julia had her own one. It must have been in the car with her."

"That's correct. We found Miss Julia's computer and we are examining it but we also need to examine this one."

"But why? Look, I don't mean to be difficult but I can't see what use all this is. I need my laptop. I run a business through the internet. I can't manage without it."

"I am sorry, Monsieur Halliday, but we need to take these things. We will return the computer to you as soon as possible – perhaps two days. If you could sign and put the date on both these papers. They are the same – one for you to keep, one for us." The friendly tone had gone. The officer was business-like and quick-fire, leaving no space for Jeremy to continue his protestations. He held out the pen. Jeremy stared at it and then at the box of clothes and then back at the tall thin officer. He took the pen and signed both sheets.

As he watched the police van crunch its way back up the driveway, he held on tightly to the windowsill as if it was the only thing preventing him from keeling over. After a couple of minutes

staring at the empty driveway, he took a deep breath, walked across to the kitchen, opened the fridge and reached for the three-quarters full bottle of white wine in the door rack. He needed a drink. Several drinks. His life had been knocked sideways by Julia's departure and he'd been drifting in a kind of limbo for the past few days, but now he felt like he was in a car careening down a mountain road without brakes. He picked up the bottle of wine and then swiftly put it back and closed the fridge door. He had to keep his head clear. In a few hours, he would be sitting in front of a judge answering more questions. He needed to be fully *compos mentis*. He didn't want the judge smelling alcohol on his breath in the middle of the day. He found his thoughts going back to the investigation in London and all the mistakes he'd made then. The way he'd presented himself to the authorities. The search of their house and car. The police taking away clothes and their computers. It was all so horribly familiar. And now, just like back then, however hard he tried to rationalise what was happening as just normal police procedures, everything was pointing towards him as the chief suspect in a murder case.

### 3

Jeremy had lost track of what day of the week it was until he drove into Villefranche at lunchtime and saw that the restaurants were crammed full. Of course. Thursday. Market day. He zigzagged around the handful of stallholders in the Place Notre Dame, packing their produce into vans, skipping out of the way of the municipal dustcart hoovering up the fruit and vegetable detritus. He climbed the steps up to the terrace on the far side of the square and surveyed the café's outdoor seating area, firstly to check that there was no-one there that he knew and, when he was sure of that, to find an empty table. A young English couple in shorts and t-shirts had just got to their feet, shouldered their rucksacks and were sorting handfuls of change before depositing coins into a blue plastic tray with the bill clipped to it.

Jeremy took their place at the small corner table. He had plenty of time before he was due to meet the Judge. There was a hollow feeling in his stomach but he didn't feel hungry even though he'd had very little to eat that morning. He decided he'd just order a coffee. While he waited to be served, he glanced across the square until his eyes rested on two white-garbed nuns clearing away the charity produce they had been selling on their table in front of the church doors. At a time like this, he regretted that he didn't have any religious faith. How comforting it would be to enter the cool dark church and pray. Perhaps light a candle for Julia. Although John's friendly voice had offered a brief moment of comfort, now all he could think about, with growing apprehension, was the impassive face and legal formality of the Judge.

He moved to the other side of the table, under a sunshade, to get out of the early June sunshine which was causing beads of sweat to form on his forehead and damp patches under his arms. A sweaty appearance would make him look nervous and shifty in front of the Judge.

Once the coffee had arrived, he started to think about the upcoming interview. What kind of questions would he be asked? What answers should he come up with? He couldn't help thinking like an accused man trying to protest his innocence. That was stupid, he told himself. If that was the way he was thinking when he entered the interview room, then he was bound to look and sound suspicious. He had to think positive. Even if he was a suspect now, he soon wouldn't be. For a start, they didn't even know yet if Julia had been murdered and, even if she had, he had been over a hundred miles away when it happened. And anyway, why would he kill the woman he loved? Ay, there's the rub, as Hamlet had said. Best not to think about that.

Villefranche police station was an ugly brutalist 1960s concrete and glass building on the outskirts of the medieval town centre on one side of a large car park. The inside was equally depressing with light blue paint peeling off the walls, polystyrene ceiling tiles, some broken, others missing completely, and the dazzling glare of strip lighting. It had fallen into increasing disrepair as plans to build a new station in an out-of-town development had hit prolonged planning application problems.

Compared to the rest of the building, Judge Jules Bouchon's office was comfortable and stylish. In place of the melamine-topped tables, plastic chairs and grey metal storage units of the other offices, it had a large solid oak desk and the walls were lined with wooden bookshelves. On the far side, by the window, there was a seating area with a large red sofa, a glass-topped coffee table and an oak sideboard with a coffee machine on it.

Jules Bouchon had just finished studying the Julia Wainwright case folder laid out on the desk in front of him. He couldn't help but feel a sense of pleasurable anticipation. Mysterious deaths of this kind were rare in that part of the Aveyron. Almost all the murders he had investigated in his long career were simple 'conjugals'. Usually husband killing wife, sometimes wife killing husband, often followed by the perpetrator taking his or her own life. Very little investigating was called for.

He looked again at the photos of Julia Wainwright and Jeremy Halliday lying on top of the document pile. A good-looking couple. Both in their early forties – in their prime. A touch of the English rose look about her. Long straight blond hair curtaining a pretty face spoiled only by a slightly too large nose. His dark brown hair curling over his ears, his dark brown eyes, square jawline and swarthy skin giving him a more Mediterranean than English appearance. He could have been an actor or rock star. More than a coincidence that his name was so close to that of French pop star, Johnny Hallyday? He could picture both their faces splashed across the front page of *La Dépêche du Midi* in the next few days. Any local murder would be big news in an area so bereft of such dramas but one featuring such a photogenic English couple would have extra special interest. It would probably make the national press and television as well. Now that he was nearing retirement, maybe this case would provide his career with a final hurrah.

There was a knock at the office door and his secretary, Eva, poked her head around it.

"Monsieur Halliday is here," she announced.

"Show him in."

Jeremy entered purposefully, walking straight across to the Judge's desk and shaking hands with him.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Halliday. I am the juge d'instruction – sorry, the investigating judge, Jules Bouchon. Please take a seat." He continued to speak as Jeremy was settling himself into a chair. "I am very sorry for your tragic loss. I understand how difficult this must be for you and I thank you for coming to see me so quickly. In cases like this, we need to proceed as quickly as possible to be able to get to the truth. Can I get you a coffee or some water?"

"No, I'm fine thank you."

"Is it alright if we keep the interview in English?"

“Definitely. My French is improving but I’m far from fluent. Your English sounds much better.”

“Thank you. I did live and work in London for two years when I was young. Near Camden Town. Do you know it?”

“A bit. I’m a South Londoner. There’s quite a north south divide in London, as you probably know. I didn’t often go too far north of the river.”

The interview was not going the way Jeremy had imagined it. He had expected a more typical French formality and not this avuncular chubby grey-haired man chatting away genially. So determined had he been on entering the room to stay in control and give nothing away that he was immediately suspicious. Perhaps it was a tactic to soften him up, relax him, so that he would be less on his guard when it was time for the serious questioning.

He decided to take the initiative and cut short the social pleasantries. “Have you found out what the cause of Julia’s death was?” He said.

“I’m afraid not. We are still waiting for results of tests on the body. Normally, we would ask you to identify the body for us but the top half was badly burnt so identification would be difficult as well as disturbing for you. As Gilles Montfort – the gendarme who spoke with you this morning – told you, we have identified it through the papers we found in the car and then the medical records in London. But, if you could look at a couple of things for us?” He reached down to a small cardboard box by the side of the desk and placed a shoe and a gold wrist bangle in front of Jeremy. Both were in good condition with no signs they had been in a fire.

Jeremy swallowed hard when he saw them. The shoe was a black leather slipper with a swirly silver band across the instep. The wrist bangle was an art nouveau style twist of snake-like loops. He recognised it immediately. He had bought it a couple of years ago for Julia’s fortieth birthday. He reached out to touch them but withdrew his hand halfway. He shuddered at the thought of what Julia’s body must look like, fighting to keep any image of the charred remains out of his head. Instead, he tried to picture her as she was when he last saw her but even that was difficult. She was already fading from his life like an out-of-focus photo.

“Yes, they’re Julia’s. She kept those shoes in the car. She found them comfortable to drive in.”

“Thank you. That is helpful.” Judge Bouchon replaced the items in the box. “You told Gilles Montfort that Madame Wainwright was returning to England to visit her sister and also for business purposes.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“When did she leave your house?”

“She left on Monday morning at about nine.”

“And did she say anything about how she was travelling back? Anywhere she might be visiting on the way?”

“No. As far as I knew she was heading straight back taking our usual route.”

“And what route was that?”

“She would drive across towards Cahors and then take the motorway heading north through Brive

and Orleans. She was probably crossing by Eurotunnel. She didn't much like the ferries – but I don't know that for sure."

"And would she go straight back in one day or would she make a stop for the night?"

"Normally we would make an overnight stop around Rouen and then get a Eurotunnel train at about midday the next day."

Judge Bouchon leaned back in his chair and touched the tips of his fingers together in a pyramid.

"So, why do you think she went to the Aurillac area? Did she have friends who live near there? Someone she might have visited? Stayed the night with?"

"No. We don't know anybody in that area."

The judge stared into space for several seconds as if in deep thought before continuing.

"You say we don't know anybody. Is it possible that Madame Wainwright might have friends that you don't know about?"

Jeremy paused to think about that. "It's possible, but I doubt it. We were a couple. We didn't keep secrets from each other. If she knew somebody in that area – I don't know – like, say, an old school friend, I'm sure she would have told me."

"You were a couple. You didn't keep secrets from each other." The judge pronounced the words slowly, as if trying to fathom their exact meaning. "So – do couples never keep secrets from each other, Monsieur Halliday? Surely, that's the very point of secrets – that the other person doesn't know about them?"

Jeremy stared at the judge trying to detect any sign that he was being sarcastic. Then he realised what the Judge was hinting. Maybe Julia had a lover who lived in the area. Before he could think of how to respond, the judge continued.

"That's okay, Monsieur Halliday. You don't have to reply to that. It was – how do you say – a rhetorical question."

The judge paused, shuffled the papers on his desk and picked up the sheet with Julia's photo and details on it.

"What was Madame Wainwright's mood when she left you on Monday? Was she happy, depressed, pleased to be going back to England?"

"She was her normal self. She was used to travelling backwards and forwards. She always looked forward to seeing her sister. They were very fond of each other." Jeremy answered without a moment's hesitation, instantly blocking out the image of a cold, silent, business-like Julia loading her things into the car while he sat disconsolately at the kitchen table staring at an uneaten slice of toast and drinking a cup of tea before she came back in to deliver a curt farewell and drove off.

"And her business. Was that going well?"

"Yes, very well. She was expanding all the time."

“So – there is no reason she might have taken her own life?”

“No, not at all.”

Jeremy was taken aback by the suggestion. He tried to picture a distraught Julia, mentally unbalanced by their separation. He couldn't. He was the one who had felt suicidal. He waited for the next question – certain it would be about the state of his relationship with Julia – knowing that he wouldn't be able to prevaricate any longer. But it didn't come.

“Where were you during the daytime and evening on Tuesday?” The Judge continued.

“I was at home. In the house.”

“And what were you doing?”

“Nothing much. Just pottering around. Some work on my computer. A spot of gardening. It was a nice afternoon as I remember. I might have sat in the garden reading. Watched a bit of television in the evening.”

“Did you visit anybody? Did anybody come to the house to see you?”

“No, I don't think so.” He tried to stay calm. They found Julia's body on Wednesday. She must have died on Tuesday. With a sudden hollow feeling in his stomach, he realised that the Judge was checking to see if he had an alibi. He was a suspect.

“Maybe a neighbour walked past when you were in the garden. Maybe you just exchanged 'bonjours'?”

“It's possible but I don't remember anybody specifically.”

“Did you make any phone calls? Receive any?”

“I don't remember. I don't think so.” He paused, starting to feel angry. “Look, are you insinuating that I might have murdered Julia, because that's absurd.”

“I am not insinuating anything, Monsieur Halliday. We do not know yet if Miss Julia was murdered. But, of course, it would be good for our investigation if we could establish exactly where you were for the past two days. Then we can.....how do you say in English.....écarte.....put you out of the investigation?”

“Eliminate me.”

“Eliminate. Yes, that's the word. So, once we have completed this interview, if you remember any other details – anyone who could confirm seeing or speaking to you on Tuesday – please let me know.”

Jeremy put the key in the ignition, wound down the windows to relieve the stuffiness in the car and then sat staring across the car park at a group of people seated on wooden decking outside a café. He watched a tall blond woman in a pink jacket, a tight black mini-skirt and black stiletto-heeled shoes come out of the café and totter unsteadily towards him. She stopped by the side of a battered, mud-spattered jeep, opened the driver's door, climbed in and drove off. It was

incongruous, he thought. It was the sort of car a farmer would drive and yet she didn't look like a farmer's wife. Unlike in London, in Villefranche he found it much harder to guess people's class or occupation by their appearance.

He continued to sit and stare out the window. There was nothing else he wanted to do in Villefranche and yet he was reluctant to go back to his empty house. Maybe he should go for a drive or for a walk along the banks of the Aveyron – give himself time to clear his head. The Judge had cut short the interview after he had failed to establish an alibi for Jeremy for the day of Julia's death. He told him he would need to question him further as the investigation proceeded but it would be best to wait until they could confirm the exact cause of death.

As Jeremy continued to gaze across at the people in the café, he tried to remember exactly what he had been doing during the few days since Julia left but his mind was a blank. That was probably because he'd been doing nothing in particular – just wallowing in his own misery. But it was a long time only to be doing that – three days. Maybe something more dramatic had happened but he had expunged it from his memory because it was too painful. He closed his eyes and pictured Julia's car on fire by the side of a sandy path, the flames scorching low hanging tree branches and scrub bushes. Flames were licking round Julia's body, slumped over the steering wheel. He snapped open his eyes to cut off the horrific scene and shuddered. It had been scarily vivid. Too real? It was as if he was remembering it, rather than imagining it.

He re-started the engine and drove out of the car park. There was nothing he could think of doing that might distract him from such thoughts so he drove back to the house.

An hour after he returned home, he received the expected phone call from Hattie. It was difficult to make out what she was saying through her sobs.

"When John phoned to tell me," she said, gulping for breath after every few words, "I couldn't take it in. I couldn't believe it was true. I thought...it must be a mistake...a misunderstanding....." she paused, struggling to catch her breath. "I was trying to phone you but you weren't home and there was no answer machine."

"Yes. I'm sorry. I was out." He decided it was best not to tell her that he was being questioned by the investigating judge. "Have the police spoken to you yet?"

Once again she sucked in a deep breath to steady herself. "Yes. About half an hour ago. They told me she'd been found in her car. It had been set on fire....." once again she was overcome with grief. "They said that's all they know at present. I don't understand. What on earth could have happened? Who would want to harm Julia?"

Jeremy considered several possible answers to her question before saying, "I don't know any more than you. They were asking me about her business – how it was going. I think they were trying to suggest that it might have been suicide."

"What?" The word 'suicide' appeared to halt the flow of tears. "That's absurd."

"I know. That's exactly what I told them. What questions did they ask you?"

"Not many. I was in even more of a state than I am now. I was barely able to speak. I just told them that the last time I'd spoken to Julia on the phone was last weekend and she told me that she'd be arriving at our place sometime around midday tomorrow."

Jeremy waited a few seconds for her to continue. When she didn't, he said hesitantly, "Did she say anything about where else she might be going on her way back to England?"

Another pause. "Oh yes. They did ask me something about that. I told them I didn't know. As far as I knew, she was driving straight here."

What Jeremy most wanted to know was whether she'd told them the real reason Julia was returning – whether she'd told them about their break up. Since she hadn't mentioned it, he was tempted to ask her himself, but he resisted. She'd started crying again. He could hear John's voice mumbling in the background but couldn't make out what he was saying.

And then it was John's voice on the phone. "Hi Jeremy. Look, I think it's best to leave it for now. As you can imagine, Hattie's in a terrible state. I'm sure she'll phone you back when she's had time to calm down."

"No problem, John. I'm finding it difficult at the moment as well." He hoped John didn't think he sounded hypocritical. He was nowhere near as audibly upset as Hattie. In fact, now that he thought about it, he hadn't shed a single tear since hearing about Julia's death.

"Of course you are, mate. You look after yourself. Speak to you soon." John rang off.

Jeremy was relieved. He'd had no idea what to say to Hattie and he hadn't wanted to be the one to cut short the call. His biggest relief was that she had been so overcome with grief that there had been no hint of the hostility she felt towards him and no suggestion that he might have had anything to do with her sister's death. \*

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Jeremy Halliday's idyllic new life in South-West France comes to a shocking end when gendarmes arrive to tell him his partner Julia's body has been found in her burnt out car.

In the ensuing murder investigation, Jeremy becomes the chief suspect when the investigating judge discovers that he has withheld important, and incriminating, information.

For Jeremy, it becomes painfully reminiscent of an investigation in London six years earlier which cast a shadow over his relationship and his career.

This time he decides to prove his innocence by doing some investigating of his own.

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