

Deception on the Danube

Chapter 1

It was the fifth morning of the 10-day, team-building exercise and the group of participants, their aides, their families and tour staff continued the routine that had been established at the outset.

After a buffet breakfast on their Danube cruise ship named the Sunna after a Germanic goddess, the 15 participants collected their high-end rental bicycles and gathered by the river's edge for their day's instructions. Their supporters came, too.

They were in the picturesque village of Dürnstein, one of the most famous in Austria thanks to the castle ruins that towered above the tiny riverside community and where Richard the Lionheart had been held captive nine centuries earlier. In any photographic representation of the Austrian Danube, Dürnstein was sure to be included.

Ex-pro cyclist Paul Burke stood near the participants. He had earned a gig as a tour guide partly due to his cycling blogs and columns for a group of French Riviera newspapers, and partly due to his notoriety in helping solve some recent murders in southern France. It also helped that the CEO for Worldwide Events Consulting Inc., which was sponsoring the trip, was a cycling fan who knew Burke's name.

As Burke waited for the start of the day's activities, he studied the people around him, trying to ensure he remembered everyone's name. Every day, he went through the roster of participants, trying to embed into his brain not just their identities but their basic work backgrounds. These were high-powered people used to being acknowledged and his job required him to give them plenty of attention. It wasn't easy, though. He had never been good with names and there were a lot of people in the group if you counted family and aides.

But he was getting better. He silently ticked off the individuals: David Fraser the quiet Englishman, Eric Chapman the affable Canadian, Roger Langford the outgoing Aussie, Ingrid Froom the businesslike Dutchwoman, Niklaus Gast the aristocratic Swiss, Hoshiko Kimura the intense Japanese and so on.

They were all executives with Worldwide Events Consulting which was based out of Switzerland and which helped organize all types of events around the world. They came from nine nations – England, France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Japan, Australia, Canada and the United States – and were between 35 and 60. Most spoke at least three languages fluently.

When he had satisfied himself that he had everyone right, he started putting names to the families and aides, a much tougher task and one he doubted he'd master before the end of the tour in Vienna in a few days.

Renata Hable, the group's facilitator, broke into his mental work by announcing it was time to begin.

"We've covered how to pace ourselves and how to work more efficiently for better results," said Hable, a tall, blonde Dutchwoman in her early 40s who also led the group on its daily rides. "Today's goal is to work on sacrificing ourselves for the team."

She was speaking English since all the participants had at least a decent grasp of the language.

Then she discussed how cycling's "domestiques" or workers often had to forgo their own ambitions for those of the team and, more specifically, for the team leader. That meant protecting

the leader against the wind, and collecting water bottles and food gels from the team car and then delivering them to the stars of the team.

“If those domestiques don’t contribute, the leader doesn’t win,” Hable said. “It’s hard, thankless work, but it’s necessary.”

As she continued her presentation about the day’s activities which involved everyone taking turns delivering water bottles to team members, Burke glanced at the participants near him. So far, they had followed Hable’s directions each day without protest although they had done so without much enthusiasm. They seemed equally involved this morning.

But team players? Not a chance, Burke thought.

However, it didn’t really matter to him. His job was simple: Bring up the rear, ensure everyone rode safely, provide direction when necessary, repair any basic mechanical issues and, at the end of the day’s ride, critique how the group had done following Hable’s directions. Since he rode behind everyone, he had the best view of how they performed.

Each day, they had listened to Burke, but he knew most of them had likely been thinking about other matters as he had spoken; several times, he had caught a participant glancing down at a cellphone while he talked.

The only time any of the group members had shown a modicum of interest in him was when the Frenchman recalled Burke’s involvement in helping solve two murders associated with the Tour de France and then two deaths connected to a series of vintage bicycle races several months later. The Frenchman, the German and the Canadian had asked a few questions about the cases. Unwilling to relive those events in detail, Burke had supplied short, simple responses which had quickly ended the discussion.

The others hadn’t cared. He was just the hired help, the guy who rode in the back and contributed few insights.

Burke felt someone come up beside him.

It was his friend Claude Briere, still dressed in his navy-blue chef’s jacket which made him look like some kind of 18th century soldier.

Burke had lobbied successfully to have Claude added to the tour staff as a chef. His friend was a culinary talent of the first order, but he had already contributed in more ways than by simply preparing meals. When he wasn’t working in the ship’s kitchen with another chef, a quiet Austrian named Reinhard, and their staff of 10, Claude had gone out of his way to engage with the riders, their staff and families. And his efforts had been successful because they had been charmed by his outgoing personality and his keen interest in their pursuits. Burke hadn’t been surprised. Claude loved the company of people and the art of good conversation.

He was also an ex-convict who had done time for recommending violent action against a development company. However, the tour’s organizers had still hired him, thanks to Burke’s recommendations and to Claude’s exemplary post-prison behaviour. Not surprisingly, neither the organizers nor Claude advertised his criminal past.

“They look truly interested today,” Claude whispered to Burke in French.

From the grin on Claude’s face, Burke knew he was being sarcastic.

The group swelled with more family members showing up. There were now about 90 people listening to Hable’s final words.

Then from high above the village came a voice.

“Did anyone hear what was being yelled?” asked the American.

“No.”

“Too far away.”

□It wasn't clear enough to understand.□

The voice sounded again.

This time it was louder.

□Help!□

Everyone understood this time. #