

A Vintage End

Chapter 1

The leader of the vintage bicycle race followed the Mediterranean coastal road around the bend and studied the next stretch ahead. It wasn't going to be fun. The road ramped up at a 10-per-cent elevation gain, a steep climb for anyone riding a new, lots-of-gears carbon fibre bike, but a nasty challenge for someone using an old-time steel machine with half the gears.

But that was fine since he had trained for the race, was well ahead of everyone, was feeling exceptionally strong on his 1970 Peugeot bike and was cycling in flawless spring conditions – sunny, mild, no wind. And the finish line back in the French working-class resort of Saint-Raphaël was not much more than 30 kilometres away.

Ahead, he spotted two people sitting in lawn chairs under a beach umbrella by the roadside. There had been plenty of spectators along the out-and-back, 110-kilometre-long route that had started in Saint-Raphaël, gone to Antibes and then backtracked along the winding, scenic coastal road. But for this patch, there was virtually no one around – except for this couple.

When he was 75 metres away, he saw they looked a little odd, as if they were frozen in motion. They were also wearing bulky clothes and strange-looking headgear.

When he was 50 metres away, he noticed the headgear resembled German helmets worn by soldiers during the Second World War.

At 25 metres, he could have no doubts what he was looking at.

The two people weren't people – not anymore.

They were skeletons.

Chapter 2

By the time Paul Burke came around the same bend a half hour later, there were three police cars, a police van and a few dozen riders congregated around the two skeletons in chairs. It wasn't what he expected to see on a Saturday bike race in springtime.

Burke pulled to the side, joining the crowd. His friend André Rousseau did the same. They tried to get a good look at what was happening, but all the people made it difficult.

A few of the police were working at keeping the riders and others away from the scene. Everyone was clearly curious, but the scene was oddly quiet with people talking little or in hushed tones.

“This doesn't look good,” Rousseau said to Burke.

Two officers started to push the crowd back while another two began staking out the area with yellow crime-scene tape.

“You should continue your race,” one officer told the onlookers. “This is now a police matter.”

A few riders mounted their machines and slowly began pedaling. One rider, thin, wiry and in his late 20s, was arguing with some race officials in a car, saying he had been at the front of the race and now he couldn't possibly win because he had to stay and talk to the cops.

The people in the car shrugged and said there was nothing they could do.

“But I was going to win,” whined the rider, his face red and pounding his chest which was covered by a 1960s, black-white-and-yellow striped Renault Elf jersey.

“It’s up to the police,” one of the race officials said. “Besides, this isn’t really a competitive event. It’s for pleasure and camaraderie.”

“It’s still a race!” snarled the rider.

Rousseau looked at his friend. “So much for this being a fun outing,” he said.

Burke nodded but his attention was firmly on checking out what was the focus of all the police attention.

Then he saw an opening and pushed through. Rousseau followed.

They saw the two skeletons.

“Damn!” Rousseau said.

“You can say that again,” Burke said. “Look at the cooler between the two skeletons, André.”

“Damn!” Rousseau repeated.

On the large white cooler was emblazoned a blood-red swastika and type that read: **Courtesy of B.Y. International Travels Inc.**

“What kind of company is that, if it’s even real?” Rousseau added.

“Not a reputable one unless this is some kind of bad joke,” Burke said.

As a former professional cyclist, Burke had seen hundreds of strange roadside scenes, many involving people in some kind of performance. He had also witnessed countless fans dressed in bizarre outfits during races: an individual running beside cyclists while inside a three-metre-high water bottle, a woman in full Viking regalia, a group of overweight males unfortunately sporting thongs and nothing else and, most celebrated of all, a German who made an international name for himself by showing up at races dressed as the Devil in a red suit and holding a trident. Burke knew there had been hundreds more bizarre figures and moments, but, as a racer, his concentration had largely been on the riders surrounding him.

He had never witnessed a scene with skeletons wearing Nazi uniforms, though.

And he expected Rousseau felt the same.

“I know it’s illegal to display Nazi flags and uniforms in public, but this is still a large police turnout,” said Rousseau, surveying the scene.

“A swastika will do it every time,” Burke said.

“Maybe it’s some kind of weird protest,” Rousseau said.

Burke knew protests had been a fact of life at major cycling races for generations for the simple reason they attracted media attention. But this wasn’t a major race, just an informal, fun event.

The police continued to push away the sightseers, but Burke and Rousseau held their ground.

“You notice anything odd?” Burke said, nudging Rousseau.

“Besides they’re skeletons dressed in old German uniforms, wearing helmets from the Second World War and supposedly drinking from a cooler with a swastika on it?” Rousseau said.

“Besides that, yes,” Burke replied.

“Putting aside they’ve obviously been dead a long time, they look like someone posed them – like a piece of bizarre artwork,” Rousseau said.

Burke nodded. “Exactly. They look like they’ve been carefully arranged, uniforms, helmet and everything,” he said. “Check out how their arms are gripping the sides of the chairs in the exact same way. Then check out how one skeleton’s leg is crossed at the ankle from the left while the other skeleton’s leg is crossed from the right. It’s all kind of symmetrical in a strange way.”

“Like whoever did this wanted us to get some kind of message,” Rousseau said.

“Look at how one head tilts left and one right – and at the same general angle,” Burke said.

“That’s weird,” Rousseau said. “How could someone do that with their necks? Wouldn’t something snap off?”

“I bet whoever did this wanted to make some kind of statement,” Burke said.

“Well, he accomplished that,” Rousseau said. “But I don’t get the reference to B.Y. International Travels Inc. Who’s that?”

“No idea,” Burke replied.

A couple of flics started to approach.

“Stall them, André,” Burke told his friend.

“How?” Rousseau said.

“Come up with anything but just do it,” Burke said.

Rousseau moved forward and placed his bike like a barrier before the oncoming officers, essentially blocking them from Burke. Then he asked them what had happened.

One of the officers ignored the question and told Rousseau to move on.

That brief exchange gave Burke enough time to take out his smartphone and snap a couple of photos of the skeleton scene. He also managed a few seconds of video, hoping he wasn’t moving his hand too quickly to blur the images.

“Hey, forget taking pictures!” the other cop said to Burke. “This isn’t some kind of show.”

Burke thought the scene was definitely constructed to be a show, but he didn’t say that, just smiled sheepishly and apologized. He had his photos and video which he’d send shortly to François Lemaire, the editor of the small newspaper group which ran his blogs and columns about cycling. Burke didn’t know if Lemaire would be interested in the photos and video, but at least he was showing the newsman that he was alert to events.

Burke and Rousseau turned and got out of police range.

A TV van shot up right beside them and a camera crew jumped out. A moment later, a car featuring the logo of another TV station pulled over and two men hopped out, one carrying a camera and the other a microphone.

“This can’t help the race,” Rousseau said.

Burke agreed. “Maybe that was the point,” he said.

Chapter 3

Burke texted the photos and video to Lemaire with a brief explanation of what was happening. Since there was a chance the editor wouldn’t be working, Burke also sent them to the newspaper’s tech expert, Antoine Pastore, who probably would be in the office.

Burke then called Antoine and got him on the second ring.

“What’s happening, Paul?” Antoine asked.

“Did you see the photos and video I sent you?” Burke asked.

There was a moment’s pause and then Antoine said: “I just got them. What’s going on? Two skeletons dressed in German uniforms? A swastika on a cooler? Where are you? Aren’t you riding in that vintage bike race?”

“I am and the race just bumped into these two spectators by the roadside,” Burke explained. “I thought you guys might be interested.”

“Wait a minute,” Antoine said.

Burke could hear tapping of computer keys in his ear.

“I just saw some posts on a couple of social media sites that said something was happening in your vintage bike race that involved Nazi memorabilia and skeletons,” Antoine said. He paused for a moment. “Now someone is saying people should check the race website.”

More tapping and then Antoine uttered an oath.

“What’s happening, Antoine?” Burke asked.

“It looks like someone has hacked into the vintage bike race website and right on the front page has written: ‘Bosco Yablonski – a heritage of shame and treason.’”

Burke knew the name. It belonged to the main sponsor, a seriously wealthy businessman with a love of cycling and a reputation for privacy.

“I wonder if the race organizers know what’s happened,” Antoine said.

“I expect they will soon,” Burke said. “By the way, have you heard of B.Y. International Travels Inc.?”

Burke heard a burst of tapping on the computer.

“It’s a huge travel company specializing in all kinds of customized group trips,” Antoine said. “And it seems the B.Y. stands for Bosco Yablonski.”

“The main sponsor of the race,” Burke said.

“One and the same,” Antoine said. “Just a second. The site’s down now. I expect someone alerted the race organizers and they took the site offline.”

“I wonder how many people noticed the message,” Burke said.

“Good question, but I expect a fair number,” Antoine said. “The message might have been up there for more than a few minutes. I expect the security on the race site was weak because their tech person never figured someone would want to hack into it.”

“Well, the scene here is probably going to be on TV soon,” Burke said. “There are a couple of television crews filming away.”

“And I’m seeing some new photos and video showing up on social media,” Antoine added.

Burke looked around and spotted several people, mostly riders, punching away at their cellphones.

Instant news.

Burke wondered how the mainstream media would treat the scene in front of him.

“Is Lemaire around?” Burke said.

“He’s in the newsroom,” Antoine said. “He’s working with a reporter on this swastika-Yablonski thing.”

“So he’ll run a story on it?” Burke said, moving slightly to stay away from the nearest flics who were once again moving the crowd.

“Yes, but he’ll have to be careful with the possibility of libel,” Antoine said. “I’m no journalist, but I know what’s happening has danger all over it from a libel perspective. But Lemaire knows his stuff so we won’t get into trouble with any lawyers for Yablonski – and I expect he has a few on his payroll.”

There was a voice in the background and then Burke heard Antoine mention his name.

“Paul, it’s François,” came the editor’s familiar voice. “I see you’ve sent some photos and video. Got anything else?”

Burke said he didn’t. Lemaire then said he already had a reporter on the story, but it would help if Burke could get a quote or two from spectators and the police.

“Get them to me as fast as possible,” Lemaire said. “You have your smartphone with you, right?”

“I do.”

“Then stop talking and get to work.”

Lemaire ended the call.

Burke shook his head. This vintage ride had started so well with a couple of old-time champions cutting the ribbon to start the race which had attracted almost 1,000 riders of all ages with nearly everyone dressed in cycling gear dating from 1900 to 1970. Lots of old caps, goggles and wool jerseys. Plus bicycles which dated back decades. Two participants had even shown up on penny farthings although they had pulled out after just a kilometre. With a few thousand spectators plus several television crews filming the start, it had seemed like a big deal.

Now there was this scene.

“Move on, move on,” said a new cop, waving for Burke and Rousseau to get back on the road.

Burke told the cop his name and how he was a columnist and blogger for a small group of newspapers and websites running out of Antibes.

“You’re also on TV, right? That sports panel show?” the officer asked.

“That’s me,” said Burke whose face had become recognized after he had started a gig on a sports show on a Nice TV station a few months before.

“I like the show,” the cop said. “I like what you say, too. Good work.”

Once again, Burke couldn’t believe how his life had changed in a year. Before that, after retiring as a pro cyclist, he had been living a lazy existence, unwilling to do much beyond writing the occasional column or blog, and watching his bank balance dwindle. Then he had gotten involved in murders connected to the Tour de France and, suddenly, he had discovered new character traits within himself as he helped solve the crimes. With his involvement in those investigations, Burke had seen his public profile expand with more writing assignments and then the Nice TV show.

Burke thanked the officer and asked if he could get a comment or two from an investigating officer. The cop scratched his chin and then nodded. He glanced around before resting his gaze on a gangly man who had just shown up in an unmarked car.

“That’s Inspector Bonnier. Come with me and I’ll see if he can give you a moment or two. He’s usually happy to talk with the media – if you get my meaning.”

Burke thanked him again. He left his bike with Rousseau and followed the uniformed officer over to Inspector Bonnier whose suit seemed two sizes too large for him.

The cop made the introductions and Burke saw how Bonnier’s face switched from stern to interested.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Burke,” the inspector said, offering a bony hand to shake. “You are racing in this event?”

“I am,” Burke said. “But the race has taken a new turn with these two skeletons.”

Bonnier nodded and said he had little information since he had just arrived.

“Is this some kind of practical joke?” Burke asked, pulling out the small notebook and pencil he now carried with him everywhere, even when cycling.

“It most likely is, but it isn’t a funny one,” said Bonnier, frowning. “When we find out who did this, they will face charges. A swastika and Nazi uniforms are prohibited from display.”

“And what about the skeletons?” asked Burke. “They don’t look that old. In fact, they seem a little juicy in spots, as if they’ve been pulled out of the ground recently. If they were from some kind of lab at a hospital or university, they’d be much cleaner, wouldn’t they?”

Bonnier shrugged. “If they are stolen, then we’re talking about some serious charges.”

“Isn’t it a little odd to have an inspector like you come out to something like this?” Burke said. “And why so many police?”

“I was in the area and one of the first officers here thought this might be more than a prank,” Bonnier said.

“Why did he think that?”

“I expect it was because of the Second World War uniforms worn by the two skeletons,” Bonnier replied. “We will investigate. That’s all I can say now. As for the overall police presence, two of the vehicles were on the race route to provide assistance in case the race organizers needed it. So, they were just in the neighbourhood, you might say.”

“And you have no idea about where the skeletons came from?” Burke asked.

“As I said, we will conduct an appropriate investigation,” the inspector said.

Burke asked for the spelling of his name. Bonnier was pleased to provide it, adding his first name – Daniel.

Then Bonnier excused himself and Burke returned to Rousseau.

“I’ll just call Lemaire to give him a quote or two, and then we can get going again,” Burke said. “No more than two minutes.”

Rousseau nodded and Burke called his editor back, providing a couple of the inspector’s harmless quotes.

“By the way, Paul, there’s a lot of activity on social media about what you’re looking at,” Lemaire told Burke. “We’ll be busy the next day or two seeing how it all plays out.”

“What does that mean?” Burke asked.

“I expect a lot of people are digging around trying to figure out what’s behind the scene with the skeletons and swastika, and the personal attack on Bosco Yablonski.”

“This is bizarre,” Burke said.

Lemaire agreed and told Burke to think about a blog that looked at the day’s events.

“Get it to me by 9 tomorrow morning,” Lemaire said. “That way, it’ll flow nicely out of whatever happens between now and then. It won’t get lost in all the social media fireworks about the race.”

They ended the call.

Burke turned to Rousseau to retrieve his bike.

“You said this was bizarre,” Rousseau said. “I’d say someone out there is a little crazy.”

Or trying to make something happen, Burke told himself.

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