

## 1 RIDING THE RAILS

The Murphy children and Agatha Harrington trudged through Frankfurt, Germany's crowded central train station. Andrew Murphy, the children's father and Agatha's uncle, lagged behind. The group was on their way to Aix-en-Provence, France to attend the opening gala of the Celebration of Cézanne art exhibition at the Musée Granet.

"I am so thankful you children know where you're going," called Andrew Murphy from the back of the group. He was huffing and puffing under the weight of two suitcases, a side bag, and a backpack. Beads of sweat collected on his brow, and he looked more like he was at the end of a long trip rather than the beginning.

Looking up at the enormous sign of train destinations, six-year-old Jane Murphy quickly found theirs and said, "I still think it's neat that Aix is pronounced the same as the letter X."

"Well, it certainly makes wordplay like Aix marks the spot easier to understand," Mr. Murphy agreed, giving Jane a wink.

The group had been invited by their friends Alec Leblanc and Beth Rahr. Alec worked for Interpol and was the chief investigator on the last case the children were involved in at Mouse Castle near their home in Frankfurt. Beth was a leading expert in medieval art, art theft, and forgeries.

"I am excited to see Beth again," thirteen-year-old Maxine Murphy said. "I'm glad she decided to work with Alec at Interpol full-time. With her knowledge of art and Alec's criminal expertise, they make an unstoppable team."

"They will catch Mr. Aix for sure! And I am definitely *not* excited to see him," Jane said.

Mr. Aix was the criminal mastermind behind the theft of valuable coins from a museum in Frankfurt. One of which was a valuable coronation coin from Emperor Maximilian II. There were only two coins known to exist, and now he had one of them.

Luckily, the children, with the help of the police and Interpol, were able to save the remaining coronation coin at Mouse Castle. Mr. Aix had sent Alec a menacing and somewhat cryptic letter indicating that 'Aix marks the spot.' The Interpol agent assumed the thief wanted revenge or, at the very least, had something up his sleeve involving Aix-en-Provence. After a quick Google search, they had come up with the Cézanne exhibition as a possible mark for the criminal's next heist.

The children lived in Germany while their mother worked on a big project in Frankfurt. Kate was a famous architect whose designs had taken her all across America. When her company offered her a position on an architectural team in Germany, she knew it was the chance of a lifetime. Kate, who had taken Agatha in after her parents passed away in an accident, never treated Agatha differently than her own children. After speaking with the group about the potential move, she was met with enthusiastic "Yeses" from everyone.

Andrew, the children's father and Kate's husband, was famous in his own right. He was a respected and well-known archeologist. And since he was always traveling for work, he was eager for Kate and the children to have some adventures as well. Most of his work was in Europe or Africa, so with the family based in Europe, he wouldn't have to travel as far to get home. He had been on a dig in Egypt for the children's first

European adventure, but they had told him all about the mystery at Mouse Castle.

The train was waiting at the track, and the children gingerly climbed aboard, carefully negotiating the small, steep steps. They saw the conductor in his gray and red German Train Company uniform and presented their tickets. He glanced at their tickets and quickly said something in German.

Sixteen-year-old Agatha had become quite proficient in German over the last few months and translated for her cousins. “He said the sleeper cars are at the end of the train. We’ll have to get off and walk a bit further.” She indicated with a wave toward the door they had just used.

The group carefully passed their bags down to Mr. Murphy, who had been at the end of the line, so he was the first to get off. He let Simon, who loved to organize things, retake the lead. They walked the rest of the way down the platform, saw “City Night Line” painted on the last car, and knew they had reached their destination.

Once they were on board again, Simon led the way down the aisle. Although he was only ten years old, he had researched and planned the trip through the German and French countryside. “We’ll pass a lot of interesting sights along the way, but unfortunately, it will be too dark to see them. I know it would’ve been easier and faster to catch a plane, taking a night train and staying in a sleeper cabin seemed too cool to pass up.”

“This adventure is starting out just like the last one,” Maxine remarked. Everyone stopped walking and turned to her with big eyes, so she continued with a sheepish grin. “Guys, I just meant that we are going to be sleeping somewhere new and exciting. Last time, we were so excited to spend the night in a real castle and look how that turned out. Who knows, maybe we’ll stumble into another mystery!”

“I hope so! I just love being a detective,” Jane said. “Simon, I didn’t know you could sleep on a train. I mean, obviously, you can take a nap on a train, but I had no idea you could have your own room. It’s like a moving hotel.”

Simon exchanged a knowing look with his father. He didn’t want to disappoint Jane by telling her how tiny the cabins actually were.

The children and Mr. Murphy walked down a narrow passageway with sleeper cabins on one side. They kept an eye out for their numbers. Jane, following behind Simon, shouted excitedly, “Here they are, Simon! Cabins 240 and 241! They’re right next to each other!”

Simon shot her a look that told her immediately she was too loud. She lowered her voice and continued, “I hope the bed is big.”

Mr. Murphy and Simon were staying in a double cabin together, while Agatha, Maxine, and Jane had a cabin with four beds.

The girls used a key card to enter their cabin and were surprised by the compact and cramped room. Jane came through the small door after Maxine and Agatha, and the three girls stood in a tight huddle in the middle of the small aisle that served as the center of their room. Looking around with one eyebrow raised, Jane said, “Whoa, this looks like a doll’s house! I wasn’t expecting it to be this small.”

Jane, usually prone to exaggeration, was not embellishing when she said the space was tiny. The room had two sets of small, single beds, set up like bunk beds on either side of the room. Immediately to the right

of the entry was a compact bathroom with a shower and toilet directly across from each other. Agatha, who was also surprised by the small space, always tried to look on the bright side. “I know it seems cramped, but think of how unique this experience is, and it’s better than sleeping sitting up in the normal carriages.”

Jane thought about it for a moment. “You’re right, Aggie. It is a pretty neat place. It’s almost like sleeping in a pirate’s ship!”

Maxine looked skeptically at her younger sister and asked, half laughing, “And when have you slept, or even seen, for that matter, a pirate ship, Janey?”

Jane turned around from her place by the small window. “Um, well, I’ve read a lot of books about them,” she said, grinning at her sister.

The girls walked over to check out the boys’ room. They only had two bunk beds, a small vanity station with a sink that didn’t swivel, and a small toilet next to the door.

“Hey, you’re missing a shower,” observed Jane.

“We don’t get a shower in our room, my dear,” Mr. Murphy told his youngest daughter. “It saves us a bit of money, and we can take turns using the shower in your compartment tomorrow. Besides, we are only here for one day.”

Once the children were settled, or as settled as they could be for such a short trip, they made their way to the club car using the sliding metal doors that connected all the cars on the train. The club car was two cars ahead of the sleeper wagon. They didn’t have a long way to walk, but it took them longer than expected.

“With all the swaying the train does, walking fast is hard. I keep falling over,” Agatha said. Then, looking at Jane, she continued, “If you need to, try holding onto the seats as you walk. It helps keep your balance.” Jane looked up gratefully at her older cousin and started grabbing onto the seats.

The dining car was brightly lit and had a retro feel. The vinyl booths, little lamps, and napkin dispensers on each tabletop looked like something from a 1950s-style diner. They found a table large enough for everyone and traded stories about different mystery books and movies they knew that took place on a train.

After a bit, Mr. Murphy and Simon went to grab some refreshments for everyone. As the rest of the group chatted, Agatha looked out the window at the passing countryside. *I can hardly believe I’m going to be in France soon. I’ve waited so long, and it’s finally happening*, she thought, smiling.

They planned on staying in Aix-en-Provence for three days as Alec and Beth’s guests and then traveling to Paris for five more days of sightseeing. Most importantly, Agatha was looking forward to visiting the famous Louvre Museum. She had been taking painting lessons for the last few years and was quite talented. She couldn’t wait to see some of her favorite artists’ works in person.

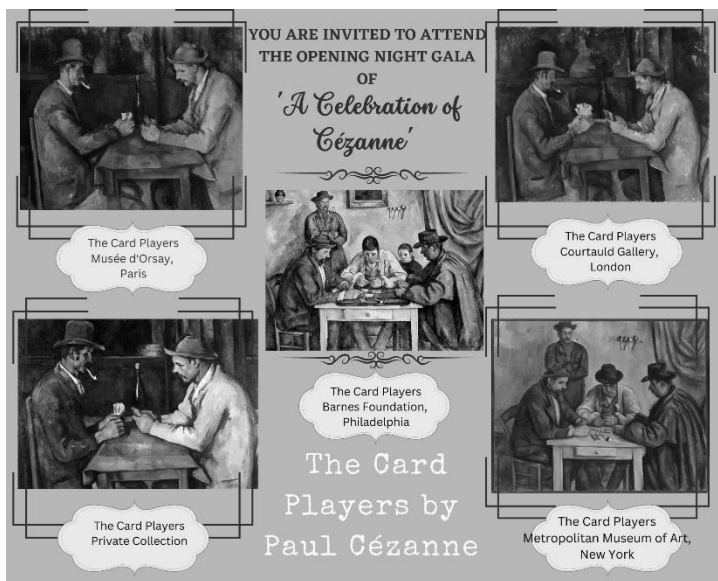
Mr. Murphy and Simon returned, their hands and arms filled with sodas, juices, and even a few bags of chips for everyone. As each person picked out their favorite and opened it, Simon raised his bottle of soda and said, “Cheers! Here’s to **not** seeing Mr. Aix in Aix!”

“All joking aside, it’s really something to be VIP guests of one of Europe’s most important Interpol officers,” said Mr. Murphy proudly. “Your children sure made an impression with Alec and Beth. They value your friendship and thought to include you in the event. I’m eager to hear more about this special exhibition.”

“Well, the exhibition celebrates Paul Cézanne, who was born in Aix-en-Provence in 1839. The Musée Granet was able to borrow some of his most famous artwork from all over the world to celebrate his long and impressive career. But the most exciting part is that his series, *The Card Players*, will be in the same place for the first time ever!” Agatha said.

“With a name like that, I’m guessing the paintings are of people playing cards,” Simon said, making a goofy face.

“Right you are, Simon,” Agatha said, returning the funny face. “Even though they’re five paintings of people playing cards, each one is slightly different. Look, here’s a picture of them on the invitation for the gala.” She pulled the card from her bag, and everyone leaned in to look at the five paintings.



“What’s so special about people playing cards?” Jane asked. “It seems a little boring.”

Agatha, who was quickly becoming an art expert, replied, “A lot of artists painted pictures of fields, people working, houses, that kind of thing. These subjects might be considered boring, but what makes them special is *how* they were painted. Cézanne took a popular subject in art, people playing cards, and used different

techniques to paint the people and objects. These techniques were considered new and interesting, and it’s what made him famous.”

“Exactly, Agatha,” Mr. Murphy said. “I’m sorry to jump in, but one of my favorite things about art is how everyday activities can have a deeper or hidden meaning. They might even symbolize something entirely different. Being an archeologist, I’ve studied different symbols in many different cultures and civilizations.”

“Um, I feel kind of silly asking because it sounds pretty important to your job, Dad. But what does symbolize mean?” Jane asked.

“Well, Janey,” Mr. Murphy began, turning to his daughter. “In this case, it means that an artist tells us something about the picture without using any words. Instead, they use the secret language of symbols.”

Intrigued that her dad had mentioned a secret language, Jane asked, “You mean they use, like, a squiggly line or a triangle to say that someone is nice?”

Mr. Murphy laughed. “Not quite, my dear,” he said, shaking his head. “They use objects to represent an idea or to tell a story. So, for example, if you see flowers in a painting, they could symbolize life, while a skull might symbolize,” he paused and let the idea hang in the air for a second.

“Death?” Agatha guessed.

Mr. Murphy nodded. “Sometimes colors are used to help an artist tell their story. Purple clothes mean someone is royal or very wealthy, while red symbolizes love or even danger. If you know what to look for,

it's kind of like a treasure hunt."

"That sounds really interesting, Dad," Simon said. "Do you know if *The Card Players* have any special meaning?" he asked curiously.

"You know, son, I'm afraid I don't know much about them other than that card playing can symbolize winning and losing. Maybe our Agatha could give us some background."

Agatha smiled. "Sure, if I can manage to read a bit before we get to Aix. I brought a book about Cézanne with me."

Rubbing his hands together and smiling mischievously, Mr. Murphy said, "You know, it's about time to start making some dinner plans. All this thinking, explaining, and *art historying* is making me hungry!"

"*Art historying* isn't a word, Dad!" Jane pointed out, giggling loudly.

"Well, it should be!" he teased, tousling Jane's hair. He stood up and went to talk to the porter who was in charge of dinner reservations. He returned a few minutes later and announced they had a reservation in the train's formal dining car at six-thirty that evening.

"I think I'll try to get a little reading in. I want to be able to tell you some interesting things about Cézanne while we're in Aix," Agatha said.

The rest decided to stay in the club car a little longer and play cards.

"What a fitting activity!" Agatha remarked as she saw Maxine pull out two decks of cards from her small backpack.

Maxine turned to her cousin with furrowed brows. "What do you mean, Aggie?"

"Well, I just told you that the crown jewel of the Cézanne exhibition is the collection of five paintings called *The Card Players*," she gently reminded her.

"I'm still not convinced the paintings are going to be interesting. I think I'd rather see the Crown Jewels in England instead," Simon said with a laugh as he shuffled the cards.

"Well, funny you should say that, Simon," Mr. Murphy began. "Next month, I'll be at a dig in the English countryside. Everyone should come over for a long weekend to visit. We could even take a trip to London to see the actual Crown Jewels if you're so interested in them. I'll be at an old estate where they've already uncovered loads of Roman artifacts. You know, come to think of it, they even run one of those mystery weekends there. So even if you're not impressed with the dig, it's still up your alley! I can't believe I didn't think to tell you guys earlier!"

"I've read about those online," Agatha said. "They look really fun! They have a bunch of actors who stay in character the whole weekend. Someone is the thief, and you're supposed to figure out who by interviewing everyone and searching for clues. They wouldn't stand a chance with us as the detectives, though." With that, she slid out of the booth and headed back to her cabin to read.

After a few spirited games of Spite and Malice, the children and Mr. Murphy also returned to the cabins to wash up for dinner.