

A Shooting at Chateau Rock

Also by Martin Walker

THE DORDOGNE MYSTERIES

Death in the Dordogne

(originally published as *Bruno, Chief of Police*)

The Dark Vineyard

Black Diamond

The Crowded Grave

The Devil's Cave

The Resistance Man

Death Undercover

(originally published as *Children of War*)

The Dying Season

Fatal Pursuit

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A Taste for Vengeance

The Body in the Castle Well

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WALKER

A Shooting
at Chateau
Rock

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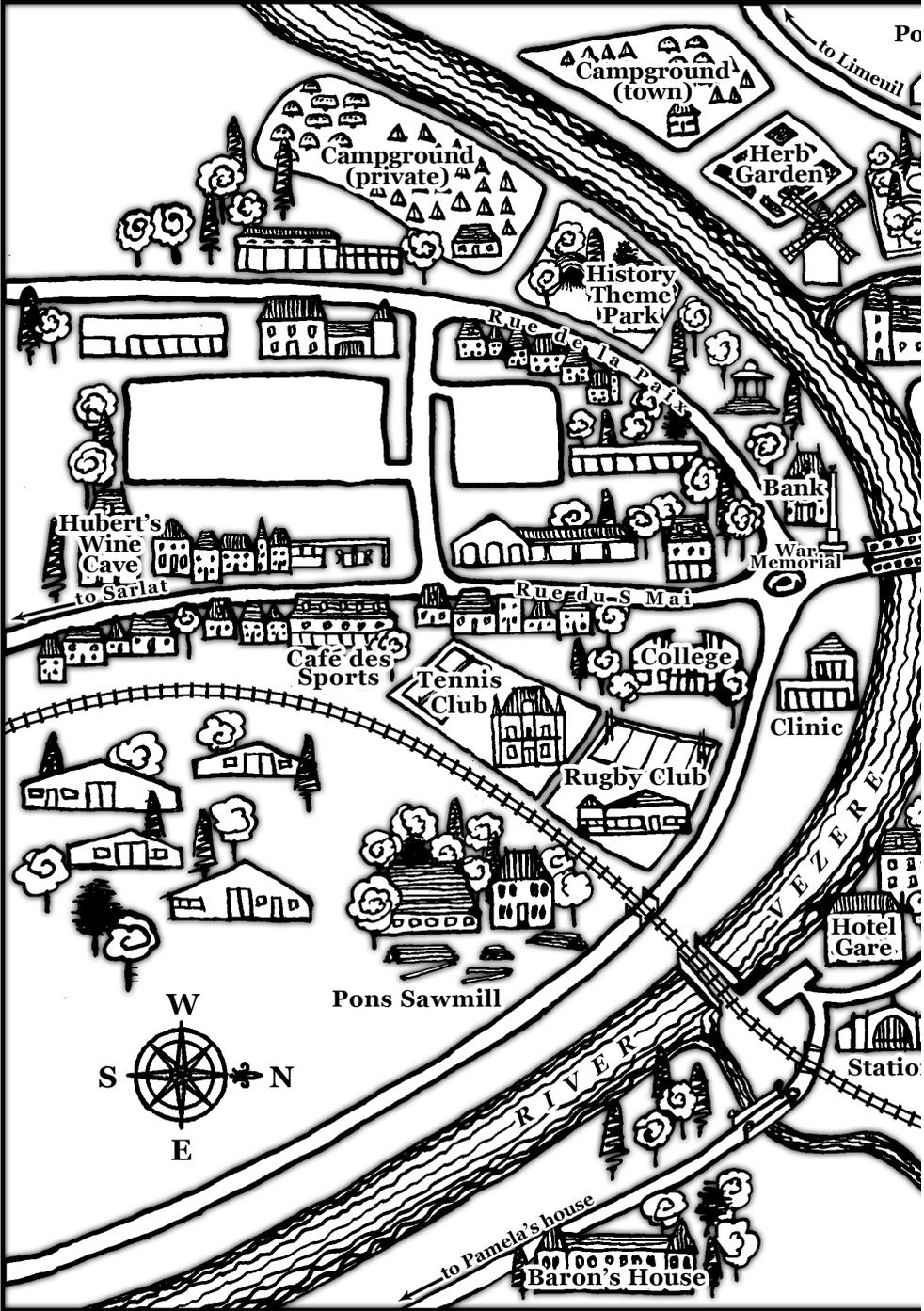
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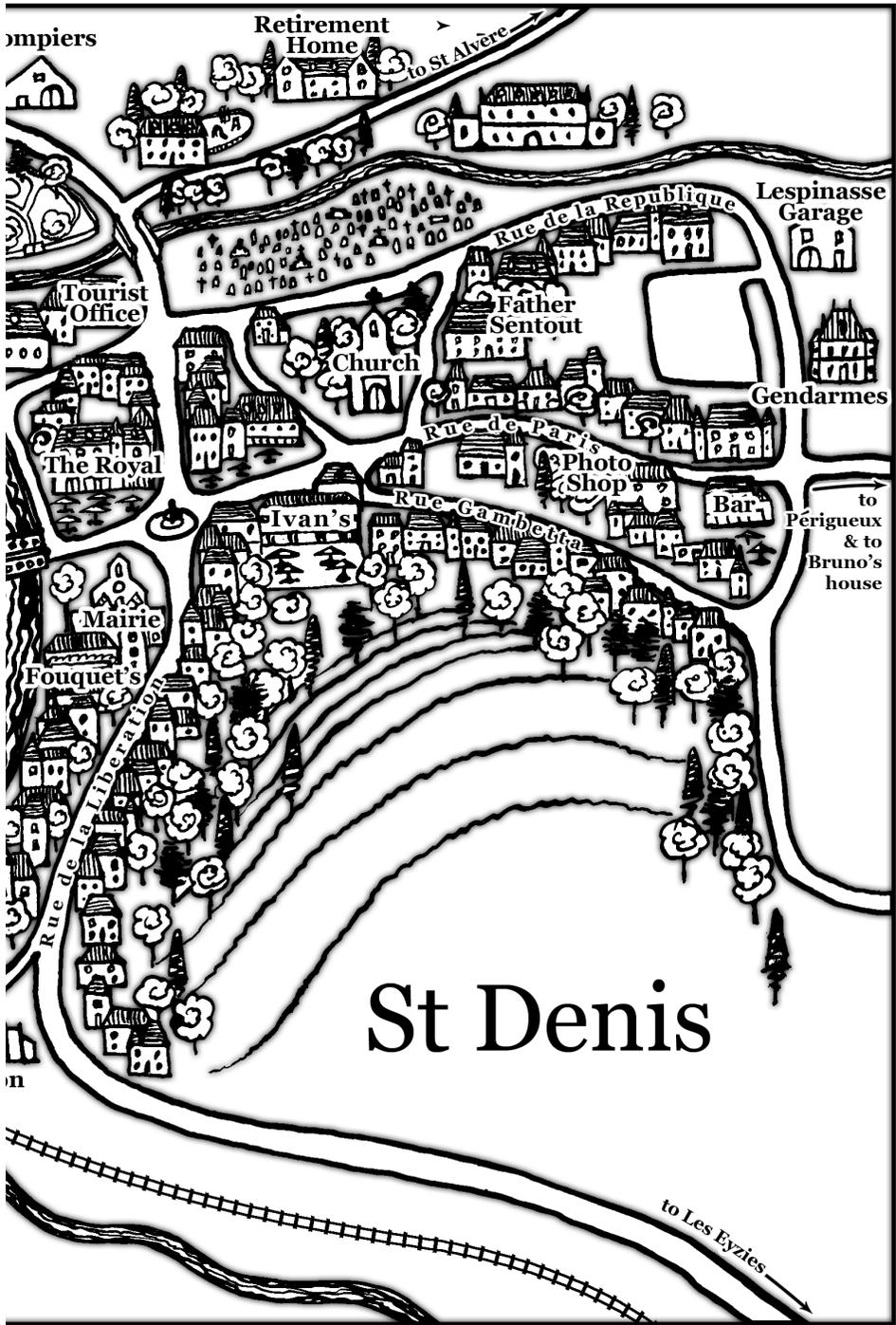
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To Gerard Fayolle and Gerard Labrousse, two fine men
and excellent mayors whose work taught me most of what
I know about the health of local democracy in the Périgord.





1

Two days after his father's funeral a distraught Gaston Driant came to the Mairie of St Denis, asking to see Bruno Courrèges, the town's chief of police. Bruno assumed that Gaston, an old acquaintance from the town tennis club, was still in shock at the dreadful nature of his father's death. The old man, a widower, had been alone on his remote farm when he had suffered a fatal heart attack, and had not been found for several days. Patrice, the postman, liked to visit his older customers from time to time to see how they were, and he'd always found a friendly welcome at Driant's home, along with a glass of his home-made *gnôle*, a notorious firewater that Bruno had learned to treat with great respect. When Patrice's knock went unanswered, he had opened the kitchen door. Two cats had darted out and then Patrice had reeled back from the smell. Then he had thrown up when he saw what the cats, desperate for food, had done to the dead farmer. Once he'd recovered, he'd called Dr Gelletreau, whom he knew had been Driant's physician, and waited outside in the fresh air for his arrival.

Gelletreau had come within the hour, accompanied by an ambulance. Once he had seen the body he wrote a prescription for sleeping pills for Patrice, along with an instruction for the

post office to grant him three days' leave. Given the circumstances, Gelleureau's death certificate, citing a heart attack as the cause of Driant's demise, had understandably gone unquestioned. And as the doctor later told Bruno, he had been treating Driant for heart trouble for the past several months and the previous month had written an authorization for a pacemaker to be installed in Driant's chest.

Bruno was surprised when Gaston firmly refused his offer to take him down for coffee to Café Cauet saying, 'This is going to be official, Bruno, so we'd better stay here in your office. I just came from a new *notaire* in Périgueux for what I understood to be the reading of Dad's will. He'd sent a letter for me that was waiting at the funeral parlour. My sister, Claudette, was with me, she came down from Paris. We were stunned by what the *notaire* told us. Anyway, on the drive back here we agreed I should come and see you as an old friend. I mean, you know the law and we don't.'

There was nothing left of his father's estate, Gaston explained. Without telling his children, Driant had sold the farm and put all the money into an insurance policy that would pay for him to spend the rest of his days in an expensive residential home for the elderly. He was due to go there in September. The *notaire* said that Driant had insisted on spending one last summer on the farm he'd inherited from his father.

'Claudette and I can't believe that Dad didn't tell us what he planned to do,' Gaston went on. 'And we don't understand why he went to this fancy *notaire* in Périgueux when the whole family had always used Brosseil for wills and such. I was going to see Brosseil right after going to sit with Dad in the funeral

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parlour but that was when I found the letter from the *notaire* in Périgueux.’

Bruno nodded in understanding. Brosseil had followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather as the local *notaire* in St Denis. He knew everybody in the district and everybody had always used him for wills, property sales and official paperwork. Brosseil was something of a character, fussy and prim in dress and manner and exhibiting a vanity so ridiculous that it was almost endearing, a private joke that the whole town enjoyed. But Bruno knew that his work was meticulous and that he was as honest as the day was long.

‘And this retirement home is not like Dad at all,’ Gaston went on. ‘My sister looked it up on her phone. It’s an old chateau that was turned into a hotel and now it’s a very grand home for the elderly. The fees start at four thousand euros a month. That’s more than double what I earn. And because my dad’s dead, this home gets to keep all the insurance money. It all seems very fishy to Claudette and me and we agreed that I’d ask you about it.’

Bruno took down the names and addresses of the *notaire*, the insurance agent and the residential home and made a photocopy of the *notaire*’s letter to Gaston.

‘Let me look into this,’ he said. ‘How old was your dad?’

‘Seventy-four next birthday, in November. But apart from what Gelletreau said about his heart, he seemed in good shape when I saw him last, still kept up the farm. I came up here in March as usual to help him with the lambing. And that’s another thing: what’s going to happen to the sheep and ducks and chickens?’

After being laid off when the local sawmill had closed a couple of years earlier, Gaston had found a job in Bordeaux as an ambulance driver. Bruno had written him a reference, citing Gaston's clean driving record and his years as a volunteer fireman which had brought him some qualifications in first aid. Gaston was raising two daughters who were still in secondary school so he'd probably been hoping for a decent inheritance when his father died.

'He'd never mentioned these plans to you or Claudette?' Bruno asked.

Gaston shook his head. 'When we were talking over dinner at lambing time he said he wanted to stay on the farm as long as he could and then go to the retirement home here in St Denis where he knew everybody. I can't understand what got into him.'

'Leave it with me,' Bruno said. 'I've got your address and phone number so I'll let you know what I find out. All I can say at this stage is that usually in cases of old people changing their wills there has to be a formal declaration signed by a doctor and a lawyer that establishes the change is being made freely and of his own volition and that he's in full possession of his faculties. If there is no such declaration, you might have a case. But going up against a *notaire* and an insurance firm would probably be a very lengthy and expensive affair.'

'*Merde*,' Gaston grunted. 'It's always the same. One law for the rich and another for the rest of us.'

'In this instance, Gaston, if there is no such attestation the law could be on your side. And you know the Mayor and I will back you. Again, my condolences on your loss. I liked your dad.'

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He was always a regular at the rugby games and at the hunting club dinners. And that *gnôle* he made was the best *eau de vie* in the valley, even if it wasn't really legal. I hope at least he left you a few bottles.'

'One or two, but he drank most of that rocket fuel himself and I can't say I blame him,' Gaston said, rising to shake Bruno's hand.

Bruno's first stop was just down the hall at the registry. There he consulted the commune's *cadastre*, the detailed map showing each property lot, its owner and the tax data. The new ownership had not yet been registered. Driant's farm was listed as sixty-two hectares, which would be big for a vineyard but was small for a sheep farm, mostly woodland and poor pasture up on the plateau. What surprised Bruno was that Driant had made an application for a construction permit to build four new houses on his land. He had described them in the application as cottages for farmworkers, which was what such applications usually said even when the real intention was to sell them off as holiday homes.

Bruno had never heard of Monsieur Sarrail, the *notaire* in Périgueux, but from the letterhead he knew he was in a fancy location on the Rue du Président Wilson in the centre of the city. When he looked up the agent for the insurance company Bruno found that he had an address in the same building. That was interesting. He checked the website of the retirement home and was startled to see a handsome chateau near Sarlat that he recognized. He'd been invited to dinner there one evening by his friend the Baron some five or six years ago, when it had been a newly restored four-star hotel with a dining room that

was said to be aiming for a Michelin rosette. The meal had been a touch too *nouvelle cuisine* for Bruno's taste, the portions small and the plates over-decorated in an effort to appear artistic and inventive. Bruno and the Baron had thought it pretentious. They'd never been back.

As a retirement home, it offered what were described as full medical services, a registered nurse, a physiotherapist and a masseuse on the premises, and a resident doctor who also sat on the management board. It advertised itself as a 'luxury establishment for the discerning customer, modelled on an exclusive private club'. It boasted its own cinema, a spa, a nine-hole golf course and a manager who had previously been on the staff of the Hotel Crillon in Paris.

The chef was said to have served his apprenticeship at a restaurant in Geneva that Bruno had heard of, and had then been a sous-chef at the Relais Louis XIII in Paris. Bruno had been taken there for dinner one evening by his old flame, Isabelle, and had eaten the finest quenelles of his life. Why on earth would Driant want to go to a grand retirement home like that, where the old sheep farmer would be sneered at by the other inhabitants and probably also by the staff? Subscriptions by application, the website said.

Bruno found the manager's name on the website, called the Hotel Crillon in Paris and asked for the head of security. He introduced himself and found that he was speaking to a former detective of the Préfecture de Police of Paris, who had heard of Bruno from their mutual friend J-J, the chief detective for the *département* of the Dordogne. Bruno said he was checking on a luxury retirement home in his region which claimed that the

manager had worked at the Crillon. The old detective laughed at the name. The man in question had indeed worked there for a few months as one of several junior assistant concierges, whose main duty was to take care of the guests' baggage and to collect and deliver their laundry and dry cleaning. He had been competent, the detective said, but had been asked to leave after one affronted female guest complained that he had offered his services as a gigolo.

Bruno then phoned J-J at police headquarters in Périgueux to ask if he knew anything about the *notaire* or the retirement home, and whether this sounded like some kind of insurance scam.

'I haven't heard about the retirement home, but this is nothing new in the *notaire* system,' said J-J. 'He's the first one here but there are several in Paris, a *notaire* who forms a partnership with an insurance agent, an accountant and an investment adviser to offer full financial consultancy, usually for rich people. They call it wealth management. So far I've heard nothing bad about the guy in Périgueux but it's not really my field. I can have a discreet word with a colleague from the *fisc* if you like.'

Bruno felt reassured. The *fisc* was the slang term for the *brigade nationale de répression de la délinquance fiscale*. Although they sometimes worked closely with the police they were not police officers, since they applied the fiscal code and reported to the Ministry for the Budget and Public Finances, not to the Interior Ministry. Bruno told J-J what he'd heard about the manager of the retirement home from J-J's friend at the Crillon and left him laughing.

Bruno then went to ask Claire, the secretary at the Mairie, if the Mayor was free. The Mayor must have heard him since he called through the half-open door to tell Bruno to come right in. Bruno explained what he'd heard and asked if the Mayor knew anything about Driant applying for a construction permit.

'Yes, and he got it approved by the council,' the Mayor said. 'It was a matter of professional courtesy. Driant served two terms on the council for the commune, before your time, Bruno. You know how councillors tend to support one another's projects, and with all these retirees coming here from the rest of France and Europe we're getting a housing shortage. But I agree it sounds odd. I'll find out what my colleague in Sarlat knows about this retirement home. It doesn't sound at all like the kind of place Driant would have enjoyed.'

'You know Driant's farm,' Bruno said. 'What do you think it would be worth?'

'They'd never sell it these days for raising sheep, not since Brussels cut the hill farm subsidies. Driant had one of the last of them,' the Mayor replied. 'The house and barns alone might fetch a hundred and fifty thousand, but only if somebody wanted to make it into a small hotel and *gîtes*. I assume that's what the construction permit was for. It would depend on how much repair work would be needed. But the place has a great view. It could be popular in summer with the right management. Maybe you should talk to Brosseil, then find out whether Driant had sworn a statement of competence and we'll talk again.'

Bruno found the fussy little *notaire* in his office on the Rue

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Gambetta. Short and getting plumper, Brosseil was always so neatly dressed in a suit and tie with a flower in his buttonhole that he had a reputation as something of a dandy. In St Denis few men wore ties to work, not even the Mayor. Brosseil was respected rather than liked. His wife, one of the dwindling number of women in town who stayed at home and prepared the traditional daily lunch rather than take a formal job, was a faithful churchgoer and a stalwart of the Action Catholique charity.

Bruno, however, knew Brosseil had hidden depths. He had heard from female friends that the *notaire* was a star of the dance floor, the best ballroom performer in town. He went twice a week with his wife to nearby clubs in Bergerac and Périgueux, where they and their fellow enthusiasts could twirl to their hearts' content. Bruno could just about waltz but had no idea of the difference between a quickstep and a foxtrot. He simply circled the room, moving his feet in time to the music while trying not to step on his partner's toes. But he recalled from the last *pompiers* ball that Brosseil had indeed been the master of the dance floor. Bruno's friends Pamela, Fabiola and Florence had each returned starry-eyed from their waltzes with Brosseil, saying he was such a skilled partner that they had never danced so well.

'This comes as an unpleasant surprise,' Brosseil said after Bruno had explained the reason for his visit. 'It's not considered good form to go poaching in other *notaires*' districts and Driant was my client. It's also a breach of professional courtesy not to let me know that the old will had been superseded. I drew up and filed Driant's original will for him. How he heard of

this new *notaire* in Périgueux I have no idea. This means that in effect Driant has disinherited his children.'

The insurance aspect of the deal was also questionable, Bruno was told. Under the usual actuarial tables, Driant could have expected to live another five to ten years, so the fees of the retirement home could reach as much as five hundred thousand euros. And the farm could only hope to recoup that money if it was sold with the gîtes as a going concern. But building the four gîtes would cost at least three hundred thousand, plus repairs to the farm, building a swimming pool, terraces, a proper parking lot, furniture . . .

'The numbers don't add up – they wouldn't get their money back. I can't see any reputable insurance firm agreeing to such a deal,' Brosseil said, ticking off each new expense on his well-manicured fingers. 'Unless, of course, they somehow knew that the old man had heart trouble. For someone of that age, any insurer would want to see medical records before agreeing to a contract. So I agree with Driant's son. It sounds fishy. Have you spoken to the Mayor about this?'

'He was the one who suggested I should talk to you. What do you know about this *notaire* Driant used?'

'Not much,' Brosseil replied. 'Sarrail is new to the region. I heard he came from Marseille or Nice, somewhere on the coast. He's obviously well-financed, judging from the office he's leased. Still, with so many retirees moving to the Périgord and the new hotels and restaurants being launched, he probably knows the region is a promising market. I'll ask around. If I learn anything useful I'll let you know.'

Brosseil paused, tapping a finger against his lip. 'It might be

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useful to get hold of whatever documents Driant signed with this insurance firm and with the retirement home. I checked on the registry of wills when I heard of his death and no new will had been registered that would invalidate the old one. That's why I'm surprised Driant's son went to Sarrail rather than to me. As far as I know Driant's original will is still valid and along with his son I'm named as an executor. I can certainly request a copy of any financial agreements he made that would affect the will. The more I think about this, the more irregular it appears to be.'

'Please do that. But could Driant have signed a new will, invalidating the old one, just before he died?' Bruno asked. 'If so, the registry might not have had time to be updated.'

'That's possible but they are usually pretty quick. I can check. And if you're in touch with Gaston, ask him why he went to Sarrail. How did he know Sarrail was involved in his father's estate? Did Sarrail contact him?'

'Sarrail sent a letter to the funeral parlour. It was waiting for Gaston when he got there,' said Bruno. He pulled out his notebook and scribbled down the questions Brosseil had raised. At the back of his mind another question was starting to surface. The crucial evidence in all this might turn out to be the death certificate signed by Dr Gelletreau, which listed a heart attack as the cause. Bruno would have heard if there had been an autopsy. Gelletreau may have made some kind of post-mortem examination but more likely the doctor, almost as old as Driant, had simply filled out the form on the basis of Driant's age and history of heart trouble. If so, since the old man had been cremated, any contrary evidence was no longer available.

As he went back to his office, Bruno pondered calling his friend Fabiola who was by far the best doctor in town and always willing to help him. Phoning her at the town clinic, where she worked with Gelletreau, did not seem like a good idea. Bruno knew he'd be seeing her that evening when they went out to exercise the horses. He could ask her opinion then. He knew she was fond of the elderly doctor, even while she had limited respect for his skills.

As he entered his office his desk phone was ringing. It was Brosseil to say that he had checked again with the registry of wills and Driant's new will had been registered on the previous Tuesday, having been signed and formally approved on the Friday, three days earlier. Bruno checked the calendar. Patrice had found Driant's body on the Friday after the will had been registered. The funeral had taken place on the following Tuesday. It was now Thursday.

'It sounds as though Driant may have died on the very day the will was formally registered,' Bruno said. 'Which is the crucial date for the will: the day it was signed or the day it was registered?'

'The day it was signed and witnessed,' Brosseil replied. 'But that's irrelevant since we don't know the exact date and time of death. Meanwhile, I've just written to Sarrail to request copies of the deeds of sale for Driant's farm, the insurance contract and also evidence that the sale of the livestock has been properly registered. That's very important in these days of European subsidies and regulations.'

'Tell me more,' Bruno said, and scribbled down notes as Brosseil explained the arcane procedures that only a country

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notaire accustomed to dealing in livestock sales would be likely to know.

‘What if the *notaire* and new owner haven’t followed these procedures with the livestock?’ Bruno asked when Brosseil had finished.

‘In a really serious case, the entire sale could be in question and the *notaire* involved could lose his licence. He could even be sued for professional negligence by the new owner. However, in this case they probably have a way out by saying that Driant agreed to take care of the formalities about the livestock but died before doing so. That’s the way I’d play it and I imagine these men aren’t fools.’

‘What happens if Sarraill won’t let you have those documents?’

‘Deeds of sale for properties and livestock and wills are public documents which have to be filed and registered at the Préfecture. One way or another, we’ll get copies of them. Whether we can get the *notaire* is another matter.’

2

Bruno had no idea whether a crime had been committed or whether Gaston had simply been another victim of some fancy legal footwork against which he had no redress without launching a lawsuit he could not afford. As a country policeman, Bruno adhered to an unwritten code that required him to do his best for his neighbours and also for their livestock. So as he drove his police van up into the hills towards St Chamassy, enjoying the pure pleasure of this fresh green landscape in May, he was wondering if anyone had taken care of the sheep and chickens. The cats, he knew, could fend for themselves.

When he pulled into Driant's farmyard he saw a truck that he recognized. It belonged to Marc Guillaumat, another elderly sheep farmer who lived a few kilometres away on the other side of the valley. He had been a friend of Driant's since their schooldays. Bruno found him filling the water troughs at the chicken coop, shook hands and asked if he needed any help.

'No, I've just about finished,' Marc said. 'I thought I'd better keep an eye on the lambs until somebody decides what to do with them, and when I got here I found there was no water for the chickens and ducks. The sheep can feed themselves up

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here this time of year on the pasture but there's a lot of foxes with young to feed so I was worried about the lambs.'

Just beyond the duck pond, Bruno saw a flock of sheep clustered close together with four sheepdogs lying on their bellies, tongues out, watching the newly shorn ewes whose lambs huddled beneath them. Up here on the plateau, the farmers usually kept the fleece on their flocks until April or even later.

'Two of them are my dogs and the others, the bitch and her pup, belonged to Driant,' Guillaumat said, following the direction of Bruno's gaze. 'He trained them well. Nobody took them away so they've kept watch on the lambs but I don't think his dogs have been fed since young Gaston came up here the morning of the funeral. I had some dog biscuits in the truck and they leaped on them like they were starving.'

Bruno raised his eyebrows. Mistreatment of dogs angered him.

'I thought Gaston would come back and tell me what he planned to do with them all but I haven't heard from him. He gave me Driant's shotgun as a keepsake but that was all. The sheep troughs were bone dry when I got here. I suppose they could use the duck pond but look at it, damn near dry. It's not right, Bruno. I'll be giving Gaston a piece of my mind when I see him.'

'It's kind of complicated but it turns out Gaston and his sister don't inherit,' Bruno said, explaining Driant's decision.

'I was wondering if he'd do something crazy like that,' Guillaumat said. 'One time earlier this year I came to visit and he had some fancy young woman with him, foreign, from the way she spoke. She wore a short skirt and too much make-up. Then

I saw her here again later and I asked him about her. He said she was from his insurance company, but he always was one for the ladies. He got lonely after his wife died. Apart from me and a few chums at the rugby club I don't think he had many friends. Mind you, he was always at that Club du Troisième Age, but that was to meet women. '

'When did you see this young woman?' Bruno asked.

'The first time was in March after the lambing and then again in early April, when I came to see him about getting the fleeces shorn. We always shared the work. It's easier with the two of us. And with his fleece money he always went down to one of those massage parlours in Bergerac.' Guillaumat gave a short, harsh laugh. 'After a few drinks he used to boast that he could still do the business, just like his old ram.'

Bruno nodded, grinning. 'If the new owners don't want the sheep, would you like to have them? They might even pay you to take them off their hands.'

Guillaumat shook his head. 'I don't have the pasture and it's the same with the only other two sheep farmers left around here. And I don't know anybody who could afford to buy them. If it wasn't for the subsidies, we'd starve. I suppose the new owners will just ship them down to the abattoir.' The old man paused and spat. 'They'll be in for a shock when they find out it costs as much to slaughter them as they'll get for the meat.'

'Would you want the ducks and chickens?' Bruno went on. 'The new owners probably don't even know they exist.'

'Maybe the ducks because I could get a few euros for them but not the chickens. There's no point. With these European regulations we're not allowed to sell the eggs in the markets

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any more. But I'll take the geese. Come December I can get fifty, sixty euros for each one.'

'Will you keep an eye on the sheep until I can find out what the new owners want to do? I'll make sure they pay you for your time.'

'In that case, certainly. I'll come by every couple of days.'

'By the way, how did you learn about Driant's death?' Bruno asked.

'In the market, I ran into Dr Gelletreau. Funny thing was, I'd called the doc when I couldn't get through to Driant because he wasn't answering his phone. He sometimes forgot to recharge it. But Gelletreau said not to worry because he'd just been in about getting a pacemaker for his heart.'

The old farmer waved and drove off. Bruno found the door to the farmhouse open, the rotten-sweet smell of the old man's death still lingering so he opened the available windows and looked around. Somebody had emptied the ancient fridge and washed the plates, stacking them in the dryer on the sink. There were two wine glasses, two water glasses, two side plates, two dinner plates and two soup bowls. Had Driant not been alone for his last meal?

There were four rooms on the ground floor – the kitchen, a primitive bathroom, a seldom-used parlour with thick dust on the window sills, and an untidy study with a desk piled with unopened mail. A narrow staircase led upstairs to one large bedroom, two small ones and a junk room filled with ancient trunks and women's clothes hanging on rails in plastic sacks. They looked very old-fashioned, as likely to belong to Driant's mother as to his late wife. It seemed that Driant had slept in the

main bedroom, since the bed was unmade and a pair of grubby striped pyjamas hung from the post at the foot of the bed. One pillow still had the depression that showed where Driant had lain his head. The other looked clean enough but when on a hunch Bruno turned it over he saw a stain that looked like lipstick. He bent down to sniff and caught the faintest of scents. Inside a drawer of the bedside table he found a small bottle without the usual pharmacist's label containing lozenge-shaped blue pills. Beneath them were two well-thumbed porno magazines and a vibrator.

There was no landline phone in the house and Bruno could find no mobile phone, even after leafing through the mess in the study. But there was a mobile phone bill from Orange, on which a quavering hand had scrawled 'paid'. In a drawer he found a cheque book, with counterfoils showing payments to Orange, the Trésor Public of St Denis and the local supermarket. Bruno took the cheque book, leaving a signed receipt, noted the number of the mobile phone and tried calling it. No result, not even the message service. That was odd, since the payments were up to date. There was little more to be done in the house so he made sure the sheepdogs' feeding bowls were filled with biscuits and croquettes he found in the barn.

Still angry at the neglect of the animals Bruno drove straight to Périgueux to confront Sarraïl, the *notaire*. A young woman in the outer office looked startled at his arrival and asked if he had an appointment.

'The police don't make appointments, *mademoiselle*,' he said briskly and strode past her to the open the door which carried Sarraïl's name.

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He found a sleekly groomed man in his thirties speaking a foreign language and Bruno heard the phrase, ‘*Da, konyechno, vsoy pariadke.*’ It sounded Slavonic, perhaps Russian. He was wearing a pinstriped suit, a brilliantly white shirt and a silk tie that looked expensive. He was sitting behind a very modern desk of steel and glass that carried a large computer screen, a notepad and a Mont Blanc fountain pen. He was rising angrily at the intrusion until he took note of Bruno’s uniform. He gestured to Bruno to take a seat, turned away and spoke again briefly in Russian before putting down the phone and asking how he could help.

‘Monsieur Sarrail?’ Bruno asked. The man nodded. ‘Where did you learn your Russian?’

‘At school, but I kept it up. I have some Russian clients. And who would you be?’

Bruno handed him a business card and explained that he was investigating a complaint from Driant’s son about his father’s new will. Had there been any formal statement of his fitness to do so?

‘Because of his age, I insisted on it,’ said the *notaire*, an educated voice with a slight northern accent, from Lille or maybe Belgium. He sounded calm and self-assured. Behind him on the wall was a large modern painting that featured battling superheroes from comic books rendered in harshly clashing colours of orange, pink and green.

Monsieur Driant had appeared before a panel of three qualified assessors in Périgueux, Sarrail explained, and went on to name them. One was a psychologist from the local hospital, the second was Maître Debeney from the Palais de Justice and

the third was François Maunoury, currently serving his third term as city councillor. The new will was handled in the usual way. The assessors satisfied themselves that Monsieur Driant was competent to sign it. Sarrail had then read the will aloud. Driant confirmed in the presence of the assessors that this was a precise statement of his intentions. Then he read it aloud and signed it.

‘At my suggestion Driant then read out the act of sale and the insurance policy and his letter of application to the retirement home and showed them the home’s letter of acceptance,’ Sarrail went on. ‘The assessors asked him whether he intended in effect to disinherit his two children and he replied in the affirmative. I forget his exact words but Driant said they had each moved away and he seldom saw them and so he felt he could not count on them to see him through his old age so he wanted to make his own arrangements. He also made a disparaging remark about his daughter’s lifestyle. I felt it proper to add that the children were not disinherited. All his other goods, including a small life insurance policy along with his furniture and personal possessions and vehicle went equally to his children. It was all completely above board and after some more questions, the assessors were satisfied that Monsieur Driant knew exactly what he was doing. Each of the three signed the will as witnesses.’

‘When was this?’ Bruno asked, thinking Sarrail’s remarks sounded carefully rehearsed.

‘Twelve days ago.’

‘Very shortly before he died,’ said Bruno and paused, as if reflecting. ‘Did you register the new will?’

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‘Yes, but not that day. The meeting with the assessors was on a Friday afternoon so I formally filed it on Monday. It was registered on the following day.’

‘And how did you learn of his death?’

‘I read it in *Sud Ouest*. I at once wrote to his son at the address of the funeral parlour in St Denis, where the paper reported that the body had been taken. What exactly was this complaint from the son? I can imagine he wasn’t happy with the new will but that’s not unusual among families.’

‘Did you visit Driant’s home? Around here that’s usual in the case of a *notaire* who drew up the will.’

‘No, I didn’t, because the farm was not part of the will. It had already been transferred to a new owner, the insurance company. It is now in their hands. Some of the contents were bequeathed to his children but I gather they had already taken those when they visited the farm.’

‘What do you plan to do about the livestock?’ Bruno asked. ‘There are more than a hundred sheep, almost as many lambs and the old ram, not to mention the ducks, chickens and sheep-dogs. There’ll be trouble if they’re not taken care of.’

There was a long silence and Bruno could see the *notaire* was thinking carefully and then he began scribbling on his notepad before he answered, ‘Again, that’s the responsibility of the new owner but I’ll look into it and make sure they are disposed of without delay. Thank you for informing me. Is there anything else?’

Convinced that the *notaire* couldn’t care less about the sheep, Bruno wanted to press the matter. He asked for the name and address of the new owners and the lawyer simply referred

him to the insurance agent in the same building, information Bruno already had.

‘Would you have the name of the young woman from the insurers who visited Monsieur Driant in April?’ Bruno asked.

‘No, but you might try the agent himself,’ came the curt reply.

‘The last time Gaston Driant saw his father a few weeks ago, the old man had said he planned to live and work on the farm as long as he could and then go to the retirement home in St Denis where he knew people,’ Bruno said. ‘Gaston couldn’t understand why his father had suddenly chosen this much more expensive place without even letting his son and daughter know.’

‘I see,’ said Sarraill. ‘There could be many reasons for that, not even allowing for the resentment with which Monsieur Driant spoke of his children during the assessment process. As long as he was judged to be in his right mind, it is not for the *notaire* to question his client’s wishes. And there’s no question about Monsieur Driant’s competence. If you’d like to speak with any of the assessors I can give you their names and phone numbers and print out a copy of their assessment for you. Will that be all?’

‘Are you in contact with the insurance agent?’ Bruno asked. ‘He seems to share your address.’

‘Monsieur Constant and I sometimes work together if a client needs insurance advice,’ Sarraill replied cautiously. ‘Why?’

‘You might want to let him know that wilful neglect of livestock is a criminal offence. I’ve been up to the farm and those animals have been left without food or water. This can be a serious matter if, as in this case, the animals and farm in question are receiving subsidies from public funds.’

‘I see. I’ll try to let Monsieur Constant know about this but he’s out of the office, travelling on business. Of course, it’s an issue for the insurance company, not him personally. I imagine such matters are outside his usual sphere. Do you have any suggestions I might pass on? Coming from a rural commune I imagine you know more about this than I do.’

Sarrail uncapped the fountain pen and held it poised over the notepad.

Bruno explained that the new owner should either sell them, and he would find livestock markets listed at the Préfecture, or take them to a licensed abattoir to have them killed and sell the meat. Before this he would have to put together the necessary forms for each animal, and inform and get approval from the local livestock agent. His name and address would also be on file at the Préfecture.

‘The laws of wilful negligence and mistreatment of animals also apply to the sheepdogs, ducks and chickens,’ Bruno added. ‘But I’m not sure whether they qualify for subsidies under the new hill farm rules.’

Sarrail said nothing but began scribbling notes.

‘As the *notaire* who handled the will, did you also take care of the sale of the farm to the insurance group?’ Bruno asked. He was starting to enjoy this. ‘If so, you will naturally have filed details of the new owner of the livestock with the proper authorities both at our own agriculture ministry and with the European Commission. And of course you’ll have ensured the new owner had a proper licence to be the owner of subsidized livestock that may be used for human consumption.’

‘I see,’ said Sarrail, avoiding Bruno’s question about drawing

up the deeds of sale. 'I'll pass all this along to Monsieur Constant. But I'm confident that the proper formalities will have been observed by Monsieur Driant, although that might have been interrupted by his unfortunate death.'

'I hope you understand, *monsieur*, that any failure to meet the livestock regulations could throw the whole sale of the farm into question, quite apart from the legal liabilities for taking due care of the animals. I will naturally try to reach Monsieur Constant himself but I count on you to ensure he is aware of these concerns and that he faces serious charges. Please ask him to contact me as soon as possible. May I wish you a very good day, Monsieur Sarraill. And by the way, welcome to the Périgord.'

Bruno rose and left, trying to suppress a grin at the thought of these city-slickers learning to their cost that animals had rights, too. He tried the door of the insurance agent in the next door office. It was locked and there was no response to his knock. He scribbled a brief message on his business card explaining that Monsieur Constant should contact him at once and pushed it under the door.

For the first time, he began to think that there might be hope for Gaston and his sister to inherit something after all. Back in his police van, he called his friend Maurice, the regional livestock commissioner at the sub-Préfecture in Sarlat, whom he knew from festive evenings after rugby games, and asked whether the Driant farm sale had been registered with him. No, it had not, Bruno was told. But it certainly should have been. Bruno then told Maurice, with only a little exaggeration, that without him and old Guillaumat, Driant's sheep might have

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died of thirst by now. Bruno explained the whole story and agreed to meet Maurice at the farm the following morning at eight.

Then he called another friend, Annette, a young magistrate in Sarlat, and asked if she would draw up a summons against the agent of the insurance company for mistreatment of livestock, with himself as witness of negligence.

3

Back in his office, Bruno found a message from Brosseil asking him to call. He rang the number and learned that Brosseil had just heard from a colleague that one of the more celebrated small chateaux in the area was up for sale, the business being handled by a fancy agency in Paris that was better known for its art sales. Bruno thanked him for the news and sat back in his office chair, staring out across the bridge over the River Vézère and along the ridge that flanked the valley to the north. The chateau was on the far side of that ridge, about five kilometres from St Denis, and Bruno sometimes passed it when exercising his horse.

The place was known as Chateau Rock. It enjoyed quite a reputation in the neighbourhood that dated from the first arrival of its rock star owner Rod Macrae, and the widespread assumption that drug-fuelled orgies with groupies and exotic sports cars would become regular features of local life. Older inhabitants of the region professed to be shocked but their younger counterparts were thrilled. This would put St Denis on the map! Even the appearance of the heavily pregnant Madame Macrae and their sedate Volvo estate had not stilled the salacious expectations of the locals, nor the way teenage boys

would dare one another to creep through the undergrowth to spy on the rock star's private life. By the time Bruno arrived in St Denis the novelty and the fantasies had long faded. But the region was glad to have a famous inhabitant and a faint echo of the chateau's old notoriety remained.

Bruno was surprised at his ignorance of Macrae's decision to sell. He thought he knew the family better than that. He had visited Chateau Rock regularly, when Rod Macrae and his wife Meghan held their annual birthday party for their two children, born on the same day although three years apart. Bruno knew them both, for they had each spent years in the tennis classes he ran for the local youngsters.

The children, Jamie and Kirsty, had both gone to the junior school in St Denis and then to the town's *collège* until the age of fifteen when each of them had been sent to a boarding school in England. Jamie, the elder by three years, was now at the Royal College of Music in London and Kirsty was hoping to go to Edinburgh University in the autumn. Bruno knew Rod quite well from the local rugby club, less for his appearance at local matches than through his almost religious attendance at the broadcasts of the Six Nations matches on the club's big screen. Whenever Scotland was playing he brought along a litre bottle of Scotch whisky for all to share. In Bruno's early years in St Denis, when the recording studio that Macrae had built in the chateau grounds was still busy, he had been invited to attend the post-recording party that Macrae always threw after some new album was complete. But there had been no such party for some years, Bruno reflected, wondering if this decline had inspired Macrae's decision to sell. On impulse, Bruno picked

up the phone to call him and was answered by Macrae's wife, Meghan.

'I just heard the news that you're selling but I hope you stay in the area,' he began. 'We'd miss you.'

'I'm going back to Britain,' she said. 'I'm not sure about Rod. He's still thinking what to do. But now the kids are grown and moving out, the place is too big. We're getting a divorce while I'm still young enough to start a new life. We'll have a last family summer here before, though.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Bruno replied. 'I half-expected Jamie and Kirsty to turn up one day to start new families of their own.'

'They love it here so they might, but not at Chateau Rock. Still, they'll be here this summer. Jamie is giving some concerts for *Musique du Périgord Noir*. And he'll be recording his first CD. Rod calls it his studio's last gasp.'

'And you're also staying on through the summer? It all sounds surprisingly amicable for a divorce.'

'It is amicable and we'll stay friends. At least I hope so. I'm still fond of him but I was a child bride, Bruno. Rod's getting on for seventy and I'm not quite forty yet. I have no intention of spending the rest of my life as his unpaid nurse.'

'Are you going back to Scotland?'

'Rod might do that but I'm off to a teacher's training college just outside London. You remember I took that degree in French and Spanish through the Open University? With one year of training I can be a full-time teacher and I'm looking forward to that. I haven't yet decided where to go. My sister lives in Manchester so I might move there.'

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Bruno wished her luck. He'd always been impressed by Meghan even before she'd begun volunteering to give English conversation classes at the local *collège*.

'Please give Rod my regards and I might come up tomorrow to say hello. Are Jamie and Kirsty back yet? I'd like to see them again.'

'Kirsty flies in tomorrow afternoon and Jamie is driving down from Paris with some of his musician friends sometime in the next few days. He's a bit vague about it. You'll be very welcome whenever you want to stop by.'

Bruno went down the hall of the Mairie to inform the Mayor of the news. The immediate reaction of the wily old politician was to regret that no local estate agent had been hired.

'It's best to keep these matters within the community,' the Mayor said. 'Local knowledge is always important, as you know, Bruno. I'd hate to see the fees from a sale like that going to some big firm in Paris. Do you know how much they are asking for the chateau?'

'Not yet,' said Bruno. 'I'll try and find out tomorrow. But I'm also concerned about the vineyard. I'd hate for us to lose that.'

Macrae had acquired almost five hectares of ragged and ill-maintained vines with his property and at first had hopes of marketing bottles of his own Chateau Rock. But after some disappointing years hiring part-time winemakers he had allowed the town vineyard to manage it on their joint behalf. Julien, who ran the vineyard, and Hubert who ran the town's celebrated wine store, had been delighted with the deal. They reckoned on getting at least fifteen and maybe twenty thousand

bottles a year from Macrae's vines and he was happy with five thousand euros in cash each year and all the bottles he wanted for his own consumption.

'I recall that it's a *bail agricole*,' said the Mayor. 'Any new owner will have to honour that or buy us out.'

St Denis was officially an agricultural commune, which gave farmers special rights and all the inhabitants outside the *zone urbaine* were entitled to keep geese and chickens, goats and horses. Newcomers were sometimes surprised and even offended that they had no legal recourse against the owners of the cockerels who woke them at dawn, or the donkeys which brayed their way through mating seasons. More than once, a new arrival who proved less than neighbourly in his dealings with nearby farmers would find a host of cackling geese appearing near his bedroom window during the night.

Moreover, such a commune allowed for a *bail agricole*, a special agricultural lease that ran for nine years, with an automatic renewal for another nine years unless formal notice was given on either side eighteen months before the lease expired. An agricultural lease could be verbal and only required a notary's intervention if it extended beyond twenty years.

'A Paris *notaire* might not know much about these farm leases,' the Mayor said thoughtfully. 'How long has the current lease been going?'

'It will be two years in November, just after that *vendange* when we launched the town vineyard,' Bruno replied. 'And the lease is verbal. You and I were there to witness it when Macrae and Julien shook hands.'

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‘Even though he’s never turned up for board meetings, Macrae is on record as a director of the company,’ the Mayor added, stroking his chin in the way he did when thinking hard. ‘And he signs the company’s annual reports, which means he cannot claim to be unaware of the *bail agricole*.’

‘I think he only became a director because Kirsty enjoyed working in the vineyard,’ said Bruno, wondering where the Mayor was heading. Most of Bruno’s savings were invested in the town vineyard which made a modest profit every year, employed half a dozen locals and would soon pay off the bank loan the Mayor had negotiated to buy out Julien’s failing business.

‘Every school holiday Kirsty was out there in the vines, pruning in winter, trimming in springtime, picking in September,’ Bruno went on. ‘Julien even offered her a job but Macrae always insisted she should get a degree first. She starts at Edinburgh University this autumn and I imagine she’ll be there during this year’s harvest.’

The Mayor waved aside Bruno’s remarks.

‘It will be up to us to ensure that due account of our lease is taken in the event of a sale,’ he said, adopting a pious air that Bruno recognized. It meant the Mayor was up to something. ‘We have a duty to consider the interests of the town vineyard. After all, the town has made significant investments and improvements there, clearing out dead vines, replanting new ones, taking on new staff. Until we took it over, that vineyard was a liability. And now it will doubtless enhance the value of Macrae’s property.’

Bruno nodded. ‘And let’s not forget that we’ve started the

process of turning it into an organic vineyard,' he said, grinning as he realized the way the Mayor's mind was working.

'Indeed, nothing could be more important than the new owner recognizing the ecological stewardship the town vineyard has displayed,' the Mayor replied. 'It's a great responsibility. They might be well advised to come to an amicable arrangement to let us take over the vineyard altogether.'

The Mayor smiled at Bruno. They understood one another perfectly. The Mayor did not need to spell out all the endless little obstructions an experienced mayor, armed with an agricultural lease, could deploy to ensure that the vineyard remained firmly and probably permanently within the town's control.

'I suppose it will depend who buys the property,' Bruno said. 'Given the history of Chateau Rock it's likely to be another foreigner. If so, we should make him or her very welcome and suggest that the mutually advantageous partnership between the new owner and the town vineyard continues for many years to come. And we have some time. The sale won't go through until October since the Macraes want a last family summer together at the chateau.'

'Good,' said the Mayor. 'Let's keep this to ourselves for the moment, though you could let Hubert and Julien know about it in confidence. If there are any further improvements to be done in the vineyard now is the time.'

'There's that experimental corner where they are trying the new rootstock. You remember that warning Hubert gave us about the way climate change is affecting our Merlot.'

Local winemakers had recognized that the hotter summers

were shortening the growing season for certain grape varieties, Merlot most of all. Some who kept good records reckoned that it was ripening a month earlier than thirty years ago and contained more sugar which meant more alcohol in the wine. Some of the red wines were now being labelled as having fifteen or even sixteen per cent alcohol, which was creeping into the territory of sherry and madeira and other fortified wines.

Producing a balanced blend with the usual Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc grapes was becoming a challenge. It was no good picking the Merlot early; the grapes would not have time to produce the phenols and tannins that give it character. One or two of the Bergerac vineyards were even planning to phase out Merlot altogether. But winemakers tended to be instinctively conservative, with many of the traditionalists reckoning that with skilful management of the leaf cover over the Merlot grapes they could slow their ripening. Giving up Merlot would be a last resort, so closely and traditionally were the wines of Bergerac and the whole of the Bordeaux region linked to this iconic grape. The wines of Pomerol, some of them – like Château Petrus – among the most expensive wines in the world, were traditionally made entirely from Merlot grapes.

Like many other growers in the region, the town vineyard was steering a middle course, hoping for the best but preparing for the worst. They continued to plant Merlot while at the same time experimenting with new varieties of grapes that were better adapted to the heat.

‘I think I’ll ask Pamela if we can take the horses that way

on this evening's exercise,' Bruno said as he left the Mayor's office. 'I'd like to see how those new grapes are coming along.'

And so later that day, his uniform on a hanger back in his police van, Bruno was on horseback in his riding clothes and boots when he drew rein and stepped down from the saddle. Patting his horse on the neck he led Hector through one of the rows of new vines, pausing every few metres to lift some foliage and examine the grapes, hard as little bullets this early in the season but already warm to the touch. It seemed to Bruno, still an amateur in the winemaking business, like a promising harvest so long as the weather remained good and no thunderstorms came to pepper the grapes with hail. Those little pellets of ice could flatten and destroy an entire vineyard overnight.

'What are you looking for?' Pamela called down from her seat on Primrose, her favourite horse. She pulled gently on the reins to stop Primrose from following Bruno. Primrose tried a tentative nibble on some of the new grape leaves and Pamela turned her away.

'Nothing in particular,' Bruno replied. 'Just the general condition of the grapes. They're coming on well.'

'When I first came here, all the rows of vines seemed to be neatly trimmed like soldiers on parade and all the rows between them were weeded and bare,' she said. 'It all looked much more tidy than the vineyards today.'

'That's because we're going organic, avoiding chemical fertilizers and sprays,' he said, looking up and grinning at her. An excellent horsewoman, who had taught Bruno how to ride,

she looked magnificent. 'The vineyard may seem a little untidy but organic wines are the future. The more life in the soil, the better the wine.'

Bruno remounted and they trotted over the low crest where Chateau Rock came into view, about three hundred metres away. The original medieval stone tower loomed over the two wings. One had been added in the seventeenth century and the other in the nineteenth. Oddly, the most recent structure looked to be the oldest part of the building, a mock-medievalism on the outside and more modern comforts within being the fashion of the Third Empire. This was the wing where the Macraes put their guests and held their dinners and parties. Its broad terrace led to the swimming pool and tennis court. Beyond the court was the old barn, once used to dry tobacco. Now it housed the recording studio.

The family lived in the other, older wing whose plumbing and bedrooms had been thoroughly modernized when Rod Macrae had first bought the place. This family wing opened onto a tidy but sprawling vegetable garden. Scaffolding had been erected and the whole façade was evidently being overhauled and the windows repainted ahead of the chateau going on sale. Bruno had expected to see at least one of the Macraes on the terrace, enjoying the evening sun over a glass of wine, but the place seemed deserted. Maybe they were out to dinner.

'There's Félix with the rest of the horses,' Pamela said from behind him. Bruno turned away from the chateau to follow the direction of her finger to see the stable lad with a string of horses on a leading rein behind him. Pamela waved, nudged

her heels against Primrose's sides and set off at a brisk walk down the gentle slope to the hunters' track below. Bruno gave Chateau Rock and the valley stretching below a final look and followed her to join the others.