

Chapter 1

Paris, dimanche 16 avril

The measured rhythms pulsed still through the aged chambers of Ascélie d'Alkov's heart: *Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et in semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.* This mid-spring morning, she made her way out of Notre Dame with a vigorous stride, unusual in a person of her years. For Ascélie, the pragmatically named Morning Prayer was still *terce*, or the service of the third hour. She attended services with fair regularity, but eschewed zeal, preferring an enlightened application of reason over the centuries of tradition to which she was heir.

With her well-clothed back to the western façade of the cathedral, Ascélie walked easily into the day. Her eyes came alive in the sunlight, as the sanctuary was a dark place. Ascélie collected the russet-red raw silk of her coat and reclined easily onto the wooden bench facing south to the Seine. The north-facing bench, a mirror image of hers, was occupied by two younger people. Ascélie disregarded their discussion, clasping the slim novel within her bag. (She was never without such a volume, as public conversational skill had cascaded from deplorable to unfathomable, even within her own tenure.) Currently, she was re-reading the Englishman Waugh's novel, *Brideshead Revisited*. Ascélie had selected it at random a few sleepless nights ago, and begun to read, knowing that such acts were never truly random. And now the reason was apparent.

She was reading of the death of Lord Marchmain, the absent father. And it was that very phrase, *the absent father*, which alerted her to what she'd missed: the day prior, in the *Marché* at Beaune, she'd overheard a merchant speaking about an excavation, attended by the police, within the caves at the Chateau de Meursault.

But the twenty euro note she held in her hand had fallen and, in reaching for it, Ascélie had forgotten the murmured gossip. Until now.

Had it been any other of the chateaux, her ear might not have caught it. But details remained with her: the last thing her husband, Todor, had said, that Saturday afternoon in 1974, was that he had something to confirm at the old chateau – he only referred to Meursault that way because he had worked there as a very young man. It left her feeling frail and aged.

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The first call Ascélie made was to her brother, Michel.

“Allo, oui?”

“Bonjour, Michel,” Ascélie said.

“Eh, bonjour Ascélie. Ça va?”

“I think they’ve found Todor.” Michel didn’t speak, so she went on. “You know I was in Beaune Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“At the first bread stall in the *Marché*, I heard a young baker talking of remains found in a cave at Meursault.”

“Charming.”

Ascélie heard Michel’s nervous motion over the phone – almost certainly he had removed his pocket handkerchief to tamp his brow.

“But these remains, Ascélie – they could be anyone’s. Do you know?”

“Not in my mind – but in my body, my heart, I know. I do. Yes.”

She heard the tenor of his voice soften and he spoke again.

“Then we must make certain. After all, we are not without resources.”

Looking back, Ascélie would smile about the timing. For in response to Michel's call for resources, she was on her way to meet a private person who dealt with such enquiries. Her *avocat*, Théberge, had found him and was confident of his discretion. Ascélie was suspicious of this confidence, for how could one who sniffed about the edges of the other's lives be discreet and trustworthy? It was at best inconsistent, at worst not possible. On bad days she suspected latent idiocy in Théberge.

Her meeting was for 3:00 that afternoon and by 2:30 her car had been summoned, her coat and scarf donned, and her bag readied. She was about to close one of her study windows when in a too clichéd fashion, there was knocking on her door. The sound unsettled her. No one made it up those stairs unannounced.

She opened the door herself, expecting her tenant, the bookseller, but faced a young woman in uniform. Ascélie didn't see an officer from Paris – she knew the look too well – this officer was from elsewhere, somewhere Ascélie thought she knew.

“Good day, please come in,” Ascélie said.

“Good day, you are Madame d'Alkov?” the officer asked.

“I am. Would you like to sit? Will this take a moment?” Ascélie asked thinking of Théberge and her driver.

“I think it would be best if we sat down, Madame. I am with the Commissariat Beaune – Police. I have some news that may be difficult for you to receive.”

Ascélie instructed Camille, her house woman, to bring coffee to the officer, now seated in the study. While this occurred Ascélie called Théberge from the reading area in her bedroom.

Her anxious fingers mis-dialed the number but she was connected on her second attempt.

“This is Ascélie d'Alkov. Is Monsieur Théberge available please?”

“I’m sorry Madame d'Alkov, he’s in a meeting.”

“I see.”

“Is it an urgent matter – should I interrupt the meeting?”

“You should. I have the police at my home – something almost without precedent in my life.”

“Stay on the line, please, Madame. He’ll be with you immediately.”

A moment later the line was switched, presumably to Théberge’s office.

“Contesse Lancourt, how can I help?” (Théberge had never relinquished her maiden name as he was a retainer whose service to her family began within the employ of Ascélie’s father, though the firm’s relationship to the Lancourts reached back generations.)

“I don’t know. I called initially to have you apologize to the investigator as I’ll have to cancel our meeting. Now that I have you on the line, what do you advise?”

“Who is there? Under what pretext?”

“A young female police officer from Beaune with news that is apparently quite serious.”

“Is there anything I should know before I advise you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there anything that happened while you were in Beaune about which you would need guidance?”

“You’re asking if I broke laws. Why don’t you just state it as such?”

“Did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Then gather information from the officer while offering none. *None*. If you are pressed to answer any questions or take any decisions tell her you will need to call me. I’ll be available to you for the next hour the moment you call. Is this satisfactory?”

“Entirely, André. I’m sorry if I’ve been difficult. It is a strange thing having police come to one’s door.”

“It is indeed, Contesse. We’ll do what we can to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Merci, André, bonjour.”

When Ascélie returned to her study the officer was using a cellular phone and did not end the conversation upon Ascélie’s entry. As a show of goodwill, and as an intentionally egalitarian gesture, Ascélie refrained from taking the seat behind her desk; she sat, instead, in the second fountain blue reading chair, identical to that occupied by the officer. Within a ridiculously rude and very full minute (which seemed interminable) the policewoman ended her call. She had placed a professional card on the table between the chairs so Ascélie knew she was opposite Officer Marise Gringnon.

“I see you have coffee. Is there anything else I can provide before you begin?” Ascélie asked.

“No, thank you, your...”

“Camille, she is Camille.”

“Camille has been very attentive.”

“Good. Then let’s move to the matter that brings you to my rooms, shall we?”

“I’m sorry to trouble you but some remains have been found in Meursault – in fact at the Chateau de Meursault.”

“Some remains?”

“Some human remains.”

Ascélie’s right hand shrouded her lips. So it was Todor. She remembered her instructions. “Tell me more, please.”

“From what we have been able to deduce, there is a large male body and a few physical artefacts. We would like your help to identify the artefacts, if you would be so kind.”

“Why me?”

“Because, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, Madame d’Alkov, the remains are believed to be those of your late husband, Todor d’Alkov.”

Ascélie stood to end the interview. She went to her desk and removed one of her calling cards from the middle drawer of the desk. She took her fountain pen, and on the blank face of the card wrote Monsieur Théberge, Avocat, and the phone number at which he could be reached. “Please call this man to arrange the details of the next interview and I will follow both his and your instructions as best I’m able. Thank you for coming here personally from Beaune. It was kind of you.”

“You’re welcome, Madame. I’m sorry, the news must be disturbing.”

“Yes. It is.” Ascélie led Officer Gringnon to the foyer. They shook hands and said goodbye. Shortly after the door closed Ascélie placed two phone calls: the first to her eldest son, Ariel, in Chicago, the other to Théberge.