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# Grand Cru Heist

A Winemaker Detective Novel

Jean-Pierre Alaux  
&  
Noël Balen

Translated from French by Anne Trager

LE FRENCH BOOK 

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*“Finishing off a bottle of wine together  
is a fine sign of friendship.”*  
—Jean Carmet

# 1

Paris finally returned to its splendor at dusk. Lights from the cruise boats caressed the buildings on the Left Bank. The bridges cast wavering shadows on the waters of the Seine. At the corner of the Rue Dauphine, a few patches of half-melted snow, curiously saved from the passing footsteps, were shining under the streetlights.

Benjamin Cooker had felt deprived of light all day. He awaited this miraculous hour, when everything could be reborn in the fleeting glow of night. As he got older, he had less tolerance for the unchanging leaden sky that covered Paris in winter. Everything, from the pallid faces of café servers to the hotel concierge's waxy complexion, the bare trees in the Tuileries Gardens, and the homeless camping out on the subway grates, seemed dull and gray. He had loved this city in his happy-go-lucky days, and now he found it suffocating.

Here, even the snow was hoary, dirty, and reduced to mud in a few hours with the constant

comings and goings of the city. He missed peaceful Médoc, and he was impatient to return to his home, Grangebelle, the next day. The vineyards would be superb, all white and wrapped in silence. The cold would be dry and refreshing, and the sky nearly royal blue. He would go for a solitary walk along the Gironde just to hear the snow crunch under his boots. Elisabeth got cold easily and would probably remain in front of the fire in the living room, her hands around a steaming cup of tea.

Benjamin Cooker drove slowly, letting his gloves glide over the steering wheel while he whistled along with a Chopin nocturne on the radio. According to the too-ceremonious radio host, it was *Opus 19*. He was comfortable, settled into the leather seat of his classic Mercedes 280SL. He turned onto Pont des Arts to get to his hotel, which was near the opera house. The red light was taking forever. He lifted the collar of his Loden and turned up the radio as someone approached the car, flicking his thumb to mimic a lighter. Cooker squinted to get a better look at the man's face. It was hidden under a hood, but he seemed young, despite his stooped, somewhat misshapen form. Cooker shook his head and waved his hands to indicate that he did not smoke.

The light turned green, but Cooker did not have time to accelerate. His car door opened

suddenly, as if it had been ripped off, and cold air rushed in.

“Take that, rich bastard.”

The man pulled out a switchblade. Cooker did not move. *Don't panic. Stay calm. Breathe slowly. Think fast.* He felt the tip of the knife on his Adam's apple and gulped. A second man opened the other door and searched the glove compartment.

“Get rid of him,” he said, unbuckling Cooker's seat belt.

The hooded man hit Cooker twice in the jaw, grabbed him by the tie, and dragged him to the ground. Then the thug kicked him in the stomach, head, and ribs—“Take that, asshole.” The taste of blood and thick grit from the pavement burned his lips—“Your mother's a bitch.” A final glance, a few notes of Chopin—“Eat shit, dirtbag!”—and screeching tires. Then nothing.

§ § §

Staff hurried through the corridors at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital. The warm aroma of hot coffee filled the ward. Benjamin Cooker was trying to look at the small corner of white sky that

was attempting—in vain—to light up the room, but he could barely turn his head.

“Don’t worry, sir. You’re safe here.”

The nurse had bright green eyes. A gold cross was hanging from her beautiful freckled neck. She had a soft voice; it was almost tender and sleep-inducing.

“You should get some rest. You are still in shock, Mr. Cooker. Your wife will be here soon.”

She spoke the way a child would speak to her father. Cooker thought about his daughter, Margaux. He hoped that Elisabeth had not told her what had happened. There was no sense causing worry. He could barely remember anything from the previous night, except the 1961 Latour he had shared with Claude Nithard, his publisher, at the Tour d’Argent.

The nurse took his pulse, explaining that he had been found unconscious on the sidewalk and rushed to the emergency room.

“What about my car?”

“Stay calm, sir. It is only a car. You are lucky to be alive.”

A tear rolled down Cooker’s cheek. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply to expel the feeling of powerless rage and isolation that tightened his chest. His old convertible also carried his tawny leather briefcase, which held the fountain pen Margaux had given him. A jeweler in New York had engraved his name on it. The briefcase also

held some bank statements, his agenda, and the thick dog-eared notebook he was very attached to. Year after year, the winemaker had jotted down his impressions of all the wines he had tasted the world over, along with who had what stocks of the best vintages. How many pages had he filled with his meticulous handwriting? At best, the document would end up in some garbage can in the projects or the sewer.

Elisabeth would be here in a few hours, sitting on the edge of his bed. He would tell her everything. Well, what he could. The truth was, he couldn't remember much. It had all happened so quickly.

§ § §

“Yes, my love, the light had just turned green.”

His wife would put a finger to his lips and said, “My poor darling, look at what they’ve done to you.”

Sadness filled his face. He stared at her and said nothing more. Then he looked down. He was disappointed with himself. He had fallen into a trap and had not even put up a fight. He felt like a coward. She knew the words to reassure him and make him feel better. She told him that

she was thankful he was alive, that he should let the police do their job. Elisabeth then whispered a few sweet nothings. And they crossed their fingers and hoped for the best, as they always did when they faced life's hardships.

"They'll find your notebook, Benjamin. Don't worry. I'll call your editor."

"No, I'd prefer that you didn't. Don't tell anyone but Virgile."

Of course, Virgile Lanssien came with Elisabeth. He would not have left his employer's wife alone in such a crisis. Elisabeth went to find him in the hallway.

"Boss, how's it going? They really crushed you, didn't they?" Virgile teased, trying to lighten the mood when he saw the winemaker's bruised face.

Cooker smiled at the vineyard humor. His jaw hurt terribly, but he felt better with Elisabeth and Virgile at his side.

"I don't remember anything. Can you believe it? Nothing! Except that 1961 Latour. I wish you could have tasted it."

The nurse came in to change the bandages on Cooker's swollen face and caught Virgile's eye. He gave her a once-over, from neck to ankles, while Elisabeth hung up some clothes she had brought for her husband. Virgile winked at his boss.

"The snow has already melted," the young woman said, clearly sorry about that.

Cooker's eyes were half-closed. He winced when the nurse ran a damp cloth over his eyebrows to remove the dried blood.

"What handsome blue eyes you have, sir," she said, trying to divert his attention from what she was doing.

"I believe they are why my wife married me. Isn't that so, Elisabeth?"

"I won't argue with you today, not with what you've been through," Elisabeth said, kissing his hand.

Virgile seemed a little uncomfortable. He turned to the window. "I think it's going to snow again," he said to fill the silence.

The nurse looked at him and smiled with something less than innocence. To the impish grin she added, "From your lips to God's ear."

Virgile looked her in the eye and said, "If that were the case, the snowflakes would be angel feathers."

"You are a lucky man, Mr. Cooker, to have such a spiritual son," the nurse said.

§ § §

The week passed slowly, punctuated by bandage-changing sessions, lukewarm meals, temperature checks, and long periods of sleep. Christmas was a few days away. Large snowflakes were falling, as if covering the ground with a layer of protection. Carole was thrilled. The nurse had disclosed her first name to Cooker, perhaps in the hope that the information would get to Virgile.

“So he’s not your son?”

“No, he’s my assistant. He is very good at what he does.”

Carole blushed and quickly changed the subject. “You are healing nicely. You were incredibly lucky. The man was that close to slitting your throat. If he had, you wouldn’t have made it.”

When she leaned over the bed, Cooker couldn’t help staring at the three beauty marks on her chest. *This is ridiculous*, he thought, reproaching himself for his moodiness. *My face is not disfigured, it’s just bruised*. He felt old, even though he was just fifty. Admittedly, the graying temples, a rebellious lock of hair, bushy eyebrows, and crow’s-feet gave him a dignified charm. But was he still attractive? And why was he wondering this after having a narrow brush with death?

“Life is all about seduction,” his father would have said. It was a maxim the man had practiced until his later years.

Still, Cooker was regaining some of his appetite for life, despite the anxiety attacks he suffered in the middle of the night. He would wake up in a sweat, pursued by hooded teenagers who threw insults and lighters at him. Cooker knew he would need time to process the trauma.

Carole, who clearly had a thing for Virgile, was helping with her disarming innocence and the childlike euphoria she expressed when she saw snow on the rooftops.

“I hope it lasts until Christmas,” she said continually, like a child repeating a prayer without really believing in God or Santa Claus.

Cooker used whatever ploys he could to keep her in his room. They would look out the window and watch the snow swirl between the zinc rooftops and chimneys.

One afternoon, the winemaker loosened up enough to tell her a personal story. He wasn't positive it was true, but that didn't seem to matter.

“My father rarely left London, but one day before the war, he went off exploring southwestern France. He ended up in Toulouse, visiting the Basilica of Saint Sernin. He stayed at Le Grand Balcon, the hotel where the famous aviators Jean Mermoz and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry had met.”

“I loved Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*,” Carole said, slipping her cross back and forth on its chain.

“At the time, my father dreamed of being a pilot. He was only twenty. He stayed in Saint-Exupéry’s room, where there was an old radio. He tried to tune into Radio London but got distracted by Radio Toulouse and the advertising slogan ‘*Dubo, Dubon, Dubonnet.*’”

The nurse laughed at Cooker’s attempt to imitate the nasal tone of old-time radio hosts. He exaggerated it to please her.

“From his room, my father could see the Place du Capitole. Have you ever been to Toulouse?”

The nurse said no and mentioned her roots in Grenoble.

“The sky was gray, the weather uncertain, and Radio Toulouse announced, ‘Dear listeners, direct from the Toulouse-Blagnac weather station, ninety-nine flakes of snow have fallen on our fine city, and the temperature is freezing. We are expecting more snow tomorrow, so get out your mittens. And now, Jean Sablon will sing ‘*Vous qui passez sans me voir.*’”

“Ninety-nine snowflakes. That was news in the day,” Carole said.

“That’s when my father said it was best to watch out for the French. He wrote his mother a letter to tell her about the ninety-nine snowflakes, and she told him to come home to London as soon as possible. She thought he was losing his mind. He even admitted to standing at his hotel window

and counting snowflakes until dusk, coming up with far more than ninety-nine.”

“I don’t believe you,” Carole said.

“It’s true. I promise you it’s true,” Cooker answered in a deadpan voice. “My father did eventually get an explanation, something about how at the time, nobody improvised on the radio. They just read from notes. The radio announcer confused some shorthand for nine centimeters for ninety-nine snowflakes. He apparently got a good reprimand from his boss.”

Cooker puffed up when the nurse laughed at his story, showing her flawless teeth. Then Virgile burst into the room. Carole turned around quickly, smoothed out her scrubs, and nearly knocked the winemaker’s IV bag off the stand.

“Your torture is nearly over, Mr. Cooker. You should be getting out tomorrow.”

Virgile watched the way Cooker and the nurse looked at each other as his assistant handed over the morning paper with a mischievous grin. The front-page story in the newspaper *France-Soir* caught the winemaker’s eye immediately: “Grand Cru Heist. A hundred bottles of the famous 1989 Angéus premier grand cru classé were stolen last night from the renowned cellar at the Place de la Madeleine in Paris. The burglar stole only this internationally acclaimed Saint-Émilion and selected the very

best vintage, which received top ranking in the *Cooker Guide*.”

Cooker pulled out the latest edition of his guide, which Virgile had brought him, and read his tasting notes in full.

“Who could want anything more for Christmas than some 1989 Angélu?” he asked.

Behind the attempt at humor, there was concern in his voice. He was thinking about his friend Hubert de Bouiard de Laforest, who owned the premier grand cru mentioned in the article.

“How are you feeling today, sir?” Virgile asked.

“Like an ass who wasn’t brave enough to fight and ended up in his shorts on the sidewalk.” Cooker suddenly felt enraged. He tensed his jaw and pushed out his chest, as if he could not breathe. “They took everything, Virgile. Everything! All my notes. My entire guide. And my memories, my pride, my honor.”

Virgile stared at his boss. Cooker pulled himself up on the bed and grimaced when he tried to turn to the window to hide the sob he felt coming on. Carole touched his shoulder.

“It’s nothing, Mr. Cooker. Calm down. You’ll be home tomorrow. You’ll forget about it over time.”

“And you’ve got all those notes in your head,” Virgile added, also putting his hand on his boss’s shoulder.

Just then, a cell phone rang.

“It’s probably Elisabeth worrying about me,” Cooker said. “Oh, it’s you, darling? My little Margaux. I’m happy to hear your voice.”

A smile came over his face. Virgile and Carole caught each other’s eye and left Cooker, who was already looking more optimistic.

## 2

At the bottom of the valley, the Indre River flowed through patches of reverent willow trees. It was January, but it felt like an aging autumn in this part of the Touraine region. Lazy cows grazed in the pasture, just as they had in the summer. From the terrace of the Château de La Tortinière, Benjamin Cooker stared at the blurry lines of the landscape. In the distance, the Montbazou castle showed off its tower from another era. The Virgin Mary that rose above the edifice would have been demoralized by the ruins of the fortress. Recently, city workers had pulled off the ivy that had overgrown the fortifications, perhaps offering some redemption to the copper statue.

“Rest.” Everyone—his doctors, of course, but also Elisabeth, Margaux, Virgile, and the others—kept saying the same thing. Sometimes Benjamin Cooker showed worrisome symptoms, with long silences that nobody dared to interrupt.

“This kind of attack is a violation, Mr. Cooker,” a psychiatrist had told him in the hospital. “You will need weeks, perhaps even months to move on.”

Cooker had closed his eyes. He was not convinced that Grangebelle, his retreat-like home in the Médoc, was the ideal spot for his convalescence. He needed new surroundings and new people.

He told Elisabeth and Virgile that he had chosen the Touraine because he still had a lot to learn about the wines in that region. He had visited the Loire River valley several times in the past. Vouvray, Bourgueil, and Chinon had pleased his palate, and he had often promised himself that he would explore this area further. It was known as France’s garden, and the vineyards grew in the shadow of stone lacework castles. His stroke of bad luck had actually become an ideal pretext to wander the vineyards, even though they were bare at this time of year.

Cooker intended to stay until January 22, Saint Vincent’s feast day. It was a symbolic choice. Saint Vincent was the patron saint of winegrowers, and with a little luck, the day would be “clear and beautiful” for “more wine than water,” as the saying went. Elisabeth arrived with him and spent a few days, but she had to return to Grangebelle to take care of their dog,

Bacchus, who did not appreciate it when they were away too long.

“Can’t you come home, Benjamin? I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone. You’re going to be bored in that hotel during the off season.”

“Me, bored? With everything there is to see and drink? Don’t worry, my love. I need to get my head together before I go home. If I set one foot in Grangebelle, I’d have to go to the office. I couldn’t resist.”

Aware that Elisabeth was not particularly reassured, Cooker saw her off on the bullet train from Saint-Pierre-des-Corps to the Bordeaux-Saint-Jean station, where Alicia Santamaria, the Spanish immigrant who lived with Grangebelle’s gardener, came to get her.

Elisabeth called her husband to say she had arrived safely and told him that Alicia had once again railed against France’s lax immigration policies. Alicia blamed them for the country’s rise in violent crime. In her mind, the assailants were probably North African.

“*Por Díos*, I can’t believe what happened to monsieur!” Alicia had said, her Spanish accent tinged with Gascon. “They let everyone into France. *Qué miseria*.”

At Château de La Tortinière, Cooker knew he would find the solitude he needed to get over his fear of driving in cities and people asking him for

a light. But he didn't quite know how he would get through the weeks ahead of him.

He dropped into a rattan chair that beckoned in front of the balustrade. He wasn't feeling faint, but he did need to catch his breath. Cooker was about to ask for a glass of water but thought better of it. The concierge, Gaétan, was right there, looking concerned.

"It's nothing. I'd like a Bourgueil from the Domaine du Bel Air. Do you have some?"

He felt better when he saw Gaétan rush off, taking the stairs two at a time and then returning promptly. Cooker seemed to regain his sense of self before the wine glass was even full of the dark red liquid. He lifted the glass to his nose, while Gaétan, looking like a dignified Greek statue on a spacious estate, held the bottle, waiting for a verdict that would be brutally honest. The wine-maker sniffed aromas of berries and spices and picked up a few woody notes before bringing the glass to his lips. He savored the Bourgueil with the mannerisms of an experienced wine taster. He rolled the mouthful like a billiard ball on a pool table, lining his palate so as not to miss any of the full, round, ripe tannins in this excellent wine. From time to time, he clicked his tongue to refine his judgment. The concierge waited for the final decision. Cooker patted the chair next to him, beckoning the young man to sit down.

“I cannot enjoy this pleasure alone,” Cooker said. Gaétan looked flattered by the invitation.

Cooker was the only guest at the hotel, so they could enjoy this luxury. La Tortinière would close for the season shortly, and the staff had been cut back.

Cooker shared his impressions of the wine. The concierge was hardly a novice and had a fairly refined palate himself. Cooker had found an ally, not unlike Virgile. Gaétan and Virgile were both about the same age, with expressive faces, a sense of humor, and a little clumsiness that made them charming.

Cooker and Gaétan chatted until the sun had disappeared behind La Tortinière’s turrets. Cooker could no longer see Montbazou, and the cows had disappeared from the pasture as if by magic. The winemaker felt a chill and returned to his room. He would order dinner from room service before calling it a night. Tucked in his pocket was the hotel chef’s recipe for saffron honey ice that Gaétan had gotten for him. Elisabeth would enjoy it.

Cooker went to sleep with Madame de Mortsauf. He had stopped at an antique book stand in the city of Tours and picked up a leather-bound copy of Honoré de Balzac’s *The Lily of the Valley* that, curiously, had been used to dry flowers. Yellowed linden leaves and flower petals garnished every chapter, like exquisite bookmarks. The book gave

off faded floral aromas, and Cooker devoured the novel. La Tortinière was his. He was alone in this manor that smelled of wax polish and holly. The owners lived in another building a hundred yards away.

“You’re the master of the house,” owner Anne Olivereau had said with a genuine charm that impressed the wine expert.

He had no bad dreams that night. Cooker was healing. The next day, he would get back to writing his guide. He had not told his editor what had happened and did not intend to. Saying nothing about it was a matter of pride.



When Cooker woke up, he spotted a Morgan Plus 8 parked majestically in front of La Tortinière. It was deep green, very English, and gleamed on the white gravel. The winemaker smiled and left his room to admire the sports car. Such a jewel deserved respect. He was sure that its owner was a subject of Her Majesty the Queen.

The license plate proved Cooker correct. He caressed the chrome, as he would a sleeping tiger.

He walked around the car several times, peering in the windows to examine the convertible's interior.

A Morgan! He had dreamed of this car since he was a kid. The mechanics were way too fragile, but nothing could top it for luxury and elegance. Twenty years earlier, he had almost bought a very fine model that had belonged to French novelist André Malraux's son. But by the time he had convinced the bank to lend him the money, the beautiful English car had been snatched up by some fifteen-minute celebrity. The winemaker had never gotten over it and had fallen back on his Mercedes 280SL, which he now missed.

The concierge came to greet him and listened to Cooker expound on the car: how it could hold the road, the custom interior, the fine cylinders, and the specific sound its exhaust made. Gaétan was not particularly passionate about vintage cars but nevertheless asked a number of questions that Cooker was happy to answer. In exchange, Gaétan gave Cooker the name of the owner, a certain Sir Robert Morton, a middle-aged man accompanied by a gorgeous young blond woman who spoke "approximate" French and seemed to come from some Eastern Bloc country.

"They arrived at dawn, demanded a copious breakfast served with champagne—he wanted nothing but Moët—and asked not to be disturbed

under any circumstances,” Gaétan said, lifting an eyebrow.

The young man looked up at the lovers’ room, where the shutters were closed. Cooker imagined the couple intertwined under wrinkled sheets. Surely, it was some secret liaison that had found refuge in this isolated hotel.

“I’ll take my tea in the small dining room,” Cooker said, rubbing his hands in anticipation of meeting this Mr. Morton.

He was impatient to see the mysterious owner of the Morgan and his conquest. He wolfed down two croissants and drank three cups of tea. Then the winemaker had to go see the car again. The air was brisk, but the sight of the chrome reflecting the January sun revved Cooker’s imagination. With his British background, he would find the right civilities and some common ground with these people, who shared his passion. He was already imagining himself riding through the countryside behind the wheel of that convertible. But the shutters remained hopelessly closed.

The concierge told Cooker about the pleasant walks in the area, down by the river. He opted for just a short walk around the hotel grounds, which were covered with moss and ivy. A number of trees watched over the La Tortinière manor. Lebanese cedars, Japanese pagoda trees, sequoias, and several varieties of evergreens formed a huge nave that even bright sun had trouble penetrating.

The solitary walker tried to see the tops of each, but clearly the trees that surrounded the hotel were much older than the building.

The winemaker remembered what Gaétan had told him the evening before. La Tortinière's architect had been inspired by Charles Perrault's legendary *Sleeping Beauty*, even though the author had set his fairy tale in the Château d'Ussé, which was not far away. Cooker, however, refused to transform Mr. Morton into Prince Charming. He imagined him plump, slightly potbellied, wearing designer clothes. His Gold Card had to be the source of unimaginable charm, capable of seducing a Lolita who had managed to escape the streets of Budapest. But this Morton fellow did get the benefit of the doubt. He could not be completely lacking in taste if he drove a Morgan Plus 8.

Cooker walked deeper into the vegetation. Frozen leaves crackled under his shoes. A squirrel caught his attention and then took off on a path festooned with red berries. A slate-roofed farm appeared among the trees. Leading to it was an old drive lined with what looked like two-hundred-year-old holly bushes. Cooker was about to investigate when he heard steps behind him. He winced before recognizing a familiar voice. "Mr. Cooker, Mr. Cooker. There's a phone call for you."

Gaétan was out of breath, and his nose and cheeks were bright red from the cold. He asked Cooker to return to the hotel. The caller hadn't given his name, but he wanted to talk to the winemaker right away.

"It's urgent and personal," the young man said. "That's all that he told me."

Walking quickly, Cooker followed Gaétan but soon had to ask him to slow down because he couldn't keep up. When they arrived in front of the hotel, Cooker was disappointed to see that the Morgan was gone.

"Have Mr. Morton and his protégé already run off?" he asked.

"Rest assured, he's just gone to Tours in search of cigars, leaving his princess to sleep," Gaétan answered with a wink.

Cooker was liking this Morton more and more. Not only did he appreciate English cars and pretty women, but he also had an affinity for cigars. The man had to be an epicurean. With so much in common, they were destined to meet.

Cooker took the phone that sat on the marble reception desk.

"Hubert? What a surprise."

Cooker was happy to have his friend on the line. They hadn't spoken since some international tycoon had the gall to make an offer on his estate. Hubert had refused, of course. Château Angélu had been in the family for eight generations.

Hubert asked him how he was feeling. Yes, Cooker told him, he was feeling better. Yes, he was recovering his appetite for life. No, he had no news about his convertible, nor about his briefcase, but he still hoped to get his tasting notes back. They were of no interest to anyone but himself.

“But tell me, Hubert, what wouldn’t you do to get people talking about your wine? I read in the paper that your *Angélus* is popular with thieves. Great publicity!”

Cooker noticed Gaétan listening discreetly as he arranged bottles of brandy on the shelves behind the bar. But he continued to speak loudly, as if he were alone in the hotel.

“It’s a strange thing that happened. What is that you said?”

After every pause, the winemaker responded, “No! That’s unbelievable.”

Cooker saw that the concierge was even more curious about his mysterious half-sentences.

“It’s a joke! Someone sent you a cryptic play on the *Angélus* devotion to the Virgin Mother—‘Hail Hubert, full of grace. The Lord is with you, but your wine is not.’ Whoever it is, he has a wicked sense of humor. I’m surprised he didn’t send a bell, along with the card. It’s too bad I only write guidebooks, because this would make a great novel, my friend.”

The winemaker was now sitting in the golden leather armchair, as if to better enjoy the comical

story his old friend Hubert de Bouïard de Laforest was recounting.

But as Cooker continued to talk, he realized that Hubert didn't think that this was anything to joke about.

"Really, Hubert, it's just a prank. Why are you taking it so seriously?"

The two friends spoke for a long while, until an elegant figure made a noisy entrance in the château lobby. Cooker supposed it was the infamous Mr. Morton and gave him a slight nod while continuing the commentary on his friend's story. Then he cut the conversation short. "All you can do now is wait. If more of your wine is stolen, I suggest that you go talk to the police."

Cooker was still amused after he hung up. He had to share the story with someone. He would tell Gaétan, or maybe he would confide in the lanky Morton, who turned out to be as tall and dried up as a Tuscany yew tree. He was savoring a Cohiba and reading the *Herald Tribune*.

As soon as there was silence in the hotel lobby, the Englishman abandoned his reading and slipped his thin glasses into the inner pocket of his jacket. Then the owner of the Morgan got up and headed toward the clearly uninhibited guest whose telephone conversation had been all but public.

"*Excusez-moi*, sir, are you not Mr. Cooker, the well-known winemaker and critic?"

The man spoke broken French mixed with Oxford English. His diction was a little precious, as were his gestures. Cooker confirmed his identity with a smile and shook the Englishman's hand.

"Let me introduce myself. Robert Morton. I work in London for a wine brokerage."

"So, we share three passions," Cooker was quick to point out.

"I have no trouble imagining the first, but I must admit that I don't know what the two others could be, Mr. Cooker."

"From what I can tell, there are cigars, and are you not the happy owner of that dream car that's perfect for taking in Loire Valley's castles?"

Morton grinned. He rubbed his chin and asked the winemaker if he'd like a cup of tea. "Unless you would prefer coffee."

"With pleasure," Cooker said. "Thank you."

"A cigar?"

Robert Morton opened his shagreen case and took out a cigar with a band that Cooker recognized. He handed the Havana and the guillotine cutter to Cooker, whose friendship he seemed keen to nurture.

"So, Mr. Cooker, you like English beauties? I truly understand."

"Not always English, but I would go to Rocamadour on my knees for a Morgan."

"Where's that?" the Brit said.

The winemaker gave Morton a lesson in the history of that town in southwestern France that had attracted pilgrims for centuries. Smoke swirled above their heads, as the two men sized each other up. When Gaétan asked if they wanted more tea, they were speaking in English. There seemed to be no stopping them. Between two thick curls of smoke, they discussed New World wines, convertible sports cars, French and English rugby teams, Médoc wines, the cost of real estate in Périgord, southwestern French gastronomy, Charles de Gaulle, Churchill, Lady Diana, Charlotte Rampling, and Lord Byron, not to mention Cooker's recent misadventure in Paris.

Toward the middle of the day, the young woman who shared Morton's bed showed up, yawning. It looked like she had just climbed out of bed and thrown on a pair of jeans and a tight T-shirt. She was beautiful, tall, and had a lofty neck. With her full bust, she almost looked like a naïve and mischievous cherub—or a fallen angel whose steel-blue eyes said much about the pain they hid. Her elegant bone structure accentuated hollow cheeks and sensual lips.

“Did you sleep well, Oksana?” Morton asked in a flat voice.

Cooker was convinced that she meant little to this dandy, who pretended to know more about life than his age seemed to imply. For that matter, it took skill to guess the slender man's age. His

flashy signet ring did, however, betray new money. That did not make the man any less likable. The new friends jumped at the idea of going to lunch at the Château d'Artigny. But the Morgan had only two seats. Oksana would be sacrificed on the altar of machismo.

“Go back to bed, darling. Tonight, we have a long drive. We have to be in Bordeaux before midnight.” Robert Morton pecked her on the forehead.

Gaétan dried champagne glasses behind the bar and Cooker saw him looking her up and down. She pretended not to notice and walked out, swaying her hips in a way that was both seductive and rejecting.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Noël Balen (left) and Jean-Pierre Alaux (right).

(©David Nakache)

**Jean-Pierre Alaux** and **Noël Balen** came up with the Winemaker Detective over a glass of wine, of course. Jean-Pierre Alaux is a magazine, radio, and television journalist when he is not writing novels in southwestern France. He is a genuine wine and food lover, and won the Antonin Carême prize for his cookbook *La Truffe sur le Soufflé*, which he wrote with the chef Alexis Pélissou. He is the grandson of a winemaker and exhibits a real passion for wine and winemaking. For him, there is no greater common denominator than wine. Coauthor of the series Noël Balen lives in Paris, where he shares his time between writing, making records, and lecturing on music. He plays bass, is a music critic, and has authored a number of books about musicians, in addition to his novel and short-story writing.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Anne Trager has lived in France for more than 26 years, working in translation, publishing, and communications. In 2011, she woke up one morning and said, “I just can’t stand it anymore. There are way too many good books being written in France not reaching a broader audience.” That’s when she founded Le French Book to translate some of those books into English. The company’s motto is “If we love it, we translate it,” and Anne loves crime fiction.

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