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Drinking unsweetened Darjeeling tea was not a problem. Resisting the three crispy little biscuits taunting him from the white porcelain dish was another thing. The evening before, his wife had told him the time had come to shed the extra pounds that were making his shirts gape between the buttons. Benjamin Cooker had, indeed, filled out a bit over the past few months. He preferred to think that his heavy neck and chin, full cheeks, prominent belly, and belt hooked in the first notch gave him the look of a bon vivant, a well-off and satisfied man in his fifties.

Elisabeth Cooker, however, did not agree. The extra weight wasn't good for his looks or his health, so she had taken matters into her own hands. She had gotten hold of a cabbage soup diet purportedly prescribed by the cardiology department of a large urban hospital for obese patients who needed to lose weight before surgery. Elisabeth had cut a large head of cabbage, four slivers of garlic, six large onions, a dozen peeled tomatoes,

six carrots, two green peppers, one stalk of celery, and plunged them into three quarts of water with three cubes of fat-free chicken broth. The mixture, seasoned with salt, pepper, curry powder, and parsley, had been boiled for ten minutes and then simmered until all the vegetables were tender. Benjamin was supposed to eat this soup whenever he was hungry over the course of seven days. It was not meant to be the only source of nourishment, and to avoid nutritional deficiencies, he would be allowed fruits, additional vegetables, rice, milk, or a piece of red meat, depending on the day.

The first day promised to be especially grueling. Other than the soup, fruit was all that Benjamin was permitted. And that was limited. He couldn't have any bananas. Benjamin surmised they were too tasty for this Spartan regimen. For drinks he could only have unsweetened tea, natural fruit juice, and water. The wine expert had initially rebelled, citing his professional obligations, upcoming wine tastings, and business lunches. Elisabeth had responded by giving one of his love handles an affectionate pinch. Surrendering, he had leaned over her and planted a grumpy kiss in the hollow of her neck.

There were only a few patrons on the terrace of the Café Régent in downtown Bordeaux, and the damp morning foreshadowed the first chill of fall. Benjamin drank his scalding-hot tea,

reached for the small white dish without looking at the perfectly golden crust on the biscuits, and offered it to the person at the next table: an elderly lady with hair pulled back in a bun who was attentively reading the last pages of the local daily newspaper, the *Sud-Ouest*, which contained the weather forecast and the horoscopes. She thanked him and gobbled the pastries in three quick bites. He stood, nodded good-bye, and resolutely took off toward the Allées de Tourny.

He was about to climb the large staircase to his office when a digital toccata rang out from the cell phone deep inside the pocket of his Loden. He dug the device out, pressed the answer button, and Inspector Barbaroux's gravelly voice assaulted his eardrum. Getting straight to the point without so much as a greeting, the police inspector asked Benjamin to come immediately to 8B Rue Maucoudinat. The detective had a clipped, authoritative tone, perhaps to give away as little information as possible. Irritated, Benjamin made a quick about-face and headed for the Saint Pierre neighborhood. He was not in the habit of complying so swiftly, and he was almost angry with himself for doing what the captain wanted without getting any explanation.

Arriving at the Place Camille Jullian, Benjamin spotted two police cars blocking the narrow street, their doors wide open and lights flashing. An ambulance was parked nearby. The street had

also been cordoned off. A uniformed officer recognized Benjamin from afar and unhooked the crime-scene tape to let him pass. He explained that the captain was waiting for him on the third floor of the small building at the corner of the Rue des Trois Chandeliers. Other police officers were holding back a crowd of onlookers, many of whom were standing on their toes to catch a glimpse of whatever was happening behind the flowerpots on the balcony. Benjamin rushed up the two flights of wooden stairs without so much as holding onto the railing and made his way down the hall where two plainclothes detectives were talking with a woman in a white coat. They all turned and looked him up and down without a word.

“Hello,” Benjamin panted. “I believe the inspector is expecting me.”

“I don’t know if he can be disturbed,” said one of the men. “Access to the area is prohibited.”

“This way, Mr. Cooker,” Barbaroux bellowed from inside the apartment.

In the hallway, an empty gurney sat next to an umbrella stand, which was also empty. The wallpaper, with tedious rows of droopy floral bouquets, oozed a musty odor. Faded prints of religious scenes, shepherds on the heath, and dove hunters added little charm to the stuffy dark tunnel that opened onto a cramped living room furnished in birch veneer.

“Sorry to trouble you, but I needed to see you right away,” the inspector said, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his trousers. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

“What happened?” Benjamin asked, overlooking the fact that Barbaroux hadn’t bothered to shake his hand. “It must be serious if you’ve blocked the road off.”

“Everyone says you’re the most brilliant wine expert of your generation,” Barbaroux said. “Some even claim that you’re one of the best in the world. Is that true?”

“You didn’t bring me here to shower me with compliments, I hope.”

“Don’t think I’m being sarcastic, Mr. Cooker. That’s not my style. But it happens that I need your expertise right now.”

The woman in the white coat came into the room. Her hand was raised, and she appeared to be asking permission to cut the conversation short. Two morgue attendants wearing serious expressions were standing behind her.

“My team has finished, Chief. Can we remove the body now?”

“You haven’t forgotten anything?” Barbaroux growled.

“Everything’s ready to go. We have what we need.”

“What about those samples we rushed to the lab?”

“They should be getting back to you any minute.”

“In that case, get him out of here!”

The men pushed a gurney through a door that Benjamin had not noticed before, leaving it open as they attempted to lift the half-naked and bloody body. It took several tries, and at one point they almost dropped the corpse. The wine expert averted his eyes and made a sign of the cross.

“Jules-Ernest Grémillon, ninety-three years old,” said Barbaroux. “Not a bad age to die.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened in this apartment or not?”

“Do you really want to know?” he asked, looking at Cooker in the eye. “Well then, follow me.”

They went into the kitchen, which looked hardly bigger than a few square feet. The floor, laminate counter, and wall tiles were splattered with dark stains that looked nearly black, except where the dim ceiling light reflected ruby red spots. Cooker felt his stomach lurch, and he was grateful there wasn't much in it. He frowned.

“Total carnage!” Barbaroux said. “The old man was butchered like a pig. What a mess! According to preliminary findings, the victim tried to defend himself before he was struck. It looks like the killer attacked quickly. Over there, the clean dishes on the drain board fell onto the dirty dishes in the sink. They're all smashed. And

there, the pans were knocked off the hooks. A box of macaroni is spilled all over the floor.”

Benjamin looked on without a word, trying to control the revulsion he felt in this ravaged, bloodstained kitchen, a repugnant cesspool where the most barbaric violence had mixed with the ordinary misery of everyday life.

“But the strangest thing, Mr. Cooker, is behind you,” the inspector said, touching the winemaker lightly on the shoulder. “Turn around. I want you to see this. Odd, isn’t it?”

On a small wooden table wedged behind the door, right beside the refrigerator, a dozen wine glasses were arranged in a semicircle. Only one, the glass on the extreme right, was full.

“What’s the meaning of that?” Benjamin asked, dumbfounded.

“Well, exactly, it’s incomprehensible! We’re all shocked, I have to admit. This neat little scene in the midst of bloody chaos. Obviously, the murderer took his sweet time leaving a calling card. But what’s the message?”

“And what’s in the glass?”

“Don’t worry. It’s not the victim’s blood. I’m sure it’s just red wine. We sent a sample to the lab. We’ve taken all the photos and measurements we need, we’ve dusted for fingerprints, tested everything—absolutely everything—under UV light. Now all I need is you.”

“And how can I be of use?”

“Other than you, I don’t know anyone who can tell me what is in this glass.”

“You’re kidding, Inspector. You want me to do a blind tasting on the spot, at the scene of the crime, amid this slaughter?”

“I suppose these are not ideal conditions, but you would be doing me a great favor.”

“I’m sorry, Inspector. I would like to help you. But how do we know that what’s in the glass, which looks like wine, hasn’t been tainted? You can’t ask me to taste it without giving me some assurance that there’s nothing in it that could make me sick.”

“As I said, we sent a sample to the lab, and they’re rushing a tox screen. I’ll know in a minute or two.”

Benjamin didn’t have enough time to refuse the detective’s request. Barbaroux’s cell phone rang. The inspector pulled it out, put it to his ear, and mumbled a few words before ending the call and tucking the device back into his pocket.

“That was the lab. Quick, aren’t they? It’s wine, and the tox screen didn’t reveal anything worrisome. You can go ahead and do your tasting.”

Benjamin sighed. There was no way out. He picked up the glass and tipped it carefully to observe the color, search for particles, and examine the density of the surface reflection. Then he brought the glass to his nose and closed his eyes. There was dead silence, barely interrupted

by a slight swishing sound when the wine finally rolled into Benjamin's mouth. He savored it slowly, taking some air into his throat before letting the wine slide to the back of his mouth. He spit the wine onto the dish shards in the sink. Then he began all over, his eyes still half-closed, as the inspector watched. Benjamin sensed the man's impatience but still took his time, employing the same expert approach, the same palpitating nostrils, lip movements, and slow, almost lazy chewing, punctuated with wet and noisy clicks.

"Well?" Barbaroux asked, unable to conceal his impatience any longer.

"Astonishing!"

"Where's it from?"

"A very nice nose! Delicate, generous, balanced!"

"Where's it from?"

"On the palate, it's a bit disappointing."

"But where's it from?"

"The aromas are elegant, but the mouthfeel is somewhat faded."

"You don't know?"

"Time has softened the structure."

"And where's it from?"

"Pomerol."

"Without a doubt?"

"Without a doubt."

"And what else?"

"Let me see..."

"What estate?"

“I have an idea what it might be.”

“So tell me, for God’s sake!”

“I can never be sure, but...”

“But?”

“Pétrus.”

“Are you sure?”

“Almost sure... Yes, absolutely.”

“Almost or absolutely?”

“Both.”

“What year?”

“You’re asking too much.”

“More or less?”

“An old vintage.”

“Approximately how old?”

“It could be sixty years old. Possibly even older.”

“Really? You don’t say! Still, you’re not being very precise.”

“Sorry.”

“Any memory of it?”

“I never tasted it before.”

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“Oh no, sir, you’re not too heavy!”

“Come now, Virgile, don’t flatter me. You don’t need to be polite.”

“Maybe a little chubby. That’s all.”

“In any case, I’ve never been svelte. I get that from my grandfather Eugene. All the Frontenac men are built like rugby players. It’s in the genes.”

“Well, on a frame like yours, the weight is fine. You just have that kind of build.”

“Yet, on the English side they are all a bit lean and even rather thin. My brother looks like a Cooker, but my father is the best example of that lineage.”

“I’ve never had the honor of meeting him.”

“He’s very distinguished and elegant. Elisabeth finds him very classy.”

“Your wife probably put you on a diet to prevent future health problems.”

“That’s right. Take her side! Why don’t you just go ahead and say I’m fat. You’ll sound just like her.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest anything, sir. I’m just trying to imagine what made her prescribe this little diet for you.”

“You must be kidding, boy. A little diet? I had to cancel an important luncheon appointment today. Instead of having a nice meal with a colleague, I’ll be choking down my nasty ration of cabbage soup, which will supposedly work miracles by the end of the week.”

“How do you mean?”

“Elisabeth’s goal is to have me lose ten pounds and no less!”

“Oh, that’s very doable, sir,” Virgile said.

Benjamin was getting irritated with Virgile, who was being entirely too cheerful and supportive of this god-awful eating plan. Sometimes it was better to just keep your mouth shut. But Benjamin could see that his annoyance was having an effect on his fiercely loyal assistant, and he immediately regretted his peevishness.

He got up from his swivel chair and smiled at the young man. “You’re right, my boy. It’s certainly very doable. In any case, I’ve never been able to say no to my wife.” Benjamin sighed. Of course, she had only the best of intentions, and he loved her for wanting to take good care of him. “Come, follow me!”

They walked to the small place at the end of the hall that served as kitchen, storeroom, and library for Cooker & Co.

“Look what Jacqueline bought us.”

“Your secretary has gotten us a microwave?”

“I suspect Elisabeth had her buy it for us.” The Cooker & Co. office had a certain Second Empire patina that was becoming increasingly hard for Benjamin to maintain. The copy machine, computers, and wireless router were rude intrusions. And now there was a microwave.

“For *us*, you say? Do you mean I am involved in this, too?”

“To tell the truth, Virgile, I don’t know how to work this machine. And I have no intention of polarizing any of my molecules while I’m heating up this damned soup.”

“It’s not very complicated,” Virgile said, reaching for the plastic container next to the microwave.

He lifted the lid, stirred the vegetables floating on top of the broth, sniffed the mixture, and turned to his boss with a broad smile.

“This cabbage soup doesn’t look bad at all! And if you don’t mind, I’d be happy to share it with you.”

“You’d do that for me, Virgile? You’d share this ordeal with me?”

“Why not?”

“In that case, be my guest.”

They returned to Benjamin’s office with their steaming bowls of soup. And as they sipped, they began organizing the tasting program they needed to finish by the end of the following

week. Benjamin was counting on Virgile to help him elaborate on his impressions and confirm his notes so that he could perfect his chapter on Languedoc-Roussillon wines for the next edition of the *Cooker Guide*. The Fitou, Minervois, Saint-Chinian, Faugères, and Cabardès appellations, as well as all the Quatorze, La Clape, Picpoul de Pinet, Cabrières, Saturnin, Montpeyroux, Saint-Drézéry, Saint-Georges-d'Orques, and Pic-Saint-Loup estates had already been completed, but they still had much to do.

New samples awaited them in the laboratory directed by Alexandrine de la Palussière on the Avenue Chapeau Rouge. Benjamin knew she was having an increasingly difficult time figuring out how to store, classify, and prepare the tasting sessions. The rooms were at capacity, and the incessant deliveries were filling every nook and cranny, often hindering personnel and slowing the analyses for Cooker & Co. clients. Such was the price of success, and Benjamin was aware that sooner or later he would have to enlarge the space to accommodate the numerous wineries that were clamoring for his services and advice.

They had to keep up a good pace to complete the tastings, especially the Corbières and clarettes of Languedoc and Bellegarde, not to mention the Méjanelle, Vérargues, Saint-Christol, and Malepère slopes. Faced with the magnitude of the task, Benjamin had decided to postpone

some assessments of the naturally sweet wines, especially the Maury, Banyuls, Rivesaltes, and muscats of Lunel, Mireval, Frontignan, and Saint-Jean-de-Minervois.

“I’m afraid we won’t be able to get it all done in two weeks,” Virgile said, blowing on his spoon before taking another sip of soup.

“It’s a matter of organization. We will work in segments. No more than thirty wines at a time, and I think we can reach our goal in three or four sessions per day.”

“You’re an optimist, sir. Personally, I am saturated after fifty.”

“That happens to me, too. That’s why I need your help. Besides, it’s one of the benefits of working as a team.”

“Of course.”

“You don’t look convinced. But you know very well that if the two of us work together, we can get ten times as much done.”

“You have a funny way of doing math, boss. I’d say we can do at least twice as much, which is pretty good.”

“No, I disagree, Virgile. I’ve often observed that we’ve increased production tenfold when we’ve worked as a team. It may not be logical, but the record speaks for itself.”

The telephone rang. Benjamin put aside his theories, his professorial air, and his bowl of soup and reached for the receiver with a scowl—another

interruption that could keep them from getting their work done. As he put the receiver to his ear, he watched Virgile plunge his spoon back into the soup and fish out the last morsels of vegetables. He listened to the caller in utter disbelief, mumbled good-bye and hung up.

“Nothing serious, I hope?” asked Virgile.

“Something god-awful. Something really sick and disgusting.”

Such trite words weren't Benjamin's usual vernacular. He was more likely to use a more formal phrase, perhaps “something horrendous,” or “quite despicable,” or “nauseating.” Benjamin could tell his assistant was alarmed. With good reason. He had just gotten some really god-awful news.

§ § §

On their way to the Place du Parlement, Benjamin told Virgile about the Jules-Ernest Grémillon murder, the carnage in the kitchen at the Rue Maucoudinat apartment, and the glass of Pétrus found in the middle of the mysterious and macabre display. Walking briskly, he shared every last detail with his assistant. Although winded, he

was even able to keep a few steps ahead of the younger man.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner, Mr. Cooker?”

“Why should I worry you? Besides, you always accuse me of sticking my nose in places where it doesn’t belong.”

“But this is different. They came looking for you. And if that was Barbaroux who just called, I bet there must be more trouble.”

“Good guess, my boy.”

Benjamin, followed by Virgile, broke into a jog. The Rue du Chai des Farines, a long and narrow street flanked by the dark facades of tall buildings, most of them dating from the eighteenth century, was filled with police cars, their lights flashing. Once again, there was an ambulance, and crime-scene tape was stretched across the sidewalks to keep curious onlookers out. Benjamin had the feeling of *déjà vu*.

He recognized the police officer who had let him in that morning and gave him a nod to indicate he was not alone. Virgile flashed the officer one of his charming smiles, and Benjamin and he went through the barricade without needing to identify themselves. They passed under a carriage entrance and crossed the mossy cobblestones of an interior courtyard to the double entry doors, which stood open.

Inside, the forensics team had not finished taking fingerprints, and Inspector Barbaroux

greeted them in a hushed voice. He asked them not to touch anything. An old man was lying in a pool of blood on an oriental rug. His cheek was crushed, and his bathrobe had been slashed open at the shoulders and abdomen. Swelling flesh and blood were oozing from the wounds and already congealing on the woolen fibers of the robe. The victim was barefoot, and his toenails were curled upward, like inverted talons of a bird of prey. His sheepskin slippers had ended up near the polished Henry II table, which gleamed under the yellowish light of a hanging porcelain lamp. Twelve wineglasses had been carefully arranged in a semicircle. Two of them, on the right side, were filled with what Benjamin supposed was red wine.

“We’ve already sent the samples to the lab, and they’re clean. I will ask you to repeat what you did this morning,” the captain murmured.

“Who is it?” Benjamin asked.

“Émile Chaussagne, eighty-eight years old. That’s all I know.”

Benjamin and Virgile looked away while the morgue attendants picked up the corpse and slid it onto the gurney. A photographer took some final shots of the room. Inspector Barbaroux asked Benjamin to approach the table.

“You know what you need to do, don’t you?”

Benjamin was quick and tasted the two glasses without excessive ritual. He swirled the glasses three times each to gauge the body. He captured

the aromas with his nose and took two small chewing sips with his eyes closed. He trusted his memory and remembered exactly all the nuances he had identified in his previous tasting.

“I covered the essentials this morning, and I don’t have much to add,” he said, turning to his assistant. “Virgile, would you like to give us your impressions?”

“No thanks, sir.”

“I thought you were more adventurous,” Benjamin said with a touch of sarcasm. “Does it have anything to do with the effect our lunch is having on your stomach?”

“You’ve got that right, boss.”

“You’re feeling the cabbage?”

“There’s a war going on in my belly. How about yours?”

Barbaroux cleared his throat. Benjamin guessed he wanted to cut the conversation short. The detective seemed a bit nervous, too. The coins he was jingling in his trouser pockets were the giveaway.

“Is it Pétrus again?” he asked brusquely.

“I think so.”

“The same one as before?”

“I would guess it is. At any rate, it’s the same vintage.”

“What about the bottle?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is this Pétrus from the same bottle?”

“It’s impossible to answer that question. I’m not a psychic.”

“With you, one never knows.”

“I know an African witch doctor in the Saint Michel neighborhood. You should try him!”

“Don’t mess with me, Mr. Cooker. This is serious, and for the moment we’re not leaving the Saint Pierre neighborhood.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that we all pay him a visit. I just thought you might be interested. At any rate, if I’m not mistaken, you’re thinking that the choice of wine wasn’t coincidental.”

“Yes, there may be a link between where the murders occurred—the Saint Pierre neighborhood—and these glasses of wine—Saint Pétrus.”

“That may be. But it seems to be a very expensive calling card. There has to be more to this. Why announce each murder with wine and such an exceptional vintage at that?”

“That’s the real question,” Barbaroux conceded. “We also need to know why the murderer lined up his twelve glasses that way. I’d put money on the number being significant.”

“Surely the number twelve is important,” Benjamin agreed, scratching his head. “It is often said that this number symbolizes the cyclical nature of the universe, and you find it in many civilizations and rituals: the twelve apostles at the Last Supper, the twelve gates of Jerusalem, the twelve signs of the zodiac, the twelve lost tribes of

Israel, the twelve fruits from the tree of life, and so on.”

“*The Magnificent Twelve*,” Virgile threw in.

“No, it’s *The Magnificent Seven*, my boy. Yul Brynner. It was based on ‘Seven Samurai.’ A classic. Rent it sometime.”

“Oh yes, that’s right, I always confuse it with Snow White and the seven dwarfs.”

Benjamin sighed and raised his eyes to heaven. Sometimes it was impossible to follow Virgile’s thinking, and there were occasions when he didn’t even want to. He looked at the detective. “We digress. I am convinced that the number is even more important because it indicates a sequence of events. I think the murderer intends to strike twelve times, since he fills a new glass with each murder.”

“I’m sure of it. He’s telling us that there will be ten more crimes, and all of them will be the same. There’s no doubt about it.”

“He won’t let up until all twelve glasses are full,” Benjamin agreed.

“He must have an impressive wine cellar if he intends to keep using Pétrus.”

“It’s not so much the market value of the bottles that intrigues me, but rather the vintage. This is definitely an old wine and therefore rare, even hard to find. And why this one in particular?”

“The number twelve, this particular wine, the setting: they appear to be symbolic and connected,” the inspector said as he started to leave.

“I’m thinking the same thing. Also, the victims are all more or less the same age. That’s certainly an element to consider in this investigation.”

“Let me do my job, Mr. Cooker. I know very well what I need to investigate and how to proceed.”

“Of course, Inspector. But be careful when you accuse me of meddling in your business. I didn’t just show up and volunteer. You dragged me into this.”

“I would be out of line to accuse you of volunteering for this assignment,” the inspector agreed. “Let’s try to work together as best we can—that is, if you’re intrigued by the case. I only ask that you keep me informed of anything you happen to find out.”

“Certainly. I’m going to see a friend who can give me more information.”

“May I have this friend’s name?”

“I’d rather not divulge it at this point.”

“Whatever you think is best,” said Barbaroux. He tilted his head back and thrust out his chin without taking his hands out of his pockets. Benjamin returned the detective’s wordless goodbye with a nod.

Benjamin, followed by a silent Virgile, stepped out of the apartment. His stomach was bloated

and gassy. Elisabeth had warned him the first few days of the diet might be slightly embarrassing. He had also been advised not to smoke, but he reached for his sharkskin cigar case and took out a magnificent Cohiba Siglo VI, whose cap seemed especially supple. He lit the Cuban cigar with relish and drew several generous puffs of the honeyed flavors. He held the smoke in his mouth as long as possible, allowing it to temporarily satisfy his hunger.