

avant

The gates of Montgenoux's only graveyard creaked and groaned as the chains that held them together strained against the cold February wind. A discarded chocolate wrapper slapped against the wrought iron spokes, a polystyrene coffee cup nudged its way under, the remaining drops spilling onto the ancient cobbles which had, in the two hundred or so years since they had been laid, seen the steady traffic of Montgenoux's citizens tracing their passage through time, from birth, to marriage and finally to death, when the gates closed behind them for the final time.

Monsieur l'Abbé Vincent Tasse had lived in Montgenoux for all of his life and once he received the spiritual calling, he had never wanted to leave the town he and his family had lived in for generations. He had seen it not only as his destiny but also his duty to minister to the good people he called friends and neighbours.

Of course in the almost forty years since he had first donned his cassock he had seen a great many changes, and most of them were not for the best. As the decades had passed the attendance at Mass had decreased steadily, people finding faiths other than Catholic, or often, he suspected, finding faith unnecessary. He could remember his early sermons were attended by all but the most ardent atheists, everyone dressed in the finest outfits that they could afford, when the money could have been better spent putting food on their tables. Now though, there were some days he barely saw congregations that made it into double figures, and most of those were elderly parishioners who he suspected were less interested in what he had to say and more concerned in keeping favour with Him above, now the light on their own candles was burnt to a shorter wick. Though Vincent did not think of himself as a prude, he could not help but be alarmed by the fact that Montgenoux's citizens, like those of most other modernising towns in France, did not see the need nor the necessity to legalise their unions. Nowadays, he performed barely a dozen weddings in a year. As he had mused in his prayers one night, it seemed to him the only people who were interested now in getting married were the homosexuals and he had to confess that, despite his instructions from the Vatican, he would gladly marry anyone who showed a desire to do so, as long as they lived an honourable life.

Vincent cast his gaze across the graveyard, the wind had blown litter around some of the tombstones and he knew that no sooner would he pick it up than it would be replaced with more. He had even seen condom wrappers tossed disrespectfully on some of the tombs. He had decided if he caught anybody showing such disrespect they would feel the back of his hand, hang the consequences. He bent to pull at a bright green weed that had pushed its nose between the cracked stones and felt the usual twinge of old age in his back.

Though he considered himself a relatively active man, he realised that now his seventh decade had opened up ahead of him, his body was beginning its angry protest at anything it considered he ought not to be doing.

He lifted his head to look at the stone building he called his home and his salvation, his church, Cathédrale Saint-Sauveur de Montgenoux. Though badly in need of repairs, he felt sure it would never happen in his lifetime but he still admired it for the spiritual salvation it had given him. The Gothic Roman Catholic Cathedral had been constructed in the mid-fifteenth century on the site of a Romanesque Cathedral and had taken many, many decades to be completed. Its foundation stone, laid by Jean de Malestroit, the Bishop of Nantes in 1440, was something that Vincent still felt unable to resist touching each time he passed it, his fingers always tracing the sign of the cross in the ancient tablet. He had done it so often he was sure he could see the groove his fingers had worn into the tablet over the last four decades. Though not necessarily a large or impressive building, with its severe façade, small tower and slate roof and a simple vaulted portal and pointed arch. Vincent nevertheless

considered it to be nothing short of a work of art and he had considered it to be his honour to serve in it for all of those years.

The history of Cathédrale Saint-Sauveur de Montgenoux, like most of the Cathedrals in France was a long and difficult one. It had been abolished as a cathedral during the French Revolution and had only been restored during the reforms of the early nineteenth century, but the damage it had undergone, partially due to its neglect, but more particularly during World War II when it had been requisitioned by the German Army, had never really been addressed, and since his tenure Vincent had struggled to stretch his meagre budget towards the vast repairs such an old and crumbling building needed. Though he tried not to think harshly of others, Vincent knew that, somehow, his Bishop managed to ensure he found room in his own budget to ensure that other more prominently situated cathedrals managed to get repaired. Vincent shrugged, what was the point in worrying about that now? Sooner, rather than later the problem would no longer be his and as much as it filled him with dread, he hoped whoever replaced him would be much more savvy in dealing with the politics which had always gone hand in hand with religion.

Behind the Cathedral was his own residence, a small terraced house which did not match the surroundings, apart from also being fiercely cold in winter. He was sure its dangerous electric wiring would be the death of him one of these days. Nestled behind his home, positioned against the crumbling boundary wall was the old caretaker's cottage. It had been deserted for many years and Vincent noted due to its neglect the earth had begun reclaiming the land the house inhabited. The weeds and brambles had begun their stretch into the cottage and soon would have their grip firmly around it, like a python wrapping itself around its prey. Then they would pull the crumbling building into the ground. Vincent took off his round glasses and wiped them on his cassock, tucking them back behind his ears. He squinted to look at his own house, the lights appeared to be on in every room, despite what he had told his sister about the cost of electricity. He sighed, not for the first time, as he trudged wearily towards the house, chastising himself again for not displaying the charity of heart that he knew he should. She was his only living relative after all, and no matter how difficult she could be, he ought to show her the charity of heart he preached about to others.

If Monsieur l'Abbé Vincent Tasse had looked around as he made his slow, silent and contemplative walk down the cobbled pathway between the tombs and gravestones and lined the way towards the Cathédrale itself, then he would have seen, in the shadowing of the red night sky, someone watching him, huddled in the nook of the Cathédrale wall. A man whose face was taut and pale, his jaw jutting out angrily, an angry hiss emanating from him. The man stepped forward then, confident now that he was alone and would not be seen as he walked along the cobbled path between the gravestones. He had it memorised so it did not take him long to find what he was looking for. He stopped, his throat tightened and a gulp fought its way up, almost as if he were going to retch. His cold eyes locked on the words on the gravestone and a snarl creased his cheeks.

"Rest in Peace" and "A good man" bombarded his corneas and a growl escaped his mouth. There was no such thing as a good man, he thought to himself, and certainly no-one deserved to rest in peace as far as he was concerned, but more importantly the skeleton housed beneath this particular gravestone deserved nothing. Not peace. Not anything which resembled kindness.

He knelt in front of the stone and looked around it, pulling a plastic bag out of his pocket he scooped a handful of dirt from the ground around the gravestone, sealed it and using a pen scribbled a name. Rising to his feet, he tucked it into his pocket and walked silently towards another grave, pulling another bag out of his pocket, a smile appeared on his face, as if finally a cloud had cleared and all he could see were bright, luminous skies. The truth was after waiting so long for this moment, he had in his heart of hearts been unsure it would ever come to fruition, and he had given it so much thought,

dedication and planning that he was determined he was going to savour it, to enjoy every moment of it. Montgenoux was going to pay for what it had done to him, he was going to make sure of it.