

## **Book Manuscript: Outline**

### THE CURSED VINEYARD

*Where a polycrisis creates a predicament for the wine-making Dubois family*

by

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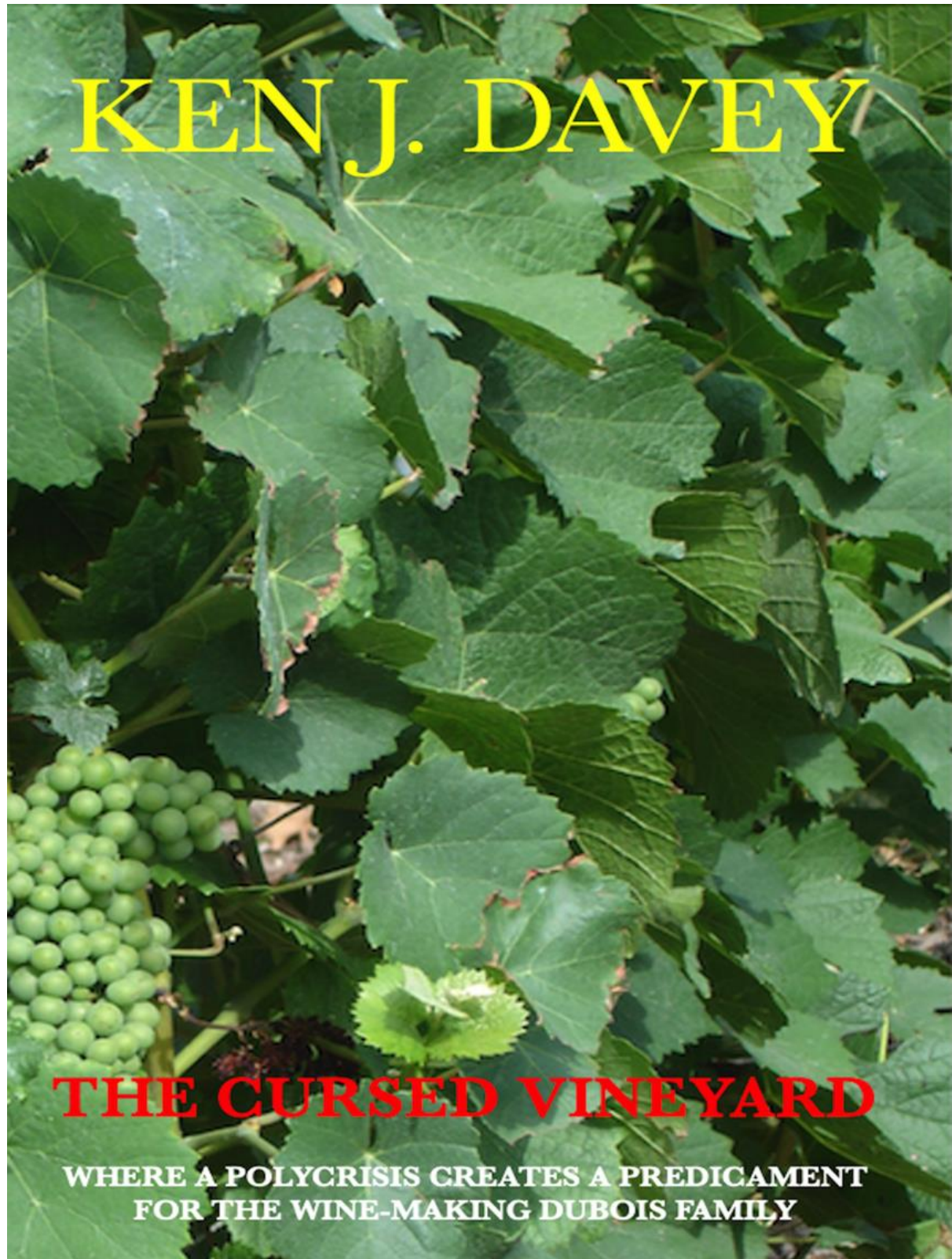
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**Book Layout**

| <b>Page</b>          | <b>Details</b>                                                       |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Front Cover          | Graphic with Author, Title & Subtitle                                |
| Half Title Page      | Main Title                                                           |
| Title Page           | Main Title, Subtitle & Author                                        |
| Copyright            | <i>Copyright © 2025 Ken J. Davey. All rights reserved...</i>         |
| Dedication           | <i>This book is dedicated to...</i>                                  |
| Epigraph             | <i>Men forget more easily the death of their father...</i>           |
| Contents             | Author's Note through to Also by Ken J. Davey                        |
| Author's Note        | <i>Wasps love grapes. When they eat the ripe summer grapes...</i>    |
| Prologue             | <i>A moment in time</i>                                              |
| PART 1               | <i>The Sanctity of Confession</i>                                    |
| Chapter 1            |                                                                      |
| PART 2               | <i>The Dubois Polycrisis</i>                                         |
| Chapters 2 - 24      |                                                                      |
| PART 3               | <i>A Conceptual Explosion</i>                                        |
| Chapters 25 - 27     |                                                                      |
| Epilogue             | <i>One month later</i>                                               |
| Acknowledgements     | <i>The author gratefully acknowledges...</i>                         |
| About the Author     | <i>Ken J. Davey, MBA, FCMA, CGMA, is a new author. Drawing on...</i> |
| Also by Ken J. Davey | Fiction & Non-Fiction Titles                                         |
| Back Cover           | Graphic with Book Description                                        |

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Front Cover



**Epigraph**

*“Men forget more easily the death of their father than the loss of their inheritance.”*

### **Author's Note**

Like us, wasps love grapes. When they eat the juicy ripe summer grapes, they also take some *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* into their body, which is an ideal environment for the yeast to survive the cold winter months. Wasps also pass down the yeast to the wasp larvae by feeding them. When the larvae mature, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* is naturally present in their system and ready to be reintroduced to the next season's grapes.

Those who suffer rashes and redness after drinking red wine should not implicate sulphites. These reactions are most likely the result of histamines in red wine, and the culprit may be wasps that like to hang around ripe grapes at harvest time. The wasps fall into the fermenting vats in significant numbers and become accidentally crushed along with the grapes. There is evidence that enough wasp venom can leak into freshly made wine and cause death by wine by anaphylaxis in some drinkers who are very allergic to bee stings – a reaction called Wine-Induced Anaphylaxis and Sensitisation to Hymenoptera Venom.

## Prologue

### Scene 0

#### *A moment in time*

The winery cellar breathed with silence, thick and oppressive in the dark. The stone walls held the chill, and only the faint drip of condensation from the ceiling disturbed the stillness.

A lantern swung low, its flame wavering in a gloved hand. The weak glow caught the curves of oak barrels in uneven flashes, light shivering over polished wood before plunging back into shadow.

A cloaked figure moved between the rows, each step precise, each breath controlled. The hood concealed everything – no hint of face or identity showed, only the deliberate rhythm of someone who had been betrayed and now knew exactly what they were here to do.

Reaching a chosen barrel, the figure slipped off the cloak and set out the tools. A portable blending tank gleamed faintly as it was prepared, a sanitised paddle fixed in place. With steady movements, the intruder drew off a measure of maturing wine; the liquid gurgled softly as it filled the vessel.

From the darkness of the cellar came another item – hidden earlier, waiting for this moment – a stainless steel flask. The figure tipped the contents carefully into the tank. Its essence vanished as it mixed, lost within the rich red depths.

The blending was methodical, unhurried. When the mixture reached the right consistency, the figure guided the liquid into a waiting bottle. The sound was almost soothing: a hushed murmur of wine slipping through tubing, viscous and slow. Tiny adjustments were made to keep the process perfect – no excess air, no flaw that might betray the work.

One bottle filled. Then another. Then a third.

Corking came next. The machine pressed the corks deep into the necks, sealing them with mechanical precision. A second device wrapped each bottle in foil, disguising its contents beneath the ordinary trappings of fine wine.

The finished trio disappeared into the shadows, hidden behind the bulk of an old oak barrel. They looked like any other bottles, but inside them, a secret now rested, patient and unseen.

Every trace of the operation was removed. The tank, the tubing, the flask – scrubbed clean, no hint of the deed left behind. The stainless steel flask was hidden once again.

The cloak returned to the figure's shoulders. The lantern's flame died with a faint hiss. Darkness reclaimed the cellar.

In the silence that followed, three bottles gleamed faintly in the gloom, their secret sealed.

Outside, the vineyard lay beneath a heavy sky. The cloaked figure paused, listening to the wind stir the vines. No voices, no footsteps – only the night. The plan was in motion, and no one yet knew how fate had shifted in those shadows.

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## **PART 1**

*The Sanctity of Confession*

## Chapter 1

### Scene 1

Father Laurent drank whisky, often a little too much, but not today, as he was driving toward Narbonne to meet a journalist. At 67, Laurent still assumed the position of parish priest in the village of Caves, despite his memory sometimes failing him and the fact that he had been told to retire by the Diocese of Carcassonne and Narbonne Bishop, the bishop responsible for all the Aude. His designated successor, Father Dufour, was seventeen years younger than Laurent, but hated confrontation so much that he settled for being the assistant priest.

Despite being a devout Catholic, Laurent thought more of his church building than of his flock, and that was his motivation for going to Narbonne today. There, he would meet an investigative journalist who had promised Laurent a significant donation for his church in return for information about the Dubois wine family's inheritance scandal.

The journalist, Léo Dumas, had already arrived in Narbonne late that afternoon and was sitting in one of the soft red chairs at a discreetly positioned table inside La Part de l'Ange – a hybrid wine bar that was also a retail wine merchant and bookshop.

Dumas was a new breed of journalist. The development of investigative reporting in France began in the 1980s. Despite some progress, this journalistic vocation was still practised on a limited scale, often confronted by political and legal obstacles.

Laurent made his way towards Dumas. Although he had never met Dumas up to this point, a rather scruffy individual, with long ginger hair and a matching beard, had all the hallmarks of an investigative journalist who specialised in scandal.

Dumas stood and offered his hand. 'Good afternoon, Father Laurent. I see you have come in plain clothes for our meeting.'

'I thought it best, given the circumstances. And please just call me Laurent.'

'Of course. Would you like a glass of wine?'

'I'd prefer whisky, if you don't mind, Dumas.'

Dumas signalled to one of the staff and whispered in his ear. A few minutes later, the waiter returned with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label and two glasses. Dumas nodded towards the glasses, so the waiter poured about two fingers of whisky into each glass.

Dumas raised his glass. 'Acclamations.'

Laurent clinked his glass and drank half of its contents. Dumas took only a sip.

‘So, how can I help you?’ Laurent asked.

‘Well, I’ve been commissioned by Le Canard Enchaîné to write an article on inheritance scandals among the wine-owner families in the Aude. And the Dubois family is my interest right now.’

Laurent looked deeply at Dumas. There was something about his eyes, but he couldn’t work out why.

‘Are you expecting me to break the sanctity of confession? You are well aware of the sacred trust and confidentiality between the penitent and the priest, I’m sure. This seal ensures that anything confessed remains absolutely private and cannot be disclosed by the priest under any circumstances.’

‘Yes, I am. But let’s be honest here. You told me that your church in Caves needs several repairs. The cost that far exceeds the contents of the collection plate. Am I right?’

‘Yes, that’s true. My calculations tell me that the cost of all the repairs would be several thousand euros – six thousand to be precise, as I told you when you telephoned.’

‘So, for six thousand euros, you would break the sanctity of confession?’

‘Let’s just say that most of what I have heard in confession from the Dubois family and staff would suggest to me I am not the only guardian of that family’s secrets. Gossip and rumour would cover most of what has been confided in me.’

‘I see. But there are more secrets?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, first, I would never name you as my source. However, I need those deeper secrets to ensure my article is accurate. Oh, sure, the names will be changed to avoid being sued, but the story needs to be precise enough to satisfy the interests of the readership, and for those readers with a detective mind, to work out who the family might be. It’s a well-known and well-used journalistic process that sells newspapers, particularly the one I am writing for.’

‘Maybe another thousand euros would help refresh my mind. After all, what Maximilien Dubois didn’t confide to me in the confessional box, he shared with me over many a glass of whisky.’

Dumas grinned and poured a large whisky for Laurent, who immediately took a big gulp.

As Laurent put his glass back on the table. Dumas placed a folded newspaper on the table. He lifted the fold to reveal two wads of money. One had a wrapper with the number

‘6000’ on it; the other had a wrapper with ‘1000’ on it. After Laurent had seen the money, Dumas covered the money.

Laurent downed the rest of his whisky in one go, after which Dumas poured more into Laurent’s glass and switched on his mini tape recorder.

Laurent cleared his throat.

‘It starts with Maximilien Dubois’s ancestors, who had been managing the vineyard for a few generations, selling their grapes to several of the larger wineries. Interestingly enough, it is believed that the Romans planted some of their original vines. After the death of Maximilien’s father, Max took out a considerable loan to create his own winery, allowing him to bottle his own grapes and have more control over quality.’

Laurent took a smaller sip of his whisky.

‘Max was in his early thirties and had been married to Elodie for several years when she suddenly died of a heart attack. It was a huge emotional event for Max; first his father, and now his wife. Well, it so happened that the woman who ran the tasting room for the estate – I think her name was Marie something – comforted Max in his grief and soon the pair became lovers.’

‘So they got married, right?’

‘Well, no. Marcia...’

‘You mean Marie?’

‘Er, yes. Marie was married to one of the vineyard workers, and with everyone pretty much everyone being devout catholic in those days, divorce was not an option.’

‘I see.’

‘However, what made things worse was that Marie became pregnant. Her husband – I don’t recall his name – thought it was his, but Marie knew it was Max’s and told Max so. Anyway, she had the baby, who was christened, er... just a minute... aha, Bernadette, I seem to recall. Yes, Bernadette, and whom Max doted on.’

‘So how did her husband deal with all this?’

‘He was none the wiser, although Marie had to stop work while she brought up her daughter. Then Max met Nathalie. I believe she was a couple of years younger than Max, but was also a qualified oenologist. So, she took over the tasting room responsibilities and provided input to the wine-making process. It seemed to work well, so Max married Nathalie.’

‘Ah, I see. So what happened with Marie?’

‘A double tragedy, actually. First... I so remember Max’s confession... he told Marie there was no place for her at the vineyard and that their relationship was finished. Then, her husband had a fatal accident in the vineyard. I recall hearing how desolate she felt when she came to confession.’

‘That is tragic.’

‘Ah, but here is the surprise. Max felt guilty about the whole affair and made a big decision. He made a new will that made his illegitimate daughter the sole beneficiary. I guess it was his penance, I suppose. However, he told me one evening, after too many whiskies, how she could get hold of the original will, on the condition she moved far away and didn’t get in touch again until he had died.’

‘Wow! I have heard some stories in my time, but this beats them all. And by the way, don’t wait for me, just pour yourself more whisky.’

Laurent did not need to be told twice, although he suddenly realised he needed to drive back to Caves. So, he further decided not to drive back but to stay over in Narbonne for the night. After all, he would soon have more than enough funds to do so. Feeling settled in his mind, he poured another large whisky for himself.

‘So what happened next?’

‘It gets confusing from now on, as during a confession, Max told me that after marrying Nathalie, he created a new will to leave everything to Nathalie.’

‘That sounds harsh. Marie and her child might now be quite destitute.’

‘Unless she found a new man, of course.’

‘And did she?’

‘I don’t know. She told me she was having an affair with someone local as well as Max, but she wouldn’t tell me who that was. But then she moved away. However, through her confessions, I think she was the type of person who would...’

Laurent stared aimlessly at the hundreds of wine bottles that lined one side of the bar.

‘Who would... what?’

‘Sorry. What was I saying?’

Dumas assumed that either whisky or perhaps Laurent’s memory might not be fully engaged right now.

‘You said...’

‘Yes, I remember... I think she was the type of person who would find a way to protect herself and her daughter.’

Dumas called over one of the waiters and ordered some tapas for them both.

‘Did Maximilien ever tell you he had involved a solicitor or lawyer when updating his will?’

‘Yes, he did. Although he complained that it was an unnecessary expense.’

‘Okay. So just to be clear, Maximilien’s last will leaves everything to his wife, Nathalie. So what about his grown-up sons, Claude and Richard?’

There was a pause in the conversation while the waiter placed a section of tapas on the table. Laurent immediately ate two or three without stopping. Dumas hoped they might soak up the whisky and keep Laurent compos mentis.

‘Oh yes, I nearly forgot,’ Laurent said as some olive oil from a half-eaten tapa dribbled down his cheek. ‘Max created a new will that still left one third of the vineyard to Nathalie, and one third each to his favourite son, Claude, and the dark horse in the family, Richard.’

‘Confusing indeed. The readers are going to love this. You just could not make this up. So where does he keep his latest will?’

‘I assume it is in his secret safe.’

‘Secret safe?’

Laurent sighed, drank some whisky, then continued.

‘Apparently, when he had the winery built, he arranged for a secret safe to be included in the tasting room. Although I don’t know where in the room it was constructed, he told me that only he and the family solicitor knew how to access it as the solicitor would have to read the will.’

Dumas leaned back in his chair with a loud sigh.

‘As I said. You can’t make this up. Look, I think I’ve got enough here to write a fascinating article that I am sure the readers will love. Again, I will not quote you as my source, but realistically, the vast majority of what you have told me could have come from gossip and rumour, and, as you might know, we journalists make stuff up to fill in any gaps.’

Dumas laughed, but Laurent’s face didn’t change. Deep down, he knew he had sinned badly and wondered how he could ever gain forgiveness without divulging that he had broken the sanctity of confession.

Dumas pushed the folded newspaper with the money inside towards Laurent, who picked it up and placed it in a small black briefcase he had brought with him.

They both stood. Dumas offered his hand, but Laurent did not attempt to shake it. Inside his head was a loud voice shouting 'Judas' over and over again.

Dumas could see that Laurent was struggling, so, put the top back on the half-empty whisky bottle and offered it to Laurent.

'Here, you might need this to wash away the thought of the thirty pieces of silver in your briefcase. Although I expect that by tomorrow, you will have started to make renovation plans for your church.'

'It's my vehicle to heaven, you know. And it gives me status in the Caves and wider community. An anonymous donation, I will call it, and just have to live with the consequences of my sin.'

Dumas remained standing as he watched Laurent leave the wine bar. His head itched, as did his beard. He smiled, picked up his glass and finished the last of his whisky. He turned off his mini tape recorder and put it into his jacket pocket.

'Well, well, well. C'est la vie.'

### About the Author



**Ken J. Davey, MBA, FCMA, CGMA**, is a new author. Drawing on his experience and meticulous research, Ken offers readers compelling stories that can expand a reader's knowledge and awareness.

His career has been with Big Four professional services firms, Blue-Chip companies, and several owner-managed SMEs. He has held sales, commercial, and financial roles and has over twenty years of international sales and delivery experience, twelve of which with KPMG.

As an author of several fiction and non-fiction books, Ken lives in London, where he has regularly worked as a mentor with the British Library and University College London.

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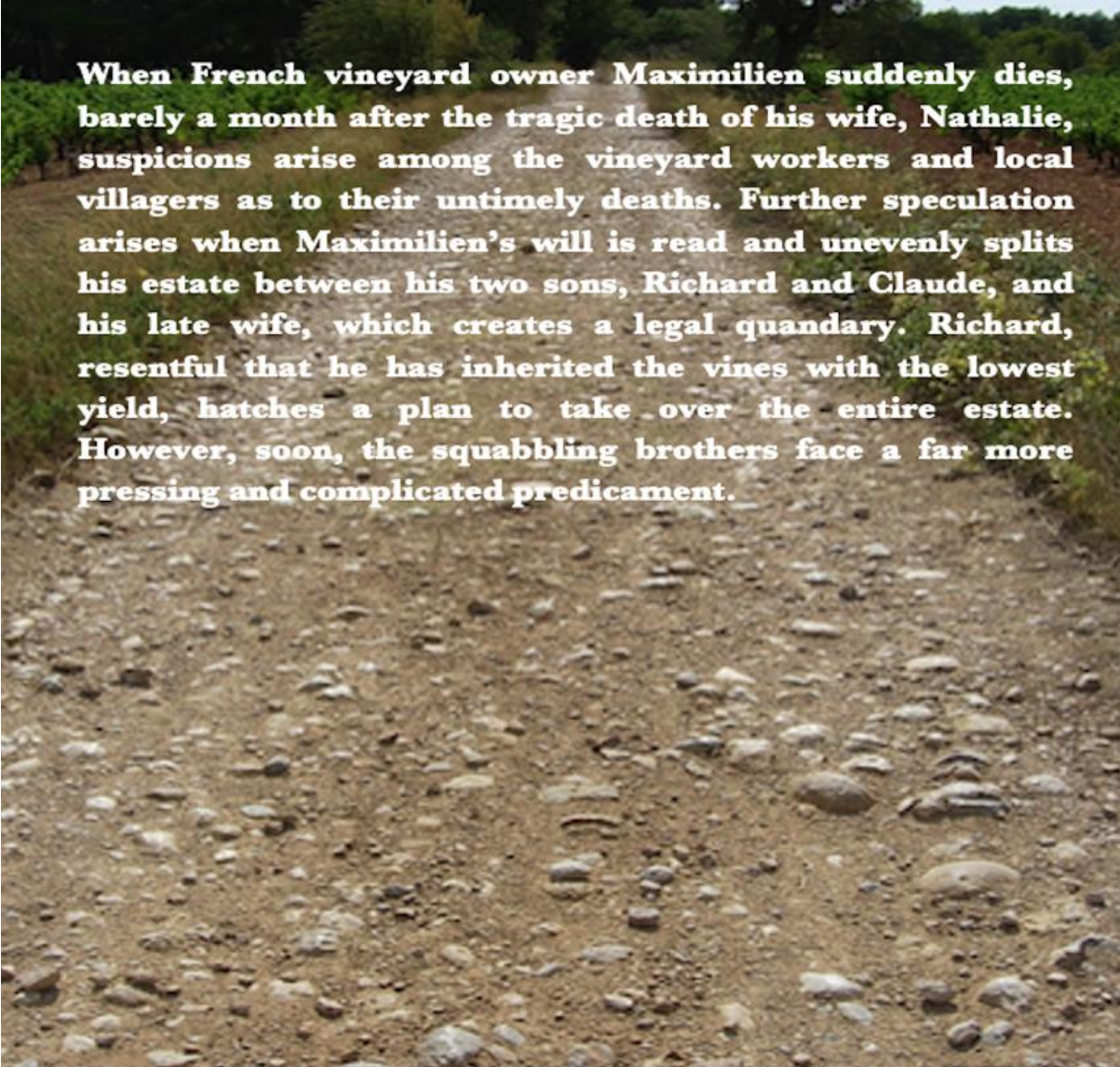
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*Back Cover*



**When French vineyard owner Maximilien suddenly dies, barely a month after the tragic death of his wife, Nathalie, suspicions arise among the vineyard workers and local villagers as to their untimely deaths. Further speculation arises when Maximilien's will is read and unevenly splits his estate between his two sons, Richard and Claude, and his late wife, which creates a legal quandary. Richard, resentful that he has inherited the vines with the lowest yield, hatches a plan to take over the entire estate. However, soon, the squabbling brothers face a far more pressing and complicated predicament.**

Ken J. Davey is a new author. Drawing on his experience and meticulous research, Ken offers readers compelling stories that can expand a reader's knowledge and awareness. Ken lives in London where he has regularly worked as a mentor with the British Library and University College London.

