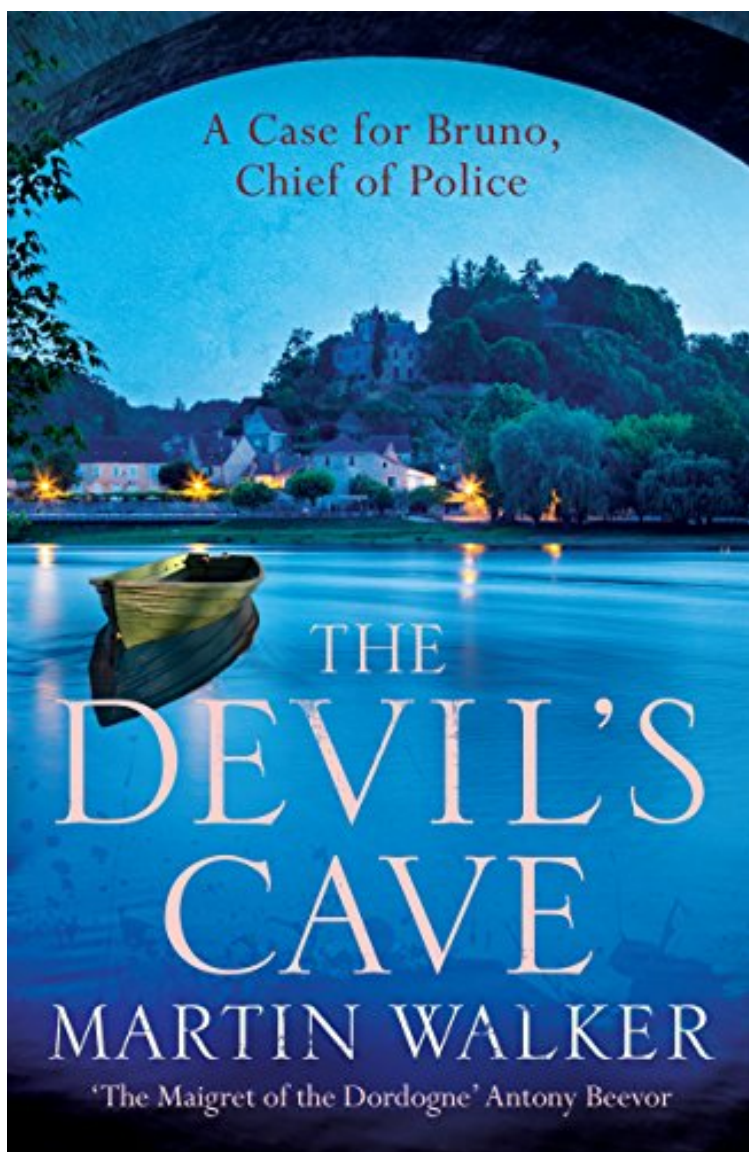


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The Devil's Cave: Bruno, Chief of Police 5



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Description :

Présentation de l'auteur
A body is found showing marks of Satanism. Bruno, chief of police must track down a murderer while quelling his town's superstitious fears in the fifth book in this internationally bestselling series
It is springtime in France's Prigord, a time of beauty and calm. But not for Bruno, chief of police of the small town of St Denis. A woman's body has been found on a boat, bearing signs of a black magic ritual. Bruno has too much on his plate as it is - mediating a domestic abuse case that needs careful handling and a dodgy local development proposal that seems just too good to be true. But a murder case must take precedent and the roots of this one lie buried deep in the past - linked to a chateau above a bend in the river, to the reclusive old woman who lives there, and to the secret hidden in the Devil's Cave.
Extrait
Chapter 1

Bruno Courges seldom felt happier about the community he served as chief of police than when standing at the rear of the ancient stone church of St. Denis, listening to rehearsals of the town choir. Unlike the formal ceremonies at Mass when the singers dressed in neat white surplices, the choir practiced in their normal dress, usually gathering immediately after work. But Father Sentouts daring decision that the choir should reach beyond its usual repertoire to attempt Bachs St. Matthew Passion had required some additional rehearsals early in the morning. Farmers stood alongside schoolteachers and accountants, waitresses and shopkeepers. These were people Bruno knew, wearing clothes he recognized, and usually singing hymns that were familiar, perhaps the only memory of his church orphanage that still gave him pleasure. On this Saturday morning two weeks before Easter, the twenty-four choristers were mostly in casual clothes, and the front pews of the church were lled with coats and shop-ping baskets they would take to the towns market, about to get under way in the street outside. As he entered the twelfth-century church, Bruno heard the rst notes that led into the chorus of Behold Him as a Lamb. The noises of the street seemed to ebb away behind him as Florences pure soprano voice lled the nave. He knew there should be two choirs and two orchestras, but St. Denis made do with its trusty organ and the enthusiasm of its singers plus, of course, the determination of Father Sentout, whose love of choral music was matched only by his devotion to the pleasures of the table and the for-tunes of the local rugby team. It made him, Bruno thought, an entirely suitable pastor for this small town in the gastronomic and sporting heartland of France. The early morning sun lifted above the ridge to the east of St. Denis and ooded the top of the stained-glass window. Shafts of blue, gold and red lanced into the body of the church. Father Sentouts black soutane stood out against the roseate glow that now suffused the choir. Brunos eye was drawn irresistibly to Florence, dressed in white with a bright red scarf at her throat. Her head was raised as she sang alone, knowing the music too well to need to look at her score. Her fair hair was lit by the sunlight into something almost like a halo. It had been one of his better moves, Bruno thought, to have found Florence the job of science teacher at the local collge. The post brought with it a subsidized apartment on the collge grounds, more than big enough for a divorced young woman and her infant twins. She was a ne addition to the life of the town and particularly to the choir.

Father Sentout might not have dared attempt the St. Matthew Passion without her. For the rst time, she seemed to notice Bruno standing in the nave. Her face softened into a smile, and she nodded to acknowledge his presence. Other choristers raised their hands in greeting. Bruno felt the familiar trembling at his waist as his mobile phone began to vibrate. Reluctantly, he slipped outside to take the call. Bruno, its Marie, he heard. She ran the Htel de la Gare beside the railway station, now unmanned to cut costs on rural lines in order to nance the massive investment in high-speed trains. Ive been asked to pass on a message. Julien Devenon says theres a naked woman in a boat drifting down the river. He says he saw her from the railway bridge as he walked along the line. Her voice sounded strained. Bruno thought of Julien, just entering puberty, transxed by the sight of a naked woman. But this was troubling. Despite the spring sunshine, this was no time for sunbathing; not even for the Dutch, German and Scandinavian tourists who seemed to discard their clothes at the slightest opportunity. He gets the train to his lyce in Prigueux, Marie added. She paused and her voice took on a deeper note. He thought she was dead. Is Julien still there? Bruno pictured the boys eager face as he trotted out for rugby practice. No, he had to catch his train. He would have called him-self, but his dad had conscated his phone. There would be a story behind that, Bruno thought. So when did he see this boat? Was it just in the last few minutes? Bruno tried to calculate how long a boat drifting downstream might take to reach the great stone bridge at St. Denis, probably the nearest place hed be able to intercept it and bring it ashore. He said he ran to tell me and the train was just leaving with him as I called you. So maybe three minutes ago, not much more. Bruno ended the conversation and darted up the rue de Paris, dodging between the market stalls and unloading trucks. He brushed aside the outstretched hands and proffered cheeks of the men and women he usually greeted twice each week on market days. He ducked under bales of cloth, dodged trolleys laden with fresh vegetables and skirted men carrying giant wheels of cheese on their heads as he made for the town square and the bridge. Just as he reached it his phone vibrated again, and this time it was Pierrot, the towns most dedicated sherman. Youre not going to believe what Ive just seen in the river, he began. A naked woman in a boat. I heard already. Where are you exactly? By the campsite, where the bank is high. Theres a bend in the river there and the trout How fast is the river moving that boat? Bruno interrupted. Five minutes and it will be at the bridge, maybe a bit more, Pierrot said. Its pretty waterlogged. One of those old at-bottomed boats, havent seen one for years. Thing is, Bruno, shes lying on her back, naked as a worm, arms out-stretched. I think shes dead. Well nd out. Thanks, Pierrot, said Bruno, closing his phone as he reached the stone bridge. He looked upstream, blinking against the dazzle of

the sun on water. There was no sign of a boat, so he had a little time. He punched the autodial for the medical center into his phone and asked for Fabiola. Shes not on today, said Juliette at the reception desk. Something about a private patient, which I never heard of before. Ill put you through to Dr. Gelleureau. Hes on call today. Dont bother, said Bruno, talking as he walked briskly back to the church, ducking and weaving through the obstacle course of market stalls. I dont have time to talk. Just tell the doctor to get to the stone bridge where it looks like we might have a dead body oating downstream. Ill meet him there. He needed Antoine, with a canoe, and Antoine was in the choir. He slipped in through the small portal that was cut into the huge wooden doors and was rocked by the sheer volume the choir was now generating, one half singing See him! and the other half replying Whom? Just before Florence could soar into the solo O Lamb of God Most Holy, Bruno strode forward to tap Father Sentout on the shoulder. The choir stopped raggedly, uncertain, but the organ notes swept on, and Father Sentout opened his eyes, blinking in surprise at the sight of Bruno. Im sorry, Father, its an emergency, said Bruno, his voice loud to carry over the organ. There could be a life at stake. I need Antoine most urgently. The organ music stopped with a dying wheeze from the pipes. You want my Jesus? the priest asked, uncertainly. Bruno swallowed hard, trying to comprehend the meaning of the question. Then he remembered that Antoine was singing the role of Jesus. Hes a waterman and theres a body oating down the river, Bruno said, speaking to the choir as much as to Father Sentout. A woman, in a boat. I dont have a canoe nearby, Antoine said, striding down from the apse and picking up a jacket from the front pew. A burly man, he had wide and powerful shoulders from a lifetime of paddling and manhandling canoes. My canoes are all back at the campsite today. Ill need you anyway, said Bruno. He led the way through the thickening market crowd and back to the river, suddenly aware that most of the choir seemed to be following, along with Father Sentout. Passersby and some of the stallholders looked up at the swelling line behind Bruno, and with the automatic curiosity that draws a crowd when people sense a drama unfolding they joined behind. Soon they were clustering at the side of the bridge as Bruno and Antoine spotted the vessel they were expecting tracing lazy circles as it drifted with the current. It might get caught up on the sandbank, said Antoine. Otherwise wed better get down to my campsite and take out a canoe, tow it ashore. Could I wade into the river and catch it here? Bruno asked. Better not, said Antoine, demonstrating why Bruno had been right to interrupt the choir and summon the boatman. See that current where it comes through the rst arch of the bridge? Thats the deep channel. Youd be up to your neck or even deeper. You wouldnt have the footing to drag it ashore. More and more of the townsfolk were gathering on the bridge, craning their necks to watch the boat draw steadily nearer. Among them, camera at the ready, was Philippe Delaron from the photography shop, who doubled as the local correspondent for Sud Ouest. Bruno groaned inwardly. A ghoulish newspaper photo of a corpse in a boat was not the image of St. Denis that he or the mayor would seek to portray. Its a punt, said Antoine, surprise in his voice. I havent seen one of those in a long time. They used them for hunting wildfowl in the old days before they built the dams upriver, when we still had wetlands with the ooding every spring. Should we head for your campsite and get the canoe? Bruno was eager to do something. Better wait and see if it gets through the current around the bridge, said Antoine, lighting a yellow cigarette, a Gitane Mas. Bruno had forgotten they still made them. If it founders, theres no point. And it might still get stuck on the sandbank. If it doesnt, Ive got an idea. Follow me. Antoine thrust his way back through the crowd and down the steep and narrow stone steps that led from the bridge to the quay where the annual shing contests were held. Three shermen sat on their folding stools, each watching his own oat and casting the occasional sidelong glance to see if his neighbors were having better luck. None of them seemed to pay much attention to the crowd on the bridge. Patrice, can you cast a line into that drifting boat and see if you can pull it into the bank? Antoine asked the rst of the anglers. Patrice half turned and eyed Antoine sourly. He mumbled something through closed lips. What was that? Bruno asked. Patrice opened his mouth and took out three wriggling maggots from where hed kept them under his tongue. It was something Bruno had seen the baron do when they went shing. Maggots were sluggish in the chill of the morning, and a devoted sherman would put some in his mouth to get them warm and energetic enough to attract sh once they were on the hook. It was one of the reasons Bruno knew hed never be a real angler. Ill lose my bait, could lose a hook and line, Patrice said, putting his maggots back into the old tobacco can where he kept his bait. He paused, squinting against the sun. Is this your business, Bruno? Bruno outlined the discovery to Patrice, a small, hunched man, married for forty years to a woman twice his size with a loud and penetrating voice to match. That probably explained the amount of time he spent shing, Bruno had often thought. Id try it myself, but youre the best man with a rod and line, Bruno said. He had learned back in his army days that a little attery was the easiest way to turn a reluctant conscript into an enthusiastic volunteer.

Across the river, a white open-topped sports car with sweeping lines raced around the corner of the medical center to the bank where the trailers parked. It braked hard and stopped, wheels spitting up gravel. A fair-haired young man climbed out dressed as if for tennis in the 1930s. He wore a white sports shirt and cream trousers with a colorful belt and ran toward the riverbank shedding his shirt. He paused on the bank to remove his white tennis shoes. The guys crazy, said Antoine, spitting out his cigarette. Hes going to dive in.

Behind him another gure stepped gracefully from the car, a woman with remarkably long legs, dressed in black tights and what looked like a mans white shirt, tightly belted with a black sash. Her face was pale and her hair covered in a black turban. The way she moved made Bruno think of a ballerina. She advanced to the bank beside the fair-haired man, and they looked upriver as if trying to assess when the punt might be in reach. The man began wading into the shallows as Bruno called out to him to stop. Patrice had his line out of the water. He had removed his bait and oat and was xing his heaviest hook, looking up every few seconds to watch the speed of the punts approach. Im ready, he said. Stand aside and dont get behind me. This will be a hell of a cast. Standing at the riverbank, Bruno could see nothing of the dead woman. But something close to three feet tall and black was standing up in the punt, almost like a very short mast. Antoine shrugged when

Bruno asked him what it might be. The punts corner seemed to catch on the edge of the sandbank, and it slowed and turned as if heading for the far bank. Bruno heard cheers and whistles coming from the crowd on the bridge as the young man plunged deeper, assuming that the shallows ran all the way to the sandbank.

They didnt, and he sank beneath the surface, then rose, shaking his head and striking out for the punt in a powerful crawl. But some eddy or wayward current caught the vessel and pushed it free of the sandbank and into the deeper, faster cur-rent where it begin drifting toward Brunos side of the bank. Patrice tensed, lifted his rod over his head and cast high and far. Bruno watched as the line snaked out and the hook and sinker landed just on the far side of the punt, and held. Got it, said Patrice, almost to himself. The man in the water suddenly stopped. He must have reached the sandbank. He stood and staggered across it to where the punt was fast moving out of his reach and launched himself into a desperate, ailing dive almost as if he wanted to

land inside the punt itself. One hand landed hard on the at rear corner, and the punt rocked so that water slopped over its side. The stupid bastards going to sink it, said Antoine. As the punt tipped toward him, Bruno caught a glimpse of the woman, her fair hair glinting gold in the sun, her arms outstretched and her head lolling as the vessel rolled. Some-thing else inside the boat ashed a bright reection, possibly a bottle. There seemed to be some marking, perhaps a large tattoo, on the womans torso. Whatever stumpy mast had been rising from the boat had now fallen. The swimmer sank beneath the water, his hand slipping from the wood. Patrice gently began to apply pressure to guide the punt toward him. But like some whale leaping from the sea, the swimmer launched himself up again for a nal, despairing effort. His hand just touched the side, but his grip failed, and the punt rocked even more as he plunged back down into the river. The woman

on the far bank strode back to the car, started the engine and swiftly turned the car to leave. She left the motor running as she climbed out, taking a towel from the backseat, and hurried down to the bank to help the swimmer. The damn fool broke my line, said Patrice, spitting in disgust. The punt gathered speed as it moved into the deeper current and headed for the bridge. Thats my best hook gone and no time to tie another. Theres no more I can do for you, Bruno. Revue de presse 'A gripping read ... descriptions of the French countryside and food make you wish you were in Saint Denis, despite its crime rate' Destination France. (Destination France) 'An entertaining read - and not just for the Francophiles' Manchester Evening News. (Manchester Evening News) 'an excellent addition to a series that is maturing as richly as the wines and cheeses that grace its pages' ing the Evidence. (ing the Evidence) 'I wanted to put it down, if only to

make it last a little bit longer, but resistance was futile' French Village Diaries. (French Village Diaries) 'Perfect reading for a hot summer's day as you easily slip into the slower pace of country life - and then feel the pangs of hunger as Bruno gets going in the kitchen' Connexion. (Connexion) 'Superb in its relentless sense of truth catching up with falsehood' We Love This Book. (We Love This Book) 'The irresistible Bruno ... leaping up mountains and plunging into caves as he prevents various ingenious crimes and plots from upsetting the traditional way of life in St Denis' Literary . (Literary) 'The setting in all the books is so vividly drawn that anyone who has visited the area on a caving holiday will feel instantly at home' Descent Magazine. (Descent Magazine) 'Walker is one of the few non-French writers writing about L'Hexagone's characters in English from a French perspective. Here he does it so well you feel as if you are reading an indigenous author's translated work' France Magazine. (France Magazine)