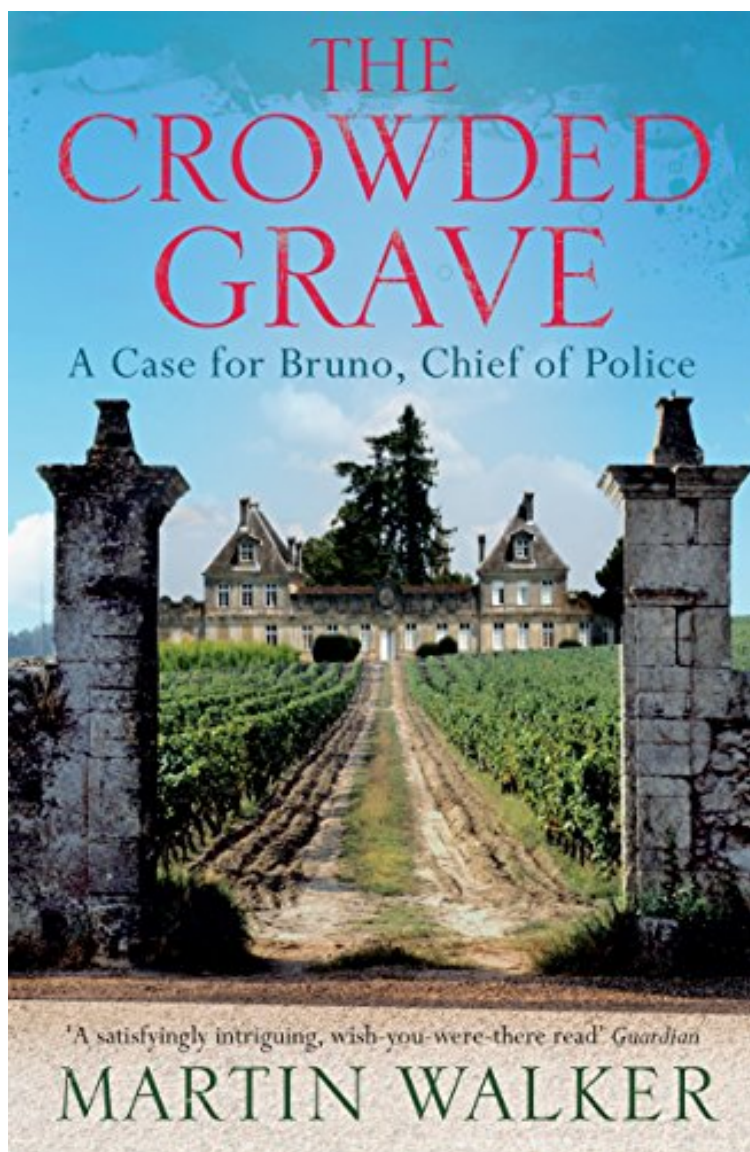


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The Crowded Grave: Bruno, Chief of Police 4



Par Martin Walker

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSpanish separatists, angry activists and a mystery corpse: Bruno, chief of police has has his work cut out in the fourth in this internationally bestselling series.Life in the South of France isn't full of the charming peace that you might imagine. In St Denis a summit in a local chteau is threatened by Basque separatists, animal rights campaigners are causing havoc and it's about to get worse. A local archaeological team unearths a well-preserved skeleton. Yet it's a lot more recent than they'd hoped - boasting a Swatch on its wrist and a bullet-hole in its skull. Meanwhile, an influx of visitors makes Saint Denis unusually crowded, and the key to the body appears to lie with one of these outsiders. Bruno must think fast and keep his wits about him in order to work out how these events are connected. Especially if the

answer lies a little closer to home. Extrait 1 It felt like the first morning of spring. The early sun was chasing the mist from the wooded hollows that sheltered the small streams flowing busily down to the River Vzre. Drops of dew sparkled on the new buds that seemed to have appeared overnight on the bare trees. The air smelled somehow different, fresh and hopeful, and enlivened by the tuneful notes of a dozen different birdsongs. Excited by the change in scents and season, even after his early morning walk through the woods, Gigi the basset hound thrust his nose at the open window of the small police van that descended the steep and curving lane from his masters home. At the wheel, Bruno was singing a half-remembered song about springtime in Paris. Vaguely thinking of the duties of the day that stretched before him, when rounding the last bend he was suddenly forced to brake. For the first time in his memory, the quiet road ahead was blocked with a line of cars and tractors, their engines running and their drivers heads poking from windows. Some were out of their cars, looking at the road that led to St. Denis. Several were talking urgently into cell phones. In the distance a car horn sounded, swiftly joined by others in discordant chorus. As Bruno surveyed the scene his own phone began to ring. He checked the screen, recognized the name of Pierre, a neighbor who lived farther up the road. He ignored it, assuming Pierre would be calling to complain at being stuck in the jam ahead. There had to be an accident of some sort. Bruno pushed aside the thought that he could have avoided this delay if hed stayed the night with Pamela, the English-woman hed been seeing since the autumn. She had called off the arrangement that he would dine with her and stay the night, saying shed finally secured an early morning appointment with the marchal, the traveling farrier who was to reshoe her horses. Pamela postponed their meetings too frequently for Brunos comfort, and he was never quite sure whether she was cooling on their relationship or simply wary of commitment. They were to meet again that evening, he reminded himself, without feeling greatly reassured. He parked the van and climbed out to investigate. The best view of the long traffic jam was commanded by Alain, who kept a dairy farm farther up the road to Les Eyzies. Geesethe roads full of ducks and geese, he called down to Bruno from his perch high on a tractor. Theyre all over the place. Bruno heard the sound of rival honking as the geese called back in response to the car horns, and he quickly clambered up beside Alain to peer ahead. The traffic jam stretched as far up the road as he could see. Darting between the stalled cars were perhaps hundreds of ducks and geese, streaming through the woods on the side of the road and heading across it to settle in a broad pond that spread across the meadow, swollen by the spring rains. Thats Louis Villattes farm, behind those woods, said Alain. A tree must have come down and broken his fence, let them all escape. Theres over three thousand birds in there. Or rather, there used to be. Looks like hes lost a few to the cars too. Have you got his number? Bruno asked. Alain nodded. Call him, see if he knows his birds have escaped. Then go through those woods and see if you can help Louis block the gap in his fence. Ill try and sort this out here. Join you later. Bruno went back to his van, released Gigi, and walked with him down the road, brushing aside the drivers angry queries. A driver he knew was looking mournfully at a broken headlamp while a wounded goose lay half pinned under his car, honking feebly. You grew up on a farm, Pierre, Bruno told him, rushing past. Put the poor devil out of its misery. Looking back, he saw Pierre bend to grip the goose behind its head and twist. The bird fluttered wildly and then went limp. Even when the farm boy grew up like Pierre to work in an accountants office, he hadnt lost the skill. When he came to the main grouping of birds, advancing in a jumbled column from the woods, Bruno saw that the road ahead was blocked by some stalled cars coming the other way. He briefly considered using Gigi to turn the birds back, but they would go off and cross the road elsewhere. There was no stopping this exodus, so he might as well try to speed it up and clear the road. He persuaded the leading cars in each queue to reverse a little to make a broader passage to let the birds pass freely across to the pond. Some drivers tried to argue, but he pointed out that the sooner he could stop the supply of ducks, the sooner the road would unblock. He left them grumbling and took Gigi into the trees, trotting past the trail of ducks and geese that was still pottering and waddling its way from the Villatte farm. Bruno smiled to himself, wondering if the birds felt a sense of escape or curiosity, of adventure triggered by the coming of springtime. Louis and his wife were already at the huge hole torn in the fence. No tree had fallen, no tractor had ridden through the sturdy barrier of wooden posts and chicken wire that ringed the farm. Instead, whole fence posts had been hauled from the earth and the wire cut. With boards and old doors and cardboard boxes stuffed beneath an ancient tractor, Louis was trying to plug the gaps in the fence. His wife and eldest son were flapping their arms, and their dog was barking to shoo away the ducks and geese following their fellows toward the freedom of the woods. Without being told, Gigi darted forward to help drive the birds back from the fence, and Bruno helped Alain to haul some branches from broken trees to seal the remaining gaps in the wire. Once the makeshift barrier was in place, Louis came forward to shake their

hands. Gigi and Louiss dog sniffed politely at each others tails and then sat beside each other, staring at any bird daring to approach. Weve been at this since daybreak, Louis said. You see how big this gap is? Some bastard ripped this fence down deliberately and did a good job of it. And we know who, added Sandrine, his wife. Look at this, stuck on the bits of the fence they didnt tear down. She handed Bruno a photocopied leaflet, sealed inside a transparent plastic envelope. STOP cruelty to animals. Boycott foie gras, he read. There was a smudged photocopied image of a duck held down in a narrow cage. A flexible tube hanging from above was thrust into its mouth by an unidentified man who was stretching the ducks neck taut for the force-feeding. At the bottom, it read Contactez PETAFrance.com. Whos this PETA? asked Alain, peering over Brunos shoulder. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said Bruno. Its an American thing, maybe British, but its growing in France. They made a big fuss up in Paris about battery chickens and veal, those calves kept in pens. Looks like theyve started running a campaign against foie gras. But thats our livelihood, said Sandrine. And we dont make foie gras, we just raise the birds. And look at this, said Louis. The wires been cut with proper cutters. This was organized. He showed Bruno the snipped strands of wire. Then they pulled it away somewhere, hiding the stretches of wire they cut. I sent the other boy out looking for it in the woods. City bastards, grunted Alain. Dont know the first thing about the country and they come here like a bunch of terrorists and try to ruin people. He turned aside and spat. You find out who they are, Bruno, and well take care of the rest. Bruno ignored Alains outrage on behalf of his fellow farmer. All the birds seem to be heading for that pond on the far side of the road, he told Louis. Have you got some way to round them up and bring them back? Ill ring the food bell. That brings most of them running. And for the rest, Ive got some netting. Thats how we usually round them up. Ill put them in the trailer and bring them back once Ive got this fence fixed. Sooner the better, because theyve blocked the whole road into town, said Bruno. Thats what brought me here. Crazy birds, said Louis, grimacing in rueful affection. Theyve got a perfectly good pond back in the field, but give them a sniff of someplace new and off they go. He gestured back beyond his house where already some of the ducks, frustrated at their efforts to escape through the newly sealed barrier, were splashing and paddling serenely in their old familiar pond. A young boy of about ten labored toward them from the woods, proudly hauling a section of wire fence. I found it, Papa, he shouted. And theres more. I can show you where. His face broke into a grin at seeing Bruno, who taught him to play rugby in winter and tennis in summer. Bonjour, Monsieur Bruno. He dropped the fence and came forward to shake hands. Bonjour, Daniel. Did you see or hear anything when this happened? Nothing. The first I heard was when Papa woke us all up to come out and save the birds. I heard something, a duck call, a single one and then repeated, just before the cockerel started, said Louis. So it must have been a bit before dawn. I remember thinking thats odd, because the ducks dont usually stir until after the hens. Could it have been a lure, one of those hunters calls? Bruno asked. Whoever cut the fence must have had some way to wake the birds and tempt them to move. Theyd have wanted them out before you and the family were awake. It must have been something like that, Sandrine said. The birds tend to stick around the barn, waiting to be fed. Theyve never gone off before, even when we had that storm that knocked part of the fence down. Id better get back to the road and see that jam is cleared, said Bruno. Before you go, what do you know about this PETA? asked Sandrine. Not a lot, but Ill find out, Bruno replied. I think youve lost one or two birds to the cars, but not many. Those birds are worth six euros each to us, said Sandrine. We cant afford to lose any of them, what with the bank loan we have to pay until we sell this lot. What if those PETA people come again? Ill shoot the bastards, Louis said. Well take turns keeping watch, sit up all night if we have to. You have a right to protect your property with reasonable force, according to the law, said Bruno. But people interpret reasonable force in different ways. If you hear anything happening again, its best you call me. Whatever you do, dont use a firearm or any kind of weapon. The best thing is to photograph them so we can identify who they are. If you have any lights you can rig up, or one of those motion detectors . . . A camera wont do any good, said Alain. Even with photos the damn courts will take their side. Theyre all mad Greenies, the magistrates. Then theres those food inspectors and all the other rules and regulations, tying us up in knots. I think I know who it is, said Sandrine. Its those students at the archaeology site who came in last week, working on some dig with that German professor, over toward Campagne. Theyre all staying at the municipal campground. This time of year, theyre the only strangers around here and you know what those students are like. Theyre all Greens now. Bruno nodded. Ill check it out. See you later. Along the fence he saw the fluttering of another of the leaflets inside a plastic bag, one of the kind that could be sealed and used in freezers. He took out a handkerchief and gingerly removed the pins that held it to the wire. Forensics might get something from it. There were several more attached along the fence and he took another. He

nodded at Alain. Do you want to come with me? You'll have to move your tractor. As he reached the road, where the jam was steadily clearing itself, Bruno's phone rang again. He checked the screen, saw the name Horst, and this time he answered. Horst Vogelstern was the German professor of archaeology in charge of the student volunteers at the dig. For more than twenty years Horst had spent his vacations at a small house he owned on the outskirts of St. Denis. He ran digs in the Vézère Valley that the local tourist board liked to proclaim as the cradle of prehistoric man. The first site of Cro-Magnon man had been found in the valley over a hundred years earlier, and the famous cave paintings of Lascaux were farther up the river. It was a source of pride to Bruno that he lived in this valley that could claim the longest continuous human habitation of anywhere on earth. Bruno had attended a couple of Horst's lectures, delivered in excellent if strongly accented French. He had visited his digs and read a couple of articles Horst had published in the popular monthly *Dossiers d'Archologie*. Normally a quiet man, Horst became passionate when he talked of his subject, the great mystery of the replacement of the Neanderthals by the Cro-Magnons some thirty thousand years ago. Had it been violent? Did they interbreed? Were the Neanderthals wiped out by some plague or disease? It was, said Horst, the crucial question regarding our human origins. Whenever Horst spoke, Bruno caught a sense of the excitement that gripped the scholar. Horst, he answered. How are you? I was just on my way to see you at the dig. Good, we need you here right away. And you had better bring a doctor with you. We've found a body. Congratulations. Isn't that what you wanted to find? Yes, yes, but I want skeletons from the distant past. This one is wearing a St. Christopher medal around his neck and I think he's also wearing a Swatch. This is your department, Bruno, not mine. *Revue de presse* 'I read this in two evenings, and there's an added bonus; Bruno cooks a couple of dishes and full recipes are supplied' *Poitou-Charentes Journal*. (*Poitou-Charentes Journal*) 'This is a grabbing read and wonderful for foodies as readers can enjoy a meander through the back roads of the Dordogne and into Bruno's kitchen for navarin d'agneau made with love and washed down with his '03 Pomerol' *Connexion*. (*Connexion*) 'Intriguing well written crime novel that keeps the reader guessing though to the final pages a good read and one of the most enjoyable books I have read in a long time' *Female First*. (*Female First*)