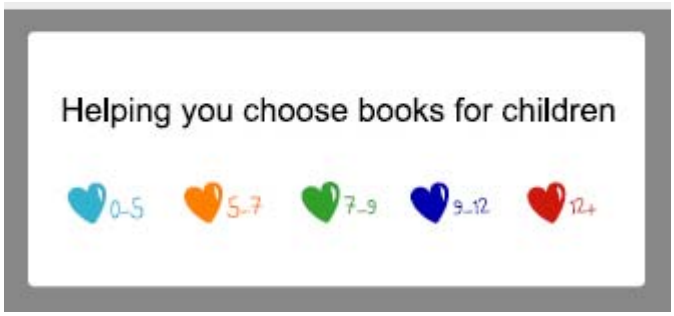
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CHAPTER 1

France 1792
Gaston Morteau

'Ta, ta, taaa ta, Taaa ta, ta ...? *Ah zut!* I so nearly have it. That tune has been in my head all night ... Is there more coffee?' Gaston hardly noticed as Colette got up quietly and refilled his cup for him. They were sitting at breakfast in the cavernous kitchen of the old winery, grouped about the end of the long table that could seat twenty or more vineyard workers when the season demanded it. The elegant rooms in the front of the house, which faced onto the street, were seldom used. Gaston abandoned his musical efforts and leaned back comfortably in his chair. He looked benignly around the table, consciously absorbing the details of the room and the company, as someone does who is about to leave home. Facing him was his father, chief winemaker – *vigneron* – to the Count du Bois who owned the vineyards that lined the gentle valley in which their village nestled. Even the village name reflected its history: Les Clos du Bois, the vineyards of the Count du Bois. His mother was sitting at the head of the table, straight-backed, looking every bit the aristocrat, which, by birth, she was.

Gaston wondered anew at the contrast between his parents. Papa's face was deeply lined, his skin burned to mahogany from long exposure to wind and sun, making him look older than his forty-five years, but his eyes sparked

bright from within the mesh of wrinkles. At the moment he was quietly crumbling the bread beside his plate, his mind far away, probably fondling the grapes that were now swelling to their vintage ripeness under the August sun. He would hold long conversations with his vines, addressing the grapes as if they were a recalcitrant class in school and he their teacher, but he was no fool. The vineyards were his life; when he drank he was like an artist standing back from his work so that he could view it as a whole. As he rolled the wine about on his tongue, his eyes would be seeing the slopes and grapes from which its various flavours sprang, and his ears would be listening to whispered histories of sun and soil, of sudden rain, and deep fermentation. He would hear confessions too: grapes picked too soon – a musty cask – the follies of youth, and like a benign priest, would admonish, and very occasionally, condemn.

For all that he was a dreamer, it was he who, years before, had surprised everyone by carrying off the Count's beautiful cousin to be his wife. And it was to him that the villagers came to relieve themselves of their personal burdens. If they needed straight advice they went to Monsieur Brouchard, the miller, but if they wanted a sympathetic ear they would slip in through the winery gates and seek out Monsieur Morteau among the vines or in the cellars. Gaston would see them deep in conversation and would know to keep away. Between them, Papa Morteau and M. Brouchard knew about most of what went on in and around the village.

Gaston tried to take it all in: his family, his home. Today he would leave them, perhaps never to return, and he must preserve this memory. He was eighteen and it was high time that he went, before the soil caught him and rooted him forever. A soldier's life would be far more exciting. '*Officer*

Cadet Gaston Morteau!' he smiled, imagining himself in the magnificent uniform that was waiting for him upstairs in his bedroom. In it he would be transformed, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of his former self. And he would be fighting for the noblest cause: the defence of his country.

It had been three years since the storming of the Bastille in Paris, when the people had turned against the King and the aristocracy, and begun the Revolution that had swept through France. Castles were burned, noble families were attacked and many emigrated in fear. The arguments for and against the Revolution had swept back and forth around the Morteau table, as in most homes throughout France, with Madame defending the 'noble privileges' and the order imposed by the aristocracy, while Gaston would defend the rights of the people. However, in truth, the village was too out of the way for the turmoil to have had any real effect on them so far.

But now it was different; the Prussians had crossed the border, determined to restore the King to the throne. Gaston's beloved France was under attack, and today he would set off to join the Hussars of Auxerre in their fight against the enemy. As he thought about what might be ahead of him, he wanted to spread his arms and embrace this dear place, his home, and his family.

And so it happened that, still smiling, he looked up and found himself staring into the eyes of Colette. She saw his smile, half returned it, and then dropped her eyes. Gaston felt a stab of guilt. Though the girl had been in the house for nearly six months, he'd hardly noticed her; she was only fourteen, four years younger than he. The poor child's father had been killed just three years ago in Paris in '89, at the very beginning of the Revolution. Hearsay had it that her

father had intervened – as he would have done to help anyone in distress – when two elderly aristocrats had been pulled from their coach by the mob. No one knew precisely what had followed. The bodies of all three were found later, and there were no reliable witnesses. Then, last March, the girl's mother, who had been a particular friend of Madame Morteau, had died, and Colette de Valenod was quietly absorbed into their family. It was a tricky time; some of Colette's relatives were under sentence for their royalist sympathies, so the aristocratic 'de' was dropped from her name. For some months Madame had kept her virtually under house arrest, now it was put abroad that she was a distant cousin of the Morteau family.

Colette was staring straight ahead now, her wrists resting dutifully on the edge of the table, head slightly forward so that her dark hair hung loose, part-curtaining her face. She looked lost and vulnerable, the half-smile gone, replaced by the sadness that was her customary demeanour. Gaston's newfound gallantry obliged him to try to restore that smile. This was a day when he wanted everyone to be happy. As if she felt the intensity of his look, hot colour suddenly washed across Colette's face. Gaston picked up his coffee and blew on the surface to cool it.

'Ta, ta, taaa...' he began again.

Colette's head lifted.

'It is rude to sing at table,' his mother interrupted him. 'And I don't think much of the words either.' But behind the criticism there was a glimmer of a smile.

'Oh, I know the words, Maman. I have them by heart; it's just the tune I can't get. I heard it when I went to be fitted for my uniform in Auxerre. It was brought to Paris by a battalion of volunteers from Marseilles, so they call it the 'Marseillaise'.

You will love it – all about country, and patriots, and blood.'

'Blood?' his mother snapped. 'Why does it always have to be blood? And the poor King, what will happen to him in prison, and Marie Antoinette ... and the boy?'

'They are safer where they are, Mother.'

'No! I don't trust those Girondins, what they really want is to do away with the monarchy and have a republic instead. And why did they have to massacre the King's Guard? In their lovely uniforms!' For all that Mother had married a commoner she was still an aristocrat and a Royalist at heart. She and Gaston would spar together as a matter of routine. 'What was it all for?' she asked.

'Mother, the King was in league with our enemies; it's not just the Prussians, half the countries of Europe are lining up to put him back on the throne and put the nobles back in their castles. Do you know what the Duke of Brunswick, the general who is leading the invasion, says? He says that when he liberates the King he'll execute the entire population of Paris? That's blood for you.'

'Well, what have *you* to offer that is better than the nobility?' she challenged.

'Liberty, equality, and fraternity – "*The Rights of Man*!"'

'They have just copied those from the Americans,' Madame Morteau sniffed. 'We should never have supported them against the British in '78; you won't remember it, you were just four, but I do. Now look at the monster it has unleashed, and on our own soil.'

'But it needn't be a monster, Mother. '*The Rights of Man*' is our constitution – that all men are born free and equal! We should know these rights by heart: Liberty, Property, Safety, and Resistance to Oppression. Sovereignty lies in the nation, whether we have a king or not. Don't you see that we are

changing the face of Europe? France will stand out as a beacon of hope!'

It was familiar territory to them all. Every once in a while Gaston and his mother had to go through this ritual combat. Even though Father never joined in, Gaston had the uncomfortable feeling that he had a clearer view of the situation than had either of them.

'I don't see anything noble in the common man when he becomes a mob,' Madame Morteau said, tight-lipped. 'Half-crazed, uneducated masses striking down innocent people.'

'That's why we need an *army*, Mother – *disciplined soldiers*.' Gaston, impressed by his own rhetoric, put his hand to his chest. Here he was, setting out to take up arms for his country, to lay down his life for these people: Mother, Father, Colette, the people of the village ...

His fine thoughts were cut short by his mother. 'Have you forgotten that the Count is coming today?' she asked.

Gaston removed his hand. The Count du Bois usually made an appearance in the village on church holidays, and used these occasions to call at the winery and discuss business with Gaston's father.

'He wants to see you in your uniform before you go.'

'My dress-uniform?'

'Of course, what else?'

'Mon Dieu, Maman ... I don't even know how to put it on!'

'I don't think he'll be critical. He didn't pay for it,' Madame Morteau said acidly. The Count, though noted for charm, was notoriously careful of his purse. 'Don't worry, he will feel that his letter of recommendation to your colonel deserves your homage.' While Mother would defend the aristocracy in principle, she gave no quarter when it came to

the faults of individual aristocrats, her cousin in particular.

'Will you tell him that you want to buy out that portion of the vineyard that is due to you?' Gaston asked, changing the subject. When his mother had married, part of her marriage settlement had been the right to buy a significant portion of the vineyard from the Count, if she so wished. Papa, however, had steadfastly refused to countenance this. His family had managed the vineyards for the Chateau du Bois for generations; he was an artist and a craftsman, not a landowner. As the Count's vigneron he had the virtual management of the whole valley. The vineyards were his palette, and the wines he created were his pictures. The idea of carving the vineyard up, even to his own advantage, was abhorrent to him. He needed the full palette of colours to create the richness and variety of his wines.

Gaston could see his father shifting uncomfortably in his chair. He felt bad about raising the matter, but with all that was going on in France at the moment, there were no guarantees that the Count would be left in possession of his vineyards. What would happen to Mother's entitlement if the Count fled, or had his land confiscated? If there were no chateau vineyard, who would employ them?

'You know your father doesn't want that,' his mother said with resignation. On matters of principle Father could be immovable. He was getting to his feet now, brushing the crumbs from his shirt.

'No, Gaston. The vineyard is a living thing; it cannot be divided. Each vine, each slope, each acre plays its part in every barrel we produce. I will not destroy what it has taken generations to make as one. The Count has declared for the Republic, he supports the Revolution, and nobody in the village will make any trouble. Our roots are with the chateau.'

Colette helped to clear the table when the meal was over and then joined Margot, the kitchen maid, in the scullery to dry the breakfast cups. She needed to do something practical with her hands. She had been acutely aware of Gaston's stare at breakfast. It felt as if she had walked on to thin ice and felt it cracking beneath her; she found the experience both disturbing and exciting. She wanted to be happy, but whenever she responded to Margot's light-hearted banter she could feel Madame's disapproval, reminding her that she was still in mourning. There was a lot about this family that Colette didn't understand. At one minute she would represent a welcome pair of hands in a busy household, but in the next she would feel that she was being preserved as some sort of relic of her poor mother. What she needed now was the practical clatter of plates, and to hear the latest round in Margot's bid for the heart of Lucien, a worker at the flourmill down by the river. Margot was almost her only contact with the village; Madame kept her so secluded – for her own safety – that she had met hardly anyone outside of the winery. She hurried into the scullery where she found Margot simmering with indignation like a saucepan about to blow its lid.

'Oh, Mademoiselle! You have come at last. I am ready to explode.' Margot opened her eyes to a startling extent. 'Wait till I tell you. Lucien, *le cochon* ... the pig... he swore to me that Bernadette meant nothing to him.' Bernadette was Margot's rival in the battle for Lucien. 'The cow ... she is a slut! Yesterday as I approached the mill I saw someone coming out. "Who is this coming towards me?" I ask myself.' Margot was shortsighted. 'My heart beats faster. Oh! No need to

worry ... it is just la Bernadette, "Pah!" I say to myself. I raise my nose in the air until she is past.' Margot imitated her own nonchalant walk. 'This woman, she means nothing to Lucien therefore she means nothing to me. I wait till she's past, then I turn to her back and I put my tongue out like this. Ohhhhhh la la, Mademoiselle what did I see?' Margot grabbed Colette's arm with a sudsy hand. 'No wonder she looked like a cat with cream ... *merde!*'

'Go on!' said Colette breathlessly. Margot was staring out of the window, her teeth bared. Colette felt another hand close on her elbow from behind but she couldn't turn, she had to hear. 'What did you see, Margot?'

'Oh, Mam'selle, there they were: two hands printed in flour like two white gloves on her back. You should have heard what I–' But Colette was not to hear Margot's denunciation of Bernadette – or was it the luckless Lucien? The hand on her elbow had suddenly become a band of steel as Madame Morteau drew Colette bodily out of the scullery door.

'Come, my dear,' she said severely. 'Leave the dishes to Margot.'

'But Madame, I like to help. Also I like to hear Margot's talk about the village. She–'

'Hush, my dear.' Madame Morteau stopped her. Then, in a softer tone ... 'ah, your poor mother, I grieve so much for her. For her sake I mustn't let you become a servant here. This is your home now.' Madame dropped her voice further. 'Margot is a good girl, but you must realise that she is a peasant. I cannot have her filling your ears with village gossip. Also there is the way she speaks ... What if your mother were to come back and hear you talking like a girl from the fields?'

Madame Morteau hadn't meant to hurt – she seldom did –

but her choice of words was unfortunate. Colette had held her mother in her arms as she died; she knew there was no coming back from where her mother had gone. Suddenly all her frustration and anger welled up inside her. Tears and helpless rage surged through her. What did her precious aristocratic upbringing matter if it meant she couldn't have friends of her own? She tore her arm from Madame Morteau's grip and ran towards the stairs. At the bottom step she whipped around, Margot's choicest vulgarities seething in her mouth. She tried to get them out, but they choked her. Oh, why couldn't she rage and fume and throw things like other girls? Madame Morteau was looking at her in amazement. Didn't she realise what she had said? Was she stupid? Had she no notion of what it was like to have your family torn away from you? Colette bit hard on her lip; if only she could have her mother back everything would be all right. She threw herself at the stairs and pounded as hard as she could up to the first landing, where she paused, feeling the sharp taste of blood in her mouth.

As she climbed wearily up the next flight, she thought bitterly of how her father had died, trying to save the lives of people who probably meant nothing to him, at the hands of a mob that had good cause to hate him and his class. And then there was Mother, who had starved herself into ill health, because she had been too proud to confess – until it was too late – that she had no money. What use were these old values? And now here *she* was, being preserved like one of those pale and pathetic pressed flowers that fall out of old books.

She reached the top landing and paused to look out of the open window. The road fell away below the house to where the statue of St Vincent stood alone in the village square.

Sparrows were chattering in the eaves above her head. She could hear Gaston humming to himself as he moved about his room to her left. He would be packing for his departure now. If only she could go with him, just to be there and to participate in his adventures. Anything to escape from this dreadful limbo.

'Got it!' Gaston gave a small cry of triumph; had he remembered his tune? He was humming it again. She listened. His confidence was increasing: 'Ta, ta, taaa ta, Taaa ...' his voice was gaining strength. Oh to be a man, for whom things were always simple and straightforward, and to be brave without thinking.

Ever since her father's death, Colette had been haunted by fear, her sleep broken by the same nightmare. She had never seen or heard a real mob, but still *the mob* lay in wait each night. She would try to open her eyes but daren't, because she knew that their faces would be there, pressed up close, terrifying, screaming, distorted faces full of hate for Father and her. Then, in a sudden silence, the killing would start. Grunts, and the sound of blows falling again and again on her father. She knew she could stop the murder if she only could wake in time, but she never could. And so each night was approached in terror and each day began with a feeling of having failed him.

She walked down the short corridor to her room where she lay down on her coverlet and stared at the cracks on the ceiling. Gaston would be gone soon, just when he seemed to have finally noticed her.



Colette woke with a start. The sun had moved while she slept. She felt refreshed and was surprised to find her face

stiff from tears. She poured the remains of the water from her jug into a basin and washed her face. Then, taking the jug with her, she hurried for the stairs. It would soon be time to start preparing for dinner. Madame would have forgotten this morning's incident. Perhaps she'd be able to corner Margot and hear the rest of the Lucien saga. First, however, she'd tap on Gaston's door and ask if he needed water too. Her knock produced an immediate response.

'Is that Colette? Come at once, you must help me!' It was an order. This would be what it would be like to be a soldier under his command, she thought.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm in trouble. I'm quite respectable ... I think.' She put down her jug, lifted the latch and looked in. Gaston was standing in the middle of the room in his shirt-tails, knees apart, feet at right angles, apparently unable to move. On the floor lay the fragmented glory of his new dress uniform. She covered a smile; he looked like a peacock that had met with a serious accident. Of course, he needed to dress up for the Count who was to come to dinner today. But why was he frozen in that extraordinary position?

'Look what I did, Colette, I put on my boots before my breeches, then I tried to get them off, and my spurs caught in the braid of my dolman.' Colette looked behind him. She could see that the spikes of his spurs were entangled in the delicate braid of the glorious silver and blue jacket at his feet. It made her toes curl just to see the damage he would cause if he moved. 'If I pull the braid, I'll be disgraced!' Colette knelt down and disentangled his spurs, carefully easing back the trapped braid as she did so.

'That's it, you're free now; you can take your boots off,' she said.

'That's how I got into trouble in the first place, Colette.' He stood on one leg, grasped the heel of his boot, tried to heave, lost his balance and began to hop backwards.

'Well, don't do it again!' she laughed, snatching away the precious dolman. 'Come, let me take the spurs off first, then I'll pull.' She undid the buckles and removed the wickedly spiked wheels. 'I'm glad I'm not a horse,' she said. Gaston sat down on a chair and held out a boot. She took it in her hands; it was smooth to touch and smelled excitingly of new leather. Then she began to pull.

'It's coming!' Gaston held hard to the sides of his chair, bracing one foot on the floor. The boot came off with an audible 'fop' as the vacuum was released. 'Now for the other one.'

'How will you ever manage on your own?' she asked.

'I may have a servant, otherwise I'll just have to rely on my friends to help.' The second boot proved more difficult. Colette leaned back while Gaston braced himself. 'Pull ... it's coming!' At that moment his stockinged foot slipped away from him on the polished floor, his body weight shifted, the chair tipped forward and the back hit him on the head with a stunning crack. Colette lost her balance and rocketed back with the boot.

'Oh, your poor head,' she said, struggling to her feet. For a second Gaston didn't stir. She threw the boot she was holding to one side and rushed to help him. He stood up groggily, then swayed alarmingly. She grabbed him about the waist and held on. At that moment the door was thrown open and Madame Morteau stood staring at them from the doorway.

'What on earth is going on here!' she demanded. 'Gaston, you should be ashamed ... and in your shirt-tails.' Her look

moved to Colette, who didn't dare release Gaston in case he fell. 'Colette, out at once! Have you no sense of propriety!'

'But, Mother, she was only helping me off with my boots!'

'I don't see why that should involve her embracing you about the middle.'

'I fell ... Mother; she's only a ...'

'I don't want to hear about it! The sooner you leave for your regiment the better.' She turned to Colette, who had stepped back, half dismayed, but yet half delighted with the excitement. 'Colette, you are wanted in the kitchen. The Count du Bois will be here shortly. I don't know how you expect poor Margot to prepare dinner on her own. There are still peas to be shelled.'

'Madame, I haven't met the Count. Is he married? Has he children?' Madame Morteau pursed her lips in the way Colette had seen her do when she disapproved of something.

'No, the Count is not married ...' she replied shortly. 'Now, run along.'

Colette hurried off to the kitchen, aware that Madame had answered only part of her question.