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LOUISE  
PENNY



THE  
BLACK  
WOLF

A NOVEL



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THE  
BLACK  
WOLF



MINOTAUR BOOKS  
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*For Andy Martin, my longtime publisher and, more importantly, my longtime friend. Thank you for climbing the mountain with me.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this book over the course of 2024, and turned in the final draft to my publisher in September 2024. Imagine my surprise in January 2025 when I started spotting headlines that could have been ripped right from the book ...

## CHAPTER 1

“We have a problem.”

Now, weeks later, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache could not overstate what a huge understatement that had been. Though at the time, while it was clear something was off, it had seemed only that.

A slight odor. A scent, a sense of something going bad.

A problem.

Not a crisis. Not a looming catastrophe that put the poisoning plot, if not to shame, then into perspective.

Jean-Guy Beauvoir and Isabelle Lacoste, his dual seconds-in-command at the Sûreté du Québec, had joined him in Three Pines in the small hours of that August morning, and together they’d reread and reread the second notebook, the one they’d underestimated, even dismissed.

The one they’d, he’d, assumed contained preliminary notes. Not the final, the fatal one, that had already killed so many.

When they’d arrived, Armand hadn’t told Jean-Guy and Isabelle what he thought. He wanted to see if they saw what he did. He knew the blast in Montréal’s water-treatment plant had severely affected his hearing. Maybe his other senses had also been jarred. So that he could no longer see and think clearly. Could no longer trust what his eyes, his common sense, his sixth sense, the tingling in his scalp told him.

But both Beauvoir and Lacoste, his best and brightest, had looked up and nodded.

“We have a problem,” they’d agreed.

He couldn’t actually hear the words over the scream of the millions of cicadas nesting in his head since the explosion, but he’d become adept at lip-reading. And if their mouths hadn’t told him, their eyes, their expressions, the sudden tension in their bodies did.

But still it was far from clear what they were now facing. What they’d missed, dismissed.

They only knew they'd been wrong about the order of the books the young biologist had hidden. They'd assumed the one outlining the poisoning plot was the second. The conclusion. The end.

But they were wrong. It was just the beginning.

Even now, weeks later, the exact threat was still concealed inside the words, the notations, the cryptic drawings and numbers that Charles Langlois had left behind. Before he'd been murdered. Mowed down within sight, within reach of Armand himself.

He'd died holding Armand's hand. Clinging to his eyes. A young man, barely more than a boy, about to die.

When Armand had begged him for some clue, some idea, of what was happening, Charles had coughed up one blood-spattered word.

"Family."

Nothing more.

Charles had been the first of many to die, some colluding in the poisoning plot, some trying to stop it, including the Grey Wolf himself. Giving his life to stop a catastrophe.

Dom Philippe was the one who'd first, years earlier on the shores of a pristine lake, told Armand the tale of the grey and black wolves, engaged in battle. The one advocating for decency, for peace, for civility and the courage to be kind. To forgive.

The other pressing forward with an agenda of hate, of aggression. Of retribution. Of a quest for power and domination, through fear. Through twisting the truth into a great lie, a great grievance.

Which one would win?

The Grey Wolf was gone. Murdered.

They'd thought the Black Wolf had been captured. But now, as Armand stepped out of the shower this early October morning, he was far from sure.

It was still dark outside when the head of homicide for the Sûreté wiped the condensation off the bathroom mirror and a man in his late fifties appeared, half his face covered in shaving cream. Though it happened each and every morning, the face that looked back could still surprise him.

Away from any reflection, he was in his early forties. But each morning he was reminded that was not actually true. And getting less true by the moment, he thought as he brushed grey hair, damp and askew from the shower, off his forehead, then continued to shave.



The creases that appeared with each stroke of the razor were more pronounced, etching deeper into his face with every year, every month, each day and concern.

He wondered what his father would have looked like, had he reached this age.

Almost every working day Armand Gamache knelt beside people who would grow no older; many would never brush grey hair from their foreheads or see lines down their faces. Would never meet children or grandchildren.

And so he did not begrudge these signs of age, they just slightly surprised him.

Behind him in the reflection, Armand saw their bedroom in the village of Three Pines. Worn oriental rugs were scattered on the wide-plank pine floors. The walls were covered in bookcases and paintings inherited when parents and grandparents died. Eclectic and not, perhaps, great art, but comforting in their familiarity. And the more appreciated for it.

A large armchair in the corner held the clothes they'd taken off the night before and tossed there, his on top of hers because he'd crawled into bed later. Though Reine-Marie had remained reading after he'd already fallen asleep, the book splayed on his chest and his reading glasses slipping down his nose.

Each morning he found both placed safely on the bedside table.

A cold breeze through the slightly open windows fluttered the curtains and brought in fresh morning air, lightly scented with pine and musky autumn leaves.

The dogs, Henri and Fred, were asleep at the foot of the queen bed, while Gracie, who might or might not be a chipmunk, or a ferret, had made a nest of their clothes and now lay half buried in them.

But while Armand took all this in, his eyes sought only one thing. They came to rest, like a homing instinct, on Reine-Marie. She was curled under the duvet, asleep. Her grey hair lay on the pillow. Her mouth was open slightly, no doubt snoring softly. A sound he'd never thought about but now missed.

He smiled, and as he did, the lines in his face deepened. His pleasure cut through and broke up those etched there by stress, by worry, by pain and sorrow.

His smile overpowered them. Though one remained. The deep scar at his temple that spoke of a sorrow that would never, could never, should never go away completely. He would carry it, Armand knew, into the next life and the next. Until he could make amends. For that terrible failure.

Now, in early October, the sun was rising later and later, though Armand himself was getting up earlier and earlier, propelled out of bed by the siren in his head and the agonizing feeling, the dread, that he'd made a mistake.

*We have a problem.*

The words, spoken in unison by Jean-Guy and Isabelle as they'd sat in the living room and read that second notebook weeks ago, were getting louder and louder.

*We have a problem.*

He shaved off the rest of the stubble and wiped his face with the moist cloth. Then, holding on to the edges of the sink, he leaned in and took a good, hard look in the mirror. He had to be brutally honest with himself.

He'd been over and over Charles Langlois's second notebook. He'd practically memorized all the strange entries the young biologist had made.

They had a problem, and the problem was that they still didn't know what the problem was. Only that one existed. Something dreadful was about to happen. Langlois, before he'd been murdered, had stumbled onto something that involved poisoning the drinking water of Montréal but did not stop there. That one terrible act of domestic terrorism was simply a prelude, perhaps even misdirection. Meant to mask what was really happening.

And Armand had fallen for it.

True, he and his team had stopped the poisoning, but they hadn't seen that there was something else he should have given equal weight to. Another tranche, a deeper, darker level. Now Armand went to bed later and later and was woken up earlier and earlier by the howl in his head and the sickening feeling he'd made another terrible, terrible mistake. In focusing on the one plot, he'd given the other time to grow, to fester, to march toward completion.

Somewhere out there, in the darkness, a black wolf was feeding, being fed. Growing.

The creature was becoming immense, grotesque. Powerful. Looming over them. Perhaps so close it was unrecognizable for what it was.

Watching and waiting.

*We wait. We wait.*

The problem, Armand was beginning to believe, wasn't just out there, but in here. In the mirror. The problem was him. But maybe, maybe, so was the solution.

*Some malady is coming upon us. We wait. We wait.*

★ ★ ★

“Not a problem.”

“How can you know that? You underestimated him once.”

As she listened to Joseph Moretti's warm voice down the phone line, she felt the thin ice crack beneath her.

She'd come close, so close, to solid ground. To safety. After years out in the wilderness, she'd finally been able to see the shore. Even smell it. That sweet pine scent that had always signaled happy times. The Christmas tree, with its playful lights and ornaments and presents. That first walk in the forest after the winter melt when the air finally held some warmth, and the evergreen needles released their scent.

Ever green. What a concept. Nature was resilient. Even optimistic.

Humankind less so.

After years of skating, of balancing, of slipping and sliding, she thought she could finally pull herself to safety. Finally.

And then, at the last moment, disaster. Thanks to Gamache. That fucker. She could not afford another mistake. Another misjudgment. Another moment of weakness.

Though they were miles apart on this Saturday morning in early October, she in her office in downtown Montréal and Moretti in the north end of Montréal at the Jean-Talon farmers' market, she could feel his eyes on her. Intense, penetrating. Strip-searching her. Removing layers, not just of her clothing but of her skin, tearing it off in strips as he searched for any lie she might be hiding in her flesh, in her bones, in her marrow.

After all these years, he still did not trust her. Despite all she'd done. He was like some predator that relied on instinct. Sniffing the air for the stench of betrayal, of approaching danger.

She wished she could stop there. Dismiss him as a wild creature, but the fact was, over the years, as she'd watched him closely, she'd seen not just the mafia boss's cunning, his guile, his charm and brutality, but also his intelligence.

This was no madman, careering from crime to hideous crime. This was a man who could have been anything.

Had Joseph been born into any family other than the Morettis, any other dynasty, his life would have been different.

But now she wondered if that was true.

For all his education and intelligence, something was off. A screw was loose. Whether it was loosened by his upbringing or by genetics, she didn't know. What she did know was that something rancid, something corrosive, was seeping through that opening.

“You say Gamache isn’t a problem,” said Moretti. “But he and his people managed to fuck up the first part of the plan. Killing six of my soldiers, including two made men, in the process. It would be over by now if he hadn’t interfered. The Five Families are getting worried. How much does he know? He found the notebooks, right?”

“*Oui*. He gave them to the prosecutors.”

“Did he read them?”

She was about to snap, *How would I know?* But pulled herself back.

“I suspect he did.” Her voice was calm. “But so did I. I don’t think he could tell much from that second book, even if he realizes it’s the one that matters.”

“You don’t think? You don’t think?” Moretti’s voice had risen, then suddenly dropped to a growl. “You should’ve had him killed in the church.”

“I wanted him to be the one to sound the alarm. They’d have believed him. He’s trusted.”

“Yeah, well, if he begins to suspect there’s more—”

“He won’t. Look, the investigation’s wrapped. No one is paying any attention. Especially not Gamache. As far as they’re concerned, it’s over.”

She was tired of his paranoia. It was exhausting. She was exhausted. So close to the shore, to the end, she could not afford a mistake now. Another one. Moretti was right. She should have had Gamache killed in the church.

She had to shut this down.

“The biologist is dead—” she began.

“I know that.” He was getting snippy.

*You should,* she thought. *You’re the one who had him killed.*

“He’s the only one who came close to figuring out what’s happening,” she continued. “But even he didn’t know it all. If he had, he’d have told Gamache when they met at Open Da Night. And even if Charles Langlois had worked it out, no one would have listened to him. Would you, if someone came to you with that story?”

She waited for the laughter, but none came.

“*Non*,” she answered her own question. “You’d have dismissed what he said as unbelievable, and Charles Langlois as crazy, delusional. Paranoid. He had a history of addiction, of mental illness. He’d be seen as a pathetic young man from a homeless shelter who was clearly out of his mind and had bought into one too many conspiracy theories. Ironically, the truth would have proven how crazy he was. No. He knew nothing of the plan.”

“He knew enough to contact Gamache,” Moretti pointed out. “Gamache listened to him, believed him.”

“True, but only about the lesser target. *Voyons*, his notebook is pretty much gibberish unless you know what to look for.”

“And Gamache doesn’t?”

“He hasn’t a clue. He’s on leave and recovering in that little village of his. He’s been silent since all this happened.”

“Silent doesn’t mean inactive. You underestimated him once. That can’t happen again.”

She sighed. “If you’re that worried, why not just kill him now? The first snowfall is in the forecast. He probably doesn’t have his snow tires on yet. Just run him off the road. *Fini*.”

She waited. *We wait. We wait.*

Moretti was considering it.

“*Non*. If he’d died in the church or the water-treatment plant, that would’ve been fine. Line of duty and all that. But now? Kill a senior Sûreté du Québec officer? Can you imagine the blowback? Even if it looked like an accident, the timing would be suspicious. There’d be questions. His people would never stop digging and God knows what they’d find. *Non*. We just need to make sure he’s not a problem.”

“He’s not.”

“You keep saying that, but how can you be so sure?”

“Because if he has any suspicions, I’ll be the first one he comes to.”

“He trusts you? Still?”

“Of course. Why not? As far as he knows, I helped end the poison plot.”

“You aren’t lying to me, are you?”

“I wouldn’t do that, Don Moretti. If nothing else, it wouldn’t be prudent.”

There was a pause, and then soft laughter. “You are many things, but prudent isn’t one.”

He was probably right, she thought. Otherwise she’d never have found herself this far from shore.

“*Bon*,” he finally said. Good. “It’ll be over soon.”

The thing about psychopaths, and she’d met her fair share, was that they knew they were the sun around which everything moved. They were the light, the dark, the gravity, the rational. The reason and the reason why. Joseph Moretti knew he was the sun, the son, the grandson. The grand sun. That nothing happened without his approval. He was all-seeing, all-knowing.

He was wrong.

This was bigger than even he knew. There was another celestial body that eclipsed even the boss of bosses. She just had to keep skating, keep her equilibrium. Keep him happy and onside. And looking in one direction, and not the other.

“*C’est vrai*,” she laughed. “We’re safe. Don’t worry.”

“Oh, I’m not the one who should be worried.”

There was a pause, and in that moment she saw her mistake. She’d dared think that she might yet make it to safety.

That was how mistakes were made, how cracks formed. Hope lured people closer to the edge, to the shore. Not realizing that was where the ice melted first. Just feet from solid ground, it gave way, and they plunged into the icy water, their breaths taken away, their hearts spasming, their last view that of the pine trees overhead, almost within reach as they sank.

“And the map?” he asked. Down the phone line she could hear voices raised, calling to each other. Friendly voices.

“We don’t know for sure there is one. If Charles Langlois had a map, it’s well hidden. If it exists at all, we’ll find it. No one else has it, otherwise I’d have heard.”

“I think it would be a good idea if you joined me here, Evelyn.”

“Now, today? At the market?” She felt her anxiety rise along with the hairs on her forearms.

Was he serious? Was this a test? Or had she already flunked the test? Was it a trap? “But we might be seen together.”

“I’m sure you can come up with a believable explanation. You’re allowed to shop for dinner.”

Into the silence, she sighed. “I’m on my way.”

She hung up and looked at the small, slightly disheveled young woman standing at the door to her office.

“You’re not going, are you, *patron*?”

“No choice.” She put on her fall coat and large hat. “Besides, I do need Brussels sprouts.”

“Can’t you get them at the grocery store?”

“I was kidding.”

They were walking briskly down the long, deserted corridor toward the elevators.

“Stop!”



“What is it?”

Her assistant now hesitated. “I heard what Moretti said. He’s right. You should have had Gamache killed.”

She nodded. They both knew that was true. That was her mistake, the chink in her armor through which Joseph Moretti was peering. And did he see the big lie?

“Should I get you a car?”

“*Non*. I’ll take the Métro.”

Just as the elevator doors closed, she heard, “*Fais attention*.”

Be careful.

As she searched her handbag for her subway pass, Chief Inspector Evelyn Tardiff knew they were well beyond careful. It was now just degrees of reckless. Her skates had slid out from under her. Her arms were pinwheeling. She was suspended in midair, and the only question was how bad, how hard, would the fall be? How much would this hurt?

On the station platform, her back pressed against the tile wall, she heard the singsong of an approaching subway train. And sighed. She’d been at this too long. She was getting too old, too tired, too sloppy. She had no idea how to regain her balance, never mind get to the shore.

Survival was not guaranteed.

*You should have had Gamache killed.*

There was nothing vindictive in it. It was simply true. And might still be necessary. Her only way to shore might be over his body.

★ ★ ★

Don Moretti slid his phone into his pocket. Picking a plump beefsteak tomato off a neat pile, he caressed its flesh for firmness in a gesture that managed to be sensual. Bringing it to his nose, he inhaled and smiled as he caught his wife’s eye, one aisle over. Then he cocked his arm and pretended to throw the tomato at his young daughter, who squealed with laughter and ducked.

Moretti then carefully replaced the tomato. Its thin skin undamaged.

It was a few minutes to seven on this autumn morning, the market not yet open. The farmers still putting out their produce.

The sky was a deep velvety blue at the horizon. The day would dawn bright and fresh and filled with promise. Anything might happen.

## CHAPTER 2

Clara Morrow brought the mug of tepid coffee to her mouth, forgetting that she had a paintbrush clasped between her teeth, like some gunslinger preparing to have a bullet removed.

The analogy wasn't that far off. This stage in her creations was always painful, wracked as she was with insecurities. The bleeding was internal. The wound worse than it appeared.

Survival was not guaranteed.

Through the window of her small home in the Québec village of Three Pines she could see a light at the rambling white clapboard house across the village green, and smoke rising from the chimney.

Someone was up and functioning at the Gamache home. And so early.

Then she noticed a soft glow over the forests and hills that surrounded the village. The sun was rising.

What time was it? Last time she looked, it was 2:17 in the morning, when That Familiar Voice had screamed that she was a fraud. That she was fucked.

It had propelled her out of bed, down the narrow stairs, and into her studio to stare at the canvas and the *merde* that someone, surely not her, had put there.

This was to be the centerpiece of her solo show at Montréal's Musée d'art contemporain.

Fuck. Fuckity, fuck, fuck!

The only comfort was that the bistro would open soon and she could escape into the company of toasted cinnamon buns, dripping butter. And maple-smoked bacon. And, and ...

Myrna.

The two women would drink strong café au lait in front of the muttering fire, and for those few minutes Clara could forget the six-shooter pointed at her heart. The trigger being pulled. Pulled ...

Putting down the mug and spitting out her brush, Clara Morrow turned her back on the easel and the series she'd been working on for two years.

It was called *Just before something happens* ...

★ ★ ★

“Mario!” Joseph Moretti put his hand on the elderly man’s shoulder. “How’re your plums?”

“As juicy as ever, Don Moretti.”

Both men laughed.

This was an old joke started decades ago when Mario had been a virile young man, and Joseph a child trailing his grandfather around the Marché Jean-Talon. At the time, the boy had thought his grandfather’s question was literal, which confused him since Mario was a butcher and did not sell plums.

The joke had been passed down to son and now grandson, who’d finally understood it about the time his own plums appeared. It was clear that the old joke, never clever or even funny, was now distressing to the dignified older man. And always had been. Which was why Moretti, like his father and grandfather, repeated it. Each and every weekend.

Joe Moretti had been coming, man and boy, to this farmers’ market in Little Italy every Saturday morning since he was younger than his daughter. Before the market opened, he’d hold his father’s hand and walk the aisles a few steps behind his grandfather, amid the hubbub of farmers unloading their produce. Setting up their stalls of bright gourds and multicolored peppers, of fragrant apples and earthy potatoes and assorted onions.

The men and women called to each other. Some singing, some arguing over a football match. A miscalled penalty. Groaning over a free kick that hit the crossbar.

It was good-natured, and young Joe had envied them. Their comradery. The ease with which they laughed and even argued. The apparent simplicity of their lives. The certainty and predictability. What to do. How to do it. While crops might sometimes fail, it was through no fault of their own. They were blameless.

Even as a child, he’d envied that and understood the difference between them.

Young Joseph had also noticed that as his grandfather approached, as his father and even he approached, the farmers fell silent, the laughter stopped. The jocularity dying on their lips, they touched their caps and nodded. Each hoping Don Moretti would stop. Would admire their produce and give them a chance to offer the family the best they had.

And now, decades later, the place looked, sounded, even smelled the same. It was still buzzing. Still fragrant with the scent of fresh-picked autumn fruits and vegetables. Even the blood from the slaughtered animals smelled good to Moretti. Or at least familiar. Now.

As a child, as a teen, as a young man, he'd taken it all in, just as his daughter did now. The young Joe had noted, subconsciously, the respect, the reverence, in which his grandfather and father, his entire family was held. It was their due, his birthright.

Or so it seemed.

A decade later, in his late teens, he'd watched it seep away when the old man had been arrested for running guns into the States and the leadership had passed to Joe Jr.'s father. A man ill-suited to the job. He was too nice, too willing to forgive, too ready to compromise and collaborate with other Québec crime families. To make alliances with the biker gangs, the East End gang. The Irish and Jewish crime families. Too willing to give up territory to preserve peace.

He was weak.

Joe Jr. knew it. And had known from a young age what would have to be done to guarantee survival.

The signs of disrespect when the grandfather had been arrested and the son took over were subtle but immediate and unmistakable. The pies held out to Joe Sr. were charred on the edges. They were ones that could only be given away. To the poor, or the Morettis.

Produce was still offered, but perhaps not the best cuts of meat. Not the choicest of fruit or vegetable. Bruises were evident. As was the message.

But still Joe Sr., the new Don, took the offerings and even thanked the farmers, while Joe Jr.'s lips curled and his emotions curdled, and he took note of names as the Moretti empire crumbled.

But the satisfaction, bordering on glee, of those who enjoyed the downfall was short-lived. As were they.

With the death in prison of the grandfather, the grandson had moved swiftly to establish himself, leapfrogging over his own father. A bold, some said foolish move that threatened all-out war. Until Joseph Moretti Sr. had been killed in Sainte-Émilie, north of Montréal, in a fire at the country home of his mistress. A fire ruled accidental by a young investigator in the Sûreté's Arson division.

Then the reprisals, swift, relentless, merciless, had begun.

And when it was over, Joe Moretti the younger emerged as the new capo di tutti capi. The head of the Sixth Family. The most powerful mob boss in Canada

and one of the most powerful in North America, behind the five New York–based mafia families.

On this bright Saturday in early October, while Don Moretti strolled the aisles of the Marché Jean-Talon, collecting gifts and signs of respect, “*Bonjour*, Don Moretti,” enjoying the fruits of others’ labors, the former arson investigator sat looking at her reflection in the window of the Métro car as it careered through another tunnel.

★ ★ ★

Jean-Guy Beauvoir stood just inside the church and looked around for his father-in-law.

He’d woken early to the smell of fresh-brewed coffee and a cold breeze scraping his face. He opened his eyes and stared with rancor at the curtains puffing out at the open window.

Fuck. Fuckity, fuck, fuck.

He snuggled deeper into the bed, spooning Annie and feeling her body heat combined with his own warming the duvet around them. He pulled it tighter and pretended the cold air wasn’t rushing into the room.

He nudged Annie gently, hoping she’d wake up and shut the window. But she didn’t move.

Getting up, he ran to the window with every intention of shutting it, then hopping back into bed. But as he reached it, he saw his father-in-law walking through the soft predawn light along the dirt road that led out of the village. Followed, Dr. Dolittle–like, by the small parade of animals. Henri, the ears that walked like a dog; old Fred; and little Gracie.

Jean-Guy looked back at his warm bed, where Annie was snoring, then returned to the window, but Armand had disappeared.

Closing the window, he kissed Annie and whispered, “I know you’re awake, awful woman.”

Her snoring grew slightly louder.

After checking on Honoré and Idola, he quickly showered, shaved, put on his heavy fall sweater that smelled of the cedar closet, and his cords. Following the scent of fresh-brewed coffee to the kitchen, he poured two mugs; then he too left the quiet house.

The sun was barely visible through the forest. There was a hint of light, rather than light itself. A promise of things to come. It was a few minutes past seven and

the day glistened, bright and fresh and filled with promise. Anything might happen.

A mist hung over the village nestled in the valley as the cooler autumn air mingled with the warm earth. The vapor rose thicker over the Rivière Bella Bella, creating a sinewy ribbon over the forest as it followed the freshwater spring through Three Pines and out the other side.

All this gave a village already steeped in mystery an almost mystical feel, heightened even further by the near impossible fall colors of the surrounding forest.

The vapor from the mugs joined the mist, adding coffee to the fragrance of fresh grass and mud and the musky fallen leaves. Jean-Guy took a big breath and inhaled a deep sense of peace.

He knew it was temporary, perhaps even illusionary, but he welcomed it as he followed in Armand's footsteps up the hill to St. Thomas's.

Once at the church, he climbed the stairs and paused to look back at the fieldstone and rose brick and white clapboard homes that circled the village green. Three immense pines stood in the middle of the Québec village, towering over the homes and shops, as though sentinels. In fact, as Jean-Guy had learned, three pines planted in formation was an old code, meant to tell those fleeing for their lives that they were finally safe. They had found sanctuary.

People still got sick, still died in Three Pines. Were still hurt, wounded. Terrible things still happened here, as elsewhere. The village did not, could never, guarantee safety from the blows life dealt. That would be ridiculous. The safety they found in the village wasn't physical but emotional.

Whatever happened, they were not alone. There was help and company, and finally, at the end, there was comfort. A hand to hold.

Jean-Guy saw Olivier leave the Bed-and-Brunch he shared with Gabri and walk across the village green to their bistro. Light soon appeared through the mullioned windows. Before long a thin line of smoke would rise from the bistro chimneys, and villagers would take it as a sign far more important in their lives than any papal election.

Breakfast was ready.

Their Saturday would begin in front of the large open fires, with strong coffee and crêpes, or French toast sprinkled with fresh fruit and doused in maple syrup drawn from trees Jean-Guy could see from where he stood.

There'd be scrambled eggs with melted Brie and maple-smoked bacon, flaky croissants and warm cinnamon buns from Sarah's Boulangerie next door.

Most of all, the villagers would start their day with each other. While Armand walked up to the church alone. He sat in the same pew each morning, under the stained-glass image of the boys, the brothers who'd left Three Pines more than a century earlier for the Great War and never returned.

It was an image that haunted not for its heroism, though there was that, but for the fear etched deep and forever into the faces of two of the boys while the third, the youngest brother, looked out at the congregation. Not with accusation, though that would have been understandable, but with something more terrifying. Almost unfathomable.

At the age of seventeen he marched with his brothers to certain death in a futile battle that only presaged the next slaughter. And then he spent the next century staring out at the congregation, at those who'd let this happen, who'd let them go. He wanted them to know one thing.

That he forgave them.

*Sneak home and pray you never know / the hell where youth and laughter go.*

Each morning Armand sat in that fear and forgiveness and pulled the copy he'd made of Charles's notebook from his pocket, struggling to see what he was missing. Fighting to understand what was written in those pages by another young man who'd also given his life for others.

Armand knew if he got it wrong, it would be unforgivable.

All this Jean-Guy also knew as he turned away from the peaceful view and entered the church.



The lines between Armand's brows deepened.

There was still so much they did not know, but what was clear to the head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec was that something else was planned. Which meant there were others still out there. Those who had avoided arrest. And to do that, their influence must extend to the highest levels of government, the judiciary, industry. Organized crime.

The police.

Even, he feared, within the Sûreté. He didn't know who, though he had suspicions. Some officers had been arrested in that first sweep, but where there were bad apples, the rot spread. Which was why Armand kept the fact he had not stopped investigating to his tight circle. Only a few knew. Very few. A carefully chosen few.

“There must be more,” Armand had whispered that morning as he’d gripped the side of the sink and stared at his reflection.

*There must*, he’d thought as he’d entered the quiet church, followed by the small parade of creatures. And the ghosts that never left.

“There must,” he muttered as he stood very still and stared straight ahead. As he fought to understand what was happening. What was about to happen.

If anything.

A part of him still hoped he was wrong. Hoped he was reading far too much into a dead man’s indecipherable notes. Had the screaming in his ear, in his head, made him deaf to reason?

Everyone else was convinced the danger was over. The plotters had been arrested. Were in prison. Including the man behind it all.

The former Deputy Prime Minister of Canada.

Marcus Lauzon denied he was involved, but the evidence against him was overwhelming. While the evidence against Don Moretti had evaporated. Disappeared.

How could that be? How could that man, that murderer, not even be arrested?

The answer was, of course, clear. Someone high up had corrupted the process.

But following that train of thought brought Gamache to an even more troubling question: Why had Moretti gotten off while Marcus Lauzon had been convicted? Would Lauzon, as the Black Wolf, not make sure the evidence against him disappeared, and Moretti fell?

Why the other way around? Why?

There were, of course, two possible answers.

Lauzon preferred to be in prison, beyond suspicion, when something else happened.

Or ...

Armand closed his eyes and, teetering on the edge, he took a deep breath, then took the plunge.

Or ... he’d been wrong. Marcus Lauzon was not the Black Wolf.

After the inquiry wrapped a few weeks earlier, Armand had called the head of the Sûreté’s Organized Crime division. In person was always better, but for now, video and virtual would have to do.

“I have the same questions, Armand.” Evelyn Tardiff’s words were transcribed at the bottom of the screen for him to read. “It seems incredible that Moretti got off. Who else is involved? And why did the head of the crime family even agree to work with anyone? He’s notorious for killing rivals, not partnering with them.”



“*Oui*. He murdered his own father for doing the same thing.”

“Unfortunately, that could never be proven. God knows I tried. As you know, I was the arson investigator on that case.”

“*Oui*.”

There was something else he knew. At the time of the fire that killed Moretti’s father, then Agent Tardiff had been approached by the head of the Sûreté to let young Moretti know she’d be open to a bribe. To make the investigation go away.

She did. And slowly over the years she’d gained more and more access to the head of the Montréal mob, even as she rose through the Sûreté ranks.

But what worried him now was that Evelyn Tardiff might have known about the poisoning plot and said nothing. What really worried him now was that he no longer knew whose side she was on.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” she said. “Though the question is now moot, thankfully. It’s over.”

Armand left it at that. He wasn’t ready to tell her about the suspicions that propelled him out of his warm bed, to sit within the light of the luminous boys and ponder the unimaginable. The unforgivable.

★ ★ ★

“Morning, numbnuts.”

Jean-Guy started, spilling a bit of coffee out of each mug. For a moment a trick of the young light made it look as though one of the stained-glass boys had spoken. And called him numbnuts. That could not be good.

Though Jean-Guy quickly realized who it must be. It was not much better.

Ruth Zardo, the elderly poet, popped up in the pew where she’d apparently been napping.

“Sleeping it off, you old hag?” He slipped onto the bench beside her. Rosa the duck looked at him, clearly pissed off at having been woken up. But then ducks were often pissed off. At least, this one was.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Rosa muttered before once again burying her beak between her chest and wing.

“Looking for Clouseau?” Ruth took one of the mugs from Jean-Guy. “For me?”

“Actually—”

Before he could stop her, she took a long sip. “Just coffee. Blech. Why would you bring me that?”

“I—”

“He’s in the basement. No doubt hiding from you. Can’t say I blame him.”

Jean-Guy stared at the mug and wondered how to get it away from her. Armand needn’t know she’d taken a sip. “How does he seem to you?”

Ruth considered the question. “Perhaps a bit better. Hard to tell. He seems worried.” Now she looked at Jean-Guy more closely. “What’s going on? What’s he worried about? Why’s he down there?”

“Hiding from you, I suspect. Can’t say I blame him.”

“Shit-head.”

“Witch.”

He looked at the warm mug cupped in her cold hands and decided not to wrestle her for it. She’d probably win.

As he walked to the stairs, he heard, “Say hi to your boss.”

Though on leave from the Sûreté, Armand Gamache was still, and would always be, Beauvoir’s mentor and boss. His Chief Inspector. No matter what happened.

And a lot had.

“*Bonjour*, Jean-Guy.”

Beauvoir stopped dead at the bottom of the basement stairs, his eyes wide with surprise. “Did you hear me coming?”

Armand’s back remained to him, his hands clasped together behind him. Jean-Guy could see the red slashes, scars where the zip ties had bitten into Armand’s wrists.

Then the older man turned, and his face broke into a smile of genuine pleasure. At over six feet tall, he was solidly built. His face was worn from days and nights in windswept fields, trudging through forests, kneeling in deep snow beside some unfortunate who had become a corpse, but never just a case.

And yet, if met by chance at a party, Chief Inspector Gamache would easily be mistaken for a professor of ancient history at the Université de Montréal. Someone who studied the lives of those long dead instead of the head of homicide, hunting those who dealt out fresh death.

Jean-Guy had watched him at social events, listening closely as strangers told Armand the minutiae of their lives. He listened and nodded, asking questions. He let whoever he was with know they were not just fascinating, they were precious. Their stories heard and valued.

Though Armand did not go to many parties anymore, and the listening part had changed, after what had happened.

Perhaps the biggest reason Armand would never be taken for a homicide cop was what Jean-Guy saw now. The smile. Radiant, it radiated from the corners of his eyes and mouth, cutting across the worry lines.

Here was a clearly happy man despite, or perhaps because of, all that he'd knelt beside. All that he'd seen.

And he'd seen the worst. But Armand Gamache had also seen the best, and insisted his people see it too and not get mired in the all-too-obvious darkness.

"How else are we going to survive," he told them, "unless we also see the kindness, the courage, the decency in people? There's more goodness than cruelty in this world."

And he believed it.

"I smelled coffee and thought it must be you," Armand explained, his voice only slightly louder than it should have been. He'd become good at modulating it. "Ruth has a whole other smell. Besides, when you and Annie and the children spend the weekend, you always join me here."

"Upstairs, yes, but not down here." Jean-Guy spoke slowly, making sure he faced his father-in-law. "Why're you here?"

The basement, with its low, acoustic-tiled ceiling and florescent lights, wasn't just gloomy, it was cold. Jean-Guy looked at his untouched mug of warm coffee, then held it out.

"For you."

"Me? Isn't it yours?"

"No. I've had mine. I brought it for you."

Armand studied him, then took the mug.

Like Ruth upstairs, Armand held the warm mug in his cold hands for a moment. He knew perfectly well the coffee was Jean-Guy's. But he also knew to refuse the kind gesture would have been much worse than accepting.

He took a long sip and exhaled. "*Merci*." He saw the pleasure on Jean-Guy's face, then turned and gestured at the wall of the church basement.

"That's why I'm here."



Evelyn Tardiff's breath came out in puffs as she walked through the chilly morning. The streets of north end Montréal were quiet. It was going to be one of those picture-perfect autumn days. Bright and fresh, the air crisp and clean.

As she made her way to the farmers' market, she wondered how many of the people she passed would be dead now, had the plot to poison the drinking water succeeded. At least half was the official estimate, maybe more. Maybe that child across the street. Probably that elderly couple walking arm in arm toward the bagel place.

Don Moretti blamed her, probably rightly, for Gamache managing to stop the plot. But there was an advantage to what had happened. Or didn't happen.

Not only were the investigations and postmortems focused elsewhere, but everyone now believed those responsible were behind bars and the water supply safe.

But water security had all sorts of meaning. The danger to it was not simply from pollution or even deliberate poisoning. A whole new threat was emerging globally, and Canada was about to demonstrate to the rest of the world how insecure a water-rich country could be.

It surprised her that no one saw it. It seemed so obvious.

Yes, Moretti and the others were home free as long as no one thought to dig deeper into the notebooks. As long as they were the only things Gamache had found.

As long as Joe Moretti hadn't seen, hadn't sensed, the one who was really in charge. Far more powerful than him. Far viler. Vastly more dangerous.

*Some malady is coming upon us. We wait. We wait.*

And the head of Organized Crime for the Sûreté knew that wait was almost over.

★ ★ ★

Armand had pinned a creased and marked-up map of the province of Québec to the wall of the church basement and was staring at it. He swayed slightly, in contemplation. Or perhaps exhaustion.

Jean-Guy had seen this map before. In fact, he'd been the one to find it in the monastery on the shores of that remote lake. They'd studied it closely, knowing if the biologist and the Abbot had hidden it, it must be important.

But try as they might, the map had yielded precious little.

When the poison plot had been uncovered and the perpetrators arrested, Armand had rolled up the map and hidden it in a cylinder under his desk at home. Telling no one except his closest confidants about the find. After all, he'd told

himself, he wasn't concealing evidence. The map had nothing to do with the poison plot.

And yet the young biologist and the elderly Abbot had taken great pains to hide it. Which was another reason Armand suspected there was more coming.

This was the first time since the arrests that the map had seen the light of day. It was a risk. But all they had left was risk.