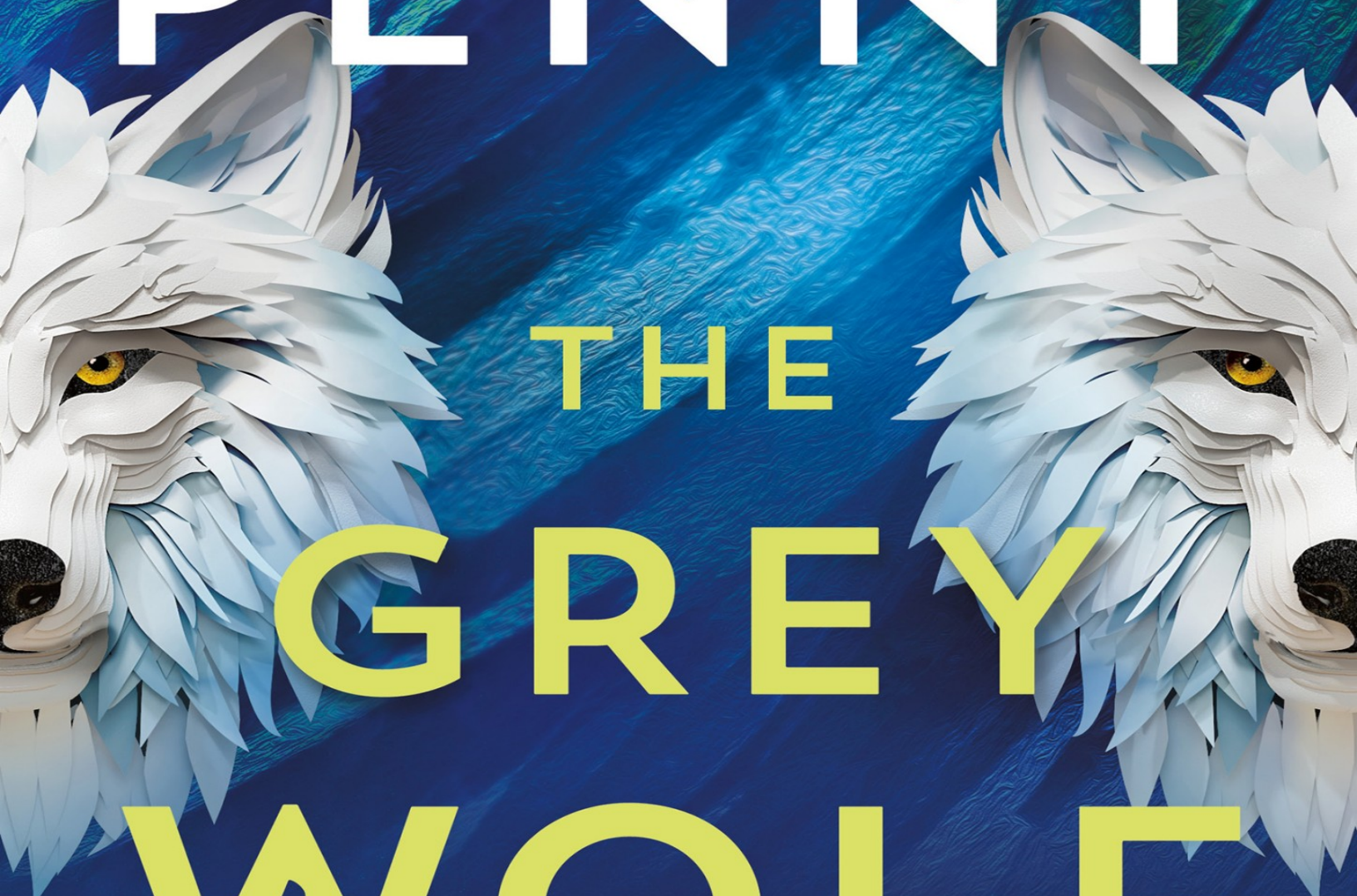


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LOUISE
PENNY



THE

GREY

WOLF

A NOVEL

LOUISE PENNY



THE GREY
WOLF



MINOTAUR BOOKS
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For Rocky and Steve, forever in my heart

CHAPTER 1

The phone rang. Again.

It was the fourth time in eight minutes.

All from the same number. All ignored by the head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec. In the hopes it would go away.

But like most things ignored, it just got worse.

The first peal had interrupted the peace of the Gamaches' back garden this Sunday morning in mid-August, in the Québec village of Three Pines. It broke into Armand's thoughts as he sat on the fieldstone terrasse, absently brushing croissant flakes from his shirt and sipping strong, smooth café au lait.

While Reine-Marie read the paper, his section lay folded and warming and gathering crumbs on his lap. He tilted his head back slightly to the sun, taking a deep breath of the late-summer air. Then he contemplated the bobbing black-eyed Susans and the morning glories and sweet pea and purple Jackmanii Superba clematis climbing the fence that separated them from the mad poet next door.

It was a lovely, though ineffective, barrier. Barbed wire would have to be added.

Actually, the duck was the menace. Thank God Rosa seemed to have forgotten that she could fly. Or, more likely, she simply chose not to.



Paper read, or ignored, and mugs in hand, they strolled down the long dew-glistening lawn, past the huge maple with the swing for the grandchildren, pausing now and then to examine the perennial beds, until they reached the point where their property ended and the rest of the world began.

This was the Gamaches' Sunday ritual. In lives so unpredictable, they found sanctuary in certainty. Even if just for a moment.

Life was, after all, made up of tiny choices. Like a pointillist painting, no one dot, no one choice, defined it. But together? There emerged a picture. A life.

Where to live, where to sit. What to eat, to drink, to wear. Whether to cut the grass or let it become meadow. What to say and, perhaps more important, what

not to say.

What job to take. What calling.

What call.

Returning to the sun-trap that was the stone terrace, he stretched out his legs, leaned back, closed his eyes, and Armand Gamache thought of ... nothing. His mind a welcome blank.

So much peace. So much to break.

When that first call came through, Armand had reached for the phone, with every intention of answering. It was, after all, his private number. Only friends and family had it.

But his finger stopped on its way to swiping the screen.

Then he slowly replaced the phone on the table, narrowed his eyes, and as the ringing continued, he stared ahead. No longer seeing the garden. No longer hearing the birds or the cicadas, which managed to be both intrusive and comforting.

All were consumed by the ringing, ringing. As was he.

Reine-Marie lowered the newspaper slightly. Just enough to look at her husband, then down at the phone. She could not see the number, but she could see the creases forming at the corners of Armand's eyes and mouth.

Now in his late fifties, his clean-shaven face was lined and weathered. From decades spent kneeling in snowy fields, in forests, and on the rocky shores of turbulent lakes, on sunbaked pavements. Staring down at a corpse.

As the head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec, Armand Gamache had seen more than his share of death. Violent, brutal, devastating death. Unnatural death.

Which was why, to balance the details of an autopsy, he sought the bumble of bees and racket of crickets. To offset a report from one of his agents into a murder, he listened to the wind through the forest, and smelled the musky scent of autumn leaves. They were his balm. His calm.

It was why home and family and a peaceful Sunday in a garden meant so much. To him. To them.

His hair was wavy and now mostly grey. It curled around his ears and at his collar. *He needs a trim*, Reine-Marie thought.

He was tall, over six feet, sturdily built, and far more likely to be mistaken, by anyone who met him casually, for a professor of arcane history than for a man who hunted killers.

And still the ringing continued. And the creases on his face deepened into crevices.

He could have, she knew, declined the call. But he didn't. He could have shut off the phone. But he didn't. Instead, he allowed it to ring. And ring. As he stared into the distance.

Finally, it stopped.

"Wrong number?" she asked.

He looked at her. "*Non*. Wrong person."

Who must have, he thought, called by mistake. Easily done. He'd done it himself.

Yes. It was only that. A mistake. This call was not intended for him.

Reine-Marie raised her brows but left it at that.

And then he smiled at her. And as he did, the furrows deepened. And she was reminded that while some of the lines down his face were certainly caused by pain and sorrow, stress and grief, by far the deepest impressions were made by just this. Smiling. Like lines on a map, these chartered the longitude and latitude, the journey of a man who had found happiness.

Though there was the deep scar at his temple, which cut across the other lines.

Silence once again descended on the garden. After a tense few moments, they raised their sections of the weekend paper and went back to reading.

Three Pines was not on any map and was only ever found by people who had lost their way. They'd crest the hill and stop, looking in wonderment across the top of the forest, to the Green Mountains of Vermont beyond the borders of Québec. Then, dropping their eyes, they would see something even more unexpected.

There, in the middle of nowhere, fieldstone and clapboard homes and rose-brick shops circled a village green. People would be out walking their dogs, or working in their gardens, or sitting on the bench on the green. Chatting. In at least one case, to herself.

In the center, three immense pine trees towered skyward. Like a beacon. A signal.

A sign.

You are home and you are safe.

Those who chose to stay—and not everyone did, though all were welcome—soon realized that the village was not impervious to the passage of time, or tragedy, any more than any community.

It was a haven, not a hiding place.

What Three Pines offered was comfort in an ever-changing world. It offered a place at the table, it offered company and acceptance. And croissants.

It offered a hand to hold.

Three Pines was where the head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec and his librarian wife had chosen to live. To make a home. Not to escape from the horrors of the world, but to heal from them.

But the world had found them, that Sunday morning. As the Gamaches sat peacefully in their back garden. The ringing, ringing, ringing had begun again. And again Armand ignored it.

The peal now mixed in, perversely, with the ringing of the church bell.

St. Thomas's was calling the faithful.

And something else entirely was calling Armand Gamache.

"Answer the fucking phone!" A handful of compost, or dirt, or ... was lobbed over the fence.

And still the phone rang. Then abruptly stopped mid-ring. Making the sudden silence almost as jarring as the sound.

When, a few minutes later, it rang for the third time, Reine-Marie lowered the weekend paper completely and looked first at the phone, then at her husband.

"For God's sake, Armand, who is it? Is it work?" Though she knew it could not be. He'd have answered.

After a brief hesitation, he held the phone up for her to see. There was no name, but she recognized the first few digits. A government number. Federal, not provincial. Though she had no idea whose number it was, it was clear that her husband knew who was calling. And calling. Knew who he was ignoring.

"Do you want me to answer?"

"*Non.*" He drew the phone to him, as though to protect her from it. He felt the vibration against his chest and moved it away.

The caller was already in his head, he sure didn't want them burrowing into his heart.

At that moment the ringing stopped, and he replaced the phone on the table.

The peace of their Sunday lay in shards around them. Even the quiet wasn't calming. It seemed merely a prelude to what they both knew was coming.

A few minutes later, it arrived, and when it did, Armand's patience broke. Grabbing the phone, he gave the screen a vicious swipe and stood up.

He listened for a few moments before saying, "Go to hell."

Then, as Reine-Marie stared in shock, he hung up. She'd never heard him speak to anyone like that. She was sure in his professional life it was sometimes necessary, but here? In their backyard?

“Tell me,” she said when he turned back to her, his knuckles white where he gripped the phone.

And he did.

Reine-Marie listened, then let out a long exhale. Now she understood why he’d refused to answer the calls.

“What did she want?”

“To meet.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask.”

“I can’t believe she’d contact you,” said Reine-Marie. “After what happened last time.”

They waited for another call, but none came. The next hour was spent apparently at ease, but their shoulders had inched up, and Reine-Marie had had to read the same book review several times before finally giving up.

“Let’s go to the bistro,” she said, hauling herself out of the chair. “We need a distraction.”

“You might need a distraction,” he said, getting up too. “I need a pain au chocolat.”

She laughed and saw him smile. But the creases that appeared were from worry, not amusement.

CHAPTER 2

“What was that about?” asked Ruth, joining them on the back patio of the bistro, in the shade of the tall maples.

“What do you mean?” asked Myrna.

“The phone calls.” The old poet jabbed a crooked finger at the Gamaches. “The racket went on all morning. I almost called the cops.”

“You do know that Armand is the police,” said Clara, brushing a hand through her wild hair and looking surprised when a licorice allsort fell out.

No one else was surprised.

She ate it.

“Don’t tell me you believe that bullshit?” said Ruth. “Like Clouseau here could possibly be a senior officer with the Sûreté. Next you’ll be saying the library is a bookstore, and these two are married.” She pointed to Olivier and Gabri. “Like that’s even possible.”

“Hag,” muttered Gabri, putting a pain au chocolat in front of Armand and dragging a chair over to join them.

“Fag,” muttered Ruth, sliding the plate over and sticking a bony finger into the middle of the pastry, as though it were a country and her finger a flag.

Armand sighed, then smiled when Olivier placed a second pastry in front of him. “*Merci, patron.*”

Then noticed Ruth was staring at him, expecting an answer.

Ruth Zardo. The poet. The laureate. Who from her ramshackle home in this little lost village managed to see things others did not.

*Now here’s a good one:
you’re lying on your deathbed.
You have one hour to live.
Who is it, exactly, you have needed
all these years to forgive?*

She was one of Armand's favorite poets, if not favorite people. Though he had to admit, she was close there too.

"So who was on the phone?"

"It was no one."

Myrna Landers, the owner of the bookshop, sat beside her best friend, the painter Clara Morrow. Olivier and Gabri, the owners of the bistro, had joined them.

"Jesus, you must really hate it when no one calls," said Ruth. "Four times in a row. The way you shouted." She looked knowingly at the others. "At no one."

Now they all, as though choreographed, tilted their heads and looked at him.

Really? Myrna thought. *Armand was shouting?*

Like everyone else, she'd seen him on the news being hammered by reporters, fielding accusations of incompetence, corruption. One blogger in particular, a young woman, really had it in for him.

But Chief Inspector Gamache kept his head, his answers measured and thoughtful.

She could not image Armand actually shouting.

What would provoke that? Who would provoke that?

Myrna Landers knew the Gamaches well. They'd often wander into her bookstore to browse, pulling new and used books from the shelves and glancing through them until something caught their interest. But sometimes Armand would come by on his own. On snowy winter days they'd sit by the woodstove, sip strong tea, and share confidences.

He'd tell her what it was like to crawl into sick minds, moving ever deeper into dark caverns until he had the answers he needed. Until he had a killer.

And she'd tell him what it had been like to be Dr. Landers, a senior psychologist specializing in criminal behavior. Until one day she'd wandered too deep into a mind, into a cave, and gotten lost. She needed to find her way back to the sunshine. To a world where goodness existed.

She'd quit her job, packed up her small car, and left the city, without a particular destination in mind. Just, away.

Stopping in the unexpected village for a break, she went into the bistro, had a café and a croissant, discovered the shop next door was for rent, as was the loft above, and Myrna Landers never left.

She had found her quiet place in the bright sunshine. And Dr. Landers became Myrna.

Then one day the head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec and his wife bought the rambling old home across the village green. He'd wandered into her shop, sat down, and Chief Inspector Gamache became Armand.

The only difference, and she knew it was huge, was that while she was out of those caves, he was still in them.

Who had been on the other end of the phone that morning? And what had that person said, what had they wanted, that pushed this steady man so far off balance he found himself shouting in his peaceful garden on a bright Sunday morning?

For his part, Armand knew he'd let his rage overpower his reason. It didn't happen often; he'd worked hard to disarm those triggers, ones that could, in his job, have catastrophic consequences. He'd seen it often enough with colleagues.

Unresolved rage and a loaded gun were a very bad combination.

He got angry more often than most knew. You could not look at the body of a murdered child and not be enraged. But anger clouded judgment. It became another problem, not a solution.

Though Armand Gamache was honest enough with himself to know that he had his own caverns, his own sinkholes. One in particular. And he'd fallen into it that morning. Pushed over the edge by a reasonable voice many, many miles away, with a simple request.

To meet.

To steady himself now, he took a bite of the soft, still-warm pastry, oozing dark chocolate. As a further balm, he looked across the patio to the Rivière Bella Bella, its fresh mountain water rushing by, catching the sun and gleaming golden. It was calming. Meditative.

His heart slowed and his shoulders dropped.

Was it a mistake to answer that call?

Why hadn't he turned off the phone after the first ring? Why hadn't he moved the phone into the study and shut the doors between it and them?

He knew why. Because he always had intended to answer. Because he had to know.

Because knowledge really was power. Where some cops thought of their guns as their weapon, Chief Inspector Gamache knew the only real weapon, and protection, was knowledge.

And yet, and yet ...

And yet he'd stopped short of getting all the information. He'd run away. Refused to meet. Refused to find out what the person wanted. He'd hung up not because he was angry, but because he was afraid.

Just then, his phone rang again.