



A GREAT RECKONING Chapter 1

Armand Gamache sat in the little room and closed the dossier with care, squeezing it shut, trapping the words inside.

It was a thin file. Just a few pages. Like all the rest surrounding him on the old wooden floor of his study. And yet, not like all the rest.

He looked at the slender lives lying at his feet. Waiting for his decision on their fate.

He'd been at this for a while now. Reviewing the dossiers. Taking note of the tiny dots on the upper-right corner of the tabs. Red for rejected. Green for accepted.

He had not put those dots there. His predecessor had.

Armand placed the file on the floor and leaned forward in his comfortable armchair, his elbows on his knees. His large hands together, fingers intertwined. He felt like a passenger on a transcontinental flight, staring down at fields below him. Some fertile, some fallow and ripe with potential. And some barren. The topsoil masking the rock beneath.

But which was which?

He'd read, and considered, and tried to drill down past the scant information. He wondered about these lives, and he wondered about the decisions of his predecessor.

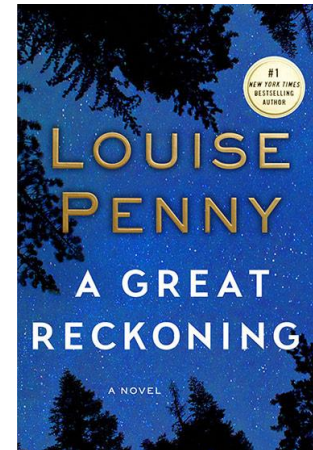
For years, decades, as head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec, his job had been to dig. To collect evidence. To review facts, and question feelings. To pursue and arrest. To use his judgment, but never to judge.

But now he was judge and jury. The first and final word.

And Armand Gamache realized, without great surprise, that it was a role he was comfortable with. Even liked. The power, yes. He was honest enough to admit that. But mostly he appreciated that he was now in a position not simply to react to the present, but to actually shape the future.

And at his feet was the future.

Gamache leaned back and crossed his legs. It was past midnight, but he wasn't tired. A cup of tea sat on his desk beside a couple of chocolate chip cookies. Uneaten.





The curtains of his study flapped and he could feel a cold draft coming in through the slightly open window. And he knew if he drew back the curtains and turned on the porch light, he would see the first snow of the season swirling in the light. Falling softly and landing on the roofs of the homes in this tiny village of Three Pines.

It would cover the perennial gardens and leave a thin layer on cars and porches, on the bench in the middle of the village green. It would be landing, softly, on the forests and mountains and the Rivière Bella Bella that flowed past the homes.

It was the beginning of November and this was an early snow even by Québec standards. A tease, a portent. And not enough, yet, for children to play in.

But soon, he knew. It would come soon enough. And the gray November would be transformed into a bright, sparkling wonderland of skiing and skating. Of snowball fights, and snow forts and snowmen, and angels made in snow that had fallen from the heavens.

But for now the children slept and their parents slept. Everyone in the small Québec village slept, while the snow fell and Armand Gamache considered the young lives that lay at his feet.

Through the open door of his study, he saw the living room of the home he shared with his wife, Reine-Marie.

Oriental rugs were scattered about the wide-plank flooring. A large sofa sat on one side of the large stone hearth and two faded armchairs on the other. Side tables were piled with magazines and books. Bookcases lined the walls and lamps filled the room with pleasant light.

It was an inviting room and now Gamache stood up, stretched, and walked out into it, their shepherd Henri following him. He poked the fire and sat in one of the armchairs. His work wasn't done yet. Now he needed to think.

He'd made up his mind about most of the files. Except that one.

When he'd first seen it, he'd read the contents then set it aside, in the rejected pile. Agreeing with the red dot of his predecessor.

But something had niggled at him and he kept returning to that one file. Reading and rereading it. Trying to work out why this one dossier, this one young woman out of all of them, was troubling him.

Gamache had brought the file with him, and now he opened it. Again.



Her face stared at him. Arrogant, challenging. Pale. Her hair jet black, shaved in places, spiked in others. There were unmistakable piercings through her nose and brows and cheek.

She claimed to read ancient Greek and Latin, and yet she'd barely scraped by in high school and had spent the past few years doing, from what he could tell, nothing.

She'd earned the red dot.

So why did he keep going back to it? To her? It wasn't her appearance. He knew enough to look beyond that.

Was it her name? Amelia?

Yes, he thought, that might be it. She shared the name with Gamache's mother, who'd been named for the aviator who'd lost her way and disappeared.

Amelia.

And yet, when he held the file he didn't feel any warmth. In fact, he felt vaguely revolted.

Finally Gamache took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes before taking Henri outside for a last walk of the night, in the first snow of the season.

Then it was upstairs to bed for both of them.

The next morning Reine-Marie invited her husband to breakfast at the bistro. Henri came along and lay quietly under their table as they sipped bowls of *café au lait* and waited for their maple-cured bacon with scrambled eggs and Brie.

The fireplaces on either end of the long beamed room were lit and cheerful, conversation mingled with the scent of wood smoke, and there was the familiar thudding of patrons knocking snow from their boots as they entered.

The flurries had stopped in the night, leaving just a thin layer barely covering the dead autumn leaves. It seemed a netherworld. Neither fall nor winter. The hills that surrounded the village and seemed to guard it from an often hostile world themselves looked hostile. Or, if not actually hostile, at least inhospitable. It was a forest of skeletons. Their branches, gray and bare, were raised as though begging for a mercy they knew would not be granted.

But on the village green itself stood the three tall pines from which the village took its name. Vibrant, straight and strong. Evergreen. Immortal. Pointing to the sky. Daring it to do its worst. Which it planned to do.



The worst was coming. But so was the best. The snow angels were coming.

“Voilà,” said Olivier, placing a basket of warm almandine croissants on their table. “While you wait for breakfast.”

A price tag hung from the basket. And from the chandelier above their heads. And the wing chairs they sat on. Everything in Olivier’s bistro was for sale. Including, he’d intimated more than once, his partner, Gabri.

“A bag of candy and he’s yours,” Olivier was heard to offer patrons when Gabri turned up in his frilly apron.

“That is how he got me,” Gabri would admit, smoothing the apron he only wore, they all knew, to piss off Olivier. “A bag of allsorts.”

When they were alone, Armand slid a file across the table to his wife.

“Could you read this, please?”

“Of course,” she said as she put on her glasses. “Is there a problem?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then why . . . ?” She gestured toward the folder.

He’d often discussed cases with her, before his early retirement from the Sûreté. He was not yet sixty and this was more of a retreat, really. To this village, to recover from what lay beyond the ridge of mountains.

He watched her over the rim of his strong, fragrant coffee, holding the warm bowl between his hands. They no longer trembled, Reine-Marie noted. Or at least not often. She always looked, in case.

And the deep scar near his temple wasn’t quite so deep. Or perhaps familiarity and relief had filled it in.

He limped still, sometimes, when he was tired. But besides that, and the scar, there were no outward signs of what had happened. Though she did not need any signs. It was the sort of thing she would never forget.

Almost losing him.

But instead, they’d found themselves here. In the village that managed to be welcoming even on the dullest day.

Reine-Marie had known, even as they’d bought the home and unpacked, that the time would come when he’d want and need to go back to work. The only question had been, what



next? What would Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, the head of the most successful homicide department in the country, choose to do?

He'd had plenty of offers. Their study was filled with envelopes marked "Confidential." He'd taken plenty of meetings. From heads of major corporations, to political parties anxious for him to run for office, to police organizations, national and international. Discreet vehicles had pulled up outside their white clapboard home and discreetly dressed men and women had knocked on the door. And sat in their living room, discussing "what next."

Armand had listened politely, often offering them lunch or dinner or a place to stay if it was late. But never tipping his hand. Reine-Marie herself had found her dream job, after leaving her post at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec as one of the head librarians. She'd volunteered to sort years of donations to the regional historical society.

It was a post her former colleagues no doubt viewed as a significant step down. But Reine-Marie wasn't interested in steps. She'd arrived at where she wanted to be. No more steps. She'd stopped. Reine-Marie had found a home in Three Pines. She'd found a home in Armand. And now she'd found her intellectual home, investigating the rich and disorganized collection of documents and furniture and clothing and oddities left to the region in wills.

For Reine-Marie Gamache, each day felt like Christmas, as she sorted through the boxes and boxes. And boxes.

And then, after much discussion between them, Armand had decided on his next step.

For weeks after, while she pored over piles of letters and old documents, he pored over his files, studying confidential reports, schematics, curricula vitae. Across from each other in their comfortable living room, they'd gone through their separate boxes, while the fire mumbled and the coffee perked and late autumn turned into an early winter.

But while she was opening up the world, he was in many ways doing the opposite. Armand was whittling down, honing, shaving, taking out the dead wood, the unnecessary, the unwanted. The rot. Until what he had in his hands was something very sharp. A spear of his own creation. And he'd need it. There could be no doubt who was in charge, and who held the power. Or that he was willing to use it.

He was almost there, she knew. But there seemed one thin obstacle.

They looked down at it now, sitting innocently on the table among the croissant flakes.

Armand opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and exhaled sharply, in irritation.



"There's something that's bothering me about this file and I don't know what it is."

Reine-Marie picked it up and read. It didn't take long. After a few minutes she closed the cover, laying a hand softly on top as a mother might on the chest of a sick child. Making sure of the heartbeat.

"She's an odd one, I'll give her that." She looked at the red dot in the corner. "You're rejecting her, I see."

Armand lifted his hands in a noncommittal gesture.

"You're considering accepting her?" she asked. "Even if it's true that she reads ancient Greek and Latin, that's not much use in the job. They're dead languages. And she might very well be lying."

"True," he admitted. "But if you're going to lie, why do it about that? Seems an odd sort of fabrication."

"She's not qualified," said Reine-Marie. "Her high school marks are abysmal. I know it's difficult to choose, but surely there are other applicants who deserve the spot more."

Their breakfast came, and Armand placed the file on the pine floor beside Henri.

"I can't tell you how often I've changed that dot," he said with a smile. "Red, green. Green, red."

Reine-Marie took a forkful of the moist scrambled eggs. A long thin string of Brie clung to the plate and she lifted her fork above her head for amusement, to see how long the string could stretch before it broke.

Longer than her arm, it seemed.

Armand, smiling and shaking his head, pulled it apart with his fingers.

"There, madame, I set you free."

"From the bondage of cheese," she said. "Oh, thank you, kind sir. But I'm afraid the attachment goes deeper than that."

He laughed.

"Do you think it's her name?" asked Reine-Marie. Her husband was rarely so indecisive, though she knew he also took his decisions seriously. They would affect people for the rest of their lives.



“Amelia?” he asked. And frowned. “I wondered the same thing. But it seems a huge overreaction on my part, don’t you think? My mother’s been gone for almost fifty years. I’ve met other Amelias—”

“Not many.”

“*Non, c’est vrai.* But some. And while the name will always remind me of my mother, the fact is I didn’t think of her as Amelia. She was Maman.”

He was right, of course. And he didn’t seem at all embarrassed to be a grown man talking about “mommy.” She knew he was simply referring to the last time he saw his mother and father. When he was nine. When they weren’t Amelia and Honoré but Mommy and Daddy. Going out for dinner with friends. Expected back to kiss him good night.

“It could be her name,” said Armand.

“But you doubt it. You think it’s something else.”

“Oh God,” said Olivier, coming over to check on them and looking out the window. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Neither are we,” admitted Reine-Marie, following his gaze to the snowy village green, now white. “You think you are, but it always comes as an unpleasant surprise.”

“And arrives earlier and earlier,” said Armand.

“Exactly. And seems more and more bitter,” said Olivier.

“Still, there’s beauty,” said Armand, and received a stern look from Olivier.

“Beauty? You’re kidding, right?” he said.

“No, it’s there. Of course, it can stick around far too long,” said Armand.

“You’re telling me,” said Olivier.

“It gets old,” said Reine-Marie.

“Gets old?” asked Olivier.

“But having the right tires helps,” she said.

Olivier put the empty croissant basket back down on the table. “What’re you talking about?”

“Winter, of course,” said Reine-Marie. “The first snow.”

“What’re you talking about?” asked Armand.

“Ruth,” said Olivier, pointing out the window at the elderly woman with a cane, and a duck, approaching the bistro. Old, cold and bitter.



She stepped inside and scanned the room.

“Yes,” said Olivier. “The right tires would solve that problem.”

“Fag,” muttered Ruth as she limped by them.

“Hag,” muttered Olivier as they watched the elderly poet take her usual seat by the fireplace. She opened the pine blanket box used as a coffee table and took out a handful of papers.

“She’s helping me sort through the stuff we found in the walls when we renovated,” said Olivier. “You remember?”

Armand nodded. Olivier and his partner, Gabri, had turned an abandoned hardware store into the bistro many years ago, and in updating the electricity and plumbing, they’d opened the walls and found all sorts of things. Mummified squirrels, clothing. But mostly they’d found papers. Newspapers, magazines, advertisements, catalogues used as insulation as though words could keep winter at bay.

Enough heated words had been hurled at the Québec winter, but all had failed to stop the snow.

In the chaos of the renovations, the papers had simply been dumped in the pine blanket box and forgotten. The box had sat in front of the hearth for years, unopened. Countless *cafés au lait*, and glasses of wine, and plates of regional cheese and paté and baguette, and feet, had rested on top of it, until the papers had been rediscovered a few months earlier.

“I doubt there’s anything valuable,” said Olivier, returning to the Gamaches’ table after taking Ruth her breakfast of Irish coffee and bacon.

“How is that woman still alive?” asked Reine-Marie.

“Bile,” said Olivier. “She’s pure bile. It never dies.” He looked at Reine-Marie. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to help her?”

“Well, who wouldn’t want to work with pure bile?” she said.

“Once she gets a few drinks in her, she becomes simply nasty, as you know,” said Olivier. “Please. Please. It’s taken Ruth two months to get the pile down an inch. The problem is, she doesn’t just scan, she reads everything. Yesterday she spent the whole day on one National Geographic from 1920.”

“I would too, *mon beau*,” said Reine-Marie. “But I tell you what. If Ruth accepts the help, I’d love to do it.”



After breakfast, she joined Ruth on the sofa and started on the blanket box, while Armand and Henri walked home.

“Armand,” shouted Olivier, and when Gamache turned he saw the owner of the bistro at the door waving something.

It was the dossier.

Armand jogged back to get it.

“Did you read it?” he asked. His voice was just sharp enough for Olivier to hesitate.

“*Non.*”

But under the steady stare, Olivier cracked.

“Maybe. Okay, yes. I glanced at it. Just her picture. And her name. And a bit about her background.”

“*Merci,*” said Armand, taking the file and turning away.

As he walked home, Armand wondered why he’d snapped at Olivier. The file was marked “Confidential” but he’d shown it to Reine-Marie, and it wasn’t exactly a state secret. And who wouldn’t be tempted to look at something marked “Confidential”?

If they knew anything about Olivier, it was that he had no immunity to temptation.

Gamache also wondered why he’d left it behind. Had he really forgotten it?

Was it a mistake, or was it on purpose?

The snow returned by early afternoon, blowing in over the hills and swirling around, trapped there. Turning Three Pines into a snow globe.

Reine-Marie called and said she was having lunch at the bistro. Clara and Myrna had joined the excavation of the blanket box, and they’d be spending the afternoon eating and reading.

It sounded to Armand pretty much perfect and he decided to do the same himself, at home.

He poked the birch log freshly tossed on the fire in their living room grate and watched as the bark caught and crackled and curled. Then he sat down with a sandwich, a book, and Henri curled up beside him on the sofa. But Armand’s eyes kept drifting back to his study,



crowded with impatient young men and women, cheek by jowl, staring at him. Waiting for the old man to decide what next for them, as old men had decided the fate of youth for millennia.

He wasn't old, though he knew he'd look old, perhaps even ancient, to them. The young men and women would see a man in his late fifties. Just over six feet tall, he was substantial rather than heavy, or so he told himself. His hair was more gray than brown and it curled slightly around his ears. While he'd sometimes had a moustache and sometimes a beard, he was now clean-shaven, the lines of his face visible for all to see. It was a care-worn face. But most of the lines, if followed back like a trail, would lead to happiness. To the faces a face made when laughing or smiling, or sitting quietly enjoying the day.

Though some of those lines led elsewhere. Into a wilderness, into the wild. Where terrible things had happened. Some of the lines of his face led to events inhuman and abominable. To horrific sights. To unspeakable acts.

Some of them his.

The lines of his face were the longitude and latitude of his life.

The young men and women would also see the deep scar at his temple. It would tell them how close he'd come to dying. But the best of them would see not just the wound, but the healing. And they'd see, deep in his eyes, beyond the scar, beyond the pain, beyond even the happiness, something unexpected.

Kindness.

And perhaps, when their own faces were mapped, kindness would be discovered there too.

That's what he was looking for in the dossiers. In the photographs.

Anyone could be clever. Anyone could be smart. Anyone could be taught.

But not everyone was kind.

Armand Gamache looked into the study at the young men and women assembled there. Waiting.

He knew their faces, or at least their photographs. He knew their stories, or at least as much as they were willing to tell. He knew about their schooling, their grades, their interests.

Among the crowd he spotted her. Amelia. Waiting with the rest.

His heart lurched and he stood up.

Amelia Choquet.



He knew then why he was reacting as he was. Why he'd left her behind at the bistro, and why he'd gone back for her.

And why he felt so strongly about her.

He'd shown the dossier to Reine-Marie hoping she'd give him the permission he sought. To do what all reason told him to do. To reject this young woman. To turn his back. To walk away, while he still could.

And now he knew why.

Henri snored and drooled on the sofa, the fire murmured and crackled, the snow tapped the windowpanes.

It wasn't her first name he was reacting to. It was her last. Her family name.

Choquet.

It was unusual, though not unique. The normal spelling would be Choquette.

He strode across to his study and, grabbing her file off the floor, he opened it. Scanning down the pathetically scant information. Then he closed it, his hand trembling.

He glanced at the fire, and briefly considered laying her there. Letting her go up, or down, in flames. A witch for the burning.

But instead he went downstairs, to the basement.

There he unlocked the back room. Where all his files on old cases were kept. And at the very back of the back room, he unlocked a small box.

And there he found it.

Confirmed it.

Choquet.

Logic told him he could be wrong. What were the chances, after all? But in his heart he knew he was right.

Returning upstairs, his feet heavy on the steps, he stood at the window and watched the snow falling.

Children, in hastily unpacked snowsuits smelling of cedar, were running around the village green, chasing and tackling each other into the soft snow. Pelting anyone in their sights with snowballs. Rolling out snowmen. They shrieked and yelled and laughed.

He went into his study and spent the next hours doing research. And when Reine-Marie arrived back, he greeted her with a large Scotch and the news.



He had to go to the Gaspé.

“The Gaspé?” she asked, making certain she’d heard correctly. It was the last thing she expected him to say. Go to the bathroom. Go to the store. Go to Montréal even, for meetings. But the Gaspé Peninsula? Hundreds of miles away, where the edge of Québec met salt water.

“Are you going to see him?”

When he nodded, she said, “Then I’m coming with you.”

He returned to his study. Staring through the mullioned windows, he saw the exhausted children falling on their backs, one after the other, into the snow, sweeping their arms and legs up and down.

Then they got up and trudged home, squirming as snow melted down their necks and trickled in rivulets down their backs. It stuck to their mitts and the back of their tuques. Their faces were bright red and their noses ran.

They left behind them angels in the snow.

And in the study, his hand trembling slightly, Armand took a deep breath and changed the dot on Amelia’s file. To green.