

CHAPTER 1

“State your name, please.”

“Armand Gamache.”

“And you are the head of the Sûreté du Québec?”

“The Chief Superintendent, *oui*.”

Gamache sat upright on the wooden chair. It was hot. Sweltering, really, on this July morning. He could taste perspiration from his upper lip and it was only just ten o'clock. It was only just starting.

The witness box was not his favorite place in the world. And far from his favorite thing to do. To testify against another human being. There were only a few times in his career when he'd gotten satisfaction, even pleasure, from that and this wasn't one of them.

Sitting uncomfortably on the hard chair, under oath, Armand Gamache admitted to himself that while he believed in the law, had spent his career working within the justice system, what he really had to answer to was his conscience.

And that was proving to be a pretty harsh judge.

“I believe you were also the arresting officer.”

“I was.”

“Is that unusual, for the Chief Superintendent to actually be making arrests?”

“I've only been in the position a little while, as you know. Everything is unusual to me. But this particular case was hard to miss.”

The Chief Crown Prosecutor smiled. His back to the rest of the court and the jury, no one else saw. Except perhaps the judge, who missed little.

And what Judge Corriveau saw was a not particularly pleasant smile. More a sneer, really. Which surprised her, given the Chief Crown and the Chief Superintendent were apparently on the same side.

Though that didn't mean, she knew, that they had to like or respect each other. She had some colleagues she didn't respect, though she doubted she'd ever looked at them with exactly that expression.

While she was assessing them, Gamache had been assessing her. Trying to get a read.

Which judge was drawn for any trial was vital. It could affect the outcome. And it had never been more critical than in this case. It wasn't simply about the interpretation of the law, but the atmosphere in a courtroom. How strict would they be? How much leeway would be allowed?

Was the judge alert? Semi-retired? Biding her time until the cocktail hour? Or, occasionally, not so much biding as imbibing.

But not this one.

Maureen Corriveau was new to the bench. Her first homicide case, Gamache knew. He felt sympathy for her. She could have absolutely no idea that she'd drawn the short straw. That a whole lot of unpleasantness was about to come her way.

She was middle-aged, with hair she was allowing to go gray. As a sign, perhaps, of authority, or maturity. Or because she didn't have to impress anymore. She'd been a powerful litigator, a partner in her Montréal law firm. She'd been blond. Before she'd ascended. Taken silk, as they said in Britain.

Interestingly, it was not unlike how parachutists described jumping out of a plane.

Judge Corriveau looked back at him. Her eyes were sharp. Intelligent. But Gamache wondered how much she was actually seeing. And how much she was actually missing.

Judge Corriveau looked at ease. But that meant nothing. He probably looked at ease too.

He glanced out at the crowded courtroom in the Palais de Justice in Old Montréal. Most of the people who might have been there had decided to stay home. Some, like Myrna and Clara and Reine-Marie, would be called as witnesses and didn't want to come in until they absolutely had to. Other villagers—Olivier, Gabri, Ruth—simply didn't

want to leave Three Pines to come all the way into the stifling city to relive this tragedy.

But Gamache's second-in-command, Jean-Guy Beauvoir, was there, as was Chief Inspector Isabelle Lacoste. The head of homicide.

It would be their turn to testify, soon enough. Or perhaps, he thought, it would never come to that.

He shifted his eyes back to the Crown, Barry Zalmanowitz. But on its way there, his gaze had brushed by Judge Corriveau. To his chagrin, she tilted her head, very slightly. And her eyes narrowed, very slightly.

What had she seen, in his eyes? Had the rookie judge caught the very thing he was trying to conceal? Was desperate to conceal?

But if she did see it, he knew she would misinterpret it. She'd assume he was troubled about the defendant's guilt.

But Armand Gamache had no doubt about that. He knew perfectly well who the murderer was. He was just a little afraid that something would go wrong. And a particularly cunning killer would go free.

He watched the Crown Prosecutor walk deliberately to his desk, put on his glasses and carefully, one might even say dramatically, read a piece of paper.

It was probably blank, Gamache thought. Or a shopping list. Almost certainly a prop. A wisp of smoke. A shard of mirror.

Trials, like Masses, were theatrics. He could almost smell the incense and hear a tinny, tiny bell.

The jury, not yet wilted from the heat, followed the skilled Crown's every move. As they were meant to. But he was not the lead in this drama. That role was taken by someone offstage, who would almost certainly never utter a word.

The Chief Crown took off his glasses and Gamache heard the slight rustle of the judge's silk robes as she reacted with impatience barely concealed. The jury might be taken in, but this judge was not. And the jury wouldn't be taken in for long. They were too smart for that.

"I understand the defendant actually confessed, is that right?" the prosecutor asked, looking over his glasses in a professorial manner wasted on the head of the Sûreté.

"There was a confession, yes."

"Under questioning, Chief Superintendent?"

Gamache noticed that he repeated his rank, as though someone so lofty could not possibly make a mistake.

“No. The defendant came to my home and confessed. Willingly.”

“Objection.” The defense attorney leapt to his feet, a little late, Gamache thought. “Irrelevant. The defendant never confessed to the murder.”

“True. The confession I’m talking about wasn’t to the murder,” said the Crown. “But it led directly to the charge, is that right, Chief Superintendent?”

Gamache looked at Judge Corriveau. Waiting for her to rule on the objection.

She hesitated.

“Denied,” she said. “You may answer.”

“The defendant came willingly,” said Gamache. “And yes, the confession was the key to laying the charges at that moment.”

“Did it surprise you that the defendant came to your home?”

“Your Honor,” said the defense, getting to his feet again. “Objection. Subjective and irrelevant. How could it possibly matter if Monsieur Gamache was surprised?”

“Sustained.” Judge Corriveau turned to Gamache. “Don’t answer that.”

Gamache had no intention of answering the question. The judge was right to sustain. It was subjective. But he didn’t think it was altogether irrelevant.

Had he been surprised?

Certainly when he’d seen who was standing on the porch of his home in the small Québec village, he’d been surprised. It had been hard to tell at first exactly who was in the heavy coat, with the hood up over the head. Man, woman? Young, old? Gamache could still hear the ice pellets striking his home, as the bitter November rain had changed over to sleet.

Just thinking about it now, in the July heat, he felt a chill.

Yes. It had been a surprise. He hadn’t expected the visit.

As for what happened next, surprise didn’t begin to cover it.

“I don’t want my first homicide case to end up in the appeals court,” Judge Corriveau said quietly, so that only Gamache could hear.

“I think it’s too late for that, Your Honor. This case began in a higher court, and it’s going to end there.”

Judge Corriveau shifted in her chair. Trying to get comfortable again. But something had changed. In that odd and private exchange.

She was used to words, cryptic or otherwise. It was the look in his eyes that threw her. And she wondered if he knew it was there.

Though Judge Corriveau couldn't really say what it was, she did know the Chief Superintendent of the Sûreté should not look like that. While sitting in the witness box. At a murder trial.

Maureen Corriveau did not know Armand Gamache well at all. Only by reputation. They'd passed each other in the halls of the Palais de Justice many times over the years.

She'd been prepared to dislike the man. A hunter of other humans. A man who owed his living to death. Not actually meting it out, but profiting from it.

No murder, no Gamache.

She remembered one chance meeting, when he was still head of homicide for the Sûreté, and she was still a defense attorney. They'd passed in the hall, and again she'd caught his eyes. Sharp, alert, thoughtful. But again, she'd caught something else there.

And then he was gone, bending his head slightly to listen to his companion. A younger man she knew was his second-in-command. A man in the courtroom now.

A very slight scent of sandalwood and rose had lingered. Barely there.

Maureen Corriveau had gone home and told her wife about it.

"I followed him and sat in on the trial for a few minutes this afternoon, to listen to his testimony."

"Why?"

"I was curious. I've never been up against him, but I thought if I was I should do some homework. And I had some time to kill."

"So? What was he like? Wait, let me guess." Joan shoved the tip of her nose to one side and said, "Yeah, da punk offed da guy. Why're we wastin' time wid a trial, ya yella-bellied, flea-infested cowards. Hang him!"

"That's uncanny," said Maureen. "Were you there? Yes, he turned into Edward G. Robinson."

Joan laughed. "Still, Jimmy Stewart and Gregory Peck never got to be head of homicide."

"Good point. He paraphrased Sister Prejean."

Joan put down her book. "In a trial?"

"In his testimony."

Gamache had sat in the witness box, composed, relaxed but not casual. He was distinguished looking, though not perhaps, at first glance, handsome. A large man in a well-tailored suit. He sat upright, alert. Respectful.

His hair, mostly gray, was trimmed. His face clean-shaven. Even from the gallery, Maureen Corriveau could see the deep scar by his temple.

And then he'd said it.

"No man is as bad as the worst thing he's done."

"Why would he quote a death-row nun?" asked Joan. "And those words especially?"

"I think it was a subtle plea for leniency."

"Huh," said Joan, and thought for a moment. "Of course the opposite is also true. No one is as good as the best thing."

And now Judge Corriveau sat on the bench, in her robes, in judgment. And tried to figure out what Chief Superintendent Gamache was up to.

This was closer than she'd ever been to him, and for a more sustained length of time. The deep scar at his temple was still there, and always would be, of course. As though his job had branded him. Close up, she could see the lines radiating from his mouth. And eyes. Life lines. Laugh lines, she knew. She had them too.

A man at the height of his career. At ease. At peace with what he'd done and must now do.

But in those eyes?

The look she'd caught a long time ago, in the halls, had been so unexpected that Maureen Corriveau had followed him, and listened to his testimony.

It was kindness.

But what she saw today wasn't that. It was worry. Not doubt, she thought. But he was worried.

And now she was too, though Judge Corriveau couldn't say why.

She turned away and they both returned their attention to the Crown attorney. He was playing with a pen, and when he made to lean against

his desk, Judge Corriveau gave him a look so stern he immediately straightened up. And put down the pen.

“Let me rephrase the question,” he said. “When did you first have your suspicions?”

“Like most murders,” said Gamache, “it began long before the actual act.”

“So you knew a murder would happen, even before the death?”

“*Non*. Not really.”

No? Gamache asked himself. As he had asked himself every day since the body was found. But really what he asked himself was how he could not have known.

“So again, I ask you, Chief Superintendent, when did you know?”

There was an edge of impatience in Zalmanowitz’s voice now.

“I knew there was something wrong when the figure in the black robe appeared on the village green.”

That caused a commotion in the courtroom. The reporters, off to the side, bent over their electronic notebooks. He could hear the tapping from across the room. A modern Morse code, signaling urgent news.

“By ‘village,’ you mean Three Pines,” said the prosecutor, looking at the journalists as though the Chief Crown knowing the name of the village where Gamache lived, and the victim died, should be noteworthy. “South of Montréal, by the Vermont border, is that correct?”

“*Oui*.”

“It’s quite small, I believe.”

“*Oui*.”

“Pretty? Tranquil even?”

Zalmanowitz managed to make “pretty” sound lackluster and “tranquil” sound tedious. But Three Pines was far from either.

Gamache nodded. “Yes. It’s very pretty.”

“And remote.”

The Crown made “remote” sound disagreeable, as though the further one got from a major city, the less civilized life became. Which might be true, thought Gamache. But he’d seen the results of so-called civilization and he knew that as many beasts lived in cities as in forests.

“Not so much remote as off the path,” explained Gamache. “People mostly come upon Three Pines because they’re lost. It’s not the sort of place you drive through on the way to somewhere else.”

“It’s on the road to nowhere?”

Gamache almost smiled. It was probably meant as an insult, but it was actually apt.

He and Reine-Marie had chosen to live in Three Pines primarily because it was pretty, and hard to find. It was a haven, a buffer, from the cares and cruelty of the world he dealt with every day. The world beyond the forest.

They’d found a home there. Made a home there. Among the pines, and perennials, the village shops, and villagers. Who had become friends, and then family.

So that when the dark thing appeared on the pretty, tranquil village green, displacing the playing children, it had felt like more than an oddity. More than an intruder. It was a violation.

Gamache knew his sense of unease had really begun the night before. When the black-robed creature first appeared at the annual Halloween party in the bistro.

Though real alarms didn’t go off until he’d looked out his bedroom window the next morning and seen him still there. Standing on the village green. Staring at the bistro.

Just staring.

Now, many months later, Armand Gamache looked at the Chief Crown. In his black robes. Then over to the defense table. In their black robes. And the judge, just above and beside him, in her black robes.

Staring. At him.

There seemed, thought Gamache, no escape from black-robed figures.

“It really began,” he amended his testimony, “the night before. At the Halloween party.”

“Everyone was dressed up?”

“Not everyone. It was optional.”

“And you?” asked the Crown.

Gamache glared at him. It was not a pertinent question. But it was one designed to slightly humiliate.

“We decided to go as each other.”

“You and your wife? You went in drag, Chief Superintendent?”

“Not exactly. We pulled names from a hat. I got Gabri Dubeau, who runs the local B&B with his partner, Olivier.”

Armand had, with Olivier’s help, borrowed Gabri’s signature bright pink fluffy slippers and a kimono. It was an easy, and extremely comfortable, costume.

Reine-Marie had gone as their neighbor, Clara Morrow. Clara was a hugely successful portrait artist, though it seemed she mostly painted herself.

Reine-Marie had teased her hair until it was almost on end, and put cookies and a peanut butter sandwich in it. Then she’d dabbed paint all over herself.

For her part, Clara had gone as her best friend, Myrna Landers. They were all slightly concerned she’d show up in blackface, though Myrna had said she wouldn’t take offense as long as Clara painted her entire body black.

Clara had not painted herself, for once. Instead, she wore a caftan made from the dust jackets of old books.

Myrna was a retired psychologist from Montréal, who now ran the shop right next to the bistro, Myrna’s New and Used Bookstore. Clara had a theory that villagers manufactured problems, just to go sit with Myrna.

“Manufacture them?” the old poet Ruth had said, glaring at Clara. “You have a whole warehouse full of them. You’ve cornered the market on problems.”

“I have not,” said Clara.

“Really? You’ve got a huge solo show coming up and all you’ve got is crap. If that’s not a problem, I don’t know what is.”

“It’s not crap.” Though none of her friends backed her up.

Gabri had gone to the Halloween party as Ruth. He’d put on a gray wig and made up his face until he looked like a fiend from a horror show. He’d worn a pilled, moth-eaten sweater and carried a stuffed duck.

All night long he’d swilled scotch and muttered poetry.

*“With doors ajar the cottage stands
Deserted on the hill—*

*No welcome bark, no thudding hoof,
And the voice of the pig is still."*

"That's not mine, you sack of shit," said Ruth. She wore a pilled, moth-eaten sweater and carried a real duck.

"A little blade of grass I see," said Gabri. *"Its banner waving wild and free."*

"Stop it," said Ruth, trying to cover her ears. "You'll murder my muse."

"And I wonder if in time to come," Gabri pressed ahead. *"'Twill be a great big onion."*

The last word he pronounced *un-ee-yun*.

Even Ruth had to laugh, while in her arms Rosa the duck muttered, "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"I worked all day on that," said Gabri. "This poetry stuff isn't so hard."

"So this was October thirty-first of last year," asked the Crown attorney.

"Non. It was November first. We all stayed home on the actual Halloween night, to give out candy to the trick or treaters. This party is always the next night."

"November first. Who else was there besides the villagers?" asked the Crown.

"Matheo Bissonette and his wife, Lea Roux."

"Madame Roux, the politician," said the Crown. "A rising star in her party, I believe."

Behind him, Monsieur Zalmanowitz heard the renewed tapping on the tablets. A siren song. Proof he'd make the news.

"Yes," said Gamache.

"Friends of yours? Staying with you?"

Of course the Crown knew the answer to all these questions. This was for the sake of the judge and jury. And reporters.

"Non. I didn't know them well. They were there with their friends Katie and Patrick Evans."

"Ahh, yes. The Evanses." The Crown looked over at the defense table, then back at Gamache. "The contractor and his architect wife. They built glass houses, I believe. Also friends of yours?"

"Also acquaintances," Gamache corrected, his voice firm. He did not like the insinuation.

"Of course," said Zalmanowitz. "And why were they in the village?"

“It was an annual reunion. They’re school friends. They were in the same class at the Université de Montréal.”

“They’re all in their early thirties now?”

“*Oui.*”

“How long have they been coming to Three Pines?”

“Four years. Always the same week in late summer.”

“Except this year, they came in late October.”

“*Oui.*”

“Strange time to visit. No fall colors left and no snow yet for skiing. It’s pretty dreary, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps they got a better rate at the B&B,” said Gamache, with an expression of trying to be helpful. “It’s a very nice place.”

When he’d left Three Pines early that morning to drive into Montréal, Gabri, the owner of the bed and breakfast, had run over with a brown paper bag and a travel mug.

“If you have to mention the B&B, can you say something like ‘the beautiful B&B’? Or you could call it lovely.”

He had gestured behind him. It wouldn’t be a lie. The old stagecoach inn across from the village green, with its wide verandah and gables, was lovely. Especially in summer. Like the rest of the village, the B&B had a front garden of old perennials. Roses and lavender, and spires of digitalis and fragrant phlox.

“Just don’t say ‘stunning.’” Gabri advised. “Sounds forced.”

“And we wouldn’t want that,” said Gamache. “You do know this is a murder trial.”

“I do,” said Gabri, serious as he handed over the coffee and croissants.

And now Gamache sat in the trial and listened to the Chief Crown.

“What took the classmates to Three Pines initially?” Monsieur Zalmanowitz asked. “Were they lost?”

“No. Lea Roux and Dr. Landers grew up together. Myrna Landers used to babysit her. Lea and Matheo had visited Myrna a few times and came to like the village. They mentioned it to their friends and it became the site of their annual reunion.”

“I see. So Lea Roux and her husband were the ones who instigated it.” He made it sound somehow suspicious. “With the help of Madame Landers.”

“Dr. Landers, and there was no ‘instigation.’ It was a perfectly normal reunion.”

“Really? You call what happened perfectly normal?”

“Up until last November, yes.”

The Chief Crown nodded in a manner that was meant to look sage, as though he didn’t quite believe Chief Superintendent Gamache.

It was, thought Judge Corriveau, ridiculous. But she could see the jury taking it all in.

And again, she wondered why he would imply such a thing, with his own witness. The head of the Sûreté, for God’s sake.

The day was heating up, and so was the courtroom. She looked at the old air conditioners slumped in the windows. Turned off, of course. Too noisy. It would be distracting.

But the heat was becoming distracting too. And it wasn’t yet noon.

“When did it all, finally, strike you, Chief Superintendent, as abnormal?” asked Zalmanowitz.

Gamache’s rank was emphasized again, but now the Crown’s tone suggested a degree of incompetence.

“It really began during that Halloween party in the bistro,” said Gamache, ignoring the provocation. “Some of the guests wore masks, though most were recognizable, especially when they spoke. But one was not. One guest wore heavy black robes down to the floor, and a black mask. Gloves, boots. A hood was pulled up over his head.”

“Sounds like Darth Vader,” said the Crown, and there were chuckles in the gallery.

“We thought that, at first. But it wasn’t a Star Wars costume.”

“Then who did you think it was supposed to be?”

“Reine-Marie”—Gamache turned to the jury to clarify—“my wife—” They nodded. “—wondered if it was the father from the film *Amadeus*. But he wore a specific hat. This person just had the hood. Myrna thought he might be dressed as a Jesuit priest, but there wasn’t a cross.”

And then there was his manner. While around him people partied, this figure stood absolutely still.

Soon people stopped speaking to him. Asking about his costume. Trying to work out who it was. Before long, people stopped approaching him. And a space opened up around the dark figure. It was as though

he occupied his own world. His own universe. Where there was no Halloween party. No revelers. No laughter. No friendship.

“What did you think?”

“I thought it was Death,” said Armand Gamache.

There was silence now, in the courtroom.

“And what did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Really? Death comes to visit and the head of the Sûreté, the former Chief Inspector of homicide, does nothing?”

“It was a person in a costume,” said Gamache with patience.

“That’s what you told yourself that night, perhaps,” said the Crown.

“When did you realize it really was Death? Let me guess. When you were standing over the body?”