



A BETTER MAN Chapter 1

"Merde."

"Merde?" Myrna Landers looked over her bowl of café au lait at her friend.

"I'm sorry," said Clara Morrow. "I meant to say fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck."

"That's my girl. But why?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Is Ruth coming?" Myrna looked around the bistro in mock panic. Or maybe not-so-mock.

"Worse."

"That's not possible."

Clara gave Myrna her phone, though the bookstore owner already knew what she'd find. Before meeting Clara for breakfast, she'd checked her Twitter feed. On the screen, for the world to see, was the quickly cooling body of Clara's artistic career.

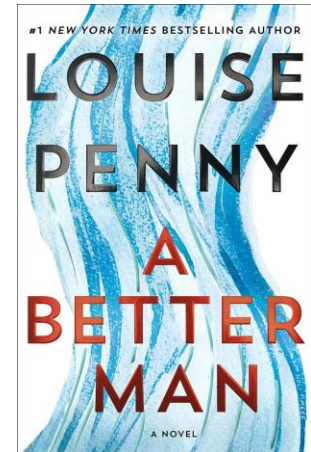
As Myrna read, Clara wrapped her large, paint-stained hands around her mug of hot chocolate, *a spécialité de la maison*, and shifted her eyes from her friend to the mullioned window and the tiny Québec village beyond.

If the phone was an assault, the window was the balm. While perhaps not totally healing, it was at least comforting in its familiarity.

The sky was gray and threatened rain. Or sleet. Ice pellets or snow. The dirt road was covered in slush and mud. There were patches of snow on the sodden grass. Villagers out walking their dogs were clumping around in rubber boots and wrapped in layers of clothing, hoping to keep April away from their skin and out of their bones.

It was not possible. Somehow, having survived another bitterly cold Canadian winter, early spring always got them. It was the damp. And the temperature swings. And the illusion and delusion that it must be milder out, surely, by now.

The forest beyond stood like an army of winter wraiths, skeleton arms dangling, limbs clacking together in the breeze.





Woodsmoke drifted from the old fieldstone, brick, clapboard homes. A signal to some higher power. Send help. Send heat. Send a real spring and not this crapfest of slush and freezing, teasing days. Days of snow and warmth.

April in Québec was a month of cruel contrasts. Of sublime afternoons spent sitting outside in the bright sunshine with a glass of wine, then waking to another foot of snow. A month of muttered curses and mud-caked boots and splattered cars and dogs rolling, then shaking. So that every front entrance was polka-dotted with muck. On the walls. On the ceilings. On the floors. And people.

April in Québec was a climatological shitstorm. A mindfuck of epic proportions.

But what was happening outside the large windows was comforting compared to what was happening on the small screen of Clara's phone.

Clara's and Myrna's armchairs were pulled close to the hearth, where logs popped and sent embers fluttering up the fieldstone chimney. The village bistro smelled of woodsmoke and maple syrup and strong fresh coffee.

Clara Morrow is going through her brown period, Myrna read. To say her latest offerings are shit is to be unfair to effluent. Let's hope it is just a period, and not the end.

"Oh," said Myrna. Putting down the phone, she reached for her friend's hand. "*Merde.*"