

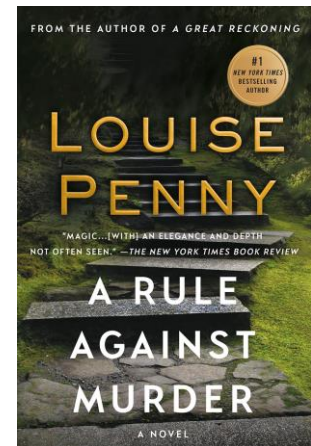


A RULE AGAINST MURDER Chapter 1

In the height of summer the guests descended on the isolated lodge by the lake, summoned to the Manoir Bellechasse by identical vellum invitations, addressed in the familiar spider scrawl as though written in cobwebs. Thrust through mail slots, the heavy paper had thudded to the floor of impressive homes in Vancouver and Toronto, and a small brick cottage in Three Pines.

The mailman had carried it in his bag through the tiny Quebec village, taking his time. Best not to exert yourself in this heat, he told himself, pausing to remove his hat and wipe his dripping head. Union rules. But the actual reason for his lethargy wasn't the beating and brilliant sun, but something more private. He always lingered in Three Pines. He wandered slowly by the perennial beds of roses and lilies and thrusting bold foxglove. He helped kids spot frogs at the pond on the green. He sat on warm fieldstone walls and watched the old village go about its business. It added hours to his day and made him the last courier back to the terminal. He was mocked and kidded by his fellows for being so slow and he suspected that was the reason he'd never been promoted. For two decades or more he'd taken his time. Instead of hurrying, he strolled through Three Pines talking to people as they walked their dogs, often joining them for lemonade or *thé glacé* outside the bistro. Or *café au lait* in front of the roaring fire in winter. Sometimes the villagers, knowing he was having lunch at the bistro, would come by and pick up their own mail. And chat for a moment. He brought news from other villages on his route, like a travelling minstrel in medieval times, with news of plague or war or flood, someplace else. But never here in this lovely and peaceful village. It always amused him to imagine that Three Pines, nestled among one the mountains and surrounded by Canadian forest, was disconnected from the outside world. It certainly felt that way. It was a relief.

And so he took his time. This day he held a bundle of envelopes in his sweaty hand, hoping he wasn't marring the perfect, quite lovely thick paper of the top letter. Then the handwriting caught his eye and his pace slowed still further. After decades as a mail carrier he knew he delivered more than just letters. In his years, he knew, he'd dropped bombs along his route. Great good news: children born, lotteries won, distant, wealthy aunts dead. But he was a





good and sensitive man, and he knew he was also the bearer of bad news. It broke his heart to think of the pain he sometimes caused, especially in this village.

He knew what he held in his hand now was that, and more. It wasn't, perhaps, total telepathy that informed his certainty, but also an unconscious ability to read handwriting. Not simply the words, but the thrust behind them. The simple, mundane three-line address on the envelope told him more than where to deliver the letter. The hand was old, he could tell, and infirm. Crippled not just by age, but by rage. No good would come from this thing he held. And he suddenly wanted to be rid of it.

His intention had been to wander over to the bistro and have a cold beer and a sandwich, chat with the owner Olivier and see if anyone came for their mail, for he was also just a little bit lazy. But suddenly he was energized. Astonished villagers saw a sight unique to them, the postman hurrying. He stopped and turned and walked briskly away from the bistro, toward a rusty mailbox in front of a brick cottage overlooking the village green. As he opened the mouth of the box it screamed. He couldn't blame it. He thrust the letter in and quickly closed the shrieking door. It surprised him that the battered metal box didn't gag a little and spew the wretched thing back. He'd come to see his letters as living things, and the boxes as kinds of pets. And he'd done something terrible to this particular box. And these people. Had Armand Gamache been blindfolded he'd have known exactly where he was. It was the scent. That combination of woodsmoke, old books and honeysuckle.

"Monsieur et Madame Gamache, quel plaisir."

Clementine Dubois waddled around the reception desk at the Manoir Bellechasse, skin like wings hanging from her outstretched arms and quivering so that she looked like a bird or a withered angel as she approached, her intentions clear. Reine-Marie Gamache met her, her own arms without hope of meeting about the substantial woman. They embraced and kissed on each cheek. When Gamache had exchanged hugs and kisses with Madame Dubois she stepped back and surveyed the couple. Before her she saw Reine-Marie, short, not plump but not trim either, hair graying and face settling into the middle years of a life fully lived. She was lovely without being actually pretty. What the French called *soignée*. She wore a tailored deep blue skirt to mid-calf and a crisp white shirt. Simple, elegant, classic.

The man was tall and powerfully built. In his mid-fifties and not yet going to fat, but showing evidence of a life lived with good books, wonderful food and leisurely walks. He looked

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like a professor, though Clementine Dubois knew he was not that. His hair was receding and where once it had been wavy and dark, now it was thinning on top and graying over the ears and down the sides where it curled a little over the collar. He was clean-shaven except for a trim moustache. He wore a navy jacket, khaki slacks and a soft blue shirt, with tie. Always immaculate, even in the gathering heat of this late June day. But what was most striking were his eyes. Deep, warm brown. He carried calm with him as other men wore cologne.

“But you look tired.”

Most innkeepers would have exclaimed, “But you look lovely.” “*Mais, voyons*, you never change, you two.” Or even, “You look younger than ever,” knowing how old ears never tire of hearing that.

But while the Gamaches’ ears couldn’t yet be considered old, they were tired. It had been a long year and their ears had heard more than they cared to. And, as always, the Gamaches had come to the Manoir Bellechasse to leave all that behind. While the rest of the world celebrated the New Year in January, the Gamaches celebrated at the height of summer, when they visited this blessed place, retreated from the world, and began anew.

“We are a little weary,” admitted Reine-Marie, subsiding gratefully into the comfortable wing chair at the reception desk.

“*Bon*, well we’ll soon take care of that.” Now, Madame Dubois gracefully swivelled back behind the desk in a practiced move and sat at her own comfortable chair. Pulling the ledger toward her she put on her glasses. “Where have we put you?”

Armand Gamache took the chair beside his wife and they exchanged glances. They knew if they looked in that same ledger they’d find their signatures, once a year, stretching back to a June day more than thirty years ago when young Armand had saved his money and brought Reine-Marie here. For one night. In the tiniest of rooms at the very back of the splendid old Manoir. Without a view of the mountains or the lake or the perennial gardens lush with fresh peonies and first-bloom roses. He’d saved for months, wanting that visit to be special. Wanting Reine-Marie to know how much he loved her, how precious she was to him.

And so they’d lain together for the first time, the sweet scent of the forest and kitchen thyme and lilac drifting almost visible through the screened window. But the loveliest scent of all was her, fresh and warm in his strong arms. He’d written a love note to her that night. He’d covered her softly with their simple white sheet, then, sitting in the cramped rocking chair, not



daring to actually rock in case he whacked the wall behind or barked his shins on the bed in front, disturbing Reine-Marie, he'd watched her breathe. Then on Manoir Bellechasse notepaper he'd written, *My love knows no—*

How can a man contain such—

My heart and soul have come alive—

My love for you—

All night he wrote and next morning, taped to the bathroom mirror, Reine-Marie found the note. *I love you.*

Clementine Dubois had been there even then, massive and wobbly and smiling. She'd been old then and each year Gamache worried he'd call for a reservation to hear an unfamiliar crisp voice say. "*Bonjour, Manoir Bellechasse. Puis-je vous aider?*" Instead he'd heard, "Monsieur Gamache, what a pleasure. Are you coming to visit us again, I hope?" Like going to Grandma's. Albeit a grander grandma's than he'd ever known.

And while Gamache and Reine-Marie had certainly changed, marrying, having two children and now a granddaughter and another grandchild on the way, Clementine Dubois never seemed to age or diminish. And neither did her love, the Manoir. It was as though the two were one, both kind and loving, comforting and welcoming. And mysteriously and delightfully unchanging in a world that seemed to change so fast. And not always for the better.

"What's wrong?" Reine-Marie asked, noticing the look on Madame Dubois's face.

"I must be getting old," she said and looked up, her violet eyes upset. Gamache smiled reassuringly. By his calculations she must be at least a hundred and twenty.

"If you have no room, don't worry. We can come back another week," he said. It was only a two-hour drive into the Eastern Townships of Quebec from their home in Montreal.

"Oh, I have a room, but I'd hoped to have something better. When you called for reservations I should have saved the Lake Room for you, the one you had last year. But the Manoir's full up. One family, the Finneys, has taken the other five rooms. They're here—"

She stopped suddenly and dropped her eyes to the ledger in an act so wary and uncharacteristic the Gamaches exchanged glances.

"They're here . . . ?" Gamache prompted after the silence stretched on.

"Well, it doesn't matter, plenty of time for that," she said, looking up and smiling reassuringly. "I'm sorry about not saving the best room for you two, though."



“Had we wanted the Lake Room, we’d have asked,” said Reine-Marie. “You know Armand, this is his one flutter with uncertainty. Wild man.”

Clementine Dubois laughed, knowing that not to be true. She knew the man in front of her lived with great uncertainty every day of his life. Which was why she deeply wanted their annual visits to the Manoir to be filled with luxury and comfort. And peace.

“We never specify the room, madame,” said Gamache, his voice deep and warm. “Do you know why?”

Madame Dubois shook her head. She’d long been curious, but never wanted to cross-examine her guests, especially this one. “Everyone else does,” she said. “In fact, this whole family asked for free upgrades. Arrived in Mercedes and BMWs and asked for upgrades.” She smiled. Not meanly, but with some bafflement that people who had so much wanted more.

“We like to leave it up to the fates,” he said. She examined his face to see if he was joking, but thought he probably wasn’t. “We’re perfectly happy with what we’re given.”

And Clementine Dubois knew the truth of it. She felt the same. Every morning she woke up, a bit surprised to see another day, and always surprised to be here, in this old lodge, by the sparkling shores of this freshwater lake, surrounded by forests and streams, gardens and guests. It was her home, and guests were like family. Though Madame Dubois knew, from bitter experience, you can’t always choose, or like, your family.

“Here it is.” She dangled an old brass key from a long keychain. “The Forest Room. It’s at the back, I’m afraid.”

Reine-Marie smiled. “We know where it is, *merci*.” One day rolled gently into the next as the Gamaches swam in Lac Massawippi and went for leisurely walks through the fragrant woods. They read and chatted amicably with the other guests and slowly got to know them.

Up until a few days ago they’d never met the Finneys, but now they were cordial companions at the isolated lodge. Like experienced travellers on a cruise, the guests were neither too remote nor too familiar. They didn’t even know what the others did for a living, which was fine with Armand Gamache.

It was mid-afternoon and Gamache was watching a bee scramble around a particularly blowsy pink rose when a movement caught his attention. He turned in his chaise longue and watched as the son, Thomas, and his wife Sandra walked from the lodge into the startling sunshine. Sandra brought a slim hand up and placed huge black sunglasses on her face, so



that she looked a little like a fly. She seemed an alien in this place, certainly not someone in her natural habitat. Gamache supposed her to be in her late fifties, early sixties, though she was clearly trying to pass for considerably less. Funny, he thought, how dyed hair, heavy make-up and young clothes actually made a person look older.

They walked on to the lawn, Sandra's heels aerating the grass, and paused, as though expecting applause. But the only sound Gamache could hear came from the bee, whose wings were making a muffled raspberry sound in the rose.

Thomas stood on the brow of the slight hill rolling down to the lake, an admiral on the bridge. His piercing blue eyes surveyed the water, like Nelson at Trafalgar. Gamache realized that every time he saw Thomas he thought of a man preparing for battle. Thomas Finney was in his early sixties and certainly handsome. Tall and distinguished with gray hair and noble features. But in the few days they'd shared the lodge Gamache had also noted a hint of irony in the man, a quiet sense of humor. He was arrogant and entitled, but he seemed to know it and be able to laugh at himself. It was very becoming and Gamache found himself warming to him. Though on this hot day he was warming to everything, especially the old *Life* magazine whose ink was coming off on his sweaty hands. Looking down he saw, tattooed to his palm, EFIL. Life Backward.

Thomas and Sandra had walked straight past his elderly parents who were lounging on the shaded porch. Gamache marvelled yet again at the ability of this family to make each other invisible. As Gamache watched over his half-moon glasses Thomas and Sandra surveyed the people dotted around the garden and along the shore of the lake. Julia Martin, the older sister and a few years younger than Thomas, was sitting alone on the dock in an Adirondack chair, reading. She wore a simple white one-piece bathing suit. In her late fifties she was slim and gleamed like a trophy as though she'd slathered herself in cooking oil. She seemed to sizzle in the sun, and with a wince Gamache could imagine her skin beginning to crackle. Every now and then Julia would lower her book and gaze across the calm lake. Thinking. Gamache knew enough about Julia Martin to know she had a great deal to think about.

On the lawn leading down to the lake were the rest of the family, the younger sister Marianna and her child, Bean. Where Thomas and Julia were slim and attractive, Marianna was short and plump and unmistakably ugly. It was as though she was the negative to their positive.



Her clothes seemed to have a grudge against her and either slipped off or scrunched around awkwardly so that she was constantly rearranging herself, pulling and tugging and wriggling.

And yet the child, Bean, was extremely attractive, with long blond hair, bleached almost white in the sun, thick dark lashes and brilliant blue eyes. At that moment Marianna appeared to be doing t'ai chi, though with movements of her own making.

"Look, darling, a crane. Mommy's a crane."

The plump woman stood on one leg, arms reaching for the sky and neck stretched to its limits.

Ten-year-old Bean ignored Mommy and continued to read. Gamache wondered how bored the child must be.

"It's the most difficult position," Marianna said more loudly than necessary, almost throttling herself with one of her scarves. Gamache had noticed that Marianna's t'ai chi and yoga and meditations and military calisthenics only happened when Thomas appeared.

Was she trying to impress her older brother, Gamache wondered, or embarrass him? Thomas took a quick glance at the pudgy, collapsing crane and steered Sandra in the other direction. They found two chairs in the shade, alone.

"You're not spying on them, are you?" Reine-Marie asked, lowering her book to look at her husband.

"Spying is far too harsh. I'm observing."

"Aren't you supposed to stop that?" Then after a moment she added, "Anything interesting?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Nothing."

"Still," said Reine-Marie, looking around at the scattered Finneys. "Odd family that comes all this way for a reunion then ignores each other."

"Could be worse," he said. "They could be killing each other."

Reine-Marie laughed. "They'd never get close enough to manage it."

Gamache grunted his agreement and realized happily that he didn't care. It was their problem, not his. Besides, after a few days together he'd become fond of the Finneys in a funny sort of way.

"*Votre thé glacé, madame.*" The young man spoke French with a delightful English Canadian accent.



"*Merci*, Elliot." Reine-Marie shaded her eyes from the afternoon sun and smiled at the waiter.

"*Un plaisir*." He beamed and handed a tall glass of iced tea to Reine-Marie and a perspiring glass of misty lemonade to Gamache, then went off to deliver the rest of his drinks.

"I remember when I was that young," said Gamache wistfully.

"You might have been that young but you were never that—" She nodded toward Elliot as he walked athletically across the manicured lawn in his tailored black slacks and small white jacket snugly fitting his body.

"Oh, God, am I going to have to beat up another suitor?"

"Maybe."

"You know I would." He took her hand.

"I know you wouldn't. You'd listen him to death."

"Well, it's a strategy. Crush him with my massive intellect."

"I can imagine his terror."

Gamache sipped his lemonade and suddenly puckered, tears springing to his eyes.

"Ah, and what woman could resist that?" She looked at his fluttering, watering eyes and face screwed into a wince.

"Sugar. Needs sugar," he gasped.

"Here, I'll ask the waiter."

"Never mind. I'll do it." He coughed, gave her a mockingly stern gaze and rocked out of the deep and comfortable seat.

Taking his lemonade he wandered up the path from the fragrant gardens and onto the wide veranda, already cooler and shaded from the brunt of the afternoon sun. Bert Finney lowered his book and gazed at Gamache, then smiled and nodded politely.

"*Bonjour*," he said. "Warm day."

"But cooler here, I notice," said Gamache, smiling at the elderly couple sitting quietly side by side. Finney was clearly older than his wife. Gamache thought she was probably in her mid-eighties while he must be nearing ninety and had that translucent quality people sometimes got, near the end.

"I'm going inside. May I get you anything?" he asked, thinking yet again that Bert Finney was both courtly and one of the least attractive people he'd ever met. Admonishing himself for being so superficial, it was all he could do not to stare. Monsieur Finney was so repulsive he



was almost attractive, as though aesthetics were circular and this man had circumnavigated that rude world.

His skin was pocked and ruddy, his nose large and misshapen, red and veined as though he'd snorted, and retained, Burgundy. His teeth protruded, yellowed and confused, heading this way and that in his mouth. His eyes were small and slightly crossed. A lazy eye, thought Gamache. What used to be known as an evil eye, in darker times when men like this found themselves at best cast out of polite society and at worst tied to a stake.

Irene Finney sat next to her husband and wore a floral sundress. She was plump with soft white hair in a loose bun on her head, and while she didn't glance up he could see her complexion was tender and white. She looked like a soft, inviting, faded pillow, propped next to a cliff face.

"We're fine, but *merci*."

Gamache had noticed that Finney, alone among his family, always tried to speak a little French to him.

Within the Manoir the temperature dropped again. It was almost cool inside, a relief from the heat of the day. It took a moment for Gamache's eyes to adjust.

The dark maple door to the dining room was closed and Gamache knocked tentatively, then opening it he stepped into the panelled room. Places were being set for dinner, with crisp white linen, sterling silver, fine bone china and a small arrangement of fresh flowers on each table. It smelled of roses and wood, of polish and herbs, of beauty and order. Sun was streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows, which looked onto the garden. The windows were closed, to keep the heat out and the cool in. The Manoir Bellechasse wasn't air conditioned, but the massive logs acted as natural insulation, keeping the heat in during the bitterest of Quebec winters, and the heat out on the most sizzling of summer days. This wasn't the hottest. Low 80s, Gamache figured. But he was still grateful for the workmanship of the *coureurs de bois* who raised this place by hand and chose each log with such precision that nothing not invited could ever come in.

"Monsieur Gamache." Pierre Patenaude came forward smiling and wiping his hands on a cloth. He was a few years younger than Gamache and slimmer. All that running from table to table, thought Gamache. But the maître d' never seemed to run. He gave everyone his time, as though they were the only ones in the *auberge*, without seeming to ignore or miss any of the



other guests. It was a particular gift of the very best maître d's, and the Manoir Bellechasse was famous for having only the best.

"What can I do for you?"

Gamache, slightly bashfully, extended his glass. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I need some sugar."

"Oh, dear. I was afraid of that. Seems we've run out. I've sent one of the *garçons* to the village to pick up some more. *Désolé*. But if you wait here, I think I know where the chef hides her emergency supply. Really, this is most unusual."

What was most unusual, thought Gamache, was seeing the unflappable maître d' flapped.

"I don't want to put you out," Gamache called to Patenaude's disappearing back.

A moment later the maître d' returned, a small bone china vessel in his hands.

"*Voilà!* Success. Of course I had to wrestle Chef Véronique for it."

"I heard the screams. *Merci*."

"*Pour vous, monsieur, c'est un plaisir.*" Patenaude picked up his rag and a silver rose bowl and continued his polishing while Gamache stirred the precious sugar into his lemonade. Both men stared in companionable silence out of the bank of windows to the garden and the gleaming lake beyond. A canoe drifted lazily by in the still afternoon.

"I checked my instruments a few minutes ago," said the maître d'. "A storm's on the way."

"*Vraiment?*"

The day was clear and calm, but like every other guest at the gracious old lodge he'd come to believe the maître d's daily weather reports, gleaned from his home-made weather stations dotted around the property. It was a hobby, the maître d' had once explained, passed from father to son.

"Some fathers teach their sons to hunt or fish. Mine would bring me into the woods and teach me about the weather," he'd explained one day while showing Gamache and Reine-Marie the barometric device and the old glass bell jar, with water up the spout. "Now I'm teaching them." Pierre Patenaude had waved in the direction of the young staff. Gamache hoped they were paying attention.



There was no television at the Bellechasse and even the radio was patchy, so Environment Canada forecasts weren't available. Just Pate-naude and his near mythical ability to foretell the weather. Each morning when they arrived for breakfast the forecast would be tacked outside the dining room door. For a nation addicted to the weather, he gave them their fix.

Now Patenaude looked out into the calm day. Not a leaf stirred.

"*Oui*. Heat wave coming, then storm. Looks like a big one."

"*Merci*." Gamache raised his lemonade to the maître d' and returned outside.

He loved summer storms, especially at the Bellechasse. Unlike Montreal, where storms seemed to suddenly break overhead, here he could see them coming. Dark clouds would collect above the mountains at the far end of the lake, then a gray curtain of rain would fall in the distance. It would seem to gather itself, take a breath, and then march like a line of infantry clearly marked on the water. The wind would pick up, catching and furiously shaking the tall trees. Then it would strike. Boom. And as it howled and blew and threw itself at them, he'd be tucked up in the Manoir with Reine-Marie, safe.

As he stepped outside the heat bumped him, not so much a wall as a Whack.

"Find some sugar?" asked Reine-Marie, stretching out her hand to touch his face as he leaned down to kiss her before settling back into his chair.

"*Absolument*."

She went back to reading and Gamache reached for *Le Devoir*, but his large hand hesitated, hovering over the newspaper headlines. Another Sovereignty Referendum Possible. A Biker Gang War. A Catastrophic Earthquake.

His hand moved to his lemonade instead. All year his mouth watered for the home-made Manoir Bellechasse lemonade. It tasted fresh and clean, sweet and tart. It tasted of sunshine and summer.

Gamache felt his shoulders sag. His guard was coming down. It felt good. He took off his floppy sun hat and wiped his brow. The humidity was rising.

Sitting in the peaceful afternoon Gamache found it hard to believe a storm was on its way. But he felt a trickle down his spine, a lone, tickling stream of perspiration. The pressure was building, he could feel it, and the parting words of the maître d' came back to him.

"Tomorrow's going to be a killer."



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