



## THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY Chapter 1

As the last note of the chant escaped the Blessed Chapel a great silence fell, and with it came an even greater disquiet.

The silence stretched on. And on.

These were men used to silence, but this seemed extreme, even to them.

And still they stood in their long black robes and white tops, motionless.

Waiting.

These were men also used to waiting. But this too seemed extreme.

The less disciplined among them stole glances at the tall, slim, elderly man who had been the last to file in and would be the first to leave.

Dom Philippe kept his eyes closed. Where once this was a moment of profound peace, a private moment with his private God, when Vigils had ended and before he signaled for the Angelus, now it was simply escape.

He closed his eyes because he didn't want to see.

Besides, he knew what was there. What was always there. What had been there for hundreds of years before he arrived and would, God willing, be there for centuries after he was buried in the cemetery. Two rows of men across from him, in black robes with white hoods, a simple rope tied at their waists.

And beside him to his right, two more rows of men.

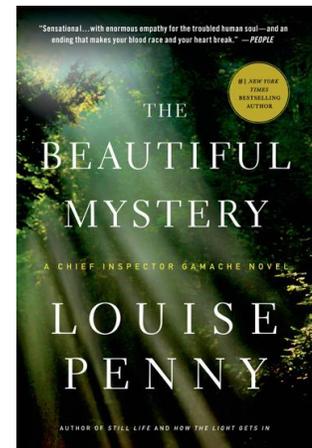
They were facing each other across the stone floor of the chapel, like ancient battle lines.

*No, he told his weary mind. No. I mustn't think of this as a battle, or a war. Just opposing points of view. Expressed in a healthy community.*

Then why was he so reluctant to open his eyes? To get the day going?

To signal the great bells that would ring the Angelus to the forests and birds and lakes and fish. And the monks. To the angels and all the saints. And God.

A throat cleared.





In the great silence it sounded like a bomb. And to the abbot's ears it sounded like what it was.

A challenge.

With an effort he continued to keep his eyes closed. He remained still, and quiet. But there was no peace anymore. Now there was only turmoil, inside and out. He could feel it, vibrating from and between the two rows of waiting men.

He could feel it vibrating within him.

Dom Philippe counted to one hundred. Slowly. Then opening his blue eyes, he stared directly across the chapel, to the short, round man who stood with his eyes open, his hands folded on his stomach, a small smile on his endlessly patient face.

The abbot's eyes narrowed slightly, in a glare, then he recovered and raising his slim right hand, he signaled. And the bells began.

The perfect, round, rich toll left the bell tower and took off into the early morning darkness. It skimmed over the clear lake, the forests, the rolling hills. To be heard by all sorts of creatures.

And twenty- four men, in a remote monastery in Québec.

A clarion call. Their day had begun.

"You're not serious," laughed Jean-Guy Beauvoir.

"I am," nodded Annie. "I swear to God it's the truth."

"Are you telling me," he picked up another piece of maple-cured bacon from the platter, "that your father gave your mother a bathmat as a gift when they first started dating?"

"No, no. That would be ridiculous."

"Sure would," he agreed and ate the bacon in two big bites. In the background an old Beau Dommage album was playing. "*La complainte du phoque en Alaska*." About a lonely seal whose love had disappeared. Beauvoir hummed quietly to the familiar tune.

"He gave it to my grandmother the first time they met, as a hostess gift, thanking her for inviting him to dinner."

Beauvoir laughed. "He never told me that," he finally managed.



“Well, Dad doesn’t exactly mention it in polite conversation. Poor Mom. Felt she had to marry him. After all, who else would have him?”

Beauvoir laughed again. “So I guess the bar is set pretty low. I could hardly give you a worse gift.”

He reached down beside the table in the sunny kitchen. They’d made breakfast together that Saturday morning. A platter of bacon and scrambled eggs with melted Brie sat on the small pine table. He’d thrown on a sweater this early autumn day and gone around the corner from Annie’s apartment to the bakery on rue St-Denis for croissants and *pain au chocolat*. Then Jean-Guy had wandered in and out of the local shops, picking up a couple of *cafés*, the Montréal weekend papers, and something else.

“What’ve you got there?” Annie Gamache asked, leaning across the table. The cat leapt to the ground and found a spot on the floor where the sun hit.

“Nothing,” he grinned. “Just a little *je ne sais quoi* I saw, and thought of you.”

Beauvoir lifted it into plain sight.

“You asshole,” Annie said, and laughed. “It’s a toilet plunger.”

“With a bow on it,” said Beauvoir. “Just for you, *ma chère*. We’ve been together for three months. Happy anniversary.”

“Of course, the toilet plunger anniversary. And I got you nothing.”

“I forgive you,” he said.

Annie took the plunger. “I’ll think of you every time I use it. Though I think you’ll be the one using it most of the time. You are full of it, after all.”

“Too kind,” said Beauvoir, ducking his head in a small bow.

She thrust the plunger forward, gently prodding him with the red rubber suction cup as though it was a rapier and she the swordsman.

Beauvoir smiled and took a sip of his rich, aromatic *café*. So like Annie. Where other women might have pretended the ridiculous plunger was a wand, she pretended it was a sword.

Of course, Jean-Guy realized, he would never have given a toilet plunger to any other woman. Only Annie.

“You lied to me,” she said, sitting back down. “Dad obviously told you about the bathmat.”



"He did," admitted Beauvoir. "We were in Gaspé, in a poacher's cabin, searching for evidence when your father opened a closet and found not one but two brand-new bathmats, still in their wrapping."

As he spoke he looked at Annie. Her eyes never left him, barely blinked. She took in every word, every gesture, every inflection. Enid, his ex-wife, had also listened. But there was always an edge of desperation about it, a demand. As though he owed her. As though she was dying and he was the medicine.

Enid left him drained, and yet still feeling inadequate.

But Annie was gentler. More generous.

Like her father, she listened carefully and quietly.

With Enid he never talked about his work, and she never asked. With Annie he told her everything.

Now, while putting strawberry *confiture* on the warm croissant, he told her about the poacher's cabin, about the case, the savage murder of a family. He told her what they found, how they felt, and who they arrested. "The bathmats turned out to be the key pieces of evidence," said Beauvoir, lifting the croissant to his mouth. "Though it took us a long time to figure it out."

"Is that when Dad told you about his own sad history with bathmats?"

Beauvoir nodded and chewed and saw the Chief Inspector in the dim cabin. Whispering the story. They weren't sure when the poacher would return, and they didn't want to be caught there. They had a search warrant, but they didn't want him to know that. So as the two homicide investigators deftly searched, Chief Inspector Gamache had told Beauvoir about the bathmat. Of showing up for one of the most important meals of his life, desperate to impress the parents of the woman he'd fallen hopelessly in love with. And somehow deciding a bathmat was the perfect hostess gift.

"How could you have thought that, sir?" Beauvoir had whispered, glancing out the cracked and cobwebbed window, hoping not to see the shabby poacher returning with his kill.

"Well, now," Gamache had paused, obviously trying to recall his own thinking. "Madame Gamache often asks the same question. Her mother never tired of asking either. Her father, on the other hand, decided I was an imbecile and never mentioned it again. That was worse. When



they died we found the bathmat in their linen closet, still in its plastic wrapping, with the card attached.”

Beauvoir stopped talking and looked across at Annie. Her hair was still damp from the shower they'd shared. She smelled fresh and clean. Like a citron grove in the warm sunshine. No makeup. She wore warm slippers and loose, comfortable clothing. Annie was aware of fashion, and happy to be fashionable. But happier to be comfortable.

She was not slim. She was not a stunning beauty. Annie Gamache was none of the things he'd always found attractive in a woman. But Annie knew something most people never learn. She knew how great it was to be alive.

It had taken him almost forty years, but Jean-Guy Beauvoir finally understood it too. And knew now there was no greater beauty.

Annie was approaching thirty now. She'd been a gawky teenager when they'd first met. When the Chief Inspector had brought Beauvoir into his homicide division at the Sûreté du Québec. Of the hundreds of agents and inspectors under the Chief's command, he'd chosen this young, brash agent no one else had wanted as his second in command.

Had made him part of the team, and eventually, over the years, part of the family.

Though even the Chief Inspector had no idea how much a part of the family Beauvoir had become.

“Well,” said Annie with a wry smile, “now we have our own bathroom story to baffle our children with. When we die they'll find this, and wonder.”

She held up the plunger, with its cheery red bow.

Beauvoir didn't dare say anything. Did Annie have any idea what she'd just said? The ease with which she assumed they'd have children. Grandchildren. Would die together. In a home that smelled of fresh citron and coffee. And had a cat curled around the sunshine.

They'd been together for three months and had never talked about the future. But hearing it now, it just seemed natural. As though this was always the plan. To have children. To grow old together.

Beauvoir did the math. He was ten years older than her, and would almost certainly die first. He was relieved.

But there was something troubling him.

“We need to tell your parents,” he said.



Annie grew quiet, and picked at her croissant. “I know. And it’s not like I don’t want to. But,” she hesitated and looked around the kitchen, and out into her book-lined living room, “this is nice too. Just us.”

“Are you worried?”

“About how they’ll take it?”

Annie paused and Jean-Guy’s heart suddenly pounded. He’d expected her to deny it. To assure him she wasn’t the least bit worried whether her parents would approve.

But instead, she’d hesitated.

“Maybe a little,” Annie admitted. “I’m sure they’ll be thrilled, but it changes things. You know?”

He did know, but hadn’t dared admit it to himself. Suppose the Chief didn’t approve? He could never stop them, but it would be a disaster.

*No, Jean-Guy told himself for the hundredth time, it’ll be all right. The Chief and Madame Gamache will be happy. Very happy.*

But he wanted to be sure. To know. It was in his nature. He collected facts for a living, and this uncertainty was taking its toll. It was the only shadow in a life suddenly, unexpectedly luminous.

He couldn’t keep lying to the Chief. He’d persuaded himself this wasn’t a lie, just keeping his private life private. But in his heart it felt like a betrayal.

“Do you really think they’ll be happy?” he asked Annie, and hated the neediness that had crept into his voice. But Annie either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

She leaned toward him, her elbows and forearms resting on the croissant flakes on the pine table, and took his hand. She held it warm in hers.

“To know we’re together? My father would be so happy. It’s my mother who hates you. . .”

Seeing the look on his face she laughed and squeezed his hand. “I’m kidding. She adores you. Always has. They think of you as family, you know. As another son.”

He felt his cheeks burn, to hear those words, and felt ashamed, but noticed that once again Annie didn’t care, or comment. She just held his hand and looked into his eyes.

“Sort of incestuous, then,” he finally managed.



"Yes," she agreed, letting go of his hand to take a sip of café au lait. "My parents' dream come true." She laughed, sipped, then set the cup down again. "You do know he'll be thrilled."

"Surprised too?"

Annie paused, thinking. "I think he'll be stunned. Funny, isn't it? Dad spends his life looking for clues, piecing things together. Gathering evidence. But when something's right under his nose, he misses it. Too close, I guess."

"Matthew 10:36," murmured Beauvoir.

"Pardon?"

"It's something your father tells us, in homicide. One of the first lessons he teaches new recruits."

"A biblical quote?" asked Annie. "But Mom and Dad never go to church."

"He apparently learned it from his mentor when he first joined the Sûreté."

The phone rang. Not the robust peal of the landline, but the cheerful, invasive trill of a cell. It was Beauvoir's. He ran to the bedroom and grabbed it off the nightstand.

No number was displayed, just a word.

"Chief."

He almost hit the small green phone icon, then hesitated. Instead he strode out of the bedroom and into Annie's light-filled, book-filled living room. He couldn't speak to the Chief standing in front of the bed where he'd just that morning made love to the Chief's daughter.

"*Oui, allô*," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Sorry to bother you," came the familiar voice. It managed to be both relaxed and authoritative.

"Not at all, sir. What's up?" Beauvoir glanced at the clock on the mantle. It was 10:23 on a Saturday morning.

"There's been a murder."

It wasn't, then, a casual call. An invitation to dinner. A query about staffing or a case going to trial. This was a call to arms. A call to action. A call that marked something dreadful had happened. And yet, for more than a decade now every time he heard those words, Beauvoir's heart leapt. And raced. And even danced a little. Not with joy at the knowledge of a terrible and premature death. But knowing he and the Chief and others would be on the trail again.



Jean-Guy Beauvoir loved his job. But now, for the first time, he looked into the kitchen, and saw Annie standing in the doorway. Watching him.

And he realized, with surprise, that he now loved something more.

Grabbing his notebook he sat on Annie's sofa and took down the details. When he finished he looked at what he'd written.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

"At the very least," agreed Chief Inspector Gamache. "Can you make arrangements, please? And just the two of us for now. We'll pick up a local Sûreté agent when we arrive."

"Inspector Lacoste? Should she come? Just to organize the Scene of Crime team and leave?"

Chief Inspector Gamache didn't hesitate. "No." He gave a small laugh. "We're the Scene of Crime team, I'm afraid. Hope you remember how to do it."

"I'll bring the Hoover."

"*Bon*. I've already packed my magnifying glass." There was a pause and a more somber voice came down the line. "We need to get there quickly, Jean-Guy."

"*D'accord*. I'll make a few calls and pick you up in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen? All the way from downtown?"

Beauvoir felt the world stop for a moment. His small apartment was in downtown Montréal, but Annie's was in the Plateau Mont Royal *quartier*, a few blocks from her parents' home in Outremont. "It's a Saturday. Not much traffic."

Gamache laughed. "Since when did you become an optimist? I'll be waiting, whenever you arrive."

"I'll hurry."

And he did, placing calls, issuing orders, organizing. Then he threw a few clothes into an overnight bag.

"That's a lot of underwear," said Annie, sitting on the bed. "Are you planning to be gone long?" Her voice was light, but her manner wasn't.

"Well, you know me," he said, turning from her to slip his gun into its holder. She knew he had it, but didn't like to actually see it. Even for a woman who cherished reality, this was far too real. "Without benefit of plunger I might need more tighty whities."

She laughed, and he was glad.



At the door he stopped and lowered his case to the ground.

“*Je t’aime*,” he whispered into her ear, as he held her.

“*Je t’aime*,” she whispered into his ear. “Look after yourself,” she said, as they parted.

And then, as he was halfway down the steps she called, “And please, look after my father.”

“I will. I promise.”

Once he was gone and she could no longer see the back of his car, Annie Gamache closed the door and held her hand to her chest.

She wondered if this was how her mother had felt, for all those years. How her mother felt at that very moment. Was she too leaning against the door, having watched her heart leave? Having let it go.

Then Annie walked over to the bookcases lining her living room. After a few minutes she found what she was looking for. The bible her parents had given her, when she’d been baptized. For people who didn’t attend church, they still followed the rituals.

And she knew when she had children she’d want them baptized too. She and Jean-Guy would present them with their own white bibles, with their names and baptism dates inscribed.

She looked at the thick first page. Sure enough, there was her name. Anne Daphné Gamache. And a date. In her mother’s hand. But instead of a cross underneath her name her parents had drawn two little hearts.

Then Annie sat on the sofa and sipping the now cool *café* she flipped through the unfamiliar book until she found it.

Matthew 10:36.

“*And a man’s foes*,” she read out loud, “*shall be they of his own household.*”