



## KINGDOM OF THE BLIND Chapter 1

Armand Gamache slowed his car to a crawl, then stopped on the snow-covered secondary road.

This was it, he supposed. Pulling in, he drove between the tall pine trees until he reached the clearing.

There he parked the car and sat in the warm vehicle looking out at the cold day. Snow flurries were hitting the windshield and dissolving. They were coming down with more force now, slightly obscuring what he saw outside. Turning away, he stared at the letter he'd received the day before, lying open on the passenger seat.

Putting on his reading glasses, he rubbed his face. And read it again. It was an invitation of sorts, to this desolate place.

He turned off the car. But didn't get out.

There was no particular anxiety. It was more puzzling than worrisome.

But still, it was just odd enough to raise a small alarm. Not a siren, yet. But he was alert.

Armand Gamache was not by nature timid, but he was a cautious man. How else could he have survived in the top echelons of the Sûreté du Québec? Though it was far from certain that he had survived.

He relied on, and trusted, both his rational mind and his instincts.

And what were they telling him now?

They were certainly telling him this was strange. But then, he thought with a grin, his grandchildren could have told him that.

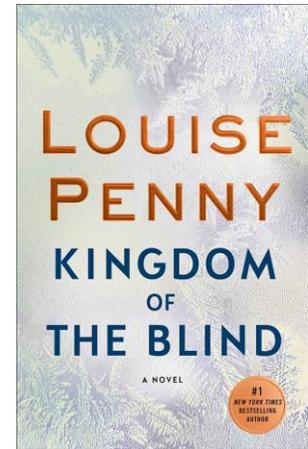
Bringing out his cell phone, he listened as the number he called rang once, twice, and then was answered.

"*Salut, ma belle.* I'm here," he said.

It was an agreement between Armand and his wife, Reine-Marie, that in winter, in snow, they called each other when they'd arrived at a destination.

"How was the drive? The snow seems to be getting worse in Three Pines."

"Here too. Drive was easy."





“So where are you? What is the place, Armand?”

“It’s sort of hard to describe.”

But he tried.

What he saw had once been a home. Then a house. And was now simply a building. And not even that for much longer.

“It’s an old farmhouse,” he said. “But it looks abandoned.”

“Are you sure you’re at the right place? Remember when you came to get me at my brother’s home and you went to the wrong brother? Insisting I was there.”

“That was years ago,” he said. “And all the houses look alike in Ste. Angélique, and, honestly, all your hundred and fifty-seven brothers look alike. Besides, he didn’t like me, and I was fairly sure he just wanted me to go away and leave you alone.”

“Can you blame him? You were at the wrong house. Some detective.”

Armand laughed. That had been decades ago, when they were first courting. Her family had since warmed to him, once they saw how much she loved him and, more important to them, how much he loved Reine-Marie.

“I’m at the right place. There’s another car here.”

Light snow covered the other vehicle. It had been there, he guessed, for about half an hour. Not more. Then his eyes returned to the farmhouse.

“It’s been a while since anyone lived here.”

It took a long time to fall into such a state. Lack of care, over the years, would do that. It was now little more than a collection of materials.

The shutters were askew, the wooden handrail had rotted and gone its separate way from the sloping steps. One of the upper windows was boarded up, so that it looked like the place was winking at him. As though it knew something he did not.

He cocked his head. Was there a slight lean to the house? Or was his imagination turning this into one of Honoré’s nursery rhymes?

*There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile,  
He found a crooked sixpence against a crooked stile;  
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse,*



*And they all lived together in a little crooked house.*

This was a crooked house. And Armand Gamache wondered if, inside, he'd find a crooked man.

After saying goodbye to Reine-Marie, he looked again at the other car in the yard, and the license plate with the motto of Québec stamped on it: JE ME SOUVIENS.

I remember.

When he closed his eyes, as he did now, images appeared uninvited. As vivid, as intense as the moment they'd happened. And not only the day last summer, with the slanting shafts of cheerful sunlight hitting the blood on his hands.

He saw all the days. All the nights. All the blood. His own, and others'. People whose lives he'd saved. And those he'd taken.