

TWO

After a refreshing swim and gin and tonics on the dock the Gamaches showered then joined the other guests in the dining room for dinner. Candles glowed inside hurricane lamps and each table was adorned with simple bouquets of old English roses. More exuberant arrangements stood on the mantelpiece, great exclamations of peony and lilac, of baby blue delphinium and bleeding hearts, arching and aching.

The Finneys were seated together, the men in dinner jackets, the women in cool summer dresses for the warm evening. Bean wore white shorts and a crisp green shirt.

The guests watched the sun set behind the rolling hills of Lake Massawippi and enjoyed course after course, beginning with the chef's *amuse-bouche* of local caribou. Reine-Marie had the *escargots à l'ail*, followed by seared duck breast with *confit* of wild ginger, mandarin and kumquat. Gamache started with fresh roquette from the garden and shaved parmesan then ordered the organic salmon with sorrel yogurt.

'And for dessert?' Pierre lifted a bottle from its bucket and poured the last of the wine into their glasses.

'What do you recommend?' Reine-Marie barely believed she was asking.

'For Madame, we have fresh mint ice cream on an éclair filled with creamy dark organic chocolate, and for Monsieur a pudding *du chômeur à l'érable avec crème chantilly*.'

'Oh, dear God,' whispered Reine-Marie, turning to her husband. 'What was it Oscar Wilde said?'

'I can resist everything except temptation.'

They ordered dessert.

Finally, when they could eat no more, the cheese cart arrived burdened with a selection of local cheeses made by the monks in the nearby Benedictine abbey of Saint-Benoit-du-Lac. The brothers led a contemplative life, raising animals, making cheese and singing Gregorian chants of such beauty that they had, ironically for men who'd deliberately retreated from the world, become world-famous.

Enjoying the *fromage bleu* Armand Gamache looked across the lake in the slowly fading glow, as though a day of such beauty was reluctant to end. A single light could be seen. A cottage. Instead of being invasive, breaking the unspoiled wilderness, it was welcoming. Gamache imagined a family sitting on the dock watching for shooting stars, or in their rustic living room, playing gin rummy, or Scrabble, or cribbage, by propane lamps. Of course they'd have electricity, but it was his fantasy, and in it people in the deep woods of Quebec lived by gas lamp.

'I called Paris and spoke to Roslyn today.' Reine-Marie leaned back in her chair, hearing it creak comfortably.

'Everything all right?' Gamache searched his wife's face, though he knew if there was a problem she'd have told him sooner.

'Never better. Two months to go. It'll be a September baby. Her mother will be going to Paris to take care of Florence when the new one arrives, but Roslyn asked if we'd like to go as well.'

He smiled. They'd talked about it, of course. They were desperate to go, to see their granddaughter Florence, to see their son and daughter-in-law. To see the baby. Each time he thought about it Gamache trembled with delight. The very idea of his child having a child struck him as nearly unbelievable.

'They've chosen names,' she said casually. But Gamache knew his wife, her face, her hands, her body, her voice. And her voice had just changed.

'Tell me.' He put his cheese down and folded his large, expressive hands on the white linen tablecloth.

Reine-Marie looked at her husband. For a man so substantial he could be so calm and contained, though that only seemed to add to the impression of strength.

'If it's a girl they think they'll call her Geneviève Marie Gamache.'

Gamache repeated the name. Geneviève Marie Gamache. 'It's beautiful.'

Is this the name they'd write on birthday and Christmas cards? Geneviève Marie Gamache. Would she come running up the stairs to their apartment in Outremont, little feet thumping, shouting, 'Grandpapa, Grandpapa'? And would he call out her name, 'Geneviève!' then scoop her up in his strong arms and hold her safe and warm in that pocket of

his shoulder reserved for people he loved? Would he one day take her and her sister Florence on walks through Parc Mont Royal and teach them his favourite poems?

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said,
'This is my own, my native land!'*

As his own father had taught him.
Geneviève.

'And if it's a boy,' said Reine-Marie, 'they plan to call him Honoré.'

There was a pause. Finally Gamache sighed, 'Ahh,' and dropped his eyes.

'It's a wonderful name, Armand, and a wonderful gesture.'

Gamache nodded but said nothing. He'd wondered how he'd feel if this happened. For some reason he'd suspected it would, perhaps because he knew his son. They were so alike. Tall, powerfully built, gentle. And hadn't he himself struggled with calling Daniel 'Honoré'? Right up until the baptism his name was supposed to be Honoré Daniel.

But in the end he couldn't do that to his son. Wasn't life difficult enough without having to walk through it with the name Honoré Gamache?

'He'd like you to call him.'

Gamache looked at his watch. Nearly ten. 'I'll call tomorrow morning.'

'And what will you say?'

Gamache held his wife's hands, then dropped them and smiled at her. 'How does coffee and liqueur in the Great Room sound?'

She searched his face. 'Would you like to go for a walk? I'll arrange for the coffees.'

'*Merci, mon coeur.*'

'*Je t'attends.*'

Breathes there the man with soul so dead, Armand Gamache whispered to himself as he walked with measured pace in the dark. The sweet aroma of night-scented stock kept him company, as did the stars and moon and the light across the lake. The family in the forest. The family of his fantasies. Father, mother, happy, thriving children.

No sorrow, no loss, no sharp rap on the door at night.

As he watched the light flickered out, and all was in darkness across the way. The family at sleep, at peace.

Honoré Gamache. Was it so wrong? Was he wrong to feel this way? And what would he say to Daniel in the morning?

He stared into space, thinking about that for a few minutes, then slowly he became aware of something in the woods. Glowing. He looked around to see if there was anyone else there, another witness. But the *terrasse* and the gardens were empty.

Curious, Gamache walked towards it, the grass soft beneath his feet. He glanced back and saw the bright and cheerful lights of the Manoir and the people moving about the rooms. Then he turned back to the woods.

They were dark. But they weren't silent. Creatures moved about in there. Twigs snapped and things dropped from the trees and thumped softly to the ground. Gamache wasn't afraid of the dark, but like most sensible Canadians he was a little afraid of the forest.

But the white thing glowed and called, and like Ulysses with the sirens, he was compelled forward.

It was sitting on the very edge of the woods. He walked up, surprised to find it was large and solid and a perfect square, like a massive sugar cube. It came up to his hip and when he reached out to touch it he withdrew his hand in surprise. It was cold, almost clammy. Reaching out again, more firmly this time, he rested his large hand on the top of the box, and smiled.

It was marble. He'd been afraid of a cube of marble, he chuckled at himself. Very humbling. Standing back, Gamache stared at it. The white stone glowed as though it had captured what little moonlight came its way. It was just a cube of marble, he told himself. Not a bear, or a cougar. Nothing to worry about, certainly nothing to spook him. But it did. It reminded him of something.

'Peter's perpetually purple pimple popped.'

Gamache froze.

'Peter's perpetually purple pimple popped.'

There it was again.

He turned round and saw a figure standing in the middle of the lawn. A slight haze hung about her and a bright red dot glowed near her nose.

Julia Martin was out for her secret cigarette. Gamache cleared his throat noisily and brushed his hand along a bush. Instantly the red dot fell to the ground and disappeared under an elegant foot.

'Good evening,' she called merrily, though Gamache doubted she could possibly have known who was there.

'*Bonsoir, madame,*' said Gamache, bowing slightly as he came up beside her. She was slender and was wearing an

elegant evening dress. Hair and nails and make-up were done, even in the wilderness. She wafted a slim hand in front of her face, to disperse the pungent tobacco smell.

'Bugs,' she said. 'Blackflies. The only trouble with the east coast.'

'You have no blackflies out west?' he asked.

'Well, not many in Vancouver. Some deerflies on the golf courses. Drive you crazy.'

This Gamache could believe, having been tormented by deerflies himself.

'Fortunately smoke keeps the bugs away,' he said, smiling.

She hesitated, then chuckled. She had an easy manner and an easy laugh. She touched his arm in a familiar gesture, though they weren't all that familiar. But it wasn't invasive, simply habit. As he'd watched her in the past few days he'd noticed she touched everyone. And she smiled at everything.

'You caught me, monsieur. Sneaking a cigarette. Really, quite pathetic.'

'Your family wouldn't approve?'

'At my age I've long since stopped caring what others think.'

'*C'est vrai?* I wish I could.'

'Well, perhaps I do just a little,' she confided. 'It's a while since I've been with my family.' She looked towards the Manoir and he followed her gaze. Inside, her brother Thomas was leaning over and speaking to their mother while Sandra and Mariana looked on, not speaking and unaware anyone was watching them.

'When the invitation arrived I almost didn't come. It's an annual reunion, you know, but I've never been before. Vancouver's so far away.'

She could still see the invitation sitting face up on the gleaming hardwood floor of her impressive entrance where it had fallen as though from a great height. She knew the feeling. She'd stared at the thick white paper and the familiar spider scrawl. It was a contest of wills. But she knew who'd win. Who always won.

'I don't want to disappoint them,' Julia Martin finally said, quietly.

'I'm certain you couldn't do that.'

She turned to him, her eyes wide. 'Really?'

He'd said it to be polite. He honestly had no idea how the family felt about each other.

She saw his hesitation and laughed again. 'Forgive me, monsieur. Each day I'm with my family I regress a decade. I now feel like an awkward teenager. Needy and sneaking smokes in the garden. You too?'

'Smoking in the garden? No, not for many years now. I was just exploring.'

'Be careful. We wouldn't want to lose you.' She spoke with a hint of flirtation.

'I'm always careful, Madame Martin,' said Gamache, careful not to return the flirtation. He suspected it was second nature to her and harmless. He'd watched her for a few days and she'd used the same inflection on everyone, men and women, family and stranger, dogs, chipmunks, hummingbirds. She cooed to them all.

A movement off to the side caught his attention. He had the impression of a white blur and for an instant his heart leapt. Had the marble thing come to life? Was it lumbering towards them out of the woods? He turned and saw a figure on the *terrasse* recede into the shadows. Then it reappeared.

'Elliot,' called Julia Martin, 'how wonderful. Have you brought my brandy and Benedictine?'

'*Oui, madame.*' The young waiter smiled as he handed her the liqueur off his silver salver. Then he turned to Gamache. 'And for Monsieur? What may I get you?'

He looked so young, his face so open.

And yet Gamache knew the young man had been lurking at the corner of the lodge, watching them. Why?

Then he laughed at himself. Seeing things not there, hearing words unspoken. He'd come to the Manoir Bellechasse to turn that off, to relax and not look for the stain on the carpet, the knife in the bush, or the back. To stop noticing the malevolent inflections that rode into polite conversation on the backs of reasonable words. And the feelings flattened and folded and turned into something else, like emotional origami. Made to look pretty, but disguising something not at all attractive.

It was bad enough that he'd taken to watching old movies and wondering whether the elderly people in the background were still alive. And how they died. But when he started looking at people in the street and noticing the skull beneath the skin it was time for a break.

Yet here he was in this peaceful lodge examining the young waiter, Elliot, and on the verge of accusing him of spying.

'*Non, merci.* Madame Gamache has ordered our drinks for the Great Room.'

Elliot withdrew and Julia watched him.

'He's an attractive young man,' said Gamache.

'You find him so?' she asked, her face invisible but her voice full of humour. After a moment she spoke again. 'I was just remembering a similar job I had at about his age, but

nothing as grand as this. It was a summer job in a greasy spoon on the Main, in Montreal. You know, boulevard Saint-Laurent?’

‘I know it.’

‘Of course you do. Forgive me. It was a real dive. Minimum wage, owner was all hands. Disgusting.’

She paused again.

‘I loved it. My first job. I’d told my parents I was at the yacht club taking sailing lessons, but instead I’d get on the 24 bus and head east. Uncharted territory for Anglos in the Sixties. Very bold,’ she said in a self-mocking tone. But Gamache knew the times and knew she was right.

‘I still remember my first pay cheque. Took it home to show my parents. Do you know what my mother said?’

Gamache shook his head then realized she couldn’t see him in the dark. ‘*Non.*’

‘She looked at it then handed it back and said I must be proud of myself. And I was. But it was clear she meant something else. So I did something stupid. I asked her what she meant. I’ve since learned not to ask a question unless I’m prepared for the answer. She said I was privileged and had no need of the money, but someone else did. I’d as good as stolen it from some poor girl who actually needed the job.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Gamache. ‘I’m sure she didn’t mean it.’

‘She did, and she was right. I quit the next day, but I’d go back every now and then and look through the window at the new girl waiting tables. That made me happy.’

‘Poverty can grind a person down,’ said Gamache quietly. ‘But so can privilege.’

‘I actually envied that girl,’ said Julia. ‘Silly, I know. Romantic. I’m sure her life was dreadful. But I thought,

maybe, it was at least her own.’ She laughed and took a sip of her B&B. ‘Lovely. Do you think the monks at the abbey make it?’

‘The Benedictines? I don’t really know.’

She laughed. ‘It’s not often I hear those words.’

‘Which words?’

‘*I don’t know.* My family always knows. My husband always knew.’

For the past few days they’d exchanged polite comments about the weather, the garden, the food at the Manoir. This was the first real conversation he’d had with any of them and it was the first time she’d mentioned her husband.

‘I came to the Manoir a few days early, you know. To . . .’

She didn’t seem to know what to say, but Gamache waited. He had all the time, and patience, in the world.

‘I’m in the middle of a divorce. I don’t know if you knew.’

‘I had heard.’

Most Canadians had heard. Julia Martin was married to David Martin, whose spectacular success and just as spectacular fall had been chronicled relentlessly in the media. He’d been one of the nation’s wealthiest men, making his fortune in insurance. The fall had started a few years ago. It had been long and excruciating, like sliding down the side of a muddy slope. It looked at each moment as though he might be able to stop the descent, but instead he’d just kept gathering mud and slime and speed. Until finally even his enemies found it hard to watch.

He’d lost everything, including, finally, his freedom.

But his wife had stood beside him. Tall, elegant, dignified. Instead of arousing envy for her obvious privilege, she’d somehow managed to endear herself to the people. They

warmed to her good cheer and sensible comments. They identified with her dignity and loyalty. And finally they'd adored her for the public apology she'd made at the end, when it became clear her husband had lied to everyone, and ruined tens of thousands of life savings. And she'd pledged to pay back the money.

And now David Martin lived in a penitentiary in British Columbia and Julia Martin had moved back home. She'd make her life in Toronto, she'd told the media just before she'd disappeared. But here she was, in Quebec. In the woods.

'I came here to catch my breath, before the family reunion. I like my own space and time to myself. I've missed it.'

'*Je comprends,*' he said. And he did. 'But there is something I don't understand, madame.'

'Yes?' She sounded a little guarded, like a woman used to invasive questions.

'Peter's perpetually purple pimple popped?' Gamache asked.

She laughed. 'A game we used to play as children.'

He could see part of her face reflected in the amber light from the Manoir. The two of them stood silent, watching people move from room to room. It felt a little as though they were watching a play. The stage atmospherically lit, the different sets decorated and populated. The actors moving about.

And he looked again at his companion and couldn't help but wonder. Why was the rest of her family there, like an ensemble on the stage? And she was outside, alone in the dark. Watching.

They'd gathered in the Great Room, with its soaring

timbered ceiling and magnificent furnishings. Mariana went to the piano, but was waved away by Madame Finney.

'Poor Mariana.' Julia laughed. 'Nothing ever changes. Magilla never gets to play. Thomas's the musician in the family, like my father. He was a gifted pianist.'

Gamache shifted his gaze to the elderly man on the sofa. He couldn't picture the gnarled hands producing lovely music, but then they probably hadn't always been so twisted.

Thomas sat on the bench, raised his hands, and sent the strains of Bach drifting into the night air.

'He plays beautifully,' said Julia. 'I'd forgotten.'

Gamache agreed. Through the windows he saw Reine-Marie take a seat and a waiter deposit two espressos and cognacs in front of her. He wanted to get back.

'There's one more to come, you know.'

'Really?'

She'd tried to keep her tone light but Gamache thought he caught an undertow.

Reine-Marie was stirring her coffee, and had turned to look out of the window. He knew she couldn't see him. In the light all she'd see was the room, reflected.

Here I am, his mind whispered. *Over here.*

She turned and looked directly at him.

It was coincidence, of course. But the part of him that didn't worry about reason knew she'd heard him.

'My younger brother Spot is coming tomorrow. He'll probably bring his wife, Claire.'

It was the first time he'd heard Julia Martin say anything that wasn't nice and pleasant. The words were neutral, informative. But the tone was telling.

It was full of dread.

They walked back into the Manoir Bellechasse and as Gamache held open the screen door for Julia Martin he caught sight of the marble box in the woods. He could see just a corner of it and knew then what it reminded him of.

A grave marker.

THREE



Pierre Patenaude leaned against the swinging kitchen door and pushed just as a rumble of laughter came out. It stopped as soon as he appeared and he didn't know what upset him more, the laughter or its abrupt end.

In the middle of the room stood Elliot, one hand on a slender hip, the other raised slightly, his index finger erect and frozen, a look on his face both needy and sour. It was an exceptionally accurate caricature of one of their guests.

'What's going on?'

Pierre hated the stern disapproval in his voice. And he hated the look on their faces. Fear. Except Elliot. He looked satisfied.

The staff had never been afraid of him before, and they had no reason to be now. It was that Elliot. Since he'd arrived he'd turned the others against the maître d'. He could feel it. That shift from being at the very centre of the Manoir staff, their respected leader, to suddenly feeling an outsider.

How had the young man done it?

But Pierre knew how. He'd brought out the worst in him.

He'd pushed the maître d', taunted him, broken the rules, and forced Pierre to be the disciplinarian he didn't want to be. All the other young staff had been trainable, willing to listen and learn, grateful for the structure and leadership the maître d' provided. He taught them to respect the guests, to be courteous and kind even when faced with rudeness. He told them their guests paid good money to be pampered, but more than that. They came to the Manoir to be looked after.

Pierre sometimes felt like an emergency room physician. People streamed through his door, casualties of city life, lugging a heavy world behind them. Broken by too many demands, too little time, too many bills, emails, meetings, calls to return, too little thanks and too much, way too much, pressure. He remembered his own father coming home from the office, drawn, worn down.

It wasn't servile work they did at the Manoir Bellechasse, Pierre knew. It was noble and crucial. They put people back together. Though some, he knew, were more broken than others.

Not everyone was made for this work.

Elliot wasn't.

'I was just having some fun.'

Elliot said it as though it was reasonable to stand in the middle of the crowded, busy kitchen mocking the guests, and the maître d' was the unreasonable one. Pierre could feel his rage rising. He looked around.

The large old kitchen was the natural gathering place for the staff. Even the gardeners were there, eating cakes and drinking tea and coffee. And watching his humiliation at the hands of a nineteen year old. *He's young*, Pierre said to himself. *He's young*. But he'd said it so often it had become meaningless.

He knew he should let it go.

'You were making fun of the guests.'

'Only one. Oh, come on, she's ridiculous. *Excusez-moi*, but I think he got more coffee than I did. *Excusez-moi*, but is this the best seat? I asked for the best seat. *Excusez-moi*, I don't mean to be difficult, but I did order before they did. Where's my celery stick?'

Titters, quickly stifled, filled the warm kitchen.

It was a good imitation. Even in his anger the maître d' recognized Sandra's smooth, cool whine. Always asking for a little bit more. Elliot might not be a natural waiter, but he had an uncanny ability to see people's faults. And magnify them. And mock them. It was a gift not everyone would find attractive.

'Look who I found,' said Julia cheerfully as they stepped into the Great Room.

Reine-Marie smiled and rose to kiss her husband, holding out a bulbous cognac glass. The rest looked up, smiled, and returned to what they were doing. Julia stood uncertain on the threshold, then picked up a magazine and sat in a wing chair.

'Feeling better?' Reine-Marie whispered.

'Much,' Gamache said and meant it, taking the glass warmed by her hands and following her to a sofa.

'Bridge later?' Thomas stopped playing the piano and wandered over to the Gamaches.

'*Merveilleux. Bonne idée*,' said Reine-Marie. They'd played bridge most nights with Thomas and his wife Sandra. It was a pleasant way to end the day.

'Find any roses?' Thomas asked Julia as he walked back

to his wife. There was a rat-tat-tat of laughter from Sandra as though he'd said something witty and brilliant.

'Some Eleanor roses, you mean?' Mariana asked from the window seat beside Bean, a look of great amusement on her face. 'They are your favourites, aren't they, Julia?'

'I thought they were more along your line,' Julia smiled. Mariana smiled back and imagined one of the wooden beams falling and crushing her older sister. It wasn't as much fun having her back as Mariana had hoped. In fact, quite the opposite.

'Time for bed, old Bean,' said Mariana and put her heavy arm round the studious child. Gamache had never known a ten year old so quiet. Still, the child seemed content. As they walked by he caught Bean's bright blue eyes.

'What're you reading?' he asked.

Bean stopped and looked at the large stranger. Though they'd been together in the Manoir for three days they hadn't really spoken, until now.

'Nothing.'

Gamache noticed the small hands close more tightly over the hardcover book, and the loose shirt fold as the book was pressed closer to the childish body. Through the small, tanned fingers Gamache could read only one word.

Myths.

'Come on, slowpoke. Bed. Mommy needs to get drunk and can't before you're in bed, now you know that.'

Bean, still looking at Gamache, suddenly smiled. 'May I have a martooni tonight, please,' Bean said, leaving the room.

'You know you're not allowed until you're twelve. It'll be Scotch or nothing,' they heard Mariana say, then footsteps on the stairs.

'I'm not completely convinced she's kidding,' said Madame Finney.

Gamache smiled over to her but his smile faded as he saw the stern look on her face.

'Why do you let him get to you, Pierre?'

Chef Véronique was putting hand-made truffles and chocolate-dipped candied fruit on small plates. Her sausage fingers instinctively placed the confections in an artistic pattern. She took a sprig of mint from the glass, shook the water from it and clipped a few leaves with her nails. Absently she chose some edible flowers from her vase and before long a few chocolates had become a lovely design on the white plate. Straightening up, she looked at the man opposite her.

They'd worked together for years. Decades, come to think of it. She found it odd to think she was almost sixty and knew she looked it, though happily in the wilderness it didn't seem to matter.

She'd rarely seen Pierre so upset by one of the young workers. She herself liked Elliot. Everyone did, as far as she could tell. Was that why the maître d' was so upset? Was he jealous?

She watched him for a moment, his slim fingers arranging the tray.

No, she thought. It wasn't jealousy. It was something else.

'He just doesn't listen,' said Pierre, setting the tray aside and sitting across from her. They were alone in the kitchen now. The washing up was done, the dishes away, the surfaces scrubbed. It smelled of espresso and mint and fruit. 'He came here to learn, and he won't listen. I just don't understand.' He uncorked the cognac and poured.

'He's young. It's his first time away from home. And you'll only make it worse by pushing. Let it go.'

Pierre sipped, and nodded. It was relaxing being around Chef Véronique, though he knew she scared the crap out of the new employees. She was huge and beefy, her face like a pumpkin and her voice like a root vegetable. And she had knives. Lots of them. And cleavers and cast-iron pans.

Seeing her for the first time new employees could be excused for thinking they'd taken a wrong turn on the dirt road into the woods, and ended up at a lumber camp instead of the refined Manoir Bellechasse. Chef Véronique looked like a short-order cook in a *cantine*.

'He needs to know who's in charge,' said Pierre firmly.

'He does know. He just doesn't like it.'

The maître d' had had a hard day, she could see. She took the largest truffle from the tray and handed it to him.

He ate it absently.

'I learned French late in life,' Mrs Finney said, examining her son's cards.

They'd switched to the library and to French and now the elderly woman was slowly circling the card table, peering into each hand. Occasionally she'd reach out a gnarled finger and tap a certain card. At first she'd limited her help to her son and his wife, but tonight she'd included the Gamaches in her rounds. It was a friendly game, and no one seemed to mind, certainly not Armand Gamache, who could use the help.

The room was lined with books, broken only by the huge river-rock fireplace and the wall of French doors, looking into the darkness. They were open, to catch what little breeze

the hot Quebec evening had to offer, which wasn't much. What it did offer was a constant trill of calls from the wild.

Worn oriental carpets were scattered about the old pine floor and comfortable chairs and sofas were grouped together for intimate conversations or a private read. Arrangements of fresh flowers were placed here and there. The Manoir Bellechasse managed to be both rustic and refined. Rough-hewn logs on the outside and fine crystal within.

'You live in Quebec?' Reine-Marie spoke slowly and distinctly.

'I was born in Montreal but now live in Toronto. Closer to my friends. Most left Quebec years ago, but I stayed. Back then we didn't need French. Just enough to speak to our maids.'

Mrs Finney's French was good, but heavily accented.

'Mother.' Thomas reddened.

'I remember those days,' said Reine-Marie. 'My mother cleaned houses.'

Mrs Finney and Reine-Marie chatted about hard work and raising families, about the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, when the Québécois finally became '*maîtres chez nous*'. Masters in their own house.

'Though my mother still cleaned the houses of the English in Westmount,' said Reine-Marie, organizing her cards. 'One no trump.'

Madame Finney beetled over to look, nodding approval. 'I hope her employers were kinder to her. I'm ashamed to say I had to learn that too. It was almost as hard as the subjunctive.'

'It was a remarkable time,' said Gamache. 'Thrilling for most French Canadians, but I know it came at a terrible price for the English.'

'We lost our children,' said Mrs Finney, moving round

the table to peer into his hand. 'They went away to find jobs in a language they could speak. You might have become masters, but we became foreigners, unwelcome in our own home. You're right. It was terrible.'

She tapped the ten of clubs in his hand, his highest card. Her voice was without sentiment or self-pity. But with, perhaps, a bit of reproach.

'Pass,' said Gamache. He was partnered with Sandra, and Reine-Marie was playing with Thomas.

'I leave Quebec,' said Thomas, who seemed to understand French better than he spoke it, which was certainly better than the other way round. 'Went far to university and settle on Toronto. Quebec hard.'

It was remarkable, thought Gamache, listening to Thomas. If you didn't speak French you'd swear he was bilingual, so perfect was his accent. But the content lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

'Three no trump,' said Thomas.

His mother shook her head and tsked gently.

Thomas laughed. 'Ah, my mother's tongue.' Gamache smiled. He liked the man and suspected most people would.

'Did any of your children stay here?' Reine-Marie asked Madame Finney. The Gamaches at least had Annie living in Montreal, but she missed Daniel every day, and wondered how this woman, and so many others, had done it. No wonder they weren't always comfortable with the Québécois. If they felt they lost their children for the sake of a language. And without thanks. In fact, often just the opposite. There remained a lingering suspicion among the Québécois that the English were simply biding their time, waiting to enslave them again.

'One stayed. My other son.'

'Spot. He and his wife Claire are coming tomorrow,' said Thomas, switching to English. Gamache looked up from his hand, which held nothing of interest anyway, and stared at the man beside him.

Like his sister Julia's earlier in the evening, Thomas's tone had been light and breezy when speaking of the missing brother. But something was drifting about beneath.

He felt a slight stirring in the part of his brain he'd come to the Manoir to turn off.

It was Sandra's turn to bid. Gamache stared across the table at his partner.

Pass, pass, he willed. I have nothing. We'll be slaughtered.

He knew bridge was both a card game and an exercise in telepathy.

'Spot,' huffed Sandra. 'Typical. Comes at the last minute. Does only the minimum, never more. Four no trumps.'

Reine-Marie doubled.

'Sandra,' said Thomas with a laugh barely hiding the rebuke.

'What? Everyone else comes days ago to honour your father, and he shows up at the last minute. Horrible man.'

There was silence. Sandra's eyes darted from her hand to the plate of chocolates the maître d' had placed on their table.

Gamache glanced at Madame Finney, but she seemed oblivious of this conversation, though he suspected she missed nothing.

His gaze shifted to Monsieur Finney, sitting on a sofa. Finney's wild eye roamed the room and his hair stuck out at odd angles so that his head looked like a damaged sputnik,

fallen too fast and too hard to earth. For a man being honoured he was strangely alone. Finney's eye came to rest on a huge original Krieghoff painting of a rustic scene hanging over the fireplace. Québécois peasants were loading a cart and at one of the cottages a robust woman was laughing and carrying a basket of food to the men.

It was a warm and inviting scene of family and village life hundreds of years earlier. And Finney seemed to prefer it to his family in the here and now.

Mariana got up and walked over to the group.

Thomas and Sandra pressed their cards to their chests. She picked up a *Châtelaine* magazine. 'According to a survey,' she read, 'most Canadians think bananas are the best fruit for chocolate fondue.'

There was silence again.

Mariana imagined her mother choking on the chocolate truffle she'd picked up.

'But that's ridiculous,' said Sandra, also watching Madame Finney eat. 'Strawberries are the best.'

'I've always liked pears and chocolate. Unusual, but a great combination, don't you think?' Thomas asked Reine-Marie, who said nothing.

'So this is where you got to. No one told me.' Julia stepped lightly through the French doors from the garden. 'What're you talking about?'

For some reason she looked at Gamache.

'Pass,' he said. He didn't really know what they were talking about any more.

'Magilla here thinks bananas are best with melted chocolate.' Thomas nodded to Mariana. This brought much hilarity and the Gamaches exchanged amused but befuddled looks.

'Don't the monks make blueberries in chocolate?' asked Julia. 'I'll have to get some before we leave.'

For the next few minutes the game was forgotten while they debated fruit and chocolate. Eventually both Julia and Mariana retired to their corners.

'Pass,' Thomas declared, his mind back on the game.

Let it go. Gamache stared across at Sandra and sent the message. *Please, pass.*

'I redouble.' Sandra glared at Thomas.

What we've got here, thought Gamache, is a failure to communicate.

'Really, what were you thinking?' Sandra asked, her plump lips pursing as she saw the cards Gamache laid down.

'*Oui*, Armand.' Reine-Marie smiled. 'Six no trumps with that hand? What were you thinking?'

Gamache rose and bowed slightly. 'My fault entirely.' He caught his wife's eye, his own deep brown eyes full of amusement.

Being dummy had its advantages. He stretched his legs, sipped his cognac and walked the room. It was growing hotter. Generally a Quebec evening cooled off, but not this night. He could feel the humidity closing in, and loosened his collar and tie.

'Very bold,' said Julia, coming up beside him as he stared again at the Krieghoff. 'Are you disrobing?'

'I'm afraid I've humiliated myself enough for one evening.' He nodded to the table where the three bridge players were engrossed.

He leaned in and sniffed the roses on the mantelpiece.

'Lovely, aren't they? Everything here is.' She sounded wistful, as though she was missing it already. Then he

remembered Spot and thought maybe for the Finneys this was their last pleasant evening.

'Paradise lost,' he murmured.

'Pardon?'

'Nothing, just a thought.'

'You were wondering whether it's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven?' Julia asked, smiling. He laughed. Like her mother, she didn't miss much. 'Because, you know, I have the answer to that. This is the Eleanor rose,' she said with surprise, pointing to a bright pink bloom in the bouquet. 'Imagine that.'

'Someone mentioned it earlier this evening,' Gamache remembered.

'Thomas.'

'That's right. He wanted to know if you'd found one in the garden.'

'It's our little joke. It's named after Eleanor Roosevelt, you know.'

'I didn't.'

'Hmm,' said Julia, contemplating the rose and nodding. 'She said she'd been flattered at first until she'd read the description in the catalogue. Eleanor Roosevelt rose: no good in a bed, but fine up against a wall.'

They laughed and Gamache admired the rose and the quote, though he wondered why it was a family joke directed at Julia.

'More coffee?'

Julia startled.

Pierre stood at the door with a silver coffee pot. His question was said to the room in general, but he was looking at Julia and blushing slightly. Across the room Mariana

mumbled, 'Here we go.' Every time the maître d' was in the same room as Julia he blushed. She knew the signs. She'd lived with them her whole life. Mariana was the fun girl-next-door. The one to grope and kiss in the car. But Julia was the one they all wanted to marry, even the maître d'.

Now Mariana watched her sister and felt blood rushing to her face, but for a whole different reason. She watched Pierre pour the coffee and imagined the huge, framed Krieghoff sliding off the wall and smashing Julia in the head.

'Look what you've done to me, partner,' moaned Sandra, as Thomas took trick after trick. Finally they pushed back from the table and Thomas joined Gamache, who was looking at the other paintings in the room.

'That's a Brigitte Normandin, isn't it?' Thomas asked.

'It is. Fantastic. Very bold, very modern. Complements the Molinari and the Riopelle. And yet they all work with the traditional Krieghoff.'

'You know your art,' said Thomas, slightly surprised.

'I love Quebec history,' said Gamache, nodding to the old scene.

'But that doesn't explain the others, does it?'

'Are you testing me, monsieur?' Gamache decided to push a little.

'Perhaps,' Thomas admitted. 'It's rare to find an autodidact.'

'In captivity, anyway,' said Gamache and Thomas laughed. The painting they were staring at was muted, with lines of delicately shaded beiges.

'Feels like a desert,' said Gamache. 'Desolate.'

'Ah, but that's a misconception,' said Thomas.

'Here he goes,' said Mariana.

'Not that plant story,' said Julia, turning to Sandra. 'Is he still telling that?'

'Once a day, like Old Faithful. Stand back.'

'Well, time for bed,' said Madame Finney. Her husband unfolded himself from the sofa and the elderly couple left.

'Things aren't as they seem,' said Thomas, and Gamache looked at him, surprised. 'In the desert, I mean. It looks desolate but it's actually teeming with life. You just don't see it. It hides, for fear of being eaten. There's one plant in the South African desert called a stone plant. Can you guess how it survives?'

'Let's see. By pretending to be a stone?' asked Julia. Thomas shot her an angry look, then his face fell back to its attractive, easy expression.

'You haven't forgotten the story, I see.'

'I haven't forgotten anything, Thomas,' Julia said, and sat down. Gamache took it all in. The Finneys rarely spoke to each other, but when they did their words seemed laden, heavy with a meaning that escaped him.

Thomas hesitated, then turned back to Gamache who was longing for his bed, though mostly longing for this story to be over.

'It pretends to be a stone,' said Thomas, his eyes boring into Gamache. The large man stared back, suddenly aware there was a significance to what was being said. Something was being communicated to him. But what?

'In order to survive it must hide. Pretend to be something it isn't,' said Thomas.

'It's just a plant,' said Mariana. 'It doesn't do anything on purpose.'

'It's cunning,' said Julia. 'A survival instinct.'

'It's just a plant,' repeated Mariana. 'Don't be foolish.'

Ingenious, thought Gamache. It doesn't dare show itself for what it really is, for fear of being killed. What had Thomas just said?

Things aren't as they seem. He was beginning to believe it.

FOUR

I enjoyed this evening,' said Reine-Marie, slipping into the cool, crisp sheets beside her husband.

'So did I.' He took off his half-moon reading glasses and folded his book onto the bed. It was a warm evening. Their tiny back room had only one window, onto the kitchen garden, so there wasn't much of a through draught, but the window was thrown open and the light cotton curtains were billowing slightly. The lamps on their bedside tables provided ponds of light and the rest was in darkness. It smelled of wood from the log walls and pine from the forest, and a hint of sweetness from the herb garden below.

'Two days' time and it's our anniversary,' said Reine-Marie. 'July first. Imagine, thirty-five years together. Were we so young?'

'I was. And innocent.'

'Poor boy. Did I scare you?'

'Maybe just a little. But I'm over it now.'

Reine-Marie leaned back on the pillow. 'Can't say I'm looking forward to meeting the missing Finneys tomorrow.'

'Spot and Claire. Spot must be a nickname.'

'Let's hope.'

Picking up his book he tried to focus, but his eyes were growing heavy, flickering as he strained to keep them open. He gave up the fight, realizing it wasn't one he could win or needed to. Kissing Reine-Marie, he burrowed into his pillow and fell asleep to the chorus of creatures outside and the scent of his wife beside him.

Pierre Patenaude stood at the door of the kitchen. It was clean and orderly, everything in its place. The glasses lined up, the silverware in its sleeves, the bone china carefully stacked with fine tissue between each plate. He'd learned that from his mother. She'd taught him that order was freedom. To live in chaos was to live in a prison. Order freed the mind for other things.

From his father he'd learned leadership. On rare days off school he'd been allowed to go to the office. He'd sat on his father's lap, smelling cologne and tobacco, while his father made phone calls. Even as a child Pierre knew he was being groomed. Trimmed and shaped, buffed and burnished.

Would his father be disappointed in him? Being just a maître d'? But he thought not. His father had wanted only one thing for him. To be happy.

He turned out the light and walked through the empty dining room and into the garden to look once again at the marble cube.

Mariana unwrapped herself, veil after veil, humming. Every now and then she looked over to the single bed next to hers. Bean was either asleep or pretending to be.

'Bean?' she whispered. 'Bean, kiss Mommy goodnight.'

The child was silent. Though the room itself wasn't. Clocks filled almost every surface. Ticking clocks and digital clocks, electric clocks and wind-up ones. All set to go off at seven a.m. All moving towards that time, as they had every morning for months. There seemed to be more of them than ever.

Mariana wondered if it had gone too far. Whether she should do something. Surely it wasn't normal for a ten year old to do this? What had started as one alarm clock a year ago had blossomed and spread like an invasive weed until Bean's room at home was choked with them. The riot each morning was beyond belief. From her own bedroom she could hear her strange child clicking them all off, until the last tinny call to the day was silenced.

Surely this wasn't normal?

But then so much about Bean wasn't normal. To call in a psychologist now, well, it felt a bit like trying to outrun a tidal wave of odd, thought Mariana. She lifted Bean's hand off the book and smiled as she laid it on the floor. It'd been her own favourite book as a child and she wondered which story Bean liked the most. Ulysses? Pandora? Hercules?

Leaning down to kiss Bean Mariana noticed the chandelier and its old corded electrical wire. In her mind she saw a spark leap in a brilliant arc onto the bedding, smouldering at first then bursting into flames as they slept.

She stepped back, closed her eyes, and placed the invisible wall round Bean.

There, safe.

She turned off the light and lay in bed, her body feeling sticky and flabby. The closer she got to her mother the

heavier her body felt, as though her mother had her own atmosphere and gravity. Tomorrow Spot would arrive, and it would begin. And end.

She tried to get comfortable, but the night was close and the covers collapsed and stuck to her. She kicked them off. But what really stood between her and sleep wasn't the stinking heat, the snoring child, the clinging bedclothes.

It was a banana.

Why did they always goad her? And why, at the age of forty-seven, did she still care?

She turned over, trying to find a cool place on the now damp bedding.

Banana. And she heard again their laughter. And saw their mocking looks.

Let it go, she begged herself. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the banana and the clocks tsk, tsk, tsking in her head.

Julia Martin sat at the vanity and took off her single string of pearls. Simple, elegant, a gift from her father for her eighteenth birthday.

'A lady is always understated, Julia,' he'd said. 'A lady never shows off. She always puts others at ease. Remember that.'

And she had. As soon as he'd said it she knew the truth of it. And all the stumbling and bumbling she'd done, all the uncertainties and solitude of her teen years, had fallen away. Ahead of her stretched a clear path. Narrow, yes, but clear. The relief she felt was absolute. She had a purpose, a direction. She knew who she was and what she had to do. Put others at ease.

As she undressed she went over the events of the day,

making a list of all the people she might have hurt, all the people who might dislike her because of her words, her inflection, her manner.

And she thought of the nice French man and their conversation in the garden. He'd seen her smoking. What must he think of her? And then she'd flirted with the young waiter and accepted a drink. Drinking, smoking, flirting.

God, he must think she was shallow and weak.

She'd do better tomorrow.

She coiled the strand of pearls, like a young snake, onto its soft blue velvet bed then took off her earrings, wishing she could also remove her ears. But she knew it was too late.

The Eleanor rose. Why did they do it? After all these years, when she was trying to be nice, why bring up the rose again?

Let it go, she begged herself, it doesn't matter. It was a joke. That's all.

But the words had already coiled themselves inside her and wouldn't leave.

Next door, in the Lake Room, Sandra stood on their balcony surrounded by the wild stars and wondered how they could get the best table for breakfast. She was tired of being served last, always having to insist and even then getting the smallest portions, she was sure of it.

And that Armand, worst bridge player she'd ever seen. Why'd she been paired with him? The staff fawned over him and his wife, probably because they were French. It wasn't fair. They were staying in that broom closet at the back of the Manoir, the cheapest room. A shopkeeper almost certainly and his cleaning woman wife. Didn't seem right to

have to share the Manoir with them. Still, she'd been courteous. They couldn't ask for more.

Sandra was hungry. And angry. And tired. And tomorrow Spot would arrive and it would get even worse.

From inside their splendid room, Thomas looked at his wife's rigid back.

He'd married a beautiful woman and still, from a distance and from the back, she was lovely.

But somehow, recently, her head seemed to have expanded and the rest shrunk, so that he had the impression he was now attached to a flotation device, deflated. Orange and soft and squishy and no longer doing its job.

Swiftly, while Sandra's back was turned, he took off the old cufflinks his father had given him on his eighteenth birthday.

'My own father gave me these, and now it's time to pass them to you,' his father had said. Thomas had taken the cufflinks, and the weary velvet pouch they came in, and shoved them into his pocket in a cavalier move he'd hoped would wound his father. And he could tell it had.

His father never gave him anything again. Nothing.

He quickly peeled off the old jacket and shirt, thankful no one had noticed the slight wear on the cuffs. Now Sandra was coming through the door. He casually tossed the shirt and jacket onto a nearby chair.

'I didn't appreciate your contradicting me over bridge,' she said.

'I did?'

'Of course you did. In front of your family and that couple, the shopkeeper and his cleaning woman wife.'

'It was her mother who cleaned houses,' Thomas corrected her.

'There, you see. Can't you just let me say something without correcting me?'

'You want to be wrong?'

It was a path worn through their marriage.

'All right, what did I say?' he finally asked.

'You know very well what you said. You said pears went best with melted chocolate.'

'That's it? Pears?'

He made it sound stupid but Sandra knew it wasn't. She knew it was important. Vital.

'Yes, pears. I said strawberries and you said pears.'

It was actually beginning to sound trivial to her. That wasn't good.

'But that's what I think,' he said.

'Come on, you can't tell me you even have an opinion.'

All this talk of warm chocolate dripping off fresh strawberries, or even pears, was making her collagen-filled mouth water. She looked around for the tiny chocolates hotels put on pillows. Her side of the bed, his side, the pillows, the night table. She ran to the bathroom. Nothing. Staring at the sink, she wondered how many calories there were in toothpaste.

Nothing. Nothing to eat. She looked down at her cuticles, but she was saving those for an emergency. Returning to the room she looked at his frayed cuffs and wondered how they'd frayed. Surely not by repeated touch.

'You humiliated me in front of everyone,' she said, transferring her hunger to eat into a hunger to hurt. He didn't turn round. She knew she should let it go, but it was too late. She'd chewed the insult over, torn it apart and swallowed it. The insult was part of her now.

'Why do you always do it? And over a pear? Why couldn't you just agree with me for once?'

She'd eaten twigs and berries and goddamned grasses for two months and lost fifteen pounds for only one reason. So that his family would say how lovely and slim she looked, and then maybe Thomas would notice. Maybe he'd believe it. Maybe he'd touch her. Just touch her. Not even make love. Just touch her.

She was starved for it.

Irene Finney looked into the mirror and lifted her hand. She brought the soapy cloth close, then stopped.

Spot would be there tomorrow. And then they'd all be together. The four children, the four corners of her world.

Irene Finney, like many very elderly people, knew that the world was indeed flat. It had a beginning and an end. And she had come to the edge.

There was only one more thing to do. Tomorrow.

Irene Finney stared at her reflection. She brought the cloth up and scrubbed. In the next room Bert Finney gripped the bed sheets listening to his wife's stifled sobs as she removed her face.

Armand Gamache awoke to young sun pouring through the still curtains, hitting their squirrelled-up bedding and his perspiring body. The sheets were kicked into a wet ball on the very end of the bed. Beside him Reine-Marie roused.

'What time is it?' she asked sleepily.

'Six thirty.'

'In the morning?' She got up on one elbow. He nodded

and smiled. 'And it's already this hot?' He nodded again. 'It's going to be a killer.'

'That's what Pierre said last night. Heat wave.'

'I finally figured out why they call it a wave,' said Reine-Marie, tracing a line down his wet arm. 'I need a shower.'

'I have a better idea.'

Within minutes they were on the dock, kicking off their sandals and dropping their towels like nests onto the warm wooden surface. Gamache and Reine-Marie looked onto this world of two suns, two skies, of mountains and forests multiplied. The lake wasn't glass, it was a mirror. A bird gliding across the clear sky appeared on the tranquil water as well. It was a world so perfect it broke into two. Hummingbirds buzzed in the garden and monarch butterflies bobbed from flower to flower. A couple of dragonflies clicked around the dock. Reine-Marie and Gamache were the only people in the world.

'You first,' said Reine-Marie. She loved to watch this. So did their kids when they were younger.

He smiled, bent his knees and thrust his body off the solid dock and into mid-air. He seemed to hover there for a moment, his arms outstretched as though he expected to reach the far shore. It seemed more of a launch than a dive. And then, of course, came the inevitable, since Armand Gamache couldn't in fact fly. He hit the water with a gargantuan splash. It was cool enough to take his breath for that first instant, but by the time he popped up, he was refreshed and alert.

Reine-Marie watched as he flicked his head around to rid his phantom hair of the lake water, as he'd done the first time they'd visited. And for years after that, until there was

no longer any need. But still he did it, and still she watched, and still it stopped her heart.

'Come on in,' he called, and watched as she dived, graceful, though her legs always parted and she'd never mastered the toe-point, so there was always a fin of bubbles as her feet slapped the water. He waited to see her emerge, face to the sun, hair gleaming.

'Was there a splash?' she asked, treading water as the waves headed into the shore.

'Like a knife you went in. I barely even knew you dived.'

'There, breakfast time,' said Reine-Marie ten minutes later as they hauled themselves up the ladder back onto the dock.

Gamache handed her a sun-warmed towel. 'What'll you have?'

They walked back describing for each other impossible amounts of food they'd eat. At the Manoir he stopped and took her off to the side.

'I want to show you something.'

She smiled. 'I've already seen it.'

'Not this,' he chuckled and then stopped. They were no longer alone. There, at the side of the Manoir, someone was hunched over, digging. The movement stopped and slowly the figure turned to face them.

It was a young woman, covered in dirt.

'Oh, hello.' She seemed more startled than they. So startled she spoke in English rather than the traditional French of the Manoir.

'Hello.' Reine-Marie smiled reassuringly, speaking English back.

'*Désolée*,' the young woman said, smearing more dirt onto

her perspiring face. It turned to mud instantly, so that she looked a little like a clay sculpture, animated. 'I didn't think anyone was up yet. It's the best time to work. I'm one of the gardeners.'

She'd switched to French and she spoke easily with only a slight accent. A whiff of something sweet, chemical, and familiar came their way. Bug spray. Their companion was doused in it. The scents of a Quebec summer. Cut grass and bug repellent.

Gamache and Reine-Marie looked down and noticed holes in the ground. She followed their gaze.

'I'm trying to transplant all those before it gets too hot.' She waved to a few drooping plants. 'For some reason all the flowers in this bed're dying.'

'What's that?' Reine-Marie was no longer looking at the holes.

'That's what I wanted to show you,' said Gamache.

There, off to the side and slightly hidden by the woods, was the huge marble cube. At least now there was someone to ask.

'Not a clue,' was the gardener's answer to his question. 'A huge truck dropped it here a couple of days ago.'

'What is it?' Reine-Marie touched it.

'It's marble,' said the gardener, joining them as they stared.

'Well here we are,' said Reine-Marie eventually, 'at the Manoir Bellechasse, surrounded by woods and lakes and gardens and you and I,' she took her husband's hand, 'are staring at the one unnatural thing for miles around.'

He laughed. 'What are the chances?'

They nodded to the gardener and returned to the Manoir to change for breakfast. But Gamache found it interesting

that Reine-Marie had the same reaction to the marble cube he'd had the night before. Whatever it was, it was unnatural.

The *terrasse* was mottled with shade and not yet scorching hot, though by noon the stones would be like coals. Both Reine-Marie and Gamache wore their floppy sun hats.

Elliot brought their *café au lait* and breakfasts. Reine-Marie poured Eastern Townships maple syrup onto her wild blueberry crêpe and Gamache speared his eggs Benedict, watching the yolk mix with the hollandaise sauce. By now the *terrasse* was filling with Finneys.

'It doesn't really matter,' they heard a woman's voice behind them, 'but if we could have the nice table under the maple tree that would be great.'

'I believe it's already taken, madame,' said Pierre.

'Oh really? Well, it doesn't matter.'

Bert Finney was already down, as was Bean. They both read the paper. He had the comics while Bean read the obituaries.

'You look worried, Bean,' the old man said, lowering the comics.

'Have you noticed that more people seem to be dying than are being born?' Bean asked, handing the section to Finney, who took it and nodded solemnly.

'That means there's more for those of us still here.' He handed the section back.

'I don't want more,' said Bean.

'You will.' And Finney raised the cartoons.

'Armand.' Reine-Marie laid a soft hand on his arm. She lowered her voice to a barely audible whisper. 'Is Bean a boy or girl?'

Gamache, who'd been mildly wondering the same thing, looked again. The child wore what looked like drugstore glasses and had shoulder-length blond hair around a lovely tanned face.

He shook his head.

'Reminds me of Florence,' he said. 'I took her up and down boulevard Laurier last time they visited and almost everyone commented on our handsome grandson.'

'Was she wearing her sun bonnet?'

'She was.'

'And did they comment on the resemblance?'

'They did, as a matter of fact.' Gamache looked at her as though she was a genius, his brown eyes wide with admiration.

'Imagine that,' she said. 'But Florence is just over a year. How old would you say Bean is?'

'Hard to say. Nine, ten? Any child reading the obituaries looks older.'

'Obituaries are ageing. I'll have to remember that.'

'More jam?' Pierre replaced their near empty containers with fresh jars of home-made wild strawberry, raspberry and blueberry *confitures*. 'Can I get you anything?' he asked.

'Well, I do have a question,' said Gamache and tilted his croissant towards the corner of the Manoir. 'There's a block of marble over there, Pierre. What's it for?'

'Ah, you noticed.'

'Astronauts would notice.'

Pierre nodded. 'Madame Dubois didn't say anything when you checked in?'

Reine-Marie and Gamache exchanged glances and shook their heads.

'Oh well.' The maître d' looked a little embarrassed. 'I'm afraid you'll have to ask her. It's a surprise.'

'A nice surprise?' asked Reine-Marie.

Pierre thought about it. 'We're not really sure. But we'll know soon.'