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The Madness of Crowds

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Louise Penny

The Madness of Crowds

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This book is dedicated to all those on the front line of the pandemic who have worked so hard, in often impossible conditions, to keep the rest of us safe.
If ça va bien aller, *it's thanks to you.*
Louise Penny, 2021

The Madness of Crowds

Chapter 1

This doesn't feel right, *patron*." Isabelle Lacoste's voice in his earpiece was anxious, verging on urgent.

Chief Inspector Gamache looked out over the roiling crowd, as the noise in the auditorium rose to a din.

A year ago a gathering of this sort would have not only been unthinkable, it would have been illegal. They'd have broken it up and gotten everyone tested. But thanks to the vaccines, they no longer had to worry about the spread of a deadly virus. They only had to worry about a riot.

Armand Gamache would never forget when the Premier of Québec, a personal friend, had called him with the news that they had a vaccine. The man was in tears, barely able to get the words out.

As he'd hung up, Armand had felt light-headed. He could feel a sort of hysteria welling up. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. Not on this scale. It wasn't just relief, it felt like a rebirth. Though not everyone, and not everything, would be resurrected.

When the pandemic was finally, officially, declared over, the little village of Three Pines where the Gamaches lived had gathered on the village green where the names of the dead had been read out. Loved ones had planted trees in the clearing above the chapel. It would be called, from that day on, the New Forest.

Then, to great ceremony, Myrna had unlocked her bookstore. And Sarah had opened the doors to her boulangerie. Monsieur Béliveau put the *Ouvert* sign in front of his general store, and a cheer rose up as Olivier and Gabri unlocked their bistro.

Banks of barbecues on the village green grilled burgers and hot dogs and steaks and a cedar-plank salmon. Sarah's cakes and pies and butter tarts were placed on a long table while Billy Williams helped Clara Morrow lug over buckets of her homemade lemonade.

There were games for the children and, later, a bonfire and dancing on the village green.

Friends and neighbors hugged, and even kissed. Though it felt strange, and even slightly naughty. Some still preferred to bump elbows. Others continued to carry their masks. Like a rosary, or rabbit's foot, or a St. Christopher medal, promising safe passage.

When Ruth coughed, everyone stepped away, though they probably would have anyway.

There were vestiges, of course. That dreadful time had a long tail.

And this event, in the former gymnasium at the University a few kilometers from Three Pines, was the sting in that tail.

Chief Inspector Gamache looked across the large space to the doors at the far end, where spectators were still streaming in.

"This should never have been allowed," said Lacoste.

He didn't disagree. In his opinion everything about this was madness. But it was happening. "Is everything under control?"

There was a pause before she replied. "Yes. But . . ."

But . . .

From the wing of the stage, he scanned the room and found Inspector Lacoste off to the side. She was in plain clothes, with her Sûreté du Québec ID clearly visible on her jacket.

She'd climbed onto a riser, where she could better monitor the swelling crowd and direct agents to any trouble spots.

Though only in her early thirties, Isabelle Lacoste was one of his most experienced officers. She'd been in riots, shoot-outs, hostage takings, and standoffs. She'd faced terrorists and murderers. Been badly wounded, almost killed.

Very little, at this point, worried Isabelle Lacoste. But it was clear she was worried now.

Spectators were jostling for position, trying to get a better view of the stage. Confrontations were flaring up around the large room. Some pushing and shoving was not unusual in a crowd with divided

loyalties. They'd handled worse, and his agents were trained, and quick to calm things down.

But . . .

Even before Isabelle said it, he'd felt it himself. In his gut. In the tingle on his skin. In the pricking of his thumbs . . .

He could see that Isabelle was focused on an older man and a young woman in the middle of the hall. They were elbowing each other.

Nothing especially violent. Yet. And an agent was making his way through the crowd to calm them down.

So why was Lacoste so focused on these two especially?

Gamache continued to stare. And then he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

The man and woman wore the same outsized button on their winter coats that declared, *All will be well.*

It was, he knew, a play on the word "well." Since the pandemic, that word had taken on several meanings. Not all of them, in Gamache's view, healthy.

He grew very still.

He'd been at many demonstrations and more than a few riots in his thirty-year career. He knew the flash points. The harbingers. And he knew how quickly things could spin way out of control.

But, but in all his years as a senior officer in the Sûreté du Québec he'd never seen this.

These two people, the man and woman, were on the same side. Those buttons declared their allegiance. And yet they'd turned their ire, normally reserved for the "other side," on each other. Anger had become free-floating. Falling on the nearest neck.

The atmosphere in the auditorium was stifling. Though dressing appropriately for the extreme cold outside, people were now inside and overdressed in parkas, heavy boots, scarves, and mitts. They were pulling off their woolen tuques and shoving them into pockets, leaving normally well-groomed people with their hair standing on end, as though they'd had either a great fright or a spectacularly good idea.

Standing cheek by jowl, the crowd was overheating physically as well as emotionally. Chief Inspector Gamache could almost smell the frayed nerve ends frying.

He looked in frustration at the tall windows behind Lacoste. They'd long since been painted shut, and there was no way to open them and bring in crisp fresh air. They'd tried.

The Chief Inspector's practiced eye continued to move over the crowd. Taking in things seen and unseen. It hadn't yet, he felt, reached the boiling point, the tipping point. His job, as the senior officer, was to make sure it didn't.

If it came close, he'd stop it. But he knew that also had its risks. Never mind the moral issue of stopping a gathering that had every legal right to be held, there was, foremost in his mind, the issue of public safety.

Having his agents move in and shut this event down could ignite the very violence he was trying to avoid.

Managing a crowd so it didn't turn into a mob wasn't science. Strategies could be taught; he himself had instructed recruits at the Sûreté Academy on managing large, potentially volatile, events. But finally it came down to judgment. And discipline.

Officers had to maintain control of the crowd, but also of themselves. Once, as a cadet, Gamache had seen trained officers at a demonstration panic, break ranks, and begin beating fellow citizens.

It was horrific. Sickening.

It had never happened under his command, but Gamache suspected that, given the right circumstances, it could. The madness of crowds was a terrible thing to see. The madness of police with clubs and guns was even worse.

Now, one by one, he asked his senior officers for their reports. His own voice calm and authoritative.

"Inspector Lacoste, what's your read?" he spoke into his headset.

There was a brief pause as she weighed her answer. "Our people are on top of things. I think at this point it's riskier to stop it than to let it go on."

"*Merci*," said Gamache. "Inspector Beauvoir, how are things outside?"

He was always formal when speaking on an open frequency, preferring to use their ranks rather than just their names.

Despite his protests, Inspector Jean-Guy Beauvoir had been assigned, in his view banished, to the entrance.

In his late thirties, Beauvoir was slender, fit, though beginning to flesh out a bit. He shared second-in-command duties with Isabelle Lacoste, and also happened to be Gamache's son-in-law.

"We're going to exceed capacity, *patron*," he reported from on top of the overturned crate he was standing on.

Jean-Guy held his gloved hand up to his eyes to cut out the glare from the sun bouncing off the snow. Those still in line were stomping their feet, rubbing their mitts to keep the blood circulating, and staring at him, as though Beauvoir were personally responsible for winter.

"I'd say there are a hundred and fifty, maybe hundred and eighty still to go. They're getting pretty antsy. Some pushing, but no actual fights yet."

"How many are in now?" Gamache asked.

"We're at four hundred and seventy."

"You know the cutoff. What's likely to happen when you reach it?"

"Hard to tell. There're some kids here, families. Though why anyone would bring a child to this . . ."

"Agreed."

There were children in the auditorium now. Gamache had instructed his people to make them the priority, should the worst happen.

That was the nightmare, of course. People crushing the life out of others in a mad rush to get into, or out of, a place should anything happen. And the children were the most vulnerable.

"Any weapons?"

"No guns. No knives," Beauvoir reported. "A few bottles, and we've confiscated a whole lot of placards. People were pretty pissed about that. You'd have thought it was in the Charter of Rights to bring what amounts to a club into a crowded room." He looked down at the pile in the snow by the brick wall.

Most were homemade, in crayon, and stapled to sticks of wood. It was somehow worse when threats were in crayon. Some placards had even been made by children, with the phrase *Ça va bien aller*.

All will be well.

That alone was enough to make Beauvoir's blood boil. The demonstrators had co-opted a phrase that had, through the recent pandemic,

meant comfort. And now they'd twisted it into a code, a subtle threat. Or, worse, made their children do it.

He looked out at the crowd and saw some pushing now, as spectators began to suspect they might not get in, and that their rival might.

"Things are getting more tense here," said Beauvoir. "I think we should shut it down, *patron*."

"*Merci*," said Gamache, and sighed.

While he'd certainly weigh what Beauvoir advised, and Jean-Guy might even be right, Gamache had to admit that in this rare instance, he didn't trust his second-in-command's judgment. It couldn't help but be colored by his personal feelings. Which was why, despite Beauvoir's protests, he'd been assigned the security outside, and not inside, the auditorium.

Gamache looked at his watch. Five minutes to four.

It was time for him to call it. To go ahead or not.

Glancing behind him once again, he saw two middle-aged women standing together in the darkness.

The one on the left, in black slacks and a gray turtleneck, held a clipboard and was looking anxious.

But it was the other one who held Gamache's attention.

Professor Abigail Robinson was nodding as the other woman talked. She laid a hand on her colleague's arm and smiled. She was calm. Focused.

She wore a light blue cashmere sweater and a camel knee-length skirt. Tailored. Simple, classic. Something, Gamache thought, that his wife, Reine-Marie, would wear.

It was not a comfortable thought.

The university lecturer in statistics was the reason these people had come out on a bitterly cold late December day.

They could be skiing or skating or sitting by the fire with a hot chocolate. But instead they were here, crowded together. Pushing and shoving. Hoping for a better view of this statistician.

Some came to cheer, some to jeer and protest. Some to hear, some to heckle.

And maybe some, maybe one, to do worse.

The Chief Inspector had yet to meet the woman who was about to

take the stage, though her assistant, who'd introduced herself as Debbie Schneider, had approached him when they'd arrived and offered what had sounded like a favor, a rare personal audience.

He'd declined, explaining he had a job to do. And he had.

But he was honest enough with himself to admit that had it been anyone else, he'd have wanted to meet them. Would have asked to meet them, to go over the security arrangements. To lay down some rules. To look them in the eye and make that personal connection between protected and protector.

It was the first time in his career he'd declined, politely, to meet the person whose life was in his hands. Instead he'd gone through those arrangements with Madame Schneider, and left it at that.

He turned back to the auditorium. The sun was setting. It would be dark in twenty minutes.

"The event goes ahead," he said.

"*Oui*, *patron*."

Chapter 2

Gamache once again walked the backstage area, getting reports from the agents stationed there. Checking the doors and dark corners.

He asked the technician to turn the lights up.

"Who are these people?" the sound technician asked, cocking her head to indicate the crowd. "Who holds an event between Christmas and New Year's? Who comes out to one?"

It was a good question.

Gamache recognized a few faces in the crowd. They were, he knew, good, decent people. Some wore the buttons. Some did not.

Some of them were neighbors. Friends even. But most were strangers.

Québec was a society that felt things strongly and wasn't afraid to express them. Which was a very good thing. It meant they were doing something right. The goal of any healthy society was to keep people safe to express sometimes unpopular views.

But there was a limit to that expression, a line. And Armand Gamache knew he was standing on it.

If he'd had any thoughts that he might be overreacting, his doubts had been banished earlier in the day when he, along with Beauvoir and Lacoste, had arrived for the final walk-through.

As they'd pulled in, they were surprised to see cars already in the parking lot and people lined up at the door. They were shuffling from foot to foot, punching their arms, rubbing their mittened hands

together in the bitter cold. Clouds of breath, like opaque thoughts, hung over them.

It was still hours until the event.

Taking off his own gloves, Gamache had pulled out his notebook and, ripping out pages, he'd given each a number depending on their place in line, with his initials.

"Go home. Get warm. When you come back, show that to the officers at the door. They'll let you in right away."

"Can't," said a woman at the front of the line as she took the paper. "We drove from Moncton."

"New Brunswick?" asked Beauvoir.

"Yes," said her husband. "Drove all night."

Others were now pressing forward, reaching for a number as though they were starving and this was food.

"The local café will be open," said Isabelle Lacoste. "Go there, have lunch, and come back when the doors open at three thirty."

Some did. But most elected to stay, taking turns sitting in warm cars.

As the Sûreté officers entered the building, Lacoste muttered, "*When were these seeds of anger sown / And on what ground.*"

It was an apt quote, from a poem by their friend Ruth Zardo. Though the Sûreté officers knew perfectly well who'd sown the seeds that now had landed on the ground beneath their feet.

It wasn't joy, wasn't happiness, wasn't optimism that had propelled that couple almost a thousand kilometers from their home in a different province, through the night, along snowy and icy roads, to here.

It wasn't pleasure that had lifted others from their armchairs in front of their fires. Leaving behind their families. Their Christmas trees lit and cheery, the remnants of turkey dinner in the fridge. The preparations for New Year's Eve unfinished.

To stand in the biting cold.

It was the seeds of anger, sown by a genteel statistician and taking root.

The building caretaker, Éric Viau, was waiting for them in the old gymnasium. Gamache had met him two days before, when he'd first been given the unexpected assignment.

Armand had been on the outdoor rink in the middle of the village of Three Pines with Reine-Marie and two of their granddaughters. He had his own skates on and was kneeling down, lacing up eight-year-old Florence's skates, while Reine-Marie knelt in front of little Zora, doing up hers.

They were the girls' first pair. A Christmas gift from their grandparents.

Florence, her cheeks glowing red from the cold, was impatient to join the other children on the rink.

Her younger sister, Zora, was silent and leery. She seemed far from sure that strapping huge razors to her feet and stepping onto a frozen pond would be fun. Or a good idea.

"Dad," came a shout from the Gamache home.

"*Oui?*"

Daniel, tall, solid, stood on their front porch in his jeans and plaid flannel shirt. He was holding up a cell phone. "You have a call. Work."

"Can you take a message, *s'il te plaît*?"

"I tried, but apparently it's important."

Armand stood up, slipping slightly on his own skates. "Do they sound panicked?"

"*Non.*"

"Can you let them know I'm doing something important myself, and will get back to them in twenty minutes?"

"*D'accord.*" Daniel disappeared inside.

"Maybe Jean-Guy should take the call?" suggested Reine-Marie, also standing up and far steadier on her skates than her husband.

They looked up the hill that led out of the village. Their son-in-law, Jean-Guy Beauvoir, and his son were trudging back up to the top of the slope. Jean-Guy was pulling the new toboggan, a gift for Honoré from Père Noël.

On his very first sled run, the boy had clung to his father and screamed the whole way down. A shriek of delight, as Henri, the Gamaches' German shepherd, bounded after them.

They'd hurtled down the hill, past the New Forest, past St. Thomas's church, past the fieldstone and brick and clapboard homes. To tumble, laughing, into the soft snow on the village green.

"Some lungs your grandson has," said Clara Morrow. She and her best friend, Myrna Landers, were standing outside Myrna's bookstore, rum toddies warming their hands.

"Is it me, or was he actually screaming a word?" asked Myrna.

"Non," said Reine-Marie quickly, not meeting her friends' eyes. "Just a scream."

Just then a piercing shout filled the air as Honoré and his father took off again.

"That's my boy," said the old poet Ruth, sitting on the bench between Florence and Zora, her duck Rosa muttering in her arms.

"What's Honoré saying, Papa?" asked Florence.

"He sounds like Rosa," said Zora. "What does 'fu—'"

"I'll tell you later," Armand said and glowered at Ruth, who chuckled, while Rosa muttered, "Fuck, fuck, fuck" and looked smug. But then ducks often did.

Rosa and Armand had a brief staring match, before Armand blinked.

For the next few minutes, he and Reine-Marie supported their granddaughters as they slid and stumbled on the ice. These were the first steps of what would become a lifetime of skating. And one day they'd teach their own granddaughters.

"Look, look!" Florence shouted. "Look at me. Fffu—"

"Oui," her grandfather interrupted and saw Ruth on the bench not even trying to hide her delight.

It was midday, and they'd all been invited back to Clara's for a lunch of pea soup, bread warm from the oven, an assortment of Québec cheeses, and pie from Sarah's boulangerie.

"And hot chocolate," said Clara.

"That better be code for booze," said Ruth, as she hauled herself to her feet.

Armand carried their skates back home and, going into his study, he found the message Daniel had taken. It was from the Chief Superintendent of the Sûreté du Québec, calling from her ski chalet at Mont-Tremblant.

He returned the call and listened, surprised, as she told him what it was about.

"A lecture? From a statistician?" he'd said. Through the window

he could see his family troop across the village green to Clara's small fieldstone cottage. "Can't campus police look after it?"

"Do you know this Abigail Robinson?" his superior asked.

Gamache had heard the name but couldn't quite place it. "Not really, *non*."

"You might want to look her up. *Voyons*, Armand, I really am sorry. The University's not far from you and the lecture will only last an hour. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it would be easy. And, well, there is one other thing."

"Oui?"

"They asked for you specifically."

"They?"

"Well, someone at the University. I understand you have a friend there."

Some friend, thought Gamache, trying to think who it might be. He knew a number of professors.

He'd showered, changed, jotted a note for Reine-Marie, then driven the few kilometers over to meet with the building caretaker.

The venue had once been the gymnasium of the Université de l'Estrie, until a new sports complex had been built. They now hired it out for community events. Fundraising dances, reunions, rallies. Armand and Reine-Marie had been at a dinner there in late summer. It was the first indoor public gathering permitted since the pandemic had officially ended, held to raise money for Médecins Sans Frontières. One of the many organizations that had experienced a shortfall in donations during the crisis.

But that was months ago now.

Armand knocked the snow off his boots and introduced himself to the caretaker, Monsieur Viau. They stood in the middle of the large gym, the faded circle of center court just visible under their feet. The unmistakable musk of teen sweat still hung in the air, impossible to banish even though the teens who'd produced it were now probably parents themselves.

There was a stage at one end of the rectangular room, a wall of entrance doors at the other, and windows along one side.

"Do you know the capacity?" Gamache's voice echoed in the vast empty space.

"I don't. We haven't had to figure it out. It's never been close to full."

"The fire department hasn't told you the capacity?"

"You mean the volunteer fire department? No."

"Can you ask?"

"I can, but I know the answer. I'm the fire chief. Look, I can tell you that the building's up to code. The alarms, the extinguishers, the emergency exits all work."

Gamache smiled and put his hand on the man's arm. "I'm not criticizing. Sorry to be asking all these questions, and interrupting your holidays."

The man relaxed. "I imagine this isn't exactly what you want to be doing either."

There was truth in that. When he'd arrived at the old gym, Armand had sat in his car and checked messages. Reine-Marie had sent a photo from lunch at Clara's. It was of their daughter, Annie, and her baby, Idola, who was wearing reindeer antlers.

He'd smiled and touched Idola's face lightly with his finger. Then he'd put his phone away and gone into the building.

The sooner he got started, the sooner he could get home. There might even be some pie left.

"Why they agreed to this booking I don't know," the caretaker said as he showed the Chief Inspector around. "Two days before New Year's. And last-minute too. I got the email just last night, for Christ's sake. Fucking inconsiderate, excuse my English. Who is this person anyway? Never heard of her. Is she a singer? Will they need more than just a microphone? I haven't been told anything."

"She's a visiting lecturer. Her talk will be in English. A podium and mic should do it."

Monsieur Viau stopped and stared at him. "A lecture? In English? They pulled me away from a day skiing with my family because someone wants to give a talk?" His voice was rising with each word. "Are you kidding me?"

"Sadly, I am not."

"Jesus," said the caretaker, "were there no walk-in closets she could've rented? And why're you here? A Sûreté officer? What does she talk about?"

"Statistics."

"Oh, for God's sake, this place's going to be empty. What a waste of time."

Gamache climbed onto the stage and looked out at the room.

He agreed with the caretaker. If they got fifty people, he'd be surprised. But Armand Gamache was a careful man. Three decades of looking at the bodies of surprised people did that.

"I'll get the room dividers ready, Chief," said Monsieur Viau.

They left the stage and walked to the main entrance, where frost had encroached and encrusted the door handles.

"Do you happen to have blueprints of the building?"

"In my office."

Viau returned with scrolls, which he gave to Gamache. As the caretaker prepared to lock up and leave, he studied the cop.

He'd recognized the name, of course, when Gamache had called for the appointment. And he recognized the man himself when he'd arrived. It was strange to see someone in person who he'd seen so often on television, throughout the pandemic and before. While Monsieur Viau had heard that the head of homicide for the Sûreté lived in the region, they'd never actually met, until now.

What he saw was a large man. Slightly over six feet tall. Even with the parka, it was clear he wasn't fat, but he was substantial. Mid to late fifties, he guessed. Gray hair, curling slightly around his ears. And, of course, the unmistakable scar, deep at his temple.

The cop's face, the caretaker noticed, wasn't so much wrinkled as lined. And Viau could guess where those lines had come from.

They stepped outside, and though they were braced for it, the bitter cold still stole their breaths. It scraped the flesh of their faces and made their eyes water. Their feet crunched on the snow as the caretaker walked the Chief Inspector to his car.

"Why're you really here?" Viau asked.

Gamache squinted into the sun. So much light was bouncing off the drifts that his companion was almost lost in the glare.

"That's exactly what I asked my superior," he said with a smile. "To be honest with you, Monsieur Viau, I don't really know."

But then Armand Gamache hadn't yet done his research on the person who'd be standing at the podium. And what she, and her statistics, would be saying.

Now, with the event about to begin, Chief Inspector Gamache looked over the heads of the crowd and found Monsieur Viau standing at the far end, by the doors. In shock, as he leaned on his mop and watched the people pour in.

Gamache had used the plans he'd been given to work out that the official maximum standing capacity would be six hundred and fifty. He'd rounded it down to five hundred, believing that they wouldn't get close.

But as he'd done more research, Gamache became less and less sure.

He'd spent his evenings after everyone else had gone to bed watching videos of lectures given by Professor Robinson. Many of which had, in the past few weeks, gone viral.

What could have been a dry recital of statistics had become a near messianic message to a population hungry for, desperate for, hope.

Though the pandemic was now over, it had left behind a population worn down. People were tired of being self-disciplined, of self-isolating. Of social distancing and wearing masks. They were exhausted, shell-shocked, from months and endless months of worrying about their children, their parents, their grandparents. Themselves.

They were battered and bruised from losing relatives, losing friends. Losing jobs and favorite haunts. Tired of being isolated and driven near crazy with loneliness and despair.

They were tired of being afraid.

Professor Abigail Robinson, with her statistics, proved that better times were ahead. That the economy could recover, stronger than ever. The health care system could meet all their needs. That there would never be a shortage of beds, equipment, medicine again. Ever.

And instead of being asked to make a hundred sacrifices, the population would be asked to make just one.

It was in that "just one" that all the trouble lay.

Her report had been commissioned by the Canadian government

for its Royal Commission into the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. Into the choices and decisions made. Professor Robinson, a senior academic and head of the department of statistics at a western university, had been tasked with correlating the figures and making recommendations.

She had come up with just one.

But, having read the report, the members of the Royal Commission had refused to let her present it publicly.

And so, Professor Robinson had decided to do it herself. She'd held a small seminar for fellow statisticians. It was streamed online so others who couldn't get there could also see.

Armand had found it and watched as Abigail Robinson had stood in front of her charts and graphs. Her voice was warm, her eyes intelligent as she talked about fatalities and survival and resources.

Others had also found it. Not just academics, but members of the public. It had been shared and reshared. Professor Robinson had been invited to do other talks. Larger talks. And larger still.

Her message boiled down to four words, now emblazoned on T-shirts and caps and big round buttons.

All will be well.

What had started as a dry research project, destined for a government file cabinet, had slipped its moorings. Gone public. Gone viral. A fringe movement had taken off. Not yet mainstream, but Gamache could see it was just a matter of time. Like the pandemic itself, Robinson's message was spreading quickly. Finding people vulnerable to just this curious mix of hope for the future, and fear of what might happen if they didn't do what Robinson was suggesting.

All shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.

It was a quote from one of Gamache's favorite writers, the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. Who'd offered hope in a time of great suffering.

But, unlike Julian of Norwich, Professor Robinson's brand had a dark core. When Robinson said *All will be well*, she did not, in fact, mean everything. Or everyone.

Other buttons were beginning to appear at her events, sold to raise

money for what had gone from a study to a cause to, Gamache could see as he sat in his quiet study with the Christmas tree lit in the living room, a crusade.

The new buttons supporters were wearing had a more dire quote. One he also recognized. It was a line from a nutty, though brilliant, old poet. With a demented duck.

Or will it be, *as always was*, *TOO LATE?* The "TOO LATE" was in caps, bold. Like a shout. A shriek. A warning and an accusation.

In a few short months a research project had become a movement. An obscure academician had become a prophet.

And hope had turned to outrage, as two clear sides solidified and clashed. There were those who saw what Professor Robinson was proposing as the only way forward. As a merciful and practical solution. And those who saw it as an outrage. A shameful violation of all they held sacred.

As the din in the auditorium rose, Armand Gamache looked behind him at the middle-aged woman waiting to go on, and wondered if the prophet was about to become a messiah. Or a martyr.