



THE BRUTAL TELLING Chapter 1

"All of them? Even the children?" The fireplace sputtered and crackled and swallowed his gasp. "Slaughtered?"

"Worse." There was silence then. And in that hush lived all the things that could be worse than slaughter.

"Are they close?" His back tingled as he imagined something dreadful creeping through the woods. Toward them. He looked around, almost expecting to see red eyes staring through the dark windows. Or from the corners, or under the bed.

"All around. Have you seen the light in the night sky?"

"I thought those were the Northern Lights." The pink and green and white shifting, flowing against the stars. Like something alive, glowing, and growing. And approaching.

Olivier Brulé lowered his gaze, no longer able to look into the troubled, lunatic eyes across from him. He'd lived with this story for so long, and kept telling himself it wasn't real. It was a myth, a story told and repeated and embellished over and over and over. Around fires just like theirs.

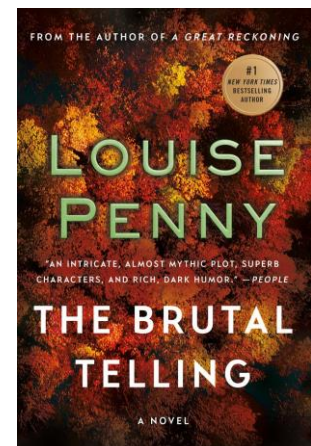
It was a story, nothing more. No harm in it.

But in this simple log cabin, buried in the Quebec wilderness, it seemed like more than that. Even Olivier felt himself believing it. Perhaps because the Hermit so clearly did.

The old man sat in his easy chair on one side of the stone hearth with Olivier on the other. Olivier looked into a fire that had been alive for more than a decade. An old flame not allowed to die, it mumbled and popped in the grate, throwing soft light into the log cabin. He gave the embers a shove with the simple iron poker, sending sparks up the chimney. Candlelight twinkled off shiny objects like eyes in the darkness, found by the flame. "It won't be long now."

The Hermit's eyes were gleaming like metal reaching its melting point. He was leaning forward as he often did when this tale was told.

Olivier scanned the single room. The dark was punctuated by flickering candles throwing fantastic, grotesque shadows. Night seemed to have seeped through the cracks in the logs and





settled into the cabin, curled in corners and under the bed. Many native tribes believed evil lived in corners, which was why their traditional homes were rounded. Unlike the square homes the government had given them.

Olivier didn't believe evil lived in corners. Not really. Not in the daylight, anyway. But he did believe there were things waiting in the dark corners of this cabin that only the Hermit knew about. Things that set Olivier's heart pounding.

"Go on," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

It was late and Olivier still had the twenty-minute walk through the forest back to Three Pines. It was a trip he made every fortnight and he knew it well, even in the dark.

Only in the dark. Theirs was a relationship that existed only after nightfall.

They sipped Orange Pekoe tea. A treat, Olivier knew, reserved for the Hermit's honored guest. His only guest.

But now it was story time. They leaned closer to the fire. It was early September and a chill had crept in with the night.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. I remember now."

Olivier's hands gripped the warm mug even tighter.

"The terrible force has destroyed everything in its way. The Old World and the New. All gone. Except . . ."

"Except?"

"One tiny village remains. Hidden in a valley, so the grim army hasn't seen it yet. But it will. And when it does their great leader will stand at the head of his army. He's immense, bigger than any tree, and clad in armor made from rocks and spiny shells and bone."

"Chaos."

The word was whispered and disappeared into the darkness, where it curled into a corner. And waited.

"Chaos. And the Furies. Disease, Famine, Despair. All are swarming. Searching. And they'll never stop. Not ever. Not until they find it."

"The thing that was stolen."

The Hermit nodded, his face grim. He seemed to see the slaughter, the destruction. See the men and women, the children, fleeing before the merciless, soulless force.



“But what was it? What could be so important they had to destroy everything to get it back?”

Olivier willed his eyes not to dart from the craggy face and into the darkness. To the corner, and the thing they both knew was sitting there in its mean little canvas sack. But the Hermit seemed to read his mind and Olivier saw a malevolent grin settle onto the old man’s face. And then it was gone.

“It’s not the army that wants it back.”

They both saw then the thing looming behind the terrible army. The thing even Chaos feared. That drove Despair, Disease, Famine before it. With one goal. To find what was taken from their Master.

“It’s worse than slaughter.”

Their voices were low, barely scraping the ground. Like conspirators in a cause already lost.

“When the army finally finds what it’s searching for it will stop. And step aside. And then the worst thing imaginable will arrive.”

There was silence again. And in that silence lived the worst thing imaginable.

Outside a pack of coyotes set up a howl. They had something cornered.

Myth, that’s all this is, Olivier reassured himself. Just a story. Once more he looked into the embers, so he wouldn’t see the terror in the Hermit’s face. Then he checked his watch, tilting the crystal toward the fireplace until its face glowed orange and told him the time. Two thirty in the morning.

“Chaos is coming, old son, and there’s no stopping it. It’s taken a long time, but it’s finally here.”

The Hermit nodded, his eyes rheumy and runny, perhaps from the wood smoke, perhaps from something else. Olivier leaned back, surprised to feel his thirty-eight-year-old body suddenly aching, and realized he’d sat tense through the whole awful telling.

“I’m sorry. It’s getting late and Gabri will be worried. I have to go.”

“Already?”

Olivier got up and pumping cold, fresh water into the enamel sink he cleaned his cup. Then he turned back to the room.

“I’ll be back soon,” he smiled.



"Let me give you something," said the Hermit, looking around the log cabin. Olivier's gaze darted to the corner where the small canvas sack sat. Unopened. A bit of twine keeping it closed.

A chuckle came from the Hermit. "One day, perhaps, Olivier. But not today."

He went over to the hand-hewn mantelpiece, picked up a tiny item and held it out to the attractive blond man.

"For the groceries." He pointed to the tins and cheese and milk, tea and coffee and bread on the counter.

"No, I couldn't. It's my pleasure," said Olivier, but they both knew the pantomime and knew he'd take the small offering. "*Merci*," Olivier said at the door.

In the woods there was a furious scrambling, as a doomed creature raced to escape its fate, and coyotes raced to seal it.

"Be careful," said the old man, quickly scanning the night sky. Then, before closing the door, he whispered the single word that was quickly devoured by the woods. Olivier wondered if the Hermit crossed himself and mumbled prayers, leaning against the door, which was thick but perhaps not quite thick enough.

And he wondered if the old man believed the stories of the great and grim army with Chaos looming and leading the Furies. Inexorable, unstoppable. Close.

And behind them something else. Something unspeakable.

And he wondered if the Hermit believed the prayers.

Olivier flicked on his flashlight, scanning the darkness. Gray tree trunks crowded round. He shone the light here and there, trying to find the narrow path through the late summer forest. Once on the trail he hurried. And the more he hurried the more frightened he became, and the more fearful he grew the faster he ran until he was stumbling, chased by dark words through the dark woods.

He finally broke through the trees and staggered to a stop, hands on his bent knees, heaving for breath. Then, slowly straightening, he looked down on the village in the valley.

Three Pines was asleep, as it always seemed to be. At peace with itself and the world. Oblivious of what happened around it. Or perhaps aware of everything, but choosing peace anyway. Soft light glowed at some of the windows. Curtains were drawn in bashful old homes. The sweet scent of the first autumn fires wafted to him.

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And in the very center of the little Quebec village there stood three great pines, like watchmen.

Olivier was safe. Then he felt his pocket.

The gift. The tiny payment. He'd left it behind.

Cursing, Olivier turned to look into the forest that had closed behind him. And he thought again of the small canvas bag in the corner of the cabin. The thing the Hermit had teased him with, promised him, dangled before him. The thing a hiding man hid.

Olivier was tired, and fed up and angry at himself for forgetting the trinket. And angry at the Hermit for not giving him the other thing. The thing he'd earned by now.

He hesitated, then turning he plunged back into the forest, feeling his fear growing and feeding the rage. And as he walked, then ran, a voice followed, beating behind him. Driving him on.

"Chaos is here, old son."