

ERIC WILSON

A Tom Austen Mystery

Cold Midnight in Vieux Québec



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by

Eric Wilson



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The author describes many real places and events in this book, but the story and the characters come entirely from his imagination.

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1

Tom Austen leaned into a cold wind.

He was in Baie St-Paul, a small town in rural Quebec. It was night-time, and snow gusted down a street that seemed hundreds of years old. Wooden houses with big porches stood along the winding road, their yards full of trees with bare branches.

But one thing didn't fit. A small, white car had just passed Tom, its wheels crunching along the icy street. The car windows were smokey-black, hiding its occupants inside, and there was an aerial for a cellular phone.

The car slowed as it passed Tom. He could sense eyes staring at him, then the car moved away. At the same time, Tom saw a woman in a red ski jacket and jeans

coming out of the night, walking toward a telephone booth. Again, the car slowed down while passing her, then crossed a small bridge and stopped at a gas station that was closed for the night. The headlights went off and the car became something that was watching.

The woman didn't seem to notice. She dropped her cigarette in the snow, took out a slip of paper, then punched at the phone buttons. As Tom passed the booth, heading into the confectionary beside it, he could hear her speaking.

"Listen. . . ." Her voice was determined. "I gave you 12 hours to agree to an interview. You haven't come through. No interview, so now I break the story. Your name is about to be mud."

Tom glanced at the woman as he entered the store. She was about 45, with a narrow face and small eyes behind thick horn-rimmed glasses. A lighter flared in her hand as she lit another cigarette, then she squinted against the smoke, listening intently to the person she'd called.

The air inside the store was warm. A man with a grey moustache and a friendly smile was behind the counter, watching television. The store was exactly like the one near Tom's home in Winnipeg, but most things were in French. His first evening in Baie St-Paul he'd wandered up and down the aisles, homesick, staring at the English side of the labels on toothpaste packages. Then he'd enjoyed a few games on the store's video machine and felt better.

The man smiled at him. "*Hé bien, Pee Wee. C'était vraiment un bon match, hier soir!*"

Tom mumbled a reply, unable to follow the man's quick French. He was crazy about hockey, and had been in the stands for both exhibition games between Winnipeg and the local Pee Wee team, whose coach was a friend of Tom's coach. Winnipeg was playing exhibition games

here before competing in Quebec City's famous Pee Wee tournament. Teams from all over North America and as far away as Japan and the Soviet Union would be playing.

Headlights glared against the store windows. Tom looked up the street and saw the white car moving away from the gas station. It crossed the bridge over a small, frozen stream. The street was empty.

The woman in the phone booth was still talking, her breath clouding in the cold air. She didn't seem to notice the approaching car.

This time the driver's window was down. He looked about 25, with sallow skin and black hair pulled back into a small ponytail. Under his left eye was the tattoo of a dagger. The skin around the tattoo was red and looked sore.

In the passenger seat was a woman, but she was difficult to see in the car's dark interior. Tom had an impression of blonde hair and unusually large eyes. Then he saw the driver lifting a fisted hand to his mouth. Tom thought the man was about to cough, but he saw that the fist was curled around a small tube. It was aimed at the woman talking in the phone booth.

Tom saw her wince. As the car sped away down the street she lifted a hand to her neck. "Sir," Tom said to the man. "*Monsieur* . . . uh . . . help! Something's wrong out there! Please, call the police."

"*La police?*"

"*Oui!* Yes—and hurry!"

Tom rushed outside. The cold wind cut through him, and even the toque and gloves he wore didn't help warm him. In the phone booth the woman was staring at a small silver dart.

"Strange," she said, as Tom approached. "This thing hit me in the neck." She flicked the dart away into the

snow. "Some kid must have been fooling around with an air rifle."

"No," Tom exclaimed. "It was a man. He was watching you from his car, then he shot you with that dart."

The woman looked up and down the street, then at Tom. "Are you certain that's what happened?"

"Yes!"

"What did that guy look like?"

"Well, kind of a dark complexion. He had a ponytail, and a dagger tattooed under his eye. There was a woman with him. The car's licence plate was hidden behind some snow, but I saw an aerial for a cellular phone. I thought maybe they were talking to you."

"No, I was speaking to. . . ." She touched her forehead. "All of a sudden I've got an awful headache." She looked at the phone. "My call. I. . . ." Reaching for the receiver, she swayed to one side and had to steady herself with a hand. Shaking her head, she looked at Tom. Her eyes seemed cloudy.

"Where. . . ?" Again she shook her head. "Once I was in a city, somewhere. . . . I remember the sky, how. . . ." She put a hand to her forehead, and then her knees gave out and she fell.

Tom gasped in shock. She was dead.



2

The man came out of his store.

“Mais, qu’est-ce qu’elle a? Elle est . . . malade?”

Tom’s fingers were pressed to the woman’s neck, searching in vain for a pulse. Standing up, he grabbed the phone receiver. “Who’s there?”

Someone at the other end was listening, but didn’t speak. Then, with a click, the line went dead.

Tom looked at the man. “Did you call the police?”

“Oui.” He raised his head. *“Écoute.”* Carried on the cold air was the piercing cry of sirens. In nearby houses, lights sprang on and people began appearing on their porches.

Blue and red flashes lit the night, growing stronger as the police raced to the scene. Car doors slammed and officers ran toward Tom and the man, who stood over the body. As an ambulance arrived, and police lines were set up to keep curious onlookers away, a woman wearing the stripes of a senior officer began questioning Tom and the store owner. "I'd met this woman," the officer said. "She arrived in town last week, to stay with her niece for awhile. This is a small town so most people know each other."

The store owner said, "*Marie-Claire est venue chez moi pour me poser des questions sur l'Enclave.*"

Tom looked at the officer. "What's he saying?"

"That the dead woman had been asking about the Enclave."

"What's that?"

"A new manufacturing plant outside of town. They make chemical fertilizers."

"Why'd she ask questions about it?"

"Marie-Claire Jasmin was an investigative journalist. That means a reporter who sniffs out secrets. If the story is hot, a scandal results and the reporter becomes famous. Marie-Claire was well known for the secrets she'd uncovered in cities like Montreal and Toronto. Some people here thought she was investigating the Enclave."

"A plant producing fertilizers has a secret? That doesn't seem likely."

The officer watched a stretcher crew lift their burden into the ambulance, then turned to a uniformed man beside her. "*Et sa nièce? Quelqu'un devrait lui apprendre la nouvelle.*"

He looked at his notes. "*Elle s'appelle Michelle Jasmin.*"

“Hey,” Tom exclaimed. “I know Michelle! She was at the hockey game last night. My age, beautiful long hair, right?”

The man nodded. “The dead woman was Michelle’s aunt.”

Tom looked down the street, remembering the night before. He and his billet had walked home with a few local kids, including Michelle. She’d mentioned an aunt staying at the house until her parents returned from a trip to Europe.

Now Michelle was in the house alone, and that white car could still be around.

“Are you going to give Michelle police protection?”

“Certainly,” the woman replied. “As soon as we get finished here, I’ll go over to her house.”

Again Tom looked down the street, picturing Michelle alone. After asking the officers if they were finished with him, he started walking. People still stood on their porches, arms crossed, calling information to their neighbours. Tom hurried down the street under a sky that was bright with stars, listening to bells sounding from the spire of a floodlit church.

Michelle was surprised to see him. “Tom, how pleasant! It was so good to meet you last night.” Her eyes were dark brown, bright and intelligent, and her chestnut-coloured hair fell in thick, soft waves down her back. Tom followed her into a comfortable living room where people on a TV screen were talking in French.

“Michelle, I . . . there’s something . . . about your aunt, she. . . .”

Telling Michelle was the toughest thing Tom had ever done. She was still crying when someone knocked on the front door.

Tom parted the curtains. “It’s that police officer. I can see her car.”

As Michelle answered questions, speaking in rapid French, tears ran from her eyes. Then she turned to Tom. “I must leave for Quebec City. *Ma soeur*, my sister, lives there. This officer has said I am probably not at risk but she would like me in the city with my sister. A night bus will depart before long.”

“When are your parents coming home?”

“Soon — perhaps only a few days.”

“I’ll be in Quebec City, too. How can I find you?”

Tom wrote down the phone number, then looked at the officer. “Okay if I stay with Michelle until she gets the bus?”

“That is a good idea. A taxi will soon be here. I want Michelle to take it to the bus stop.”

Within 15 minutes they were in the taxi, travelling along icy streets past darkened houses. Michelle was still crying softly, but she wiped away her tears while listening to Tom and the taxi driver talk about the Enclave. “People here do not feel good about that place,” Michelle said. “There are no jobs available in the Enclave. All workers come from other places and live behind fences of barbed wire. Only one local person is working there.”

“Who’s that?” Tom asked Michelle.

“A man with the name Gaston. He is a chef, cooking meals for the workers inside the Enclave.”

“Hey, I’ve met him. He’s a neighbour of my billet. His clothes smell of cigarette smoke.”

She nodded. “*Oui*, that is Gaston. An excellent chef but an unhappy man. He lives alone. So *triste*.”

“My billet says Gaston’s been acting strangely lately. Really paranoid, afraid someone’s going to get him.”

“But why?”

"I don't know," Tom replied. "Maybe he told your aunt a secret about the Enclave. She was probably working on a big story that would have made her even more famous."

"Fame was not my aunt's goal in life. She just tried to make the world a better place." Michelle brushed away more tears. "I loved her so much."

Tom squeezed her hand, then looked out at the houses lining the street. "Your aunt gave someone 12 hours to agree to an interview. Maybe that person ordered her death. The guy in the white car shot the dart, but I bet he was working for someone with a secret to protect."

As the taxi driver unloaded Michelle's bags, Tom stamped his feet against the cold. Minutes later, big headlights cut the night as a bus arrived, its sign reading QUÉBEC EXPRESS. "Sit near the driver," he suggested. "And switch off the reading light over your head. That'll be safer."

Michelle smiled and touched his hand. "You care about me, Tom. *Merci—j'apprécie beaucoup.*"

"Listen, I'll phone you when I get to Quebec City. My team's got only one exhibition game left here."

"I would like that, Tom. *Bonne chance* with the hockey game tomorrow against my Baie St-Paul friends. Now I will be cheering for both teams."

Tom watched as Michelle climbed into the bus and found a seat by herself. She leaned close to the glass, waving. Under the reading light her headband was a soft pink. Then she flicked off the light, and the bus pulled away into the darkness.

* * *

Arriving back at his billet, Tom studied the neighbouring house where the chef lived. It was small and white, and stood alone in the middle of an enormous yard drifted

with thick snow. A plume of smoke rose from the chimney but the windows were dark.

Tom's billet opened the door of his house. "*Salut, Tom,*" he called. "Are you coming inside? People have been phoning, saying you were at the store with the police. We are anxious to hear what happened."

"I'll be in right away, Hubert."

Tom took a final look at the chef's lonely house, then went inside. Hubert's parents waited in the living room, looking anxious. *Monsieur* Ferron was a gentle man whose nose was usually deep in a book, and *Madame* Ferron was an artist. As Tom ate homemade bread covered with maple syrup, and drank hot chocolate, they asked him a lot of questions.

"What a terrible event," Mme Ferron said. "Something is wrong about the Enclave. I have not liked that place since it was built."

M. Ferron smiled. "We have discussed this before, *ma chérie*. Your imagination is running away."

"*Vraiment?* Then why the imported workers? Why the barbed wire fence around the Enclave? Why the trucks arriving and leaving only at night? What do the trucks carry that is so secret?"

"*Ma chérie, ma chérie*. You are much too excitable." M. Ferron clapped his hands. "*Allez, Hubert and Tom*. Straight into bed. Tomorrow is the final game for the Winnipeg Pee Wees and Baie St-Paul. Our two favourite players must get their rest, and so must their fans."

Tom followed Hubert upstairs. Alone in his room, he stood at the window studying the chef's wooden house, surrounded by deep drifts and dark, bare trees. Even though it had two floors, the house looked small in the middle of all that snow. Then Tom crawled under the bed's cozy duvet and stared at the patterns of moonlight on his ceiling, thinking about Michelle and her aunt and

Gaston, then about the white car and its driver with the tattoo.

Finally Tom fell into a deep sleep where he dreamed about a little wooden house alone in the trees. Standing at a fireplace, he warmed his hands over the flames. Tom shifted in his sleep. The crackling of the flames was so loud that he opened his eyes.

The moonlight patterns were gone from the ceiling, replaced by flickering red and orange light. Tom rolled over, glancing at the window, then sat straight up, horrified.

The chef's house was on fire.



3

Tom pulled on his clothes and raced downstairs to the porch. *Madame* Ferron was already on the phone to the fire department, and Hubert was putting on snowshoes.

“The chef is in trouble, Tom!”

Quickly he also strapped on snowshoes. The burning house made the snow appear red. The boys raced across the drifts, then saw an upstairs window explode out, followed by billowing smoke.

“Is that Gaston’s bedroom?”

“No — he sleeps downstairs.”

Water was dripping off icicles melting in the heat. Tom slammed into the buckled front door with his shoulder, smashing it open. Hubert rubbed snow on a toque and a

scarf, handed one to Tom, and they ran into the building with this protection over their mouths and noses. The flames hadn't yet reached the lower part of the house, but smoke stung Tom's eyes as he followed Hubert down a dark hallway.

The chef lay on his bed in pajamas, breathing with a strange sound. He didn't respond to Tom's first-aid attempts so finally the boys carried him from the burning house, thankful he was a small man, and wrapped him in a blanket when they were safely outside.

"Hey!" Tom stared into the nearby trees. The fire's fierce light showed a face watching them from behind a tree. Once again Tom strapped on his snowshoes, then hurried toward the woods. In the shelter of the trees, where the snow wasn't as deep, recent footprints showed the trail of the person Tom had spotted.

Somewhere in the night an owl cried, making Tom's skin prickle. The snowshoes were clumsy on his feet as he moved forward, trying to follow the man's trail, then he heard the thump of a car door closing.

Hurrying to the top of a nearby ridge, Tom saw a car driving away into the snowy darkness. He was positive it was the same white car he'd seen earlier.

* * *

Tom woke early the next morning. Quietly leaving the house, he walked along the snow-packed road past the black ruins of the chef's home. Down by the river, on the outskirts of the small town, a fishing boat was moored for the winter, surrounded by ice. Across the road from it was the large house where Tom's coach and some of the other boys were billeted. When he arrived there he found them sitting around a long wooden table in the kitchen, shovelling down a huge breakfast.

Tom's coach hadn't yet poured his first cup of coffee so he was still grumpy, but after hearing about the events of the previous night he accepted Tom's request to miss the final exhibition game against Baie St-Paul, so he could take the bus to Quebec City and check on Michelle's safety.

Dietmar Oban looked up from buttering a stack of toast. "Hey, Austen, tell us about Michelle. Is she one of the girls who were hanging around the arena last night after the game?"

Jesse Silsbe smiled. "She's the one who asked for your autograph, right?"

"Michelle didn't mean it," Tom protested, as everyone laughed. "She was just kidding."

"Then you and your billet took off with those cute girls. The rest of us got the thrill of walking home with Coach."

The man patted the round tummy that stretched the fabric of his sweater. "My wife still thinks I'm cute. It's my personal opinion she's absolutely right."

"Well, Austen?" Dietmar demanded. "Did you give her an autograph?"

Tom grinned. "That's privileged information. You'll have to ask Michelle."

Pale light was finally creeping into the morning sky as Tom left the house and returned toward town, huddled in his jacket for warmth. A slow-moving car approached, its driver studying Tom. "Hey," she said, leaning out the window. She was in her forties, with a round face and round eyes, and hair turning grey. "You're Tom Austen, right? I was just at your billet, looking for you. They told me to try down here." She nodded at the passenger door. "Hop in."

"No thanks."

Tom kept walking as the car crept along at his side. "My name's Alexis Alexander," the driver said. "I'm a