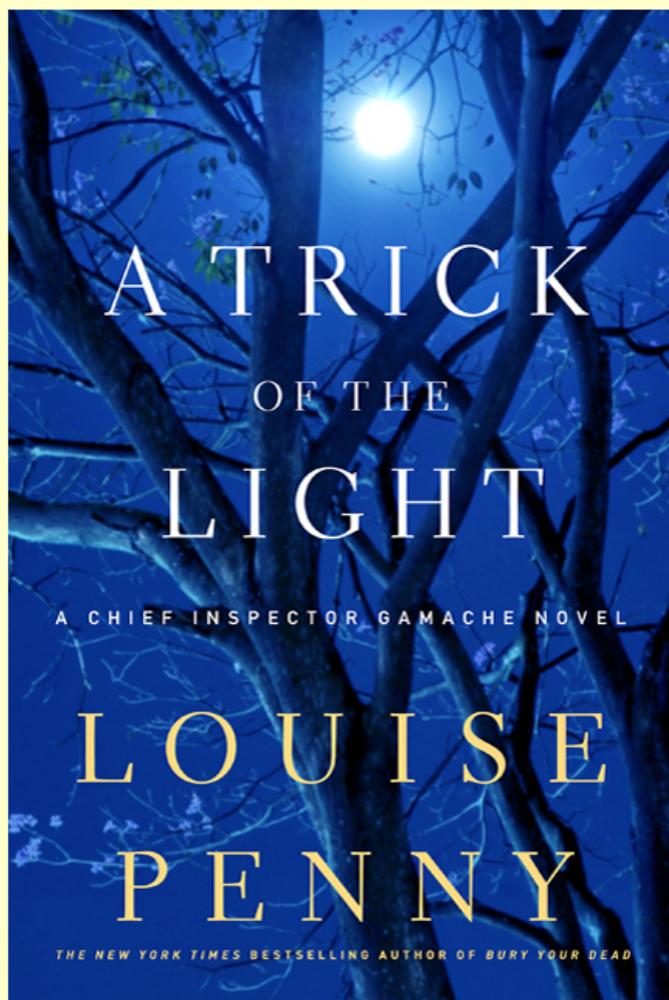


READ IT FIRST



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ONE



Oh, no, no, no, thought Clara Morrow as she walked toward the closed doors.

She could see shadows, shapes, like wraiths moving back and forth, back and forth across the frosted glass. Appearing and disappearing. Distorted, but still human.

Still the dead one lay moaning.

The words had been going through her head all day, appearing and disappearing. A poem, half remembered. Words floating to the surface, then going under. The body of the poem beyond her grasp.

What was the rest of it?

It seemed important.

Oh, no no no.

The blurred figures at the far end of the long corridor seemed almost liquid, or smoke. There, but insubstantial. Fleeting. Fleeting.

As she wished she could.

This was it. The end of the journey. Not just that day's journey as she and her husband, Peter, had driven from their little Québec village into the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montréal, a place they knew well. Intimately. How often had they come to the MAC to marvel at some new exhibition? To support a friend, a fellow artist? Or to just sit quietly in the middle of the sleek gallery, in the middle of a weekday, when the rest of the city was at work?

Art was their work. But it was more than that. It had to be. Otherwise, why put up with all those years of solitude? Of failure? Of silence from a baffled and even bemused art world?

She and Peter had worked away, every day, in their small studios in

their small village, leading their tiny lives. Happy. But still yearning for more.

Clara took a few more steps down the long, long, white marble hallway.

This was the “more.” Through those doors. Finally. The end point of everything she’d worked toward, walked toward, all her life.

Her first dream as a child, her last dream that morning, almost fifty years later, was at the far end of the hard white hallway.

They’d both expected Peter would be the first through those doors. He was by far the more successful artist, with his exquisite studies of life in close-up. So detailed, and so close that a piece of the natural world appeared distorted and abstract. Unrecognizable. Peter took what was natural and made it appear unnatural.

People ate it up. Thank God. It kept food on the table and the wolves, while constantly circling their little home in Three Pines, were kept from the door. Thanks to Peter and his art.

Clara glanced at him walking slightly ahead of her, a smile on his handsome face. She knew most people, on first meeting them, never took her for his wife. Instead they assumed some slim executive with a white wine in her elegant hand was his mate. An example of natural selection. Of like moving to like.

The distinguished artist with the head of graying hair and noble features could not possibly have chosen the woman with the beer in her boxing glove hands. And the pâté in her frizzy hair. And the studio full of sculptures made out of old tractor parts and paintings of cabbages with wings.

No. Peter Morrow could not have chosen her. That would have been unnatural.

And yet he had.

And she had chosen him.

Clara would have smiled had she not been fairly certain she was about to throw up.

Oh, no no no, she thought again as she watched Peter march purposefully toward the closed door and the art wraiths waiting to pass judgment. On her.

Clara’s hands grew cold and numb as she moved slowly forward, propelled by an undeniable force, a rude mix of excitement and terror. She wanted to rush toward the doors, yank them open and yell, “Here I am!”

But mostly she wanted to turn and flee, to hide.

To stumble back down the long, long, light-filled, art-filled, marble-filled hallway. To admit she'd made a mistake. Given the wrong answer when asked if she'd like a solo show. At the Musée. When asked if she'd like all her dreams to come true.

She'd given the wrong answer. She'd said yes. And this is where it led.

Someone had lied. Or hadn't told the whole truth. In her dream, her only dream, played over and over since childhood, she had a solo show at the Musée d'Art Contemporain. She walked down this corridor. Composed and collected. Beautiful and slim. Witty and popular.

Into the waiting arms of an adoring world.

There was no terror. No nausea. No creatures glimpsed through the frosted glass, waiting to devour her. Dissect her. Diminish her, and her creations.

Someone had lied. Had not told her something else might be waiting. Failure.

Ob, no no no, thought Clara. *Still the dead one lay moaning.*

What was the rest of the poem? Why did it elude her?

Now, within feet of the end of her journey all she wanted to do was run away home to Three Pines. To open the wooden gate. To race up the path lined with apple trees in spring bloom. To slam their front door shut behind her. To lean against it. To lock it. To press her body against it, and keep the world out.

Now, too late, she knew who'd lied to her.

She had.

Clara's heart threw itself against her ribs, like something caged and terrified and desperate to escape. She realized she was holding her breath and wondered for how long. To make up for it she started breathing rapidly.

Peter was talking but his voice was muffled, far away. Drowned out by the shrieking in her head, and the pounding in her chest.

And the noise building behind the doors. As they got closer.

"This's going to be fun," said Peter, with a reassuring smile.

Clara opened her hand and dropped her purse. It fell with a plop to the floor, since it was all but empty, containing simply a breath mint and the tiny paint brush from the first paint-by-number set her grandmother had given her.

Clara dropped to her knees, pretending to gather up invisible items and stuff them into her clutch. She lowered her head, trying to catch her breath, and wondered if she was about to pass out.

“Deep breath in,” she heard. “Deep breath out.”

Clara stared from the purse on the gleaming marble floor to the man crouched across from her.

It wasn't Peter.

Instead, she saw her friend and neighbor from Three Pines, Olivier Brulé. He was kneeling beside her, watching, his kind eyes life preservers thrown to a drowning woman. She held them.

“Deep breath in,” he whispered. His voice was calm. This was their own private crisis. Their own private rescue.

She took a deep breath in.

“I don't think I can do it.” Clara leaned forward, feeling faint. She could feel the walls closing in, and see Peter's polished black leather shoes on the floor ahead. Where he'd finally stopped. Not missing her right away. Not noticing his wife was kneeling on the floor.

“I know,” whispered Olivier. “But I also know you. Whether it's on your knees or on your feet, you're going through that door.” He nodded toward the end of the hall, his eyes never leaving hers. “It might as well be on your feet.”

“But it's not too late.” Clara searched his face. Seeing his silky blond hair, and the lines only visible very close up. More lines than a thirty-eight-year-old man should have. “I could leave. Go back home.”

Olivier's kindly face disappeared and she saw again her garden, as she'd seen it that morning, the mist not yet burned off. The dew heavy under her rubber boots. The early roses and late peonies damp and fragrant. She'd sat on the wooden bench in their backyard, with her morning coffee, and she'd thought about the day ahead.

Not once had she imagined herself collapsed on the floor. In terror. Longing to leave. To go back to the garden.

But Olivier was right. She wouldn't return. Not yet.

Oh, no no no. She'd have to go through those doors. They were the only way home now.

“Deep breath out,” Olivier whispered, with a smile.

Clara laughed, and exhaled. “You'd make a good midwife.”

“What're you two doing down there?” Gabri asked as he watched Clara and his partner. “I know what Olivier usually does in that position and I hope that isn't it.” He turned to Peter. “Though that might explain the laughter.”

“Ready?” Olivier handed Clara her purse and they got to their feet.

Gabri, never far from Olivier's side, gave Clara a bear hug. “You OK?”

He examined her closely. He was big, though Gabri preferred to call himself “burly,” his face unscored by the worry lines of his partner.

“I’m fine,” said Clara.

“Fucked up, insecure, neurotic and egotistical?” asked Gabri.

“Exactly.”

“Great. So’m I. And so’s everyone through there.” Gabri gestured toward the door. “What they aren’t is the fabulous artist with the solo show. So you’re both fine and famous.”

“Coming?” asked Peter, waving toward Clara and smiling.

She hesitated, then taking Peter’s hand, they walked together down the corridor, the sharp echoes of their feet not quite masking the merriment on the other side.

They’re laughing, thought Clara. *They’re laughing at my art.*

And in that instant the body of the poem surfaced. The rest of it was revealed.

Oh, no no no, thought Clara. *Still the dead one lay moaning.*

I was much too far out all my life

And not waving but drowning.

From far off Armand Gamache could hear the sound of children playing. He knew where it was coming from. The park across the way, though he couldn’t see the children through the maple trees in late spring leaf. He sometimes liked to sit there and pretend the shouts and laughter came from his young grandchildren, Florence and Zora. He imagined his son Daniel and Roslyn were in the park, watching their children. And that soon they’d walk hand in hand across the quiet street in the very center of the great city, for dinner. Or he and Reine-Marie would join them. And play catch, or conkers.

He liked to pretend they weren’t thousands of kilometers away in Paris.

But mostly he just listened to the shouts and shrieks and laughter of neighborhood children. And smiled. And relaxed.

Gamache reached for his beer and lowered the *L’Observateur* magazine to his knee. His wife, Reine-Marie, sat across from him on their balcony. She too had a cold beer on this unexpectedly warm day in mid-June. But her copy of *La Presse* was folded on the table and she stared into the distance.

“What’re you thinking about?” he asked.

“My mind was just wandering.”

He was silent for a moment, watching her. Her hair was quite gray now, but then, so was his. She'd dyed it auburn for many years but just recently had stopped doing that. He was glad. Like him, she was in her mid-fifties. And this was what a couple of that age looked like. If they were lucky.

Not like models. No one would mistake them for that. Armand Gamache wasn't heavy, but solidly built. If a stranger visited this home he might think Monsieur Gamache a quiet academic, a professor of history or literature perhaps at the Université de Montréal.

But that too would be a mistake.

Books were everywhere in their large apartment. Histories, biographies, novels, studies on Québec antiques, poetry. Placed in orderly bookcases. Just about every table had at least one book on it, and often several magazines. And the weekend newspapers were scattered on the coffee table in the living room, in front of the fireplace. If a visitor was the observant type, and made it further into the apartment to Gamache's study, he might see the story the books in there told.

And he'd soon realize this was not the home of some retiring professor of French literature. The shelves were packed with case histories, with books on medicine and forensics, with tomes on Napoleonic and common law, fingerprinting, genetic coding, wounds and weapons.

Murder. Armand Gamache's study was filled with it.

But still, even among the death, space was made for books on philosophy and poetry.

Watching Reine-Marie as they sat on the balcony, Gamache was once again struck by the certainty he'd married above himself. Not socially. Not academically. But he could never shake the suspicion he had gotten very, very lucky.

Armand Gamache knew he'd had a great deal of luck in his life, but none more than having loved the same woman for thirty-five years. Unless it was the extraordinary stroke of luck that she should also love him.

Now she turned her blue eyes on him. "Actually, I was thinking about Clara's *vernissage*."

"Oh?"

"We should be going soon."

"True." He looked at his watch. It was five past five. The party to launch Clara Morrow's solo show started at the Musée at five and would end at seven. "As soon as David arrives."

Their son-in-law was half an hour late and Gamache glanced inside their apartment. He could just barely make out his daughter Annie sitting in the living room reading, and across from her was his second in command, Jean Guy Beauvoir. Kneading Henri's remarkable ears. The Gamaches' German shepherd could stay like that all day, a goofy grin on his young face.

Jean Guy and Annie were ignoring each other. Gamache smiled slightly. At least they weren't hurling insults, or worse, across the room.

"Would you like to leave?" Armand offered. "We could call David on his cell and ask him to just meet us there."

"Why don't we give him another couple of minutes."

Gamache nodded and picked up the magazine, then he lowered it slowly.

"Is there something else?"

Reine-Marie hesitated then smiled. "I was just wondering how you're feeling about going to the *vernissage*. And wondering if you're stalling."

Armand raised his brow in surprise.

Jean Guy Beauvoir rubbed Henri's ears and stared at the young woman across from him. He'd known her for fifteen years, since he was a rookie on homicide and she was a teenager. Awkward, gawky, bossy.

He didn't like kids. Certainly didn't like smart-ass teenagers. But he'd tried to like Annie Gamache, if only because she was the boss's daughter.

He'd tried and he'd tried and he'd tried. And finally—

He'd succeeded.

And now he was nearing forty and she was nearing thirty. A lawyer. Married. Still awkward and gawky and bossy. But he'd tried so hard to like her he'd finally seen beyond that. He'd seen her laugh with real gaiety, seen her listen to very boring people as though they were riveting. She looked as though she was genuinely glad to see them. As though they were important. He'd seen her dance, arms flailing and head tilted back. Eyes shining.

And he'd felt her hand in his. Only once.

In the hospital. He'd come back up from very far away. Fought through the pain and the dark to that foreign but gentle touch. He knew it didn't belong to his wife, Enid. That bird-like grip he would not have come back for.

But this hand was large, and certain, and warm. And it invited him back.

He'd opened his eyes to see Annie Gamache staring at him with such concern. Why would she be there, he'd wondered. And then he knew why.

Because she had nowhere else to be. No other hospital bed to sit beside.

Because her father was dead. Killed by a gunman in the abandoned factory. Beauvoir had seen it happen. Seen Gamache hit. Seen him lifted off his feet and fall to the concrete floor.

And lie still.

And now Annie Gamache was holding his hand in the hospital, because the hand she really wanted to be holding was gone.

Jean Guy Beauvoir had pried his eyes open and seen Annie Gamache looking so sad. And his heart broke. Then he saw something else.

Joy.

No one had ever looked at him that way. With unconcealed and unbound joy.

Annie had looked at him like that, when he'd opened his eyes.

He'd tried to speak but couldn't. But she'd rightly guessed what he was trying to say.

She'd leaned in and whispered into his ear, and he could smell her fragrance. It was slightly citroney. Clean and fresh. Not Enid's clinging, full-bodied perfume. Annie smelled like a lemon grove in summer.

"Dad's alive."

He'd embarrassed himself then. There were many humiliations waiting for him in the hospital. From bedpans and diapers to sponge baths. But none was more personal, more intimate, more of a betrayal than what his broken body did then.

He cried.

And Annie saw. And Annie never mentioned it from that day to this.

To Henri's bafflement, Jean Guy stopped rubbing the dog's ears and placed one hand on the other, in a gesture that had become habitual now.

That was how it had felt. Annie's hand on his.

This was all he'd ever have of her. His boss's married daughter.

"Your husband's late," said Jean Guy, and could hear the accusation. The shove.

Very, very slowly Annie lowered her newspaper. And glared at him.

“What’s your point?”

What was his point?

“We’re going to be late because of him.”

“Then go. I don’t care.”

He’d loaded the gun, pointed it at his head, and begged Annie to pull the trigger. And now he felt the words strike. Cut. Travel deep and explode.

I don’t care.

It was almost comforting, he realized. The pain. Perhaps if he forced her to hurt him enough he’d stop feeling anything.

“Listen,” she said, leaning forward, her voice softening a bit. “I’m sorry about you and Enid. Your separation.”

“Yeah, well, it happens. As a lawyer you should know that.”

She looked at him with searching eyes, like her father’s. Then she nodded.

“It happens.” She grew quiet, still. “Especially after what you’ve been through, I guess. It makes you think about your life. Would you like to talk about it?”

Talk about Enid with Annie? All the petty sordid squabbles, the tiny slights, the scarring and scabbing. The thought revolted him and he must have shown it. Annie pulled back and reddened as though he’d slapped her.

“Forget I said anything,” she snapped and lifted the paper to her face.

He searched for something to say, some small bridge, a jetty back to her. The minutes stretched by, elongating.

“The *vernissage*,” Beauvoir finally blurted out. It was the first thing that popped into his hollow head, like the Magic Eight Ball, that when it stopped being shaken produced a single word. “*Vernissage*,” in this case.

The newspaper lowered and Annie’s stone face appeared.

“The people from Three Pines will be there, you know.”

Still her face was expressionless.

“That village, in the Eastern Townships,” he waved vaguely out the window. “South of Montréal.”

“I know where the townships are,” she said.

“The show’s for Clara Morrow, but they’ll all be there I’m sure.”

She raised the newspaper again. The Canadian dollar was strong, he read from across the room. Winter potholes still unfixed, he read. An investigation into government corruption, he read.

Nothing new.

“One of them hates your father.”

The newspaper slowly dropped. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he realized by her expression he might have gone too far, “not enough to harm him or anything.”

“Dad’s talked about Three Pines and the people, but he never mentioned this.”

Now she was upset and he wished he hadn’t said anything, but it at least did the trick. She was talking to him again. Her father was the bridge.

Annie dropped her paper onto the table and glanced beyond Beauvoir to her parents talking quietly on the balcony.

She suddenly looked like that teenager he’d first met. She was never going to be the most beautiful woman in the room. That much was obvious even then. Annie was not fine-boned or delicate. She was more athletic than graceful. She cared about clothes, but she also cared about comfort.

Opinionated, strong-willed, strong physically. He could beat her at arm-wrestling, he knew because they’d done it several times, but he actually had to try.

With Enid he would never consider trying. And she would never offer.

Annie Gamache had not only offered, but had fully expected to win.

Then had laughed when she hadn’t.

Where other women, including Enid, were lovely, Annie Gamache was alive.

Late, too late, Jean Guy Beauvoir had come to appreciate how very important it was, how very attractive it was, how very rare it was, to be fully alive.

Annie looked back at Beauvoir. “Why would one of them hate Dad?”

Beauvoir lowered his voice. “OK, look. This’s what happened.”

Annie leaned forward. They were a couple of feet apart and Beauvoir could just smell her scent. It was all he could do not to take her hands in his.

“There was a murder in Clara’s village, Three Pines—”

“Yes, Dad has mentioned that. Seems like a cottage industry there.”

Despite himself, Beauvoir laughed. “*There is strong shadow where there is much light.*”

Annie’s look of astonishment made Beauvoir laugh again.



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