



THE LONG WAY HOME Chapter 1

As Clara Morrow approached, she wondered if he'd repeat the same small gesture he'd done every morning.

It was so tiny, so insignificant. So easy to ignore. The first time. But why did Armand Gamache keep doing it?

Clara felt silly for even wondering. How could it matter? But for a man not given to secrets, this gesture had begun to look not simply secretive, but furtive. A benign act that seemed to yearn for a shadow to hide in.

And yet here he was in the full light of the new day, sitting on the bench Gilles Sandon had recently made and placed on the brow of the hill. Stretched out before Gamache were the mountains, rolling from Québec to Vermont, covered in thick forests. The Rivière Bella Bella wound between the mountains, a silver thread in the sunlight.

And, so easy to overlook when faced with such grandeur, the modest little village of Three Pines lay in the valley.

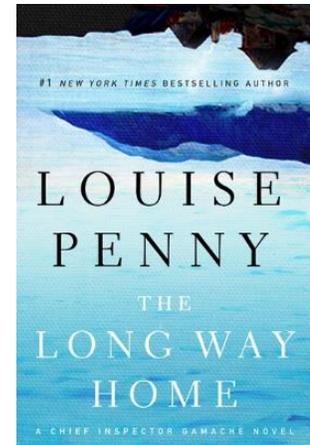
Armand was not hiding from view. But neither was he enjoying it. Instead, each morning the large man sat on the wooden bench, his head bent over a book. Reading.

As she got closer, Clara Morrow saw Gamache do it again. He took off his half-moon reading glasses, then closed the book and slipped it into his pocket. There was a bookmark, but he never moved it. It remained where it was like a stone, marking a place near the end. A place he approached, but never reached.

Armand didn't snap the book shut. Instead he let it fall, with gravity, closed. With nothing, Clara noticed, to mark his spot. No old receipt, no used plane or train or bus ticket to guide him back to where he'd left the story. It was as though it didn't really matter. Each morning he began again. Getting closer and closer to the bookmark, but always stopping before he arrived.

And each morning Armand Gamache placed the slim volume into the pocket of his light summer coat before she could see the title.

She'd become slightly obsessed with this book. And his behavior.





She'd even asked him about it, a week or so earlier, when she'd first joined him on the new bench overlooking the old village.

"Good book?"

"*Oui.*"

Armand Gamache had smiled as he said it, softening his blunt answer. Almost.

It was a small shove from a man who rarely pushed people away.

No, thought Clara, as she watched him in profile now. It wasn't that he'd shoved her. Instead, he'd let her be, but had taken a step back himself. Away from her. Away from the question. He'd taken the worn book, and retreated.

The message was clear. And Clara got it. Though that didn't mean she had to heed it.

Armand Gamache looked across to the deep green midsummer forest and the mountains that rolled into eternity. Then his eyes dropped to the village in the valley below them, as though held in the palm of an ancient hand. A stigmata in the Québec countryside. Not a wound, but a wonder.

Every morning he went for a walk with his wife, Reine-Marie, and their German shepherd Henri. Tossing the tennis ball ahead of them, they ended up chasing it down themselves when Henri became distracted by a fluttering leaf, or a black fly, or the voices in his head. The dog would race after the ball, then stop and stare into thin air, moving his gigantic satellite ears this way and that. Honing in on some message. Not tense, but quizzical. It was, Gamache recognized, the way most people listened when they heard on the wind the wisps of a particularly beloved piece of music. Or a familiar voice from far away.

Head tilted, a slightly goofy expression on his face, Henri listened, while Armand and Reine-Marie fetched.

All was right with the world, thought Gamache as he sat quietly in the early August sunshine.

Finally.

Except for Clara, who'd taken to joining him on the bench each morning.

Was it because she'd noticed him alone up here, once Reine-Marie and Henri had left, and thought he might be lonely? Thought he might like company?



But he doubted that. Clara Morrow had become one of their closest friends and she knew him better than that.

No. She was here for her own reasons.

Armand Gamache had grown increasingly curious. He could almost fool himself into believing his curiosity wasn't garden-variety nosiness but his training kicking in.

All his professional life Chief Inspector Gamache had asked questions and hunted answers. And not just answers, but facts. But, much more elusive and dangerous than facts, what he really looked for were feelings. Because they would lead him to the truth.

And while the truth might set some free, it landed the people Gamache sought in prison. For life.

Armand Gamache considered himself more an explorer than a hunter. The goal was to discover. And what he discovered could still surprise him.

How often had he questioned a murderer expecting to find curdled emotions, a soul gone sour? And instead found goodness that had gone astray.

He still arrested them, of course. But he'd come to agree with Sister Prejean that no one was as bad as the worst thing they'd done.

Armand Gamache had seen the worst. But he'd also seen the best. Often in the same person.

He closed his eyes and turned his face to the fresh morning sun. Those days were behind him now. Now he could rest. In the hollow of the hand. And worry about his own soul.

No need to explore. He'd found what he was looking for here in Three Pines.

Aware of the woman beside him, he opened his eyes but kept them forward, watching the little village below come to life. He saw his friends and new neighbors leave their homes to tend to their perennial gardens or go across the village green to the bistro for breakfast. He watched as Sarah opened the door to her boulangerie. She'd been inside since before dawn, baking baguettes and croissants and *chocolatine*, and now it was time to sell them. She paused, wiping her hands on her apron, and exchanged greetings with Monsieur Béliveau, who was just opening his general store. Each morning for the past few weeks, Armand Gamache had sat on the bench and watched the same people do the same thing. The village had the rhythm, the cadence, of a piece of music. Perhaps that's what Henri heard. The music of Three Pines. It was like a hum, a hymn, a comforting ritual.

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His life had never had a rhythm. Each day had been unpredictable and he had seemed to thrive on that. He'd thought that was part of his nature. He'd never known routine. Until now.

Gamache had to admit to a small fear that what was now a comforting routine would crumble into the banal, would become boring. But instead, it had gone in the other direction.

He seemed to thrive on the repetition. The stronger he got, the more he valued the structure. Far from being limiting, imprisoning, he found his daily rituals liberating.

Turmoil shook loose all sorts of unpleasant truths. But it took peace to examine them. Sitting in this quiet place in the bright sunshine, Armand Gamache was finally free to examine all the things that had fallen to the ground. As he had fallen.

He felt the slight weight and bulk of the book in his pocket.

Below them, Ruth Zardo limped from her run-down cottage, followed by Rosa, her duck. The elderly woman looked around, then glanced up the dirt road out of town. Up, up the dusty path, Gamache could see her old steel eyes travel. Until they met his. And locked on.

She lifted her veined hand in greeting. And, like hoisting the village flag, Ruth raised one unwavering finger.

Gamache bowed slightly in acknowledgment.

All was right with the world.

Except—

He turned to the disheveled woman beside him.

Why was Clara here?

Clara looked away. She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. Knowing what she was about to do.

She wondered if she should speak to Myrna first. Ask her advice. But she'd decided not to, realizing that would just be shifting responsibility for this decision.

Or, more likely, thought Clara, she was afraid Myrna would stop her. Tell her not to do it. Tell her it was unfair and even cruel.

Because it was. Which was why it had taken Clara this long.



Every day she'd come here, determined to say something to Armand. And every day she'd chickened out. Or, more likely, the better angels of her nature were straining on the reins, yanking her back. Trying to stop her.

And it had worked. So far.

Every day she made small talk with him, then left, determined not to return the next day. Promising herself, and all the saints and all the angels and all the gods and goddesses, that she would not go back up to the bench the next morning.

And next morning, as though by magic, a miracle, a curse, she felt the hard maple beneath her bum. And found herself looking at Armand Gamache. Wondering about that slim volume in his pocket. Looking into his deep brown, thoughtful eyes.

He'd gained weight, which was good. It showed Three Pines was doing its job. He was healing here. He was tall, and a more robust frame suited him. Not fat, but substantial. He limped less from his wounds, and there was more vitality to his step. The gray had left his face, but not his head. His wavy hair was now more gray than brown. By the time he was sixty, in just a few years, he'd be completely gray, Clara suspected.

His face showed his age. It was worn with cares and concerns and worries. With pain. But the deepest crevices were made by laughter. Around his eyes and mouth. Mirth, etched deep.

Chief Inspector Gamache. The former head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec.

But he was also Armand. Her friend. Who'd come here to retire from that life, and all that death. Not to hide from the sorrow, but to stop collecting more. And in this peaceful place to look at his own burdens. And to begin to let them go.

As they all had.

Clara got up.

She couldn't do it. She could not unburden herself to this man. He had his own to carry. And this was hers.

"Dinner tonight?" she asked. "Reine-Marie asked us over. We might even play some bridge."

It was always the plan, and yet they rarely seemed to get to it, preferring to talk or sit quietly in the Gamaches' back garden as Myrna walked among the plants, explaining which



were weeds and which were perennials, coming back year after year. Long lived. And which flowers were annuals. Designed to die after a magnificent, short life.

Gamache rose to his feet, and as he did Clara saw again the writing carved into the back of the bench. It hadn't been there when Gilles Sandon had placed the bench. And Gilles claimed not to have done it. The writing had simply appeared, like graffiti, and no one had owned up to it.

Armand held out his hand. At first Clara thought he wanted to shake it good-bye. A strangely formal and final gesture. Then she realized his palm was up.

He was inviting her to place her hand in his.

She did. And felt his hand close gently. Finally, she looked into his eyes.

"Why are you here, Clara?"

She sat, suddenly, and felt again the hard wood of the bench, not so much supporting her as stopping her fall.