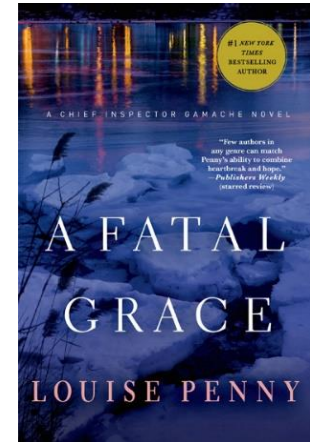




A FATAL GRACE Chapter 1

Had CC de Poitiers known she was going to be murdered she might have bought her husband, Richard, a Christmas gift. She might even have gone to her daughter's end of term pageant at Miss Edward's School for Girls, or 'girths' as CC liked to tease her expansive daughter. Had CC de Poitiers known the end was near she might have been at work instead of in the cheapest room the Ritz in Montreal had to offer. But the only end she knew was near belonged to a man named Saul. 'So, what do you think? Do you like it?' She balanced her book on her pallid stomach.



Saul looked at it, not for the first time. She'd dragged it out of her huge purse every five minutes for the past few days. In business meetings, dinners, taxi rides through the snowy streets of Montreal, CC'd suddenly bend down and emerge triumphant, holding her creation as though another virgin birth.

'I like the picture,' he said, knowing the insult. He'd taken the picture. He knew she was asking, pleading, for more and he knew he no longer cared to give it. And he wondered how much longer he could be around CC de Poitiers before he became her. Not physically, of course. At forty-eight she was a few years younger than him. She was slim and rosy and toned, her teeth impossibly white and her hair impossibly blonde. Touching her was like caressing a veneer of ice. There was a beauty to it, and a frailty he found attractive. But there was also danger. If she ever broke, if she shattered, she'd tear him to pieces.

But her exterior wasn't the issue. Watching her caress her book with more tenderness than she'd ever shown when caressing him, he wondered whether her ice water insides had somehow seeped into him, perhaps during sex, and were slowly freezing him. Already he couldn't feel his core.

At fifty-two Saul Petrov was just beginning to notice his friends weren't quite as brilliant, not quite as clever, not quite as slim as they once were. In fact, most had begun to bore him. And he'd noticed a telltale yawn or two from them as well. They were growing thick and bald and dull, and he suspected he was too. It wasn't so bad that women rarely looked at him any more or that he'd begun to consider trading his downhill skis for cross country, or that his GP



had scheduled his first prostate test. He could accept all that. What woke Saul Petrov at two in the morning, and whispered in his ears in the voice that had warned him as a child that lions lived under his bed, was the certainty that people now found him boring. He'd take deep dark breaths of the night air, trying to reassure himself that the stifled yawn of his dinner companion was because of the wine or the *magret de canard* or the warmth in the Montreal restaurant, wrapped as they were in their sensible winter sweaters.

But still the night voice growled and warned of dangers ahead. Of impending disaster. Of telling tales too long, of an attention span too short, of seeing the whites of too many eyes. Of glances, fast and discreet, at watches. When can they reasonably leave him? Of eyes scanning the room, desperate for more stimulating company.

And so he'd allowed himself to be seduced by CC. Seduced and devoured so that the lion under the bed had become the lion in the bed. He'd begun to suspect this self-absorbed woman had finally finished absorbing herself, her husband and even that disaster of a daughter and was now busy absorbing him. He'd already become cruel in her company. And he'd begun despising himself. But not quite as much as he despised her.

'It's a brilliant book,' she said, ignoring him. 'I mean, really. Who wouldn't want this?' She waved it in his face. 'People'll eat it up. There're so many troubled people out there.' She turned now and actually looked out their hotel room window at the building opposite, as though surveying her 'people'. 'I did this for them.' Now she turned back to him, her eyes wide and sincere.

Does she believe it? he wondered.

He'd read the book, of course. *Be Calm* she'd called it, after the company she'd founded a few years ago, which was a laugh given the bundle of nerves she actually was. The anxious, nervous hands, constantly smoothing and straightening. The snippy responses, the impatience that spilled over into anger.

Calm was not a word anyone would apply to CC de Poitiers, despite her placid, frozen exterior.

She'd shopped the book around to all the publishers, beginning with the top publishing houses in New York and ending with Publications Réjean et Maison des cartes in St Polycarpe, a one-*vache* village along the highway between Montreal and Toronto.



They'd all said no, immediately recognizing the manuscript as a flaccid mishmash of ridiculous self-help philosophies, wrapped in half-baked Buddhist and Hindu teachings, spewed forth by a woman whose cover photo looked as though she'd eat her young.

'No goddamned enlightenment,' she'd said to Saul in her Montreal office the day a batch of rejection letters arrived, ripping them into pieces and dropping them on the floor for the hired help to clean up. 'This world is messed up, I tell you. People are cruel and insensitive, they're out to screw each other. There's no love or compassion. This', she sliced her book violently in the air like an ancient mythical hammer, heading for an unforgiving anvil, 'will teach people how to find happiness.'

Her voice was low, the words staggering under the weight of venom. She'd gone on to self-publish her book, making sure it was out in time for Christmas. And while the book talked a lot about light Saul found it interesting and ironic that it had actually been released on the winter solstice. The darkest day of the year.

'Who published it again?' He couldn't seem to help himself. She was silent. 'Oh, I remember now,' he said. 'No one wanted it. That must have been horrible.' He paused for a moment, wondering whether to twist the knife. Oh, what the hell. Might as well. 'How'd that make you feel?' Did he imagine the wince?

But her silence remained, eloquent, her face impassive. Anything CC didn't like didn't exist. That included her husband and her daughter. It included any unpleasantness, any criticism, any harsh words not her own, any emotions. CC lived, Saul knew, in her own world, where she was perfect, where she could hide her feelings and hide her failings.

He wondered how long before that world would explode. He hoped he'd be around to see it. But not too close.

People are cruel and insensitive, she'd said. Cruel and insensitive. It wasn't all that long ago, before he'd taken the contract to freelance as CC's photographer and lover, that he'd actually thought the world a beautiful place. Each morning he'd wake early and go into the young day, when the world was new and anything was possible, and he'd see how lovely Montreal was. He'd see people smiling at each other as they got their cappuccinos at the café, or their fresh flowers or their baguettes. He'd see the children in autumn gathering the fallen chestnuts to play conkers. He'd see the elderly women walking arm in arm down the Main.



He wasn't foolish or blind enough not to also see the homeless men and women, or the bruised and battered faces that spoke of a long and empty night and a longer day ahead.

But at his core he believed the world a lovely place. And his photographs reflected that, catching the light, the brilliance, the hope. And the shadows that naturally challenged the light.

Ironically it was this very quality that had caught CC's eye and led her to offer him the contract. An article in a Montreal style magazine had described him as a 'hot' photographer, and CC always went for the best. Which was why they always took a room at the Ritz. A cramped, dreary room on a low floor without view or charm, but the Ritz. CC would collect the shampoos and stationery to prove her worth, just as she'd collected him. And she'd use them to make some obscure point to people who didn't care, just as she'd use him. And then, eventually, everything would be discarded. As her husband had been tossed aside, as her daughter was ignored and ridiculed.

The world was a cruel and insensitive place.

And he now believed it.

He hated CC de Poitiers.

He got out of bed, leaving CC to stare at her book, her real lover. He looked at her and she seemed to go in and out of focus.

He cocked his head to one side and wondered whether he'd had too much to drink again. But still she seemed to grow fuzzy, then sharp, as though he was looking through a prism at two different women, one beautiful, glamorous, vivacious, and the other a pathetic, dyed-blond rope, all corded and wound and knotted and rough. And dangerous.

'What's this?' He reached into the garbage and withdrew a portfolio. He recognized it immediately as an artist's dossier of work. It was beautifully and painstakingly bound and printed on archival Arche paper. He flipped it open and caught his breath.

A series of works, luminous and light, seemed to glow off the fine paper. He felt a stirring in his chest. They showed a world both lovely and hurt. But mostly, it was a world where hope and comfort still existed. It was clearly the world the artist saw each day, the world the artist lived in. As he himself once lived in a world of light and hope.



The works appeared simple but were in reality very complex. Images and colors were layered one on top of the other. Hours and hours, days and days must have been spent on each one to get the desired effect.

He stared down at the one before him now. A majestic tree soared into the sky, as though keening for the sun. The artist had photographed it and had somehow captured a sense of movement without making it disorienting. Instead it was graceful and calming and, above all, powerful. The tips of the branches seemed to melt or become fuzzy as though even in its confidence and yearning there was a tiny doubt. It was brilliant.

All thoughts of CC were forgotten. He'd climbed into the tree, almost feeling tickled by its rough bark, as if he had been sitting on his grandfather's lap and snuggling into his unshaven face. How had the artist managed that?

He couldn't make out the signature. He flipped through the other pages and slowly felt a smile come to his frozen face and move to his hardened heart.

Maybe, one day, if he ever got clear of CC he could go back to his work and do pieces like this.

He exhaled all the darkness he'd stored up.

'So, do you like it?' CC held her book up and waved it at him.