

THE MUSEUM OF BROKEN PROMISES

Also by Elizabeth Buchan

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I Can't Begin to Tell You

Daughters

Separate Beds

The Second Wife

That Certain Age

The Good Wife

Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman

Secrets of the Heart

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Beatrix Potter: The Story of the Creator of Peter Rabbit

Against Her Nature

Consider the Lily

Light of the Moon

Daughters of the Storm

THE MUSEUM OF BROKEN PROMISES

ENTER ITS DOORS, AND THE PAST WILL FIND YOU

ELIZABETH
BUCHAN



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For Annie and Duncan

‘I gradually came to realize that
there were two kinds of freedom,
internal and external’

Ivan Klíma, *My Crazy Century*

Austria, 1986

A TWENTY-YEAR-OLD GIRL WITH A BANDAGED HAND waits on an Austrian station platform with a suitcase at her feet inside which is stuffed a rucksack but nothing else because it is only there for pretence.

The platform is grey and so badly maintained that plants scramble through the cracked asphalt. It is the same story on the track where the weeds sprout lustily between the sleepers.

Her eyes slot right and left, searching for a watcher. One of the grubby but sometimes desperate people who keep afloat by reporting on others. She is becoming an expert on those.

She strains to see into the distance. Small and isolated, the station is surrounded by woods. Ash and pine, and beautiful silver birches. Through a break in the trees, she sees a cluster of red roofs from the centre of which rises an onion-domed baroque church. So typical of Middle Europe, she thinks, the breath catching in her chest. Of free Europe.

A couple walks onto the platform. The woman is carrying an overnight bag and he a larger suitcase which he sets down. The woman is thin and dressed in a camel-coloured coat. He is stockier

and wears an Alpine hat with a feather in the hatband. They are prosperous and smug, and she hates them on sight. *They* can park their bottoms on the train seats and sit in perfect tranquillity all the way to Vienna.

The girl swings around in the direction from where the train will arrive. To the north and east is the border between Communist Czechoslovakia and the Austria where she now waits. Even though the rail route was established in the Hapsburgs' heyday and is well mapped, it is not going to be, and never would have been, a simple journey.

If the schedules run true to form (not something on which one counts in Czechoslovakia) the tank-like, grimy Soviet Bloc engine with its red star on the smokebox should be pulling into Gmünd, which is the exchange station for the engines and on the border between Czechoslovakia and Austria. Having made the same journey from Prague to Vienna a week earlier, she knows there is a special platform fenced off by a wall and barbed wire where the passport and custom control officials wait.

She is not Czech. Her ability to travel was not in question. Yet, on that train journey she realized she had been infected by the pathogen of repression. Sweaty palms. A constant urge to urinate. Checking, checking on her fellow passengers. Paranoia is promiscuous. It doesn't mind which philosophy it feeds on.

At Gmünd, the Czechoslovakian frontier bullies worked their way through the carriages as they will be doing at this moment. She and the other passengers sat in dead silence. On the platform, dogs and police checked the length of the train's chassis for 'deadheads' clinging to the underside.

When the all-clear signal sounded, the Czech engine decoupled. There was a bump as a shiny western one replaced it.

She remembers clutching her UK passport in her injured hand and trying not to think of the ‘deadheads’. Instead she made herself concentrate on him – of when they first met and how it became what it is.

Then, as she is doing now, she thinks about love and what an extraordinary, incendiary thing it is and of how it consumes her. Of how her life has been transformed.

If she closes her eyes, she can summon him. His touch, his smell, his body.

The single bench on the platform by the waiting room is free and she sits down. Its wood is gnarled and splintering and guaranteed to ladder tights.

She lights up a cigarette.

Milos will have gone over and over the plan with Tomas. *It's the details that count.* She remembers Milos telling her about the escape plans. *Learn them.* The right seat, the right station, the right clothes... *You have to convince them that your journey is normal and you have been given permission to make it.*

A crate of champagne will have been sent to the watchtower.

It seldom fails, said Milos. Get them drunk.

Step by step. The architecture of an escape is painfully hazardous to construct because it involves trust.

Her heart beats faster. Don't think about failure.

It's madness to try and do a runner from the cross-over point at Gmünd. Suicidal. Everyone knows that. That's why this unremarkable station on the other side of the border is the one to go for and why she is here.

On arrive, he promised in his execrable French. ‘I will.’

The autumn wind whips the tops of the trees. Her cigarette flares up and then dies. She grinds the butt with her boot and shivers.

The watchers. Who are they? Answer: everyone, including your grandmother. Once it is understood that an elderly woman with a string bag bulging with vegetables is as dangerous as the bully boy in the leather jacket, it becomes obvious that anyone can manipulate anyone. She also knows that, in more cases than she supposed, the watchers are as frightened as the subjects on whom they spy.

Waiting.

Waiting is an art form. Those who live in eastern Europe know its intimacies. The dry lips. The rapid heartbeat.

She shoves her cold hands into her pockets. In the left one she clutches the railway ticket she used to make her own getaway. *Prague, Brno, Gmünd...* She refuses to throw it away.

The elderly Volkswagen she has bought from a garage is parked up outside the station. God knows what condition the car is in but if it gets them to England it doesn't matter a toss. On the back seat is a loaf of bread, sausages, apples and beer.

'You'll have to marry me if you want to stay in England.'

'Do I now?'

Her stomach clenches with pain and she begins to shake.

She knows what she has done.

She knows.

She checks her watch. In the world she has just fled, there are many jokes about timetables being made of jelly. She's not laughing now.

Again, she checks her watch.

If all is well, the newly attached engine is easing its way to the border where the frontier police are poised to open the concrete barriers, leaving it free to gather speed towards Vienna.

If all is well.

She knew that the instructions would be precise. He must chop his hair short and wear a business suit – not his style at all. He must always keep his forged passport to hand.

‘I hope your name won’t be Wilhem,’ she told him as they said goodbye. ‘I refuse to love a Wilhelm. It should be Viktor for Victory.’

On the station bench, she prays that he is occupying the aisle seat – aisle seats are better positioned to make a break for it. In his briefcase should be a made-up schedule of business commitments for his four-day visit to Vienna and a forged docket for the hotel.

She squints into the distance. Smoke is billowing over the trees and, in the far distance, a train moves against a green backdrop. Gradually, it enlarges and bears down towards the station, wheels screeching on the rails as it reins in its momentum. A stink of anthracite and low-grade coal floats over the platforms.

What is love? What is her love? Profound, infinite, burning, tender... all those words.

Guilty?

Her hands clench.

The train has precipitous steps up to the carriages and the passengers are descending. A toddler is coaxed down. An elderly man clings to the rail and summons his courage.

The smug, prosperous couple further along the platform wait to board.

The wind shifts and the engine’s steam throws a dense, white veil over the scene. A man in a pinstriped suit and black brogues steps down from the third carriage. His hat obscures his face but he has short hair and a red handkerchief tucked into his lapel pocket.

Gritty smoke blows into her eyes which are watering copiously. Her heart beats a tattoo of relief.

Then...

The figure halts in front of her. 'Laure.'

The smoke clears. *Oh my God.*

Her insides are dissolving, her knees weakening. In a second or two, she is going to collapse onto the grey platform.

Petr holds out his hand.

Hers remain at her side. 'Where is Tomas? Tell me where he is.'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Is he alive?'

'I can't tell you that.'

He looks at her with a mix of pity and contempt. In a moment of clarity, she understands that Petr's feelings for her do not extend to ensuring her happiness. He has his life. He has his family. He has his politics.

She steps back, one foot feeling unsteadily behind the other. 'My God ... you've betrayed him.'

He grabs her by her injured arm and she bites back a scream. 'I betrayed him?' he says.



CHAPTER 1

Paris, today

HER LIFE WAS NOT QUITE IN ORDER. WOULD POSSIBLY never be – but it wasn't bad. Accommodations had been made. She had the museum.

At 9 a.m., Laure folded back the shutters in Room 2 and looked out at a Paris revealed by the morning light. A bunch of pigeons strutted over the roof next-door uttering their pigeon racket.

In summer, the sun lightened the colours of the roof tiles. In autumn, they were slicked with rain and, in winter, frost sometimes ran a rim around their edges so that they resembled a Fabergé fantasy.

Little else changed over a year, which was precisely what Laure craved. She wanted to look out at the same vista, open the same shutters and turn to inspect the glass cabinets in which were enshrined the disquiet of those who sought resolution.

Those objects could be disturbing. Or poignant. Or funny. Almost always marked in their effect. It was not uncommon for a visitor to say they had experienced a sense of *déjà vu* when studying the display cabinets. Some confessed they had a feeling that there was someone else in the room other than the visitors. Some said that the objects appeared to exude a soul, with all its imprecision

and mystery. Stopping to polish a small smudge on the glass of the cabinet nearest to the door, she walked into the next room. The day had begun.

Just before the lunch hour, a muffled cry sounded in the building.

Upstairs in the office, Laure, and her assistant, Nic Arnold, looked up from their desks. *One of those*. A touchstone moment when a dam broke in a visitor, releasing... well... many things.

She gestured to the door. 'You or me?' The cry was repeated and Laure made a decision. 'Both, I think.'

It was early autumn and the visitor numbers were dropping as they always did after the summer. Technically, it was a normal day. Yet, normal days could be deceptive. From them could erupt disquiet, even a violence of sorts. Certainly, violent emotions. The contents of Laure's unassuming, unshowy museum possessed a power to trigger them, particularly in those close to breaking point.

She picked up the first-aid pack. Nic picked up the clipboard. Together, they ran downstairs. If procedure was being observed, Chantal at the kiosk would be hastening upstairs ready to herd visitors away from the room in which the incident was taking place.

In Room 3, a man and a woman were fighting. Or rather, he was fending off an attack as she beat him on the face with the museum catalogue. Laure and Nic exchanged a glance. Nic put down his clipboard, stepped forwards and, as politely as possible in the circumstances, pulled the woman off the man.

Panting, the man stood back – disappointment and rage written all over his face. He touched his cheek where the edge of the catalogue had left a red mark. 'What do you think you're doing, Odile?'

'I wish I could kill you.' She was matter-of-fact which made what she said the more chilling. One hand clung to the belt threaded

through her jeans which, Laure noted, had a large metal buckle. 'Perhaps I will one of these days.'

They were French. Not so surprising as this was Paris – but you could never predict in this museum (any museum?) what a visitor's nationality might be.

The woman's knees buckled, forcing Nic to tighten his grip. Laure whipped the chair, stationed by the wall for precisely these emergencies, under the woman and together they eased her down.

The first-aid pack had been designed to snap open easily and Laure produced a cup and a bottle of water. 'Would this help?' She was calm and measured. 'I'm forbidden to hand out medication but I can contact a doctor or the emergency services if you think you require them.'

Nic picked up the clipboard and wrote the time and date down in the boxes on the form headed 'Incidents'.

She held the plastic cup to the woman's lips who took a mouthful and pushed away Laure's arm. 'Thank you.'

Laure eased herself upright and addressed the man. 'Are you the person who we would deal with in an emergency?'

Tall. Wearing jeans and a corduroy jacket. Probably in his forties... 'If you're asking if I'm her husband, I am,' he answered. 'Yves Brun.'

Sour, too.

Nic noted it down. 'Is your wife unwell or was it something in the museum which has upset her?'

A shade crossed the man's features. 'I suspect it was something here.'

Even to an uninformed observer, and Laure and Nic were habituated to seven degrees of deception practised by the public, it was obvious Yves was skirting the truth.

Odile shivered. 'He knows what's wrong.'

Nic wrote that down too. Current regulations insisted on a precise record and he asked Yves for their telephone numbers.

Yves bent over his wife. 'Odile, you can't do this in public. It's becoming a problem.'

She gazed up at him and, without warning, spat at his feet. 'That sort of problem?'

'*Putain.*' He stepped back.

Again, Nic and Laure exchanged glances. The situation was likely to be more complicated than met the eye.

'The shoes...' Odile wiped her mouth. 'They belong to my daughter.'

Nic wrote: 'Room 3. Marital incident.'

Laure knew to what Odile was referring. At the front of the display cabinet was a rectangular box into which was meticulously folded a baby's layette. It included a cashmere shawl, two tiny vests, a pair of socks and distinctive green-and-white booties. The label read in French, English and Italian: 'My baby never made it into this world because of negligence.'

Laure placed herself so that she blocked the cabinet and its objects from Odile's sight. 'Do you wish me to summon help?'

The husband winced. 'No.'

'We all need help. The whole world needs help,' said Odile. 'And he's taken my daughter's things and put them here without my permission.'

'It's the medication,' said Yves. The anger had been superseded by a sadness, which Laure – who understood sadness – knew was unfeigned. 'She doesn't know any more.'

'Thank God,' said Odile. 'Who wants to know about being alive? Do you?' She swivelled around to look up at Laure. 'You don't look brimming with excitement.'

‘Odile... may I call you Odile?’ asked Laure. ‘Those baby clothes were sent in by someone who lives in Italy. I have the records.’ She waited for the information to sink in and added gently, ‘The objects in here can affect one and it’s possible to become muddled.’

‘Don’t patronize me.’ Ignoring her husband, she opened her bag and drew out a blister pack of pills and squeezed a couple out into her hand. Yves exclaimed and turned away. ‘Shut up,’ she told him.

‘When you left hospital you promised.’ Yves stuffed his hands into his pockets.

‘Oh yes, I promised.’ She gagged over the pills but got them down. ‘My baby... our baby... did make it into the world but only for a few hours. I had bought her the clothes,’ she pointed to the cabinet. ‘Exactly those. I never saw her in them.’

Deal with. Record. Facilitate. She and Nic knew the procedures well.

In the adjacent Room 4, Chantal had kettled off the visitors, who no doubt were riveted by her purple hair and many piercings, and asked them to remain there for five minutes. Shortly afterwards, Laure and Nic helped a shaky Odile down the stairs. Yves followed and reluctantly took his wife’s other arm and he and Laure ushered her outside.

‘Will you be all right?’ she asked. He shrugged, and she added, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘What use is that?’ said Odile, breaking free from her husband and making for the street. ‘You can say sorry till your tongue drops out, it doesn’t change things. It doesn’t bring the dead back.’

Yves cast an apologetic glance at Laure and went after his wife. Laure turned to go back in.

‘You’re Laure Carlyle, the curator, right?’

Laure was accosted by a tall, Nordically fair girl in dark glasses but her accent suggested she was an American from the South. Tennessee? Georgia?

Normally, the museum staff shielded her from the madder and more extreme petitioners. But the girl looked sane. And energetic. She also looked as though she wasn't acquainted with fear.

Buttonholing obviously came naturally to whoever this was for she continued, 'I'm a freelance journalist over in Paris working on stories. I heard about your museum and I would love to talk to you about it.' She searched in a black neoprene rucksack and thrust a card at Laure. 'I've just spent time here. It's special. It needs to be written about. *You* need to be written about.' She added, 'I do all the grunt work, so you needn't worry. You just have to talk.'

This was not unusual. The museum had gained footfall and traction in the guidebooks and the press. Journalists were intrigued by the concept and the location – oh, it's in *Paris*! There was a hum about it on social media. Even *Newsweek* had made an overture in an email: 'We will put you on the map.'

'I rarely give interviews.' Laure pocketed the card without looking at it.

'I googled you,' the girl said, and Laure bristled. As she always did. 'You gave an interview to an Italian magazine a few months ago. Might it be time for another?'

'No.'

'I have a big contact at *Vanity Fair*,' says the girl. 'It would be red meat for them.'

Carrot. Dangled.

This girl was on the make. Working her way into a career. She'll take risks, lie a little. Or, bend the truth. Laure had clashed with the type often. 'Please don't think this is unkind, but no.'

‘Not unkind, but protective perhaps?’ Far from taking the flat refusal, the girl remained polite, charming and persistent. ‘This place needs to be known. It helps people?’

This was true. ‘It does.’

‘If I had set up this place, it would be because I have something in my past to exorcise. What do you reckon?’

The question was clumsily put, transparently ambitious, but smart.

‘You’d be wrong.’ Laure gave no hint of her dismay and made for the entrance. ‘I have to get back to work.’

At the door, she looked back over her shoulder.

Chantal had returned to the entrance desk. She looked up at Laure. ‘*Quelle scène.*’ She had the half-fascinated, half-appalled expression on her face that Laure had seen before. ‘Nic reckons she was a bit mad.’

‘Maybe.’ Laure placed a foot on the first stair. ‘Back to normal upstairs?’

‘They all wanted to know who was killing whom and why.’ Chantal’s smile revealed very even teeth. ‘It’s made the visit for them. They’ll tell everybody about it and we’ll have double the numbers tomorrow.’ She gestured to the revolving stand with the postcards. ‘We never know what happens in the end.’

‘No,’ said Laure. ‘But that’s the point.’

‘*Dommage.*’ Chantal stuck her head on one side. ‘You all right?’

Chantal’s purple hair and piercings did an excellent job of disguising her motherly nature and she was hoping Laure would admit that she wasn’t because it would give her permission to fuss over her boss.

‘You’re a treasure, Chantal, but I’m fine.’

‘People...’ She fiddled with one of her several ear studs. ‘They think they can sound off anywhere.’

‘No, they think they can sound off in here. And that’s fine. Absolutely fine.’

Laure went upstairs to check over the rooms. Rooms 3 and 4 were crowded with visitors which always added an air of excitement. A large group of Japanese tourists wearing orange baseball hats were being shepherded through Rooms 6 and 7. Laure stepped aside to let them pass. Most of them ignored her and surged through the doorways, blind to anything but their determination to reach the end.

Room 5 was empty and the two videos on screens at either end of the room rolled on a continual loop. The first was of a walled garden. The first shots were of it under snow, with a frozen gallery of trees and bushes flanking a central lawn. The following shots were taken in spring and the starkness had been replaced by blossom and foliage. The summer brought frilled peonies and brazen dahlias in oranges and crimsons. The autumn shots were of berries and the laden apple trees at the far end of the garden.

The final view was of a garden that was no longer a garden. Instead of a flowerbed blazing with autumn colour and windfall apples servicing punch-drunk wasps, four houses had grown within the walls. Unimaginative creations with plate-glass windows of the variety beloved by out-for-a-quick-profit property developers. These were houses not constructed for beauty or pleasure but to make money. The label underneath this video read: ‘My elder brother promised my parents never to sell the garden. Six months after their death, he did so for a large sum of money. I will never forgive him for destroying this piece of paradise.’

A couple of years ago, Laure gave a lecture to trainee curators,

with an age range from early twenties to early forties, during which she described the second video in Room 5.

‘The video is in black and white and shows a small room, furnished with a table and two chairs facing each other. There is no window in the shot. A black Bakelite phone, the squat old-fashioned type with a cumbersome dial and plaited cording, occupies the centre table. The cheap plastic chairs are embossed with cigarette burns, and the floor is of rough planking. There are no indications as to where the room might be.

‘The shot is held steady on this *mise en scène* and the only sound to break the silence is the click of the camera.

‘Without warning, the phone shrieks into the silence.’

She continued. ‘The piece is powerful and disturbing, and the image of the telephone ringing appears to tap into a collective unease that many of us carry. I have watched it many times and, like most onlookers, still jump. Some of the visitors have been known to scream. On the feedback form which we ask visitors to fill in, one of the questions asks them to tell us which object had the most effect on them. A consistent majority pinpoint it.

‘We’ve had letters about it asking if it’s a horror film. Or a political one? Or is it just an installation?’

At this point, she ran the video for the audience.

‘The answer is,’ she concluded, looking at the row of expectant faces, ‘the answer is that it combines all these elements which, I would argue, is the mark of a successful exhibit. You will, of course, question how it qualifies for the Museum of Broken Promises?’

There was a shuffle of expectation and the women – generally it was the women who took notes – in the audience took up their pens.

‘I should add that this particular exhibit was sent in anonymously in the early days of the museum’s life and you will understand why

when I read the label, which is in French, English and Czech. “From 1948–1989 in Communist Czechoslovakia we were promised employment, peaceful politics decent living standards and no corruption. This is what we got.”

By mid-afternoon, Laure was ensconced in the interview room with a cake tin from Room 1 on the table between her and the smiling woman who sat opposite.

‘It’s lovely to see you again, Myrna.’

‘It’s quite a journey from St Louis,’ Myrna replied, ‘but I had to see you. And to pick this up.’

The change in her was startling. Three years ago, middle-aged, newly divorced and drained, Myrna had sat in this room crying so hard that Laure fetched a second box of tissues. Today, she was no less faded or unobtrusive, but there had been a sea change: she was tougher-looking, full of humour, resolved on who and what she was. It was very attractive.

It had been another matter then. Deep and profound weeping, such as Myrna had indulged in, was one way of groping towards an explanation.

‘My husband couldn’t understand that I had another life inside my head,’ she explained. ‘When we got married, he promised that he would make it possible for me to paint but he didn’t.’ She gazed over Laure’s shoulder. ‘He went out of his way to make it almost impossible. Then I realized that he didn’t want me to paint because it took attention away from him. He doesn’t want me to paint because he loves me.’

It was always tempting to pronounce judgment. ‘Never, ever do so,’ Laure instructed her team.

The cake tin was decorated with a series of cartouches, scenes from a domestic life, the first of which showed a woman cooking at a stove. Hovering above was the same woman with permed frizzy hair and a frilled blouse holding a paintbrush filling in a sky of lapis-lazuli blue.

Each of the cartouches repeated the device of Myrna performing her housewife routines, with the conceit of her alter ego hovering above to create a transcendent or magical scene. Open that tin, Laure remembered thinking, and out would sift broken desires along with the cakes over which Myrna had cried as she baked.

‘It was not as though I was overambitious,’ Myrna confessed through the tissues. ‘I just need the peace to do my painting.’ She struggled for composure. ‘I’ve left my husband. The paintings on this tin tell you why.’ Averting her eyes from the tin, she said, ‘There’s an angel cake inside. Pink and white with frosted icing. Enjoy. Please.’ She got to her feet. ‘I love him,’ she said. ‘But it’s not enough.’

‘I’ve come to take back the tin,’ Myrna was now saying. ‘He’s begged for forgiveness. He tells me that he now understands. We’re starting over.’

Possibly, Myrna’s husband had arrived at a new understanding because the beautiful, glowing tin displayed in the museum had brought his wife a small fame and many commissions. No cynic (well, only a touch), Laure was delighted to acknowledge this winning fusion of love, forgiveness and... money.

‘I’m so glad,’ she told Myrna, and meant it.

‘Would you like to meet him?’ He’s lurking in the street outside.’ Myrna shot Laure a conspiratorial look. ‘Didn’t have the balls, if you know what I mean.’

This was a day in the life of the Museum of Broken Promises.



CHAPTER 2

AS HE NEVER ATE BREAKFAST AT HOME BUT, IF THERE WAS time, Laure brewed strong black coffee.

Her apartment on the second floor of a former warehouse was typical of a modern Parisian conversion: small (some said cramped), the windows were plate glass and the doors MDF. The kitchen only just accommodated a modest oven and fridge and, if the table flap was up, it was a squeeze to get to the sink.

Apart from the stacked, labelled boxes in the second, tiny cupboard of a bedroom occupying what space there was in it, furniture and trimmings were kept to a notable minimum. Sometimes, there was a vase of flowers, a coat cast onto a chair, a French novel in a yellow dust jacket but, usually, the effect was extreme minimalism.

Finding anywhere to live in Paris was a nightmare and a flat, however small, was a flat. Admittedly somewhat joyless, the anonymity of the place suited her plus it was only a short walk to work.

In the courtyard below, Madame Poirier, the *concierge*, conducted one of her conversations punctuated with explosive syllables. 'It's against regulations, *monsieur*,' she was saying.

Which ones this time? Laure wondered. (Madame Poirier's regulations came and went.) Which *monsieur* was she bullying? In truth, Madame never shut up, but, like the ugly doors and windows, she was part of a set-up into which Laure had inserted herself. The quasi-bullying, the tiptoeing around the regulations, the irritations were anchors. They were the ingredients of the life she had chosen.

Having washed up the coffee pot, she put it out to dry on a tea towel spread out over the drainer and checked that the one sharp kitchen knife was back in the drawer. Not content, she reopened the drawer and stuck a cork onto the tip of the knife, just to be sure. Sharp knives made her uneasy.

She rarely cooked or entertained and possessed only four pieces of good furniture, including the sofa. But hardly anyone ever slumped down into it for a late-night drink or to read the Sunday papers. Sometimes her English friends – including Jane back home in Brympton – commented on how unlived-in it felt.

Charlie, her younger brother, was more forthright. 'You could at least unpack the boxes, Laure.'

'They're fine as it is. I want it light, free from clutter.'

'Most normal people have something. A photo, some books, the chair Granny gave them. You might as well live in an egg box.'

Laure eyed him. Charlie was not much of a home-bird either and their mutual amusement held more than a tinge of irony. 'Pot and kettle?'

'The very ones.'

If it was a *modus vivendi* which struck the English as odd, the French saw nothing peculiar about it. They were not curious as to how Laure chose to live and, if they wished to eat a meal together, they met at a restaurant.

Listening to the news with half an ear, she drank her coffee and dried her hair. The *meteo* predicted 26 degrees at midday and she hoped no higher because her hair would suffer. *Dommmage*. She gave it a final blast from the dryer, threaded drop pearl earrings into her ears and inspected her nail varnish, an exciting dark red that required upkeep. But, the colour of riot and sex, it was worth it.

She tilted her head at the image in the mirror.

What she saw in it told her that her efforts had paid off. She had sometimes listened to other women saying how much they hated their looks but she felt that she had been through too much to allow herself to indulge in that. It hobbled the mind. She swept a finger over her cheek. Her skin, of which she was proud, was still clear and youthful-looking. Once upon a time, in another country, Tomas told her that her skin reminded him of mother-of-pearl. Her final act was to apply sun-protection cream before picking up her laptop and handbag and letting herself out of the front door.

Emerging into the street, she turned canalwards, glancing right and left and scanning the buildings. It was the old habit of ‘dry-cleaning’, the art of shaking off surveillance, that she had never discarded. Or rather, it refused to discard her. She set off and her mobile piped ‘Night Owl’. It was Xavier, her ex-husband. ‘*Oui, mon brave.*’
‘*Ma belle.*’

Neither greeting meant anything much. It was the language and tone they had mutually agreed to adopt since parting several years previously. Xavier had remarried and had had the son for which he had longed. So civilized had been the divorce that Marie, the new wife, invited Laure over to dinner from time to time. Possibly to keep an eye on her predecessor?

‘If we had loved each other more,’ Xavier once remarked, ‘meeting would be a problem, but it’s not.’

‘Strange to think how cut and shut it is now,’ she remembered replying.

‘Strange but true. Yet not uncomfortable, I think?’

‘No, darling Xavier, not uncomfortable at all.’

They had stared at each other. Laure could not help thinking, as she sometimes did, that his kindly, worldly regard enshrined the accusation: your heart is arid.

Traffic sounded in her ear and she deduced Xavier was in the street. A decade of marriage inevitably meant that this and that intelligence about your spouse stuck in the memory and there was a fair bet that he was wearing taupe chinos and the same black jacket he had cherished for years. His hair would be brushed back and, ten to one, he would be squinting into the distance because he was too vain to wear his glasses.

‘It’s one of the days I miss you, Laure. And your lovely gooseberry-coloured eyes.’

She smiled. ‘Me too, Xavier.’ Regret for the failed marriage surfaced more frequently than she owned up to. Xavier had his quirks, but he was a principled man and often very funny. ‘But you have a wife.’

‘So I do.’

Knowing that Xavier was still fond of her warmed Laure, picking her way around the rubbish on the street. ‘You will always be half a Brit,’ he once said. ‘However good your French and however long you live here. You need a champion.’

Rubbish. Laure was more French or, to be accurate, more Parisian than Xavier gave her credit for. ‘*J’aime deux choses seulement... vous et la plus belle ville du monde*,’ she replied. It was a line from an old and sentimental poem, but it pinpointed her giving of her heart to the city.

Xavier's point about championing her was the one that held the real bite. If they had championed each other a little more during their marriage, the outcome might have been different. For that, she blamed herself. Mostly.

Despite the banter, Xavier never wasted his phone calls. 'Spotted an article in *Figaro* about the Louvre lobbying to gather the Museum of Broken Promises into its embrace. Its spokesman argues that the day of the private museum is over. They reckon you and they would be terrific in bed together.'

'Apparently.' She gave a tiny sigh.

'Pushing the metaphor: the Louvre is a disgusting old roué and you're but a child bride. It's the old thing. Money talks and those who have it talk away. How would it fit in with Nos Arts en France?'

Nos Arts en France was a semi-government body that issued grants for cultural enterprises. Laure had been warned that they were tricky but had found her dealings with them to be straightforward.

'The board of Nos Arts will assess the situation and let me know whether they wish to continue funding the museum. If they do, nothing will change and I'll be happy.'

'Nos Arts have been generous to you.'

'We could not have survived without them.'

Xavier became serious. 'Do you mind if you're taken over?'

She looked up in a sky lashed with trails of whipped cream. 'I shall fight tooth and nail.'

'*Chérie*, you might not have any choice.' He sounded regretful. 'You have become powerful but not that kind of powerful.'

It wasn't the first time Laure had encountered a threat – theoretical or otherwise – and she had learnt to deal with them by splitting herself into compartments.

There was the Laure whose experiences in the past helped her to negotiate the dusty, complicated structures of public governance without too much bother.

Then there was the Laure who burned to make her museum work precisely because the past still lived in her and who could be cast down by the bureaucratic grind.

‘On a happier note,’ she said, ‘Maison de Grasse is going to be our patron.’

It was Xavier’s turn to be taken aback, and the audible click of his tongue was an expression of admiration for a coup. ‘Nice.’

Having started life as a small, exclusive perfume house, Maison de Grasse had grown into a multi-national that supplied scents for a huge range of goods from household cleaners, which would be unusable without them, to candles and room sprays. They still created and manufactured the most exclusive perfumes, of course. Many of the larger French companies offset tax liabilities by becoming patrons of a museum. Maison de Grasse was following suit in concluding that it would be a prudent blend of fiscal planning and largesse to support a slightly alternative arts project. For Laure, there were sweeteners promised in the form of publicity for the museum and advertising support.

‘Nice, Xavier repeated.

A man totally absorbed by the screen on his phone banged into Laure. She dropped hers and the conversation went dead.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ said the man. ‘I didn’t see you.’

Crystal clear.

Many of Laure’s older memories were anguished and fudged, but what she recorded on first setting eyes on Canal Saint-Martin

and the streets spidering out from the ribbon of water were just that: crystal clear.

Ten years ago, it had been run down in places and it was stupid to wander there at night alone. But, here was the thing: the *quartier* clung to its seductions. Her searches revealed that, in its past, it had seethed with life (some of it pretty low), with sex (bartered or otherwise) and it possessed a unique louche elegance. It was an area that proclaimed to the visitor: I possess an impeccable pedigree, and many of my old buildings have survived revolutions and the destructions of Baron Haussmann. Or something like that. The wording often changed in her head but the gist was the same.

The poor and homeless liked it. As did its long-stayers. So did Laure on the run from her divorce. Listening to the slap of water against the sides of the canal was to feel grounded into the city's inner life. Likewise, traversing one of the cast-iron footbridges spanning the grey-green, rubbish-speckled water, or tracing the topography of streets with their occasional sinister feel, and she was passionately protective about the just-hanging-on-to-a-living shops and cafes.

That had been then. Recently, an ice-cream shop selling every hue and flavour known to humanity, and an expensive clothes boutique, had arrived, plus a *chocolaterie* and a *salon de beauté*. Possibly, her museum had helped the renaissance but now that she had become a true-blooded *canaliste*, she kept watch over rapacious developers. Unreconstructed it still may be, but the *quartier* commanded intense loyalty from those who lived there, in a way that modern, sanitized areas possibly did not. Even, as some partisan *canalistes* argued, the up-itself Left Bank.

The smell of the water was familiar and inescapable as she emerged out of the street and onto the canal bank. Flattish.

Brackish and, since it was early autumn, carrying a hint of decay. (She had first noticed how water could smell that hot summer in Prague when she and Tomas had idled along the river.) An empty *bateau mouche* slid through the water eastwards, leaving a backwash of flotsam of orange peel, a plastic bottle and the remains of a hamburger.

In the Rue de la Grange aux Belles, Madame Becque was folding back the shutters of her grocery shop. Recently, she and her husband had painted the woodwork a bright blue and dyed their poodles' coats a lighter blue to harmonize, which added immeasurably to the gaiety of nations. The favoured bar on the corner that served late-night brandies was putting up the shutters for a few hours' rest. A homeless man sat cross-legged outside it. As she went past, Laure dropped a euro into his cup.

Further up the street, a scruffy, litter-strewn patch of earth was sandwiched between two buildings. Laure stopped. 'Kočka,' she called. Czech for 'cat', it was not an imaginative choice, but it was the one that had come into her head when she first spotted the little stray a couple of weeks ago.

Tail dragging behind her, a tabby emerged from the shadow cast by the wall. Tiny-boned. Almost emaciated. Exhausted from the business of staying alive and beyond frail. Laure touched the small triangular face and ran a finger down her backbone, gently rubbing the spinal bumps and flat bone before the tail. It was a moment of communion. Of comfort. Of a small trusting exchange between animal and human.

Should she be worried that she was not doing Kočka any favours by feeding her? An argument ran that said that a homeless stray would be better off dead. Death was not the worst thing to happen. Death could be welcomed.

It was then she noticed that under the starved belly poked pink, swollen nipples.

Her throat tightened. *Kittens.*

Kočka was waiting unsentimentally (unlike Laure) for her benefactor to service her hunger. Laure emptied the expensive cat food stuffed with vitamins into the fruit punnet she had brought along and watched the cat fall on it.

Bending down, Laure caught the faintest of purrs but, otherwise, she was ignored. Pleased about the purr, she told Kočka, 'No promises.'

She continued north up the Rue de la Grange aux Belles.

When she had first set foot in the street, she was a woman whose decree absolute had just slid onto the lawyer's desk. It had been a hard-frosted winter's day. Her shoes were flimsy, and her frozen feet had refused to cooperate. As they grew damper, they made a flapping sound on the pavement.

She had caught sight of a girl in a red coat and pile of coffee grounds on the pavement. A bad-tempered exchange emanated from the Asian supermarket. A dog barked. The cold was neither kind nor exhilarating and grey, bad-tempered snow flurries threatened.

Exploring the *quartier* was to experience a jumble of impressions. It was only later, much later, these initial images assembled like a jigsaw to construct her personal landscape: the shutters, the noise of the dinky machines which cleaned the streets each morning, the ironwork on the older houses and, in her stone niche, a statue of the Virgin whose bovine eyes appeared to skewer passers-by.

She had been so certain that pessimism was a condition of life and the slightest setback tipped her thoughts out of the box in which she struggled to confine them. Not helped by her broken marriage,

she was dogged by a sense of failure. By that she meant: the past was too big to cope with. Apparently, according to quantum physics, the atom does not follow one path in order to exit a maze. It goes down every path all at the same time, which was a fine description of what Laure was doing. Running down every path without knowing why, falling at every obstacle, finding her face in the mud.

It had taken her roughly thirty seconds to identify as interesting the flat-fronted, three-storey house at the further end of the street. A good proportion of its roof tiles were slipping from their moorings and the paintwork had bubbled and flaked. She watched the first few flakes of snow sift down over its roof while she absorbed its worn-at-the-edges presentation, the fact that it had obviously survived for a couple of hundred years, that it did not care a tinker's cuss whether she, Laure, was a failure or not. Having absorbed that, the suggestion winged through her mind that the life inside the – no-doubt – moth-eaten rooms could be creative and serene.

Crucially, it was for sale.

She had no money. No expertise. Nothing except an idea that arrived as she gazed at the house from the opposite side of the street and clenched first her right foot then her left in an effort to drive circulation into her feet.

After arranging access to the house, she allowed herself plenty of time to walk through it. She examined its sash windows and tapped the floorboards, she trudged up the too-narrow staircase, poked her head into antiquated lavatories and ascended to the attics. She sniffed neglect, decay and trouble and winced at the reluctant squeal of a swollen door and the scatter of mice up above.

The atmosphere suggested past struggles to live and to thrive, some disastrous, some triumphant. She wished for no more turbulence in her life. None, ever. As she paced the freezing,

despairing rooms, she asked herself: would it be better to avoid such a place?

Redemption was more than a word. It was a nirvana. It was a state of grace perpetually shuffling away from her. But maybe she could source it in bricks and mortar?

In the cold, her toes had felt as stiff as clothes pegs. Yet, as she listened in to the orchestration of the house's creaks and shifts, the answer became clear.

Today, its paintwork was new, its stucco repaired, the roof fixed and a sign hung over the entrance which read: *Musée* and, underneath in French and English: 'Museum of Broken Promises'.

The second line read: 'Curator, Laure Carlyle'.