

# Passage du désir

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## *Translator's Note*

*In Chapter 1 three youths carry out an audacious armed raid on a bureau de change on the Champs-Élysées in the early hours of the morning. They get away with a cool one-and-a-half million euros...*

*Chapter 2 introduces one of the book's two main protagonists, Ingrid Diesel, an American masseuse who has settled in Paris. Though still unaware of the fact, she is shortly to become an amateur detective when one of the young women who lives in her building is found brutally murdered (Chapter 3). Her feet have been hacked off with a cleaver and removed from the scene.*

*The dead girl's apartment also contains the cash from the Champs-Élysées robbery, though that will remain a secret from the investigators for the time being...*

*In Chapter 4 the reader meets Ingrid's future partner in criminal investigation, retired former police commissaire, Lola Jost. The acerbic, redoubtable, chain-smoking, port-drinking Jost is reluctant to come out of retirement and team up with the breezy, no-nonsense young American until one of their mutual friends is arrested on suspicion of murder...*

*And as the book progresses the reader discovers that the detective duo are concealing some secrets of their own...*

## Chapter 2

Reinventing yourself takes determination. That was how Maxime Duchamp came to be lying on Ingrid Diesel's massage table. Ingrid had dreamt of this moment. She'd imagined his body before she saw it in the flesh for the first time: not large but well-built, with a powerful torso, strong shoulders and biceps, perfect buttocks, well-shaped legs, hands and feet. And she'd guessed right. What she hadn't imagined were the marks on his body. But then how could she have imagined the marks left by his brush with death? Maxime's back and right side bore signs of swelling and stitching, which hinted how close he'd come to death.

Maxime was calmly telling her about the penultimate day of the Gulf War, February 28, 1991. It also turned out to be his last day as a photojournalist. Ingrid was eager to hear more, but he was taking his time. His body was relaxed. He was breathing softly with his eyes closed. He seemed to be listening to the rain, which had long held off but now was making up for lost time. It streamed down the plate glass window of Ingrid's work-room and bounced off the paving stones in the passageway outside.

'We're cosy in here,' thought Ingrid. 'It's raining out, but only the smell of the rain can get inside. It smells like dead leaves. I'm glad we're in here, thinking about the same thing, even if Maxime's thinking in French and I'm thinking in English. Safe inside where only the smell of the rain can reach us ...'

'OK, turn over now, Maxime.'

He did as she asked, opening his eyes and smiling. It was impossible to say whether his eyes were green and blue. His face was endlessly fascinating and quick to express emotion. He had a strong neck and short hair that was starting to thin. It was the face of someone who

has seen life.

The first time Ingrid saw him, his face had made her think of a sailor, eager to set sail in new directions. She imagined him taking the world in, storing all his experiences away in his head. She hadn't been far wrong. But the boats he'd sailed in were aircraft carriers.

'They lied, you know, Ingrid.'

'What do you mean?'

'About the Gulf War. It wasn't a clean fight. It wasn't surgical. It was disgusting - the blood and burnt flesh. People weeping and screaming in terror. And I photographed it all.'

'Until that day in February '91...'

'Yes. But I didn't quit because I was wounded.'

'No?'

'I was photographing a convoy when it came under fire on the highway. We were in a press jeep. The driver died instantly. I got shrapnel in my back. Jimmy - he was with Newsweek - escaped with just a few scratches. He'll probably wonder why till his dying day. They flew us out. I can still visualize the scene in that helicopter. I couldn't move. My back was ripped to pieces. Across from me there was a wounded marine. He couldn't have been more than twenty. He was in tears. His best friend was in a body bag beside him. His tank had been destroyed by an American missile. "Friendly fire." Between them there was another soldier whose face was covered with a bloody bandage. And I couldn't stop myself thinking that the three of them would make a great shot, but that I couldn't move to shoot it and Jimmy would be the one who'd get it. You could put it down to the painkillers making me woozy... I guess.'

'But it wasn't that...'

'No. Later when I thought about it in the cold light of day I knew I had to stop before I lost all feeling. Or went crazy. Lots of my colleagues were surprised that I quit. Jimmy got the World Press award for his picture and I was happy for him.'

Ingrid was working on Maxime's arms now. He was still relaxed, but

less so than before. They were no longer listening to the rain together. Just as she was thinking the spell had been broken, he said: ‘What a grip! This isn’t how I imagined Balinese massage!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I didn’t think it’d be so firm. It hurts but at the same time it feels good.’

‘If it’s too gentle, it’s not worth doing.’

‘I’m not complaining. Keep going.’

Ingrid Diesel was a professional masseuse but she didn’t go looking for clients. She worked discreetly in the Passage du désir in the 10th arrondissement. There was no brass plaque by her door. Word of mouth was enough and she reserved the right to choose her clients: they had to be people she liked, whose bodies she was happy to touch. Maxime certainly qualified. In fact Ingrid would have liked the sympathy between them to go further. She wanted it to deepen until all they could do was fall into each other’s arms. But that wasn’t how things were going.

There was someone else in Maxime’s life – ultrafeminine Khadidja Younis, with all that hair and her firm little butt. She knew all about making herself desirable in that way that French women seem to have invented. They could talk about the equality of the sexes all they liked, but Frenchwomen knew how to turn on the seduction when it came to it. They’d lower their voices or just listen to make men feel in charge. It was as if history had gone into reverse and the feminists had never burnt their bras. As though the struggle for women’s rights had been an optical illusion, no more significant than a few ladies swapping recipes. It was as if no one had ever said that men are from Mars and women from Venus.

What was for sure was that girls like Khadidja were 100% from Paris. All they had to do was put on their balconnette bras and men would fall over themselves to hold doors open for them so they didn’t swing shut on their pretty little faces. Men would light their cigarettes, buy them flowers, pay them compliments as they gazed through

fluttering (false) eyelashes. It was a bit like Balinese massage. You knew it would hurt, but it felt good.

Ingrid thought about her own body. She was Russian on her mother's side, Irish on her father's, and had been born in Brooklyn in 1972. Her physique could be termed 'out of the ordinary'. She was tall (a good few inches taller than Maxime) and didn't have an ounce of fat on her well-toned body. Her close-cropped hair was very blonde, her skin very pale, and her eyes were almond-shaped and ice-cool. She had prominent cheekbones, full sensual lips, strong teeth, and a long slender neck. And as a finishing touch, she had a magnificent tattoo that ran from her shoulders down to her right buttock. It showed a woman leaning over a pond of koi carp fringed with irises. One of the fish was splashing playfully.

Aesthetically it was a marvel, a genuine *bonji* created by a Japanese Kamakura master, though it was maybe less effective from the erotic point of view. At least for Maxime Duchamp. Ingrid got back to work. She wore her nails very short, unlike Khadidja's claws; her nails were always polished and her hands adorned with gold rings. This didn't seem to get in the way of her waitressing job at 'Belles de jour comme de nuit', the restaurant on the passage Brady. This restaurant was Maxime Duchamp's new life. Ingrid already knew about the time he'd spent convalescing at the family home in Quercy after the Gulf War. This return to his roots had snapped him out of his gloom. Maxime's grandmother ran the only inn in the village, a few kilometres from Castelsarrasin. He spent hours helping her in the kitchen, just as he had done when he was a boy. The habit had come back. And his appetite for life returned, as crisp and sharp as a starched apron and chef's hat.

Maxime was on good form this morning and Ingrid intended to make the most of it, so she tried a different tack: 'You never married?'

As she expected, he opened his expressive eyes and looked at her in surprise. 'I'm sorry. I'm tactless. That's what Americans are like. People you never met before get on the bus and within five minutes

they're telling you all about their marriages, their divorces, their health problems. But it doesn't really mean anything... Anyway, you and I aren't strangers any more.'

'It's not a secret. I was married once.'

'So you're divorced?'

'Widowed. Rinko died.'

'Rinko?'

'She was Japanese. We met during the Falklands war. She was in Buenos Aires researching a story.'

'Was she a journalist?'

'She drew manga.'

Reluctantly Ingrid told Maxime the massage was over. He thanked her with a friendly tap on the shoulder, got dressed and picked up his sports bag. He said no to coffee. He had to get back to the restaurant to help Chloé and Khadidja with the deliveries. They kissed goodbye chastely on both cheeks and Ingrid watched him open his umbrella against the downpour in the Passage du désir. As he turned back, he realized that she was waiting for him to say something else. He had to speak loudly to make himself heard over the noise of the rain drumming on his umbrella: 'She was murdered.'

'What?'

'She let someone into her studio. Into our apartment. We lived on the rue des Deux-Gares. They never caught him. It was twelve years ago.'

'I'm really sorry. I can be so dumb sometimes ...'

'It's OK, Ingrid. That's not a secret either. I have Rinko's ashes at home. One day Khadidja asked me about it and I told her.'

Ingrid wanted to know more. How had Khadidja reacted? Had she stopped thinking about her looks, which she took such care over for her auditions, long enough to hold his face between her hands and tell him how much... 'That's exactly what I want to do right now,' thought Ingrid. 'But I can't. I can massage his body from the roots of his hair to the tips of toes but I can't take his face in my hands and I

can't put my lips on his and kiss him. Shit.'

Ingrid had to content herself with returning his wave. She watched him disappear towards the Faubourg Saint-Denis and the passage Brady. It was only a stone's throw away, yet it might as well have been light years. She had wanted revelations. Oh well, now she had them. Ingrid made herself a coffee, put on some music and sat down on the pink couch in her waiting room. Maxime was her only client of the morning. She listened for a while to *The Future Sound of London*. The mind-blowing techno went well with the rain and the melancholy feeling that had just washed over her. But when she finished her coffee, she jumped up and went to her computer. She would tell Steve in Miami about her conversation with Maxime. Steve knew how to cheer her up. He was good at making you feel you weren't alone with your problems. After 9/11 Ingrid had felt particularly troubled. Her emails from Steve had helped her to keep things together.

It was two years since Ingrid had found herself in France: Ingrid the globetrotter, who had learned Balinese massage in Bali, Thai massage in Bangkok, and shiatsu in Tokyo. She knew people everywhere, from Sydney to Seoul, Koh Samui to Hong Kong, Luang Prabang to Manilla, Vancouver to New York. But this traveler had called a temporary halt to her globe-trotting in Paris, a city where she had neither friends nor lovers, only acquaintances and hopes. She talked to her far-flung friends on the internet and hardly ever turned her computer off.

Paris was too beautiful to tire of in a few months. It was a place where the pleasures of life weren't just a cliché, in spite of what the locals said. They were past-masters at grumbling and didn't realize how lucky they were to live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Ingrid had found her place in the *Passage du désir* by chance. Steve thought that it was a great address. What was less great, though, was that by some cruel irony Khadidja lived in the same building. 'Your rival's walking around up above you. It's as if she's trampling

on your heart. It's kind of perverse,' Steve had written. He was fond of the word 'perverse' but she didn't mind because he was funny and smart.

Khadidja shared her apartment with her friends Chloé and Vanessa. Chloé was the plump waitress at the restaurant. Vanessa was the serious-looking blonde who worked in a center for homeless children. Ingrid wished that she were the only person Maxime knew in the Passage du désir. 'The passage of desire' was such a great name – poetic and direct at the same time. But some things are beyond our control.

After emailing Steve, Ingrid planned to take a walk. Paris on Sundays was a pleasure to be savoured and walking always made her feel much better. She would walk for hours, even in the rain, even now that it was getting colder by the day. The sidewalks often had the look of wet tarmac, grey-black but spangled with glints of quartz. And in the neighbourhoods where there were parks or tree-lined avenues, the dead leaves would color the slate-grey sidewalks a thousand shades of gold. Ingrid liked the delicate geometry of the maple leaves the best, the way they grew in a wonderful sort of organized disorder as if governed by chaos theory. And then there was the ever-changing sky, whose dark leaden clouds would part all at once to reveal a slash of blue. Then the color of the buildings would change from grey to warm cream and the city, free of most of its week-day traffic, regained its own sweet sound.

## Chapter 3

Someone was standing above her. His hands reached for her throat. No chance of escape. He was too strong. A wild animal cried out within her. An animal sweating in panic. *I never knew how much I wanted to live... I never knew...*

She was looking up at the shelf.

*There was that book.*

The book was all she could see.

*Hans Christian Andersen... I'd listen for hours... mother reading...*

The last line of the story from childhood suddenly flashed into her mind:

*'No one knew... the beautiful things she had seen... and amid what splendor she and her grandmother had gone into...'*

### §

Chloé Gardel and Khadidja Younis returned home at around 4p.m. Usually Khadidja hung around at Maxime's after the lunchtime service on Sundays, but this Sunday she had an audition she didn't want to miss, so she needed time to primp herself. As soon as she got back, Khadidja went to take a shower, which meant that it was Chloé who found the body. Chloé was on her way to her room to practise her cello when she noticed Vanessa's door was open.

The girl was lying on her bed in her pyjamas. At first Chloé thought her friend was day-dreaming because her eyes were wide open. Her head was turned towards the books and the soft toys cluttering the shelves. Chloé went closer, as though Vanessa's fixed expression was drawing her nearer. She noticed the traces of red on Vanessa's pure white neck and realized that her own feet were wet. She was standing in a pool of blood. It never crossed her mind that the murderer could

still be in the apartment. Her brain disconnected and her throat filled with hot lava. She threw up.

She noticed something out the corner of her eye: an unfamiliar shape to her left which brought her back to reality. She turned her head and saw a large black zipper bag on the armchair.

Meanwhile, Khadidja Younis, dressed in her shower cap and bath robe, was wondering how the vacuum cleaner had found its way into the bath tub along with a ton of cleaning products. Chloé, looking pale and shocked, opened the bathroom door. She was holding the bag in her arms. An endless stream of banknotes was spilling from it. In spite of look on her friend's face, Khadidja couldn't help smiling. Never in all her life had she seen so much money.

## Chapter 4

Lieutenant Jérôme Barthélemy loathed commissaire Jean-Pascal Grousset. He hated everything about his new boss, even his name. Barthélemy had always thought double-barrelled first names were ridiculous, especially if they were 'Jean-something-or-other'. The first part always clashed with the second. To his face his colleagues called him JPG, but behind his back he was known as the garden gnome. He was a short man who was also short on ideas, and had a regulation hair-cut and a beard which he was devoted to. He smoked a pipe and had pipe-smoker's breath. It was useful to have something to stick in his mouth whenever he had nothing to say.

Right now the garden gnome was making the attractive girl go over her story again, the North-African-looking one who'd made the emergency call and opened the door to them. She didn't look dumb, but Grousset was talking to her as if she were.

'So you took care of the deliveries at the restaurant, worked your shift, and came home. You were about to take a shower. But you didn't stop to wonder where your friend was. Explain that to me again.'

'I had an audition to go to.'

'Where?'

'The M6 agency.'

'So what are you, a waitress or an actress?'

Khadidja Younis had known the gnome for just twenty minutes, but already she had his measure. She was giving him the shortest answers possible. Her friend meanwhile, still in her blood-soaked socks, sat on a kitchen chair, tracing the same shape over and over on the table top with a trembling finger. That girl needed to be treated for shock, but all the garden gnome's attention was on her pretty room-mate.

It wasn't a surprise; she had a good figure. Attractive, self-confident girls always set Grousset on edge. It wasn't a sexual thing, more like a nervous compulsion.

'And your friend there, is she an artist too? A musician?'

'She's a student at the conservatoire. And a waitress at the Belles.'

'Same as you.'

'Yes.'

'And at the time when your friend was murdered, she was at the restaurant 300 yards away waiting for deliveries. Same as you.'

'That's right.'

'And neither of you left the restaurant?'

'For the third time, no. Neither of us left the restaurant to come back here and kill Vanessa. And we didn't do it together, either. Because that's your next question, isn't it?'

'Answering a question with another question won't cut any ice with me.'

Jérôme Barthélemy couldn't take any more of this. He went to see the boys from forensics. They were working in silence. The younger the victim, the deeper the silence.

This one would have been twenty in February. She looked as though she were resting, lying on her back with her long tangled blonde hair fanned out. She had finely arched eyebrows, pale almond-shaped eyes, a porcelain complexion. But she no longer had any feet. The photographer was going round the body, forced into awkward positions by the small size of the room. The flash went off at regular intervals. Philippe Damien was waiting patiently for him to finish. The red marks on the neck indicated that she had been strangled, but unlike other cases of strangulation that Barthélemy could remember, her face looked intact. There was no facial swelling or cyanosis, no ecchymosis. Vanessa Ringer had been pretty. She still looked pretty.

'The face is unharmed,' Barthélemy said to Damien.

'Yes, she died quickly. Continuous manual pressure on the carotid

arteries in the neck for 15 to 30 seconds would have been enough. Manual strangulation is more likely than ligature strangulation to cause a heart attack because the pressure on the arteries is more precise. And the scratch marks on the neck must be hers. Made as she tried to escape.'

'So her killer must have been big?'

'Bigger than her anyway.'

'And he cut off her feet after she was dead?'

'That's right. It looks to me as though he mutilated her with a powerful implement.'

'Like a chain-saw?'

'More likely a butcher's cleaver. The cuts are clean. He even used a chopping board from the kitchen. It's over there. But he took the cleaver with him... And her feet.'

'No sexual molestation?'

'No, it was cold and clinical.'

'He's careful.'

'Down to the fine detail, Jérôme. You saw the vacuum cleaner in the bathtub?'

'Yes.'

'I reckon I'm not going to find much in the way of DNA in here or in the vacuum cleaner filter.'

'Sounds likely.'

'Let's hope he's not a serial killer...'

Screaming interrupted their conversation. Khadidja Younis was yelling at the gnome. Barthélemy and Damien exchanged weary smiles.

'I never thought I'd miss the old boss this much,' Barthélemy said, 'but I really can't bear that guy.'

Damien shrugged sympathetically and muttered, 'Maybe he won't last long. Meanwhile, good luck. Especially if you've got a serial killer.'

Khadidja Younis was kneeling beside her friend. Chloé had her back

to the wall and was kicking her legs. Her eyes were wild and her mouth was gasping as if she couldn't get enough air into her lungs. She looked as though she wanted to push herself into the wall. The garden gnome had stuck his pipe in his mouth to hide his embarrassment, and was looking at the two girls as though he were offended. 'I'm telling you, we've got to call her psychiatrist! He lives near here on the rue du Faubourg-saint-Denis. His name's Antoine Léger. Shit! It's not complicated!'

'Mind your language, Miss.'

'Can't you see she's having a panic attack? I'd like to see you cope with this.'

'Panic attacks are a luxury we can't afford in the police, Miss. In spite of all we hear and see. What interests me is to know why your friend is throwing a fit and why you're being so aggressive. There's something that you're holding back and you'd better spit it out now.'

'God help them,' thought Barthélemy. He went to take a look in the bathroom cabinet. When he came back to the kitchen, nothing had changed. The plump girl had gone off the deep end and the North African one, Khadidja, was arguing the gnome and at the same time making a great fuss over her friend. She looked rather like a madonna who had given birth to a very big Jesus. Barthélemy put the box of Lexomil on the table and made a discreet sign to Khadidja.

'She can't tell you anything in the state she's in. And neither can I for that matter.'

'Oh, I've got plenty of time. All I need's my tobacco and I've enough of that to last all day.'

'Are you for real or is this a nightmare?'

Hell fire and damnation. This is your fault, Lola Jost. Why did you quit, boss? Why?

'Barthélemy!'

'Yes, boss.'

'Go and interview the neighbours and take Vernier with you. The kid needs to get his hands dirty.'

Barthélemy didn't wait for the boss to change his mind. He took the rookie, put him in the hands of a uniform who knew the ropes, and told them to interview everyone in the building. Then he set off to look for Antoine Léger, the psychiatrist, on the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis. Not far. Not complicated. Apart from the fact that it was Sunday.

On his way he tried to imagine what this Antoine would look like. He had developed a pet theory as a result of taking down so many witness statements over the years: just as people sometimes look like their dogs, sometimes they also resemble their first names. It's clearer in some cases than others, especially Antoinettes. Antoinettes often had curly blond hair and an innocent kind of expression that made them look younger than their years.

Lieutenant Barthélemy found the brass plaque without difficulty. Léger was a psychoanalyst as well as a psychiatrist.

He was two floors up. The doctor did indeed have curly fair hair and a somewhat childlike expression. The apartment must also have been his consulting room, as everything in it was pale blue or beige, so as not to upset the patients, Barthélemy reckoned.

'Yes?' said the doctor in a fine, serious voice.

'We have an emergency, doctor. One of your patients, Sophie Gardel. Panic attack. She's in a bad state. Her roommate, Vanessa...'

'Vanessa Ringer?'

'She's been murdered.'

There was the slightest hint of disturbance in his blue eyes, nothing more. His eyes were deeper blue than the décor. The doctor was apparently used to crises.

'And you are?'

'Lieutenant Jérôme Barthélemy from the 10th commissariat.'

The psychiatrist nodded and narrowed his eyes as though the policeman had just put his finger on a marvellous repressed memory.

'OK, doctor, I'll let you finish whatever you're doing, but better hurry

it up because my boss is about to take the poor girl to the station house.'

As Barthélemy turned to go he saw a dalmatian, a splendid animal with big dark eyes. At first sight, it didn't seem to look like its owner. All the same, it was staring silently and not getting excited. It could have allowed itself a bark or a growl, a sniff at your shoes or around your crotch.

'We'll be right there,' Léger said.

'We?'

'Sigmund and I. He doesn't like to be left alone in the apartment.'

'As you wish, but you'll have to leave him outside. Because of the blood. There's a fair amount of it. And the DNA samples. You understand?'

'I understand, lieutenant.'

Back on the street Barthélemy hesitated: should he return to the Passage du désir or visit 32, rue de l'Echiquier? That unremarkable street was where Lola Jost had shut herself up from the world. She must have felt contempt for her close-knit team to have abandoned them overnight; it was a team that had been through a lot but they knew how to enjoy themselves when the opportunity presented itself. It wasn't right that she had turned her back on them like this, throwing away good memories along with the bad. Especially when she was the boss. Lola Jost wasn't an easy woman. But no one would have dared refer to her as 'the fat woman,' 'pain in the ass,' 'the old girl,' even if some days they had cause to. She could have a rotten temper and she wasn't going to win any beauty contests.

Almost without being aware of it, his feet were taking him south, towards a pale sun, which was trying to force its way through a barrier of grey clouds, like a weak light bulb behind tracing paper. Lieutenant Barthélemy passed the rue d'Enghien. If his memory served, the boss lived on the next street. He began to walk more slowly. What if she simply told him to get lost? What if she left him standing ringing like a fool in front of the spyhole in her door? And what

if she had gone off to warm her old bones somewhere quieter and less damp than Paris, now that she no longer liked people? No, that wasn't likely. Lola Jost always used to say that she hated unnecessary travel – weekends both short or long, holidays, sabbaticals, national holidays, any opportunity for adventure... There was only one exception: when she had gone to visit her son and granddaughters in Singapore. But that was a family trip, not a quest for exoticism. She wouldn't even talk about her holidays in the tropics, no matter how much they grilled her.

Well, she certainly drew attention to herself when she left her cramped office for good, thought Barthélemy as he climbed the steps of her building, which had neither elevator nor caretaker. Wisely, the boss lived on the second floor.

He couldn't tell what chain reaction he was about to set off as he pressed the brass button by her name. Barthélemy felt uncomfortable standing in front of an anonymous-looking door which was little more than a plank of plywood. His feet were rooted to the spot and his throat felt dry, yet soon he'd have to come up with something to say. Up until now he had just been brooding on his resentment. That was a bad beginning, but he rang. Several times. Nothing happened. No chain reaction. He'd drawn a blank. But as he went back down the stairs, which smelled of toast and Sunday breakfast, he smiled to himself and took out his cell phone. He'd been so focused on his grudge against the boss that he'd forgotten the phone in his pocket. And sure enough, there was the boss's number under L for Lola, a familiarity he only allowed himself in the privacy of his telephone contacts list.

The funny part is, Lola's not even her real name, he thought, selecting her number. She's really called Marie-Thérèse. And she certainly looks more like a Marie-Thérèse than a Lola. Well, she's allowed one affectation... All the same, on certain evenings in the office, seeing her leaning against the window ledge, with a cigarette in her mouth, her arms folded and her skirt revealing surprisingly shapely legs

given the rest of her figure, Marie-Thérèse might make you believe she was indeed a Lola. Her intelligent eyes would dart around as she talked to you about the details of a case in her husky voice whose drawl had a hint of a Swiss accent.

At the fifth ring she answered and Barthélemy's heart gave a lurch. It was great to hear that gruff, cigarette-fuelled voice again. It sounded almost asthmatic but blazed with authority.

'Hello, boss. It's Barthélemy. I'm outside your door.'

'And what might you be doing outside my door?'

'Eh, I'm on a case in the area with the garden gnome and... I came out to get some air and have a coffee... with you perhaps, if you happened to have one ready...'

'You've also woken me up.'

'Were you still asleep at this time? I don't believe it, boss.'

'Apart from you, I don't see that it was bothering anyone.'

'I just meant I didn't think siestas were your thing.'

'Hold the excuses, Barthélemy. I can manage coffee. Just give me a second to get my bathrobe on.'

'A second' – as if, thought the lieutenant. After a good five minutes the door opened to reveal a Lola with a crumpled, puffy face, and an expression like thunder. The bathrobe looked like it had once belonged to Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind* but it certainly seemed warm. What with the weather turning colder and all...

Barthélemy had been allowed in the boss's home a couple of times before. It was a badly laid-out two-room apartment with a passageway that was too wide and a kitchen that was too narrow. It was done out in shades of green and salmon pink, doubtless to keep her calm when the pizza joint on the first floor was busy dispatching delivery bikes at all hours of the day and night. He took off his shoes to try to get into her good books and followed her into the living room. The whole room had been taken over by a table with all its extensions out. On it was a jigsaw puzzle on a board. The kind that gave you a headache even to look at it.

‘The Sistine Chapel in 5,000 pieces,’ Lola said. ‘My little vice. Yesterday I went at it like a madwoman. Bloody Michelangelo kept me from my bed till three a.m.’

‘Impressive,’ said Barthélemy.

‘Do you really want some coffee?’

‘No.’

‘That’s good because I feel a bit queasy. I was running on fifty-year-old port. The face of Eve being cast out of Eden has been giving me a bit of trouble. I’m going to make some mint tea. Are you up for that?’

‘Absolutely, boss.’

‘I get the impression there’s something you want to ask.’

‘No, nothing, boss, it’s just that, well... I’m not feeling too good, but it’s not flu.’

‘At your age there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘You can spend your time studying the Sistine Chapel. But all I have to look at is the garden gnome. The very sight of him gets me down. His working methods, and his stupidity make me want to blow my brains out.’

“*A prize one cannot attain is no prize,  
When hope dies, so too must desire.*”

‘Is that some Zen monk?’ Barthélemy asked. He took the boss’s quotations in his stride; she’d been a French teacher in another life. She must have put several generations of high-school students through the mill.

‘No, an elegy by Bertaut. What I mean is, you’re going to have to get used to the idea: there’s no way I’ll ever set foot in that commissariat again.’

‘You were less than a year off retirement. There’s no sense in it.’

‘I didn’t join the police to be a pen-pusher. And my reasons for leaving are nobody’s business but my own.’

‘We all know your reasons,’ said Barthlémy boldly, braving his boss’s glare, which was chilly to the point of freezing. ‘Toussaint Kidjo.

That's your reason.'

Lola Jost looked her former colleague up and down and then marched off to the kitchen without a word. Barthélemy, who was relieved to be back on speaking terms with the boss again, could hear her clattering about in the kitchen. She came back, inscrutable as a statue, with a steaming tea pot and two cups on a tray, and the hideous bathrobe hanging like a royal train.

'Move that board and make sure you don't damage Michelangelo.'

Barthélemy did as he was told, feeling overjoyed to be back in touch with the one person who was able to clear the fog from his horizon. An illusion, of course, but it still made him feel better. Not a single piece of the jigsaw fell on the green carpet.

'Ok, tell me about it,' she sighed. 'It'll get it off your chest and it'll divert me.'

So Barthélemy told her about Vanessa and her two friends in the Passage du désir, girls who didn't seem to be rolling in money and shared a small apartment in order to be able to live in the centre of town. He described the victim's pale unblemished face, the quick, powerful strangulation, the business with the vacuum cleaner, the absence of a sexual angle. And the feet removed with a cleaver. Barthélemy emphasized the feet hacked off and spirited away. He mentioned the lack of everything: DNA, potential enemies, motive, meaning. And the contrast. The incomprehensible contrast between a clean strangulation and a hideous mutilation, an intact face and the bloody stumps. And all this had happened to a girl with no history, with a modest job, and not even a boyfriend, if her roommates were to be believed. No diary, no letters, nothing but a shelf of books – mainly children's books like 'The Little Match Girl' – some dolls and soft toys.

Lola Jost's fingers were entwined around her cup. The steam had misted her glasses so it was impossible to read her expression. By mentioning mutilation to her he was running the risk of reawakening memories of Toussaint Kidjo. All their troubles dated from

his sudden violent death; it had lit the flames and left nothing but ashes. Under the boss's leadership, the lads of the 10th had formed a solid team. Soon there'd be nothing left but charcoal – every day the garden gnome threw gasoline on the inferno like a sadistic imp, destroying what little point there was in getting up in the morning. It was getting him down. It was hardly surprising that people ended up going to see the psychiatrist. Whether he's called Antoine or Jean-Gédéon and has a dalmatian or an orang-utan.

Lola broke the silence: 'I know Khadidja and Chloé. They work at the Belles. It's a restaurant I often go to in the passage Brady. They're good kids. Grousset will give them a hard time for a bit, then he'll let them go.'

'That's not how he's looking at it. There's no trace of a break-in. So either the killer had a key or she let him in.'

'Barthélemy, you know as well as I do that 70 percent of homicide victims know their killer. And if you know it, JPG knows it too. He'll work on Vanessa's room-mates. Any cop would do the same.'

'It's not his thinking that worries me, it's his methods.'

'A word of advice, Barthélemy. Give it time. You'll see, it'll all work out.'

'My gut instinct's telling me different. And it's not often wrong.'

'Do you know the metaphysics of the jigsaw puzzle, Barthélemy?'

He shook his head.

'All it takes is a single piece and suddenly the whole universe makes sense. As long as you're happy with a rational universe. One we can grasp. When you can't carry more than your own weight, you've got to lighten the load.'

'I don't get it, boss.'

'Come on, Barthélemy, you used to be quicker than this! What I mean is: I can't cross the threshold of the 10th. It's physically impossible. I can't sit behind my desk as if nothing had happened and take charge of your ship of fools. I'm through with the iron first in the velvet glove and the carnival mask pulled over my hangover. I've done

that. I can't do it any more. I've given and I don't have anything left to give. So I'm doing my jigsaws and that's enough for me. Plenty.'

'That's hard to believe.'

'I'm not asking you to believe it. I'm not a guru, no matter what you might think. Now Grousset's in charge. He's not as dumb as he looks. He's letting you look for the piece.'

'The piece?'

'Of the puzzle. Keep up. The one you're going to put in the right place to close your investigation and hold the world in a single piece for five minutes. It's your calling and your glory. But in order to get there, you might have to get started with your investigation, don't you think?'

Barthélemy raised a sceptical eyebrow as he brought the tea cup to his lips. It had begun to rain again. He could see great sheets of it in grey and silver in front of the building opposite. He should go. There was nothing else for it. Interview all those people to see if they had seen anyone, knew anything, had an opinion about Vanessa Ringer, Chloé Gardel or Khadidja Younis. Before Lola's departure, Barthélemy had found this sort of meticulous work satisfying. He was a bloodhound sniffing out truffles in the mud, and he didn't mind a bit, on the contrary, since the boss also went snuffling after clues herself and rarely missed a single one. But those days were over. The boys of the 10th were back on their own again.

Barthélemy said goodbye with a heavy heart. He had come with a doubt; he was leaving with a certainty. 'When hope is dead, desire too must die.' Once upon a time Lola Jost was someone you couldn't ignore, her invisible sword of justice bearing down on her quartier, her very approach making the ground shake. Now she was just a grandma who did jigsaw puzzles.

After Barthélemy left, Lola Jost stared at the rain and tried to bring Vanessa Ringer's face to mind. She recalled a pretty girl who looked sad or cold. She'd bump into her from time to time in the local stores, dressed in dark colors, which made her camellia complexion all the

Lola abandoned thoughts of Vanessa and her window. She ate two slices of gingerbread and a banana (for the magnesium) – that would be good for the grey matter and therefore for the jigsaw puzzles. She coughed her way through a cigarette and did the washing up with the radio on. They were talking about a stick-up on the Champs-Élysées. Three hooded men armed with assault rifles had cleaned out a bureau de change in a few minutes shortly before 5a.m. and made off with a cool one and a half million euros. They disappeared as quickly as they had come, leaving their ram-raid vehicle behind. The piece finished with a Canadian tourist in a state of shock and some big shot from the Anti-Organized Crime unit explaining that times were changing: they were dealing with a new generation of criminals, very different from the old stick-up men who had had a code of honour, professional experience, and an awareness of the risks they were taking. Now, young delinquents, often from the projects around the capital, would attack jewelers' shops, bureaux de change or auction houses armed with military weapons and a hell of a nerve. They went in quickly, took crazy risks and sold off the fruits of their heist for whatever they could get without a second thought.

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