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The New Mrs Clifton

Written by Elizabeth Buchan

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The New Mrs Clifton

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For the ship's company, with thanks for golden holidays,
and in memory of Paul Sidey (1943–2014)

The Germans call the months after the war *Stunde Null* ('Zero Hour') – the implication being that this was a time when the slate was wiped clean, and history allowed to start again. But it does not take much imagination to see that this is a decidedly rosy view of postwar history.

Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent*

Chapter One

1974

They had alighted on Clapham Common by chance. A friend recommended it as an area that was still affordable in London for young couples. Then he had read an article in an evening newspaper extolling its virtues – its greenness and the inexpensive period-housing stock – which sold it to both of them.

Once installed, they relished the Common's space and freedom, the pleasant streets and the late-Victorian and Edwardian architecture. Cheered by the brightness of the rooms, their contentment blossomed. It was an area where they felt they could put down roots and, if all went well, have a family. If the house required refurbishment and ongoing repairs, at least it had the benefit of being roomy and filled with light.

Inch by inch, they were kicking it into shape. There were priorities, of course, and the basic upkeep, such as replacing windows and gutters, had first claim on their meagre budget. It was not until they had been living there for a couple of years that they turned their attention to the garden.

It was a long garden, sixty feet or so, with a south-west aspect which meant it should have been sunnier than it was. A mature sycamore tree had been allowed to grow unchecked thanks to a preservation order put on it by the council, and, because she craved the sun, the plan was to create a seating area beyond its perpetual shadow.

The digging began. Except for the smack of the shovels, and the hiss of earth, there was silence in the garden. Both of them

enjoyed it, although she tired more quickly and had to break more frequently for coffee. On the first day, they made good progress. On the second, less so. The soil was tough and smelled rank. The roots from the sycamore writhed in misshapen snarls and fought back. He was mocking her lack of grit when his shovel struck an unyielding object and he bent down to take a look. When he straightened up, every iota of colour had drained from his face.

'I think we have to call the police,' he said.

Many months and an official investigation later, the forensic pathologist's report detailed that the skeleton wrapped in the roots of the sycamore was that of a female between twenty-five and thirty years of age, and five foot four to five foot six inches tall. She had had a child.

The position of the skeleton indicated that she had been buried lying on her back and had been wearing, or wrapped in, a garment made of blue wool of which several traces were exhumed.

The pathologist also gave a detailed description of the bones; they indicated that the victim had suffered from osteomalacia – bone fragility – as a result of a Vitamin D deficiency. The trauma to the back of the skull was considerable and she had probably been killed by a blunt object.

The date of death was placed between 1945 and 1947 and the police were in the process of identifying the body and tracing the next of kin.

Chapter Two

1945

Krista had heard about the battle of Waterloo, of course, but not of the London railway station. Gus, her husband, had put her right.

As she stepped down from the boat train at Waterloo, onto a platform littered with cigarette ends, a light spilled over the hard ground. Dazzled, she lifted up her face and felt its promise.

It was the first September after the war ended in Europe and she possessed nothing but the clothes she was wearing, the one photograph she had of the parents she had never known and the notebook she had kept in the Berlin convent as Germany fell.

From the taxi, she watched an orange-gold leaf-fall sifting down onto a cityscape substantially different from the one she had left a couple of days earlier. Once so confident and solid, her Berlin was flattened, smoking and stinking, whereas this city appeared to have kept most of its profile. But it was not unscathed – her country had seen to that. Rolling out before her was a bombed-out landscape of potholed roads and ruined buildings rearing against the autumn sky. Here also were gap-toothed terraces of houses which, like clapped-out cancan dancers kicking up grubby skirts, revealed intimacies of a previous life. As they passed, Krista spotted a paraffin heater, a doll's cot, a torn and grimy towel.

The cityscape was familiar, and yet it wasn't. The route from the station to Gus's house in Clapham Common wound through streets where people appeared to be living like human beings,

not the animals they had turned into in Berlin. Houses which looked as though they were functioning more or less normally were a rare sight over there and the damage was wholesale. Once so efficient, the railway had been reduced to a jumble of shattered rails. Potsdammer Strasse played host to the blackened skeletons of offices. Kleist Park was a wasteland, seething with tormenting flies, piled with faeces, picked over by a Third Reich of beggars. Everywhere was coated in white dust and plagued by germs and a smell of death.

Gus took hold of one of Krista's gloved hands. She forced herself to allow him to do so; it was his right. He was her husband.

Turning it over, Gus inspected her wrist. 'How frail it still is.'

He looked up at her. Their gazes met, fell away.

The gloves had been bought – at vast expense – on the black market in Brussels. Gus knew all about black markets. (She was discovering he knew about a lot of things.) Trains from Berlin to London were unreliable and they had ended up stranded overnight in Belgium. There was no need for the gloves, she had told Gus: 'I'm used to the cold.' 'Precisely,' was the reply. Everything Gus now did was to ensure his new wife's comfort, her warmth, her survival. 'I'm going to make sure that life is the opposite of what it has been. My aim is to make you fat and rosy.'

Her hand moved in his – *Don't touch me* – and she pulled it away.

They spoke in German and she never failed to marvel at how expert Gus's was. Her English was almost as good, but not quite. Krista did not have Gus's grasp of idiom, which came from living in a country, as Gus had done before the war. His German needed to be more than good. After the Allies reached Berlin, Gus had been seconded to the unit interrogating suspected war criminals and he was there to pick up on every hint, every evasion, every lie, every innocuous fact, and piece together a truth – even though she had learned in the rubble of her country that absolute truths were as precious and as fragile as life itself.

'You are very thoughtful, Gus, and I am grateful. Please don't think that I'm not. I know how lucky I am.' Krista used, as she always did, the formal *sie* not *du*.

Gus was usually matter-of-fact, a practical man, but he surprised her. 'If I knew you better, and I wish I did, I would know what you're thinking.'

Why should he? No one knew anything about anyone else and would it be a good idea if they did? Much of what was hidden in people's minds was shocking.

'Does it matter?'

'You can argue both ways. But if we are to have a marriage . . .'

They contemplated in silence the implications of what had been done and what lay in the future.

Once or twice, she and her friend, Lotte – beloved Lotte – had talked about marriage and what they would like from it. Unsurprisingly perhaps, as they were orphans and as neither had experienced much of it, kindness was the top of both their lists. As she was dying, Lotte reminded Krista: 'Find a kind man, my friend.' She paused for a difficult breath. 'My darling friend.'

That was that.

Every so often, the blackness prompted something to shut down in Krista's head. Like now. It was as if she could not process as many moments as there were to be processed – as if her mind needed a second's rest. Then it lifted.

Krista probed the crack in her bottom lip with a tooth. It stung and she could never work out why she continually provoked such discomfort. Not that she was much interested in explanations. All she knew was that, in relation to the hunger and savagery she had weathered, this small pain offered a diversion from the big picture.

The tiny drop of blood on her lip tasted salty. 'Gus, you should have told your sisters about us.'

Both sisters were living in Gus's house. The elder, Julia, had been widowed nineteen months previously and Tilly was unmarried. 'I hope they learn to love you,' said Gus when he told Krista about them.

'I think people more often want to kill each other than to love,' Krista replied.

Reaching for his cigarettes lying on the seat, Gus lit up. 'Perhaps.'

What was she doing with this man?

'What's the time, Gus?'

Gus frowned at the question. He didn't like to be reminded; but Krista didn't mind one way or the other. In Berlin, no one possessed a watch because the Soviets had stolen them wholesale. The more watches a Soviet soldier possessed, the higher his status.

One of them – a sergeant, as he boasted to Krista, who understood a smattering of his language – cornered her in the ruins of the convent. He had raised his arm and there they were, a dozen or so of them stacked up over his wrist. 'I make sure I have the fancier ones,' he explained in broken German, 'and I can trade them.' He had taken care to point out the one where a jewel winked at the centre of its face. Fascinated by this reminder of luxury, she had stared at it, finally reaching over to touch it with a fingertip. 'What a beautiful thing,' she said.

A couple of minutes later, he raped her. But she had been expecting that. Her main feeling was of anguish that her one remaining pair of knickers had been ripped.

'Are you ever sorry?' she asked the Russian sergeant.

He shook his head. 'It's war,' he replied. 'That's what happens. We expect to do it.' He pulled down his cuff over the watches. 'You women expect it.'

'I'm going to buy you a watch.' Gus looked out of the taxi window. 'That's a promise.'

Gus was telling Krista that she had a new life. No longer would she creep through the ashes of the city, no longer would she fight for bread: loaf, slice, crust . . . any bit of bread. No longer would the soldiers come and go, doing what they wanted, when they wanted. If she now found herself in England, about which she knew nothing, it would be worth it for that release.

What would she remember of her old life? Certainly the nights, which had belonged to the British bombers. Or had it been the days? Often Krista became confused but, actually, it didn't matter which. Night or day, the sky turned violent red, pierced by flashes. Those still alive burrowed like rats into the rubble, the only difference being that the rats did a better job of surviving.

Occasionally, in the aftermath of their fire and destruction, she thought about the British airmen who flew the planes. What did they imagine they were doing when they sent down the bombs? She had prayed that they, too, were rotten with fear, because, down below, they breathed, ate, slept and excreted terror. Or, if those bombers were the fearless types, Krista prayed they were rotten with conscience.

'Not long now,' said Gus. 'Another five minutes.'

The taxi had slowed right down and Krista found herself peering into the front garden of a terraced house bordering the road. It had a workable gate, a front door with a brass door knocker, windows streaked with dirt and a rose bush growing unevenly in the front garden.

How grey, almost apologetic, it looked, and yet how reassuringly respectable. She imagined submerging herself with relief into its dreariness, its lack of imagination.

She struggled to assemble a mental geography of the city. 'Do you live in a smart area?'

Gus was amused. 'Anything but. But those who live there come to love it. The houses are beautiful and there are plenty of

trees and grass and it's quiet. Which makes up for not being smart.'

Quiet.

When the Soviets did reach Berlin, Krista understood the saying that that hell had many rooms. The mother nation could no longer protect her children and they were for it. Crouching in the convent's cellar, she and Lotte, plus the one surviving nun, Sister Eva, listened to the boom and bang of the *Stalinorgel* – the dreaded Soviet land torpedo. Smoke from the fires enveloped the streets and buildings rocked. Venturing out to forage, Krista ran up against the body of a German boy hanging from a lamp-post. The notice tied around his leg with string by the retreating SS read: 'Deserter'.

Still tuned to the daily rule of the convent, Sister Eva knelt stony-faced in that cellar even while her faith fell visibly away from her, like the hair that was falling daily from Krista's head.

Mein Gott, mein Gott, you have abandoned us.

Inside that drab English house with the rose bush, routines would not shift and its inhabitants would assure each other: *Things will go back to normal.* There would be set times for meals, for housework, for listening to the radio, for shopping.

Paradise.

Krista gave an audible intake of breath.

'All right?' asked Gus.

Nothing, but nothing, was more desirable in heaven or on earth than a grey house with routines.

The taxi moved on along Clapham High Street, where many of the shop fronts were either smashed or boarded up. Yet there were signs of life. Some of the shops displayed goods in the windows and queues had formed outside.

'Nearly there, Krista.'

'That's good.'

Dusk was mustering and ineffectual lights struggled to

illuminate rooms into which Krista was peering. As they approached the end of what Gus said was the High Street, Krista's apprehension deepened, for the next step was crucial.

'Gus?'

He turned his head to look at her.

'I shall try to be your wife and make the arrangement work. I hope we can manage.' She spoke in German.

'Arrangement?' His eyes questioned the notion. 'Yes, of course.'

The High Street opened up onto a large space criss-crossed with earthworks and vegetable patches and fringed by trees. Yellowing leaves dripped from the branches.

Glancing round, the taxi driver said, 'Road's a bit of a problem here, sir, so hold on. They haven't got round to mending the bomb damage.'

He wasn't joking. The road was so potholed that Krista was forced to cling to the strap. The taxi drew up in front of a house and the driver hauled on the brake.

They stood on the pavement outside the gate.

'Hello, Clifton!' A figure in a brown demob suit had materialized from over the road. 'Back again?'

Gus turned round. 'Hello, Mr O'Connor. I hope you are well.' He turned to Krista. 'Mr O'Connor is our neighbour at Number 18. Let me introduce you. Mr O'Connor, my wife, Krista.'

Krista held out her gloved hand. 'How do you do?'

Mr O'Connor did a double take at her accent and she could see the thoughts sledging through his mind. Accent. Foreign. German? For God's sake. 'How very nice.' He dripped hostility. 'But I must be going.'

How we all hate each other, she thought. Germans. English. Soviets. French. Italians. And she was as good a hater as any.

'We'll be seeing each other,' said Gus to Mr O'Connor's departing back.

The driver searched in a leather wallet for the correct change and jerked his head in Krista's direction. 'Was the missus talking German?'

'Yes,' said Gus.

'Right,' he said. 'Right. If you want my advice, sir, best not to round here, you know.' The hand with which he handed over a sixpence had black fingernails. 'You're in luck, sir. Sixpences these days are like hens' teeth.'

Krista remained rooted to the spot.

Chapter Three

A figure stood at one of the windows on the first floor observing their arrival.

The presence was rendered shadowy by a lace curtain sagging from a pole. The silhouette revealed a woman about the same height as Krista and there was a glimmer of fair hair rolled back from her face. Her pose suggested extreme tension. One hand rested on the window frame, the other was clasped tightly across her body.

The house?

It was nice, Krista thought. No, it was more than nice.

In the middle of a terrace of handsome semi-detached houses that faced onto the Common, it had an innate elegance. To its right, further down the block, several of the houses were badly damaged; to the left only a couple of them had shattered windows and cracks in the masonry. Somehow, because it was central in the terrace perhaps, Gus's house appeared to have survived intact.

With sound and lovely bones, complemented by large sash windows, and steps leading up to a portico at the front door, its quality was obvious. Gus had said it was the kind of house built by early developers for the city workers who wanted to ape aristocratic tastes. And why not? A few plaster cornices here and there were harmless enough in the imitation game.

Krista wriggled her fingers inside the expensive gloves. Was it a place of safety? Please, God, it was.

'After the bomb,' he had said, during the course of one of their curious, getting-to-know-you conversations that had

leavened the interminable train journey from Berlin, 'the ruin recorder sent to check it over passed it as safe.' Apparently, the ruin recorder, who wore a boiler suit with his ribbons from the last war pinned above his council badge, had spent considerable time knocking at walls and peering out of windows.

'Do they inspect all the houses?' She had been curious. 'I don't think there are any houses left in Berlin to do so.'

She could not but applaud British thoroughness.

'But,' Gus dropped into the silence which had fallen in the railway carriage, one of many silences full of unspoken tensions, 'a tight rein is kept on anyone wanting to improve their home. You're only allowed to spend £100 on paint or distemper and it's a struggle to get anything looking reasonable. Anyone caught using too much paint is reported.'

Would people report each other for using too much paint? Yes . . . oh, yes . . . Krista understood that better than anyone. By the time Hitler's National Socialism collapsed in flames, every German, apart from babes in arms, knew all about people reporting each other.

Herr Miller leaves by his back door . . . Fräulein Best is wearing a surprisingly expensive perfume . . .

Gus picked up his suitcase. 'Come.'

She placed a hand on the railing leading up to the front door.

'I ought to carry you,' said Gus behind her.

'No,' flew from Krista. '*No*.'

The front door was painted iron grey and had a big brass knocker in the shape of a hand. Gus was searching for his key when the door opened.

A woman was framed in the entrance to Number 22 – possibly the one who had been watching them from upstairs. She was wearing a blue wool skirt and cardigan and lace-up shoes. '*Gus!* Where have you come from? I was expecting Mr Forrest, the ruin recorder, for tea.'

Gus dropped the suitcase and kissed her on the cheek, and she clung to him. 'It was impossible to get a message to you.'

'Never heard of the telephone?' She sounded very dry.

'You've no idea, old girl, how difficult things are out there.'

'Never mind,' she said with a glimmer of a smile. Turning to Krista, she asked, 'Who . . . ?'

Gus tried to take hold of Krista's hand but she avoided him. 'Julia, this will come as a shock, but one I hope you will welcome. This is Krista, my wife.'

A pair of bruised-looking eyes widened in the pale face.

'Krista and I got married while I was in Berlin.'

Married.

The word ricocheted between them, catching all three in its passage.

'Good gracious.' Julia's hands flew up to her cheeks. '*Married*.' She stepped back and her shoe clicked against the door. 'I don't believe it. You can't . . . There's . . . Does Nella know?' She checked herself. 'Look, this is a shock.' She flashed a strained smile at her brother. 'You always loved surprises.' She called over her shoulder. 'Tilly! Tilly, *come*.'

Gus shrugged. 'Whether you believe me or not, I refuse to stand on the doorstep of my own house to debate it.' Picking up the case, he ushered Krista through the front door.

'Your own house,' Julia echoed. 'Yes, of course.'

Stepping into the hallway, Krista felt as if she was walking out of a cold and dark place into sunlight. There were not many sensations to match it – perhaps the assurance of a blanket on a freezing night, or hot soup settling on a screaming stomach.

As she took in the curved bannister, the sash window and the room flooded with light opening off the hall, her depleted imagination soared and leapfrogged over the black holes of the past. Yes, the paintwork was knocked about and the bannister looked rickety

but, in two seconds flat, she had mended it and polished it into gleaming beauty.

Unsure what to do, she fiddled with her gloves, eventually stripping them off and stuffing them into her coat pocket.

Julia banged shut the door behind them and leaned back against it. 'Well . . .' She brushed down her skirt and began again. 'Well . . .'

She was a beautiful woman – elegant and long of limb – but her beauty was marred by the tight set of her mouth, which suggested that, in the struggle to control strong emotions, she took refuge in permanent disapproval. 'You could have told Tilly and me, Gus. About something so important.' She glanced down at the brass ring on Krista's finger. 'I'm sorry, but you will realize that we need a little time . . .'

'I know,' said Krista.

She pronounced it: *I now.*

She was aware how odd it sounded, and how marked her accent. In normal circumstances, Krista had no need to worry about her English; it had improved many times over from working on Gus's interrogation team. But it was not her language, nor the language of her heart, and, in this unfamiliar situation, it might fail her altogether.

Julia flinched. 'You're German?' Her voice rose in scandalized question. 'German?'

'Yes.'

It was said – and everything was set in stone.

Julia looked absolutely dumbfounded. She turned to her brother. 'And you brought her here, to us?' She stopped herself, wrestling visibly between her shock and the need for good manners. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that.'

Gus used the quiet, but deadly, tone she had heard him employ in interrogations. 'Krista is very tired.'

That was true. Her bones were tired. Her spirit was tired.

'Yes, of course,' said Julia quickly. 'Let me think. You're home for a while?'

'Yes, we are,' Gus replied. 'As far as I know.' He spread his hands in a gesture which took in the house. 'Here, the job, normal life.' He looked at Krista. 'Doesn't sound much, does it? But it is.'

Julia checked the front door was properly closed and hooked up the front-door chain.

Krista watched her. The outside world was locked out.

Julia was still casting around for something else to say. 'I hope you will think that I have kept the house in order, Gus?' she said. 'It hasn't been easy.'

Gus took hold of one of Julia's hands. 'I'm very grateful, Julia. I could have trusted no one else.'

Julia looked everywhere but at her brother. 'I didn't mean to be snippy. Sorry, sorry, Gus. Please don't think me horrible. It is a shock . . . I mean . . .' She glanced up at Krista and pulled her hand away. 'It's harder than ever to get things now. Would you believe it? Rationing's still awful. And we all long for pretty clothes and nice food . . .' She was almost gabbling. 'But you must have been all right wherever you were. I know you can't talk about your work, hush-hush and all that, but it was Berlin, wasn't it? The wireless says that supplies are going in.'

'I believe they are.' Gus did not elaborate.

'I suppose it is the right thing to do.' She sounded unconvinced and more than a little antagonistic to the idea.

Yet, sour or not, Julia was pulling herself together: straightening her shoulders, adjusting the cuff of her cardigan. Once upon a time, in another world, Krista had read an article about Englishwomen in a magazine that a visitor had brought into the convent. How she and the other girls had enjoyed reading about the English *memsahib* (as the article referred to her) who took for granted that the atlas was coloured a reassuring red more or less across the globe. The article had not been particularly kind or

reflective and it had struck Krista then that its writer was recycling received wisdom about the British woman's stiff upper lip without examining it. Stealing a look at Julia, she felt more in sympathy with the writer now.

Her knees were threatening to buckle. 'Gus, could I sit down somewhere, please?'

Gus touched Krista's elbow lightly – *She could bear that. Just.* – and said, 'We can discuss all that later, Julia, but at this precise moment . . .' He steered Krista towards a staircase leading down into the basement. 'Could we have a hot drink? We've been travelling non-stop.'

'Of course. Where's Tilly?' Julia stood at the bottom of the staircase which curved up two storeys and called, 'Tilly! Come at once. There's news.'

Situated in the basement, the kitchen did not have much natural light and the single, unshaded light bulb hanging down from the centre of the ceiling did little to lighten its gloom.

There was a white enamel stove and a wire rack for vegetables but, otherwise, it appeared to be practically empty There was no food; no shiny pots and pans to be seen either. No jars of spices. No onions. No dried herbs. No loaf of bread waiting to be sliced. No flitches of bacon. No sausage. Nothing familiar: no meat or herb scents, no aromas of vanilla and cinnamon.

To be fair, she was comparing this dingy, damp-smelling and sparsely stocked kitchen with the well-appointed convent one which had existed before the war – but which, of course, didn't survive it.

'Pride is a sin,' said Sister Hannelore, who had been in charge, repeating it frequently (oh, so frequently) before she died of starvation. 'But when it comes to my kitchen, well, my Sisters, you must excuse me the sin . . .'

Julia seemed at a loss. Gesturing vaguely at the kettle, she said, 'I'll make some tea.'

Krista looked at the surface of the wooden table that had been scrubbed so hard it had turned chalk-white. The what-had-been was just that. Gone.

After boiling the kettle and filling the teapot, Julia sat down. 'The tea isn't up to much.'

No, it wasn't; and the cups into which she poured the brew were of such an intense blue that the tea sheltering in them appeared even weaker and more beige.

'It will do,' said Gus. 'Is there sugar, by any miraculous chance?'

'You *are* joking?' said Julia tartly. All the same, she got to her feet and searched in a cupboard by the window. 'There might be a few grains. Nobody can get anything . . . Aha.' Triumphantly, she pulled out a blue paper bag. 'There's a tiny bit.' She placed a teaspoon and the bag in front of Gus. 'Our last.'

Gus dug into the bag with the spoon. 'Krista, you should have it.'

Krista longed for hot, sweet tea but reckoned it would be prudent not to accept it and shook her head.

'Nonsense.' Gus tipped the sugar into her cup, leaving a tiny portion for himself.

Julia observed the interplay. 'Sugar is almost too precious to cook with. Do you remember, Gus, when we used to make toffee? There was tons of it and we never gave it a second thought.'

'Toffee is a sweet,' Gus explained. 'I was good at making it.'

'Good at eating it, you mean,' said Julia. 'Since you've been gone, Gus, we've had no help in the house. Everyone's vanished. I say they can't all be dead or working in factories but they seem to be. Whatever the reason, I'm left with the chores – and don't say there's Tilly because you can't count on Tilly. She's useless.' Hot, resentful words hovered on the tip of her tongue but she bit them back. 'Sometimes, I think I'm going to murder her.'

Gus wasn't that interested. 'I agree; you can't be expected to

run this house by yourself.' His tone acted on Krista like a prod. Gus was, apparently, including *her* in these calculations because she was his wife.

'If Martin hadn't been killed it would have all been so different . . .' Julia was taking great care to fold up the empty sugar bag. 'Those bloody . . .'

'Don't,' said Gus.

'Martin deserved to live.' Julia got up and inserted the bag into a drawer. 'Not to end up smashed into a French field by . . .'

'*Julia . . .*'

Krista concentrated on the tea. Its sweetness. Its warmth. Its comfort.

'So it *is* Gus,' said a voice from the doorway. 'I knew it had to be something to make Julia shout like a fishwife.'

Julia raised her eyes to the ceiling.

'Tilly . . .' Gus rose to his feet.

Tilly advanced into the kitchen and it flashed across Krista's mind that she had waited to make this entrance; it was a successful ploy as three pairs of eyes were now trained onto her.

She wasn't as conventionally beautiful as Julia, but her face was the more interesting of the two. They shared the same colouring but Tilly's rumpled hair flowed unchecked over her shoulders. She was in black from top to toe, a whiff of the Gothic which was complemented by bright-red lipstick and dark mascara. The overall effect was young, louche and suggestively fatigued.

Grasping Gus by the shoulders with a pair of neat, almost childish-looking hands, she kissed him, European fashion, twice on his cheeks. '*Ciao* . . . Why didn't you let us know the prodigal was returning?'

Julia looked up from her tea. 'Gus has some news.'

It was only then that Tilly let on she knew there was someone else in the room. A pair of intense blue eyes fixed on Krista.

Gus explained.

Krista got to her feet. 'How do you do?'

'How perfect!' Tilly exclaimed. 'German.' She shot a look at her brother. 'How wicked of you, Gus. How brilliantly perverse. That will set the cat among the pigeons.' The blue eyes were alight with interest – and mischief? 'We'll have to make sure that you get the welcome you deserve. But it's lovely news. Of course it is. Congratulations.' She reached for the teapot. 'Obviously, it's a whirlwind marriage.' Her gaze rested for a second on Krista's stomach. 'Or have you known each other for some time? Either way . . .' Tilly thought better of what she was going to say and flashed a genuine smile at Krista. 'Either way, it is delightful.'

'Yes, isn't it?' said a cold, stiff Julia.

Krista drained her teacup to the last drop, and used a teaspoon to scoop up the dregs. Observing this, Julia remarked, 'You can have a second cup, you know.'

Krista flushed. She was forgetting. She held out the cup with both hands and Julia refilled it.

Tilly asked, 'Where on earth did Gus find you?'

She and Gus hadn't finally agreed on their stories. If truth be told, they didn't *know* each other's stories.

'In a convent in the Charlottenburg district. Quite near the centre of Berlin . . .' she began. 'I had been brought up there by the Sisters after my parents died. I did not like it much but, at the end, it was a sanctuary.'

She hated to think about that terrible end, but it never took much – the scream from an aircraft engine, a car exhaust, even – and she would be struggling not to relive the moments when the distant thuds of the Soviet guns rolled closer and turned into a roar. Then Berliners knew they were for it.

Her face must have reflected her terror and Tilly jumped in, 'There's no need to talk about it now, if you don't wish to. There

will be time for us to find out about each other.' She glanced at her sister. 'Won't there, Julia?'

Julia picked up a teaspoon and put it down again.

'When we realized the Soviets were coming, I took my friend and some others back there to hide. I knew the convent well, you see. The women had to get out of sight. We had all read of the violence that was happening on the eastern approaches to the city. We knew what they would do to us.'

Tilly seemed fascinated. 'But what on earth was Gus doing in a convent?'

Krista did not look at Gus, refusing to give him that lifeline.

'When a city's flattened you don't take much notice of what buildings are,' said Gus. 'My unit needed an office and someone suggested the convent, which still had a wing standing. I found Krista trying her best to get the library cleaned up.'

Part of that was true. The rest was not.

'Terrible times,' said Gus. 'I will never forget Krista's heroic efforts to save the books.'

There was almost a touch of envy in the way he pronounced 'heroic'. 'But stupid,' said Krista. 'And impossible.'

'Heroic, all the same,' he repeated, this time with a decided bitterness.

Tilly looked from one to the other. 'It makes for a good story.'

Krista went to Gus's aid. 'The Sisters were proud of their library. I was proud of the library. In a small way, its collection was famous and the most famous book was the Magdeburg Book of Hours. Scholars came to see it. Sometimes, when I lived there as a child, I was allowed to unlock the cabinet in which it was kept.'

She, Lotte and the others living in the convent had been starving, for God's sake, and their bodies were falling to pieces. A Book of Hours could not feed them or keep them warm. Yet she had clung to the irrational belief that, if it was destroyed,

nothing would be left for any of them. So she had heaved up a marble slab behind the altar in the chapel and hid it. It was probably still there. After Gus began bringing in food to the convent and her mind and body began to function more normally, she had set about salvaging what she could of the remainder of the collection. As a child, she had hated the Sisters. Now they were dead, she felt impelled to honour them.

Or, perhaps, she had just been bloody-minded? The Tommies or the Ruskies were not going to get their hands on German things.

'Gosh,' said Tilly. 'I know we were bombed but one forgets that we didn't have foreign boots trampling all over us. That I can't imagine. It must have been terrible.'

Julia frowned.

Julia probably had no idea that, if you are deprived of fat for weeks, odd things happen. How would she? A persistent mist in front of the eyes was one; the sensation of floating while walking was another. Lotte's back teeth fell out and none of the women had menstruated for months. Their physical predicament left no energy to deal with the Sisters' god, not even to ridicule him. *Ach so*, ran Krista's reasoning. *How glad I am that my faith went. In that way, I cannot be disappointed in how all this has been allowed to happen.* The body and mind were no more, or less, than a mix of chemical compounds which reacted to certain circumstances.

'Gus gave me a tin of spam,' she said. 'It was the best thing I had ever tasted.'

Could she ever describe the joy of encountering the small fat deposits encasing the meat? Its damp, meaty smell? Running a finger around the inside of the tin, she had licked it until it was almost raw.

'Be careful,' she'd warned Gus. 'If anyone sees me with this, they'll kill me.' And she had wondered if Gus would prefer her dead.

'We knew nothing of what was happening to us, Gus,' said Tilly, thoughtfully. 'We had no idea that we had a sister-in-law, and a German one at that.' Her voice inflected the word 'German' but not in a hostile way. 'Congratulations, again. No, really. This is very exciting. Have you been travelling day and night? Those trains are a nightmare.' She sprang to her feet 'Jules, they must be dog-tired and will want an early night. We should make up a bed.'

Aware that her accent was becoming more marked through fatigue, Krista said, 'Please let me do it. I do not want to be any trouble.' Using the table for leverage, she stood upright.

'It's no trouble,' said Julia insincerely. She got up and reached for the apron hanging on a peg by the door.

The three women faced each other. They were of the same height, more or less, with Julia just a fraction taller, which made it easier for her to look down at the other two.

'On second thoughts, I'll leave you to Julia,' Tilly said, suddenly losing interest. 'She's much better at the boring things. I'll see you later.'

Julia's brown leather lace-up shoes sounded hollowly on the carpet-less stairs as she led the way, ushering Krista into a room off the first-floor landing. 'This is Gus's room. It used to be our parents' room. The bed isn't made up.' She shrugged. 'We weren't expecting you. Normally, with guests, I would have made sure. A well-run house . . .' Her voice trailed away. 'I'll fetch sheets and towels.'

Krista hovered in the doorway. With relief, she saw that it was a large, airy room with a smaller one opening off it. Yes, the paintwork was blistered, the window and bed sagged and there was only a modest-sized, faded, green rag-rug to cover the expanse of floorboards. But it looked solid, sheltering, ordinary – oh, so wonderfully ordinary.

At the window, she was able to look over the Common, dotted

with those golden-tipped trees and scarred by the trenches. Across it, a row of fine period houses flanked a road running parallel to the one outside Number 22, and a church spire poked up through the trees clustered at its middle. Traffic moved sedately on the encircling roads. Three or four cars. Two buses. A couple of carts.

Normal?

Yes, yes, what she was seeing was normal.

Perched on the edge of the bed, she imagined the conversation which would later take place between Gus and his sisters. She pictured their fair English complexions, faintly flushed with indignation, and heard the intonation peculiar to a certain type of English person.

She's a German, Gus.

We'll be a laughing stock.

Her life will be a misery.

Who is she?

She was frightened that she was no long capable of feeling. Yet she was a past master at practising deception on herself and on others, so that no one could know about the fear which traced a spider's web through her mind. *I am fine. My body is fine.* Those were her counter-deceptions which lapped and overlapped each other, until her life was covered in liar's dust.

Julia returned with a pile of linen. Stripping back the bedspread, she thrust a sheet at Krista. 'Let's get on with it.'

Getting ready for bed later that evening, Gus undressed in the small room off the main bedroom, which he explained was his dressing room. Seizing the chance, Krista fled down the passage to the bathroom and undressed there. The hot water had run out so she splashed her face with cold and made herself clean her teeth. Cold water on her bleeding gums and wobbly teeth was still something from which she shrank.

The toothbrush bristles searched out the sore places between her teeth.

Someone clattered down the corridor and banged on the bathroom door. 'Sorry,' Tilly called out. 'Didn't know it was occupied.'

On that long train ride from Berlin, Krista had asked Gus about Tilly and he told her that, before the war broke out, she had disappeared off to Italy for six months. 'Umbria. She's got this idea she's Italian in spirit. It took me many telegrams and the threat of coming to fetch her before she came back.' His description was tender and indulgent and, from it, Krista deduced that Tilly held her brother's heart in those childlike hands. 'During the war, she analysed photographs taken by the RAF reconnaissance planes. Apparently –' Gus rolled his eyes – 'working out what lay behind, or below, an image helped her poetry. Tilly *is* clever. She's also . . . Our parents died when she was only seventeen. It's had an effect. She's full of energy one moment, and immovable the next and you never know quite where you are with her. My parents worried about her. To them, she seemed so extreme.'

Tilly definitely had her brother's heart in her keeping.

Slipping back along the uncarpeted corridor, Krista sneaked a look at the back garden but the dark prevented her from getting much of an impression of it except for the outlines of some trees. Still, she sensed its presence, a place where it was possible for life to stir and to grow and which was as far away as possible from the wasteland of Berlin.

In the convent garden, she – the child – had watched the ivy mobbed by hoverflies and bumblebees driving their tongues into the lavender flowers to take their last feed for the year. She had gazed on autumnal spiders' webs and picked up the ripened quinces lying in the grass beneath the tree. She – the adult – had dug with a spade in that same garden to bury the Sisters.

Returning to the bedroom, she was confronted by Gus in his dressing gown. 'Would you like me to sleep in the dressing room? There's a camp bed.'

Oh, yes, she would. Very much. She yearned to capture the smooth empty kingdom of the bed for herself. 'Would that seem odd?'

'It doesn't matter if it does.'

She swallowed. 'Stay.'

'Thank you.' Gus folded his dressing gown, draped it over the chair and got into bed. Krista did likewise.

A space stretched between them, over which neither would travel.

Much later, she was aware of the noises in the house: a brief exchange between the sisters on the stairs, a chair scraping across an uncarpeted floor, the outraged shriek of a bedspring, the rattle of a window.

She tried to pinch the flesh over her hip bones between finger and thumb, but there was none to spare. She was well aware that her extreme thinness was off-putting to some. Despite the rationing, the two sisters looked reasonably well fed. Beside them, she was a figure from a medieval painting depicting creatures in hell. Shrunken, wild-eyed, with knees that were far too big.

The house was settling around them. She knew nothing about its history. Who had lived here, who had cared for it? Who wanted to live here, now the war was over, especially since she, Krista, had arrived?

'Are you comfortable, Krista?'

His voice sounded companionable.

'The sheets,' she said. 'They are so clean. So smooth.'

'I want to make sure that you have a chance to heal. Find time for the soul again.'

'There's been no room for the soul.' The words were dry and bitter on her tongue. *The soul*. 'It wasn't the soul that foraged for food, or a light, or fought to keep warm and dry. The soul was useless.'

'Look at me.'

Obediently, she shifted over to face her husband, searching to make out his shape in the dark.

'That's the point,' he said sadly. 'There is a roof here.'

'Ah.'

Having gathered like the high tide waiting to strike the shore, fatigue hit her, drawing her down under the waters.