

Anne Goodwin

Underneath



Part One

AS I DESCEND the concrete staircase, I can't see my feet for the cardboard box I'm cradling in my arms. Nudging the banister with my elbow for balance, I duck to avoid the underbelly of the main staircase and catch a whiff of chocolate sponge filtered through the fragrance of your freshly laundered clothes.

The stairs shunt left and left again. I count the last three steps beneath my breath. A short walk down the corridor and I'm setting down the provisions on the chequerboard lino alongside the panelled door.

I put my eye to the peephole and flick the switch on the wall. Inside the room, the ceiling light beams on the grass-green carpet dotted with daisies and on the three hundred and sixty degree mural in fiery sunrise hues. It picks out the lidded bucket in the far corner and, directly opposite the door, the double mattress marooned in a sea of discarded food packaging and dirty underwear. It traces the curve of your back where you lie beneath the duvet.

The duvet veils your torso, your hands, your head, your hair. But it can't disguise the spasm in your shoulders as the light comes on. The flinch. There's an echoing jolt through my own body, and I have to back away for a moment while my pulse quells. When I look again, you're frozen in the same teasing posture: camouflaged by the quilt

apart from one foot peeping out the bottom, the enamelled nails a regal lapis lazuli.

The bolts squeal as I drag them one-two-three into their casings. I shoulder your box of goodies and shove through the cream-coloured door.

WE MET AT the staff canteen at Queen's, when I was over there for my induction. Perhaps it was the new start, or the unseasonably hot weather for early May, but things felt a bit surreal back then. Like anything could happen.

I grabbed a table by the window, partly curtained by a plastic bougainvillea, nodding to a pair of nurses at the next table as I set down my tray. The way they turned away from me was as standardised as their uniforms. I didn't let it bother me. Amid the chorus of chatter and cutlery, I searched for the spices in my chicken madras, and didn't look up until a laminate tray grazed mine.

A woman with lavish Pre-Raphaelite hair beamed down at me. "Mind if I join you?"

"Be my guest!"

Her hand shot to her mouth. "Gosh, I'm so sorry. I thought you were Adam Applegarth."

"I could pretend to be," I said. "If it would help."

She laughed, resting her hand on the back of the blond-wood chair. I put her in her early thirties, slim verging on skinny, but I admired a woman with the gumption to walk past the salad bar in a public place.

"You might as well sit down," I said. "Your curry's getting cold."

Gathering up the folds of her flouncy gypsy skirt, she dropped onto the seat. "What's it like?"

"Tastes like plasticine, but the colour's good."

“Turmeric,” she said, loading up her fork like a spoon.

I clocked her ID, dangling from a ribbon round her neck below the vee of her pinstriped waistcoat. Hospital hierarchies were still new to me but her Art Therapist had to trump my Theatre Orderly any day. “Liesel O’Malley. That’s an interesting juxtaposition.”

Liesel swallowed a yawn. “*Sound of Music* meets *The Aristocats*?”

“I was thinking Germany plays Ireland.”

“My grandmother versus my dad. I’ll have to tell you about that one sometime.”

“Perhaps right now you’d rather talk about Adam Applegarth?”

She shook her head, a beam of sunlight glancing her nut-brown curls.

“Don’t be shy,” I said. “What’s he like?”

“Average build. Square jaw. Short black hair. Thinnish nose. Kind eyes.”

“Good-looking?”

The two nurses clattered their trays as they vacated their table, noses aimed at the ceiling.

Liesel’s gaze darted back and forth between my face and my photo ID. “I think so.”

“And personality-wise?”

“A proper gentleman, but bold, too. Decisive. Spontaneous. Occasionally rather shocking.”

“I could tell you something shocking.”

“Go on, then.”

“I’ve won the lottery.”

“Never! How many millions?”

“Not even a quarter. Two hundred and thirty thousand, give or take a few quid.”

“It’s still a lot of money,” said Liesel. “What are you doing here? You could be climbing Kilimanjaro. Trekking the Inca Trail. Snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef.”

“I’ve spent the last twenty years travelling.”

“Now that *is* shocking,” said Liesel.

“Time to stop pissing about. Gonna buy myself a house and settle down.”

“So you’re house-hunting right now?”

“Just about to start.”

“That’ll be fun.”

“You think so?” The whole thing felt such a mammoth waste of time, I’d have outsourced it to my sister if I could trust her judgement.

“Don’t you love poking round other people’s houses?”

“Can’t say I’ve had much experience of it.”

Liesel’s hair fell across her face as she turned her attention back to her food.

I’d have to be rather more bold and decisive to sub for Adam Applegarth. “Why not come with me? I’ve got a viewing this Friday at six.”

“Sorry,” she said. “No can do.”

I studied the orange smears on my plate. “Of course. Never should’ve asked.”

“Not at all,” she said. “I’d love to come, but I’ve got a hospital appointment.”

I’d been an idiot to expect Liesel O’Malley to be free on a Friday. If she wasn’t on a date with Adam Applegarth, she’d be gossiping with her girlfriends at some cliquey riverside bar. She’d probably rather stay home and attend to her abundance of hair than see me again. But she could’ve done me the honour of a more credible excuse. “Sure.”

“What the hell, it’s not as if I’m ashamed of it.” Liesel fingered the top button of her waistcoat, exposing a snip of white lace underneath. “Can I tell you something shocking?”

I remembered my sisters whispering behind a screen of hands, planting secrets in each other’s ears. “If you like.”

“I’m booked in for a termination on Friday. But if you arranged another viewing next week, I’d gladly tag along.”

OUT THE BACK door, weeds thrust upwards through the cracks in the paving. The covered carport alongside reeked like a night shelter for feral cats. Liesel tapped a dandelion-clock with her bare foot and a mass of gossamer bombed around her brilliant-blue toenails.

“A bit of a scrub and it’d make a lovely patio,” said the estate agent.

The other side of the high brick wall, a radio buzzed: a jangle of adverts on the local network. It still felt strange to be able to pick out the words so easily with the sun as hot as in Cochin or Caracas or Dar es Salaam.

Liesel made a visor of her hand as she inspected the corrugated roof of the carport. She wore a sleeveless maxi-dress of harlequin chiffon and an assortment of pins held her thick chestnut hair off her neck. “That’s not asbestos, is it?”

The estate agent consulted the printed sheets of A4 clamped to her clipboard. Her *particulars*, as she’d referred to them earlier. “I don’t think so.” Her heels clicked on the paving as she ushered us back indoors. “Now I guarantee you’re going to like this.” Her sharp black suit and crisp white blouse made no concession to the weather or her condition. Liesel and I, in contrast, might’ve been heading for the beach.

We re-entered the house through the kitchen, its innards concealed behind curry-coloured cupboard doors. Like the other rooms, it smelled like a crusty old sock.

“It’s rather poky,” said Liesel, running her hand along the dusty work-surface.

I hadn’t known her long enough to learn the language of her face, to distinguish genuine disappointment from charade. Either way, she seemed to be enjoying playing along with the estate agent’s assumption we were buying together.

The woman pushed through the glass-panelled kitchen door and took a right into a tiny alcove I hadn’t noticed on the way in. *Dead space, this*, I thought. Perhaps I could knock through the wall and extend the kitchen.

The estate agent turned a key in a solid wooden door and fumbled for the light switch on the wall. A concrete staircase dipped steeply to the basement. She stroked the banister as she negotiated the steps one at a time. “Watch your heads,” she said, as Liesel reached up to touch the underbelly of the regular staircase above.

Approaching the wall at the bottom, the stairs veered left and left again; three more steps brought us to a narrow corridor decked with tessellated lino, which must have been immediately below the hallway on the ground floor. I couldn’t see what there was to get excited about. As if to compensate for its limitations, the estate agent indicated the storage area under the staircase, and the lavatory behind the door at the far end. Each time she stopped, she rested her clipboard on her bump, as though the *particulars* were feeling the heat, not her. Liesel sniffed.

Then we noticed the panelled door, painted cream, on the right. A metal bolt squeaked as the estate agent dragged it out of its moorings. She stood on tiptoe to reach another bolt at the top and crouched to unhitch a third.

“What on earth did they keep down here?” said Liesel, peering blindly into the room. “It’s like Fort bloody Knox.”

The estate agent flicked the light switch and stood aside to let us pass. There wasn’t a wick of sweat on her, as if a literal sangfroid were part of her training. “I suppose traditionally it would be a wine cellar.”

As I followed Liesel into the room, a refreshing chill settled around me. It was as if the hot weather had misaligned some regulator in my brain, and the cellar had reset it to normal. Liesel must’ve felt it too because she started spinning like a toddler playing aeroplanes, her skirt twirling around her bronzed legs in a kaleidoscope of colour. A wisp of hair escaped its fastening to fondle her left shoulder. Her small breasts bounced under the veneer of her loose top and it occurred to me that she might not be wearing any underwear.

The basement floor was brindled concrete; the walls whitewashed bricks that cooled my back as I sloped against them. The estate agent stood plumb by the door, fiddling with her phone while Liesel danced.

She was a fizz of mustard and indigo, vermillion and lime. She brought to mind some dancers I’d seen deep in the desert of Rajasthan: jingling bangles, swirling saris and nose-rings glinting in the sun. For a moment, I lost all sense of where I was, who I was, or when. I bent my knees and slid my back down the wall till I was squatting on my heels.

Liesel stopped dancing and yanked me to my feet.

“You like it?” She smiled and turned me round, patting the back of my T-shirt. White flakes fluttered to the floor like dead skin. “Can’t take you anywhere,” she said.

Her touch vibrated through my body: a plucked guitar string settling to quiet.

The estate agent squeezed her clipboard against her bulging belly. “Fabulous, isn’t it?”

Liesel shrugged. “But what’s it for?”

“A space like this could lend itself to all kinds of possibilities. If you’re musical you could have yourselves a soundproofed practice room. Or get it fitted out as a designer kitchen. It’s twice the size of the one upstairs.”

“I couldn’t imagine slaving over a stove in a room with no window,” said Liesel.

I couldn’t imagine Liesel slaving over anything. But I could picture her at an easel with a palette of paints. “Could be a studio.”

The estate agent smoothed her hand across her bump. “It would make an ideal playroom if you were planning on having children.”

Barely a week had gone by since the abortion. My stomach lurched but Liesel didn’t falter. “I haven’t the slightest intention of reproducing. You can’t justify it, can you, when the planet’s already bursting at the seams?”

I reached out, let my fingers glance her clammy forearm. Liesel didn’t shy away.

The estate agent raised an eyebrow and gestured towards the door. “Anything else I can show you?”

Liesel squeezed my hand as we crossed the room together. Whether her display of affection was for my benefit or the estate agent’s, I couldn’t say. But I knew what I wanted. After four decades, and as many continents, I was heading for home.

“SO IT’S YOUR first proper job since Uni?” said Liesel.

We were squatting on a wooden bench in the beer-garden of the Frog and Parrot, imbibing exhaust fumes along with our crisps and real ale. A few tubs of bedraggled tulips shielded the car park,

where a couple of dark-haired youths lounged beside a zinc bucket and a wooden board promoting a hand car-wash.

She'd accompanied me round three properties and still Liesel showed no sign of sheering off in search of Adam Applegarth. That had to be worth something. "Depends how you define proper," I said. "I had to do something these past twenty years to keep myself in beer and T-shirts."

"For instance?"

"I taught in a school for a while in South Africa. Temped in a Dive Centre in Belize and a car hire firm in Hong Kong. I ran my own cycle repair shop in Guatemala, but I couldn't make it pay."

"My friend Jules has a theory about people who go travelling," said Liesel.

"Oh yeah?"

Liesel preened herself like she was about to tell a joke. "According to Jules, there are two types of traveller, one lot searching for something, the remainder running away."

"It's a pretty slim theory with only two options."

"So give me another! What made you go roaming the world for two decades?"

I shrugged. "I suppose at first it was for the thrill of coming home."

It sounded pathetic, but Liesel didn't seem to mind. "Going away to discover where you've come from? I'll have to tell Jules that one. And who was at home?"

"Just Mum and my two sisters." Not many thrills there.

"No Dad?"

"No Dad."

A group of youths in mismatched football tops scrummed onto the next table. Liesel took my hand and knitted her fingers through mine. "We should stick together, you and me. We can scrape together a full set between us."

She had me there. I gave her a look I hoped was more quizzical than gormless.

“Parents. I lost my mother when I was seventeen.”

There was an etiquette around acknowledging bereavement, but I’d never mastered it. “Sorry,” I muttered, as the lads at the next table burped and guffawed into their beers.

“No need,” said Liesel. “Heavens, I’ve had half my life to get used to it! And she wasn’t much cop when she was here.” She laughed, releasing my hand and grabbing our empty glasses. “I think it’s my round. Same again?”

AT FIRST, I felt rather smug as I waited for Liesel to return with the drinks. The clowns at the next table couldn’t have failed to notice the calibre of woman I was with. Liesel was intelligent and feisty, she was fabulous looking and she had style. So far, she seemed happy spending time with me. To top it all, unlike so many women in their thirties, she wasn’t bogged down by mother issues, neither frantic to become one, nor fighting off the talons of her own.

I watched the car-wash guys lather a lime-green Avensis as cigarette smoke drifted across from the next table. I’d never had a problem getting laid, yet Liesel had me feeling like a teenager again, unsure how to play it. It was one thing hanging out for a few days or weeks or even months with someone I met at a backpacker’s hostel; it was more complicated now I was looking to put down roots.

The juveniles at the next table were challenging each other to produce the noisiest burp. I glanced back at the side door of the pub, but caught no sign of Liesel. I considered going inside to check, but she’d probably think I was nuts. I tried not to think of her walking in, setting down the glasses on the nearest table, and stepping right out again through the front door. Exiting my life as casually as she’d entered.

I ran over our conversation in my mind, feeling a bit of a wally about *the thrill of coming home*. It reminded me of a stupid game Jaswinder and I used to play as kids. We'd knock on the door with our suitcases, as if we were fresh from the plane. We were practically wetting ourselves with excitement, waiting for his granny to let us in.

The glasses were glistening with condensation as Liesel set them down on the table. "Sorry about the wait. Got talking to a woman at the bar. She was raving about the new exhibition at The Space."

I smiled, as if absolutely cool with her leaving me twiddling my thumbs while she went off looking for someone more interesting to talk to. I remembered Jaswinder's granny, acting like she was ecstatic at having us back, but she probably preferred the start of the game when she could shoo us outside and secure herself a few minutes' peace.

Liesel tasted her pint. "I thought I might take a look sometime next week. Would you like to join me?"

WE MET BY the stone lions in the market square after I'd finished an early shift at work. Liesel looked stunning in stripy cut-off dungarees over a skimpy white vest, with her hair woven into a plait that issued from the top of her crown. I tried to take her hand as we meandered through the town, but women laden with carrier bags and babies in the pavement-scorching heat contrived to keep us apart.

A wall of dazzling glass concealed the gallery entrance, right round the corner from where anyone would expect to find it. Inside, an open-plan reception housed a sprawling shop peddling posters and postcards, overpriced jotters and coffee-table books of high-concept art. Pretentious tat but, hey, I was not-buying it with Liesel.

She stuffed her flip-flops in her shoulder bag as we entered the exhibition room. It was chilly, and cathedral-quiet apart from the whirr of the air-conditioning. The punters huddled in twos and threes, ogling splashes of colour framed under strategically-placed lights, but it was the lofty ceiling that got me, the yards of unclaimed parquet. I expected Liesel to commandeer the space, spread her tanned arms and twirl like she'd done in the cellar, but she strolled across to a canvas daubed with reds from coral to carmine, and gawped.

I followed, reaching for her hand.

"Sorry," she whispered, slipping her hand away, "but I can't do it with someone else. Stops me feeling anything. It's nothing personal."

Why did you invite me then? I thought, but I nodded like some bearded guy on a Channel Four arts programme, and made to contemplate the gory mess on the wall. When, after a few moments, Liesel moved on, I stayed.

Yet it pissed me off: the painting was ugly and poorly executed and resembled nothing I'd encountered this side of the womb. To be honest, I found it kind of depressing. I turned my back and scanned the room for Liesel.

She stood before a canvas that might've been meant to represent a bloody massacre or the maws of hell. Or the artist's grandad's garage, for all I cared. I watched her tongue caress the corner of her mouth. I watched her jaw clench. I decided if I couldn't make sense of the artwork, I could use the time profitably in untangling the idiom of Liesel's expressions.

She hunched her shoulders, shifted her weight onto one foot and scratched her ankle with a blue-varnished toenail. She pursed her lips, wrinkled her nose, laughed, frowned. Rubbed her bare arms and shuffled into a patch of sunlight. In every pose and posture, she looked magnificent.

The attendant rose from her stool by the door, flashing disapproval my way. I smiled and spread my hands but I didn't take offence. After all, a stalker wouldn't look so different from a regular guy.

Liesel had moved on to a pair of suppurating eyes, one big, one small, like the wheels of a penny-farthing bicycle. A glistening thread cut through her cheek like a scar. By the time I'd figured out she was crying, she looked radiant again.

I clenched my fists. There was nothing for me here and I could hang about for Liesel equally well outside. As I left the gallery, the attendant offered me a leaflet, but I shook my head.

WE PERCHED ON a wall in the shade of the multi-storey car park, swinging our legs and catching the drips of our ice creams with our tongues like a couple of kids. A man walked by, all white shirt and briefcase, but the envious look he gave us didn't leave me feeling as good as it ought.

Liesel said, "So you're not into modern art?"

She spoke casually, like it was no bigger deal than declining hundreds and thousands on my ice cream, but I could read the subtext. Seemingly it would take more than a house and a job to turn me into a regular guy in her eyes. "I didn't get it, that's all."

Liesel licked a splodge of ice cream from her wrist. "Not many men would." I waited for her to elaborate, but she slapped my thigh and said, "Count yourself lucky. Anyway, it's your call next time."

So I hadn't blown it. Down the end of the road, the bloke in the white shirt lugged his briefcase over the zebra crossing. "I've been meaning to tell you," I said. "I put in an offer on that house."

"Good for you," said Liesel. "Was it the one with the rosemary bush by the front door?"

We'd seen three, Liesel indulging her penchant for snooping while helping out the new guy in town, a mere man who lacked the aesthetics to remember a clump of rosemary in front of any of them.

"The one with the cellar," I said.

"Oh."

"I thought you liked it."

She fingered the metal clasp of her dungarees. "I did. Yeah, it was cool."

"How would you like to live there?"

"You're looking for a lodger?"

"I was hoping you'd be something more." The day we met she'd said she liked surprises. She liked her men to be bold.

"But we haven't even ..."

"I know."

She frowned. "You're not one of these born-again types, are you? No sex outside marriage and that kind of thing."

I wiped a film of sweat from the hairline at the back of my neck. "I thought, you know, the abortion. I thought perhaps you wouldn't be able to for a while."

A pigeon cooed as it nuzzled a discarded burger carton. Liesel grabbed my hand. "What a gentleman," she said. "Tell you what, why don't we go back to my place and find out?"

I DIDN'T PAY much attention to the flat until Liesel left me on my own to make tea. I grabbed my shorts and scabbled in the pockets for my gear. I could hear her clattering in the kitchen and, through the open window, high-pitched voices and the thud of a football against a wall. At a distance, the hum of traffic on the ring road. I lay back against the heap of cushions and rolled the wheel of my lighter against my thumb.