

# PROLOGUE

BONN 1941

**A** LOOK SO PRECIOUS it cut.  
Wolfish and veiled, they were not quite Kurt's eyes. Almost recognisable. Maybe a trick of torch light in the dark, wartime street. Far, far too late for Hildegard to understand. Kurt sat wedged in the black army car between two officers, their shoulders like iron blocks, his gold hair shining.

Only minutes ago, he had refused to see his young wife as he turned from the cold ash in the grate and faced soldiers ransacking their tiny living room. Now from the car, he gave back that lost moment, but with a stranger's eyes. Not Kurt's. They flickered across her—cherished, embracing, but alien. She would remember that was the first moment that she saw those eyes and the last.

Hildegard limped over the cobbles, reaching out as the Mercedes-Benz slid away with darling Kurt, further and further into the night until she could not keep up. SS lightning bolts bordered the number plate, and hooded tail lights washed blood-red arcs across walls and doors in the medieval lane. The car rolled towards the basilica and vanished.

She stood in the middle of the road while overhead a portent of monumental change gathered strength. Tens of thousands of blackbirds trilled as they lifted into the autumn migration, a vast, deafening mass, black over the rooftops of Bonn, filling the whole sky, muffling the sounds of the city, blocking out the stars as they flew south.

Hildegard stumbled home and bolted the door. As she drew the curtain, a blackbird, adrift from the flock, landed on the outside ledge. A yellow-rimmed eye peered in.

# ONE

BONN 2015

**W**ARNING BLACK DECALS of birds dotted the glass walls of the old West German Bundeshaus in Bonn. Eagles shot up, wings folded over curved bodies, sleek like cannons. Others hurtled earthward, wings arced, piked beaks splitting. Perspiration coursed down Stella's back as she halted to squint at splayed razor talons, black and glossy against greenish glass walls. They took her back to school days and the startling, evolutionary link between dinosaurs and birds. Bored teenagers, suddenly engaged, seized on evidence in the skin of a bird's claw—thick, ancient, reptilian—as if wrapped in scabs and scars. Scabs protected the body, but if you picked at them, you bled.

Stella blotted her neck as she dodged historians, archaeologists, architects, politicians and journalists, all of them flapping fans on the hot driveway of the old Bundeshaus, now a glass-walled conference centre which reflected heat and glare—a stiff price for the architectural metaphor of post-war German transparency. Beyond the pang of melting bitumen, the River Rhine emitted that slightly mouldy smell of warm freshwater as it swirled into

sedge and stone wall cracks, whipping up blotchy froth of mud and bird dung.

Inside the conference auditorium, video screens in the lower chamber lit up: *Welcome to the World Heritage Committee Meeting Bonn Germany 2015*. Chatter, laughter and loud phone conversations filled the air. Through the glass balustrading in front of her knees, Stella watched preparations in the lower chamber for the afternoon session. Delegates plodded back to their desks to vote on sites for admission to the World Heritage List.

Stella inspected her last scab, shrinking on her elbow, but pulled and puckered and late to heal. A throb strummed up from her wrist as she waited in the first seat of the first row of the Observers' Gallery, a U-shaped mezzanine. She rubbed her arm, willing away a tenacious ache. Her arm felt foreign after six weeks in plaster, weeks of pretence to university colleagues: 'Clumsy old me'. The left arm retained its spray of freckles, but the right had faded and withered. She danced her fingertips along the pale skin which Peter kissed when he saw it released from the cast. 'Welcome back,' he said, as if he had not broken his wife's arm.

She stopped rubbing. The only way to survive was to pretend that everything was ok. Surely, the last few weeks *had* been about survival with Peter, not complicity. Not quite. Same old story for every woman.

Hot and jet-lagged, Stella struggled to keep her eyes open at her fifth annual World Heritage Committee Meeting. The Bundeshaus air-conditioning laboured. A stench of sweat swelled steadily over the semi-circle rows of blue seats as observers returned to the mezzanine. A woman in a summery orange jacket blotted her face as she paused on the aisle steps to the right of Stella's seat. Stella pulled in her legs to let her pass as she drowsily numbered fourteen hand-written pages of notes from the morning World Heritage discussion on the River Jordan where John the Baptist baptised Jesus, a heritage site that she wanted to visit—one day. With Peter? Perhaps. She hoped so, but...

She flipped through her notes, enough for two academic papers on the politics of World Heritage if she sliced and diced the topic. Maybe even three if she diced to a mince. Better yet, she'd grind that mince and show everyone that she was not a new professor resting on her laurels. What a thrill it had been to order business cards and add 'Professor' to her name. She had two hundred crisp, new cards to give out.

Below, a garden door opened; the blazing July day sucked a fug of humidity off the Rhine and swirled it inside. Against the auditorium glass, the garden crushed, green and sticky, strident with insects. Claws flared in bird decals, ready to snatch and shred.

A thump on her back.

Her head bounced off the glass balustrading in front of her. Pen and note pad shot from her lap to the floor.

Stella flung herself back, forehead on fire from the bash on the glass. 'Hey!'

A man hovered, his plump, middle-aged face shining with sweat; his eyes hard, bored, glazed in detachment.

'Get out! This is my seat.'

She pressed a hand to her forehead. 'I don't understand.'

His grey and black moustache lifted in what seemed a habitual sneer with the skin under his nose permanently wrinkled.

'The seat's mine.'

'Excuse me, it's mine.'

She smoothed her polka-dot jacket. 'Excuse me?' Why be polite? He hit her! With his brief case? His hand? She lowered her eyes. Expensive, black, leather brogues menaced from the aisle steps on her right. The man loomed over her. Looming, she hated it. Her ears rang and the rows of seats became fuzzy-blue as the U-shaped gallery slipped out of focus.

Seats behind and to the side filled up with people from everywhere, but no one noticed what was happening to her? She twisted to face the three people in the row behind, but they were deep in a conversation in Chinese. In the background, at

least two hundred observers chatted or stared into the middle distance, fanning themselves with glossy heritage magazines which snapped back and forth. She turned to the few people who shared with her the almost empty front row. A man sweated in a brown woollen suit, his jaw set, reading the cover of a Cyrillic script magazine. The woman in the orange jacket watched from four seats away. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged as if to say: ‘Men, what can we do?’

In the chamber below, senior World Heritage Committee members took their places on the podium in front of the voting delegates. The session was about to start; a hush settled on the upper and lower floors but Stella was caught in an awkward exchange.

The man’s brogues inched closer. ‘Give me my seat.’

She would not be that type of woman who caused a rumpus.

‘It’s my seat. I’m here!’ Stella cringed; her voice was too loud.

A tap on her shoulder. A Chinese woman put a finger on her lips. ‘Shhh.’

Stella started to apologise, but the looming man arched further over her body.

‘Move!’

The word had two syllables in his accented English. His head took up the whole right side of her vision with a breathtaking look of entitlement. Now everyone was watching; it was too embarrassing. ‘Shhh...’ hissed along the rows, even from the man who had been reading Cyrillic.

The bag strap on the looming man sliced across his stomach flab; he clamped his suit jacket under his arm and a runnel of sweat dribbled down his left forearm. Her neck and face scarlet, Stella stared into the lower chamber, counting: one, two, three. Breathe slowly. Routine. That would help, as it had in the past. She opened her notebook. Four, five...keep control. She needed someone to join her in asking him to take another seat, but the new professor in an unseemly altercation? She’d never live it down.

A seat, it might seem trivial. She was not heroic Rosa Parks in 1955, retaining her Alabama bus seat against a white man and brutal, racist oppression. She was not igniting sparks in the US civil rights movement, but it was her seat and yet another man demanded that a woman move. It seemed an outrageous comparison, but banal, everyday insults could explode into the monumental.

The man's threatening bulk blocked Stella's view. She heard cables slithering and camera cases bashing against seats. Journalists and camera operators must have been arriving on the right side of the gallery, but she could not see them.

The man knuckled hard into her shoulders. 'This is my place. I need it to observe my delegation.'

She struggled to keep her voice low. 'But you can see into the lower gallery from anywhere. Help yourself. And sir—'

He punched the back of her seat. Thug! Blotches of heat inflamed her face. She itched to scratch his throat, but no one became a university Vice-Chancellor after that disgraceful scene. She calculated taking a stand, thrusting his horrible head up and away, but the career loss yawned in front of her. Professorships could be stripped.

From the seat behind, 'shhh, shhh' filled her ears.

Below, a spokeswoman tapped a microphone. 'Testing, testing.'

Someone sneezed. A mobile phone rang. Instantly shut off. Chatter died. It should have been an exceptional professional afternoon, one that fascinated her and advanced her career. Instead, she found herself pointing to hundreds of identical blue seats.

'Behold, seats!' Too loud again.

'I want *this* seat.'

Ah...so it was 'want'. Tough luck, buddy, I was here first.

The man reading Cyrillic script whispered angrily. 'Quiet!'

The looming man's eyes narrowed and his garlicky breath settled on the right side of her neck, hot and greasy. He shifted his weight and gravity rammed his satchel into the side of her mouth.

‘Ah!’ A stabbing pain flared from her chin. ‘Stop!’

Stella’s voice rose, not by much, but more than she wanted. The blur in her head crisped into white-hot anger, crackling from her skull to the base of her spine. A broken arm, and now—a fractured jaw? More pretence coming up. Oafish me!

The man reading Cyrillic twisted sharply. ‘Enough!’

The woman in orange turned and then looked away. Stella’s lips swelled into a tractor tyre, but she wouldn’t cause a fuss; she’d look hysterical. If she got up for ice, it would mean abandoning her seat. She’d look crazy if she then asked for it back. Victory to another bully. The politics of gendered behaviour were too complex.

She checked that the man’s bag had not dislodged her new earrings, pink baroque pearls from Peter. Her anger at Peter and fury with the man fused, her visceral response sickeningly familiar—a tense stomach, confusion, sneaking self-doubt. But she wouldn’t move. She wouldn’t! A flush surged up her neck; ears burnt in the mess of her hair. Those explosive feelings again.

She tried to whisper. ‘The chair announced free seating. Leave me alone or I’ll call an usher.’

She looked up to his face hanging over her right side. Eyes wide, mouth tilting between a gape and a sardonic grin. Was he going to give in? She took a second to study his hair in transition to baldness, thick grey on the sides, but wispy on top. Most startling was a vestige of lime green hair dye.

Photographs of stony, Biblical streets transformed the giant screens in the lower chamber, but she found it difficult to concentrate on ancient Ephesus, the first site for discussion. The man hung even closer, not moving as the session began. A ripple of pleasure rose in murmurs of happy memories from the gallery behind. Many observers had visited the home of the famous words, ‘love is patient, love is kind’, from St Paul’s *First Letter to the Corinthians*. Stella leaned forward to study the amphitheatre of Ephesus and, for the first time, spotted a business card taped

to the glass balustrade. ‘Professor Giovanni Costa, Cultural Heritage Services, Archaeologist, Via Nazionale, Roma, Italia.’ The man had scrawled ‘KEEP OUT! MY SEAT’ across the top in a faltering red ballpoint pen. The card was barely visible against the patchwork of people below.

A tatty business card! Not enough authority to save a seat, not nearly enough. Why justify herself? She would not move, and taking notes would demonstrate it. She opened her writing pad to where, so recently, she had posed scholarly questions. She scribbled a spiral, glanced at his elegant shoes—she’d lost her train of thought.

Shock. Jacket buttons scratched her face. The man flung himself across Stella, from the aisle steps into the seat on her left when he could have selected from at least a dozen spare seats in the front row. Brute!

But she had kept her seat. A mortifying spectacle, but this woman had not moved.

Professor Giovanni Costa settled into the second seat by thrusting his shoulder hard against hers, forcing her own body to pinion her fragile right arm against the armrest. Pain zipped from wrist to neck.

With the incandescent truth of hindsight, Stella should have moved, nothing more than scooting along three plush blue seats—a passionless life blip—but she had not. Life should not veer off course because of a mere seat.

But it was *her* seat.

In abjection, Stella would look back. She had stayed put and over the next few days mutated into a rash, lying, heartless, violent criminal and, *ergo*, hell bent on destroying family and career.

A spurt of wrath unlike any other she had known. I know who you are, Giovanni Costa.