

asb

An Uncertain Heart

JUNE TATE

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2017.

Copyright © 2017 by JUNE TATE

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2133-7

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*For my dear cousin
Margaret McVickers
with love*



Chapter One

Belgium. July, 1917

It was just after dawn at the base hospital at Poperinghe, a few miles from the front line. Wards were made out of wooden huts and tents to house the many patients who had been brought in from the front. A place that was a mud bath underfoot after the heaviest rainfall in thirty years, where drainage systems had all but been destroyed by preliminary bombardments. Where troops faced the enemy, ankle-deep in mud, where the duckboards now failed to give the men a solid footage and where rats scuttled round their feet as the troops stood waiting for the order to go over the top, many of them knowing they might never return to the safety of the trenches.

Gunfire sounded in the far distance as Sister Helen Chalmers climbed out of her camp bed, and washed in a small tin bowl with cold water before donning her uniform and hat. She quickly checked her reflection in the cracked mirror, hanging from a nail in the tent pole, before pulling on a pair of boots and swishing her cape around her shoulders. Taking an extra pair of shoes, she opened the flap of the tent and, lifting her skirts, made her way through

the mud, eyes down allowing her to pick her way through the ruts and deep puddles. The sky was grey without a hint of sunlight to follow.

She walked into the large tent that was the operating theatre, took off the boots and changed into her shoes. There were three tables awaiting the injured, with surgeons and staff standing ready, scrubbed up, preparing for another long day of surgery, knowing that soon, ambulances would be arriving, full of injured soldiers in desperate need of their skill. Then the first patient was brought in.

Hours later, Helen looked over her face mask at Captain Richard Carson, the surgeon with whom she worked, as she handed him a scalpel. This was their sixth operation of the day and yet another brave soldier was to go under the knife. As the battle raged on at Ypres, more and more casualties arrived. They were attended to by the medical orderlies and nurses, assessing which patient necessitated the urgent attention of the surgeon, who could wait and who was beyond medical help. It was a desperate choice to have to make, but the medical staff remained as stoic as possible under the strain. Those who could wait were taken to their beds, their uniforms, caked with mud, blood and crawling with lice, were removed and the men given blanket baths.

In the operating theatre, one of the nurses leant forward and wiped the sweat from the surgeon's brow. He nodded his thanks and continued. The day wore on. Limbs were amputated, shrapnel removed from chests, blistering from mustard gas treated, hoping to stave off infection from

bacteria. Lives were saved and lives were lost on the operating tables. Bodies removed, the next patient brought in.

Eventually, other medical teams took over, giving those who'd worked time for a break and a meal. They made their way through the lines of washed sheets, pillowcases and bandages hanging out to dry.

Richard Carson lowered his aching body onto a bench at the table in the mess. He stretched his back and let out a deep sigh. Looking across at Helen, he smiled ruefully.

'At least we didn't lose many today.'

'No,' she agreed, 'it could have been so much worse.'

They ate in silence, lost in their own thoughts, almost too weary to make conversation.

'I'm going to get my head down for a couple of hours,' he said. 'I'll see you back in the theatre later. Perhaps after dinner you would like to come to my tent and have a well-earned glass?'

She nodded, rose to her feet and made her way to her own room. Stripping off her uniform, she set her alarm clock and climbed into bed.

Later that night, after completing their second shift, Richard and Helen made their way from the mess to Richard's tent. She sat on the bed whilst the surgeon poured two glasses of whisky, and handing one to her he sat in a chair. 'Bottoms up!'

She smiled and drank, closing her eyes, enjoying the heat from the liquor as it slid down her throat. Her back was painful, her legs ached and she longed to soak in a hot bath with water up to her neck as she lay back, but it wouldn't

be until she was on leave that this luxury would be on offer. She rose wearily from the bed.

‘I’m off to grab some sleep.’

Richard got to his feet and gathered her into his arms and kissed her.

‘God! I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t here.’

‘Your job – that’s why you’re here, like the rest of us.’

She kissed him quickly and walked out of the tent, deliberately ignoring the picture of his wife, placed upon his desk.

Alone in her own tent, she undressed. She could still feel the imprint of Richard’s mouth on hers and cursed the war. War messed with people’s lives. How else would she have become a mistress of such an eminent man and who was married? They had worked together under the most difficult conditions, had faced gunfire, sometimes escaping with their lives by a hair’s breadth whilst moving from one hospital to another. Facing death brought people together, lowered the barriers that should have kept them apart and now she was involved with a man who belonged to another!

At the end of July, Sir Douglas Haig ordered another attack on Passchendaele. The infantry attack churned the clay soil and smashed even more of the remaining drainage systems. The mud was now a quagmire, clogging rifles and immobilising tanks. In some parts the mud was so deep that men and horses drowned – and the hospital was full to overloading.

Outside of the hospital, lines of injured men lay on stretchers, waiting to be attended. The death list grew, and

in the theatre surgeons and nurses worked non-stop for hours on end. Wards were full of lines of iron beds, moved close together to take as many patients as possible. During the day, the side flaps of the tents were lifted to allow air to flow through the inside, giving at least a modicum of comfort.

Those in pain called out and nurses would scurry over to them to try and relieve their suffering, bathe their fevered brow, try to calm them and give them comfort.

‘I ain’t never going back to that hellhole again, Nurse!’ cried one young soldier to the nurse attending him.

‘Indeed you won’t, Corporal Greene,’ she said with conviction, knowing that the young man had lost a limb and that, due to his fever, he was as yet unaware of this. ‘You’ll be going home as soon as you’re fit enough. Now, be a good lad and try and get some sleep.’

She moved on to the next bed, taking the temperature of the patient, checking his chart, having a few words of cheer, offering a sip of water, then on to the next man to change his dressing, still thinking of her first patient, hoping she wouldn’t be the one to eventually tell the poor boy he’d lost a leg. She’d had to do it too many times and had to cope with the distress, sometimes hysteria, other times silence – then shock, followed by the realisation among the married men that they’d be unable to return to their jobs and make a living for their families.

At the front it was strangely quiet, both sides had stopped firing at each other. Tinned mugs, full of tea, were gratefully received, cigarettes were lit, men perched wherever they could or leant against the stacked sacks that made the

high wall between them and the enemy. Where the ladders rested, waiting for the men to climb up and over the top at the next excursion in an attempt to gain territory.

It was a soulless scene between the lines. Rolls of barbed wire crossed the landscape, now obliterated by the rain. There were no green fields here, only mud and potholes made by the bombs that had been dropped and holes made from heavy cannon fire. There was no birdsong – no birds. Any trees had been obliterated or left stripped of leaves like wooden sentinels. Battle-worn, like the troops on either side.

Yet there was black humour despite everything. The indomitable spirit surfaced at the oddest moments, a half-buried, raised hand sticking out of the mud. One of the soldiers took off his tin hat to take a rest. He hung it on the fingers of the hand.

‘Here, hold this a minute, mate, will you?’

‘Should have brought my bloody mother-in-law with me,’ said another. ‘She’d have frightened the Hun to death with just one look!’

Captain James Havers walked among his men, stopping to chat to them as he made his rounds. He had been sent to the Fifth Army immediately after getting his commission. It had been a baptism of fire in every way, but he was a good officer, mentally attuned to what needed to be done and had a good rapport with his men. He had a natural air of authority about him and his men would have followed him anywhere.

His batman, Bert Higgins, handed him a mug of strong tea.

‘Here you are, sir, bet you could murder this right now.’

‘Thanks, Higgins. We all needed this break.’

‘How long before we go over the top again?’

‘I’m just waiting for my orders. Let’s hope it’s not too soon.’

Higgins walked away and lighting a cigarette muttered to himself, ‘Anytime is too bloody soon for me.’ He took from a pocket in his uniform a creased picture of his wife and baby. He stared at it, wondering if he’d ever see them again, and fervently prayed that he would.

The orders came through, and a few minutes later James blew his whistle. The men climbed the ladders to go over the top and advance on the enemy once again. Immediately, the opposing guns opened fire, the air full of screams as men were cut down. Cries of ‘Medic!’ carried in the air.

James crouched low as he advanced. His heart was beating so hard he thought it might burst through his chest. Bullets whizzed past him and every moment he thought would be his last, but he called out encouragement to his men as they advanced.

‘Keep down. Stay low!’ He and several others dived for cover into a large crater and sank in the mud, water up to their knees. One of the men carried a green canvas bag holding Mills bombs.

‘How’s your aim, Jenkins?’ James asked.

‘Played cricket for my county, sir. Was the best bowler on the team.’

‘Right, think you can hit that machine-gun post over there?’

‘No problem, sir.’ The man took out a bomb, lifted his head to quickly glance over the top of the crater to find his target and tossed it towards the enemy lines. Everybody ducked. The sound of the explosion filled

the air. They waited . . . the machine gun was silenced.

James shouted his order and they climbed out of the crater, running towards the enemy, but gunfire opened from other positions and James saw Jenkins fall, a look of surprise on his face. He stopped, bent down and shook the man.

‘Jenkins! Come on, man, speak to me.’

But there was no expression in the eyes that were still open. No sign of life. Just a bullet hole in his forehead, showing what had transpired. Another man fell beside them, his blood splattering James, but he was still alive.

‘Medic!’ James called. ‘Over here!’ But he had to move on.

The onslaught was relentless. Cries of pain could be heard as men were injured. Body parts were strewn over the ground as the troops were battered by gunfire and brought down by flying pieces of shrapnel. The company did their best, but eventually James had no choice but to order a retreat, beaten once again by the strength of the enemy.

He climbed down the ladder with the others, relieved that they were still alive. James waited for all his men that were left to return, the injured carried away on stretchers, then he went to his quarters and poured a hefty measure of Scotch. He was shaking so much he could hardly hold the glass.

Months passed. Several attempts were made to win back ground but little was achieved except for the cost of more lives of the gallant troops and it wasn’t until November that what remained of Passchendaele was captured by British and Canadian troops, fighting together. It had taken this long and many lives to cover five miles.

* * *

During the following weeks, the hospital was made redundant and moved. All staff were deployed elsewhere and at last given leave. They were driven to a hotel way behind the lines, where the hotel manager was delighted to still be in business making money from the British government for catering to the troops.

Helen Chalmers leant back in the bath, resting her head on the rim, water up to her neck as she'd dreamt of back in the days, near the fighting. She let out a deep sigh and relaxed, squeezing the soapy water out of the sponge over her arms, watching the water trickle, pondering as to how such a simple thing could mean so much. But then a lump of stale bread given to a starving person would seem like a feast, she mused. She closed her eyes. For the following three days there would be none of the blood and gore of the operating theatre. No smell of ether or stench of rotting flesh. She could rest, eat in the dining room, drink at the bar and feel like a human being once again and at night she could lay in the arms of her lover. His wife could have him back when they returned to England but for now, he was hers.

She reluctantly climbed out of the bath and dressed in a long skirt and a white blouse. It was a joy to wear civilian clothes, a dash of perfume and make-up. Brushing her hair, she looked at her reflection in the mirror, then made her way downstairs to the dining room. Richard was already eating his breakfast. He rose from his seat as she approached.

'Good morning. Sleep well?'

She smiled softly, knowing that he'd shared her bed, and after they'd made love they'd slept entwined in each

other's arms until the early hours, when he'd returned to his own room.

'Like a baby,' she answered as she sat down.

She helped herself to a couple of croissants and spread marmalade over one as a waiter came over with a fresh pot of coffee for her.

'Being here, you can almost forget the war,' she remarked and bit into her pastry.

'Fancy a walk round the grounds after?'

'Why not, but not until I've finished eating everything and emptied the coffee pot. It's been so long without such luxuries, it's made me greedy.'

He looked across the table at her and softly said, 'Not only for food, darling.'

She felt her cheeks flush. It was true, away from the battlefield and the hospital, the long hours, which sapped every ounce of her energy, she felt renewed and couldn't get enough of Richard. It was like being on a honeymoon.

'Are you complaining?'

'Don't be ridiculous! I'd happily stay in your bed all day and send for room service when we wanted nourishment and a rest.'

Helen started laughing, which made some of the others in the room look over to see what had amused her so. 'You are outrageous.'

'No, darling, just being truthful.' He sipped his coffee, staring at her over the rim of his cup, his eyes twinkling.

Looking at her lover, Helen was pleased to see that he'd lost the drawn look that so many hours in the operating theatre had caused. His skin was no longer sallow and he

was relaxed. She wondered just how much longer they could have carried on without a break.

Drinking the last of her coffee she looked at him.

‘Ready for that walk?’

‘Indeed I am, let’s get some fresh air in our lungs. I’ll get my coat.’

An army lorry pulled up outside the hotel and Captain James Havers stepped out, pulling his haversack after him. He thanked the driver and walked into the hotel and up to the reception desk where he was greeted warmly by the owner.

‘Good morning, sir, what can I do for you?’

James smiled warmly. ‘I’m hoping you have a room free for a few days.’

‘I have, sir, once it’s been cleaned. Somebody signed out this morning. Let me take you to the dining room for some breakfast while you wait. Leave your bag with me.’

The young captain was only too happy to oblige. He’d been travelling for thirty-six hours and was thirsty and starving – a bath could wait.

Pouring a cup of steaming coffee, James lifted it and breathed in the strong aroma. God! How long had it been since he’d had a decent coffee? He eyed the continental breakfast placed before him. He’d have given anything for bacon and eggs, but nevertheless, he was glad of anything right now. His stomach was empty and he was ready for a welcome break, accepting anything that was on offer. After breakfast he would have a bath and sleep. The thought of a proper bed with clean sheets was now uppermost in his mind and he hoped that his room would soon be ready.

He looked around at the other diners; everyone looked worn out. Not surprising. The battlefield was relentless. Ground won and lost, so many deaths for so little. He knew how lucky he was to still be in one piece and alive.

As he finished his breakfast, the manager walked over to his table and handed him a key. 'Your room is ready now, sir,' he said.

James thanked him, gulped down the last of the coffee, picked up the key and made his way to his room on the first floor. As he took off his uniform jacket, he gazed out of the window overlooking the gardens. Here everything was green – the grass, the many shrubs and some trees – unlike the mud-laden fields he'd so recently left. He ran a bath, soaked in it until the water cooled, then dried himself and climbed into bed after closing the curtains. He lay for a second and listened. It was quiet, strange, no sound of gunfire. He shut his eyes and within minutes was asleep.

Helen and Richard pulled their coats around them as they strolled through the gardens. There was a bitter wind but the skies were clear and the air fresh. They found a bench seat beneath a cedar tree and sat, chatting. Soon they'd receive their orders and Richard was wondering where they'd be sent.

Helen snuggled closer. 'Let's leave the war behind whilst we're here,' she pleaded. 'I'm so sick of it, I want to forget it until we leave.'

Catching hold of her hand, he apologised. 'Sorry, darling, just thinking aloud. Perhaps on our next leave we can pull a few strings and get a few days somewhere really nice.'

They chatted about the possibility and what they'd

like to do if it were possible. They walked further around the grounds until, driven by the cold, they returned to the comfort of the hotel lounge, where they both sat writing letters to their folk back home. Helen, writing to her mother, tried to shut out the fact that Richard would be writing to his wife.

James Havers eventually woke from his sleep and stretched languidly before climbing out of bed. He wandered into the bathroom, swilled his face in cold water to help him wake up, then shaved. He felt like a different man. He dressed and, leaving his room, headed to the bar, where he perched on a stool and ordered a Scotch and soda.

In the lounge, Helen had finished her letters and, seeing Richard was still writing, quietly left her seat and wandered off to the bar. She knew it was wrong of her but she was feeling peeved, knowing to whom Richard was writing. There was a lone figure sitting at the counter. He smiled at her.

‘Hello. I hate drinking alone, so can I buy you a drink?’

Helen looked at the young captain and smiled. ‘That’s a great idea. Thanks.’ She held out her hand. ‘Helen Chalmers.’

He placed his hand in hers. ‘James Havers. What are you doing here?’

‘I’m on leave, I’m one of Queen Alexandra’s nursing sisters.’

‘So what’s your poison?’ he asked.

‘A gin and tonic would go down very well at this moment.’

She studied the stranger whilst he ordered her drink. His

blonde hair, worn short as was required by the military, his blue eyes, wide apart, and a full, sensuous mouth, which parted to smile at her, showing perfect white teeth. Far too good-looking for his own good, she mused, but as he chatted to her, there was no arrogance in his tone. He had a quiet but sharp sense of humour and he soon had her laughing.

Grinning at her he said, 'You are the first woman I've seen in a very long time. I've been surrounded by men and mud for an age, I began to wonder if I was really human! There wasn't anything to enjoy at Passchendaele.'

'I can believe it. We dealt with so many of your casualties. I can't begin to imagine what it must have been like.'

For a moment a frown creased his brow and his smile faded and Helen saw behind the eyes, a brief memory of a man who had been in the midst of the war. Then he smiled again. 'Let's not talk about the war. Where is your home in Blighty?'

'I live in the Cotswolds in the Vale of Evesham – and you?'

'Would you believe, Cheltenham?' He began to laugh. 'I have to come all this way to meet a near neighbour.'

They spent the next half an hour talking about home, the places they both knew and how wonderful it would be to get back to civilisation.

Richard entered the bar and seeing her, walked over. 'So here you are.'

'Richard, this is Captain James Havers, he's also on leave. James this is Captain Richard Carson, the surgeon I work with.'

The two men shook hands.

‘He lives in Cheltenham, would you believe? Imagine that!’ she said.

With a broad grin, James looked at Richard. ‘Small world, isn’t it?’

Richard and Helen spent a relaxing day in the hotel, sitting reading, having lunch, neither wanting to do anything but recharge their batteries. They drank cocktails at the bar before dinner and went to bed early, enjoying the fact they could make love leisurely without the fear of interruption or discovery.

Helen stretched, arms above her head, and let out a deep sigh.

‘It’s easy to forget the war here,’ she said. ‘No sound of gunfire, a comfortable bed. Log fires in the lounge, a bar, food served on proper plates, not tin ones.’

Richard swung his legs over the side of the bed and lit a cigarette. ‘I can’t see it going on for much longer,’ he said. ‘The number of casualties and deaths alone weaken the forces on both sides. Something has to give.’

‘Imagine, Richard, being able to go home. To return to normality. Will you go back to the hospital in London?’

‘Yes, fortunately for me I do have a job waiting.’ He turned to her, his hand caressing her bare breast. ‘You could be my theatre sister there too, if you want. I can fix it for you.’

She frowned. ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

He looked surprised. ‘Why on earth not?’

‘Because things will be different. You’ll be back with your wife, leading a normal life. It would be awkward after our relationship.’

His hand slipped to her inner thighs. ‘That doesn’t have to change,’ he said.

Helen caught hold of his hand and pushed it away. ‘I can’t believe you said that!’ She sat up, pulling the sheet around her.

‘I don’t understand,’ he exclaimed, ‘you knew I was married, I never pretended to be anything else.’

‘True. But when we do go home, I’m certainly not playing the part of your mistress, waiting for you to spare a few hours when you can. Let’s face it, it was only the war that brought us together. Had we met and worked back at home, it wouldn’t have happened – but it did. Be honest, we both knew it wasn’t going to last.’

‘God, that sounds so cold! Is that all I mean to you?’

‘No, of course not,’ she said softly. ‘If you were free, then it would be wonderful.’ She paused. ‘Let me ask you a question and I want you to promise to give me an honest answer.’

He looked at her and saw she was deadly serious. ‘I promise.’

‘Are you prepared to divorce your wife for me?’

He didn’t answer but continued to look at her.

‘There, your silence speaks volumes.’

He rose to his feet. ‘I don’t know what’s got into you tonight.’

Helen turned back the covers on her side and, getting out of bed, put on a dressing gown. ‘Let’s face it, Richard, in the hospital, surrounded by death and war, we clung together for comfort, affection, mutual respect and desire, but sometime we’ll have to face up to the future. I realised that one day you would no longer be in my life. I’d got so

used to you – to us – and there is no us . . . only now.’

Richard dressed hurriedly. ‘I can’t cope with you in this mood; I’m going to the bar for a nightcap.’

She watched him dress and walk out of the room, then wandered over to the French windows, opened them and walked outside, lit a cigarette and gazed out over the garden now bathed in moonlight. Men! She couldn’t believe that Richard thought they could continue their relationship when they returned home. What was he thinking? Of course they couldn’t! In wartime it was different. Things happened. Men and women found comfort where they could, not knowing if every day would be their last. That was acceptable in a strange way, but after . . . well that was a different thing entirely. You had to try to return to normality. Perhaps it was time to prepare for the future – without Richard.