

# *The Kindness Of Strangers*

## Chapter Summaries

### \* Chapter One: Berlin \*

Vera Levin grows up in Berlin, the only child of a wealthy architect and builder, and lives a privileged and cultured life, wanting for nothing -- until 1933, when Hitler comes to power. Jews are expelled from universities, their businesses are expropriated and leaders arrested. Vicious anti-Semitic propaganda is everywhere.

### \* Chapter Two: Stockholm \*

Fearing for her safety, Vera's parents send her to Sweden in 1935. She studies to be a dental technician, but hates it. She meets people with connections to the cinema, and soon Vera is cast in a few of Ingrid Bergman's earliest films. Her Swedish is poor, however, so she goes to France to pursue her dream of a movie career.

### \* Chapter Three: Paris \*

Vera arrives with introductions to influential Parisians, including Socialist Premier Leon Blum's right-hand man of. Nevertheless, she has a tough time. Without working papers, she almost starves until she meets German-Jewish dancer Bobby Rogers. They become engaged, and he helps her survive by giving dancing lessons -- and stealing food. She is tutored by a prominent French actor, and through his efforts get a few parts as an extra. To make ends meet, Vera also peddles silk stockings and neckties. Actor-director-writer Erich Von Stroheim takes a fancy to her; when she turns away his seduction attempt, he is amused and opens more doors for her. She is cast in speaking roles, and her performances are noted by prominent directors.

### \* Chapter Four: Gurs \*

Germany invades France, and Vera and Bobby, German nationals, are sent to internment camps, Vera at Gurs in the Pyrenees, Bobby at Cepoy, near Bordeaux. Vera becomes friends with Helga, a German-Jewish and French-Catholic girl of 20. Camp life is harsh, there is little food -- but Vera has a ray of hope: US visas await her and Bobby in Nice. France surrenders, and Germany occupies the northern zone. Vichy, an unoccupied pro-German zone, is established in the south. A French officer arrives to announce that Jews will be deported. Meanwhile, Bobby meets the mysterious Count Von Kester, a German who promises to help them.

### \* Chapter Five: Marseilles \*

Vera and Bobby leave their respective camps and meet near Bordeaux. But the Germans continually expand the occupied zone, and each time the couple flees to avoid capture. Along the way they destroy their papers, which reveal their Jewish identities. Unable to reach the US consulate in Nice, Vera and Bobby hide in a

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succession of cellars and haystacks in and near Marseilles, stealing or begging food. Then the police began to round up refugees. Bobby feigns illness, and Vera sets out for Paris, hoping that Count Von Kester will help her and Bobby with travel papers.

### **\* Chapter Six: The Road To Paris \***

Trying to reach Paris, Vera thumbs rides with passing truckers. But the border is shifting and police checkpoints are everywhere. She walks for a time, then steals a bicycle and, dressed as a farmer's daughter, follows back roads. As she tops a rise she sees a German military checkpoint far ahead. She drags the bicycle miles through dense forest and circles the checkpoint, dodging patrols until she returns to the road.

### **\* Chapter Seven: Algeria \***

In Paris at last, Vera finds Von Kester. He is now a top police official and wears the uniform of a German officer. He provides documents for the couple, along with train fare. Now all she has to do is collect her visa and go to America! Upon entering the Vichy zone, however, she makes a call for Von Kester, and is soon arrested. Bobby is apprehended in Marseilles. Along with others carrying papers from Von Kester, they are sent to Algiers. A Vichy military tribunal finds them guilty of spying against France on behalf of the Germans. Each is sentenced to three years prison.

### **\* Chapter Eight: Prison \***

To occupy her mind, Vera writes soulful poetry. She learns how real spies behave from some of her cellmates, and she reads underground "newspapers" circulating in the prison that detail the fate of Europe's Jews: forcibly deported, starved in ghettos, murdered in gas chambers and their bodies burned. In 1942, more than a year after her sentence began, a Gestapo agent unexpectedly arrives to remove her from prison.

### **\* Chapter Nine: France \***

Vera reaches the depths of despair as she learns that Bobby has hanged himself while in SS custody. She is returned to Marseilles, where teams of Gestapo agents quiz her about "espionage activities" on behalf of Germany. Denials are useless, so Vera embraces the role of a spy and pretends to have worked for the Reich. Pressed for details, she does a verbal dance, changing the subject, refusing to provide names, dates, places, etc., on security grounds. Although treated decently, she is questioned relentlessly. Their patience exhausted, the Gestapo ships Vera to Paris.

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### \* Chapter Ten: Paris \*

When it seems that her Gestapo interrogators won't buy her act, Vera leaps from a second-floor window to escape. She is injured in the jump. On the lam, she finds a network of sympathetic Germans who, at great risk, protect and hide Jews. Moving from hotel to hotel to evade Gestapo sweeps, she lives in terror for months. She meets other Jews who are under protection. Through her protector, Major Botticher, she learns that her parents, hiding in Berlin, have been taken to an extermination camp, murdered, and their bodies burned.

### \* Chapter Eleven: Underground \*

After a chance meeting and tearful re-union with Helga, Vera enters a twilight world. She needs to earn a living, but without papers has few options. With Helga at her side, she dabbles in the black market, selling hard-to-find hardware to the German Army. She falls ill, and not daring to chance a hospital, Helga cares for her. When she recovers, they return to business. Thrice arrested on suspicion of black-marketing by the Gestapo, she talks her way out of danger. When Major Botticher can no longer help, she moves to the suburbs with two civilian aircraft technicians. She works as a bar hostess, and dates German officers who are shocked but sympathetic to learn that she is a Jew -- and a virgin. A prominent German goes to Berlin and registers papers making himself Vera's father. A few weeks before the Normandy invasion, the Gestapo arrests Vera and Helga, and bring them to *Oberst Reimann*, a ranking SS leader who reports to Hitler's architect, Albert Speer.

### \* Chapter Twelve: Liberated Paris \*

Reimann is hunting Jews to steal their property, but Vera and Helga, threatened with death, spit in his eye. Miraculously, he waves them away. Months later, when Paris is liberated, Vera is arrested by French police and chained in a dungeon for weeks. They want to return her to prison in Algeria to finish her sentence. Freed through the efforts of friends, she is soon re-arrested, freed, arrested yet again. Vera is forced to prove that she never worked for the Germans.

### \* Chapter Thirteen: New York \*

Although French police finally drop their crusade, The FBI refuses Vera a US visa because of her Vichy conviction. Once again, she has to clear her record. When she finally does so, the visa is granted. En route to the US on a luxury steamship, she makes the acquaintance of a Park Avenue jeweler, who asks her to become his "third mistress." Although she declines this honor, he tips New York's tabloids that a French "movie star" is arriving, and they greet her dockside, where she poses for pictures. But while Vera gets a few modeling jobs, she finds it impossible to make a living that way.

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### **\* Chapter Fourteen: Atlantic City & Miami \***

Vera becomes an Atlantic City waitress, takes her first lover, then follows the tourists and jobs to Miami. She struggles to earn a living, to make a life worthy of the people who saved her. But she has not yet given up her dream of starring in the movies.

### **\* Chapter Fifteen: Hollywood \***

Moving to California, Vera gets a screen test, a speaking part in a film -- and learns that a charming European accent is not a hot commodity in postwar America. She models, works as a cocktail waitress in a strip bar, as a Beverly Hills manicurist, then opens a Hollywood dog grooming salon. She finds a sweetheart, and settles into a dull but safe life. Every now and then lands a small role in a television program. She will never be a star, but Vera, now age 88, has already played the role of a lifetime.