

Chapter Ten: Paris

"Come, come, *Fraulein* Laroche, we are the *Geheime Staatspolizei*, the Gestapo," said the senior *Shutzstaffel* officer, the one behind the desk. "Security is our business. We decide what is a secret, and who should know it." His cruel, hooded eyes belied his friendly smile and polite manner. He seemed to be in his late thirties, with fair, thinning hair, and several gold teeth. His black SS uniform with the lightning bolts on its lapels was immaculate. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "You may speak freely about all things! We know that you have been of service to the Reich, but we need the details. So please, we are not here to discuss the cinema or the symphonies of Wagner. Please answer our questions."

How much longer will this go on, I wondered, my heart was beating so hard that I feared that it might burst from my chest. I didn't know exactly why I had been brought here, why the Gestapo was so interested in me. At the train station, my SS escort, a handsome, muscular, well-groomed man in his early thirties, had hailed an ordinary taxi and bundled me into it. My fear grew with every street we passed. We stopped at a nondescript building that might once have been a hotel on Avenue de L'Opera, near the center of Paris. By the time we entered the building and the SS man had locked the elevator's folding gate and pushed the button for the second floor, my knees were so weak that I could hardly stand. My God, I thought, will it never finish? And, Why are they holding me, what is it about me that makes them so curious?

I was offered a chair, and as I sat, I glanced around the room, noting the senior officer behind his enormous desk, and five or six other uniformed SS men flanking

him, I felt as though I was before a tribunal. Or that I had been brought in for their personal amusement, as a cat torments a mouse before he devours it. They began immediately. First one SS man asked a question, and then another, and before I could finish my answer someone would interrupt with yet another question. My head swam. I had not slept more than a few minutes for several nights running, and I was drained, exhausted with fear. I knew that they would as soon deport me as order lunch, and I knew, sitting in that chair as the minutes and hours ticked by, that I would not be able to resist much longer. And always the same questions:

What was my mission?

Who was my controller, my boss? To whom did I report?

Who were the others that I worked with?

Where had I been trained? In what skills?

What were the protocols that I had used for sending or receiving information?

Of course I had no answers for such questions. I had never been a spy. I had never worked against France. My only crime was accepting travel papers from Count Von Kester. Or perhaps, by making a telephone call to a number in Lyons, by passing on a short message, I had unwittingly involved myself in his business.

But *what* was Von Kester's business? In the camp at Cepoy, where Bobby had met him among the thousands of interned German nationals, it was whispered that he was a spy who gave German secrets to the French. But when I met Von Kester at the Paris apartment of his mistress, I beheld a good-looking man who wore the uniform of a senior German officer. For almost two years, since my arrest, I had wondered whom he really worked for. Why had he been interned among thousands of Jewish refugees?

Was he a double agent, pro-French but pretending to be a loyal German? A loyal German selling worthless secrets to the French? Or maybe he had no loyalties at all, and worked for himself? If he was loyal to Germany, why had he given me travel documents when he could have merely arrested me? How was it that the Vichy police had nabbed me so quickly? Perhaps, it came to me years later, the Gestapo was actually after Von Kester, and hoped that I would tell them something that could be used against him. Wheels within wheels! Even now it confuses me.

I had no answers for the SS, only the questions that I will take to my grave. I had already admitted that I was Jewish. That was one of the first questions that they asked, and because I knew that they could easily check, and that they would, I admitted it. I knew how the Nazis felt about Jews, but I had no idea if my working for the Reich would have made any difference to my personal situation. I tried to feel them out, to learn if the SS appreciated me more because they thought I had served Germany. But my inquisitors said nothing, and I never knew what they thought of me.

In 1940 I had told the French Vichy authorities that I had done nothing to merit arrest, much less prison. They did not believe me -- so why would the Germans? And so I had allowed the Gestapo to think that I had served the Reich by working against the French after coming to Paris and before the war began in August 1939. But then they demanded details. What could I tell them? Certainly, I could never mention Von Kester.

And I knew that it would only get worse and worse and worse. The more I evaded their inquires, the more they became convinced that I must know *something*. They would never stop, I was sure.

"From the beginning, again," said the man behind the desk. "When did you leave Berlin? Where did you go? What did you do in Stockholm? Why did you come to Paris? Where did you live in Paris?"

I told them, and they wanted to know where I went, what I did and why I did it. Why had I worked for the Reich? What were my ideas about National Socialism, about Hitler? What did I believe, that I was a German, or a Jew, or both?

It has been too long for me to recall exactly what I said. But I am sure that I felt obliged to say that as a Jew I couldn't be for the Nazis. On the other hand, I had to give the impression that I had done something for Germany, something to help the Reich make a better place in the world. I was born in Germany, I considered myself a loyal German, and before Hitler came to power I was a good German. I still considered myself a German, loyal to my country. And of course, this was true.

I couldn't tell by the way they looked at me, by the tone of their voices, by their body language or what they did if they were satisfied with my responses, or if they were dissatisfied. I was worn out by their questions, exhausted. I couldn't know what they would do with me next -- but I had the feeling that they would deport me. I would be sent to a concentration camp, where they would put me in the gas chamber and burn my body in a furnace. Each time I paused for breath there were more questions, a torrent of questions, over and over and over. Today I have an enlarged heart, and I have no doubt that this was its cause.

When it seemed that the SS men were losing patience, that the interview would soon be over, I asked to be excused to relieve myself. One of the officers took me down the corridor and around the corner to the WC. It was a tiny room, with just

a toilet and a sink, and as I locked the door behind me I thought, Now this is it, this is my only chance, I must get away from here at once.

On the outer wall was a little window, and by some miracle it was not locked. When I closed the lid to stand on the toilet, I could just reach the window. I raised the pane as far as it would go, and leaned outside. I was probably about fifteen feet above the street, but it seemed much higher. I searched for a ledge that I could crawl out on, but there was nothing but the rough stone of the building.

I wore a mid-calf skirt, a jacket over my blouse, and low-heeled shoes. Thank God! If I had been wearing a full skirt or high heels, I would have had to remove them. I made up my mind: The SS man outside the door would not give me more than a few minutes before he began to wonder what was going on, so if I was ever going to go, now was the time. Before the war, before the hungry months of the internment camp, and before the lean months spent in an Algerian prison, I had a very nice figure, but I had never weighed much more than a hundred pounds. When I climbed atop the toilet seat, I was skin and bones, perhaps ten pounds lighter. After pulling myself up to the window, I was able to squirm sideways through the narrow opening, feet first.

As I jumped I tried to keep my knees and ankles together, not out of modesty but because before the war I had seen a newsreel report about parachute troops, and I had noticed that they kept their legs together as they left the aircraft.

I slammed down onto the cobblestones and something cracked in my spine. A terrible river of agony shot through my back as I toppled over. I can still feel the shock of my landing; to this day I suffer the pain of that jump.

I got up slowly, wondering if something was broken, and as I pulled myself together I noticed the passers-by in the street. Some stared at me, and some affected not to notice. Perhaps they knew the sort of offices from which I had unceremoniously departed. I was very fortunate in that no one rushed up to help me. I was in severe pain, but the last thing I needed just then was someone insisting on taking me to a hospital. Another bit of luck: I had landed on my feet, but the heels of my shoes remained intact. Had they broken, I would have had to walk with a noticeable limp or go barefoot. Either way, I would have stood out.

Then I thought, What now? I must get away from here. I walked very quickly down the street to the Place de L'Opera, a large square with a Metro station on one side and the Opera House on the other. Although every step was agony, I hurried along as fast as I could, trying meanwhile to think even more quickly. I had no money, not even a sou, none at all. And no papers, at a time when everyone was required to carry identification or risk jail or deportation.

When Von Kester had provided me with papers to get to Marseilles, he also gave me the name and address of a friend, a German officer. The Count had also told me, almost two years earlier, that if in the future I needed help and he was unable to assist me, I was to go to this man, Franz Vollmer, and he would help me.

The last time I had contacted a friend of Von Kester, I had been arrested. But I didn't know what else to do. I had no funds for a bus or the Metro, or for the telephone, and the few Parisians whom I knew that might help me lived many miles away -- and doubtless the Gestapo knew who they were. I suppose I might have