



Chapter 13

Krista

Lane finally had the freedom of the continent, thanks to the understanding of his superiors. He had to find his friend, if he survived, so as to find his fiancée, if she survived. There had been no word as Germany collapsed, and now in the chaos of the war's ending there seemed to be no way to run them down through Allied or German records. He had to do it himself, his own way.

On May tenth, 1945, he came to Wiesbaden, which was where Ernst Best's family had been going. He would start his search here.

The phone service was cooperative. Yes, there were Best families here, but no phone listed for Ernst. Lane took a list of their addresses, and drove to each, inquiring for Ernst Best. On the fifteenth he found recognition. "Yes, he is my nephew," Karl Best said. "A good young man. But lost in the war."

"Lost?"

"He left his woman here with my brother's family and returned to Berlin for a dangerous mission. We have not seen him since."

"How long ago?" Lane asked anxiously.

"Seven months ago."

"How can I search for him?"

The man studied him with disconcerting lack of expression. Lane realized that to these people the British and Americans were still the enemy. They had to be polite, but they were not friendly. "Krista might know."

That must be the woman. "Where is Krista?"

"I will take you to her." The man seemed relieved.

Krista was surprisingly attractive despite her worn clothing. Her hair was blond, her features fair, and her figure appealing.

"Krista, this is Herr Dowling," Karl Best said. "He is looking for Ernst."

The woman said something in German.

Karl Best turned back to Lane. "I must translate for her," he said, with an opaque expression.

"Do it," Lane agreed.

The man spoke rapidly in German. Then Krista reacted.

She turned her blue eyes on Lane. They seemed almost to glow with recognition. "Lane Dowling!" she exclaimed.



"You know my name?" he asked, startled.

She spoke again in German.

"She says you are Ernst's American friend, are you not?" Best translated. "He spoke of you."

"Yes. I must find him. Do you know where he is?"

Again the German and translation. "I know where he worked, in Berlin. But I do not know whether he remains there. I fear he is dead."

"He must not be dead!" Lane exclaimed.

She nodded when she heard with something more than agreement. "Ja, he must not be dead. But he has not returned." The intensity of her gaze made Lane uneasy. What was in her mind?

"Tell me where he worked."

"He was in the SS. There was a special mission. Perhaps one of the other officers would know."

"What other officers?"

She shook her head. "They did not speak their names to me. I would know some by sight, however."

"Then come with me, and tell me who they are," Lane said. Then, as Best translated his words to her. "I am Ernst's friend. I will not hurt you."

"I have no money to travel," Best translated.

"I have money. I have a car. Just go to Berlin with me, and show me. Then I will bring you back. I promise."

With seeming reluctance, and something else, she agreed. "But how shall we speak to each other?" she asked through Best after a moment.

"We don't need to speak! But I will teach you a few words of English while we drive there."

She turned those great blue eyes on him again. "Ja." Then she walked away.

Lane watched her go. She had an interesting walk. "She's a strange one," he murmured.

"We are a defeated people," Karl Best said. "We are careful where we tread. Especially our young women. For a woman to go with a soldier--this has implications."

"I will bring her back unscathed," Lane said, appreciating the implication. "I'm--I'm not after the local women. I'm looking for my friend, who I hope will know where my fiancée is. Maybe Ernst mentioned her: Quality Smith?"

"He did." The man seemed to be ill at ease.



Lane's heart leaped at this confirmation. "Do you know--did he say--is she alive?"

"She is alive and well. I can not tell you more."

"That's enough!" Lane exclaimed. "All this time I've been afraid she was--thank you, Mr. Best! You have given me wonderful hope."

"I have given you very little."

Lane realized that the man, perhaps mourning the loss of his nephew, was taking a negative view. If Ernst was dead, how would Lane find Quality? Yet that assurance that she was not only alive but healthy buoyed him. Ernst must have found her and gotten her to safety somewhere. Otherwise how could Ernst's uncle have known of her? He would find her somehow.

Krista returned with a handbag. "Thank you," Lane said to Karl Best. Then he stepped to Krista, to take her bag. Evidently surprised by this minor gallantry, she yielded it, smiling. She was stunning when she smiled. They walked to his rented car.

"Do you know the way to Berlin?" Lane asked. Then, remembering that she did not speak English: "Berlin. Where?"

"Berlin," she repeated. Then she pointed her finger straight ahead.

Good enough. She knew the way. He could find it, using the map, but it would be easier with someone who had been there.

Krista guided him to Frankfurt, and then north through the mountains to Kassell. It was getting late, and he realized that it wasn't worth trying to reach Berlin in one haul. He would have to spend a night on the way. But he hadn't anticipated traveling with a woman. What was he going to do with her?

He would simply have to foot the bill for a separate room for her. If she enabled him to find Ernst, and therefore Quality, it would be worth it.

"Must stop. Night," he said. "Know place?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Place?"

"Night. Eat. Sleep. Hotel."

"Sleep?"

"Two rooms! No trouble."

She seemed to understand. She pointed to the side, where a road diverged. He took it. Soon it led to a hotel.

He parked the car and entered the lobby with her. "You have rooms?" he asked.

The clerk looked blank. Then Krista spoke in German, and the clerk brightened. It turned out that he would take American dollars. Lane paid, and picked up the room key. "But there are supposed to be



wo rooms," he said.

Krista took his arm and guided him away from the desk. Apparently she had told the man one room. There was no bellhop, which was unsurprising in this chaotic time. Lane was glad to make his own way.

It was not a perfect room, but it had the amenities, including twin beds, which was a relief. They could make do.

They took turns using the bathroom and changing. Then they went out to eat. Krista was now in a blue dress which accented her eyes and her figure, which was really quite good. She had combed out her hair, which was like corn silk. When he stood behind her before the mirror, he realized that their eyes matched. She smiled, seeming to realize it also. It was as if they were on a date.

She was very helpful in ordering food, too, because she knew the cuisine and the language. They had a good meal.

Something occurred to Lane. "Ernst Best--what was he to you? Ernst--Krista?"

She smiled again, and he realized that she was not just pretty, she was beautiful. "Ernst, Krista," she said, then made a kiss.

"His girlfriend!" he exclaimed, glad for the confirmation of his assumption. "That's why you're ready to go with me. To find him."

"Find Ernst," she agreed.

They finished the meal and returned to the hotel. But Lane was excited by the the thought that this woman might know of Quality. "Ernst knew Quality Smith. Quality. You know Quality?"

"Quality," she repeated.

"Yes. My--my girlfriend. You know?"

She seemed to hesitate. Then she lifted the hem of her dress, showing her fine leg. "Girlfriend?"

She thought he was asking her for sex! "No, no! Not you." Apparently he would not be able to question her about this. Not until they had a better mutual vocabulary. "Let's learn words," he said. He pointed to himself. "Man." Then to her. "Woman."

"Man, woman?" she asked, lifting her dress again.

"Oh, brother!" he muttered. Then, to her: "Forget it." he turned away.

"I know some English," she said.

Lane whirled around. "You know? You understand me?"

"I understand you, Lane Dowling."



"Then why the dumb act? We could have been talking all along!"

"Because a man traveling with a woman might take advantage."

"I've been trying to explain, that's not what I'm after! I just want to find Quality!"

"Not Ernst Best?"

"Him, too. He's my friend. But if he knows where Quality is, she's my fiancée. I have to find her."

She paused, evidently considering. "I must tell you, Ernst Best and I are no longer that close. Suppose your Quality has found another man?"

"In Germany?" he asked, laughing. "Let me tell you, she's a Quaker. A pacifist. An American. How would she find a man here?"

Krista shrugged. "Do the folk of different lands never get together?"

"Of course they do! But Quality is different. If you knew her, you'd know."

"You would never find another woman? From another land?"

"You mean if Quality found another man?" Lane shook his head, finding the question awkward. "The truth is, I last saw her in 1938. It's been seven years. I don't know whether I still love her. But I have to be sure she's okay, and if she still loves me, I'll marry her. I mean to do what is right."

Krista nodded. "You are a good man, Lane Dowling."

"I'm just doing what I have to do."

She unbuttoned her dress and pulled it off over her head.

"Hey!" he protested. "Go change in the bathroom. I already told you I wasn't after your body."

"I apologize. I forgot." She held her skirt in front of her and walked to the bathroom in her bra and panties. He could not help seeing how well endowed she was. All his prior impressions of her body turned out to be shy of the mark. Ernst had had good taste in girlfriends! Yet it seemed that they had broken up. What had happened?

Krista soon emerged in a gauzy nightgown. She chose one of the beds and got into it. Lane saw another flash of her leg as she did so. Was she trying to tease him?

"What happened between you and Ernst?" he asked. "Who broke it off?"

"He did. I was most annoyed."

"He found a more beautiful woman than you?"

"Yes."



"I don't believe it."

She glanced sidelong at him. "Believe it, Lane Dowling."

"Oh come on, call me Lane. We can be friends, can't we? Or at least not enemies."

"I would like to be friends." She smiled and lay back.

He went to the bathroom to strip and clean up. Then he realized that he would have to walk by her bed in his underpants, as he did not use pajamas. This was awkward.

Well, there was no help for it. He walked out, went to his bed, and turned off the light. She seemed to be asleep, which was a relief.

"You have a nice body, Lane," she said.

Next day they resumed the drive to Berlin. Krista wore a skirt and blouse. It was amazing what she had been able to pack in her single bag. The blouse was tight and translucent in bright light; he kept catching glimpses of the outline of her bosom. Finally he addressed the matter. "Please put on a jacket or something, Krista."

"But it is warm."

"Because you are driving me crazy. I promised to leave you alone, but the sight of you keeps reminding me how long it's been since I've had a woman."

"I can do that."

"So if you'll just put on something--" He broke off. "Do what?"

"You have been kind to me, Lane. You have been a gentleman. I understand your need. I can oblige it."

"What are you, a whore?"

Her face froze. Then she hid it in her hands.

Lane felt like a heel. "Oh, damn, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say that. I apologize."

She faced away from him.

He pulled the car to the side of the road. "Krista, I said I was sorry! It's--I've been in the RAF, and the women--it's like a reflex. They do it for money. Of course you're not that kind."

She lifted her face, wiping the tears away. "I understand. I should not have spoken that way. I thank thee for thy apology."

"Sokay." He started the car again.



Then he did a mental doubletake. Could she have--no, of course not. In his confusion he must have imagined it.

But his interest in Krista increased. She was becoming fascinating in more than just her body.

They reached Berlin in the afternoon. Then Lane remembered: "The Russians hold Berlin! They aren't letting Americans or British in. We're allies, but they haven't quite caught on yet. This is no good."

"But workers go in and out," she said.

"I'm not a worker."

She smiled. "But I am. Or was, before they closed down my job. I could go in. You could pretend to be a German worker."

"I can't speak a word of German!"

"*Ja* means yes. *Nein* means no. That will be enough."

"You're crazy!"

She gave him a level stare. "Do you want to get in?"

"Yes! But not if I get shot for spying!"

"They will not shoot an ally. But I think they will not stop us. All we need is some German clothing for you, and a card. I have an extra card for you."

"Now why do I have the suspicion you are not as innocent as you look?" he asked, amazed.

"I had to survive in a defeated nation. I learned how."

She took him to a store where he bought a typical German worker outfit. This was a lot like a Nazi uniform, which made Lane wince; it had black boots, baggy brown trousers, a billed cap, and a slightly less weathered place on the arm where the red Nazi armband had been. Obviously a secondhand outfit, though he had paid the price for a new one. Then she had him take the passenger seat while she drove. But before she got in, she adjusted her clothing.

"What are you doing?" Lane asked, staring. Her skirt was now drawn up to the point of nonexistence, and her blouse was open to the navel.

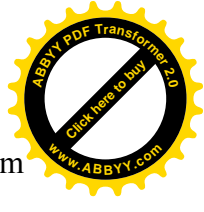
"I am arranging not to be questioned closely."

"You're asking to be raped instead!"

"In public daylight? I think not."

He spread his hands. "Do it your way."

They did it her way. The Russian guard looked down into the car as Krista proffered her card,



aning toward him. His face went slack. He passed their two cards before his face and approved them without blinking. Soon they were on their way into the city.

Lane shook his head in wonder. "You're some woman, Krista!"

"Thank you."

"Were you really upset when I called you a--when I said what I shouldn't have?"

She shot him one of her sidelong glances, half smiling.

Lane made a soundless whistle. This was a woman who knew how to manage men! His eyes kept straying to her body, but this time he did not ask her to cover it.

She drove to the building where she said Ernst had worked. "He was in the SS," she explained. "I used to date him here. But he never told me his work; it was secret."

"And he found a beautiful SS woman?" Lane asked jokingly, then bit his tongue.

"She was not SS. But she was secret from me, until I came to his hotel room in his absence. Then I found her."

"That must have been a hair-pulling scene!"

"No. I tried to hate her, but could not. He had given her his swastika, so I knew the game was lost. So I moved in with her."

"You're joking!"

"No. She was very beautiful and nice. A better woman than I."

"I doubt it."

"Believe it, Lane. Ernst has a very fine taste in women."

"That much I believe. I have good taste too."

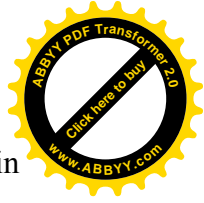
"I believe it."

They parked at the building. Krista readjusted her clothing, becoming considerably more demure.

But the building turned out to be in chaos. Those rooms which remained tight were being used to shelter the homeless. The German SS was no longer in operation. "But maybe I can inquire," she said.

Krista inquired, speaking rapid German, as she went from person to person, while Lane followed somewhat helplessly. Finally she found someone who seemed to know something. "He was transferred to Skorzeny's unit," she reported. "In October."

"Who is Skorzeny?"



"They say he participated in the--you call it the Battle of the Bulge. The Ardennes campaign, in December."

"English-speaking Germans!" Lane exclaimed. "Saboteurs! Ernst wouldn't get into that!"

She looked at him. "If they threatened to kill someone you loved, to make you do their will--"

Lane clenched his teeth. "If he got into that--if he got caught, they'd have executed him."

"Can you reach the American records? To see whether that happened?"

"Maybe eventually. But this is now. Isn't there a faster way?"

"If they did not kill him, maybe they made him a prisoner of war. There are camps."

"We'll check the camps! Where are they?"

"I do not know. But your people must know."

He looked at her cannily. "Your people must know too! You can probably find them faster than I can."

"I will inquire." She did, and in due course had the locations of several recently established camps for German prisoners of war. "But we cannot get into them by showing flesh," she cautioned him as they returned to the car.

"*We* don't have to get into them at all," he said. "I will take you home, as I promised, then check with the prisoner of War Information Bureau. If he's there, I'll find him."

"But you will need someone for the German," she said. "I will go with you."

He shook his head. "If I remain much longer in your company, Krista, I'll forget my promise to bring you back unmolested. I may even forget what I'm here for."

"You need me to get you out of Berlin."

"Sure, to take you home. I'll do that. Then--" He paused. "Uh-oh. Are you blackmailing me?"

"I would not think of it."

"Why are you so hot to travel with me? You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough."

"We'll discuss it on the way back."

To that she acceded. She got them out of Berlin in much the fashion she had gotten them in. Then they went to a hotel for the night.



This time the room had only one bed. "Damn!" Lane said. Then he looked at her. "You *asked* for this! You could have gotten twin beds or two rooms."

Krista shrugged.

"Listen, Ernst probably could've slept naked in your arms and not done a thing. But I'm not that type. You're trying to seduce me, and you have a damn good shot at succeeding. You have a loathsome disease you want to give me?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "I want nothing but good for you, Lane."

"Why? I mean, why seduce me?"

"You are a rich American. I have not gone hungry in your company."

"I'm not rich and you're no whore! And don't pull the tears act this time; you know what I'm talking about. You can get money from me without giving me sex. So why are you bothering?"

She shook her head. "I do not think you want to hear, Lane."

"I'll be the judge of that! You looked at me strangely the first time you saw me. What are you up to?"

She met his gaze. "Please, Lane, there will be real tears if we go into this. I will tell you when you are ready. You must trust me that far."

"I don't trust you at all! You have an ulterior motive. Are you a spy or something? What do you want from me?"

She spread her hands in surrender. "Then I must say it. I want to marry thee."

"Marry me!" he exclaimed incredulously. "We spend two days and nights on the road, and you want marriage?" Then before she could answer, he held up his hand in a "stop" signal. "There! You did it again. You said 'thee.' *You* know Quality!"

Krista bowed her head. "Now I must tell you, and take the consequence. Quality was the woman who took Ernst from me. The one with whom I roomed. I polished my English, talking with her, and I learned her ways."

Lane dropped to the bed, stunned. "Ernst--Quality? They would not!"

"They did not mean to. But she was fading in a prisoner camp in France, and he could save her only by taking her with him and hiding her in his room. Then he hit her, and--"

"What?"

"Another officer suspected his loyalty, and thought that she was a subversive agent. So Ernst knocked her down to show that he did not care for her, and after the other was gone, they recognized their love."



"But he would never--she would never--"

"Believe it."

He turned on her. "You--what's in it for you?"

"She took my man. I will take hers."

"In revenge? I want no part of this!"

"In understanding. She chose you first, so I knew you were a good man. You are now without a woman. You are hurting as I was hurting, but I can ease your hurt. I know you, Lane Dowling."

"You can't know me!"

"I know you from her. I know every detail of you. I know how you seek unusual friends. I know the weakness of thy childhood, and the strength of thy manhood. I know--"

"Don't *do* that!"

"I do it when I forget myself, as she does. She calls me thee."

"She calls you--*you* know where she is now!"

"She is with Ernst's family. They moved out of Wiesbaden, to better survive the war, but I see them often. She said she would introduce me to you, but you found me first."

"You could have taken me right to her!"

She shook her head. "You were not ready, Lane."

"You know I'd never touch you if I found her!"

"I knew your heart would break if you found her too soon."

"So you're just going to patch it up. Just like that."

"I had hoped to. If I could have had enough time with you, before you learned."

"You even proposed marriage to me!"

"No. You asked me what I want of you. I told you. That is not the same. I did not want to tell you yet."

"That's right! You did everything you could to avoid telling me anything! Knowing where Quality was all the time."

"Yes."



He stared at her. "That's a really practical deal, Krista. Everything all set up in advance."

"I am a practical woman." She dabbed at her face.

"And now you make with the waterworks again."

"I said there would be real tears, this time. I meant yours. I meant mine."

"Why the hell should I believe you?"

"Because it is true."

He got up and paced the floor. "Well, you got some of it right. You did hurt me."

She did not reply.

"Tell me again: exactly why do you want to marry me?"

"I want to marry well. There is a blemish on my ancestry which prevents me from marrying well in Germany. And Germany now is not a good place to be. When I lost Ernst--"

"What do you mean by a blemish?"

"My grandmother may have been Gypsy."

Lane burst out laughing. "No, really. I want to know. What's wrong with your ancestry?"

"You do not believe?"

"That doesn't matter. I don't *care*. What does it matter whether your grandmother had two heads? *You* don't."

"A German of quality would care. I may not be pure Aryan."

He shrugged. "So?"

"So I must marry outside of Germany."

"You're serious?"

"Always."

"No love, no fun, just pedigree? That's all you care about?"

"I care about everything. But I must not love without first being practical."

"That's not how it's done in America."

"You do not understand our ways."



"Damn right I don't! What makes you think I could stand having you around all the time, with your--I'll bet you're a Nazi, too!"

"I was."

"That's all I need! A Nazi wife! That's almost as funny as Quality taking a swastika!" He looked at her. "She did do that?"

"Yes. But she was never a Nazi. She accepted it from Ernst in lieu of a ring, because it was his most cherished possession. It is Ernst she loves, not the swastika."

"You know, she *would* do that," Lane said, bemused. "She has her own values."

"She is a good woman."

"All right! You've really run me through the meat grinder, here. I admit it. You tell me my best friend ran off with my fiancée, and you want to take her place, and you've got sex on the line to prove it. I'm going to tell you one thing, and ask you one thing, and then we'll see."

She waited without seeming emotion.

"Here's what I'm telling you," he said. "I don't regard sex as a commitment. I could do it with you without marrying you. Ernst is different. So you can't rope me that way. And here's what I'm asking you: suppose we do it, and then we discover that Ernst is dead? Who do you think I'll marry then?"

"I do not want Ernst to be dead."

"Well, neither do I! But I'm not going to leave Quality stuck here in Germany, for sure! So do you want to gamble that's he's alive?"

"Oh, yes! I still love Ernst, in my way. I would never wish him dead. But I have accepted my loss of him. He loves Quality, and I want him to have her. If she died, he would not marry me, he would mourn her. And so would I. And if Ernst is dead, Quality will not marry you. She will mourn him. So do with me as you wish, Lane; I have no fear of that. And perhaps you will find that you like me."

"You're on, sister!" Lane felt lightheaded, almost euphoric after the recent storm of emotions. This was like a dream, and Krista was as beautiful a woman as he could remember, and he needed release.

In a moment they both were naked. He met her on the bed, and she matched him kiss for kiss and move for move, as passionate as he. She *did* know him, and she catered to his foibles, fulfilling him almost perfectly. And in the throes of it, he found a strange doubt looming.

"God, Krista!" he gasped. "You may be right!"

She guided him to the present residence of Ernst's family. A woman came to the door. "Frau Best," Krista said formally, "I bring Lane Dowling."

The woman--Ernst's mother, looked at Lane. "I will tell Quality."



Then Quality came to the door. "Oh, it really is thee, Lane!" she cried, rushing out to hug him. "I have not seen thee in so long!"

"Krista brought me."

She looked up at him. "And did she tell thee, Lane?"

He knew already that it was true. Her love for him had diminished into friendship. Now he saw the bright silver swastika at her breast. He found it both appalling and fitting. "Yes. I--I understand."

"Now thee must meet my son." She turned back to the house.

"Your--?"

She picked up a child of about a year and a half. "Ernst Junior."

Speechless, Lane looked at Krista, who nodded.

Quality caught the look. "I promised to introduce thee to Krista, but it seems I am too late."

"Too late," he echoed numbly.

"The game is lost," Krista said.

"Lost," he agreed.

Quality smiled, briefly. "And how long did it take for her to conquer thee, Lane?"

He had to smile, realizing that there was a new game. "About two days."

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