MURDER IN PARIS

By Christina Koning

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For Maia and Cecilia

Paris, April 1945

Chapter One

As the train pulled into the Gare du Nord, Frederick Rowlands was already on his feet, reaching for his stick and valise, both of which he'd stowed in the overhead rack. Moments after the engine slowed to a halt, with a grinding of brakes and a final burst of steam, he was descending from the first-class carriage in which he'd travelled from Dieppe, onto the platform of the great Parisian terminus. All around him was bustle and excitement: the slamming of carriage doors; the shouts of porters pushing trolleys; the joyful cries of people meeting their loved ones for what might be the first time in six years . . .

'*O*! *Maman, Maman . . . Est-ce vraiment toi*?'

These, combined with that unmistakable smell of French cigarettes and the delicious aroma of roasting coffee beans emanating from a nearby kiosk, told him he was once more on foreign soil. He was still getting his bearings –

surely someone would have come to meet him? – when he felt a touch on his arm. 'Hello, Frederick.'

'Miss Barnes. I wasn't expecting . . .'

'I insisted on meeting you myself. It's the least I could do, since you've come all this way. How *was* the journey?'

'Fine.'

'Good. I'll take your arm, shall I? It's this way.' She began piloting him through the slowly moving crowd, whose voices intermingled, in that vaulted space, in a kind of symphony:

'*Mon Dieu! Cela fait si longtemps que nous ne nous sommes pas recontrés . . .*'

Interwoven with these heartfelt utterances were those of the more phlegmatic English: 'I say, old chap. Fancy a spot of lunch?'

'Rather. Shall we see if we can get a table at Maxim's?'

American voices, too, rose above the rest.

'Gee, ain't it swell to be back in gay Paree?'

'Sure is. Last time I was here was on the back of an army truck . . .'

By contrast with all this ebullience, Rowlands and his companion exchanged only the blandest remarks about the weather – fine – and the crossing – smooth – until they were seated in the car Iris Barnes had waiting. It was not until the big Citroën moved out from the side street in which it had been parked and into the Rue La Fayette, that she broached the subject of what had brought him to Paris. 'You must know,' she said in a low voice, although the glass panel between them and the driver was shut,

'that your coming here at such short notice has been much appreciated in official circles.'

'I wanted to come,' he said. 'Although I'm not sure how much use I can be.'

'We've cabled her brother, of course,' said Miss Barnes. 'But his ship's in Simonstown. No chance of his getting here for another few weeks – always supposing that the Navy give him leave.'

'Well, I'll do my best,' he said, as the car moved out into what he guessed, from the increased speed at which they were travelling, to be one of the *grands boulevards*. He wondered if it all still looked the same as it had when he'd last set foot here.

'Do you remember Paris before the war?' asked his companion, perhaps guessing his thoughts. He realised as she spoke that she meant the war that had just ended, and not the Great War, which was the defining one for him.

He said that his memories were distinctly hazy, since he'd only visited a couple of times on leave, soon after his division was posted to France. The streets had been full of soldiers – both French and English – and there had been a hectic, hedonistic mood across the city, as if everyone was doing their best to forget what was happening not many miles away.

'What I do remember of the city was its beauty,' he went on. 'Notre-Dame and the Pont Neuf, and all those tall stone houses with the shutters.' And that steel-blue light over everything, he thought, but did not say. Yes, he remembered the light . . .

'*My* first visit was a school trip with our French assistant, when I was fifteen,' she said. 'Mam'selle did her best to impress on her charges – horrid little girls that we were – the superiority of French culture, while trying to stop us running after the local youth . . . not always successfully,' she added. 'In fact, I can date my interest in subterfuge to that very time. Then there was the couple of years I spent at the Sorbonne, after my father was posted to Paris . . . Ah, here's the Place de l'Étoile. I expect you remember that?'

He said that he did.

'It was here, just eight months ago, that the General had his great triumph,' she said. 'Over a million people turned out to cheer him. They were hanging out of windows and climbing on lamp posts to get a glimpse of him. It was quite a spectacle. Seeing him marching along the Champs-Élysées, with his head held high, as if he and he alone were responsible for beating the Nazis . . . Oh, he was revelling in it, all right! France's great liberator.'

The last words were said with a certain irony. 'It's just a pity that when he made his speech to the cheering crowd he forgot to mention the men and women – not all of them French – who'd made that liberation possible. Those who'd fought the Germans on various fronts, and who'd carried out acts of resistance. I don't,' she went on, still in the same dry tone, 'make any particular claim for my own outfit. We did what we could – which was never enough. But a word of thanks would have been nice. *Arrêtez ici*,' she called to the driver as the car, having traversed the great space, with

its radiating avenues, passed down one of these and turned at last into a side street.

This, said Miss Barnes, was the Rue Saint-Didier, where the Hôtel Cécil – present headquarters of her 'outfit'– was to be found. 'It's seen better days, of course,' she said. 'What remains is a rather faded version of its *Belle Époque* glory . . . Not that anything here is as it was,' she added cryptically. 'Some might think Paris was lucky to escape the bombing London endured – but in a way, what's happened here is worse. It's as if the heart has been torn out of the place, leaving an empty shell . . . albeit a beautiful one.'

Entering the hotel, whose marble-floored foyer had the echo of a more spacious *fin-de-siècle* era, they climbed the stairs (the lift was out of order, said Miss Barnes) to what Rowlands surmised, after counting five flights, to be an attic floor. Here, the MI6 officer opened a door, saying apologetically, 'I hope this is all right? We're rather full up here, at present.' Rowlands murmured that he was sure it would be fine. The room, although evidently small, was airy, with windows opening onto a tiny balcony. 'I wouldn't advise going out there,' said Miss Barnes, after a glance. 'Looks decidedly rickety. Lovely view, though . . .'

If she realised the irrelevance of this remark as far as he was concerned, she didn't allude to it. 'If you leave your bag here it should be quite safe. We'll go and find some lunch. We'll need it for what we've got to do later.'

Descending the four flights up which they had just come, she halted at the first floor. 'We'll step into my office for a minute. There's someone you ought to meet.'

As they walked in, the rattle of typewriter keys greeted them; the sound stopped abruptly. 'I wasn't expecting you back so soon, madame,' said the typist.

She spoke in English, but Rowlands detected the trace of an accent – French, he thought – a supposition confirmed when Miss Barnes said, 'Don't let us interrupt you, Louise. I just wanted to introduce Frederick Rowlands, a friend from England. He'll be staying with us for the next few days. This is Mrs Collins, Frederick. My right-hand woman. There's nothing that happens in this office she doesn't know about.'

'Good to meet you,' said Rowlands, holding out his hand. From the brief contact that followed – scarcely prolonged enough to count as a handshake – he gained an impression of a slight, rather nervous woman, whose hand, despite the mildness of the weather, felt cold in his.

'Have you got those lists for me?' Iris Barnes went on, evidently deciding that the social niceties had gone on long enough.

'They are nearly done, madame. I was just finishing them,' replied the secretary.

'Then we'll leave you to get on,' said Miss Barnes, after shuffling through a few papers on her desk. 'We're on our way to Fresnes. I take it they're expecting us?'

'Yes, madame. I rang the directress first thing this morning.'

'Good. Lunch first, I think, Frederick, don't you?' Then to Mrs Collins, now busily typing, 'I'll be out for the rest of the day. You needn't stay beyond your usual time, Louise.'

'Madame.'

'She's the best secretary I've had since I came to this place,' Miss Barnes confided in a low voice, as she and Rowlands descended the last flight of stairs. 'Keeps everything running like clockwork. That's one advantage of employing an older woman – they've more sense of responsibility than some of the flighty young things you get nowadays.'

'She can't be all that old,' said Rowlands, to whom the voice, and the nervously clammy hand, had suggested someone not long out of her teens.

'Oh, she's probably not more than twenty-five,' said the MI6 officer carelessly. 'War ages people, I suppose. Louise Collins is a widow. Husband was in the Resistance. He was British – or rather, Irish. Captured and shot, after being tortured by the Gestapo. That was two years ago. I don't think Louise has ever got over it.'

As they crossed the lobby they encountered two men, deep in conversation, who'd just come in. 'Ah, Rosalind, so you're back, are you?' said one of them, addressing Rowlands's companion. 'I take it this is the witness of whom you spoke?'

'Yes, sir. We'll be on our way to Fresnes within the hour.'

'Good show, good show. Well, keep me informed of any developments, won't you?'

'Sir.'

Then the two men, neither of whom were introduced to Rowlands, continued on their way upstairs, still talking in low voices. 'You must see,' said the man who had asked to

be kept abreast of developments, 'that it's a question of the balance of power . . .'

'"Rosalind"?' enquired Rowlands, when they had exited the building.

'A *nom de guerre*,' replied Miss Barnes. 'It needn't concern you. We'll go this way.' Taking his arm, so that any onlooker might have supposed that he was the one escorting her and not the other way around, she drew him along the street until they reached an intersection with what appeared to him, from the increased volume of traffic, to be a large thoroughfare. 'There'll be somewhere we can get a bit to eat along Avenue Kléber,' she said, confirming this. 'If we can find a place that hasn't run out of food.'

A few minutes' walk brought them to one such establishment, where, after some consultation with the proprietor as to what was good that day, she ordered plates of rabbit stew and a bottle of wine. 'Not the best,' she said after a mouthful of this. 'But it's all one can expect, these days. There's still rationing here – although you can get most foods at a price.'

'It's the same in London.'

'I suppose it must be. I've spent very little time there during the past two years. Well,' said Iris Barnes, chinking her glass against his. 'Here's to the success of our venture.'

'I still don't know,' said Rowlands, 'what you hope to achieve from our "venture", as you call it. I'm hardly the best witness you could have chosen – given that I've never actually set eyes on the girl.'

'And I've already told you – our other witness can't get

here for another few weeks. Besides which, he was a child when he last saw her. You're our best hope, Frederick.'

'Best hope for what?'

'Why, for preventing an injustice.'

'What do you mean?'

She lowered her voice, although they were speaking in English and, as far as Rowlands could tell, those sitting at the tables on either side of theirs were French. But he knew enough of what living in a city riven with fear and suspicion was like from his time in Berlin in 1933. 'There's a strong possibility,' said Miss Barnes, 'that this girl isn't who she says she is. She might be a genuine deportee, returned from the camps, or she might not.'

'But why on earth . . . ?' he began; but she answered his question before he had finished putting it.

'Do you have any idea of the treatment meted out to collaborators here – especially if they happen to be women?'

'I *have* heard something,' he replied. 'They've put some people on trial.'

'Yes, and hanged them – with good reason, in most cases,' she said, with the chilling matter-of-factness he recalled from previous encounters. 'But there are other ways one can destroy a person – not always by killing them. Women, as I said, have paid a high price during this war, and after it. Hardly surprising if our young woman – whoever she might be – prefers to avoid having her head shaved, or being spat at for the crime of being too free with her favours . . . even though in most cases she will have had little choice in the matter. It may be, of course,

that she has committed worse crimes – informing being one – for which the punishment would be more severe. Yes, she – our mystery woman – has every reason to fear exposure, if she has betrayed others to their deaths.'

It was just on four o'clock when their car pulled up outside the gates of Fresnes prison. Iris Barnes gave a little shudder. 'I never see this place without thinking what *it* must have seen,' she said, as they got out. 'They held a number of our people here, as well as members of the French Resistance. Treated them with appalling brutality. Quite a few died – from torture, typhus and general ill-treatment, even before they could be transferred to one of the camps. Now, the position's been somewhat reversed, in that most of those housed here have been *returned* from the camps. It's a sort of holding pen, so to speak.'

'I see. Then these people – of which she's one – aren't prisoners, as such?'

'That's right.' She laughed. A mirthless sound. 'Although exactly *what* they are isn't always clear. That's to say . . . *nothing* is. One thing you learn, when you've been in Paris for a while, is that all the distinctions have become blurred. Who's a victim of oppression and who's an oppressor . . . a Resistance fighter or a collaborator . . . Sometimes they're the same thing.'

They had by this time entered the gaol by a wicket gate to one side of the main portal. After a cursory glance at the documents proffered by the MI6 officer, an official waved them through. 'They know me here,' said Miss Barnes;

although he had worked that out for himself. 'This way. You'd better stick close to me. It wouldn't do for you to get lost in this place – it's a labyrinth.' This, too, he hadn't needed to be told. The prison had the smell of all such places: a combination of strong carbolic, barely masking the stench of urine; institutional food (cabbage seemed to be the main ingredient) and something else he was inclined to characterise as the smell of fear. As if the horrors this place had seen had seeped into its very walls.

They crossed an echoing entrance hall and came to an iron staircase. 'We go up here.' Having climbed the stairs, which clanged beneath their feet, they went along a mezzanine whose floor was an iron grid. Ahead of them marched the wardress (they were in the women's section of the gaol) to whom Miss Barnes had stated their business on arrival.

'I needn't tell you that you'll probably find her changed,' murmured the latter. 'Physically, I mean.'

Before he could remind her that he, of all people, was hardly likely to notice this – given that he'd only the vaguest idea of what Clara Metzner looked like – they reached a door, the wardress unlocked it with a jangle of keys and they went in. If Rowlands was surprised that Miss Barnes should have chosen to interview the girl in her cell, rather than in the more convenient surroundings of an interrogation room, the thought was immediately swept aside by the physical sensations of finding himself in that cramped space, with its heavy, almost tangible atmosphere of pain and disgrace.

As he stood there, awaiting the moment when either the woman who had brought him here or the one he had come to see would break the silence, he felt the sweat spring out on his forehead. A foul metallic taste was on his tongue.

'Well, Clara,' said Iris Barnes at last. It came as a shock that she spoke in German. 'I have brought you a visitor, you see.' *Ich habe Ihnen einen Besucher mitgebracht, sehen Sie.*

'*Ja, gnädige Frau* . . .' The girl hesitated, then spoke again. '*Mais je préfère parler français, s'il vous plait*.'

'And English? You speak that too, don't you?'

'Yes. A little. My English . . . it is not good. But I will try.' She must have held out her hand then, for she said, addressing Rowlands, 'How do you do, sir?'

He took the hand in his, and was appalled to feel how thin it was – no more than a little bundle of bones. She was standing closer to him now – he could smell her sour breath – and he estimated her height at a little over five foot. Perhaps five foot two or three. How tall had Clara Metzner been? He couldn't now recall. Only that the impression he'd had, all those years ago, in Berlin, was of a lively, energetic girl, full of charm and mischievous humour. Not a bit like this spiritless, emaciated creature.

She was speaking again, in the same careful English – as if, thought Rowlands, she was weighing every word she uttered. 'I know you . . . do I not? There was an English man . . .'

'Yes . . .' began Rowlands eagerly; Iris Barnes put a warning hand on his arm.

'Don't prompt her.'

But the girl said nothing more to the purpose – except to murmur brokenly, 'It was so long ago. I do not remember. Only that there was an Englishman.'

'Well, we will leave that for the present,' said Miss Barnes. 'Tell us what you do remember. Your name, please.'

'Clara Metzner.'

'Age?'

'Twenty-nine years.'

'Address?'

There was a faint note of mocking humour in the young woman's reply that recalled the Clara Metzner that Rowlands had once known. 'Do you mean apart from Ravensbrück camp?'

'I mean your address in Berlin.'

'There were so many,' sighed the girl. 'But I think you are referring to 36 Marienburgerstrasse, where I lived with my mother and brothers. All dead, now,' she said flatly. Rowlands found that he was holding his breath. Surely she knew that, out of all her family, at least one had escaped? She must have sensed his unease – or perhaps his expression had given away more that he imagined – for she added, 'As far as I know.'

'All right.' The MI6 officer wasted no time offering condolences. 'Father's name?'

'Jakob. He died when I was a small child – of wounds received in the First War.' This, at least, was accurate, thought Rowlands.

'Mother's name?'

'Sara. She died in the camp. Of typhus.' At this, Rowlands felt a pang. He had been very fond of Sara Metzner.

'Other family members?' went on this relentless catechism.

'Two brothers. Joachim – the elder – and Walter. I have not seen either of them for many years. Both left Berlin when I was still at school.'

'And what was your job, after you left school?

'My job? I was an elementary school teacher, until I think, 1935 or 1936 . . . when all Jews were proscribed from teaching. By that time, my mother and I had moved away from Marienburgerstrasse. Or rather, we *were* moved. Do you want to know the addresses where we lived after that?'

'No, that will do.' Miss Barnes now turned to Rowlands. 'Do you have any questions for this woman?'

He thought about it. 'One or two. What floor did your family live on, in Marienburgerstrasse?'

She barely hesitated. 'The third.'

'And what was the name of your school – the one you attended as a pupil, I mean, not the one you taught at.'

'It was Heinrich-Heine-Oberschule, on Driesener-strasse.'

These were things she might easily have been told by someone else. Uncomfortably aware that he was trying to trip her up, he said, 'One last question. Can you tell me what your brother Walter liked reading about most, when you saw him last?'

There was a pause, which lasted so long that Rowlands began to fear that it would end only with the girl breaking

down and admitting that she was a liar and a fraud, and not whom she pretended to be. But all she said at last, in the same expressionless tone that bore no resemblance to that of the girl he had known, was, 'I do not remember. It was all so long ago.'

'There were two girls,' said Iris Barnes, in the car going back to Paris. 'One German, one French. Both Jewish. They met in the camp, of course. The German was the girl we have just been to see – Clara Metzner, or so she claims. The other was called Amélie Mendl. A seamstress by trade. Quite a highly paid one, too. She worked for Gaby Bonheur, before the war.' She paused, as if to allow him to comment. 'You will have heard of *her*, I imagine?'

'The dressmaker.'

'She would say "couturier". They take dressmaking very seriously here. But it amounts to the same thing.'

'What happened to her – Amélie Mendl, I mean?'

'She's dead, or so the other girl says – the one calling herself Clara. *Is* it her, do you think, Frederick?'

He hesitated. 'It's difficult to say for certain. There were moments when I was almost sure . . . and others when she sounded like a completely different person from the one I knew. It *was* twelve years ago.'

'I realise that. But were there any similarities – of voice, for example?'

Again he reflected. 'I think so. Given that she's now a young woman, not a girl of seventeen, and considering . . . well, all that's happened since.' He meant the camp, and

the privations – physical and mental – Clara Metzner must have endured.

'Understood,' said Miss Barnes. 'Go on.'

'There was a moment when she spoke of her mother. I thought the emotion sounded genuine.'

'She isn't the only one to have lost a mother,' was the rejoinder. 'Anything else?'

'She knew the names of her parents and siblings – and that Jakob Metzner had been wounded in the last war. The fact that she couldn't answer my question about Walter is hardly surprising.'

'No. But it is suggestive. If she's lying about who she is, then she'd only have known about her brother's interest in cinema . . . or actresses, or whatever it was . . . if she'd been there at the time. She could have picked up the family's names and the other details she mentioned from talking to the real Clara. If this girl's impersonating her, then there's no one alive who can prove it. Except you,' she added slyly.

He was silent, thinking about the conversation that had taken place in the prison. The sound of the young woman's voice – listless, indifferent – as if she were only half alive. If this was Clara Metzner, then she had changed immeasurably in the dozen years since he had been in Berlin. 'What did she do, this Amélie Mendl, that would make her want to hide who she really is? Did she betray somebody?'

'It's not so much what she's done, as what she *might* do,' was Miss Barnes's typically evasive reply. 'If she's who we

think she is, then she's in possession of some information that might be very useful to us.'

'What kind of information?'

But on this, Iris Barnes would not be drawn. 'Suffice it to say that it will help us identify some *real* traitors,' she said. 'It's why I asked you to come to Paris.'

'I thought that was because you wanted to prevent an injustice,' said Rowlands. 'Only it seems as if it's more about setting a trap.'