

CHAPTER 1

PARIS—JUNE 20, 1940

“*Arschloch*,” one of the German officers sitting two tables away said. The crude insult caught Walter Hirsch’s attention immediately. Now that’s a switch, Walter thought, with a bemused smile. People usually wait to get to know me a bit before calling me an “asshole.”

“*Jah. Natürlich. Amerikaner*,” laughed his companion. The Germans had been in Paris for less than a week. One by one, Walter’s favorite restaurants had been taken over by their new, grey-clad customers. Now they’d managed to find his special quiet place, the tree-lined outdoor terrace of the Brasserie Chez Jenny in the 3rd arrondissement theater district

“*Lächerlich. Dieser Depp weiß nicht mal wie man isst*,” the first one continued, clumsily pantomiming an American switching his fork from his left to his right hand to eat the meat he had just cut.

Walter instinctively looked down at his hands. Well, they spotted *that* quickly enough ... I probably shouldn’t mess with these guys. I’ve seen how they treat civilians. They don’t fool around. But insulting my country

Walter eavesdropped on the Germans’ conversation as he addressed the remains of his Strasbourg sausage and Chez Jenny’s incomparable sauerkraut, accompanied by a lovely 1935 Clos Saint Landelin Gewürztraminer. The Germans were complaining about the food. Small wonder. Anton liked to piss on the sauerkraut before sending it out to Germans.

The two young officers were much like him. Had they been American college students, he would have guessed football players. The older *Wehrmacht* officer, obviously a veteran in his 40s, was proper and aloof. Everything about him looked starched: his uniform, his shirt, his underwear, and, no doubt, his mind.

The SS officer, unmistakable in his black uniform, seemed shriveled in the presence of his companions, the gaunt pallor of his skin in keeping with the *Totenkopf* Death’s Head insignia on his collar tabs.

Walter motioned his server over to the table. Etienne greeted Walter with a smile and then a quick glare directed at the Germans. They had become louder, and drunker, as the evening progressed. Etienne spit out in rapid French. “*Ces encleurs! Fucking Boche!* I apologize for these bastards on behalf of the house. Our patrons used to be decent people—workers, neighbors, some theater people. Now we have to serve dogs.”

“They have been having some fun at my expense, Etienne,” Walter said. “Would you be so kind as to bring them a bottle of wine with my compliments? Perhaps what I’m having? I think it’s a bit better than what they’re drinking.”

“*Bien sûr*,” Etienne replied, meaning, “Of course I will, and of course it is better than they deserve.”

“Well, I intend to tweak their noses. It’s too good a wine for a gift but it might make a nice insult.”

“*Bon*,” Etienne shrugged again. “*Domage que ce n’est pas du poison*.”

Walter waited until the bottle had arrived and Etienne pointed in acknowledgment to Walter's table. Walter rose, glass in hand and walked over to the Germans, a broad, friendly smile lighting up his face.

"Guten Abend, Herren Offiziere. Würden Sie ein Glas mit mir trinken?"

The response of the three grey-clad *Wehrmacht* officers was instantaneous—surprise at his perfect German with its unmistakable Prussian accent—and what Walter was pleased to note looked like instant respect.

One of the younger army officers sprang to his feet, reached behind for an empty chair, and placed it by Walter at the table. "My name is Dieter. Dieter Haffner. You must sit with us, please! You are kind to offer us wine."

"And I am Claus von Stauffenberg," said the other. "Please sit."

Once Walter had joined them, Dieter filled the fresh glasses Etienne had brought with Walter's wine, then raised his own. "*Zum wohl!*" he offered.

"*Prost!*" Walter replied, and he and the three *Wehrmacht* officers saluted each other and drank.

The SS Officer continued staring at him, declining to raise his glass with the others. The two youngest army officers at the table noticed his deliberate rudeness and exchanged a quick glance Walter could not read. Embarrassment? Fear?

"Now I'd like to propose a toast," the SS officer said, standing and lifting his glass, "In honor of our glorious Führer, *Sieg Heil!*" The other three officers rose to their feet, raised their glasses, and cried "*Sieg Heil!*" Walter lifted his glass as well. He didn't join the *Sieg Heil!* toast, but a second before they all drank, added, "*Und für Präsident Roosevelt, Gesundheit und ein langes Leben.*"

It was the SS officer who broke the awkward silence when they sat back down again. "Your German is quite good." He spoke in accented, but confident English. "Surely one does not acquire such fluency in an American school?"

"No," Walter continued in German. "My father emigrated to America after the war. We continued to speak German at home."

"And your name, please?"

It felt like an interrogation, but Walter continued the dual-language exchange. "*Mein Name ist Hirsch. Walter Hirsch.*"

"Hirsch," laughed the SS officer. It was not a friendly laugh. "That's a Jewish name. You *are* a Jew, aren't you?"

Walter paused to savor his response. "Actually no, I'm not. My family are Lutherans. And my real name is not Hirsch. My father anglicized it when we came to America in 1918—for obvious reasons. I was baptized Walther Heinrich Gerhart von Hirschberg. My father is Walther Gunter Friedrich Graf von Hirschberg und Gaffron and my mother is Elisabeth du Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg." He had just named two of the most respected old Prussian aristocratic families.

"And you," he said, returning the SS officer's hostile stare with a pleasant smile, "you must have a name, too."

“Sommer. *Hauptscharführer* Hans Sommer.” He had abandoned the pretension of English and now spoke in German—lower class, southern German. Walter allowed himself a slight reaction—just the slightest of smiles—to Sommer’s dialect, an insult Sommer immediately caught and understood.

“So,” Dieter said quickly, “if I may ask without being rude, what do you do here in Paris?”

“I study at the Sorbonne. I’m writing a book on Pierre de Ronsard.”

“Ronsard?” asked the older *Wehrmacht* officer who had been silent until now. “Are there no German writers you admire?”

“Of course. Especially Rilke. He’s superb. His *Der Panther* never ceases to shock me with its power. And reading *Morgenstern*—well, there is always a witty surprise. There are others I might add: Hesse, Thomas Mann, Brecht. But they seem to have fallen out of popularity in Germany these days.”

“We prefer writers who speak the truth about the German culture,” the older officer replied testily.

“That’s your business, I’m sure,” Walter answered affably, then wanting to ease the mood at the table, added with a helpless shrug, “But as for Ronsard, I think it is with poets as it is with women. One can never quite manage to explain one’s love affair to a friend.”

“Or to her husband,” Claus said.

After the laughter subsided, Dieter said “It’s nice of you to join us. One sees so few Americans in Paris these days.”

“I suspect,” Walter said, “it’s that so many Americans are concerned about the war.”

“War? What war?” bristled the older officer. “Do you see a war here?” He swept his arm in a wide arc that clearly indicated Paris and, Walter thought, western Europe as well. “I think you mean conquest.”

“No,” Walter answered. “I was thinking about the war that will, unfortunately, come, sooner or later, between America and Germany.”

The older officer just laughed. “Really? And just how do you imagine you will fight the war since America does not have an army?”

“We didn’t in 1917, either. But my father served as a captain under von Boehn, 461st of the 237th division, and was awarded the Iron Cross for bravery. He fought against American Marines at Belleau Woods and says he never faced an enemy so unrelenting. What did your troops call the Marines? *Höllenhunde*. Devil Dogs, I think, is the American translation. So with all respect, I might say that it is easy to underestimate Americans, but perhaps not always wise.”

Walter’s comments had clearly stirred a painful memory in the older officer. He retreated momentarily into his own thoughts.

Claus’s question broke the silence. “If there is a war,” he said gently, “may I ask what side you will choose?”

“I don’t know,” said Walter. He did know, but this wasn’t the time to be truthful. “It will be a terrible choice: the land of my birth or the land of my family. No matter what I decide, I will be killing men I would prefer to call brothers. One could wish...”

“This is all well and good, Herr Hirsch,” Sommer interrupted impatiently. “So you say you are a scholar. And typically American: blonde, athletic, brashly confident, rich—or we would not be drinking the wine you provided—with the irritating pretense of charm that Americans use in place of decent manners. You are a cliché—but one who speaks flawless German. You could, in fact, easily pass for a German. And judging from your friendliness with your waiter, who, I might add, will get a needed lesson in proper manners before we leave, you could pass as easily for a Frenchman. So I wonder if you are not something other than the cliché you appear to be.”

“And what might that be?” asked Walter. The older officer was now staring at him. Dieter and Claus were intently studying their wine glasses.

“I wonder if you are not a spy. An American spy.”

Walter exploded in amazement. “A spy? A SPY? Now that’s really rich.” Then realizing he had spoken in English, added, “*Das ist wirklich lächerlich!*”

“Truly ridiculous?” smiled Sommer. “Perhaps. Or perhaps not. We will see.”

“Then go ahead and investigate me. That’s what you people do anyway.” Walter didn’t say the other thought that popped into his head—and you torture the people you capture. “You’ll find I am a man of predictably boring routine. My hotel is the Les Jardins du Luxembourg on Impasse Royer-Collard.” On an impulse, he added, “Although I may be looking for new lodgings soon. My concierge is a real termagant, *eine alte Hexe*. During the day, I’m in the library or my study at the Sorbonne. I typically lunch with fellow students at the Café d’Harcourt in the Place Sorbonne. I return home, usually around 4:00, to read or nap, and go out again for supper at one of the same restaurants I always patronize—you can often find me at Au Petit Suisse on rue de Vaugirard. For exercise, I walk in the Luxembourg gardens and ride in the Bois de Boulogne on nice weekends. That’s my itinerary. I rarely vary it. Did you get all that, *Hauptscharführer* Sommer?” Walter added with feigned pleasantness, “or should I write the names down for you?”

“No thank you,” Sommer said, matching Walter’s pretense of politeness. “You’ve been quite helpful.” He was smiling agreeably, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Well, that’s it then,” Walter said. “Other than university colleagues, I have no friends in Paris. So follow me if you wish.” He couldn’t resist a parting shot at Sommer. “With all respect to you, *Hauptscharführer*, I would suggest assigning someone fit for that work. I walk briskly.”

“Oh don’t trouble yourself about that,” Sommer said. “We will.”

Shit, Walter thought. I think I’ve gotten myself into trouble here. Maybe the Germans were right. Insulting that SS creep *was* kind of an asshole move. Well, the hell with it. He stood and gave a slight bow to the company at the table. “Thank you for an interesting conversation, gentlemen. I’m afraid I must take my leave.” With that, he turned and walked past his own table, leaving a large handful of francs for the meal and tip. He felt Sommer’s glare following him down the stairs. Sommer had also not missed noticing Etienne’s contempt as he served the Germans. Walter did not dare look at Etienne or think about the beating he might receive as payment for that contempt.

At the bottom of the stairs, Walter noticed a woman sitting by herself at a corner table, about his age and splendidly Parisian. Her face radiated in the soft light reflected off Chez Jenny’s gold-hued Thomas Spindler marquetry on the wall. He remembered a passage from a Hemingway manuscript he’d read once. “She was very pretty and her hair was black as a crow’s wing and cut sharply and diagonally across her cheek. I looked at her and she disturbed me and made me very excited.”

She was dining alone. There was only one place setting at the table. Another night he would have walked over and started a conversation. Not now, Walter thought. I really need to get out of here. He gave a nod to Antoine at the door, said a quick, silent prayer for Etienne, and headed into the Parisian night—through the Place de la République, down the boulevard du Palais, across Ile de la Cité, and then home.

His footsteps echoed off the stone buildings around him. Paris had become a ghost town. It was as if the plague had returned and instantly killed all the people, leaving only mute, shuttered buildings and silent, empty streets. A month ago, before the Germans arrived, he had been enjoying himself with Dominique. That world had disappeared as if it had never existed.

There was a chill now in the air. He pulled his jacket collar up tight around his neck.