

## CHAPTER ONE

The blood-red swastika banners dominated Berlin. Draped across storefronts, houses, or taking over entire buildings, they demanded attention. Oranienburger Straße was as busy as ever this frosty afternoon, and Jacob Kagan deftly maneuvered through the stream of people on their way to the U-Bahn. He approached the New Synagogue, its gold-domed roof a proud symbol of defiance amidst the sea of Nazi symbolism.

Jacob nodded at one of the men standing guard in front of the building. “Everything okay today, Hans?”

“No trouble,” Hans replied, shaking Jacob’s hand, “if you don’t count the Hitler Youth over there. But we can handle them.” *Just like you always handled us in class*, Jacob thought wryly. He felt sorry for Hans, who had recently lost his job having taught at the same school for almost ten years until the new government decided Jewish teachers were no longer welcome. Now he spent most of his time keeping away trouble from the largest synagogue in the city.

Across the street, five teenagers in dark green uniforms handed out flyers. A common sight these days, they were generally harmless unless drink was involved – which often ended in pub brawls.

Jacob shook his head. “I’m sure they’ll get bored soon enough and move on.”

“I’m not so sure.” Hans scratched his beard and puffed vapor into the air. “They’ve been here all day.” One of the youngsters, who must be no older than twelve, stopped an elderly lady walking past. His face was flushed, and he gesticulated wildly. She responded calmly, took one of his flyers, and gently pushed the boy out of the way.

“They give everybody a flyer,” Hans said, while Jacob frowned. “Everybody but us.”

“I’m sure you fellows are not the most popular people on this street,” Jacob said as he gestured to the other members of the synagogue standing watch.

“I’ve never cared about being popular, Jacob. Most people hurry by, their gazes firmly on the pavement in front of them—occasionally, the odd man will give us a dirty look,” Hans said with a shrug and a wry smile. “It’s business as usual. Speaking of which, how’s the pharmacy doing?”

“Business is surprisingly good!” Jacob answered. “I’ve been out delivering all day. People will always need medicine, even if they won’t be seen in our store anymore.”

“Some of the lucky ones,” Hans said. “Glad to hear it—your father has always been good to the community.”

“Papa does his best navigating the restrictions. Some of our suppliers are wary, so we need to be creative.” He looked up at the clock across the street. “I’ll see you later, Hans. I have a few more packages to deliver before dark.”

Jacob merged into the growing stream of people heading south toward Kreuzberg – all the while his fists were clenched.

It was dark by the time Jacob made his last delivery to a long-term customer, Herr Müller. He had been especially happy with Jacob for delivering his medication and saving him a trip to the pharmacy. Jacob turned from Spittelmarkt back onto the main thoroughfare of Leipziger Strasse—the street was alive with activity. Streetcars occupied the

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middle, their bells clanging to shoo careless pedestrians out of the way, while commuters paused to shop before making their way home.

Jacob hurried through the street and turned a few corners. He was late for his meeting with Ethan, his lifelong best friend. It didn't take him long to open the door to the Augustiner, a tavern just a few streets from his home.

He looked around for Ethan as the door closed behind him. The Augustiner was one of the few places in Berlin where Jews were still welcome, and as a result, it was packed every night. Tonight the warm, smoky air enveloped Jacob like a comfortable blanket.

Jacob spotted Ethan at a small table in the corner. Jacob pushed his way through the packed room, and Ethan stood up to hug him. Jacob was usually the tallest person in the room, except when Ethan was around.

"You're a bit late—nothing like you," Ethan said, flashing a broad smile.

Jacob took off his coat with a grin. "Are you trying to grow a beard?"

Ethan proudly scratched at his two-day stubble. "I think I'll look very respectable in a few weeks."

"Not until you take care of that mess on top of your head," Jacob said. Ethan's hair was especially wild today.

"These curls? Never!"

A waitress set down two large mugs of beer, catching Ethan's eye, the pair smiled at one another before she headed back to the bar.

They lifted their mugs, took their first sips, and set them down at the table. Ethan looked around the tavern – taking in a group of middle-aged men who were laughing loudly.

Ethan's face turned serious. "Do you remember when we would go out on Saturday nights, and walk into any bar we liked?"

Jacob nodded. "Nowadays, this is as good as it gets."

"I miss those days, Jaco."

Jacob looked around and thought nothing of the elderly couple at the table next to them, sharing a plate of pickled sausage and a small carafe of red wine in silence.

"What will be next?" Jacob asked. "Changes are taking place all around the city. Did you hear about that young boy who was attacked

by the Brownshirts last week? They beat him almost to death in front of a crowd. Nobody did anything.”

Ethan nodded. “And people losing their jobs. How long has it been since your mother left the school?”

“She hasn’t set foot in there for over five years now. She used to go to school happy every day, and now she just sits at home.”

They were silent for a moment.

Ethan stood and picked up their empty mugs. “I think we should have another one. There’s not much we can do about it all tonight.”

Jacob watched his best friend navigate his way to the small bar. Ethan was right—there was nothing they could do. The Augustiner was one of the few places where people could pretend everything was still normal.

Ethan returned with two foaming pints he placed on the table. “Right, Jaco. Here’s to not speaking about politics, Nazis, or other shitty things for the rest of the evening.” He raised his mug.

Jacob clinked Ethan’s mug and took a sip of his own. Ethan met Jacob on the first day of school when they were just six years old. An older boy pushed Jacob in the playground, and Ethan had come to his rescue. Ethan suffered a black eye in the scuffle, but the boys had been inseparable from that day onward. Now both twenty-one, they were as close as ever.

“Oh, great.” Ethan’s expression darkened. “Not these guys.”

Four men walked into the bar, wearing the characteristic brown shirts of the *Sturmabteilung*. One of the men pushed aside customers at the bar, causing an elderly gentleman to lose his balance, though someone caught him just in time.

The other people at the bar quickly made way for the heavily-built men. Jacob shook his head and looked down at his beer. “That’s the first time I’ve seen Brownshirts in the Augustiner!” He took another sip to suppress the anger building up inside.

“You think we can take them?” Ethan asked with a twinkle in his eye.

Jacob set his mug down. “Are you kidding? There’s four of them.”

“So? I’m sick of these guys showing up everywhere and acting like they can get away with anything.”

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Ethan never walked away from a fight, but he was pushing it now. Jacob turned back to the bar and sized the men up. They were clearly drunk; perhaps this wasn't their first stop tonight. It was an open secret that the Brownshirts served as Hitler's personal riot squad, bringing violence and destruction wherever they went, although they were not officially recognized by the government.

The Brownshirts brought their beers into the main room, where most of the people kept their eyes on the group, anxious to see what they'd do next. All the tables in the Augustiner were taken, someone would need to make way.

The largest one spoke up: "Any Jews in here?"

A hush fell over the room as people averted their eyes and focused on their drinks.

Jacob looked at Ethan, whose face had further darkened. Jacob felt his anger bubbling over and heard himself say, "Right here."

The men turned toward their table. One of them cocked his head. "How about you get up, then?"

The other men laughed, and they took a few steps in Jacob and Ethan's direction as the people around them held their breath.

Ethan was the first to react. "We're okay here, but perhaps you want to knock another old man off his legs?" he nodded toward the bar.

The larger man scowled. "What did you say?" He stepped closer to Ethan, who stood up from his chair. Jacob did the same.

"You heard me. Nobody wants you here. Everybody was having a grand time until you stank the place up." Ethan gestured across the room, where the stunned patrons were looking back at him.

The largest of the Brownshirts was taken aback for a few seconds, then quickly regained his posture and lunged at Ethan with surprising speed.

Ethan side-stepped and easily dodged the blow. He landed a punch to the side of the man's head, and he went down like a sack of potatoes.

This only enraged the others.

The smallest of the three turned to Jacob, who managed to avert the man's first attack but didn't expect the off-hand blow that connected with his shoulder as he crouched down.

*Bring it on—I can dodge your slow punches all night.*

The attacker was panting and snarling. “Hit back, you *kike*,” he slurred.

Then came the moment Jacob was waiting for. His opponent stumbled into one of the tables and lost his balance. Jacob’s fist connected firmly with the man’s face before a satisfying crack followed. The man grabbed his face while he crashed down onto the table, glasses shattering around him as he slumped to the floor.

Jacob turned to see Ethan holding his own against the two other men—waiting for the perfect time to strike.

Suddenly, the tavern door burst open, and more Brownshirts piled into the Augustiner, pushing their way through the thick crowd. Jacob counted at least five.

“Ethan!” he shouted, pointing at the door. “Time to go!”

His friend gave him a quick nod. The two Brownshirts still blocked Ethan’s path out of the corner, so he took a step toward them and feinted an attack. Both men took the bait and swung wildly. Ethan ducked, and two quick stabs to the ribs doubled the men over. He kneed one in the face and the other in the groin, leaving them in pain, twisting on the floor.

Ethan skipped over them and joined Jacob. “Okay, now what?”

Jacob looked to the door and saw to his surprise that the new Brownshirts hadn’t gotten much closer. The people in the Augustiner had blocked their path, forming a human wall.

“Quickly, over here!” One of the barkeeps waved from the side of the bar.

Jacob and Ethan hurried toward the man, deftly avoiding the overturned tables. The barkeeper lifted the bar and indicated the door behind it. Just as they passed, the elderly gentleman who had been almost toppled earlier placed a weak hand on Jacob’s shoulder.

“If only more people stood up to them, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” he said.

Jacob smiled as he hurried through the door Ethan had left open behind the bar. The cold evening air hit his face as he stepped outside. Ethan was already halfway down the deserted alley, and Jacob rushed after him.

## CHAPTER TWO

It had been a while since Jacob and Ethan had been in a fight. Fortunately, the previous night's damage was restricted to a few bruises, and Jacob wondered how their opponents had spent their day. It felt good to put some of the Brownshirts in their place and get away with it.

Jacob opened the door to the pharmacy as he returned from the last delivery, his father busy at the counter, helping a regular customer pick up her prescription.

"Jacob! What took you so long?" The handful of customers in Kagan & Sons Medicine turned to look at Hermann Kagan—a small, stout man. "You only needed to cross Kreuzberg! It's been more than an hour!"

Jacob gave the customers a reassuring smile and went behind the counter to hug his father.

"I'm here now, safe and well," he said, grinning as Hermann tried to wrestle free from his grasp.

"Wonderful. Now let me go!" Hermann protested as Jacob released him. He was no match for his much taller and stronger son, and it was an odd sight—the pharmacist and his son jousting behind the counter. An elderly lady at the counter smiled knowingly.

Jacob casually tossed his bag behind the counter. “Any more deliveries?”

“No, we’re done,” Hermann said as he handed a small bag of medicine to the elderly lady. A modest bell clanged as the door closed on her way out.

Jacob watched as his father rang up orders for the last customers. Hermann had taken over the pharmacy twenty years ago from his father, who had built it from the ground up, and the business soon thrived. Then Hermann had worked hard to grow it into one of the largest pharmacies in the city.

“Jacob, can you help carry these to the back?” His father pointed to some boxes next to the door.

Jacob took them to the empty storeroom behind the counter—getting a steady stream of medication to the pharmacy was tough.

They stepped outside, and Hermann locked the door. It was already dark, and a chill hung in the air. Their neighbor, Herr Wagner, closed the door to his law office as well.

“Did you hear about vom Rath?” Wagner looked concerned.

Jacob tensed. “Is he still in the hospital?”

Ernst vom Rath, a diplomat, was shot inside the German embassy in Paris a few days ago. A young German-Jewish man named Herschel Grynszpan was arrested on the spot and admitted to the shooting. According to the newspapers, his original target was the ambassador, but he had not been present. Vom Rath had been in critical condition since, and the story dominated the German news.

Wagner shook his head. “He passed away a few hours ago. Goebbels was just on the radio.” He checked the lock on his door. “He’s calling it a Jewish attack on Germany.”

Jacob looked at his father. Hermann’s face was ashen in the glow of a street-lamp.

“Goebbels said the Jews should feel the anger of the people,” Wagner continued. “I’m sorry, Hermann—I don’t know what that means.”

The words were a punch in the gut to Jacob.

“Hitler was looking for an excuse,” Hermann said, his bottom lip quivering, “and the Grynszpan boy has given him the perfect excuse.”

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Wagner nodded. "They're talking about bringing him back to Germany to make an example of him, whatever that means."

Jacob had a good idea what it meant. His father looked like he'd aged ten years in the past few seconds. "Let's go home," Jacob said. "There's no sense in staying in the cold."

Wagner nodded and walked solemnly off in the opposite direction. Jacob and his father set off along the cobblestoned street, all the shop windows now dark. They passed the *Berliner Gasthaus*, one of the few places where light shone from behind the windows. A few tables were occupied, the people enjoying simple suppers of sausage and bread.

"I'm worried about Goebbels," Jacob said, breaking the silence. "Do you think this means they'll make us close the pharmacy?"

Hermann shook his head. "I don't know. There's no telling what they'll do. We've been lucky to stay open so far, I guess."

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens the next few days," Hermann continued. "There's not much we can do about it."

They walked home in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Jacob's mother always made sure there was a hearty meal waiting for her men at the end of the day. Elsa Kagan cleared the empty plates from the table, and Jacob followed to help her wash the dishes in the small kitchen.

The Kagans lived in a modest house that had been in the family for generations, and while they could certainly afford to move to a larger home, they preferred to stay in Kreuzberg. Elsa always said the house had the sort of character which couldn't be bought. Jacob agreed; there were so many memories here that he couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

"Just hand me those, Mama."

Jacob rinsed the plates before plunging them into the scalding water. His mother joined him at the sink and started drying the dishes while Hermann sat down with a newspaper and switched on the radio. Goebbels' voice boomed from the speakers.

"I hope they keep him there," Elsa said. "Who knows what will

happen if he's handed over to the Nazis. I doubt there will be a trial at all."

Goebbels was calling for reprisals after the assassination of Ernst vom Rath and added that the German government demanded the extradition of Herschel Grynzspan from France.

"He'd probably receive a one-way trip to an SS basement," Jacob said. Rumors about the makeshift prison under the SS headquarters circulated Berlin, those unfortunate enough to earn an unsolicited invitation were never heard of again.

"It's such a shame. The boy must've been so desperate to do what he did," Elsa said, placing the dry plates in a cupboard.

Jacob drained the water and dried his hands with a small towel. "This gives the Nazis more incentive to blame all of us, even though we had nothing to do with it."

He put the towel down and yawned. "I'm going to go upstairs and study a bit."

Hermann smiled. "I should have the exam for you next week."

Jacob stopped. "Herr Lughart at the university came through?"

"He did. He's smuggling the latest exam out for you."

Jacob saw his mother smile. Even though he wouldn't be able to formally take the exam, this was as good as it got these days.

"I'll be ready, although this first book is quite tough," Jacob said as he bound up the stairs with a spring in his step. He closed the door to his room. He wasn't just going to be ready; he planned to ace the exam.

Jacob awoke in the middle of the night. It was dark, and it felt like he'd slept for only a few minutes. His eyes needed a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. He squinted at his watch on the bedside table—one in the morning.

He switched on the night light and got out of bed. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he felt his senses switch on. He heard angry voices outside and smelled smoke. He quickly dressed and opened his bedroom door. His father stood in his nightclothes in the hallway, a surprised look on his face.

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“What’s going on, Jaco? Is there some kind of protest outside?”

“I don’t know, but I smell smoke.”

Jacob raced down the stairs and looked out into the street. A dozen or so people stood outside, the small bakery across the street was ablaze. Angry bursts of fire shot from the bakery window, smoke billowing from all sides of the building.

Hermann appeared next to Jacob. “Oh no! Midas must’ve had an accident. Let’s help him put out the fire.” He went for the door before Jacob stopped him.

“Wait,” Jacob said, a hand on his father’s arm. “Look at the people around the bakery.”

Their neighbor was frantically pleading with the growing crowd to help him fight the fire. The people didn’t move as the baker rushed between his burning bakery and a well, carrying a small bucket. It was useless; the fire had engulfed the shop.

“It doesn’t look like an accident,” Jacob said.

One of the men said something to Midas, prompting a chorus of laughter from the others. Midas looked distraught and ceased his attempts to put out the fire. The crowd stood by idly as the flames consumed the building.

“We can’t just stand here and do nothing,” Hermann said, opening the door to the street. Jacob followed him, and they rushed toward their neighbor.

A few paces down the street, a jewelry store had its front window smashed, and several looters were running away, dropping necklaces as they went.

On the other side of the road, two men doused the front of a small butcher shop in gasoline while another man held a blazing torch. The men stepped away from the shop window, throwing the now-empty jerry can on the ground. The man with the torch casually lobbed it at the window, and the fire roared to life with a loud whoosh—the butchers was engulfed in flames within seconds.

Jacob looked around, their peaceful street transformed into a war zone.

*What’s wrong with these people?*

“They’re targeting Jewish businesses!” Hermann said, fear rising in his voice.

*Papa is right, but what about—*“I’ll check on the pharmacy,” Jacob said, rushing back to their home to grab the keys from just inside the door. “You stay here with Mama and don’t go anywhere. Lock the doors!”

His father nodded and disappeared back inside the house.

Jacob ran down the street, reaching the intersection with the larger Gitschiner Straße. The mayhem was even worse here, with half the buildings on fire. A large man took a loose stone from the street and launched it at a shop window. The window exploded into a thousand pieces. Further down the street, a group of firemen stood working a large hose. Jacob was relieved; maybe they could salvage some of the damage?

As he got closer, he overheard who he assumed was the owner of the store, pleading with the firemen.

“But my building is burning down. Please help me!”

“I’m sorry, we can’t,” one of the firemen said. “We’re only here to make sure it doesn’t spread.”

The plumes of smoke increased, obscuring the view of the surrounding buildings as pieces of stone crumbled down haphazardly.

Jacob ran on for another five minutes, almost to where their pharmacy was located. He braced himself as he thought of the mess he’d find there. *If a crowd were looting the pharmacy, there wouldn’t be anything I can do about it.*

As he turned the corner, he was relieved to find the pharmacy untouched. The street was relatively quiet, and there were no fires, but there were plenty of people outside their homes. A young girl not much older than seven looked up at Jacob with big, frightened eyes. She wore but a nightgown, and her mother kept her close. A man stood next to them, holding a shovel, scanning the street with an air of defiance.

Jacob reached the pharmacy, where Herr Wagner stood outside the door to his offices. He saw Jacob and motioned him to come closer.

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"It's madness," he said, his eyes wide with fear. "They're destroying the city."

Jacob nodded. "I ran across town, and there are fires everywhere. People are looting shops, grabbing whatever they can. I haven't seen any fights yet, but it can't be much longer."

"They're only attacking Jewish businesses, though," Wagner said. "Looks like Goebbels got exactly what he wanted."

"I can't believe this is a spontaneous reaction. Do you think it's the SS?"

"Maybe, or the Brownshirts, more likely. I saw some men in uniforms giving orders. Most of them are wearing normal clothes, though." An explosion on the next block rocked the ground, and they instinctively ducked.

A large group of men appeared from around the corner. They carried torches and jerry cans and shouted at people to get out of their way. Jacob counted at least twenty of them.

"Out with the Jews!"

Jacob looked at Wagner. He'd turned pale, his gaze fixed on the men.

"Trouble's here," Jacob said. The man across the street tightened his grip on the shovel. Jacob tried to get his attention, but the man was too focused on the group. The girl hid behind her mother, only her face peeking out.

The group reached the small family's house and stopped.

"Look at the brave one," one of the larger men in the front said. He flashed a sinister smile and held his arms out wide. "What do you think you're going to do?"

The homeowner didn't respond but just looked at the brute and clenched his jaw.

"Get out of the way," the man said, stepping forward. "Don't give me a reason to hurt your little girl there."

Behind him, a man took a bottle from his backpack and filled it with gasoline from one of the jerry cans.

"You want to be a homeless *kike*?" The first man flashed a dirty, toothless grin "or a dead one?" He held up the bottle menacingly and struck the first match. The flame didn't hold, and the man cursed.

Jacob looked around the street—most people had fled into their houses.

*We can't just leave them to fend for themselves.*

He took a step toward the family across the street. Before he could take another, he felt a firm hand on his shoulder.

“You can't help them, Jacob.” Wagner's eyes showed concern as he shook his head. “Look at those thugs—there's no reasoning with them.”

Jacob tried to shake off the older man's grip, but Wagner was adamant.

“If you walk over there, they'll burn down the pharmacy as well. Not to mention what they'd do to you. You're a Jew, Jacob. Don't give them an excuse.”

Jacob felt his eyes sting as he struggled to control his anger. *I can't just stand here and do nothing.* At the same time, he knew he couldn't take on twenty men on his own. *If only the man backs down, maybe it won't be that bad.*

The little girl started to cry. The sound pierced the evening sky, and her father looked over his shoulder. It was the first time he took his eyes off the group.

“It will be okay,” he said softly as he put down his shovel to gently stroke her hair. “These angry men think we're going to hurt them, but you know that's not true, right?”

She sobbed and buried her face against her mother's skirts. The mother looked up at her husband with pleading eyes.

He shook his head. “I can't let them destroy our house. It's all we have.”

The man grabbed his shovel and swung it at the man holding the bottle, smashing it to pieces on the street. The man roared with pain, and for a moment, everybody was too stunned to react as the sweet smell of gasoline spread.

The group recovered quickly and descended on the man like a pack of hyenas. He managed to get a few swings in, stepping back while they approached. He could only keep them from him for so long, and it was only a moment later he was pinned down on the ground.

Jacob saw the flash of a knife and looked away.

The leader of the group called out: “Stop, don't kill him!”

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The man holding the knife paused and looked up at the leader in surprise. The man on the ground was a mess, his face bruised and bloodied. Despite this, defiance still shone in his eyes.

“Get him up,” the leader said. “And get his wife and kid away from the house.”

The man was dragged away; the girl left crying as her mother tried to comfort her. She shielded her daughter and clawed at the men approaching them. Outnumbered, the men pulled her and the child away from the house. They were left next to their husband and father, whose breathing was labored and shallow as he struggled to sit upright.

“I’ve decided it’s better to have you see your house burned to the ground than to kill you here,” the leader of the group said. “Besides, there’s a better place to send you than kill you.” He grinned and lit the rag hanging out of one of the bottles. The thugs smashed a window using the homeowner’s shovel and stepped out of the way.

The leader threw the bottle into the house, which instantly engulfed the small front room in fire. The house turned into an inferno within seconds.

Jacob felt the heat on his face from the other side of the street. He could only watch as the small house crumbled in front of them.

“Okay, that’s enough. Take him to the police station.” The large man pointed at two strong men to pick up the homeowner, who’d passed out.

They dragged him away and left his wife and daughter in front of their now-smoldering house. They looked stunned.

“Where are you taking him?” the wife asked the group leader, who was walking away. She held her sobbing daughter close.

He looked at her with contempt. “He’ll be in one of the jail cells nearby, along with the rest of you scum. You can go with him if you want—I don’t care.” He walked on, the group following him and ignoring the woman on the ground.

Jacob looked on in shock as the men passed him chanting Nazi anthems with outstretched arms. Most of them were in their early twenties, although he also spotted a few teenagers amongst them. Their eyes were full of menace, satisfied with the damage they’d wrought.

Wagner tugged at his shirt. “Keep your head down, Jacob,” he whispered. “It looks like they’re passing by our shops.”

The men appeared to have sated their lust for blood for now and moved away. Relative peace returned to the street. Jacob stood in a daze. The pharmacy had survived this attack, but he felt the next wave of violence was just around the corner – would he suffer the same fate as the young father?

Wagner looked at him and took control. “I know it feels wrong, not doing anything just now. But we couldn’t stop them. You know this, right?”

Jacob nodded absently.

“You need to get home and stay inside,” Wagner said. “This can’t go on forever, and you can’t protect the pharmacy on your own. Keep yourself safe.”

Jacob looked across the street, where the mother and child were wrapped in blankets.

*He’s right. I’m just as much a target.*

He regained his senses and looked Wagner in the eye.

“Now go home, Jacob. I’m going to do the same. Avoid the main streets, and don’t stop until you’re inside.”

Jacob shook Wagner’s hand before turning back toward the city center, the dark sky overcast in smoke.

The Berlin streets were in pandemonium. People were dragged along by mobs of young men as trucks holding bound men zipped around the streets. This was no spontaneous uprising.

Jacob’s only option was to keep moving and pray he wouldn’t run into any of the groups he’d seen earlier. If he kept his head down, his chances were pretty good. So far, the people he’d seen hauled off were trying to defend their property. He pitied them; they didn’t know what they were up against.

He suspected the Brownshirts were behind the attacks. They were the only group in Berlin that would exert themselves at these tasks with

such zeal. The SS was just as despicable, but they were too organized and proud to plunder and loot.

Jacob avoided the main thoroughways, but he needed to cross Oranienburger Straße and pass the New Synagogue to get home. When he got there, the street was swamped, shattered glass lined the pavement.

He stepped over the large pieces of glass and hoped his boots would stop any smaller bits. Something was going on in front of the New Synagogue. He spotted a row of about twenty people who'd hooked arms and formed a human wall. Jacob was unsurprised to see Hans standing in the middle of the group.

Opposite them stood a much larger crowd, some armed with clubs and knives.

The groups were in a deadlock. Those people protecting the synagogue were content keeping the thugs at bay. Bystanders waited to see what would happen next. The sound of broken glass signaled that one of the ornate windows of the synagogue had been smashed.

A large man wearing a dark red coat stepped forward, Jacob could see a large scar on his cheek, his face blotted with rashes.

"We're burning down your synagogue," he said in a quiet, raspy voice.

Jacob couldn't place his accent, but he wasn't from Berlin.

"You can get outta the way or burn with your holy building," he continued.

A number of the younger men in front of him shuffled their feet. They looked to Hans, who stood tall in the middle of the group.

"You have no authority—you can't bully us," Hans said, his face hardening. "I've dealt with people like you all my life, and I'll be damned if I let you destroy our synagogue without a fight."

The man held Hans' gaze while he stepped toward him. "I was hopin' you'd say that." He leaned toward Hans, and their noses almost touched.

Hans was unfazed, and the men stood frozen for what felt like an eternity.

After everything Jacob had seen earlier today, he knew Hans wouldn't blink first.

"You'll have to go through me to get to the synagogue." Hans took a

step toward the man, forcing him to step back. His courage emboldened the people around him, and they moved forward, too.

The man in red recovered quickly. Behind him, the larger group became restless as they clenched their weapons tighter.

Out of nowhere, the man lashed out at Hans, but Hans ducked, and the man hit nothing but air.

“You shoulda moved,” the threatening man growled. The men behind him took this as their cue and poured forward.

The scene was horrific. The bloodthirsty crowd of thugs cut through the Jewish barrier with ease. Some of the younger men guarding the synagogue got a few punches in, but the fight was unfair. The men attacking knew what they were doing, expertly cutting and stabbing at essential spots on the defenders’ bodies. Some of them were cut down and trampled as the men moved on to their next victims. Jacob watched on helplessly—there were too many people between him and the synagogue.

It ended as quickly as it started.

The coppery scent of blood hung in the air as Jacob searched for Hans amongst the fallen people. He was aghast to see him on the pavement, a large pool of blood forming around his body. Hans’s breathing was shallow, his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Jacob instinctively began pushing through the crowd to help his friend, but hands clutched at him, and one voice came through sorrowfully: “Wait—or you’ll end up just like them.”

The thugs stepped over the bodies, ignoring the victims’ pleas for help. They carried their jerry cans toward the New Synagogue, people nearby unable or unwilling to stop them.

“Just move the jerry cans into the place,” the man with the scar said. “It’ll burn faster, and they’re not going to stop us anymore.” He pointed at the heap of people sprawled on the ground.

Just as they opened the doors to the synagogue, there was a commotion in the crowd. A uniformed policeman marched straight to the entrance.

Jacob recognized Otto Belgardt, a well-known lieutenant he knew as a friendly and dedicated officer. He was the first uniformed policeman Jacob had seen all night.

## BEYOND THE TRACKS

Belgardt looked in horror at the scene. He stopped one of the men carrying a jerry can to the entrance of the synagogue.

“What do you think you’re doing? Get that gasoline away from the building!” Belgardt barked. The young man stopped, a flash of uncertainty crossing his face.

Jacob felt hopeful. *Is someone finally going to put a stop to this mayhem?*

Belgardt went up the steps, pushing past the other men. “All of you, stop this nonsense right now!” he shouted at the group drenching the New Synagogue in gasoline. “Don’t you know this is a protected building? You’re all breaking the law!”

The men turned to their leader, who stood in front of the main door holding an unlit torch.

“Move along, cop,” said the man in red. “You got no power tonight. You know who we are, dontcha?” He struck a match and held it to the torch, which caught fire immediately, its hungry flames consuming the gasoline. That encouraged his men, who turned back to their work and ignored the police officer.

Belgardt looked unfazed. He calmly opened his jacket and unclipped his gun. Effortlessly, he cocked the hammer and aimed it at the man with the unsightly face—the scar now a deep shade of red, betraying his anxiety.

“Perhaps you’d like to reconsider my authority now?” Belgardt said. He moved closer to the door of the synagogue, keeping his pistol aimed at the leader.

Fear crossed the man’s face and quickly spread to his companions, who put down their jerry cans.

A few of the younger attackers shirked away, trying to blend into the crowd.

*Good.*

Belgardt reached the top of the stairs and was only a few steps away from the leader. His aim was fixed on the man’s chest. “I suggest you get out of here now. You’ve done enough damage for one night.”

The larger man looked angry, but Belgardt was the one with the gun.

“This isn’t over,” the man said, walking away from the synagogue.

“You know we work under the Führer’s own say, dontcha?” He spat on the ground.

Belgardt didn’t budge, the barrel of his gun following the man down the stairs. “I must’ve missed the part about destroying national monuments.”

The man snarled at him one last time and disappeared into the crowd.

Jacob rushed forward to check on the injured people, especially Hans, as the crowd dispersed now that the fight was over. He scanned the faces of the people on the ground; some of them no longer moving as he made his way up the steps. Fire trucks screeched to a stop in the street, the firemen quickly extinguishing the torches the men had left behind.

He found Hans propped up against the side of the synagogue. He was relieved to see his old teacher looking a little better than before.

“You see? We can stop them—we just need to have faith”—he burst into a violent cough, and a fireman handed him some water.

“Take it easy,” Jacob said. Hans looked horrible, his face swollen and his left eye completely shut. Hans’ clothes were stained with dark crimson patches of blood, but his good eye shone brightly.

The fireman gave them a thumbs-up. “You’re going to be fine, but you need to get yourself checked by a doctor soon.” He moved on to a young man next to Hans; hands gripped tightly to his side—it looked like they’d cracked a few of his ribs.

Jacob gently patted Hans on the shoulder. “That was both the bravest and most foolish thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

Hans smiled. “Somebody had to stay here until the police finally showed up, no? You boys gave me practice in standing up to ruffians.”

“I think Belgardt is one of the good ones—I haven’t seen any other police out on the streets tonight.”

“He IS a good one,” answered Hans with a nod toward the policeman, who hadn’t moved from his post, his eyes scanning the street. “He’s checked on us a few times a day while we were out here the past two weeks. Even sent the Hitler Youth away on a few occasions. I’m sure he’s not very popular with the brass.”

## BEYOND THE TRACKS

Jacob looked around. "The streets have been taken over by gangs of thugs."

"It's the Brownshirts, no doubt. They might be wearing regular clothes, but I recognized a few of them."

"You saved the synagogue tonight, Hans. Don't you think you should see a doctor? There have to be plenty of them still willing to help you." Jacob looked around. "You're going to be okay here?"

Hans nodded. "Of course. It'll take more than a few cowards to get me down. Is the pharmacy okay?"

"It was when I was there a little earlier, but who knows?" Jacob shrugged. "Anything could happen tonight. I'm going to check on my parents."

Jacob walked wearily down the stairs. The Oranienburger Straße was a little less crowded, the shattered windows the remnants of the destructive wave that had passed through earlier. In the distance, the first rays of the rising sun struggled to make their way through the smoke.