A BOOKSELLER IN MADRID

A Novel

MARIO ESCOBAR

HARPER MUSE

A Bookseller in Madrid

La Librera de Madrid

Published by Harper Muse, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

Translator: Gretchen Abernathy

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[[CIP TO COME]]

Printed in the United States of America

$PrintCode

To the booksellers, ever at the vanguard of culture, who protect the sacred temple of the conscience and fight to keep books from disappearing.

To the bookseller in Concepción who eyed me suspiciously when I entered his store, and who wielded his smoke pipe like a flaming sword to protect the borders of humanity's lost paradise.

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A Note from the Author

A Bookseller in Madrid is a work of fiction born out of the desire to draw readers into the harsh reality of the Second Spanish Republic, the Spanish Civil War, and the early years of Franco's rule. Nearly ninety years after the outbreak of the bloodiest conflict in Spain's history, it's time for us to calmly review the past.

All wars are bad, but civil wars are perhaps the most tragic. The wounds from fratricidal fighting endure, and the simple fact of time passing does not cure them. Every city, every town, and every household in Spain holds a family tragedy related to the war, a story that reminds them of the humiliation and injustices their loved ones suffered. People tend to face such suffering in one of two ways: with attempted amnesia, which renders the memories helpless, or with hatred, which stores up resentment toward those who took away loved ones, a nation, or freedom. Novels are a sort of practice round for real life. They can help us reconcile with the past and put ourselves in the shoes of those who lived it.

The terrible ideological battle that a few years later dragged the world to the brink of destruction was also waged in Spain. The fear of the spread of Communism in Europe, especially in Germany, made it easy for Fascism to extend beyond the borders of Italy. Meanwhile, Western democracies had inadequate answers to the

challenges of the new political and economic scene. Spain had initially emerged stronger from the Great War. After the military dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, the country attempted to transition to democracy. Yet the success of the Republic was brief. Social divisions, economic inequality among regions, insufficient agrarian reform, rapid changes to which a large sector of society did not adapt, violence, and international pressures kicked the country's second attempt at being a republic to the curb.

Bárbara Spiel is the protagonist of this fictional story about a young German woman who opens a bookshop in Madrid during the tumultuous 1930s. Representative of a generation of young idealists who struggled to keep another worldwide conflagration at bay, her work is in line with the very real tenacity of Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier. These women, who sought to change the world through books, were the founders of the Parisian bookstores Shakespeare and Company and La Maison des Amis des Livres, respectively.

The story of Bárbara Spiel details the turbulent, exciting Madrid of the Second Spanish Republic, ever changing and full of rapid social transformation but also of violence and danger. During the war, the Republican government retreated from the besieged, relentlessly bombed city to a safer zone, which opened the door for extremist factions to take control and subsequently purge their ideological enemies. The arrival of Franco's troops brought hunger, fear, and the persecution of intellectuals. In *The Hive*, Camilo José Cela poignantly describes the disenchantment of the capital in the postwar years:

> Something like sorrow floats in the air and strikes into people's hearts. Hearts don't hurt and can suffer for

hour after hour, a whole life long, without anyone ever knowing for sure what's happening.

A Bookseller in Madrid is about dreams, about the capacity of human beings to face adversity, and about life that finds its way through day-to-day difficulties and tragedies. Bárbara's bookstore becomes both an island of peace, tolerance, and hope in a collapsing world and the target of attacks by extremists.

The young German woman's love for a Spanish Socialist parliamentarian binds her to a country sinking into a spiral of hatred and terror, two sides of the same coin. Hounded simultaneously by Stalinist *checas*, Francoist Fascists, and the German Gestapo, Bárbara struggles to keep her bookstore's flame of liberty from being snuffed out.

In our current turbulent times, the defense of common sense, tolerance, and respect for others has become a dangerous act. Books remain one of the few pillars upholding Western society, a society rendered feeble by its own contradictions and undermined by the Trojan horse of its culture that, like the Roman god Saturn, is willing to devour its own.

I invite you to join the club of readers who, from the trenches of books, hold out in the endless war against truth. Come, lose yourself in the beautiful story of Bárbara Spiel.

Prologue

New York
November 2022

Kerri Young was a keen hunter-gatherer when it came to old books, the ones that jumped out at you with their yellowed pages and begged you to open them even just once. She had studied philology at UC Berkeley with an eye to becoming an editor, though the desire coiled deepest inside her heart was to be a writer.

Kerri was making her way down Seventy-Second Street in Manhattan when she saw construction workers tossing old books into a dumpster. She froze, scrunched her upturned nose, and could not keep herself from calling for them to stop. Barely glancing at her, the workers tossed another box into the dumpster.

Kerri rolled up the sleeves of her cardigan, hoisted herself over the side of the dumpster, and started rifling through the books, hoping to rescue a few from demise. Her tiny Brooklyn apartment could not hold any more books, but she could donate them to the synagogue's library. Her fingers were caked with dust and globs of cement when they unearthed a dark green leather volume. Kerri wiped the front cover with her forearm and could just make out the tarnished gold leafing: *A Bookseller in Madrid*.

Kerri had been to Spain once but never to the capital. After a layover in Barcelona, she had flown to Majorca for a few glorious days of sunshine and relaxation on its beaches.

She flipped opened the book and discovered it had been published in 1964 by a small publishing house in Boston. The first few lines sucked Kerri into what appeared to be the autobiography of a young German woman who had left the dangers of Berlin in the 1930s to open a bookshop in Madrid during the Second Spanish Republic. It smacked of Hemingway, the Woolfs, and the bygone generation that had tried to keep a second world war at bay.

She read the entire subway ride home. Back in her apartment, she threw herself onto the bed and lost herself in the incredible story of Bárbara Spiel until the first rays of dawn lightened the window.

After a quick shower, Kerri fixed a pot of coffee and hurried to the Manhattan publishing house where she worked. She took tiny sips from her thermos mug as she pushed her way across the street. She needed to get her newest discovery into the hands of her boss and friend, Alice Rossemberg, as soon as possible. The story of that marvelous woman had to line the stands of bookstores around the world. Kerri sensed its power to inspire the hundreds and thousands of people who understood that books were the key to changing reality and restoring a bit of sanity and heroism to this tumultuous, confusing world.

The two women spent that Friday morning reading, dreaming, and planning the future of *A Bookseller in Madrid*. The rest is history.

Part 1

From Berlin to Madrid

Chapter 1

Berlin
Summer of 1933

My father was a writer. We had loads of books at home, our huge library bigger than anyone else's I knew except my grandfather Gábor's. He was a well-known playwright who passed away when I was young. I inherited another passion from my father: his love for the French language. We Germans have always had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the French, swinging between deep admiration for their culture and literature and complete disdain for so many other things. Yet since Adolf Hitler's rise to power and relentless attempt to take over every aspect of German society, France had become just one more enemy to take down.

My other grandfather, Klaus, came from a much humbler background, and his family trade was woodworking, though he became a pastor. I was just a child when he built me a lovely little bookshelf for my room in our house on the outskirts of Berlin. From then on, I played at being a bookseller. I practiced all the time with my two sisters and my friends. When I finished my degree in French philology, it was the most natural thing in the world for me to start working at a highly acclaimed bookstore in

downtown Berlin.

The store belonged to a well-known Jewish family. The owner was one of the women I admired most in the world. Ruth Friedman inherited the business from her father, who had inherited it in turn from his. Initially selling only books in Yiddish, the store evolved into a niche for foreign-language literature, especially French.

"That girl's a tough cookie," Mrs. Friedman said, flipping through the magazine for German booksellers. Hitler had threatened to do away with all non-Aryan cultures, but so far nothing had come of it. Mrs. Friedman believed his words were just a political maneuver to secure the support of all the racist Nationalist citizens.

"What girl?" I asked.

"Françoise Frenkel, the Polish woman who runs La Maison du Livre, the French bookshop. The Nazis have been giving her grief for a decade now, though I don't know if it's because she's a Jew or because she sells French books."

I had heard glowing reports about that meeting place for book-lovers but had never been able to visit. As soon as my workday ended, I would head straight there to continue my research. My goal was to finish my doctorate in French philology and then to open my own store. On top of all that, I was an editor for a few small publishing houses that translated books from French.

"Why don't the police do something to stop them?" I asked.

Ruth burst out laughing at my naivete. "The police? Hermann Göring is their boss! You think he'll lift a finger to protect the Jews or the Polish immigrants?"

My father, a Social Democrat, had a seat in parliament and had already experienced the wrath of Adolf Hitler and his henchmen.

After the burning of the Reichstag a month prior, the Enabling Act passed in March granted dictatorial powers to Hitler. Communist and Socialist representatives were denied access to their seats in parliament, and many of them were locked up in jails or in Dachau, the fearful concentration camp outside of Munich. My father had friends in the Centre Party and among the non-Nazi ministers. For the moment, that had kept him out of jail. Everyone advised him to get out of the country, but he was not yet willing to leave our family home and all the memories, especially everything he had shared with my mother, Magda.

That day, when my shift was over, I removed the pink apron all the female employees wore to reveal a floral dress, which was a celebration of the long 1933 summer, and went to pay my first visit to the bookstore of Mrs. Frenkel. From the outside it looked like a little French hole-in-the-wall, but inside it was open and welcoming, the kind of place you never wanted to leave. There was a poster on the door about an upcoming lecture by a famous French author. Several French newspapers lined a front table. Many Berliners bought French papers because censorship had already stifled most of the German periodicals.

A man with round glasses looked up as I entered. Besides us, the place was oddly empty for that time of day, when people were generally out and about doing their shopping. My presence clearly surprised the man.

"May I help you with anything, young lady?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm just having a look."

The man nodded and went back to his book. I wandered between tables and mahogany bookshelves, carefully opening the cover and running my fingers down the spine of one volume after another. I loved the smell of books and wood, of ink and paper—

the aroma of libraries and bookstores. For me that smell was the gateway to paradise lost, where nothing bad could happen to me.

After a while, a handsome man in a double-breasted pinstriped suit walked in. He had a thin mustache, and his black hair was combed back, revealing dark eyes that devoured everything in his path. I observed him discreetly as he greeted the man at the counter and began looking through German and French titles.

I had lost my concentration. Every few seconds I glanced up cautiously at the stranger. I wondered where he was from and what he was doing in a store that so few Germans dared to enter anymore. Then an attractive, slender woman emerged from the back room emanating simple, natural elegance. She introduced herself to me as the owner, Françoise Frenkel, and asked if she could help me find anything.

"Good afternoon, my name is Barbara. I'm looking through your French collection. I'm finishing my doctoral thesis about Honoré de Balzac. Well, in fact . . . it's about why he became one of the greatest authors in French literature despite being rejected by scholars and other famous authors."

A smile played at Françoise's lips.

"Ah, Balzac's importance cannot be understated; one of the greatest writers of all time," she replied. "Not every book will go down in history, of course, but he painted a precise portrait of society in his day. No other author has hit the nail so squarely on the head. I think people were miffed at how easy story telling came to him. Balzac could churn out a masterpiece in a matter of weeks." With a click of her tongue and a sigh, she continued, "The envy of his contemporaries was bound to come. The main difference between the genius and the artist is that the first does not need the effort and tenacity of the second."

I nodded in agreement.

"Have you read Stefan Zweig's essay on Balzac?" Françoise asked.

"Yes, of course; it was fascinating. That's where I learned the sad story behind the great writer. In fact, that's what convinced me to research him."

"One book leads to another. That's the magic of reading. Balzac, like all the great hearts, had to be forged in pain. There is no real art without suffering. It's the price the gods demand." Françoise lit a cigarette while she talked.

I longed to become a writer, and I knew Françoise was correct. A brief glance at the biography of nearly any famous author proved that literature was no bed of roses.

"At least they've managed to turn their frustration and pain into something good." I immediately regretted saying something that sounded so frivolous. At the time I did not realize that insecurity is one of the virtues of youth: the ability to question everything and believe that there is always a better way of doing things. Later, life batters away until you cede to harsh reality; or at least that is the excuse of those who become content to survive.

"Zweig published that piece with two other biographical essays, one on Dickens and the other on Dostoevsky. We can only hope that Zweig doesn't have to flee the country like other intellectuals have."

She named the fear that defined what was occurring around us. Just as things had started to stabilize after years of political tension and economic difficulties, the world as we had always known it was disappearing. How ironic.

The jingling of the bell at the front door announced the entry of four men dressed in the brown uniforms of the SA. They

reeked of sour beer and sweat. They glanced haughtily around the store, as if waiting to make sure we were all paying sufficient attention, before going into action. Their pathetic, vulgar existence was only justified in their eyes by the amount of terror they inflicted on their victims.

As if taking a stage cue, the oldest of the rabid Nazi dogs yelled, "Damned Communist Jews!" and cleared an entire shelf of books with his short nightstick. His puppy underlings followed suit.

Over and above the crash of books against the floor, the SA belted out patriotic songs proclaiming the irrational beliefs of National Socialism. The man at the counter, whom I'd learned was Françoise's husband, raised his arms and ran into the pack of wild dogs to stop them. "Gentlemen, please!" he cried.

One of the Nazis shoved him down and another began kicking him hard. The man groaned. Françoise made to run to her husband armed with nothing but her glasses and a pen, but before she got there, the dark-haired stranger cut her off. Without a word, he held her by the shoulders until she stopped trying to enter the fray. Then the stranger turned and stared at the four SA officers.

"You've had your fun, comrades. Now, if you'll please move along." He spoke in such a low voice that I could hardly distinguish his words from the shouts of the Nazis, the groans of Françoise's husband, and the noise of books flying off the shelves and carpeting the floor.

The oldest Nazi, who was clearly starting to gray beneath the cap covering his close-cut hair, frowned. Waving his nightstick, he ambled toward the stranger.

"Are you one of these damned Jews? Looks like it from those dark eyes and that dark hair."

"My hair is as dark as the Führer's, it's true; to my knowledge that is no crime. I've asked you politely to please stop beating an innocent man. I will not be so polite next time."

The SA officer guffawed at the man's threat. The other three, having left off throwing books around and beating the man on the ground, howled with laughter in turn. The fat old assault guard did not see the blow coming. Nor did I. The stranger's fist slammed into his jaw and knocked him off-balance. The Nazi looked up in shock and made to swing with his nightstick, but he barely had time to raise his arm, which the stranger immediately twisted. He deftly swiped the nightstick and commenced to beat the SA guard senseless. The three lackeys threw themselves on him, two of them bearing hunting knives. They were not laughing anymore. Instead, their faces were swollen with an anger that made me step back farther in fear that they would turn on us next. I looked behind me for a way out, but my mind was frozen in terror.

The stranger dodged the SAs' blows and knives but landed several punches, which left the Nazis increasingly confused and scared. Five minutes later, they struggled up from the floor and hobbled out of the store in humiliation.

"Thank you," Françoise said to the stranger as she ran to tend to her husband.

I was horrified and paralyzed. Blood covered the leather covers of several books, and hundreds of volumes blanketed the floor, sprawled out at grotesque angles. I picked up a few and put them back in their places, grasping at the hope of order to relieve my distress. Then I found myself face-to-face with the stranger.

"Let me help you."

I did not know how to respond, but we both spent the next long

while organizing the books and smoothing their twisted pages.

"I haven't introduced myself," he said after some time. "I'm Juan Delgado."

"Juan Delgado?" I asked, puzzled.

He nodded. "I'm from Spain."

I had never met anyone from Spain. In Germany, there were all sorts of negative stereotypes and prejudice against southern Europeans.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Barbara," I said, feigning a calm I did not feel.

Françoise and her husband had joined the cleanup efforts, and everything was back in order within an hour.

"Thank you both for everything," Françoise said. "It's gotten late. The least we can do is invite you to dinner."

My locked-up state continued and I seemed unable to respond to the invitation, but Juan accepted eagerly. Then he turned to me. "Don't worry; I'll walk you home afterward. The streets of Berlin are crawling with swine like those guys, drunkards looking to wreak havoc."

The four of us went up to the apartment above the bookstore where the couple had lived since opening the business a few years before. It was a simple abode with few luxuries but with so many books that it seemed like an extension of the shop below.

"Dinner is chicken breasts over artichokes. It's not much, but with a good French wine and a bit of bread, I think we'll make do," Françoise said.

While her husband set the table, Juan and I stood around, unsure of what to say or do. Françoise rescued us from the awkwardness by arriving with two trays and placing them on the round table.

"Please, do sit down," her husband said. "Now to formally introduce myself: I'm Simon Raichenstein. I'm Russian, and my wife is Polish. We opened this bookstore in 1921 in a smaller location. Back then, we never could have imagined that twelve years later we would be in a situation like what just happened."

We all took our seats, and Françoise served the food on delicate china plates.

Simon continued speaking. "I got out of Russia because of the revolution. At first I thought that my country, which I love dearly, would modernize and leave behind the era of the czars . . . but really, now it's just a new kind of czar—the Reds—governing the Kremlin. And they're even crueler than the real ones."

"Don't burden our new friends with your sad stories, Simon. Nobody has it easy in these times." Françoise snapped.

The tension could be cut with a knife. It seemed that they were one of those couples who loved each other but could no longer stand to be in the other's presence.

"Forgive me," Simon said, with an apologetic shrug.

"What's happening in Russia is an enormous social experiment. It's to be expected that few people understand it," Juan said.

"Are you a Communist?" Simon asked.

Juan shook his head, a spoonful of the delicious food in his mouth.

"And what if he were?" Françoise reproached. "This man saved your life, and likely the entire store." She refilled the Bohemian crystal wine glasses.

"True, true, forgive me. It's just that my family and I have been through so much . . ."

"I'm so sorry about that. By no means did I intend to imply that I'm in favor of what is occurring in the Soviet Union, but society

does need new paradigms, and the bourgeoise democracies either cannot or will not offer them. Which is precisely why Adolf Hitler has ended up on top here."

At that, I looked straight into the Spaniard's eyes and asked in a very serious tone, "Are you comparing National Socialism with Communism? My father was a Social Democrat in parliament and was ousted from his seat. He's on the verge of fleeing the country out of fear. Friends have invited him to the Netherlands to get him out of this mess. Nazism and Socialism are antagonistic."

"Not for the masses," Juan answered. "I'm a member of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, and I know how the common people think. Many of the people who voted for leftist parties now support Hitler. It's a reality we can't avoid. I've come to Germany precisely to study this phenomenon, because a few Fascist movements have sprung up in Spain, and we want to understand what's happened in Germany and Italy to keep it from spreading to our young Republic."

"Well, to be frank, the ascent of the Nazis here is a result of people being afraid of the Communists," Simon said. "You know, after the war there were several attempts to apply the Soviet system here, and people are afraid."

Françoise raised her glass and said, "Let's change the subject with a toast. Here's to being alive today, since we don't know what tomorrow holds."

We all clinked our raised our glasses and sipped the delicious Bordeaux wine.

The rest of the evening passed in a more relaxed atmosphere. Juan told us a lot about his country, and by the end of dinner I was fascinated by Spain. I recalled that an old friend worked in a

bilingual school in Madrid. I began to think it might not be a bad idea to pay her a visit and get to know Spain firsthand.

Later, Juan accompanied me through the empty Berlin streets. Very few people ventured out at night anymore to dine at the fashionable restaurants or while away the hours at the cabarets the city was famous for. The country's new masters did not approve of respectable Germans enjoying those degenerate spectacles, as Nazi propaganda frequently reminded us.

"It's a pity you've had to get to know this aspect of Berlin. I promise you things were really different a few years ago," I said timidly.

"The whole world is changing, you know? The optimism from the turn of the century has given way to entrenched pessimism. But human beings always manage to rise above."

"You really think so?"

The young Spaniard smiled at me, and my heart skipped a beat. I had the feeling that I had found my soulmate that night: Juan was the perfect mixture of realism and idealism, he was handsome and chivalrous, and he treated me with great respect. When we got to my door, he paused with his hands in his pockets, pulled out a cigarette, and, before lighting it, asked, "Do you mind?"

"No, I like the smell. It reminds me of my dad."

We stayed in the island of light from the streetlamp. The end of the cigarette pulsed like an incandescent rock expelled from an erupting volcano.

"Would it be terribly brash of me to ask if we could see each other again?" he asked.

I laughed at the combination of his stuttering accent and impeccable grammar. For the first time that night, he was the one who seemed intimidated.

I pulled out a card for the bookstore where I worked and handed it to him. "This is where I work. My lunch break is at twelve thirty."

"I'll see you then," he said with a mischievous smile.

From my doorway I could hear him whistling all the way down the street. It was the theme song from a movie I loved, *À nous la liberté*, with Henri Marchand. I sang it quietly to myself as I climbed the stairs to my apartment, hoping the lyrics about beauty and freedom were a prophecy for my own life.

Chapter 2

Berlin
Autum of 1933

The hope that things will not get any worse is so often denied. Hitler had been in power fewer than eight months, and the pressure against all who dared question his designs grew by the day.

My boss was debating whether or not to close the bookshop. She knew that sooner or later it would be the focus of Nazi attention: it was too close to the synagogue and in its early years had sold Jewish books exclusively. I was not far from finishing my thesis. Juan Delgado and I had developed an avid correspondence after his return to Spain, and we had promised to meet up some day in Madrid. Things were complicated in his country as well. Juan told me there was a possibility of early elections and that the right-wing parties would likely come out on top. There were uprisings in some parts of the country, and the initial euphoria of the Republic had turned into widespread tension.

I spent many afternoons in Françoise's bookshop. She refused to close it despite the increasing difficulty of importing foreign books, especially from France. Many readers continued buying foreign newspapers from her since the government still intervened in the German press. Freedom of press and of expression

had ceased to exist in Germany, though the majority of my fellow citizens seemed not to mind.

Things in the university were no more hopeful. After the expulsion of Communist and Socialist professors, it was now the turn of Christians, many of whom resigned in protest. The only islands of peace were my long afternoons in La Maison du Livre and the short phone calls with Juan, despite the constant background noise that made it nearly impossible to hear each other.

"I'm learning Spanish," I told Françoise, who smiled sadly in reply.

"Love is a sweet flower that quickly withers." She bit her lips in regret as soon as the words were out of her mouth. I did not know what to say. "I'm sorry," she continued, taking my hand. "That's unkind of me. You know things with Simon aren't going well. When we met here in Berlin more than a decade ago, I thought he was a gift straight from heaven, the answer to my loneliness. I missed my mother and brothers and sisters so much. He was also alone, separated from a big family. We were like two wretches shipwrecked on the same island who finally found each other after years of painful solitude. And, of course, our love for books brought us together. We spent entire days talking, but at the core we had very different interests. He wanted a family; the only children I want to take care of are my books. Motherhood is wonderful, of course, but if you don't want to be a mother, then it's the worst thing that can happen to you."

Françoise grew quiet. She was not given to opening up like that, and her eyes were glassy with tears.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry; forgive me," I said. "With everything you've got going on, I've done nothing but go on and on about Juan."

She shook her head. "No, no, your happiness comforts me from what I've lost."

We hugged, but the intimate moment was broken by pounding at the door below.

We stared at each other, our breaths catching in our throats.

"Who could it be?" I asked.

"Given the time, it should be Simon. But I don't know what on earth could be going on."

We went down the stairs to the bookshop. In the dim light, the books crouched like ghosts longing to spill their secrets to us. The light from the street came through the shop window and showed the silhouette of a man.

"Françoise!"

"Simon!" she exclaimed, hurrying to open.

Her husband's face emerged from the shadow like something from a horror story: his frantic eyes were swollen, his forehead bloody, and his suit disheveled.

"What happened?" Françoise demanded.

Simon did not answer until he had shut and locked the door with Françoise's key.

"We have to get away, now," he whispered. Only then did he notice my presence. Startled, he said, "Girl, go home. They'll be here soon."

"Who?" Françoise's voice was choked with fear.

"The Gestapo."

Françoise and I both shivered visibly. The newly formed secret police was to be feared even more than the SA. Gestapo agents circled at night to catch their prey like a modern-day Inquisition, and no one ever saw the victims again.

"But why is the Gestapo after you?"

Her question went unanswered. Simon went upstairs and started packing a suitcase. We followed him.

"What have you done?" Françoise insisted.

"Nothing! Well . . . I may have passed along some information to the Russian embassy."

"You did what?!"

"We needed the money, and I didn't think they'd find out. Anyway, they would've come for me sooner or later, either for being a Jew or for selling books. Have you forgotten what happened in May? Those fanatics burned a lot of our books. They're purging the culture, Françoise, and Jews are being expelled from all trades and professions."

Françoise knew all of that but kept hoping the fanaticism was passing. Things had gone very badly for the Jews in Poland in the pogroms, but then the situation had calmed down.

"I'm not leaving." Françoise's voice was so calm and confident that her husband looked up in disbelief.

"Things will be better in France. People still breathe freely there."

"You know that this shop is my life, Simon. What good would another French bookstore do in France?"

Simon closed his suitcase and looked at Françoise for a long moment.

"I spied for us, to get the money we needed to be able to escape. Germany has become a prison, though most people still don't see it."

"I'm sorry," Françoise said, shaking her head and swallowing back tears.

Simon sighed, nodded, and gave Françoise one last lingering look. Then he disappeared down the stairs.

The next morning, Françoise called me at work, and I went over as soon as I could get free. I found her slumped cross-legged on the floor with her head down, surrounded by a sea of books scattered around the floor. The Gestapo had ransacked the store.

I threw myself down and hugged her.

"It was awful. They destroyed everything."

"I'll help you clean up. I've got to go back to work, but I'll ask for the rest of the day off and can be back here around twelve thirty."

With a heavy heart, I left Françoise in the middle of that desolation. But I arrived back at the bookstore where I worked to find that things had taken a dangerous turn. Two SA bullies were guarding the entrance and would not let anyone in or out of the store.

"Where do you think you're going, little lady? You don't look to be quite Aryan," one of them growled.

"I'm German, and I work here," I said. The assault guard looked barely fifteen years old.

"This is a Jewish store. Those pigs can't be allowed to keep doing whatever they fancy. You'd better find more respectable work."

"Yes, perhaps I should dress up like a little soldier to intimidate people." I regretted my remark immediately. Without another word, the young guard slapped me so hard that my bottom lip started bleeding. I had never been hit before. That first time hurt my pride more than my face.

My boss ran out of the bookstore. She gathered me into her arms and shouted at the Nazi, "You damned brute!"

The people on the street passed by indifferently, as if this matter were no concern of theirs. Dissenters against Hitler's regime were invisible to the rest of the population. I had always been proud of

being German, but at that moment I was wholeheartedly ashamed of belonging to a nation that had disavowed its humanity.

"Are you all right?" Ruth asked, looking at my lip. But without waiting for my reply, she said, "You'll have to go home, Barbara. We're closing the store. I've got family in northern Italy . . . This seems to be the time to go, before things get even worse."

"But if we all flee . . ."

"Barbara, love, sometimes fleeing is the bravest way to face evil. If we stay in Berlin, there may not be any survivors left when it's time to rebuild Germany. Our country is hurtling into a very deep abyss, and only God can save it."

Her solemn pronouncement surprised me. I had never known Ruth to be religious. I hugged her tightly, a show of love being my best response to fear and suffering.

I went home with my head hung low. I forced myself to eat, but my lips hurt with every bite. Then I returned to Françoise's bookshop and helped her with the mess. We cleaned in silence, and she did not even notice my bruised face. Over tea after we were finished, I said aloud a thought that had been forming in my mind all day.

"I'm going to leave the country. And I think you should too."

She stared at me with a mixture of anger and sadness. "I have nowhere to go, Barbara." With a gesture that encompassed the store, she said, "This is my life's work. I'd rather stay for now."

"But . . ."

"I respect your decision, my friend. Where will you go? Your dad is still in the Netherlands, isn't he?"

My father had finally heeded his friends' advice and gone into exile.

"He is, but I'd rather go to Madrid. I've been talking with my

friend Maria. She says I can teach German at the school where she works. It's called El Porvenir, 'the Future.' I like the way that sounds, though what I really want to do is open a bookstore. Until all this calms down, I'll be safe in Spain. They haven't gotten involved in Europe's problems in years. And the new Republic sounds very promising."

"As does Juan," she added in a gravelly voice and with a raised eyebrow. I started to smile, but it turned into a grimace at the pain in my lips.

"Oh, Barbara, have you treated that cut?"

"It's not that bad."

We kept chatting for some time, as always ending up talking about books and the power of literature to change the world. In Berlin or Madrid, we both hoped that our bookstores would serve as little paradises for people of goodwill to get their fill of the fruit of the tree of wisdom and heal a world bound for destruction.

Chapter 3

Paris
December 1933

I had always dreamed of going to Paris. The city's splendor seemed untarnished by the threats growing throughout Europe. The specter of Fascism loomed over the continent as Communism had a few years prior. But being alone while walking down the boulevards of Paris did take some of the shine off. My father should have been at my side. He and I had planned Paris trips time and time again, but after my mother's death five years before, his ability to dream had fallen flat in every realm except perhaps politics.

I checked off tourist sites with low spirits until I came to the fascinating world of the bouquinistes along the Siene. There were countless boxes of old books attached to the quayside, and I was thrilled to lose myself in the booksellers' stalls. My mind went back to Berlin and to the books thrown to the ground of the bookstores or burned in pyres in the city squares. It was ludicrous to imagine such barbarism ever touching France. I could not help myself from buying a few antique editions of Balzac. I had had to leave all my books in Berlin, adding them to my grandfather's library. I feared that the Nazis would ransack or requisition my

father's properties since he was a Social Democrat and had fled the country. So my books would stay under my grandmother's protection until I returned.

As I put the two books I had bought in my backpack, the storm that had been brewing let loose. I hurried to the modest hotel where I was staying near the Luxembourg Gardens. The next day I was to leave for San Sebastián, where Juan Delgado would be waiting to escort me to Madrid. The lightning and thunder grew more intense, and the rain turned from a sprinkle to a shower and then, suddenly, to a downpour. I joined the throngs of people running wildly for cover.

When I reached rue de l'Odéon my eyes landed on a sign that struck me as altogether mysterious, especially for being in the middle of Paris. It read, Shakespeare and Company. The façade was so plain that, if not for the books visible through the windows, it could have been any sort of business. The only feature that stood out was the image of the great British dramatist. Without thinking twice, I entered the shop.

It was empty of clients. A thin woman with short hair smiled and brought me a towel.

"You're German?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Well, I'm used to seeing a lot of tourists. One ends up learning how to tell them apart."

"I'm Barbara Spiel."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Sylvia Beach."

"Are you American or British?" I asked, trying to place her accent.

"It's hard to say where I'm from. I came to Paris when I was fourteen. My dad was a Presbyterian minister and came here to

work at the American Church in Paris. I've also lived in Spain and—"

"Spain?" I interrupted. "I'm headed there now to open a bookstore in Madrid."

At that, the woman burst out laughing. "Though it may sound odd, the land of Quixote is not known for its reading public. I wish you luck—you're going to need it."

"Things are changing," I explained. "The Republic has opened schools all over the country. I want to help people get access to books from other regions."

"Let's hope you're right. Anyhow, bookstores are always necessary. True freedom is found between the doors of a bookstore, and the world has never needed freedom as much as it does now."

It finally dawned on me where I was. I had read a few articles about this bookstore, which had welcomed great writers like Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce.

"Wait a minute, you're the one who published *Ulysses* by Joyce, aren't you?"

Sylvia nodded. "Well, booksellers have a moral obligation with literature, and the literary world needed a good shake-up." She glanced out the window and added, "I think it'll be awhile before this lets up. Would you like some coffee?"

"I can't imagine anything better at the moment!"

With steaming mugs in our hands, the conversation veered toward Sylvia's upbringing and personal life.

"Family can be a blessing and a curse. My parents never got along. They separated when I was about twenty. I traveled constantly around Europe with my mother and sisters, and my dad stayed in Princeton. Books became my refuge, and, as you can see, they still are." Her tone was jovial but her face showed exhaustion.

I nodded. "Books are the only companions that will never betray you."

Eventually it stopped raining, and it was time to go. I stood and held out my hand. As I left the back room and headed for the shop door, Sylvia caught up with me and held out a book, an antique edition of Balzac's *Lost Illusions*.

"I wish you all the luck in the world. Being a bookseller is a bit like working a lighthouse: You try to keep the world from getting stuck in the shoals. It's a Herculean effort, and society is dead set on going belly-up. We're approaching one of those dark nights of the soul. I hope that literature lights up your way. Good luck!"

That book was my companion until the train station of San Sebastián. I entered Spain hand in hand with Honoré de Balzac who, as in so many times in the future, was my refuge amid fear and uncertainty.