

EXCERPTS FROM BOOK

SIGN OF THE ALEPH

PROLOGUE

Berlin: Before the War

The Jockey Club offered an atmosphere of tension and edginess to those revolting against the rising National Socialist Party, and to those seeking outlets for their forbidden desires. The edgy ambiance fit the club, an elegant and decadent Weimar-era Club nestled in the dark recesses of Berlin. The Gestapo's surveillance was pervasive, but at the urging of their ardent high-level patrons, the Jockey Club was given a pass from being shut down.

Inside the club, worlds away from the terror in the streets, women in sequined jewels danced alongside men in stylish smoking jackets. Africans manned the establishment's doors, vetting the guests. The outcasts of minor nobility played along with its habitués, mixing easily with artists, opportunists, drug addicts and cross dressers.

The dark curtained corners of the club stylishly concealed the sexual desire of its patrons in the brothel-like atmosphere. Miniature gold flasks of morphine were passed around as casually as candy bars, adding to the enticement of the drug-addled population. Heavy velvet curtains and couches gathered fan-like toward the center, where an erotic cabaret played. The crowd cheered to the pulsating music growing in intensity, along with the wanton intentions of the performers and watchers. They looked like a burning mass of throbbing fire. On this makeshift stage, Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt played "Nuages", the Marseillaise of Nazi-occupied France in the background, as he and his entourage entered and were quickly encircled. Reinhardt was beloved

and well-known, dedicating his music and life to the rescue of the Gypsy community, among the first to be taken to the concentration camps.

High-ranking officers were frequent visitors at the Jockey Club. They arrived along with their prey, the young flaxen-haired boys promising the willing and uninitiated everlasting glory in the Third Reich in return for practicing the highest levels of depravity. Male waiters dressed in fine dresses and jewelry, as sharp as any cultured woman, conversed with the clientele, both charming and savvy, lining their pockets with their private side arrangements. Everyone understood their conspiracy of silence and caution, the conversations go no further, ensuring those secrets would remain out of earshot of the Nazis — and the horrifying consequences that might follow.

One of those Nazi officers, Wolf, stood outside the Jockey Club, gazing at a boy as he walked past the club with his teenage friends. Just fifteen, Peter possessed perfectly chiseled features, with the look and maturity of a young athlete from ancient times. Yet, he still retained his boyish charms. Wolf sensed and decided immediately that he would become the gangling youth's paramour, that he would shape the gorgeous youth to his liking.

Both smart and gay, Peter was born into a conservative German family that now considered him an outcast. His parents idolized Hitler and enthusiastically attended his anti-Semitic rallies, knowing well Hitler's equally passionate views against homosexuals. Peter soon left his childhood behind in favor of his teenage friends and the streets of Berlin.

Wolf had much to offer the homeless boy. He introduced Peter to the gay life in Berlin and escorted him to the finest clubs. The Jockey Club welcomed them with enthusiasm, knowing of Wolf's rank. Soon, owing to Wolf's rank and Peter's disarming charisma, they soon became a

sought-after couple at the Jockey Club as well as the notorious El Dorado nightclub, where cabaret was all the rage.

Outside the confines of the swinging nightclubs, a nationalistic hysteria swooped in and rounded up the citizens of Germany in a frenzy of hatred. Crippled by the economic despair of the depression, and harboring a deep mistrust for outsiders, the German populace was quickly seduced by the Nationalist Socialist Party. In the process, they turned a blind eye to the Nazi's racist and paramilitary leanings. Marching mobs chanted the hypnotic strains of "Heil Hitler!", snuffing out the much happier and more festive jazz music at the Jockey Club. Soon, the ideology seized a firm grip over Germany and its culture. Artists that interpreted the terrors of the day on their canvases, often in scathing ways, would soon be labeled "degenerate", their work forbidden, or worse, destroyed. Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and the mentally ill were attacked on the streets and either killed or sent to the concentration camps, which were quickly popping up and multiplying throughout Germany and beyond. The Nazi effort gave first priority to the elimination of Jews and others they considered undesirable; by 1943, there were over 40,000 camps and sub-camps in the Nazi regime.

It wasn't long until Nazi-driven terror engulfed all of Europe.

As the war took hold, and he felt the independent urgings of thought and action that come with growing into a man, Peter scorned the Nazi ideology. He also began to loathe his bondage to Wolf, whom he considered a lonesome deviant. Still, when Wolf was offered an assignment to command a regiment in Paris, Peter agreed to accompany him. Moving to Paris would be not only a fresh start, but a dream come true. And, the beginning of the life he always craved. Once he could get away from Wolf.

FROM CHAPTER 1, The Streets of Paris

Paris lost its soul and became a city gone mad, its honor drained, the once loving, trusting heart of the city barely beating. Occupation plunged the City of Light into darkness and despair.

Fugitive shadows of a former glory remained, concealed within the eyes of the beholder, bravely trying to shine through the darkness, yet quiet enough to avoid offending the new Masters. The Eiffel Tower, dedicated to the French as a symbol of freedom, stood tall and visible, though its spirit was obscured by the deceit lying at its feet. Evident in people's eyes were the betrayal of leaders who capitulated to the Nazi invaders, without remorse or concern for Parisians or any Frenchmen. At an apparently abandoned structure, a tattered placard above the entrance read: Jean Philippe Benichou, Docteur en médecine. A lone, silent figure stood next to Notre-Dame de Paris, no more visible than a distant shadow. The cathedral was calm and serene, indifferent to the passions that inflamed it through the centuries, including the nationalistic fervor now cascading rage and madness over the city. The front door of the structure opened. The hidden figure took notice. Out walked Arlette Benichou, a beautiful, simply dressed girl of nineteen. She paused and shifted her gaze from side to side, taking in her surroundings as though seeing them for the first time. After a minute of observation, her cautious look transformed into one of determination. She sheltered the memories of what she saw, like objects in a Museum. She committed each detail to memory, to her soul, in fear that she would lose what she knew before the occupation. She closed the door behind her...

FROM CHAPTER 3, Reunion with Rose Valland

Arlette reflected on the intense loathing for Nazis that rumbled in her heart and thoughts as she passed the Louvre, now stripped of its paintings. As a child, she used to watch with wonder as

her mother set up easels with her dear friend Rose Valland. The two then copied the “Old Masters” works hanging in the Louvre. That cherished reminiscence now fell on the far side of a haze of sadness, loss and silent rage that always seemed to engulf her. As she neared the doors, Arlette vividly recalled the works she knew so well from the many times she accompanied her Mother in past years. She imagined herself in the center of the story in painting after painting. Sadly, those stories and paintings of the Old Masters were stolen and destined for Hitler’s Museum in Linz, Austria, the whole expropriation handled under the direction of von Choltitz, the Nazi general in charge of Paris. Along with paintings of mediocre landscapes and bucolic nudes that appealed to the pedestrian taste of the Nazis, there sat a trove of paintings purloined by Göering, Hitler’s closest deputy, who was much more knowledgeable in fine art than von Choltitz. Göering ordered the artistic and military authority to select a few of the most interesting and valuable works for his estate in Carinhill. For his part, von Choltitz had no idea of the value of the pilfered contents, nor was it his business to know. But anyone could see it was theft on a massive scale. Rose Valland stood at the door of the museum, defying a chorus of ‘Heil Hitlers’ from crowds in the street as she held out her arms to welcome Arlette. “My child, I know of the arrest years ago of your grandfather and the disappearance of your parents during Kristallnacht. You will not be lost,” she said, sweeping Arlette into her arms and shielding her from the spectacle. She led her into a hidden salon and wept softly, though trying to hide her tears. “My child, we will remember what we need to do to survive, as we have always done, and resolutely defy the enemy in the guise of being their loyal colleagues.” Arlette listened, her face neutral but her eyes already smoldering. “What they did to my family, Aunt Rose... I will not rest until I make them feel like they made my family feel,” she said, her voice hardening.

FROM CHAPTER 7, Returning to Gruber's Apartment

The scene outside the Hotel Lutetia was chaotic. Crowds of onlookers whispered the breaking news of a gruesome murder to one another, faster than any newspaper reporter could possibly write it. Under Nazi orders, French police officers cordoned off the perimeter of the stately hotel. Arlette wove through the crowds surrounding the building, fighting her instinct to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction, Eric-Philippe's admonishing words driving her forward. She walked up to a police officer. "May I speak with the commander in charge?" she asked. "I am from the Musée Jeu de Paume." He directed her to a portly lieutenant. "Grinsz," the name tag read. Gripping the wrapped painting, Arlette approached the man, reminding herself that her only task was to be remembered by him. Grinsz looked the girl over briefly, barely acknowledging her presence. "The hotel is closed, come back tomorrow," he said. Arlette stood on the tips of her toes, to gain maximum visibility. "I must be let through, or I will be fired – or worse," she said, enunciating her words like an actress in a bad audition. "I am sent by Rose Valland of the Jeu de Paume. I am trying to deliver this painting. It is very important." Grinsz finally took full notice of her for the first time. "Who is this painting for?" he asked, his voice rougher than a rock scraping glass. "A Lieutenant Gruber," she said. "He came into our museum and specifically asked that I deliver this piece. Is he in?" The officer scrutinized her. "He is... unavailable at the moment," he said dryly, as if the man had stepped out for an espresso. "Do you expect him to return soon?" she asked innocently. Grinsz raised an eyebrow, unaccustomed to being questioned by civilians. Still, he found her to be a pleasant distraction. The ability of superior Aryan men and women to produce such beautiful, fine young specimens worthy of any man's bed never ceased to amaze him. Grinsz finally elevated his eyes from her waist and chest to her face. "I would be quite surprised if he did. A serious crime has taken place. I must inform you, jungen

frau, that you do not leave immediately, I will have no choice but to arrest you,” he said coldly. “And that would be something I do not wish to do.” Arlette made one more attempt. “Please... sir... the painting must be delivered to Lieutenant Gruber. It’s from the Jeu de Paume.” She kept her voice calm, like anyone making a final appeal without pushing too hard. The Commander held his hand up, his tolerance suddenly gone. “The lieutenant is dead, alright? Leave now!” he barked. “I cannot allow this delivery.” Arlette feigned shock and surprise. “Oh my goodness, that’s...that’s terrible. Who would do such a thing to one of our officers?” She forced a tear from her eye, making sure Grinsz saw it, then turned and melted back into the crowd, surprised with her calmness and apparent shocking indifference to a murder she had committed less than two hours before. Not to mention the cool words she delivered... who would do such a thing to one of our officers? She shuddered at her ability to cover up her own crime with such thick shade. As objectively harrowing as it was, she viewed the whole scene as if merely watching a play, a passive witness to the drama unfolding before her. Had she done enough for Grinsz to remember her? Probably, she thought. She walked purposefully through the streets as she clutched the Rembrandt, running the day’s events through her mind over and over, her confidence in her safety growing with each stabilizing stride. Occasionally, she gripped Benti’s locket, reassuring herself that she was going to be alright, certain a higher force was watching over her. She quickly closed her eyes and saw Eric-Philippe’s smiling face. Thank you, brother. Uncle Benti.

FROM CHAPTER 15, Madame Jamette

Madame Jamette presided over her usual table, maintaining a clear view of all who entered. It was quiet, the kitchen staff hovering around, wanting to know the fate of their loved ones. She’d come into the world with an ability to read the future, an inheritance from her Mother, an expert

in reading tea leaves. Madame's face retained a reasonable outline of her youth, glowing with desire and warmth, her radiant green eyes formidable and embracing everything that came before her. They drank in everything they saw. She moved softly, enveloped in a haze of smoke, an Egyptian cigarette at her fingertips, the Shiraz tin always open, her extravagant manners and low décolleté the center of attention. Her quality of always being open to pleasure, making the best of any situation, was especially evident during the occupation as Paris became a feminized city, with hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen shipped to Nazi Germany to work as forced laborers. As Arlette passed by, Madame Jamette introduced her to Inspector Tourette. He offered a fatherly hug and a quick, "I know about you, my dear." His face exuded an uncharacteristic warmth that held no suspicion. Tourette always showed an ardent affection to Jamette, his expression that of lovers long past, their old passions transformed into a deeply held friendship. "I see, Jamette, in your eyes that you are as always open to pleasure and an insistence that any situation be made the best," he said in his usual warm tone and cadence. The other man at the table, Hemingway, was admired by the Nazis for his machismo. They were completely indifferent to his American identity, liking the fact that he tended to side with nationalistic movements, his preference for Franco in Spain the last decade a perfect example. His drinking bouts were legendary as was his tongue when loosened, as he and his entourage talked about the deviants in Hitler's inner circle, the evening ending in goose-step marching and charades and mimicry of Göering's effeminate mannerisms. With her extravagant manners and low décolleté, Madame Jamette was always the center of Hemingway's attention. She was what he loved more than anything else, as her style, mystique and elegance reflected the deeper degrees of love the City of Light presented. Even without being aware, she lowered her voice to a seductive growl, her well-practiced sensual gestures a regular part of her countenance. Always accompanied by

her most beautiful girls, whom she protected and to whom she gave a voice, attention and love, she and Hemingway presided over the bar as the American writer, a regular, openly expressed his adoration. They drank and chatted through the night about their past and present romances, his latest sexual misadventures, and the latest women who surrounded him. Together, they held court with the intelligent and dangerous, the artists and Resistance, understanding each other with their keen intellects and shared backgrounds.

FROM CHAPTER 21, Conducting the Brothel's Business...

Madame conducted the brothel's business with a cold eye but an open heart. Her intuition for making the right introductions for, and her protection of the girls under her watch, burnished her reputation as "the best in the business." She was a woman in charge, and many who stopped at her table sought counsel on a variety of personal matters. Others came merely to be in her elegant presence or to inquire about an appointment and exchange of gossip, the best and most salacious in Paris. Her keen wit and preternatural eye brought her into everyone's business, her clients and the byzantine matters of the military and the street. When the Nazis entered Paris, Madame was faced with a tough business decision, in many ways an agonizing moral decision as well. She conferred with Tourette on how to accommodate a clientele that was loathed, yet keep the Maison 1.2.2 maintained to match its reputation. Given the Maison 1.2.2's international clientele, as well as German patrons, Jamette agreed that the club would continue in its usual manner, just as the Ritz had done. However, there would be an unspoken and strictly observed protocol of avoiding discussions about the war. All who gained entry were protected and waited upon by its knowing and sophisticated staff. Any talk of politics was severely frowned upon and politely reprimanded. The beautiful and cultured woman, who in times past would have been a

courtesan and mistress to the monarchy, offered exquisite attention and absolute discretion, as well as good conversation and non-sexual pleasures. For the very few able to overlook the horrors that existed outside its doors, the Maison was considered a perfectly proper private club and nightly habit to escape the vicissitudes of war. There were many French citizens and noteworthy visitors from Hollywood willing to do business with Germany, the principal buyer of American films. What Madame found shocking was the patronage of Hollywood moguls, many of whom were Jewish and maintained their relationships with their counterparts in Berlin. Finding it convenient to look the other way, owing to Germany serving as a major source of revenue. They conducted their nefarious dealings until well into the occupation, at which point their shady transactions became widely known and their names exposed to colleagues, not only Hollywood but the world came to know of these unsavory deals, creating a public relations nightmare. The Hollywood PR machine went quickly to work... When Madame finished greeting the guests, she and Tourette turned toward one another and engaged in deep conversation that no one would dare interrupt. "Jamette, I'm going to be straightforward and forgo the usual preliminaries of which we always indulge," Tourette began, his voice uncharacteristically hushed. "I'm investigating a murder that surpasses anything I have come across. It appears to be a personal vendetta, exquisitely planned and choreographed by someone who seemed to walk onto center stage under the direction of a satanic and accomplished Director. The purpose is evident, without any deviation from script, as with any classical work of art. It was obviously perpetuated by someone willing to go to any extent to carry it out." Although maintaining a professional, detached stance to separate his obligations as an inspector from his personal life, it was evident that Tourette was deeply disturbed, not only by the nature of the crime but by the mysterious motives. Von Goetz had been quickly identified by his I.D.

papers, which were found neatly folded inside a case made by the finest leather-maker in pre-war France. There were no signs of a struggle. When they found his body, he was lying in a bucolic area, supine and dressed in a flawless summer-white uniform, stretched out on a perfect green patch of grass, under a clear sky, the bullet hole so neat and discreet it looked like a large round pencil mark on his forehead. While investigating, Tourette proceeded in his usual, obsessive manner. He had viewed the body from many angles, circling the perimeter, looking twice for any clue he may have missed. He reflected on the complexities of what, on the surface, seemed to be a perfectly premeditated crime, planned out in extraordinary detail. Still, he knew that no matter the skill of the murderer, there would inevitably be a flaw in the execution, a clue left behind that led to the killer. All of the circumstances created a fascinating and formidable case for a man who held a perfect record of solving every major crime assigned to him, even if it took months to unravel. Finding a connection between this murder and the similar one, Tourette noted similar motives: the victim was also a high-level Nazi officer with the same Aleph symbol carved into his forehead. In the case of von Goetz, not known as a predator or prone to violence, he found the crime fascinating and even unprecedented. Tourette kept thinking of the girl, Arlette, but wasn't settled on it. He had no hard evidence. He would have to rely on his instincts, leaning on Grinsz's statement of seeing a delivery girl at Gruber's apartment. The bellman said the same thing. He'd placed a note in his dossier, deciding to speak to Jamette, and availing himself of her otherworldly ability at interpreting the tea leaves. After Tourette had laid out his findings at their table at the Ritz, Madame gave the mystery her scrutiny, knowing she would find meaning in the tea leaves. He observed her gathering herself, in deep thought, watching the leaves in the cup bunching and dividing in uncanny ways with fascination. They formed a pattern that, for the uninitiated, appeared mysterious, arcane and illogical.