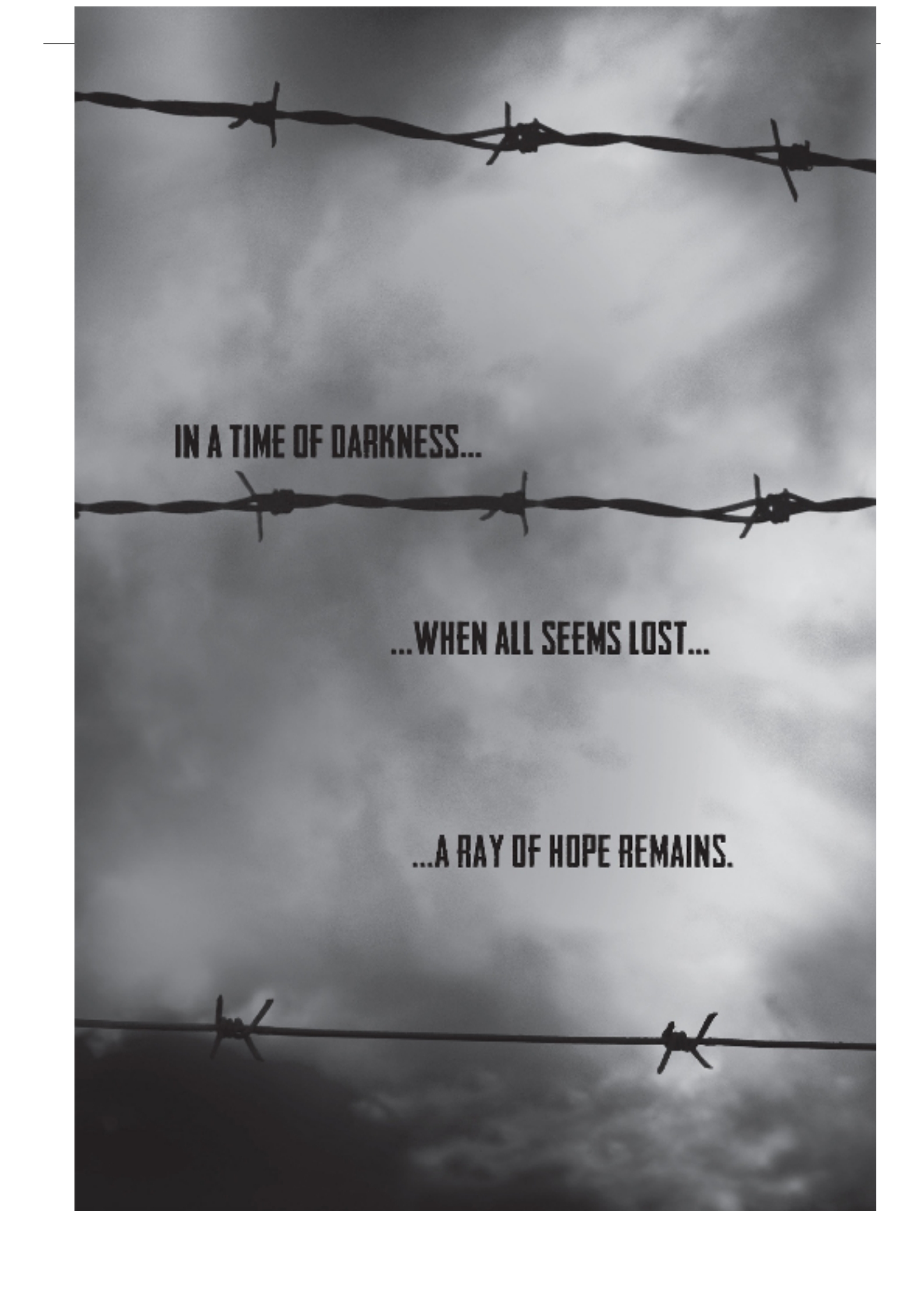


**THE
AUSCHWITZ
ESCAPE**

A NOVEL

**JOEL C.
ROSENBERG**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



IN A TIME OF DARKNESS...

...WHEN ALL SEEMS LOST...

...A RAY OF HOPE REMAINS.

**THE
AUSCHWITZ
ESCAPE**

JOEL C.

ROSENBERG

TYNDALE HOUSE
PUBLISHERS, INC.
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*To the memory of all those who were murdered at Auschwitz and throughout the
Holocaust—
may you never be forgotten.*

*To the remarkable spirit of those who survived the Shoah—
may your lives and your witness be forever honored and blessed.*

*To all those unknown souls whose faith compelled them to risk their lives to rescue
Jews from a terrible evil—
may your love be an example followed by others.*

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

GERMAN

Weisz Family

- Jacob Weisz, young Jewish man originally from Berlin
- Avraham (“Avi”) Weisz, Jacob’s uncle
- Ruthie Weisz, Jacob’s younger sister
- Dr. Reuben Weisz, Jacob’s father
- Sarah Weisz, Jacob’s mother

Siegen Residents

- Hans Meyer, Jacob’s friend
- Naomi Silver, Jacob’s neighbor
- Herr Berger, tailor
- Eli Berger, his son
- Herr Mueller, baker

Auschwitz Officers

- Rudolf Hoess, Auschwitz commandant*
- Colonel Klaus Von Strassen, director of security
- Josef Mengele, Auschwitz doctor*
- “Fat Louie,” camp guard

FRENCH

Leclerc Family

- Jean-Luc (“Luc”) Leclerc, assistant pastor in Le Chambon
- Claire Leclerc, his wife
- Lilly Leclerc, their elder daughter
- Madeline Leclerc, their younger daughter
- Philippe Leclerc, Jean-Luc’s brother
- Monique, Jean-Luc’s sister
- Nicolas (“Nic”), Monique’s husband
- Jacqueline, their daughter

Others

- Pastor Chrétien, Jean-Luc's colleague
- ~~Pastor Émile, Jean-Luc's colleague~~
- François d'Astier, former French ambassador to the U.S.
- Camille d'Astier, his wife

AMERICAN

- Cordell Hull, secretary of state*
- Colonel Jack Dancy, military aide to President Roosevelt
- William Barrett, senior advisor to Secretary Hull
- Sumner Welles, undersecretary of state*
- Henry Stimson, secretary of war*
- Harry Hopkins, secretary of commerce*

BELGIAN

- Maurice ("Morry") Tulek, commander of a Resistance cell
- Micah Kahn, Resistance member
- Marc Kahn, Micah's brother, a Communist
- Henri Germaine, Resistance member
- Jacques Bouquet, Resistance member
- Léon Halévy, Jewish refugee

AUSCHWITZ PRISONERS

Jewish Prisoners

- Maximilian ("Max") Cohen, Romanian, works in "Canada"
- Abigail ("Abby") Cohen, his sister, works in the clinic
- Lara, woman on the train to Auschwitz
- Mrs. Brenner, woman on the train to Auschwitz
- Marvin Eliezer, man on the train to Auschwitz
- Leonard Eliezer, Marvin's son
- Josef Starwolski, Polish, works in the records office
- Otto Steinberger, Czechoslovakian, registrar
- Abraham ("Abe") Frenkel, Czechoslovakian, registrar

Others

- Leszek Poczciwinski, kapo in charge of "Canada"
- Gerhard Gruder, block senior

- Stefan, bakery worker
 - Andrej, bakery worker
 - Janko, bakery worker
-

POLISH

- Jedrick, farmer
 - Brygita, his wife
-

* Real historical figures

IT SEEMED THAT A PRODIGIOUS CLOUD OF TOXIC, NERVOUS, AND PARALYSING GAS HAD ENGULFED THE COUNTRY. EVERYTHING WAS UNRAVELLING, FALLING TO PIECES AND BEING THROWN INTO PANIC LIKE A MACHINE THAT WAS DRUNK, EVERYTHING WAS TAKING PLACE AS IF IT WAS PART OF AN INDESCRIBABLE NIGHTMARE.

ANDRÉ MORIZE



**PART
ONE**

MAY 12, 1940
SEDAN, FRANCE

“*Evil, unchecked, is the prelude to genocide.*”

It was a phrase Jean-Luc Leclerc had once read in an old book. It had caught his eye, and his subconscious had filed it away. At the moment he could not even remember who had written the book or what its title was, but neither was important. The book was forgettable; the phrase was not. Now, try as he might, he could not get it out of his head.

He felt as though every molecule in his body were shaking. Evil was on the march, and though everyone around him seemed bound and determined not to believe it, there was no question in his mind the Nazis were coming for them, for the people of France, all of them, with all their murderous fury, and he desperately feared the bloodbath that was coming with the jackboots and the broken cross

Not that anyone was listening to him. And who was he, anyway, to think he knew what fate lay in store for his country? He was just a kid, really, only twenty-eight years old, and when he looked in the mirror every morning, he didn't see anyone special. He didn't stand out in a crowd. He was of average height and average build, with sandy-blond hair and bluish-green eyes set behind round, gold wire-rimmed glasses that made him look a bit more studious, even intellectual, than he really was. He'd always wanted to grow a beard—a goatee, at least—but even his adorable young wife teased him that his efforts were never quite successful. He had no great office or title or power, no money or fame or renown. He had no direct access to the political class or the media. He was, instead, a nearly penniless son of five generations of farmers. A Protestant in a nation where Catholics were by far the majority, he was a lowly pastor—actually merely an *assistant* pastor—in a little country church in the little country hamlet of Le Chambon, in the south of France, which no one had heard of nor probably ever would. Why should anyone take him seriously?

There was no reason, he told himself, but that didn't mean he was wrong.

To the north, Winston Churchill was warning that Hitler wanted to take over the world. The new British prime minister had been saying it for years. No one had listened. Now *der Führer* was on the march, and France was not ready. Not the people. Not the politicians. Not the press. Not even the generals.

In Paris, they said the Germans would never dare to invade France. They said the Nazis could never penetrate the Maginot Line, the twenty-five-kilometer-thick virtual wall of heavily armed and manned guard posts and bunkers and concrete tank barricades and antiaircraft batteries and minefields and all manner of other military fortifications designed to keep the Germans at bay. They'd convinced themselves Hitler would never try to move his panzer divisions through the forests of the Ardennes.

Those forests were too thick, too dense, too foreboding for anyone to move tanks and mobile artillery and armored personnel carriers and other mechanized units through.

But Jean-Luc Leclerc knew that they were wrong.

“Luc? Luc, are you listening?”

No one actually called him Jean-Luc. Not since he was a little boy. His parents, his siblings, his grandparents—they all called him Luc. Now, though he still felt like a kid at times, theoretically he was “all grown up.” Married. Two small daughters. A mortgage. A parish. Ever-growing responsibilities.

“Luc, are you even hearing a word I’m saying?”

Suddenly he realized his sister, Monique, was trying to get his attention, and he was embarrassed. “Yes, yes, of course; I’m sorry—what do you need?”

“Would you turn out the lights and bring those napkins and forks?” she asked with a warm smile as she stood in the center of the cozy kitchen and lit the candles on an exquisitely decorated and no doubt scrumptious homemade birthday cake.

Luc did as he was asked and followed his sister into the dining room, singing with the others and trying his best not to let his fears show on his face. He was not there to ruin his niece’s birthday party. Little Jacqueline stood there in her pink dress and shiny brown hair and black leather shoes. She didn’t know war was looming. She knew nothing of Herr Hitler’s invasion of Poland the previous September. Nor did she know anything of Hitler’s invasion of the Low Countries—Belgium and the Netherlands—three days earlier. The adults had shielded the children from their worries over their older brother, Philippe, who lived with his family in Brussels, the Belgian capital. Jacqueline didn’t know they had not heard from Philippe since the German invasion, that Luc feared Philippe was dead. All she knew was that she had a houseful of family and friends and a cake with candles and a new doll from her beloved Uncle Luc and Aunt Claire and her cousins Lilly and Madeline. She was so innocent, he thought as he sang, so unaware of the darkness that was settling upon them all. At least she had an excuse. She was only four.

What was her parents’ excuse? Monique was thirty-two. Her husband, Nicolas, was thirty-six. They were a sharp, attractive couple, well-educated and by all measures worldly-wise. They’d both been to university. She had studied nursing. He had been to the Sorbonne and had become a gifted physician. They were well-read. They had a little money socked away. They had interesting friends in high places all over Europe. How could they not see what had happened to Philippe? How could they not see the grave danger they were in? Why did they not flee while they still could, away from the border, to Le Chambon to be with Luc and Claire?

“. . . Happy birthday, dear Jacqueline; happy birthday to you!”

With that, the room erupted in applause and smiles and laughter and great joy. Jacqueline looked radiant, and Luc knew that his wife, Claire, and their two daughters would have loved to be at his side. Claire had made the doll and written the card, and Lilly and Madeline had colored it and made it special for their beloved cousin. But despite their protests, Luc had forbidden them to come. The Belgian border was no place for his family. Certainly not now.

As Jacqueline made a wish and blew out the candles and Monique cut the cake, Luc dutifully distributed the forks in his hand and then stepped back into the kitchen to get a couple bottles of cold

milk.

Then, without warning, the house was rocked by an enormous, deafening explosion. The blast wave sent everyone crashing to the ground. All the windows shattered. Shards of wood and splinters of glass flew everywhere. Plates and glasses smashed to the floor. Terrified parents grasped their children, trying to shield their small bodies with their own as they covered their heads with their hands and hid under the table and behind overstuffed chairs.

Before they knew it, smoke and dust filled the room, pouring in through the shattered windows. Luc fully expected to hear people screaming and crying, but for the moment everyone seemed too stunned to do anything but cough and choke.

“Is everyone okay?” he asked, covering his nose and mouth with his shirt.

There was a low murmur as parents checked their children and themselves and then indicated that but for a few cuts and scrapes, they were mostly all right.

Luc checked himself as well. He, too, seemed fine—physically, at least—so he got up, dusted himself off, and moved toward the front door. “Wait here,” he told the others. “I’ll see what’s happening.”

“I’ll come with you,” Nicolas said, standing and grabbing his leather satchel of medicines and supplies.

“Nic, what are you doing?” Monique asked. “Come back here. You can’t leave us.”

“People may be hurt, darling,” Nic replied. “Don’t worry. It’ll be okay. I’ll be back soon.”

It would not be okay, and everyone in the room knew it. Tears streamed down Monique’s face as she clutched their daughter in her arms. Nic leaned down, kissed them both on the forehead, then headed for the door.

Luc couldn’t help but admire his brother-in-law’s commitment to his oath as a physician. As he went to follow Nic, he heard Monique whimper, “What’s happening? Someone tell me what’s happening.”

Luc knew full well what was happening. The Nazi attack had begun.

He was petrified. He had been certain the Germans were coming, but he’d thought it would take at least a week before the invasion of France actually began. That was why he had come. That was why he had driven through the night from his home in Le Chambon to his sister’s home in Sedan. Not for party. Not for cake. But to implore Monique and Nicolas to pack up their belongings and come with him, away from the border, away from the danger, to Le Chambon, where they would be safe. All day he had made his case. All day he had pleaded with the couple, but they had refused to listen. They had a party to prepare. They had Jacqueline to care for. They had patients to attend to. They couldn’t leave. It was out of the question. Besides, they argued, Hitler would never invade their beloved French Republic. Why would he? It would be an act of suicide, they said.

Now, as he opened the front door and stepped out of the narrow, three-level house not far from the river Meuse, Luc was horrified by the scene before him. To his left lay a flaming, smoking crater. Moments before, it had been a police barracks. Now the stench of burning human flesh was unbearable. Thick, black smoke billowed into the late-afternoon sky. People were rushing to the scene from all directions. Nicolas sprinted off, helping people carry a few survivors into a nearby church just up the street. The bells in the steeple began ringing furiously, sounding the alarm and calling

people to action.

Luc could hear the sirens of fire trucks and ambulances approaching from the west. He knew he should rush to his brother-in-law's side and help the wounded and the wailing. But for a moment he hesitated—not because he didn't want to help but because he wanted to understand what was truly unfolding.

He turned to his right, looking toward the east, and what he saw nearly knocked the wind out of him. It was a sight apparently lost on all the people around, for they were riveted on the death and destruction that had already been wrought. They couldn't see what was coming. But Luc saw it, and he stood there unable to move.

The eastern skies were filled with planes as far as the eye could see. Nazi planes. Fighters. Bombers. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. Like a plague of locusts, the Luftwaffe was coming. And that was not all. Out of the thick, dense, supposedly impassable and impenetrable forests of the Ardennes now emerged German mechanized divisions and swarms of infantrymen, armed to the teeth—more than he could possibly count. Jean-Luc Leclerc had never been so scared.

The Germans were advancing quickly, and there was no one to stop them. The northern end of the Maginot Line was many kilometers away. The bulk of the French forces were positioned along that line, waiting for a frontal German attack that Luc now realized would never come. The Nazis had achieved what the generals and politicians in Paris said was impossible. They had carefully navigated their way through the Ardennes. They had used the trees as cover to keep French reconnaissance planes from spotting them. And now they were launching a devilishly clever sneak attack. They were outflanking the French forces. They were about to skirt right around them and attack them from behind.

It was now clear that the little town of Sedan—with a population of less than eighteen thousand people—was one of the Germans' first targets. How long would it take them to overrun and consume the town? How long would it be until everyone was dead or a prisoner of war? Once the Nazis controlled the bridges across the Meuse River, they could pour their forces into France, annihilate her armies, and march on Paris.

How long would it take them to occupy and enslave the entire country?

All color drained from Luc's face.

His body felt numb. His mouth went dry. He had to warn the others. But it was as if his throat had constricted. Try as he might, no sound came forth. Just then, he was startled by a high-pitched whine off to his left. Then another and another. He looked up and saw that the German planes were now overhead and were unleashing their ordnance. It seemed to be happening in slow motion. He could see bomb-bay doors opening. He could see the long black dots spilling out and raining down toward the town and the paltry few French units that flanked Sedan. Down came the bombs. They were getting larger and larger. They were reaching terminal velocity. He knew he should run. He knew he had to hide. But he could not. He just stood there frozen in place.

One by one, the bombs began to land, closer and closer until one scored a direct hit on the church. The force of the blast sent Luc sprawling backward, nearly crushing him against a brick wall and leaving him crumpled on the ground. The sound was deafening. He had never heard anything so loud.

More bombs fell. He watched a young woman—running for her life—thrown through the plate-glass window of a patisserie. He saw others disintegrate before his very eyes as the bombs kept falling and the carnage grew.

Adrenaline began coursing through his system. Luc's first thought was the church. Nicolas was in there. He had to pull him out of the wreckage and get him back to his family. He started heading for the church, but as he approached the roaring flames, he watched in horror as the steeple collapsed, then the roof, and then the walls imploded as yet more bombs decimated both the church and the buildings around it. The Nazis were carpet bombing Sedan, and soon whole portions of the town were blazing infernos.

Nicolas was dead. There was nothing Luc could do to save him now. That much was clear. But what of his family?

Luc turned and ran back into the house. He could hear screams, and he began shouting for people to follow him. Some listened. Some did not. But he couldn't wait. They had no time to spare.

Scooping up Jacqueline in his arms, he grabbed Monique by the hand and ordered her to come with him. She was sobbing, asking for Nicolas. But Luc didn't dare tell her. Not yet. He feared she would not come if she knew he was dead. They had to leave now. They had to get to his truck. They had to flee Sedan before the Nazis entered the town.

"Follow me!" he shouted, though he could barely hear himself over the successive explosions and the raging fires.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two fathers grab their families and pull them toward the door. Their families followed the three of them into the streets, now littered with fallen bodies and body parts. The wounded and the frightened were everywhere, and people huddled against walls that were still standing.

Luc was running now. His truck was parked two blocks away. It was a pickup, almost new, and unless it had been hit, it would run. He could fit all of them in the back—and at the moment that was all that mattered to him.

“*Don’t stop!*” Luc shouted to his ragtag team. “*Keep moving.*”

Just then he spotted a German Messerschmitt in the sky ahead of them. It was firing its machine guns and seemed to be aiming right for them. He ordered everyone to dive into the alleyway beside them, and they all took cover just as the fighter roared by, killing all those who remained in its path. Then came another explosion, just behind them. Luc pressed his body down on Monique and Jacqueline, doing everything he could to protect them. But he knew they couldn’t stay pinned down. He could hear the German tanks rumbling up the road from the east. The Nazis were approaching far more quickly than he’d expected. They had to keep moving.

Checking the group for injuries, Luc decided they were okay for now. He quickly ducked his head out of the alleyway to see if the coast was clear. It was, but he could also see the flaming wreckage where Monique and Nic’s house had stood moments before. It had taken a direct hit, and now it—and all the souls who had stayed inside—were gone.

“Come on, everyone. We need to go now,” Luc ordered. “Turn to the right. Run for the park. Don’t stop. Don’t look back. My truck is the red one. When you get there, jump into the back. I’ll be right behind you. Go!”

One by one the group climbed to their feet, moved to the corner, and sprinted for the truck.

All but Monique.

“I can’t leave Nic,” she cried. “We have to find him.”

Luc hesitated but only for a moment. He had no choice. He had to tell her. He set Jacqueline down, then said bluntly and without emotion, “He’s dead.”

“What? No. He’s helping people.”

Luc grabbed Monique by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. “Monique, listen to me. Nic is dead.”

“No, no, he’s—”

“Listen, Monique. Nic is dead. He’s gone. He was trying to help people. He helped carry a wounded man into the church. I was about to follow him there myself. But before I got there, the bombs began to fall. They destroyed the church. They killed everyone inside. I watched it happen. I’m sorry. But he’s gone.”

Just as Luc feared, Monique collapsed in his arms. She was sobbing uncontrollably, crying, “*No, no, no!*”

Luc set her down gently, then glanced across the park. The rest of the group had reached the truck. They were waiting for him. They were counting on him. He again scooped up Jacqueline in his arms. Then he pleaded with Monique to come with him. They had to go, but she would not budge. She collapsed in a heap on the ground, wailing.

Luc turned and started toward the truck. Jacqueline screamed, “*Mommy, Mommy!*” The girl struggled to break free, to go back to her mother, the only parent she had left. But Luc held his niece tighter and ran all the faster.

As he approached the pickup truck, a 1939 Ford import, he could see everyone huddled in the back

He could see the horror in their eyes, the shock that he could be so heartless as to leave his own sister in a war zone and rip her little girl away from her. But he had no time for sentimentality or explanation. He reached the truck and quickly handed Jacqueline to one of the mothers who knew her best. Then he raced around to the other side of the truck, fumbled for his keys, unlocked the cab, and jumped into the driver's seat. Three seconds later he was gunning the engine, and they were off.

One explosion after another ripped through Sedan. Those residents who were not dead were running for their lives, heading for the countryside on the flimsy premise that they could outrun the Nazi war machine. Anyone with a car or truck was on the move as well, with whatever valuables they'd had time to grab. But now vehicles clogged every available street out of town and were sitting ducks when the Luftwaffe came swooping down to strafe them with 20mm cannon fire.

Luc, however, was not following them. Instead he raced back to the corner where he had left his sister. Reaching the spot, he slammed on the brakes, jumped out—leaving the engine running—and ran over to Monique, who was still weeping and shivering against a brick wall. With no time to be gentle, he grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to the truck, and then, opening the passenger-side door, he pushed her inside and slammed the door shut.

Back in the driver's seat, he slammed his own door and hit the gas.

"Hold on!" he yelled to the people in the back, then turned to Monique and ordered her to do the same.

He began driving but could see that to the west, the road heading toward the main bridge across the Meuse was jammed with cars and trucks and motorcycles of every kind. There didn't appear to be any way out. He dared not get stuck in a traffic jam. Nor did he have any intention of letting anyone in his care be captured by the Nazis. That was a death sentence, he knew. So he jammed the truck into first gear, then second, and raced along the eastern outskirts of town. Perhaps the town's other bridge—Pont Neuf—was not yet jammed. It was their only hope, but they hadn't much time. As he sped down one side street after another, zigzagging his way through the town, he could see the enemy forces rapidly approaching from his right.

Bombs continued dropping all around them, and Luc found himself drenched in sweat. Just then he heard an artillery round go whizzing over the truck. A split second later a small grocery store erupted into flames. Distracted, he made a wrong turn. He headed into a cul-de-sac and didn't realize it until he had gotten to the end. Screeching to a halt and praying everyone in the back was still safe, he threw the pickup into reverse, did a K-turn, and retraced his path. When he got back to the cross street, Rue de Pierremont, he took a hard left, heading once again for Pont Neuf.

The good news was that at the moment there was no one else on the street. It was deserted as far as the eye could see. Luc breathed a sigh of relief, but that was premature. Screaming erupted from everyone in the back of the truck. Just then Monique unexpectedly stopped crying. She craned her neck to see what the commotion was about and then went white as a sheet.

"Luc, behind you!" she shouted, the first words she had uttered since Luc put her in the truck.

Luc quickly glanced in the rearview mirror and gasped. A German tank was bearing down on them. He was stunned to see it already in town and even more stunned that it was no more than a hundred meters away. Machine-gun fire opened up behind him and with it came more screams. Trying to take evasive action, he began swerving back and forth across the empty boulevard, but he knew it wasn't

enough. Rounds of ammunition kept hitting the tailgate of the truck and even the cab, forcing him to duck down repeatedly even as he fought to maintain control of the vehicle.

He hit the gas, trying to open up the distance between them and the tank. But he knew he had to get off this road. The machine guns kept firing, and he suddenly realized they were heading straight for a complex of army barracks near the heart of the town that was experiencing a withering bombing campaign. He glanced back again and saw the tank lowering its cannon and preparing to fire.

Saying a silent prayer that God would have mercy on them all, he again shouted for everyone to hold on, then slammed on the brakes, downshifted, and took a hard left turn onto some boulevard whose name he did not catch. As he did, he heard the tank fire and felt a projectile go whooshing behind them. The resulting explosion rocked the vehicle, but they kept on driving, weaving through streets that were completely empty. This sector of Sedan was now a ghost town, and Luc hoped the bridge was just as clear.

Moments later, they came around the bend. He could see Pont Neuf ahead. It wasn't empty. Indeed, the roads leading to it were filling with vehicles. More and more people were heading this way, but the traffic was moving, and they weren't far from the bridge now. The road shook from one explosion after another. German planes roared overhead, and Luc wondered where the French air force was. Why weren't the Nazis being engaged? It would take time for ground forces to launch a counteroffensive and try to hold—or perhaps retake—Sedan, but why weren't the Germans being countered in the air?

Finally they reached the bridge. A flash of panic rippled through Luc's body. He wondered what would happen if the Germans bombed the bridge while they were on it. But the thought passed quickly. The bridges were the very reason the Germans had targeted Sedan. Hitler's forces weren't going to bomb them. They were going to do everything they could to protect them.

Crossing Pont Neuf didn't turn out to be the problem. The problem was the other side. As he came around a bend, Luc found the road clogged with vehicles of every type. Now a new fear gripped him. No traffic jam had prevented their crossing the Meuse River. But one still might prevent them from successfully fleeing the German forces, which were at that very moment overrunning the town.

Seeing so many red taillights ahead, Luc slammed on the brakes. They came to a full stop. They were just idling there while the Nazi forces pressed their attack, closing in on the bridge with every passing moment.

Luc had to make a decision. He knew he could not hesitate. He could not ponder his options. There was no time to weigh pros and cons. Every second wasted brought death closer. He made his choice and didn't think twice. He was going to get these people out of harm's way. He was going to get them to Le Chambon. He was going to hug Claire and his girls before the night was through. That was all there was to it.

So he gunned the engine and turned the wheel hard to the left. He hopped a curb and accelerated. He began driving over people's lawns, through their backyards, across their fields. No one was around to stop him. Everyone on this side of Sedan had already evacuated.

After a few minutes, he came to the end of a cornfield and found the main road heading south. At first he was glad to reconnect with a real road, but he found it just as clogged as all the roads behind him. He didn't think twice. He veered into the lane of oncoming traffic and gunned the engine again.

In any other circumstance, it would have seemed like an act of lunacy. But in this case there was no oncoming traffic. The lane was empty. Not a soul was heading north toward Sedan and the Belgian border. Why on earth would they? His fellow Frenchmen were following the rules, staying in the southbound lane. They weren't even thinking of using the northbound one. Luc could think of nothing else.

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