

**THE
AUSCHWITZ
ESCAPE**

A NOVEL

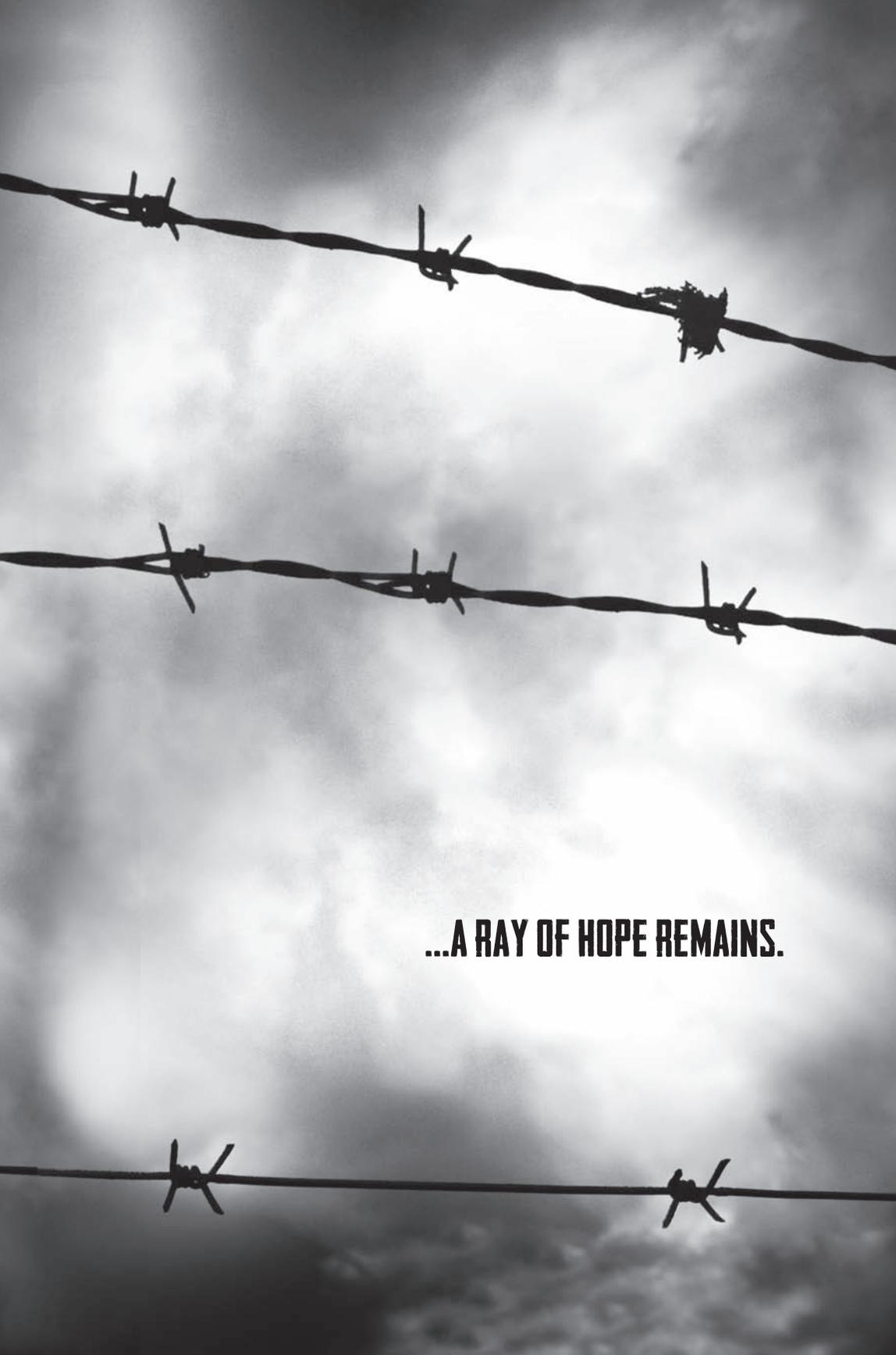
**JOEL C.
ROSENBERG**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



IN A TIME OF DARKNESS...

...WHEN ALL SEEMS LOST...



...A RAY OF HOPE REMAINS.

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**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 a 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?