After

The Village

May 1971
Geneva Hospital

The nurse, the plump one, puts her head inside his door.

"Someone to see you, Pastor."

"For me? Who?"

"From the newspaper. A reporter."

"Oh. Hmm. Okay. Tell him . . ." He pauses, searches the room. "Tell him I'll just be a moment."

He'd intended to wear his bathrobe all day. A kind of Sabbath. But now he pulls on his clothes, at great cost to his back. He walks, stiff and bent, to the visiting room, muttering the whole way, scolding the cranky, willful old man who's usurped his body, who's taken up residence in his bones.

A young woman sits alone. Pretty, severe, dark hair pulled back tight in a ponytail. She rises to greet him.

"Reverend Trocmé."

"Call me André. These are modern times. You, you're the reporter?"

"A journalist. Yes. I'm Laura."

"Oh. Lovely! I once knew a Laura. Sister Laura. A very fine woman. Perhaps the bravest woman I've ever known."

"Will you tell me her story?"

"Perhaps. Is this why you're here?"

"In a way. Thank you for meeting with me, Reverend Trocmé."

He laughs. "I've so much time on my hands. Too much. I'd crawl the walls if I had strength. Please call me André. It makes me feel younger."

"André." She says it hesitantly, as though tasting food she's uncertain of.

"So, Laura, what are we meeting about?"

"I'm hoping to do an interview with you. For my paper. *Zietung*."

"Ah. My very reading this morning. An interview about . . ."

"The village in France. What happened there. Your role in it."

"Oh, I did very little. A little encouraging, is all."

"It's rumored that Yad Vashem will recognize you as Righteous Among the Nations as early as next month."

"Yes. Well, if it happens, it will have to include the whole village. Villages, really. Not just me. If there's one person most to be thanked, it's Magda. My wife. But it was, well, everyone. The people, all of them." He pauses. "Most, anyhow."

She looks down, flips through her notepad to a fresh page, and scratches something down. Then she looks up. "But people usually need someone to point the way. To inspire them. Many people say that's you. You're that man. A hero."

He laughs so hard he starts to cough. "No, no. No hero. Never a hero. I'm just a man, a person. We only knew people."

He looks away, out the window. A bright day. Wind sways the large oak trees, their branches like the arms of angels, wide with welcome, huge with warning. "Listen. A hero is . . . what? Someone who never fears, never doubts, never hesitates. Never anguishes over decisions. Or if he does—fear, doubt, anything like that—there's a moment, a fierce moment, when all that goes away. Poof! And he does what he does with terrible clarity.

"That was not me. Not ever. Every day I fought the enemy—not Vichy, not Germany, not collaborators. *Me.* Every day I had to overcome myself—my cowardice, my laziness. My inner protests. My hatred. *Mine.* The voice in me that on some days said to do nothing and on others urged me to wreak vengeance. I felt it all as deep as any man. And my hatred, oh. Do you think I did not pray the psalms like David? You should have seen me, every day on my knees asking God to break the jaws of my enemies. So every day I was making war, fierce war. Bloody, deadly war. But not against the enemy, *that* enemy, the one out there. No. The enemy in here. In me. And it's still here right now. The one man I ought to have killed . . . he still lives."

"But isn't that heroic, Pastor Trocmé? Overcoming that man?"

He looks out the window again. The trees are massive. Their leaves tumble with light and shadow. The wind in them is laughter and rage. "No. Not heroic. Just human. If you could see inside my heart, you'd know.

A frightened, angry, ordinary man, lost in many ways . . . who somehow found a way."

She says nothing. Her face says nothing.

"Laura, I know Yad Vashem might declare us Righteous Among the Nations. It's news. But why are *you* here? Were you assigned to come, or did you volunteer?"

"I asked."

"But it was long ago, almost thirty years. Before you were born, yes? Look at today. Oil shortages. Ireland. Vietnam. The Middle East. The Soviets. Riots in cities. Drugs. Gangs. These are enough to fill the pages of *Zietung*. I'm sure they could keep a young journalist busy all day. Why do you care about an old story and an old village and an old man?"

She looks away. She's bracing, he sees, against some eruptive emotion, leaning against a door that, on just the other side, a weight presses hard to open. It dismantles her professional crispness. She's fighting just to stay in one piece.

"Laura, can I help?"

"Did . . . did you know the Ludensteins?" Her voice thins to a whisper. "Carla and Bull?"

"Ah, hmm. Sounds vaguely familiar. Tell me more."

She takes a few deep breaths. "They arrived in Le Chambon in the spring of 1944. They stayed with the Garniers and then the Hértiers. They were there until after the war."

"Ah yes. Of course. I was a refugee myself most of that time, hiding in this farmhouse, in that barn. Nobody wanted me. You see, no hero. But Magda—my wife—she knew them. Talked about them a few times. Bull helped around the village. Fixed our door, in fact. All that pounding over the years took its toll. And I did meet them briefly, before they left. Carla, she was slight, pretty. Bull, quiet. Well built."

"They are my parents. I'm here. I'm alive—" She weeps. "I'm here because of you. Because of what you did. What all of you did. Because of the village."

Part I

During
1942

Home

The Pastor
February 1942

A NORTH WIND SCYTHES THE valley. It plucks and scatters every loose thing, tugs hard at every fixed thing. It's bent on tearing roofs from walls, pulling trees from roots. It flings away weighty matters as though they're nothing.

A French flag, left to fend for itself on a wooden staff, snaps loud as gunfire, then rends in two.

And it snows—not gently, each flake a tiny barb multiplied a million times, each gust of wind a strafing.

Hard to find warmth tonight. The wind is often bitter cold here, but tonight is *la burle*, the demon wind. A force of pure malice. Gleeful destruction. A power that can destroy in a single blow things that the earth grew over centuries, works that people built in generations past.

Only fifty feet to go. Then bread, soup, fire. Then the children, younger ones gathering around him, older ones hovering. Then her arms. Her strong arms, lean and tough as ropes, cinching his waist, pulling him with sinewy strength into her fierce embrace. Though if he doesn't stop eating all that bread, she won't be able to reach all the way around. She'll lose her grip on him.

Pastor André Trocmé pulls the collar of his jacket tight against his neck. He shields his cheeks with his arm. His bones ache. And his back. That old injury twists deeper into him every year. Shows up in damp or cold weather, pushes farther down, takes up more room in bone and muscle. He limps the last twenty feet, drags his left leg like he's taken a bullet to the thigh.

The door is locked. He hammers on it.

And she is there—worn, frail, beautiful.

"Come in," Magda says. "Oh, come in."

And her arms take him and reach all the way around.

And it is warm.

Flight

The Fugitive
March 1942

Heavy snow drenches Hannah's clothing. It soaks her skin, seeps into bone and muscle. Coldness like a burning. She's trembling, can't stop. Wants to cry but swallows it. She must not give herself away. The dogs are coming. Their barking is sharp, like glass breaking. Soon they'll smell her, double their speed, find her.

And the soldiers will not restrain them.

She thinks of Aliza. Dear sister, always laughing, head tipped back. Home, glowing with candles and firelight. The room filled with the smell of roast meats, baked breads, sugary pies. The whole place filled with laughter, like coins falling.

And warm.

⇢ ⇠

She wakes in utter darkness. Breathing hard. Numb with cold. Not knowing where she is, how she got here. Then remembering the escape, the panicked flight, the shouting guards, the frenzied barking of the dogs.

The gunshots. The screams.

Did they catch her? Is she a hostage in a lightless room?

She wraps trembling arms around quaking legs. Gray light stains the sky, bleeds through the trees. Enough light to see she's still where she collapsed, in deep moss at the base of a tree.

Safe.

No, just not caught.

And her mother? And Aliza?

Hannah cannot live without Aliza. She can, she realizes, live without her mother. But not Aliza. Aliza keeps her alive. Aliza is her life.

Were they caught? Or worse? It all happened so quickly—the train shuddering to a halt. Soldiers talking. She knows enough German to have made out what they said: landslide ahead, tracks buried. Maybe the Resistance. Maybe nature.

She remembers the old man in the cattle car, his face all bones. A locksmith maybe, or a thief. She'd watched him as the train lurched and swayed, pitched them around. He worked slowly, patiently, with magical steadiness, reaching through a gap in the slats, fiddling with a long pin he'd drawn from somewhere in his jacket, working at the lock. Just minutes before the train stopped, he pried the lock open, though he left it looking clasped.

They sat idle for a long time. The old man kept peering through the slats. Voices outside surged, then faded to silence. She watched as the old man, with that magical steadiness, unclasped the lock and slid open the door, just a foot. Poked his head out, looked around. And then he jumped, fell, picked himself up, and ran limping into the forest.

Hannah looked at her mother. The others, too, all looked at someone. Everyone afraid, puzzled. Waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Two young men, brothers or cousins, jumped out, ran. No guard noticed. Hannah's mother grabbed her arm and pushed her. She fell onto the stony bed of the tracks, scraped her elbows raw, tumbled into prickly bushes. Aliza came hurtling after her. Their bodies thumped against each other. Then Mother was there, on her feet.

"Run!"

They ran. She heard others jumping, running, but she didn't look back. She had reached the forest's edge when she heard the first shout, the first gunshot.

Then all at once and everywhere, yelling, shooting, barking.

And Hannah ran, her body all wind.

Crossing

The Spy
March 1942

Cuthbert is being troublesome again. He chafes the stump of flesh beneath Virginia's left knee, making her severed bones ache, her knotted skin burn. Cold and wet have worked their way between Cuthbert and that stump of flesh. Her back and hips ache too, from overcompensating.

For the first time ever, she understands how some people weary of life.

Early this morning, just minutes before leaving Villefranche, she'd received a telegram from the London office, a reply to her telegram of an hour earlier. At least it made her laugh. She'd told them her cover was blown. The Gestapo were onto her. She was fleeing France for Spain. Through the Pyrenees. By foot. In deep snow.

It's already hard going, she'd told them, *and I've only just begun. The worst is Cuthbert. He's more tiresome than usual. Causing delays. He'll make a long, grueling journey insufferable.*

London's curt reply: *If Cuthbert tiresome have him eliminated.*

"How d'you feel about that, Cuthbert?" She hears the twang in her own voice, the way the speech of her upbringing rushes back into her mouth the second she drops her French. She lifts her left pant leg, looks at the wood and metal and leather contraption poking out beneath. "Let that be a warning to you. Any more trouble, the High Commission itself has given me express permission to off you. And I will. My pleasure. So be a good boy. We've got a long way to go before nightfall."

Up, up, up. Pushing against the pain. Feeling it more than ever. Trying not to lurch but lurching anyhow. The trail of untrod snow rises before her like a taunt, climbing until it disappears in thick dark forest.

And Virginia thinks about walking somewhere else, far away, years ago.

İzmir, Turkey.

And she thinks about the bullet that changed her life.

It was a warm, clear day in early December 1931. A Friday. She'd coaxed several friends to join her in the marshes of the Gediz Delta, just before the river empties into the blue green of the Aegean Sea. She loved this the most, the hunt, the gun, the wild places. It was when she felt closest to her father, Ned. So different from her mother, Barbara. Her mother, stuffed with primness, insufferable with it. Her father, like her, filled with his own wildness, an irrepressible need to push convention to the breaking point. It was he who gave her the 12-gauge shotgun and taught her how to shoot it.

"Dindy, hold it tight to your shoulder. Squeeze the trigger like it's a plum you're wringing juice from."

Dindy. His name for her. Their secret name. The one she knew herself by.

She cherished it like a keepsake.

And she cherished that gun like a talisman.

She and her friends usually stalked exotic birds with immense and brilliant plumage, but that day it was the humble snipe with its earthy markings, its long needly bill, its quick wings, its erratic flight. It took special skill to get a bead on one, to pluck one from the air.

They came to a wire fence. Her pant leg caught on a barb as she climbed over. She pulled hard to free it.

A shot, sharp in the morning air. Her friends jumped with surprise. She saw their startlement even as she fell headlong into the marsh waters. She came up gasping, saw the water bloom red.

"Virginia, what have you done?"

Her gun still lay among the reeds, a thread of smoke still coiling from its barrel.

Then searing pain. Her head snapped back, her teeth clamped tight. Then all was black.

That's how she lost her leg and almost her life.
It's how she became a different person.
After that, everything got more interesting.

Hunger

The Fugitive
March 1942

Hannah aches with hunger. Cold binds her joints like splints, makes each movement stiff and jerky. She remembers a marionette show she saw with her father. She was maybe five. Whatever story the puppet master was telling flew past her. Her eyes were on the dolls, the way their limbs moved against their own will, the way they seemed both alive and not. She drew close to the tiny stage—her father didn't notice, didn't fetch her back until much later—and stretched her neck to peer behind the curtain. She saw a face high above her, glowing as though aflame. She saw hands flicking wildly, strings tangling and untangling, falling slack, pulling taut. The making of the illusion was far more engrossing than the illusion itself.

Her feet are numb, her fingers too. Her breath is thick as the plumes of smoke her grandfather used to make puffing on his fat cheroots, veils of blue that wreathed his grizzled face and from which he stared out like an apparition.

The memory pricks her with longing. She misses what she never imagined missing: her grandfather's strong scent of brandy and cigars, his sour breath, his prickly chin against her cheeks, the roughness of his hand on her arm. They'd sit together each evening as he read to her—not children's books but long, complex novels by Thackeray and Tolstoy and Dickens, books she barely understood but whose spell she fell beneath. His gravelly voice moved back and forth, a sound like stones sifting between two pails. In those moments, the unpleasantness of the man vanished, and what came in its wake was deepest contentment, a sense that here, beside this gruff, thick-boned man, nothing in this dangerous world could find her, could hurt her. She was forever safe in the shelter of his arms.

They'd taken him first. Her mother and Aliza and she had gathered at the train station to watch him, rounded up with others, hundreds of them, old men and women mostly. Pushed up ramps into cattle cars. Most afraid. A few—her grandfather one—glowering with defiance. He carried a cardboard valise he'd packed the night before with a few clothes, a thick fold of toilet paper, extra socks, three of his favorite novels. It had taken him half the night to decide which ones. But the guards took it away—took all the bags away—said they'd be sent later. They mounded them up beside the tracks in a mountainous pile. No one had to tell her that all would be looted and whatever was of no value would be burned.

Her papa looked at them one last time. He wore the expression she'd seen all her life: stern pride hiding deep sorrow. Even her mother cried.

What would he tell her to do? He'd tell her to outwit them. To outlast them. To never let them break her spirit. To find a way when there is no way. He'd tell her to take a Jew's ultimate vengeance and survive. To resort to her people's last best insult: to refuse to cease existing.

Her father would say something else. *You're French*, he'd say. *Be French. Don't listen to the old man's tales of the Hasid.*

And Aliza? Aliza, innocent and mischievous all at once, would simply laugh. She finds mirth in everything, spun jests from nothing. Aliza—a year younger, three inches shorter, even thinner—is the center and foundation of Hannah's life. Aliza is sheer unstoppable vitality. When she comes into a room, it brightens, seems to expand to make space for her. Hannah's entire life is an exercise in waiting for Aliza to laugh again.

Is Aliza laughing now? Has she found something amusing about it all—perhaps how ridiculous the guards are, mere boys, so afraid, pretending to be brave, so scrawny, thinking their uniforms hide that. Or maybe she's joking about always wanting to travel through Europe by train, but next time she'll have to remember to get a pass to the dining coach. Or she's saying that if she knew they were going camping, she'd have worn different shoes.

Or is Aliza shot and left to die and rot in the forest, without even the meager dignity of a shallow grave?

The thought is unbearable.

Hannah moves deeper into the forest, then realizes she'll only end up lost, perishing from cold, from hunger, at the mercy of wild animals. So she moves toward where she can see the forest thinning, the sky opening beyond the tree line. At the seam of a steep slope, she fords a swift creek. She almost loses her footing and thrashes to stay upright, to avoid the coils of the icy current. She wishes she'd been more diligent about learning to swim when her father was alive and took Aliza and her a few times each summer to a small lake close to their home. Aliza gave her whole heart to learning, as she gave her whole heart to everything, and by the end of the second summer was as sleek and buoyant as an otter, whereas Hannah remained ungainly and panicky, a cat tossed in wide-eyed and flailing, hating every moment.

She steps out of the water and runs up the other side of the slope to warm herself.

At the top the forest is almost parklike in its spaciousness. A scattering rather than a clustering of trees. Obvious footpaths, some well tramped. She can see now the edge of the woods, a brightness there like curtains parted. She moves slowly, with heightened caution. She hears voices and stops, fresh afraid. Then she realizes the voices are far away, made loud by hard surfaces: stone walls, stone streets. A town or village just beyond the woods.

She wishes she could see herself in a mirror, to see how obvious or hidden her desperation is. Does she look like a fugitive? Will she arouse suspicion instantly? Or will she blend in, looking like everyone in small villages does these days: hollowed from hunger, pinched with worry, wary and hurrying and afraid?

She must risk it. She hears now her father telling her to walk with obvious purpose, like she's bent on an important errand or going directly to meet a friend. She steps out from the forest, crosses a field, and comes to a lane that runs behind a row of joined houses. She walks down the lane until she comes to the first street. She sees it leads to the center of the town. She sees a church steeple maybe half a mile away, rising above the rooflines.

She's heard that sometimes churches help people like her.

And sometimes not.

She moves toward the church anyway.

She encounters others—two young boys, an older couple, a middle-aged man fixing a chain on his bike. No one pays her any mind. She keeps walking, briskly but not too fast. A man, maybe in his early twenties, strides toward her. Something in his manner—he seems to be coming for her, not just toward her—makes her panic. She pushes the feeling down and keeps walking. When he's mere feet away, he stops abruptly, stares at her, leering maybe, scowling—she can't tell. When she passes him, she smells liquor. It can't be past eight in the morning.

"You won't find him there," he says, though it's not clear whether he's speaking to her or to himself or to someone imaginary. "He's gone. You won't find him. He left a long time ago."

She turns a corner near the center of town, and two things stop her dead: the smell of fresh-baked bread, and two gendarmes standing only feet away. The policemen both stop talking and look at her.

"You lost?" one asks.

"No. My mother sent me. For bread."

"Then here you are."

"Yes."

"You have your ration card?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I doubt there's much left. But go on in and see."

She edges past them and into the bakery. It's small and crowded.

She slips between a large woman, with sacks hanging from both her arms, and a low table with a few raisin biscuits. Hannah takes two biscuits and puts one into each jacket pocket. She waits a little longer, then slips out. The gendarmes have left. Relief makes her lightheaded.

Twenty feet down the sidewalk, a hand grabs her shoulder from behind, pulls hard. "Come here."

She turns, ready to hit, to thrash, to flee.

A nun in full habit is holding her. Her face is a blade.

"I did nothing," Hannah says.

"You stole food."

"I did not—"

"We have no time for this. Come. Now."

Outsider

The Writer
March 1942

He slips into Le Temple du Protestant as the service starts and takes a seat on the back pew. He's nervous being in church, especially a Protestant one. Its austerity of form, its casualness of style, the sparseness of its walls—all unnerve him. Faith unnerves him. He needs to be able to slip out quickly, quietly, inconspicuously after the service, or in case he starts to cough. Sometimes the musty dampness of old stone buildings does that to him. It congests his lungs, and only bouts of violent hacking loosen them, leaving him dizzy, tottery.

A few people greet him with smiles. Otherwise he's ignored. One woman scowls at him, perhaps for coming in late, perhaps because she knows he doesn't belong here. He smiles at her. She turns away abruptly.

He finds the singing simple and folksy—one song is like something he might hear in a café or on a street corner. He enjoys it and disdains it in the same breath. When the collection is taken, he finds a few rumpled francs in his pocket and tosses them into the plate. An elderly woman sings a solo. There are hints that her voice was once strong and clear, but now it trembles as it climbs each high note and crumbles before it reaches the top.

At last, what he came for—the pastor he's heard about. The man mounts the steps to the pulpit. He's taller than expected and must have been dashingly handsome at one time, like a movie star. Middle age is robbing him of that, thickening his middle, thinning his hair. His round glasses alternately shroud and magnify his eyes.

Albert Camus is suddenly afraid that the pastor will see him and expose him as a fraud. An unbeliever. An apostate in their midst.

But the pastor smiles warmly, opens his long arms wide. Camus has seen priests do this many times, but they've always done it wearing priestly robes. It's always suggested to him a great bird taking wing. But this

pastor's robe is open at the sides, and his arms thrust out with singular starkness. Camus is startled—it's the posture of a man being crucified.

"Welcome," the pastor says. "To you who always come, no matter the weather, no matter what work goes undone."

A few people make a low chuffing sound that might be laughter.

"And welcome to you who've come for the first time."

It seems to Camus the pastor rather studiously avoids looking at him now, though the woman in front of him turns back and gives a torturous smile.

"I am Pastor Trocmé. Welcome, all. Seeing your faces this morning—your face, Monsieur Hértier, your face, Madame Giffard, yours, Madame Martel, all of yours. Oh, and especially the faces of our beautiful young people—seeing your faces is like seeing the face of God."

For the second time, Camus is startled. He knows this story. Jacob and Esau, two brothers reconciling after many years of bitter enmity. Even he knows it's a story of homecoming.

That story is Trocmé's text today. He starts reading where Jacob receives news of his brother, Esau, approaching with a war party of four hundred men. Jacob schemes to appease Esau, to avoid disaster, to come out alive. And then, abruptly, Trocmé mimics Jacob in limb and voice, startling several people. Jacob is all alone, standing in the dark, nothing and no one around him. And a man ambushes him. Jacob is in a battle for his life, fighting all night, fighting until the man wounds him, names him, blesses him. Fighting until daybreak, when he finally sees the man face-to-face. Then Jacob limps away, toward Esau, toward his long-aggrieved brother.

Trocmé retells it all, then he pauses. "Do you see Jacob? Limping toward . . . what? Toward a reckoning. Toward his past catching up with him." He steps a few inches back from the pulpit, makes a full turn in the narrow space. He acts injured, acts afraid.

"It's daybreak. Jacob is limping. But Esau is running. Closer and closer they come. Imagine the terror. Esau's the brother from whom Jacob stole precious things, irreplaceable things. A birthright. A father's sole blessing. Every good thing intended for Esau, Jacob took for himself.

"Jacob's name—you know what it means. 'Heel grabber.' 'Trickster.' 'Supplanter.' But it's not only his name. It's mine. It's yours. We're a whole race of supplanters."

Trocmé goes on like this at length, retelling more of the story, dramatizing parts, impersonating characters, making asides and, here and there, astute observations. Camus allows his attention to ebb and flow. At one point a tickle in his throat threatens to turn into a coughing bout, and he plans his exit. He misses a good five minutes of the sermon. When he resumes attention, Trocmé is talking again, bewilderingly, about Jacob wrestling the man all night.

"'Let me go,' the man insists.

"But Jacob won't. 'I'll not let you go unless you bless me.'

"What a strange thing to demand. Jacob's already stolen his father's blessing. He's acquired wealth, two wives, two concubines, many children. He has more animals than he can count. What more blessing can he want? What can he need?

"Imagine it's you, fighting this man all night. It's not a fight you started. You're not evenly matched with your opponent. Every part of you aches. You're tired to the bone, but you won't concede. The man himself is tired, dead tired, and begs you to let go. Would you stay at it, would you hold on, until he blessed you?

"What is it you still want?" Trocmé pauses, lets the question hover over the congregation's anxious stillness. Then he resumes, so quiet it's like he's calming a small child awakened by night terrors.

"The one blessing he still wants is to see God, God himself, face-to-face. He holds on until daybreak for that single glimpse.

"And then there's a surprise. He looks up, and Esau is running toward him. Not to hurt him, not to kill him, not to take vengeance. Esau runs to embrace Jacob, to fall on his neck, to kiss him.

"'Seeing your face,' Jacob says, 'is like seeing the face of God.'

"Yes. Yes. Once you see the face of God, you see it everywhere. In everyone. Amen."

Camus slips out, quick and quiet because he wants to get home, to avoid talking, to be alone to wrestle with his own thoughts.