

Prologue

1945, August

The nightmares made their rounds hours ago. The tossing and whimpering are over. Even the insomniacs have settled down. The twenty restless bodies rest, and faces aged by hunger, grief, and doubt relax to reveal the beauty and the pity of their youth. Not one of the women in Barrack C is twenty-one, but all of them are orphans.

Their cheeks press against small, military-issue pillows that smell of disinfectant. Lumpy and flat from long service under heavier heads, they bear no resemblance to the goose-down clouds that many of them enjoyed in childhood. And yet, the girls burrow into them with perfect contentment, embracing them like teddy bears. There were no pillows for them in the other barracks. No one gives a pillow to an animal.

The British built Atlit in 1938 to house their own troops. It was one in a group of bases, garages, and storage units set up on



the coastal plains a few miles south of Haifa. But at the end of the world war, as European Jews began making their way to the ancestral homeland in violation of international political agreements, the mandate in Palestine became ever messier. Which is how it came to pass that Atlit was turned into a prison or, in the language of command, a “detention center” for refugees without permissory papers. The English arrested thousands as illegal immigrants, sent most of them to Atlit, but quickly set them free, like fish too small to fry.

It was a perfectly forgettable compound of wooden barracks and buildings set out in rows on a scant square acre surrounded by weeds and potato fields. But the place offered a grim welcome to the exhausted remnant of the Final Solution, who could barely see past its barbwire fences, three of them, in fact, concentric lines that scrawled a crabbed and painful hieroglyphic across the sky.

Not half a mile to the west of Atlit, the Mediterranean breaks against a rocky shore. When the surf is high, you can hear the stones hiss and sigh in the tidal wash. On the eastern horizon, the foothills of the Carmel reach heavenward, in keeping with their name, *kerem-el*, “the vineyard of God.” Sometimes, the candles of a village are visible in the high distance, but not at this hour. The night is too old for that now.

It is cool in the mountains but hot and damp in Atlit. The overhead lights throb and buzz in the moist air, heavy as a blanket. Nothing moves. Even the sentries in the guard towers are snoring, lulled by the stillness and sapped, like their prisoners, by the cumulative weight of the heat.

There are no politics in this waning hour of the night, no regret, no delay, no waiting. All of that will return with the sun. The waiting is worse than the heat. Everyone who is locked up

in Atlit waits for an answer to the same questions: When will I get out of here? When will the past be over?

There are only 170 prisoners in Atlit tonight, and fewer than seventy women in all. It is the same lopsided ratio on the chaotic roads of Poland and Germany, France and Italy; the same in the train stations and the Displaced Persons camps, in queues for water, identification cards, shoes, information. The same quotient, too, in the creaking, leaky boats that secretly ferry survivors into Palestine.

There is no mystery to this arithmetic. According to Nazi calculation, males produced more value alive than dead—if only marginally, if only temporarily. So they killed the women faster.

In Barrack C, the corrugated roof releases the last degrees of yesterday's sun, warming the blouses and skirts that hang like ghosts from the rafters. There are burlap sacks suspended there as well, lumpy with random, rescued treasures: photograph albums, books, candlesticks, wooden bowls, broken toys, tablecloths, precious debris.

The narrow cots are lined up unevenly against the naked wood walls. The floor is littered with thin wool blankets kicked aside in the heat. A baby crib stands empty in the corner.

In Haifa, the lights are burning in the bakeries where the bread rises, and the workers pour coffee and light cigarettes. On the kibbutz among the pine trees high in the Carmel, dairymen are rubbing their eyes and pulling on their boots.

In Atlit, the women sleep. Nothing disturbs them. No one notices the soft stirring of a breeze, the blessing of the last, gentlest chapter of the day.

It would be a kindness to prolong this peace and let them rest a bit longer. But the darkness is already heavy with the gathering light. The birds have no choice but to announce the dawn. Eyes begin to open.

