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RESCUE

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CHAPTER ONE

Friday, February 27, 1942

I hadn't seen my father for 657 days. From this exact moment, that is one year, nine months, two weeks, four days, and one hour. That's how long it had been since I had not waved goodbye. In 657 days, we had not heard anything about him . . . or from him.

Maman believed that Papa was still alive, and so did Grandmère. I was beginning to have doubts.

But I never said that aloud. Life for our family was difficult enough without me bringing up the fact that if he could, Papa would have written us by now. Besides, we were hardly the only family wondering what had become of their loved ones.

On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded France. They bypassed our thin lines of defense on the border, then rolled through the country in a blitzkrieg—a lightning war. Within

two months, France surrendered. Germany took possession of our land, our resources, and nearly two million French soldiers, who became prisoners of war, almost overnight. Maybe Papa had been taken too. Or maybe something worse had happened.

But I didn't want to think about that. I couldn't, because today I had a job to do. I entered it in my journal with the codename FEMALE LONG THROW. If the journal was ever found, most people would think I had spent my day practicing how far I could throw a ball, but that wasn't even close to the truth. The real message would only be found by unscrambling the letters.

Maman didn't know my real plans for the day. She'd be furious if she did, and for good reason. If I were caught by the Nazis, they wouldn't care that I was only twelve. An enemy was an enemy. And all enemies must be stopped.

That was how I thought of them too. An enemy that must be stopped.

Maman believed my only plan was going into town to sell our extra food. It was illegal and risky to sell on the black market, but also necessary. There wasn't enough food legally available in France for everyone who was hungry, especially in the cities. People here had to choose between hunger and breaking the law.

My family's choice was whether to supply that food. Our prices were higher than what a person could find in the

stores, but that was the problem—too often, the store shelves were empty.

People were angry about the prices we charged, but they didn't understand how expensive it was to run a farm during wartime. Maman was saving every franc that she could in hopes of getting us out of France. These last two years of the German occupation had been difficult.

No, not difficult. That wasn't the right word at all.

They had been devastating.

When the war first broke out, Papa had wanted to get us out of France. He planned to bring us to England with him, but Maman worried that England wouldn't be any safer than France. Then the telegram came from London, and all the plans changed.

Papa left for the war.

He didn't go as a soldier, but I knew by the worry on Maman's face that he was in the battles somehow. The only thing I could think was that he must be part of the resistance.

That was why I helped the resistance. It felt like I was helping Papa too.

Thus, the Female Long Throw.

"Meggie, are you ready to go?" Maman called from the back door of the house. She's French, so it sounds like M'gee when she pronounces my name, but I loved that. Papa is British. In public, he called me Margaret, but when it

was only him and me, he called me Daisy, because the French word for the daisy flower is *marguerite*. I especially loved that.

“Almost ready, Maman,” I called back.

I finished my entry for the day and set the journal into the small hole Papa had dug out beneath the floor of Grandmère’s barn before he left.

My pencil went on top of the journal, and then I returned the two pieces of barnwood flooring where they belonged. As always, I covered them with dust and straw to be sure that my hiding place looked the same as everywhere else.

In the distance, the church bells rang out the time, eight in the morning. I was late today. Some customers would already have begun arriving from Paris. I needed to be there to greet those I knew, the people I trusted. And I wanted to sell all my food before any newcomers could find me. Most of them were safe, but there would also be those who stole food out of desperation, or those who might report us to the authorities if they didn’t like what we had to offer.

I didn’t blame them when they did, not much. From the reports we heard on the radio, we were better off here in the forests of the Perche than in the cities, where they faced a stronger Nazi presence, sharp questions of loyalties, and where hunger, even starvation, was a constant threat.

I wouldn’t have much to sell today. It was still cold outside, and so far, this seemed to be the kind of winter that

would linger, trying to stretch as far into spring as possible. Maman said that while we needed the money, we also needed food for ourselves until the first harvest came in. We wouldn't eat like the wealthy, or like the Germans did in our pubs and restaurants. But I held back enough food that we wouldn't starve either.

I tried not to think about my hunger as I chose several of the softer potatoes for today, those that wouldn't last much longer. Even if they were old and rubbery, they'd still sell. Some people had resorted to grinding acorns to make coffee and boiling pumpkins to create a sugar substitute. By comparison, a rubbery old potato was fine dining.

I finished packing my bag, covering our potatoes with a few schoolbooks, which was only for show. I didn't see the point in studying the German-approved books that we were now supposed to read. It was little more than propaganda, which I'd become numb to long ago. Pro-German stories flooded through the radio waves until my ears ached with them; their phony pictures and slogans were plastered on posters pasted up all over town, so that I saw them when I shut my eyes. The German propaganda was even drummed into our heads in newsreels on our rare trips to the movie theater.

But I put the books in my bag anyway. If a German tried to search my bag and found a book he approved of, then he'd send me on my way rather than hold me for further questioning. I had to be smart about these things. I'd had to

grow up quickly over the last two years and learn to take care of myself. Most of the time, I felt older than my age.

I picked up my bag and slung it over one shoulder, then stood up straight, as Maman had taught me.

“Never look as though you’re carrying anything heavy. Never make anyone curious about you.” She had warned me of this so often, I never failed to hear her words in my head whenever I left to sell food.

Maman was waiting at the door as I left the barn, and I couldn’t help but stare. Most people did. She was a beautiful woman—everyone said so. I doubted I’d ever grow up to be as beautiful as she was, but few people ever could be. My hair was brownish, without actually being brown, and my eyes changed with the light, or the colors I wore. I hoped that made it harder for people to identify me, or to remember my face. That was important, because I had my father’s courage, and these days, courage mattered most to me.

As I came closer, Maman gave me one of her pretend smiles, and even that quickly faded.

“You will sell the food and come home quickly?”

“Yes, Maman, I promise.” Maman and I used to sell together, but last summer, we decided it was less suspicious if I worked alone. So far, I had managed fine on my own.

“I have a few errands to do today. Be sure to do your afternoon chores.”

My brow wrinkled. “What errands?” Maman hesitated

and I glanced behind her, spotting a brown suitcase on our tile floor. I'd seen it before, but Grandmère had told me not to be curious about something better left to adults. Since then, I'd been more curious than ever. I knew only one thing about it: The suitcase was heavy, but whenever Maman left the house with it, she'd stand straight and tall as if there were only feathers inside.

Just in case someone was watching.

"These errands are nothing to worry about." There was an edge to her voice that made my gut twist into knots. I wanted to believe her—I *needed* to believe her—but I was already worried, and she hadn't even left the house.

Maman must have seen my worry, for she brushed a hand over my hair and smiled. "There are things to be done, that's all."

Things to be done? What was that supposed to mean?

Maman often talked that way lately, in bundles of words that said nothing whatsoever, giving long explanations without a hint of information. She didn't want me to know her plans for the day.

As much as I didn't want her to know mine, I supposed.

Maman gave me a quick hug. "After I return, we'll plan a fun evening together. Perhaps you can solve the last of your father's codes."

My muscles tightened. "No, Maman, I'm saving that one until he comes home."

Maman nodded as if she understood more than I was willing to say. She kissed my cheek, then fastened the top button of my coat. “Be safe, come home quickly.”

“You too,” I replied.

I didn’t know what Maman’s errand would be: maybe buying supplies off the black market that we needed, or selling something bigger than a few potatoes. But I did know what my plans were, and I had to stay focused on them.

I had the Female Long Throw.