Chapter 7

France

My name is Pierre Chevalier. I have brown hair and brown eyes. I was 26 in 1940.

Birds chirping, flowers blooming, and a breeze rustling the leaves in the trees where the only sounds to be heard in the country side. All of this beauty was in stark contrast to the turmoil happening just across the border into Germany and the countries around it. I felt the effect of war, even though France had not yet become a battle field. I hope my country would never become a battle field again like in my father’s stories of the First World War.

Even though I knew and feared for all that was coming, I happily watched my two young children play in the backyard of my small home. Being only 4 and 1 years old, they did not yet understand what was happening outside the borders, nor did my wife or I want inform them. My beautiful wife, Juliette, and my children were the reason I had not rushed to join the army. I felt I could protect them better staying at home than if I were to travel to the Netherlands or Belgium to fight the Germans there. I feel that we are safer in our house, just out of Versailles and about one and fifteen minutes from Paris.

I had felt safe until May 10 when the Nazis invade my France under the code name Case Yellow. My friend wrote to me to inform me of the conditions on the front lines. He is very lucky to still be alive after what was in his last letter. When the Germans invaded, they had a massive armored offensive through the Ardennes Forest on France’s northern border. The Germans had completely bypassed the Maginot Line we had built and reinforced on the German border. This line was our strongest frontier defenses. Four days later, the Germans crossed the Muese River and broke through our lines.

The Germans were on the march, and I sat in my house listening to the radio of the reports of their movements. Closer and closer they marched in, but the French army seemed to be putting up a fierce resistance from this invasion. It seemed every week, however, that another one of France’s neighbors had surrender under their own Nazi invasions. The Netherlands fell on the 15th, Luxembourg on the 17th, and Belgium on the 28th.

My children played inside most days now with the occasional day outside, but only if I went outside to watch them. The oldest constantly asked me if she had done something wrong for only being allowed to play outside for short periods of time. I did not want her to know of the horrors outside our own little world yet, so I lied and said I just did not want her out there without me to see her have fun. This excuse worked for now, but France was quickly changing.

On June 3, I had seen some planes flying overhead toward the capital. At the time, I had thought nothing of this because they were far enough overhead that I could not make out the markings, so I thought they were French planes. Later on the radio, an announcer stated the Germans had bombed Paris earlier today. Those filthy pigs had dared to bomb my beloved Paris! For two more days, the French army continued with heavy fighting until they could do no more. The French resistance had finally collapsed under the onslaught of wave after wave of Germans.

Five days later, I heard the radio say how Italy had declared war on Great Britain and France. I felt they were being cowards, waiting until we had surrendered and the British army was retreated back to their island.

If I had my way, my family and I would have been on vacation to the Americas or anywhere safer than right here. On June 14, the Germans had entered Paris, and I heard rumors of collaboration with the Nazis. Whether the rumors are true, I do not know, but on June 16, Marshal Pétain replaced Paul Reynaud as Prime Minister of France. He had announced early on of his intention to sign an armistice with the Nazis. Later that night, one of our generals, Charles de Gaulle, broadcasted from England to the people and troops of France to keep fighting the Germans. I have no clue what to listen to or what to believe with the sudden changing of leadership and this General I had never really heard of, urging us to keep fighting. For now, I would wait and stay at home, keeping my family safe.

Most days now, I stay by the radio, waiting for updates on France’s conditions and her enemy invaders. On June 22 and 23, finally France signed the promised armistice with Germany, and after, Hitler took a tour of Paris. I was so angry that this German pig would get to enjoy the sights of my beloved France while everyone cowered from the soldiers occupying her. Five days later on the 28th, Britain announced they recognized General de Gaulle as the Free French leader.

The rumors appeared to be true because, on July 5, our French Vichy government broke off relations with our ally Great Britain. They had been collaborating with the Nazis after all and killing the France I love. When Pétain was elected, he was supposed to boost the morale of all the French people in the country under the force of the Nazi invasion. Instead, he sold us out and invited the Nazis in. I was 26 years old. At least I was safe in my home unlike how the people of London were.