



# CHAPTER 1



TUESDAY, JUNE 6, 1944  
THE CLIFFS ABOVE OMAHA BEACH  
NORMANDY, FRANCE  
AROUND 1:00 A.M.

Eleven-year-old Paul Colbert was running for his life.

It was D-Day, one of the bloodiest days of World War II. More than 150,000 soldiers from America, England, and Canada were invading France.

They had sailed across the sea on seven thousand ships, creeping through the dark of night.

Their mission: to free France from the brutal grip of Nazi Germany. It was time to crush the Nazis, and end the war.

In the minutes before the ships arrived, Paul was crouched on a cliff above the beach. He was trying to escape before the battle began. But now warplanes were zooming through the sky. And suddenly there was a shattering blast.

*Kaboom!*

Paul looked up in horror and saw that a plane was now in flames. And it was in a fiery death spiral, heading right for him.

Paul ran wildly as the burning plane fell from the sky. The air filled with the gagging stench of burning metal and melting rubber. The engine screamed and moaned. It sounded like a giant beast bellowing in pain.

No matter where Paul went, the dying plane seemed to be following him, like it wanted Paul to die, too.

And then, *smack!* Something hit Paul on the head. His skull seemed to explode in pain. Paul fell to the ground as the burning wreckage came crashing down.

For four long years, Paul had been praying for this day — for the war to end, for France to be finally free from the Nazis.

But now, it seemed, this day would be his last.

# CHAPTER 2



THE DAY BEFORE  
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5, 1944  
THE TOWN OF LE ROC  
NORMANDY, FRANCE  
AROUND 11:00 A.M.

Paul kicked his soccer ball along the winding dirt road. For the first time in months, he wasn't worrying about the miserable war. He wasn't wondering whether he'd ever see Papa again. He wasn't thinking about Adolf Hitler, the evil German Nazi leader, or his soldiers

who'd invaded Paul's country, his town, and his life.

*This is going to be a good day*, he told himself. It was his mother's birthday. Paul was going to buy her some cookies.

How long had it been since he or his mother — Maman — had eaten a cookie or a cake or a bar of chocolate? He had no idea. With the war in its fifth year, all the best foods had disappeared. Poor Maman made her coffee out of ground acorns mixed with hot water.

Paul's mouth watered as he remembered biting into a chocolate éclair, with the sweet, velvety cream that slid down his throat. Or a crepe filled with strawberry jam that made his fingers sticky all day.

Maman's favorites were madeleines, little buttery cookies that melted in your mouth. So that's what Paul would get for her.

Paul pictured Maman now — her gentle eyes, her warm smile. She worked all the time, sewing and mending clothing to support them. Some mornings she was gone making deliveries before he climbed out of bed.

Making Maman happy was worth anything to Paul.

Even his soccer ball.

He gave the brown leather ball a gentle tap with his toe.

That's how he was going to get Maman her cookies. He would sell the ball. Right now he was heading to the dingy little market down by the river. That's where desperate people from Le Roc went to sell things — their wedding rings, their prized books, their last pair of shoes.

Nobody played much soccer these days. Practically every young man in Europe was either fighting in the war or was a prisoner of the Germans. But Paul's soccer ball was leather, which was scarce. Someone could cut it up and turn it into a pair of shoes or gloves.

Paul flinched as he imagined his ball getting butchered. He kicked it even more gently.

Maman and Papa had given it to him for his seventh birthday. He'd rushed over to show it to his best friend, Gerard. They were both soccer fanatics.

“Now we’re going to the World Cup for sure!” Gerard had said, pushing his curls out of his eyes and cracking that bright, lopsided smile of his.

Over the next few years, this ball had gone everywhere with them.

They’d chased it thousands of times across their schoolyard. They’d dribbled it through the wheat fields and orchards and down every cobblestoned street of their town. They’d practiced penalty kicks on the beach as the waves crashed, diving into the sand to stop the ball from rolling into the ocean.

“Race you!” Paul would shout, and he and Guy would go charging after the ball.

Paul still loved the game. But he hadn’t touched the soccer ball in months.

Not since Gerard had disappeared.

The Nazis had taken Gerard and his family away.

Paul’s stomach twisted as he thought about it. One cold night in March, the Nazis had arrested every Jewish person in town and shoved them into trucks. Nobody knew for sure where the



Nazis had taken them, but there were rumors too horrifying to believe. About children torn away from their parents. About train cars where people were packed so tightly they couldn't breathe. About huge prisons where people were starved and worked to death.

Some nights Paul lay in his bed, praying that what he'd heard wasn't true.

Paul gave his ball a furious kick. Then he closed his eyes and took a breath. *No*, he told himself. He wasn't going to think about the Nazis today. It was Maman's birthday.

This was going to be a good day.