

Chapter One

March 4, 1917
A village in northern France

Luc Caron was twelve years old when the black object fell from the sky. He had never seen anything like this before, and he didn't stop to think. He ran as fast as he could towards the place he thought the object would land.

This was a time of war, a terrible war that people would later call World War I. Already, it had lasted almost three years. More than one year ago, the Germans had captured Luc's village in northern France. Not all of France was occupied by the Germans, only a small

part in the north and east. But Luc's village was one of the unlucky ones.

Fighting and shelling had destroyed many houses and roads and shops. Soldiers had moved in and taken over. Men of fighting age were taken prisoner and sent to Germany. There, they were forced to work in factories.

The old men, along with the women and children, stayed on in the village. Farmers continued to farm, and shopkeepers kept the shops open. Women did the laundry and hung it out in the wind to dry. Children went to school. Two sisters baked bread in the bakery. The blacksmith, an old man, put shoes on the horses and repaired farm tools. The priest, also an old man, visited the sick and said Mass, but that was all. The villagers had to obey the new rules. They could not leave their houses after eight o'clock at night. The only time they could meet in groups was when they went to church.

The soldiers gave orders; the villagers did as they were told. There were soldiers everywhere, checking to see that people obeyed. But no one had ever said what to do if you saw something falling from the sky. Something like the black

object that twelve-year-old Luc saw on that Sunday morning in 1917.

Ten minutes earlier, just after eleven o'clock, Luc had left the village church. In the sermon, the old priest had talked about hope that the war would soon end. After three years, the village had suffered enough. The people in the parish listened with their own quiet hope. When they left the church, they hurried back to their homes to take up their hard lives again.

Luc's mother had gone home ahead of her son to prepare the noon meal. She and Luc lived alone in a small house at the far end of the village. Luc's father had been a soldier, but he had died two years ago, while fighting the Germans. Luc's mother was now a widow.

Luc was not in a hurry, and he did not go straight home with his mother after church. He pictured her in the kitchen, making his lunch, slicing a bit of pork from the bone. She would be looking out the window while she sliced, wondering where he was and why he hadn't come home. Now that his father was dead, she worried about him all the time. She watched to see if he had buttoned his jacket and wrapped

his scarf around his neck. Every day, she warned him to dress warmly so he wouldn't catch a cold.

Luc liked to prowl around the village, to see if he could find out what was going on. He was always alert, always watching, ready to run if any soldiers came too close. He practised spying whenever he could, but if the soldiers saw him, they shouted and told him to go home. Still, that didn't stop him from snooping.

Luc shivered on this cold and bitter morning, but he took his time and walked slowly along a dirt path. He held a stick in his hand, and he poked it at the ground and under bushes. He was looking for small treasures. Stones that glinted of silver, old birds' nests, shiny buttons that had fallen from uniforms. One afternoon, Luc had been lucky. He had found a German coin that one of the soldiers had dropped. He kept his treasures in his bedroom, some on a small table, some on the windowsill. He hid the best ones in a canvas bag under his narrow bed.

Luc picked up a sharp pink rock and turned it over in the palm of his hand. At the same moment, he heard the sound of pecks and

rattles coming from far above. He knew, right away, that he was hearing machine guns. Long ago, he had learned the pattern of sound when airplanes were fighting in the sky.

He looked up quickly and saw three airplanes. He could tell by the markings that two were German and one was British. The aerial fight was high in the sky, directly overhead. The planes dipped and dived so close to one another, Luc was certain they would crash. The two German planes circled and darted after the British plane, which made daring loops as it tried to escape. The machine guns kept shooting. The pecks and rattles went on and on while the planes buzzed through the sky.

Luc was excited by this fight in the sky. He hoped the pilot in the British plane would get away safely. He did not want the Germans to win, but with two airplanes attacking one, this was not an even fight. Although the aerial fight was terrible to watch, Luc was thrilled to see the skill of all three pilots.

Suddenly Luc was afraid. He wanted to shout out. But before he could make a sound,

the British airplane flipped upside down. And that is when something large and dark fell out of the plane.

Luc ran as fast as his legs would run. When he came near the falling object, he thought his eyes were fooling him. The object looked like a large black bird gliding to earth. Only a bird could glide so slowly. But that was a crazy thought and made no sense at all. Why would a large bird fall from a plane and drift down through the sky?

The two German airplanes dipped their wings and flew off. The buzzing of their engines faded as they vanished from sight. The British plane, still upside down, dived at a sure and even angle between earth and sky. It headed away from the edge of the village and towards some trees. But Luc did not run to the trees. Instead, he ran as fast as he could to the place where he thought the black object would land.

As he came near, Luc understood his mistake. This was not a large bird at all, nothing like a bird. It was a man, a pilot, falling straight down to earth out of the sky. His thick, black coat had puffed out around him. From the ground, the ballooning coat had looked like a

small, dark parachute. It must have slowed the pilot's fall a little, and that is why he seemed to be gliding.

The pilot was wearing a tight-fitting flyer's helmet. His arms were stretched out wide. He was coming in feet first, faster and faster, nearly at the ground. Now, Luc could see where the pilot would land. He would land on a pond, and the pond was covered with ice.