

A PLOT OF ROSES

Jean LeClerc and his family lived on a fifty-acre plot of land near the coast of France across from England. As a third-generation nurseryman on the land, he felt proud to raise roses as his life's work. Numerous hybrids bore the names of family members over the years from their rose breeding program.

Naturally, with such a history, Jean became a patriot and fierce defender of French life and values. With two brothers already killed by the Nazi war machine, he struggled to figure out how he could fight and still preserve the family legacy. One dark, cloudy day in April, there came a knock on his office door.

“Jean LeClerc?” asked the woman wearing a dark overcoat.

“Yes,” replied Jean.

“Monsieur LeClerc, my name is Heather Lebeau. My friends and I rescued your brother Charles from the Nazi soldiers. We did everything we could to save him, but he had lost too much blood. Before he died, he asked me to kneel down

beside him. He whispered in my ear that should we ever need anything, we must come to you. We have to be so very careful in these times who we trust or talk to, but this came from the mouth of a dying, loyal French soldier and patriot.”

“I appreciate what you did for my brother, Heather ... You must be very tired from your journey. Can I get you anything, food or wine?”

“Yes, monsieur. I would be most grateful for that.”

“How can I be of help to you, Heather?”

“My friends and I are with the French Underground. We desperately need a haven over here on the coast. In his dying breath, your brother also said you were a loyal patriot to France. We wondered if you would consider providing such a haven for us here on your farm?”

“What would this haven require of me and my family?”

“We need a place to set up a relay station for sending messages to the allies. Your farm would be an ideal place to set that up and enable us to radio our messages to London.”

“I understand how the farm with its setting on the land is situated for such an undertaking, but what makes you think the Nazis wouldn’t find it in short order?”

“There is no guarantee, monsieur, but how your brother bragged of your ingenuity leads me to believe we could figure out a way to outfox them.”

“Well, Heather, what you ask could be very dangerous ... but, of course, I will help you. Let me think. We must plot this out. Are your friends with you?”

“Yes, monsieur. They are waiting in the woods.”

“Good, you go get them and come back. We will give you room for the night.”

“Thank you, monsieur.”

“Please, no more monsieur. It is to be Jean, okay?”

“Yes, Jean.”

Two weeks passed since that first night and Jean had managed to redo part of his wine cellar underneath the house as a hiding place and radio center. With Heather and her friends to help, they dug a tunnel from the wine cellar to the potting

shed. Members of the Underground would come each day as workers in the nursery. They would enter the potting shed and two would go through the tunnel to the radio center in the wine cellar. From there, they could get word to London of targets and troop movements. The plan seemed to work well when one day Heather brought the news of a Nazi radio truck in the area. They were searching for the source of radio broadcasts that the truck had detected in the area. They shut the radio center down immediately without letting London know why.

“Jean, we have to figure out a way to get this information to London without the radio,” said Heather.

“I agree, that we must do,” replied Jean. “Let me think and we will get together for work in the morning as usual.”

When morning came, so did a new plot from Jean’s mind.

“First, Heather, we must get word to London about the radio and about our new plan. Do you still have a courier who makes it over there sometimes?”

“Yes, Jean. It is risky, but if we must, we can still do it. Father Pierre at the church in town is our coordinator for the couriers.”

“Good, then this is what we will do, first. We will put the message into a thin tube and insert it into the hollowed-out stem of a long-stemmed rose. That rose will be part of an arrangement that is delivered to the church for the altar. If we use long-stemmed roses, Father Pierre can cut them just above the tube and everything will seem as it should be.”

“What is your plan, Jean?” asked Louis, a leader of the group.

“I have a hillside at the far end of the property that faces England. I will plant that hillside with roses in a distinct pattern according to Morse code. The roses will go into the ground with their pots so we can easily move them around. When we have a location to bomb, the planes from London can fly over our place and see the plantings of Morse code, so to speak. The planes will then know exactly where to bomb. It will take a little experimenting to make sure they can read the dots and dashes of the plantings, but I feel confident it will work.”

“What if the Nazis come?” asked Louis.
“Will they not see it also?”

“You would not be able to see the pattern easily from the ground,” answered Jean. “Of course, it is always possible that one of their planes might see it from the air. But if they do not know what they are looking for, I believe it will be difficult to distinguish from the general nursery and the countryside. Besides, my friend, this is war and we are all taking risks. I will devise an explanation for the odd plantings as a backup should anyone question it. And should that not work, I will have a quick exit strategy for me and my family.”

“I believe it will work, Louis,” said Heather.
“I believe we must try.”

“Yes, we must try, Heather,” said Louis.

With everyone’s help in planting the test plot and with the aid of a spotter plane from the RAF, they managed the first message - a simple ‘Can you read this’. The pilot tipped his wings several times to let them know he could read their message. At one o’clock in the morning, Heather turned the radio on and broadcast one chime from a grandfather’s clock and then quickly turned the radio off.

That one chime let London know of a new message on the hillside.

For two months, the French Underground sent messages that saved countless lives and led to the destruction of many valuable targets. On the first day of the third month, Jean LeClerc opened the door to a Nazi officer and his two guards. He informed Jean that they were taking over his rose farm to grow food for the German soldiers.

“But please, sir,” pleaded Jean. “I have lived here all my life and my family before me for two generations. Is there not something we can do?”

“Well ... if you wish to cooperate with us and accept the inevitable domination of The Third Reich, then ... I suppose, if you would farm the land for us, then I suppose ... I suppose we could allow you to stay on the land.”

“Yes. Yes. I would do that.”

“You understand that we will have to destroy all the roses, and replant the farm with food crops?”

“Yes, I understand. But if you would allow me one acre on that hillside where nothing will grow, I could still have some roses and grow plenty of food on the good land.”

“If there is one thing I can’t stand, it’s a begging Frenchman,” said the Nazi officer. “Very well, one acre of land on the hillside for your precious roses.”

“Thank you, sir. If I might offer a little bonus for your kindness in that regard. I could see that fresh roses are delivered to your wife or girlfriend every week. And I could send some to the Führer as well. It could gain you good credit to give the Führer another example of German excellence from afar.”

“That is very wise of you,” said the officer. “For a Frenchman.”

“I merely acknowledge superiority when I see it,” replied Jean.

“I am not a farmer,” said the officer. “But I must ask why you plant the hillside so erratically.”

“Sir, my family has been on this land for a long time. That hillside is far too rocky to grow anything. We have used it as a holding area for plants that we sell. The areas you see empty are where the rock is so close to the surface that the only thing that will grow there is the native grass. Where you see the roses planted is merely the areas where the

rock is deeper, and we can temporarily plant the potted roses until we ship them.”

Jean’s bargaining with the Nazi officer allowed their mission to continue for another two months. Sadly, their mission came to an end one fateful day in September. A German spy had infiltrated the highest levels of Allied intelligence and came to learn of the plot of roses. Nazi soldiers came to the farm and executed Jean LeClerc and his entire family. The members of the French Underground managed to escape into the woods. Once the soldiers left, Heather and her friends came back and recovered the bodies of the Leclerc family. While they buried them in a hidden site, Heather vowed they would return their bodies to the farm one day. One dark night the following month, The Underground returned to the farm and with the cover of darkness sprayed all the crops with an herbicide. With their food crop destroyed and with more pressing military problems, the Nazis abandoned the farm. Heather and her friends dug up the caskets of the LeClerc family from their hidden spot and returned them to the only burial plot worthy of their patriotism and sacrifice—the plot of roses at the foot of a hillside facing England.