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Opening extract from

The Bomber Dog

Written by

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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Prologue

Occupied France, 1940

Sabine knew what the soldiers had come for as soon as she saw them marching down the muddy lane to their farmhouse. Her hands shook as she grabbed the nearest of the twelve-week-old German Shepherd puppies and ran out of the wooden back door with it.

Her younger brother, Claude, was outside feeding the chickens.

'What is it? What's going on? Where are you taking that puppy?' he called out.

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The German soldiers were almost at the farmhouse. There wasn't time for Sabine to explain.

'Tell the soldiers one of the puppies died,' she said. 'Do you understand? Tell them he was the smallest and weakest of the litter and he wasn't strong enough to survive and he died.'

Claude's blue eyes opened very wide. 'But that's not true,' he said.

'Just say it!' Sabine shouted.

The puppy, frightened by the harshness of her voice, wriggled to get away but she clung on to him.

'You're not going to kill it, are you?' Claude said, his eyes filling with tears. 'You wouldn't . . . You couldn't.'

Those tears would help convince the soldiers that what he said was true.

The Germans were now so close she could hear their voices as they entered the farmhouse. She heard her mother screaming at them not

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to take the puppies away. Alsatians, or German Shepherd Wolf Dogs, as they were also known, were highly prized by the Nazis. They were famed for their intelligence, strength and bravery, making them ideal dogs to train up for war duty. Herr Hitler owned two of them.

'No,' Sabine told her brother. 'It's a lie. Just tell them what I told you. At least this one will be safe.'

Claude nodded once, dropped his pot of corn on the ground, and ran back to the farmhouse. The chickens clucked with excitement as they rushed to peck at their unexpected feast.

Sabine looked behind her and then ran the other way. It wasn't easy to run with a wriggling, heavy, furry bundle in her arms, but if she could save just one of the pups from becoming part of the war, it would be worth it.

The puppy was still very young and not used to being snatched away from his mother or

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being squeezed so tightly, but there wasn't time to stop and reassure him.

Sabine ran so hard it felt like her heart was beating almost out of her chest and her breathing came in painful gasps, but she wouldn't stop. Not even when she got a stitch in her side. She couldn't stop. She had to save the puppy.

The British undercover soldiers were boarding the rowing boat hidden by the newly formed French Resistance as she ran up to them.

'Please take this puppy with you. Please save him,' she begged.

Ever since France had been occupied by Germany, a few brave fighters had formed a group known as the Resistance. It was a secret organization made up of ordinary French people and their aim was to try and do anything they could do to undermine the German occupation of their country. They were being

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helped by British soldiers from across the English Channel, but their work was incredibly dangerous and secretive. Sabine's father was part of the French Resistance, just as her brother and mother were.

The Resistance had started with just a few people, but it had gradually grown and grown. Not everyone was a member though, and Sabine and Claude's mother always warned them that they had to be very careful who they told.

'Whatever happens, the flame of the French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished,' General De Gaulle had broadcast on the radio.

But he was now in London and they were on the front line in France.

There were rumours that if the German army found out they were part of the Resistance they would be taken away and put in a prisoner of war camp.

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Chapter 1

Close to the white cliffs of Dover a little German Shepherd puppy cowered away from the seagulls that circled menacingly above him. He'd tried to run away from the birds but they were bigger and faster than he was. He'd barked at them but the seagulls' cries only seemed to mock his high puppy yap.

Molly, a honey-coated spaniel, spotted the puppy and the gulls near the docks. She barked and ran at the large, sharp-beaked birds, scattering them into the drizzly sky of the early February morning, dodging the silver barrage

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balloons that floated high in the air, and circling to land on the warships anchored in the harbour.

They screeched in protest but didn't return.

Once they'd gone, the rain-soaked, floppy-eared, sable-coated puppy came over to his rescuer, whimpering and trembling with fear and cold. Molly licked his blue-eyed face to reassure him and he nuzzled into her. His pitiful cries were gradually calming but his desperate hunger remained.

Molly used her nose to knock over a glass bottle of milk that the milkman had just left at the Dover harbour-master's door. The bottle smashed and the puppy's little pink tongue lapped hungrily at the milk that flowed on to the ground.

'Get away from that!' the milkman yelled angrily, when he saw the puppy drinking. His boot kicked out at him, only narrowly missing his little legs. Molly barked at the milkman and

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she and the pup ran off together with the milkman's furious shouts still ringing in their ears.

The smell of the sea and the reek of the oil from the ships grew fainter as they ran, but the small dog wasn't strong enough to run for very long yet, and their run slowed to a walk as soon they left the docks. Molly led the puppy through the outskirts of Dover to her den, a derelict garden shed at the edge of the allotments. There was sacking on the floor, it had a solid waterproof roof, and as an added bonus, every now and again a foolish rat or mouse would enter the shed – only to be pounced on and eagerly gulped down.

The tired puppy sank down on the sacking and immediately fell fast asleep, exhausted from the morning's excitement. Britain was in the grip of the Second World War, and Dover was a crucially important port, constantly filled with the hustle and bustle of ships and soldiers,

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but the puppy was blissfully unaware of all that.

Molly lay down too, her head resting on her paws, but she didn't sleep; she watched over her new companion.

Only a few weeks ago, Molly had been a much-loved pet, until a bomb hit the house she lived in.

She remembered her owner being put on a stretcher and rushed to the hospital, but Molly herself hadn't been found. She'd stayed hidden amongst the rubble, shaking uncontrollably, too traumatized to make a sound.

She'd stayed in exactly the same spot for the rest of the night, covered in debris, too scared to sleep. At dawn she'd crawled out of her hiding place and taken her first tentative steps towards the shattered window and the world outside, alone.

The puppy snuffled in his sleep and Molly licked him gently until he settled. There were

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hundreds, maybe thousands of lost and abandoned dogs in Dover but at least she and this baby Alsatian had found each other.

For the first few weeks, the puppy stayed as close to Molly as he could, never allowing the two of them to get more than a few steps apart. Wherever she went he followed her, not wanting to be left alone again, even for a moment.

Every night they lay close together on the sacking and kept each other warm, listening to the bomber planes as they flew overhead on their way to London and other cities.

As the weeks turned into months, and winter turned into spring and then summer, the bomber planes and the bombs they dropped became so commonplace they no longer woke Molly or her young friend, curled up together in the shed.

Now one year old, the German Shepherd

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was no longer the vulnerable puppy he'd once been, but Molly still licked his furry sable head to soothe him when he twitched and cried out in his sleep. He still had the same piercing blue eyes he'd had as a young puppy, but one of ears now stood straight up, while the other still flopped down. With Molly's care and love he'd grown fast and he was now much larger and stronger than her, but she was still definitely the leader of their two-dog pack.

Their first priority each day was always to find food and the most delicious food in the world, just waiting for a dog to help himself, was in the pig bins.

Two or more tin dustbins were set on most street corners for people to put their waste food into. These dustbins were collected each week and taken out to farms to feed the pigs. Although the bins were emptied regularly, they still attracted flies, especially in the warm summer weather. Molly and the German

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Shepherd didn't mind about the bluebottles that buzzed around the bins. In fact, the young dog sometimes forgot the reason they'd come to the pig bins in his excitement at trying to catch one. He'd jump and snap at the insects as they flew out of the pig bins and buzzed around him, almost taunting him, daring him to try and catch them. He did dare, but however hard he tried, he only occasionally managed to swallow one.

Molly would remind him with a look or a whine, and occasionally even a bark, that they were at the pig bins to eat. Then he would stick his head in the bin and gorge himself until he could eat no more. Sometimes the leftovers had only just been put in the bin and were fresh, but more often, if the bins hadn't been emptied in the previous few days, they were rancid and mouldy. The dogs ate them anyway, ate and ate and ate.

Today, Molly led her friend to two bins at

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the end of a dead-end street. He skilfully knocked the lid off the first one and then sneezed with excitement at the tantalizing smell coming from inside it. The next moment all that could be seen of him was a fiercely wagging tail as his sensitive nose investigated the intriguing scent coming from the bottom of the bin. He was so busy trying to reach it that he didn't even hear the growl.

But Molly did. She turned to find five vicious-looking feral dogs spoiling for a fight. The growl had come from its leader: a large rough-furred, yellow-toothed, muscular dog that towered menacingly over Molly.

Molly gave a low, warning growl in return.

It was at this moment that the German Shepherd emerged, triumphant, to show Molly what he'd found. The ham bone had been right at the bottom of the bin, and old potato peelings and cabbage leaves dropped from him as he rose. He hadn't expected to find five

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snarling dogs waiting for him. The brutish-looking leader of the new pack's mouth drooled at the sight of the bone.

The dogs' faces twisted into snarls as they headed towards him. There was only one way out – he leapt out of the pig bin and raced past them and out on to the main street. The new dogs turned and charged after him, while Molly ran after them, barking loudly.

He raced down one street, and up another, and still they followed him. They were big dogs and looked better fed than him, but he was much quicker.

The large ham bone was heavy in his mouth and slippery in his jaws, but he wouldn't let it go, not even when one of the other pack got so close he could hear it breathing. He doubled back through an alleyway, raced left then twisted right, racing on through the graveyard where he and Molly used to sleep, and back through a concealed hole in the fence and into

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the allotments, where he hid in the blackberry bushes. He panted as he listened intently for the sound of the other dogs, but there were no such sounds. He'd successfully lost them and he gnawed on his ham bone trophy with relish.

Molly found him a few minutes later and came up to him, out of breath. He dropped the bone and nudged it over to her with his nose. She wagged her tail in thanks and gnawed on it. The bone had been worth it and they took it in turns to chew on it until it was quite gone.

At twilight they made their way back to their den in the old disused shed.

The blackout had been in force since the beginning of the war, so with no streetlights on and with clouds hiding the stars, it grew very dark very quickly.

Usually the young dog paid very little attention to the high wailing sound of the air-raid siren.

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It was such a common noise, one he'd heard since he was born and he, like many other pets, knew instinctively when there were no bomber planes headed in their direction and nothing to fear.

But tonight was different. Tonight the hackles along his back rose and he sat up and listened to the strange, almost bird-like whistling sound. Tonight he was afraid. He got to his feet but there wasn't time to run before the bomb fell. A deafening roar filled his ears and for a moment the whole world seemed to collapse around him. The force of the blast literally threw him across the shed, and he lay still as the dusty air swirled about him.

For a moment he was knocked out, but as soon as he came to, he belly-crawled over to Molly who lay unconscious on the ground.

He whined and nuzzled his head against hers but her eyes didn't open. He lay down beside her to keep her warm and listened as

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outside in the street people called to each other, fire-engine bells rang and ambulances screeched to a halt.

Then he smelt a new smell. The smell of smoke. A spark from the burning houses had caught the shed and now it began to smolder.

The dog whined again and then barked at Molly, but still she didn't stir. He pawed at his friend, instinctively knowing the smell meant serious danger.

In desperation he barked again and then he took hold of Molly's collar with his teeth and pulled. Although Molly was much smaller than him it was still almost impossible for him to drag her leaden body across the uneven ground. He lost his grip, whined, then gripped her collar more firmly in his teeth and crouched low so he could pull her with every ounce of strength he had.

The back wall of the shed had been completely blown away in the blast and he

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dragged Molly out of it and across the ground away from the flames that had now taken hold. Then he lay down beside her, in the smoke and ash-filled air panting and trembling.

Molly was in a bad way; her fur was coated in blood and her breathing was ragged. The anxious young dog licked his friend's face and whimpered.

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