Chapter 9

Dieter's company made another push forward on Christmas Day. Dieter didn't know exactly where they were, but he had seen a road sign that said, BASTOGNE, 14 KILOMETERS, and someone in the company said that Bastogne was in Belgium, not Luxembourg. "From what I'm hearing, the Americans are dug in there, and they're hanging on," Schaefer told Dieter. "It's a crossroads for this area, and they can slow down our offensive, maybe even stop it, if they can hold on to it."

"Then why don't we take it? Why did we stop so soon today?" It was late in the day, and Dieter was surprised at how little ground they were taking now. The first few days had been like a pleasure walk, and then everything had slowed, and now the crash of artillery was constant up ahead.

"We moved as far as we could. The companies up front took a beating all day. You heard the artillery."

"But we have better tanks. Why don't we smash our way straight into Bastogne—and rout the *Amis*, the way our commander said we would?"

"They're dug in, and we're on the move. That makes us easy targets."

"That's an excuse, Schaefer. Good soldiers don't make excuses."

Schaefer and Dieter had scraped away the snow from the ground, but now they were trying to crack through the frozen earth with their little entrenching shovels. The weather had turned much worse. Snow had fallen the day before, and after the storm the temperature had dropped. Schaefer rested for a moment, took some deep breaths. "Hedrick, we've been in reserve, so far—following the lead companies. You don't know what it's like to be at the front. One of these days they'll send us up and let those guys fall back. When that happens, we'll see how you talk."

"I look forward to that day, Schaefer."

"Yes, yes. No doubt." Schaefer laughed a little, and then began hacking at the ground again.

Dieter wasn't going to argue about such things with Schaefer. It was pointless. He

remembered how he had felt that first morning when artillery had started to strike nearby and machine guns were firing. He could admit to himself now that he had been afraid. But heroes weren't people who were unafraid. Heroes were people who did what they had to do, afraid or not.

It took Dieter and Corporal Schaefer most of the evening to dig an adequate foxhole. But the work kept them busy and kept them warm. They were wearing their heavy winter gear, white for camouflage, and for a time Dieter got warm enough to throw off his coat. But when they finally got the hole deep enough, and got in, their bodies cooled quickly. Inside the heavy clothes, Dieter could feel his sweat turning cold, and he wondered whether it would freeze in his clothes, against his body. He hated the nights, so miserably cold, and sleep so difficult. Schaefer was drifting off into one of his silent moods again, and that meant nothing to do but sit there, or try to sleep, and the night would last forever. This time of year, it seemed as though the sun hardly came up before it set again.

There was something on Dieter's mind, too. He had been fighting off the thoughts all day,

but they kept working their way into his consciousness. It was Christmas Day, even though the men all seemed to go out of their way not to mention it. He kept thinking about his home, his farm. His family had always celebrated for three full days: Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and the "Second Day of Christmas," on the twenty-sixth. That was a day for another fine dinner and more visits from relatives. The three days lived in Dieter's mind as a brightness in the dark of winter—the cold held out by the fire inside, all the laughter. And always, he had gone to mass with his family. His Hitler Youth leaders had derided religion and taught that it led people into a stupid sentimentality that good Nazi party members couldn't afford. Maybe that was true. Dieter didn't know what he believed about God and all the things his parents believed, but he did think fondly on the Christmas Eve mass, the music, the festive decorations. This dark Christmas night was the first for him, away from his family and all that light. In the silence, now, with Schaefer off in his own thoughts, Dieter finally allowed himself to picture his parents, to ask himself what everyone back home was doing. He promised himself that he would only allot a

little time for that, and then he would turn his thoughts to something else.

But Schaefer said, "This is your first Christmas away from home, isn't it?"

"Yes. Certainly," Dieter said, and he tried to sound matter-of-fact.

"I've been gone four times now. The last time I was home for Christmas was nineteen forty."

"I thought you went home after you were wounded."

"I did. But not until August. And then I was sent out here. Last Christmas I was in a hospital, in Poland. That wasn't so bad."

"We'll have plenty of time for Christmas after we win this war."

"Just be quiet if that's all you can say, Hedrick. I don't want to listen to any of that tonight." Schaefer leaned back and was quiet for a time, but then he startled Dieter by beginning to sing. *"Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht."* His voice was hoarse, ugly, but he could carry a tune better than Dieter would have thought, and he sang the song all the way through, every verse, every word.

Dieter felt it all, but he didn't protest.

"You sing one," Schaefer said, when he was finished.

"No. I can't sing."

"What song do you like?"

"It doesn't matter."

"No. Tell me."

"I don't know. '*O du Fröliche,*' I suppose."

"Yes. Everyone likes that one." And Schaefer sang it through. "Oh you happy, oh you blessed, grace-bringing Christmas day. The world was lost, Christ was born; take joy, all Christianity."

Dieter listened, but when Schaefer was finished, he felt the need to say something, to prove that he was in control of his emotions. "So tell me, Corporal, do you believe in God, then?"

"No. I guess not."

"Why sing such things, then?"

"I like the songs. I like the memories."

"Then why no faith in God?"

"I don't know. I thought I believed right up until the moment I knew I didn't. Suddenly, nothing was there. I wanted to pray, but the idea was stupid to me, and I couldn't do it."

"What happened?" Dieter was still trying to sound as though he were merely chatting, but he was a little afraid of what Schaefer might say.

"I got a letter from my wife. I was on the eastern front, near Stalingrad, and it was the

heart of winter. We had had no mail for a long time, and we were in the worst conditions you can imagine. Men were starving to death, freezing to death. Finally, we got a little food, and we got our mail. I opened my letters—four or five of them—and in one, months old, was the news that my son had been killed."

"Killed in action?"

"Yes. In a way. He was in Hitler Youth, like you, and he was manning an antiaircraft gun, near Mannheim, where I'm from. He was only seventeen. The last time I had seen him, he had been fourteen. Just a boy—happy, a good football player, innocent of everything."

"He died for his country, Schaefer. You have that to be proud of." Dieter knew when he said the words that they would bother Schaefer, but it was the truth, what the man should think.

Schaefer took a long breath, and then muttered, "I can't talk to you. I simply can't do it."

Dieter knew better than to say anything else, and actually, he was sorry—not for what he had said, but merely that he had said it, knowing how Schaefer thought about things. But the man was a sad case, someone who had lost his will.

"Do you have any idea how many boys have

died in this war, Hedrick? German boys? Russian boys? American and English boys? Chinese? Japanese? Polish? Canadian? Australian? How many little children? How many women?"

"The Americans and Brits are swine, Schaefer. They're the ones who attack civilians."

"Do you think that *we* don't?"

"We bomb London, in retaliation, but they are the ones who—"

"You believe all these lies. You know nothing. We attacked London early on, in the beginning. We wiped out Warsaw. We're as much to blame as anyone for all this killing of children and women and little boys."

That couldn't be true. Dieter was sure it wasn't, but he wouldn't argue with this man. He would only pity him. The man had lost a son, and that was something Dieter could try to understand.

"Dieter, there's something I want to tell you. You won't believe me, but listen, anyway, and the time might come when you'll see that I'm right."

Schaefer almost never called him Dieter, rarely spoke with such gentleness. The tone only frightened Dieter. "Save your words, Schaefer,"

he said. "I won't listen to you. I won't ever believe the distortions I hear from you."

"You'll listen because you can't do otherwise." But then he hesitated before he said, "You need to know this. We aren't moving fast enough. The Americans retreated for a while, but now they're holding, and that means we've lost this battle. The Americans and British have troops all over France and Holland. They're all rushing here now. You can bet on that. Once they hit us with all they've got, we're dead. We'll have to retreat back into Germany—that or be taken prisoner. Or die."

"Then I'll die first."

"If that's what you want, you'll have the chance. Plenty will. But that's what I want to tell you. Don't do it, Dieter. Don't do it. Go back to your parents. Don't break their hearts."

"I don't want to hear this, Schaefer. I told you that. It's more traitorous talk. I could have you shot for the things you've said to me."

"Just listen to me. I have some good advice for you. You'll claim to refuse it, but remember it when the time comes."

Dieter decided to be silent, to let Schaefer talk, but not to let the ideas sink in.

"First, if we get overrun, and you get the chance, surrender. That's your best chance of surviving this war."

"Swine."

"Second, if I get wounded or killed, find one of the older men to partner with. They've learned how to stay alive, and you haven't."

"Schweinhund."

"Listen to me, Dieter. You didn't answer my question before. But I know this. Millions of boys are dying in this war. Millions. The only thing you should care about now is staying alive. Germany has already lost the war. The Russians have won in the east. And now the enemy are overtaking us in the west. This battle is desperate, just a wild gamble, and it isn't going to work. So there's nothing left to fight for. Save your own life. Don't die for that pig Hitler."

But this was too much. "You can't say that to me," Dieter shouted, and suddenly he lunged at Schaefer, swung his fist at the voice. But he hit the man's big coat in the chest or shoulder, and then Schaefer grabbed Dieter's wrist and held it. Dieter tried the other fist this time, and got in a punch at Shaefer's face, but it didn't seem to move the man, and now he had hold of both

Dieter's wrists. And the sickening man was saying softly, "It's all right, son. I don't blame you. But I'm telling you the truth. I beg you, don't get yourself killed. It isn't worth it."

Dieter struggled a little against Shaefer's grip, but not much. He didn't have the strength to break free.

Chapter 10

On the day after Christmas, Spence's battalion boarded trucks and moved north, closer to the front. The truck drivers dropped the men off, threw off some equipment, and got out fast, but Spence saw no sign of any action nearby. In the distance he heard rumblings of artillery fire, and down the hill from where he was standing he could see two burned-out American Sherman tanks and a German *Panzer*. "That looks like one of those big Tiger Tanks," Ted said.

Spence nodded, but what he had noticed now were some dark lumps alongside the German tank. He was pretty sure they were bodies.

"Hey, look at that," Vic Barela said. "Stiffs. I'm going down there to check 'em out. Maybe I can pick me up some souvenirs."

But Sergeant Pappas said, "Just stay where you are. We've got to find out where we're digging in."