Dieter's wrists. He pulled one of Dieter's hands and then the other deep under his arms, against his warm body, and then he clamped his arms down over them.

Dieter liked the warmth, but not the dependence or the cost this was to Schaefer. "Your coat is wide open," Dieter finally said.

"I'm all right." Dieter knew what he had to do, but the idea was repulsive, angering. "I'll lean against you so you won't freeze."

It was the logical thing to do. The man's coat was open, and Dieter could press his chest against Schaefer's, keep the front of him warm while Dieter's hands were warming. It was almost more than Dieter could stand, but he leaned forward, laid his head against Schaefer's shoulder, and pressed his chest against the man's front. He rested there for a moment, liking the warmth and comfort more than he ever could have suspected, but was shocked when he realized that—for no reason he understood—he felt as though he was about to cry.

But he didn't cry. What he did was go to sleep, resting against Schaefer's chest, feeling almost warm, almost safe.

Chapter 13

"Okay, men, listen up." Lieutenant Nowland was striding toward the men of the platoon, many of whom were gathered around little fires. They were heating coffee, thawing out K-ration cans. Spence didn't like the serious look on the lieutenant's face.

Nowland asked the men to gather around him, and then he said, "We've spotted a company of Krauts in that forest down off this hill. We're going after them."

"Across an open field?" Sergeant Pappas asked.

"Yes." Pappas cursed quietly, but he didn't have to say what he thought. Everyone knew. Men were going to die today.

"Sergeant, that's enough. In case you haven't learned the concept yet, in a war we engage the enemy. We can't do that from here."

Pappas took a long breath. He knew ten times more about fighting a war than Nowland

did. "I understand that, sir," he finally said. "But do they have tanks?"

That was almost always the problem for Airborne divisions. The Germans they were facing were mostly armored units, but paratroopers weren't equipped with tanks.

"The captain didn't say anything about tanks," Nowland said. "He just said we're all going in—the whole company. Finish up what you're doing. At 0800 we jump off."

Spence didn't want to eat anything more. He tossed a half-eaten can of SPAM into the snow. It made a hole the shape of the can, and all Spence could think about was putting his foot into that snow, hiking all the way down the hill, straight into enemy fire.

Last time he had done that, he had made it—by luck, as much as anything—but it was hard to believe he could get that lucky again. He had taken a hit in the arm that day, but the bullet had only bit a hunk of flesh out of his forearm, just below his elbow, and the medics had dressed it, there in the field, and hadn't even sent him back to an aid station. Another bullet had torn a chunk from the heel of his boot. At times now, Spence wished that one of those bullets

had done enough damage to get him sent to a hospital, at least until spring. He was scared of being killed, and tired of the cold, but there was more to it than that. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about the young boy he had killed, or Erickson, who had been torn in half only because he had gone up the stairs first, ahead of Spence. When he tried to go to sleep at night, he kept seeing all that, like movies, playing back.

At 0800, the order came: "Move out. Stay spread out. Five yards between you and the next guy." Spence looked over at Ted. The skin around Ted's eyes was drained of blood; his lips were white. Up and down the line, no one was talking. Spence was having trouble getting his breath, but he stepped into the opening. It was 600 yards down this hill—something like that—but he was relieved when he had gone twenty and no one had fired on him. He told himself it was just a hard walk, in deep snow, but that no one was watching him from the woods at the bottom of the hill—not like last time.

It was hard going, the same hard going he had known so often lately. Every step was a fight as he tugged his boot back out of the hard-crusted snow. In only a few minutes he was

breathing deep, feeling his lungs start to labor, and in another couple of minutes he felt himself begin to sweat inside his heavy overcoat and uniform. He was carrying a musette bag over his shoulder, with extra socks and underwear, and at his waist, attached to his webbing gear, were a canteen, knife, first aid kit, compass, grenades, and his entrenching tool. Besides that, his pockets were full of K-ration cans. All of it was heavy and only made things harder.

But halfway down the hill there was still no fire, no sign of the enemy. He began to think about the hole he would dig that night, probably in these woods. He hoped the dirt was softer there. And then a thought occurred to him, and he felt a load lift from his shoulders. Those Germans had been dug in. If they had cleared out, they had left some nice foxholes behind. He could spend his time fixing a hole up, enlarging it, covering it, and maybe he would get a nice night's rest, for once.

It was a good thought, and he was still moving ahead, no problem. After 400 yards or so, the ground leveled out, which actually made the walking a little harder. He was getting a little ahead of the others, and so he held up for a moment to

catch his breath. He was looking around, actually thinking how pretty the snow was on the trees, when he heard someone gasp, "Tanks!"

Spence scanned the woods to the end. Off to the left, crawling around the trees, were two big German tanks. Tigers. Their long guns—88s—were swinging around toward him. At the same moment, Spence's eyes were pulled back to the woods, where something had moved. He saw three men, in white suits, run into the opening. One was carrying something over his head; he looked as though he had a thin, black horn growing out of his forehead. He dropped down, and the other two men dropped to their knees with him. They were setting up a machine gun, a big MG42. Off to the right of the threesome, another team was doing the same thing. And now soldiers with rifles were emerging from the trees.

Spence had already spun around by the time he heard the command, "Fall back! Fall back!"

This was a trap. There was nowhere to go but back up the hill, no reasonable cover to the left or right. The woods back at the top of this long incline seemed miles away, but that's what he had to get to. Spence had no time to think,

only to run, but he already knew what was about to happen, and somewhere in his consciousness was an obvious truth. Some officer, somewhere, had made an absolutely stupid decision to send him into such a mess.

For about ten steps, Spence tried to run all out. But he knew immediately that his body wouldn't hold out. He couldn't last a hundred yards running that hard, and he had 400 to go, maybe more. And so he slowed to a reasonable pace, slogged hard, jerked his feet from the snow, reached as long as he could, stepped again, and made what wobbling progress he could. And every second, he expected a bullet in his back. The machine guns had already begun to chatter.

The first of the 88s' shells hit to Spence's right. He heard the familiar *whomp* as it thumped into the snow, and he saw the dark earth spatter over the white, up the hill ahead of him. He heard men screaming, too. What he didn't do was look around. He concentrated on the snow in front of him, trying to step where he—or someone else—had stepped before, on the way down. But it didn't help, and when two more shells struck, almost at the same time, the concussion knocked him off his feet. One shell had

hit close, and he had seen a steel helmet fly past him, had heard the grunt of a man who must have died too quickly to feel the pain.

But he still didn't look, didn't glance back. He fought his way back onto his feet and kept driving himself up the hill. The buzz of machine-gun fire was around him, the bullets pounding into the snow. He was moving as fast as anyone, faster than most, but he didn't think about that, didn't think much of anything except that there was no chance to make it to the top. He was breathing too hard already. He remembered that old agony, the searing sickness in his lungs that he had known during those agonizing training runs back in Georgia, and he knew his limits. He could go another fifty yards, perhaps, but his legs would never take him to the top. He tried to step too long, stumbled, and went down on his face, and he felt bullets whap around him. For a moment be thought of staying down, playing dead, but another spray of bullets brought him back to his feet. As he came up he threw off his musette bag and then tore off his heavy coat. For a few steps he felt lighter, and he burst ahead. He tried to imagine that he was a harder target, farther from the bullets and the big shells, smaller

without that coat. But then the guy next to him went down. He cursed, and Spence heard the gurgle in his voice, knew that he would die. Spence didn't hesitate, didn't think of stopping to help his comrade, didn't even wonder whether it might be Ted.

Shells were crashing into the earth, spraying mud, mostly to the distant side of the hill now, away from Spence. But the machine guns kept pounding, and a guy almost in front of Spence went down. How had that happened? How had a bullet gotten through him—over him or past him—and hit a man in the same path?

The man was screaming at God, swearing, but also praying. As Spence trudged past, the soldier rolled onto his back, and Spence saw a bloody glob, the guy's insides hanging out of him.

Spence kept going, but he fell again, face first, into the snow. As he came up, his hand fumbled for his webbing, and he released the other things he was carrying—his ammunition, canteen, everything. And that helped. He willed himself back onto his feet and kept hold of his rifle. It crossed his mind, vaguely, that he was running from battle, that he should actually turn

and fire his weapon. But he knew he couldn't do that. Maybe he knew it was useless; maybe he was following the command to fall back; maybe he was only doing what everyone else was doing. But the fear inside him was screaming, "Don't look back. They'll see you. They'll shoot you."

He was driving his left foot forward, rather off balance, when something hit him in the head. It banged off his helmet, sending him flying. He plunged into the snow, confused. He had taken a hit, he was sure, but he felt no pain, only the burning in his lungs. His legs were leaden now, too dead to go on. He stayed in the snow and decided to take his chances on the ground. Maybe he was hurt; maybe medics would come for him and fix him up, take him to a hospital.

But Sergeant Pappas's voice was suddenly there, screaming at him, and he felt someone grasp his arm. "Get up, Morgan. Keep going. They'll kill you if you stay down."

Maybe the few breaths, the seconds of rest, had helped, because he expected to fall down again when he tried to get up, but he got his legs under him and drove forward again. And he realized he

was closer to the top than he had thought. He finally looked to the woods above, not just at the snow in front of him. He saw he had only a hundred yards or so to go—like that last kick in a race—and he was out in front of almost everyone. He didn't know how many had fallen, didn't know how many were behind him, but there was comfort in being the most distant target, comfort in the thought that in those trees was dark cover, a place to hide.

And then a new thunder opened up. A series of tremendous thuds shook him, almost knocked him over. What terrorized him was the realization that the sound was in front. Were the Germans shooting from both sides now? Was there nowhere to go?

He came to a stop, in spite of himself, and it took a moment to accept what he suddenly realized: The guns were his—American. Big 105s. And they were firing down the hill *at* the Germans.

The sound was like trains flying overhead, like the sky breaking apart, but the guns had saved him, and Spence knew it. He pushed ahead again. He lumbered on through the snow, and finally he glanced back. The tanks were turning, dropping back. The machine-gun teams

had already disappeared. Spence sank to his knees, bent forward, tried to get his breath. But he wouldn't really feel safe until he was off this hill. He breathed for a time, then forced himself up one more time and, wobbling, put one foot ahead of the other. He glanced around and saw that others were catching up, also finishing their retreat. Something like half the men had made it—many more than seemed possible. Most had dropped their gear, the same as he had. He was relieved not to be the only one.

He staggered into the trees and dropped on his back, but he was sick. He rolled onto his side and expected to vomit. Lieutenant Nowland stopped next to him. "Good job," he said. "Good job, Morgan. That was some run."

"I tossed my gear," Spence said, wanting to confess, wanting to find a reason to be angry with himself.

"We all did. At least you have your rifle. Some of the guys dumped their weapons, too."

Spence was glad to know that. He didn't want to believe that he was a coward. But as he lay there gasping, he finally got a chance to think, and he realized what he needed to know. "Did Ted make it?"

"Who?"

"Draney?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him. Do what you've got to do here for a minute, but when you can walk, head over to where we were this morning. We'll go back to the same holes."

"All right." But now Spence was frightened. He got to his knees, breathed some more, and then stood up and looked around. A guy named Slocum, a fellow from his squad, was lying in the snow not far away, still heaving for breath.

"Did you see Draney?"

Slocum couldn't talk yet. He drew in air for a long time before he said, "Draney went down. I saw him on the ground, on his back."

Spence took a step toward the hill. "Where?"

"I don't know. Way down there."

"Where?" Spence was going back down the hill. He had to.

"He's dead, Morgan. His chest was bleeding. He wasn't yelling or nothing. He was gone."

That wasn't good enough. Spence had to find him. Medics might be able to fix him up. He walked to the clearing at the top of the hill, where the last of the men were down on the ground, still trying to breathe. He went on past, starting down the hill.

"Morgan, where are you going?" Sergeant Pappas yelled at him.

"Draney," was all Spence could manage to say.

"Let the medics do what they can down there—when they can. You can't walk down and back again."

Spence was suddenly furious, and it was mostly because Pappas was right. He couldn't make it down and back. And Slocum was probably right. Ted really was dead. Spence knelt in the snow again, and finally he vomited. But that only relieved him of the sickness in his gut. And suddenly he was furious. He hadn't known it would be like this, hadn't understood what he was getting into when he had signed up. Some idiot had sent the company down that hill, sacrificed them for no good reason. Who was running this war? Did they know what they were doing? Did anyone even care that Ted had died for nothing?

Spence wanted to be angry, stay angry. He wanted to hate someone for this. But the anger was hard to hold. Out there in the snow, without a coat, he began to cool, began to weaken, feel the pain in his arm—feel everything. But he didn't want to walk back to the men, didn't want

to hear what Nowland or any of the rest of them had to say. It was Pappas who finally walked out to Spence. "Look, Morgan," he said, "I know that's real tough—losing your buddy. But we gotta get you over to a fire or you'll get so cold inside, you'll never survive the night. We've got some guys going down to bring back the coats and gear and everything, but you won't get that stuff for a while."

Spence got to his feet, and then he turned and looked at Pappas.

"I lost my partner, too," Pappas said. "Barela is down there on the hill with Draney. You and me, we might as well dig in together." He put his hand on Spence's shoulder. "You'll be all right. The best thing is, don't think about it too much. Just keep doing what you gotta do. That's the one thing I've learned. You can't let all this stuff get in your head too much."

Spence didn't agree with that, not at all. He couldn't just forget Ted. The idea was almost sickening. And yet the kindness in the sarge's voice reached him, meant something. He turned back around, looked down the hill. He had started to cry, and he didn't want Pappas to see that. He tried to control himself, not let go, but sobs were

breaking from him, shaking him, and he felt like a stupid little boy.

"That's okay, Morgan," Sergeant Pappas said. "Give it a minute, and then come on over."

And that's all that Spence could do. But if he could have, he would have traded places with Ted, let him have his chance to get home to see his family.