

CHAPTER 14

When the first crash of artillery struck, Dieter heard the sound behind him, the shell bursting in the trees. "Fall back," he heard his sergeant shout, but his instinct was not to do that, not to run into the very trees where the shell had just hit. Besides, there were still Americans on the hill, maybe half of them still alive and moving. Dieter wanted to keep shooting.

But the next crash was much closer, and Dieter heard a scream, saw mud spatter. And again he heard his sergeant. "Drop back into the woods and keep going."

This time Dieter didn't hesitate. He ran hard, fought through the snow, reached the trees, and kept moving. He knew where the hole was that he and Schaefer had slept in the night before—or thought he did—and wanted to get to it. But the trees were confusing, the trails trampled, and he wasn't sure where he was going. He ran, kept plunging downward

through the wooded area, and now the artillery shells were striking in the trees. A few minutes before, he had felt the thrill of seeing the *Amis* on the run, trying so hard to fight their way up that long hill. Now all that was forgotten. He heard the shrapnel spinning through the trees, and he expected any second to be hit.

And then someone grabbed his arm, and he twisted to see Schaefer. "This way," he shouted, and he broke to his left. Schaefer was right, too. He ran ahead, not very fast, but directly to the hole he and Dieter had dug. He stopped and let Dieter drop in, and then he climbed in with him. They ducked down, and Dieter felt much safer.

Schaefer was breathing hard, his face splotchy from the effort. "I'm too old for this," he muttered.

Dieter laughed. He felt the exhilaration now. He and Schaefer were all right. Dieter had learned to accept the sound of artillery shells, not to feel the panic he had in those first days. And now he was remembering what he had done. He had shot some of those Americans. He was certain that he had put down at least a couple of them himself. "They won't get many of us," he

said, "and we cut their numbers in half. Tomorrow, we'll attack again, and we'll drive them back. I guess we're doing all right for ourselves."

"Yes. For now."

"What's wrong with you, Schaefer? You never take any joy—not even in our victories." Dieter didn't want to be angry with the man. Schaefer had gotten Dieter through the night. He had warmed his hands, inside his coat, and then, once Dieter was doing better, had given him his own gloves. Schaefer had survived the night with his hands tucked inside his coat, and now he was using a double pair of socks for mittens. When Dieter had begged him to take his own gloves back, Schaefer had absolutely refused. In some ways, all that bothered Dieter; he didn't want to be treated as a child. But still, the man, however gruff—however misguided—could be kind, and Dieter did appreciate that.

"On the eastern front we would throw back the Russians sometimes, and always, the next day, they would come back all the more determined—and with reinforcements. There was never any end to them. They just kept coming."

"It isn't that way here."

"Maybe. I don't know. Those are big guns

they're firing at us. If they stay after us, they can do some heavy damage."

Dieter leaned back and breathed. He could still hear artillery, but it wasn't zeroed in on this part of the woods. The bursts rumbled through the trees—no more frightening than a distant storm. Dieter was proud of himself that he was learning how things were, that he wasn't frightened by every little noise any longer. "We took care of them today, in any case. Did you see how many of them went down?"

"Yes. I saw."

Dieter was still excited. He squirmed a little in the hole and found more room for his legs. "Did you get a few yourself? I did."

"I don't know."

"You must be a good shot by now, Schaefer. You probably killed more than I did."

Schaefer didn't respond. Dieter could see his face, shadowed, his growing whiskers, his tired eyes, but he couldn't see any emotion. He didn't know what the man was thinking, but the silence seemed a censure, and it was maddening. "Don't tell me you're not happy for every *Ami*, and for every Russian, you can put away? If you say that, I'll know you're a traitor."

Again, Schaefer said nothing. "Well, which is

it? Are you proud for the enemy you've killed or not?"

Schaefer took a breath, still rough from the running, and then he said, "Dieter, be quiet. Let's get some rest. I'm tired."

"I want to know whether you're on our side or not. I need to know what kind of a man I'm stuck with."

Schaefer's hands came up, those dark stockings, palms out. "Enough," they seemed to say. "Stop."

"I tell myself, these are the men who will rape my sisters, who will kill my parents and take away my farm. These are the men who want to destroy my country. I have no problem taking their lives before they take ours. Maybe you're soft inside, Schaefer; maybe you shed tears for these men who fall in front of us, but I'm not like you. I know what I'm fighting for."

"Dieter, I'll tell you what you're fighting for." But this was something new. Dieter heard a kind of rage in Schaefer, not in the volume of his voice, but in the tightness. "I'll tell you what I saw in Poland. I was in Warsaw, after I was shot. I was in the hospital there for over a month. I met a man who knew what was happening. He

didn't try to hide it—he bragged about it."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Most of the Jews who have been gathered up in Germany, across Europe, that's where they've been taken, to Poland. They live in ghettos, in filthy, stinking apartments, with barely enough food to survive."

"It's what they've brought upon themselves, Schaefer. You know what the *Führer* says. We must do hard things to set the world right."

"Listen to me, Dieter. I want you to know this." He was breathing harder now, as though he had been running again.

Dieter was frightened. He had some idea what was coming, and he didn't want to hear it. "Don't start with the lies that the Jews themselves spread. I won't listen to that kind of nonsense."

"Dieter, do you know any Jews?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever known a Jew? Even one?"

"I had a friend, in school, when I was young. A boy named Aaron. But that was before I learned all about them, the way they are."

"What did you learn? Was Aaron filthy, Dieter? Did he do anything to harm anyone? Was he dangerous?"

"He was just a boy."

"What about his parents, then? What problems did they cause?"

"I don't know."

"Then answer me this: Where are they now?"

"I have no idea," Dieter said.

"Are they living near your home somewhere, where they did before?"

"No."

"Where did they go?"

"I told you. I don't know." But Dieter did know something. Aaron's family had been forced to leave, forced to board a train and take nothing more than suitcases with them. When Dieter had asked about it, his father had merely said, "It's not our business, son. It's better not to ask about these things." But after, in the Hitler Youth, when Dieter had heard the disturbing, nasty truth about Jews, how they controlled the money supply, and hated Christians, caused terrible problems with their deceit and lies, he would sometimes think of Aaron, and he would wonder whether that was true of him. He had seemed a normal boy, like any of them.

"I'll tell you what has happened to them, this family you knew," Schaefer said. "If they were

treated like the others, they were pulled out of the ghetto. They were forced into trains—men and women and children, young and old—and they were shipped to death camps."

"This is all a lie. You've accepted the lies of our enemies. I'm telling you, Schaefer, stop now, because I won't listen." He pushed his fingers up under the curve of his helmet, clamped his hands over his ears.

"Hitler is gassing these people, Dieter—and burning their bodies."

Dieter pulled his hands down. "Burning them? What in the world are you talking about?"

"It's done by the SS. The cowards *murder* Jews, then drag their bodies off to ovens and burn them. I have talked to a man who did all these things—a guard who bragged about the number of Jews who could be burned in a day, the thousands and thousands he had put to death."

"He was a liar, then. I have no idea why you want to believe all this." Dieter was sickened by the thought of such a thing, but he knew it couldn't be true. His Hitler Youth leader had told him that lies like this sometimes circulated,

but they were senseless. Why would Germans kill people when labor was so much in demand? It wasn't logical. Some people only wanted to make Germans look bad, didn't care about truth.

But Dieter knew there was no use talking to Schaefer. As soon as he had the chance, Dieter would have to report the man, get him off the line.

"Dieter, listen to me. You have to know this—whether you want to or not."

"No. I don't have to hear it. I hate these lies."

"When this war is over, Dieter, all this will come out. I hope, by then, you lie in bed at night and remember this day and those boys you killed. I hope you'll be ashamed to know you fought for Hitler—a little madman."

"Be quiet. That's enough." He grabbed his ears harder this time, began to hum, so he wouldn't be able to hear.

But Schaefer grabbed Dieter's wrists, hard, and jerked his arms down. "I shot at no one today, Dieter. I aimed beneath those boys. I didn't kill a single one of them. But I have killed, killed plenty in Russia, and what I wish is that I had died instead. I'm ready to die anytime."

"You're a coward. You listen to lies, and then you put your comrades in danger by refusing to shoot the enemy. You will be hanged if you make it through this battle. I'll see to it that you are."

But Dieter was only saying words now, and he was struggling to believe them. He needed his Hitler Youth leader. He needed those who knew the whole truth to join with him. It was too hard to take on Schaefer by himself.

"I want you to live, Dieter. I want you to live long enough to be ashamed. It's what you deserve. Maybe you've been duped and misguided, but there's something wrong with German boys like you—and me—that we fall for these things. Hitler visits with you in his fancy train, gives you a piece of junk medal, hardly worth a mark or two, and you're willing to die for that. What's wrong with you? Do you have any idea?"

Dieter was sitting with his rifle next to him. He grabbed it and pressed the barrel against Schaefer's chest. "Stop now. Don't say another word. If you do, I'll pull this trigger and blow you apart. I cannot tolerate one more word."

"Pull the trigger, Dieter. It would be a relief to me, and it would give you one more thing to think about the rest of your life."

Dieter knew he needed to kill Schaefer before he tried to corrupt anyone else. So Dieter squeezed the trigger, hard—or tried to—but nothing happened. The message never seemed to leap from his brain to his finger, and he was humiliated when he let the weapon slip back down to the ground.

CHAPTER 15

"Here they come," Sergeant Pappas whispered, but Spence didn't have to be told. He saw the tanks—three in a line again—roll out of the woods. It was early morning, still mostly dark, but the big Tigers looked like giant black beetles, bucking over the snowdrifts, squirming up the hill. Spence could also see tiny creatures in winter whites, working their way out of the trees. What the Germans didn't know was that reinforcements had been brought in overnight—a whole company. The tanks were formidable, but the Americans definitely had the numbers on their side this time, along with the artillery, and they had the high ground.

Spence didn't move. He knew what he had been told: not to shoot until the Germans were well up the hill. The whole idea was to draw them out. Artillery would open up first. What Spence hoped was that those tanks would retreat once the shells started landing. Lieutenant