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

Nowland kept saying that the Germans were getting short on tanks, and they wouldn't leave them out in the open to get worked over. But if they kept coming—and artillery didn't take them out—the only defense the Americans had was a couple of bazookas, and Pappas had told Spence the antitank guns weren't very effective against the big German *Panzer.* Bazookas could sometimes knock off a track and put a tank out of commission, but they could usually only penetrate the armor if a man was willing to put his life on the line and move in close.

"Why are they doing this?" Spence whispered.

Sergeant Pappas was next to him, lying on the ground. "They're getting desperate, I think. Somebody must be telling them they have to break through and take Bastogne, and do it now."

There was something eerie about it. The Germans were walking into a trap, but Spence hated to watch the whole thing: the slow movement of the troops, climbing in a skirmish line, steadily moving up the hill. He wanted to start shooting, drive them back, and then he wanted to return to his foxhole. He always wanted to be

in that hole these days. What he knew was that the Germans still had artillery in the area, and he expected it to start opening up at any second.

But the guns didn't fire and the tanks kept coming, the men. And then, behind him, Spence heard the big American 105s. The first two blasts struck long, over the tops of the tanks, but Spence saw the German soldiers hold up, the tanks stop, and then the next two explosions were right on target. He saw men fly into the air, turn over, their legs spinning over their heads, like acrobats.

By then the German tanks began to fire. But they were backing off, only lofting up a few shells as they retreated. A couple of explosions burst in front of Spence, down the hill a little, and he ducked his head. Then he heard a crash behind him, in the woods. But the shelling didn't last long, and the tanks soon disappeared. What astounded Spence was that the men kept coming. They must have been assuming that the Americans had been riddled the day before and were undermanned. Still, it was amazingly brave, and Spence watched in awe. The 105s kept the heat on, explosions breaking across the long,

open field, but the Germans stayed spread out, and few were being hit. They just kept coming, and the American riflemen, the mortar teams, the machine-gun teams, continued to wait. It was all sort of sickening, these men hunched forward, working their way through the deep snow, not yet realizing that two companies, not just the remains of one, were waiting for them.

The Germans were not more than a hundred yards away when the word went down the line: "Fire at will!"

The machine guns began to clatter—like the putt-putt sound of a single-piston motor—and the blast of rifle fire sounded all up and down the line. Spence didn't worry about aiming at a single target. He merely did as trained, fired to an area in front of him, tried to keep a lot of bullets in the air. But the white uniforms were mostly down now, in the snow. They had taken cover, but they were stranded out in the middle of the hill just as the Americans had been the day before. Artillery and mortar rounds were dropping in on them, however, and if they stayed down they would be wiped out. Spence didn't hear the command, but he knew what was happening. The Germans were being told

to get up, to retreat, to get off the hill. He saw them rising like ghosts, turning, trying to get moving in the deep snow. And he saw them falling, saw blood spatter from their uniforms.

But amazingly, some were not hit—more than Spence could imagine. They charged down the hill, falling, tumbling into the snow, rolling and getting up, fighting ahead. Some of them stayed down, but others managed to keep scrambling ahead, and gradually they were blending into the shadows, the white of the snow. In time, some of them disappeared into the trees. But three-fourths of them, maybe more, had stayed down, were out there dead or wounded. Spence had never seen anything like it. He kept thinking of the day before, when he had been the one trying to get away, and he felt a strange identification with the soldiers who were lying in the snow.

The artillery had stopped now, the small-arms fire, and the silence was strangely unnerving. Spence was breathing harder than he needed to, and the steam kept puffing into the cold, past his eyes. He lay on his stomach, his rifle still ready, but the only soldiers he could see were lumps of white, like mounds in the snow. There

were craters, blotches of black earth, but the only color was a spot of red, here and there. A few of the lumps were moving—not getting up, but squirming, perhaps digging bandages from a pack, or maybe just writhing in pain.

Spence heard a few of the Americans laughing, bragging, but most were as silent as Spence. "Just sit tight for right now," Pappas said. "I'm going to see what Nowland wants to do." He got up, stood straight, and walked away.

Spence kept watching the Germans who were down, and he wondered what they were going through. He knew what he feared more than anything—knew what other soldiers said, too—that they didn't want to die slow, all torn up and mutilated. He had to believe that German soldiers felt the same way. Those guys had walked up that hill, brave as anyone could expect, and some of them were in agony now, with no one to help them. Spence didn't want to think about Ted, but he had to wonder, had he really died in an instant, the way Slocum had said, or did he feel that bullet tear through his back and chest, then feel the life drain out of him?

"Can't we send medics down there?" Spence

asked, not exactly sure who would answer him.

The soldier next to him, a corporal named Atkins, no more experienced than Spence, said, "I guess they send out their own. It's not our job."

That was probably right, but nothing was happening. People were dying who didn't have to, it seemed, or flopping around in pain like those rabbits Spence had killed, back home. Spence glanced around, wondered what the other men were thinking. He saw Sergeant Pappas, over by Nowland, both of them looking through field glasses. He got up and walked to them, and as he approached, he heard Pappas say, "There's more of them down there than you realize. A lot of them are alive, too. I can see the steam in the air when they breathe."

"Why don't their medics come?" Spence asked.

"I don't know."

"That's not our problem," Nowland said, and he walked away.

"Let me look through your glasses," Spence said.

Pappas continued to watch for a time, but finally he handed the glasses to him. Spence

adjusted them a little, and then he scanned the hillside. He saw one of the Germans moving, seeming to be busy at something, probably trying to patch himself up.

And then, for just a moment, the soldier glanced up the hill, toward Spence, and Spence got a good look at his face. He was young—really young. "One of those guys is just a young boy," he said. But it occurred to Spence that the guy probably wasn't a whole lot younger than himself, maybe a year or two. Still, he was one of the farthest up the hill, only 200 yards or so away. He had made a brave charge into all that fire.

"The medics are coming now," someone said, and Spence moved his glasses, spotting the guys with red crosses on their helmets, moving up the hill. One of them kept trudging through the snow, ahead of the others. He eventually reached the boy Spence had seen through the glasses and knelt down next to him.

And then bullets zinged through the air. The medic humped, the way Spence remembered deer doing, when they were standing still and took a bullet. The medic held for a moment, and then slumped to the ground. Spence couldn't believe it. He jumped up and spun to his right. "Hey, what are you doing?" he shouted at a

boy—a kid maybe his age, a guy from the other company.

"I just got my first German," the kid said, and he laughed.

"That was a medic."

"We're going to have to kill 'em all before we're finished. I don't care what his job is."

Sergeant Pappas had gotten up. He spoke almost matter-of-factly. "Hey, don't shoot their medics. That ain't right." But there was no passion in his voice, and the soldier didn't respond. A few seconds later, Spence heard him laugh and make some joke to the guy next to him. One of the men said something about going souvenir hunting down on the hill, once the medics had pulled out.

Spence raised the field glasses again and focused in on the soldier who was down, the one next to the medic. The boy was pulling something from the medic's pack. He probably wanted to bandage himself and stop his own bleeding. He was also yelling for help. When Spence listened closely, he could hear him. But the other medics—three of them—were retreating off the hill, obviously frightened by the gunfire that had taken one of their team.