CHAPTER 16

Spence was sitting in his foxhole, alone. Sergeant Pappas was out checking on the other men. Pappas was a pretty good guy, but he had a lot on his mind. He wasn't one to sit and chat. With time to think now, Spence had Ted on his mind again. He kept wondering about his family. He doubted that a telegram had reached their farm yet, but it wouldn't be long before it did, and Spence knew how devastated the whole family would be. He figured Ted's little brother, Kenny, was going to have the hardest time. A few days before, Ted had let Spence read a letter from the boy. It was simple, with some local news—and lots of misspelled words—but at the end, he had written, "I'm proud of you, Ted. You're fighting for our country, and that's what I want to do, too. Just as soon as they'll let me." Spence hoped that wouldn't happen. He hoped the war would end before Kenny got in on it.

Spence also wondered about his own family,

how everyone would feel if something happened to him. He realized now that he hadn't thought enough about that before. He had worried about being brave, being man enough for battle, but he hadn't considered the effect his decision would have on other people. He knew it would be hard for his parents if he were lost, hard, too, for his brothers and sisters, especially for Lloyd. That should have been obvious to him back when he was so eager to join up, but death hadn't been real to him back then. It was something that happened to other people. Now, already, half the guys in his company were dead, either that or all shot up, and he wondered what chance he had of making it through the rest of the war.

As the sun went down, and sounds began to carry across the snow, Spence had noticed a distant sound. It was like the bellowing of a young calf—one that had gotten its leg caught in a barbwire fence. As Spence listened, however, he thought he heard a word. "Shay-fuh," it seemed to be. "Shay-fuh. Shay-fuh." Spence didn't know any German. Maybe that was a way of calling for help.

Sergeant Pappas came back to the foxhole after a time, and Spence asked him whether he

had noticed the sound. "Sure, I have," he said. "It sounds like he's saying 'Schaefer.' That's a German name."

On and on, the wailing continued, for maybe two hours. The voice would come, strong the first time, and repeat four or five times, the volume trailing off, and then there would be a long wait, maybe ten minutes, before it came again. After each call, Spence would hear a rasping, wheezing sound as the German sucked for air after the exertion. Each time Spence expected a final gasp, and an end to it. But it would return, seeming as strong as the time before. "Shaayyyy-fuh, Shaayyyy-fuh."

The pain in the boy's voice was pitiful. It hurt Spence, got inside him. And what was worse, he thought he knew which soldier it was. He was almost sure it was that young boy who had been trying to bandage himself—the one the medic had been trying to help when some dumb kid had shot him. The whole idea was sickening. That boy could have been bandaged and then moved off the hill. His agony would have been over. He would have had his ticket home.

"Someone toss a grenade down there and shut that guy up," someone yelled from one of the foxholes. "Put him out of his misery."

That actually did seem a good idea to Spence. The boy was probably bleeding to death and would never make it through the night. It might be better if someone ended everything quickly for the guy. He knew that if he were out there on that hill, in pain, bleeding, maybe freezing, he would want the end to come fast. But that thought only led back to his fears—the ones that had been filling his head. He didn't want everything taken away—all the things he had expected of life. He wanted to see Brigham City again; he wanted to get married, have some little kids who called him "Daddy"; go to work, pay bills; do all the things a man did. There were other girls besides LuAnn. He wanted to find one, wanted to know, once in his life, that some girl loved him, even if he was short, even if he did have crooked teeth.

Maybe tomorrow Spence's company would make another drive, down the hill again, and try to push the Germans back. Sergeant Pappas had said that's what might happen. But if it did, Spence could be the one out there bleeding in the snow. In fact, if they kept making these stupid charges, over and over, how could he possibly

hope that his turn wouldn't come? He let that knowledge run around in his head for a while, and then he told himself the truth. All the odds were on the wrong side. And he remembered what Ted had said, that he wished he had never signed up, that he had just stayed home for one more year. Spence thought of Box Elder High, sitting in a warm schoolroom, going to basketball games, eating hamburgers at Dale's.

He shut his eyes and tried to get it all back: home. He pictured Main Street, with the sycamore trees lining the road and hanging over the cars like a canopy. He thought of his house, the way he could look out the kitchen windows toward the Wasatch Mountains and Logan Canyon. He thought of playing basketball with Lloyd, out at the barn, hearing the old wooden backboard rattle when the ball hit the rim. He remembered one morning in the summer, really early, when he had been out working in the orchard with his father, remembered the way the sun had streaked through the trees, and he and his dad had talked about this and that: baseball and boxing and tractors. He wanted another day like that, with his dad. And Mom, with breakfast ready, after his early chores—fried eggs and

bacon, hot rolls, butter—humming church hymns while she fussed around in the kitchen.

Sergeant Pappas left again, checked his men, and then, when he came back to the foxhole, all he said was, "It's getting cold." He hunkered down next to Spence.

"That German is still yelling for help," Spence said.

"I know."

"Can't someone help him?"

"Someone ought to kill him."

"Couldn't one of our medics go down and get him?"

"I've seen Krauts shoot our medics rather than accept their help."

That didn't make sense to Spence. It sounded like an excuse. "I'll go down there, if you want. I could maybe patch the guy up and pull him back."

"No, no. If we overrun this hill again tomorrow, our medics will look after him. But they don't go out in front of our lines to help one of their guys."

"But one of our guys shot their medic. That's why the kid is still there."

Pappas hesitated, as though the point carried

some weight with him, but then he said, "Maybe so. But we can't do anything about that now."

"He's just a young kid, Sergeant. Really young."

"We can't help that. That's what the Germans are doing now—calling up little boys." And then he laughed. "About like you."

"Schay-fuh!" came the cry again. The voice was getting weaker. "Schay-fuh!"

"If that was some kind of animal, we'd at least go shoot it. There's no way we ought to let that guy moan like that."

"Never mind. There's not one thing we can do. Let's just go to sleep."

But sleep didn't come for Spence, and every time he thought the German was finally dead, the voice would return. It was a moan now, not a desperate cry. It was like a little kid crying after the pain had ended, just crying from momentum, from memory of the hurt. Spence remembered Lloyd, when he was younger, how he would cry like that. But that thought, that connection, was almost too much for Spence. What would he want someone to do, he asked himself, if his own little brother were the one down there?

Sergeant Pappas slept for a time, snored, and Spence thought of trying to climb from the hole without his knowing, but that was impossible. A guy like Pappas slept half awake, ready for trouble. He would surely feel Spence move, and stop him. But eventually the sergeant roused himself. It was late in the night, but he got up and then pulled himself out of the hole. Spence figured that he was going out to check on the outpost, make sure the men out there were all right, hadn't fallen asleep.

Spence had made up his mind by then. If Pappas left, he was going down there. He would crawl to that boy and see what he could do for him. So as soon as Pappas left, Spence stood, and once the sergeant was far enough away, he climbed from the hole.

Spence knew his danger was not from the Germans at this point; it was from his own sentries, who might think he was an infiltrator. So he crawled slowly and quietly down the hill, sometimes waiting for minutes at a time before he moved ahead. It was cold in the snow, and he was scared. He was disobeying orders, taking a huge chance, and he didn't feel right about that, but he had to do this.

As he rested, tried to keep his breathing quiet, he thought of the words again, the ones he heard on Christmas Eve: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven." He had sung those words one year in a Sunday school Christmas pageant. But they hadn't meant this. They hadn't meant much of anything to him. He had heard so many sermons, never considered what he was supposed to do about any of them, but a current of warmth came through him as he sang the rest of the verse in his mind:

> "No ear may hear his coming;
> But in this world of sin,
> Where meek souls will receive him, still,
> The dear Christ enters in."

He still wasn't sure what that meant, but he felt like he was doing the right thing, maybe what his dad would have wanted him to do.

He moved ahead, slowly, carefully. At times he lost track of where he was going, but always the sound would return, the call, the heavy breathing. The German was running out of

strength, maybe calling out only in his delirium now, not even knowing what he was doing.

Spence took upward of an hour to crawl the distance, and then, as he approached the German, he began to whisper to him. "Don't get jumpy now. I'm coming to help you." And then, between breaths, "Help you. Only help you. I won't hurt you."

"Schay-fuh?" the man whispered, and he sounded distant, as though he were only half awake.

"No. American. But I'll help you."

Spence was frightened as he came close. He didn't want this guy to react, in his confusion, and shoot him. But the boy was lying on his back, staring upward, and as Spence finally got a look at him, a hint of moonlight on his face, he saw again how young he was. Like Lloyd. Like Kenny.

"I'll help you if I can," he whispered. He got to his knees and looked down on the boy, and the young man's eyes finally seemed to focus. Spence saw the fear, the realization. He threw up his hands, tried to push Spence away.

"I just want to help you," he said, but he could still see the fear in the boy's eyes. And

then he thought of the song. "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie," he sang. He had no idea whether Germans knew the song, but he watched the frenzy leave the boy's eyes, saw him calm. "Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by."

There was blood on the boy's pant leg and in the snow. He had wrapped a bandage around the outside of his pants, over the wound, but the bandage wasn't tight, wasn't really doing much good. Spence kept humming the song as he pulled off his gloves and fumbled in his pockets until he found one of the bandages he kept there. He used it to wrap the boy's leg, around the other bandage, and then he pulled it tight, putting pressure on it. If that was the only problem, he could drag the boy partway up the hill, closer to his own lines, and then he could yell for someone to come out and help. At that point, Sergeant Pappas may not like it, but he couldn't do much about it. He wouldn't stop his men from coming out to help. He might even come down himself.

"Are you hurt anywhere else—or just your leg?"

The boy looked at him with wonder. Clearly,

he didn't understand. But when Spence moved around behind his head and gripped him under the arms, he cried out. And Spence saw the problem. He had tugged on the boy's arm just enough to pull his elbow away from his side. He saw where the coat was torn, saw the blood that was seeping from another wound in his ribs. Maybe there was no way to save this kid now. Spence crawled back to his side and lifted his elbow. He didn't know what to do. He had to keep pressure on the wound, and he had to drag him, too. He looked into the boy's eyes, tried to think.

What Spence saw was desperation, dependence. The boy had to know he was dying, know this American offered his only hope. For a moment some clarity seemed to come into his gaze, as though he were seeing Spence as a boy like himself.

Spence thought of the medic's bag. The medic was lying dead, nearby, but his bag was on the snow, open. Spence turned it over, dumped everything out. There were bigger bandages, in rolls. What he couldn't find was any morphine. But he got behind the boy and raised him up. The young man moaned but tried to use

some of his own strength to stay seated. Spence placed a big bandage over the outside of his coat, and then rolled a long strip around his entire chest. But it wasn't enough, wasn't tight enough. So Spence unbuckled the belt from his trousers and pulled it loose. Then he wrapped it around the boy's chest and snugged it up, over the bandage, tight enough to make him gasp. "Okay. I'm going to drag you. It's going to hurt. But it's your only chance."

Spence moved back around behind the boy's head, began to hum the song again, reached under him, got hold of him under the arms, and he pulled. The German was heavy in the snow, with his snow uniform dragging, but Spence figured he could move him. Once he cut the distance to his men, he would yell, so they would know what the noise was, but for now, he wanted to move him as far as possible without drawing attention to himself.

Dieter was confused. He wasn't thinking straight. He felt weak, horribly weak. Sometimes, he would drift away, lose touch with what was happening, but then the tug would come under his arms and he would feel the pain through his side, and that

would bring him back. What he sensed was that this boy with the kindly voice was helping him. He knew that the soldier was an American, but he didn't seem so. He was just a young man like himself, humming that pretty song, and there was no war in Dieter's head. There was pain, and mostly there was confusion, but there was this boy, too, who had applied new bandages to him, who wanted to pull him off this hill. And sometimes, in this half reality, the boy was Schaefer, his friend Schaefer, looking out for him, finally there to save him.

And then a loud noise shocked Dieter into wakefulness. Someone had fired a rifle. He saw the flash of it, heard the report, from very close. And now a man was over him. A German. "We came for you," he said. "We couldn't stand to hear you yelling all night. We'll get you off this hill."

There were two of them. Two of his comrades. He knew their names, he thought. They were stalwarts, what Germans ought to be. They had come for him after all. They picked him up, the two of them. They lifted him between them, and they tramped down the hill, bouncing and jostling as they went, causing more pain than

Dieter could bear, and then after a time, set him down. They breathed hard, and he realized they were resting, but he was not yet back to the camp below. Something was coming clear to him by then. "Where is the American?" he asked.

"We shot him. The swine was trying to take you prisoner. We put him away."

But the American had spoken so quietly, soothingly, had sung to him. He had bandaged Dieter. Had he only wanted to take him in, to question him? Was that it? Dieter couldn't think about that, not with his mind making dreams half the time.

Spence wanted to yell, but there was no breath in him, no power. He was lying on his back in the snow. And he knew he would die. It was a strange thing to think about, to realize. The pain was filling him up. It had been like fire in his chest at first, and then it had swelled through all of him. Now it was evolving into numbness. But he was still clinging to the wish that all this weren't so. He didn't want to die. He wasn't ready to die.

He kept fighting not to go to sleep. He wanted to yell, to shout for Sergeant Pappas,

but he had no voice, no breath, no strength. He tried to look at the sky, the stars, to keep himself awake by staring hard, not give up, but the fight was just too hard. "I'm sorry Dad," he tried to say, and he let his eyes go shut. He thought of the words again, tried to let the words of the song go through his head.