Spence was angry. Why hadn't anyone told him, just once, what it was really going to be like out here?

"Lassiter and Jones are dead," he told Ted. He was still trying to get it through his head.

"I was talking to those guys coming through the woods on the way over here," Ted said. "Jones was complaining about digging holes all the time."

"I gave Lassiter the cigarettes from my K-ration box. Traded him for Hershey bars."

Ted stopped digging. Spence could hear him taking long breaths. "Jones had a girl waiting for him," he finally said. "He was engaged to her, I think."

Spence had seen the girl's picture. She was no movie star—just a girl with kind of a nice smile. Fairly pretty. One of these days she was going to get the news. So were Jones's parents. He had little brothers and sisters, too. He had shown Spence a family picture.

"It sounds like Bigler's in bad shape."

But that was worse to think about—a boy's jaw torn loose, steel in his back. "Let's not talk about it," Spence said. "Let's just get this hole dug."

Chapter 11

Spence and Ted put in another hard night. At some point in the endless darkness, Spence realized that his toes were freezing. "You asleep?" he asked Ted.

"I don't know. Not exactly."

That was about right, Spence thought. "I think my feet are freezing up," he told Ted.

"We're supposed to take our boots off and rub them."

"I know. That's the last thing I want to do, but I guess I'd better do it." Spence had seen the films on foot care, on trench foot and frostbite, and he knew a guy could lose his toes pretty fast. He sat up and, without getting out of his sleeping bag, tried to work one of his boots off. It was a tight enough squeeze for two of them down there together, but pulling the stiff boot off was a hard job. "What about your feet?" he asked Ted.

"I don't know. They don't hurt much, but they've been numb for three days."

"We gotta get your boots off, too." Part of what Spence liked was something to do, some excuse to move. He was sick of waiting out these nights. After working so hard all day, he felt as though he ought to sleep soundly, but fear had become a third partner, felt like it was snuggled up with him. He hated this tight little hole, and he longed for light, but he didn't want to get out, either. Out in the open, danger had room to maneuver, to come at them from any direction.

Spence got one boot off, finally, and his sock, which had gotten wet and was frozen.

"Put the sock inside your shirt, next to your body," Ted told him. "It's the best way to dry anything. At least that's what they told us in survival training."

"Best way to freeze my ribs solid," Spence said, but he unbuttoned his coat, unzipped his field jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, and worked the sock inside on top of his long underwear. Everything was such a chore. In a minute he would have to dig though his pockets and find his change of socks, but his hands were freezing and so was that bare foot. When he began to rub his toes, pain shot through his foot, like bee stings.

"What's the matter?" Ted asked, obviously hearing Spence moan.

"My toes are like ice. It hurts to move 'em."

"It's supposed to hurt when the blood starts to circulate. Here—let me help you." Spence didn't know what Ted had in mind, but he was sitting up, twisting around. "Get your foot up here and I'll stick it inside my coat for a few minutes. That'll thaw it out faster than anything."

Spence worked his leg out of the sleeping bag, turned around, and then slid back so he could stick his foot toward Ted. As it turned out, the heat under Ted's arm, along his side, was welcome, but painful, as his foot came to life. Spence knew this was what they had been taught to do, but it still embarrassed him a little. He was sort of glad for the dark.

"Did your mom ever heat up a rock, or something like that, and put it in the foot of your bed?" Ted asked.

"No. Not that I remember. I've heard about my parents doing that, though, staying warm in a buggy that way."

"We didn't have electricity out on our farm," Ted said, "not until I was ten or eleven. The whole house was heated by a coal stove in the

kitchen. It was just a little house, but the bedrooms would get cold as all get out. Mom would pile up a bunch of quilts, and then she'd heat up a big round rock in the oven and stick it in the bed—wrapped in a towel or something—before me and my brother would run and jump in. I'll tell you, that rock felt awful good."

"What did you do in the evenings, in the winter, without electricity?"

"My mom and dad don't have much education, but both of 'em like to read. We read a lot of books together, and played checkers, stuff like that. Then in the summer, me and Kenny stayed outside just as long as we could. We'd catch frogs, down at the pond. Bugs, water snakes—anything. We killed some big old rattlesnakes, too. We ran pretty wild, I guess, but we sure do have a lot of good memories."

"Me and Lloyd were kind of like that—except Dad worked us quite a bit."

"Yeah, well, we worked, too. But Kenny always figured out a way to have a good time. Even if he worked, it seemed like we were playing a game. I remember one time he wanted to drive dad's tractor, and he didn't really know how. He got it going and didn't know what to

do—ran it into the side of our chicken coop and knocked a big hole in the side. Dad tried to be mad, but Kenny got him laughing about it."

"He sounds a little like Lloyd. That kid is always fouling something up, but it never worries him too much. He got away with all kinds of things that Dad wouldn't let me and Robert do."

"Yup. Same thing."

Spence felt the warmth sinking into his foot, and he wasn't quite so self-conscious about it the more they just talked. Eventually, he got a dry sock on the foot, and his boot back on, and then he pulled his other boot off. Ted warmed that one, too, the same way, and they talked some more about their families, about teasing sisters, mostly, tricks they had pulled. Then Spence took his turn, took Ted's bare feet, one at a time, in against his own body. It all took time, which was good, and when the two finally tried to sleep again, Spence was glad for the dry feel of his new socks, even if his feet were aching worse than before. But he was also full of thoughts about Lloyd, about the two of them teasing Louise, about the time they had traded a bushel of Dad's Bing cherries for a basketball and then got

caught for it. And he thought about Ted, how much fun they might have had if they had grown up in Brigham City together.

Spence did manage to get a little sleep. It was still early, however, when Sergeant Pappas came to the foxhole and said, "Morgan, Draney, eat something. As soon as first light breaks, we're going to clear the woods just down the valley from here."

"All right, Sergeant," Ted said, and then the two went through another complicated procedure: finding cans of K-rations in the dark, opening them with their bayonets, eating whatever happened to be inside whether it was what they had hoped or not. Spence ended up with some Vienna sausages, which weren't too bad, so he split those with Ted. He also found some cheese and some dry biscuits, but there was nothing to drink since the water in their canteens was frozen.

When they finally pulled themselves out of the hole, Spence realized the worst: that he needed to relieve himself, needed to pull his pants down. He didn't dare go far off, but he slipped a few steps into the darkness, and fortunately Ted had found some toilet paper in his pack. Spence had never gotten used to the inconvenience of living this

way. The time with his pants down, bent over a log, was not just cold but was awkward, with so much gear hanging off him. He thought of mornings back home when he had complained that his sister had taken too long in the bathroom. What he wouldn't have given now for the light, the heat, the mirror, the soap and water he always had at home.

Other men were taking care of the same needs, and plenty of grumbling was going on. The sergeant kept whispering for everyone to keep the noise down. Finally, he led the squad to an assembly point, where Lieutenant Nowland, the platoon leader, whispered instructions. "Just as soon as we can see a little more, we're going to fan out in a skirmish line. We're going to work our way through the woods down this valley a little way. But here's the problem. These Europeans replant their forests after they cut them. Once you get twenty or thirty feet in, you won't be able to see each other most of the time. The trees are all the same size, and they're in rows, so they all look exactly alike. It's easy to get lost. Keep moving forward, and check your compasses once in a while, but don't start shooting each other. We know we've got Krauts up

ahead, in a little village, but we don't know what to expect in the woods. So go easy, watch what you're doing, and don't shoot unless you know what you're shooting at."

This didn't sound good at all. Spence glanced at Ted. "Let's stay within sight of each other," Ted whispered. That did sound like a good idea. But when the sergeant got them set up to go, he had them spread farther apart than Spence had expected. Just as Nowland had warned, once into the trees, it was not only hard to see anyone left or right, it was hard to know directions. In the early gray light, the trees, all firs, were like giant watchmen, and each one could have been hiding a sniper or even a machine-gun emplacement. Spence kept moving ahead, sinking deep into the snow, each step, and then jerking his foot back up, high, to take another stride ahead. He liked the warmth he felt in his body, but he hated everything else—the loneliness, the fear of what might be hiding behind the next tree, the work of moving ahead in the snow.

The walking took his full power, full attention, and after maybe fifteen minutes he was not very confident he was heading in the right direction or that he was out there with anyone else. He checked his compass as he took a breather, and then whispered, "Ted," but he got no answer. The snow on the trees muffled the sounds. What he wanted to do, more than anything, was to bolt to his right and yell for Ted or for his sergeant. It was all he could do to keep moving ahead.

What he found, after a time, however, was that he had moved faster than the others, that he had reached the opposite edge of the woods before anyone else around him. But within a few minutes, others began to catch up. They hunkered down at the edge of the trees and looked down the valley toward a little group of houses—what the lieutenant had called a village. Ted soon came over. "There are two *Panzers* behind that barn down there," he said.

"I know. You can see the back end of them."

"There must be Krauts in those houses."

That was obvious, and yet it was a strange thought. Just a few hundred meters away, men were getting up, or having breakfast—like men getting up to go to work. There was smoke coming from the chimneys, and the houses looked nice, like a picture on a postcard, with

snow-covered roofs and icicles hanging from the eaves. It looked like a little place that ought to be peaceful, ought to be left that way.

Lieutenant Nowland was moving through the trees, talking to the men. "Stay back. Don't get yourselves spotted," he told them. And then he whispered, "We're going to go straight at them, get across this open area just as quickly as we can, and take them by surprise. That means you have to get to those houses before they get their tanks going. Once you start down this hill, don't stop. If they throw some mortars at us, or get some small-arms fire going, you'll think you're safer to drop down into the snow. But if you do that, it's just a matter of time until they get you. The only way to break them loose from those houses is to get down the hill quick and get some grenades inside." He moved the men into another skirmish line and spread them out across the top ridge, inside the trees. "Don't bunch up," he kept telling everyone. "Don't give them any easy targets. When I say, 'Move out,' we all go at once."

Spence wasn't cold now. He had forgotten about the pain in his feet, about the discomfort of the night before. Ted whispered, "Maybe we

can sleep in those houses tonight," but Spence couldn't even think of that. What he knew was that he was going to be running straight at the enemy, right to their doorstep. It was something like that first jump out of an airplane. He knew that very soon he would do what he had to do, but only if he didn't think. His instincts were saying, "Duck down. Don't go."

When the command came, Spence ran harder than most. He was in great shape and had strong legs, even if they weren't very long. He wanted off that open slope as fast he could make it, and so he loped, pulling his knees high—like elk he had watched back home. And nothing happened. Everything was still out in the morning air—except for the grunts and gasps of the men, the rattle of their equipment on their belts. They were more than halfway down the hill, no longer in much of a line, when Spence heard the first *ping*. It was nothing, like the pop of a breaking light globe, and one simple *buzz*, like the ones he remembered from his deer hunting days. But a man to his right went down—hit by the bullet or scared to be hit. Then there was a second *ping*, a second *buzz*, and this time the thud of the bullet in the

snow, very close. Spence's knee buckled, and he almost dove down, but he wanted off this field of white, this target area. He drove himself forward.

By then a chugging sound had begun—like a motorcycle engine. And off to Spence's left the air was all full of thumping sounds. Machine-gun fire, Spence realized, and at the same time he knew the mistake he had made: He was out front, a good target. He had come maybe three hundred meters and had about two hundred still to go. But he didn't slow down. He had to get all that open space out of the way, had to get in next to those houses.

The bullets were whizzing, tracers flying, and ahead of him was a stone fence that cut across the hill. He kept working hard, hopping, pulling against the snow that clung to his feet, but when the buzzes turned into whistles and filled the air right around him, he took a few more steps and then dove down behind the fence. And it felt good to get down. Bullets pounded into the snow, cracked off the stones of the low fence, but he was behind it, safe. Other men were diving down alongside him, but Spence heard the lieutenant scream, "You

can't stop. You're dead men if you do."

And in that instant Spence saw the truth in what the lieutenant was saying. He heard a thump, down by the houses, and a second later, felt an explosion nearby, saw dirt and ice fly. The Germans were getting their mortars going now, and one had hit not twenty feet away. When he felt the crash of debris against his steel helmet, he thought for a moment that he was filled with shrapnel, but no pain struck him—he was all right. Now he had to go again. As he jumped up, the whistling was all around him, and he felt something grab at his coat, rip at his forearm like barbed wire. But he ran, anyway.

He stumbled and rolled, turned over in the snow, and knew even then that his awkward lurch had saved his life, but he scrambled up and ran a few more steps, rolled again, and kept tumbling forward. And somewhere in the confusion, he caught sight of the muzzle fire of a machine gun in the second-floor window of the first house. He knew that was the enemy, the danger that had to be dealt with.

He came up scrambling again, and this time felt something rip at his foot, send it flying out from under him. He cartwheeled again, but

rolled back up to his feet before he was ever really down. He was now just fifty meters away, and he turned the final run into a burst. He wanted to sprint, but the snow was still clinging to his feet, like he was running in a bad dream. When he hit a spot where the snow was not so deep, he made a final charge to the wall outside the first house. When he dropped down behind it, he knew he couldn't stay. He was closer to that machine gun than anyone. He had the best chance of taking it out. He pulled a grenade loose from his belt and then slung his M-1 rifle over his shoulder. He leaped onto the rock wall, rolled over it, and broke to the door of the house. He ran hard, pulled the pin on the grenade, and rolled it ahead of him toward the door. Then he slammed himself against the wall of the house and ducked his head.

The grenade went off, showering him with debris, but as soon as he could look up, he could see that the door was gone. Someone was with him by then. Spence swung the rifle off his shoulder, and when the other soldier—a guy from his platoon named Erickson—broke inside the house, he followed. They ended up side by side, pivoting their rifles, ready for any

movement. But the gun was upstairs, and the popping sound hadn't stopped. Erickson broke up the stairs, and Spence followed again. But as Erickson hit the top of the stairs, he seemed to explode. Blood splattered in all directions, and Erickson's body was thrown back down the stairs on top of Spence. Both men fell backward, crashed to the floor at the foot of the steps, but Spence pushed Erickson off himself and came up quickly. He jerked another grenade from his belt, ran halfway up the stairs, slammed himself against the wall, pulled the pin, then threw the grenade up the stairs and through the open door just as a German soldier stepped out. The grenade rolled past the man's legs, and then blew up behind him. The explosion blasted from the room, and the German was thrown face first onto the stairs. He hit and stayed, and Spence merely watched, too shocked to think of going back downstairs for his rifle. But when the soldier didn't move, Spence waited a second or two, then fumbled at his belt, found another grenade, pulled the pin, jumped up the stairs a few more steps, and rolled it into the room. He waited, pinned himself once more, and heard the detonation. Then he hurried down the stairs,

saw Erickson, now lying in a pool of blood, his legs torn mostly off, his mouth hanging wide open.

But Spence did what he had been trained to do. He grabbed his rifle, pulled it out from under Erickson, and then he charged back to the upstairs room. He came in spraying bullets at nothing, at anything. He shattered a mirror, shot through a chest of drawers, and thumped a couple of bullets into a German who was on the floor next to his machine gun. But the man's face was smashed into the hardwood floor, sideways, and blood was running from his nose, his mouth, his eyes.

Spence stared at the man. And then at another soldier next to him: a young kid who had apparently been feeding bullets to the gunner. The boy didn't seem hurt. There was no blood, no sign of damage. He was lying on his back by a baby cradle, and he seemed to be resting, almost as though he had been spilled from that cradle without waking up. He was clearly younger than Spence. He might have been fifteen, but he looked twelve—he reminded Spence of Lloyd. He was little, with delicate hands, stained from the metal ammunition belts

he had been handling. His eyes were open halfway, dark blue.

Now boots were thudding up the stairs, and Spence spun around. But these were guys from his platoon. "Nice work," someone said. The lieutenant. "You're going to get a medal for this, Private Morgan."

Spence stared at him. He couldn't think what the words could mean. Couldn't Nowland see this little boy on the floor? Hadn't he seen Erickson downstairs?

"Are you hit? Looks like your arm is bleeding." Spence looked down, saw the tear in his coat, the blood. He had forgotten about that.