Chapter 12

It was the first day of 1945. For two days Dieter's company had stayed put. Once their forward movement had bogged down, they had dug in and held on. Now they were being hit, off and on, by artillery fire, so the men couldn't stray very far from their foxholes. To Dieter it was maddening, all this sitting. On the days when the sky was clear, American fighters had become a constant menace, and yet, Dieter had seen almost no German air power.

As night fell, Dieter and Schaefer huddled low in their foxhole to keep as warm as possible, but they said nothing. And Dieter hated the silence as much as anything, these nights that seemed to come in the middle of the afternoon and last almost until the next night. How could a man fight, show himself for the hero he was, when he spent his life huddled in a hole, just trying not to freeze? He pulled a blanket over his head and pressed his face against his arm. His

cheeks were stinging. But when he shut his eyes this way, the same images always came to mind: his home, the light inside, the warmth from his fireplace. Food had been scarce for many Germans for the last couple of years, but the Hedricks had eaten well on the farm. They had always had fresh potatoes, chickens to kill, and they had drunk plenty of fresh milk. He longed for that now, some warm milk and some of his mother's homemade bread. Or the cherry *Kuchen* his mother baked on summer mornings before the kitchen heated up. He remembered the smell of it when he walked into the house after doing his morning chores, or after returning from the creek, where he and his friends liked to swim on summer days. He tried to think of other things, but he kept wishing he could go back to that time—back to his glorious days in the Hitler Youth when the younger boys looked up to him and no one ever talked like Schaefer. Dieter's rise in the *HJ* had been the great achievement of his life. He had started out as such a little boy in *Jungvolk,* small for his age, and timid, but each time he had met the test, had proved himself, he had risen in the esteem of the other boys. Finally he had gotten his

growth, was as tall and strong as anyone, and by then he was a confident defender of the principles that good German boys believed. He could give commands, teach the younger boys. And he had seen in their eyes how much they had wanted to be like him, just as he had once wanted to be like Hans Keller.

The problem was, he was surrounded by lesser men now, and he was stuck with Schaefer, of all people, who must surely have foreign blood running in his veins, who was not half a German, not a tenth of what a great German soldier should be. Dieter had to concentrate on his medal, on the way he had felt that day the *Führer* had looked him in the eye and asked him for a commitment never to stop fighting. And that's what he would do, too. He would keep his promise. He wouldn't think so much about cherry *Kuchen,* about Mother and his warm house. He wouldn't fuss about the cold. He would be ready when the call came to thrust the Americans out of Bastogne. He would do his part and much more. He would show these dolts around him what heroism was all about.

So it was a great relief when Sergeant Franke came to him and Schaefer that night and said,

"We're going to start a push in the morning, and our company will take the lead this time. We'll clear these woods in front of us, and then our whole battalion will make a thrust toward the south. We need to break through the enemy lines and take Bastogne. It's crucial to our entire operation, and we've let the Americans hold out too long."

This was the kind of talk Dieter had been waiting for. When Franke left, Dieter even took a chance and said, "Schaefer, this is it. Tomorrow we can fight like lions. We can prove ourselves. Wouldn't you like to sleep in a nice, warm house in Bastogne tomorrow night?"

Schaefer hesitated for a time, and then, in a quiet voice, said, "Dieter, stay alongside me. The important thing is that tomorrow night, you're still alive."

Dieter rejected the words, casting them aside with a laugh and a wave of his hand. But he did think of dying, of lying dead in the snow. He had seen the bodies, frozen, gray, eyes staring. He told himself that once he was dead, it wouldn't matter what became of his body, but what he feared was nothingness—that if he died, there would be nothing at all. He knew that a hero

shouldn't fear death, but where was the glory in dying for his country and never knowing it—just lying on the battlefield, gray and hard as ice? It was nice to think of a statue in his village, at least a placard with his name on it, but it wouldn't happen, he supposed, and even if it did, what would it mean to him, once he was one of those frozen corpses?

It was a long night. He slept at times, but never long enough to push much night behind him, and the black—which only forced the idea of death into his head—clung like nausea. It stretched time, made it seem worse even than the cold. His winter uniform, his white coveralls, his gloves, his woolen hat—it all helped, but cold had gotten down inside him, and his body felt as though it would never be warm again.

Before daylight Dieter was up with the other men in his company. He ate from his bread sack—black bread and canned meat—and then he set out in the dark, struggling through the snow. The movement was good. He liked the return of blood to his feet and hands. He marched through the trees and then heard the whispered command: "We wait now. The other companies are moving up to join us. When first

light breaks, we start our move, and we don't let anything stop us."

This was it. Dieter finally had his chance. He waited while his breath continued to pump, the steam flooding over his face, his heart pulsing in his ears. Long after he was cooling down, getting his breath, his heart continued its drumbeat. And he told himself that was good. He was ready and alive, not hiding in a dark hole any longer.

As light broke, the men moved forward, worked their way, in a line, through the trees. What Dieter hadn't expected was to feel so separated from the others. Schaefer stayed with him, to his right, and off to his left he caught glimpses of Franke at times, but they were moving through trees that were covered with snow, trees all the same size, and the snow sucked up most of the sound. It was as though Dieter were marching into battle alone, with only Schaefer alongside him. He wished that he had marched with Sergeant Franke, or someone else who wanted this victory as much as he did.

But there was no victory, exactly—just hard walking, with his boots breaking through the crusted snow and sinking to his ankles on some

steps, all the way to his knee on others. The snow had drifted through the trees unevenly. When he would sink to his knee, he would have to struggle to free his foot, and then, on the next step, sink again. It was easy to forget about the enemy, to worry only about moving ahead.

And then Dieter heard the sound he had learned to hate: the high whine that deepened and then ended in a sucking gust just before the concussion. "Get down," Schaefer shouted, but Dieter didn't have to make that decision. His knees had already given way. He was flat on his face in the snow, and when the explosion broke in the trees just ahead, he heard the crash of limbs, the whir of metal in the air. Back in his foxhole, he had told himself that the shell would have to hit right into his hole to get him, and if that happened, he would never know it. But out here, those slashing chunks of metal could cut through his body and leave a string of intestines across the snow. They could spatter his skull, his brain, in all directions, or even worse, they could rip off a leg or an arm, and leave a man screaming, berserk, desperate for help. He had seen all that already, and however brave he wanted to be, he was frozen to the ground now, terrified

that the next shell would strike closer.

For the better part of an hour the noise continued. The explosions were often far off, and Dieter would breathe during that time, wondering whether any soldiers in his company were being hit, but then the guns would shift their aim, and for a time, the shells would come in his direction again. They would shatter the trees, seem to crack the air into pieces, and send a shock of concussion over him, sucking him upward, and then the whistling shrapnel would shoot over him, around him, crashing off trees, knocking limbs down. And sometimes, a scream would follow. "Medic! Help me! Help me." The sound was always so wild and desperate, as though the man were being burned with scalding water.

When the bombardment finally ended, Sergeant Franke gave the quiet a little time, and then he shouted through the woods, "All right. Now we move again. We're all right. We don't have ground troops in front of us."

But Schaefer whispered to Dieter, "Be careful. The *Amis* like to pause and give us time to get up, and then they hit us again."

But it didn't happen. Schaefer had thought

of the worst again, and he had been wrong. All morning the men trudged through the woods, and they confronted no one. Dieter saw no sign, in fact, that enemy troops had ever been here. That only proved how wrong Schaefer was—how wrong all the cowards had been, all those who had held up for several days instead of marching into Bastogne. Dieter had a feeling that his unit could leave these trees, catch a good road, and thrust straight into town.

Early in the afternoon the men came to a little road that cut through the woods, and Captain Schmidt had them stop. It was a chance to re-form the skirmish line, to get everyone moving along together again. It was also a chance to eat. Dieter was happy for the rest, but he hoped this delay wouldn't last long. His company had to move fast to accomplish something today—something more than "clearing" a woods that was empty already. What he feared most was that they would stop soon and start digging in again. Once the digging started, all there was to wait for was another night.

Dieter was sitting by the edge of the road, a piece of bread in one hand and a chunk of old cheese in the other. He had taken both his gloves

off, but he wasn't cold. The clouds had broken up a little, and the sun was actually shining.

But then he heard a buzzing sound. It wasn't artillery, wasn't a truck. He started, looked around, but didn't know what he was hearing until Schaefer screamed, "Fighters!" The airplanes were there, instantly. Two of them. They came in low over the trees, and by the time Dieter moved, they were already strafing straight down the road. *Whap! Whap! Whap!*

Dieter had heard all three thumps in the snow, not more than a meter or two in front of him. If he had moved faster, he would have stepped right into them. It was his indecision that had saved his life. But now he was moving. He jumped and tripped, fell, but scrambled up and stumbled into the woods. He kept running even after he was under cover of the trees. He found a place where brush had grown up around the base of a fir tree, and he dove inside.

He had no idea where Schaefer was, and he felt the loss immediately. The fighters came back, swept along the edge of the woods, and this time fired blindly into the trees. The men were scattered, and the trees stopped most of the bullets this time, but as soon as the fighters passed over

and were gone, Dieter heard Schaefer. "Hedrick, where are you?"

"Over here."

Dieter didn't move, stayed in the cover, but he looked out enough to see Schaefer coming his way. "They won't come back," he said. "Not unless they have ammunition to waste. We never should have let ourselves get caught in the open like that."

Dieter hadn't thought of airplanes, but with the clearing skies, he should have.

By then, Franke was walking over. "The lieutenant says to dig in here," he said. "Under these trees. We'll make another thrust in the morning."

Dieter didn't admit it to himself, but he felt some relief at the idea, no matter what he had thought earlier. He got out his entrenching tool, and he and Schaefer dug their hole very close to the tree, partly under it. The ground was not as hard here where the needles had fallen and insulated the ground under the snow, and he and Schaefer made fast progress. After a time, however, Schaefer took a rest to breathe, and when he did, he asked Dieter, "Where are your gloves?"

Dieter hadn't needed them yet, but he had

thought of them. They were back by the road. He knew he would go back for them, but he hadn't been in any hurry to walk out into the open. "I'll go get them," he said. "I left them where we were eating."

"I'll get them," Schaefer said.

"No, I can."

"You dig. I'm tired of digging. I'll get your gloves."

That was fine with Dieter, but he wished Schaefer would stop telling him what to do. Maybe the man was a corporal, but he didn't really take his rank seriously. He didn't talk to Dieter as a military leader—but like a grown-up dealing with a child.

Schaefer was gone much too long, and when he finally returned, he said, "They're gone. You shouldn't have left them out there so long."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"Just what I said. Someone with old gloves, full of holes, was just happy to have them."

"One of our own men—from our company?"

"Sure."

"No one would do that. German soldiers don't steal from one another."

"It's not your fault you're a fool, Dieter, but

at least start to learn from your mistakes."

"What do you mean? Soldiers steal from their comrades? Is that what you want me to learn? I don't believe it. You looked in the wrong place. I'll go look myself."

"No. It's pointless. Men have to survive. If you don't return for your gloves, someone has to assume you're a dead man. That's the way it is out here."

"What can I do? Where can I get gloves?"

"You can't. I'll give you mine. I know how to manage."

"No. Absolutely not."

Schaefer had begun to dig, but now he raised his head, slowly, and he said, "Fine. Have it your way."

By the time the hole was dug, the sun was low in the west, and with the clearer skies, the cold was coming on fast. Dieter got into his hole, ate again, and then tucked his hands inside his coat pockets. But that wasn't enough. His hands had gotten too cold, and his pockets couldn't produce the heat he needed to get his circulation back. He could feel already that if he didn't do something soon, he would never make it through the night without frostbite. He unbuttoned his coat, trying to be quiet about it. What

he didn't want was for Schaefer to know that he was struggling. He crossed his arms and worked his hands inside his coat along his sides, and for a time that didn't seem too bad. But the cold gradually intensified, and Dieter was feeling it, especially now, with his coat gaping open at the neck. He could also feel his frustration building.

"Put your hands in here," Schaefer said.

"What?"

"In my coat. I'm bigger than you. I make more heat."

"I'm all right. I'm doing fine."

"Will you be doing fine when they cut your fingers off? You won't be able to pull any triggers then—or milk your old cow, when they send you home."

Still, Dieter didn't move.

"Lean forward. Give me your hands."

Dieter pulled his hands from his coat and reached forward, but he was humiliated.

"Button your coat."

Dieter fumbled with the buttons, and the effort sent shooting pains through his fingers, but he got his coat tightened around his neck, and then he reached forward again. He didn't say a word, but he heard Schaefer pull up the sweater inside his coat and then felt him grip

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