

Ardennes Sniper

Cafe Cole, #2

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Author's Note

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



A man sees in the world what he carries in his heart.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Chapter 1

Caje Cole looked through the rifle scope at the Germans.

Six Wehrmacht infantrymen, passing around a pack of cigarettes in the gray winter dawn. From a distance of two hundred feet, the four power scope wasn't powerful enough to pick out the brand, but from the flash of red and white Cole guessed they were smoking Lucky Strikes.

Taken off a dead American, he reckoned. No shortage of those, thanks to these Krauts.

One of the Germans laughed, and the sound telegraphed across the frigid air, making the enemy sound much closer. These were battle-hardened Wehrmacht soldiers, wearing winter gear filthy with the mud of a hundred fox holes. They couldn't see Cole, who had crept all night with Vaccaro toward the German lines, finally burying themselves in a rotting wood pile at the edge of an abandoned farm. Dirty white strips of cloth, wrapped around their rifle barrels, disguised the outlines of their weapons.

The cloth strips were Cole's idea. Even after months as a sniper, Vaccaro was still a city boy at heart, so it had taken all of Cole's considerable skill as a hunter to get them this close.

Right now, it felt a little *too* close. The Germans laughed again. Cole smelled their cigarette smoke.

He had figured on picking off a German or two, but this group was too good to pass up. The Germans stood around a machine gun. If they got to it in time, Cole and Vaccaro would be dead.

"Take the shot already," Vaccaro muttered. "I'm freezing my ass off."

Cole did not reply, but let his crosshairs settle on the German handing out the Lucky Strikes. He let out a breath. Squeezed the trigger.

Gentle-like, he reminded himself. The pad of his finger added a fraction of tension.

When the rifle fired, it almost surprised him.

The German collapsed. Vaccaro took the next shot and knocked down another German.

Cole worked the bolt. Fired again.

Vaccaro's next shot missed, and the last German went for the machine gun. Cole put the crosshairs on him and fired. His ears told him that his bullet had struck the German. When a brass-jacketed round hit a human body it made a solid *whunk* sound like a ripe watermelon being split with a big knife.

Seconds after the first shot, all four Germans lay dead in the snow.

"You missed your second shot," Cole said.

"That's why you're here, Hillbilly."

The two snipers extricated themselves from the wood pile, then followed a stone wall toward the ruins of a barn. Keeping low, they were careful to maintain a distance between themselves. Always good to make a hard target.

Now came the dangerous part, crossing nearly one hundred feet of open field between the barn and the edge of the Ardennes Forest.

"You go first," Cole said.

"Easy for you to say and me to do."

Vaccaro took a big breath and ran. Cole raised his rifle to cover Vaccaro as the city boy dashed for the trees. Once there, he covered Cole as he ran across.

Safely in the trees, Vaccaro produced a hip flask filled with calvados. He had gotten a taste for the apple brandy right after the D-Day landing in June. Christmas was in a few days, and then the new year of 1945.

"Wish we could have gotten us an officer," Cole said.

"Look at it this way, Cole. If things go according to plan, those are the last Germans you'll have to shoot this year." He handed the flask to Cole.

Cole looked at him with eyes that seemed cut from glass, then took a long drink from the flask and tossed it back. "I reckon we'll see about that," Cole said.

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In the winter of 1762 when the Ardennes froze hard, wolves crept down from the mountains and out of the deep shadows of the forests. At first, the people in the isolated villages noticed only the paw prints in the snow beyond the houses and barns, but the wolves themselves remained unseen. The hungry beasts became more bold and visible, attacking sheep, children, even grown men. In local legend it was remembered as *der Winter von den Wölfen der Ardennes*, the Winter of the Wolves of Ardennes.

It had been a long time since a wolf had attacked anyone in the hills and forests, but that did not mean danger wasn't present. In the winter of 1944 the wolves were two-legged, and they were once again about to sweep across the sleepy forests and villages.

One of these wolves was named Gunther Klein. Walking alone at dusk it was easy to believe the legends about the forest that he remembered from his boyhood. But he did not feel much like a wolf at the moment. Truth be told, he was downright nervous and jumpy, because he was a German soldier well behind the

American lines—a wolf, perhaps, but one in sheep's clothing. Or, in his case, an American uniform.

If caught, he would be executed immediately as a spy.

Klein was one of a specially trained unit led by none other than Otto Skorzeny, the dashing six-foot-four SS commando with the dueling scar or *schmiss* on his cheek. Eisenhower had called Skorzeny “the most dangerous man in Europe,” and it had been Skorzeny’s brainstorm to form this team of one hundred and fifty saboteurs.

In addition to wearing an American uniform, Klein carried a captured M1 rifle. He was making his way toward one of the crossroads villages where it was rumored the Americans had a large fuel depot. His orders were quite simple—blow up the fuel, cut any telephone lines, spread misinformation. Basically, he was a one-man sabotage squad. His secret weapon was that he spoke English fluently.

Klein had slipped through the thin American lines without any trouble. To keep to his schedule, he decided to follow the road into the village. He would have preferred keeping to the woods, but the snow was already knee deep in places. He would just have to take his chances on the road.

"*Verdammt, es ist kalt!*" he muttered, teeth chattering, then chided himself. English, you fool. One slip of the tongue in front of American troops and that would be it for him. There would likely be no trial, but only a roadside reckoning. Skorzeny had made that much clear to everyone.

So far he hadn't seen a soul. The situation changed abruptly when he rounded a bend in the winding road and a figure materialized from behind a tree and stepped into the road. Klein swung his rifle at the American GI.

"Easy there, pardner! I was just taking a leak. I saw you coming and wanted to make sure you weren't a German."

"No Germans around here." Klein's heart pounded so loud he was sure the American could hear it.

"You never know. But I'll bet they're holed up somewhere nice and warm, waiting for us to come to them." He coughed, and Klein smelled alcohol on the man's breath. "Cold as a witch's tit!"

"Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey," Klein said. He was not quite sure what it meant, because it certainly didn't make any sense, but he had been taught that it was a popular American saying.

"That's why I was trying to keep warm in one of the local taverns," the GI said. "I'm headed back to the village. How about you?"

"Yes, the village sounds like a fine idea." Klein winced as soon as he said it. He knew he had come off sounding stuffy. Skorzeny himself once said that Klein spoke English like he had the queen's royal scepter up his ass. He needed to work on sounding more American.

The GI gave him a sidelong look. "Say, what are you doing out here, anyhow?"

"Same as you. Running errands for HQ."

"What unit you with?"

"The two hundred and ninety-sixth engineers."

"Engineers. Huh. I thought you guys were back on the other side of the Meuse River." They trudged along in silence for a minute. The American seemed to be thinking something through. Klein could almost hear the cogs of his brain

spinning in the winter quiet. "It is real peaceful out here, though, with all this snow. It's almost like I can hear Frank Sinatra singing *White Christmas*. You know that song?"

Klein knew it was a trap. The American had been working up to it. He kept his answer vague: "Who does not like Sinatra?"

The GI stopped in his tracks and stared hard at Klein. "Hey, who are you, buddy? Everybody knows it's Bing Crosby who sings *White Christmas*."

The GI took a clumsy step back and his heavily gloved hand slipped toward the holstered .45 on his belt.

Too slow. While the GI fumbled with the gun, Klein pulled a knife from a sheath at the small of his back and jabbed it at the GI's heart. But the heavy coat interfered and the point struck a rib. Stupidly, the GI kept trying to get the pistol out of the holster. Klein got a better grip on the knife and struck again.

This time the razor-sharp blade slipped between the sixth and seventh rib, driving into the GI's heart. Just like Skorzeny had trained him to do. The man's eyes blinked in shock as his heart stopped. Klein stepped back and let the man topple into the snow. He bent down and wiped the blade on the man's coat, then returned the knife to the sheath.

His own heart hammered in his chest. He had never killed anyone with a knife before and the experience was both sickening and somehow exhilarating.

Klein looked around, but the road remained empty and silent except for the whisper of falling snow.

Using the knife was taking a chance because it was less certain than a bullet, but it was better to avoid a gunshot that might attract attention.

Klein looked down at the body. He decided not to waste time moving it off the road. *Better him than me*, he thought. To his immense satisfaction, he had thought the words in English.

Klein had no way of knowing it, but the dead soldier was the first casualty in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. Hidden on the other side of the mountains, nearly two thousand German tanks and two hundred thousand men waited for the order to attack.

The lone wolf on this lonely road would soon be joined by the pack. It was to be the winter of the wolves all over again.

Chapter 2

If snow was money, every GI in the Ardennes Forest would have been filthy rich by now. All it did was snow. Then freeze. Then snow some more. It was hard to tell where the dull leaden sky ended and the whitened fields and woods began. A group of soldiers trudged along a road through this gray landscape, shoulders hunched, resigned to the cold.

There were six of them, all carrying rifles with telescopic sights. Snipers. They wore dirty white ponchos made from bedsheets in an effort at camouflage, and the snow that dusted their shoulders helped them blend into the backdrop of forest. Some of the trees hung over the road so that in patches the frozen mud was nearly

bare. Most of the men kept their heads down, trying to keep the snow out of their faces.

Only one man, who walked last in the line, further back from the others, scanned the surrounding trees constantly. Cole was unofficially the deadliest sniper in the United States Army. Unofficially, because the Army didn't track such things, not like they kept track of the number of planes a pilot shot down, for example. But word had gotten around. Just hours ago, he and Vaccaro had taken out a squad of Germans that strayed too close to the American lines.

Cole had pale eyes with so little color that they resembled ice. He was taller than average and lean like a fence post. Though covered in grime, a Confederate flag was just visible painted on his helmet. In a nod to their Southern heritage it had been painted by Jimmy Turner, another country boy whom Cole had tried to keep alive at D-Day—and failed.

Vaccaro looked back. He was an Italian-American of average height and build from Brooklyn. In his own mind, he thought he looked like Rudolph Valentino and somehow managed to wear his helmet at a jaunty angle. "Cole, what's eating you?"

"Too quiet," the other sniper said.

"Quiet is fine by me," Vaccaro said. "But I would give my left nut for some sunshine and warm weather." He stuttered the words because he was shivering in the cold. "Hell, I'd give both nuts to be at Coney Island on a July day rubbing coconut oil into some girl's shoulders. Mmmm."

"Vaccaro, if you give away your nuts that's all you're gonna be able to do to her," Cole said. "Unless you plan to talk her to death, which wouldn't be no surprise."

"Cold as my Johnson is right now, I'm not sure it's ever gonna thaw out, anyhow."

A moment of silence passed as the men mentally checked the status of their own Johnsons. It was definitely cold enough for concern. For weeks now they had been battling the cold and its consequences—everything from frozen gear to frostbite to shivering all night in their blankets. And it was only mid-December, with the heart of winter still ahead.

These men had been at D-Day and fought their way across France and into the Ardennes Forest in Belgium. Germany was nearly on the horizon. They could almost taste the end of the war. It was warm and sweet in their mouths like the mulled wine the locals drank at Christmas, or maybe the lips of that girl Vaccaro dreamed about, with a little tongue slipped in. These snipers had been through hell and back. But now they were in a quiet backwater of the war that even offered a few opportunities for some R&R. Some soldiers had even seen Marlene Dietrich performing nearby with a USO tour. The snipers would settle for spending Christmas someplace indoors, sleeping and eating. Real turkey dinners, if they were lucky.

Lieutenant Mulholland signaled for a stop. The weary men flopped down in the snow, except for Cole, whose eyes continued to scour the woods, looking for any sign of movement.

"Cole, you need to relax," said Vaccaro. "There ain't a German around for miles."

Cole ignored him and searched the trees with his rifle scope until he was satisfied that they were alone, then joined the others in munching chocolate bars and smoking cigarettes. In the cold, the brittle Hershey bars tasted like wax. He

sat a little apart and kept his rifle across his knees. In the Ardennes Forest in December 1944, staying alert was just part of staying alive.

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Sometime after midnight on December 15, the highly decorated German sniper Hauptmann Kurt Von Stenger sat in the back seat of a staff car roaring through the night. He was wedged between a nervous Wehrmacht general named Rothenbach and SS Obersturmbannführer Aldric Friel, who was so relaxed that he seemed to have fallen asleep. Handsome as a Nazi poster boy come to life, Friel was a firebrand who had made quite a name for himself, first as an adjutant to Heinrich Himmler and then as a ruthless tank commander in Russia. Even asleep, Friel seemed to radiate energy.

Von Stenger stared out into the trees that loomed in the headlights. No one knew where the winding road would take them. He had been on leave from the fighting in France and Belgium when the summons came in the form of an SS driver appearing at his door. So much for a Christmas holiday.

No one knew why they had been summoned to this mysterious meeting in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, piled into staff cars driven by grim young SS soldiers. Clearly, the general thought they were being taken out to the woods to be shot.

It was not out of the question.

"Relax, Herr General. Here, have a cigarette," Von Stenger said. He offered the man one of his trademark gold-tipped Sobranie cigarettes. "Why drive us all the way out here to shoot us? It seems like a waste of petrol."

The general's hands shook when he tried to light the cigarette. Maybe it was just the bumpy road. Von Stenger lit it for him with a Zippo lighter taken from a dead American. As the general leaned in, Von Stenger caught a whiff of alcohol and garlicky sausages.

On the other side of him, Obersturmbannführer Friel gave a low laugh. So, the SS *Wunderkind* had awakened. "You always had a sense of humor, Kurt. Still reading your Goethe?"

"Of course. I appreciate a man who tries to make sense of the world but admits when he can't. We could use more of that these days."

Von Stenger felt the Wehrmacht general beside him stiffen in alarm. It was getting dangerous to make any criticism of the beleaguered Führer, implied or otherwise. There were rumors that the wrong words could get you strung up on a meat hook in some dark Gestapo dungeon.

Or driven out to the woods in the middle of the night.

To be shot.

Clearly the general did not think it prudent to criticize Hitler in the presence of an SS officer, even one who, like them, might already be condemned. This seemed unlikely, however, considering that Friel was known as one of Hitler's favorite young officers.

"May I have a cigarette?" Friel asked.

"Of course." Von Stenger offered him the pack. "So, do you know where we are going?"

"We are going to see a man who makes sense of the world, my friend."

"Ah."

The flame as Friel lit the cigarette illuminated the twin silver lightning bolts on the collar of his tailored uniform. Beside the lightning bolts were four silver squares known as pips that indicated his rank. The flicker of flame revealed Friel's craggy, blonde good looks. He could have played an SS officer in a movie. He was not yet thirty. Certainly, he was young to be an Obersturmbannführer.

He and Von Stenger came from similar backgrounds and had traveled in the same social circles in the heady early days of the war, though Von Stenger was a few years older. Both men became soldiers. But that was where the similarity ended. Friel was a capable commander while Von Stenger preferred being a lone wolf. But the most important distinction of all was that Friel was a disciple of the Nazi cause.

Now here Von Stenger was, taking a car ride with a frightened general and an SS Obersturmbannführer in the middle of the night. What had he gotten mixed up in?

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After they had eaten, the sniper team started moving again. They had not gone far when Lieutenant Mulholland stopped. "What the hell?" he muttered.

A lump lay in the middle of the road. All the soldiers had seen enough carnage to know it was a dead body. Somehow, a body always looked smaller than an actual person. The snow had not quite covered the dead soldier. He wore an American uniform, of course, because they were far from the German lines or any fighting.

"Poor bastard probably froze to death," Vaccaro muttered from between blue lips.

"Maybe he did, but what's he doing out here in the middle of nowhere?" the lieutenant wondered aloud. "Huh. There's a crossroads village down that way. Maybe he got drunk and was hit by a truck."

"Yeah, but where are the tire tracks?"

Three of the snipers stood over the body. Cole slowly circled them, prowling the edges of the road. He stopped in a place where the snow had only dusted the frozen mud.

The lieutenant bent down and took the corpse by the shoulder, rolling him over. The body wasn't quite frozen. Moving the body revealed a puddle of blood beneath it.

"Jesus, what happened to him?"

The lieutenant had seen plenty of gunshot wounds, but this wasn't one of them. "It looks like he's been stabbed."

"There's no m-m-muggers in the middle of the goddamn woods," Vaccaro stammered. "M-m-must be Germans."

Cole spoke up. His voice had a Southern, hillbilly twang to it. "It weren't no German," he said. "These here are fresh boot prints. Bigger than what he's got on. But the boots belonged to an American."

"How can you tell?"

"Vaccaro, I been starin' at your footsteps for the last six months. I reckon I know what a boot print looks like."

"Huh," Vaccaro said.

The lieutenant gave orders to move the body to the side of the road. "No sense letting the poor bastard get run over. Once we get to HQ we'll send somebody back to pick him up."

Then the snipers moved down the road. Dusk was coming on, and the snowy woods that moments ago had seemed peaceful as a scene on a Christmas card now looked dark and sinister.

Chapter 3

The car carrying Von Stenger plunged on through the forest. No one said much. After he finished his cigarette, Obersturmbannführer Friel managed to fall asleep again. The general emitted several deep sighs of resignation. Von Stenger cracked the window, lit another cigarette, and spent some time thinking about the long years that had led up to this moment.

Von Stenger had seen more than his share of action, starting in Spain back in 1938 when Hitler had sent military "observers" to help the cause of dictator Ferdinand Franco. Von Stenger was already an accomplished marksman, and his role was to perfect the art of sniper warfare. He proved quite adept—gifted, in fact. He was not only a good shot from years of boyhood hunting trips, but also quite clever in his tactics.

After Spain, he had seen action in Poland and Russia. God, what a mess the Eastern Front had been. Only the fact that he had been wounded in a sniper duel at Stalingrad and then evacuated to Berlin had saved his life—not so much from the bullet wound as from the onslaught of Russians.

It was in Stalingrad that Von Stenger had earned his nickname, *Das Gespenst*—The Ghost—for his ability to slip unseen among the city ruins and reap Russian after Russian. The effort had earned him the Knight's Cross he wore at his throat, making him Germany's most decorated sniper. Although he had been made an officer almost out of hand because of his family and connections, Von Stenger had resisted being in charge of anything or anyone other than himself.

However, it was only natural that while recovering from his wound that he had served as an instructor at the Wehrmacht's sniper school. He found that he enjoyed teaching snipers. He was good at it. He was older than the trainees, many of whom were hardly more than teenagers, and his reputation preceded him so that his trainees respected him.

While teaching, he thought of ways to be even better as a sniper. He read everything he could on sniper warfare and survival techniques. It was interesting that the British had compiled the most information about sniper tactics, going back to the Napoleonic wars. The German military, too, had a rich tradition of employing *Jäger*—lone hunters and military scouts equipped with rifles for long-range shooting. He passed the best of what he learned on to his students.

Von Stenger saw teaching as a way station, however. He never doubted that he would return to the field when the time came, and put his knowledge into practice.

It was training and superior equipment that gave the German snipers an advantage—the Americans had no such special training for snipers other than the basic marksmanship taught to all soldiers.

In Russia, more than a few Germans and Russians had been forged into expert snipers. Between the cold and the constant fighting, the Eastern Front had been hell. Now the Russians were pressing at the borders like the Barbarians at the Gates of Rome. Von Stenger shuddered to think of what might happen if Germany's last defenses fell. The Reich that had been destined to last a thousand years now had its back against the wall.

The Allies had swarmed ashore at Normandy on the sixth of June. Since then, Von Stenger had been fighting the Americans, Canadians, English, and the odd Frenchman. It was now December, and the end of the war looked near. Short of a miracle, defeat was almost certain. Germany was running low on petrol, troops, food, and airplanes. Allied planes pounded German cities, slaughtering German civilians by the thousands with incendiary bombs. No, it wouldn't be long now.

Von Stenger kept such thoughts to himself, however. And like any good German, he would fight until the bitter end.

If the SS didn't shoot him first.

After driving through the woods for an hour, the car slowed. The general beside him tensed. Friel slept on. The line of cars passed through an enormous iron gate that swung on stone pillars. Could it be? With a quickening of his heart, Von Stenger realized that they must have reached Hitler's fabled secret headquarters. Alderhorst. Like many secrets surrounding Der Führer, Von Stenger had assumed such a place was only a rumor.

Beside him, Friel woke up and peered out the window. "Ah, Alderhorst," he said. "We made good time."

"You have been here before?"

"Haven't you?"

"The Reichspost must have fallen down on the job. Either that, or Der Führer skimped on the postage."

The SS officer smiled and lowered his voice. "Kurt, I appreciate your sense of humor and the fact that you are a man who thinks for himself. But in this place... my friend, it may be wise to choose your words carefully. Or better yet, keep your mouth shut."

Feeling chastised, Von Stenger nodded. Friel was right, of course. The German High Command was not known for its appreciation of witty banter. They were a literal bunch. If you criticized the postal service, then it implied you were criticizing the entire Nazi regime.

"What on earth are we doing here, Aldric?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Kurt. We are about to find out."

The cars emptied out in the courtyard, spilling their contents of high-ranking officers. Von Stenger was shocked to spot SS General Sepp Dietrich and Wehrmacht General Hasso von Manteuffel in the crowd. He himself was a mere *hauptmann*. Who had invited him along?

"But I don't understand. What am I doing here? Everyone in those other cars is a general or at least a colonel. I'm just a sniper!"

Friel grinned again. "No, you are not just a sniper. You are the best sniper in the Reich! You are here because I requested you, of course."

Von Stenger stared. "So you know what all this is about?"

"Not exactly, but I knew it wasn't to be shot, ha, ha!" Friel lowered his voice. "Did you see old Rothenbach in the car coming up with us? He thought his number was up."

With the exception of Friel, most of the other officers did not seem to know whether to be relieved or in despair at having arrived at the Führer's headquarters.

They filed through the thick oak doors into a massive assembly hall. Guards armed with submachine guns loomed everywhere. Some held Rottweilers on chain leashes. These sights did nothing to put anyone at ease. No coffee or food was served.

In the old days, the grand hall was where barons and knights would have feasted on roast boar in front of a roaring fire. But tonight there was no heat except for whatever came from the electric bulbs overhead. Those were a 20th century addition, of course. At the front of the room hung a large map, flanked by two flags. Von Stenger recognized the map as depicting the Ardennes—but that made no sense. The terrain was so rugged that there was hardly any fighting there, or any real need to defend it. Only a handful of troops faced each other, more as a symbolic presence than for any strategic purpose. Nobody was coming through the Ardennes Forest in great numbers.

An officer stood at the front of the room and called the officers to attention. The generals and colonels got to their feet and sucked in their bellies.

Then Reichsführer Adolf Hitler entered the great hall. He appeared stooped, as if worn down or exhausted. Von Stenger was shocked. The man he had seen many times early in the war had appeared to have boundless energy. Yet even now, Von Stenger could sense something coiled within the Führer, reserves of power, much like a cornered bear or bull waits for the right moment. There was no weakness.

All around him, the officers seemed to be holding their breath.

The change in the Führer's appearance was surprising. Von Stenger had seen him in person many times during the early days after he came to power. He was such a charismatic man then, so full of energy. Germany, lost and belittled after the defeat in the Great War, had been eager to follow a man of such vision. The years of war, however, showed clearly in the lines etched across Hitler's face and in his stooped shoulders, as if he carried a great weight that no one else could see.

As the officers took their seats again and waited in tense silence, Hitler revealed his plan quietly and slowly at first. It was something he called Operation Watch on the Rhine.

"My generals, the time has come for us to change the tide of war," he said matter of factly. "We must crush the Allied forces and drive them back into the sea."

In many ways the plan that Hitler laid out was Germany's version of D-Day—only this massive invasion would take place through the Ardennes Forest and across the Meuse River, which was the natural boundary between the rugged Ardennes region and the more open country of Belgium—and France beyond.

Hitler explained that the operation had been planned in utmost secrecy. Most of the generals in the room had no idea that all through the late summer and fall, panzer corps had been massing along the German border for the push into Belgium. Great caches of ammunition and petrol were dispersed in the Ardennes to resupply German forces. What remained of the Luftwaffe had been gathered at secret air fields in order to support the attack.

Von Stenger wondered where so many men and so many tanks had come from. The forces along the Eastern Front, the final defenses against the Red Tide, must be nothing but straw men and cardboard tanks. No, Hitler was making one last great gamble here. It was clear that it was win or lose—if the attack failed, there would be no way to replace what had been lost.

Hitler's voice built to an excited crescendo. He became animated as he had in the old days, exhorting the troops to victory at Nuremberg. Now his hand chopped at the air. Spittle flew from his lips. "Nothing short of victory! There is no turning back!"

Abruptly, the Führer ended his speech. He stood there before them, no longer a stooped old man but their charismatic leader once more. For the moment, he had cast his familiar spell on the officer corps.

"Heil Hitler!" echoed through the room as men sprang to their feet. He had given them a plan. He had given them hope.

Von Stenger glanced over at Friel's face. It glowed in admiration.

Chapter 4

The tanks rolled before dawn. When it came, the morning was a poor excuse for daylight, being dull and gray. Snow fell and wind blew. But that had been part of the timing of Hitler's surprise attack—the bad weather would keep the Allies' planes grounded.

Even Von Stenger had to admit the plan was almost crazy enough to succeed. As Goethe had said, "Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward. They may be beaten, but they may start a winning game."

Swirling with the gray dawn mist were thick diesel fumes and, almost improbably, the smell of coffee and frying sausages. Von Stenger's belly growled hungrily. He lit a cigarette. One had to shout to be heard over the sound of clanking tank treads and churning engines. It was as if some great, rumbling beast had awakened and was now on the prowl through the Ardennes.

Kampfgruppe Friel was comprised of more than twelve hundred SS troops—not baby-faced recruits, but mostly battle-hardened veterans. The battle group was equipped with six hundred Tiger II tanks, mobile anti-aircraft guns called *Wirbelwind*, and scores of combat vehicles. It was more than a formidable fighting force. It was a conquering army.

At the head of the column, Friel rode in a Tiger II tank. It was not just big—it was a monster. The tank weighed seventy-seven tons and was armed with a cannon and machine gun. Powered by a 700 horsepower Maybach engine, the tank could reach speeds of twenty-four miles per hour on good roads or through

open country. The more lightly armored Sherman tanks used by the Allies did not stand a chance against a Tiger II tank. It would be akin to a medieval knight on a war horse attacking a peasant armed with a stick. All across the countryside from Normandy to the Ardennes, the blackened wreckage of Sherman tanks testified to that fact. It wasn't without good reason that the Sherman tanks had been nicknamed "Tommy Cookers."

Von Stenger had declined riding on the tank and had opted instead to climb aboard a Volkswagen Schwimmwagen, an amphibious vehicle based on the VW Beetle. In many ways it was the German equivalent of the Allies' popular Jeep. The clattering tank was too loud—he couldn't hear himself think—and he did not like the idea of being closed up inside the steel walls of a tank. Von Stenger was not particularly claustrophobic, but he preferred to be in the open, where he could keep an eye on the passing countryside.

He was a sniper, after all. What could he shoot inside a tank?

Beside him, the Schwimmwagen driver gave a hearty laugh. "You see, Herr Hauptmann, we are already most of the way to Paris. Where are the Allies? On the run, I tell you!"

"We shall see," Von Stenger said.

"I will be sorry if we don't see some action." He nodded at the rifle in Von Stenger's hands. "You may not even get to use that, sir."

"I am sure none of us will be disappointed," Von Stenger said, giving the driver a sidelong look. He could see him better now that it was getting light. He realized the driver could not be more than eighteen. Did he even need to shave? His uniform had a crisp new look. And of course, he was enlisted SS—which in Von Stenger's experience meant that the boy must have been dropped on his head as a child or had grown up pulling the wings off flies.

The SS were the last of the true believers, real fanatics for Hitler and the Fatherland, when it was clear to any reasonable German that the war was nearly lost. "*Sie sind ein junger Idiot*," he muttered under his breath.

"What did you say, sir?"

"I said, *The Allies are going to get quite a Christmas present.*"

"*Ha, ha! Frohe Weihnachten, Amerikaner.*"

Merry Christmas. It would not be the sort of holiday the Americans were expecting.

Von Stenger knew very well that the Americans he had encountered in the last few months were not likely to be on the run. They were not professional soldiers like so many of the Germans, but they had learned quickly and showed fierce determination.

They did not have the brutality of the Russians—there was already speculation among Wehrmacht soldiers of how it would be better to surrender to the Americans when the time came. SS troops like these did not speak of surrender, of course.

While Von Stenger hated the Russians, he had no grudge against the Americans, English and Canadians. He had even encountered one American sniper in the days after the Normandy invasion who had very nearly proven his match. He had heard rumors that this sniper was still alive and had taken quite a toll, but so far the tides of war had kept them apart. Von Stenger would not have

mind a rematch, which would have a different outcome this time for the American sniper.

As they slowed for a disruption in the column ahead, a Scharführer came running over. He had the look of a hardened veteran, and in the dim predawn light a nasty scar on his right cheek seemed to match the twin SS lightning bolts on the collar of his tunic.

"You there, you have room. Take these men with you," the Scharführer said, gesturing toward two soldiers behind him who were lugging heavy panzerfaust, shoulder-mounted weapons used to attack tanks.

"Sir?" the driver turned toward Von Stenger.

The Scharführer was having none of that. "Driver! I am giving you an order. You have more important things to carry than Wehrmacht tourists."

Von Stenger fixed the Scharführer with a stare that the man returned coldly. "When I want an opinion, Scharführer, I will give it to you. Of course, these men are welcome to ride along. The last time I checked, we are all on the same side."

The Scharführer turned away without saluting, and the two men with the panzerfaust clambered aboard.

"I am sorry, Herr Hauptmann," the driver muttered. "That was Udo Breger. He is a real ball buster."

"That is why he is a Scharführer." Ball busting was what sergeants in any army did best—but he did not appreciate being on the receiving end of it. He turned to the men who had squeezed into the back of the Schwimmwagen. He saw that like the driver, they were very young. His teaching instincts stirred. "Listen," he said. "When the time comes, get in close with those things. Aim for the tracks, and then get down low. The Americans will come out shooting. And whatever you do, don't stand behind someone firing a panzerfaust or you will end up looking like a burnt sausage."

"Yes, sir."

The traffic jam abated, and they rolled on for several minutes. Von Stenger let his thoughts wander—they were still some distance away from the American lines.

His thoughts were interrupted by the driver. "Herr Hauptmann, they say you are a legend with a rifle. How many men have you killed so far?"

Von Stenger shrugged. It was a question he was asked frequently, and yet it was hard to answer. Back when it mattered, he had kept count. The number had climbed above two hundred during the first few weeks of Stalingrad. At that point, he had stopped counting. Such numbers were a point of pride that also managed to sicken him. Who knew how many Allied troops he had shot since June alone? "Do you just want to know how many men I have shot? That would be around two hundred. I have not kept track of the women and children, but maybe fifty of those."

Now it was the young SS driver's turn to give him a sidelong look. "So many."

"Yes," Von Stenger said. "So many. And yet not enough. Now pay attention and don't run into the back of that panzer, or the invasion is going to end quickly for us."

• • • • •

When Von Stenger looked at Friel, he reminded himself that he was looking at a panther. The man was handsome and urbane—in fact, he was friendly and clever company. But deep down, he was utterly ruthless.

Where Friel's heart should have been, there was a swastika. He was a believer in the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler. Though quite intelligent and a good student, he had dropped out of high school to join the military. But even as a teenage high school dropout, Friel was a military standout. It helped that he looked like he had stepped straight out of some Aryan propaganda poster. He didn't just mouth his loyalty to the ideals of the Reich—it shone from his soul like a beacon. These qualities soon saw him sent to Bad Tolz, the German equivalent of West Point. There, he received advanced training in military tactics and performed incredible feats of physical training—often under live fire. The officers who graduated from Bad Tolz were the very best, the SS version of Spartan warriors.

Instead of being sent to the battlefield, Friel was taken under wing by Heinrich Himmler, a real monster. The middle-aged Himmler looked bland enough with his round eyeglasses and receding chin, but he was the mastermind of Hitler's plan to eliminate all *untermenschen*—subhumans. At Himmler's side, Friel planned and then watched the murder of Poles and Jews. He was even present for the testing of the first poison gas chambers.

But Friel was eager to see action. Given a tank command in Russia, he was utterly savage. On two occasions, his men had surrounded Russian towns and killed everyone within. The screams of dying women and children fell on Friel's deaf ears. After all, he saw the Russians as being among those *untermenschen*. For his efforts, he received the Knight's Cross and became one of Hitler's darlings.

Despite Friel's friendly manner, Von Stenger constantly reminded himself that this was the man sitting next to him.

Like most people of his class, Von Stenger was a pragmatist. Idealists did not create and then keep family fortunes intact. Germany was at war; therefore, he would help to fight and win. He was not one of the fanatics, like Friel, who welcomed war and fought on when saner minds might have sought a favorable peace. When it came to politics, he sometimes considered what the Roman general and emperor Marcus Aurelius had said in his *Meditations*: "The object of life is not to be on the side of the majority, but to escape finding oneself in the ranks of the insane." He doubted that Marcus Aurelius would have joined the Nazi party, and neither had Von Stenger.

Chapter 5

In all of his eighteen years, Hank Walsh could not remember being so cold. His fingers ached, his ears stung, and his nose felt numb. It was bad enough that the air itself was frigid, but the chill seemed to seep from everything around him and into him. When he stood on the frozen ground it soaked up right through his boots and turned his feet to blocks of ice.

Even now, sitting in the front seat of a GMC deuce and a half truck, the cold oozed out of the seat and froze his backside. The windshield wipers swiped fitfully at the snow and ice pellets that popped against the glass.

"Goddamn miserable but it beats walkin', huh?" said the driver, a burly 29-year-old from Philadelphia named Ralph Moore. Moore was married and had two kids; back home he worked as a plumber. Since there wasn't much need for plumbers in an army fighting its way across Europe, Moore mostly drove a truck for Battery B of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion. Hank looked up to him because he seemed eminently older and wiser—a man of the world compared to a kid fresh out of high school.

Back then, Hank had been eager to get into the war because it seemed like an adventure. It's not like he had ever been to Europe. Shooting Germans would be like plinking targets at the town fair.

Considering that he was going off to war, his prom date had felt obliged to let him get to third base in the back seat of his dad's Ford. Technically he remained a virgin—and there had been few opportunities to change that fact once Hank found himself in basic training and then shipped off to France almost immediately after that. Most of the French women he had seen were old enough to be grandmas. And they had hairy legs.

He had once confessed to Ralph that he hadn't yet gone all the way with a girl.

His older and wiser companion had laughed, but to Hank's relief had not made fun of him. "Don't worry, Kid. Next time we get to a decent-sized town we can make sure you get laid. And believe it or not, someday you'll find yourself a good little wife and get it nice and regular every Saturday night that she doesn't have a headache."

Prom night had been the highlight of his teenage years. So far, the war had been a lot less exciting. It was mostly a cold, wet slog. Because he was good at math, he had been put into an artillery observation unit, on the off chance that the need might arise to triangulate fire. So far, their main role had not involved combat but shoring up bridges so that the heavy guns could cross, repairing roads and moving supplies. Most of the men of the 285th had not fired a weapon since basic training.

"Where are we?" Hank asked.

"Just outside of some town called Baugnez."

"Huh."

The name didn't mean a whole lot to Hank, so he settled back in the seat and hugged his arms around himself in some hopes of staying warm. Nobody bothered to put a heater in an Army truck. Never mind the fact that this truck had been manufactured in Pontiac, Michigan—where it certainly got plenty cold.

The crossroads village came and went in a blur of small houses crowded close to the road. A few old men and women peered at them from doorways and windows. Five roads came together here, so that on a map Baugnez looked something like the hub at the center of an old wagon wheel, while the roads formed the spokes. Some of the Americans had taken to calling it Five Points. Just two miles away was a larger town called Malmedy. The convoy crept out of the village and back into the countryside.

The landscape around them was flat and snowy, with a distant view of hills shrouded in a cold mist. Out the window, Hank could see for quite a distance across the bare, level fields. He glanced off to his right and was surprised to see another line of vehicles moving into the village on one of those spokes that fed into the village at the hub of the wheel.

"Look at that," he said, tapping on the glass. "Who are those guys? Those are some big tanks."

Ralph leaned forward over the steering wheel and glanced out the passenger window. He lurched back, his eyes wide. "Holy shit! Those are Germans!"

No sooner had he spoken than one of the panzers fired, and a truck on the road ahead exploded.

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Friel kept checking his map and his watch. He had left the tank to ride in the Schwimmwagen with Von Stenger. In the smaller, more nimble vehicle he could roam the entire length of his column to urge his men to make constant forward motion. For Friel, keeping to the rollbahn or attack route was vital to success. Already, he was several hours behind schedule.

All across the rugged Ardennes region, other commanders were making a similar push. He knew very well that if he and the other commanders did not keep to the schedule in reaching their objectives, then the attack would quickly fall apart. Friel's goal was to get his column across the Meuse River, and from there to race on to Antwerp.

Though they had gotten off to a good start, the column had quickly become spread out and faced delays when some of the massive tanks bogged down. Though the temperature was below freezing, the tanks broke through the icy crust, leaving behind a churned-up slurry of half-frozen mud and dirty slush. Some of the trucks got stuck and his men wasted precious time getting the vehicles moving again.

He ordered the Schwimmwagen's driver to move up and down the column as Friel shouted, "Get moving! Get moving!"

So far they had not seen a single American. "You have taken the Amis completely by surprise, Herr Obersturmbannführer," Von Stenger said.

"That gets us much deeper into the Ardennes without any delays," Friel said. "If only it was colder! We could use some real Russian weather right now. This mud is slowing us down, and I will be damned if we fall behind schedule on the first day of the attack."

Von Stenger did not have a comment—his expertise was not in moving troops and tanks. And yet they seemed to be moving forward as if driven by Friel's willpower alone.

Friel waved over a Scharführer. Von Stenger saw that it was the same sergeant who had shared Friel's opinion of Wehrmacht officers. "Breger, I want you to make sure that your men keep up the pace. We need to be most of the way to the Meuse River by nightfall."

"Yes, Herr Obersturmbannführer," the man said, saluting. "Sir, the men want to know what we are to do if we capture any prisoners. Are we to send them to the rear?"

"We do not have a rear, Breger. We are a flying column. There are to be no prisoners. Is that understood?"

"Of course, Herr Obersturmbannführer."

The man moved off and began shouting orders. Watching, Friel nodded with satisfaction. "I can always count on Breger," he said. "He was with me in Russia, you know. He is a man who follows orders and does not ask questions."

The Schwimmwagen pulled alongside Friel's tank, and the Obersturmbannführer jumped down and ran to climb back aboard the still-moving panzer. Von Stenger's driver fell in behind the tank in case the Obersturmbannführer needed the Volkswagen again.

Von Stenger glanced at the skies, or rather, took notice that the damp gray sky seemed to have settled on the French countryside like a thick blanket. As long as the bad weather lasted, they would be free of any worries about the Allied aircraft. If the clouds lifted—well, it would be better to be across the Meuse by then.

They were approaching the Baugez crossroads near the town of Malmedy. They had crossed several miles and were much closer now to the American lines. Von Stenger's watchful eyes constantly scanned the countryside, but they seemed to be free of any enemy activity. As they neared the crossroads village where a handful of roads converged like the hub of a wagon wheel, he saw several trucks on the road that ran roughly parallel to their own road. While they were approaching the village, this other column seemed to be leaving. He was confused because the Schwimmwagen was at the very front of the column—how had those vehicles gotten ahead of them?

He raised his rifle and put his eyes to the telescopic sight so that the vehicles instantly appeared closer. The trucks had large white stars painted on their sides. Americans.

No one else had seemed to notice the Americans on the parallel road. Von Stenger stood up, gripping the windshield for balance. "Friel! Friel!"

Once he had the Obersturmbannführer's attention, he pointed at the enemy column. Friel put his field glasses to his eyes, then snapped them down and began shouting orders. Troops streamed into the field, advancing on the American column, and the panzer abruptly changed direction and swerved into the field. Its massive gun swung round to put the enemy in its sights.

The driver of his own vehicle swerved out of the way and came to a stop in the shadow of the tank. The two soldiers carrying panzerfaust tumbled out.

"Stay close to us and hold your fire," Von Stenger told them. "If you have to shoot, use your rifles. You want to save those panzerfaust if we go up against Ami tanks later."

Von Stenger put his rifle atop the windshield again, and this time took aim, settling his crosshairs on a soldier riding behind a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a Jeep. Fortunately, there were no tanks in sight. Unbelievably, the American column had not yet noticed them.

Then a tank opened fire, turning an enemy truck into scrap, and the American column erupted in panic like an ant's nest stirred with a stick.

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The parallel line of vehicles stopped and several tank turrets swiveled in the direction of the American convoy. Hank saw a burst of flame. Another truck in line ahead of them exploded.

Hank froze, this time not from the cold. "What should we do?"

"Get out of the truck! We need to get in those ditches along the road. We're sitting ducks out here!"

They scrambled out of the truck. All around them, men were doing the same thing, taking cover in the ditches. Machine gun fire chewed into the trucks behind them. A few bodies lay sprawled in the snow. So far, the fighting seemed one sided because none of the Americans was shooting back. Most of them didn't even have weapons.

When the Americans did not return fire, the Germans stopped shooting. The faster vehicles in the German convoy reached the hub at the village and raced up the "spoke" or road that the Americans were on. More Germans approached across the field, covered by the tanks. Hank couldn't take his eyes off them—the tanks were huge, much bigger than the American Shermans he had gotten used to seeing.

"Tiger tanks," muttered Ralph, who must have been thinking the same thing.

Not every American soldier had forgotten his weapon. In the ditch next to them a man still carried an M1 rifle. His hands shook as he worked the bolt, then laid the rifle across a clod of frozen dirt to aim at the oncoming Germans.

"Hey, what are you doing!" Ralph reach out and wrenched the rifle away.

"I'm doing what I'm supposed to do," the soldier stammered. "I'm fighting Germans!"

"You take a pot shot at them and you'll get us all killed," Ralph said. "They've got us pinned down with those tanks. Are you going to take on a Tiger tank with that rifle?"

"But to just give up without a fight—"

"If you're smart, you'll toss that rifle in the bottom of the ditch," Ralph said. "The Krauts will shoot you if they see you with a weapon."

The soldier looked at the rifle in his hands, then let it fall to the ground.

Up and down the ditches, men began to wave white handkerchiefs, just so there was no mistaking their intention to surrender. The Germans came closer, moving at a trot now. Then Hank could actually see their faces under their square, blue-gray helmets. He had never seen a German up close before. Except for the uniforms, they looked pretty much like Americans. One of the Germans started yelling in English, "Out of the ditches! Hands up!"

Beside him, Ralph muttered, "Look at the insignia on their collars. These guys are SS. Hard core. Ain't that just great for us. Just do what they say, Kid, and we'll be all right."

His stomach churning with fear, Hank climbed out of the ditch and raised his hands high.

Chapter 6

Within minutes, the Germans rounded up the American unit. The GIs came out of the ditches with their hands up, looking scared. Von Stenger did not know if he should feel sorry for them—or if he should feel contempt. They had given up like sheep.

It soon became clear why they had been captured so easily. This was an observation and support unit rather than a combat unit. Most had never fired a weapon in battle.

"That's good for us, Kurt," Friel said happily, standing tall in the Volkswagen and surveying the groups of captured Americans and their vehicles. He was clearly pleased with the outcome of the encounter. "A fight would only have slowed us down, and we have a schedule to keep!"

"We took them by surprise," Von Stenger said. "They did not even know what hit them."

"Look at all these trucks! We can put them to use, hey Kurt! Ha, ha! Imagine riding right around the Americans using their own trucks."

Von Stenger had to admit it was a positive turn of events. In spite of himself, he was starting to become hopeful about the offensive. Maybe Hitler was right. By attacking the soft underbelly of the Allied line, they could demoralize and defeat the enemy. It was almost too much to hope for, but here he was, surveying a group of more than a hundred Americans with their hands raised over their heads and twenty or thirty captured trucks full of valuable petrol. And the day was yet young.

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Hank stood with his hands in the air. He shivered, but not just from the cold. It was hard not to be frightened when enemy soldiers had their guns pointed at you.

"Jesus, Ralph, what should we do?"

"Just keep your hands up and do like they tell you, Kid. It's gonna be all right."

The Germans came closer, covering the American prisoners with their Mauser carbines and submachine guns. Hank thought briefly of making a run for it, but those guns made him think better of that plan.

"Hands up! Over here now!" shouted one of the Germans in English. Others simply shouted in German and used the muzzles of their weapons to indicate where they wanted the Americans to go.

The Germans began to fan out into the ditches, forcing out those Americans who had tried to hide or even to play possum. So far as Hank could tell, the short burst of gunfire the Germans had sent into the column had not killed anyone.

More German soldiers went from truck to truck, peering into the backs of the trucks and cabs. An American soldier who had hidden himself in the back of a truck was discovered and came out with his hands up. A German clipped him in the side of the head with a rifle butt and knocked him down for his efforts to escape capture.

An officer jumped down from one of their funny-looking amphibious vehicles.

"Merry Christmas!" he shouted. He was tall, blond and blue-eyed, like some actor playing an officer in a movie. "You will be spending the holidays with us! You were smart to surrender, or you would all be dead."

Amid the shouting, seemingly angry enemy soldiers, the arrival of the jovial officer put Hank more at ease. The officer approached an American lieutenant, who was standing nearby, hands held high.

"What unit is this?" the German officer asked.

"This is the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion," the soldier said.

"Where are you heading?"

"Saint Vith," the young officer said. "We're going to Saint Vith."

"Hey, don't tell him anything!" someone shouted.

The German officer just laughed. "Come now, these are hardly military secrets."

"You're a goddamn Kraut!" an American shouted. Then he spat on the frozen ground.

A German sergeant with a nasty scar on his cheek stepped forward and drove his rifle butt into the man's belly so that he crumpled to the ground. The soldier lifted the rifle as if about to club the man again.

"*Nein, nein!*" the handsome officer said sharply. The soldier stepped away. Then the officer raised his voice again and addressed the Americans. "You are all prisoners now! Do as you are told and there will be no trouble."

At gunpoint, the Germans began to herd the captured Americans away from the road and into the snowy fields. The village was within sight with its modest houses and a few small outbuildings. At the edge of the field was a low stone wall topped with a worm fence like you saw in old Civil War photographs. The edge of the forest began just beyond that.

There was enough of a breeze to give the air an icy edge. Hank wasn't wearing gloves and his hands began to tingle in the cold. He did not dare to lower his arms, so he flexed his fingers, trying to keep them warm. Wherever they were going, it promised to be a long, cold march.

"Nothing to it, Kid," Ralph muttered. "In fact, we're lucky. We'll be sitting out the rest of the war in a POW camp eating schnitzel while the other poor bastards shoot at each other."

They stood in the field for what seemed to be a very long time, getting colder by the minute. For now, the Germans largely ignored the captured Americans, except for a few guards who had been posted to keep an eye on them. More than a few guys studied the distant stone wall and calculated whether or not they could reach it before the guards opened up on them. Nobody tried it—out in the open field, there was no way to outrun a bullet, no matter how fast you were.

Ralph seemed to read his thoughts. "Don't even think about it, Kid. You'll never make it."

Over by the road, the Germans ransacked the convoy. The officer who had interrogated the lieutenant was all business now, shouting orders to his men. They quickly commandeered the trucks and drove them over to their own vehicles, then began loading equipment aboard. They seemed particularly excited when they came across a few spare drums of gasoline. Hank figured they must be hard up—a tank had to use a lot of fuel. Also, it appeared that the Germans had been short vehicles so that a lot of their men had to hoof it through the snow. Laughing and joking, the Germans climbed aboard the trucks.

"I guess we're gonna have to walk," somebody said. "It's gonna be hard to keep up."

"Nah, they'll send us back behind their lines."

"What lines? As far as we knew as of yesterday, the nearest Germans were twenty miles away."

Then a change seemed to come over the Germans. The activity of securing the American trucks ended, and they turned their attention back to the prisoners. Hank could not tell what they were saying, but there was a definite change in the mood, almost like the way the air changes before a thunderstorm.

Ralph felt it, too.

"Something's up," he said. For the first time, he sounded nervous. "I hate to say it, Kid, but I don't like the looks of this."

The SS officer climbed aboard a tank and waved, and the German column began to move off. However, another officer stayed behind with about twenty men, who formed a loose line between the road and the captured soldiers. One of the Germans shouted something, and the guards moved away from the Americans to join the other SS men. None of them were that far away—maybe about thirty feet, which was close enough to see the looks on the Germans' faces. What scared Hank was that they did not appear angry, just blank—as if they weren't looking at anything at all.

Then the SS sergeant with the scar on his face stepped forward, leveled his rifle at the nearest American, and shot him. In the cold air, the noise of the rifle going off was like a slap in the face, yet the prisoners were so surprised that no one so much as shouted. The German worked the bolt and shot another American.

It all happened so fast. Terrified and defenseless, the Americans stood in mute silence like cattle waiting to be slaughtered. The Kid thought it was unreal, like watching someone else's nightmare. He kept hoping to wake up.

Then the other Germans started firing. The ones with machine guns opened up and groups of Americans jerked and danced as the bullets hit them before their bodies fell into the bloody snow.

Something struck Hank like a sledgehammer and he found himself facedown on the frozen ground.

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Von Stenger watched in disbelief as the SS sergeant named Breger stepped forward and shot first one American, and then another. He opened his mouth to shout an order for Breger to stop, but then the other SS men opened fire and there was no chance of being heard.

The shooting was over in less than a minute, leaving his ears ringing and a smell of cordite hanging in the winter air. At such close range, the automatic weapons had done their work all too well. The field was now littered with a mass of bodies.

A few GIs, however, had somehow survived. Two men jumped up after the shooting ended and began running toward the fence line. Fear made them fleet, because they were already out of effective range of the Schmeisser MP 40 submachine guns. A couple of SS men tried to shoot them with their rifles, but hitting a running target is no easy feat. It looked as if the men were going to make it over the fence to safety.

"Herr Hauptmann?" The driver was looking up at Von Stenger with an expectant expression, the way one might look to a politician for a speech.

Von Stenger was still too shocked by what he had just witnessed to understand what the driver's look meant. But then he realized. *The rifle*. Gripped tightly in his hands. He tossed away his cigarette.

Automatically, he raised the Mosin-Nagant to his shoulder, put the sight on the back of the closest fleeing American, and shot him. The second man was even faster and was almost at the fence line. Von Stenger worked the bolt, acquired the target, and squeezed off another round. He worked the bolt again and a second empty shell casing went spinning toward the ground. This man had been running so fast that he tumbled before he lay still.

"Good shooting, sir!" the young SS driver said with something like awe. "I thought you were going to let him get away. What a shot! Incredible!"

Even the SS sergeant looked back toward the vehicle and gave Von Stenger a stingy nod.

"It is better if there are no survivors," Von Stenger said. "The Americans will never forgive us for this. But what is done is done—at least now there are no witnesses."

The young driver seemed confused. "Witnesses to what, sir?"

"To a massacre. We just shot more than eighty unarmed Americans prisoners of war. Once word gets out, there won't be another German taken alive."

Most of the other soldiers began to move away in order to join the column that was leaving. Breger saw that he was still there and called out to him, "Herr Hauptmann, do you wish to help us finish them off?"

"No, I will let you have that honor." He turned back to his young SS driver. "Get us out of here."

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When the bullets started flying, Hank was so stunned that he just stood there, unable to move. He would have been mowed down in seconds, but Ralph tackled him and knocked him to the ground, partially covering Hank with his own body in the process.

Ralph's actions saved him—if only for the moment. He felt Ralph shudder as a flurry of bullets struck him. Then the firing stopped, as suddenly as it had begun.

Ralph lay there groaning in pain, his body still draped partway over Hank's own. Hank realized his legs felt wet and warm. He was horrified to see that blood covered his legs. He wasn't sure if it was Ralph's blood or his own—not that he was in any pain. Had he been shot and simply hadn't felt it in these freezing temperatures? Already, the bitter cold seeped up through the ground and into his bones.

All around him, he could hear others in the field moaning. He could also hear the grind of gears and the groan of engines. The German column of tanks and trucks—including some of their own trucks now—was on the move again.

Good. At least now they had a chance to survive if the Germans left.

But the Germans were not finished with their killing field.

Peering from under Ralph's arm, which was flung over his face, Hank saw a group of SS soldiers standing at the edge of the field near the road, smoking

cigarettes. The SS commander was nowhere in sight, but Hank spotted the sergeant with the scar on his cheek. That man tossed away his cigarette, drew a pistol, and walked out into the field, calling, "Hey, you OK?" Two more soldiers followed him, pistols drawn.

Some poor soul made the mistake of answering the SS sergeant. He heard an American voice cry out, "Over here! Over here!" Then came the crack of a pistol, and silence.

It was terrifying to lay there, wondering what was going to happen next. From his vantage point, he could see only a narrow swath of the field, but he dared not move. He heard another pistol shot, then another, as the Germans worked their way through the field.

Hank's heart pounded harder. To his horror, he realized that his warm breath was creating a cloud of vapor. It wasn't much, to be sure, but to the eyes of the Nazis walking around the field looking for survivors to shoot, he was sure his breath would look like the smoke from a forest fire.

He sucked in one last breath and held it, praying.

Then Ralph moaned. He was still alive. But he was going to get them both killed. He heard German voices, coming closer.

"Please, Ralph, I know it hurts, but you've got to be quiet," he whispered. "Please Ralph."

Ralph moaned again. It was no use. He was too out of it to hear Hank's warning.

Sure enough, Ralph's moans had drawn the attention of the SS sergeant with the nasty scar. Hank saw him coming, and shut his eyes. His best hope was to play dead. He forced himself not to breathe and told himself that he had to keep his body limp, no matter what.

He could hear the SS men shouting in English, "Hey Joe! Who needs a doctor?"

A few desperate men called out in response. Moments later, they were silenced forever by a single pistol shot.

He heard the SS sergeant walk up. The man smelled strongly of cigarettes and diesel fumes, with a whiff of alcohol thrown in. To Hank, it was the smell of death.

"Hey Joe. Are you OK?" The sergeant asked. When there was no answer, he kicked Ralph's foot. Ralph moaned in response. The sergeant shot him. Hank felt the body jerk and then go limp as a rag doll.

Don't move, don't move, don't—

He knew that in spite of himself he had jumped when the sergeant fired into Ralph's body. How could the SS sergeant not have seen it? The German may have thought it was just from the jolt of the bullet hitting the body above.

"Last chance," he said, then kicked at Hank's foot.

Hank heard him work the slide on the pistol, cycling another round into the chamber. He was so frozen with fear that he couldn't have moved if he wanted to.

"Help me!" one of the wounded GIs called from several yards away.

Hank sensed the sergeant moving in that direction. He had thought holding his breath would be difficult. It was harder telling himself to breathe again.

He heard a gunshot and the soldier who had been crying for help fell silent.

Would the sergeant come back? Hank screwed his eyes shut and started counting to ten. It would be good to live another ten seconds.

He counted to five, heard the Germans moving through the field again, double checking their handiwork.

He got to eight, his heart pounding as he imagined the German standing over him, about to put a bullet in his brain.

Ten. Still alive. He started counting again. Just ten seconds more, God. That's all I ask. Just ten seconds.

He got to eight again when he heard laughter and the sound of an engine starting. Having finished delivering the coup de grace to the wounded Americans, the SS soldiers drove away.

Still, Hank did not move. He did not open his eyes. What if it was a trick? The cold crept up from the frozen ground. He imagined he could hear the heat leaving the bodies all around him, in the same way that a truck motor ticks as it cools.

The Germans were gone. All around him lay a sea of silent bodies.

Finally, Hank forced himself to his knees. He glanced at Ralph's dead body. Then he retched again and again, the contents of his stomach spilling across the snow. His vision blurred. And then everything went black.

Chapter 7

Hundreds of miles away at Allied headquarters in Paris, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower tossed the latest communiqué from the front down on his desk and lit another cigarette.

"It's just a feint," Ike said. "The Germans are stirring the pot, but it's nothing serious. It can't be. They don't have enough men to staff a Rotary carnival, let alone an offensive."

Eisenhower inhaled the smoke deeply. He was up to four packs a day. Not to mention the endless cups of coffee and terrible diet. He was too busy to eat properly. Yet for a man in his mid-fifties he looked quite fit—if one overlooked the fact that he was balding and carried a small potbelly—but it did not take much to imagine him as the West Point football player that he had once been.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, sir," said Lieutenant General Walter Bedell Smith, his chief of staff. His nickname was Beetle, although by nature he was much closer to a Doberman—woe to anyone who interfered with Ike's schedule or tried to waste the general's time.

"When's Kay getting back? We're supposed to see a movie tonight."

"I don't know, sir."

Ike's pretty Irish driver, Kay Sommersby, was out doing some Christmas shopping on Ike's behalf. It was a poorly kept secret that she was the general's mistress. Yet neither Ike nor Sommersby found anything odd in having her pick out something nice for the general's wife, Mamie, safely out of the way stateside.

Ike smoked and thought. All day long reports of German activity in the Ardennes had been coming in. None of it made sense. "Listen, Beetle. You know as well as I do that the Germans are finished. It's just a matter of time. They don't have the resources for a counteroffensive. Why they don't just do us all a favor and give up is anybody's guess."

“Because it’s Adolf Hitler, sir. That’s why.”

Ike was a man who operated on percentages and forecasts and compromise. He admired brilliant military strategists, particularly General Robert E. Lee, but Eisenhower’s great talent was as a politician and administrator. He was the glue that held together sometimes prickly Allied forces. He relied on Omar Bradley and George Patton to lead troops on the field. They were Ike’s equivalent of James Longstreet and Stonewall Jackson, both of whom had been Lee’s top generals during the Civil War.

Intellectually, Ike understood that Hitler was a fanatic, and yet the concept of ignoring the percentages was hard for him to grasp. Why go on fighting a war you couldn’t win?

Hitler had missed his chance. If the Germans had bid for peace six months before, in the weeks leading up to D-Day when Ike had lost sleep over the dismal casualty projections, the terms of a peace agreement would have been quite favorable for the Germans. But there was no need to negotiate terms with the losing side.

An aide entered with another report. Ike read it, his eyes going wide.

“The Germans have broken through our lines. Damn it, Beetle! Reports are coming in of hundreds of tanks, thousands of men, even Luftwaffe planes. I can’t believe it.”

Beetle Smith got up and spoke to the MP guarding the door. And then he shut the double wooden doors into Ike’s office. He walked over to the windows and drew the blinds. “These stay closed from now on, sir. And we’re going to triple the guard.”

“What the devil are you taking about? It’s no secret that we’re fighting a war. You think we’re being spied on?”

“It’s not to protect information, sir. It’s to protect *you*. Those reports about Otto Skorzeny’s assassins and saboteurs—

“Hogwash.”

“Well, we didn’t think the Germans could launch a counteroffensive, either.”

“All right, let’s get Bradley and Patton in here pronto,” Ike said, stubbing out one cigarette in an overflowing ashtray and immediately lighting another. “One thing for sure—Hitler has a lousy idea of a Christmas present.”

“Not if you’re German, sir.”

• • • • •

In the heart of the Ardennes, the American snipers didn’t need intelligence reports to know that the Germans were up to something. The sound of gunfire in the distance made them uneasy. Something was up. Something big, from the sounds of it.

"Keep your eyes open," Lieutenant Mulholland said to his squad, though the warning was hardly necessary.

"What's going on, Lieutenant?" asked Billy Rowe, scanning the woods nervously.

"To hell if I know, but it's not good," Mulholland responded. "Like I said, keep your eyes open."

Rowe was new to the squad, but so far he had proved to be adept at the job, mostly because he had managed to stay alive, which was harder than it looked when you were hunting German snipers.

Since D plus 1 the snipers had been assigned within the 29th Division as a counter-sniper unit. They had done their job well—perhaps a little too well, because someone at headquarters had gotten the bright idea that the squad needed to be larger. And so they had sent Rowe and two other soldiers to fill out the ranks. Both men were good shots—Mulholland had given them an impromptu marksmanship test when they were assigned to the unit.

But it took more than being a marksman to be a good sniper. One of the replacements had died that first day in the field when he made the mistake of peeking over a log to see if he had hit anything. The German sniper on the other side of the field had picked him off. It was the kind of dumb mistake that always got the new guys killed.

Cole had hunted down and shot the German during the course of a long, tense afternoon. You could count on Cole to get even. He was from that southern hill country where people still held grudges and fought feuds. Cole was serious about that eye for an eye thing. Dead serious.

That was how sniper warfare went. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. It felt personal, even when death was delivered at long distance by a nameless German with a Mauser.

Sometimes, Mulholland felt like it was all similar to an endless chess game in which you lost a pawn here or there to expose the enemy's rook. Both sides had won and lost an awful lot of pieces, and checkmate didn't seem any closer.

They trudged along the frozen, snowy road until they came to a crossroads. The signs were like something out of a storybook—simple white with the names Malmedy and St. Vith painted on them in black, pointing in the direction to take. Say what you wanted about the German occupation, but they had been sticklers for maintaining the roads.

"Which way, Lieutenant?" Vaccaro asked. He nodded at the road toward St. Vith. The snow was nearly pristine and untrammled. "Looks quiet down that road. There's probably a nice little tavern at the end and some warm calvados."

"We'll head toward where we heard that gunfire," Mulholland said. "That's where they'll need us."

"I was afraid you would say that, sir."

It soon turned out that they were not the only travelers on the road. In the distance, they heard the whine of a vehicle approaching at high speed over the wintry roads.

"Sounds like a Jeep," Mulholland said. "But I'm not taking any chances. Everybody off the road. Now!"

Cole had already taken a position down in the ditch, his telescopic sight trained on the road they had just come down. The others hurried to join him. "Looks like one of ours, but you just can't tell for sure."

"Is it one of our Jeeps or not?" Vaccaro wanted to know.

"It's one of ours, but maybe it's a German driving."

"What are you talking about?"

"You saw that dead man in the road back there," Cole said. "He damn sure didn't die of frostbite. Maybe the Germans sent some guys behind the lines to soften us up. That could be them now, coming to link up with their Kraut buddies."

"Cole, you have got one devious mind, but I like how you think." Vaccaro worked the bolt action of his Springfield. "Shoot first and ask questions later, I always say."

The Jeep came closer, headed toward the hidden snipers. If there were Germans at the wheel, they were driving straight into an ambush. Then the Jeep began to slow as the crossroads came up.

Cole had been watching the approaching Jeep intently through his telescopic sight, but he suddenly lifted his head away and blinked. "Cover me," he said, and stepped out into the road.

"Cole," the lieutenant said. "Get back here!"

But the sniper was already standing in the middle of the road, rifle lowered, waiting for the Jeep to come closer. It rolled to a stop just a few feet from him.

The passenger got out, threw a pair of arms bundled in a great coat and mittens around Cole's neck, and kissed him.

Still watching from the ditch, the other snipers had to pick their jaws up out of the snow.

It was Lieutenant Mulholland who recovered first. He stood, brushed the snow and frozen mud from his knees and elbows, then approached the Jeep. The others followed.

The passenger was Jolie Molyneaux, a French resistance fighter who had been assigned as the sniper unit's guide in the days following D-Day. Jolie was as pretty as a girl straight from a pin-up calendar, an asset that had served her well in dealing with the Germans during the occupation. Most of the time, a smile and a flip of her hair were all she needed to get out of a tight situation.

But that was not the real Jolie at all. She was tough as a boot and sharp as the blade of a knife. Jolie was initially just as skeptical about the American liberators as she was bitter toward the Nazi occupiers. However, she had quickly become a vital part of the unit and had struck up an unlikely romance with Cole, who by most appearances was about as friendly as a copperhead. A bullet from the German known as the Ghost Sniper had nearly killed her outside Bienville. The last time Cole had seen her was when he loaded Jolie into an ambulance nearly six months before.

"What a bunch of assholes," Jolie said in heavily accented English. "I never got one letter."

"Uh, you picked one heck of a time to show up for a visit, Mademoiselle Molyneux," said the lieutenant. Like a compass needle spinning in the presence of a magnet, the look on his face bounced between delight at seeing her and outright annoyance. It was no secret that he once had romantic intentions toward the French fighter, but those had been dashed by her interest in Cole.

"But there is not supposed to be fighting," she said. "Everyone knows this is a quiet zone."

"In case you haven't noticed, we are in the middle of a German offensive." Mulholland's tone indicated that his internal needle had moved closer to the

annoyed category. "All hell has broken loose. You need to get back in that Jeep and return to HQ."

The driver spoke up. "Whoa, whoa, sir. I can't just turn around. There are Krauts back that way and we barely got past them. I have a message for the company that came this way."

"Well, you'll have to take her with you."

"That's impossible, sir. She made such a pest of herself at HQ that I was told to leave her with your squad, just to get her out of there. I took her this far, and that's as far as she can go."

"Now look here, Corporal—"

Jolie spoke up. "I am where I should be," she said. "I am back with all of you. I want to be fighting Germans again."

"This is ridiculous," the lieutenant said. "You're a civilian."

"It is my country they are trying to invade again. It is my fight. Do not tell me what is ridiculous." She reached to get her bag, but Cole beat her to it, lifting a battered rucksack from the back of the Jeep.

"She can't come with me," the driver repeated, then eased his foot off the clutch so that the tires started to catch on the frozen surface, kicking out slush. "Orders are orders."

"Then get the hell out of here, if you're in such a goddamn hurry."

"No need to get sore, sir." Then the Jeep driver hit the gas. The wheels spun momentarily on the slick icy surface of the road, but the chains soon dug in and the Jeep shot away toward St. Vith.

As the noise of the engine faded, the winter stillness seemed to envelope them as they stood in the middle of the empty road, staring at one other.

"Well," Cole finally said, in an uncharacteristic display of conversation to break the silence. "Ain't it just a Merry Christmas."

Chapter 8

The snipers headed up the road, following the tire tracks of the Jeep that had dropped off Jolie. The Jeep had been heading to catch up with the artillery support unit in the direction of St. Vith.

Cole had his share of questions for Jolie, but he decided that now was not the time to ask them. It was enough that she was alive. He was glad to see her, even if the circumstances were not ideal. The same could not be said of Lieutenant Mulholland, whose disapproval radiated from him like the heat from a wood stove. Having a Resistance fighter guide them in Normandy was one thing, but having a French national accompany them now was highly against regulations. It wasn't just the rules that Mulholland was worried about. There was the very real risk of running into German armor.

Unlike Lieutenant Mulholland, Cole was not all that concerned about Jolie putting herself in danger. She could take care of herself. Like Cole, Jolie never had been much for small talk, and trudged along in silence just to his right. She and Cole had that much in common.

"I reckon we need to see about getting you a weapon," he said.

Jolie shrugged through her heavy coat. She had come prepared for the weather, at least. "When the time comes, I am sure I can find a rifle."

They moved on toward St. Vith, their senses on hyper alert. Except for a short burst of machine gun fire somewhere ahead, there had been no more sounds of firing from the direction of the town, but that did not mean the Germans were not on the move.

As the scattered houses of a French village came into sight, they saw the first signs of trouble. The Jeep that had dropped off Jolie was halfway in a ditch, the driver slumped over the wheel. This was no traffic accident. The Jeep and the driver's body were riddled with bullets.

"Poor bastard," Vaccaro said. "The Krauts would have heard him coming from a long ways off. They used him for target practice."

"He had orders to deliver messages to those guys from the 285th," the lieutenant said. "The question is, what happened to them?"

Vaccaro nodded at the road beyond the crossroads village. The countryside surrounding the crossroads was so flat that they could see for a long distance across the frozen fields. Several roads converged at the town, and on one of the roads beyond they could see a scattering of military vehicles. But the vehicles weren't moving, and there was no one in sight.

"Huh," Vaccaro said, putting his scope on the abandoned vehicles. "Those belong to our guys. What's up with that? Nobody around."

"Let's talk about it once we get off this road and in among those houses," Cole muttered. "We're like sittin' ducks out here. Lieutenant?"

"Yeah, good idea."

Like many other towns they had passed through during the past few months that had been touched by war, the houses and streets appeared deserted. Just because they were Americans did not mean the residents were eager to show themselves. Men with guns were much the same when you were an unarmed civilian. For all anyone knew, the Germans could return at any moment and the shooting would start all over again. People here would be hiding in their cellars, or they would have fled for the forest with their food, valuables, and daughters—just as they had since medieval times whenever an army passed through.

The silence built around them. The only noise other than the crunch of snow came from a bunch of crows circling one of the fields—the cold had not stopped them from scavenging. For some reason, the quiet made it feel colder. They entered the village cautiously, using the buildings for cover, moving from house to house as they covered one another. With them, it had become a well-practiced routine. It was true that a sniper would have opened fire before they reached the crossroads, but there was still the possibility that the Germans had left behind some kind of rear guard that might be holed up with a machine gun and a grudge.

"Nice and quiet, just the way we like it," Vaccaro said, then nodded in the direction of the gathering crows. "What I want to know is what all those birds are up to."

"I have an idea," Cole said.

It did not take long to pass through the village, which seemed unscathed by any fighting. The same could not be said of the abandoned American vehicles on the

road beyond. Somebody had chewed them up, and good. The snowy fields surrounding the road were churned up by tank treads and tires. Clearly, a large number of vehicles had passed through.

The crows circled an area not far off the road. It was surrounded by low hedgerows and fences. Vaccaro started toward the field. "Why is it I have this feeling I'm not going to like what I see?"

Slowly, they advanced into the roadside field. Bodies lay scattered across the field among the withered stalks of last year's corn. Pools of blood stained the snow. All the bodies belonged to GIs, and there were a lot of them.

"Jesus, this wasn't a fight. They were mowed down. Look at that."

Cole prodded a body with his boot. "Wasn't that long ago," he remarked. "A couple of hours, maybe."

"Anybody see a weapon? I sure don't. These guys were unarmed. Those German bastards murdered them."

"Do you think anyone survived?"

"Let's find out."

They spread out and walked through the killing field. The bodies were twisted in the curious poses that sudden death brings. Already, the cold was seeping into the dead, freezing them into grotesque positions, death and the cold working hand in hand. Even more chilling was the fact that many of the bodies showed signs that they had been shot in the head—or even clubbed to death. Mulholland's squad had seen its share of death these last few months, but this was different. The thought of executions on this scale was sickening.

Rowe bent over and retched. "Shit," he said. "This is awful."

"Yeah."

"Hey, anybody need help?" the lieutenant called out. His only answer was the wind sighing across the field. He tried again. "Can anybody hear me?"

"I dunno, Lieutenant. I think they all bought the farm."

Then, ever so faintly, a voice cried out, "Over here."

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They rushed to the spot. All that they could see was a jumble of bodies. Vaccaro said, "Buddy, we don't know which one is you. You have to wave your arm or something."

One of the bodies raised an arm and they hurried over. He was just a kid, half hidden by a corpse on top of him, spattered with blood. No wonder the Germans had missed him.

They pulled him out and got him to his feet, then half carried, half dragged him away from the carnage. It seemed amazing that he had come through the massacre without a physical scratch. But some wounds couldn't be seen. The kid was shivering badly, probably from a combination of shock and cold. To their surprise, it was Jolie who sat him down on the stone wall, wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, and hugged him tight. Vaccaro handed her a flask. "Here, give him some of this calvados. That ought to warm him up."

Gradually, the shivering eased enough that the lieutenant walked over to ask the GI a few questions. Cole, Vaccaro and Rowe were still combing the field for any survivors.

"You want to tell me your name, soldier?"

"Hank Walsh, Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion—the whole unit is wiped out, sir."

"What happened?"

Private Walsh recounted how his unit had just passed through Five Points on its way to St. Vith when the Germans opened fire. "They had panzers, sir. King Tigers. They knocked out the first and last vehicles in the convoy and we were stuck on the road. Some of the men wanted to fight, but the others told them to surrender. What were we going to do against Tiger Tanks? So we got out of the ditches and the Germans rounded us up."

"Wehrmacht?"

"No, sir. These were SS."

The lieutenant and Jolie exchanged a look. "Hard cases."

"The Germans took most of our vehicles because they had a lot of men on foot. Most of their column moved off, and they left just a few guys guarding us in the field. Then one of them just up and shot one of our guys. Then all the Germans started shooting. It was over in a few minutes." He fought back a sob. "I'd be dead right now if it hadn't been for my buddy, Ralph. He tackled me and the bullets hit him instead."

"It looks like those bastards made sure they did the job right."

The kid shuddered. "They walked through the field, and anybody who was still alive, they shot him or caved in his head with a rifle butt."

"Jesus."

"Ralph was wounded so bad he was out of his head, just mumbling nonsense, and they shot him. I tried to tell him to keep quiet—" The kid choked back a sob.

"It's all right," Mulholland said. "You did what you could."

"I held my breath, hoping they would think I was dead."

"Well, you made it." The lieutenant clapped him on the shoulder in what was meant to be a reassuring gesture, but it almost knocked the skinny young GI off the wall.

The others came back, looking grim. "There's nobody else alive, sir."

Mulholland muttered, "Son of a bitch."

The kid finally broke down and sobbed.

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After the lone survivor of the massacre had told his story, Cole had to spend a few minutes alone. He was well aware that most people thought he was a hard case, and maybe he was. Lord knows he had seen his share of bad things in this war, and done a few of them himself. Nobody could call him a saint. But something about the massacre scene affected him deeply. It was the idea of shooting American boys like hogs in a pen.

The bodies in the field told the story plain enough. The Americans had been gunned down where they stood.

He noticed that two of the bodies were much farther away than the others. The poor bastards had almost made it over the fence and escaped.

It was a long way to hit someone with a submachine gun—especially if you were occupied shooting lots of targets close up. Certainly it was too far for a pistol shot. Which meant a rifle.

He knew from experience that a moving target at that range was not easy. Hitting two running targets was damn near impossible. He doubted it was the work of your typical infantryman, SS or not.

Curious now, Cole moved closer to the road. It was easy to tell where the killers had stood because their footprints were surrounded by spent shell casings.

Cole scanned the ground, looking for some other clue—for what, he was not sure. Cole was good at reading tracks, but mostly what he saw were a lot of German boot prints, of which he had seen his share over the last few months. Empty brass cartridges, of course. A few cigarette butts. An empty wine bottle. What had been left behind did not tell him much, and yet it told him everything. The SS men had massacred the Americans, had a smoke and passed around a bottle, then moved out into the field to finish the job.

A little off to the side, a different cigarette butt caught his eye. It was much fancier than the others, gold tipped, of a kind Cole had learned was called a *Sobranie*. He had learned about those cigarettes during his first few days in Normandy, when he had encountered the vicious German sniper nicknamed *Das Gespenst*. The Ghost.

Cole considered himself to be a good sniper. But the German... well, there was a reason he had that nickname.

Cole looked again at the snowy ground. Two more brass cartridges winked up at him, more elongated than the others. Rifle rounds rather than machine guns rounds. He looked across the field at the two distant bodies of the GIs who had almost escaped. Two shots. Two dead soldiers. He bent down and picked up one of the rifle cartridges. A closer look revealed that the cartridge was stamped with the alien-looking characters and symbols of the Cyrillic alphabet, which meant that these were from a Russian rifle chambered for 7.62 mm rather than the usual 8 mm Mauser rounds.

If it was possible, Cole now felt colder.

There was just one German sniper Cole knew of who smoked gold-tipped cigarettes and used a Russian rifle.

Das Gespenst. It couldn't be. And yet here was the proof, staring back at him.

He was sure the son of a bitch had died in a flooded field outside Bienville after shooting Jolie and very nearly killing Cole. Even Cole had to admit that he'd gotten lucky when an artillery barrage had rolled in, stopping the German sniper from finishing the job. He had reckoned that the shelling had turned the German into hamburger.

Cole clenched his fist around the brass shell casing.

The Ghost Sniper had returned.

Chapter 9

Klein felt like a fox that had sneaked into the henhouse. Since killing the lone American on the deserted road, he had avoided any one-on-one encounters. Instead, he mixed in with large groups by saying that he had been separated from his unit, which was easy enough because the Americans were in such disarray. Rumors flew like the snow. Patton was on the way! Hitler himself was leading the attack! None of it made much sense, but the German attack had created a blizzard of confusion.

As a saboteur, he would do what he could to make the situation worse.

Later that day, Klein fell in with a group of muddy, half-frozen American soldiers. Lucky for him, they were all too tired and cold to be curious about where he was from. No one broke the silence. The only sound was that of boots tramping through the slush.

At the best of times, the American military operated in a way that resembled orderly chaos. The German advance had thrown it into disarray, mixing men from different units together like a big khaki-colored omelet. Nobody was too worried about one more straggler. He was just another guy separated from his unit.

Klein just hoped they weren't marching right into German lines. He wasn't so sure he would be able to explain that he was a German playing at being an American. No, it would be far easier for the SS to shoot him.

After an hour of slogging through the snow, they came to a crossroads headquarters. A few tents had been thrown up to shelter the most frostbitten soldiers. Soup was being heated in buckets over an open fire.

Klein wouldn't mind something to eat, but it was the sight of stockpiled barrels of gasoline that brought joy to his heart. Clearly, the gasoline had been salvaged to fuel Sherman tanks, trucks, and Jeeps so that the American forces could stay mobile. It was just the target Klein sought.

He accepted a tin mug of soup with a grateful smile and a nod, then moved closer to the fire to warm his bones. While he ate, he studied the fuel depot.

A few guards kept watch on the perimeter of the camp, but no eyes were on the fuel depot. The Americans were obviously more concerned about the entire base being overrun at any moment by a panzer group than about saboteurs slipping in.

He debated how to set the fuel ablaze, then settled on a very direct approach. He also wanted to survive the resulting explosion, which seemed unlikely until he noticed a stalled Sherman tank about forty or fifty meters from the depot.

He could run that distance in five or six seconds over level ground. But with boots over rutted mud and slush? Maybe.

Klein bided his time until dusk, which thickened the already gray afternoon. He needed enough light to see by, but not so much that he would be seen.

He got up and lit a cigarette, then wandered toward the stacked barrels. The air smelled strongly of gasoline—smoking in proximity to so much fuel was unwise. No one was around to warn him away.

He was about to do far worse than light a cigarette.

Klein reached into the pocket of his American-issue winter coat and felt the cold lump of a hand grenade. An Mk 2 fragmentation or "pineapple" grenade, to be exact. He reached in his other hand and pulled the pin.

When he was sure no one was looking, he pulled out the grenade and tossed it toward the drums of fuel.

His aim was less than perfect.

The grenade bounced off and rolled a few feet away from the barrels—a fact that registered from the corner of his eye because Klein was already running flat out toward the abandoned tank. He just had time to put the tank between himself and the fuel depot when the grenade detonated and lit up the gasoline. An orange fireball filled the sky. He felt a wave of heat and hot wind stir his hair.

Fortunately for Klein and the American soldiers, the fuel depot exploded in a series of fireballs rather than a single, cataclysmic blast. He heard shouts and screams. In the confusion that followed, Klein ran for the woods.

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An hour after discovering the massacre site, the snipers were ready to move out. The kid who had somehow survived the massacre was warmed up and steady enough. It was also clear that he had no choice but to accompany them.

"You're coming with us," the lieutenant told him. "And we're giving you a nickname. We're calling you the Kid, since you barely look old enough to shave."

"There you go, Kid," Vaccaro said, clapping him on the back. "Welcome to the squad."

"We don't know the situation right now," the lieutenant continued. "We could have Germans all around us. If we start back down the road toward where our lines used to be, we could walk right into the Krauts."

"So we're basically surrounded, cut off, short on supplies and freezing cold," Vaccaro said. "I'm glad that's cleared up. So, now what, sir?"

"We're going after them," Mulholland said. "We don't know what's behind us, but we sure as hell know what's in front of us. Germans. And lots of them. The same ones who murdered these poor bastards here."

"They have tanks, sir."

"No, we don't have tanks. But we are scout-snipers. We can at least track their movements and harass their rear. It's better than running off with our tails between our legs." The lieutenant knew he sounded grim, so he was surprised to find Vaccaro grinning at him. "If you have something to say, Vaccaro, say it."

"It's just that it sounds like we have a tank-less job ahead of us," Vaccaro said.

Lieutenant Mulholland shook his head. "Vaccaro, half the time I don't know whether to have you shot for insubordination or for telling bad jokes."

Cole chimed in. "Don't worry, sir. With any luck the Germans will shoot him first and save you the trouble."

"Ha, ha. You guys are more laughs than a barrel of monkeys." Vaccaro turned to the newest member of the squad. "See, Kid, you don't know what you're getting yourself into. Not that you have any choice right now but to tag along with us. We don't know where the rear is, or even if there is a rear anymore."

"I don't even have a weapon," the Kid said.

Cole unsnapped his utility belt and handed Hank his .45 in a holster. "That's better than nothing until we find you a rifle. Just make sure the Germans get nice and close. How far can you throw an ashtray and hit what you're throwing at?"

"Uh, not that far, I guess. Twenty feet?"

"That's about the range of this here pistol. Of course, the slug is about as big as an ashtray. Like I said, just make sure you get close."

"Yeah, don't shoot till you see the whites of their eyes," Vaccaro said.

"That's the British, Vaccaro. We haven't shot at them since the War of 1812. With the Germans, you don't shoot till you smell the bratwurst on their breath."

"Hillbilly, you're always full of good advice. If I were you, Kid, I'd listen to him."

They started down the road. "This is the road to St. Vith," Lieutenant Mulholland said. "From there, the Germans will probably try to get across the Meuse River and then make a dash for Antwerp or maybe even goddamn Paris. Crazy Kraut bastards. Who would have thought they still had it in them? I thought the fight was all out of the Third Reich at this point and we were just mopping up."

"At least they're easy to follow." The road ahead had been churned up by the passage of tanks and trucks. "What I want to know is, where the hell are our planes?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "They can't fly. Look at this sky. It's right on top of us, right down to the ground. Nothing but clouds and snow. Lousy weather—unless you're the Germans trying to advance without being attacked from the air, in which case it's beautiful weather."

"Lieutenant, do you even have a map?"

"We don't need one, Vaccaro. All we need to do is follow these tracks. Best of all, the Germans are going to be in such a hurry covering ground that they won't even worry about us coming up behind them."

"Don't be so sure about that," Cole said. "I have a feeling this German unit is going to have eyes in the back of its head."

"What are you talking about?"

He nodded toward the field, where the bodies of the massacred Americans lay slowly freezing into twisted poses. "Something I found other there." He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the spent rifle cartridges he had found and held it out to the lieutenant. "Does that look familiar?"

"It's got those Russian markings on it." The lieutenant's eyes lit up. He knew all about Das Gespenst. "I'll be damned. You don't think it's the same guy?"

"Reckon I do," Cole said. "The Ghost Sniper. He's one of their best snipers, and now he's a goddamn murderer, too. And he's out there somewhere up ahead. Best not let him get the drop on us."

The lieutenant hefted his rifle. "You heard Cole. Keep your eyes open, everybody. It sounds as if the Germans will be doing the same."

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Once the squad was on the move, Cole fell into step alongside Jolie. They had some catching up to do.

"So, where you been all this time?" he asked Jolie. "I thought—hell, I don't know what I thought."

"I was mostly in the hospital. The bullet did a great deal of damage. I wrote you."

Cole didn't have an answer for that. They walked a bit in silence, glad to be moving again, because that helped them to stay warm. "Jolie, maybe you ought not to be out here with us. Mulholland is a goddamn Boy Scout most of the time, but he's got a point. For one thing, it's cold as hell, in case you ain't noticed."

"Where else would I go now?" Jolie asked, sounding exasperated, then sweeping her arms wide to indicate the barren white landscape. "If I get too cold, maybe you can keep me warm."

"I take it then that the bullet didn't damage anything important?"

Jolie did not answer right away. "I get pains now, just thinking about what happened. My body aches all the time."

"For what it's worth, Jolie, I didn't expect to see you again, but here you are, and I'm damn glad to see you."

"The lieutenant, he is not so happy."

"To hell with him. But you know, he is worried about you. You showed up just in time to be in the middle of a big goddamned fight. Why are you here, Jolie?"

She took her time answering. "There is nothing for me at home, Cole. Most of my family and friends are gone, thanks to the Germans. I want to see this war through to the end. If I can, I will go all the way to Berlin. I will dance on Hitler's grave."

"Something tells me that you just might."

She walked along in a silence for a moment. "Are you sure he is still out there? The Ghost Sniper?"

"I don't know who else shoots a Russian rifle and smokes them fancy cigarettes, so it's a good bet it's our old friend."

"He is no friend of mine. This time, you need to shoot him."

"I reckon I will, if I get half a chance. That is, if he don't shoot me first. This Ghost Sniper is a tough customer."

"So are you, Micajah Cole. A real hillbilly, no? This time, you show him who is the better shot."

"If I get the chance, I'll only have to show him once."

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Fifty feet ahead, Vaccaro was filling in the Kid about the sniper squad. "Let me give you the lay of the land, so to speak. The unit you were with—what did you and those poor bastards do?"

"We were artillery support mostly—finding positions, moving munitions, observing fire."

"So you didn't actually shoot at anything yourself?"

"No, that wasn't my job."

"Well, your job description just changed, at least temporarily. You're in a sniper squad now. Hang on to that gun Cole gave you. Like he said, we'll find you a rifle when we can."

"I used to hunt a lot. Squirrels and rabbits mostly. I was a good shot with a twenty-two."

"There you go, Kid."

"Tell me about Cole. It was nice of him to give me his pistol, but he seems like a real cracker."

Vaccaro laughed. "You don't know the half of it. And if I was you, which fortunately I ain't, I would not go around calling him a cracker. You do not want to screw with Cole. Just be glad he's on our side. I can joke around with him because

he's used to me by now, but your best bet is to keep your mouth shut around him and just do what he says. If it wasn't for Cole, we'd of been dead a long time ago."

"What about the lieutenant?"

"Mulholland? He's all right for an officer, but half the time it's really Cole who calls the shots. The problem with the lieutenant is that he's got a little too much Sunday school teacher in him. He likes to play by the rules."

"And you don't?"

"Hey, I'm just a guy from Brooklyn who wants to survive the war. My only rule is, 'Don't get killed.' "

"The others?"

"Rowe and McNulty have only been with us for a few weeks. They ain't bad, but they ain't stone-cold killers like Cole."

The Kid glanced back at Jolie and Cole. "What's with the French girl? She and Cole seem awfully close."

"Yeah, so you better steer clear of her if you don't want Cole's boot up your ass. Jolie is a tough one herself. She's one of those French Resistance fighters. You know, a *Macchi*. She absolutely hates Germans."

"She seems all right. She tried to keep me from freezing to death back there."

"Hell, Kid, you looked like a lost puppy. What did you expect? I was ready to wrap you in a blanket myself."

"Sorry." The Kid looked down at the snow, his shoulders slumped.

"Hey, there's nothing to be sorry about. You survived a massacre. It's those Krauts I've got a problem with. Now, let's go get even."

"I don't know. Those SS guys—"

"Don't worry about them. Just stick with us and keep your head down, Kid. That, and keep your socks dry. You get wet feet in this cold and it's as good as taking a bullet."

Chapter 10

The German column rolled into the next village beyond Baugnez. The place was little more than a scattering of buildings around a wide place in the road, but the hamlet was large enough to have a handful of residences, a boulangerie, a post office, a school house, and a tavern. In the snow, the modest stone buildings had a Christmas village look about them, like a scene from a whimsical Weihnachtskarte. The arrival of the tanks, with their treads churning the road to slush and their engines filling the air with exhaust, soon shattered that peaceful illusion.

This was the first village beyond the Baugnez crossroads and Malmedy, where the massacre had taken place. Most of the German troops were not even aware of the killings. Those who had taken part were still filled with a kind of blood lust, like dogs that had gotten a taste of raw meat.

Some of the villagers came out to wave at the tanks as if the brutal machines were on parade. Although this town was in Belgium, they were close enough to the border that a few Germans had settled here over the years. A middle-aged woman

emerged from the tavern with a basket loaded with bottles of beer and sandwiches, handing them out to the passing troops. Clearly, she and a few of the parade spectators were German loyalists. An older man emerged from a house and waved an old German flag, the black, red, and gold tri-color of the Weimar Republic.

Others in the village clearly were not so enthusiastic. They stood with hands at their sides, gazing sullenly at the unwelcome sight of German tanks, or hid in their houses.

"Do you want something to eat, Herr Hauptmann?" his driver asked.

"No, but you go ahead."

"Thank you, sir."

The driver parked the Schwimmwagen and ran to the woman handing out the sandwiches and beer. He returned, grinning.

"Real ham on fresh-baked bread!" he said, holding the sandwich aloft like a prize. "At least some of the people here are loyal Germans!"

"Good thing for us," Von Stenger said. He had kept his rifle at the ready, even now as his driver gulped down the sandwich and guzzled the beer. Old habits died hard, and he half expected some partisan to take a potshot at them from an attic window. But so far, the only thing shot at them by the more unfriendly locals had been caustic glares.

Von Stenger noticed the sergeant with the scar, along with a couple of SS men, saunter toward the woman. One of the men took away her nearly empty basket. What did they want with her?

He did not spend much time wondering about that, because he soon spotted Friel, who had climbed down from his tank to consult with his officers over the map. The sniper could see from the way Friel kept waving his right arm in a chopping motion that he was upset. He walked over to hear what was being said.

"We need to get across the Meuse River before this weather breaks!" Friel said. "If the Allied planes catch us too soon, the whole operation will come to a halt."

Von Stenger caught his eye. "I would not mind a break in the weather," he said. "Nothing but snow, cold, and more snow."

"You won't be saying that when you have an American plane buzzing over your head." He turned to the others. "We must be across the river by morning! There can be no more excuses!"

Friel's voice had the force of an iron bar when he needed it to; his men seemed to bend under it. His eyes shined with intensity and energy. For all his urbane ways, it was no wonder that he was an SS officer. There had been rumors that Friel had suffered a nervous breakdown after returning from Russia, where his unit had earned the nickname The Blowtorch Brigade for its propensity for burning everything Russian in its path. Seeing him now, Von Stenger thought that maybe Friel had indeed suffered a breakdown, but not necessarily from any weakness of character. Just the opposite. Friel must have needed time to recharge. How could someone possibly maintain that level of intensity?

Von Stenger drifted away from the other officers, slung his rifle over his shoulder, and lit a Sobranie in the lee of the tavern. The thick stone walls served as an effective wind block against the icy air and snow. The walls were not thick enough, however, to block out the sound of the woman's scream that came from within.

He looked around with only passing interest. The woman who had been handing out sandwiches and beer was gone. Though she was well past her prime, that apparently had not stopped the soldiers from dragging her inside. He might have tried to stop them—he was an officer, after all—but these SS troops were *verrückt*. Crazy. He certainly felt like an outsider among them. And that foolish Sergeant Breger had been only too happy to shoot down the Americans. He might not have any qualms about dispatching a meddling Wehrmacht officer, either. Von Stenger had seen it happen in Russia near the end, when discipline began to wane. A bullet in the back, apparently by accident.

Trying not to be too obvious about it, Von Stenger adjusted his collar so that his rank insignia showed more clearly.

It appeared that the sergeant and his two thugs were not the only ones rampaging through the town. Another group of SS soldiers was going from house to house—ostensibly for a security check—but in the process they were carrying off anything of value. They were hardly more than boys, just eighteen or nineteen, from the look of them. Baby faces. But there was nothing childish in their demeanor. One of the boys had stuffed a pair of silver candlesticks into his pockets. Another had a bottle of liquor in one hand. The other hand held a pistol. Friel stood nearby, still obsessing over his map, apparently oblivious to what his troops were doing—or else he didn't much care.

The older man who had been waving the German flag earlier came out of the house that Von Stenger had been sheltering against. With angry eyes, he followed the progress of the marauding young soldiers. And then he started toward them, clearly intending to chastise them.

Von Stenger pushed away from the wall to block his path.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll leave them be, *mein guter Mann*," he said.

"You are an officer. Are you in charge here?" the old man demanded, speaking German.

"No, I am not," Von Stenger said quietly. "I think the devil himself is in charge. You had better go back inside and don't come out again."

But it was too late. The trio of young SS men approached. "Is this your house, old man? We need to go inside and see your papers."

The old man drew himself up. "I fought for the Kaiser in 1914! I was a good German before any of you were born! This is not how German troops should act."

The young soldier who was holding the liquor bottle slipped it into his pocket and aimed the pistol at the old man's head. His face was a blank mask and already he was turning his face slightly away to avoid the inevitable spattering of blood and bone that was about to take place.

Von Stenger spoke up. "I will look at the old man's papers. There are other houses here to search."

The SS boys looked at Von Stenger as if seeing him for the first time. Their eyes slipped over his rank insignia, but lingered at his throat, where his Knight's Cross was visible. Even if they did not respect a Wehrmacht captain, they would respect that bit of black metal.

Over at the Schwimmwagen, his driver had stopped chewing and was staring.

The boy with the pistol lowered it and shrugged. "Yes, Herr Hauptmann," he said. They moved on.

Von Stenger turned to the old man and gave him a shove—it was more for show, but the old man began to stammer indignantly. He shoved him again and got him inside the tiny house. An old woman and a very young boy, no more than eight or nine, stared at him wide-eyed.

"I must speak to the commanding officer!" the old man said. "I am a German citizen!"

"Listen to me," Von Stenger said. "These are SS troops. They do what they want. They will kill you and your family if you confront them. I will tell them that I saw your papers and that you are a good German. Maybe they will leave you alone—if you keep your mouth shut."

Smoke had started to rise from the tavern across the street.

"They have set fire to the tavern!" the old man shouted in alarm, moving toward the door. "I must go to help Madame Lemerand."

Von Stenger blocked his path. "There is nothing you can do for her. If the SS killed her, then that's that. Is that your grandson? You had better stay here and look after him."

For a moment, it looked as if the old man might try to push past him. And then just as suddenly realization seemed to come over him. His whole body sagged. "This war has gone on too long. I thought it was already lost until I saw these tanks arrive. Now, I wish I'd never seen them. Poor Madame Lemerand!"

"Stay inside if you know what's good for you," Von Stenger said.

The old man nodded. "I can see there are a few good soldiers left. Thank you, Herr Hauptmann."

Von Stenger stepped back out and shut the door firmly behind him, then lingered near the house. Most of the SS troops were leaving, but it wouldn't hurt to hang around for a few minutes. It was silly, but he now felt obliged to protect the old man and his family.

His driver came over. "They were going to shoot him."

"Yes."

"I was not sure they were going to listen to you, Herr Hauptmann."

"But they did. That man is a good German. He fought in the Great War."

"Then you did the right thing, although it hasn't won you any friends."

To Von Stenger's surprise, the confrontation at the house had drawn Friel's attention. The SS commander dodged between the rolling tanks to cross the village street.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Just an old man who wanted to join up and help us win the war."

"Ha, ha! That's the spirit." Friel looked at the tavern, from which flames were just beginning to lick the sky, and then at Von Stenger. "I can see you don't approve. But let me tell you something. The last time I was in Germany a month ago, I was there when the Allies bombed Kiel. I saw little schoolgirls reduced to bloody smears on the wall. That is what war has become. So please save your silent judgments for someone else, Herr Hauptmann."

Friel had cold blue eyes. Von Stenger met them. He had dismissed Friel previously as just another believer, a Nazi fanatic. He could see now in those eyes

that Friel was not only fiercely intelligent, but that he had the soul of a glacier. Von Stenger knew he had better be careful from now on. "No one needs to tell me what war has become, but that does not mean one has to enjoy this kind of excess. A good soldier does his duty."

"Good." Friel's easy smile returned and he clapped Von Stenger on the shoulder. "Then do yours, Kurt. Start killing some Americans with that fancy rifle of yours."

At that, Friel returned to his waiting tank. Somehow, the Nazi officer managed to make even crossing the muddy street look like he was marching on a parade ground.

Von Stenger got back in the Volkswagen. "How was your sandwich?" he asked the driver.

"Good, sir."

"Drive us out to the head of the column," he said. He stopped short of adding, *I need a break from these SS bastards.*

"Yes, Herr Hauptmann."

They drove out, passing tanks and dodging trucks. For all of Friel's cajoling about keeping to the schedule, the column did not seem to move at much more than a snail's pace. They reached the woods, and trees pressed in close to the edge of the road. In fact, it was almost like passing through a tunnel. Coming up, he could see where the woods ended and the road came out into an open field. Perfect place for an ambush.

"Pull over up here," he told the driver.

The driver did as ordered, and Von Stenger climbed out. He slipped on a white poncho and pulled a white covering over his helmet. Quickly, he wrapped his rifle in a strip of white cloth. He would now blend easily into the winter woods.

"What do you want me to do, sir?" the driver asked.

"Come with me and keep quiet."

They started off into the woods. The head of the column was just entering the copse—the roar of diesel engines and clank of tank treads had shattered the wintry stillness. And yet there was something comforting about being away from the column. As a sniper, he was used to operating by himself and he missed that after being assigned to Friel's Kampfgruppe. Not for the first time, he was glad that although he held the rank of officer—rank did have its privileges, such as being driven around in a Schwimmwagen—he was not in charge of anyone but himself. He did all he could to keep things that way.

He pressed deeper into the woods. The snow had settled on top of a layer of leaves, so that with each step his boots sank several inches. Walking just a few hundred yards was exhausting, and yet that's just what he did now, moving away from the road and toward the tree line where the woods met the field. His driver struggled to keep up. The crunch of leaves and snow underfoot made it almost impossible to be silent, but he was not too concerned about that because the growing noise of the mechanized column would drown out any sound they made.

He would have liked some height in order to get a better view of the field, but there wasn't really time for him to get into a tree. Instead, he found a windfall that had caught in another tree, so that it was a couple of meters above the forest floor. He climbed the sharply angled trunk of the deadfall and was rewarded with a

glimpse of the open field beyond. He straddled the deadfall and positioned his rifle between the fork of the tree that the deadfall had lodged in.

The field spread out before him. But he did not just see it as a wintry plain more than a mile across, crisscrossed by stone fences, hedgerows, and a snow-covered road. He saw it the way that a chess master saw a chessboard—as a playing field to be assessed for every strength and weakness, and where one false move could mean defeat. Although the snowy fields appeared empty, Von Stenger was certain that they were not.

He was sure that Kampfgruppe Friel was rolling into an ambush. Von Stenger put his eye to the scope of his rifle. He was just as certain that he could bring that ambush to a quick end.

All he needed was a target. Eye pressed against the scope, he bided his time.

Chapter 11

"Look at that smoke," Vaccaro said, nodding to a dark spiral against the gray sky. "The Krauts are up there torching something. I feel sorry for the poor bastards they caught up with."

"They must have slowed down. The way they've been moving, I thought they would be back in Paris by now."

For the past hour, the snipers had been following the tracks left by the German column. The passage of the heavy panzers and trucks had broken through the crust of frozen snow and mud and churned up the road, which was now a muddy swath through the snowy countryside. As much as possible, the snipers kept out of the mud and walked in the fields in hopes of keeping their boots dry, but it wasn't always possible where the road narrowed.

"We don't even need Cole to track these bastards," Vaccaro said. "My grandma could follow this column, and she's half blind and fat as a pickle barrel."

Although they were on foot, there was a chance they might catch the rear of the advancing German column. The slower vehicles, and those that became bogged down in the mud, would be left behind. One thing was clear, however, which was that the Germans were more interested in advancing than in holding any territory. So far, they hadn't left any forces behind.

Aside from the mud, the smoke was the first sign that there were Germans up ahead. There hadn't been so much as the sound of a gunshot since they had left the massacre site, which meant the German column was advancing unopposed.

Lieutenant Mulholland stopped and nodded at the spiral of smoke. The smoke was not straight ahead but slightly to their right, indicating that the road ahead turned sharply. "If we angle across these fields, I'll bet we can come out ahead of these Germans."

"And do what, sir?" Vaccaro asked.

"Ambush them."

"Uh, they've got tanks, sir. All we've got are rifles. These are like BB guns against a King Tiger tank."

"We aren't trying to take out the tanks, Vaccaro, but their operators. It's time we started paying those bastards back for what they did at Malmedy."

"I can't argue with that, sir."

The lieutenant turned to Cole. "What are you thinking?"

Cole appeared to turn it over for a moment, then slowly nodded as he looked across the whitened fields and woods. Unlike the lieutenant, he possessed an internal compass that gave him an uncanny sense of the landscape. "I think it's a good plan, Lieutenant. It's a sight better than trailing along on their ass end. Even if we don't get out ahead of them, we'll come right out beside them. These Nazi bastards are probably thinking they've won the war already. Let's teach them different."

Mulholland looked at Jolie. "Can you keep up, Miss Molyneaux?"

"I would walk to the moon for a chance to stop these Nazis who want to get back into France."

"All right, let's do it. You lead the way, Cole."

They left the road and started across the fields. It was better than trying to pick their way around the muddy ruts left by the Germans, but the footing was challenging in its own way. Beyond the shelter of the trees and hedges that lined the road, the cold wind and blowing snow cut at their exposed faces. The new snow was just a few inches deep, but it lay atop an older layer of snow that had crusted over, so that every few paces they broke through the crust and sank shin deep in snow.

Cole soon found that in the lee of the low stone walls the snow was thin, barely covering the frozen ground. He led the snipers single file, following the stone walls that crossed the fields like the seams of a patchwork quilt. Up ahead, the column of smoke darkened and spread across the sky. Whatever was burning was really rolling now, sending up billowing smoke. It was likely that the Germans would be moving on soon. The snipers needed to hurry if they hoped to get ahead of the enemy.

Cole broke into a trot. It wasn't a full-out run, but a long-legged lope that would have been familiar to a coyote—or a mountain bootlegger. With Cole setting the pace, the others struggled to keep up.

A soldier in the field carried a variety of gear, and the snipers were no different. They were laden with mess kits, cleaning kits for their rifles, spare ammo, and a dozen other items in their haversacks and in their pockets—or hanging off their utility belts. It was a lot of weight to lug, considering they were already weighed down with winter clothing.

What was noticeable was that despite all the gear they carried, the men ran almost silently. A unit of green troops would have clanked and rattled as the things they carried banged together with each step. Men who had been in the field long enough knew that to stay quiet—to stay alive—it was important to tie everything down. And with the Kid and Jolie not really carrying any gear, the only real sound was their breathing and the crunch of old snow under their boots.

Despite the cold, sweat soon ran from their armpits and down the backs of their necks. Later on, they would feel damp and cold as a result. But for now, the objective was to get out ahead of the German column.

They ran for a couple of miles until they reached the edge of the road. Cole's shortcut across the road had worked. Cole hunkered down behind a stone wall and waited for the others to catch up.

Off to their left, the road ran toward the village, and they could see the flames now from the burning building.

After he had caught his breath, Lieutenant Mulholland got out his binoculars. "Looks like our friends set fire to a tavern. But their column hasn't left the village yet. We got here ahead of them." Mulholland put down the binoculars and grinned. "You know what Nathan Bedford Forrest used to say, 'Get there firstest with the mostest.' "

"I reckon we are firstest," Cole said. "But we sure as hell ain't mostest."

"We'll see about that," Mulholland said. He nodded at a thicket of trees off to their right that surrounded the road like a bead around a string. The trees were thick enough to create a bottleneck for the German column—they would have to follow the road through the woods. Also, a deep ravine paralleled much of the road, creating even more challenging terrain. On the other side of the thicket, the road emptied out into wide open fields, punctuated here and there by deserted farmhouses. An ancient stone barn located several hundred yards from the road was the largest visible structure. "If we take up positions in that field beyond the woods, we can pick off the Germans as they come out of the trees."

"Not a lot of cover for us."

"There are some hedgerows we can get into, and plenty more stone walls. That should give us enough cover. We'll be all right. You lead the way again."

Cole was skeptical. These were SS panzers they were going against. "If you say so."

Cole slipped over the stone wall and ran down toward the road. Fortunately, the Germans were confident enough that they had not sent scouts ahead. Soon, the sniper squad was running down the road and into the woods.

The trees seemed to close in around them, sucking the light from the winter air. It was such a silent, gloomy place. They ran on. The woods stretched for half a mile, and then they emerged on that open field—and kept running.

Lieutenant Mulholland brought the squad to a halt. He pointed Rowe and McNulty toward a hedgerow. "You two take up positions in there. Once the Germans are out in the open, let them have it. Try to pick off the tank drivers. When it gets too hot, get the hell out—we'll regroup by that barn over there. These Jerries are in a hurry to get somewhere and they're not going to bother chasing after a few snipers."

"Yes, sir."

"One last thing. Let Cole shoot first. Don't fire until he does."

"Why the hell not?" Rowe asked.

"Because he's got good instincts. You, you're just a good shot. There's a difference." The lieutenant turned toward Jolie. "Listen, I want you to—"

"I will go with Cole," Jolie announced.

"All right," he said. If he wasn't happy about that idea, he was trying hard to hide it. He handed Hank his binoculars, "Kid, you stick with me. I can use a spotter."

"All I've got is this pistol."

"Don't worry, Kid. We aren't going to let the Germans get that close."

The snipers spread out through the field, taking up positions. There wasn't time to set up a real hide before the Germans came at them, so they would simply have to rely on the natural camouflage around them.

Back toward the village, smoke still filled the sky from the burning tavern. The countryside was no longer silent. Instead, the frigid air trembled with the rumble of distant engines. The German column was on the move, headed right for them.

Chapter 12

"Brace yourself, Bridget," Cole said to Jolie. "It's about to get rough around here."

He crouched behind a low stone wall, his rifle aimed toward the passage through the trees where, in a few minutes, he expected the advance elements of the German column to appear. Jolie knelt nearby, her head just visible as she rested a pair of binoculars on top of the wall.

He would have liked a better sniper's nest, or at least one that put them farther away from the Germans. This land looked to be what the mountain people back home called scald—barren. Cole felt far too exposed. They did have the stone wall, which Cole could keep between himself and the enemy, using it as a shield if he and Jolie had the need to slip away across the open plain. Also, Cole did not expect that they would be in position long. Once they opened up on the armored column, they would have a few minutes at the most before the German fire got so hot and heavy that they would have to retreat. Considering that it was a few rifles against panzers, there was no doubt they would retreat.

Cole wasn't interested in making any last stands in some godforsaken Belgian field. This was a delaying action, not the Alamo.

"I reckon it's cold enough out here to freeze the warts off a witch," he said, shucking his mittens to flex his stiff fingers.

"*Misérable*," Jolie agreed. "In French we say, *Cold enough to freeze the grin off an American's face*."

"Are you funnin' me, Jolie?"

She made a noise through chattering teeth that might have been *oui*. "Perhaps it should be a saying."

Cole grinned at her. "Guess it ain't that cold, after all. That's some saying, though. And here I thought you Frenchies would be grateful, seeing as to how we liberated your country and all."

Jolie turned serious. "We are grateful." She shook her head. "I was also at Normandy, remember? So many dead."

"I wonder how much gratitude a few thousand dead Americans buys. You think the French will still be grateful in ten years?"

"If you win this war, we will still be grateful in seventy years, or a hundred," Jolie said. "But right now, we have to make sure the Germans do not return to Paris. So shoot some Germans now."

"I'll do what I can," Cole said, putting his eye to the scope.

"I wish I had a gun," she said.

"I gave my pistol to that kid," he said. "You won't be needing a gun. I'm goin' to fire a few shots and then we high tail it for the hills."

"They will come after us," she said.

"Maybe, but I reckon they won't try too hard. These bastards have got bigger fish to fry than catching a few snipers. And don't worry, I got your back." He gave her a look. "And your front. And just about any other area that needs covering, come to think of it."

Jolie couldn't help but smile. "It is good to know that not every part of you is frozen."

"If we have to sit in this here field much longer, all bets are off on that."

They did not have to wait long. The winter air already vibrated with the noise from the approaching German column. Tanks, trucks, assorted vehicles—more than a thousand German troops were moving through the woods. Because the Germans had to shout to be heard over the diesel engines, their voices carried clearly toward the waiting snipers.

"You speak Kraut. What are they saying?"

She cocked her head and listened. "Nothing important, just something about how it's colder than a polar bear's asshole."

"For once, we can agree with the Krauts on something."

Then the first vehicles emerged from the woods. A couple of smaller vehicles appeared first, followed by a truly massive tank. Cole recognized it as a King Tiger, which was a sort of battleship on land. The tank churned into the field and took up a position beside the road, swiveling its 88 mm gun across the field to cover the rest of the column. Even from this distance, the muzzle looked big enough to fit a watermelon. This was the closest he had been yet to a King Tiger tank.

"Holy shit," Cole muttered.

He played his crosshairs over that iron behemoth, but the hatch of the King Tiger was not open, so there was no kind of target.

The Germans poured from the wood now like angry ants. He picked out another tank, this one with a German in goggles standing in the hatch. Cole breathed out, put his finger on the trigger, and fired.

The tank commander went down. Quickly, he picked out another target, the driver of one of those German jeeps. He hit the man, causing the car to veer off course into the field as the passenger clutched at the wheel in an effort to regain control.

One by one, the other snipers opened up. It was not a heavy fire, but it was a withering one. Much to the Germans' credit, the sniper attack did not slow them down. After all, these were mostly veterans of the Eastern Front. They were well used to snipers. A few Germans deployed to counterattack.

Fortunately for the Americans, it was hard for the Germans to pick out their individual attackers. Looking across the fields, all they could see was a vast stretch of snowy landscape, punctuated here and there by stone walls and hedgerows. The grinding diesel engines drowned out the individual crack of the rifle shots. The Germans knew they were being shot at, but it was impossible to tell where the shots were coming from.

Cole fired again and winged a soldier standing ready at a machine gun mounted on the back of a German vehicle.

"A little to your left," Jolie said, peering through the binoculars.

Cole worked the bolt and fired again, hitting him so solidly that the German somersaulted backwards off the vehicle.

It was all a little too easy, and Cole worried when things were easy—in his book easy didn't last long, or worse yet, something with teeth and claws was sneaking up behind you.

He glanced to his right, where Rowe was located behind another stone wall similar to Cole's. Rowe was alone, but he was picking out and shooting targets just like Cole. But Rowe was still new to being a sniper. So far the attack on the German column had the air of a Mason Lodge turkey shoot, and Rowe was caught up in the excitement, firing as fast as he could without giving enough thought to keeping behind cover.

"Keep your head down, you damn fool," Cole muttered.

• • • • •

Von Stenger lay stretched out on the raised log, feeling the cold seep into him. He longed to tug his coat collar tighter to keep in as much body heat as possible, but the first rule of the sniper was to minimize any movements. Motion drew the opponent's eye. Although he felt confident that he was well hidden, there was no point in tempting fate.

"Herr Hauptmann?" the driver whispered up. "What do you wish me to do?"

"When I want you to do something, I will tell you," he said. "Now get down and don't move a muscle."

The driver did not have the patience of a sniper. He coughed softly once or twice, and even had the audacity to sneeze, which surely would have given away their position if there had not been a column of panzers churning through the woods and filling the air with a tumult of diesel engines and clanking tanks treads. There was no one in sight, so Von Stenger considered shooting the driver just for being annoying.

He ignored the fidgeting SS driver and kept his attention on the wintry field. At any moment, the enemy would reveal himself.

His predictions of an ambush had been correct. No sooner had the column emerged from the woods than the firing began. Friel's men were met with a handful of well-placed shots, rather than a barrage of machine gun fire and mortars. Snipers, then.

He peered out across the field, trying to see where the shots originated. As Von Stenger knew from personal experience, locating a well-hidden sniper in a country landscape was like trying to find a flea on the belly of a shaggy dog.

He held his fire and watched. As he had often lectured his students at the SS sniper school, the chief skill of a sniper was not necessarily his ability with a rifle, but his capacity for patience. One had to wait out the enemy until he gave himself away with a sudden movement or even a muzzle flash.

Patience. Then accuracy.

Meanwhile, bullets continued to chew up the German ranks. But these were bullets, not bomb shells. In the end, a few snipers were just a nuisance to an armored column. Like bees on a bear. Like flies on *das scheisse*.

To his surprise, Friel came barreling up the road in another Schwimmwagen. Even from this distance, Von Stenger could hear him shouting. "Keep moving! Forward! Get going! Let the panzer finish them off."

Bullets flicked around the commander, but Friel gave no sign of noticing. He really was a brave bastard, Von Stenger admitted. A real fire eater. Under Friel's verbal lashing, the column ground forward, once again an unstoppable force, like a glacier of steel.

Von Stenger returned his attention to the field.

Instead of binoculars, he used his telescopic sight to explore likely sniper nests. A fallen tree. A notch in a stone wall. A hay rick.

There. A flicker of movement caught his eye. Near the foot of a haystack. He was not sure, but it might have been the motion of someone working a rifle bolt. The air was gray and gloomy, flecked with snow, but he was sure he saw something else—the telltale puff of warm breath on the winter air.

The American sniper was well hidden, because Von Stenger could not see a clear target. He sent a bullet just below where he had seen the vapor of someone's breath. Even if he missed, it would give the Ami something to think about.

No other targets presented themselves. The field, after all, was vast. Then he saw a head and shoulders showing above a stone wall. He put the sights over the sniper's heart and fired. The man slumped forward. A machine gun opened up and continued to riddle the body. Then the column continued its advance.

Bullets kept coming at them. Where were the other snipers?

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Rowe never expected the bullet that killed him, but felt it bury itself in his chest like a stake being driven into his heart. His body shut down the way a fan stops when the cord is yanked from the socket. His thoughts kept spinning even as his body fell across the stone wall in front of him. At least it doesn't hurt, he thought. He couldn't breathe, couldn't talk. Then everything got far away, like looking through binoculars from the wrong end.

His body had slumped forward over the top of the stone wall. There was a burst of machine gun fire from the King Tiger. The Germans kept pumping bullets into him.

From his own hiding place, Cole watched helplessly.

"Goddamn," he said. The sight of Rowe's body jumping and quivering from the impact of the bullets made him angry. They weren't just killing him. They were mutilating him. He yanked at the bolt action on the Springfield.

Cole was sure a single bullet had killed Rowe, not the burst of machine gun fire. Where had it come from? That was some fine shooting to hit him from the German position.

While he thought about that, Cole noticed a squad of SS soldiers taking cover behind the tank that was chopping up Rowe. Cole picked one off. Worked the bolt. Scanned for the next target.

"Nine o'clock," Jolie said.

He caught sight of a man crouched low to the snowy ground, just beside the tank tread. There was a jolt of flame from the German's muzzle. Cole settled the crosshairs just where the rim of the helmet crossed the bridge of the man's nose. Slowly, he let his breath out, squeezed the trigger, and was almost surprised when the rifle butt kicked his shoulder.

A rifle scope magnified a very focused area, which was useful for shooting, but made it hard to see the big picture of a battlefield. Taking his eye off the sight tended to disorient him. That was why it was useful for a sniper to have a spotter. A spotter could also stay aware of the immediate surroundings, leaving the sniper free to focus on targets.

At this moment, however, Jolie kept the binoculars glued to her eyes. "To your left, there's a man trying to charge the machine gun on the back of that armored car."

Cole shot him.

"Good. At two o'clock there is *un fou* with his head still out of his tank."

Cole put the crosshairs on the German and squeezed the trigger.

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Von Stenger scanned the field for more targets.

"Schiffer?" he called down to the driver.

"Yes, Herr Hauptmann."

"Take those binoculars I gave you and watch the field. Tell me if you see any movement."

"Do you want me to shoot at them, Herr Hauptmann?"

"No, it's just your eyes I need right now."

"Yes, sir."

Over to his right, he could hear the distinctive mechanical whine of a panzer turret and gun being aligned for a shot.

The problem with using tanks to fight a handful of pesky snipers was that it was like trying to drive a nail with a boulder, when what you needed was a hammer. He held that hammer in his hands.

"Herr Hauptmann? I think I see something," the driver said.

"Where?" Von Stenger had to prompt.

"Ten o'clock. Behind that stone wall. I think I saw the cloud from someone's breath."

Von Stenger swept the scope over the wall. Nothing. He tried again, and finally noticed where the snow had been disturbed where someone had gone over the wall. But there was no one in the immediate vicinity. Where, where... finally, he spotted the vapor left by warm breath in the freezing air. Two distinct patterns of vapor, which meant two snipers, or a sniper and a spotter.

The sniper's rifle was buried under snow, creating the perfect camouflage. Clever, clever. The sniper had arranged his rifle in such a way as to present almost no target. Just where his head should have been, Von Stenger found himself staring at a large frozen rock. This Ami was good at hiding himself.

He thought about sending a bullet out anyway, bouncing it off the frozen wall, on the off chance that a splinter of stone might catch the sniper in the face.

"Herr Hauptmann, the panzer is preparing to fire. Trust me, sir, but you will want to cover your ears."

"Schiffer, maybe after the war you can get a job announcing soccer games on the radio. But for now, please shut up."

Von Stenger had never taken his eye off the scope. He was amazed when the American sniper lifted his head up from behind the wall. Like Schiffer, he seemed worried about the tank.

He saw the American clearly through the scope. Thin face like a fox, covered in stubble. Young. And on his head was a helmet decorated with what the Americans called a Confederate flag—the *Stars and Bars* of the Old South. Von Stenger knew his American military history better than most Americans.

He also knew that helmet and that face. It was the American sniper who had challenged him in the days following Normandy.

Von Stenger put the crosshairs on the man's forehead and let his finger put pressure on the trigger.

Goodbye, Ami.

• • • • •

Cole started to worry that they had overstayed their welcome. These Germans were not going to let a handful of snipers bring the entire column to a halt. If any of the Germans had been paying attention, there was a good chance that someone had figured out where the shots were coming from. There were an awful lot of Germans and an awful lot of firepower they could bring to bear.

Like a tank. Like *several* tanks.

He put the scope back on the King Tiger at the side of the road, just in time to see the massive turret swivel slowly in his direction. Cole took his eye away from the scope and took a chance, popping his head above the wall just long enough to make sure he was seeing this right. Even without the scope he saw the barrel jig up, then back down, as the gunner tried to get the range right.

Nothing melted your insides quite so much as looking down the barrel of a tank. He gave Jolie a shove. "Run!"

• • • • •

Then the air ripped apart around Von Stenger. The panzer had fired.

Von Stenger's rifle never wavered, but the tank shell struck just short of the wall, erupting in a geyser of frozen mud and snow.

He moved quickly to reacquire the target, but the sniper was gone. The tank fired again, demolishing the wall.

Out on the road, the column surged forward. The sniper fire dwindled, and then disappeared. Any snipers that were not dead had slipped away.

Von Stenger slid down from the sloping trunk of the windfall. Schiffer was waiting for him, stamping his feet to stay warm.

"Did you get him, Herr Hauptmann?"

"No, but the tank sent them scurrying like rats. Don't worry, we will have another chance at him."

They started back through the trees toward the road, Von Stenger leading the way. He was surprised to find himself humming a tune—a chord from the second act of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, the scene in which the doomed lovers are

finally alone together while the cruel king and his knights are hunting wolves in the forest. He had seen it in Berlin in 1933 during a special performance for the Führer. It was an opera so challenging and intricate that over the years it had literally killed one opera singer and two conductors.

Von Stenger loved such complexity. And he appreciated the idea of things that could be beautiful and challenging and deadly all at once. Thinking about the American sniper, he realized that the road through the Ardennes was going to be more interesting than he had expected.

"Keep up, Schiffer," he said. "We have much work to do."

Chapter 13

Nightfall approached as the snipers rendezvoused in the barn. The massive structure, built of stone and thick beams, was missing patches of its roof thatch. The cows and horses had long since been cleared out. Not so much as a footstep disturbed the snow around the barn, which had been abandoned and forgotten like so many war-torn farms.

Cole was the last to go in. He had already sent Jolie ahead to let the others know he was out here, keeping watch in the last light of day.

Shrouded in a white poncho, he waited in a hedgerow where he could keep watch on the fields and road leading to the barn. He blended into the scenery so well that a red fox walked within ten feet of him without so much as giving Cole a glance. As dusk fell and he was satisfied that the Germans were pushing forward, not hunting for the American snipers, he slipped quietly from his hiding place and entered the barn.

"Jesus, Cole. I was starting to worry about you," said Vaccaro. "I wasn't sure if the Germans got you, or maybe a wolf."

"Are there wild animals around here?" the Kid asked nervously.

"Just the two-legged kind," Cole said, thinking of Von Stenger—and all the rest of the Germans. He stamped his feet. "Colder than a penguin's pecker in here."

"Nah, it's colder than an Eskimo's nose."

"That's right cold," Cole agreed. "But it's still colder in here than Santa's ass in a North Pole outhouse."

"All right, you two are a regular couple of Bob Hopes," the lieutenant said. "If that's a hint that somebody wants to build a fire, go ahead. If we keep it small, the Krauts aren't going to see the flames inside the barn, and now that it's dark they won't see the smoke, either."

Cole built a fire better and faster than anyone in the squad, hands down. He cleared a place on the stone floor of the barn, then found a weathered pine plank. With a few strokes of his razor-sharp knife, he had long dry shavings that he added to a pile of old straw. He struck a match and the flames licked up to catch a few smaller pieces of wood that Vaccaro had scavenged for him. In a few minutes, they had a small fire going. The flames did not create much warmth inside the cavernous barn on a frigid December night, so they huddled around the flickering glow.

Cole looked around the fire, relieved to see that the only face missing was Rowe's. He had seen him go down, killed by a single bullet. He was sure it was not some lucky shot from an SS trooper.

The other new sniper, McNulty, had a heavy bandage around his upper arm.

"What happened to you?" Cole asked.

McNulty shook his head. "Damnedest thing. I thought for sure nobody could see me. I was in a pile of hay, dug in like a tick, but if that bullet had been another couple of inches in the wrong direction, I wouldn't be here right now."

"Huh," Cole said, mulling it over. Whoever had killed Rowe and wounded McNulty was one hell of a shot, but there had been no sign of him. *Like a ghost*. He recalled the gold-tipped cigarette and Mosin-Nagant shells from earlier today. His mind spun at the thought that they may have encountered Von Stenger at the ambush. Could it have been *Das Gespenst*?

Vaccaro brewed coffee over the fire. He poured a mug for Cole, who barely even glanced at it before giving it to the Kid, who took it gratefully. Vaccaro shook his head. That was Cole for you—he could be the meanest son of a bitch you ever met, meaner than a pissed-off copperhead snake having a bad day, and yet he would give you his left nut if he liked you.

"I know that *huh* thing," Vaccaro said. "It means you've got a theory. So, what does your theory have to do with Rowe getting killed and McNulty getting winged?"

"I reckon it was that sniper. *Das Gespenst*."

"The Ghost? But I thought he was dead. You killed him in that flooded field back in Bienville."

"Maybe, maybe not," Cole said. "Back at the massacre site I found those shell casings with the Russian markings, and one of those fancy gold-tipped cigarettes. Then someone killed Rowe with a one-of-a-kind shot and winged McNulty."

"Nah, could be anybody," Vaccaro said.

"How many Germans can shoot like that?"

Vaccaro fixed his eyes on Cole's. "Not many."

"It's him," Cole said. "It's *Das Gespenst*."

"How do you know for sure?"

"I just got a feelin' is all."

Nobody questioned Cole further. In the last several months of combat, they had learned that a hunch usually meant something. Especially when it was Cole's.

Vaccaro poured him more coffee. "If you run into him again, this time make sure he stays dead."

Jolie took McNulty off to one side to have a look at his bandage, which had been done hastily in the field and needed to be readjusted. Vaccaro and the Kid went to poke around the barn to see what they could find. That left the lieutenant and Cole sitting together near the fire. They both sipped coffee. A tension hung between them, and they both knew what it was—Jolie Molyneaux. Mulholland acted like some kind of Sunday school chaperone around her, but he wasn't fooling anyone—the French girl had caught his eye as far back as the beach in Normandy.

But it was Cole she had chosen. That fact hurt his pride and left him puzzled. Wasn't he the officer? Wasn't he the one who had been to college? Cole was

nothing more than a hillbilly who was handy with a rifle. Mulholland was the one who was supposed to get the girl.

"Listen, Cole," he began. "This thing with you and Miss Molyneaux—"

"What thing?"

Cole was rubbing salt in the wound. "You know what I'm talking about," Mulholland snapped. "We're not supposed to be fraternizing with the civilians."

Even to his own ears, Mulholland thought that had to be one of the lamest excuses he had ever heard. Fraternizing with the civilians? Could he sound any more pompous? He didn't like to admit it to himself because it was a base emotion, but the truth was that he was jealous that Jolie Molyneaux had picked Cole, of all people. Most of the time, Cole was about as friendly as barbed wire. Come to think of it, Jolie was not all that welcoming herself.

"Whatever you say, sir," Cole said in a tone that made it clear that wasn't what he thought at all, and fixed him with those cut-glass eyes that always seemed to be taking Mulholland's measure.

Mulholland tried to meet Cole's gaze, but soon gave up.

"All right, let's not make a big deal out of this," Mulholland said. Somehow, without actually saying it, they had agreed to disagree about Jolie Molyneaux. "We've got enough problems as it is."

"I reckon we do," Cole said. "We got hundreds, if not thousands of problems, all of them with swastikas on their helmets."

"In the morning, we're going after them. We can't do too much damage, and I know that we're certainly not going to stop them, but we can harass the hell out of that German column."

Cole nodded. "That's just what I was thinking. But there's one thing that's got me worried about that plan."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Das Gespenst."

"He's just another German."

"He shot Jolie."

Again, Mulholland felt that twinge of jealousy. It was like a blister on his heel. Always rubbing. He tried to get past it, but deep down it was hard to change the way he felt. No getting around it.

"So now you can shoot him."

Cole smirked. A flicker of uncertainty passed across his face. "He's damn good. I'll give him that."

Mulholland dug a bottle of schnapps out of his pack, took a swig, and handed it to Cole. It was a small gesture that made him feel better about his earlier feelings of jealousy. Whatever their differences might be over Jolie, they were still just two young men a long way from home. "Didn't you say you had a relative who was in the Civil War?"

"Sure, my Uncle Lucas. Well, great uncle, I reckon."

"What did he do?"

"He was a sharpshooter."

Mulholland didn't have to ask which side Cole's relative had fought on, considering that a Confederate flag decorated Cole's helmet. Mulholland had asked about that flag before, and learned that it had been painted by a kid who Cole had

gone through boot camp with and then landed at Omaha Beach with in the first wave. The kid had lasted about five minutes. Though obscured now with dirt, scarred and faded, it was clear that the flag meant something to Cole.

"My grandfather served on General Grant's staff," Mulholland said. There was a family story about how his grandfather had saved the general from a ruthless Confederate assassin—a sniper, as a matter of fact—probably someone who was a lot like Cole. The incident had been hushed up at the time to prevent any kind of panic, but his grandfather had spoken of it long after the war.

Mulholland took the bottle that Cole handed back, then put the cork in it. He felt the warmth of the schnapps working through him. It would definitely help him sleep. "Listen, Cole. That German doesn't stand a chance against you."

"I'll take the first watch," Cole said, and headed for the hay loft.

Chapter 14

Cole was not on watch long before Jolie came up the ladder after him.

"*Il fait chaud*," she said, setting down beside him. She wore a blanket across her shoulders for warmth and tugged it across Cole as well. This close, he could smell her hair, a touch of lavender perfume, and the faint smell of soap on her skin. He knew what he smelled like—campfires, gunpowder, and sweat-soaked wool.

"Jolie, what in hell are you doing here?"

"I just thought I would keep you company."

"You know that ain't what I'm talkin' about. Why are you in this place?"

"This is where I belong," she said. "I want to be fighting the Germans. I want to make them pay—not just for me, but for France."

"Go home, Jolie. I know how you feel, but this is no place for you. As soon as we can, we'll get you back to our lines. We'll send the Kid with you. He's right shellshocked, even if he's hangin' in there for now."

"*Non*, I will not go."

"Goddamnit, Jolie. You already did your part. You were in the Resistance long before any Americans set foot in France. What you're talkin' about is revenge. Ain't you had your pound of flesh yet?"

"You tell me, Cole. When does one have enough revenge? Satisfying one's revenge is like drinking from a cup with a bullet hole in it. You can never get your fill."

It felt like too much to explain to Cole tonight, but she tried. She felt that Cole was one of the few people who could understand her. She told him how the Germans had murdered her lover—another young resistance fighter—early in the war. The winds of war had scattered her family. Once she was released from the hospital, there was no one for her to go back to. These losses left holes in her heart and soul. Hatred had flowed in, filling these fissures in the same way that minerals turn something that was once living into fossil. The thought frightened her.

"What I was before I can be again if I see this war through to the end," she said. "Do you understand now?"

“I reckon so.”

“Besides, I think we make a good team,” she said.

Cole grinned. “And I have to say, you are a lot better looking than Vaccaro.”

They sat for a while just looking out at the darkness through the huge window in the gable end of the loft. This was where the hay was thrown in on summer days that were impossible to imagine now on this winter’s night. There was not much to see—mainly they sat listening for the crunch of feet on the snow or the growl of a diesel engine. So far, all was silent.

A bit of stray firelight from below reflected in Cole’s clear-cut eyes and cast deep shadows under his high cheek bones—he had told her that there was some Cherokee mixed in with his Scotch-Irish blood. The light and shadow made his face feral and wolf-like. If she had not known him, she would have feared him.

“I wrote you from the hospital,” she said. “Did you not get my letters?”

In answer, Cole reached inside his coat and pulled out a half dozen envelopes, tied together with a piece of string. He smoothed the packet with his rough hands. “You have real nice handwriting,” he said. “Prettiest I ever seen.”

“Why did you never write back?”

“You know how it is, Jolie. I wanted to write you, but—” Cole’s voice trailed off.

“What?”

“Nothin’. Jest nothin’. There’s a war on, is all.”

Something about the letters clearly made him uncomfortable. She changed the subject, thinking it was enough that he had kept the letters. “Do you think he is still out here? Das Gespent?”

“Darlin’, I know he is. He killed Rowe. At that range, it wasn’t some lucky shot. And he was at that massacre.” Cole paused. “I can smell him out there.”

Jolie shuddered. “That German has killed so many. He is a monster. A killer. Cole, do not let him get away this time.”

She kissed his cheek, then stood, taking the blanket with her. With hardly a sound, she crossed the hay loft and descended the ladder, leaving Cole alone on watch.

Her scent lingered on the night air, keeping him company. In the privacy of the loft he pulled out the packet of letters again and breathed in their smell, just as he had done many nights before. He was too embarrassed to tell her that he stumbled over the words like a child, trying to puzzle out their meanings. He never had been to school. His classroom had been the woods and mountains. Cole could read tracks in the woods as clearly as other men read headlines in a newspaper, but he struggled to read a single sentence of her letters. Nobody else in the squad knew.

He had finally contented himself with imagining her hand moving across each page, leaving behind neat letters, a touch of perfume, and the smell of cigarettes.

He tucked the letters away. The cold soon crept through him again. He ignored it. Long, hungry hours in the woods as a boy had long since trained him to shut out most things he couldn’t do anything about: cold, fear, hunger.

But tonight after Jolie went down the ladder he experienced a new sensation that nagged at him. He tried to push it from his mind, but failing that, he attempted to put a finger on this troubling emotion.

The realization came to him as suddenly as a cork being pulled from a jug. It was like something in his mind went *pop*.

He felt lonely.

It was an emotion he had rarely felt before, and Jolie Molyneaux was to blame.

• • • • •

Cole always had been a loner. It seemed to him that it was the best way to be a survivor, something that he had been doing all his life. On a winter's day in 1936, a fourteen-year-old Micajah Cole had learned a valuable lesson in the difference between life and death, and that lesson had stayed with him on the battlefields of Europe.

In the days following Christmas that year a cold snap settled over the mountains back home. There was none of this gray and snow, but bright blue skies and wind sharp as a Cherokee flint knife. At night the cold seeped into the ancient rock, freezing the ground iron hard and turning the mountain creeks into ribbons of ice. It was only in the really deep, fast-moving water like Gashey's Creek that Cole could still set his traps.

A beaver pelt brought a dollar and a really good muskrat pelt was worth 50 cents—not nearly what prices had been just a few years before, when the Cole family had experienced a brief spell of such prosperity that they bought canned goods and even new boots for pa. Then the Depression hit, and the demand for fur had dried up like everything else. Just about anyone with good sense had given up trapping, but for a mountain boy it meant a little money coming in for the family and maybe some muskrat for the stew pot.

Cole's pa was what the mountain people called a "woody" in that he mostly lived off the land—hunting and trapping, no matter the season or the game laws. Hard cash was tough to come by in the mountains so the old man would sometimes trade firewood he had split by hand or a jug of moonshine from the still he kept way up in the hills. When he was sober, he taught Cole everything he knew—how to read tracks like a road sign or the way to aim so that a bullet would travel true in the mountain air. Sober, Cole's daddy was a hard man of few words. Drunk on moonshine, he was mean and quick with a beating. It was best to stay out in the woods.

Locked in a deep freeze, the winter woods were silent to most ears, but not so quiet if you knew what to listen for. Cole could make out the chirp of a cardinal, the chatter of a squirrel, the gurgle of creek water so cold it was like liquid ice.

He went down to the edge of Gashey's Creek, to a hole where the water was at least ten feet deep and still flowing. The current reminded Cole of the quiet, smooth movement of a muscle under the skin.

A mud path on the steep bank showed where the beaver ventured out to gnaw the bark from the willows growing near the water's edge. He set down the bag of traps he carried. A beaver could weigh nearly 50 pounds, and so a beaver trap weighed about 10 pounds. It was a lot of weight for a boy to carry, but already Cole had muscles hard as knotted cordwood.

Working carefully, he set the trap. A steel trap has a system of dual springs that require all the weight of a lean fourteen-year-old boy to set them—and then some. With one boot on each spring, Cole got the jaws open, then set the pan that held them in place. It was not an easy task with bare fingers on cold steel in the frigid air. The slightest touch would trigger the jaws to snap shut. From one spring ran a

length of chain, at the end of which was a loop of steel through which was threaded a length of wire that ran down into the water.

When the jaws snapped shut on a beaver, the weight of the trap dragged the animal down into the deep water and drowned it.

Cole knew to be careful around the traps, but the cold made him hurry and take a shortcut. Instead of setting the trap from beneath—a safety precaution in case the jaws snapped shut, although it required extra effort—he set the pan from above. The trigger caught and held, and he started to take his hand away. But the movement caused his feet to shift on the ice and the jaws clamped around his wrist, catching him in his own trap.

The jolt of pain caused him to slip on the icy bank and he encountered an even bigger shock when he plunged into the creek.

The extra winter clothes and layers of wool intended to keep him warm instantly soaked through, weighing him down like a granite shroud. With a 10-pound trap around one hand, he could not swim. Bubbles escaped toward the surface, but he was trapped beneath the water.

How long could he hold his breath? This wasn't some summertime swim. One minute in the icy creek, maybe two, and it would all be over.

Not much time. He had to think of something.

Cole let himself sink to the bottom. There was some current but the wire that ran through the ring at the end of the trap's chain tethered him in place. The only way back to the surface was to get the trap off his hand. But it would take both his feet to do it.

The icy water was very clear; he could look all the way back up to the surface. Like he was the fly in the bottom of a Mason jar of moonshine.

The creek bed was soft and muddy, but he kicked around, ignoring the pain in his hand, until he found a good, flat rock. He put the trap on the rock, then stood on the springs. There was some give, but the buoyancy of the water meant his full weight wasn't on the springs. He raised both feet at once and did a kind of jump. Nothing. His lungs screamed for air. Try again. He bobbed up and came down again on the springs. The added force was just enough to make the jaws loosen their grip and he wrenched his hand free, leaving a good bit of skin behind.

He then kicked his way to the surface and swam the short distance to the creek bank. Once there, he lay half in and half out of the water, taking big gulps of air like it was money some rich man was giving away. Then he crawled the rest of the way up the creek bank.

Though he had not drowned, the frigid air would kill him almost as quick in this cold. It was only about five degrees above zero at midday, which meant ice immediately formed on his wet clothes. His hair froze. He was three miles from home.

Move, he told himself.

He took the time to pick up the sack of spare traps. Pa would whip him if he left those behind.

Then Cole started running, trying to outrace the cold. He trotted through the snowy woods, leaving spots of blood in the snow. His heart hammered with the effort, but he did not stop.

The last couple hundred yards as he came into sight of the shack, its plume of woodsmoke coming from the rusty stovepipe, were the hardest. By the time he reached the porch he was staggering rather than running.

His ma and pa helped get his clothes off him, wrapped him in a dry blanket, and stood him by the wood stove. His sister pressed a hot mug of sassafras tea into his good hand. Once he stopped shivering enough to talk, he explained what had happened.

His pa was half drunk and Cole expected to catch a beating, or a cussing out at the very least. Instead, his old man gently washed his cut hand and poured some whiskey over it, then wrapped it with strips of clean rags. "You done good, boy. You kept your head. That can make the difference between livin' and dyin'. You remember that."

Cole had remembered. He had kept his head time and time again when others panicked. And so far he had stayed alive, which for anyone who had survived until December 1944 in the Ardennes Forest was something of an accomplishment.

He looked out at the darkness, keeping watch.

Chapter 15

In the morning, the snipers awoke to yet more fresh snow. Flakes drifted in through the gaps in the thatched roof, covering the cold remains of their campfire. Nobody moved to rekindle the fire. They wouldn't be there long enough, and there was no point in the smoke from a fire letting any Germans in the area know that they had company.

"Does it ever stop snowing in this frickin' place?" Vaccaro muttered. He tried to take a drink from his canteen, but the water was frozen. McNulty handed him a bottle of schnapps instead. He took a swig of liquor and grimaced.

"I reckon it will stop snowing right about the time you stop griping," Cole said. "Now pass that bottle around. It ain't moonshine, but it ought to give a little heat this morning."

"Who the hell drinks moonshine?" Vaccaro wondered.

"My daddy drank it for breakfast. Of course, he was a mean son of a bitch. Moonshine killed him in the end."

"Drank too much, did he?"

"No, he messed around with some other man's still and got shot."

"Cole, sometimes you leave me at a loss for words, which is saying something."

Cole winked. "You come around the holler after this here war and I'll treat you to a jar of the best white lightning you ever tasted."

"Gosh, Cole, now I've got something to live for. I sure as hell hope some German doesn't shoot me before I can get all liquored up on some rotgut you cooked up in a radiator."

The others rolled out of their blankets, looking stiff and creaky in the frigid air. It was so cold that their nose hairs felt brittle. The Kid had not slept far enough away from the opening in the roof so that the snow made him resemble a cruller dusted with sugar.

Cole climbed up to the loft and looked out the hay window at the south end that faced the road where they had encountered the Germans yesterday. Nothing moved on the wintry fields except a handful of crows. He could hear them cawing; for all Cole knew, the crows were bitching about the cold, too.

He moved to the window at the opposite end of the barn. Again, nothing was visible but empty fields, stone walls and hay stacks. Not even so much as a sheep or cow. He knew that the quiet was deceptive. The Germans were out there. Even now, Das Gespent might be in some tree on the other side of the snowy landscape, waiting for someone or something to move. They didn't call him The Ghost for nothing. Maybe he'd known all along that the Americans were hiding in the barn and was waiting for daylight to pick them off.

Cole pushed the thought from his head. He had been fighting the enemy for months, one bullet at a time. He did not keep count as Vaccaro did of how many Germans he had shot. What was the point? Wasn't a contest—not that Vaccaro would have won. Although he had dealt more than his share of death, he did not take his own survival lightly. Somewhere out there was a German soldier who might be faster, a better shot, or goddamnit, just luckier.

It was one thing to have a vague idea of an enemy sniper who was better. It was another thing altogether to know that Das Gespent was somewhere nearby. Flesh and blood, lead and powder. He was the real deal. Cole just hoped to get another crack at him—before the Ghost Sniper picked him off.

Vaccaro came up the ladder to the loft just as Cole began to unbutton his trousers to take a leak from the window. Vaccaro joined him and their twin streams arced down, steaming in the cold, and made patterns in the snow below.

"One thing I haven't done yet is shoot a man taking a leak," Vaccaro said. "What about you?"

"Hell, that's the best time to shoot a Kraut," Cole said. "Even better is if you can shoot one takin' a shit. Or just havin' hisself a smoke. It makes 'em feel like they ain't safe no matter what. Besides, I'd rather shoot a man who had his pecker in his hands than his rifle. It makes it hard for him to shoot back."

"Hell, Cole, once you've got a Kraut in your sights, he's not gonna have a chance to shoot back, no matter what he's doing." Vaccaro looked down. "I don't want to brag, but that snow sure is cold."

"If I was braggin', I'd tell you how that snow sure is deep."

Vaccaro looked over at Cole and thought that they could almost be friends. Almost. Cole always managed to put a fence around himself to keep others out. There was also something about Cole that was off the rails and unpredictable. He was bat shit crazy and stone cold deliberate all at once. He was like one of those Old West gunfighters in a movie—the one wearing a black hat. The truth was that Cole scared him more than a little. Sure, he could take a joke now and then, but deep down, Cole was hard like some Brooklyn mobster. An enforcer. A hit man. Where his soul should be there was a black lump of mountain coal—or maybe even a copper-jacketed bullet.

He hadn't been joking when he told the Kid that he was glad Cole was on their side.

Vaccaro was sometimes amazed that the war had lifted someone like Cole out of the woods and mountains of his boyhood and thrown him together with someone

like himself. In another time and place, they never would have met. They were opposites, as different as chianti and moonshine, and yet they were alike in some ways. While Cole was a backwoods boy, Vaccaro was from the mean streets of a working class Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn. You had to be tough to survive. Was that so very different from the mountains?

They heard a noise behind them, and looked over their shoulders to see Jolie coming up the ladder.

"Well, this is embarrassing," Vaccaro said.

"Do not worry, I will not look at your willy," she said. "I have left my magnifying glass downstairs, anyway."

"Ha, ha. These French girls are ruthless."

"Hell, piss on 'em if they can't take a joke." Cole shook himself and buttoned up his trousers. "Let's see if we can get the ghost to show hisself today."

They climbed down to the first floor of the barn, where the others were preparing to head out. The morning was achingly cold, but it felt good to be up and moving. The movement brought warmth to their stiff limbs.

Cole scanned the scenery once more and saw only white, dull grays and browns. The sun was up, but hidden by the deep cloud cover, it barely did more than give the forest a dusky light.

"Listen up," Lieutenant Mulholland said. Although the squad was hardly bigger than a Boy Scout patrol, he always managed to sound as if he were addressing a briefing of Division commanders. "We have one objective today, and that's to go after the Krauts."

"Objective?" Vaccaro spoke up. "Isn't that something they say in the courtroom, sir?"

"That's objection," Mulholland said, realizing a second too late that Vaccaro was yanking his chain. "All right, wise guy, you can take point."

"Aw, and here I thought it wasn't my turn to get shot today."

"Shut up, Vaccaro." The lieutenant turned to Jolie. "You don't have to come with us, you know. I don't know what we're walking into but there's a good chance you'll be safe if you stay here."

"I am coming with you," Jolie said. "Give me a gun."

Lieutenant Mulholland opened his mouth to argue, but then thought better of it. Instead, he gave her his sidearm, a Browning 1911 .45 that would definitely put a fat hole in a German.

"Good?"

"*C'est bon.*"

McNulty spoke up. He had been unusually quiet this morning, which was understandable. He and Rowe had been close, considering that they had both been newcomers to the squad. "Sir? The Kid and I was just thinking that nobody knows we're here. Out here, I mean. Nobody at HQ, that's for sure. We could lay low and sit this one out. There's enough wood—"

The lieutenant cut him off with a shake of his head. He looked at the Kid. "Is that how you feel, son?"

"Sir, it was just talk, is all."

Mulholland looked at the faces around him. "Listen up, everyone. We are a sniper squad. Which means we operate independently. You all ought to know that

by now. We are going to do what snipers do. We are going after the enemy, with or without reinforcements. Any questions, McNulty?"

"No, sir."

"Then let's move out," Mulholland said.

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Still reeling from the news of the massive German attack, General Eisenhower had called a gathering of his top generals in Verdun on December 19. With Christmas a few days ahead, planning a defensive battle was not what anyone had in mind as a way to celebrate the holiday. But Hitler had ruined their plans.

In fact, he seemed intent on stealing victory from the Allies. His massive surge of men and tanks had taken the Americans completely by surprise.

"We are getting reports of tanks and even Luftwaffe planes. What I want to know is, where did all this stuff come from?" Eisenhower asked his staff.

"Out of Hitler's asshole, most likely," said General George S. Patton.

Leave it to Patton to put it crudely. Eisenhower didn't care for Patton's choice of words, but silently he agreed it was about as good a source as any, at least where Hitler was concerned. No one had thought the Germans capable of this kind of surge. They were supposed to be on the ropes. Broken. Yet they had somehow staged this counterattack in complete secrecy, much as the Allies had done in planning the D-Day invasion. Now, it was their turn to be surprised, and Eisenhower didn't like it one bit. Being Supreme Allied Commander meant being under constant scrutiny, and the surprise attack made him seem unprepared.

He took a gulp of coffee, then a drag on his cigarette.

At first, no one had wanted to believe the scope and scale of the attack, hoping that it was only a feint. The reports coming back from the Ardennes region soon crushed that hope. The Germans were attacking in force. The question was, how to stop them? That was the job of the men in the room.

There was Omar Bradley, a calm and even-keeled presence—at least as far as battlefield generals went. General Jacob Devers was there, and so was British General Sir Arthur Tedder, who served as Eisenhower's deputy.

And Patton was there, of course. He was the best-dressed officer in the room, with a polished steel helmet and ivory-handled pistols. Somehow, he managed to wear more general's stars than all the other generals in the room put together.

Patton came from old money and felt quite at home on the world stage. He also knew tactics, having learned them first-hand as a boy from none other than John Singleton Mosby, the Gray Ghost of the Confederacy, who had been a friend of Patton's grandfather. The old soldiers used to take the boy riding with them, and some of Mosby's boldness had worn off on the impressionable boy. But where Mosby had been sly like a fox, Patton was more like a charging bull.

He was also Ike's most problematic general. In fact, Ike had almost been forced to sack him when Patton started slapping shell-shocked soldiers and berating them as cowards. Eisenhower had tried to sweep the incidents under the rug, but the press had caught wind of it. Anyone who had been in combat in this war knew well enough that those soldiers were not cowards. They had simply had all that they could take.

Back home, Americans did not take kindly to the news. These suffering boys could be their sons and brothers Patton was slapping around. Who did he think he was, anyhow?

Ike had managed to save Patton's job by having him make public apologies to the soldiers he had slapped, along with apologies to the hospital staff who had witnessed these incidents. Patton hadn't liked eating crow, but he liked being a general, so he had done as Ike told him.

Now, here was a chance to redeem his reputation.

"I've got a plan," Patton announced to the room. "We can kick these Nazi sons of bitches all the way back to Berlin."

The others looked at him with interest. It was true that Patton was full of himself, but he did not make idle boasts.

"We're spread too thin," another officer pointed out. "We'll never get troops there in time to reinforce our lines. The Germans are going to push right through."

"I'll have the Third Army there in hours," Patton said confidently.

"George, don't make promises you can't keep," Eisenhower said. He lit another cigarette. The air in the room was hazy with tobacco smoke.

"My boys will be there. You can bet on it."

After Patton had outlined his plan, the generals looked at the battlefield map. They hated to admit it, but they had few options. Eisenhower gave his approval.

As the meeting broke up, there were a few subdued exchanges of "Merry Christmas." Nobody felt all that merry.

Except for Patton. He hummed *Jingle Bells* as he left the room.

Unbeknownst to Eisenhower or anyone else in the room, his boys were already on their way to relieve the embattled forces in the Ardennes region. He had given the orders even before the meeting, taking a gamble that Eisenhower would approve.

Already, hundreds of tanks and thousands of men were on the move to the Ardennes. Once they got there, it would be another nail in the coffin of Operation Watch on Rhine.

Until then, the American forces would just have to hang on and stop the German juggernaut as best they could.

Chapter 16

"Obersturmbannführer Friel has orders for you," said Breger, the scar-faced sergeant. Von Stenger recognized him immediately. Having watched him shoot down the American POWs, Von Stenger was not going to forget Breger anytime soon.

Von Stenger looked around for Friel, but he was nowhere in sight. By now, the column was stretched like a rubber band—the front part raced toward Friel's objective of crossing the Meuse River and advancing into France, while the slower end dragged along behind. Somehow, Friel still had time to worry about the placement of a single sniper.

"And what are the Obersturmbannführer's orders?"

"You are needed at the rear of the column," Breger said. The barely suppressed grin on the Scharführer's face suggested that he liked giving orders as a proxy. "We are being harassed by snipers. In fact, I believe the Obersturmbannführer's exact words were, 'I don't want those GIs coming up the road after us and fucking me in the ass.' "

That sounded about right. For all his polished ways, Friel had a soldier's foul mouth. "How many snipers?"

"Who knows? Who cares? But you are the expert, so the Obersturmbannführer was sure you would take care of it."

Von Stenger raised an eyebrow. He was sure that last bit was the sergeant's own invention. It was clear by now that Breger was one of those noncommissioned officers who despised officers. Perhaps all of them did, come to think of it—but most were better at hiding it.

"I will see what I can do to protect the Obersturmbannführer's ass," he said. He started to turn away, irritated by the sergeant, but then turned back to Breger, raising one finger as he did so, as if he had just had an idea. Which, in fact, he had. "I could use another man. However, it is dangerous work, Breger, so you would not want to undertake it yourself. You are too valuable, of course. You may have someone in your unit you can spare. Preferably a man who fears nothing."

As expected, the Scharführer was insulted. "You call shooting a few snipers dangerous work? Sir, I can tell you—"

"When you find a man for the job, send him to me," Von Stenger said curtly, and turned away.

"I will go myself," Breger said. "There is no need for another."

"Very well," Von Stenger said. "Be ready in ten minutes. And Breger—see if you can find a machine pistol."

Breger stood there for a moment after the sniper walked away, realization coming over him that Von Stenger had tricked him into something. He gazed after the sniper, eyes smoldering, then stomped away to get his gear.

Von Stenger walked over to the Schwimmwagen, where his SS driver waited.

"Leave the vehicle," Von Stenger said. "Put on your warmest clothes—in fact, put on all your clothes—and bring your weapon."

"Yes, sir."

Minutes later, the Scharführer joined them, carrying an MP 40 submachine gun, and the trio set off for the rear of the column. They faced an oncoming stream of vehicles and men.

"Are we going to walk the whole way?" griped the sergeant, in a tone that made it clear that he thought the sniper must be an idiot. "It could be miles in this mess!"

Von Stenger did not answer. It was indeed hard going, like swimming against the tide. The passage of so many vehicles had churned the road into a soup of slush, mud, and spilled diesel fuel and motor oil. Tanks, trucks, and military vehicles of almost every description formed the oncoming current. The faces of the troops they passed looked grim, many of them pale with cold and fatigue. But they held their heads high. They were on the offensive. They were gaining ground, bringing the fight to the Americans. No one had felt this way in months. It was almost possible to ignore the cold, gray air around them.

Finally, they neared the end of the column. Traffic thinned out. A lieutenant in a jeep was pulled to one side, supervising a crew pushing a truck out of a muddy rut. His eyes fastened on the telescopic sight on Von Stenger's rifle and he waved his driver toward him.

"Sir, those American snipers back there are chewing us to pieces. It is like a shooting gallery, and we are the targets."

"How far back?"

"A couple of miles. You will hear them shooting—or should I say, it may be the last thing that you hear."

As Von Stenger shifted to get his left boot out of a puddle, his coat opened slightly, revealing the Knight's Cross at his throat. The young lieutenant caught sight of it and his eyes widened.

"Sir, are you Von Stenger? I have seen your photograph. What an honor! Those Americans do not stand a chance."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Von Stenger said, oddly touched. "And thank you for this information. I will shoot a sniper for you."

They moved on, laboring through the half-frozen mud. The SS sergeant smoked a cigarette but kept his mouth shut with the air of the long-suffering soldier saddled with an idiot for an officer. Finally, Von Stenger saw what he was looking for—a captured United States Army truck with an olive drab canvas top. The truck was moving slowly enough that Von Stenger simply stepped out in front of it and raised a hand in a gesture that indicated "stop," like a gendarme directing traffic on a Paris street. He walked up to the driver's open window.

"Sir?" the puzzled driver asked. Another man sat next to him. They both had their helmets off. One man was gray-haired, while the other's bald head gleamed. Both were deep into middle age. Clearly, even the SS was running low on men at this late hour of the war.

"Turn this truck around," Von Stenger said. "You are returning to the rear of the column with me and two of my men."

"Yes, sir." The driver did not look happy, but he did not argue. "How far back do you want me to go?"

"You will know when to stop."

Schiffer came up. "Do you want me to drive, Herr Hauptmann?" he asked. "Those two old men look like grandpas."

"They will serve their purpose. You and Breger will get in back with me."

Breger suffered a momentary lapse in patience. "In back? With no heat? We should kick them out so we can ride up front!"

"You may thank me later," Von Stenger said. "Now, get in."

The truck was empty except for a couple of abandoned crates—whatever supplies it had carried had been stripped by the SS. Von Stenger mused that Friel would have had a conniption at the thought of a truck burning up that precious petrol so that a couple of over-the-hill soldiers wouldn't have to walk. The truck was a two and a half ton GMC—nicknamed a "Deuce and a half" by the Allies. The countryside had crawled with them all summer and fall as the Red Ball Express worked to keep the Americans supplied with everything from ammo to dry socks. The trucks were made by the thousands in Pontiac, Michigan, in stark contrast to the steadily declining numbers of German trucks. One reason why the Allies were

so surprised by Operation Wacht am Rhein was that no one thought it possible that the Germans still had so many vehicles.

The truck had a wooden bed and metal sides that came up about knee high. Metal hoops held the canvas roof taut. The front of the canvas covering rose about two feet above the cab itself. There was a little extra canvas material hanging down, so Von Stenger cut free a long strip of it.

Schiffer started to sit down on one of the wooden benches that ran the length of both sides of the bed. "*Nein*," Von Stenger said. "Stand here behind the cab. You will want as much metal as possible in front of you, believe me. But first, we have some chores to do. Drag those empty crates over here."

Once Schiffer had done so, Von Stenger stood on one of them. It was hard to keep his balance as the truck churned along the road, back the way it had come. He slung the rifle over one shoulder to keep it handy. Then he drew his sheath knife and cut a six-inch slit in the canvas, beginning just about even with the top of the truck's cab.

He handed the knife to Schiffer. "Cut a slit eight inches long, parallel to the top of the truck cab."

"Parallel, sir?"

"Yes, like this." Von Stenger mimicked the motion of cutting the canvas, then reached into his pack and took out the binoculars. Once Schiffer had made the cut, he traded Schiffer the binoculars for the knife. "Now, you are my spotter. The sniper will fire once or twice—or more if he is not a very good sniper. I want you to see where he is shooting from. Don't worry, he won't see you—the last thing he'll be looking for is a pair of binoculars poking through the canvas. Imagine that you are looking at a clock face. You tell me where on the clock face the sniper is hiding."

"What am I looking for?"

"No one is invisible," Von Stenger said. "In this cold, you will likely see his breath. It is dark enough in the trees that you may spot a muzzle flash. The American sniper rifles are usually single shot like our own, so you may see the movement of him working the bolt. Whatever you do, don't blink, and don't fall off the crate."

Von Stenger took the strip of extra canvas he had cut and wrapped it around his rifle barrel. The paint of the truck and the dye of the canvas were very close in color. Once the barrel was wrapped, he put the rifle through the vertical slit. The road far ahead of the truck sprang into view, but only a narrow circle of it. He would have to depend on Schiffer to be his eyes.

Breger spoke up. "Why am I along for the ride?" he asked.

"There is a possibility that the snipers may have a crossfire set up," Von Stenger said. "So, you have the machine pistol to make them keep their heads down in case there is a sniper behind us. Keep low, behind the tailgate. It is made of steel, so it should give you some protection."

With the soldiers in position, they waited. Several minutes passed. It seemed to grow colder and colder in the truck. At his post behind the tailgate, Breger cursed as he began to shiver. Von Stenger had trained himself to be inured to cold and physical discomfort—he would not have survived long as a sniper otherwise. However, he wished that he had not had quite so much coffee previously. It had

warned him up, but now his bladder practically sloshed around as the truck bounced over the rough road. It was only a minor annoyance and he focused his thoughts elsewhere.

He did not take his eye off the scope. Soon, they began passing the detritus left by the passing column—everything from the empty wrappings of rations to abandoned vehicles that were either broken down or too mired in the muddy road to be moved.

"How far are we going?" Breger wondered. "Back to Berlin? All the fighting is in the other direction, Herr Hauptmann."

"Keep your eyes open," Von Stenger replied. "It won't be long now."

The driver downshifted to gain traction in the mud, slowing the truck down. Von Stenger began to wonder if his plan was such a good idea, after all. At the rate they were going, it was true that they would soon be halfway back to Germany. They had been moving through wooded areas, but they reached a clearing that could have been a wheat field buried beneath the snow. Footsteps had disturbed the surface of the snow. Most likely these marks had been left by the passing German troops.

Whang. A shot ring out over the grinding of the engine. The truck lurched toward the snowy field, but then swung back into the road.

"Where are you?" hissed Von Stenger, desperately scanning the tree line. "Where are you hiding? Schiffer, do you see him yet?"

"No, sir."

A second shot. This time the truck rolled into the field, but ever so slowly. It became clear that the first shot from the American sniper had killed the driver. The other man in the cab must have snatched the wheel, but now he, too, was dead. Without anyone to give it gas or downshift, the truck lurched a few times, then made a hopping motion like an overgrown steel rabbit. Then the engine shuddered and died, leaving them stranded in the field.

"There," Schiffer whispered, excitement tinging his voice. "Ten o'clock. Just at the edge of the field."

Von Stenger moved the rifle in that direction. Through the scope, he saw it, too. A puff of vapor caused by the sniper exhaling the breath he had held while making the second shot. Beneath it, Von Stenger could just see the outline of a helmet, even though an attempt had been made to camouflage it in white. The sniper had buried himself in the snow. Clever, clever.

Instantly, more by instinct than by any conscious formula, Von Stenger worked the calculations in his head. Wind. Distance. He put the bottom post of the sight just a little above and to the left of the sniper's helmet and squeezed the trigger.

The crack of the rifle did not quite cover the hollow noise of the bullet striking home. The sound of a bullet hitting the target always reminded Von Stenger of how a pumpkin had sounded when, as a boy, he had dropped one out of a third story window to the stone-paved courtyard below. *Whump.* Such a satisfying sound.

"You got him!" cried Schiffer.

"Quiet," Von Stenger barely breathed the words. "It is likely that he has a spotter."

The snow seemed to explode upward, and then a white-garbed soldier was up and running like a rabbit. It was definitely the sniper's spotter. A running shot was never easy, and the spotter had the good sense to run and dodge. Von Stenger fired, but he knew the shot was wrong as soon as he touched the trigger.

The spotter went down, though. Shot through the legs. He struggled to get his footing in the snow.

Von Stenger worked the bolt and let the crosshairs settle on the spotter, who was looking toward the truck, shouting something to someone in the woods, pointing—

There was another sniper in those trees. Von Stenger felt the hairs crawl on the back of his neck just before a bullet punched through the canvas. It missed Von Stenger, but Schiffer wasn't so lucky. He caught a glimpse of Schiffer's look of surprise at the fact that he had been shot. He put a hand to his neck, blood flowing between the fingers.

Von Stenger got back on the scope. In the seconds he had looked away, someone had run from the tree line toward the fallen spotter. The second sniper. He put the crosshairs on this target, but was surprised when the sniper dropped to one knee. What was that painted on his helmet? He looked through the scope and saw that the man's rifle was aimed right at him. An instant later, a bullet plucked at the canvas, causing Von Stenger to flinch away.

"Scheiss!"

When he looked through the scope again, the sniper had managed to half drag, half carry the wounded spotter into the cover of the trees. Von Stenger put a bullet into the gray maze of branches where he had seen them disappear. Then Von Stenger kept his head down, below the metal cab. His skin crawled as he recalled how close the bullet had passed by his face.

No one was that good. Perhaps not even him. The man had dropped to one knee and fired a shot with amazing accuracy.

Memory flashed to a sight picture of what he had seen through the rifle scope. It was like seeing a photograph in his mind. The mental image clearly showed a Confederate flag painted on the American sniper's helmet. *You again.* The hillbilly sniper.

"Breger?"

The Scharführer was trying to staunch the flow of blood in the wounded man's neck. Schiffer was bleeding out, his eyes already glassy.

"If I had any bandages—"

"Leave him. I want you to get behind the wheel and drive this truck across the field into the woods. Head toward the tracks where those snipers disappeared."

Breger looked as if Von Stenger had just asked him to drive to Mars. "Herr Hauptmann?"

"Do it! Use that machine pistol to lay down some covering fire, then make a run for the cab."

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Breger did as he was told, sliding out the back of the truck and running in a crouch toward the front of the cab, firing as he went. He dragged the dead man from the cab and slid behind the wheel, keeping low, expecting at any moment

that a bullet would find him. Fortunately, as long as he kept his head down, there was a huge block of metal between him and the snipers.

He got his feet under the dash and worked the clutch, then hit the starter button. The engine thrummed to life, and he shifted into gear, heading across the field toward the trees.

He kept going. Driving blind. He risked a peek over the dash to get his bearings, then ducked down again.

And then they were at the tree line. He heard Von Stenger shout at him to keep going. Go where? The big tires churned over the snow-covered brush at the edge of the woods and then the truck was in among the trees themselves. The trip ended when the bumper connected with the trunk of a large oak tree. The frustrated motor surged, then stalled out. They had not been going fast, but Breger still found himself thrown hard against the dashboard.

Breger tumbled out, dragging the machine pistol with him. The snow was deep among the trees, and he slogged around to the back of the truck, where Von Stenger was taking his time getting out. Nonchalantly, he pulled on a white snow smock that dropped to below his knees. He flipped up the hood and covered his helmet.

Breger could only stare. He had thought this Wehrmacht officer was nothing but a fool and soft as butter. How wrong he had been. If there was something colder than the winter air, it must be the blood in Von Stenger's veins.

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As he climbed out of the truck, Von Stenger paused to look down at Schiffer. The young SS driver stared up sightlessly at the canvas ceiling. He had only known Schiffer for a short time, but he had seemed like a capable young man. A good soldier.

He searched within himself for some emotion and came up empty, other than a passing thought that it was too bad it wasn't Breger laying there dead. Was that the best he could do in terms of emotion? *What is wrong with me?*

He got out and found Breger crouched beside the truck, trying to cover the entire woods with the machine pistol. Between the truck and the surrounding trees, they were well protected from any sniper fire.

"Relax," he told Breger. "You can go back now."

"Go back?" Breger sounded puzzled. He looked around at the trees. "Go back where?"

"To your unit, Scharführer Breger. I would recommend against walking through the middle of the field, of course, but you can work your way through the woods back to the road. I think the snipers are gone."

"What about you, sir?" The "sir" was spoken with new respect.

"I am going after the snipers."

Without further explanation, Von Stenger slipped away into the woods. He moved with an almost feline grace, managing to cross the snow without a sound. He ducked under branches and around brambles. With the white camouflage helping him blend into the snowy trees, he seemed to melt into the winter woods like another dollop of milk added to a cup of cafe au lait.

Beside the truck, Breger lost sight of him, blinking his eyes in disbelief. Von Stenger had disappeared... like a ghost. Breger was relieved that he was gone. His own commander cared deeply about his men. This officer was willing to toss lives away.

Breger got a good grip on the submachine gun, then looked around at the snowy woods pressing in around him. Now what?

Chapter 17

From several yards away, Cole, Jolie, and the Kid watched the truck driven by the Germans crash into the trees. Cole had no doubt that the German sniper had survived. And not just any sniper—he was sure it must be Das Gespenst in the back of that truck. Who else was such a good shot, or half as clever?

He stared down at the rifle in his hands. The enemy sniper's bullet had only grazed him, but it had smashed the telescopic sight on the Springfield. The rifle was next to useless.

He turned to Jolie. She was busy wrapping a scarf around the Kid's leg, trying to staunch some of the blood flowing from the wound. The Kid winced. Fortunately for him, it was not a fatal wound, although it would definitely slow him down in this snow.

McNulty hadn't been so lucky. Cole could see the body sprawled in the snow, half hidden by the dirty white camouflage smock.

"Go!" Cole shouted at Jolie and the Kid. "You need to get out of here. Those Kraut bastards are coming after us."

"I am not going anywhere," Jolie said.

"This ain't the time to argue. The Kid is hurt and you need to get him out of here."

Jolie muttered something filthy and French under her breath.

"Listen up," Cole said. "See if you can link up with Mulholland and Vaccaro. If you can't find them, then you're bound to run into one of our units. We can't be the only Americans in all of the Ardennes Forest. You can get the Kid some help and get yourself the hell away from these goddamn SS bastards."

"That sounds like you are not coming with us," Jolie said. "What are you going to do?"

"Nail that Nazi sniper's hide to the barn door."

"Maybe you killed him just now."

Cole shook his head. "If I did, that would have to be the luckiest shot since Robin Hood split that arrow. No, he's still in that truck. He's going to come looking for us."

"You are wounded," Jolie said with concern, reaching for his bloodstained sleeve.

Cole pulled his arm away. "It's just a scratch."

The sniper's parting shot had indeed clipped him as he dragged the Kid into the woods, gouging a furrow across his upper arm. It burned like hell, but it was only

a flesh wound. Lucky for him, their old friend Das Gespenst must have been having an off day.

Cole was more concerned about the damage to his rifle. The telescopic sight was ruined. The Springfield was not equipped with an iron sight, which meant it was now useless. All he could do was point and shoot. That worked all right with a shotgun, but with the rifle Cole could not hit anything beyond spitting distance with any accuracy.

McNulty's rifle was out in that field, probably clogged with snow, but with the Germans nearby he didn't want to chance going out in the open to retrieve it. Jolie still had the lieutenant's pistol—and she might be needing it. That left him with a damaged rifle and a hunting knife.

"I'll be all right," he said. "You and the Kid get out of here. It's me he wants. It's me he'll come after."

"Cole—" Jolie started to say more, but then stopped herself.

"Go on," he said. "Get out of here."

"*Vous revenez à moi ou je te tue moi,*" she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It is French for, *Good luck, you stubborn horse's ass.*"

Cole grinned. "Now git. We ain't got all day."

Jolie and the Kid worked their way through the woods, keeping near the edge of the field but under cover of the trees. Fortunately, the Kid was skinny, and Jolie was able to put his arm over her shoulders to take some of the weight off his wounded leg.

Cole heard a door opening in the wrecked truck, but he couldn't see more through the trees. He waited until he was sure Jolie and the Kid were not being followed by the Germans, then headed deeper into the woods. He was sure he would lead the sniper away from them, as surely as a mouse lures the cat.

• • • • •

Von Stenger kept to the edge of the woods, looking for where the American snipers' footprints entered the trees. The path of the truck had roughly followed their footsteps, so he did not have to go far.

Every sense was tuned to the woods around him. The enemy might be lurking anywhere. As a sniper, he had trained his eyes to seek motion rather than try to distinguish shapes among the puzzle of trees. Something gray flickered across his vision and his rifle was halfway to his shoulder before his brain registered that it was only a bird. Even his nose tried to pick up any smell that did not belong in the forest—men smelled like leather, damp wool, cigarettes, spearmint gum, gunpowder—smells that could carry surprisingly far on the winter air.

The silence of the woods was a little too quiet—someone had passed this way recently—or could still be waiting in ambush. He moved more slowly, rifle at the ready. The last thing he wanted to do was walk right into the sights of the Americans—or surprise them in their hiding place.

He soon found what he was looking for, the place where their tracks came into the trees. Two sets of tracks, none too neat, considering that one man was helping the other.

And blood on the snow.

Against the white snow, the blood stood out clearly as a full moon in the night sky.

There was not enough blood to indicate a fatal wound, but his bullet had found some piece of its target.

He followed the tracks to where they stopped just inside the tree line. To his surprise there was another set of tracks, indicating a third man. A spotter? Or another sniper? Two sets of tracks moved back toward the field. Again, he saw flecks of blood on the snow. One of these men was wounded.

Curiously, a set of tracks moved away, deeper into the woods. Blood also spotted the snow beside these tracks. He could almost see it steaming in the cold.

Von Stenger could read these tracks like a story. The two sets of tracks leading into the field did not concern him much. One man was slightly wounded; the other man was providing a shoulder to lean on.

The lone set of tracks headed deeper into the forest. Away from any help. Why? Because they belonged to a man just like him. The hillbilly sniper. Wounded but still very dangerous, like some cornered predator. Inviting Von Stenger to follow him rather than the two who had fled to help and safety. Deep in the woods, once and for all, they could settle this matter of who was the better man.

Von Stenger accepted the challenge.

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The forest soon closed in around Cole. The snow-covered ground and frosted branches absorbed any sound. The wound alternately ached and burned, but it did not impede him.

Here in the woods, he was in his element. It did not matter if these were the hills of the Ardennes, or the mountains back home. He might not know the lay of the land here, but he understood the rules of survival.

It would just be the two of them now. Cole and the Ghost Sniper. He would have liked his chances better if he'd had a working rifle.

The first thing he had to do was to turn the tables. The German sniper would be coming after him, and Cole's trail was far too clear. He was leaving tracks in the snow, as well as blood.

The situation was like being in an aerial dogfight—you were at a disadvantage if you were the plane out front. The pilot behind you could just settle in and pick you off. To win the dogfight, you had to turn the tables and get behind your opponent.

All Cole had were his own two feet, but that was enough. He moved downhill, rather than seeking the higher ground. Normally, being up high would be to his advantage. But he needed to outfox Das Gespenst, so he moved downhill as quickly as he could, hoping that he had enough of a head start on the German. The trees would hopefully screen his movements—but all the man had to do was follow Cole's tracks. The German would know the general direction Cole had taken, but Cole would not really know where the German was coming from.

His ears strained for some sound, some clue that he was being followed. Except for the occasional creak of branches overhead, the forest was silent. Not so much as a bird broke the quiet.

At the bottom of the forested hill, he was disappointed to find nothing more than an ice-locked ravine. Damn it all. It wasn't what he had hoped for. The German would be coming, and Cole felt very exposed.

He started up the next hill, panting with the effort, and less careful about any noise he made. He needed speed and distance right now, not quiet. Once he got to the top, he heard just what he was hoping to hear. The sound of running water.

In the distance, he heard a branch snap.

He half ran, half slid down the other side of the hill toward the sound of the creek. At the bottom of the hill was a creek maybe twenty feet wide and a couple of feet deep. The water moved fast enough that it had kept ice from forming.

Without a moment's hesitation, Cole plunged into the stream, instantly getting soaked up to his knees. Even if the water wasn't frozen, it definitely felt like ice. Already, his lower legs grew numb.

He waded with the current, trying not to make too much noise. He slung his damaged rifle and used his arms to keep his balance on the slippery stones under his boots. It was bad enough to get his legs and feet wet. If he fell in, the cold would get him before the German did. He noticed that his shoulder wasn't bleeding so much—the blood had started to coagulate in the chill air.

Cole churned down the stream for about one hundred feet, until he spotted a log, bare of snow, that slanted down into the water. On an impulse, he moved past it until he came to a place maybe fifty yards down where a spring bubbled down into the main creek. The area was free of snow, yet was frozen solid enough that his boots would not leave tracks. He waded out of the creek and followed the frozen spring bed back into the woods. The frozen path did not go far, but it was enough. He looked back, just to make sure that he had left no tracks—or any blood.

Not a trace.

Satisfied, he worked his way back into a tangle of wild grapevines where he would be well hidden, but had a view of the creek. He rested his rifle over a fallen branch and settled down to wait. Von Stenger would have to be very close for Cole to shoot with any accuracy. He might just have to shove the rifle barrel up the Kraut's ass in order not to miss. But with any luck, he had just gone from hunted to hunter.

Chapter 18

Von Stenger thought that following the hillbilly sniper's tracks was deceptively easy, like tracking a rabbit to its burrow.

All that was left to do was club it on the head.

At the same time, he was well aware that Cole was no rabbit. He was something with teeth and claws and fangs. He also carried a high-powered rifle, and he was a very good shot.

Von Stenger could be walking right into a trap.

Cautiously, with his Russian rifle at the ready, Von Stenger began to follow the American's tracks through the snow. Moving quietly was almost impossible. Every

step crunched. A branch cracked underfoot. He paused to listen. Heard nothing. Either Cole had managed to levitate himself and float across the snow, or he was too far ahead for Von Stenger to be able to hear him.

He focused on the trees ahead, but it was hard to see anything except a puzzle of gray and white. Again, he kept his eyes attuned to movement, any flicker that might give his target away.

Truth be told, Von Stenger did not particularly enjoy the woods and fields. While he had spent his share of time hunting—and then fighting—in forests and mountains, he supposed that he preferred pavement. Even the fighting in Stalingrad, as horrible as it had been, had been more to his liking because it had taken place across streets, shattered buildings, and rubble, not snow and trees and rocks. No, he did not love the woods, but he understood the tactics of fighting here well enough.

And this was no nature hike, after all. This hike would end when someone died—hopefully, it would not be him.

He tracked the American to the top of one hill and saw that the tracks ran down the other side of a hill toward a ravine. He carefully scoped the ravine at the bottom—it would have made a good sniper's nest. Then he saw the tracks leading up the next hill. The other sniper was not laying in ambush down in the ravine, after all. He followed the tracks.

The hill was steep, and he was winded by the time he reached the top. He could only imagine what an effort it must have been for the American—the blood stains beside the American's tracks were clearly evident. Each drop was big enough to leave a coin-sized spot of crimson, the heat of the blood melting down into the snow. The American must be in pain. The loss of blood would weaken him.

The amount of blood in the snow did not increase, however, and it certainly had not slowed him down. The American must have legs like iron.

If Von Stenger had only gotten his shot off faster, there would be no need to track the other man at all. The American would be dead back in that field, shot through the heart.

Next time.

Von Stenger paused at the top of the hill to catch his breath. He scoped the slope of the hill along the path of the sniper's tracks. No sign of the American, other than the footprints and the blood.

He listened. What was that? Not footsteps in the snow, to be sure, but something that sounded like a splash. He was becoming a bit deaf in his right ear—firing too many rounds from a high velocity rifle tended to have that effect. It was an occupational hazard... much less serious than the other occupational hazard, which was what one might euphemistically call lead poisoning. He cupped his hand around his left ear and listened. No more splashing, but he could hear the sound of running water.

Von Stenger descended the hill as quickly as he dared. At the bottom was a shallow, fast-moving creek.

The American's footsteps ended at the edge of the creek. That would explain the splashing he heard. He scanned the other side for some sign of where the American had come out, but no tracks disturbed the snow.

Clever, clever. The American was trying to throw him off the trail.

The water looked invitingly cold and clear. Pure. The other sniper was not in sight, so he bent down and scooped a handful of water toward his mouth. It was quite refreshing after his hike, although the water was so cold it made his teeth ache.

Still crouched down, rifle at the ready, he thought about what to do next. The obvious course of action was to follow the stream down and look for where the American sniper's tracks emerged. He had no doubt that the other man must have moved downstream simply because wading against the icy current would have been quite challenging.

Von Stenger was not about to get in the water. With wet feet, he would not last long in this cold. The hillbilly had taken an awful gamble by wading down the stream. He had thrown Von Stenger off his trail, but at what cost? Frostbite?

Carefully, making each step as quiet as possible, he moved down the bank. His hearing might not be as sharp as it once was, but there was nothing wrong with his eyes. He scanned the creek banks for any sign that the hillbilly had climbed out, but the snow remained undisturbed.

He followed a pattern: step, scan, step...

Slowly, he worked his way down the bank.

Then he saw it—a log sloping down into the creek at an angle that would be just right to walk up. There was just a dusting of snow on the log—not enough to display tracks. If Cole was looking to get out of the water without leaving a trace, the log was the perfect spot.

Von Stenger was sure that if he kept going down the bank, and the American was already out of the water waiting for him, then he would just be walking into a bullet.

The problem, however, was that the American could be hiding anywhere along the stream. He would be waiting for Von Stenger to walk right into his sights.

He stopped to consider his options.

Leap and the net will appear, Goethe said.

He looked across the creek to the hill that rose on the other side. If he could get up on that hill, he would be looking down at the creek to pick up on any movements that the other sniper made.

Von Stenger possessed a cartographer's mind. He constantly charted every hill and tree and rock he saw, creating a running map of vantage points where a sniper could hide—or where danger might be hidden. It was something he did unconsciously, but he could remember miles and miles of territory that he had crossed. Even indoors, he behaved the same way, always sitting with his back to the wall and memorizing the entrances and exits.

He retraced his steps to the point where he had first come down to the creek, then walked upstream until it went around a bend—no sense giving the American a straight shot at him. He soon came to another log that spanned the entire creek from bank to bank.

He walked across the log, keeping his rifle at the ready. He was not worried about leaving tracks—he was the one following the hillbilly, not the other way around.

He then worked his way up the bank, moving slowly and deliberately in an effort to minimize the noise he made crossing the snow. It would be to his advantage if the American was not aware that Von Stenger was on the hill behind him.

As stealthy as he tried to be, it was almost impossible to move without a sound. His feet betrayed him, sinking down through the snow. A branch cracked under foot, although the sound was muffled by the snow. He swore silently under his breath and moved on.

He found a spot behind a fallen log that gave him a clear view of the creek below.

And then he settled down to wait. With any luck, the American's next move would be his last.

• • • • •

Cole shivered. He could only ignore the cold to a point, considering that his legs were soaked through. His wet feet had gone numb with cold. Considering that the temperature was below freezing, frostbite was a real danger.

Wading into the creek had been a calculated risk. The truth was that he would rather take a chance on frostbite than a bullet from Von Stenger, whose only challenge would be to follow his tracks to his hiding place.

He waited for Von Stenger to come down the creek bank, looking for where Cole's tracks came out of the water. He kept the rifle pointed in that direction, expecting at any moment for Von Stenger to appear. At this range, he had a good chance of hitting him, even without the telescopic sight.

Moments passed, then minutes, but there was no sign of the German.

Where had he gone?

As more time passed, Cole knew that he had to move. He was wet, he was wounded—he needed to find shelter before nightfall, which would come early here in the Ardennes.

He was just getting ready to move when he heard a sound on the hillside above him. Had that been a twig snapping?

He swung the rifle in that direction, but there was nothing to see but trees and snow.

As Cole scanned the hillside above him, a chilling realization gripped him even more strongly than the cold. If Von Stenger had somehow managed to get above him, Cole was in real danger. He had to hand it to the Kraut for being a tricky bastard.

If he had not heard that twig snap, he might have gotten up and started walking—which would have gotten him killed. From that hill, the German could see anything that moved.

But Cole had to move—it was either that, or freeze to death. *Ain't much of a choice.* The winter day was short, and already the light was fading. Once the sun went down, the temperature would drop fiercely, and navigating the woods in the dark would be nearly impossible.

He kept still for a while and thought it through. Von Stenger didn't even have to shoot him. The German simply had to wait for the cold and the wound to do their work. His shoulder still bled from the Ghost Sniper's parting shot. He had lost enough blood to make him lightheaded.

Cole had to get out of these woods. He had to get someplace warm and dry. He needed to have his shoulder tended to. It was a matter of survival. But without a functional rifle, how in the world could he get the upper hand on the German?

He needed to trick him.

By waiting for the cold to do its work, the German was expecting to find a dead man. Why not give him one?

• • • • •

Jolie and the Kid moved through the trees with as much stealth as possible. They had no idea how many Germans might be waiting out there. They stopped from time to time, listening, but heard nothing but some distant machine gun fire. Not so much as a breath of wind stirred the pine boughs.

Cautiously, she approached the truck that the Germans had driven into the trees. She poked the .45 into the cab, but saw a dead body slumped across the seat.

Cole had been right—he was the one that the Germans wanted. She saw another set of tracks following his into the forest. Still more tracks followed the tire ruts back across the field toward the road.

“How is your leg?” she asked the Kid.

“It’s not too bad.” He explained that the bullet had mostly caught the baggy winter camouflage and thermal underwear. The force was enough to knock him down, but he had hardly more than a scratch on his leg.

“Wait here,” she said. “I have an idea.”

Jolie looked out into the field where McNulty’s body lay nearly hidden in the snow. She wanted his sniper rifle.

She took a deep breath and jogged into the field, praying that she was right about the Germans leaving the area. No shots rang out, and she soon had the rifle in her hands. She returned to the Kid.

“Now what?” he asked.

“We do what Cole told us,” she said. “Find the lieutenant and Vaccaro, or find another American unit.”

“What if the Germans find us first?”

Jolie waved the .45. “Then I will shoot as many as I can, and save the last bullet for myself.”

They started for the road, keeping to the cover of the trees. The Germans would be moving west, so their best bet seemed to be to follow the road east, in hopes of stumbling across any American units that had been cut off in the German’s rear.

Though it was still afternoon, a winter gloom had settled over the woods, which explained why they did not see the figure in the trees until almost the last minute.

Jolie pushed the Kid toward the forest. “Hide!” she urged in a harsh whisper. She pressed McNulty’s rifle into his hands. He started to protest, but she put a hand on his shoulder. “I do not know if these are Americans or Germans. If they are Germans, they will shoot you on sight. I am wearing civilian clothes, so I may be able to talk my way out of it.”

A moment later, the soldier spotted her and stepped into the road, aiming a submachine gun at Jolie. One touch of the trigger, and she would be cut in two.

He wore a white camouflage smock over his uniform and his helmet was also wrapped in white.

"Hände hoch!" he shouted. Hands up!

Jolie's heart sank. But she had no intention of surrendering. She curled her fingers tensely around the .45 in her pocket.

"Thank God," she said in German. "I was worried you were Americans."

The soldier was not buying it. He kept the weapon pointed right at her. "Get your hands out of your pockets."

"What do you mean?" Perhaps playing dumb would buy her a few seconds. In her pocket, she pointed the pistol in his direction and started to squeeze the trigger. To her dismay, three more soldiers materialized from the shadows of the trees. How many shots did she have? She had meant what she had said to Hank about saving the last bullet for herself. She would not be captured alive by the Germans. She knew well enough what they did to prisoners.

She was so intent on the man in front of her that she did not see the other soldier step out of the woods behind her.

He clubbed her with his rifle, and everything went black.

• • • • •

The jostling of the truck awoke Jolie. Disoriented, it took her a moment to remember what had happened: the Germans stepping out of the trees, her hand around the pistol, then being clubbed on the back of her head. In the dark and cold, she wondered at first if she was already dead.

Non, she thought, shaking her aching head. Spit had drooled from her mouth and she swiped at it. When she moved, she winced when the painful knot on her head came in contact with the floor of the truck. Not dead. Only in living was there so much misery.

She tried to sit up and found that her hands were tied. So tightly, in fact, that the rough cords cut into her wrists. Her hands felt numb from lack of circulation and cold. A blanket that smelled foully of diesel fuel fell away as she sat up.

The Germans had dumped her in the back of this truck, then apparently tossed a blanket over her in a half-hearted effort to keep her from freezing to death. It was as if it didn't really matter if she lived or died. They had not even bothered to post a guard.

Where would she run, after all, with her hands tied, in the middle of the Ardennes Forest, in the dead of winter, with an invasion taking place?

Jolie was rather surprised that the Germans had not killed her outright. She had made no secret of fighting with the American snipers. What was the point? The Germans had found the gun in her pocket.

But there was no relief in being alive, even temporarily. This only meant that when she came to, someone would drop by to interrogate her.

As a Macchi or French Resistance fighter, she had seen the aftermath of a German interrogation more than once. It was not a pretty sight. Some of those interrogations had not even been conducted by the SS. Only the Gestapo was worse.

The truck moved in fits and starts, with a frequent grinding of gears. Apparently the Germans were not making easy progress.

She heard voices and footsteps. Jolie slumped down again and tugged the blanket over her. If they thought she was still unconscious, they might leave her alone. Someone leaned into the back of the truck and shouted, "Hey! You awake?" When she did not answer, the soldiers went away.

Jolie put her wrists to her lips so that she could get her teeth at the rope. Whoever had tied her up knew his business. The knots were tight as rocks. Giving up, she tried her teeth on the rope itself. It was the sort of rough, bristly rope that lacerated her lips and gums. She could chew her way through—if she had a few days to do it.

She might only have hours—or minutes. It would help if she had more light to see what she was doing.

Jolie threw off the blanket and sat on the wooden bench that sufficed as seating for the troops who would normally ride back here. She attacked the rope anew, first trying to saw it along the edge of the wooden bench. When that did not work, she tried her teeth again.

The truck came to yet another stop, bouncing her wildly on the seat. Her teeth slid off the rope and cracked together painfully. She might as well be trying to chew her way through steel cables.

It looked as if she wasn't going anywhere.

• • • • •

Cole had grown up setting traps, catching animals for their skins or meat, so a trap for the German sniper came to mind immediately.

Using his hunting knife, he cut a branch about the thickness of a finger into six-inch sections, and then slashed each one to the sharpness of a rattlesnake fang.

Several saplings grew along the creek bank near his hiding place. He selected a green sapling that was big around as a broom handle, and went to work cutting it down with a few quick strokes of his heavy knife.

Next, he drove the point of the knife near one end of the sapling, neatly splitting that end. He inserted the sharpened sticks, then bound them tightly together with the tough grape vines. The result he had hoped for would have looked something like a three-pronged fork, but this was even better—the prongs stuck out at different angles like a knot of barb wire.

Staying low, and trying to keep his movements to a minimum, he wedged the other end of the sapling horizontally between two small trees at about thigh height. He tied more string to the end with the sharp sticks, then ran the string under a smooth-skinned branch to serve as a fulcrum.

The trigger was simple to make. He used the stump of the sapling he had cut down—it was embedded as firmly into the ground as a stake—and cut a groove near the end. He cut a groove in another six-inch length of wood, and tied the other end of the string to that. Then he pulled the sapling taut. It took some adjustment, but when he was done he basically had the rigging for a snare. The sapling stump and the other piece of wood were the trigger device—all the tension of the curved sapling was held in place by that floating piece of wood.

Normally, a bit of meat would bait the trap. When an animal took the bait, it released the trigger and sprang the snare. But with the trap Cole had set, there

would be no snare, just the sharpened spikes whipping through the air at the end of the sapling.

He eased out of his coat, hoping he would not regret leaving it behind. A piece of string ran from the coat to the trigger, out of sight. He would use his coat as bait.

Cole sat for a while, waiting for it to get darker. The cold seeped deeper into his muscles and bones. Cole was mostly bone and sinew so there wasn't much insulation from the cold. He put some snow in his mouth and let it dissolve. It had the double advantage of satisfying his thirst and disguising his position by preventing his breath from rising up as warm vapor.

When he was ready, he began to move ever so slowly out of his hiding place, hoping that the brush along the creek would screen him from view of the hillside above. So far, he had been lucky.

He worked backward until he reached the creek again, then eased into the water. The icy water was like an electric shock that didn't end, but he forced himself to wade against the current, keeping close to the bank nearest the slope. He continued back to where his original footprints came down into the creek. His plan was to backtrack along the path he had used to get into the forest. He eased out of the water, praying he wasn't in the Ghost Sniper's sights.

He had one last thing to do. He reached down into the crystal clear water and found a smooth rock the size of a baseball. Then he pitched it toward where he had hung his coat in a tree, and set his trap.

Cole started up the hillside, shivering despite the fact that he was nearly running.

Chapter 19

Von Stenger heard the crash in the brush below and pressed the rifle scope tight to his eye, searching for the source. Had the American fallen? Was he making a run for it?

He spotted a patch of olive drab. Exhaling, he put the crosshairs on the target and pulled the trigger.

Von Stenger waited for an answering shot that never came. Dead was dead.

He left his hiding place, not being particularly cautious, and started down the hillside. The American had been roughly where he expected, but the noise had helped him pinpoint the coat in the tangle of brush.

He kept going until he reached the edge of the creek and worked his way into the thicket. The brush was dense here; briars scratched at his snow smock and he slipped it off.

He saw the empty coat draped in the bushes—and froze. Where was the hillbilly? Gone. He sensed that he was alone in the woods. The other sniper had managed to escape by fooling him with this scarecrow.

Von Stenger shook his head. How long ago had the hillbilly slipped away? Probably when he had thrown the rock. Von Stenger had spent precious time maneuvering down the hillside, creeping up on the scarecrow.

With a sigh, Von Stenger reached for the coat.

A blur of movement registered and he started to duck and turn, but not before the sapling whipped at him and the three sharp stakes bit into his leg. Von Stenger screamed.

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Struggling up the hillside, Cole heard the scream and grinned. That would give the German something to chew on. Hopefully, it would also buy him some time. Once again, he was at a disadvantage because all that the German had to do was follow his tracks. As hunting went, it was not much of a challenge.

He could have stayed and tried to get the jump on Das Gespenst, but he had a more immediate problem—keeping from freezing to death. The temperature was in the low teens, and it was starting to snow again. The falling snow wrapped the woods in a hushed shroud and dark shadows filled the gaps between the trees.

Cole was not a big believer in ghosts and spirits, but he had to admit that this woods felt spooky.

He forced himself to move faster. He was so cold and exhausted that each step through the deep snow required Herculean effort. Running was impossible, but he managed to propel himself up the hill at a good pace. He got to the top, then half ran, half slid down toward the ravine below, and started up the hill on the other side.

The damaged rifle was only slowing him down, so he tossed it away.

If Von Stenger didn't get him, the cold sure as hell would. Wet and without a coat, he needed shelter and warmth. The sun would be going down soon, and he didn't like his chances of making it through the dark forest where every root and rock waited to trip him.

At the top of the next hill, his luck changed. The woods ended, opening to a field that sloped sharply toward the road. An old barn stood just beyond the trees.

Cole ran for it.

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Von Stenger was angry. It took a lot for him to lose his temper. He prided himself on self control. An angry sniper was a dead sniper. Looking down at the stakes jutting from his leg, he realized he felt more anger than pain.

The American had set a trap, and he had walked right into it. He continued to underestimate this hillbilly sniper.

Gritting his teeth, he reached down and ripped the bloody spikes from his thigh. Fortunately, he wore heavy canvas trousers and thermal underwear, which had cushioned the blow. Still, the wooden stakes had done damage. One sharp stick had sunk at least two inches into the meat of his leg. It came out reluctantly, with a nauseating sucking sound. He took time to cut a strip from his snow camouflage smock and then wrapped it around his leg.

Gingerly, he tested his weight on the leg. It seemed to support him—not that he had any choice but to keep going.

He did not cross the creek immediately but worked his way back to the fallen log where he had crossed initially, then walked up the far bank, looking for tracks. He wasn't so worried now about the American, who seemed more interested in fleeing than fighting. That alone was puzzling. What was the American's motive?

His mind was a bit dazed from the pain, so at first he could not determine where the hillbilly had climbed out of the stream. Then it dawned on him that it was probably that the other sniper had simply stepped back into his old tracks, retracing his steps through the snow.

Von Stenger followed the footprints back up the hill and down the other side. It seemed unlikely that the American had simply lost his nerve and fled. Was he more badly wounded than Von Stenger had supposed? He was wet and cold—certainly that was a factor. But a man like this hillbilly—

That's when he saw the rifle, tossed away beside the tracks. At first he thought it might be another trap, but looking more closely, he saw the damaged telescopic sight.

The American no longer had a functional weapon.

Smiling to himself, Von Stenger picked up his pace, wincing in pain with each step.

He struggled to reach the crest of the hill and saw the barn in the clearing ahead.

Is this where you have gone to ground, Ami? I am coming for you.

• • • • •

Most of the farm country in these parts had been abandoned, and the barn was as empty as the countryside. Cole slipped inside, his eyes adjusting to the gloom, knife at the ready. It was the only weapon he still had.

Somewhere in the rafters, some pigeons cooed. He took that as a sign that no one else was in the barn.

Quickly, he looked around the barn. Anything of value had been picked clean. He had been hoping to find an old horse blanket or a piece of canvas—anything that he could use for a coat. The only item he could find was a dry-rotted grain sack that crumbled to shreds in his hands. Though the barn offered some shelter, it was hardly warm.

He kept looking. The barn smelled strongly of horses and cows, but there was no recent evidence of livestock. The farmer had long since cleared them out.

His eyes fell on a broken rake and a wooden shovel, hanging from a post. Just the thing if he wanted to plant a garden, but not much use now. He looked a little higher and noticed another wooden object hanging from the rafters. Intrigued, he took a closer look. It was a homemade toboggan, about six feet long, built of slats fitted together and then curved at one end. There was a fine layer of wax on the slats to help the wood slide over the snow. Some kids had used this toboggan not that long ago—even the war couldn't stop some things, like kids going sled riding. The long, sloping hill below the barn would be perfect.

He left the toboggan and continued prowling through the barn. Nothing useful, unless you had a need for moldy straw and horse turds.

He was still figuring out what to do when a bullet zipped through the open door and punched a hole in the barn wall, inches from his head. The shot had come from the forest.

Von Stenger had found him.

At that same moment, out the window, he caught sight of movement on the road below. The dusty windows were hard to see through, so he rubbed a corner

clean with his finger. He saw the deuce and a half trucks with the big white star on the door and figured it was a German unit driving the captured trucks. His heart sank.

Then he spotted GIs trailing the trucks. Unlike the Germans, most Americans hadn't been issued white camo. For the first time that afternoon, his spirits lifted. He saw a Wolverine tank destroyer mounting a 3-inch gun, and two or three Jeeps, along with a couple of dozen men on foot. Not a large unit, but one that had, so far, managed to elude the larger German force.

They would have food, and they would be able to patch up his wound. He just had to get down there.

The problem was that crossing the open field would leave him exposed to the woods—where Das Gespenst was now waiting, bent on revenge. Also, he didn't like his chances walking down to the road toward a bunch of trigger happy GIs.

But if he was going to catch up with the GIs, he had to do it soon. Otherwise, he would miss his opportunity to link up with his own troops.

He could stay and get shot at by the German sniper, or take his chances with the GIs. It was six of one, half dozen of another.

Another bullet punched through the barn.

Now or never.

He glanced up again at the toboggan. His mind made up, he lifted it down.

• • • • •

Had he hit something?

Von Stenger glimpsed a figure silhouetted inside.

He worked the bolt and walked closer, then fired again toward where he had seen the American's shadow.

He dropped to one knee and took aim.

When the other man did not return fire, Von Stenger aimed again, taking his time.

• • • • •

His heart hammering in his chest, Cole ran for the back of the barn, dragging the toboggan along. The rear foundation of the bank barn was several feet above the ground. He tossed down the toboggan, which landed on the snow and immediately began to slide downhill.

Another bullet whipped through the barn, bounced off a rafter, and ricocheted with a whine that made his spine crawl.

The toboggan picked up speed.

Cole jumped and just managed to catch the tail end of the toboggan. He got his knees under him and squatted down. Though it was snowing again, the snow beneath was mostly glazed with ice. With his added weight on the toboggan, it began to pick up speed.

Another shot plucked at the snow inches from where Cole's hands gripped the front curve of the toboggan.

The toboggan moved fasted on the ice-crusts slow. He was sliding fast toward the road. He leaned one way, then the other, to make the toboggan weave. Another bullet cracked past his ear.

By now, the troops on the road had noticed him. Someone pointed, and a burst of machine gun fire churned up the snow ahead, like a shot across the bow. "Don't shoot!" he shouted, but his words whipped back at him. He gained speed, sliding directly into the guns below.

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Lieutenant Mulholland looked up at the burst of machine gun fire, reaching instinctively for his rifle at the same time. He expected to see a tank bearing down on them, but blinked in disbelief at the sight of a soldier on a toboggan.

The soldiers around him were slow to react. They were cobbled together out of stray units, including a few refugees from the Malmedy massacre.

"We could use you with us," the major in charge had said to Mulholland. "Everything is a goddamn SNAFU, though. Up is down, front is back—nobody knows exactly where the Nazis are or how many there are."

"What's your plan?" Mulholland asked.

"To go after the Krauts," the major said. He wasn't much older than Mulholland, and etched in his face had the same worry lines that seemed unique to officers. They worried about keeping not just their own socks dry, but everyone else's, too.

"Sounds like as good a plan as any," Mulholland agreed.

Now, staring up at the slope above the road, Mulholland thought he had seen everything. But he had never seen a toboggan attack.

"What the hell?" he wondered out loud. He heard another shot, this one from the hill at the top of the field. Snow kicked up beside the toboggan.

Beside him, Vaccaro gasped. "That's Cole!" he cried. "Tell these dumbasses not to shoot him."

"Cole?" He squinted.

Without waiting for him, Vaccaro ran toward the Jeep on which was mounted a .50 caliber machine gun. Something had jammed in the feed, but they had just cleared it and were about to shoot again.

"Stop!" he cried. "He's one of ours!"

Vaccaro pointed at Mulholland, who nodded to confirm what Vaccaro had just said. "Hold your fire! He's one of ours!" the lieutenant shouted.

Seconds later, the toboggan slid into the road and the rider rolled off, continuing to slide along the frozen road until he crashed into the tires on a stopped truck. The toboggan sailed on into the trees.

The figure got unsteadily to his feet. It was indeed Cole. He was pointing up the hill.

"There's a Kraut sniper in the barn!"

"You heard the man," Mulholland shouted. "Light up that barn!"

The machine gun crew had warmed up on the toboggan. The barn was a much easier target. Splinters flew off the sides of the old barn. Incredibly, one of the machine gunners slumped and fell off the Jeep. The German sniper was still at work.

Not for long. The major in charge saw what was happening and shouted orders, waving frantically. The massive barrel of the tank killer swiveled around and took aim at the barn.

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Von Stenger rushed the barn in time to see a toboggan sliding away down the steep hillside toward the road. It almost made him laugh to see the American sniper crouched on it, digging into the crusted snow like a paddler in a canoe, desperate for speed. A toboggan ride was for children.

He fired—and missed. The angle from the barn to the sliding toboggan was steep, and he tended to overshoot downhill targets. He chided himself for making such an amateur mistake. To his surprise, he realized that his heart was hammering inside his chest—he had, after all, expected to have to confront the hillbilly in the barn and there was a lot of adrenalin coursing through him.

As he took aim again, this time aiming much lower to compensate for the incline of the hill, he noticed the American troops on the road below. Someone fired a machine gun, churning up the snow around the toboggan, which had picked up speed and flew now across the snow. He surmised that the machine gunner had missed for the same reason he himself had—shooting uphill also required aiming lower. Of course, the machine gunner had the advantage of seeing exactly where his burst was hitting.

Von Stenger fired again, but the toboggan remained a surprisingly hard target to hit as it flew away, weaving this way and that, and shooting downhill was challenging.

Then the toboggan reached the road. He had an opportunity for one more shot. He rested the rifle more carefully against the frame of the door, took a deep breath—

Machine gun fire burst through the barn, leaving the old planks with daylight showing through like a colander. Keeping low, he put the crosshairs on the man behind the machine gun, and fired.

Von Stenger worked the bolt, preparing for another shot, when he noticed that the big muzzle of a tank destroyer was moving in his direction. Seeking him like a large, dark, angry eye.

The barn was about to be turned into kindling by a 15-pound shell traveling at nearly three thousand feet per second.

He got to his feet, ignoring the pain in his leg, and ran like hell.

Chapter 20

Cole rolled off the toboggan. He had grown up sliding down his share of snowy hillsides on winter days, but that was for fun. Nobody had been shooting at him. This was just about the wildest sled ride he had ever taken. Mulholland and Vaccaro helped him get unsteadily to his feet. He looked around for other familiar faces. The only one he saw was the Kid's.

“McNulty? Any chance he made it, after all?”

Mulholland shook his head. “McNulty is dead.”

“I knew it didn't look good for him, but Christ on a cross, I thought maybe he had a chance.” Cole sighed. “Where's Jolie at?”

Mulholland hesitated. “She's been captured by the Germans.”

“What?”

“She and the Kid were coming along the road, hoping to link up with us, and they ran into some Germans instead.”

Cole nodded at the Kid. “They let him go?”

“No, she told him to hide just before the Krauts saw them. She figured her own chances would be better. Once the Germans were gone, the Kid here kept going and found us with this unit—” Mulholland lowered his voice “—which is mostly made up of cooks, clerks and cripples, by the way.”

The Kid walked up, looking like he was about to cry. “It’s all my fault she got captured.”

Cole gave him a long, hard stare, but then looked away and shook his head. “It ain’t your fault, Kid. They would have shot you on sight like those poor bastards at Malmedy. You know these Krauts aren’t taking any soldiers as prisoners. At least they didn’t shoot her on the spot.”

“I’m so sorry, Cole,” Mulholland said.

“Jolie will think of something,” he said. “I reckon she always does. And if she don’t, we’ll just have to go get her.”

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Having left the barn and the American unit behind, Von Stenger spent the long winter twilight making his way back to Kampfgruppe Friel. He paused to bind the gash in his leg tightly, and then started along the road. He would have preferred keeping to the woods and fields, but the deep snow would have slowed him too much. Fortunately, the dusk provided good cover.

Here in no-man's land, it could just as easily be Americans coming along the road as Germans, so he kept ready to dodge into the trees at any moment.

The wound did not slow him down much. From outward appearances, Von Stenger was an aristocrat used to the finer things in life. Somehow, he always managed to keep his uniform clean—it was as if mud and dirt would not stick to him. Those who judged him to be a soft man were soon proven wrong. Von Stenger came from the upper class, it was true, but deep in his veins ran the much older blood of the Germanic barbarians who had swarmed across the frozen Rhine to strike fear in the hearts of the Roman Legions, the Gauls, and anyone else who stood in their way.

His leg hurt, but he managed to ignore it. If anything, it served as a reminder that come what may, he would pay back this American hillbilly sniper. Von Stenger felt that his honor was at stake. How could he let a man like that escape him? No, Von Stenger would hunt him down and shoot him to prove who was the better sniper.

He soon heard the whine of an oncoming engine struggling through the snow and half-frozen mud. He slipped between the white-coated tree trunks and disappeared. Only when he saw that it was a German half track did he step back out on the road. It turned out to be a scout patrol that had been spying on the American column just behind them. They gave him a ride back to the Kampfgruppe.

"Kurt," Friel said with obvious delight upon seeing him. "I thought we had lost you."

"Come now," Von Stenger said, unable to hide a smile. "You give those American snipers too much credit."

"That is good to hear," Friel said. The Obersturmbannführer looked exhausted—clearly he had not slept in days as he exhorted his men forward. In some men, the lack of sleep would have made them look older, but exhaustion had the opposite effect on Friel. He wasn't even thirty yet, and at the moment he looked very boyish. "I can do without them picking us off. Now, how are you at shooting down planes? If this weather clears, we will have a lot more to worry about than a few pesky snipers."

"I am afraid a rifle is not much use against an airplane. Might I suggest using the Wirbelwind anti-aircraft guns? The planes will come in low."

"That is what I like about you, Kurt. You have a sense of humor." He waved in the direction of a truck directly behind them. "Get something to eat and drink. There is a good bordeaux, I believe. And have someone look at that leg. It appears the Amis gave you more trouble than you let on. Oh, and something else. We captured one of their snipers."

Von Stenger looked up with interest. "Yes?"

"Not a soldier. A woman. French, by the way. The defiant sort of bitch you might expect. She made no secret of the fact that she was fighting with the American snipers. I am going to question her again in the morning and then have her shot, if I can remember it, ha, ha."

"Do you mind if I ask her a few questions?"

"Go right ahead."

At that, Friel roared off to manage one of the countless tasks facing a commander. He seemed to be everywhere at once, telling a limping soldier to get off his feet for a while and change his socks, even pausing to help push a stuck vehicle out of the mud. His men loved him for it. Some in the Kampfgruppe had been with him since Russia, and they would follow him to hell and back if it came to it.

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Gratefully, Von Stenger climbed into the truck. Darkness would not be bringing the German advance to a halt. Friel was determined to cross the Meuse River and make a race along the better roads that led to the strategically important city of Antwerp, no matter what. The column crept onward through the cold, frozen night.

A medic sent by Friel cleaned and bandaged his wound. By then, Von Stenger had opened the bordeaux and was a little drunk. He ate some cheese and bread with the wine. For some reason, it made him think of Goethe: "If you've never eaten while crying you don't know what life tastes like."

The medic interrupted his thoughts by asking, "How far did you say you walked on this?"

"As far as I had to."

The medic shook his head in disbelief. "I will need to stitch these wounds."

"Do your worst."

First, the medic washed out the wounds, making them bleed anew. Von Stenger drank more wine. The medic worked deftly, pulling the edges of each gash

together, then stitching them closed. He finished with a liberal dose of sulfa powder.

"You must keep off your feet for a while."

"Thank you for that advice, *Herr Doktor*. Perhaps you can write the enemy a note to that effect so that they go easy on me. Would you like some wine?"

"I am not a doctor, Herr Hauptmann. Just a medic."

"And I am not a sommelier, but I can pour you a glass."

The medic had to settle for a tin cup. He gulped it down and smacked his lips. "Thank you, Herr Hauptmann. I must go. Believe it or not, there are men with much worse wounds."

Von Stenger sighed. "I am sure there are. Take some of this bread with you. I cannot eat it all."

The medic left the flap open at the back of the truck. Though it caused him some pain, he climbed down and went in search of the captured sniper. He might not have bothered, except for the fact that Friel had described her as French. Something about that nagged at him. What was a French sniper—and a woman, at that—doing out here in the Ardennes? He took the bottle of wine along. If nothing else, he could offer her a drink.

One of Friel's men pointed him in the right direction. He found her in the back of another truck. Nobody bothered to guard her, because her hands were tied together. No sooner had Von Stenger levered himself over the tailgate than the truck lurched forward. She was trying without much success to stay upright on a bench in the back.

He sat on the floor of the truck near the tailgate, and lit a cigarette. He was surprised when the woman gasped as the flame from the match illuminated his face. "So, you are a sniper," he said in French.

"And so are you," she said. "You are Das Gespenst."

He was somewhat taken aback. "How do you know me?"

"We met once before. Near a little town called Bienville not long after the Allied invasion."

Von Stenger flicked on a flashlight to study her face more closely. "Now I recognize you. I believe we shared a meal at that chateau. What I wouldn't give for that fireplace now, eh?"

"You shot me in that field at Bienville. I was in a rowboat."

"And yet here you are. My aim must have been off that day."

"How I hated you," she said. "I was in that hospital for months."

"If the bullet had gone an inch in another direction, perhaps I could have spared you that trouble."

How could he make light of what his bullet had done to her? She lashed out at him with the only thing she had: "The American sniper who was in the field that day is here now, in the Ardennes, and he is looking for you."

"Yes, I know. I almost got him today."

"But he got away?" she asked, all too quickly.

"Yes, he did. That's more than I can say for you," Von Stenger said. He held up the bottle of wine. "Where are my manners. Would you care for a drink?"

She shook her head and forced a smile. "Not if you don't have a glass. It is unladylike."

Von Stenger shrugged and took a swig from the bottle. "The Obersturmbannführer is going to have you shot in the morning. He may interrogate you first. Have you ever been interrogated by the SS? You may find it, how shall we say... unpleasant."

"I have nothing to tell him that I haven't already said, and nothing more to say to you."

"I am sure that you do, but I think I have heard enough." They sat for a while quietly in the back of the bouncing truck. "Hold out your hands."

"What?"

"Do it!"

She extended her hands, which were tightly tied together at the wrists with rough cord. Von Stenger took out a folding knife, opened the blade, and sawed through her bindings.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"Tell your friend the hillbilly sniper that I will see him later, and that this time, I will finish him off. I want him to have something to think about until we meet for the last time. Now listen carefully. Get into the woods and let the column go past. There is an American unit following in our rear. Make sure you put your hands up high when they come along so that they don't shoot you. Now go!"

Without so much as a word of thanks, the woman slipped out of the truck and was gone, far more agilely than he had entered. She reminded him of a wild animal set free.

Von Stenger looked up at the sky. He could see stars for the first time in many nights. The clear sky cheered him, but only briefly. For it meant that the Allied planes could fly. The Luftwaffe itself had disappeared from the skies, so there was no hope for cover.

His leg throbbed, but he chose to ignore it. He hoped to have the opportunity to pay back this hillbilly sniper for the pain he had caused him. If the woman did survive and find the hillbilly sniper, she could give him that message.

He smoked a cigarette, finished the wine, and closed his eyes. The war would go on tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. But for how much longer, it was hard to say, especially if Operation Watch on the Rhine faltered.

The thought of the war ending made Von Stenger wistful. If he survived this end game, what would he do? Manage a factory somewhere? Teach Goethe to university students? There were whispers that some Nazis with the money to do so were leaving for Argentina or smuggling their families there. It was a better alternative than living in a defeated Germany. Something to think about.

He climbed out and returned to the vehicle where the medic had attended to him. Rocked by the lurching truck, Von Stenger slept.

Chapter 21

Just as Von Stenger had told her, the Americans came along in the wake of the German column. It was getting close to midnight when she stepped out into the road with her hands up. The American sentries were easier to convince than the

German ones had been. Nobody clubbed her over the head. A few minutes later, she was reunited with the snipers.

Cole surprised her by giving her a hug that crushed the breath out of her. "Goddamnit, Jolie. We heard you were captured."

"I got away," she said, then looked around. "Where is leetel Hank? Is he all right?"

"I'm right here," the Kid said. "Those Krauts never saw me. You saved my life."

Jolie grabbed Mulholland's elbow. "You have to stop now. The Germans are right in front of us. If these men keep going, they are going to run right into German tanks."

Mulholland called over the major. When he heard how close they were to the rear of the German column, the American commander called for them to stop for the night in that stretch of desolate forest. The major wanted to press on, but the darkness in the woods was too thick to do more than feel their way along the road. Using headlights was now too much of a risk, and even the noise of the truck engines was dangerous, given that the Germans could be closer than they thought.

Cole returned to the back of the truck in which he had been riding, getting what rest he could, and the other snipers joined him, making their camp in the back. Vaccaro draped some canvas half shelters across the opening in the back to keep out the cold, and he and the Kid camped out there, along with Lieutenant Mulholland. The driver let Jolie have the cab.

"It's not exactly warm, but you'll get a little heat off the engine," he said apologetically, before going off to find shelter elsewhere.

They settled down, looking forward to some much-needed sleep.

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The snipers' rest did not last long thanks to a corporal named Daryl Muckelroy, who was on his way back from sharing another soldier's bottle of captured schnapps in a futile effort to stay warm. In fact, he had spotted the bottle and made a beeline for it, then managed to drink much of the schnapps. If it had been Muckelroy's bottle, he wouldn't have shared.

He passed by the truck and noticed Jolie sleeping inside. He recognized her right away as the French woman who had taken up with the snipers. He recalled that she had been none too friendly. One glimpse of her civilian clothes filled him with anger. Why should he be the one who had to sleep on the snowy ground tonight? He stopped and pounded on the door of the truck.

"No civilians!" he shouted. "If I'm going to be over here fighting for your lousy country, the least you can do is let me sleep in the cab."

His anger fueled by the schnapps, he pulled open the door and made the mistake of grabbing Jolie by the foot and trying to drag her out, which earned him a kick in the face.

"You little French bitch! Why don't you give me something to stay warm! *Foutre, baby, foutre avec moi!*"

The scuffle that followed brought Vaccaro, the Kid, and Lieutenant Mulholland crawling out from the back of the truck, where they had already been asleep. Cole climbed down stiffly from the truck, following the rest.

The corporal was outnumbered, but he wasn't ready to give up. "She ought to sleep in the goddamned mud and snow if she's not going to be friendly, if you know what I mean."

"Give it a rest, Corporal," Lieutenant Mulholland said wearily. It wasn't the first time an American GI had gotten angry about the French not being more accommodating.

He saw Cole approaching and made sure he put himself between the soldier and Cole, who was carrying his huge hunting knife. He knew all too well that Cole had a short fuse and violent tendencies. Mulholland confronted the corporal. "She's killed a lot more Germans than you, believe me."

"It's not like I haven't made these French bitches pay up before, whether they wanted to or not. What is she to you, anyway? Just give me ten minutes with her and—"

"What's your name, soldier?" Mulholland demanded.

The corporal hesitated. "Muckelroy."

"That's Muckelroy, sir," Vaccaro said, standing shoulder to shoulder with the lieutenant.

"Get lost, Corporal Muckelroy, and I'll pretend I didn't hear what you just said," Mulholland said. "That's an order." He held the flashlight so that it lit up his rank, making it clear to this asshole that he was talking to an officer.

Looking around, the corporal seemed to realize that he was outnumbered and outranked. His eyes lingered on the flashing blade in Cole's hand. "Goddamn snipers. Nobody likes you sneaky bastards," he muttered, and strode off.

Vaccaro had also managed to put himself between Cole and the soldier. When the corporal had gone, he turned to Cole. "Jesus Christ, put that knife away. It's as big as a sword. I was worried you were gonna cut his head off."

"It ain't his head that I'd cut off," Cole said. "But I'm too tired to kill him right now. I reckon that down the road we might just need us a cull for the herd."

"That must be some kind of hillbilly saying. You're gonna have to translate that to normal American for me."

"It means we got us something to keep the wolf happy when he comes calling."

The others returned to the back of the truck, but Cole turned to Jolie. "Are you going to be all right up here?"

"I am not worried about that GI," she said. "*Je m'en fou*. But I have to tell you, it is getting cold in this truck."

"Move on over, then."

Cole slid into the truck. From the cold, and having been half asleep, he realized his body was stiffer than wet leather boots left too close to the fire. His muscles ached. Wading into the creek earlier that day—had all that really taken place in just one day?—had left his toes stinging with chilblains—the stage just before frostbite that left deep, painful bruises under the skin, like fruit that had frozen and thawed. His toes felt as if they had burrs between them.

His shoulder ached from the graze wound. It was a bone-deep ache—he had been lucky in that the bullet had struck a glancing blow and had not caused too much damage, but your body did not absorb all those foot-pounds of energy without penalty.

He reminded himself that it could have been much worse. Dead worse.

"I'm glad you're back," he said. "When they told me you were captured—well, it didn't sound good. I told them you would figure something out. How did you manage to get away, anyhow?"

She quickly debated whether or not to tell him, wondering how he would take it. Her mind made up, she said: "Das Gespenst let me go."

"Jesus, Jolie. You actually saw that son of a bitch?"

"He came to see me, then cut the rope around my wrists."

"It ain't that I'm not happy to see you—but why the hell did he let you go?"

"He had a message for you. He said that he will see you again."

"I just hope I'm the last thing that ol' Ghost Sniper sees." Cole paused. "How did he look to you?"

"Like he was in pain."

Cole grinned. "I have to say, that's good to hear. I reckon I owe him one, though, for letting you go."

Jolie shook her head. "He is a cruel man. You can see it in his eyes. He did not let me go out of kindness, but only to taunt you. How many has he killed? Hundreds? No, if you face him again, you must end this for good."

"I hope I get another chance at him." Cole shifted, trying to get comfortable on the truck seat.

Jolie seemed to sense his aches and pains. "Come here," she said—as if they could possibly be any closer, huddled together for warmth across the seat of a Chrysler truck. They had a blanket and a canvas shelter half spread over them to keep off the cold. "No more frostbite for you today."

But he was wrong about getting closer. Jolie's hands slid under his shirt, warm and gentle, massaging. She pushed his own hands away when he reciprocated. "Ouch! Too rough. Your skin is like leather. How are your lips?"

He kissed her more roughly than he intended, his lips moving down her throat, to her breasts. Jolie's hands moved down and undid his belt buckle.

Neither of them wanted to shed their clothes. It was too cold, and they were too tired. She tugged down her pants to her thighs, and Cole slid his hands over the soft, perfectly shaped ass. She could just spread her legs wide enough for him to slip inside. There was so much heat coming off her skin that Cole thought he might melt right into her. She clenched him inside her. "You are trapped," she said. "What do you call that? A honey trap?"

Cole thrust deep into her, but gently and slowly, taking his time. He was too worn out for anything else.

Jolie gave a moan, and Cole moved his hand up to her mouth. She bit down on the edge of his hand. Both of them aware that the others were just on the other side of the thin wall of metal and canvas.

When they had finished, Jolie seemed to melt into him.

"*Mon dieu*," she said, and sighed contentedly. "How is your frostbite now?"

Cole grinned at her in the frozen darkness. He felt his exposed ears and cheeks prickle in the cold, while under the blankets, belly to belly, their skin was covered with a sheen of sweat. "Honey, I hate to tell you this, but it wasn't my pecker that was frostbit."

"Good thing," she said, and reached for him again.

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The American column moved out as soon as it was light enough to see the road. For a change, the snow and rain had stopped. It was still cold, but the low clouds overhead began to lift just after daybreak. They were so used to sleeping on the ground that being in the truck made them uneasy.

It didn't help that the Kid had woken them up, screaming from a nightmare. Considering that he had seen his buddies murdered by the SS, who could blame him? They all slept fitfully after that.

Vaccaro surveyed the gray dawn. "It ain't exactly summer sunshine, but I'll take it," he said.

"The Germans won't like it because it will mean our planes can fly," Lieutenant Mulholland said. "The weather has been in their favor so far for every minute of this attack. It's almost as if God loved Hitler more than us."

"If there is a God, he's a cruel bastard," Cole said. Nobody bothered to argue with that statement. "What's our plan, Lieutenant?"

"To go after the Germans. We'll tag along with these guys. With any luck, we'll catch up to Kampfgruppe Friel today."

"You mean if we're lucky, our fly boys will knock out their panzers before we catch up to them," Vaccaro said.

The snipers rode in the back of the truck. They could deploy when the time came. For now, they could bide their time and save their legs.

The Kid handed Cole the scoped Springfield rifle he carried. "You need this more than I do," he said.

Cole accepted it gravely. "McNulty's?"

He nodded.

Corporal Muckelroy trudged past. When he saw the snipers, he stopped. "It's our pleasure to drive you around," he said, then casually leaned over and spat. "Wouldn't want you sniper types to get your boots muddy."

As he walked off, Vaccaro said, "Are we going to let him get away with that? Maybe I can accidentally shoot him."

"If you shoot every dumbass in the Army, there won't be nobody left to fight the Germans," Cole said. "He'll get his when the time comes, don't you worry."

The column was soon rolling. Cole spread a blanket on the bed of the truck and used the time to field strip and clean the Springfield rifle. It wasn't long before they could hear sporadic firing in the distance. The Americans were not the only ones on the move.

Chapter 22

"Nothing can stop us now." Friel took his eyes off the map and looked at the road leading toward the bridge at Trois Ponts. "Today, we begin to turn the tide of the war."

Von Stenger nodded, wishing he shared in Friel's enthusiasm. What he said was: "You have done well, Herr Obersturmbannführer."

This morning, Von Stenger was along for the ride as the Kampfgruppe made its final push toward the Meuse River. Food and a few hours of rest had worked to

repair his injuries. He put weight on his leg to test it. Pain shot through him, but his leg was functional, if stiff from the stitches.

"Did you hear that our captured sniper escaped?" Friel asked. "I understand that you talked to her last night."

Von Stenger tensed. Was Friel testing him in some way? Did Friel suspect that he had helped her escape?

He shrugged as he met Friel's eyes. "All she did was curse at me and spit. She was trussed up like a hog when I left her. Sneaking French bitch," Von Stenger said.

Friel laughed. "Since I can't shoot her, I should shoot her guards. But I fear that I will need every man before the day is through."

Von Stenger followed Friel's glance toward the sky. The long stretch of overcast weather was beginning to clear. For a change, no snow or rain fell. He would have welcomed the change if it hadn't meant that the sky could soon be raining bombs.

As the clouds lifted, the Allied planes would soon be on the prowl. There would be few Luftwaffe fighters to give them cover. It would be like a shooting gallery.

Since the start of Operation Watch on Rhine, Friel had one objective, and that was to get across the Meuse River at any cost. The Meuse was the unofficial boundary of the Ardennes. Once he was across, the stopper would be out of the bottle. With General Patton and his Third Army still to the south, there would be nothing to stop his Kampfgruppe from rushing headlong back into the plains of Belgium and even into France. If enough Germans managed to break out of the Ardennes, it would cost the Allies dearly and perhaps even change the dynamic of the war.

Hitler had chosen the Ardennes as his breakout point through the encircling Allied forces because the region seemed an unlikely choice. The rugged hills and terrain made it difficult country for moving troops. As a result, the Americans had barely defended it. Many of the troops stationed in the Ardennes were veteran units due a good rest, or green units who needed time in the field.

While in many ways the choice of the Ardennes was brilliant, the rugged nature of the region also worked against the Germans. Massive tanks had to follow each other single file down the narrow country lanes, forcing the Kampfgruppe to spread out over many miles. Given enough time, the Germans could still break out. However, the clearing sky meant the clock was ticking.

Over coffee that morning, Friel had explained to Von Stenger that the Ardennes was not like Russia, where the flat plains had enabled his armored column to move swiftly as it captured village after village, leaving flames and ashes in their wake. That was why they had nicknamed themselves The Blowtorch Brigade, much to Hitler's delight.

"A more apt name for us now might be The Turtle Brigade," he mused.

Friel ordered his driver to get him to the front of the column. With as much speed as possible, the driver maneuvered between trucks and massive tanks, all of them creeping along the muddy road.

The car bounced wildly over the ruts, doing Von Stenger's head no favors. He had enjoyed a bit too much wine last night, but Friel had roused him early to ride along with him. The jarring motion made his headache throb. Thick diesel fumes

permeated the air itself, making his stomach churn. But the car ride beat walking. His injured leg was stiff as a result of the hillbilly sniper's trap.

They soon ground to a halt behind a stalled panzer. Friel cursed in frustration.

"Faster!" he shouted at his harried driver.

He took out his map and attempted to read it. The town at the crossing was called Trois Ponts. The river loomed ahead like a finish line. They had to get across.

"Do you want me to keep going, sir?" the driver asked as they passed the lead tank.

"Go, and do not stop until we are back in France."

Friel stood, wind slapping at his reddened face, and waved at the lead tank to keep up. The panzer had been lagging behind, trying not to outpace the rest of the column, but what Friel needed now was speed.

"Almost thirty kilometers per hour, sir," the driver said.

"Good, good." Friel said. "You are doing a fine job, Paulsen."

"Thank you, sir."

It was true that Friel's men would follow him anywhere because he led by example. Looking up at him now, standing in the vehicle like a captain at the prow of a ship, Von Stenger thought that Friel certainly looked the part of conquering hero.

Around a bend in the road, the village came into view. There was a bridge in town that would get them across the river. Having this goal in view was a sensation like a starving man getting sight of a plate of sausages. They had done it!

"Ha, ha! You see, Kurt, that is our key to victory. And not an American anywhere. We have caught them napping again."

Von Stenger had to smile back. Friel's enthusiasm was infectious. "I must say that this village is a beautiful sight."

Friel waved the tanks forward.

Not so much as a cat or dog moved in the streets—the villagers had long since fled at the sound of the approaching tanks.

"Go! Go!" Friel urged his driver, and the car raced into the deserted streets. Von Stenger kept his rifle ready, just in case any partisans decided that a German officer made a good target. They turned a corner, almost on two wheels, and raced down the road toward the river.

Von Stenger saw the rubble before he saw the water. Two stone piers rose up out of the river.

The bridge was gone, along with their chances of crossing at this place.

It was hard to know who had destroyed the bridge. It could have been American engineers, Allied planes, or possibly French resistance fighters—the vicious Maquis. In the end, it did not matter how the stone bridge across the river had been destroyed, but only that it was gone.

Friel stared at the ruins for a full minute. Von Stenger attempted to read some emotion on the Obersturmbannführer's face, but the young tank commander seemed lost in thought.

"Breger!" Friel finally called. "Pass the orders to burn the village. We will show them what happens when they oppose German troops. When the cowards return, there will be nothing left."

Under Breger's direction, men soon filled the streets, splashing gasoline and setting the village on fire. Von Stenger watched with a sickened feeling. The smell of the greasy flames did not sit well on his queasy stomach.

Something exploded and blew skyward to form a mushroom-shaped cloud.

Satisfied, Friel turned back to his map.

So close a moment ago, the road to Antwerp and victory now seemed as far away at the surface of the moon.

"What are you going to do?"

"There is still a chance that the bridge near Habiemont may be intact." Friel waved his map. He still clung to his precious *rollbahn*. "It is only a few miles away. With luck, we can cross there."

That's when they heard an angry whine in the clouds. Fighter planes, coming fast.

Please let them be Luftwaffe, Von Stenger thought.

But as the planes broke from the cloud cover, coming in low, they opened fire on the German column below.

Chapter 23

"Do you see that smoke?" Jolie asked.

"Whatever it is, it's a helluva big fire," the Kid said.

"Kid, you've been in the Army too long. You're starting to swear. What would your mama say?" Vaccaro leaned out of the back of the truck, trying to see up the road. "We'll, I've got some good news, and some bad news. The good news is that we're gonna find out what's burning because we are heading right toward that big plume of smoke rising up into the sky."

"What's the bad news?" the Kid wanted to know.

"The bad news is that we're gonna find out what's burning because we are heading right toward it," Vaccaro said. "My guess is that where there's smoke, there's Germans."

"Everybody hang tight," Lieutenant Mulholland said. "They'll let us know when they need us."

The snipers did not have to wait long. Not more than twenty minutes passed before the truck came to a halt. Out the back of the truck, they saw a couple of soldiers running back the way the column had just traveled.

Vaccaro yelled out to one of them. "Buddy, what's the rush?"

"Panzers coming down the road right toward us!"

"Everybody out," said the lieutenant. "It's time to go to work."

The snipers jumped out of the truck. All around them, the American column was in disarray. There had been so much focus on catching up with the Germans that no one was really prepared for the Germans coming back at them. The

Americans couldn't know it, but with the bridge at Trois Ponts gone, the German column had no choice but to backtrack and find a different river crossing.

If it came to a fight, it would be one sided. The Americans had a single tank destroyer, but nothing else heavier than a couple of machine guns mounted on Jeeps. A tank would knock through them like a bowling ball through a stand of ten pins.

"Damn, but I wish we had a bazooka," Vaccaro said. "At least then we'd have a chance against tanks. Remember that crazy English bastard who knocked out a tank with a bazooka back in Normandy?"

"You got a can opener, don't you?" Cole asked. "That might work on one of them panzers, if you had enough time. Like a hundred years."

"Very funny, Cole. I hope you can still make cracks when the Germans line us up and shoot us like those poor bastards at Malmedy."

Cole gave him a cold grin. "Ain't happened yet."

Mulholland gave orders: "Listen up, we're going to deploy on the south side of this road. We'll get back in those trees." The lieutenant waved to where the edge of the forest began maybe a hundred yards from the road. "Once the Germans get here, we can put down some suppressing fire."

"With four rifles?" Vaccaro asked. "Lieutenant, these are tanks we're talking about here."

The lieutenant and Cole said simultaneously: "Shut up, Vaccaro."

They hurried into the trees. Jolie went with them, carrying a pair of binoculars so that she could act as a spotter.

They didn't have to wait long before the first panzers came into view down the road. Against the white winter landscape, the tanks stood out like leviathans. The Germans were still half a mile away, well out of range. No soldiers on foot were visible, but they could see a German looking out from the open hatch of the lead panzer.

"Look at those things," Vaccaro muttered. "King Tigers. Big as a goddamn Tyrannosaurus rex."

"What in the hell is that?" Cole asked.

Vaccaro looked at him. "Cole, I keep forgetting that you're from East Peckerwood. It's a dinosaur, Cole. A Tyrannosaurus rex was the King Tiger tank of dinosaurs."

"If you're so goddamn smart, city boy, tell me where them dinosaurs are now."

"How many dinosaurs have you seen? They're extinct, Cole."

"My point exactly."

Cole put his Springfield across a fallen log. Through the scope, the German standing in the hatch of the lead panzer sprang closer to life. He wore a helmet, and goggles. Cole put the crosshairs on a point slightly above and to the left of the German, to allow for trajectory and the light breeze this morning that had cleared off the low-hanging clouds. Just below the German in the open hatch was the tank's gun, pointed up the road at the American column. The dark maw of the tank's muzzle looked massive.

"If you miss and he shoots back, his gun is a lot bigger," Vaccaro said.

"Shut up, Vaccaro," Jolie whispered. "Cole is trying to shoot."

Cole was only dimly aware that either of them had spoken. He had already slipped into his shooter's trance. Nothing existed beyond the target and his finger on the trigger. He let out a breath. Held the crosshairs on that point in space that felt right. It was not something that he could measure or even explain—it was simply where the bullet needed to be.

Gently, gently, he took up tension in the trigger. When the rifle fired, the Springfield pounding into his shoulder, it actually surprised him.

The German tank commander crumpled and slid down into the tank like a dead gopher.

Cole worked the bolt. "T rex my ass."

The bullet had taken out the tank commander, but it had not stopped the tank. Like an angry bull, but one made of steel and spewing diesel fumes, it kept coming. The red flag this bull saw, however, was not the snipers hidden in the woods but the American column on the road before it. The Americans deployed across the road, but they were no match for the panzer. A machine gun opened up on the German tank, but the stream of bullets bounced harmlessly off the steel hide. Then the tank did come to a stop. The main gun elevated slightly, and then moved a little to the left.

All the while, more tanks were coming up the road behind the first panzer. They were turning down a side road, though—a narrow track that roughly paralleled the river. The Germans were not interested in returning down the road they had already traveled. The single King Tiger had been assigned to pin down the Americans while the other tanks in the column took the side road. The tank's barrel was pointed right down the road.

"Cole?" Vaccaro asked.

Again, Cole ignored him. He was hunched behind the scope, studying every inch of the armored behemoth. Finally, he found what he was looking for—a tiny glass lens no more than two inches high and six inches wide, just where the armor sloped down. This was the tank driver's periscope. At this range, hitting that periscope would be like hitting the moon.

Dimly, Cole was aware of the whirring noise the tank turret made as it took aim, and the nervous shouts of the soldiers on the road who were being targeted.

Cole put his crosshairs on the tank and fired.

The King Tiger seemed to pause. Cole's bullet had found its mark, smashing the periscope and effectively blinding the tank. Even if he had not hit anyone, the bullet would have rattled the crew inside.

"I'll be damned," Vaccaro muttered.

One rifle bullet was not enough to stop a tank. The tank was only temporarily blinded. After a pause, the gun in its turret made some final adjustments.

But Cole had bought the Americans time. They managed to spread out. When the tank fired, it would no longer have a concentrated target. Far behind the panzer assigned to pin down the American column, a row of tanks and trucks turned down the other road as steadily as ants.

Then came the whine of aircraft engines. Coming fast. The snipers looked at the sky. Two planes flew nearly wing tip to wing tip, at no more than two hundred feet elevation, moving at astonishing speed through the leaden sky.

"I hope to God those aren't Luftwaffe planes," Vaccaro said.

It took just seconds to answer that question. They saw the familiar American star on the wings. These were P-47 Thunderbolts, moving at more than four hundred miles per hour. The planes dipped even lower and released a pair of bombs that sailed down as expertly as a touchdown pass toward the German tank.

The snipers burrowed themselves as far under the fallen log as they could and covered their ears.

The tank vanished in a burst of smoke and debris. The ground shook and the blast seemed to suck the oxygen from the air. The tank, which until an instant before had been about to dole out death and destruction to the Americans, now burned like a July Fourth bonfire.

In perfect precision, the planes circled back and swept low toward the German column. Though caught by surprise, the Germans quickly sprang into action. Lines of white-hot tracers stitched searing patterns against the sky as several heavy machine guns opened up on the planes. But these were not clay pigeons—the planes moved too fast for the reflexes of the gunners. The planes were soon out of range, but not before they had dropped more bombs, leaving another flaming tank and a burning truck in their wake.

The planes looped around and returned again, but this time they simply strafed the Germans on the road. The big .50 caliber bullets chewed up anything that wasn't armored, leaving behind more wreckage. The German gunners were better prepared, leading the planes like a duck hunter leads his quarry, so that the planes flew right into a stream of machine gun fire reaching toward the sky. Smoke trailed from one of the planes as the Thunderbolts raced away. This time, they did not reappear.

The German column quickly regrouped. While the aerial attack had wreaked havoc, these soldiers were veterans of many such attacks. Those who could get back to business, and the Kampfgruppe rolled on.

"Looks like they forgot about us," the Kid said.

"Don't be so sure," Vaccaro replied.

The Germans were not about to leave their flank unprotected from the soldiers on the road. A second panzer rolled into position beside the burning hulk. It wasted no time pumping a shell into the nearest American truck on the road. The truck blew apart, scattering fenders, doors and hood like steel confetti. The Americans on the road scattered, but the snipers were well hidden.

"What now, Lieutenant?" Vaccaro asked. "I don't think we can do much good here without a bazooka."

Mulholland patted the front pocket of his coat, where he kept a map. "The Germans must be headed toward Habiemont. There's another bridge near that town where they'll try to cross the river. We can try to beat them there."

"How, sir? They're thick as hookers in Times Square on that road."

"Who said anything about taking the road?" Mulholland said. "We're going cross country."

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Some things were easier said than done. Cutting cross country through snow-covered fields on a sprawling battlefield was one of them. The snipers stared out at the world of white before them.

Through that snow, every mile on the way to the bridge at Habiemont would be as exhausting as running a marathon.

“I got an idea,” Cole said.

He drew his knife and headed toward a stand of saplings at the field’s edge. With two swift motions, he cut down two of the saplings. Taking one, he bent it around until it was in an oval shape, then tied the two ends together with a piece of half-inch rope. He then wove the rope back and forth in a rough web pattern, like a drunken spider might make. He repeated the process on the other sapling. Within five minutes, he had the makeshift snowshoes strapped to his boots.

With Cole’s help, the others followed suit. “Keep this up, Cole, and you’re going to make Eagle Scout one of these days,” Vaccaro said.

The snowshoes would not have held up for an Arctic expedition, but they were enough to get them to the bridge—which they needed to do, fast.

“Cole, do you have any other tricks we should know about?” the lieutenant asked, already breathing hard. With the snow shoes they didn’t sink as far into the drifts, but it was still a workout to move quickly.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Cole said. “It’s a little something I call running. It gets you there faster.”

The snipers broke into a trot. Off to their left, they could see the German column far in the distance. Headed to the same place. The race was on.

They heard more planes coming. “Those planes will slow them down and buy us some time,” the lieutenant said. “Like Cole said, let’s hoof it.”

Chapter 24

Von Stenger stared in horror and wonder as the American planes decimated the column. A P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bomber carried two 500-pound bombs. For the Germans on the receiving end, it was a devastating arsenal. The thousands of pounds of high explosive turned once-fearsome tanks into burning hulks.

The sight was both terrifying and mesmerizing. Fortunately, he and Friel were too far away to be in any real danger from the Allied bombs.

That changed when the planes returned from their bombing run to strafe the narrow road. Each American plane was equipped with wing-mounted .50 caliber machine guns. Like dozens of others, Von Stenger scrambled for shelter as the heavy slugs churned up clods of frozen mud and shredded whatever vehicles were in the line of fire.

Considering that the planes traveled at high speed, the strafing was over in an instant. The planes circled back to hit the column again, but this time the Germans were prepared. Behind a MG-42 mounted on a vehicle, he could see Sgt. Breger was one of those soldiers unleashing twelve hundred rounds per minute at the planes, which were well within range. Without doubt, the planes took fire, because they did not return.

Once the planes were gone, Von Stenger crawled out from the roadside ditch and was amazed to see Friel still standing in the back of the Volkswagen, unscathed, even though the strafing had punched holes in the hood of the vehicle.

The bastard had nerves of iron.

"That was just two planes," Friel said ruefully as Von Stenger climbed somewhat sheepishly back into the vehicle. "They will return, and perhaps in greater force. Fortunately for us, their base in Saint-Dizier is more than one hundred twenty kilometers distant. Even if those were scouts, that buys us some time."

"It will take hours for the entire Kampfgruppe to get there on these roads."

"Do you have an alternative to suggest, Kurt?" the Obersturmbannführer snapped at him.

"No, Herr Obersturmbannführer."

"I wish you did." The SS officer folded his map and stowed it in a pocket of his coat. "Keep that rifle of yours handy. Perhaps you can shoot down an Allied plane or two."

The Kampfgruppe continued along the road, its progress slowed by the burning or disabled vehicles in its path. Panzers now doubled as bulldozers, pushing the wreckage off the roads. Behind them, a single tank was engaged with a small American unit that had scattered with the first shot from its 88 mm cannon.

With the weather clearing, Von Stenger knew well that they were in a race against time. The return of the Americans to the skies meant real trouble for them. It was hard to ignore the fact that the Kampfgruppe was spread out now over many kilometers, making concerted movement difficult and communication challenging.

They had to get to that bridge at Habiemont.

"Come with me, Kurt." Friel climbed aboard a tank. A single tank could race ahead and hold the bridge. It was their best hope. He ordered Breger to follow in a half track equipped with a machine gun.

At speed, a Tiger II tank could move at twenty-four miles per hour. The road ahead was narrow but frozen hard, not broken up yet by the passage of other vehicles. They moved close to top speed, the countryside of snow-covered fields and rolling hills passing in a satisfying blur. If there were civilians, they had the good sense not to show themselves. Friel rode with his head out of the hatch, keeping one eye on the skies and the other on the road ahead. The tank crew tried to ignore the falling fuel gauge as the roaring engine drank greedily.

Von Stenger rode on top of the tank, feeling very exposed. He would have preferred to be on the ground, but he could not have kept up with the mechanized treads of the tank.

From time to time, Friel leaned down and shouted into the tank below, "Faster! You can do better than that! The road ahead is clear. Full throttle!"

Despite the speed of the tanks, it took them an hour to reach Habiemont. Finally, the village came into view. It looked like something out of a storybook with the little houses all covered in snow. The bridge came into sight.

The bridge was narrow, so the massive tanks would need to cross one at a time.

Movement ahead caught Von Stenger's eye. He spotted a knot of soldiers in olive drab struggling up the far bank of the river. They appeared lightly armed, as if they were not concerned about defending the bridge. What had they been up to?

With a sinking feeling, he realized that one of the men held a large spool of wire in his hands as he scrambled up the bank. Another man held a detonating plunger.

Von Stenger lifted his rifle and shouted a warning. "Friel, they are going to blow the bridge!"

Their driver had already stopped so that Friel could direct the panzers, so Von Stenger stood and balanced the rifle across the tank turret. He put the crosshairs on the American engineer holding the spool of wire and squeezed the trigger. It was not too difficult a shot—no more than 300 meters. The man crumpled and the spool of wire went bouncing away. For a moment it looked as if it might roll right into the river. But the wire got caught on something and another man slid down after it. Von Stenger worked the bolt of his rifle.

Friel was shouting, ordering the tank to fire on the engineers while urging Breger forward with the half track so that he could open devastating fire with the machine gun.

Von Stenger could aim faster than a panzer and with more precision than the machine gunner. No sooner had the next engineer picked up the spool, than Von Stenger shot him. Once again, the spool bounced away.

The next man dived on top of it like an American football player. He almost hated to shoot such a brave fool. He lined up the crosshairs on the soldier, let out his breath—

A split second later, the tank lurched beneath him as the cannon fired. The sound was deafening, making the powerful rifle seem like a pop gun as it went off, the bullet going far astray. Von Stenger cursed; his ears rang and his eardrums hurt as if a nail had been driven through them.

He ignored the pain. No time for that.

A bullet pinged off the top of the tank. *Scheiss!* Von Stenger swiveled around. The shot had come from behind them. Another bullet cracked past. He could not see anyone behind them, but there were clearly snipers back there.

"Kurt, get down!" he yelled. "You are drawing sniper fire. Get inside the tank!"

Another bullet *karoomed* off the steel skin of the tank. Friel wasn't so lucky this time, because a fragment of the bullet grazed his face. He tumbled inside the tank, where operations came to a standstill as the crew hurried to help their injured commander.

Cursing, Von Stenger jumped down from the tank. Now fully exposed to sniper fire, he ran to one side of the road. A bullet kicked up ice and snow inches from him. Stabs of pain radiated from his wounded leg, but he ignored that. He got free of the road and sprawled in the snow, hoping a prone position would keep the rifle steady.

For now, he chose to ignore the snipers aggravating them. All that mattered was securing the bridge.

Locked under the rifle, his elbows were effective as a bipod. He put his eye to the scope in time to see the drab-uniformed Americans scurrying like rats to attach the wire to the detonator.

The pause in the firing from the Germans as they reacted to the sniper attack was all the time that the American engineers needed. They scrambled to lay wires and set charges.

Von Stenger took aim. He was just about to fire when from the corner of his eye he saw the bulk of a King Tiger tank approaching as it raced toward the bridge. Cursing, he rolled out of the way to keep from being crushed. Several tons of steel now blocked his line of fire.

He ran to a new position and fired, the bullet going wide, kicking up mud a foot or so away from the man working at the detonator.

Von Stenger worked the bolt, put the crosshairs on the man, forced himself to let out a breath and take better aim.

The American soldier seemed to look right at him defiantly. Von Stenger shot the man through the heart, but his dying action was to slump across the detonator.

Multiple explosions flashed beneath the bridge.

The panzer was preparing to cross the bridge when the structure blew sky high. Chunks of stone, mortar and wood shot upwards, propelled by a geyser of ice and water.

The panzer fired with telling accuracy, the arc of its tracer aimed as accurately as Von Stenger's bullet, but with much more telling impact. The high explosive round detonated, leaving a crater where the American engineers had been a moment before. They had paid for the bridge with their lives.

But for Kampfgruppe Friel, it was too late. Their route back into France had vanished.

Nearby, Friel popped back out of the tank long enough to scream curses at the remnants of the bridge that splashed down into the icy river. He shook his fist at the wreckage, but it was a futile gesture. "Those damned engineers!"

More bullets from the rear. Von Stenger thought he saw a flash of movement. He fired and the shooting stopped.

Friel was still staring at the ruined bridge when a courier approached. The lead elements of the Kampfgruppe, left behind by Friel's lone panzer, were already pouring into town. "Sir, an American force has been sighted to the east. They have Sherman tanks and tank destroyers. It is a sizable force, sir."

Friel nodded. It had only been a matter of time before the Americans managed to regroup. Operation Watch on the Rhine's element of surprise had run its course.

The reality of the situation began to sink in. Kampfgruppe Friel's back was to a river that it could not cross. Retreat toward Germany was now blocked by the enemy.

With no route across the river, Friel turned his forces toward the nearby town of La Gleize, which offered a better defensive position. It would be his rallying point. More of his straggling tanks and support vehicles streamed into La Gleize. Kampfgruppe Friel might be cut off, but it remained a formidable force. True, they were low on fuel. However, they had plenty of ammunition for one last battle.

Surrender to the Americans was not an option. Not after the massacre at Malmedy. At best, they would stand trial in some puppet court for murder. At worst, they would be gunned down where they stood. He would not do that to his men.

Just hours ago, success had seemed within their grasp. But the loss of the bridges had changed all that. Now, the struggle would be for survival.

"We will stand and fight," he said.

Chapter 25

"La Gleize," Lieutenant Mulholland announced. "If we weren't in the middle of a war, this town could be on a goddamn Christmas card."

Even Cole had to agree, although he was hardly in a holiday mood. It was true that the village tucked into the rolling countryside was scenic, with old stone houses festooned with snow. The sight of German panzers and machine gun emplacements marred that picture. Their arrival just in time to harass the lead elements of Kampfgruppe Friel had helped to keep the Germans pinned down on this side of the river.

Cole lit a cigarette. "Ain't goin' to be so pretty once the shootin' starts."

He smoked the cigarette as he studied the layout of the village.

It was Bienville all over again.

At that French village in Normandy, Americans had fought to hold the village against a much larger German force. Strategically, Bienville had been a vital town—nobody was getting anywhere on the roads through Normandy unless they came through Bienville. Cole and the other snipers had been part of that last-stand defense. Thanks to Jolie, they had invited Das Gespenst to what was essentially a duel between the German and Cole.

But Das Gespenst had lived up to his name by tricking them. During the night, he had found a passage into the heart of the village. Safe inside the stone spire of an ancient Norman church, he had picked off the American defenders and then slipped away. Cole had caught up to him, but had paid a steep price for that encounter.

He had hoped that Das Gespsent died that day. By all rights, he should have. Luck had been on the German's side and he had lived to haunt them all over again in the Ardennes.

Now, at La Gleize, it was the Germans making a last stand. The tables had turned—to a point. For starters, La Gleize had no real strategic value—it was simply where the German armored column had run to ground.

Unfortunately, there would be no using Das Gespent's tricks against him by slipping into town undetected. The Germans were already dug into La Gleize. The snipers were on the outside, looking in.

"Lucky for us, we're in the suburbs," Vaccaro pointed out. "Plenty of space to roam around."

Vaccaro's description was apt. A much smaller village, really just a clump of buildings that included a few shops, a scattering of houses, and a church, was located east of La Gleize, just within rifle range. The American forces were centered around this smaller village.

A teenage girl came out of the church. She looked to be seventeen or eighteen, pretty in a country way with cornflower blue eyes and dark hair. She wore a simple kitchen apron, flecked with blood. The interior of the church had been converted to a makeshift hospital, staffed by a few medics and this local villager.

There had been a short, sharp fight as the Germans settled into La Gleize and the leading edge of the American force arrived. Inside the church, the pews were filled with wounded Germans, Americans, and townspeople. Someone had taken a white sheet and painted a red cross on it, then hung that from the church steeple.

"You should not be here," Jolie called out to the girl in French. "Go home. There is going to be a battle here."

"I'm not going anywhere," the girl replied. "This is my village. Some of my neighbors have been hurt. What about you? You are fighting alongside those men."

Jolie shrugged and turned back to loading the rifle she had been given.

"What were you two jabberin' about?" Cole asked.

"I just told her this was not going to be a good place for her. That she should go home."

Cole snorted. "Well, if that ain't the pot calling the kettle black."

"That is just what she said to me."

As the girl spoke, an old man approached her, smiling ear to ear, and brought her what appeared to be a bag of rags. Bandages. The girl took them gratefully.

"Look at her," Vaccaro said. "She's a regular Florence Nightingale, only cuter. Quick, somebody shoot me in the foot."

"Oh, I reckon I might shoot you, but not in the foot."

"Ha, ha. Hey, Cole, ever hear of a redneck virgin? That's a girl who can outrun her brother."

"Vaccaro, did you want me to shoot you now?"

"Wait a little and you might save yourself a bullet. It's gonna get ugly around here any minute now."

• • • • •

As a saboteur behind enemy lines, Klein's tactic of falling in with an American unit had worked so well in destroying that fuel depot that he repeated it. However, it soon became apparent that this unit was not as disorganized as the one he had mixed with yesterday. He realized that most of these Amis knew one another, making Klein the odd man out. He had to slip away as soon as possible to avoid discovery.

The captain called a halt, and Klein welcomed a few minutes of rest. He put his rifle down against a tree and sat on a tree stump. He kept his head down and tried not to talk, but finally someone asked him a direct question.

"You look lost, buddy. What unit you with?"

"The two hundred and ninety-sixth engineers."

"Yeah? You're a long way from home, ain't you?"

"*Ya*. Everything is a mess," he said. Klein could have kicked himself. Not *yes* or *yeah* or *yep*, but *ya*. He was that damn nervous and tired. He hurried to cover his mistake. "These damn Germans are causing a lot of trouble."

"You got that right. I heard they blew up a fuel depot yesterday. Killed a couple of guys in the process. You know how the rumor mill goes—I hear there are Krauts dressed as Americans trying to cause all kinds of trouble."

"If you see any, you let me know."

"Ain't you funny, buddy. You sound like you could be a German yourself. Are you from Pennsylvania? You know, Pennsylvania Dutch."

"Philadelphia." Klein didn't know what Pennsylvania Dutch meant, but he knew Philadelphia was in Pennsylvania.

"I used to go into Philly to shop at the Macy's," the soldier said. "You know the big one near City Hall?"

"Macy's. Of course." Klein smiled tentatively. "I buy all my ties there."

The soldier chatting with him came to a dead stop. He raised his M1 so that it was—almost—pointing at Klein.

"What the hell are you doing?" Klein stood. His hands crept toward the knife tucked into his belt, at the small of his back.

"Hey fellas," the soldier said. "This guy here says he's from Philly but he don't know Wanamaker's from Macy's. You think he's one of those German agents?"

The others stopped and circled Klein in a loose ring. They held their rifles so that they would be ready in an instant.

Klein said nervously, "You have the wrong guy."

"Ask him what the capital of Pennsylvania is," somebody said.

The soldier looked at him. "You heard the man. Well?"

"Philadelphia," he said, grinning, as if the answer was obvious.

"No, buddy. Try Harrisburg."

Somebody else fired another question at him. "Maybe he ain't much on geography. How about the movies. So tell me, buddy, the name of the movie that won Best Picture last year?"

What? He had trained for hand-to-hand combat and for rigging explosives, not for trivia questions. He said the first title that came to mind. If it was that famous, it must have won the award. "*Gone with the Wind*," he said.

But even as he said it, Klein knew from the look on the soldier's face that the answer was wrong. His fingers searched for his knife. With luck, he might be able to cut his way free. His fingers groped frantically. Where was his knife?

"Looking for this?" a soldier asked, holding the knife in front of him. The American had been quicker than him.

Klein's brain scrambled for just the right thing to say, but he was confused. German and English words vied for attention.

Too late. He saw that the first soldier's rifle was now pointed directly at him. No amount of fast talking was going to get him out of this hot water.

"Hands up," the soldier said. "It looks like we found us one of those backstabbing Nazi saboteurs."

• • • • •

Lieutenant Mulholland was called to a briefing before the attack on Kampfgruppe Friel. It was Mulholland who had enlightened the colonel that they were facing a column of SS troops.

"That figures," said the colonel, whose name was Akers. "If they were Wehrmacht, they would have had the good sense to surrender. Now, we'll have to kill every last one of the bastards."

"There's something else you should know, sir. These are the same bastards who murdered our men at the Malmedy crossroads," Mulholland said. "Shot them down in cold blood."

That caused a stir among the gathering of officers. The colonel finally waved them to silence with the stub of his unlit cigar. "All right, all right. If we're going to be shooting fish in a barrel, the fish may as well be piranhas."

The American attack would be head on. It would not be an assault so much as a bombardment. The Germans had their backs to the river with no way to cross, now that all the bridges had been blown. The American force surrounded them in a loose semi-circle, putting the lid on the pot.

For the Germans, the only choice would be surrender—or annihilation. Of course, the Germans were far from finished. Kampfgruppe Friel still had close to a thousand veteran SS troops and several dozen tanks, along with other artillery. Already, they were dug into the village, with panzers wedged between stone buildings and machine gunners burrowed down between thick stone walls.

When Mulholland asked for orders, the colonel waved his cigar again. He had a lot more to worry about than deploying a few snipers. He had absorbed the ragtag force that the snipers had joined on the road into his own unit, but he told Mulholland to deploy as he saw fit in support of the attack.

"You know more about it than I do, Lieutenant," the commander said. "You just pick off as many of those SS bastards as you can."

"Yes, sir."

Returning to his men, Mulholland decided that a team approach would be best. That way, if there was a need to concentrate their fire, they could work together to do that.

"Listen up, I want Cole and Vaccaro on my left," he said, coming back from the briefing. He handed the young soldier a powerful pair of binoculars. "Kid, you will act as my spotter. I want you to keep those glasses on the Krauts. We are looking for any way, shape, or form to take out their machine gun nests or any gun emplacements they have set up." He looked at Jolie. "I don't suppose there's any convincing you to keep out of the fighting? It looks to me like that girl could use some help up at the field hospital."

"These Germans want to get back into France," she said. "How can I let them?"

"They had their chance to get to France," Mulholland said. "The only place they're going now is to hell. You ought to let us handle it."

Jolie lifted her chin defiantly. Even after living rough in the field, hiking through snow and sleeping in trucks, she still managed to look like a dish. "You cannot tell me what to do."

Mulholland sighed. After six months of fighting his way across Europe, there was still a lot of Boy Scout in him that didn't want to see a woman in combat. But seeing that face, Mulholland felt his resolve melt. "You do what you want, Jolie. I know you will, anyhow. But do me a favor and don't let the colonel see you, or it's my derrière."

They spread out behind a stone wall, their position anchored on the left by a butcher shop and on the right by the bulk of the old church that had been converted into a field hospital.

No sooner had they moved into position than the American guns opened up. The German guns replied. The battle of La Gleize had begun.

Chapter 26

Time to hunt.

Cole let his shooter's calm settle over him, although it was hardly quiet on the battlefield. The heavy guns on both sides barked at one another like big dogs. Shells from tanks and tank destroyers hurtled back and forth, blasting both La Gleize and the woods beyond the American lines to rubble and splinters.

He wasn't worried about that. The only gun that mattered to him was the one in his hands. Between the gouges in the stock and the scratches on the barrel, the Springfield taken from McNulty was showing signs of hard use. The rifle must have been used when it was issued to McNulty in the first place. But it shot as true as ever. Cole had cleaned and oiled every inch of it—there was no machinery better cared for anywhere in La Gleize.

The snipers were scattered among the ruins of the little village on the fringes of La Gleize. The American tanks and tank destroyers were located further back. Most of the artillery being traded screamed overhead. From time to time, the Germans raked the village with machine gun fire, but most of their attention was on the encircling American lines on the higher ground.

Lieutenant Mulholland saw this as their opportunity to show the value of snipers on the battlefield.

Cole saw it as a chance to get even. To get even for the miles they had trekked across the frozen hills and forests in pursuit of the Germans. To get even for Rowe and McNulty. To get even for the Americans murdered in the snowy field at Malmedy.

"Do you think he's out there?" Jolie asked.

"Oh, I reckon he is," Cole said. He didn't need to ask who Jolie was asking about.

"How can you tell?"

"I can feel him." Jolie didn't have to ask him what he meant. She knew, because she could sense him, too. This was the German who had shot her, after all.

The thought made her shudder. Von Stenger had nearly killed her at Bienville, shooting her in order to draw out Cole and put him in Von Stenger's sights. To him, she had been nothing more than bait.

"You get him this time," she said. "Don't stop until you do."

The snipers were spread out in an uneven line, hidden among the various buildings and stone walls in the village. Lieutenant Mulholland had chosen a spot where a shell had torn through a couple of small buildings, leaving a jumble of timber and stones. The Kid was spotting for him, using a huge pair of field glasses. Vaccaro was to his right, hunkered behind a stone wall.

"The thicker, the better," he had announced in picking it out.

Cole wanted height. So he had chosen the second floor of a bakery. It offered a good view of La Gleize. The thick stone walls helped, too.

He did not go to the window, where he would have been an obvious target. Instead, he put a wooden table in the middle of the room, put a folded blanket on top of the table, and rested his rifle on that. His view of the town across the field was limited, but that's where Jolie came in. Armed with binoculars, she could move freely between windows, if need be, trying to spot the Ghost Sniper.

"How will you know where to find him?" she asked.

"Give it some time."

They did not have to wait long. The snipers were not the only American troops in the village. Other soldiers were busy setting up defensive positions or ferrying messages between points on the battlefield. For the snipers, these other soldiers were the canaries in the coal mine.

A soldier passing below Cole's window crumpled and fell. The shot had come just as a German tank fired, so it was impossible to tell the location of the shooter.

"Anything?" Cole asked Jolie, who was low to the front window, looking out with the binoculars, trying to see some clue as to Von Stenger's location.

"I see nothing."

Cole swept his telescopic sight over La Gleize, located across the snowy fields that were now a no-man's land. He saw targets—mostly German machine gunners and a few tank commanders with their heads out of their hatches, directing their fire. He left those targets to Mulholland and Vaccaro. There was just one target he had in mind. Das Gespenst.

In the streets below, another soldier fell. This one did not die cleanly, but dragged himself to the base of a wall, then lay still.

Cole moved his scope across the edge of La Gleize once again. There was no sign of Von Stenger.

He thought again about Bienville. The man had been clever, slipping into the town and then occupying the church steeple. Another time in Normandy, he had occupied a church steeple and managed to pin down an entire American company almost singlehandedly.

Cole realized he had been looking for Von Stenger in the front lines of the fighting, which was far too obvious for Von Stenger.

"Jolie, do you see any church steeples in La Gleize?"

There was a pause while she looked. "Yes. Ten o'clock. But you will have to move closer to the window to see it. "

Reluctantly, Cole slid his table forward several feet until he could see the church steeple. It was stone, substantial, and offered a commanding view of the countryside around La Gleize. He judged the distance to be maybe 300 yards—far behind the front lines.

You would have to be a very good shot to hit anything reliably at that distance. Das Gespenst had proven himself to be a good shot—and then some. The last thing that Cole wanted was to end up in those crosshairs.

The same went for Jolie. She had already been in Das Gespenst's sights once before, and it wasn't going to happen again, if he had anything to say about it.

"Jolie, I want you to go up to that church here in the village and see if you can help that girl we saw. There's an awful lot of wounded."

"You are as bad as the lieutenant, wanting to send me away."

"Aw, don't go arguing with me now. Go out the back and keep every building you can between yourself and those Germans over there. Go in the back door of that church. I reckon it's got one. And once you're in that church, don't so much as stick your nose out. Stay inside those stone walls."

"You found him, didn't you?"

"I reckon I did. Trouble is, he'll figure out where I am right quick once I shoot at him."

"Let me stay and help you."

"No, Jolie. Remember what happened last time? He might just use you to get at me, and I can't let that happen."

"Cole—"

"The best way that you can help me is not to be here. That is, unless you've got a cannon up your sleeve. This is between me and him."

She slid back from the window, careful to keep her head down. "You are stubborn like a horse's ass."

"The expression is *stubborn as a mule*," he pointed out.

"I know what the expression is, you horse's ass," she said. "Do not get shot."

Then she slipped out the door and down the stairs.

Once she was gone, he put the scope on the church steeple. Cole waited. Long years of hunting had taught him how to let minutes, even hours, pass without notice. He was nothing if not patient. Part of his mind drifted. The other part stayed locked on the small field of view afforded by the scope.

Then he saw what he was looking for. Not so much a stab of flame as a shifting of the air around the distant, open windows in the stone steeple above La Gleize.

Got you now, you son of bitch.

But Von Stenger was not standing at the window with a swastika painted on his chest. That would be too much to hope for. No, like Cole himself, he would be farther back in the room to avoid becoming a target.

Cole put his crosshairs on the window, moved them up and to the right to allow for elevation and windage. He exhaled. It was a hell of a long way to shoot, but he tried not to think about that. His finger took up tension on the trigger.

Slowly, slowly.

When the Springfield kicked his shoulder, it felt like a surprise.

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High above La Gleize, the bullet whipped through the window of the church steeple and struck the stool that Von Stenger had rested his rifle upon. Splinters swarmed up and stung his cheek, drawing blood. The impact was startling enough to knock him down, which was just as well, because seconds later another bullet came through the window and struck the far wall. The sound of the ricochet in the small space made Von Stenger tighten his sphincter.

Keeping low, he crawled to a window to the right of the one he had been shooting through. He used a monocular periscope to chance a peek so that he would not need to expose his head. Where had the shot come from?

His opponent was eager to kill him, so the third shot was not timed to be disguised by the noise of a simultaneous tank round. The crack of the rifle directed him to the cluster of buildings just beyond La Gleize.

A fourth shot.

Von Stenger was impressed. He had no doubt that this was the hillbilly sniper. He knew that the American was using a bolt action Springfield rifle. To fire four shots in rapid succession over a distance of 300 meters into a space no larger than a coffin lid was good shooting.

Yes, the enemy truly wanted to make sure that he was dead.

Von Stenger had the quick eyes of a hawk. In the gloom of a second-floor window in a shop, he spotted the muzzle flash, magnified by the periscope.

He did not bother to slide his own rifle into the window, just in case the other sniper also had good eyes or a spotter with powerful binoculars.

Crawling on his belly, he reached the stairs and then descended from the bell tower itself. Rivulets of blood ran into his mouth, filling it with a salty, coppery taste. He touched his cheek and his fingertips came away bloody.

Annoyed, he shook out a pocket handkerchief and touched it to the wound. Had the bullet been just a few centimeters higher, he would have caught a lead slug in the face rather than a few shards of wood.

Von Stenger ran through the town, keeping low.

In the hours before the attack, he had set up a total of three shooting locations. One in the church steeple, one on the roof of a warehouse, and one in the attic of the *Rathaus*, or town hall.

He would keep the American guessing.

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Cole fired the fourth shot and rolled off the chair onto the floor. If the Ghost Sniper returned fire, Cole had given away his position.

No shots answered, but he slipped from the room in a crouch and went down the stairs, then out the back as Jolie had done.

Four shots from the same position was taking an awful chance when confronting someone like this German, but no one had fired back. That meant he had killed or at least wounded his opponent. He sure as hell hoped so. But the Ghost Sniper was nothing, if not patient. What if he had only been biding his time, lining Cole up in his crosshairs?

Cole did not plan on giving him that chance.

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Von Stenger was disappointed to leave the church steeple. It was such a superb sniper's nest because of the commanding view. But the first rule of staying alive as a sniper was to stay on the move.

He was nothing if not prepared. Having already set up his other sniper's nests, he felt like the hunter rather than the hunted, even trapped within the confines of La Gleize.

It was toward this nest in the town hall that he moved now, keeping the handkerchief pressed to his face.

The hillbilly sniper had found him. The shot had been good, but it had been a roll of the dice. At the distance involved, the hillbilly was only guessing at the target.

But with luck, Von Stenger would turn the tables. He knew where the sniper was hiding.

And unlike the American, he would not miss.

• • • • •

Having abandoned the church steeple, Von Stenger went up the stairs to the top floor of the town hall. The space had long since been cleared of any town officials. SS troopers occupied the first floor, using it to set up a machine gun. Von Stenger nodded at them, and they gave him a grin in return.

“*Das Gespenst!*” one of the SS men shouted heartily.

The story had spread about how he had driven right into a nest of American snipers, and wiped them out.

He had gone about preparing this second sniper's position with some care.

On a desk near the center of the room he had placed a stack of books and topped it off with a helmet. From a distance, in the shadows of the room, the dummy might very well resemble a sniper.

There was a row of three large double-hung windows. He had opened one window directly in front of the crude dummy. It was just the sort of anomaly that an enemy sniper would notice.

During the night he had taken a large knife and gouged a hole in the plaster and lath near the bottom windowsill of the far right window. The exterior was covered by wood sheathing and then clapboard. He had started to carve his way through that wood, but quickly lost patience. So he had gone down and found a 12-gauge fowling gun some townsman had left behind in a nearby house. It took four shots, but he blasted a hole right through the side of the building.

He used the big blade of the knife to widen the hole.

It was through this hole that he extended the rifle. He hoped that a sniper would focus on the obviously open window. Meanwhile, Von Stenger would have his sights on whoever opened fire at the top floor. If that bait was not sufficient, he planned to set up the old shotgun to blast from atop the desk. That should draw fire like lightning to a lightning rod.

Von Stenger settled into his hidey hole and found what he was looking for—the shadowy second floor where he had last seen the hillbilly sniper.

He did not hurry—he was savoring the moment.

Through the scope he could see into the room. He could make out a table and a chair.

But there was no one there. Was the American gone? Like Von Stenger, he must have moved on to another location. It would be up to Von Stenger to draw him out. He set to work rigging the shotgun to do just that.

Chapter 27

Cole crossed the street, being careful to put the taller buildings and a few trees between himself and the line of sight from the steeple. Just in case. The back of his neck crawled with each step. He could almost feel Von Stenger's crosshairs on him.

He found Vaccaro just where he had left him, down by the wall that ran parallel to the hamlet's central cross street. The church stood directly behind him. He felt better with a stone wall between him and the German.

"How many did you get so far?" he asked Cole.

"One, maybe. Hard to say for sure."

"Are you kidding me? I'll bet I've shot six of these Kraut bastards so far. They're so worried about the tanks up on the hill and the planes hitting them again that they aren't paying attention to me picking them off." Vaccaro looked at him. "One? I can guess which one it was. He's like your Moby Dick."

"He's the only one that matters right now."

"Then you won't mind if I go back to helping us win the war?"

"You go right ahead." Cole slumped behind the wall next to Vaccaro, who went back to scanning La Gleize for targets. Despite what he had said, it wasn't so easy to pick off the enemy. The SS troops did not readily expose themselves to sniper fire.

Vaccaro made a satisfied noise. "You're like a lucky rabbit's foot, Cole. I just saw a muzzle flash in the top floor of that big building in the square. There's even a window open up there. That dumb Kraut sniper should have just hung up a sign. Come to papa."

Cole thought about that. Was it just some fool up there with a rifle, or was it a trap?

He reached out to grab Vaccaro's leg just as he fired.

Vaccaro bent toward him. "What?" He sounded annoyed. "You made me miss."

Leaning over is probably what saved him. The incoming bullet struck the stone where Vaccaro's head had been and grazed his neck instead.

He flopped down next to Cole. "Son of a bitch, I'm hit!"

"Let me see."

"Goddamn, Cole. Is it bad? It hurts like it's bad." The two of them worked through the layers of clothing to get a look at the damage. Cole saw that the wound in Vaccaro's neck was a bloody mess.

"We best get you to a medic."

"I won't argue."

"That sniper hung out a sign all right. It said, 'Vaccaro, you are a goddamn idiot.'"

"Thank you for your sympathy," he said. "Don't you worry about me. I'm just sitting here bleeding to death."

"Let me help you over to the field hospital."

For all his bravado, Vaccaro was losing some blood and was going into shock. Cole tugged Vaccaro's arm across his own shoulders, and together they made their way to the old stone church.

Vaccaro sagged, his legs suddenly like stone. He was surprised that Cole didn't seem to notice the extra weight. The guy was skinny, but he must have had oak where his muscles should have been.

The pretty local girl appeared at the door of the hospital, once again wearing her blood-spattered apron. She saw them approach, and reached up to tuck a stray strand of hair back under the cap she had donned.

"I have to say that I might not mind being wounded," Vaccaro said through clenched teeth. "Did you see her fix her hair when she saw me coming?"

"Hell, she was just getting the hair out of her eyes to see if you really are that ugly."

"Cole, you're such a jealous peckerwood," Vaccaro said. "What I'm worried about is that you're not gonna be able to kick that German's ass without me."

"Oh, I reckon I'll get me that German yet. He's just wily, is all."

"If you say so," Vaccaro said. "You—"

Vaccaro's words were drowned out by a burst of machine gun fire that raked overhead. The telltale sound of high-speed rounds came from a MG-42 machine gun—what the German's called a "bone saw" for the fact that it could fire twelve hundred rounds per minute and hit targets half a mile away.

The bone saw's target was the front of the makeshift hospital—never mind the sheet with the big red cross that hung from the church. The warning shout that Cole was about to yell froze in his throat. The burst from the bone saw struck the girl and she fell limp as a rag doll.

When the firing stopped, he and Vaccaro covered the rest of the distance to the hospital entrance, with him doing his best to support Vaccaro's weight. The girl lay sprawled in the snow-flecked rubble. Her face was angelic and untouched, but two large, gory holes marked the front of her apron where the rounds from the MG-42 had shredded the girl's abdomen. Blood pooled around her. The girl's cornflower blue eyes stared up at the sky. Two middle-aged women came running out of the hospital, saw the girl, and started wailing.

Cole got Vaccaro inside. The dark interior of the church was filled with wounded and smelled of blood. He helped Vaccaro into a vacant pew, and waved over a medic. Jolie saw them and moved their way, her lips pursed in concern.

To Cole's surprise, tears ran down Vaccaro's face, carving rivulets in the grime. A sob escaped him, and he swiped at the tears with the back of a bloody hand.

Cole was taken aback. He and Vaccaro had been through a lot. But he had never seen Vaccaro cry.

"Jesus Christ, they just gunned her down," he explained, his voice husky. "A sweet girl like that. What is wrong with those people? Shit fucking Nazis!" He swiped angrily at his eyes again, then reached to grab Cole's elbow and drag him in close. Vaccaro looked exhausted. His face appeared to have aged ten years in the last ten minutes. "You get those bastards, Cole. You teach them a lesson. If anyone here can do that, it's you."

The medic came and gave Vaccaro a shot of morphine, and Cole left him. He knew Jolie would look out for him.

The older women had dragged the girl's body out of the way and covered it with a blanket. Her feet stuck out from beneath, at odd angles. The feet of the dead. Cole had seen that often enough. He tried not to think about the dead girl's eyes, which had been such a lovely shade of blue, like a field of bluebonnets in bloom.

He made his way back to where the remaining snipers were positioned.

"How is Vaccaro?" the lieutenant asked, looking worried.

"He'll be all right," Cole said.

The Kid came up to them, shaking. Cole thought at first the Kid was cold, but then realized that the young soldier was shaking with anger. He clutched a pair of

binoculars. "I saw him," he said. "That son of a bitch who shot that girl at the church with the machine gun. He's got a scar on his face. It's the same Kraut who was at the massacre. I wanted to shoot him, but I knew I couldn't hit him from that distance. You've got to shoot him, Cole."

"Keep our head down, Kid," Cole said. "Gettin' mad won't keep you from gettin' killed. We'll get him when the time comes. Somebody give this kid a drink, and I'm not talkin' about water."

Someone passed the kid a bottle, and he choked down a couple of swallows. The lull in the fighting continued. They smoked cigarettes and waited. Mulholland left to check on Vaccaro. A courier came along, and they realized it was the same corporal who had given them a hard time on the road.

Cole searched for a name. Muckelroy.

"Go ahead and take it easy," Corporal Muckelroy said. "The rest of us can fight the war."

The Kid started to get up, propelled by anger, but Cole's hand shot out and pulled him back down. He froze the Kid with a look, then turned back to Muckelroy. "You got a message for us?"

"Your lieutenant, if he's around."

"He went up to the hospital. You can find him there."

"I must have just missed him. I just came by there. I saw how that girl got shot. What a waste of fine poontang, if you know what I'm saying. I would have liked to tap that."

The Kid looked like he was about to be sick.

Cole put a hand on the Kid's knee, then looked at the corporal and said good naturedly. "I done shot six Nazis already today. It's like a turkey shoot. They don't even shoot back. You want to try?"

The corporal looked at Cole, then at the scoped rifle in his hand.

"You serious?"

"Dead serious," Cole said, offering the rifle. "Go ahead. Shoot one. You'll have a story to tell your grand kids."

The corporal took the rifle eagerly. "What do I do?"

"Go on over to that wall and take a peek through the scope. When you see a Nazi, you just put the crosshairs on him and pull the trigger. Just like shooting rats at the dump."

"I'll give it a try."

Muckelroy started toward the wall. The others watched, curious, wondering what Cole was up to. Cole called the man back.

"Hold on, let me trade helmets with you. This here's a special sniper helmet, shaped so it won't get in the way of the scope."

When the Kid heard that, he raised an eyebrow in surprise. Even he knew that Cole's helmet was the same shape as anyone else's. The only thing different was the faded Confederate flag painted on it. Corporal Muckelroy trotted back and put on Cole's helmet—the Confederate flag facing forward.

"There's no such thing as a special sniper helmet," the Kid said to Cole. "Is there?"

"Sure there is, Kid. This one," Cole muttered. He looked over at Muckelroy, who was in position behind the wall. "Put your head up over the wall and take a look. Get the lay of the land."

"I don't see anything."

"You need to be patient. But maybe you can't see? Move your head up a little."

The corporal popped his head over the wall, like a gopher peeking out of a hole.

"Oh no," the Kid said, hardly realizing he had said it out loud.

The rifle crack was instantaneous, as if the shooter had been waiting since the beginning of time for that helmet to appear.

The corporal's body collapsed in a heap. A neat round hole was visible in the very center of the Confederate flag.

Christ on a cross, Cole thought. What was that, eight hundred feet? That German can shoot.

"You murdered him, Cole. Dear God." The Kid stared at the body, his face pale.

"Ain't my fault that he stuck his head up too high," Cole said. "Besides, that was the most useful thing that son of a bitch ever did in his life. Now slide over there, will you, and fetch my rifle and helmet back. And keep your fool head down, you hear?"

The Kid just sat there for a while, but then finally did as Cole asked. The helmet was not so much of a bloody mess as might be expected. Cole looked with interest at the dead corporal. Aside from the neat bullet hole in the top of his forehead, the only other indication of violent death was the fact that his staring eyes bulged from their sockets due to the pressure of the bullet's impact. There was no exit wound. He kicked the body to roll it over so they wouldn't have to look at the face.

Cole stuck a finger through the hole in the helmet. "Dang, that there really is fine shootin'."

Cole used snow and a rag to clean the helmet, then stowed it in his pack, keeping the corporal's helmet on his head. "With any luck, the Ghost Sniper will think he got me. Who is the ghost now, do you reckon? One thing for sure, I'm goin' to haunt that Kraut sniper."

Chapter 28

Von Stenger blinked in surprise. It had all happened so fast. When the American sniper's helmet appeared, Von Stenger had simply reacted, putting his crosshairs on the target and pulling the trigger.

This was no helmet on a stick trick. He was sure that had been a real head. He had seen a body fall. Who else would be wearing that helmet but the hillbilly sniper?

After so much preparation, victory felt too easy—more like buying a cheap whore than seducing a beauty.

Perhaps the hillbilly got careless. Or perhaps it was hubris. Deadly pride punished by a bullet. Such things happened. He was sure Goethe had some comment about the downfall of the proud, but he was not about to page through the small book of Goethe's verses that he kept buttoned in the pocket of his tunic.

After all, he doubted that Goethe had ever been called upon to put a bullet through someone's head.

He watched through the scope for a long time, but there was nothing more to see. Gradually, he became aware of the fighting raging all around La Gleize. Several floors below, the machine gun spat forth angry streams of lead. Shells flew into town—he had been almost unaware of them, but now it began to dawn on him how close they were. His own form of hubris, perhaps, so caught up in his own sniper's duel that he had lost sight of the larger battle.

He packed up his gear and made his way to Friel's headquarters. The winter days were short, and already it was starting to get dark.

Von Stenger was surprised to find Friel and the other officers of the Kampfgruppe gathered in their makeshift headquarters, taking stock of the situation.

The Kampfgruppe was surrounded. Friel had his back against a river he could not cross—and what would be the point, because any advance now would only be into the guns of Allied forces. Now that the Germans had long since lost the element of surprise, and without any supply lines, that could only mean disaster.

The Americans had learned the hard way that Kampfgruppe Friel was still a viable fighting force. Today, they had given as good as they got. But they were low on food, ammunition, and medical supplies. Friel knew they could hold out for another day at most. And then what?

Leaving La Gleize by one of the roads radiating from the town was no longer a possibility, either. The Allies had cut off their escape route to Germany.

Slowly, an outrageous plan had begun to form in Friel's mind. Their best hope was to abandon their equipment and slip through the woods, at night, unseen by Allied planes.

Friel preferred to think of it as a tactical withdrawal, rather than a retreat. Earlier in the day he had radioed a request to do just that—and been denied.

Friel did not give up easily, but it was time to face reality. Germany's hopes of turning the tide of war had been dashed.

Surrender was not an option. He knew that he and his men would be treated as criminals after the massacre at Malmedy. Perhaps his men would receive the same treatment—for all their talk of high ideals, the Americans could be vengeful.

His men were loyal to him, but he was just as loyal to them. He owed them a fighting chance of survival.

"I am going to contact headquarters again," he told his staff.

"That did not go so well last time," Von Stenger said. He knew that Friel had radioed earlier, requesting permission to withdraw. He also knew that the request had been denied.

"Perhaps the situation has changed," Friel said, and picked up the hand-held radio transmitter.

The conversation was short, and much like the one earlier in the day.

"You must advance at all costs," he was told. Crackling with static, the words bounced around the room like a death sentence. "You must cross the Meuse and make for Antwerp. Heil Hitler!"

He tossed the transmitter on the table and stared at the radio.

One of his officers stepped forward. "Herr Obersturmbannführer, you have done your best. We will make our last stand—"

The officer never finished the sentence. Without warning, Friel unholstered his pistol and shot the radio three times in rapid succession. Sparks flew, and the room filled with the smell of gunpowder and burning electronics.

The officer looked at him in shock, his mouth hanging open.

Friel holstered his pistol. "We are walking out of here just before dawn." He looked at a hauptmann. "Baumann, at that time, you take a handful of men and set our panzers on fire. Another small detachment will man the machine guns to provide cover while you do this and distract the enemy. Then you must all catch up to us. No one gets left behind."

"But Herr Obersturmbannführer, your orders—"

"From headquarters, the situation is not always as clear as it is in the field. It is twelve miles through the woods to Germany. The trees will give us some cover from the Allied planes. It is true that we will have to destroy our tanks, but we will return with eight hundred SS troops. Not old men and boys, but eight hundred good SS soldiers to defend the Fatherland from the Allies. That fool at headquarters will be glad to see us. Mark my words, he will forget that he gave any order otherwise. In any case, I accept full responsibility. If there are repercussions, you were simply following my orders."

Von Stenger thought it took courage to use common sense. There was so little of that here in the waning days of the war. With more officers like Friel, he thought, Germany might have won the war.

The tank officer who had questioned Friel's decision saluted. And then he smiled. "Herr Obersturmbannführer, we shall do as you command!"

Friel dismissed the officers, but Von Stenger seemed to be the only one who didn't need to rush off somewhere.

A bottle of wine and some glasses stood on a table. Von Stenger poured himself a glass and cut a slice of bread from the stale hunk that someone had found. He added a slice or two from a sausage. It tasted delicious—he had not eaten all day.

One of Friel's staff was already busy burning papers in the fireplace in preparation for the retreat—various orders and maps, from the looks of it.

Suddenly, a feeling of relief washed over him. He had killed the hillbilly sniper. Who cared if they were about to retreat! He lifted the glass. Cheers to me, he thought. He wondered what hillbillies drank. Beer? Moonshine? He took a big drink of wine. The wine tasted a bit flat. Upon reflection, he decided that it was not the wine, but him—deep down in the dregs of his soul, he felt disappointed. As if he had been cheated somehow. Killing the American had just been too easy.

Friel came in and Von Stenger poured him a glass as well.

Friel raised the glass. "Just think of it, Kurt. By tomorrow at this time we shall be back in Germany—or in hell."

They drank to that.

Chapter 29

As darkness fell, Cole thought about his next move. In many ways, that depended on what the Germans were going to do. He wasn't a general who had to think about how to position an entire division, or worry about how to capture a German column to keep Ike happy. He only had himself to order around, and he was focused on just one German: Von Stenger.

The thought of the Ghost Sniper gnawed at him. Even if Von Stenger believed that Cole was dead, it didn't mean that Cole was through with the German. This was like some blood feud between mountain families. It ended when the last drop of the other man's blood was spilled.

So what were Das Gespenst and the Germans planning? They had their backs to the river and the roads out of La Gleize were blocked by American artillery. They would not be able to fight their way out. It didn't take a brilliant military strategist to know that the Germans couldn't hold out much longer. They had to be low on food, fuel, medical supplies, and maybe even ammunition. For Kampfgruppe Friel, it was only a matter of time.

He doubted the Germans would surrender. Killing the Americans at Malmedy meant that they were all war criminals, so surrendering was the same as putting their necks in a noose. At the same time, fighting to the last man sounded good in the movies, but it wasn't really how battles ended.

No, Cole wasn't a general, but he saw the possibility exactly because of that—the Germans were planning to escape.

Observing them through the scope of his rifle, he had a closer view of La Gleize than most of the other Americans. He could see that they were up to something.

While most of the Germans were engaged in hurling shells at the American lines, as dusk fell a handful were rounding up Jerry cans of gasoline. The clincher was when he saw them knocking together several sets of travois. You didn't do that unless you planned on hauling wounded or possibly supplies on foot—sure as hell not with a tank.

It dawned on Cole that the Germans were planning to abandon La Gleize.

But how did they plan to escape?

At first glance, the Germans seemed to be corralled. But the Americans had focused on blocking the roads out of La Gleize. To the northwest of town the forest marched down out of the Ardennes toward La Gleize. The Americans hadn't bothered to guard the forest because the trees were too thick for tanks and trucks to pass through. It was like a fence. So why bother protecting it when the American forces were already spread so thin?

On foot, at night, the Germans could pass among the trees and right through the American lines.

Acting on his hunch, Cole slipped into the woods to explore them. He took with him a map borrowed from Lieutenant Mulholland. He did not have to go far before he found a forgotten sunken road, more of a cart track really, worn down below the surface of the forest floor from centuries of use. The sunken road was too insignificant to appear on the map. Not so much as a footprint showed in the thin snow covering the road bed. It was much too narrow for tanks, but the road would take the Germans right through the woods to what the map showed was a clearing on the other side.

Leaving the woods, Cole debated about whether or not to share his hunch with anyone. Who would believe him, anyway? But if the Germans did slip away, after what they had done to those poor bastards at Malmedy, it just wouldn't be right.

He went to tell Lieutenant Mulholland.

• • • • •

Half an hour later, Cole and Mulholland were waiting to see Colonel Akers, who was commanding the assault on La Gleize.

"Cole, I hope you're sure about this," Mulholland said.

"Sure I am," Cole said. "If we get some troops on the other side of those woods, we can bag the Germans neat as a rabbit in a sack."

Mulholland gave him a look. "When we get to see the colonel, you better let me do the talking."

They watched other officers and couriers hurrying in and out of the house that the colonel had taken over on a hillside overlooking La Gleize. Within a stone's throw was the main road into town. Within sight at one end of the road was the town itself. To the west was Germany. The road was the obvious route of retreat through the rugged Ardennes territory. It was not heavily defended by Sherman tanks, Wolverine tank destroyers, and machine gun emplacements.

Cole and Mulholland had not even been invited inside the house. They stood outside in the cold, shivering.

"You reckon he forgot we were out here?" Cole asked.

"Maybe."

Finally, an officer came out and beckoned impatiently to them. "You still here? The colonel will see you now."

They found Colonel Akers pacing in front of a stone fireplace, chewing on an unlit cigar, with a mug of coffee in hand. Well over six feet tall, in his late forties, he looked like a tough son of a bitch—and exactly the kind of officer who was sure of his opinions.

He didn't mince words. He also didn't seem to remember Mulholland from the briefing before the initial attack on La Gleize. Looking at Mulholland, all he said was: "What?"

"Sir, we think the Germans are going to retreat through the woods just west of town." Quickly, Mulholland explained Cole's theory.

The colonel listened impatiently, taking long pulls from his mug of coffee, then throwing the dregs into the fire. The wood sizzled and steamed. He held up a hand, interrupting Mulholland.

"Lieutenant, I've heard enough. The Germans are going to try to fight their way out. They will try to come down this road and skedaddle back to Germany. If they went through the woods, they would have to walk out, and that's not going to happen. An SS panzer group is not going to abandon its armor."

"But sir, Cole here—"

"Lieutenant, what's your name?"

"Mulholland, sir."

"Mulholland, I hope to hell that you are not in charge of anything important. What unit are you with?"

"We're snipers, sir."

The colonel narrowed his eyes at Mulholland. "Right, now I remember you from the briefing. Snipers, huh? Sneaky bastards. Well, go shoot a few Krauts in the back, and leave the strategy to me. Meanwhile, I am putting every gun I can on the roads out of town for when these Krauts bastards do try to break out."

Another officer came in, and the colonel turned his attention away from them. Mulholland put his helmet back on and stamped out of the house, with Cole following him. After the warmth of the house, the cold hit them like a hammer.

"We tried, Cole," the lieutenant said. "If what you say is true, the Germans are going to walk out of La Gleize by the back door while we're guarding the front door."

"At least one of them Germans won't get very far, if I can help it," Cole said. "Thank you for going to the colonel with this, sir. With any luck, he won't hold it against you when he wakes up tomorrow and the Germans are gone."

"It's all right, Cole. Who said I ever wanted to make captain?"

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"You're comin' with me, Kid. I need some help," Cole said.

"Why me? You know I can't shoot worth a darn."

"This isn't about shooting. I need me an assistant."

"An assistant what?"

Cole thought about that. "Assistant ass kicker. How does that sound?"

Cole had already scouted the buildings in and around the hamlet. In an old barn, Cole had spotted just what he needed. Hung up on a nail high up on an old beam. Steel traps. The massive jaws measured nearly a foot across when opened. Cole had done his share of trapping, but he had never used traps so big. Mostly likely because he had never gone after wolves or bears. He guessed that the traps were very old. Antiques even. After all, when was the last time a beast of that size had prowled the Ardennes Forest?

Cole took them down and inspected the traps. Rusted shut. Getting one to function would require some work, which is why he had brought along the Kid.

"Got to be some oil around here. See what you can find."

The Kid returned with an old-fashioned oil can that might be used for a bicycle chain. Cole knocked off most of the loose rust. He soaked the trap in oil.

"All right, now I want you to stand on the springs. Whatever you do, don't take your weight off. I want to keep all my fingers."

The trap itself was a simple mechanism. The "jaws" of the traps were shaped like the curved portion of a capital letter D. Powerful springs were shaped like "greater than" and "less than" signs < > slid along the curved part of the D. When the Kid stepped on the springs, compressing them, the jaws of the D opened, revealing rusty serrated teeth.

Cole applied more oil and worked at the trap with a wire brush. By fitting a metal latch into a notch at the base of a flat metal pan, the jaws stayed open. He was careful to work from beneath the jaws—if they accidentally snapped shut, he did not want to lose a hand.

Once the trap was set on the barn floor, he handed the Kid a spare ax handle he had found.

"Go ahead and see if that thing works."

The Kid touched the pan with the ax handle and the trap sprang shut with an audible snap, steel teeth digging deep into the wood. The Kid stepped back in surprise, as if the trap might bite him next.

"That thing is like a land mine!"

Cole nodded, then stepped on the springs to release the ax handle. "That ax handle is about as thick as a leg bone, only bones act more like green wood. But it gives you an idea."

In the dim light of the barn, Cole's grin made the Kid step back, just as the trap snapping shut had done. His teeth gleamed.

"What are you gonna do with that trap?"

"Not just me, Kid. You know that Nazi with the scar who shot up your buddies in that field? He shot up that church today, too, and killed that girl. We're goin' to make sure he gets what he deserves."

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Cole wrapped the trap carefully in cloth so that it would not make any noise. The last thing he needed was for the trap to be clanking and rattling around to give him away. He would be crawling into the German lines to set this trap. He left his rifle with the Kid, but carried a Browning 1911 in case any of the Germans turned out to have sharp ears. Slung across his shoulders by loops of string, he also carried a large hot water bottle that he had found in a ruined house.

"Cover me," he said to the Kid, who was now equipped with Vaccaro's scoped Springfield.

Wearing his makeshift white winter camouflage, Cole seemed to disappear into the vast snowy field within a few steps.

Long years of hunting enabled him to move silently through the field. His feet did not so much as crunch on the snow. Cole could have been floating, so silently did he move.

The Germans had sentries, but they were watching for tanks, not a lone soldier. No matter—they neither heard nor saw Cole approach. He located the machine gun nest where the Kid had spotted the SS sergeant with the scarred face that afternoon. Just as he expected, nobody was manning the gun—the Germans had called it quits once darkness fell because the Americans were unlikely to make a nighttime attack. The gun could be ready in seconds if they needed it.

The machine gun was still there—even if the Germans planned on abandoning La Gleize, they would need someone to cover their retreat. Cole was betting that job would fall to this particular machine gunner, who seemed so good at his job.

Cole found the path where the soldiers had waded through the snow to the machine gun nest. He was now within the town limits. One wrong move and the Germans would find him. This was maybe the craziest thing he had done yet in this war. His heart pounded.

A couple of Germans went past, carrying boxes of supplies, rifles slung over their shoulders. They talked quietly to each other in their guttural language, which reminded Cole of rocks grinding together. He kept the Browning ready. They passed so close that he could have touched them with the barrel. Once they had walked on, Cole let his breath out. For the moment, he was alone again. He had better hurry.

Because the machine gun was well hidden, the only time that the machine gunner was exposed was when he crossed to the nest, or returned. Cole planned to trap him out in the open.

He could see where the German had to step down from a stone ledge as he made his way to the machine gun—his feet had sunk deeper here into the snow. It was just the place to set the trap.

He opened the jaws carefully. Even with a new coat of oil, it was like prying open the jaws of a lion. His own weight was barely enough to depress the springs, and the cold made his fingers less than nimble when setting the pan trigger. Then he took a water bottle and poured the steaming water slowly into the ground near the trap, melting the frozen earth. When he was satisfied that the hot water had done its work, he worked a long metal stake deep into the earth, securing the trap's chain. By morning the ground would be frozen again, hard as concrete. He kicked snow over everything to hide it.

Then he quietly retraced his steps.

The Kid was waiting for him.

"That took you long enough. I was worried. How did it go?"

"I said I was goin' to set a trap for him, and that's what I done. You be here at first light, Kid."

"Where are you going to be?"

"This is your score to settle. I reckon I've got one of my own."

• • • • •

Breger was disappointed when the order came to withdraw, but he would do his duty. Friel had told him to fire a few rounds at the Americans at first light, just to keep them convinced that the Germans were still in position. Then it would be up to him to join up with the others who had been left behind to destroy the tanks and trucks. Once that was done, they could link up with the others, slipping into the safety of the trees.

He would be happy to fire more than a few rounds. The so-called "bone saw" was a joy to fire. The machine gun had no trouble reaching the American lines outside La Gleize, the heavy slugs pounding into the makeshift fortifications. He had gotten lucky yesterday and shot a few civilians in front of the church... or was that a hospital? No matter. They were on the American side, which made them targets, civilians or not.

He picked his way toward the nest, following the path through the trampled snow, not all that worried about keeping under cover. There wasn't enough light yet for the Americans to see him.

Breger stepped down off a stone ledge and instantly felt something spring up and grab his foot. He thought at first that some animal had attacked him—maybe a badger. But he looked down and in disbelief saw that his foot was now firmly clamped inside the steel jaws of a trap. Breger had never seen one before, but he knew right away what it was. Then the pain came, and his curiosity vanished.

The jaws of the trap had teeth that had bitten right into his ankle. Now that the initial shock had worn off, every movement was agony.

He hated to think of how rusty the trap must be. He had seen how rusty metal could cause wounds to fester.

He tried to move, but the trap was staked firmly to the ground. His ankle hurt like hellfire. Who had done such a thing?

Once he got tired of trying to pull the chain out of the frozen ground, he took out his combat knife and tried to pry the jaws open. The knife slipped and he ended up sinking the point into his leg. He grunted in pain. The steel jaws did not budge. He tried stepping on the spring with his good foot, but the weight was not enough to release the jaws.

Someone didn't want him going anywhere. He was literally staked out here in the open, fully exposed.

"Help!" he called in a hush voice. The pain in his foot grew worse. His next call for help was louder.

No one came to his rescue. Most of La Gleize was now deserted, except for the handful of rear guard troops like Breger. They were not about to leave their posts.

The sky grew lighter. Dawn was coming. He glanced toward the American lines. He had the feeling that once the sky became light enough, he was going to be in someone's crosshairs. Meanwhile, he was staked out here like a goat.

Breger started to shiver, and not entirely from the cold.

Chapter 30

As the long winter's night faded, the Kid kept his eyes glued on the German lines. He was out here alone with a Springfield rifle equipped with a telescopic sight. It was bitterly cold; the temperature had dropped a great deal during the night, turning the mud and slush rock hard.

Anyone with sense would be asleep if he wasn't on watch, but Cole had told him to be out here early.

"That German is going to get in position while it's still dark." Cole smiled that cold grin of his. He did not know Cole all that well, having known him just a few days, but he knew enough that he would prefer to stay on the hillbilly's good side. "Don't worry—you'll hear him before you see him."

He hadn't been sure of what Cole meant by that until he heard the snap of the trap, audible in the cold, clear dawn. He heard something clanking, then cursing. That would be the German tugging at the chain.

The SS sergeant was trapped.

He heard footsteps approaching behind him, and was surprised when Lieutenant Mulholland appeared, holding two steaming mugs of coffee. He handed one of the mugs to the Kid and settled down next to him.

"Thank you, sir."

"I thought you might want some company. Besides, another pair of eyes helps. You spend enough time staring out into the snow and you start seeing things."

They didn't have to wait long. The Kid had just finished the coffee, feeling the warmth go all the way down to his toes, when the gloom dissipated enough for him to make out a figure standing on the other side of the field. He had heard the jaws snap shut. Sure enough, there was the German. But was it *his* German?

The lieutenant had his binoculars out. "You said this German sergeant had scars on his face?"

"Yeah."

"That must be him, all right."

The Kid peered at him through the scope. It was not quite as powerful as the binoculars. The light increased rapidly—he wondered if the sun might even come out this morning. If it did show itself, it would be the first time in days.

Even in the gray light, the man's features were unmistakable. It was the same SS sergeant who had cut down so many Americans at Malmedy.

The Kid settled the crosshairs on the German's chest.

His finger took up tension on the trigger, but too fast. The first shot went wild, kicking up snow at the German's feet. The man tugged at the chain, his face grimacing with pain, but the German wasn't going anywhere.

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Just as Breger had feared, the Americans were shooting at him now that it was light enough to see.

A bullet zipped past his head. If it hadn't been the dead of winter, he might have thought it was a fat, angry bumblebee.

Frantically, he tugged at the chain with new urgency. The effort seemed to set his foot on fire. What had been a dull throbbing now roared with agony each time he moved.

Zip.

Another bullet flicked past.

Sweat dripped from Breger's brow, even though the temperature was well below freezing.

He had not brought a rifle, but he did have a pistol in a holster. He unsnapped the holster and drew the pistol, then pointed it toward the American lines and squeezed off a shot. At this distance, it was impossible to hit anything, but it was better than nothing.

He raised the pistol and fired another shot. Again and again.

Then he tugged again at the chain in frustration, crying out at the pain that the struggle with the leg trap cost him.

When no one shot back, he thought that maybe he had gotten lucky and by some miracle had struck the sniper. But then he began to itch all over. He could almost feel the American's crosshairs upon him.

Shoot the chain, he thought. He blasted at the chain but the links held firm. No wonder. They were almost as thick as his little finger.

The pistol clicked on an empty chamber. Angrily, he threw it as far as he could into the snow.

Then he faced the American lines, hands at his sides.

Hurry up and get this over with, he thought.

He stood there, waiting for a bullet.

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The Kid wasn't a very good shot, not like the actual snipers, but this was like target practice. He worked the bolt action and slid another brass-jacketed round into the chamber.

The lieutenant watched through the binoculars. "The crosshairs should be sighted dead on at this range," he said. "Take a breath, let it out, squeeze the trigger. Easy peasy."

Some part of the Kid's mind registered that this was revenge, pure and simple. Could he really shoot someone in cold blood?

Then he thought about Ralph Moore, gunned down in that field. With a twinge of guilt, he reflected that he had been so busy trying to stay warm and stay alive that he had barely thought of Ralph in the last couple of days. He had been a good guy, and he was never going home again. Then he thought about himself, cowering in that field, waiting to die.

Could he pull that trigger?

The rifle kicking into his shoulder answered that question.

The bullet went wild, no telling where. Its supersonic crack carried across the open field. The German tugged even more desperately at the trap. He pulled a pistol and fired blindly, but the shots came nowhere close.

"Almost," Mulholland said casually. "Take another shot. Hold it steady."

The German was just standing there. The Kid pinned the crosshairs to the German's chest.

The rifle kicked again.

This time, he did not miss.

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Friel did nothing without a plan—even his marriage had been arranged by the SS, after all—and the retreat from La Gleize was no exception. He gathered his officers for a briefing at two a.m. Von Stenger was included as an officer, although he commanded no one but himself.

No one wanted to call it a retreat, so Friel used the term "tactical withdrawal." Orders were reviewed. All of their equipment would be left behind. The men would take rations and their small arms—it was likely they would have to fight their way back into Germany, but using the panzers was out of the question. There was no petrol and their ammunition was mostly spent. The remaining petrol would be used to douse the trucks and panzers, then a small team would move from tank to tank, setting them ablaze. By then, the bulk of Friel's men would have slipped out of town and into the safety of the forest.

"We move out at five a.m. under cover of darkness," he said. "Soon after that, we should have enough light to find our way through the woods. Is everything understood?"

"Yes, Herr Obersturmbannführer!" Not everyone agreed with the retreat, but now that there were clear orders, they would be followed. They were SS; they were good at that.

"Kurt, come with me," Friel said.

Von Stenger fell into step with Friel as they left the makeshift headquarters. He waited for Friel to speak.

"I see that you brought your rifle. In fact, I have noticed that you rarely go anywhere without it. One of the men told me that you shot your nemesis in the fighting yesterday. What did you call him? The hillbilly sniper? If you shot him, why are you still carrying that rifle everywhere?"

It was true that Von Stenger had seen the American sniper fall. His bullet had hit hard. Nonetheless, he would keep his rifle close.

"One must always be prepared," Von Stenger said. He did not admit it to Friel, but the truth was that he felt like a part of him was missing when he did not have the rifle with him. There was something reassuring about the feel of cold iron and solid wood, as well as the smell of gun oil and gunpowder. "It is how one stays alive on a battlefield."

"You are a hunter at heart, Kurt, which is why I want you in the vanguard, in case we run into any American scouts. They are not to make it back to the enemy lines to give us away. We need all the time we can get. If we have enough of a head start, the Americans may not bother to come after us. They will be satisfied with capturing La Gleize."

"Very well," Von Stenger said. "I will shoot any Americans I see."

They made their way toward the town hall, where the wounded were receiving care. It was on the top floor of this building that Von Stenger had made his sniper's nest yesterday. There were many more wounded now—the day-long battle with the American forces had taken its toll.

Just inside the doorway, Friel paused and took a deep breath. The air inside the claustrophobic space smelled of blood, antiseptic, and unwashed bodies. "This is very hard for me," Friel said quietly. "So many brave men."

He went from man to man, shaking hands, offering a word of encouragement, or even a cigarette. Some lay unmoving, swathed in bandages, and Friel knelt beside them on the floor for a few moments, simply touching a shoulder or a knee and uttering a few quiet words. If Friel's God had not been the party and Adolf Hitler, Von Stenger would have thought he was praying. He spent more than an hour there. Von Stenger did what he could, handing around a few mugs of coffee and lighting a cigarette for a teen-aged Schütze whose hands were bandaged, but he did not like hospitals.

He had suffered through one in Stalingrad after getting unlucky with a Russian sniper. That hospital stay had been the exception to the rule for snipers. Usually, when a bullet came for a sniper, death was swift and final.

Among the wounded, those who could would make the retreat with the rest of Kampfgruppe Friel. But the rest would be left behind. Friel had no choice. He wished them goodbye and good luck.

When they left the hospital, Friel had tears in his eyes.

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Cole spent most of the evening drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and thinking. The battle for La Gleize was still going on, but the few bullets he might contribute seemed paltry compared to the artillery that the American forces rained down on the heads of the Nazis.

With their tanks, the Germans gave as good as they got. But for how long could they keep it up? It was only a matter of time before they ran out of ammunition.

Just before dusk, a handful of Luftwaffe planes had attempted to drop supplies to their beleaguered ground forces, but most of the parachutes had missed the town. The failure to resupply the kampfguppe had not taken the fight out of the Germans.

The soldiers getting killed on both sides were anonymous to Cole, but there was one German he wanted in his sights.

Das Gespenst.

So, he sat this fight out. He wanted to keep a low profile. After all, some fights you had to plan if you wanted to win them, and being dead—at least, he hoped Das Gespenst would think he was dead—gave him time to consider his next move.

Cole knew there were two ways to hunt. The first method was what some back home in the mountains called long walking. The hunter moved through the woods quietly, rifle or shotgun at the ready, in hopes of flushing out game. If a hunter was lucky and very quiet, he might come across a deer, spook a rabbit, or startle a covey of quail.

A hunter covering ground felt like he was doing something, but there were days when no game showed itself and mostly he just tired himself out.

The second form of hunting required that the hunter himself become the trap. It took some knowledge of the quarry. A man had to know the habits of what he was hunting, which trails his quarry would follow, where it would stop to drink.

Unseen, he could hide himself in some vantage point overlooking the path—and wait.

This second approach required tremendous patience. A man might sit for hours before his quarry appeared. It helped to have some bait to draw the game in, like a salt block, shelled corn, or fresh meat.

It was this second method that Cole planned on using against Von Stenger. In place of a game trail, he planned to use the old road where it came out of the woods into the clearing he had found.

He planned to use some bait. But he would need some help to do that. He needed someone he could trust to keep his mouth shut.

Vaccaro.

At nightfall he made his way to the hospital. Earlier, he had liberated a bottle of rough red wine and a pencil and paper from the ruins. He brought these along with him to the hospital.

Inside, he nodded at Jolie, who was busy helping the wounded. After the death of the local girl who had been helping the wounded, there was no one else to do the work. Jolie moved around the interior of the church, carrying bowls of soup or new bandages. She gave Cole a weary smile.

Vaccaro was going to be all right. The bullet had only grazed him, but he didn't seem to be in any hurry to get back to the fighting.

"How long you fixin' to be in here?" Cole asked. "Looks to me like you're patched up."

"It's all about the exit wound," Vaccaro said. "This is my exit from having to put my ass back out there in that freezing weather. Did you get the bastard who shot me? I'll bet you a hundred bucks it was Das Gespenst."

"I'm workin' on it."

"How about this—you get him and then I'll come out of the hospital."

"Vaccaro, I never pegged you for a coward."

Vaccaro smirked. "It ain't that, Cole, and you know it. Look around you. This sure as hell ain't the Taj Mahal but it's warm and dry. I got plenty to eat. Nobody

is shooting at me. Hell, I plan on staying in here until they kick me out or we get sent home."

"Then I reckon your hospital stay just got better," Cole said, producing the bottle of wine and a corkscrew, which he considered a fiddly thing. In his opinion, a bottle of liquor ought to have a cork you could pull with your teeth. He opened the bottle and filled tin mugs for them both.

"You're all right, Cole. I don't care what Jolie says about you."

"What does she say about me?"

"Jee-suz, Hillbilly. Relax, will you? It's a joke that people from civilization use."

Cole gulped down a cup of wine, which was another surprise. He never was much of a drinker. "Listen, I got a favor to ask."

"Sure—as long as I can do it without getting out of bed."

Cole handed him the pencil and paper. "I need you to write me a note."

"What the hell are you talking about, Cole? Do I look like Ernest Hemingway?"

"Who's that?"

"Never mind. What I mean is, I'm not much of a writer. The nuns in school always smacked my knuckles because my handwriting was so bad."

"But you can read and write?"

"Do I look like an idiot? Sure I can read and write." Then it dawned on Vaccaro. He stared at Cole. "You mean you can't?"

"Why the hell do you think I'm here."

Vaccaro nodded, any thoughts of gloating having vanished at the edge in Cole's voice. "Don't get sore. I'll do it. Listen, where I grew up there's book smarts and street smarts. One can be as good as the other, depending on the situation. You got plenty of street smarts. Or maybe woods smarts in your case."

Cole handed him the pencil and paper, then told him what to put in the note. "Make the letters big enough so the son of a bitch can see it."

"Cole, he shot me from three hundred yards. I don't think there's anything wrong with his eyes." He handed the paper back to Cole. "That's it? I don't get the twelve o'clock part. How you know what position you'll be in?"

"It don't matter where I am. It matters where I put this here note. With any luck, it will be the last thing ol' Das Gespenst reads."

Chapter 31

Under cover of darkness, Cole slipped across the fields and into the woods. He dressed warmly against the bitter cold, with a white smock made from a sheet to camouflage his uniform. Over a wool cap, he wore his Confederate flag helmet with the bullet hole in it. He carried his rifle in his hands.

Strapped across his back were a half dozen fence pickets with names painted on them. He had put aside his pride to have Vaccaro write him that note, but he could manage to scrawl last names on a scrap of wood. He had used the names of dead snipers: Rowe and McNulty. He also used the name of Jimmy Turner, the simple country kid who had died in the first minutes on Omaha Beach and who

had no more business in a war than a choir boy had in a prize fight. The last name scrawled on a picket was Cole's own.

The forest was absent of any human sounds. The artillery had fallen silent for the night, and it was hard to know that thousands of men were nearby, dug into foxholes, waiting for a German breakout attempt that would never happen. The pine trees whispered in the night breeze. He heard an owl, then the screech of some animal hunting.

Cole felt right at home. Where others would feel spooked in the woods at night, alone, he knew that running across an animal was the least of his worries. The two-legged kind were the ones to fear tonight.

Fortunately, anyone in the forest would have a hard time seeing him in the nearly pitch blackness. Cole's night vision was good enough for him to see the looming tree trunks against the snow for several feet ahead. He stopped periodically to check his compass, because it would be easy to get off course in the dark—the stars above were hard to see through the pine canopy. He had coated the inside of the compass lid with a dusting of powder made from ground-up fireflies. It was just enough light to make out the compass needle without affecting his night vision.

The ground grew steeper, forcing him to move more slowly. However, he stayed off the old sunken road through the woods and walked parallel to it instead, keeping to the trees. The last thing he wanted to do was leave footprints on that road. It took him a while in the dark, but he managed to cross two miles of woods and emerged in the clearing he had scouted yesterday. The Germans would walk right into it if they followed the sunken road through the woods, as they surely must.

He could still hear the whisper of pine trees overhead, but the other night sounds had fallen quiet. Not so much as a rabbit stirred. Was someone—or something—in the forest?

After the darkness among the trees, the open field was almost blinding, even at night. Surrounded by nothing but snow, he felt very exposed. He stepped back into the trees. Something did not feel right.

He waited, rifle at the ready, biding his time. A minute passed. And another.

Then he saw a flicker of flame in the trees to his right. Soon, the smell of the cigarette drifted toward him.

He was not alone.

Who else would be in the woods at this hour?

His plan depended on no one else seeing him, of course. He thought about what he needed to do.

He unslung his load of pickets and placed his rifle on top. This had to be done quietly. He didn't want to fire a shot and take a chance that there were other scouts nearby. He slipped off his mittens. Pulled his knife free of its sheath.

Silently, he moved through the trees toward where he had seen the flicker of flame. He took his time. He had all night. Now and then, he caught a whiff of cigarette smoke.

He covered the last few feet as cautiously as if he had been crossing a glass bridge over a chasm. He moved as silently as if his life depended on it—which it did.

He could see the man standing next to a tree, looking out over the field.

Not an American. A German. The square *stahlhelm* was the giveaway.

He realized he had been foolish to think that he would be the only one staking a claim to these woods. The Germans weren't fools—they had sent a scout to keep watch over the clearing.

He was now within twenty feet of the German, and he was totally undetected.

He tested his grip on the knife in his hands. How fast could he move? Not fast enough.

What he needed was a distraction. The snow covered anything useful, like a stick. He groped in his pockets, hoping for—he wasn't sure what.

His hand touched the compass. It was military issue, nothing fancy. He could get another one when the time came.

Even with its metal cover, the compass weighed only a few ounces, but it was enough. He brought his right hand back beside his ear, then with a single smooth motion flung the compass away into the trees.

He got lucky in that he missed hitting any trees close by and the compass made a noise when it finally smacked against a tree.

The soldier dropped his cigarette, grabbed his rifle and spun toward the noise—his back to Cole.

Cole crossed the distance between him and the soldier in three bounding steps. He grabbed the man's chin with his left hand, pulling it up and away, and then sank the point of the knife in his right hand into a spot just below the German's right ear.

Cole thrust upward and the man's body went limp—dead weight. He let it slump to the snowy ground.

He stood there a moment, trying to hear something besides his own heart hammering in his chest. He had killed his share of soldiers with a rifle, but never before with a knife. The brutality of what he had just done sickened him. He tried not to think too much about it.

He crouched down beside the dead German and waited several minutes. No shouts of alarm filled the night. If he was lucky, the scout was alone. He spent several minutes dragging the body deeper into the woods. It never failed to surprise him just how heavy a body could be—something that moved so gracefully on its own was just so much dead weight of lifeless bone and muscle. He stuffed the body as best he could under a windfall to hide it from view.

Back at the clearing, he retrieved his bundle of pickets and moved out into the open. He had already lashed the pickets together in pairs, so he now twisted the boards with the names on them to create a series of grave markers, which he thrust into the snow. He wasn't worried about footprints—in fact, he made an effort to make a confusion of them so that it would look as if a number of men had passed among the graves.

The last thing he did was to take off his helmet, tuck the folded note Vaccaro had written inside, and then put the helmet on top of the cross that read "Cole."

Anyone emerging from the trees on the sunken road couldn't miss it.

Then he returned to the forest and found a likely looking pine tree that overlooked the clearing. He climbed up, rested his rifle across a bough, and settled down to wait.

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And just like that, the Germans abandoned La Gleize. They moved across the open field to the northwest of the town and entered the forest. The trees here were old and shadowed the forest floor so that little underbrush grew to impede their way. They moved more easily than they had across the field because the boughs of the fir trees caught much of the snow, leaving just a few inches of snow that filtered to the forest floor. A sunken road through the woods made the way easier for a few of the walking wounded who had managed to escape with them.

They were taking a huge risk because it would not take a genius to see that this corridor of trees was the only escape route from La Gleize. Escape was the last thing the Allies expected to be on Friel's mind. Through his binoculars, he had seen that the main road leading out of La Gleize remained heavily fortified, as if the Amis expected a breakout attempt at any moment. Still, there was such danger—to be caught here in the forest could mean being cut to pieces.

His orders demanded strict silence. When a man stumbled over a tree root, he did not so much as swear. If a man had to cough, he put his arm across his mouth to muffle the sound. No lights were allowed.

Eight hundred men moved through the woods in almost total quiet. Shadows and silence—that was all that remained now of Kampfgruppe Friel.

Behind them, they could hear the sounds of their remaining panzers being destroyed by the team left behind. A few machine guns chattered to distract the Allied forces into thinking that La Gleize was still being defended.

If the thought of leaving the wounded had brought tears to Friel's eyes, the destruction of the tanks was just as emotional for the tank commanders. There was nothing that made a man feel so much like a god on a battlefield as commanding a King Tiger tank. Now they were setting their machines on fire, and they were mortal again. In the cold, tears froze on the cheeks of a handful of even the toughest tank commanders. The distant explosions as the panzers were destroyed sounded like the death cries of old friends.

Soon, the licking flames danced with a devilish light across the ancient stone streets and buildings. Ammunition within the tanks began to explode, muffled within. A few machine guns peppered the dawn, continuing to keep the eyes of the Americans on the town itself, even as they wondered what was going on.

Then the rear guard and demolition team slipped away in what remained of the darkness and ran across the open field, headed for the woods that had swallowed the rest of Kampfgruppe Friel.

Scharführer Breger was not among them.

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Several hundred feet ahead of the main column, Von Stenger moved like a shadow. Dressed in winter white camouflage, he was nearly invisible. The woods and the creatures within it couldn't be fooled, even if the soldiers behind him moved quietly. They knew something else was in the woods, and hunkered down.

Von Stenger was cautious, but his confidence grew with the dawn. He did not see any signs that someone had gotten there ahead of them. No American force seemed to be waiting in ambush.

But he did not let his guard down, moving silently forward.

Dimly, his mind registered that it was Christmas Eve morning.

The forest stretched on for more than two miles, cloaking the Germans perfectly. The terrain grew more rugged and rocky, so they followed an old sunken road bed through the woods. It must have been used by the local people, going into the forest to cut wood, but it clearly had not been traveled in some time. Then Von Stenger saw a clearing ahead where the sunken road emerged from the trees. This was where the danger began. By the time they reached the clearing, what remained of Kampfgruppe Friel would be funneled into one area. Out in the open, they would be vulnerable to attack.

He moved carefully into the clearing. Once again, all was quiet. The sun promised to come out that day for the first time in weeks. Already, dawn light played over the snowy trees, tinging them in brilliant green and white. The snow on the ground looked like purity itself. Von Stenger knew a beautiful day when he saw one, but while he admired his surroundings, he was more interested in what they might be hiding.

Nothing.

Birds flitted here and there. A squirrel chattered high up in the trees.

There was supposed to be a scout, but there was no telling where the man had gotten to. Maybe he had fallen asleep. Maybe he had given up and gone on to Germany alone.

In addition to the fact that they were now in the open, this clearing was a danger zone because they would be passing very close to the American lines. The only sign that anyone had been there recently was a cluster of graves, marked with wooden crosses. He barely gave them more than a glance. Such graves were scattered everywhere throughout the Ardennes, signs of a deadly skirmish. No one wanted to carry a body through miles of rough terrain, so the bodies were buried in graves hacked from the frozen earth, then marked with crude crosses. In this case, the Americans must have been using this quiet spot as a burying ground for their dead from the battle for La Gleize. The footprints in the snow looked fresh.

Von Stenger felt terribly exposed in the clearing, so he moved into the makeshift graveyard. At least it offered some kind of cover. The remnants of Kampfgruppe Friel would not emerge from the woods for several minutes. No sign of the enemy appeared. In the winter quiet, he began to relax.

He glanced at the names of the dead around him. Someone had taken the trouble to paint or scratch names on the crude crosses. These were American graves with names like McNulty and Turner. Many of the names could easily be German, such as the one on the cross for a soldier named Rowe. The sight of the last cross made him pause.

On top of the crude cross was a helmet. One with a Confederate flag painted on it. And a bullet hole in the middle of the flag. A hole made by his bullet.

The name on the cross was Cole. *So that was his name.* This was the grave of the American sniper.

The American really was dead. He felt a sense of relief, but also of regret. The American had been a worthy adversary, but ultimately he had let his guard down and died in a careless moment.

Von Stenger reflected that he had been there waiting when the moment came. He had won their deadly game.

He slung his rifle and reached for the helmet. He was not above keeping trophies. It was how he had obtained his first Russian rifle, after all.

Hmm. Heavier than the German helmets. But not as deep, which left more of the head exposed.

He flipped the helmet over and looked inside. Much to his surprise, he saw a piece of paper tucked into the webbing there.

He took it out and unfolded the note. It was written in English, but he had no trouble understanding it.

Pine tree. Twelve o'clock. See you in hell, you Nazi son of a bitch.

He read the note in disbelief. Then he felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck, knowing he was in the American's sights. He sighed. What else could he do? The American had been playing chess, after all, and this was checkmate. He took a deep breath, enjoying how the cold air filled his lungs. Let it out.

Then Von Stenger looked up.

Epilogue

A day and a half after slipping out of La Gleize, Kampfgruppe Friel arrived back in Germany.

Or what was left of Kampfgruppe Friel. On foot, Friel's remaining eight hundred troops had avoided American forces as much as possible but still had been involved in a running battle or two. Yet they counted themselves lucky to live and fight another day.

Operation Watch on the Rhine had begun with so much hope, not to mention around two hundred thousand men and nearly two thousand tanks. In the days of fighting between December 15 and the official end of the offensive on January 25, the casualties were astounding on both sides. Only half of the Germans troops managed to return. Hitler had gambled everything on one last battle—and lost at tremendous cost. In the East, the Russian army approached.

American forces were also severe, with nearly ninety thousand casualties and missing—including nineteen thousand dead. It would go down in history as the biggest and bloodiest battle ever fought by the United States Army. It was the only major defensive battle fought by U.S. troops in Europe.

Among those who would never be coming home were the eighty-three Americans murdered by Friel's men at Malmedy. In retaliation, angry Americans machine gunned sixty German prisoners of war on New Year's Day at the town of Chenogne. Most of those lined up in rows and shot were eighteen or nineteen years old.

The fact that Friel had essentially disobeyed orders in abandoning La Gleize was overlooked. Germany needed soldiers and capable officers for the final defense of the Fatherland. After the years of war since 1939, so few remained.

Instead of a court martial, he received a hero's welcome. Hitler personally ordered that Friel receive the addition of a sword to the Knight's Cross he had won in Russia.

“Obersturmbannführer Friel, what are your orders?” one of his officer had asked, once they had rested and eaten on the German side of the Rhine. It was the day after Christmas. They had crossed more than twenty kilometers of frozen woods and snowy fields, dodging American forces most of the way.

Friel gazed in the direction of the distant hills of the Ardennes. Before long, the Americans would be following them. There would be planes, tanks, men—

“We will make camp here, then resupply and regroup,” Friel said. “The war is not over yet.”

When the end did come the next spring, Friel was a wanted war criminal for the massacre at Malmedy. Using false papers, he fled to Argentina, evading the Allies one last time, just as he had done at La Gleize.

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The guards came for Klein just before noon. He decided that today was just as good as any to die. It was not in the way he had expected, of course, but at least he was dying for the Fatherland. Clinging to that thought gave him courage.

To his surprise, there were three others being marched out of the makeshift prison. He recognized them as fellow saboteurs who had trained with Skorzeny. None of them met his eyes, however. Each man inhabited a bubble of his private thoughts. Final thoughts, Klein reminded himself.

The gray skies had lifted, finally, and the sky, if not quite blue, was at least clear. The cold, fresh air felt like tonic after being confined to a single room. He took a deep breath, filled his lungs.

Four posts had been set into the ground, each post about ten feet apart. These might have been the beginnings of a fence, but he knew well enough that these posts had a darker purpose. Klein and the others were each brought to a post, and stood against it. Their hands were tied behind them, on the opposite side of the post.

To their credit, his German comrades remained completely silent.

Just fifty feet away from the Germans stood a row of American GIs, all armed with rifles. The Americans appeared very grim. In fact, they looked like they wanted to be there even less than Klein, if that was possible.

The officer in charge read out something official, but Klein wasn't really listening. He caught the words *guilty ... spy ... shot*. No matter. He already had heard the words read to him before inside the building behind him during a kind of puppet trial.

Someone had the idea to pin a white square of paper to his shirt to make a target, as if the Americans might miss at this range.

Another officer moved to put a blindfold on him. Klein shook his head. “I do not need it,” he said, his voice sounding raspy to his ears. The atmosphere suddenly seemed unreal, as if being seen in a dream.

“It's not for you, son,” the officer said, not unkindly. “These men don't need to see your eyes.”

The blindfold tightened into place.

He thought of a girl he had made love to while on leave at the start of the war. It was a pleasant memory, but not worthy to be his last, he decided. Instead, Klein thought of his parents, home in Frankfurt. They were proud of him, he knew, and

the thought comforted him. He took one last breath and let it fill his lungs, calming his pounding heart.

The last words he heard were those of the officer calling out, "Ready... aim... fire!"

And so the wolf slumped against the post, bringing his reign to an end.

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Slowly, spring came to the Ardennes. Winter unlocked its grip on the mountains and forests. Rivers full of snow melt rushed around the skeletal pillars of the ruined bridges. Even in the killing field at Malmedy, a few flowers struggled out of the cold ground.

In the woods around La Gleize, some boys ventured out and found all manner of abandoned gear left by the Germans: helmets, bayonets, canteens. It was a real treasure hunt.

One of the items was a thick, pocket-sized book of Goethe's verse with what appeared to be a bullet hole through the center. The boy who found it flipped through the pages hoping that there might be some money tucked inside. Finding nothing, he tossed the book to the forest floor and ran on after his companions.

The spring brought more than the end of winter; it also signaled the thawing of Hitler's grip on Europe. On March 22, the first U.S. Forces crossed the Rhine into Germany. Hitler was dead by April.

Among the first troops to cross that pontoon bridge and walk on German soil were a handful of snipers wearing battered uniforms. Over the last several months Cole, Vaccaro, and Lieutenant Mulholland had walked nearly every step of the way from Omaha Beach to the Rhine, and they looked it. Even the Kid, who was now officially part of the sniper squad, looked weary.

Jolie returned to France a few days after the fight at La Gleize, when an irate Colonel Akers had found out that a French civilian—and a single female at that—was in a combat zone and traveling with a sniper squad. He had shipped her out with the truckloads of wounded from the Ardennes Forest. Jolie did not complain—seeing the young Belgian girl killed at the church outside La Gleize had spilled cold water on her fighting spirit. She still wrote to Cole.

He still saved the letters, even if he couldn't read them.

The incident involving Jolie had not improved Lieutenant Mulholland's chances for promotion.

But now here the snipers were, ready to cross the Rhine.

"I can't believe we're in Germany," said Vaccaro, expressing how they all felt. "Germany."

"It don't mean the war's over," said Cole. That was a fact—there had been plenty of hard fighting through the first few weeks of 1945. They might be on German soil, but Cole knew well enough that a cornered beast could be very dangerous. A few fanatical German troops didn't seem to have gotten the message that the war was almost over. Most worrisome were the Hitler youth boys holed up with their rifles in church steeples, trees, and tall buildings. The poor dumb kids had been brainwashed all their lives and were ready to die for the Fatherland. A preferred tactic was to let American troops pass by and then shoot them in the back. It was the job of the American snipers to eradicate that threat.

Vaccaro had more to add. “I can’t wait to have some beer and sausages in downtown Berlin. Maybe some weinerwurst, weisswurst, bratwurst, schnitzel—”

“Shut up, Vaccaro,” Cole said, shaking his head. “The Russians will get to Berlin before we do. You’ll be lucky if there’s so much as a pretzel left when they get through. I don’t trust them damn Russians one bit. And don’t forget that there are a lot of Germans between here and there.”

Cole got a strong grip on his rifle and walked on.

Author’s Note

Ardennes Sniper was inspired by events surrounding the Battle of the Bulge that took place in the rugged Ardennes region of Belgium from December 1944 to January 1945. However, in writing this book, I have taken a few liberties with geography and the timeline of events to better suit the storytelling format of a novel.

Many of the events in the novel are based on actual history, particularly the terrible massacre of American troops near Malmedy, Belgium. There remains some controversy even today about how and why the massacre took place. What can’t be disputed is that more than eighty unarmed American POWs were killed there.

Kampfgruppe Friel is a fictitious unit and the commander and other soldiers are invented characters.

All too real is the fact that soldiers on both sides suffered in the bitter cold, and thousands lost their lives in the fighting.

For those who would like to read more about the Battle of the Bulge, there are several fascinating nonfiction histories of the battle and of events at Malmedy. I would also recommend William Peter Grasso’s excellent novels in the *Jock Miles WW2 Adventure Series*. Fans of World War II fiction will also enjoy the historical novels by David L. Robbins, including *War of the Rats*.

Finally, I want to thank all those who had a hand in producing or editing this book, especially Aidan, Mary, Joanne, Marianne, and Michael, as well as the many readers of *Ghost Sniper* who encouraged this follow-up story.

