

**DECEMBER 16, 1944**

## Winley on the Ridge

Captain Winley stood alone at the broken window, staring into the dark forest. He craved a cigarette, but hiding in a dilapidated barn less than a mile from the German front demanded caution. He flipped the collar of his dull green overcoat against the night air, his shallow breath marking each tired exhale in the waning moonlight.

He looked at the three privates sleeping in the far corner and shook his head. Despite trying, he couldn't forget they were his responsibility. Outside the glassless opening, the clouds thickened. Winley knew that snow would soon fall over the Ardennes. The limbs on the pines and firs already hung heavy with the weight of moisture. The Captain hung heavy with thoughts of his sister.

He took off his glove and slid his hand through the slit in the army-issued overcoat, reaching deep into his left pocket. His lungs filled with the icy air as he touched the silk. Turning his back to the window and leaning against the framing, Oberon Winley removed the white handkerchief and held it up to the last brush of moonlight. The initials JAW stitched into the corner with fine blue thread allowed his mind to wander.

"Shh! She's in the other room," Oberon cautioned his sister.

"We're gonna get caught."

"Not if you stop talking."

The two children crouched behind the kitchen island counter. On the other side, large French doors led to the dining room where their mother sat drinking tea. They stared at the remaining few feet in the open until reaching the pantry.

"I don't really want any anyway," whispered Josephine.

"You know we're not getting any at the party. We can't even come downstairs when they have people over. We won't get caught. So, shh."

Oberon, who was an inch shorter than his twin sister, moved first. He scuffled across the tile floor, watching his mother's back. He reached the pantry and breathed.

Waving at his sister, he mouthed, "Come on."

Josephine peered around the corner of the counter. Her mother was stirring her tea with a small spoon. An open book sat next to the cup. Squatting, Josephine pulled her dress to the side and into a knot which she fisted. She crossed the kitchen unnoticed.

“See,” he whispered.

Oberon stood inside the large pantry. He took out his pocket knife and began to cut. The thick frosting and cake sliced easily. He laid a thin piece of ruby red cake with white frosting in his palm and looked down at his sister.

“Here,” he said rolling the cake into her hand. He cut another small chunk. Oberon then used the knife to spread extra frosting into the gap in the cake. He made little swirls in a failed attempt to camouflage his misdeed. Licking the blade, his mouth began to water. He folded the knife and put it into his back pocket.

Oberon sat back down, cake in hand. With a large grin, he bit into the sweetness and ran his tongue across his upper lip. “Mmm,” he muttered.

Josephine didn’t say anything while she licked sticky frosting off her fingertips. The two thieves sat on the floor next to each other and savored the confection.

“Ready, Jo?” the boy asked.

“Yeah.”

Oberon looked out the pantry door. “She’s reading her book. It’s all clear.”

The siblings scooted back across the kitchen. As they reached the island counter, they heard a chair scrape on the dining room floor. They paused and exchanged frightened glances.

“Come on,” he whispered. Oberon grabbed his sister’s hand and ran with her out of the kitchen.

They entered the foyer breathing heavily. At the base of the broad staircase, Oberon looked around and said, “In here.” He led his sister through the entryway and into the music room. They momentarily hid underneath the black, grand piano.

“Oberon Winley the third, you get in here immediately! Where have you taken off to?” his mother yelled from the kitchen, her voice echoing through the spacious home.

“I think we’re in trouble, Obee,” Josephine said.

“No we’re not. Come on!”

The two children ran through the music room and into their father’s study. They had discovered long ago the secret staircase behind one of the bookshelves. Together they pushed against one edge forcing the other to swing open. They didn’t turn on the light but just sat in dark on the first tread, heaving with the rush of adrenaline.

The steps led upstairs to a similar bookshelf in a sitting room off the master suite. An ancestor of the Winley’s had been a commissioned general in the revolutionary war. He built the home and installed the passage as an escape route from night marauders. Although the residence had remained in the family, the general was the last soldier to occupy the seventy-acre estate nestled on the hills just outside of Boston. The last until Oberon III joined the army.

“What do we do, Obee?”

“Nothing! We’re fine if we stick together.”

“I don’t think I can,” Josephine admitted.

“Look, if she doesn’t catch us inside the house, she’ll blame one of the servants.”

“Obee!” Josephine looked at her brother even though she couldn’t see him in the darkness.

Oberon felt the glare.

“The cake was for her big party tonight. She’ll be so mad I don’t know what she’ll do. We have to say something. We shouldn’t have done that.” Josephine began to cry.

“Don’t worry, Jo. I’ll tell her. I’m used to the whippin’ anyway.”

“No you won’t.”

With that, Josephine Alice Winley leaned against the bookcase and ran out.

“Hey, Winnie, what’s out that window that’s got you so interested?” Private Larsen asked, chuckling from under his bedroll in the corner of the abandoned barn.

Opening his eyes, Captain Winley stuffed the last tangible memory of his twin sister back into his pocket. He didn’t hear the Private.

Larsen continued, “Close the window! It’s freezing in here! Can’t you see I’m trying to get some sleep.”

“I cannot close it. The glass has been blown out.”

Larsen smiled. “Winnie, you’ve got no sense of humor.” Larsen’s head emerged tortoise-like from his roll.

“Refer to me again by that appellation, and I will see to it that you receive a court martial for insubordination.”

“Huh?” Larsen only understood the words court martial. He held his large and growling stomach underneath the bed roll. “It’s, like, early, or something. What time is it, anyway?”

Winley pulled on the cuff of his overcoat and glanced at his watch. “0600.”

Larsen pulled the cover tightly under his neck. “A little earlier than I would normally eat, but would you order some breakfast. I’d like eggs, flap jacks, real maple syrup, please, and a whole lot of hot coffee. And could you turn up the heat in this room.”

Winley heard nothing cognizable from the comedian in the corner. He considered Larsen large on weight and small on wit and had learned to ignore him. Besides, the case of the stolen confection still lingered in his mind.

His sister had immediately confessed to their mother, relieving him of his father’s belt. He couldn’t remember if he felt guilty back then, but he certainly did now. That episode had occurred just before Christmas, exactly twenty years ago. The two were only seven.

Currently, Captain Oberon Winley, an officer with the 395<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, led three inexperienced and incompetent privates through the Belgian woodland on what he felt was a meaningless fishing expedition.

The day before, the Captain and the privates were sent on a reconnaissance assignment to the Elsenborn Ridge on the eastern edge of the Ardennes forest, overlooking the German border. On their way to the ridge, chance favored the small group not only with shelter in a large clearing but a couple of enemy bedrolls. The farmhouse had been burned leaving only the stone foundation and walls, and the sheep had long since wandered on to friendlier pastures. The barn, although crumbling from the rafters, still provided some relief from the cold, northerly wind.

“I said could you turn up the heat,” Larsen repeated.

“Be quiet, Larsen.” Winley turned his ear to the wind outside the broken window.

“Wah, wah, be quiet,” Larsen replied in muted breath. “Nothing’s going on out there. We haven’t seen a thing since we left. The rumors were just a bunch of paranoid locals, old folks gossiping in cafés because they have nothing better to waste their day on.”

“I said please be quiet.”

“There’s nothing in these woods but these comfy bedrolls. By the way, thanks, Jerry,” Larsen said staring at the cold air above his head.

Winley now squinted. Flakes of fresh snow began to flutter to the ground, and shadows seemed to shift with the passing clouds. But a dark figure moved between the trees.

“Well, we’ve got to take off at first light anyway. Might as well get up.” Larsen emerged and stretched his broad chest like a bear after hibernation. His breath only frosted the damp air as he blew on his hands for warmth.

“Ouch!”

Larsen kicked another bedroll. “Get up, we’re taking off.”

The bundle barely moved.

“Larsen, shut up and get down!”

Larsen reacted quickly to the uncharacteristic language from Captain Winley. The only familiar intonation in the command was the New England “R” in Winley’s accent, making the private’s last name sound more like Lawson.

The Captain ducked beneath the open window. From a crouched position, he motioned above his head. The others, instantly alert, crawled over to the Captain, sliding their rifles along the bare ground.

“How many?” whispered one soldier.

“I saw only one. Do you have your mirror?”

Larsen pulled out a square sheet of metal he used for shaving from his field glass case. However, the disappearing moon provided inadequate light. In another uncharacteristic move, Winley dared a personal observation. Behind a snow-covered fir tree, a dark figure brandished a shred of cloth.

“I believe he is waving a flag,” Winley informed the others.

“A white flag? The international symbol of being a pansy?” responded the comic. “What? You give the Kraut that stupid hanky of yours so he could give himself up?”

“Quiet.” Captain Winley stood up.

“What are you doing? There could be others! You don’t know what he’s up to. Winnie, hold on.” Larsen shuffled toward the barn door. The door had detached from the hinges, and a three-inch gap formed between the door and jamb.

The two other soldiers also took strategic positions. The first man skirted to another broken-out window opened to the front, and the second snuck out the back and around the side of the barn.

From his vantage point, Larsen watched the figure emerge from behind the pine tree and slowly make his way forward. The man was thin and wore a German officer’s gray, double-breasted, wool overcoat. The insignia on the right collar revealed him as part of the *Waffen-SS*. On his head he placed a cap of the high command, not a helmet. He held out his arms spread eagle, the white cloth prominent in his dark gloves. Larsen saw no weapon as the man continued toward the barn.

Winley, Larsen and the private at the other window presented their rifles. Three barrels from three angles were aimed directly at the man’s chest. The fourth American remained hidden outside and scanned the forest. The German officer acknowledged the weapons and proceeded forward.

Standing to the side of the window and tracing the German with his gun sight, Winley could see this was no foot soldier. The man was a first lieutenant. Winley suddenly realized that the officer must have known they were in the barn yet took no aggressive action.

Accordingly, Winley took no action. Many Germans were deserting, so he watched.

The SS officer reached the barn door, less than two yards from the tip of Larsen’s barrel. Winley re-aimed inside the barn. With arms still raised, the German pushed open the leaning slab

of wood with his boot. The private outside the barn, too apprehensive to notice the sub-freezing temperatures, tried to recon the meadow: nothing but darkness and falling snow.

The moon, now fully covered by clouds and floating low in the sky, withdrew its light. Inside, the wanderer became nothing more than a faint silhouette in the doorway.

“Halt.” Winley didn’t know what else to say. Although his university education allowed some measure of invention, it was no substitute for experience. He despised relying on instinct, and not knowing the answer made him uncomfortable. He held his rifle raised in caution, and fear.

The officer stopped and said nothing.

Larsen, legs wobbling, pressed the muzzle into the back of the intruder’s neck. Winley went for the gas lantern. He propped his rifle next to a small shelf. He reached inside his overcoat and removed the matches next to a pack of cigarettes. He really wanted a smoke now. In a single flick he lit a match, and the lantern produced a pale, blue-white glow.

Larsen hid his fear from the artificial light.