

UMBRIA, 1944

“It was as cold as hell that night.

We’d pinched a hen from the last farm we’d passed, cooked it quick, then peed on the fire.

Couldn’t keep a fire going, could we? We knew that they were looking for us...”

“Who told you they were coming, Grandad?”

“You didn’t ask things like that, young Sergio. Not in the Resistance.”

“Why not, Grandad?”

“They told you what to do. You did it, or they shot you. Bang! So, there we were up on the hillside, lying in ambush, whipped raw by the wind, taking turns keeping watch with these binoculars we’d picked up on the last raid. Carl Zeiss – Jena. Spectacular glasses, believe me. You could see from here to Perugia with ‘em.”

“You, and who else, Grandad?”

“There was seven of us on watch that night. And all you could hear was the sound of our teeth. They wasn’t only chattering because of the cold, mind. We knew we might be dead that night. Then, of a sudden, someone whispers, ‘There they are!’”

“The Jerries, Grandad?”

“That’s right, Sergio. Down in the valley, spread out across the meadow, making for the Argenti farmhouse...”

“That old place on the hill near us?”

“That’s the one. Twelve Jerry soldiers in leather boots and steel helmets, each one carrying a machine gun. And that was when the fog came down.”

He was telling the story for the umpteenth time.

The important thing was that everyone should know. Even Sergio, his only grandson.

Sergio was old enough now, and Grandad Brunori told the story every chance he got. Most

people didn't believe him, but those that did made the Sign of the Cross and went home looking over their shoulders in the dark.

Sergio stared at him, eyes wide, taking in every word.

"Those Jerries had orders to blast the living sh... well, to kill us dead..."

"But you're still here, Grandad," Sergio whispered.

"We was saved by the fog. Like I said. As thick as a... you know, that Persian carpet in the living-room? All thick and fluffy, like? And just a glimmer of a Moon, no light coming out of it. We couldn't see a thing, but we heard it, all right."

"What did you hear, then?"

"A scream in the woods. Long, and horrible. Then another one. And another one after that. Then, a howl that froze the blood in your veins, and stopped your heart from beating."

"Did you run when you heard it?"

"Run, lad? We had to stop them Jerries."

"So, what did you do?"

"We waited, didn't we? Loaded up, a bullet in the breech, ready for firing. Told the others to do the same, for all the use it was. You couldn't see the end of your rifle for the fog. We stayed that way all night. On guard, in position, ready for anything."

Sergio nodded, his face set stern and stiff, as if he was on guard with his Grandad.

"Next morning, down in the woods... You wouldn't believe what we saw, lad. We'd heard the shooting, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, but it didn't last long. And they hadn't come looking for us. Where were the Jerries? That was the question. At dawn, I gave the order, didn't I? Advance! For all I knew, they were down there waiting for us..."

"Were they, Grandad?"

"Well... they were, and they weren't. They were dead, lad. Every last one of them. Twelve men torn to shreds, thrown away like bits of old paper. Arms and heads and legs and guts all over the place, the ground sopping wet with blood."

“Was it wolves, Grandad?”

“Not wolves, lad. We saw the wolves... They was hiding in the wood, their eyes bright like diamonds in the gloom. They ran off when they saw us coming, more scared than we were.

There’d been a massacre, but it wasn’t the wolves that did it.”

“Who was it, Grandad? Who killed the Jerries?”

“I’ll tell you, lad, but on one condition.”

“What’s that, Grandad?”

“Don’t you go telling this to you mother...”
