

In any man who dies there dies with
him his first

 snow and kiss and fight...

Not people die but worlds die in
them.

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(1932–2017)

Prologue

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The road was long and straight, and the dark forest pressed on to the verge on both sides. Heaped snow, ploughed from the previous winter, was still frozen and had become an even higher bank from the fresh snowfall. He lengthened his stride and ran faster towards the rising sun.

He dared not stop.

The sun had reached the top of the trees either side of the chill, sunless gulley of a road. His laboured breathing muted the sound of the first vehicle. Instinct made him turn. Another vehicle was travelling behind that, its headlights weaving. There were probably twenty men in pursuit.

He leapt over the snow ledge on the side of the road and ducked beneath the overhanging branches. A slender track channelled between the accumulated snow and ice on the side of the road and where the tree trunks barred his way into the forest. He heard the engines change pitch. They were slowing. He ran; branches caught his face and he raised an arm. A rattle of gunfire cut the air above his head. He cursed his own stupidity. By brushing the branches away from his face he had disturbed the snow lying on them and the fine powder left low on the tree had been seen. He kept running, ducking

lower, avoiding the branches. The thwack of bullets hit the trees where he had been moments before. They were shooting wildly. Ripping through the air. A storm of treebark and snow.

His breath came hard. The cold air raw in his lungs. And then he ran out of track. He plunged into the low branches. Felt them whip his face. Searing pain scorched his thigh. He stumbled as another bullet tore into his side. Ignoring the pain he ran on. He was leaking blood. Leaving a trail. The distant sound of dogs echoing through the forest. His foot caught a root, tumbling him into deep snow. He slammed into a tree, the wind knocked out of him. He needed a moment to draw breath. He shook clear the pain and the sweat from his eyes. He could hear them now. Voices calling to each other. Fearful. Of him. He dared to close his eyes for a moment. More gunfire.

And he remembered what had brought him here.