

# CHAPTER ONE

**2 August 1943**

**Near Palermo, Sicily**

**0600 hours**

“We got a waver,” Lieutenant Eddie Harkins said when he spotted the GI up ahead. A soldier was flagging them with both arms, right near a dirt-road turnoff marked with a hand-lettered sign saying 11TH FIELD HOSP.

“Two hands. Must be more than one bedpan missing.”

Harkins directed these comments at his driver, Bobby Ray Thomas, who sat shivering in the passenger seat of their jeep. Malaria. Sweating and shaky, too sick to drive but not wanting to let Harkins down. Harkins had been behind the wheel all night and now, just after dawn and coming off twenty-four hours straight duty, he and Thomas were exhausted bone deep.

Since the invasion began on July 10, over a hundred thousand GIs and British Tommies had poured ashore, engulfing first the southern and then the western end of the island, overwhelming the roads until nothing could move, drinking the wells dry, looting stores of wine, driving up prices of everything from whores to fresh food, leaving the detritus of battle covering the sun-scorched landscape. Every roadside was littered with discarded ration cans and cigarette packs, fire-blackened German and Italian war equipment, bloody bandages, used condoms, splintered furniture, filthy clothing, dead burros, and the occasional unburied enemy soldier, bloated and black and stripped of his shoes.

“We’ve turned this place into a shithole,” Harkins said to Thomas that morning, when first light revealed that they’d parked in a field alongside a dozen dead cows.

“We liberated them from the Germans,” Thomas had offered, mock-serious. “And from the Fascists.”

“I bet they’re overcome with gratitude,” Harkins countered. He got his red hair and light blue eyes from his mother, but he’d inherited from his father a mistrust of all landlords and liberators.

For the past six days, Harkins and his platoon of twenty-five military police soldiers, riding in eight jeeps, had been shepherding columns of American war machines—tanks, trucks and wreckers, jeeps and trailers hauling bulldozers, ambulances and big Dodge staff cars, all of it crammed onto the patchwork of dirt trails that passed for roads in western Sicily, all of it headed to Palermo, where Harkins had promised his men a dip in the sea. In the meantime, everyone was struck dumb by the heat.

Harkins' neck was sunburned, raw. There were salt stains on his trousers where the sweat had dried repeatedly; his socks were damp as dishrags inside his GI shoes.

Thomas opened his eyes; his voice was cracked and just loud enough to be heard over the jeep engine.

"We should have invaded Ireland," he said. "I read it's always green and cool there."

"You should write to General Eisenhower," Harkins said.

Thomas dreamed of someplace cool. Harkins, who'd been running on little sleep for what seemed like months, craved rest. Now it looked like they'd be sidetracked; Harkins hoped it wouldn't be for long.

The soldier up ahead had spotted the military police brassards they wore, big armbands with "MP" in white letters. This happened more than Harkins would have expected—GIs coming to them—but it was usually for help with some small, impossible-to-solve crime: someone took my pocketknife, somebody stole my poker winnings, some jackass pissed on my bedroll.

Harkins let the jeep roll to a stop. "Big crime spree here?"

The soldier, whose helmet had the red cross on white circle of a medic, saluted then jumped into the back. He looked shaken, a little bug-eyed.

"Glad you guys were driving by," the medic said. "Straight ahead. You'll see everybody. Look for First Sergeant Drake."

The dirt track into the hospital compound was lined with dozens of U.S. Army tents of various sizes, all of them sun-blasted and coated with dust. Harkins had seen medical units positioned throughout the battle zone, chains of care starting with small aid stations just behind the front. There, medics and perhaps a single doctor treated minor wounds and injuries and, for more serious cases, stabilized a wounded soldier for evacuation to the rear.

Here—Harkins estimated they were some twenty-five to thirty miles behind the front—field hospitals did major surgery. Soldiers who required long-term care were moved to more permanent station hospitals even farther from the fighting. A GI in Harkins' platoon, a Californian named Maretsky, talked endlessly about the "million-dollar wound," one that didn't hurt too much and wouldn't mean permanent disability, but was serious enough to warrant evacuation all the way back along the chain to some cushy stateside hospital, with "fresh orange juice and fresher nurses."

A hundred yards along, Harkins found a small crowd of fifteen or twenty soldiers standing in the wide alley between two large tents. Some of them had their heads pressed together, whispering. A few stood with arms folded, looking worried. The crowd parted a bit and Harkins saw the body, felt the adrenaline jolt he knew from his days as a street cop in Philadelphia. Beside the corpse was a big man wearing the stripes of a first sergeant and a slouch campaign hat that was twenty years old if it was a day. He looked at Harkins, checked the MP brassard, and tipped his chin down in silent greeting.

The dead man lay on his stomach in the dust, left leg straight behind, right leg cocked, arms shoulder high and bent at ninety degrees, like he was demonstrating how to crawl beneath barbed wire. His helmet was a few feet away; his hair on the right side was dark and curly. The top left side of his skull was a tangle of blood and brains. Exit wound.

In his six years as a patrolman, Harkins had worked a couple dozen murder scenes, and five or six times he'd been the first cop to arrive. The exhaustion he'd felt a moment ago faded as his training and the adrenaline kicked in, like someone had flipped his own personal power switch to "on."

*Secure the crime scene.*

He looked around. Didn't seem much chance the killer was lurking in the crowd, waiting to shoot someone else.

A second man was beside the first sergeant, close to the victim's head, bent over, hands on knees.

"I'm going to ask you to move away from him," Harkins said. "Just move back a few yards. Please."

The man straightened up but didn't move. He had a stethoscope in his front pants pocket, two silver bars of a captain on his collar. A doctor.

"He was right behind me," the doc said. "Running for the shelter right behind me. He said something and I kept going. But he never made it."

Harkins looked in the direction the dead man had been running. About twenty yards along, three rows of sandbags marked the top of a slit-trench air-raid shelter.

The first sergeant put his hand on the doctor's shoulder, gently nudging him back.

"What did he say?" Harkins asked.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t hear because of the yelling and the sirens and ack-ack.”

There’d been a German air raid at first light, one of those surprise last-ditch sorties by whatever shattered remains of the Luftwaffe wanted to test Allied air control of Sicily.

When the first American and British troops came ashore on July 10, most of the Italian units collapsed immediately, surrendering rather than risking death for their cartoonish dictator, Mussolini. But the Germans were proving as formidable here as they had in North Africa, as they no doubt would prove formidable as they backed up all the way to Berlin, if that day ever came.

“Maybe it was—what do you call it, a strafing run.” This from a nurse in the crowd.

Harkins looked around for evidence that the German plane had machine-gunned the area, but there was no other damage. The staff just didn’t want it to be a shooting at close range. A murder.

“I’m First Sergeant Drake,” the big man said. He did not salute or offer a handshake, just gave Harkins a once-over.

“Lieutenant Harkins, military police.”

Drake’s eyes flicked to the MP brassard.

“I guess you figured that part out,” Harkins said. “Anyone touch the body?”

“You mean besides the murderer?” Drake said, a bit smartass.

Conscious of the twenty sets of eyes on him, Harkins knelt beside the corpse for a closer look. There was some stippling below the wound, a tattoo of small black dots from the powder, no contact burn from a barrel. The shooter had been behind the man, holding the gun at an upward angle. The entrance wound was large; Harkins guessed a government-issue .45 caliber pistol. Only about fifty thousand of those on the island. The exit wound, left side, top of his head, was massive, pieces of skull mixed with blood-soaked hair.

Harkins saw, from the corner of his eye, someone step into the clearing Drake had created around the body.

“I came as soon as I heard, First Sergeant.”

Harkins turned to see a tall full-bird colonel with a narrow face and sharp widow's peak. He wore a clean uniform with a silver eagle on his right lapel point and the caduceus of the Army Medical Corps on the other. Another doctor, probably the hospital commander. Behind him, a nurse wearing captain's bars. She put her hand to her mouth when she saw the body up close.

"Oh, my God," the colonel said. "It's Stephenson, right? Can't we get him moved?"

"I'd rather we didn't move him just yet, sir," Harkins said.

"Who are you?"

Harkins thought about saluting, skipped it since Drake kept his thumbs hooked into his belt, like he was waiting for a bus.

"Lieutenant Harkins, military police."

Harkins wanted to pass this mess off to the provost marshal, the command section that had jurisdiction for crimes committed in the war zone.

"I think we should wait for the provost, sir. And we might want to get some photos."

A couple of spectators sucked in their breath.

"Crime scene photos," Harkins explained, eyes still on the commander. "For the investigators. It'll be helpful in the long run."

The colonel studied Harkins for a moment, then looked at Drake and tilted his head to the crowd.

"You people go back to work now, hear?" Drake said to the circle of onlookers.

The enlisted men moved smartly; the officers—doctors and nurses—either scattered or made a pretense of moving. Clearly the first sergeant was a not a man to trifle with.

"Probably a good idea to wait a bit, Colonel," Drake said, low, so no one else would hear.

"It's just that poor Stephenson is there, with his head blown open," the colonel said. "And it's upsetting the rest of the staff." It was a polite dismissal. "I'd like to see him taken to the morgue, First Sergeant, if you don't mind."

After a beat, Drake managed an unenthusiastic, "Right away, sir."

The colonel walked away without introducing himself to Harkins.

The first sergeant stepped back and pointed at two orderlies, who had appeared with a canvas litter. When the privates moved toward the body, Harkins nodded to Bobby Ray Thomas, who blocked them. The stretcher-bearers stopped, unsure.

"Sorry, First Sergeant," Harkins said. "All due respect, we should wait for the provost, for the investigators. They're going to want to see the scene."

Drake looked a little sad, like he was about to get into something he'd tried to avoid. He was older than most noncoms Harkins knew; in his late thirties, at least, with crow's-feet framing small brown eyes. Probably Regular Army before the war.

"You heard the colonel, Lieutenant," Drake said, stepping closer. He had five inches on Harkins, who was five ten. Thick across the chest and shoulders, with a slight paunch. Big arms and hands. Harkins imagined the enlisted men in the unit avoided pissing him off. Also not a bad strategy for lieutenants.

"This is my hospital, and that's one of our docs," Drake said, calm, maybe a bit menacing. "Go find a traffic jam that needs unscrewing."

Harkins had been chewed out by lots of sergeants when he was a trainee back in the States, but here in the combat zone most noncommissioned officers at least made a show of military courtesy, even for junior officers. Harkins felt his hands tense into fists, forced them to relax. No margin in arguing with the ranking noncom in front of his people.

"It may be your hospital, First Sergeant, but for the moment it's my crime scene," Harkins said, his voice even, almost a whisper. "I'm sure you and the colonel are going to want a thorough investigation. We're not talking about some dumbass being late for formation. Pretty sure we're looking at a murder here."

Behind the first sergeant, the orderlies fidgeted with their stretcher.

"Are you even a real cop?" Drake asked.

"I was a cop in Philadelphia before the war."

"A detective?"

“A patrolman.”

The whole truth was that Harkins felt like an accidental soldier. He'd enlisted right after Pearl Harbor, only partly because of what everyone called, as if it were one word, the-dirty-Jap-sneak-attack. He'd also joined to get away from a brewing scandal at home: a woman who was someone else's wife, and a husband who was both suspicious and a detective in the same precinct as Harkins.

The army made him a military policeman because he'd been a Philadelphia cop, and he got sent to Officer Candidate School because of good scores on some aptitude tests, and now here he was, battling the Hun, or at least battling sunstroke. He was determined to keep his head down, do what he was told and whatever good work he could, and not get killed.

“Look, I've secured dozens of murder scenes,” Harkins continued. “Waiting for detectives. I know what they want to see.”

The first sergeant shook his head. “Whole goddamn army full of amateurs. Did you at least send for the provost?”

“Just about to do that. And when he gets here, he's going to make better progress if the crime scene isn't compromised.”

“Make it quick,” Drake said. “Then let's get him out of here. We got a hospital to run.”

It was just at that moment, when Harkins was savoring his little victory, that Bobby Ray Thomas fainted. Passed out cold. Didn't crumple at the knees, but fell like a tree onto his face. A couple of the nurses reached him first.

“He's got malaria,” Harkins said. “Fevers, then chills.”

Drake pointed at the orderlies with the litter. They rolled the driver, who was barely conscious, onto his side and got him loaded.

“We'll get some fluids in him, see if he should be admitted,” one of the nurses said.

When Harkins turned around again, Drake wore an unfriendly smile.

“Crackerjack operation you're running, Lieutenant. The investigation is obviously in good hands.”

Then the first sergeant turned on his heel. "OK, back to work," he said to the few people remaining. "This shitshow is over."

*This day keeps getting better and better,* Harkins thought.

Harkins asked the duty sergeant to send a runner to the provost marshal at corps headquarters. Since everyone was on the move, very few units had static command posts. But the headquarters of the parent unit, II Corps, was gigantic, with scores of vehicles and hundreds of soldiers—mail clerks and typists, radio operators and mechanics, cooks and translators and photographers—who did everything but fight. Harkins had read somewhere that for every front-line GI firing a weapon, there were seven men behind him keeping the beast fed and in motion.

With so many men moving around, many of them with their own vehicles, it was inevitable that some GIs spent chunks of time doing things other than what they were supposed to be doing; "goldbricking," in Army lingo. And not every soldier spent his time well.

In fact, Harkins thought there was a sense of barely restrained lawlessness behind the battle lines, which were moving steadily, bloodily eastward. Men who might have been upright citizens their entire lives were tempted to petty crime; men who were already criminals picked up where they left off at home: robbery, rape, assault. Harkins had seen it in North Africa, where the local people whose lives were overturned by war were brown and powerless and unable to communicate with the GIs. Sicily was more of the same. As the fighting pushed east, there was a vacuum of authority behind the front, and the zone of chaos expanded; it would take a while for the Allies to re-establish the local police functions and civil authority.

He doubted the provost himself would come, but he'd send a deputy. In the meantime, Harkins asked a soldier to cover the body with a blanket, then approached a few of the nurses who drifted back after Drake had cleared the area. From them Harkins learned the victim was Captain Meyers Stephenson, a surgeon. The doctor who'd been running ahead of Stephenson was a Captain Gallo.

"And that colonel was the hospital commander," one of the women said. "Boone. Colonel Walter Boone."

"And that first sergeant is Drake?"

"Irwin Drake."

"How about that nurse, the captain? She came up with the colonel."



Two of the women exchanged glances but said nothing.

“You do know who I’m talking about, right?”

Finally, one of them spoke up. “Captain Palmer. Phyllis Palmer. She’s the head nurse.”

Harkins wrote the names in his pocket notebook as the nurses gave him a rundown of the morning. The sirens went off while it was still totally dark. Anyone not on duty headed for the slit-trench shelters; doctors, nurses, and orderlies in the recovery wards stayed with their patients and surgery continued in blacked-out tents. There was an antiaircraft unit, four trucks with quad .fifty machine guns, on a small hilltop beside the hospital compound. It would have been impossible to hear anything while those were firing, and none of these women had noticed Stephenson until the all clear sounded.

Harkins was still listening and writing when a jeep pulled up with a captain in the passenger seat—a deputy provost, Harkins hoped—and a private in the back. Time to turn this over to someone else and get some sleep. Harkins thanked the nurses and said someone would get back to them with more questions.

The captain climbed out of the vehicle, waved his hand in front of his face in an effort to clear the dust. He didn’t approach Harkins or the body, so Harkins walked toward him. Stuck his notebook in the pocket of his shirt, which was salt-stained, sweat-soaked, and already sticking to him. Ninety degrees at seven in the morning. Fucking August in Sicily. Harkins had been perpetually sunburned in North Africa, where he’d landed back in November as part of Operation Torch, the first big American offensive of the war in Europe. He’d probably stay lobster red until he left this island, too.

“Morning, sir. I’m Lieutenant Harkins.”

“Captain Adams, deputy provost.”

Adams held an army-issue canvas briefcase in front of him. His face was shiny with sweat, his collar and shirtfront dark. On his left collar point was the insignia of the Judge Advocate General Corps.

“You asked for a photographer, right?” Adams said, punching back the round spectacles that were sliding down his nose.

The man who climbed out of the jeep wore a private’s single stripe but looked like he was forty. He had a camera with a flash attachment on a strap around his neck, a cigarette stuck to his lip.

“You a real photographer or an army photographer?” Harkins asked.

“Ten years shooting Chicago crime scenes,” the private said, eyes scanning past Harkins to the body beyond. “I guess I know what to do.”

“Make sure you get some ground-level shots, OK?”

“Ain’t my first rodeo, Lieutenant.”

“All right, then.”

Harkins turned and walked toward the body, Adams falling in beside him, holding his canvas bag even tighter.

“Captain Meyers Stephenson. Surgeon. Single gunshot to the head, a forty-five, I think. Probably as he was running toward the shelter during the air raid this morning. All that noise.” Harkins pointed at the anti-aircraft battery. “I haven’t found anyone who saw or heard anything.”

Harkins knelt beside the draped corpse to remove the blanket for the photographer, and then realized Adams wasn’t with him. The captain had stopped several paces away, looking sick.

“You OK, Captain?” Harkins asked.

“I . . . uh . . . I’ve never been to a crime scene.”

“Oh,” Harkins said. He lifted the blanket, used it to fan away gathering flies. They buzzed around his face instead, droning like little fighter planes.

“He’s gonna get ripe fast in this heat,” the photographer said as he started shooting.

“You a criminal lawyer, sir?” Harkins asked.

Adams had a tight grip on the satchel, like he was trying to wring water from it. He removed his helmet. A few thin strands of hair stuck to his sweaty scalp, which he wiped with his shirtsleeve. Some flies attacked, and Adams waved one arm, to no effect.

“What? Uh, no. I was writing contracts for the War Department in Washington when this chance to come overseas opened up.”

“You volunteered to ship out?”

Adams, who had been staring wide-eyed at the body, now looked at Harkins, tried a weak smile. "I didn't want to have to tell my grandchildren that throughout the whole of the great World War Two I lived in Maryland, where I was wounded once by a stuck typewriter key."

"OK, then," Harkins said, nodding. "Let me show you what we have. Can you come a little closer, sir?"

Adams took two short steps toward the body. Harkins used his pencil to point to the entrance wound. Adams nodded, his lips pressed together.

"Come around this side," Harkins said, directing Adams so that he could see the top of Stephenson's head. "Exit wound."

"Is that . . . ?"

"Skull fragments," Harkins said.

Adams brought his canvas bag to his mouth and turned away. He made it to a drainage ditch behind the hospital tent before losing his breakfast.

Harkins stood and got out of the way of the photographer, who was unfazed by the scene. Then he followed the captain.

"You all right, sir?"

Adams nodded yes, then leaned over again, choking up a bit more.

Harkins rubbed his eyes, which felt like they had sand beneath the lids. The photographer was shaking his head, probably thinking what Harkins was thinking. No way Captain Adams was going to take over the investigation this morning.

"Are you the provost marshal?"

It was Drake, the hospital first sergeant. When he walked up to Adams, the lawyer wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Drake did not salute.

"Captain Theodore Adams, Sergeant. Deputy provost."

"That's *first* sergeant, Captain," Drake said.

Harkins had made this mistake before. It took a long time and a lot of work to become a first sergeant, and the job came with massive responsibility. Drake was the top

noncommissioned officer in the unit and oversaw the daily operation of the hospital outside of the actual medical work: everything from who set up the tents and where to who pulled guard duty. He had to look out for two hundred enlisted men and thirty-plus officers, all so that the medicos could concentrate on saving lives. First sergeants deserved to be called by their full title. Still, Harkins thought, Drake didn't have to be such a gold-plated ass about everything.

"Right," Adams said, intimidated. "First Sergeant."

"You going to take over this investigation from our patrolman friend here?" Drake asked, tilting his head toward Harkins.

"I'll initiate the paperwork, yes."

"Can we move the body now?"

Harkins looked at the photographer, who gave him a thumbs-up. He had the shots. Harkins met Adams's eyes and nodded.

"Yes, ah, First Sergeant," Adams said. "We can move the body now."

"You got a stomach bug?" Drake asked.

"No, I . . . I've never seen a murder victim before."

Drake looked at Harkins, who could almost read the older man's mind. *Fucking amateurs.* "Well, Captain, you're going to need a little more grit than that to hunt down a murderer."

Drake motioned Adams closer to the body, then put his arm around the man to keep Adams from turning away. The first sergeant was either teaching him or messing with him. Harkins thought it a toss-up.

"Entrance wound at left occipital bone. Exit at the frontal bone, of course, forward of the coronal structure, I'd say. Left cerebral hemisphere destroyed pretty completely."

As Drake talked and pointed, the flies came back, and that was all Adams could take. He stumbled back to the drainage ditch.

Harkins stepped beside Drake, who said, "So far, looks like neither you or the deputy provost are up to the task."

Harkins looked around. The orderlies Drake had brought along were not close enough to overhear.

“You don’t seem all that upset by what happened here this morning. First Sergeant.”

Drake looked at Harkins for a long few seconds, looking sad, maybe a tiny bit amused. “Are you that much of a dumbass, Lieutenant? You think the first person you talk to is going to, what? Confess?”

Harkins, who’d been hoping exactly that, didn’t answer.

“Now, shall we do what the colonel wanted and get this body out of here?” Drake said.

“Sure.”

When Drake walked away, Harkins motioned to the orderlies. “You got a morgue, right?”

One of the men spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust. “Yeah, but they won’t keep him long. In this heat he’ll be cooked like a Coney Island dog in two hours. Got a temporary cemetery about a half mile from here.”

They unfolded the stretcher, then covered Captain Stephenson with the blanket, gently tucking it in along the sides as if to make him comfortable. When they lifted him, Harkins—acting more out of habit than faith—crossed himself.

He found Adams sitting on a supply crate around the corner of the big tent.

“Well, I made an ass of myself, I guess,” Adams said.

“Lots of people lose it at their first crime scene.”

“Yeah, but I gave our friend the chance to show he’s boss, right?”

“I’m pretty sure he never doubted that he’s the boss,” Harkins said. The adrenaline rush was fading. He wanted to check on Thomas, then get back to his tent and close his eyes.

Adams stood. “What now?” he said.

“What do you mean?”

"I'm going to start the paperwork saying that there's been a murder here," Adams said. "How are you going to proceed?"

"I'm *proceeding* back to my bivouac," Harkins said. "I'm not an investigator. That's your job."

"I'm not a detective."

"Neither am I. I was a beat cop. You need somebody popped in the head with a nightstick, I'm your guy. But this is serious stuff. Aren't there any detectives or former detectives with the provost marshal?"

"We're stretched thin," Adams said. "This one belongs to you and me."

"Captain, I've been on duty for twenty-four—" Harkins looked at his watch. "Make that twenty-six hours. My driver dropped over with a fever. We were headed back to link up with the rest of my platoon and get some sleep when we got flagged down. Hell, we just happened to be driving by."

"Good thing," Adams said. When Harkins didn't respond, he added, "Well, good thing for me, I guess. Not so great for you."

Harkins pressed the heels of his hands to his eye sockets. He wanted to look up and see a potbellied Philadelphia detective, somebody with a bourbon habit and thirty years' experience. But there was just Adams, with his crumpled briefcase and a string of vomit on his shirt.

"Look, I've done exactly zero investigations, unless you count contract scams," Adams said. "You've at least got some idea of what to do next, right?"

"Kill myself."

"What?"

"I said I guess I do, but I'm going to need help. There's got to be a hundred thousand GIs on this island. Somebody had to have been a detective, or at least a sheriff."

"Absolutely," Adams said. "I'll start looking right away. In the meantime, we both better get to work."

