

Chapter 1

The dull orange taxi, shuddering from age and abuse, rattled southbound along Pacific Avenue in San Pedro, California, towards the ocean. It was the summer of nineteen sixty-one and Private Ray Holland watched nervously from the simmering heat of the back seat as pawnshops and old war surplus stores passed by in haphazard fashion. Prosperous during the Second World War, this part of Los Angeles now suffered from too many years of peace. Times were hard here but for Ray Holland it was both scary and exciting. He'd passed his first big test by getting through basic training. That, along with the twenty-five pounds of fat that had been screamed off of him by several angry drill instructors, had given him a new confidence in himself. He was in the best shape of his life. But would that be enough? The answer kept him perched on the edge of the stained seat as the first of the pale green army buildings came into view on both sides of the street. Fort MacArthur: his first real duty station. He'd spent the last two and a half months thinking about today. He'd find out here if he had made the right decision. If he had what it takes.

"Fort Mac," said the driver, slowing down and turning left through the main gate. They passed an empty guard shack and drove alongside a vast green parade field. Ahead of them, an olive drab 1956 Chevrolet, with white Military Police markings, red light revolving, sat behind a blue pick-up truck. A tall, unsmiling MP motioned them to pass. His black holster stood out against the immaculate khaki uniform. It was the first time Holland had ever seen an MP up close.

"Some poor jerk getting the screws," muttered the cabby, looking through the rearview mirror. The dark eyes stared at Ray without blinking. "I hate the goddamn MPs. Everybody does. They're all bastards. I should know. I was in the stockade here during World War Two. Keep away from those assholes and you won't have any trouble. Know what I mean?" Ray nodded and looked out the window, wondering about the cabby's words. He'd heard them before, during basic. He also knew where he stood on the matter and he was relieved that the driver didn't ask him what outfit he was being assigned to. He watched two large ceremonial cannons come into view and then the car turned left again, past a towering flagpole, and entered a small deserted square, which was bordered by the main garrison buildings. The cab pulled over and scraped along the curb. "That's the Headquarters Orderly Room there. Good luck and remember what I said, soldier."

Holland thanked the driver, gave him three dollars and stepped into the blinding glare of summer. Hoisting the sixty-pound duffel bag onto his shoulder, he trudged up the six stairs into the office. A harried sergeant at the front desk took a copy of his orders and told him to wait outside till someone came to pick him up. Returning to the cement steps, Ray shielded his eyes from the sun. The long-sleeved khaki shirt, still damp from

the taxi ride, clung to his back. He squinted at the buildings and tried to calm himself down. The orange tiled roofs gave the place a Spanish flavor. The manicured lawns reeked of military neatness. He tried to forget that sergeants had been yelling at him for the last eight weeks and that they might start up again at any moment. It was the privilege of rank. But the Military Police had privileges too, and they stuck together, or so he'd heard. And he was about to become part of them. The hard way perhaps, but all he wanted was the chance to prove himself. A WAC in a pale green uniform walked past on the sidewalk below. Ray tried not to stare. That was another untested part of his life, which had figured in his decision to join up. Soldiers always had women in the movies. His first one was waiting somewhere and he would find her, too.

"Is your name Holland?" barked a deep voice.

Startled, Ray turned and saw another tall MP. This one carried plenty of beef and stared solemnly through dark sunglasses as he squeezed a small black rubber ball in his left hand. His bandaged nose appeared broken.

"YES, SIR." The words were out before he could choke them off. The big man broke into a grin.

"Yes, sir? Shit, you don't have to call me sir. I'm a private too. Are you the new MP?"

"Yes, I am. Here are my orders."

The MP glanced down at them and then back at Ray.

"Jesus. Tough break, Holland. My name is Tom Scranton and it looks like I'm your official welcoming committee. The first thing you can do is take off that fucking tie and relax. You wanna get heat stroke or something? You look pretty tense. Grab your bag and we'll walk over to the station and get you checked in. You're kind of small. How'd you get through MP School?"

"I didn't. I came here right from basic training."

"You didn't go to MP School?" Scranton looked down at him.

"They told me I wasn't tall enough, but I had a guarantee so they sent me here for On-the-Job Training."

"A guarantee? What's that?"

"It's a new thing the army came out with. If you enlist for three years, you get to choose your job or your overseas station."

"And you chose the MPs? You ain't nearly tall enough."

"I joined up three days before they changed the height requirement. I quit college so I could beat the deadline."

As they walked down the steps, Scranton shook his head, looking puzzled.

"You're kidding? Why do you want to be in the MPs? It's a shit job. You never get enough sleep. By the way, how tall are you anyway? About five foot...?"

"Seven," answered Holland, walking as straight as possible.

"I thought so. That's a strike against you. They're expecting someone bigger. Atila the Hun and King Richard think that size commands respect." Scranton rubbed his fingers lightly over his bandaged nose. "Size don't mean shit to a drunk."

"Who did you say thinks size is important?" asked Ray, wondering if he'd heard right.

"Atila the Hun, as he's known among his troops. Major A.T. Hunneywell. He's our Provost Marshal. Our police chief. A gung-ho son of a bitch. He used to have a

combat MP unit in Bumfuck Egypt or someplace. He really likes his men to be enthusiastic. And sharp, as does Sergeant King. They really like starched uniforms and spit-shined boots. I hate both of those pricks but don't let me spoil your first day." Scranton laughed and began pointing out and identifying the different buildings they passed. Holland marched through the heat, grateful for the warning and glimpse of what lay ahead. Between furtive glances at his new surroundings, he reminded himself that he had asked for this chance and that the army was fulfilling its promise.

Desk Sergeant Richard King ran a hand over his closely cropped, graying hair. He'd always been big but too many years of riding in a patrol car and sitting behind desks had transformed muscle into flab. He appeared lost in thought as he leaned way back in the swivel chair, watching the overhead fan turn slowly. Drafted in Nineteen Forty-Four, today marked the seventeenth year of an undistinguished military career. He was going nowhere slowly. Overseas orders were due this year which meant moving to another part of the world and trying to settle down a family that was falling apart.

"It's like a raffle," he said loudly.

Jenkins, his desk clerk, looked up from the typewriter and followed King's gaze to the ceiling. "You mean the fan?"

Sergeant King sat up and glared at him. "No, you shitbrain, I mean the army. It's all chance. I wish I knew where I was going."

"Oh, your orders. No need to worry about that, Sergeant. I'm sure the army will send you where they need your talents. There's some nice places out there."

"Don't get smart, Specialist. Just cuz they sent your ass to the Panama Canal Zone."

Jenkins raised his hands, palms outstretched and shrugged.

"Who says I didn't like it? Everyone should have a chance to wear bermuda shorts, knee socks and a pith helmet. That kind of heat is healthy for you. Cleans out your pores everyday." He gestured toward the open window behind them. "This would be cool weather down there. Anyway, don't be worrying about the unknown. Think of right now. The army is doing you a favor today. Scranton is bringing over a new MP. Just like you ordered. And just what you wanted. Right out of MP School. That means he's big and probably dumb, but it's a warm body at least and we could sure use a few more around here, especially our platoon."

King scowled. "We could use some real MPs, you mean. Not like half the guys we got now. I want someone who ain't afraid to kick ass. The best thing the army ever did was to raise the height requirement. They should have put it up to six feet. Anyhow, I am going to personally see that this new guy shapes up. I want him to be an example for the rest of you. Yeah: a real MP. Otherwise I might just make his life miserable." Sergeant King smiled for the first time that morning.