

RUINS OF WAR

by

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Chapter One

Munich, Germany: The American Zone of Occupation

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Criminal Investigator Mason Collins felt as though he were being whisked through the landscape of a bad dream, the charred bones of what had once been Munich passing before him. His driver maneuvered the jeep down the street as if in a road rally, swerving around piles of rubble, horse-drawn wagons and languid pedestrians. He honked the horn yet again when an elderly couple pushing a wooden cart stacked with their few belongings tried to cross the street at the wrong time.

“Dumbass krauts,” the driver yelled as they blew past.

“Corporal, you know the murder victim is already dead?” Mason said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then dial the speed down to somewhere below bat-out-of-hell.”

The corporal slowed but purposefully veered narrowly by two ex-German soldiers still dressed in their shredded uniforms then sent up his middle finger, “*Sieg Heil*, motherfuckers!”

“I’m only going to say it one more time, Corporal. You will can that crap, right now.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but you feel sorry for these people? First they’re saluting Hitler and wanting to take over the world, and now look at ‘em.”

“Yeah, look at them.”

Mason nodded at the pitiful scene before their jeep. People huddled against the biting wind as they shuffled along a street lined with the blackened shells of buildings rising from a graveyard of brick and stone. The heavy gauze of snowfall made them appear as lost souls wandering purgatory, custodians of the dead buried beneath the rubble. Except for the old and the very young, few men moved among them. Women, always women. A line of women extended for blocks, waiting hours in the cold for a Red Cross center to open, hoping to receive a loaf of bread and a few ounces of lard. Others scoured the rubble looking for wood not already burned to fend off the cold. They formed knotted daisy chains salvaging brick and stone from the ruins, inspiring a new German word, *trümmerfrauen*, meaning ‘rubble women.’

The corporal was a boy of no more than 17 and fresh off the streets of New York City. His name was Sal Mangarella, but everyone called him Salamander. A fitting nickname — all nose and chin. He noticed Mason looking at him, and hunched his shoulders as if anticipating further rebuke. He relaxed when Mason looked away. “Word is, they offered you a discharge, but you turned them down.”

Mason waited a moment before responding. “The army needs experienced cops, so I re-upped.”

“Pardon my speaking freely, sir...”

“That doesn’t seem to be a problem for you.”

“Yes, sir... what kind of crackpot wants to stay in this hellhole when they could be a cop back in the states?”

Mason remained silent. There was no way he was going to get into it with a snott-nosed kid whose only notion of the war was getting drunk and chasing frauleins.

War-torn Germany *was* a hellhole. The nation had surrendered seven months ago, but millions would continue to die. Disease, starvation, and winter’s icy embrace had replaced

the bullets and bombs. And murder flourished in the ruins. Retribution, greed, madness, jealousy and desperation all fed a hungry beast. Murder happened every day, hundreds in a week, thousands in a month.

Mason had been a reluctant guest of the German Army from December of 1944 until liberated in mid-April. After a two-month stint in a hospital with typhoid fever and dysentery, he'd been offered a discharge. Much to the surprise and delight of the army staff, Mason had volunteered to stay on. He'd worked an interminable six months at a desk job at US Army headquarters in Frankfurt, before his request to be transferred to the Criminal Investigation Division had finally been accepted. And now, in less than two weeks since he'd arrived in Munich, he'd landed his first homicide. It felt good to be back in the saddle.

Maybe here, among these ruins, Mason could find a new beginning, regeneration in a festering wound.

Manganella made another sharp turn, nearly throwing Mason into his lap. Mason was about to chew him out, when the corporal slammed on the brakes. Two U.S. Army military policemen, or MPs, held their hands high for them to stop. They stood in front of two jeeps parked to block the road. Four other MPs and two officers formed a wall that blocked Mason's view of whatever caused the screaming Bedlam behind them.

"You're going to have to turn around, sir," one of the MPs said. "All hell's broken loose. We've got a bunch of Germans and DPs fighting it out over a cellar full of wine bottles."

Mason stood up in the jeep and peered over their heads. It was a madhouse. More than a hundred civilians were jammed in the narrow street acting as if possessed. Women screamed as they fought each other, pulling hair or using wine bottles as clubs. Old men whacked anyone within striking range, while clutching bottles to their chests. In the midst of the pandemonium emaciated children darted between sparing adults, taking boxes dropped

during the fighting then disappearing into the gaps of the collapsed buildings. People emerged from what looked like a simple hole in the rubble with wine bottles or whole cases tucked in their arms. Some men stood among the fighters, downing as much wine as they could, and then throwing away the empty and breaking the neck of the next. They paid no heed to the broken glass or the swings of their alcohol-fueled competitors.

An MP sergeant stood on a jeep with a bullhorn shouting in English, “Disperse. This is property of the US Army. You will be arrested. Disperse. That’s an order.”

Corporal Manganella laughed at the spectacle, while off to Mason’s right a small group of journalists took notes or snapped pictures. One of the photographers caught Mason’s eye, an unexpected beauty among the beasts. She had a broad face and thin, upturned nose framing stunning blue eyes. Her black hair was pulled back in an up-do victory-roll style beneath a billed hat with the circular patch of “War Correspondent” sewn onto the crown. The journalist snapped another picture while sporting a mischievous smile. She, like the rest, was having a field day reporting on today’s version of chaos while the helpless MPs looked on.

Mason jumped out of the jeep and stepped up to the master sergeant. “You better get this under control, Sergeant, or you’re going to have a *real* riot on your hands.”

The sergeant whirled around. “I’m goddamned trying—” He stopped when he saw Mason’s CID bars. “We’re trying the best we can, sir. The damned radios we’ve been issued are worthless. I had to send someone to headquarters for backup. They should be here in a few minutes.”

Mason climbed up onto one of the MP jeeps, which had a mounted .30 caliber machinegun. He pulled back the charger and whirled it on the crowd.

The sergeant yelled, “Sir, that’s against reg—”

Mason fired a long burst above the heads of the crowd. The blasts from the machinegun were deafening. The bullets shattered brick and stone.

The crowd stopped in unison, stupefied by the man with the machinegun. Some froze with fists or bottles still poised to strike. Mason shouted in German, "Stop this now. Get out of here. You do not want me lowering my aim."

There was no argument, no resuming the fight. Those who had been beating on their opponent a moment earlier were now helping them to their feet. They all began to disperse, women holding each other for support, drunken men staggering away, all leaving their once prized booty on the ground or dropping it to the pavement with a crash. MP medics rushed in to take care of the injured sprawled on the ground.

"Who the hell is the moron on that machinegun?" someone yelled at the far left side of the street. A bull-sized master sergeant came running up, red faced with anger.

The sergeant pointed at Mason.

The master sergeant stopped in mid-stride, came to stiff attention and saluted. "A fine idea, sir. I'm not familiar with that method of crowd control. I'm wondering, sir, if you would have carried out your threat if they hadn't stopped."

"Have you been on the receiving end of machinegun fire, sergeant?"

"Can't say as I have, sir."

"I have. It's a great motivator."

"I'll remember that, sir. Anytime I want to make a point, I'll open fire on innocent civilians."

The master sergeant stiffened and waited to be chewed out for his insubordination. Instead, Mason smiled and held out his hand. "Mason Collins."

The sergeant's shoulders relaxed and he gave Mason a hardy handshake. "Pleased to meet you, sir. I'm Vincent Wolski. Actually, Warrant Officer Wolski, now that I'm with the CID. Colonel Walton told me I was to partner with you—"

"I don't need any partners," Mason said and started walking back to the jeep.

Wolski followed behind. "I'm just following orders, sir. What you do with that is up to you."

"You're CID?"

CID was the army's acronym for Criminal Investigation Division, the army's detective bureau.

"Just transferred me to the detachment in this morning from the 508th C Company. Been here for two months as an MP until the orders came through to join you guys. Didn't have time to change out my uniform. A driver was taking me to the crime scene when we ran into this mess."

The 508th Military Police Battalion was in charge of law enforcement for Munich and the surrounding areas.

Mason stopped and eyed him for a moment. The man was big enough to play tackle for the NFL, and Mason saw the keenness in his eyes. But Wolski's most endearing quality, Mason thought, would be his subversive sense of humor. "Tell your driver to go back to the station. You can ride with us."

"That was quite a display you put on back there," someone said behind him.

It was as much the velvety voice as the provocative statement that made Mason stop and turn around. The brunette reporter stood shoulder height and looked up at him with the same mischievous smile. She held out her hand. "Laura McKinnon with the Associated Press."

Mason shook her hand. "I don't talk to reporters."

“Why not? Are you afraid?”

“I saw you over there snapping pictures of a dangerous situation with a big smile on your face. That’s when a little alarm bell went off in my head.”

“It’s not everyday I see a soldier open fire on innocent civilians.”

“Well, ma’am, I’m happy to report that the result was damage to a few ruined buildings. And if I hadn’t done that people could have been killed.”

“A rather dire prediction. I think some soldiers miss the war and look for any excuse to discharge their weapon.”

Even without Miss McKinnon’s sly smile, Mason got the play on words.

“In June, while I was stationed in Frankfurt, 300 recently released Russian POWs and Polish DPs rushed two tanker trucks full of industrial-grade alcohol. A drunken riot ensued that spilled over into the civilian population. It then grew to 2000. In the thirty minutes it took for the MPs to arrive and the additional thirty minutes for them to decide to fire over their heads, over a hundred people had died from beatings or alcohol poisoning. Another 350 were hospitalized. We’ll never know how many would have been saved if they’d fired sooner. But you won’t write about that. No, I can see it now—” Mason waved his hand in the air as if revealing a headline in bold letters—“‘CID Chief Warrant Officer Opens Fire On Innocent Civilians.’ That’s why I don’t like to talk to reporters. Good day, ma’am.”

Mason turned away before being trapped by her mesmerizing eyes and strode toward the jeep. He jumped in and signaled for Manganella to take off.

“What the hell was that riot all about?” Manganella said as he reversed the jeep and drove back the way they had come.

Wolski leaned forward and yelled over the noise of the engine. “Seems a group of civilians discovered a big wine cellar while recovering a couple of bodies from that collapsed building.”

Once they were far enough away from the other MPs, Wolski pulled out a wine bottle from his overcoat and wagged it at Mason and Manganella. “A nineteen-twenty-seven *Maison-Lafitte*. That cellar was full of the best French wines. Now half the stuff is soaking into the cement floor. A damn shame. I doubt many of the bottles are going to make it back to the collection depot.”

Mason took the bottle from Wolski and examined it.

Corporal Manganella said, “Some Nazi son-of-a-bitch stole it from some poor French bastard. Spoils of war, sir.”

“Maybe I could have done more to stop those people, but I felt sorry for them,” Wolski said. “Can you imagine what a bottle of wine like this could get on the black market? At least a month’s worth of food. Or better yet, a pile of blankets and cart full of coal.” He shook his head. “Mid-November and already as cold as my ex-girlfriend’s heart.”

When Manganella turned the jeep onto the main thoroughfare, Mason ordered him to stop next to an old woman leading two small children. He held out the bottle to the woman, urging her to take it. The woman reached out and accepted as if he’d given her diamond tiara. Mason signaled for Manganella to proceed. Manganella giggled as he did so. Wolski remained silent.

Mason adjusted the side-view mirror to look at Wolski. He liked the fact that the man hadn’t whined or complained. “You came from the 508th?”

Wolski’s nodded.

“Ever done any detective work?”

“Three years on the beat in Detroit, then three in vice before joining the army. My time on the force in Detroit is why they sent me over to you guys. That, and me driving my superior officer crazy.”

“No homicide?” Mason asked.

“Vice isn’t just about busting hookers and smut dealers. I collected evidence, ran interviews.”

“Well, that’s better than some of the jokers they’ve put in CID.”

They entered another street of burned-out apartment buildings with boarded up storefronts occupying the ground floors.

Wolski leaned forward and faced Mason. “So, about your machinegun remark... you must have seen some action.”

“Enough.”

“I didn’t think you CID boys saw much fighting.”

“I was an human intelligence agent for G2 intelligence attached to the 422nd regiment.”

“I heard they got chewed up pretty bad in the Bulge.”

“Overrun and surrounded. I was out on a patrol and wound up behind enemy lines. They roughed me up pretty bad.”

“You were a POW?”

Mason tended to avoid discussing it with anyone who hadn’t been in combat, but Wolski was growing on him. “Buchenwald for two weeks then transferred to a couple of POW stalags.”

Wolski sat back in his seat. “Buchenwald? Damn. No wonder...”

“No wonder what?” Mason said and turned to Wolski.

“No offense, sir. You got the right, is all I was going to say.”

Corporal Manganella pulled up the jeep on front of a four-square-block, seven-story warehouse. The structure still stood, but it had been clearly gutted by fire, its brick scorched black by intense heat and smoke. Thick wooden beams propped diagonally against the wall

kept it from collapsing. A handful of jeeps and army-green sedans were parked in front of the building. Four MPs held back a small crowd of curious civilians.

Mason instructed Corporal Manganella to stay with the jeep. Then as he and Wolski made their way through the crowd of German onlookers, Mason said, "All I ask is you don't stumble over your own two feet. Watch, listen, and do what I say."

Wolski gave him an exaggerated salute. "Yes, sir."

At the factory entrance, Mason showed his CID badge to one of the MPs. The guard told them to go straight through and across the courtyard to the loading docks. A sergeant would direct them from there.

Mason and Wolski entered an enclosed driveway just wide enough for small trucks. On their left, they passed a former shipping office with its shattered windows crisscrossed by slats of wood. Somewhere inside the dark room a baby cried. Through the gaps Mason could see crumpled blankets and a tiny field stove like the German soldiers used to carry. People now lived in these ruins, having no other place to go. With estimates of up to 70% of the city damaged or destroyed, the homeless had occupied virtually any hovel that sheltered against the foul weather.

Thirty feet of driveway opened up to a courtyard. High stacks of debris were piled everywhere. Tents and lean-tos dotted the grounds, all empty for the moment, since the "residents" had been herded outside during the investigation.

"What misery," Wolski said.

Mason grunted an acknowledgment. He'd seen enough misery in the last two years that words no longer seemed sufficient.

They crossed the courtyard, where an MP sergeant waited below a loading platform.

"This way, sir," the sergeant said.

Mason and Wolski clambered after him up a pile of rubble, and into the building's shipping department, where rolling platforms and conveyors belts sat in twisted heaps, or were crushed under the debris of the collapsed floor above. Guiding with his flashlight, the sergeant led them through the dark maze. Drops of melted snow echoed in the open space. Snowflakes somehow found an opening that the fading afternoon light could not.

"What have we got, Sergeant?" Mason said.

"A couple of women found the body. They'd been searching for firewood, and came out screaming. Nearly started a panic with the rest of the people using this place as a shelter."

"Most of these people have seen plenty of dead bodies," Mason said. "What made them panic?"

"You'll have to see for yourself, sir. I've seen a lot of corpses, but nothing like this."

They entered a short hallway then a stairwell. Metal stairs led upward. Snowflakes and streams of water tumbled down from a large hole in the roof, seven stories above. Wolski hesitated at the bottom step. The sergeant said, "It'll hold a big fella like you. We only got two floors."

The weakened stairs creaked as they climbed. Even ten months after the bombing raid that had devastated this area, the building still reeked of the acrid smell of spent explosives, smoke, and now, decay.

On the third floor they entered another open space. Burned army blankets, uniforms and canvas tents were fused together in long blackened rows. The stench grew pungent, like that of burned hair.

"You should see about getting a team with a genny and work lights," Mason said.

"We're going to be here a while."

"Already ordered, sir," the sergeant said. "Should be here any minute. The photographer just got here, and the scene techs are on their way."

At the far end of the room, Mason saw flashlight beams beyond a set of collapsed doors. He quickened his pace, with Wolski and the sergeant close behind. Mason's foot inadvertently kicked a piece of metal, sending it across the floor. The clanging brought someone from the room to investigate. Mason was hit in the face by a blinding flashlight beam.

"Who's there?" someone said with an underlying tone of fear in their voice.

Mason shielded his eyes from the light and could only see the man in silhouette. "Get that light out of my face."

The beam swept away, and Mason recognized the egg-shaped silhouette of Havers, another CID criminal investigator. It hadn't taken more than an hour on Mason's first day for him to figure Havers out: a reasonably competent investigator who did as little as possible to accomplish a task, and as much as possible to lick his superiors' boots.

"As if we didn't have enough people around here already." Havers half-blocked the door and glared at Mason. "This is my investigation. I was first on the scene."

"Talk to the colonel if you have a problem," Mason said as he pushed past Havers.

Almost pitch black beyond the group's pool of flashlights, only the echoes of shuffling feet and low murmurs hinted at the immensity of the room. Mason lit his flashlight, as did Wolski. A wall of men stood in front of them, six MPs that Mason didn't immediately recognize, and Havers' CID partner, who always looked pained to be associated with Havers. They all wore grim expressions. A few looked as though they might run to a dark corner at any moment to empty the contents of their stomachs.

"Someone want to fill me in?" Mason asked.

Havers stepped in the middle of the group as if to claim his territory. Mason could see by Havers' taut, blanched face that he was profoundly shaken by whatever waited in the

darkness behind him. Without looking, he pointed to the dark center of the room. “Up there on the column.”

None of the others seemed anxious to look again. Mason and Wolski moved forward and trained their flashlights toward the center of the vast room. A huge portion of the upper two floors above them had collapsed, taking their floor with it and crashing to a stop thirty feet below. Mason and Wolski now stood at the edge of a gap twenty feet across. With their flashlight beams, they found the thick support column of concrete and steel. Their eyes followed the beams up the column then stopped.

Wolski gasped and took a quick step back. “Tell me that wasn’t a man.”