

CHAPTER 2

Chief Warrant Officer Scott Brodie drove his Army-issue Chevy Impala down the narrow back road. Thick growths of Virginia pine crowded the shoulders between dirt driveways leading to dilapidated houses and shanties. It was a bright and frigid day in the middle of January, and yesterday's snow still clung to the pine needles and patchy lawns.

Brad Evans sat in the front passenger seat. He cracked his window and lit a cigarette. "Hate these off-base busts."

Brodie did not reply.

"A soldier won't resist arrest in the barracks. But once he's got his own roof over his head, even one of these little shitboxes . . . his thinking is different. It's instinct. A man defends his castle."

Brodie preferred his partner in the morning, when he was hungover and didn't talk much. But it was 4 P.M., and by now Evans had had his Irish coffee for lunch, followed by two or three more, and he was all jaw.

Brodie, age thirty-nine, was a Special Agent in the United States Army Criminal Investigation Division, more commonly known as CID, which was responsible for investigating major felony crimes and violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice within the Army. Brad Evans was his partner and, like many of Brodie's partners over the course of his thirteen-year career, Evans was an asshole.

Evans continued talking between drags. "These new enlisteds think they can get away with anything. Remember that jerkoff in Norfolk? Growing enough weed to smoke out a brigade? Just heard, they docked his pay, no reduction in rank, no confinement. Bullshit. What the hell kind of message . . . ?"

Brodie let Evans ramble and focused on the road. Brodie and Evans shared an office at CID Headquarters, which was within Marine Corps Base Quantico, a large complex in northeastern Virginia that also housed the Marine Officer Candidates School and Basic School, as well as the Marine Corps University, the FBI Academy, the Drug Enforcement Administration Training Academy, and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service—NCIS—which was the Navy equivalent of Army CID, but with bigger egos thanks to the hit TV show.

Brodie lived in a rented house close to base, though until recently he'd been a nomad, traveling the country and the world on challenging assignments. But that was back when his life was interesting. Before his wings got clipped. Now he could actually spend time in his office. He even got around to checking his mail and doing paperwork, the ultimate indignity.

He eyed the rearview, where the Virginia state trooper was following close behind. Since they were conducting a search outside of a military installation, civilian law enforcement had to ride along. Brodie also had to get the search warrant from a civilian judge. The military had its own ways of doing things, of course, and its own parallel justice system. But in America the civilians still ruled the realm, and intruded when they felt like it, which Brodie guessed meant it was still a free country. But it didn't make his job any easier.

Brodie glanced at his partner as the man kept smoking and yammering. Although CID was full of motivated professionals, Scott Brodie seemed to get stuck with the duds. He'd chosen to not read too much into this, despite his commanding officer Colonel Stanley Dombroski telling him on more than one occasion: "If everyone you work with is an asshole, the asshole is you."

Dombroski was a commissioned officer. Brodie and Evans were officers of a different stripe: warrant officers, which put them above all enlisted soldiers in the Army chain of command, including NCOs, but below the lowest-ranked commissioned officer, meaning a rookie lieutenant just out of ROTC, OCS, or The Point. Within the warrant officer rank there were five grades. Brodie was a CW4. Evans was five years older than Brodie and had served longer, but was still a CW3, which said a few things about Brad Evans.

Scott Brodie, despite his time in service and his time in grade, was fairly sure he'd never get that final promotion to CW5. And the reason for that was his tendency to buck authority when the authority was being stupid. But Brodie could close tough cases, and at the end of the day that's what the brass wanted to see—points on the board. Brodie had a lot of points, which partly made up for his bad attitude and other personality defects. He recalled another Dombroski-ism directed his way: "The only thing worse than a useless idiot you can't work with is an effective pain in the ass you can't fire." Brodie wondered how much of this wisdom the colonel had picked up at Officer Candidates School.

Warrant officers, while technically considered commissioned officers, differed from regular commissioned officers in a few ways that made sense only to the Army. They didn't have formal officer titles and were simply referred to as Mr. or Ms.—or occasionally the gender-neutral Chief—and as CID agents they usually wore civilian clothing and drove civilian unmarked cars. Today Brodie and Evans were both dressed in slacks, dress shirts, and dark-blue windbreakers with the words "CID FEDERAL AGENT" emblazoned on the front and back in big yellow letters. When you're smashing down a suspect's door, you don't want any confusion. And in case there was, Brodie and Evans were packing their M9s.

Evans flicked his cigarette out the window and punched the power on the car radio. A rock song came on, something awful that Brodie half remembered from his college days. Evans started tapping the glove box along with the riffs. "These guys rock. Saw them last summer at the Birchmere. They still got it."

Brodie suggested, "Keep an eye out for the turn."

"Shoulda let the state cracker lead."

"Not when you're with me, Mr. Evans."

This should be a simple bust. But sometimes the cases that looked straightforward ended up going sideways and screwing up your whole day. Still, it beat parking your ass behind a desk all day like some of Brodie's colleagues at Quantico.

Within the CID were experts in a host of fields such as cybercrime, procurement fraud, forensic analysis, polygraph administration, criminal records processing—the desk jockeys—as well as specialists in counter-

terrorism, protective services, and, in special circumstances, war crimes and treason.

Brodie and Evans were not in a specialized unit, but general criminal investigators—the equivalent of police detectives—working felonies that fell outside the skills and purview of the specialists. They spent much of their day out on the beat gathering evidence, conducting interviews, and—on a good day—locating and arresting the bad guys. Lately the bad guys seemed to be getting stupider and easier to catch, though in reality it was Brodie's cases that were getting stupider, and smaller. And this afternoon's assignment was a perfect example: searching for stolen goods at the home of Private First Class Eric Hinckley, who was suspected of involvement in a larceny ring operating out of Fort A.P. Hill, an Army base near Fredericksburg. Someone was stealing MREs—meals ready to eat—the canned and dehydrated rations that kept America's fighting men and women satiated and constipated while deployed in the field. Private Hinckley worked as a guard at a warehouse that stored MREs, and he was suspected of supplying a third party who was running an online store that had so far done about sixty thousand dollars' worth of business. That was more than enough for a felony charge, though not generally enough to get Scott Brodie out of bed in the morning.

He used to work big cases. Homicides, narcotics, weapons theft. High-stakes stuff. Often overseas. Evans had too, before he sabotaged his career with an assist from Johnnie Walker. Scott Brodie, on the other hand, hadn't drunk himself into career oblivion. In fact, he'd done his job *too* well on his last major assignment, investigating beyond his mandate, pissing off several Intel agencies, and discovering a few things that were well above his pay grade, and way beyond his need to know. So he got saddled with a deadbeat partner and a bullshit caseload not befitting his experience or skills. Brodie wasn't sure if this was temporary punishment or an attempt to drive him into early retirement. Either way, the Army's aggression toward its maverick officers was often passive but never subtle.

The case that had gotten him on everyone's shit list was from five months back, and had involved tracking down an infamous deserter, Captain Kyle Mercer of the Army's elite Delta Force, who had apparently abandoned his remote post in Afghanistan and been captured by the Taliban. Captain

Mercer eventually escaped his captors and turned up in—of all places—Caracas, Venezuela. It would have been more pleasant for everyone if Kyle Mercer had instead decamped to, say, Tahiti, or the Côte d’Azur, but Mercer had chosen the armpit of the Western Hemisphere for very specific reasons that dated back to some wet stuff he’d gotten into while commanding a Black Ops team in Afghanistan. It was a complicated, messy, sensitive, and ultimately sad case, and more than one person who should have stood in front of a court-martial instead came home in a body bag. And people like Brodie and his former partner Maggie Taylor, and their boss, Colonel Dombroski, should have gotten promotions—but got a ton of shit instead. Shit happens.

Evans pointed to a roadside mailbox. “Two-five-six. Right here.”

Brodie turned off the road onto a dirt driveway that led to an aluminum-sided ranch house. He parked his car fifty yards from the house and the Virginia state trooper pulled in behind them.

Brodie noticed a Toyota compact parked in front of the detached garage. Brodie, Evans, and the trooper got out without slamming their doors shut.

The Virginia trooper, a pale and lanky redhead in his late twenties named Dave Finley, walked up to them with a crowbar in his hands. Brodie had interacted with Finley before in executing a search warrant, and the guy was a straight arrow. Trooper Finley nodded to the door. “How do you want to do this?”

Brodie looked at the house. The front bay window had heavy curtains drawn. He said to Evans, “Cover the back.”

“Copy.”

Evans headed around back as Brodie and Finley approached the front door. Brodie noticed there was no doorbell. He could hear something playing loudly on the TV—explosions, gunfire, demonic screams. Probably a video game.

Brodie waited a moment to give Evans time to get to the back door, then he knocked loudly and dialed up his Virginia accent. “Delivery! Need y’all to sign.”

They waited. After a few seconds the sound from the TV cut out. They heard footsteps approaching the door. Brodie put his thumb over the door’s peephole as he pulled his M9 from its holster and held it at his side.

The footsteps stopped.

Brodie said, "Need a signature or I can't leave it."

All was quiet for a moment; then a face peeked out from behind the window curtains, and disappeared.

Finley shoved the crowbar into the doorjamb and began to pry it open.

The door splintered and Brodie kicked it open as he raised his M9 and caught sight of a male figure running toward the back of the house.

"CID! Halt!" Which is military for "Stop, asshole."

But the asshole kept running.

Brodie took off after him, and the guy ran into a small kitchen, kicked open a metal storm door, and sprinted through the doorway, where he collided with Brad Evans, who didn't seem ready for what was coming and got knocked on his ass.

The guy bolted across the backyard and Brodie chased after him, past a scrawny black Lab that was barking and howling and pulling on the end of a chain.

Brodie cut wide of the dog and headed for the man he assumed was PFC Hinckley, a pasty young guy with a military buzz cut in a tank top and jeans running barefoot. Hinckley was a few yards from a high chain-link fence that marked the edge of his property. Brodie yelled, "Halt! Or I shoot!"

The guy knew that was bullshit and jumped onto the fence and started to scramble up. Brodie holstered his pistol as he caught up to him, grabbed him by his belt, and threw him face down onto the lawn. Hinckley, possibly recalling his Basic Training hand-to-hand combat class, tried to flip, but Brodie jumped on the guy's back and pressed his face into a patch of snow. "Say uncle, asshole!" Hinckley didn't, but he stopped resisting. Brodie grabbed the man's wrists and cuffed his hands behind his back.

"Private Eric Hinckley, I presume?"

"Fuck you."

"I will take that as an affirmative response."

Evans had recovered from his knockdown and was rushing toward them. "Guy came out of nowhere."

"Actually, he came out of the house. Get in there and check for other occupants."

Evans muttered something as he jogged toward the open storm door, gun at his side.

Brodie pulled Hinckley to his feet and spun him around. He flashed his badge and said, "I'm Warrant Officer Scott Brodie, a Special Agent in the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command. I am investigating the alleged offense of larceny, of which you are suspected. I advise you that under the provisions of Article Thirty-One of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, you have the right to remain silent."

Hinckley looked at Brodie, and they made eye contact.

"Yes, sir, I was—"

"Shut up."

Hinckley shut up.

Brodie continued, "Any statements you make, oral or written, may be used as evidence against you in a trial by court-martial or in other judicial or administrative proceedings." He continued to inform Hinckley of his Article 31 rights, essentially the military version of Miranda rights. Brodie had rattled this off hundreds of times over the course of his career, and most suspects were too scared, stupid, or belligerent to absorb what you were saying. But the inevitable lawyers sure as hell wanted to know that you said the magic words.

Brodie wrapped up his spiel with, "Do you understand your rights?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now listen closely and answer yes or no. Do you want a lawyer? Do you want to see my search warrant? Do you want a kick in the balls?"

"No."

"Good." Brodie pushed Hinckley against the chain-link fence, patted him down, then pushed him toward the house. "Let's see how much trouble you're in."

They walked past the barking black Lab. Brodie now noticed the dog's rib cage pushing through its mangy black hair.

Hinckley said, "It's all right, girl."

The dog growled at him.

"I don't think she likes you, Private."

Hinckley didn't respond. Brodie led him through the open door and

into a small, filthy kitchen. About two dozen cardboard crates labeled Meals Ready to Eat, featuring the Department of Defense seal, were stacked against one wall. Brodie said to Hinckley, "Don't they feed you enough in the mess hall, soldier?"

No reply.

"You want to tell me where the rest is before I turn this place inside out?"

Hinckley stared at the floor, silent. Brodie wondered if the guy understood that his Army days were over, except for the time he'd spend in a military prison.

Brodie led him into the living room, where Trooper Finley was taking photos with his cell phone. Finley said, "Did a sweep. No one else here."

"Copy."

Brodie pushed Hinckley onto the couch. "Don't move."

Brodie heard Evans rummaging around in a room off the living room and entered a small, cluttered bedroom. Evans, wearing latex gloves, was closing a dresser drawer and slipping a small baggie of white powder into his jacket pocket.

Evans looked up at him. "About six cases under the bed." He gestured to the open closet. "Few more in there. And you saw the ones in the kitchen."

Brodie stared at his partner for a moment. "Check the garage. Then circle back for a thorough search of the house."

Evans nodded and walked out. Brodie reopened the drawer, which was full of civilian and Army socks, along with a wad of cash.

Brodie walked back into the living room and sat down on the coffee table opposite the handcuffed Hinckley, who was staring at the pause screen of his video game on the big flat-screen across the room. A voluptuous woman in a Nazi uniform with bloody chainsaws for hands was standing in some sort of bunker.

Brodie asked, "Why did you run?"

Hinckley shrugged, looked down at the floor. "I freaked."

"I didn't need the cardio, Private."

He looked at Brodie. "I'm sorry, sir."

"And you knocked down my partner. That's assault of a law enforcement officer, plus evading arrest in addition to the larceny charge. But maybe those additional charges won't show up in my report."

Hinckley looked at Brodie and nodded. "I certainly would appreciate that, sir."

"Is my partner going to find anything in the garage?"

Hinckley nodded.

"How much?"

"Fifty, sixty cases."

"You've got about ninety grand in stolen government property here, Private. And that's not counting what you've already moved. Who's helping you?"

Hinckley didn't reply.

"Someone at the base? Who's running the shop? They military?"

No reply. Brodie could still hear the dog barking in the backyard.

"We're going to call Animal Control about your dog."

Hinckley looked at him. "I don't want her to go to a pound."

"What do you care?"

He was silent for a moment. "My sister can take her. She lives in Charlottesville."

"Maybe." Brodie asked, "Whose bright idea was this?"

Hinckley hesitated. "The seller. I don't know his name. He's not active-duty, maybe retired. Some kinda prepper dude. He heard from . . . someone that we had a big stash that had been ordered by DOD but wasn't going nowhere because of the drawdowns in Afghanistan. So, easy pickings. And demand's through the roof for this shit. Everyone's getting ready. You know?"

"Ready for what?"

Hinckley shrugged. "Things to go from bad to worse, I guess."

"I'd say it's already headed that way for you. Who linked you with the seller?"

Hinckley didn't reply.

"I might be able to keep you out of prison."

Hinckley looked at Brodie, maybe trying to read if this was bullshit.

CID agents had a reputation for playing the good cop to a T, empathizing with the suspect and promising the moon for cooperation, when half the time they were just giving the perp the rope to hang himself. There was no rule that you couldn't lie through your teeth when trying to extract

information from a bad soldier. Brodie had no idea what kind of deal PFC Hinckley could get, nor did he care. But over the years he'd learned to play the part, and play the perp.

Hinckley said, "I think . . . I need to talk to a lawyer."

Well, when the suspect said that, you were supposed to stop asking questions, but Brodie said, "Speak up, Private. I can't hear you."

Hinckley didn't respond and stared at the flat-screen.

Brodie regarded PFC Eric Hinckley. He knew from the man's file that he was nineteen years old, though he looked even younger. Probably a low-achieving student who got recruited in his high school on career day. Promised a steady paycheck, three hots and a cot, maybe some adventure, plus brotherhood and a meaningful career to boot. And that's not a lie. The Army can provide all those things if you're getting in for the right reasons.

Some guys, however, lost their way and went crooked, like Brad Evans, who was bored, burned out, and looking to start trouble if it didn't naturally present itself. But nineteen-year-old Private Hinckley hadn't lost his way. He never knew where he was going to begin with.

Well, the kid had asked for a lawyer, so the questions needed to stop. But Brodie still had something to say.

"Look at me, soldier."

Hinckley turned to him.

"You are a disgrace to your uniform and your country. You took an oath."

Hinckley averted his eyes.

"You made a bad choice, and you will face the consequences. And you better figure out why you made that bad choice, to prevent yourself from screwing up even more of your life. Do you understand me, Private?"

Hinckley looked back at him. "Yes, sir. I . . . wasn't thinking."

"This is a good time to start, Eric."

"Yes, sir."

Brodie got up and noticed Trooper Finley looking at him. The man had probably listened to that interaction with some interest. There was no analog in the civilian world for what had just transpired. Cops don't usually dress down the perps they're arresting. But the Army was one big semi-functional family, and a criminal act within that family was a violation of something beyond and perhaps greater than the law.

Brodie went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. It was mostly bare except for a bottle of ketchup, a few cans of beer, and a couple of hot dogs.

He grabbed the hot dogs and walked out to the backyard. The dog was lying in the grass, lethargic. Her ears perked up as Brodie approached and tossed the hot dogs to her.

His cell rang. It was his boss, Colonel Dombroski. He picked up. "Brodie."

"Mr. Brodie. Where are you?"

Brodie watched as the Lab inhaled both hot dogs. "Executing an off-base search warrant."

"We need to meet."

"Is this business or pleasure?"

"I occasionally enjoy your company, Scott, but it's always business."

"Yes, sir. O Club?"

The Officers' Club was an on-base bar and restaurant that, as the name suggested, was restricted to military officers and their guests. Dombroski liked the Quantico O Club and often held his meetings there. At the age of fifty-five, he was on the old end of colonel, and he had something of a chip on his shoulder in place of the general's star he might never get. The O Club reminded Colonel Dombroski that he was still in the exclusive fraternity that is the military officers corps. Also, the club had a decent twelve-dollar sirloin.

Dombroski replied, "A little farther afield this time. Annie's Junction. Sports bar just off Ninety-Five, past the Lowe's."

"Is it ten-cent wing night?"

"Can you be there in twenty?"

"I'm working outside of Fredericksburg, Colonel. The Hinckley larceny case."

"Evans can handle that."

"Can I get that in writing?"

"It's urgent, Scott. Thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Dombroski hung up.

Brodie put his phone back in his pocket as he saw Evans exit the detached garage and walk across the lawn toward Brodie. "The mother lode's in there."

Brodie nodded.

“Chili mac ’n’ cheese. Beef brisket. Doesn’t sound bad. You eat that shit in Iraq?”

Brodie had served as an infantry sergeant in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. He didn’t like to talk about it much, but Evans, who had never seen combat, was always asking him stupid questions. “I ate snakes.”

Evans laughed. “Hard-core.” He stopped walking and stared at the black Lab looking up at Brodie, tail wagging. “You feed it?”

“Someone had to.”

“This guy’s a real prick.”

“I need to head out. Call the evidence team and catch a ride back with them to HQ once they wrap up. Have the MPs send a patrol car to collect Hinckley and let him call his sister to collect the dog.”

“Where you going?”

“Something came up.”

Evans didn’t seem sure what to make of that, but he nodded. “Okay.” He walked past Brodie toward the house.

Brodie watched him walk away for a moment, then said, “And don’t remove any more evidence.”

Evans turned around. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Brodie stared into the man’s eyes for a moment. “How does it feel to be everyone’s hardship duty?”

Evans glared at him. “You think you’re better than me?”

Brodie didn’t reply.

“It was less than an eight ball.”

“Great.”

“A nice Saturday night for me and the boys, or a year in prison for our young private on top of everything else he’s facing. What do you think?”

“You’re a saint, Evans. A real class act.”

“If I go back in there and find a kilo in the toilet tank, we got possession with intent to distribute. Until then, let’s keep it in the family.”

“Get out of my face.”

“No one told me you were a fucking narc.”

“Everyone told me you were a useless burnout.”

“Eat shit.” Evans walked back into the house.

Well, that had gone well. Brodie had been looking for the right reason to terminate this particular relationship. He wasn’t going to rat the guy out to Dombroski, but this gave him all the justification he needed in his own mind to demand a new partner and maybe reassignment. Evans would second the motion.

Brodie looked down at the dog, which was whining for more food. He crouched and scratched behind her ears.

He’d never had a dog, or a cat, or any pet higher on the food chain than a goldfish. He also couldn’t imagine himself with kids, and he had never stayed in a relationship longer than six months. He told himself that he needed the freedom to do his job and live his life the way he wanted.

But what good was that freedom now? He was tooling around the Eastern Seaboard arresting petty crooks and wife beaters, and solving blockbuster crimes like the curious case of the missing chili. And for the first time in his career, he had a partner who was even more screwed up than he was. This didn’t work for him. This sucked in a whole new way.

Brodie walked around the house to his parked Impala. He climbed in, pulled out of the driveway, and navigated the narrow roads that led back to the highway.

It was past five and dusk was settling in. He noticed string lights and other holiday decorations on a few of the houses he passed.

Christmas was three weeks ago. Brodie was supposed to have gone back to his folks’ place in upstate New York, but he hadn’t. He wasn’t sure why. He’d lied and said he was spending the holidays with a friend, which he allowed them to interpret to mean his girlfriend, whom he’d dumped a month earlier. So he spent the holiday alone, eating takeout and watching alien abduction documentaries on Netflix. He’d actually enjoyed himself, which worried him.

Whether in the infantry or the CID, his Army career had always required him to exist outside the rhythms of the civilian world. He’d spent Christmases in Riyadh and Tokyo and in South Korea a few miles from the DMZ. He recalled his first and most notable Christmas away from home—Baghdad in 2003, manning the mounted .50-caliber machine gun of an

armored Stryker vehicle protecting a Christian quarter of the city from insurgents and car bombs.

He remembered rolling down the narrow streets at dusk. No lights or decorations, no music. Just the quiet air, thick with fear. He recalled passing an old church where he could faintly hear prayers, beautiful and solemn, in a language he did not recognize as Arabic and would later learn was ancient Aramaic.

He didn't miss being home. Who needed a tacky holiday when a place like this existed? A place full of history and meaning and consequence. A place where he had a mission and a purpose.

That same feeling carried him through his career. At some point he realized he'd structured his life so he didn't have things to miss. And that was fine. It was nice to be a lone wolf. Except once you're defanged, you're just alone.

He thought about his last partner before Brad Evans. Maggie Taylor. Despite her lack of experience on the job, she was one of the smartest and most capable people he'd ever worked with. She was also a knockout blonde, but that had nothing to do with his high opinion of her. Except that he had sort of tried to sleep with her in Caracas. But he blamed that on the stress of the mission and the strength of the Venezuelan rum. Also, she'd sent mixed signals. But they all do.

He'd struck out, which in retrospect would have been good for their continued professional relationship had there been one. But after the Mercer case she was transferred to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where she was assigned a new partner along with—as Brodie had heard through the grapevine—a new rank of CW2. She and Brodie hadn't spoken since, despite Brodie's half dozen attempts to contact her. He assumed she was under orders to have no contact with him, and that those orders had come from either the Pentagon, who didn't like how the mission had turned out, or from the spooks at Langley, who were nervous about the classified Intel that Brodie and Taylor both now possessed. Or maybe her Army shrink had advised her to rid herself of toxic relationships. Or perhaps Maggie Taylor figured out all by herself that Scott Brodie was hazardous to her continued well-being.

Brodie got on the northbound ramp for I-95 and slipped into a stream

of slow-moving taillights. He'd probably be a few minutes late, which in the Army was a crime close to desertion.

Dombroski had said it was urgent. Maybe Warrant Officer Brodie was being promoted. Maybe he was being relieved of duty. Maybe Colonel Dombroski was in cahoots with the CIA, who were going to put ricin in Brodie's happy hour nachos.

Well, it had been a while since anyone tried to kill him. That would at least be interesting.