

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA

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“Tell me something, Mr. Brodie. Wasn’t there some way you could have avoided shooting the mule?”

Chief Warrant Officer Scott Brodie could not believe he had been summoned to the general’s office to talk about the f-ing mule. There was nothing left to say about the mule. In fact, everything that could *possibly* be said about the mule had already been said.

Major General Stephen Hackett was the Provost Marshal General of the United States Army—the Army’s top cop—and Brodie was a Special Agent in the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division, the CID, which was the detective arm of the CIC, the Criminal Investigation Command. The CID was tasked with solving all the Army’s law enforcement problems, and on its seal was the motto “Do What Has to Be Done.” Brodie took that motto to heart. His critics might say he misinterpreted it to mean . . . well . . . *do what has to be done*.

The office of the Provost Marshal General was located in Quantico, Virginia, about forty miles south of Washington, DC. The Marine Corps had one of its largest bases at Quantico, and also headquartered there was the Naval Criminal Investigative Service—NCIS—of TV fame, and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations. Quantico was also home to the Drug Enforcement Administration Training Academy, the FBI Academy, and the FBI Laboratory. The government might have had synergy and cost savings in mind by co-locating all these law enforcement facilities, but knowing the government, it was probably accidental.

Also sitting in General Hackett’s office were Colonel Stanley Dombroski and Warrant Officer Maggie Taylor. Dombroski was

the man who normally gave Brodie his assignments. Maggie Taylor was Brodie's recently assigned partner.

Hackett looked like a general from central casting: He was six feet tall and had a full head of short gray hair, and his posture suggested he had a ramrod up his ass. Colonel Dombroski, by comparison, looked like a guy you'd see selling beer at Fenway. He was five foot eight, at least forty pounds overweight, mostly bald, and had a permanent six-o'clock shadow. He also looked as if he might not be the sharpest bayonet in the armory—but there was nothing dull about Stanley Dombroski. Brodie suspected that Dombroski would never rise above the rank of colonel. The Army, often to its own detriment, wants generals who look like generals.

The Army had no problem, however, with Maggie Taylor's appearance, and if Brodie and Taylor weren't frequently required to go undercover, the Army would have plastered Maggie Taylor's photo on recruiting posters. She was five foot nine and had short blonde hair, a perfect nose, full lips, bright brown eyes that radiated intelligence, and a CrossFit body.

Brodie was tall with civilian-cut dark brown hair, and he considered himself a pretty good-looking guy, based on the unbiased testimony of former girlfriends and his mother. Today he was wearing jeans, a black T-shirt, and a counterfeit Armani sports jacket that he had bought in Taiwan for twelve dollars. Army criminal investigators usually wore civilian clothing—unless they were undercover, posing as uniformed personnel. Today, however, Maggie Taylor was in uniform because that was the protocol upon being summoned by a general, as Dombroski—who was always in uniform—had reminded them in an e-mail that Brodie hadn't read. He was sure he'd hear from Dombroski later about how he never checked his e-mail, which was true, because as far as Brodie was concerned most official Army e-mails should be classified as spam.

“Mr. Brodie?”

Male warrant officers are addressed as “Mr.” Female WOs are “Ms.” Warrant officers are not commissioned officers, as are lieutenants, captains, colonels, and generals, and they exist in a gray area between noncommissioned officers—meaning sergeants—and the commissioned officer corps. It was a nice rank, thought Brodie. You had no command responsibilities and no one called you “sir,” but you could still drink at the Officers’ Club.

The wall behind Hackett was covered with framed commendations and awards, as well as pictures of him with other generals and the current Secretary of Defense. Among them was a framed photo of Hackett in desert combat fatigues holding an M4 rifle, which Brodie suspected he’d only fired in training. General Hackett certainly had never had one fired at him by a methed-up redneck riding bareback on a charging mule in backwoods Kentucky.

Wasn’t there some way you could have avoided shooting the mule? The general’s question still hung in the air. And when a two-star general asks you a question, even a stupid one, you are expected to answer.

“I was aiming for the suspect on the mule, sir,” said Brodie. “Not the mule itself,” he added to be as clear as crystal meth.

Taylor stifled a laugh. They’d only worked this one case together, but Brodie was starting to notice that she found the wrong things funny, and at the wrong times. Also, Taylor was absolutely *golden* when it came to the mule. She’d saved its life.

Two months ago, Brodie and his new partner had been dispatched to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, which was experiencing a major methamphetamine epidemic. Somebody on the base was selling crystal meth to a lot of soldiers, and an M4 rifle that fires seven hundred rounds per minute is not something you want in the hands of a guy flying high on crank. But Army CID agents at Fort

Campbell, even with the assistance of the DEA, had had no luck in figuring out who was making and pushing the stuff. So they'd called Chief Warrant Officer Brodie.

Scott Brodie, age thirty-eight, had enlisted when he was twenty-one. He'd been a CID agent for twelve years. In those years he'd apprehended murderers, rapists, Pentagon embezzlers, and people trying to sell military hardware to terrorists. He'd worked hard to establish himself as the guy you send in when the other guys can't solve a case, and the meth case was one of those times.

He and Taylor had gone undercover posing as clerks in the adjutant general's office, and in less than two months they had managed to identify all the members of a small cartel. The ringleader was a master sergeant named Enos Hadley who worked at the base National Guard armory, and his cousin cooked the meth out in some backwoods holler. Sergeant Hadley had a dozen guys on the base, some military, some civilian, who acted as his corner boys.

The day the CID was planning to make all the apprehensions, somebody had tipped Hadley that they were coming for him, so he'd left the base in his pickup, taking with him an M4 and enough ammunition to invade North Korea. Brodie and Taylor went after him in an unmarked car.

They hadn't bothered to notify the Kentucky State Police because the Army likes to solve its own problems. They also hadn't radioed any MPs for backup, over Taylor's protests, because, as Brodie explained to her, he hadn't just spent seven weeks in Deliverance country to let someone else get the glory.

"Brodie," Taylor had cautioned, "these guys are crazy."

And Taylor would know. She was from this part of the world—the strip of rugged country that snaked from southern New York to northern Alabama known as Appalachia. It was full of famously

short-tempered Scots-Irish descendants, such as one Enos Hadley, who was currently following the genetic imperative of his ancestors and fleeing to the Highlands—or, in his case, the back hills.

“We can handle it,” Brodie had assured her.

And that was the end of it. Brodie outranked her. He was a Chief Warrant Officer Four; Taylor—five years his junior and with only a year in CID under her belt—was a One. He was sure that if she kept at it she’d eventually make Chief Warrant Officer Five, the highest rank. He was less sure about his own prospects. And behavior such as this was a large part of the reason for his uncertainty.

They’d chased Hadley into the hills where he’d been raised, and by the time he got to his backwoods ancestral shack, Brodie and Taylor were less than a quarter mile behind him and saw him run into a barn. Brodie figured he’d barricade himself inside, which would force them to call the local sheriff and tell him to bring a SWAT team and wait the guy out until he either surrendered or blew his tiny brains out.

But that wasn’t what happened. Just as they got out of their car with their 9mm Glock pistols drawn, Hadley burst out of the barn on a mule, which they’d learn later was in such fine and fit shape from spending the last fourteen months carting supplies up to the meth lab.

Hadley charged them like a hillbilly Geronimo, M4 firing on full auto, and it was a minor miracle he didn’t hit either of them. Their car wasn’t so lucky.

Brodie returned fire, trying to kill the guy trying to kill him, which is what they teach you in Basic Combat Training. But it’s a challenge to hit a guy bouncing on a mule, firing a submachine gun at you, while you’re trying to find cover and shoot at the same

time. Brodie missed Hadley and shot the mule in the ass.

The mule bucked and Hadley fell off. He rolled once and came up firing. Taylor shot him, hitting him in the right shoulder. She claimed later that she aimed to wound him, which Brodie knew was complete bullshit since the military does not train you to aim to wound. But as they say in the Army, “Whatever I hit is what I was aiming for.”

In the end, both the mule and Hadley survived. Brodie disarmed Hadley and then used a compress bandage to keep him from bleeding to death, while Taylor did her best Dr. Dolittle on the mule, cooing soothingly to the beast while pressing a bandage against its wound. She said, “Jesus, Brodie! Did you have to shoot the mule?” That was the first but obviously not the last time he would hear that question.

The mule shooting made the papers, and it went viral on the Internet. PETA protested, and a lot of people pointed out that a mule happened to be the West Point mascot. Have you no shame, Brodie?

A Pentagon spokeswoman apologized for the mule shooting, the Army paid its veterinary bills, and it made a full recovery. To compensate Hadley’s half-wit wife for the mental anguish she claimed to have suffered when she saw the poor animal at the vet hospital, the Army gave her enough money to buy a Kentucky thoroughbred.

The only good news was that Brodie’s name and photo were withheld from the media, which was vital, considering the kinds of assignments he was often given. Same with Taylor, though within the CIC she became the hero, the one who’d shot Hadley and therefore saved their lives, and the one who’d saved the mule’s life. It was not lost on Brodie that if he had just killed Hadley, no one would have cared and it would have saved everyone a lot of

trouble.

Hackett shuffled some papers on his desk. “The mule isn’t the reason I called you here today.” He looked at Brodie and Taylor, and paused for effect. “This is about Kyle Mercer.”

Kyle Mercer. The most famous Army deserter since Private Eddie Slovik, a World War II soldier and the last man executed for desertion.

Brodie suddenly got interested in the meeting.