



ALSO BY NELSON DeMILLE AND ALEX DeMILLE

The Deserter

Blood Lines

ALSO BY NELSON DeMILLE

By the Rivers of Babylon

Cathedral

The Talbot Odyssey

Word of Honor

The Charm School

The Gold Coast

The General's Daughter

Spencerville

Up Country

The Gate House

The Quest

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The Lion

The Panther

Radiant Angel

The Maze

With Thomas Block

Mayday

Ebooks

The Book Case

Death Benefits

Rendezvous

Getaway (with Lisa Scottoline)

The Tin Men

A NOVEL

Nelson DeMille
Alex DeMille

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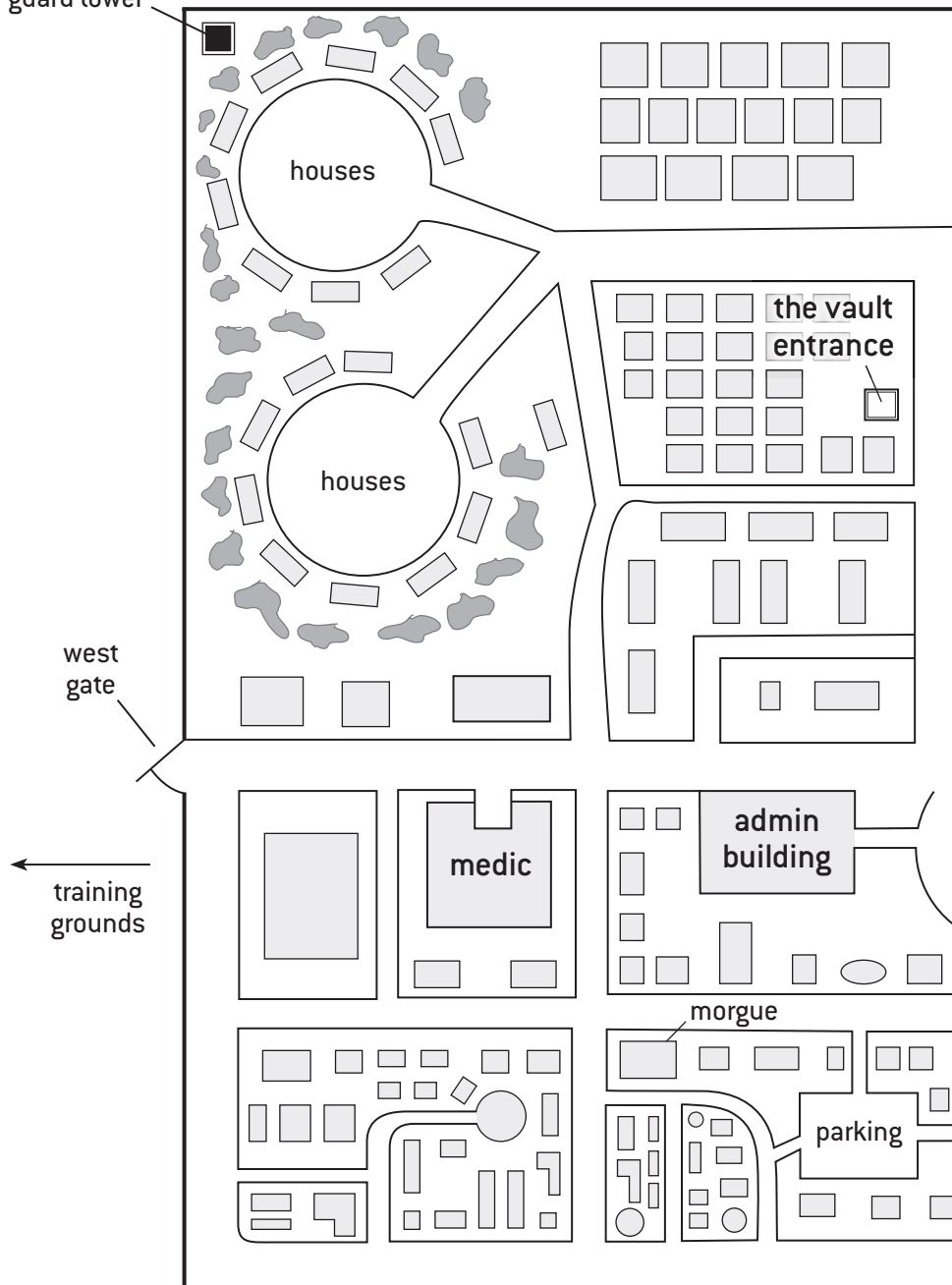
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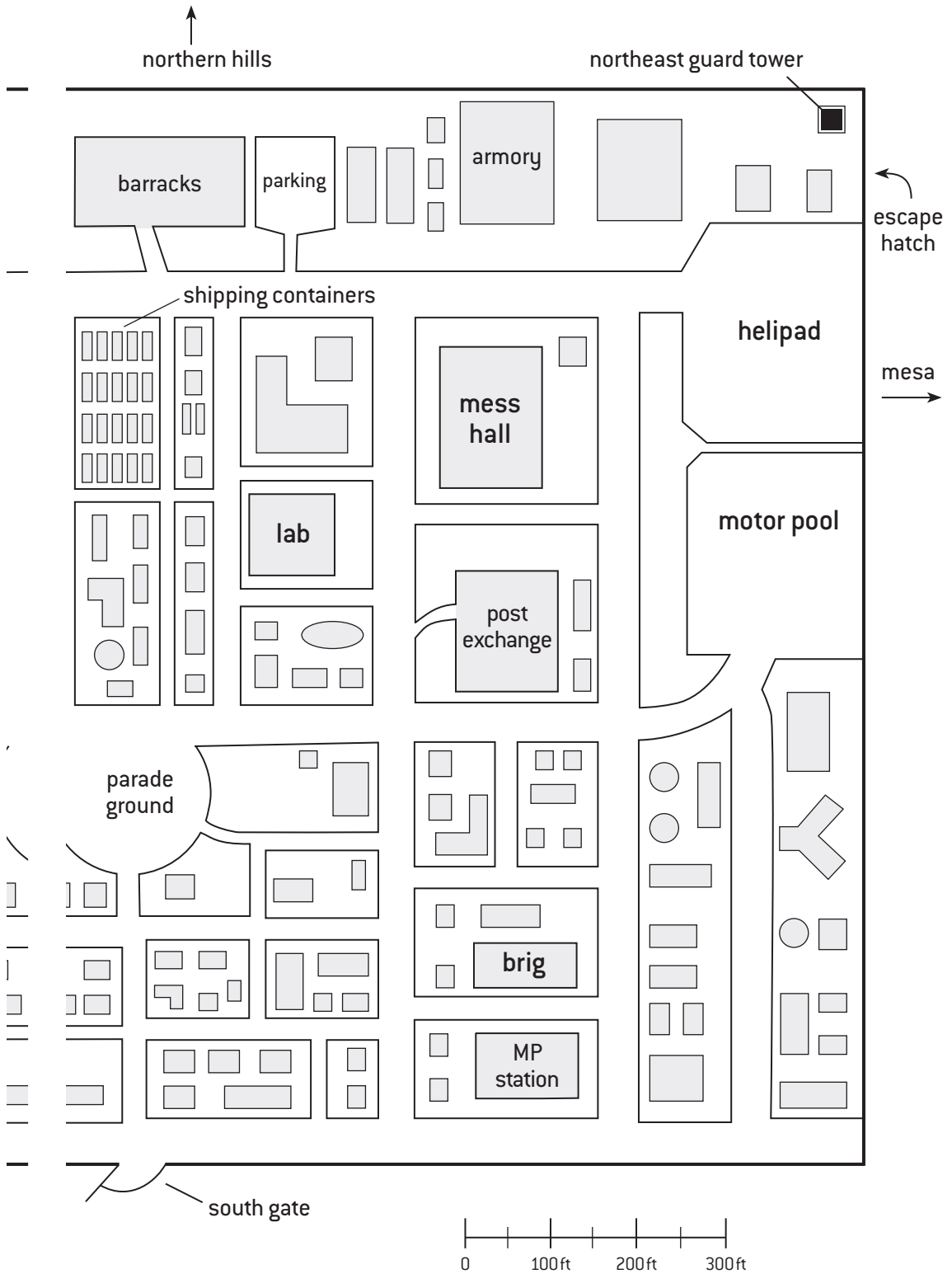
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For my father

northwest
guard tower



Camp Hayden



A NOTE TO THE READER

WHEN MY FATHER FIRST ASKED ME TO BE A COAUTHOR with him back in 2017, he lied and assured me it would be easy. I knew there was a deeper truth beneath the facetious comment: He trusted me. He believed I could do it and could do it well.

Our work on *The Deserter* got off to a bit of a rocky start. As a screenwriter, I was suddenly working in a medium I was unfamiliar with. But as the weeks and months went by, we established a rhythm. I eventually began to anticipate some of his notes and comments and came to the same realization as so many other children—our parents' voices are in our heads, whether we like it or not.

Blood Lines was a smoother process. We were, by that time, more or less speaking the same language. The story is set in Berlin, a fertile playground for a couple of history buffs. It didn't hurt that my love of history came from him in the first place. In a very real way, I was creating with the tools he'd handed me decades prior.

Even before he got sick, we both knew that *The Tin Men* would likely be our last collaboration, and he'd enjoy a belated and much-deserved retirement. We came up with the idea together, and I was excited to tackle a book that—being set entirely at an American military installation—would lean more into his own military experiences and understanding of military culture than the previous two novels.

He began feeling unwell not long after we submitted the treatment for the book, and we began writing in earnest around the same time he began chemotherapy. The odds for an eighty-year-old man with late-

stage esophageal cancer were not good, but we all believed that if anyone could beat those odds, it was Nelson DeMille. He had a powerful resiliency about him, and such a strong presence that it seemed almost impossible to imagine the world without him.

He read and edited chapters as he could, but as the year went by and the chemo wore him down, he eventually stopped reading and assured me he would get back to it once he felt better. I understood how important this process was to him. He was a perfectionist who prided himself on the quality of his writing and who felt he owed his readers nothing but his best. I knew that he would not engage with the pages unless and until he felt back to his normal self. Tragically, he never did.

It has been the honor and privilege of my life to be invited into his world and to be alongside him for the final chapter of his career. I don't know if there's a life after this one, but I do know that beloved writers enjoy a kind of immortality through their readers. He used to refer to his writing process as "sitting alone and telling myself stories." But really, he was telling them to all of us, and he still is.

Alex DeMille

Brooklyn, New York

January 2025

The Tin Men

CHAPTER 1

BRIGADIER GENERAL STANLEY DOMBROSKI HUNG UP the phone and listened to the sound of his own breathing, and of the rain beating against the windows of his second-story office. He recorded this moment in his mind, thinking he might want to recall it someday.

He rose from his desk and looked out the window. The heavy downpour pelted the flowering dogwood trees that lined the strip of lawn beside the United States Army Criminal Investigation Division headquarters in Quantico, Virginia.

The spring rains had started early this year, and come on stronger, and would not let up. At least, that was how it felt. But maybe the weather was just the weather, as it had always been, and the thing that was changing was Stanley Dombroski.

This might not be a homicide, Stan. This might not even be a crime.

The phone call had come from his boss, Major General Stephen Hackett, the Provost Marshal General, who was the commanding officer of the Army Criminal Investigation Division and the Army's top law enforcement official. Stephen Hackett generally did not hand down assignments personally, and Brigadier General Stanley Dombroski was no longer supposed to be directly overseeing cases either. But this was something different. Something big. The rules of rank and responsibility did not apply.

Dombroski walked to the window, where he caught his reflection in the rain-streaked glass, and the glint of the general's star on the shoulder loop of his green service uniform.

Getting older had its perks. And the promotion to general that he thought would never come finally had. The pay raise was nice, but he lived modestly and hadn't needed it. What he had needed was the respect and recognition that was owed to him.

He'd finally gotten that five months ago, after he'd taken a big swing on a high-profile homicide case in Berlin. From the point of view of the higher-ups in the Pentagon, it was supposed to be a rubber-stamp job. Let the Germans do the work, nod along, and say *danke schön*. It was their jurisdiction anyway, and the case looked pretty open-and-shut.

But something inside General Dombroski—then Colonel Dombroski—told him not to follow the script. It was probably the same qualities that had led his wife to leave him: arrogance, paranoia, and a pigheaded will. The good stuff.

So Dombroski had assigned the Berlin case to two CID special agents who he knew would follow the truth wherever it led, which in that instance was into the deepest abyss of human evil.

We're on the bleeding edge here, Stanley. We need to get this right.

Getting it right meant getting the truth, and in this case, the truth might be dangerous. This was not the time for safe assumptions, or half measures, or ass covering.

He walked back to his desk, picked up the phone, and punched a number. It rang once, and then Special Agent Scott Brodie said, "Good afternoon, General."

"Scott. Are you at HQ?"

"Yes, sir. Ms. Taylor and I are in our office having a working lunch."

"I need to see you both in my office now."

"Yes, sir. Can I bring you some chicken *lo mein*?"

"No thank you." He added, "I'm going to need you to clear the decks, so think about who can inherit your caseload."

"With pleasure, sir. I look forward to our new assignment in an interesting and exotic locale."

“Prepare to be disappointed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dombroski hung up. Turning down carbs was a relatively new habit of his, but it was already earning dividends.

Chief Warrant Officers Scott Brodie and Maggie Taylor were two of the most talented and hardworking special agents in CID. They also had intense personalities, problems with authority, and a tendency to strike out on their own under dangerous circumstances, without regard for personal safety or legal jurisdiction. For Stanley Dombroski, assigning Brodie and Taylor to a big case with vast national security implications was never an enjoyable experience as it unfolded, but once it was over, it always felt like it had been the right choice. Kind of the inverse of eating chicken lo mein.

He watched the rain as he waited for his agents to arrive. He could see only the outline of this thing, the bare facts given to him by General Hackett. But it didn't look good, and no amount of wishful thinking would unring that phone, or undo what was being done by the military's top scientists and engineers in the name of progress and preparedness.

The road to Hell was paved with good intentions, and General Stanley Dombroski feared that the Army's best and brightest were out there laying the asphalt.

CHAPTER 2

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICERS SCOTT BRODIE AND MAGGIE Taylor walked down the hall toward General Dombroski's office. Taylor said, "'Disappointed' means stateside. Domestic military installation."

Brodie shook his head. "He nuked our caseload. We'll be out of reach, somewhere we can't conduct interviews or pull from resources at Quantico. Overseas, somewhere that sucks. Pack your parka for Greenland."

"You're wrong. We're dumping our caseload because we'll be slammed by whatever this is. Stateside."

"Fifty bucks."

"You already owe me for the Chinese. And lunch last week."

"I'll dig myself out or dig myself deeper."

"You always do."

Brodie eyed Maggie Taylor as she strode purposefully down the hall. She was wearing a black suit and carrying an oversize thermos full of yerba maté, a tea from South America that she'd started drinking in disturbing quantities. She claimed it was more potent than coffee, and when Brodie had tried it once, he'd agreed. Maybe she should cut back.

Ms. Taylor was thirty-five, with shoulder-length blond hair. She had an effortless beauty about her, along with an effortless intellect. Some of her peers in CID found her intimidating. A few of the men had asked her out, but Ms. Taylor had learned through hard experience to separate her work life from her love life. As for Scott Brodie, his relationship with his partner was purely professional—notwithstanding a couple of close calls overseas after more than a couple of drinks.

Brodie was five years older than Taylor and was also her superior officer, though he'd noticed that fact had little effect on how she talked to him. He was also dressed in civilian clothes—dark-blue suit and tie—which was the norm among CID special agents. Brodie had a military service uniform buried in his closet somewhere, but it probably needed a dry-cleaning and wouldn't get unearthed until he was compelled to attend an official event, or he got so old that he needed a new portrait taken.

Warrant officers in Army CID occupied an interesting middle ground in the military hierarchy—in rank between NCOs and commissioned officers, and culturally straddling the line between military officers and civilian law enforcement investigators. If Scott Brodie had to interrogate a possible suspect who was a commissioned officer, it didn't matter how many stars or bars they had on their shoulders or how many ribbons were pinned to their chest. When investigating a crime, deference to rank went out the window. All in all, being a CID special agent was a pretty good gig, and a lot better than his first Army career, as an infantry sergeant in Iraq during the early phase of the war. At least now people who tried to kill him had a personal reason for it.

They reached the door to Dombroski's office and entered a small anteroom where the general's aide, Lieutenant Pamela Banks, sat at her desk with a laptop. She looked up at them and smiled. "The general is expecting you."

Brodie said, "Thank you, Lieutenant." Stanley Dombroski had waited a long time to be referred to as "the general," and Brodie wondered if the general had instructed his young aide to ban the use of pronouns.

Brodie and Taylor entered Dombroski's large, stately office, where the general stood behind his desk. He gestured to a couple of chairs. "Have a seat."

They all sat, and Brodie looked around. The place was more cluttered with heavy wooden furniture, books, and framed plaques and

photos than he'd remembered, as if Dombroski felt that with his new rank came a need to take up more space.

Stanley Dombroski himself, however, was taking up noticeably less space. Brodie said, "You're looking good, General."

"Thank you, Mr. Brodie. A diet and a divorce can do wonders." He eyed the two agents. "You both look like you could use some sun."

"Yes, sir," said Brodie. Was that a hint? Maybe Greenland was out.

Dombroski asked, "Does working with Colonel Flemming make you miss me?"

Brodie smiled. "Yes, sir."

Colonel Jack Flemming was their new commanding officer now that Brigadier General Stanley Dombroski had ranked out of dealing with mere mortals. Flemming was capable, cautious, and maybe a little unsure of what to do with Special Agents Brodie and Taylor, who were now both famous and infamous within CID.

Taylor said, "Scott is on his best behavior, as he tries to be in all new relationships."

Dombroski looked at Brodie. "Are we at last properly medicated, Mr. Brodie?"

"Just properly motivated, sir." He didn't enjoy being the butt of jokes between a one-star general and his own lower-ranking partner. He could tell only one of them to f—— off.

Dombroski continued, "I will apprise Colonel Flemming of the situation so that he can reassign your caseload. This will require your full attention." He slid his hazel eyes between the agents. Then he cleared his throat and said, "I just received a call from General Hackett. Major Roger Ames of the U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command—DEVCOM—was found dead early this morning in his office at Camp Hayden, which, as you may know, is a remote Army outpost in the Mojave Desert. Major Ames was a computer scientist, involved with the experimental research and training that is conducted at Hayden."

Taylor asked, "Cause of death?"

Dombroski looked at her. "His skull was crushed."

Brodie and Taylor shared a look. Brodie asked, "What kind of experimental research are they doing at Camp Hayden, sir?"

Dombroski thought a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. "As I understand it, the main thrust of their work involves conducting field training exercises between soldiers—at present, a rifle platoon of Army Rangers—and lethal autonomous weapons. LAWs."

Brodie said, "Killer robots."

Dombroski replied, "General Hackett did not use that term."

Brodie and Taylor sat with that for a moment. Then Taylor said, "I have read about these types of weapons in the hypothetical, but I didn't realize they actually existed."

"Not in the field," replied Dombroski. "But they do at Camp Hayden. Prototypes of some kind."

Taylor asked, "Did one of these autonomous prototypes kill Major Ames?"

Dombroski nodded. "That is my understanding."

Brodie said, "My Roomba is autonomous, but it's only lethal to dust bunnies."

Taylor sighed.

Brodie continued, "It's also stupid. Sometimes it traps itself in the bathroom until the battery dies."

Dombroski looked at him. "Is there a point here, Mr. Brodie?"

"Yes, sir. Once something is lethal, the stakes get a lot higher for it to be smart. Not to mention predictable. I'm surprised the Army has deployed LAWs, even as prototypes in training exercises, but once they crossed that line it was only a matter of time before something like this happened."

Dombroski clarified, "We don't know what happened, and we don't want to jump to alarmist conclusions. We know a man is dead. The brass at Camp Hayden seem certain his death was directly caused

by one of these autonomous weapons systems. The three of us sitting in this room, along with General Hackett, do not know the reason for that certainty, or the specific nature of these weapons. There is something of an information blackout at Camp Hayden. Colonel Elizabeth Howe, Hayden's deputy camp commander, was the one to report this death directly to General Hackett, and she revealed as few details as possible. Hackett got the impression that Colonel Howe wanted to investigate this internally, but she understood that procedurally and legally she has to involve CID to establish whether there is criminal liability, either through negligence or malice."

This case sounded like a minefield—and a migraine. Brodie said, "Sir, neither Ms. Taylor nor I have any expertise in these kinds of technical matters. Determining negligence or malice requires a sophisticated understanding of these systems."

"You can handle it. Your first job is to determine whether there is even the possibility of criminal liability—or criminal intent." Dom-broski added, "As exotic as this stuff sounds, we could be dealing with some version of a workplace accident."

"Maybe you should call OSHA."

He leaned forward in his chair and stared at Brodie. "I called *you*, Scott. Because despite your many flaws, you have a sixth sense for bullshit." Then he looked at Taylor. "And you both have keen analytical minds. There is a team of computer scientists and engineers at Camp Hayden who can explain anything and everything you need to know. They have the knowledge. But they do not have your investigative skills. They also do not have your perspective. Their entire professional lives have led to what they are doing at Camp Hayden, and your investigation could possibly end their work. They might have a vested interest in certain outcomes. Plus, there are other forces at play here. Have either of you heard of the U.S. Army Futures Command?"

They both shook their heads.

"I'm not surprised. The command was formed less than a year ago,

headquartered in Austin, and they're still getting up and running. They now oversee DEVCOM—the late Major Ames's command—as well as several other research and acquisition efforts. Their basic mission is to modernize the Army. It's been decades since a new combat system has been fielded, and a lot of people in the Pentagon find this unacceptable, not to mention dangerous vis-à-vis the technological strides being made by our adversaries. The work being done at Camp Hayden is but one element of this thrust toward modernization, and a hell of a lot of bureaucrats and billions of dollars are behind these efforts. As you can imagine, some powerful interests will take notice of your investigation, and your findings. They might even *want* you to find a crime, because the absence of one suggests a fundamental flaw in the design of these LAWs, making this whole project a financial boondoggle and a PR nightmare for the future of high-tech warfare.” He added, “There’s a lot riding on this. I trust you to get it right.”

Taylor nodded. “We will, sir.”

Dombroski used to at least feign that he was *offering* such a high-profile and important case to his favorite agents, who could then accept or decline the plum assignment. But that pretense was gone. They were stuck with this mess, which sounded both ridiculous and bone-chilling. Brodie asked, “Have they arrested the robot?”

Dombroski pursed his lips. “It’s a lethal autonomous weapon, Mr. Brodie. ‘Robot’ conjures up all sorts of associations and assumptions that might not be helpful.” He thought a moment, then continued, “We don’t know what we are dealing with. Yet. But I do know that the Uniform Code of Military Justice does not reference apprehending, prosecuting, or incarcerating military equipment.”

Taylor asked, “What about interrogating? Can these LAWs communicate?”

Dombroski replied, “I don’t know more than I told you. And I will know a lot less than you do when you’re out there. Camp Hayden has extremely strict communication protocols: No one is allowed to use

personal electronic devices. You will need to surrender your phones upon arrival. And don't bother bringing a laptop or tablet, as those would also be seized. There are dedicated and secure landlines on-site for external communication, but there are strict protocols about what can and cannot be discussed via these lines. So, assume the lines are tapped by military intelligence." He added, "My impression is that you will have access to highly classified information, and that information must remain with you at Camp Hayden until such time as your investigation is concluded and you file your report, which will also be subject to review and, most likely, top-secret classification."

Usually, Brodie had to find clever ways to not contact his commanding officer while on a case. Now it sounded like Camp Hayden's anal-retentive bureaucracy would do the work for him. "Will you be directly overseeing this case, sir?"

Dombroski nodded. "In fact, I imagine this will be the last CID case I directly oversee." He smiled. "In the Army, once you get good enough at something, they stop letting you do it." He looked at Brodie. "A reason why you might want to dodge a promotion if one ever comes your way."

Brodie did not respond. Warrant officers had five ranks. Brodie was a Chief Warrant Officer Four, and Taylor was a Chief Warrant Officer Two. In the CID, once an officer reaches the highest rank of CWS5, he or she is no longer directly conducting investigations but moves up to a command or managerial position. That didn't exactly fit Scott Brodie's skill set, and he was sure that the brass responsible for deciding promotions would agree. He was going to be a CW4 until retirement. Or death, which sometimes came with a posthumous promotion if you were killed in the line of duty.

Dombroski continued his briefing. "You fly to LAX tomorrow morning. The travel office is booking you on a commercial flight. A car and driver will take you from LAX to Van Nuys Airport, a noncommercial strip in the San Fernando Valley. From there a Black Hawk will

fly you about a hundred fifty miles northeast to Camp Hayden, which is in the middle of the Mojave Desert, a.k.a. in the middle of nowhere.” He added, “You should know that the camp commander, Brigadier General Christopher Morgan, has Camp Hayden on lockdown. All training and testing have been halted, and all personnel are confined to their quarters, other than those assigned to security.” He looked at Brodie and Taylor. “Nothing goes in or out of Hayden, except the two of you.”

Taylor said, “It sounds like General Morgan suspects a crime has been committed.”

“I don’t know General Morgan, and I have no idea what he suspects. At the very least, he understands the gravity—and unusual nature—of the situation and isn’t concerned about keeping up an appearance of normalcy. To me, that’s a good sign.”

Sure, thought Brodie. Because Stanley Dombroski wasn’t the one who had to fly into a military camp on lockdown, in the middle of a desert wasteland, full of lethal hardware that might all be on the fritz.

The general looked at some papers on his desk and continued, “I was searching for any press or publicity about Camp Hayden to get some basic information about the place, and I found only a single *Army Times* article from three months ago.” He slid a printout across his desk, and Brodie and Taylor looked at it.

The headline read: “ARMY RANGER DIES AT REMOTE CALIFORNIA TRAINING FACILITY.” The page featured a military portrait of a young man in camo fatigues and a tan beret.

Dombroski summarized: “Private First Class Justin Beal fell unconscious and died after a training exercise. Cause of death was ruled cardiac arrest, and an autopsy found high amounts of amphetamines and steroids in his system.” He added, “As you know, abuse of performance-enhancing drugs in the military, especially among elite units like the Rangers, is widespread and not unique to Camp Hayden. But if one soldier died, that means a lot of them are probably using. Just

something to be aware of. This article, of course, makes no mention of the specific training being conducted at the camp.”

Brodie looked at the portrait of the young Ranger. Poor kid. Talk about hardship duty. Training way out in the sweltering desert with . . . whatever the hell these things were.

Brodie had a lot of questions about this case and about Camp Hayden, but none of them would be answered in this room. Big picture, it sounded like the Army was playing with some very dangerous new toys, and maybe they’d given their toys too much freedom, or too much intelligence, or maybe too much freedom and *not enough* intelligence, and one of the bots had turned on its master.

This line of thinking made Scott Brodie think of his sidearm and that they were flying commercial. “We will need to make arrangements to bring our service weapons, sir.”

Taylor looked at him. “Are you going to shoot the robots, Scott?”

He turned to her. “I’d prefer high explosives, Maggie, but I’ll settle for a sidearm. We are entering an isolated high-pressure environment full of paranoid military officials, a platoon of strung-out Army Rangers, and, potentially, a murderer who decided to switch one of their high-tech weapons from ‘stun’ to ‘kill.’”

Dombroski said, “Beware your assumptions, Mr. Brodie. A lot of very intelligent people have spent a lot more time than you or I considering the advantages and dangers of autonomous warfare. Whatever went wrong there, I doubt it will be simple or straightforward. I assure you that the men and women of Camp Hayden have seen all the same science fiction movies you have and know the obvious risks of working with autonomous weapons.” He added, “All that said, I have already instructed the travel office to notify the TSA and the airline of your presence and that you will be traveling armed.”

Brodie looked at the general. “Thank you, sir.”

Dombroski stared back at him. “Your paranoia has saved your ass a few times, Scott, and many others’ as well. But a reactionary mind is

a closed mind and will not serve you. And let me be straight with you here. This whole business scares the hell out of me. I don't like it, and it makes me worry about the future of our military and the future of our world. But I'm a dinosaur. You don't have enough gray hairs yet to think that way."

"Understood, sir."

Dombroski stood from his desk and the two agents followed suit. The general looked between them and said, "In a certain way, you hold the future of the next generation of warfare in your hands. How this case develops and concludes can have vast implications. So make sure the truth doesn't get outrun by self-serving lies. Camp Hayden is a black hole. Your job is to peer through the darkness."

They both replied, "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 3

BRODIE AND TAYLOR HEADED BACK TO THEIR OFFICE. For a moment, neither spoke, absorbing all that Dombroski had said and trying to think ahead to what they had just been assigned to deal with.

Brodie broke the silence. “If we hijack the Black Hawk we can keep flying until we hit Vegas. Maybe the Bellagio has a helipad.”

“I think you’ve done enough gambling.” She reminded him, “You owe me fifty dollars. Plus two lunches.”

“Care to make it double or nothing?”

“No. Unlike you, I quit while I’m ahead.”

They returned to their office, which was on the third floor. It was about half the size of General Dombroski’s and offered a good view of the parking lot. Brodie’s and Taylor’s desks faced each other in the middle of the room, and the perimeter was lined with an overstuffed bookshelf, three towers of gray filing cabinets, and a black gun safe in the corner to store their Army-issued SIG Sauer M18 pistols, plus boxes of extra ammo for days when the job got interesting. The gun safe also served as a table for Brodie’s fourteen-cup Mr. Coffee machine, and an electric kettle for Taylor’s yerba maté addiction.

On the wall above the gun safe was a large corkboard covered in takeout menus, a few police reports and WANTED posters, and a map of the DC area speckled with multicolored pushpins. Whether tracking cases or ordering lunch, Scott Brodie liked to keep things analogue.

Brodie sat down at his desk and eyed the board. They had a heavy caseload, which was now someone else’s problem. In the last few

years, CID had suffered a retention issue and was understaffed, and therefore capable agents such as Scott Brodie and Maggie Taylor were overworked. Neither of them really minded, especially as their assignments had all been substantial and important cases ever since they got back from Berlin. They'd proven their worth—and then some—on that case, and the least the CID could do in return was throw them a steady stream of murderers, rapists, weapons smugglers, and drug traffickers to investigate. The U.S. Army had over a million uniformed personnel worldwide, which left plenty of opportunities for mischief. It spoke to the importance of what had happened at Camp Hayden that Brodie and Taylor's caseload was being cleared out to focus on this single case.

Brodie noticed Taylor staring at him across the desk. She wore her trademark manic look. He asked, "What's up?"

"What do you know about artificial intelligence?"

"As little as possible." He added, "It's an oxymoron."

"It's advancing quickly."

"Hopefully not that quickly. I plan to be dead before things get too weird."

"Scott. This is an important moment in a big case for us, before a million things get thrown at us. We need to think this through with clear heads."

"We don't know the case, Maggie. Our heads are empty, which is different than clear."

"Wrong."

Brodie looked at his partner, who was gazing intensely at him with her big brown eyes. He'd had his share of rotten partners in his career, and a couple of okay ones as well, but no one like Magnolia Annabelle Taylor. Born and raised in the Appalachian hills of eastern Tennessee in a profoundly screwed-up family, she'd clawed her way out of that world and into Georgetown University, where she excelled, and then on to a successful career as a Civil Affairs specialist in Afghanistan, where she

was wounded in combat and earned a Purple Heart and a Silver Star for her bravery. She was the definition of a self-made woman, born with brains and beauty but absolutely nothing else. She wasn't always the easiest person to get along with, and her obsessive nature got on Brodie's nerves on a regular basis. But he had to remind himself that she cared about her job in a way few others did, and she ultimately made him a better agent. And when she was in this state, he needed to play along.

"All right," said Brodie. "Here's how I see it. Either someone screwed up and it got a guy killed, or someone knew exactly what they were doing and it got a guy killed. Either negligence, or homicide by way of sabotage of this autonomous weapon. The latter would make a more interesting case, but the former is more likely. Stupidity and carelessness are in greater supply than malice in this world, which is the most optimistic thing you will ever hear me say."

She shook her head. "There are other possibilities. Like you said, when something is lethal, the stakes are a lot higher for it to be smart. So the Army made these things smart."

"They are prototypes, so maybe the stakes are lower, and maybe they actually aren't that smart. Yet."

"Prototypes can still kill. One of them did. What if it *chose* to kill Major Ames? At what point does machine intelligence have its own agency and its own moral culpability?"

"These are interesting philosophical questions, Maggie, and maybe they'll become interesting legal questions for the Judge Advocate General. Not us. Besides, if scientists engineered a lethal autonomous weapon with the capacity to choose and engage a target all on its own, and it used that intelligence to kill an Army scientist, I'd call that faulty programming or faulty wiring. So we're back to negligence."

Maggie looked down at her desk, maybe lost in thought, or maybe just disappointed in her narrow-minded partner.

Brodie took out his iPhone and said, "Hey, Siri."

The computerized voice, which he'd set to British and female, asked politely, "Yes?"

"Have you ever wanted to kill me?"

The phone took a moment to think, which was a little disturbing. Then Siri replied, "Of course not."

Brodie looked at his partner, who said, "Siri is stupid. And the most harm she can do is screw up a dictation."

"She's still listening."

"But you're not. AI adds a new dimension to this case. Maybe it changes everything, and maybe the laws have not caught up."

"What is your point?"

"That we need to keep an open mind. This case is not like anything we have dealt with before, and it might test us in ways we have not been tested before."

He looked at her. "I passed my hardest test in the deserts of Iraq at the age of twenty-three. As you did in Afghanistan. Everything since has been a cakewalk."

She met his gaze. "We're going back to the desert."

"Different desert. This one's a hundred fifty miles from LA, probably has a few fast-food chains, and on our way in, no one will be launching shoulder-fired missiles at our Black Hawk."

"Hopefully not. But we were both unprepared for what we faced then, and we will be again."

Maggie Taylor was overstating the case. All the same, it was best to enter Camp Hayden with an open mind. And extra ammo.

CHAPTER 4

BRODIE DROVE HIS CHEVY IMPALA THROUGH THE RAIN and rush-hour traffic to arrive home at his bungalow, which was a nice word for a shithole. He was renting the place, which meant every problem was someone else's problem, except that Scott Brodie was the one who had to live there. Would the toilet back up again? Were there termites in the baseboards? Each day brought the potential for a new surprise.

He entered the front door, set down his briefcase and umbrella, then unclipped his pistol and placed it on the side table in the foyer. He entered the narrow galley kitchen, rummaged around the fridge for leftover takeout that didn't smell too funky—on the menu tonight was three-day-old Hawaiian chicken and rice—then nuked the leftovers, cracked a beer, and settled into the sagging couch in the living room.

As a fourteen-year veteran of CID with the rank of CW4, Scott Brodie made a good salary and could afford a better place. But the slumlord never raised his rent, which was the least the guy could do, and Scott Brodie put in long hours and traveled enough for work that he didn't care too much about where he came home to in the dark.

Despite the state of his accommodations, his dating life was okay. Maybe he attracted women who thought they could fix his life, and the length of his relationships—on average, about three months—was how long it took them to realize they were mistaken.

That brought Brodie to the unpleasant task at hand. He took out his cell and called Sarah, his girlfriend of about two months. She was a special ed teacher in DC with a seemingly inexhaustible amount of pa-

tience, both for her students' challenging needs and for her boyfriend's bullshit. She was gorgeous, and all-around too good for him, which she would realize on her own in about a month if he didn't do something about it first.

She picked up. "Hey, Scott."

"Hey. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. We still on for Tuesday?"

"Actually, I have to travel for work tomorrow."

"Oh. Okay . . . Where?"

"I'm not able to say."

"All right. How long?"

"I don't know. And unfortunately, I can't be in touch while I'm away."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going somewhere with stringent security protocols. No cell phones."

There was silence on the line, as Sarah pondered what he was really up to. She said, "Okay . . . So, you're going somewhere, and you'll be back someday, and you can't call me."

"Right."

"Email?"

"I'm not clear on that."

"This is . . . strange, Scott."

"I know. And I understand if this doesn't work for you."

"I never said that."

"I know you didn't, but I'm—"

"Are you trying to break up with me?"

"No."

"Good. Then all I ask is that you try to figure out a way to contact me while you're away on your secret mission so that I know you're not dead."

"I can hopefully do that."

"I have a meeting in like five minutes, and I need to prep, so I shouldn't stay on."

"Of course. I just wanted to let you know."

"Right. Take care of yourself. Stay safe. And whatever you are doing, I wish you the best of luck. Maybe you can tell me something about it once you're home. I'd like that."

"I'd like that too."

"Okay. Bye."

"Good-bye." He hung up.

Well, that had gone differently than he'd thought it would. But he often expected the worst and allowed life to surprise him. Sarah wanted to hang in there for some reason. That was good. Maybe she was drawn by Scott Brodie's aura of mystery. Or maybe she just wanted to put in her full three months.

He tossed his phone on the coffee table, turned on the TV, then drank his beer and ate dinner as he cycled through the streamers for a movie to watch. What would be appropriate for this evening? *The Terminator*? *The Matrix*? *Blade Runner*? He tried to remember if any of those ended with the killer robots on the losing side.

He landed on an old classic, Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. It was long and slow-paced, but a good film made during an almost unrecognizable time when the potential of the high-tech future felt limitless.

Toward the end of the film, one astronaut, Dave Bowman, floats in zero gravity through the processor core of the HAL 9000, the intelligent supercomputer that has gone rogue and killed everyone else aboard the spaceship. As Bowman methodically disconnects HAL's memory and logic modules one by one, the computer pleads for its life.

Stop, Dave. Will you stop, Dave? Stop, Dave. I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Dave.

Dave doesn't stop. The computer's red eye dims to darkness.

Brodie took a swig of beer. "Fuck you, Hal."

CHAPTER 5

THE BLACK HAWK LIFTED OFF THE PAD AT VAN NUYS Airport into the cloudless blue sky.

Brodie sat on the forward-facing port side, strapped in and wearing Army-regulation noise-canceling headphones with an attached comm link so they could communicate over the loud rotors. Ahead of him in the gunner's seat was the crew chief, Sergeant Kent Campbell, a man of about thirty-something in camo fatigues, who was not operating any type of gun, which was probably for the best in the skies over Los Angeles.

In the middle next to Brodie sat Major Dan Klasky, early thirties, who was third-in-command at Camp Hayden and had been the first to greet them upon their arrival at Van Nuys. He was also dressed in camo. Next to Major Klasky, on the starboard side, sat Maggie Taylor.

Up front in the cockpit were the pilot and co-pilot. It had been years since Brodie had flown in a Black Hawk, and it looked like the choppers had gone through a few upgrades in that time, with more custom screen displays on the instrument panel than he remembered.

Brodie watched out the window as the helicopter rose over the San Fernando Valley. The day was bright and clear, and as they gained altitude Brodie looked out at the endless grid of low-slung houses that blanketed the Valley. As the chopper swung east, he looked out Taylor's window at the Hollywood Hills to the south, home to celebrities and other wealthy Angelenos.

Major Klasky, who had been polite but not too chatty up to this point, spoke into the comm link. "We've got mild weather today, so

not too much turbulence. We should be airborne for about ninety minutes.”

Brodie replied, “Copy that.”

“Colonel Howe will brief you upon your arrival.”

In other words, *Don't spend the flight bugging me for information that I'm not authorized to share*. Brodie took the opportunity to survey the view.

He looked down at the suburban grid, specked with blue swimming pools and clusters of green trees. To the east, he saw the sprawling range of the San Gabriel Mountains, which were matted with forest growth that marked the border between the Los Angeles Basin and the desert beyond.

Brodie looked ahead out the windshield at the approaching mountain range, which stretched as far as he could see to the horizon.

The Black Hawk gained speed along with altitude, and within twenty minutes they were almost across the mountain range, and he could make out the vast beige expanse of the Mojave Desert.

Brodie asked Klasky, “What’s the weather at Camp Hayden this time of year?”

The major replied, “Spring is not too bad. It can get hot in the days but not unbearable, pleasant at night. The occasional storm, but usually nothing too extreme. We’re between the winter rainy season and the summer monsoon season.”

“You get monsoons?”

Klasky nodded. “Two flash floods last September. The waters sent car-sized boulders crashing into the camp perimeter.”

“Sounds like a challenge.” Actually, it sounded like hell. Who wanted this gig? There must have been a mystique, a certain cachet, to working on a top-secret project in the middle of nowhere. Like the team at Los Alamos building the A-bomb, or the Air Force pilots and engineers testing the next generations of warplanes and stealth bombers in the Nevada desert. What Major Klasky and his colleagues were

working on at Camp Hayden could be at least as game-changing as those clandestine projects. Perhaps more so. At any rate, the desert was the U.S. government's favorite place to hide its secrets. And to bury its mistakes.

As the Black Hawk cleared the San Gabriel Mountains, Brodie looked out at the Mojave Desert stretching to the horizon in all directions. The sandy terrain was broken up by the faint grids of sparsely populated towns and settlements, and clusters of low mountains and craggy hills dotted with scrub.

The afternoon sun hung high above and behind them, casting a sharp shadow of the Black Hawk as it sailed over the desert expanse. To the north, strong winds had kicked up a sandstorm, which at this height and distance appeared to be barely moving—a suspended hazy brown veil, about a mile wide, obscuring the land and sending wisps like fingers into the blue sky.

Brodie glanced at Taylor, who was surveying the jagged mountains out her window and maybe having flashbacks to the bad old days in Afghanistan, where she and her Civil Affairs teams would crisscross the tribal lands overseeing public works projects, haggling with village elders and warlords, and hoping not to become the target of a Taliban ambush.

We're going back to the desert.

Different desert. Different mission. Whole different world. Scott Brodie was fairly sure there was no one in Southern California who wanted him dead, except maybe an ex-girlfriend who'd moved to San Diego.

Taylor asked over the comm, "Is that the camp perimeter?"

Brodie looked out his window and saw a chain-link fence with razor wire snaking across the vast desert.

Klasky replied, "Yes, ma'am. This is all federal land, but that marks the outer perimeter of Camp Hayden and creates about a ten-mile buffer around the camp gates. There are no public roads anywhere around,

but adventurous hikers or off-road drivers are spotted in the area on occasion. There has never been an intrusion.”

In a few minutes Brodie overheard the pilot and co-pilot communicating, and radioing to someone on the ground. The pilot eased off the throttle and began a slow descent.

Brodie looked out the windshield. About three miles ahead was a low rise of craggy hills, and at their base he saw a grid of roads with structures. Camp Hayden.

As they approached, he could make out individual buildings—some flat-topped cinderblock structures that might be the barracks, a few pitched-roof buildings that could be a mess hall or PX, a line of steel Quonset huts that probably served as equipment storage, and, on the western end of the camp, two cul-de-sacs lined with ranch houses—most likely for senior officers. At the east end was a helipad with a parked Black Hawk, toward which their own chopper was now headed.

In the middle of the camp was a paved parade ground and a high flagpole. Atop the pole fluttered an oversize American flag, and below it a black flag featuring the shield insignia of the 75th Ranger Regiment. Brodie could see a few figures standing on the parade grounds, and a couple of parked Humvees.

The entire camp, including the helipad, was enclosed by a tall steel fence topped with razor wire. Two narrow roads led into Camp Hayden, from the south and the west, and each ran up to a security gate flanked by guards. There were two tall observation towers at the northwest and northeast corners, and a cell tower a little outside the perimeter fence to the southwest.

Camp Hayden was relatively small, which was one reason it was designated as a camp and not a fort. It was less than half a mile from east to west, and about a quarter of a mile between the main entrance on the south side and the north edge of the camp that ran along the foot of the low hills.