

CHAPTER ONE

Boots on Hallowed Ground

JOINT BASE LEWIS-MCCHORD · 2026

My name is First Lieutenant Andre Briggs, United States Army, and for the first time in sixteen years I am back where it all began for my family. I am the newest intelligence officer assigned to the analysis cell supporting 1st Special Forces Group at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and I am not sure if I dreaded this posting or welcomed it more. Both feelings sat in my chest, heavy and tight. As I stand just inside the gate and look out over ground I thought I would never see again in uniform.

Lewis smells the same. Jet fuel, wet pine, that faint sting from the motor pool that rides the wind and seeps into your clothes. The rain has not changed either. It beads on the chain-link, slicks the asphalt, turns the grass along the road into a dark green smear. The place feels like someone hit pause. Then waited for me to hit play.

I stop on the sidewalk and let my eyes travel across the low buildings and parked vehicles, the distant hum of a helicopter winding up somewhere beyond the tree line. When I was a kid, this base was a playground and a kingdom rolled into one. I remember short legs pumping hard to keep up with my father's stride, boots too big for my feet clapping on the concrete as I tried to match the sound of his. I remember soldiers stepping aside and grinning, how one of them would scoop me up and carry me on his shoulders while my father pretended to be annoyed and failed.

There was a day in late summer when my sister Zara and I raced each other along this very stretch of road, little legs running with glee, her laughter bouncing off the cinder block walls. A formation was breaking up near the parade field, rows of men in green berets dissolving into smaller knots, and one of them peeled away, jogged over, and scooped her up just before she collided with a stack of orange traffic cones. He spun her, set her on her feet, and sent her back toward our mother with a mock-stern warning to "watch your six." We had no idea what it meant, but we repeated the phrase for weeks like it was a magic spell.

Now the same road feels narrower, the buildings closer, the air heavier. The men in uniform are strangers. The laughter is not for me. I stand there a few seconds longer, my orders folder tucked under one arm, and I let it sink deep into my bones.

I watched a man in this same uniform hug my mother, ruffle my hair, kiss my little sister on the forehead, and walk away from us toward a world we thought we understood. It's been years since that doorway, that smile, that promise he would be back before the school year ended. I did not realize then that the ground I was running across in sneakers and grass-stained jeans would one day feel like a graveyard, even in broad daylight.

I draw a slow breath, adjust my patrol cap, and force my boots to move. The building with the Special Forces crest waits for me down the road, familiar in outline yet altered by time. I never thought the Army would actually send me here. There are other Groups, other posts, other assignments for an intel lieutenant with a decent record. For a long time, I counted on that. I did my job, took the hard schools, went where they told me, and told myself that this patch of Washington was a closed chapter.

Yet here I am.

Every step toward that crest feels like walking back into an old photograph, one where half the faces have been blurred out by time and the other half by choice. I pass a parking lot where my sister and I always waited in the back of our mother's car, fogging up the windows while she sat in the driver's seat and watched the building door like it was the mouth of a cave. Men came and went, uniforms dark in the rain, berets tucked under rank. We turned them into a game, counting them one by one as if placing bets, convinced that if we hit the right number at the right time, he would appear, smiling, keys in hand, ready to drive us off base for ice cream.

We were terrible at it. No matter how we guessed, how we changed the rules, he never walked out when our count said he should.

Turns out soldiers are good at never letting anyone see their next move, even the people waiting for them in the parking lot. But there was one move he never saw coming until it was too late.

He did not walk out that day like he promised. Until then, I had never known him to break a promise. He did not walk any day after either.

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Now I am the one walking toward the door. Not a waiting kid, but a lieutenant with orders in hand, assigned back to the place where my family's story cracked open. I can feel the past pressing against the back of my neck.

I tell myself this is just another assignment. A job. A new unit, a new chain of command, a new set of maps and names and problems to solve. That is the rational layer. Underneath it, another truth coils tighter.

I did not choose this ground. But I chose the Army. I chose to learn its language, its maps, its silences, the same machine that reached out one ordinary morning and took him from us. It carved out every dream we had built as a family and left only ash in its place. Birthdays still came after that. My mother made sure of it. Cakes appeared on the table, presents stayed wrapped beneath colored paper, and Zara still laughed with the easy joy only a child could carry. But even at that age, I could see the strain behind my mother's smile. The house never sounded the same again. The raging current we had been shielded from took over once the anchor was ripped away.

I told myself that studying that machine would give me answers.

It only proved the machine had no floor nor ceiling, just more gears grinding in the dark.

Maybe that path was always going to drag me back here, boots on the same wet gravel, whether I wanted it or not.

I reach the steps and pause, looking up at the sign that crowns the entrance. 1st Special Forces Group. Quiet Professionals. The motto sits beneath it, carved into metal, the same one I remember tracing with small fingers while a deeper voice murmured the translation. *De Oppresso Liber*. To free the oppressed. At ten, the words sounded noble and simple. At twenty-six they feel heavier and more complicated, like something you carry for a long time before you understand the cost.

Rain slides down the face of the sign, beads along the edges of the letters, drips onto the concrete below. I watch it fall, then step forward, boots striking the same hallowed ground I used to run across with a child's careless joy. I push the door open.

The hallway inside smells like floor polish and old coffee. White cinder block walls close in on either side, lined with bulletin boards crammed with

training schedules and worn photographs. Back then those boards were just background color to me. Now they look like a timeline that never quite made sense, snapshots of people on either side of events no one wants to explain.

A reception desk breaks the line of pictures near the end of the hall. A staff sergeant looks up from his screen as I approach, a mug of coffee resting by his elbow.

"Morning, sir. Can I help you?"

"Yes, Sergeant." I set my orders on the counter. "Lieutenant Briggs, reporting for duty."

He glances at the paperwork, then at my name tape. The change in his expression is tiny, just a brief tightening around the eyes, a slight stilling of the shoulders, but I have seen it too many times to miss it.

"Briggs," he says, careful, even. "Yes, sir. We have you on the list. Intel cell, Group support."

"That's right, Sergeant."

He stands and squares himself. "Right this way, sir. Major Kwon wants to see you before we saddle you with all the fun stuff. We'll get you squared away afterward." He checks his watch. "You been to Lewis-McChord before, sir?"

"A few times. Exercise, a few years back." I leave out the years I lived here, the miles I ran on this pavement with shorter legs and a different perspective. No sense opening that door for a stranger in the hallway.

He doesn't push. We walk past a series of framed photos, team pictures, all of them. Twelve men at a time, desert or jungle behind them. Some of the frames have a small black ribbon pinned in the corner. My gaze skims the faces without stopping. I know better than to search for the one I grew up with. His picture doesn't belong in a hallway where anyone can see it. People like to keep that story in drawers and closed conference rooms.

We move down another corridor. Voices seep out around closed doors, low and controlled. Years ago, I walked this same stretch holding a cooling cup of hot chocolate in both hands while my mother spoke in a near whisper with a man whose shoulders filled an office doorway. I don't remember the

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words, just how straight her back stayed and how his eyes slid past her to me and my sister and then away.

"Here we are, sir," the staff sergeant says.

He taps on a door that is already half open.

"Ma'am, Lieutenant Briggs reporting."

"Send him in," a woman's voice answers.

I step into a compact office, one desk and a large map of the Indo-Pacific pinned to the far wall. Colored pins and grease-pencil rings mark out places most people will never look up on a globe. The woman behind the desk rises as I enter, hand extended.

"Lieutenant Briggs," she says. "Major Hana Kwon. I run the analysis and targeting cell for 1st Group."

"Major." I take her hand, then move to parade rest.

"At ease," she says. "Have a seat."

I sit, cap on my knee, spine upright out of habit.

Her hand remained close to a secure, red-labeled external drive resting beside her keyboard. She picked up a heavy bronze challenge coin on her blotter, her thumb tracing its raised edges.

She opens the folder in front of her and scans the first page. "You've covered a lot of ground for twenty-six," she says. "Enlisted infantry, deployment with the Eighty-Second, OCS, Military Intelligence, division intel, now here."

"Yes, Major."

"How do you feel about working this close to Special Forces?"

There are plenty of honest answers to that. None of them simple. I pick the one that will move us forward.

"Ready to do my job, Major."

A small smile crosses her mouth, gone almost before it lands.

She leans back slightly, the rigid professionalism in her expression loosening just enough to notice. "And you can drop the Major after every sentence. We're going to be working closely together. Just talk to me."

"Yes, Major." I catch myself, and a quiet exhale slips out before I can stop it. "Yes."

The corner of her mouth moves. Not quite a smile, but close enough.

"We don't get people in this building by accident, Lieutenant. We ask for who we want. Your record is solid. Your previous commanders speak highly of you. Your OCS instructors noted you were persistent in a way that made their lives difficult and your future commander's life easier." She sets the folder down. "That's why you're here."

I began running this race at eighteen, signing enlistment papers while the rest of my class worried about dorm assignments and meal plans. When the Eighty-Second wasn't in the field, I was chewing through online credits, study guides, anything that pushed me closer to a commission. Filling every blank space in the timeline had become its own survival skill.

I still remembered the sharp smell of industrial cleaner in the recruiting office, the sun-faded poster of a free-falling paratrooper taped to the drywall, and the scratching sound of the cheap plastic pen as I signed away my civilian life.

Ironically, I never needed to join the Army. Some people believed I was out of my mind for following this path. Others understood the need to stand close enough to touch what remained of him.

She closes the folder and rests her fingertips on it. "This Group has a long memory for names," she says.

She does not look down when she says it. She watches my face instead. The air between us tightens just a little.

"I'm aware," I say.

"I imagine you are." Her voice stays even. "I'm not going to ask you how you feel about being assigned here. That belongs to you. What I will say is, people will make up their own version of events when they hear your name in

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this building. They will make assumptions. You don't owe them explanations for any of their versions. You owe them your work."

I acknowledge with a nod.

Her shoulders eased by a fraction. "Your job here is simple to describe, but demanding in reality," she says. "You help us see what others miss. You look at fragments and find patterns. You raise your hand when something feels wrong. You will spend long hours in a windowless room staring at feeds and maps and transcripts, knowing that out there, people you may never meet are moving based on what you find. It's not glamorous. But it matters."

"That's what I want."

"Good." She slides a printed schedule across the desk. "Today is administrative. Badges, accounts, introductions. Tomorrow, you sit in on our morning sync. Listen more than you talk. Learn how this place breathes before you try to change the rhythm."

"Understood."

"And Lieutenant," she adds as I stand.

"Yes?"

"If you ever have questions, about this unit, or about anything you think you're not supposed to ask, my door closes for privacy, not to keep you out. Understood?"

"Understood. Thank you."

"Welcome to 1st Group."

I step back into the hallway. The staff sergeant, Adams, according to his name tape, is waiting with a stack of forms thick enough to stop a bullet.

"Time for the fun part, sir," he says. "Badge, accounts, six passwords you'll forget by morning. Then I'll show you around."

We move through the loop. ID card photo under hard fluorescent light. Fingerprints. A brief on what goes and does not go into the secure areas. A tour of the SCIF, with rows of screens glowing in dim light and voices murmuring over headsets.

Adams swiped his clearance card through a heavy steel digital lock, waiting for the green indicator light to flash before pushing the pneumatic door open.

It feels less like an office and more like a nervous system, information pulsing in and out faster than any single person could track alone.

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By the time my stomach speaks up, Adams checks his watch.

"Beat the chow line if you can, sir. After noon it's a gamble."

We cross a small open space, drizzle clinging to my sleeves, and head toward the DFAC. The water beaded into tight gray drops across the nylon Gore-Tex of my uniform jacket, rolling off the cuffs as I walked. The building is low and plain from the outside; it could be any dining facility on any base. But I know better. I have sat inside this one before, a chocolate milk ring on the table in front of me.

Back then the smell of the place was all I cared about, that mix of grease and bread and fruit punch, heavy and enveloping when you walked in. Men in uniform would stop at our table, clap him on the shoulder, talk over our heads in a language of acronyms and half-finished sentences. Sometimes he would slide his dessert onto my tray when my mother wasn't looking. Sometimes he would lean back in his chair and just listen, eyes on the middle distance, as if he could see something beyond the walls that the rest of us could not.

Now the doors open with the same clatter and hum. I grab a tray, fall into line, and let the current carry me forward. The thick plastic tray slid along the stainless-steel rails with a dull, hollow rattle, catching behind a stack of green ceramic bowls.

At the end of the line a captain shifts his tray to make room. Mid-thirties, lean, airborne wings above his pocket, a row of ribbons over his heart. His heavy metal serving spoon clinked against the edge of a stainless-steel insert as he cleared a space.

"New face," he says. "Just get in?"

"This morning, sir," I say.

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He offers his hand. "Rivera. Bravo Company."

"Briggs, sir. Intel cell."

The name hangs in the air for a half-second longer than it should.

The nearest conversations dimmed, like someone had turned a dial. Forks pause halfway to mouths. A soldier at the next table glances at my name tape, then back to his plate so fast you would think he touched something hot. Another shifts in his seat and says something quiet to the man across from him.

Rivera's grip stays steady, but something behind his eyes adjusts, a recognition he does not put into words. "Welcome to 1st Group, Lieutenant," he says, measured.

"Thank you, sir."

He releases my hand, dips his chin and moves on toward a cluster of other officers. As he sits, heads tilt together. Eyes cut looks in my direction, then away when they see I'm still watching.

The room's volume climbs again in uneven steps, pockets of sound rising and falling. The easy laughter prior to my entry struggled to return.

I take an open seat near the end of a table. No one sits directly across from me. I unclipped my patrol cap and placed it flat on the formica surface beside my tray, my fingers remaining on the stiff brim. A staff sergeant a few spots down is focused on his phone. Two younger soldiers talk through a training schedule without lifting their eyes past their plates.

They don't say his name. They never do. Not here. Not anywhere. Not when I'm in the room.

For years I told myself it was because they were ashamed of him, ashamed of whatever story they had built to explain what happened, ashamed to have his memory hanging around their necks like a stone. It made sense when I was old enough to notice the pattern and not yet old enough to know better.

Listening to the careful gaps in conversation now, watching shoulders tighten and eyes slide away when they realize who I am, I understand it differently.

They're not afraid of his name.

They're afraid of their own.

Afraid of the crack this place opened in all of them, in the base, in the oaths still recited at dawn, in the image of something unbreakable. It didn't just take him. It reached in and tore something from the fabric of this country, thread by thread, until the whole thing hung in ragged pieces that no amount of silence or ceremony could sew back together.

I push my tray aside, food only half touched, and rest my hands on the cool edge of the table. The plastic base of the tray scraped across the salt grains on the table, leaving a clean track in the dust.

The tile under my boots is solid and old. A faint line of dried water marks the path I took in from the rain. I sat in this same room with my feet swinging above the floor, more interested in dessert than in the undercurrent running beneath the adults' low voices.

I thought I was reporting to a new unit today. Stepping into a role that would challenge me and fill a line on my record.

But as I sit in the heart of the building that shaped the man whose shadow I have never quite escaped, something settles with a clarity I can't ignore.

It all began here. Long before rank on my chest, long before briefs and maps and acronyms, long before I knew what any of this cost.

I was ten. I had no idea what we were losing.

CHAPTER TWO

Dark Halo

COLUMBIA · SIXTEEN YEARS AGO · 2010

Captain Solomon Briggs lay prone near the crest of the hill, rifle canted over the drop, scope trained on the compound lights below. At six-four, he had to adjust his position slightly to keep his long frame low and stable. He reached forward with his left gloved hand, clicking the elevation turret of his Leupold optic two notches clockwise to compensate for the downhill slope. His clean-shaven head and face caught no reflection in the thick tropical dark. His lean, muscular build locked into the earth like it belonged there, dark skin and camo paint making him part of the night itself.

Below, the cartel compound glowed in patches of hard, artificial light. Generators hummed. Music leaked from a half-open door. The place might have passed for a country house with hired guns if you didn't know what to listen for. Solomon knew. He had been reading places like this his entire career.

Something about this op still didn't sit right with him.

Mission package came down less than twenty-four hours earlier. No full build-up, no rehearsals, just a hard deadline and a target window. Retrieving an asset on that kind of notice was rare. Using a full twelve-man ODA for it was rarer still. That level of commitment on such short notice meant the asset carried extraordinary importance.

Solomon filed that thought where he kept the others he couldn't act on yet and breathed slowly.

He keyed his mic. "Ghost, Steel. Pattern steady. Holding."

"Copy." Hale clicked his optic a degree. "Roof unchanged. Two up."

Lower down the slope, back in the trees, his men waited in the dark, weapons ready, loadouts tuned to the job. They had moved into position without waste or noise, a chain of small, efficient motions that no one needed to direct. They had run versions of this night on more ranges and in more countries than most people would ever hear about.

On the net they did not use names. Captain Solomon Briggs call sign is Ghost. Malik Jackson's, Steel. Ryan Hale's, Pike. Sergeant Michael Kincaid, their communications sergeant, Ridge. And Sergeant Jensen Cole, Wolf, the closest thing Solomon had to a younger brother. Each of the twelve had their callsign. Out here, it was the only name that mattered.

The net stayed quiet. No background chatter, no stray comments. Just breathing and the faint rustle of cloth when someone budged an inch to ease pressure on a joint.

"Copy," Solomon's voice came calm, clear in the headset. "Maintain eyes. Call any change."

Malik Jackson double-tapped his push-to-talk, then leaned back behind the glass. The tiny rubber button on his tactical radio harness clicked twice under his thumb, sending a low static squelch into the team's earpieces.

"Gate." Hale kept his tone flat. "One out, one in."

"Copy." Jackson flicked his gaze along the fence line, then to the tree line beyond it, then to the small display clipped to his kit, green numbers counting down to their planned time on target.

Solomon eased his cheek off the stock and slid back from the crest, keeping his profile low until the ground rose between him and the compound. Only when the lights below were cut off by the fold of the hill did he push to a crouch and turn into the trees, moving down toward the line of men waiting in the dark. His shoulder-mounted infrared strobe brushed past a thick, wet palm frond, leaving a smear of dark water across his camouflage sleeve.

The rest of the team adjusted in slow, practiced ways. Fingers brushed over buckles and straps. A gloved hand confirmed the lock on a suppressor, then stilled. Shoulders rolled to seat plate carriers. Those small corrections said more than a string of questions ever would. Every man knew where the others would be at any minute of the op. Each one, a lifeline for the next.

Solomon moved among them without noise, boots finding the gaps between roots and stones. He paused behind each man just long enough to register what he needed, gear squared away, eyes clear, focus where it belonged. No one reached for him. No one asked for anything. The trust between them lived in the meticulous preparation done long before this hill.

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Solomon keyed his mic. "Ghost to Steel. Status."

"Ghost, steel, Outer security unchanged." Jackson never lifted from the scope. "Gate, perimeter, roof, two at barn."

"Copy. Weapons?"

"Rifles, sidearms." Hale adjusted his support hand. "No heavy guns. No change from last sweep."

"Copy. Interior?"

"Thermal shows six lower level, four upper." Hale's voice remained steady. "Target window, one seated figure, size and posture match. One transient every few mikes."

Solomon watched the house scanning its layout, then checked the time and the sky. "Copy. Civilians?"

"Negative. All armed."

Solomon let that sit for a breath. One less variable. He thumbed his mic. "Ghost to Ridge."

"Ridge, send." Kincaid's reply came low and measured.

"Bird status?"

Kincaid tilted his head, listening to the net. "Raven up. LZ Echo green."

"Copy. Command?"

"No change."

Solomon listened to the night, to the generators, the distant dogs, the near silence of his men on the hill. Every operation carried its own pulse. This one felt steady, held in a narrow band. He would take it.

"Ghost to Steel. Break overwatch."

"Steel. Copy."

Jackson and Hale peeled away from the overwatch position and slid back through the trees toward the waiting team. Above them, Kincaid settled in behind the optics and radio net, eyes returning to the compound as he took over surveillance and air coordination.

The two men emerged from the dark and slid into position beside the others. Jackson stepped in close beside Solomon. Solomon turned his head slightly and mouthed.

"Take your element."

Jackson moved without hesitation, gathering five men behind him. The rest formed on Solomon.

The assault element split cleanly in the dark.

Jackson's element spread into position through the trees, dark shapes settling into their assigned lanes around the objective.

A quiet crackle touched the net. "Steel set."

"Ghost to Steel." Solomon kept his voice level. "Execute on schedule."

"Steel. Copy."

No one needed more than that. Around him, rifles rose a fraction, gloved hands firmed on their grips, boots edged into their first steps. They had walked this plan in windowless rooms and on training lanes. Now it was only a matter of matching reality to the lines on the map.

Malik Jackson swept his optics one last time. Fence. Gate. Roof. Yard. Target window. He was not looking for comfort, only for the one detail that would tell him tonight was wrong. The compound kept its slow, unaware rhythm.

Jackson lowered the optic and gave a sharp two finger motion through the dark. His element moved immediately.

The men vibrated on the edge of motion, each one holding his piece of the assault in place.

Armed shadows in the dark moved toward the compound, unaware they were already stepping into the center of something far larger.

Solomon lifted his hand, fingers closed, then opened.

He rose from his squat in one smooth motion, his long frame unfolding like a shadow detaching from the earth. Rifle stayed low but ready as he moved, boots finding purchase without sound. The team flowed behind him

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as one unit, silent, coordinated, every man carrying his sector and his place in the line.

The fence came up out of the night. Rusty wire, leaning posts. Two shapes stood near the gate, rifles slung, attention drifting.

Two operators angled off to cover. A third slid forward with cutters wrapped in cloth to kill the noise. He clamped the jaws of the tool over the bottom strand, his forearms tightening as the hardened steel sheared through the rusty core. The wire parted without a sound.

On the far side of the gate, one guard turned his head at the wrong time, eyes narrowing at a shadow that didn't match his memory. It was the last full thought he had. A suppressed shot snapped once in the dark. Then twice more, a clean double tap ending the question before it could form into a shout. Two spent five-point-five-six casings ejected from the port, dropping silently into the tall grass beside the fence line.

"Gate." Jackson pressed the word into his mic.

They flowed through, Jackson led his team toward the west side of the main house. Solomon took the others around the opposite flank, keeping parallel to the wall, eyes up on the roof, mind on the window where the asset waited. The coarse, peeling stucco of the exterior wall brushed against the fabric of his left shoulder pouch as he kept his muzzle oriented toward the roofline.

Inside the courtyard, the noise hadn't changed. A man laughed near the barn; sound carried loose on the night air. A radio crackled in Spanish from somewhere out of sight. None of it carried urgency. Not yet.

At the west door, Jackson raised a gloved fist. The stack formed on instinct. The breacher, Leon Walker, callsign Blade, moved forward, hand already on the charge. Two men behind him, rifles up, ready to flow past at the first gap.

"Set." Leon leaned in with the charge.

"Set." Jackson cleared the line.

The charge went off with a controlled thump, the door blowing inward, hinges torn. The sound was sharp but contained, swallowed quickly by the

walls and the night. Before the dust had dissipated, the first two men were inside, weapons driving to their arcs.

"We're in." Jackson spoke softly into his mic.

Rooms fell in quick succession. A kitchen with a cold stove and a table still cluttered with plates. A storage area stacked with crates stamped with logos from three different countries. A back room with two men asleep on cots, rifles against the wall. They never made it out of the blankets.

"Clear." The calls came quiet and sequential. "Clear. Clear."

On the far side of the house, Solomon's element mirrored the movement. A side door, a short hallway, a man coming out of a bathroom rubbing his face. A gloved hand caught his wrist. A short burst dropped him before he could find his voice.

"Stairwell." Hale edged to the corner. "Left side, leading up."

"Copy." Solomon acknowledged with a tilt of his head.

The two elements converged at the foot of the stairs, rifles covering both directions, bodies slotted into their practiced positions. Solomon gave a nod. They started up, muzzle leading, each step placed with care, the old wood holding its breath beneath their boots.

The hallway at the top was narrow. Doors on both sides. The third on the left was their target. Hale moved past the first two without hesitation, trusting the men behind him to hold them. He centered on the third. Door, frame, handle, lock.

"Set." Hale breathed.

Leon Walker (*Torb*) stepped in with the breaching shotgun, he pressed the muzzle just above the latch and fired once. The wood around the mechanism shattered inward. Before the lock had finished breaking, Hale kicked the door hard and went through.

The target sat on a chair, hands bound in front of him, bare feet on tiled concrete. A single guard stood near the wall; rifle hung on his neck. The man's eyes widened at the door, his hand jerking toward his weapon.

Hale put a round into him before the rifle cleared his chest.

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Jackson pushed in behind, weapon tracking the corners.

The asset stared at the men pouring through the doorway, eyes narrowing against the sudden rush of movement and light. Rifles swept the room with disciplined precision. Corners cleared. Commands stayed low and controlled.

No rank patches. No names. Nothing identifying who they were or where they came from. That alone told him these were not conventional soldiers. Professional units stripped away those details before operations like this.

But that proved nothing.

Not in Colombia.

Not with what he carried.

The knowledge alone made him valuable enough to be hunted dead or alive.

His eyes moved carefully from man to man, searching for whoever carried authority inside the room. It proved harder than expected. Every operator moved with the same restrained confidence, the same polished discipline. No one barked orders. No one postured. No obvious leader revealed himself.

Another man entered behind the breach team and folded naturally into the formation without drawing attention to himself. The asset studied him no differently than the others.

He needed certainty. If these were not the men sent for him, then this was not a rescue. It was another transfer, another room, another round of pain dressed in a different uniform. The only way to know was to test the name.

Then he spoke.

"You're late." His voice scraped from dehydration and exhaustion. His eyes moved across the operators one by one. "Ghost, right?"

Almost nothing changed.

Almost.

One man paused for the smallest fraction of time before continuing forward.

The asset saw it immediately.

And in that instant, he knew the right team had finally come for him.

The call sign hit the room like a stone dropped in still water.

Solomon felt it land in his chest before his mind finished processing it. Jackson's rifle dipped a fraction. Hale's eyes cut to Solomon, then back to the asset, fast and sharp. The men behind them went very still. A loose sling swivel on Kincaid's rifle clicked against the aluminum handguard as he locked his posture.

An asset didn't know their callsigns. An asset didn't know anything about them, not faces, not names, not the words they used on the net. That was the whole point. The callsign Ghost was operational, buried in compartmented channels no rescued man in a cartel safehouse should have ever touched.

Solomon eyed the asset without fully turning toward him, studying the look in his eyes. The man appeared calm. Ungrateful, even. But beneath the controlled expression sat another truth entirely. Fear.

He filed that away. Hard and deep.

"Can you move?" Solomon asked.

"Yes." The asset winced as he tested his legs. "I think so."

Gloved hands with steel blades of a rescue hook sheared through the thick black polymer zip-ties with a sharp, plastic snap, the severed bands dropping onto the concrete floor. They hauled him up, slipped a spare vest over his head and clipped it tight.

"Collateral," Solomon said, eyes steady. "Where?"

"Office." The asset replied immediately. "Downstairs office. Safe on the wall. Everything I had, phones, hard drives, documents. All of it."

"Steel." Solomon turned to Jackson. "Office. Safe."

"Roger."

Omar Rahim and Daniel Chen took the asset between them. Solomon led them back into the hallway, eyes and muzzle up. Jackson's element peeled off down the stairs toward the portion of the house they had cleared but not yet fully searched.

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The office door was heavier than the others, brass handles worn bright. Jackson pushed it open, rifle up. Shelves lined the walls, filled with binders and ledgers. A large desk sat in the center; papers spread across it. Behind the desk, half recessed into the wall, a safe waited, dark steel and combination dial catching the beam of a weapon light.

The team spilled through the doorway, rifles snapping to their sectors as boots found bare floor and rug without a word.

"There." The asset pointed toward the safe behind the desk "They put it there."

"Breach."

Leon was already moving. He placed the charge, hands unwavering in the dim light.

"Set."

"Clear." Jackson ordered.

They stepped back. The charge cracked hard and contained. Dust puffed out around the safe door as it buckled and swung outward on its hinges. Hanging crooked in the frame.

Leon was already moving, stepping into the haze, one arm up against the dust as he grabbed the twisted handle and dragged the door fully open, he ran his gloved hand across the interior, feeling only cold, bare steel where there should have been cargo.

Empty. Bare steel. Thin dust.

"Empty," Leon said.

Solomon calculated the scene with the cold precision of a cartel strategist.

"Staged. Secondary." He swept the room with his eyes. "Check the frames. Walls. Fireplace."

Men moved without question. Pictures came down, backs checked. Tyler Hayes, code name Bolt, ran his hand along the paneling, feeling for seams. David Miller, code name Vise, flipped the rug edge with his boot toe.

In the corner, the wide fireplace yawned black and cold. The mantle held bottles and a framed landscape. One of the men Caleb Willis, code name Flint, pressed along the underside of the shelf. A raised edge. A click.

Stone shifted behind the throat of the chimney. A vertical section of soot-covered granite ground backward two inches, scraping against the stone base to reveal a smaller steel door, newer, seated flush in the rock.

"Safe." Caleb said quietly. "Hidden. Behind the stack."

Solomon crossed over quickly.

"Breach."

Leon placed the smaller charge, shielding his hands. The crack was sharper this time, stone dust billowing out in a white cloud. The door twisted open.

Leon moved quickly, stepping into the cloud, he hauled the twisted door wide and reached in. White masonry dust coated his forearms as his fingers dragged a few of the plastic-wrapped bricks of currency out, the thick polymer bands snapping against the concrete floor. He reached back in and closed in on two bulky envelopes, pulling them into the light.

"Package." He passed them back.

Solomon took the top envelope. The flap hung partially open and several photographs began slipping free. He caught them before they fell and started to shove them back inside.

Then one image caught his eye.

His hand stopped.

Slowly, he pulled several of the contents from the envelope and studied them beneath the dim light. He knew the rules. No opening. No reading. Secure and exfil.

But what he saw stopped him cold.

Politicians. High-level officials. Some faces he recognized from the news, Men and women in compromising positions. Minors, men, women and animals bound, tortured and used. Bizarre carefully engineered torture contraptions. Unmasked figures posing with bodies and animals like trophies.

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Images clear enough to end careers, devastate families, and hollow out whatever was left of a reputation.

The muscles along his cheekbone stood out. He squeezed the glossy edges hard enough to bend them. Rage came up fast and clean, like a blade pulled free. He let it rise, then forced it back down into the place where he kept everything he couldn't use on target. When he looked up, his expression hadn't changed. The men saw only their captain, stone-faced as ever.

He opened the second envelope. Two ruggedized solid-state hard drives with taped-over serial numbers and three black, unbranded burner phones lay side-by-side inside the foil lining. The kind of devices that held entire second lives.

Solomon keyed his mike "Wolf. On me."

Miller stepped out of the office and headed for the entry point Jensen was covering.

Jensen Cole appeared in the doorway, rifle low, eyes scanning.

Solomon tilted the envelope just far enough for him alone to see. Jensen's face hardened into stone. He said nothing. But his eyes said everything.

Solomon closed the envelope and handed the stack back to Leon Walker who carried the secure pouch and was designated to carry sensitive items.

Without realizing it, Leon, an explosives expert, stuffed the equivalent of a geopolitical detonation into the pouch, sealed, locked, ticking silently.

Solomon glanced at the bundles of cash still sitting on the floor by the open safe. "Leave it," he said.

No one touched it. They stepped back from the safe and moved for the door.

The asset had watched the whole exchange from the doorway, hands loose at his sides, Omar and Chen assigned to him kept him close. A faint smile on his face. These men had no idea what they had just stepped into.

"Solomon glanced back at the asset and caught the faint smile on his face. The cold feeling that had been building since this op started dug deeper into him

Who is this guy?"

"Movement east side." Kincaid's voice came controlled and fast. "Two vehicles. Voices. Estimate two mikes to contact."

Solomon met Jensen's eyes. "We're done here."

"Ghost. Ridge." Solomon thumbed the mic. "Asset and package secure. Bird?"

"En route. LZ Echo two mikes."

They did not run. They moved with purpose, weapons up, the asset hustled between two men but not dragged. The house behind them held the echo of their brief violence, doors broken, bodies cooling. They left it without looking back.

In the courtyard, the air had changed. The man near the barn no longer laughed. An engine revved hard somewhere beyond the outbuildings. A voice called out in Spanish, sharp and urgent.

The men slipped back out through the gap in the fence.

Solomon checked his watch, then the sound of the night. Shouts now carried from the compound. A single shot barked in the distance, someone firing into the air out of confusion or anger. Not a coordinated pursuit. Not yet.

Branches parted behind them as Kincaid dropped back in with the team, rifle slung across his chest, radio headset still pressed tight against one ear.

"Break contact." Solomon's voice hardened just enough. "We stay black. No engagement unless necessary."

"Roger." Kincaid acknowledged.

They moved quickly through the trees, trading speed against noise. Branches brushed shoulders and helmets. The asset stumbled, caught himself, pushed on without being told. No one spoke.

The trees thinned ahead. The dark opened into a rough clearing, tall grass flattened by earlier passes. Faint chem lights marked the edges of the landing zone the team had laid before the assault. The sound of rotors came low and heavy from the west, building fast.

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Two helicopters dropped into view, running lights off, only the dim glow from instruments painting the cockpits. Rotor wash kicked dust and grass into a frenzy as they flared and touched down, skids kissing the ground for as little time as possible.

"Let's move." Solomon said.

They closed the last distance at a jog, heads low against the rotor wind. A crew chief leaned out of the nearest bird, hand up, fingers spread, then curling inward. The team flowed into the open doors. Asset pushed in toward a seat and buckled down. The secure pouch passed hand to hand into the waiting arms of a crewman who locked them into a metal case near the forward bulkhead. Men took their places on the benches, rifles between knees, eyes still on the tree line.

Solomon was the last to step onto the skid, one hand on the frame. He scanned the dark one final time, listening for the wrong kind of gunfire, the wrong kind of shout. The night showed him only trees and the distant glow of the compound fading behind them.

He climbed in. The crew chief slapped the fuselage twice and yanked the door closed.

The helicopters rose as one, rotors biting hard into the air, the ground dropping away beneath them. The compound fell back into the darkness, its brief disturbance already swallowed by distance and noise.

Inside the dim cabin, the men sat in silence, faces unreadable behind goggles and paint. The asset stared at the floor, hands clenched on his knees, chest rising and falling in tight, controlled breaths. But every few seconds his eyes lifted, first to Solomon, then to Jensen, and each time they did, that faint smile returned. Unhurried. Certain.

Solomon felt it in his gut like cold steel.

His men had just been sent into a cartel compound to pull out a man who already knew his callsign. They had been handed an op with no build-up and no questions allowed, and at the bottom of a hidden safe they had found evidence that powerful people in Washington were being blackmailed or were doing the blackmailing. He didn't know which yet. He wasn't sure it mattered.

Jensen sat still in the cabin. The same thoughts sat between them, unspoken and immovable. The shared quiet understanding that, one way or another, they were going to follow this past the limits of their orders. Solomon wouldn't bury it. Neither would he.

The rotors thumped on. But the feeling that had taken root on that hill, the low, cold certainty that this op was never what they were told it was, refused to stay behind. It climbed aboard, geared and armed. It flew back with them, coiled between them in the dark, patient, listening and waiting.