

# Prologue

**Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico**  
**Two Years Ago**

The silence before dawn carried the weight of impending violence. FBI Special Agent Chad Lloyd crouched behind a concrete drainage pipe fifty meters from Salvador Ramirez's compound, his HK416 locked and loaded, night vision painting the sprawling estate in ghostly green. Around him, five other FBI agents checked their gear one final time—suppressed weapons, breaching charges, flexicuffs, medical kits. Everything needed to take down the most feared cartel leader in the Western Hemisphere.

Professional. Well-funded. Deadly.

Exactly what Chad expected from two years of hunting this bastard.

"Alpha-Six, this is Bravo-Six." Chad's voice whispered through the tactical net, barely audible above the desert wind. "FBI team in position at primary breach point. Pattern of life confirms target is on-site. Black Suburban arrived twenty-three hundred hours, never left."

Across the compound's eastern approach, DEA Special Agent Antonio Baez led his own six-man team toward the secondary entrance. The joint FBI-DEA task force had spent months planning this raid, coordinating with Mexican authorities, building the intelligence package that would finally put Salvador Ramirez in an American prison cell.

"Roger, Bravo-Six." Baez's voice carried the slight accent of his El Paso upbringing and the steady calm of a man who'd kicked down doors across three countries chasing narco-traffickers. "DEA team ready at Alpha breach. Mexican Marines report positioned at checkpoint Charlie."

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Local police have been... relocated."

Chad knew what that meant. The Sinaloa State Police had been pulled back fifteen kilometers under the pretense of "securing the outer perimeter." In reality, they'd been moved because half of them were on Ramirez's payroll. The other half were too terrified to function once the shooting started.

Only SEMAR—the Mexican Navy's elite Marines—could be trusted for this operation. Even then, Chad had caught the nervous exchanges between the Mexican commanders. The Ramirez cartel owned judges, generals, and politicians. They'd infiltrated police departments across six states. Their sicarios had turned entire Mexican cities into war zones when cornered. Their influence was growing more and more every day.

"Charlie-Actual, sitrep." Chad keyed his radio, addressing the Mexican Marine commander positioned two clicks south while scanning the compound's defensive positions through his night vision.

Static.

"Charlie-Actual, confirm your ready status," Baez pressed over the radio. "We're ninety seconds from green light."

More static. Dead air that stretched for nearly three minutes while Chad checked his watch in the darkness. Had the Marines been compromised? Attacked? Or something worse?

Finally, Colonel Mendoza's voice crackled through their earpieces, flat and emotionless: "Charlie-Actual. We've been ordered to withdraw. You're on your own, americanos."

The radio went silent.

Chad's jaw tightened as he watched the compound through his night vision. Twenty years of military and federal service had taught him to recognize the sound of an operation falling apart. He'd seen this dance before in Iraq and Afghanistan—local partners who suddenly realized they needed to be elsewhere when bullets started flying, backup that melted away the moment operations went kinetic. The kind of betrayal that turned routine operations into desperate survival scenarios. Whether it came from Washington bureaucrats or Mexico City generals, political interference always sounded the same.

"We've lost our window and our backup," Chad said quietly. "We go

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now or we lose him for another six months."

Chad and Baez studied the compound through their night vision, noting the subtle changes in guard positions. Unlike El Chapo's functional safe houses with their escape tunnels and modest facades, Salvador Ramirez had built a monument to his own arrogance. The sprawling estate screamed "drug lord" to anyone with eyes—white marble columns, gold-trimmed balconies, and manicured gardens that belonged in *Architectural Digest* rather than a cartel stronghold. Concrete walls topped with decorative iron spikes rather than razor wire. Hardened guard towers disguised as elegant gazebos at each corner.

"They've doubled the perimeter watch," Baez observed. "Two additional sentries on the east wall, and they've moved to overlapping fields of fire." He paused, calculating odds. "Twelve agents against fifteen-plus shooters in a hardened compound. No backup. No extraction support."

Armed sentries with body armor and military-grade weapons patrolled beneath crystal chandeliers visible through bulletproof floor-to-ceiling windows. Salvador had chosen intimidation over operational security, believing his reputation would protect him better than El Chapo's paranoid escape routes.

It was exactly the kind of tactical arrogance that got cartel leaders killed.

Chad had seen worse odds in Fallujah. "Your call, Tony. You've got two years invested in this case."

"Ramirez moves locations every three weeks. Next time we find him, he'll have twice the security and we'll still have the same political problems." Baez checked his MP5 one final time. "We don't get another shot at this."

Without Marine support, this had just become a straight gunfight between twelve federal agents and a fortress full of professional killers.

"Target of opportunity," Chad replied, sliding the selector switch on his rifle from safe to semi. "Primary is priority one."

The plan had been surgical: Marines provide outer security while joint FBI-DEA teams execute precision arrests. Clean. Documented. Politically defensible.

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Now it would be warfare.

Chad switched his radio to channel two—the secure FBI-DEA frequency that excluded Mexican assets. "All units, this is Bravo-Six. Mexican support has been compromised. We're executing with current assets only. Rules of engagement remain in effect—positively identify targets, minimize civilian casualties, but anyone pointing a weapon in your direction is hostile."

He paused, watching armed figures moving through the compound below. "Salvador Ramirez has personally ordered the deaths of dozens of American law enforcement officers. His organization floods our streets with fentanyl that kills two hundred Americans every day. Today, that ends."

Chad's crosshairs settled on the main entrance where his team would breach. Behind the reinforced door, thermal imaging showed multiple heat signatures moving through the compound—guards conducting their pre-dawn patrol changes.

"Sinclair, you have eyes on the transformer?" Chad whispered into his radio.

"Affirmative, Bravo-Six. Power junction is two hundred meters south of your position. Ready to cut on your signal."

On the eastern approach, Baez's voice came through the tactical frequency: "Overwatch, confirm you have clean shots on tower sentries."

"Alpha-Six, Overwatch. Two tingos in north tower, one in south tower. All targets acquired."

"Green light in sixty seconds," Chad announced. "Sinclair, kill the lights on my mark. Overwatch, drop the towers on power cut. All units switch to NODs and prepare for breach."

Below in the compound, security cameras continued their mechanical sweeps, unaware that death waited in the shadows. The mansion's lights burned behind bulletproof glass, casting geometric shadows across manicured gardens. In moments, those lights would die, plunging Salvador Ramirez's fortress into the kind of darkness where American night vision technology ruled supreme.

"Mark," Chad whispered.

The compound went black as Sinclair severed the main power lines.

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In the same instant, muzzle flashes flickered from the DEA sniper's position as suppressed rounds dropped the tower sentries. Emergency generators kicked in three seconds later, but only for critical systems—leaving most of the estate in tactical darkness that favored the hunters over the hunted.

"Towers clear," came the sniper's confirmation through their earpieces.

Seconds later, at exactly 0350 hours, Chad's and Baez's breaching charges detonated simultaneously. The main entrance and east doors blew off their hinges in perfect synchronization as twelve American federal agents stormed Salvador Ramirez's sanctuary from two directions with righteous fury and automatic weapons.

Two years of investigation. Months of intelligence gathering. Weeks of planning. All condensed into eighteen minutes of sustained combat.

The gunfight raged for eighteen brutal minutes across three floors of reinforced concrete and marble. Chad's tactical instincts saved lives twice—yanking Baez back from a blind corner just as automatic fire chewed through marble where his head had been, then hauling Agent Coleman to cover when the FBI man took a round through the shoulder. The cartel guards fought with professional discipline, using the mansion's marble columns and reinforced walls to create deadly crossfires that made every advance costly.

When the smoke finally cleared, Chad's ears rang from close-quarters battle in enclosed spaces. His tactical vest had caught two rounds—rifle plates doing their job—and a grazing shot across his left forearm that left his sleeve sticky with blood.

Around him, the aftermath of urban warfare painted the mansion in cordite and destruction. Bullet holes stitched across imported Italian marble. Shattered crystal from a chandelier that had cost more than most Americans made in a year now glittered like deadly snow across bloodstained Persian rugs. The metallic tang of blood and the acrid smell of spent gunpowder hung heavy in the air.

"Alpha-Six, Alpha-Six." Chad keyed his radio while stepping over the body of a cartel enforcer whose military tattoos marked him as former Mexican Special Forces. "Bravo team has secured lower level. What's your

status?"

"Upper floors secure," came Baez's reply, slightly breathless. "Three KIA, two wounded and stabilized. Primary target location confirmed—master bedroom behind reinforced door, top floor. Moving to your position."

Chad checked his rifle—half a magazine remaining—and changed magazines. The compound felt different now. Quieter. The kind of silence that came after violence had decided everything.

He found Agent Martinez applying pressure bandages to Agent Coleman's shoulder wound in what had been an opulent living room. Persian rugs soaked with blood. A sixty-inch television with a bullet hole through its center, still flickering with Mexican telenovela reruns.

"How is he?" Chad asked.

"Through and through," Martinez replied, his medic training evident in the professional way he worked. "Clean entry and exit. He'll live to tell war stories."

Coleman managed a weak grin through the pain medication Martinez had administered. "Bastard came around the corner like he knew exactly where I'd be."

"They probably did," Chad said grimly. "Someone fed them our approach routes. This wasn't luck."

Heavy footsteps on marble stairs announced Baez's arrival. The DEA agent's face was grim, streaked with cordite residue and the thousand-yard stare of someone who'd just survived close-quarters combat.

"Final count?" Chad asked.

"Eleven cartel KIA, plus the two we took downstairs. No prisoners—they fought to the last man." Baez's voice carried professional respect for enemies who'd chosen death over capture. "But we've got a problem. Intelligence said Hector and Elena Ramirez were supposed to be here tonight. Their rooms are empty. Beds haven't been slept in. Looks like they've been gone for days."

Chad felt cold certainty settle in his gut. The secondary targets had escaped before the operation even began. Another intelligence failure that let the next generation of cartel leadership slip away.

"Primary target?" Chad asked, though he already knew the answer

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from Baez's expression.

"Barricaded in the master bedroom behind a reinforced steel door. He's armed and refusing surrender." Baez checked his watch. "We've been calling for him to come out for ten minutes. He's not interested in negotiating."

Chad charged his rifle, muscle memory making the action automatic despite the adrenaline crash setting in. Two years of investigation. Months of intelligence gathering. Weeks of planning. All compromised by corruption and betrayal.

But they still had Salvador Ramirez.

"Stack up," Chad ordered. "Let's finish this."

The master bedroom door was reinforced steel disguised as carved mahogany. Chad placed breaching charges while Baez and two other agents took positions. The blast that followed ripped the door from its frame and filled the hallway with smoke and debris.

Chad was first through the breach, his HK416 tracking across the room, night vision cutting through the haze. Baez followed immediately behind him, MP5 at the ready, both agents scanning for additional threats. The bedroom was a monument to narco-wealth—hand-carved furniture, silk tapestries, a bed that could sleep six people comfortably. But their attention focused on the figure behind the massive oak desk.

Salvador Ramirez sat in his leather chair, hands visible on the desktop, expensive silk pajamas torn by shrapnel, blood trickling from a scalp wound. The most feared cartel leader in the Western Hemisphere looked smaller in person—a sixty-year-old man with graying hair and the soft belly of someone who'd grown comfortable ordering death from behind bulletproof glass.

"Salvador Ramirez," Chad announced, his weapon steady despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins. "FBI. You're under arrest for conspiracy to distribute controlled substances, racketeering, and murder of federal officers."

Ramirez smiled, a cold expression that never reached his eyes. "Agent Lloyd, yes? You think this ends anything?" His English was perfect, cultured—the product of American universities before he'd chosen a different path. "You have no idea what you've started."

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Chad kept his rifle trained center mass while his peripheral vision scanned for threats. Intel had mentioned escape routes that architectural plans hadn't revealed, hidden weapons caches, panic buttons that could summon reinforcements.

"Your children ran," Chad said. "Left you here to face the consequences alone."

"My children?" Ramirez laughed, a sound like breaking glass. "They are enjoying the beaches of Panama. Such a lovely family vacation." His eyes glittered with malice. "They are building something far beyond what you can comprehend. Something that will reach into your country, into your homes, into your families."

"Ah, Agent Baez," Ramirez continued, his smile turning predatory as he recognized the DEA agent. "The man who thinks he understands my business. My children will remember you as well. Both of you. They have resources you cannot imagine. Corruption that reaches into the highest levels of your government. No one is beyond their reach."

The threat hung in the air like smoke. Chad had heard similar words from Taliban commanders and Iraqi insurgents—the dying boasts of men who believed their cause would outlive them. But something in Ramirez's tone carried conviction beyond mere bravado.

"The Ramirez family forgets nothing," the cartel leader continued, his eyes boring into Chad's. "And they—"

Chad saw the movement before his conscious mind processed it. Twenty years of combat experience condensed into microseconds of recognition: Ramirez's right shoulder dropping slightly, his hand shifting toward the desk drawer that intelligence had identified as containing a loaded Sig Sauer P226. The cartel leader's fingers moved with surprising speed for a man his age, desperation lending strength to his final gambit.

Time dilated the way it always did in life-or-death moments. Chad's training kicked in—Air Force JTAC reflexes honed by years of calling in danger-close airstrikes, FBI tactical experience from a hundred high-risk arrests. His finger found the trigger as his rifle's muzzle tracked right, following Ramirez's movement.

The cartel leader's hand was inches from the pistol grip when Chad's single shot took him between the eyes, snapping his head back against the



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leather chair. The would-be weapon clattered to the floor, unfired, as Salvador Ramirez's body settled into the stillness of death.

Chad kept his rifle trained on the corpse for three full seconds—long enough to confirm no further threat, short enough to maintain tactical awareness of the room. Professional. Methodical. The kind of kill that would look clean in after-action reports and congressional hearings.

But hidden security cameras had recorded everything—every word, every threat, every detail of their father's final moments. And later, on a pristine beach in Panama, thirty-two-year-old Hector Ramirez and thirty-year-old Elena Ramirez would watch the footage and hear their father's final words about remembering faces and reaching into American families.

They would memorize Chad Lloyd's voice as he announced the charges. They would study his face as he pulled the trigger. And they would begin planning a revenge so comprehensive, so devastating, that it would make their father's empire look like child's play.

The corruption that saved their lives would become the foundation of their war against American federal law enforcement.

Some wars never truly end. They just wait for the next generation to pick up the weapons.

# Chapter 1

**FBI Headquarters**

**Washington, D.C.**

**Two Years Ago –**

**Two Weeks After Salvador Raid**

The air conditioning in the J. Edgar Hoover Building wheezed like a dying animal, losing its battle against the oppressive Washington summer. Chad could feel his dress shirt sticking to his back as he walked through the corridors that still felt foreign after all these years. The transition from field operations to headquarters assignments was never easy, but after what had happened in Sinaloa, the Bureau had decided he needed some time behind a desk.

Two weeks of mandatory psychological evaluation. Two weeks of sitting across from Bureau shrinks who'd never heard a shot fired in anger, explaining why he'd put a bullet between Salvador Ramirez's eyes. Two weeks of desk duty while Elena and Hector Ramirez consolidated power and planned their response.

Chad's instincts screamed that time was running out.

Special Agent Janet Holmes was waiting in Conference Room B, her severe gray suit and clipboard precision radiating the kind of bureaucratic authority that made Chad's teeth itch. Beside her stood someone Chad didn't recognize—a woman in her early thirties with auburn hair pulled back in a practical ponytail and the brightest green eyes he had ever seen. She wore a navy blazer over dark jeans, the kind of outfit that said federal agent without screaming it to anyone within fifty yards.

"Agent Lloyd," Holmes said, standing as he entered. "I'd like you to

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meet Agent Samantha Belle. She'll be joining your task force as of tomorrow."

Sam Belle extended her hand with a firm grip that spoke of confidence earned rather than assumed. "Agent Lloyd. I've studied the reports from the Sinaloa operation." Her voice carried the precise diction of someone who'd learned to make every word count. "Textbook tactical execution under impossible circumstances.""

"You can call me Chad," he replied, studying her with the same attention he'd give a new piece of equipment. "What's your background, Agent Belle?"

"Sam," she corrected with a slight smile. "Six years with the Bureau, all in the financial crimes division in New York. I've been tracking money flows for the organized crime task force, following digital breadcrumbs through shell companies, offshore accounts, and cryptocurrency networks that most agents can't even pronounce."

Chad nodded, his tactical mind already cataloguing her skillset. "Italian families? Russians?"

"Both. Albanian networks, some Irish remnants, even a few old Jewish operations from Brighton Beach." Sam's voice carried the flat precision of someone who'd spent too many nights staring at spreadsheets that represented human misery. "Money laundering, racketeering, extortion—organized crime has gone digital in ways that would surprise most people."

Holmes cleared her throat, drawing their attention. "Agent Belle specifically requested this transfer to violent crimes. Given the evolving nature of criminal organizations we're facing, her financial expertise will be invaluable." She paused, studying Sam with the kind of bureaucratic curiosity that made Chad uncomfortable. "What brought you to DC, Sam?"

Sam's professional composure shifted almost imperceptibly, like armor plating sliding into place. Chad recognized the expression—the same look he'd seen on soldiers' faces when someone asked about their worst day downrange.

"My husband was NYPD," she said, her voice carrying the controlled calm of someone who'd practiced this explanation. "Beat cop in

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Manhattan. Three months ago, he responded to a drug store robbery—armed suspect holding the clerk at gunpoint."

Chad's tactical instincts immediately catalogued the scenario: confined space, innocent civilian, armed and desperate subject. The kind of situation where split-second decisions meant the difference between going home or going to the morgue.

"The new mayor's de-escalation policies required officers to attempt negotiation in all situations. No weapons drawn unless absolutely necessary." Sam's voice remained steady, but Chad caught the slight tightening around her eyes—the same expression he'd seen on the faces of soldiers who'd lost teammates to rules of engagement written by people who'd never been shot at. "Ron tried to talk him down. Twenty minutes of negotiation while the suspect got more agitated."

Chad already knew how this story ended. He'd seen too many good cops die because politicians made policies that sounded compassionate in boardrooms but got people killed on the streets.

"The guy finally snapped and started shooting, Ron was caught without his weapon ready." Sam met Chad's eyes directly, her gaze steady despite the pain beneath. "He died trying to save a store clerk from a Venezuelan gang member who'd been arrested six times in the past year and released every time without charges."

The silence in the conference room carried the weight of institutional failure and personal loss. Chad understood that particular combination of grief and rage—the knowledge that bureaucratic incompetence had cost someone their life while the system responsible faced no consequences.

"The suspect?" Chad asked, though he suspected he already knew.

"Released again," Sam replied, her voice carrying a bitter edge sharp enough to cut glass. "Immigration wouldn't hold him, DA wouldn't prosecute due to 'humanitarian concerns.' He was probably back in Venezuela before Ron's funeral." She straightened, her professional demeanor sliding back into place like a weapon being holstered. "I decided that tracking financial crimes from behind a desk wasn't enough anymore. If these organizations are bringing their violence to American streets, I want to be part of stopping them."

Chad found himself impressed despite his natural skepticism about

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new partners. Sam Belle had the kind of quiet competence that complemented his more direct approach, but more importantly, she understood that the real work of law enforcement happened when good people decided to do whatever was necessary to protect those who couldn't protect themselves.

"Fair enough," he said. "But field work is different from financial analysis. Things happen fast, and there's not always time to run the numbers."

"Then I guess you'll have to teach me," Sam replied, her voice carrying the steel undertone of someone who'd made a decision and intended to see it through. "Because like it or not, Agent Lloyd, we're partners now."

Holmes stood, gathering her materials with bureaucratic efficiency. "There's a briefing tomorrow at 0800 on your first case together. I'll let you two get acquainted." She paused at the door. "Agent Lloyd, Agent Belle—the criminal organizations we're facing have evolved beyond traditional law enforcement capabilities. Your combined expertise represents our best chance of adapting to meet that threat."

As Holmes departed, Chad found himself alone with his new partner. Sam was studying him with the same analytical attention she'd probably given financial records in New York.

"Question," he said, settling back in his chair. "You've spent six years tracking organized crime money. What's the biggest difference between what we're dealing with now and the old-school operations?"

Sam considered the question, her analytical mind engaging. "The traditional families were territorial. They had neighborhoods, specific industries, established hierarchies that took decades to build. Their money laundering was crude—cash businesses, real estate, simple shell companies."

She leaned forward, her focus complete. "But the new networks are global, digital, and completely fluid. They can move millions of dollars across six countries in minutes using cryptocurrency exchanges that barely existed five years ago. No territories to defend, no permanent infrastructure to protect. They're like ghost organizations that materialize, complete their operations, and vanish."

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Chad nodded, impressed by her tactical thinking applied to financial warfare. "That's what makes them dangerous. No fixed positions to target."

"Exactly. And that's probably what we're dealing with—criminal organizations that have evolved beyond anything the Bureau was designed to handle." Sam met his eyes with the kind of direct honesty that marked someone who'd stopped believing in comfortable lies. "The question is whether we can evolve fast enough to catch them."

Chad watched her gather her materials with the kind of brisk efficiency that marked competent professionals, and found himself thinking that maybe headquarters assignment wouldn't be the professional purgatory he'd expected. Agent Belle carried herself like someone who understood that sometimes the real work required operating in the gray areas between official procedures.

"0800 tomorrow," he said, standing. "Conference Room C. Don't be late."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Sam replied, extending her hand again. "Looking forward to seeing how the other half lives, Agent Lloyd."

As Chad watched her leave, he found himself thinking about Elena and Hector Ramirez, somewhere out there consolidating power and planning their response to the men who'd destroyed their world. His combat experience had taught him that revenge was always personal, always violent, and always inevitable.

The only question was whether American law enforcement would recognize the attack before it was too late to stop it.

## Chapter 2

**Washington, D.C.**

**Present Day - Friday Evening**

That's the third shell company this month," Sam said, sliding another financial report across Chad's desk. The cramped office they'd shared for two years was covered with surveillance photos, cryptocurrency transaction charts, and satellite imagery of warehouse facilities across the mid-Atlantic region. "Elena's burning through fronts faster than we can shut them down, but she's making mistakes."

Chad studied the latest analysis, impressed as always by Sam's ability to follow money trails through layers of corporate obfuscation. Over the past eighteen months, their joint task force with Antonio Baez's DEA team had systematically dismantled twenty-three Ramirez front operations—warehouses, shipping companies, logistics firms, even a chain of food trucks that had been moving drugs and cash throughout the D.C. metro area.

"What kind of mistakes?" Chad asked, leaning back in his chair.

"She's getting impatient," Sam replied, pulling up a chart on her laptop. "Look at these transaction patterns. Two years ago, Elena would set up a front company, run it legitimately for six months to establish credibility, then slowly integrate criminal operations. Now she's cutting that timeline to six weeks."

"Pressure from her board of directors?" Chad suggested with dark humor.

"More likely pressure from competition," Sam replied, highlighting several cryptocurrency transaction patterns. "Elena's not struggling to

launder money—she's struggling to stay ahead of us. Look at these blockchain traces."

Chad studied the complex web of digital transactions. "What am I looking at?"

"Cryptocurrency mixing services, privacy coins, cross-chain transfers," Sam explained, pulling up another screen. "Elena's using every trick in the book—Bitcoin tumblers, Monero conversions, over-the-counter brokers who don't ask questions. She can move millions through crypto ATMs and unregulated exchanges without leaving traditional banking footprints."

"So why the rush to expand?"

"Because we're getting better at tracking her," Sam said with satisfaction. "Blockchain analytics are improving faster than criminal countermeasures. Every transaction leaves digital breadcrumbs, even through mixers and privacy coins. Elena's trying to diversify her operation before we can map her entire network."

The partnership between Chad's FBI violent crimes unit and Baez's DEA task force had proven devastatingly effective. Sam's financial analysis would identify suspicious shell companies, Chad's team would conduct surveillance and tactical assessments, and Baez's agents would coordinate with local law enforcement for simultaneous raids. They'd seized millions in cash, arrested dozens of mid-level operatives, and disrupted supply chains across six states.

But Elena Ramirez always seemed to be one step ahead, opening new operations faster than they could close the old ones.

"Any word from Baez on the Baltimore operation?" Chad asked.

"Clean sweep," Sam confirmed. "Eighteen arrests, half a million in cash, and enough fentanyl to kill fifty thousand people. But the warehouse was already being evacuated when his team hit it. Someone tipped them off."

Chad's jaw tightened. After two years of hunting the Ramirez organization, the pattern was becoming disturbingly clear. Elena had sources inside American law enforcement—not just bought cops like the ones who'd warned Salvador, but sophisticated intelligence networks that gave her advance warning of federal operations.



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"Speaking of operations," Sam said, checking her watch, "shouldn't you be heading home? Lana's probably started dinner by now."

Chad smiled, the first genuine expression he'd worn all day. "Casey's birthday party. Six years old today. She specifically requested 'Aunt Sam and Uncle Nolan' be there for her princess cake."

"She won't burn the cake," Sam laughed. "Lana could bake a seven-course meal blindfolded. You're just nervous because you haven't bought Casey's present yet."

"How did you—"

"Because I know you, Chad Lloyd. You're tactical and methodical about everything except gift shopping. Casey's been dropping hints about that new art set for weeks."

Chad gathered his things, grateful as always for Sam's insight into his family dynamics. Over the past two years, Sam had become more than just his partner—she'd become Lana's closest friend, spending weekends at their house, joining family barbecues, becoming so much a part of their lives that five-year-old Casey called her "Aunt Sam" without anyone suggesting it.

"You're coming to the party, right?" Chad asked. "Casey's been planning this for weeks. She even invited Grey."

Sam hesitated, the same pause that appeared whenever family gatherings were mentioned. "I don't want to intrude on family time—"

"You're not intruding," Chad interrupted firmly. "You're family. Casey made the guest list herself—Mommy, Daddy, Aunt Sam, and Uncle Nolan. That's it."

The word hung in the air between them, carrying weight that neither acknowledged directly. Sam's composed professional mask slipped slightly, revealing something more vulnerable underneath.

"Besides," Chad continued, oblivious to the impact of his words, "Lana specifically said she wanted you there. Something about Dr. Warner stopping by after his shift to meet everyone."

Sam's smile became forced. "Tom's a nice guy. Really."

"But?"

"But nothing," Sam replied, organizing papers with unnecessary precision. "He's smart, stable, successful. Everything a rational woman

should want in a partner."

Chad studied his partner's carefully neutral expression, recognizing the defensive posture she adopted whenever personal topics arose. In two years of working together, he'd learned to read Sam's moods—the slight tightening around her eyes when cases hit too close to home, the way she threw herself into financial analysis when emotions threatened to surface, the careful distance she maintained whenever conversations turned to relationships or dating.

"Sam," he said gently, "it's been two years since Ron died. You don't have to—"

"I know," she cut him off, but not unkindly. "I know it's been two years. I know Lana means well with the matchmaking. I know Tom Warner is everything any reasonable woman should want." She paused, meeting his eyes directly. "But sometimes what you should want and what you actually want are two completely different things."

Before Chad could respond, Sam's phone buzzed with an incoming text. She glanced at it and her expression shifted back to professional mode.

"Speak of the devil," she said. "Lana wants to know if you remembered to pick up ice cream for the party."

Chad groaned. "Add that to balloons on the list of things I forgot."

"Already handled," Sam replied, holding up a bag he hadn't noticed. "Picked up that 64-piece deluxe art set Casey's been coveting—you can give it to her as your present. And before you ask, yes, I got wrapping paper too—the one with unicorns. Plus chocolate chip ice cream and princess balloons."

"What did you get her then?" Chad asked.

"That pottery wheel kit she saw at the craft store last weekend," Sam said with a smile. "Lana mentioned Casey's been talking about wanting to 'make beautiful bowls like the lady on TV.' Figured she's ready to graduate from finger painting to actual art projects."

Chad shook his head, once again amazed by her thoughtfulness. "Sam, you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do," she said simply. "Because that's what family does. We take care of each other."

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As they gathered their things and headed toward the parking garage, Chad found himself thinking about Sam's words. Over the past two years, she'd become an integral part of their lives in ways he'd never expected. She remembered Casey's favorite bedtime stories, helped Lana with hospital fundraisers, and somehow always knew exactly what his family needed before he realized it himself.

What Chad couldn't see was the way Sam's hands trembled slightly as she locked her desk drawer, or the careful control it took for her to maintain her cheerful facade. He didn't notice how her eyes lingered on his wedding ring when he talked about anniversary plans, or the pain that flickered across her face when he casually referred to her as family.

Because the truth Sam could never admit was more complicated and more painful than anyone suspected. Over two years of working alongside Chad, watching him be a devoted husband and father, seeing the way he and Lana looked at each other after sixteen years of marriage, Sam had found herself falling for a man she could never have.

Chad was married. Lana was her best friend. And Sam would carry these feelings silently, burying them beneath professional competence and genuine friendship, because some lines could never be crossed—no matter how much her heart might wish otherwise.