

CHAPTER 1

LOCKER ROOM

*Varsity football locker room
United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado
1 week before Hell week
1545 hours*

The locker room reeked of bleach, sweat and cheap cologne.

Cadet 2nd Class Bobby Hunt—320 pounds, new team captain—had the freshman pinned against the locker with a forearm the size of a Christmas ham. His mouth never stopped.

“You keep showing up to my practice, exchange boy,” Hunt snarled, “we’re gonna break something that won’t heal by Saturday. Legs, pride, whatever hurts most.”

The freshman—Cadet 4th Class James Smith, slight and perfectly poised, didn’t flinch. He simply stared back with quiet calm.

Cadet 4th Class Grayson Thompson stepped dripping from the showers, towel slung low, water tracing the ridges of his abs, eyes locked on the scene.

Hunt saw him and laughed. “Relax, Smack, this ain’t your—”

The punch came fast and wide.

Grayson slipped inside it, caught Hunt’s wrist, and pivoted. One short, vicious strike collapsed the cartilage in Hunt’s throat with a wet crunch. Hunt dropped to his knees, choking, eyes bulging.

Hunt’s buddy, Jenkins—305 pounds of starting tackle—charged with a roar, shoulder down like he was blowing up a blocking sled. Grayson used the bigger man’s own momentum, redirected it, drove Jenken’s face straight into the edge of a metal locker. Bone met steel. Blood sprayed across the tile in a bright red fan.

Eleven seconds.

Two starters down: one gurgling, one unconscious and leaking

from the scalp.

Grayson stood barefoot over them, chest barely moving. He looked at the rest of the room—twenty-five football players suddenly fascinated by their shoelaces— then at his roommate.

“You good, Jimmy?”

James Smith gave the smallest nod.

“Get dressed, we’re out of here.” Towel still knotted around him, Grayson’s footprints as he headed to the door trailed crimson through the water and blood mixing on the floor behind him.

The hidden camera caught every second in merciless 4K.

Superintendent’s conference room

1900 hours

The footage froze on Bobby Hunt sprawled on his back, mouth open, blood pooling. Jenkins slumped against the bench, scalp split wide. Grayson Thompson stood barefoot, tracking blood. Beside him, his roommate Cadet James Smith—stood untouched, expression calm as winter glass.

The screen snapped to black.

The only sound was the ticking of the original Lafayette Escadrille wall clock.

General Scofield’s coffee cup slammed down onto the U2 wing conference table with a crack that made everyone flinch. Three generals and Colonel Rhys Walker stared at the dead screen. Scofield’s voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried like a gunshot.

“Somebody tell me I did not just watch Mason Blackstone’s grandson put two starting linemen in the hospital while the entire locker room sat there and watched.”

Colonel Walker—Director of Ethical Warfare and Middle Eastern Studies—didn’t blink. “You did.”

General Breese, the Dean of Academics, slapped a palm on the table.

“Blackstone’s grandson? Here? And nobody thought to tell us that on day one? You’ve gotta be shitting me. Why am I just now hearing that?”

Colonel Tillman, the Athletic Director, looked ready to throw up. “My defensive line just got dismantled by one freshman. In less than eleven seconds.”

Scofield’s eyes never left Walker. “You host both those boys. Talk.”

Walker exhaled once, slow. “Grayson Thompson and James Smith. Roommates. Superintendent’s list. Zero disciplinary notes.”

Scofield leaned forward, voice dropping low and flat. “If LJ finds out her kid just hospitalized two football players on video, she’ll pull him so fast you’ll hear the paperwork leave a sonic boom. And Mason Blackstone will personally chew every star in this room off your shoulders with his teeth.”

He let that settle. Walker met his eyes. Scofield stared at him for a three-count that felt like an hour.

The goblets on the Hero’s Wall glinted in the low light, as if the 164 dead grads were waiting for the verdict. Before anyone could ask another question, General Scofield’s aide knocked on the door and entered the room.

“Excuse me for intruding sir, but there’s another development with the football team.” He reached over to the computer and pulled up a live feed. “The Cadet in Charge of Quarters in 20th Squadron just called in a security issue. The Security Police are on the way. Evidently some football players came into the squadron looking for Cadet Thompson. They’re talking about another fight.”

General Scofield and the group watched the monitor as three defensive linemen stormed down the hallway in the cadet dorm.

“Bubba, stand down the SPs,” said Colonel Walker. “Let’s keep this contained. Stephanie and I can walk. It’s in Vandenberg Hall and we can be there in five minutes. Faster than the SPs. Keep

them out of it. I'll grab the boys and clear out the circus. General Dickson will add some beef.”

“Do it,” Scofield said calmly. “And Walker—if this leaks before we have answers, careers end. Mine included.”

Walker was already moving. General Stephanie Dickson, Commandant of Cadets, fell in beside him.

Scofield's coffee sat cold and untouched. Around the table, the three most senior officers at the United States Air Force Academy felt the floor tilt under them.

Walker and Dickson stepped out and the door closed behind them, the same soft click of a chambered round.

Outside, two stories above the cadet area, the Flames of Honor burned on the Superintendent's balcony, steady against the Colorado night.

Vandenberg Hall Dormitory

Cadet Squadron 20

1907 hours

The door exploded inward.

Three defensive linemen filled the frame—seniors, in their summer uniform, faces twisted. Cadet 2nd Class Luis Martinez, 265 pounds, eyes wild, was in the middle.

Grayson was already on his feet, shirt half buttoned. James stepped quietly to the side, out of the choke point. Pressed record on his iPhone.

The first lineman—Cadet Rourke—charged. Swung. Grayson batted the arm, punched the armpit, stomped the knee. Rourke hit the floor screaming.

The second lineman threw a wild roundhouse. Grayson slipped inside, pivoted an elbow to the throat, followed up with a kick to the knee. The big man folded like cheap furniture.

Martinez was last. He pulled a knife from his pocket and flipped it open with one hand: five inches, black handle—illegal at the Academy.

The room went still.

“You’re going to pay, boy,” Martinez hissed. “I’m going to open you up right here.”

Grayson raises both hands, palms open, voice low and steady.

“Martinez. Look at me. You pull that blade on federal property, you’re done. Leavenworth done. Put it away.”

Martinez lunged. Grayson moved like water—a snap kick to the lower jaw.

Martinez out cold. Lower jaw shattered. Grayson started to throw a punch to the liver but stopped short. He rolled Martinez on his stomach.

Twenty-four seconds. Three linemen on the floor. Grayson stood over them breathing normally, eyes on the knife.

1910 hours

Colonel Rhys Walker and Brigadier General Stephanie Dickson came off the corner at a run. They saw the crowd standing, the door closed. The murmuring stopped the moment they saw the Commandant of Cadets and Colonel Walker. Walker took in the scene in one heartbeat. Growled at the crowd.

“Anyone still here in ten seconds eats tours until graduation. Move.”

The hallway emptied as if someone had yanked a plug. Walker shouldered the door open, glanced at the carnage: three unconscious linemen, two freshmen standing at attention as if nothing had happened. No sounds.

“Grab your overnight bags. Laptops, phones. Two minutes. You’re at my house tonight.” He pulled out his iPhone and tex-

ted, —Now.

Dickson on her radio, ice calm: “Medical to Vandenburg. Room 317. Three ambulances. No lights, no sirens.”

Walker nodded to General Dickson. “My car. Both of us. I’ll have someone bring yours.”

They stepped over the bodies and were gone. The corridor lights flicked off floor by floor behind them as they descended the stairwell.