

January 15, 1972
Phước Vĩnh, South Vietnam

The late midday sun beating down on him, Lt. Colonel Jackson MacKenzie walked across the packed earth of the Phước Vĩnh forward base camp. A distinctive growl broke the silence. Close enough to feel the pressure wave, a low flying fully laden F4 Phantom flashed over his head like a lightning bolt. Sunlight glinted off the camo-painted wings as it banked sharply west. The air exploded with the sounds of bombs and machine-gun fire. *Charlie must be close to the perimeter.* He flipped off the safety on his M16 with his finger on the trigger.

Jackson strolled into Colonel Matthew Johnson's outer office, shouldered his M16, removed his Green Beret, and tucked it under his belt. The colonel's aide, Captain Colin "Knuckles" White, ushered him into the inner office. He smiled at the former Golden Gloves boxer as he passed and came to attention in front of his superior officer. "Lieutenant Colonel MacKenzie reporting as ordered, sir."

Colonel Johnson finished his signature before acknowledging him with a nod. "At ease."

Jackson snapped his hands behind his back and waited for further instructions.

"Take a seat, MacKenzie."

"Yes, sir." Jackson sat on the chair in front of the desk and laid his weapon on the floor.

"The Pentagon brass and the CIA have a new mission for you." Colonel Johnson drummed his fingers on the desk.

"What do they want us to do, sir?" Jackson ground his teeth together. "And why is the CIA involved?"

"I know you don't like to work for them. It's a broken record every time it comes up."

"Yeah, too many chances of getting screwed over."

"Well, this operation came directly from the Pentagon. The information on the black market art dealings came from the CIA."

"Well, sir, what's the mission?"

"The North Vietnamese government has been selling their rare artwork on the black market to finance their war efforts and replacing them with fakes. One piece went for over three million dollars in an underground auction last week." Colonel Johnson tapped a light green folder on his desk. "The brass wants your unit to recover four of the most expensive originals and replace them with counterfeits. This would deny them money and their troops needed weapons and ammo. You would save the paintings for the people of Vietnam and the lives of American troops. It could even shorten the war. The art dealers will know the canvases are reproductions, and the North won't get paid."

"They want us to what?" Jackson hit the desktop with a closed fist. "We're supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of these people."

Colonel Johnson's narrowed eyes stared over the top of his reading glasses, his forehead puckered in the center. "From your reaction, MacKenzie, you don't like the idea."

Unwilling to back down, Jackson shook his head. "No, sir, I don't. It smacks of hypocrisy."

"Your dissatisfaction and reservations are duly noted." Colonel Johnson leaned forward in his chair. "I will not tolerate insubordination." His voice became lower and louder. "You have my permission to forward your doubts up the chain of command. You will follow the order as given or be relieved of command."

"I may do that, sir. Will anyone else even take the mission?" He already knew the answer.

"Probably not. You were the only choice given your current track record of pulling off the impossible. You're the best chance of it going off without a hitch as the US Army's absolute expert in small unit tactics."

Jackson resisted the urge to give an eye roll to his superior officer. "Sir, I don't agree with the mission at all. However, I will follow my orders unless my doubts find the right ears in the chain of command."

"Fair enough." Colonel Johnson opened the folder. "Let's go over the plan."