 CHAPTER ONE

Current Day
Silver Creek, Montana

He could feel it coming long before he heard it, descending like a sudden chill that swept through his bones, causing every muscle to tighten. It was a primal response, sharpened by years of experience. This, he thought, must be how dogs feel in those quiet moments before the earthquake hits, when they alone know the devastation of what’s coming. When they alone know that everything is about to change.

For a split second, he considered tactical evasion, but out here among the pines and Rocky Mountain junipers, he knew it was a fool’s errand. How far could he get? Maybe to the shore of the river before they arrived, maybe to the tree line, if he was lucky. And then what? He was easily fifty miles from the nearest town, equipped only with what could fit in his backpack.

But what did it matter? They’d already found him. And if they’d found him, that meant they knew.

He looked over the rolling water of the mountain stream. How long did he have? A minute? Maybe two? Scratching at the worn military cap covering his dark brown hair, his eyes fell on a rainbow trout swimming lazily near the surface, eyeballing the red-and-black fake bug dancing on the stream’s surface. He’d spent the past hour luring the trout from the shadows. Maybe he had time enough for that. After all, if there was anything he hated, it was unfinished business.

“Come on. Come to papa,” the man whispered. The trout, hypnotized by the hand-tied fly, drew closer.

But just as the fish was ready to strike, the water began to churn and rise upward around him, accompanied by a growing apocalyptic roar.

It was too late. They had arrived.

High above him the churning blades of the monstrous machine eclipsed the sun before sweeping over the tree line and coming to an imposing hover just above him. Droplets of water spattered onto the pepper-like stubble on his chin.

The sound of a Bell UH-1Y Venom helicopter is something that no soldier who has heard it ever forgets. It is what a man hears going into battle and what he hears when he is done fighting—if he is still alive.

The pilot landed in a clearing next to the stream and a twenty-something kid wearing an off-the-rack suit jumped from it, the blades of the aircraft still cutting though the clear air.
“Derrick Storm?” he called. “Is that you?”

The fisherman glanced at the kid with disdain.

“Never heard of him,” he growled.

Unsure what to do next, the young courier looked over his shoulder at the helicopter. A side door slid open and an older, pudgy man stepped to the wet ground. He slowly made his way to the creek’s edge, cupped his hands around his lips, and yelled: “Jedidiah sent me.”

“Don’t know him.”

“He said you’d say that.” The speaker hollered, “Jedidiah says he’s calling in Tangiers.”

Tangiers. Tangiers had been bad. Even after all of these years, whenever the fisherman thought of Tangiers, he could still feel the cold linoleum pressed against his cheek, sticky and wet with his own blood. He could still see the mangled bodies and hear the unanswered cries for help. If it weren’t for Jedidiah . . .

Reeling in his line, the man started toward the creek bank. He did not talk to the two strangers waiting there. He gathered up his gear and boarded the helicopter.

Tangiers. It was a hell of an IOU to call in. Jedidiah knew how difficult it had been for him to disappear. To go off-the-grid. To die, at least to be dead to a world that he had once known. A world that had tried to kill him, not once, but many, many times. Jedidiah understood why it had been important for him to no longer exist. And now Jedidiah was calling him back, dragging him back, to what he had worked so hard to free himself from.

Now inside the chopper, the man looked outside at the creek, the meadow, the blue sky. He was leaving it all.

“Let’s go,” the fisherman told them.

“Then you are Derrick Storm!” the younger man gushed. “You aren’t dead like everyone said.”

The older envoy gave the pilot a thumbs-up and the helicopter lifted from the ground.

“What’s it been, Storm?” the older man asked. “How many years have you been dead?”

It had been nearly four. Four years of solitude. Of peace. Of self-assessment. Of reevaluation and reflection. Jedidiah knew Storm better than any man alive. And he had known that he would come back if the trump card was played. Jedidiah had played it. Tangiers. Derrick Storm always paid his debts.

Even in death.

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