

One

Day Five

5:48 pm

Someone—hell, he didn't know who—once said the Phoenix wasn't a mythical creature at all, but a crow driven to madness. The bird, having failed to rid itself of parasites by anting or drowning or bloody self-grooming, would spread its black feathers and cook itself in flame.

Some rebirth.

Ryan Beck surveyed Evergreen Lake. His stance against the shoreline was broad, defiant. Somewhere at the distant cove: his target. According to U.S. Intelligence, a parasite. A butterfly hairclip and birth-control-eyeglasses kind of parasite. It wasn't his job to question. He would convince her he was some covert Jesus named Phoenix. He had to. Answers—the life-changing kind that meant you could die with some degree of peace—weren't cheap.

Night shadows stalked the white-barked aspen, stiff ghosts of their autumn glory. The chop on the water's surface was brutal. He couldn't—wouldn't—swim. This time, this one last time, why couldn't his job be somewhere less snot-freezing cold? Less wet. Less anywhere that

reminded him of dying.

Beck checked his watch. Ten minutes to reach the cove.

His Doc Martens navigated icy slips of ground. Dry patches left evidence, a mess to clean up after local law enforcement got involved. A holstered Glock humped his lumbar. He hated it back there, all awkward and shit, but he couldn't risk a looksie by some granola tourist in the bait shop. He had enough parasites to cook.

Ingram's Line and Tackle was a palace: rotting planks, naked bulbs, Johnny Cash crackling from a speaker as old as Folsom Prison. Rusty door hinges jacked his already-primed nerves.

"We're closed," said a chapped voice. A round woman clamored toward him like a red and white bobber on a polluted tide. The heady fragrance of dead bait and arthritis cream reached him before she did.

"I need a boat." Beck nodded toward the dock.

"Don't see no fishin' poles."

"I'm not fishing. I want to catch the sunset from the water."

"You a photographer?" She turned and limped behind the counter. A camera around her neck beat against her enormous breasts, a pendulum ticking away precious seconds. Haunting snapshots of tourists, more like mug shots without the arrest board, littered the pine walls.

"No. Nature lover."

"Love nature tomorrow. We're closed."

His heel rapped the worn floorboards. First, the boat he stashed was stolen. Now the minnow princess. Beck thought to appeal to her romantic side. All women had one, right? Even ones who looked like they bit the heads off rainbow trout. "Please, I had hoped to propose to my

girl, but I want it perfect. Just the right light. A dry run. You understand.”

“Forget it. No boats out after six.”

“It isn’t six yet,” said Beck. “You’ll have it back within the half-hour.”

“Nuh-uh.”

He checked his watch. Seven minutes.

His Glock itched. Without an official-looking badge or ID, he was fucked. Men like him weren’t supposed to exist. It’d be easy to plug her—eleven years *had* blurred the lines of patriotism, but he had promised himself. He had promised Natalie. One. Last. Time.

Beck removed a money clip and peeled off five one-hundred dollar bills. “This cover it?”

“Ain’t no sunset worth that much.”

He snapped one more bill from the fold to join the rest. “For your time.”

The woman’s lips anchored. Her nose wrinkled as if she’d just stepped downwind of herself. “Half hour?”

“Tops.” Beck’s gaze slid from her telephoto lens to the view beyond the dirty window. Quarter mile, maybe. Nothing a two-hundred millimeter zoom could reach. Thick spruce concealed the cove’s mouth. He pictured the target’s boat adrift. Engine quiet. Waiting, watching, waiting.

“Mister?”

Beck turned.

A camera’s flash exploded.

His vision blanched. “What the—?” He pinched the bridge of his nose until the dancing orbs subsided.

“Don’t trust no one these days.”

Shit. Becoming one of the macabre mug shots papering the walls meant evidence. If she hadn't eaten so much time already, he'd find a way to expose her film. This hit was becoming a four-ton battleship sinking in a bathtub.

Five minutes left.

Beck motored out to the dock, picked a v-notch christened *Colorado Beaut*, untied it, and broke into a sweat. His hands and face stiffened. He waited for it to pass, dismissed it as the fifty degree temperature drop—the kind that sucks your nads back into your abdomen—but it stayed and spread through his body. *It's not the goddamned Titanic. Focus, man. You're more likely to bang the bait shop lady than get a drop on you.*

He fell back on his training, always did when his lungs cut fresh with the memory of drowning. Eyes closed, pulse sharp, he imagined a rifle's muzzle warm against his cheek. A couple of good exhales, ten beats—*Guh-gung—Guh-gung*—and his extremities returned. Somehow—somehow—he started the motor and took off full-throttle. Somehow, scavenger birds anticipated his balls-out wake and scattered like witnesses in flight. Somehow, he calmed his shit enough to remember his mission: Obtain the serum. Eliminate the target.

You.

Are.

Phoenix.

He entered the cove, engine killed.

Three minutes late. What if his target had grown tired of waiting? What if she decided her contact, Phoenix, couldn't be trusted?

She'd be right.

A distant *whaaaaaw* cut him off, mid-curse. The noise alternated two sharp bursts for

every dying spell as if the motor choked on sludge. Before visual contact, before he could pin the sound waves to one quadrant of the lake, a jon boat sputtered into view. Its lone passenger was buried in enough white nylon to put the Michelin man to shame—must be warm, the bitch. One extremely long, extremely dark strand of hair slipped free of her Eskimo hood and waved in surrender.

Or not.

She hadn't killed her engine. Hadn't come closer. She just—just—fucking stared.

He knew it before it happened, knew by the way she glanced at the shoreline, knew by the way she never let go of the throttle, grip whiter than her coat, knew by the perfectly-formed O-cloud that escaped her mouth. He felt that instinctual hiccup of his heart, and he knew she would bolt. He knew she wasn't buying him as Phoenix, must have expected someone older, someone more like a covert Jesus, because she goosed the motor and scampered.

Beck yanked his starter cord and gunned it, wolf to snowshoe rabbit.

He carved the shortest angle through her ripples. Forty-horsepower revolutions vibrated up his arm and knocked around his ribs.

Her boat floundered. One glittery red stripe on its side crested a wave and spun half-circle like a trail of blood down a freezer drainpipe. She glanced over her shoulder then wobbled to her feet.

No. You did not just do that. No way you're going in.

Her arms flailed for balance.

Beck assaulted his throttle, dared the cables to snap. No way he was going in that ice bath. No fucking way.

“Don't jump!” he shouted.

Her body crouched low; her arms swung back into a diver's arc.

"No!"

The crafts collided. Beck leapt aft and tackled her to her boat's bottom. Frigid water crashed over the sides. His vision flooded. A fresh catch, bloated to hell in down feathers, squirmed beneath him.

So much for that drop.

"Get off me." Water streamed down her obnoxiously-thick eyeglasses. She spit and grunted under his weight. With a padded glove worthy of Mike Tyson, she clocked him on the jaw.

The hit, no stronger than a fart, was enough to knock him off-balance in a damned boat. Her legs slithered free.

He recovered and pinned her wrists. Their exhales squared off, hers all grainy-smelling.

"You wouldn't have jumped," Beck said.

Her eyes narrowed.

He squinted back. A rogue wave pitched him forward. Her thigh hugged his crotch. If she hadn't been six ways of homely, he might have enjoyed it. He realized the pressure against his spine was gone. *Shit*. He turned and saw his gun on the stern-side seat.

"Well?" she said, not at all wicked-mad scientist. Her voice was more snowshoe with a little false bravado thrown in. She glanced at the gun then him. "What are you waiting for?"

His muscles quaked, from the cold, from the adrenaline dump, from the gravity of a botched job. If he held her at gunpoint, she'd toss the serum in the lake. If he held to the plan, he'd get what he came for. He always did. So he wasn't Phoenix. Big fucking deal. He'd be better than Phoenix.

“I brought it for protection.”

“In case I kick your ass?”

He laughed. Couldn't hold it. He straightened her glasses, found it hard to let go. God almighty, she looked like a school girl. “No. Our protection. Phoenix sent me.”

Beck released her and holstered his gun. He expected her to scramble away or put the rudder arm between them—hell, shove him overboard—but she showed no indication that she was afraid save the sizeable proportion of white to brown in her eyes.

“I won't give it to anyone but him. Tell him that.”

Christ, now he had to go all De Niro on her. He summoned the memory of that Golden Retriever—what the hell was his name?—that his dad got when he was ten. Inside of a week, it had been hit by a car. He even managed a tear despite the Arctic blast hitting his eyeballs.

“Phoenix is dead.”

Her gaze shifted to the timberline. Wariness curled beneath her eyes like bruises under a thick curtain of glass. For the first time, he saw what lay hidden beneath those awful lenses. Fragile features. Flawless skin, nose pink from the cold. She didn't look capable of medical experiments on disabled kids and illegal immigrant children. Hell, she didn't look capable of killing a spider. And since when did lying make him all nauseous and shit?

Focus, man. She's your fucking target.

“Phoenix told me to give you this.” Beck reached into his pocket and handed her an amulet.

No idea what it was or what it meant, but when he'd taken it out of the briefing envelope yesterday, he couldn't have imagined so complete a reaction: gone was the critical slant to her eyes, gone was the prominent vein, brow to hairline, gone was her near-dead pallor. She gasped

as if the ass-biting air was a gift.

“Said you’d know what it meant,” Beck added.

“Who *are* you?”

Who the fuck *was* he? A friend? Too shallow. A protégé? Hell, he knew nothing about what this covert Jesus did. Blood was always convincing.

“I’m his son.” Sounded good. Damn but his stomach hurt. Was she crying?

You’re going to blow this. Then you’ll be the one at the bottom of the lake with a hole in your head. He tugged his knit cap lower over his ears as if the woven fibers could filter the irrational thoughts spilling from his head.

She unzipped her jacket.

He reached for his gun, but her hand merely freed a necklace. He relaxed his arm and studied her clothes: lace, pearl buttons, gold cross—apparently, he was sent to off a Sister of the Holy Order of Devious Scientists. He blinked, looked away. *Concentrate.*

“The chain’s too short.” She stretched it toward him. “Will you snap it together?”

Beck replayed his mission, a mantra designed to suffocate any variable of independent thought: Obtain the serum. Eliminate the scientist. The brief used the words ruthless, insane patients, torture—all to advance her work. The woman packaged it well.

His Glock became an anchor. He needed her to trust him so he knelt toward her. His knees waded into the shifting puddles at the boat’s bottom. He blew into his fist to thaw his grip, took the amulet back and puzzled it to the charm she held out from her neck. Long neck—as in tall—how had he not known that? The charm had some kind of arrow and more points like a half-star—he couldn’t make it work—one half, his half so battered and tarnished, her half as polished and cherished as the Blue Hope Diamond. He almost gave up when the lines of the

piece fell together and snapped.

Beck recoiled.

“What is it?” she said.

His heart—*Guh-gung-gung-gung-gung*—nothing to do with the water—was the only part of his body not cadaver-frozen.

The full amulet matched the base-of-his-neck tattoo. The tattoo still ripe and swollen from the previous day. The tattoo that marked the final phase of acceptance to a secret organization he’d grown to despise. The tattoo on a strip of flesh he had gladly sacrificed to learn the truth about what happened to Natalie.

“What’s wrong?” she pressed.

“Nah—just—my father.”

She took it, ran with it, almost in a whisper, her gaze right there and not there at all. “When I was ten, this stranger sat beside me on the dock. He sank his expensive shoes in the water. One tapped my bare foot. I thought he was crazy.”

Beck fought the image. He didn’t want to know the barefoot girl.

“He gave me the necklace. Told me one day, the missing piece would find me when I most needed to believe in something.”

“Something or someone?” *Christ*, she was walking right into it and didn’t know. She could have been set up at age of ten, and she didn’t know. It was too easy. Too fucking easy. Something was off. His stomach was a powderkeg.

“That man was your father? Phoenix?”

Her stare galvanized him, robbed him of his capacity for anything *but* independent thought. He nodded.

She smiled then, the carefully orchestrated dance of betrayal reaching its final chord. From her boot's sheepskin lining, she removed a metal cylinder no larger than a rifle casing. She unscrewed the cap and shook the contents into her palm: digital storage the size of an eyelash and a vial of blue liquid.

“Everything is here. Labs. Formulas. The identities of all test subjects...”

Her voice raced on a current of scientific lingo, Swahili to his internal dialogue: Obtain the serum, eliminate the scientist, obtain the serum, eliminate the scientist. He zeroed in on her palm's roadmap lines, lines that led to one kind of freedom, but forever denied him another. What if he spent his days free of The Assembly justifying every life he had extinguished? What if he spent his days justifying this one last hit?

What if he let Natalie slip away because he second-guessed the intelligence?

Beck reached for the vial.

Her fingers closed around it; her stare tightened.

It all played beautifully along her downy expression—that vein, that one strong vein pulsed at her forehead as if to say *you've made a mistake, you've trusted too soon*. The perfect study in perception had his patience not run out.

“No,” she whispered.

She knew—she knew—she knew.

Beck drew his gun, aimed.

She charged backward. The boat pitched. Beck stumbled over the cross-supports deep in the hull. *Goddamnit*, he'd lost track of her vial-hand. In her coat? Her fingers trailed from somewhere near her pocket.

“Give me the serum.”

“No.” Her knees bounced like engine pistons. “If this falls into the wrong hands, no one is safe. Please...”

He was going to retch. Individual thought. Different pieces of the same puzzle. Polished and tarnished. In her final moment, she didn't plead for her life as most did. She pleaded for all of them, him included. It aligned with every contradiction before, every truth the Assembly suppressed for their agenda.

The ball of his finger scratched at the trigger.

What was the truth?

A single tear, magnified a thousand in those glasses, slipped free and coasted down her cheek.

Natalie-Natalie-Natalie.

Gunshots rent the silent winter.

Feathers blasted from her coat, white to red.

Beck's gun remained cold.