ENDGAME
THE ZERO LINE CHRONICLES
VOLUME 1
INCITE
JAMES FREY
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Excerpt from *Endgame: The Calling*
    Marcus Loxias Megalos
    Chiyoko Takeda

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PROLOGUE

“So that was your first murder?”
“No. It was my first kill,” I respond. “It wasn’t planned. I’m not a murderer. I killed him, but I’m not . . . it’s not what you think.”
He sits down across from me at the table in the corner by the hotel window. My left wrist is handcuffed to the armrest, but it’s an old wooden chair, and when I lean back, the arm comes out of joint. I haven’t tried to push back far enough to get my handcuff off the arm yet. I have to be ready to roll when I do that. I only have one shot at escape.
“How is that not murder?” he asks, his face a mask.
“It was self-defense.” My heart is in my chest. I can’t even tell if I’m bluffing anymore, or if it’s the truth.
“You had just killed two other men. Was that self-defense too?”
“I didn’t kill two men.”
“Your friends did.” The agent—I don’t know if he’s CIA or FBI or what—stands up from his chair and paces the room. I don’t know what to say to him. All I know is that I’ve got to get out of here, fast. The team is counting on me. We don’t have much time.
“The cop,” I say, thinking fast, “had just shot my friend in the chest.”
“Your friend was shot in the chest while you were robbing a store at gunpoint. You face charges of grand larceny, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder, and that doesn’t begin to address what you’re doing here in Germany.”
He is the only agent here—alone and stupid. He’s from the US consulate, and he clearly has no idea who he’s dealing with. He thinks I’m just a run-of-the-mill terrorist. But I’m not. I’m Zero line. What we are doing is so much bigger than one local cop’s life. So much bigger than an FBI agent. So much bigger than me. He’s wasting my time, and time is the one thing we need on
our side.
“Listen,” I say, “can I use the bathroom? You’ve had me handcuffed here for
two hours.” I’ve also scanned the place for anything I can use to escape. It’s
no prison—it’s a hotel. Someone slept in the bed last night. It’s probably this
agent’s personal room.
He stares at me through narrowed eyes. “I’ll let you get up when you’re
finished answering my questions.” He leans forward, trying to intimidate me.
“Why are you in Munich? What’s your plan here?”
“I want a lawyer.”
“We’re not in the United States,” he says. “Different rules.”
“Different rules?” I say, nervously laughing a little bit. “You’re an American,
I’m an American. The Constitution guarantees my rights.”
“Here’s the passenger manifest from your flight. I’m going to read through
the names, and you’re going to tell me who else is in your group.”
“Seriously?” I say, and laugh. “You have no idea what is going on. No idea.”
“I know that you are part of a terrorist group. That you’re here to make a
political statement at the Olympics.”
“I’m not a terrorist. I didn’t have any friends on the plane. I’m not here to
make a political statement,” I say flatly and truthfully.
“I don’t believe you, kid.”
While the agent talks, I lean back in my chair. The armrest isn’t moving
enough. The joint is loose, but the back of the chair hits the wall, and I’m not
able to squeeze the handcuff out through the gap. I grip the armrest, try to
guess its weight.
He’s sitting again, and his chair is scooted all the way in to the table. “I know
you’re not here alone. Who else from the plane is working with you? I’m not
going to ask again.”
“You’re wasting my time,” I say. “I need to get out of here. I don’t have
time.”
I grip the arm of the chair with my handcuffed left hand.
“If it’s so important, why won’t you tell me what it is?”
I shove the table with my right hand, tipping it into the agent’s stomach. I
leap to my feet, yank up the chair, and smash it into him.
It loses some of its momentum as it scrapes against the wall, but I’m still able
to bring it down on him hard. The chair breaks as it hits his shoulder and the
table, but the armrest is still in my hand. I beat him across the face with it
until he goes down. He’s dazed, and I scramble out from behind the table and pieces of broken chair.  
He goes for his gun, slowly pushing the broken chair away. He’s bleeding from his head—a lot. I hit him again with the armrest and then give him a right hook. He’s not struggling anymore, and I grab his pistol from his holster.  
I pull the broken armrest out of the handcuff and kneel down next to him to find his keys. I grab them just as he tries to throw a weak punch. It catches me off guard, and I stumble back slightly. But I have his keys and gun, and I hold the pistol in my left hand while I unlock the cuffs.  
He looks up at me, his eyes barely open. “Who are you?”  
“I’m Zero line. This is Endgame. I’m in Munich to save the world.”
CHAPTER ONE

It was a beautiful May afternoon as the bus drove into Berkeley. I was finally getting out on my own, leaving Pasadena, my job, and my parents behind. My mom had given me a halfhearted hug. We’d never been close. I wondered if my mom had ever been close to anyone. She was small and subservient and never talked.

My dad did the talking for both of them. He barked orders around the house from the minute he got home at night until long after I’d gone to my room. He’d never wanted me to go to college. Well, to tell the truth, I was never sure what he wanted of me. After high school, I tried working at the family business for a year—Dad ran a furniture store—and I couldn’t remember doing anything that he approved of. I could never meet the outrageous quotas that he gave me, and he certainly didn’t make an effort to teach me anything. But when I told him I was going to college—that I’d saved up enough for tuition—he sneered at me as though I’d just said I was joining the circus. But I’d held on to my money—everything I’d ever earned at the furniture store, and everything I’d earned the summers I’d worked for the Forest Service. My friends loved to go out to movies and dinner and spend money on girls and weed, but I knew I needed to be a penny-pinching miser if I ever planned to get out from under Dad’s thumb.

After I told him that I was going to Berkeley, of all places, he stopped talking to me. It was the best two months I’d ever had at home. I wasn’t starting school until the fall, but I’d managed to get a janitorial job cleaning the empty dorms over the summer. The school let me move in early, into one of the dorms that held guys year-round, and it gave me a chance to earn a little more money and leave my parents’ house.

I couldn’t help smiling on the bus. This was everything I wanted. Freedom. A place where I could be in the middle of the action: the protests, the rallies, the
parties, the free life and free love. I wanted a place where I could be my own man, voice my own opinions, be part of something important. I was finally there.

After checking in at the administration building, I found my dorm and headed upstairs to room 117.

“Hey!” a guy said, jumping up when I opened the door. “Are you the new guy? I’ve been expecting you!”

“I’m the new guy.” I had a backpack and an old duffel bag I used to store my football gear in, and dropped them both on the empty bed.

“Mike Stavros.” I held out my hand to him.

He shook it enthusiastically. He had medium brown skin and black hair that fell to his shoulders. “Tommy. Tommy Selestewa.”

“Good to meet you.”

“What are you here for? They told me you were coming, but I don’t know why anyone would come this time of year. School just got out.”

“Job brought me early,” I said. “Why are you still here?”

“Just trying to graduate earlier. I’m a sophomore, and I don’t have anything else to do—no reason to take summer off. I’ve loaded up on classes.” Tommy sat down at his desk. “Got a major?”

“Not sure yet. I’m thinking city planning, or forestry. Or maybe political science.” I sat on my bed. The mattress was thin and hard.

Tommy laughed a little. “No worries, man, you’ve got time.”

I looked at Tommy’s desk and bookshelf. He had a typewriter. A book lay open beside it—Plato’s *Republic* —and under it was *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle. It made me feel a little small that my roommate was studying such great philosophies. This was why I’d wanted to come to college. To learn about something bigger than myself.

“I used to work for the Forest Service,” I said, “during my summers in high school. I was part of a fire crew that saved a neighborhood from a forest fire. It was coming from two sides, and we were able to redirect the flames. I was really proud of that. It makes me want to do something that will make a difference. Become someone important. Or, well, just do something important. Not just be a furniture salesman like my old man.”

“Why school, then? Why not join the fire department?”

“I thought about that, but I decided that, on the fire crew, I was just one person with a shovel and a mattock. What if I could do something bigger?
Design a subdivision where fires are less likely? What if I could invent something—some kind of emergency sprinkler, or I don’t know what. Something.”
“I get that,” he said. “So you want to fight fires on a big scale.”
“Not necessarily fires. Anything, as long as it’s something worth fighting for. My old man has never done shit. I just haven’t figured out what I’m going to do yet.” I smiled. “How about you?”
“I haven’t declared yet. I’ve just been doing my generals. I think I’ll end up in engineering. But this summer I’m taking a lot of ancient history classes.”
“Whoa. Those are pretty different.”
“I read a lot.” He motioned to the bookshelf above his desk. It was filled with titles like *Turning Points in Ancient History* and *Inventions of the Gods*. “I’m sure I’ll be boring you to death with some of my theories soon.”
“Go for it. I have nothing else to do. I don’t know anyone north of Santa Barbara, and I was worried it was going to be a long, lonely summer.”
Tommy laughed. “You want to go out tonight? Some of my friends and I were talking about having some beers, shooting some pool. Interested?”
I was exhausted, but I didn’t care. I was finally on my own, and I couldn’t wait to celebrate. “Absolutely. What time?”

Tito’s was a local dive, about a 20-minute walk from our dorm. It was busy, and Tommy led me through the crowd of students to a row of pool tables in the back. There was no one in the place who looked over 30, but they were all dressed better than average. Tommy had changed from jeans and a T-shirt into corduroys and a zippered sweater. I was more casual—a pair of beat-up jeans and a Rose Bowl sweatshirt.
A small group in the back called out to Tommy, and we made our way over to them.
“Guys,” he said. “This is Mike, my new roomie. Mike, meet Jim, Julia, and Mary.”
“Hi,” I said, and stretched out my hand. Jim grabbed it. He was black, with silver-rimmed glasses and a newsboy cap.
“Jim Jefferson,” he said. “Not James, definitely not JJ.”
“Mike Stavros,” I said back. “Good to meet you.” But my eyes weren’t on him. They were glued to the blonde sitting next to him, the one Tommy had called Mary.
I reached out my hand to her. She took it in a firm grip and stood up. “This isn’t a business meeting, you know.”

“Is shaking hands too formal?” I asked, letting go and laughing at myself. “I’ve been living the life of a furniture salesman. Salesmen shake hands with people. It makes them feel at ease.”

Mary laughed, a sweet, melodic tone. “I can assure you, I’m feeling very at ease.” She picked up her beer and took a quick sip.

“I’m Julia,” the next woman said. She was black, with short hair, and dressed in purple paisley. She reached for my hand, and I shook back.

“Where you from?”

“Pasadena,” I said. “You guys?”

“Northern California,” Mary said. “Ever heard of Susanville?”

“Never.”

“You’re not missing out,” she said with a quick laugh. “I grew up north of there on a ranch. Moved to Piedmont when my dad retired.”

“I’ve never heard of Piedmont either,” I said, and she laughed again.

“Touché, Mike.” I beamed.

“So, how’d you all become friends?”

I noticed a look between Tommy and Mary. Mary shook her head slightly. My stomach dipped—I hoped that didn’t mean they were together.

“Julia and I are locals,” Jim said. “Grew up in Oakland, known each other since kindergarten. You play pool?”

“A little.”

“Eight ball,” Jim said. “You and Mary, me and Julia.” He handed me a cue. I was about six feet tall, and Mary had to be a foot shorter than me. But she was gorgeous. Long, blond, curly hair that flowed loose down her shoulders like a waterfall. I didn’t want to say no to being on her team, but I turned to Tommy.

“That’ll leave you out.”

“The night is young,” he said. “I’m going to get something to drink. Want anything?”

“Not now,” I said.

Julia racked the balls and stood back. Mary looked at me. “You wanna break?”

“You go for it,” I said. I hadn’t played a lot of pool at home, and I wanted to
pull off looking cool in front of this girl for as long as I could.
She broke, and the 14 ball fell into a side pocket.
“Do all of you guys go to Berkeley?” I asked.
“We do,” Jim said, gesturing to himself and Julia. “Art program. She paints; I
sculpt.”
“Not me,” Mary said, lining up her new shot. “Stanford. Prelaw.”
“Really?”
“It gets better,” Julia said. “She’s there on scholarship. Smart kid.”
“Why are you here if you’re at Stanford? That’s like an hour away.”
“Taking a quarter off,” she said. “I’m interning for a firm across the bay.
Divorces and bankruptcies.” She rolled her eyes and added, “Real exciting
stuff.” She missed her shot.
Julia took a pull from her beer and bent down, taking aim at the 3 ball.
“So, Mike,” Jim asked, “why are you showing up in the summer?”
“I’m starting in the fall,” I said, “but I got a job over the summer. It’s no
internship with a law firm, though. You’re looking at Berkeley’s newest
janitorial staff member.”
“Nice,” Jim said with a laugh. “I hope you’re not the poor sap who has to
clean up Wurster Hall. My studio is a mess.”
Julia missed, and I was up. I searched for a good shot. There was a long one,
right along the bumper. I knew I couldn’t make it, so I tried a closer, easier
shot and missed, of course.
“No worries,” I said. “Just cleaning out empty dorms.”
Jim was really good. He got three balls in before missing on an awkward,
reaching shot.
Tommy came back with a beer.
“So,” I said as Mary leaned over to take her shot, “prelaw, huh? What kind of
lawyer do you want to be?”
“It’s better to ask what kind of lawyer I wanted to be. I’m probably going to
drop out. The biggest thing I’ve learned about the law is that I hate it. Taking
notes during back-to-back-to-back divorce settlements has made me swear
off marriage too.”
“John!” Tommy shouted. At once, the whole group turned. Someone was
walking toward us, a huge grin on his face. Everyone smiled wide when they
saw him.
“Tommy!” The guy waved as he made his way over. John was tall, wearing
jeans and the coolest jacket I’d ever seen. It was denim, but embroidered intricately all over the back, shoulders, and arms. Bright splashes of color—flowers, spirals, and a peace symbol.

It was clear everyone in the place knew him. He slapped hands with the people at the bar and hugged one of the waitresses.

“What’s up, man?” Jim asked, and gave him a hug, thumping him loudly on the back. John kissed Julia and Mary each on the cheek. When he got to Tommy, they did some kind of secret handshake.

“Everything is up, guys. It is a good day.” He turned to the waitress and shouted, “Bring a round of—what are you guys drinking? Looks like three beers and a . . . What’s that, Julia?”

“Jack.”

“Three beers, a Jack, and I’ll take a Scotch and water.” He turned, noticing me for the first time. “You want a drink?”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

“Suit yourself. I’m John, man. Good to meet you.” He stretched out his hand and I took it.

“Mike,” I said.

“Cool,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder. “So who brought you?”

“Tommy,” I said. “I’m his new roommate. Spent the day on a bus ride from Pasadena, and this is my first look at Berkeley nightlife.”

“Well, we better make it a good one, then. You’re not drinking anything, so we’ll need a higher level of discourse.”

Tommy laughed. “Higher than beer and pool?”

“Did you guys see the news today?” John asked as he sat down. I looked back at the pool table. It was my turn.

“No,” Julia said, her brow crinkling. “I was in the studio all day. What’s happening?”

“The bastard just said that he’s mining Haiphong Harbor.”

“The bastard?” I asked. I took a shot and missed the pocket by an inch.

“We don’t say his name,” Jim said with a laugh.

Mary laughed. “If you say Nixon three times into a mirror, he’ll appear next to you.”

“What’s Haiphong Harbor?” I asked.

John took off his hat and twirled it in his hands. “Don’t know your Vietnam geography?”
“I know Hanoi and I know Saigon,” I said. “I know the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Gulf of Tonkin.”

“And what, may I ask, is your position on the war?”

It was Mary’s turn, and she drilled the 5 ball into the side pocket. She held out her hand as she walked past me and I slapped it. “Good shot.”

“Thank you.” She lined up another one.

“My father,” I said to John, “would tell you that the Vietnam War is being fought to prevent the vile spread of Red Communism and strengthen our alliance with Australia. I worked with him nine to seven almost every day of the year, selling furniture, and he said that at least four times a week.”

John smiled and put his hat back on. “And what do you say?”

“I think we’re sending kids over there to die just so the president can say we’re doing something about the ‘communist threat,’ with the false belief that, as a superpower, we have the right to invade any small country we want.”

Mary knocked in the 7 ball and then stood up.

John nodded his agreement, and the waitress arrived. She set the drinks on the table beside John. John paid her and, if I was seeing correctly, gave her a huge tip.

“And today,” John said, “the bastard has declared that he’s going to be placing mines in Haiphong Harbor, the main port of North Vietnam. There are military ships in those waters, but it’ll mostly affect imports, like food and medical care. Yeah, it will hurt the army, but it’s sure as hell going to hurt the civilians more.”

Jim nudged me. “He was over there.”

“You’re a vet?” I looked at John.

He stared back at me and then pulled up his sleeve. There was a tattoo of a skull wearing a green beret.

Mary walked over next to me. “You coming? I don’t want to have to win this all by myself.”

“She could too,” John said.

I stood up. John looked older than everyone else. He looked weathered.

“John, what do you do?” I asked.

John exhaled, a deep, slow breath. “It’s a long story.”

Mary pulled on my arm. “Come on.”

He grinned. “It’s called Endgame. Now go play pool.”
I sat on one of the couches, watching Jim and Julia play nine ball against each other. Mary had stuck with me all evening, which surprised me, but I didn’t want to question it. I didn’t think a girl like Mary had ever even looked at me, but here was one who was pulling me over to the couch by the hand and was in no hurry to let go. Tommy followed us and sat down in the chair next to our couch. He put his feet up on the table in the center, and I waited for John to join us.

“So, how do you know all these people?” I asked again, more to cut the silence than because I was interested.

Mary waved her hand dismissively. “Eh, I don’t want to talk about them. Tell me about you. Who is Michael Stavros?”

I took a breath. “Well, I already told you the important stuff. I came to Berkeley to do something more with my life than just be a furniture salesman. But for now I’m a janitor. Classy, right?”

“Don’t feel bad about that,” she said. “I worked at a burger place until I got my internship. I’ll probably go back there when school starts.”

“I thought you were on scholarship.”

“Pays for tuition, but nothing else. My dad has plenty of money, but he wants me to make my contribution, which is a buck sixty-five per hour, fifteen hours a week. But it could be worse. He originally didn’t want me to go to college at all.”

“You should be a janitor. We make one eighty.”

“I’d rather flip burgers.”

“What about your internship? That doesn’t pay?”

“Nope, but that’s okay, because I don’t really do anything. I make coffee, I take notes in meetings, and I get ogled by men who are divorcing their wives. But I have a desk with a window on the eighteenth floor, and my mom took
me on a shopping spree for business clothes. That was fun. You should see me before I change clothes after work. I look like a Republican.”
“Scandalous,” I said with a laugh. “I could see you as a big-name lawyer in the city.”
She grimaced. “That’s because you don’t know me very well yet. I should get paid just for having to wear high heels every day. I’m a country girl, born and bred. I hated leaving the ranch and moving here. Give me boots and a rifle and I’m your girl.”
“I liked that about Pasadena. You can be over the hills and out of the city in ten minutes. Well, scratch that. I don’t like Pasadena. It’s too suburban—is that the word I’m looking for? It’s too bland. Nothing happens there.” I laughed. “The thing I just said that I liked about it was how easy it is to get out of there.”
“Never been there. Is it close to Disneyland?”
“About an hour. If you’re still a country girl at heart, how did you ever get into law?”
“I like to argue,” she said, and laughed.
John sat down with us and put a foot on the coffee table. He was wearing boots—looked like alligator skin.
“Mike, answer a question for me.”
“Sure,” I said. “Anything.”
“I don’t know Pasadena, but there was something in the paper about it a couple weeks ago. Made me think. There was an apartment fire. A guy had gotten out safely, but he ran back inside. They found his body in a hallway—they speculated that he’d been knocking on all the doors. Now, he wasn’t the manager. Neighbors said he was quiet, and no one really knew him.” I nodded. I’d heard about the fire. “So what’s the question?”
“Why did he run back in? He was safe. The fire department was there.”
“Do you want details from a Pasadena native? Or just my opinion?”
“Just your opinion,” John said. “Hypothetical. Let’s say you’re the guy.”
“I think he was just a good guy. Wanted to help. Got out of his depth.”
A waitress brought him a new Scotch and water, but he seemed in no hurry to drink it. “You know, the Mormon missionaries came knocking on my door once. They have a saying: ‘It becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor.’ You sure you don’t want a drink?”
I shook my head. “No,” I said, and decided to change the subject. “Tell me
about that game. What’s that?”
“Endgame?” John asked, and took a sip.
“It’s scary shit,” Tommy said.
Mary squeezed my hand.
“There’s a lot to know,” John said. “The history of it would take hours to tell. I’ll start with a question—what do you believe about the end of the world?” I laughed for a moment, because I didn’t think he was being serious. But I was the only one laughing. “The end of the world? I don’t know. My mom is the churchgoer in our family. A Baptist. I’ve never paid much attention. Raining fire and brimstone, and all the sinners go to hell and the good people go to heaven, I guess? Why’s that important?”
“You want to know about Endgame, right? Mary, tell us what you know,” John said.
“What I know? Or what I was taught in catechism?”
“First what you were taught.”
She brushed some loose strands of hair out of her face. “I was raised Catholic. The Bible says that Christ will return, and that no one knows the time of his coming. The wicked will grow worse and worse and the Antichrist will come and the entire world will fall away. Finally Christ will come down to purge the wicked and sit in judgment of all people. That’s what I was taught, anyway.”
I smiled, first at her and then at John. “Are we really sitting in the back of a bar talking about the end of the world? Do you know what I’d be talking about if I was back home? Furniture. And if I went out with my friends—which I never had time to do—we’d talk about baseball. And I hate baseball.”
“Oh, you’ve just never seen good baseball,” John said with a laugh. “But yeah—the end of the world. It’s is a crazy topic. You’ve got to be a little bit nuts to deal with it all. Tommy, how about you? What do you believe?”
Tommy rolled his eyes. “I’m Hopi. Everything is different for us.”
“Yeah,” John said, “but I like to hear it. And it will help Mike understand.”
“There are, supposedly, nine signs to watch for. The first one is that white men will come. As you can see, that one’s already happened.” Tommy laughed. “There are prophecies about covered wagons and longhorn cattle and telescopes. But it all comes down to the ninth sign. All the others have happened already. We’re currently in the Fourth World, and the ninth prophecy says we’re going to hear a crash in the heavens and see a blue star.
The Blue Star Kachina will be revealed and take the faithful to the Fifth World.”
“So,” I asked, “what happens if you’re not Hopi?”
He pointed at Mary. “What happens if you’re not Catholic?”
John took a sip of his drink, looked at me, and said, “What do you think the truth is?”
“Nuclear holocaust,” I said. “Sooner or later.”
“And you don’t believe in a god or a kachina or the Rapture or anything like that?”
“I’m not saying there definitely isn’t a god. I’m just saying I never really believed in one, like you.”
John eyed me carefully. “I don’t believe in God,” he said. “I believe in Endgame.”
“What?” I asked. “What religion is that?”
“It’s not a religion. It’s the end of the world. It could start at any moment. I don’t know.”
I looked at Tommy, who stared at me like he was waiting for me to say something. Mary still held my hand, her other holding her bottle of Budweiser. She looked back at me as I stared, our faces close together.
“This,” I said, turning back to John and laughing, “is why I never drink. You guys are freaking me out.”
“I like you, Mike.” John leaned back and laughed. “Listen, when do you start work?”
Mary’s hand brushed against mine, but I tried to focus on John. “Uh . . . not till next week.”
“We’re having a get-together this weekend with a lot of my friends. Up at Mary’s ranch. Nothing formal, just fishing and shooting and hiking. Come with us—it’ll be fun.”
“Thanks, man. But I don’t have a car.”
“That doesn’t matter,” John said. “We have plenty of people coming who can give you a ride. Why don’t you get a lift with Mary?”
She nodded emphatically. “I have my dad’s old Buick. I’ll pick you up.”
Tommy spoke up. “C’mon, Stavros. It’s cool. You should come.”
I never did anything like this. And not only that, but I never did it so spontaneously. “Well, I don’t know how to shoot, and I haven’t fished since I was in the Boy Scouts, but sure, sounds good.”
I was happy. I’d found a group of friends who felt like they could be my people. And for a moment I forgot about all the talk of the end of the world as John bought another round of drinks.

Tommy and I walked back to our dorm. He was drunk—we’d played pool for two straight hours. For my first day of college, this had been pretty cool. I’d met a bunch of new people, including a beautiful girl who’d stayed next to me most of the night. I had no idea where that had come from—I didn’t know what she meant by it. I hoped it meant something.

“Tommy,” I said, “how long have you known Mary?”

“Not long. I only started hanging out with that group . . . um . . . during fall semester?”

“So you’re pretty new?”

“Yeah,” he said, his words slightly slurred from all the beer. “I guess. She’s been with the group for only a little longer than me. But I always get the feeling that she’s known John forever.”

“Forever?”

“For a long time. I don’t know. Longer than a year anyway. Are you interested in her?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Hey man, that’s cool. She’s not my type anyway.”

We turned onto a street without any streetlights.

“A totally hot girl with deep blue eyes and blond hair isn’t your type? She’s on a scholarship at Stanford, so she’s smart too. What is your type?”

“I like brunettes,” he said.

“Well, your loss is my gain.”

Tommy winked at me. “I assume this means you’re coming on our ranch trip?”

“A whole weekend with Mary?” I said. “Are you kidding? Of course I’m in.”

I really did want to go—and not just because of Mary. I’d had this picture in my head of what Berkeley was supposed to be like, and suddenly I was living it. Getting together with friends, talking about big issues—the war, the government. Even the end of the world.

Of course, at that point I had no idea what I was getting myself into.
CHAPTER THREE

We all met in the grocery store parking lot Friday at five in the morning, and I was stunned by who showed up. I thought it was going to be just our group, but it turned out to be a whole lot bigger than that. There were the people I knew—Mary, Tommy, Jim, Julia, and John—but there were also many I’d never met.

Other than a change of clothes, I hadn’t brought anything with me, but most had fishing poles or shotguns or deer rifles. When we got there, Mary threw her arms around me in a huge hug. She smelled like flowers, and I let my face nuzzle in her hair. My heart sped up at what that hug could mean. But then she gave the same big hug to Tommy, and another one to John. She was a hugger, I guessed.

She looked like the youngest girl there, and I was probably the youngest guy. I introduced myself to everyone.

“We’re going to have fun today,” said a girl named Kat, smiling at me. She was in her twenties, super skinny, and a nurse. She gave me a hug too, and whispered in my ear, “This may seem crazy at first, but you’re going to love it.”

What? I thought. It seemed like such an odd thing to say. I figured she meant I’d love the group—the fishing and shooting.

“The old guy,” I asked Kat. “Who’s he?”

“That’s Rodney. And he’s only thirty-two,” she said. “That’s not old. It’s his beard. But you should get to know him—he owns a deli in Oakland. And watch for it: he’ll ask you to go fishing with him, and he’ll make a bet on who will catch the first fish. Don’t take him up on it. I swear, he could get a fifteen-pound bass out of a pothole.”

Mary came and took my hand and led me to her car. “It’s a coupe,” she said, “so there’s only room for the two of us.”
“Great,” I said. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that showed her curves, and I couldn’t believe Tommy wasn’t interested in her. She was beautiful. Her hair was loose and long, and her skin was soft and warm in my hand. I couldn’t believe how lucky I was that we had the whole car ride to ourselves.

Once everyone had arrived—there were eight cars and 21 people—Mary and I pulled out of the parking lot and headed west. Her ranch was five hours north. I’d heard Northern California was pretty, and she said there were lakes and rivers and hills on her family’s property.

“Do your folks know you’re going up there?” I asked.

“What makes you ask that?” she said, tilting her head.

“Just curious.”

“No,” she said, her expression suddenly tense. “They don’t. And they can’t find out, or I’m dead.”

“So we have to keep the place nice and tidy?”

“Exactly.” Mary glanced over at me, noticed I was smiling. Her face loosened up, and she laughed. “Really, though, my parents don’t use the ranch for much anymore. So they don’t care. In the spring my dad will go up and make sure the fences are okay, and in autumn he still takes us hunting. The ranch is really big—have I said that? It’s fifty-five thousand acres.”

“Wow,” I said. I knew from my time with the Forest Service that that was enough land to get seriously lost in. It could cover whole mountain ranges.

“My oldest brother owns a feed store up in Klamath Falls, Oregon. We keep expecting him to ask for the land so he can start his cattle operation, but so far he hasn’t. His wife is from there, and I think she wants to stay. For now everything works out well for the ZL, though.”

“The ZL?”

“Oh,” she said, glancing over at me, like maybe she’d said something she shouldn’t have. “That’s us. The group of us. It stands for Zero line.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means . . . basically, it means that we consider each other family. You know how people talk about their bloodline? We—this group—call ourselves Zero line. We’re our own kind of family.”

“I like that idea,” I said. “God knows I’d like to distance myself from my own family.” Mary laughed. I loved her laugh: so quick and light.

“Speaking of family,” I said, “where does yours think you are this weekend?”
Mary laughed. “Back at school for a workshop. There are just some things you don’t want to tell your parents, you know? They’re not the most open-minded people in the world. My dad—forget about sneaking onto the ranch. He wouldn’t care about that too much. But if he knew I was with a boy from Berkeley, I think he’d flip.”
“Too liberal?”
“My dad is a staunch Catholic, Nixon-supporting old cowboy. Just the idea that you want to study urban planning is enough to make him think you’re a pot-smoking hippie with newfangled ideas and immoral goals. He thinks a man should work with his hands. He should be a self-made man with big plans for being self-reliant.”
“And has that worked with the rest of the family?”
“Well, I’m the baby,” she said. “And I’m going to college on scholarship, which is the only way that he’d let me go. Otherwise it would be secretarial school. I hate to say it, but my dad is a bit—well, more than a bit—sexist. My two older sisters married men my dad approved of—men like himself. One married a farmer down in Southern California. They grow avocados and artichokes. The second married a contractor who builds big modern houses in San Jose. And my two brothers: the one runs a feed store—I told you that—and the other is a doctor . . . and he got drafted. His wife, Bonnie, lives with us. She’s a doctor too, and I think that drives my dad crazy, that my mom is effectively raising their baby while Bonnie works.” She glanced over at me, and smiled. “I’m talking a lot. Your turn.”
“I don’t have much to say. I have a dad who . . . well, he’s an asshole. Not like your dad—a man of principles. You can say that your dad is sexist, but my dad is a cheat and a liar. I worked with him at his furniture store, and he cut every corner and raised prices and gouged people when they needed something. The only way he gets away with it is because he’s the only shop in town, and he makes all of his profit off the old-timers who never realized there are other stores in the greater Los Angeles area. I swear, he once sold a desk, and then, when the customer was writing the check, he explained to her that the drawers were an extra five dollars each. I’ve tried to find some way to describe him, and the only thing I can come up with to adequately do the job is just to call him an asshole. He stays out late, and when he finally comes home, well . . .”
She was quiet, and I was beginning to wonder if she had been listening, but
she finally spoke.
“That’s why you don’t drink.”
“What?”
“You don’t drink. Because your dad’s a drunk . . . and an asshole.”
I paused. “Well, yeah.”
“Does he hit your mom?”
“What?”
“Does he hit your mom? You don’t have to answer.”
I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t like that she could see right through me.
But she was right. “Yes.”
“And you?”
“Sometimes.”
“I’m sorry,” she said, and reached over to take my hand.
“It’s—” I said, and then stopped. “It’s okay. I got out of there. I’m not going
to be like him. I have to be different. I have to do something real.”
“Well, it’s a good thing that you fell in with us.”

We drove in silence for most of the rest of the way. I fell asleep and dreamed
of furniture until she woke me up as the caravan drove through Susanville,
the town where she was born. Her ranch was still 45 miles past it, on a
turnoff that was obscured from most of the houses and buildings by a small
row of hills. Mary went on and on about this water pump and that orchard
and I just listened and wondered what lay ahead.
We came to a turnoff with an archway made of three large logs—one
standing on each side of the road and one laid across the top. The words
GOLDEN PINE RANCH were carved into the crossbeam. A few of the other
cars were already there.
“This is it!” Mary said excitedly. She climbed from her seat and ran over to
the padlocked gate.
Beyond the gate, I couldn’t see much more than tall green and yellow grass,
sloping upward until the crest of the hill got obscured by forest: tall, straight
white firs, short and stubby western junipers, and crooked and droopy gray
pines. It reminded me of my time with the Forest Service.
Mary unlocked the gate and swung it open. I drove her Buick through after
everyone else had gone in; then she closed the gate and put the lock back in
place and mashed it closed with the butt of her hand.
“The house is out of sight of the road,” she said, getting in the passenger seat, “or else I’d worry about bringing so many cars in here. The neighbors aren’t close, but they all drive this road.”

We drove over a ridge, the road taking a gentle turn around a cluster of trees. “Those are some of the tallest gray pines I’ve ever seen,” I said. Mary smiled wistfully. “I don’t know much about them, but they have huge pinecones. We used to collect them when I was a kid.”

The ranch house was everything I was expecting: a large, gabled house with a wraparound porch. The siding was planks of red cedar, and the railings and window casements were painted white. There was plenty of space in front to park all the cars, and I was the last one to pull into a parking spot.

Everyone got out and stretched. One of the guys—Bruce, maybe 25, his muscled arms covered in tattoos and a well-trimmed goatee on his chin—called out for a beer, and people began unloading their cars. Mary led me to the front door and unlocked it. “This is where you grew up?” “Yep,” she said. “Until I was twelve.” “Cool place.”

The first floor was almost entirely open, with huge tree-trunk posts holding up the floor above. There was a kitchen to the left, and a massive dining table. It almost fit all of us—there were 18 chairs.

John came in from behind us. “Who wants to go shooting?” he asked. I’d only fired a gun once—people as low on the totem pole as I had been in the Forest Service only carried pepper spray for dealing with rabid raccoons. Game wardens and the occasional park ranger had pistols. The only thing I’d ever shot before was a .22 rifle at Boy Scout camp. Even there, we only got five bullets. Most of that merit badge was about gun safety and maintenance. “Come here, Mike,” Mary said, and the three of us walked into a dark room. She opened the blinds, and the light revealed a large gun safe in the corner of the bedroom. “This is my parents’ room,” she said, walking to the safe and bending down to turn the combination lock. She turned the dial one way, then the other, and back, and the safe opened silently to reveal eight guns. “Can you handle a little kick?” John asked me. “I guess.” This all seemed a little off. “You guys like to shoot guns a lot?”
John laughed.
“You’ll get the hang of it. Great stress reducer. Let’s take the M14. And the 30.06,” John said, pulling the rifles out of the safe.
Mary took one for herself that John referred to as a Winchester 94. “I got this when I turned ten,” she said.

Thirty minutes later I was at the gun range. We’d gone up a canyon a short way to a spot where the winding dirt road spread out into a wide meadow. There were six of us—John, Mary, me, and three of the people I hadn’t met before today: Molly, a tall, redheaded Berkeley student with an English accent; Larry, a twentysomething full-time bass player for a record studio; and Walter, an unkempt, thick-bearded man who rarely talked, and who had been at John’s side since we’d arrived at the ranch. I couldn’t guess his age—his beard covered so much of his face. But almost everyone in this group was pretty young in general, so I assumed he was maybe somewhere in his thirties.

The gun range was big, with trees marked by orange spray paint that designated the distance—50 to 500 yards.
Walter set up the targets: bottles on fence posts, paper bull’s-eyes stapled to trees, and beer cans placed on fallen logs.
“This is a good gun,” John said to Mary as he inspected the M14. “This is the civilian version of the gun I used in Vietnam. Big bullets. The new M16s are a mess. Jam like crazy, and not as much stopping power. I knew guys who gave up on their guns and used Soviet AK-47s that they took from dead VC.”
He sounded so cool, like a badass. I bet John had amazing stories from the war—I hoped he’d tell them at some point this weekend.
Walter came back from the range, and John handed the M14 to me. “You know how to shoot?”
“More or less.” This gun weighed a ton, and I found it hard to sight the targets. This was nothing like the .22 I’d shot as a kid.
“Pick an easy target, one at fifty yards,” John said. “Now, get down on one knee—sit on the side or heel of your right foot. No, don’t rest your elbow on your knee—just get the elbow as low as you can while aiming. You still want that arm to take the full weight of the gun. It feels a little uncomfortable at first, but it gives you better balance—the recoil’s not as bad.”
I did what he said, folding my right leg under my body. It was weird to be holding such a big gun, but part of me felt like maybe I looked as cool as
John.

“Okay, good, now bring the gun up to your face, and press your face into the stock—yeah, like that. Now put your finger on the trigger. Don’t pull on it—that will pull the gun away from your target. So just press the trigger. And do it gently: press until you feel it start to resist, and when you fire, well . . . how to describe it? Surprise yourself with the shot. Don’t anticipate it and tense up—if you do that, when you press the trigger, you’ll flinch and miss. All right, now fire when ready.”

I lined up my sights on a beer bottle and, following John’s advice, I pressed down on the trigger.

The gun jumped, kicking back into my arm more than I expected. And, when I looked down the field, I could see the Budweiser still sitting there. John grinned at me. “A little bit of a jolt, right? Try it again.”

I obeyed his guidelines and finally hit it on my third shot, the glass bottle shattering. He clapped and laughed, and set down two boxes of ammunition on the rock in front of me. “Knock yourself out.” With that, he walked away and began shooting with his own rifle. Mary was shooting too—her gun had a scope, and she was firing at the far targets. I stood and watched her for a minute, just taking it all in. I knew I was staring, but she was the best shot I’d ever seen. That wasn’t saying much, though—this was all new to me.

Over the next hour, I got better and better at hitting the short-distance targets, and moved on to the long ones, which I missed frequently. We’d run out of cans and bottles by then, so we began aiming at whatever was left—pinecones, stumps, and the orange spray-painted markings on trees. By the time I’d spent all my ammunition, my arms and shoulder ached as if I’d been in a fight. I’d been part of a boxing league when I was a sophomore and junior—it was the one thing my dad had supported me in. Shooting through two boxes of M14 ammo made me feel like I was back in the ring.

When the sun started to set, we headed back to the ranch house. We had a big dinner of steaks and potatoes that Bruce had cooked while we were shooting. Everyone talked and laughed. It felt the way big family dinners are supposed to feel—the way I’d always wanted to feel with my own family. After dinner, we all gathered around a campfire out behind the house, near the banks of a stream. There were logs in place for sitting, and I took a seat next to Tommy. I would have sat by Mary, but I was feeling like I’d been with her all day, and I didn’t want to come on too strong.
“All right, guys,” John said as we were all sitting. “Let’s get this going. You’ve all been working for a month, since the last time we met here, so let’s hear what you’ve found.” He turned to me. “Mike, I know you’re new to the group and don’t really know much about us yet, or what we do. Just watch and listen for now, okay?” What do we do? I nodded—what else could I do? Everyone had turned to look at me, and it was like I forgot how to talk for a second. “So,” John said. “Let’s hear it.” Tommy raised his hand. “I’ve been studying the pyramids at Giza. Found a lot of really weird things. Things that don’t seem to have a ready explanation.”

John pointed at him and said, “Go for it.”

“First, you all know what pi is—the mathematical constant that is the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter? People have known about the number for a long time, but there are weird places it shows up. For example, the Great Pyramid: if you take the perimeter of the pyramid and divide it by twice its height, you get pi. Why is that?

“And another thing,” he continued. “The pyramid, like most monumental architecture built in ancient times, was built perfectly north and south, east and west. But the mind-blowing thing is that it wasn’t built using a compass. I mean, the first compasses didn’t show up until two thousand years later anyway, but even so, the pyramid doesn’t point to magnetic north, like it would if they used a compass. It points to true north. How is that even possible?”

What the hell were these guys talking about? Was this some kind of study group? With the Forest Service I’d never witnessed anyone who was camping, fishing, and target shooting who then met around the fire to talk about ancient archaeology.

Barbara, a pretty girl about the age of Kat—22 or so—with a round face and dimples, spoke. “I’ve been reading about the Aztecs, and they have this weird connection to the pyramids in Egypt. First, at Teotihuacan, there’s the Pyramid of the Sun, and its base is almost identical to the main pyramid at Giza. I mean, within inches. It’s crazy. And then there is the Temple of Quetzalcoatl and the Pyramid of the Moon. And those three line up almost perfectly with the three pyramids in Egypt. It’s uncanny. How would two cultures, separated by the Atlantic Ocean and three thousand years, have any knowledge of each other?”
“Well, I’ve been looking into Atlantis,” Larry said, “and there’s—”
“Wait a minute,” I interrupted. “Stop.” I hadn’t meant to say anything out loud, but the words just came flying out. “What are we talking about? Ancient architecture? Why do you guys care about the circumference of ancient buildings? Is this a study group or something?”
Everyone was quiet, waiting for John to answer. Mary looked at me and gave me a sympathetic, almost pitying smile.
“Mike,” John finally said. “This is Endgame.”
“What the hell are you talking about?” The words came bursting out again. I hadn’t realized how nervous and tense I’d been getting until now. I’d thought the end of the world—I’d thought *Endgame*—was just a bunch of drunk talk. A few too many beers and talk of war turns to talk of the apocalypse. But this was getting way too real for me way too fast. I felt like I had stumbled into some weird cult.

John stared at me for several seconds. I had no idea what was going through his brain.

Mary stood up. “Can I take you for a walk?”

I looked from John to her, and then one time more.

“I think that’s a great idea,” John said. “But, Mike, I want to make it clear that you’re welcome back to the fire anytime you want so we can talk more about this.”

Mary took my hand, and we left the group and headed back into the house.

She led me by the hand out to the front porch, where there was a porch swing. She sat down.

“I thought we were going for a walk.”

“It was a very short walk. Now we can sit here and watch the stars. You don’t see skies like these anywhere near the city.”

I sat down, and her fingers intertwined with mine.

“Do you like the ranch?” she asked.

I paused. “Sure. It’s really nice.”

“Some people like it and some people don’t,” she said. “Larry back there hates that we come out here for retreats. He says all that we’re talking about could be done in someone’s living room, but I think Zero line is different from that.”

“Mary,” I said. “What is all this? I honestly don’t have any idea what I’m
“You’re sitting on the porch swing, talking to me.”

I held up my hand, our fingers still interlaced. “I don’t want to ask this, I really don’t, and I hope you won’t be offended.”

She smiled in the moonlight. “Go ahead.”

“Is this a cult?”

She laughed softly.

“No,” she said. “It’s not a cult. Not exactly.”

I looked down at our hands. “I feel like there are a lot of things I should ask you next, but there’s only one thing on my mind right now.”

“What, Mike?”

“Are you pretending to like me so that I’ll join this group?”

She laughed, loud enough that the people around the campfire probably heard it.

“No,” she said, still giggling. “No. I’m not pretending. I like you.”

“You latched on to me as soon as I came into the bar.”

“Mike, don’t you know?” she said. “You’re kind of cute.”

I laughed quietly and shook my head. “I’m cute?”

Her smile widened. “Yes.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on here. I don’t understand what Endgame is about. I don’t know why we’re talking about the end of the world. I don’t know why we’re talking about pyramids. When is someone going to be straight with me?”

“We are being straight with you,” Mary said, letting go of my hand and standing up. She walked to the porch’s guardrail and leaned out to look at the stars. “Here’s the thing that you need to understand. Endgame is crazy. I mean, really, really insane. It’s hard to wrap your head around. I’ve been involved with Zero line for about a year, and it took a lot of convincing and an open mind, because it makes you really question the way that the world works. It makes you question the history books. It makes you question church. It makes you question science. But I’ve seen enough that I’m convinced.”

She turned around to face me. “And then, when I was convinced, I felt—I feel—the need to spread the news. It’s like, if you found out that a dam was going to burst, what would you do? Would you just run away?”

She paused, and I thought that she was thinking, but after a minute I realized
that she was waiting for me to respond.
“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t run away. I’d warn everyone I could.”
“Exactly,” she said.
“So explain it to me.”
“Let’s go back to the others,” Mary said. “But I want you to know this: I haven’t told everyone else. I haven’t told my parents. I haven’t told my sisters, or Bonnie, or any of my family. They wouldn’t get it. I love them, but they wouldn’t get it. They are too closed-minded.”
“But you told me.”
“Yeah. I hope you know what that means. I haven’t recruited anyone to the ZL. But there’s something about you—I just wanted to tell you so bad. You have the right mind. I knew from the first moment we talked and you told me how important Berkeley was to you. I remember—and this is stupid, but just listen—Bonnie told me once about why she married my brother Hod. She said she was eating Thanksgiving dinner. They’d only started dating a few weeks before. But at dinner she had a butterflake roll. And as she was eating it, she thought, ‘This is delicious. I wish Hod was here to have one.’ She said that was the first time that she really knew they had a connection—because she realized how much she liked him. That’s kind of how I feel about this. We’re still going to tell the world that the dam is breaking—and I’m totally mixing my metaphors here—but you’re the one I wanted to share the butterflake roll with.” She put her hands to the sides of her face. “Am I making any sense at all?”
“No,” I said. Mary looked at me, and suddenly we were both laughing.
“I know I sound crazy, Mike,” she said. “But will you just do one thing for me? Will you trust me? Just keep an open mind and hear what we have to say.”
I looked at Mary, and I couldn’t help smiling. I knew then that if I was going to do anything important in my life, she’d be the one I’d want to share my butterflake roll with too.
“What the hell,” I said. “I’m in. I want to know everything.”
She smiled wide. “Really?”
“Really.” I took her hand. “Here goes nothing!”
And then she kissed me.

We were back at the campfire. I sat on a log, my back to the house, with
Mary by my side.

John was sitting on a stump, using a stick to prod at the coals. It was after 10 o’clock now and the sky was a deep midnight blue.

“So, you’re ready to learn about Endgame?” John asked.

“I guess,” I said. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

John nodded. “Mary has vouched for you. So has Tommy. They’ve only known you for a couple of days, but if they already feel this strongly about you, I trust you too.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Bruce, the big guy with the tattooed arms, spoke up. “How do we know you’re not a narc?”

“I’m not,” I said.

“We’re not doing anything illegal anyway, Bruce,” said Julia pointedly.

“No,” John said. “We’re not.” He was looking at me in a way that made me feel like he was looking directly into my soul. “Where to start?”

“Start with Walter,” Mary said.

“Sounds good,” John said. “Walter?”

Walter leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees as he spoke. “I joined the army. I wasn’t drafted, not like John. I wanted to be a Green Beret—the best of the best. When I got to ’Nam I was assigned to an operational detachment that was right up around the demilitarized zone, and we’d work back and forth across the line, trying to disrupt the NVA’s supply runs on the Ho Chi Min Trail. We would go on missions for one or two weeks at a time, living with only what we had in our packs. And we chalked up the kills. We were brutal. We captured one soldier who told us we were known as the ‘ghosts of the jungle.’”

I looked at Mary, who was listening intently to Walter, and wondered what was going on in her head. She had to be thinking of her brother Hod in Vietnam. Back at the bar, she’d said that his letters were spotty. Maybe he was out on secret raids like this.

John spoke. “I was just a drafted grunt, but I applied and made it through Green Beret training. I managed to get promoted to sergeant because everyone else outranking me kept dying. I got assigned to Walter’s unit.”

It was hard to think of John as a soldier, let alone a sergeant. Walter looked the part of a Green Beret vet, but I just couldn’t imagine John. He was too . . . happy? No, that wasn’t it. He just wasn’t worn down like vets usually were.
“There’s no glamorizing war,” Walter said. “This is no John Wayne, World War Two movie war. It’s gruesome. Inhumane. Numbing. You stop seeing people as people. They’re just targets. They’re just obstacles in the road. They’re not even things. They’re nothing. And we killed and killed until we found it funny, until one of our own men accidentally planted a claymore backward and blew himself up and we laughed and laughed because there was no other option. We were past being sad. We just couldn’t feel sad anymore. We couldn’t feel anything anymore. We’d seen so many Charlies blown to pieces, or cut in half by our machine guns, or hit in the head by our sniper rifles, that the only feeling we had anymore was to laugh, like we were shooting ducks at a carnival.

“And then, seven months ago, some son of a bitch at some airfield decided to bomb our position. Not their fault, of course—no one knew where we were. But they wiped us out. The only three left were me, John, and the captain, and the captain had lost both his feet and his right arm. We patched him up as best we could, and then we promised him we’d sit with him until he died. It didn’t take long.”

John spoke. “Walter made an offer to me. He said that if I followed him, obeyed his orders, we could get out of this damned war. You see, he wasn’t just an average, ordinary Green Beret. He’s had special training. He’s Cahokian. It’s his line—an ancient tribe that a huge percent of North America’s population sprang from. Some of the people around this fire are probably Cahokian.”

“It’s hard to tell for sure,” Walter said, “but Cahokians are an ancient people here in America. The Mound Builders. We come from the center of the US, around Missouri.”

John stepped in, barely able to contain his excitement. You could tell this was something he loved talking about. “I want you to imagine all the way back to the beginnings of civilization on Earth. There were these twelve tribes.”

Walter recited the names. “Cahokian, Minoan, Mu, Koori, La Tène, Donghu, Olmec, Shang, Harappan, Sumerian, Nabataean, Aksumite.”

John continued. “It’s the whole world. Cahokians are the ancestors of the Native Americans—Tommy is Hopi, so he’s of Cahokian descent. Harappans are India, central Asia. The Sumerians and Nabataeans are the Middle Easterners: Egyptians, Palestinians, Persians, Arabs—Bakr is Sumerian.”

Bakr—a black-haired man who was whittling with a short, curved blade—
nodded his head.
“Minoans are the Greeks, Romans. Anyone with Italian blood probably
descends from the Minoan line. Mike Stavros, maybe you? Aksumite is
African—Phyllis, Tyson, Jim, and Julia descend from the Aksumites.
Donghu is Mongolian. Shang is Chinese—Lee and Lin are both descendants
of the Shang line. Mu is Japanese. La Tène accounts for a large part of
Europe, Switzerland, France, Spain, Germany, England, Ireland, Scotland,
Wales. Mary, Molly, and Bruce are all from the La Tène line. Olmecs are
from Central America, the ancestors of the Mayans, the Aztecs. And lastly,
Koori are the ancestors of most modern Australians.”
John turned to me. “Mike, does all of this make sense so far?”
What they were saying made sense. But why they cared didn’t. “Sure,” I said.
“I didn’t know that this was a genealogy club. But the idea that we all came
from twelve groups of common ancestors—I can see that.”
Walter spoke. His voice was hard and curt. “The point is, we all fall
somewhere on one of these bloodlines. It isn’t as clean as we just described,
but that gives the necessary background. Make no mistake, though: Zero line
is not a genealogy club. When Endgame comes, there will be a war between
the twelve lines. Whoever wins, wins the right to survive and have their line
carry on. Everyone else perishes in the end of the world. All of us here today
in the Zero line want to stop Endgame from happening. So we’ve turned our
backs on our own lines and formed a new one.
“There is a secret council of the Cahokians that survives. I used to be their
trainer, teaching the best and brightest young Cahokians to be Players and
win Endgame. I joined the Green Berets with one purpose: to hone my skills
in wilderness survival, to be a master of the art.”
“And he’s damn good,” John said. “When we were bombed and our unit was
almost wiped out, we were on the North Vietnamese side of the border, with
no communications and few provisions. So instead of going south to the
American side, we went north to the Chinese side. Walter led me through the
wilderness of Vietnam and China. We eventually caught a boat to Hong
Kong, and he used his contacts to get us home.
“Mike.” John looked right at me. “Walter was only one of dozens of trainers
to the Cahokian Player. He was the master of wilderness survival, but there
was someone for hand-to-hand combat, for marksmanship, for knife fighting,
for acrobatics, for lock picking, for bomb making—it just goes on and on.
This Player is supposed to be the best of the best. The best on earth. One Player from each of the twelve lines is chosen to compete in Endgame.” I stared back at John, and then at the fire. They were quiet—everyone was. “But how do they play?” I asked.

“There are three keys, hidden across the globe. The first Player to obtain all three keys—and be the last Player standing—wins.”

“What do you mean, keys? And who organizes all of this? Who is hiding the keys?” I asked.

“That’s a big question—” John started to say, but was cut off by Walter. “Aliens. The Sky Gods. The Makers. The Annunaki. They have many names.”

I laughed uncomfortably. Walter couldn’t be serious. This was all a ghost story around the campfire. “Bullshit. This whole story is shit from start to finish. You had me there for a bit. But really, what are we going to do now? Go snipe hunting? Search for Bigfoot?”

But no one else in the circle was laughing. Just me.


“Their own entertainment,” Walter said. “It started with early man, with the aliens hunting us for sport. When things grew dull, they made us smarter, better competitors. And on and on until here we are. Killing us is their ultimate game. But we still have to try to win.”

I still laughed, but no one else made a sound.

I turned to Mary. “Come on. Tell me. What is this really all about?”

She shook her head and then looked into my eyes. “They’re telling the truth. Remember, Mike—trust me. Listen and keep an open mind.”

“There are three ways this can go,” Walter said. “The first is that we, Zero line, do nothing. The Players aren’t called to Play the game, and we all live out our lives just fine until we die of old age or heart attacks or car accidents. The second is that the Calling does happen, and we don’t do anything. One of the Players kills all the others and solves the puzzle, and everyone on Earth—everyone not of their bloodline—dies. I don’t know how it will happen: disease, earthquake, alien invasion. But it will be something big and something bad.

“The third way is the whole reason we’re meeting: If the Players can’t Play, then no one will win Endgame. If no one wins Endgame, there’s no end of the world. So if we can stop the Players from Playing, then the game will
end. And we’ll save humanity.”
The group was quiet, watching my face, waiting to see how I would react.
“So do you have . . . um . . . proof?” I asked.
Mary answered. “We have Walter. He knows this inside out.”
“No offense,” I said, looking at Walter. “But what if I don’t believe you?”
“You don’t have to believe me,” Walter said. “I don’t care if you do. I know it’s true. I’ve lived it since I was born, part of my Cahokian line. If you want something tangible, I have ancient texts that I found by tracing leads across the country. They lay out the truths of Endgame.”
“Let me see those.”
“In a moment. First, I will prove to you that I am a Cahokian.”
He unbuttoned his shirt. I glanced at Mary. She nodded at me and smiled reassuringly.
He pulled off his shirt and turned his back to us. There was a tattoo that twisted back and forth on his back until it reached his neck, where a snakelike mouth stretched to swallow a large oval. In that oval there was a large scar—an X.
“It’s the Serpent Mound in Ohio,” he said. “It represents my culture and my line.”
“That’s a cattle brand,” Mary said. “The X.”
“That’s my punishment for questioning Endgame. I returned from the war, searched for the papers, and when I found them and tried to discuss them with the line’s leaders, I was branded a traitor and kicked out. Excommunicated from my family, my line.”
He pulled the shirt back on, only buttoning a few of the buttons before pulling two folded pieces of paper from his pocket. They looked tattered and worn. He read from the first.

This is the lie, the one that has fueled your life and the lives of all who have come [unreadable] before you. I have risked everything to remove the veil of mystery that shrouds the Annunaki, to show [unreadable] It will all be for nothing [unreadable] understand. The Mu had a choice. You have a choice.
To Play the game is to lose the game; success, survival, freedom can only come . . .
Prove to the Annunaki that you are not mindless animals, that you can
think [unreadable] we, all of us, deserve a chance to live.
Choose to question what you have been taught.
Choose to be free, that we might all be free.
Choose not to Play.

Everyone was quiet. Some nodded. Some looked up at the sky. Some turned toward me, as if my reaction was important to them. I just shrugged. Phyllis broke the silence. “I’ve researched the Annunaki. They were the gods in Mesopotamia. Kinda like the Titans in Greek legends—they were there before the gods. They even made the other gods. I found them in the Epic of Gilgamesh. They created something called Esagila—this crazy temple to the protector god. Standard kinds of stuff from old legends. But if we accept that they were the Makers, aliens—not myths, not real gods—then it’s easy to cast them as aliens who helped start the human race.”

I looked at her for a moment and then stared into the depths of the fire, where the coals were glowing white and flaking apart like little bits of paper in the wind. “So is that what you’re saying?” I asked no one in particular. “You’re saying that aliens started the human race?”

“Look,” Mary said, turning to face me. She touched her finger to my chin and made me look back at her. “We’ve all been brought into this. Every one of us has had the same doubts that you do, because—I mean, aliens, right? That’s crazy stuff. But is it really crazy?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

John laughed, but Mary reached out and grabbed my shoulders. “We know the universe is unimaginably huge. Our galaxy has a hundred billion stars. And there are a hundred billion galaxies in the universe. Isn’t it the height of arrogance to say that we’re the only planet with people on it? I don’t care if you’re religious or not. It doesn’t matter. I was raised Catholic and still go to mass every week. But we’re talking about science here, not religion, not myth. I doubted like you. But I find it easier now to say that aliens are out there than to say they’re not. With that many solar systems, there’s got to be something out there—”

I cut her off. “I’m honestly not stumbling over the existence of aliens. Sure. They exist somewhere. That’s logical. What I’m fighting against is the idea that the entirety of human experience is one big game.”

John stood up, looking at me but speaking loud enough for everyone to hear.
He grinned. “Would you like to meet someone else caught up in this spider web?”

There was an audible gasp around the campfire. Mary swung around to face him. “Who?” Then she looked at Walter. “Another Cahokian?” John answered. “Not Cahokian. La Tène. She actually found Walter. Well, they found each other. She doesn’t want to be a part of that world anymore. She was a Player until a couple years ago—” He looked at me. “All players have to be twenty or younger.”

“How did she find you?” Bruce asked, worry on his face.

“That, I don’t know,” John said.

Walter shook his head and looked at Bruce. “You have to understand, these people are experts at everything. I was one of dozens of trainers. The Players are constantly being tutored: practicing martial arts, boxing, swimming, rock climbing. They know how to tail someone—on the street or in a car. They know how to disappear. And they can find anyone. It’s one of the biggest things we stressed during training, because they have to kill all the other Players, and that means they have to hunt them down. Our contact lived that life.”

“So, when do we meet her?” asked Bruce.

John smiled. “What are you doing next weekend?”
“This is huge,” I said to Tommy as we made our way through the crowd on Sproul Plaza, back in Berkeley. He looked back at me with a grin. “You need to come to more protests. This is small, maybe five or six hundred.”

“Five hundred is small?”

We’d been back from the ranch for five days. It was Thursday, and we knew that we’d be meeting the La Tène Player tomorrow. Zero line was electric—like a kid counting down the days until Christmas morning. But all we could do was wait.

“I finished that book this morning,” I said. “The one by the German guy.”

“That book is something like eight hundred pages,” he said with a laugh. “I take it to work with me. I figure, if one of the other janitors can spend all day in the stairwell smoking grass, I can sit in a room and read.”

“You’re going to get fired.”

“Come on, it doesn’t take long to mop some floors. Have you read that book, cover to cover?”

“No,” Tommy said, peering over heads, looking for the rest of the group. “I’ve barely cracked the spine.”

“Have you heard of the Piri Reis map?”

“No.”

“Okay, get this. There’s a map that was drawn in, like, 1500 AD. So, not long after Columbus. It shows the Atlantic Ocean, and everything that touches it: Europe, Africa, North America, South America, and, the crazy one, Antarctica. The map makes some mistakes, but it shows the exact coastline of Antarctica. The Air Force was shown the map and they confirmed the accuracy of the map’s representation of the coast.”

“So what?” he said, and looked at me with a grin.
“Back then, big maps were compiled from older maps, so this exploration of the Antarctic must have been done before 1500—or whatever that date was. 1515, maybe. But the first known exploration of Antarctica was in the seventeen hundreds.”

“And why do we care about Antarctica?” He was still smiling, as if he suspected the answer.

“Because that shoreline has been under a mile of ice for six thousand years.”

“And what does that tell us?” Tommy said.

“I have no idea,” I said, laughing.

“What it means is that you’re joining Zero line. I was having my doubts about you, Mike. Didn’t know if you could open your mind to it. But you’re coming along, bud. You’ve found evidence of some kind of ancient knowledge that must have been delivered by advanced technology. It’s just another sign. Let’s get up closer to the front. I don’t even know what we’re protesting.”

I nodded and followed him through the crowd until he spotted Jim over on the far side.

I still had reservations. Big reservations. At this point, a lot of arguments had been made, but all of it hinged on whether I could trust Walter. And he wasn’t the easiest person to get to know. He was terse and angry, and he’d spent the entire time at the ranch with a bottle in his hand.

I didn’t trust people who drank like that.

That said, I liked Mary, and I felt like I could trust her. She was so smart, so down-to-earth. And it really did seem like she trusted Walter. Maybe I couldn’t dig up enough belief to trust Walter, but maybe I could put that trust in Mary.

The girl with the megaphone was yelling the same antiwar rhetoric that I’d heard for as long as I’d been paying attention. I was 19, and the Vietnam War had been going on since I was a kid. I hardly remembered a world without it. It was on the news every night, as much a standard as the weather report or the baseball scores.

And so were the protests. I’d been hearing about them forever, it seemed. At times I wondered if America was going to survive this whole thing. There was a war going on far away, and a war going on at home too.

Mary found us at the side of the plaza, against the wall of a building.

“This is amazing,” she said, slipping her arm through mine. Her lips almost
touched my ear so I could hear her over the noise.
I glanced over my shoulder and saw that the lower part of Sproul Plaza was filling up.
“What makes you trust Walter?” I shouted. I hadn’t gotten to see Mary at all this week, and I still felt like we had so much to talk about from the previous weekend.
Mary looked thoughtful. She leaned in and spoke into my ear. “I believe what he has to say. I believe his story, and his mission.”
“But do you trust him?” Right now, my trust in the group rested firmly on the shoulders of Mary and Tommy. If they could trust, I could trust.
“With my life.” She pulled back, and looked at me. “He’s going to officially ask you to join Zero line, Mike.”
I took a deep breath. “Whoa. Okay. So, was last weekend some kind of test? Was it like a tryout to see if I should join your group?”
Mary smiled, sheepish. “Kind of. Look, we have to cover our bases. There have been people who we’ve invited in who have refused. They think we’re crazy. One of them called the police on us—they accused us of being another Manson Family. You’re different. You’ve been to the ranch; the others never came. You met everybody. I’ll be honest: there were a handful of people who thought that you shouldn’t have come up there. But John and I both trusted you.”
“So,” I asked jokingly, “will they kill me if I say no? Do I know too much?”
But Mary wasn’t smiling anymore. “Don’t even kid about that. Of course that won’t happen, but this is serious. I mean, you know—it’s the end of the world. We’re not joking about this, and I would really appreciate it if you didn’t either.”
I glanced around the crowd and saw dozens of police officers standing around the protestors, watching everything. I didn’t know why, but I felt uncomfortable. We weren’t doing anything but listening. We weren’t going to get into trouble. Still, just by talking about Zero line, I felt like we were involved in something wrong. I felt like they were watching me. “Are you angry?” the woman said into the bullhorn.
The crowd shouted back “Yes!”
Mary shouted too, but I could tell she was unhappy for a different reason. She’s upset because I still don’t believe her, I realized.
“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” the woman with the megaphone shouted.
“We’re not alone. Today, fifteen thousand people marched on Washington to protest the mining of Vietnam’s waters. That’s what we have to remember. We are not alone. And in the coming months and years, we’ll need to remember it even more: we are one people, one civilization, one humanity. It’s not us versus Charlie. It’s not West versus East. It’s not United States versus USSR. It’s one Earth, and we’re fighting for a good cause.”

The crowd cheered. I saw John get up onstage and start making his way toward the speakers. Mary saw him too.

“Damn it, John. Let’s get up there,” Mary said. “We need to get him off the stage. We’re going to meet the La Tène girl tomorrow. We can’t screw this up. He can’t get arrested. He’s AWOL.”

I looked over at Mary, wondering what I was getting myself into. But I followed. I couldn’t resist the pull she had on me. She held my hand and dragged me through the crowd, up to the stairs.

From there we could see an entirely new column of protestors, off to the north of the stage—another thousand between Sproul Hall and the Student Center.

Someone else took the megaphone, but the police were starting to move in toward us.

The new guy with the megaphone saw the police and immediately changed the subject. “You know what? There’s nothing we can do about Haiphong right now. But I think we can tear down a fence. How many times do we have to mourn our compatriots? How many times do we need to tear down those fences? Everybody to People’s Park!”

Mary and I dashed up the steps. John was about to take the microphone, but we pulled him away just in time. “John, what the hell are you doing? You can’t get on that mic! We’ve got to get out of here. We can’t screw up before tomorrow. What about the La Tène girl? Zero line is on the verge of something big. Things are happening. You’re jeopardizing everything we’ve worked for.” One of the cops was coming up toward us, his nightstick out.

There were six of us on the upper plaza—John, Mary and me, and the three protest leaders who’d been speaking before we got there.

John shook his head. “This time will be different. There aren’t many cops. This won’t affect tomorrow.” He pointed around. Everyone was moving toward us.

“John,” Mary said. “Mike and I can get arrested and spend the night in jail.
But if you get caught, you’re going to be in real trouble. Without you, Zero line won’t have a leader. You’re going to blow our whole mission for nothing!”
John started walking—we were at the head of the crowd, the leaders in front of the mass of people. “You’re right, Mary. You’re right. Let’s get out of here.”

I could hear the sirens before we got to the park, but that didn’t matter. There were a thousand of us, at least, and there was nowhere for us to go. There were police to our left and right, and behind us was the wave of people. Where the campus sidewalk ended and turned into Bancroft Way, there were only six police cars with flashing lights. People poured into the street to join us.
Mary and I held hands as we went, trying to push back into the crowd, but there was no stopping it: the people behind us were being pushed by the people behind them, and so on all the way back. John tried to weave his way through to get out of the front lines, but it wasn’t working. People kept trying to join arms in a line across the front of the crowd. We were at the tip of the spear, the very front of a massive tidal wave of hundreds of people.
This reminded me of all the protests I’d seen on TV, from draft-card burnings in Boston to the Days of Rage riots to the Kent State shootings. People were killed—students, police, bystanders. But here there were only a couple dozen cops against a thousand of us; they had to retreat.
And I realized for the first time that this was real life, and that Mary was standing next to me, holding my hand. What would I do if this turned violent? And if I was this nervous about a protest, how would I be able to handle something like Endgame?
We wanted to move back through the crowd, away from the cops, but the mass of people was as reasonable as an avalanche.
*It won’t turn violent,* I told myself. There were too few cops. They’d retreat. And if they had shotguns again? I’d defend Mary. I’d defend John. I could hold my own in a fight, if it came to that.
“We’re not here for a fight!” John shouted at the cops, but his voice was drowned out in a sea of voices. He took off his hat and turned in a circle.
“We’re unarmed. This is a peaceful protest!”
The mob pushed, and Mary and I stumbled a step forward. The whole front
line did. Everyone was trying to stop as we faced the roadblock of cop cars, but there were too many people pushing from behind.

One of the officers spoke into a handset on a long cord that stretched into his car window. “We—” EEEEEEE! There was an enormous squawk from the speaker, and the crowd erupted in shouts and laughter. “We order you to disperse! Return to your homes.”

Mary and I got pushed forward again. We were no more than 15 feet from the officers.

“Shit,” she said, starting to panic. “Push back, Mike. We can’t get pushed to the front. Hang on!”

John gestured with one hand to get the cops’ attention. “Just let us pass. There’s no stopping these guys.”

Another shove forward, but I grabbed Mary’s hand tighter and held my ground. I looked behind us and all I could see was an endless sea of people—most of them still marching toward us—packing harder into the mob.

John didn’t have much room now between the crowd and the police.

“Get back,” the officer’s loudspeaker blared.

Another push. There was nowhere to go. John was almost face-to-face with the cop. He had his hands up. “I can’t get back! We don’t want to fight!”

But there was another surge forward—I almost fell to my knees, and Mary had to grab my arm to keep me on my feet.

“No!” Mary yelled. “This is so bad!”

The cop in front of us was getting scared. I could see it in his eyes. His hand went to his gun, but he didn’t draw.

Another officer shouted into his loudspeaker. “Disperse. We order you to disperse.” But nothing was stopping the wave. John was next to me, on my left, Mary was on my right, and all of us were pleading with the cop.

The frightened officer moved his hand to his nightstick and swung.

John ducked his head, but he wasn’t fast enough, and the stick cracked loudly across John’s scalp.

The cop raised the stick again to bring another blow down, but as the nightstick sliced through the air, instinct kicked into gear. I let go of Mary’s hand and dove into the fray.

The nightstick crashed into the back of John’s shoulder, and I tackled the cop, slamming him into his squad car. I didn’t wait to see how he would respond—I suddenly saw myself in all those Friday-night fights Dad and I used to
watch. A punch to the stomach and then an uppercut to the chin. He swung at me with the nightstick, but it was wild, blind, and I avoided it easily and threw a right hook. The cop dropped to the asphalt. And, just as I looked up, I saw a reporter on the other side of the car pointing a camera at us. I stared at him as the flash popped. “Damn it,” I said. The mob was splitting around us, some climbing over the car. I could chase the man down, steal his camera, break it, expose the film. But we were being passed by the mob now, as we crouched beside the cop car, and the photographer was lost in a sea of people. The cop in front of us was dazed, and John reached down to take the officer’s gun. “John!” Mary whisper-yelled. “Put it back! Are you crazy?” “I don’t want to be shot in the back,” John hissed, blood dripping down his face. He popped out the six rounds from the revolver and broke down the pistol, dropping the pieces to the ground. “Damn it, damn it, damn it. Shit shit shit.” I dropped back down by the car. “It’s nothing,” John said, a hand on his scalp. Blood trickled on his hand, face, and jacket. “No,” I said. “I think a reporter just got pictures of the whole thing, me punching the cop.” John pulled off his jacket and pressed it against his head. “Let’s go.” It took the mob nearly 10 minutes to thin out enough for us to head back, swimming against the current. “Mary, are you okay?” I shouted to be heard as the people poured past us toward the park. John started leading us down an alley, away from the park and the university. Mary nodded at me. “If the photographer got you, he got me too.” “Where’s your car?” I asked. “A couple blocks from here. We’ve got to get you to a hospital—” John interrupted. “You guys go ahead. I’ve got a place I can go.” While he talked, he kept his eyes on the street, back and forth. “You two have really proven yourselves today, you know? See you at the meeting tomorrow. We may need to move up our schedule, especially if that photo surfaces.” He took a few steps back, then stopped and smiled at me. “Mike,” he said. “There’s no way you can’t join us after this! You’re a part of it now! We all are!” He whooped and threw his fist into the air, then jogged across the busy road
and disappeared into the shadows of another alley. Mary laughed, watching him go.
“You can’t tell me this isn’t all exciting, Mike,” she said. “You wanted to be a part of something bigger. Well, this is it.”
I turned to her. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement; her eyes sparkled. So why did I feel dread creeping into my stomach? “What did he mean, we may need to move the schedule up?” I asked.
“Don’t worry about the schedule,” Mary said to me, and let out a long breath. “Everything will depend on the meeting with the La Tène Player.”

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s worry about that photo. If that’s in the paper, that’s it for me. I’ll be arrested. Assaulting a cop. That’s gotta be—what? Five years? Ten?”

“It’d be battery,” she said. “Not assault.”

“Why are you being so calm about this?” I said, almost shouting. “This is my life we’re talking about! I’m finally out of my dad’s house and out on my own! I can’t go to prison!”

“I’m not exactly happy about it,” she said. “But panicking isn’t going to help anything. I’m just trying to think. I may have been in that picture too, you know.”

“But you weren’t punching a cop.”

“We don’t know what that picture will be. Maybe it’s a picture of you hitting a cop, but maybe it was taken just before or just after. We don’t need to freak out yet. Who knows? Maybe the shot will be of the policeman attacking John.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just go back to my dorm and wait?”

She exhaled and folded her arms. “Yes. And if police come to see you, demand to see a lawyer.”

“I can’t afford a lawyer.”

“The court will appoint one for you. But it won’t come to that. You’re overreacting, Mike. Do you know how many marches and protests there have been in this city? About Nixon, Vietnam, freedom of speech, equal rights? People get arrested at every one, and they get a misdemeanor slap on the wrist and they have to pay five hundred dollars, or something like that, and they move on with their lives. No one’s sending you to jail.”
“Unless that picture comes out.”

“Unless that picture comes out,” she agreed. “But let’s cross that bridge when we get there. Listen: I work in a law office. On Monday I’ll ask them what we should do.”

“I don’t want you to get involved in this.”

She laughed. “Mike,” she said, “I’m more involved in this than you even know.” She ran her fingers through her long hair and leaned back against the brick wall of the alley. “Let’s go get ice cream.”

I snorted. “What?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Let’s go get ice cream. There’s a place right down the road.”

“Shouldn’t we be trying to get out of here?”

“Think about it. If that photo is blurry—and it might very well be, because everyone was jostling around—they may not know who exactly it was. So let’s go make an alibi. Act totally normal, like we’ve never been to a protest. We’ll act like it’s a date. Then when the police come looking for you, you can say, ‘No, I wasn’t there. I was at the Creamy Freeze with Mary Nesmith.’ And the employees there will back us up.”

I smiled, my first real smile since we’d gotten into the mob of people. I didn’t know how Mary was so calm under pressure—I wasn’t, that’s for sure.

“A date, huh?” I nudged her with my elbow.

She rolled her eyes. “I said we’ll act like it’s a date.”

“For now,” I said, grinning. “Okay, let’s do it.”

She reached out her hand, and I took it. Her fingers were cold as I interlaced mine with hers, and my heart began to race. As much as I wasn’t entirely sure of Zero line, I liked that I was doing stuff with her, that when we left the protest, she was going with me. We started walking—quickly so that we could be at the ice cream shop before anyone else from the march could get there.

“So you never answered me. What did John mean by moving the schedule up?” I asked.

“That is a question that is better answered by John,” she said.

“That’s evasive.”

“Not trying to be evasive,” she said. “You ever go to church?”

“What does that have to do with it?”
“Did you ever study the Bible?”
“I’ve listened to a lot of preachers. My mom is Baptist.”
“You know I still go to church,” she said. “Isaiah says that you learn ‘precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little.’ That’s the way that John teaches people. I’ve seen him bring several people into Zero line that way. He talks about one part of Endgame, then another, deeper part, and so on until . . .”
She didn’t finish, but she didn’t have to. *By that point they’re already too deep in it to leave.*
Part of me knew I should get out now. But there was a part of me too that had to see what would happen next.
“So,” I said, “he was talking about me? He’s moving up the schedule for how fast I’m going to learn.” Mary nodded. “How much more is there? I mean, what else could possibly be left to tell me? He’s already talked about how all of human existence is a big game run by aliens, and how twelve Players are supposedly competing to outsmart them and save their lines from the end of the world. There’s *more*?”
“A little more. But you’re learning fast; it’s great. I think tomorrow, when we meet with the La Tène Player, we’re going to hear most of what there is to know—probably a lot of stuff even *I* don’t know.”
Darkness was settling in as we crossed the street. A police car flipped its lights on and sped off in the direction of People’s Park.
“So, here’s a question,” I said. “If you believe those alien guys, why do you still go to church?”
“You really are Mr. Inquisitor, aren’t you?”
“I just punched a cop to protect John, who could be a cult leader for all I know.”
Mary’s face turned serious. “Zero line isn’t a cult.”
“It’s definitely not a book club.”
“Are those the only choices? Book club or cult? I believe that’s what’s called a false dichotomy.”
I smiled to relieve some of the tension that was building. “You Stanford kids with your big words.”
“Look. We’re not the Manson Family, but we’re not exactly the PTA either. And as long as we’re laying our cards on the table, John isn’t sleeping with any of us, and I haven’t seen anyone use anything stronger than marijuana.”
“Walter drinks a lot. I mean, a lot. I don’t like that.”
“I know,” she said. Walter drank even more than my dad, but he didn’t seem to have the angry streak in him. “I bet you would too, if you’d seen the kinds of things he has. It surprises me more that John doesn’t drink with him. They were there together. They both saw and did the same things. And about church, I go because I like it. I was raised going to church, and I feel like it’s a part of who I am. Is that good enough?”
“Sure.”
We turned a corner and could see the big sign of the Creamy Freeze. This was definitely the weirdest first-date conversation I’d ever had.
“Hey,” I said, taking her hand and swinging it. “How did you become a member of Zero line?”
“Kind of a boring story, really. Kat—you remember her? The nurse?”
I nodded. She was cute, but nowhere near as pretty as Mary. She was also older than me by three or four years.
“She works at a clinic near my dorm.” Mary raised her right arm and showed me a jagged scar on her arm, just below the elbow. I’d never noticed it before. “My second day at Stanford I fell down the stairs and caught it on a carpet nail. Not my proudest moment. Kat treated me, and we became friends. She’s the one who introduced me to John.”
I opened the door of the Creamy Freeze for her and then followed her in.
“I like to joke that they use me for my ranch. And the funny part is that it’s totally true. While Kat and I were talking, I found out she was camping a lot on land up by Susanville, and I told her my family had the ranch. Four days later, John and Kat showed up at my Stanford apartment and laid out the sales pitch. Nothing about the Zero line then, of course. They just wanted to do some fishing and shooting. I found out more and more as we went—like I told you, precept upon precept, line upon line. I’ve been with them ever since.”
We stepped up to the counter in an otherwise empty shop and ordered. She got a vanilla ice cream cone, which I told her was the most boring thing in the place. I got a banana split with a scoop each of Rocky Road and strawberry. We made sure to stand at the counter and talk happily with the teenaged scooper, trying to make a clear impression on her so that she could pick us out of a lineup.
It had been at least 25 minutes since we’d gotten away from the mob and
police. Probably more. But we acted as though we didn’t have a care in the world.

As we headed for a booth, I didn’t know what to think. I liked Mary, and she seemed to like me. But part of my brain kept telling me that this Zero line stuff was crazy and this Endgame story was bullshit. Yet each time I saw Mary, I couldn’t wait until the next time I could see her. I’d never felt this way after knowing someone for only a couple of days. It felt like much longer.

I’d never had a girlfriend before. I’d been to prom, but that was just a group of guys asking out a group of girls. I went out a few times with Camille Edwards because my friends goaded me into it more than because I liked her. We made out a bit, but that was it. And I mean, that was it. I, Michael Stavros, was a virgin. It was one of those things that I hoped Berkeley would solve for me. College would be a fresh start—no one from my high school was there. I was a new man; this was a new life. One that now included Mary. And Endgame.
CHAPTER SEVEN

It was on the front page.
When I woke up, the first thing I did was go to the mail room to check the
copy of the San Francisco Chronicle we got delivered each day. It was clean.
I felt light-headed with relief. There was a story on page three about the
march (they called it a riot), but no picture and no mention of me. One man,
Officer Scott Hoover, had suffered a dislocated jaw. But that was it, and I felt
like I was walking three feet off the ground. There was no picture, no names,
no ongoing investigation.
It wasn’t until I got to the dorm cafeteria, got my breakfast, and sat down at
the table that I saw a discarded copy of the Daily Californian, Berkeley’s
student paper. I came crashing back to Earth. My face was three inches tall,
completely clear and in focus. My fist looked like it had just connected with
the cop’s chin. It was a perfect picture. It looked as professional as if it had
been taken at a prizefight. My face, the cop’s face, and the top of John’s head
—he was looking down, and his face couldn’t be seen.
I surprised myself by not freaking out. I picked up the newspaper, took my
full tray of food to the dishwashers, and quietly left the building. By the time
I got to the bottom step I was sprinting, running as fast as I could from the
other students and desperately trying to avoid anyone. I had to get to my
dorm, to the phone. I had to talk to John. He could make this go away. I was
stepping in to save him—couldn’t he step in to save me? He knew the leaders
of the protest.
Something could be done. Someone could save me.
I got to my dorm and ran up the stairs, hoping Tommy would be in the room,
but he wasn’t. I darted into the bathroom and called his name. No answer. I
jogged down to the common room, but he wasn’t there either.
“Damn it,” I said, digging in my pocket for coins. I tried to compose myself
as I went down the hall to use the pay phone. Except I didn’t have any phone numbers. I had no way to reach Tommy, and no idea how to get in touch with John. I realized I didn’t even know his last name. There was no one to call. I walked back to my room, but before I went in, a thought struck me: if the campus police—or the city police—were looking for me, of course they would check my room.

But I’d only been in Berkeley for a little over a week, and I’d spent a whole weekend of that at Mary’s ranch. My boss never paid any attention to me when he was assigning tasks. But he did always have a copy of the newspaper open on the table in the supply room. He’d recognize me, sooner or later.

I looked down at the paper and began reading the story. My heart sank, and I thought I was going to be sick. I’d only just gotten to Berkeley and my time here was already over. What was I going to do? There was no caption under the photo, but now my face was all over campus.

I had money in my room. I had brought it all in cash, everything I’d saved for tuition. Yes, it was stupid of me, but I’d planned to open an account at a local bank once I got to Berkeley. I just hadn’t done it yet. The cops could be watching my room, but I had 3,000 dollars in there—everything that I’d saved from working for my dad and two summers with the Forest Service. I could go get it and some clothes, hide out in a hotel for a couple weeks, and grow a beard.

Shit. I needed help.

I cautiously walked back to my room, quietly inserted the key, and turned the lock. The door swung open.

It was still empty. I let out a long, slow breath.

I rushed to my desk and unlocked the drawers. In the back of one, behind a divider, was all my money—a thick stack, wrapped in two rubber bands. Eventually someone would search my room once they figured out who I was. I pulled my wallet from my back pocket and tried to fit in as many bills as I could. In between the folds of the wallet I found what I needed: a business card for the law firm of Goodman and Odenkirk. Mary’s job. It listed a phone number, even though it didn’t have her name—it just said Legal Assistant.

She could help me. She worked in a law firm, after all. At the very least, she’d be able to point to someone for me to talk to.

My wallet was bulging as I crammed it into my back pocket, and I put the
remainder of the cash into my front right pocket. There were neighborhoods in Los Angeles where I would never dare carry a wallet that was so obviously big, but Berkeley seemed safer. Or maybe I was just clueless. My hands were shaking, and I didn’t want to use the pay phone on this floor. I wanted to get out, away from here, away from any place where there was a copy of that newspaper. The police would have seen the photo by now. They’d be investigating the assault on the cop, and nothing that I did could change that, could throw them off the scent. The only thing I could wish for was that no one at the school would be able to identify me. But there were so many people that I’d interacted with: the admissions office, the cafeteria and dorm staff, my boss and the other janitors, local shop owners, and all the students who were hanging around campus over summer session. I left the dorm and headed off campus. It was too warm for a jacket and scarf to hide me, but I had a ball cap, which I pulled low over my eyes. I stopped at the closest phone booth—it was on the corner next to a gas station. I held the business card in front of me as I dialed the number. On the third ring, someone answered. “Mary Nesmith, please,” I said. “One moment.” I waited for what seemed like an eternity, but which was probably only 30 seconds. “This is Mary.” I recognized her voice. “Hey,” I said. “This is Mike.” There was a pause, and then her voice was much softer. “You can’t call me here. I’m not supposed to take any personal calls.” “You gave me your business card.” “I didn’t think you’d call.” “They got a picture of me, Mary. It’s all over campus, in every newspaper rack in every lobby.” “Oh my God. What are you going to do?” “I don’t know,” I said. “That’s why I called you. Yours was the only phone number I had.” There was a pause. “Am I in it too?” “No. Neither is John’s face.” “Can you talk to Tommy?”
“I don’t know where he is. Police are going to see this, Mary. They’re going to search my room.”

“Is there anything they’ll find?”

I thought of my meager belongings. Books, bedding, some clothes. No photos that might connect me to the one in the paper. “Nothing important.”

“Good.”

“Do you think Tommy will lie? Will he say that it’s a picture of me? I know they’ll question him.”

“Tommy’s . . . I don’t know what he’ll do. Do you have a lawyer?”

“Of course not, unless your firm wants to represent me.”

“We do divorces and bankruptcies. We’re not defense attorneys.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“Can you make it to the meeting today?”

“I don’t know where the Berkeley Rose Garden is,” I said.

“It’s less than a mile from campus,” she said. “Take Euclid and just walk north. You’ll find it.”

“Is there a pavilion or somewhere we’ll meet?”

“There’s a room. I’ll show you.”

“Okay.”

“You can call me again if you need to.”

“Thanks.”

I was about to end the call, but she said, “Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I hung up. I couldn’t go to work. I couldn’t hang around campus, or stay in my room. And I had almost seven hours before the meeting. I was going to need to find something to do all day. Instead of heading north, I walked west to the public library. It was close to campus, but there wouldn’t be any university newspapers in the foyer.

I went to the card catalog, looking for law books. I wanted to see what I was in for if I got caught. But after an hour and five books, I couldn’t find anything about sentencing recommendations for assaulting a policeman. One book, though, made it clear that there was a big difference between assaulting a regular person and assaulting a police officer. Assault was usually a misdemeanor, but if the injured party was injured—and a dislocated jaw
definitely counted—then it would be a felony charge. Worse, another book, which talked about the marches and protests of the sixties, said that riots were a whole other ball game. I could be charged with rioting, disorderly conduct, and criminal mischief. And the law said that it didn’t matter whether the rioters’ cause was just: attacking police was always assault, even if the protest was against something horrible.
I was screwed.
As the day wore on, I ran out of things to research, at least in regard to the law. But I didn’t have anywhere else to go. I found myself looking for other books. Books related to Endgame. There was nothing in the card catalog with that name except for a play by Samuel Beckett. I looked at it, and it had nothing to do with what John and Walter were talking about.
Then I remembered what Phyllis had said about the Annunaki, the aliens in Walter’s papers. There were a handful of results in the history section. The Annunaki were a group of gods in Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian. According to legend, they were the seven judges of hell. Was it possible that they were really aliens?
I looked at the time. The meeting was going to start in an hour.
I didn’t know what secrets were waiting for me. I was in a new city, at a new school, and I didn’t have many people I could really trust. I was in trouble, and I was alone. I needed to lie low, and maybe the Zero line could help me with that. At this point, I didn’t have anyone else.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Mary was waiting for me in her car when I got to the rose garden. She got out. She was wearing a printed black-and-white dress—she probably had just come from work—and she ran to me. She wasn’t smiling.

“I passed by an electronics store on my way here that was playing the evening news on the TVs in the window. I stopped to watch.” She threw her arms around me in a hug. “They talked about the march, and they showed the picture. They said the cop was still in the hospital—they’re saying you broke his jaw.”

“Shit.” I held her tightly.

She pulled back. “They’re going to come after you, Mike. Hard. That’s what one of the lawyers in my office said—and no, I didn’t tell him I was there or that I knew you.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked, my heart pounding. “I can’t go back home. I won’t.”

“John might know what to do. In the meantime, quit shaving. Maybe we can dye your hair.”

“I can’t go back to my dorm.”

“Definitely not. Let’s talk to John. He’ll know what to do.”

She hooked her arm with mine and started leading me into the rose garden. It looked like a Roman amphitheater: a large half circle, terraced several steps down to an epicenter, which led to a tunnel under the street. I would have found it beautiful if my world hadn’t been falling apart around me. I had been on the news. Everyone would have seen it. Now it wasn’t just a matter of hiding from the Berkeley campus. I had to hide from everyone in the city.

“It’s going to be okay,” Mary said. She probably could hear my heartbeat—it felt like it was thudding in my chest, pounding in my ears.

“How is this going to be okay? You just said your lawyer thinks I’m sunk.”
“That’s only if they can find you.”
“Where else can I go? Back to Pasadena? I’ve spent my whole life trying to get out of there.”
“You could get a job and an apartment.”
“Not anywhere around here. Besides, what about school? I’ve wanted to go to Berkeley forever. I’ve been saving money for years.”
“Well, there’s your answer. Lie low, get a place out of town, and wait for all of this to blow over. They’ll be looking for you now, but soon they’ll move on to something else. One cop’s broken jaw is not going to warrant an all-points bulletin.”
“Thanks, Mary, but that doesn’t change the fact that my time at Berkeley is over. There’s no way I can return to school. I can’t believe this is happening.”
“We don’t know if anyone has your name. Just stop going to work, lay low, and then go back in the fall when the new semester starts and you have a beard. You haven’t even started classes yet, no one will remember you. You’ll be fine.”
I nodded. It made sense. But it required that no one connect my face with my name, which still scared me.
We both went quiet as we reached the tunnel entrance. It was narrow and dim, a low, curved ceiling closing in on us. There was the silhouette of someone standing in the center holding a push broom. We approached him and he stopped sweeping.
“Is there a secret word?” I whispered to her.
“No. We just give him a ten.”
I dug into my pocket, but she was faster than me, and in a moment she slipped him the money. He opened a door and let us into a small, dimly lit room.
The room smelled of motor oil and grass clippings. It was an equipment room for the care of the rose garden and the park on the other side. There were two desks, each with a chair, and a beat-up sofa. About 20 people were already there. I recognized most from last weekend. Jim stood up from one of the desk chairs and offered the seat to Mary. She protested, but he insisted.
Tommy rushed over when he saw me. “Mike! I’ve been worried, man. I saw the paper this morning but I haven’t been to the room all day. I was hoping I’d see you here.”
John came over too. He shook my hand and then clapped me on the back. He
had a ball cap on, but I could see a gauze bandage peeking out under the brim. “First things first,” he said. “We know about the picture. And I want you to know that you have our complete loyalty. You’re one of us now, Mike. A part of Zero line, if you want to be.”
I shrugged, angry. “I don’t know what good I’ll be to you after this. I’ve got to get out of town. I’m screwed if they find me.”
“I know, Mike. It’s a bad spot. But you’ll be a lot of good to a lot of us. A lot of people in this room have stuff. You know that I’m AWOL, don’t you? Walter too.”
Eugene, a scrawny guy with a wispy beard, spoke up. “I was right there with you at the march yesterday. I saw—you were trying to help John. I’d have done the same thing if I’d been closer. And I’ve got a record.”
Mary leaned over and whispered to me. “Eugene robbed a couple banks.”
One of the older guys, Henry—maybe 30 years old—waved his hand. “I’ve got warrants. Three of them. Battery and possession.”
Bruce nodded. “I served sixty days for failure to appear.”
“See, Mike?” John said. “We get it. And we’re going to be watching out for you.”
I nodded. “Thanks, guys. Seriously—I don’t know what else I would do. I mean, I don’t know anybody else. You guys are my lifeline right now.”
“And we’ll protect you. Keep a roof over your head,” John said. “That’s a promise.”
He nodded at me, but then pointed at a girl I didn’t know. “We’ll come back to this,” John said. “But first, let me introduce you to our guest of honor. Agatha, a former Player from the La Tène line. She’s seen all of this lifestyle up close and personal.”
A pale-faced woman with reddish-blond hair stood up. I couldn’t believe it—she was so young! I was expecting a grizzled warrior, not a girl just a few years older than me. Watching her now, I was disturbed by her age. She, and others like her, would be deciding our world’s destiny.
“Agatha,” John said, “you’ve already been introduced to everyone else. Mary here has been part of our group for a year. And Mike is our newest recruit.”
“What do they bring to the table?” she asked.
John seemed surprised by the question, and paused for a moment. “Mary is smart as a whip, an aspiring lawyer, and a passionate supporter of the cause. And you should see the ranch she’s got up in Northern California. Lots of
land, secluded, private. A great place to train. We’ve been going up there for about a year now.”
“What about him?” Agatha said. “What’s he good for? Sounds like he’s a wanted man.” She tapped a cigarette out of a pack from her pocket and lit it. She took a long, deep drag, and then blew the smoke into the air above her. “He’s got a famous right hook,” John said with a smile, giving me a little wink. “It was on the front page of the paper.”
I didn’t smile back. It may have been a clever thing to say, but I was still wanted by the police. I was still wondering where I was going to sleep that night.
Agatha looked at Mary, then at me. “So is everybody here, then?”
“Yes,” John said. “We can get started.”
“All right,” she said, tapping ash onto the cement floor. “Well, where to begin? I know all of you, though you don’t know me.”
“Well,” John said. “I’ve told you their names, but—”
Agatha held up her hand. “I’ve been to the Bay Area several times, watching. Ever since you reached out to me, John. I know all about you.”
John stared at her for a moment and finally smiled.
“Told you,” said Walter.
John laughed uncomfortably. It was strange to see him shaken up. Even at the rally, he’d seemed to have everything under control.
“Well, Agatha,” John said. “We have Walter, from the Cahokian line. He has told us as much as he knows, but there are holes.”
“Before we get started,” Agatha said, “I want to make sure of what we’re all talking about. The Zero line’s goal is to stop the Players, stop Endgame before it happens for real, right?”
“Absolutely,” Walter answered. “We’re in one hundred percent. It’s all or nothing.”
“Good,” she said. Despite her freckles and cigarette, she came across as an expert, like a warrior, like a sage. “Because that’s the only way that you can make this work. Everybody has to agree; all the Players need to be stopped. We need to make them all see Endgame for what it is. If even one goes behind the other Players’ backs and seeks the keys, they can still ‘win’ this goddamned thing.” She spoke like someone a lot older than she looked. I had to admit, she was intimidating.
“Several years ago, I discovered documents about the origins of Endgame. I
stole them from the archive at the La Tène compound,” she continued, handing an unbound sheaf of paper over to John, who looked at it and then passed it to Walter. “Only a few people know about these papers. Stealing them led to my excommunication from my line. Worse, the day I started asking questions about this, they killed my sister. They told me to keep my mouth shut, and that if I ever spoke out against Endgame—that if I ever did something like speaking to you—I’d be killed. But I learned the truth. It cost me my family and the only life I’ve ever known, but I learned the truth. I’ve been on the run, in hiding ever since, but I swore to myself that I would find a way to stop Endgame. If you want to know the true story of Endgame, read this.”
Walter flipped through the pages. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. He reached into his shirt pocket for the paper he had read to us, and then looked at the last page of Agatha’s papers again.
“It’s the same,” Walter said, startled.
“The same as what?” Agatha said.
Walter handed his paper to her. “I stole this one from the Cahokian vault.” Agatha read through the paper, and Walter handed the unbound pages back to John.
“We don’t know where it comes from,” Agatha said. “It was written by a member of the Brotherhood of the Snake. I translated it from Latin. Annunaki is a Sumerian word, but it can mean lots of things: Sky People, Gods, Makers, aliens.” She stepped over to John, turned a couple pages. “Read that. Out loud.”
John cleared his throat.

_The Annunaki’s presence in the pages of human history becomes obvious, if you know where to look. Their fingerprints are everywhere. We find the Annunaki in the enormous stone heads of Central America’s Olmec civilization, whose depictions of ancient Olmec rulers include elaborately carved stone headdresses—headdresses that are actually Annunaki helmets that protect against the harsh light of the sun, marking these rulers as aliens in disguise. Though a volcanic eruption in the 1st millennium BCE spelled the end of the Olmec, enough survived to pass their culture down to the civilizations that followed. And so even in the Maya and Aztec_
traditions, we can see shadows of the Sky People. We have forgotten what we are; we have forgotten where and who we came from. And our creators will not take kindly to the oversight. The Annunaki are, as I have said, a proud race. They crave the worship and dread of their human servants. They do not appreciate being forgotten. The Annunaki have not been kind to us, but they have, in their way, been generous. Our success as a species is due only to their repeated and continual intervention. We have forgotten this too.

We believe we owe nothing to any being other than ourselves. We believe we are the highest power in the universe. We have become proud, as proud as our old masters. I fear the Annunaki will not abide it for much longer. Endgame is their corrective, their reminder to us, the human race, that we are nothing but tools. Endgame is their way of putting us in our place. They defeated us once—they taught us humility, and obedience, and fear. We may have forgotten this, but the Annunaki have not.

They have great patience, these beings from the stars. But their patience is not infinite, and time grows short. Heed me now: They are coming.

It is coming.

Endgame is coming. We cannot prevent it. I, certainly, cannot prevent it. But I will do what I can—I have always done that. I have inscribed what I know in these pages, and I will do everything in my power to circulate them among the lines, so that they and their Players can know the truth. So that you can know the truth.

The room was silent. It seemed so real, so rooted in history. If this document told the truth, Endgame sounded terrifying. I was starting to understand why the Zero line would do anything they could to prevent it from happening. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a bigger task than even we could take on. If Endgame was real, was stopping it even possible?
“You can keep that copy,” Agatha said. “Read it, every one of you.”
“Has it stopped the La Tène line?” John asked as he stared at one of the pages.
“It was part of what convinced me to change my mind. But few agree with me, and of those few, none would dare risk their lives to speak up about it. Especially after I was cast out. Not many have seen this document or even know of its existence. I asked the wrong people about it—the power brokers within the line didn’t want everyone to know that I was questioning Endgame. They’re on the wrong side of this. I’m happy I’m out. So, of the twelve lines, you don’t need to worry about La Tène. I’ll take care of the La Tène Player.”
“Tell us about the Players,” Julia said. “Are there any like you?”
“What do you mean?” Agatha said. “Do you mean ‘are they as well-trained’ or ‘are they thinking of quitting?’”
“Both, I guess.”
“All are highly trained. One thing to remember, though, is that some of the Players are pretty young. Players have to be older than thirteen and younger than twenty. I’m twenty-two, and I’m sure I could easily take care of any tough guy. Face-to-face with someone my age—who’s had as much training and experience as I’ve had—it would be a toss-up. But none of you, with the possible exception of Walter, should ever let yourself go one-on-one against a Player. They’ll eat you alive. Even the thirteen-year-olds.”
Tommy said, “So tell us what we’re supposed to do. We’ve got eleven people we need to track down and talk into giving it all up, like you. And there’s only twenty-one of us. First, how do we find them, and next, how do we stop them?”
Agatha stretched. “I can help you find them. La Tène have spies. All the lines do, don’t they, Walter?”
Walter nodded.
“We know where everyone else is living,” she said, taking Walter’s bottle of whiskey and taking a healthy swig. “I still have enough friends in my line to get the latest intel. We can get to their compounds.”
John spoke up. “But, Tommy, you’re right. If we split up into smaller units, we wouldn’t want to face them with just two or three of us. Agatha, Walter, and I have been talking, and we have a plan worked up. We’ll vote on it, of course.”
Henry folded his arms and audibly scowled. Henry was a Vietnam vet himself, and I got the impression that he didn’t like looking up to someone who had gone AWOL—or the idea that a kid could take him out.

“First,” John said, “Agatha, tell us more about the Calling.”

She took another drag on her cigarette. “The Calling is a big event that will be seen by all the Players on a global scale. So we’re not talking about an earthquake in Istanbul. It would be an earthquake in Istanbul and New York and Ulaanbaatar and every other place the Players are. When the Calling happens, each Player is sent a message about where to go and meet.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Agatha said. “That’s what the council tells us. A real Calling has never happened. Legend and ancient documents are all we can go on.”

“But that’s a good thing, right?” John asked. “That means it’s unlikely to happen anytime soon?”

“Yes, but we’ll come back to that. For now, just think of the Calling as a disaster meant to get our attention. Natural disasters: earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes. We would literally get a tornado in every city where a Player is living.”

“So,” Kat began, “tell me if I’m understanding this correctly. What we’re going to do is have you, Agatha, direct us to the other eleven compounds and try to get all the Players to sign some kind of peace treaty?”

“No,” Agatha said. “You can’t get into a compound. If you went to my house and asked to see me, my line members would kill you on the spot and make it look like you disappeared. No one would ever see or hear from you again.”

“Then what?” I asked. “There has to be something we can do. How did we find you?”

“You didn’t. I found you. I found Walter originally. I’ve been looking for a way out for a long time now. There are a few other groups like yours—people who have stumbled onto Endgame. But no one as organized as you, no one who knows as much. You’re our best shot.”

John opened a notebook. There were dozens of papers. He looked at us.

“We’ve been communicating through letters for some time now.”

“The thing is,” Agatha said, “all of us Players are constantly under threat of death if things don’t work out well. I’ve been keeping my eye on you. It took me months to believe you guys were real—and serious about stopping Endgame.”
Kat spoke up again. The sarcasm dripped from her voice. “So is that really what we’re going to do? Write letters to all of the Players?” “No,” John replied firmly. “We’re going to fake a Calling.”
“How the hell do we fake a Calling?” I asked. Agatha’s story was convincing—she at least seemed sincere—but how could we fake an earthquake? Let alone do it simultaneously around the world?

“Here’s the plan,” John said. “I’ll go through it and explain exactly what we need to do, and then we can discuss the details.”

Mary looked at me. Her eyes were wide with excitement and determination. I could see it on her face: the talk was over. This was it—when Zero line finally met its purpose.

“We’re going to use explosives,” John said, “and we’ll hit all twelve compounds at the same time, all over the world. With the explosives, we’ll leave a signature—the symbol of the Munich Olympics. They’ll take it as a message from the Makers that that’s where they need to go. We’ll be one step ahead of them, go there first, wait for them to arrive. And then, well, we’ll stop the game.”

Henry laughed sardonically. “That sure makes it sound easy.”

“Well, let’s take all the pieces individually,” John said. “First, we use explosives that Lee and Lin have been smuggling to various warehouses all over the world.”

I looked at Lee and Lin. They were not much older than me, but they were smugglers?

“We set the bomb, and Lee has made some thermite artwork.” Walter stepped up, holding a large roll of black fabric. As he opened it across the desk, I saw it was a symbol I’d seen in the papers—a spiral of rectangles. “This will burn into walls, floors, asphalt, lawns—wherever we put the bomb in each location.”

“So they see this burning,” Tommy said, “and they’ll go to Munich?”

“Exactly,” John said. “There’s a replica of this symbol built into the Olympic
plaza—big cement thing. I’ve seen pictures on the news and in the papers. Exactly the kind of place you’d see a group gathering.”
Walter added, “Agatha is coming to help identify who is who so we can make sure we don’t miss anyone.”
“And we’ll just walk up to these trained killers and kindly explain to them why they should not play the game?” I asked, getting suspicious.
“We’ll use Agatha as an example. We’ll convince them to go rogue, like her, when the real Calling finally occurs. We’ll get them to join Zero line with us, abandon their lines and their lives as Players. Or else . . .”
“Or else what?” I asked.
Walter’s eyes blazed. “Or we stop them permanently. Kill them. Send a powerful message back to their lines that people in this world won’t stand for Endgame.”
“Kill them?” Mary’s hand gripped my leg tightly, and I turned to look her right in the eyes.
“Only if they won’t listen, Mike,” she said. “We’ll all be there to explain. And Agatha’s giving us more—she stole a lot of documents.”
“You have to understand,” Agatha said. “These people are trained in death. They can kill you with a bullet, a knife, or the side of their hand. And they’re desensitized to pain and fear. Yes, I think we can reason with some of them. But not all of them. The most important thing is to stop them. And you can’t hesitate, because they certainly won’t. That’s all there is to it.” She leaned in. “Look, we can’t stop the Makers. But we can stop the Players. We can convince them to end this multimillennium bloodline feud.”
I took a deep breath and held it. If the Players didn’t agree, we’d stop them. We’d kill them. Dead players couldn’t win the game. And if no one won, no other lines would be wiped off the face of the planet. Killing 11—11—teenagers was going to save the world. I exhaled, looking Mary in the eyes. She believed this. And I wanted so badly to believe her, to be with her. I had a feeling that if I opted out of Zero line, a future with Mary was unlikely. I exhaled.
“Won’t this just be seen as a fake?” Bruce said. “Explosions from regular explosives?”
Agatha shook her head. “Not at their compounds. Coordinated explosions at those sensitive locations—and there’s more to it. We don’t have a long time to get ready for this. In addition to trainers, La Tène’s best and brightest have
been doing research. And in the course of their studies, they talked to some NASA scientists who said a meteor is headed our way—it may collide with Earth, or it just may fly through the atmosphere like a fireball. But this is the kind of thing that could be a sign of the Calling. I spoke with a friend about it last week and the asteroid should either impact or pass through the atmosphere around August 10th. No one can fake that.” She was right. No one could fake that. But that wasn’t what made up my mind for me. It was staring at Mary that did it. We weren’t from the same line. They’d said I was probably Minoan and she was probably La Tène. I didn’t have anything else. I couldn’t go back to Berkeley, couldn’t go back to my parents. I needed to grow a beard just to stay free in town, and even then it was a crapshoot. So I could find an apartment, get a crappy job, and say good-bye to Mary, or I could go with her and do something that saved lives. If it was true. It had to be true.

Agatha disappeared after the meeting. The only evidence that she left was the book and a handful of loose papers, and John wanted to keep that to read it first—he said he’d pass it along soon enough. I wondered if anyone had followed her—was there a Walter-type person from the La Tène line who had watched Agatha come to our meeting and was going to kill us off if we got involved?

I wasn’t the only one who wondered if it was all a ruse: an ex–La Tène Player’s plan to have us stop the other Players and clear the way for her line. Tommy and I talked about it, and he voiced the same concerns, when he brought me some clothes from our room. Mary had more confidence, but Mary always seemed to have confidence.

I spent the next five days in a motel on the edge of town. The plans were set and everyone was getting their affairs in order. All of Zero line was going to spend the several months between now and August at Mary’s ranch, hiding on a back road somewhere, preparing and training, getting ready for the meteor to signal a Calling.

It was only a five-hour drive. Mary could go home on the weekends, not giving her parents any reason to think she wasn’t continuing on with her internship.

She came to the motel every day. And on the last day, she spent the night.
CHAPTER TEN

In Reno—it was the closest city—we bought a few of the supplies that we didn’t think we could get in Susanville: three pairs of walkie-talkies, four large canvas tents, an ax, a few cast-iron skillets and Dutch ovens, and canvas tarps. Walter was watching us buy everything, directing us. Afterward we stopped at an army-surplus store, and Walter filled our carts with three huge rolls of camouflage netting, camo clothing for all of us (although Lin and Mary couldn’t find sizes small enough for them, and Rodney couldn’t find a size large enough for his beer gut). Most of the gear was Korean War- or World War II-era equipment. Walter found two ghillie suits and immediately bought them, even though they were in strange sizes—one very small and one very large.

Our final stop in Reno was at the grocery store, where we stocked up on cases of canned goods: beans and corn and chili and peaches. We cleaned out their shelves of dehydrated potatoes and instant noodles.

We drove in silence for most of the rest of the way. Mary’s ranch was still 45 miles past Susanville, on a turnoff that was obscured from most of the houses and buildings by a small row of hills.

We soon came to the familiar turnoff. We all stopped.

“We’re going to be here for a while,” I said. “What’s the chance that your family comes up?”

“My parents normally wouldn’t come up until fall for the hunting season. But if they find out that I’m not at Stanford, they might come up here to look for me.”

John came to her window. “We’re leaving Bruce, Jim, and Walter to watch the road. Eventually we’ll all rotate through security detail, and the rest of us will head up——” He handed the map to Mary. “Pick the place they’re least likely to check.”
“Sheep Creek Canyon,” she said, without even looking. “There’s nothing up there—it’s just rocky, and the creek is always dry. My brother and I used to go up on horseback, but Dad never had a reason to go there. Plus, it’s got a good place we can set up a shooting range, and there’s a small lake that’s good for fishing.”
“Can cars get up there?”
“It’s rocky, but it’s our best bet. At least for now.” He nodded and smiled. “I’m just being overcautious. I think we’re going to be okay.”
“I’m right there with you,” she said.
“I’m excited for this,” he said, patting the roof of Mary’s car. “We’re going to do good things. Can I fit in your car?”
“Sure,” I said. “It’ll be tight.”
“Well, we’re all good friends,” he said with a laugh.
Henry took John’s place in the van. Mary drove at the head of the caravan, the van right behind us. Henry stopped three times to drop off the security team—Walter first, by a group of trees, then Jim at the crest of a hill, and finally Bruce at the house. Each of them had a walkie-talkie, and John kept one for himself.
“Other than the M14, we have deer rifles and shotguns in there,” Mary reminded John as we watched Bruce. “And not enough for everyone.”
“I’ve thought about that,” John said. “We’re going to need to be training. Seriously, real training. Training until August is going to chew through a lot of ammunition.”
I nodded and took a deep breath. I knew that what we were preparing for was going to be intense. It was going to be hard—the hardest thing I’d ever done, by a mile. I had nothing to compare it to.
I took another deep breath and exhaled slowly. I told myself that it was going to be okay. And I thought about the viciousness that Agatha had talked about: the cold-blooded murderers we were going to have to stop. I knew it had to be done—for the preservation of humanity. I was committed. But that didn’t chase all my fears away.
John handed the walkie-talkie to me and turned the knob to increase the volume.
Walter’s voice: “Okay, I’m about thirty-five feet up the fir. I’ve got a good look in every direction. I see two cars coming from the south. Wait—let me
“They have rifles?” Mary asked.
“Just as telescopic sights,” John said.
“Okay,” Walter said. “A Ford Galaxie and a station wagon. I think it’s a Chevy Brookwood. Galaxie’s blue and Brookwood’s tan. Neither of them is slowing down.”
Mary’s eyes never left the road as she spoke. “What will they do if they see my dad’s car? They won’t shoot him, will they?”
“No,” John said. “No way. The whole point is to watch him come and do what he came to do, and then let him leave. Hey—this is a big mud puddle. Is there a road around it so we don’t leave tracks?”
“Yeah,” Mary said. She followed side road by side road. We passed several outbuildings: two barns, a toolshed, a birthing pen, multiple corrals, water tanks, and a utility shed. And Mary said there were more in the fields and woods.
Near the canyon road, John got on the walkie-talkie and told Eugene and Kat, who were driving in a Jeep—definitely the most rugged vehicle with us—to go up the other three canyons and see if anyone was out there.
The Sheep Creek road was worse than Mary had described it. It was narrow—frighteningly narrow, with a 50-foot drop on one side. And the roadbed was nothing but rocks the size of baseballs. The wide van probably had the worst time of all, sliding in the scree, perilously close to the edge.
After half an hour the road we were on widened, and Mary pulled to the side. The other cars behind us did too.
“Here we are,” Mary said. “Just right up this embankment there’s a meadow. I used to bring my horse out here.”
Mary went to the trunk of her car and found a saw while we were all climbing out. She handed it to me. “We need to cover the cars with pine boughs—a lot of these ranchers have airstrips and little Cessnas.”
John turned to Henry and Phyllis. “Get these tents up. Follow Mary—she’ll show you where.”
Mary was listening to the walkie-talkie.
I nearly stripped a couple of pines, sawing the low boughs and putting one after another onto the car. Before I could finish, the tents were all erected, and they’d spread the camo netting across the top of them and the cars.
Every five or 10 minutes Eugene reported that they had cleared a building
and were moving on to another. The worst wait was when they took a drive up Christmas Tree Canyon to check on a small hunting cabin. It was 45 minutes up and 45 minutes back. Henry and Tyson spent the time splitting wood for a campfire. Douglas lit one cigarette with the end of the last one. Rodney surprised us all with sandwiches, and I could see why his deli had been so lucrative.

Finally Jim gave the word that Eugene and Kat were back from the hunting cabin, the last outbuilding where we might find Mary’s extended family, and all was clear. He was stopping at the house again. Mary and I sat in the grass and talked, and I wished, not for the last time, that we were alone and had never heard of Endgame or Zero line.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning I woke early. Tommy was next to me on one side and Larry and Bruce were on the other. I was the only one up, and I carefully got dressed, trying not to disturb anyone else. I stepped out of the tent and checked my shoes for bugs, a lesson I’d learned in the Forest Service: it wouldn’t be unusual to find beetles and ants in there, and once, I found a scorpion.

There was no sunlight in the meadow, and the sky was still gray. I walked over a large fallen tree to where Walter, John, Jim, and Julia were looking at a map. Barbara and Kat had made a small fire and were warming themselves by it.

“What are you guys doing up so early?” I asked.

“Trying to put together a training regimen,” Walter said without taking his eyes off the map. He shook his head. “I’m telling you, John. There’s nothing we can do in time to get these people ready for direct combat with a Player.”

“I don’t think they can beat one,” John said. “But training results in discipline. And even if they can survive a minute longer in a fight with a Player, that’s an extra minute that someone with a gun can help.”

“It can give them complacency. Let’s worry about guns first, and then I’ll see what I can put together.”

“Bruce knows karate,” Julia said. “He said it in the car on the way up. We could put him in charge.”

Walter didn’t answer, but John nodded. “Good idea. So what do we need for the gun range? A pistol for everyone, and a rifle too?”

“How are we going to get our guns over to Germany?” I asked.

“Lee and Lin,” John replied. “Three weeks before we go, we’ll ship them, and they’ll work their smuggling magic.”

“There are twenty-one of us,” I said. “Where are we going to get that many
“Excellent question,” John said, smiling and clapping me on the shoulder. “We’re picking a team to do just that, and we thought you were a good candidate.”

“A good candidate for what?”

“I have rifles,” Mary said, as if she wasn’t sure of what John meant. “We can use them like we always do.”

“We need more close-quarters guns, I’m thinking. A deer rifle might get you one sniping shot at a Player, but if you miss and they run, then it’s all over. We need to have people on the ground with pistols, submachine guns, assault weapons. Anything semi- or fully automatic. We need to train with them, and we’ll need to get them to the Calling.”

“I can teach gun safety,” Julia said. “Proper grip too, I guess. But even that’s going to change since we don’t know what kind of guns everyone will be using.”

“So,” Walter said, looking much more sober than I was used to seeing him, “we’re going to rob a gun store.”

“What?” Bruce said, wandering up behind us. “Maybe you don’t understand gun people. But they don’t get scared and hand you their wallet and tell you everything is okay and please don’t shoot them. Gun-store owners have a sawed-off shotgun behind the counter, and they eagerly wait for the day they get to use it.”

Walter seemed unmoved. “If you did it, Bruce, how would you do it?”

“Well, I wouldn’t do it.”

“If you had to.”

He sighed. “Send someone in first to scout the place, but they can’t look like a scout. They have to know about guns, and they just go in and out. Just go in to buy some ammo. Count how many customers are in there. If there’re customers in the store, they’re just as bad as the guy at the counter—they could be carrying. You need to look and see if there’re any employees in the back, but without looking like you’re checking the back.”

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and continued. “Then, if there aren’t customers, and if there isn’t someone in the back, you hit the place fast and hard—rush it, guns up, everybody ready to shoot the guy behind the counter—before he can get his shotgun. And time it perfectly with your scout customer: he cuts the telephone as soon as you go in.”
Walter scratched at his beard and then lit a cigarette. “That’s about how I figured it too.” He took a long pull on the cigarette and blew the smoke out his nostrils. “Julia will be our scout. She knows plenty about guns. Our assault team will be me, Bruce, Mike, and Tommy.”

“No,” John said to Walter. “If shit hits the fan, we can’t afford to lose you.”

“And we’re expendable?” Bruce asked.

“I want you to be the squad leader,” John said, lowering his voice. “I need you to clean out that store—rifles, handguns, and ammo, lots and lots of ammo. We don’t need deer rifles. Guys are coming home from ’Nam and need money, and they’re selling their souvenirs. I’m talking anything full auto, or something they’re selling out of the back: AK-47s, MAC-10s, AR-15s, grenades, grenade launchers, mortars. You’ll know it when you see it. The good stuff. But clear out everything. Take the van.”

“I want at least one more guy,” Bruce said. “I’ve got Julia as scout, and she can cut the phone lines, but that just leaves me with Mike and Tommy. I want at least one more with real combat experience.”

“I’ve only shot at targets with a rifle,” I said, feeling my heart begin to race. “Nothing close. Never a person.”

John clapped me on the shoulder and said, “Mike’s got one mean punch. I think he’s going to teach us all a little bit of hand-to-hand combat in the next couple of months.”

I scoffed. “I’ve heard you’re not supposed to bring a knife to a gunfight. But just bringing fists? I think the gun would win.”

“Right,” John said. “I mean, we’ll give you a gun, but you have instincts. That’s the key.”

“Give me Eugene too,” Bruce said. “He knocked over a couple banks. This is a little similar.”

“Okay.” Walter nodded. “Eugene is out front watching the entrance. Take Lee with you and switch him out.”

Bruce agreed, and went to his tent to get his gun.

I found Mary sitting on a large rock by the fire pit, holding her hands out to warm them. “What’s up?” she asked as I sat down next to her, and she put a hand on my knee.

“We’re going to rob a gun store,” I said, trying to sound as unconcerned as possible, but inside I was filled with fear. A month ago, I had never committed any crime worse than a parking ticket. Now I’d punched a cop and
was about to commit armed robbery. I was only at 51 percent agreeing with
this plan. We needed the guns, sure, but what if the shop owner got to his
weapon and shot us all? I’d thought getting arrested was the worst thing that
could happen to me. Now I couldn’t believe what I’d gotten myself into.
I could still walk away from this. I could take Mary’s car and just head out on
the open road—go to Canada and live off my 3,000 dollars, get a job, get an
apartment. Hide.
“Mike,” Mary said, leaning against me. “Don’t let anything stupid happen. I
don’t know what I’d do without you.”
“Mary. I’ll be fine.”
“That’s what everyone says. Just promise me you’ll be smart, stay out of the
line of fire.”
“I will,” I said. “That’s what John told me. I swear, they said they want me
because I can throw a punch, but I’m sure they just need an extra hand
loading the van with all the boxes of ammo.”
She turned to look at me. “Mike, I really care about you.”
I stared back at her, our faces inches apart. I touched her face with my cold
hands. “I care about you too. More than I ever have about anyone.”
We kissed, silent and slow. Her face was cold, but her lips were warm, and
she put her arms around me. I promised her I’d take every precaution.
She could have talked me out of it. I half expected her to. But she didn’t. She
wanted me to go. I think that was the moment when everything changed for
me—when I fully embraced Zero line. When I knew I’d follow Mary
wherever she took me.
I looked across the fire. Lee and Lin were grinning at us.
I pointed across the fire. “Lee, you’re moving up to a guard post.”
“Cool,” he said with a nod.
“Be careful,” Mary said, looking at me. There were a thousand words in her
eyes. A hundred emotions. But all that came out was “Be careful.”
“I don’t want to do this,” I whispered.
“It’s okay to be scared,” she said. “But that’s courage, right? It’s being afraid
and doing it anyway.”
She held me by my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Be careful.”
“We will.”
CHAPTER TWELVE

Bruce, John, and Walter decided that we’d go all the way to Redding instead of just Susanville. It was a bigger town, and one that we’d—hopefully—never have to go back to. It added two hours to the drive each way, which gave the highway patrol two extra hours to catch us if they caught wind of what we’d done. But we needed good guns, and this was our best bet. We woke Eugene and filled him in on the plan.

“I don’t suppose this place will have any night-vision devices?” Eugene asked. “Porky Pig coulda come over that rise last night when I was on watch and I never woulda seen him.”

“It’s a gun store, not an army-surplus store,” Bruce said as we climbed into the van. “Besides, those things have got to be so expensive that no one would ever let one wind up in a gun shop in Redding.”

“Who knows?” Julia said. “Like John said, vets coming home might have anything with them.”

“What’s the deal with you?” Bruce asked. “You’re an artist. I would expect you to be one of those hippie antigun types. Why are you hanging out with us?”

“Why are any of us doing this?” Julia asked. “We’re trying to save the world.”

“There’s got to be more than that to this.”

“Well,” she said, “I was too young to take part in the civil rights protests. Now I finally have the chance to do my part for a cause that’s important to me. I can’t just sit back and let Endgame happen.”

We drove on through the farms and forests of Northern California, and every time I saw a cabin or cottage, I imagined Mary and me living there, getting old together there.

I dozed off, and Tommy woke me up just as we came into Redding. We
drove around for a little while, just looking at businesses, before Bruce finally stopped at a gas station and tore the map from the phone book while I topped off the tank. Aside from pawnshops, which Bruce said would be more trouble than they were worth, there was only one gun shop listed: Dead Zone Guns ’n’ Ammo. Once Bruce figured out the maps, it was a short five-minute drive.

“You know what you’re going to do, Julia?” Bruce asked.

“Relax,” she said, “or you’re going to get people killed. I know what I’m doing. Pull the van right there, right under the phone line.”

The store was a freestanding building, not part of a strip mall or anything like that. It was cinder block, painted white, with one door in the front and no door anywhere else that we could see. We parked in the back, out of sight from the street and the front door.

Julia had to climb through the back of the van to get out—Bruce had pulled in so tightly against the wall and under the phone line that she couldn’t open her door. She was dressed in a pair of very tight-fitting bell-bottom jeans, a plaid shirt (strategically unbuttoned to show just enough), and a pair of worn boots.

As soon as she was gone, Bruce climbed in the back and handed a submachine gun to Eugene and another to Tommy. “These are simple. S&W M76. Okay, this tab switches from single shot to full auto. Let’s leave it on full. Now hit the magazine release button here to put in a fresh mag. Easy. Take an extra each. Always best to have extra. Now pull back on the charging handle to chamber a round. Okay. You’re ready.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“Mike,” Bruce said, “I only have so many guns, and none of the deer rifles from Mary’s gun safe are going to be useful in there. You’re going to be watching the door, making sure nobody comes in behind us. But if something happens, here’s this: M1911. Simplest pistol there is. Safety is up here. Just use your thumb. It’s already loaded. Just pull the slide back and it’s ready to rock and roll.”

I looked at the pistol, hefted its weight in my hand. It weighed more than I expected. “How many bullets are in here?”

“Thirteen,” Bruce said.

I pointed the gun at the floor and pulled back the slide.

Bruce nodded. “Now you just point and pull the trigger. Just try not to. Okay,
guys. Masks. Eugene, you cover the door Julia saw.”
We all pulled our ski masks on—we’d picked them up in Reno too. There
was a knock on the van door, and then it opened. Julia stood there with two
boxes of shotgun shells. “Only the owner. There’s a door to a back room, but
it was closed, so I don’t know if anyone’s in there. No customers.”
Julia pulled a pair of bolt cutters from the van and moved to the front to
climb up to the phone line.
“Okay, guys,” Bruce said. “We hit it hard and fast, before the owner has a
chance to get his gun. Eugene and I go in first, then Tommy, then Mike. Let’s
go!”
Bruce and Eugene jumped from the van.
They ran to the front door and threw it open. Tommy and I were right behind
them.
“Don’t touch it,” Bruce barked at the man behind the counter, who was just
ducking down as Bruce burst through the door. “Stand up real easy, you son
of a bitch. Show me your hands.”
Very slowly, the man stood.
Eugene hopped over the counter and trained his gun on the store owner too.
The shop was dark, compared to the midday light outside, and wood paneling
gave everything a golden hue. There was a glass counter that ran the length of
the shop, turning at the end to make an L shape, and behind it the walls were
lined with long guns: shotguns at our end, deer rifles next, and then combat
weapons—submachine guns, assault weapons, and antiques. I didn’t know
guns well enough to put names to any of them, except to say that the assault
weapons looked like the guns I saw every night on the news, being carried by
soldiers in Vietnam. Some of the submachine guns looked vaguely like ours,
but others looked tiny—I’d seen them in movies, being carried by
bodyguards. The glass counter was filled with pistols, revolvers—every type
of handgun. The only thing on our side of the counter was a floor-to-ceiling
rack of ammunition.
The steel door was at the far end of the L. We guessed there was no back
door to the building, so it was likely an office or storeroom. Maybe a
bathroom.
I tried to aim my gun at the shopkeeper and found that my hand was
trembling far too much to keep the sight on him. I used both hands, and that
barely helped. Sweat poured down my back. I turned back to watch the door.
“You’ve got three guns trained on you,” Bruce said. “Are you right-handed or left?”
“Right,” the man answered.
“Use your left, just two fingers. Pick up your gun and place it on the counter.”
We all watched as he reached for the gun. I kept glancing back and forth between the owner and the door.
“Put your other hand on your bald old head,” Bruce said.
He obeyed, and then continued to reach for the gun. And then he shouted, “Morris!”
The steel door flew open, and an elderly man fired blindly at us. The shopkeeper raised the barrel of his sawed-off shotgun, but Eugene and Bruce blasted him in a cacophony of gunfire. I fired at Morris, once, twice, and then Bruce turned his gun on the old man.
In less than five seconds it was all over.
“Nice work,” Bruce said to me. “Next time just aim a little higher and . . .”
We both saw Tommy at the same time. He was slumped against the back wall, behind all of us. His green shirt was black with blood. I dropped to my knees beside him, immediately checking for a pulse, knowing that of course there wouldn’t be one. He’d taken Morris’s shotgun blast full in the chest.
This was nothing like the movies. No eyes open to tell me a last request, to tell me it was okay, to make an ironic joke. He was just dead.
“We need to get the hell out of here,” Eugene said.
“This was your fault, jackass!” I yelled at Eugene. “You were supposed to cover that back door.”
“I did! As soon as I saw the guy, I dropped him.”
I felt hot tears on my cheeks. “I don’t give a shit, man. Tommy is fucking dead because of you.”
“Come on,” Bruce said, and then pointed at my arm. “It looks like you’re hit, Mike.”
For the first time, I noticed that I was bleeding down my right arm. I pulled up my T-shirt sleeve and saw two entry wounds in my shoulder. I didn’t feel any pain, but knew I would soon.
“I can patch that,” Eugene said, taking hold of my arm.
“The hell with you,” I snapped, shrugging him off me.
I should have been watching, I thought. I was supposed to be with this group
because of my instincts, but what good had they done me? What good had they done Tommy? I shouldn’t have been there. It should have been John the Green Beret, or Henry, or Jim, or anyone else who actually knew what they were doing. I was there, I was supposed to be protecting everyone, and now Tommy was dead.

Bruce had already found the keys locking the chains on the long guns. “Guys, I said come on.”

Julia came in and saw Tommy’s body. “What the fuck happened? Oh my God.”

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “Help us with these.”

We weren’t picky. We scrambled to collect every assault rifle and shotgun in the shop and carried them, one in each hand, to the van. When we had a full layer across the floor of the van, Bruce and I laid a tarp over the top of them, and Bruce started bringing out pistols. He ordered Eugene to start packing ammunition into boxes he found in the storeroom.

Bruce stopped me from carrying and had Julia bandage my arm—I was bleeding everywhere. After she patched me up, I went back into the store to help with the last load.

Bruce had two assault rifles in his hands, and Eugene was carrying a box of ammo, when we heard a voice: “Morris, I’ve been trying to get you on the horn for ten minutes. What’s with this call I got about gunfire . . .”

A sheriff walked into the shop. He froze, eyes going from Tommy to Eugene to Bruce to me.

He started for his gun, but mine was in my hand—I didn’t have a holster. I fired, just like Bruce had told me, but aiming a little higher: sternum, throat, chin, face.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I sat and stared at the sheriff while the others flew through the store, filling boxes with ammo and searching for anything else of value. Time seemed to stop for me. I saw the sheriff’s face, saw the cop’s face back at the protest, saw the hole in Tommy’s chest.

Bruce found all the Vietnam contraband in the back room: dozens of grenades, three claymores, five flak vests, two portable radios, and a mortar with four rounds. I had no idea what we’d even do with half the stuff. Bruce drove very slowly back toward Mary’s ranch. As my head began to clear, I could see that he was driving five miles under the speed limit, giving the highway patrol no reason to pull him over—and avoiding the risk of a bump in the road setting our whole van ablaze.

We’d had to leave Tommy there, after putting all the bodies in a pile to make them harder to identify. The building was cinder block, but the gun mounts were wood, and the rest of the walls had wood paneling. The incendiary grenade we threw onto the pile would cause havoc for a small town’s law investigation. With any luck, they wouldn’t even realize that there were four bodies there. One of them was my roommate. My friend.

But we needed the guns, didn’t we? We were trying to save the world. We’d agreed to be full participants of this group. If we hadn’t done this, then we wouldn’t be prepared for the mission ahead. And we had to stop the Players. We had to. I had to fight even harder now, so that Tommy’s death wouldn’t have been in vain. I’d make it up to him.

Then something occurred to me. What would Mary think when I told her I’d killed someone? This was so much worse than just punching a cop in the middle of a protest. I’d ended another person’s life. The whole reason I’d gotten involved in Zero line was for Mary. The whole reason I’d gone on this robbery was because she’d told me she couldn’t do this without me. But
would she still want me when she found out what I’d done? Mary had told me to come. She’d known what could happen. It wasn’t her innocence I should worry about—it was mine. I was a murderer. I felt filthy, covered in other people’s blood and my own. My arm stung and ached at the same time. I had buckshot in me—the buckshot from the same blast that had killed Tommy. Julia sat in the front seat while Bruce drove. Eugene was in the back, silently staring out the window.

I moved a box of ammo and reached down to pick up an assault rifle with a scope. I rooted through the box of ammo until I found one that said 7.62X51. “Julia? Do these match this gun?” “Yes,” she said. “Why do you want to know?” Bruce looked back at me through the rearview mirror. “I want to be a scout. I want you to leave me at the front when we get back to the ranch.” I couldn’t see anyone at the ranch. Not like this. If I did, I’d crack. My doubts about Endgame would come flooding out, and I couldn’t voice them. They couldn’t be true. If they were, all would be lost. “Can’t do that,” they both said, almost in unison. “You’ve never shot that gun before,” Bruce said. “I’m not going to put you in charge of guarding the camp.” “And your arm’s going to need attention. You’ve got buckshot in there,” Julia said. “If you don’t get that out, it’ll get infected.” “I can’t go back to camp,” I said. “Why not?” Bruce asked. “And it better not have anything to do with you shooting that sheriff. You saved all of our lives.” “Four people are dead right now who woke up this morning feeling fine. Lives are destroyed.” “Lives get destroyed every day, damn it,” Bruce said, “by car accidents or house fires or getting a knock on the door from the Department of Defense. You need to suck it up and realize that we’re not on a Boy Scout camping trip. This is war. War to save humanity. Unfortunately, there will be casualties.” I looked down at the floor beneath me, guns stacked six inches deep. At the blood covering my arm and shirt. At the gun I’d used to kill the sheriff. *I don’t know if I can do this*, I thought. Bruce turned off the road. I hadn’t realized we were back at the Golden Pines
Ranch. Even though I knew where our scouts were, I couldn’t see them. “Kat bought medical supplies in Reno,” Julia said, not looking back at me. “She’s not an ER nurse, but I think she should know how to suture a wound.” We got to the camp to see that they’d been busy. Tables had been built around a real fire pit, and it looked like someone had shot a deer, which they were cooking over the fire. I took the automatic rifle with me and two boxes of ammunition. I still had the pistol Bruce had given me, and I tucked it in the back of my pants. The camp rushed toward the van. Mary ran over to throw her arms around me, but I waved her off, and she saw the pained look on my face. “Mike, what happened? Kat! Kat! Get over here with your kit.” I sat on a log away from the group. I dropped the two flak jackets that I’d taken for Mary and me, and on top I set the pistol and then the rifle. Walter had given me a look when I took the jackets, but he didn’t say anything. I was going to make sure Mary and I were safe. They could argue with me later. “Mike,” Mary said, kneeling next to me, “talk to me. What happened? You’re shot.” My chin began to quiver. “Tommy . . . he’s dead.” And then I fell apart into tears. Training would start in earnest now. We had a stockpile of ammo, and more than enough guns. John approached me, and I stared up at him with wet cheeks. “Mike, I’m sorry about Tommy, but you did the right thing by taking out the sheriff,” he said. “Your first kill is always the hardest. Remember, you saved the mission and protected Zero line. We’re one step closer to saving the world from Endgame.” He started to walk away and then stopped, turning back around. “Let’s have a memorial for Tommy tonight.” “We’ll be there,” Mary said. Kat knelt down in the dirt and pulled back my blood-soaked sleeve. “That looks worse than it is, Mike. You’re going to be fine. Just fine.” It was a lie. Total bullshit. I would never be fine again.
SEE HOW ENDGAME BEGINS:
Marcus Loxias Megalos is bored. He cannot remember a time before the boredom. School is boring. Girls are boring. Football is boring. Especially when his team, his favorite team, Fenerbahçe, is losing, as they are now, to Manisaspor.

Marcus sneers at the TV in his small, undecorated room. He is slouched in a plush black leather chair that sticks to his skin whenever he sits up. It is night, but Marcus keeps the lights in his room off. The window is open. Heat passes through it like an oppressive ghost as the sounds of the Bosporus—the long, low calls of ships, the bells of buoys—groan and tinkle over Istanbul. Marcus wears baggy black gym shorts and is shirtless. His 24 ribs show through his tanned skin. His arms are sinewy and hard. His breathing is easy. His stomach is taut and his hair is close-cropped and black and his eyes are green. A bead of sweat rolls down the tip of his nose. All of Istanbul simmers on this night, and Marcus is no different.

A book lies open in his lap, ancient and leather-bound. The words on its pages are Greek. Marcus has handwritten something in English on a scrap of paper that lies across the open page: *From broad Crete I declare that I am come by lineage, the son of a wealthy man*. He has read the old book over and over. It’s a tale of war, exploration, betrayal, love, and death. It always makes him smile.

What Marcus wouldn’t give to take a journey of his own, to escape the oppressive heat of this dull city. He imagines an endless sea spread out before him, the wind cool against his skin, adventures and enemies arrayed on the horizon.

Marcus sighs and touches the scrap of paper. In his other hand he holds a
9,000-year-old knife, made of a single piece of bronze forged in the fires of Knossos. He brings the blade across his body and lets its edge rest against his right forearm. He pushes it into the skin, but not all the way. He knows the limits of this blade. He has trained with it since he could hold it. He has slept with it under his pillow since he was six. He has killed chickens, rats, dogs, cats, pigs, horses, hawks, and lambs with it. He has killed 11 people with it. He is 16, in his prime for Playing. If he turns 20, he will be ineligible. He wants to Play. He would rather die than be ineligible. The odds are almost nil that he will get his chance, though, and he knows it. Unlike Odysseus, war will never find Marcus. There will be no grand journey.

His line has been waiting for 9,000 years. Since the day the knife was forged. For all Marcus knows, his line will wait for another 9,000 years, long after Marcus is gone and the pages of his book have disintegrated.

So Marcus is bored.

The crowd on the TV cheers, and Marcus looks up from the knife. The Fenerbahçe goalie has cleared a rainbow up the right sideline, the ball finding the head of a burly midfielder. The ball bounces forward, over a line of defenders, near the last two men before the Manisaspor keeper. The players rush for the ball, and the forward comes away with it, 20 meters from the goal, free and clear of the defender. The keeper gets ready.

Marcus leans forward. Match time is 83:34. Fenerbahçe has yet to score, and doing so in such a dramatic way would save some face. The old book slides to the floor. The scrap of paper drifts free of the page and slips through the air like a falling leaf. The crowd begins to rise. The sky suddenly brightens, as if the gods, the Gods of the Sky themselves, are coming down to offer help. The keeper backpedals. The forward collects himself and takes the shot, and the ball blasts off.

As it punches the back of the net, the stadium lights up and the crowd screams, first in exaltation for the goal, but immediately afterward in terror and confusion—deep, true, and profound terror and confusion. A massive fireball, a giant burning meteor, explodes above the crowd and tears across the field, obliterating the Fenerbahçe defense and blasting a hole through the end of the stadium grandstand.

Marcus’s eyes widen. He is looking at total carnage. It is butchery on the scale of those American disaster movies. Half the stadium, tens of thousands
of people dead, burning, lit up, on fire.
It is the most beautiful thing Marcus has ever seen.
He breathes hard. Sweat pours off his brow. People outside are yelling, screaming. A woman wails from the café below. Sirens ring out across the ancient city on the Bosporus, between the Marmara and the Black.
On TV, the stadium is awash in flames. Players, police, spectators, coaches run around, burning like crazed matchsticks. The commentators cry for help, for God, because they don’t understand. Those not dead or on their way to being dead trample one another as they try to escape. There’s another explosion and the screen goes black.
Marcus’s heart wants out of his chest. Marcus’s brain is as hot as the football pitch. Marcus’s stomach is full of rocks and acid. His palms feel hot and sticky. He looks down and sees that he has dug the ancient blade into his forearm, and a rivulet of blood is trickling off his hand, onto the chair, onto his book. The book is ruined, but it doesn’t matter; he won’t need it anymore. Because now, Marcus will have his Odyssey.
Marcus looks back to the darkened TV. He knows there’s something waiting for him there amidst the wreckage. He must find it.
A single piece.
For himself, for his line.
He smiles. Marcus has trained all of his life for this moment. When he wasn’t training, he was dreaming of the Calling. All the visions of destruction that his teenage mind concocted could not touch what Marcus has witnessed tonight. A meteor destroying a football stadium and killing 38,676 people. The legends said it would be a grand announcement. For once, the legends have become a beautiful reality.
Marcus has wanted, waited, and prepared for Endgame his entire life. He is no longer bored, and he won’t be again until he either wins or dies.
This is it.
He knows it.
This is it.
Three chimes of a small pewter bell awake Chiyoko Takeda. Her head lolls to the side. The time on her digital clock: 5:24. She makes a note of it. These are heavy numbers now. Significant. She imagines it is the same for those who ascribe meaning to numbers like 11:03 or 9:11 or 7:07. For the rest of her life she will see these numbers, 5:24, and for the rest of her life they will carry weight, meaning, significance.

Chiyoko turns from the clock on her side table and stares into the darkness. She lies naked on top of the sheets. She licks her full lips. She scrutinizes the shadows on her ceiling as if some message will appear there.

The bell should not have rung. Not for her.

All her life she has been told of Endgame and her peculiar and fantastical ancestry. Before the bell rang, she was 17 years old, a homeschooled outcast, a master sailor and navigator, an able gardener, a limber climber. Skilled at symbols, languages, and words. An interpreter of signs. An assassin able to wield the _wakizashi_, the _hojo_, and the _shuriken_. Now that the bell has rung, she feels 100. She feels 1,000. She feels 10,000, and getting older by the second. The heavy burden of the centuries presses down upon her.

Chiyoko closes her eyes. Darkness returns. She wants to be somewhere else. A cave. Underwater. In the oldest forest on Earth. But she is here, and she must get used to it. Darkness will be everywhere soon, and everyone will know it. She must master it. Befriend it. Love it. She has prepared for 17 years and she’s ready, even if she never wanted it or expected it. The darkness. It will be like a loving silence, which for Chiyoko is easy. The silence is part of who she is.

For she can hear, but she has never spoken.
She looks out her open window, breathes. It rained during the night, and she can feel the humidity in her nose and throat and chest. The air smells good. There is a gentle rapping on the sliding door leading to her room. Chiyoko sits in her Western-style bed, her slight back facing the door. She stamps her foot twice. Twice means *Come in.*

The sound of wood sliding across wood. The quiet of the screen stopping. The faint shuffle of feet.

“I rang the bell,” her uncle says, his head bowed low to the ground, according the young Player the highest level of respect, as is the custom, the rule. “I had to,” he says. “They’re coming. All of them.”

Chiyoko nods.

He keeps his gaze lowered. “I am sorry,” he says. “It is time.”

Chiyoko stamps five arrhythmic times with her foot. *Okay. Glass of water.*

“Yes, of course.” Her uncle backs out of the doorway and quietly moves away.

Chiyoko stands, smells the air again, and moves to the window. The faint glow from the city’s lights blankets her pale skin. She looks out over Naha. There is the park. The hospital. The harbor. There is the sea, black, broad, and calm. There is the soft breeze. The palm trees below her window whisper. The low gray clouds begin to light up, as if a spaceship is coming to visit. *Old people must be awake,* Chiyoko thinks. *Old people get up early.*

They are having tea and rice and radish pickles. Eggs and fish and warm milk. Some will remember the war. The fire from the sky that destroyed and decimated everything. And allowed for a rebirth. What is about to happen will remind them of those days. But a rebirth? Their survival and their future depend entirely on Chiyoko.

A dog begins to bark frantically.

Birds trill.

A car alarm goes off.

The sky gets very bright, and the clouds break downward as a massive fireball bursts over the edge of town. It screams, burns, and crashes into the marina. A great explosion and a billow of scalding steam illuminate the early morning. Rain made of dust and rock and plastic and metal hurls upward over Naha. Trees die. Fish die. Children, dreams, and fortunes die. The lucky ones are snuffed out in their slumber. The unlucky are burned or maimed.

Initially it will be mistaken for an earthquake.
But they will see.
It is just the beginning.
The debris falls all over town. Chiyoko senses her piece coming for her. She takes a large step away from her window, and a bright ember shaped like a mackerel falls onto her floor, burning a hole in the tatami mat.
Her uncle knocks on the door again. Chiyoko stomps her foot twice. *Come in.* The door is still open. Her uncle keeps his gaze lowered as he stops at her side and hands her first a simple blue silk kimono, which she steps into, and, after she’s in the kimono, a glass of very cold water. She pours the water over the ember. It sizzles, spurts, and steams, the water immediately boiling. What is left is a shiny, black, jagged rock.
She looks at her uncle. He looks back at her, sadness in his eyes. It is the sadness of many centuries, of lifetimes coming to an end. She gives him a slight bow of thanks. He tries to smile. He used to be like her, waiting for Endgame to begin, but it passed him over, like it did countless others, for thousands and thousands of years.
Not so for Chiyoko.
“*I am sorry,*” he says. “*For you, for all of us. What will be will be.*”
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About the Author

JAMES FREY is originally from Cleveland. All four of his books, *A Million Little Pieces*, *My Friend Leonard*, *Bright Shiny Morning*, and *The Final Testament of the Holy Bible*, were international bestsellers.

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