ENDGAME
THE ZERO LINE CHRONICLES
VOLUME 2
FEED

JAMES FREY
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Excerpt from *Endgame: The Calling*
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CHAPTER ONE

I knelt in the rocks, sharp stones digging into my knees and shins, and placed the bomb. It was small, about the size of two bricks, and was contained inside a cardboard box. There wasn’t much to it: a chunk of C4—a plastic explosive with the consistency of soft clay—a few components of an alarm clock, and four D-size batteries. I took the two wires from the clock, twisted them onto the leads of the detonators—short metal cylinders. I pushed the detonators into the C4.

C4 was supposed to be extremely stable—you could drop it or shoot it or rip it in half, and it wouldn’t explode. It needed an electric current to detonate. And I’d just given it that electric current. It was ready to blow, and sweat dripped down my forehead onto my nose and into my eyes.

This wasn’t the first time that I’d done this: I’d prepped a dozen practice bombs, where the C4 was replaced with Play-Doh. This was the first time I’d done it for real, though: real batteries, real detonators, real explosive. My fingers trembled with every step.

I looked over at Kat. She was older than me by five years: 24. She was tall and pretty, with brown hair that shone like copper in the evening sun. Eugene was with her, the two of them unrolling a tarp that had been painted with a thick and heavy coat of thermite. The design was a spiraling series of rectangles—the logo for the Munich Olympics. At the bottom was painted “9-5-1972.”

This was how we would “invite” the Players to meet with us. John and Walter didn’t know for certain how a real Calling worked. Walter had said that the Cahokians believed that there would be a sign from heaven—possibly something violent. The only thing they knew for sure was that it would be unmistakable, and the Players would know where they were to gather. So we’d use bombs to get their attention, and use the thermite to burn
the Olympic logo into the ground. When they had the tarp unrolled, Eugene unrolled the fuse and pulled out a lighter.

I hit the timer on the clock, and it started to count down.

I stood up and walked to them. Eugene touched the unlit lighter to the fuse, and we all headed for the trees. As we walked, Bakr, the man who’d made the bombs, walked past me, heading toward the bomb to check it.

Eugene held his hand out to me, and I slapped it, reluctantly.

“Nice job, man,” he said.

“Let’s see what Bakr says,” Kat said, stopping at the tree line and turning around.

I looked back at him, 30 yards away in a natural low spot in the forest. It was muddy in the middle, which we’d worked around, but he had boots on and walked right through the mud, just as he’d done for the other groups who had practiced this exercise. We were now the eighth group to practice with the real equipment. Four more to go. All the Zero line members were getting their chance, because practicing with Play-Doh was one thing but sticking detonators into real C4 was something completely different. I hadn’t expected to be so intimidated by the bomb.

Bakr turned around and gave a thumbs-up sign. I’d done it right.

“Nice job, Mike,” Kat said, and squeezed my arm.

“We’ve rehearsed this enough,” I said. “I should be able to do it in my sleep.” Walter spoke without looking at me. “Don’t get cocky. Forget a single step in there and you could blow yourself to hell.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s not what I meant. I’m just saying we’ve practiced enough. We’re ready. As ready as we can be.”

“You and your team need to be a well-oiled machine,” John said. *Then why is Eugene with me?* I thought. The whole group blamed Eugene for Tommy’s death—at least I assumed they did. It was obvious in the way they talked to him, talked about him, and spoke about Tommy. Eugene screwed up and Tommy had died. And now I was in a squad with him and Kat.

I sat down on the hillside next to Mary. Why we’d gotten split up, I couldn’t explain. We had grown so close throughout the summer spent on her family’s ranch. We each knew how the other thought, how we’d respond in any given situation. But she was leaving with Bruce—just the two of them—going after the Olmec.
“Nice job,” she said as I sat.
“It’s easy,” I replied. “Like I said, we’ve done it so much.”
“But this time the bomb is real. Come on, I had my turn, and it wasn’t the same thing at all. I kept freaking out that there was going to be a spark—from the clock wires, or even the static electricity in my clothes. Nerves, you know?”
“Yeah,” I said. “Nerves. I think we’ve all had our final turns. No more until the real deal. How’s the weather in Veracruz this time of year?”
“Shut up,” she said, and laughed a little. “It’s not like this is a vacation.”
“You get to go to the beaches of Mexico, and I get to go to Istanbul and Baghdad.”
“It’s going to be hot.”
“You think Baghdad isn’t?”
“It’s probably more humid in Mexico.”
Kat squatted down next to us and laughed. “You can wear a bikini in Veracruz. I have to wear a hijab in Baghdad’s heat.”
Bakr took the disassembled bomb to the west side of the depression, and Bruce and Eugene rolled the tarp up again and then hauled it back to the bomb. Bakr had grown up in Baghdad—one of the cities Eugene, Kat, and I were going to, but he wasn’t part of our team. He said he didn’t want to be accidently recognized.
“Rodney, Jim, Julia,” John said. “You’re up.”
Jim was right behind me, and he stood up.
“Last time,” John said to him. “We’re off to Reno tomorrow, so make it count.”
Reno tomorrow. That gave us a week before the meteor would come and we’d have to go off to plant the bombs—to send the invitations to the Calling. It would only be a few more weeks before we were all reunited in Munich at the Olympics.
Weeks that I would be away from Mary. Weeks that Bruce would spend pretending to be her boyfriend, on a vacation on the sapphire shores of Mexico, drinking margaritas and tequila, and—
“What are you thinking about?” Mary asked.
Fifty yards away from us, Julia had picked up the bomb and Rodney and Jim were carrying the tarp into position.
I kept my voice low. “I think you should ask John to swap you out for Kat.
Or Eugene—even better.”
She didn’t immediately answer. She leaned back on her elbows, watching the bomb being moved into place.
I knew what she’d say by this point. We’d been over it a dozen times.
“Mike,” she said, a sigh in her voice.
Walter reached over and smacked me lightly in the head. He wasn’t quiet when he spoke. “Get over it already. We’ve been practicing in these groups for six weeks. I’m not going to change it at the last minute. You have the streets of Istanbul memorized. You learned conversational Turkish. You need to worry about the plan now, and about your love life later.”
“I don’t speak Turkish. I’ve learned how to count to ten and how to ask directions to the hotel.”
John looked at me. “We’ll all be back together soon.”
“I just think that Mary and I work well together. Look,” I said, pointing at the group planting the bomb and tarp. “Jim and Julia are staying together.”
“Because they know how to work together,” Walter said, his tone cold as ice.
“You don’t. You think you do, but in every combat exercise we did, you’d ignore mission objectives to defend Mary.”
“So you’re putting her in a different unit so I’ll be less worried about her?” I said rhetorically. I knew his answers.
“We’re saving the world. We have to make sacrifices. You’ve never seemed to understand that.”
“I don’t understand that?” I said, standing up. “Are you fucking kidding me? I’ve given up all my life’s goals. I gave up my admission to Berkeley. I gave up my life savings. I killed a man for Christ’s sake. I’ve given it all up, and you can’t cut me a little slack.”
“Quiet,” John said, watching Julia kneeling next to the bomb.
“I asked to be on a different team,” Mary said. “You know that.”
“I know. And I’m asking for you to change your mind.”
“It’s too late to change,” John said. “Even if she wanted it. She knows Spanish. Four years in school. Bruce does too. Not to mention all of the intel she’s memorized—and the intel you’ve memorized. Tell me, where in Veracruz is the best place to find black-market guns? The best place to hide if the police come after you?”
“I don’t need to know it. Mary already does.”
“What if she gets shot?”
Then what’s the point? I thought. I believed in Zero line’s goals, but I had my priorities, and Mary was placed above the mission.

Walter spoke. “Where do you get the bomb and tarp in Turkey?”

I ignored him.

“I’m asking you a question, Mike. Where do you get the bomb in Turkey?”

I glared at him. “The Fethiye fish market, from an anchovy dealer named Salomao.”

“And what’s it going to be packaged in?”

“A case of fish with a false bottom. Look, I know what you’re getting at.”

“Then shut up,” Walter said.

Mary looked at me and took my hand.

Something inside me wondered if I was losing her. Yes, I did defend her. Of course I would. I wasn’t an unfeeling bastard like Walter. If chasing down Players meant leaving Mary on her own, of course I would stay with her.

I knew the Players were tough—Walter and Agatha had drilled that into us—but we would operate as a team. In every practice—the daily runs and obstacle courses, the shooting drills, the bomb practice, the sales dialogues—we were a team, and we stuck together. The only times where I changed the plan and defended Mary were when there was an error: when we were attacked from behind, or when we lost radio communication. That wasn’t a reason to tear Mary and me apart. It was adapting to the changing conditions.

Julia stood up from the bomb, and Rodney touched the fuse with his unlit lighter.

Bakr once again trotted out to disassemble the bomb, readying it for squad nine, which was just John by himself. John and Walter were taking on their jobs alone. We had so few of us that this was the only option. Groups of three—like me, Eugene, and Kat—had two targets to hit. Others had just one.

I squeezed Mary’s hand. I wanted all of this to be over.

John stood up. “We’re leaving for Reno tomorrow afternoon. We have more practice ahead of us before our flights next week. And we’ve scouted out a good place to watch for the meteor.”
“We still have more training we need to do,” Walter said. All of us were back in camp, except for Tyson, who was staying out front guarding the gate. “We’ve started surveillance training, but we need to do it in a city environment. We need to teach you how to follow people, both in a car and on foot. So we’re going to hit it hard this week—we’ll need this to track down the Players when they get to Germany.”

Rodney spoke. “I know we’ve been over this already, but are we really sure about this? Does that meteor affect our plans? My squad is supposed to go to the Aksumite compound first. Ethiopia. That’s on the other side of the world. They wouldn’t have seen any meteor.”

“It’s a trigger event,” Walter said with a hint of anger. “It would make the news, and this is what the Cahokian line believed would be the signal. A big natural event. It could have been an earthquake in Rome or a tsunami in Japan. Some big event that sets everything into motion. Nature is sending us a big break, but now it’s our turn to use it and send out these invitations to the Players.”

“But why bombs?” Lee asked. He was smiling—obviously not concerned about the morality of bombing anyone. After all, he’d been the one to design the thermite and smuggle all the bombs out to our destinations. “We want to call them, not kill them, right?”

“It’s what Walter knows and Agatha described,” John said. “She said that the invitation would be violent. It sends a message.”

“Speaking of which,” Henry said, “why does the La Tène get a free pass? Why aren’t we stopping him?”

“We’ve been over this before,” John said. “Agatha said she’d handle it. We have to trust her. She has no reason to betray us since she’s been excommunicated by her line.”
“And remember,” John said, “our goal is not to kill these people. We’re stopping them. We’re going to, hopefully, enlighten them.”

“And more importantly,” Walter said tiredly, “as I’ve said a hundred times: this is not a real Calling. It takes more to win Endgame than just killing the other competitors. You have to follow clues and solve a puzzle. Even if Agatha is lying to us about the La Tène Player, he couldn’t win anything.”

Henry stood up and started to pace. “Do we know that? This meteor is a big deal. Too big, I think. How do we know it won’t set off a real Calling and game?”

“All the more reason to hurry,” John said.

“Right,” Walter said, “let’s just worry about the task at hand. We have a lot to do, every one of us, and it’s going to be dangerous and deadly serious. We can’t lose sight of what we’re about to do. We need to get to Reno, train there, and then get moving.”

Henry waved his hand dismissively.

“Don’t be discouraged,” John said. “We know that there will be problems. We just need to remember that there’s twenty of us and eleven of them. We’re luring them onto our turf. They’ll all be on their guard, but they’ll be waiting for the other Players at that sunburst plaza. They won’t be ready when we knock on their doors, wanting to talk. Yes, we’ll have guns, bombs, anything we need, but that’s the backup plan. The ideal is that we convince them all, and they walk away.”

“And if someone turns on us?” Henry asked. “You’ve made them out to be killing machines.”

“They’re also very savvy. Smart, tactically and strategically. A good argument, well made, could do wonders,” said John. “Yes, there are some vicious sons of bitches in the group. For them, a bullet might be the only solution. But most of them should listen to reason.”

I walked to the supply tent—it wasn’t so much a tent as it was a waterproof shelter built of tarps—and got a couple of boxes of 7.62 ammo. Ever since the gun-store robbery, I hadn’t been able to sit still. I needed to be doing something, and sitting around camp wasn’t one of those things.

Shooting helped, sometimes. I practiced almost entirely to fire at long range; the precision and concentration that it required helped drive thoughts of the sheriff out of my mind. I could hear someone coming up behind me.

“Hey, Mike.”
“Mary,” I said, and smiled for the first time all day.
“I caught the tail end of Henry’s rant. Can’t take these bullets on the plane. Well, not as carry-on, at least,” she said, with a quick smile.
She set down a box of 9 mm hollow points and pulled her Beretta from her hip.
I pulled the ear protection down into place. I picked a target at 200 yards, and took the straight-forward stance that Walter had recommended to me months ago. I made sure Mary had earplugs in before I let off my first round. The target was a one-inch sheet of steel. I’d hit it hundreds of times by now. It took me about five minutes to go through each shot: gauge the wind, adjust for the falling bullet. Mary, on the other hand, emptied her magazine into a target at 30 yards.
When we were out of ammo, she pulled her earplugs off and draped them around her neck like a necklace. She put her arm in mine, interrupting my reloading of the magazine. I set the M14 onto the hastily constructed plywood table.
“I’m still not happy we’re not going to the same place for these invitations,” I said. “I don’t care what Walter and John say.”
“I know, Mike. I know,” Mary said, exasperated.
“Do you think the thermite will work?” I asked.
She shook her head. “Barbara told me about it. Supposed to light up like fireworks. So I guess we’re going to the Olympics, huh?”
“I don’t think we’ll have much time to watch anything.”
“We might,” she said. “Once the Players are stopped, we’ll have won. We can do whatever we want.”
Mary took the binoculars from the table and spotted for me while I shot at the 300- and 400-yard targets. I was getting so much better with the rifle—I was one of the best in the group, beating everyone except the recent war vets: John, Walter, Bruce, and Henry. In all honesty, I was better than Bruce, but I had decided not to talk about it, as cranky as he was. He’d learned to shoot during Vietnam, but he’d served in the Navy, in the engine room of a destroyer, and never had the need to use his shooting skills after basic training.
I took aim at the 300-yard target through my scope, exhaled slowly, and squeezed the trigger.
“Hit,” Mary said. “Upper left shoulder.”
The target was just a chalk outline drawn on the trunk of a thick pine tree. I adjusted my aim and fired again.
In the instant I pulled the trigger, my mind was back in Redding, in the gun store where Tommy had been killed. The chalk outline on the tree was no longer a chalk outline but the image of the sheriff, his blood spouting forth from his chest, neck, and head. I closed my eyes to get rid of the image, but it was still there—it was always there. I hadn’t told anyone about it, but Mary had to know, right?
“Hit,” she said. “Center of the chest. Kill shot.”
My heart was pounding, and I began to sweat as I sighted the target once more. I could feel my hands trembling, and the crosshairs on the sight were dancing around the tree. I blinked and the sheriff was back.
*Morris, I’ve been trying to get you on the horn for ten minutes. What’s with this call I got about gunfire . . .*
Tommy was lying on the floor. The huge blast of buckshot that had come from Morris’s sawed-off shotgun had killed him immediately—no time to suffer, or move, or speak. I had been hit in the shoulder, and I could still feel the dribble of blood.
I fired the gun again.
“Whoa,” Mary said with a smile in her voice. “Way off to the left.”
I tried to hold my hands steady. I didn’t know how Bruce and Eugene were able to shrug it off. Bruce had killed Morris, and the guy who shot Tommy. I fired again, and a chip of bark blew away two feet above the outline’s head.
“I can’t do it, Mary,” I said, dropping the gun onto the ground and standing up.
“Now you’ll have to resight the scope,” she said, picking up the rifle.
“Didn’t you hear me? I can’t do this!”
“Just practice,” she said. “You can do it. You’ve been beating everyone in camp for weeks. You’re beating me, and I grew up with guns. I had my first twenty-two when I was ten, and my dad had been teaching me to shoot his guns since I was seven. And as of our last competition, you came in third place out of twenty.”
“That was a fluke. So what if I shoot like this when we’re in Munich? What if I’m shaking so hard I can’t even look through the scope? I’m supposed to be a sniper. At this rate I’ll kill our own people who are down on the ground.”
“Two bad shots don’t make you a bad sniper. You probably just need water
and something in your stomach.”
“I see him every time I shoot,” I said.
Mary was quiet. She was looking down at the rifle in her hands, checking the scope to see if it was damaged.
Without looking at me, she said, “I know you do.”
“How am I supposed to live with that? And don’t tell me that it’s better to kill one person than lose billions, because I’m so sick of John saying that. The Players are legitimate targets—we need to stop them. Even kill them if they don’t listen to us. That sheriff was one of the good guys. He didn’t need to die. He shouldn’t have even been there. Damn Eugene.”
“I agree,” she said simply. “It was Eugene’s fault. I worry every day about you and Kat. Kat’s smart, but Eugene is a screw-up. He’ll get you killed if something doesn’t change.”
“Well, we’re out of time for things to change. The meteor can’t be postponed, and that means that we have to send the invitations.”
“We have time. The Olympics don’t start for another two weeks.”
I took the rifle back from her and aimed at the closest target—a white fir with a big red dot spray-painted on the trunk. It was only 25 yards away. I fired.
“Wide right,” Mary said.
I fired again, aiming to the left of the tree trunk.
“Hit,” she said.
I fired again. And again. And again until the magazine was empty.
CHAPTER THREE

It didn’t take long to break camp and load our equipment. We left the tents and the rest of our camping gear—our Coleman stoves, sleeping bags, coolers—and just took what we thought we would need. One day Mary was going to come back and return to her old life, maybe. But for now the camp was secluded in a place where no one should stumble across it until hunting season. And if they did, they wouldn’t necessarily know it was us. The only thing she insisted we clean up was the thousands of brass shells at the gun range. She wasn’t worried about her family finding a shooting range—they were all shooters, and there was another range somewhere else on the ranch—but the sheer quantity of spent shells made it obvious that this range was not for casual use.

It was nearly three in the afternoon when we started driving to Reno. Mary and I rode in the Suburban, the second vehicle in our little convoy. We wanted to leave the van behind—it was what we used to rob the gun store, and it might have been seen by someone—but we just had too many people and too much gear. We planned to ditch it as soon as we found something else.

We had pooled our money together as soon as we got to the ranch. We didn’t have enough, though; it had cost Lee and Lin quite a bit to secretly obtain enough C4 and thermite for our invitations. We’d have to find another business to rob to get the kind of cash we’d need for plane tickets: traveling to Munich was expensive in itself, but first we had to fly people to all kinds of unusual places. My squad was going to Istanbul for the Minoan Player and then Baghdad for the Sumerian. Lee and Lin had to get into China, which was almost impossible. We had to get to Syria and Ethiopia and India, and all those flights would be pricey, not to mention the hotels we’d need, and food, bribes, and tickets to Munich.
No one had made plans for anything after Munich. No one had even brought it up. I think we were all too nervous.

Our caravan of vehicles—the Jeep, the Suburban, the van, and the Skylark—stopped at a grocery store in Susanville. Douglas and Barbara, who had spent much more time out of camp than the rest of us, went inside to buy dinner.

“Everybody else stay in your vehicle,” Walter said over the walkie-talkie. “Molly, can you find a new license plate for the van?”

She was in the Jeep, ahead of us, and jumped out. She walked confidently into the back of the parking lot.

“How long is it to Reno?” Bruce asked from the driver’s seat.

“Ninety minutes,” Mary said. “And I don’t care what anyone else says: I’m taking the first shower.”

“Tired of washing in the stream?” Kat asked. “I may fight you for that shower.”

“How many rooms are we getting for the twenty of us?” Jim asked. “I vote we splurge. I want a bed.”

“A bed,” I said, relishing the thought. “I haven’t gotten a single good night’s sleep in forever.”

“I’m with you guys,” Bruce said. “But I’m not the one holding the money. I’m just driving the car.”

“I donated my life savings to this,” I said. “And I’m getting a bed.”

Mary squeezed my hand. We had shared a tent, along with Bruce and Larry. I had gotten used to nuzzling up next to her, wrapping my arms around her as we slept.

Mary had become a part of me, more than I had ever thought possible. We spent every waking minute together. We knew how to press each other’s buttons. When we ran the hills at camp, I could tell when she was just tired or when she needed real help—and she did the same for me. When she was fussing with the camping gear, making dinner or stoking the fire or sweeping dirt out of the floor of the tent, I knew what must be troubling her. I knew her thoughts, and she knew mine.

And she helped me as I struggled to get over killing the sheriff. When I woke in the middle of the night, screaming and fighting against the claustrophobic confines of my sleeping bag, she could whisper me back to sleep.

When this Calling was over, I would have nothing left—no home to go back to, no money to live on, no friends I could turn to. Except Mary.
But could I truly turn to Mary? Now that she was going off with Bruce, I . . .
Well, I didn’t know. What if something happened to her?
I had to get that out of my head. I shouldn’t be paranoid. This had been the
plan for two months, almost. I should have come to terms with it.
Ahead of us I saw Molly climb back into the Jeep, the old license plate in her
hand. She worked fast.
It took 20 more minutes for Douglas and Barbara to return from the grocery
store, and they had a full cart. I wished that it could be a hot meal, but at least
it was food. They stopped at each vehicle and handed off bread, cold cuts,
mayo and mustard, and far more snacks than we’d ever need: potato chips,
Hydrox cookies, Hershey bars, caramels, Ring Dings, Twinkies, and several
six-packs of Fanta, 7Up, and TaB.
Mary took the bread and cold cuts and took sandwich orders from everyone
in the car. It wasn’t fine dining, but it tasted fresh, and it was the first meat
we’d eaten in months that hadn’t been cooked over a campfire.
We ate and ate. The sudden sugar rush of snack foods we hadn’t had since
June made us all a little sick, but I stuffed myself nonetheless. I think I ate
half the Ring Dings all by myself.
Kat held the newspaper on her lap while she ate. “They’re calling it the Great
Daylight Fireball,” she said. “And dig this—it’ll fly over Nevada up to
Canada.”
Mary finished chewing a bite of her salami sandwich and read over Kat’s
shoulder. “It says it might not hit. It’s close enough to pass through the
atmosphere and burn. We just need it to work as the trigger.”

John came up to the car and Bruce rolled down his window.
“We’re going to hit the bank,” John said.
“Whoa,” Bruce said.
“Are you serious?” Kat asked.
“It’s almost closing time,” John said, looking at his watch. “We want to hit it
before they lock up. Look, I know you’re not happy with him, but Eugene is
taking the lead. He’s robbed three banks before.”
Bruce laughed. “And he spent five years in jail for it.”
“Because his getaway car chickened out.”
“And you’re asking me to go with him?” Bruce asked. “To make sure he
doesn’t accidentally shoot someone?”
“I’m not worried about that.”
“This isn’t something easy to walk away from,” Bruce said. “Do we have a getaway car?”
“We’ll take the Skylark. Molly will switch the plates. In the meantime, I want you and the other two vehicles to go to Reno now. Find us rooms at Harrah’s. Use your fake IDs.”
John looked back at me. “You’re coming with us, Mikey. You too, Kat. This is your team’s operation.”
“Partly because you saved everyone’s asses at the gun store, but also because you have grown a hell of a distinctive beard. It’s gonna be you, me, Kat, Eugene. Grab a pistol and make sure it’s loaded.”
As John left the window, Mary squeezed my hand. I kissed her and grabbed my M1911.
“Don’t say it,” I said as she stared at me. “I’ll be careful.”
But even as I took the pistol and tucked it in the back of my pants, hidden under my shirt, I could feel myself trembling. Still, I climbed out of the Suburban and walked back to the Skylark, where the six of us robbers gathered. Kat walked with me. She was in a T-shirt and jeans.
“I didn’t expect to be doing this today,” Kat said to me.
I put my hands in my pockets to hide their trembling. “You’ll do great,” I said. “We’ve practiced working as a team. And we have both Walter and John to help us, and they know what they’re doing. We just need to make sure we keep Eugene under control.”
“He’s done this kind of thing before,” she assured me.
“I know what he’s done.”
“Listen,” Kat said. “I know you hate him for what happened at the gun store. But we have to work together. This whole trip to Turkey and Iraq is going to be for nothing if we can’t work together.”
“I know it,” I said.
She touched my arm. “It’s going to be fine.”
“We’re robbing a bank.”
“We need to. We can’t buy plane tickets if we don’t. We have to live in Turkey and Baghdad for three weeks, remember.”
I stopped, and looked at her. “I trust you,” I said. “I just don’t know what to do about him.”
“I trust you, too,” she said. “It’ll work out. We’ll just rely on each other. Just you and me. We’ll let Eugene take care of his jobs, but think about this. It’s just you and me. We can do this, together.”
I looked into her green eyes. I didn’t know what it was. But I believed her. She hugged me and told me it was all going to be okay, and then we walked to the car.
Molly sat in the driver’s seat, her long red hair hidden under a very convincing Afro wig.
I climbed in beside John. Eugene was next to him. Kat took the front seat.
“This is going to be easy,” Eugene said as the other three vehicles pulled away on their way to Reno. “Walter, you stand outside and don’t let anyone in or out. We want customers in there. Anyone we can threaten with a gun is going to be important. John, you go in first and ask to open a checking account. Mike, take two hundreds with you and ask the teller to give you change. Kat, you go with him. Act like you’re filling out a form—a deposit slip or something. I’ll be the last in. You’re all there backing me up if something goes wrong. Make sure there are no heroes. This isn’t going to be a quiet robbery—I’m going to be loud, get in their faces. Don’t show your guns unless you have to. Kat and Mike, don’t even get into the action unless you have to. Just act normal. Molly, how long will it take for you to steal new wheels?”
“Faster than it will take you to rob the bank.”
“Okay, good.” He looked at his watch. It was 20 minutes from closing time.
“Let’s go.”
Molly drove three blocks down and turned into a parking lot that was shared by the bank, an insurance company, and a Burger King.
Everyone checked their guns. John and Kat had pistols, like me, but Eugene carried the Beretta Model 12 submachine gun that he’d been practicing with all summer. All the guys had beards, and we all smelled of wood smoke. I doubted we’d really blend into the crowd very well.
Eugene put a backpack on.
John hopped out of the car and sauntered to the door. He looked so relaxed. I didn’t know how he did it. Especially with Eugene calling the shots.
I got out of the car and walked into the bank. There was a line of just two people. Three tellers were at their stations, helping customers. I made a show of pulling money out of my pocket.
The pistol seemed so heavy and so bulky against my back, only hidden by my Los Angeles Rams T-shirt. I felt very exposed, like this was the dumbest thing I could be doing. I started breathing too fast, and I tried to use the meditation techniques John had taught us all at camp, forcing myself to breathe five times per minute.
The door squeaked as Kat came in behind me. She went to the table in the middle of the bank and started filling out a deposit slip.
I watched her. Her fingers were shaking as she tried to separate one slip from the others behind it.
Eugene kicked in the door; its glass cracked with a loud pop. “If anyone touches the silent alarm I’ll kill every single person in this bank,” he shouted, waving his gun back and forth. “If I hear a siren, you’re all dead. And don’t test me—I’ve already got two murder charges in Sacramento. I’m getting the chair whether I kill all of you or not, so don’t test me.”
The bank guard, an older man with a beer belly, backed away from Eugene. His voice shook as he spoke. “Don’t do it, son.”
“I’m only going to do it if I hear a siren, or if some idiot tries to be a hero. Now give me your gun.”
The two customers in front of me had fallen to the floor and were hiding behind a narrow counter. I dropped down next to them.
The guard unholstered his revolver and very slowly laid the gun on the floor. Eugene picked it up and shoved it in the back of his pants.
Eugene pointed his gun at the first teller, a young man in a suit and tie. “Did you touch the alarm?”
“No sir.”
“How about you?” He pointed to the woman at the next stall. She shook her head. The man on the end raised his hands and said, “I didn’t either.”
“Was I talking to you?” Eugene shouted. “Now find a bag and put all the money you have in it. Empty all the drawers. Where’s the bank manager?”
The man sitting at a desk with John stood. John very calmly pulled his gun from his belt and pointed it at the manager.
“Hi,” John said, smiling casually and cocking his gun.
Eugene walked to the counter and held his submachine gun up to the customer—an overweight woman with an enormous purse. “She’s dead if I don’t see more money coming, Mr. Manager.”
“We put the money in a time-lock safe,” the manager said.
“She’s dead if I don’t see more money coming,” Eugene repeated. “Did I mention this gun fires five hundred fifty rounds per minute? But don’t worry, because it only has forty in the magazine.”
“We don’t have any more,” the manager pleaded.
John spoke. “Well, I reckon you’d better find some more. How about everybody in here empties their wallets?”
The woman next to me on the floor touched a gold chain with a heart pendant on her neck, trying to hide it behind her hand, but I stood up and pulled my gun. “Hand it over.”
I took the necklace and pocketed it. Then I reached in her purse and found sixty dollars. Eugene had the bag of money and was walking back and forth with it.
“Is everybody drained dry?” he asked, and John and I said yes. Kat was still acting like a customer. She’d given her handbag to Eugene.
Eugene tossed the bag of money over to John, who proceeded to empty it on the bank manager’s desk. The manager looked stunned.
“Mr. Manager,” John said, “help me search through this mess and find the dye packs.” The manager slumped back into his chair. There was a lot of loose money, and John scooped all of that up to put it away in the bag. He took the wallets, emptied them, and dropped them on the floor. Meanwhile the manager dejectedly flipped through the bundles of new bills. He put one aside, and John looked at it. “Come on. I know there’s more.”
The manager eventually pulled five stacks of bills from the stash, and John double-checked every one.
He turned to Eugene and said, “I think we’re done here.”
Eugene looked back at the people and took off his backpack. “A couple more things. Inside this backpack is a bomb. It’s extremely sensitive. Once I set it, I don’t recommend that you try to move it. Nod if you agree.” Everybody nodded.
Kat stood up and joined us.
John, Kat, and I walked past Eugene out the door. He followed us, turning around once the glass double doors shut. He looped the backpack straps over the door handles.
“Let’s get the hell out of here,” John said, and, fighting the urge to run, we
walked away, giving no indication that we were in a hurry.
Kat never even had to draw her gun.
Molly, still sporting her Afro, met us in the parking lot in a tan-and-brown Monte Carlo.
Once we were inside, everyone patted Eugene on the back. Even I had to admit he knew what he was doing.
There was a paper sack on the front seat, and Molly reached in as she drove. “Gentlemen, it’s time to be civilized.” Out of the bag came four razors, four towels, and a can of shaving cream. “Let’s go to Reno.”
I only nicked myself twice.
I stood in front of the window of a department store, facing the TVs on the other side of the glass. *All in the Family* was on, but I wasn’t paying attention to it; I was watching a man in a three-piece suit walking down Second Street. He’d left Harrah’s, and John had declared him “the mark.”

It had been four days since the bank robbery, and we were a completely different-looking team. The guys were all clean shaven, with the exception of a few well-trimmed mustaches, and the women all wore makeup and had styled hair. All the clothes that we had worn camping for months had been thrown in a Dumpster behind the Bank Club casino.

We had a lot of cash from the bank robbery, but we hadn’t tried to pawn the jewelry: we were too close to Susanville, and Eugene insisted that the cops had probably reported the thefts to the shops in Reno. We decided to pawn the jewelry in whatever cities our flight layovers would be on the way to deliver the invitations to the Players.

But for now we were in Reno to train in a city setting, to hone a different skill set from what we’d learned in camp. That was all about fighting: shooting, throwing knives, wrestling, and stacking up to enter a house.

We were learning how to shadow and track. I was in a position I hadn’t thought of before: I was leading the mark—walking down the sidewalk about 50 feet ahead of him, only occasionally stopping to make sure I could still see him. There was someone else—Eugene—following him about 100 feet behind. And Kat, the third member of our squad, was on the opposite side of the street about 300 feet behind. Her job was to move up and take over for Eugene if he was worried the mark had noticed him.

I could move pretty casually—it was summer and there were a lot of tourists, so one kid in a baseball cap and T-shirt didn’t stand out in the crowd.

The mark wasn’t in a hurry. It was probably his lunch break. He had to be
getting tired, though: it was a scorching August afternoon, and he was in a wool suit.
I moved a little farther down the road to a gift shop, where there was a rack by the door full of postcards. I picked one up and glanced at the mark. He was getting close to me—walking quickly now, as if he might be late to get back to work. I tucked the postcard back and hurried down the road to stay in front of him. I didn’t want to look like I was moving in any relationship to him, but I was new to this and didn’t know what to do if he got in front of me.
I stopped again, this time at a restaurant. A glass case showed the menu. Chinese food—I hadn’t even stopped to notice the name of the place. I had to be standing out in the crowd. Any real mark would have me pegged by now. I knew the signal for Kat to hurry forward and take over, but she’d have to sprint to get in front of this man.
There wasn’t anything I could do. After the Chinese restaurant was a cross street, and I had no idea which way he’d turn. I paused at the corner, looked up and down the street like I was trying to figure out which way to go. The mark was 10 feet from me.
So I did the only thing I could think of. I pretended not to notice him, and then turned quickly, timing the turn perfectly so that I collided with him.
“Excuse me,” the man said, stumbling backward.
“My fault,” I said. “Sorry.”
“Excuse me,” he said again, annoyance in his voice. He patted his pockets, checking for his wallet.
He thought I was a pickpocket!
The light turned green and he began walking away. I didn’t follow. Instead I turned and headed back to Eugene. I could see Kat jogging up to us.
“What was that?” Eugene asked, obviously angry at how it went.
“Hey,” Kat said, catching up. “What happened?”
“I didn’t know what to do. So I stabbed him.”
Kat looked past me at the man continuing down the road. “What?”
“Well, not really,” I said. “But he was going to get away, so I turned and—if this were real—I stabbed him.”
“What if we didn’t want him stabbed?” Eugene asked.
“Sorry,” I said. I didn’t care about his attitude. “He was getting away.”
“No,” Eugene said. “You should have waited at the light and then crossed
with him, whichever direction he was going. Then give the signal to me or Kat, and we would have hurried up to take your place.”

Kat spoke. “Or you could have just fallen back, turned the corner. We’re here to relieve you. At least that’s how I understood it. It’s like juggling: there’s always one person up in front of the mark, but the three of us rotate position to position. Stabbing him was smart, though,” she added, “if he was a Player. It was a good move.”

“If he was a Player, he would have recognized me earlier, I bet. And if I stabbed a Player, he’d be fighting back for sure. It feels like we’re the Mod Squad, but a stupider version. And I don’t mean that as an insult. I just bet that this would work better if John and Walter gave more advice.”

Kat took a deep breath. “I don’t think that they know what they’re doing either. I mean, they gave us instructions and all that, but I think they’re making them up. My brother’s a vet, just like them—and the Marines didn’t teach this kind of spy stuff in basic training.”

Eugene nodded his head. “Right, but they were Special Forces. The problem is we don’t have anyone in our entire group who really knows how to do this or has done it before. I mean, I’ve robbed people, but it was stores and banks. I’m not a mugger.”

“The guy—the mark—thought I was pickpocketing him when I bumped into him. We don’t even have a pickpocket on our team.”

“That’s not true,” Kat said. “I bet Molly could give us some tips.”

Eugene let out a long breath. “Well, we’ll have to ask her tonight. For now let’s pick a new mark. Kat, you want to take the lead?”

“Sure.”

“Mike, you take my spot in the middle, and I’ll go to the back.”

We worked for the rest of the afternoon, choosing targets of every demographic. We ended up following a real pickpocket around five thirty p.m. and watched him steal from at least three people. Finally he noticed that I was following him, and we suddenly had a real mark. He didn’t run—he was too smart for that—but he went into Red’s Casino and stripped off his blue shirt, revealing another, white T-shirt underneath that one. I would have missed it if I’d been 10 seconds slower. As he threw the shirt away, our eyes met for a moment.

If he’d been a Player, he would have killed me right then and there, but he was just a street crook, and he headed into the chaotic maze of slot machines
to ditch me. I followed closer—now that it was real—and tried to catch him while both of us tried not to get noticed by casino security. I stayed on his tail until he left the slots and made a speed-walking break for the doors. When I got outside, Eugene had the pickpocket in his hands, and Kat was playing the role of undercover cop.

“Cough it up,” she said as Eugene pushed the crook against the brick-walled exterior of Red’s.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit,” Eugene said. He looked at me. “How much did he lift?”

“I saw three people.”

Eugene grabbed him by the collar and turned him around, face against the wall. There were wallets in both his back pockets. Eugene grabbed one and opened it. “So, you’re Daphne Shelton, age fifty-three?”

“It’s my mother,” the man said.

“Then who is Rachel Johnson, age forty-six? That you?”

“Your mother.”

“Oh, and I was going to let you go. You lose, princess.” He pulled the guy over to the casino doors. There was a very tall, very large man in a suit standing just inside.

I took the wallets from Eugene and held them out to the security guard. “This guy tried to pick my friend’s pocket while he was in your casino. It looks like he’s already stolen from a few people.”

“No problem,” the guard said, taking the wallets and looking at the IDs inside. After a moment he stepped to a phone on the wall and muttered something into it. He hung up and then came back, taking the thief’s arm and slapping a handcuff onto his wrist. The guard looked at me. “I’m sorry you had a bad experience in our casino. Here, on the house.”

He reached out to me and dropped a twenty-dollar chip in my hand.

Kat, Eugene, and I spent the next hour playing blackjack. I was too young to even be on the casino floor, but my fake driver’s license showed that I was 22. I played conservatively, sometimes winning a few dollars and sometimes losing several dollars, while Eugene and Kat each used their own money (well, the group’s money, but I wasn’t going to throw a fit about it) and made big bets. Eugene lost 35 dollars before giving up. Kat quit while she was ahead, and had turned her 20 into 60. I bet and bet, trying to get back the money I was losing, until I had spent my final chip.
Kat bought drinks, a luxury they had gone without on the ranch. I just had a club soda—I still didn’t drink—while Eugene did shots and Kat sipped wine. After tracking the pickpocket and catching him, we all felt pretty good. We toasted Istanbul. If all went according to plan, we would be on the plane in two days.
“If even one of us Plays, then I lose,” John said, cutting a piece of steak and dabbing it in the broken yolk of an over-easy egg. “And you know what losing means. My entire line—all my family, everyone I know—will die. Do you even comprehend that?”
“And if no one Plays, the Makers will lose,” I said. “That’s what we want. That’s what we need to have happen.”
“They don’t lose. They have all the power. Don’t you get that they are insanely powerful? They’re talking about wiping out eleven-twelfths of the planet’s population when one Player wins. What are they going to do to us if we refuse to Play?” John stabbed his steak again. It was rare—red in the middle. I’d already eaten mine.
“But,” I said, searching for words. Some Zero line members in the otherwise-empty casino restaurant were listening to us, but most were practicing their own arguments. We had the place to ourselves as we waited and watched out the huge northwest-facing windows. “But think about the last time the Makers were here. We were cavemen, essentially. We were hunter-gatherers. What if we—the world—can fight them off now? The last time they came, we had rocks and spears. This time we have nukes.”
“They have interstellar space travel,” John said, smiling.
We’d been practicing these dialogues all summer, and now we had all the debates planned out, argument by argument. We didn’t want to fight 11 Players—that was tantamount to suicide. We wanted to convince them not to Play, to follow the counsel of the ancient writings from the Brotherhood of the Snake:
To Play the game is to lose the game; success, survival, freedom can only come from refusing to Play.
Prove to the Annunaki that you are not mindless animals, that you can think
for yourselves. That we, all of us, deserve the 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.

“Your own book says,” John said, “and I quote: ‘we, the human race, are nothing but tools.’ Do you think our atom bombs are going to beat them?”

“We,” I said, “are going to beat them. The book says we should refuse to Play the game. And at the time this book was written, they were far more advanced, but they aren’t anymore. Look, I’m not talking about you and me fighting them off. I’m talking about a spaceship coming to Earth, and the American military juggernaut goes after them. The Russians would fight too. Everyone would come together to save the human race.”

“Is that the same military juggernaut that hasn’t gained any ground in Vietnam in the last ten years?”

I leaned forward, elbows on the table. “We would be united against a common enemy. That’s what I’m asking you to do: unite with the other Players against a common enemy.”

“Has anyone else agreed yet?”

“We have people at their hotels right now. We’re talking to all of you at the same time.”

“So what guarantee do I have that I’ll quit the game, become a pacifist, and some crazy kid from the Olmec line won’t stab me in the back?” John said, and took a sip of coffee.

I stammered, not knowing what to say. “You’ve read the pages.”

“What’s the provenance of that book, anyway? You say you got it from the La Tène—but what if the La Tène gave it to you just so you could do all their dirty work? Take out some of the competition, help the La Tène win.”

“An excerpt of those same pages came from the Cahokian line. Two witnesses.”

“Except that, for all I know, you’ve made this whole thing up.”

“There are some things you’ll have to take on faith.”

“You can’t tell me where it came from, or who wrote it, or how they knew what they were talking about. That’s just more faith than I’ve got.”

“I . . .” I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Now if you will excuse me,” John said. “I have a game to go win.” He held up a hand, shaped like a gun, and said “B—”
“We kill them,” I interrupted. “If someone won’t join us in peace, then we take them out of the picture.”
“So you’ll kill me if I don’t agree?” He snapped his thumb down on his index finger. “Bang.”
“Damn it.”
“Remember the ground rules,” John said, stretching his arms out.
“I wrote the ground rules,” I said. “I taught you guys how to do this.” I was the only one in the group who’d ever worked in sales—at my family’s furniture store. I’d helped write the dialogues, and I’d taught them over the summer at the ranch.
Then again, I’d never been good at sales. I’d hated it.
“Come on,” John said with a grin. “You always beat the rest of us at this. But you went for the book as evidence. Weren’t you the one who told us not to use the book?”
“Yes,” I said, and took a long drink of my orange juice.
“What are the keys of selling the story?”
I hated repeating it back to him. “I wrote this stuff.”
“And don’t cite facts you can’t back up.”
“The book is out,” he said.
“I know it.”
“Good news,” John said, pointing at my keno ticket. “I think you’ve just hit the big time. You put five dollars on that?”
I picked up the ticket and turned to look at the big board of numbers on the restaurant wall. “Ha! Seven!” It was a 10-pick game, and I’d guessed seven correctly.
“We have a winner!” Mary said, motioning to the waitress.
I’d been putting five dollars on the keno game all day, as we’d been sitting in this restaurant for hours. I’d already blown 50 or 60 dollars.
A casino employee—not the waitress—came over to our table. Light was pouring in from the north and west windows, illuminating the burgundy décor: the carpets, the booth seats, the paint on the walls. He was holding the Keno card I’d given the waitress.
“Seven correct guesses in a ten spot,” he said with a gleaming smile, reviewing my card. “With a five-dollar bet, and fifty dollars per dollar, is two
hundred and fifty. May I please see your identification?”
“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, sure.”
I reached into my back pocket. “Does my passport work?”
“That will be perfect.”
The passport was forged, and this was the first time that I’d ever had to use it. Technically I wasn’t old enough to be gambling. But I shouldn’t have shot a sheriff, either. Lying about my age to gamble, in comparison, didn’t feel like something to worry about anymore.
“Frank Finn,” he read. “Congratulations.” He handed me an envelope with the money and my passport.
“Nice job,” Mary said. She’d been sitting next to me through my practice with John.
“Yeah, if I have one skill, it’s guessing random numbers.”
She held up a stack of 10 or 12 keno cards I’d lost with. “I don’t think this counts as a skill,” she said with a smile.
“I made back all my money and some extra,” I said, handing her the envelope.
Suddenly we heard a loud rumble, and the tables shook like a plane was flying overhead.
“Damn,” Jim said, standing up and running to the window. “Guys, this is it!”
All of us—all twenty of us—got up and crossed the lounge.
The windows were large, looking down on the parking lot of the Tombstone Casino and out into the desert northeast of Reno. But we weren’t looking at anything on the ground. In the sky, to our east, was the meteor, a shining fireball leaving a trail of smoke. The meteor Agatha had told us about, the meteor that we were going to adopt as our own and use to convince Players about a supposed Calling at the Munich Olympics. Agatha, a former La Tène Player who had been expelled from her line, had told us it was coming—she had contacts at NASA. But I wasn’t prepared for something so spectacular.
The streak of fire was moving slowly from south to north, and it must have been far away from us if it looked so slow.
“This is it, guys,” John said, and looked around, then whispered, “Keep quiet.”
I turned to look and saw that the casino staff were joining us at the windows, looking in amazement at the ball of light. It looked like it was actually on fire, but I didn’t know much about meteors. This couldn’t be the same kind of
thing that gave us a shooting star—those were quick and gone in an eye
blink. This one was still moving across the sky.
“It’s gotta be a hundred miles away,” Bruce said. “At least.”
“Gonna touch down in Canada, I bet,” Eugene replied.
“Could be like the Tunguska event,” Rodney said. “Meteor slammed into
Siberia fifty, sixty years ago.”
“I’ve heard about that,” John said, and laughed. “A lot of conspiracies about
that.”
“Well,” Rodney said, “there’s a fool born every minute.”
The waitress touched the glass. “Do we know that that’s not a Russian
missile? I mean, is there someone we need to call?”
“Who would we call?” the hostess answered.
“The police?”
“What are our local police going to do about it?” the hostess said. “Besides,
I’m sure it’ll be all over the news.”
A moment later, as people were turning away and getting back to what they
had been doing, there was an enormous crash, and all the windows shattered.
I ducked, and shards of glass flew at me, scratching the side of my face.
“Oh!” Mary shrieked. “Is everyone okay?”
“I think I’ve got something in my eye,” Bruce said. “Shit.”
The waitress had blood on her arm, and I saw where it was coming from: a
daggerlike piece of glass, maybe three inches long, stabbed into her forearm,
bleeding a steady, bright red.
Bruce was calling for water to flush out the glass from his eye as Mary found
Julia bleeding from her forehead. I touched the back of my scalp, and a few
drops of blood came back on my hands, but nothing stung as though there
was glass embedded.
Barbara was checking Kat’s neck, where there was a small trickle of blood.
John grabbed me and whispered in my ear. “Get back to your room and make
sure everything is packed. Spread the word.”
Mary and I shared a room at the hotel, and I tried to get her to leave with me,
but she wanted to stay and help Bruce.
Every one of us was trained in first aid, because we’d be traveling in such
small groups. Kat was a nurse, and we’d spent four or five hours a week
learning first aid from her.
Someone ran into the restaurant with a white first-aid box. Kat took it from
him and yanked it open. “I’m a nurse.”
She went to Bruce first. “Damn it. Why is there no saline in here?”
I moved to the waitress, but Walter was already there, using a cloth napkin to make a tourniquet. He made her sit down so she wouldn’t faint. The hostess was on the phone, dialing the police.
Mary was now standing above Bruce and Kat, and I grabbed her elbow, pulling her toward me.
“John wants us to go back to the room and get ready to leave.”
“I’m not going while Bruce is lying here with glass in his eye,” she said.
“Okay,” I said, and then moved on to the next bystanders—Julia and Jim. I told them what John had said, and they nodded and headed toward the exit. Eugene was next.
“What if this is real?” Eugene said, still staring out the window. “I mean, we’ve talked to John and Walter about this, but what if that meteor was a real Calling? That was pretty incredible.”
“If it’s a real Calling, then we need to get to the Players as soon as possible. We have to stop them from Playing or even going to the real Calling.”
“It’s still flying,” Eugene said, pointing out the window. “Where did the blast come from?”
“Sonic boom,” Walter said.
Sirens were going off now. I didn’t know where the police were going, but at some point they’d head here to the casino. The hostess had already called them.
“We have to get out of here, Eugene.”
“Not just you and me,” he said. “We all do.”
Through the window I saw a police car pull up in the parking lot, its red-and-blue lights flashing. The parking lot was full of broken glass—many of the cars had had their windows blown out too.
I pushed through the group, whispering to everyone to clear out, and I finally made it back to Mary.
“Cops,” I said. “The bank robbery. And that photo in Berkeley can still be traced to me. Come on. Kat’s taking care of Bruce.”
She looked at Bruce for several seconds and then followed me out of the restaurant.
CHAPTER SIX

Mary and I lay on the king-sized bed, the TV on, and we kept rotating through the channels in search of news about the meteor. At long last there was a knock at the door. We both jumped. She went to the peephole, and I grabbed my M1911 pistol off the desk, standing beside Mary. I flicked the safety off. “It’s John,” she said, and undid the chain. As she opened the door, I put the safety on and slid the gun into the back of my waistband. I was comfortable with guns now. We’d trained every day all summer—not only target shooting, but tactics for raids too. A lot of it made me think we were going overboard, that it was unnecessary to our plans, but Walter said that the Players had trained to do it, so we were going to train how to do it. John came in the room, closing the door behind him. “How’s Bruce?” Mary asked. “He’s going to be fine,” John said. “Kat got the glass out, and we got out of there before the paramedics showed up.” “I saw the cop car,” I said. “We were gone from the restaurant before they even came upstairs. There was pandemonium in the casino, and the police headed that way first.” Mary ran her fingers anxiously through her hair. “Is this going to change any of our plans?” “No. Everything is the same as before. You and Bruce to Mexico. Mike: you, Kat, and Eugene to Turkey and Iraq.” “I want to renew my objection to Eugene.” “I know how you feel about him,” John said. “But you were there in the bank, and he did a great job. The gun shop was a fluke.” “A fluke?” I said, raising my voice.
“Yes,” he said calmly. “A fluke. You’ve been holding on to that grudge all summer. It was a fluke, plain and simple.”

“Tommy died.”

“It could have been any one of us. We’re all risking our lives, Mike. Tommy knew that going into this.” John patted my shoulder. “Flights are tonight. I’ll see you there. Don’t let this change anything. We have work to do, so I want the two of you to smooth this out. We’re a team or we’re not. And if we’re not, the Players will take us apart.”

He turned and opened the door. “Barbara has your plane tickets and your share of the money. And don’t blow the money—you’ll need it for all your operations: getting from city to city, eating, getting safely out of Munich. Wait here for it. She’ll come by.”

I didn’t speak as the door closed, leaving Mary and me alone together.

“Eugene is going to be fine,” Mary said. “He’ll be good to have on your team.”

“You weren’t there at the gun store.”

“I feel like I was. You’ve told me about it so much. You need to get over it.”

“Get over it? It was Tommy’s life.”

“Mike, don’t do this. Not right now.”

I picked up my suitcase and put it on the bed. I unzipped it to check the contents, despite the fact that I had packed it days ago. There was everything in there for a trip to Turkey and Iraq. Guidebooks, maps, translation dictionaries, and dossiers on the Minoan and Sumerian lines. Mary was standing off to my right, closer to the door. I could only see her in my peripheral vision. She wasn’t moving.

“The only person I want on my team is you.”

“Mike. You know that’s a bad idea. For so many reasons.”

“Because I’m better off without you?”

“We’ve talked about this, Mike. A lot. And remember two weeks ago?”

I knew what she was talking about. We’d been on a practice run—we trained constantly for every possible situation we could think of. This one had me, Bruce, Mary, Kat, and Eugene clearing an abandoned textile factory in Sacramento’s industrial district. We had all gone into the building with our guns ready, just as Walter and John had trained us. Bruce was the leader, Mary next in line, then Kat, Eugene, and me in the back. After we had
cleared the ground floor, Bruce had me position myself behind a fifteen-foot loom, guarding the stairs and watching the door. He and Mary had gone upstairs. They were silent. We had trained for this kind of thing for months—how to walk quietly, how to communicate with hand signals—and we were good at it. I had been focused on the door just long enough for my mind to wander. I knew that this wasn’t real, and I was tired, and staring down the sights of my M14 carbine was getting old.

And then Mary had yelped and there’d been a clatter upstairs.

“That wasn’t a real situation,” I said now to Mary. “I wouldn’t have left my position if it had been a real situation.”

“I called out and you came running,” she said. “It was very sweet, but then Jim, Julia, and Rodney came up the stairs and killed us.”

“It wasn’t real. It was an exercise. I was calling a time-out.”

“What if it had been real? Would you still have come running?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I only did it because I knew that it was an exercise. You gashed your leg open. It was a good thing that Kat came up the stairs when she did so she could help you. You should have a little faith in me.”

“Mike,” she said, taking a few steps toward me, “I have faith that you’ll have my back anytime I’m in danger. I know that you’ll come to my rescue. But that is the exact opposite of what you needed to do there. You needed to stay where you were. And frankly, I don’t think a real situation will be any different from this.”

“So I’m supposed to be happy that you are going to Mexico with Bruce? That’s going to be safer?”

“What am I supposed to say, Mike? I’ve told you this before. You’re too protective of me, and it’s tactically dangerous.”

“Tactically dangerous’?” I asked, letting out a snort. “That sounds like something that Bruce would say.”

“So what if it does? Bruce is smart. He’s been training with us all summer. He has experience, and he’s seen the way you and I work together. And he’s worried about it. He’s worried about you.”

“You’re saying this was all his idea?”

“No. Why are you bringing all of this up right now? You’ve known about this change for six weeks.”

I didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry. I’m just not ready for this. To leave you.”
Mary stared at me, her lips a straight line. “We’re going to see each other in Munich. This is just a bump in the road. We’ll be back together.”
She picked up her suitcase and left for the door.
“You need to wait for Barbara to get your ticket.”
“I’ll find her.”
She stopped at the door, and turned. “Mike, I like you. I like you a lot. We have something good together. Just trust me, okay?” She grabbed the doorknob and walked out.
I was left all alone in the room, my heart racing and my stomach suddenly sick.
I wanted to trust her. I wanted to trust all of this. But it was getting harder. I just wanted to believe we’d get to the end and move on from all this, after Munich, after the Players had been stopped and Endgame was over. I thought Mary and I could find a new life in a new country. Somewhere far away from the violence, my crimes, my family, everything about my previous life. We’d start over.
I cared about stopping Endgame. I believed in what we were doing, and so did she. She made me believe. But while I’d thought we were growing together, she was leaving me to work with Bruce. Because she trusted him more. Were she and Bruce . . . ?
Had it ever been real? Or was she just an expert recruiter?
Was she sleeping with me so that I’d fully commit to Zero line?
“No, damn it,” I said out loud. I had to trust Mary. I had to get all these thoughts out of my head.
There was a knock on the door, and for a brief moment I dared to hope that it was Mary coming back, but that thought was gone before I had time to walk to the door and look through the peephole. I knew she wouldn’t be there.
I had my pistol in my hand.
The figure outside my door was turned to look down the hall, and I couldn’t make out who it was.
With the gun in my right hand, I opened the door with my left and peered out. “Hey, Mike,” Eugene said.
I let out a breath.
“Hey,” I said, letting him in. He’d spent a lot of time over the summer tanning, and with his stubbly beard he looked like he’d fit in well in the Middle East. I’d done the same, but I suddenly felt like I would be picked out
easily. I had Greek ancestry on my dad’s side, but I didn’t know much about my mom’s side.

I walked back to the bed and put the pistol back on my suitcase.

“I have our tickets from Barbara.”

“Thanks,” I said, anger rising up in me again. Every time I saw Eugene, all I could think about was Tommy crumpled against the cinder-block wall, a shotgun blast in his chest, his green T-shirt turned dark brown.

And I saw the sheriff, and each one of the five bullets I’d fired into him.

Now, today, Eugene looked like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Kat and I are ready. You and Kat are going to Istanbul, and I’m heading to Baghdad. We want the invitations to be delivered as close as possible to each other, so you’ll prep in Turkey, set off your bomb, then immediately come join me and I’ll have the plans all made for Iraq.”

And now I’d be traveling alone with Kat, who I thought was great, but she wasn’t Mary. There was still a lot I didn’t know about Kat. I knew she was a nurse at a hospital in Oakland. I also knew that she had left a boyfriend to come be in Zero line. She had tried to recruit him, but he thought it was a bunch of bullshit. Like I had at first, until Mary convinced me. Kat abandoned him instead of turning her back on the rest of us. As bright and sunny as she seemed on the outside, there must have been a fierce zealously in her. I was glad I was going to have her covering my back in Istanbul.

Eugene, on the other hand, was trouble. I doubted his ability to set up a good scenario for our Sumerian invitation even if he had pulled off the bank job so well. But, as I was quickly learning today, I wasn’t in control of anything that was happening.
CHAPTER SEVEN

We left the hotel, slipping out while workers were putting plywood in place of the broken windows. We went through a side door so we wouldn’t have to deal with the front desk. Everybody had scoured their rooms for any evidence that we had been there.

Mary was in the van with me as we drove to the airport, but she was two rows ahead, and she didn’t look back. Kat and Eugene were with me, Barbara was in the passenger seat, and all the other seats in the van were stacked with luggage. The others were crammed into our three other vehicles.

We drove in silence all the way to the airport. Bruce, driving the van, pulled to the curb of the loading area, and we all climbed out, making a large pile of everyone’s suitcases. Bruce then drove off to long-term parking.

After a few minutes Eugene said he had to have a smoke, and he bummed a cigarette off the skycap.

I approached Mary, who was turned away from me, standing alone, waiting for Bruce to come back.

“Hey,” I said. “Have a safe flight. Good luck. I’ll see you in Munich.”

“You too, Mike,” she said.

“Mary . . .” I moved in front of her so she had to look at me. “Mary, I love you.” I pulled the gold heart necklace out of my pocket and placed it in her hand.

She looked defeated, her shoulders slumped and her face blank. “It’s beautiful. But we both have planes to catch. Please. Let’s wait until Munich.”

“Just take it.”

She nodded, put the necklace around her neck, and fastened it easily. The gold heart gleamed in the evening light.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“You’re beautiful.”
She hugged me. “Be careful, Mike.”
“You too.”
“I’ll see you in Germany.”
And with that she turned from me and walked away.

Everyone from Zero line was going through the airport at the same time, though we all acted according to our cover stories. Kat and I perused the shelves of a bookstore and let Eugene go through before we did. I took a few minutes to pick up a National Geographic magazine and a chocolate bar, let a few dozen people go ahead of us. Then Kat and I walked as confidently as possible to the security checkpoint, holding hands.

She was my girlfriend. We both went to UC–San Francisco, and we were taking a semester off to see the world and go to the Olympics. It was a good enough story.

As I walked through security, a police officer watched me the whole time. I was acutely aware that the cop’s gaze was fixed on me.

I paused longer than I should have as the security guard checked my ticket, my mind completely focused on the cop, who was still watching me.

“All right,” the guard said tiredly. “Have a safe flight.”

As I walked past him, the cop approached. “Hey,” he said. “Where are you heading?”

I handed him my ticket.

“Istanbul,” he said, looking surprised. “What’s in Istanbul?”

“I will be, soon,” I said, smiling. “My girlfriend and I are traveling there to meet friends.” It was the story Kat and I had agreed on.

“How did you get friends in Istanbul?” he asked, his voice low and even. I couldn’t tell if he suspected me of anything.

“College.”

“What college?”

“Berkeley,” I said. Damn it. I shouldn’t have said that. What if he’d seen the article on me? What if he recognized me? We had rehearsed this, and I was supposed to say UC–San Francisco.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Uh . . .” I reached into my pocket and showed him my passport.

“Frank. Frank Finn.”

“If you’re from Berkeley, why are you flying out of Reno?”
“Look, is there a problem? I need to get to the gate.”
He refolded the ticket but didn’t hand it to me. “Why are you flying out of Reno?”
“I’m from here,” I said. “School’s out for another couple weeks.”
“What part of Reno?”
“I’ve got to get to my plane,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.
“What part of Reno?”
“Sparks, actually. Near the golf course.” I was making it all up, but I was banking on the hope that he, as a Reno cop, wouldn’t know details about the streets in Sparks. In all honesty, I didn’t even know if there was a golf course in Sparks.
Kat had made it through the checkpoint and came up behind me.
“Hey, Frank.” She took my hand.
“You’re with him?” the cop asked.
“Of course,” she said.
“Okay,” he said slowly. “Listen. I know why people your age go to the Near East. Hashish and opium, right?”
“We won’t be messing with that,” I said, and took my ticket out of his hand.
“We have to go—we’re going to be late.” I started backing away from him, heading toward the concourse.
Behind the cop, I could see another officer leading John to a room just beside the security line. Had he been recognized? My worry must have shown on my face, because the cop looked over his shoulder.
“You know him?”
“No,” I said too quickly.
_Calm down_, I told myself. _You’re acting defensive and stupid._
He narrowed his eyes. A voice came in on his radio, and he answered it. Then he nodded at us.
“Go on, then. Have a safe flight.”
As he walked away, I turned to Kat, feeling simultaneously relieved and panicked. Kat was grimacing.
The police were on high alert. What would happen if they arrested John? After all that hard work, our mission would be screwed.
We hadn’t discussed any of this as a potential problem. My squad had contingencies in case we failed. If Kat and I didn’t show up in Baghdad by a certain date, then Eugene was to try to do the job alone. But no one expected
John to fail. No one was backup for him. The same went for Walter. He was going to Omaha since he knew the Cahokian line so well, and he insisted he could get the job done despite being recognizable to them. He said he was able to get through their defenses. He said he knew them all.

If John didn’t get on the plane, should I try to find other Zero line members in the airport and ask them if we needed to back up John? Maybe Barbara or Douglas had copies of the dossiers.

But I didn’t know where Walter would be in the airport. He wasn’t taking the same plane that so many of us were, since he wasn’t going international.

I took Kat’s hand. We made it to the gate in three minutes, just as the airline crew was closing the door.

Kat and I had seats next to each other, and I saw a few other members of our crew scattered around the plane. We were all pretending not to know one another. We were going to have a layover in Atlanta, and then Kat and I had another 10-hour layover in London before continuing on to Istanbul.

But the plane didn’t leave.

I flipped absently through a *Time* magazine that someone had left in the pocket of the seat in front of me, knowing I needed to stay calm. Were they on to us?

There was nowhere to run to, even if I dared. It didn’t help that this was my first time on a plane—I felt claustrophobic, and my heart was pounding in my chest.

Two policemen appeared at the front of the plane.

Damn.

They started to very slowly walk down the aisle, looking at all the faces.

I wished I hadn’t shaved my beard. Not looking like Michael Stavros would have been a big help right then.

The cops stopped. I was in the back of the plane, in a middle seat. Kat was by the window. She was reading a book in her lap, her head down and her long brown hair covering the sides of her face. I knew Eugene was up in front somewhere, but I couldn’t tell if that was where they had stopped.

“What’s going on?” I asked the man in the aisle seat.

“Cops,” he said. “Do you think that maybe they were going to try to hijack this plane?”

“Who?”

“You know,” he said. “The pinkos trying to get to Cuba. They’re always in
the news.”
“Yeah,” I said with a nod, trying to stay calm.
A stewardess walked past, and the man next to me asked her what was happening.
“Don’t worry,” she said. “Everything is safe.”
*Everything is safe.* That sounded ominous, even though it was supposed to be reassuring. She should have said something like “Everything is fine.”
“Everything is safe” meant that something was unsafe, but the problem had been taken care of. Did that mean they stopped a criminal? Did they catch one of us in Zero line?
She left us. He blew out a long breath and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. “I need a smoke. You travel much?”
“No,” I said. “Not by plane, I mean.”
“The name’s Marty.” He held out his hand to me. “Cigarette?”
I shook it. “Frank. No thanks.”
“Here they go,” Marty said.
The police were pulling someone up from a seat.
“Shit,” I murmured.
The police were pulling someone up from a seat.
It was Eugene.
Did that mean they were onto us? Would Kat and I be next? And what had happened to John? He was supposed to be on our plane, but I hadn’t passed him as I’d made my way to my seat. I’d never seen him come out of the room by security.
Had he been arrested?
Would we be able to manage with Walter in charge? Walter was working with John, but it was John we always went to with problems. Walter was focused tight on the objectives, not paying attention to the people who were supposed to perform all their duties. Walter didn’t understand people who were struggling, or confused, or those who weren’t as well trained as a Green Beret. He had no tolerance for problems. People were going to be scared now, and Walter was not the leader to calm anyone’s fears.
“I wouldn’t worry,” Marty said, talking to me as if I was a kid. “They say planes are the safest way to travel. Much safer than cars.”
“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”
Were the police just catching Eugene based on his other crimes? Or was this about the gun store? Or the bank robbery? My heart was pounding so loud, I
was sure the cops could hear it.
What if they stopped Mary’s plane to Mexico?
The captain came on the PA and announced that we would be departing in a few minutes, and he apologized for the delay.
I flipped through the pages of the magazine again, stopping on a photo of ancient Anasazi petroglyphs in Arizona. They were images somewhat in human form, but with circles around their heads, or horns, or antennae.
“Look like aliens, don’t they?” Marty said with a laugh.
“Yeah.”
“All this time we’ve been talking about aliens and seeing UFOs, wondering if they’re real or not. Imagine if they really came to make contact with Earth, and they landed a thousand years ago with the Indians. Maybe they decided that we were primitives and they left thinking we were just living in tepees and not worth bothering with.”
I forced a chuckle. He had no idea what was really going on. No one did. He had no idea that we were on our way to stop the aliens from destroying the world.
The police left, and a moment later John came on the plane, smiling broadly without looking at anyone in particular. He sat down, and the stewardess closed the door.
He hadn’t been arrested. Relief flowed through my body. We’d lost Eugene, but at least we had our leader.
The low roar of the engines started up, and the plane began taxiing away from the terminal.
“This food is pretty terrible,” Kat said to me, looking disdainfully at the ham sandwich in her hands. “Even the chips are bland.”

We were sitting in the Atlanta airport during a three-hour layover, waiting for our plane to London. There were quite a few Zero line members waiting for the same flight—London was a hub that would lead many of us to our final destinations. But, besides Kat and me, no one else was supposed to know one another, and after the trouble at the Reno airport, we all sensed we should stick to our cover stories carefully. That only gave me Kat to talk to.

I ate the dry, stale sandwich I’d bought at an airport restaurant. From where I sat, I could see Rodney had one too, but he hadn’t touched it. He used to run a deli, so this kind of prepackaged airport food must have seemed terrible to him.

They called his flight before ours.

Kat was reading a book. I debated asking her what we should do now that we didn’t have Eugene. Just as I was about to, John appeared beside me and sat down.

He crossed his legs and slouched in his chair. “Ever been to Atlanta before?”

I stammered for a minute. I was four seats away from the next traveler, close enough that I didn’t want to say anything important.

“I haven’t. It’s humid. Getting off the plane felt like walking into a Laundromat.”

“It is. And this is nothing compared to outside.”

I had bought a *New York Times* and a copy of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe. It didn’t sound like my type of book, but John had recommended it several weeks ago. It was sitting on my lap.

“Any good?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Haven’t started it yet,” I said.
“It’s missing a major character.”
“Yeah,” I said slowly and casually. “I wonder what it’ll be like without him.”
“The plot is still solid. You’ll be surprised how well it all works out.”
“How do you know?”
“I’ve been studying it all summer. Two great characters who work together well.”
I nodded. “I hope you’re right.”
“Of course I’m right. I assume this edition has copies of all the notes? Details?”
“Yeah,” I said. “I guess so.” I had copies of all the Baghdad plans—the place where we were supposed to pick up the smuggled bombs, the thermite, and guns.
His voice lowered. “Do you need me to send you a third?”
“Who?”
“I could arrange Julia. Or Rodney.”
I thought about it for several seconds. I flipped through the pages of the book, and then closed it again.
“No, we’ll be good.”
“Okay. Good. Don’t worry. I know you’re upset about Mary. But don’t let that screw with your head. She’ll be waiting for you.”
“Okay.”
“I’ll see you. Be safe.”
I didn’t nod, just stared straight ahead. “Okay.”

As it turned out, I started reading the book on the 747 and fell asleep, waking up to find it was the middle of the night in London.
I didn’t know about the others, but I breathed a sigh of relief to be on foreign soil. There were no American cops to worry about the bank robbery or the protest at Berkeley or the gun store. And since no police were waiting for me at the airport, I figured that Eugene hadn’t ratted us out. Not that he would, but my mind was wandering down a catastrophic road.
I checked my watch. It was set to California time. I mentally added two hours to it and tried to visualize where Mary was and what she was doing. Odds were she was asleep. Or staying up late, drinking with Bruce. Or they were—no. I had to stop myself from imagining the worst.
During our 10-hour layover in London, Kat and I ventured out of the airport.
I’d never left the United States before. It was the middle of the night, so nothing was open, of course. After changing some money, we took a taxi into town and had the cabbie drop us off at Big Ben. I didn’t know where any of the landmarks were, but we found Westminster Abbey and followed the signs to Buckingham Palace.

As I stared through the gates, I wondered what I’d gotten myself into. I was nineteen, a college dropout, standing in front of Buckingham Palace while I waited to get to Istanbul so I could plant a bomb. I was going to kill people. A Calling didn’t need to kill people, Walter had said, but it could. If things didn’t work out, I would die, Kat would die, and maybe a lot more people would die. Eugene might very well be the only one to make it out of this alive.

No, that wasn’t true. If we failed, then the whole world would face apocalypse. My death would be horribly insignificant.

It was the surviving Player whose people would live, which made my mission almost laughable. Walter had guessed that I was part of the Minoan line—which was the line I was going to end. If any one of our squads failed in their missions, or failed in Munich, then I was signing my own death warrant.

With that thought, I joined Kat in wandering the streets of London, down a long road that was lined with trees, and, as the sun rose, we found ourselves in Trafalgar Square. I ate breakfast at a pub on a side street—the full English breakfast: sausage, eggs, beans, black pudding, and fried tomatoes and toast. I didn’t know what black pudding was, but it tasted good. I wasn’t a tea fan, but Kat insisted that I drink it, and the cup they brought with the breakfast was hot and satisfying.

We went back to the airport, and I broke the rules. I wrote everything down in the back pages of my book. Everything. I started by describing the Calling the best that I could, listing all the lines: Minoan, Shang, Cahokian, Aksumite, Sumerian, Harappan, and on and on. I wrote down where these lines could be found. I forgot the cities where some of the lines lived, but I narrowed the others all down the best I could: some got a city name and others got a city and street. I listed the specific addresses of the Minoan line and the Sumerians. And then I wrote about the aliens. Everything I knew. Everything that John and Walter had said. All the discussions we’d had around the campfires all summer, all the weird historical anomalies John preached about: the Pyramids, the Mayan artifacts, the Nazca lines, the Piri
Reis map, the Annunaki. I wrote down how I’d been recruited, how Walter knew about this, how we’d lived and trained on Mary’s ranch. I wrote about the meteor—how it flew harmlessly through our atmosphere, almost smashing into Earth and blowing out our windows with a sonic boom. I wrote about Mary.
I didn’t know how to end the section on Mary, so I left that page in the middle of a sentence.
I confessed to the gun store robbery, to killing the sheriff, to burning down the store. I wrote about Tommy. I wrote about the bank. It all came out, a manifesto of the Zero line.
And I left a paragraph of warning, saying that these 12 ancient lines needed to end, that we needed to imprison the Players, or kill them if need be, if we were to ever have a chance as the human race. We were not a game created by aliens; we were a planet filled with good people. Zero line wasn’t intent on killing for the sake of killing. We were saving the world.
“What’s that?” Kat asked, looking over my shoulder.
“Everything,” I said. “In case this all goes wrong. Someone needs to follow in our footsteps.”
“Is it safe?”
“Is any of this safe?”
“I worry about you, Mike.”
“I’m not going to screw up our missions.”
“That’s not what I meant,” she said. “I worry you won’t make it. I don’t want that to happen.”
I reached over and took her hand, gave it a squeeze.
“We’ll be okay. You and me.”
Near baggage claim I found a locker. I used some coins to open it and leave my book. I put the key, clearly marked with the locker number and HEATHROW—in the pocket of my jeans.
Eight hours later I was waiting to pick up my luggage in Yeşilköy Airport with Kat at my side. We were here together, as boyfriend and girlfriend. There was a cacophony all around us, but we ignored it and stared, waiting as the big, brown, hard-sided suitcase appeared and slid toward us. A few moments later, a burly man dropped Kat’s smaller blue bag onto the sloped luggage rack.
I carried the big one, along with my backpack, out of the airport. It was hot
there in the Turkish sun, and humid on top of it. Kat immediately stepped out into the road and waved for a taxi. One stopped in front of us and the driver jumped out and placed our cases in the trunk.
CHAPTER NINE

The Minoan house wasn’t a house at all. It was a compound. All the buildings in Istanbul were crammed together, and to get to the Minoan house you had to walk down an alley about twenty yards and then take a left into a parking area. A slim metal door opened into the compound, and from our vantage during a scouting mission, we couldn’t tell if that door went into a building or a courtyard.

We’d been in Istanbul for a week, and only had five days left to figure out the best way to set off the bomb. So far, our trip had been careful and slow: we’d rented a truck, figured out where the Minoans were, and traced three different routes between their compound and our hotel (which we’d purposely gotten on the opposite side of the city). We visited the fish market, and a few of the tourist spots, just in case someone was following us.

Our scouting mission had the two of us holding a map and walking down the alley, arguing about where we were and which way we needed to go to get to Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque.

Following our cover story, we were dressed in normal Western clothes—jeans and a T-shirt for me, a long, casual sundress for Kat.

We’d discovered that Turkey was a blend of Middle Eastern and European influences. Many of the men there were wearing jeans—even some women. In some ways it wasn’t all that different from London.

When we were done finding the complex, we went to a café with outdoor seating, along a bustling street, about a half mile from the compound. I ordered four plates of mezes—something akin to appetizers—that we’d enjoyed the most since our arrival.

“It’s going to be tough,” Kat said. “We don’t know what’s on the other side of that wall. It might be a courtyard or it might be a roof. Remind me of the detonation time again.”
I looked at my watch, doing the math to compare the current time to California time. “Two in the morning. So we’ll have the cover of darkness. Much easier.”

“I don’t think so,” Kat said. “I think they’re always watching their place. I bet they have people watching that alley twenty-four hours a day. Couldn’t you feel it, Mike? I could tell we were being watched.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m just saying that it’ll be easier in the dark.”

“Unless they have more guards at night.”

I took a bite of something called borek, which seemed to be a savory cousin of baklava. “Do you still think that these guys are aware of the meteor?”

“Definitely,” Kat said. “Look over there.” She pointed to a newsstand. “There’s an English paper over there with US news. And from what Agatha said, all of the Players watch for astronomical signs, just in case they represent the aliens. They’ll have known about it, and they’ll be waiting for an invitation to see if that was the true sign of the Calling.”

“What if that meteor was a real sign, and they’re going to get a real invitation? What if they already have?”

She frowned. “We need to Play as if this is the invitation. We need to stick to the plan. If they’re already somewhere on Earth looking for clues, then we’re screwed, but there’s no way to know. I mean, we don’t even know which person at the compound is the Player. Or if the Player is even at the compound.”

I smiled. “You used the phrase ‘we need to Play.’ As if we’re part of the game.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I’m getting tired.” She took a slice of pide, a kind of oblong pizza topped with cheese, egg, and diced beef.

“How big is the bomb? Yield, I mean. How big of an explosion?” I asked quietly. The busy street was overpowering our conversation, and I felt comfortable talking openly. There was no one at the tables beside us.

“Bakr said it was big,” Kat said. “He said we needed to be at least 500 yards away when it goes off.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The whole thing weighs five or six pounds, and I’ve heard that a pound is pretty big. Like, half a pound is used in a car bomb.”

We were supposed to pick the bomb up tomorrow. Bakr’s connections had shipped the plastic explosives to a fish market down on the Bosporus Strait. We already had the detonator in our bag—all incorporated into a fully
functioning clock radio.
“So,” I said, “we don’t need to worry as much about where we put it—on one side of their wall or not. If we put it in that small parking lot, it’ll take out all the cars and knock down the walls on all three sides, you know?”
She shrugged. “I guess so.”
“So do we even need to be in the parking area? We could put it in the alley, up against the compound wall.”
Kat nodded her head emphatically. “Yeah. Yeah, I think that’s smart. We’re not trying to kill anybody with this thing. We’re just trying to leave an invitation.”
“Speaking of which,” I said, chewing a piece of kofte—a sausagey meatball thing. I swallowed. “The thermite—what if we put it up on a wall and then the bomb destroys the wall?”
“We trained that over and over. We light the fuse on the thermite tarp at the same time we plant the bomb. If we secure it properly, it should burn itself into the wall before the bomb even goes off.”
“You can use explosions to stop things from burning,” I said. “You ever see Hellfighters? It’s John Wayne fighting fires at oil rigs. He’d set off a bomb by the fire, and the bomb would suck up all the oxygen and put the fire out.”
“Thermite supplies its own oxygen. It can burn underwater.”
“Really?”
“We’ll be fine,” she said. “Bakr knows what he’s talking about.”
“Then where are we going to lay it out?” I said. “I wish we could ditch it altogether.”
“Then how are we going to lead the Player to Munich?” Kat asked. “Wait. Let’s not even put it next to the compound. Let’s not even put it there on the same day. We’ll put it in the alley—that they all have to drive through—so they’ll see it, maybe think it’s a warning, and then the next day we’ll plant the bomb.”
“Do you think it’ll go against our planned timeline?” I asked. “The other teams might be using their thermite signs on the same day as their bomb. Will this give the Minoans an advantage?”
“The only advantage is that he might go to Munich a day early, but that’s fine, because not all the bombs are going off around the world at the same time. We still have to go through this whole mess again in Baghdad.”
She chewed a bite of her kofte. “But from what Walter said, they’re
expecting the big bomb. They’re expecting something big.”
I looked over to the TV screen in the café. There was an Olympic report. It must have been some kind of preview since the games didn’t start for a few more days.
“I’ve always wanted to go to the Olympics,” Kat said, gesturing to the TV with her fork. “Not like this, though.”
I turned to see the TV. “If everything goes to plan, we might be able to see an event or two.”
“After we’ve possibly killed a bunch of teenagers?” she said, turning back to face me. “I don’t think I’ll be able to enjoy any of them.”
“I checked the schedule,” I said. “There are no medals being awarded on September fifth. It’s going to be a quiet day, and I think that’s good for us. There will be a lot of people in the Olympic plaza. We’ll fit in, and no one needs to expect a thing.”
“Unless the talks go wrong and we have to ambush them. The backup plan is supposed to have six snipers in place to take out the Players. How are we supposed to hide rifles?”
“There’s rifle shooting in the Olympics,” I said. “We’ll just keep our guns in cases and act confident. No one will be the wiser.”
“So we’re supposed to look like athletes?” Kat asked.
“Sure. What do target-shooting athletes even look like? We don’t even have to look fit.”
She raised an eyebrow.
“I wasn’t meaning you,” I said with an embarrassed laugh. “You look good—I mean, really good. I meant people like Walter, with a little too much weight around the middle. Speaking of which, what is on this pide? It’s fantastic.” I pulled another piece off and wolfed it down.
Kat did look good. She was beautiful, and any guy should have felt lucky to be having a fake vacation with her in an exotic city, thousands of miles from our real life.
But Mary was always in the back of my mind. And Bruce. The two of them together.
We changed the subject to other things—to the crazy traffic in front of us, which seemed so disorganized, to the food, and to the architecture that was so foreign and magnificent. At Kat’s request, we stopped at the Hagia Sophia on the way back to the hotel. It was amazing: a huge building with a grand dome
in its center, surrounded by four minarets. It had been a Christian church, 
then a cathedral, then a mosque—each conqueror recognizing its beauty and 
not wanting to destroy it, just remodeling it for his own religion. 
While we were there, we heard the Islamic call to prayer, echoing from 
several minarets at once. We stood silently and listened. 
Even though the Hagia Sophia was no longer a religious building—it had 
been converted into a museum in 1935—I sat down and silently prayed. I 
wasn’t a praying man and never had been, so speaking to God fit me better in 
a museum full of tourists than in a church. But I poured out my heart. I knew 
what we were going to do, knew that people were likely going to die. And I 
knew how many people would die if I didn’t go through with our plans. 
If humanity was just the product of aliens, did that mean there was no God? I 
pushed that thought out of my mind and concentrated on my prayer. 
But, even now, equipped with guns, C4, and thermite, I was starting to worry 
that all of this was a lie. I trusted Mary far more than I’d ever trusted John or 
Walter, or Kat or Bruce, but I wondered now if Mary had been brainwashed. 
Was I brainwashed? I hadn’t seen over the wall of the compound, but I knew 
it housed far more people than just the Player we were targeting. We had a 
bomb with five or six pounds of C4, and that was going to be a big explosion. 
Was this going to kill innocent people? Was it going to kill children? 
Could I turn my back on this now? Kat couldn’t carry out the plan without 
me if I just ran away, could she? I’d walk away, and the Minoans would 
survive. So would the Sumerians. 
But she might be able to do it all on her own. It wasn’t going to be hard 
unless she got seen, and she was too smart to get seen. She could go into that 
parking area and plant the thermite without anybody’s help. 
In front of the Hagia Sophia, we held hands and walked casually. Kat had her 
camera hanging around her neck. 
A man came up to us—we were surrounded by tourists, and he was obviously 
looking to make a buck. 
“Ben bir fotoğraf alabilir miyim?” he asked. I thought that Kat and I had 
learned the basics of Turkish, but we both stared back at him blankly. 
He made a motion with his index fingers and thumbs. “Fotoğraf?” 
She handed the camera to him, and we leaned close together. He snapped a 
picture.
“One more,” she said. “Bir tane daha.”

Kat looked at me. “Well, we are supposed to be on vacation.” And before I could say anything, she turned and kissed me.

And I kissed her back. Because Mary was on the other side of the world. Because she was with Bruce. Because Kat was gorgeous. Because we could both be dead soon. Because, because, because . . .

Kat went back to the hotel, and I told her I’d join her in a while. I went to a café that was closer to the compound. I sat outside as the sun set, eating baklava and watching for any movement. I went through two more helpings of baklava and a plate of mezes. I recognized two of them—hummus and falafel. Those had made their way to Southern California. But there was also afelia, stifado, and halloumi cheese, all of which still felt foreign.

A big black Mercedes pulled out of the alley, turning away from me and heading north. No one in the car looked at me, but why would they? And besides, did the lines live in fear that someone would attack their houses? Did the Players declare war on other Players? Nothing Walter or John or Agatha had said implied that.

I wondered what Mary was doing right now. I checked my watch. It was just after noon in California, so two o’clock in Veracruz. Had they found the house yet? I was sure they would have. It was one Walter knew a lot about. It wasn’t even a compound like this one. It was just a house. Expensive, to be sure, but just a house. Walter had even told that squad the name of their target.

Our only direction was that the Turkish Player was a teenage boy, a couple of years younger than me.

I ate the last bite of baklava, paid my bill, and left. I crossed the street, heading toward the alley and the compound.

The compound had a parking area for just three or four cars. The entrance was on the north side, the door just a blank piece of metal. The cars were extremely nice: an Alfa Romeo and a Bentley. It was dark, and I walked into the small area. It was probably 50 feet by 30. On the west and south sides were blank walls of a stone building that rose three stories. I was hoping to find a patch of weeds in the corner, or someplace where we could hide a shoe-box bomb, but there was nothing. If we could guarantee that the cars wouldn’t move, we could leave the bomb under one of them, but that was a
big question mark.
The Player’s house was short. I couldn’t see any of it over the wall. I looked to the east, toward the alley. That was another stone building, but it had windows. I walked back to the street to get a better look. The wooden door had a metal gate in front of it. I tried it and smiled. It wasn’t locked—the latch looked broken. Painted above the door was TOPTAN SATI§ YERI . I tried the doorknob, and though the door felt flimsy, it was locked.
I closed the gate and then jogged back to the café across the street. The waiter who had been serving me was stacking the chairs outside and taking them back into the shop to close for the evening.
“Excuse me,” I said. I knew he spoke a little English, but not much.
“Hello,” he said, turning toward me, a chair in his hands.
“Toptan satt § yeri?” he said.
I nodded.
“It is a . . . house. For things. To put things in.”
“A factory?”
“No, not factory. It is”—he set the chair down and put his hands on his hips—“a house for putting things in.”
“A warehouse?”
“Yes! Warehouse.”
I pointed at the building on the other side of the alley—the three-story building that made the south wall of the compound’s parking area.
“What is that?”
“Office,” he said. “Closed.”
“No one works there?”
“Office,” he repeated. “No people.”
CHAPTER TEN

I arrived at the Turkish fish market at four in the morning. I was wearing the traditional black thawb, a long-sleeved, ankle-length shirt. Kat was out in the rented truck, waiting for me to come out of the almost entirely male crowd of fishermen, auctioneers, grocers, and restaurateurs. I felt completely out of place in this hectic, fast-talking mass of people. All around me was bickering and bartering. This was no place to be timid, but I couldn’t assert myself without knowing the language better. Instead I stayed in the center of the aisles, arms folded as though in judgment of the fish, looking at the fishmongers who were holding up their prize catches, but engaging no one.

The man I was supposed to find would be wearing a red taqiyah, a round skullcap. It reminded me of a short, squat fez, complete with a top knot and small tassel. And, in case anyone else was wearing anything similar, he was going to have a long gold necklace with a large round green-and-black pendant that had Arabic writing on it. Lee and Lin had given me a photo of what the necklace looked like, and I’d memorized the symbol.

As I walked the aisles, my mind wandered again to Mary, and to Kat. And at that moment, both my head and my heart told me that my mind ought to be wandering to Kat, not Mary. When I thought about Mary, I thought about betrayal and jealousy and Bruce—even if I was just being paranoid. When I thought about Kat, I remembered that she had volunteered to be on my team, all those many weeks—months—ago. We were a team. We thought alike. We worked together so well. We finished each other’s sentences. We finished each other’s thoughts.

I could see the Bosporus just past the market. It smelled of fishing boats—oil, exhaust, fish, blood. All waterways were eventually connected. The water I saw out behind the market flowed into the Mediterranean, the Atlantic,
Caribbean, and to the beach Mary was on.
But that was the closest connection I could draw to her.
She was probably using the same cover story with Bruce that Kat and I were
using—a young couple sharing the same hotel room.
And Mary had asked for us to be separated. To be safe. But maybe it was
because she wanted to be with Bruce.
My mind snapped back into focus as I spotted the man. Red taqiyah, long
chain with a green-and-black pendant. He was at the end of a row, lifting
crates of large fish covered in ice.
I stopped in front of him, and he set down the crate and wiped his wet hands
on his apron. “Ne yapt yorsun?”
“I’m looking for anchovies from the Black Sea,” I said. “You are Salomao?”
He looked at me with no sign of recognition.
“No anchovies. Torik.”
That was what he was supposed to say, but he was completely calm about it.
It made me wonder how many times he had smuggled something.
“I hear that anchovies make the best lakerda,” I said.
He frowned and made a face. “No. Best lakerda made from Bosporus torik.”
I dug into my pocket and pulled out a prearranged bundle of Turkish lira and
handed it to him. He grabbed a cooler from behind him and set it down in
front of me. “Fresh torik. High quality. You like.”
“Teş ekkür ederim,” I said. Thank you.
That finally got a smile from him, a snort at the poor accent. He patted the
cooler. “You like.”
I picked it up—it was heavy—and I carried it toward the street. Two of
Salomao’s workers carried the tarp, rolled up like a carpet. When I got to the
truck, Kat and I put the cooler in the bed of the pickup, and the workmen
casually tossed the tarp in after it.
It was still early in the morning, and we drove down a quiet road, then
stopped under a cluster of shade trees. We climbed out and went to the
cooler.
As expected, it was full of fish. We pulled them all out, tossing them aside.
But halfway down the cooler, covered in torik and ice, was a false bottom.
Under it, we found the shoe-box bomb.

On August 28, at 1:30 a.m., we dressed all in black, in Turkish robes that
we’d bought at the market, and checked out of the hotel. I had parked the rental truck two blocks east of the compound. Our disassembled rifles now sat in our otherwise empty suitcase. Kat held the thermite sheet—it was folded and heavy. I didn’t know what thermite was made from—it was the hottest-burning chemical on the planet, or so Lee had told me—but Lee had painted it on thick, with the hope it would burn the Olympic symbol into the ground or the wall, or wherever each of the various squads was going to put it.

I had a coil of fuse—Bakr had packed everyone’s bags with 50 feet of fuse just in case the situation called for it.

I held the bomb. It wasn’t heavy. There was five pounds of C4 in it, the clock, and the detonators. It seemed so innocent. I knew that this much C4 would make a decent crater, but I really had no idea what to expect. This was just a shoe box. It could have been holding a pair of loafers, not explosives that could level a building.

And we carried the guns we’d hidden in our luggage. They would be hard to get to in a fight, considering the big robes we wore, but at the hotel Kat had cut a slit in both our robes at our waists so we could access our weapons. Kat had a holster for her Beretta. I tucked my M1911 into my belt. We didn’t expect to need them. We’d watched the compound since we arrived in Turkey, sitting at the same café. There was never anyone coming or going from either the warehouse or the office building. The lights never came on at night, and no one even tried the knobs.

Kat went to the warehouse and I went to the office. I stood on the empty street and watched as she smashed into the wooden door with her shoulder—once, twice, and then it broke open. She turned to pick up the thermite tarp and a small box of tools and then disappeared into the building, pulling the wrought-iron gate closed behind her. I knew the tarp was heavy, but she never looked like it was a burden.

I stood in front of the office building. Three cars were coming down the street, blasting music and swerving back and forth. I tried to look innocent and casual as they passed, but it was a good thing it was two a.m. Standing on the street, loitering in front of an abandoned building, must look suspicious. But they were too preoccupied with their race to care about me.

I set the box down and kicked in the flimsy wooden door. Shards of wood flew as the doorjamb split, and the knob was wrenched free, skittering loudly
onto the cement floor.
I was expecting a musty smell—the odor that houses get when no one lives in
them—but instead I immediately noticed the cigarettes. I’d cleaned more than
my fair share of dorms, and I knew what old smoke smelled like, and this
wasn’t it. This was new smoke. This was someone smoking nearby.
I ran to the wall, knelt down on the concrete, and placed the box.
*Watch your back,* I thought.
This wall was the other side of the parking area’s south wall. My plan was to
blow this building to bits and, with a little luck, have it collapse into the
Minoan compound. It was sure to destroy the expensive cars out there and, at
the very least, make an enormous explosion that they couldn’t ignore. There
would be fire and smoke, and they’d come running out of their compound
just in time to see the sheet of thermite hanging from the warehouse wall,
outside a third-story window. Kat should be doing that right now.
I opened the shoe box. Bakr had written the instructions on the inside of the
lid, and I turned on a flashlight to read it.
I pushed the detonators into the bricks of C4 and attached the batteries to the
clock. Immediately the display lit up and started counting down from four
minutes.
“*Durmak,*” a male voice said.
He sounded like he was just behind me.
It had to be just as dark for him as it was for me. I quickly replaced the lid,
turned off my flashlight, reached under my robe, and readied my pistol.
Slowly I turned around to face the voice.
There was a figure in the darkness, illuminated by just the dim lights out the
door and in the street. “*Kt pt rdama.*”
If we were as concealed by darkness as much as I thought we were, the man
shouldn’t be able to see my hand pulling out my gun.
“I don’t speak Turkish,” I said.
There was a pause. “American?”
“Yes,” I said. I was stalling for time, but I didn’t know what he expected me
to do. I started to stand up.
“*Kt pt rdama!*” he shouted. “Do not . . . Hold still, please.”
“Look,” I said. “This is just a mistake. I thought this building was empty. I
didn’t expect you to be here. Just a mistake.”
I was talking quickly, not expecting the Turk to translate and understand what
I was saying. It was a distraction. But a distraction for what? I needed a plan. “It’s a mistake,” I repeated. “I wasn’t expecting anyone to be in here. Not that it makes much difference, I suppose. I haven’t touched anything.”

“Durmak!”

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, keeping my voice as calm as I could. I had to make a move. I took a breath and turned on my flashlight, pointing it into the man’s face while I pulled my gun out from underneath my robe. He immediately squinted at the light, and there was a loud bang. For a second, I thought I’d been shot. But as I waited for the pain to start, the Turk slumped to the floor.

“Shit,” Kat said from the open door as she lowered her pistol, her voice wavering. She’d just killed a man. “There goes the element of surprise. Is that bomb running?”

“Yeah.” I took off the lid and the red timer lights shined up at me. “Three minutes, fifteen seconds. Are you done?”

“No,” she said. “I saw him follow you in. Is this building part of the compound?”

“I guess so. We have to hurry!”

She ran out the door and I followed, sprinting down the street to the warehouse. The door was ajar, and we ducked inside, hoping that this place wasn’t also part of the compound and guarded. It didn’t look like it. There were rows and rows of boxes stacked to the ceiling. A freight-elevator shaft was there, but Kat didn’t want to wait for it. She ran to the steps in the corner and climbed them, two or three at a time, until she reached the top floor. I was only a step behind her as we ran to the windows.

She was standing at an open window.

“This building could come down in the explosion,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Don’t have a choice, though. If it comes down, we’re screwed.” Kat reached out the window, holding nails in her lips. I held the heavy fabric up as she began pounding a nail into it. I could feel every second, as if the timer was giving me electric shocks as it counted down. Working on the last nail, she spoke. “If they didn’t hear the gunshot, they’re going to hear this hammer.”

“I haven’t heard any alarm.” Looking out the window, I could see down into the compound. Behind the wall was a squat, sprawling one-story house. There were no lights on.
I checked my watch under the flashlight. “We’re all going to hear a lot in about sixty seconds.”
“Did you lay the fuse?” I asked.
“Not yet,” she said, smacking her head for forgetting it. She dug through the bag to find the coil.
“Forty-five seconds,” I said.
“I’ve got it,” she answered, twisting the end of the long coil of fuse onto the two-foot fuse Lee built into the thermite.
“Twenty-five seconds. Come on,” I urged, and Kat started unrolling the coil, both of us retreating to the stairs.
“Ten,” I said, and stopped looking at my watch. “Light it.”
She pulled out a match and struck it against the wall. But before she could light it, there was a tremendous crash, and our building shook, knocking Kat and me down the stairs to the landing at the second floor. Everything turned white and then black.

Kat was above me, looking down into my face, pointing my flashlight into my eyes.
“What happened?”
“You all right?” she asked.
“Yeah, I guess.”
“Then let’s get the hell out of here. You probably have a concussion. You got knocked out pretty good there.”
I couldn’t see straight, and I put my arm over her shoulders, and she held me around the waist.
“What time is it?” I asked. I felt like I was waking up from a deep sleep.
“You’ve only been out for a couple seconds,” she said.
“What happened?” She helped me walk. I could feel wetness on my face as we descended the last flight of stairs. “I’m bleeding.”
“It’s not bad. Let’s just get to the truck.”
We got out of the building with no problems and found that the street outside was shrouded in dust. Kat was holding me around the waist, but I pulled away from her and stumbled, confused, toward the fallen building. It was hard to see because of all the white dust, but the office building was flattened. All three of the expensive cars outside the Minoan compound—the Mercedes, Alfa Romeo, and Bentley—were twisted mounds of steel. The
wall with the compound door was gone, revealing the house beyond. Half a
dozens people had come out of it, dazed and sleepy.
But there was a brilliant fire on the wall up to the east—the thermite was
burning. Kat must’ve lit it while I was knocked out. Right now it just looked
like a spiral, but once the fire died down, the logo of the Munich Olympics
would be obvious. I turned, about as stable as a man made out of Jell-O.
Kat pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and had me press it to the gash on
my head.
“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m going to be black-and-blue tomorrow, but right
now I’m fine. I kind of landed on you. Sorry about that.”
“I’m okay.”
“We need to find a clinic somewhere,” she said.
“I’m going to be fine.”
“But you don’t look fine,” she said. “Security will definitely question a
foreigner walking around the train station with a homemade bandage
strapped around his head. We have to look like regular, unremarkable
people.”
I nodded as we hobbled to the truck. “Just buy bandages and gauze from a
pharmacy. We don’t want anybody paying that much attention to my face.”
She paused, dabbing at the wound. “Yeah. It’s probably not too serious. It’s a
head wound, and head wounds bleed a lot. If you start feeling worse, we’ll
take you to the hospital. For now, let’s get to the train station. We’ll have
time on the train to rest up before we have to do this whole thing a second
time in Baghdad.”
Two police cars came flying past us, but the cops didn’t look our way. We
were only a block and a half from the bombing—almost to our truck—but
they didn’t stop to worry about us. We might show up in a police report or
witness statement later. But there was so much confusion, and so much dust,
that no one could be sure of what they saw. And we would be long gone by
then.
The truck was right where we had left it, and I climbed into it and then
slumped against the closed door. As we drove, Kat kept reaching across the
seat to see how the wound was doing and whether or not I was sleeping.
We stopped at an all-night pharmacy, and she went in to get the things we
needed.
Sirens blared in all directions, but they were far away. I ducked down anyway.

“Are you okay?” Kat asked me as she got back in the truck.

“I’m going to be fine. I just need to lie down.”

She drove the truck and I wished I could recline the seat and sleep. But she forced me to keep pressure on the cut on my head. We finally ended up at the train station, and she stopped in the long-term parking lot. She told me it wasn’t going to hurt as she treated my wound, and then she spent 10 minutes hurting me—scrubbing the wound with gauze and alcohol. She said it was full of dust and grit from the explosion, and she had to dig it out, and that normally something like this would be done with a toothbrush, which sounded awful. Finally she trimmed a bandage to fit the gash. It wasn’t that big once it was cleaned—about two and a half inches long—and the bleeding had mostly stopped.

She had me hold it in place while she got the surgical tape.

“You know,” she said, “we haven’t made any plans for after Munich. Everyone is supposed to scatter. But we haven’t bought any plane tickets. Some people have money tucked away—not everyone contributed all of their life savings. I kept some of my money, just a couple hundred dollars. But we really don’t have any plans. Maybe you and Mary can find a place to live where no one will ever find you. We’re all criminals now. We all need to go underground. I can go back to my life, but everyone will ask me where I went for three months, and what am I going to say? I joined a cult and sacrificed some teenagers to save the world? If we ever get caught, there will be a lot of explaining to do.”

She taped down the bandage.

“Mary and I aren’t going to settle down.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s not here, and you are.”

Kat pressed the last edge down and leaned back to look at me.

“I thought that you guys were split up because you—” She stopped.

“What? What did you hear?”

She frowned and began putting the medical supplies back in the paper bag.

“John told me that both of you were too attached—that you wouldn’t follow the plan if either one of you was in danger.”

“Did he say that it was his idea?”
“Yes.”
“He told me Mary asked to be separated from me for the raids. That’s what Mary said too.” I took a deep breath. “I’m starting to realize how naïve I’ve been this whole time.”
“What do you mean?”
“Mary and I . . . I wonder if she’s just using me.”
Kat stared at me for a few seconds, then touched the bandage again, pressing down the edges of the tape. But this time her hand lingered on the side of my face.
I stared back at her.
And then she kissed me. Again.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Baghdad Railway was 1,600 miles, three days of travel with all the stops. Kat and I spent the time sleeping and reviewing the brief dossiers on the Sumerian line, making sure we had the plan down cold without Eugene. The planning in the dossiers had already been done by Bakr, who was from Baghdad, and we’d already studied it for weeks. The Sumerians’ compound turned out to be a more public space than the Minoans’. The family ran a hotel and restaurant as a front for their secret activities. Bakr had gotten Eugene set up there, and now we would get a room at the Sumerian hotel as well. It sounded risky, being right under the noses of the people we were supposed to attack, but it also made everything easier: we could place the bomb nearly anywhere. We could just leave it in our room, if we wanted. Or an elevator, or a housekeeping closet. And there was a central courtyard ideal for our thermite stencil.

Even picking up the bomb and thermite would be simple: Bakr had had Lee and Lin ship it to his uncle’s house. There was no need for code phrases or fake names.

Or so we’d been told.

So there wasn’t much to do on the train.

We’d delivered one invitation, and it had nearly killed both of us. But we had done it. We had completed the first part of our mission. I’d been cracked on the head, and Kat had had to shoot a man, but we had made it.

Maybe we actually had the chance to succeed at all this. To survive, and go on with our lives. Everything felt renewed and reenergized. So when Kat wanted to introduce me to the world of wine in the plush dining car, I thought for a minute about my policy on drinking, and my insistence that I was never going to be like my father, and said, “Why not?” And when we’d gone through two bottles, laughing loudly and making a scene, we decided to take
the third bottle with us back to the stateroom. And when we got back to our room, as the train was hurtling past Aleppo, we slept together. Maybe it was the thrill of completing the Sumerian mission, or being nearly killed, or Kat patching me up, or the wine. We were trying to save the world, so I didn’t feel like holding back anymore. We were going to live.

When we got to Baghdad, we enjoyed ourselves as much as we could. We were still riding high from the Sumerian raid and since we didn’t have to do any recon on the compound, we sampled everything: the best food, the best wine, and the best bed in the hotel. Kat spent the money she had; I spent the money I had. And we had the best vacation anyone could ask for. Well, for a day, at least.

The bomb and thermite were easy to get, as Bakr had said they would be. We checked out of the hotel and walked through the plan dozens of times. I set the bomb in the middle of the street, in front of the building, and Kat laid out the tarp. And then, just like we’d discussed, she lit the fuse and I set the timer. We watched as the thermite began to burn hot and white, illuminating the square in front of the hotel.

Backing up, I saw windows opening, someone throwing curtains aside and opening ornate shutters.

“Kat,” I said. “Look.”

“The guests are coming toward the tarp,” she said, horror in her voice. I didn’t know “Get away” in Arabic, so I started waving my arms, trying to get people’s attention, trying to get them to duck and cover. But no one was looking at us.

“Mike,” she said. “The bomb. We have to go.”

Windows were lighting up all around the square, silhouettes appearing.

“Come on,” Kat said, and grabbed my hand. “The bomb.” I stared at her in fear. We were having too much fun. We weren’t taking this seriously. We were playing lovers while we were supposed to be playing terrorists.

“Run!” she screamed.

I finally found my feet, and we ran south down the street. Everyone was looking out their windows, watching the whole scene.
A moment later there was a flash so bright it lit up the neighborhood like it was noon, and I was lifted off my feet and thrown wildly across the road. Everything went black again.
CHAPTER TWELVE

“Mike.”
I was blinking. I could feel the rough dirt in my eyes and my tears trying to wash it away.
They were dribbling down the side of my face. Tears—or was it blood?
“Mike.”
Something was touching my chest. Cold and wet.
And then, as if a switch had been flipped, I could hear everything—the screams, the sirens, the scraping of rock falling on top of rock.
“Mary?” I called out.
“Mike. It’s me.”
“Mary?”
“Kat,” she said.
“I can’t see. Kat, I can’t see.”
“I’ve put my hijab over your face. Your head is fine. It’s just one deep cut above your eyebrow. Nothing serious. I can stitch that up.”
“Are we safe?”
“We have to get out of here. I’ve pulled you into an alley.”
“Can I stand up?”
“I hope so.”
“My chest hurts.”
“You might have hurt a few ribs.”
I felt her hands pressing on my side, and I gritted my teeth at the pain. I tried to stand. I was weak and hurt, but my feet were steady.
There was a searing pain near my sternum, and I yelped as she pulled my arm over her shoulder so we could walk.
“What happened?”
“What do you think? The bomb went off.”
“Did people die?”
She was quiet for a minute. “Maybe. Yes. At least a few.”
“We should have planted it in the hotel. Then at least we would have killed the Sumerians.”
“And all the innocent people staying in the rooms.”
“My chest hurts.”
“Maybe you were hit by a chunk of cement—they came hurtling out of the hotel.”
“Are you okay?”
“Scuffed up, but nothing worse than a few bruises. I think. It’s a good thing we don’t have to plant any more bombs. You have a tendency to get beat up.”
We walked for another 20 minutes or so, but my pain wasn’t letting up.
“There’s a pharmacy up here. I can see the sign. I’m going to leave you here and go get some painkillers and something for the cut.”
“Don’t be long.”
“I won’t. You’re going to be fine.”
She lowered me down onto the stony ground of what must have been a dirt road. A dirt alley, probably.
I felt her kiss my cheek, and then she was gone.
I tried to raise my right arm again, but it felt like the muscles weren’t even there. It didn’t respond at all. It hurt like hell, though.
After what felt like an hour, Kat came back.
“We have to get out of here.”
“Where is there to go?”
“Listen. I’m not wearing the abaya and hijab anymore. My hijab is wrapped around your head. The pharmacy wouldn’t sell to a single white girl not wearing the right clothes. I had to shoplift. It’s a good thing all the cops are busy with the explosion.”
“Great.”
“Let’s just get out of here. I got what we needed.”
“Kat?” I said, as she was helping me to my feet again.
“What?”
“I’m sorry I called you Mary.”
She laughed, but there wasn’t a lot of cheer in it. “Old habits.”
After walking a long way, we checked into another hotel, where we had dropped off our luggage earlier. I got the feeling that Kat picked it because
they didn’t look too discriminating in their clientele.
In our bathroom, she unwrapped the hijab from my face. The bleeding had stopped, and my tears had flooded the dirt out of my eyes. She scrubbed out the wound—I took off my leather belt and bit down on it as she scoured the gouge in my forehead with a toothbrush. Once it was clean, she stitched it up with a needle that she sterilized by holding in the flame of a candle.
I showered, and the shower stall turned brown from all the dust I had covering me—in my hair, on my face, up and down my arms. When I was clean and dry—and she had taken a shower of her own—she bandaged my head with gauze and surgical tape.
We divided up the money that we had left, after factoring in plane tickets, which wasn’t much. A couple hundred dollars.
We had guns waiting for us in Munich, so we discarded the pistols we were carrying—throwing them down the hotel’s garbage chute.

We had originally planned to split up on our way to Munich, but we had stopped caring about that. We boarded a plane bound for Munich, with a brief layover in Belgrade.
What if we really did live through this? It occurred to me, then, that we’d also have to live with what we’d done.
Everybody was talking about the Olympic Games on the plane. From what was said—that I could understand—the USSR and East Germany were on a spree. The couple across from me was talking about gymnastics, where the USSR and East Germany had swept the floor exercises, the vault, the uneven bars, and the balance beam.
We had done our part. We had delivered our invitations. Munich was going to be a mess, but we made it this far, taking a beating, but with no serious problems. Now we would be getting to the heart of Endgame. We’d see who would show up for the Calling, and we’d try to get them to see reason. It sounded impossible before, but so did the invitations—and we did those missing our third team member.
I squeezed Kat’s hand and reclined my seat.
We hadn’t made any contingencies for Olympics security. Jim and Julia had been to the Mexico City games in 1968, and they’d said the security was slim to none, especially in the plazas—like the plaza with the sunburst symbol, where we were going to meet up with the Players, if we couldn’t stop them at
their hotels first. Mexico City had had a student demonstration turn into a massacre 10 days before the games—it reminded me of the People’s Park protests where activists had died—along with the one where I hit that cop. I looked at Kat. I imagined us heading toward some new, pleasant adventure instead of to Munich to possibly kill people. These Olympics were nicknamed “the Happy Games,” and I wished we were heading there for another reason. I missed Mary. And more than once on the plane, I wished that Kat’s hand, which I was holding, were Mary’s hand. I hated myself for it.

It was all planned out. Agatha, the excommunicated former La Tène Player, was going to meet us at the sunburst spiral, where we would all play the role of tourists. Agatha insisted that all of the Players would come to the spiral when they got into the city, just to scope the place out, to make plans for where and when they would show up on September 5. From there, Agatha would ID them, and we would tail them to their hotels—just like we’d practiced in Reno. I looked around the plane and wondered if the Player from Baghdad was here. There were a couple of guys who looked to be the right age, but neither of them looked like a trained killer. But maybe that was part of the act.

I slept from Belgrade to Munich. It was the shorter flight, just over two hours, and I woke up as the plane descended into the city and the captain made an announcement. The plane was crowded, all the seats filled. Everyone was going to the Olympics. A woman sitting next to me was eager to talk now that I was awake. She wore a T-shirt with the Greek flag on it.

“You know,” she said, “the Olympics are Greek. We started the whole thing.”
“T’d heard that.”
“You are American?”
“Yes, you?”
“No, no, no. Greek.”
“I’ve missed out on the Olympic coverage so far. How is Greece doing?”
She laughed, and took a bottle of mineral water from her bag. “Not so good.
Not like America. Not like the Soviets. No medals yet. But we’re going to win in Greco-Roman wrestling. It’s named for us—we must win!” She chuckled to herself. “The Americans are doing well, but this is not their year. I am always amazed at the . . . what’s the word? Tenacity? Is that right? The tenacity of the Soviets. And the East Germans always surprise—they are such a small country, but they perform so well. Of course, they get help from the Soviets.”

“Are you traveling alone?” I asked, mainly out of politeness. I should have been faithfully watching for tails or even for Players.

“Traveling, yes, but meeting friends.”

“We are too.”

“Meeting other Americans?”

“Mostly, yes,” Kat said.

“Try to keep your chin up. The Soviets already have ten more gold medals than the Americans.”

“There’s still over a week left,” I said.

She laughed. “See? That’s what I’m talking about. Keep your chin up. We learn that in Greece. No medals in the winter Olympics, only one bronze at the summer games last time, in Mexico City. A Greco-Roman wrestler. It’s what we’re good at.”

I looked at my watch. It was just past noon on September 2.

“Is that your luggage?” she asked, pointing to the backpack between my feet.

“Yes. And we checked two bags.”

“You’re going to be in for a long wait. That’s why I don’t bring much. The Germans check all the bags when you come into their country, and I’ve heard they’re being extra careful this year. Terrorists.”

“Terrorists?”

“Have you not read the news?”

“Nothing new. I bought a newspaper yesterday, but it was a couple days old.”

“Terror attacks all over the world, all within days. America, Iraq, China, India.” She reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out an Olympics ticket to see the wrestling matches later in the week. “You see that logo? It appeared at all of the bombings. There was even one in Turkey.”

“Maybe someone is grandstanding—telling those countries that they will lose in the games. Taunting them.”

“Maybe,” she said, putting the ticket away again. “But they’ve killed people.”
My stomach dropped. We tried our best to avoid killing civilians, but sometimes it couldn’t be avoided.
“So German security is tighter?”
“Yes, very much. They always check luggage, but now they’re looking for bombs.”
I looked down at my bag and at Kat, grateful we had ditched our guns.
It worried me that this woman hadn’t mentioned a bomb going off in Ethiopia, or Japan, or Mongolia. If we’d missed anyone, we’d have to travel to their compounds and find a different way to stop them.
The plane hit the tarmac and slowed.
“Good meeting you,” she said.
“Yes,” I said. “You too.”
I closed my eyes, seeing the images of the bombs again and again—seeing the man in the office building go down from Kat’s bullet. He would have died in the explosion anyway. Hell, maybe other people had died in the explosion as well. But I knew for certain that I’d been part of two people’s deaths now. I didn’t feel like a murderer, but that’s what I was, and it disturbed me how easy it had all been—and how little I felt about the second one. That first—the sheriff—had hit me hard. I’d had panic attacks, nightmares, and waking dreams plaguing me for months, but this second one was easier. I had trouble even remembering the details.
My squad was the second to arrive. We were renting a house about a mile from the Olympic Plaza—the plaza with the sunburst spiral, where we all would set about turning the Players. We took a cab to the house, left our luggage, and then headed for the plaza.

Agatha and John were sitting on a cement bench. Agatha was young, only 22 years old. But instead of youthful vigor, she had the posture and attitude of someone who had spent most of her life training to kill other kids like herself. She looked worn out, mentally and physically, and as she sat next to John, I could see the same look on his face. They were both tired of being who they were. They both wanted all of this to end.

John stood up to hug us as we reached him. “Tell me everything,” he said, pointing at my head. “I know Eugene got nabbed. Did you get your invitations sent?”

“Yep,” Kat said. “We might have killed the Baghdad player for all we know, though.”

“I read about that in the paper. You guys are all right?”

“I got hit in the head a couple times, and might have cracked some ribs,” I said. “Good thing Kat’s a nurse.”

“Well,” John said. “Agatha and I are watching for Players. You up for tailing?”

“Sure,” I said, and sat down next to him. Kat sat next to me.

Agatha knew the Players by sight—the lines all spied on one another, and she had a book of photographs and physical descriptions. We leafed through it, trying to familiarize ourselves with the faces.

“There,” Agatha said. “Girl wearing a black abaya and head scarf. Ghaniyah. Sumerian.”

John pointed across the plaza to where squad two—Larry, Lee, and Lin—
were sitting on a grassy berm. The three of them stood up and gestured back to John that they had seen her.

They all spread out casually, Larry moving forward to be the lead, Lin walking close behind Ghaniyah, and Lee in the far-back position. She crossed the street confidently, seemingly unaware of the tail.

“She doesn’t look like a killer,” I said to Kat.

“Neither do we,” she said.

“Don’t get complacent,” Agatha warned. “These people have trained their entire lives to be Players. They know how to kill and how to torture. They know how to shadow other people, and they’ll be conscious of someone following them unless we’re at our very best.”

“Don’t be afraid to screw the plan,” John said. “If you think you’ve been spotted, then kill if you have to, or abort entirely. Don’t let them get the jump on you.”

We nodded, though we’d heard all of this a hundred times from Walter and John. We knew what we were doing—or, at the very least, what we should be doing. We weren’t experienced in actually shadowing a real Player. But that was going to have to be enough. The time to prepare was gone, and it was time to act.

The pay phone at a nearby booth rang, and John jumped up and answered it. I couldn’t hear the call, but it was short.

“It was Douglas,” John said. “He’s back at the safe house. Phyllis, Henry, and Molly just arrived from India. They say Phyllis is hurt, but they came in on the same plane as their Player. Henry is following him. Molly’s staying with Phyllis.”

“I’ve heard Pravheet is very good,” Agatha said. “I hope that guy you’ve got following him is one of the best.”

“Pravheet is his name?” Kat asked. “The Indian?”

“The Harappan,” Agatha said, nodding.

“Henry has his ups and downs,” John said. “He can shadow, though. He did all right in training, anyway.”

Agatha shook her head. “Doing all right is not enough. He’s got to be good.”

We waited there for another hour, everyone quiet. This was what we had been training for. Everything here—waiting for the Players, shadowing them to their hotels. This was real. This was where people were going to get hurt. Us or them. Probably both. Hopefully both, because I didn’t expect us to
come out unscathed—we just had to get them on our side or take them out. There were more of us than there were of them, and we’d need all the manpower we could get.

“Why don’t you stay here and help, Agatha?” I asked, the waiting driving me crazy.

“I’ll tell you what I told John and Walter: I’m out of the business. I’m done. Done with the La Tène line. I’m helping you because the world needs fewer Players. We need to stand up to the Makers and say we’re not part of their game. But my method of doing that is to walk away.”

I was about to speak when Agatha interrupted.

“There she is,” she said. “Raakel. The Minoan. Gorgeous.”

Raakel was indeed gorgeous. She was dressed in tight jeans and a loose shirt. Her dark hair was twisted into a knot on the top of her head, and she literally danced down into the concrete sunburst, her small backpack swinging in her hand before she pulled up on it and slid it on her back.

“She’s excited about something,” John said.

“She’s one of them,” Agatha said wearily. “Eager to Play. Excited to be the big winner. Everything I’ve been told indicates that she’s cocky but deadly—she enjoys a fight. Bloodlust. Whatever you want to call it.”

“Well,” John said. “Mike, Kat, go shadow her. Take Barbara with you.” He nodded toward the grass where Barbara sat. She nodded back and stood.

I was in the lead, Barbara was back, and Kat was far back.

At the airport I had gone to a clothing store and bought everything that a certain mannequin was wearing, from its shirt to its shoes. I wanted to wear something authentically German. It wasn’t lederhosen or anything like that, but it was a slightly different look from American jeans and a T-shirt.

I hurried up the opposite side of the main road. Raakel was moving at a fast clip, and so I didn’t try to sprint to get in front of her. Instead I walked parallel to her.

We followed her for five blocks when she suddenly turned on her heel and headed backward. I had to peel off. If she’d seen me in her periphery, she’d see me if I turned around and tried the same trick. I stopped at the traffic light and pretended I was heading the other way, but it just gave me a chance to stop and watch.

Barbara kept moving in the same direction, crossing paths with Raakel. Kat was the only one of us who could keep after her—she’d now become the
Barbara turned and ran down the side street, while I hurried into an alley, furiously unbuttoning my shirt. Underneath was a yellow T-shirt. I walked back out onto the street and searched for Raakel. I couldn’t see her anywhere, but I told myself not to panic. I was just here to watch the Olympics and do a little shopping. I wasn’t supposed to run.

As I backtracked my route, I saw Kat, briefly, heading north—the same direction Barbara had gone. I turned at the next opportunity. I walked down a block, amongst a large group of tourists. And, for just an instant, I saw Barbara turn a corner and disappear behind a building. I followed her as quickly as I could, but as I turned the same corner, Barbara was kneeling down, tying her shoe. I walked past her, trying not to look like we were together.

“Mike,” she said.

I froze. That wasn’t how we were supposed to shadow someone. We weren’t supposed to talk.

“She went in that hotel on the left—the Hilton.”

“Should we wait for her? See if she gets a room? A lot of hotels are full because of the Olympics.”

“Kat went in,” she said, standing up and moving next to me. We sat down on the bench beside a bus stop and waited. The bus came, and we waved it past us.

“I’m not as afraid of them seeing us,” Barbara told me. “The Players, I mean. They have no idea who we are. Why would she even care about us? I don’t think anything bad will happen if she—Raakel—spots us.”

“Either way, we don’t really know what we’re doing.”

“For all the training we’ve gotten, all the weeks of shooting and fighting and shadowing, we’re still just normal people. I’m a PR assistant. You’re a student.”

“And barely that.”

Kat came out of the hotel a few minutes later, saw us, smiled, and took a different route. Barbara and I stood up and headed back to John. When we got back, Kat relayed the number of the room Raakel had gotten.

During that day we saw all the Players arrive except the Aksumite, and all the squads came back except for squad five—the one that was Rodney, Jim, and Julia, going after the Aksumite. It took two days, but Douglas managed to get
forged press credentials to access the Ethiopian Olympic team. They had just won bronze in the 10,000-meter, and Douglas got a chance to sit down with the team’s governmental delegate. The delegate was not familiar with any bombing in Addis Ababa. We had to assume that Rodney, Jim, and Julia were not coming back.

Mary arrived alone. She told me that in the lead-up to the bombing, Bruce had gotten some kind of virus. He was in a hospital in Veracruz and was in no condition to fly, let alone stand up and help with the bombing. Mary had laid the thermite on the Olmec’s expansive lawn and set it burning. She’d had to place the bomb, too, by herself.

I was so happy to see her that I kissed and hugged her before I even knew what I was doing.

But then my mind flashed back to Kat and what had happened between us after Istanbul.

What was I doing?
On the morning of September fifth we rose at four a.m. We split back into squads. Kat looked angry. I couldn’t blame her. I had shared a bed with Mary back at the safe house. We didn’t do anything, but it still was wrong. I didn’t know what to do about that. But now wasn’t the time. Kat and I had been assigned to Raakel first this morning. We had to give her the talk. We had to hope that Raakel would be receptive to our message and not just kill us on the spot. We entered the hotel, our pistols concealed beneath T-shirts and jackets. We had a walkie-talkie with an earphone so we could use it without the rest of the hotel hearing it. We’d had a word of warning from Agatha that we needed to be perfectly accurate—the Players would scatter at the slightest sign of a trap. None of them knew what to expect; no living Player had ever gone to a Calling like this, and she said they wouldn’t immediately start killing one another. They’d be waiting for a sign. But a hail of bullets was not that sign. They would scatter: they’d assume that one of the lines was breaking the rules by killing everyone before the Players could start Playing. Agatha said these Players were lightning fast, dangerous, and brutal. I followed Kat through the Hilton lobby, walking across intricately cut marble floors. There was a stairway marked NUR AUTORISIERTES PERSONAL —Kat told me it meant “authorized personnel only.” We went to the fourth floor, and then Kat led me back out to the hallway. We waited down the hall from Raakel’s room for the call to go in. “I don’t like being exposed like this,” Kat whispered. “I’m sure it’ll only be a minute.” “I hope you’re right.” “Where will you go when this is over?” I asked, to cut the tension.
“Switzerland? France?”
“I want to go home,” she said, kneeling in position, but resting her Winchester on her legs. “If I make it out of here alive, that’s where I’m heading.”
“Go back to your job? That’ll be some awkward explaining to do.”
“I’m so good at telling lies now,” she said with a sad, defeated tone. “I’ll make it sound okay.”
“About Mary,” I said. Kat looked at me sharply. “What should I—”
She cut me off. “You’re a big boy, Mike. You can figure it out on your own.”
“No, I need to tell you. Nothing happened last night. It’s over. There’s nothing real about it. There never was. But you and I—that’s something special. I’ll go back with you to your job. Or we can go somewhere else—anywhere. I mean it.”
Kat frowned. “You’re so young, Mike.”
“What’s five years?”
“That’s not what I meant.”
Walter came on the walkie-talkie—I turned the volume down very low, even with the sound coming through the earpiece. “Something’s going on. We’re seeing a larger police presence than we saw when we did recon yesterday morning. Over.”
“Are they on to us? Over,” I said.
“I’ll get back to you,” Walter said. “I’m going to try a police channel. I’ll need Kat to translate. Over.”
I looked to Kat. “He wants you to translate.”
“What? I had five years of German but haven’t touched it since high school. I’m pretty rusty.”
“You can do this.”
Kat took the walkie-talkie. “This is Kat. I’ll help if I can. Over.”
“Walter says go to channel sixteen. There’s a lot of static, but something is going on,” I told her.
I unplugged the earpiece so we could both hear. What came next was five minutes of German chatter. I kept waiting for Kat to translate it, but she just shook her head. This was coming fast, from multiple people, probably using radio lingo she didn’t know.
She flipped back to channel 23—our channel. “There’s been a shooting in the Olympic Village. I’m really missing a lot of this. Something about Israeli
team members and . . . a hostage situation? I’m not sure. They keep using a word that must mean ‘terrorism.’ Terrorismus. And they’re activating everybody. But I don’t really know. I don’t have the vocabulary for this.”
I looked out the hallway window to the street below at the entrance to the hotel. No one was moving.
“Keep listening, Kat,” Walter said. “Over.”
She switched the radio to the police channel, then back again.
“Shots are being fired in the Olympic apartments,” she said after a moment.
“Switching back. Over.”
There was more chatter on the police channel, and we started to hear sirens, first to our east, but soon they were all around us, speeding to the Village.
Kat looked at me in horror as she switched channels again. “It’s a group called Black September. They’re armed, and they’re murdering the Israelis in their beds. A guy managed to escape. He said they’ve killed at least two people, both coaches. Someone jumped out his window and alerted the authorities.”
There were policemen everywhere now, combing the plaza.
I took the walkie-talkie. “Walter, this is Mike. Should we go ahead with the plan? Over.”
“There are more and more cops here at the plaza,” Molly broke in on her radio. She was watching the starburst spiral plaza. “And they’re jumpy. If we stay here and if the Players come, it’ll be a suicide mission. It’ll be a shootout with police, and we don’t have an escape route other than the way we came in. Over.”
Plan Bravo. We weren’t just staking out Raakel. We were going to knock on her door. It was going to be us versus her, and we had to convince her that she’s wrong about everything she’s worked for her entire life. And if she didn’t agree, we were supposed to kill her.
“It’s time,” I said to Kat.
We double-checked our guns, made sure they were loaded, flipped off the safeties, and headed down the hall. We were either going to convince the Minoan Player or we were going to have to kill her. This was it. We stopped at room 412.
Ready? Kat mouthed.
I nodded.
I knocked on the door.
Excerpt from *ENDGAME: THE CALLING*

SEE HOW ENDGAME BEGINS:

ENDGAME IS REAL. ENDGAME IS NOW.

ENDGAME THE CALLING

JAMES FREY

AND

NILS JOHNSON-SHELTON
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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