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Opening extract from

Zeroes

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CHAPTER 1
SCAM

"MORE COFFEE?"

Ethan jumped. It'd been a long night. "Okay."

The waitress wasn't even listening, the coffee pot dipping toward Ethan's cup. Which was fine. The coffee was crap and he was already wired, but it gave him an excuse to keep sitting there.

He'd spent the last two hours hunched in a back booth of the Moonstruck Diner, staring out the window at the Cambria Central Bank. It was right across the street, and it opened at eight.

"Want anything else?" the waitress asked.

"I'm good. Thanks."

He drank some more coffee. Still crap.

At least the bitter java gave him a reason to seem jumpy.

Nobody would look at him and say, "Hey, that kid is real jumpy. Must have something to do with the army-green duffel bag under his feet."

Nope. Nobody would blame the bag.

He glanced around the diner. Everyone was wrapped up in their own six a.m. thoughts. Nobody was even looking at him. Okay, one girl was looking at him. But she glanced away like she'd been caught staring. So apart from that one cute girl at the front of the diner, nobody was looking at him.

Besides, this was the middle of Main Street. Nobody would come rolling in to seize Ethan and his bag and haul them both out into the dawn. Nothing bad ever happened here in Cambria, California, population half a million during a college term.

The diner was filling up with delivery guys on breaks, respectable citizens in suits, and the occasional group of clubbers winding down. All Ethan had to do was watch the bank and wait for the doors to open.

Easy. As long as the waiting didn't kill him.

"More coffee?"

"Seriously, it's been five minutes. Can you stop with the coffee?"

The waitress looked stung.

"Sorry," Ethan said. But she was already gone.

He pulled the duffel bag up and wedged it into a corner of the booth like a makeshift pillow. Which was pretty funny,

given what was *in* the bag. It was the stuff *in* the bag that was keeping him awake. That, and the people looking for it.

He'd always known the voice would do this one day—get him into serious trouble. The voice didn't care about consequences. The voice didn't weigh up the pros and cons and then say, "Hey, Ethan, this is how you can get what you want." The voice wasn't sentient like that; it wasn't smart. It didn't negotiate. The voice just went for it. It lied and lied, and most of the time Ethan didn't even know where the lies came from when they poured out of his mouth. How did the voice know half that stuff?

But Ethan had always known that one day he'd pay for all those lies.

Right now he was hoping today was not that day.

CHAPTER 2

SCAM

THE EVENING BEFORE HAD STARTED WELL.

A date with a beautiful woman, a premed student from the north side. Ethan put on his best shirt, a pin-striped button-up his sister had bought him last year, promising it would drive girls crazy.

The premed girl was way out of his league, even with the shirt, but the voice had talked her into it. He could see her trying to understand it herself. She was at least four years older than him, way more sophisticated and much hotter. But every time she seemed uncertain, Ethan would draw her back in.

Or, rather, the voice would.

It would say just the right thing about the midnight art-house film they'd seen, or the obscure premed stuff she

was into, or Ethan's plan to study at the Sorbonne one day. Whatever the hell the Sorbonne was.

But then it got late and exhausting and frankly kind of expensive. He'd used up all his cash buying movie tickets and caramel popcorn and drinks from a wine bar so divey that Indira had called it "quaint." The wine was fifteen bucks a glass. Ethan didn't even like wine.

If it'd been up to him, he would have scammed his way through the night. The voice was great at getting stuff for free. But Indira clung to Ethan's side, watching his every move like he was some exotic breed she'd never seen before. A teenage kid from the wrong side of town. She probably thought he was quaint too, in a divey way.

It was pretty clear that the voice could never convince Indira to do anything more than talk and smile and cling. A nice girl from the north side, she probably wouldn't even make out on a first date.

So the voice switched itself to mute while Ethan worked out what he wanted to do next. When he decided all he wanted was to go home, the voice sorted that out too.

He left Indira standing by her car in front of the art-house cinema. She seemed to glow, lit by the marquee lights announcing a lineup of classic films. Her long summer dress billowed in the night sea breeze. She looked confused by his sudden departure. Maybe a little hurt.

"This blows," Ethan muttered to himself. In his real voice.

He hated how sad she looked. But he didn't have the energy to turn around. It was all the fault of that stupid art-house film. Who knew it could be *that* boring? Watching it had sucked the life out of him.

As Ethan walked away, he rubbed his jaw with the palms of both hands. His muscles always felt weird after a long night of letting the voice talk for him. Like he'd been speaking a foreign language. It left a taste in his mouth too. Oily charm with notes of bullshit.

The worst part was, he had no way home. He was totally out of cash, so a cab was out of the question, and buses didn't run this late. Indira would've given him a ride, but of course the voice had spun some crap about his vintage Jaguar parked a few streets away, just to get rid of her.

The voice sucked at planning ahead. The voice just knew when Ethan wanted out.

It also liked to twist the knife sometimes. It had claimed the Jaguar was a present from his dad. Yeah, right.

Luckily, it was summer and Cambria's nightclub strip was still in full swing. There were plenty of people to hitch a ride with on Ivy Street. Ethan followed the thudding drumbeat until he reached the crowd. Light spilled from canopied doorways, and people shouted at each other, deafened by music that rebounded from the pavement and warehouse walls.

The voice could talk Ethan's way into one of the clubs. But once inside, no one would hear him over the music. He'd

be just another gawky seventeen-year-old with a mousy buzz cut and too many freckles.

No, what he needed was somebody here outside.

A muddle of tribes skirted each other on Ivy. Hipsters and scene kids, crumpled coked-up suits from the stripper bar, a few raver wannabes in summer outfits showing lots of skin. They were mostly older than Ethan, which meant they mostly had cars. Somebody could be talked into giving him a lift home.

Just ahead of him, a guy exited one of the clubs from a side door. Which probably meant he was staff and sober enough to drive.

Ethan sped up.

The guy walked with a steady purpose. He had an army-green duffel bag over one shoulder. Ethan let himself drift into the guy's way until the bag slapped against him.

"Hey, watch it!" he said in his own voice.

The guy spun to face him. He was a few inches shorter than Ethan, but twice as big across the shoulders. And he had no neck. The sort of guy who could crush you with an annoyed glare. His right hand dropped into a jacket pocket, like he was ready to pull a knife.

"Whoa." Ethan backed away. "My mistake. Sorry about that."

The guy scanned Ethan. His eyes were piercing, way too blue. Almost electric. But a moment later he smiled, eased his hand out of his pocket, and gripped Ethan's shoulder. It was like being held up by a wall.

"Sorry, man," the guy said. His voice was calm and low. "Did I hit you?"

"No problem. You missed, actually," Ethan sputtered, fear beating in his chest. All he wanted was to be on the same side as this guy in his next fight. He let the voice take over. "Taylor sent me over to help you out."

That was one of the voice's specialties. Names.

The big guy paused, looking him up and down. Not smiling anymore.

"Taylor sent you?" An edge of disbelief in the low rumble of his voice. "How's a squirt like you gonna help?"

Ethan hated when this happened. The voice would get him into situations that only the voice could get him out of. Then he was stuck, listening and waiting. Letting it talk.

"Taylor said you were bad off last night. Wasn't sure you'd remember the way to his house." The voice sounded like it was making a joke, so Ethan tried to smile.

The guy stared at him another moment, then laughed. Abruptly, like that was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. "What a dickhead. I worked off that hangover in the gym this morning. How do you know Taylor?"

"My sister's in his old army unit," Ethan heard himself say, and cringed.

Thing was, his sister really was in the army. Stuff could go really wrong when the voice told the truth. What if the guy asked for his sister's name? What would the voice say then?

But the guy relaxed, like he understood everything now. "So you're family. Taylor wants you to join the team."

Ethan nodded, because it seemed like the right thing to do. "He said I should learn from the best." The voice twisted his throat, like it was imitating someone. "'Nobody better than the Craig."

A low thunder of laughter spilled out of the Craig, who reached over and took Ethan's shoulder again. The weight of his hand almost buckled Ethan's knees.

"He tell you to say that? What a dickhead." He shoved Ethan, sending him stumbling a few steps backward. "Come on. Car's this way."

The Craig headed for a side street. Ethan took a breath and followed.

Hell, maybe he could still get a ride home out of this.

CHAPTER 3

SCAM

THE CRAIG OWNED JUST ABOUT THE CRAPPIEST car Ethan had ever seen. It was an old beat-up Ford sedan. Either it was brown or it was covered in enough dirt to make it look that way. It was hard to tell.

The Craig saw his expression and laughed that sharp, abrupt laugh again.

"Lesson one, kid: Skip the fancy cars. Too easy to spot. Don't let your ride make you an easy mark. Someone sets up on you, they'll be looking for a fancy car."

Ethan shrugged. There was a kind of paranoid logic to what the Craig was saying. Plus, his right hand had sunk into his pocket again, and Ethan still couldn't decide what was in there. A gun? A knife? Even at four a.m., it was way too hot to be wearing a jacket.

Craig noticed the direction of his gaze. "You're not carrying, are you?"

Ethan clenched his jaw, not trusting the voice. He shook his head.

"Good." Craig looked both ways up and down the street, then opened the Ford's back door and slung the duffel bag across the seats. "For now, your job is to keep your eyes open."

Ethan nodded mutely. A trickle of cold ran down his spine. He was about to get into a car with a strange man—a *really* strange man—who was armed and probably a criminal, with a duffel bag full of who-knew-what, and head for someplace unknown.

He opened his mouth to let the voice take over. It could say whatever it wanted—lie, plead, beg—as long as the Craig let Ethan walk away, back to Ivy Street, where he could charm some clueless raver into a ride home instead.

But the voice didn't say anything. Which meant there was nothing to say and no way out of this, not without raising Craig's suspicions. Ethan wasn't sure what would happen if Craig called Taylor and found out that everything he'd said was a lie. But nothing good, that was for sure.

So Ethan shut his mouth and got into the car.

CHAPTER 4

MOB

KELSIE NEVER WANTED NIGHTS LIKE THIS TO END.

When the nightclubs closed at four a.m., she wasn't ready to leave. But the crowd was breaking into groups of two or three, looking for a way home or some other kind of fun or . . . whatever else they were looking for.

Kelsie hated it when the throngs of dancers shattered into lonely pieces, like the gears of some wonderful machine broken beyond recognition.

She found Mikey leaning against the wall outside the Scheherazade. He looked beat, but he still managed to pull off that lazy-rock-god attitude—knee out, one foot on the wall. He had a cigarette pinched between finger and thumb, and he was watching the crowd through his own exhaled smoke.

She called his name.

His eyes rolled toward her. “Hey, little sis.”

She wasn’t his sister, but Mikey liked to remind Kelsie that she was too young to hang out in the clubs.

“Wanna get some pancakes?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“We should find some people,” Kelsie said. “You know, get a crew together.”

Mikey took a drag of his cigarette, said in a roiling stream of smoke, “Don’t you ever get sick of crowds?”

Kelsie laughed. “Mikey, it’s me you’re talking to.”

He grinned.

She found Remmy next. He was trying to pick up a girl—two girls, actually—and when one of them announced that she oh my God loved pancakes, Remmy came with. That made five, including Kelsie. Five was okay, but six was better.

As they headed up Ivy, Kelsie spotted her friend Ling coming out of the Buzz.

She swept up behind her, linking arms. “Hey, girlfriend!”

Ling jumped and spun. When she saw it was Kelsie, she gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m both wired and tired. Is that weird?”

“Too wired and/or tired for pancakes?”

“Never.”

That made six, and Kelsie relaxed.

A group was forming around her, like an engine whose last part had clicked into place, ready for the power switch to be thrown.

She knew that if she guided them toward a common purpose, she could keep the group going the rest of the night. At least until the sun came up. The stupid sun always broke up parties.

Kelsie had needed this, the crowd, as long as she could remember. The boom and beat and *feel* of a group. Since the time when she was six and had run away from home, following the pulse of something in the distance.

She'd asked Lee, her mom at the time, what it was she could feel. Was there a flood coming?

"No, darling." Lee had been watching TV, sprawled on the couch. "We don't get floods round here."

So six-year-old Kelsie had walked out of the house in search of answers.

She remembered it clearly. She'd opened the door and stepped into the dark street without the slightest fear, because she had to find the rumble and hum that made her fingertips tremble. She had to follow it to its source.

It'd turned out to be a high school football game. Though it wasn't the game that had called to her; it was the crowd. The temperature and pressure of their excitement had rolled across her like a wave.

The parking-lot security guard had found her an hour later. Sitting on the hood of a pickup, eyes closed. Feeling the sweet nervous thrum of the home team running down the clock for a win. The home team, she was told later, hadn't won a game in ten years. Kelsie had never felt anything like it.

When the guard asked her what such a tiny thing was doing there all alone, Kelsie had said, "Floating."

And she was floating now, savoring the dregs of the night's energy in the little group she'd gathered. It was like riding an echo, a ghost of the dancing that had swept her away for long hours before.

They headed for the Moonstruck Diner on Main Street. She wanted this. She wanted the group to stay together, because life outside a group was boring. The good stuff only happened when she was part of something bigger than herself.

And Kelsie was all about the good stuff.