

01

ALEX'S NIGHTMARE

A cursor blinks on the dark screen, bright, flashing. My breath fogs in front of me and I shiver again in the darkness.

"What does it mean?" a voice asks.

I turn away from the computer screen.

Sam stands before me. He's dressed in heavy snow gear, like he's just come through a blizzard. There's a shovel in his hands. He's heaving in deep breaths, like he had to dig his way through endless thick snow to get here.

"Alex," Sam says, "what are you doing? We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Why?"

"The weather's changing fast. There's a superstorm coming in, some kind of polar vortex thing. We have to go—now."

"But we haven't got what we came for."

"We'll come back tomorrow," Sam says. "We're already a bit snowed in. We're going to have to dig ourselves out. Come on, move!"

I look from Sam to the computer. The cursor still blinks

rhythmically as the file downloads. The screen shows the download is thirty-three per cent complete.

I shrug. "I'll stay behind. Come get me tomorrow." I don't look at Sam, I just keep watching the computer. The file I am waiting for is a map of the area, detailed, showing the geography of the vast region. The download via satellite is slow.

Thirty-four per cent.

Thirty-five per cent.

"Alex, you'll freeze out here—"

"I'll be fine, Sam, really. You go. I'll stay and do this."

Sam is silent.

I sigh and turn around, expecting him to still be standing over me, ready to argue, but he's gone.

"Sam?"

I get up from the chair to follow him. "Sam?" I call out again. "Sam!"

Outside the communications room, I walk down a hall that wraps around in a gentle curve. I find Sam standing by the outside doors with his back to me. He's motionless, facing the doors like he's waiting for something.

"Sam?" I approach him. "Are . . . are you OK?"

There's no answer.

"Sam?"

He swings around, and before I can say anything more, he hits the side of my head with the shovel.



I wake up with a throbbing headache. It feels like my whole face is swollen and on fire. I wince and that makes the pain in my head even worse. I realize everything is moving, ever so slightly, back and forth. And I realize something else—something’s not right about what I can see . . .

The world is upside down.

I’m looking at the computer terminal but it’s the wrong way up.

I can feel my ankles are tied together. I can see my wrists are too, dangling uselessly out in front of me. Looking down—*up*—at my feet, I see the rope around my ankles is lashed over a big hook in the ceiling.

I’m hanging from my feet upside down, trussed up like a carcass in a cool room.

Sam comes in.

“Sam!” I say. “What a relief! Help me down from here.”

Sam stops next to an old wooden chair. I struggle to recall what happened.

I was working at the computer, downloading something . . . Sam came in and said we had to go and then . . . then what?

My head throbs as Sam begins to drag the chair across the hard concrete floor, the sharp screeching noise knifing into my skull.

04 THE LAST THIRTEEN

The sound stops abruptly, and I wonder why Sam is now in the middle of the room and not next to me, helping me down.

Isn't he dragging the chair over to stand on and cut me free?

He sits down, facing me.

Wha—?

I look at him. We are face to face, not far apart, only I am still upside down.

"Alex," Sam says, "this is really simple."

"Sam—what's going on? Why am I tied up?"

"All you have to do is tell me the location." Sam's voice is slow and deliberate.

"The location?" I start to panic. "Of what?"

"Yes. The location." Sam smiles. "Tell me *where* the Gear is. Tell me *that* and we dig our way out of here, together. OK? It really is that simple. Tell me where your Gear is, and we're out of here."

"I—I don't know . . . wait, *my* Gear?"

"Tell me where it is."

"But I don't—"

"Alex, this is important. Don't waste any more time."

What's happening?

"Sam—help me down. This isn't funny, man!"

Sam shakes his head slowly and looks disappointed.

"Sam? What the—? What's going *on*?"

"You tell me," he says.

"Get me down from here," I say through clenched teeth.

"Why would I help you?" Sam replies calmly. "You're not helping me."

"You have to . . . wait—*what did you say?*"

"I need answers, Alex. Tell me where the Gear is."

"I don't *know!*"

"Of course you do. You found it. Tell me."

"I—I didn't! I've never found a Gear!" I struggle against the binds, swaying under the hook that has me hung from the ceiling. "Stop fooling around, Sam! Get me down from here right now, or so help me, when I do get down . . ." The blood is pounding in my ears, my head feels heavy, my skin flushed and hot from hanging upside down.

"When you tell me where—" Sam says evenly.

"I DON'T KNOW!" I scream. "Why are you doing this?! You're supposed to be my *friend!*"

"No," Sam says in a quiet voice, leaning forward. "You're supposed to be *my* friend. It's *you* who's been at the Enterprise all this time, while I was out doing all the hard work. You who has been sailing around in luxury, doing *nothing*, while I've been risking my life. It's *you* who sided with Hans to get the Gear—for him. You're a traitor, Alex. You're working with the enemy. So you can be there at the end? So whatever is beyond the Dream Gate belongs to you, is that it?"

"You're wrong! *Get me down!*"

"Have you been with Hans all this time, down here in Antarctica?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But *what*? Wait, let me guess—you were just down here sightseeing?" Sam paces around the room. "Look, Alex, I know you found it. You found the Gear, and you hoped the rest of us would be killed coming to help you, so that you could be there, on your own, at the Gate."

"What? Sam, you're acting crazy. What's with you, man? You know I'd never—"

Sam stops pacing and turns sharply on his heel to face me, eyes fierce. "Tell me where it is, and this can end, OK?"

A muffled explosion sounds from outside, in the distance. Dust drifts down from the ceiling.

"That'd be your friend, Hans," Sam says. "Tick-tock, Alex, we don't have much time."

"No—he's not my—I was only with Hans to get this done. To find out what he knows, to help us win."

Sam is silent. I struggle against my wrist binds, the movement rocking me from side to side as I hang there, like a pendulum in motion.

"*You're* the enemy, Alex, when you act like this," Sam says. "Think back. Think back to when you came to Antarctica, wandering across the ice and you found a way into the complex and you found the Gear."

"I, I was . . ." I concentrate.

Faded memories start to swim around my aching head.

I did find it.

"Fire," I whisper, "so much fire. But deep, under a mountain. It's so hot . . ."

"Good," he says, taking a step toward me. "Tell me where you found it. Start there, everything that happened, right up until you got it."

Something's not right. Why's he doing this?

How did I end up here? The shovel! It was HIM!

"I—I can't tell you, Sam," I force myself to say. My eyes widen as the dread fills me, overwhelming me. "All I know is . . . we don't make it, Sam."

At the end, there's only—

Darkness.