BLURRED REALITY



EVAN JACOBS

MONARCH
JUNGLE®

Art Seen
Avalanche
Baby Mama
Blurred Reality
Cloud Warrior
Instafamous
Lost in Time
Summer Lake
The Throwaways

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Chapter 1

Killing It

"Yeah!" Alden shouted. He sat at a computer. Fingers of one hand tapped the keyboard. The other hand moved the mouse. His eyes darted around the screen.

A young woman sat next to him. "No!" she shouted back.

They were talking to each other through headsets.

"Bad move," Alden said.

"Dude!" she said. "Are you kidding me?"

"You shouldn't be alive!" he said.

The players were tense. There was a lot to gain. And even more to lose. Reputation. Money. Pride. This was the world of eSports. It was as big as pro football.

Alden went pro a year ago. He was a PC player. Many gamers would laugh at that. They only used consoles.

In the gaming world, it was a big debate. For Alden, it was about click speed. The PC was faster. The mouse gave good aim. That mattered in shooting games. Consoles gathered dust.

But Alden didn't make excuses. He won. His gamer name was "Black Heart." And he was in the world's top 10.

Today's game was *Dead End*. There was violence, of course. Guns. Lasers or bombs. Fist fighting at times.

Each level had two tasks. Kill the enemy and escape. There were only minutes. It took quick decisions. Fail, and your avatar died.

Alden was facing a great player. Her name was Kady Adams. "Red Ivy" was her gamer name. No one had played *Dead End* better. That would change today. It was Alden's hope anyway.

Now the two sat side by side. People looking down saw only two small dots. That didn't matter. The arena was filled with big screens. That's where the action was seen.

Black Heart was a pirate. He had long brown hair. Red Ivy's hair was crimson. She was dressed in a tank top and fatigues.

They fought. Guns went off. There were explosions. People watched in awe.

Every attack got cheers. Alden didn't hear them. His headset blocked the sound. For now, the real world didn't exist. He was in the zone.

There were five rounds altogether. So far, Alden had won two. He needed one more win. Then he would sweep the series. But Kady had never lost this game.

Today was different. Alden was feeling bold. He'd even said it to reporters. "Red Ivy is going down."

The third round started. It was set in a chemical plant. A fire was raging. They had one minute to work it out.

"I'm coming for you," Alden said into his headset. "That's right. Stay right there."

"Get off my back!" Kady yelled.

Bullets flew past Black Heart. They hit a tank of gas. Flames shot up. More tanks burst open. There was a string of explosions.

"Oh my God," Alden said.

Black Heart flew across the room. He was down. Red Ivy started shooting.

Nine, *ten*, *eleven*. Alden was counting to himself. He knew her gun had twelve bullets. One more bullet and she'd have to reload. *Twelve*.

Suddenly Black Heart stood. The crowd gasped. This was sure death. Red Ivy's gun clicked. She reached for another one. In that second, she was shot.

"Got you!" Alden shouted. The screens went black. The crowd roared. He jumped to his feet.

"Nicely done," Kady said.

The two shook hands. Then the crowd rushed in around him.

"You're the greatest gamer in the world," someone shouted.

"Nah," Alden said. He didn't like to brag. It was better to act humble. "But I did kill it today."

Chapter 2

Feeling the Love

Alden was having dinner with his parents. They were at a restaurant. His girlfriend, Lia, was there too. The meal was his treat.

"Here's to my son." Alden's dad lifted his glass. "I'd like to take credit. But I can't," he said. "I don't know a joystick from a stick of gum."

Everyone at the table laughed. They raised their water glasses. "Cheers!"

His mom smiled. "Thank you for being so good at what you do."

"Gee, thanks, Mom."

"There's one thing I don't understand," she said. "Why does your name have to be Black Heart? You're such a nice young man."

Everyone laughed again. Alden just smiled.

Gamers as good as Alden made big money. He often spent it on the people he loved. It made him happy. The times they were together meant a lot. But that didn't stop him from texting at the table.

"Who is it, Alden?" Lia asked. "Can't it wait?"

"It's just some gamer friends. They're stoked about my win. I'll be off in a sec."

She looked at his phone. "Wait. What's this? You're playing a video game?" She looked up at Alden's parents. "It's *Duck Shoot*. The lamest game ever."

Lia didn't treat Alden like a star. She didn't care about him being a big gamer. Or that he'd gotten rich off it. She liked him because he was funny. When he acted like a jerk, she called him on it. Alden liked that about her.

"Stop hating," Alden said. "You know I love this game."

"He can't help himself," his dad said. "And we don't want him to. Keep playing, son."

"Right," Alden said. "Video games are paying for dinner!"

Alden's mom and dad laughed. Lia gave him a nudge. He was the center of attention. That's the way he liked it.

After dinner, Alden walked Lia to her car. "Did you have fun?" he asked.

She nodded. He pulled her in and hugged her. She

always smelled so good. Tonight she smelled like coconut. He kissed her.

"I'll text you later," he said.

She got into her car and drove off. Alden looked at his phone. His agent had texted him during dinner.

"Call me ASAP. Great news."

Alden decided to call in the morning. Business could wait.

Chapter 3

Nothing to Lose

It was the next day after school. Alden was waiting for Lia.

"Hey, Alden," a voice called. "I saw you play *Dead End*. That was a sick kill."

"Thanks, bro!" Alden didn't know the kid. But most students at Volt High knew Alden. He got a lot of respect. Even the teachers loved him.

Alden's phone buzzed. It was Zac Elliot. He was the best agent in gaming. All the good talent went with Zac. Alden hired him a year ago. There had been many big deals since then.

"Hey, Zac. What's up?"

"Great news," Zac said. "Your last win got a lot of hype. Some big gaming execs saw it. They want you to play for them. It's a VR game."

"Oh man, Zac. Not virtual reality. You know how—"

"Before you say anything, just listen. This is different."

"There's no way. I'm not wearing one of those headsets. They're heavy. I sweat like a pig. And I hate using a controller."

"This is new technology."

"I've heard that before," Alden said.

"I have two words for you. *World Quest*. They're testing it. This is a contest. Does that change your mind?"

"Maybe," Alden said. "Tell me more."

World Quest was made by Grunt Games. All the best games came from them. *Warped*. *Click*. *Chaos*. It was because of the man who made them. Andrew Foster.

His games didn't seem like games. The images were real. And the stories had meaning. Every game had tons of hidden secrets. There was real-time action. Players didn't wait for a turn. It was a total experience. So yeah. If anyone could make VR better, it was Foster. Some called him a mastermind.

Alden had heard how the game worked. A friend of his was in the business. She was a coder. *World Quest* used a headset. It read a player's brain. They just had to think their actions.

It sounded good. But it hadn't been proven. And the game itself seemed kind of lame. In fairness, many did on paper.

The task was to save Earth. A deadly disease was killing off the planet. There was a cure. It came in eight hidden bottles. Each avatar was dropped in a random place. It could be anywhere in the universe. They each had four lives.

"Who am I up against?" Alden asked.

"The best. Nina Lenz from Germany. Lee Yang from China. Dev Reddy from India."

"Okay," Alden said. Dev's name was a surprise. Players from Russia or Korea were always among the top. But eSports had gotten so big. And the names were always changing.

"I'm still listening." Knowing Zac, it had to be a sweet deal.

"Players will be in their own countries. You'll be at Grunt Games. Millions will watch over the internet. The game will last four hours."

"That's a long day. What's the top prize?"

"One million dollars. Fourth place is 100 thousand. You can't lose. So are you in?"

Alden was quiet. He liked to tease Zac. "Heck yeah!" he finally said.

BLURRED REALITY

Grunt Games has created a new video game. *World Quest* is beyond virtual reality. Players use thoughts to control their avatars. They wear sensors and feel everything. Elite gamer Alden Nash has been asked to test the game. As Black Heart, he'll battle three other gamers to find a cure to save Earth. What he ends up finding is a piece of code. This wasn't part of the game. It could be the key to winning … or losing his mind.



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Lost in Time



Donna Shelton

Chapter 1

Give Me a Break

Being a responsible teenager has its pluses. Your parents trust you. They do things like buy you a car. Any teen would be happy about that. What you don't know is how long they've waited for this moment. Now you can drive your little sister places. That's what happened to me.

Today is Saturday. It's noon. But I'm still in my pj's. I settle in for a long session of texting. My best friend, Liv, broke up with her boyfriend. I've heard it all before. They've broken up three times.

She just sent me a long message. It's mostly about how mean Mark is. He controls everything Liv does. It makes me sad for her. I hope she leaves him for good this time.

I start to text when there's a knock on my door. I'm sure it's my sister, Teera.

"Go away! I'm busy!"

"Tansy?"

Oops. It's Mom.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure," I call out.

The door opens. Teera is there too. I know what this means. She wants to go somewhere.

"Your sister needs to go to the library."

I don't want to do it. But those were the rules when I got the car.

"Fine," I say.

"Don't be too long," Mom says. "Were having barbecue. Dad's making ribs."

Yum. I'm already hungry. Mom leaves the room. Teera stays behind.

"Will you help me with my book report?"

"What's it about?"

Teera looks at her notebook. "Wyatt Earp and the Cowboys," she reads.

"From the Old West? I saw a movie once. Wyatt Earp was a sheriff. And there was a gang of outlaws. They were called the Cowboys. That's all I know."

"Then just give me one of your old reports. I can copy it," she says.

"That's cheating. Besides, they're all on the Middle Ages. And sorcery. It's too scary for you."

"Ooh. You mean witches? Cool."

"You're not using my reports. Now get out, please. I need to get dressed."

My phone is going off again. I didn't answer Liv's text yet. And now she thinks I'm ignoring her.

"I'll meet you in the car!" I tell Teera.

Chapter 2

Bad Brakes

At the library, Teera wanders off down an aisle. I head for the young adult section. It's an awesome space. Big windows let in lots of light. And there are comfy sofas.

I find a spot and settle in. I start reading Liv's text. It starts out, "Boyfriend from hell." Liv was talking to a guy. Mark got jealous. He started a big fight. Then he told Liv that he was going to—.

"Tansy! Look what I found."

"Oh, good. You got a book. Let's go."

"I don't mean that." Teera shoves something in my face. It looks like a gemstone.

"Turn it in at the front desk. And check out that book if you're getting it."

Teera holds the stone up to the window. It catches the sunlight and glimmers. "It's so pretty. Can I keep it?"

"Whatever. Check out the book. And hurry. I'm hungry."

"Okay. But I'm keeping the stone."

A librarian comes up to us. She's dressed in black. Her hair is black too. "Be quiet!" she says. "Or you'll have to leave!" She walks away.

"Great," I say to Teera. "You nearly got us kicked out."

"She's an old witch."

"Teera! That is not nice."

I'm pulling out of the parking lot. "Teera!" I call out. "I can hear your music! Turn it down!"

Teera takes off her earphones. "What?" The music stops.

Now she's saying something about the stone. Then I hear a buzz. It's Liv again. She's been blowing up my phone.

It's hard to focus on the road. I nearly run a red light. Mom and Dad cannot know about this.

Teera holds the stone up to the windshield. It catches the sun. Light bounces and blinds me for a second. I reach out and grab air. Finally I'm holding the stone.

Jeez. There goes my phone again. Then there is a loud noise. Someone is laying on their car horn.

Tires screech. There's a loud boom. Teera grabs my arm. Then there is only bright light. It surrounds us like a blanket.

Chapter 3

Lighten Up

What just happened?

Pain jolts through my body. Every part of me hurts. Even if I wanted to move, I can't. It's nearly impossible to see or breathe. Panic is starting to set in.

I try to focus. How is Teera? I'm aware of her hand on my arm. But I can't tell if she's okay.

My hand is clasped around something sharp. Then I remember. It's the gemstone. It digs into my skin. I'm too frightened to care.

Moments pass. The loud noises start to fade. So does the light. Now everything is dark. I call out to Teera. "Are you okay?"

"Great," she sobs.

I should say something to comfort her. But my mind is blank. All I know is that we're trapped. And whatever

happened? It's my fault. How could I have been so reckless?

There is a second of silence. Suddenly Teera lets go of me. "I can't see anything!" she cries. In a fit of anger, she punches my arm. "This is all your fault!"

"Hey!" I know she's scared. So am I. But I'm not going to sit here and let her hit me. "Don't put all the blame on me."

"You're so stupid! I can't believe that I'm related to you!"

Teera always tries to get in the last word.

"Just be quiet," I say. "You're wasting oxygen."

"What's the difference? We're going to die anyway. Unless we magically get out of here."

"We are not going to die," I tell her. "And we will get out of here." How? I don't know.

Chapter 4

Ready to Ride

Teera is quiet except for a few sighs. I let out a deep breath. My hand relaxes. The stone is still there. But instead of pain, I feel warmth.

I close my eyes for a moment. When I open them again, I see a faint white glow. It's coming from the stone.

"Look, Teera."

"I see it," she says.

The glow gets brighter. Soon it fills our small prison with light. There is enough to see each other's faces. In just seconds, the stone heats up in my hand. It burns me. But I can't let go.

I look at Teera. Her eyes are on the white-hot stone. Suddenly there's a flash of light. A gust of wind blows through. Its force sends us flying. We land with a thud.

"Whoa!" I hear Teera say. "That was weird."

I stand up and look around. Now where are we? And where is my phone?

Teera scrambles to her feet. "What is this place?"

"I'm not sure," I say. But it looks familiar to me. It seems to be a ranch. I think I've been here before. If I'm right, there are riding trails. I've taken lessons. My favorite horse is a red mare.

"There should be an office," I tell Teera. "We can call Mom and Dad."

We walk for about a mile. "Something isn't right," I finally say. There is no office. No riding trails. Not even one horse. Instead, there is desert. It stretches to the mountains.

Up ahead is a sign. As we get closer, I see what it says. Tombstone. It makes me think of the Old West.

Soon we come to the town. The streets are dry and dusty, which is made worse by the wind.

We pass tents where men are mining. Ahead is a main street lined with buildings. Along the way, we see horses. This is a good sign. Except these horses are tied to hitching posts.

A stagecoach flies by. Dust rises up and covers us. When it settles, we see all the people. Maybe they can help us. But then I see their clothes.

Men wear wool pants, long coats, and vests. Others

have on brightly colored shirts and boots with spurs. A few men wear aprons. They greet customers and sweep their porches. These must be shop owners.

It seems odd that no one wears denim. Not even the miners. Or were jeans invented later?

The women wear Victorian clothes. Even in this heat they are covered up. Long sleeves. Gloves. Hat *and* parasol.

A few women are in ruffled skirts that are knee-length. I know this is short for the times. Their petticoats show. They remind me of saloon girls.

As we walk along, I notice the businesses. Ice house. Opera house. Jail. Dry goods. Several saloons. I get it! This is a movie set.

Outside one saloon is a group of cowhands. One of them tips his hat at me. I give a little smile.

Where are the lights and the movie cameras?

Lost in Time

Tansy is comfy in her pj's. She's not going to do anything but text. Only two words could ruin this day—*little sister*. Then Teera needs to go to the library. Tansy has to drive her. Ugh. But she's a good big sister, so she does it. On the way home, she's forced to take a detour. It wouldn't be bad, but Tansy doesn't know the roads. They're only leading the girls farther from home. When and where will the nightmare end?



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