BLURRED REALITY

EVAN JACOBS

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.

"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.

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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