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CHAPTER

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thirty-nine

David fell onto a floor, which broke apart under his feet. Shards of pain jabbed into his eyes. He squinted against a harsh brightness: a sun that burned fiercely overhead *and* all around.

*Snow . . .* the whitest, most dazzling snow he had ever seen.

He crashed through an icy crust into flakes that were nothing like the fluffy stuff he'd skied on at Mammoth Mountain. This snow had seemed to crystallize into tiny Chinese throwing

stars. He flipped and rolled, and an awful fact struck him as forcefully as the bitter cold—

*I'm not stopping!*

He somersaulted and tumbled down a steep incline, breaking a trench in the crust as he went. He clutched and clawed, but everything he touched slipped through his fingers or broke off in his hands. Scrambling, squirming, he pivoted, bringing his feet into a downhill inclination, and found himself skimming over the crust of icy snow on his butt.

Below him, at the base of the hill, the snow gave way to a narrow ledge of stone. Beyond that—nothing. A cliff. Far, far away, across an entire sky of empty air, huge mountain peaks pierced the clouds.

He screamed and rolled onto his bare stomach. The frosty crust chafed his skin like sandpaper. He clawed and scratched. Ice crystals splintered under his nails and shot away like sawdust. The toes of his sneakers streaked over the surface, as effective at gripping the ice as hockey pucks.

His descent made a sound like static in his ears. It occurred to him how silent death-by-falling would be. No explosions, no crunching metal or breaking glass. There would be wind, but certainly it would not be louder than your own pulsing heartbeat, so it didn't count.

*A sudden, unexpected death shouldn't be silent, he thought. It should be frantic and dramatic and noisy.*

Nothing like what happens in a fall. Maybe that's why people screamed on the way down.

Desperate, David pounded his cast into the snow's surface, gritting his teeth against the stabbing pain. His cast broke through, violently ripping through the crust like a bulldozer through a wall. His descent slowed . . . slowed . . . stopped.

Scrunching his eyes closed, he howled in pain. With his right hand he seized his left wrist and hugged it to his chest. He twisted around to see that he had stopped where the icy slope met the gray ledge of stone. Not twenty feet away, the world ended.

Xander's surprised shriek reached him. High up on the slope, his brother spun in circles, round and round, as he plunged down the hill.

A flash farther up the hill caught his eye. The torturer appeared to materialize against a shimmering ripple of air and drop to the snow. He began sliding, his eyes even wider than Xander's, which David would have thought impossible.

David scrambled up. Pain, like molten metal, shot up his arm. He fell onto his knees, screaming out again. Every pulse of blood his racing heart sent into his arm felt like a hammer blow.

He forced his eyes open to see Xander struggling to get his feet under him. His brother stood, his legs taking great strides down the hill, then plunged through the air, belly flopping on

the crusty surface. Arms stretched out, skimming down on his stomach, he could have been Superman learning to fly—but he wasn't Superman and he couldn't fly, a fact that would become horrifically evident when he went over the cliff.

"Xander!" David screamed, pointing at the torturer skimming on the ice thirty feet behind his brother.

Hugging his arm, David stomped up the slope.

Xander was almost on him. His brother's hands skittered over the surface, doing nothing but kicking up snow crystals that flew back into his face.

David stomped, cracking the crust. Another stomp, and his right foot broke through. He did the same with his left foot. Wiggling, rocking, he dug himself in. He swung his injured arm out of harm's way, and Xander slammed into him like a tidal wave hitting a ship. Anchored in the snow, David bent backward.

Xander's arms crumpled. His head struck David and continued moving over David's chest and head. His body followed, sliding onto—*over*—David as though he were a ramp.

When David realized Xander wasn't stopping, he shot his right hand up and hooked his fingers into Xander's waistband. The force wrenched David's shoulder. He was yanked out of the hole, and together they slid toward the cliff.

But David's efforts had slowed his brother's momentum. When Xander hit the stone ledge, he came to a jittery stop. David coasted into him.

The sound of the torturer's descent—like the ripping of paper—increased rapidly as he approached.

“Roll!” Xander yelled “Roll!”

David felt Xander twisting away, and he rolled with him.

The torturer's hand slapped at David's arm and shoulder as he sailed past. David craned his head to watch the man hit the rocky ledge, slide, roll, and disappear over the edge: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh . . .”

Then nothing. The sound of the sky breathing over the boys.

David squeezed his eyelids together, feeling tears push against them. He was lying on his back, too aware of his body to care about anything else. Bolts of pain shot out of his right shoulder into his neck. His left arm formed a V on the ground beside him, like the wing of a dead bird. It blazed in agony. His fist was still locked onto Xander's pants. His teeth gnashed together.

“Holy cow,” Xander said, panting. “David? You okay?” He nudged David's hand, then gently pried David's fingers open. He crawled to him and cupped a palm over David's cheek. “You saved me, Dae. You did it. I would have gone over the edge like that guy, if you hadn't stopped me. Dae?”

David could not stop crying. He *hurt*. His broken arm . . . his shoulder . . . his abraded chest and stomach . . . his legs and back . . . He cried from the pain, and he didn't want to stop, because it eased the agony a little bit. His chest hitched

in jerky motions as he took small gulps of air to fuel his sobs.

“Oh, David,” Xander said. He carefully moved David’s arms for him, crossing them over his chest. David felt a warmth envelope him and knew Xander had covered him with the Union army coat. Xander pushed the two front halves under him on either side.

“How are your legs?” Xander said. He brushed the snow off David’s jeans.

David felt his sneakers come off and heard Xander knocking the snow out of them. His brother slipped them back on and tied them tight.

David dialed down the tears. His breathing remained in choppy crying mode, but it was getting smoother.

Xander’s footsteps crunched over the snow and stopped after a few paces. He said, “We gotta get out of here—fast, before we freeze to death.”

“Where . . .” David’s voice was barely audible to his own ears, let alone Xander’s. He tried again: “Where are we?”

Xander’s feet crunched back to David’s side. “No clue.”

David blinked and found his eyeballs drowning in tears. He slipped a hand out from under the coat and wiped them. His temples and ears were soaked . . . and *cold*. The wetness had begun to ice up.

Xander stood over him, looking out beyond the cliff. He was hugging himself, furiously rubbing his hands over his

biceps. He wore a short-sleeved button-up shirt. His lips were turning blue. Through chattering teeth, he said, "Well, at least it's beautiful." Plumes of vapor came out with each word.

David coughed out a pathetic laugh. "Yeah, the same way a great white shark is before it eats you."

"Guess we took care of that torturer guy, huh? Man! Bet he was surprised."

David tried to laugh again, but he hurt too much.

Xander crunched beside him. "So?" he said. "Are you dizzy? Any mixed-up memories?"

David squinted at him, uncomprehending.

"You know," Xander said. "Did cutting that guy from the rack . . . getting rid of the torturer . . . did it change history? Can you tell?"

David closed his eyes again and shook his head. "Nothing like what happened back at the Civil War." He breathed. "Maybe we didn't save him after all." He started to cry again. "Maybe we didn't do anything but almost get killed."

He wanted to cry again. It wasn't just the feeling that he'd failed or the pain or being tired . . . it was *everything*.

"Maybe you just can't tell what changed," Xander said. "Could be not everything we do is noticeable. We made a difference, but it's too subtle for us to know about it."

David draped his arm over his face, across his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have tried."

Xander nudged him. "Don't say that. Like Toria said, you feel bad when people on *TV* get hurt." He paused. "Follow your heart, Dae, but try to keep it beating, okay? If you want to do it, you can help a lot of people using the portals. But you can't if you're dead."

"You really think we can do that—help people in the other worlds?"

"*While* we're looking for Mom." Xander considered his words, then added, "But not that way. Not stupid."

David nodded.

Xander tapped his arm. "How are you feeling?"

David moaned. "Let me think about it." And he did: his skin was warming up, a little; the sledgehammer-pounding in his broken arm had subsided into a throb; and the throbbing in his shoulder had settled into a dull ache. He said, "Better."

Xander grabbed his shoulders to help him up. "Then we better go."

"Where?"

"Is the coat . . ." Xander looked at it with hope. "Is it pulling yet?"

David held it up between them. It hung limp. "No," he said. "You think it's going to?"

"It got us out of the torture chamber," Xander said. "We just have to not freeze to death while we're waiting for it." He looked up the slope. The hill stopped just above the place where they came into this world—marked by the broken crust

at the top of their slide-tracks. Beyond, the mountain continued its jaggy, rocky ascent into the sky. "I think there's some kind of flat area up there," he said. "Maybe a pass or a road. That's the place to start."

He stepped off the gray stone ledge onto the snow.

"Xander," David said. He extended the coat to him.

Xander scowled at it. "Are you kidding?" he said. "Put it on."

"You s-s-sure?" David's entire body trembled from the cold.

"Don't be dumb," Xander said.

David slipped his right arm in, hissing in pain as he did. He draped the left side over his broken arm. Xander crouched in front of him to button it up.

"Thanks for not being mad at me," David said.

"Who said I'm not mad?" Xander said, not taking his eyes off the buttons. His hands were shaking so much, each button took ten seconds. He smiled up at David. "Don't worry about it. We're still figuring all this out." He finished and tugged the coat down. It was too big, hanging almost to David's knees.

"You were something back there," David said, forcing a smile. "Swinging that sword. Man, you saved us."

Xander shrugged. "We watch out for each other. That's what we do." He stood, said, "Here, I should have thought of this before . . ." He unbuckled his belt and took it off.

"What?" David said.

“A sling,” Xander said, “for your arm.” He buckled the belt and slipped it over David’s head.

David tucked it inside the coat and rested his arm in the loop.

“Better?” Xander said.

“Yeah. Thanks.” He tried to smile, but his lips trembled too much. He said, “What if we’re too deep in the worlds for the coat to work?”

Xander smiled. “Then I hope we like this place.” He started up the hill.