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Opening extract from

Ice Claw

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It was too beautiful a day to die.

Max Gordon gazed up at the mountain peaks that scarred the crystal-clear sky. A whisper of mist soared up the valley beyond them, twisted briefly and escaped across the peaks. Flurries of snow scattered from the rocks like a flock of white butterflies disturbed from a meadow. But this was no gentle English summer landscape. Max was two thousand freezing metres high in unpredictable weather and no one knew that he and his best friend, Sayid Khalif, were there.

A blanket of snow the size of a football pitch clung precariously to the rock face a hundred metres above him. One shudder from the breeze, a single tremor from the overladen trees, and a thousand tonnes of snow would avalanche down and crush him and his injured friend to death.

Fifty metres away Sayid lay twisted in pain and fear. Max had to reach him and get him off the mountainside. There wasn't much time. A sliver of the loosely packed snow crunched down, tumbling beyond Sayid.

'Don't move!' Max shouted, an arm extended towards the boy in warning as he trod carefully, using his upended snowboard to probe the snow.

Max's breath steamed from his exertion as he slumped on to his knees next to Sayid. Using his teeth, he pulled off his ski glove and tenderly cradled his friend's leg.

Sayid cried out. His eyes scrunched up, then widened at the pain.

'Sorry, mate,' Max said, keeping one eye on the threatening field of loose snow above them.

'It's broken,' Sayid mumbled.

'Your leg's all right. Probably just a twisted ankle.'

'You think so?'

'Yeah,' Max lied. 'Serves you right, going off-piste. The whole idea was to stay on safe slopes.' He eased Sayid into a sitting position, straightened the crooked leg and wiped snow from the boy's face.

A stupid bet: Sayid on skis against Max on his snowboard – who'd get to the bottom first? But Sayid had veered off several hundred metres back and dipped into this dangerous cleft. It was a deceptive snowfield promising fast skiing and Max's warnings had been ignored. When Sayid hit the fallen tree trunk lying just below the surface he'd tumbled forwards for another ten metres. He was lucky he hadn't snapped his neck.

Max busied himself with the broken ski. Pulling the tie cord from Sayid's ski jacket, he strapped the good ski across the snapped piece – forming a cross.

'You making a splint?' Sayid said.

Max shook his head. 'You don't deserve one, you idiot. This is your way out of here.'

'Are you kidding? I'm in agony. I need a helicopter.'

Max finished the binding. 'You won't need anything if that

lot slips off the mountain,' he said, nodding towards the snowfield.

An ominous crunch reinforced his warning as a huge chunk of snow gave way. It growled down the far side of the slope, a frightening display of weight and power.

'Max! What do we do?'

'If we don't get out of here in a hurry, panic would be a good idea. We've gotta move, Sayid. Grab the cross-piece.' Max clamped Sayid's hands on to the broken ski, which now served as a handlebar. 'Sit on the good ski, hold on tight, and aim for down there.'

Sayid scrambled for something in his pocket. 'Wait. Hang on!' He pulled out a string of small black beads, spun them round his fist, kissed them and nodded nervously at Max. 'OK. Go!' he said.

Sayid's fear for his life overcame the stabbing pain in his foot as Max shoved him away. Looking like a child on a tricycle whose feet had come off the pedals, Sayid sliced through the snow, the rush of wind carrying his yelps of fear back towards Max.

Max had just clamped his boots on to the snowboard when the mountainside fell. The scale of the huge block of snow mesmerized him. It dropped in slow motion, a fragment of time during which he knew he could not outrun anything that powerful or fast. A shudder came up through the ground. Max bent his knees, lunging away as the blurred power smashed the trees two hundred metres to his right. Swirling powder smothered him and the gust of wind from the avalanche pummelled his back. He threw his weight forward and curved away as fast as he could. The avalanche ran parallel

to him for more than a hundred metres, growling destruction, like a frustrated carnivore hunting its prey.

A surge of adrenalin pumped through Max's veins. The lethal risk of riding the edge of this terrifying wave was forgotten as a wild excitement overtook him. He laughed out loud. *Come on! Come on! I can beat you. I can win!*

A boulder-sized chunk of snow broke loose from the main fall and careered towards him. A sudden reality check. Max arched his back, veered inside the block of snow and felt the swirling edge of the avalanche smother his knees. *Don't fall! Not now!*

And then it was suddenly over. The monster snowfall smashed only metres away from him on to compacted snow, rocks and the treeline.

Spraying crisp, white powder, Max turned the board side-on and stopped. Looking back. he saw that where he and Sayid had been only moments earlier was now unrecognizable.

The silence was almost as frightening as the short-lived roar of the avalanche. Sayid had skimmed beneath snow-laden branches and gone through the other side. He was well out of harm's way. Max gulped the cold air. The voice inside his head was still laughing with victory but Max was under no illusion. If that avalanche had veered his way, he'd have been buried alive and crushed to death.

In the ski village of Mont la Croix the small emergency clinic was used for immobilizing broken limbs and stabilizing patients before they were sent to a city hospital. It was usually adults, crying in agony, who were admitted, people who

thought skiing could be tackled without getting fit, practising, or that any idiot could do it. Any idiot could – they were often the ones with the broken legs.

Max watched as Sayid was wheeled out of the emergency room, an inflatable splint covering his leg from his foot to his knee – a specialist dressing that kept the limb immobile and cushioned against any ill-effects from being moved.

'I told you it was broken,' Sayid moaned.

'How bad is it?' Max asked the young French nurse.

She smiled, then spoke; her accent had a melodic attraction. 'It's not serious. A bone in his foot is cracked. We offer only emergency aid here. We will send him down to the hospital at Pau. It's a couple of hours away, and there they will put a plaster on his leg.'

'By helicopter?' Sayid asked hopefully.

'No, no. You are not sufficiently injured for that,' she said, and smiled again.

'I could always make it worse,' Max suggested.

'Do not joke,' she said, gently chastising him. 'You were lucky today. It was a miracle you were not swept away by the avalanche. They have banned off-piste skiing now.'

Max was already feeling a twinge of guilt for letting Sayid get into trouble. He had promised Sayid's mother, who was a teacher at their school, that he would keep an eye on her only son. 'Can I go to the hospital with him?'

Before she could answer, Sayid said, 'You can't. You've got the finals tomorrow. If the roads ice up you'll never get back in time. Max, it's all right. I'll be OK. You're almost there. You can win this championship.'

Sayid was right. Getting this far in the Junior X-treme

competition was a small miracle in itself. Even though his dad had helped, Max had limited funds. He had done every odd job he could to earn money. It didn't buy him the best equipment, but it was enough to help cover the costs needed to get to the French Pyrenees and compete.

Max had trained for two years to enter this contest and his teachers had encouraged him every step of the way. Dartmoor High wasn't a normal secondary school. Built into the rock face like a small medieval fortress on the northern edge of the Dartmoor National Park, it offered a sound education with an emphasis that engendered self-reliance. The often treacherous moorland tested not only the boys at Dartmoor High; it was tough enough to be used as a combat training ground for British soldiers and marines.

What Dartmoor didn't have was snow slopes, so Max had relied on skateboarding to work up his skills. A slither of downhill tarmac road with a wicked lump forced up by the roots of a hawthorn tree gave him a perfect take-off ramp. The deep heather cushioned his falls, and there'd been plenty of them, but between that and the dry ski run at Plymouth he had learned some of the skills needed to compete. There were two remaining events and tomorrow's was crucial.

The nurse saw Max's concern. 'Perhaps I can help,' she said. 'The roads, they are icy, so the ambulance will probably not return from Pau in time to take him before tomorrow. It is possible we could give him a bed here for the night.'

'That's a great idea, Max,' Sayid said. 'I don't fancy you trying to carry me up the three flights of stairs at the hostel.'

'Your room is upstairs?' she said. 'No, then you stay here for the night. Wait a moment. I will go and arrange it now.'

She left the two boys alone and went to an administration desk, where she flipped over pages, checking a chart.

Sayid smiled at Max. Hostel beds had wooden slats with hard mattresses, and the showers had a tendency to gasp and splutter just as you were covered in soap. A comfy hospital bed with personal attention was like a mini-holiday. Almost worth the pain.

Max looked through the window. He'd lost track of time. It was late. Cones of light from the streetlamps cast deep shadows across the village's jumbled buildings. A perfect winter picture, but treacherous underfoot. He would have struggled to get Sayid down those streets, make sure he got hot food and then nursemaid him into bed.

'All right, Sayid, you jammy devil. I'll come and see you in Pau after the competition. OK?' Max told him.

Sayid nodded. But as Max turned to go he took his arm. A distraught look crumpled his face.

'What?' Max said quietly.

Sayid hesitated, then shook his head sadly. 'Max, I lost Dad's beads.'

'Where?'

'When I went through those lower branches.'

Max remembered Sayid's downward path as they raced the avalanche. The beads were important to Sayid. Max unconsciously touched the old stainless-steel chronograph on his wrist. His dad had worn it when he had climbed Everest twenty years ago and given it to Max on his twelfth birthday. The inscription on the back plate said: *To Max. Nothing is impossible. Love, Dad.*

A few years ago Max's dad had rescued Sayid and his

mother from assassins in the Middle East, but Sayid's father had been gunned down. The string of beads – his father's *misbaha* – was, like Max's watch, one of the few things he had from his father. A *misbaha*, a string of either thirty-three or ninety-nine beads, was used to help its owner do anything from meditating to alleviating stress. They were, in their own way, very personal and, even though these prayer beads, or worry beads as they were more commonly known, were only of ebony, they were priceless as a tangible link to Sayid's dead father.

Max's dad had risked his life to save Sayid's family but what had Max done? Put Sayid's life in danger by taking on a stupid bet. Sayid may have gone off into dangerous snow territory but Max felt responsible. Just like his dad had done.

'I'll take a look after the competition,' Max told him.

'Don't. It's too dangerous up there,' Sayid said. 'They're not worth getting killed for.'

Snow and ice crunched underfoot as Max made his way down the half-lit streets towards the hostel on the edge of the ancient town. The gloomy light created sinister shadows, embellishing the old stonework with rippling darkness. The high Pyrenean town had given very little away to the modern world and the fifty-year-old streetlamps were now more quaint than effective.

He carried his snowboard and Sayid's broken skis across his shoulder. A pizza and a mug of hot chocolate would be a treat right now. The efforts on the mountain had drained his energy and niggling anxieties about tomorrow's competition gnawed

away at his mind. Occupied by these thoughts, Max missed the shadow that flitted between buildings across the street. But then he heard a grunt of effort and looked up to see a figure leap from a low wall, hit the street running, kick against a car for balance, roll and lope effortlessly away. All in one easy fluid movement. *Parkour*, thought Max immediately. Freestyle urban running, which had been developed by a group of French enthusiasts and now had a dedicated following in cities around the world. They used buildings, cars, bridges – in fact, anything in their way – as an obstacle course. This runner was fast and perfectly balanced. The black-clad figure disappeared from view, but only for a few seconds. Scratchy exhausts from off-road motorbikes suddenly tore the silence from the streets. Their headlights picked out the runner from the darkness as they roared into the street from different alleyways. Within moments the riders swung their machines into a tight circle. Cutting and weaving, their studded tyres gave them perfect grip on the icy surface as they taunted the runner, now barely able to take a step without being hit. The bikes competed to make the most noise, and exhaust fumes cast an eerie veil over what was fast becoming a vicious attack.

Four of the six bikers wrenched their machines to a standstill, a four-pointed star blocking any escape, as the other two revved and slid their bikes, sideswiping the runner. The noise suffocated any cries from the desperate victim, who fell and rolled, narrowly avoiding the wheels of one of the bikes. But then, as he got to his feet, he was shouldered by one of the riders who roared past.

Max suddenly realized that the bikers were going to maim or kill their defenceless victim. He reacted instinctively. His

snowboard scratched across the ice, moving fast – he had already covered twenty-odd metres. He needed to find a gap between the bikes and put as many of them on the ground as he could.

Bending his knees, throwing his balance forward, he picked up more speed. The runner was down, winded, maybe even injured, and the bikers were going to ride over him.

Max lifted Sayid's unbroken ski, held it across his body and swept between two of the stationary bikers. It shattered as it hit the unsuspecting riders, knocking them aside and throwing them into the others. It was sudden chaos. Bikes and riders fell, engines stalled, another machine slid away out of control. Max's sudden blitz had taken them all by surprise.

The sliding bike's headlamps spun crazily across the faces of the downed bikers and Max saw they were about his age. One of the attackers rolled to his feet quickly; though still dazed, he glared into Max's eyes. This was an older boy by a couple of years. Max stared. The boy's head was an unusual shape. His cheekbones and nose protruded forward and his chin receded. Snarling and gasping for breath, he revealed ragged, broken teeth. Max couldn't remember where he had seen a face like that before. Then, with a shock, he knew.

His father had taken him on a diving holiday off Aliwal Shoal in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The muddy rivers that run into the sea there are a haven for Zambezi sharks. The reef was five kilometres offshore and the water had good visibility, but as they surfaced the local diver signalled, shouting a shark warning, 'Johnny One-Eye!' – the local nickname for those ragged-toothed killers.

This boy reminded him of one of those cold-staring,

emotionless creatures. A thin white line – an old knife wound – ran from his ear down across his neck. It was a warning signal that he fought close-in and dirty. Max was bigger than any of them except Sharkface, but he was outnumbered. They would quickly overpower him, put him on the ground and kick him into submission. Or worse.

Max released the board's bindings and pulled the slightly built runner to his feet. Time to go. The black ski cap had been torn free in the struggle; a tumble of auburn hair fell across the runner's face.

It was a girl.

The café's steamed windows blurred the empty streets. Max and the girl ate pizza and drank hot chocolate. Occasionally a car would crunch by and once they heard the high-revving engine of a motorbike. Max tensed, but it passed without stopping. The girl reached out – a small gesture of assurance. Max liked the warmth of her touch, but squirmed his hand away to fiddle with his food. French girls were more demonstrative than any of the girls he knew at home, and they seemed unafraid to express their feelings. Max concentrated on his pizza.

Her name was Sophie Fauvre. Her slight, elfin build put her age anywhere between fourteen and eighteen. She had lived in Paris until two years ago, and Max was right, she was a *parkour*, and the discipline of urban free-running was something her elder brother Adrien had taught her. But those boys who had boxed her in tonight – they had been sent deliberately to hurt or kill her.

'Someone sent those blokes? I mean, how do you know it wasn't just a bunch of yobs having a go?'

She frowned. 'Yobs?'

'Er . . .' He scrambled for a French equivalent. '*Loubards*.'

'No, no. They are paid to stop me. They are kids, sure, but they're like feral animals. The men with the money buy them anything they want, and they do as they are told. If they had hurt me tonight the police would have put it down to a malicious accident.'

'Then why would these people who are buying off street kids with fancy motorbikes want to hurt you?'

She hesitated. Hadn't she told him enough? He was an innocent who had jumped into danger to help her.

'Have I got food on my face?' Max asked.

'What?'

'You were staring at me.'

'Sorry. I was thinking. Look, you don't understand. My brother has gone missing. He called us from a town called Oloron-Sainte-Marie; it's a few kilometres down the valley. And then he disappeared. I thought I could find him. People I have spoken to remember him but nothing else. So, now I have to go home. Perhaps there is news there.'

'To Paris?'

'No. To Morocco.'

'Ah. Did I miss the Moroccan connection somewhere?'

She laughed. She liked him. Which was not a good idea. It wasn't going to help her complete her task. He had a habit of rubbing a hand across his tufted hair, and then, as he smiled, his eyes would flick self-consciously away. Nice eyes, though, she thought. Blue or blue-grey, she couldn't be certain in the soft light of the café.

'Now *you're* staring,' she said.

Embarrassed, Max quickly recovered and put a finger to his mouth. 'You've got cheese in your teeth.'

And as soon as he said it he wished the earth would open and swallow him.

He walked her back to her small hotel through the winding streets, keeping in the middle of the narrow road, the brightest place, away from light-swallowing alleyways. The cold night air began to bite, even through his padded jacket.

He ignored the creeping ache in his body, alert for any movements in the shadows. Fear kept the circulation going better than any warm coat.

Sophie told him that her father used to run the Cirque de Paris, but over the years had turned more and more towards animal conservation. Her Moroccan mother had been taken ill several years ago and the family had returned to her homeland, where, after her death, Sophie's father founded an endangered-species conservation group. Like other conservationists who tried to stop the illegal trade in animals, threats and violence were not uncommon. The traders made big money. People like her father were bad for business.

'My brother Adrien discovered one of the routes was through Spain and across the Pyrenees. There are no customs posts any more, so every day thousands of lorries cross from the ports in the south of Spain.'

'And your brother found one of the animals?'

She nodded. Cupping her hands to her mouth, blowing moist air to warm her gloves. Her shoulders hunched against the icicle-snapping cold. Max wondered, for all of a nanosecond, whether he should put his arm around her.

'An endangered South American bear was shipped out of Venezuela, through Spain and into France,' she said. 'Buyers pay a huge premium for anything endangered.'

'Why? Do they have private zoos?'

She shook her head. Maybe Max Gordon really did not understand the cruelty of the world beyond his snowboarding dreams.

'Trophy hunters. They kill the animals. Shoot them. And one day one of the killers will be the luckiest hunter of them all. He'll be able to say he shot the very last animal of its species.'

They reached the corner of the *pension*, the small hotel where she had a room. A car eased along the street behind them; its exhaust growled as the studded tyres purred into the layered snow and ice. Max eased Sophie behind him into a shadow. It was a black Audi A6 Quattro – high-powered, four-wheel drive, fast, sure-footed and expensive. As it came to the intersection it stopped. A tinted window purred down. Two men: the driver and his companion. They wore black leather jackets over black roll-neck sweaters. They were big men. Dark cropped hair, their faces unshaven for a couple of days – designer stubble or tough blokes? Max settled for tough. Their cold, hard stares went right through him.

The window glided upwards, then the car eased away. Maybe they were just tourists looking for their hotel late at night, but there were no ski racks on the car and they didn't look as though they were into snowball fights for fun.

'Do you know those men?' he asked.

'No. I have never seen them before.'

'Probably nothing,' he said, smiling to reassure her, despite his own sixth sense warning him otherwise.

The night porter shuffled towards the *pension*'s door on the third ring of the bell.

'I can order you a hot drink, if you would like. Before you go?' she said.

'No. Thanks. I've gotta get back. Big day tomorrow.'

'Of course. Good luck for that.'

The sallow-faced porter stood waiting silently.

She lowered her voice. 'Thank you, Max. If there is anything my family can ever do for you, my father would be honoured.' She went up on tiptoe, placed a hand on his shoulder and kissed his cheek. Max's head bobbed to meet her lips and, uncertain where to put his hands, he fumbled and dropped his snowboard. He felt the heat rising into his neck and face.

The night porter gazed at him in bored pity.

She stepped through the door. Smiled again. 'Sure you don't want a drink?'

'No. Honest. Thanks. I've . . . I've got ironing to do,' he muttered uselessly.

She said nothing, then nodded and turned, walking further into the half-lit reception area, as the porter, now with unconcealed disdain, latched and bolted the door in Max's face.

Cheese teeth and ironing. What a disaster.

The truth was he *did* have ironing, but it had nothing to do with making himself look any less untidy.

Max's snowboard rested across the two single bed bases

in the room he shared with Sayid at the hostel. The mattresses had been shoved to one side on the floor. A towel and a newspaper were spread out beneath the board and, holding the pointed end of the iron downwards, he pressed a stick of wax against the hot surface and dribbled the melting liquid across the board's surface, which was badly scratched from sliding across the road.

The heat opened the board's pores and allowed the wax to penetrate. Twenty minutes later, when it cooled, he scraped off the excess wax and rubbed hard with the back of a pan cleaner, buffing the surface.

His kit was as ready as it could be. All he had to do now was secure a place in the top three of the wildwater kayak race next morning and he'd be ready for the final in the freestyle snowboarding event.

He checked the alarm clock.

The wake-up call was only three hours away.

Max slumped on to one of the mattresses on the floor fully dressed. He pulled the duvet over himself and fell sound asleep.

And then – what felt like two minutes later – the alarm clock's bell clattered him awake.