

SAM'S NIGHTMARE

The bright orange sunlight shines off the tops of ancient stone buildings. Birds sing as they dart by me. Green jungle stretches below me, a vast blanket of trees swaying with the breeze, interrupted only by waterways and relics. This is paradise. And it feels like I'm floating over it, flying—seeing everything all at once.

“Sam!”

I'm on the ground now, standing in an elevated clearing in front of one of the immense temple palaces that surround me. I turn around to look for the voice, but I'm alone.

“Sam!” the voice says again. I spin around, scanning full circle.

Suddenly, I see a tiny figure emerge from the trees below.

Eva.

She starts running toward me. I look around again, panicked that some threat is waiting—like I am—but there is no one else. My panic makes the beautiful sculptures in the ornately carved stone tower feel somehow dark and menacing.

02 THE LAST THIRTEEN

I watch Eva as she nears. She breaks into a smile, and then she is laughing.

Eva's not afraid, she's—*happy*.

"Sam," Eva says, "come down!"

I clamber down the rough stone stairs and Eva crashes into me.

"Hey, you're crushing me!" I say, laughing, and Eva releases me from her hug.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I'm with them," Eva says, looking back over her shoulder to the trees where she's just come from.

I watch as a group of people appear in the distance. They run toward us too.

"Is that . . . ?"

"Yes," Eva replies.

"And . . ."

"Yes," Eva says. "We're all here."

I smile as the rest of the last 13 rush toward us. They all look happy.

First comes Alex, waving like crazy.

It feels like forever since I've seen him.

Gabriella, the Italian pop star, follows him with Xavier. Next comes the French art student, Zara, with Rapha from Brazil. Right behind them are Maria from Cuba, Cody from the States and Arianna, the feisty Russian gymnast. Issey, the pro-gamer from Japan, is at the back. And then I notice someone else.

"Who's that?" I ask Eva.

"That's Poh," Eva says.

"Poh . . . the next Dreamer?"

Eva nods.

"But it can't be, can it? *I'm* supposed to find him," I say.

Eva shrugs and stays silent.

"I'm supposed to be the one who finds the last 13," I repeat, my panic returning. "And if I'm dreaming of the next Dreamer now, then who else can see . . ."

No answer.

"Eva?"

I turn to Eva, but she's gone. I look back toward the group, but they're gone too.

The tall grass that stretches away from where I stand seems to whisper in the breeze. The lush jungle trees sway in unison. The ancient building to my back is casting a longer shadow over the rock-paved court. The sun is going down. But fast—too fast. Like I'm watching a time-delay sequence. I know *he* will be here. I know he is coming.

I close my eyes.

Wake up, wake up, wake up . . .



I open my eyes to a new scene.

I stare, confused, before realizing—

I haven't woken up.

04 THE LAST THIRTEEN

This is not a new scene. I'm in the same place, but seeing it from a far different viewpoint.

I'm up high now, above the trees. I'm standing at the very top of the temple spire. Somehow I know now where I am.

Cambodia.

At the temple of Angkor Wat, to be precise.

On top of the highest tower.

I look out over the sprawling complex and can see for the first time the majesty of the place—the trees, the grass lawns, the surrounding moat.

I know I'm in a dream, that this may be where I have to go next. I sit and wait—listening, watching.

But nothing happens. Time does not seem to pass. Birds fly, clouds move, leaves rustle, but it feels like everything is on a repetitive loop—nothing is going forward.

Eventually, I close my eyes.

When I open them, things will change.



Bill is standing there. My best friend from my old high school. My best friend, who died in the house fire. We are at the temple forecourt.

"Hi," I say. "Are you OK?"

"Of course," he replies.

"Why are you here? *How* are you here?"

"I'm in your dream, Sam."

"Right . . ."

"You're making this happen," Bill says.

"I am?"

"Yes, because you know something is not right. You're in trouble. You should wake up."

"I guess, but I don't feel worried anymore." I look around at the scenery—the birds still flying, uniform clouds are inching across the horizon, the trees swaying in the same unchanging rhythm.

The loop continues.

"Wake up, Sam."

"But I need information. Poh was here."

"Not now—later."

"But what about you?"

The birds freeze mid-flight.

I feel a shiver run through me. The shudder ripples down my spine like an electrical spark as a dark shadow is cast over me.

Bill turns to me. "It's too late, Sam. You couldn't save me then, and you can't save me now."

What? No!

Bill laughs, distorting his face into an ugly grimace. "You're always going to be too late, *boy*."

Boy?

Is this Solaris?

"You're not Bill!" I jump to my feet and push him away.

“But Sam, please, help me!” Bill suddenly looks like himself again, now scared and reaching for me.

What do I do?

But there is nothing I can do. It *is* too late. The flames are already surrounding us as Bill grabs my hand, frantically looking for an escape, but there is none.

I close my eyes as I hang onto him. Knowing it’s coming does not lessen the horror as the huge fireball erupts and I hear Bill’s screams mingling with mine as we—

Burn.