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*For Carolyn,
who helped me get from there to here.*

Also by Dan Smith

Big Game

Boy X

My Brother's Secret

My Friend the Enemy



OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA

3 DAYS AGO

There was something happening at Outpost Zero. Something that wasn't *supposed* to be happening, and Sofia Diaz wanted to get to the bottom of it.

Curiosity killed the cat, she thought as she throttled the engine and accelerated across the ice. *Yeah, well. Satisfaction brought it back.* And the only thing that was going to satisfy Sofia Diaz was finding out exactly what those BioMesa guys were doing at The Chasm.

Outpost Zero was run by the Exodus Project, and was supposed to be just thirty-two people – eight families – training for a life on Mars. Sofia had been in Antarctica with

her mum and dad, and her brother Pablo, for two months now. Two months without sunlight because she had persuaded her family to join the Exodus Project. But a few weeks after Sofia and the other seven families arrived at the base, some new guys turned up. Eight of them, working for a research company called BioMesa – but their work didn't have anything to do with Mars or the Exodus Project. They had come to Antarctica because of The Chasm – a huge crack that had appeared in the ice several months ago, not far from Outpost Zero. And Sofia wanted to know *exactly* what they were up to, but when they were in the main part of the base – The Hub – the BioMesa guys kept themselves to themselves, and when Sofia asked the other families about them, she was met with blank faces and gently shaking heads.

'Don't ask,' everyone said. 'Just pretend they're not here.'

But they *were* there, wearing their bright red Outpost Zero jackets, with the black BioMesa logo on the sleeve instead of an Exodus Project badge like everyone else. And they left at the same time every morning to ride out to The Chasm, and they came back at the same time every evening. Except for yesterday. Yesterday, they came back three hours later than usual, and when Sofia asked where they had been, everyone clammed up and told her not to ask.

At fourteen years old, Sofia was the youngest member on base, and she was expected to do as she was told. But Sofia hardly ever did what was expected, and *never* did as she was told, so she waited until the BioMesa guys had

returned to the base, before hurrying back to her room. On her way there, she bumped into a young, bearded man with the name 'Jennings' printed on the chest of his blue BioMesa sweater. He was coming back from the kitchen area, carrying a mug of coffee.

'No harm done,' he flicked the splash of coffee from his hand and smiled.

He seemed nice, and Sofia almost felt guilty for bumping into him.

Almost.

In her bedroom, Sofia felt a nervous thrill of excitement as she pulled on her Extreme Cold Weather gear. She slipped out through the emergency exit at the end of the West Tunnel, jumped down on to the ice, and sneaked round to the Arctic Cat snowmobiles parked at the front of Outpost Zero. Sofia chose the furthest snowmobile, and pushed it away from the base. As soon as she was out of earshot, she started the engine.

No one saw or heard her leave.

Soon the base became nothing more than a few glittering lights behind her. With a surge of adrenaline, Sofia kept going until the dim red glow of the beacons came into view. They marked the BioMesa research area. When she arrived, Sofia switched off the snowmobile and pulled Jennings' access card from her pocket. She approached a door that was built into the towering ice wall in front of her.

Too easy, she smiled to herself. *He'll think he lost it in the snow.*

She wiped ice from the scanner on the door, and

touched the card against it.

The door slid open and Sofia stepped inside.

Now let's see what you guys have been up to.

She followed a tunnel down to a square cavern in the ice. The right side of the giant room was home to a bank of computers. The left side, close to where Sofia was standing, was latticed with a grid of rectangular holes cut into the ground.

Like graves, she thought. Cold graves.

At the far end of the cavern, the world dropped away to never-ending darkness. The Chasm. This wasn't the first time Sofia had seen The Chasm, but something about it drew her towards the edge. She wanted to know what was in its hidden depths. As she came closer, though, she glanced into the nearest grave and saw something that made her stop.

It was filled with long ice cores; cylinders drilled from deep below the surface. They were the kind of thing scientists got nerdy about when they were researching climate change. Boring stuff, as far as Sofia was concerned, except the cores in *this* grave were different from the cores in all the others.

Something was frozen inside them.

Sofia got down on all fours and lifted out the nearest core. It was inside a clear plastic tube with the BioMesa logo, and '#31' printed on the side. She twisted it this way and that, but all she could see were dark shapes about the size of the tip of her thumb, stuck inside the ice. There was one close to the end. So close, in fact, that a little bit of

scraping with a sharp instrument might . . . just . . . ease it out . . . Sofia took off one of her clumsy gloves and fished a Gerber scout knife from her pocket. She flicked open the blade and used it to pop open the seal on the tube. She slid out the core and scraped at the ice until the small black object was protruding from the end of the core. Sofia used her fingers to loosen it and pull it free.

She held it in the palm of her hand and inspected her treasure.

It was actually more brown than black. And now she could see it better, she thought it looked like a cocoon. Or a pupa – the kind of thing a beetle would grow inside. It was cold against the skin on the palm of her hand, but the longer she held it, the more she had the sense that it was growing warm.

And when it moved, Sofia jumped so suddenly she almost dropped it.

Her heart was thumping, her blood rushing in her ears, and she held her hand further away from her face, as if something was about to burst from the pupa and . . .

And what? It's tiny. What could it do? Don't be such a scaredy-cat.

She smiled to herself and slipped the object into her pocket. She'd take it back and show Doc Blair; he'd find out what it was. In fact, why not take the whole ice core back to Doc Blair? There was something strange going on here, and it wasn't cool that BioMesa was keeping secrets from the people living on the base. It was not cool at all. The others needed to know about this.

Sofia slipped the ice core back into its container and made her way to the door. Outside, she put the plastic tube on the back of the Arctic Cat, pulled her goggles over her eyes, and started the engine.

As she accelerated across the snow towards the lights of Outpost Zero, Sofia thought about the grave filled with ice cores, and wondered if the BioMesa people would notice one was missing. But the more she thought about it, the less she cared. What could they do? She wasn't scared of them.

But she *would* be scared.

Later.

She would be scared to death.