

# The Gate

Alison Jacobs  
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"Ed. Ed, wake up."

There were worse things to come round to than Alec Freeman's gently concerned voice. Except that he had been dead five years. Ed Straker regained consciousness with a start to see his friend breathe a sigh of relief.

"I thought you'd got stuck."

"Stuck where?" Straker asked.

Alec gestured downwards and he rolled over to see his own body lying on the ground below him. "Is this what they call a near death experience?"

His friend chuckled. "You want to define near?"

"You want to define death? You're supposed to know."

Freeman shrugged. "How long does it take to define life when you've got it?"

That had him stumped. "A lifetime?"

Again that chuckle. It was good to hear it but it could not be real. This was one more alien plot messing with his brain. They had a knack for picking the sorest spots. Now he had to find a way out. He said as much.

Freeman rolled his eyes. "You're incorrigible. And paranoid. And dead."

He tried to remember what had happened. He looked more closely at his body as it lay sprawled and broken across the rocks, eyes open. It *looked* convincing. He *could* be dead.

He got up and looked around. This could pass for heaven. He could not exactly place the landscape, it seemed to be an amalgam of everywhere he had admired on Earth. It looked a little like England and a little like New England. It seemed to have the endless vistas of Australia and in the distance he could see the hazy shape of mountains. He could even see stars through the clear, blue sky.

A treacherous thought at the back of his head said: *Why aren't you in the other place? You've got enough blood on your hands.*

He tried to ignore it. "So where are the pearly gates?" he asked.

Alec turned him round.

It was some way off and did not look at all like he expected, more like a small wrought iron garden gate than the impressive things you see in pictures. It appeared to be made out of mother-of-pearl but that was the only thing that stood out about it except that it was on its own with no fence or wall attached to it.

It had to be a trap. If he went through there, something would happen. He would die or go mad or whatever it was the aliens had in store for him this time.

"Go on, then." Alec sounded impatient.

"Why?" Straker asked. "I like it here."

"It's better through there."

"You've seen it?"

There was a noticeable pause. "No."

Silence for a moment, a strained silence.

"Why not?"

Alec had got that shiftier look he remembered so well. That *You're better off not knowing, I'm doing this for your own good* kind of look. He had missed it.

It was the aliens. It had to be the aliens. Alec was dead. He had to remember that.

"Why not?" he repeated.

Alec shrugged. "There are things you can do here you can't do there. And once you go through, you can't come back. I mean, I couldn't pass up the chance to haunt Henderson."

Straker nearly choked. "That was you? I thought he was losing his marbles."

"He did that years ago."

Both of them collapsed into uncontrollable laughter. It took Straker a couple of minutes to recover himself. As he did so, he realised three things. He genuinely did feel different, more relaxed. He would never have let himself go like that otherwise. The aliens could be doing that to soften him up. On the other hand, if it was them, he realised that they had not played the most obvious card. There had been no sign, no mention of Johnny. Maybe that was too obvious but they had not hesitated to use him in the past.

Third, he realised there was a perfectly reasonable explanation why Alec Freeman had not gone through that gate and would not. He was waiting for him.

For and against were perfectly balanced. This could be all true or all poison. He could wait here for ever. He could find a way back, maybe. He could live without Johnny, he had for years. He still had work to do.

And Alec, if it was Alec, would wait for ever.

He made his mind up. He had to take the risk. Pay back time, because he never had paid Alec back for everything. "Come on, let's get it over with."

Alec just grinned.

As they strode along, a path seemed to appear before them, leading straight to their destination. They reached it quicker than he would have thought, which made him vaguely suspicious. It was too narrow for them both to go through. He stopped.

"You want me to..." Alec put his hand on the gate.

Straker shook his head. He pushed it open, heart thumping, and stepped through.

A bolt of pain shot right through him as he heard a crack like thunder. A split had opened up down his front. It was growing. He was shocked, puzzled, watching it as it seemed about to bisect him.

Then he understood.

The carapace that had grown around him for decades fell away. He tugged the last shards clear as the pain, the fear, the guilt and all the rest of it crumbled to dust. Just Ed Straker remained and he no longer knew what pain was.

Alec stepped through and the same happened to him, though Ed noted that the shell was much thinner in his case.

"Right." said the bigger man, clapping his hands. "Let's explore."

As they turned to go on, he heard another voice.

"Dad? Dad!"