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**THE
FEVER
CODE**
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Excerpt from The Maze Runner

Excerpt from The Mortality Doctrine

For all the die-hard Maze Runner fans.
You're crazy and full of passion and I love you.

PROLOGUE

NEWT

It snowed the day they killed the boy's parents.

An accident, they said much later, but he was there when it happened and knew it was no accident.

The snow came before they did, almost like a cold white omen, falling from the gray sky.

He could remember how confusing it was. The sweltering heat had brutalized their city for months that stretched into years, an infinite line of days filled with sweat and pain and hunger. He and his family survived. Hopeful mornings devolved into afternoons of scavenging for food, of loud fights and terrifying noises. Then evenings of numbness from the long hot days. He would sit with his family and watch the light fade from the sky and the world slowly disappear before his eyes, wondering if it would reappear with the dawn.

Sometimes the crazies came, indifferent to day or night. But his family didn't speak of them. Not his mother, not his father; certainly not him. It felt as if admitting their existence aloud might summon them, like an incantation calling forth devils. Only Lizzy, two years younger but twice as brave, had the guts to talk about the crazies, as if she were the only one smart enough to see superstition for nonsense.

And she was just a little kid.

The boy knew he should be the one with courage; he should be the one comforting his little sister. *Don't you worry, Lizzy. The basement is locked up tight; the lights are off. The bad people won't even know we're here.* But he always found himself speechless. He'd hug her hard, squeezing her like his own personal teddy bear for comfort. And every time, *she'd pat him* on the back. He loved her so much it made his heart hurt. He'd squeeze her tighter, silently swearing he'd never let the crazies hurt her, looking forward to feeling the flat of her palm thumping him between his shoulder blades.

Often, they fell asleep that way, curled up in the corner of the basement, on top of the old mattress his dad had dragged down the stairs. Their mother always put a

blanket over them, despite the heat—her own rebellious act against the Flare, which had ruined everything.

That morning, they awoke to a sight of wonder.

“Kids!”

It was his mother’s voice. He’d been dreaming, something about a football match, the ball spinning across the green grass of the pitch, heading for an open goal in an empty stadium.

“Kids! Wake up! Come see!”

He opened his eyes, saw his mother looking out the small window, the only one in the basement room. She’d removed the board his dad had nailed there the night before, like he did every evening at sunset. A soft gray light shone down on his mother’s face, revealing eyes full of bright awe. And a smile like he hadn’t seen in a very long time lit her even brighter.

“What’s going on?” he mumbled, climbing to his feet. Lizzy rubbed her eyes, yawned, then followed him to where Mum gazed into the daylight.

He could remember several things about that moment. As he looked out, squinting as his eyes adjusted, his father still snored like a beast. The street was empty of crazies, and clouds covered the sky, a rarity these days. He froze when he saw the white flakes. They fell from the grayness, swirling and dancing, defying gravity and flitting up before floating back down again.

Snow.

Snow.

“What the bloody hell?” he mumbled under his breath, a phrase he’d learned from his father.

“How can it snow, Mummy?” Lizzy asked, her eyes drained of sleep and filled with a joy that pinched his heart. He reached down and tugged on her braid, hoping she knew just how much she made his miserable life worth living.

“Oh, you know,” Mum replied, “all those things the people say. The whole weather system of the world is shot to bits, thanks to the Flares. Let’s just enjoy it, shall we? It’s quite extraordinary, don’t you think?”

Lizzy responded with a happy sigh.

He watched, wondering if he’d ever see such a thing again. The flakes drifted, eventually touching down and melting as soon as they met the pavement. Wet freckles dotted the windowpane.

They stood like that, watching the world outside, until shadows crossed the space at the top of the window. They were gone as soon as they appeared. The boy craned his neck to catch a glimpse of who or what had passed, but looked too late. A

few seconds later, a heavy pounding came on the front door above. His father was on his feet before the sound ended, suddenly wide-awake and alert.

“Did you see anyone?” Dad asked, his voice a bit croaky.

Mum’s face had lost the glee from moments earlier, replaced with the more familiar creases of concern and worry. “Just a shadow. Do we answer?”

“No,” Dad responded. “We most certainly do not. Pray they go away, whoever it is.”

“They might break in,” Mum whispered. “I know I would. They might think it’s abandoned, maybe a bit of canned food left behind.”

Dad looked at her for a long time, his mind working as the silence ticked by. Then, *boom, boom, boom*. The hard cracks on the door shook the entire house, as if their visitors had brought along a battering ram.

“Stay here,” Dad said carefully. “Stay with the children.”

Mum started to speak but stopped, looking down at her daughter and son, her priorities obvious. She pulled them into a hug, as if her arms could protect them, and the boy let the warmth of her body soothe him. He held her tight as Dad quietly made his way up the stairs, the floor above creaking as he moved toward the front door. Then silence.

The air grew heavy, pressing down. Lizzy reached over and took her brother’s hand. Finally he found words of comfort and poured them out to her.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered, barely more than a breath. “It’s probably just some people hungry for food. Dad will share a bit, and then they’ll be on their way. You’ll see.” He squeezed her fingers with all the love he knew, not believing a word he’d said.

Next came a rush of noises.

The door slammed open.

Loud, angry voices.

A crash, then a thump that rattled the floorboards.

Heavy, dreadful footsteps.

And then the strangers were pounding down the stairs. Two men, three, a woman—four people total. The arrivals were dressed sharply for the times, and they looked neither kind nor menacing. Merely solemn to the core.

“You’ve ignored every message we’ve sent,” one of the men stated as he examined the room. “I’m sorry, but we need the girl. Elizabeth. I’m very sorry, but we’ve got no choice.”

And just like that, the boy’s world ended. A world already filled with more sad things than a kid could count. The strangers approached, cutting through the tense

air. They reached for Lizzy, grabbed her by the shirt, pushed at Mum—frantic, wild, screaming—who clutched at her little girl. The boy ran forward, beat at the back of a man’s shoulders. Useless. A mosquito attacking an elephant.

The look on Lizzy’s face during the sudden madness. Something cold and hard shattered within the boy’s chest, the pieces falling with jagged edges, tearing at him. It was unbearable. He let out an enormous scream of his own and threw himself harder at the intruders, swinging wildly.

“Enough!” the woman yelled. A hand whipped through the air, slapped the boy in the face, a snakebite sting. Someone punched his mother right in the head. She collapsed. And then a sound like the crack of thunder, close and everywhere at once. His ears chimed with a deafening buzz. He fell back against the wall and took in the horrors.

One of the men, shot in the leg.

His dad standing in the doorway, gun in hand.

His mum screeching as she scrambled off the floor, reaching for the woman, who had pulled out her own weapon.

Dad firing off two more shots. A ping of metal and the crunch of a bullet hitting concrete. Misses, both.

Mum yanking at the lady’s shoulder.

Then the woman threw an elbow, fired, spun, fired three more times. In the chaos, the air thickened, all sound retreating, time a foreign concept. The boy watched, emptiness opening below him, as both of his parents fell. A long moment passed when no one moved, most of all Mum and Dad. They’d never move again.

All eyes went to the two orphaned children.

“Grab them *both*, dammit,” one of the men finally said. “They can use the other one as a control subject.”

The way the man pointed at him, so casually, like finally settling on a random can of soup in the pantry. He would never forget it. He scrambled for Lizzy, pulled her into his arms. And the strangers took them away.

CHAPTER 1

221.11.28 | 9:23 a.m.

Stephen, Stephen, Stephen. My name is Stephen.

He'd been chanting it over and over to himself for the last two days—since they'd taken him from his mom. He remembered every second of his last moments with her, every tear that ran down her face, every word, her warm touch. He was young, but he understood that it was for the best. He'd seen his dad plummet into complete madness, all anger and stink and danger. He couldn't take seeing it happen to his mom.

Still, the pain of their separation swallowed him. An ocean that had sucked him under, its coldness and depth never-ending. He lay on the bed in his small room, legs tucked up to his chest and eyes squeezed shut, curled into a ball, as if that would bring sleep down on him. But since he'd been taken, slumber had come only in fits, snatches full of dark clouds and screaming beasts. He focused.

Stephen, Stephen, Stephen. My name is Stephen.

He figured he had two things to hold on to: his memories and his name. Surely they couldn't take the first away from him, but they were trying to steal the second. For two days they'd pressed him to accept his new name: Thomas. He'd refused, clinging desperately to the seven letters his own flesh and blood had chosen for him. When the people in the white coats called him Thomas, he didn't respond; he acted as if he couldn't hear them or as if he thought they were talking to someone else. It wasn't easy when only two people stood in the room, which was usually the case.

Stephen wasn't even five years old, yet his only glimpse of the world had been full of darkness and pain. And then these people took him. They seemed intent on making sure he realized that things could only get worse, every lesson learned harder than the one before it.

His door buzzed, then immediately popped open. A man strode in, dressed in a green one-piece suit that looked like pajamas for grown-ups. Stephen wanted to tell him he looked ridiculous, but based on the last few encounters he'd had with these people, he decided to keep his opinion to himself. Their patience was beginning to wear thin.

“Thomas, come with me,” the man said.

Stephen, Stephen, Stephen. My name is Stephen.

He didn't move. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, hoping the stranger hadn't noticed that he'd taken a peek when the man had first entered. A different person had come each time. None of them had been hostile, but then, none had been very nice either. They all seemed distant, their thoughts elsewhere, removed from the boy alone in the bed.

The man spoke again, not even trying to conceal the impatience in his voice. “Thomas, get up. I don't have time for games, okay? They're running us ragged to get things set up, and I've heard that you're one of the last ones resisting your new name. Give me a break, son. This is seriously something you want to fight about? After we saved you from what's happening out there?”

Stephen willed himself not to move, the result only a stiffness that couldn't possibly look like someone sleeping. He held his breath until he finally had to suck in a huge gulp of air. Giving up, he rolled onto his back and glared at the stranger dead in the eye.

“You look stupid,” he said.

The man tried to hide his surprise but failed; amusement crossed his face. “Excuse me?”

Anger flared inside Stephen. “I said, you look stupid. That ridiculous green jumpsuit. And give up the act. I'm not going to just do whatever you want me to do. And I'm definitely not putting on anything that looks like those man-jammies you're wearing. And don't call me Thomas. My name is Stephen!”

It all came out in one breath, and Stephen had to suck in another huge gulp of air, hoping it didn't ruin his moment. Make him look weak.

The man laughed, and he sounded more amused than condescending. It still made Stephen want to throw something across the room.

“They told me you had...” The man paused, looked down at an electronic notepad he carried. “...‘an endearing, childlike quality’ about you. Guess I'm not seeing it.”

“That was before they told me I had to change my name,” Stephen countered. “The name my mom and dad gave me. The one you took from me.”

“Would that be the dad who went crazy?” the man asked. “The one who just about beat your mom to death he was so sick? And the mom who asked us to take you away? Who's getting sicker every day? *Those* parents?”

Stephen smoldered in his bed but said nothing.

His green-clothed visitor came closer to the bed, crouched down. “Look, you’re just a kid. And you’re obviously bright. Really bright. Also immune to the Flare. You have a lot going for you.”

Stephen heard the warning in the man’s voice. Whatever came next was *not* going to be good.

“You’re going to have to accept the loss of certain things and think of something bigger than yourself,” he continued. “If we don’t find a cure within a few years, humans are done. So here’s what’s going to happen, *Thomas*. You’re going to get up. You’re going to walk with me out that door. And I’m not going to tell you again.”

The man waited for a moment, his gaze unwavering; then he stood and turned to leave.

Stephen got up. He followed the man out the door.

CHAPTER 2

221.11.28 | 9:56 a.m.

When they entered the hallway, Stephen got his first glimpse of another kid since he'd arrived. A girl. She had brown hair and looked like she might be a little older than him. It was hard to tell, though; he only got a brief look at her as a woman escorted her into the room right next to his. The door thumped closed just as he and his escort walked by, and he noticed the plaque on the front of its white surface: 31K.

"Teresa hasn't had any problem taking her new name," the man in green said as they moved down the long, dimly lit hallway. "Of course, that might be because she wanted to forget her given one."

"What was it?" Stephen asked, his tone approaching something like politeness. He genuinely wanted to know. If the girl had really given up so easily, maybe he could hold on to her name as well—a favor to a potential friend.

"It'll be hard enough for you to forget your own," came the response. "I wouldn't want to burden you with another."

I'll never forget, Stephen told himself. *Never.*

Somewhere at the edge of his mind, he realized that he'd already changed his stance, ever so slightly. Instead of insisting on calling himself Stephen, he'd begun to merely promise not to *forget* Stephen. Had he already given in? *No!* He almost shouted it.

"What's *your* name?" he asked, needing a distraction.

"Randall Spilker," the man said without breaking his stride. They turned a corner and came to a bank of elevators. "Once upon a time, I wasn't such a jerk, trust me. The world, the people I work for"—he gestured to nothing in particular all around him—"it's all turned my heart into a small lump of black coal. Too bad for you."

Stephen had no response, as he was busy wondering where they were going. They stepped onto the elevator when it chimed and the doors opened.

Stephen sat in a strange chair, its various built-in instruments pressing into his legs and back. Wireless sensors, each barely the size of a fingernail, were attached to his temples, his neck, his wrists, the crooks of his elbows, and his chest. He watched the console next to him as it collected data, chirping and beeping. The man in the grown-up jammies sat in another chair to observe, his knees only a couple of inches from Stephen's.

"I'm sorry, Thomas. We'd usually wait longer before it came to this," Randall said. He sounded nicer than he had back in the hallway and in Stephen's room. "We'd give you some more time to choose to take your new name voluntarily, like Teresa did. But time isn't a luxury we have anymore."

He held up a tiny piece of shiny silver, one end rounded, the other tapered to a razor-sharp point.

"Don't move," Randall said, leaning forward as if he were going to whisper something into Stephen's ear. Before he could question the man, Stephen felt a sharp pain in his neck, right below his chin, then the unsettling sensation of something burrowing into his throat. He yelped, but it was over as fast as it had begun, and he felt nothing more than the panic that filled his chest.

"Wh-what was that?" he stammered. He tried to get up from the chair despite all the things attached to him.

Randall pushed him back into his seat. Easy to do when he was twice Stephen's size.

"It's a pain stimulator. Don't worry, it'll dissolve and get flushed out of your system. Eventually. By then you probably won't need it anymore." He shrugged. *What can you do?* "But we can always insert another one if you make it necessary. Now calm down."

Stephen had a hard time catching his breath. "What's it going to do to me?"

"Well, that depends...*Thomas*. We have a long road ahead of us, you and me. All of us. But for today, right now, at this moment, we can take a shortcut. A little path through the woods. All you need to do is tell me your name."

"That's easy. Stephen."

Randall let his head fall into his hands. "Do it," he said, his voice little more than a tired whisper.

Until this moment, Stephen hadn't known pain outside of the scrapes and bruises of childhood. And so it was that when the fiery tempest exploded throughout his body, when the agony erupted in his veins and muscles, he had no words for it, no capacity to understand. There were only the screams that barely reached his own ears before his mind shut down and saved him.

Stephen came to, breathing heavily and soaked in sweat. He was still in the strange chair, but at some point, he'd been secured to it with straps of soft leather. Every nerve in his body buzzed with the lingering effects of the pain inflicted by Randall and the implanted device.

"What..." Stephen whispered, a hoarse croak. His throat burned, telling him all he needed to know about how much he'd screamed in the time he lost. "What?" he repeated, his mind struggling to connect the pieces.

"I tried to tell you, Thomas," Randall said, with perhaps, *perhaps*, some compassion in his voice. Possibly regret. "We don't have time to mess around. I'm sorry. I really am. But we're going to have to try this again. I think you understand now that none of this is a bluff. It's important to everyone here that you accept your new name." The man looked away and paused a long time, staring at the floor.

"How could you hurt me?" Stephen asked through his raw throat. "I'm just a little kid." Young or not, he understood how pathetic he sounded.

Stephen also knew that adults seemed to react to *pathetic* in one of two ways: Their hearts would melt a little and they'd backtrack. Or the guilt would burn like a furnace within them and they'd harden into rock to put the fire out. Randall chose the latter, his face reddening as he shouted back.

"All you have to do is accept a name! Now—I'm not playing around anymore. What's your name?"

Stephen wasn't stupid—he'd just pretend for now. "Thomas. My name is Thomas."

"I don't believe you," Randall responded, his eyes pools of darkness. "Again."

Stephen opened his mouth to answer, but Randall hadn't been speaking to him. The pain came back, harder and faster. He barely had time to register the agony before he passed out.

"What's your name?"

Stephen could barely speak. "Thomas."

"I don't believe you."

"No." He whimpered.

The pain was no longer a surprise, nor was the darkness that came after.

“What’s your name?”

“Thomas.”

“I don’t want you to forget.”

“No.” He cried, trembling with sobs.

“What’s your name?”

“Thomas.”

“Do you have any other name?”

“No. Only Thomas.”

“Has anyone ever called you anything else?”

“No. Only Thomas.”

“Will you ever forget your name? Will you ever use another?”

“No.”

“Okay. Then I’ll give you one last reminder.”

Later, he lay on his bed, once again curled up into himself. The world outside felt far away, silent. He’d run out of tears, his body numb except that unpleasant tingle. It was as if his entire being had fallen asleep. He pictured Randall across from him, guilt and anger mixed into a potent, lethal form of rage that turned his face into a grotesque mask as he inflicted the pain.

I’ll never forget, he told himself. I must never, never forget.

And so, inside his mind, he chanted a familiar phrase, over and over and over. Though he couldn’t quite put a finger on it, something *did* seem different.

Thomas, Thomas, Thomas. My name is Thomas.