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THE
KILL
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For Kathy Egan.
I really miss you.

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PROLOGUE

Teresa looked at her best friend and wondered what it would be like to forget him.

It seemed impossible, though she'd now seen the Swipe implanted in dozens of boys before Thomas. Sandy brown hair, penetrating eyes and a constant look of contemplation—how could this kid ever be unfamiliar to her? How could they be in the same room and not joke about some smell or make fun of some clueless slouch nearby? How could she ever stand in front of him and not leap at the chance to communicate telepathically?

Impossible.

And yet, only a day away.

For her. For Thomas, it was a matter of minutes. He lay on the operating table, his eyes closed, chest rising and falling with soft, even breaths. Already dressed in the requisite shorts-and-T-shirt uniform of the Glade, he looked like a snapshot of the past—some ordinary boy taking an ordinary nap after a long day at an ordinary school, before sun flares and disease made the world anything *but* ordinary. Before death and destruction made it necessary to steal children—along with their memories—and send them to a place as terrifying as the Maze. Before human brains were known as the killzone and needed to be watched and studied. All in the name of science and medicine.

A doctor and a nurse had been prepping Thomas and now lowered the mask onto his face. There were clicks and hisses and beeps; Teresa watched as metal and wires and plastic tubes slithered across his skin and into the canals of Thomas's ears, saw his hands twitch reflexively at his sides. He probably felt pain on some level despite the drugs, but he'd never remember it. The machine began its work, plucking images from Thomas's memory. Erasing his mom and his dad and his life. Erasing *her*.

Some small part of her knew it should make her angry. Make her scream and yell and refuse to help for one more second. But the greater part was as

solid as the rock of the cliffs outside. Yes, the greater part within her was entrenched in certainty so deeply that she knew she'd feel it even after tomorrow, when the same thing would be done to her. She and Thomas were proving their conviction by submitting to what had been asked of the others. And if they died, so be it. WICKED would find the cure, millions would be saved, and life on earth would someday get back to normal. Teresa knew this in her core, as much as she knew that humans grow old and leaves fall from trees in autumn.

Thomas sucked in a hitching breath, then made a little moaning sound, shifted his body. Teresa thought for a horrifying second that he might wake up, hysterical from the agony—things were inside his head doing who knew what to his brain. But he stilled and resumed the soft and easy breathing. The clicks and hisses continued, her best friend's memories fading like echoes.

They'd said their official goodbyes, and the words *See you tomorrow* still rang in her head. For some reason that had really struck her when Thomas said it, made what he was about to do all the more surreal and sad. They *would* see each other tomorrow, although she'd be in a coma and he wouldn't have the slightest idea who she was—other than an itch in his mind that maybe she looked familiar. Tomorrow. After all they'd been through—all the fear and training and planning—it was all coming to a head. What had been done to Alby and Newt and Minho and all the rest would be done to them. There was no turning back.

But the calmness was like a drug inside her. She was at peace, these soothing feelings keeping the terror of things like Grievors and Cranks at bay. WICKED had no choice. She and Thomas—*they* had no choice. How could she shrink at sacrificing a few to save the many? How could *anyone*? She didn't have time for pity or sadness or wishes. It was what it was; what was done was done; what would be ... would be.

There was no turning back. She and Thomas had helped construct the Maze; at the same time she'd exerted a lot of effort to build a wall holding back her emotions.

Her thoughts faded then, seemed to float in suspended animation as she waited for the procedure on Thomas to be complete. When it finally was, the doctor pushed several buttons on his screen and the beeps and hisses and clicks sped up. Thomas's body twitched a little as the tubes and wires

snaked away from their intrusive positions and back into his mask. He grew still again and the mask powered down, all sound and movement ceasing. The nurse leaned forward and lifted it off Thomas's face. His skin was red and marked with lines where it had rested. Eyes still closed.

For a brief moment, Teresa's wall holding back the sadness began to crumble. If Thomas woke up right then, he wouldn't remember her. She felt the dread—almost like panic—of knowing that they'd meet soon in the Glade and not know each other. It was a crushing thought that reminded her vividly of why she'd built the wall in the first place. Like a mason slamming a brick into hardening mortar, she sealed the breach. Sealed it solid and thick.

There was no turning back.

Two men from the security team came in to help move Thomas. They lifted him off the bed, hoisted him as if he were stuffed with straw. One had the unconscious boy by the arms, the other by the feet, and they placed him on a gurney. Without so much as a glance toward Teresa, they headed for the door of the operating room. Everyone knew where he was being taken. The doctor and the nurse went about the business of cleaning up—their job was done. Teresa nodded at them even though they weren't looking, then followed the men into the hallway.

She could barely look at Thomas as they made the long journey through the corridors and elevators of WICKED headquarters. Her wall had weakened again. Thomas was so pale, and his face was covered with beads of sweat. As if he were conscious on some level, fighting the drugs, aware that terrible things awaited him on the horizon. It hurt her heart to see it. And it scared her to know that she was next. Her stupid wall. What did it matter? It would be taken from her along with all the memories anyway.

They reached the basement level below the Maze structure, walked through the warehouse with its rows and shelves of supplies for the Gladers. It was dark and cool down there, and Teresa felt goose bumps break out along her arms. She shivered and rubbed them down. Thomas bounced and jostled on the gurney as it hit cracks in the concrete floor, still a look of dread trying to break through the calm exterior of his sleeping face.

They reached the shaft of the lift, where the large metal cube rested.

The Box.

It was only a couple of stories below the Glade proper, but the Glade occupants were manipulated into thinking the trip up was an impossibly long and arduous journey. It was all meant to stimulate an array of emotions and brain patterns, from confusion to disorientation to outright terror. A perfect start for those mapping Thomas's killzone. Teresa knew that she'd be taking the trip herself tomorrow, with a note gripped in her hands. But at least she'd be in a comatose state, spared of that half hour in the moving darkness. Thomas would wake up in the Box, completely alone.

The two men wheeled Thomas next to the Box. There was a horrible screech of metal against cement as one of them dragged a large stepladder to the side of the cube. A few moments of awkwardness as they climbed those steps together while holding Thomas again. Teresa could've helped but refused, stubborn enough to stand there and watch, to shore up the cracks in her wall as much as she could.

With a few grunts and curses, the men got Thomas to the edge at the top. His body was positioned in a way that his closed eyes faced Teresa one last time. Even though she knew he wouldn't hear it, she reached out and spoke to him inside her mind.

We're doing the right thing, Thomas. See you on the other side.

The men leaned over and lowered Thomas by the arms as far as they could; they dropped him the rest of the way. Teresa heard the thump of his body crumpling onto the cold steel of the floor inside. Her best friend.

She turned around and walked away. From behind her came the distinct sound of metal sliding against metal, then a loud, echoing boom as the doors of the Box slammed shut. Sealing Thomas's fate, whatever it might be.

THIRTEEN YEARS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

Mark shivered with cold, something he hadn't done in a long time.

He'd just woken up, the first traces of dawn leaking through the cracks of the stacked logs that made up the wall of his small hut. He almost never used his blanket. He was proud of it—it was made from the hide of a giant elk he'd killed himself just two months prior—but when he did use it, it was for the comfort of the blanket itself, not so much for warmth. They lived in a world ravaged by heat, after all. But maybe this was a sign of change; he actually felt a little chilled by the morning air seeping through those same cracks as the light. He pulled the furry hide up to his chin and turned to lie on his back, belting out a yawn for the ages.

Alec was still asleep in the cot on the other side of the hut—all of four feet away—and snoring up a storm. The older man was gruff, a hardened former soldier who rarely smiled. And when he did, it usually had something to do with rumbling gas pains in his stomach. But Alec had a heart of gold. After more than a year together, fighting for survival along with Lana and Trina and the rest of them, Mark wasn't intimidated by the old bear anymore. Just to prove it, he leaned over and grabbed a shoe off the floor, then chucked it at the man. It hit him in the shoulder.

Alec roared and sat up straight, years of military training snapping him instantly awake. “What the—” the soldier yelled, but Mark cut him off by throwing his other shoe at him, this time smacking his chest.

“You little piece of rat liver,” Alec said coolly. He hadn't flinched or moved after the second attack, just stared Mark down with narrowed eyes. But there was a spark of humor behind them. “I better hear a good reason why you chose to risk your life by waking me up like that.”

“Ummmmm,” Mark replied, rubbing his chin as if he were thinking hard about it. Then he snapped his fingers. “Oh, I got it. Mainly it was to stop the awful sounds coming out of you. Seriously, man, you need to sleep on your

side or something. Snoring like that can't be healthy. You're gonna choke on your own throat one of these days."

Alec grumbled and grunted a few times, muttering almost indecipherable words as he scooted off his cot and got dressed. There was something about "wish I'd never" and "better off" and "year of hell," but not much more Mark could make out. The message was clear, though.

"Come on, Sergeant," Mark said, knowing he was about three seconds from going too far. Alec had been retired from the military for a long time and really, really, *really* hated it when Mark called him that. At the time of the sun flares, Alec had been a contract worker for the defense department. "You never would've made it to this lovely abode if it hadn't been for us snatching you out of trouble every day. How about a hug and we make up?"

Alec pulled a shirt over his head, then peered down at Mark. The older man's bushy gray eyebrows bunched up in the middle as if they were hairy bugs trying to mate. "I like you, kid. It'd be a shame to have to put you six feet under." He whacked Mark on the side of the head—the closest thing to affection the soldier ever showed.

Soldier. It might have been a long time, but Mark still liked to think of the man that way. It made him feel better—safer—somehow. He smiled as Alec stomped out of their hut to tackle another day. A real smile. Something that was finally becoming a little more commonplace after the year of death and terror that had chased them to this place high up in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. He decided that no matter what, he'd push all the bad stuff from the past aside and have a good day. No matter what.

Which meant he needed to bring Trina into the picture before another ten minutes ticked off the clock. He hurriedly got dressed and went out to look for her.

He found her up by the stream, in one of the quiet places she went to read some of the books they'd salvaged from an old library they'd come across in their travels. That girl loved to read like no one else, and she was making up for the months they spent literally running for their lives, when books were few and far between. The digital kind were all long gone, as far as

Mark could guess—wiped away when the computers and servers all fried. Trina read the old-school paper kind.

The walk toward her had been as sobering as usual, each step weakening his resolve to have a good day. Looking at the pitiful network of tree houses and huts and underground burrows that made up the thriving metropolis in which they lived—all logs and twine and dried mud, everything leaning to the left or the right—did the trick. He couldn't stroll through the crowded alleys and paths of their settlement without it reminding him of the good days living in the big city, when life had been rich and full of promise, everything in the world within easy reach, ready for the taking. And he hadn't even realized it.

He passed hordes of scrawny, dirty people who seemed on the edge of death. He didn't pity them so much as he hated knowing that he looked just like them. They had enough food—scavenged from the ruins, hunted in the woods, brought up from Asheville sometimes—but rationing was the name of the game, and everyone looked like they were one meal a day short. And you didn't live in the woods without getting a smear of dirt here and there, no matter how often you bathed up in the stream.

The sky was blue with a hint of that burnt orange that had haunted the atmosphere since the devastating sun flares had struck without much warning. Over a year ago and yet it still hung up there like a hazy curtain meant to remind them forever. Who knew if things would ever get back to normal. The coolness Mark had felt upon waking up seemed like a joke now—he was already sweating from the steadily rising temperature as the brutal sun rimmed the sparse tree line of the mountain peaks above.

It wasn't all bad news. As he left the warrens of their camps and entered the woods, there were many promising signs. New trees growing, old trees recovering, squirrels dashing through the blackened pine needles, green sprouts and buds all around. He even saw something that looked like an orange flower in the distance. He was half tempted to go pick it for Trina, but he knew she'd scold him within an inch of his life if he dared impede the progress of the forest. Maybe his day would be good after all. They'd survived the worst natural disaster in known human history—maybe the corner had been turned.

He was breathing heavily from the effort of the hike up the mountain face when he reached the spot where Trina loved to go for escape. Especially in

the mornings, when the odds of finding someone else up there were slim. He stopped and looked at her from behind a tree, knowing she'd heard him approach but glad she was pretending she hadn't.

Man, she was pretty. Leaning back against a huge granite boulder that seemed as if it had been placed there by a decorating giant, she held a thick book in her lap. She turned a page, her green eyes following the words. She was wearing a black T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans, sneakers that looked a hundred years old. Her short blond hair shifted in the wind, and she appeared the very definition of peace and comfort. Like she belonged in the world that had existed before everything was scorched.

Mark had always felt like she was his as a simple matter of the situation. Pretty much everyone else she'd ever known had died; he was a scrap left over for her to take, the alternative to being forever alone. But he gladly played his part, even considered himself lucky—he didn't know what he'd do without her.

“This book would be so much better if I didn't have some creepy guy stalking me while I tried to read it.” Trina spoke without the slightest hint of a smile. She flipped another page and continued to read.

“It's just me,” he said. Half of what he said around her still came out sounding dumb. He stepped from behind the tree.

She laughed and finally looked up at him. “It's about time you got here! I was just about ready to start talking to myself—I've been reading since before dawn.”

He walked over and plopped down on the ground beside her. They hugged, tight and warm and full of the promise he'd made upon waking up.

He pulled back and looked at her, not caring about the goofy grin that was most likely plastered across his face. “You know what?”

“What?” she asked.

“Today is going to be a perfect, perfect day.”

Trina smiled and the waters of the stream continued to rush by, as if his words meant nothing.