

CHAPTER 1

It was the smell that began to drive Thomas slightly mad. Not being alone for over three weeks. Not the white walls, ceiling and floor. Not the lack of windows or the fact that they never turned off the lights. None of that. They'd taken his watch; they fed him the exact same meal three times a day – slab of ham, mashed potatoes, raw carrots, slice of bread, water – never spoke to him, never allowed anyone else in the room. No books, no movies, no games.

Complete isolation. For over three weeks now, though he'd begun to doubt his tracking of time – which was based purely on instinct. He tried to best guess when night had fallen, made sure he only slept what felt like normal hours. The meals helped, though they didn't seem to come regularly. As if he was meant to feel disorientated.

Alone. In a padded room devoid of colour – the only exceptions a small, almost-hidden stainless-steel toilet in the corner and an old wooden desk that Thomas had no use for. Alone in an unbearable silence, with unlimited time to think about the

disease rooted inside him: the Flare, that silent, creeping virus that slowly took away everything that made a person human.

None of this drove him crazy.

But he stank, and for some reason that set his nerves on a sharp wire, cutting into the solid block of his sanity. They didn't let him shower or bathe, hadn't provided him with a change of clothes since he'd arrived or anything to clean his body with. A simple rag would've helped; he could dip it in the water they gave him to drink and clean his face at least. But he had nothing, only the dirty clothes he'd been wearing when they locked him away. Not even bedding – he slept all curled up, his butt wedged in the corner of the room, arms folded, trying to hug some warmth into himself, often shivering.

He didn't know why the stench of his own body was the thing that scared him the most. Perhaps that in itself was a sign that he'd lost it. But for some reason his deteriorating hygiene pushed against his mind, causing horrific thoughts. Like he was rotting, decomposing, his insides turning as rancid as his outside felt.

That was what worried him, as irrational as it seemed. He had plenty of food and just enough water to quench his thirst; he got plenty of rest, and he exercised as best he could in the small room, often running in place for hours. Logic told him that being filthy had nothing to do with the strength of your heart or the functioning of your lungs. All the same, his mind was beginning to believe that his unceasing stench represented death rushing in, about to swallow him whole.

Those dark thoughts, in turn, were starting to make him wonder if Teresa hadn't been lying after all that last time they'd spoken, when she'd said it was too late for Thomas and insisted that he'd succumbed to the Flare rapidly, had become crazy and violent. That he'd *already* lost his sanity before coming to this awful place. Even Brenda had warned him that things were about to get bad. Maybe they'd both been right.

And underneath all that was the worry for his friends. What

had happened to them? Where were they? What was the Flare doing to their minds? After everything they'd been subjected to, was this how it was all going to end?

The rage crept in. Like a shivering rat looking for a spot of warmth, a crumb of food. And with every passing day came an increasing anger so intense that Thomas sometimes caught himself shaking uncontrollably before he reeled the fury back in and pocketed it. He didn't want it to go away for good; he only wanted to store it and let it build. Wait for the right time, the right place, to unleash it. WICKED had done all this to him. WICKED had taken his life and those of his friends and were using them for whatever purposes they deemed necessary. No matter the consequences.

And for that, they would pay. Thomas swore this to himself a thousand times a day.

All these things went through his mind as he sat, back against the wall, facing the door – and the ugly wooden desk in front of it – in what he guessed was the late morning of his twenty-second day as a captive in the white room. He always did this – after eating breakfast, after exercising. Hoping against hope that the door would open – actually *open*, all the way – the whole door, not just the little slot on the bottom through which they slid his meals.

He'd already tried countless times to get the door open himself. And the desk drawers were empty, nothing there but the smell of mildew and cedar. He looked every morning, just in case something might've magically appeared while he slept. Those things happened sometimes when you were dealing with WICKED.

And so he sat, staring at that door. Waiting. White walls and silence. The smell of his own body. Left to think about his friends – Minho, Newt, Frypan, the other few Gladers still alive. Brenda and Jorge, who'd vanished from sight after their rescue on the giant Berg. Harriet and Sonya, the other girls from Group B, Aris. About Brenda and her warning to him

after he'd woken up in the white room the first time. How had she spoken in his mind? Was she on his side or not?

But most of all, he thought about Teresa. He couldn't get her out of his head, even though he hated her a little more with every passing moment. Her last words to him had been *WICKED is good*, and right or wrong, to Thomas she'd come to represent all the terrible things that had happened. Every time he thought of her, rage boiled inside him.

Maybe all that anger was the last string tethering him to sanity as he waited.

Eat. Sleep. Exercise. Thirst for revenge. That was what he did for three more days. Alone.

On the twenty-sixth day, the door opened.