A dramatic, high-angle photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. In the center, a large, dark wooden structure, possibly a cabin or a bunker, is partially obscured by a large, snow-covered dome. The scene is filled with snow-covered evergreen trees and a misty, blue-tinted atmosphere. The overall mood is cold and mysterious.

THE DEATH CURE

**JAMES
DASHNER**

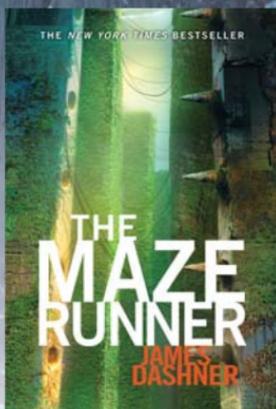
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHAPTER SAMPLER

THE TIME FOR LIES IS OVER.

FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES DASHNER



KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .

CHAPTER 1

It was the smell that began to drive Thomas slightly mad.

Not being alone for 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 disoriented.

Alone. In a padded room devoid of color—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.

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 or anything to clean his body with since he'd arrived. 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.

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?

The madness 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 that things were going to get bad. Was she on his side or not? And how had she spoken inside his mind? 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, in his mind 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.

CHAPTER 2

Thomas had imagined this happening, countless times. What he would do, what he would say. How he'd rush forward and tackle anyone who came in, make a run for it, flee, escape. But these thoughts were almost for amusement more than anything. He knew WICKED wouldn't let something like that happen. No, he'd need to plan out every detail before he made his move.

When it *did* happen—when that door popped open with a slight puffing sound and began to swing wide—Thomas surprised himself by how he reacted. He did nothing. Something told him an invisible barrier had appeared between him and the desk—like back in the dorms after the Maze. The time for action hadn't arrived. Not yet.

He felt only the slightest hint of surprise when the Rat Man walked in—the guy who'd informed the Gladers of the last trial they'd been forced on, through the Scorch. Same long nose, same weasel-like eyes; that greasy hair, combed over an obvious bald spot that took up half his head. Same ridiculous white suit. He looked paler than the last time Thomas had seen him, though, and he was holding a thick folder filled with dozens of crinkled and messily stacked papers in the crook of his arm and dragging a straight-backed chair.

“Good morning, Thomas,” he said with a stiff nod. Without waiting for a response, he pulled the door shut, set his chair behind the desk and took a seat. He placed the folder in front of him and opened

it, started flipping through pages. When he found what he'd been looking for he stopped and rested his hands on top of everything. Then he flashed a pathetic grin, his eyes finally settling on Thomas.

When Thomas finally spoke, he realized that he hadn't done so in weeks, and his voice came out more like a croak. "It'll only be good if you let me out."

"Yes, yes, I know. No need to worry—you're going to be hearing plenty of positive news today. Trust me."

Thomas thought about that, ashamed that he let it lift his hopes, even for a second. He should know better by now. "*Positive* news? Didn't you choose us because you thought we were intelligent?"

Rat Man remained silent for several seconds before he responded. "Intelligent, yes. Among more important reasons." He paused and studied Thomas before continuing. "Do you think we *enjoy* all this? You think we *enjoy* watching you suffer? It's all been for a purpose, and very soon it will make sense to you." The intensity of his words had built until he'd practically shouted that last word, his face now red.

"Whoa," Thomas said, feeling bolder by the minute. "Slim it nice and calm there, old fella. You look three steps away from a heart attack."

The man stood from his chair and leaned forward on the desk, the veins in his neck standing out in taut cords. He slowly sat back down, took several deep breaths. "You would think that almost four weeks in this white box might humble a boy. But you seem more arrogant than ever."

"So are you going to tell me that I'm not crazy, then? Don't have the Flare, never did?" Thomas couldn't help himself. The anger was rising in him and he felt like he was going to explode. But he forced

a calmness into his voice. “That’s what kept me sane through all this— deep down I know you lied to Teresa, that this is just another one of your tests. So where do I go next? Gonna send me to the shuck moon? Make me swim across the ocean in my undies?” He smiled for effect.

The Rat Man had been staring at Thomas with blank eyes throughout his rant. “Are you finished?”

“No, I’m not finished. I want you to tell me everything. Now.”

“Oh, Thomas.” The Rat Man said it quietly, as if delivering sad news to a small child. “We didn’t lie to you. You *do* have the Flare.”

A cold chill cut through the heat of Thomas’s rage. He was sure they’d lied to him before—though Rat Man could just be lying again now. He took a deep breath and shrugged, as if the news was something he heard every day. “Well, even so, I haven’t started going crazy yet.” At a certain point—after all that time crossing the Scorch, being with Brenda, surrounded by Cranks—he’d come to terms with the fact that he’d catch the virus eventually. But he told himself that for now he was still okay. Still sane. And that was all that mattered at the moment.

Rat Man sighed. “You don’t understand. You don’t understand what it is that I came in here to tell you.”

“Why would I believe a word that comes out of your mouth?”

Thomas realized that he’d stood up, though he had no memory of doing so. His chest lurched with heavy breaths. He had to get control of himself. Rat Man’s stare was cold, his eyes black pits. Regardless of whether this man lied to him, Thomas knew he was going to have to hear him out if he ever wanted to leave this white room. He forced his breathing to slow. He waited.

After several seconds of silence, his visitor continued. “I know

we've lied to you. Often. We've done some awful things to you and your friends. But it was all part of a plan that you not only agreed to, but helped set in place. We've had to take it all a little farther than we'd hoped in the beginning—there's no doubt about that. However, everything has stayed true to the spirit of what the Creators envisioned—what *you* envisioned in their place after they were . . . purged.”

Thomas slowly shook his head; he knew he'd been involved with these people once, somehow, but the concept of putting anyone through what he'd gone through was incomprehensible. “You didn't answer me. How can you possibly expect me to believe anything you say?” He recalled more than he let on, of course. Though the window to his past was caked with grime, revealing little more than splotchy glimpses, he knew he'd worked with WICKED. He knew Teresa had too, and that they'd helped create the Maze. There'd been other flashes of memory.

“Because, Thomas, there's no value in keeping you in the dark,” Rat Man said. “Not anymore.”

Thomas felt a sudden weariness, like all the strength had seeped out of him, leaving him with nothing. He sank to the floor with a heavy sigh. He shook his head. “I don't even know what that means.”

Rat Man kept talking, but his tone became less detached and clinical and more teacherly. “You are obviously well aware that we have a horrible disease eating the minds of humans worldwide. Everything we've done up to now has been for one purpose and one purpose only—to analyze your brain patterns and build a blueprint from them. The goal is to use this blueprint to develop a cure for the Flare. The lives lost, the pain and suffering—you knew the stakes when this began. We all did. It was all to ensure the survival of the human race. And we're very close. Very, very close.”

Memories had come back to Thomas on several occasions. The Changing, the dreams he'd had since, fleeting glimpses here and there, like quick lightning strikes in his mind. And right now, listening to the white-suited man talk, it felt as if he stood a few feet back from a cliff and all the answers were just about to float up from the depths for him to see in their entirety.

But he was still wary. He knew he couldn't trust anything, despite being aware that he'd been a part of it all, had helped design the Maze, had taken over after the original Creators died and kept the program going with new recruits. "I remember enough to be ashamed of myself," he admitted. "But living through this kind of abuse is a lot different than planning it. It's just not right."

Rat Man scratched his nose, shifted in his seat. Something Thomas said had gotten to him. "We'll see what you think at the end of today, Thomas. We shall see. But let me ask this—are you telling me that the lives of a few aren't worth losing to save countless more?" Again, the man spoke with passion, leaning forward.

Thomas only stared. It was a question he couldn't answer.

The Rat Man might have smiled, but it looked more like a sneer on his face. "Just remember that at one time you did think that, Thomas." He started to collect his papers as if to go but didn't move. "I'm here to tell you that everything is set and our data is almost complete. Once we have the blueprint, you can go boo-hoo with your friends all you want about how *unfair* we've been."

Thomas wanted to cut the man with harsh words. But he held back. "How does torturing us lead to this blueprint you're talking about?"

Rat Man sighed heavily. "Boy, soon you'll remember everything, and I have a feeling you're going to regret a lot. In the meantime,

there's something you need to know right now and maybe it'll bring you back to your senses."

"And what's that?" Thomas really had no idea what the man would say.

His visitor stood up, smoothed the wrinkles out of his pants and adjusted his coat. Then he clasped his hands behind his back. "You're *immune* to the Flare, Thomas. The virus lives in every molecule of your body, yet it has no effect on you, nor will it ever."

Thomas swallowed.

"On the outside, in the streets, they call you people Munies," Rat Man continued. "And they really, really hate you."

CHAPTER 3

Thomas couldn't find any words. Despite all the lies he'd been told, he knew that what he'd just heard was the truth. When placed alongside his recent experiences, it just made too much sense. He, and probably the other Gladers and everyone in Group B, were immune to the Flare. Which was why they'd been chosen for the Trials. Everything done to them—every cruel trick played, every deceit, every monster placed in their paths—it all had been part of an elaborate experiment. And somehow it was leading them to a cure.

It all fit together. And more—it pricked his memories in the void. It felt familiar.

“I can see that you believe me,” Rat Man finally said, breaking the long silence. “Once we'd discovered there were people like you—with the virus rooted inside you, yet showing no symptoms—we sought out the best and the brightest among you. This is how WICKED was born. Of course, some in your group are *not* immune, and were chosen as control subjects. When running an experiment you need a control group, Thomas. It's the glue to keep all the data in context.”

That last part made Thomas's heart sink. “Who isn't . . .” The question wouldn't come out. He was too scared to hear the answer.

“Who isn't immune?” Rat Man asked, eyebrows raised. “Oh, I think they should find out before you, don't you? But first things first. You smell like a week-old corpse—let's get you to the showers and

find some fresh clothes.” With that he picked up his file and turned toward the door. He was just about to step out when Thomas’s mind focused.

“Wait!” he shouted.

His visitor looked back at him. “Yes?”

“Back in the Scorch—why did you lie that there’d be a cure at the safe haven?”

Rat Man shrugged. “I don’t think it was a lie at all. By completing the Trials, by arriving at the safe haven, you helped us collect more data. And because of that there *will* be a cure. Eventually. For everyone.”

“And why are you telling me all this? Why now? Why did you stick me in here for four weeks?” Thomas motioned around the room, at the padded ceiling and walls, at the pathetic toilet in the corner. His sparse memories weren’t solid enough to make any sense of the bizarre things that had been done to him. “Why did you lie to Teresa about me being crazy and violent and keep me in here all this time? What could possibly be the point?”

“Variables,” Rat Man answered. “Everything we’ve done to you has been carefully calculated by our Psychs and doctors. Done to stimulate responses in the killzone, where the Flare does its damage. To study the patterns of different emotions and reactions and thoughts. See how they work within the confines of the virus that’s inside you. Try to understand why, in you, there’s no debilitating effect. It’s all about the killzone patterns, Thomas. Mapping your cognitive and physiological responses to build a blueprint for the potential cure. It’s all about the cure.”

“What *is* the killzone?” Thomas asked, trying to remember but drawing a blank. “Just tell me that and I’ll go with you.”

“Why, Thomas,” the man replied. “I’m surprised being stung by the Griever didn’t make you recall at least that much. The killzone is your brain. It’s where the virus settles and takes hold. The more infected the killzone, the more paranoid and violent the behavior. And we’re using your brain and a those of a few others to help us fix the problem.” Rat Man looked pleased with himself. Almost happy. “Now come on, let’s get you cleaned up. And just so you know, we’re being watched. Try anything and there’ll be consequences.”

Thomas sat, attempting to process everything he’d just heard. Again, it rang true, made sense. Fit in with everything that had come back to him in recent weeks. And yet his distrust of Rat Man and WICKED still sprinkled it all with doubt.

He finally stood, letting his mind work through the new revelations, hoping they’d sort themselves into nice little stacks for later analysis. Without another word, he walked across the room and followed the Rat Man through the door, leaving his white-walled cell behind.

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Nothing stood out about the building in which he found himself. A long hallway, a tiled floor, beige walls with framed pictures of nature—waves crashing on a beach, a hummingbird hovering beside a red flower, rain and mist clouding a forest. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. Rat Man led him through several turns and finally stopped at a door. He opened it and gestured for Thomas to go in. It was a large bathroom lined with lockers and showers. And one of the lockers was open to show fresh clothes and a pair of shoes. Even a watch.

“You have about thirty minutes,” Rat Man said. “When you’re

done, just sit tight—I’ll come back for you. Then you’ll be reunited with your friends.”

For some reason, at the words *friends*, Teresa popped into Thomas’s mind. He tried calling out to her again with his thoughts, but there was still nothing. Despite his ever-growing disdain for her, the emptiness of her being gone still floated like an unbreakable bubble within him. She was a link to his past and, he knew without any doubt, had once been his best friend. It was one of the only things in his world that he was sure of, and he had a hard time letting go of that completely.

Rat Man nodded. “See you in a half hour,” he said. Then he pulled the door open and closed it behind him, leaving Thomas alone once more.

Thomas still didn’t have a plan other than finding his friends, but at least he was one step closer to that. For now, a hot shower. A chance to scrub himself clean. Nothing had ever sounded so good. Letting his cares slip away for the moment, Thomas took off his nasty clothes and got to work making himself human again.

★ ★ ★

T-shirt and jeans. Running shoes—just like the ones he’d worn in the Maze. Fresh, soft socks. After washing himself from top to bottom at least five times, he felt reborn. He couldn’t help but think that from here on out things would improve. That he was going to take control of his own life now. If only the mirror hadn’t reminded him of his tattoo—the one given to him before the Scorch. It was a permanent symbol of what he’d been through, and he wished he could forget it all.

He stood outside the door to the bathroom, leaning against the wall, arms folded, waiting. He wondered if the Rat Man would come back—or had he left Thomas to wander the place, begin yet another Trial? He'd barely begun the line of thinking before he heard footsteps, then saw the weaselly man's white form turn the corner.

"Well, aren't you looking spiffy?" Rat Man commented, the edges of his mouth crawling up his cheeks in an uncomfortable-looking smile.

Thomas's mind raced with a hundred sarcastic answers, but he knew he had to play it straight. All that mattered at the moment was gathering as much information as he could and then finding his friends. "I feel fine, actually. So . . . thanks." He plastered a casual smile on his own face. "When do I get to see the other Gladers?"

"Right now." Rat Man was all business again. He nodded back toward the way he'd come and gestured to Thomas to follow him. "All of you went through different types of tests for Phase Three of the Trials. We'd hoped to have the killzone patterns mapped out by the end of the second phase, but we had to improvise in order to push further. Like I said, though, we're very close. You'll all be full partners in the study now, helping us fine-tune and dig deeper until we solve this puzzle."

Thomas squinted, trying to process what he'd just heard. He guessed his Phase Three had been the white room—but what about the others?

Finally they arrived at a door. Rat Man opened it without hesitating and stepped through.

They entered a small auditorium and relief washed over Thomas. Sitting scattered among a dozen or so rows of chairs were his friends, safe and healthy-looking. Gladers and girls of Group B. Minho. Fry-

pan. Newt. Aris. Sonya. Harriet. Everyone seemed happy and animated—talking, smiling, laughing—though maybe they were faking to some extent. Thomas assumed they'd also been told things were almost over, but he doubted anyone believed it. He certainly didn't. Not yet.

He looked around the room for Jorge and Brenda—he really wanted to see Brenda. He'd been anxious about her ever since she'd vanished after the Berg picked them up—worried that WICKED had sent her and Jorge back to the Scorch like they'd threatened to—but there was no sign of either one of them. Before he could ask Rat Man, however, a voice broke through the din.

“Well, I've been shucked and gone to heaven. It's Thomas!” Minho called out. His announcement was followed by hoots and cheers and catcalls. A swell of relief mixed with the worry clawing in Thomas's stomach and he continued to search the faces in the room. Too overcome to speak, he just smiled until his eyes found Teresa.

She'd stood up, turned from her chair on the end of the row to face him. Black hair, clean and brushed and shiny, draped over her shoulders and framed her pale face. Her red lips parted into a huge smile, lighting up her features, making her blue eyes glow. Thomas almost went to her but stopped himself, his mind clouded with vivid memories of what she'd done to him, of what she'd said about WICKED being good even after everything that had happened.

Can you hear me? he called out with his mind, just to see if their ability had come back.

But she didn't respond, and he still didn't feel her presence in-

side him. They just stood there, staring at each other, eyes locked for what seemed like a minute but could only have been a few seconds. And then Minhó and Newt were by his side, slapping him on the back, shaking his hand, pulling him into the room.

“Well, at least you didn’t bloody roll over and die, Tommy,” Newt said, squeezing his hand tightly. His tone sounded grumpier than usual, especially considering they hadn’t seen each other in weeks, but he was in one piece.

Minhó had a smirk on his face, but a hard glint in his eyes showed that he’d been through something awful. That he wasn’t quite himself yet, just trying his hardest to act like it. “The mighty Gladers, back together again. Good to see ya, shuck face. I bet you cried every night, missing me.”

“Yeah,” Thomas muttered, thrilled to see everybody but still struggling to find words. He broke away from the reunion and made his way to Teresa. He felt an overwhelming urge to face her and come to some kind of peace. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she replied. “You okay?”

Thomas nodded. “I guess. Kind of a rough few weeks. Could . . .” He stopped himself. He’d almost asked if she’d been able to hear him trying to get in touch with her, but he didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of knowing he’d done it.

“I tried, Tom. Every day I tried to talk to you. They cut us off, but I think it’s all been worth it.” She reached out and took his hand, which set off a chorus of mocking jabs from the Gladers.

Thomas quickly pulled his hand from her grasp, felt his face flush red. For some reason, her words had made him suddenly angry, but the others mistook his action for mere embarrassment.

“Awwww,” Minho said. “That’s almost as sweet as that time she slammed the end of a spear into your shuck face.”

“True love indeed.” This from Frypan, followed by his deep bel-low of a laugh. “I’d hate to see what happens when these two have their first *real* fight.”

Thomas didn’t care what they thought, but he was determined to show Teresa that she couldn’t get away with everything she’d done to him. Whatever trust they’d shared before the trials—whatever relationship they’d had—meant nothing now. He might find a sort of peace with her, but he resolved right then and there that he would only trust Minho and Newt. No one else.

He was just about to respond when Rat Man came marching down the aisle clapping his hands. “Everybody take a seat. We’ve got a few things to cover before we remove the Swipe.”

He’d said it so casually, Thomas almost didn’t catch it. The words registered—*remove the swipe*—and he froze.

The room stilled and Rat Man stepped up onto the stage at the front of the room and approached the lectern. He gripped the edges with his hands and repeated the same forced smile from earlier, then spoke. “That’s right, ladies and gents. You’re about to get all your memories back. Every last one of them.”

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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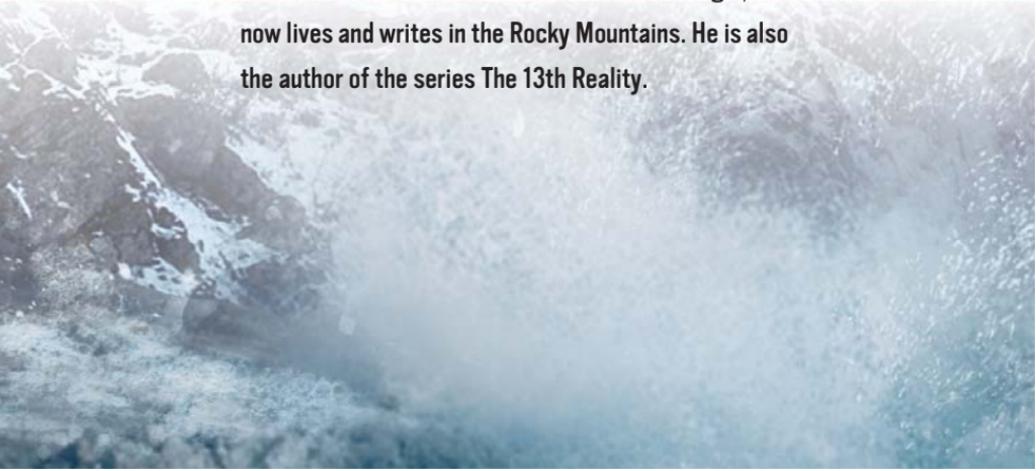
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