

THE GOOD LUCK GIRLS

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PROLOGUE

It was easier, she'd been told, if you kept a tune in your head.

Clementine sat as still as she could at the claw-foot vanity, searching her memory for any of the songs she'd learned on the piano in the parlor. But her mind had been blank ever since the auction, leaving only a wordless wail of fear like the keening of the dead. Behind her, mumbling around a mouth full of hairpins, Mother Fleur crowed over what an honor it was for Clementine to have fetched such a high bid, and how proud of her she was. The housemistress had spent the last hour preparing Clementine for her Lucky Night, lacing up her frothy white dress, rouging her cheeks, and shadowing her eyes with soot.

"You ought to be proud of yourself, too," the older woman went on. She brushed Clementine's woolly black hair away from her face and pinned it up in an elegant knot. A weary sigh tickled the nape of Clementine's neck. "Sixteen years old, finally a woman proper. I remember when you were just a cricket—you and your sister both. But she did fine, Clementine, and you will, too."

Clementine found no comfort in the words. Mother Fleur was well past working age herself. Her favor, a carnation, had

begun to wither on her wrinkled white cheek, the cursed ink long since faded to gray. Clementine wondered how much she even remembered of her Lucky Night. Had she been this frightened? Had anyone? Sundown girls were discouraged from talking to daybreak girls about the business. They'd only told Clementine the essentials. Not whether these last minutes were supposed to stretch out like the held breath between lightning and thunder, or whether her stomach was supposed to drop like she was falling down a gorge. Even Clementine's sister, Aster, had never given any details about her Lucky Night.

It had been Aster's suggestion, though, to keep a tune in her head. *It doesn't have to be your favorite song*, she'd said. *In fact, it's better if it isn't. Just pick one you know in your bones, and think of nothing else.*

Aster had also insisted that Clementine didn't take any Sweet Thistle, the soothing tincture sundown girls were required to use to settle their nerves. She'd even gone as far as to tell Clementine to lie to Mother Fleur about taking her dose. Clementine hadn't asked why, even though she'd been surprised. She trusted Aster in everything.

Now, though, she wondered if a drop of Sweet Thistle might not have been a bad idea.

Mother Fleur finished fussing with her hair, sticking the last pin in place. "Almost done," she muttered. Clementine tried to relax and let herself enjoy being pampered. In her six years at the Green Creek welcome house, this was surely the kindest Mother Fleur had ever been to her. She'd never been prettied up like this before, and it was a welcome distraction from the duty that lay ahead.

Clementine cleared her throat. "I love the look of it," she managed to say.

"*You're* not the one we're trying to impress tonight," Mother Fleur said with a dry laugh. "But I'm glad you like it all the same. Gives a girl confidence when she knows she looks good."

Mother Fleur picked up a crystal bottle of perfume next. Clementine offered up the left side of her throat, where her own favor shone black against her dark brown skin: a clementine flower, her namesake, its starlike petals fluttering occasionally as if from a gentle breeze. It suited her, she liked to think. She'd gotten it when she was ten years old. The tattoo man had carefully prepared the ink, mixing it with the unsavory ingredients that gave it its power. A dead man's blood. Powdered bone. Venom from a black-fanged skink. Then he'd burrowed the needle into the hollow above her collarbone, sharp as a catamount's claw. The favor would mark Clementine as property of the welcome house for the rest of her days.

At first, the clementine flower had been just a seedling—two teardrop leaves, a curl of a stem. But it had grown slowly with each passing year, ink unfurling up the crescent of her neck, until this morning, finally, she had woken up to find it fully blossomed just above her jaw.

Her skin prickled at the cool kiss of the perfume. Mother Fleur returned the bottle to its place.

"There," the housemistress said, resting her hands on Clementine's shoulders. Her voice rang with finality. Clementine's heart leapt in her chest. She met Mother Fleur's eyes in the mirror, questions gathering at the top of her throat.

“Now, remember,” Mother Fleur said, “you’re not just representing yourself tonight. You’re representing the whole of the Green Creek welcome house.” A familiar hint of warning crept into her words. “But we all know how special you are, and so does the brag. That’s why he paid such a fine fortune. You prove to him that it was worth every copper, and then we’ll celebrate, hear?”

She didn’t need to say what would happen if Clementine failed. The raveners, the welcome house’s muscle, had ways of punishing a girl without leaving a mark on her body, of ripping into her mind and tricking it into a place of pain or fear. Clementine had been subjected to their bewitchment before. They all had, at least once. Every girl had to be conditioned when she first came to the welcome house, had to learn to fear the raveners’ wrath. Some of them never recovered from the experience—girls who were thrown, gibbering mad, into the streets to die.

The veiled threat was enough to finally loosen Clementine’s tongue.

“Mother Fleur—” She faltered. “It’s only— Is it normal, to be this nervous? My stomach feels a touch unsettled.”

“Those are just moon moths, Clementine. Every girl gets them. They’re from excitement as much as anything. And why shouldn’t you be excited?” She winked. “Flattered, too. It’s not every girl who catches the fancy of such a respected young man.”

“Who is he, though?” Clementine dared to ask. A politician maybe, or a slick businessman, or a world-class gambler with winnings hot in his pocket—

"If I tell you you're just going to get yourself even more worked up," Mother Fleur replied. "He'll be good to you. That's all you need to know."

Clementine relented, afraid to push any further. And in the end, it didn't matter, did it? Her whole life at Green Creek had been leading up to this moment. There'd be no more maid work after tonight, no more scrubbing dishes until her hands were raw or sweating over the stove. She was excited to wear fine dresses and laze around the parlor rooms with the other sundown girls—including Aster, whom she'd hardly seen this past year. Spending time with her sister again . . . that would be the best part of all of this, Clementine knew.

She only had to get through tonight.

"You ready for me to send him up?" Mother Fleur asked.

"Yes," Clementine said, and she meant it.

"Good." She gave Clementine's shoulder another squeeze, nails biting into skin. "Don't disappoint, Clementine."

Mother Fleur swept away, turning out the gas-lit chandelier overhead as she went. The room was left with the rosy glow of a slag-glass lamp, as if blushing. The door clicked shut behind her.

For several heartbeats, Clementine remained seated at the vanity, her reflection an exaggeration of shadows. The brag would be up here any moment. Should she stand to greet him? Lie waiting on the bed? She'd had all day to plan for this. She'd had years.

Then she heard it. The heavy creak of footsteps on the stairs.

Think of a song, she told herself. *Aster's right downstairs. Just think of a song.*

The door opened.

The man behind it was more brutish than Clementine expected, a broad-shouldered ox stuffed in a suit. His fine black coat fell down to his knees, while his derby hat hung low over a shovel-shaped face framed by an auburn beard. Nothing about his outward appearance gave away who he might be, but his wealth was evident from the glint of the theomite ring on his thumb. The dark gemstone was large enough to buy the whole welcome house.

The brag paused in the doorway as he took stock of his suite: the plum-colored walls and their paintings of Arketta's red-rock mountains, the ornate imported rug underfoot, the plush couch against the wall, the decanter of wine at its table. And, of course, the royal bed in the center of the room, its pillows piled high against a gilded headboard. At last the brag's gaze landed on Clementine herself, who held up her chin. He ran his tongue over his thin lips and grinned. Clementine recoiled, then scolded herself for it. This was a welcome house. She would make him feel welcome.

The brag swung the door shut, the latch loud as a gunshot. He tossed his coat and hat on the hook. His thick shoulders strained against his white dress shirt, but Clementine could see now that he was younger than she'd first thought. Nineteen, maybe twenty, with ice blue eyes. She took a tentative step forward.

"Let me get that for you," she said, stepping in to unbutton his vest. "You must be glad to get off the road."

The scripted words felt unnatural to her, but the brag held out his arms cooperatively as she pulled the vest free and loosened his tie.

"And what would a girl like you know about the road? Or anything outside this fine establishment?" he drawled.

Clementine's memory flickered, sunlight on water. "Enough," she replied.

He licked his lips again, stepping in to study her more closely. He ran a thumb over her favor. "Skin like silk," he murmured. "They did a good job with you."

She was surprised by the roughness of his hands, the warmth of his touch. The only other man outside of kin who had touched her at all was the welcome house doctor, who always wore cold rubber gloves. She brought her own hand up to cover the brag's and wound their fingers together.

"Glad you like what you see," she said, summoning her courage. "Let's find out what else you like."

It must have been the right thing to say, or near enough, because he lifted his brow and led her to the bed, his bear paw of a hand still wrapped around hers. Clementine's stomach gave another flip. *Just the moon moths*, she told herself, and a moment later they were sitting side by side on the edge of the mattress. The brag leaned down to unlace his boots. Clementine struggled for some way to fill the silence. Her cheeks began to burn. She wasn't allowed to make idle conversation, wasn't allowed to ask his name or where he'd come from. Those secrets were a man's to give or keep as he saw fit.

Then he started unbuttoning his shirt. Clementine gripped the duvet.

"Quiet one, are you?" he asked.

She let out a nervous laugh. "I guess you might say that."

"Seems y'all are always quiet the first time," he said

matter-of-factly. "Just as well. All that cooked-up banter some of the girls throw around just wastes time. I'd rather get my shine's worth out of every minute."

Clementine's heart dropped. Her breaths grew sharp and short. "Looks to me like you're the kind of man with plenty of shine to spare," she replied. She had to keep him talking.

"Well, it's my father's money, for now." He stood and shrugged off his shirt, revealing a thickset chest matted with red hair. "You know who my father is?"

Clementine shook her head.

"Just as well," he said again. "I'll be running things soon enough. And once I am, I'll come back sometime and bring you something pretty, hear?" He tilted her chin up, meeting her eyes for the first time. His grin cut like a blade. "If you treat me right, that is."

Then, before Clementine could stall him any longer, he scooped her up and laid her down on the middle of the bed, crawling over her, trapping her between his arms. His breath was sour with the smell of whiskey. Clementine's stomach rolled as his gaze traced the v of her neckline. There was no more mistaking this queasiness for a few harmless moon moths. She was going to be sick.

I have to stop this—

The brag leaned in and began kissing her throat.

Clementine drew a startled breath and held it. Tensed, shut her eyes. His cracked lips scraped across her skin. His blunt teeth tugged at her with clumsy need. After a moment, though, she slowly opened her eyes. This wasn't so bad, she told herself. The kissing may be a little messy, but it wasn't so bad.

Then he relaxed, settling his full weight on top of her as he began to work way down her neckline, tracing her favor. Clementine squirmed underneath the suffocating pressure.

"Wait," she managed. He ignored her. She began to struggle, raising her voice. "Wait, please—"

"You said you'd be quiet," he said roughly. His hand slid up her leg, slipping under her dress, resting on her bare knee. Her heart beat hard as a horse kick. *Think of a song, think of a song.*

His hand moved higher.

"Wait, please, I'm not ready—"

He braced a forearm against her throat. To quiet her, Clementine was sure. She swallowed around a knot of pain. Lightheadedness washed over her.

She couldn't *breathe*.

It was enough to unleash the fear that had been mounting in her since that morning, spurring it into a red-blooded panic. She didn't want this, she wasn't ready for this, she couldn't breathe—

"Stop!" she cried out, pushing against his chest with all her strength. It was the last word she was able to choke out. He only pressed his arm down more firmly. Her vision swam, eyes watering. Her lungs grew tight. She reached out blindly for the side table, searching for something, anything. Her fingers found the lamp. Grasped it by its neck.

And swung its heavy base towards his head.

The man roared, reeling back, pressing his hand where the lamp had connected.

"*Damn you!*" he cried, eyes flashing with rage. "I'll *kill* you for that—"

Clementine hit him again, harder. This time his body went slack and he collapsed on top of her. She sucked in a gasping breath at the sudden, crushing pressure. She heaved him off of her and rolled away, leaping up and backing herself into the corner of the darkened room, her spine pressed against the wall. She coughed so much she feared she'd retch, forcing out the tears that had pricked at her eyes. She'd done it now. Now he was going to be even more furious, and he'd come for her again, and he—and he—

And he wasn't getting up. Clementine went still, listening for the sound of his breath. Looking for the slightest movement.

Nothing.

Slowly, she crept back towards the bed. She could just make out the shape of his body in the dark. She laid a hand to his head and snatched it back the moment she felt the bloody dent in his skull, warm and wet.

Shock washed over her, followed by a relief so pure it buckled her knees. A song finally floated up from her memory, its last three chords ringing in her ears.

*Eliza Little with her hair so red,
Her first husband took another woman to his bed,
She found him out and listened to him beg,
Then she took her rifle and she killed—him—dead.*

CHAPTER ONE

Twelve hours earlier

Aster's hand itched for a knife, but she settled for forming a fist instead.

She lurked in the corner of the plum-colored bedroom, watching as Mother Fleur showed Clementine her lavish new living quarters—a striking contrast to the rough bunk room where the daybreak girls slept. Aster swallowed the sick taste in her mouth as Clementine took it all in. Like every Good Luck Girl, Clem was starting her sixteenth birthday with a welcome to the sundown girls' world—and she would end it here, in this room, with her Lucky Night.

It was this last thought that made Aster wish for a weapon, the thought of her sister trapped in here with the vermin who frequented the welcome house. But it would do no good to fight what was coming. Not when a word out of turn was enough to get your mind thrashed by a ravener. A girl stole what happiness she could when no one was looking. That was how she won.

Mother Fleur cleared her throat, seeming to notice Aster's stony silence. "I have no doubt that beastly scowl is fixed on

your face by now, Aster, but you would do well to show a little more enthusiasm for your sister's big day," she warned.

Clementine cut her eyes at Aster. "She just doesn't care for mornings," she explained nervously. "Never has. Go on, Aster, smile for Mother Fleur."

Aster turned to Mother Fleur and bared her teeth. Mother Fleur pressed her lips together in a tight line. An all-too-familiar look of disapproval. Aster knew she'd never been one of the housemistress's favorites. Not because she ever openly misbehaved—she refused to give Mother Fleur the pleasure of punishing her—but because she'd always been like the fist at her side. Tense, hostile. Waiting for a moment to strike.

That low-burning anger had only grown hotter these past few days. Aster hadn't been able to stop thinking about her own Lucky Night a little over a year ago, when Mother Fleur had sold her away to a skinny, beady-eyed skink of a man. She'd promised Aster it would be the proudest night of her life, the night she'd become a woman.

She hadn't become a woman. She'd become a shade with bile for blood and a well of shame in her heart. The only thing that had kept her from falling down that well was knowing that Clementine needed her.

Aster hadn't thought it was possible to feel more helpless than she had when that first man laid his hands on her. She was wrong. This was worse.

"I would say you owe me an apology, wouldn't you, Aster?" Mother Fleur went on, clearly unsatisfied. "Or do I need to have a word with Dex?"

The head ravener.

Aster uncurled her fingers.

"Beg pardon, Mother Fleur," she murmured. "Clem's right. I just haven't been up this early in a while."

Mother Fleur gave her a cold, knowing look, but she let it go. "Well, those lazy mornings are one of the many privileges of being a sundown girl that Clementine can look forward to," she said, with a forced breeziness. "Now, I'm needed downstairs to open the house. But I trust you can finish getting your sister settled in?"

"It'd be my pleasure."

Mother Fleur held her glare for a moment longer, then turned and flashed Clementine a bright smile.

"Well, then, happy birthday, Clementine," she said grandly. "I will see you both at breakfast."

She left them.

As soon as Mother Fleur was out of sight, Clementine let out a whoop and jumped backwards onto the bed, the skirt of her yellow day dress flaring around her like a bell.

"By the Veil! This room is fit for a princess. I reckon it's even bigger than yours."

Aster grinned despite her misgivings. She crossed her arms. "Yeah? I don't see any windows like mine's got. Bet you're right this room's bigger, though. Spoiled."

In truth, Aster would have taken even the smallest room if it'd meant she got to keep her window. She loved watching the sun rise over the mountains in the morning, light spilling like liquid gold into the valley where Green Creek slept. The welcome house was near the center of town, which gave Aster a view of just about everything, from the tidy shops that lined

Main Street to the deadwall that surrounded the town, its mortar mixed with theomite dust to keep vengeful spirits away.

That view was an escape, the only one she had.

"Spoiled, my hide," Clementine went on. "I worked hard for this room. And this *bed*. Look, even the pillows have pillows."

"Better than those piss-smelling cots upstairs?" Aster said.

"Much better." Clementine sat up, a shadow passing over her face. "But then, I guess it'd have to be."

A cold, slippery feeling trickled through Aster's gut. "Never mind all that for now," she said, pulling Clem back to her feet. "Let's go get all your stuff, make this place feel like home."

Clementine's excitement returned. "Right, if we hurry we can catch the others before they have to get to the kitchen."

The "others" were Tansy and Mallow, Clementine's two closest friends. They still lived up in the attic along with all the other girls who hadn't yet turned sixteen. Until today, Clementine had been on the kitchen crew with them.

"Does it feel strange not have any chores to do?" Aster asked as they made their way down the hall.

"Well, I sure don't miss it, if that's what you mean," Clementine snorted. Her smile faded. "I will miss Tanz and Mal, though."

"They turn sixteen in, what, three and four months? They'll be sundown girls soon enough," Aster reassured her.

"Right. And I'll still see them around some, so there's that," Clementine added.

Aster paused. "Right, there's that."

But, of course, it wouldn't be the same, not at all. Sundown girls and daybreak girls lived separate lives, and when they did

cross paths, there was an unspoken barrier between them, like the Veil between the living and the dead. Clementine wouldn't be allowed to talk about the work with the daybreak girls—but for the sundown girls, the work was all there was.

Aster had been told, many times, to be grateful for that work. Good Luck Girls never went hungry, always had a roof over their heads, saw the doctor and the dentist twice a year. Entertaining the brags meant they got to wear the kind of clothes other girls could only dream of, too, and enjoy an endless supply of Sweet Thistle.

It was far more than most folks could expect in Arketta, especially out in the Scab, the ragged line of mountains that cut through the middle of the country. Its wind-torn wilderness was where, in the long-gone days of the old Empire, anyone the Empire deemed criminal had been banished to work in the mines. Some had been captured in Arketta on the battlefields where they'd fought against the Empire's onslaught. Others had been sent to Arketta on reeking prison ships from the colonies. Dustbloods, they were called. They looked just the same as ordinary, fairblood folks, except that they couldn't cast a shadow. The first dustbloods had had their shadows ripped away as part of their punishment, and their children had been born without them. A dustblood's debt could never truly be paid. If at first you owed ten eagles for stealing, then by the end of the year you'd owe ten thousand, for everything from the moldy bread you were rationed to the leaking roof over your head.

Now, some two centuries after the Empire's fall, there were more dustbloods living in the Scab than ever. Enterprising

businessmen had bought up the land and taken on the dustbloods' debt in return for their labor—an arrangement that became known as the Reckoning. The Reckoning promised fairbloods the opportunity to become wealthy landmasters and live among Arketta's elite, while it promised dustbloods the opportunity to work away generations of debt and finally earn their freedom from the Scab. And it had worked out well enough for the landmasters, but the miners never ended up with anything to show for it but broken bodies and empty bellies. Disease took them, or they disappeared down the gullet of a mountain, or a vengeant ripped them open with its invisible claws. There was no escaping the Reckoning, the law had made sure of that—Arketta's border with its industrial neighbor to the north, Ferron, was protected by its finest armymen, and no one without a shadow got out.

That was how the welcome houses got girls to work for them in the first place. Scouts found desperate families with young daughters and offered to take them away for a modest compensation. Girls worked as the help until they turned sixteen, then serviced guests until they aged out at forty. They didn't have to pay for anything, but they didn't earn any wages, either. It was a bitter compromise, and everyone knew it. But when there were one too many mouths at home to feed, when an accident underground left parents unable to work, when the alternative for a girl was a life of suffering cut brutally short, the welcome house remained the only option. At least her belly would be full at night. At least her medical needs would be seen to. Indeed, the landmasters argued, these girls were lucky to live such pampered lives.

The only problem was, Aster had never chosen this life.

None of them had. And none could ever truly leave it. Not when their favors marked them for what they were even after they'd aged out. As much as the brags liked to talk about how great the Good Luck Girls had it, they never seemed to mention how most girls died on the streets, as beggars. On the extremely rare occasion, a wealthy brag would buy a girl from a house, to have for his exclusive use. But this was hardly preferable: once purchased, she never aged out at all—she was the brag's property for life.

Aster's hand wandered up to the side of her throat, where a chain of thin-petaled flowers mottled her skin like bright black starbursts. She had thought about running away. It was impossible not to. But a favor didn't just mark someone as property of a welcome house—it was bewitched, too. If a girl covered hers up, with makeup or a dustkerchief or anything else, the ink would heat and glow like iron in a fire. Red, first, then orange, then yellow, then white. The pain was enough to bear for a few minutes, but eventually it would bring even the strongest to her knees, and it took hours to fully subside.

They couldn't hide their favors, couldn't remove them. They couldn't even get past the front *door*. Dex stood guard in the foyer, watching all the comings and goings with eyes the color of rust. He was supposed to be there for their protection, but everyone knew any girl who tried to slip past him would be hunted down and dragged back for a prolonged execution.

Aster used to think she would become accustomed to the welcome house eventually, maybe even learn to see the glamor of it all, the way many girls did. The delusion probably made

it more bearable for them. But for Aster, no amount of time was going to turn this barrel of piss into wine. The only good luck she could see was that she and Clementine still had each other. Most of the girls never saw their families again.

Ahead of her, Clementine reached the stairs at the end of the hall and took the steps two at a time, swift and silent. Aster followed, muscle memory guiding her over the creaks beneath the carpet. They rounded the corner and passed the third floor, home to Mother Fleur's private rooms, and continued upstairs to the unfinished attic.

"Happy Lucky Night, Clementine!" a younger girl chirped as she passed them on her way down. Two other girls followed, nearly knocking Aster over in their hurry.

"Oh—sorry, Miss Aster," one of them stammered. She probably hadn't been expecting to see an older girl up here. Aster winced at the deference in her voice, as if she herself hadn't been one of them just a year ago.

"It's fine," she mumbled. *And don't call me "Miss,"* she wanted to add. But of course they were just doing as they were told. Aster eased by them.

The attic served as a makeshift bunkroom, and it had none of the luxury of the rest of the welcome house, bare floors bristling with crooked nails and cold morning air seeping through the walls. A string of mining lanterns offered sickly, flickering light. A dead scorpion nestled on the windowsill. At night, when all was still, you would hear a creak in the rafters where a girl had hanged herself with her bedsheets thirty years ago, and if you were fool enough to open your eyes you would see her moon-pale remnant, too.

But it was morning now, loud and full of life, and some two dozen daybreak girls bustled back and forth, getting ready to go to work. They hurried their friends along, made their beds, and changed into their maids' dresses—stiff green linen under a crisp white apron. Though they all wore the same uniforms, their bodies came in every size, shape, and color. It was common knowledge that a welcome house that offered a variety would get more customers.

Aster felt a swell of sympathy as she passed between the cots. Most Good Luck Girls were dustbloods like her and Clem, and they came to the welcome house hollowed out and hungry, without even their own shadow to keep them company. The youngest, only ten, still had that lean look about them. As they got older, though, they grew fuller and sleeker with health. But they were all hogs being fattened for a slaughter, and most of them didn't even realize it yet.

Don't think about that, Aster reminded herself. *Smile. For Clementine*. She exhaled and relaxed. She angled towards the lone mirror in the corner, where Clementine was showing off her outfit to Tansy and Mallow. The inseparable pair had always been opposites—Tansy with her wild, sandy hair and white, freckled skin; Mallow with her warm, brown skin and straight, cropped black hair. At fifteen, they were among the oldest in the attic—both of their favors nearing full bloom. Clusters of round flowers dotted Tansy's neck like tufts of cotton. Mallow's favor was as dainty as she was coarse, each flower unfurling into five heart-shaped petals.

"This isn't what I'll be wearing tonight, of course," Clementine was saying as Aster approached. "I'll get changed after the

auction. But my wardrobe is already full of new delights like this.”

“Are you nervous?” Tansy asked, fretting with the end of her fraying pigtail.

Clementine hesitated, the answer plain on her face, but then Mallow gave her an encouraging shoulder-shove.

“Of course she’s not, she’s about to get out of this shithole for good,” Mallow said, glancing around the bunkroom. Clementine flashed her a look of relief.

“Yeah, whatever happens tonight, I figure it’ll be worth it to start living like a sundown girl,” Clem said.

Aster hung back, watching them, a tug in her chest. Unlike Clementine, she had never gotten close with any of the other girls. It was better that way. She couldn’t lose people she didn’t have.

Could’ve used a friendly face or two after my Lucky Night, though, Aster thought. Clementine and the others seemed to think things would be better after they came of age. Aster couldn’t bring herself to tell them it would be far worse.

Instead, she summoned her smile and joined them. “Come on, Clem, we have to be downstairs for your breakfast banquet in a few minutes.”

“Oh, hey, nice to see you, too, *Miss Aster*,” Mallow said, with none of the reverence of the girls on the stairs.

Tansy snickered. “Promise you won’t get too good to say hello to us, Clem.”

“*Miss Clem*,” Clementine sniffed.

Aster huffed. “Listen, I’m just here to tell you all that being grown won’t stop Mother Fleur from giving you hell if you

don't do what she says. And she said to get settled in your new room before breakfast. Now where's your stuff?"

Clementine sighed dramatically, but she led them over to her cot. A simple trunk stood at the end of it. She wouldn't be needing the old clothes anymore, so they only salvaged her more precious possessions. Notes and drawings she'd collected from other girls over the years, a jar of rock candy leftover from Reckoning Day, a dusky red feather she'd once found while sweeping a chimney.

"And what about . . . ?" Tansy asked at last, holding up Clementine's rag doll.

Aster glanced at Clementine, whose expression broke for a brief instant. But then she set her mouth and shook her head.

"A fine fool I'd look explaining that old thing to some brag," Clementine said. "The last girl who had this cot left that doll here for me. I'll do the same and let the next girl have her."

The next girl, Aster thought grimly.

Always a next girl.

CHAPTER TWO

The dining room was one of the finest rooms in the welcome house, from its gleaming marble floors to its gold tile ceiling. Every plate had been piled high with food: corncakes topped with whipped cream and jam, spiced hog sausage, scrambled eggs and skillet potatoes, fresh fruit carved into flowers. While daybreak girls ate yesterday's leftovers in the kitchen, sundown girls, along with any brags who stayed for breakfast, enjoyed a meal fit for a timberman. Idle chatter flowed between the tables like the murmuring of a creek.

Aster sat with Clementine and four other sundown girls, none of them older than twenty. Lily, Marigold, and Sage were all acquaintances Clem would remember from growing up together—Good Luck Girls tended to stick with people near their own age. To Aster's great annoyance, this meant that their group also included Violet, Mother Fleur's apprentice and favorite little pet. Unlike the rest of them, Violet had been *born* in the welcome house to one of its former sundown girls, which she seemed to think made her a damn princess. Even now, somehow, she had managed to make herself the head of the table, despite the fact that it was a circle.

"The brags have until noon to clear out of here," she was saying to Clementine. Violet was the only fairblood girl in the welcome house, her shadow trailing out behind her like the train of a dress. She always spoke with a superior tone that grated against Aster's ears. "Most men can't afford much more than an hour or two with us," she went on, "but if you get an overnighter, it's your duty to keep him company in the morning. Then, from noon to four, you'll be expected to bathe, groom yourself, tidy your room, and so on. I have a list of the expected duties, and while they're certainly more of a treat than the maid work, they're no less important: Green Creek represents the height of polish and professionalism. *Then*, at four, we open house again for the next round of guests—"

Aster curled her lip. "By the dead, Violet, will you let Clem enjoy her corncakes?"

Violet turned to her, narrowing her cold blue eyes and tucking a stray lock of black hair behind her ear. Her favor, with its elegant, teardrop-shaped petals, had the dark iridescence of a raven's wing. "I just want your sister to be successful, Aster," she said. "Don't you?"

"I just want her to finish her ripping food before it gets too cold."

"Foul language is strictly forbidden during work hours," Violet added to Clementine.

Aster gritted her teeth. Usually she was better at holding her tongue, but she didn't know how long she could take this *celebration* of what would happen tonight. It reminded her of how she always felt on Reckoning Day, the Arkettan holiday when dustbloods were supposed to celebrate their "good

fortune” and landmasters were celebrated for their supposed beneficence. The holiday always made Aster sick. Today was even worse.

Breathe. Smile.

Next to her, Clementine had begun busily drinking down her milk to avoid talking to either of them.

Lily laughed. “Come on, Violet. Aster’s right. It’s a lot to take in at once. What questions do you have for *us*, Clementine?”

Clementine finally set her glass down and licked the milk moustache off her lip. She glanced at Aster. “Well, um—I guess—what’s the auction like? Do I really only stand there for a few seconds?”

Aster’s grip tightened around her fork.

“Oh, don’t worry yourself over that,” Marigold jumped in. “It’s quick, quiet. The brags aren’t allowed to talk. Like Violet said, Green Creek’s a nice place. None of the nastiness they get at some welcome houses.”

“You’ll be blindfolded, too,” Lily explained. “It’s tradition. Bad luck to see the brag before sundown. So you just stand there and look pretty, really. Nothing to it.”

Aster didn’t trust herself to look at Clementine, afraid her sister would see the truth in her eyes. Green Creek was not a “nice place.” Its “traditions” existed to keep them all under control. But she knew Lily and Marigold were acting sunny for her sister’s sake, as a kindness, and Aster let them. The auction would be the least of Clem’s worries, anyway.

Clementine asked a few more questions, but they were all met with the same vague answers and false glamor. It was, Aster realized dryly, a perfect introduction to the sundown girl’s

world. Shining on the outside with the promise of sweetness while the inside went soft with rot.

Aster picked at her food. Even after seven years at the welcome house, she never took a meal for granted, but this morning she had no appetite.

At last, some of the daybreak girls came by and cleared their dishes away. One of them let a glass slip from her hand. It shattered crisply on the floor.

"Beg your pardon," the girl said quickly, eyes lowered as she hurried to clean up the mess. But Violet caught her by the wrist before she could get started.

"You *fool*. Leave it for now," she ordered, showing teeth. "You'll only make more of a mess. Rest assured Mother Fleur will hear about this."

"But—"

Violet's brow arched. "Talking back, too, are we?"

The girl scampered off before she could make more trouble for herself. Violet turned back to Clementine, all smiles once more.

"Now, Clementine, it is your birthday, after all, so the girls and I each got you a little something. Aster, why don't you go first?" she said, businesslike.

Aster dragged her gaze up from the broken glass at her feet. This was the one part of the morning she actually had been looking forward to. She'd spent the past week working on a bracelet for her sister. She'd used spare thread from her sewing kit and a hairpin for the clasp. The bracelet had the same brown-black-white pattern of a diamondback rattletail.

"Look familiar?" Aster asked, pulling the bracelet out of her pocket. For the first time that day, her smile felt real.

Clementine's eyes lit up with recognition. "You know it does! I'll never forget those colors as long as I live."

"Wait . . ." Sage began uncertainly. "I remember you telling us once that you got bit by a snake when you were little, Clementine, right? Is that what this is about?"

Aster nodded. It was ten years ago, long before they'd come to the welcome house. When they'd still lived in the tenant miners' camp. Death had prowled from house to house like a coyote on the hunt, and some nights Aster's hunger had been so vicious she'd chewed on the collar of her nightgown for relief. But at least, then, she and Clementine had been free.

One evening they'd been sitting outside while their mother swept the porch, and Clementine, who'd wandered into the grass to play, had disturbed a rattletail in the brush. It sank its fangs into her ankle—but, somehow, thank the dead, she had survived.

"You weren't supposed to survive that," Aster said. "But you did, and you're here—" She swallowed. She hadn't planned this. "And that means everything to me." She clasped the bracelet around Clementine's wrist, hands shaking, then kissed her forehead. "You survive something like that, you can survive anything, hear?"

Violet cleared her throat. Probably she was upset that Aster hadn't kept to the script.

Too damn bad, Aster thought. Someone had to be honest with Clementine. This work wasn't to be enjoyed. It was to be endured.

Sage shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, I got one of my friends on the kitchen crew to bake up a batch of sweet

potato cookies," she said. "I know they're your favorite, so . . ." She handed over a lumpy bundle wrapped in old newspaper. Marigold and Lily went next, Marigold offering a sketch of Clementine with Aster, while Lily gave her a broken pocket watch a brag had once left behind. Clementine thanked them all, her face split with a grin. It was the most she'd ever gotten for any birthday. Every so often she glanced down at her bracelet, though, her smile slipping, and Aster wondered if it had been a mistake not to play along like the others.

Then it was Violet's turn.

"My present comes on behalf of Mother Fleur," she said, and she handed Clementine a small brown bottle. "Sweet Thistle."

Now all the girls were smiling. "That's the *real* gift," Marigold murmured.

"Liquid gold," Lily said, nodding along with her.

Aster said nothing, though her neck burned.

"I'm sure you've heard us all talk about Sweet Thistle before, Clementine," Violet continued, "but words don't really do justice to the feeling it gives you. It's like letting your mind sink into a warm bath. Outside the welcome house there're people clawing at each other for just a taste, but now that you're a sundown girl you'll get it every night. The cap is an eyedropper, see? One drop under the tongue will do. Mother Fleur will refill it for you every week."

Aster had only ever used her Sweet Thistle once, on her Lucky Night. She could understand why some girls liked it, but it left her limbs sluggish and her mind foggy in a way that had only made her feel more helpless, and the crushing hollowness it left the next morning had been worse than any

natural hunger. Another dose would have sated it, but Aster knew that if she gave in, she'd be lost to Sweet Thistle for good. Even girls like Violet, who had only been taking it for a year, became fatigued and forgetful from its influence, and many of the older girls' minds had melted away completely.

Aster hated the thought of Clementine ending up like that.

"Thank you, Violet," Clementine said quietly. "Really—thank you *all*. This has been my best day at Green Creek, and if every day as a sundown girl goes something like this . . . *lucky* really is the right word."

She unscrewed the top of the bottle, running it under her nose.

"Oh, not yet," Violet said. "Save it for tonight."

"Oh—sorry."

"Don't apologize. We're all happy for you. Aren't we, Aster?" Violet asked.

Aster let out a breath through her teeth. "Delighted."

After breakfast Aster and Clementine took the presents up to Clementine's bedroom. Clem carefully laid the cookies and sketch on the bureau, and put the pocket watch in her jewelry box alongside all the glinting necklaces and earrings Mother Fleur had given her. Now that they were alone, it was as if Clementine let a mask slip away. Her smile was genuine, but it was tired. She ran her finger over the bracelet Aster had given her.

"Thanks again," she said. "You know, it means everything to me to have you here, too." Then she paused. "What should I expect tonight? Really? I know you're not allowed to talk

about it, and you don't have to now, but I just—I want to know.”

Aster looked over her shoulder, making sure the door was closed behind them. But still she hesitated. She'd never seen the good in planting fear in the Clementine's mind. Not when she could do nothing to help her. Aster wondered, again, if Violet had the right of it.

But Violet lied. Mother Fleur lied.

Everyone lied. That was how girls ended up in welcome houses to begin with, sent there by parents who'd been desperate enough to believe it would be better than the life they could provide.

Aster finally met Clementine's eye. “None of us can really know what to expect on any given night,” she said. “That's just as true for me now as it was when I turned sixteen. But listen, I meant what I said, Clem. You've always been stronger than anything they've thrown at us. Stronger than me, too, because you still find a way to be your same sunny self no matter what.” Aster managed a smile, even though she felt dangerously close to tears. “So if you feel yourself getting scared . . . just think of a song, hear? It doesn't have to be your favorite song. In fact, it's better if it isn't. Just pick one you know in your bones, and think of nothing else. That's what I do.”

Clementine nodded. “Okay. Right, okay.” She exhaled and wrapped Aster in a hug. “Thanks.”

Aster squeezed her tightly. “I'll be just downstairs the whole time.”

“Okay.”

Clementine let go, laughing a little self-consciously. “Anyway, I better get down to the reception room for the auction. Wander

well.”

“Wander well,” Aster replied solemnly. She followed her sister out of the bedroom and into the hallway, where they would part ways. Aster had to head back to her own bedroom to prepare it for the next brag. The next time she saw Clementine, the worst of this night would be behind them.

And then we'll be on the same side of things again, Aster thought.

She wouldn't have to keep secrets from Clementine anymore, wouldn't be separated from her. They could talk like they used to. Find things to laugh about. Steal their happiness where they could. That was how they won.

Unless . . .

Aster spun around. “Clem?” she called, cold at the sudden image of Clementine as empty-eyed as the oldest Good Luck Girls, the girls whose only remaining happiness came in a little brown bottle.

Clementine turned. “Yeah?”

“Don't—don't take the Sweet Thistle, okay?” Aster pleaded. “Lie to Mother Fleur if she asks you about it. Your body may belong to them, but your mind doesn't have to. We can keep each other brave. Same as always.”

Clementine's brows furrowed in confusion. “But, Violet . . .”

“Promise me, Clem.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I promise.”