

THE GOOD LUCK GIRLS

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The
GOOD LUCK
GIRLS

CHARLOTTE NICOLE DAVIS



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

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THE GOOD LUCK GIRLS

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*To my parents,
for supporting this dream of mine from the beginning*

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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

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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

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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 tattooist had carefully prepared the ink, mixing it with the unsavory ingredients that gave it its power. A strand of her hair. 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

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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 an important 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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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.*

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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 raver.

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

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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."

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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 to 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

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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 six-

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teen, 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 outright, 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

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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,

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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, while 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."

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"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

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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.

2

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 the daybreak girls ate yesterday's leftovers in the kitchen, the 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.

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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 scene. 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

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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 hadn't 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."

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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 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."

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3

Evening had fallen on the Green Creek welcome house, and the sundown girls, true to their names, came alive as they worked the growing nighttime crowd.

Aster was far too worried about Clementine to put any effort into flattering the puffed-up men around her. Instead she clung to the shadows of the reception room, watching as the other girls draped themselves over the parlor furniture and flirted with practiced ease. The mirrored walls reflected the chandelier light infinitely, creating the illusion of stars in a sky, while the deep rugs underfoot dampened all sound to an intimate hush. Iris, one of the oldest women at the welcome house, leaned into the grand piano that dominated the southwest corner of the room and began to play a slinking melody. Aster remembered when they'd first arrived at the welcome house, and how nine-year-old Clementine had been caught sneaking out of bed to try to pick out a lullaby on the creamy white keys. The raveners scoured her mind so viciously that she hadn't spoken for three days. But then kindly Iris had taken her under her wing. *It's about time I started training one of you to take over this old beast for me*, Iris had said. *I know it looks like it has teeth, but I promise it won't bite.*

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Right about now, Clementine would be greeting whichever brag had bought her at the auction.

Aster fought a fresh wave of queasiness. The air in the room was stifling, adding more heat to her temper. The men must have sensed it because for once, they left her alone. Some of them were connoisseurs of the business, come to see if the Green Creek welcome house lived up to its reputation. Others were wealthy but road-weary travelers just looking for a rack and a roll for the night. And almost all of them had come to the Scab from one of Arketta's fattened cities along the borders—where they belonged. The Scab had a way of making even big men feel small, what with its towering mountains and its restless dead. Good Luck Girls made them feel big again.

Or at least, they were supposed to.

Aster continued pacing along the edge of the room, tugging up the front of her corset. Her dress, cobalt blue with black lace, barely reached midthigh, leaving her legs to sweat under too-tight fishnet stockings. Her hair frizzed around her silk headband like a thunderhead. Mother Fleur frowned at Aster from her favorite chair, but, mercifully, the housemistress decided not to try her tonight, either.

A particularly loud chord rang out from the piano, and Aster jumped, nerves strung near to the breaking point. Violet, who sat on the nearest couch, cocked her eyebrow up at the brag whose lap she was perched on.

"You look tense, Aster," she said lazily. "No need to worry. Your sister is just fine."

"And how would you know that?" Aster asked.

"I got a good look at the brag with her. He's big as a house. I suspect she's having a Luckier Night than most."

"Excuse me?" Aster took a step towards her, fist clenched.

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Violet's smile fell clean off her face. But before Aster could say anything more, someone grabbed her wrist from behind with a deathly grip. A feverish chill shot up her arm and spread through her whole body, followed by sudden, crushing dread.

Ravener.

"That'll do," he said, his voice slipping down the back of her neck like cold water.

She turned and faced a lean, smartly dressed man, his forest green vest marking him as welcome house help. Aster recognized him as Amos. Like all raveners, his eyes were an ember-orange, set deep in his hawkish face. Meeting his stare only intensified the effect of his bewitchment. Aster's knees crumpled beneath her. Pain blossomed in her chest. And the fear roared in her skull, building to a scream—

Amos released her mind. A moment later, he released her wrist, too. He had only trapped her for a few seconds, but having your mind ravened was akin to holding your hand to an open flame: a few seconds was more than enough.

"Don't let me catch you skulking again," Amos hissed in her ear. "Find a brag, or you'll get worse."

His work done, he retreated to his post in the corner of the parlor. There were others like him scattered throughout the house. Raveners drew their power from beyond the Veil, and it made them half like the dead themselves—indifferent to cold or hunger, fatigue or pain. It was said that all men who became raveners lost their souls to that power over time, though Aster suspected anyone drawn to raveners' work didn't have much of a soul to begin with. *They're necessary to keep the peace*, Violet would've said.

The little bootlick was smirking at Aster now. Probably she thought Aster had had this coming. Aster curled her lip and stalked off. She was still shaky, sweating. She needed to clear her head.

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The reception room was flanked on either side by two smaller parlors, a gambler's room and a saloon that doubled as a dance hall. Aster made the rounds through both, careful to avoid further attention. The walking did little to calm her. Amos might have dredged up an ancient, animal fear, but it had already been just below the surface. It'd been mounting all night.

Aster had always known it was her job to protect Clementine, had always known that meant playing by the rules as best she could and avoiding Mother Fleur's deadly temper.

So why did she feel like she had failed Clementine completely?

Soon enough, Aster found herself back in the reception room, which was now livelier than ever. She angled towards one of the windows, where it was quieter. She could see nothing in the black square of night, but the pocket of cool air was a welcome relief. The worst of the ravening began to wear off.

Then, just as Aster was about to drag herself back into the crowd, she saw it: one window over, by the foot of the stairs, the velvet curtains jumped.

Far too sharp a movement to be a draft.

Aster narrowed her eyes. The welcome house had its dead, of course. The Veil was always thinner in places of great suffering. But a hallower came through once a month to cast out what spirits he could; there hadn't been a serious disturbance in years.

Another rustle, more exaggerated this time. No one else seemed to have noticed yet. Aster steeled herself and wandered over to investigate, if only to give herself a distraction from this never-ending night. When she pulled the curtains back, she swallowed a gasp.

Clementine.

Her hair had come undone, and her eyes were wide with

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panic. She shook feverishly. Aster's shock robbed her of her words. Clementine pulled the curtains closed before anyone else could see her. Aster turned around quickly, making it look as if she were just leaning against the wall.

"What *happened* to you?" Aster whispered out of the side of her mouth, looking around them anxiously. She hadn't even noticed Clem coming down the stairs, but someone else might have. Some of the daybreak girls working the floor were sure to be spies, selling others out in return for Mother Fleur's goodwill. And a ravenor could sense fear just as well as he could control it.

"Aster, the brag I was with—um—he's—" Aster could barely catch Clem's voice. "I think I—" Her voice faded entirely.

"What?"

"I said I—I think I killed him."

Killed? No. Clementine wasn't capable of such a thing. The brag must have passed out drunk. He could wake at any minute and come looking for her.

Aster started to tell her as much, but Clementine's words poured out in a rush. "I didn't mean to do it, Aster, I swear. I hit him over the head with the lamp. He was choking me and I wasn't thinking, I just wanted him to stop, but now there's all this blood—"

By the Veil.

"Okay," Aster said. "*Shh*, Clem, it's going to be fine. Just stay quiet for now."

In fact, her own heart had begun to hammer in her chest. She took another look around through the haze of cigar smoke. Mother Fleur wasn't paying her any mind, but Violet was watching her with obvious suspicion. Aster had already challenged her twice today. Violet would be dying for an excuse to rat her out.

Look away, Aster pleaded. Just this once, Violet, please, mind your own business.

Violet's brag took her by the chin and brought her down for a kiss. Violet closed her eyes.

"We have to go," Aster whispered immediately. "Now."

They left the window and slipped up the stairs, Clementine sticking close to the shadowed wall. Aster forced herself to remain calm and keep her pace measured, squeezing Clementine's hand to quell her fear, too. It was only once they reached the hallway that they began to run.

Clementine stopped a few feet away from her door, clearly unwilling to take another step. Praying that her sister had misjudged the situation, Aster opened the door herself.

The room was dark except for the rectangle of light pouring in from the hallway. But even so, Aster could see the body on the bed. The man was massive, naked from the waist up, and sprawled on his stomach with thick limbs spread in an X. His skull glistened with blood, a rotten melon that had been kicked in. The broken glass of the lamp glittered on the floor.

Aster stared, as if waiting for him to get back up.

"It was an accident," Clementine whispered again, almost pleading. "That's what we'll tell them, right? That it was an accident?"

Aster pulled Clementine inside and closed the door behind them, leaning against it, giving herself a heartbeat to think. It wouldn't matter that it had been an accident. There would be no forgiveness for this.

"Clementine—" Aster's mouth had gone dry. "We can't tell anyone. If Mother Fleur finds out . . ."

She trailed off. Clementine had turned on the gasolier overhead, twisting the knob to full brightness. Horror pooled in Aster's belly at the sight before her, the empty shine of the brag's eyes and the silent scream of his slack mouth. There

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wasn't a night that went by that she hadn't fantasized about killing the men that came into her bed. A pistol kissed against their temples. Her hands wrapped around their throats. But they were just that—fantasies. The real thing left her sickened and stunned.

Still, she would rather Clementine kill this man a thousand times than risk him doing the same to her. It wouldn't have been the first time a Good Luck Girl had gotten killed on the job because a brag got too rough.

Thank the dead I told her not to take the Sweet Thistle, Aster thought suddenly. Clementine never would have had the strength to defend herself if she'd been drugged.

For the briefest instant, Aster was almost proud. Her sister had shown the kind of courage Aster wasn't sure she had anymore.

"I'm so sorry," Clementine said at last, wiping her tears.

"*Don't be*," Aster said. "Don't apologize, Clem. I'd rather it was him."

Clementine sucked in a deep breath. "What do we do?"

Aster silently ran over their options. If anyone found out about this, Clementine would be put to death. That was for certain. Murderers in the Scab were hung high in a gibbet and left to the mercy of the vengeants, the most ruthless spirits this side of the Veil. A man might languish in that gibbet for days before the vengeants were drawn, irresistibly, to his suffering . . . but sooner or later they would always have him, splitting his belly with invisible claws and savaging his throat with unseen teeth. The crows would pick at the ruined body until the bones fell to the ground.

Aster would die herself before she let that happen to Clementine.

"All right," she said, straightening. "All right, first we hide the body. Mother Fleur likes to check up on the new girls,

make sure they're doing right by their men. We can't have her coming in and seeing yours like this."

"And then what?"

"I don't know!" Aster snapped. She shot Clementine an apologetic look. "Sorry—I'm just—I'm working on it. But all I know for sure is that we need to get rid of this body." She scanned the room. "The wardrobe," she said. It was the best hiding space available.

After opening the wardrobe doors and shoving aside dresses to make room, they moved quickly, Clementine grabbing the brag's ankles, Aster taking his wrists. But as they started to drag him, it became clear he was too heavy. Even if they could get him all the way off the mattress, they could never hold him up. His body would crash down on the floor and bring someone running. Clementine suggested they get Tansy and Mallow to help. Aster didn't trust them with this secret. Clementine insisted she could. Aster finally gave in, all too aware of the time they were wasting arguing.

With as much composure as she could muster, Aster hurried to the attic. Clementine stayed behind to keep talking as if the brag were still alive, in case Mother Fleur listened at the door, like she was known to.

The attic was relatively empty—it was the busiest time of the night, and most of the daybreak girls would be needed on the floor. But Tansy and Mallow had finished their last shift after supper. They were both relaxing on Mallow's cot, still in their livery, Mallow lying down with her head on Tansy's knee. Tansy giggled over something Mallow said.

Aster marched over.

"Tansy! Mallow!" she barked. "You're wanted downstairs."

"And just what the hell for?" Mallow demanded.

"Just come with me," Aster ordered. Then she leaned in and said softly, "Clem's in trouble."

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Tansy and Mallow sobered immediately. They got up from the bed and followed Aster downstairs, through dimly lit hallways. Aster explained the situation in a whispered rush, stopping and forcing a smile the couple times they passed another girl.

Before opening the door to Clementine's room, she paused a moment and glanced both ways to make sure no one was coming. "Listen," she said. "If you want to turn back, now's the time." She held each of their gazes, one after the other. "I'll understand if you don't want to be a part of this. So will Clem."

A look passed between them. "We're not going anywhere," Mallow said first, turning back to Aster. "We can't leave you alone with this."

Tansy nodded. "She'd do it for us."

Aster gave a quick, grateful nod back. Then she opened the door.

"Oh," Tansy said softly, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Well, shit, Clem," Mallow said under her breath, though she sounded more impressed than anything. "Remind me never to cross you."

"It was an accident—" Clementine began.

"Never mind what it was," Aster interrupted before her sister could get going again. She closed the door behind them. "Everybody grab a limb. We're stuffing him in the wardrobe."

Mallow rolled up her sleeves, exposing farm-strong forearms, while Tansy tugged her sleeves down over her hands, presumably to keep them clean. They grabbed the legs while Clementine and Aster grabbed the arms. Even with all of them working together, the body was still heavy and awkward to handle. They shuffled over towards the wardrobe. Luckily, it stood against the front wall, out of the line of sight from the doorway. So when the inevitable moment came and Mother Fleur opened the door—

"What's the plan after this?" Mallow whispered, as if reading Aster's thoughts. "They're sure as hell going to notice when he doesn't come downstairs."

Aster had been thinking of nothing else. She still didn't have any idea. Clem couldn't stay here—not if she wanted to live—but there was no way to get her out of the welcome house, either, with Dex at the door. The only people let in and out of that door were paid customers.

The brags.

Like the one right here.

"Well?" Mallow prodded, her voice tight with effort.

Adrenaline surged through Aster's body as an idea sparked through her. "Hold on, I'm thinking," she said. "Rest him here for a second."

The girls set the body down gently on the floor. Aster stared at the brag's hand, coming out of his shirt cuff near where she'd gripped his arm. Like all guests, he'd gotten a temporary favor on the back of his hand on his way in—the welcome house emblem, a skull with roses growing through it. He'd have to show his hand to Dex on his way out. Proof that he'd paid for his pleasure. Then he was free to go.

"We're going to run," Aster said, with more confidence than she felt. "Me and Clem. We're getting the hell out of here." The brag's favor would disappear once the time he'd paid for ran out. And, for all Aster knew, it might fade away any minute now that he was dead, too. But if they hurried . . .

Clem stared at her, eyes wide. "We are?"

"You can't be serious," Tansy said. "You can't get past Dex."

Aster didn't have the details all worked out yet. But she knew they had the most important thing they needed. "Yes, we can. Give me a minute to figure it out," she said. "Clem, get your things. We're bolting. No way you'll survive if we don't."

"How?" Clementine said. "Where?"

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"*Out of the damn house,*" Aster barked, breaking her whisper. She swallowed hard. "For now, just get ready."

After one more moment of shock, Clem hurried over to her trunk.

Aster stood staring at the brag, desperately trying to puzzle out the rest of her plan. Mallow fished out a knife tucked in the brag's boot, giving it an expert flourish. "I hope you don't need this, but I'll feel better if you have it," she muttered. "Though I still don't see what you're thinking."

"And you're definitely going to need some shine," Tansy added, pulling his theomite thumb ring free. "This ought to fetch you plenty."

"How can we—" Clementine started.

But before anyone could say anything else, the doorknob turned with a soft rattle.

They'd been discovered.

4

Violet stood in the doorway with her arms crossed.

"I swear I knew you were up to something, Aster," she said. "What the hell is going on here?"

Aster let out a low curse. *Of all people*. Violet, the one girl guaranteed to turn them in.

They had to get rid of her.

"Nothing that concerns you," Aster said. "I'll see you back downstairs in a minute."

"Mallow? Tansy?" Violet continued, ignoring Aster. Her face reddened. "One of you better answer me. Clementine, where's your brag?"

Clementine glanced at Aster, her desperation plain.

"He took off early," Aster said evenly. They crowded the doorway enough that Violet wouldn't see the body unless she looked past them. Aster couldn't give her any reason to. "Went on over to Clooney's," she added. The gambling hall across the street. It was plausible enough. Not every man stayed the night.

"That's right," Clementine jumped in. "And after he left I decided I might as well go get my friends to . . . you know . . . just to have someone to talk to . . ."

Violet narrowed her eyes. "You mean your brag paid for a

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Lucky Night and left after twenty minutes? Was he that unsatisfied?" She took a step towards Clementine. "If you lost us that patron, Mother Fleur will have your hide—"

"Hey, easy," Mallow said in a low warning.

"And *you* better get back upstairs before I let Mother Fleur know you're wandering around without permission," Violet added, rounding on her. "You, too," she said to Tansy. "And look at the two of you, all a mess. Is this how you present yourselves?" Her eyes caught on something. "Tansy, what's on your sleeve? It's stained." She stepped forward.

Aster now saw that a dark red splotch marred Tansy's cuff.

"Nothing," Tansy said, quickly moving her hands behind her.

"On Mother Fleur's behalf, I demand—" Violet came in even closer as she spoke. Heart racing, Aster stepped forward to block her. But it was too late. Violet's face shifted, wide eyes finding the blood on the bed and tracking it to its source. "What the—"

Aster's hand shot out before she could even question herself, grabbing hold of Violet by the wrist. She yanked her inside and kicked the door shut. Violet let out a short, sharp cry as Aster held her pinned against it.

"*What did you do to that brag?*" Violet screeched. "*Let me GO!*"

"Quiet!" Aster said. She looked back over her shoulder, holding Violet's upper arm against the door with one hand. "Mallow, the knife." She held her free hand out for the weapon.

"Aster," Clementine began.

"*The knife.*"

Mallow surrendered it wordlessly.

So this is what it feels like, Aster thought as she took the knife, the leather smooth beneath her fingers, the blade heavy

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in her hand. Something about it immediately stilled her frenzied mind.

Finally, she wasn't helpless.

Violet stopped struggling and went quiet at the sight of the weapon. She desperately scanned the room. "What happened?" she asked again, softer.

No turning back now.

Aster held the knife up to Violet's throat, pressing the flat of the blade against her skin.

"The brag is dead," Aster said slowly, quietly. Her voice shook, but her hand was steady. "I killed him. It was an accident. Now me and Clem have to make a run for it."

Clementine began to speak, but Aster shot her a warning glance. *Let me handle this.* If all else failed, at least Aster could take the blame.

"You expect me to believe that?" Violet choked out. "Clementine's the one who was with him this whole time. And she looks a damn sight more rattled than you do."

"Believe what you want. I don't have time to convince you. But if you can't convince *me* you'll keep your mouth shut, I'll carve your tongue out before we go."

Aster sensed the others shifting uncomfortably. Violet met Aster's dark stare. Weighed her words. When she answered, her voice was just above a whisper.

"You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Aster snarled, pressing the knife deeper. She spoke roughly in hopes of hiding the fact that, in truth, she *wasn't* sure she had the stomach to follow through on her threat.

But she had to. Or Clementine would be killed.

She drew a jeweled bead of blood just below Violet's favor.

"All right, all right, stop!" Violet hissed.

"Quiet," Aster reminded her.

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"You're serious about leaving?"

"As the dead."

"You take me for a fool? If there was a way to run, don't you think I'd know? Don't you think other girls would run all the time?"

"Other girls don't have what we have."

"A death wish?" Even now, up against the wall with a knife to her throat, that condescending tone never quite left her voice.

Aster hesitated. It felt wrong to tell Violet anything about their plan. But, at this point, it didn't really matter.

"The brag's hand. We can cut it off, use it to get past Dex."

The dead body was the only answer to the problem it had created for them.

"Ripping hell," Mallow muttered after a moment. "You're right."

Violet's brow furrowed. "That . . . might actually work . . ."

Aster drew a breath and backed up a step. "Go on and sit on the bed," she said to Violet, gesturing with the knife. "I think you know you're not leaving this room until you convince us we can trust you."

Violet walked to the bed as straight and proper as ever. She perched on the edge.

"I'm still working out the details," Aster said, looking at Clementine, Mallow, and Tansy, who were all staring at her. "But that's the basic idea: Clem and I use the hand to get out."

Mallow looked at Tansy. A wordless question passed between them. Tansy gave her a subtle nod and turned to Aster.

"Take us with you."

"No way," Clementine jumped in before Aster could reply. "I won't have you all killed because of us. Bad enough we asked this much of you."

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"She's right," Aster agreed, relieved they felt the same. "We have no idea what to expect out there, and the law's going to be on our tail the whole time. We're only running because we have to. But no one else knows you all are involved—you can still walk away from this."

Mallow scowled. "So, what, me and Tanz stay here, give up our one shot of getting out of this place?" she asked. "I don't think so. I'd rather die on the outside tomorrow than live out the rest of my days in here."

"I feel the same," Tansy said quietly.

Violet shifted. Aster immediately raised the knife. But Violet held up her hands in surrender.

"Take me with you," she breathed. "I want to run, too."

Aster laughed. "Right."

"Take me with you!" Violet repeated desperately.

"And why in the hell should we? After all your years of bullshit?"

"Please."

Violet had never said "please" to any of them. *What's she playing at?* Aster looked at the others, but Clementine, Tansy, and Mallow seemed just as mistrustful.

"Some sort of trick," Tansy muttered.

"It's not a trick!" Violet insisted. "I want out." Then she set her mouth. "Either you take me with you, or I tell Mother Fleur everything."

"Or I cut your throat," Aster reminded her.

"Better than living like this."

Aster felt a flicker of doubt. If it had been anyone else, Aster would've believed them, no question. But Violet? Mother Fleur's favorite girl? The one who never shut up about how much she *loved* Green Creek? No, something wasn't right.

By the Veil, we don't have time for this—

"Besides, you need me," Violet continued.

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"For what, exactly?" Clementine asked, sounding equally unconvinced.

"I *know* things, things Mother Fleur doesn't tell the rest of you."

"You'd only slow us down," Mallow spat. "Pampered little princess—"

Violet showed her teeth. "Dustblood scum—"

"*Shut up.* All of you," Aster broke in. She didn't trust Violet any more than the others did, but they couldn't keep arguing. Mother Fleur could be here any second. And even if cutting Violet's throat was clearly the only sure way of keeping her quiet, Aster still felt sick at the idea of it. Unlike the brag, Violet was an innocent—an insufferable, selfish shrew, yes, but an innocent.

She had to make a decision.

Aster dropped her voice to a low warning and raised the knife once more. "You do anything to try to sabotage us, and I *will* make you sorry."

Once again, Aster circled the reception room. This time, though, she was the hunter, not the prey. She needed to find a guest who was still unattended, and she needed to do it quickly, before Violet came downstairs disguised as Clementine's brag.

The idea was for Violet to slip outside, find a hay cart in the livery stable, and wheel it around underneath Aster's bedroom window so the rest of them could jump out. But in order to get past Dex, she'd have to hold out the severed hand from the end of the coat sleeve as if it were her own. Aster hated trusting the most important part of the plan to Violet, but she was the only one tall enough to wear the big brag's clothes.

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Mallow and Tansy had agreed to see to the grisly business of cutting the hand off with the brag's knife. It was Aster's job to create a distraction in the reception room so Dex wouldn't look at Violet too closely when she tried to leave.

Aster's neck prickled with frustration as she continued to scan the crowd, her every heartbeat like the ticking of a timer. They had no idea how long the brag's favor would last. And if it disappeared before Violet got out? They were dead.

A skinny brag in a long brown coat stood by himself at the bar, looking down at an untouched drink. He was one of the youngest men here. Aster was just about to approach him when another girl reached him first, leaning easy against the counter.

Damn it.

Aster turned away, searching desperately for someone else she could corner. Then, she spotted him: a man hovering alone by the piano, near enough the front door that Dex was sure to come running at her distraction. The brag wore the faded gray uniform of the Arkettan forces. *Glory to the Reckoning*, the words beneath his stripes said—the national motto. Like lawmen, armymen were offered a reduced price at welcome houses. They were always eager to find someone to listen to their stories about the dustblood rebels they'd helped capture.

Aster started towards him, slicing through the crowd.

"Looks like you could use some company," she said, slipping in at his side and trailing her fingers along his arm. Aster was never usually this forward, and for the first time she found herself wishing she had Violet's skill in effortless flirting.

The armyman squared up, his eyes glassy and unfocused from too much drink. "And what's your name, miss?" he asked thickly.

"I'm called Aster. See?" she teased, turning to show off her

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favor. She managed a sweeping glance of the room as she did so, but there was still no sign of Violet. She swallowed around the knot in her throat.

"Well, Lieutenant Carney, at your service, Aster," the armyman introduced himself, clumsily tipping his slouch hat. He eyed her up and down slowly, a half grin spreading across his face. A daybreak girl passed by with a tray of bright cocktails. He swiped two.

"Sweet drink for a sweet girl?" he asked.

Aster thanked him demurely, taking the glass. She looked past him to the stairs. *Where* was Violet?

And then Aster spotted her, swaggering down the steps with surprising confidence. Her long hair had been tucked away underneath the brag's hat, her feminine figure hidden by his knee-length coat. She'd wrapped his silk dustkerchief around the bottom half of her face. But it wasn't these things that made her look the part. It was the way she carried herself, the natural authority and obvious sense of entitlement. She showed none of the fear that she surely felt.

Aster's blood raced. She wet her lips.

"Wander well," Carney said to her cheerfully, raising his glass in a toast.

She turned to the armyman, fighting to keep her calm. "Wander well," she replied with a forced smile, and she drained her drink in three swallows.

The alcohol lit a fire down her throat, sticky sweetness burning on her tongue. She coughed violently. Braced herself against Carney's shoulder as her head spun.

Carney rubbed her back, laughing. Her skin crawled at his touch.

"Easy!" he said with disbelief. "You dustblood girls really are tough as drygrass."

"Well, we aim to impress, Lieutenant," she replied airily.

"Though I'll confess I'm feeling a bit faint now." She straightened up but let herself sway where she stood.

"Nothing a chaser won't fix," Carney said with too much eagerness.

Aster looked past him again. Violet had made it to the foyer. She was next in line to leave.

Carney persisted. "Here, I'll take you to the bar—"

"Don't trouble yourself," Aster said quickly. "I just need to sit for a spell." She took a few wobbly steps, let out a dramatic wail, and collapsed to the floor. The piano music cut off. A collective gasp went up around the room.

Aster remained on the floor, eyes closed, as chaos erupted around her. A jumble of voices filled the air: girls calling her name, a man calling for help. The floor vibrated under her cheek with the thumps of footsteps as a crowd gathered. She could hear Mother Fleur pushing through them and apologizing for the disturbance. The smell of cigar smoke in the rug turned her stomach.

"Keep back, she's with me," Carney ordered.

Aster fluttered her eyes open. A tangle of legs stood between her and the front door, but she could just make out Violet, striding outside. Dex was lumbering towards the growing crowd, forcing calm upon the guests with his mental influence. Aster's relief, however, was her own.

Violet had made it out.

Then a cold realization trickled down Aster's spine, chilling her brief rush of triumph: What if Violet simply ran away? What if she didn't wheel the cart around for the rest of them, just used the brag's hand to make her escape and leave them for dead? Maybe she'd only wanted to use them, maybe that had been her plan all along.

No choice now but to see this through.

Aster looked up at Dex, whose lip curled to reveal yellowed

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teeth, and Mother Fleur, whose mouth smiled but whose eyes flashed with fury. Aster's sloppy behavior would reflect poorly on the welcome house. Normally that would mean she'd spend tomorrow having her mind pulled apart by one of the raveners.

But by this time tomorrow, Aster would either be free or dead.

"Are you all right, Aster?" Mother Fleur asked, her voice dripping with false concern.

Aster took Carney's hand and stood up slowly. "I'm fine now, ma'am. Just got a little lightheaded. Sorry for causing a stir." She didn't have to fake the quaver in her voice. "I think I had better retire for the night, though, with your permission."

"Of course," Mother Fleur replied. "And the lieutenant here would like to come along and make sure you're okay, and spend a little time with you." She turned towards the brag and smiled. "The Aster Room is at the end of the hall on the right."

Carney stepped in closer as the rest of the crowd began to dissipate. Aster's panic doubled.

"Actually, I'm not sure—" she began.

"Don't worry, I'll look after you," he promised. He draped his arm around her and guided her towards the stairs.

Aster's heart thudded against her rib cage. This wasn't part of the plan. She couldn't bring him into her room. Clementine and the others were probably climbing out of the window right now. Or, if Violet had abandoned them, they were trapped there with no escape.

She made herself stumble on the first step.

"Careful, now," Carney said. "Don't want you taking another nasty tumble."

"Seems I'm too weak to go upstairs just yet," Aster demurred. She'd hoped to stall for a moment, give everyone

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time to get out, but Carney simply scooped her up and started up the stairs.

"No problem at all," he said gallantly.

Aster mouthed a curse. Of course acting helpless would only encourage him.

He smiled down at her as he continued to talk, and Aster began to feel ill in earnest. And then there was the usual fear, too, the one that took hold of Aster every time she climbed these stairs with a brag. Bone-cold dread rose up to drown her. It didn't matter that Carney seemed to think himself chivalrous. The end result was always the same.

They reached the top of the stairs. Carney set her down. Aster made a slow gallows walk to the end of the hall. She drew in a tight breath as she wrapped her hand around the knob.

Please, by the Veil, don't let me find anyone behind this door. Let them have escaped. Please.

She opened the door.

And exhaled. The room was empty, the window open. She strolled over to it, pretending to simply close the curtains. She glanced down and saw the hay cart waiting below.

Clementine had gotten out. They'd all gotten out.

Then Carney closed the door behind him with a thud, dropping Aster's heart. She couldn't jump with him standing there right behind her.

You'll just have to fight him. Knock him out.

A trained soldier? She didn't like her chances.

"Well, then, where should we start?" Carney asked, his words slurring slightly. He stepped in behind her and circled her waist with his meaty hands.

Aster's throat swelled. Her eyes burned. She could already feel herself sliding into that place of numb detachment where she went every night, her mind floating farther and farther

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away and leaving her body to fend for itself. Her breath was overloud in her ears, and her limbs grew so heavy she might as well have swallowed a whole week's worth of Sweet Thistle.

Sweet Thistle.

That's it.

"Let's get you out of that dress. Help you breathe a little easier," Carney said. She spun around to face him, still in his grasp.

"There's something I've been wanting to try for a while," she murmured into his ear. "But I'm not sure you're up for it."

"Oh?"

"Let me see if I can find it."

Aster disentangled herself and retreated to her vanity, where her bottle of Sweet Thistle sat nestled among the jewelry and hairbrushes.

She wet her lips, a flare of anger burning through the fog filling her mind. Every week, Mother Fleur had expected her to be grateful for this Sweet Thistle. Her parents had expected her to be grateful for this home. Lieutenant Carney probably expected her to be grateful for his restraint. As if any of those things changed what this place was, what it had almost done to Clementine. What it had already done to Aster and a thousand others.

"You're beautiful, you know," Carney said idly. "Most of these dustblood girls . . ." He just shook his head. "But what else can a man expect from the Scab? Glad I found some good luck here after all."

I should crack a mirror over his head.

Slit his throat with a shard of the glass.

Let him bleed like a pig.

But no, she couldn't. She had to control her anger just as she controlled her fear. It was the only way she would make it out of here alive.

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"What've you got there?" Carney continued. He had snuck up behind her, surprisingly light-footed.

She swallowed and showed him the bottle of Sweet Thistle. "Just a little pick-me-up leftover from a former guest," she said brightly. "Interested?"

Carney raised an eyebrow. "What exactly does this pick-me-up do?"

"It's an extract of a rare flower from the peaks of the mountains," Aster lied. "Said to open your mind and senses and unlock your deepest potential for pleasure."

"That so?"

She nodded. "Just a drop under your tongue. And the more you use, the stronger the effect. Not every man can handle it, though. Most can't manage more than a dose or two. But an armyman such as yourself . . ."

"Hand it over," Carney said roughly. Aster obliged, watching, tensed, as he unscrewed the cap and ran the bottle under his nose. If he recognized the scent of Sweet Thistle, he would know Aster was playing him. But he just filled the dropper all the way to the top, opened his mouth, and emptied the liquid under his tongue.

"See? No problem," Carney said, his slur growing even more pronounced, the drug beginning to work its magic. "Now you just come over here and we can—we can—"

He sat heavily on the bed, muttered a low curse, and fell back. Aster hurried to his side. His eyes were half open but unseeing, his words faint and incomprehensible. If he wasn't already asleep, he would be soon.

Aster moved quickly.

She ran back to the window. The hay cart was still there, mercifully. And the sluggishness that had taken over her limbs just moments ago had lifted completely. Aster brimmed with

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energy, equal parts fear and anticipation. How many nights had she imagined an escape? It was finally happening.

But not if she didn't hurry. Every second she wasted was a second the other girls might be discovered in the stables.

She lifted first one leg then the next out the window, the iron sill biting into her palms. She was certain that if she lingered even a moment, someone, something would come to stop her. A heartbeat later, she sat on the window ledge, legs dangling over open air. The distance between her feet and the hay cart seemed to yawn wider, now that the moment to jump was here. Go, she told herself. *Jump.*

But instead Aster turned and looked over her shoulder—at the room that had been her prison for so long, at the man who would have used her like so many others already had. Nothing short of the death of a brag had given her this chance to escape, and she knew it was a chance that would come only this once.

Aster made a decision right then. Even if it meant her life, she would never come back to this place or any place like it.

She would never be a Good Luck Girl again.

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