



The
GOOD LUCK
GIRLS

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

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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 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

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.

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.*