

CHAPTER 1

On the map, all the roads led to Estiel.

Eddy didn't like that. He hated how inevitable it felt. Touching the star on the faded map, he had asked his mother why Estiel was the bigger city, with the giant arch and the huge tall buildings, when it hadn't been the state capital in the old world.

"That's just not how it worked," Mother Ina would say tiredly. "I don't know why, my living child. That was before my time."

He thought of the skeletal silver arch against the black sky, the smell of smoke in the back of his throat.

How does a memory make me sick? How does it make me feel like running from somewhere I am not?

He was a few days away from the city on foot. He knew the southern routes better, knew where to find water and the safest places to rest. On the map, old names were scratched out and new names were written in. A faded red star at the crux of all roads read *S-T-L*. Eddy traced the roads with his finger, but he never went over that spot. He sought out the little signs his fellow raiders had supplied. Here, you'll cross the herds moving in season: a set of wide horns. There, a big building in

the process of falling down: a number 7 lying on its side. Here, a town that did not admit black people: a smudged, filled-in circle inside an X. There, a town that trades in slaves: three links of chain.

As a child in his small town called Nowhere, Eddy found the maps foreign and exciting. They confirmed something he had always believed: that the world outside was different and there were all different people in it. He couldn't wait to become a raider, mark up his own maps, go everywhere. Not just Estiel. Even then, the way the lines on the map puckered toward it made it seem like a mean old mouth.

He was forty miles south of the city when he found Chloe. This spot had been his camp many times, often for moons on end. The round gray birds, partridge and grouse, were thick here. In some seasons, wild chickens and pheasants in brown and red and checks mixed among them. The partridges were slow and showed little sign of contact with people. Eddy would pick off one or two, snapping their necks and plucking them at his leisure.

The old woman who held Chloe's tiny hand was gray-haired and short, her spine bent like a question mark. Her belt was circled around with blades. Rusty razors alternated with broken knives, their tangs showing empty screw holes. Sharpened hunks of tin glittered in the sunlight. Her mouth had the sunken look of a recently filled grave; Eddy knew she would be toothless, but he didn't expect the black stumps that showed when the hag smiled. Her eyes were covered by black plastic glasses that wrapped around her head, chipped and fogged but still transparent enough to see through.

The hair on Eddy's arms stood up suddenly, in hard little bumps identical to those on the half-plucked bird he was working on. He got to his feet slowly, feeling the presence of the gun at his back suddenly take on weight.

Black teeth and split lips opened, but what came forth didn't sound like words at all. Eddy stared in amazement, trying to puzzle it out.

Her accent was deep bayou south, traveling through the marshland of her mouth and landing in the Midwestern air sounding like no human language. He cocked his head to the side, affecting mild confusion to mask bolting horror.

Her man walked up slowly, carefully. This time Eddy put his hand on his gun and left it there.

The man was tall and thin with long, slender arms. He wore a cap made of an inexpertly skinned animal, and bad tattoos marched up his arms. "Ho, there. Ho, there, son. No trouble, now. No trouble at all. We thought we might bring you something nice."

Wee that wee mat brang you sumpn nahs. Eddy turned it over and over in his head, trying to make it into words.

"This here is the last girl in the world."

It came together all at once, the way a heavy summer rainstorm breaks in an instant and soaks the ground. He understood. They were selling the girl. Their talk was sloppy, slow, like something clotted pouring through a ragged hole. But once he got the feel of it, he could understand them.

He shifted his stance. "Is that right? The last girl in the world?"

The old woman's head rocked in a wild nod on her tortured spine. "That's right. The very last one. Of course, I don't count anymore. I can't tell you how many old women there might be. But girls . . . now that's different. This here is the last one."

Eddy tried to remember the last time he had seen a girl this small on the road. He tried to remember how many girl children had died being born back home, how many women had died trying to have them. It didn't make the girl any more or less precious. He didn't feel like doing the math.

The old woman touched the girl's blonde hair as though it were the finest merchandise before yanking the child forward, leading her roughly by one hand.

Eddy let his eyes rake over the child. Thin enough to make him wince. Dirty and scabbed and dull in the eyes past all recognition.

If this is the last girl child on earth, he thought, surely she deserves better than this.

He kept his hand on his gun.

The man spoke up again. He wore a long cloak that had been patched and mended with some care. The main body of it had once been made of velvet. He had stubble but had shaved fairly recently. His eyes were clear, and Eddy could see the ropes of his muscles when he moved his long arms.

“Will you just look at that? Pretty as a pitcher and no trouble at all. Just does exactly what she’s told. Watch this.”

He gave a short whistle and the girl turned toward him mechanically, following as devoid of will as when a flower turns to the sun. As the man lowered his pants she shoved one small, filthy hand in to root for her salvation, her face turned away.

Eddy saw her seize upon the man’s member and resignedly tuck herself toward him, saw the habit and economy in her gestures. He knew the girl had been born in captivity, never known a free day in her short life. He saw the way the man sagged, hips forward, whole body relaxing as the child moved to service him. The old woman did not trouble herself to look away.

“I don’t want to watch that,” Eddy said, struggling to keep his voice unconcerned. “Let’s hear the price.”

The man shrugged and pulled the child’s hand out of his pants, hitching and tying them back into place. “Man doesn’t need to be shown, I reckon. You know what you’re getting. We want a gun.”

“I don’t have one.” He said it too quickly. There were only a few guns in Nowhere, and only a few girls this young. If he was careful, he could change one of those numbers today. He let a beat pass, took a breath and let it out slowly. “I have throwing knives, and I’m pretty good with those. I could show you.”

A look passed between the cloak and the old woman. “Any drugs, then?”

Eddy thought a moment. “Yes. Yes, I might have something that you want.”

He picked up his pack, laid there beside the bloody feathers. He reached into the exact pocket, knowing precisely what he wanted and finding it with his fingertips. He pulled out two small vials of clear liquid, made by Alice.

He held the two vials up between two fingers. “This is a powerful painkiller. If you drink the whole vial, you’ll sleep deep enough to have a bone set or a bad tooth removed. If you drink half, you can come through a bad infection without pain. If you just take a drop or two, you feel fine and kind of sleepy. I’ll give you both for the girl.”

They shared another look.

“The drug and the knives,” the hag said. “Both.”

Eddy looked at her belt of blades. “What are those for?”

She looked down like she hadn’t known she was wearing it. “Oh, these? Just for my own protection.”

The silence hung.

The tall man reached out, taking a step forward. “I want to try it first. I ain’t trading you the last girl on earth for some water.”

Eddy stepped back, flinching at the man’s sudden movement.

Damn it. Try for some control.

“Here. I’ll break the seal and show you. You just put a few drops under your tongue. No more than four, though.”

He took a knife off his belt and ran it around the wax seal. His palms were slick and it took a minute. He held the other vial in his teeth. When Eddy handed it to the man in the cloak and cap, he took extra care that their hands did not touch.

Eddy opened the second vial and pressed his dry lower lip against the mouth of the bottle. He tilted his head back, pretending to tap out drops. Nothing entered his mouth.

The man watched this, then opened his own mouth and dripped the liquid beneath his tongue. Eddy got the impression that he wanted the drugs mostly for amusement and not because he had sickness or pain. The old woman watched them both, moving her jaw from side to side, grinding her teeth.

The little girl stood motionless, her bare feet in the dirt. Toes pointed in. The feathers of small birds blew on the wind.

Eddy wasn't completely sure how this would go. When the tall man's eyes rolled back in his head and he started to pitch forward, Eddy pulled out his machete and advanced toward the old woman. He watched dapples of sunlight glint on her belt of knives as she trembled.

It was always old women who did the cutting on girls who were too small to fight. Men did the trading, the buying and selling. Every camp seemed to have an old woman who knew the anatomy well enough to condition a girl but not to ruin her. Eddy understood what men were, and how they lived and died selling girls just like this one. He did not, never could, understand the old women who helped them do it. He raised the machete, ready to split her skull in two.

At the last second the woman bolted, suddenly spry, zigzagging past the trees.

The last girl in the world did not turn to watch her go.

She did not react when Eddy walked up, swearing, and kicked the limp body of the man in the cloak. She said nothing while Eddy roughly searched the man's pockets. This yielded an inferior knife and a compass.

He heard the man's breathing, slow and without urgency. The man would just slip away, no fuss and no struggle. Eddy wished the girl had seen him kill them both. It would have done her some good. Still, the old woman was out alone now, with only her knives and her skill to peddle. She wouldn't live long.

Eddy was fine with that.

He didn't touch the girl. He didn't try to make her meet his eyes or take his hand. He sat down, opened up a canteen, and set it near

her. It brimmed over with water, the drops running down both sides in the sunlight.

As soon as he was out of arm's reach, the girl seized the canteen and drank in hasty gulps. She let it fall to the ground, empty. She didn't replace the cap or say anything.

He didn't talk to her. He smiled as nicely as he knew how and returned to plucking the birds. When they were spitted and roasting, he let the smell of it bring her closer. When she came near enough that he could see her trembling, he tore off a hot leg and blew on it.

The bird's bones were tiny and he had to hold it between two fingers as it smoked.

"My name is Eddy," he said softly. "I'd like to know your name. You don't have to tell me, and I will still share food with you, even if you don't. But it would be better for us to share dinner if I at least knew what to call you."

He sat waiting, trying to encourage her with eye contact but not dominate her.

"Ch . . . Chloe." She said it very quietly before reaching out with both hands to snatch the partridge leg. She curled her tiny hands around it and brought it to her mouth.

"Careful, it's still—"

The girl had eaten every shred of meat and was gnawing the knuckle.

"Well alright then, Chloe." He pulled the whole bird off the spit and onto his metal plate. With two knives he held it down and cut it in half. He held the plate out to her, one thumb holding down his own dinner.

She snatched her half up and sat down in the dirt, teeth buried in the thigh meat.

"Alright then," Eddy repeated, smiling.



The girl had been the perfect reason to avoid the city. Eddy told the people of his village that he raided in the city with the Arch every summer. He brought back all kinds of useful objects to prove it.

The truth was that Eddy had not been to Estiel since he was seventeen years old, a still-green raider with only two years behind him. His very first solo raid at fifteen had taken him straight into the heart of the city, cocksure and invincible. He had come back with precious, irreplaceable things.

He was a hero.

Like a hero, he'd walked out of Nowhere in his sixteenth year, a little taller and stronger but not much wiser. He left on the same warm spring day, intending to return at the end of the summer. He followed the same route and raided the same part of the city.

He had walked back to Nowhere in the dead of winter with nothing but his gun. He had lost every ounce of extra weight on his body and shaved his head. He spoke to no one until three whole moons had passed.

When his voice had returned and he was no longer starving, he told them he had gotten lost. When he left the following summer, he followed those same roads, all of them leading toward Estiel under its dead rainbow. He never got close to the city. He raided other places and found people to trade with and returned a hero once more.

The reputation had stuck, and Eddy rescued girls and women to keep it safe. To cut off questions about when he was going to settle down.

Chloe was the first girl he had found this year. It seemed like a good omen to have rescued one so soon.

Eddy walked to the gates of Nowhere holding Chloe's hand. The child was sleepy and sick of walking, he could tell. She did not complain.

He whistled the signal, and a half-covered face appeared in the guard tower above a shotgun.

"Your name?"

Eddy lifted the child up onto his hip. He was too weary to be glad to be home, but he hoped Chloe would be happy here.

He pulled back his hood to show his shaved head. The spotter would know his face in the afternoon light.

“Etta, daughter of Ina. And this is Chloe, daughter of the Road.”

The gates opened and they walked through. Etta turned to the little girl and spoke softly in her ear.

“I don’t know what they told you,” she said. “But you are not the last girl on earth.”