

**THE**  
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**KASS MORGAN**

  
HODDER

First published in the United States of America in 2013  
by Little, Brown and Company  
An Hachette Book Group Company

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Paperback 978 1 444 76688 2  
Ebook 978 1 444 76689 9



alloy**entertainment**

Produced by Alloy Entertainment  
1700 Broadway  
New York, NY 10019  
[www.alloyentertainment.com](http://www.alloyentertainment.com)

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

# CHAPTER 1

*Clarke*

The door slid open, and Clarke knew it was time to die.

Her eyes locked on the guard's boots, and she braced for the rush of fear, the flood of desperate panic. But as she rose up onto her elbow, peeling her shirt from the sweat-soaked cot, all she felt was relief.

She'd been transferred to a single after attacking a guard, but for Clarke, there was no such thing as solitary. She heard voices everywhere. They called to her from the corners of her dark cell. They filled the silence between her heartbeats. They screamed from the deepest recesses of her mind. It wasn't death she craved, but if that was the only way to silence the voices, then she was prepared to die.

She'd been Confined for treason, but the truth was far worse than anyone could've imagined. Even if by some miracle she was pardoned at her retrial, there'd be no real reprieve. Her memories were more oppressive than any cell walls.

The guard cleared his throat as he shifted his weight from side to side. "Prisoner number 319, please stand." He was younger than she'd expected, and his uniform hung loosely from his lanky frame, betraying his status as a recent recruit. A few months of military rations weren't enough to banish the specter of malnutrition that haunted the Colony's poor outer ships, Walden and Arcadia.

Clarke took a deep breath and rose to her feet.

"Hold out your hands," he said, pulling a pair of metal restraints from the pocket of his blue uniform. Clarke shuddered as his skin brushed against hers. She hadn't seen another person since they'd brought her to the new cell, let alone touched one.

"Are they too tight?" he asked, his brusque tone frayed by a note of sympathy that made Clarke's chest ache. It'd been so long since anyone but Thalia—her former cell mate and her only friend in the world—had shown her compassion.

She shook her head.

"Just sit on the bed. The doctor's on his way."

"They're doing it here?" Clarke asked hoarsely, the words

scraping against her throat. If a doctor was coming, that meant they were forgoing her retrial. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. According to Colony law, adults were executed immediately upon conviction, and minors were Confined until they turned eighteen and then given one final chance to make their case. But lately, people were being executed within hours of their retrial for crimes that, a few years ago, would have been pardoned.

Still, it was hard to believe they'd actually do it in her cell. In a twisted way, she'd been looking forward to one final walk to the hospital where she'd spent so much time during her medical apprenticeship—one last chance to experience something familiar, if only the smell of disinfectant and the hum of the ventilation system—before she lost the ability to feel forever.

The guard spoke without meeting her eyes. "I need you to sit down."

Clarke took a few short steps and perched stiffly on the edge of her narrow bed. Although she knew that solitary warped your perception of time, it was hard to believe she had been here—alone—for almost six months. The year she'd spent with Thalia and their third cell mate, Lise, a hard-faced girl who smiled for the first time when they took Clarke away, had felt like an eternity. But there was no other explanation. Today had to be her eighteenth birthday, and the only present

waiting for Clarke was a syringe that would paralyze her muscles until her heart stopped beating. Afterward, her lifeless body would be released into space, as was the custom on the Colony, left to drift endlessly through the galaxy.

A figure appeared in the door and a tall, slender man stepped into the cell. Although his shoulder-length gray hair partially obscured the pin on the collar of his lab coat, Clarke didn't need the insignia to recognize him as the Council's chief medical advisor. She'd spent the better part of the year before her Confinement shadowing Dr. Lahiri and couldn't count the number of hours she'd stood next to him during surgery. The other apprentices had envied Clarke's assignment, and had complained of nepotism when they discovered that Dr. Lahiri was one of her father's closest friends. At least, he had been before her parents were executed.

"Hello, Clarke," he said pleasantly, as if he were greeting her in the hospital dining room instead of a detention cell. "How are you?"

"Better than I'll be in a few minutes, I imagine."

Dr. Lahiri used to smile at Clarke's dark humor, but this time he winced and turned to the guard. "Could you undo the cuffs and give us a moment, please?"

The guard shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not supposed to leave her unattended."

“You can wait right outside the door,” Dr. Lahiri said with exaggerated patience. “She’s an unarmed seventeen-year-old. I think I’ll be able to keep things under control.”

The guard avoided Clarke’s eyes as he removed the handcuffs. He gave Dr. Lahiri a curt nod as he stepped outside.

“You mean I’m an unarmed eighteen-year-old,” Clarke said, forcing what she thought was a smile. “Or are you turning into one of those mad scientists who never knows what year it is?” Her father had been like that. He’d forget to program the circadian lights in their flat and end up going to work at 0400, too absorbed in his research to notice that the ship’s corridors were deserted.

“You’re still seventeen, Clarke,” Dr. Lahiri said in the calm, slow manner he usually reserved for patients waking up from surgery. “You’ve been in solitary for three months.”

“Then what are you doing here?” she asked, unable to quell the panic creeping into her voice. “The law says you have to wait until I’m eighteen.”

“There’s been a change of plans. That’s all I’m authorized to say.”

“So you’re authorized to *execute* me but not to talk to me?” She remembered watching Dr. Lahiri during her parents’ trial. At the time, she’d read his grim face as an expression of his disapproval with the proceedings, but now she wasn’t sure. He hadn’t spoken up in their defense. No one had. He’d

simply sat there mutely as the Council found her parents—two of Phoenix’s most brilliant scientists—to be in violation of the Gaia Doctrine, the rules established after the Cataclysm to ensure the survival of the human race. “What about my parents? Did you kill them, too?”

Dr. Lahiri closed his eyes, as if Clarke’s words had transformed from sounds into something visible. Something grotesque. “I’m not here to kill you,” he said quietly. He opened his eyes and then gestured to the stool at the foot of Clarke’s bed. “May I?”

When Clarke didn’t reply, Dr. Lahiri walked forward and sat down so he was facing her. “Can I see your arm, please?”

Clarke felt her chest tighten, and she forced herself to breathe. He was lying. It was cruel and twisted, but it’d all be over in a minute.

She extended her hand toward him. Dr. Lahiri reached into his coat pocket and produced a cloth that smelled of anti-septic. Clarke shivered as he swept it along the inside of her arm. “Don’t worry. This isn’t going to hurt.”

Clarke closed her eyes.

She remembered the anguished look Wells had given her as the guards were escorting her out of the Council chambers. While the anger that had threatened to consume her during the trial had long since burned out, thinking about Wells sent a new wave of heat pulsing through her body, like

a dying star emitting one final flash of light before it faded into nothingness.

Her parents were dead, and it was all his fault.

Dr. Lahiri grasped her arm, his fingers searching for her vein.

*See you soon, Mom and Dad.*

His grip tightened. This was it.

Clarke took a deep breath as she felt a prick on the inside of her wrist.

“There. You’re all set.”

Clarke’s eyes snapped open. She looked down and saw a metal bracelet clasped to her arm. She ran her finger along it, wincing as what felt like a dozen tiny needles pressed into her skin.

“What is this?” she asked frantically, pulling away from the doctor.

“Just relax,” he said with infuriating coolness. “It’s a vital transponder. It will track your breathing and blood composition, and gather all sorts of useful information.”

“Useful information for who?” Clarke asked, although she could already feel the shape of his answer in the growing mass of dread in her stomach.

“There’ve been some exciting developments,” Dr. Lahiri said, sounding like a hollow imitation of Wells’s father, Chancellor Jaha, making one of his Remembrance Day

speeches. “You should be very proud. It’s all because of your parents.”

“My parents were executed for treason.”

Dr. Lahiri gave her a disapproving look. A year ago, it would’ve made Clarke shrink with shame, but now she kept her gaze steady. “Don’t ruin this, Clarke. You have a chance to do the right thing, to make up for your parents’ appalling crime.”

There was a dull crack as Clarke’s fist made contact with the doctor’s face, followed by a thud as his head slammed against the wall. Seconds later, the guard appeared and had Clarke’s hands twisted behind her back. “Are you all right, sir?” he asked.

Dr. Lahiri sat up slowly, rubbing his jaw as he surveyed Clarke with a mixture of anger and amusement. “At least we know you’ll be able to hold your own with the other delinquents when you get there.”

“Get where?” Clarke grunted, trying to free herself from the guard’s grip.

“We’re clearing out the detention center today. A hundred lucky criminals are getting the chance to make history.” The corners of his mouth twitched into a smirk. “You’re going to Earth.”

# CHAPTER 2

## *Wells*

The Chancellor had aged. Although it'd been less than six weeks since Wells had seen his father, he looked years older. There were new streaks of gray by his temples, and the lines around his eyes had deepened.

“Are you finally going to tell me why you did it?” the Chancellor asked with a tired sigh.

Wells shifted in his chair. He could feel the truth trying to claw its way out. He'd give almost anything to erase the disappointment on his father's face, but he couldn't risk it—not before he learned whether his reckless plan had actually worked.

Wells avoided his father's gaze by glancing around the

room, trying to memorize the relics he might be seeing for the last time: the eagle skeleton perched in a glass case, the few paintings that had survived the burning of the Louvre, and the photos of the beautiful dead cities whose names never ceased to send chills down Wells's spine.

"Was it a dare? Were you trying to show off for your friends?" The Chancellor spoke in the same low, steady tone he used during Council hearings, then raised an eyebrow to indicate that it was Wells's turn to talk.

"No, sir."

"Were you overcome by some temporary bout of insanity? Were you on drugs?" There was a faint note of hopefulness in his voice that, in another situation, Wells might've found amusing. But there was nothing humorous about the look in his father's eyes, a combination of weariness and confusion that Wells hadn't seen since his mother's funeral.

"No, sir."

Wells felt a fleeting urge to touch his father's arm, but something other than the handcuffs shackling his wrists kept him from reaching across the desk. Even as they had gathered around the release portal, saying their final, silent good-byes to Wells's mother, they'd never bridged the six inches of space between their shoulders. It was as if Wells and his father were two magnets, the charge of their grief repelling them apart.

“Was it some kind of political statement?” His father winced slightly, as though the thought hit him like a physical blow. “Did someone from Walden or Arcadia put you up to it?”

“No, sir,” Wells said, biting back his indignation. His father had apparently spent the past six weeks trying to recast Wells as some kind of rebel, reprogramming his memories to help him understand why his son, formerly a star student and now the highest-ranked cadet, had committed the most public infraction in history. But even the truth would do little to mitigate his father’s confusion. For the Chancellor, nothing could justify setting fire to the Eden Tree, the sapling that had been carried onto Phoenix right before the Exodus. Yet for Wells, it hadn’t been a choice. Once he’d discovered that Clarke was one of the hundred being sent to Earth, he’d had to do something to join them. And as the Chancellor’s son, only the most public of infractions would land him in Confinement.

Wells remembered moving through the crowd at the Remembrance Ceremony, feeling the weight of hundreds of eyes on him, his hand shaking as he removed the lighter from his pocket and produced a spark that glowed brightly in the gloom. For a moment, everyone had stared in silence as the flames wrapped around the tree. And even as the guards rushed forward in sudden chaos, no one had been able to miss whom they were dragging away.

“What the hell were you thinking?” the Chancellor asked, staring at him in disbelief. “You could’ve burned down the whole hall and killed everyone in it.”

It would be better to lie. His father would have an easier time believing that Wells had been carrying out a dare. Or perhaps he could try to pretend he *had* been on drugs. Either of those scenarios would be more palatable to the Chancellor than the truth—that he’d risked everything for a girl.

The hospital door closed behind him but Wells’s smile stayed frozen in place, as if the force it had taken to lift the corners of his mouth had permanently damaged the muscles in his face. Through the haze of drugs, his mother had probably thought his grin looked real, which was all that mattered. She’d held Wells’s hand as the lies poured out of him, bitter but harmless. *Yes, Dad and I are doing fine.* She didn’t need to know that they’d barely exchanged more than a few words in weeks. *When you’re better, we’ll finish Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* They both knew that she’d never make it to the final volume.

Wells slipped out of the hospital and started walking across B deck, which was mercifully empty. At this hour, most people were either at tutorials, work, or at the Exchange. He was supposed to be at a history lecture, normally his favorite subject. He’d always loved stories about ancient cities like Rome and New York, whose dazzling triumphs were matched only by the magnitude of their

downfalls. But he couldn't spend two hours surrounded by the same tutorial mates who had filled his message queue with vague, uncomfortable condolences. The only person he could talk to about his mother was Glass, but she'd been strangely distant lately.

Wells wasn't sure how long he'd been standing outside the door before he realized he'd arrived at the library. He allowed the scanner to pass over his eyes, waited for the prompt, and then pressed his thumb against the pad. The door slid open just long enough for Wells to slip inside and then closed behind him with a huffy thud, as if it had done Wells a great favor by admitting him in the first place.

Wells exhaled as the stillness and shadows washed over him. The books that been evacuated onto Phoenix before the Cataclysm were kept in tall, oxygen-free cases that significantly slowed the deterioration process, which is why they had to be read in the library, and only then for a few hours at a time. The enormous room was hidden away from the circadian lights, in a state of perpetual twilight.

For as long as he could remember, Wells and his mother had spent Sunday evenings here, his mother reading aloud to him when he was little, then reading side by side as he got older. But as her illness progressed and her headaches grew worse, Wells had started reading to her. They'd just started volume two of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* the evening before she was admitted to the hospital.

He wove through the narrow aisles toward the English Language section and then over to History, which was tucked into a dark back corner. The collection was smaller than it should've been. The first colonial government had arranged for digital text to be loaded onto Phoenix, but fewer than a hundred years later, a virus wiped out most of the digital archives, and the only books left were those in private collections—heirlooms handed down from the original colonists to their descendants. Over the past century, most of the relics had been donated to the library.

Wells crouched down until he was eye level with the *Gs*. He pressed his thumb against the lock and the glass slid open with a hiss, breaking the vacuum seal. He reached inside to grab *Decline and Fall* but then paused. He wanted to read on so he'd be able to tell his mother about it, but that would be tantamount to arriving in her hospital room with her memorial plaque and asking for her input on the wording.

"You're not supposed to leave the case open," a voice said from behind him.

"Yes, thank you," Wells said, more sharply than he'd meant. He rose to his feet and turned to see a familiar-looking girl staring at him. It was the apprentice medic from the hospital. Wells felt a flash of anger at this blending of worlds. The library was where he went to forget about the sickening smell of antiseptic, the beep of the heart monitor that, far from a sign of life, seemed like a countdown to death.

The girl took a step back and cocked her head, her light hair falling to one side. "Oh. It's you." Wells braced for the first swoon of recognition, and the rapid eye movements that meant she was already messaging her friends on her cornea slip. But this girl's eyes focused directly on him, as if she were looking straight into his brain, peeling back the layers to reveal all the thoughts Wells had purposefully hidden.

"Didn't you want that book?" She nodded toward the shelf where *Decline and Fall* was stored.

Wells shook his head. "I'll read it another time."

She was silent for a moment. "I think you should take it now." Wells's jaw tightened, but when he said nothing, she continued. "I used to see you here with your mother. You should bring it to her."

"Just because my father's in charge of the Council doesn't mean I get to break a three-hundred-year rule," he said, allowing just a shade of condescension to darken his tone.

"The book will be fine for a few hours. They exaggerate the effects of the air."

Wells raised an eyebrow. "And do they exaggerate the power of the exit scanner?" There were scanners over most public doors on Phoenix that could be programmed to any specifications. In the library, it monitored the molecular composition of every person who exited, to make sure no one left with a book in their hands or hidden under their clothes.

A smile flickered across her face. "I figured that out a long time ago." She glanced over her shoulder down the shadowy aisle between the bookcases, reached into her pocket, and extracted a piece of gray cloth. "It keeps the scanner from recognizing the cellulose in the paper." She held it out to him. "Here. Take it."

Wells took a step back. The chances of this girl trying to embarrass him were far greater than the odds of her having a piece of magical fabric hidden in her pocket. "Why do you have this?"

She shrugged. "I like reading other places." When he didn't say anything, she smiled and extended her other hand. "Just give me the book. I'll sneak it out for you and bring it to the hospital."

Wells surprised himself by handing her the book. "What's your name?" he asked.

"So you know to whom you'll be eternally indebted?"

"So I know who to blame when I'm arrested."

The girl tucked the book under her arm and then extended her hand. "Clarke."

"Wells," he said, reaching forward to shake it. He smiled, and this time it didn't hurt.

"They barely managed to save the tree." The Chancellor stared at Wells, as if looking for a sign of remorse or glee—anything to help him understand why his son had tried to set fire to the only tree evacuated from their ravaged planet. "Some of the council members wanted to execute you on the

spot, juvenile or not, you know. I was only able to spare your life by getting them to agree to send you to Earth.”

Wells exhaled with relief. There were fewer than 150 kids in Confinement, so he had assumed they’d take all the older teens, but until this moment he hadn’t been sure he would be sent on the mission.

His father’s eyes widened with surprise and understanding as he stared at Wells. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

Wells nodded.

The Chancellor grimaced. “Had I known you were this desperate to see Earth, I could have easily arranged for you to join the second expedition. Once we determined it was safe.”

“I didn’t want to wait. I want to go with the first hundred.”

The Chancellor narrowed his eyes slightly as he assessed Wells’s impassive face. “Why? You of all people know the risks.”

“With all due respect, you’re the one who convinced the Council that nuclear winter was over. *You* said it was safe.”

“Yes. Safe enough for the hundred convicted criminals who were going to die anyway,” the Chancellor said, his voice a mix of condescension and disbelief. “I didn’t mean safe for my *son*.”

The anger Wells had been trying to smother flared up, reducing his guilt to ashes. He shook his hands so the cuffs

rattled against the chair. "I guess I'm one of them now."

"Your mother wouldn't want you to do this, Wells. Just because she enjoyed dreaming about Earth doesn't mean she'd want you to put yourself in harm's way."

Wells leaned forward, ignoring the bite of the metal digging into his flesh. "She's not who I'm doing this for," he said, looking his father straight in the eye for the first time since he'd sat down. "Though I do think she'd be proud of me." It was partially true. She'd had a romantic streak and would have commended her son's desire to protect the girl he loved. But his stomach writhed at the thought of his mom knowing what he'd really done to save Clarke. The truth would make setting the Eden Tree on fire seem like a harmless prank.

His father stared at him. "Are you telling me this whole debacle is because of that girl?"

Wells nodded slowly. "It's my fault she's being sent down there like some lab rat. I'm going to make sure she has the best chance of making it out alive."

The Chancellor was silent for a moment. But when he spoke again, his voice was calm. "That won't be necessary." The Chancellor removed something from his desk drawer and placed it in front of Wells. It was a metal ring affixed with a chip about the size of Wells's thumb. "Every member of the expedition is currently being fitted with one of these bracelets," his father explained. "They'll send data back up to the

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ship so we can track your location and monitor your vitals. As soon as we have proof that the environment is hospitable, we'll begin recolonization." He forced a grim smile. "If everything goes according to plan, it won't be long before the rest of us come down to join you, and all this"—he gestured toward Wells's bound hands—"will be forgotten."

The door opened and a guard stepped over the threshold. "It's time, sir."

The Chancellor nodded, and the guard strode across the room to pull Wells to his feet.

"Good luck, son," Wells's father said, assuming his trademark brusqueness. "If anyone can make this mission a success, it's you."

He extended his arm to shake Wells's hand, but then let it fall to his side when he realized his mistake. His only child's arms were still shackled behind him.