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## *Mallie Ramble*

Dustflights are trained to sense explosions in the Down Below.

Honeysuckle is my papa's Dustflight, a tiny yellow bird they give every miner in Coal Top. When I was a little girl, Honeysuckle brought me heaps of comfort as I watched Papa walk to the mines. I couldn't go with him to the Down Below. But our brave yellow bird could. She perched like a speck of plump sunshine on his shoulder.

She'd coo lullabies in his ear if he got lonely. She could keep him safe. Papa hasn't been Down Below in more than a year now, but Honeysuckle stays right near him most of the time. Until the work whistle blows. That's when she floats down to Windy Valley to find me.

*Alloo, alloo*, Honeysuckle sings against the window. I run to the glass and raise it just a notch. A cool, dusty breeze carries her sweet birdsong into the room. The sound is a hint of home, and for a second, I forget I've been covered in dirt for hours. Honeysuckle snuggles her feathery face against the pane.

"I'm hurrying," I promise her. And she sings a chirpy tune to help me speed up cleaning Mrs. Tumbrel's floors.

That's one of the reasons all the miners get a Dustflight when they start work in the Down Below; their sweet presence helps you work faster. Here's another: The birds can warn the miners if they've gone too deep. Or if they're about to find gold. Not that anybody finds much gold these days. Mostly, I believe the birds are a tactic the Guardians use to get kids to join up young. In a town the color of dust, who wouldn't want a bright yellow bird they can take home every day?

I stretch my stiff neck and hear a cluster of pops. The fingers on my left hand are clenched in the cold rags, so I stretch them straight, slowly. One by one. My hand will

stay that way, eventually. Bent and clawed like I'm always clutching rags. *Old maid's grip*, mountain people call it.

Honeysuckle taps the glass lightly with her beak, her way of telling me it's time to get out of my slop pile and get on up the mountain. My mountain. If I miss the train, I'll have to walk to the top. I did that once, and I will never do it again. For as long as I've been alive and breathing, I've heard stories about monsters who roam the woods at night. I used to think our parents made it all up just so we'd stay close to home. Now I know better. Still, sometimes I wonder if walking through the monster woods is any worse than being around valley people. They can be monstrous, too; these snooty folks who want their floors cleaned and toilets scrubbed and powder cakes made just so, *just sooooo*.

I stand, balance the bucket full of filthy water in the crook of my right arm, and haul it back to the kitchen, careful not to slosh it over the newly polished wood. My right arm ends just below my elbow, but I've never had a problem getting things done one-handed. I'm not going to lie: Sometimes I think it'd be nice to have two grippy hands. Especially when it comes to opening stuck windows. Braiding hair faster. Carrying this nasty muck bucket around. Scrubbing floors might go by a little quicker, maybe. But it doesn't matter much. I was born this way, so I'm used to it. And besides, I'm a fast worker.

I check my Popsnap to make sure it's secure—that's my fake arm, complete with a fake hand, that I keep attached to my right elbow when I'm working in the valley. *This way you'll blend right in*, the valley doctor told me. *It's a universal color that fits everybody*. Thing is, Popsnaps only come in pale orange. I've met all kinds of people, who look all kinds of different ways, but I've never met a soul who's orange.

I spin around quickly when the front door squeals open. This is payday, and there's nothing that makes me prouder than giving my family the money I've earned for all of us: Papa, Mama, and my little brother, Denver. We need this more than ever today.

We *have* to have this today. Money's not just running low for us Rambles. Our money has flat run out.

The front door slams shut, and four kids—wild as mountain chickens—run screaming across the floor I just mopped.

I lurch forward and nearly yell—QUIT IT!!—but the words gob up inside me. *Be gentle*, Mama always tells me. *Be gentle in the valley*. That's her polite way of telling me not to get so fired up down here. Not to argue. Not to disobey. And I get it: I'm all the income my family has now. I have to keep this job. So I clutch my apron, bite my

tongue, and watch the ruckus. The Tumbrel kids stomp red-clay clusters and clots of grass all over my handiwork. Their mother—Mrs. Tumbrel—saunters through behind them, bracelets jangling. She clutches her velvet skirt and lifts it, trying to avoid her offspring’s sloshy path of yuck.

She snarls at the mess on the floor. Then she looks at my right elbow, at my Popsnap.

“I worry you aren’t capable of the work, Mallie,” she says with a sigh of fake concern. “Finding another mountain girl might be best for us both. Perhaps you’d be better suited for other chores.”

“No! I’m perfectly capable.” I try to sound calm and submissive. Gentle, like Mama says. But I’m not a gentle soul. I’m still learning many things about myself, but I already know this much: I’m wild and brave on the inside, a fire-popper in a glass jar. Some days I can’t help but spark a little. Some days, my heart is a raging fire.

“Don’t misunderstand me, sweetie. You are . . . an inspiration!”

I bite my tongue so hard I wonder if it might fall off. Mrs. Tumbrel knows only two things about me: my name, Mallie Ramble, and that I have a Popsnap where part of my right arm should be. Neither one of those things makes me inspirational. She’s only saying this because my arm

looks different from hers. That is called pity. And pity feels like an insult. Words leap off my tongue before I can cage them: “If your children hadn’t—”

“Hadn’t what?” One black-inked eyebrow arches at me.

I gulp, trapping the words I really want to speak back down in my heart. “They must not have realized I’d just finished these floors. They tracked mud all over the place!”

“Mmm.” She cocks her head at me, thinking. Does she really not believe I’m capable of scrubbing a stupid floor?

She saunters close enough to peer down her long, regal nose at me. “I’ll keep you on, Mallie. Because I am a good woman. But some advice: Having high spirits will make it hard for you to find another employer. And you already have your loss working against you.” She glances at my right arm again and clears her throat.

She’s always looking at my Popsnap. Just flat-out staring at it. I get having a little bit of curiosity about people—I’m a curious soul myself!—but she can’t even make eye contact with me. Sometimes I imagine pulling it off and throwing it at her so she can have a good long look and be done with it.

“Here, now. For your work.” She drops two Feathersworth in my hand.

That's only two days' wages. She hasn't paid me in a week.

"Mrs. Tumbrel, I don't mean to be disrespectful. But this is the wrong amount. I earned—"

"I decide what you earn. Remember that before you unleash your temper again. And anyway, these are hard times." Mrs. Tumbrel flutters her eyelashes dramatically. They look like little ink bats, flapping over her lying eyes. Because I *see* the velvet bags of goods she brings in every day. The new dresses she wears. It's not that the Tumbrels don't have enough money. They just don't feel like paying me.

But the words *Yes, ma'am* float out of my mouth. And the coins make a dull jangling sound when I drop them in my apron pocket.

"Finish this before you leave," she says dismissively, waving at the floors as she walks away.

No time to grumble, so I lean in to the day:

*Bucket, refilled.*

*Knees, grounded.*

*Lean in, Mallie, lean in.*



*Finish strong,*

*Finish proud!*

I don't see the shiny brown boots of my enemy until they're right in front of me, tracking more sloshy lines of mud and crud across the floor.