



### Chapter 2

We reach the lake, walking arm in arm, and I end up getting lost while staring at the water. Lea is lucky. Her sister's sacrifice meant her family's Libris was sealed.

Once sealed, it's considered that the family has already paid enough. The parents give up their firstborn, and in return, they get the certainty that they won't lose any other children, and a little pouch of coins to feed themselves for a year. A small alms in exchange for losing a child forever.

"Are you listening to me?"

I blink, coming out of my thoughts.

"Sorry." I smile, embarrassed. "What were you saying?"

"Don't worry." That sad smile again. "I'm sure you have a lot on your mind. I was saying that yesterday, during the walk with my mom, Felippo, the baker's son, stopped to chat with us for a while. He couldn't stop looking at me, maybe..."

"Maybe...?" Her cheeks turn pink. "Do you like Felippo?"

She tries to ignore me, looking at anything but me. Still, I don't give up and start poking her in the side, forcing her to look at me between laughs.

"Don't be silly, Felippo is too much..."

"Too what?"

"Too right."

"Not right?" I raise an eyebrow. "You're the most correct person I know."

She unlinks her arm and starts walking backward, spinning slowly as she talks.

"Yes, that's why I want someone who's rebellious,

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adventurous, someone who makes me feel alive. I don't want something traditional and typical—I want someone who pushes me to do new things."

"You want to give your parents a heart attack," I say.

She laughs again, twirling on herself while walking along the rest of the path. We reach the end, the sign that it's time to turn back and return to the comfort of our homes. I have a different idea for tonight. We retrace our steps and, when we reach the end, I stop in front of Lea and look her straight in the eyes.

"Tonight I'm going home alone," I announce. "I need a few moments to myself."

"Elara, that's not a good idea. It's getting dark, you can't go back alone..."

"Lea, please..." I say pleadingly. "I don't have much time left, soon I won't have these walks, I won't have time for myself. Not even to think."

The rustling of the hem of her dress sounds on the gravel as she comes closer and hugs me tightly. I let her comfort me, inhaling the sweet violet scent of her hair. I feel the tremble in her shoulders, and then I know she's crying. I try not to let the tears cloud my eyes. We've been friends all our lives, and one of us has to say goodbye forever to the other, even if she doesn't know about my definitive intentions. She won't receive my letters, because I'm so terrified of my fate that I plan to run from it like a coward.

"There, there..." I stroked her back in a soothing gesture.

"Everything will be fine, I'll write to you and tell you what my new home is like. It'll be like I'm here."

The lie tastes like ash.

She pulls away from me, unable to hold back the sob that escapes. I wipe the tears running down her cheeks with my

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thumbs and give her a small smile.

"I'll write you so many letters," she promises. "So many that you'll get tired of me."

"That's impossible."

"I'll tell you all about what I discover in my books, I'll tell you about Felippo and any other who comes around during our walks..."

"I want the wedding details with Felippo," I tease. "You're blushing again!"

"You're an idiot!"

She hugs me again and ends the farewell with a little wave of her hand and an exclamation.

"See you tomorrow!"

As she walks down the path, she turns to look back several times to see me, and I stay in place until her orange waves disappear.

I let out the air I was holding in my chest and collapsed to the ground, where the vegetation is dull and dry. I don't bother gathering my skirts—how dirty my dress gets no longer matters.

The sky slowly turns a dark blue and the only sounds accompanying me are the breeze, the moving water, and the treetops being shaken. The lake is at one end of the village, in the most uninhabited area. The first occupied house is probably hundreds of meters away. It's not proper for young ladies to come here, much less stay alone in such a remote and lonely place. My parents would not approve of this.

I kick off my round-toed shoes and then my tights. I feel the earth beneath my feet as I begin to walk toward the shore.

When the water touches my toes, a shiver runs through me

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that numbs my whole body. I take another step, and then another.

My body doesn't get used to the cold—the icy December water feels like hundreds of needles stabbing into me. As painful as it is, I won't stop. I have a goal and I'm not going to abandon it.

My chest protests as my shivering body presses the boning of my corset into me. I keep moving forward, the water covers me past my chest, and my teeth won't stop chattering. I can't feel my toes, and it's hard to move my hands. I keep advancing a little more, struggling to stay on the surface.

Each minute is like a grain falling from an hourglass, marking the countdown.

Little by little, my whole body goes numb, the cold clouds even my mind. Small clouds of breath escape my trembling lips.

There comes a moment when my feet feel so heavy that I stop moving them and remain still, letting my head sink, inch by inch.

Air rushes from me when I dive under. The shock of being fully in this cold water is brutal. The excess calm in it is even unsettling.

I sink slowly, suspended in the water, watching my hair float around me while neither my arms nor legs can make the effort to swim and rise to the surface. The cold stabs into me like ice stakes.

My chest protests. It burns, and I swear hands are pressing against it, compressing it.

I open my mouth involuntarily, searching for air and finding only water. I choke. A spasm shakes me, my vision blurs, and the weight of my body keeps dragging me deeper and



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deeper.

More spasms run through me, breaking the stillness of the water, and no matter how hard I try to move my arms, they don't respond.

Even if I want to die, the survival instinct is strong, but I remind myself over and over that this is what I want.

My vision turns treacherous, showing me what looks like a face that vanishes as quickly as I blink.

The edges of my vision go dark, like the borders of a photograph burning.

"You must live, you have to live..."

The words are whispered in the water.

"You have to live, you must live."

The weight of my eyelids gets heavier, and so does the feeling that something is coming toward me.

"This act of cowardice disappoints me."

Something in those words makes me seethe.

They pour into me like acid corroding my veins.

A wave of shame overwhelms me.

I can't do this. I can't do this to my parents. To my siblings.

The Libris isn't sealed—Silas will have to enter the Red Auction because of me. I can't condemn him to that—this is my burden, mine alone.

I try to open my eyes, to fight against the water, but it's too late.

No matter how hard I try, my body refuses to respond.

"Stupid girl."

Hysteria makes me open my mouth again, and water gushes into me, filling my lungs and silencing my screams.

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Hair crosses my vision, wraps around my neck like a noose.

I look up and all I see is black. I'm far from the surface.

That mysterious face is getting closer, closer, closer...

I lose consciousness momentarily and when I come to, my face is against the shore of the lake, stained with wet dirt.

My dress still floats in the water, and my legs are still numb.

I press my elbows into the earth to drag what's left of my body out of it.

My hands tremble, and when I glance at my fingers, I see they're purple.

I roll onto my back, with the sky growing darker and the moon more present.

My breathing isn't normal—it's ragged, and my chest makes sounds of agony.

I try to bring my hands up to my mouth to try and warm them.

My legs don't obey my commands, and my feet are a purplish hue.

The breeze shakes the treetops, and with it, a new whisper reaches me.



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