

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Sara (August 2008)**

"50... 49... 48..."

As her sister began the countdown, Sara looked around frantically... *Where can I hide?* she thought.

The first place her sister would look was the attic, their favorite part of their grandparents' house. As Sara thought about a hiding place, her mind wandered to all those old objects they used to play with and let their imaginations run wild - the old China, with which they pretended to have a tea ceremony like high society ladies, their mom's old school books, used to play school, and that dusty old sofa where they would curl up to read their uncle's comics... *Dylan Dog*, "the nightmare investigator."

The ten-year-old twins knew their mother would disapprove of their reading material, likely intended for a more adult audience, like their twenty-five-year-old uncle, who had recently stored those comics in the attic. However, they were not easily frightened by horror or paranormal stories and maintained an unshakable belief that ghosts, monsters, and the like did not exist. Avid readers since childhood, they had always known how to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Even as children, when they read stories like *Alice in Wonderland*, they never deluded themselves into believing in the existence of secret worlds or magical characters. They were too quick and intelligent to believe in fairy tales.

"37... 36... 35..."

Her sister's voice, busy with the counting, brought her back from her ever-drifting thoughts. She had to find a new hiding place. Sara decided she wouldn't be found so easily this time. She decided to go down to the ground floor, where among her grandfather's tools, the chicken feed sacks and the cheese-aging cellar, there were certainly plenty of good hiding spots. She opted to curl up behind the demijohns<sup>1</sup> of her grandfather's homemade wine, where the dim afternoon light barely reached.

But suddenly, she changed her mind. In a corner near the door, leaning against the wall, lay her uncle's fishing rods. Her mind immediately turned to the river, as the land behind the house bordered the watercourse. She just needed to cross her grandfather's vineyards and go down slightly to reach it. Her sister would take a long time to find her there.

As soon as she reached the river, she began to look around: numerous rocks jutted out in the water, and she was used to jumping from one to another to cross. Often their uncle would take his nieces with him during his fishing sessions.

Right before her, on the opposite bank, she spotted a huge rock— the perfect hiding place.

That day, the wind was blowing strongly, the water

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<sup>1</sup> *Demijohn* is a large glass bottle used for fermenting and storing wine, often encased in wicker or plastic for protection. It's very common in Italian households and wineries.

was flowing more forcefully than usual, crashing hard among the stones.

Sara noticed that the rocks were wet and, wearing ballet flats, she risked slipping. The water was quite shallow at that point, but if she got wet... she could already hear her mother's scolding.

She looked around for another hiding place but found nothing better: the perfect spot was right in front of her. She just had to cross the river to reach it. She quickly glanced at her watch—the one with the red rubber strap her uncle had given them both. Apart from that accessory, the two twins have little in common. Sara had light hair and blue eyes inherited from their mother, with sweet features, a preference for pink dresses and ballet flats that made her look like a doll. In contrast, her sister had their father's brown hair and eyes, a more angular face, and preferred to wear jeans and sneakers. Their personalities were also different. Despite appearances, sweet Sara was the real tomboy between them: adventurous and enterprising, she was always the one to get into trouble, while her sister, shyer and more introverted, was the wiser and more prudent of the two. Nevertheless, she accompanied Sara on her adventures and defended her in every situation, even taking the blame for Sara's outlandish ideas. She was only a few minutes older than Sara, yet she behaved like the older sister in every way.

By then, the countdown had almost certainly ended, and her sister was probably already looking for her in the attic.

*I still have a bit of time before she gets here*, she thought to herself.

About twenty meters to the left, Sara could see the small wooden bridge where the river widened, and the water became much deeper. Looking towards the bridge, she realized the water level was significantly higher than usual. After all, it was the first sunny day after a week of rain.

She decided to run quickly across the bridge and reach the rock before her sister could see her. As she approached the wooden bridge, she noticed the bubbling river below her, but armed with all her courage, she determinedly began to cross it. With each step, she felt the strength of the current and the wood vibrating under her feet. Then, in an instant, the bridge collapsed with a deafening crash, dragging her into the tumultuous dance of the rushing water.

Sara closed her eyes and immediately thought of her sister: *Look for me*, she whispered mentally as if she could somehow reach her telepathically. Then, all she heard was the roaring sound of the water before everything went quiet – devastatingly quiet – and black.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **Laura (July 2024)**

"Last night I dreamed I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while, I could not enter, for the way was barred to me..."

Laura closed her eyes for a moment... she could almost see the gate of Manderley. It was the third time she was rereading her favorite book: *Rebecca*, by Daphne du Maurier. For as long as she could remember, she had been an avid reader. Most of the books she had read as a girl came from the attic of her paternal grandparents' house in a small town in Veneto. Her mother, on the other hand, was from the Marche region but rarely returned to her parents' house. However, when Laura was about fifteen, her uncle visited them and, at her request, brought her some of the books her mother had read during pregnancy, including *Rebecca*.

Perhaps she had inherited her love of reading from her mother. Working in the small downtown bookstore, where the flow of customers was quite limited, she had plenty of time to read. She loved her job: the smell of books and the soft rustle of pages being turned.

At nineteen, Laura graduated from a Technical Economic Institute because her father, a steelworker for many years, was convinced that one day she could work as an employee at the same company. Although

she didn't particularly like accounting and economic subjects, she couldn't bear to disappoint her father's expectations because she was very attached to him.

Right after graduation, thanks to his recommendation, she was hired into the administration office of the steel mill, where she performed tasks she found boring and repetitive, such as recording invoices and printing delivery documents. However, her job there did not last long.

Just one year after being hired, a terrible accident at work claimed the life of her father, who was only forty-five, from the burns he sustained when a ladle full of molten steel overturned.

Five years later, the trial ruled that the tragedy had been a terrible misfortune and that no one could be held responsible. Although Laura and her mother received a large settlement, the money couldn't ease the pain of their tragic and premature loss.

Immersed in her reading, Laura heard Carla enter through the back door, which led to a small courtyard.

"Good morning, Laura!" she said cheerfully. "How's the day going?"

"Just a couple of customers here and there," she replied. Carla shrugged. The bookstore was more of a pastime than a job for her, as she had inherited it from her father and kept it open for the few loyal customers.

Although the income was barely enough to cover expenses, Carla valued the shop deeply. She was a

retired teacher, and Laura had started working there as a volunteer six years earlier, after leaving the job at the steel mill, to immerse herself in books whenever painful memories resurfaced.

Carla approached her, waving a festival flyer in front of her eyes. The event would take place in town the following month. The big news of the event was the arrival, for the occasion, of the antique horse carousel, a splendid merry-go-round dating back to the nineteenth century.

"Thought this might interest you," Carla said with a smirk, handing Laura the flyer.

Laura smiled, fascinated by the idea of seeing such an old and evocative carousel. Although the bookstore was a refuge for her, the idea of attending such a special event thrilled her. She loved the idea the city was organizing something so unique and exciting, and she couldn't wait to attend the festival and admire the horse carousel in all its splendor.