
Chapter 1

Dear Diary,

I am told this is the last time I will ever have to write to you. Yesterday was my last day of career school. After today, I will no longer be an object of study for the psychologists at Fraiberg. I will be just another eighteen-year-old graduate, waiting in line for my turn at the Assignment Ceremony. Waiting to see if my calling belongs with the self-reliant thinkers in One, or the loving homemakers in Two.

I bet you can guess what last night's dreams were about, but just like every other night, I'll tell them to you anyway. A crowd of strangers, a rusty platform, a dangling chandelier over my head. Noah watches me from the audience, his fingers laced together instead of entwined with my own. Harmony and Melody already stand among a circle of Twos, rejoicing that their life as sisters has been allowed to continue.

I raise my hand to the level of my eyes, peering through bright lights. There she is, Violet, clutching Mom's wrist and whispering to herself. Could she be praying? It isn't like Violet to believe in that which she cannot see.

I take two steps closer to the edge of the platform, and the light goes out. Through the darkness, I glance from left to right, from the comfort and safety of the Village to the isolation of the Fray. I can't make out the bodies, but I know what it means when an invisible hand to my right holds up a red sparkler to the sky.

My sister, a Two. Harmony and Melody and Dawn, all Twos. Noah, an only child—one of the rarest breeds in Cerenia—fated for life as a Two.

I am a One.

I know that dreams are not reality, Diary, but can they ever be omnipotent?

I have always looked to them for knowledge. But today, I can only hope that they are made from fear.

The Fondest of Goodbyes,

Phoebe Ray

I wrap my silver moon journal in thread, binding the wrinkled pages worn from opening and closing once a night for eighteen years. My name is scrawled across the front in my mother's neat handwriting, and a twinge in my gut recalls her face in my dream.

I could never leave them.

But today, I might have to.

Crawling out of bed, I pull on a yellow sundress—my assignment outfit—and pin my long hair back into a bun. A few strands fly out of place the moment I let down my hands, but I leave them be, knowing this will give Mom the excuse to play with my hair for what might be the last time.

“Phoebe!” her voice beckons. “Are you up?”

“Yes!” I shout back, not worrying about the possibility of awakening my siblings. Three years ago, I would have tiptoed down the stairs, wincing at every creak in the wood. But that was before Milo and Violet turned eighteen.

There is something equally thrilling and dreadful about becoming an adult.

Before leaving the room I turn around, taking in the strange triangular shape, the yellow walls, the daffodils on the windows. Bright colors are an integral part of our lives in the Village. I wonder if all of Cerenia follows the same code.

“Phoebe,” Mom greets me as I enter the family room. Her eyes wear bags the size of golf balls, and I wonder what her dream diaries would reveal, if she were still under Fraiberg’s gaze.

“Hi, Mom,” I smile back. The effort makes the corners of my mouth hurt, but I’m used to this. Since birth, I have been raised under the same principle that has governed this city for sixty-one years: smile, or they’ll think you’re up to something.

“Today, you can call me Irene,” my mom replies, and I can tell that it’s hurting her, too. “Your father’s gone to fetch Violet. They’ll meet us at the Hub.”

I nod my head, trying not to cry as she moves to tuck the defiant strands behind my ear.

The dream meant nothing, I tell myself. Milo is already a One. Vi is already a Two. I’m in the best position I could be, short of having a choice.

As the word enters my brain, I shake my head, and the strands fall back out of place. Choice is not an option in Cerenia. There is only one subject on which we ever have a choice.

It didn’t used to be this way. My great-grandmother, now ninety-one, has stories of an older city where men and women could choose who to love, where to work, and what they wanted to become. They could travel to exotic destinations, make friends with people unlike themselves, and live in whatever city they desired. They could choose to pursue success, love, or both.

But when she was thirty, everything changed. A young man in his early twenties decided to place a bomb in the center of the city. His name was Atol. They say he was retaliating against his parents, absent for most of his childhood, who made him feel unworthy and unloved.

After that day, a new city was set forth on paper—Cerenia, a city of peace—built from the sweat and tears of hard workers, and the blood of the surviving families. And the ability to decide, undeniably, was stripped from our people.

When Atol attacked, the city realized that the biggest threat to our survival isn't foreign—it can come from inside the lines. His act of vengeance wiped out the city's transportation center, the bank, and the school, along with 40 percent of the population. Men, women, children, all suffered because of what Atol had done—and in the eyes of many, what his parents hadn't done.

Five years later, as Atol was executed, his parents were not seated in the audience, watching. They were already dead. By his hands or by someone else's, I'll never know, but Rosemary tells me that many people thought the city might be better off without any of them.

And so Cerenia came to be founded with one goal in mind: to build the city back up from within, relying on the greatest thinkers, inventors, entrepreneurs, and laborers to put in sixty-hour weeks for the common good. But Cerenia couldn't get by on just a temperate economy; it needed to rebuild its population. A new generation of peace-loving children with nothing but love for their city, and the wish to do right by it.

There couldn't be another Atol. From then on, all parents had to be present, involved, and dedicated to their child's well-being.

Hence, the Split-City system was created: the Ones would rebuild the economy, and the Twos would rebuild the population. The Ones would provide food, money and clothing to the Twos, who would then provide workers for the people in One.

Unfortunately, no matter which side of the split you land on, your life will inevitably involve sacrifice. Destined to spend their lives working for the sake of others, the Ones are unable to marry, have children, or live among the community. But they are also the fearless leaders of our city, viewed by all as more intelligent, gifted, and independent than any of the men or women in Two.

The Twos, prescribed to a life of marriage and child-rearing, are governed by their own rules. They must marry by the age of nineteen, and begin reproducing by the age of twenty. From that point on, their entire lives revolve around the children they bring into the world, and the not-far-off day when they must give them away.

It was my grandparents, Godfrey and Charity, who persuaded the Council to give all Twos a single opportunity to choose. My great-grandmother was already pregnant with Charity when Atol attacked, and her husband, a former doctor working his shift at the Hospital, died from the bombing. Rosemary, a school teacher, would have died too, if it weren't for the bouts of morning sickness that had kept her at home that day. She was spared, and for the next nine months, she continued to work long days while raising the child that she considered her little miracle.

Charity, my grandmother, was born during what Cerenia refers to as the "Rebirth Year," when our city picked itself up off the ground and began structuring a whole new society.

Charity and Godfrey were the test-tube children, the first generation to be raised into a peace-promoting, split-city world. And they were also the best behaved children Cerenia had ever seen, which Fraiberg took as proof of their psychological theory.

At eighteen years of age, Godfrey and Charity were assigned to remain Twos, and moved into shared living quarters within the burgeoning Village. Upon meeting, they immediately fell in love—but the Council had already paired them with other mates. Luckily, Rosemary was an adored member of the Old World, and many members of the Council still recalled her perseverance in raising Charity during the Rebirth Year. They agreed to allow the surprise love to foster, under one condition: Charity and Godfrey's children must prove to be more adept, well-mannered, and beneficial to Cerenia than any match-based couple's offspring.

It didn't take long for my mother, Irene, to change the Council's minds. Irene excelled in school, was adored by all, and there was more love in that household than in any other families of the Village. The Council readjusted, decreeing that one year would be allowed between the moment of assignment to Two and the wedding day for eligible young Twos to fall in love and choose each other.

At nineteen, my sister Violet is a Two. My brother, Milo, is a One.

And me?

Well, that depends on the results of my tests, compiled from fourteen years of schooling, and whatever inferences Fraiberg makes from the writings in my diaries. An institute of psychology, Fraiberg has the ultimate say in my fate, having invented the Split-City solution as a cure to the criminal youth problem.

They will decide if I am self-reliant or dependent; above- or below-average intelligence; talented or ungifted.

“Ready to go, sweetie?” my mom—er, Irene—asks me. I find that my tight grip on the dream diary has etched sharp lines in my palm.

I nod my head, unable to utter a response, when Felix trots out from his hiding place behind the couch and sniffs the air.

His back arches when he sees me, as if I’m a different person already. I’m worried he’s going to hiss at me, and I thank the veterinarian for insisting on de-clawing him before we brought him home last year.

Felix was a present for me after my sister left home. Irene and Asher were concerned about my mental health, so on the way home from the Assignment Ceremony, they stopped at a small brick building and instructed me to wait at the door. Moments later, Asher emerged carrying a fierce-looking tabby cat with gray stripes along her tail.

I was scared of him then, and I admit I am now, but careful observation lets me know that Felix is only stretching. He wanders up to me and places his paw on my yellow shoes, staring into my eyes, unblinking.

“You really think I would forget to say goodbye to you?” I sigh, scooping up the furry feline and handing Irene my diary.

Felix sniffs my collarbone, probably marveling at the scent of my perfume. I swear I see his nose wrinkle, and he springs from my arms to the arm of the couch.

“That bad, huh?” I ask him, giving myself a quick sniff. “I knew being an adult was going to stink.”

“Phoebes,” Irene whispers, motioning to the clock on the wall.

The Hub is only a five-minute walk from our house in the Village, but I can tell she's anxious to reunite with my dad, soon to be the only family member she'll have left under her roof.

We leave the diary in a box outside the door, where the emissaries will pick it up on their delivery routes. As Irene and I make our way to the Hub, I notice that our steps are perfectly in unison from years of walking to school and to the Sunday Meets.

Cerenia's golden rule for parents in Two: Never leave your child's side.

I smile wide, bearing all of my teeth. I am happy. I am happy. I am happy.

One of the consequences of a crazed lunatic blowing up your city: no one is happy. Years go by before anyone feels safe. Happiness has to be faked, encouraged, and enforced like a commandment.

As I walk the pebbled streets of my city, I wonder if anyone now has to fake it the way that I do. And then, I realize how silly I am to even question it. Of course they don't. What is there to be unhappy about, anyway? Nothing bad ever happens in Cerenia. There is never any bad news. Marriages last lifetimes, and never a second less. Death only occurs at the optimal time, in Elders who have given everything to Cerenia and accepted their final obligation to this city: to depart as fertilizer for the soil.

There is a reason this city has survived and flourished in the face of so much terror. We understand the rules. We value our commitments. We are not selfish.

Irene takes my hand as we cross the street, although no danger is present. We no longer have those racing boxes on wheels that my great-grandmother speaks so tartly of.

My mother holds my hand because she has been taught to do so. Or perhaps she longs for the closeness. I don't mind; I want it too.

We leave the circular design of the Village and enter the Hub—the center of life here in Cerenia. The better part of my childhood was spent between my home and the Hub, where my siblings and I attended three tiers of schooling: character-building school, ethic-developing school, and career school. Career school is of the most interest to Fraiberg—it separates the gifted ones from the indecisive. But there are exceptions.

As Irene waves at a blond-haired woman on her way to work in the Hub, I marvel at the fact that my mother wasn't made a One. The smartest in her class, she easily could have changed lives for the better in Cerenia by becoming one of the Council. Instead, she became a Two, no doubt because of her family's track record in producing valuable offspring.

Absalom, our Mayor, is also a Two. I remember when I first saw him speak at the fifty-year anniversary of the Rebirth Year. I was seven. Our entire city gathered at the steps of the Town Hall, where a man with dirty-blond hair wearing a finely pressed blue suit took the podium. Before he had even begun to speak, I felt enraptured by his smile—the crinkling of his eyes, the warmth of his gaze, even the soft-spoken nature of his voice seemed to touch my very bones.

Beside him stood a man with short black hair and a cavalier grin. With every word Absalom spoke, the man's lips moved silently and his eyes darted from left to right, as if he were reading from an invisible parchment. He matched Absalom's rhythm almost exactly.

It wasn't until later that night that Irene explained to me the nature of the Council and Mayor relations.

Absalom, our leader, was elected to be the face of Cerenia. His peaceful, loving nature, his mesmerizing voice, and his respect for family are just a few of the reasons why we have grown to trust this man. Even when the words he utters to hundreds of civilians are not his own, but those of his chief councilman, Cato.

We follow a pebbled path between the schoolhouse and the library, two of my favorite places to visit as a kid. The most beloved, not just for me but for all of Cerenia, would be the Lake—one of two sites where the Sunday Meets take place. Just once a week, all citizens of Cerenia are relieved from their duties (with the exception of the athletes, the officers, and the news reporters) to attend the greatest athletic spectacles this city has to offer.

From May to November, the Lake shimmers with life, and our athletes compete one-on-one in swimming meets and waterball matches. Then, from December to April, the games shift to the Diamond, where the athletes form two teams and compete in a game of batball. At the end of every meet, the first-place swimmer, volleyer, or team player, is awarded with the Mayor's Golden Dove, a statue of a bird that flutters from one household to another with each new victor, and hangs on the door for all to see. But win or lose, no one ever leaves the games empty-handed.

As we close in on the Mayor's house, the absolute center of our city, I wonder whether I will be attending the meets with my family as always, or sitting alone with the Ones, come next Sunday. But there's hardly any time to ponder this before the sight of Absalom quiets my nerves.

He stands outside the gates of his gorgeous three-story home, painted bright blue and surrounded by the prettiest flowers I have ever seen: roses, daisies, and yes, violets.

The sight makes me ache for my sister, who I haven't spoken to since her last Visiting Day, almost six months ago. While Twos are granted more leniency to pay visits to their former families, their first priority must always be the new seed.

"Mo—uh, Irene ... where is she?" I turn to my mother, but she has her eyes locked, like most, on our Mayor.

I sigh, but refuse to join the line of anxious citizens filing two at a time toward the gates. I can understand their excitement—Assignment Day is the one day a year that we are given free access to the Mayor's colossal home. But I have to wait for my sister.

She appears from the crowd, her brown hair longer than I remember, falling freely about her shoulders the way only Twos are allowed. Her cheeks are round and pink, and her eyes light up when she sees me. Normally a dark brown, they appear almost hazel in the late morning sun. As a kid, I was always jealous of her eyes—how they stood small and round in perfect symmetry against the smooth skin of her face, while my large brown eyes and pointed nose drew laughs from my classmates.

"Phoeb's!" she squeals, pulling me in for a hug. Our embrace is so tight, so desperate, that my arms go numb from the effort.

"Vi," I sigh into her ear. "You made it."

"Well of course," she grins, tucking another flying strand of hair behind my ear. "You better be a Two, sis, that's all I can say. With this hair, I don't think you'd make it as a One."

I know that so much more than hair styling is hidden in that comment, but I let her play with my curly brown locks for a moment longer, reminiscing on the days when we used to sit on our bedroom floor and give each other crazy hairdos.

Mom would laugh, shake her head, and pass us each a brush, and Dad—

“Hey, Sweetphee,” a male voice I know so well whispers in my ear, and I launch myself into his arms.

“What took you so long?” I demand after we’re through with the greetings.

“I had to drag your sister away from the farm,” he tells me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. We used to do this all the time when I was a little girl. Dad would put an arm over me and lean on me with all of his weight, and I would attempt to carry him across the family room. My dad was always impressed at how far I could make it before tiring out; he never stopped letting me know how strong he thought I was.

“What was she doing there?” I ask, looking at Violet. Her eyes look back at me, innocently.

“Running from her new husband.”

“Dad! I was not,” Violet pipes in, punching him in the shoulder. Dad fake-winces and begins massaging an absent bruise. “He’s really not that bad.”

“Then why were you kissing a cow when I came to get you?”

Irene and I can’t help it. We explode into laughter at the thought of my sister puckering up with a wet, pink snout.

“To be fair, the cow was a better kisser than Jude,” Violet pouts, and I tousle her hair.

“Why don’t you just pick someone else?” I ask her as we enter the gates of the Mayor’s house.

“I can’t. My year is up in two days. And so far, I haven’t been able to meet anyone in my building except for a cross-eyed genius who got stuck in Two by default, and a guy named Oliver who thinks the Village is his own personal playground ... and lavatory.”

I wrinkle my nose at the image and follow Irene and Asher through the doors. A sign pointing left, right, and center directs us to where we need to be. Our family pauses at the crossroad, and I feel the tingling sensation of goosebumps rising on my arms.

“So, no word from Milo, Dad?” I ask my father, who I refuse to call Asher by name because that would be just plain stupid, even if I am an “adult.”

“Don’t take it to heart, Sweetphee. He hasn’t spoken to any of us in years. I don’t even know if I got the address right when I sent him the invitation.”

“But some Ones come to the ceremony anyway, even if they don’t have family,” I remind him. “So he could still be here ... couldn’t he?”

Asher gives me a pat on the shoulder blade, and I send up a silent prayer that Absalom and Cato will not make me a One. But then I’m reminded of my dream last night, and I pull my sister in for another hug.

“No matter what happens,” I tell her, “we will not be separated. I won’t go a day apart from you.”

Her grip loosens on my back just a little, and although she barely raises her voice above a whisper, I can still make out her response. “That’s not for us to decide, Phoebes.”