

# CHAPTER I



“YOU NEED TO LEAVE.”

I can't seem to meet Mrs. Dean's glare as I maneuver around her stall. The soft tinkling of polished jewels follows in my wake, drowning the echo of her words in my head.

She crosses her withered arms over her chest, limp hair swinging to and fro as she nods toward the streets. Despite being so old—or perhaps *because* of it—she commands authority with every movement. She's my boss, after all. If she wants me to leave the jewelry shop, I can't very well refuse her orders.

But did I do something wrong? Why in the world would she fire me now, during the thick of the selling season? I glance back at her, wringing my hands.

I must look pitiful, because she shakes her head and sighs. “There simply isn't enough money to go around, girl. You know what the harvest has been like. When there's no food, no one wants to buy my jewelry, and I have six mouths to feed...”

I nod and silently grab my satchel, then head out of her jewelry stall and into the dusty streets. The hot summer sun weighs down on me, and sweat runs down my back. It isn't until I round the corner that I let my shoulders slump. The weight of the day's events hammers into my limp body, and I close my eyes.

A lump forms in my throat. With no job, I can't make good coin. With no money, my younger brother and I will starve. It's no secret that village orphans are destined for an early death.

I just hoped we could last a bit longer.

The smell of fried meats and boiled sweets hits my nose, and my stomach grumbles. Another reminder of my impending doom. I can't help but feel relieved that my brother isn't around. He would be whining for food right about now, and I hate having to refuse his eager demands.

As if on cue, a tuft of ginger curls rushes past me and into the thick of the crowded market.

"Thief!" someone yells. "Get him!"

My feet are moving before I can even register what's going on. I quicken my pace until my malnourished body screams in pain, looking frantically for the ginger curls I saw just moments before.

Distracted, I don't notice a fruit seller wheeling his cart out. But it's too late. I barrel right into the perfectly arranged mangoes, landing face-first in a pile of fresh grapes.

“S—sorry,” I manage to mumble before scrambling to my feet and ducking away.

I regain my momentum, chasing after my brother like my life depends on it. Perhaps it does. Who knows what he’s stolen?

Curse that troublemaker.

I catch a glimpse of ginger once more and pump my legs harder. I’m catching up with him! I run faster and faster, my entire body aching until we’re only a hair’s breadth apart. Then I grab him and pull him into a nearby alley. He tries to escape, but my grip is firm.

“What do you think,” I say, catching my breath, “you’re doing?”

“Mal, let me go!” He continues struggling in my hold, then lowers his voice. “If we stay here, they’ll catch us.”

Despite the secluded area we’re crouched in, he’s right. Anyone could find us.

Sweat runs down my face, stinging my eyes. I glare down at Baz. His freckled face, red hair, and tanned skin—similar to my own features—is full of youth and bright with innocence, though his brown eyes carry grim determination. He knows the punishment for stealing will be great, more so because of the shoddy harvest this year.

“What did you steal?” I whisper. He averts his eyes, his shoulders slumping. A sigh escapes my lips. “Come on, out with it.”

He opens his chubby fists to reveal a delicate silver chain. Attached is an ornate gem, as dark as the night sky itself. I gasp, first in awe of such a beautiful trinket...

And then in despair.

This is Mrs. Dean's craftsmanship. Having been employed by her for the past six months, I've come to recognize the elaborate grooves in her metalwork. I've also become familiar with her exorbitant prices, especially for such a lovely piece. The punishment for stealing this won't just be harsh—it might very well be our doom.

"Why?" I croak. He's never done something like this before. "Baz, why would you do this? You know how tight money is for Mrs. Dean."

His cheeks turn bright pink. "I'm sorry."

I cross my arms. "That's not an answer. You know this is going to get us in trouble—"

"It was for your birthday, all right?" If possible, his cheeks turn even redder. "I just wanted to get something nice for you, for once."

I'm stunned into silence. My sixteenth birthday is in two days, but I would never expect him to get me anything, let alone a piece of *jewelry*. We need food these days, not gems. I'd end up selling it anyway. But seeing the guilt and good intentions in his round eyes, I can't muster the energy to berate him.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't notice the sinister shadow fall across us. Slowly, I turn to see Mrs. Dean and a marshal at the alley entrance. My

heart jumps, and I place myself squarely between them and my brother.

“Well, look who we have here,” the marshal says. “You thievin’ orphans think you can get away with this?”

## CHAPTER 2



THE SHINY SILVER BUTTONS on the marshal's dark gray uniform stand out in the dust and dirt of the alley. His gleaming locks of black hair stick to his sweat-drenched face. And his tiny eyes, grim and devoid of compassion, zero in on my brother behind me and the necklace in his hand.

"I stole it." The lie spills out of my mouth smoothly. "I told him to take it and run, but my brother wasn't aware it was stolen. He merely obeyed my request. He didn't do anything wrong."

"Mal—" Baz tries to contradict me, but I turn and shoot him a look. Then I slip the jewelry out of his hand and kneel before the two adults before me, offering the chain.

"I deeply apologize. I'll take my punishment." I keep my head bowed and my hands raised as I speak. Mrs. Dean's worn leather flats come into view as she leans forward and retrieves her necklace. "Just spare my brother, please."

A note of desperation seeps into my voice. I withdraw my hands and raise my head ever so slightly, waiting.

After what seems like an eternity, the marshal clears his throat.

“Right,” the marshal says. “Off you go then, Mrs. Dean. I’ll handle these two troublemakers on my own.”

She looks like she wants to stay and defend me, but defying a marshal’s command is as good as signing your own death certificate. She backs away out of the alleyway, clutching the silvery chain. I catch her gaze, and for a moment I feel like I’m drowning in the pity filling her eyes.

“Mala is a good girl. I’m sure she has her reasons...” she whispers. Her voice breaks a little. “Thank you, Officer.” She turns and leaves.

I start to stand, but the marshal’s hand lands hard on my cheek. I fall backward, my elbow landing hard on the ground. My cheek stings with both the harshness of the blow and the burn of embarrassment.

He heaves me up to my feet and marches out of the alley, keeping a harsh grip on my arm. It takes me only a few moments to orient myself and realize where we’re headed—the town square. My stomach clenches. The town square, where the flogging post is.

I glance back at my brother, who’s following us closely. His eyes tear up. If I am really about to get

flogged, I don't want him to witness it. And if I'm too weak to get up afterward, I don't want him to be alone at night.

"Baz," I whisper. "Go to Old Yelena's hut. If I don't join you by nightfall, ask if you can sleep there." When he hesitates, I sharpen my tone. "Now!"

He nods, sniffing, and makes his way in the opposite direction toward the forest.

Old Yelena has a soft spot for Baz—she'll let him stay the night for sure. Whether or not I'll be able to join them is a different question. I shudder, dreading the pain to come.

The marshal increases his pace, lugging me down roughly to the center of the town square. A crowd is already gathered, curious to see who's committed such a dastardly crime. A collective sigh of relief ripples through the crowd when they spot me. *Of course*, they're probably thinking. *It's just that dirty orphan girl. Not someone I care about.*

It takes the marshal only moments to erect the flogging post. It's an ugly wooden thing, rickety and stained with age. Two holes at the top are designed to hold the criminal in place so they can't run when the whip crashes down on them. I shiver. In a few moments, that will be me.

My stomach heaves as the marshal drags me in front of the two holes and pulls my arms through each hole. My shoulder protests this rough treatment. But he doesn't do it sadistically—no,



to him, this is a chore, like cleaning a trough or organizing market produce.

He leaves, and I try to twist around to see where he's going. But the movement makes my shoulder throb in pain, so eventually I give up. Before me, the crowd grows larger until I'm surrounded on all sides, and someone throws a pebble at me. It grazes my cheek, and I flinch.

"Filthy thief!" someone yells.

There's a shift in the crowd, and their gazes turn to something behind me. The marshal must be back. I break into a cold sweat at the thought of being in such excruciating pain in front of all of these people. I bite my lip and hope I don't end up a wailing mess by the end of this.

In the distance, I spot Mrs. Dean. A strange look gleams in her eye. Guilt, perhaps? She meets my eyes, frowning

*Please, I think. Please, please, please.*

But she doesn't come over. I guess I can't blame her; she'll be putting herself and her reputation in harm's way to protect me. Her children will suffer from her actions as well.

I know it's futile, but still, I struggle against the wooden structure surrounding me. Splinters cut into my wrists. Tears form in my eyes. As I blink them away, I spot something black swirling around my hands. Smoke? But when my vision clears, it's gone.

A clamor rises above the din of the crowd. Has something fallen? I crane my neck but fail to see anything beyond the swell of people before me.

“Oh, no!” someone cries out.

“Is that Mrs. Dean?” another says.

A stout woman at the head of the crowd gasps. “First, her craftsmanship is stolen, now this?”

What’s happened to Mrs. Dean? My heart sinks, fearing the worst. Is she injured?

The marshal steps into my view, clearing a path in the crowd so he can assess the situation. As the crowd parts, I glimpse the scene beyond—Mrs. Dean’s stall is tipped over so her jewelry is buried in the dirt and muck. A few sneaky children have already slipped away some of her pieces. When I finally see her beside her destroyed work, she turns to face me.

And winks.

As the marshal clears the commotion, I feel my entire body shaking. Did she cause this disaster on purpose? But why? The marshal will come right back and continue where he left off in a few moments.

Sure enough, it’s only minutes later when the marshal manages to catch one of the thieves, a surly boy of about my age. He rights the stall and consoles Mrs. Dean, then heads back toward me with the boy in tow.

As the marshal ties him to another post opposite me, the boy glances at me. A flicker of terror reaches

his eyes. Of course, who wouldn't be scared of the contraption I'm tethered to?

And then the marshal turns to me. He takes hold of his leather strap, stretching it between his hands. I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the sting of the lashes, the sting of embarrassment, the sting of tears in my eyes.

But it never comes.

Instead, a weathered voice rises above the crowd. It snakes down the square, around the flogging post, and into the marshal's ears.

"Stop!" the voice says. "Stop this nonsense right now!"

Once again, the crowd parts, and a withered woman makes her way toward the center of the square.

Old Yelena has arrived.