

# SEVEN MINUTES

Written by Chiara Cacco

## The Final Tunnel

A dark tunnel.

A point of light at the end.

It draws me in like a siren's song.

So is that really how it happens?

Is it truly that simple and terrifying, in its banality?

All that's missing is an announcement over the loudspeaker.

*Ding dong.*

*Welcome aboard, Cleo.*

*The captain and his crew welcome you to the Final Tunnel.*

*Please fasten your seatbelt, make sure the tray table in front of you is stowed, and ensure your seat is in the upright position.*

*You will soon collide with the Great Light.*

*Have a good trip, and thank you for having been in this world.*

I'd almost laugh.

If it weren't for the fact that I'm dying.

How did I end up here?

I try to remember as I accelerate toward that blinding circle.

My eyes don't burn, though.

It's exactly as they describe it, the Light.

Warm. All-encompassing. Enveloping.

Alive.

A radiant target that seems to be speaking to me.

*Come, Cleo. You'll be okay, Cleo.*

I stretch out my arms. I extend my fingers.

I feel my body transforming, my mind unveiling itself.

I'm about to merge with the Light. Soon I'll be Light.

When...

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR... sharp blows to my chest.

They push me backward.

One after another.

FIVE

SIX

SEVEN

Backward. Again and again and again.

EIGHT

NINE

TEN

I spit out water.

I gasp for air.

The light is now just a pinprick.

THUMP

THUMP

THUMP

Darkness.

## **FIRST PART**

### **Awareness**

## Chaper 1

### Like fireflies in the dark

Submerged in the misty sea that lies between sleep and wakefulness, I drift among the waves of a dream that's about to slip away from me.

*Will you remember this, Cleo, once you're back in the world of the living?*

I hope not. The Final Gallery wasn't bad, but I'd rather forget it. Thanks anyway.

*Come on, open your eyes, Cleo.*

The voice speaking to me takes on a familiar tone. Mom?

*You can't sleep forever, Cleo.*

Okay, all right, all right, I'll open them now.

But my eyelids feel as heavy as bags of cement.

*Come on, just a little effort. First one, then the other.*

I get it! Give me a moment!

The dark waters fade, my body regains its shape: my feet, calves, thighs, hands, my right cheek pressed against something cold and hard.

Isn't a pillow supposed to be soft?

I open my eyes wide. I'm sitting with my arms dangling, my face resting on a table covered with white tiles, interspersed with thin gray grout lines. Straight ahead of me is a wall with a long rectangular window, beyond which I can make out a stretch of sky, dark as a sea of ink.

Welcome, Cleo.

The voice is now behind me. Authoritative and gentle, with that slight Roman accent that won us all over from day one. But it's...

"Yes, it's me."

I jump to my feet and turn around.

Professor D'Angelo, wearing one of his many dark turtlenecks, is leaning against the wall next to the door of a place I know well. The metal cabinets, with microscopes and test tubes neatly arranged on the shelves; the large interactive whiteboard on the right wall, the slate board on the left; the tiled tables; and, in one corner, the lopsided skeleton that my class has nicknamed Mr. Bones. There's no doubt about it: I'm in my high school's science classroom.

But. "What's going on? What am I doing here? Did I fall? Did I hit my head?"

"Calm down, Cleo," he replies, adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses.

My heart, on the other hand, is racing like a galloping horse while my brain recaps the essential facts: I'm Cleo Lorus, seventeen years old, living with my mother in Vallette, on the northwestern outskirts of Turin. Today is June 25, 2023 (at least I think so).

Okay, so far so good. But how did I end up at school? My jumbled memories won't play back.

"What a pretty dress, Cleo, it really suits you," the teacher comments, glancing at me.

I lower my eyes and realize: I'm wearing a black floral sheath dress and flat gold sandals. Why am I dressed like this? I always come to school in jeans and sneakers. Or straight in a tracksuit if I have practice in the afternoon—track and field, specializing in the 1,000-meter dash.

"The Feast of St. John. Yesterday was June 24," I say without even realizing it. "Anna and I went to see the fireworks at OndaBlu. I bought this dress at the stalls just for the occasion."

The teacher nods.

Okay, OndaBlu. I was there last night. But why am I here now?

I close my eyes. I take a deep breath. I focus. I breathe in again.

And it happens: fragments of memory flicker like fireflies in the dark.

Bye, Mom, I'm heading out.

Anna is waiting for me in front of the OndaBlu entrance. She looks upset: Joe stood her up.

And Ricky? Is Ricky coming?

Friends, music, drinks, laughter.

Me, still keeping an eye on the entrance: is Ricky coming? Does he think I'm a sure thing?

Eight o'clock, eight-thirty, nine, ten. Ten twenty.

Me slipping away without Anna noticing.

The paved path leading from the kiosk to the pool, the little gate with the sign that says "NO TRESPASSING." I don't care. I walk right past it.

The deserted pool surrounded by folded-up lounge chairs.

The bass from the music in the distance.

The diving board. I climb up onto it, sit on the edge, and look down.

The water is an onyx mirror reflecting only a motionless sliver of moonlight, until a thousand flashes explode in the darkness: the fireworks.

It's 10:30.

Ricky didn't show up, and I don't even lift my head: I watch them swirl, like rainbows fading on the water's surface.

There I am, suspended, contemplating that spectacle of lights.

Until...

I widen my eyes, gasping for breath as if I'd been holding it in for a lifetime.

The professor has his back to me, standing at the window. Through the glass, in the black sky, I now see the same crescent moon I'd just seen in my memories.

A chill envelops me. The little dress I'm wearing is now soaked; my hair is dripping onto my shoulders and forehead.

"You fell into the water," says the professor.

"Yeah," I reply. "And I can't swim."