

Section 1

Chapter 1

“Annie? Annie...where are you?”

Full of anguish, Candy ran down Pony’s Hill and almost bumped into Sister Lane in front of the pile of firewood.

“Oh, Candy, did you find Annie?”

“She’s nowhere, Sister Lane...Not even on Pony’s Hill.”

“What are we going to do? The time of her departure is approaching. Where did she go?”

With a perplexed expression, Sister Lane looked all around her.

“Don’t worry, Sister Lane. I’ll find her no matter what! When we play hide and seek, I always manage to find everyone, right?” said Candy with all the vivacity she could muster.

After her attempt to comfort the nun, she started running again. She hadn’t gone to the chicken coop yet.

She had to find her quickly, otherwise Mr. and Mrs. Brighton might think that Annie had changed her mind. If they left without adopting her...

Your wish is finally granted, Annie...You’re going to have a father and a mother, and the Brightons are such lovely people...

It was about an hour ago. When Mr. and Mrs. Brighton came to pick her up, Annie looked so happy and smiling in the new dress they had given her, light blue as the morning sky. But as the hour of her departure was approaching, she had suddenly hidden herself.

Annie, don’t you want to be adopted anymore?

As she headed to the chicken coop, Candy cherished a hope she hardly dared to express.

Actually, for her, to be separated from Annie was heartbreaking, like giving up half of her body.

She had known Annie since she was a baby, and from that moment, during the six years of their young lives, they had never left each other. Annie, the crybaby...She was following Candy all the time.

If we don’t find Annie and Mr. and Mrs. Brighton give up the idea of adopting her, then we’ll stay together forever...

Candy immediately drove that thought away.

No, no, Candy! If Annie was hidden, it’s just because of her character; always a crybaby, a fragile little girl. Candy, you know better than anyone how much Annie wants to have a father and a mother!

“Yes, yes, I know that very well!”

Candy nodded with conviction in front of the chickens which were looking at her, shaking their heads and clucking, and then she left the chicken coop.

Annie was nowhere; she was neither in the chicken coop nor in the old barn.

Where could she be hiding? The only place Candy could still think of was the forest. But how could she imagine Annie had gone to hide there alone, since she was so fearful?

One never knows...Even so, I'm going to take a look.

Candy started running towards the forest that extended behind Pony's Home.

She ran desperately, in the dim light among the trees, under the rays of the sun that filtered through the branches.

She had to find her as soon as possible.

"Annie! Answer me, Annie!"

The birds, frightened by Candy's worried voice, flew away flapping their wings loudly.

The little girl was running at full speed. The dead branches were crackling under her feet.

That was when she stopped short. For a moment, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a light blue glow moving at some distance, behind the dark trees.

Candy took a deep breath and started running again in the direction of the moss-covered trees.

Annie was there.

Crouched at the foot of a large tree and exposed to the sunlight that filtered through the branches, she was crying with small sobs.

"Annie...I found you!"

Relieved, Candy spoke to her as cheerfully as possible. Annie looked up at her with tears sparkling in her eyes.

"Oh, Candy..."

"I was worried about you...But anyway, Annie, what happened to you?"

Candy had spoken to her as merrily as she could, but the tears kept flowing from her friend's eyes.

"Candy...I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to be separated from you."

"What are you talking about, Annie? You'll finally have a father and a mother, and they're lovely!"

"But I'm so afraid..."

Her long brown hair was shining. Candy sat beside her friend.

The forest usually frightened her. She must have been really very confused to venture so far.

Her heart must be breaking, torn between anguish and the hope which the prospect of a new life could bring her.

Candy smiled and brought her face closer to Annie's.

"You're afraid? Of what? From what I've seen, the Brightons don't really look like count Dracula!"

Candy started squinting, showing her teeth and making facial expressions.

"Candy..."

Annie finally gave a little laugh, even though she continued wiping her tears.

"That's it, Annie! You have to laugh! Today you're going to be happy!"

And the little girl helped her friend get up.

Then she removed with the back of her hand a few leaves that had stuck on her blue dress.

"If you want to know the truth, I would be very annoyed if you weren't adopted by the Brightons. I remind you that you have promised to invite me to your new house! Your large mansion will have dozens of bedrooms, and for dinner there will be a banquet such as nobody has ever seen before, right? I'm looking forward to your invitation, Miss Annie Brighton!"

"That's true, Candy; I'll be a young lady and live in a mansion..."

Annie's eyes, still wet, were shining now with a dreamy look.

"Come on, let's go! Annie! Your father and mother are waiting for you."

Annie turned her smiling face towards her and nodded.

While they were running through the forest, hand in hand, Candy was trying hard to hold back her tears. Her friend's hand was so warm... They would never run together again as they were doing that moment.

But she mustn't cry. She had to say goodbye to Annie with a smile. A life of happiness awaited her now...

A little later, the rest of the children of Pony's Home had gathered there. Everyone was trying not to show their feelings.

At the moment of their friend's departure, they surrounded the carriage of the Brightons which was drawn by two horses and in which Annie had already taken her place. All remained silent, with their heads lowered, without getting too close.

Candy finally decided to run to the carriage and saw again two big tears in her friend's eyes.

"Annie! We said we wouldn't cry anymore."

Candy did her favorite trick: she wagged her eyebrows convulsively up and down. A smile appeared immediately on Annie's lips.

Mr. and Mrs. Brighton said their goodbyes to Miss Pony and Sister Lane, and then they got into the carriage. Immediately the coachman pulled the reins to make the horses move.

Sister Lane suddenly approached, as if to detain him a little longer.

“Annie, be careful what you eat; your stomach is so sensitive,” she cried, but her words choked in her throat.

“I’ll always be praying for you,” cried Miss Pony too behind Sister Lane.

She was also smiling and nodding.

Annie couldn’t bear it any longer and burst into tears.

“Miss Pony...Candy...All of you...”

The sobs didn’t let her finish her sentence. Mrs. Brighton gently put her arm around her shoulders and pulled her towards her.

The carriage gradually gained speed.

“Goodbye, Annie!”

“Take care!”

The children finally stopped being silent, and began bidding farewell to their friend, following her as far as possible. Annie looked up with her face wet with tears and turned around.

Candy thought she saw her friend’s lips pronouncing her name. Unable to emit the slightest sound, she remained motionless, watching her as she was moving further and further away.

That moment she couldn’t run after the carriage as the other children had done.

When the horses were about to disappear, Candy ran like the wind towards the tallest oak tree of Pony’s Home. Its branches were just beginning to sprout. She climbed the tree as quickly as possible, without thinking at all.

“Candy, no...Come down!” cried Sister Lane in surprise.

“Sister Lane! I can still see Annie’s carriage from here,” said Candy from her high perch. “Annie! Be happy! I’m looking forward to your invitation!”

“Candy, don’t wave your hand so much! Don’t let go of that branch!”

Sister Lane was about to get angry, but Miss Pony gently put a hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s leave her alone today. Of all of us, she is the one who must be suffering the most.”

“Yes, indeed, Miss Pony.”

Sister Lane wiped away her tears and looked up at Candy.

She was sitting quietly on a big branch with her gaze lost in the distance.

Miss Pony also looked up at the top of the oak tree and murmured:

“I would rather congratulate her. Since Annie’s adoption was decided, not once did she admit to us that she was sad or that she would miss

her friend.”

“Indeed. To think that both came here on the same day. I wish Candy could be just as fortunate...”

Sister Lane recalled that day of May.

It was six years ago, a beautiful sunny day.

A gentle breeze was blowing; the white petals of the full-bloomed hawthorns which were planted by the roadside were flying in the wind and all seemed to point in the same direction.

In front of Pony’s Home, a baby was crying at the top of its lungs. It was kicking vigorously in an old wicker basket. It was bawling so loud that one would have sworn that those cries managed to scatter the hawthorn petals.

The orphanage was run as best as possible by two nuns. Babies were often abandoned in front of that building which was attached to a small wooden church.

“Well, today is the day of little girls,” remarked Miss Pony, exchanging a look with Sister Lane.

Those words didn’t prevent her in any way from affectionately lifting the baby girl, wrapped up in an old towel. She kept crying with both arms outstretched.

“Look, Sister Lane, she has already stopped crying. Why, she’s smiling...”

Miss Pony entered the house with the baby in her arms. Then she bent over another baby who was sleeping peacefully in a modest cradle.

“Well, you were abandoned on the same day. It’s as if you were sisters. So, what names are we going to give you?”

The first baby had been left in front of Pony’s Home just two hours earlier.

It was Annie.

“You are a nice little girl...And you, well, let’s say you have so much vitality! Sister Lane, I have the impression we’re going to have a lot of trouble with this one.”

While saying that, chubby Miss Pony couldn’t help smiling at the baby who immediately smiled back at her.

“Both are six years old now...I’m glad they are so healthy.”

“Certainly. I would even say a little too healthy, as far as Candy is concerned.”

Miss Pony, standing next to Sister Lane, looked up at Candy, still perched on the oak tree.

“Indeed, Miss Pony. When she was still a baby, her skin was as white as snow. That’s why we gave her the name Candice White. But now

look at her tanned complexion...”

Miss Pony and Sister Lane didn't leave until they saw Candy coming down from the tree safe and sound. They were going back to Pony's Home when Mike, who was always snitching on his comrades, caught up with them screaming.

“Miss Pony! Miss Pony!”

“What's the matter, Mike?”

“Sister Lane, it's Candy's turn to clean up the chicken coop, and she didn't do it! She has gone to the hill. Look, over there!”

Miss Pony and Sister Lane turned towards the direction pointed out by Mike. They actually saw Candy's silhouette running away at full speed.

The two women exchanged a look. They were thinking exactly the same thing.

“You're going to scold her, huh?”

Neither Miss Pony nor Sister Lane answered him. Mike pouted, annoyed.

Candy had just said goodbye to Annie. Normally, separations at Pony's Home were nothing special; they happened all year round.

And the children moved so easily from one feeling to another.

But not Candy...

No, they couldn't scold her. She had never cried...How hard it must have been to contain all that sadness in such a small body!

Even at that moment, Candy seemed to be climbing the hill with a joyful bounce.

Chapter 2

Candy ran up Pony's Hill in one go and collapsed into the verdure. The smell of the grass that began to grow was tickling her nose. She turned and looked up at the sky. It had a blinding blue color. A white cloud seemed to be gliding on it. Little by little, it took the shape of the horse-drawn carriage in which Annie was seated.

Annie's carriage had become smaller and smaller, and had eventually disappeared far away.

Had she stopped crying? Candy still had that image in her mind: Annie sitting in the carriage, with her head lowered, between kind Mr. and Mrs. Brighton. Afraid that the image would fade with the slightest blink of her eyelids, Candy forced herself to keep her eyes wide open.

"You are really gone, Annie," she said in a low voice.

Immediately, all the emotions she had contained until then were released, and her eyes became wet.

Annie would live in Chicago now. It was the first time Candy had ever heard the name of that city. It seemed so far away, as if it were in a foreign country.

"Soon the hill will be covered with flowers but we'll no longer pick them up together...We'll no longer play, or swim in the river, or go fishing..."

The memories of the countless days she had spent with Annie passed before her, one after the other.

The day they had decided to name that place "Pony's Hill" while they were weaving wreaths of buttercups.

They had plucked the petals of daisies trying to guess their fate.

"One day a father and a mother will come and take me, they will not, they will come, they will not..."

Annie had been abandoned the same day with her. Therefore, Annie had been like a real sister to Candy. They had been together all the time, whatever they did. Annie, the fearful, the crybaby...

"Annie...From now on I won't be able to help you if the others are mean to you."

Candy was startled by her own words and wiped away her tears.

She didn't need to worry about her friend anymore. Now she had a father and a mother who were absolutely perfect.

"What am I saying? I am the one who is in trouble. I've lost the one who always apologized for my mischief..."

Indeed, Annie had always defended Candy.

"Miss Pony, don't scold Candy; forgive her, I beg you..."

Every time Candy's pranks were discovered, or whenever she was too

naughty, Annie cried and begged Miss Pony and Sister Lane not to reprimand her. How many times she had escaped punishment or a well-deserved scolding thanks to Annie...

Yes, contrary to what one might have thought, it was perhaps Annie who helped Candy most of the time.

“What am I going to do without her? It scares me.”

Candy stood up and rubbed her eyes vigorously with the palms of her hands. But to no avail; the tears wouldn't stop. She tried to hold her breath in order to keep the tears from flowing, but she had to admit that it was not working.

Oh, I'm getting tired of that! I believe I've shed a lot of tears. If I go back looking like this, Miss Pony and Sister Lane will wonder what happened to me. Oh, also I'm supposed to clean the chicken coop today... Well, I just have to cry once and for all, and be done with it!

As soon as she said that, Candy gathered all her strength in the pit of her stomach so that she would have a good cry.

Her screams made it sound more real.

But the echo of her own crying that resounded in the surroundings had the effect of stopping her tears. Actually, it was rather funny. It began to amuse her.

It sounds like the howling of a hungry wolf.

Involuntarily, she laughed softly.

“That's it, little girl; you are prettier when you smile.”

A gentle voice suddenly reached Candy's ears. She looked up in surprise. A boy in a strange outfit was standing out against the blue sky and was looking at her, smiling. He was carrying a peculiar object over his shoulder. She vaguely remembered she had already seen that in an illustrated encyclopedia. The little girl blinked her eyes.

That boy must have fallen from the sky...

“Who are you? Are you a Martian maybe?” murmured Candy, looking at him with her big round eyes.

He burst out laughing.

“You are a funny little girl. To tell you the truth, I think I'm still a human!”

“Well...if you are a boy, why are you wearing a skirt?”

“This is not a skirt. It is called a kilt, and it is the traditional costume of Scotland.”

“A kit from sutland...”

She had never heard those words before. The boy laughed again.

“A kilt, a kilt! It comes from Scotland! And this is a bagpipe. It's a musical instrument. I'll show you how we play it.”

Candy remained speechless. Looking at her with an amused air, the boy brought the bagpipe to his mouth.

Suddenly, some strange sounds came out. Candy jumped up.

“Oh! That sounds like a parade of snails climbing up a wall!”

The boy almost choked with laughter, prematurely ending the “parade of snails”.

“You are really a funny little girl!”

The boy had a radiant smile. A lock of his blond hair shone as it fell on his forehead. His tender blue eyes were like the clear sky of that day.

Candy immediately felt that she could tell him anything, even though she had just met him.

“Where do you come from? My name is Candy. Do you see the small church over there? That’s ‘Pony’s Home’. It’s very small but it’s a church and an orphanage too. We also teach the village children to read and write. Miss Pony is the chubby one and Sister Lane is the skinny one, and I live...”

Candy spoke without stopping, pointing at the foot of the hill. She turned and cried in surprise.

The boy was no longer there.

“He disappeared...”

Candy looked around her, stunned.

Nobody was there.

He had disappeared as he had appeared...Just like that, without warning...

Was it a dream?

No, it was not a dream.

“Little girl, you are prettier when you smile.”

The boy’s voice was still echoing very distinctly in her ears.

“He looked like a prince...” murmured Candy.

That moment, something sparkling at her feet caught her eye.

Through the grass, she discovered a silver badge in the shape of an eagle with spread wings, under which a little bell was attached.

“It seems my prince has lost something...”

Candy picked up the badge and smiled. That object was delicately crafted. It must have had a special meaning, maybe even a great value.

“I must give it back to him. Will I see him again tomorrow?”

That sweet hope which had just been born...It was like a diffuse light that had crept into her heart; as if a gentle breeze were starting to blow inside her.

Prince on the Hill was such a charming boy...I’ll talk more to him tomorrow...If I see him.

And yet...

The next day, the day after that and all the following days, Candy took the habit of climbing faithfully to the top of Pony’s Hill, vibrating with joy, but she never saw “Prince on the Hill” again.

That day...The day of Annie's departure.

It was also the moment she had met Prince on the Hill...

Only the silver badge was the evidence of that, like a fragment of a memory.

Chapter 3

Candy climbed on the oak tree which had so many leaves now that its branches were bending. A sea of green opened up in front of her eyes. She deeply breathed in the fragrance of the leaves which still carried in them something of the scent of the wind and the earth.

She looked up and saw between the leaves a beautiful corner of the blue sky which was like colored paper.

Candy, sitting on a branch, was eating an apple.

A bird wanted to land on the branch, but it was surprised to find the place occupied by Candy. Frightened, it flapped its wings and flew away quickly.

Candy laughed softly.

“It must have taken me for a large bird! Oh, if only I could fly in the sky too...”

Through the branches, Candy looked at Pony’s Hill which was in full bloom.

It overflowed with flowers of yellow, pink, white, blue...flowers of all colors, like the dress of a queen.

In five days it would be her thirteenth birthday.

There was a time when, during that season, she went every day on that hill with Annie to pick up flowers. They never got tired of it. There were so many...As soon as they filled their arms with them to the point that they couldn’t carry any more, new flowers seemed to have already taken their place. It was as if the hill had a permanent gift for the two little girls.

They celebrated their mutual birthdays by offering each other a necklace of flowers they made themselves.

It must be said that they didn’t know their real dates of birth.

So their birthday was the day they had been abandoned in front of Pony’s Home.

Thirteen years already...I wonder how Annie is going to celebrate her birthday.

Candy sighed and put the rest of her apple on a branch; a small gift for the birds.

It was already seven years ago that Annie had been adopted by the Brightons.

Since her departure, time had passed.

Mike, who never stopped snitching on the others, Tom, who always participated in some mischief, and even little Milly, all had been adopted. Candy was now the oldest child at Pony’s Home.

At the beginning, Candy often received letters from Annie, but over time they had become less frequent, and now they were quite rare.

Usually it was Candy who wrote to her. She waited impatiently for her friend to invite her, but that never happened, not even last Christmas. *Annie must be busy with her studies and piano lessons. After all, she is Miss Brighton now...*

Candy looked up at the sky, and blinked her eyes.

The limpid sky reminded her of the blue dress Annie was wearing on the day of their separation.

Thirteen years...I've grown old. And Sister Lane too, by the way...

Sister Lane had just passed under the tree; Candy bent between the oak leaves so as not to be seen.

However...the oldest thing of all is probably her habit...

Through the leaves, Candy glanced at the nun's habit, which had been washed so many times and whose colors were now completely faded. One could also notice patches in several places. The signs were not deceiving, and Candy suspected that the financial situation of Pony's Home was not prosperous.

Sister Lane suddenly looked up at the tree and exclaimed in surprise.

"Candy, you're climbing trees again!"

"Oh, you found me! Sister Lane, you have a good eyesight."

The nun was looking kindly at Candy who had finally appeared from behind the leaves.

"It was not so difficult! Especially since I spotted those legs hanging from the branches."

Amused, she pointed at Candy's legs.

"Oh, you got me there!"

"Come on, get down immediately!"

"Yes, Sister Lane!" replied the girl in a cheerful voice.

She jumped from the branch where she was perched to another which was a little lower. A crash was heard immediately. The branch she was holding in her hands had just broken under her weight. Candy had a nice fall.

Usually she knew very well how to jump from a tree and land on the ground. But a fall such as this was nothing usual.

Sister Lane ran and lifted up Candy, who was frowning.

"Candy...How many times have I told you not to climb trees anymore?"

"But, Sister Lane, usually I have no problem...Ouch!"

The girl looked at the tree, wondering what might have gone wrong, while she was rubbing her hips.

"I'm even surprised that you've never really hurt yourself until now. Soon you will be thirteen years old, won't you? You may be small for your age, but in terms of weight, you have already exceeded the average..."

To prevent the nun from finishing her lecture, Candy hurried to make

the first joke she could think of. She imitated loudly all the cries of animals that came to her mind.

She succeeded in her goal; Sister Lane started laughing.

“Oh, what was I thinking? There’s so much work to do. I have to clean my room, go and bring water, wash the children’s aprons...Oh, I’m so busy!”

Candy stopped short and went away hurriedly.

“She is really incorrigible.”

Sister Lane was watching her with a smile.

“Look, she’s dropped something.”

She picked up a silver badge that had reflected a ray of sunlight.

She rushed to find Candy.

“Candy, you’ve dropped something.”

“Oh, thank you, Sister Lane!”

Candy was already drawing water from the well. She wiped her hands on her skirt and took back the jewel, blushing.

“I’ve seen you sometimes look at that badge. You must be quite attached to it, I imagine.”

“Exactly, Sister Lane. This is my greatest treasure, my lucky charm.”

Candy smiled, held the badge firmly in her hands, and then pressed it against her chest.

Prince on the Hill...

That badge was the proof that their encounter had really happened that day; that it was not a dream.

She had the impression that as long as she kept the badge, she might see the Prince again one day.

He was so handsome...

Candy remembered his smile which had relieved her sorrow in an instant.

“Little girl, you are prettier when you smile.”

She also remembered his gentle voice...

Through all her troubles during the years that followed, it had always been enough for her to remember that moment so that the smile would come back to her naturally.

She couldn’t talk to anyone about the Prince, not even to Sister Lane whom she adored.

It was a secret Candy had kept to herself.

“Well, you are so strange, Candy, smiling all by yourself. Come on, hurry up and finish what you have to do. Then you’ll come and help me prepare dinner. Miss Pony will be late today.”

“Where has she gone?”

“She had something to do...about Becky.”

“Oh! Has she found a new family?”

“If everything goes well, yes. Go on; I’m counting on you, Candy.”

Sister Lane walked away. When Candy was left alone, she let out a deep sigh.

Becky is going to be adopted...Oh, dear, why doesn't anybody want me?

The village church sometimes organized “adoption evenings” in which prospective parents could meet the children of the orphanage. It so happened that a couple or two were interested in her, and even spoke to her a little in order to get to know her, but that had never resulted in anything.

And now she was turning thirteen. No child had ever remained at Pony’s Home until that age. Candy suspected that the orphanage couldn’t afford to take care of a teenager.

“Sometimes I wonder if people have eyes to see. It just takes a bit of common sense to realize that they have the prettiest and the most hard-working of orphans in front of them!”

To accentuate her words, Candy knocked slightly on the wooden bucket, just to cheer herself up.

Little Nancy, who was barely three years old, couldn’t sleep if Candy was not by her side.

That night, when she finally fell asleep, Candy went out into the corridor. She heard Miss Pony whispering.

“I’m worried about Candy...”

The girl stood still.

Miss Pony and Sister Lane are talking about me? Why is she worried?

Candy held her breath and listened.

“Miss Pony, I would like to keep her with us as much as possible...”

“I would like that too, Sister Lane, believe me. But I’m afraid that’s not very good for her. We can’t offer her a satisfactory education here. I would like to give her the opportunity to learn more. Besides, from next month we’ll have to take care of a two-year-old boy. And we can’t count on new donations either...”

Candy heard Miss Pony’s deep sigh, followed by another, this time from Sister Lane.

“Oh, if only she could have some good adoptive parents, nothing could make us happier. She’s a good little girl; why can’t we find anyone for her?”

It was too hard for Candy to hear Sister Lane so troubled. She preferred to return quietly to the children’s room.

Both women were worried about her situation. It was very painful for Candy too. If it were up to her, she would also have wanted to stay forever at Pony’s Home.

But the harsh reality was different.

If I was no longer here, they could take in at least three more orphans. Candy went to each one of the small beds to tuck the children in. They were all fast asleep.

Then, sitting by a window, with her chin resting on her hand, she looked up at the night sky. The moonlight was pouring softly in the room. The stars were twinkling as if smiling at her. Candy took the badge of Prince on the Hill out of her pocket and moved it quietly. The little bell tinkled gently. One would have sworn that it wanted to cheer her up.

Thirteen years old is a difficult age... Too young to work, too old to be adopted. What do you think, little bell? You agree with me, don't you? She smiled but at the same time, in some mysterious way, she couldn't see the moonlight clearly, probably because of a speck of dust in her eye...Candy hastily put the badge back into her pocket. She couldn't explain why, but she didn't want the little bell to see her tears.

What must I do now?

There was only one person whom she could ask for some advice: Annie.

Certainly, their correspondence had been one-sided for years, but if Annie didn't answer, it was simply because she was busy, of course. If Candy explained her difficult situation, her friend would surely understand.

I'll ask Annie for advice...I won't go as far as to beg her to look for some adoptive parents for me, but maybe Mr. Brighton could find me a job.

Leaving Pony's Home and working: that was certainly the best solution.

But at that thought she felt so discouraged, so lonely, that tears threatened to appear once again.

No, no, enough with tears! Stop right away! Well, there's nothing better than a little exercise to scare sadness away!

Candy gathered all her strength and stood in front of the mirror, with her legs apart from each other. Then she made a grimace. That was a good warming up!

Let's begin the exercise against sadness! Come on! One-two-three, hop! One-two-three, hop!

Candy started making rhythmic movements and jumping like a frog. Every time she stood in front of the mirror and did that exercise which she had invented herself, she didn't know why, but she always ended up laughing. Therefore, she systematically forgot why she was so sad just a few moments ago. It worked every time! And today again she let herself go and gesticulated more and more vigorously.

One, two, hop! Hey! Come on! One! Two! Hop!

“Say, Candy, what are you doing?”

“Hop...eh?”

Candy turned around in surprise. Nancy, Slim and the rest of the children who were supposed to be sleeping were now standing beside their beds and were looking at her astonished.

“Eh...Nothing at all. My legs moved on their own; they needed some exercise! Get back to your beds, and quickly!”

Candy hurriedly put out the lamp by blowing on it.

That night, under the moonlight, she decided to write a letter to Annie.

Chapter 4

“Dear Candy,

Thank you for your letter. I’m fine.

My piano recital will take place soon, so I’m working on my scales and my piano lessons. Because of that, I’m very busy every day.

Candy, thank you for all the letters you have written to me. Every time I receive one, I feel nostalgia and tears come into my eyes. At the same time, I’m sorry for not answering you.

I’ve always told myself that I must write to you and explain clearly everything I feel, but I couldn’t find the courage to do it.

But today I’m writing to you without hesitation.

You will certainly be angry. That won’t prevent me from being sincere in everything I’m going to write.

Candy, I beg you, don’t write to me anymore.

It’s been seven years since I became daughter of the Brightons. My adoptive parents love me as if I were their own child. And I also love my father and my mother.

I don’t want anyone to know that I was in an orphanage, that I was abandoned at birth.

To tell the truth, I don’t even want to remember it!

I’ve made a lot of new friends. They all come from important families and believe that I am the true daughter of the Brightons. If they find out where I really come from...Just by imagining that I’m overwhelmed with fear.

Candy, I don’t want people to know the truth.

I’m sorry; I haven’t kept my promise to invite you to my house.

I won’t write to you anymore. I beg you not to write to me either. I’m sorry.

I really wish you happiness from the bottom of my heart!

Forgive me!

Goodbye, Candy.

Annie Brighton

P.S. I couldn’t tell my father that you were looking for a job. Forgive me for that too.”

When Annie’s answer had come, very quickly for once, Candy had pressed the envelope on her chest. It had made her so happy!

She had run up Pony’s Hill, pouncing joyfully. She was still holding the envelope in her hands. She wanted to read the letter where nobody would come to disturb her.

Annie had certainly understood her difficult situation. If that was so,

Mr. Brighton might have already found a job for her. Candy had sat among the white umbels of the wild carrots that were swaying in the wind. Then she had opened Annie's letter, with her heart beating hard.

Slowly, her fingers began to tremble.

"Goodbye, Candy."

She must have read it wrong. She could hardly breathe.

No, Annie couldn't have written such a thing. It was someone else who had written it, or had forced her to do it. Candy read the letter again and again, as if to convince herself.

"Goodbye, Candy."

There was no mistake. Annie's delicate handwriting, as delicate as her voice, was trembling on the pale blue paper.

Candy curled up, as if she had lost all her strength.

This is the truth. That's what she had been thinking all this time. I should have known...

She hadn't received any reply from Annie. There could be little doubt about that.

She knew very well her friend's character: timid and worried about what the others might think of her. And yet, Candy had interpreted everything at her own convenience.

Annie...How scared you must have felt every time you received a letter from me...And that's not good for you, is it?

Without her even realizing it, tears ran down her cheeks.

But what's wrong with the orphanage? Annie, it's not our fault that we were abandoned. As long as we behave properly...

However, Candy didn't want to blame her.

"Forgive me!"

She had the impression she was hearing Annie's voice, faint and ready to burst into tears. Annie must have gathered all her courage to write that letter.

"You forgive me, Annie...I even had the nerve to ask you to find me a job. Don't worry, Annie. I won't write to you anymore."

As she uttered those words in a low voice, a tear fell on the letter. Candy saw it and blinked her eyes. She didn't want to cry...

If Prince on the Hill appeared and found me like this...If I started crying loudly here, now...

"You are prettier when you smile, little girl"

The words of Prince on the Hill were still there, in her memory. That remembrance made her smile. She took out of her pocket the silver badge in the shape of an eagle with the little bell which she always carried with her.

"Dear Prince on the Hill...I won't cry anymore."

*Ding, ding...*replied the little silver bell with its musical sound.

“If only you were magical, little bell...I would make you tinkle over Annie’s letter and it would immediately turn into an invitation to go and see her...No, I’m joking.”

Two white butterflies were fluttering and dancing together. Just like Annie and herself used to do. Candy hurriedly drove away that thought which had come to her mind.

Annie is happy, so everything is fine; that’s the most important thing. But how am I going to find a job?

Candy sighed and looked at the orphanage at the foot of the hill. At this hour, the children were taking a nap. The building itself seemed asleep, wrapped in the soft light of late spring.

“Look, there is a car coming...”

Candy stood up, coming straight out of the tuft of wild carrots with the tall white umbels.

In the middle of that sleepy landscape, a luxurious navy blue car was approaching from the village road, raising a big cloud of dust. It stopped in front of Pony’s Home.

A man came out and walked towards the building. Despite the distance, she could see that the man had a stylish poise and was elegantly dressed.

“Who is he? What is he doing here? Oh, maybe he’s someone who wants to adopt a child. I hope he wants to adopt a pretty girl, even though she’s a little small and has a lot of freckles!”

While Candy was talking to herself, Sister Lane ran out of Pony’s Home.

“Candy! Candy!”

Candy put the badge back into her pocket and ran down the hill at full speed.

“Oh, there you are! Candy, Miss Pony is calling for you,” exclaimed Sister Lane, as soon as she saw her. “It is possible that you will go to Lakewood...”

Immediately, a wild hope made the girl’s heart flutter.

“Oh! Finally someone wants to adopt me? I imagine it’s that gentleman who arrived in a shining car, isn’t it? He seems to be rich!”

“Yes, indeed...He was sent by a very rich family...”

Candy gave a leap of joy.

“Hurray! All this waiting has been worth it! How lucky! Sister Lane, I was sure that day would come; that’s what I’ve always thought!”

“Candy...it’s not about adopting you. Actually...”

As the girl was bouncing towards the house, she didn’t bother to pay attention to the nun who was murmuring those words.

To calm down, Candy took a deep breath. Finally, the long-awaited day had come!

Above all, let's be graceful...

Candy removed the dust from her skirt with the back of her hand, and then she knocked on the door of Miss Pony's office, taking the most elegant air she could muster.

Miss Pony looked at Candy with a vaguely embarrassed expression on her face.

The man, who was sitting in a chair, stood up and turned to the person who had just entered. He didn't smile. Candy straightened up. Did that gentleman, who looked still young, want to become her father?

Her hope was dashed in an instant.

Miss Pony made the introductions, without looking into her eyes.

"Candy, Mr. Stewart is coming on behalf of the Leagan family from Lakewood. The Leagans are looking for a lady's companion for their daughter, Miss Eliza."

A lady's companion...Not an adopted daughter?

Candy's discouragement was visible.

Unconsciously, she turned to Sister Lane who had entered the room after her. Embarrassed, the latter remained standing with her arms in front of her chest and her eyes lowered.

"Mr. Stewart, this is Candice White. She has just turned thirteen, like Miss Leagan."

Stewart stared at Candy as if to examine her, and then he nodded.

"She seems to me a little young, but full of life, and that's the best thing. Well, let her prepare her things without delay."

"So quickly?" exclaimed Sister Lane.

Miss Pony couldn't restrain herself either and got up from her chair, startled.

"Indeed; we should ask for her opinion too...I haven't explained anything to her yet after the pastor of the village told me about this opportunity..."

Miss Pony was looking at Stewart and Candy with a worried expression.

"I understand that the village church has already agreed, since my master has made a donation, isn't that so? Anyway, Mr. Leagan ordered me to bring her to them at once..." announced Stewart, completely expressionless.

Seeing the perplexity of the two adults, Candy finally intervened in the conversation without hesitating.

"I...I'll go!"

"Wait, Candy; first we must explain to you! You can even refuse that proposal," said Miss Pony in a troubled voice.

"Miss Pony, I've made my decision. I'll go! I'll get ready right away."

Candy smiled at Stewart who nodded, relieved.

It was the only right decision.

It didn't matter if that job concerned only being a lady's companion for their daughter or anything else. Someone had expressed a wish to take care of her. Wasn't that an excellent opportunity for her to leave Pony's Home?

For thirteen years Candy had lived at their expense. One thing was certain for her: that was enough.

"Candy, think about it...If you don't want to, you can..."

"Don't worry, Sister Lane, I'm already thirteen years old!"

Candy smiled at the nun who was on the verge of tears.

As for preparations, ultimately she didn't have many things to take with her.

The time of departure came quickly. Candy got into the car with Stewart.

At that moment Candy had not yet understood what was happening. She had the impression she was walking on the clouds in the middle of the sky.

She was leaving Pony's Home so quickly...

"Wait. I'll wake up the children so that they can say goodbye to her..."

Sister Lane looked desperately at Stewart.

"No, Sister Lane; if they start crying that will only make their farewell more painful...Let them sleep," said Candy in a low voice.

To tell the truth, it was rather herself who might burst into tears if she saw them.

"So...We must be at home before nightfall..."

Stewart started the engine. The car began moving slowly.

"Miss Pony! Sister Lane!" Candy called, looking through the window.

Thank you for everything...

So many words were jostling in her head that she kept silent.

"Candy!"

As if pushed by a great force behind her back, Miss Pony, who had remained motionless without saying anything until then, suddenly rushed towards the car.

"Here, this is for you, Candy!"

She took off the cross that she was always wearing and put it around the girl's neck.

"Candy, be always happy..."

Miss Pony's eyes were moist behind her glasses. As for Sister Lane, she was looking steadily at the girl, with her hands over her mouth and her eyes full of tears.

I mustn't cry! the little orphan promised herself.

"Thank you...Goodbye, Miss Pony, goodbye, Sister Lane!"

With a big smile and without looking back, she waved her hand to them.

Chapter 5

Sitting in front, next to Stewart who was driving, Candy remained silent, looking stiff, until the car passed through the village.

She knew that at the slightest word she would pronounce, she would burst into tears. And there was no question of practising her “exercise against sadness” inside the car.

The two women had become smaller and smaller through the rearview mirror, and they had eventually disappeared.

I couldn't even say goodbye to the children...Nancy will start crying when she wakes up.

“My visit has surprised you, as I see.”

While driving, Stewart spoke to her, as if to reassure her.

“Mr. and Mrs. Leagan want their wishes to be executed as soon as they express them. Moreover, they get in a very bad mood if everything doesn't work out as they have decided, and that is a trouble for us.”

Stewart gave a small ironical smile. But he recovered immediately and regained his strict attitude. No doubt it had occurred to him that he had talked a little too much.

“There's still a long way to go until we reach the Leagan house. You can sleep if you wish.”

“Thank you,” replied Candy in a low voice.

Stewart's small attentions pleased her.

She mustn't arrive at the Leagan house in such a melancholic state. She had to appear smiling in front of the people who had expressed the wish to take charge of her, even as a lady's companion.

But all that came to her mind at that moment was the painful expression of the two women.

Miss Pony, Sister Lane...I'm going to be happy, I'm sure of that... Don't worry.

Candy held tight in her hand the cross Miss Pony had placed around her neck.

The landscape she knew so well, and which from now on she would feel so nostalgic about, was becoming more and more distant.

“Oh!”

As soon as the car left the narrow road that was passing through the forest, Candy let out a cry.

“What's the matter?” asked Stewart surprised, turning towards her.

Lupines extended endlessly on each side of the road like a blue river.

“How many lupines! Are there only blue ones here? On Pony's Hill we have also pink and purple ones!”

“Lupines? Mr. Hawkins calls these flowers bluebonnets.”

Stewart was smiling. He was beginning to relax.

“Who is Mr. Hawkins?”

“He’s the chief gardener who works for the Ardlay family. He knows everything about flowers.”

“The Ardlay family?”

“The Ardlays are one of the most renowned families of Chicago’s high society. They are also one of the wealthiest ones. They own a huge property in this area. The Leagan family is a part of the Ardlay clan.”

“The Leagan family belongs to the clan...”

Those majestic words seemed to come straight out of a historical novel...An illustrious family, no doubt.

“Oh!”

“What is it now?”

Stewart was laughing openly now.

“How beautiful!”

The car had left the road which was covered on both sides by blue lupines and now it was passing through a meadow full of flowers of white, pink and all the other colors. It looked as if the car were sneaking through flowered curtains which were rising one after the other.

Beyond that meadow there was a lake of an even deeper blue than that of the lupines...or the bluebonnets. Under the light of the setting sun, the expanse of water was sparkling like a path leading to paradise. Without her realizing it, Candy’s sadness had turned into real joy. She let out a sigh.

“I have never seen such a beautiful landscape...”

“The Ardlay estates are very well maintained. They are wonderful.”

Stewart looked somewhat proud.

“As soon as we go around the lake and pass that hill, you’ll see the residence of the Leagans.”

Candy felt tense. Something bothered her.

“Eh...What kind of girl is Miss Eliza?”

Stewart was startled by her question. He kept silent for a while before answering.

“Well...How could I describe her? I think we can say that she is... charming...”

“Just as I suspected...”

A girl living in a beautiful house and in such a magnificent setting couldn’t be anything but pretty.

She must be sickly and delicate to need a companion.

Candy promised herself to be nice to her.

Oh, if only we could become friends as I was with Annie...

A little later, the light of the setting sun covered the sky like the shawl of a lady of noble birth.

“Here we are. Over there you can see the house of the Leagans.”
Stewart’s voice seemed to have lost its vigor all of a sudden. Candy looked through the window of the car.

In the dim light of the sunset, beyond a tree-lined driveway, appeared the cocoa-colored Leagan residence, surrounded by flower beds. Ecstatic, Candy couldn’t take her eyes off that large and beautiful building.

“What a splendid house! It’s a real fairy tale castle!”

Candy sighed again.

Miss Eliza was certainly as she had already imagined her, a pretty girl like Snow White. How lucky she was to be able to work in such a beautiful house! Candy got off the car and tried to regain her composure.

She followed Stewart to the big double entrance door, when she heard a voice coming from somewhere:

“There she is!”

At that precise moment, a bucket of cold water was poured from the balcony upstairs.

Candy was immediately drenched. It was a real deluge! Astonished, she looked up in the direction of the voice. She saw a girl with pretty brown curls who was watching her maliciously. Next to her, a boy was carrying a large basin in his arms. He was looking at her, his mouth twisted by a wicked smile.

“This is Miss Eliza...and beside her is her brother, Mr. Neal.”

“Eliza? Is that her?”

Candy turned to Stewart who lowered his head with an embarrassed expression. Some splashes on his shoulder showed that he had got wet too.

So that’s Eliza...Well, she doesn’t look sick at all. I would even say that she’s in great shape...

Maybe it was an accident! Candy had accidentally found herself under that cascade, coming there at the wrong moment.

She pulled herself together and showed her most beautiful smile.

“Hello!”

She looked up and waved her wet hand.

“Goodbye! I don’t need a companion!” replied Eliza in an icy voice, before returning to the room with Neal, sneering.

“Go and change quickly; you have to meet madam...”

Stewart was urging her not to stay there when the door suddenly opened. A woman with an annoyed look came out, accompanied by a maid. She was wearing an elegant indigo satin dress, adorned with a large pearl brooch. Her beautiful eyes were cold and looked like Eliza’s. That must be Mrs. Leagan.

“You are late, Stewart. So she’s here? But...She’s soaking wet! Did she

fall into the lake? My God, she will wet the carpet. Let her change quickly and then come to me.”

Mrs. Leagan threw just a quick glance at Candy before entering the house with a quick step.

Candy was led to a small room facing north. So far, it must have been used as a storage room because there were still cobwebs in the corners. There was a wooden bed and an old closet. Nothing else.

Yet the girl was delighted.

A room all my own!

Candy had always dreamed of having her own room.

She changed quickly. At the same time, it didn't take her long to choose a dress, since she only had one more.

Eliza Leagan...I think we can say she is...charming...Well, I think I see what you meant, Mr. Stewart...

Candy had come to understand why Stewart had looked tense earlier in the car, and that made her laugh. But it was true that at first sight Eliza was not bad-looking...

I'll try to get along with her, if that is possible...

The very moment Candy left the room, she stumbled on a leg extended across the door. Fortunately, it took a little more than that to make her fall down.

That vexed Neal, who looked at her irritated.

“So you come from an orphanage, huh? You orphan brat!”

Candy felt more astonished than angry. What surprised her was how easily he could pronounce such offensive words. She was speechless. As Candy didn't reply, Neal looked at her triumphantly before he walked down the hall whistling.

Unbelievable! If that had happened at the orphanage, Miss Pony would have given a big punishment to those two! Well, I don't care about those little meannesses.

In the village that was close to Pony's Home there were also many wicked children who enjoyed playing jokes on people. It was not the first time...

However, she would have to admit later that she had underestimated them.

Following Mary, one of the housemaids, Candy entered the luxurious living room of Mr. and Mrs. Leagan, decorated in dark green. She noticed with astonishment the presence of Eliza and Neal.

They were standing beside their parents, with a docile expression and even a benevolent smile on their lips.

They were quite different from what she had seen a moment ago.

“What is your name?” asked Mrs. Leagan, pointing at Candy.

“My name is Candice White, madam.”

“All right. You will have to accompany Eliza in her studies and be her

playing companion. To tell the truth, I would have wished for a girl with a little better upbringing...but never mind. My daughter's private teacher has suddenly resigned, and I had to hurry and find someone else. I don't know why, but Eliza doesn't have any friends, although she is so kind, poor thing."

While saying that, Mrs. Leagan took her daughter's hand. Eliza, for her part, hugged her mother in a wheedling manner.

"I am often away from home on business. You will always obey my wife," added Mr. Leagan with a piercing look and with his pipe in his hand.

Candy felt her courage fail her for a moment but she immediately pulled herself together.

"Yes! I'll do my best," she said cheerfully, bowing her head.

Candy had dinner with the other servants in the enormous kitchen. It was just leftovers, as they told her, but it was so good that she would have liked to take it to Pony's Home.

During the meal, the servants told her that Eliza and Neal were deceitful and selfish. There were so many stories about them that Candy could never have remembered everything at once.

For example, they had changed thirty-eight private teachers. Mrs. Leagan believed that the fact that Eliza had no friends explained the frequent resignations of their various tutors, and that's why she had thought to hire a lady's companion this time.

"Mr. and Mrs. Leagan are so optimistic that neither can imagine that the reason is their daughter's character," concluded Mary.

Candy acquiesced, nodding her head.

It had been a long day.

At night Candy went to bed but she couldn't sleep right away. She hadn't actually realized yet where she was. It was the first time in her life that she slept somewhere else and not at Pony's Home...

I wonder how everybody is doing. Miss Pony and Sister Lane...I hope Nancy isn't crying. Slim, please don't wet your bed. I will no longer be able to wash your sheets without the others seeing them...

The smiling faces of Miss Pony, Sister Lane and the children came to her mind, one after the other. And then, there was Pony's Hill...

Prince on the Hill, I won't be able to come and see you up there...But I'm sure we'll meet again some day...wherever that will be.

Candy said good night in a low voice to the badge and the cross which she had placed next to her pillow, and then she closed her eyes.

Chapter 6

All the naughty children in the world joined together would not have equaled Eliza and Neal.

“But what are you doing still in those pajamas?”

As soon as Eliza saw Candy the next morning, she grimaced and made fun of her.

“This is not a pajama! I don’t have any other clothes. Besides, it’s you who got my other dress wet yesterday, remember?” answered Candy calmly.

“How dare you speak to me in that way! You must call me miss!” retorted Eliza, like a queen giving orders.

Then she brought her nose close to Candy.

“Oh, that girl stinks! Hey, Neal, come and see! She has a strange smell.”

“That’s true! It must be the smell of the orphanage. What a stink!”

Neal approached her too to sniff and pinched his nose in an exaggerated manner.

Candy looked at them annoyed.

“You are very rude! Hygiene was essential at Pony’s Home. You two are the ones who have a strange smell!”

“Oh, how impertinent! Neal, pull her hair!”

Although she was younger than him, Eliza ordered her brother around.

“With pleasure! Take that, you orphan brat!”

Candy grabbed Neal’s hand as he was about to pull her hair and twisted it.

“Ay! You’re hurting me!”

“Help! Mother! Mother!”

As soon as Eliza gave a frightened little cry, Mrs. Leagan rushed to her from one of the rooms at the end of the corridor.

“Mother, she twisted Neal’s arm...” said Eliza, fluttering her eyelids anxiously.

Neal showed his wrist that had turned red.

“Oh! What a violent girl! And she has just arrived!”

Mrs. Leagan gave Candy a piercing look.

“Mother, she is horrible! She pulled my hair.”

“What? That’s not true!” protested Candy.

“Oh...”

Eliza stifled a sob and brought her hands to her face.

“Now she’s calling me a liar! Mother...”

Of course her crying was feigned and Candy saw her watching her reaction through her fingers.

"I hate children who have a poor upbringing! Candy, return to your room and think about what you have done, until we call for you."

"All right, madam."

Candy went back to her room despite herself, while Eliza secretly stuck out her tongue at her.

First round...But in the end, I have to know how to give in if I want to win...

Candy remembered what Mary had told her the night before.

"...If you want to stay here, you must not make madam angry. Don't pay attention to what Mr. Neal or Miss Eliza might say. You must know how to give in if you want to win."

However, when Eliza spoke again, loud enough for Candy to hear, the latter felt hurt.

"Mother, I don't want to play with an orphan girl as violent as she is!"

"And who also stinks!" added Neal.

"I suspected that...That's why I was not convinced by the idea of taking care of a child from the orphanage. I see now that despite his nice words, the pastor has recommended me an impossible child! Well, let's wait and see how it will go."

Candy hastened her steps in an attempt to escape Mrs. Leagan's words.

She closed the door of her room and bit her lip.

Orphan brat...Child with a poor upbringing...Oh, there was such contempt in their voices...No, Candy, you mustn't be angry or let yourself be overwhelmed by sadness. After all, they tell the truth...

Candy touched the cross she kept hidden on her chest and tried to convince herself.

That's the truth, Candy. Compared to the members of the Leagan family, we can't say that you have received a very good upbringing. It's true that you were abandoned at birth and you grew up in an orphanage, that you have no family...But didn't Miss Pony use to say that what we didn't see, what was inside, was more important than appearances?

"Yes, you are absolutely right!" she answered herself energetically.

Letting yourself be defeated by something so little isn't worthy of you, Candice White!

One thing was certain; there was no question of her being sent back to Pony's Home for such trifles. If she ever wanted to see again the place she considered her home, she would do that with her head held high, not as a lady's companion who had been dismissed from her position. The honor of the orphanage depended on her.

Candy flexed her arms as if to show her muscles, ready to face life.

Seven days had passed since Candy had arrived at the residence of the

Leagans.

The wickedness of Eliza and Neal was getting worse every day. They used ingenuity to torment her and make her life impossible.

They had deliberately broken a vase which Mrs. Leagan was very fond of, just to put the blame on Candy. They had also accused her of scribbling on the walls or hiding their textbooks. With each new accusation, Mrs. Leagan became hysterical and scolded Candy, ordering her to go to her room and think about her wrongdoings. She even had to skip dinner several times.

However, Candy endured all that by biting her lip. She knew well that even though she might have claimed her innocence, Mrs. Leagan wouldn't have believed her.

Candy had only one fear: to be sent back to Pony's Home. Of course, Miss Pony would warmly welcome her with open arms. But there was no room for her in that pleasant house. Other little orphans needed now that place more than she did.

Moreover, Candy had written an enthusiastic letter to Pony's Home:

“Mr. and Mrs. Leagan are very kind and the days pass incredibly quickly. Eliza, to whom I keep company, has very pretty curls. She's a cheerful and friendly girl and teaches me so many things.”

Only the part about her “pretty curls” is true...

Candy sighed.

But no; the house, surrounded by flowers, that looks like a land from a fairy tale, the lake and the forest are so beautiful. All that is true too!

“I'm happy to live in such a wonderful place.”

Forcing herself to describe all those positive aspects, Candy had ended up feeling really happy.

Besides, Mary and all the employees of the house, including Stewart, were considerate and attentive to her on all occasions. Actually, there were positive things too in that place!

One day, a letter came from Pony's Home. She opened it impatiently by the shores of the lake which extended behind the house.

The letter was full of tenderness from the two women. Miss Pony and Sister Lane told her that they were reassured by what Candy had written to them.

“Candy, take good care of yourself. We are delighted that you like the house of the Leagans. We pray every day for you to be healthy and happy. We and the children look forward to hearing from you.”

Candy gently sniffed the letter, hoping to feel through the paper the aroma of the baked bread, of the milk and of the wood burning in the fireplace...All the smells of Pony's Home.

"What have you got there?"

Someone snatched violently the letter from her hands. It was Neal, who had taken advantage of her momentary distraction and had taken it away from her as quick as lightning. Eliza came running to take a look.

"A letter! It comes from her orphanage!"

Neal tore it up in the blink of an eye and threw the pieces into the air.

"That was mean! Why are you doing this?"

Candy rushed to pick up the pieces of her letter. It was useless to rebel against them; she'd better pick up the pieces quickly before the letter from Miss Pony and Sister Lane was carried away by the wind. At that moment, something fell from her pocket with a tinkling sound.

The badge of my Prince!

Eliza was quicker and she picked up the badge as soon as she heard the sound of the little bell.

"Look at this, Neal!"

"Oh, it's made of silver. But this is..."

"Give it back to me!"

Candy threw herself upon Neal with all her might.

"No way! Where did you steal it from, orphan brat?"

"I didn't steal it. It's mine! Give it back!"

"Don't give it back to her, Neal!" exclaimed Eliza amused.

"How about throwing it into the lake?"

"That's a good idea!"

"No! I beg you! Stop! Give that back to me!" cried Candy, on the verge of tears.

The badge of Prince on the Hill. Her precious amulet.

Eliza and Neal looked at each other with a triumphant smile on their lips.

Until now they had tormented her so much and Candy had never submitted, and she hadn't even seemed to be hurt by their wickedness.

But this time they could see they had found her weak point. The tears in Candy's eyes satisfied them more than ever. Eliza inflated her chest.

"Well, we may give it back to you but on certain conditions...Get on all fours and bark like a dog."

"That's a good idea. And then confess where you have stolen it from! Then get on your knees and ask us to forgive you," added Neal,

tinkling the little bell of the badge which he was holding between two fingers.

Candy's eyes blazed with anger. Why should she behave like a dog and ask for forgiveness from those insufferable children? And then, she hadn't stolen that badge!

She took a deep breath, waiting for the opportunity to attack.

"Well? Hurry up! Oh!"

Candy rushed forward with all her might. Neal, losing his balance, almost fell backwards. Candy picked up her badge and went away running.

"You savage! Go back to your mountains!"

"We'll send you back!"

Candy was running desperately, as if to escape the voices of her tormentors.

She was repeatedly telling herself not to cry, even though tears were already coming into her eyes.

Horrible...It's so horrible...I want to go back...I want to go back to Pony's Home...

Candy kept running in the middle of the dense forest. Where was she going? She didn't even know herself. Getting as far away as possible from the Leagan house was the only thing she had in mind. With her eyes full of tears, she couldn't see in front of her.

Her head was bumping on the branches, and the leaves were lashing her cheeks.

Suddenly, Candy stumbled against something and fell. The wet grass hit her face.

She didn't even have the courage to get up. Lying flat on the grass, Candy was sobbing as hard as she could.

The tears she had contained until that moment burst all at once.

Oh, she wanted to go back to Miss Pony and Sister Lane right away...

She missed them so much...

That was when a gentle voice was heard above her.

"Don't cry, little girl."

She looked up with her eyes wet and she remained breathless.

"My Prince..."

On top of an arched iron gate, covered with red roses that seemed to spring from everywhere, Prince on the Hill himself was sitting and smiling at her.

Chapter 7

Is this an illusion?

Candy was staring at Prince on the Hill.

The boy's smile was reflected in the depths of her eyes which were full of tears. He was surrounded by the red roses of the arched gate. She was so afraid that the slightest blink of her eyes would make her Prince disappear that she couldn't even breathe.

At last I can see you again, my Prince...

The gentle voice came down to her again in a swirl of petals.

"Is it me that you call your 'prince'? You say funny things, little girl."

Candy's heart started beating wildly.

"You are a funny little girl."

Prince on the Hill had also told her something similar.

Candy blinked her eyes but the image didn't disappear. Then she wasn't dreaming.

And yet...The boy between the roses couldn't be Prince on the Hill.

Seven years had passed; he must have grown up.

For a moment she had thought they looked exactly alike, but compared to the Prince, the shining blond hair of the boy with the roses, as well as his smile, were paler and more delicate.

Finally recovering, Candy straightened up and rubbed her eyes.

"Oh, I've got mud everywhere..."

Her hands were covered in mud. Were her cheeks dirty too? She wiped her face in a hurry, and in doing so, she only ended up spreading more mud on it. This time she was sure of it; she had made a mess of herself...The boy with the roses was looking steadily at Candy who was wiping hurriedly her face with her apron. Embarrassed, Candy laughed involuntarily. The boy smiled too.

"You are much prettier when you smile, little girl!"

She was startled again and looked straight into the boy's eyes.

That was exactly what Prince on the Hill had said, word for word.

How is that possible? Why did he tell me the same thing...?

When Candy finally took a breath, still surprised, she heard someone whistling a little further away, beyond the iron gate.

In the blink of an eye, the boy smiled at Candy, and then jumped nimbly off the flowery arch. He disappeared with a light step, as if he were flying away, with his soft blond hair flurried by the wind.

She hadn't even had the time to speak to him.

For a few moments Candy stayed there, deep in her thoughts; then she approached the iron gate to look beyond, towards the place where

the boy had fled. There was only his smile left behind. Behind the gate, a path lined with roses in full bloom, of all colors and all kinds, extended without end.

The sweet scent of the flowers was floating in the air, like a trace of the boy's passing.

"Little girl, you are much prettier when you smile."

The voices of the Boy of the Roses and Prince on the Hill superimposed one another. A bittersweet sensation flooded her heart.

It's not right to cry; that's not like you, Candy. If he says that I'm prettier when I smile, it means that when my face is full of tears, it makes him sad, of course! From now on, you'll be dignified in all circumstances. Do you understand, Candy?

Deep in her heart, Candy scolded herself.

Where could he have gone? He had suddenly appeared and he had disappeared just as suddenly. Yes...just as Prince on the Hill had done years ago, leaving a gentle breeze in her heart...

This time too, she had the impression that the boy who looked like the Prince had come to comfort her in a difficult moment.

Candy looked up gratefully at the arched gate with the roses, as if the one who had spoken to her was still there.

"Thank you. I promise you I won't feel weak again, my Prince. So... could I see you again some day?"

Those last words came out of her lips without her thinking about them.

But it was so embarrassing to say them, even though nobody had heard her and she had spoken in a very low voice. Candy finally decided to return home through the forest, turning back several times to make sure that the gate of the roses had not disappeared.

Well, it's not so bad to stay at the house of the Leagans if such a thing can happen! To think that there is someone so wonderful who looks exactly like Prince on the Hill and who is so close to me...

By the shores of the lake, Candy picked up the pieces of the letter from Pony's Home. Her face was now bright and smiling.

Back at the Leagan house, Candy found Eliza and Neal whispering in front of the backyard fountain. They were probably planning some new Machiavellian project. But Candy promised herself that she would never be defeated by such children.

She took a deep breath and approached them from behind, without giving them any time to notice her.

"You can keep tormenting me as much as you want. I don't care at all. I am made of iron! Well, see you later!"

Taken aback by Candy's declaration, Eliza and Neal just looked at her, annoyed.

It's like I have given them permission to torment me further... Well, it

doesn't matter! I can't wait to find out what new wickedness they'll be able to invent.

Candy headed to the courtyard and made sure that nobody was watching her. She climbed quickly to one of the tall trees; it was an oak tree, and the structure of its branches looked like those of the oak tree at Pony's Home. Sitting on a large branch and leaning against the trunk, she turned her eyes to the purple sky as the sun was setting. Then she told herself that the sky extended as far as the orphanage which she missed so much.

She hadn't been able to gather all the pieces of the letter Neal had torn apart. Most of them had been swept away by the wind, and she had recovered only a few fragments. Of course, she was disappointed to have lost her precious letter, but on the other hand, she had to admit a fact, as strange as it might seem to her.

If Neal hadn't torn up the letter, I wouldn't have met the boy at the gate of the roses.

Miss Pony had once taught her something. She hadn't understood its significance immediately, but that lesson seemed to apply to what had happened that day.

"The world is made up of several threads intermingled in a complex way, and until those threads are completely undone, it is impossible to know if something will turn out well or end in disaster. That's why we must never give up, Candy..."

The smile of the boy of the roses, whom she had met that day and who looked so much like Prince on the Hill, was enough to make the wickedness of Eliza and Neal seem insignificant.

I would like so much to see him again...I wonder if that is possible. Maybe if I go back to the gate of the roses...

With a smile on her lips, Candy recalled that place which was filled with the sweet scent of the flowers.

The next day, after she finished cleaning Eliza's and Neal's rooms, while those two were doing their French lesson, Candy ran off to the forest.

One thing was certain. Eliza and Neal had decided to consider Candy as their servant rather than a companion.

After she cleaned the floor, Eliza had ordered her to iron her ribbons. She believed that she would set her to working while she and her brother were busy with their lessons. She didn't know that Candy was an expert in cleaning and ironing! She had finished that work in the blink of an eye and now she had only one concern: she wanted to make sure that the "gate of the roses" really existed, that she hadn't dreamed of it the day before. It was still hard for her to believe it!

She ran all the way down that shady path in the forest. As she was approaching, a sweet fragrance was mingled with the wind. It was as

if that scent was guiding her. The day before, her crying had prevented her from noticing it.

Through the branches of the trees, Candy could see now the rays of light, announcing a vast clearing.

Suddenly, a bright red glow appeared. Candy hurried her steps even more.

The gate of the roses! Then it really exists...

In the forest, only that place could have such a flaming color. The gate was so high that one had to look up to see it.

From above, red petals were floating like smiles of angels.

The boy was not there that day.

Through the gate, Candy looked at the path which was covered with bright leaves and red roses.

That was where the boy had disappeared the day before. What kind of house could be beyond that path?

Did he live there? Candy wanted to know more. She pushed gently the two doors of the iron gate where the roses were intertwined. She did that very carefully; however, that didn't prevent large red roses from unfolding and falling with a crystal-clear sound.

"Oh! But this is..." exclaimed Candy.

Under the fallen roses, an engraving had just appeared on the iron gate.

It represented an eagle...An eagle that had a resemblance to the one which adorned the badge Candy had never got tired of admiring every day.

A shudder ran through Candy's body. She took the silver badge out of her pocket.

"No doubt it's the same..."

Candy felt her head spinning. With trembling fingers, she touched delicately the engraving on the gate of the roses. The dimensions were not the same, of course, but as far as shape was concerned, the eagle with the spread wings was identical to that one of the badge.

Was that place connected with Prince on the Hill, as she had felt instinctively?

How can I enter this place?

Candy squeezed the badge in her hand and started walking along the enclosure that led from the gate of the roses.

It was a high and long iron grating, just like the gate itself. It was covered with red roses too. On the side of the forest, carefully carved yew trees stood like guards assigned to protect the property. The effect of the light that was falling from the foliage had so much beauty that everything seemed artificial. Walking on that lovely path, Candy noticed that the red roses were gradually giving way to flowers of lighter color. Everything was so beautiful that Candy couldn't restrain

a sigh. Before she realized it, she was surrounded by white wild roses in full bloom.

The air was fragrant with the scent of the flowers and the vegetation.

Candy thought she was in a dream.

Then the wild rose bushes were interrupted. The view became suddenly clearer. Candy blinked her eyes and made a discovery...

“What? A gate of stone?”

A gate of white stone stood like a fortress, sparkling under the sunlight.

That gate was at least three times higher than the girl. There were several engravings on the pillars of that imposing gate. Candy approached breathlessly to observe those engravings more closely. They represented a goddess, angels, a knight on his horse fighting a dragon...

“It’s so beautiful...Is this a story?”

Candy looked carefully at the details of each engraving, one after the other, and suddenly she screamed.

The brave knight’s shield had the same eagle with spread wings she had already seen earlier on the iron gate.

And it was the same with that on the badge of Prince on the Hill!

That emblem was also visible on the flags waved by the many men who escorted the knight.

The Ardlay clan...

That name came instantly to Candy’s mind. It was Stewart who had told her about that illustrious family who possessed enormous lands in the surrounding area.

Was the eagle with the spread wings the emblem of the Ardlay family?

Then, the Prince would be...

The thought which she didn’t dare fully formulate yet made her shudder. That emotion was almost suffocating.

And the Boy of the Roses who looked so much like Prince on the Hill...

As if in a dream, Candy resumed her walk, caressing with her hand the white stone gate. The carved narrative which had begun at the gate continued along the wall that had taken its place. And that carved wall ended when the story itself ended, with the knight killing the dragon.

Then a wall of great rocks took over. The fresh green moss through the gaps contrasted with the raw mineral color of the rocks.

Distracted by the impressive wall, she hadn’t noticed that, on the other side of the road, the densely planted trees in the forest had given way to a vast meadow of tall grass and aquatic plants.

Candy stopped and took a deep breath. The wind brought the smell of fresh water and wet earth.

Maybe I'm close to the lake...

She continued to walk, still following the rough stone wall, when she began to hear a noise that was getting louder and louder until it became deafening.

“Oh! A waterfall! Is that a gate too?” she exclaimed, looking up at the wall, full of joy at the magnificent spectacle.

The waterfall was sprouting between the rocks. Looking closely, she actually perceived a large, sturdy-looking wooden door hidden behind the curtain of water.

“This time it's a gate made of water! That's great!”

The water was falling like a powerful storm at the foot of the wall before reaching a canal dug in front of it and then flowing into the lake.

First a gate of roses, then a gate of stone and now another one made of water. What could possibly be the aspect of the building to which those three gates led?

I can't even imagine it! This Ardlay clan is definitely amazing. Only the fact that the Leagan family is a part of it is quite surprising in itself...

If the water portal belonged to the Ardlay family, the famous emblem of the eagle should also be seen somewhere...

She wanted to make sure of that and she began searching.

She climbed carefully on the slippery rocks in order to reach the top of the gate. Her face was quickly splashed with droplets of water. Approaching the top of the waterfall, Candy noticed that the wooden gate was actually protected from moisture. The waterfall was falling into a curved arch without reaching it. It was only from afar that the gate seemed immersed into the water.

But how can I open it?

As soon as she asked herself that question, she noticed a thick chain hanging from the rock, beside the waterfall. She looked up and remained breathless.

“There it is! The eagle!”

The chain was hooked to the caudal feathers of the statue of an eagle with spread wings. It was like the chain that was holding the little bell of her silver badge!

Candy held her breath and pulled that chain energetically.

Immediately, a deafening noise of a crash of rocks was heard, as if the waterfall had collapsed. The gate was lowered towards Candy like a drawbridge, producing a sound that covered her cry. Then it turned into a suspended bridge over the lake. The waterfall stopped flowing.

“Oh, how surprising!”

Fortunately, nothing more happened and Candy, clinging to a rock, let out a sigh of relief.

In fact, she might have rejoiced far too quickly. A cry of panic came suddenly from the lake.

“My boat! My boat is being carried away!”

Candy looked all around the place and finally noticed a boat unceremoniously shaken by the waves. On board the boat, a boy with long hair which had the color of a sunny field of wheat was waving his arms towards her. No doubt his boat had drifted off because of the big wave produced by the opening of the gate.

“Hey, little lady! Help me instead of standing there! My boat will be carried away!”

The boat didn’t seem to have oars.

“What must I do?” asked Candy, loud enough to be heard.

“There’s a rope over there, tied to the rock! Hurry up!”

“I understand! Leave it to me!”

Candy was full of joy. She untied the rope that was tied around a rock, spun it in the air above her head, and then threw it to the boy. Candy smiled to herself. She hadn’t lost her touch!

“Well done! I can see you are very skillful with the lasso.”

The boy grabbed the rope and then, pulling it towards him, he made his boat return to the shore without difficulty.

“What a fright! I had fastened my boat between the aquatic plants and I was taking a little nap.”

The boy was talking in a refined manner, while fixing his long shining hair. He didn’t look at all like the person he was a moment ago, and now he had taken an air of great importance. Candy stifled her laughter.

“My boat was almost carried away because of you! Do you think that’s funny?”

“Oh, forgive me. But you were so scared...Can’t you swim?”

“Are you joking? I’m an excellent swimmer.”

“What?”

“It’s that... I didn’t want to mess up my hair or wet my new silk shirt! It was brought from France!” replied the boy with a mischievous wink.

He likes taking care of himself!

Candy observed his face. He was elegant and handsome. He even smelled slightly of cologne. With a natural gesture, he ran his slender fingers through his hair which had been ruffled by the wind. However, although his gestures were delicate, his way of looking at Candy had a touch of cynicism and provocation.

“But I must say that you have impressed me. You managed to throw the rope at me on the first try. I’ve never seen a girl throw the lasso as well as you do. So, where do you come from, little tomboy?”

“My name is Candy, and I work at the Leagans.”

“Oh...I’m sorry for you!”

The boy raised his eyes to the sky with a grimace.

A horn sounded beyond the bridge, on the side of the road that led to the water portal.

“Oh, they have come to pick me up. Goodbye, little tomboy! My name is Archibald. We’ll meet again!”

Without further ado, the boy ran towards the car that was waiting for him some distance away.

What a nice boy...And he’s blond just like the boy at the gate of the roses!

But the hair color of the Boy of the Roses, thought Candy, brought with it something that made her heart contract painfully because of a sudden flare of longing.

Chapter 8

“This afternoon I’m going to town to get the dress I’ve ordered, and you’re coming with me.”

That day, Eliza gave an order to Candy in her usual tone before returning to the corridor with a light step.

For a few days, Eliza had been in an exceptionally good mood. Certainly she hadn’t stopped being wicked so far, but it could be said that from Candy’s point of view, wickedness accompanied with a smile was always a little less unpleasant!

Unfortunately, Eliza’s good mood hadn’t been transmitted to the rest of the Leagan family. On the contrary, the household was nervous and tense. The monthly cleaning had to be done ahead of schedule, and the servants had to immediately scrub and wash everything and polish the silverware. Candy was working all day long, without a moment of rest.

According to Mary, there was a reason for all that commotion: the “matriarch” of the Ardlay clan was going to move in nearby.

The Ardlay family...

At the mere mention of that name which reminded her of the famous emblem of the eagle with the spread wings, Candy felt more courageous and cheerful.

Mrs. Leagan gave instructions to all the servants in her usual authoritarian tone, particularly insisting that the house should be shining at all times. She couldn’t bear receiving Great Aunt Elroy in a slum if the latter did them the honor of visiting them.

That “Great Aunt”, the matriarch, must be someone important.

What kind of person was she, so that Mrs. Leagan would be so afraid of her?

The afternoon of the same day, inside the car that was going to town, Eliza was still cheerful.

“Tomorrow is the grand party at the house of the Ardlays, Neal.”

Even her voice was more excited than usual.

“Finally I’ll see Anthony again!”

“I wonder if old William will be there.”

That prospect seemed to be extremely boring to Neal.

“Mama said that he might not come.”

“So much the better! That grumpy old Elroy is more than enough!”

“You are absolutely right!”

Neal and Eliza burst out laughing. And Candy, infected by their cheerful mood, laughed along with them, earning a furious look from Eliza.

“Stewart! You’re driving too fast!”

The chauffeur accepted that reproach.

“All right, miss,” he said, straightening himself up.

Eliza didn’t seem to like the fact that Stewart and Candy were speaking to each other in a friendly tone, even though they hadn’t met for several days.

The elegant shops with the beautifully decorated shop windows were lined up along the town’s main street. There were those selling luxurious dresses, of course, but also those selling hats, purses, shoes...Whenever Eliza picked up a dress or a pair of shoes she had ordered, she had the huge boxes brought to Candy. She was carrying so many of them in her arms that she couldn’t even see where she was going.

“Tell me, Neal, do you think Anthony will like my new pink flounce dress?”

“Stop talking to me about Anthony!” replied her brother, frowning.

Indeed, that “Anthony” seemed to completely occupy Eliza’s thoughts.

Every time she pronounced that name, her expression softened a little. That amused Candy immensely.

It’s clear that Eliza is in love with that Anthony. Incredible, but true! Even a malicious girl like her knows about love!

A smile appeared on Candy’s lips. Immediately she dropped the boxes and the whole stack fell down with a crash.

“What are you doing? You’re so clumsy!”

Eliza’s usual voice, strident as always, was heard.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t carry so many parcels all by myself.”

“Nevertheless, you’re going to do it, orphan brat! You are our servant. Mama gave us permission to use you as we want,” retorted Neal, with his hands in his pockets and a wicked expression on his face.

“Oh, all right. But you should at least stop calling me ‘orphan brat’. I have a name: Candice White.”

“White? That’s funny! Black would suit you better, with that dark complexion of a country girl.”

“Miss Pony gave me the name ‘White’ when they found me, precisely because I had such a fair complexion,” replied Candy proudly, trying to pick up the boxes she had dropped.

“They ‘found you’? How awful!” said Eliza, with a shocked expression.

“So what are all those moles on your face? That’s ridiculous.”

“Oh, Neal, that’s so kind of you! Moles...Are you talking about my freckles? How nicely you put it! The children at Pony’s Home used to tell me that I had my face full of leftovers from lunch!”

“Moles” sounded much better than “leftovers”. Candy was delighted

and that annoyed them more than anything else. They finally looked at each other.

“Oh, I was about to forget I had to go and get the books I have ordered. So put our things here, in front of the car. Stewart will come back as soon as he finishes some errands for mama. That will give you the time to go quickly to the bookstore and get my books. You will ask for ‘Elegance’ and ‘The dreams of a china doll’. Just say you are an employee of the Leagans, and that will be enough.”

“I’m going right away!”

Candy put the parcels on the sidewalk and headed to the bookstore Eliza had indicated to her.

However, the staff of the bookstore replied that they hadn’t received any order for those books.

Candy suddenly had a bad feeling.

She hurried back.

“Just as I thought...” she told herself in a low voice when she noticed that Eliza and Neal were no longer there.

The car was not there either. They had left without her.

“I suspected it! From the beginning they intended to leave me here. That’s the only reason they took me with them.”

Stewart must have been embarrassed to find himself involved in the shenanigans of his young master and mistress.

“Well, this is a black star for me...” Candy murmured discouraged.

“What do you mean by a black star?” said a cheerful voice from a car that had just stopped beside her.

Through the open window, a boy with a cap on his head was smiling at her. His jovial expression was enhanced by the colored glasses he was wearing.

Candy didn’t know why, but that smile seemed familiar to her. Had she already met him?

“Thank you for saving Archie’s life the other day by the lake,” added the boy, smiling even more.

“Excuse me? Oh, it was you in that car which came to pick him up, right?”

“Exactly. What are you doing in town today?”

“Well...That is...I went to the bookstore on some errand for Miss Leagan, but by the time I came back the car had disappeared...”

“I see...So they left you here. That’s not very nice, is it? It will take you two hours to walk home. Come on, get in! I’ll give you a ride.”

“Oh, thank you! That’s very kind.”

Relieved, Candy smiled before climbing quickly to the front, next to the boy at the wheel. The car made a loud noise, like a multitude of balloons breaking, and started moving. However, its departure turned out to be a little sluggish.

“Phew, let’s go! It’s a little difficult at the beginning. To tell you the truth, I constructed this car!”

“Your car? Did you make this car by yourself? You are a genius!”

“If you say so...”

The boy took on a proud expression, obviously pleased with Candy’s surprise.

She burst out laughing when she saw that reaction. She felt more at ease with him. He was such a nice boy. She had just met him and she already had the impression that they had been friends for years.

“Well, what did you mean when you spoke about that ‘black star?’”

The car had gained speed and was going smoothly now. The boy, reassured about the engine’s functioning, was completely relaxed.

“Well, it’s because I write them down...”

“What do you write down?”

“The days when certain people are mean to me. The days when they don’t do anything to me, I don’t write down anything...But that almost never happens. The days when they aren’t so mean, I put a white star, and when things are a little more difficult I put a star half-white and half-black. And the days when they are really horrible...”

“...a little black star!” cried the boy laughing. “Indeed, I have rarely seen a girl as mean as Eliza.”

“But...Do you know her?”

“Unfortunately, I do. I’m sorry to say that, but she’s even a member of my family.”

“So you belong to the Ardlay family.”

“That’s right. My name is Cornwell. Alistair Cornwell. But everybody calls me Stear.”

“My name is Candice White, or else Candy.”

Alistair whistled.

“That’s a very sweet name!”

“Your name is great too. It sounds like a philosopher’s name!”

“Hmm...I would prefer something more romantic...Be careful, I’m going to take the shortcut by the lake. If everything goes well, you’ll arrive even before Eliza! But the road is quite bumpy, and we’ll move a lot. Hold on tight!”

“Oh! That’s wonderful!”

Candy clapped her hands. How much she would have liked to go back before Eliza and Neal and to see their astonished faces!

Alistair’s car was swinging in all directions, so much so that Candy didn’t even have the time to enjoy the scenery.

It was staggering like a drunkard and began to lose speed. Then it made some disturbing noises, and later it began shaking.

“There we go, the wheel is gone...”

“What?”

“I feel it’s going to end up into the lake again. Same old story...”

He was right: by the time he finished his sentence, the car went straight to the sloping shore of the lake, diving in without slowing down. Water splashed everywhere around it.

Candy was a good swimmer, and although her style was not equivalent to Alistair’s, she was faster than him.

Both reached the shore, soaking wet.

“I failed again...That’s exasperating.”

Alistair hadn’t stopped smiling, even as he recognized the failure of his invention. And his smile was contagious. Candy laughed along with him.

“That’s not funny! Still, I’m supposed to be disappointed!” said Alistair, wringing his cap.

Then he wiped his glasses.

“I’ll come back and pick up my car later...But tell me, Candy, how are you going to return home?”

“With these two wheels, of course!” answered Candy, tapping her legs and wringing her skirt as much as she could. “Anyway, I wouldn’t have had any other choice if I hadn’t met you, would I?”

“Except that you’re soaking wet now...”

Alistair wasn’t laughing anymore. He felt guilty.

“Don’t worry, Alistair.”

Candy tried to reassure him with a cheerful expression.

“Call me Stear...Still, it’s a long walk...I know a way to reach quickly the Leagan house but that’s impossible for a girl...” said the boy, as if he were speaking to himself.

“What do you mean?”

“The villa of the Leagans is beyond this forest. The fastest way to get there is...through the trees.”

“Oh, really? Then it’s very simple...”

“How is it ‘very simple?’”

“If it’s just climbing trees, you can trust me!”

“It’s not just climbing. You have also to jump from one tree to another, like Tarzan!”

“There’s no problem. Come on, let’s go!”

Candy was excited with that idea. She spotted the nearest tree and climbed very easily on it. Alistair whistled with admiration.

“You’ve made it!” he whispered.

“So, what do you say? You too, Alistair, come quickly!”

“I told you to call me Stear!”

Stear chose another tree with suitable branches, climbed on it in no time, and then jumped to another.

Candy did the same. All she had to do was choose her target well...

Both were jumping from one tree to another, much faster than if they

had remained on the ground.

Candy recalled her childhood at Pony's Home. Only Annie and some of the other children were aware of that dangerous game she was so good at. Every time she saw her doing it, Annie was terribly worried about her...

A little later, the house of the Leagans began to appear among the vegetation. Actually, the forest ended just behind the villa.

Candy descended with agility from the last tree.

"Thank you, Stear!" she said in a clear voice, turning around and looking up at the branch where her new friend still was.

"We'll meet again, Candy! Now I understand why Archie called you 'little tomboy' the other day!"

Alistair gave her a friendly smile and then greeted her, touching his cap with two fingers.

Candy struggled to hold back her laughter. From the top of the trees she had seen Eliza and Neal's car approaching. There was no doubt that Eliza would be surprised and very upset when she saw that Candy had already returned.

Next morning, after having spread all her dresses and hats throughout her room, Eliza stood in front of her large mirror.

"This one or that one...? Which would suit me best?"

"That yellow one, I would say."

"I didn't ask you!"

Eliza stared at Candy and pointed to a dozen pairs of shoes spread across the carpet.

"I'll put them on for the party tonight, so hurry up to polish them all!"

"You're going to wear ten pairs of shoes at the same time?"

"That's exactly why I hate girls with no breeding. Since I haven't decided yet which ones I'll wear, obviously you'll polish all of them."

Of course, Eliza had said that in an unfriendly manner before turning back to the mirror.

"Oh, I don't know...I have to ask for mama's advice."

She left her room with several dresses in her arms.

Alone in Eliza's room, Candy looked at the numerous dresses that were thrown on the sofa. All of them were fit for a fairy tale princess: with lace, ribbons and luxurious silk ruffles...They were so beautiful that she sighed.

Without really thinking about it, Candy took a light green dress in her hand. She had never touched anything so soft. She put it gently against her chest and stood in front of the mirror to look at herself.

I look like a princess...

The "princess" in the mirror smiled back at her.

That moment Eliza shouted at her.

“What do you think you are doing?”

Candy hurriedly put the dress on the sofa.

“Who gave you permission to touch my dress? I hope you haven’t stained it!”

“Please forgive me...but my hands are clean.”

Candy showed both her hands but Eliza preferred to examine the dress.

“You’ll never wear such a dress in your life. Stop dreaming, poor girl. Besides, it wouldn’t suit you.”

I’m not so sure about that...

From what she had seen in the mirror, she felt that, on the contrary, the green dress would certainly suit her.

“I’m going to polish the shoes!”

Candy picked up the shoes and left the room cheerfully. Irritated, Eliza watched her as she was going out, when suddenly a sinister glare illuminated her eyes.

“I’ve got an idea! And this time I’ll manage to make her cry, I promise...Neal!”

Eliza headed decidedly to her brother’s room.

That same afternoon, the whole Leagan family was about to leave for the party. Candy was folding up the clothes that Eliza had left scattered all around. The door opened suddenly and Eliza and Neal, dressed in their best clothes, burst in, obviously happy.

“Hurry up; you’re coming to the party with us. We’re leaving right away!”

It was an order, and Eliza accompanied it with an insolent lifting of her head.

“What? Me? But...dressed like that?”

“Yes, you can stay in those pajamas, since we’re taking you along with us!” replied Neal with a sly look in his eyes.

Candy immediately realized that they intended to humiliate her.

Could she show up at a big party in a dress faded by many washings? Candy was not ashamed of it...On the contrary, she loved that dress, a testimony of Sister Lane’s affection since she had made it using pieces of other dresses.

“Thank you so much! If you allow me to keep my ‘pajamas’, I’ll gladly go with you!”

Actually Candy was delighted to be able to go to the party of the Ardleys.

“I can’t believe it! Did you see how insolently she accepted your invitation just now?”

“Don’t worry. When we arrive at the house of the Ardleys she will soon realize how pitiful she is.”

Inside the car, Eliza and Neal were talking to each other in a low voice. Candy had decided not to let herself worry about their small meannesses.

Eliza and Neal had laughed at her dress and had called it a “pajama”. Candy had no doubt that her dress was perfectly clean. Its only flaw was that it was rather old-fashioned and lacked any ornaments. But that did not matter. Her heart was leaping with joy at the thought that she was on her way to the house of the Ardlays, the clan owning the emblem of the eagle with the spread wings which seemed to have a close connection with Prince on the Hill...

Besides, it was the first time she was invited to a party. Even the Leagans submitted to the Ardlay family. Candy expected to see an incredibly luxurious house.

I imagine it will be a grand party. What kind of dinner are they going to serve?

The car was going along the lake. Then it left the road and entered a small path that was passing through the forest.

A breeze was blowing and the rays of the sun were filtered through the trees.

When a scent of roses began to float in the air, Candy’s heart got so excited that it was difficult for her even to breathe. The fragrance became more and more intense. Beyond the green forest appeared a flaming red landscape.

Oh, the gate of the roses is open!

Candy beamed with joy. She held her breath.

The car entered through the gate of the roses.

After the path that was covered with multicolored flowers, a huge garden extended around a fountain which was decorated with a goddess carrying a jar in her arms. In that perfectly manicured garden, various statues were symmetrically placed on the right and on the left. Beyond there stood a magnificent stone building that looked like a palace. That building had a lot of pinnacles which gave it a majestic appearance. It was the most beautiful mansion Candy had ever seen in her life, and that impression was getting stronger and stronger.

But this was not the only surprise that awaited her.

Three boys dressed in Scottish costumes were greeting the guests at the entrance of the mansion, accompanied by a small orchestra.

All three of them were surprised when they saw Candy getting off the car. Immediately surprise gave way to three radiant smiles.

“Hello, Candy!” said Alistair, or rather Stear.

“Hello there, little tomboy!” said the ever elegant Archibald.

As for the third boy...

“Today you’re smiling!”

It was the boy of the gate of the roses who was smiling at her.
“Anthony, we haven’t seen each other for such a long time!”
Eliza, with an ecstatic expression, called him by his name.

Chapter 9

Was that a dream?

Surrounded by three boys, Candy remained on a little cloud for a few moments.

They were all dressed in kilt, that traditional Scottish costume which Prince on the Hill had worn too.

“Candy, have you already met Anthony?” Stear and Archie asked discreetly.

Candy confirmed that with a nod of her head and blushed when she met Anthony’s eyes as he was smiling at her.

Anthony...So that’s his name.

She had noticed that Eliza had been repeating that name for several days. She had tried to imagine what that person was like. If only she could have guessed it...

“Will you please come into the grand salon? Madam Elroy will receive you.”

A liveried butler, worthy of the greatest royal families, introduced the guests to a large room.

“Anthony, I’m so happy to see you again!” said Eliza in a sweet voice, blocking Candy’s way and at the same time interrupting the boy who was about to talk to her.

Eliza dragged him away with her through the front door, without him being able to say a word.

And of course she took advantage of that to step nonchalantly on Candy’s feet.

The grand salon was wonderfully decorated with marble like the beautiful ceremonial halls of the European imperial courts. An abundance of flowers brightened the decoration. In front of a huge terrace, appetizing cakes and petit-fours had been placed in an artistic way. The crowd of guests, dressed in their finest clothes, saturated the room with a multitude of perfumes. The air was almost suffocating.

If Stear, who was behind Candy, hadn’t pushed her gently with both hands, she would have hesitated to set foot in such an intimidating room.

In the middle of the grand salon, on a sumptuously decorated velvet armchair, a tall, elderly lady was sitting, like an empress on her throne. No doubt that was the famous Great Aunt Elroy. One after the other, the guests were taking a step forward and bowing with the greatest respect in front of her.

“Hey, Anthony, will you tell us where you met our Candy?” asked Stear, nudging his elbow.

Obviously that question troubled him.

“Oh, some day in the forest...” replied Anthony vaguely, intending to stir up his curiosity.

“She’s very good at climbing trees...”

“And she’s a real expert at throwing the lasso!” interposed Archie who was anxious to get a word in edgewise.

As for Anthony, he just answered with a smile.

Does she really climb trees and throw the lasso? When I saw her, she was crying...

Anthony was looking furtively at Candy who, at that moment, was ecstatic in front of a magnificent candlestick. Her eyes were literally sparkling.

That day, Anthony was about to return to the mansion, and he had climbed on the gate of the roses in order to go faster. Soon it would be time for his Latin lesson. He had sneaked out of the house to see a robin’s nest he had found in the forest. Fortunately, the three blue eggs seemed to be in perfect condition.

The moment he was crossing hurriedly the gate of the roses to go back, he had heard the sound of footsteps similar to a large bird flapping its wings. Then he had seen a girl coming out of the forest in tears.

She collapsed in front of the gate, crying as if there was no tomorrow.

Anthony couldn’t help talking to her.

At the first word he said, the girl who was crying raised her face which was covered with mud.

She looked at me surprised, and then she called me “my prince”...As for me, I had the impression she was a little nymph who had ventured out of the forest...

How long had they been looking at each other like that?

The girl had calmed down, and she had even smiled. All of a sudden, it was as if a ray of sunlight had illuminated everything around. Anthony had blinked his eyes. That girl was dazzling. Her smile seemed to have the ability to melt even the hardest of hearts. No, he had never seen anything like that.

How can anyone have such a radiant smile? Who is she?

Since then, he had wanted to see her again. But he hadn’t dared to tell anyone about it, not even Stear or Archie. He had the impression that if he had told them, that moment between the roses would have vanished, like a dream.

And now that girl was in front of him.

Her name is Candy...

Anthony couldn’t take his eyes off her.

Great Aunt Elroy cleared her throat, and that was enough to cause complete silence in the parlor. All eyes turned towards her.

She cleared her throat again, and then she began to speak solemnly:

“Dear members of the Ardlay family, welcome. Anthony, Alistair, Archibald and I have decided to move in these parts. As you know, Anthony’s father has embarked on a long sea voyage, and Alistair and Archibald’s parents are in Arabia on business, so we have decided to live together. This was Great Uncle William’s idea. He thought it would be better for the boys to live in this place, surrounded by lush nature, rather than in the big city. That’s why we are moving into this summer residence which we have been using only in the summer until now. However...”

Great Aunt Elroy continued her speech in the same inflexible tone, stating that the prosperity of the Ardlay family, as in the past, was still due to Great Uncle William’s enterprises.

He must be a very influential person.

Candy couldn’t believe it. So that sumptuous palace was just a “summer residence”. Then what did their principal residence look like?

She could hardly imagine it...A moment later, Candy’s thoughts turned elsewhere and she had a hard time repressing her laughter. Behind the guests, near the terrace, Stear was cleverly handling a kind of small fishing rod, so that he could “fish” some cakes over the heads of the guests, without being noticed, and put them into his mouth, one after the other.

The whipped cream formed a circle around his lips and his crammed cheeks made him look like a squirrel.

Candy finally burst out laughing.

Immediately, everybody turned and looked at her.

“Who is there?” exclaimed Great Aunt Elroy angrily.

Candy turned pale.

“It’s...it’s me...I’m sorry!”

She had hesitated for a moment, but finally she stepped forward and stood in front of Great Aunt Elroy.

“What manners! Who are you? And what are those rags? How did you come here?”

“My name is...Candice White, and I work for the Leagan family. Forgive me for disturbing you while you were talking. I’m sorry!”

Candy lowered her head, on the verge of tears.

“The Leagan family?”

The “matriarch” was about to say something when Stear cried in a tense voice:

“Great Aunt! Please forgive me; it was me who made Candy laugh.”

“Alistair, it’s you again! You always exaggerate with your jokes. What have you done this time?”

When she saw Stear’s face with a mustache of white cream all around his mouth, the old lady’s expression was softened.

“I was fishing cakes with this.”

Stear showed his small fishing rod with an adjustable length.

“What is that, Alistair?”

“That’s a good question, Great Aunt! This is one of the century’s greatest inventions: the fishing cakes machine! Do you want me to make a demonstration?”

“No, thank you. Your inventions always surprise me. You’d better clean your face. You’re not at all presentable.”

Great Aunt Elroy was a very strict woman but evidently not with the boys. But every cloud has a silver lining: that incident had cut short a speech which could have continued for a while, and the guests finally seemed more relaxed. The butler invited them to be served with tea and cakes while they would be waiting for dinner. The servants brought the appetizers.

“Great Aunt, I’m really sorry for our servant’s rudeness,” began Mrs. Leagan tensely, taking a fearful step towards the matriarch. **“Eliza had pity on this girl who had never had the opportunity to go to a party, and she suddenly had the idea that we should take her with us...”**

“I understand the situation, Sara. Eliza has been very kind to show compassion for this poor child. But a girl dressed like that and with such manners might disturb the other guests. We must never forget where we are. It may not have been the right time...”

“I’m sorry. I’ll send her back home immediately...”

In the meantime, Anthony intervened cheerfully so that Sara Leagan’s words were silenced.

“Thank you for being lenient to this girl, Great Aunt. And thank you too for inviting her, Eliza.”

Seeing Anthony’s smile, Eliza, who was standing beside her mother, began to melt. Her lips, tight with anger, took on a much softer expression.

“Come on, it’s a party, let’s have fun!”

Archibald winked at Candy and led her to the terrace, since now the situation seemed to be under control.

Candy was worried about Mr. and Mrs. Leagan’s reactions, but she was delighted that Anthony and the two brothers had helped her get out of trouble. And she was also fascinated by the large table on which there were cakes from around the world.

A group of bagpipes began to play. The atmosphere was much more festive now.

“You have been brave, Candy. Usually nobody dares do anything whenever Great Aunt Elroy looks into their eyes,” Anthony said behind her, startling her.

As soon as Anthony spoke to her, she was short of breath.

“You saved me, all three of you...How can I thank you...?”

While Candy was stumbling over her words, trying to express her gratitude, the music changed into a romantic waltz. The guests began to dance.

“Will you dance with me, Anthony?” said Eliza.

Obviously, she had been waiting for that opportunity until now.

“Y...yes, if you want it.”

Anthony turned to Candy for a moment, a little distressed, but he took politely Eliza’s hand.

Anthony...He’s a really gentle boy.

Candy was looking absentmindedly at the boy who was smiling.

“Well, Candy, will you give me this dance?”

Archie invited her in a very formal tone.

“Ah, no, I’m sorry, but Candy will dance with me,” intervened Stear who had come back just at that moment, after having cleaned his face.

Without further ado, he took Candy’s hand.

“That’s not fair, Stear!”

“Too bad for you; the older one goes first!”

“But I have never danced...”

While Candy was blinking her eyes in surprise, Stear led her to the circle of the dancing pairs and assured her:

“Dancing is just moving your feet!”

Then he laughed and asked her mischievously:

“Will you put a black star again today?”

“Well, for today, as an exception, it’s going to be a white star! I have to do it since I was invited to such a wonderful party.”

She was sincere about it. Under Stear’s guidance, Candy’s footsteps might not be very steady, but they could still keep in rhythm. She was feeling light in her heart and body, as if she had wings.

When she met Anthony’s eyes as he was dancing with Eliza, he told her:

“Candy, the next dance is mine!”

Eliza immediately gave her a piercing look.

“You’re out of luck; the next one is already reserved for Archie. Your turn will come later, if you want,” answered Stear, assuming the air of an adult.

“Say, this little girl has a great success, I think!”

Why did Candy’s heart beat so hard when Anthony smiled? Everything seemed vague around her, which allowed her not to worry about Eliza’s murderous look. Only Anthony in a kilt was clearly outlined. He really looked like Prince on the Hill.

No...It’s not him. Certainly he looks like him but when I take a better look, no, it’s not the same person...

After dancing with Archie, while the musicians were taking a break, Eliza approached Candy with eyes burning with anger. She pulled her behind a curtain.

“I warn you, if you dance with Anthony, you won’t get away with it!”

She was clenching her fists, ready to strike her at any moment.

“And papa and mama are very angry with you!”

“And yet...If he asks me, I’m willing to accept!” replied Candy, without beating about the bush.

Eliza’s eyes opened wide.

Candy intended to dance with Anthony, and it didn’t matter whether Mr. and Mrs. Leagan and Eliza were angry or not.

“Don’t cry, little girl.”

She had seen again the boy who had comforted her at the gate of the roses. She had taken him for Prince on the Hill, and he had given her courage, exactly like him.

The musicians started playing again.

And when Anthony asked her for the next dance, Candy didn’t hesitate for an instant.

That dreamy party had ended.

Back in her small room, at the house of the Leagans, Candy was still smiling ecstatically. The members of the Leagan family had remained at the Ardlay mansion for dinner. She had come back alone, and without Eliza or Neal, Candy could still enjoy her thoughts.

She had danced with Anthony, the boy she had met at the gate of the roses...

He had smiled at her so radiantly while they were so close to each other.

He had held her hand so gently.

She had felt so light that while she was dancing she had the impression she was back at Pony’s Home. The image of the Prince who was holding his bagpipe and that of Anthony who was smiling were superimposed before her eyes.

“You dance beautifully.”

The simple evocation of Anthony’s gentle voice whispering that compliment in her ear was enough to make her blush once again.

So it was not a dream...

Candy sighed, took out the badge with the eagle and tinkled the little silver bell. She took a few dancing steps, alone in her room.

“My dear Prince, the boy who looks so much like you and about whom I have already talked to you so many times is called Anthony.”

The little bell was tinkling at every step, as if it were singing along with her.

“All three of them were wearing kilts. They told me that the ancestor

of the Ardlay family was a Scottish immigrant, so that's why they wear this outfit in special occasions. Would my Prince be somehow connected with the Ardlay family? I wonder..."

Candy was dancing while she was talking to the little bell, when the door of the room opened violently.

Candy turned around in surprise and saw Mrs. Leagan, her face red with anger. When did she return? She must have come to Candy's room without even changing...She was still in her evening dress and cape.

"Take this girl's things immediately to the stable!" she ordered the servants who had followed her.

"My things? To the stable?"

Surprised, Candy couldn't even move.

That pleasant dream vanished instantly. Disillusioned, she came back to reality.

"And you should be glad I'm not throwing you out of the house! Tonight, during the party, you brought shame to our family! Is that how you thank Neal and Eliza for their generosity? You are an awful girl...I can't allow you to live under the same roof as my children. From now on you will live in the stable and you will do every kind of work!" screamed Mrs. Leagan, completely hysterical.

"That's right, you'll take care of our horses; that will suit you very well."

Behind her mother, Eliza, with her arms crossed, was smiling triumphantly.

Chapter 10

A strange sound reached Candy's ears. She quickly hid her head under the covers.

I'm sleepy. Stop those weird grunts.

The sound didn't stop.

"Will you stop this racket? I can't sleep..."

Candy got up but her words gave way to a little cry when she found herself in front of two horses looking straight into her eyes, a few centimeters away from her nose.

"Oh...Oh, yes...That's right, I moved to the stable last night. I had forgotten about it..."

She had had so much fun at the Ardlay party...Her heart had overflowed with happiness like a balloon...so much so that it had finally exploded...

Candy shook her head.

"Sister Lane used to say: 'Every time we think of something bad, we feel moody or depressed...Then our heart gets smaller'."

Caesar shook his head neighing. It was clear he agreed with Candy. She giggled. That horse had such tender eyes!

Caesar was a beautiful animal with a shiny black coat. He belonged to Neal. Cleopatra, white as snow, belonged to Eliza. Both of them were thoroughbreds, so she had heard. And yet, Eliza and Neal had soon been tired of horse riding. Since equitation had ceased to interest them, they had completely neglected their horses and showed them no more affection.

The two horses were shaking their heads and showing their teeth.

"That's it, you're hungry...I'm sorry. I'll prepare your breakfast right away. I say, you are very early risers!"

Candy yawned, and then turned around to get dressed.

One must be polite with everyone, even horses!

But it must be said that with her bed and dresser there was not much room left in the small building.

The place was dark, filled with straw and impregnated with the characteristic smell of any stable. But that didn't bother Candy.

"I used to take care of the chickens at Pony's Home and I've had friends of your kind from the nearest farm," she explained.

Then she decided to introduce herself to her new roommates.

"Caesar, Cleopatra, I'm glad to meet you. My name is Candice White but you can call me Candy."

Caesar and Cleopatra opened their snouts at the same time, in a kind of smile, as if welcoming her.

Candy patted both of them and immediately started cleaning up the

place.

“I’ll turn this stable into a brand new palace; trust me!”

Every time Candy spoke to them, the two animals responded with a snort. They were delighted to have company at last!

When Candy finished cleaning up, she carried a bucket full of manure to the garden. Mr. Whitman, the gardener, was already working. He was an early riser too.

Miss Pony appreciated it when the neighbors brought to her buckets of manure to use as a fertilizer. Maybe Mr. Whitman would also be happy with that gift.

And carrying manure might also bring good luck to her. At least it couldn’t hurt...

“Well, I’m going around carrying manure early in the morning!” ♪

While she was humming, Candy waved her hand at Mr. Whitman’s straw hat that she saw going up and down between the colorful hollyhocks.

“Mr. Whitman! I’ve brought you some horse manure for your garden!

♪ La, la, la, I’m going around carrying...”

Suddenly, Candy blushed and froze on the spot.

“Good morning, Candy!”

Behind a high orange hollyhock, she saw Anthony.

“An...Anthony? Eh...Good morning...”

“Good morning, Candy,” said Mr. Whitman this time, appearing with his hair and beard all white.

He straightened up behind another hollyhock.

“Did you come on purpose to bring me horse manure? That’s very kind of you...”

Mr. Whitman didn’t keep smiling for a long time.

“This morning Mary told me what happened to you. So they have put you in the stable? Everybody thinks it’s shameful...Unfortunately I can’t do much for you but if I can give you some advice, don’t hesitate to ask me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Whitman...”

Candy forced a little smile, trying not to get emotional. Behind Mr. Whitman, Anthony looked away and lowered his head. He seemed to be biting his lip.

“So, Mr. Anthony, did you want to know anything else about pests?” asked the gardener.

Anthony shook his head quickly.

“Thank you, Mr. Whitman, I have understood everything.”

Then Mr. Whitman went away to take care of the rest of the flowers.

At that moment Anthony looked into Candy’s eyes with a serious expression.

“They put you in the stable? What does that mean?”

“It’s nothing. This is my room now, that’s all.”

“What do you mean, that’s all?”

Anthony was red with indignation. When she saw him frowning, Candy hurried to smile.

“Oh, it’s much better than before, Anthony. I’m more comfortable now, I assure you!” she said breathlessly.

The boy kept looking at Candy. He saw clearly that she forced herself to look happy.

Who would like to live in a stable?

He remembered that she was crying when he had met her in front of the gate of the roses.

Her smile had broken his heart.

Candy changed the subject.

“I didn’t know you knew Mr. Whitman, Anthony.”

“Excuse me? Oh, yes...I’m learning a lot of things from him, about cultivating roses, creating hybrids, selecting new varieties...”

He had understood that Candy didn’t want to talk about her situation anymore. So he tried to keep that conversation.

“Cultivating roses? You really like these flowers, don’t you, Anthony?”

“I love roses! They are sweet and also noble.”

Just like you, Anthony...

Candy didn’t dare to pronounce those words, at least not distinctly. Usually she was so sincere...Why did she get so flustered when she was with Anthony?

She would have liked to stay longer and talk to him, but there was so much work waiting for her that morning. So she let him go back to his private rose garden which he kept in a corner of the immense Ardlay estate, and returned to the stable. She was almost dancing with happiness.

I’ve just seen Anthony for the second day in a row! Actually I’m lucky they have put me here! Still, I would have liked to talk to him a little more. When I have a little free time, I’ll go to the gate of the roses. He may be there...

Now that she had made her decision, she could devote all her energy to her work: washing the napkins, cleaning the windows...As soon as she finished, she ran as fast as she could to the gate of the roses without stopping, and without being spotted by Eliza or anyone else. She put so much energy into it that the birds on the trees flew away, wondering what might be causing that noise.

The gate of the roses was closed.

Candy clung to the iron bars through which the red roses intertwined. She tried to see what was on the other side. She murmured Anthony’s name. But who could have heard such a faint voice?

“Anthony...”

She might have repeated it, but only a few petals of roses answered her by falling on her, as if they wanted to make fun of her.

She preferred to give up and went back, much slower than she had come. Why was she so anxious to see him again?

She was surprised at herself.

Was it because he looked like Prince on the Hill?

No. When she was with Anthony, she felt immersed in feelings she had never experienced before. It was something unknown until now. As if she were on a fluffy cloud from which a delicate perfume of roses emanated.

She was greatly disappointed when she returned to the stable...And then she stopped short.

“Anthony!”

He was there, in front of the entrance. He was holding in his arms a pot containing a rosebush whose buds seemed ready to open.

“Candy...I was waiting for you,” said the boy, lowering his head shyly.

“But I...”

Candy lowered her head too. Her heart was full of emotions. She had run to the gate of the roses hoping to find Anthony there. And he had been waiting for her all this time...

“Come in...Actually, no...We’d better stay outside, Anthony...This stable is certainly not the place that suits you best.”

“That’s not true...”

Anthony entered first, frowning. The surprised reaction he couldn’t restrain didn’t go unnoticed by Candy. In a corner of the small stable there was a wooden bed. The straw was properly gathered in a pile, and the horse feeder was decorated with flowers. Candy’s efforts to make that place as comfortable as possible were visible but...

Candy...They treat you as they treat their horses...

“Anthony...I’m sorry to receive you in this place which is definitely not very pretty. At least my room has its style, doesn’t it? I don’t just have pictures of horses on the walls; I have real horses! People don’t usually have real animals like these in their own bedroom. Don’t you agree?”

Anthony couldn’t take his eyes off Candy who was welcoming him to her room, so naturally and without the slightest shame.

He felt such warmth inside his chest that moment...That feeling was something new for him.

Candy...You are always yourself, wherever you are! You never complain, you always see the bright side of everything...

He had never met a girl like her.

“By the way, I’ve brought you a small gift.”

“Oh, is that for me?”

Candy’s eyes brightened with joy.

“Of course. Here it is.”

“What beautiful roses...Are they really for me?”

The girl’s heart was beating fast as she was receiving the pale pink flowers from Anthony’s hands.

One of the buds was shyly preparing to open.

“This rose...It’s a new variety I’ve just successfully created... Finally, after a lot of failures, I have to say...”

“In that case, it must be very important for you. Why do you give it to me?”

She was so overwhelmed with emotion that she could hardly breathe.

“It’s been a while since I started looking for a name for this flower... But I have found it at last.”

“Oh? And what did you call it?”

Anthony caressed Caesar’s nose and added quietly:

“Sweet Candy.”

It was almost a whisper. Then he looked up at Candy with an abashed expression.

Sweet Candy...

It was as if a scarlet bud had opened deep in the girl’s heart.

The two of them stayed there for a long time, unable to say anything.

They were just looking at each other, each one lost in the bright eyes of the other.

Chapter 11

The buds of the Sweet Candy roses grew bigger every day, as if they tried to stretch with all their strength and capture the rays of the morning sun. When she woke up, Candy's first gesture was to greet Anthony's roses. That was enough for her to be sure that the starting day would be wonderful once again.

Everyday life in the stable was always pleasant. She had become immediately fond of her roommates, the two intelligent and affectionate horses.

But the best part of all this was that Eliza and Neal hated the stable. They never came close to it.

Actually, Candy could no longer find any snakes or frogs in her bed, Neal's great specialty, which had happened so many times when she was staying in the north room.

The domestic tasks that had been assigned to her from now on didn't displease her; quite the contrary. Stewart, Mary, Mr. Whitman and Doug, the cook, were all nice to her. All of them had taken the trouble of teaching her how to do her work well. And now, thanks to them, Candy knew what a car was constituted of, how to make bread, and she even started to learn about botany.

On the other hand, the situation was very favorable for Eliza and Neal, of course.

"How can she be having fun all day long? She lives in the stable!"

"I'm sure even monkeys are smarter than her."

They were secretly watching her from an upstairs window as she was splitting firewood at the back of the house. Every time she managed to split a wood, she did a V with her fingers, a sign of victory, out of pure satisfaction.

"My word, that poor girl is a complete idiot," fulminated Eliza. "I'll have to teach her a good lesson one of these days..."

"You are right. We'll make her cry and force her to apologize to us."

Neal spat out of the window in Candy's direction, evidently without reaching her.

Candy was happy for a simple reason: her Sweet Candy roses.

Whenever she recalled Anthony's shy smile, it seemed to her that her heart was filled with soft rose petals.

That day, Candy was brushing Cleopatra, when a sudden hissing sound passed by her. It was an arrow that had hit straight on a pillar of the stable.

The silver dart was shining brightly, with a red ribbon attached to it.

"Oh, I was so scared...But this arrow is very pretty."

Laughing, Candy pulled it out. She knew only one person capable of making such an arrow, and she was not mistaken.

“Although I’m used to it, I’m still surprised by my archer’s skill. I’ve never missed a shot; I’m so talented!”

That cheerful voice was that of Stear who appeared shortly afterwards. He was accompanied by Archie who was wearing a wide-brimmed green hat.

“I suspected it was you, Stear. Isn’t that arrow strange?”

“That’s because this arrow is edible.”

Stear swaggered with a triumphant air.

“It’s made of chocolate. It can pierce your heart and you can eat it! Isn’t that a good idea? It’s a gift for you!”

“Oh, how nice!”

Candy exclaimed joyfully before bringing her nose close to the chocolate arrow. The aroma of the cocoa that came out of it was rich and seemed to be of first quality.

“Anthony is not with you?”

She couldn’t help asking that.

“We haven’t spoken to him. That will teach him to sneak away like he did the other day.”

While speaking, Archie began to quietly sniff the scent of the half-opened Sweet Candy roses which he had spotted at first glance, when he cried out:

“Hey, what are you doing?”

He quickly put his hand on his hat, because Caesar had stretched his neck to bite it.

“Oh! My beautiful French hat is all crushed now...”

“I’m sorry, Archie. Caesar must have mistaken it for a large cabbage.”

Candy apologized to him, trying not to laugh. Caesar neighed.

“My hat is not a cabbage!”

Archie sighed, but there was a mischievous look in his eyes.

“Even if your precious hat is eaten, you’re still happy, aren’t you, Archie?”

Stear gave him a nudge to tease him.

“Why? Is there any good news, Archie?”

“Indeed. Candy, you know that tomorrow there will be a garden party at the house of the Leagans, don’t you?”

“Of course I do! That’s why I was asked to groom Caesar and Cleopatra and show them to the guests.”

In fact, the entire household of the Leagans was busy with the preparations.

“We’re invited to that party too, and among the guests there is a very charming young lady who...”

“Shut up, Stear.”

Archie tried to silence his brother with his hand, but the latter went on undisturbed.

“Don’t be shy, Archie. That young lady is crazy about him!”

Stear disclosed the secret in an instant.

“So, Archie, is that why you bought a new hat?”

Candy also smiled mischievously. The boy let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Not at all. I just like hats. Besides, I don’t feel very comfortable with girls who are too shy.”

“Ah, but this young lady is madly in love...She wrote him a letter saying: ‘I’d like so much to stop during my journey, if only for one day’. And if you want my opinion, it’s obvious that she convinced her parents to let her come to the party.”

Stear began an imitation, just to tease him:

“ ‘I want to see you, Archie, if only for a moment’.”

“Stop it!”

Archie gave his brother a slight push. Even if he didn’t seem so annoyed, he took on a greatly distressed expression.

“It’s so hard to be successful with women, my dear Candy.”

The stable filled with laughter.

Anthony would probably be invited too to the garden party the next day.

She would have an opportunity to see him, even from a distance.

What would that girl be like, who was so shy and madly in love with Archie?

She may be shy, but still she must be feeling a true passion since she’s coming especially to see Archie.

Candy felt she could understand what that girl was experiencing.

The next day the sky was blue and completely cloudless, perfect for a garden party. A pleasant breeze was blowing in the garden of the Leagans.

Candy had been working since dawn, without having a moment of rest. She had put up an awning in the garden and had decorated the tables with flowers. She also had to make some flower garlands for Caesar and Cleopatra.

For that reason, Mr. Whitman had prepared for her several sunflowers of different sizes.

“This is an opportunity for you to look pretty! The one with the large sunflowers is for you, Caesar. Here you are. And the one with lots of small sunflowers is for Cleopatra. Oh, yes, you look wonderful!”

Caesar and Cleopatra shook their heads happily.

Cheerful laughter was coming from the garden.

The guests arrived, and the party started.

Is Anthony already here? I wonder about Archie's expression when he will be talking to that girl.

Then one of the staff who were in charge of organizing the party came looking for her. Candy took the reins of the two horses with both hands and headed towards the garden.

Under the awning, the guests were talking cheerfully around the decorated tables.

Candy immediately spotted Anthony.

That girl in the purple dress who is looking down must be that one who is madly in love with Archie.

The girl's face was hidden by her hair. That was a pity, since Archie was right next to her.

"Oh, I'll show you Eliza's and Neal's horses now. They are thoroughbreds!"

Mrs. Leagan proudly announced the arrival of the animals. The girl in the purple dress slowly raised her face.

That moment, Candy held her breath, and her legs refused to go one step further. The horses started trampling on the ground.

Annie! Is that you, Annie?

There was no doubt; Candy was sure of that. Annie, with whom she had grown up at Pony's Home, was there, very close to her.

Annie turned pale. She had recognized Candy too.

The girl's lips were trembling. She seemed to be ready to burst into tears.

Candy immediately turned her eyes away. She had just remembered her friend's last letter.

She had written very clearly that she didn't want anybody to know she had grown up in an orphanage.

Candy had to start walking again immediately...and to pass in front of the one who had been her closest friend, pretending she didn't know her.

Candy managed to calm down and started to walk, looking straight ahead.

Don't worry, Annie. I won't say anything...And above all, don't cry...

"What's the matter, Annie? You look very pale."

Archie spoke to her, full of concern.

Annie answered him in a weak voice:

"It's nothing...It's that...I'm afraid of horses."

Then Mrs. Leagan responded in her own piercing voice.

"Oh, forgive us. Candy, take the horses back quickly."

Candy, with her head still lowered, bowed and then hurried back to the stable.

"I adore horses, but my daughter is a little fearful...Annie, are you all right?"

The voice of her father, Mr. Brighton, was full of affection.

Annie...I wanted so much to see you again...It's been so long...

Candy would have wanted to turn around, run to her and embrace her.

Her shoulders were trembling slightly.

Stupefied, Annie was watching Candy as she was moving away.

I would never have imagined I would find her in a place like this...

She had tried so hard to forget; she had wished so much to forget.

The memories had finally become blurred...The memories of Pony's Home.

And the memories of Candy who had always protected her.

Annie held tight the handkerchief in her hand.

If Archie ever learns that I was abandoned, that I grew up in an orphanage...

That simple thought made her suffocate.

She didn't want him to know.

Archie had gone to a nearby table to get some refreshment for Annie who was watching him discreetly, with her eyes full of tenderness.

Archibald was elegant and cheerful, and seemed to literally glow.

Conversation with him was always amusing and he had great success with girls. Even though he was nice to all of them, he remained elusive, a mystery for everyone.

Since their first meeting, she had been attracted to him. After having admired him for a long time, she had finally dared to talk to him.

If there was only one person who shouldn't know her secret, that was Archie.

"Hello, Annie Brighton."

It was Eliza calling behind her, which made her shudder.

"It's a shame you don't like horses. But as long as you're here, don't hesitate to ask anything you want from the girl who brought them. She does all kind of work, and she's also our personal servant, Neal's and mine."

"Yes, you can put her to work all you want."

Neal intervened in the discussion too. Annie stiffened immediately, unable even to turn around.

"That girl lived in an orphanage; we took her in and yet she has a terrible character. Now she lives in the stable. At least that place suits her perfectly."

That moment Annie closed her eyes very tight, as if she had to endure something unbearable.

Chapter 12

Candy had climbed on a tree in the internal garden and was looking absently at the sky.

It had turned into a giant screen on which the days of her childhood were passing before her eyes.

The flower necklaces they made on Pony's Hill, the fishing in the creek, the paths on which she used to run without ever getting tired, chasing the dry leaves swept by the wind...

In the winter days they used large boxes instead of sleighs to slide down the snowy hill. And Annie had always been by her side.

Annie, how beautiful you have become...You are such a charming young lady...

That purple dress suited her very well. It made Candy think of the day Annie had left Pony's Home. At that time she was wearing a light blue dress, of a much lighter color than that she was wearing at the garden party.

Tears came into her eyes. Surprised, Candy blinked them as hard as she could.

There was also Annie's last letter.

Of course, she hadn't answered her since. But she had never forgotten her friend for a moment.

Was she happy? Was she afraid? Did people treat her well?

Although Candy knew that Annie had been adopted by a rich and loving family, she couldn't help worrying about her.

You look happy, Annie...I'm relieved...Even if I didn't expect this meeting.

She could blink her eyes as long as she wanted, but tears didn't stop flowing.

Candy plucked two leaves and put them over her eyes.

"Here! There's nothing better than covering your eyes to stop the tears, even the most stubborn ones...Except that they won't keep at all."

Candy was murmuring those few words, when she saw from a distance Eliza and Neal stealthily coming towards her.

"That Annie is such a weakling. Speaking to her was enough to intimidate her."

Eliza seemed very amused. Hearing her from the top of her tree, Candy held her breath.

"Finally there's someone who is worth teasing...We're really going to have fun."

Neal said that in his usual insidious tone.

"Definitely. How are we going to make her cry?"

“I guess a little coward like her must hate caterpillars.”

“Yes, caterpillars! That’s a very good idea! She’s going to leave as soon as the party is over. We’ll manage to put a little souvenir in her purse.

“Eliza! That tree seems to be full of caterpillars. Moreover, we have an ideal culprit...”

“The ‘scapegoat of the stable!’”

Neal and Eliza shook hands and then approached the tree on which Candy was perched.

She would have recoiled too upon learning that there were caterpillars in that tree, but she told herself that it was not the right moment to worry about that.

Annie really detested caterpillars. She started crying at the mere sight of them.

“I won’t let you do something like this to Annie!”

From the top of her perch, Candy shouted that warning to them before jumping from the branch on which she was sitting and landing in front of them.

“Huh? What are you doing here?”

Eliza and Neal, stupefied, took a step back. Neal had already caught some caterpillars in his handkerchief.

“If you hurt Annie...Miss Brighton, I’ll never forgive you!”

Candy lashed out at Neal.

“Stop it! Let me go! You orphan brat! Stable wench!”

“Let go of those caterpillars first!”

Neal resisted waving the handkerchief in which he kept the insects. Candy threw him on the ground with a push and fell upon him astride. She grabbed his arm and scratched his face. His sister began to scream and ran off to call their mother.

“Ah! Mother! Help!”

Hearing Eliza’s cries, Mrs. Leagan came hurriedly, followed by Archie, Stear and Anthony.

“Candy, let go of his arm!”

Anthony’s tense voice sounded behind Candy. She noticed that and moved away from Neal immediately.

“Oh, look at Neal’s face...It’s horrible!”

“Mother, Neal just tried to prevent this girl from hurting Annie.”

In a nasal voice, Eliza whimpered beside her mother.

“Yes, that’s true! She was going to put caterpillars in Annie’s purse.”

“Liar! It was you who wanted to do that!”

Candy couldn’t accept such an accusation; it was more than she could bear.

“How impertinent! *You* are the liar! Mother, we’ve got proof. Isn’t that so, Neal?”

The boy nodded and suddenly put his hand with his handkerchief in the pocket of Candy's apron. He took out a handful of caterpillars, the same ones he was holding until now.

"I..."

Candy stopped short.

Behind Archie, who was frowning, Annie kept her head down with a frightened expression.

Oh, no...If this argument continues, Annie will be put in an awkward position.

In silence, Candy lowered her head. Anthony didn't say anything. What was he thinking of all this?

Mrs. Leagan gesticulated as she spoke, while the air was impregnated with her strong perfume.

"She is really a horrible girl! She always brings shame to us."

"You should have sent her back to her orphanage a long time ago!"

It was Neal, full of frustration, who had screamed while rubbing his arm. His face was red with scratches.

"We'll talk about this later. Not now, in front of all our guests...And as for you, you won't get away with this. Return to the stable!"

Mrs. Leagan's voice was trembling with anger as she was talking to Candy. Eliza and Neal, with their most angelic expression, winked at each other.

With her eyes down, Candy didn't say anything.

"I regret that you had to witness such an unpleasant spectacle. Annie, that servant girl who takes care of the horses has no manners at all. I'm sorry. Why don't we forget this incident and have some rose tea and a tasty pudding?"

Mrs. Leagan smiled kindly at Annie, who nodded slowly and then turned her back on Candy.

Annie knew very well what had happened: Candy had started that fight for her.

She knew how much Annie hated caterpillars.

Candy...

Unable to restrain herself any longer, while she was walking, Annie turned around and glanced stealthily over her shoulder. Then she met the gaze of her friend who had raised her head.

I'm sorry, Candy. I'm in such a situation that I can't help you. I can't even speak to you. Forgive me...

Candy felt she had heard her friend's plea.

I know it very well, Annie...Don't worry!

She would have liked so much to tell her those words, to smile at her and reassure her.

"Why are we still here? Let's go back, everyone!"

Mrs. Leagan grew impatient and invited Anthony and the others who

were still lingering.

Stear looked at Candy cheerfully.

“Don’t feel bad about that.”

“Exactly. Everybody knows that Eliza and Neal are behind that bad trick.”

With those few words, Archie ran to join Annie. She was waiting for him, without looking back.

“Let’s hurry, Anthony, before aunt gets angry with us too.”

Absorbed in his thoughts, Anthony started walking beside Stear. Suddenly he turned around and gently wiped the mud off Candy’s arms while she was standing motionless, looking elsewhere.

“Anthony...I would like to...”

“Candy, don’t be so rebellious. You should apologize to Neal.”

“What?”

Anthony was looking at Candy with a serious expression. That took her breath away.

“I’ll come and see you later if you like.”

He told her that quietly before turning his back on her. Eliza approached him immediately.

Anthony...

The image of the boy who was walking away was quickly blurred by tears.

“Don’t be so rebellious.”

Anthony didn’t turn around anymore.

He must be thinking I’m a savage who acts violently for no reason; a real tomboy.

More than anyone else in the world, Candy would have wanted Anthony to understand her. She would have liked him to comfort her as cheerfully as Stear had done. Even Archie had understood what had happened!

Anthony...I wanted...

Not knowing what to do, Candy didn’t stay there any longer and started running.

Maybe she was unconsciously looking for some place where she could cry.

Anthony must have been astonished...And he probably hated her now...

She was so sad that she couldn’t stay there.

She reached the bank of the river. A boat was tied to a tree. It was swinging gently among some aquatic plants.

At least nobody would see her there.

Candy climbed into the boat and, lying flat on her stomach, she began to cry. Her shoulders were trembling, causing the boat to sway.

“Miss Pony...Sister Lane...”

Without realizing it, she had begun to whisper those names which brought her so much nostalgia. She grabbed Miss Pony's cross which she was always wearing under her blouse. She had also hung the badge of Prince on the Hill around her neck, so as not to lose it.

Still crying, Candy tinkled the little bell. A sound that was always sweet in her ears.

"Prince...what should I do now?"

Little girl, you should smile anyway. You are prettier when you smile.

The sound of the little bell mixed with the Prince's voice.

Anthony told me that too. But now he hates me...

Candy held the badge tight in her hand.

Be careful, Candy! If you keep crying like this, you'll be even more miserable...Come on, think about some pleasant memory. You have plenty of them, don't you?

"Yes...So many..."

Candy lay on her back and rubbed her eyes. The blue summer sky seemed to radiate. She had only beautiful memories from Pony's Home. And then there was the party at the Ardlay house...When she had danced with Anthony.

Naturally, Candy had started smiling and without realizing it, she had even fallen asleep.

Her body swayed. Hearing the lapping of the water, Candy woke up.

"Oh, the boat got carried away!"

While she was sleeping, the rope had broken loose from the tree. Places she had never seen before were passing in front of her, one after the other. The boat had gained incredible speed. And there were no oars! The current was too strong for her to jump into the water and try to swim.

What am I going to do?

It was almost dark. There was nobody by the river.

And then she heard a deafening rumble, like a thunder. It was getting louder and louder.

"A waterfall!"

Candy, in a panic movement, clung to both sides of the boat.

The rumble was getting closer and closer. The boat was speeding up even more, as if it was absorbed into an increasing current.

Candy didn't even have time to scream. She was thrown off the boat into the river, and then she lost consciousness.

Chapter 13

She was feeling very well. She was warm, and that was just what she needed. Woods were crackling in a fireplace. The smell of burning wood made her homesick. Was she perhaps at Pony's Home? Had she come back there?

Candy slightly opened her eyes.

"Ah! A pirate!"

She instantly let out a shriek, clutching the blanket that covered her. A man with long brown hair was watching her. Half of his face was covered with a thick beard and he was wearing sunglasses.

"I've known better greetings than that."

His voice was gentle and cheerful. Candy was reassured by that kind voice which didn't agree with his appearance at all.

"Eh...What happened to me?"

"I'm glad you're feeling better."

The "pirate" smiled. He actually seemed deeply relieved. Any sense of danger dissolved immediately and the atmosphere became relaxed and much more pleasant. Candy sat up in bed.

"Was it...was it you who saved me, sir?"

She asked that question timidly. The last thing she remembered was when she had fallen into the waterfall.

"Well, I was the one who got you out of the water while you were about to drown. But I would appreciate it if you didn't call me 'sir'. I may not look like it, but I'm not that old."

He removed his sunglasses. His eyes were blue and clear like a lake in the morning light.

"You look much more handsome like this, sir. At least you don't look like a pirate anymore."

Candy told her opinion honestly.

"You insist on calling me 'sir'! I'm neither a pirate nor a sir!"

The man looked amused.

"My name is Albert. And this is Poupe."

With a delicate gesture, Albert took a skunk out of one of the pockets of his frayed and huge coat.

"Oh, a skunk!"

By reflex, Candy put her hand on her nose. Albert and Poupe seemed annoyed.

"Don't be afraid. Poupe is a young lady who knows how to behave."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Candy took the animal's tiny "hand" and squeezed it.

"Nice to meet you, Poupe. I'm Candy."

"Well, Princess Candy, it's time for lunch. You woke up just when the

soup was ready. Can you get up?”

Albert discreetly put Candy’s dress at the foot of the bed and went towards the fireplace to take care of the soup that was simmering in a pot.

Apparently, Candy had slept wearing an old shirt of Albert’s.

She had fallen into the waterfall. How long had she remained unconscious?

The dress was almost dry. Candy put it on, folded the shirt which she had borrowed, and jumped lightly out of bed. As she was advancing, with her steps still a little hesitant, a squirrel brushed past her. Candy blinked her eyes. Looking more carefully, she noticed that that house looked like a mountain cabin but there were animals everywhere. A dog, a duck, a rabbit, and even a deer, which at first she had mistaken for a stuffed animal.

All those animals were injured, and it seemed that Albert had been treating them. Suddenly, Candy felt a great anxiety.

“Tell me...we are still in America, aren’t we? We are not in Africa, anyway...”

Candy’s troubled expression must have amused Albert, who burst out laughing heartily.

“Yes, last I’ve heard, we are still in America...But tell me, Candy, where are you from? You haven’t fallen from the sky, have you?” he said cheerfully.

“I live with the Leagan family...”

Candy stopped short. That was it; she remembered everything that had happened before she got into the boat. She thought of Anthony and her heart sank immediately.

“Then it’s all right, you’re not that far. We can eat in peace.”

Albert smiled reassuringly at Candy.

Then he took the simple ham sandwiches and the steaming pot of soup and placed them on a large wooden board that served as a rustic table.

“Thank you.”

Candy sat on a chair made of a tree stump. She took a sandwich, and then immediately thought about her situation. It wasn’t really the time for her to eat nonchalantly.

She had been ordered to remain confined in the stable.

Not only had she disobeyed, but she had also disappeared without warning anyone.

I wonder if Annie has returned home safe and sound...And Anthony... What will be his reaction when he finds out I have disappeared?

“What’s wrong?”

Albert was looking cheerfully at Candy’s face while she was lost in her thoughts.

“I...I have to go back!”

Candy got up hurriedly from the tree stump. Yet if she went back to the Leagans, they would throw her out.

Anyway, Candy wanted to see Anthony one last time.

With the sandwich still in her hand, she bowed her head towards Albert.

“Thank you for everything you have done for me. I’ll never forget that you saved my life!”

“Don’t worry about that. But are you sure you want to go back now?

In the middle of the night?”

“In the middle of the night?”

Indeed, outside the window she could see the moon shining through the darkness.

“Even though the Leagan residence is not far, it will take you a long time to go there on foot. And it’s better to avoid walking in the forest when it’s dark. Don’t worry; I’ll accompany you in the boat tomorrow at dawn. And if that can reassure you, I tell you that even with this moon I won’t turn into a wolf and devour you. Come on, finish your soup before it gets cold.”

To turn into a wolf? Albert had sounded so funny that Candy couldn’t help laughing. And that was when she felt she was starving.

“So, bon appetite!”

“Yes, let’s eat! To tell you the truth, I’m very hungry too.”

Albert laughed so much that his bearded face became almost unrecognizable.

In the meantime...

Anthony was walking in the forest, with a lantern in his hand.

Where did you go, Candy?

As soon as Annie had left, Anthony had immediately returned to the stable, and he had been looking for Candy ever since.

Why did I tell her such a thing? The poor girl must be in trouble...

Candy would never have scratched Neal’s face without any reason.

And yet I told her she was too rebellious...

Anthony felt his heart was crushed whenever he remembered Candy’s expression at that moment. She had wanted to tell him something, but she hadn’t been able to.

Why couldn’t I be nicer to her? I thought I was the one who knew her best, the one who was more convinced than anyone else that she would never behave the way she was accused of.

It was possible that Candy would be sent back to the orphanage but he wanted to prevent that at all costs.

That moment Anthony heard a sound coming from a nearby bush.

“Who’s there? Candy, is that you?”

He rushed to illuminate that bush.

“Oh, it’s just you, Archie.”

The boy came out of the bush, removing the leaves from his hair.

“It’s me who should have told you that. I thought I had found Candy!”

Archie turned his lantern, which was about to burn out, towards Anthony.

“You can’t sleep either? But where could she have gone?”

Archie murmured as if he were talking to himself. It was the first time he couldn’t sleep because he was worried about someone. He enjoyed having a charming company, but he had never been madly in love with any girl. And he didn’t like any girl to be too much attached to him either.

He liked Annie Brighton, but nothing more than that. In fact, he had been relieved that she hadn’t stayed longer. He enjoyed much more talking to Candy.

“I went back to the stable to look, but she hadn’t returned yet.”

“All right, Archie. Let’s go back to the lake.”

Anthony held up his lantern, and the two boys began to walk.

The moonlight projected a golden fringe on the surface of the water.

The shadows of the trees only enhanced the darkness of the surrounding area. That moment they heard a soft lapping of water coming from the lake and getting closer to them. They could also see a small light in the same direction.

“But that is my brother’s boat!”

Archie swung his lantern.

“Stear!”

Anthony and Archie shouted together towards the light.

The silhouette in the boat must have heard them, because it began to wave a hand to them.

“Stear is looking for Candy too...” murmured Anthony.

It was indeed him. As soon as he heard that Candy had disappeared, the boy couldn’t remain idle.

Why do I think so much about her? She is so little, and her face is full of freckles... Yet until now I have never been interested in anything but inventions and mechanics...

When the boat reached the shore, Anthony and Archie ran to meet Stear.

“I went around the lake, but I didn’t find anything,” said the young inventor, getting off the boat.

“Where could Candy have gone?”

If only I hadn’t told her something like that...

Exhausted, Anthony sat on the edge of the boat that was stranded on the shore.

“We have to find her quickly; the Leagans intend to throw her out of the house,” sighed Stear.

“What is even more awful is that they all say they would rather she didn’t come back.”

Archie turned to look at the water, annoyed.

The lake seemed to sigh too, sparkling under the reflection of the moon on its surface.

The three boys had no desire to return home. Each one, absorbed in his own thoughts, was looking up at the night sky.

Was Candy looking at the moon too? And in that case, where was she?

Candy... Where are you? I hope you are safe and sound...

Anthony kept looking steadily at the bright moon, while he was praying.

Chapter 14

“Cheer up, we’re almost there.”

Albert tightened his grip on the oars by clenching his fists.

In the morning mist, the boat was moving quietly on the water, while the oars were making a drowsy noise.

A bird crossed the clear sky.

“I’ll be in trouble if I go back...”

Candy murmured and inhaled the fragrance of the flowers and the vegetation that grew along the banks of the river, soaked with the morning dew.

She had enjoyed that evening with Albert and his animals. The warm fireplace, the taste of the plain soup he had prepared. Candy had confided to him her adventure, watching the fire.

It was strange. She had just met him, and yet she had been able to talk about everything with Albert.

She had told him about her childhood, when she had been abandoned in front of Pony’s Home. Then she had been brought to the house of the Leagans, initially as a playing companion for the children, and later she had been forced to take care of the horses. And now, she might be in danger of losing even that position.

She expected that they would probably throw her out as soon as she returned.

“But I don’t want to go back to Pony’s Home. Well, actually, I want to. And I know I would be welcomed with open arms. But first of all, I don’t want to cause them any trouble. That’s why I’d rather the Leagan family would keep me, even if I had to live in the pigsty.”

Since the day before, until late at night, Albert had listened to Candy’s story, without saying a word, just nodding occasionally.

“I see...You don’t have any place to live, like me.”

“What? Like you, Albert?”

Candy was surprised. Albert scratched his head, embarrassed.

“To tell the truth, this cabin isn’t mine. There was nobody here, so I stayed without asking anyone’s permission.”

“Oh, I didn’t know...”

Candy began to understand that moment why Albert’s clothes were not so neat.

“So, Candy, even if we meet again...”

Albert looked away, as if he didn’t dare finish his sentence.

“Of course, I won’t say a word to anyone!”

Candy nodded sympathetically.

“Actually I’m glad you don’t have a home either!”

“Say, maybe that makes you happy, but I’d rather it wouldn’t be like

that!”

Albert laughed all the same, a little embarrassed.

He finally reached the shore, coming to a place which Candy could recognize. What about the boat they were in? To whom did it belong?

“Well, now you can follow alone from here, can’t you?”

Candy nodded and got off the boat.

“Thank you, Albert...I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

She looked steadily at him, full of gratitude.

“I am the one who should thank you for cleaning the cabin and washing my clothes.”

“Take care, Poupe.”

Candy caressed softly the head of the skunk sitting on Albert’s shoulder. He waved goodbye to her, and the boat moved away from the shore. Before he went too far, Candy called him again:

“Albert, what should I do if I want to see you again?”

“Throw a bottle into the river! Put a message in it. Choose a day when the wind blows from the south. I’ll be sure to find it. Candy, take care of yourself!”

Albert kept rowing steadily. The boat was getting further and further away.

“Thank you! Goodbye, Albert!”

Candy continued waving goodbye, even after the boat was out of sight.

Albert was gone, and the river had regained its morning calmness.

Candy took a deep breath and pulled herself together.

She would return to the Leagan house. And she mustn’t cry, whatever Eliza and Neal told her.

This is hard for me...But I have to apologize to Neal...After all, it was me who behaved aggressively.

Despite her resolution, Candy walked with heavy steps towards the Leagan residence.

Even if they want to throw me out, I’ll beg them at least not to send me back to Pony’s Home.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Candy was heading slowly to the Leagan house, when suddenly she stopped.

Someone was running towards her along the small path.

Anthony...

The boy recognized Candy too and stopped, visibly out of breath.

“Candy...”

“Anthony...”

Then they ran to each other.

“I was so worried about you, Candy. Where have you been all this time?”

Catching his breath, Anthony looked straight into the girl’s eyes with

a very serious expression.

Candy began to stammer.

“Where...have I been?”

No, she couldn't talk about Albert.

“Well, I found an enchanted kingdom in the middle of the forest...”

“Stop joking!”

A slap sounded immediately.

Anthony...He...He slapped me...

With her hand on her cheek, Candy remained speechless.

Anthony's voice was trembling:

“Can you imagine how worried I was?”

He bit his lip, turned around and ran away.

Anthony hit me...

Her cheek was burning, and yet a gentle breeze was blowing in her heart. Candy had seen the glimmer in Anthony's eyes.

She was so happy that she could burst into tears.

Anthony, you were really worried about me...

It was as if her aching cheek had transmitted to her what he had felt.

She covered it delicately with her hand. That pain was so sweet that she would have wanted to keep it forever in the depths of her heart.

“Hey, he was right, it's Candy!”

Stear and Archie came running towards her too, crying joyfully.

“Candy, where have you been?”

“Stear, Archie, I'm sorry I've worried you so much.”

Candy lowered her head.

“We just ran into Anthony, and he told us that you were back. But what happened to him? He was sulking, while he's the one who had been most worried. Actually, he should be glad you are here.”

“It's all right, Stear. I have to go and apologize to Mrs. Leagan and the others,” replied Candy, as if she was not troubled at all.

“Are you sure you want to go alone? Candy, we can come with you, if you like.”

Archie was frowning.

“Thank you, Archie, but...I'll be fine.”

“I'm worried; who knows what they're going to tell you?”

“I told you I would be fine. I'm very good when it comes to apologizing...”

Candy managed to smile triumphantly. Archie and Stear were convinced and smiled back at her. However, a vague anxiety remained in their eyes.

“Neal, look who's coming. It's that girl, the one who takes care of the horses.”

While Eliza was coming out of the back entrance, she turned to her

brother who was behind her and winked at him.

Neal answered her so that Candy would hear:

“She dares to come back here. This orphan has got a nerve!”

As if she hadn’t heard anything, Candy approached him.

“I’m sorry I left without permission yesterday. I see the spot where I scratched you is still red. Does it still hurt?”

She apologized to him as politely as she could. Neal looked away contemptuously.

“However, Neal, I’ll give you some advice...It’s embarrassing to be beaten by a girl. You should do a little more exercise.”

Neal’s attitude had pushed her to be too insolent. But by the time she realized it, it was already too late. Neal’s mouth was twisted in humiliation and he was staring angrily at her.

“I’ll make it clear to you: your place is no longer here!”

“Yes! Why did you come back? You might even have spared yourself the trouble! Get out of here quickly!”

Eliza approached Candy, determined to push her away.

“They are absolutely right, Candy!”

The door of the back entrance had just opened, and from the top of the stairs Mrs. Leagan was glaring at Candy.

“Do you have the nerve to come back here? Aren’t you ashamed? It won’t do any good to Neal and Eliza to have you by their side. I was wrong to have been so lenient to you until now.”

“Yes, she didn’t deserve so much kindness,” said Eliza.

Mrs. Leagan squinted her eyes and then approached her children, hugging their shoulders.

“You are such kind-hearted children; I had forgotten about that...”

Candy couldn’t believe her eyes. Her mouth was slightly open.

“I would like to throw you out right away, but considering the priest who recommended you, sending you back to the orphanage would be a disgrace for the Leagan family. I will keep you until you find another place to work. You should be grateful, Candy.”

“Well...I...”

Mrs. Leagan turned her back. She didn’t want to talk to Candy anymore, no matter what she might say. She went back into the house, taking Eliza and Neal with her, and slammed the door behind her.

Candy didn’t even have the time to apologize properly.

Anyway, even if I did, she wouldn’t forgive me.

She had no choice but to leave that house. And when she went somewhere else to work...

Candy bit her lip, trying to prevent the tears that threatened to come into her eyes.

Then I won’t be able to see Anthony again...

Chapter 15

It was as if there was another moon at the bottom of the lake. That was what Candy told herself when she saw the full moon that rose above the dark forest and was reflected perfectly on the surface of the water.

Standing by the shore of the lake, Candy was exposed to the wind. It was not just any wind; that one was coming from the south.

It was Mr. Whitman who had taught her how to recognize it.

Make sure this letter reaches Albert...

As he had indicated to her, Candy had put her letter in a bottle and had brought it to the river.

In her message she was saying that the moment when she would have to leave the Leagan house had eventually come. However, the reassuring point was that she wouldn't be sent back to Pony's Home. She would go somewhere else to live.

“Dear Albert,

The time I spent in the cabin was like a dream to me.

Take care of yourself and live happily with your animal friends!

My new working place hasn't been decided yet but wherever I go, I'll be fine, you may be sure of that.

I pray you can live in the mountains without anyone finding you.

You have saved my life, so I'm going to take great care of it.

Thank you for everything, and please give my regards to Poupe!

Candice White

As you can see, my real name is very elegant.”

Wherever I go, I'll be fine... Will I really?

For once, Candy was not so sure of herself.

The place where I'll go, what will it be like? At least, somewhere else it's less likely to come across another Eliza or another Neal. Children like them can't be found anywhere.

That was something, but wherever she would go...

Anthony won't be there. And I won't be able to see Stear and Archie again.

Candy sighed. She began walking along the lake shore.

Overwhelmed with anxiety, she knew she couldn't sleep.

Cheer up, Candy! When you came here, you didn't know Anthony and the others. After all, you met them by chance... That day when you were crying in the forest.

“Don't cry, little girl.”

She suddenly remembered Anthony's voice and smile that day.

Yes, everything will be all right! It's enough for me to remember that moment and wherever I am, I'll have the strength to move on.

Candy was trying to encourage herself, when she heard a delicate sound of hooves behind her.

She turned around and was out of breath.

Anthony!

He was mounted on a white horse. He slowed down and approached the girl slowly.

Under the moonlight, Anthony was so handsome that he seemed unreal.

She wanted so much to see him again, and he had just appeared in front of her. It was like a dream! She couldn't articulate a single word and she was just looking up at him.

Anthony remained silent too. He had made his horse stop beside her and he was looking at her steadily.

He had had a presentiment.

He couldn't help thinking that he might meet Candy on his way to the lake.

Almost naturally, Anthony was not surprised when he saw her silhouette by the shore of the lake.

It was as if an invisible thread connected him to her. He was convinced of that.

He let out a little sigh and extended his hand to her.

"The moonlight is wonderful tonight, Candy. They say that we can meet fairies in the forest on a night like this. Would you like to see them?"

Candy nodded and took his hand. Anthony lifted her up easily and put her on the saddle.

He delicately picked up the reins, being careful not to touch the shoulders of the girl in front of him.

Was this a dream?

Perhaps.

Candy held her breath. She told herself that if she pronounced even a single word she would wake up.

The white horse resumed its trotting. The moonlight, like a transparent invitation, was urging them to enter the forest.

An owl was singing softly its song, as if to welcome them.

The place was bathed in a silvery light. The moon was shedding its sparkling drops which were glittering through the dark branches of the trees.

"I'm sorry for the other day," murmured Anthony, looking steadily in front of him. "Did I hurt you?"

Candy mechanically shook her head. She hastened to reply in a trembling voice:

“No, no!”

I am the one who should apologize, Anthony. I didn't know you were so worried.

She wanted so much to tell him that, but she could hardly breathe...

“We'll gallop to get out of the forest. Candy, hold on tight.”

Instead of answering, she could only hear the beating of her heart which seemed to be ready to burst out of her chest. The thought that Anthony might actually hear it made her heartbeat accelerate even more.

Anthony held the reins tightly, and the white horse went off at a gallop.

The night wind was whispering in their ears.

What he had said was true. Under the moonlight, the forest at night sheltered fairies everywhere. She could hear them.

The horse's hooves were beating rhythmically on the ground. Being lulled by that rhythm, she closed her eyes...It was so pleasant, while the branches were rustling on their way.

Ah, let this not be a dream and the forest never end.

“I love you. Yes, I love you...”

Candy thought she heard those words, and she immediately opened her eyes.

“I love you. Yes, I love you...”

Was it Anthony who was talking to her? Or was it just the whispering of the wind? The rustling of the tree tops? Oh, it did not matter.

I love you too, I love you too...

Candy was repeating many times those words in her heart.

Yes, Anthony, I love you!

A sweet warmth invaded her body. Her heart was vibrating as if it had become a harp.

Love. So that was falling in love? It was so sweet, and languorous at the same time. She felt a tenderness which she couldn't contain any longer, a feeling that gave her the desire to scream...

I don't want to go anywhere! I don't want to leave Anthony...Anthony, let's keep galloping forever!

However, when they eventually crossed the forest, the white horse slowed down its pace, until it stopped near the villa of the Leagans.

“Thank you, Anthony. It was very nice.”

Candy descended from the horse and looked at its rider with sparkling eyes.

“It was for me too...” he replied gently.

His face was in the shadow, and Candy couldn't see his expression.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

Still on his horse, Anthony followed Candy with his eyes as she turned

and walked away.

This is so complicated, Candy...I can't...We can't do anything in this situation.

Anthony bit his lip annoyed.

He didn't want Candy to leave.

He had gone to see Mrs. Leagan and had even gathered all of his courage to talk to Great Aunt Elroy. He had begged them not to send Candy away, even if he would take the blame himself. But neither of them had paid any attention to him.

What should I do? What can I do?

Anthony shook his head violently and striking the horse on the flanks, he went away at full speed.

Through the window, someone had watched the whole scene without missing anything, without blinking once. Eliza was watching Anthony – Anthony and Candy, more precisely – and a growing rage was burning deep inside her. It was suffocating her.

I'll never forgive that girl! I should have thrown her out earlier. I can't wait another day. Great Aunt Elroy is coming here tomorrow for tea. That's fine.

Eliza, her face deformed by jealousy, made an evil grimace.

Chapter 16

“This is strange; I was sure I had put it here.”

For some time now, Mrs. Leagan had been opening and closing her jewelry box with an angry expression.

“Anyway, I haven’t put it here, have I?”

Still, she checked the drawer of her dressing table, knitting her thin eyebrows, and then she turned her eyes to the clock placed on the console.

“This is really annoying. And Great Aunt Elroy will be here soon...”

That moment Eliza burst into the room, very pale, almost crashing against the door.

“Mother! My pearl bracelet has disappeared. You had told me to wear it with my dress today, hadn’t you?”

“You too, Eliza?”

Mrs. Leagan got up in front of her dressing table.

“I can’t find my emerald brooch either. I had ordered a matching green dress for the occasion.”

“That one with the big emerald which father gave you for Christmas? Mother, have you checked if there is anything else missing?” asked Eliza.

Mrs. Leagan was startled by those words and checked her jewels again.

“I was so worried about that brooch that I hadn’t realized it yet, but my opal necklace has also disappeared...And my ruby earrings too!”

Mrs. Leagan brought a hand to her chest, shocked. That moment Neal entered the room:

“Mother! Great Aunt’s car has just arrived.”

“My God...She’s already here...”

Mrs. Leagan hurried towards the entrance to welcome the matriarch of the Ardlay clan. Eliza followed her. She winked at Neal and whispered in his ear:

“It’s worked, Neal. And what about Anthony?”

“He hasn’t come.”

“What a pity! I would have liked him to be a witness of the decisive moment!”

Eliza made a grimace of disappointment.

In front of the entrance of the villa, Mrs. Leagan and all the servants had gathered to receive Great Aunt Elroy.

“Welcome, Great Aunt.”

“Thank you for the invitation, Sara. I have left Anthony and the Cornwell brothers to their studies. But what’s the matter, Sara? You seem troubled.”

“Oh, I’m sorry...It’s that...”

“Several jewels which my mother was very fond of have disappeared, Great Aunt.”

It was Eliza who had announced this in an affected manner since her mother remained silent.

“And it’s not only those jewels! I can’t find my pearl bracelet either...I wanted so much to show it to you.”

The old lady frowned.

“How awful! Don’t tell me they have been stolen?”

Great Aunt Elroy was about to enter the house, when she added:

“I don’t see Neal. Where is he?”

That was when the boy came running from the garden, out of breath.

“Mother! Eliza!”

“Where have you been, Neal? You didn’t even come to greet Great Aunt.”

“Mother, look! I’ve found the jewels!”

He showed her the emerald brooch and the pearl bracelet he was holding in his hand.

“You have found them! Neal, where were they?”

“In the stable! Where the girl who takes care of the horses lives.”

“Oh, my God!”

Mrs. Leagan’s face lost its color. Neal looked at his mother and then at Great Aunt Elroy.

“I had some doubts, so I went to search in secret. And the jewels were indeed there!”

“Mother, let’s go and see. It’s possible that she has stolen many other things from us.”

Eliza straightened her shoulders in an authoritative manner, and headed first towards the stable.

“That girl will stop at nothing!”

“That child who takes care of the horses is that one who was so badly dressed the other day? That one you have brought from the orphanage?”

Now Great Aunt had taken on a severe expression too.

Mrs. Leagan walked first. Everyone headed to the stable, with serious faces, the women lifting their dresses so as not to get them dirty.

When they arrived, Candy was brushing the horses.

“Don’t move! We’re going to search this place!”

Mrs. Leagan entered without further ado and went straight to Candy’s old closet that was placed in a corner of the stable.

The girl’s eyes opened wide, while she was wondering what was going on: even Great Aunt Elroy had come there. She was probably annoyed by the smell of the stable because she was holding a handkerchief in front of her nose.

Mrs. Leagan opened Candy's closet.

"What's going on? What are you looking for in there...?"

Nobody answered her. Neal pulled out a box from under the bed. It was a trunk for clothes which Candy had never seen before. Inside there were several luxurious dresses of different colors.

"I recognize them! They are Eliza's!"

It was Eliza's turn to scream.

"Mother, the jewels are in the feeder!"

Dresses? Jewels?

"It's dreadful! And to think that she's just a little girl!"

Great Aunt Elroy turned her eyes away from Candy as if she were looking at something dirty, and left the stable. Mrs. Leagan's eyes were full of rage.

"I...I don't know what to say. I had never thought you were a thief!"

Hearing Mrs. Leagan's harsh voice, Candy finally understood the situation. She began to tremble.

"But this is not my fault! I don't know anything!" she cried desperately.

Why were those dresses and jewels there?

"I swear it, I don't know what's going on! Eliza, what does that mean?"

"Mother! That's awful, she's blaming me!"

Eliza threw herself into Mrs. Leagan's arms, crying.

"How terrible! You steal and you want to put the blame on my poor Eliza!"

"But I don't know anything! You have to believe me. I would never take anything that didn't belong to me. I have never stolen anything in my life!"

Candy had turned pale, overwhelmed with sadness and rage, and with tears in her eyes.

"Silence! I can't tolerate your presence here anymore, not for a single day!" declared Mrs. Leagan, her lips trembling with anger. "I have just been told about a ranch in Mexico which is looking for new workers. At first I refused by telling them that it was too far away and that the work would be too hard for you."

Mrs. Leagan looked coldly at Candy.

"I've decided to send you to Mexico! Candy, make sure to pack all your things by tomorrow afternoon. They will come to pick you up. Is that understood?"

Mrs. Leagan's decision was final.

She turned her back on Candy, who had opened her mouth to speak, and then left the stable.

Neal and Eliza left too, following their mother and taking back the dresses and the jewels. They looked surreptitiously at Candy, with a

triumphant little smile.

Mexico...

For a while, Candy remained frozen on the spot, unable to make even the slightest movement.

Mexico...

It seemed to her like a place beyond the end of the world.

Chapter 17

Caesar and Cleopatra neighed. They touched Candy's back with their snouts.

That brought the girl back to herself. Her cheeks were wet but she didn't remember having cried. Cleopatra licked her cheek gently. As for Caesar, he shook his head with concern.

During all that fuss, they had stood back, intimidated, but probably they didn't understand how upset Candy had been.

"Thank you...Cleopatra, Caesar. You, at least, know that. You know I'm not a thief."

Caressing the manes of the horses, she couldn't stop the tears from running down her cheeks. This time it was Caesar who licked her tears.

If only those animals had been able to say what had really happened there...

No, even if Caesar and Cleopatra could speak, Mrs. Leagan would have believed the version by Eliza and Neal.

Candy would go to Mexico; she had no other choice.

I don't want to go to a ranch in Mexico...

But she couldn't run away either. If she returned secretly to Pony's Home, both Sister Lane and Miss Pony would be mortified. Moreover, she would have to admit that all the enthusiastic letters she had written to them until that moment were full of lies.

"It's strange...Until yesterday I didn't want to be sent away from this house, but now I would be willing to go anywhere, as long as I could stay in America."

Candy forced herself to smile at the horses which seemed worried. She didn't want to cry anymore in front of them, but that didn't stop her tears from flowing.

As long as she stayed in America, she could hope to see Anthony again one day. But if she went to Mexico...

"And what if I went to Albert's house?"

As soon as she murmured that idea, Candy shook her head.

That's not a good idea. Albert is homeless too. I would only cause him trouble.

She remembered his outfit. He didn't have any money in order to look after her; that was obvious.

What should I do then?

Candy caressed softly the cross she kept hidden on her chest.

The gentle and melodious sound of the little bell dangling under the cross was always the same.

"Little girl, you are prettier when you smile."

My Prince...This time, though, it's difficult for me to smile. I can't even imagine what it is like in Mexico.

The little bell sounded clearly and sweetly. Listening to it, Candy, who kept wiping away her tears, gradually calmed down.

“That’s right, my Prince. You at least will follow me to Mexico. You will always comfort me, right?”

Indeed, as long as she had that silver badge with her, she could see him whenever she liked.

“Don’t worry so much about what’s going to happen in the future.”

Miss Pony used to repeat that motto whenever some difficulty arose.

“It’s decided! I’ll make the Sweet Candy roses flourish in Mexico too. And together with Stear’s umbrella...I’ll never be alone, wherever I am!”

She recovered her smile.

The memory of Anthony’s look when he had given her the roses came back to her.

She also remembered Stear’s triumphant expression when he had given her the “portable umbrella” which he had proudly called a “masterpiece” and a “brilliant invention”.

“That’s it; you wear it on your shoulders as if it were a backpack. And now, you press the button in the middle. Surprised? The umbrella opens! So, your hands will be free, even when it rains.”

Stear had had that idea after he had seen Candy getting water from the well, soaking wet under the rain.

Archie also gave me a lace handkerchief filled with lavender flowers he had collected himself. It was one of his own handkerchiefs, made in Switzerland, which he was very fond of. No doubt the smell of the stable must have worried him...

This time she would have to say a final goodbye to the three boys.

Candy’s eyes filled with tears again, which made her angry with herself.

She couldn’t just stay there crying. In the afternoon of the following day she would have to leave that place.

She had to see Anthony and the two brothers and say goodbye to them.

I would especially like them to know that I haven’t stolen anything.

The sun was setting.

Candy went away running, before anyone came to charge her with another task.

At the same time, at the Ardlay residence, the three boys had gathered in Anthony’s room, holding an “emergency council” about the young girl.

“Aunt Sara Leagan is determined to throw Candy out; that is certain...”

Stear let out a deep sigh.

“Aunt Sara lets herself be led by Eliza and Neal...And we can't count on Great Uncle who is absent so often.”

That sigh was apparently contagious; it was Archie's turn to sigh.

“Stear, could you stop making your idiotic inventions for once and create a machine to save Candy?”

“If I could, I would have done it a long time ago!”

Stear fixed his glasses.

Anthony had remained silent, looking absentmindedly through the window.

When should Candy leave that place? They needed to think of something as soon as possible.

Anthony was in a state of internal turmoil, tormented by impatience and at the same time extremely frustrated with his helplessness.

That moment, the satin curtain of the terrace was raised and something fell on the carpet, as fast as a missile. Well, it was not a missile; it was Candy who had just landed on her back in a spectacular manner. She smiled, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Candy!”

The three boys shouted in chorus and extended their hands at the same time to help her get up. The girl, still smiling, stood up by herself.

“How did you get here?”

Archie's eyes had opened wide. Candy, trying to catch her breath, pointed to a large tree in the garden, whose branches reached the terrace.

“I climbed that tree...But it was harder than I thought.”

“You see? I told you Candy was a champion in climbing trees.”

“This is not the moment to be glad about such a little thing, Stear. What's going on, Candy? If you have made so much effort to come and see us, it's not for nothing, I imagine.”

Anthony was looking at her anxiously.

“To tell you the truth, I came to say goodbye to you.”

“What?”

The three boys instantly turned pale and approached her.

“Don't look at me like that, you'll make me feel embarrassed! Well, I've got some news. Candice White has to leave for Mexico tomorrow afternoon!”

While she was doing her little climbing session, Candy had repeated that phrase many times. She wanted to announce it cheerfully. And somehow, she had succeeded.

“But, Candy...Mexico? Why?”

The three boys remained silent for a few moments, and then Stear finally let out a deep sigh that seemed to say he couldn't believe it.

“Yes, I was told that on that farm in Mexico they needed workers, and especially someone charming, and that’s why they have chosen me! Thank you all. Thank you with all my heart for everything you have done for me.”

Candy lowered her head. She couldn’t look Anthony in the eyes; it was more than she could bear.

Anthony didn’t dare to look into her eyes either.

As soon as he looked at her, he knew. He understood how she felt at that moment. Just to listen to Candy’s voice as she was struggling to sound cheerful was breaking his heart.

“And also...How can I say this? I would like you to believe one thing. They suspected me of stealing Mrs. Leagan’s jewels but I have never done such a thing.”

“That’s evident!” exclaimed Anthony in rage.

Candy met his gaze that moment, and that was enough for the tears to come into her eyes.

“You can be sure of that! Nobody believes that you could do a thing like that!”

Stear had spoken in a decided voice, while Archie approved nodding affirmatively.

“Thank you...That was the only thing that really worried me.”

Relieved, Candy smiled faintly. She took a deep breath, and seemed to regain her courage.

“Well, thank you all! I’ve had such good times with you. I’ll write to you as soon as I have settled. And then, if you have the chance some day, don’t hesitate to come and see me in Mexico!”

Candy had started her speech in a playful manner, while she was looking carefully at all three of them, trying to engrave their faces in her memory.

Stear, always amusing, with his funny glasses...Archie, elegant and charming...And Anthony...No, don’t look at me like that. I’m going to cry...

Candy suppressed her emotions.

“So...Goodbye! I’ll never forget you...”

Her voice was trembling at the end of that phrase. Then she jumped with all her strength from the terrace to the tree.

“Candy!”

Anthony wanted to follow her, but her silhouette had already disappeared between the trees that were bathed in the twilight.

The next day, at dawn, while it was still dark, Candy was awakened by Stewart.

“Now? I thought I was leaving in the afternoon.”

She jumped up in surprise.

“They are already here to pick you up, Candy...”

Stewart announced the news sadly, but she replied carelessly:

“One would think that I have always to be leaving in a hurry!”

Stewart seemed sorrowful and the girl wanted to lighten the atmosphere. She got dressed quickly. She had already gathered all her belongings in the bag she had brought with her when she had come there.

Stewart took it and Candy said smiling:

“I’ve got more things than when I came here, isn’t that right?”

Then she gently took in her arms the pot with the Sweet Candy roses.

Stewart, with his head lowered, remained silent.

It was better that the farewell was a quick one. When she had left Pony’s Home, it had also happened in the blink of an eye. There hadn’t been time for sadness. Maybe the fact that they had come to pick her up so early was a sign of kindness towards her.

That was a pleasant thought.

“Goodbye, Caesar, goodbye, Cleopatra...”

The horses, still sleepy, probably didn’t realize that Candy would never come back.

“Take care! Everyone will look after you, I’m sure.”

Candy hugged the two horses while they were sniffing her. Then she left the stable without looking back.

Everything was wrapped in mist. Through it she saw Mary, Doug and even Mr. Whitman waiting for her.

“How could we ever imagine we would come to this? We couldn’t do anything...”

“Thank you, Mr. Whitman! Don’t worry about me. Thank you all for coming so early. Take care!”

Mary hugged Candy without saying anything, with tears in her eyes.

“Hurry up!”

It was a robust Mexican who had barked that order from the top of a wagon, beyond the mist.

“Yes, I’m coming right away! Goodbye, and thanks to all of you!” said Candy in a trembling voice.

Then she climbed quickly to the wagon.

She didn’t want the others to see her crying.

“Hurry up!”

The Mexican, visibly irritated, whipped the horses.

That dense morning mist was perhaps another sign of kindness towards her. She couldn’t distinguish the silhouettes of the people anymore. They were calling her name but their voices quickly became distant and stifled until they weren’t heard anymore.

The wagon was wobbling along the road and it gradually gained speed.

Without thinking, Candy looked around her. Maybe Anthony and the brothers were waiting for her somewhere by the roadside.

That's impossible, it's too early...I thought myself that I was leaving in the afternoon.

Still, she would have liked so much to see them one last time. Anthony, Stear, Archie...

Candy decided to turn that page, and held tight in her arms the pot with the roses.

After the wagon which had taken Candy away disappeared in the morning mist, Eliza and Neal, standing by the window, rejoiced clapping their hands. How lucky that the hour of her departure had been earlier!

"That was good!"

"Good riddance!"

Neal had a big smile on his face.

At that moment, a sound of hooves was heard. There were three galloping horses which stopped right in front of the villa's main entrance.

"It's Anthony and the others! What idiot has warned them?"

Annoyed, Eliza leaned over the window. Neal spoke to them cheerfully:

"What a pity! You've just missed her! That filthy orphan is already gone."

"What do you mean?"

Mounted on his horse, Anthony turned pale.

"The time of her departure was advanced. She practically ran away. That's normal for a thief like her."

"I forbid you to talk like that about Candy!"

Anthony looked up at Eliza with a glare. She turned away, irritated.

"Let's go! Maybe we can still catch up with her."

Archie kicked the flanks of his horse and galloped away.

"Yes, let's hurry!"

Stear spurred on his horse too.

Candy...I want to see you, even if I only meet your eyes...

Anthony bit his lip.

"You're wasting your time, you'll never reach her."

Eliza spat out her poison through the window.

The morning mist was clearing up. They had gone a long way, but the wagon that had taken Candy was nowhere to be seen.

"Let's go up the hill! Maybe we'll see better from there."

Anthony changed the course of his cavalcade.

They reached the top of the highest elevation in the area as fast as possible, until they were out of breath.

Then they finally saw a dark shadow in the distance which could be that of a wagon moving further and further away.

So I won't see you again, Candy?

There were tears in Anthony's eyes.

"Candy!"

The three boys screamed as loud as they could. Their voices were spread in the clear morning sky. However, they couldn't reach the girl.

The wagon was continuing its way without stopping, raising clouds of dust.

The bleak sky was covered with clouds. The Mexican hadn't stopped talking for a single moment, but Candy didn't understand much of what he was saying. His English seemed to be quite approximate.

At least, as she was trying to grasp the meaning of his words, Candy didn't feel like crying anymore. After a while, she finally understood that the man's name was Garcia, but nothing more than that.

Mr. Garcia was robust, with thick hair and beard, and he spoke very loudly. At first she was intimidated, but when the man realized that Candy hadn't eaten anything, he shared his breakfast with her.

They speak another language in Mexico...If they say something bad to me, I won't even understand them. But why do I have to suppose that Mexico is such a horrible place even before getting there? It may be a pleasant country.

Candy was a little relieved at that thought. If she worked hard to save enough money, she could definitely return to America some day, and then she would go find Anthony again.

As evening was approaching and the sky was darkening, the wagon finally stopped by a river.

"Hurry up! Prepare lunch! Pick up wood, make fire!"

Candy had tried to make him repeat her name, but Garcia didn't seem willing to memorize it.

"I suppose he means I have to collect firewood and light a fire in order to prepare dinner."

"Hurry up! Hurry up!"

Obviously the phrase he could pronounce best was: "Hurry up!"

Candy couldn't help giggling, nodded and ventured into the thicket that extended near the river.

His way of speaking is a little brusque but he's not a bad person...Ah!

Candy didn't even have time to scream. Without warning, someone put a hand on her mouth and pushed her into a car that was parked not far from there.

Chapter 18

A cold wind announced the end of summer.

Lost in his thoughts, Anthony was standing motionless in the rose garden which was in full bloom. Candy had left just the day before, but he had the impression that many years had passed.

“Ah, there you are. I suspected you would be here.”

Stear and Archie entered the rose garden.

“Did you manage to sleep last night, Anthony?”

“How can he sleep under these circumstances?”

It was Archie who answered, annoyed.

“Yes, of course...It’s the same with us.”

Stear took off his glasses for a moment to rub his eyes.

“Candy...I imagine she hasn’t arrived in Mexico yet,” murmured Anthony.

“No. And in the meantime, I have advanced on my detector of Candy!”

“Have you finished it, Stear?”

Anthony turned around with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“I would have liked to...but actually, I haven’t.”

“Anyway, even if you could have developed that machine, being *your* invention, there would have been no guarantee that it would work.”

“How dare you insult me in that way? To be betrayed by my own brother! However, you’re probably right,” said Stear with a sigh that didn’t inspire any confidence.

“Oh, this is a Sweet Candy rose, right? It must have taken you a long time to find the right hybridization but you have managed to grow them. You’ve done a great job.”

Archie approached his nose to one of the delicate pink flowers.

“When I learned that you had given Candy’s name to this variety of roses which you had hesitated to baptize for so long, I resented the fact that you had outwitted us in that way.”

Stear was looking far away in the distance with a blank gaze while he spoke.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, since she’s no longer here.”

Anthony didn’t reply to Stear and caressed the petals of a Sweet Candy rose. They fell down immediately, one after the other. He picked up one of them and brought it to his lips. The sweet scent that came out of it only increased his sadness a little more.

That moment Great Aunt Elroy appeared on the other side of the rose garden, accompanied by a maid who was holding out her parasol. She was taking a walk.

“You should be studying right now.”

Anthony didn't answer and simply looked away.

Meanwhile, Stear replied honestly and wistfully:

"We don't have the heart to do it at all."

Great Aunt Elroy took on a severe expression.

"I am not interested in your whims. I don't want your parents to tell me that your grades have become worse since you came here. Moreover, we have decided that from this afternoon Eliza and Neal will be joining you in your studies. Be kind to them."

After giving her instructions, she resumed her walk.

Stear met his brother's gaze before looking up at the sky in a theatrical manner.

"Eliza and Neal! Oh, my God, why are you so relentless?"

That same afternoon, Eliza came to the Ardlay house, so elegantly dressed that it was hard to believe she had come just for studying.

"Hello! I'll join you from today. I'm looking forward to studying with you."

Eliza's tone of voice was obviously affected.

Anthony and Archie didn't look up from their books but that wasn't the case with Stear.

"Hello. You know, our teachers are very strict. I'm not sure if you can keep up with us."

The boy ironically tilted his head sideways as if he were in doubt. Neal didn't like that.

What? Is that how you are greeting us?

Eliza almost gave him that answer, but she immediately changed her mind and smiled quickly. Anthony had just looked up from his book.

"Anthony, I'm delighted to be able to study with you."

She had said that in her most engaging manner, but the boy just looked out of the window and said:

"That's great..."

Does Anthony still think about that girl? But she's no longer here, and he'll have to accept that. He has no other choice but to fall in love with me. Anthony can't be seriously infatuated with a girl who grew up in an orphanage. She was so ill-mannered!

Eliza smiled, full of confidence, and approached the boy who occupied her thoughts, while holding the book of Physics.

"Anthony, could you please explain something to me before the teacher comes?"

At that precise moment the boy's eyes were illuminated.

There! I knew Anthony was interested in me.

She quickly understood her mistake. Anthony got up and ran to the window.

A luxurious black car bearing the Ardlay family emblem was turning

around the fountain which was located in front of the main entrance.
Only one person in the whole clan has such a car: Great Uncle William...

Anthony couldn't believe his eyes.

Who is in it? I can't see clearly.

Anthony felt overwhelmed with a burst of exaltation. His heart was beating hard.

He caught a glimpse of a light pink dress fluttering in the back seat of the car. And that bright hair...

Even in that distance, Anthony recognized her.

"Oh! It's Candy!"

Anthony cried out her name and rushed outside.

"What? Candy?"

Stear and Archie got up, knocking down their chairs, and rushed towards the window too.

"It's true! Stear, it's Candy; over there, inside the car!"

"Yes, it's her! Candy is back!"

No longer controlling his joy, Stear unintentionally turned his face towards Eliza and Neal.

"What? But that's not possible! She should be in Mexico by now."

Eliza glared at Stear. Her expression was so cold that it could have triggered a new ice age. Together with Neal, she looked outside in panic. Stear and Archie had already left the room to run after Anthony. Eliza and Neal, with their faces pale, followed them.

The black car had stopped in front of the main entrance.

A middle-aged gentleman with elegant appearance got out and opened the back door.

A young lady in a pink dress came suddenly out of the car.

It was Candy.

Candy herself, no doubt.

"Candy!"

Archie couldn't restrain his excitement.

"It's her! It's really Candy!"

Stear examined the girl from head to toe several times to make sure that it was truly her.

"Candy..."

"Anthony, I can't believe it. Stear! Archie! I must still be dreaming!"

Candy's cheeks were flushed. She was looking at the three boys, feeling as if she were floating on a little cloud.

She was wearing a dress of pale pink silk, adorned with lace and ruffles.

In such an elegant dress, she was lovely; a real fairy tale princess.

"I...I still can't believe what's happening! I have been adopted by the Ardlay family!"

Her voice was trembling as she announced the news to her friends.
“That’s fantastic! Great Uncle has listened to my request!”
Archie straightened up with a proud expression.
“What? Have you also written to Great Uncle asking him to adopt Candy?”
“Huh? Do you mean you have written to him too?”
“Obviously. And maybe...”
Stear and Archie turned to look at Anthony who laughed and nodded vigorously.
“I’m sure that my letter was the most convincing one!”
“Listen to him! Hey, you two, let’s play according to the rules, all right?” exclaimed Stear.
They hugged each other and burst out laughing.
“Can anyone explain to me what is going on?”
Great Aunt Elroy appeared on the threshold.
“Great Aunt! Candy is back! And now she is the adoptive daughter of the Ardlay family.”
Anthony also took on a proud and very dignified expression and stepped towards Great Aunt Elroy.
She raised her voice:
“What? Stop that nonsense. I am not aware of any such thing. If I had consented to such absurdity, I would have known it!”
Eliza and Neal stood behind her.
The matriarch glared at Candy. Her eyes were piercing and flaming with anger.
That moment, the elegant gentleman who had stood aside until now approached.
“It was Sir William who made that decision, madam.”
He had spoken in a calm voice, bowing his head.
“But this is George, William’s secretary! What is going on? He wouldn’t make such an important decision so suddenly and without consulting me. George! You are his right hand man; how dare you do such a thing...”
“Madam, this is a matter which Sir William has considered urgent and of the utmost importance. That’s why he has instructed me to take care of it. This is for you.”
George bowed again respectfully and handed her a letter.

*“To anyone it may concern.
I have accepted the requests of Anthony, Alistair and Archibald.
Consequently, I have decided for Miss Candice White to be adopted
by the Ardlay family.
William A. Ardlay”*

Chapter 19

It still seemed to Candy that she was floating, as if in a dream.

She couldn't believe what had happened to her since she had been forced to get into that car. A real abduction near a bush, on the banks of the river, while she was already on her way to Mexico.

But her abductor was revealed to be a true gentleman. His name was George and he was Great Uncle William's secretary.

"I was asked to welcome you as the adoptive daughter of the Ardlays, Miss Candice."

George hadn't even blinked as he announced the news solemnly.

"I must have scared you with that brusque behavior, but I didn't have the time to go by the rules."

Adoptive daughter of the Ardlays...

Candy had asked George to repeat that countless times before she was sure she had understood what it really meant. He was wearing a navy blue suit of excellent cutting. He looked like a university professor and not at all like a kidnapper. Besides, what could he have gained by kidnapping her?

"I finally accepted the fact that I was really adopted by the Ardlays, but actually I still can't believe it."

Anthony and the two brothers found the "case of Candy's kidnapping" extremely amusing.

They asked her to repeat her story several times.

Archie remarked:

"George doesn't look like it, but he's an expert at martial arts! He is also an excellent shooter. Besides, he never says a word, and that can be fearsome! It's not fun to be with him. You must have been scared! But if it had been otherwise, it could have taken him much longer to bring you back."

He was enjoying himself by joyfully turning over a cushion among his fingers.

Candy still felt light, as if she were floating in the air.

A large bedroom had been reserved for her. Apparently, it was the most beautiful room in the mansion, apart from that of Great Aunt Elroy's.

It seemed to her that that room was at least as big as the entire Pony's Home! There was a soft burgundy-colored carpet. The curtains were of the same color. The furniture had arched legs. There was a four-poster bed...Even Eliza didn't sleep in such a beautiful bed! But above all, what filled her with happiness was the look of the three boys who were watching her with a smile.

Oh...That was the reality! She had truly become the adoptive daughter

of the family.

I'll never again be separated from the three of them!

That would have been more than enough for her to be happy, but apart from that, her name now was Candice White Ardlay. How nice it sounded!

Stear burst out in a hearty laughter.

"I'm still impressed by Great Uncle William. A simple letter signed by him is enough to silence Great Aunt Elroy."

Archie added:

"Exactly. We are told all the time that he's someone difficult to manage but he seemed to be pretty sensible when we wrote to him."

Archie threw a cushion at Stear. Stear threw it at Anthony. They were in a playful mood.

"Tell me, Archie, what is Great Uncle William like?" asked Candy, suddenly becoming serious. "I asked George several times, but he never answered me."

"We don't know either. Isn't that so, Anthony?"

It was Stear's turn to become serious.

"Indeed. Nobody has ever met Great Uncle William, Candy."

"Nobody?"

Surprised, the girl turned to Anthony. Without knowing why, she was a little shy. All this time she had just been throwing furtive glances at him.

"I've never heard of anyone in all the family who has talked to Great Uncle William. Apart from George, of course, there's probably only Great Aunt Elroy who can talk to him directly. They say he's a very grumpy and eccentric old gentleman."

This time it was Anthony who was looking timidly at Candy.

"Oh, well...I would have liked to see him, at least once, so I could thank him."

Stear added in a carefree manner, before stretching himself:

"It seems he's a misanthrope, so if I have a choice, I'd rather not meet him."

"Well, I can't wait to meet him! He has saved me! Since my childhood at Pony's Home, I have always prayed for someone to adopt me, even though nobody ever wanted me. It is thanks to him that my dream has come true today."

Anthony looked into Candy's eyes, sparkling and full of gratitude. He didn't need anything more to feel calm and relaxed.

He felt a complete euphoria.

From now on I can be with Candy forever.

Now I can see Anthony every day...

Whenever their eyes met, Anthony knew that Candy felt the same as he did.

In the evening, Candy wrote to Pony's Home using the stationery paper reserved for the members of the Ardlay family. She could finally tell them the whole truth.

The fact that she had been adopted by the Ardleys...She imagined how delighted Miss Pony and Sister Lane would be.

Even though Eliza gave me such a frightening look.

She slipped into her soft bed, so soft that she almost sank into it. She recalled Eliza's expression during dinner that night; she seemed like a volcano about to erupt at any moment.

And she was not the only one, of course. Obviously there was Neal, but also Great Aunt Elroy and Mrs. Leagan; all of them had completely ignored Candy.

It is natural that they should be annoyed. To think that they had finally managed to throw me out...I'm even a little curious to see what bad tricks they'll prepare for me now.

The moonlight gently entered the room through the roof window.

Anthony is in the same house with me!

Just by thinking about it, a sweet warmth invaded her heart.

"Dear Great Uncle William, thank you so much for everything you have done for me. I wish you may be always healthy. I hope you'll be less misanthropic one of these days so that I can see you soon. Good night."

After that prayer, which she made under the covers, she closed her eyes and let herself be wrapped in a rose-colored happiness.

Next morning...

Candy was awakened by the twittering of the birds.

Oh, no! I have to hurry and clean up the stable!

She sat up, and then laughed softly. She was no longer in the stable of the Leagans. She didn't have to get up early to look after the horses or help in the kitchen.

Yes, it's true; now I am Candice White Ardlay.

She still couldn't believe it.

Candy looked at the luxuriously furnished room. Everything in that room belonged to her.

"This room is at your disposal. Sir William wishes you to have a pleasant time and work diligently."

That was what George had told her the day before, after driving her there.

After those last words, once his task had been accomplished, he had left the mansion hurriedly, as if many other occupations were waiting for him elsewhere.

Candy got out of bed and opened the closet. She gasped in amazement.

“Not even Eliza has got so many clothes! When did they prepare all this?”

She looked for a moment at those dresses of all colors.

They all fitted her perfectly, but she chose the most modest and comfortable one.

She got dressed and left the room.

She was suddenly worried about Caesar and Cleopatra. She had to go and tell them that she had returned and brush them. Even if she had been adopted, she wanted to continue taking care of the horses.

She walked down a wide corridor and descended a large staircase that was covered with a burgundy carpet. That was enough to make her feel like a queen. With a ceremonious step, just to see the effect it would make, Candy headed to the back entrance which was near the garden.

Then she heard the servants talking to each other in the vestibule.

“Well, I’ll never be able to call ‘miss’ that Candy.”

“Neither will I! Miss Eliza told me that while she was at the house of the Leagans she had stolen their jewels!”

“They told me that too! I don’t like it that such a girl has been adopted by the Ardlay family.”

“Miss Eliza also warned me that this girl is very skilled at ingratiating with people. It seems she’s also a big liar. We have to be careful!”

Candy bit her lip and passed the room stealthily. She opened the door slowly and went outside. The morning breeze, carrying the scent of flowers, wrapped her like a cloak.

I haven’t done anything wrong...

“If you have nothing to be ashamed of, you just have to stand up straight with your head held high.”

She remembered what Miss Pony had told her when she had been accused of some mischief Tom had done.

Yes, if I persist in remaining honest, people will eventually understand one day...Also I have to become a young lady worthy of this name so that I make Great Uncle William proud.

Candy was walking along the garden, trying to be positive, when she saw Anthony coming towards her.

She might have expected that she would meet him!

She stopped immediately. Her heart suddenly seemed to be illuminated.

“Candy! You’re an early riser. I was sure you were still sleeping. After all the excitement yesterday, you must be still tired!”

Anthony...His smile was radiant.

“You always wake up early too, Anthony.”

Candy blinked her eyes.

“The roses wake up even earlier than I do.”

Anthony smiled.

The roses...

Then a shadow passed over Candy’s face. She had been adopted by the Ardlays, but despite her happiness, something still worried her: the flower pot of the Sweet Candy roses.

“What is it, Candy?”

Candy had suddenly lowered her head. Anthony looked at her anxiously.

“Did Eliza and her brother bother you again?”

“No, not at all! It’s that I must apologize to you about something...”

Candy took a deep breath before raising her head.

“It’s about the Sweet Candy roses...”

“You have left them in the Mexican’s wagon, haven’t you?”

Anthony smiled, as if he had already guessed it.

“I’m sorry, Anthony! I’d like so much to go and get them back...”

She was on the verge of tears. As a reflex, Anthony held out his hand to caress Candy’s flushed cheek. He realized that and stopped his gesture. Then he quickly dragged the girl to the rose garden.

“Candy, come over here and see.”

She followed him with small quick steps and let out a cry of joy without really noticing.

“The Sweet Candy roses!”

In a corner of the rose garden, a Sweet Candy rosebush was blooming proudly, unfolding its pale pink petals.

“The roses I had given to you were grown in this plant. I’m glad the Sweet Candy roses have taken your place, and that the real Candy is back!”

“Thank you, Anthony.”

Candy had tears in her eyes again. Anthony was so kind to explain to her seriously all that so that she wouldn’t worry about it. She was so touched that she could hardly hold back her tears.

She approached several roses that had bloomed. Their sweet scent made her feel nostalgic. Candy lowered her head and in the early morning light something shone on her chest.

“What’s that badge you’re wearing around your neck along with that cross?”

Anthony seemed surprised to discover that object and was looking steadily at it.

“Oh, that? It belongs to Prince on the Hill.”

Candy pulled delicately the chain and grasped the badge.

“Prince?”

“Well, that’s the name I have given him...I don’t know anything about

him, not even his name! Only that he was handsome. When I met you for the first time, I was very surprised. You looked exactly like my prince.”

Anthony’s face darkened but Candy didn’t notice it. She wanted to share everything with Anthony, even what she had never told Miss Pony or Sister Lane.

“When I was six years old, while I was crying on Pony’s Hill one day, my prince appeared...He was wearing a traditional Scottish costume...”

“I recognize that badge. It belongs to the Ardlay family, although it’s a little different from mine...”

Anthony interrupted Candy’s remembrance in a suddenly harsh voice. She noticed that and looked at him, a little surprised.

“To the Ardlay family? Do you mean that the Prince could be a member of the family?”

“It is possible...”

Anthony looked away. Suddenly his heart felt so oppressed that it was painful.

Candy had met a boy a long time ago.

And he still existed in her memories, so vividly that he was still able to make her smile despite the time that had passed.

Who is he? Who is the owner of that badge? Who is that boy Candy has never forgotten? And he looked like me...

“What’s the matter, Anthony?”

Candy looked at him, worried about his sudden silence. The boy was still looking away, with his head lowered.

“Candy, when we met for the first time, you called me ‘prince’...Is it because I look like your prince that...”

“Anthony!”

Taken by surprise, Candy denied it by shaking her head vigorously. She knew how Anthony would finish his sentence, and that troubled her so much that she suddenly gasped:

“It’s not what you think, Anthony!”

He had misunderstood. How could she explain it to him?

“Anthony, I...I love you for what you are; yes, I love you so much!”

That’s it, she had said it.

Candy held her breath and looked down.

I said it out loud. I’m so ashamed.

That was too much for Candy. Breathless, she turned on her heels and suddenly started running. Still shocked, Anthony remained motionless in his place, stunned.

“Candy, I love you too; I love you very much!”

It was the first time he had managed to express his feelings like that. Those few words had rushed out of his heart with so much power, yet

when they reached his lips he could only pronounce them in a very low voice.

Chapter 20

A week had passed in the blink of an eye since Candy's adoption by the Ardlays.

Every day she had a busy schedule, full of special lessons of how to become a proper young lady. The teachers Great Aunt Elroy had chosen for her were all cold and severe, but Candy was determined to work hard!

After all, she was the adoptive daughter of the Ardlays.

I want Great Uncle William to congratulate me the day I meet him. And then, I'll also ask him...

Candy blushed with embarrassment.

She wanted to become a woman worthy of Anthony.

In the afternoon, when her lesson in etiquette was finished, Candy accompanied her teacher to the main entrance. She stretched out discreetly and ran at full speed to the courtyard, towards the fountain decorated with the statue of Diana, the goddess of the moon.

"Have you finished, Candy?"

Anthony and the two brothers seemed to be waiting for her in front of the fountain, and they ran to meet her.

"Yeah, it's over...I mean: I am very glad that my lesson has finally finished..."

Candy made a grimace and then a reverence, slightly lifting the edge of her dress.

"Hey, what was that?"

Stear burst out laughing. Anthony and Archie smiled too, a little embarrassed by the result.

"It was my teacher in etiquette, Miss Jane, who taught me that. According to her, a monkey would greet better than me. And it seems that when I speak I'm worse than a parrot."

Candy pouted with a vexed expression, slightly lifting her chin.

The boys were laughing and nudging one another. Candy continued her antics and stuck out her tongue at them. Then she let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Well, it's so boring to be a well-bred young lady! I'm forbidden to climb trees and biting an apple is simply out of the question."

"Then what can you do, Candy?"

Stear was looking at Candy, amused.

"I've got an idea!"

She took off her leather shoes and her socks, matching the color of her dress. Impulsively she jumped and took hold of the goddess Diana's arm. She made a vigorous twirl and got back to her place.

Stear whistled in admiration. Then Archie teased his brother:

“You see? She did it. That time you tried you missed the statue and fell into the water.”

“Why don’t we forget about that? Anyway, if Candy started behaving in that affected manner, she wouldn’t be the real Candy anymore. Don’t you think so, Anthony?”

“Indeed. Candy, you just have to be yourself. That’s when you are more charming,” said Anthony with an affectionate look.

Archie targeted Anthony this time:

“Say, Anthony, I’m the charmer around here. It’s up to me to give this kind of replies...”

“By the way, Stear, you told me this morning you would show us something that would surprise us. What is it? I’m dying to find out.”

Anthony’s abashed expression was so adorable that Candy felt completely invigorated.

“Yes, that’s true! Let’s go, quickly! To the lake!”

Raising his arm, Stear started running. Candy followed him barefoot, with her shoes in her hand.

Anthony was now by Candy’s side all the time. It had become something natural.

At that moment, he was running close to her.

Great Aunt Elroy was taking her tea with the others in a hexagonal-shaped summer house of the garden.

Quite irritated, they looked away from the four young people who passed in front of them laughing, without even noticing their presence.

To avoid getting angry, Eliza kept walking in circles in the summer house.

Neal, visibly annoyed, deposited loudly his cup of tea on the table.

“Great Aunt! Will you let such a girl do as she likes? She’s just a little thief, and now she thinks she’s an important member of the Ardlay family!”

“Indeed, Great Aunt! I’m afraid she’s going to steal more jewels.”

“Don’t worry, Neal. Everybody is keeping an eye on her. I have explained to the servants about this girl’s bad habit. But there is nothing else we can do. Great Uncle William’s decisions will not be discussed.”

“But even so, Great Aunt! Despite Great Uncle William’s decision, I can’t accept such a girl as a member of the Ardlay family. Father and mother have also the same opinion!”

“Eliza, I totally agree with Sara. I have to make sure that this insufferable girl decides to leave the house by herself. But for the time being, according to Great Uncle William’s order, we have to organize a fox hunting to celebrate her official adoption. What a problem!”

Great Aunt Elroy brought a hand to her temple.

“But she doesn’t even know how to ride a horse!” snapped Neal.

Eliza nodded so forcefully, that one would think her head would part from her body.

“This is all very annoying! How can I introduce a girl without any education in a reception worthy of our name? Maybe that’s why Great Uncle William had the idea of that fox hunting; it is a good pretext to reunite all the members of the family for entertainment and take advantage of that to present her to everyone.”

Why did Great Uncle William take so much trouble while that decision would only ridicule her in front of the whole family?

Great Aunt Elroy let out a deep sigh.

Just before sunset the lake was glowing with a beautiful blue color that seemed to merge with the sky. A large swan was gliding on the water.

That was Stear’s surprise. A boat in the shape of a swan.

“Well, Candy, what do you think about being the first to go on board this elegant skiff?”

“It’s lovely! It looks like it has come straight out of a fairy tale. I can’t wait to get on it.”

Candy looked at the swan-boat with a smile.

“Candy, don’t hurry to rejoice. Maybe this story will end in tears.”

“What are you talking about, Archie? Come on, Candy, get on board! You’ll see, surprises are not over yet.”

“Oh, what is awaiting me?”

Candy climbed cheerfully on the boat. As soon as she sat down, a jet of water sprouted from a cylinder placed in the middle of the boat. It fell like a shower on Candy who was soaked from head to toe.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you that we needed an umbrella.”

Stear put his hands over his head, while Anthony and Archie were squirming with laughter.

“Indeed, this is a surprise...”

“Don’t laugh, Anthony. This is a swan-boat with a fountain. While you navigate on the lake you can see a rainbow. Well, at least that was the idea.”

“It’s not a bad idea, Stear, but do I have to take a shower every time I get on board?”

Candy got off the swan-boat. Three handkerchiefs were immediately offered to her. A real princess surrounded by her knights. Candy smiled at them and received each handkerchief.

A gentle breeze was blowing over the lake. Candy thought that it was probably the south wind. Maybe it was a good opportunity for her to put a message into a bottle and send it to Albert.

She wanted to tell him as soon as possible that she was very happy.
Albert, I'm back! And I have been adopted by the Ardlay family! Can you believe it? Life is wonderful.

“Candy, have you thought about our proposal?”

Archie smiled at her as he passed his slender fingers through his tousled hair.

“Yes, the Gate of Candy!”

Stear lay down on the grass. The others sat down around him. Anthony was close to Candy, so close that his shoulder was brushing against hers. That was enough to fill the girl's heart with joy.

The Gate of Candy. In other words, that gate would belong only to her.

Anthony had the gate of roses. The stone gate decorated with the engravings of a brave knight belonged to Archie. And finally, the aquatic gate, equipped with different devices, had been designed by Stear.

Therefore, each one of those gates had its own meaning. Seeing Candy marvel at that story, the three boys had offered to create a gate just for her.

“Of course I have thought about it! I would like a gate of confectionery! To enter you will have to pass through a donut. The walls around will be made of chocolate, cakes, and...”

“Not to mention plenty of candies, right?”

Anthony had replied immediately, and then he looked at Candy with complicity.

“That is going to be a very sweet gate.”

As he visualized everything, Archie couldn't help rubbing his belly.

“I don't know about you, but it has made me hungry.”

Stear got up suddenly and the others burst out laughing. Candy laughed too. She felt so happy that she had tears in her eyes.

Great Aunt Elroy was cold towards her. The servants ignored her and clearly disliked her. Nevertheless, Candy couldn't be happier than this thanks to the three charming boys around her. Just being by their side, she didn't care about anything, especially with Anthony's smile so close to her...

The other day she had told Anthony that she loved him.

Anthony hadn't answered her, but she felt that since then he had become more intimate with her, more tender. Even if he hadn't told her anything, Candy happily accepted his silent feelings.

Every day, at dawn, they took advantage of that quiet hour, when everybody in the house was still sleeping, to meet each other in the rose garden. They had never arranged that meeting. They felt as if they were connected by an invisible thread. They knew where they could find each other, in a place of their own.

There was nothing more pleasant than those moments she spent together with Anthony, wrapped in the sweet perfume of the roses they took care of.

Many times Candy had the strange feeling she was still dreaming.

The morning before the day of the fox hunting, Candy ran as usual to the rose garden.

A strong wind was blowing that day. Rose petals had been swept away, dancing in the air and landing at the girl's feet.

Anthony was looking at the Sweet Candy roses which had lost almost all of their petals. Candy was about to speak to him, but she didn't. She had suddenly the impression that the boy, who had his back turned on her, was terribly far away. She couldn't tell why. He was so close to her that it would have been enough for her to say a word to him. Yet he was actually very distant. Even if she ran after him, she could never have reached him.

Then Anthony turned around slowly.

"Well, Candy, what is it? Why are you standing there?"

Anthony smiled at her. Candy had the boy she knew in front of her. She was immediately reassured.

"I have been thinking that a lot of petals are carried away this morning..."

Precisely the moment she said that, a pale pink petal landed on her hair before being swept away again, like a butterfly. The rose petals kept twirling in the wind, as if they were in a hurry to go somewhere. That little aerial ballet continued as the wind carried them away to the clear blue sky.

"A season has just ended," murmured Anthony, following with his eyes the spinning petals. "When my mother died, the petals were flying in the same way..."

Candy was startled. She knew Anthony had lost his mother when he was very little. However, he had never told her about this until now.

"You know, Candy, my mother adored roses."

His mother's smile was forever engraved in Anthony's memory. Her health had always been delicate. And except when she took care of the flowers, she spent the rest of her time looking at the garden, sitting in a rocking chair. When she turned her beautiful green eyes towards Anthony, their color became brighter and an even more tender smile appeared on her face.

"When I was little I hated to see the roses wither. It made me so sad, for no reason. I felt awfully alone. I probably made a parallel between those flowers and my mother. I had the feeling that my mother would be taken away as quickly as the rose petals. But one day she said to me: 'Anthony, roses are beautiful because they wither one day. Then

they bloom again before they wither again...In this way, flowers live forever.' ”

Anthony was looking far away. He had murmured those words as if he were talking to himself.

“ ‘Flowers wither and bloom again, even more beautiful. In the same way, people die but they are born again even nicer in the hearts of those who love them. My little Anthony, your mama will live forever in your heart.’ My mother didn’t take her eyes off me while she said that to me. I was still too little and I didn’t really understand what those words meant. But I agreed with great conviction. My mother’s green eyes were like a deep lake. She passed away three days later...”

“Anthony...”

Anthony smiled at Candy, and his eyes were even clearer than the morning sky.

“It’s strange, Candy. I remember my mother perfectly well, even after all these years. I remember her voice. Sometimes the dead live in our hearts in a resplendent way, much more than many living people.”

Candy kept looking at the boy without saying anything. She was afraid that if she looked away for a single moment, he might dissolve in a ray of light and disappear in front of her.

Conclusion

When I think about it now, I tell myself that the feeling of worry I experienced at the time, an oppressive anxiety, almost suffocating, was undoubtedly a foreboding of what happened afterwards.

How long have I been standing in front of Slim's painting?

I had the impression it had been an eternity, but the rays of the sun, always so generous in the afternoon, hadn't yielded to the shadows in the least. I immersed myself in that painting which portrayed Pony's Home, and in the blink of an eye I went back in time.

What happened later that day still hurts me, just thinking about it. I wish that day had never existed.

However, I can never forget it. I guess it's the same for everyone; all of us live with similar wounds in our hearts.

I sigh and sit down on the sofa, located a little further away.

I look at Slim's painting of Pony's Home from some distance.

Yes...Every time I saw that little path leading to Pony's Home, I felt true relief, followed by the urge to start running towards the orphanage.

This is the place where I can return to whenever I want. And also the place from which I can leave full of new hope.

I remember every word Anthony said that morning. A whisper, while we were in the rose garden and the petals were dancing around us, as if we were flying to the sky along with them.

I remember Anthony's sad voice at that moment, his gestures, his tender smile.

However, back then I hadn't kept anything in my mind. I had moved on to something else and the anxiety that had assailed me had quickly dissipated.

I was much more preoccupied about the fox hunting that would take place the following day.

I wanted everything to be perfect for the ceremony during which I would be introduced to the whole family, and to honor Great Uncle William, as well as Anthony, Stear and Archie, who had secretly taught me horse riding.

The three boys didn't seem very interested in hunting, at least not like the adults. Anthony even felt guilty about the foxes.

"Adults do as they please. They tell us to love animals, but they allow themselves to hunt the foxes. When I grow up, I'll never hunt."

Anthony continued:

"But this time it's something special. This hunting was organized to introduce you to the whole family, Candy. If that can be the first step

for you to be accepted by the rest of the Ardlay family, I would like to catch a fox big enough to impress everybody, and offer it to you.”

Oh...Anthony...

That’s all I can say.

Twenty years have passed now, but I still can’t find any other words to express what that moment was like.

The morning of the fox hunting the weather was fine. It was a wonderful day. Even Great Aunt Elroy had smiled and said it was an ideal day for hunting.

That day I would be introduced as the adoptive daughter of the Ardlay family.

All day I had been forcing myself to smile and be calm, but actually I was extremely tense.

I knew very well that nobody, starting from Great Aunt Elroy, would welcome me with open arms. Obviously it was the same with the servants.

Everybody obeyed reluctantly the patriarch’s orders.

“Will Great Uncle William be here?”

That was the question which worried me the most. Although I had written him several letters, I had received no reply. I wanted so much to meet him, at least on that special day, so I could show him my gratitude, even with just one word.

“I don’t think he’s going to participate in the hunting. He’s a great misanthrope. Not to mention that we call him ‘Great Uncle’ rather than ‘Uncle’. Considering his advanced age, we shouldn’t expect him to be able to hunt. He could hardly ride a horse.”

Whenever I recall Stear’s facial expression at that moment, I can’t help smiling.

That day the three boys were my knights, even more than usual.

The Ardlays owned a huge forest. The looks of the family members who had gathered for the occasion were even colder than I had imagined. Obviously Mrs. Leagan had spread stories about me to everybody, and they mustn’t have been complimentary at all.

“Great Uncle William’s whims are a constant source of concern for me. And this is the latest one, maybe the most unreasonable to this day; Candice, who has just been adopted.”

Great Aunt Elroy introduced me with those words. Obviously she didn’t welcome me gladly. But still I remember I was surprised and delighted to hear that. Actually I didn’t even expect her to make my presentation.

Nobody thought I was worthy to be a part of the Ardlay family. And I was determined to prove them wrong later.

Eliza and Neal participated in the hunting too, in their most sumptuous clothes, ready to humiliate me if they had the opportunity. Fortunately, my three friends protected me all the time.

A shot signaling the start of the hunting sounded in the forest.

The horses hit the ground with their hooves and started galloping. The barking dogs scattered through the forest.

I also made my horse move slowly so that Stear, Archie and Anthony could keep an eye on it.

I had secretly mounted Cleopatra, and the contact with horses was not a problem for me, but galloping was a different story.

“Hey, Archie, what is the hunting prize?” asked Stear, turning to his brother and pulling the reins of his horse.

“A ruby pendant offered by Great Uncle William. And I’m the one who’s going to get it,” replied Archie winking at me, before galloping into the forest.

“That’s not fair! He must know where the hiding places of the foxes are!”

Stear spurred his horse and followed Archie. Suddenly, I found myself alone with Anthony.

He slowly brought his mount closer to mine.

“I won’t be left behind. I also know a secret hiding place.”

Anthony said that with a mischievous expression, but he didn’t seem to be in a hurry.

That was kind of him. He knew I was not familiar with horseback riding yet.

Gunshots rang in the distance. The barking of the dogs moved further and further away.

Anthony crossed the densest corner of the forest. The branches of the trees, so low that he had to crouch his back in order to avoid them, made that place dark.

Suddenly the forest gave way to a glade. Then a meadow spread out before us, like an oasis in the middle of the vegetation.

That immediately reminded me of Pony’s Hill.

Yes, it had the same atmosphere that reigned in that place.

I talked to Anthony about it right away.

“Pony’s Hill...Oh, yes, this is where you have come from, isn’t it?”

Anthony turned around.

“I would like to go there one day. I want to see Pony’s Home, the place where you grew up, and also meet Miss Pony and Sister Lane.”

“Oh, yes! We’ll go, I promise. All right, Anthony?”

I was so thrilled that I pounced on my horse’s back. Anthony looked at me amused and then his expression changed suddenly and became serious.

“Candy, you met your prince on Pony’s Hill when you were little, didn’t you? That reminds me of something...Maybe, when I was a little boy...”

In the meantime, the nearby bushes began to stir and make a rustle. A big fox appeared.

“Candy, it’s me who will give you that ruby!”

Anthony smiled at me and immediately straightened up on the saddle. He tapped his horse on the flanks and set off in pursuit of the animal with the long tail and the bushy fur.

The fox was running at a breakneck speed. Anthony’s horse also increased the speed of its galloping. The fox, trapped, swerved right and left and kept running as fast as it could.

That moment Anthony’s horse kicked hard with its front legs, arching backwards.

It had just stepped on a wolf trap.

Then, that neighing...

I cover my face with my hands and get up from the sofa.

Even today I don’t want to remember that moment. I am unable to face it.

And yet that precise moment is engraved forever in my memory. Even now, it still comes often in my dreams.

Anthony is falling from his white horse as if in slow motion. Actually it mustn’t have happened so slowly.

On the contrary, it happened in the blink of an eye.

Anthony was thrown off his horse. In my mind I can see that moment again as if everything were in slow motion.

There was no sound. I didn’t even hear myself screaming.

I must have fainted, because I don’t remember what happened afterwards.

Anthony Brown.

He was only fifteen. He was a gentle boy who loved roses.

How cruel God could be.

I had the impression that colors had instantly disappeared from this world. I suppose it must have been the same for every member of the Ardlay family. Stear’s and Archie’s eyes were full of sorrow, and yet they had tried to protect me from Great Aunt Elroy’s rage.

“This is all your fault! If only you hadn’t been adopted...”

After having shouted those words to my face, she shut herself in her room, determined never to see me again.

Stear and Archie had tried to comfort me as best as they could, but I understood only too well what Great Aunt Elroy felt because, to tell the truth, I was in exactly the same state as she was.

What an irony...

Since I was little I had been dreaming of being adopted by a rich family.

If I had known it would be like this, I would have preferred to go to Mexico. It didn't matter how hard I would have to work, if that meant Anthony would still be alive.

That thought kept haunting me. I even imagined that if I left for Mexico immediately, that might bring Anthony back to life.

What is happiness?

I didn't know anymore.

Even today I can't say I know the answer to this question.

The only thing I want now is not much. To keep living with the person I love; nothing more...

The funeral was over. But the Ardlay family didn't seem to have awakened from that nightmare.

Stear and Archie became more taciturn day after day, as if they had lost all their joy of living.

I went to the rose garden every morning, at the exact time I had been meeting Anthony.

The flowers had all withered. The rose garden was dead too. The bare branches trembled with the wind, as if they were cold.

I was convinced that no flower would ever bloom again in that desolate place.

"Flowers wither and bloom again, even more beautiful. Likewise, people die but they are born again in the hearts of those who love them, even nicer."

Anthony's words resurfaced from the bottom of my heart.

No, that's not what I want! You may be in my heart, Anthony, but what I want is to hear your voice! To see the sparkle of your eyes! To feel the warmth of your hands!

I contained the cry inside of me but tears came to my eyes.

I crouched down and cried my heart out. No matter how much I was crying, the tears didn't stop.

What should I do... What should I do?

While sobbing, I grabbed the stem of a rose with my hand, as if to hold on to Anthony.

I was pricked by a thorn. Blood spilled on my fingertip.

I remained frozen for a while, looking at that red drop.

And suddenly I felt I was alive. Then I looked slowly around me.

I sensed life in that rose garden was in gestation. I had thought that place was completely lost. Yet next season the flowers would bloom even more beautiful.

Anthony...Life...Death... What does all this mean? Does all this make

any sense? Anthony, even if you are dead, does that mean I have to go on living?

“Exactly, Candy.”

That moment, the wind brought Anthony’s voice to me, and I heard it very clearly.

“I want you to go on living and to keep smiling, as you have always been doing.”

Yes, you are right, Anthony, but it’s so difficult...Anthony, I loved you so much.

“I loved you too.”

Maybe Anthony’s voice, or whatever I heard at that time, was just a bad trick my senses were playing on me.

But at that precise moment, it was him who gave me the strength to go on living.

What should I do now?

I looked at my fingertip, crying. The blood had stopped without my noticing it.

“Dear Stear,

Dear Archie,

I’m leaving without a word. Please forgive my bad manners.

I can’t stay in that house any longer. It’s full of Anthony’s memories, and this is too hard for me.

And I don’t want to make Great Aunt Elroy suffer any more.

But above all, I can’t bear to see both of you so sad...

I finally managed to face myself for the first time.

Becoming the adoptive daughter of the Ardlay family...That was the most wonderful dream coming true.

But now I know that patched cotton dresses suit me much better than refined silk ones.

I’ll find happiness on my own. There’s a little voice inside of me telling me that.

Stear, Archie, thank you for everything you have done for me. I’ll never forget your kindness and all the beautiful memories we have shared.

The simple fact of having spent those moments with you is enough to make me happy.

I plan to write to Great Uncle William in order to thank him for doing me the honor of adopting me. I’ll take this opportunity to apologize to him too. Even if it was only for a short time, he has allowed me to live the most beautiful of dreams.

Stear, Archie, don’t worry about me.

By the time you read this letter, I’ll probably be on the train that will take me to Pony’s Home.

*Take care of yourselves, both of you. Also look after Great Aunt.
We'll meet again with a smile. I promise you that.*

Candice White

To:

Mr. Alistair Cornwell, the best inventor in the world.

Mr. Archibald Cornwell, the brave knight of the stone gate.”