

Section 2

Introduction

Since I received the letter that brought the good news of Miss Pony's complete recovery, the excitement I feel in my heart doesn't seem to calm down. In fact, the nostalgia for the past days is so strong that it takes my breath away. How much I would like to go back to Pony's Home...

Now the villa of the Ardlays in Lakewood belongs to another family, and even that of the Leagans has become now a pleasant memory. What happened to Stear's Portal of Water, to Archie's Stone Entrance and to Anthony's Gate of Roses? Could the new owners possibly be still cultivating the rose garden with the Sweet Candy roses?

The Sweet Candy roses...Their color was as soft as only the pink cheeks of fairies could be. I've never seen anything like them. They are the roses created by Anthony, but now I am so far away that I can't even smell their fragrance.

That morning Anthony died in front of my eyes. That moment I just didn't know what to do. Every time that moment returned to my mind, it became even more vivid.

Trying to mitigate this tension, I go out on the large terrace. The Avon river flows slowly, bathed in the afternoon light of the early spring. Out of the water comes a cool wind that relieves the tension of my restless thoughts. I breathe deeply the sweet perfume of the daffodils, coming from the garden. They are in full bloom, and I'm grateful for those golden reflections that seem to filter through the trees. In the small rose garden, the buds are opening. It's the only part that I don't leave to the care of the gardener and take care of personally.

That day I left the Ardlay house, leaving only a letter for Stear and Archie. I was moving like a sleepwalker, with the only objective to get to Pony's Home.

I arrived late at night, and Miss Pony and Sister Lane welcomed me with an embrace, without asking any questions. They say I fell in a deep sleep. Hearing me crying in my sleep, Sister Lane woke me up gently. Surely I must have repeated countless times Anthony's name. However, the teachers didn't ask me anything, waiting for me to speak.

Yes, I had dreamed many times that Anthony was still alive and, to be honest, that happens even now.

In my dreams he is always alive, and I feel relieved.

“How nice...Anthony, I thought you were...”

Even the things he tells me are always the same.

“Candy, you go on living with a smile, don’t you?” he asks me with a serene expression.

“Of course, Anthony. Because I live with the person I love...”

While I answer, my eyes get wet. Somewhere in my heart, I feel that all this isn’t real.

The loved ones who have left this world never change; their time stops forever. It’s just as Anthony had said, that day when the petals of the roses were falling like snow: those who depart continue living forever in our hearts. However, unfortunately, we can’t see them anymore...Until now I’ve had to face many painful separations, but I have also understood that as long as we continue living, it is possible to meet again. That’s why I’m no longer afraid to say goodbye.

It’s spring, but being outside on the terrace I still feel the cold wind brushing my cheeks. Trembling, I go back into the living room and look again at Slim’s oil painting.

Slim...Where are you now? I only hope you are alive.

I tried to find him in vain. There was the Great War, and the world situation had not yet stabilized. I don’t know what happened to him, but I believe that when he drew that picture he was happy.

There is Pony’s Home as it was once. The building has been expanded and modified, and the only thing that remains intact is the church. Thanks to Great Uncle William, Mr. Cartwright has also given some land. Even today the building is full of little orphans. I wish I could do something to make myself more useful to Miss Pony; but...I don’t want to go away from the person who, more than anything else, wants me to always stay by his side.

After having left the Ardlays and returned to the orphanage, I became the naughty Candy again.

Jimmy, a boy who arrived during my absence and ignored my true power, tried to challenge me, but later he was obliged, although reluctantly, to give me the scepter of the Chief.

The teachers would run out of words, but even today, if I returned to Pony’s Home, I’m sure that nobody would be able to beat me in throwing the lasso or in climbing trees.

“Well, Candy, how can you compete with a child much younger than you...You really haven’t grown up,” said Sister Lane on that occasion, but her eyes, like Miss Pony’s eyes, were smiling.

They were certainly relieved to see me cheerful again.

Even so, I felt that I was not the same anymore. It was as if frozen water had accumulated at the bottom of my heart and, occasionally, it hurt me. There was no day that I didn't think about Anthony. And Stear and Archie too.

Whenever I felt overwhelmed by memories, I skillfully got rid of Jimmy and the other children and went alone to Pony's Hill. It was early winter, and I heard the sound of the dry grass being whipped by the cold wind. The smell of snow was in the air. I always tried to hold back my tears. I had promised it to Anthony; I had to go on smiling. And I had also promised it to Prince on the Hill.

I had written a long letter to Great Uncle William, asking him to forgive me for acting on my own and expressing all my gratitude. I had also told him that I was ready to know about the cancellation of my position as an adoptive daughter of the Ardlays; but I hadn't received any reply. I was sure that I would not be part of that illustrious family any longer.

Then, in the afternoon the first snow fell, a shining black car that I knew very well arrived to pick me up...

Chapter 1

The deck of the ship was wrapped in a thick fog.

“It’s so cold!” said Candy, tightening the shawl on her shoulders.

Out there, the joy that permeated the parlor of the ocean liner seemed almost unreal. Darkness and mist, the sound of the waves breaking against the boat, the white foam that suddenly rose in the darkness of the night...

Candy couldn’t believe that she was really on board that magnificent ship going to England.

In the parlor they were here holding a New Year’s Eve party, but she had slipped out silently. Live music and dancing, champagne flowing and drunk people who were laughing happily; that place was too cheerful for her.

A new year...Although Anthony is no longer here, time still goes on.

With a little sigh, she clung to the railing which was moistened by the mist. In the air echoed the whistle of the siren.

How many days had passed since she had left the United States?

Every day the ship was approaching its destination, and every day she was going more and more away from home.

It certainly seems that my destiny is always leaving in a hurry.

Smiling, Candy turned her eyes to the night sky, dark and without stars, appearing from time to time through the fog.

In the car, which arrived the day of the first snowfall, was George.

With the same expressionless face he had had while rescuing her during the journey to Mexico, he had merely informed her about those important matters:

“I am here by Sir William’s order. He wishes you to go to England to attend a prestigious college in London. Everything is ready, therefore you must leave immediately.”

The snow kept falling, whitening all the land surrounding Pony’s Home.

“I...I was convinced that I was no longer his adoptive daughter...” she had replied confused, but George had remained silent.

Not knowing what to do, she had looked at Miss Pony and Sister Lane. Without saying a word, the two women had agreed. They seemed to be already aware of everything.

But, I...attending a college in London...

England was certainly too far away. After all, she only knew that small village and Lakewood. Seeing her troubled, the man had delivered to her two letters from Stear and Archie.

“Dear Candy,
How are you? Stear and I wanted to come and visit you and we escaped from the villa, but George discovered us right away. It’s my fault for having trusted that ramshackle car constructed by my brother...

Anyway, we will wait for you in London.
I’m looking forward to seeing you here.

Archie”

“Do you have any idea how sad life will be in London without you? Finally we are free from Great Aunt’s control, can you understand that? Come on, bring me a little of your joy, Candy!

I gave George some gifts that I made myself. The first one is a doll identical to you (try to pull the thread!). The second one is an automatic lifejacket. Just put it in the water and it inflates on its own, so you can take the boat trip in complete safety!

I’m waiting for you in London!

Stear”

Candy’s wooden doll...Whenever she was pulling the thread, its eyes and mouth were taking on a happy expression.

Stear...My nose isn’t so flat...

Embracing that gift, the girl had smiled through her tears.

Suddenly, a quiet voice had said:

“Miss Candice, you are still a worthy adoptive daughter of the Ardlay family.”

It was George who was talking to her. Due to his character, his tone of voice was full of emotion.

“Please, don’t let down Sir William’s expectations.”

Surprised, the girl kept staring at him.

I’ve never done anything to thank you...

Once Candy had wished to become a lady worthy of the Ardlay name, but things had happened differently.

“Candy...A wonderful gift like this certainly doesn’t happen to everyone. Be grateful and accept this proposal. We would be happy. We are sure that wherever you go, you’ll never forget who you really are,” Miss Pony had encouraged her.

Next to her, Sister Lane had agreed with a profound expression.

At that moment, the young girl’s feelings had become clear.

The engine noise joined that of the waves. The music coming from the parlor changed into a rhythm of tango.

Miss Pony...Sister Lane...Anthony...

Murmuring those names, she felt her eyes getting moist. She blinked them quickly.

The wind had become even more frozen and the deck was wrapped in a mist similar to an invisible white mantle brought by the nymphs of the night.

The girl decided to return inside, but she stopped immediately. Beyond the fog, a figure had appeared. When the view became clearer, she could distinguish the image of a boy from behind.

The lad was standing in front of the boat railing, laying on it the upper part of his body. Absorbed in watching that dark sea, he seemed to want to jump into the water at any moment.

Worried, Candy couldn't help coming closer, but suddenly she held her breath, with her heart beating so hard that it hurt her.

"Anthony..."

Her lips were trembling slightly.

That boy looked so much like him...The same posture of someone who seems absorbed in some thought, the soft hair caressed by the wind...

She continued approaching as if attracted by a magnet. The fog was moving without interruption, covering the boy's profile, and Candy felt her chest overwhelmed by an unbearable burden.

He really looked much like Anthony. Actually, the boy in front of her was taller and more muscular, but nevertheless, the resemblance was still impressive.

The fog cleared up again and made the boy's profile clearly visible. Candy was startled and continued staring at him.

He's crying...

It seemed to her that she had glimpsed a glitter in those eyes looking almost defiantly into the darkness that was spreading everywhere beyond the sea. Candy hesitated, feeling that she had witnessed something she shouldn't have seen, but she was unable to draw back.

He reminds me of Anthony's profile, when he sometimes looked far away with that sad countenance.

Candy's heart was full of emotions.

"Who's there?"

Suddenly, the boy turned and spoke in a firm voice. His tone didn't correspond to the sad image she had seen from behind him.

"I'm sorry...you seemed so sad to me...I was afraid you wanted to jump into the sea..." murmured Candy stunned.

"Sad? *Me?*"

Pointing at himself with one finger, the lad started laughing loudly.

"That was good! So I'm sad and ready to jump into the sea?"

He kept laughing and Candy began to get irritated, feeling that he was mocking her. That person who was in front of her didn't match at

all with the lad she had seen from behind and who looked like Anthony. The light she had seen in his eyes a little while ago must have been a mistake.

“What are you doing here walking by yourself? In the parlor they are having a grand New Year’s Eve party,” he asked her ironically.

“I don’t care much for parties,” replied Candy in an indifferent way, annoyed this time.

The boy started laughing again and said:

“Of course, you’d better say that you don’t have anyone to dance with.”

“You are wrong!”

“Don’t be offended, Miss Freckles. If you get angry you’ll see even more of them.”

The boy brought his face closer and let out a whistle:

“But look at that! There is *really* a face behind all those freckles. Poor girl...”

Candy gave him a piercing look and answered:

“Well, I’m very sorry for you, but I *love* my freckles! I would even like to have more! I suppose you are simply jealous, since you don’t even have one!”

“What are you saying?”

The boy pretended to be surprised and approached her again.

“Do you mean that you are also proud of that snub nose?”

No. That mocking look wasn’t at all like that of Anthony’s.

“Of course! And imagine that, in order to have it like this, I intentionally crush it every day!”

Dominated by anger, Candy pressed her nose on purpose. The boy continued emphasizing all the physical characteristics about which she was most concerned.

“Surely you’re a vivacious kid.”

Laughing, the lad turned and started walking along the deck.

“I’d better run away, before you bite me. Happy New Year! It was fun to meet you, Miss Freckles.”

Raising his arm in farewell, he disappeared whistling in the fog.

Candy watched him going away and she made a grimace. She was angry with herself for being mistaken for an instant, deceived by the apparent resemblance to Anthony.

“Miss Candice, I was looking for you.”

That moment, instead of the boy, appeared George and Candy hastened to assume again an expression worthy of a young lady.

“Tonight the fog is very thick; how could I justify myself to Sir William if you accidentally fell into the water?”

“Forgive me...”

Candy apologized with sincerity and moved along beside him.

“Listen, George...Have you by any chance met a boy earlier?”

“Do you refer to young Mr. Granchester?”

He seemed to know him.

“Oh, so that’s his name, Granchester.”

“Exactly. I believe he is part of an illustrious and noble English family.”

“*What?* That arrogant and impertinent boy is a *noble?*”

“Has anything happened with that young gentleman?”

“No...It just seemed to me that he looked a little like Anthony...”

“Master Anthony...?” murmured the man, stopping.

Unable to bear George’s grieved look, Candy gave him a big smile and said annoyed:

“Oh, but I was greatly mistaken! He certainly doesn’t look at all like Anthony! That boy was a noble? Anthony was a gentleman, and he was a noble in every way, don’t you think?”

George didn’t reply and lowered his gaze. Candy also remained silent and they reached their cabins without talking.

“In three days we’ll arrive in England. Have a good rest,” he told her in front of the door, still looking away.

“Thank you. Good night, George,” murmured Candy, but then she called to him again with a cheerful voice: “Happy New Year, George! I hope this new year brings to us only nice things!”

The man stopped and turned slowly.

“That is my wish for you too, Miss Candice. Happy New Year,” he said gently, with a bow of his head.

That new year, Candy thought, would mark the beginning of a new life.

Chapter 2

St. Paul's Royal Institute.

Candy looked up at the high bars of the huge building. Extending without end and threatening, they seemed to shut out the rest of the world. They were adorned with the most varied artistic engravings and that was enough to give them the aspect of a museum. Beyond the bars she could see a large, well-kept garden and a big lake in a geometrical shape, surrounded on both sides by molded spherical-shaped hedges that succeeded each other in an orderly fashion, leading to the school building, built of brown stone, located at the centre.

Candy remained ecstatic seeing that wonderful institute, embellished with solemn stone statues.

"Say, it looks like a medieval castle! It's wonderful! You had told me a lot of nonsense...You wanted to scare me, didn't you?"

Laughing, Candy looked at Stear and Archie in a vaguely threatening way. Anything she saw or said, the girl was so happy she had met them again that she couldn't contain her smile.

The two boys had gone to pick her up at the port, which was at some distance from the city of London.

Until the moment they were reunited, Candy had been struggling with mixed feelings. She couldn't wait to see them again, but at the same time Anthony's memory troubled her. She almost feared that the nightmare of that day would come back to haunt her, and therefore she was wondering what she would say to them in greeting.

However, all those feelings disappeared the moment she saw the striking sign displayed by Stear, framed with artificial flowers and with the words: "A warm welcome, Miss Candy!"

It couldn't be anybody else's doing. It had even a graceful caricature of "Miss Candy" with her flat nose.

After a happy embrace, laughing, the girl hadn't missed the opportunity to protest against that drawing.

"Stear, I admit I have a flat nose, but do you seriously think that I have such short legs?"

Despite the complaints, Candy was so happy to be with her two friends again that she almost cried with joy.

"Do you think it's wrong? I was convinced I had made a good drawing..." Stear had replied with his usual cheerful and careless expression.

"Brother, you are certainly inept at drawing. I should have taken care of it myself," Archie had remarked in an arrogant manner.

His tweed coat with the brown fur was very becoming.

The eyes of the two boys were moist too.

Later, in a car reserved for them, they had gone directly to London, continuing to talk all the way without stopping. Archie interrupted Stear's chatter, and then Candy joined in the conversation.

Almost all that time, the boys had continued describing to her a "false academic life of daily torture", rigid days marked by absurd rules.

"The teachers are more than 'pious women', they are 'harpies'," sighed Stear.

Candy started laughing and said:

"Do you want to make me believe that the college is actually a Royal Institute of Harpies?"

"Exactly," Archie answered with absolute seriousness, and the three of them started laughing again.

They hadn't changed at all; they were the same as when they had met for the first time in Lakewood. Only Anthony was no longer with them. Candy felt suddenly a twinge in her heart.

St. Paul's Royal Institute was on the outskirts of London. After having heard terrible stories about that place, Candy was feeling a little tense, but fear had given way to admiration due to the magnificent aspect of the building.

"Once you get inside you will notice if we are exaggerating or not, isn't that true, Stear?"

Archie intentionally kept away from the main entrance and, together with him, Stear pretended to be trembling exaggeratedly, leaving Candy speechless.

"All right. I would say that you have to enter," said George in an expressionless way, ignoring the boys' behavior and calling the gatekeeper.

The great iron gate opened with a creak.

"Candy, let's stay outside a little longer. We still have twelve minutes left," suggested Archie with a frown.

"George, I beg you! We have seen each other again after such a long time; don't separate us so cruelly," implored Stear, clasping his hands.

"But what are you talking about? From now on you can see Miss Candice at any time."

Without paying any attention to the boy, George crossed the gate.

"He's right, come on, let's go inside," said Candy, following him.

"No! You two are talking like that because you have no idea what kind of *prison* this is!" shouted Stear.

"I also want to enjoy these last eleven minutes of freedom I have left," added Archie, watching the clock and pushing back the hair that fell on his forehead.

“Don’t do it, Candy! Come back here!”

Stear tried to call back the young girl, who was now inside the college, and he attached himself to the gate, shaking the bars as if he were a prisoner. Watching that scene, the girl was convulsed with laughter.

Oh, Stear, you’ll always be the same...and you too, Archie!

Laughing, she greeted her two friends waving her hand to them and continued following George with small quick steps.

On the other side of the garden a silent forest of evergreens extended.

“It’s a very beautiful college...I can’t believe there is a forest inside of it.”

“It also has a stable, an archery building and an astronomical observatory. Here you can find anything.”

“However...this forest doesn’t have the same atmosphere with Lakewood...”

The trees of Lakewood looked more enchanting.

Candy returned mentally to those dear places and also remembered the huge villa of the Ardlays. She had heard that Great Aunt Elroy had returned to the main residence in Chicago, and that now the building had been abandoned. She was worried about Anthony’s roses, but George never answered her questions, as if he considered them inopportune.

She climbed the stone steps and headed to the great entrance of the school building. There, in front of it, a middle-aged nun with a sad expression, dressed in grey, was waiting for her.

“Sister Gray, the director of the institute, is expecting you,” she informed her.

The woman didn’t even deign to look at George, although he had intended to greet her, and she advanced along a broad corridor, decorated with armors and old paintings.

“This corridor also looks as if we were in a castle,” exclaimed Candy with admiration.

The nun turned immediately and looked at her coldly.

“You must walk in silence. Even whispering is strictly forbidden.”

Receiving that order which deprived her of any words, Candy shut her mouth and tried to walk without making any noise.

Do you want to see if Stear and Archie haven’t exaggerated with their stories?

Inside the college everything was cool and silent. The only source of heat were the rays of the winter sun that were filtered through the stained glass.

The nun stopped before an imposing double-leaf door. She knocked respectfully, and then entered.

“Sister Gray, the young lady of the Ardlay family has arrived,” she announced, bowing her head.

It hadn't almost passed a second after she finished her sentence, when a grave and clear voice resounded in the room:

"There is a delay of three minutes and twenty eight seconds. It is important to respect punctuality."

Surprised, Candy looked in front of her and she was forced to stifle a cry: it seemed to her she saw an imposing rock. She tried to observe better, but Sister Gray really looked like a rock dressed in a habit.

"I beg your pardon for our delay. I am the secretary of Sir William Ardlay, and I am here as a guardian for Miss Candice, and..."

"That is sufficient. I am already aware of everything. Now you can leave."

The woman interrupted George with a gesture of her fat hand, which looked like a stone.

"But..."

"The person that will become a student in this college is Candice. It is with her I must speak. The girl will reside in our institute and I suppose that it is not necessary to tell you that she will not require any longer the intervention of a guardian. From now on we will take over her education."

"I understand."

George threw a fleeting and worried glance at his protégée, and then he left the room with a bow.

Candy followed him with her eyes. She had still wanted to talk to him of so many things...She hadn't even thanked him for accompanying her to London.

I wanted to finally know something about Great Uncle William...

That moment the director's voice, powerful as a thunder, echoed:

"Candice White Ardlay! What are you looking at? Straighten your back and look directly in front of you! Listen carefully: a correct posture reflects an integral spirit."

Seated before the desk, Sister Gray also straightened up. Now the rock seemed to rise even higher than before.

"Now I will talk to you about the history and the regulation of the prestigious St. Paul's Royal Institute. I beg you to pay full attention!"

With the appearance of someone who is accustomed to making speeches in public, the woman began to talk as if she were chanting.

Candy was listening attentively to her, but her mind was rambling elsewhere.

It is truly incredible...Under these circumstances maybe it will be really difficult to see Stear and Archie...Oh, Archie was right. I should have taken better advantage of those twelve minutes! Maybe I would have time to go to a coffee shop to have some tea and eat a muffin...

Candy's mind didn't imagine just the muffin, but also a roll and a banana cake.

The director's speech seemed to have no end. Only the regulation of the students had a hundred articles and it would be impossible to learn them all at once. After the first five, Candy had given up on that venture.

"I hope everything is clear, Candice White Ardlay. Do honor to your illustrious name!"

"Yes!" responded Candy with confidence.

Sister Gray, without even smiling, nodded and rang the bell on her desk. Immediately the gloomy nun who had accompanied her there a little while ago appeared.

"Call Patricia O'Brien for me."

After a short wait, someone knocked on the door and appeared a girl not very tall, with chubby cheeks. She greeted the director tensely and entered the room. She seemed to have a quiet character and she was wearing a pair of blue-rimmed glasses that suited her very well.

"Patricia, this is Candice, our new student. Accompany her to the special room."

"Yes, Sister."

Patricia replied like an automaton and gave a look at Candy to greet her.

Once they were out, Candy stretched herself and said:

"Oh, I got so tired standing there all this time!"

"Oh, no, you should not do certain things in the corridor...If they catch you they will strike your hands with a stick!"

Frightened, Patricia looked immediately around her to make sure that no one was there.

"Well, in that case, I wouldn't be able to hold the pen in my hand and it would be impossible for me to study, don't you think?"

Despite Candy's cheerful tone, the girl still had a tense expression and continued walking frightened along a piazza.

"This is the girls' dormitory," she said, pointing out to an elegant building.

"How beautiful!"

"It's beautiful only on the outside. Inside it is suffocating...You're not even free to go out," remarked Patricia looking down, avoiding Candy's eyes.

"Really? There are actually few windows...but I'm sure that there will be a way of sneaking out."

Seeing Candy's mischievous smile, the other girl's face finally softened. Opening a heavy door, they entered the dormitory.

"I'm glad that a person like you has come...I had been worried, not knowing to whom the special room was assigned. You know, just a short time ago there came such a wicked girl that..."

Patricia left the sentence unfinished and shut her mouth, stopping suddenly. Candy stopped too and, when she looked in front of her, she couldn't believe her eyes. On the other side of the corridor, walking haughtily, Eliza Leagan was approaching. Stear and Archie had told her that the Leagan siblings had been studying in London, but she had never imagined that she would meet them so soon.

Eliza looked away annoyed, but Candy was accustomed to such behavior.

"It's been so long since we have met, Eliza..."

Candy felt a strange nostalgia seeing her again, and couldn't help approaching her.

"Keep your distance! You're disgusting me!"

Hearing Eliza's cry, the other students turned around surprised.

"Patty, what are you doing here with her? You'll end up getting dirty! Do you know she comes from an orphanage and that my family was so kind as to give her work? Imagine, she had been taking care of the *horses!* I don't know how this shameless has earned Great Uncle's good will; the fact is that he decided to adopt her out of the blue. But *nobody* in the family has accepted her! Patty, if you continue frequenting her, you will also end up isolated from everybody!"

Candy looked with admiration at the rapid movements of Eliza's mouth. How could she have said so many evil things without stopping for breath?

Patricia seemed honestly worried and didn't know what to do.

"Well...The thing is...the director gave me instructions to accompany her to the special room..."

"What...*what?*" exclaimed Eliza, raising quickly her eyebrows. "A *tramp* in the private room?"

Eliza's voice became shrill. She felt as if her heart had turned into embers and had come up to her throat. She gave Candy the most scathing look she was capable of.

"You don't have to accompany her. Let's go, Patty!" she said, and with a grin on her face, she took hold of Patricia's arm.

"But I..."

"Don't worry about me," said Candy cheerfully, trying to reassure her while she was being dragged away.

Eliza...Wherever you go, you will always be the same.

Candy sighed. Eliza would certainly use all her energy to make life difficult for her, even inside the college.

If she put all this effort in studying, she would become an excellent student.

She almost felt sorry for her.

However, she wondered where the special room would be. She thought to ask some girls who were there whispering, but when she

tried, their only answer was to turn quickly to the other side. Then she decided to forget about that and find the room all by herself.

An orphan, a girl who took care of horses...Eliza has really introduced me beautifully.

Certainly all those young ladies from good families had decreed instantly her marginalization.

Surely this is not a novelty...

At the end of the corridor, she came across a door larger than the others. Devoid of any number, it was the only one displaying delicate engravings on the wood.

“Would this be the special room?”

Candy opened timidly the door and her eyes widened.

“But this is splendid!”

She entered as if she was being sucked by the room. The accommodation seemed to be that of a princess, and everything was furnished in pale pink, slightly darker than the Sweet Candy’s color. Although its dimensions were smaller compared to her room at the Ardlay house, it was elegantly furnished. She glanced at the inner room, elegant and perfect with a beautiful bed. The shelves were full of books and on her little dressing table several perfumes were lined up. Candy opened slowly the closet and discovered it was full of dresses. She let out a cry of happiness, but then a doubt came upon her.

Is this really the special room? Haven’t I been mistaken?

But that was really her room.

On an austere desk located under the window, a thick diary had been placed in an almost casual manner. When Candy saw it, she was out of breath for a moment; on the brown leather cover it was written in golden letters “Candice White Ardlay”.

“Thank you, Uncle...”

With her voice trembling with emotion, Candy grasped the diary. She flipped it and the white pages seemed to slip smiling at her. From now on she would narrate all her days in there.

It almost seemed to her that she heard Great Uncle’s voice telling her: “Whatever happens, never lose heart. Candice White Ardlay, don’t do anything you can’t write proudly in this diary.”

She nodded decisively.

“Yes, Uncle. I will write sincerely about every day of my life. I will live in such a way that, if some day you get to read these pages, I won’t have anything to be ashamed of,” promised Candy, holding tight her diary against her chest.

Chapter 3

“What a blinding sun!”

Candy drew with force the red velvet curtains and closed her eyes, dazzled by the wave of light that had flooded the room.

She went out on the large balcony and inhaled deeply. The morning air seemed to bring the scent of the city of London, but the twitter of the little birds, gathered out there, was the same she used to hear at Pony’s Home.

Candy was happy that the institute was surrounded with trees. All of their branches were set in such a way that facilitated the possibility of climbing them. And then there was the well-kept internal garden, and even the dense forest, a little further away. Beyond the trees she could see the tower of the boys’ dormitory. Leaning over the railing, Candy looked sadly at that distant brick-colored building. The previous day Sister Gray had informed her solemnly that being connected with persons of the opposite sex was strictly prohibited inside the college. It wasn’t even possible to hold a conversation, let alone go to the boys’ dormitory to join Stear and Archie. Apparently, even exchanging a few words during a casual meeting promised a penalty.

“And to think that we have finally seen each other again after such a long time...I would have so many things to tell them! I would never have believed that I would find a person similar to Aunt Elroy in London too...”

In Candy’s mind appeared simultaneously the images of the director and of Great Aunt Elroy. The girl hastened to chase away both images.

“The special room’s balcony is truly beautiful. I almost feel like Her Majesty the Queen! Good morning, English village. Good morning, good mor...”

Lowering her head, Candy returned hurriedly to the room. In fact, while she was outside playing the queen and waving ceremoniously, she had been caught by a nun who was passing by the courtyard. The woman had given her a fulminant look.

Come on, I was just joking, she didn’t need to look like that...I hope not all the nuns of the institute will be such terrible and somber harpies.

Grinning, she put on the grey uniform. Patricia had told her that for the common prayer she should use the uniform reserved for normal activities. The girl had appeared the night before. She seemed frightened, but anyway she had been very kind to inform her.

Patricia doesn’t seem to have a very strong character, but she is a nice girl.

At that moment, she heard the bell ringing from the church adjoining the college.

Candy winked at her image reflected in the mirror and went out decisively.

She was thirty minutes earlier than the hour she had been told, but every time she had to go to a place she didn't know she used to go in advance, as Miss Pony had taught her.

Once a month, early in the morning, all the students met at church for the common prayer. It was a religious ceremony, but it was still a valuable opportunity for her to see her two friends. Therefore, Candy was feeling happy.

The girls' dormitory was wrapped in silence and she didn't meet anybody along the corridor. Were they all still sleeping? When she arrived at the piazza, her carefree expression gave way to surprise. Candy looked around her and saw that the few remaining students were running towards the church dressed all in the black uniform. Suddenly she spotted further away Eliza, wearing of course the dark suit, and Patricia. The girls turned around. Being aware of her presence, Patricia was startled and looked away immediately. She was dressed in black too. Watching her out of the corner of her eye, Eliza, on the contrary, smiled with superiority.

That moment, Candy realized what had happened.

Oh, no! After such a long time here comes a "little black star"! That's Eliza's doing! She has pressed Patricia to...

She was accustomed to Eliza's teasing, but Patricia's participation hurt her. Although Eliza had just arrived at college, she seemed however to have become a very important person among the girls, and she wouldn't let anyone contradict her.

I have to change!

She was ready to run back to her room, when she heard again the ring of the bell and everybody hurried to the church. The mass was about to begin; she didn't have time any longer. Patricia had also lied to her about the time.

Candy gathered her courage, remembering Miss Pony's words. If she didn't hurry, she would be late. It was better to participate in prayer, even if she was dressed like that. After all, she hadn't done it on purpose.

When she entered the chapel with her head held high, the students who were already seated turned to look at her, amazed. At the front benches reserved for the boys, were Stear and Archie. Even they looked worried at her, frowning. Candy realized that the grey uniform was considered an inappropriate costume for that occasion but, trying to reassure them, she gave them a little smile and sat down.

Suddenly Sister Gray's severe voice sounded, as she was standing in front of the altar to check if everyone had taken their place:

"Candice White Ardlay! You have been asked to wear this uniform on the weekdays!"

Candy held her breath and stood up quickly. Then she bowed her head and apologized solemnly:

"Of course, forgive me. I realized it too late and I thought about going to change but I would have missed the mass. It will not happen again."

Certainly she couldn't blame Patricia. Surely the girl was so scared at that moment, that she was about to collapse.

For a moment Sister Gray stared at her as if to evaluate her behavior, but then she said:

"Considering the fact that you are a new student, for this time I will be lenient. The person who will consider taking a measure in regard to this matter is Sister Iris, who is responsible for the students' dormitory. Now, you may sit down."

The director's voice resounded strongly in the silent chapel. Everybody was holding their breath. With a little curtsy, Candy, also absolutely tense, took her place on the hard bench.

"Well, let us start the morning prayer."

Sister Gray closed her eyes and clasped her hands together, while everyone imitated her. Candy also did the same and concentrated with all her heart on the words the woman was uttering. She had so many things to pray for.

A huge thank you to Uncle William...and may Anthony rest forever in peace...

Suddenly, a loud noise was heard in the church and everybody looked up immediately. Sister Gray also had to interrupt the prayer and opened her eyes wide, furious.

"Terrence G. Granchester!"

Her cheeks became livid with rage.

"Not only do you present late but also you behave in a way that prevents others from praying. It is inadmissible!"

Granchester?

Astonished to hear that name pronounced, Candy turned around, wondering at Sister Gray's anger.

Reclining on one of the pews, there was a boy with his arms crossed, looking mockingly at the students who were assembled there. He was the same lad she had met that misty night on the deck of the ship.

The boy smiled insolently and stared at the nuns.

"What are you laughing at, Terrence G. Granchester?" insisted Sister Gray with a threatening look.

“Nothing in particular. It’s just that I find it amusing to see everyone here praying. At first sight they all seem very devoted, but who knows what they’re really thinking about.”

“Terrence G...”

“Do you want to ask me to leave? Don’t worry, it’s not necessary. I have nothing to pray for.”

In an affected manner, Terrence put over his shoulder the grey jacket he had taken off and walked towards the door, accompanied by the silent glances of all who were present there.

“Terrence...”

“Don’t bother repeating my name all the time, I already know what you’re going to tell me: I have to present myself in the director’s office, don’t I? Of course I’ll go, and with great pleasure,” he said.

Then he turned slowly and added:

“So, farewell, dear students.”

After bowing elegantly, like a real gentleman, he left the chapel.

As soon as he was gone, the church seemed to come to life.

“Who is that Terrence G. Granchester?” whispered Eliza eagerly, sitting some benches behind.

“He is the son of the duke of Granchester, a noble.”

“A noble...”

“He’s handsome, isn’t he? We all love him, but Terry doesn’t seem to like female company at all. He is cynical and looks like a wicked boy, but he always gets the highest grades and...”

The girls seemed to have forgotten the place where they were and did nothing else but talk about him.

So this boy...is called Terry...

Candy remembered that meeting on the deck of the ship, wrapped in dense fog. From behind, that boy had seemed identical to Anthony for a moment.

“Silence!”

Sister Gray struck the altar. As if the congregation had withdrawn, the chapel became silent again.

“How indecent to get carried away in that manner by something meaningless! That means the moral discipline we regularly give is not enough! The teachings of this morning will be duplicated! And I don’t want to see a single flicker!”

If Candy could endure Sister Gray’s endless teachings that morning, it was only thanks to Anthony’s memory.

Terrence G. Granchester. She had never thought that she would meet him again. That night she had felt that Anthony had come back to life, but maybe that had happened thanks to the magic of the fog. It couldn’t be true...

Throughout the day, the girls continued talking about Terrence. “So this Terrence isn’t coming out with any girl yet?” asked Eliza with shining eyes.

Even after lessons were over, she didn’t stop asking for information from the group of girls that had rapidly been formed around her.

“If he doesn’t appreciate female company, it’s only because he hasn’t met a truly fascinating girl yet.”

Being careful not to be discovered by her schoolmates, Candy slipped away from the building and went towards the forest. She was glad that Eliza had something else in her mind.

Thanks to that Terry, maybe she’ll forget about me for a while...

The forest in the winter smelled of wet wood. Candy inhaled deeply that scent which was filled with memories. Maybe the forest of Lakewood was already covered with a white and resplendent cloak of snow, and everywhere you could hear the sound of snow falling from the branches.

If only Anthony were still here...

Stepping on the dry branches, Candy stopped for an instant at this thought. If nothing had happened, maybe both of them would be together that moment, taking a walk in the winter forest. If nothing had happened...

Suddenly, from the depth of the vegetation, emerged a trampling of hooves. Candy held her breath. No, she wasn’t mistaken; it was the same sound as that day, the same sound of a horse galloping. Instantly, the light that was filtered through the branches of the trees turned grey. The sound became stronger and stronger, faster and faster. At the same time, Candy’s mind returned rapidly to the past.

No, Anthony! Don’t go so fast!

She saw a grey horse running towards her. Backlit, she couldn’t see who was riding.

Stop! You mustn’t come to this part! There is a trap...There is a trap! Anthony!

In an attempt to stop the dark silhouette of the rider, Candy extended her arms, but the animal didn’t slow down.

“Stop!”

At the same moment she screamed that order, Candy lost consciousness. What had happened? Candy felt her mind was confused, like she was wrapped in a cloud. Maybe she was dreaming? Someone was looking at her worried.

“Anthony!”

As if in a dream, the girl pronounced that name and opened her eyes, but the next instant she got up startled: the boy who was staring at her was Terrence G. Granchester.

“Actually my name is Terrence,” he said, as he was looking away ironically. “Don’t call me with such a silly and common name as that,” he added without much contemplation, and then he jumped nimbly on the grey horse which was waiting beside him, shaking its mane.

Candy hurried to stand up. The insult to Anthony’s name had clarified her ideas in a second and, at the same time, she felt overwhelmed with rage.

“A silly name? On the contrary, it’s a beautiful name! *Terrence*, on the other hand, what kind of name is that?”

“Is this the way you are speaking to your savior?” asked Terrence with a mocking laugh, from above his steed.

“My...savior?”

“I took care of you so tenderly before, when you were unconscious.”

“You took...care of me?” asked Candy, suddenly holding her breath.

Of course, for a second everything had become dark. What had happened afterwards?

Looking at her from above, Terry said in a teasing manner:

“Oh, yes. You couldn’t stand on your feet, so I held you tight in my arms and...”

“What?”

Candy turned suddenly red and waved her hands quickly, interrupting Terrence’s speech.

The boy started laughing and said:

“It doesn’t matter, I was joking. As a rule, I’m kind only to *pretty* girls.”

Laughing still, he struck the horse on the flanks and went away galloping. The animal disappeared, as if it were absorbed into the light that was filtered through the trees, and Candy remained aghast and still. Later, finally, she could take a deep breath.

She should have answered him with something like that:

“Then, *thank goodness* I’m not pretty! That is preferable to receiving a favor from you!”

But it was already too late.

How long had she remained unconscious? Anthony...The sound of the galloping horse had the same effect on her even now and it made her heart contract painfully. She recalled Terrence G. Granchester riding his horse.

I had again the impression that it was Anthony...Even when I recovered...

Terrence, however, didn’t seem to have related her to that meeting on the ship. On deck, it had seemed to her that the boy’s moist eyes were gleaming, but maybe even that had just been an illusion.

Chapter 4

January...

Ten days have passed since I became a student of St. Paul's Institute, but I feel as if I have arrived at least six months ago. The days go by all the same. I feel like a kind of puppet that comes to life only by regulation and by the ringing of the bell.

Although I happen to come across Archie and Stear inside the college, I can't even speak to them.

Eliza is adjusting more and more. I wish she would stop taking advantage of my presence to relieve her dissatisfaction caused to her by living in such a rigid environment.

It is really hard not to have friends. Thanks to Eliza's introduction, everybody knows now that I come from an orphanage. I wonder what's wrong with that. It's not a real lady's behavior to determine the value of people based on their origins.

The nuns always say that we are all equal in God's eyes, but even they treat me coldly. However, to tell the truth, that could also be due to my constant mistakes. I wonder how I should become a real lady as Uncle William would want me to...

But the college has also many positive aspects. The kitchen in the dining room of the students' dormitory is very rich. Everybody's complaining and saying that their cooks are much better, but it seems to me that every day they serve us dishes of a grand banquet.

I have the intention of exerting myself in my studies to the maximum, but it is also important to have some time to catch my breath.

The bell indicating the beginning of lessons was ringing at that moment. Candy hurried to close the diary and headed towards the school building. Because of the large number of assignments she had to do during the day, she had decided to write in her diary in the mornings. She had promised it to Great Uncle William (even though only in her heart) that she would write honestly the events of every day, and certainly she couldn't forget the commitment she had acquired. Good things and bad things, she would tell everything and would hide nothing, not even the punishments she had received.

She started running at full speed. If the nuns saw her they would lower her grade in "Fundamental knowledge of a young lady", but if she arrived late, not only would they remove points from "Rules of life", but she would also have repercussions on her final grades. Therefore, Candy decided to hurry.

A rule established that classes should be reached before the bell rang out. However, that morning Candy couldn't save herself by a hair's

breadth. Panting, she rushed into the classroom and almost tripped. The bell was still ringing, but everybody was sitting in their seats with their heads over their books.

“It seemed to me that I was clear: students arrive to my class before the bell rings.”

Sister Kreis, already seated in her chair, scrutinized her maliciously. Among the “harpies”, or rather among all the “nuns”, that teacher was the least expressive of all. Her face was like a funereal mask.

That day, Candy would face her first lesson in French. She had promised not to make mistakes and instead of that...

“I’m sorry, it will not happen again,” she said, feeling upon her the cold and merciless looks of all the class.

She also realized that once again nobody had given her the exact information.

“You will have demerit points for this, Candice. Go immediately to your seat, the lesson is about to begin.”

Finally the bell stopped ringing.

“Well, having arrived late, Candice will be the one to recite the memorized poem. Candice, stand up.”

“Yes...”

Candy had just sat down, but she got up again immediately.

Recite memorized poetry...What was she talking about? Looking carefully, she realized that everybody had in front of them a text: a text she had never seen. Candy shuddered. That must be Eliza’s work.

“What’s the matter, Candice? Go on, begin!”

“But...which...Which memorized poem do I have to recite?” she asked timidly.

“What do you mean?” asked Sister Kreis, in a tone that froze the blood in her veins.

Trying not to be intimidated, Candy took a deep breath and spoke loudly, articulating well her words:

“I don’t know which memorized poem I have to recite.”

“But this is strange. We are talking about the work of the French poetess Louise Labè. I had the text of the lyric poem distributed, ordering you to memorize it.”

Candy held her breath for an instant; no one had informed her about this. She looked directly at Sister Kreis’s face. It was true that she knew nothing, and she had to say it clearly.

“Sister Kreis, I have never received that text. I was not informed by any message.”

Candy defended herself with all her might and chuckles were heard in several parts of the classroom.

Even Sister Kreis, incredulous, shook her head saying:

“This is not possible. Louise, you have distributed the text to everybody, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Sister Kreis,” replied the student that had been asked, standing up with her face red with rage.

Louise had become immediately Eliza’s close friend. At first sight she seemed a perfect girl from any point of view, but the wicked light that sparkled furtively in her eyes was identical to that of Eliza’s.

“That’s not true!” exclaimed Candy, unable to contain herself.

Her determined look made Louise hesitate for a moment.

“It’s terrible! How can you put the blame on somebody else?” interposed Eliza at that moment, in a loud voice. “You are a coward! Poor Louise!”

The other classmates also started blaming her. Only Patricia remained with her eyes lowered.

“Silence!” demanded Sister Kreis, hitting the desk.

Then, pointing inexpressively to the blackboard, she ordered:

“Candice, come here!”

“Yes.”

The girl walked with her head held high; she had nothing to fear. When Candy came in front of the blackboard, Sister Kreis took the chalk and wrote with large letters, just above her head: “I am a liar.”

“Louise has never been late. She has always respected the rules. Candice, do you *really* want to blame her for your faults? You should be ashamed of yourself. Stay here and reflect on your mistakes.”

The girl turned and looked with rage at the letters above her: “I am a liar.”

I haven’t told any lie!

She immediately took the eraser and with a rapid movement she made the writing disappear.

“But what...What are you doing, Candice?” the teacher reprimanded her with a sharp voice.

Candy looked straight into her eyes and refuted:

“Sister Kreis, I swear to God: I have not lied! If it were my own mistake, I would be willing to receive a punishment! My classmates, more than anyone, *know* I’m telling the truth!”

Furious, Candy looked at the whole class.

“How impudent...”

“That’s the behavior of someone who doesn’t *really* come from a good family...”

Eliza’s and Louise’s voices resounded clearly over all the others, but Candy was not intimidated.

Sister Kreis stood staring at her, but after a while she said:

“I understand, Candice.”

Without looking away and keeping the cold expression of her face unchanged, she nodded.

“Given that you insist on this point, in the next lesson you will have to memorize from the third to the fifth sonnet by Louise Labè!”

“Yes, Sister Kreis!”

Candy answered with a voice that sounded captivating, even to herself.

Well done. Now she had made the whole class her enemies. That day, even when the lesson was over, nobody deigned to look at her or say a word to her.

“After all, they had been ignoring me from the beginning...There is nothing to surprise me. Maybe some day they will understand that there is no sense in being angry with me...”

But now, how could she deal with a French lyric poem? She didn’t know a single word of that language. Surely Sister Kreis was testing her to find out if she was a liar.

“I have to do it at all costs! Eliza and the others will stare at me with their mouths open! I can memorize these sonnets although I don’t understand their meaning...Of course, if only I knew a little French...”

Sitting on a bench in the courtyard, Candy looked steadily at the text which the teacher had delivered her and sighed. The geographical map of an unknown country would have been more understandable to decipher.

“But of course...If ‘S. Project’ works tonight, they will help me. Maybe I can do it.”

Candy smiled. It suddenly seemed to her that everything was possible.

S. Project was a secret plan invented by Candy herself.

Three days ago, when lessons were over, she was walking in the forest and had discovered, looped around a branch, a little piece of paper that was shaking in the wind. Upon it was drawn a pair of glasses. A little later, she had found the drawing of a hat.

She had understood right away that these clumsy things belonged to Stear. The first one represented the glasses he always used, while the hat was a French beret, green as cabbage leaves, which was so precious to Archie. Candy’s heart had skipped a beat; that must have been a kind of riddle left there by her friends. She began studying the drawings immediately.

Thinking better about it, she recalled that a few days ago she had run into the two boys inside the college. Stear had begun making some strange gestures, while Archie was pointing towards the forest with elegant gestures. That time she had wondered what they were trying

to tell her, but now she understood: they wanted her to go for a walk in the forest and find the drawings.

There were still three more pieces, representing Stear's motor car, Archie's boat and ultimately, a stomach.

"A stomach...? Oh, no, I suppose that is a bagpipe, isn't it, Stear?"

After arriving in front of a large tree, Candy had burst out laughing. She looked immediately around her. Fortunately, she heard only the twittering of the little birds. Under the drawing of the bagpipe there was an arrow. Following that, Candy found a small hole in the trunk of a tree, which contained a folded note, painted brown. Being careful not to tear it, she opened it and read its contents: "A day for you, when you find this." This fine handwriting surely belonged to Archie. Candy felt her heart grow warmer. Having nothing with which to write an answer, she put her handkerchief into the hole.

Stear, Archie, thank you...Now we have found the way to secretly communicate!

Since then they had exchanged several messages, until "S. Project" was created, where the letter S indicated the word "secret".

That would be the famous night.

Sitting on a bench in the courtyard, Candy closed the text and got up resolutely. She hadn't climbed trees for such a long time; she had to start doing some warm-up. She jumped, when suddenly someone pushed her violently behind, causing her to lose her balance.

"Neal!"

Neal Leagan had certainly collided with her on purpose and, backed up by his classmates, he was looking at her contemptuously, with narrowed eyes.

"I was just wondering who was walking like stupid around the yard, and who would say it was you, orphan bastard. What a nerve you had to come all the way to London."

"I would say the same thing about you," replied the girl haughtily.

"What did you say? Listen, boys, guess what: *This one here* was taking care of our stable! I don't think it's appropriate that this kind of people should attend a place like this! She is an orphan my family had taken out of compassion, and she was working for us!"

Neal explained to his friends the whole situation with an incredible ardor.

"It seems to me I've always been listening to the same things...How boring! If you really have to talk, why don't you tell me something I don't remember already?" suggested Candy, half-seriously, and half-jokingly.

"Do you *actually* think you can speak to me in that way?" Orphans should behave with..."

Suddenly, behind a tree, appeared a shadow that grabbed strongly Neal by the neck.

“What do you have to say about orphans, newcomer brat?”

In the horse riding uniform, Terrence was staring at Neal with a piercing look, hovering over him. Candy held her breath.

“Do you think she chose to be born an orphan? You are a coward treating her that way! You make me sick!”

Terrence squeezed more strongly Neal’s neck, while Neal gasped unable to answer back.

“I...I can’t breathe...”

Terrence made a grimace and, with a threatening look, he ordered him:

“Get out of my sight!”

“You...you will pay for this!” shouted Neal, now free of his grasp. Then he ran at full speed to his friends. Despite what had occurred, his eyes had still the same evil light.

All this took place in an instant. As if nothing had happened, Terrence headed to the stable which was located in the forest. He didn’t even turn around towards Candy.

The girl hurried to reach him.

“Wait!”

Finally the boy stopped. Annoyed, he turned slowly to look at her and asked:

“What’s the matter?”

“Well...thank you, first of all for...”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

Candy was speechless, stunned by the sharp tone of his voice.

“The thing is that nobody has ever...”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I haven’t intervened to defend you,” Terrence interrupted her. “I hate guys like these. That’s all.”

Candy didn’t know how to respond to that cold attitude and was staring at him, but suddenly Terrence’s face seemed to soften.

“Well, why are you looking at me like that, Miss Freckles? Do you want to make a love declaration to me?”

“*What?*”

Candy opened her eyes wide with surprise. Miss Freckles? Then he did remember her. Terrence had noticed that they had already met on the ship...

“Well? Now that you have seen me in my horse riding uniform, do you intend to faint again?”

“Do...do you want to make fun of me?” she replied hurriedly.

Looking at her amused, the boy continued:

“Fortunately, I don’t like taking care of girls with freckles and a snub nose. See you!”

Holding his riding cap in his hand, Terrence left.

Watching him go away, Candy felt rage burning inside her.

“But what do you want? And stop giving yourself airs! My name is Candice White Ardlay! And everybody calls me Candy! If next time you go on with that story about freckles and snub nose, you’re not going to get away with this!”

Candy cried all this out loud, but the boy didn’t even turn around.

“*Candy*, you say? In my opinion, Miss Freckles is a much better name,” he murmured.

The girl couldn’t see that a smile had appeared on the lad’s face.

Chapter 5

S. Project for us!

That night, after arriving in front of the boys' dormitory, Candy held her breath for a moment and threw herself towards Stear and Archie's bedroom. But she had exerted too much force, and she ended up overturning the couch.

Archie was on the balcony, holding a candelabrum in his hand to give her the signal of the green light. Seeing the result of that landing, he put his hand over his eyes and hurried to close the large window door. "Couldn't you be a little more quiet, Candy?" he said, amused and worried at the same time.

Then he put off the candles and helped her get up.

"Forgive me! When I took the jump I couldn't stop."

Laughing embarrassed, she picked up the rope she had made by intertwining the sheets.

"Fortunately these are sheets of good quality!"

Actually S. Project consisted of using that rudimentary rope instead of a lasso to cross the forest from one tree to another. The final objective of that secret plan was to enter the room of the two brothers without being seen.

"We have agreed because we really wanted to see you, but oh, how anxious we have been!" smiled Archie, putting one hand on his heart with a theatrical gesture.

"That's true, but at least in that way we can enjoy a little this academic life," replied Candy, finally relaxed.

Then she looked around her and said:

"How strange, I don't see Stear."

"He's there," answered Archie, in a tired manner, pointing upwards.

"Stear!"

Candy started laughing. The boy was stuck to the ceiling thanks to some large suckers he was wearing on his hands and feet.

"Hello, Candy! I present to you the Spider Man! Not even Eddison has ever thought of a way to climb the walls!"

Stear started walking proudly above their heads.

"But...But this is fantastic! And it looks amusing! Let me try it too!" said Candy, standing on tiptoe.

"The fact is that...there are limits...weight limits," said Stear.

And suddenly he rushed down, screaming.

"Brother!" shouted Archie, and this time he had to help Stear get up.

"Have you seen that beautiful fall? Thanks to these suckers I haven't hurt myself...ay...ay..."

Candy released his feet from the funny invention; then, feigning an annoyed expression, she said:

“Stear, what were you saying before? Something about...*weight limits?*”

“B...but no, Miss Candice, I...I hope you don’t misunderstand me...You...you have a perfect figure! Doesn’t she, Archie?”

“I have always thought that Candy was *perfect*.”

Archie took out of a bookcase a box with chocolates and ceremoniously handed them over.

“Tell me, Archie, in what way am I perfect?” asked Candy, playfully acting the role of a great lady, taking specifically one of the treats with her little finger raised up.

“Well, you are perfect in your...attempt to be elegant?”

All three of them began to laugh.

It seemed to Candy that she had gone back to Lakewood. She felt a pricking in her heart at the thought that one of them was missing. If only the door would open wide at that moment and Anthony would appear...

Although they didn’t say it, surely it was also the same for the two boys.

Trying to cheer up again the atmosphere that had suddenly become melancholic, Archie, with a joyful smile, took one of the chocolates and asked:

“What do you think about these French chocolates, Candy? I’ve hidden them especially for you to taste.”

“Do you realize that? Apart from lunches in the students’ dormitory, we are not permitted to bring food or beverages into the room. Who could ever respect such a rule? Candy, do you understand that now? This is *really* a prison,” complained Stear.

Candy nodded repeatedly.

“And are you convinced too that the nuns are harpies?”

“Stear, don’t talk so loud,” Archie reprimanded him, frowning anxiously. “Don’t forget that there are spies.”

“Do you mean Neal? Don’t be afraid, I have already activated the Anti-Spy Device. If you try to listen through the door, it emits sound waves, so sharp that they’ll give you a headache. There it is!”

All three of them turned around to look, and a moment later Stear ran panting to the door.

“Damn it, it has been disconnected!”

“Those inventions of yours, they are all the same...”

Meeting Archie’s look, Candy smiled. However, the boy put on suddenly a serious expression.

“Candy, this place is really a prison. It has a pleasant atmosphere, and even the education is excellent...but it seems that there are really *cells* reserved for disobedient students.”

“But I have never seen one! And I have never heard of anyone having been there,” interposed Stear cheerfully, after having repaired the small hat-shaped object that he had pompously baptized Anti-Spy Device.

“Anyway, considering all this, I wonder if it’s right to make you take such a risk, Candy...”

“Archie, don’t worry about me. I have years of experience in climbing trees and jumping with the lasso,” answered the girl with a radiant smile.

Then she threw a chocolate in the air and caught it skillfully with her mouth. Stear applauded admiringly, but Archie still didn’t seem reassured.

“Come on, Archie, believe me, you can rest easy. Tonight, however, you seem a little melancholic to me, am I wrong?”

Candy bowed her head as if doubting, and Stear agreed with her, amused:

“He has been like that lately. ‘Melancholic’ Mr. Archie is always on the clouds. He doesn’t know if he’s happy, content or excited...”

“Come on, that’s enough.”

“Oh, Annie, how happy I am you are coming to this college,” recited Stear, putting both hands on his chest.

That moment Candy’s heart started beating and her face softened.

“That’s enough, Stear! For me this is *really* a problem.”

“What a liar! Annie Brighton had been trying all this time to convince her parents just to be near you. Even when you wrote to her that this institute is severe and demanding, she didn’t hesitate for a moment! How can you remain insensitive to something like that?”

“You are already sensitive for both of us!”

Archie looked away from his brother and watched Candy, who remained still and restrained.

“Candy...You know whom we are talking about, don’t you? I don’t think your memory of Annie Brighton is a good one...”

“Oh, no! That’s not true!” she replied quickly, shaking her head.

Her memories of Annie were only good ones. She struggled to hold back her tears.

“Of course. They met on that occasion of the Leagan garden party. I’m sorry, Candy, I shouldn’t be joking in that way,” said Stear frowning regrettably.

“Hey, don’t worry! Miss Annie was really a very nice girl. I would be happy if we became friends...”

While she was talking, in front of her eyes came the picture of her friend since she was a little girl. Annie would come to this college...Her beloved Annie. At the thought that they would be able to spend time together again, her heart felt warmer. Now she was no longer working in the stable of the Leagans; she had been adopted by the Ardlays. But who knows if Annie would be happy to see her again...

She was awakened suddenly by the song of the little birds. From the closed curtains a soft ray of the morning sun was filtered. Candy woke up. She must have fallen asleep on her writing desk.

She opened the window to enjoy the fresh morning air. She had stayed up all night, but she was feeling well.

“Hello, little birds of London. In case you reach the green American soil, deliver a message, just one: today I feel wonderfully well.”

Using the style of the French lyric poems against which she had fought until dawn, Candy greeted the little birds which were moving from one branch to another. Although she didn't understand a word, she had managed to learn the sonnets by heart.

And all thanks to help from a kind person.

Candy recalled Patricia's face and downcast eyes.

The night before, she would have liked Stear and Archie to instruct her about the French language, but later the conversation had turned to Annie and her mind had been absorbed in other matters.

However, when she returned to her room safe and sound, despair came upon her. She had sat down in front of her writing desk, but she didn't even know where to begin. The moment she had begun looking up words in the dictionary, almost on the verge of tears, she heard a slight knock on the door.

She had gone to verify, thinking she had made a mistake, but on the threshold she had found a paper bag. There was nobody around. Candy had opened it with caution and had let out a little cry: inside there were texts of French language, manuals on pronunciation, and notes about lyric poetry. The sonnets by Louise Labé which Sister Kreis had indicated, even with small annotations to make pronunciation easier.

Candy had understood immediately who her savior had been: Patricia O'Brien. Avoiding the vigilance of the nuns and of her classmates led by Eliza, she had come furtively to her rescue.

Candy's heart was illuminated.

Patricia... Thank you! I wonder how scared you must have been...

The girl had been with Eliza and the others all the time. Since the day of her arrival, they hadn't exchanged a word again.

“If I manage to recite the poem well, that will surely make her happy for helping me.”

Accompanied by that thought, she had devoted all night in studying the sonnets.

“Oh, sad moans, oh, obstinate wishes...”

Going out on the balcony, Candy had started reciting the third sonnet, when suddenly she hid behind the window door.

Terrence...

The boy was crossing the path that led from the courtyard to the forest. He had his hands in his pockets and seemed absentminded. His sad image from behind was identical to that one she had seen on the deck of the ship, immersed in the fog. Exactly as before, the girl was baffled and felt again the sensation that she had seen something she shouldn't. Maybe he had also stayed up all night, unable to sleep. Terrence was walking with his head crouching and everything about him expressed weariness and melancholy.

Suddenly, in Candy's mind came back his words: “Do you think she chose to be born an orphan?” It was the first time that someone had stood by her in that way.

Oh, how silly of me! Certainly he didn't want to defend me. Miss Freckles, snub nose...He does nothing but make fun of me!

Remembering everything that had happened, Candy started to get irritated, but she couldn't take her eyes off the boy.

The lad had disappeared into the white forest, still immersed in what was left of the morning mist. His image from behind had something so sad that her heart was oppressed.

The bell rang announcing lunch, but unfortunately Candy would have to skip that. Carrying with her the text of lyric poetry, she was the first to sneak out of the classroom and she hurried to the garden behind the school building. Close to it there was a small elevation to which she had given the name False Pony's Hill. She wanted to practise the recitation of the sonnets one more time, since the first class of the afternoon would be exactly Sister Kreis's lesson.

“I can't wait for the French lesson, so we can see how ridiculous you're going to be.”

“I'm sorry for you, but I *never* make a fool of myself.”

That morning Eliza had deliberately gone to tell her some scathing words without any reason, but she hadn't answered her in the same way. From afar, Patricia had been watching her anxiously. Candy had wanted to run and thank her, but she ignored her. She certainly didn't want to cause her any problems.

She went up False Pony's Hill reciting Louise Labé's verses.

“ ‘But this is not because he favors us, he who despises gods and men...’ How does it go next? This Louise Labé really writes complicated things...”

Candy particularly loved one of the bushes she found on False Pony’s Hill, with its dry leaves which seemed to have been molded professionally. However, approaching it, she was stunned.

“Oh, no! Fire!”

A cloud of smoke was rising from the bush.

“I need water, quickly!” she cried, but while she was about to run, a familiar voice sounded behind her.

“What’s up, Tarzan in a skirt? Why are you so disturbed?”

Almost ending up stumbling, the girl turned around. Removing the dry leaves and holding a cigarette between his fingers, appeared Terrence.

“Terrence!” she exclaimed.

“Hey, call me *Terry*, please. Only useless people call me Terrence. Although I haven’t said you’re not one of them,” he said chuckling.

Then he went on smoking.

“But what are you doing? Smoking in a place like this?”

Candy approached him and snatched nimbly the cigarette from his mouth, treading on it with her shoe to turn it off.

“Oh, no...that was the last one...” complained Terrence, with an amused laugh.

“And what if you had caused a fire? It’s against the rules!”

“Look who’s talking, Tarzan in a skirt.”

“*Tarzan in a skirt?*”

He had called her that way a little while ago.

With a teasing smile, the boy did a circular movement with one finger and continued:

“In the darkness of the night I saw a white rope and a monkey jumping from one tree to another!”

“Oh...”

Candy was amazed and turned stiff. That meant Terrence had seen her using the sheets instead of a rope to sneak into the boys’ dormitory.

“ ‘Miss Freckled Tarzan in a skirt’ sounds too long to me. What about ‘Freckled Tarzan?’”

“And what would that be?”

“Your name.”

Candy put on a threatening expression and looked straight at his face. She couldn’t submit herself to that abuse just because he had discovered S. Project.

"I think I've told you already, but my name is Candice White Ardlay. I don't accept any other name, is that clear? Candice White Ardlay, do you understand?"

"Certainly, Freckled Tarzan."

"Oh, stop it!"

While amusedly observing Candy's irritated expression, Terrence narrowed his eyes as if to catch a sound from a distance.

"Isn't that the bell for the afternoon lessons? Will you skip them too?"

"What...What did you say?"

Stamping her foot on the ground, the girl shifted her gaze from the text she was holding in her hand to Terrence.

"What will I do now...? I came here to practise the poem I have to memorize...If I go wrong it will be your fault! My God, how did it begin...?"

Speaking hastily, she started running, but then she changed her direction and turned back.

"Listen to me carefully: my name is Candy, is that clear? Candice White Ardlay! And besides, this is False Pony's Hill, and this is *my* bush! Don't you ever again dare come here to smoke whenever you feel like it! And pick up that stub before the nuns notice it!"

The girl said all this in one breath, and then hurried down the hill, as fast as a bullet.

"What a nerve," murmured Terrence, bending down anyway to pick up the cigarette.

False Pony's Hill? Her bush? But does she even know how long I've been in this college? And so her name is Candy...

The boy lay down on the grass again to look at the sky.

Sister Kreis wanted her to be in the classroom before the bell rang, but Candy was still far away...

Oh, no...I'm late...

She entered the classroom panting, but strangely enough the teacher hadn't come yet. She felt relieved and straightened up her back, in response to the wicked looks of Eliza and her friends.

At that moment Sister Kreis came into the classroom, and Candy's heart started beating uncontrollably. Behind the nun stood a girl who kept her eyes downcast.

It was Annie.

"The registration of a new student has been suddenly anticipated, and for that reason we will start our class late."

Sister Kreis's voice sounded very distant. Candy's eyes were moist seeing her beloved Annie a few steps away. She kept looking down timidly and hadn't changed at all: the bright hair, the white skin, the calm countenance.

I would never have thought that I would see you again so soon, Annie.

The teacher silenced the bustle that had invaded the room and turning towards the newcomer she said:

“I present to you your new classmate: her name is Annie Brighton and she comes from America. Welcome her as one of you.”

“Delighted to meet you...”

Annie met Candy’s gaze, fixed upon her. For an instant she was out of breath and blinked her eyes several times, incredulous. Getting pale, she looked away.

Candy suddenly came back to herself and lowered her head. Her heart was full of emotions.

Then...Annie doesn’t really want to see me...

It seemed to her that she heard Annie’s heart crying fearfully: “What are you doing here, Candy?”

The orphanage, the past she wanted to bury forever: she was the person who brought back to her mind those memories.

Don’t be afraid, Annie...I swear I’ll keep my promise...I’ll continue to pretend I don’t know you.

Keeping her head lowered, Candy made that oath with all her might.

“We have recently received some other students coming from America. Eliza, Candice, I put you in charge to take care of Annie. Your seat will be...Well, the desk beside Candice is empty. You can sit there.”

“Excuse me...” said Annie turning her eyes to the teacher, and looking at her desperately. “I...well...if it was possible, I would like to sit with Eliza. We already know each other and...”

“This is an inappropriate request, Annie Brighton. I understand you may feel disoriented, but beside Eliza Leagan is already...”

“Sister Kreis, I will move next to Candice.”

Patricia O’Brien got up awkwardly and spoke with a low voice. Candy looked at her surprised. The girl’s face was all red.

“Patricia, it is very nice of you to wish to give up your seat. Well, I agree because this is a very exceptional case.”

Before the teacher’s signal of approval, even Candy felt relieved and, when Patricia sat at her new desk, she murmured with a voice full of gratitude:

“Thank you, Patricia...”

Patricia shook her head slightly and replied timidly:

“Call me Patty.”

Her smile penetrated into Candy’s shattered heart. The girl, moved, smiled at the same time.

Suddenly, Sister Kreis’s severe voice drew the attention of the whole class:

“All right, Candice. The moment has come for you to recite the poem as it was planned.”

“Yes!”

Candy steeled herself and stood up.

When she started to declaim Louise Labé’s lyric poetry, she heard small giggles. Possibly her French pronunciation wasn’t correct, but it was natural that it should be so; she had never studied it before. She had only to go on without stopping.

The suffocated giggles turned to real laughter.

“Silence!” cried Sister Kreis.

The teacher’s look was not at all amused and, when Candy finished the three sonnets, she nodded solemnly.

“I recognize your effort, Candice. Keep applying that to your studies,” she said without smiling.

A week had passed since Annie had entered St. Paul’s. They lived in the same students’ dormitory and met every day. Candy did her best not to be near her, but they also shared the meals and anyhow ended up meeting each other. She couldn’t bear to see Annie turning her back every time as if she was being traversed by a chill. She would have wanted to tell her that she had nothing to be afraid of, but she couldn’t even say those simple words to her.

Near Annie there were always Eliza and her friends. Or rather, it was Annie who was always with them. It was unimaginable that they would be kind to her and Candy was always worried that they might treat her badly, but she could do nothing.

Annie feels quieter if I’m far away...

She understood her feelings, in an almost painful way. Surely Annie had never imagined that she would meet her again there and definitely Archie hadn’t mentioned this fact. Not even he knew that she, the stable wench of the Leagan house, was Annie’s childhood friend.

What could she do to reassure her? Those days the diary was full of letters written to Annie.

Oh, Annie...

Some day we’ll be able to talk as in the old times, won’t we? Pony’s Home, the teachers, the flowers we collected on Pony’s Hill... You and I have always been together, remember?

Annie, I haven’t changed at all and I remember very well my promise. So I beg you, don’t avoid me. Why don’t we start again from scratch here?

My name is now Candice White Ardlay. This is the only great change in my life. But I’m not like you, Annie. You have a mother and a

father. I am an adopted daughter too, but I still don't have any parents. My guardian is Great Uncle William, but I have never met him! It's incredible, isn't it? Some day...

That moment, the balcony window opened wide and loudly.

“Who’s out there?”

Candy left the pen and got up frightened. She saw the dark shadow of someone clinging to the curtain and falling to the floor.

“Terrence!”

Candy held her breath and ran to him.

Chapter 6

The cobbled streets were illuminated by the dim lights of the lanterns. Candy was running at night in the streets of London. She had just slipped away from St. Paul's Institute using her rope made of sheets.

Leaving the college has not been a problem. But now I have to find a drugstore. Where could it be?

Since she arrived in England, this was the first time she had left the college and now she was facing an unknown city. While she was moving along, she looked quickly around her. Almost all shops were already closed, but she definitely had to buy quickly the medicine and go back.

She remembered Terry's painful image, snuggled up on the couch. The boy's shirt was torn, his lip was bruised, and he also had bleeding wounds in his arms and legs. Maybe he had some fracture.

What can I do...?

Supplying first aid to him didn't seem to be sufficient, and besides, there was no kind of medicine in the room. As if that was not enough, Terrence smelled of alcohol.

I can't inform the nuns...

That moment Candy decided.

"Terrence, I'll go and look for medicine."

"Wait...stop!"

Keeping pressure on his arm, the lad struggled to get back on his feet.

"I was mistaken...disoriented...Just let me rest for a moment...I'll leave immediately..."

"Don't speak," Candy advised him, stopping the bleeding of his lip with a towel, and forcing him to sit on the couch. "Wait here for a moment. Do you understand? I'll come back soon."

"Stop...don't do it..."

"Once and for all stop talking, you drunkard with no respect for the rules! Stay here quietly until I return, understand?"

She placed a pillow behind his back, and then she took her rudimentary rope which she had hidden under the bed. Terry had tried again to say something, but Candy put a finger on his mouth to order him to remain silent.

Once she was outside through the glass door that was still open, she looked cautiously around her and threw the rope, passing it through a branch.

Trying to get up, Terrence couldn't reach her on time to prevent her from leaving. In an instant, clinging to the rope, Candy had disappeared in the darkness of the night.

“What a meddling girl...” remarked Terrence getting up from the couch with a grimace.

But look at her...She is more of a Tarzan than the authentic one of the novels...What a disaster to have ended up right in her room...

After taking a deep breath, he headed with hesitant steps towards the balcony. Fine, he was able to walk. Under no circumstances did he want to cause any problems to that girl.

In the meantime, Candy was wandering in the streets of London, fleeing at full speed from the sound of footsteps pursuing her. There was nothing more disturbing than being in a desolate corner of a city and listening to someone’s footsteps.

Who could it be? I don’t even have much money with me...

The sound of the footsteps was getting closer and closer. Feeling they had almost reached her, Candy stopped with determination. Trying to put on the most threatening expression she could muster, she turned around decisively and firmly.

“Hey, you, will you stop following me?”

Hearing that infuriated voice, the shadow that seemed to haunt her was startled and stopped.

“I’m poor! And besides, I’m in a hurry, so stop following me!”

She spoke vehemently and without a breath, and then resumed her running.

“Candy? So it’s really you,” said the mysterious presence at that moment.

The girl stopped surprised. She knew that voice, but where had she heard it? She turned around immediately.

The man who appeared under the light of the lantern was wearing sunglasses, a wrinkled Saharan jacket and stained working trousers. His gentle voice didn’t agree with his appearance, and it reminded her of someone...

Albert? But it’s not possible! Here in London?

She remained stunned while the man was approaching her.

“Don’t you remember me anymore?” he asked her laughing and taking off his glasses.

“I can’t believe it...Albert, is it truly you?”

With a joyful cry, Candy threw herself to his neck.

“Albert, is it really you? Isn’t that a dream?”

“Why should it be a dream...?”

Albert lifted her off the ground and spun her in the air.

Around them, the London night was spinning as if it had been a merry-go-round.

After arriving in England, Candy had resigned herself to the fact that she wouldn't be able to see again her friend across the ocean, and on the contrary...

"Candy, you looked at me in such a way...I really thought you had forgotten me," said Albert putting her down.

Amused, he gave her a little tap on the forehead.

"Forgive me...it's that I didn't expect to see you here...And then you don't have a beard anymore!"

The girl scrutinized his face and realized that also his hair had been carefully trimmed.

"Oh, of course, the beard...Well, you know, it's because of my job..." replied Albert shyly, stroking his chin.

"Job? Albert, are you working here in London?"

"Don't be so surprised, Candy. Even someone like me can work. Thanks to a friend, I got a job at the Blue River Zoo. And of course I've also brought Poupe with me."

"Oh, Poupe...how I have missed her!" exclaimed Candy, bringing her hands to her chest. "I had got used to the idea that I would never see her again."

The girl was almost moved, and the man also put on a melancholic expression.

"That's true, I wouldn't have thought either that I'd meet you here... But, Candy, where were you running to at this time of night?"

Suddenly Candy came back to herself and answered:

"Oh, no! I was looking for a drugstore! A friend of mine is wounded and..."

"Really? Apparently tonight there are a lot of people wounded. A drugstore...Yes, that's it! I know one that keeps open until late. Let's hurry!"

Guided by Albert, Candy ran again through the city.

"Terrence, I went to get you medicine."

Later, when Candy landed on the balcony panting, she immediately called the boy in a low voice, but she got no reply.

"Terry...?"

She headed quickly to the couch, but there was no trace of the lad anywhere. Turning on the light in the room, she saw stains of blood that led towards the window.

"And to think that I had advised him to stay still! What a boy!"

Annoyed, Candy threw the bag with the medicine on the couch.

"I took a lot of risk to go and buy them, and what does he do? How ill-mannered! He's gone without even saying goodbye! And with all those wounds...so..."

Candy went out on the balcony and felt suddenly tired. Across the forest, the boys' dormitory was dark. The building reserved for the boys had the same aspect with that in which the girls slept. Terrence had said that he had been disoriented, so he surely had a special room too.

Has he got to his room safe and sound?

Candy remained for a moment staring at the darkness beyond the vegetation, and then she closed softly the window. She sat at her desk. She was tired, but she needed to write everything in her diary.

I have met Albert! It just happened a few minutes ago. I still think it's a dream...but on the contrary, everything is real.

Candy added those few sentences to the pages in which she had already written previously, then she let out a deep sigh.

I had never imagined that I would meet him here...in London...in the middle of the night and in this city! Oh, thank God! Albert told me that, after being discovered by the ranger who worked for the Ardlays, he had to leave the cabin.

Later he secretly embarked on a ship bound for England. Does that mean that he traveled as a stowaway? Even so I'm glad he did it.

The cabin, the waterfall's thunderous noise, the forest animals... When I think about it again, I feel tears of nostalgia. Since they threw him out, Albert completely ignores what happened in the forest and in the villa.

All the people I met back then have left Lakewood. However, while Anthony still lived, those places were full of life.

That's enough! I don't want to remember these sad things; today is a happy day and I've met again Albert!

Albert, I promise I'll come and visit you at the Blue River Zoo! Next time we'll talk more quietly!

I hate to admit it, but our meeting happened thanks to that arrogant Terrence G. Granchester. How did he get those wounds? Oh, how sleepy I am. And what an eventful day...

In the following month, Candy didn't even once meet Terry. The night the boy had entered her room was the same night she had met Albert again. To prove to herself that it wasn't a dream, she had still on the desk the paper bag that contained the medicine.

The young girl was still worried about Terry's condition, but...

I suppose that if they had found him somewhere unconscious, all the girls would have made a great scandal. I'm sure he's all right...

Candy decided not to think anymore about what had happened.

It was the beginning of March and, day after day, the wind and the morning light became warmer. The sun that was filtered inside the college was more radiant, and even Candy's mood was rejoicing. Annie still behaved as if she didn't even notice her presence. Maybe satisfied with that behavior, Eliza treated Annie better than expected, but she had her always under her control.

I wonder that Annie isn't bothered much being with Eliza. She is exactly the kind of person she can't stand...

However, thinking about that she felt a twinge in her heart; if there was now some person Annie couldn't stand in any way that was precisely Candy. If it had not been for Patty, who sometimes spoke to her in secret, eluding Eliza's and Louise's looks, she would probably have collapsed under the weight of that suffocating situation. And then, occasionally, she could meet Stear and Archie.

At lunch time, the girl went to the forest. It was really lucky that Eliza and the others preferred to stay away, considering that it was a place infested with insects and serpents. On the grass there were already buds of snowdrops and daffodils, spreading their fragrance in the air. Candy delved into the dense vegetation and, when she reached the big secret tree, she whistled. Superimposing on the song of the little birds, another whistle answered her. After looking cautiously around her, she climbed up the tree.

"Welcome, Candy!"

Sitting astride a strong branch, Stear helped her up.

Sheltered by the numerous leaves that were left, they couldn't be seen from outside and, as if they had been deliberately placed there for them, there were also several branches on which they could sit comfortably. That big tree had been discovered by Candy, and now it had become the place of their secret meetings.

That day she had met only Stear.

"Candy, look here!" said the boy showing proudly the object he carried with him.

It was a scaled model of a ship with wings.

"Is that the famous flying ship on which you had been working for a long time?"

"Exactly! Finally I have finished it, Candy. This will be our Flying Ship Messenger, and it will serve to keep us in touch!"

Stear explained fervently to her his invention:

"Here in the lower part we'll put our letters, and then we'll fly it in the air, between our rooms..."

"Imagination has no limits," remarked Archie, peering out suddenly among the leaves.

"Archie, you are late!"

“Couldn’t you get rid of Miss Annie’s pleading eyes? ‘Archie, please, let’s talk even for a moment,’” mocked Stear, putting his hands on his chest while imitating Annie.

“Stop it!” cried Archie with an expression of genuine concern. “I can’t stand it anymore. Inside the college it’s enough to exchange even a few words to be reprimanded by the nuns. I’m lucky they haven’t seen us until now...However, she must know too how strict the rules are in this place.”

“‘Yes, I know, but even so I want to speak to you’.”

“I’ve told you to stop!”

“Come on, Archie! After all I know you don’t dislike her.”

“I told you that’s enough! I don’t want Candy to misunderstand!”

“What? And what if she did? Is it perhaps a problem for you if Candy would misunderstand?”

“Oh, my God, how irritating you are, Stear! Have you finished explaining one more time your disastrous project?”

Archie changed the subject with difficulty.

Laughing, Candy asked:

“Does that mean that your project has already failed?”

“Of course not! This is still a prototype,” refuted Stear, stroking his precious flying ship.

Then he added with his eyes shining:

“I want to try it tonight. Candy, can you come?”

“We have also a new supply of chocolates,” Archie teased her smiling.

“Of course I’ll come! And besides, it’s been a long time since I have jumped between the branches with my rope,” replied Candy, beginning immediately to crackle her fingers.

Stear and Archie started laughing.

The bell was ringing. Candy waved goodbye to her friends and nimbly descended first. The quickest way to get to the school building was to cut through the forest and pass through the meadow. Running among the grass which was sprinkled with daffodil buds, Candy started meditating.

Annie must really love Archie very much...

Her childhood friend had even persuaded her parents to send her to that college. Even knowing the severe punishments for those who broke the rules, she had certainly felt the need to speak with Archie. And to think that she was such a quiet girl...

Suddenly, she stumbled on something and fell forward.

“Hey, it’s fine that you find me irresistible, but if you jump on me so suddenly, you’ll scare me to death!”

Lying on the grass a moment ago, Terry tried to help her get up.

“But...what are you doing?”

Candy refused immediately the boy's hand and got up in a hurry. The thing on which she had stumbled was his foot. How unlucky to bump into just *that* person...

"What do you mean about what I'm doing? It's me who should have asked that question," he retorted, laughing and getting up from the ground.

With her face blushing, Candy stood up immediately.

"I just tripped! You shouldn't be lying on the ground where nobody can see you! As if you were a stone!"

"Stones don't have the scent of daffodils."

Candy stayed for a moment watching Terry's face. It hadn't the slightest mark of the wounds, and even his lip was completely cured.

"Well? Why are you looking at me like that? Do you want a kiss?"

Terry's little smile made the blood rise to her head.

"I am speechless! I was relieved to see that the wounds had been healed!" she answered, getting serious. "That night I went out to buy you medicine, and you, instead..."

"What did you say? So you have broken the rules! You went out without permission? And at night too? I'd better tell the nuns..."

Candy knew very well that he was just provoking, but that behavior was really driving her mad; she had been sincerely worried about him.

"Terry, I saw that you were seriously injured, and that's why..."

"Well, I asked nothing at all from you!"

Suddenly the lad's expression hardened and his tone of voice became distant.

Candy was about to answer him in the same way, but she decided to remain silent, although with difficulty.

"Of course I don't want to force you to accept my help! And even if you asked me to, it would be me who would refuse to lend you a hand!"

Having said this, Candy started running again. The ringing of the bell was about to end.

Good Heavens, what a perplexing boy!

She felt every part of her body tense as if it were the string of a violin.

With narrowed eyes, Terry watched amused the figure of an infuriated Candy as she was going further and further.

It is the first time she calls me Terry.

Without realizing it a smile appeared on his lips.

That night, when the moon was hidden behind the clouds, Candy began her tour through the forest, sliding from one tree to another until she saw the twinkling light emanated from Archie's candelabrum. The boy was waiting for her, standing on the balcony of the boys' dormitory.

Candy just needed to do the final jump, the most exciting one. Holding tight the rope made of sheets, she decidedly aimed towards the candle flame, when an unexpected gust of wind changed her guide mark. However, the girl didn't stop. She remembered well where the illuminated spot was a moment ago.

Come on, let's go forward.

She precipitated the gap, but she exerted too much force and overstepped the balcony, getting directly into the room through the glass door, which was open wide.

She landed rolling and immediately realized the different atmosphere that surrounded her. She was startled and looked around her in the dim light. The room possessed luxurious furniture and was larger than Stear and Archie's. It had the same dimensions with her room. Candy was troubled, understanding she had missed her objective.

I have to get out of here quickly!

When she tried to get up, she noticed at her feet a photograph that had fallen on the floor. Without thinking she picked it up, discovering that it was actually an advertising picture. She realized right away that something was wrong: the face of the person portrayed was strikethrough with a large cross.

"But this is Eleanor Baker!"

The great American actress was the most popular artist of the time. The lovely Eleanor; there was nobody who didn't know that name.

Why had that woman's face been lined in that way? There were even some words written with rage saying: "I wish you were dead!"

Candy turned the photograph and a scream escaped her.

"To my son Terrence.

With love,

Eleanor Baker"

The dedication she had read was written on the back.

To my son...? Then...then Terry is...

That moment she heard the door opening behind her. She turned immediately and saw Terry, leaning on the door, and staring at her with cold and inexpressive eyes. As if she were under the effect of a spell, Candy couldn't move.

It seemed to her that an eternity had passed, but it must have been a moment. Terry approached her threateningly and took brusquely off her hands Eleanor Baker's photograph, then he began tearing it up with all his might, raging against that picture until almost he couldn't get smaller pieces out of it. The white fragments went scattering on the carpet, and Candy was watching them, holding her breath. She

couldn't believe that the beautiful world-famous actress, who all thought was single, was actually Terry's mother.

"I...Well...I..." she murmured weakly.

"Shut up!" cried Terry in a throaty voice.

Looking at her with blazing eyes he warned her:

"If you tell this to anyone..."

At that moment the boy held her from the shoulders and began to shake her violently.

"If you tell this to anyone I'll tear you to pieces like this photograph!"

Being at Terry's mercy, Candy tried not to cry. Through the lad's fingers, although he was holding her tightly, she sensed a great sorrow. With trembling lips, the girl lifted her head and felt her eyes wet. When their gazes met, Terry seemed to come back to himself and stopped. As if his strength had suddenly abandoned him, he loosened his grip and lowered his arms, as if dominated by a sudden weariness. Then, turning his back on her, he murmured:

"Get out..."

His weak and trembling voice seemed to belong to another person.

With her head crouching, Candy went towards the balcony. She would have wanted to say something, but she didn't find the words. Armed with courage, she turned and finally managed to express herself, although in a husky voice:

"I'm sorry..."

Terry didn't turn and remained motionless as if he were a stone statue.

Chapter 7

Oh, Lord, I beg you, relieve Terry's pain...Don't let him be tormented because I've discovered his secret...

That night, after returning to her room, Candy prayed for the boy.

Immediately after having ended up by mistake in the lad's room, Candy used again the rope to enter Stear and Archie's bedroom. The boys had been waiting for her anxiously on the balcony, holding up the candelabrum.

"Candy, is everything all right? Hasn't that conceited noble discovered you?" asked Archie.

"No...Everything is all right," she replied cheerfully, trying not to reveal tenseness in her expression.

"Fine, thank God. I don't like that fellow at all. He is shielded with his father's influence in order to behave as he pleases. No matter how many times he breaks the rules, he knows very well that thanks to the duke he will never run the risk of being expelled. That is an injustice! Curse on him and the director who permits all this!"

Archie simply seemed not to bear it.

"I don't think he's really such a bad person..." murmured the girl instinctively.

Listening to herself defending the boy, Candy couldn't help wondering.

However, that was the truth: she couldn't really consider Terry as a dishonest person.

Terry's eyes are almost transparent...

The impression she had had when they had met on the ship, that misty night, hadn't been a mistake. She recalled the boy's image from behind and his dejected countenance that couldn't be ignored.

Terry had just held her and shaken her violently, but that moment Candy had noticed that his dark and sad eyes were at the same time surprisingly tender.

She had discovered the boy's secret, although by sheer chance.

"What can I do? I can't sleep..."

Getting up from bed, she sat in front of the writing desk and opened the diary. She had so many things to say: the quick jolt of Stear's Flying Ship Messenger, the young inventor's disappointment, the projects of the experiments, completely incomprehensible to her, Archie's new hat...

However, Candy couldn't concentrate and her thoughts always went back to the boy's look and his voice that was full of pain.

Sighing, she closed the diary and went out on the balcony. The night breeze was caressing her hair.

On the other side of the dark forest was Terry. Who knows what he was thinking about at this moment?

I won't say anything...So, please, don't worry.

Looking at the darkness, Candy murmured these words in her heart.

That moment, Terry was on the balcony too and he was watching the trees of the dark forest.

Out there, everything was dark around him, but the lad was able to see: immersed in the darkness, he saw well his own stupidity. Candy had discovered his secret, but that wasn't what bothered him. Why had he kept the photograph until that moment? With a pen he had marred the woman's face and he had even written a disowning word above it. However, what he couldn't really bear was his own heart, incapable of parting with this object. That made him furious. He clenched his fists.

The wife of the duke of Granchester, his actual stepmother, although in name only, never missed the opportunity to contemptuously laugh at him. That seemed to be her reason for living.

“Look at you. This is the only behavior that can be expected from a child in whose veins runs the blood of that miserable and vulgar American woman.”

His younger brothers and sister, despite all of them having the same father, looked away from him, as if he were something dirty. The duke of Granchester, on the contrary, didn't even look him in the eyes. He didn't recognize his great mistake.

Ah, duke of Granchester! Is your social position so important to you? Does your prestigious name have so much value?

Above all, his father was preoccupied about his own person. But this also had value for *her*.

Terry would have wanted to laugh at himself for having decided to cross the ocean that winter day, driven by some uncontrollable emotions.

What an idiot! What did I expect, when I arrived that moment?

He had gone there for her, but what had he obtained as an answer? Eleanor Baker hadn't concealed her shame. When the great actress had finally allowed him to meet her, her beautiful face had frowned, dragging him behind a set, away from indiscreet eyes. There, she had put in his hand an envelope full of money.

“I beg you, go back to London immediately! Don't ever come back! Not even my agent knows my past. Oh, Terrence...I should have never left you that photograph...Terry, don't ever show it to anyone! Don't tell anyone I'm your mother. Everybody knows I'm single...”

“Go to hell, all of you!”

Terry threw a white porcelain vase against the wall, just as he had thrown at Eleanor Baker’s face the money she had just given to him that day. The vase was shattered to pieces, and the rose petals were scattered on the carpet like drops of blood.

In April, St. Paul’s Institute began to take colors as if it were a painting, thanks to the delicate colors of the flowers, the color of the grass and the sprouts of light green that were thrusting out on the trees. The severe aspect of the school building changed thanks to the genial atmosphere, like a sombre old sorceress who had turned again into a young girl. With the coming of spring, even the interior of the college seemed to come to life, as the sound of laughter filled it.

Although she was treated like a servant, Annie continued to follow Eliza throughout everything.

Candy had decided not to worry any longer. She had put distance between them, and they had never spoken a word, but she remained convinced that her childhood friend could understand her feelings. When, at times, their gazes met, Annie took on for an instant a painful expression, as if she wanted to tell her something. It almost seemed to Candy that she heard her saying: “Candy, forgive me...I would also like to speak to you, but I can’t. Forgive my failing.”

With the arrival of that beautiful season, the girls didn’t return immediately after lessons to the students’ dormitory anymore, but they chatted in the courtyard, which overflowed with flowers. The rose buds of the most varied colors were ready to burst.

But Candy didn’t like that place: it always brought Anthony to her mind and reminded her of the Sweet Candy’s perfume. That morning too, after she said hello to Patty, who was going to the library, she headed to the forest.

“She goes often to the forest alone, doesn’t she?” asked Eliza suspiciously, twisting her mouth.

Surrounded by her friends, the girl was sitting at the edge of the courtyard fountain and following with her eyes Candy’s movements.

“She doesn’t make so many mistakes lately, don’t you think so?” remarked Louise, tilting her neck dubiously.

Eliza gave her a fulminating look and said:

“It’s only that she’s good at pretending! Don’t forget that those girls who come from an orphanage are shameless!”

“You are absolutely right! She goes with the appearance of someone who has always been in this college, and it seems she has also taken Patty with her side. I see them talking together all the time.”

“That silly Patty leaves me speechless! Louise, you mustn’t speak to her anymore! Who would ever want to have anything to do with someone who has come from an orphanage? Isn’t that so, Annie?”

“Well...I...” stammered Annie, feeling Eliza’s gaze fixed upon her. Then, with her face red, she shook her head.

“Of course. It’s evident that nobody could wish something like that!” Louise and the others continued assenting, so Annie forced herself to imitate them.

Every time they pronounced the word “orphanage”, Annie felt troubled. She was always afraid that her classmates might realize something, and therefore she lost her control even more. Even that moment, she felt her mind completely blank.

Suddenly Eliza jumped up.

“I’ll follow her in secret! Knowing her, I’m sure she’s going to the forest because she’s plotting something!”

“We’ll come with you,” exclaimed Louise and her friends, getting up.

“No. If we all go we’ll not be unnoticed. And besides you don’t know how to move gracefully.”

Eliza stopped them with a fulminant look and started running, with more noise than anybody else. She was completely convinced that she was right.

I don’t believe she keeps quiet and still. I’m sure she has a reason for going to the forest all the time! I swear I’ll catch her red-handed! She must leave this college quickly!

That girl who had been adopted by the Ardlays attended the same college and the special room had been reserved for her: Eliza considered all this really insufferable.

Where was Terry? Exhausted, Candy leaned on a forest tree. She had looked for him on False Pony’s Hill, in the college stable and even in the forest, but she hadn’t been able to find him. Since that night, she could see him around the college, but of course she couldn’t speak to him. She wanted so much to apologize and make him understand how she felt. Although accidentally, that day she had discovered the secret that united Terry and the great actress, opening again the boy’s wound.

Terry...I ask you to at least believe me in this: I will never tell anything to anyone.

“If you tell this to anyone...”

Terry’s desperate voice was still echoing in her ears and his dark gaze was still engraved in her eyes. Candy was thinking that she could understand how he had felt that moment.

Maybe we two... resemble each other in some way...

Terry, the son of an illustrious noble, and Candy, an orphan who didn't even know who her parents were. Beyond their origins and the education they receive, maybe the souls of people sometimes come from the same place.

A gust of wind swayed her. The girl turned away from the tree and straightened up. It seemed to her that she had glimpsed the horse riding jacket she had once seen Terry wearing, hanging from a distant tree branch and whipped by the wind.

No doubt he is here, lying again on the ground as if he were a stone...

She was about to run in that direction, when she had the impression that she was being watched, and turned around. For an instant something moved behind a bush, and a yellow ribbon retracted in the shadow of a trunk.

As I had thought...It's Eliza.

Candy sighed with exhaustion. She already knew that Eliza and the others didn't know how to pass their time. Finally they had got to follow her.

They want to study my actions to find something useful with which to torment me.

Although understanding Eliza's secret intentions, she couldn't forget Terry, considering the few occasions she had been able to meet him. For a moment she remained undecided as to what she would do, but then she took a deep breath. She put her hands to her head and, armed with courage, she started singing.

Excuse me, forgive me.

I had really no idea.

Rest assured, believe me.

I'll keep my mouth shut!

I swear by my freckles!

It was a song invented that moment. The words and the music she had composed represented a device of emergency but, if Terry was really in the vicinity, they would serve to convey to him her feelings without Eliza being able to realize anything.

Intoning her song without pause, she left the forest. Each time the melody changed slightly, but eventually she began taking a constant style and the girl even started thinking that she wasn't so bad. She went on singing even more loudly.

“Obviously she's out of tune, like a cat meowing on a roof..”

Terry was following her with his eyes. He wasn't among the bushes, but on a tree.

“ ‘I swear by my freckles’? You didn’t need to sing such an amusing song, I’m sure...You know, I believe you,” murmured the boy to himself, smiling.

That moment he heard a sudden noise, as if someone were tapping loudly the ground. Holding on to a branch, he looked down and saw Eliza who was furious among the grass.

“How stupid she is! I knew she was empty-headed; after all she has grown up in an orphanage! But after wandering aimlessly, what does she do? She starts singing something just like that, without any sense! I’ve just wasted my time following her!”

After shouting in frustration, Eliza began to walk looking haughtily upwards, when suddenly...

“Aaah!”

He heard a crunch and the girl’s figure disappeared.

“Quick! Somebody help me! Help!”

“You ended up falling in that pit because you don’t look where you’re going.”

Terry descended nimbly from the tree and took a look in the hole hidden by the grass.

“Who’s there? Oh, it doesn’t matter, hurry up and get me out of here!” screamed Eliza from below.

“You really don’t know what the word ‘please’ means, do you?”

Shaking his head puzzled, the lad bent and extended his hand.

“Come on, hold on! Hey, how heavy you are.”

Laughing, he lifted her up. Free at last, Eliza cleaned first her uniform, and then she gave him a piercing look.

“You don’t intend to tell anyone I fell in there, do you?”

“Who knows?” he replied, pretending to be indifferent.

“That’s fine, although I don’t *really* believe anyone would listen to the version of a delinquent like you. But, in that case, I want you to know that I won’t forgive you!”

“And that’s gratitude to me for helping you? Well, anyway, I’m glad nothing happened to you.”

Ignoring her, he got back the jacket he had hung on a branch, he threw it over his shoulder and started walking without looking behind him.

But what does that boy want?

With burning eyes, Eliza watched him going away.

Of course he could also go with me...

She was surprised to discover that, without realizing it, she had put her hand to her cheek. It was the same hand that a little while ago had grabbed tightly Terrence’s hand.

Terrence...You are really a noble...and you’re much more of a gentleman than they say around here...

She couldn't help smiling. That moment it seemed to her that she understood perfectly the reason why her friends, although frightened of someone they considered as a bad boy, felt so attracted to him.

Even when she returned to the students' dormitory, Eliza continued thinking enchanted about Terrence's smile. If he had been so kind to her, there was no doubt that he harbored sympathy for her.

However, that evening she wasn't the only one feeling she was in the seventh heaven. Just a few moments ago, in the recreation room the May Festival had been announced, and although the nuns had struggled to calm them down, the girls were overwhelmed by an inexhaustible excitement. Chirping like little birds in a nest, they didn't stop talking for a single moment.

"It has arrived at last! The May Festival!"

"The only feast of the year! We can have so much fun!"

The voices became louder.

"Patty, what kind of a festival is it?" asked Candy, beginning to get excited too.

"It's a wonderful feast, Candy! There is a procession of floats parading all around the college covered with flowers, carrying the girls elected as the fairies of May. In the evening, instead, there is a ball...And on that unique occasion we are allowed to dance freely with the boys."

"Really? This is fantastic!"

Candy was startled, feeling that Terrence's image had begun suddenly to materialize in her mind.

"And besides, Candy, we can invite to the festival not only our families, but our friends too!"

At these words, Candy's bewilderment flew away instantly.

"Our friends too? Can we really invite them?"

She wanted to jump with joy. She thought immediately of Albert, and of course the illustrious Great Uncle William!

I don't know if he would be so kind as to come, but I want to try and send him an invitation!

Maybe she would be able to meet her benefactor. Candy's heart began to fill with hope.

Chapter 8

“Please, make Albert and Great Uncle William come to the May Festival!”

Candy made her prayer over the two invitations and carried them to the room where the postal service was performed. In that institute, all the letters that were received or sent had first to be subjected to revision by the nuns.

The May Festival...Just to hear those words was something exciting.

“Have you decided yet what to wear for the festival? I insisted so much that papa buy me a French dress!”

“So did I! I have ordered a scarlet one, what about you?”

The classmates she came across along the corridor always talked about the same subject.

I would be so happy if I could invite for this occasion Miss Pony and Sister Lane too...But they are really too far away.

In the letters she sent them, Candy could now tell the truth: her improvement in French, the great elegance she was acquiring thanks to the rigid school regulation...in conclusion, things that were all real.

The teachers had told her that the lupines were beginning to bloom.

Soon Pony’s Hill will be all yellow, thanks to the buttercups and the black-eyed-susans...

From the college window, the girl was looking at the courtyard. The roses were in full bloom and the wind carried with it their sweet scent.

Will Anthony’s roses have blossomed too? And what about those red ones at the Gate of the Roses?

After the boy had died, Candy thought that spring would never come again. However, seasons always kept their promise, and went on succeeding one another through the pages of the calendar.

If only people could also come back exactly like seasons...

Prince on the Hill, Anthony...There were so many persons she had wanted to see again, even if it would be only once more.

“But at least I was able to find Albert again. I shouldn’t ask too much.”

Back in her room in the students’ dormitory, Candy opened the closet.

“What could I wear for the May Festival?”

She looked at the row of innumerable dresses prepared for her by Uncle William. But her benefactor hadn’t been limited to dresses; there were also shoes, purses to match and even flower corsages. Every time she admired that panorama, Candy felt an immense gratitude.

After much hesitation, she took a light green dress and brought it close to her body.

“Yes, green is the color that matches a fairy of May,” she said winking at her own image in the mirror.

“Well? Does it suit me? Do I look like a charming young lady or like a Freckled Tarzan?”

As soon as she pronounced these words, Candy quickly took her eyes away from the mirror. She had thought about Terry again.

Maybe Uncle will come to the May Festival...Of course he will, I have also written to him that I have been elected as one of the Fairies of May and I'll step out on a float covered with flowers! Oh, how lucky I am!

Still grasping the dress on her chest, she began to spin around.

April...

Today, without even a shadow of a smile, Sister Kreis said to us:

“Every year the Fairies of May are represented by students who have been born in a particular month. Since we proceed in order and last year it was April's turn, this year there will be, matching exactly the festival's name, the students born in the month of May.”

When I heard that news, I was so overwhelmed with joy that I almost wanted to hug the teacher! Both Annie and I were born in May! I have also heard that the fairies are carried in a float full of flowers and participate in the parade. It will seem to me I'm the flower queen!

Eliza is really envious and said to me some scathing words again. She declares that, since I'm an orphan, there is no way of knowing when I was born. And to think that Annie was there and heard everything! When I gave her a sidelong glance, I realized she had suddenly turned pale.

Annie, why do you want to hide until now the fact that you originate from an orphanage? Do you really think it is something so shameful? It's not our fault that we were abandoned...

I believe Annie is afraid of Archie's possible reaction, but he's not that kind of person at all. If only I could tell her that...Surely on the occasion of the May Festival they'll dance together. And what about me? With whom will I dance? With Stear? Or with T.G.?

Having arrived at this point, feeling a little agitated, she left the pen. “T.G.” stood for Terrence G. Granchester. Whenever she spoke about him in her diary, she always used only his initials.

According to what they said, Terrence had never taken part in the festival, just as he avoided all the grand events organized by the college. The boy seemed to have no friends and avoided his classmates in the institute.

Candy remembered the boy's dark gaze, but she immediately drove away that image from her mind.

In May the forest released its fragrance even at night. Stear and Archie were on the balcony, while the breeze was gently caressing their hair. Archie was trying to look through a kind of astronomical telescope, irregularly shaped, but suddenly he turned around disappointed.

"Hey, brother! Does that telescope seem to you capable of enlarging images a million times? I can see nothing!"

"What are you talking about? That seems very strange to me..."

Stear also brought close to his eyes that peculiar object and tilted his head repeatedly, perplexed.

"It's always the same with your inventions..." remarked Archie.

Then he turned to enter the room and added:

"What a disappointment. And to think that I was so looking forward to taking a look inside Candy's bedroom..."

"Archie! I didn't make this telescope to use it that way!" replied Stear seriously, following him inside.

"We haven't seen her so often lately...She doesn't even send us any messages," murmured Archie absently, lying down on the couch.

"Yes..." agreed Stear, sitting next to his brother.

He was thinking of Candy too. Trying to raise his spirits again and get rid of that sentimental atmosphere that had fallen on him, he said cheerfully:

"She's probably very busy with the preparations for the festival. Apparently she'll be one of the fairies, since she was born exactly in May."

"I see you're well informed, Stear."

Archie got up. Whenever he had to talk seriously to his older brother, he always called him by his name.

"Yes, that's why I've also been well informed about Annie. She'll be a fairy too."

"That's true...she was born in May too," remarked Archie indifferently, turning his head away. "I would like to dance with Candy at the festival."

"What a traitor! You'll make Annie Brighton cry, Archie!" exclaimed Stear, throwing a cushion at him.

"Will you stop for once making fun of me with that story?"

Archie threw the cushion back and, missing its objective, it ended up to a canvas on the wall.

"I know Annie is a nice girl, but..." admitted Archie, getting up to straighten the painting.

Then he turned around towards his brother:

“Now I understand! You want to throw me into Annie’s arms to keep Candy completely for yourself!”

“Archibald!”

Archie was surprised by Stear’s unusually grave tone.

“Candy...Candy...hasn’t forgotten Anthony yet.”

“I know that very well!” cried Archie with rage, looking away. “But I...since the first time I saw her...”

“Don’t say any more, Archie!” Stear interrupted him severely.

Then he added with melancholy:

“Keep the rest for yourself...”

It’s like I’m saying this to myself...

In his heart, Stear smiled bitterly. He had never expressed aloud what he felt...

“The best thing we can do for Candy is to watch over her from a distance,” murmured the boy, almost as if he were talking to himself. Archie seemed not to have heard him and he had lied down on the couch again to stare at the ceiling.

“*What?*” exclaimed Stear that moment, with a strange tone in his voice.

“What’s the matter?”

“That’s why you couldn’t see anything! Look where the lens of the Device to Observe the Confines of the Universe has ended...” he said frowning in a dejected manner, picking up the lens from the carpet.

“Oh, brother, your inventions always have a miserable end...So, this object *really* serves to look at something in secret.”

“You have misunderstood, Archie! This is a *completely innocent* instrument for observing the universe...”

Hearing that heated justification, Archie burst into laughter. His hilarious mood infected Stear and both of them continued laughing as they were looking at each other.

That night someone knocked softly on the door of the special room. That shy knocking couldn’t belong to any other than Patty.

When Candy opened the door she was in front of the girl, who asked her:

“May I come in?”

She looked cautiously along the corridor, and then she crossed quickly the threshold.

“My family sent me some confectionery. I wanted to share them with you, Candy,” she said holding carefully a parcel in her arms.

“How wonderful! How did you manage so that the nuns haven’t confiscated them?”

“They have obtained permission...”

With a faint smile, Patty sat on the couch. The parcel contained chocolates, caramels and bonbons of every color.

“They are so refined! And they look great! How lucky you are, Patty, to have such thoughtful parents! That’s an advantage!”

Taking one of the chocolates, Candy pinched cheerfully the cheeks of her friend, who was strangely melancholic. However, when Patty looked up, Candy noticed that her eyes were moist and stopped eating. She looked at her face worried.

“They have cheated me again,” said Patty, wiping with the tips of her fingers the tears that started flowing under her glasses.

“Who has cheated you?” asked Candy, swallowing slowly the morsel that was left in her mouth.

“Neither mama nor papa can come to the May Festival...What do they think I’ll do with this confectionery? You know, I don’t go home lately, not even during the holidays. My parents are very busy with their work... And even if they’re not, I don’t see them.”

With her head lowered, Patty began to cry. The tears were falling on her hands.

She told her that her father was a lawyer, while her mother wrote articles for a magazine. Both had to take frequent business trips and do research, so ever since she was little she had been entrusted to the care of a governess.

“We only eat together a few times a year...If they have enrolled me in this college, it’s only because there is a student residence and they control us severely...They almost never visit me.”

“Well, they have sent you this confectionery, haven’t they? I don’t even have any parents to do that for me. Apart from the sweets, think that they have also abandoned me!”

Annoyed, Candy put one chocolate after another in her mouth. When she saw her inflated cheeks, her friend finally smiled.

“You are right...Maybe I complain too much. But, you know, I’m always so sad...My only consolation is...”

Patty seemed undecided to talk about this, but then she lifted her head with decision.

“Candy, I have a secret...”

“What? A secret?”

“Yes...But I want to tell you what it is. Wait a moment.”

Armed with courage, she left the room quickly. Candy let out a little sigh.

Even when you have parents, there are still problems...Patty seems so sad...

Who knows what that secret was? The girl hadn’t come back yet. Candy was about to put another caramel in her mouth, when

suddenly she heard Sister Gray's severe and resonant voice resounding in the corridor.

"Patricia O'Brien! Don't you know that regulation forbids keeping animals in the dormitory?"

An animal? Patty?

Surprised, Candy rushed out of the room. Outside there were not only the nuns who accompanied the director; maybe attracted by the commotion, Eliza, Louise and all the others were also present. In the middle of them, with lowered head, was Patty. Candy was startled seeing that her friend was holding firmly in her hands a small turtle.

"Go on, get rid of it immediately!" ordered Sister Gray.

Patty was looking down, keeping still and holding firmly the animal.

"Patricia O'Brien! Didn't you hear me?"

"Sister Gray...I beg you!"

Trembling, the girl lifted her head to look at the director with imploring eyes.

"Hughley is special to me! You have no idea how much strength she's giving me..."

The girl, who was generally so submissive, had her eyes flooded with tears, but she was resisting desperately with all her being.

"You must get rid of it! If you make me repeat it once more, you will only make your punishment worse!"

Sister Gray seemed relentless.

Candy stepped forward and said:

"Sister Gray! Why must Patty be forced to get rid of her turtle?"

Frowning, the director turned to look at her with a cold glare.

"You should be ashamed for not being able to understand even that kind of discipline measure. Regulation doesn't allow keeping animals, much less a dirty turtle like this!"

"But...how dare you? This turtle is important to Patty, as if it were a member of her family! And you do nothing but speak about regulation! That's why there is always such a cold atmosphere in this institute!"

"Patricia, what are you waiting for?" screamed Sister Gray loudly, ignoring Candy's intervention.

"Stubborn old woman!"

Candy had been carried away by rage. She put immediately a hand to her mouth, but it was already too late. Instantly an intense cold, full of tension, fell over the corridor.

Sister Gray's face hardened. Getting pale, she looked at her threateningly. Her lips trembled imperceptibly, but when she spoke, her voice resounded with a disturbing tranquility.

“Candice White Ardlay, I order you to go to the punishment room and I forbid you to participate in the May Festival.”

Sister Gray’s words fell upon Candy like a curtain of iron.