

Section 1

Chapter 1

“Annie! Annie! Where have you gone?”

With her heart pounding, Candy was running down Pony’s Hill and, while arriving in front of the firewood, she almost fell upon Sister Lane.

“Oh, Candy, have you found Annie?”

“I haven’t seen her anywhere, Sister Lane...not even on Pony’s Hill.”

“What can we do? It’s almost time for her to leave...Where could she have gone?”

Sister Lane looked around with a worried expression.

“Don’t worry, Sister Lane! I swear I’ll find her! Nobody can escape me, not even when we play hide and seek!”

Candy said those words cheerfully, hoping to encourage Sister Lane, and she started running again. She had not searched in the chicken coop yet. If she did not find her as soon as possible, the Brighton couple might think that Annie had changed her mind. And what would happen if they had already decided to leave, without adopting the little girl?

Annie, your wish has finally come true...Now you have a wonderful mother and father, and you, on the contrary...

About one hour ago, when Mr. and Mrs. Brighton had come to take her, Annie seemed very happy wearing the dress they had given her, blue as the morning sky. However, as the moment of her departure was approaching, she had suddenly disappeared.

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

As she was going towards the chicken coop, a sweet hope had risen in Candy’s heart. In fact, to be separated from her friend was very painful to her. She was feeling like someone was tearing out half of her body.

Since babyhood, and during those six years of their lives, they had always been together. Annie, weeping all the time, did nothing else except following her everywhere.

If we don’t find her anywhere, she will not become the adopted daughter of the Brightons and we can stay together forever...

But Candy drove this thought out of her mind immediately.

No, no, Candy! If Annie has hidden, it is only because she is afraid, as always. Shouldn’t you know better than anyone how much she wants to have a mother and a father?

“Yes, yes, I know that very well,” she replied to herself, nodding energetically, and turning to the chickens, which had approached cackling and waving their necks.

She left the chicken coop. Annie was not there, neither in the old barn. Where could she have gone? There was only the forest, but would it be possible that she might have gone there alone, since she was so scared?

However, there is that possibility...I want to make sure.

Candy headed quickly towards the dense forest that grew behind Pony’s Home. She ran with all her might under the shadow of the trees, getting deeper and deeper in the fringes created by the sun that was filtered between the branches. She must hurry to find Annie.

“Annie! Answer me, Annie!”

The little birds, frightened by her nervous voice, flew away, flapping their wings loudly. Under her running feet, the dry branches were breaking with a crunch. At that moment, Candy stopped suddenly. For an instant, she had caught a glimpse of a blue reflection behind a tree. Taking a deep breath, Candy ran to that tree, which was covered with moss.

Annie was there. Illuminated by a ray of light, she was crying, sitting at the foot of a huge trunk.

“Annie...I’ve found you!” said Candy, after catching her breath.

Hearing that happy voice, her little friend looked up with her eyes full of tears.

“Candy...”

“Oh, Annie! I was so worried! What happened to you?”

Although Candy was trying to speak cheerfully, Annie’s eyes were still filling with tears.

“Candy...I don’t want to go anywhere...I don’t want to leave you...”

“Annie, why are you saying these things again? You will have a wonderful mother and father, you know that!”

“But...I’m afraid, Candy...”

Annie’s long dark brown hair was shining in the sunlight. Candy sat beside her. She could not believe that her playmate, who was usually so afraid to go to the forest, had decided to take refuge in that particular place. Surely her heart was breaking because of the anxiety of having to face a new life, but she was also full of hope.

Candy smiled and moved closer to Annie.

“You are afraid? Well, I understand that...But I don’t think that the Brightons look like Dracula,” she said, showing her teeth and twisting her eyes.

“Candy, you will never change...” said Annie laughing and wiping the tears from her eyes.

“That’s right, Annie! You have to smile! Today is a happy day for you!”

Candy grabbed her friend’s hand to help her get up, then she removed the leaves that had stuck on her blue dress.

“Besides, it will be a trouble for me if the Brightons don’t come to adopt you. We have given a promise, remember? You will invite me to a house full of bedrooms, and I could eat a lot of delicious things! I can’t wait for that, Miss Annie!”

“You are right, Candy...I’ll become a lady and live in a grand house...” replied her friend, with a dreamy expression, while her eyes had still some traces of tears.

“Come on, Annie! You’ll see that your mama and papa will be waiting for you!”

Annie smiled and nodded. Holding her hand, Candy hurried to leave the forest, trying to hold back her tears. The warmth of that hand...They could never again run together holding each other’s hand. But she mustn’t cry; she wanted to say goodbye with a smile to her beloved Annie, who was ready to start a new and happy life.

A little later, when Annie climbed into the carriage of the Brightons, which was pulled by two horses, the other children surrounded her, watching sadly and without saying a word.

Candy hurried to go near her friend and couldn’t help noticing that her eyes were filling with tears again.

“Annie, I told you to stop crying, didn’t I?” said Candy, raising her eyebrows, until she saw Annie’s face smiling.

After saying goodbye to the teachers, the Brightons climbed into the carriage too, and the coachman pulled the reins to make the horses move. Sister Lane ran towards the carriage and said in a muffled voice:

“Annie, be careful not to get sick...”

“You will always be in our prayers, Annie,” added Miss Pony behind her, nodding and trying to smile.

Annie, not being able to contain herself anymore, began to cry.

“Miss Pony, Sister Lane...Candy...children...”

Then she couldn’t say another word. While the Brightons patted gently her shoulders, the carriage took off quickly.

“Goodbye, Annie!”

“Good luck!”

Hearing the voices of the children who had gathered around the carriage, Annie turned back with a tearful countenance. Candy...Had her little mouth pronounced her name maybe? Candy, unable to speak, was watching the carriage that was getting smaller and smaller. She did not even have the strength to run after it, as her

friends had done. When the carriage disappeared in the horizon, she suddenly began to run towards the tallest oak tree that grew in the surroundings of Pony's Home. She climbed up among the branches which were covered with new sprouts.

"Candy, it's dangerous...Come down!" shouted Sister Lane, wiping away her tears.

"Sister Lane! From here I can still see Annie's carriage!" replied the little girl from the top of the huge tree. "Annie, be happy! I'm waiting for your invitation!"

"Candy...Hold firm to the..."

Miss Pony touched gently Sister Lane's shoulder, interrupting her.

"Let's leave her alone today, Sister Lane. At this moment the person that suffers most of all is surely this little girl..."

"Yes...yes, Miss Pony," agreed Sister Lane, wiping again her tears and looking up to watch her.

Candy, sitting on a strong branch, was looking far away in the distance.

"We have to congratulate her, Sister Lane. From the moment she knew that Annie would be adopted, Candy has not even once said that she was sad, and has never cried..." murmured Miss Pony, looking up too.

"You are right, Miss Pony. They were abandoned on the same day...I wish Candy will find happiness too..."

Sister Lane's thoughts went back to that beautiful sunny day of May, six years ago.

The wind was blowing softly the white petals of hawthorns that grew along the path, almost as if wanting to show to a certain direction. In front of Pony's Home, there was a newborn baby. Kicking inside a worn basket, it was crying at the top of its lungs. It was such a loud cry that it seemed to chase away the white petals that were falling on the baby girl. Pony's Home was an orphanage run by two nuns. At the entrance of that building, attached to a small and simple wooden church, they often abandoned newborn babies.

"But look, apparently today is the day of little girls!" said Miss Pony, looking at Sister Lane.

She lifted lovingly the baby girl, who, wrapped in a ragged towel, was crying and clenching her fists.

"Do you see, Sister Lane? She has already stopped crying, and look how she is smiling now!"

When she entered Pony's Home with the little girl in her arms, Miss Pony leaned to observe the other baby girl who was sleeping peacefully in an old basket.

“You two were abandoned on the same day. In some way we can consider them as sisters...Let’s see, what names can we give them?”

Indeed, just two hours ago, another newborn baby girl had been abandoned in front of Pony’s Home. It was Annie.

“The one is very quiet, the other is the exact opposite, really vivacious! Sister Lane, we are going to have our hands full from now on,” said Miss Pony, with a smile on her chubby face, looking at the happy baby.

“Today they are both six years old...How they have grown since then...”

“That’s true. Although Candy seems to have too much energy for a girl of her age...”

The two women were still watching her while she was sitting on the tree.

“You are absolutely right, Miss Pony. When we found her, she was white as snow, that’s why we named her Candice White. And look how tanned she is now...”

As soon as the teachers were sure that she could climb down the tree safe and sound, they hurried back to Pony’s Home, when suddenly they heard a voice:

“Miss Pony! Sister Lane!”

Mike the snitch was running towards them screaming.

“What’s the matter, Mike?”

“Sister Lane, today it was Candy’s turn to clean the chicken coop, but instead of doing that, she is going to the hill! Look at her!”

Following with their eyes the direction pointed by the child, they saw the figure of the little girl, who was climbing at full speed. Miss Pony and Sister Lane looked at each other and realized that they were thinking the same thing.

“Sister Lane! Are you not angry?” insisted Mike, annoyed at the silence of both.

Candy had hardly ever been separated from Annie. For Pony’s Home that farewell was a great event. The children would forget quickly, but Candy...How could they possibly scold her? She had not even once cried. How she must suffer keeping all that pain in such a small body! However, even at that moment, Candy seemed to be climbing up the hill, pouncing.

Chapter 2

Arriving out of breath at the top of the hill, Candy dropped herself down among the bushes.

The smell of the fresh grass was tickling her nose. She turned around and remained lying on her back, looking at the almost dazzling blue sky. As they were moving away, the white clouds seemed to take the form of a carriage that was getting smaller and smaller, until it disappeared, taking Annie away. Had her friend still been crying? Candy could still see the little girl's picture, with her head lowered, as she was sitting between kind Mr. and Mrs. Brighton. She was trying to keep her eyes wide open, fearing that if she blinked them, that picture might disappear.

"Annie, have you really gone now?"

As soon as she whispered that phrase, all the emotions that she had retained until that moment began suddenly to break free, searching for a way out through her eyes. Annie was going to Chicago, a city Candy had not even heard about. For her this was a place so distant, it almost seemed to be in another world.

"Soon the hill will be covered with flowers, but we won't be able to play here anymore...or go fishing, or swim in the river..."

Candy's mind was full of memories of the past days she had spent with Annie: of the time when, while making garlands with buttercups, they had decided to call that hill "Pony's Hill", or when they were trying to guess about their mother and father, picking the petals of the little daisies, in order to find out if someone would come some day to take them. For Candy, that little girl, who had been abandoned on the same day with her, was like her real sister. No matter what they did, Annie was always close to her. Annie, the fearful, the crybaby.

"Annie...even now, if anyone makes fun of you, you know that I can't protect you."

Hearing her very own words, Candy shuddered and wiped away her tears. It was no longer necessary for her to run to the rescue of her friend. Now she had found two wonderful parents.

"But I am the one who has lost something. Now there is no one to apologize for me..."

That was exactly the case. Annie always defended her:

"Miss Pony, don't be angry with Candy, forgive her, please..."

Every time Candy did one of her pranks and happened to be discovered, Annie begged the teachers in that way, so that they would not reprimand her too harshly. How many scoldings and punishments

she had escaped over the years, thanks to her interventions...Maybe it was her who always needed Annie's help, not the other way around.

"I'm afraid of what might happen to me..."

Candy stood up again, rubbing her eyes with her hands. However, the tears did not seem willing to stop. She tried to hold her breath, but her eyes continued filling with tears.

Oh, that's enough...I understand that I tried to repress my tears for too long...If I go back looking like this, Miss Pony and Sister Lane will be worried...Oh, I also have to clean the chicken coop...It's all right, at this moment I want to cry all I can!

Having made her decision, Candy inhaled deeply and started crying loudly and screaming with all her might. Listening to the great noise she made everywhere, the tears stopped and Candy started feeling a little silly.

My crying sounds like the howling of a hungry wolf.

At this thought, she could not suppress a giggle.

"That's exactly what I thought. You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry."

Hearing that gentle and unexpected voice, Candy looked up in surprise. Against the sky was highlighted the figure of a boy dressed in a strange outfit. He was looking down at her smiling and he was carrying a peculiar object, similar to the shape of a heart, which she had seen once in an illustrated encyclopedia. Candy blinked her eyes. Who was that boy, who seemed to have fallen suddenly from the sky?

"You...are an alien?" she whispered in astonishment.

The boy started laughing and replied:

"You say very funny things, little girl! However, although you see me dressed like that, I assure you that I am a human."

"But why are you wearing a skirt, when you are a boy?"

"This is not a skirt. This is a kilt and it is the traditional costume of Scotland."

"A *kit* from *sutland*?" repeated Candy.

It was the first time she had ever heard these words.

The boy laughed again.

"No, no! It is a *kilt* from Scotland. And this is a bagpipe, a musical instrument. Look, this is how it is played."

Looking merrily at the incredulous Candy, the lad brought the bagpipe to his mouth, producing suddenly a mysterious sound.

"That sounds like a group of snails when they are crawling!" exclaimed Candy in surprise, jumping up.

The boy laughed one more time and the sound of "the group of crawling snails" stopped.

"You are really a funny little girl!"

Watching his smiling face, which seemed to shed a light of its own, the bright blond hair that fell lightly on his forehead, and those tender blue eyes, that were almost the same as the clear sky of that day, Candy had the impression that she could tell him anything.

“Where are you from? My name is Candy. Do you see that church? That is Pony’s Home, and although from here it looks very small, it is a church and an orphanage too. It is also a school for the village children! There is chubby Miss Pony, and skinny Sister Lane, and I...”

Candy was absorbed in talking and pointing to the building at the foot of the hill, but when she turned to see the boy, she couldn’t suppress a little cry. He was no longer there. There was no sign of him.

“He disappeared...” she said, looking around her with her mouth open.

There was nobody there. He had disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

Maybe it was a dream...

No, it wasn’t a dream. Candy could still hear clearly that voice echoing in her ears, saying:

“You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry.”

“He looked like a prince...” she murmured dreamily.

Suddenly, she noticed something sparkling through the grass. On the ground there was a silver badge in the shape of an eagle, with a little bell hanging under its wings.

“This...must belong to the Prince...”

Candy picked it up and smiled. That badge was so fine and expensive, that it must surely be of great value.

“I must give it back to him. Who knows if I can meet him again tomorrow...”

As hope was rising within her, Candy felt like her heart had been illuminated by a bright ray of light and caressed by a gentle wind. Prince on the Hill was certainly a wonderful boy. If she met him again next day, she would tell him many more things.

However, Candy didn’t see the boy the following day, nor later. She went every day to the top of the hill, full of expectations, but she never found her mysterious Prince on the Hill.

The day Annie had gone. The day she had met the Prince. All that was left was the silver badge, as if it were the fragment of a memory.

Chapter 3

Between the branches of the oak tree, bending under the weight of the leaves, the world seemed to turn green. The air was impregnated with the scent of the wind and the earth full of foliage and, looking up, one could glimpse magnificent pieces of the sky. Sitting on one of those branches, Candy was eating an apple. When the little birds, that had the intention of perching on the tree, saw her, they were frightened, flapped their wings in the air, and flew away.

Candy smiled.

“They must have thought that I was one of them, but much bigger. Oh, how I wish I could fly...”

From above, Candy could see Pony’s Hill. Covered with flowers of yellow, pink, white, blue and all the other colors, the hill was like a queen’s gown.

In five days Candy would turn thirteen years old.

When she was little, at that time of the year, she always spent her days on the hill. She was never tired of picking flowers together with Annie and, no matter how many they were collecting, they were blooming all the time. It was like a gift meant only for them. As little girls, they were weaving necklaces of flowers to celebrate their upcoming birthdays. None of them knew the exact date of their birth. The day they had been abandoned on Pony’s Hill, that day was their birthday.

Thirteen years already...I wonder how Annie will celebrate.

With a sigh, Candy put one third of the apple on one of the branches, leaving it there for the birds.

Seven years had passed since Annie had been adopted by the Brightons. Time had passed, and Mike the snitch, Tom, Candy’s companion in mischief, and even little Milly, had found a family. Now Candy was the oldest child left at Pony’s Home.

During that time, Annie wrote to her frequently only at the beginning, and now she rarely sent her news. Candy was almost always the one who sent letters. Even last Christmas she had not received the much desired invitation she was expecting every year.

Annie must be very busy with her studies and her piano lessons...After all, now she is a young lady living with the Brightons...

With her gaze towards the sky, Candy half-closed her eyes. That transparent color reminded her of the dress Annie was wearing the day of their farewell.

Thirteen years...I think that I’m growing too old to... Oh! That is Sister Lane...

When she saw the nun passing under the tree, Candy bent between the oak leaves trying to hide herself.

However, maybe the thing that is the oldest of all is Sister Lane's robe...

Through the branches, Candy observed the robe which, after so many washings, had completely faded. It even had several very visible patches. The girl was aware of the difficult financial situation of Pony's Home.

"Candy! Have you climbed on that tree again?" exclaimed Sister Lane, looking up towards her direction.

"She found me! Sister Lane, you really have a very good eyesight," remarked Candy, peeking through the leaves.

The woman gave her a look of mild reproach and replied merrily, pointing to the girl's legs:

"That's the pure evidence! How could I not see those long things hanging from the branches?"

"Oh, I had forgotten about them!"

"Come on, hurry down!"

"I'm coming!" she answered cheerfully.

Candy moved nimbly to a lower branch, but, unexpectedly, that branch from which she was clinging broke, and she fell to the ground with a crash. Of course that was not the first time she was falling, but not in such a precipitate way...

Sister Lane ran immediately and helped her get up with a worried expression.

"Candy, I have told you not to climb trees anymore..."

"But, Sister Lane, I assure you that I have never had any trouble! Ay!"

Rubbing her back, Candy looked up at the tree doubtfully.

"I'm amazed that nothing like this has ever happened to you before! Soon you will be thirteen years old, do you realize that? Anyway, even leaving aside your height, you have exceeded the average weight for your age, and..."

Candy interrupted her, continually imitating, in a funny way, the sounds of animals, until Sister Lane started laughing.

"Oh, I forgot, I have a lot of work to do! I have to clean the chicken coop, go and get water, wash the aprons of the children...Oh, how many things!"

Smiling, Sister Lane was watching Candy, who was leaving in a hurry.

"That girl is incorrigible...Oh, look, she has lost something..."

On the ground, shining in the sunlight, was the silver badge. Picking it up, Sister Lane rushed to call its owner:

"Candy, you've lost something important!"

"Thank you, Sister Lane!"

Candy, who had just gone to fetch water from the well, dried her hands on her skirt and took back the badge, blushing.

“I see that you look at it from time to time. It must be something quite valuable to you.”

“So it is, Sister Lane...It is my little treasure, my lucky charm,” she replied smiling and firmly holding the badge close to her chest.

The Prince on the Hill...That object was the proof that their encounter so many years ago had not been just a dream. She was sure that, if she kept it, one day she would meet again its owner. Such a wonderful boy...Candy remembered perfectly well that smiling face that had been able to relieve her pain.

“You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry.”

His voice was so sweet...She would think of those words whenever she was sad, and then she would smile again. But she couldn't tell anyone about the Prince, not even her beloved Sister Lane: that was her most precious secret.

“How unusual it is for you, Candy, to stand there laughing by yourself...Come on, hurry up to finish your chores and then help me prepare the dinner. Today Miss Pony will be late.”

“Where has she gone?”

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

“About Becky? Really? Then she will surely be adopted!”

“Yes, we hope that everything will be all right...Don't forget what I have asked you, Candy.”

When she was left alone, the girl took a deep breath.

So Becky will be adopted too...Why am I the only one who has not found any family...?

Occasionally, in the town church, they would organize meetings for children and perspective adoptive parents. On those occasions, some of them approached Candy, but afterwards the matter didn't make any progress at all.

Years had passed. It was the first time that such a grown up child had remained at Pony's Home, and Candy knew that the orphanage couldn't afford to take care of older children.

“Don't people in this world have eyes to see? Can't they think that here is such a pretty girl, so kind and hard-working...?” she told herself, giving a tap to the bucket, in order to cheer up.

Nancy had recently turned three years old and couldn't sleep without her. That night, when she put the little girl to bed, Candy went out into the hall.

“I'm worried about Candy.”

The girl stood still when she heard Miss Pony murmuring from one of the bedrooms.

Are they talking about me? Why is she worried?

With a sigh, she tried to understand what was happening.

“Miss Pony, I would like her to stay forever with us...”

“Sister Lane, I wish the same thing, but really, is that the best for Candy? She can never get a suitable education here, and I would rather she had the opportunity to learn much more. Besides, from next month we will have to take care of a two-year old child and we can’t count on any other donations...”

Miss Pony sighed, and so did Sister Lane.

“Certainly, nothing would make me happier than to see her adopted by a good family, but...she is such a good girl, that I wonder why she is so unfortunate.”

Unable to listen to those painful words any longer, Candy returned to the bedroom. She couldn’t bear thinking that the two teachers were so sad because of her. If it was possible, she would also prefer to stay at Pony’s Home, but the present situation was complicated.

If I leave, they can have at least three more orphans...

Candy went to each one of the beds to tuck the children in, and then she rested her forehead against the window and looked at the night sky. The moonlight was falling softly in the bedroom, while the stars, almost smiling, seemed to dance all around. She took the Prince’s badge out of her pocket and moved it slightly. The little bell tinkled gently, as if it wanted to cheer her up.

Thirteen years old is an inconvenient age...I’m too young to work and maybe too old to be adopted...Do you think so too, little bell?

Candy smiled at the object that had answered her question, but suddenly a cloud came over her eyes and she hurried to put away her valuable amulet. She didn’t know why, but she didn’t want it to see her cry.

What must I do now?

The only one whom she could ask for advice was Annie. Their correspondence was often one-sided, but probably that was because of her many tasks. Her friend would surely understand the problem she was facing.

I will try to ask for help. Even if I can’t be adopted, maybe the Brightons can help me find a place to work.

To leave Pony’s Home and start working: yes, that was the best decision. But although she was convinced of her choice, Candy felt so sad that she wanted to cry.

No! Enough with tears! Here I need a little exercise to scare sadness away!

Encouraging herself, she went in front of the mirror, separated her feet from each other, bent her knees and extended her lips forward. She was ready!

Well, the exercise to scare sadness away begins! Let’s go! One-two-three! One-two-three!

When she established her rhythm, Candy started jumping like a frog. She had invented those movements herself and, when she repeated them in front of a mirror, she always ended up looking so funny, that she forgot the reason of her sadness. The same thing was happening this time.

One, two, three! Jump! One, two, three!

“Candy, what are you doing?”

“One, two...eh?”

She turned around in surprise and was face to face with Nancy, Slim and the rest of the children who, instead of sleeping, were looking at her confused.

“Well, I...you know, my leg was a little...Oh, come on! Go to sleep!”

Candy turned off the lamp with a quick blow.

That night she would write the letter to Annie, illuminated by the moonlight.

Chapter 4

“Dear Candy,

Thank you for writing to me. I am fine.

My piano recital will take place soon and I’m very busy with the rehearsals every day.

Candy, thank you for all the letters you have sent me. When I read them, I always think about the past with nostalgia and I almost feel like crying. I’m sorry for not replying to you regularly. I always wanted to write to you honestly about my feelings, but I didn’t have the courage.

Today, however, I have decided to be brave.

I’m sure you will be angry, but I want to be sincere: Candy, please, don’t write to me anymore.

Seven years have passed since I was adopted by the Brightons. They treat me like their real daughter, and I love them very much too.

I don’t want anyone to know that I lived in an orphanage, nor that I was abandoned. I don’t even want to remember all that.

Now I have many new friends. All of them are children of good families, and they are convinced that I am true daughter of the Brightons. But if they knew where I came from...just thinking about it makes me tremble with fear.

Candy, under no circumstances do I want this to be known.

Forgive me, I have not even been able to keep my promise to invite you to my house.

I will not write to you anymore, so please do the same. Forgive me.

I really wish you can find happiness, Candy. Believe me! And forgive me!

Goodbye, Candy.

Annie Brighton

P.S. I could not talk to papa about the matter of work of which you have written to me. I deeply apologize for that too.”

It had been such a long time that she had not received an immediate answer from Annie, that Candy, being so happy, had pressed on her heart the envelope that had arrived. Pouncing joyfully, she ran to Pony’s Hill to read the letter without being disturbed.

Annie had surely understood her critical situation and maybe the Brightons would find a place for her to work. She sat among the swaying grass and ripped anxiously the envelope.

As she was reading on, her fingers began to tremble.

“Goodbye, Candy.”

Had she read right? She could hardly breathe. Annie couldn't have written something like that. Surely it was another person who had signed with her name, or had forced her to do that. Trying to convince herself, Candy read those pages over and over again.

“Goodbye, Candy.”

No, she was not wrong. Annie's delicate handwriting, similar to her voice, seemed to tremble on the pale blue paper. As if her strength had completely abandoned her, Candy collapsed; that's what her friend really thought.

I should have known before...

The fact that she almost never answered her left her little doubt. She knew well Annie's timid character, always tending to worry about what the others might think, but wanting to see only what was convenient for her.

Oh, Annie...How disturbed you must have felt each time you received a letter from me...It must have hurt you very much...

Without realizing it, the tears began flowing down her cheeks.

Annie, what's wrong with originating from an orphanage? It's not our fault that we were abandoned. We must be proud of ourselves...

But Candy didn't want to blame her.

“Forgive me!”

It seemed to her that she was hearing Annie's voice amidst crying. Surely she must have gathered all the courage she had to be able to write those lines.

No, you forgive me, Annie...I even allowed myself to ask you for help to find work...You have nothing to fear anymore...I will not write to you again...

She had not yet finished murmuring these words, when a tear fell on the letter. Candy recovered and blinked her eyes. She didn't want to cry.

But maybe, if I started crying loudly now, Prince on the Hill would appear, just like that time...

“You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry”.

While thinking of those words, Candy's lips relaxed. She took out of her pocket the silver badge in the shape of an eagle with the little bell, which she always carried with her.

“Prince on the Hill...I will not cry anymore...”

The little silver bell tinkled gently.

“How I wish this little bell would be magic. Listening to its sound over Annie's letter would suddenly turn these words into an invitation to go and see her! But that's impossible...”

Playing with each other, two white butterflies were fluttering in the air and Candy started thinking that they looked like Annie and herself as little girls. She drove that thought immediately out of her mind.

The important thing is to be happy, isn't it? But now...how can I find a place to work?

With a sigh, she looked at Pony's Home at the foot of the hill. That moment the children were taking their afternoon nap. Wrapped in the warm sunrays of spring's end, even the building seemed to be asleep. "There is a car coming," remarked Candy, standing in the middle of the meadow.

In that sleepy panorama before her eyes, a luxurious dark blue automobile was approaching, raising a cloud of dust. It was coming from the village and stopped right in front of Pony's Home. A man came out and headed towards the orphanage. Even from a distance, his stylish poise showed that this was an important visit.

"I wonder who he is and what he is doing here. Maybe he is interested in one of the children! 'Good afternoon, sir...Although I'm not very tall and I have freckles, don't you find me pretty enough to adopt me?' How beautiful that would be, if he were really that kind of person..."

While talking to herself, Candy saw Sister Lane running out of the building and shouting:

"Candy! Candy!"

The nun looked through the oak branches, trying to find her. The girl put the badge in her pocket and went down the hill at full speed.

"Oh, my goodness, Candy! Miss Pony is looking for you," said Sister Lane, as soon as she saw her. "A family in Lakewood might be interested in you..."

Candy felt suddenly her heart beating uncontrollably.

"Then at last someone has come who wants me as an adopted daughter! Sister Lane, is it that man who just arrived in a shining car?"

"Yes, that's him...I believe that the family has an enormous villa..."

Candy gave a leap of joy.

"Hurray! All this waiting has been worth it! I'm really a lucky girl! You know, Sister Lane, I always thought that this moment would come sooner or later."

"Candy...it's not about a family that wants to adopt you..."

But Candy did not hear those words that were spoken very low and she passed the threshold jumping. When she was inside, she tried to take a deep breath to calm herself. The long-awaited day had finally arrived.

I must behave politely and be elegant.

She removed the dust from her dress and knocked on the door of Miss Pony's office, trying to act in a carefree way. When she heard her come in, the headmistress of the orphanage looked up. She had an unintelligible expression. The man, who was sitting in a chair a moment ago, stood up to turn and look at her, without even smiling. Candy straightened up her back, wondering if that gentleman, who looked still young, would become her father. However, her hopes were dashed in an instant.

"Candy, this is Mr. Stewart. He is coming on behalf of the Leagan family who live in Lakewood, because the young lady...well, Miss Eliza wishes to have a 'playing companion'," Miss Pony informed her, avoiding looking at her in the eyes.

A playing companion? Not an adopted daughter?

Her heart, having been full of expectations, seemed to be empty. Candy couldn't help turning to Sister Lane, who had come in just at that moment. The nun lowered her eyes, with her hands clasped in front of her chest and with a worried expression.

"Mr. Stewart, this is Candy White. She is thirteen years old, the same age as Miss Eliza."

Mr. Stewart scrutinized her as if he wanted to analyze her, nodded and said:

"She looks much younger than her age, but the important thing is to be a girl full of energy. Well, you'd better pick up all her things."

"But, right now?"

That cry had come from Sister Lane.

Miss Pony got up from her chair too and, shifting her anxious glance from Mr. Stewart to Candy, objected:

"Sister Lane is right; we should know first what the person who is interested thinks...Until this moment I did not know anything. I received this news from the pastor at church, but..."

"I'm sure that the church will receive all the necessary information together with a donation. Anyway, the girl must be taken to the house immediately," remarked expressionless Mr. Stewart.

"I...I want to go!" energetically interposed Candy who, until that moment, had been only observing the two anxious-looking teachers.

"What do you say, Candy? First you have to know how things are. You may as well refuse, you know," exclaimed Miss Pony disturbed.

"Miss Pony, I have decided! I'm going! I'll go at once to prepare myself."

Upon receiving Candy's smile, Mr. Stewart nodded relieved.

It should be decided. It didn't matter that she would be a playing companion for Miss Eliza Leagan or any other; the important thing was that she had finally found a family to take charge of her. Wasn't that perhaps the exact opportunity for her to leave Pony's Home?

They had brought her up for thirteen years, and that was enough. Candy tried to convince herself with those explanations.

“Candy, think about it! If you don’t want to, just say that...”

“Don’t worry, Sister Lane! After all, I’m thirteen years old!” she replied with a smile, trying to reassure the woman who was about to cry.

They had talked about preparations, but there was not much to do. The moment of departure came in no time and Candy got into the car with Mr. Stewart. Even at that moment she wasn’t fully aware of what was happening; it almost seemed to her that she was walking on a cloud. She had never thought that one day she would have to leave Pony’s Home so suddenly.

“Please, Mr. Stewart, wait just a moment. Let me wake up the children so that they can see her off...” begged Sister Lane, with the expression of a person who faces a dilemma.

“Sister Lane...It would be too hard for me to see them cry...Let them sleep,” murmured the girl.

If she saw the faces of the little ones, she would be the first to collapse.

“Very well. I must go back before sunset, so...”

Mr. Stewart started the engine and the car began moving slowly.

“Miss Pony! Sister Lane!” Candy called them unexpectedly, looking out of the window.

She wanted to thank them for everything they had done for her, but she couldn’t say a word.

“Candy!”

Miss Pony, who had been still and silent, ran towards the car as if a sudden force had driven her, and said:

“Here, Candy, take this.”

She took off the cross that she always carried with her and put it around the girl’s neck.

“Candy, I will pray for you to be always happy...”

Behind her glasses, Miss Pony’s eyes were moist. Sister Lane, with both her hands over her mouth and her eyes full of tears, was looking at her steadily.

I mustn’t cry, thought Candy.

“Thank you...Miss Pony, Sister Lane, goodbye!”

She smiled at them, waving her hand. Afterwards, she did not turn back.

Chapter 5

Until the car left the village behind, Candy remained silent and still beside Mr. Stewart, who was concentrated on driving. She was afraid that, if she spoke, she would burst into tears, and of course she couldn't practise her exercises to scare sadness away inside the vehicle. She remembered the last picture she had seen, of the teachers through the mirror; two figures that became smaller and smaller, until they disappeared.

I couldn't even say goodbye to the children...I'm sure that when Nancy wakes up from her afternoon nap, she will start crying.

"Actually I must have surprised you," began Mr. Stewart, trying to comfort her. "Both Mr. and Mrs. Leagan are people who want to get immediately what they want, and when things don't come out just as they expect, they get grumpy, causing many problems to those who work for them..."

The man smiled bitterly but, maybe fearing that he had said too much, he added immediately in a friendly way:

"We still have a long way to go; please sit back and rest."

"Thank you," replied Candy in a low voice, happy to have so much attention.

Certainly she couldn't appear in such a state before the Leagans. They had considered her to be their daughter's playing companion, but in the meantime they would take charge of her: she must show them a beautiful smile. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get Miss Pony's and Sister Lane's sad expressions out of her mind.

Don't worry...I have decided to find happiness.

Candy pressed gently the cross she had just been given and looked at those dear places that she had known all her life and that were becoming more and more distant.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, as soon as they left the road that went through the forest.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Stewart startled, turning towards her. On both sides of the road there seemed to flow two interminable blue streams of lupines.

"I have never seen so many lupines in my life! Are there only blue ones? On Pony's Hill there are also pink and violet!"

"Lupines? Mr. Hawkins actually calls them bluebonnets," said Mr. Stewart smiling.

Now his expression was quite relaxed.

"Who is Mr. Hawkins?"

“He’s the chief gardener of the Ardlay family. He knows everything about flowers.”

“...The Ardlay family?”

“It is a very rich family, also very well known in Chicago. They have extensive lands in this area too. The clan of the Leagans is also a part of the Ardlay family.”

“The...*clan?*” asked Candy surprised.

That was a majestic word that she could read only in historical novels: really this must have been a prestigious family.

“Oh!”

“Now what happened?” asked Mr. Stewart laughing.

“But this is...wonderful!”

The car had left behind the road with the blue lupines and was crossing now a meadow full of flowers of all colors. It was as if the vehicle was passing through a flowered curtain that had opened on its way. Beyond the meadow, there was a lake of an even deeper blue than that of the lupines...or the bluebonnets, as the gardener of the Ardlays called them. Illuminated by the rays of the sun that was setting, that bright water mirror seemed to create a path that led directly to paradise.

Candy felt recovering from her sadness and sighed:

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

“You are right. The Ardlays take good care of their possessions,” said Mr. Stewart, almost proudly. “After we go around the lake and pass that hill, we can see the villa of the Leagans.”

Suddenly anxiety came over the girl: in fact there was something that worried her.

“Listen...that Miss Eliza...What kind of person is she?”

For an instant, the chauffeur seemed to jerk, but after a moment he replied:

“Well...how can I say it...Let’s say that she is...that she is a charming girl...”

“Just as I thought...”

Since she lived in a villa immersed in a splendid environment like that, she couldn’t be anything but pretty.

She must have a delicate health, otherwise why would she need a playing companion?

Candy promised herself to treat her with kindness.

I wonder if I will get along with her as well as with Annie...

When the light of the sunset highlighted the sky, like a lady’s unfolded shawl, Mr. Stewart announced:

“We have arrived. This is the villa of the Leagans.”

Startled by the man’s voice, suddenly devoid of any kind of enthusiasm, Candy began looking through the window. Beyond the

trees that were getting dark, she could see a brown building surrounded with flowers. Fascinated, the girl was observing it, as she was approaching.

“What a magnificent house! It looks like a castle from a fairy tale!”

Candy sighed. Surely Eliza must be as she had imagined her: a young girl similar to Snow White. Thinking that she was truly fortunate to be able to live in such a house and suppressing her emotion, she got out of the car. Following the chauffeur, she walked towards the large gate, when she heard a voice shouting:

“There she is!”

She was just wondering where that cry had come from, when from the balcony of the second floor fell a cascade of water. Completely drenched by the sudden violent rain that had fallen upon her, Candy looked up astonished, as if to understand what had caused this unexpected event.

A girl with splendid curls of light brown color was watching her maliciously from above. Close to her was a boy holding in his hand a large vase. He was also looking at her with a mocking smile on his face.

“Well...This is Miss Eliza...And beside her is her older brother, Master Neal...”

“Eliza? *That* is Eliza?” exclaimed Candy, turning to look at Mr. Stewart.

The man lowered his gaze. He was clearly ashamed and didn’t know what to do. Some water had also dropped on his jacket.

So this is Eliza...She doesn't seem sick at all to me...but maybe it's just my impression...

Candy thought that probably this was only an incident. She gathered up her courage and, looking up with a pretty smile, she waved her wet hand in greeting.

“Hello!”

“Goodbye! I don’t need any playing companion,” replied Eliza coldly. Then, with a mocking laugh, she turned and entered the house with her brother.

“Come on, hurry up, you have to change before meeting madam...”

But Stewart didn’t have time to finish his sentence. Followed by a maid, a woman with piercing eyes and angry aspect made her appearance. She was wearing a splendid indigo satin dress and a large pearl brooch on her chest. She was a very beautiful woman, but those cold eyes were the same as Eliza’s. Undoubtedly that was Mrs. Leagan.

“You are late, Stewart. Is that the girl? Why is she soaking wet? Certainly she hasn’t fallen in the lake, has she? Good heavens, she will

wet the carpet. Let her change quickly and join us to be presented properly!”

After hardly looking at her, the woman walked away with a quick step.

The room that had been reserved for her was in the north wing of the house. It was a small room with spider webs in the corners. It had all the appearance of having been an attic until the day before and it had only a wooden bed and an old closet, but, at any rate, Candy was enthusiastic.

This room is all mine!

She had always wanted to have a room all by herself. She changed her dress quickly, but the truth was that she only had one more dress.

Eliza Leagan...Is that the “charming” girl?

Remembering the rigid profile of the chauffeur while pronouncing those words, Candy couldn’t help finding that scene funny. Now she understood the real meaning of that sentence, but certainly she couldn’t deny that, at first sight, Eliza was beautiful.

From now on I’ll have to try to be her friend...I wonder if I will succeed.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Candy left the room and almost tripped over Neal’s foot, which he had purposely extended. But she was not one of those who fall to the ground with something like that.

The boy stared at her irritated and said:

“You come from the orphanage, don’t you? You’re nothing but a beggar abandoned by her parents!”

Realizing that the boy was accustomed to speaking in that harsh and hateful tone, Candy was so unprepared for this that she could not even get angry. Seeing that the girl did not respond to this attack and just stared at him with her eyes wide open, Neal was satisfied and walked down the hall whistling victoriously.

That’s incredible! If Miss Pony had known she would have given a memorable punishment to those two! But these things don’t affect me.

Candy remembered that, after all, in the village near Pony’s Home there were also many children who were mean and hateful to the orphans. But at that moment she didn’t have the slightest idea how far the two offsprings of the Leagan family would go.

Mary, the maid, led her to a luxurious living room completely decorated in dark green. Mr. and Mrs. Leagan were waiting for her there.

When she entered the living room, Candy observed Eliza and Neal in astonishment: they were both sitting beside their mother with a docile

expression, and even showing off an impeccably innocent smile. They seemed completely different from those she had met a little while ago.

“Your name?” asked Mrs. Leagan, pointing at her.

“My name is Candice White.”

“Good. We want you to help Eliza with her studies and be her playing companion. In fact, we would have preferred someone who would come from a good family, but apparently we will have to conform, since our teacher has suddenly left and we had little time to take care of this matter. Eliza, for some strange reason, has a difficulty in making friends, despite being a very good girl.”

Saying these words, the lady took the hand of her daughter who, at the same time, cuddled gently next to her.

“I will have to be leaving frequently for work. I recommend that you obey my wife’s instructions,” intervened Mr. Leagan, while puffing his pipe.

Without being discouraged by the man’s hard look, Candy made a little bow and replied merrily in a loud voice:

“Of course! I assure you that I’ll do my best!”

That night she had dinner in the enormous kitchen with the servants. They told her that it was just leftovers, but for her it was such a rich banquet, that she wanted to go and share it with everyone at Pony’s Home. On that occasion they told her so many stories about how spoiled and cheating Eliza and Neal were that later she couldn’t remember all of them. They told her that they had changed a private tutor at least thirty eight times. Mrs. Leagan had attributed the brief stay of the teachers to the fact that her daughter had no friends, so she had decided to find a playing companion for her.

“It doesn’t even occur to her that her children are hateful. Mr. and Mrs. Leagan are really too indulgent. Those two children have actually a double personality...”

Candy listened to Mary’s stories nodding her head.

Finally that agitating day was coming to an end, but Candy couldn’t sleep. Lying in her bed, she still couldn’t believe that she was in such a place. Since she was born, that was the first time she did not sleep at Pony’s Home.

How are Miss Pony and Sister Lane doing? Will Nancy be crying? Slim, please don’t wet your bed. I will no longer be able to help you put everything in order before the others realize it...

One after another, there appeared the smiling faces of the teachers and the children. Then she found herself thinking again about Pony’s Hill.

Prince on the Hill, I can’t go to Pony’s Hill anymore. But I’m sure that, wherever you are, some day we will meet again.

Candy said good night to the badge and the cross which she had placed together next to her pillow, and finally she closed her eyes.

Chapter 6

If all the worst children in the world had joined together, surely they could not surpass evil Eliza and Neal.

“Why don’t you decide to take off these disgusting pajamas?” Eliza reproached her sarcastically, twisting her mouth as soon as she saw her next morning.

“This is not a pajama. I have nothing else to wear, remember? You got my other dress wet yesterday,” answered Candy indifferently.

“How dare you speak to me in that way? You must call me *Miss!*” commanded Eliza immediately.

Then she added, holding her nose towards Candy:

“Oh, but it seems to me you are stinking! Neal, come here! Don’t you smell this strange odor in here?”

“That’s true! It must be the smell of the orphanage! What a stink!” agreed Neal, covering his nose in a theatrical gesture.

Candy faced them irritated:

“You are rude to say such things! At Pony’s Home hygiene comes first! In any case, you two are the ones who have a strange smell!”

“I can’t believe that! This is unpardonable! Neal, pull her hair!” said Eliza, ordering her older brother.

“Watch out, you orphan bastard!”

Candy held quickly the boy’s hand, that had stretched to her hair, and twisted it hard.

“Ow! Ow!”

“Oh, no! Mama! Mama!” called Eliza, suddenly using her voice as a good girl’s.

Mrs. Leagan came running out of one of the rooms.

“Mama, look what she has done to Neal’s hand...” falsely wailed Eliza, blinking her eyes with worry.

Her brother hurried to show his mother his hand, that had turned all red.

“Oh, my God, what a violent girl! She has just arrived and she’s already out of control!” exclaimed the woman, with an angry look at Candy.

“Mama, this girl is terrible! She also pulled my hair!”

“What are you saying? But this is completely false!” protested the accused, taken by surprise.

“She is horrible!” retorted Eliza, bursting into tears. “She says I’m a liar! Mama...”

Of course her crying was feigned and, through her fingers, she was watching Candy’s reactions.

“This girl of low social status is truly unbearable! Candy, go to your room and don’t come out until you are required to! I want you to think about what you have done!”

“All right...”

Not having another option, Candy went away, while Eliza secretly stuck out her tongue at her.

First round. I have to know how to give in if I want to win...

She remembered well the advice Mary had given her the night before.

“If you want to stay here, you must not make madam angry. Whatever the children tell you, ignore them. You must know how to give in if you want to win.”

However, Eliza’s words, said intentionally to hurt her, were piercing her heart:

“Mama, I don’t want to play with such a violent girl, who comes from an orphanage too!”

“And who also stinks!” echoed Neal.

“You are right. That’s exactly why I was not convinced by the idea of bringing up an orphan girl. It’s all the Reverend’s fault! Saying nice words is all he’s good at...See what kind of a poor child he has introduced to us! We have only to wait for some time and try to see how it will go.”

Candy hastened her steps in an attempt to escape those words. When she arrived to her room and closed the door, she bit her lip. Orphan bastard. Girl of low social status...She was hearing those two voices echoing in her head full of contempt.

You must not be angry, you must not be sad, Candy. After all, although not tactfully, they’re just telling the truth...

Caressing the cross she kept hidden on her chest, Candy tried to calm down.

Exactly. Look, Candy, unlike them, you certainly can’t say that you come from a good family. You are an orphan, you were abandoned and therefore you come from an orphanage...All that is true. But these superficial things are not important. Don’t you remember? Miss Pony always said that, although it is not seen, the heart is the one thing that matters.

“That’s exactly how it is!” she said joyfully.

All right, Candice White, don’t let yourself down for something so little!

And besides, she didn’t want for any reason to be sent back to Pony’s Home.

Let’s go forward!

Candy flexed her arms as if to show her muscles.

A week had passed since she had arrived at the house of the Leagans, but the taunts of the two siblings became more and more vicious. It seemed that treating her badly had become their daily duty.

They blamed her for the vases that had been shattered, so dear to Mrs. Leagan, for writing on the walls and for the disappearance of the textbooks. Every time the woman shouted at her hysterically and ordered her to repent. It also happened that she was sent to bed without dinner.

As for Candy, she bit her lip and tried to resist. She knew well that, although she could swear that she was innocent, they would never believe her.

In fact, the thing she was most afraid of was to be sent back to Pony's Home. The teachers would surely welcome her with open arms, but that cozy building had no longer room for her. Other younger orphans had certainly taken her place already. Not to mention the enthusiastic letters she had sent them until now.

“Mr. and Mrs. Leagan are great people and the days seem to fly. Eliza, my playing companion, is a cheerful and friendly girl. She has beautiful curls and teaches me so many things.”

The only real information is that concerning her curls...

Candy sighed.

But other things are also true: The villa, surrounded by flowers, looks actually like one of those realms that are seen in fairy tales, and also the lake and the forest are fascinating!

“I'm happy to be able to live in a wonderful place like this.”

Forcing herself to write this way, she felt real joy inside her. Besides, Mr. Stewart, Mary and all the servants were very attentive to her. Actually, the list of positive things she had found in that place was quite long.

Then one day, a letter arrived from Pony's Home. How long she had waited for it! Candy went to the lake shore, which was located beyond the back garden of the villa, and opened the envelope. Finally, there was the message from the teachers, full of kindness and attention. Both wrote to her how much they were relieved reading Candy's cheerful letters.

“Dear Candy,

You must always take care of your health. We are immensely happy that the Leagan family has welcomed you so well. Every day we wish

that you can learn many things and grow up healthy and happy. We and the children look forward to hearing from you.”

The girl touched gently the letter to her face. Maybe she could feel the smell of Pony’s Home, the aroma of the baked bread, of the milk and of the wood burning in the fireplace...

“What’s this?”

In an instant the paper was snatched from her hand. Neal had taken advantage of her momentary distraction, and followed by his sister, had run out to see what was happening.

“It’s a letter! It comes from the orphanage!”

The boy quickly tore up the letter, throwing its pieces into the air.

“Oh, no! What are you doing?”

Candy went immediately to pick them up. She had no time to argue with those two: if she didn’t hurry, the wind would sweep them away...But at that moment something fell tinkling from her pocket.

The Prince’s badge!

She didn’t have time to notice the sound of the little bell, because it was already in Eliza’s hands.

“Neal, look!”

“Hey, it’s real silver! But this...”

“Give it back to me!” cried Candy, throwing herself with all her might upon the boy.

“No, I won’t! Explain to me, you orphan bastard, where did you steal it from?”

“I didn’t steal it! It’s mine! I told you to give it back to me!”

“Neal, don’t give it back!” shouted Eliza with delight.

“We could throw it into the river...”

“Oh, yes, what a good idea!”

“No! I beg you! Stop! Give it back to me!” cried Candy, already on the verge of tears.

That was her precious amulet...the badge of Prince on the Hill.

The two siblings looked at each other with an evil and triumphal chuckle: despite all their efforts, Candy had never been miserable by their taunts, but now she seemed completely desperate to them. They couldn’t feel more satisfied.

Eliza arched her back and said:

“Of course, we can also return it to you. But, before that, sit down like a puppy and bark!”

“That’s right! And then confess where you have stolen this badge from! Get on your knees and beg us to forgive you!” added Neal, tinkling the little bell.

Candy's eyes blazed. Why should she humiliate herself in that way and ask for forgiveness from those two? She hadn't stolen anything at all!

She took a deep breath and waited for the right moment to come.

"Well? Will you hurry up? We don't have much time to..."

Neal fell to the ground, taken by surprise as Candy suddenly pushed him. Instantaneously, the girl regained possession of the badge and went away running.

"Damned savage!"

"We'll throw you out of here, did you get that?"

Candy was running at full speed, away from those voices. She was struggling not to cry, but the tears were flowing from her eyes.

This is horrible...horrible...I want to leave...I want to return to Pony's Home...

Crying, she entered the forest. She didn't know where she was going. The only thing she wanted was to get away from the Leagan house even for a little while. The tears were blurring her vision, while the leaves and the branches were lashing her cheeks. Suddenly she stumbled and fell. The wet grass hit her face, but she didn't get up and went on crying, with her voice broken and her face hidden among the flowers. The tears she had contained until that moment burst all at once. How much she wished to go back immediately to Pony's Home...

At that moment, a voice said:

"Don't cry, little girl."

Those gentle words echoed from somewhere above her head. Surprised, Candy looked up, with her eyes still flooded with tears, and for a moment she remained breathless.

"...Prince?"

Sitting on top of an iron arc-shaped gate, and surrounded by a lot of red roses, was her Prince on the Hill, smiling at her.

Chapter 7

Am I...am I dreaming?

Holding her breath, Candy looked confused at the Prince on the Hill and her tear-wet eyes were filled with the boy's smile, surrounded by the red color of the roses. She was afraid that a single flicker of her eyes might make that image disappear. She couldn't even breathe.

At last...I was able to find my Prince again...

That moment, together with the red petals of the flowers, from above came his voice again:

"Do you mean me when you're talking about a prince? You're certainly a funny little girl."

Hearing those words, Candy felt her heart almost exploding.

"You are really a funny little girl."

Hadn't the Prince on the Hill told her the same thing? The boy didn't disappear when she closed her eyes; she wasn't dreaming. But the lad with the roses couldn't really be her Prince: seven years had passed since then. At first sight they looked alike, but looking at him carefully, both the smile and the golden hair of the boy between the roses seemed to have a darker color.

Recovering, Candy got up rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, no! Mud..."

Her hands were all dirty and in her attempt to wipe her face, she had only ended up making it even dirtier. The boy kept looking steadily at her, while she was hurriedly tightening her apron. Candy started feeling a little embarrassed and couldn't contain a giggle. At that moment, the boy smiled too.

"You know, you are much prettier when you laugh than when you cry."

That gave Candy another heartbeat and she turned to stare at him. For the second time in a few moments, he had spoken like the Prince.

"That's exactly what I thought. You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry."

How can that be? How did he know...?

More and more surprised and shocked by a thousand of emotions, Candy took a breath. That moment she heard a whistle coming from a distance, beyond the gate with the roses.

The lad instantaneously gave her a smile and jumped lightly down. With his golden hair flurried by the wind, he went almost flying to the direction from which the sound had come, disappearing from her sight.

Candy hadn't even been able to speak to him. She was stunned for a moment, then she approached the iron gate and looked towards the direction in which the boy had disappeared. Remembering that last smile, she saw a small path that was extending without end, filled with all kinds and colors of roses. The air was impregnated with the sweet fragrance of flowers and it even seemed to her that this smell was a gift the boy had left for her.

"You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry."

The voices of the Prince on the Hill and the Boy of the Roses were superimposing one another and Candy felt a sweet sensation flooding her heart.

That's not right, Candy...don't start crying. If he told you that you are prettier when you laugh, that means it's not good to cry. From now on you should not behave in this disgraceful way anymore. Do you understand, Candy?

While talking to herself, she couldn't help wondering where that boy had gone. He had appeared suddenly and had disappeared in the same way. Yes...just as the Prince on the Hill had done that day, leaving a gentle breeze in her heart. The encounter with that young boy, who was very much like the Prince, had given her great consolation in a moment of weakness. Candy looked up at the gate with her eyes full of gratitude, as if there were still someone there.

"Thank you. I promise that you'll never see me miserable again, so...so...tell me that we will meet again..."

Pronouncing the last words, she felt ashamed and lowered her voice. She turned back several times as she went again into the forest; she wanted to be sure that the iron gate had not disappeared.

I would never have imagined that right at the house of the Leagans something so wonderful could happen to me! I have discovered that there is a great person near me, just like the Prince...

After she returned, going around the lake, she started picking up the pieces of the letter she had received from the teachers, and her expression had become more serene.

Approaching the villa of the Leagans, Candy spotted Eliza and Neal in front of the fountain, at the back of the garden, murmuring between them. They were probably plotting to do something evil again, but she would definitely not give up. She took a deep breath and came near them from behind with a quick step.

"I wanted to tell you two that from now on you can treat me as badly as you like. Whatever evil you have in mind to do to me, I simply don't care at all. I have a heart made of iron! Well, then, goodbye!"

Having been taken unawares by that unexpected declaration, the two siblings could not do anything else but watch her annoyed.

Now that I have said something like that, I'm sure they will treat me even worse...It means that I'll stay alert to see what they will think up. Candy headed to the inner courtyard and, after having verified that nobody was around, she climbed nimbly to the top of a tree. The structure of the branches was very much like those of the oak tree at Pony's Home, that she knew well enough. Supporting her back against the trunk, she watched the sunset sky taking on a violet color. That was the same sky that rose above the beloved place she had come from. The letter Neal had torn to pieces had been carried almost entirely away by the wind and she hadn't been able to recover more than some of its fragments. She felt frustrated, but at the same time there was also another feeling inside her.

If Neal hadn't torn up the letter, I would never have met that boy...

Miss Pony had once told her:

"This world is lined with innumerable threads, and as long as they don't break, you can't know where exactly joy or pain awaits you. Therefore, Candy, you must never lose hope."

Just coming across the smile of that boy, who reminded her so much of Prince on the Hill, was enough to make the taunts of the two siblings seem insignificant.

I would like to see him at least once more. If I go to the gate with the roses, I may be able to find him again...

Daydreaming, Candy returned mentally to the iron gate surrounded by red roses and their sweet fragrance.

The next day she finished cleaning Eliza's and Neal's rooms and, while those two were absorbed in continuing their French lesson, she hurried to the forest to make sure that the Gate of the Roses was still there. Actually it seemed that the siblings had decided not to treat her as a playing companion, but as their personal maid. After she finished cleaning, Eliza had ordered her to iron her ribbons, but that was too easy and it took her a minute to carry it out. Above all, Candy wanted to be sure that the Gate of the Roses wasn't something she had imagined. Moving through the shady forest, she realized something that the previous day, overpowered by crying, she hadn't noticed: the more she entered the vegetation, the more the air was filled with the perfume of the flowers. It almost seemed like that sweet scent was pointing the way, while the sun was filtered through the cropped branches of the trees. Suddenly she saw a reddish reflection before her, and it became more and more intense.

The Gate of the Roses! Then it really exists!

It was as if there were a unique flaming red area in the forest. From above the wonderful iron gate, the scarlet petals were descending, light as smiles of angels. But the boy was not there. Candy tried to

look inside, glancing between the bright leaves and the red flowers. She wondered what kind of building could be established at the end of that path flanked with roses of all colors, along which the boy had gone. Maybe that was where he lived. In an attempt to see further ahead, Candy pushed the doors of the rose-covered gate. She had touched it gently, but the large corolla of one of the flowers dissolved in an instant, accompanied by a sweet sound.

“But this is...” she exclaimed in surprise.

Located at the point where the gate closed, the flower had uncovered an engraving. It was the image of an eagle, identical to that one which Candy was looking at almost every day. Excited, she took the silver badge out of her pocket.

“They are the same...”

She felt her head spinning. With trembling fingers, she caressed the engraving. Except for the dimensions, the bird with the outstretched wings was exactly the same as that represented on her badge. That meant that this place really had to do with Prince on the Hill.

How will I get in there?

Candy walked along that flower-covered entrance and discovered that it was changing into a very long iron gate, also surrounded with roses. On the side of the forest, the road presented well-shaped trees with straight trunks, similar to soldiers placed there to protect the entrance. Even the light and shadow they projected looked like works of art, creating a wonderful path. As she was going forward, the color of the flowers gradually was getting lighter, until it became pink. Captivated by so much beauty, Candy continued walking, until she found herself between wild roses of white color. Accompanied by a breeze in which the fragrance of the flowers was mixed with that of the vegetation, Candy felt like she was in a dream.

Suddenly the succession of wild roses was interrupted, leaving space for something brighter. Candy closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again she exclaimed:

“What? A gate of stone?”

The rays of the sun were actually reflected against a majestic gate of white stone, which rose like a fortress. It was at least three times higher than Candy herself and contained several engravings. Breathing shortly, the girl ran to see what they illustrated. There were representations of female deities, of angels and of a knight riding his horse and facing a dragon.

“What magnificent images...I wonder if they represent a story...”

She started examining them carefully one by one, and then suddenly she screamed: The spear wielded by the brave hero had the emblem of an eagle. The same thing happened with the flags waved by the many men who escorted him. Candy suddenly remembered the noble

Ardlay family of which Mr. Stewart had spoken to her. On that occasion he had also confided to her that they possessed enormous lands in the surrounding area. Maybe the eagle was their emblem.

In that case...the Prince...

Her heart was beating so hard that it took her breath away. Who was really the Boy of the Roses, so similar to the Prince?

With a dreamy expression, she walked around the white gate which contained the engravings. In fact, it was a story that continued along the high stone wall. At the point where the exploits of the hero culminated in the death of the dragon, a new change took place and the wall was transformed, taking many different shapes, with new cocoons thrusting out among the rough rocks. Later, the trees by the side of the road that was going towards the forest began to disperse, leading suddenly to a vast meadow that contained aquatic plants. Candy stopped and took a deep breath: the wind brought the smell of water and the earth was getting more wet.

Maybe I'm close to the lake...

Moving along the wall, she heard the rumble of the water and hurried on.

“A waterfall! Isn't this some kind of a gate too?” she cried joyfully, looking up.

Between the rocks, a waterfall was sprouting and, looking closer, she could see a sturdy wooden gate hidden among the shining jets of water.

“Amazing...This time it's a gate made of water!”

The powerful jet of the waterfall ended in an artificial river that later flowed into the lake.

“Three gates? I have never seen anything like this...”

A gate with roses, a gate of stone and now another one made of water...What could possibly be the aspect of the building to which they led?

I can't even imagine it! The Ardlays must be really a prestigious family...And to think that I was so astonished by the clan of the Leagans...

If this was another gate of the Ardlays, it should have the emblem of the eagle somewhere, and she absolutely had to make sure of that. While the jets were splashing on her face, she began climbing cautiously the wet and slippery rocks, trying to get closer to that last gate. Reaching the top of the waterfall, she realized that, unlike what it had seemed from a distance, the wooden access was well protected from the water which, while falling, created an arch.

But how can I open it?

A gate hidden in a waterfall...Suddenly the girl noticed a thick chain hanging between the rocks. Looking up, she was out of breath:

“The eagle!”

In fact, the chain falling from the bird with the extended wings was exactly like the little bell that was hanging from her badge. Candy swallowed and, without thinking twice, she pulled it. She suddenly heard a noise similar to that of rocks rolling down the road and the gate fell hard, turning into a suspended bridge over the lake and blocking the waterfall’s current. The sound it had produced had been so loud that it even covered her cry of surprise.

“I was so scared!” she said with a deep sigh, still clinging to the rocks.

Almost at the same time another voice cried:

“The boat! The boat!”

Those startling cries were coming from the lake, and Candy noticed the presence of a small boat at the mercy of the waves, in which a boy was waving his arms in order to attract her attention. The boy’s long hair had the color of the sunlit wheat fields. Probably the boat had been driven away by the movement caused by the fall of the water portal.

“Hey, little lady! Don’t stand there and help me! The current is taking me away!”

Apparently he didn’t even have oars.

“Yes, but what can I do?” asked Candy, raising her voice.

“There is a rope tied to the rocks somewhere! Hurry up!”

“All right! Leave it to me!” she answered excitedly.

She untied the strong rope and spun it in the air above her head, then threw it with force to the boy’s direction. She reached him on the first try. Candy smiled satisfied with herself: she had not lost her touch.

“Fantastic! You are good at throwing the lasso!”

The lad grabbed skillfully the end of the rope and pulled it, returning easily to the shore.

“What a fright! And to think that I was just taking a nice nap between the aquatic plants, in that small boat,” he said in an affected manner, while fixing his shining hair.

Now he no longer seemed to be the same breathless boy he was a moment ago, and that made Candy laugh loudly.

“How dare you laugh? Because of you a disaster was about to happen!”

“Oh, forgive me. It is that I saw you so agitated before, and now, instead...Perhaps...you can’t swim?”

“How rude! I’m an excellent swimmer!”

“But then...”

“The fact is that if I had got wet I would have spoiled my hair and besides, I certainly didn’t want to ruin this new silk shirt brought from France,” he explained, winking at her with a cunning air.

He was very elegant. Amazed, Candy looked at his handsome face and also noticed the slight aroma of cologne. With his slender fingers he easily fixed his hair, which had been disheveled by the wind. His behavior was refined, but in his eyes there was something cynical and provocative.

“I didn’t expect that you would do it on the first try, you know. It is the first time that I meet a girl so skilled with the rope. Tell me a little about yourself, little tomboy. Where are you from?”

“I...my name is Candy...I work at the Leagans.”

“You don’t say...” remarked the boy frowning and raising his eyes to the sky.

At that moment, from the road connected with the bridge, he heard the sound of a horn.

“They have come to pick me up. See you, little tomboy! My name is Archibald. We’ll meet again!”

The boy, who had a name now, ran to the car that was some distance away.

What an amusing boy this Archibald is...He has blond hair just like the Boy of the Roses.

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

Chapter 8

“In the afternoon I’ll have to go to town to pick up the dress I have ordered and you will accompany me!”

That day, after having given the order, Eliza ran through the corridor with a light step, full of excitement. For two or three days, the girl had been in a strangely good mood, but that didn’t mean that she had put aside her inclination to plan jokes. However, if she had really been forced to choose, Candy would rather endure whatever came to her from a smiling person. Nevertheless, the only one who seemed happy was Eliza; the rest of the family seemed dominated by an unusual tension.

Between general cleaning, which was usually done at the end of the month, and polishing the silver cutlery, Candy was working all day long, without a moment of rest. As Mary had said, it seemed that the greatest representative of the Ardlay family was going to move to those parts. When she heard that surname, Candy remembered the picture of the eagle and felt her heart beating hard.

Mrs. Leagan did nothing else but give severe instructions to the servants and repeat constantly that the house should be “in a decent condition to receive Great Aunt Elroy”. With all probability, it was exactly that Great Aunt who was indeed the great representative about whom she had heard so much. It was a wonder what kind of person she was, that even Mrs. Leagan was so afraid of her.

That afternoon, inside the car, Eliza was also particularly cheerful, and even her voice sounded different than usual.

“Neal, a grand party is waiting for us tomorrow at the house of the Ardlays! And finally I’ll be able to see Anthony again!”

“I wonder if Great Uncle William will be there too,” retorted her brother, who was not at all enthusiastic.

“Mama said that he will probably not come.”

“Thank God! That grumpy old Aunt Elroy is more than enough!”

“You are absolutely right!”

Infected by the laughter of the two children, Candy joined them, but Eliza gave her a sharp look and said:

“Stewart! Don’t go too fast and don’t get distracted, do you understand?”

The chauffeur nodded and corrected his posture. The young lady didn’t seem to like the fact that Candy and the man were talking with a certain confidence, despite having seen each other again after a long time.

Along the town's main street, the beautiful shop windows of the elegant shops were in a row. There were all kinds of them: those specializing in expensive evening dresses, those selling hats, purses or shoes. Every time she collected the dresses or slippers she had previously charged for, Eliza unloaded the large packages in which they were stored on Candy to carry them. They were so many that she couldn't even see where to put her feet.

"Look, Neal, do you think Anthony will like this dress with the pink feathers?"

"Anthony, Anthony...Enough with this Anthony," exploded impatiently her brother, frowning.

Indeed, Eliza's mind seemed to be completely occupied by that Anthony, and only in those moments her expression softened a little. Candy couldn't help finding that amusing.

Eliza must really like that Anthony very much. I didn't believe that such a wicked person could fall in love with someone...

The moment she smiled, the stack of boxes in her arms fell down with a crash.

"But what the hell are you doing? You're good for nothing!" screamed Eliza, returning suddenly to her usual squeaky voice.

"I'm sorry, but I can't carry all these things by myself."

"Well, make the best of it, because this is your duty, you orphan bastard! You are our servant, and mama also said that we can do whatever we want with you," refuted Neal, twisting his mouth and putting his hands in his pockets.

"I understand...but I really wish you would stop calling me 'orphan bastard'. I've got a name, you know. My name is Candice White!"

"What? Such a candid name for someone like you? Really, it doesn't make any sense!"

"When they picked me up they decided to give me that last name, because back then my skin was very white," responded Candy proudly, trying to collect all the things that she had dropped.

"When they...*picked you up?* My God, how awful..." remarked Eliza, twisting ostentatiously.

"I don't see anything to boast so much about, you know. Moreover, look how ugly you are with...with that face full of moles!"

"Oh, Neal, what pretty things you say sometimes! You mean my freckles, don't you? It's funny that you call them *moles!* At Pony's Home they were always teasing me, saying that they were leftovers from lunch!"

It was certainly more pleasant to think that she had a face full of moles instead of one stained with food. Annoyed, the two siblings observed a very satisfied Candy. But suddenly they winked at each other.

“Oh, I forgot...We have also ordered some books. Go and pick them up. You can even leave the purchases here as Stewart will soon finish the errands for mama and will come to take us. Hurry to the bookstore and get *Elegance* and *The dream of the French doll*. Just say that you are at the service of the Leagan family.”

“I’m going!”

Candy put everything down and headed to the store they had indicated to her. However, once she got there, they told her ashamed that they had never received such charges. The bad feeling that had warned her suddenly became a reality. She hurried back and, when she arrived in the vicinity of the street, she sighed:

“Just as I thought!”

Eliza was gone and what was worse, the Leagan car was not there either.

I should have known it! From the beginning they had planned to leave me here! That’s why they wanted me to accompany them to town!

Surely Mr. Stewart, involved against his will, must have really felt in trouble.

“Today is really a day for a little black star,” she murmured disappointed.

“What is a little black star?” asked a cheerful voice.

Just at that moment a car stopped beside her. A smiling and lively boy with a cap on his head was looking at her through the window. The glasses he was wearing intensified even more the amiable expression of his face. Surprised by that friendly behavior, Candy asked him if they had already met somewhere.

“That time you were so helpful to Archie,” continued the boy, smiling even more.

“What? Then it was you that day in the car?”

“That’s right! What are you doing in town today?”

“Well, you see...I went to the bookstore to take care of some errands for the Leagan family, but while I was there the car was gone.”

“They left you here, eh? It’s terrible, it will take you more than two hours to walk home. Come on, get in, I’ll give you a ride!”

“Really? Thank you!”

Relieved, Candy smiled and sat nimbly in the seat next to the driver. With a noise similar to the breaking of a thousand balloons, the vehicle got finally into motion.

“It takes a little time before it starts moving. I constructed it myself, you know.”

“Did you make it yourself? The car? This is great!”

“Yes, that’s true.”

The lad looked proud. Probably Candy's surprised expression had made him very happy. She, feeling now more at ease, started laughing. That boy had made an excellent impression on her and she couldn't believe that she had just met him. He seemed to her more like an old friend.

"Well...What was that little black star you were talking about a little while ago?" asked the lad, once the car had gained speed and he was more relaxed.

"It's really a symbol..."

"For what?"

Animated by the boy with the glasses, Candy felt that she could speak freely.

"For the bad jokes certain people play on me. Every day I put a mark on the calendar. When they don't do anything to me, I don't put anything...Although this almost never happens! When things aren't so bad, I put a little white star, while on the days that are a little more difficult, I draw a star half-white and half-black. But when they do something really serious to me..."

"...it's the turn of the little black star," concluded the boy merrily, and then added:

"Indeed, few girls are as terrifying as Eliza."

"What? Do you know her too?"

"Do I know her? Unfortunately, we are relatives."

"So you too are part of the Ardlay family..."

"That's right. Although in fact my last name is Cornwell. I'm Alistair Cornwell, but everybody calls me Stear."

"I'm Candy. Candice White."

"What a sweet name!" remarked the boy whistling.

"Well, yours instead sounds like a philosopher's name."

"Really? How sad! Well, hold on tight now, because the road is very bumpy and we'll move a lot. It goes around the lake, but it's a short cut and, if everything goes well, we'll arrive before Eliza!"

"Are you serious? That would be wonderful!" said Candy clapping her hands, excited with the idea of seeing the astonished faces of Eliza and Neal, surprised to see her already at home before them.

The car was moving like a drunkard, swinging in all directions, so it was impossible to admire the landscape. Little by little it began to lose speed, and later an alarming explosion initiated a strong shaking.

"Here we go again! The wheel has gone!"

"What?"

"Once again, straight into the lake..."

Alistair didn't have time to finish his quiet premonition, as the car really went into the water, splashing everywhere and taking its passengers along with it. However, Candy was also a very good

swimmer and, moving forward like a puppy, she reached the shore before her new friend. They went out, soaking wet.

“A failure again. Poor me.”

Infected by the smile of Alistair, who was almost amused by his own disaster, Candy also started laughing.

“Come on, don’t laugh! Look, although I don’t look like it, I’m *very* sorry,” said the boy, wringing his cap cheerfully and wiping his glasses. “I’ll take the car later. But what about you, Candy? How do you think you can return home?”

“With these two powerful wheels, of course,” said Candy, wringing her skirt and giving a slight tap on her wet legs. “After all, that was the initial plan, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Yes, but you’re soaking wet...” objected Alistair with a serious face, feeling responsible.

“Don’t worry, Alistair,” Candy assured him cheerfully.

“Call me Stear...It will be a long walk. As a matter of fact, there is a good way to get home, but I don’t think that a girl like you could do that,” he said, looking at the forest.

“What do you mean?”

“When you pass the forest, there is the villa of the Leagans. The easiest way is crossing it from one tree to another.”

“Oh, I was wondering if it was something more difficult than that!”

“But look how...”

“I assure you that I’m very good at climbing trees!”

“You don’t have just to climb, you have to jump from one branch to another like Tarzan, and...”

“Exactly. It’s very easy. Let’s go!”

Candy was feeling full of life. After having examined the trees, she climbed one of them.

“Not bad at all!” murmured Alistair with admiration, emitting a cheerful whistle.

“You see? Come on, Alistair, hurry up!”

“Yes, but call me Stear.”

Having located the right tree, the lad also climbed nimbly, moving from one branch to another. Candy followed him, choosing from time to time her object and jumping from tree to tree.

It seemed to her that she had gone back to the days of her childhood at Pony’s Home. Only Annie and the other children knew that she practised that dangerous game. Her friend was always watching her from below with concern and on the verge of tears.

A little later, the house of the Leagans stood out over the vegetation. Actually the forest overlooked the back garden.

Candy quickly descended from the tree and said, turning upwards:

“Thank you, Stear!”

“Goodbye, Candy! Now I understand why Archie calls you *little tomboy!*”

Stear gave her a sweet look, smiled and took off his cap. For her part, Candy laughed and shrugged her shoulders. From above she had seen Eliza’s car arriving from a distance. She wondered if they would be surprised or disappointed to see that she was already there.

Next morning Eliza was busy admiring herself in front of a large mirror. The room was full of clothes and hats.

“This one or that one? Which will be better for the occasion?”

“I think you look better in that yellow one.”

“Did I ask you?” said Eliza, after casting a fulminant glance at Candy.

Later she pointed to the dozens of shoes arranged on the carpet.

“I intend to put them on for the party tonight, so hurry up to polish them!”

“You will put *ten pairs of shoes* at the same time?”

“That’s why I hate girls with low social status...I haven’t decided yet, so that’s the reason you have to polish *all of them!*” she exclaimed sharply, and then turned to the mirror. “I’m so undecided, I’ll ask mama for advice.”

Picking up some dresses, Eliza left the room.

When she was alone, Candy looked at the numerous dresses that were on the couch. They were all splendid, like those used by fairy tale princesses, decorated with lace, ribbons and feathers, so beautiful that they took her breath away. Candy couldn’t contain herself and extended her hand towards a light green dress. It was the softest garment she had ever touched. She brought it to her chest and, turning to the mirror, she looked at her own image reflected.

I look like a queen...

The “queen” in the mirror smiled back at her.

“What are you doing?”

Surprised by Eliza’s stern voice, Candy put hurriedly the dress on the couch.

“Do you think you can touch it without permission? You’ll be sorry if you have made it dirty!”

“Forgive me...Anyway, my hands are clean.”

Eliza didn’t even deign to look at the hands Candy showed her and simply examined the dress.

“You’ll never use anything like that in your whole life! It wouldn’t even suit you!”

On the contrary, it seems to me that it would...

Candy remembered her image in the mirror. She was pretty sure that the green dress would suit her very well.

“Well, I’m going to polish the shoes,” she said cheerfully, picking them up.

Annoyed, Eliza watched her as she was going out of the room, but suddenly her eyes blazed with a cruel light.

“That’s a good idea...This time she will certainly start crying,” she said to herself. “Neal!”

And she hurried to her brother’s room.

In the evening it was time for the Leagans to go to the reception. Candy was in Eliza’s room to put the dresses that were scattered all around back in their place, when suddenly the door opened wide. The two siblings, dressed in elegant clothes, entered the bedroom and, lifting her head haughtily, Eliza said:

“Hurry up, you must come too!”

“What? Me? Dressed like that?”

“Yes, you’re fine, even in those pajamas! Come on, we’ll take you along with us.”

Now Neal’s eyes too were shining with cruelty. Candy understood immediately what was happening. They wanted to embarrass her. Her faded dress might not be appropriate for a party, but it had been sewn with great skill and love by Sister Lane, using pieces of other dresses. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

“Thank you! If I can go in my *pajamas*, I’ll be very happy to accompany you!” smiled Candy cheerfully.

It seemed to her like a dream to be able to attend the party of the Ardleys.

“That’s unbelievable...She’s so impertinent!”

“You’ll see that when she gets there she will be ashamed to be dressed like a pauper.”

Candy decided to ignore the conversation of the two siblings inside the car. What they defined with contempt “pajamas” was a simple dress, but also decent and clean. It was only that it lacked ornaments because of prolonged use. What mattered was that she could go to the Ardley house, and her heart was rumbling at the thought of how lucky she was.

The shield with the eagle might be connected with her Prince...And besides, it was the first time she would attend a similar event. If the Ardley family could cause fear even to the Leagans, in what amazing villa could they possibly be living?

Surely it will be a grand reception, and I wonder what banquet they will serve us...

The car went around the lake, following a narrow road that was passing through the forest. The rays of light were sparkling as they

were filtered through the branches, the wind carried the fragrance of roses, and Candy barely noticed that her heart began beating so hard that it almost hurt her. The perfume was becoming more and more intense, and beyond the green forest appeared a small incandescent red area.

The Gate of Roses...It's open!

She held her breath, with joy illuminating her face.

The car crossed the entrance. After passing the road that was surrounded with flowers, they were found in a large garden at the centre of which was exhibited a beautiful fountain depicting a goddess holding a turtle in her hand. On both sides, placed symmetrically, there were many other sculptures. Beyond the garden stood a stone building that looked like a palace. That building, with its numerous pinnacles, had a certain grandeur.

Stunned, Candy was looking at that authentic and peculiar mansion, as she was getting closer and closer to it. She had never seen anything like that, but the surprises were not over. At the entrance, along with some musicians, there were three boys dressed in the traditional Scottish costume.

When they saw her getting out of the car, the boys looked surprised, but instantly a great smile appeared on their faces.

“Hi, Candy!” said Alistair, or, as he preferred to be called, Stear.

“Look who’s here again, the little tomboy!” greeted her the elegant Archibald.

And then it was *him*.

“At last I see you smiling!”

That boy who was smiling at her was the same she had met at the Gate of the Roses.

“Oh, Anthony, it has been such a long time!” interposed Eliza with a dreamy expression, revealing the name of the mysterious boy.

Chapter 9

Was it a dream maybe? Surrounded by three boys, Candy was stunned for a moment. They were wearing a kilt, the traditional costume of Scotland, that Prince on the Hill was also wearing that day, so many years ago.

“But, Candy, have you already met Anthony too?” the other two boys asked her in a low voice.

The girl simply nodded and blushed when she met the smiling look of that boy.

So this is Anthony...

Eliza had done nothing but repeat that name, and Candy had wondered many times to whom it belonged, but she had never imagined the truth.

“Please, follow me to the salon. Madam Elroy is waiting for you,” announced an elegant butler, worthy of a palace, who had appeared to guide the guests.

“Anthony, you don’t know how happy I am to see you again...”

With a sweet voice, Eliza stopped in front of the boy, who was ready to speak to Candy instead. She quickly walked along with him, but she didn’t miss the opportunity to step on her rival’s foot.

The marble-decorated salon really seemed to be part of a royal palace. In several places there had been placed vases overflowing with flowers, and in front of the large terrace they had placed, in an artistic way, all kinds of cakes and desserts. The air was almost suffocating because of the perfumes of the guests who had dressed elegantly for the party. If Stear hadn’t pushed her gently, surely Candy couldn’t have crossed the threshold.

In the middle of the salon, on a velvet chair set high, she saw a robust elderly lady, sitting solemnly. That woman, who looked like an empress, was the famous Great Aunt Elroy and, one after another, the guests presented themselves before her, bowing their heads in greeting.

“Anthony, where did you meet this girl?” asked Stear, giving him a slight push, unable to resist his curiosity.

“It happened in the forest...”

“You know, she’s very good at climbing trees.”

“However, she’s also perfect at throwing the lasso,” added Archie.

Anthony just laughed.

Climbing trees, throwing the lasso... When I met her, on the contrary, she was crying...

The boy was watching Candy furtively, while she was admiring with bright eyes the sumptuous lamp hanging from the ceiling.

The day they had met, Anthony was jumping the gate to go back to the villa. His professor of Latin would soon arrive, but he was too much worried about a robin's nest he had discovered in the forest and he had sneaked out. The three blue eggs of the little birds were safe and sound. However, just at the moment he was obeying the impulse to cross the entrance, he heard the sound of footsteps similar to the fluttering of a large bird, and among the trees a girl had appeared running, with her face bathed in tears.

She fell in front of the gate...and she was crying like there was no tomorrow.

How could he not speak to her? When he did, the girl lifted her head from the mud in which she had fallen.

She looked at me surprised, and then she called me "prince"...To me she seemed like a little nymph who had appeared in the middle of the forest...

He didn't know how long they had remained there staring at each other, but suddenly the girl had stopped crying and had smiled at him. At that moment, it was as if a ray of light had illuminated everything. He had narrowed his eyes, as if he had been blinded by the light she seemed to radiate. That smile seemed to have the power to melt even the hardest of hearts. It was the first time he saw a smile like that.

Who is that girl who can smile in such a way?

Anthony had also wanted to see her again, even if it was just one more time, but he hadn't told anyone what had happened, not even Stear. He was afraid that if he had, that meeting, adorned with roses, would have disappeared like a dream. Conversely, that girl was now before him.

Her name is Candy...

He couldn't take his eyes off her.

Great Aunt Elroy's clearing of the throat was enough to silence everybody in the salon. The atmosphere became tense, and all the guests gathered around that woman who, after another clearing of her throat, began to speak solemnly.

"I welcome all the dear members of the Ardlay family. I announce that Anthony, Alistair, Archibald and I will come to live here. As everyone knows, Anthony's father has embarked on a long sea voyage, and Alistair and Archibald's parents are in Arabia on business. For that reason, Great Uncle William has decided for all of us to live together. He strongly believes that it is preferable for the boys to live surrounded by nature and not in the city, therefore we'll settle in this residence, now used only during the summer. On the other hand..."

Maintaining her regal posture, the woman continued her speech, talking about how Great Uncle William was contributing to the Ardlay family's prestige. He was certainly a man of great power.

Candy couldn't believe that this building was a summer residence. How splendid could the main residence be? It must be something beyond imagination.

The girl was lost in her thoughts, when suddenly she had to hold back her laughter. Behind the guests who were near the terrace, she saw Stear who, using a kind of small fishing rod, without being seen, was taking advantage of the empty space between the ladies and the gentlemen, in order to take desserts and eat them in a hurry. His mouth was completely white and stained with cream, and his crammed cheeks reminded her those of a squirrel's.

Candy started laughing.

At that moment, everybody turned towards her.

"Who is that?" shouted Great Aunt Elroy angrily.

Candy went pale but, when the fear passed, she stepped forward and said:

"It was me...Forgive me!"

"How ill-mannered! Who are you? Where did you come from? How did you get in here dressed like that?"

"Well...I work for the Leagan family, and my name is Candice White. I beg your pardon for interrupting your speech...Excuse me," said Candy on the verge of tears, bowing her head.

"Did you say Leagan?"

The woman opened her mouth to continue speaking, but she was interrupted immediately.

"Aunt, forgive me! It was me who made Candy laugh."

It was Stear's voice, full of tension.

"Alistair, is that you again? You always exaggerate with your jokes. What are you up to this time?"

When she saw her nephew's face stained with cream, with two white moustaches around his mouth, her expression softened more.

"I was fishing for desserts with this," said the boy, showing a kind of small fishing rod with an adjustable length.

"And what is that, Alistair?"

"Thank you for asking me, Aunt! This is the century's greatest discovery! I have called it Dessert Fishing Rod! Do you want me to do a demonstration?"

"Certainly not! Your inventions always leave me speechless. Come on, hurry up to clean your face, you're not at all presentable in such a shameful state."

Even a woman as strict as herself seemed to soften in front of the boys.

The incident put an end to the speech, and the guests finally assumed a relaxed expression. The butler invited everyone to be served with desserts and tea while waiting for dinner, and the waiters brought the appetizers.

“Aunt, I ask your pardon if one of our servants has troubled you,” said Mrs. Leagan tensely, offering fearfully her apologies. “At the last minute, Eliza felt compassion for this girl who has never been able to attend a party, and so she insisted that we bring her with us...”

“I see, Sara. Eliza is really a kind-hearted girl and must have been moved by this helpless child. However, dressed like that and with such behavior, she will cause problems to the other guests. It is always necessary to understand what is the right time and place for certain things.”

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

“Thank you for your generosity to that girl, Aunt! And thank you too, Eliza,” interrupted Anthony cheerfully, silencing Mrs. Leagan’s words.

Seeing the boy’s smile, even Eliza’s lips, which, until that moment, had curved into a sly smile, softened.

“Come, let’s enjoy the party!”

Winking at her, Archibald pulled Candy to the terrace.

Although she was worried about Mrs. Leagan’s reaction, the girl was happy mostly because Anthony and the other boys had helped her get out of trouble. And naturally, she was also attracted by the large table which seemed to have all the desserts in the world.

The musicians began to play a bagpipe concert.

“You have been brave, Candy. Nobody can stand Great Aunt’s threatening gaze.”

Seeing Anthony just behind her and smiling at her, Candy was almost startled. She was short of breath.

“You have helped me...I...”

While she was hesitantly uttering these words, the music transformed into a romantic waltz, and the guests began to dance.

“Anthony, let’s dance,” said Eliza.

She seemed to be expecting nothing else.

“Oh...All right...”

The lad looked at Candy somewhat distressed, but he took politely Eliza’s hand.

Anthony is really a gentle boy.

Candy was watching him dance with a dreamy expression, while smiling at his dancing partner.

“Come on, Candy, dance with me,” Archie asked her with a refined gesture.

“Ah, no! Candy has to dance with me!”

With his face finally clean, Stear interposed between them and took skillfully Candy's hand.

"Hey, that's not fair!"

"I'm sorry for you, but the older one goes first."

"But I have never danced in my life," objected Candy, blinking her eyes with disbelief.

Alistair led her to the circle of the dancing pairs and assured her:

"Just keep moving your feet, that's dancing."

Then he started laughing and added ironically:

"Is there a little black star today too?"

"Oh, no, this day has definitely a little white star...It doesn't seem real to me that I am at such a splendid party."

It was true. Guided by Stear, Candy was moving her feet at random, but she was feeling her heart and her body as light as a feather.

Suddenly she met Anthony's eyes, as he told her:

"Candy, will you give me the next dance?"

Hearing that invitation, Eliza glared at her.

"What a shame, the next one is Archie's. Your turn will come later," responded Stear calmly.

"Apparently everybody wants to dance with you."

Why did Anthony's laughter make her heart beat so hard? Immersed in that floating world, even Eliza's piercing eyes were no longer important to her, and among all the others, the only thing that was clearly outlined was Anthony's figure in a kilt. He really looked a lot like Prince on the Hill.

No, that's not true...If I look at him carefully, I notice immediately that, although they look alike, they are completely different...

After the dance with Archie, the musicians took a short break. With eyes burning with rage, Eliza approached her and dragged her behind a curtain.

"Now you listen to me! If you dance with Anthony, you won't get away with it!" she threatened clenching her fists.

She seemed ready to strike her at any moment.

"Mama and papa are furious because of you!"

"I...I will accept if he asks me," replied Candy with sincerity, while Eliza's eyes opened wide.

She wanted to dance with Anthony, and she didn't care what Eliza or her mother could do. She had managed to find Anthony, the boy who had told her those gentle words at the Gate of the Roses. And that moment, when she had confused him with Prince on the Hill, he had given her a lot of courage.

The music resumed, and when Anthony asked her to dance, she did not hesitate for an instant.

The enchanting party had ended, but Candy, although she was already back in her narrow room at the house of the Leagans, was still feeling like she was in a dream. The servants had not yet returned, busy with the preparations for the dinner, and neither had Eliza and her family. Candy was reflecting peacefully. She had danced with Anthony, the boy she had met at the Gate of the Roses. That smiling face, radiant like the sun, was just a few inches away from hers. His hands had touched her gently. Her body had become light and it had almost seemed to her that she was back at Pony's Home. The face of the Prince with the bagpipe overlapped Anthony's smile.

"You have been brave, Candy."

Remembering his gentle voice whispering that phrase, the girl blushed.

Is it true that it was not just a dream?

With a sigh, she took her badge and tinkled the little silver bell. Then she started dancing by herself.

"Prince, the boy that looks so much like you is called Anthony."

The little bell's jingle seemed to be singing, accompanying Candy as she was whirling.

"All three of them were dressed in a kilt...I heard that this is their evening costume, since the Ardlay ancestors came from Scotland, but what has Prince on the Hill got to do with them?"

While she was concentrating aloud on her thoughts and dancing, Candy suddenly heard the door open violently. When she turned surprised, she was in front of Mrs. Leagan. She didn't know when she had returned, but she had an irritated expression and she was still in her evening gown. Probably she had come straight to her room.

"Take this girl's things immediately to the stable!" she ordered the servants who had followed her.

"My things...to the stable?"

Candy looked at her in amazement. Until a moment ago it had seemed to her that she was living in a dream, but in an instant that sensation had vanished.

"And thank me for not throwing you out of the house! Today you have brought shame to the home of the Leagans! Is that how grateful you are for Neal's and Eliza's kindness? You are an awful girl! I won't allow someone like you to live in the same house where my children live! From now on you will be at our service and live in the stable!"

Mrs. Leagan said all this in one breath and in a hysterical tone.

"Now you'll have to take care of the horses," concluded Eliza, behind her mother.

She had crossed her arms and on her face there was a smile of satisfaction.

Chapter 10

A strange sound was heard close to her ear. Candy stuck her head under the blankets.

Please, stop making those noises, I'm sleepy.

The sound didn't stop.

"I've told you to stop! I can't sleep..."

Getting up suddenly, the girl was found in front of a pair of horses and had to contain a cry.

"I forgot it...Last night I had to move into the stable."

She recalled how, the previous day, her heart, overflowing with joy at the splendid party, had burst out like a balloon in an instant. Candy shook her head and said:

"Sister Lane always said: 'Every time you think of something bad and you feel sad, your heart gets smaller.' "

Caesar neighed shaking his neck proudly, as if agreeing with her. The girl smiled. Those horses had such tender eyes...

The one with the shiny black coat, called Caesar, belonged to Neal, while the white Cleopatra was Eliza's. As it had been said, both of them were thoroughbreds. However, the two siblings had expressed a certain interest in horse riding only at the beginning, and they seemed to harbor no affection or admiration for their animals.

The horses were remaining there, moving their heads and showing their big teeth.

"You are hungry, aren't you? Forgive me, I'll prepare your breakfast right away. They're really very early risers!" said Candy yawning, and then she turned around to get dressed quickly.

It is necessary to respect good manners, even in the presence of horses.

It was a dark structure, filled with straw and moist hay. The inside had the typical smell of stables, but Candy didn't care at all.

"You know what? At Pony's Home I had taken charge of the chickens, and there were also ranches in the area, so I've had friends like you," Candy told them.

Then she made a proper introduction:

"Caesar, Cleopatra, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Candice White, but you can call me Candy."

As a reply, the horses opened their snouts at the same time, in a kind of smile. After having greeted them with a light tap on their noses, the girl devoted herself to cleaning up the place.

"You'll see, I'll turn this stable into a shining palace."

Each time she spoke, the two animals snorted as if to answer her. It was wonderful to be able to speak to someone. As soon as she

finished cleaning up, she took the bucket that was now completely full. Whitman, the gardener, always started working very early in the morning.

I remember Miss Pony used this as a fertilizer. Maybe Mr. Whitman will be happy to have some of it too. I'm really very fortunate to have to go around carrying such a valuable asset! La-la, la-la.

Humming to herself, Candy made a gesture of greeting to the man with the straw hat, half hidden among the abundant and colorful flowers of alcea.

“Mr. Whitman! I’ve brought you a little fertil...”

She stiffened, with her face red.

“Good morning, Candy!” said Anthony, peeking out among the high yellow alceas.

“Oh...Anthony...good morning...”

“Ah, you’ve been so kind as to bring me the manure of the horses, haven’t you? Thank you, Candy,” interposed the gardener.

The man, with a white beard and hat, got up to take the bucket, and then, overshadowing his face, he said:

“This morning Mary told me everything. So they have put you in the stable? We all agree that this is an injustice...Unfortunately I can’t do much, but if you want to talk to someone, you know where to find me. You will tell me if you need anything, won’t you?”

“Thank you, Mr. Whitman...” said Candy, giving him a big smile, trying not to get emotional.

Behind him, Anthony had bowed his head and was looking away, but it seemed that he was trying to contain his rage.

“By the way, Master, did you want to know anything more about pests?” asked the gardener, turning to Anthony.

“No, I have understood everything...Thank you, Mr. Whitman,” responded the lad hurriedly.

When the gardener went away to look after the other flowers, Anthony stood in front of Candy and, with a very serious look, he asked:

“Candy, what does that mean about...putting you in the stable?”

“Oh, nothing important. The stable has practically become my room.”

“How can you say it’s nothing important?” exclaimed the boy, reddening with indignation and frowning.

Candy showed immediately a beautiful smile and said:

“For me it’s better this way, Anthony! I feel much more comfortable, truly!”

She had spoken too fast and the boy kept watching her silently, while she was struggling to look happy. She couldn’t possibly prefer living in a stable. Anthony remembered that when he met her she was crying. That smile made his heart ache.

Candy tried to bring the conversation to another topic:

“Tell me, do you know Mr. Whitman well?”

“What? Oh, yes, he teaches me many things about cultivating roses, for example, the method of creating hybrids,” replied the lad, changing his attitude.

If Candy didn’t want to talk anymore about her situation, he would definitely not force her to do that.

“Cultivating roses? You like them a lot, don’t you?”

“Yes. They look sweet and noble.”

Just like you, Anthony...

Candy refrained from expressing her thought. She always used to say everything that she had on her mind, but when she was with that boy, for some strange reason, she always felt too excited. She would have wanted to stay there and talk to him, but the morning was full of chores she had to do.

Anthony said goodbye to her and went away to take care of his flowers, located in an internal area of the immense rose garden of the Ardlays, and Candy went back to the stable, pouncing.

I can’t believe I’ve seen him again so soon...Maybe I was really lucky to have been moved to the stable...I would have liked to talk to him a little more...But of course! When I have a little free time, I’ll try to go back to the Gate of the Roses!

Candy expected that she could find him again that way. Once she made that decision, she felt full of energy and started washing the napkins and cleaning the windows at a good pace. When she finished her chores, she went running to the Gate of the Roses, before Eliza and the others discovered her. Surprised by her quick steps, the little birds of the forest were chirping loudly from the top of the trees.

The entrance was closed. Clinging to the iron bars, on which the scarlet flowers intertwined, Candy looked inside. She tried to pronounce softly Anthony’s name. But who could have answered a voice that was calling so faintly?

“Anthony!”

With her second attempt, almost as if they wanted to make fun of her, the petals of a rose fell on the ground.

Candy decided to forget about it and, in contrast to the way she had come, she slowly walked back down the road. She was surprised at her own behavior. Why did she need so much to see that boy again? Maybe because he looked like Prince on the Hill? No, when she was with Anthony, Candy felt something she had never experienced before. It was almost like being on a soft cloud, wrapped in the perfume of roses.

When she returned disappointed to the stable, Candy stopped short.

“Anthony!”

There, in front of her, was the boy she was looking for. He had in his hand a pot containing a little plant of roses with buds of a pale pink hue.

“Candy...I was waiting for you,” he told her shyly, lowering his gaze.

“I...”

Candy also averted her eyes. Her heart was full of emotions: she had run to the Gate of the Roses to meet him, but in the meantime, he had also come to find her, and he had waited for her to return...

“Do you want to sit down? No, we’d better stay outside. After all, a stable is not very appropriate for you, Anthony.”

“That’s not true.”

The lad entered first in a decided manner, although he had to hold his breath for a moment. He saw the wooden bed located in a corner of the small stable, the well-packed straw on one side, and some flowers placed inside the feeder. The environment seemed pleasant and almost magical. However...

They are treating her exactly the same as the horses...

“Anthony, I’m sorry, this is not a very pretty room. But even so, it still has its style, don’t you think? There are people who have paintings of horses on the walls, instead I really have them! Not everyone has this kind of magnificent animals in their own bedroom.”

Anthony was watching the girl while she was describing, without being ashamed, her new home. What was that feeling growing inside him? It was the first time something like that was happening to him.

No matter where she lives, she is always the same. Never complaining, and always seeing the bright side of everything...

He had never met anyone like her.

“I forgot, I’ve brought you a gift,” he said.

“What? For me?”

Candy’s eyes brightened.

“Here it is.”

“What beautiful roses...Are they for me?”

With her heart beating hard, Candy took the pot that contained the pale pink flowers. One of the buds was shyly preparing to open.

“These roses are the result of a hybrid I look after myself. I have failed many times, but finally...”

“And you want to give something so valuable to me?” asked Candy, moved.

“You know, it’s been a while since I thought of what I would call this new rose, but I have found the proper name at last,” said Anthony in a low voice, caressing Caesar’s nose.

“And what did you call it, Anthony?”

“Sweet Candy...” he murmured.

Then he turned to look at her, abashed.

Sweet Candy...

That moment, it was as if a scarlet bud had opened in Candy's heart.
The two of them stood staring at each other silently, each lost in the
bright eyes of the other.

Chapter 11

Closer and closer to blooming, the Sweet Candy buds stretched their stems towards the morning sun. Every day, as soon as she woke up, Candy greeted Anthony's gift, and that little ritual was enough to make her feel that a wonderful day was awaiting her.

The days were passing pleasantly since she had been established in her new room. Intelligent and affectionate, the horses had become immediately fond of her, but what she was most grateful for was that Neal and Eliza hated the stable, to the point that they avoided approaching there. When she was living in the north part of the villa, she often found in her bed snakes or frogs, hidden there by Neal, but now similar incidents didn't happen any longer.

She also enjoyed very much the domestic tasks that had been assigned to her. Mr. Stewart, Mary, Whitman the gardener and Doug the cook, were all very attentive to her and taught her with kindness everything they knew. Therefore, Candy had learned how the interior of a car was built, how the bread was baked, and the characteristics of plants. The only negative point was just Neal and Eliza.

"What is it that makes her so happy? Living in a *stable*, can you imagine that?"

"She must have a monkey's brain!"

The two children, hidden behind the windows of the second floor, were watching her irritated while she was splitting firewood. Every time she succeeded in her work, Candy did the sign of victory to herself.

"How stupid!"

Eliza's grunts became more and more contemptuous.

"One of these days we'll teach her a good lesson!"

"You are right, and then you'll see how she'll be crying! She'll have to beg us to forgive her!"

Neal spat in Candy's direction, but without reaching her. The reason for the happiness of the enemy of both was the Sweet Candy rose. Every time she recalled Anthony's abashed smile, it seemed to her that her heart was full of sweet rose petals.

That day, while she was brushing Cleopatra, suddenly an arrow flew through the stable and hit straight on a pillar. The gleaming silver dart was tied to a red ribbon.

"Oh, my God, I was so scared...But what a pretty arrow!"

Laughing, the girl took it. There was only one person who could have made it.

“I’m really delighted at my ability, I have never missed a shot,” said a cheerful voice.

As she had imagined, Stear appeared. Beside him was Archie, who was wearing a wide-brimmed green hat.

“I knew it was you, Stear! But what is this arrow made of?”

“You can eat it, you know,” said the boy proudly, inflating his chest.

“It’s chocolate. It pierces the heart and it’s edible; don’t you think it’s a brilliant idea? It’s a gift for you.”

“How wonderful!” exclaimed Candy joyfully.

Bringing her nose to the arrow, she smelled the aroma of first-quality cocoa.

“And what about Anthony?” she asked, not being able to contain her curiosity.

“It’s a secret! He is punished for sneaking out last time,” disclosed Archie.

The boy had discovered Sweet Candy, almost open now, and was smelling it with indifference, but an instant later...

“Wait! What the devil are you doing?”

Archie hurried to recover his green hat, which Caesar had bitten by stretching his neck.

“Oh, no! My French hat is all crushed!”

“I’m sorry, Archie! Caesar must have mistaken it for a large cabbage,” apologized Candy, trying not to laugh, accompanied by the animal’s neighing.

“But why...? Does it really seem like a cabbage to you?” objected Archie sighing, with a comical look.

“So, even if you don’t have your expensive hat anymore, you’re still happy, aren’t you? Aren’t you?” Stear teased him, in a mocking tone.

“What’s the matter? Did something nice happen to you, Archie?”

“Oh, yes. Tomorrow there will be a garden party at the house of the Leagans. I imagine that you’re already aware of that, Candy.”

“Of course! In fact, I have been ordered to prepare well Caesar and Cleopatra, so that the guests can admire them.”

Those days the villa was all in a commotion, preparing for the imminent event.

“We are also among the guests, and you must know that a very charming young lady will come, who...”

“Shut up, Stear!”

Avoiding his brother’s attempt to silence him with his hand, the lad went on saying everything in a single breath:

“Don’t be shy, Archie! I was saying that this young lady is violently in love with Archie!”

“I understand now. So that’s why you bought this hat?” asked Candy, with a saucy smile.

Archie sighed in a theatrical manner and said:

“Of course not, I bought it because I liked it. And besides, I don’t like girls who are too quiet.”

“Ah! But *she* really seems cajoled... ‘During my journey, I would like to come and visit you, even for one day...’ Didn’t she write you like this in her letter? I’m sure that she has also convinced her parents: ‘I would like to see Archie, even for one day’,” recited Stear mockingly.

“Hey, I’ve told you to stop that!”

Archie gave him a slight push, but he didn’t seem particularly annoyed by the situation and, in a theatrical manner and with a feigned melancholy, he added:

“You know, Candy, it’s very difficult to be liked so much by women.”

The stable was full of laughter.

Surely Anthony would be present too at the party next day, which meant that, even from a distance, she could see him. However, Candy couldn’t help wondering how that girl would be like, so shy but so fond of Archie.

Although she has a quiet character, she will come to visit him. That’s true passion!

Candy was able to understand how that girl could feel.

The next day brought with it a completely clear blue sky, perfect for a party in the open air. A pleasant breeze was blowing in the Leagan garden, and Candy was working tirelessly since dawn, fixing the awning and putting flowers on the tables. She also had to make some garlands for Caesar and Cleopatra, and the previous day, Mr. Whitman had brought several sunflowers, some small and some other larger.

“It’s a grand occasion, we must make them look beautiful. This bigger one is for you, Caesar, while that smaller but more extravagant one is yours, Cleopatra...Oh, they will be wonderful!”

The horses, dressed for the party, shook their manes with a happy look.

Cheerful laughter came from the garden. The guests had arrived, starting the party.

Will Anthony be here already? I wonder about Archie’s expression when he will talk to his “young lady”.

When the servants assigned to serve at the reception were called, Candy headed towards the garden, holding tight the reins with both hands. Under the awning, the guests, gathered around the decorated tables, were chatting affably. Candy immediately spotted Anthony.

That girl in the purple dress who is looking down must be that one who is so fond of Archie.

She couldn't see her face, hidden by her hair. And she was right beside the boy she liked so much.

"Well, I would like to show you Neal's and Eliza's horses. They're thoroughbreds, you know," announced Mrs. Leagan proudly.

That moment, the girl in the purple dress raised slowly her face and Candy, for an instant, was out of breath. Her feet froze and behind her the horses started kicking the ground.

Annie! This is Annie!

No, it was not a mistake: a few steps away from her, there was really the girl with whom she had grown up at Pony's Home. The face of her childhood friend lost its color. She had recognized her too. Seeing her with trembling lips and on the verge of tears, Candy turned her eyes away. She remembered well the last letter she had received: Annie had expressed firmly her desire to hide from everyone the fact that she came from an orphanage. She had to hurry in order to start walking again. And she had to pass in front of her as if nothing had happened. With her heart fluttering, Candy looked straight ahead and started moving her feet.

Don't be afraid, Annie. I'm not going to say anything...So...don't cry...

"Annie, what's the matter? You look very pale," asked Archie worried.

"I...I...the horses..." replied Annie in a weak voice.

"Oh, my dear, I'm sorry! Candy! Take them away immediately!"

At the urgent order of Mrs. Leagan, Candy retired hastily, with her head crouched.

"I adore horses, but my daughter is a little fearful...Annie, is everything all right?" asked Mr. Brighton in a gentle voice.

Annie...I had always hoped to see you again...

She would have wanted to turn around and run to embrace her. Candy's shoulders were trembling slightly.

Annie, in an almost absentminded way, was staring at her as she walked away.

That's not possible...I have found Candy...right here...

She had decided to forget, she had *wished* to forget, and ultimately her mind was returning more and more frequently to Pony's Home. When they were little, Candy had always defended her. Annie held tight the handkerchief in her hand.

If Archie knew I was abandoned...If he knew I came from an orphanage...

That thought alone took her breath away. That could not happen. She looked towards the boy, who had gone to a nearby table to get her something to drink, with her eyes full of feelings.

Archibald: an elegant and very cheerful lad, who seemed to glow. It was amusing to talk to him and he had many admirers. Always friendly with all of them, he remained elusive. He was a mysterious

boy. Since the first time she had met him, he had always been in her thoughts and, after a long time, she had summoned up her courage and had been able to speak to him.

Archie was the last person who must know the truth.

“Hey, Annie Brighton!”

Hearing suddenly Eliza calling behind her, a chill went through Annie’s body.

“It’s a shame you don’t like horses, but have you seen that girl that was leading them? For as long as you stay here, you can dispose of her as you see fit. She works for us, but above all she is our personal maid.”

“Oh, yes. Put her to work all you want,” added Neal.

Annie was petrified, and couldn’t even turn around.

“You know, we got her from an orphanage, but because of her bad character she lives now in the stable. After all, it’s a place that suits her perfectly.”

When she heard those words, Annie closed her eyes tightly, trying to endure a great pain that had suddenly overwhelmed her.

Chapter 12

Between the branches of a tree, in the internal garden, Candy was looking absently at the sky.

The days of her childhood began to pass before her eyes: the flower necklaces made on Pony's Hill, the fishing in the creek, the endless races after the dry leaves carried by the wind, the large boxes they used in the winter instead of sleighs to slide from the snowy elevation...And Annie was always beside her.

Annie, how beautiful you have become...You are really a splendid young lady...

The purple dress suited her very well. When she left Pony's Home, she was wearing a light blue dress. Feeling the tears coming, Candy hurried to blink her eyes. Since the last letter she had received, she had effectively avoided writing to her again, but she had never forgotten Annie. Was she happy? Were they playing jokes on her? Was she afraid? She knew well that she had been adopted by a rich and loving family, but she couldn't help worrying.

You seem very happy, Annie...I'm so glad...But I would never have imagined that I would meet you here, like this...

Even though she was trying to hold them, the tears began flowing down her cheeks, so Candy plucked two leaves and put them over her eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Applying the compresses this way your eyes may block any kind of tears! But, look here...Oh, they got off immediately..."

While she was murmuring those words, she realized that Eliza and Neal were stealthily approaching.

"I say, have you seen her? That Annie is really a coward! It was enough to speak to her to make her frightened!" remarked Eliza cheerfully.

Candy, from the top of the tree, tried not to be discovered.

"I think we can have a lot of fun with her around. It's fantastic!" added Neal in his usual insidious tone.

"What can we invent to make her cry?"

"I bet a coward like her can't stand caterpillars."

"Caterpillars! That's a wonderful idea! Anyway, she's not leaving until the party is over, is she? What do you say about putting a few of them in her purse before she goes away?"

"What a great idea, Eliza! We have a tree right here that's full of them; let's get them!"

"And obviously the culprit will be the stable wench as usual!"

The siblings shook hands and approached the tree where Candy was. The girl didn't even have time to worry about which tree they were talking about. She remembered very well how much Annie detested caterpillars: it was enough for her to see them to burst into tears.

"I won't allow you to do something like this to Annie!" she shouted jumping from the tree.

When they saw her suddenly in front of them, Eliza and Neal were astonished. The boy had already grabbed several caterpillars and had put them in a handkerchief.

"Candy! What are you doing here?"

"I won't let you do such a bad thing to An...to Miss Brighton," said Candy, lashing out at the boy.

"Be off! Let me go! You orphan! Stable wench!"

"No, *you* let go of those things you have in your hand!"

Neal was trying to resist waving the handkerchief in front of her, so Candy threw him on the ground with a push and fell upon him astride. Immobilizing his arm, she hit him on the face. Screaming like crazy, Eliza ran to call her mother.

Mrs. Leagan came hurriedly, hearing her daughter's cries, followed by Archie, Stear and Anthony.

"Candy, let go of Neal's hand!"

Hearing behind her Anthony's tense voice, Candy seemed to come to herself and walked away from the boy.

"Oh, my God...Neal's face...What's going on?"

"Mama, Candy wanted to play a bad joke on Annie, and Neal tried to stop her!" Eliza accused her with a nasal voice.

"Yes...Candy wanted to put caterpillars in her purse!"

"That's a lie! That was *your* plan!" refuted Candy.

She couldn't bear such a lie.

"Our plan? How impudent! *You* are the liar! Mama, we've got proof! Isn't that true, Neal?"

Her brother nodded and, gripping the handkerchief, he put his hand in one of the pockets of Candy's apron. Then he took it out to show its content: evidently it was the caterpillars that he had collected himself.

"But these are..."

Candy didn't finish her sentence. Behind a worried Archie, she had caught a glimpse of Annie's figure, frightened and with her eyes downcast.

Oh, no...If the situation gets worse, it is her who will suffer the consequences...

Therefore she decided to remain silent and lowered her head. Seeing that Anthony didn't say a word, she wondered what he was thinking.

The air was impregnated with the strong perfume used by Mrs. Leagan.

“You are really a horrible girl! You are a continuous shame for our family!”

With his face full of red marks and rubbing his arm, Neal exclaimed furiously:

“So we have to send her back to the orphanage immediately!”

“We’ll talk about it later. Now our guests are here...But you won’t get away with this! Return to your stable and don’t you dare come out!”

Simulating a docile expression, Eliza and Neal winked at each other secretly. Candy couldn’t even raise her head and kept her eyes down.

“I regret that you had to witness this unpleasant spectacle...Annie, unfortunately the girl that takes care of the stable really lacks any kind of education, I’m very sorry to say. Why don’t we forget this incident having some rose tea and a tasty pudding?” suggested Mrs. Leagan with an affectionate smile.

Annie just nodded and turned her back on Candy, but she had understood how things were: her childhood friend had fought for her, because she knew well how much she hated caterpillars.

Oh, Candy...

As she was going, she couldn’t restrain herself and turned back. At that moment Candy also looked up and their eyes met. It almost seemed to Candy that she heard Annie’s own heart saying: “Forgive me, Candy, because I’m in such a situation now that I just can’t help you. I can’t even speak to you. Forgive me...”

I know, Annie...Don’t worry...

She would have wanted to reassure her and show her a big smile, but she knew she couldn’t do that.

“Come, come, why are we still here? Let’s go back to the party!” said the mistress of the house annoyed, talking to Anthony and the other boys.

“Don’t feel bad,” said Stear to Candy cheerfully, bending to look into her eyes.

“That’s right, we all know that it’s Eliza’s and Neal’s fault,” said Archie hurriedly, before running to reach Annie, who had remained waiting for him, but without turning back.

“Let’s go, Anthony, or Aunt will be angry with us this time.”

Anthony had started walking thoughtfully beside Stear, but he suddenly turned back. He approached Candy, who had remained stunned, and wiped the mud off her arm.

“Anthony...I...”

“Candy, you must not exaggerate acting like a tomboy. This time you’d better apologize to Neal.”

“What?”

The boy was looking at her with a serious expression, and Candy was out of breath for an instant.

“Later I’ll come with you too, all right?” he continued in a low voice.

Then he left, approaching Eliza immediately.

Anthony...

The image of the boy’s back was blurred, and in her ears were echoing the words she had just heard: “You must not exaggerate acting like a tomboy.” Anthony kept walking without turning back.

Anthony must have thought that I’m really a tomboy...Willing to get into a fight for no reason...

Candy had wanted him in particular to understand her. If he had comforted her as cheerfully as Stear had done...Even Archie had taken her part, but...

Not knowing how to behave and not being able to stand this situation any longer, she went away running. With quick steps, she was inadvertently looking for some place where she could cry. She could only think of Anthony, of the fact that she had definitely disappointed him, and of what would have changed his opinion about her. It was something so painful, that she was unable to stand still.

She reached the river and she saw a boat tied to a tree by the shore, swinging among the aquatic plants. She thought that nobody would see her there. Getting aboard, she lay down at the bottom and started crying. Her shoulders were trembling, causing the whole boat to swing softly.

“Miss Pony...Sister Lane...”

Almost unconsciously, she pronounced those dear names linked with her past.

She took the cross that had been given her and had always worn under her blouse. She had also hung around her neck the badge of Prince on the Hill, to avoid losing it. Through her tears, she shook the little bell which, as always, responded with a sweet tinkling.

“Prince, what should I do now?”

“You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry.”

The Prince’s voice overlapped the little bell.

Anthony also told me the same thing, but now...

Candy held the badge tight.

No, Candy...If you’re going to stay here crying, you’ll only end up suffering even more...Cheer up, remember all the beautiful things you know! There are so many!

“Yes...there are really so many...”

Candy turned on her back and rubbed her eyes. The blue color of that summer sky was dazzling. The memories of Pony’s Home were all wonderful. And then it was the party at the Ardlay house, the dance

with Anthony...Remembering those things, she couldn't help smiling and, without realizing it, she fell asleep.

The waves were rocking her for a long time.

Later, little by little, the movement became progressively stronger and stronger.

Hearing the roar of the water, Candy woke up suddenly:

"The boat! The boat is blown away!"

While she was sleeping, the rope must have come loose, and now she was moving in front of places she had never seen before. Dragged by a violent current, Candy didn't even have oars, and the running water was too fast for her to jump and save herself by swimming.

What will I do now?

Night had almost fallen around her, and there was nobody in the river. That moment she heard a deafening noise, similar to that of a thunder. It became louder and louder.

"It's a waterfall!" she cried, clinging to both sides of the boat.

The more she was approaching that thunderous noise, the more the boat seemed to be absorbed into an increasing current. Without even having time to scream, Candy fell and was thrown off the boat. Then, when she was found into the water, she lost consciousness.

Chapter 13

She was feeling very well. Wrapped in a pleasant heat, she heard the crackling of the woods in the fireplace, and the smell of burning wood brought her back to her childhood. Was she perhaps at Pony's Home? Had she returned to that beloved place from which she had come? Candy half-opened her eyes.

"Help, a pirate!" she cried suddenly, clinging to the blankets.

A man with long brown hair was watching her closely. The lower part of his face was covered with a beard and he was wearing sunglasses.

"Not bad for a greeting!" he said laughing gently.

Reassured by that kind voice, which didn't agree with his appearance at all, Candy stammered an apology.

"I'm glad you're feeling better..." said the pirate smiling.

He seemed deeply relieved, and in a moment the sense of danger dissolved, being replaced by a pleasant atmosphere.

Getting up in bed, Candy summoned up her courage and asked:

"Excuse me, sir, was it you who saved me?"

She didn't remember anything of what had happened after she had fallen into the waterfall.

"Actually, I was the one who found you while you were panting for air in the waterfall basin, but it's really *horrible* to call me 'sir'. I may not look like it, but I'm young, you know."

The pirate removed his glasses, revealing his clear blue eyes, similar to the color of a lake in the morning.

"You look much better without glasses, sir! Now you don't look at all like a pirate," said the girl with complete sincerity.

"Again with that 'sir'? I'm neither a sir, nor a pirate," he said, and started laughing merrily. "My name is Albert. And this is Poupe," he introduced, taking a skunk out of one of the pockets of his frayed and huge coat.

"Oh, no! A skunk!"

Seeing her putting her hand on her nose as a reflex, Albert and Poupe seemed quite offended.

"There is no need to do a thing like that. Poupe is such a delicate young lady that even flowers envy her."

"Oh, I'm sorry..." apologized Candy, holding the little animal's paw in greeting. "Nice to meet you, Poupe. I'm Candy."

"Very well, Princess Candy. Would you like something to eat? The soup is ready and you should be able to get up now."

With ease, the man put Candy's clothes at the foot of the bed and went towards a pot set in the fireplace. Apparently, Candy had slept

wearing an old shirt of Albert's. But how long had she remained unconscious after she had fallen in the waterfall?

She put on her clothes, almost completely dry, folded the shirt which she had borrowed, and jumped lightly out of bed.

As she was advancing, with her steps still a little hesitant, a squirrel approached her. Candy blinked her eyes. Looking closely, she realized that inside that house, which had all the appearance of a mountain cabin, there were several animals. Dogs, ducks, rabbits and even a stag, which at first sight she had mistaken for a decorative object. All of them had some injury and it looked like they were receiving medical attention from that man.

Suddenly, with an embarrassing doubt, the girl asked:

"Excuse me, but...we are still in the United States, aren't we?"

Amused by the expression on the young girl's face, Albert let out a cheerful laugh and replied:

"Yes, we are definitely in the United States. But what about you? Where are you from? You haven't fallen from the sky, have you?"

"I work at the villa of the Leagans and..."

She stopped her sentence short. Suddenly the remembrance of what had happened before she got in the boat came clearly to her mind, and she also remembered with pain what had happened with Anthony.

"Then you're not far away, don't worry. Come on, let's eat these sandwiches and have some soup."

With a comforting smile, Albert placed the simple ham sandwiches and the steaming pot on the large table made of a single piece of wood.

"Thank you..."

Once she had taken some food with her hand and had settled into one of the chairs, which were manufactured by using logs, Candy came completely to herself. Definitely it was not time for her to be sitting there for dinner! She had been ordered to stay confined in the stable, and not only had she disobeyed, but she had practically disappeared without saying anything to anyone.

Will Annie have returned home safe and sound? And what will Anthony think when he finds out how far I have gone?

"Is anything wrong?" asked Albert cheerfully.

Lost for an instant in her thoughts, Candy got up hurriedly from her chair saying:

"I must go back home immediately!"

It was almost certain that, even if she went back to the Leagans, they would throw her out, but the most pressing matter was for her to be able to go back and see Anthony, even for one more time. Still holding the sandwich in her hand, she bowed and thanked her savior:

“Albert, thank you for saving my life. I’ll be forever grateful!”

“Forget about it...Do you really want to go? At midnight?”

“...Midnight?”

Indeed, outside the window it was all dark, even though the moon was shining in the sky.

“The Leagan residence is not far, but it will take you a long time to go there walking. And besides, it’s dangerous to wander in the forest at this time of night. Tomorrow morning I’ll accompany you in the boat, don’t worry. You have nothing to fear, even when the moon is hidden. And I will definitely not become a wolf and devour you, Candy. Come, take the soup before it gets cold.”

To become a wolf? Albert’s phrase had sounded so funny that it made her laugh. Suddenly she felt that she was starving.

“So, bon appetite!”

“Go ahead! I’m very hungry too,” said Albert with a theatrical expression on his bearded face.

In the meantime, Anthony was walking in the forest, illuminating his way with a lantern. After Annie had left, Anthony had run to the stable, and since then he hadn’t stopped for a moment looking for her.

Where are you, Candy? Why have I told you these things? What happened to me? Candy couldn’t have attacked Neal without a good reason...And I told her that she should not exaggerate acting like a tomboy...

It had seemed to him that Candy was about to say something to him that moment, and every time he remembered the expression on her face, he felt that his heart was crushed.

Why couldn’t I say something nicer to her? Shouldn’t I know her better than anyone, and know that she is not such a person?

Maybe they would send her back to the orphanage, and he simply couldn’t accept that.

Suddenly, he heard a crack in the bushes, a few steps away from him.

“Who’s there? Candy?” he said, rushing to illuminate the area from which the noise came. “Oh, it’s you, Archie.”

Shaking the leaves from his hair, Archie’s figure appeared between the vegetation.

“It’s me who should be disappointed. I thought it was Candy...” he replied.

Then, illuminating Anthony with his lantern, which was about to burn out already, he asked:

“You can’t sleep either? Where might Candy have gone?”

Archie almost seemed to be talking to himself. It was the first time such a thing happened to him, being so worried about someone that

he couldn't sleep. He always liked to be surrounded by many girls, but he had never been interested in anyone and, to tell the truth, he found it annoying to be the centre of attention for someone. He felt affection for Annie Brighton, but nothing more. The fact that she had left earlier than expected had been almost a relief. He found chatting with Candy much more amusing.

"I have tried again to find her in the stable, but she has not returned yet."

"I see...Archie, let's try looking for her once more near the lake."

Holding up the lantern, Anthony led Archie towards the mirror of water.

The moonlight projected a bright golden fringe, and the shades of the trees made the darkness that had enveloped the area even more dense. Suddenly, from the other side of the lake came the soft sound of the waves, accompanied by a small glow.

"That looks like my brother's boat!" exclaimed Archie, swinging the lantern.

"Stear!" shouted both of them.

He probably had heard them, because a shadow in the boat began to wave a hand towards them.

"So he's looking for Candy too..." murmured Anthony.

It was that simple: since the moment he had heard about Candy's disappearance, Stear had been so worried that he couldn't stay doing nothing.

I wonder why I worry so much...She's a little girl, full of freckles and with such bright eyes. In the past I was interested only in inventions and machines but now...

When he was close enough, Anthony and Archie ran to meet him.

"I combed the shore of the lake...but I couldn't find her," said Stear, getting off the boat. "Where could she have gone?"

Exhausted, Anthony sat in the boat that was stranded on the shore.

I shouldn't have told her something like that...

"We must hurry to find her, or the Leagans will throw her out of the house," sighed Stear.

"They're really wicked. I even heard them saying that they would rather not see her coming back," remarked Archie annoyed, looking towards the water.

Even the surface of the lake seemed to sigh, sparkling under the rays of the moon. The boys, unable to return home, kept watching the night sky, each one lost in his own thoughts. They were wondering if Candy was looking at the moon too, wherever she was at that moment.

Candy, where are you? I hope I'll find you safe and sound...

Praying in his heart, Anthony kept looking steadily at the moon.

Chapter 14

“Cheer up, we’re almost there.”

Albert started rowing with more force. Immersed in the morning mist, the boat was advancing slowly, making a drowsy noise while it was sliding on the water. The waterfowls were crossing the clear sky above them.

“I don’t know if I can go back,” murmured Candy, and inhaled the fragrance of the grass and of the dew-covered flowers that grew along the river bank.

The night Candy had spent with Albert and the animals had been wonderful. The warm fireplace, the plain soup he had prepared... Watching the fire, she had told him many things about herself. Although she had just met him, for some mysterious reason she felt that she could confide everything to him. She had told him about how she had been abandoned and about her childhood at Pony’s Home, her coming to the Leagan villa as a playing companion, the fact that she was forced to take charge of the stable. Also she talked about the danger of even losing what little she had, and of her fear that, once she returned, they would probably throw her out.

“But I mustn’t go back to Pony’s Home. That would be lovely, and I know that they would receive me again with open arms, but I don’t want to be a burden. Therefore, at the cost of having to live in a pigpen, I would rather the Leagans allowed me to stay...”

All this time Albert had merely nodded, remaining silent and listening to Candy’s words until late at night.

“I see...So you don’t have any place to go...Then we are the same.”

“What? You too?” exclaimed the girl surprised.

Scratching his head, the man replied:

“You see, this cabin isn’t mine...I found it uninhabited and I took the liberty of living in it.”

“Oh, I see...”

Candy began to understand why he was wearing those clothes that were not very neat.

“So, Candy, our meeting...” said Albert embarrassed, lowering his gaze.

“...Will remain absolutely secret!” concluded for him the girl, nodding comprehensively.

Then she added:

“Then you don’t have a home either, Albert! I’m almost glad of that!”

“Hey, does that seem to you as something to be glad about?” he replied laughing, a little perplexed.

Albert led the boat to a bank that Candy could recognize. Surely that boat wasn't his property either.

"Well, do you know how to follow alone from here?"

After nodding affirmatively, Candy got off the boat, and looking at him with huge gratitude, she said:

"Thank you, Albert...There are no words to express my gratitude..."

"I am the one who should thank you for cleaning the house and washing my clothes."

"Take care, Poupe."

Candy caressed softly the head of the skunk sitting on Albert's shoulder. After waving goodbye to her, the man moved away from the shore.

"Albert! What should I do when I want to see you again?" asked the girl breathless.

"Put a message in a bottle and throw it into the river. The best days are when the south wind blows...I promise you I'll receive it! Candy, be happy, all right?"

The boat, driven by Albert's oars, moved away more and more.

"Thank you! Goodbye, Albert!"

Candy continued waving goodbye, even when he was out of sight. The river by which he had disappeared was now wrapped again in the silent morning atmosphere. Candy took a deep breath and her expression became determined: she had to go back to the Leagan house and, whatever Eliza and Neal did to her, she mustn't cry.

It's the last thing I would want, but I must apologize to Neal...After all, it was I who behaved aggressively...

However, the steps that were leading her back to the Leagan residence had never seemed so heavy to her.

Even if they have to kick me out, I'll beg them not to send me back to Pony's Home.

Lost in her thoughts, Candy was advancing slowly, but suddenly she stopped. Someone was running towards her along the road.

Anthony!

When he noticed her presence, the boy stopped too, holding his breath.

"Candy..."

"Anthony!"

They ran to each other at the same time.

"I was so worried, Candy! Where did you go?"

Panting, the boy looked straight at her face with a serious expression.

"Well..."

Candy didn't know what to say. And certainly she couldn't tell him about Albert.

“I was walking around the splendid enchanted kingdom of the forest...”

“Stop joking!”

Suddenly a slap sounded.

Anthony...Anthony hit me...

Remaining silent, Candy put her hand to her cheek.

“I was worried about you!” said Anthony with a trembling voice.

The boy bit his lip and then, turning back, he ran away.

Anthony slapped me...he slapped my cheek...

Despite the stupor, Candy’s heart seemed to be swayed by a slight wind. She had seen Anthony’s wet eyes and that made her so happy that it gave her the desire to cry.

Anthony was worried about me...

Through her still warm cheek, it seemed to her that she could feel the boy’s emotions. She covered it delicately with her hand; she would have wanted to keep forever that sweet pain in the depths of her heart.

“Hey, it’s true! It’s Candy!”

Suddenly two merry voices sounded and Stear and Archie appeared.

“Candy, where have you been?”

“Stear, Archie! I’m sorry I’ve made you worried,” she apologized, bowing her head slightly.

“We just ran into Anthony and it was him who told us that you were back...But what happened to him? He had been so worried about you, while now, on the contrary, he seemed annoyed. He should be glad to see you again...”

“Don’t worry, everything is fine, Stear. I must go and apologize to Mrs. Leagan,” said Candy, containing a chill.

“Are you sure you want to go alone? We can come with you,” suggested Archie, with his beautiful forehead frowned.

“Thank you, Archie...but I can do it.”

“I’m worried about what they might tell you.”

“Don’t be afraid, Stear, I’m very good at apologizing!” she told him laughing, full of certainty.

Captivated by the girl, the two boys smiled, but their eyes couldn’t mask their anxiety.

“Oh, look, Neal. It’s her. The stable wench has returned!”

Eliza was going out just at that moment by the rear entrance, and she turned to wink at her brother.

“How dare you come back here? It really seems that orphans are very cheeky,” remarked Neal, fully intending to be heard.

Ignoring the words of both, Candy approached and apologized with as much amiability as possible:

“I wanted to beg pardon for sneaking away yesterday. I hope I didn’t hurt you too much, Neal.”

Neal walked to her contemptuously.

“But, Neal, it’s embarrassing to be beaten by a girl. I think you should do a little more exercise and...”

When she realized that she had said something insolent to Neal, it was already too late. The boy was looking at her with threatening eyes, and with a smile of superiority on his face.

“Do you know you can’t stay here any longer?”

“Yes! You might even have spared yourself the trouble of coming back! Get out of here quickly!”

Eliza turned menacingly towards Candy, but she was interrupted by a voice:

“They are right, Candy!”

The entrance door had opened and at the top of the stairs appeared Mrs. Leagan.

“Do you have the nerve to come back here without showing the slightest shame for what you’ve done? The presence of a naughty girl like you is not good for Eliza and Neal! We were wrong to have pitied you until now,” she said, with a threatening look.

“Exactly, we’ve been too kind to her,” interposed Eliza and Neal.

“That’s because they’re really good-hearted children,” said Mrs. Leagan, hugging the shoulders of her children and squinting her eyes. Candy was looking incredulous at them, with her mouth open.

“I would like to throw you out right now, but sending you back to the orphanage would be a serious matter in the Reverend’s eyes and would bring dishonor to the good name of the Leagans. Therefore, I will allow you to stay until you have found another place to work. You should be grateful, Candy!”

“Well...I...”

Mrs. Leagan seemed to have no intention of listening to Candy’s words, turned her back and returned inside, slamming the door behind herself and her two beloved children. She didn’t even have time to apologize properly.

But, after all, even if I did, they wouldn’t forgive me anyway...

She had no choice but to leave the Leagans. But if she found a new place to work...Candy bit her lip, trying to contain the emotions that were growing inside her.

I won’t be able to see Anthony anymore...

Chapter 15

It almost seemed to Candy that there was another moon at the bottom of the lake. Above the darkness of the forest, rose a full moon that was reflected perfectly on the water.

Standing near the shore, Candy felt the wind blowing, but it was not any wind; it was the south wind. It was Mr. Whitman who had explained to her how to recognize it.

Please, make this message reach Albert...

Following the instructions, Candy had put her letter in an empty bottle and had entrusted it to the stream.

She had written that she had been forced to leave the Leagan house, that her only consolation was that she didn't have to return to Pony's Home and that she was waiting for a new place to work.

“Dear Albert,

The time we spent in the cabin has been like a dream to me.

I hope you are always well and can continue living with your animal friends.

I don't know yet who will be my new employer, but wherever I go I will never give up, so I ask you not to worry. I will always pray nobody finds you so you can live in peace.

You have saved my life, and now I will always take care of it.

Truly, I thank you from my heart, and please give my regards to Poupe!

Candice White

As you can see, my real name is very refined.”

Wherever I go, I will not give up...

However, this time Candy was not so sure of herself.

What will my new working place be like? I don't believe that children like Eliza and Neal are found everywhere, but still...

That was her only consolation, but...

Wherever I go, Anthony won't be there...And I'll not be able to see Stear and Archie again!

With a sigh, she began walking along the lake shore. She was so overwhelmed by anxiety that she couldn't sleep.

Come on, Candy! Cheer up! Anthony and the others were not here for you at first. You met them by chance. It all started that day when you were crying in the forest...

The words Anthony had said to her that day, his smile...Everything had happened for the best; wherever she went, if she remembered those moments, she would have the strength to move on.

While Candy was trying to encourage herself, she heard behind her the delicate sound of hooves. She turned and was out of breath.

Anthony!

Mounted on a white horse, the boy slowed down and approached her slowly. Under the rays of the moon, he was so handsome that he didn't look like a creature of this world.

Candy almost believed she was living in a dream: the person she wanted so much to see had appeared in front of her. Unable to speak, she watched him getting closer and closer.

Anthony made the horse stop beside her and stayed looking at her steadily, without saying a word. When he had spotted the young girl's silhouette by the shore of the lake, he hadn't been surprised; he had felt in his heart that, if he went there, he would find her. He was convinced that there was an invisible thread that united them.

After a little sigh, he extended his hand.

"It's a magnificent moonlit night, Candy. You know, the forest at night is an enchanted kingdom where it almost looks as if fairies are hiding there. Would you like to see it?"

Candy nodded and took the boy's hand. Anthony lifted her lightly to make her sit in front of him and, careful not to rub her shoulders, he delicately took the reins. Candy held her breath, fearing that this was a dream and everything would disappear with the first word she would pronounce. The white horse began to move slowly.

Before them an invisible invitation was unfolding, with the rays of the moon seeming to guide them into the forest, which was wrapped in a silvery light. The resplendent moon drops were falling on the dark branches of the trees, and an owl was singing softly its song, as if to welcome them.

"Forgive me for that slap, Candy," murmured Anthony, keeping his gaze in front of him. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, no..." Candy hastened to reply in a low voice, shaking her head.

"You forgive me, Anthony. I didn't want you to worry so much," Candy would have wanted to say, but she was so excited that she could hardly breathe.

"We'll cross the forest at full speed, Candy. Hold on tight."

Instead of answering, her heart began to beat hard. The fear that he might notice it made her heartbeat accelerate even more.

Holding the reins tightly, Anthony made the horse go at a gallop. The night wind was whistling in the ears of both, and under the rays of the moon, the forest actually seemed to hide fairies everywhere. The horse's hooves were beating rhythmically on the ground, breaking in its path the branches that had fallen down.

Candy closed her eyes, accompanied by that pleasant constant march.

Please, let this not be a dream. Make this forest never end...

“I love you, I love you...”

Candy suddenly opened her eyes. For an instant it had seemed to her that she had heard a voice speaking those words.

“I love you, I love you...”

Was it Anthony who had spoken? Or was it the whistling of the wind? Or maybe the crunching of the leaves? It did not matter.

I love you too, I love you too...

In her heart, Candy was uttering those words countless times.

I love you, Anthony!

She felt a warmth spreading all over her body, and her heart was vibrating as if it had become a harp. So that's what you felt like when you loved someone? A sweet sensation, so pleasant that it was almost painful, a feeling that gave you a desire to scream...

I don't want to go! I don't want to leave Anthony...Please, let's keep galloping forever!

However, once they left the forest, the horse advanced slowly, until it stopped when it approached the villa of the Leagans.

Candy descended from the horse and, looking with moist eyes at the boy, she said:

“Thank you, Anthony...It was beautiful.”

“It was for me too,” he replied gently.

Candy couldn't see his expression, completely covered by darkness.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

The young girl turned and went back to the house. The lad kept watching her, motionless on his steed.

There is nothing we can do, Candy...I...We...We don't have any authority...

Annoyed, Anthony bit his lip. He didn't want Candy to leave.

He had gone to Mrs. Leagan and, armed with courage, he had even begged Great Aunt Elroy, at the risk of being punished himself, to allow the girl to stay. But the two women had not even considered his request.

What can I do...what can I do?

Shaking his head strongly, Anthony struck the white horse on the flanks and went away at full speed.

He didn't know that someone was watching him. Or rather, that someone had watched the whole scene.

Without blinking once, Eliza had witnessed everything through a window and now, unable even to breathe, she felt a growing rage burning inside her.

I'll never forgive her. I should have thrown her out long ago. I'll not stand another day...But, of course...Tomorrow is the day that Great Aunt Elroy is coming to have tea with us...

Consumed by a passionate envy, the girl curved her mouth in an evil giggle.

Chapter 16

“How strange, I was sure I had put it here...”

Mrs. Leagan continued opening and closing her jewelry box nervously.

“Surely I didn’t save it again here...”

Checking the inside of the bathroom drawers, Mrs. Leagan took a look at the clock placed on the console, and knit her thin eyebrows.

“What a problem...Great Aunt Elroy will arrive soon...”

Suddenly, almost crashing against the door, Eliza burst into the room, very pale.

“Mama! I can’t find my pearl bracelet! I should wear it with my dress today, remember?”

“What? Eliza, have you lost something too?” exclaimed the woman, getting up. “I can’t find my emerald brooch. I had ordered this green dress so I could combine them but...”

“That big brooch papa gave you for Christmas? Oh, mama! Are you sure that’s the only thing missing?”

Alarmed by those words, Mrs. Leagan checked again the jewelry box immediately.

“I was so concentrated on looking for the brooch that I hadn’t noticed, but...It isn’t here...My opal pendant isn’t here either...Oh, no! Where are my ruby earrings?”

She put a hand to her chest, shocked. At that moment Neal entered the room and announced:

“Mama, Aunt Elroy’s car has arrived!”

“Oh...She’s already here?”

Preparing to follow her mother, who had hurried towards the entrance to receive the guest, Eliza winked at her brother and whispered to his ear:

“A complete success, Neal. Is Anthony here?”

“He hasn’t come.”

“Oh, what a pity! I really wanted him to witness the decisive moment,” said Eliza disappointed, with a grimace.

At the entrance of the villa, together with Mrs. Leagan, there was a crowd of servants ready to welcome Great Aunt Elroy.

“Welcome...Great Aunt.”

“Thank you for your kind invitation, Sara. Anthony and the boys haven’t come because they’re busy with their studies. But what’s going on? You seem troubled.”

“Well...I apologize...You see...”

“Mama can’t find several of her valuable jewels, Aunt.”

In a remorseful manner, Eliza spoke instead of her mother, who remained silent.

“But it’s not just mama’s jewels. I can’t find my pearl bracelet either. I was so looking forward to showing it to you, Aunt...”

“Good heavens! How alarming! Have they been stolen?” asked the old lady, with her face darkening, and then added: “I don’t see Neal.” When they were about to cross the threshold of the villa, a voice was heard:

“Mama! Eliza!”

It was Neal, who was running out of breath in the garden.

“Where have you been, Neal? Why weren’t you here to receive Great Aunt?”

“Mama, I’ve found the jewels! Look!”

Saying this, the boy showed his mother the emerald brooch and the pearl bracelet.

“Oh, Neal, you’ve been able to find them! Where were they?”

“In the stable! Where the girl who takes care of the horses lives!”

“What?”

Mrs. Leagan’s face changed color.

Shifting his gaze from his mother to Great Aunt Elroy, Neal continued:

“I had some doubts and sneaked in to check. It was just as I thought!”

“Mama! Let’s go too, maybe we’ll find other things she has stolen from us!”

With a threatening expression, Eliza headed first towards the stable.

“Oh, my God...what a terrible girl!”

“When you spoke about the girl who takes care of the horses, you referred to that ill-mannered child that was brought from the orphanage, didn’t you?” asked Great Aunt severely.

Guided by Mrs. Leagan, with reddened faces and flourishing dresses, they all headed towards the stable.

In the meantime, Candy was brushing the animals.

“We are here to inspect the stable!”

Mrs. Leagan came in at once and went with a decided step to the old closet located in a corner. Candy opened her eyes wide, wondering what could have happened that required the presence of Great Aunt Elroy who, perhaps not liking the smell of that place, was holding a handkerchief in front of her nose and mouth. The mistress of the house opened the closet without much consideration.

“Can you tell me what’s going on? What are you looking for in there?”

Nobody deigned to answer her.

Meanwhile, Neal had extracted a box from under the bed. Candy had never seen that trunk for clothes before, but when they unveiled the contents, there appeared magnificent dresses of all colors.

“These are Eliza’s!”

“Mama! The jewels are in the feeder!”

Eliza’s scream pierced her ears.

Dresses...? Jewels?

“It’s dreadful! And to think that she’s just a little girl!”

Almost like looking away from something dirty, Great Aunt Elroy turned and left. Mrs. Leagan’s eyes were full of rage.

“I have nothing more to say to you! You’re a thief!”

That sharp voice finally shook up Candy, who began to understand what was happening. She started trembling...

“I don’t know anything! I don’t know anything about these things!” she cried desperately. “How could these objects come to the stable? I swear it! Eliza, it wouldn’t have been you who...?”

“How dare you? Mama!”

With her voice broken with crying, Eliza took refuge in her mother’s arms.

“You are really an odious person! Putting the blame on Eliza for what you have stolen!”

“I don’t know anything! Believe me! I would never take anything that didn’t belong to me! I have never stolen in my life!” she defended herself through tears, with her face pale, overwhelmed by sadness and rage.

“Be quiet! I don’t intend to continue having someone like you in my house, not for a day more!”

The woman’s lips were puckered up by anger.

“Do you know there is a ranch in Mexico looking for new workers? And to think that I had been so benevolent in refusing to send you there, thinking it would be too far away and that this kind of work would be too hard for you!” said Mrs. Leagan giving her a frozen look.

Afterwards, she informed her relentlessly:

“Candy, you will go to Mexico! Make sure to pack all your things by tomorrow afternoon, before they come to pick you up! Have I made myself clear?”

The girl opened her mouth to speak, but the woman silenced her by turning her back on her.

Getting back the jewels and the dresses, Neal and Eliza followed their mother satisfied, smiling maliciously and looking at Candy out of the corner of their eyes.

Mexico...

For a moment Candy stood petrified, unable to move. Mexico. It seemed a place beyond the confines of the world.

Chapter 17

Snorting, Caesar and Cleopatra touched Candy's back with their snouts.

The girl suddenly came back to herself. She didn't remember crying but her cheeks were wet.

Cleopatra licked her tears, while Caesar was looking at her with concern, shaking his mane. During the discussion, a few moments ago, the horses had remained motionless and in silence, but maybe they had understood the accusation she had to endure.

"Thank you, Cleopatra. Thank you, Caesar. You know that, don't you? You know that I would never steal anything that didn't belong to me..."

Stroking their manes, she couldn't help crying. This time it was Caesar who comforted her. If only these two animals could say what had really happened in the stable...But even if they had been able to speak, Mrs. Leagan would only have believed Eliza's version. Candy would be forced to go to Mexico, she had no other choice.

I don't want to go to a Mexican ranch...

But where could she run away? If she returned to Pony's Home, the teachers would be very sad and would discover that the enthusiastic letters they had received until that moment were only full of lies.

"It's funny, isn't it? Until yesterday I was afraid of the idea of having to leave this villa, while today it would be enough for me to know that I can stay in the United States."

She tried to smile at the two worried horses. It was not fair for them to continue to see her crying, but she simply couldn't stop. At least, if she stayed in the United States, sooner or later she could hope to see Anthony again. But in Mexico...

"And...if I stayed with Albert...?" she murmured, shaking her head immediately after that.

No. He doesn't have a home either; I don't want to be a burden to him...

She remembered his appearance. It was enough to look at him to realize that he didn't lead an easy life.

"What should I do...?"

Candy caressed delicately the cross that she kept hidden on her chest. The sound of the little bell dangling from the badge that was hanging around her neck had never changed.

"You are prettier when you laugh than when you cry."

Prince...This time I don't know if I can smile...I can't even imagine how it could be in Mexico...

Listening to the tinkling, she went on wiping away the tears that were flowing. It was a serene and sweet sound, and little by little she began to calm down.

“You are right, Prince...You will come to Mexico with me and give me courage.”

It was definite. Carrying with her the silver badge, she could meet the Prince any time. It was useless to worry about the future; Miss Pony always said that every time she was worried about something.

“Sweet Candy will flourish in Mexico too...And then there is Stear’s ‘umbrella-holder’... Anywhere I go, I’ll never be alone!”

Candy recovered her smile. She recalled Anthony’s look while he was giving her the flowers and Stear’s proud expression when he gave her the “umbrella-holder” saying to her:

“This is a masterpiece! A great invention!”

Candy remembered his words:

“If you wear it on your shoulders as if it were a backpack and press the button that is here at the centre...Ah! Surprised? You see? An umbrella opens! Thanks to that, you’ll always have your hands free, even when it rains!”

Surely Stear had seen her getting water from the well, completely soaked in the rain.

Archie, on the other hand, gave me a lace handkerchief in which he had collected a lot of lavender flowers. It was a Swiss handkerchief that had a great value for him. He must have been worried that the smell of the stable might annoy me...

She must also say goodbye to the three boys. A cloud came again over her face, but Candy quickly scolded herself. She couldn’t spend all the time crying; in the afternoon of the following day she would be forced to leave. She had to meet Anthony and the others and say goodbye to them.

I want them to know that I’m not a thief...

The sun was setting. Before they came to charge her with another task, she went away running.

Meanwhile, the three boys were in the Ardlay residence, in Anthony’s room, holding a meeting about Candy.

“Aunt Sara has the intention of throwing her out at any cost,” said Stear with a deep sigh. “She believes everything Eliza and Neal are saying, and Uncle is never here and can’t help us.”

Stear’s sigh infected Archie too.

“Brother, instead of wasting your time with your silly inventions, why don’t you think of something that can help us save her?”

“Don’t you think I would have done it if I could?” responded Stear, fixing his glasses.

Anthony had remained silent, looking absentmindedly through the window. He didn't know when Candy would be forced to leave, but he should think of something as soon as possible. However, although he was trying, he couldn't find a solution. He was exasperated with his own impotence.

Suddenly the satin curtain of the terrace was inflated and something flew into the room, as fast as a missile, and then landed on the carpet in a way far from perfect. Candy had fallen on her back and was now on the floor, laughing embarrassed.

"Candy!" shouted all three of them at the same time, simultaneously extending their hands to help her stand up.

Laughing, the girl got up by herself.

"How did you get here?" asked Archie, opening his eyes wide.

Panting, the girl pointed at the trees that grew in the garden, whose branches extended to the terrace.

"Moving from tree to tree...but it was more difficult than I expected."

"What did I tell you, boys? Did you see how good she is at climbing trees?"

"It's not time to be glad about these things, Stear. Candy, what's going on? Why did you come straight to us in that way?"

Anthony was looking at her worried.

"I...I have come to say goodbye to you."

"What?"

Getting pale, the boys surrounded her.

"Come on, don't look at me like that, you make me feel embarrassed. Well, are you ready for the news? Tomorrow afternoon, I, Candice White, am leaving for Mexico."

On her way there, the girl had been practising that phrase repeatedly, and as cheerfully as possible. In some way, she seemed to have succeeded...

"Candy...What do you mean *Mexico*?"

All three of them remained silent for a moment, and then Stear let out a deep sigh, incredulous.

"Yes...It seems that some agricultural farm in Mexico needs a 'charming' assistant, so they offered me a job. I thank you for everything you have done for me."

Candy lowered her head. It was impossible for her to look Anthony in the eyes, but the same thing had happened to the boy; one look was enough for him to realize his true feelings. It was difficult even to just listen to that voice that was struggling to sound cheerful.

"And then...I really wanted you to believe me about this...They accused me of having stolen the jewels of Mrs. Leagan...But I'm innocent, I swear!"

"That's evident!" exclaimed Anthony in rage.

As soon as Candy met his gaze, she felt her eyes getting moist.

“But of course! Nobody believes that you could have done a thing like that!” asserted Stear firmly, accompanied by Archie’s affirmative gesture.

“Thank you...That was the only thing that was really worrying me,” said Candy relieved, with a faint smile.

Then she took a deep breath, as if to take courage, and added:

“Well, boys...I truly thank you! Everything has been...so beautiful... As soon as I have settled, I’ll write to you! And...if you have the chance some day, I really hope that you will come and visit me in Mexico!”

Candy tried to make that matter sound unimportant, then she looked at them slowly, trying to imprint their faces in her heart.

Stear’s merry face and his funny glasses...The elegant and very handsome Archie...Oh, Anthony, don’t look at me like that. You make me want to cry...

Trying to keep away these thoughts, Candy parted with them:

“So...Goodbye, boys! I’ll never forget you...”

She uttered those last words with a trembling voice, then impulsively jumped off the terrace to one of the trees.

“Candy!”

Anthony tried to call her, but she quickly disappeared between the darkness of the trees.

Next day, at dawn, Candy was awakened by Stewart. Outside it was still dark.

“Must I leave now? Weren’t they supposed to come in the afternoon?” she cried, jumping out of bed in surprise.

The man replied sadly:

“They’ve already come to pick you up, Candy...”

“I will always have to be leaving in a hurry, won’t I?” remarked the girl merrily, trying to cheer him up.

She got dressed quickly. She had already put all her things in the bag with which she had arrived at the house of the Leagans.

“See? I’ve got many more things than when I came here,” she said smiling, while she was taking gently the pot containing the Sweet Candy roses.

The sad chauffeur helped her get her luggage outside, remaining silent and with his eyes lowered.

It was better that the farewell was a quick one. When she had also left Pony’s Home, everything had happened in an instant, preventing her from feeling pain. Therefore, Candy tried to convince herself that this early departure was actually a kindness towards her.

“Goodbye, Caesar. Goodbye, Cleopatra.”

She wondered if the two horses, still sleepy, realized that she would never come back.

“Please, take care. I’m sure that everyone will look after you...”

She said goodbye to them, hugging their snouts, pressed her cheek against their necks and then came out of the stable without turning back. Everything was wrapped in mist. Outside were Mary, Doug and even Mr. Whitman.

“I would never have imagined that we would come to this...We couldn’t do anything to help you...”

“Thank you for everything, Mr. Whitman! You’ll see that I can get along! Thank you, everyone, for waking up so early to see me off... Goodbye!”

On the verge of tears, Mary hugged her silently.

“Hurry up!”

The mist was diluted and Candy got a glimpse of a covered wagon, driven by a Mexican with a grumpy countenance.

“Yes, I’m coming immediately! Goodbye and thanks to all of you!”

After having said farewell to them with a shaking voice, the girl climbed quickly to the wagon, so that the others would not see her crying.

“Hurry up!” repeated the man irritated, and then he whipped the horses.

Even that dense morning mist, in which she could only distinguish the outline of people, was perhaps a gift. The voices calling her name became more distant, until they weren’t heard anymore and, wobbling from side to side, the wagon started going faster. Candy tried to look around her, hoping to see Anthony and the other boys.

No, it’s impossible...The sun is just rising and I thought myself that I was leaving in the afternoon.

She would have liked so much to see Anthony, Stear and Archie one more time, but she had to resign. She tried to be strong, holding tight the pot with the roses.

Eliza and Neal had witnessed the whole scene from a window, and when the wagon disappeared completely, swallowed by the mist, they began to applaud with happiness. How lucky that early departure was for them!

“That was perfect! Absolutely perfect!”

“What a relief...” remarked Neal, smiling maliciously.

At that moment they heard the sound of hooves getting closer and closer. Three horses stopped right in front of the villa’s front door.

“It’s Anthony with the other two boys! What idiot has warned them?”

Eliza looked nervously out of the window and Neal spoke to them cheerfully:

"I'm sorry for you, but that orphan bastard has already left!"

"What?"

Mounted on his horse, Anthony went pale.

"Her departure was earlier. Besides, a thief like her could only sneak away!"

"Don't talk that way about Candy!" said Anthony raising his head and throwing a murderous look towards Eliza.

The girl averted her eyes, intimidated.

"Let's go, maybe there's still time!" suggested Archie, galloping away.

"I agree. Let's speed up as fast as we can!" said Stear, spurring on his horse.

Candy...Even if it's only for one day...

Anthony bit his lip.

"Anyway, you can't reach her!" shouted Eliza from the window.

The morning mist was clearing up but, as much as they were accelerating, they couldn't see the wagon.

"Let's go up the hill! Maybe from there..." said Anthony, changing the course of his own cavalcade.

Already out of breath, when they reached the top of the highest elevation in the area, they finally saw in the distance a dark shadow similar to that of a wagon moving away more and more along the road.

Really, won't we see each other again, Candy?

Anthony's eyes were moist.

"Candy!" cried the boys as loudly as they could, but their voices were lost in the clear morning sky and couldn't reach her.

The wagon was advancing on its way without stopping, raising clouds of dust, under a sky full of heavy clouds.

The Mexican did nothing else but talk, but Candy didn't understand what he said. He didn't seem to know English very well, and the girl was too concentrated on trying to understand him to give herself up in tears. The only thing she had finally been able to discover was that the man was called Garcia. He was robust, with an abundance of eyebrows and hair, and he was speaking in a very high voice. At first Candy had been a little scared, but when the man realized that she had had nothing to eat, he offered her some of his lunch.

In Mexico they speak another language...So, even if they have to say bad things to me, I will not understand them. How can I say that Mexico is a difficult place if I have not even once been there? It may be a wonderful country.

Thinking of that possibility, she began to feel a little better. If she worked with all her energy, some day she might return to the United States and hug Anthony again.

Towards the sunset, when the sun was beginning to disappear, the wagon finally stopped near a river.

“Hurry up! Lunch! You, little girl; wood, fire!”

No matter how many times she had tried to let him know it, señor Garcia seemed incapable of memorizing Candy’s name.

“I suppose he’s telling me to go find firewood and light a fire to prepare dinner.”

“Hurry up! Hurry up!”

Apparently the words he could pronounce best were “hurry up”. Candy smiled and nodded, then went into the weeds that grew in the vicinity of the river.

He has a brusque way of speaking, but he’s not a bad per...

She didn’t even have time to scream. Someone held her suddenly from behind and covered her mouth with his hand, dragging her towards a car parked nearby.

Chapter 18

A cold wind seemed to be announcing the end of summer.

Anthony was standing absently in the rose garden which was in full bloom. Candy had left just the day before, but it seemed to him that years had passed.

“We knew that you would be here...”

Stear and Archie entered Anthony’s private garden.

“Did you sleep last night, Anthony?”

“Of course not,” replied Archie instead, annoyed.

“Yes. I see that it’s the same for everybody,” said Stear taking off his glasses to rub his eyes.

“I wonder if Candy has arrived in Mexico,” murmured Anthony.

“If we used a device to locate her...”

“Can you really construct something like that, Stear?” asked Anthony, turning to look at him.

“I would like to, but it doesn’t seem feasible...”

“And even if it were, being *your* invention, I doubt that it would work.”

“Is this an opportunity for you to offend your older brother in that way? Although, after all, you are right...” admitted Stear, sighing sadly.

“Are these the Sweet Candy roses? I knew you were working hard to create hybrids...You’ve really done a great job.”

Archie drew close to the pale pink flowers.

“However, when I discovered that you had finally found a name for your rose and had used Candy’s name, I considered it a little unfair...”

With a blank gaze, Stear remarked:

“If she’s not here, we have little to be unfair about.”

Without answering, Anthony extended his hand to touch a Sweet Candy. He brought to his lips the petals that had fallen softly before his touch. Their sweet scent sharpened his pain even more.

That moment, on the other side of the garden appeared Great Aunt Elroy. Protected by an umbrella held by a maid, she seemed to be taking a walk.

“Shouldn’t you be studying?”

Anthony didn’t answer and turned his head defiantly.

“We simply can’t concentrate,” interposed Stear sadly and honestly.

Hearing that reply, the lady took on a severe expression.

“Such an imprudent behavior is absolutely unacceptable. I have no intention of hearing your parents telling me, sooner or later, that since you came here your grades have become worse. I have decided that

from this afternoon you will be studying together with Eliza and Neal. And I also urge you to be kind to them. Don't forget that."

After having dispatched her orders, she resumed her walk.

"With Eliza and Neal? Oh, my God!"

Stear and Archie exchanged a glance and raised their eyes to the sky in a theatrical manner.

That afternoon, Neal and Eliza appeared at the Ardlay house. The girl was elegantly dressed and didn't seem at all to have gone there for studying.

"Hello! Apparently from today we'll spend a lot of time together," she said in an affected manner, greeting the three boys who had gathered in the living room reserved for their studies.

Anthony and Archie ignored her, keeping their heads over their books.

"Yes, but all our teachers are very strict. I don't know if you're capable of keeping up with our pace," said Stear, ironically welcoming them, and tilting his head sideways as if he were in doubt.

Neal's face was contracted.

And is this the way to greet us?

Eliza was about to respond in the same way, but she skillfully changed her expression, showing a big smile. Anthony had actually looked up.

"Oh, Anthony, I'm so happy I can study with you."

Although she had spoken to him in her most enchanting manner, Anthony continued looking out of the window and only answered:

"Yes?"

He wouldn't be still thinking about her? Anyway, now that she's gone, I'm sure he will notice me too. He couldn't really like that low-status girl who comes from an orphanage.

Eliza smiled confidently and approached Anthony carrying with her the book of Physics.

"You know, Anthony, there is something I would like you to explain to me before the teacher comes."

That moment the boy's eyes were illuminated.

I knew it; Anthony feels something for me.

But Eliza was wrong.

The lad got up and shot towards the window. A big luxurious black car, that carried the shield of the Ardlay family, was turning at that moment around the fountain which was located in front of the main entrance.

In the whole family there is only one person who could use a car like this. It's almost certain that it's Great Uncle William.

Anthony tried to sharpen his eyesight. Who was aboard? He couldn't see clearly, but his heart was beating hard, full of expectations. Suddenly he spotted in the back seat a pink dress and bright colored hair. Despite being still far away, Anthony understood.

"It's Candy!" he shouted and rushed out of the room.

"Candy?" asked Stear and Archie incredulous, and knocking down the chairs, they also went towards the window.

"It's true...Stear, Candy is in that car!"

"Yes, it's Candy! Candy is back!"

Overwhelmed with excitement, Stear turned to Eliza and Neal.

"What? That's not possible! She should be in Mexico by now!"

Eliza gave him a look that made the blood freeze in his veins and hurried to reach the window, followed by Neal. In the meantime, Stear and Archie left the room at such a speed, that they overtook even Anthony. The two Leagan siblings, with pale faces, also headed to the door.

The big black car stopped in front of the entrance. First came out a middle-aged man with elegant appearance, who hurried to open the back door. From inside the vehicle came out suddenly a young lady dressed in pink. It was Candy. No doubt it was her.

"Candy!" cried Archie excited.

"It's really her! It's really Candy!" said Stear, examining her continuously from head to toe to make sure that it was truly her.

"Candy..."

"Anthony...I...I can't believe it...Stear! Archie! It still seems to me I'm living in a dream!"

With flushed cheeks and an ecstatic expression, the girl was looking at her three friends. Wrapped in a refined dress of pale pink silk enriched with lace and ruffles, Candy was so lovely that she looked like a princess from a fairy tale.

"Something incredible has happened to me...I...I have been adopted by the Ardlays!" she informed them, holding back her tears.

At that moment, Archie inflated his chest and exclaimed proudly:

"I've done it! Great Uncle has listened to my request!"

"What? Have *you* also written to Great Uncle asking him to adopt Candy?"

"Have *you* done it too, Stear?"

"Obviously...But then..."

Stear and Archie turned to look at Anthony. The boy answered laughing and nodding vigorously.

"I think that my letter was the frankest of all."

"Listen to him! Hey, boys! Let's play according to the rules!" exclaimed Stear.

Hugging each other, the three lads started laughing loudly.

“What’s going on here?”

That moment Great Aunt Elroy appeared on the threshold.

“Aunt! Candy is back! She has been adopted and now she is an Ardlay!” said Anthony proudly, going towards her.

“What do you mean? This is really a very bad joke! I’ve never heard anything about this matter! And I certainly don’t remember having given my consent,” exclaimed the old lady indignantly.

With Eliza and Neal behind her, she looked at Candy with piercing, flaming eyes. That moment, the gentleman who had brought the girl back home, and who had stood aside until now, stepped forward.

“Madam, that is Sir William’s decision,” he announced with a quiet voice, bowing his head.

“George! Explain to me what is happening! I can’t believe that Sir William has taken such an important decision so suddenly and without consulting me! George! You are William’s right hand man; how could you...”

“Madam, it was a matter of the greatest importance which required an immediate intervention, that’s why Sir William has sent me. This is for you...”

Bowing respectfully, he handed her a sealed envelope.

“With the present, I intend to inform everyone that I have accepted the petitions of Anthony, Alistair and Archibald.

Therefore, I have given instructions for Candice White to be adopted and become a part of the Ardlay family.

William A. Ardlay”

Chapter 19

It still seemed to Candy that she was floating in a dream. She just couldn't believe what had happened to her along the road that would lead her to Mexico, when on the banks of the river, being near a bush, she had been forced to get into a car. The man who had brought her after carrying out that kind of abduction had said that he was called George and he was Great Uncle William's secretary.

"I have been ordered to do that so you would become the adopted daughter of the Ardlays, Miss Candice," he had said to her in a moderate way and without even smiling. "I suppose you were scared, because this way of acting was a little brusque, but we didn't have even a moment to lose."

Adopted daughter of the Ardlays. To understand those words well, Candy had asked the man countless times to explain the situation to her again.

George was wearing a dark blue suit of excellent cutting and he almost looked like a professor in the university. He didn't have the appearance of a kidnapper at all, and in case he had been one, no doubt he couldn't have gained anything from her.

"Adopted daughter of the Ardlays...Even when I realized that he was telling me the truth, I couldn't believe it anyway."

Amused, the boys were never tired of listening again to the story of the so-called Case of Candy's Kidnapping.

"Maybe he doesn't look like it, but George is an expert at martial arts, and he is also an excellent shooter. As if that was not enough, he is taciturn and infuses some fear. Surely you were scared, but if he had not acted like this, maybe it would have taken him much longer to get you back home," explained Archie, sitting on the couch, while joyfully turning over the cushions.

Candy was feeling light, as if she were floating in the air. According to what they had told her, the large bedroom that had been reserved for her was, next to that of Great Aunt Elroy's, the most ostentatious room in the villa. It seemed at least as big as the little Pony's Home. She had found in there a soft burgundy carpet, heavy curtains of the same color, furniture with arched legs, and even a four-poster bed. Not even Eliza had that. But the most wonderful of all was to see the smile of the three boys, who were absorbed in looking at her.

That thing she was living was the reality. She had really been adopted. *Now I won't have to leave Anthony and the others anymore...*

That would have been enough for her to be happy, and instead, apart from that, her name had changed to Candice White Ardlay. It sounded great!

“Uncle William is surely amazing. A letter from him is enough to definitely silence Great Aunt Elroy,” remarked Stear laughing merrily.

“You are absolutely right. Everybody says that he has a difficult character, but he has been unexpectedly understanding to us.”

Archie threw a cushion at his brother, who threw it back at Anthony. All three of the boys had a great desire to celebrate.

“Hey, Archie, what kind of person is Uncle William?” asked Candy suddenly, becoming serious. “I have tried many times to ask Mr. George, but he didn’t want to answer me.”

“To tell the truth, we don’t know either, do we, Anthony?”

Even Stear at that moment took on a thoughtful expression.

“Exactly. Nobody has ever seen him, Candy.”

“*Nobody?*”

Astonished, the girl turned for the first time to Anthony. All this time she had been looking timidly at him with sidelong glances, overwhelmed by bashfulness.

The boy looked back at her uncomfortably and added:

“I’ve never heard of anyone in all the family having known him. Apart from George, the only one who communicates directly with him is Aunt Elroy. He is said to be an eccentric and grumpy old gentleman.”

“I see...I would love to meet him at least once so I could thank him.”

“You know, he seems to be a real misanthrope. We would never have liked to meet him,” interposed jovial Archie, stretching himself.

“On the contrary, I can’t wait to be able to meet him. He has saved me. I have always dreamed of being adopted, ever since I was at Pony’s Home, but nobody wanted me. But he has fulfilled my wish,” said Candy, full of gratitude, with shining eyes.

Just looking at her brought a smile to Anthony’s face. The boy was immersed in a sweet-scented happiness.

From now on I can be with her forever...

I can see her every day...

It was enough for them to look into each other’s eyes to understand that both felt the same emotions.

That night Candy wrote to Miss Pony and Sister Lane using the stationery paper of the Ardlay family. At last she could tell them something that was true.

Who knows how happy they would be to hear about the news of her adoption.

But Eliza had such a dreadful look...

Lying on her bed, so soft that she had almost sunk into it, Candy recalled the dinner that had just finished and Eliza's expression; she seemed like a volcano about to erupt at any moment. But she was certainly not the only one who was annoyed. Mrs. Leagan, Great Aunt Elroy and of course Neal too, had completely ignored her.

It is natural for them to be irritated; they had finally managed to throw me out...

I'm almost curious to know what they will invent to vex me.

The glow of the moon was filtered gently through the skylight.

Anthony was there too, in that same villa she was now. Just the thought of it made Candy's heart warmer.

"Dear Great Uncle William, I'm really grateful for everything. Please be always healthy, and I hope that your misanthropy improves as soon as possible, so that I can meet you...Good night."

When she finished her prayer, wrapped in a rose-colored happiness, Candy closed her eyes.

Next day she was awakened by the little birds singing.

Oh, no! I woke up late and I haven't cleaned the stable!

She got up with a start, but then she started laughing; she was no longer in the stable of the Leagans. It was no longer necessary for her to get up at dawn to look after the horses or to work in the kitchen.

Yes, of course. Now I am Candice White Ardlay.

Actually, she still couldn't believe it. She looked around her to observe that splendidly furnished room that now belonged to her.

"Everything is at your complete disposal. Sir William hopes you will be well and strive in your studies," George had told her the previous day, when he had accompanied her to her new room.

Later, as if he had fulfilled all his obligations, he had left hurriedly.

Candy got up and opened the closet. She remained ecstatic and breathless for a moment.

"How many dresses...Not even Eliza has got so many! But when did they prepare them?"

She admired those outfits of all colors and exactly her size, but she decided to wear the simplest and most comfortable. Then she left the room. She was worried about Caesar and Cleopatra. She had to go to them to notify them that she had returned and to brush them. Although she had been adopted, she wanted to continue taking care of the two horses.

She walked down the hall and descended the stairs which were covered with a purple carpet; that was enough to make her feel like a queen. With a ceremonious step, she headed to the back entrance, which was nearest to the garden. At that moment, she heard the servants talking in the vestibule.

“I just can’t call *Miss* that girl named Candy.”

“Oh, neither can I! I heard Miss Eliza say that when she was in the house of the Leagans she even stole things from them!”

“I heard that too! It’s terrible that such a person has been adopted by the Ardlays!”

“Miss Eliza also told me that this girl is very skilled at ingratiating with people and that she’s a big liar. We have to be careful...”

Candy bit her lip and, trying not to make any noise, passed to the other side. She opened the door slowly and went outside. Carrying the scent of flowers, the morning wind wrapped her like a cloak.

I have done nothing wrong...

Then she remembered Miss Pony’s words:

“If you have done nothing to be ashamed of, go forward with your head held high.”

She had told her that phrase when she had been accused of a mischief Tom had done.

Exactly. If I behave honestly, sooner or later everybody will notice it. I have to become a real young lady to make Great Uncle William feel proud!

Armed with courage, she walked towards the garden. Suddenly she saw Anthony coming to meet her and stopped, with her heart full of joy. She was sure that she would find him!

“What an early riser you are, Candy! Yesterday was such a tiresome day that I thought you would still be sleeping.”

The boy’s smile was radiant.

“You always wake up early too, Anthony,” replied Candy, squinting her eyes.

“The roses get up long before I do,” he said smiling.

The roses...

Candy frowned suddenly. She was very happy that she had become a part of the Ardlay family, but there was a thought that couldn’t be driven away: the flower pot of the Sweet Candy roses. Seeing her sad all of a sudden, Anthony leaned forward worried and looked at her face.

“What’s the matter, Candy? Don’t tell me that Eliza and Neal have again...”

“No, no. You see, I...I must apologize to you...” replied Candy taking a deep breath and raising her eyes. “It’s about the Sweet Candy roses...”

“You have left them in the wagon, haven’t you?”

The boy smiled, as if he already knew everything.

“Anthony, forgive me! I would like to go back there just to get them...” said Candy apprehensively.

The lad couldn't refrain from holding out his hand to caress her flushed cheeks, but he stopped halfway. Speeding up his pace, he said:

"Come with me, Candy."

He led her to his rose garden. Candy followed him with small quick steps, crying joyfully:

"How many Sweet Candy roses!"

In a corner of Anthony's garden there was a Sweet Candy rosebush. The pale pink flowers were blooming splendidly.

"Those I had given to you came from this plant. I'm happy that they have taken your place, and that you are here."

"Thank you, Anthony..."

Listening to the boy's explanations, as he was trying to reassure her, Candy had almost wanted to cry, touched by so much kindness. Bending down, she brought her face close to many of the corollas that had opened and noticed the perfume she already knew. Suddenly, illuminated by the morning light, something shone on her chest.

"What's that badge you're wearing along with that cross?" asked the boy surprised.

"Oh, that? It belongs to Prince on the Hill..." she explained, grasping her valuable badge.

"A prince?"

"Actually, I'm the only one to call him that. I don't know anything about him, not even his real name. He was a wonderful boy. You know, Anthony, the first time I saw you, I was speechless. You look exactly like him."

Candy didn't notice that the boy's expression had suddenly changed. She just wanted to confide to him this secret that she hadn't even told Miss Pony and Sister Lane.

"When I was six years old, I was crying on Pony's Hill one day, and that's when my Prince appeared. He was wearing the traditional costume of Scotland and..."

"This is undoubtedly the badge of the Ardlay family, but it's a little different from mine..." Anthony interrupted her, with his voice slightly veiled with sharpness.

Candy looked at him surprised:

"The badge of the Ardlay family? Then the prince is *really* a member of your family?"

"It is possible..."

Anthony looked away. He had the feeling that a great weight had fallen on his heart. He thought of that boy Candy had met many years ago, and had never forgotten. Even today, his memory could change her expression in that way...

Who is that boy Candy can't forget? Who is the owner of that badge which is so much like mine?

"Is anything wrong, Anthony?"

Noticing his silence, Candy stared at him full of anxiety, but Anthony kept his head lowered, looking away.

"Candy...the first time we met you called me 'prince', remember? Then it's just because I look like him that..."

"Anthony!"

Taken by surprise, Candy denied it shaking her head vigorously. Her breathing was quickened: she had already guessed the conclusion of that phrase.

"You're wrong, Anthony! I didn't want you to misunderstand me, but I didn't know how to explain it to you. Anthony! You...I love you for whom you are! I love you because you are *you!*"

She had said it. Candy held her breath and lowered her head. What a shame: she had really said something like that...Not being able to endure it, she turned breathless and started running.

Anthony was stunned for a moment, but then he exclaimed:

"Candy! I love you too! I really love you!"

Turning to the figure that was running away, he pronounced those words for the first time. They had rushed out of his heart, but the voice that had expressed them had in fact been barely perceptible.

Chapter 20

The first week as an adoptive daughter of the Ardlays flew by. Candy's days were full of special lessons of how to become a "real lady", taught by cold and severe teachers chosen by Great Aunt Elroy. However, the girl had decided to strive to the fullest. Not for nothing; now she was an Ardlay.

Some day, when I meet Uncle William, I wish that he could be proud of me...And then...

And then she wanted to become a young lady worthy of Anthony. At this thought, she blushed with embarrassment.

In the afternoon, when she finished her private lesson in etiquette and said goodbye to the teacher at the main entrance, Candy stretched out without being seen and ran at full speed towards the fountain with the statue of Diana, the goddess of the moon, located in the inner courtyard.

"What have you been doing, Candy?"

Anthony and the other two boys were impatiently waiting for her there. They ran to meet her.

"I...Umm...I have just *finished*," she said with a grimace, leaning to lift the edge of her dress.

"And what's that?" asked Stear laughing, imitated by Anthony and Archie.

"I learned it from Miss Jane, my teacher in etiquette. She says that my manners are worse than a monkey's, and that even a horse could express itself with greater elegance than me," she explained in a haughty manner, lifting her chin.

Nudging one another, the boys laughed heartily.

Candy jokingly stuck out her tongue at them and sighed in a theatrical manner:

"Oh, how uncomfortable it is to be a young lady. You can't climb trees, and don't even speak about biting apples...It seems terrible, you know."

"And what about you, Candy? What do you plan to do?" asked Stear naughtily, studying her face.

"I think that's evident!"

Candy took off her leather shoes and her socks, matching the color of the dress, and impulsively took hold of the arm of the goddess Diana, returning later with a leap back to her place. Stear whistled and shouted with joy.

“Hey, brother, didn’t you try that too the other day? It’s too bad you didn’t even reach the statue; you fell into the fountain,” commented Archie ironically.

“Let’s forget about the past. Well done, Candy, you wouldn’t be yourself if you behaved in that affected manner. Isn’t that true, Anthony?”

“Yes. You must always be yourself, Candy. It’s when you are spontaneous that you are more charming,” responded the lad, watching her tenderly.

“What impressive phrases, Anthony! They sound much better coming from me,” Archie said in jest, immobilizing him from behind.

“Hey, Stear, what is that amazing thing you were talking to me about this morning? I’ve been waiting all day to find out!”

Unable to bear Anthony’s abashed expression, Candy’s voice became more cheerful.

“Oh, all right! Come on! Everybody to the lake!”

Raising his arm, Stear started running. Candy followed him barefoot, carrying her shoes in her hand. Almost naturally, she was always close to Anthony. Even at that moment, they were running side by side. Without realizing it, the boys passed laughing in front of the hexagonal-shaped summer house of the garden.

That moment Great Aunt Elroy and the Leagan siblings were having their tea, and they looked away annoyed. Restraining herself from tapping her foot on the floor, Eliza kept walking in circles, while Neal deposited loudly his cup in the saucer, irritated.

“Aunt! How can you let her do as she likes? How can a thief like her rule the house of the Ardlays?”

“Eliza is right, Aunt! I’m worried too. What if she steals the jewels again?”

“Of course, we all keep our eyes open, Neal. I have already warned the servants about the bad habit that girl has. However, I can do nothing. Great Uncle William’s orders will not be discussed.”

“But, Aunt! It may be Great Uncle William’s order, but I can’t accept her as a member of the Ardlay family! Even mama and papa say that...”

“Eliza, I think exactly like Sara. We have to find a way for her to leave. Nevertheless, according to Great Uncle William’s order, we have to hold a fox hunting to present her officially as the adopted daughter of the Ardlays. This is really a great problem,” said the woman plaintively, rubbing her temples.

“But she doesn’t even know how to ride a horse!” snapped Neal.

Eliza nodded so forcefully, that her head was almost parted from her body.

“I’m really worried. How can I bring a girl lacking in any kind of education like her to a great reception? Great Uncle William must have thought the same thing, since he is determined to present her officially on an occasion like a hunting, when we will all gather to entertain ourselves. But I wonder why he has made a decision that will ridicule her in front of the whole family...”

Great Aunt Elroy let out a deep sigh.

Just before sunset the lake merged with the sky, glowing with an even more intense blue. A large swan was gliding on its surface. That was precisely Stear’s fanciful invention, a boat in the shape of that white bird.

“Well, Candy? What do you think about this elegant mode of transportation as its first passenger?”

“It’s wonderful! It seems as if it has been taken out of a fairy tale! I can’t wait to get on it!”

The girl looked at the interior, smiling.

“Candy, don’t be too happy ahead of time. Maybe you’ll cry later.”

“Very funny, Archie! Come on, Candy, once you get in, something amazing is waiting for you.”

“Oh, how thrilling!” she answered cheerfully.

When she got on board, a cylinder placed in the middle of the boat suddenly sprouted a jet of water which fell on her like a shower. Candy was soaked wet from head to toe.

“Oh, forgive me! I forgot to tell you to open the umbrella!”

Seeing Stear putting his hands over his head, the other two boys were squirming with laughter.

“This is *really* something amazing, Stear!”

“Don’t say that, Anthony! This is the Swan Boat with a Fountain: it allows you to navigate on the lake admiring the rainbow and...Well, at least that was the idea.”

“It’s a fantastic idea, Stear...But is a bath required every time someone gets on board?”

Candy got off the boat and the three boys offered her their handkerchiefs. Feeling like a princess protected by her knights, the girl accepted their presents.

A light wind was blowing on the lake. It was probably the south wind. If at that moment she had entrusted to the stream a bottle containing a message, it might have got to Albert. Candy would like to tell him as soon as possible about the luck that had befallen her.

Albert, I’m back! And now I’m a part of the Ardlay family! I can’t believe it. Life is really something extraordinary!

“Candy, have you thought about our proposal?” Archie asked her smiling, concentrated on fixing his hair with his slender fingers.

“Oh, of course! The Gate of Candy!”

Stear lay down on the grass and the others settled around him. Candy felt her heart racing: Anthony’s shoulder was so close that it was touching hers.

The Gate of Candy. It would be a gate belonging completely to her.

Anthony had the Gate of Roses, Archie the Stone Entrance with the engravings of the elegant knight, and Stear had designed the ingenious Portal of Water. That was the true meaning of the three entrances. When they saw the girl’s admiration, the three of them had expressed their intention of constructing one just for her.

“Of course I have thought about it! I would like...a Gate of Confectionery! To enter you need to go inside a donut, and the walls around must be made of chocolate, with pastry, and...”

“...And with so much candy that we will all remember your name, I suppose,” said Anthony instantly, looking at her with his crystal-clear eyes.

“That would be a really sweet gate,” remarked Archie, rubbing his belly just at the thought of it.

“That’s true. In fact it has made me a little hungry,” said Stear getting up immediately, and they all started laughing.

Candy was feeling so happy that she almost wanted to cry.

Great Aunt treated her coldly, while the servants ignored her without hiding their contempt, but she couldn’t be happier than this. She had those three splendid boys with her, and with them by her side nothing mattered. But, above all, she was so close to Anthony’s smile...

That day, when she had confided to him that she loved him, he hadn’t made any reply. Or at least she was convinced of that. Nonetheless, Candy felt that since that moment the boy had become even more gentle and he was with her more often than before. She didn’t need any words to understand Anthony’s feelings.

Early in the morning, while the rest of the house was still sleeping in silence, Candy met Anthony in the rose garden. They had never really agreed to meet, but they already knew where to go, as if a thin thread connected them and guided them to each other. That was a moment only for them. Wrapped in the sweet perfume of roses, Candy took care of the flowers together with Anthony, and she often felt that this was still a dream.

Candy ran to the garden even the morning before the day of the fox hunting.

It was a windy day, and from the rose garden there came softly the petals of the flowers, flying in the air and landing at the girl’s feet. Anthony was already there, looking at the Sweet Candy roses, now almost leafless.

The girl was about to call him, but then she stopped. He seemed very distant. It was a strange sensation; he was there, a few steps away, it would have been enough for her to pronounce his name, but she had the impression that Anthony was in a place so far away that, even if she ran towards it, she would never reach it.

At that moment, the boy turned slowly.

“What’s the matter, Candy? Why are you standing so still there?”

Watching him smile as he always did, Candy cheered up and replied:

“I have been thinking that today many roses are withering.”

Even at that moment, the pale pink petals that had fallen on the hair of both of them were suddenly transported by the wind as if they were butterflies.

They seemed to be hurrying to go anywhere. Dancing in the air, they disappeared in the clear blue sky.

“It’s the end of the season,” murmured Anthony, watching with Candy the direction of the petals. “The petals were also falling like this when my mother died...”

Candy was startled. She knew that the boy had lost his mother when he was little, but he had never talked about this.

“You know, Candy, my mother loved roses very much.”

Anthony remembered her smile. She had a delicate health, and when she didn’t take care of the flowers, she was always sitting in a rocking chair, looking at the garden. Whenever she looked at her son, her beautiful green eyes seemed to light up, and on her face appeared an even sweeter smile.

“When I was little I hated so much seeing the roses throwing their petals...It was sad, and for some strange reason I felt alone. Maybe it seemed to me that I saw my mother in them...It was as if along with the flowers, she would die too. But it was my own mother who told me that the roses are beautiful because they wither. ‘They are born and die, again and again. In this way, flowers live forever...’ ”

Almost as if he were talking to himself, Anthony murmured his mother’s words, looking at some distant point.

“ ‘Flowers die and they are born again even more beautiful. People die and they are born again even nicer in the hearts of those who stay behind. Therefore, Anthony, I will live forever in your heart...’ Mama said this to me looking straight into my eyes. I was too little to really understand what she was trying to tell me, but seeing her green eyes getting wet as if they were two beautiful lakes, I agreed with great conviction...She passed away three days later...”

“Anthony...”

The boy looked at her and smiled. His eyes were more limpid than the morning sky.

“It is strange, isn’t it, Candy? I can still remember her perfectly well. I even remember her voice. It’s true that when people die, they live again in our hearts, becoming even more beautiful than they were.”
Candy remained silent, looking at him. She was afraid that, if she turned her eyes away, the boy would dissolve in the light.

Conclusion

Now that I think again of that oppressive presentiment I had back then, I believe that maybe in my heart I already knew what was about to happen...

I don't know how long I remained standing in front of Slim's picture. It seemed to me a very long time, but the afternoon light that was filtered copiously through the curtain hadn't dimmed at all. I immersed myself in that painting that fully portrayed Pony's Home, and in an instant I went back in time.

A painful tragedy, even to just remember it...A day that I wish I had never lived, but I can never forget in any way. Surely during our lives all of us carry similar memories in our hearts.

I sigh. I sit carefully on the sofa located a little further away, and Pony's Home in that painting becomes a little more distant. Just seeing it at the end of the road was something so comforting to me that it made me run towards it with confidence. This is the place where I can return to and, at the same time, the place from which I can leave with my heart full of hope.

I remember one by one all the words whispered by Anthony that morning inside the garden. Among the petals that were dancing in the air, that place was so beautiful that it seemed like paradise. I remember his sad voice, his gestures, even his smile that was so sweet. But, on the contrary, back then I immediately forgot everything, even that presentiment that had invaded me for a moment; I was too preoccupied about the fox hunting the following day.

I wanted to successfully get over the ceremony of my presentation, in a way that would not embarrass Uncle William. I wished everything would work out well even for Anthony, Stear and Archie, who had secretly taught me how to ride a horse.

The three boys, unlike adults, didn't show great interest in hunting activity and Anthony felt guilty too about foxes.

"Adults really contradict themselves, don't they? They teach us to love animals, but they accept fox hunting. When I grow up, I won't do certain things," he told me once, and then added: "But you know, Candy, this time it's different because it's about your presentation. On the occasion of this first step for you to be accepted as a member of the Ardlay family, I want to catch in your honor a fox that even the adults will envy."

Oh, Anthony...

I can only keep repeating his name. More than twenty years have passed since then, but these are the only words I can say.

That morning the sky was unusually clear. Even Great Aunt Elroy had let a smile escape her saying:

“It’s a perfect day for the fox hunting.”

My official presentation as the adoptive daughter of the Ardlays...I presumed a calm appearance, but my smile concealed a great nervousness. I knew well that, starting from Great Aunt, none of the family would be friendly with me. The attitude of the servants was clear too. Everybody simply obeyed reluctantly Great Uncle William’s orders.

“Will Great Uncle William be here?”

That was what I wanted most in my heart. I had written to him many times, without ever getting a reply, but I was hoping to meet him at least that day, so I could tell him even a single word of gratitude.

“No, I don’t think he’s going to join us. Remember that he’s a misanthrope. Besides, he’s more than an uncle, he’s a *great uncle*, so I don’t really believe he can take part in a hunting. I’m almost sure he can’t even stand, let alone ride a horse!”

Recalling Stear’s burlesque movements, as he was interpreting, always makes me smile.

That day the three boys had been my knights more than ever.

The huge forest of the Ardlays. The looks of the people gathered were even colder than I had expected. Certainly Mrs. Leagan had already spread terrible stories about me to all the family.

“Great Uncle William’s whims always put us in great trouble, but this time it has been a real folly. Here is Candy, his adoptive daughter.”

Great Aunt Elroy introduced me with those words, making immediately her displeasure clear. I remember I was surprised, but I was so happy, since I was not even sure that she would actually make the presentation. Nobody considered me as an Ardlay, but my challenge started that moment. My heart was full of determination. Of course Eliza and Neal were there too, dressed in pompous clothes. They seemed to look for the right moment to embarrass me, but I had always my three friends by my side.

Later, in the forest rang the shot that started the hunting. Hitting the ground, the horses launched at a gallop, accompanied by the barking dogs scattered everywhere.

Even I, protected by Stear, Archie and Anthony, started my slow racing. From time to time I had secretly mounted Cleopatra, and I

had been accustomed to being in contact with horses, but riding at such a speed was actually something completely different.

“Archie, what is the hunting prize?” Stear turned to ask him, pulling the reins.

“A ruby pendant offered by Great Uncle William. And it will be mine!”

After winking at me, Archie had suddenly spurred his horse and headed towards the forest.

“You’ll see that he knows a good hunting place!”

Stear hurried after him and suddenly I was found alone with Anthony. He slowly brought his mount closer to mine.

“I also know an excellent hunting place,” he said mischievously, but he remained in his place to take care of me due to my lack of familiarity with horses.

Another shot rang from somewhere, and the barking of the dogs moved away.

Anthony had entered the dark and dense forest, advancing with his back crouching. Suddenly everything was illuminated and, almost as if it were an oasis, we were found in a glade. The atmosphere of that place suddenly brought to my mind Pony’s Hill and, almost without thinking, I shared that thought with him.

“Pony’s Hill? This is the place you have come from, isn’t it, Candy?”

Anthony asked me, turning around. “I would like to see it some day. And I also want to visit there to see where you grew up, and meet Miss Pony and Sister Lane.”

“It’s a promise, Anthony!”

I pounced with joy on the horse’s back.

He looked at me amused, but he suddenly became serious and said to me:

“When you were little you met your prince on Pony’s Hill, didn’t you? You know, the description you have given me of that boy reminded me of something...Maybe, when I was a little boy...”

At that moment we heard a rustle coming from a nearby bush, and suddenly appeared a fox with a voluminous tail.

“Candy, it’s me who will give you that ruby!”

Smiling at me, he rearranged himself lightly on the saddle and tapped the horse on the flanks, launching in pursuit of the animal.

Running at a breakneck speed, the prey was trying to escape, and even Anthony’s horse increased the speed of its galloping. By the time it was already trapped, the fox was trembling and shaking frantically, as if it had become crazy.

But suddenly, Anthony’s horse kicked hard with its front legs, arching backwards. It had ended up in a trap.

Then, that neighing...

I immediately cover my face with my hands and get up from the sofa. Even now I don't want to remember that moment again. It's hard to face reality. However, that moment is engraved in my memory and it comes back, again and again, reviving in my dreams.

Anthony is falling slowly from his white horse. No, it can't have happened in that way. Actually everything happened quickly. Anthony was thrown off his horse, but in my mind it is as if everything were in a slow motion.

There was no sound. I didn't even hear my voice screaming.

Then I fainted, and when I regained consciousness I remembered nothing.

Anthony Brown. He was only fifteen years old. He was a gentle boy who loved roses. How cruel God could be.

In a moment, it seemed to me that all colors had abandoned this world. It must have been the same for every member of the Ardlay family.

I remember Stear's and Archie's sad and dull looks. Despite everything, they had tried to protect me from Great Aunt Elroy's rage.

"This is your fault! If only you hadn't been adopted by the Ardlays..."

After having shouted those words against me, she retired to her room, as if she didn't want to see me ever again.

Yes, Archie and Stear had comforted me with all their strength, but I knew very well how that old lady was feeling. In my heart, I also thought I was guilty.

This is the irony of fate. Since I was little I had been dreaming of being adopted by a rich family.

If that was the price, then it would have been better if I had gone to work in Mexico. I would have faced any hard job, if that would serve to keep Anthony alive...

How many times have I thought about that? I even imagined that, if I had returned that moment to Mexico, he would have come back to life.

What does it mean to achieve happiness? I don't know anymore...I'm not sure I understand that even now. What I search for is something simple: to be able to live with the person I love.

Even after the funeral, the nightmare continued hanging around the Ardlay house.

Stear and Archie became more and more taciturn, almost as if they had lost all of their spirit.

I used to go to the garden every morning, at the exact time I had been meeting Anthony, but that place, already devoid of flowers, was

completely dead and the branches trembled with the wind, as if they were cold. I was convinced that no flower would ever bloom again.

Flowers die and they are born again even more beautiful. People die and they are born again even nicer in the hearts of those who stay behind.

From the bottom of my heart, Anthony's words had come again to the surface.

That's not what I want! I don't care if you relive in my heart, even if it happens in a wonderful way, Anthony! I want to hear your voice! I want to see your eyes shining! I want to touch your hands!

When I screamed those words inside of me, my eyes were filled with tears. I collapsed on the ground and started crying disconsolately. But, as I continued, the tears didn't seem to stop.

What should I do...what should I do?

Crying, I grabbed a branch, as if to cling to Anthony. It was then that I pricked the tip of my finger with a dark spine, causing a drop of red blood to flow. I stood staring at it for a moment, bewildered, and I suddenly realized that I was alive. I looked slowly around me.

That place, that had seemed barren to me before, gave me the impression that it was protecting life, so that the flowers could bloom even more beautiful next season.

Anthony...What does it mean to live? What does it mean to die? Anthony, do I have to go on living even if you don't anymore?

Yes, Candy.

That moment, I really heard his voice in the wind.

I want you to live with a smile, just as you have been doing until now.

I know, Anthony, but it will be difficult...Anthony, I loved you so much...

I loved you too.

Maybe that voice I thought I heard was a pure suggestion of mine, but I'm convinced that it was him who gave me strength to move on.

What must I do now?

Crying, I looked at my injured finger. Without my realizing it, the blood had stopped.

“For the king of inventions all over the world, Alistair Cornwell, and for the brave knight of the Stone Entrance, Archibald Cornwell.

Dear Stear and Archie,

Please forgive me for leaving without saying goodbye to you.

I can't stay any longer in that villa which is full of Anthony's memory. It would be too painful for me.

I don't want to be a cause of more suffering for Great Aunt Elroy, but most of all I can't see you so sad.

For the first time in my life, I managed to explore inside of me. Being adopted by the Ardleys has been a wonderful dream. But cotton dresses with patches are more fitting for me than silk ones. What I realized is that I am the one who prefers them.

I hear a voice inside of me telling me to look for happiness with my own strength.

Stear, Archie, I don't know how to thank you for all you have done for me. I'll never forget your kindness.

We have so many good memories, don't we? It's those memories that will make me a truly happy person.

I also intend to write to Great Uncle William to apologize and thank him for adopting me. It was only for a short time, but he has allowed me to live a beautiful dream.

Stear, Archie, you mustn't worry about me. When you receive this letter, I'll be on the train going directly to Pony's Home.

I hope you are always well. Also look after Great Aunt. The next time we see each other, we'll do it with a smile. It's a promise.

Candice White"