

The Season of the Daffodils
By
Josephine Hymes



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PROLOGUE

To all who attempt to read this text,

The story you are about to read is not a work of art and does not attempt to make any aesthetic statement with its composition, events, or symbols. It is based –more or less- on a story written by Keiko Nagita and Illustrated by Yumiko Igarashi in the 1970s. This same story was later retold by the same Nagita in a series of two novels and finally revised and edited in a publication named ***Candy Candy: Final Story*** (November 2010). Therefore, the present piece of fiction is anything but original.

Even as a fan-created fictional story this text is not the result of one single creative mind. In fact, it is plagued with ideas that have come from the minds of many members of Candy Candy fandom. My especial acknowledgement goes to my fellow fans from the candyterry.com forum, which was the first English-based forum devoted to Candy Candy in our international fandom. This forum was active since the mid-1990s and remained online for over 20 years. Although this forum is no longer active, the spirited discussions, shared feelings, and enthusiastic speculations about Final Story fan-translations still live and tell a story from the pages of this fanfiction. It is only fair that all due appreciation is here given to all the participants who have inspired this fic. Special acknowledgements should be given to:

- Nila B., webmistress of the candyterry.com website and friend of many years, who helped me by patiently reading the first manuscript and encouraging me to continue to the end.
- Sara Nardo, a dear fellow-fan, who read the drafts of this story and sent helpful feedback and ideas to improve the 2011 version.
- Nuria Márquez, who created a series of wonderful 3D fanart inspired by this story. The reader can admire her work at:
<http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv7f8k5fE4Y1mzXxqgAJ34w>
<http://nmarquez72.deviantart.com/>

Therefore, I have put together this story weaving my own ideas and those of my fellow fans together. Consider it as my own way to orchestrate an interpretation of the story that only reflects my preferences and personal views of the adventures and tribulations of Candice White Ardlay. This new and revised version of the story is here published as we approach the 15th anniversary of CCFS first edition.

In conclusion, while reading this –if you dare – you may find things you agree or disagree with, things you find unlikely to happen in a real sequel of the story that we all love. Please, do not take it personally. As an amateur writer, I only attempted to please myself, easing down the stress of my professional life. I had the daring thought that perhaps others might enjoy the piece as well, and that is why this story is here for you to read.

During the composition of this story, some research has been done regarding the customs and conventions of the 1920s and 1930s, the historical period in which the story develops. Some inspiration has been taken from books, movies, music published at the time, Shakespeare’s plays and poems, photos, and encyclopedia entries. I offer no apologies for the ideas respectfully borrowed and the images depicted, since no copyright is violated in a fanfiction that will never be sold or commercialized.

I can only claim authorship of those details of the story that my imagination and pen orchestrated to fill in the blanks left by Keiko Nagita and give more detail and historical realism to this story.

Finally, as for the rating, this fic falls mostly in the “general” category, though some sections may be considered as “mature” for strong language and some sensual depictions of love; please, consider this before reading if you do not like seeing /reading Candy and other characters depicted this way.

This been said, if you do not care for reading an “original” story and want to kill your time with a perhaps prosaic love tale full of clichés, you may continue reading. You have been warned.

Yours Truly,

Josephine Hymes

Chapter I

Two Letters



1

Children voices filled the air. It was one of those splendid summer mornings in Illinois' countryside, when the elderberries are in bloom. Candy had picked a whole basket of those tiny white flowers, and Miss Pony was about to prepare her famous elderflower cordial². Not long after the old lady had poured the sugar in the boiling water, the sweet fragrance of the flowers began to pervade the kitchen. Miss Pony closed her wrinkled eyes in delight. When the lady finally opened them back, her attention was caught by the sight of her daughter picking up the mail from the box.

"Candy was a full grown-up woman by now", Miss Pony mused as she observed the young woman through the kitchen's window. They had just celebrated her twenty sixth birthday the previous month. It had been quite a celebration with all Pony's dear old children and their loved ones attending the occasion. Annie Cornwells with her husband and little heir, Jimmy Cartwright coming from Chicago where he studied, Tom Stevenson from Lakewood, Patricia O'Brian travelling all the way from Oxford . . . all of them had conspired with Sister Lane to prepare the surprise party. Even Mr. Ardlay had been able to be there, finding a respite in his endless traveling around the world.

¹ All images were created by Josephine Hymes using Copilot Designer, empowered by DALL-E 3

² The elderberry and lemon cordial was a typical summer drink -with or without alcohol- of the Victorian times. Miss Pony perhaps preserves this recipe like a family secret that might indicate that the old lady could have come from a family with long-standing traditions.

“They all love her dearly,” Miss Pony smiled to herself, as she constantly stirred her cordial, “How not to? She is a real darling, and a blessing to us all.”

The old lady remembered the many times during the past years when the young woman had proved to be crucial in most of their lives. Candy had been by Annie’s side during the months of her difficult pregnancy, not leaving her for a minute until the end of her confinement. Then she had been there for Jimmy when Mr. Cartwright had passed away, inspiring him to go on. It was because of her encouragement that he had decided to attend college, as his father had desired. It was Candy again, who played an important role during the Scarlet Fever outbreak in Pony’s Home. It was the same Candy who had worked tirelessly to gather funds for the immigrants’ children in Patty’s school, during her time in Florida.

“Always putting her own pains and worries aside for the sake of others,” thought Miss Pony with a soft sigh, “I’m glad that Sister Lane and I are still here to look after her, at least. Yet, I sometimes wonder if that is all that she needs.”

Candy’s brisk steps could then be heard entering the fragrant kitchen. Miss Pony put off the fire in her stove and turned to face the young woman.

“Any news?” asked the lady casually.

“Let’s see. There’s a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Hawthorn.”

“Let me see it,” said Miss Pony as she wiped her chubby hands with her apron, “They should be sending the donation they promised.”

Candy, who was wearing a pair of denim pants and a checkered shirt, spread the bunch of envelopes on the oak table to continue sorting the mail. Meanwhile, Miss Pony was perusing her letter absentmindedly.

“Here,” Candy added, “There’s another postcard from Albert and a little note from Annie....and...”

Miss Pony lifted her eyes from the paper she was reading noticing the sudden silence. Candy had literally collapsed on a nearby chair and her cheeks had lost her usual blush.

“Sweet Jesus, Candy, what is the matter?” urged the old lady. “Candy?” called Miss Pony as she got close to the young woman.

“It. . . it is nothing,” the blonde finally answered with a husky voice.

“Candice White Ardlay,” scolded Miss Pony, “Do you think I’m going to buy that? You have gone pale for nothing. Tell me, what is the matter?”

Miss Pony observed that Candy's hands were trembling as she still held the unopened letter. She was like in a trance, just staring at the envelope.

"Who sent that letter?" Miss Pony asked again.

"It's a letter from Terry!" Candy finally blurted, almost screaming as if pricked by pain. Then, all of a sudden, she stood up and ran out of the kitchen. Her movements were so swift that Miss Pony barely had time to notice that Candy's eyes were in tears.

"What's going on here?" asked a third female voice as Sister Lane entered the room.

The nun found Miss Pony as she heavily sat on the very same chair Candy had used, just a second before.

"What happened, Miss Pony, I think I heard Candy raising her voice?"

Miss Pony silently signaled her life companion to sit down next to her. When Sister Lane saw the solemn expression on Miss Pony's face, she understood that they were up for something really serious at Pony's Home.

"It has happened at long last, Sister Lane" said the old woman breaking the silence. She produced a handkerchief from her pocket and began cleaning her glasses, "It appears that Mr. Grandchester has finally gathered the courage to reach out and contact Candy."

Sister Lane exchanged a knowing look with her friend as she instinctively held the cross in her wooden rosary.

"We knew this was coming since we heard of Miss Marlowe's unfortunate death, didn't we, Miss Pony?" replied the nun.

"I know, my friend, but it took him a while to make up his mind. I was beginning to think that he would never do it."

"Over a year, I think," added Sister Lane lifting her eyes as if concentrating to make the figures, "The proper time for a decent mourning, I believe. Mr. Grandchester has always been a man of decorum in his own particular way."

"Perhaps it was out of propriety he waited so long, or perhaps out of fear," commented Miss Pony, pensive "but what really matters here is how Candy is going to react to whatever news his letter may bring."

"What could you observe?" asked Sister Lane.

“She was in shock and I think she was crying as well,” responded the old lady whilst she stood up to turn to the window. The old yellow poplar³ that dominated the view from the top of Pony’s Hill was still in bloom, “She should be reading his letter by the shade of Father Tree, I suppose.”

“That will appease her heart a bit, I hope” commented Sister Lane and then, as if having second thoughts she added, “that such a gesture from Mr. Grandchester takes her by surprise, though, does not cease to amaze me.” Miss Pony turned to see her old friend with a dreaming expression on her face.

“I am afraid that is the way of love in the human heart; . . .always uncertain, always unsecure about our powers over our beloved. I believe this letter was totally unexpected for Candy, Sister Lane. She had given up all her hopes, after so many years.”

“In her mind, I think she had,” added the nun, “but obviously, in her heart she had not given him up.”

“In that, I agree,” rejoined the old lady as she went back to her duties.



Father Tree faithfully bloomed each May. His yellowish green, magnolia-like flowers lasted only for a month or so, but their beauty made the wait worth-while. Candy remembered Annie and herself gathering the old flowers that fell from it by the beginning of June. They would press them in their notebooks as a keepsake of spring times. In the long and cold winter nights, the girls used to look at the dried flowers wishing for spring to be back.

It was again the beginning of June now. Candy raised her face to observe the few flowers that still remained attached to their stems. The sun light streamed through the dense foliage of the Yellow Poplar. Candy breathed deeply. She could feel the smell of summer floating in the air.

She still held his letter in her hands. Her eyes had perused the words on it by the hundredth time. She was afraid of reading too much or too little in the brief lines he had managed to send.

³ The yellow poplar or tulip tree is considered Indiana State Tree. In this story, Father Tree is a yellow poplar because its canopy shape and height is close to the idea that us fans have of the emblematic tree in the anime and because it is considered a local species in the place in which Pony’s Home is located (in this fanfiction).

Stratford, 7th of May, 1924

Dear Candy,

How are you? I am not certain if this letter will ever reach you, but I had to try my luck. I decided to send it to the only address I suspected you would still have some sort of contact with.

I may presume too much, but I trust you are aware that it's been over a year. . . I had been planning, rather hoping against hope, on getting in touch after the end of the first year. Yet, my indecision prevented me from doing anything for almost six months after.

Oh well, there, I said it. This is as much as an overture only. If I don't send this letter now, I never will.

J.G.

P.S.

You must know that nothing has changed within me during all these years.

Candy's eyes studied each line and curve in his writing. His neat and strong handwriting had not swayed a bit. That was sure. However, she did not know what to make of the words she was reading.

"A year and a half ago," Candy whispered wistfully.

Of course she knew well what had happened in December the year before last. It was in a gray winter morning that she had discovered the news in the obituaries. She still remembered that her legs had faltered when her eyes accidentally stumbled over the title that announced Susannah Marlowe's death. Apparently, the young woman had succumbed after a long and difficult fight with a rare disease. She had never lived to marry Terrence, even

though they had both sustained a long engagement. Faithful to his promises, the young man had supported her to the very end.

Being the tender-hearted person she ever was, Candy had felt deep sorrow upon finding the unfortunate news. She had trusted that Susannah would bring Terry some peace of mind after the turmoil of his adolescence. He, on his turn, thought Candy, was the only one that could make Susannah happy. She deserved as much after her sacrifice. . . . Once again, Candy's hopes had been disappointed.

The young woman knew that Terry had suffered deeply after their separation eight years before⁴; her "almost" encounter with him at Rocktown, being the vivid proof of his grief. However, Candy did not consider herself unforgettable. How could she? She was just a country miss without great accomplishments, elegance or beauty. She was sure that Terry would end up falling for Susannah and that they would live happily ever after, just as Candy had wished. One thing she wanted above all things, his happiness.

So, the news of Susannah's parting was a hard blow for Candy. Her death left Terry a widower before he could ever become a husband. She was afraid that his bleak nature would soon get the worse out of him, sinking him into depression or even worse. For weeks she debated on what she could do to bring him some kind of consolation. However, she hesitated, unsure of her own powers to bring any comfort to the man. How can you console someone who had lost someone so dear as Susannah surely was to him? Besides, there was always the question whether her intentions could be misconstrued. God knew she did not expect any gain for herself in such business. But what about the others? More importantly, what of Terry himself? These considerations were heavier than her resolve; hence, she decided to trust in prayer for any possible help that Terry would need. Her prayers were answered, or at least she believed so.

As the year passed, Candy felt relieved when finding out that he seemed to go on with his life. His career was more successful than ever and there weren't any rumors of dejection or drunkenness. Nothing seemed to be amiss. Then it was Candy's turn for another bitter realization. Now it was official. Terry was over her. He was free in the world, standing on his two feet without her.

Candy was happy for him, truly happy. That was the Terrence G. Grandchester she had always known and admired. Nevertheless, deep in her heart she mourned her own loss,

⁴ In this edition, I have revised my estimation of the years between the New York breakup and the summer of 1924, in which I have imagined the arrival of Terrence's letter. I have reconsidered that it is more realistic to believe that Candy took at least a year and a half to earn her nursing degree between the beginning of 1914 (the year following her arrival from England in the winter of 1913) and the summer of 1916. Therefore, the breakup could have happened in the winter of 1916.

knowing that he did not care for her anymore. A passionate man like Terrence could not stay single all of his life. He was not yet thirty, of certain means, famous and surely as handsome as ever. In due time, he would fall in love again, get married and have children of his own; children who would not be hers. She could recognize the old tinge of jealousy still alive in her heart to her own chagrin. Terry might be over her; she was not over him.

But these regretful musings were always kept in secret by the young woman. She would confide in nobody, not even Miss Pony or Sister Lane. "Whatever for?" she would argue to herself when she felt the need to open her heart to someone. "There is no use crying over spilt water", that had always been her philosophy. Therefore, during the previous year she had redoubled her efforts to make the improvements in Pony's home that her two mothers had dreamed of for so long. These plans brought her a happiness of sorts and for that she was grateful.

Now, all of a sudden, came this letter, saying so much and so little at the same time.

"I had been planning on getting in touch after the end of the first year," he had written.

It was plain, almost cryptic, yet it was also loaded with meaning. From the very beginning he "had planned" to approach her. It was all too confusing for Candy.

The young woman heard a muffled sound over the grass. It was one of Father Tree's daughters, as she fell from her original home. The young woman reached for the flower and softly caressed its cup-shaped form.

"What did you mean with such plans, Terry?" she wondered talking to the flower, "Is it my friendship what you wanted to recover? If that was so, why waiting till Susannah was dead to do it? Had you written in the previous years with the purpose of renewing the acquaintance in friendly terms, I would have replied, Terry. No matter how difficult it might have been for me to pretend, I swear I would have replied. I even considered it once, writing letters to you, which I never dared to mail. Then, if it is something more what you are looking for; how come you were already thinking so, just as soon as Susannah had passed away?"

"Didn't you love her?" was the unthinkable question that inevitably crossed her mind. "Then all these years, you kept . . ."

Then, she commanded her wandering mind to stop right there! It could not be.

The young woman covered her face with both hands. An all too familiar headache was beginning to pound in her temples. A part of her wished that such a letter had never reached her. However, it was now an undeniable fact lying on her lap.

Miss Pony rang the bell calling everyone for lunch. The young woman folded the paper carefully, fitting it back in the envelope. She then picked the yellow flower as she kept the letter in her pocket. She could not stay there any longer. There were plenty of chores that were waiting for her in the house.

Slowly walking down the Hill, Candy decided that she had to reply as soon as possible. Yet, she hardly knew what she would say.



Miss Pony and Sister Lane had agreed not to question their daughter about the letter and Candy had felt grateful for their discretion. She had managed to remain composed for the whole journey, accomplishing her usual tasks. Her energy notwithstanding, she could not fool the older women. Candy was way too quiet and pale to pass as her normal self. When she finally went to bed, after eating dinner in a desultory manner, the two women just exchanged glances. Yet, they kept true to their arrangement and remained silent.

During the day, Candy had decided on the explanation that best fitted her fancy. For her, Terry was only searching the contact of an old friend. In the past, he feared that Susannah would feel jealous and not wanting to upset her, he had remained aloof. Now it was different. He was his own master to renew the friendship. There was not any reason to read more in-between the scarce lines he had written.

She might have been disregarding other details of the letter, such as the one year deadline that he had set for himself. But she did not want to risk her heart in speculations. So, in such grounds, she decided to reply.

The next morning, after mailing her message, she had made some casual comments about Terry's intention to renew the acquaintance.

"I don't want you to start jumping to conclusions on this letter issue," she had warned the ladies that looked at her in disbelief, "It is just old friends catching up, I assure you, nothing more."

Miss Pony and Sister Lane did neither gainsay Candy nor make comments of any sort.



The night was warm and the sky full of stars. Despite the lights of the city, it was still possible to descry them far above. The young man felt the warmth of the summer air grazing his face

as he came out of the Aeolian Concert Hall⁵. It had been a momentous evening. His artistic sensitivity assured him that tonight's premier would make history in American art⁶. Georges Gershwin was certainly a talented composer and what Whiteman's concert band had just played that evening was the best thing he had ever heard from Gershwin. "Rhapsody in blue" was the name. "That is quite a title," he thought.

He signaled to his chauffeur, who was already waiting for him, to let him know that he had decided on walking home that night. The evening air and some exercise would do him good.

The young man leisurely lit a cigarette and began walking down the street with his characteristic strides. It seemed like a dream to feel so free, so alive, after eight long years of oppression. It was such a change, that it had taken some time to get used to it. Not that he complained.

Gershwin sensuous overture still rang in his ears as he recalled his life in the last months. The season had gone marvelously and the new projects for the next fall were thrilling. Now he could go home and read the new plays just on his own, savoring the lines as he read aloud, no matter how late he wanted to stay up. No nagging, no obtrusive and uncomfortable presence. He could feel that he finally had the control of his own destiny.

Unfortunately, it had been a victory bitterly won, he had to admit. The last year of Susannah's life had been a wretched ordeal for the young woman. No matter how ill-fated their relationship had been, he certainly did not wish for her death. How could he? She was such a weak and tormented creature, the poor soul. Besides, her physical ailments had been so harsh on her that she deserved his compassion, not his resentment.

Whatever had occurred in the past, it was all gone. The physician had broken the news of Susannah's eminent death early in 1921. There was nothing to be done, but wait. He had had several months to accept the truth and prepare for the final moment before it actually came. He knew that once she was gone, he had to make a series of decisions and that some of them were not going to be pleasant. The very day of Susannah's burial he knew exactly what he had to do.

⁵ Original place in which the Rapsody in Blue was first played.

⁶ Allow me this minor anachronism. Rapsody in Blue premiered in February of 1924 instead of July, but I couldn't resist the idea of including this detail in the scene.

A week after the funeral he had sat down to talk to Mrs. Marlowe once for all. He still remembered that moment.

“I believe there are some pressing matters we have to discuss, madam,” he had said sitting in the parlor of his town house.

The woman had just remained silent, as if expecting the worse from this young man in whose house she had lived for more than four years. Now that she had not the excuse of her being his future mother in law, she was ready to be kicked out sooner than later. She knew she did not rank high in the young actor’s sympathies.

“I believe that we have reached a point where our paths must part, Mrs. Marlowe,” he had blurted, choosing the direct approach.

“I knew it was coming,” the woman replied with a sour expression, “I will only require a couple of days to pack my things, Terrence. I won’t impose on you any longer.”

“You are mistaken, madam, I was not implying that you should leave this house. In fact, I was meaning quite the opposite,” he had answered casually.

Mrs. Marlowe opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“I’ve leased an apartment in the Village. I’ll be moving there tomorrow morning. If you don’t mind, madam, I’ll take the furniture in my bedroom and in the studio with me. The rest will be at your disposal,” he had explained.

“But this house . . .” the woman managed to utter.

“It was Susannah’s since the very beginning. I bought it for her, so I suppose that it is just fair that you keep it.” He added.

Then, feeling that the necessary information had been conveyed, he stood up as he searched for something in the interior pocket of his jacket.

“Here,” he said giving the woman a large envelope, “These are the house deeds; they are registered in Susannah’s name. Although she never managed to write her will, being her mother and only relative I suppose you won’t have any trouble to claim the property. There’s some money as well. I thought you could use it while you figure out what you will do from now on.”

The woman received the envelope without a word, not knowing how to respond to the unexpected gift. Deep in her heart, Miss Marlowe knew that she and her daughter had wronged him terribly. So, it was hard to understand his generosity.

“Tomorrow, when I leave, the housekeeper and the chauffeur will go with me as well. The decision has been all theirs. I hope you will not harbor any hard feelings towards them,” he said coldly.

“I see,” she barely whispered.

“One more thing, madam,” he said before retiring, with a spark of determination in his eyes “I wish that you understand that our connection has now reached its end. Please, do not expect anything from me in the future,” and with this subtle warning the man had stepped out of the parlor.

The following morning he had left the house without saying a word to Mrs. Marlowe, who had preferred to remain in her chambers. Terry had not seen her ever since and wished for things to remain that way. Even for a noble soul there is an end to charity.

That had been the easiest part, he remembered.

However, the other issue -the one that really mattered- was not as simple as moving to some new quarters and start living alone again. If he had known his heart eight years before the way he did now, things would have been so different, he thought. Now, at twenty-seven, he knew exactly what he needed to do. But knowing and doing were two very distinct things.

His affections were unchanged. If anything, they were now deeper and more mature. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” some say. He knew that in his case it was so. Unfortunately, a man cannot disappear from a woman’s life one day to reappear again eight years later, as if nothing had happened. The sole idea of the scene, made his heart jump with uneasiness.

Now, there was the problem of the mourning period. It will not do to approach a lady when his former fiancée was still warm in her grave. Not that he cared about social conventions. He believed that he had given Susannah more than it was her due during her life, but he also knew that Candy, as most women, cared more for those details. After all the mistakes he had made, he had to show some delicacy to begin with.

Besides, there was the question on how he was going to deal with his own fears. An ocean of “what if”s flooded his mind whenever he thought about Candy. To believe that she could still care for him was an arrogant presumption. No, he did not expect as much. Yet, he dared to hope that she would not keep a grudge against him. He knew that if she did, the woman would have the right to feel so. It had all been his fault from beginning to end. But he trusted her sweet and forgiving nature for a more amiable reception, at least, as an old friend.

Of course, there was always the question of whether it would be possible to become friends again. What were the odds of her still being single? A woman like her would hardly go through

life without awakening the interest of men around her. Terrence knew well that her outer and inner beauty were a prize that many would covet and fight for. The sole idea of her being married to another man was repulsive to him, but he had to admit that it was a strong possibility.

One thing was certain, if she was married, her husband would not welcome an overture from an old flame. He couldn't blame such man because, if she were his, Terrence would never admit any former suitor to come close to her. Not for a single fleeting moment!

So, he was painfully aware that his chances were thin. Nevertheless, he knew he had to try to contact her to find out, even at the cost of making a fool of himself once more. If after a first contact he discovered that she was another man's own, he would have to accept it and disappear from her life for good. His hands sweated every time his head rambled on that direction.

Time would make his qualms disappear, he had thought, trying to give himself courage. The more he got used to the idea of seeking Candy again, his resolve would grow. "When the first year is over, then I will be ready to act". That had been his mantra. Eventually, time had passed and his heart was still as nervous as the very first day the idea had crossed his mind.

He might be a full grown-up man now, but when it came to Candice, he still felt pretty much the insecure teenager. "I'm doomed," he thought as he remembered his feelings in the last six months. Just when his self-imposed deadline was nearing, he had tried to have his plans come into fruition, but to no avail. He would make a resolution one day, only to find the strategy faulty in one way or another the following day.

It was then when the most extraordinary thing in his young career had happened. The New Shakespeare Company⁷ had issued him an invitation to work with them as a guest performer in their 1923 winter season. It was an honor and a great achievement for so young an actor. His mother had been the first to urge him to accept. He did not need any encouragement. For him, it was the perfect excuse to delay his decisions for a month or two after the dreaded date. He knew he was foolishly escaping from himself and his pressing feelings, but still he accepted the invitation.

Therefore, he traveled to England, where he spent the most successful months of his career so far, playing a number of different roles. It had been exhilarating! The company had been playing in Stratford-Upon-Avon, Newcastle, and London, of all places. So, before his mind could digest the reality, he was back in the town of his childhood once more. He had returned to the place where he had once been mistreated by his stepmother as the bastard child he

⁷ Later to be known as the Royal Shakespeare Company

was. Now, he was received as an accomplished performer, respected and admired among his peers and by the whole of London society. What a triumph! What a joy it would have been, if only London were not full of his memories with her!

His initial commitment with the Company had been only for the “little season”, from November to January. However, his success had been so sound that he received another invitation for a few performances during the Spring Season in March and April. Unluckily for him, all this glory was tinged by his internal turmoil. The longer he took to make up his mind, the worse his humor turned. It was all very upsetting.

When his professional commitments had come to an end, he decided to take a break before returning to New York. He needed some time to start thinking seriously in his situation and act upon. He went back to Stratford-Upon-Avon and rented a cottage in the outskirts. He hoped that in such a retirement he could find some peace and finally gather the resolve he was lacking.

Terrence remembered those days in the solitude of the old cottage as one of the most profound soul-searching episodes in his life. He thought of thousand ways to produce the encounter. He argued against himself again and again, rejecting this approach as too melodramatic, and that other as too prosaic.

How to contact her was the first question. He did not know where she could be after all those years. Could he simply risk it all in one shot and travel to Chicago to look for her? Where should he go if that was the case? To the Ardlays’ manor house? If he did so, what should he say?

“Hi, Archibald, I’m looking for your cousin, the same one I was stupid enough to let go. Could you tell me where she is?” he said to himself as he looked at his reflection on the mirror.

“Bollocks! I wouldn’t blame the old bloke if he killed me right on the spot,” he told himself dismissing the whole notion.

Then he thought of the kind ladies in the orphanage. He was sure that Candy would have kept in contact with them during the years. Should he go there and talk to them? The mere idea of facing the gentle women that had once received him warmly in their home scared him.

“No, I couldn’t look at their eyes without feeling ashamed for my conduct. I hurt their dear daughter. How can I go there and ask for their help.”

Running out of better ideas he had finally decided for a letter. He would send it to Pony’s Home with the hopes that the ladies could redirect it to wherever Candy could be. He had written as many versions of the missive that he lost count.

Which would be the appropriate wording? Should he make it simple and direct? Would it do to pour all his heart in one single letter? How far should he go? Was “hello” too distant? Was “my love” out of place? Could it be written burning with passion or cautious as corresponded to a slight acquaintance?

It was in these tormenting considerations that the morning of the 7th of May caught him by surprise. It was her twenty sixth birthday. On an impulse he had finally composed the unarticulated letter that he ultimately mailed with great trepidations. Even when sealed, it took him three trips to the post office to gather the guts to leave the envelope there. However, when done, as if possessed by a new energy, he had hurriedly packed his things, booked his tickets and parted back to America, as if a previously fixed appointment required him back in New York expeditiously.



Terrence sighed again as he recognized the sober shape of his building. He had reached the end of his evening walk.

“I’ll leave the car in the garage, sir,” called the chauffeur with his strong Italian accent, as he got out of the automobile, “Do you think that you will need me tomorrow?”

“No, Roberto,” Terry replied absentmindedly, “I don’t have plans for this Sunday”

“So, it will be till Monday, Mr. Graham,” added the man calling his boss by his stage name. The only one Roberto had ever known.

The young man waved a slight goodbye to Roberto as he entered the building. The porter was napping and he did not want to disturb him. So, he silently took his way up the stairs.

It had been a long day; he had been out the entire journey. Very early he had breakfast with his mother; then he had attended a long meeting with Robert Hathaway and the Stratford Troupe. The plans for the new season that would begin in September were already demanding all of his attention. Later, he had been to a boring photo session, had lunch with his solicitor –as he insisted in calling his lawyer – and the rest of the afternoon he had worked in the theatre rehearsing on his own. His musical evening at the Aeolian had been his way to indulge a bit after a tiring day.

He turned the keys and his door opened slowly. The room was not all in the dark. The house keeper had left the lights of the vestibule on. Terry appreciated Mrs. O’Malley’s thoughtfulness. It was because of this light that he could see a pinkish spot on top of one of the tables in the living room.

Terry's eyes almost went out of their orbs as he understood that the reply he had been waiting for had arrived at last. He had practically dashed to grab the envelope, but once he had it in his hands it took him a while to open it. He was lost, taking in the shape of her handwriting, still tiny and feminine as he remembered it. Then, after a second of more hesitation, he opened the envelope and read thus:

Pony's Home, June 15th, 1924

Dear Terry,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive your letter. I'm glad that you don't resent me for being such a lousy friend all these years, never finding time to drop you a line at least for Christmas' sake. I promise that I will be a better correspondent this time.

Your idea of sending the letter to Pony's Home was certainly a good one. I have been living and working here for almost six years now. I help Miss Pony and Sister Lane look after the children and lately, I am also involved in raising funds for our dear home. Sometimes I travel around a bit visiting our sponsors, but I'm always happier when I am here, in this little spot in the countryside. We are planning some major improvements in the house this year, you know. We are all very busy with these plans.

So, you see, I am still the same unsophisticated country girl you once met; only a little older. Annie usually scolds me saying that I will be on my way to spinsterhood if I insist in continuing living here. But this is my home and I love it.

Well, I am afraid you'll find my life kind of dull compared with your glamorous theatrical adventures and your travels. Anyway, as it seems you still care for my friendship, I'm really happy to be able to catch up with you.

Yours Truly

Candy

P.S.

Miss Pony and Sister Lane are still your biggest fans. They have followed your career very closely. They send you their kindest regards.



The dawn was already breaking when Terry had finally fallen asleep. The letter, which he had literally memorized by then, was still resting on top of his chest.

Chapter 2

The flower of hope



He lazily opened the piano lid and with one hand played a few notes at random. With the other hand he held his customary cup of tea. The distinctive aroma of the dark infusion soothed him, penetrating his nostrils.

“Nothing better to begin a day,” he thought, as he took the first sip.

The young man sat leisurely on his favorite armchair as his eyes wandered around the solitary room. Outside, the summer showers bathed the city. The rhythmic chorus of the rain drops falling on the pavement raised its voice as in a lullaby. What a perfect Sunday to think! That was precisely what he had been doing almost all night and since he had woken up again in this rainy morning.

He simply couldn’t stop thinking of her letter.

She had written a much longer letter compared to his own but had also been sly enough to convey less. She had bluntly overlooked what he had implied in his postscript. That one simple sentence devised to let her know that his heart was unaltered, had simply being ignored . . . or perhaps misunderstood.

“You are a strange creature, Candy,” he said aloud, “I write to you after long eight years of estrangement and instead of accusing me of my neglect, as you could fairly do, you offer an apology for not keeping in touch! As if it had been your fault that we lost communication.

Then, I tell you that I had deliberately planned to get close again after the proper time was over, and you just babble about your life in the countryside.”

“But you will not discourage me, Tarzan with Freckles, if that was your intention,” he warned raising one of his eyebrows, “For, you see, you have at least been kind enough to tell me the one tiny thing I needed to know most urgently.”

He then rose from the chair and walked to the window, still holding his cup of tea.

“On the way to become a spinster?” he said, quoting Candy’s words. “Not if I can have a saying in that, missy.”

For the first time in almost a decade, Terrence G. Grandchester felt that he was back to his real self.



“I wish summer would last forever,” thought Annie Cornwell while she took in the warm afternoon breeze in her conservatory. At her feet, little Alistair Cornwell was playing with his favorite toy cars, while making noises to imitate the engines.

The young woman lowered her light blue eyes to check again on her son, a tender smile curved her lips with motherly pride. On her garden table, a little lot of letters waited in silence and a cup of jasmine tea kept her company.

Annie, still the country lass inside the body of a sophisticated woman, felt an utter peace among the ferns and orchids of the green house. It was her personal refuge to meditate, a hideaway from her usually busy social life, a secret spot where she could breathe without the pressure of her status.

The young woman brushed away a strand of her shiny raven hair. Once more, Annie wondered if she would ever have the courage to have it cut in a bob. Everybody seemed eager to follow the new fad those days, except for the old matrons like Mrs. Elroy, of course. She knew her luscious straight hair was just perfect for the style, and she fancied that she would look ravishing with it. Yet, two considerations were keeping her mane long. One was her mother’s disapproval of the boyish haircut. The other was the effect that her rich long hair had on her husband each evening, when she loosened it from her customary chignon. Annie laughed inwardly at her frivolous indecision.

“Candy’s hair looks chic like that,” she thought. “Her natural curls are perfect for the wavy bob, *in Mary Pickford’s style*⁸”

But Annie knew that Candy had her mane cut out of practicality only. She neither minded fashion nor cared about pleasing anybody. That idea brought Annie’s mind back to the one issue that worried her the most as of late: Candy’s state of singleness.

Annie had been fortunate in many ways. Maturity and experience had made her acknowledge that in the most crucial moments of her life –exactly when things could have gone wrong for her – it had been Candy who had intervened to save her in one way or the other. While Candy had sacrificed her own well-being for Annie’s sake, it had taken Annie many years to correspond with equal kindness. Annie was not proud of herself in that quarter but was deeply grateful for whatever Candy had done for her.

Annie knew her marriage had been crafted by Candy since the days of their adolescence. Had Candy not stepped aside, had she not rejected Archibald, Annie would not be married to this wonderful and tender man, who now adored her. For, the reader must know, Annie’s faithful devotion to Archie had in time won what she most desired: his heart.

Thus, being the fortunate creature that she was, Annie wanted to be instrumental in conquering the same sort of happiness for her childhood friend. Unluckily for her, for years, Candy had been reluctant to cooperate with Annie’s attempts at matchmaking. As time went by, and the young blonde insisted in leading such a secluded life in the countryside. Annie fell into despair. Sometimes, she thought that she would never be able to repay her benefactress as she deserved.

“Why so pensive, my love?” whispered a masculine voice near her ear, taking her by surprise.

Annie raised her eyes to meet her husband with a welcoming glitter. Their lips followed next, in a brief but tender kiss. Still playing on the floor, young Alistair giggled contemplating his parents’ free display of affection.

“Hey, Stair, how’s my dear boy?” asked Archie lifting the child in an affectionate gesture.

“Play, Daddy, play” the three-year-old boy invited as he giggled some more.

For a furtive moment something in the kid’s face that Archie could not define reminded him of another face from the past. Perhaps it was his smile or the glow in those innocent dark

⁸ Mary Pickford was one of the greatest silent movie figures during 1915-1925. At the time, she interpreted the role of the romantic ingenue in multiple occasions, becoming the most powerful and best paid female actor of her time. The American public knew her as “little Mary” and the original “America’s Sweetheart”.

eyes that evoked the cherished memories of his brother. Archie felt a sudden pang in the heart and instinctively held his son close to his chest.

“Sure, pal, I’ll play with you” he said, kissing the child’s rosy cheek.

For a moment, the young family felt in a comfortable silence as the father sat on the floor to play with his son. A small cobalt blue Ford Model T became the star of the game for some time. The mother remained at her garden table, with her tea and her letters.

“Any good news,” the young man asked after a while, admiring the view of his wife dressed in a lavender frog, the low-waist, pleaded skirt grazing her calves. He loved the way the dress revealed her slim arms.

“Candy is still busy with the carpenters and the plumbers,” replied Annie with a hint of annoyance.

“I pity the poor chaps with such a **formidable foreman** after them,” he said chuckling at the image of his fearless cousin ordering around a lot of grown-up men that should double her in age.

“**Forewoman**, you mean”, Annie corrected.

“No, honey, I chose my words very well,” he teased as he chuckled.

“Oh you!” Annie said pouting.

“Is that what is worrying you?” Archie asked, guessing the reason for his wife’s pensiveness.

“Well, in a way, yes. Candy refuses to socialize as she should. She needs to go out and meet people here in Chicago, instead of burying herself in Pony’s Hill.” The woman explained.

“Are you joking? She has been travelling a lot of late and I believe she will travel some more before the year is gone.” He reasoned.

“Oh, Archie, that is not what I mean. All she does is visiting Pony’s sponsors. I don’t see the need of all that effort when you and Albert could afford all the money that is necessary.”

“Well, you know the lady has her own rules. It was all her idea to set a limit to our contributions on the grounds of allowing others to cooperate with her cause,” Archie replied, “You should know by now that Candy enjoys doing things on her own. I guess that depending completely on our family’s position would make her feel uneasy. We have to respect that.”

“That is nonsense! She should be coming to spend the season with us instead of visiting all those people. Most of those men are either married or too old. No, this will not do at all,” she bitterly complained.

“Annie, when will you cease to play the matchmaker with Candy?” Archie demanded crossing both of his arms on top of his chest.

“Until she finds the man that makes her happy as she deserves, Archie.” Annie replied with unusual determination.

“Candy does not need a man to be happy, Annie. With the years, I have begun to believe that she is not cut out for marriage, you know? How long will it take you to understand that her free spirit is like . . .” he paused trying to find out the best image, “. . . like the wind? I wonder if there is a man on this Earth with the power to grasp the wind with his bare hands.” Archie concluded and, in his voice, there was a hint of wistfulness.

“Oh, Archie, do not say that! I wish so badly to see her well settled. I know her better than you could ever do. I am certain she needs to be loved just as any woman does.” An involuntary tear rolled down Annie’s cheek.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Archie cheered his wife up. “Do not cry so. What about paying her a visit? Perhaps you can feel better if you see her sooner than planned. And, who knows, perhaps you can convince her to attend one of your tea parties. What about that?”

Annie smiled between her tears as Archie held her hand in a supportive gesture. Little Stair had fallen asleep in his father’s arms. In his tiny hands he still held his cobalt blue Model T, blissfully unaware of the unavoidable hardships of life.



“Now, here is Miss Fannie Brice⁹ and Secondhand Rose” said the announcer in the radio and immediately the high-pitched voice of a woman invaded the house. The rhythmic and playful song told the story of a young girl whose father had a secondhand store, and thus complained about never owning new things. The comic verses did not take long to put a smile on the workers’ faces. One of them even joined singing the chorus:

“Secondhand curls,
I'm wearing secondhand pearls,
I never get a single thing that's new!
Everyone knows that I am just Secondhand Rose,
From Second Avenue.”

⁹ An influential American singer, comedian, and actor of the 1920s and 30s. She was the creator and star of the successful radio series, “*The Baby Snooks Show*”. Seventeen years after her death, her life was dramatized in a theatrical piece and later a movie entitled “*Funny Girl*”, sterilized by Barbra Streisand.

Candy, who always enjoyed a happy song, felt a strong desire to dance.

“Shall we dance, madam?” asked Mr. Thompson.

“I thought nobody would ask!” she replied with a spark in her eyes and soon the carpenter and the young woman were dancing together at the lively tune. The steps were energetic, and Candy seemed to be well acquainted with the new style. Thompson, who was in his early fifties, got easily tired and barely reached the end of the song in one single piece. The men cheered the couple when they finally curtsied each other at the end of the dance.

“Wow, Miss Candy, you are a heck of a dancer, m’am,” the man said fanning himself with his cap.

“My cousin Archie is a great dancer,” Candy replied, her eyes sparkling with mirth, “whenever we see each other, he teaches me the latest steps.”

“And you certainly take advantage of those lessons, I can see,” the man smiled, internally reminding himself that he was not as young as he used to be.

“Well, people learn fast when they enjoy what they are doing, says my friend Patty, and I must admit I love these songs.”

“Oh, I love Miss Fannie Brice’s songs too,” the man replied with a spark, “They say she is quite a plain gal, but anyway, I would love to have the chance to see her show in New York! It must be an awesome experience!”

“Don’t believe a word he says, Miss Candy,” joined another of the builders, “Thompson doesn’t care about that Brice woman, but he would die to see those other pretty girls in the Ziegfeld Follies¹⁰.”

“I bet he would,” Candy replied with a wink, and all the men laughed out loud at the comment.

“You all go back to work!” Thompson scolded his men, not happy with the joke, and then turning back at the young woman, he addressed her with a gentler tone. “Going back to business, m’am, I suppose that you were not here just for the dance.”

“You are right, Mr. Thompson,” Candy answered suppressing a smile at the man’s sudden change of topic, “I came down here to discuss with you about that window in the new living room. I thought it over and it doesn’t seem a good idea to have this window facing west. I

¹⁰ Ziegfeld Follies (1907-1931) was the name of a series of theatrical revue productions in New York. The series was inspired by the Folies Bergere in Paris. The concept was created and directed by Florenz Ziegfeld upon an idea of his wife, the actor Anna Held. The entertainment including music, dancing, and comic skids.

believe it will be very uncomfortable to have the sun shining right on Miss Pony's face, especially when she sits here during the afternoons."

Internally, Candy thanked that the conversation was now on the safe ground of the building project. The mere mention of New York had activated all her unsettling thoughts about a certain gentleman who lived in that city. In the past, Candy had hoped that the passage of time would eventually ease all her anxieties about Terrence Grandchester. She had expected that one day she would only think of him as a fond memory of her adolescence. When that day arrived, she would be able to meet him and Susannah again, greet them with a serene smile, and welcome both of them as her friends.

One part of her had sincerely tried hard to see Terrence this way. Yet, another part of herself resisted with all her might, secretly keeping little reminders of him. Once, she had tried to burn his old letters, but lost her resolve just as the thought had entered her mind. Instead, she had asked Albert to keep them all, along with her old diary, which her adoptive father still had in custody. Against all reason, she still kept all the newspaper clippings with favorable reviews of Terry's work, especially that first one that Annie had sent her, many years before. Another of these keepsakes was his silk scarf. She knew such a personal memento did not help much to keep her peace of mind, but she somehow thanked her luck for never having the opportunity to give it back to its owner. Now, while Candy made efforts to concentrate on the house improvements, her heart did not stop beating fiercely.

"What should I think of you now, Terry?" she silently asked herself, *"What do you mean by all these letters?"*

Ever since his first letter had arrived, over a dozen more had followed during the last four months. Candy did not know how to interpret the nature of this new long-distance friendship between the two of them. In his letters he was casual and even playful at times, very much the Terry from the old times. However, it was clear for Candy that the eight-year estrangement gap between the two of them was still floating in the air. Sooner or later, they would have to talk about it . . . "but not just yet", she told herself, fearful of the moment in which they would have to address their painful past. For the moment, both had tacitly agreed to keep their communication in a lighter tone, never dropping a hint about their common past.

Candy did not know what to do about Susannah, either. The young woman knew it was too late for sending her sympathies but felt guilty for never mentioning that she sincerely felt sorry about her death. Despite this feeling, Candy could not find the words to express what she wanted, especially when Terry's letters seemed to radiate a newly found positive view of the future.

After discussing her new ideas for the parlor window, Candy left the builders to their own devices and continued with her daily duties. It was still morning; so, most of the children would be taking their lessons with Miss Pony and Sister Lane. Only a couple of them who were sick remained abed. The young woman first checked on them. After making sure that

they were progressing and had been given their medication properly, she changed her morning dress for her usual working pants and cardigan.

Candy enjoyed physical work; therefore, she did not complain about the menial tasks she had on her charge, such as milking the two cows, washing the small children's clothes, or tending the vegetable garden. It was during these private moments that her thoughts mostly ran to the different places in the world where her dear friends were. Normally, she would think about the restless Albert and his last business adventure in some faraway country, or about the colorful words in which Patty described the progresses made by her dear students. This time, her mind wandered to her memories of Annie's last visit the previous week.

Her friend had become a real elegant lady and the proud mother of the sweetest little boy Candy had ever known. She always enjoyed Annie's visit, not only because she treasured Annie's friendship, but also because she could see little Alistair. This time had not been the exception. The child was all that was charming and loving with her and she couldn't help herself giving him every single minute of her attention.

"Candy, stop fussing over Alistair. Come here with me. I have brought you lots of new things that I want you to try on," Annie had insisted at some point, during the second day of her stay.

The young blonde, who was playing hide and seek with little Stair and other four children of his age, removed the blindfold from her eyes. When Candy saw Annie's resolute expression, she knew well that she did not have any other option. She reluctantly handed the handkerchief to the oldest boy in the bunch and followed her friend with a resigned sigh.

"We could do this while the kids take their nap, Annie" she still resisted as they both walked towards the house.

"Then you will insist on your being busy with a hundred pending things," said Annie firmly, "No, we'll do this now."

Candy laughed inwardly at how their roles seemed to reverse at times, with Annie turning bossy while Candy had to follow her childhood friend obediently.

When the two young women had entered the room, Candy's eyes went open wide at the display of feminine garments that were spread all over her bedroom.

"You had all these clothes in your suitcases, Annie? How did they ever fit them all in there?" she wondered.

“I have my ways, you see, and I was determined to bring as many pieces as possible. Otherwise, you’ll never find the time to update your wardrobe,” Annie replied proud of her skills.

For a few minutes the ladies spent their time admiring the pieces in all shades of fall and winter colors. Candy was not impervious to the effect of finery and truly had a good time appraising the dresses, hats, coats, and shoes that her friend had picked for her. However, from time to time her eyes wandered to the window as she checked on the children playing outside.

“These gowns are a dream, Annie, thank you.” She said appreciative as she admired three party dresses of delicate design, “but I don’t think I’ll have many opportunities to wear them here.”

“Come on, Candy, you will come to our Thanksgiving dinner party, won’t you? Besides, you have your trips to Boston and Pittsburgh in November. You don’t plan to go on your denim pants, I hope,” replied Annie jokingly.

“Those are business trips, Annie. I attend business meetings and sometimes a formal lunch with the sponsors. An afternoon dress, a cloche hat and a coat will do for those commitments.”

“But you must come to Chicago next month. I’ll have a tea party,” Annie added casually, and then with a special glare in her eyes she hinted; “there are some new friends that I would like you to meet.”

Candy looked at Annie, frowning suspiciously. She knew that tone of voice in Annie, it betrayed a new matchmaking scheme.

“Annie, Annie.... Not another stiff rich guy, please. How many times do I have to tell you that I am not interested?” Candy threatened.

“But I am sure you will like this one,” Annie said openly accepting the true motives of her invitation, “he is really open minded and sincere, not to mention that he is very handsome too.”

“Then I give you my permission to marry him if you like him so much,” Candy replied, tongue in cheek.

“I am already married, you fool,” the young brunette argued as she threw a pillow striking right on Candy’s face.

That was the perfect excuse for the blonde to start a pillow fight in which the two young women engaged for a little while as their giggles rose in the air. From her kitchen, Miss

Pony could hear them clearly and once again thought that there are some things that even time cannot change.

“Oh, stop it, Candy!” cried Annie, being always the first one to give up.

“You, chicken!” complained Candy as she freed her head from the garments that Annie had thrown to her during the fight. All of a sudden one of those pieces caught her attention, “What on Earth is this, Annie?” she asked, looking quizzically at a strange piece of lingerie.

“That is a corset, you silly.”

“What? I thought these things were part of the past. Isn’t the new trend a more natural sort of figure?” Candy asked having trouble to recognize this new kind of corset with a kind of brassiere attached to the top.

“Well, not all women are blessed with a slender and light figure that can fit well with the new low-waist style. Nowadays our curves should be softened. Too much accent on the hips or on your chest is not the inn look for this season.” Annie explained not noticing Candy’s funny frowns of amazement.

“You mean that we have to look flat as boys?” Candy asked in disbelief.

“Well, I wouldn’t put it that way. It is just that today’s figure is rather more stylish. But you shouldn’t worry that much, Candy. Your silhouette is fine about the hips. Perhaps you’ll only need a little bit more help with the breast. This corset will do the trick.”

“You must be kidding me,” Candy laughed, “When we were 15, they made us wear those old awful corsets to lift our front. God knew that there wasn’t much to be lifted, back then. Now that Mother Nature has made some changes up here, I have to press my breast to make me look as if were 15. No way! I’m not wearing this.”

“Don’t be stubborn. Your pearls won’t look well if your breast is too swollen. The string will go both sides instead of naturally hanging in the middle”

“I don’t care. I’ll stick to my regular bras and camisoles. Thanks anyway for trying. And thanks also for the invitation to the tea party, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to go, Annie.” Candy concluded by trying not to sound too harsh.

“You are impossible!” Annie said pouting, as she tried to fold the undergarments and put them in Candy’s drawers. However, before she could articulate more opposition, her eyes got caught by an envelope lying on top of a handkerchiefs pile, inside the drawer.

Usually, Annie would have discreetly ignored the letter and continued her task, but a name flashed like lightning, catching her attention to its highest. The young woman took the envelope, which was still sealed. It was obvious it had just arrived with the rest of the mail that very morning.

The blonde observed Annie's gesture and did not take long to realize what had made her go silent.

She internally chastised herself for leaving that letter in the drawer, instead of putting it in the box where she usually kept his letters. "Why was I so careless?" she thought.

"Yes, it is a letter from Terry," Candy finally admitted after a moment of silence and before Annie could utter a question. The blonde lowered her eyes and did her best to appear collected.

"He wrote to you! That is capital news! But you weren't surprised this morning when the mail arrived," Annie said almost thinking aloud, and then realization dawned in her head, "This is not the first time you receive a letter from him, is it?"

"Well, not really," Candy admitted, trying to busy herself hanging the dresses in her closet.

"Good!" Annie exclaimed, digesting the notion, "He's still a bachelor. Right?"

"Goodness, Annie! Don't start getting ideas. The man just lost his fiancée!" replied the blonde making her best to appear nonchalant.

"By Heaven's sake, that was almost two years ago, darling! You have been very sly with me, Candy! You two are corresponding and you did not mention it at all. To think that I was busying my mind looking for suitors on your behalf and the suitor is right on your nose and knocking at your door! At least this time, I am sure you like this one."

"Oh please, do not go on to imagine wild stories in that fanciful head of yours, Annie" there is nothing like a romance going on here." Candy denied energetically, starting to sound upset, "we are just two old friends trying to catch up with a letter every now and then. Nothing more."

Candy remembered that it had been really hard to convince Annie that her new relationship with Terrence was not on romantic grounds –or at least, she had done her best to make her drop the topic for the time being. Now that she thought about the incident again, she felt a little bit guilty for not trusting Annie or anybody for that matter. Candy sighed again, while leaving the milk in the kitchen. She simply couldn't voice her feelings about Terrence with anybody. Perhaps it was the habit of keeping whatever she felt for him hidden in her heart. She had done that for so many years since the breakup; that it was awkward to do otherwise.

Now the sun was high again, and even when Candy seemed all absorbed in her task picking fresh carrots and spinach from Sister Lane's vegetable garden, her head was full of Terry. It was mid-October, and his new play was yet another great success in Broadway. She could not avoid feeling proud of him. In his last letter he had told her that soon he would be touring the country again. Thinking of his imminent trip, Candy remembered that in one of his letters -while narrating details of his numerous travels- he had once told her about a certain cabinetmaker that he knew in San Francisco. He had mentioned that the said man was extremely skillful and had made several pieces of furniture for Ms. Baker. This story had prompted Candy to confide in him that she wanted to present Miss Pony with a rocking chair for the new parlor, which she expected to have ready for Christmas.

Candy smiled remembering her excitement when Terry had replied that during his tour in the West Coast, he would get the new rocking chair for Miss Pony and send it by special delivery just in time, before Christmas Eve. The young woman knew that Miss Pony would be thrilled with the present and it would take an Army to rip her off from the chair, just because Terry had made the purchase himself. Little did Candy know that her innocent scheme was going to turn into a series of unexpected events before the year closed.



Terrence Graham was neither patient nor even-tempered. His co-workers had learned this the hard way. Ever the perfectionist and uncommonly gifted, his tolerance towards the deficiencies and mistakes of others was always low, especially when such errors were the product of carelessness or irresponsibility. Therefore, when Walter Simmons –one of his fellow actors– had taken the wrong cue and entered the stage before the due time during the final rehearsal, everyone was sure that an acrimonious remark and then a verbal fight would ensue.

An uncomfortable silence had reigned for a while. Surprisingly, even when it was clear that Terrence was displeased with such a novice blunder, just before the day of the premiere, the star did not say a word.

“Let’s do it again from the beginning of the scene,” Robert Hathaway had finally said breaking the silence and the rehearsal had continued without any unsavory scene.

The director meditated on this incident and many other tiny details he had noticed lately. The whole thing could have been rather imperceptible for someone who knew Terrence less than he did. However, Hathaway hadn’t worked with the young actor for over ten years for nothing. Something was going on with Terrence since he had come back from England. Hathaway believed that whatever it could be, it was definitely good for the young man and for everyone in the troupe.

Over the years, Hathaway's esteem for Terrence had grown to the point that the man felt almost a fatherly affection for the young actor. He still remembered the sixteen-year-old boy who had shown in his office one winter morning in 1913. There had been some sort of unusual determination in his eyes that impressed the veteran actor to the point of inviting him to participate in an audition. He was not disappointed. Since Terrence uttered the initial lines during that first session, Robert had known that the boy owned an innate histrionic ability, with a maturity beyond his years. It was only a matter of time and proper coaching for him to become an exceptionally skillful performer. Hathaway was proud of his role as Terrence's mentor, because it was obvious that his efforts had not been in vain.

Nevertheless, Hathaway was not blind to Terrence's flaws. His taciturn ways and antisocial habits were not to be borne and rendered his work as director one millimeter below the impossible. Moreover, his coworkers had a very difficult time keeping with his obsessive pace. At the beginning, when he was just a novel actor with only secondary roles, this problem was rather imperceptible. However, as Terrence gained prestige and more important parts, the young man showed that he was capable of dragging the whole troupe in his tireless quest for perfection to the point of exhaustion. Hathaway had to fix limits to Terrence's excessive energy, but the task had been a difficult one, because the man added to his flaws that of being stubborn.

Then, there was the problem of his personal life, always a puzzle of contradictions and secrets. Robert had never understood Terrence's relationship with Susannah. He knew well that the young actress had been madly in love with Graham since the beginning of their acquaintance. Yet, he also knew that Terrence did not show any interest until the accident happened.

Hathaway was convinced that Terrence had never loved Susannah, having observed their interactions on countless occasions. The whole affair had turned him from a solitary soul to a real misanthropist and for some time had almost made him lose his career and control of his own life. Even when Terrence had managed to overcome his demons and made a sound return to the stage, it was obvious he had never recovered emotionally. He had certainly reached a higher level as an actor but had lost spirit and worsened his temper. Therefore, and without any qualms for his callous observation, the director felt that Susannah's death had been the best thing that had happened to the young man in a long time.

Of course, there had been a time of real mourning. Terrence was, despite the general belief, a man with a sensitive soul and was sincerely touched by Susannah's suffering during her sickness and eventual death. However, since the day the young man had moved into his new quarters in *The Village*¹¹, the recovery had been notorious. Now, about two years after,

¹¹ Greenwich Village: A well-known neighbourhood in Manhattan that is famous for being the home of several cultural institutions such as NYU's Tisch School of Arts, and the place of residence of famous artists and intellectuals during the early 20th century.

Terrence seemed serene and even softened in temper. Robert had to admit that Terrence Graham would never be called a cheerful character, but to see his rare smile once in a blue moon was a clear sign that something was going on within his heart.

“I don’t know how to interpret your observations, Robert,” had Eleanor Baker said, the time they met to discuss Terrence’s behavior, “You know he is always so private, even with me. Although I must admit that I have noticed some changes, as well.”

“I dared to call you, because I thought that perhaps you could advise me on a decision that I feel I will have to make sooner or later and concerns Terrence, as much as myself,” the director confessed over his cup of tea.

“You flatter me with your trust, Robert. What is the matter?” had the woman asked; her maternal instincts alerted at the mention that something could affect her son.

“I have been considering an early retirement. Melanie has been diagnosed with heart disease. The doctor says she can still live many years, but she will require special attention,” the man replied with a shadow crossing his face, as he spoke of his wife.

“I am so sorry to hear that, Robert. Does she know about it?” asked Eleanor, truly concerned for her old friends.

“She does. I would say she is faring it with optimism, but as you surely understand, we want to be together as much as possible. She cannot follow me in my tours as she used to, and I can’t leave her alone here in New York.”

“I totally understand Robert. Melanie’s health should be your priority, but can you afford the retirement now?” asked Eleanor pragmatically. A whole life of taking care of her own affairs had taught her to be cautious with money matters.

“Yes, Eleanor, years of sober management are paying off right now. I can now retire without any worries for our future, even if we have to pay for her medical care. My preoccupations are more centered in the troupe,” said Robert as he rested his elbows over the table and held both of his hands together in a nervous gesture. Then, after a pause that betrayed he was searching for the right words he added, “I had considered leaving the company in Terrence’s hands first, but then decided against it. He is a brilliant actor but is not ready to be a director. He lacks tact to deal with people’s faults and idiosyncrasies. Besides, his relations with the rest of the actors have never been the best. I am sorry to say this, but I believe the crew would not hold together if he took the lead.”

“Don’t be sorry, Robert, I know my son and agree with your assessment. He is not ready for the job,” was Eleanor’s immediate reply. Her serene countenance gave Robert the courage to continue.

“For this reason, I am considering selling the company. I would do my best to find a buyer that would maintain the work we have done so far, but I am not sure how Terrence will feel with the new management. On the other hand, I have been thinking that perhaps this could be an opportunity for opening new horizons in his career. The time he spent with the New Shakespeare Company did marvels for his technique. What do you think? Would he be ready to move on as a freelancer or into another company?”

“If you had asked me this question three years ago, I wouldn’t have known how to answer, Robert,” the woman said with an elegant move of her head, crowned by a large, brimmed hat, “Terrence was in a constant internal turmoil back then. I doubt he would have had the energy to redirect his career into the unknown when his head was too busy with Susannah’s illness. Now, it is very different, as you have noticed yourself. He seems to be enjoying life as much as a man of his nature can do it. I mean, he goes out to concerts, art exhibitions, and has even taken up playing the piano again. I only wish he had a friend his age, you know –but I’m digressing. Do not worry about him. If the new owner and director of Stratford’s Troupe is not to his liking, he can easily search for new outlets. You have done a great job training him.”

“I appreciate your thinking so. I only wished he could learn to be more sociable with his peers. It would make things easier for him,” the man confessed with a smirk.

“I know what you mean, Robert. But I am afraid that is his father’s trait,” the two veteran actors laughed at the remark, “Anyway, when will you break your news to your crew?” she asked after a while.

“Next January, when we start the readings prior the spring season rehearsals. I will let them know that it will be my last season.”

“Would you mind if I prepared Terry in advance?” Eleanor ventured to ask and seeing that her friend needed more clarifications, she elaborated further, “I mean, I won’t tell him about your decision. I’ll leave that to you, whenever you think fit. Yet, I would like to drop him some hints about new venues for his career. I want to take advantage of his being more receptive to my advice as of late.”

“I understand, Eleanor. Sure, I do not mind at all.”

The two friends lingered some minutes more over their tea, and finally said their farewells with the promise from Ms. Baker to call on Mrs. Hathaway the following week.



Once every two weeks Terrence Graham took a day off to drive all the way to Long Beach, enjoy the sea view in the Riviera of the East, and visit his mother. He loved the new bohemian

atmosphere that the town had gained since William Reynolds's Real Estate Company had gone into bankruptcy. Gone were the uptight restrictions of the past, and entertainers and other artists could live there without fearing ostracism from their neighbors. Old money had moved away years before, anyway.

Despite these changes, Eleanor Baker's house still preserved the Mediterranean style with impeccably white stucco walls and red tile roof that had been the initial trademark of the development. The lady had a preference for simplicity of lines and Terrence thought it suited her aesthetic preferences well. His mother had always been the paramount of elegance and distinction.

Her table was not in disagreement with her taste either. Dinner at Ms. Baker's was always a gourmet affair, with multiple courses, fine China, polished silverware, Baccarat glasses and French wine, which she managed to get despite the Prohibition. Terry thought that not even his father's aristocratic palate could find fault in Eleanor's selection, even for a regular meal. But the day Terrence called on his mother, was not a common day. So, the young man knew he was up for a major spoiling treat whenever he visited.

"You must tell your cook that he has excelled himself with this apple crostata," he complimented while sipping his tea after dinner.

"He would be thrilled to hear that you took notice of him and praised his work," she replied smiling, "Really Terry, you should do it more often. People tend to respond when you treat them with consideration."

"Mrs. O'Malley does not have anything to complain about me, mother. I swear I have been all that is civil with her," Terrence defended himself raising his left eyebrow in a natural gesture.

"I believe you, son. But let's not change the subject here," she said redirecting the conversation to the point they were previously discussing, "What do you say about the New Shakespeare Company? Do you think they would issue another invitation next year? I have it from a good source that they were really impressed with your work."

"Well, I haven't heard from Bridges-Adams since last summer. Only time would tell. I am not in a rush either. You know that I feel quite comfortable working with Robert," he remarked as he left his cup on the tea table.

"Perhaps this could be a good time for you to experiment with new projects, Terry. I must tell you that I am really happy seeing you in such a good mood lately. Now that you have regained your peace of mind, you should focus and take some risks with your career. I am sure Robert wouldn't mind."

“I know it, mother, but I am not ready for a drastic change, now. I have other things that occupy my mind,” he replied and for a moment he hesitated. He still had his reserves on how much he could disclose to his mother without raising her expectations in vain.

“Pray, explain, what is troubling you?” she asked slightly alarmed by his sudden silence.

“If I trust you with something, do you promise to hold on check that great imagination of yours?” he asked with half a smile playing in his lips.

“Absolutely!”

Terrence stood up and walked to the window. A gust of wind blowing the yellow leaves announced the decisive arrival of the fall. The young man turned and looked at his mother directly to the eye.

“I wrote to Candy last May,” he simply announced.

Ms. Baker blinked a couple of times trying to digest what her son had just said. As much as she prayed for her son’s happiness, she had long given up all hopes that he would ever recover what he had once lost. Not in her wildest dreams after Susannah’s passing, she had imagined that such possibility could still be open. It took her a few seconds to gather her wits and ask:

“Did she reply?” was the first thing she could utter.

“She did,” Terry answered in almost a whisper and a brief silence lingered for a while. Eleanor took advantage of the pause to organize her thoughts. The woman knew that she shouldn’t force her son’s confidence. If he wasn’t ready to speak, he would just shut off and drop the subject. Still, she was practically bursting with questions.

“Where is Candy now? In Chicago?” she then asked.

“No, she’s living in the orphanage where she grew up. I think she has become a sort of patroness for the place. She raises funds from different sponsors across the country. The rest of the time she works as a nurse with the children and in clinic in the nearby village. She also helps around in the orphanage doing the hard work that the ladies over there cannot handle anymore,” he explained surprising his mother with the exact information he possessed and giving away a certain hint of admiration in his words.

“I take we are talking of only one woman doing all that work. Am I right?” Ms. Baker inquired.

“She’s always been a busy bee,” Terry chuckled, the very mention of her setting his mind in a good mood.

"I wonder if the poor soul has time for herself," she replied. For a moment, Terry's mother thought that Candy's hyperactivity reminded her of the younger Eleanor Baker. She remembered having spent many seasons working to the point of exhaustion. She used as an excuse that she wanted to achieve a solid economic situation, but the truth was that she was just trying to forget Richard Grandchester and ease the pain for the loss of her son.

"I have asked myself the same question, but Candy takes no advice in this matter. I suppose she is happy with her life, as it is," Terrence said wistfully. He thought that he had no right to lecture Candy on how to lead her affairs.

Another silence ensued and Eleanor struggled to articulate the question that had been burning on the tip of her tongue since the beginning.

"With all that work . . . am I right to suppose that she is still single?"

"Yes" was Terry's plain reply. His mother noticed that he was making great efforts to repress a smile.

"And has she mentioned any beau, any gentleman she is interested in?"

"I think it very unlikely for her to broach such a personal subject with me, and through letters for that matter, mother. But I know for certain that she is wearing nobody's engagement ring for now, if that is what you are so anxious to find out," he replied amused at his mother's growing eagerness.

"Are you considering providing such ring, sometime in the future, Terry?"

"Perhaps I am, but do not get too excited, mother. We are now just trying to get to know each other anew," he replied finally offering his mother one of his rare smiles.

Then, Eleanor responded with a smile that mirrored her son's in every detail. She was more than glad with such good tidings.



From her vantage point, Candy could see the valley. She knew that Sister Lane would scold her for climbing again way too high up Father Tree, but she didn't care a bit. It was the napping time for the youngest children, and the oldest ones were doing their afternoon duties in the house. So, she took advantage of the occasion to spend some time of her own and think. Being up there and breathing the clean air of the mountains had always cleared up her mind.

She observed in the distance the colorful spot of her little garden. Three years before she had asked Miss Pony permission to grow a flower garden right next to the old chapel. Even now, at the beginning of the fall, some of her dear plants were still blooming. Her pansies in shades of blue, violet and yellow, the bright marigolds, and a few of her roses persisted in their mission of adding beauty to the landscape. Soon, the perennials would go dormant, and the annuals would inevitably die. Candy knew well that the alternation of life and death was a necessary condition of nature. Anthony had taught her well.

However, no matter how long and cold the winter could get, with the return of spring, the Sweet Candy would live anew, along with the gorgeous peonies she had first planted last year. For the following year, she planned on experimenting with some new flowers. The young woman was counting on some forget-me-nots to add some blue to her beds during springtime. She especially wanted little Stair to see how those tiny flowers went from a few seeds to a thousand little buds. Candy sensed that the child had inherited an acute curiosity and natural sensitivity, which she wanted to encourage to the most. With that purpose, the previous week she had visited a nursery in La Porte. She had bought the forget-me-nots seeds and, in an impulse, she had acquired some bulbs of another flower she wanted to try. Just that morning, Candy had planted the bulbs that she hoped would end up blooming in March, because Easter was the season of the daffodils.

Holding Terry's latest letter in her hand, Candy had decided that perhaps, just as flowers faithfully sprout every year; it was her time to hope again.



Manhattan, 20th of October 1924

Dear F.I.,

I hope you are fine when this one reaches you. You must be busy preparing for Halloween by now. Now that I think of it, you won't have to work that hard in your costume; you'll only need to add a broom to look the part. When you go trick-or-treat with the children, remember that the sweets and pumpkin pie are just for the young ones.

Here, we have been working extra hard. I'm double-booked the weekends. So much for my Sunday rides in the country club, I'm afraid. Unfortunately, I cannot utter a complaint because Robert has promised that we'll be free for the two last weeks of the year. Allow me to tell you that this is a real oddity. We usually work during the Christmas Holiday and New Year's Eve. I do not know what has come over Robert lately, but then again, some time off will do me good.

We'll be leaving for our tour within two weeks. I remember you told me that you would be travelling in November as well. I wish you could go some day to visit the West Coast, but I'm afraid we must be traveling in opposite directions this time.

I have taken the liberty of telling my mother about our renewed friendship, I hope you do not mind. She was very glad to hear about you and sends you her best regards. She has always thought very highly of you.

Do not think I have forgotten about Miss Pony's present. I have already written to the cabinetmaker with all your instructions for the chair. As soon as I get to San Francisco I'll make all the arrangements to have it sent.

Well, I must be going now, time stands still for no man. Please take care and remember that I am always

Yours truly

Terrence

P.D.

F.T. stands for Freckled Tarzan, in case you were wondering. I bet you should be up on some tree branch when you read this letter.

Chapter 3

Macbeth in love

Pony's Home, October 27th, 1924

Dear P.F.,

I'm sending this letter with the hope that it can reach you before you leave for your tour. I will be off myself after November the 6th. I don't know how you stand travelling and being away from home all the time. I haven't started packing yet and I am already loath to leave. Then again, perhaps you and Albert are a much better fit for such restless wandering than I will ever be.

Speaking of which, I must tell you that I've just received news from Albert. He will be back for Thanksgiving. Isn't it great? He has been away for over five months now and I'm dying to hug him and tell him how much I have missed him. I wish this time he could stay longer and spend more time with me.

Anyway, all that will have to wait till December. Right now, it's time to prepare for the winter and that means a lot of work in Pony's Home. This week I harvested the last of our apples, pears, and apricots from Miss Pony's orchard and now we are making all the preserves we'll need for the following months. Sister Lane usually gets cranky with all this cooking, but Miss Pony seems to enjoy it. They both send you their love, by the way.

Please, tell your mother that she has always had a place in my heart. Will she be travelling this season? Last time I talked to Archie, he told me there are rumors that she will work in the movies. Is that true?

Oh, well! I'm rambling now. This will be the last letter I'll send you till Christmas. Please, take good care of yourself during your trips and thanks again on behalf of Miss Pony for the favor you'll do for us.

Best regards

Candy

P.S. 1

Rest assured, sir, that my children will have all their candy and pie just for themselves, because a witch like me can bake her own cakes whenever it strikes her fancy. Not that you'll ever have the chance to try one if you keep being a real cad, calling me names.

P.S. 2

P.F. Stands for pompous fool. How many times do I have to tell you that my name is Candice?



The ceaseless noises of the Grand Central Terminal didn't seem to mind him when the uproar in his mind was much louder. Already installed in his private compartment he did his best to revise his itinerary for the hundredth time. Once more, he eyed his wristwatch lifting the sleeves of his impeccable Brooks Brothers jacket. He was anxious to start this trip.

Trying to appease his anxiety he took off the gray pinstriped jacket he was wearing and his homburg hat, hung them on a hook near the door, and came back to his seat. Just as he had done so, the train started to move. He then closed his eyes and again hoped against hope that everything would work as expected during this tour. In a reflex move he touched again his vest pocket where he had kept her last letter.

He experienced a mixture of emotions as he remembered every word in it. He had read it several times trying to reconcile his mind with the paragraph that spoke about Albert. During the previous months Candy had referred to him on several occasions. In one of her first letters, she had told him the story of how *the* “Mr. Albert” they both knew from their school times had turned out to be Candy’s adoptive father. The whole notion had been shocking for Terrence and it had taken him some time to adjust to the idea.

After the young man had digested the news, the constant mention of Albert’s name in Candy’s letters had become justified, at least for a while. However, with time, the never ending “Albert” topic had worn his patience out. The truth was that, despite the overwhelming fact of the legal bond between Candy and Albert, there was still a certain uneasiness that Terrence couldn’t dispel.

The thought that Albert was neither so old a man, nor truly blood-related to Candy, did not let him lower his guard. Would it be so strange for a woman of 26 to fall for a man like Albert, who was barely 36 or 37 and still a bachelor? Terrence knew it was not impossible. In fact, it was not at all uncommon to find a man married to a woman ten or more years his junior.

Perhaps all that would have meant nothing if Candy did not insist on writing about Albert in the most endearing terms. Terrence could not forget that the man had lived with Candy during the time he had suffered amnesia. In those days, both had ignored the legal relationship that existed between them. Feelings could have been born then, at least on Albert’s side. Moreover, Albert had been there for Candy after she had broken up with Terrence. That was certainly a time when the relationship between the young woman and the tycoon had grown stronger. This last thought was eating Grandchester’s guts even eight years later.

However, Terrence was aware that there were strong arguments against the likelihood of a romantic liaison between Albert and Candy. For starters, the fact that Albert was her adoptive father represented a serious legal and moral impediment to a legitimate romance. And the years that had passed without apparent change in Candy’s relationship with Albert were also proof of the chastity of their friendship. More importantly, Candy’s strong moral principles would not allow such deviant feelings to nest in her heart, and her mothers would not condone such a relationship either. Yet, just yet, what if there were unconfessed feelings, at least on Albert’s side? Could that be? After all, Terrence knew by his own experience that a man could love the same woman for many years, even against his own sense of duty and after all hope to make her his own has been lost.

A soft knock at the door interrupted Terrence’s thoughts.

“Come in,” he said and a man in his early fifties entered the compartment.

“Your tea, Mr. Graham, with only one lump” offered the man, “lemon is right?” he asked, leaving the cup on the table in the compartment.

“Lemon is fine, Hayward,” he replied absentmindedly, his eyes fixed on the window.

“Will you need anything else, sir?” asked Hayward.

“I don’t think so. Just knock at my door twenty minutes before we get to Boston.”

“Yes, sir,” and with a brief nod the man disappeared closing the door behind.

After being in show business for over a decade, Terrence felt entitled to indulge himself with certain comforts during his tours. The private compartment was one of them and the help of an assistant was another. For the last four years, Terrence had hired Martin Hayward to deal with practical matters and was happy with his services. The man, who was of English origin, worked as his personal secretary, booking hotel rooms, packing and taking care of the luggage, ordering his meals when he did not want to go out with the troupe or making any arrangements he could need. Hayward was discreet and unobtrusive. Terrence liked him because of that.

After Hayward had disappeared, Terrence continued musing about the same subject.

His thoughts ran to the distant point in Indiana where Candy was. He calculated that the following day Candy would be taking the train to Indianapolis to visit the first sponsors on her list. The desire to see her again was growing more and more urgent every day. He asked himself again how she looked at her present age.

He still cherished the image of her bright smile and unruly curls in his memories. He wondered if that glitter that he had always loved so much was still glowing in her big green eyes. During the months they had corresponded so far, on more than one occasion he had thought about asking her for a photo. Then, he discarded the idea. She had kept her communications always in a light tone, never talking about very personal matters, never tackling the subject of their common past. In that context, it seemed unbecoming to request a photo. So, he refrained from asking. He could only hope that soon circumstances would change for the better.



While Terrence’s train approached Boston, Candy was finishing her packing. Since the young woman was going to be away for over twenty days, she needed to think well what she would

take with her. In her mind, she went over the list of things she still had to pack: the blueprint of the improvements they had made in the house, the photos of the finished work, including the new school room and the infirmary, letters from Miss Pony and Sister Lane for all the donors, pictures of the children at different times of the year, carbon copies of the budget for the following year, and other documents to show the sponsors. All these items ranked at the top of her list. She also had to pack some pieces of embroidery and a few jars of preserves made by Miss Pony as presents for the donors.

With so many things to carry, she had to be very selective with her personal stuff. However, she hadn't embarked on the same tour since 1920 for nothing. She had learned how to select just a few pieces that she could wear interchangeably. Now, she also had to consider Annie's Thanksgiving party.

The last stop on her way back would be Chicago. As the Ardlays, Cornwells, and Brightons were the major sponsors, they couldn't be left out of the annual visit. So, Candy had learned to mix business with family matters for the sake of Pony's Home. She would attend the Thanksgiving dinner, make Annie happy, see Albert, and get a check for the children in one single visit.

The young woman opened her closet thinking of the dinner party. Despite her preference for travelling as light as possible, she had to take something for the occasion. The young woman did not want to disappoint Annie by underdressing for such a day. She looked at the three gowns that Annie had bought for her the previous month. The one that attracted her the most was a red cocktail dress of sheer fabric and asymmetrical hem that would graze her ankles. Red had always been her favorite color. Notwithstanding her first impulse, when she was about to take the red dress, her eyes were caught by a second gown.

"What is this? A slip or a nightgown?" had asked for Candy when Annie showed it to her the first time.

"Of course, not! It's a cocktail dress! Don't you see?" had answered Annie with offended air.

"But Annie, it is shorter than my undergarments!" she exclaimed in shock.

"That will be the new thing next year, Candy!" Annie patiently explained, *"The hem is going up even more. Everybody will be wearing skirts just an inch below the knee. Isn't it a scandal?"*

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely! You know I'm always updated with the latest news from Paris," Annie said proudly. In that aspect Archie and Annie made the perfect pair of *fashion animals*.

Candy took a second look at that strange piece cut in simple lines. It was a sleeveless, straight sheath dress with Art Deco jewellery and appliqué decorating a round neckline. Besides the particular length, there was another detail that made the dress unique. It practically dripped with countless crystal beads in shades of silver, grey and pale green over a light gray silky fabric.

"It is funny! The beads move with the gown!" giggled Candy after a second observation.

"So, do you like it?" asked Annie, pleased to see that particular glitter in Candy's eye, which she knew would turn on every time the young woman saw something that appealed her fancy.

"Well, it looks comfortable to wear. No trails or long skirts I can trip over with. Besides, it's chic in its simplicity. I will have to get used to show my legs as if I was a five-year old, but I can survive that."

"I knew this dress had your name spelled all over it," stated Annie with gladness. Then, she made a pause and with a bit of hesitation in her voice added, *"Just make sure you don't wear it when Aunt Elroy is around. She would make a fuss over the hem length issue."*

At that last remark, Candy could not avoid bursting into laughter.

"That is certainly an understatement," she finally said when she had regained her composure.

Candy woke up from her flash back and looked at the dress again. A mischievous grin appeared on her face. If Sister Lane had seen her expression at the moment, she would have known that the young woman was up for a prank.

"Well, Aunt Elroy," Candy said maliciously as she talked to herself in the mirror, *"What do you say about having something to stare at this Thanksgiving Day?"*

And with a new one of her capers in mind, she packed the dress and the luscious silver-gray wrap that Annie had bought to go with the dress.



The hilly landscape told Candy that the train would soon get to its destination. It was the morning of the 13th of November. She had been travelling for almost a week now and was anxious to get to the next hotel and take a shower.

Her schedule was especially packed that year. She had first travelled to Indianapolis to visit Mr. and Mrs. Jones who were Miss Pony's childhood friends. They owned a chain of bookshops and had supported Miss Giddings –as they called her– ever since she had started her work at the orphanage. As usual, they had received her warmly and responded with a generous donation. Next stop had been Cincinnati. There she had visited the Sisters of St. Joseph of Bourgh to deliver some letters from Sister Lane to her superiors. She also had a meeting with an old banker who had been Candy's patient in Chicago years before. The good man had become a faithful benefactor of Pony's Home ever since. This year, his donation had been larger than before.

Her next destination was Pittsburgh. In that city, she had scheduled a meeting with a person she had never met before. The contact had been made through Albert's connections with the Carnegie family. The late Andrew Carnegie, the steel magnate, was a Scottish immigrant just like Albert's grandfather. They had met during their trip to America, long before they both made their fortunes. During the years, both men had maintained a close friendship till Mr. Ardlay's death. Five years before the visit that Candy was about to pay, Mr. Carnegie had passed away. However, his widow, Mrs. Louise Carnegie, was still active in every charity pursuit that she could find. Candy was hoping that the old lady's heart could be moved to give a generous donation for Pony's Home. If everything went as planned, Candy expected to be having lunch with Mrs. Carnegie that very afternoon.

Little by little the countryside gave way to the neighborhoods in the outskirts of the city. The sky was gray, and it looked as though it was soon going to rain. Candy took off the glove of her right hand and touched the window of the train wagon to sense the temperature. The thermometer should be in the mid-forties¹² by then. Candy thought that she really needed a warm bath before meeting Mrs. Carnegie. She wanted to make a good impression and be fully awake for that afternoon.

When the train reached more populated areas, Candy was surprised by the impressive view of two rivers that practically dissected the city. In the center, a triangular shaped piece of land was connected by an amazing number of bridges to the rest of the urban area. The train went over one of those massive constructions and then Candy knew that they were about to arrive at Penn Station.

It was nine thirty when Candy got off the train. With some difficulty, the young woman tried to make her way through the crowd. It seemed that all Pittsburgh had something to do in Penn Station that morning. The porter who was helping her with her baggage did not make any comments, so she thought the uproar was a normal thing in that place.

Soon, she got herself a taxi and was on her way to the Renaissance Pittsburgh Hotel. When Candy had determined that Pony's Home could not depend only on Albert's and Archie's donations, she had made a compromise with her adoptive father. Albert would respect her decision if she accepted his help to pay for her trip expenses. Since the magnate had been very adamant on that point, Candy didn't have any option. Therefore, she allowed him to spoil her with expensive hotels through her funding tours. Normally, Miss Pony herself would suggest the places –since she knew well most of the sponsors and the cities they lived in– and Georges would book the rooms several months in advance. However, this time, when Candy entered the great lobby, she thought that Miss Pony had overdone it by choosing such a place.

The morning light streamed in through a gigantic dome made of glass, which was an architectural wonder by itself. Under the dome, a majestic marble staircase screamed all aloud that the place was made for those who knew what luxury was. To make matters worse, the concierge received Candy with all the bombastic protocol that the name Ardlay usually called for. Candy knew that drill very well.

The young woman sighed internally. She had long understood that being an Ardlay would always be unavoidably linked to such circumstances. No matter how discreet a life she led in Pony's home, once in a big city, she would always be treated as a woman of consequence. Although she would always feel uncomfortable with the notion, for her own peace of mind she had to accept it and live with it.

¹² Fahrenheit, (45°F is about 7°C)

Once she was alone in her room, her eyes wandered around and bumped into a beautifully arranged fruit basket. The young woman was pleased to read Mrs. Carnegie's card on top of the basket. Candy took it as a good omen. Happy with the lady's thoughtfulness, she grabbed an apricot, biting it with *gusto* as its sour and sweet taste watered her mouth. She then continued the inspection of her room.

There were two big windows near the bed. The sheer curtains were opened; so, she looked through the windowpanes to see the street below. Some cars were parking just right then, and a multitude seemed to pack the hotel's entrance.

"My, Oh My! Talk about a busy city. And I thought Chicago was crowded!" she said nonchalantly as she left the window to go into the bathroom.



By eleven thirty the blonde was already descending the marble stairs of the lobby. She had changed into a mauve dress made of fine twilled tricotine. A black silk scarf around her slender neck, a coat and a cloche hat of the same color finished the neat composition. She left her keys with the front desk clerk and took the taxi that would take her to her appointed meeting.

Just as she had gone, a middle-aged man with spectacles and dressed in a well-cut business suit approached the receptionist.

"Was that Ms. Ardlay?" asked the man with spectacles.

"Yes, the same," answered the employee with reserve.

"In which room is she staying?" asked the man again, slipping a five-dollar bill to the receptionist, who suddenly became more talkative.

"Room 178, sir. But I'm afraid the lady won't be back till late in the afternoon."

"That's perfectly fine. Thank you."

Without any other word the man turned back and walked up the marble staircase towards his own room.



Mrs. Louise Whitfield Carnegie was a lady in her late sixties with grey hair and all the looks of a wealthy Northeast matron. She had been the daughter of a well-to-do businessman from New York, but despite her upper-crust breeding, she was sensitive because her life had not been easy. Her mother had been an invalid, and she was her main caretaker till her passing.

When Carnegie's widow finally met Candy that afternoon, she was well impressed with the unassuming young woman. They both fell easily into animated conversation as Candy described with colorful words how Miss Giddings had first decided on starting an orphanage. While they talked, Mrs. Carnegie observed the young woman carefully, trying to spot traces of the old William Arday on Candy's face.

"Do you know the story of your great-grandfather and my late husband?" inquired Mrs. Carnegie over the tea.

"No madam, but I would like to hear it" invited Candy with a smile and the old lady replied in kind.

"Well, William Arday was five years older than my Andrew, but they became best friends when they met on the ship that brought them to America in 1848. Andrew was just thirteen back then and as penniless as young William Arday. As soon as they arrived in New York, they parted. My Andrew came to Pittsburgh where two of his aunts lived and William found his place in Chicago. Yet, they always wrote to each other and visited whenever they could. Andrew attended William's wedding in 1853."

"And when did you marry Mr. Carnegie, madam?" asked Candy while sipping her tea.

"Oh, My Andrew was a bachelor for a long, long time," the woman chuckled, "When we married, he was fifty-one. I am afraid his mother thought that no woman would ever deserve her Andra, as she called him."

"But she finally convinced herself that you would be a good wife, I suppose."

"Not at all!" the old lady said waiving her hand as if dispelling the idea, "We had a very long and difficult engagement, for over six years! We broke up and then reconciled twice during that time. It was all very upsetting, darling. Hadn't Andrew's mother died, we might have never made it to the altar. I was beginning to think that I would die a spinster," the lady said laughing wholeheartedly.

"That must have been really hard," Candy said thinking that she sort of knew the feeling, "Yet, it was very romantic, somehow," she added wistfully.

"Well, we were indeed deeply in love, my child. Just like your great-grandfather and his wife. My Andrew once told me that they fell in love at first sight. I understand the lady, for William Arday was a most handsome man."

"How did my great-grandfather and his wife look like? We do not have any pictures of them at home, you see."

"Well, I'm afraid to say that I never met Mrs. Arday. I first saw William Arday the day of my wedding. He was already a widower back then. However, I remember him very well. He had made his fortune by that time and was in his middle fifties. He was very tall, had a square jaw and carried himself with a distinguished air. He was very much the Scott man. He attended the ceremony with his son, William Charles, your grandfather. They both were blond like you, but it was Mr. William Arday the senior who had your green eyes, my child."

Suddenly, Candy realized that Mrs. Carnegie did not know about her adoption.

"Well, Mrs. Carnegie, I must disabuse you here. I am an Ardlay by adoption only. Mr. William Albert Ardlay adopted me when I was thirteen. Before then, I lived in Pony's Home. Miss Giddings raised me," Candy explained naturally.

"Are you serious, child?" asked the lady in disbelief. "I could have sworn that your eyes and those dimples on your cheeks were just like the late William Ardlay the First!"

"Well, I had been told before that I look a lot like Mrs. Rosemary Brown, Mr. William C. Ardlay II's late daughter. But I never imagined that I could also have some resemblance to great-grandfather William," Candy said raising both of her eyebrows.

"Are you sure you are not related by blood?" insisted the young lady.

"Yes, madam; I'm absolutely sure. I never met my parents, because I was abandoned at Pony's Home doors when I was a baby. There are not any records of children born out of wedlock in the Ardlay's family. So, as much as I would like to amuse you with a fantastic story about my origin, the real facts are as simple as this: my parents, whoever they were, could not afford my rearing and left me at Pony's home. Thirteen years later, a good man of fortune, totally unconnected with me, became my adoptive father. I am only grateful to Mr. William Ardlay the Third for adopting me and providing his protection ever since. My physical resemblance with the family is just a happy coincidence," Candy concluded.

"Young Mr. Ardlay must have been quite a child when he adopted you, then," continued Mrs. Carnegie, making figures in her mind.

"Certainly madam, he was just 24 and was not yet in public possession of his fortune. Nevertheless, I assure you, he has been a dutiful father for me, or perhaps more like an elder brother or young uncle. He is protective but gives me freedom and spoils me as much as any big brother would do. But, above all, we are each other's best friends."

Candy continued to explain how Mr. Ardlay had gladly accepted her decision to work and live in Pony's Home and how supportive he was of her devotion to the little orphans of Indiana. She seized the opportunity to explain that one of the biggest problems that the orphanage administration had always struggled with was their lack of means to help the children to further their education. Candy's special concern was focused on those children that were not adopted at an early age.

"Most people want to adopt babies or very young children, for obvious reasons." Candy explained vehemently, "Therefore, those who are older see themselves rejected over and over. This alone is very discouraging for the poor souls. On top of that, we cannot offer them any help to continue their secondary education and find a good job if they are never adopted. I almost suffered the same fate. Had it not been for Mr. Ardlay, I do not know how Ms. Pony and Sister Lane could have managed with me."

"So, perhaps, we could do something to contribute to the education of those poor children, my dear. My Andrew was always convinced that the best thing you could do for people was to give them a proper education," said the old lady and Candy realized she was on her way to achieving her mission in Pittsburgh.



It was past six p.m. when Candy returned to the Renaissance Pittsburgh while a persistent rain was falling over the city. The young woman was proud of herself and felt full of energy with her success. Mrs. Carnegie had promised a generous donation. They had agreed to meet the following morning at the bank to arrange the details of the deal. She barely could wait to see Ms. Pony and tell her the whole story.

When she opened the door of her room, it was already dark, and she had to turn on the lamps. As the lights began to illuminate the chamber, Candy could descry a huge flower arrangement over a table. For someone without a gardening passion, the arrangement could have been just a beautiful decorative note in the room. Yet, for Candy, the set of flowers in the cobalt blue vase in front of her was a real wonder.

The vase was overflowing with blue irises and white and yellow daffodils, all of them spring flowers. The only explanation for such a miracle in the middle of November was that the arrangement had been bought in a highly sophisticated shop. Probably, it was a florist with a year-round supply from one of those green houses that cultivated hybrid variations. Candy was so amazed at having a piece of Easter in her room, that it took her a while to wonder who had sent such an offering.

Nevertheless, after a while of contemplation, her eyes saw an envelope lying on the table, next to the vase. On the white paper, she could only see her name. Unable to organize the jumble of her own upset thoughts, she kept staring at her name written with a very familiar penmanship.

It was not until several minutes later that the young woman dared to open the envelope.

Pittsburgh, 13th of November 1924

How do you like Pittsburgh, Ms. Arday?

I've just arrived this morning. I would have liked to be there to welcome you, but my train was scheduled to arrive half an hour later than yours. The Stratford Troup will be performing at the Gayety Theatre tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Are you surprised?

Well, I feel I owe you an explanation. I have to confess that I planned it all to make my visit coincide with yours. Robert, who always spoils me, let me choose the dates for our commitment in Pittsburgh. The rest was just a matter of simple Arithmetic.

You might be wondering how come I had such exact information about your trip's schedule. Can you guess? Miss Pony was my accomplice in this prank. Since it is done, I suppose you will have to forgive us sooner or later.

All my planning notwithstanding, I cannot impose my presence if you don't have time to see me. I know that you have a number of commitments during your stay in the city and I wouldn't dare to intrude. Nonetheless, do you think you could make room in your busy schedule for an old friend? Would you be available to attend the Theatre tomorrow evening? Perhaps a late dinner afterwards?

I'm enclosing a ticket for you and, if you are willing, I'll send my assistant, Mr. Martin Hayward, to escort you. As much as I would like to do it myself, I must be at the theatre a couple of hours before the show starts.

If you are not available, just call my room to let me know. I'm staying here at the Renaissance, in room 238. If I don't get any call from you, I will instruct Mr. Hayward to pick you at 8:00 tomorrow evening. He's as British as Yorkshire pudding, so don't make him wait.

Yours,

Terrence.

Candy read the letter five or more times before her brain could process what it meant. She touched her chest to sense the wild pounding of her heart. When she finally could command her muscles to move, the young woman lay down on the bed, still holding the letter. She did not know what to think or do.

"He's here! Oh my God! Oh my God!" she kept repeating to herself, *"I must be dreaming...Oh my God!"*

"I can't believe he is in this same hotel. His room must be on the second floor!" she reasoned sitting now at the edge of the bed, *"I could call him right now. . . if I only had the nerve to do it,"* Candy remembered then that she hadn't heard his voice in eight years. Unwillingly, the tears began to roll over her cheek.

"And you ask me if I want to see you tomorrow night, Terry? Are you so blind that you truly believe I could ever refuse you?" she smiled beneath her tears, "If you only knew what you mean to me, insufferable man!"

The young woman stood up, still dizzy by the emotion. She managed to walk to the dressing table, pondering what she would do. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and, suddenly, the realization that the following evening she would be attending his performance sank in her head. The memory of the three occasions on which she had seen him acting came to her mind. Those three times had been a complete disaster. In fact, ever since Terrence had left England in 1913, it had always been that way between the two of them, a complete disaster. It was as if fate opposed their meeting with all its power.

"I'm afraid it may happen again!" she said aloud, "What if I get sick? What if I lose my ticket? What if there's an earthquake or something. . ." the young woman then realized the silliness of her reasoning, "Get a grip, Candice! You have never been such a coward, have you?"

Despite her determination, the negative thoughts mixed with exalted emotions kept her awake till very late that night.



The following day went by in a haze. Years later, Candy would try to remember what had happened during that morning and the subsequent afternoon, without success. She hardly recollected having met Mrs. Carnegie in the bank and signed several documents there. The conversation she had with the lady, their farewells and her promise to visit Pony's Home in the spring did not register in the young woman's mind. If the good lady had not written to her later, reminding Candy of such things, the young woman would have never been able to know what had been said.

Eating very little –which was totally out of character in Candy– and barely managing to remember her hotel room's number, the young woman spent the hours after lunch trying to figure out how she was going to gather the courage to meet Terrence Graham Grandchester again. For once, she wished to have Georges Villers' presence of mind and collectedness. In her life, she had never met someone with the ability to control his emotions and conceal whatever he was feeling or thinking as the good old Georges did.

As much as she had begun to hope her present friendship with Terry could grow into something closer to a romantic liaison, she was not sure if he could reciprocate her feelings. If he did not regard her as a potential love interest, she wanted at least to enjoy the benefit of keeping her true feelings just for herself. The last thing she wanted was to upset him unnecessarily if he could not requite her love for him. Unfortunately, Candy was afraid that Terry would be able to tell what she felt for him, just by looking at her eyes.

"You have to pull yourself together!" she chastised herself after hours of useless considerations, "If you don't start getting dressed by now, you'll never make it!"

It was then that reality hit her hard. She remembered herself choosing the dress for Annie's Thanksgiving dinner party with the malicious intention of shocking Aunt Elroy. To wear the most scandalous "dernier cri" in a family gathering was one thing, but to do it in a public place and in front of Terrence –of all

people— was a totally different thing! In a reflex move, she looked at the clock hanging on the wall. It was 7pm, definitely too late to go out and buy another dress.

After pondering other possibilities, Candy had to accept that nothing else she had in her baggage could be suitable for an evening at the Theater.

“All right, Candy, it serves you right! Now your little joke is backfiring on you! Stupid idiot!” she scolded herself again, as she walked nervously around the room. A second look at the inexorable clock made her realize she was running out of time, *“Are you going to freeze and spend the evening inside the closet?”* she tried to reason with herself, *“If you are going to be tonight’s talk in Pittsburgh, you’d better do it with dignity”* and with this last resolution the young woman squared her shoulders and began her toilette.

Never one to spend too long preening herself, she changed her underwear to light cami-bockers that would be short enough for the infamous dress. Hating girdles, she simply rolled her silk honey beige stockings to her knees to allow more freedom of movement. The hair business was nothing she did have to work on because her natural curls refreshed with just a hint of almond oil and water did the trick for a perfect finger-waved bob. She pondered wearing the headband with rhinestone appliqué that Annie had chosen for her, but discarded the idea thinking that it was too much for her taste. Instead, and as the single piece of jewelry, she put on a pair of square black garnets dangling at the bottom of silver Art Deco earrings. She observed in the mirror how the marcasite accents in the set glittered as she moved her head. She was pleased with the effect. Make up was also a light business. Some powder, pink lipstick and discreet eyeliner were more than enough for her.

Once she was dressed, a pair of t-strap pumps in a dark pewter shade and a matching square clutch finished the composition. She was getting the silver wrap trimmed with ermine fur out of the closet when she could hear a decisive knock at her door. She looked at the clock again. It was 8 sharp.

When she opened, a thin man with a bowler hat and spectacles bowed in front of her. She extended her hand introducing herself.

“You must be Mr. Hayward. I’m Candice White Ardlay.”

“Enchanted, madam,” the man said as he briefly shook Candy’s hand, “Mr. Graham sends his appreciation for your willingness to attend his performance. I can see you’re ready.”

“You’re right, Mr. Hayward. Shall we go now?” she asked, tilting her head.

The man gestured for Candy to lead the way and she followed his hint. Outside, the evening was cold, and the young woman thought that it would be an unpleasant walk to the theater. To her surprise, a car was waiting for them at the hotel’s entrance. Candy thought it was funny to use a car when the theater was just on the following street, but considering the temperature, she welcomed the extravagance.

Before she could realize it, they were already at the Gayety. Getting out of the car, Candy made a pause to read Terrence’s name written all over the marquee. He would be incarnating Macbeth that evening. Candy had not forgotten that he had read that play for her one sunny afternoon in Scotland.

"You are on this challenging leading role, now," she thought, "I always knew you were meant for great things!"

With this uplifting thought Candy entered the theater. When Hayward helped her to take off her wrap, she had to use all that initial energy to maintain a nonchalant air. More than one look was caught by her audacious attire. To her great comfort, Mr. Hayward seemed as unaffected and calm as before. So, she gladly accepted his arms when he offered it.

As they walked along the theatre hall and up the carpeted staircase, Candy could feel how the tassels at the end of each one of the Rhinestone strands on her dress moved with her every step.

"If I wanted to be noticed, I couldn't have chosen a better outfit," she internally made fun of herself.

Oblivious to Candy's thoughts, Hayward conducted the young woman through the theater corridors. When the man finally stopped, he opened a door and gestured to Candy for her to enter.

"Your box, madam," he said.

Looking at the private seating area Candy felt confused.

"Does Mr. Graham have other guests tonight, Mr. Hayward?"

"No madam, Mr. Graham thought this box had the best view of the stage. So, he reserved it all for you. Now, if you excuse me, I will be back for you when the play ends."

"Aren't you going to stay and watch the play with me, Mr. Hayward?"

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Ms. Ardlay" the man replied flattered, "but I have duties to fulfill," and saying this last thing, the man closed the door leaving Candy to her own devices.

Once alone, Candy picked a seat in the front row and began an inspection of the theater. She confirmed that she would have the best view of the performers from that point. It was so close to the stage that she felt she could touch the velvet curtains. Then, the thought that possibly Terrence could see her from the stage, assaulted her. However, soon she reckoned it was very improbable, because he would have the spotlights pointing to his face most of the time, and the rest of the theater would be in the dark.

"So, I'll see you, but you won't see me, Terry . . . not yet," she thought smiling inwardly, *"I think I prefer it that way. It will give me time to adjust to your presence and compose myself."*

In that moment the theater lights started to fade leaving the place in darkness. The curtains opened and Candy's heart stopped for a moment that seemed to last an eternity. In the mist of the darkened stage, a sudden light illuminated the scene just to allow the public to see three women. The paleness of their faces was stressed by the black robes they were cloaked in. The sound effects of thunder announced the opening of the great piece.

"When shall we three meet again in thunder, lightning or in rain?" said the first witch.

Candy avidly listened to the cryptic dialogue that she remembered from her high school years. The first exchanges between Duncan, his sons, and the heralds from the battlefield then followed, announcing the victory of Macbeth. Soon, thanks to another change in the lights and a thunder-like sound, the scene moved again to the heath where the weird sisters met. Finally, as Candy's heart went to her throat, Macbeth himself appeared in the scene and delivered his first line.

"So foul and fair a day I have not seen"

His voice was as powerful as she remembered, only deeper and perhaps richer in the scope of modulations he displayed. His figure was even more imposing than in her memories. As the play progressed and lights began to bathe him, she could appreciate that his was the tallest frame of all the actors in the company.

Candy felt a shiver run down her spine. To look at his face in a newspaper photograph could never be compared to the utmost pleasure she was experiencing now, seeing him for the first time in many years. It was a mixture of discoveries and recognition. There were certain things that she was pleased to behold once again, like the soft cleft on his chin, the way his left eyebrow arched and that particular curve of his lips, which he used to express so many different moods. At the same time, there were also a great deal of new details that she had never seen before. He had grown in height and size, though his frame was still proportionally athletic. His hair was cut short, but this she knew before from the newspaper. However, as the spotlights illuminated him now, she could observe his strands were now darkened with shades of chocolate and roasted chestnuts. His skin was a little more tanned than before, probably because he had been outdoors more often, as he had taken up riding again. Perhaps the greatest change was the way he held himself on stage. He moved with more security and his body, as well as his voice, could use a greater repertoire of devices to convey meanings. He could make a simple gesture to speak tones of a character's emotions and thoughts. A look, a wave of his hand, a tilt of his head or a simple step could be enough for him to express a thousand things.

The play was perfect for Terrence to showcase his skills. In front of Candy's eyes his Macbeth experienced multiple changes. He was at first the great hero and soon turned into the ambitious but still doubtful plotter. Then he was the lover, the manipulated husband, just to be soon the ruthless murderer, and later the tormented soul eaten with anguishing guilt. His evil and increasing corruption were so palpable that for a while frightened her. Finally, his strength in the final battle as he died fighting turned him again in a tragic hero. Candy wondered how he could fake so many different emotions in just two hours and a half.

All too soon, King Malcolm delivered the last line of the play and the whole audience stood up in ovation. Candy looked at the crowd in amazement. This whole theatre roaring in admiration was so different from the mocking little rabble in Rockstown. Through the years, Terrence had gone from bitter despondency and total failure to self-control and absolute success. The young woman's heart swelled with pride.

"You have overcome your own demons, my love!" she thought, fighting her tears, "You have won your own battles all by yourself, Terry. This applause is the rightful proof that you are by far a better man. I am so proud of you!"

In that precise moment all lights went on, the curtains lifted once more and the whole company appeared again. All the actors bowed together and then one by one received their dues. At the end, the troupe stepped back and left Terrence Graham alone to be especially praised by the public's applause. It was then, as he bowed and lifted his head with a brisk movement, that his iridescent blue eyes met those of

the only occupant in the first box. It was all too fast for the observers to notice, but for a fleeting second, as Terrence took in the sight of her, he smiled.



The curtains fell for the last time. The performers all relaxed, coming back to their true selves and slowly motioning towards their dressing rooms. A rushing leading actor practically fleeing from the stage was not anything new for the troupe members. That was Terrence's usual way to end a play. He would dash off to his room before anyone could breathe. That night was not the exception.

This typical reaction notwithstanding, Terrence knew well that he was not his usual self that night. In fact, nothing that night was like any moment in his life before. Since that one single look from the stage, all sounds in the atmosphere had faded leaving him momentarily deaf. The earth stopped twirling because she was there looking at him, and in her eyes, there was something like deep admiration. Was it all for him? Could it be only for him? His heart was swelling; its loud beats were the only thing he could hear, whilst the rest of the world went silent.

The whole day....no, rather the whole tour, since the very beginning, had been like living in an ever-growing crescendo of doubts and excitement. He had planned this encounter with so much hope and still, he was plagued by all sorts of apprehension, fearing that something could come in the way to prevent their meeting. The day before, since Hayward had delivered the flowers and the note to her room, Terrence had practically stopped breathing. When she did not call, he knew that she would attend the play. Yet, he was tempted to go to her room and talk to her at last, but his initial resolve to wait was stronger. As much as he longed to see her again, he did not want to make this meeting as prosaic as just knocking at her door. His dramatic nature needed something more special, for one does not wait for eight long years and drops by as on any working day simply to say hello. Thus, he spent a sleepless night in nervous anticipation that previous evening.

To make matters worse, the rehearsal that morning had been a real mess. When the moment arrived, it had cost him three times the regular amount of concentration to prepare for the play. Nevertheless, once Hayward announced to him that Candy was already seated in her box, a strange peace invaded his mind. It was like nothing else he had experienced before. He still remembered the night of Romeo and Juliet's premiere and could not avoid comparing the feeling. She had been there too, but the shadow of Susannah's accident and the pressure he had to suffer did not allow him to enjoy Candy's presence. This time it had been totally different.

Once on the stage, the energy flow inside him was the strongest he had ever felt. His connection with the character, as different as Macbeth was from his real self, had been the deepest he had accomplished, and above all, he had enjoyed the play immensely. Despite all these good things, nothing compared to the brief glance of her slender figure fiercely applauding from the first box. He couldn't avoid remembering the vision of her face in Rockstown. Her deep sadness and tears were forever engraved in his mind. But this night she was not a vision. The very woman of his heart –for a grown-up woman she was now– had been there, wearing her brightest smile for him.

In the midst of these unusually happy considerations, he was interrupted by a knock at his door.

"Terrence, may I come, in?" called Robert Hathaway's voice.

"Come in, Robert," he responded and a second later Hathaway's robust figure, dressed as King Duncan entered the changing room.

"Are you coming to have dinner with us?" the man asked casually.

"Not tonight, Robert," he replied while he started to take off his make-up, "I have a previously fixed commitment."

"Really?" said Hathaway in disbelief, but knowing by experience that asking questions to his old pupil did not work with him, he declined further inquiries, "All, right, you have a good night then."

And saying this, the man closed the door leaving Terrence alone.



While Terrence hurriedly finished changing, Hayward was back by Candy's side. The emotions that the play had elicited in the young woman were still fresh by the time the man arrived to escort her.

"Will I be able to see Mr. Graham now?" she had first asked him.

"Surely, madam. In fact, Mr. Graham would be honored if you accepted his invitation to have dinner with him. But first, he has to get rid of his admirers and the reporters who will be waiting for him outside."

Candy then remembered the evening Terrence had visited Chicago to play the role of the King of France. The overwhelming crowd striving to get a piece of the young actor while she tried to approach him in vain was impressed in her mind. She certainly did not want a repetition of that evening.

"And how does he plan to do that?" the woman inquired curious.

"Well, madam, we have our methods. First, I'll take you to the car and then we will rescue Mr. Graham, before the crowd claims him."

And as predicted, Hayward conducted the young woman out of the theater and into the car. He took care to pull down the shades of the back seat, which made Candy wonder, what kind of impertinent sun the man was expecting at that hour of the night. He got in the driver's seat and drove round the block a couple of times and then into the back street behind the theater.

"Miss Ardlay, no matter what you hear outside, do not raise the blinds," he instructed and soon Candy could understand his meaning, because seconds after, the noise of people and the flashes of cameras rained all over the car.

They stopped by the Theater's back door, where the uproar was at its highest. However, the turmoil in Candy's head was much louder. All the emotions of her life seemed to pile up in that very second. Her head was giddy, and she was not sure whether it was hot or cold, because she was shivering and also felt feverish at the same time.

Then, in a confusing mass of voices and lights, the backseat door opened and closed snappily. As the car started moving again, and still in a mental haze, she could take in the sight of his presence right next to her. None of them were able to speak at first, allowing an indescribable silence to penetrate the atmosphere.

Suddenly, they could not say if it was still night or if morning had inexplicably risen. It was as if eight years had not gone by so slowly and painfully, and yet the passage of time was undeniable, because it took them both a while to adjust to the image of their more mature selves.

Internally, Terrence mocked himself, because all his acting powers had abandoned him for a brief while. No matter how hard he tried to command himself to speak, he could not utter a word. Even in the dark, his eyes were lost in the clear green sparks twinkling inside hers.

“How are you?” Candy was the first to speak, though she hardly recognized her own voice. Unknowingly, a shy smile began to expand over her face.

“Really glad to see you again, Freckles.” he managed to answer huskily.

Candy rolled her eyes, and her smile grew wider.

“Will you ever call me by my real name?” she asked.

“That is my private name for you. Would you like that I simply call you Candice, as any jack out there would do?”

“Perhaps, not,” she giggled and suddenly the atmosphere relaxed.

“Then, Madam Freckles, tell me if you enjoyed the play tonight?”

“I will not do such a thing” she teased, crossing her arms over her chest “the last thing a Pompous Fool like you needs are the words of praise you mistakenly think you deserve.”

“You hurt my feelings!” he replied frowning, internally ready for the game they knew how to play so well, “Contrary to what you think, a star needs some recognition after an exhausting performance. Maybe I should go back to the theatre now and join those people so eager to sing my praises, since you are so adamant to say at least that you had a good time.”

“If I said that I did, would you be content with that?” she inquired in disbelief, arching her eyebrow.

“Perhaps not . . . perhaps I would need to ask you next whose’ performance was the best.”

“To that question, I’d probably say that Lady Macbeth was fantastic, especially when in her torment, walking asleep and washing her hands stained with blood.”

“Mrs. Sanders, delivered a fine Lady Macbeth, indeed, but I was thinking of some other actors who did also an awesome job.”

“Mr. Hathaway, for instance,” she suggested poisoning her index on her chin, as if trying to think over the matter.

“Oh, well, Robert is a seasoned actor of amazing talents, but you know the role he played today is not so prominent in the play.”

“That does not signify! His performance was outstanding nevertheless. . . I also think that Banquo’s ghost was impressive,” she added, enjoying his growing impatience.

“Maybe you are overlooking some grand actor, who happened to have the leading role tonight,” he suggested casually placing his left elbow on top of the back seat, to rest his left temple on his closed fist.

“I’m not certain of whom you could be talking about” she faked ignorance, but she soon regretted her playful banter, for the man responded getting dangerously closer and grabbing her hand before she could react.

“Come on, Candy, won’t you say that you liked **me** tonight?” he whispered as his breath brushed her ears.

“Did you not see it right there on stage, when our eyes first met, Terry?” she confessed, lowering her eyes, unable to keep up with the game.

He did not respond, but the smile on his lips answered in his stead. The sound of his shortened name on her lips lingered in his ears, soothing his soul. By then, nobody but his mother called him that way anymore. For a while he stayed motionless, enjoying the warmth of her hand in his. He could scarcely believe that after so long, he was again touching her! Her hand was still as small and soft as he remembered.

“We are just there, Mr. Graham” announced Hayward from the driver seat. Candy did not know if she should hate the man for breaking the mood or if she should thank him for saving her of giving away her feelings on the first hour of the date.

“*Is this a date?*” she suddenly asked herself. After brief consideration, she had to admit that it certainly looked like one. As Terrence helped her to get out of the car, the continuing evidence of his grip on her hand made her wonder how heated she could feel despite the chill of the night. The temperature had surely dropped to something close to 38 degrees¹³, but she was not conscious of it.

“Are you cold?” he asked taking her hand to rest in the crook of his right arm, “You’re shivering”

“Am I?” crook of his arm

“Come, let’s get inside.”

¹³ About 3 °C

Hayward dutifully opened the main door of a building that, from the outside, looked like one of those old stone houses adorned with decorative woodwork. Inside, Candy could see that it was a buoyant restaurant with a jazz band playing in the background. The place was dimly lit by candle lights on the tables and a few lamps strategically distributed on the walls. Everybody seemed so absorbed in the music and conversation that only an employee who helped the newcomers to get rid of their coats noticed their entrance. The waiter greeted Hayward as if they knew each other and then bowed respectfully to Terrence and the lady. Before Candy's eyes could get adjusted to the darkness of the place, the waiter had conducted them to a private room with large windows that allowed a regal view of the city.

"Will it be all for today, sir?" Candy heard Hayward's voice, addressing Terrence, who remained near the door talking to his secretary for a while.

Candy tried to compose herself by looking at the Golden Triangle's skyline¹⁴ that could be distinguished from the panoramic window. Apparently, the restaurant was on one of the hilly sides of Pittsburgh, affording an excellent view of the rivers and the city lights. She had turned her back to see the evening view, but she could still hear Hayward's parting words as Terrence dismissed him. Then, during the brief silence that ensued, she distinctively felt Terrence's eyes running over her figure. She then turned and her eyes caught him unawares.

She was surprised to see in his eyes a strange glare that she had never seen before. It was of such an intense nature that made her limbs grow weak.

"The view from this place is amazing," she mumbled trying to ease the atmosphere, "Where . . . where are we?"

"At West End," he replied with a hint of hoarseness in his voice. He slowly walked towards the window to join the young woman, "This area is called Mount Washington, by far the steepest point in Pittsburgh. The view from this room is great, but if we could take a ride on one of those funiculars they have here, you could witness a superior one. I have never seen an urban vista such as this."

"I can see you've been here before," she inferred.

"You can say that again, Freckles. Pittsburghers love Shakespeare. Sometimes we come here more than once a year," he replied. Internally, he was glad to find out that the topic had allowed him to recover his composure.

While Terrence explained to Candy how he had first discovered the secluded restaurant they were in, during one of his trips; he inwardly rebuked himself. His lapse had been inexcusable. So far, he had managed to keep his unruffled appearance, exercising his well-trained histrionic skills, but only half an hour near her had been enough to erode his self-control. Although her nearness inside the car had been trying, and the contact with her hand exhilarating; he was performing well until she had

¹⁴ Golden Triangle is the name given to Pittsburgh downtown area, which is a triangular piece of land flanked by two rivers.

taken off her wrap. When the lights of the room had struck her legs, the unexpected view of a feminine pair of shapely calves had arisen in him the most disturbing thoughts.

“Blast! You are not a young folk¹⁵ anymore, Graham,” he thought, “do not start acting like one or you’ll soon earn another slap on your face!”

They both remained observing the skyline for a little longer standing at a prudential distance from each other, until the waiter made his entrance with a tray.

All of a sudden, Candy noticed her lost appetite had returned; therefore, she welcomed the food with great alacrity.

“I had almost forgotten that I hadn’t eaten much today,” she exclaimed looking with a watering mouth at the dishes that the waiter was serving.

“I do not believe a glutton like you, could ever forget about eating,” he said helping her to take her seat.

“You’re such a cad! The gentleman here should be thinking I am a troglodyte!” she complained pouting. The alluded waiter only smiled at her comment.

“Don’t worry, Harry will keep your secret,” Terrence said chuckling.

“Stop it! . . . Anyway, I won’t let your annoying remarks ruin the meal. It looks delicious! What is it?” she asked, turning to the waiter.

“It’s Welsh lamb, steamed vegetables and roast potatoes, madam,” the waiter explained. “The owner’s father was from Wales, you see. This is the house specialty. What should I serve you for a drink? Red wine, perhaps?”

Candy looked at the waiter in shock and Terrence burst into laughter.

“Good heavens! You should see your face, Candy. You look like a member of The Woman’s Temperance Union¹⁶,” he mocked.

“But The Prohibition¹⁷ . . .” she almost choked.

“There are ways to get around any prohibition, Freckles,” he winked at her naturally, “but to judge by your face I think you’d better have some ginger ale. Please, Harry, bring us two glasses.”

¹⁵ In the 1920s people did not use the word teenager as we do now. Instead, “young folk” was commonly used to refer to adolescents.

¹⁶ Woman’s Christian Temperance Union was an association of women whose goal was to combat the influence of alcohol on families and society. This group was influential in the institution of Prohibition during the 20s.

¹⁷ The Prohibition is a period of North American History in which the sale of spirits was forbidden in the country for several political and moral reasons. The Prohibition was installed in 1919 and ended in 1933.

The funny incident and Candy's subsequent blush set Terrence in such a good mood that soon the conversation over the meal became fluent and pleasant. Before they could notice, both had lost track of time.

Once she felt comfortable enough, Candy recovered her easy-going chatting style, giving Terrence a detailed report of her success with the sponsors she had visited so far and the fund she was planning to constitute for Pony's children's education with Mrs. Carnegie's help. However, never one to talk only about her own interests, she naively inquired about his tour and the cities he had been to. He replied when prompted, encouraged by the openness she inspired in him. A naturally reserved man like him would have found it awkward to be thus questioned, had she not been the one making the questions. By her side, he knew well, his usual guard lowered, as his heart warmed up.

She, on her own, was doing her best to memorize his every move and feature. From the shine on his hair neatly parted on one side, to his impeccable Cunningham's tuxedo, and the impossible blue pools of his eyes, she was making the most detailed inventory of his presence. She also took careful note of the most recent news of his tour, knowing that she would be following him with her heart when they had parted.

Before that evening, he had been in Boston, Montpelier, and Buffalo. He would have to stay for another day in Pittsburg and then other eight cities would follow until he reached the West Coast.

"Don't you ever get tired, Terry?" she asked pursing her lips, and the man wondered if it was his name thus pronounced by her or the glitter in her short curls that made his pulse beat faster.

"I'm used to traveling, but I confess one gets weary by the end of a tour. However, I believe you are not one to talk about a quiet life. Don't you think that the clinic in the village and the work at Pony's Home at the same time is way too much for one single person?"

"Oh, you must be mocking at my unsophisticated lifestyle," she giggled behind her ginger ale glass, "but I love nursing, so it is like a game to me!"

"A game?! I'm glad I have never been in the position of being your toy, I mean your patient, then."

"Mock me if you will, but I am a very good nurse, and my patients are happy with my services and so is Dr. Martin."

"But all work and no play . . ."

"I know, I know," she interrupted, leaving aside for a moment the Bara Brith¹⁸ they were enjoying as dessert. "You are starting to sound like Annie."

"Has it occurred to you that Mrs. Dandy-Boy could be talking some sense here? You'll become an embittered spinster before you can realize it," he instigated her purposefully, knowing his comments were uncalled.

¹⁸ Bara Brith is a sort of fruit cake typical in Welsh cuisine.

“Oh nonsense!” she dismissed, chuckling; “I am perfectly able to handle my duties and see my favorite beau when I need him. Besides, he has never complained about my jobs,” she said biting the fruit cake with delight.

Then it was Terrence’s turn to choke on his tea.

“You’re jesting!” he said when he could recover his voice.

“About my beau?” she asked innocently, “Of course not. He is the most adorable man of my acquaintance. How could I be joking about him?”

Candy smiled impishly while she observed Terrence’s face grow paler. She didn’t know what had come upon her to say such a preposterous thing, but Terrence’s reaction, so similar to a sudden jealousy onset, was precious. Christ! She was enjoying it!

“Do you want to see his picture?” she continued as she opened her clutch, handing him a little booklet with photos that she kept inside her wallet.

Terrence’s eyes could not escape the sight when she opened the booklet and flashed it in front of his face. With eyes wide-open, he saw the photo of a little boy, practically a toddler, with large dark eyes and a sunny smile.

“This is Alistair, my dearest beau. Isn’t he a cutie pie?” she asked with pride, whilst the color returned to Grandchester’s face as he finally realized she had been toying with him.

“All right, Miss Freckles,” he thought, “two can play a game.”

As soon as he regained his collectedness he replied aloud, “So this is Dandy-Boy’s little kid. He has his Namesake’s eyes and smile.”

“You noticed! I have always thought so, since the day he was born. Have I told you that I assisted in the birth?” She continued talking while she showed him other photos of the boy when younger.

“Did you?”

“Oh yes! I was with Annie during her confinement and Dr. Martin let me receive the baby when he came into this world. When I first took him into my arms, he opened his eyes, and I saw Stair’s dark eyes staring at me once again. I was ecstatic. You have no idea the thrill it gives you to hold a new life, especially when the baby has a striking resemblance with someone you love, Terry.”

Candy’s face was beaming with the memory and Terrence imagined that she would look a thousand times more beautiful and brighter if the baby were hers. He was about to forgive her for her dirty trick just because he found her smile irresistible, but too proud for such a gesture he decided to wait for the next opportunity to make her pay. After all, revenge is best served on a cold plate. For the moment, he just wanted to enjoy his time with her. In fact, he was about to change the subject, when he decided to lead the conversation in an unexpected direction.

“Now that we talk about The Inventor,” Terrence said; his voice and his demeanor turning serious, “I know it’s been many years since his passing, but I think I must tell you I’m really sorry for your loss. He was a swell bloke. I wish I had been able to get to know him better.”

“I appreciate it, Terry,” she thanked, lowering her eyes, looking at little Alistair’s photos once again, “You know, it’s been seven years since Stair parted, but I still cannot get used to the idea of his being no more among us. Sometimes I feel that he is going to knock at my door one of these days and tell me *“I’m back, Candy!”* I see him coming up with one of his disastrous inventions and all of us laughing together at the time it explodes or something, as the happy and carefree bunch we once were.”

“Sometimes it is hard to let go,” Terrence whispered wistfully, his eyes lost on the flickering flame of the candle that decorated the table.

Candy perceived his change of mood. His words had sounded so deeply despondent that she could not avoid remembering Susannah.

“He must be thinking about her. How could I have been so insensible?” she thought, *“Dearest Terry, you must be suffering even now.”*

Suddenly, Candy realized that this was the right cue to open up the subject she had long procrastinated.

“Terry,” she began using her sweetest tone, “I beg you to accept my apologies for never sending you a letter with my sympathies right after Susannah’s passing. I was shocked and grieved when I found out about it. I could have never imagined it. She was so young! . . . Unfortunately, we live far from town and the papers always get to us too late. We did not have a radio by then, as we do now. When the news finally arrived, it had been more than a month since her funeral. Now that I think it over, I believe I still could have sent a card, a note or something, but at the very end my indecision paralyzed me. Later, when you sent me your first letter, it did not mention a word about her. So, I supposed that you were not ready to talk about it.”

Terrence raised his eyes to see Candy. The young woman had instinctively reached for his hand on the table, and the most sincere expression of contrition had spread over her face.

“I . . . I am really sorry I could not offer you any comfort at the right time, Terry. I know how hard it is to lose those we love. But if my friendship can be of any help now, I promise I won’t desert you this time.” she mumbled visibly moved.

It took Terrance a while to understand that Candy was under the impression that he was still pining over Susannah’s death. He could see that she was sincerely worried for him. For a moment, he hesitated, asking himself how to explain such a delicate matter, especially when it was so intrinsically connected with their common past. He had not planned to broach the subject in their first meeting, but now it was there, as if conjured by a capricious twist of fate. How could he go about it without being hypocritical?

“Candy, I appreciate your concern,” he began, his hand responding to Candy’s touch, interlacing his fingers with hers, “I have to admit that Susannah’s parting was painful, but being honest with you, it was not as you suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he vacillated, knowing that one confession would inevitably lead to another, “Over the years, I managed to nurture a sincere regard for Susannah. I learned to appreciate her talents and virtues, even though I also discovered her faults, which were not few. I do not pretend to speak ill of the dead at this point. Suffice to say that I managed to accept her as she was, without adornment and I sincerely got to esteem her. Nevertheless, I am not grieving anymore because of her parting.”

Candy’s eyes grew wide in confusion.

“Do not look at me in that way, Candy. You are such a generous woman that you surely find it hard to understand the complexities of certain characters. On this world, there are people who can be at the same time selfish and kind, brave and coward, heroic and vile. Susannah was like that . . . and so am I . . . In a way, we were very alike in our paradoxes and our relationship was equally contradictory. Here, I must also admit a grave fault of mine. I’m afraid I will disappoint you.”

The young woman’s heart shrank, unconsciously moving away her hand from Terrence’s. The man lowered his eyes, trying to find the courage to continue.

“I know I promised you that I would make her happy. I certainly did it. Unfortunately, if in your notion of a happy relationship you include that both partners should be in love with each other, I must admit that I never met that standard.”

Candy was dumbfounded. She had never imagined –even in her darkest nightmares– that Susannah’s love could have remained unrequited for so many years. She felt hurt and disoriented by the news.

Terrence understood that it would take her some time to digest his news, so he respected her silence.

“Are you saying that you. . . that you just performed for her? You just pretended to love her all those years?” Candy finally said, visibly upset. She nervously stood up from her seat, not able to continue looking into Terrence’s eyes. As if searching for a way to escape from the truth, she moved towards the window, her eyes lost in a distant point of the nocturnal landscape.

“Not in the way you are implying, Candy,” he defended himself, “When I offered her my protection, I made it clear that I was bound to her by gratitude and honor. She understood it perfectly and accepted me that way.”

“But she was expecting that someday you would come to love her,” Candy insisted, without turning her face to see him. She was aware that she was sounding reproachful but could not hide her profound disappointment.

“Perhaps, she did, but we never spoke of that. I knew well that love is supposed to be the reason for a commitment such as the one I had made with her, and I swear upon my soul that I tried, but to not avail. Despite this failure, my conscience is at ease because I esteemed her, supported her during her rehabilitation, encouraged her to undertake a new career, provided for her as a husband would have done, even though I was only her fiancé. I was with her when she first got ill and during all that painful time as her illness progressed. Even her own mother had lost heart to find a cure, but I insisted until we had consulted every physician that money could pay to save her life. When all science was found futile, I was by her bed the night she breathed her last. During all that time, I respected her and honored her as was expected. You may ask anyone; I never gave her a reason to complain. But I did not love her, because it was not meant to be. My heart would not respond to my command on that score.”

By now, Terrence had also left his chair and was pacing the room as he spoke in earnest. His words penetrated Candy’s ears like swords, piercing her heart and tearing down her understanding of the matter. As Terrence narrated how he had been by Susannah’s side to the very last moment of her life, her initial outburst slowly subsided. She also felt her admiration for Terrence grew immensely by the minute. He had been faithful, generous, and supportive to someone he did not love and not many men can say that about their relationships with the women they claim to love. Yet, there was still something she needed to know to reconcile with the truth revealed by his words.

“Do you think she was happy?” she finally asked, turning to look him in the eye.

“I know it,” he replied straightforwardly, “She told me so on several occasions and she said it again before she died. I doubt one can lie in such a moment.”

“And how has it been for you since she left?” she ventured to ask, her concern for his well-being emerging again, as it always did.

Terrence walked in Candy’s direction until he was right in front of her, close enough to reach her with his arm if he decided to do so.

“It was sad to see her go. It was such a waste of a life,” he replied, a cloud crossing his eyes. “She was a young woman, and her life could have been so different if she had not fallen ill. Yet, I would lie to you if I told you that I grieved over her the way you did when Anthony died” he added, reluctantly bringing up a topic that was always difficult for him, “. . . I might sound callous to you, but after two years, I cannot say in all honesty that I miss her, not the way you still miss Alistair. This is, although I esteemed her, I was never close to her. We had very different views of life and our opinions ran in very opposite directions. As friends, we made an awkward pair, because beyond the theatre we had very little in common.”

Candy was bewildered by the overwhelming load of Terrence’s confessions. His words made her mind twirl with more and more questions.

“Had he been happy all these years, as he had promised? Could one be happy without love?”

But she lacked the strength to inquire any further.

In that moment, the waiter knocked and soon entered again to clear the table. By doing so, he left the door open for a while. The music from the restaurant followed Harry, until it reached Terrence's ears.

The young man then realized that the conversation had turned way too gloomy. Could it be possible that every time he saw Candy things were doomed to end up in an unsavory fashion? He had to do something to change the course of the evening.

"When was the last time you went out dancing, Freckles?" he asked on an impulse.

"Beg your pardon?" she asked frowning, unable to understand his meaning, "You said dancing?"

"What I'm saying, very inarticulately, is that I'd like to dance with you. Shall you like to dance with your old school mate?" he bowed.

"That would be fine, Terry," she answered with a timid smile, the cloud around them both slowly starting to lift.

Before she could react, he had taken her by the wrist and led her out of the private room and towards the salon. As it was very late, most of the customers had already left. So, they had the dance floor all to themselves. The brass players of the jazz band had finished their gig and only a small ensemble with bass player, drummer, pianist, and a female singer remained at work.

The notes of a different tune began to fill the air while Terrence took Candy in his arms to dance to the mellow song.

Worn out by the many emotions of the evening, Candy could not refuse his lead. They moved slowly but Candy's heart began to beat faster with every step. She had shyly rested her hand over his arm, but in every new twirl their bodies grew closer until she felt her own hand brushing his nape. He was slightly bent towards her, and his cheek grazed hers ever so lightly. His oriental perfume penetrated her nostrils with cedar wood and spices accents.

The woman besides the piano began to sing. Candy, who was an avid radio fan, recognized the song immediately. She had cried with the lyrics more than once, because she could read her own story in each stanza. Ironically, now that she was dancing in Terrence's arms, the song was not as sad as before, but a million times more beautiful.

Gone is the romance that was so divine.
'Tis broken and cannot be mended.
You must go your way,
And I must go mine.
But now that our love dreams have ended...

What'll I do
When you are far away
And I am blue
What'll I do?

What'll I do?
When I am wond'ring who
Is kissing you
What'll I do?

What'll I do with just a photograph
To tell my troubles to?

When I'm alone
With only dreams of you
That won't come true
What'll I do?

Terrence was not even paying attention to the lyrics; he barely had enough command of his senses to perceive things beyond her warmth. For years, he had only dreamed of a moment like that, embracing her as they slowly moved around the dance floor. The young man was conscious that he was overstepping the accepted distance between two dancers who were not acknowledged lovers, but he couldn't help himself. He only knew that as they grew physically closer, he felt alive and bold. He buried his cheek in her scented curls. His eyes got lost in the sight of her neck and bared arms. He had always admired her milky complexion and the illusion of nakedness that her attire created was a blatant invitation to caress her. Yet, for the time being, he contented himself with caressing her with his eyes only. In that instant, feeling the shape of her waist beneath his hand, he realized that his original plan to court Candy slowly and cautiously was not a feasible scheme. Sending letters to an old flame whose memory he had cherished for years had been enough for a few months. But now, after this evening, after having her in his arms, with his desires for her rekindled as never before, he knew things would have to go much faster.



It was almost five am when they returned to the hotel. They both picked up their keys at the front desk. The receptionist, who knew perfectly well who they were, gave them an intended look. It made Terrence consider the convenience of sending Hayward to bribe him before they parted from Pittsburgh. The last thing he needed now was a scandalous note in the tabloids with Candy's name implied. As much as he wanted the whole world to know that he was in love with the most amazing woman in the world, he wanted it to be done properly, not in a malicious article that would only sully her good name.

Terrence escorted Candy to her room, walking at a distance, not daring to touch her again. He could not trust his self-control when they were just a few yards from her room. When they reached her door, she looked into his eyes and gave him a shy smile.

"Thanks for a lovely evening, Terry. I had the time of my life."

"I'm glad," he replied and then did not know what to say. He wondered if he had read too much in her eyes while they were dancing. "Will you . . . will you be leaving tomorrow?" he finally muttered, unaware of the hour.

"It is tomorrow already, Terry," she giggled, showing her dimples, "but the answer is yes, my train leaves at eight o'clock, so I'll barely have time to take a shower and pack. I think I'll have breakfast on the train, to speed up things."

"I'll see you off," he said matter-of-factly.

"No please, do not bother. You must rest well for tonight's performance," she declined.

"I said I'll see you off," he insisted firmly, a feeling of déjà vu in the air, "I'll pick you up here in two hours. Be ready."

And saying this last thing, he left, not allowing her any chance to refuse again.



Light snowflakes were falling when they got to the station half an hour before eight. Terrence had resourced again to one of his tricks to evade a couple of reporters who were already waiting for him in the lobby. The couple had left the hotel from one of its service entrances with Candy laughing wholeheartedly, while Terrence lifted the lapel of his trench coat and pulled his fedora down.

Finding the whole situation utterly funny, Candy couldn't stop making jokes about his mobster appearance and their dramatic escape. Terrence took immediate revenge from her teasing remarks reminding her how her freckles seemed to have multiplied by daylight. Silently driving towards the station, Martin Hayward wondered whatever had come upon his usually somber employer. It was amid that almost childish bustle that they had arrived at the station.

Having left Hayward in the car, the couple walked slowly along the station halls, both internally dreading their imminent separation. Candy had changed into a black business suit with straight skirt that reached her ankles. The only touch of color was her red scarf and a matching brooch that adorned her cloche hat. Terrence thought that even in that sober outfit she still seemed seductive to him, with her cheeks and lips rosier than ever because of the morning chill.

As they waited for the train to be announced, Candy talked about her plans for the holidays. She asked him about his own plans, but beyond giving her the date on which his tour would end, he did not disclose much. It was then that a voice was heard in the loudspeaker announcing the departure for Philadelphia.

Terrence made sure that a station employee helped to load Candy's baggage in the railroad car, while they lingered for a while on the platform.

"So, you'll be in Chicago for Thanksgiving," he remarked, his eyes fixed on hers.

"Yes, Albert will be there by then. Unfortunately, Eliza and Neil will also be around," she added biting her lower lip, ignoring the effect it had on her interlocutor.

"So much for a cozy family gathering," he mocked, but then, remembering how annoying the Lagan siblings could be, he added, "You take care and stay away from those two, you hear me?"

"I will, Terry. Don't worry about me. I know how to deal with them," she replied smiling and brandishing her fist.

"That's a good girl," he smiled back, as the train whistled.

"Terry, I think it is time for our farewell. Thanks for everything and you too take care of yourself," she said stepping on the car and extending her hand to the young man.

"So long, Candy," he said shaking her hand. Another whistle resounded in the air and his hand let go of hers.

He took two steps back and turned his back to hide his turmoil with all the intention to dash away from the platform. But all of a sudden, as lightning flashed in one of the corners of his mind, the memories of other moments in his past erupted in realization. He turned over his heels swiftly, and with firm steps walked towards Candy, who was still standing on the strides of the passenger car. Before the young woman could understand what was happening, she saw how he took off his hat with one hand and with the other took hold of her face, approaching his own until his lips stroke hers in a sound kiss.

Paralyzed and flabbergasted by the surprise, Candy did not fight back. On the contrary, she allowed his lips to caress hers at will, leaving a warm and wet trail and sending shivers through her body. It was only when the train began to move that their lips separated. The last thing Candy could see before getting inside the wagon was Terrence's smug smile as he waved her goodbye from the platform.

For a long while, Candice White Ardlay did not remember her name.

Chapter 4

A family portrait



In a state of unconsciousness Candy walked through the train car. Even when her feet were definitely stepping on the floor, she felt as though they were floating. Stumbling with angry passengers, whom she ignored by sheer inability to perceive the surrounding reality, she finally reached her compartment. However, she stood outside for a while, her lips still sensing the most delicious tingle from his kiss. Suddenly, it didn't matter that the sky was overcast and the day chilly; for her, the sun was high and the entire world a marvelous miracle.

It had all been too fast. When she saw him approaching her, her heart had stopped and the whole station disappeared as his lips touched hers. The kiss had been all that she had dreamed of and a lot more, for she had never felt such a thrill running through her veins as in that brief minute he caressed her gently, yet so decisively. The silliest grin slowly spread over her face, while she finally managed to enter the compartment and sit. Luckily, she was alone.

She stretched her arms and putting both hands behind her neck, she sighed deeply. As the air she exhaled escaped from her lungs, she clearly felt how the heaviest cloud that had darkened her life for a long time slowly dissipated. A single thought filled her mind.

"This wasn't an accident. He turned with the decided intention of doing it. This changes all between us!"

Candy raised her eyes playfully, recollecting the events of the previous night. She saw again his face, always so serious in all his photographs, practically glowing while they danced together. She also remembered how he had sought her touch from the very beginning; not to mention that peculiar glare in his eyes when he thought she wasn't seeing him.

"Was he an old school friend simply trying to catch up for old times' sake? Good old friends don't look at you with that fiery gaze" she answered herself in delight, *"good old friends don't kiss you in*

that way!" she finally admitted taking her fingers to her lips, still feeling the undeniable proof of his intent.

She couldn't believe her luck. The previous night and everything that happened afterwards had been so strangely perfect, that she again pinched herself. The pricking pain that followed was welcomed. No, she was not dreaming this time. She simply had to admit it. Terrence was interested in something beyond her friendship, and she was more than happy to receive his attentions.

"What now?" she suddenly asked, "What to expect? How to react?"

The questions mounted up, but this time, uncertainty only made the thrill more exciting. It seemed that his touch had rendered her emboldened and unabashed. Feeling that the whole atmosphere was heated, the young woman opened the window and grabbing the frame with both hands, she put her head out of the window. The golden landscape was starting to turn white. A nipping wind which penetrated to the bone crashed into her face, but she did not feel it. With her mind reeling, she screamed at the top of her lungs:

"I love you more than anyone else, Terry! I always have!"

The train kept on its track taking her miles away from Terrence, but for the young woman, the distance between them was now insignificant.



The incessant rattle of the train was almost imperceptible in the elegant dining car. Instead, the clinking of the silverware and glasses pervaded the atmosphere. Robert Hathaway observed the effect of light inside the amber waves of his brandy. Behind the glass, he could see the blank expression of his companion, absentmindedly enjoying his cigarette and a cup of black tea. For the hundredth time, Hathaway wondered how to ask the question that was burning on the tip of his tongue.

"We did have a couple of great nights in Pittsburgh, didn't we?" he finally said as a starter.

"You can say that again, Robert," the young man across the table replied.

"The Gayety is a fine theater; the dressing rooms are sort of lousy, though. They should refurbish them soon."

"You think so? I didn't notice anything amiss," commented Terrence behind the smoke puffing from his mouth.

"You don't seem to notice a great deal of things these days. However, I can't complain; your performance is at its best now" added Hathaway leaving his empty glass on the table.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It is the unembellished truth,” the older man said intently. “As a matter of fact, I have been wondering why you waited till Pittsburgh to deliver your best version of Macbeth, instead of doing it in the premiere.”

Terrence tapped the cigarette’s end against the ashtray and then looked at Robert with his trademark raised eyebrow.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” was his plain answer.

“You must be kidding me,” the man chuckled, “I won’t buy that you didn’t calculate it. You have always been an advocate of technique and method over inspiration and intuition. Haven’t we discussed it countless times? Do I have to remind you that you don’t believe in luck when it comes to acting?”

“No, you don’t need to remind me. I think I know where I stand in my beliefs, as far as acting is concern,” the young man remarked, “I still believe that the performers’ preparation and command of the technique are the key for their performance. But maybe I should revise what I once said about other sources actors can use to improve their work,” he concluded as he drank the last sip of his tea.

Hathaway looked at Terrence as if he had grown a second head. The brief silence that followed did not appear to bother Grandchester, who continued to observe the landscape that moved in front of his eyes.

“Am I to interpret that your performance in Pittsburgh was the spontaneous result of . . . of inspiration?” Hathaway finally asked, still skeptical.

“I don’t know, Robert. It just happened,” replied Terrence putting out his cigarette and standing up from his seat, “Perhaps I was inspired . . . perhaps I was touched by an angel,” he suggested and then added: “I think I’ll dose for a while now, Robert. It was a pleasure.”

“Same here,” said Hathaway still ruminating what Terrence had just said.

The young man walked lazily towards his compartment with both hands buried in his pockets. His countenance was stern as usual, but inside he was secretly enjoying the feeling of being alive. For the first time in years, he felt a wave of optimism lapping on his mind and lifting his mood.

He took off his jacket as he entered his compartment and then sat complacently. At times, he still couldn’t believe what had happened. In the history of his rather unlucky experiences with love, he did not recall a more fortunate and satisfying moment. Of course, he had the memory of those halcyon days in Scotland. However, as much as those recollections were unique in their innocent and untarnished joys, they could not compare to this new feeling of having recovered what had been lost for so long.

Absentmindedly, his fingers softly stroked the upholstery of his seat. He thought again of the feelings that had been awoken when he had her body encircled in his arms, the same as before and yet

different in intensity and depth. As they danced, he had been pleasantly surprised by the natural changes that time had made on her. Where he had last seen a pretty girl of expressive eyes, there was now a woman with a graceful figure and enticing curves, in all the right places. The expressive eyes were still there, but now spoke tones of her feelings and her lips tasted sweeter.

“Now you know how to kiss back, honey,” he thought with self-satisfaction. “Had I known that you weren’t going to slap me, I would have done it way before.”

He remembered that on first impulse he had just shaken her hand goodbye with all the intention of closing their meeting in friendly terms. All of a sudden, as he had turned his back, the memory of other moments in the past had struck him hard. He saw himself restraining his impulse to hug her as they sat in front of the hearth in Scotland; he felt his frustration at New York’s train station, when he had not dared to hug her then and there; and above all, he relived his desperation as he watched her leave the hospital the following day. It was then that he decided that it was about time to throw caution to thin air. The result had just been glorious! The taste of her ripe lips still lingered in his mouth.

“But I am a greedy man, Candy,” he continued to reflect, “and recently I’ve noticed that time has not made me more patient either. It is rather the opposite. A kiss is more than I could have expected from this first meeting; yet, now that I’ve got it, I want all the kisses from those lips of yours and far more. Be aware, madam, that I will not rest until I can possess you in all ways a man can ever possess a woman. You have to be mine; just as it should have been since the very beginning. This time, I will let neither friend nor foe come in the way between us.”



It seemed to be a perfect morning. The young man grazed his golden hair ever so slightly, carefully brushing off a rebellious strand on his forehead. He was silently reading the newspaper, sitting at the breakfast table. Every detail in his attire had been selected with the utmost detail, from the French cuffed-shirt to the tailored-made double breasted jacket, everything satisfied his demanding standards. His wife had dutifully attended to his every need during the meal and the coffee was still doing its job waking him up, preparing him for the usual work during the day.

There was nothing of great importance in the news that morning. He attentively browsed the finances page, then surveyed the currents affairs, and was about to leave the papers aside, when a heading in the entertainment section caught his eye. A sardonic smile drew across his lips for a while.

“There, he’s showing his true colors,” said Archie aloud, passing the page to his wife who was quietly drinking her tea, “Now that the Marlowe woman is dead, he’s finally showing himself as the vulgar womanizer I’ve always suspected he would be. Look at him!”

Annie’s eyes went out of her orbs as she saw a picture of a couple locked in a loving kiss.

“He has the bad taste to parade his conquest by daylight. Aren’t you glad he never managed to get into our family? Candy should congratulate herself for her narrow escape,” added again Archie as he left the table.

The young woman did not answer to her husband and simply mumbled a perfunctory “have a good day, sweetheart” while still staring at the newspaper. The heading read:

“A new Juliet for Romeo. Has the famous Broadway star found a new love?”

The photo showed Terrence Graham himself kissing a woman whose face was partially hidden by a dark cloche hat and the actor’s hand, which was holding her cheek. The writer explained that the identity of the lady was still a mystery. The photo had been taken in Pittsburgh a week before at the local train station. Annie observed the photo narrowing her eyes in suspicion. Suddenly, an enigmatic smile appeared on her face.



A few days after, during the evening, Candy was in her hotel room in Boston. She had written a long letter to Miss Pony and Sister Lane with the latest news of her fund-raising tour. The campaign had been a great success, and she was more than excited with the new possibilities that the New Year seemed to reserve for Pony’s children. Now, she had to begin packing her belongings. The following morning, she would finally leave for Chicago.

Candy started to fold her clothes to fit them in the suitcases. Then, she took her old prayer book from the night table and opened it in the middle. Her eyes sparked in joy as she saw the worn-out newspaper clipping with Terrence’s first review published in 1915. She had carried it ever since, just as she spoke his name in all her prayers. Now, on the following page, she had pressed an iris and a daffodil from the flower arrangement that he had sent her.

The phone rang and she had to wake up from her reveries.

“Miss Andrew, you have a call from Chicago. A Mrs. Archibald Cornwell wants to talk to you. Do you want to take the call?” asked the operator.

“Yes, please, thank you,” she said hurriedly and then, right after a distinctive click told her the connection had been made, she added, “Annie, is that you?”

“Yes, Candy, how are you?”

“Pretty well, Annie, I’m already packing. I can’t wait to be with you all.”

“Neither can I” rejoined Annie excited, “This will be a historical Thanksgiving party. Archie’s parents just arrived two days ago, and my parents will attend too.”

“That is wonderful news! Now we just need that Neil and Eliza catch the flu or something and all will be perfect.”

“Don’t be mean. They have become more civil lately,” chastised Annie.

“Am I the one who has been mean for the last thirteen years, Annie? Plus, I wouldn’t take their hypocrisy as civility. Anyway, it does not signify. Is Albert already home?”

“Oh, yes. He arrived this afternoon. We had lunch together. He looks tanner and I think he put on some weight.”

“I find that very comely! The last time, when he came back from Brazil, he was way too thin. I’m dying to see him. Can I talk to him now?”

“I’m sorry, Candy. He and Archie are out now in a late meeting with their associates, but Albert will be picking you up at the station. I actually called you now because I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Really? What can I do for you?” asked Candy, intrigued.

“Well, it is something silly, but I’d appreciate it if you could humor me this time,” announced Annie a bit doubtful, “You’re preparing what you are going to wear for the trip, right?”

“Yes.”

“Could you make sure you don’t wear your red brooch tomorrow?” Annie finally said.

“The red brooch? May I ask why?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. Just make sure that you don’t wear it. Trust me in this one. Will you?” pleaded Annie.

“Don’t worry, Annie, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

The two friends talked a bit more and then said goodbye. When Candy hung up the phone, she continued her packing, taking care to comply with her friend’s strange request. The young woman thought she had not heard Annie’s voice sounding so disconcerted for quite a while. However, imagining that the decision of wearing or not wearing a brooch was not capital, she chose not to worry too much about her friend’s emotional state about a simple jewelry piece.



The immense flow of people going up and down at Central Station in downtown Chicago was never ending. Candy remembered the morning when she had first beheld the place. She had been sent from the Mary Jane Nursing School to finish her training as a nurse with four of her classmates. Most of the girls had never been to such a big city and were impressed and a little bit frightened when they first saw the crowd that seemed to move all together, as a giant monster creeping on the pavement. Even Candy, who had already been to New York¹⁹ and London before, had found Chicago truly overwhelming. So many things had happened after that day. Now that her swept over the multitude, seeking for a familiar face, Candy thanked God again for giving her the chance to find Albert in that

¹⁹ In case you are wondering, dear reader. Candy must have been in New York twice before the time she visited Terry. When she travelled to London, she must have left America from that city, being the major port in the North of the United States where transatlantic liners would arrive from and part towards The United Kingdom.

infamous hospital room in Chicago, nine years before. Ever since, despite his constant travelling and multiple business obligations, they had become the closest of friends.

Now she knew, no matter how far he could go in the world, they would always be united by invisible threads as strong and real as if they were truly related by blood. He was her solid rock to cleave to in times of sorrow and she was his beacon in the darkest night. They both gave each other comfort and solace in a way that many blood siblings would envy.

The young woman turned around starting to feel anxious. Being late was totally out of character for Georges, and since it was him who practically dragged Albert to every appointment he had, it was strange not to see them there, waiting for her. Then, while her eyes searched for the third time across the platform, she finally distinguished the tall figure with dark blond hair she longed to see.

“Candy! Candy!” he screamed while waving his hand enthusiastically.

The young woman, forgetting all the composure that a lady of her age was supposed to keep, ran as fast as her legs allowed it towards the man, who was neatly dressed in a double-breasted town over coat. Had Albert not been such a large and strong man, Candy would surely have tackled him down with the thrust of her impulse when she finally reached to hug him.

“God gracious! I can hardly believe you’re here, Albert!” she said, burying her face on his broad chest. “I’m so happy!”

“So, am I, Candy!” he replied smiling, “I missed you immensely. Please, let me see you now,” and saying this he pushed her softly to better appraise her appearance.

With proud eyes, the man assessed the bright cobalt blue coat and the black wide brimmed-hat with blue feathers that crowned Candy’s golden head. Behind the black tulle veil, he could see the cheerful green eyes and the cute dimples that he loved dearly. His smile grew wider.

“I can still see the little girl beneath the cover of this pretty lady,” he told her sweetly.

“And I can see my dear Great-Grand Uncle disguised as a tanned handsome man,” she replied not wasting the opportunity to play a joke on Albert, “Did you know that for someone your age, dear uncle, you are looking quite rejuvenated? Is it the sun in the places you visited that did the magic?”

“Oh, no, not again, Candy. Will you ever drop it?” he chuckled as he placed his arm around Candy’s shoulder affectionately, “I think you’d better say hello to Georges; will you?”

Cued by his suggestion, Candy turned round to see the slender and flawless figure of Georges Villers, who except for the gray hair that now covered his temples and a few additional wrinkles on his face, looked exactly the same as Candy remembered him since her childhood.

“How do you do, Georges?” Candy greeted him warmly as she extended her hand.

“Very well, Miss Candy,” he responded with a bow as he kissed Candy’s hand, “I’m happy to see that you are well too.”

“I can see you took good care of my Daddy, here,” she insisted, mischievously rolling her eyes.

“I did my best, Miss Candy,” the man replied suppressing a smile, but then, looking at Albert’s pouting face, turned serious, “If you allow me, Miss Candy, I’ll take care of your baggage now.”

“Oh, thanks, Georges. Go and don’t you worry about Daddy, I’ll see that he is fine. By the way, Dad, where is your walking cane?”

“Come on, Candy-Crybaby,” Albert replied good-humoredly, his protective arm still around the young woman’s shoulder, “let’s go home before I have to spank you in public.”

“Don’t call me crybaby! You’re talking to a grown-up lady here, little Bert,” she riposted.

And the playful argument went on and on, even when they were already in the car. Both clearly felt how their hearts warmed up at their mutual companionship, just as they knew it happened every time they saw each other. Seated next to the driver, Georges Villers could finally smile freely. He was grateful for Candy’s presence in the family. For a clan constantly marked by tragedy and particularly prone to excessive severity, the effect of a radiant personality as Candy’s was refreshing. Before her, Rosemary had been the only sunny character in the Ardlay’s family. To his great chagrin, she had been gone for over twenty years by then. Georges believed that nobody could have ever filled her place better than Candy. Through the years, he had learned that the petite young woman, despite her looking so frail and vulnerable, had the presence of mind and physical strength that Rosemary had lacked. Georges thought that it was just fine that she was there for Mr. Albert.



The luxurious black Rolls-Roice drove away from Michigan Avenue and took its way towards Near North Side²⁰. Very soon, the skyscrapers were left behind and the luxurious homes of The Gold Coast presided by Palmer Mansion²¹ appeared over the city landscape. The Andrew’s manor house was on the border of the neighborhood, practically on Chicago’s outskirts²². Beyond the extensive grounds that surrounded the property, the Midwest countryside expanded with its seemingly endless planes now covered with golden grass and dead leaves, aimlessly carried by a merciless wind.

When the car finally parked right in front of the mansion’s front door, a little bolt flashed out the house and down the façade’s staircase until it crashed right on Candy’s lap. The young woman automatically responded by enfolding in her arms the little body of her nephew.

“Aunt Candy! Aunt Candy! You take too lonk’!” the boy said holding Candy’s face with his tiny hands, as she lifted him in her arms.

“Did I make you wait, Stair?” she asked looking with surprise at the round spectacles that the kid was wearing, “Hey, what with these glasses, honey?”

²⁰ One of the 77 communities that compose Chicago. NNS is among the four areas that compose downtown Chicago.

²¹ A well-known mansion in Chicago built in the 19th century. It was located in the Near North Side neighborhood, facing Lake Michigan.

²² Back in the day, of course. Chicago has grown much more ever since.

“They’re Daddy’s birthday present,” the kid explained touching the frame of his glasses, “I’m a grew-up kid, now.”

“You’re a grown-up now, huh?” Candy corrected, “You look very handsome, indeed!”

The kid assented naturally making Candy laugh.

“You know that smart men always wear glasses, don’t you?” she asked, “Your uncle Stair always did!”

The kid frowned as if trying to understand Candy’s statement.

“Uncle Bert wears glasses when he’s reading,” the kid reasoned with his little index finger on his chin, “. . . but Daddy never wears them.”

“Oh, well darling, it was your uncle Stair who was the smart cookie of the family,” Candy said giggling.

“Talking behind my back, naughty girl,” said a masculine voice that made Candy raise her face to meet Archibald Cornwell’s blue eyes.

“Not at all, I have always said to your face that you are very silly when you talk about suits and ties,” replied the young woman leaving the kid on the floor to hug her cousin tight, “but you know that I’ve always loved you the same.”

The young man kissed her on the cheek and then took her hand to rest on the crook of his arm.

“And you are the same minx who thinks that everyone will always forgive her insults with just a hug,” he replied with a warm smile.

“I don’t know about everybody, but I’m sure my dear Archie can’t hold a grudge against his cousin Candy. Can you?” she replied.

“I would like to contradict you, but I can’t, kitten,” he admitted, using his affectionate nickname for Candy, as in the good old days²³.

“Are the glasses necessary?” Candy asked then, lowering her voice, while the kid ran to greet Albert.

“Unfortunately, yes. He stumbled on the stairs a couple of times and had problems when coloring his books. I guess you were right when saying that he is very much like my brother.”

“But he looks absolutely cute with them,” Candy commented cheerfully as she looked behind, as Albert was taking the child to sit on his shoulders.

²³ I know that this nickname is from the anime and not considered canon anymore, but I find it much more endearing than “tomboy” used by Archie in CCFS.

"I think the same," added a second female voice that rejoined the group, "I'm so happy to see you again, Candy."

"Annie, darling!" screamed Candy always happy to see her sister, "I've missed you so much."

The young woman left Archie's side to hug Annie with the same alacrity she had greeted her friend's husband.

"How was your trip, sweetheart," asked Annie looking at her friend intently.

"Why, yes, it was an absolute success. We'll be able to do wonderful things for the children next year. Can you imagine, Annie, Pony's children who are not adopted will be able to go to college if they choose so!"

"That is a great thing, Candy," commented Albert who had caught up with the group. You must tell us the whole story."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait after lunch," intervened Annie taking Candy's hand and smiling to the men, "Candy and I have some things to discuss, girl talk, you know," and before they could object, Annie took her friend upstairs and across the house's immense halls.

They entered a chamber with lustrous parquet, white stucco flowers on the ceiling and soft mint walls. It was Candy's room in Chicago, where a maid was already hanging the young woman's clothes inside the walk-in closet.

"Mariah, would you excuse us for a moment?" asked Annie when she saw the chamber maid. The young servant curtsied and disappeared before Candy could protest.

"Goodness, Annie, you should have let her finish her job. On second thoughts, I can unpack by myself; don't bother her later, please."

Candy took off her hat, leaving it on top of her white dressing table and hung her coat in the closet. Especially trained for order and neatness, Candy decided that she could talk to her friend while doing the task of hanging the rest of her clothes and coats. Annie sat on a striped loveseat, next to a large French window. For a while, she just observed the blonde's active pacing across her room.

"I suppose you would like to hear about the Suttons and their new house in Boston. Isn't it, Annie," asked Candy with a smile, feeling that Annie had purposefully sought the privacy of her bedroom to get the freshest gossip she could have collected during her tour.

"Well, that would be fine, later on," hesitated Annie with her hands over her knees, "First of all, I would like to know other things" she paused, "For example, how was Terry's performance in Pittsburgh?" the woman finally said point-blank.

The sudden question erased Candy's smile from her face in an instant. Instead, her eyes grew wider –if that could ever be possible– and her mouth opened, but no sound came out of it for a while. Instead, she sat on her bed, as if her legs could not sustain her weight anymore.

“Candice White Ardlay, do not have the nerve to lie to me this time. I know for sure that you saw the man in Pittsburgh!” Annie warned her friend with an admonishing finger.

“A-Annie, I, I, I don’t know, whatever is making you think that I saw him?” Candy finally stuttered, still dumbfounded by Annie’s assertiveness.

“Oh yes, you did Miss Ardlay, and you’ll have to spill all the beans right now. And please, do not think I’ll buy the *“we’re-only-friends-catching-up”* tale this time, because I won’t believe a single word of it anymore.”

“Annie. . . I don’t know what to say . . .” mumbled Candy, wondering when Annie had become a clairvoyant.

Starting to look annoyed by Candy’s reluctance to speak, Annie stood up, walked to the dressing table and got a newspaper out of the drawer, which she tossed on Candy’s lap.

“You could start by explaining this,” blurted Annie, crossing her arms over her chest.

Candy’s eyes went out of their orbs this time, as she saw a photo of Terrence kissing her in Penn Station. Of all the possible indiscretions she could have ever dreamed being part of, this was the wildest of them all. First, her face turned so pale that one could have thought she was transparent, but a second later, the heat of her blush spread all over her cheeks to a point it burned her.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” she finally said when she could recover her voice, “I never noticed any flashlights; there weren’t any photographers around . . .”

“Maybe it was because you had your eyes closed,” suggested Annie with a giggle.

“Don’t mock me, Annie. What am I to do now? Does Aunt Elroy know about this?” asked the blonde visibly worried.

“Oh, Candy, do not dramatize it! Nobody but me knows about it,” said Annie trying to appease her friend.

“But it is on the papers for everyone to see! How can you say that you are the only who knows about it?”

“Now I know that you are totally head-over-hills for Terry,” said Annie, “Can’t you see that the newspaper is not disclosing your name and that your face can not be recognized in the photo?”

Candy looked at the article again. It was true. The note said that Terrence Graham had been seen at Penn Station in Pittsburgh, locked in a kiss with an unidentified lady. The rest of the story only speculated about the seriousness of the relationship and the oddity of such a public display, especially coming from a man who had always been so secretive about his personal life.

A second look at the photo confirmed Annie’s observation. Candy’s cloche hat had done her the favor of concealing her face. Then she looked at Annie’s with curious eyes.

“It was easy for me to know that it was you,” Annie explained guessing what Candy was wondering. “I recognized your brooch. You must remember that I got it for you in my favorite shop down the Magnificent Mile. Then I checked your trip schedule with Georges to confirm that you had been in Pittsburgh the same day Terry was there. It was easy to put two and two together,” she said getting the very object from Candy’s toiletry kit. It was a butterfly shaped pin with red Austrian crystal stones, big enough to be distinguishable in the photo.

“Are you sure that nobody else’s in the family has seen this picture?” Candy asked again, still unsure.

“Archie saw it but couldn’t recognize you. He doesn’t know a word about you and Terry writing to each other again; so he had the photo in front of his eyes, and did not suspect at all. I supposed that you would want to keep the secret for some time, especially from Archie, who’s never been Terry’s fan. That is why I asked you not to wear the brooch. I didn’t want to risk the chance for him to discover it. You know he has an eye for jewelry and clothes. Even if the photo cannot show colors, I was afraid he would have recognized the brooch if you had it on this morning.”

“Thanks, Annie. You were very clever. I think it’s best if Archie does not find out about all this right now; at least until I could figure out what is going to happen.”

“Before we speculate about what will happen next and all the juicy details of your encounter with Terry,” rejoined Annie, “I would like to know one thing, Candy”.

“Tell me,” whispered Candy, noticing that Annie’s had turned equally serious.

“Have you fallen-back in love with Terry or is it that you never stopped being in love with him, Candy? The truth, please,” asked Annie as if she were begging.

Candy’s eyes filled with bittersweet tears before she could reply.

“I’ve always loved him, Annie. Against my better judgment, my pretended indifference, and my sense of what is right and wrong,” the young woman confessed hoarsely, lowering her eyes, which forced her unshed tears to roll down her cheeks, “He is the man of my life, Annie! I’m sorry if I tried to convince you otherwise” she concluded opening her eyes again.

“I suppose you were trying to protect me and everyone around you, as you always do, stupid girl,” replied Annie standing up to grab a handkerchief from Candy’s still opened suitcase, which she then handed to her friend. It was not every day that Candy allowed others to see her cry.

“There, there,” whispered Annie with a throaty voice, “today is a happy day, Candy, for I have saved your life from Archie’s overprotective meddling, haven’t I?” she added to lightened mood.

“Yes, you did, sweetie,” responded Candy smiling as she wiped her tears with her embroidered handkerchief.

“Well, now you owe me one and I want to be paid” sentenced Annie mischievously “Details, Candy, I want a full account with plenty of details, and in exchange I’ll give you another surprise, which I’m sure you’ll love, by the way,” promised the young woman with her eyes twinkling with excitement.

Knowing that she did not have any other option and also needing some relief for her heart, Candy narrated the events to the minute detail. Always the romantic, Annie's head spun with emotions picturing the star-crossed lovers' reencounter. Deep in her heart, Annie had never accepted Candy and Terry's separation, unable to understand Candy's decision. However, once the ill-advised breakup had been official, Annie hoped, rather than believed, that someday her friend would be able to forget Terry and fall in love with another. Contrary to Annie's expectations, Candy's open-heart confession, followed by a glow that bathed her face at the recollection of her encounter with Terry, told Annie a very different story. That was how the young Mrs. Cornwell could finally comprehend that all her attempts at matchmaking were doomed to fail. In front of a love so deeply rooted and compelling, not even fate seemed able to prevail.

"Oh, Candy, this is just as it ought to have been since the very beginning," Annie remarked taking her friend's hands in hers, "To think that he loved you all these years, even when engaged to another. It's like one of those romantic novels."

"Goodness, Annie, you are jumping to conclusions again. He never said that. He only explained that his affections for Susannah were not of the strongest nature," Candy argued.

"For someone who is so clever in a surgery room and as a fund-raiser, you can be very dull at times, Candy," said Annie with a frown, "Anyone that ever saw Terrence looking at you, as I did in Scotland, would have known that he dotes on you. You should have seen him the night he came to Chicago to perform as the King of France. When he discovered that you were living here, the entire world disappeared and the only thing that mattered for him was to find you. I doubt that he could have forgotten you with that insipid Susannah Marlowe."

"Do not speak that way, Annie. She's dead."

"I know, I know, but it is the truth. That woman was nothing compared to you and do not give me that talk about how beautiful and good she was, because I can't stand it. But if you don't believe it, ask Terry next time you see him. I'm certain you will see him very soon, by the way."

"You think so?" Candy asked doubtfully.

Annie smiled smugly and again stood up to retrieve a large envelope from the same dressing table drawer. She turned to see Candy right into her questioning eyes and after a brief moment of suspense said.

"Your Terry is a cunning man. You must know that he came here last week."

"He came to the house!" asked Candy, her colors draining from her face once again.

"Of course not, Candy. He knows that at least one resident of this house would not be pleased to see him. He came to perform for two days at the Baker's Theater. Eliza surely would give you a complete review of his performance tomorrow at our Thanksgiving dinner. But that is inconsequential. He sent his Mr. Hayward in his instead, explicitly looking for me to give me this," Annie explained handing Candy the sealed envelope, totally blank on the outside.

“The man never mentioned Terry’s name to the servants. He only said that he had a package from you, which was supposed to be delivered directly in my hands. Once we were alone, Mr. Hayward explained that the message was from Terry and addressed to you. He surely did not want to risk his message to be intercepted by anyone who could be displeased by his corresponding with you. He has always been a perceptive fellow; somehow, he knew that I would be his ally in this delicate matter.”

Candy eyed again at the manila envelope. It was large and it clearly had something more than just a letter.

“Now, I will leave you alone for you to read your letter, which given by the dimensions of the envelope must be of gigantic proportions. We’ll have lunch in an hour. It will be just us because Aunt Elroy is doing her shopping with Mrs. Lagan. So, it will be a pleasant meal.”

Candy did not respond, but Annie was not expecting much attention now that Candy had her letter in her hands. So, she simply exited the room and took care to lock the door from the inside to give Candy more privacy.

Once alone, Candy took a pen knife from her secretaire and opened it with shaking hands. To say that she was shocked when she saw the content is an understatement. Inside the envelope there was the same photo that had been published in the newspaper, but properly printed on matte photo paper with a paper clipped to it that said:

I make no excuses for what I did, but I swear I did not plan to make things public in such a way, Freckles. But now that the news is out there and even when your name has not been disclosed, I imagine we’ll soon become an issue. Do you mind? I don’t.

On the contrary, I thought the photo was a good reminder of our time in Pittsburgh. We must thank our resourceful Mr. Hayward for getting two copies from the newspaper’s editor. Keep this one, while you decide what to do now. As for me, I’ll make sure to wear my fencing mask next time I see you, in case you feel like practicing your slapping skills on my face.

*But I warn you, **my** lady, if given the opportunity, I’ll repeat the scene as many times as possible, reporters notwithstanding.*

Candy covered her face with one of her hands while nodding in disbelief. Her cheeks were inflamed. This was Terry, always blurting his saucy comments in the midst of the most inappropriate situations. The gesture of sending the photo as a souvenir was the most impudent idea he could have ever produced. In addition, he had the impertinence of threatening with repetitions of the scene that was now publicly displayed for all to see. Finally, to make matters worse, she wondered if it had been just an uncalculated accident with his fountain pen that had made the word “my” in the last paragraph appear bolded . . . or had it been an intentional calligraphic decision?

“I can’t believe his cheek! “This is alarming,” Candy told herself blushing furiously, “You truly deserve the slapping, but instead of getting mad at you, I am actually wishing that you act upon your threats. I must be going crazy!”



The hotel room in Topeka had not been to Mr. Graham’s liking because it didn’t connect to Hayward’s own room with an interior door. The idea of having to open the main door every time his valet entered the room simply did not fit in his aristocratic mind. So, he was now impatiently waiting in the hotel’s lobby, while Hayward made arrangements to get a room that responded to his employer’s demands.

Seeing that the actor’s nerves were on the verge of an outburst, the hotel manager had sent him a tea service and the liquid was working its magic in his humor. Deep inside, Terrence’s knew that lately he could not be in a foul mood for long. Even the indiscreet photo in the newspaper had not bothered him to a great extent.

The news had been broken into him in the most unexpected fashion. While still in Columbus—the the city that had followed Pittsburgh during his tour—he had been finishing breakfast with Robert Hathaway, when the veteran actor started to look at him with a puzzling expression.

“Is anything the matter, Robert?” he asked intrigued.

“It is just that I have been asking myself what is going on with you of late,” had said Hathaway observing his pupil behind his reading glasses and still holding the newspaper, “and now I think I know the answer; though I can hardly believe it.”

“Oh, really? And your answer is . . .”

“As you said a few days ago,” replied Hathaway with a triumphant smile, “you were touched by an angel.”

And saying this, the older man had thrown the newspaper on the table, for Terrence to see the photo. The young man had made an effort to keep his emotions in check when his eyes saw the article, but it takes an actor to tell other actor’s tricks, so he couldn’t fool Hathaway. It was not like Terrence to be caught in such an intimate exchange with a lady, and in one of the largest train stations in the country, of all places. In fact, Hathaway did not recall one single

faux pas like that in all the years that Terrence had been engaged to Susannah Marlowe. This new lady had to mean something really important for him to lower his guard and act as a normal human being.

"*What do you say to this?*" had asked Hathaway triumphally.

Terrence had taken his time to respond. For a while he just scratched his chin softly as he attempted to coordinate his ideas, his unreadable mask still on. His first fears had vanished as soon as he discovered that Candy's name was not revealed in the note. He didn't want her to be explicitly exposed to the public eye if she was not decided about her feelings for him yet. This undesired event discarded, the young man was able to see the humor in the whole situation.

"*I say that this is a very bad picture,*" he finally replied without losing his austere expression, "*the lady in question is far prettier in person.*"

Terrence remembered that after his conversation with Hathaway, Candy's own reaction to the article had been his main concern. On his part, he had surprised himself by not feeling upset with the indiscretion. Although he had always hated and avoided reporters, now he was rather pleased with the article. After Pittsburgh, he had started to question if he had only dreamed what had happened. Happily, the photo was there as tangible proof that it had not been just a figment of his imagination. Terrence wondered if Candy felt the same. Spurred by these thoughts, he had taken great pains to get the photo and, later on, had concocted the plan to have it delivered to Candy in the safest way possible.

As Terrence was remembering all this, his recollections were interrupted by Hayward, who had already made the necessary adjustments to get the room as the actor had requested. In a matter of minutes, the actor was installed and left alone in his chamber with a letter from his housekeeper.

As a practical arrangement between him and his mother, whenever Terrence or Ms. Baker travelled, they exchanged letters that were sent under the name of Terrence's housekeeper, to avoid prying eyes. So, it was not a surprise when the young man saw his mother's elegant writing inside the letter. The nature of the communication was entirely a different matter. The least expected topic was the main subject of the message.

Long Beach, November 18th, 1924

Dear Terry,

I hope this letter reaches you during your stay in Topeka. I will not make any comments about an article published today; suffice to say that I'm really happy for you. The reason for my letter is totally different. I have just received a letter myself, from someone that I thought would never ever address me a single word again.

This is, your father has written and you have been the motive for his communication. Please, Terry, do not throw this letter away in one of your fits of temper. Read it well and then decide what you are to do. The tone of your father's words is conciliatory. I had never read something so sincere coming from his pen.

I suppose age and the hardships of life are taking their toll on your father's pride. Richard explicitly says that he regrets many things he did in the past, especially concerning you. He says that he would like to see you next time he comes to America, which will be this coming January. He promises that his only intention is to seek reconciliation. He is asking me to persuade you to accept his visit.

I know very well that you will not welcome his entry on first impulse. I understand that you feel too resentful towards him to receive him with open arms, but I pray that you may consider well what you are going to do. I imagined that you would need all the time in the world to ponder the matter, which is why I decided to send you this letter.

Before you make up your mind, I think I can't avoid mentioning that despite his many failings, Richard Grandchester is your father - blame me for this poor choice if you wish - and as such, you should at least give him the chance to talk to you. Moreover, recently, someone who is very important to you has given you a lecture on forgiveness that you should imitate. I am sure she would be proud of you if you could make peace with your father.

Think of all these things, son. Whatever you decide, you know that I will always remain your loving mother.

Love

Eleanor

Visibly upset, the young man let the letter fall to the tea table in front of him. The mere idea of his father attempting to contact him was preposterous, but having his mother using Candy as an argument to intercede for his father was too much to bear. He just hated his mother for knowing him so well.

Terrence leaned over the couch in his chamber, with his eyes lost on the ceiling. For years he had tried to convince himself that his heart did not care a straw about *His Grace*. However, the sudden pressure on his chest was proving him wrong. Now, on top of all these confusing feelings for his father, he dreaded the day on which Candy got to find out about this issue.

"If you weren't back in my life, Candy, I would dispatch the duke without even bothering to consider what he could say to me. But now that I feel that you and I might be able to reach some sort of

understanding, I'm sure you will not allow me to turn my back on Richard Grandchester." The young man laughed at the irony of his situation, "Having you back is something I have desired more than life itself for so long. Yet, I had forgotten that it also means having you nosing in all my issues and taking out all my skeletons from the closet; precisely those that hurt the most. But not this one, Freckles. You will not find out about this one."



Candy looked at herself in the mirror for the last time. After Pittsburgh, she didn't have the heart to wear again her dress with crystal beads, so she had decided on buying something different. She had chosen a dark green *crepe de chine* dress with side pieces under a sleeveless bodice. The low waist was adorned with tiny bows by the hips on the left side; the skirt, which reached her ankles, was made of lace of the same color. She liked the effect of the dark colored dress over her white skin, even when paleness seemed to be *démodé*. Candy understood that a tanned look was an impossible standard for a blonde like her²⁴. But as she had never been a slave of fashion, she did not sulk for her paleness or her freckles.

Anyway, no matter how hard she tried to look the part tonight, she knew that some of the ladies in the company would find fault either in her attire, her countenance or her words. Since it was useless to dress to please others; she had decided to please herself. She looked again at the jewelry she had chosen for the occasion and felt happy with the effect of the brilliants she was carrying. The discreet set of necklace and earrings had been Albert's present for her birthday.

The young woman left the mirror and was looking for her gloves when a distinctive knock at her door told her that Albert was already there to pick her up. She thought it was a bit early, so her guess was that he wanted to take advantage and talk to her for a while, before the whole show started.

"Come in. It's open," she called as she turned to receive the man with a smile, "How do I look?" she asked.

"You know well that you are beautiful, dear," he answered giving her a peck on her cheek.

"Go and say that to Aunt Sarah and Cousin Eliza," she joked inviting Albert to sit in the sitting area of her bedroom.

The man followed her, sitting on a light green armchair while Candy preferred her loveseat.

"What is it, Albert?" she asked choosing the direct approach, "I know that look in your eyes. Something is troubling you."

²⁴ *Despite what CCFS says about Candy being tanned as a teenager, that is a biological impossibility for a white person.*

“You are dangerously perceptive, sweetheart,” he chuckled with a half-smile. “You’re right; I came here because I wanted to have some time to talk before dinner. There are a couple of things bothering me of late.”

“Doesn’t one of them have to do with Aunt Elroy?” she asked frowning almost imperceptibly, “I’ve noticed she has lost some weight.”

“You’re right again. A couple of months ago the doctor diagnosed her with diabetes. He says there is no cure,” a dark shadow crossed over Albert’s blue eyes.

Candy remained quiet for a moment, knowing very well what the disease implied.

“Albert, the doctor is right, but surely he must have told you that a new drug has recently been developed to control diabetes,” she entreated as she reached to hold the man’s hand in hers.

“He did, but then he also explained she has to change her lifestyle to help with the treatment and eventually, the battle will be lost anyway. I know that death is part of life, and considering her age, it is something we should expect sooner than later, but I just can’t get used to the idea. She has always been so strong and independent, always there, always part of my life.”

“It is not that Mrs. Elroy is going to leave us tomorrow, Bert. Insulin treatment is new, and we do not know yet how long people can keep fighting when using it, but it is a far better option compared to what we had before,” Candy said doing her best to cheer him up, “but she will have to cooperate with the treatment, especially as far as her diet goes.”

“That is precisely what worries me. I know the staff is devoted to her despite her harsh ways, but she will not listen to them. She needs one of us to verify whether she’s following her treatment and push her a bit if she doesn’t. You know that when I’m in Chicago, I get too busy with the bank and the other companies we own; the rest of the year, I travel all the time. This being the case, I don’t think I qualify as a good nurse. Cousin Janice lives abroad and seldom visits us, and Sarah. . . well, you know her. I don’t think she can be trusted to look after an elderly person. Then you live in Pony’s Home and I wouldn’t dare to interfere with the work you have there.”

“Have you ever considered that Annie is here all the time, Albert?” asked Candy.

Albert looked at Candy in disbelief.

“I don’t think Annie would be strong enough to oppose my aunt when she decides on eating something sweet,” Albert said scratching the back of his neck.

“Annie will always be the sweet tempered and a bit fearful sort of girl that she ever was,” Candy argued, “but marriage and motherhood have operated some changes in her. She is less selfish and insecure than before. I know that, if aided by the staff, she can supervise Aunt Elroy’s diet and keep track of her reactions. If you wish, I can teach her how to measure the blood pressure and other vital signs and we can discuss the whole treatment with Aunt Elroy herself. You know that she tends to listen to me since I looked after her when she got that terrible fever a couple of winters ago. Annie

was with me at that time and was a good aid during those days. I'm sure she could keep an eye on Aunt Elroy and, if things get dangerous, she would be there to call the doctor at once."

"Well, as you put it now, sounds like a good plan," he replied looking a bit relieved, "you have the virtue of making difficult things look easy," the man added as his countenance relaxed.

"You can trust this nurse to solve all your troubles, Mr. Albert," she joked, happy to see her friend smiling again. "And what about the other thing that is worrying you?" she asked again, not willing to drop the subject until Albert had discharged everything that was upon his shoulders.

"The second problem falls into my lot, I think," he started.

"So, it has to do with business," she guessed.

"You're right. I know you hate talking about money, but I think you and Archie are the only ones I can truly trust in this whole thing. I have discussed it with him, but I didn't want to leave you ignorant of the things I want to do."

"O.K., if you can't help it, go ahead," she said resigned, hoping that she could understand his explanations. For her, the world of finances was a puzzle she did not care about solving.

"Candy, we are getting really rich these years, you know," he started.

"Is that a novelty?"

"Well, not really, but there is something that is not right in all this new bonanza. You see" he tried his best to explain hoping that he could make sense, "Banks make money out of loans, and they can be useful to people to certain extent. When the economy looks healthy, loans are cheaper, and people borrow more money."

"That should be good for the family business," Candy interjected.

"Yes, but when people start borrowing more money than they can ever repay, things can get really bad for everyone," he continued as he stood up and reclined on the chimney mantle, "Since the war ended there's a real craze. People buy and ask for loans as never before. Everybody seems to be enthusiastic and optimistic about the economy, but at the same time business are getting dirtier than ever. There's a lot of speculation; too risky and excessively aggressive for my taste. Sarah's husband is making lots of money this way."

Candy observed that Albert became more and more tense as he spoke. She understood that he did not agree with Mr. Lagan's business style.

"You don't seem to approve," she said straightforwardly.

"Not at all, Candy. People with money, like us, tend to believe that the world is there for their taking. We forget that this power that money bestows on us also gives us a great responsibility. Hundreds of families depend on our corporate for their daily bread. If we only think of our own greed, we may end

by becoming richer, but that will only mean that they will become poorer. That is not what my father believed in. I did not have the chance to know him as a businessman, but he taught Georges everything he knew, and I also have eyes to see and a mind to read the surrounding reality. I am afraid that this whole economic stability and growth will not be sustained forever as some suggest. If a crisis came, having most of our assets invested in speculative business would be too dangerous.”

“You’re not really thinking that the Ardlays could reach the point of starvation, are you?” Candy asked, amused with the possibility.

“That would be difficult, given our connections and influence,” Albert responded sharing the amusement, “but if our fortunes are dramatically reduced, it would have a negative impact in the lives of all the people who work for our corporate. Therefore, I’ve decided that I will not get so many of my tokens in this speculative craze, as the Lagans would like. All on the contrary, I think I will retrench.”

“What exactly does that mean in this particular case?” asked Candy, intrigued.

“It means that I will decline to participate in certain partnerships, I’ll sell some of our properties and put the money into something solid, gold perhaps, and reduce our budget for some years. I want to create an emergency reserve to protect the interest of our employees and assure that their jobs will not be at risk if a crisis comes.”

“Does that mean that you will reduce your donations for Pony’s Home?” she asked, alarmed with the possibility.

“Jesus, no, darling; on the contrary, the reserve should be large enough to allow us contributing to the good causes we are engaged in, no matter what. Unfortunately, the family will be required to sacrifice some of their personal projects. Aunt Elroy will have to give up her idea of redecorating this house once more and Archie will have to be content with being second after the Prince of Wales, when it comes to style. I may be getting a little apprehensive here and some may think I’ve lost my mind. But I have a hunch and would like to follow it. I want to be prepared if something could ever destabilize our economy. Would you back me up?” he inquired, his eyes filled with doubts.

Candy found it funny how even Albert, always self-assertive and wise, could at times feel insecure. The young woman felt glad that she could now be in the position to provide him with support and advice. Perhaps she did not understand the mysteries of the economy and the stock market, but her common sense was keen and sympathized with Albert’s altruistic worries.

“Bert, if you think it wiser for the family business and those who depend on us to retrench instead of expanding the corporate; then go on and do it. You are the head of the family and whatever you do, I’ll support you. If you fail in the attempt to protect those that depend on the family’s business, at least you will know that, in all honesty, you did what you thought was right, putting your best effort in the task. Besides, if you ever become a poor man, you can still come to live at Pony’s Home with us. It’ll be fun. Wasn’t it that way when we lived in our little apartment here in Chicago?” she concluded winking.

Albert’s face and shoulders relaxed with Candy’s assuaging words.

“We were quite happy back in those days. Weren’t we?” he asked as he opened his arms to hug the young woman.

“Money can be useful, Bert, but one can manage with little of it, if necessary. There are other things that, when missing, make us more miserable and unhappy,” she responded resting her head on his chest.

They remained like that for a while. The silence that ensued was comfortable and, in a way, necessary.

“Candy,” he first said, breaking the silence, “I’ve told you what was keeping me on pins and needles. What about you, girl? When are you going to tell me what it is that you have? You have not been yourself these two days,” the man asked as he lifted her face with his right hand.

“It’s complicated, Albert,” she began knowing that she owed her adoptive father a full account of the recent events. In that moment, the clock in her room struck six pm. sharp. “Can we discuss this after the dinner party? It will take some time for me to tell you everything.”

“You may be right. Aunt Elroy must be waiting for us to escort her to the dining room. Let’s do this,” he suggested as he took Candy’s hand to guide her to the door, “after coffee and the usual musical entertainment, make your excuses to everyone and wait for me in the library. As soon as I can get rid of our guests, I’ll meet you there.”

And saying this, they both exited the green chamber, trusting in their strong friendship and affection to face the hyenas at the dinner party.



Since Priscilla Andrew died, Mrs. Emilia Elroy, née Arday, had always been the hostess in all the great events and gatherings in the family. Nevertheless, for the last three years the lady had delegated that responsibility in the young but capable hands of Anne Cornwell. The decision had been a bitter surprise for Sarah Lagan, who had imagined that she would become the next female dominant figure in the family, as long as William Albert did not choose a bride. Rosemary, the only daughter of William C. Andrew was dead, and Cousin Janice Cornwell who preceded Sarah in seniority and lineage –being a true Arday from her mother’s side– lived abroad. So, the logical conclusion was that Elroy’s stepdaughter would end up receiving the honor. Sarah had forgotten that in the absence of Janice, the rightful successor was Janice’s daughter-in-law. The lady knew that the protocol demanded it to be so, but she simply could not stand the idea of a having an orphan more than twenty years her junior, having social precedence over her. Therefore, she would systemically search for faults in Annie’s management in every social event, but without much success. Mrs. Brighton’s work educating her daughter had been done flawlessly. The young woman was perfectly capable of coping with the usual responsibilities of a grand lady. Annie, as shy and quiet as she could be, had developed a refined taste and was meticulously efficient in her management. Besides, Mrs. Brighton was always around, backing up Annie in all her endeavors and ready to defend her daughter if necessary. The Thanksgiving Dinner party was a battlefield in which these ladies played their little game of power and social status, just as their men did it in their business adventures.

The number of guests that night was not so large. It was, after all, just a family reunion with fourteen people from Mr. Ardlay's inner circle. However, Annie had chosen to use the large dining room with the massive mahogany table and the great baroque chandeliers. Since Archie's parents were present, the occasion was supposed to be considered as highly important, calling for the most elegant and formal provisions. The best china and silverware had been prepared to present the guests with a great Thanksgiving meal. The menu included two soups, several dishes for the main course, assorted side dishes, three choices for dessert, a variety of Cheese and plenty of French and Italian wine. Before the *Prohibition* started, Mrs. Elroy had cleverly stocked the cellars of all her properties with enough spirits to enjoy for years, without having to worry about the law. Now, Annie could surprise her guests with her sophisticated selection.

Candy, frankly unconcerned about the social statements that Annie was making with every dish she served for her guests, was determined to enjoy the meal. The young blonde had never been one to sneer good food and the clam soup and recently baked buttered rolls looked so inviting that she forgot about her surroundings for a while. Unbeknownst to her, several couples of eyes were intently looking at the two Pony's girls, waiting for the opportunity to throw the first dart of the evening.

"So, how are your little orphans?" asked Eliza, bored at the generally sedated conversation about the amazing transatlantic trip of the Zeppelin from Germany to New Jersey the previous month.

"They are very well, it's very kind of you to ask," replied Candy before taking another sip of the white *Romanée Conti* she was drinking.

"I don't know how you manage to lead such a quiet life. I couldn't be away from the hustle and bustle of Chicago," Eliza continued moving her head with affected style, "but of course, having been a country girl most of your life, it couldn't represent a problem for you," she added scathingly.

"You're right, Eliza, I am very fond of our beautiful Midwest countryside. Every time I have been away from home, I have missed it immensely," Candy responded naturally as she indicated the servant who was next to her that she wanted some green bean casserole, winter squash and carrots as side dishes.

"You are not the only one to sigh for our green meadows, dear Candy," intervened Mrs. Janice Cornwell, who was seated next to her, "I longed for the days when Rosemary and I scampered around the fields near our Lakewood house to gather wildflowers. I remember that baby blue eyes and calendulas were my favorites."

"Which wildflowers did Mrs. Brown prefer?" Candy immediately asked, always avid to learn more things Anthony's mother.

"The sweet-williams, of course," was Albert spontaneous answer, accompanied with a mischievous wink addressed to Candy seated at his right.

"You sound very full of yourself, William. I wonder why it does not surprise me," joined Aunt Elroy, who despite been seated at the other extreme of the table was following the conversation. Everybody laughed at her remark. It was not every day that the old matron ventured a playful comment.

“Miss Rosemary favored zinnias above all wildflowers. I’m sure you can find them in great numbers around your Pony’s home, Miss Candice,” informed Georges, who was seated at Albert’s left side. Candy noticed that the man did not lift his eyes from his plate as he mentioned Rosemary’s name.

“That all sounds very poetic,” interrupted Eliza, unhappy with the change in conversation, “but I insist that life in the city offers a wider variety of amusement and occupations. For instance, not many days ago I had the pleasure of attending a most delightful event,” she suggested while scarcely nibbling at the glazed Long Island waterfowl she had chosen as main course.

“Would you be so kind as to tell us all the particulars?” asked Candy foreseeing what was coming.

“Oh well, you know Chicago, always offering plenty of entertainment of the highest quality. I went to the theater a few days ago to see a play by Shakespeare. You must remember that I was an enthusiastic devotee of The Bard since High School.”

Candy gave Eliza a condescending smirk. As far as she could recall, Eliza spent most of Sister Margaret’s English literature classes dozing and daydreaming.

“Pray, which play you saw?” cued Candy giving more attention to her roast turkey and cranberry sauce.

“Macbeth. I was absolutely astonished by the rich production and the complexity of the characters,” replied Eliza, happy to have captured everybody’s attention.

“I think there are some characters in that story that you surely identify with,” said Archie unable to resist the temptation, being seated right next to his infamous cousin. “Isn’t this the play that has three witches in it?” he asked then, addressing the whole audience with an impish smile. Annie, who was silently following the whole interaction, pinched her husband’s leg beneath the table.

“You’re always joking, cousin,” Eliza answered with a fake smile, but then turned again to address Candy, “You won’t believe who was starring that evening in the role of Macbeth, Candy. It was Terry Grandchester of all people, or should I say Terrence Graham himself. It was such a pity that you had to be soliciting alms for your little orphans at that time. I know you would have loved to see him.”

At least three pairs of eyes darted towards Eliza’s direction at her malicious comments, ready to stop her and change the conversation, but before Archie, Albert or Neil could act, Candy replied in a soothing tone.

“If it was Terry performing that night, I’m sure that you had a pleasant evening at the theater and I’m happy for you Eliza. As much as I would have been thrilled to be there with you to share the experience, I must say that I don’t regret any minute I invest in the wellbeing of my dear children. One of these days, I will invite you to come with me on my fundraising tours. Being a lady as socially prominent as you are, I’m sure you would be of great help for this cause,” Candy riposted without flinching.

“Perhaps you would be more successful at that, dear sis’,” interjected Neil who had remained silent for the whole meal, “As far as I recall, your efforts at chasing Grandchester, after the show, were rather fruitless.”

If glances had the power to kill, Neil would have fallen dead on that spot under his sister’s murderous look.

“A lady of our station should always keep in mind that she is expected to take interest in the needs of the less fortunate, Eliza,” commented Aunt Elroy, and the rest of the guests at the table turned silent to listen respectfully to the great matron, “My sister-in-law, the late Priscilla Andrew, was a real champion of charity crusades. I must admit that after her, the women of our clan, including myself, hadn’t been able to fill in her shoes in that quarter. Fortunately, Candice is now redeeming our family with her efforts. All Chicagoan ladies approve of her work, even if they think that her insistence on living in the orphanage is incomprehensibly eccentric. Anyway, you would do well accepting her invitation next time, Eliza.”

“Yes, Aunt Elroy,” replied the young woman, who chose to keep quiet for the rest of the meal, while other subjects of conversation were raised. She knew she would still have other occasions to bother Candy during the evening, especially when men separated from the ladies.

Albert looked at Candy; she was blissfully enjoying her pecan pie while talking to the senior Mr. Cornwell and his wife. Not a trace of discomposure could be seen in her face after Eliza had maliciously brought up the subject of Terrence’s visit to Chicago. He was proud of the way she had handled the situation and wondered if she had finally concluded her mourning after the painful breakup. Albert smiled inwardly thinking that it was just about time, after so many years. Feeling quite content with the way the evening was evolving, he continued enjoying his lobster. Annie knew Albert’s preference for seafood and had explicitly ordered the Cook to prepare the lobster for him. Most of the guests were already having dessert, but William Albert was a slow eater, as he always preferred to taste every bite, relishing the different flavors combined in a dish. After all, it was his prerogative as the head of the family to make the dinner last until he was completely done and satisfied. Besides, he knew that after the dinner the sexes would part and men would join in the French room over Cognac and cigars, while the ladies remained in the drawing room. He dreaded the moment, knowing that the Lagans would try to convince him again to participate in one of their projects.

For the moment, he felt just right, enjoying his meal having Candy seated to his right and Georges to his left. He thought it was funny that the two people he was more intimately bonded to in his whole family were not of his own blood. Moreover, this young woman and this man next to him were despised by some of his true relatives, who regarded them as their inferiors. He knew that some members of his extended family called Georges “The Interloper” and resented the great influence that the man had over the head of the family. He was also aware that the Lagans still hated Candy despite the appearance of civility they tried to keep. Deep down her heart Sarah and Eliza still saw Candy as the “Stable Girl”. He didn’t care a straw, though. His relatives may think as they pleased, as long as they just kept their opinions to themselves without doing any harm to the people he loved. For the moment, he was thankful for Annie’s thoughtful table disposition that evening, having placed him at the one extreme of the table near his dearest people, who were followed by the Cornwells, both senior and junior, leaving the Brightons and the Lagans closer to Aunt Elroy. What else could he wish for?



After the library, the French Room had been Mr. William C. Ardlay's favorite place in his home. It was in this room that he had crafted his most successful business projects and alliances during the lavishing parties he offered. It was decorated in the Beaux-Arts style, with wooden panels that covered the walls, dark green rugs over the parquet and French furniture in dusty-gold shades. The sofas and armchairs made of solid birch were decorated with shell and acanthus leaf moldings made of cherry. The upholstery was predominantly green with a couple of pieces with the designs of the clan's tartan.

Mr. Raymond Lagan remembered that it had been in that very same room that he had come to ask for the hand of his wife Sarah. Since her father had died some years before, it was Mr. Ardlay's responsibility, as head of the family, to decide over the future of his sister's stepdaughter. He clearly recalled how nervous and insecure he had felt at first, conscious of the inferiority of his station and fortune, before the imposing blond figure of Mr. Ardlay. To his surprise, William Ardlay, though very serious and reserved, was not overbearing and accepted his petition without any qualms. His marriage to Sarah had been the first step he had taken in his ambitious rise towards the first echelon of Chicago's society.

Always clever and aggressive when it came to business, Raymond had taken plenty of advantage of his new gained position since the very beginning of his marriage. Through the connections provided by his wife's relations, his fortune had grown in exponential proportions through the years. Now, after the great success of his Resorts in Miami, he was ready to expand his corporate abroad.

That evening, his main goal was to entice William Albert to finance his new project in Cuba. He knew that the task was not easy, because the young tycoon had not shown any interest in his business propositions so far, but he had to try anyway. Lagan still regretted that his son had not been able to marry Candice. If that had been the case, he would not be there, expecting to convince William to join in his adventure. He imagined how he and his son would be using Candice's trust funds and the tremendous profit they could be making out of those resources. But that was a plan he had been forced to relinquish.

To be honest, it had not been his original idea. No, as good as the plan sounded, he had to give credit to his daughter and wife for suggesting the possibility. The fact that his son Neil was genuinely in love with Candice at the time was just a fortunate circumstance in the whole strategy. Of course, Lagan and his wife could have never foreseen the decided opposition of Candice's adoptive father to the scheme. He still felt the humiliation he and his family had suffered when William Albert Ardlay finally introduced himself as the head of the clan and cancelled the engagement.

Ironically, something good had come out of that embarrassing event. His son Neil had changed dramatically after his disappointment, turning interested in the family business for the first time. Since then, the young man had given signs of the natural commercial genius that was now his trademark. Lagan was proud of the cunningly shrewd businessman his son had become. Like him, Neil was not restrained by all those scruples that seemed to be the rule that governed every decision made by William Albert Ardlay and his disciple, Archibald Cornwell. Lagan considered such moral

considerations in business as a weakness, and for that he despised Albert. Yet, this time he hoped he could persuade him to back up his adventure with a loan. Perhaps the cognac would help him a bit.

The Courvoisier was decanted generously that evening and Cuban cigars were welcomed. Lagan had brought them himself from the island. During his student years in Cornell University, Raymond Lagan had met Mario García Menocal, who later became president of Cuba, as they both had been members of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. In 1920, while García Menocal was still in office, he had hosted the Fraternity's Convention in his country with a generosity and luxury that had made history. Since then, the idea of opening a chain of night clubs in Habana had first been born in Lagan's head. Now, with the success of his resorts, he felt that he had the experience and financial status needed to try his luck in Cuba.

"I take that your friend, García, ran for president again this year, but lost to some liberal named Machado," said Mr. Cornwell Sr. after Lagan presented his idea, "That cannot be good for your plans. Machado is not a friend of the United States."

"That was the same argument used when President Zayas took office after Mario García, but despite Zayas' liberal ideas, American interests in the island were not affected during his period. I don't see that changing in Machado's administration. There's nothing to fear there. Night clubs in Habana are highly profitable, even if the new president raises taxes, it will still be a win-win deal." said Neil savoring his cigar.

"So, what do you say, William, would you join us? If you don't, I'm sure you will regret it later," insisted Mr. Lagan.

"I'm afraid I'll disappoint you again, my friend," answered Albert calmly, "My experiences in Latin America had not been good. After my trips to Brazil and Mexico I am convinced that we Americans should let those countries solve their own problems before thinking of doing business with them. When I went to Brazil two years ago to see our iron mines and coffee plantation there, I was appalled and ashamed of the inhumane conditions in which my own employees had to work. Then came the "*tenente*" revolt. President Pessoa did a very poor job handling the situation; it turned into the worst social mess I've ever seen. I simply couldn't bear the shed of blood that ensued. I was glad when I finally found buyers interested in our properties."

"You could have preserved your assets in Brazil and improve the workers conditions if you were so interested in helping them," suggested Mr. Brighton, who had no experience in investing abroad.

"It's not so easy," Albert answered, his voice turning gloomy, "Latin American governments do not do what they should, this is protecting their people's best interest. Instead, they allow our money to control their decisions and to encourage our investments they promote the most outrageous exploitation of the poor, allegedly for the sake of progress, or so they say. I found that, if I made changes to protect my miners and field laborers, they would only last while I was present. As soon as I returned to the States, the corrupt system, even inside the unions and the police, would end up by restoring the previous chaos. I decided that since I was not planning on moving to Brazil and supervise the whole operation of my interests there permanently, I should sell. I did the same with the farm and the factory in Mexico. I do not regret it a bit."

"I'm sorry to hear that," was Raymond's cold reply, "I will have to find another partner, then, perhaps you Cornwell."

"You're looking to the wrong man here," answered Archie's father, "I am also selling my assets in Arabia. I think I have all the money I'm going to need for the rest of my life. Janice and I had spent too many years away from home, and as you could hear from her during the meal, she is longing to return to Illinois and enjoy our grandson. From next year, it will be up to Archie to decide whether he wants to venture with foreign investments," concluded Mr. Cornwell as he laid his right arm on his son's shoulder in a gesture full of fatherly pride.

"I'm with Uncle William," stated Archie, "but I wish you luck with your night clubs, uncle Raymond. I'm sure they will turn out really profitable in Neil's hands," he concluded doing his best at politeness. Inside, his guts cringed at his uncle's condescending look. But if Archie was learning something from Albert and Georges, that was self-control and extreme tact in all business dealings.

Albert was aware of the great efforts at civility that his hot-headed nephew was making and felt proud of him. He hated this custom of doing business even during the Thanksgiving gathering, but if it had to be so, the last thing he wanted was an argument with his relatives on such a day.

Mr. Lagan internally cursed himself for insisting on a lost cause. From then on, he thought, the Lagans would not turn to the Ardlays searching for support ever again. Soon, he would be far richer than all of them together and that vulgar *arriviste* named Candice White Arday would regret bitterly the arrogance of ever rejecting his son.



After the customary time, the two sexes rejoined in the music room, for the last part of the evening. Candy, who had just had enough of Eliza's and Sarah's caustic remarks during the ladies gathering, welcomed the return of the gentlemen. She had to admit that Aunt Elroy had kept the Lagan ladies under check, but even with her censoring intervention, the two women had managed to drop some unpleasant comments here and there. To a certain extent, observing the repartee between Mrs. Brighton and Mrs. Lagan over the organization of the meal had been fun to watch. On the other hand, Candy had also had her share of private laughter at Eliza's detailed review of Terrence's performance, which was extensively narrated with the bad intention of hurting her. Candy had hidden her smile behind her cup of tea for most of the time, secretly rejoicing in the present state of things between the actor and herself.

Despite these undeniable sources of amusement, Candy was happy to see Albert, Georges, and Archie again and relieved to hear that Neil presented his excuses to retire for the evening. It had been Neil's custom for the last few years to avoid her in the most uncivil manner every time that they were forced to see each other at family gatherings. In a way, Candy felt uncomfortable with his attitude, but also pitied him for the despondency that his behavior implied. For this reason and because she did not find a way to ease the atmosphere between the two of them, she felt better when he had left.

For the last part of the evening, the party gathered around the grand piano to hear Mrs. Brighton and Annie display their accomplishments for the family's pleasure. Before they started, the members of the audience requested some of their favorite pieces and the ladies were happy to oblige them. Candy sat next to Aunt Elroy, just right in front of the instrument, while Albert preferred his armchair near the chimney, placed opposite the rest of the audience. From that point, he expected to have his own share of amusement, observing the reactions of his relatives.

The first one to play was Mrs. Brighton who perhaps was not as proficient as her daughter but made up for her technical deficiencies with a mature musical sensibility. She played two of Bach's inventions and then a piece by Albinoni that was pretty much appreciated by Mr. Brighton.

Then, when it was Annie's turn to play, Candy ventured a request.

"Please, Annie, play Mozart's Lullaby for me," asked Candy, picking the corresponding sheet music from the selection that Annie had taken for that evening.

"Of course, Candy."

The audience sat comfortably on their places to enjoy the three pieces that had been suggested. First, Annie played Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1*, as requested by Archie, then the first movement of Beethoven's C-sharp minor piano sonata, which Aunt Elroy preferred.

From his seat near the chimney, Albert could see the faces of most of his guests. He observed the motherly pride in Mrs. Brighton's face as her daughter displayed her proficiency at the piano. At the same time, Archie's look of tender fondness was obvious for everyone to see. Then, Albert turned and saw the plain annoyance of one who had neither taste nor artistic sensibility spread all over Eliza's countenance. Later, whilst the notes of the *Claire de Lune* invaded the atmosphere, he thought that for a fleeting moment he could descry a hint of wistfulness in his Aunt's face. He imagined that the piece brought her memories of days long gone.

Albert closed his eyes for a while, enjoying the beauty of the sounds masterfully weaved in the sonata. When he opened them again, Annie was about to start the Lullaby.

The man turned then to observe Candy, for she had been the one to request the piece. What he saw on her face, while the music soothed the audience, astonished him unexpectedly. It was a particular glitter in her eyes, a soft blush on her cheeks and a secret smile curving on her lips. Albert had not seen Candy's face lit with such a glow in many years. His mind searched through his memories, and when he could identify the last time Candy had worn that expression of utter delight, he understood that his Candy was in love again.

Now he knew why she had been so absent-minded during the previous day. Yet now that he had guessed the origin of her alterations, he felt an urge to find out who was the man responsible for that blissful aura. Candy's experiences with love had been so traumatic, that she had not shown interest in any man for a long time. As much as he wanted the best of happiness for his protégée, Albert couldn't avoid the natural apprehension that most men suffer when a young woman under their tutelage is in a position of vulnerability. He still remembered her distressing tears and depression after the breakup with Terrence Grandchester, years before. The last thing he wanted for Candy was

another bitter disappointment. He was decided to find out who that new man was, and do whatever could be necessary to protect Candy, if the said man turned out to be undeserving of her affections. With that firm decision in mind, he turned again to observe Annie, trying to do his best to preserve his composure.

Unaware of Albert's brotherly worries, Candy's mind had escaped out of the four walls of the drawing room, and was back in Saint Paul's Academy, walking through the woods. The sky bled, tinging the clouds with different hues of orange, gold, and red. In her memory, she could even feel the dampness of the dew over her skin and Mozart's Lullaby filling the sunset air. Then, following the path of the music, she had discovered that it was Terry playing the piano in the deserted music room.

For a brief moment, before he found out that he was being observed, she had been able to behold a new expression on his usually nonchalant face. Candy closed now her eyes, remembering the last rays of the sun streaming in through the window and bathing his face in all possible shades of gold and ochre. He looked serene and even softened, as if transfixed by the music. A face like that, she had thought, could only be the mirror of a sensitive and loving heart.

"I wasn't wrong," the adult Candy thought, "that boy in the music room has become the most splendid of men. To think that this same man held me in his arms just a few days ago; kissed me so tenderly. . . You cannot hide your noble heart from me, Terry. In exchange, my heart is exposed for you to see through it as you wish, Terry, my love."

The applause of the small audience brought Candy back from her pleasant musings. As the musical time had come to its end, the young woman presented her excuses to the family as she had promised Albert. After bidding goodnight to all the guests, the blonde took the stairs in direction of the library.



Mr. William C. Ardlay's library was in semidarkness when Candy entered the imposing room. She turned on the monumental chandelier illuminating the place with its Baccarat luminous prisms and beads. The young woman started to stroll around the room in search of a book to take to bed. After the music session, her mind was in the mood for poetry; so, she thought some Elizabeth Barrett Browning was in order. However, when searching through the B section, her eyes were caught by a volume of the Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake.

Candy took the book when a noise from the fireplace made her start.

"Would you please, leave me alone," Neil's husky voice came from the couch that faced the chimney, in the library sitting area.

"I didn't know you were here," Candy replied, still overwhelmed by the young man's unexpected presence.

"Well, now you see me. Please leave," he insisted.

Candy observed that the young man had been drinking. A decanter almost empty was resting on the tea table, in front of the couch, and his unsteady voice betrayed his slight intoxication.

"I'm afraid I can't oblige you, Neil. Uncle William asked me to wait for him here," she explained.

"Oh, well, I suppose this is your house and you can do as you please. Thus, I will be the one to leave," he said, standing up and taking the decanter and his glass with him.

"I'm sorry, Neil," she excused herself, instinctively averting her eyes.

Unexpectedly, the young man's laughter filled the library.

"Sorry for what, Candy?" he asked, visibly upset, "For all these unpleasant encounters we're forced in every now and then?"

"I know that my presence offends you, Neil; but I cannot offer excuses for simply being who I am," she answered, the tension evident in her temples, "I am only sorry if I once caused you pain."

"Pity!" he blurted out, his expression turning now somber, "That is exactly what I can't tolerate; your pity drawn all over your face, as you parade your indifferent beauty in front of me. If that is all I can ever inspire you, please don't give me your empty apologies, Candy. We are beyond the point of civility, now. But do not, worry, I will let you be."

Before Candy could phantom what to say to Neil's bitter remarks, the young man had darted out of the library, leaving her with the sad realization of his long-lasting disappointment. Candy would have liked to tell him that she knew what it was to love when all hope seemed lost; to offer him her true sympathy, instead of the condescending pity that he clearly resented so deeply. But the young woman understood that all attempts to peace with Neil were useless. She truly felt sorry for him.

Sighing heavily, but never one to dwell for long trying to understand the Lagans' twisted ways, Candy quickly tossed away the memory of the unpleasant scene. She had far better things to occupy her mind with. Looking at the book she had selected, the young woman sat down to browse the poetry she had at hand. Unavoidably, her fingers flipped the pages to find a particular poem. When she found it, she read it in silence, savoring each word:

TIGER, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thee?

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The young woman closed her eyelids. She could see with the eyes of her mind the feline movements of the only man she knew that could compare with a tiger. She thought the words in the poem depicted her own amazement at the existence of such a creature that could inspire in her the same fascination that drove the moth towards the fire. Even during her time in the Academy, when she fought with all her might against the attraction that such a man inspired in her, he had exerted an irresistible influence over her. Now, the Terrence she had met in Pittsburgh was no longer a sixteen-year-old kid, and above all, Candy understood that she was not the same clueless girl she once had been. She intuitively knew that the next time she met *the* tiger; she would be heading directly and willingly into his all-consuming flame. She was certain because his burning eyes, forged in some mysterious deep, as the poem suggested, had not allowed her a single night of full rest for weeks.

The noise of the door's hinges and the decisive steps of a man announced Albert's entrance. Candy closed the book and left it aside.

"Did I make you wait too long?" He asked, sitting in front of her.

"Not really, there are plenty of friends here to spend long hours," she answered as she looked at the countless books on the shelves, trying to appease her unsettling thoughts. "Are they all gone?"

"Well, the Brightons took their leave, and so did Raymond Lagan, who claimed he had some pending correspondence in his townhouse. The rest of his family will stay here for the evening and leave tomorrow morning after breakfast. I'm afraid we'll have to tolerate their presence a little bit longer. Do you mind?" he asked while sitting in front of the young woman.

"Some of them are not among my favorite people, I must confess; but I think a few hours more won't hurt," she said with a smile. Candy decided not to tell Albert about her brief encounter with Neil just a moment before.

Albert nodded and then looked right into her eyes. It was time to tackle the topic. He bent his body to rest his elbows on his knees, somehow lowering his height to her level.

“Candy, tell me. Are you very much in love?”

The young woman’s green eyes widened in astonishment.

“Am I so transparent?” was her candid response, making Albert smile.

“So, I was right. I must admit that you were acting a bit out of character recently, but I haven’t spotted the reason till a few minutes ago, when we were in the music room. Your face was radiant. I haven’t seen you wearing that silly smile in years,” he joked trying to ease Candy’s nervousness.

“I knew I would have to tell you this, sooner or later, but I was reluctant, knowing that you would tease me endlessly,” she told him nodding and smiling broadly, her dimples showing on her cheeks.

“There’s nothing wrong with being in love, Candy; I’m only worried that this new person could end up hurting you. Tell me, who is he? Is it someone I can trust my dearest Candy with?”

Candy turned serious this time and lowered her eyes. Albert was confused by her change of mood. Suddenly, the alarms of his protective side were set on. Was Candy entangled in an inappropriate relationship? Was her love unrequited? Was he someone undeserving of her value? Was he a patient with some hopeless disease?

“You know him well,” she finally said without looking at him, “and it is not that I have just fallen in love, Albert. I’ve loved him for many years. It is only that I now have new reasons to hope.”

Albert face went from anguish to astonishment, and then his eyebrows frowned in disbelief.

“You are talking about Terry!” he said still surprised, “but he. . .”

“His fiancée died two years ago, Albert. He wrote to me while he was touring England last spring and we’ve been in contact ever since. I just saw him during my trip.”

“And has he shown you he is interested in you, as in the past?” he asked, unwilling to discard his reserves.

Before Candy’s words could reply for her, the dimples appearing on her face once more had given Albert his answer.

“In his own irreverent way, he has made it clear to me,” she replied rolling her eyes. Albert’s shoulders then relaxed.

“I can hardly believe it, Candy. I . . . I thought that you, that you were over him,” he then said, realizing he had failed to interpret her usual energy and *joie de vivre* as a proof of her having forgotten Terrence.

“I had tried to convince myself of the same fantasy, Albert; but you don’t pray every evening for someone you have truly forgotten; you don’t cherish every memory and remember every birthday of someone you do not care for anymore.”

"I think I have made a poor friend," Albert regretted.

"Don't torture yourself this way, Bert," she said touching his hand, "I meant to hide it from everyone. Perhaps only Miss Pony and Sister Lane with whom I've lived these many years, may have suspected my feelings. The substantial thing here is that I'm happy now."

Albert sighed, understanding that Candy was right. Whatever had happened was in the past. The only thing that truly mattered at the moment was that she and Terrence were trying to mend their past mistakes. He knew by experience that it is not often that life offers such opportunities.

"When am I to wish you joy, then?" he asked, not without certain sense of loss similar to that a father would feel in such a situation.

"You're worse than Annie!" Candy laughed, "Terry and I still have to discuss a great deal of things before reaching an understanding. Right now, I suspect that won't be happening till next year. He's touring the country, as you heard from Eliza this evening."

Then, Albert understood Candy's serene demeanor when Eliza had attempted to bother her during the meal. He burst into laughter seeing the comic side of the situation.

"And Eliza was boasting of her seeing Terrence during his performance, while you had reasons to believe you still hold his heart in your hands. All that time you managed to remain silent and collected. Dear Candy, I believe you have become a good actress, here," he jested.

"Well, I must confess I enjoyed every single moment of my time with Eliza, this evening," Candy replied, but then turned silent, as if remembering something important, "Albert, now that things are changing for me in such a way, there is something I want to ask you."

"Anything, Candy. What is it?"

"Could you give me back my old diary? I think it is safe for me to have it with me now."

Realization sank into Albert's mind. The diary with all her entries written during her days at Saint Paul's Academy could no longer be a painful reminder of the past.

"Sure, I understand; but you must wait till I visit Lakewood. I have that diary locked in the safe there. I promise I'll retrieve it as soon as possible and take it to Pony's Home."

"Thank you, Albert."

"But now you must tell me how you found Terry when you saw him. I haven't seen him for so long that I believe I won't be able to recognize him now. He must be older than I was when I first met him."

Candy was more than happy to satisfy Albert's curiosity. It was very late in the evening when they finally retired to their quarters. Candy took William Blake's book with her, hoping that "The Lamb" poem would bring her some peace of mind. However, when she finally fell asleep, it was another creature of God's creation that filled her dreams.



The hills were whitened by the persistent snow that hadn't stopped falling every evening for the previous three days. The roads were slippery with ice, so she was driving carefully. She was clad with a heavy cape and scarf that covered her face up to her nose and still felt cold inside the car. It was about five in the afternoon, but dusk was already falling over the snowy landscape. Candy loved driving her red Model-T Fordor Sedan right after her work at the clinic. It relaxed her and put her in the mood for dinner. That evening, however, she was eager to go back to the house as soon as possible. As Christmas was just around the corner, there were many things to do at Pony's Home. However, the roads conditions did not allow her to speed up as much as she would usually do.

Accepting her fate, she tried to distract herself along the way with the radio. Silent Night was playing then, and she tried to follow the tune with her whistle.

"You can't carry a note even when you whistle, Candy," she mocked at her non-existent musical talents, "It is only fine that little Stair does not seem to mind my deafness and still asks me to sing with him."

Candy remembered how the little boy had cried so persistently when she was about to leave Chicago just the previous week. Alistair could not be reconciled with the idea of Candy leaving for Pony's Home without him, and after many tears, he had convinced his parents to let him go with Auntie Candy and stay with her till Christmas Eve.

Little Stear had just turned four at the beginning of November and had never been away from his mother before. So, it was understandable that all the adults would be skeptical about letting him go into such an adventure, even when it was just for a few days. Surprisingly, the kid had not cried a single tear once he was installed in the train and during his entire visit so far, he had been all laughter and joy. Candy thought it was good for the boy to start gaining a bit of independence.

It was thirty past five when the young woman finally got home. She entered the property from the back, right towards the barn that also served as garage for her car. When she opened the gate, the horses and the cow welcomed her with friendly noises. She greeted the animals calling them by their names with her sweetest tone. Once she had parked the car, she searched her pockets for the sugar lumps she used as treats for Caesar and Cleopatra. The horses approached her anticipating the gift.

"Here you are, old pals," she said affectionately, taking off her gloves to feed the horses with bare hands "You know well I couldn't forget about you two."

Candy spent some minutes more petting her horses and padding the cow as well, before entering the house from the back door. As soon as she was in, the warmth of her home filled her heart. She took off her cape, scarf and hat, revealing her nurse uniform. Despite having been worn for a full workday, her still impeccable white apron crossed over her back, tied around her minute waist. The cotton striped fabric of her dress was not the best for the season, but she couldn't help it. Most nurses kept the same attire all year long. Once inside the house, it didn't matter.

Cleanness firmly ingrained in her mind, the first thing she did was to wash her hands in the sink and while she was still doing it, she began to wonder why everything seemed so quiet. For a house with

twenty-four children, that was a real miracle. Still wiping her hands with a towel, the young woman left the kitchen calling everyone without success.

“Miss Pony?” she called without answer, “Sister Lane?”

Candy kept walking through the new corridors. With the recent improvements, the building had turned into a labyrinth.

“We’re here, Candy!” Miss Pony finally called, her voice coming from the parlor. When the young woman finally entered the room, her jaw dropped at the sight of Miss Pony happily seated on a beautifully crafted rocking chair, Sister Lane fussing over the tea pot, all the children uncharacteristically quiet around the Christmas tree, and little Alistair merrily swinging his short legs as he comfortably sat on Terrence’s lap.



Chapter 5

The Gap



Stair, Rick, Peter and Larry were making all sorts of funny noises with their throats to imitate the sound of car engines. The patterns of the dining room's carpet had become the perfect road for Stair's collection of miniature cars; whilst the legs of the table and chairs had transformed into an intricate labyrinth, where the most fascinating crashes could occur. The boys had been thus occupied for a long while.

Every time a car crashed, Stair would take it to the mechanic's to be fixed. The pretended garage was a box in which the boys kept all the cars. Stair would leave the "broken" car and take another to continue playing. It was in one of those moments that the kid noticed that his favorite toy car was missing. He had a soft spot for his cobalt blue Model T because its doors and trunk opened and closed, and the wheels had real tiny tires. But now the car was nowhere to be found.

Sister Lane was busy with her knitting while she supervised the small children as they played. Next to her, a baby wrapped in soft blankets slept soundly in her cradle. The rest of the children were in class with Miss Pony. The nun was observing little Stair worried face, when a decisive knock was heard coming from the front door.

"I'll open, Sister Lane!" offered Stair jumping from his place on the carpet.

Figuring that it was the mailman, the woman allowed the little boy to do the task. Living in a large mansion with servants that would always do such things, Stair felt a naïve fascination to take charge of those activities that apparently only grownups could do.

The boy ran to the main door and standing on tiptoes managed to reach the doorknob. When he opened the door, the kid discovered a man, whose height reminded him of Uncle Bert. The man bent his body slightly to talk to him.

“Good afternoon, sir. Is this Pony’s Home?” the man asked with a voice so deep that made Stair think that he had swallowed a toad.

Stair did not answer at first, just giggled and shook his head.

“No,” the boy finally said smiling.

“Are you sure this is *not* Pony’s Home, sir?” the man asked again doing his best to appear serious.

“No. I’m not a “sir”. I’m a boy!” the child answered and then, his eyes caught a blue shadow behind the man, which distracted him from the conversation with the stranger.

The kid tilted his head to his right and the man followed his gaze, turning back. The man’s movement allowed Stair a complete view of something that had attracted his attention. The child’s eyes opened wide in amazement when he discovered that behind the man, in the parking area of the front yard, there was a cobalt blue Ford Model T Coupe that was the exact copy of his favorite toy car. The fact that this car was of a normal size was not relevant for the kid’s vivid imagination.

“My car!” he gasped in amazement.

“Beg your pardon?” asked the man amused.

“You *brinc*²⁵ me my car! Thank you!” the boy explained, smiling broadly and hugging the man’s long legs in sheer excitement.

“Hey! Young man! Take it easy. It is just a rented car!” the man chuckled.

“Are you Santa’s helper?” asked Stair ignoring the man’s explanation.

“Heavens, no!” the man laughed wholeheartedly, and thinking that an introduction was in order, he took off his hat and crouching down to be closer to the kid’s level he said: “I’m Terrence Graham. Pleased to meet you, young man” he said offering his right hand.

Stair, who was not used to being treated like an adult, found the whole situation really funny.

“Hi, Mr. Caam” Stair answered shaking Terrence’s hand, giggling some more.

“No, not Caam, Graham” the man repeated slowly.

“Caaaam” said the kid again with greater emphasis making the man laugh once more.

²⁵ Brinc = Little Alistair meant “bring”, but the boy has problems to pronounce the “g” sound that is produced from the back palate (velar), like in “guy”, “goat” or “garment” and of course “Graham.” But he can say “gee”, because this sound is produced with the tongue vibrating under the teeth ridge.

“Graham, with a G” he explained, but seeing the kid’s puzzled face, he soon realized that the boy was too young to know how to spell.

“G? Mr. G?” asked the boy frowning, while his eyes were still smiling.

“All right! You can call me Mr. G. if you wish, pal,” the man gave up.

“Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus!” exclaimed a female voice coming from inside the house, gasping in surprise, “Mr. Grandchester!”

“Sister Lane, you must forgive my intruding without previous notice,” the young man said bowing courtly in front of the woman.

“Dear Lord! You’re not intruding at all, son. Do come in,” she said warmly as she offered him her hand. Instead of shaking it, Terrence kissed Sister Lane’s hand respectfully. If the young man had not been in the lady’s good graces –as he already was– he would have earned them with the gesture.

The man, closely followed by Stair, entered the house, which he found greatly altered at first glance. The old parlor had turned into a vestibule, the inside door was ajar and allowed the view of a large parlor, with a tall Christmas tree. The nun made the visitor enter the parlor, but instead of inviting him to sit there, she conducted him to an equally big dining room, where other small children were playing with a pile of toys spread all over a Persian rug.

“You must excuse me for bringing you here, instead of receiving you properly in the living room, Mr. Grandchester,” explained Sister Lane, “but I can’t leave the little ones unattended for long.”

The nun took her seat near the cradle inviting Terrence to sit in front of her.

“Can I offer you anything to drink, Mr. Grandchester, perhaps some coffee or cocoa?”

“I haven’t had cocoa in a long time, madam. So, I think it would do me good to have some, if you are so kind.”

“Could you keep an eye over them, while I come back?” she asked, eyeing over the children meaningfully.

Terrence looked at the little men playing on the floor.

“I think I can manage, madam,” he replied politely, but slightly doubtful of his skills as a caretaker.

“Great! I’ll be back in no time. I hope Isabella does not cry while I’m gone,” said Sister Lane hurrying towards the door.

“I-Isabella?” asked Terrence confused, observing that there were only boys playing in the room, but Sister Lane had already disappeared behind the kitchen door and couldn’t hear him.

"Isabella is there!" said little Alistair pointing to a cradle. The young man stood up and walked towards the said cradle to discover that it was occupied by a tiny baby who slept peacefully.

"Blimey! She looks pretty quiet. Does she often cry?" asked Terrence to the kids, trying to hide his bewilderment.

"All the time!" answered one of Stair's companions.

"Does she?" said the young man dreading the worst, while looking at the kitchen door, and wishing that immediate return of the nun, "Oh dear, and what are we to do if she does cry?"

"I don't know!" said a second boy shrinking his shoulders.

"Aunty Candy holds the baby like this," mimed Stair holding one of his toy cars and lulling it as if it were a baby.

"Aunty Candy?" repeated Terrence looking again at the little boy. He observed his face more carefully, inwardly smiling at the recognition of the warm smile and the bright dark eyes behind the round glasses, "*This must be Dandy-boy's son*," he thought and then –alarmed at the possibility– he wondered if the father would be around. The last thing he wanted now was an acid encounter with Cornwell. His mood was set for more pleasant meetings at the moment; so, even though he knew that he would eventually have to face Candy's relatives, he was hoping that such a feat could be left for later.

"Stair," he called the boy, who immediately reacted looking at him, confirming his suspicions, "Where are your parents?" he asked casually.

"At home," was Stair's candid reply.

"Are you here alone?" asked Terrence sitting on the carpet next to the kids, who had resumed their game.

Stair smiled again as he dissented shaking his head emphatically.

"Aunty Candy is with me, and Miss Pony, and Sister Lane, and Pete, and Rick, and Larry, and Caesar, and Cleopatra," he explained nodding his head at the mention of every name.

"And where is your Aunty Candy?" the man asked raising his eyebrow, a spark shining in his eyes.

"Workinc²⁶," the kid replied naturally, and, after a pause, he added with the tone of someone who has something very important to say, "Did you know that Aunty Candy can sew your skin with a needle, when you fall down?"

²⁶ Working

“She gave me these stitches, and I didn’t cry,” joined the third kid who had remained silent so far, as he showed off his bandaged leg.

“Very impressive,” replied Terrence repressing a smile. The sudden change of subject in children’s conversation was something new for him.

In that moment, the kitchen door finally opened, and Terrence rushed to help Sister Lane with her tray. Soon, all attendants in that unplanned meeting were enjoying a cup of hot cocoa, while Sister Lane took up again the conversation that had merely started.

“I must say that your visit is very much welcomed, Mr. Grandchester. But I am afraid the particular person you surely want to see is not at home at the moment.”

“Though I cannot deny that I’ve come here with the express desire of seeing Candice, there is also another motive that has made me incur in this breach of propriety calling unannounced, madam.”

“Really? May I enquire for your motives,” the nun asked amused at the man’s formality.

“In one of her letters, Candice expressed her desire to present Miss Pony with something special for this Christmas, and I offered to acquire the gift during my tour. So, I’m here in the capacity of a messenger and package carrier.”

“That is very thoughtful of you Mr. Grandchester, but Candy shouldn’t have bothered you to that extent.”

“Not at all, Sister Lane, I offered myself to do the transaction and told her that I would send the present by special delivery. I only omitted how special it would be,” he half smiled with an impish light in his eyes.

“So, I take it is not only Miss Pony who is up for a surprise this evening,” the woman said intently.

Seeing that she had plenty of time, Sister Lane took advantage of the moment to inquire about Terrence’s tour. The young man was not used to hold long and personal conversations with anyone apart from his mother and Robert Hathaway; however, for some strange reason, he felt comfortable enough with the nun. Perhaps there was something of Candy’s genuine interest in others within Sister Lane’s engaging manners, which made him let go of his usual reserve. Therefore, he gave the lady a thorough account of his tour, slightly mentioning his encounter with Candy, without the most intimate details.

This omission notwithstanding, his account of his travels was so full of colorful details that soon caught Sister Lane’s attention. The lady got so absorbed in the conversation that she could barely remember rocking Isabella’s cradle when the baby started to move in her sleep. Even the children who were absentmindedly playing on the floor, managed to pick up pieces of the story.

Before any of them could realize how long they had been talking, the sound of a bell, the tinkle of children’s giggles, and the noise of brisk steps announced the end of school. In a matter of seconds after the bell rang, a real troupe of around twenty children appeared out of the blue in the dining

room, which did not seem so large anymore, full of the restless presence of so many children. Some instants after the kids' arrival, Miss Giddings made her entrance with her rounded figure, and sunny smile. Terrence thought that besides the fact that now her hair was completely gray and a few extra pounds, the old lady was exactly as he remembered her from his first visit in the winter of 1913.

The old lady opened her mouth gasping when she realized who was standing right there in her dining room. She took off her glasses for a second and put them back in place. She then held her face with both of her hands, still unable to utter a word.

"Good afternoon, madam, it is a pleasure to see you again," said Terrence as he bowed, being the first to react after the initial moment of mutual recognition.

"Goodness! Is that you Mr. Grandchester?" she asked approaching the tall man with the unguarded curiosity of those who had lived long enough to disregard social conventions. "You've grown up a great deal, son! Look at you, a grown-up man, no doubt. Welcome to Pony's home," she greeted spontaneously, hugging the young man with her usual maternal warmth.

Caught off guard, Terrence accepted the old lady's affectionate hug without words. To be treated with such innocent sweetness by someone other than his own mother was an awkward novelty for the young man. He remembered that, on his first visit, both ladies had been kind and warm. Yet, back then, they had been taken by surprise, having ignored his existence till the moment he had appeared at their doorstep; hence, certain reserve was kept during that first interview. However, now Miss Pony was giving him the welcome of a dear child who comes back home after a long absence. It was overwhelming, but still unexpectedly pleasant.

"You have certainly given me a great surprise, son," the old lady said when she broke the embrace, "but you shouldn't do such things to an old soul like mine. I may not resist them, you see?"

"You must excuse me then, madam, but I am running an important errand for your daughter," he explained, "I've brought a package for you in her behalf."

"You mean Candy?" she asked intrigued.

"Candy asked Mr. Grandchester to bring a present for you, Miss Pony, or something similar," Sister Lane intervened, knowing that Miss Pony was not one to wait for Christmas morning to open a gift given in advance.

"Is that so? How kind of you to do that for me, Mr. Grandchester!" the lady rejoined with mirth. Then, after a pause, she addressed again the young man with a different tone. "Do you think I can see the present now?" she said, winking mischievously.



Candy couldn't believe her own eyes. Even though her soul yearned for Terrence's presence, she had resigned herself to the idea that their correspondence would have to wait to be resumed until he

ended his tour. In a way, she had felt a little disappointed by the fact that he hadn't expressed any desire to see her during the holidays; even when she had explicitly asked him about his plans after his tour. She had reasoned that their relationship was in an uncertain moment, and probably he wanted some time –and distance– to sort out his feelings before making his next move. Despite the thrill left by his last letter and the photo attached to the missive, certain doubts had grown in her heart of late. The furtive thought that his interest could have faded with the passage of the previous weeks had not allowed her a night of complete rest.

“What makes you think that a man like him, sophisticated and distinguished, will entertain serious designs for a country-nobody, who happened to be his High School sweetheart a million years ago?” that old internal voice, awakening from a dark corner of her deeply rooted insecurities, had whispered in her ear more than once in her sleepless nights, *“What if he met someone else that could have attracted his attentions during the last weeks of his tour?”*

Despite these disquieting thoughts, Terrence was right there, sitting in her parlor and looking at her from those iridescent blue eyes of his, she had always liked so much. That he was enjoying her bewilderment, was obvious in his roguish half smile. And to make matters worse, the scamp seemed to have charmed her entire household, because everybody appeared to be welcoming him as if this were his own home.

“Aren't you happy to see that Mr. Grandchester has come to visit us after such an exhausting tour, Candy? The poor soul has traveled all the way from San Francisco, just to bring me this luscious present,” Miss Pony said, having her good share of fun at Candy's expenses. The expression of bafflement mixed with enamored bliss and a dash of anger was clearly spread all over Candy's face and easy to read for the old lady.

The blonde, making an effort to avert her eyes from Terrence's, looked at the piece of furniture that Miss Pony had alluded. She had to admit that the piece was exquisite. Calla lilies and roses were masterfully carved over the backrest frame and the armrests. The rockers were made of massive oak, giving the composition an appearance of stability and strength, while the chair seat and backrest were upholstered in soft leather.

“I think I must thank the two of you for the present. I had wished to change the old chair, now that we have this new parlor, but couldn't find the time to buy a new one. You have both been most thoughtful,” thanked Miss Pony sincerely.

“I must also thank you for your Christmas present, Candy,” added Sister Lane,” pointing to a square box under the tree, “I think I'll wait till Christmas to open it, though.”

Candy cast a look at Terrence and immediately understood that the additional present for Sister Lane had been all of his doing.

“You must thank Terrence for going through all this trouble to buy the presents in my instead. I must admit that he has covered the expenses all by himself, so do not thank me until I have repaid him.”

“Do not mention it, Candy,” said the young man and for a second Candy thought that something like a soft blush had passed over his features.

“Mr. G. *cave*²⁷ me a present, too, aunty,” interjected Stair surprising the audience. “My blue car is as *bic*²⁸ as yours now.”

“What do you mean, Stair?” asked Candy confused and astounded at the pet name that the kid had spontaneously devised for Terrence.

“It’s a long story,” the young man said chuckling.

“We can save long stories after dinner, don’t you think?” Miss Pony interrupted and then added, “Candy, you must know that Mr. Grandchester has accepted our invitation to stay for the holidays. He didn’t want to at first, but I’ve insisted most decidedly. Can you believe he had not made any plans yet?”

“Oh, really? Who would have thought! Such a busy celebrity as he is,” the young woman commented with a hint of irony in her voice.

“Yes! Now we can monopolize his company for a few days. Would you show him the way to the guest room while we set the table for dinner, my dear?”

At this cue, Terrence took Stair and deposited him on the floor handling him with upmost care. For an instant, Candy felt her heart melt at the sight of the man she loved interacting with the child. Yet, she still had to decide whether she was going to openly welcome the young man or scold him first for giving her the wrong impression, just for the sake of a good joke.

“Annoying man! Had I known that he cared enough to come all this way to visit me, I would have slept well all these past days...wouldn’t I?” she thought, her temper rising by the minute as looked at the devilish twinkle in the man’s eyes. She could tell that he was rejoicing in the success of his prank.

“Would you please follow me?” she asked with a nod of her head, swiftly turning her back to him to guide him through the corridors.

Terrence took his leave from the ladies and then, grabbing his suitcases, which rested at a corner of the room, followed the young woman. He knew she was mad at him for coming unannounced and even when he ignored the extent of her anger, he had decided to enjoy the view of her incensed eyes.

Soon they reached a door in the new section of the house and Candy opened it without ceremony. The room, though unpretentious, was fragrant with the smell of new cedar, fresh linens, and dried lavender spikes that rested in a vase, over the night table. Terrence thought that he couldn’t have asked for a more inviting retreat after a tiring tour. The full bed covered with a multicolor handmade patchwork quilt reminded him that he hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in more than two days.

²⁷ Gave

²⁸ Big

Too angry to notice the signs of weariness in the young man's face, Candy waited until Terrence had left his suitcases on the floor to confront him.

"Could you now stop playing games, Terrence? Why didn't you tell me you intended to come here?" she said drily. She then reopened her mouth to begin an even longer diatribe but was interrupted by the man's fast movements. Before she could prevent it, he had approached her dangerously to the point that she could feel his breath bathing her nose.

"And miss the chance to see these moggy's ²⁹eyes thus lit with fire? I don't think so," he whispered to her ears, as he leaned over her petite frame. "Besides, it serves your right for making me believe that the little gentleman with spectacles could be my rival."

"You. . . you mean. . . Stair?" Candy asked, dumbstruck.

"Yes, your beau who does not complain about your many jobs, madam. You see, us Shakespearean actors always enjoy a sweet and well-designed revengeful scheme." he confessed smirking.

Understanding finally dawned in Candy's head, realizing that he had not forgiven her for toying with him that night in Pittsburgh.

"That. . . that was an innocent joke!" she defended herself raising her index as to mark her point. From anger, her eyes had now transfixed to panic at seeing herself cornered. Terrence could not decide which of the two expressions was more provoking for him. He instinctively got even closer.

"Te- Terrence! Don't . . ." she mumbled, putting both of her hands over his chest in a weak attempt to resist him.

"Am I Terrence to you, now?" he asked, his lips grazing her ear's lobe and sending flames through her body, "In Pittsburgh I was still **Terry**. Wasn't I?"

She could distinctively feel her heart speeding up by the second. Without great effort he had enfolded her with his arms and was heightening the pressure of their embrace. Candy knew it was impossible to react now and he, sensing she had surrendered, grew more daring. His lips began to ignite her temples and cheeks with feather-like kisses.

"I've missed you!" he sighed with a totally different tone that suggested longings repressed for years, his breath leaving a burning trail across the skin of her face.

²⁹ Moggy= British dialect for "cat"

“I’ve missed you too, Terry,” she murmured with a sigh, her eyes closing and her mind forgetting all her doubts and insomnia in an instant.

“That’s better,” he smiled, just the moment before his lips claimed hers again.

This time it was a kiss with all the trimmings. The man’s lips covered hers with enfolding strokes, which increased their pressure in every soft contraction; until she unwittingly responded, parting her lips. For a fleeting moment he doubted but emboldened by his own passion he finally delved into her mouth, savoring it fully for the first time.

For Candy, that initial invasion of her body was unexpected and alluring at the same time. She had never imagined that a kiss could turn into such a private exchange. But inexperienced as she was, her understanding of her own feelings for Terrence was by then so well defined that she welcomed their advancing into more intimate endearments. As if possessed by a strange force she had never felt before, her arms responded by going automatically around his neck, whilst his tongue caressed hers. Both of his arms encircled her now so tightly, that her breast and hips were firmly pressed against his frame in a way that it could not be possible to be closer. It was then that she first perceived an unknown shudder that melted her insides and made her belly tremble. Her breathing each second heavier, she let escape a soft moan, which aroused him even more. As much as he was enjoying her reactions, he realized that they would have to stop soon. His pulse was rising, and the rest of his body would soon begin to respond to her sweet surrendering in a way that was far from chaste; when he started the kiss, he had not anticipated things could go so heated in a second. However, unwilling to part abruptly, he decided to ease down the exchange slowly, reducing the heat of their embrace and lightening their kisses little by little.

When he finally broke apart from her lips, he rested his forehead on hers, his eyes still closed, while sensing the delicious heaviness of her breathing over his face. This open acceptance of the physical expression of his feelings for her was a delightful new sensation for him. He understood that it was just the prelude to the things that could come. “*Can this be me, living this dream?*” He silently asked himself in disbelief. Unconsciously, he smiled and opened his eyes to see her.

“So, Miss Ardlay, do you think I will need my fencing mask?” he joked, and she giggled in response, tossing her head backwards. He thought that there was nothing as charming as those jingling giggles of hers.

“I believe that you are well aware that we are past that phase, Mr. Graham,” she responded, looking at him again and observing his eyes illuminated with that intense blaze she had first noticed in Pittsburgh. Blake’s poem came instantly to her mind, and she had to lower her eyes, unsure of her own reactions if she kept looking at him, “I think we should be going now,

Miss Pony and Sister Lane must be waiting for us to begin with dinner,” she added, knowing that they couldn’t stay alone in the room for longer.

“I guess you’re right,” he accepted, his voice suggesting an almost childish reluctance that amused Candy.

As he slowly liberated her from his grip, he ran his hands along her arms. Even under the long sleeves of her uniform, her skin trembled at his touch. Then, taking her hand in his, he conducted her out of the room. They both walked their way back to the main rooms of the house hand in hand, without saying a word.



When the couple reached the door of the dining room, Candy discreetly loosened Terrence’s hand, and he did his best to repress his smile at the sight of her beautiful blush. Nevertheless, he could not hide the sparks in his eyes that betrayed his happiness. Miss Pony, who was way too old and experienced to not comprehend what was going on, smiled inwardly.

Now, meals at Pony’s Home were a complex business that Terrence could not have predicted. Feeding twenty-four children and a baby at the same time was certainly a frightening task. However, it seemed that the three ladies somehow managed to keep the mess under control, preventing the meal from degenerating in total chaos.

Making an effort to give the appearance of collectedness, Candy engaged in her usual duties, and, after a while, she was again on track serving soup, cleaning noses and making funny faces for Isabella. The baby was fully awake, drinking eagerly from her bottle and comfortably cuddled in Sister Lane’s arms.

Terrence had sat by Miss Pony’s side at her request and was deep in conversation with the old lady. Nevertheless, at every moment, his eyes followed Candy, as if bewitched by her most minute movement. Miss Pony and Sister Lane exchanged knowing looks while observing the whole scene.

“Was this happiness always here, by her side? Was it that simple to reach?” he asked himself, whilst silently observing her fussing over the children, cutting the bread loaf with fast hands, and talking to Stair who was a chatting box himself.

Terrence confirmed that the boy was indeed a real darling, and having inherited from his deceased uncle, not only his looks, but also a great number of his gestures and mannerisms, ranked up high in Candy’s affections. The boy seemed to correspond in kind, for it was obvious that he doted on his Aunt Candy, just as much as his uncle and his own father had done before him, only with a different kind of adoration.

The young man couldn’t avoid thinking that, hadn’t it been for the disastrous decisions made in New York eight years before, instead of Archibald and Annie Cornwell’s son now sitting on

her lap, his beloved Candy could be carrying her own children –the ones that **he** could have given to her so long ago. A sudden pang of regret pierced his heart at the realization of the time lost in bitter, sterile pain.

“I made a gross mistake when I let you go, my love,” he thought, “I suffered the consequences all these years, but it was fair because it was my own doing, the result of my lack of resolve; but you? What had you done to deserve my abandonment? I wronged you cruelly, Candy! And now, you welcome me without a single word of reproach. Can a bastard like me deserve a second chance?”

His gloomy thoughts unknown to her, she smiled at him across the table, and soft warmth crept over his chest dispelling the darkness for a moment.

“We must talk,” he said to her, moving his lips without making any sound.

“Later,” she answered similarly with a smile that he recognized as the one she only used for him, or at least he had thought so during their school times.

The meal went on with its characteristic buzz and confusion. The food was simple, but tasty and plentiful. The smallest ones just had noodle soup with vegetables, bread and hot milk while the oldest children and the adults had some pot roast and salad beside the soup. By the end of the meal there was much alacrity about the dessert, which was apple pie and apparently a great favorite among all the children.

Candy stood up to cut a couple of huge pies into slices and Miss Pony took charge of serving the hot drinks.

“Tea or coffee?” the old lady asked addressing Terrence with her customary kindness.

“Tea,” answered Candy before the young man could reply. Perfunctorily, Candy handed Miss Pony half a lemon and a sugar lump. Immediately and without flinching, Candy continued her task serving the pie, starting with the little ones. Terrence, who was glad to find her recollection of his preferences so exact, did not make any comments, but the conviction of her caring for him increased yet a bit more within him.

Unaware of the young man’s musings, Candy continued her work. As she concentrated on her task, she remembered one of Terrence’s letters in which he had jokingly said that she didn’t need to wear a costume to pass as a witch during Halloween. Looking at the pie which she had baked the previous evening, an idea came to her mind.

When it came the turn for her to hand Terrence his piece, she smiled at him naughtily and said giving her voice a husky and menacing tone:

“Beware of a witch’s pie, oh Thane of Glamis³⁰; you may choke on a poisoned apple.”

The young man looked at her and remembering the playful banter they had engaged in through letters, he understood that she had made the pie. Last time he had discussed the topic of culinary skills with Candy many years before, the young woman had confessed to him that in her apartment in Chicago, it was Albert who did the cooking, because she couldn’t cook to save her own life. So, he looked at the slice with distrust.

Once she was comfortably seated in her place, Candy observed Terrence’s reluctance to try the dessert, and could hardly hide her amusement, watching him as he forked the pie cautiously. Miss Pony and Sister Lane noticed the whole game and did their best to pretend that they didn’t understand.

The young woman sat right in front of him, once she finished serving. With petulant ease, she took a bite to her mouth and began enjoying her dessert without missing any detail in Terrence’s reactions. The man was still looking around him, observing that everyone seemed to deem that the pie was edible. Finally, he decided to try his luck and have a bite. To his great surprise the dessert was actually really good. His expression gave away his bewilderment.

“Oh man of little faith,” she told him shaking her head. “Why do you doubt that a tomboy like me can learn how to bake a pie?”

Miss Pony and Sister Lane could not restrain their mirth any longer and burst into laughter closely followed by Candy herself. Understanding that he had been victim of the young woman’s unquenchable thirst for teasing, he joined them wholeheartedly with his own laughter.

Terrence thought that he couldn’t remember the last time he had enjoyed a meal in such a merry company.

In that moment, the general laughter was interrupted by the ring of the phone. Candy stood up as if pricked and ran to take the call. Terrence followed her with his eyes again.

“Hello”

.....

“Oh, Albert! I’ve been expecting your call since yesterday.”

.....

³⁰ Macbeth’s title before becoming King in the play: Noble man, usually head of a Scottish clan.

“All right, all right; I forgive you, but you know that I always get jealous if you ignore me,” she giggled, “How’s everyone?”

.....

“Is Annie taking good care of Aunt Elroy’s diet?”

.....

“Great! I told you things would work well that way. You just trust in your Candy to fix things for you, Bert.”

.....

“Sure, Stair is fine. You may tell Annie not to worry. He’s making new friends and behaving marvelously. When will you come to pick him up?”

.....

“That’s fine! Everybody here is anxious to see you again, you know you’re everybody’s favorite. Besides, when you come, I have a little surprise for you. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

.....

“I know, I know...., but you surely understand that I must spend Christmas here, Bert. It’s a very important day in Pony’s Home. They can’t do without me. I promise I’ll go to Chicago again after the Holidays, so you can spoil me as much as you want.”

.....

“All right. I’ll give them your regards. You say hello to Annie and Archie on my behalf.”

.....

“I love you too, Bert.”

As Candy’s conversation on the phone developed, Miss Pony observed how Terrence’s face transfigured. Suddenly, the warm and bright light in his eyes faded, while the rest of his features turned stern.

“Albert is coming on the 21st,” she announced once she had hung up, “He’s coming to take Stair back home. Your Mommy is missing you a great deal, Stair,” she added looking at the boy.

Terrence remained silent, centering his attention on his cup of tea.

“He’ll be quite surprised to see you here,” she said addressing the young man.

“Perhaps,” he replied drily.

Candy sensed his change of mood. She knew well that Terrence was prone to sudden swings of humor, but she hadn’t witnessed one of them in many years; so, his reaction had caught her unawares. The conversation then strayed in other directions and Terrence regained his composure. Nevertheless, his face began to give signs of fatigue.

Noticing all this, Sister Lane and Miss Pony tactfully suggested their guest retire early to recover from his journey. The young man appreciated the ladies’ thoughtfulness and presenting his excuses, he left the dining room towards the guest room. Candy, who was expecting to have a word or two with him before bedtime, was appalled by his taking leave so hurriedly, without even exchanging a glance with her.

Unable to account for his behavior and trusting that they would have time to talk about it later, the young woman engaged in her usual evening tasks. She decided that there were too many motives to be happy that day to waste time sulking for no good reason.



Terrence dried out his recently washed hair with perhaps too energetic rubs. He had thought that a shower before going to bed would set his thoughts in order, but apparently the strategy hadn’t worked at all. Wearing only his pajamas bottoms and with the towel still around his neck, the young man sat on the bed. Absentmindedly, he lay propped up on his elbows, against the pillows; his face lost in confusing thoughts.

He looked around the room and identified the spot where he and Candy had been hugging and kissing just a few hours before. His heart skipped a beat or two at the recollection of his feelings while having her in his arms.

In all his life, he had never kissed and been kissed in return with such an absolute and unmistakable passion. It had been just as he had dreamed for so long, with Candy not only accepting him in full, but also matching his own urge with her responsiveness. Even when neither of them had verbalized their mutual feelings; for him, the fact that she had given herself so willingly had been as good as the most tender of love confessions. He knew that he would have done or said anything she had asked for at that moment. But she did ask for nothing.

During the whole dinner –he was fully aware– it had taken him all his histrionic skills not to look like a total mooncalf and coordinate his thoughts to keep up with civil conversation. Then, just when he had finally recovered control over his actions, by the time Candy teased

him with the dessert, Albert had called. His conversation –or rather, Candy’s interaction with Albert on the phone– had made Terrence’s old insecurities rekindle all over again.

Only a very thin thread of rationality had held the reins of his incensed impulses under check at that moment. Even though he was still young and passionate, years of hardships and disappointments had taught him how to master his reactions in public. Therefore, he had managed to subdue his violent feelings by resorting to silence. He was aware that his sudden withdrawal must have been awkward and confusing for Candy, but it had been preferable to an open outburst right in front of the ladies of the house. For that reason, he had welcomed Miss Pony and Sister Lane’s suggestion to retire, for it would give him time to overcome his uneasiness.

Now, thinking about these events was not helping much. His rational side told him he was overreacting. Terrence told himself again that Albert was Candy’s adoptive father and best friend. Moreover, in the capacity of a friend he had remained for many years. Had the man harbored other feelings towards her, being a man of integrity, he would have fought against those feelings. He would have put a healthy distance between his protégée and himself before succumbing to that abominable temptation, dragging Candy’s good name into the mud. Wouldn’t he? And as long as her feelings were concerned, hadn’t she shown him where her heart lay that very evening?

*“And yet. . . I couldn’t stand it when she called herself **“his”** Candy, saying that she had been expecting his call, and that she had been jealous, even if she was just jesting,”* Terrence thought, while now lying on his back; his eyes turning grayish as his temper rose again, *“It was so revolting to hear her call him **“Bert”** over and over, that I thought I would throw out right then and there!”*

Spurred by the unpleasant memory, the young man stood up again and walked towards the window. Outside, the night had already fallen over the peaceful snowy landscape.

“But the worst of it all,” he continued thinking *“was when she told him **“I love you too”**. Had he been here I think I would have strangled the dear life out of him. I’m such a brute!”* Terrence chastised himself covering his face with his right hand, as if ashamed of his feelings. *“The good old chap deserves my gratitude for so many things, and here I am, having these murderous thoughts against him.”*

Terrence remembered clearly that Albert had saved his life once, and to make matters worse, he had been the one who had sent Candy to study in England; so technically he was indebted to Albert for having ever met her. Besides, he had been her friend and protector for all these years, while Terrence had been tied to another woman. He knew all this jealousy was totally irrational and out of place.

*“It is. . . it is only that I can’t bear the idea that you could love another man, Candy,” his mind remembered again the flavor of her lips under his passionate caresses, “If you were here with me right now . . . and if you told me with those lips of yours that you love **me**, that I am to be your man and you my woman, only then I would feel totally reassured.”*

Realization hit him hard in that very moment: they had never talked about their feelings in an open manner; neither in their time at school, nor after they had met again in New York, so many years before.

“Yes, that is the main issue here! I need to hear from you that you love me and to tell you straightforwardly what I feel for you! I must find the time and the place to set things right and clear between us before Albert comes, otherwise I will go mad.”

With this resolution in mind, he finally went to bed and slowly drifted into a deep sleep full of dreams of her.



The dawn hadn’t broken yet and the whole household was still sleeping soundly when Candy’s boots stepped into the kitchen. Making the least noise possible, the young woman started to prepare a light breakfast with oatmeal and fresh coffee. As she filled the coffee pot with water, Candy reviewed in her mind the events of the previous day for the hundredth time. She could hardly believe that she and Terrence had just slept under the same roof. For years, she had resigned herself to the idea that she would never see him again. Only at times, in those furtive moments when the zealous guard she kept over her thoughts faltered, she had dared to dream that perhaps . . . somehow . . . someday, life could give her the chance to hope again. But all too soon her reason forced her to dispel such improbable considerations. Unbelievably, these impossible dreams of hers had now materialized and Terrence was there, in the flesh, resting in the guest room.

“And there is no doubt of his intentions for me now,” she thought blushing fiercely at the memory of their embrace just a few hours before, “Oh dear me! I can’t believe my reckless behavior!”

Candy knew they couldn’t go like that forever, pretending that they were just picking up where they had left so long ago. They needed a long and serious talk, but she dreaded the wounds that they would have to reopen in such a conversation.

Miss Pony had made that point crystal clear when she talked to her before going to bed the previous evening. It was not the habit of the old lady to meddle in Candy’s life, but in this particular case, she had taken the pains to broach the subject.

The young woman remembered she had been taken by surprise when Miss Pony paid her a visit in her room that evening.

“Candy, you know that Sister Lane and I have always respected your decisions regarding your relationship with Mr. Grandchester in the past and during the last months as well,” the old lady had started looking at her with the love of a mother, *“but, if you allow me this time, I would like to know in which terms your friendship is standing right now.”*

“Well. . . er. . . we haven’t discussed things in full. . . as of. . . yet,” the young woman had stammered lowering her eyes.

“But you cannot hold to the delusive notion that he is just interested in you as a friend, Candy, can you?” asked Miss Pony sitting on the bed next to the young woman.

“No, Miss Pony, I think I can safely say now that he regards me as a woman, not only as a friend,” she had avowed while her eyes were still fixed on her own nervous hands.

“But has he made his feelings clear to you?”

“Not with words, if that is what you are asking. I know it from his behavior,” Candy managed to explain, hoping that Miss Pony would not require more details.

“Well, that is very clear to me too,” Miss Pony pointed out smiling, *“the poor man is totally besotted, and that is precisely what worries me, Candy.”*

“I . . . am not sure if I understand your meaning,” Candy had asked confused by Miss Pony’s enigmatic expression and words.

“Oh Candy!” Miss Pony sighed heavily, *“A man in love can be rather clumsy to voice his feelings even in the most encouraging of situations. And in the difficult case Mr. Grandchester is right now, knowing that in the past he brought you so much pain, even if it was unwillingly, he certainly should be struggling a great deal to find the courage to talk to you. His heart must be loaded with insecurities and doubts about your feelings for him.”*

“Do you think so?” Candy managed to ask, her eyes wide open in surprise.

“Didn’t you notice his change of mood tonight?”

“Oh, well, yes . . . but in a way, he has always been a moody man,” Candy tried to reason.

Miss Pony did not contradict the young woman but looked at her intently before asking.

“Candy, have you made clear to Mr. Grandchester the nature of your relationship with Mr. Ardlay?” the lady asked, narrowing her eyes.

“My relationship with Albert?” had asked the blonde, unable to comprehend where Miss Pony was leading the conversation to, “Of course, Terry knows that Albert is my adoptive father. Besides, he and Albert know each other very well. When we were in London, they both were the best of friends.”

“Perhaps he knows it here,” said Miss Pony pointing to her own temples, “but he still has very strong doubts in here,” she added pointing now to her heart.

Candy gasped in disbelief, taking her hand to her open mouth.

“You cannot be implying that Terry is jealous of Albert!”

*“For once, try to be in his shoes. He has been away from you for . . . how long? Seven, eight years, right? In all this time you and Mr. Ardlay have become really close, just like brother and sister, I would say. But **your** Mr. Grandchester has not witnessed all this. All of a sudden, he hears your conversation with Mr. Ardlay on the phone, while you talk to him so affectionately and even say that you love him. Do you think that a man would take it lightly if the woman he loves shows affection for another man? Mr. Ardlay may be your adoptive father, but now that you’re a grown-up woman, the difference of age between the two of you may not seem such a . . .” the old lady paused here, not so much to gasp for air, but because she knew she was about to make a suggestion that would be disturbing for Candy.*

“. . . I mean, an impediment for a potential romance between you and him, as inappropriate as that could be”.

“But that is preposterous!” cried Candy as she turned so red that Miss Pony wondered if she had misspoken. She then hurried to reassure the young woman.

“Of course it is, sweetheart” Miss Pony replied holding Candy’s hands that she was now clenching to a point that her knuckles had turned white, “But consider this, the fact that Mr. Ardlay is still a single man, and that you are also unmarried may as well arise suspicions from any outside observer, let alone a man in love like Mr. Grandchester. Have you thought about that?”

Candy remained silent for a while. In a rush, she searched through her memories. She clearly remembered that during her time at Saint Paul’s Academy, Terrence had been jealous on more than one occasion. In fact, now that she thought about the matter,

his jealousy had been totally irrational and uncalled. To begin with, they were only friends back then –if their constant verbal fights could be rated as friendship. Yet he would go ballistic as a cheated husband whenever she mentioned Anthony. At the time, Candy had been unable to identify Terrence’s reactions as jealousy outbursts, but now she knew better than that. He had been possessive towards her even since the beginning of their acquaintance. His senseless fights with Archibald had also been a proof of his jealous disposition and if she was honest in her assessment, she had to admit that he had been suspicious of any young man around her.

Candy’s thoughts stopped here as another memory came to her mind.

“What is your relationship with Mr. Albert?” he had asked her once, with a certain nervousness in his voice and his eyes turning grayish blue; just exactly as they would look when he argued with her about Anthony.

Candy had a slight recollection of his shoulders easing down as she told him the story of how she had met Mr. Albert and how he had been her favorite older friend and shoulder to cry in the past. After that, Terrence’s friendship with Albert had grown so intimate that his suspicions were dispelled completely. Years later, he had even consented to her living with Albert during the time he suffered from amnesia. However, she had to admit that Miss Pony’s reasoning made perfect sense; all that had happened long, long time ago. Terrence’s trust in Albert could have eroded with the passage of time.

Moreover, despite the kisses she had shared with Terrence, she had to admit that they hadn’t talked about their feelings yet. Being the jealous man that he ever was, he could be sulking in his room right then, thinking all sort of wild things, as she was speaking to Miss Pony.

“I see that you are starting to understand my meaning,” said Miss Pony reading Candy’s expression as an open book, *“Candy, make sure you have a good talk with Mr. Grandchester as soon as possible, and meanwhile, do not speak of Mr. Ardlay that much in front of him. It will not help if he hears you praising Mr. Ardlay as you often do.”*

“I will do my best to encourage Terrence to talk, Miss Pony, I promise,” she had said reassuring Miss Pony.

Their conversation had not lasted long after that, but the content of their talk had made her stay awake till late. Now, she would need a stronger dose of caffeine to remain awake at work. The coffee pot started to whistle telling her that her coffee was ready.

The young woman poured the black drink in the largest mug she could find and was still standing there in front of the sink, looking for the sugar, when she felt a familiar presence behind her.

“Still the early bird, huh?” asked Terrence with his baritone voice a pitch lower than usual.

“Always,” she answered turning back to look at him, “I know you’re not a coffee lover, but would you care to join me? Some oatmeal and a toast, perhaps?” she offered, noticing that he was fully dressed and apparently ready to begin the day.

“That would be agreeable. Thanks”

The young woman turned again to serve the breakfast and strain the coffee for her guest, while she made the customary questions one asks when greeting someone in the morning. He answered back cursorily, a bit distracted by her silhouette marked under the simple lines of her nurse uniform.

The fashion of the time made it common for most women to wear dresses with rather loose and boyish lines. But Candy’s nurse dress was still tightly fitted at her waist, and the natural curvaceous outline of her hips and derriere was softly hinted by her straight skirt. Terrence found that he wouldn’t mind at all if Candy wore that slightly *démodé* outfit every day.

“No outfit at all, would be far better to begin the day, though” he mused, his imagination running wild once again, *“Would you stop, Graham?!”* He chastised himself trying to turn his eyes to see the window but failing in his attempt just a second later.

“Here you are,” the young woman said as she handed him the coffee, “be careful, it’s really hot.”

“Thanks,” he replied brushing her hand as he took the mug in his.

Candy instinctively withdrew her hand. She noticed that his eyes were again inflamed with that fiery look that she was now beginning to identify. If she wanted to seize the occasion to talk, it would not help her at all to let him engage her in another silent exchange of caresses.

“I’ll be in the clinic during the morning,” she informed, serving the promised toast and oatmeal and taking her seat as a way to start civil conversation.

“I thought you didn’t work there on a daily basis.”

“In fact, I don’t. Dr. Martin has another nurse that helps him every other day. But today he just called me to ask my help with a C-section. My colleague in the clinic doesn’t have surgical training; so, he needs my assistance with the surgery. He’ll be here any time to pick me up.”

“Miss Pony told me yesterday that you usually drive your own car,” he pointed out, thinking that the doctor’s attention was unnecessary.

“Oh, well, the patient lives on a farm nearby and Dr. Martin was called there, expecting to have a normal delivery. Unfortunately, things didn’t work as planned and he’s taking the mother and her husband with him to the village clinic. He thought he might as well pick me up on the way and drive me back after the baby and the mother are safe. In a way, he’s always concerned when I drive alone, especially with the weather conditions and all that ice on the roads.”

“How kind from the doctor,” Terrence said with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Candy was surprised by his tone.

“Could it be that he is resented because I’ll be away for a few hours? Or is he . . .?” she thought, trying to interpret his mood, and then, reacting, she responded to her interlocutor, “Oh well, after so many years working with him, I think Dr. Martin regards me as if I were his daughter, more than his employee. I see him as part of my family too,” she added casually and then observed that his expression relaxed a great deal after her comment.

“Oh my! We really have to talk about us very soon or he’ll hold me hostage to make sure I’m far from the reach of any living man,” she thought half worried and half amused.

Trying to ease the atmosphere, Candy changed the subject. She spoke of the village and its inhabitants, giving Terrence a detailed account of the place where she worked. Both knew they had to tackle the substantial issue of their relationship. However, the joy of sharing breakfast in such a quiet surrounding was too sweet in its charming beauty to spoil it with painful recollections about the past.

“It is so cozy this way,” Candy thought. *“It feels as though we had been married all these years, and we are just breaking our fast as in any working day.”*

So, unable to find the courage to let their hearts speak for themselves, they remained on the safe ground of small talk.

“What would you say if I went to pick you up after the surgery, so you can show me the village?” he suggested when he had finished his meal, a different twinkle shining in his eyes.

“Well, that sounds convenient for Dr. Martin, but I don’t think our small village can afford a great deal of entertainment for a man of the world like you.”

“My taste can be much simpler than you could suspect. A nice ride around the village may suffice for me.”

"If that is the case, you might as well go with me to the Grocers'. Miss Pony wants me to buy a few things for the turkey stuffing she's planning to cook for Christmas," she said getting up and taking the empty mugs and bowls to the sink, "I promise it won't take long. Besides, in our little village there won't be any reporters to bother you," she continued talking as she turned her back on him to wash the dishes.

"I am not the one that should worry about the reporters," he said while silently standing up from his chair.

"What do you mean?" she asked but received no answer.

Before she could utter her question a second time, she felt the warmth of his body as he leaned over her back. His two hands holding firmly both sides of the sink basin; she found herself trapped again in a compromising position.

"I mean that I couldn't care less if they took a picture of me walking around a Midwest village with this beautiful nurse; but I don't know if you would mind having your upper-crust family name, publicly associated with mine," he whispered to her ear.

"Terry. . . please, step back," she managed to protest with just a weak thread of her usual voice.

"Why?" he asked irreverently, "Am I so disgusting to you?"

"You know perfectly well that you aren't. But this . . . this is not proper" she argued.

"Then, you should have taken better care to button up this blouse properly," he replied huskily.

Before Candy could react, his index finger ran down the back of her neck drawing an imaginary line, reaching as deep as the opening of the blouse allowed. Next thing she could perceive was the now familiar touch of his lips kissing her nape, while one of his hands encircled her waist, pressing her against his body. The shivers running through her spine were almost unbearable.

The unassuming fragrance of honey and chamomile left by the soap she had used in her bath pervaded her skin and taunted his nostrils. So, despite the fact that he appeared to be controlling the situation, he was painfully aware of his being trapped by his own desire.

"You're driving me mad!" He murmured between kisses, inebriated by her taste, as he fought against his own uncontrollable urge to forget himself.

Torn by their inability to control themselves and their awareness that they were playing with fire, they didn't know whether to welcome or curse the interruption, when a few seconds later the loud sound of a horn made Terrence stop.

"That must be Dr. Martin," she said almost panting, "I must go."

"I know," he accepted, while he reluctantly buttoned up the infamous blouse.

Hastily, the young woman moved away from his embrace to put on her cape and nurse cap and grab her bag. As she turned, he could catch a glimpse of the crimson red that had tainted her cheeks.

"What time should I pick you up?" he asked, visibly pleased with the view of her charming blush.

"Eleven would be fine. Miss Pony or Sister Lane can give you the directions," she added before disappearing behind the kitchen's back door.

Terrence, with the flavor of her skin still fresh in his mouth, decided to finish washing the dishes that Candy had left in the sink. Internally, he promised himself to gather the wits to produce "the substantial question" before the end of the day.



The village was as small as it was picturesque. It did not take Terrence long to find the Happy Clinic following Sister Lane's precise directions. It was obvious that the building had previously been a large house and that someone had painstakingly done a great job to transform it into a fairly decent little hospital. The foyer was now the reception and the living room worked as the waiting room.

When Terrence arrived at eleven sharp, faithful to his characteristic obsession for punctuality, a middle-aged nurse received him at the entrance desk. She was so busy ordering files that did not raise her face to see him when he spoke to her.

"Good morning, madam," he began.

"Good morning. Please, take a sit and wait till I call you," answered the woman perfunctorily.

"Excuse me, I don't think you understand," he insisted.

"Of course, I do, sir. I know that your case should be urgent, but we are a bit behind schedule today because the doctor is just finishing surgery. Please, take a seat now and I'll call you soon," the woman insisted, pointing to the seats in the waiting rom.

Terrence, not used to being forced to wait, felt a bit frustrated. However, since he had heard that the surgery was about to conclude, he supposed that he had to wait for Candy to finish her work anyway.

A young African American couple with a little girl, an old lady, and a man in his thirties were also waiting in the room. Terrence sat down next to the old lady crossing his long legs while he took off his homburg hat.

The old woman, who was occupying her time with her knitting, lifted her eyes to observe the newcomer. The elegant fur felt hat and the neatly cut overcoat that matched perfectly with the suit underneath, made her think that the foreigner had indeed been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. She also noticed that his demeanor was secure and his appearance healthy, which made her wonder what kind of ailment could have brought him to the clinic.

A few minutes after his arrival, Terrence saw the door of the adjacent room open wide and a stout man in his late fifties, gray hair and a white robe came out, greeting everyone in the waiting area.

“Good morning to y’all,” Dr. Martin said to all his patients with his trade-mark jolly mien, “I’m sorry that you had to wait so long, but today has been a great day for our village. We have a new neighbor! The Stewarts have had a beautiful baby girl.”

“I’m glad for both of them, Doctor. Is Mrs. Stewart all right?” ask the African American lady with a sweet twang in her voice.

“Oh yes, very well, Mrs. Johnson. Her family will have to take good care of her for longer than usual, because we have had to operate on her. But she’ll be fine. Now, I suppose it is time to assist y’all,” the doctor explained and then, looking at the nurse in the reception he asked, “Cynthia, who shall I see first?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Johnson have brought their little Paulette with some mild fever, doctor. Then Mrs. Donnell is second, Mr. Kennedy is after her and the gentleman over there goes last,” the nurse replied.

Doctor Martin saw the tall man with the Northeastern look and smiled widely.

“This young man is no patient of mine, but a very welcomed guest,” said the physician offering his hand to Terrence, “It’s an honor to meet you, Mr. Graham.”

“The honor is mine, sir,” replied Terrence standing up and shaking the doctor’s hand with a firm grip, “Candy has spoken very highly of you.”

“Gross exaggerations, I’m sure. You, on the contrary, are every bit as she described you; but come, come, she’s waiting for you upstairs. She must be in the second room to the left,” the

man said while pointing the way to the second floor. Terrence understood that he was welcome to go upstairs to meet the lady.

“Thank you doctor and please, accept my apologies for stealing your nurse this afternoon.”

“Nonsense! It is me who is guilty of taking advantage of her good heart calling her even when she is off duty. I hope you two have a great weekend!”

Saying this, Dr. Martin turned to see the couple with the sick girl, leaving Terrence free to search for Candy. The young man, of course, did not need any further encouragement.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he took the corridor and knocked decisively on the door.

“Come in,” invited Candy’s tinkling voice.

Terrence entered a room completely painted in white and surrounded by large glass cabinets full of medicines, bottles and bandages. There was a table on top of which lay a couple of metal trays with surgical instruments arranged in neat order. Next to the table, he could see a laundry trolley. Terrence observed that the white apron that Candy had worn in the morning was now hanging there, covered with some stains of blood.

The view took him by surprise. He had never really thought of the tough kind of work that Candy did on a daily basis. He remembered when she had tended his wound the night that he had entered her bedroom by mistake, so many years before. Despite her youth and inexperience at the time, Candy had not flinched an inch at the sight of his blood. Somehow, she had intuitively known what was best to do to stop his bleeding and her hands had not faltered when she bandaged him.

“My lady is not a flimsy damsel who faints at the sight of blood,” he thought proudly.

Definitely, the work as a surgical nurse was not a job for one with a feeble heart, but Candy’s fearless temper combined with her sweet disposition and caring heart were perfect for her trade. He reasoned that those traits of her character had spurred in him the deep admiration he had always felt for her.

“She is like a bonfire in a winter’s night; warm and soothing, but at the same time, all consuming!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” begged Candy, her voice coming first from the adjacent bathroom and soon becoming clearer as she entered the room. Terrence noticed that she had changed her uniform for an orange dress with a pleaded skirt that reached her ankles. The shade of the dress brightened her face marvelously.

At her entrance, the woman noticed the apron and hurried to dispose it properly and move the laundry trolley away.

“Excuse the mess,” she said embarrassed.

“Are you joking? This place is so clean and neat that makes me think that I’m defiling it with my presence,” he replied with half a smile.

“You should have seen Mary Jane’s Hospital. It was so sparkling that it would make this room look like a dump,” she laughed as she stretched her hand to reach for her cape, but before she could do it, he took it first and put it over her shoulders.

“I think you owe me a tour around the village,” he reminded her.

“So, I intend to keep my word, Mr. Graham. Shall we go?”

They both came down the stairs and Candy took leave from her colleague and the patients in the waiting room with her trademark warm smile, exchanging the usual holiday greetings. Dr. Martin was nowhere to be seen, busy with the patients in his office; therefore, the couple left without seeing him again.

Once on the street, Terrence offered Candy the crook of his arm and she rested her hand on him very lightly. She wondered what her neighbors would think when they saw them walking together around the village arm in arm; but then, the young woman realized that she did not mind if they came to the conclusion that this dazzling man walking with her was romantically connected with her. And, if she was honest, their private interactions the previous day and that very same morning could not be labeled differently. “*Who am I trying to fool?*” she told herself, “*It is almost official that we are together. Isn’t it?*” She smiled inwardly and grasped his arm more firmly.

Though the day was chilly, the sun was high and there was some sort of effervescence in the air. Because of the coming holiday, many of the village dwellers were out that morning doing their Christmas shopping. Terrence and Candy walked idly around the charming little stores and spent some time at the local Grocer’s while the young woman picked some herbs and nuts for Miss Pony’s stuffing.

As Candy carefully inspected the merchandise, ready to bargain the best price possible for Miss Pony, Terrence savored the simple beauty of sharing even the most prosaic moment with her. Unavoidably, his mind travelled a few years back, when he had been waiting in a shop, a lot more sophisticated and expensive, while another woman finished buying gifts, some days before Christmas. He remembered the extreme annoyance and unbearable

spleen he had experienced, as Susannah and her mother dragged him around B. Altman's Store³¹.

In fact, if he was honest, most of the memories of his life with Susannah were tainted by some kind of discomfort, frustration, or contempt. Even though he had managed to nurture a certain esteem for Susannah, it had sprouted mostly out of pity and concern for her sufferings, among which the greatest one was her unfortunate family relations.

Over the years, he had understood that Susannah's greatest misfortune was her relationship with her mother. Both depended on one another in a way that was as unhealthy as perverse. Even in the times when Susannah's career had been just starting, Mrs. Marlowe had depended economically on her daughter's earnings to survive, as if the roles of mother and daughter had reversed before time. However, Mrs. Marlowe controlled the young woman's decisions and life with a tyrannical grip that appalled Terrence. At the same time, the woman spoiled her daughter complying with her every whim, even if she had to go through great pains to appease Susannah's often irrational demands. It was like a dead-end alley where they abused, manipulated, and pampered each other, unable to break the vicious circle. Understandably, Susannah had become such a sickly character, selfish to a monstrous degree and completely unable to stand alone in life. Terrence could not forget how her immature and feeble character repelled him and provoked his contemptuous disdain.

Said succinctly, even though Terrence pitied her situation and did his best to offer her some sort of consolation, he could barely stand her. Sometimes, despite his great efforts to understand her, Terrence lost his temper and argued with her, urging the young woman to pull herself together and outgrow her childish dependence. However, these fights only served to embitter their already precarious relationship and poisoned the atmosphere they had to share.

For this reason, he had welcomed her decision to undertake a new career, hoping that she could finally find an outlet to develop some kind of independence and, concurrently, allow him a respite from her suffocating presence. Unfortunately, her ventures as a playwright had been unexpectedly cut by her sudden illness, which had eventually accentuated her immature and capricious ways.

During all those years, Terrence hadn't been able to avoid comparisons between Susannah and Candice. He had a vivid memory of Candy's contagious passion for freedom and her amazing ability to make decisions on her own, often with a bold strength that did not match

³¹ Benjamin Altman's Store: It was a famous department store in 5th avenue. It opened in 1865 and closed in 1989.

her sweet and rather frail appearance. She was so petite and skinny at fifteen that it was almost incredible that such a willful mind could be contained in so small a package.

Therefore, when Terrence remembered her in his private moments, he repeatedly wondered how that amazing independent young girl he had once met had evolved into adulthood. Now, he had her right in front of him, in the alluring body of a woman, still slender and not really tall, but exuding security in her every move and interaction.

In the small clinic, on the streets as she showed him the village, at home surrounded by noisy children, everywhere she went and with everyone she talked to, Candy displayed a vitality that was contagious. Terrence felt, in an intuitive level, that she was the only woman on Earth who could strike the right chord in his heart and dispel the darkness of his past. In a way, he always knew it and for that reason, it was beyond his comprehension why he had ever let her go.

“Would you like some praline almonds, Terry?” she offered, waking him up from his musings.

Terrence saw her face had colored with a rosy blush from the recent walk in the cold morning chill. She was a sight to behold, he thought.

“Should we be nibbling sweets before lunch, Nurse Andrew?” he asked as he grabbed some of the sugar-coated nuts she was offering him.

“Just a few won’t hurt. After all, it will take us at least thirty minutes to get to Pony’s Home.”

“In that case, we should be going now, because we still have to walk all the way back to the clinic. I left the car parked over there. Shall I help you with that?” he said pointing to the groceries bag she was now carrying.

“Sure! Thanks!”

They went out of the store and walked again in the direction of the Happy Clinic. As they got there, Terrence guided Candy to the place he had left his car and was about to open the door for her, when he noticed that she had just frozen as she fixedly stared at the vehicle.

“What’s going on?” he asked intrigued by her expression.

“This car! It’s just the same color and model as one of Stair’s toy cars,” she said.

“Really? That might explain his enthusiasm when I arrived yesterday afternoon. He was the one who received me at the front door and saw the car then,” he reasoned.

Candy raised her eyes as if trying to solve a puzzle.

“Terry, I think Stair believes this car is actually his toy. I mean, as if the toy had grown to reach the normal size of a real car.”

“Do you think so?” he asked chuckling while he helped her to get in the vehicle.

“I know it sounds funny,” she continued when he got in the car and started the engine, “but Stair has an amazing imagination for a child of his age. Did he tell you anything about the car when he saw it?”

“Well, yes! I think he thanked me for bringing him “*his*” car. Of course; I told him that this is just a rented car; though I’m not sure if he understands the idea.”

“Surely, he doesn’t have the slightest idea what it means to rent something. I think I’d better ask him a few questions when we get home.”

“He really takes after his uncle; crazy notions and passion for machinery all included. Huh?” he pointed out smiling.

“You can say that again,” she responded, and both laughed out loud.

Terrence guided the car out of the village, but when he was about to take the same road he had previously used, Candy suggested taking an alternate way.

“Take the next exit to the left. I prefer to use this shortcut. It will take us right into Pony’s Home backyard, and it’s much faster; though Dr. Martin always says it is too lonely a road for me to ride on my own,” she explained with a mischievous smile.

“The good old doctor seems to be pretty attached to you, I take, and you are so cheeky that you wouldn’t follow his advice. That’s really bad from you, lassie,” he retorted playfully as he made the car turn in the direction Candy had suggested.

“I know! But he’s such a sweet man that he does not take offence,” she replied giggling.

“Do you know him since you were little?” he asked out of sheer curiosity, his previous jealousy having faded after meeting the man in question.

“Oh, nothing like that! I met him in Chicago. I was already a nurse and was looking for a new job. He had this small clinic in an inner-city neighborhood. I worked for him for about a year before moving back to Pony’s Home.”

“But you had a job in a big hospital before that, didn’t you?” he inquired, intrigued. So far, none of them had shared much about their lives right after their breakup.

“Yes, but I was fired,” she replied pouting comically.

“You were sacked?” he chuckled, “What on Earth did you do to deserve that?”

Candy sighed heavily; sort of unsure if she should tell Terrence the whole story.

“Come on, Candy, tell me what happened,” he demanded sensing her reticence.

“O.K., but you must promise me to keep in mind that everything I’m going to tell you happened many years ago; it’s all over and solved. Deal?” she said, brandishing her index finger as a warning.

“You’re scaring me! But all right, I promise. What happened?”

Candy looked straight at his deep blue eyes, still pondering how much of her story he could take in. Something in his intense look told her that he was in earnest; so, she finally decided to be honest with him.

“About seven years ago or so, for a reason still unfathomable to me, Neil Reagan developed . . . a sort of . . . fondness for me,” she began choosing her words carefully, “he started doing all kind of things that I would have thought impossible, such as sending me flowers and . . . ,” she lowered her eyes instinctively, “asking me to go on dates . . . with him.”

At this point Terrence stepped on the brakes, stopping the car abruptly.

“You’re saying the bloody son of a bitch had the nerve to court you?” he asked, his voice raised and indignation coloring his face, “You surely did not allow his advances, did you?”

“Of course I made it clear to him I wasn’t interested, but that is not an excuse for you to use your gutter language in front of me, Terrence,” she scolded him, “I’ve told you this happened long time ago, there is no reason to get all grumpy about it now!”

The young man breathed in deeply, his eyes showing his internal turmoil.

Candy, not knowing what else to do or say, stayed looking at him in silence for a while.

“I’m sorry for my lapse, go on,” he said, once he had recovered his self-control.

“Well... when I refused Neil, he and his sister used their influence to have me fired from my job and then they also black-listed me, so I couldn’t get another position in any hospital in Chicago. They thought that if they could corner me, I would eventually consent to marry Neil. But they were grossly mistaken,” she said with a hint of pride in her voice.

Candy made a brief pause observing Terrence’s reaction. The man was silent, and his hallmark unreadable expression was on. She decided to proceed.

“It was then that I found Dr. Martin and his Happy Clinic. He barely had any patients and was not in his best shape either but was kind enough to hire me and gave me a decent pay. In a way, I believed that God threw us into each other’s path purposefully. He helped me

providing me with a job and, when I found out that he had a drinking problem, I felt obliged to help him in return.”

“He. . . was an . . . alcoholic,” said Terrence, his left hand crushing the steering wheel.

“Yes, he had recently lost his wife and had turned to drinking heavily as a way to cope. It was a pity to see his medical talents wasted in such a way, because he is indeed a very good physician. Fortunately, since he hired me, he felt sort of responsible for me, you see, and started to fight against his problem. As he managed to remain sober, we received more and more patients to a point that he began to feel useful again.”

“I’m sure your presence helped him a lot,” Terrence murmured, averting his eyes from her.

“We both helped each other,” she said, noticing the young man had turned somber. “Those were really tough times for me too, and having a friend around always helps. After some time, I decided to come back to Pony’s Home and Dr. Martin remained in Chicago. I had lived here just a few months when the only doctor available in a nearby village died. I thought that Dr. Martin might be interested in taking his place and wrote to him dropping some hints that he might be needed here.”

“He obviously accepted your invitation,” he said, starting the car again.

“As you can see; he’s been living in the village for about six years, now. He’s become someone whom everybody respects and trusts. Not to mention that being the goodhearted man he’s always been, sometimes he forgets to charge for his services. If you know what I mean.”

Candy continued talking for a while, but Terrence remained mostly silent the rest of the way back to Pony’s Home. Sometimes he would only reply with monosyllables as she prompted him, but nothing more. Even though the young woman made great efforts changing to more amiable subjects and trying to remain cheerful, it proved to be useless. Nothing seemed to improve his mood.

When they finally arrived at Pony’s Home, Candy, who was utterly frustrated with Terrence’s sudden sullenness, thanked God for the opportunity to interact with other people, which perhaps would help to ease the young man’s humor.



It was practically impossible to spend a minute at Pony’s Home away from the ever-constant presence of children. As the afternoon unfolded, Terrence mood improved greatly partly

because interacting with children was somehow a novelty for him, and partly because being a sensitive soul, he responded to their openness. Perceiving that his mask of aloofness was down once more, Candy could relax and enjoyed the leisure afternoon despite the fact that the cold weather did not allow them to spend time outdoors.

They played all sorts of games with the children most of the afternoon. After dinner, everybody gathered around the fireplace to read aloud a selection of Mother Goose stories. Sister Lane, Candy and Terrence took turns to make the characters' voices, while Miss Pony played the narrator. The children followed the plot with great delight, giggling and clapping their hands from time to time, whenever the heroes managed to win over the villains.

Little Alistair, who had become very fond of Terrence, spent most of the evening sitting on his knee and finally fell asleep in his arms. When other children began to yawn, Miss Pony knew that it was time to dismiss the party and send all the little ones to bed.

Candy asked Terrence to follow her, in order to take Alistair to bed. They walked through a corridor of the house that the young man had not seen before, until they reached the children's dorms area. Terrence caught glances of the bunk beds and could hear the usual rattle of the kids as they prepared to sleep. To his surprise, they did not stop there, but continued walking until they reached a different bedroom, where they finally entered.

When Candy turned on one of the lamps, and the light allowed his eyes to see the place, he understood by the clear feminine traits in the decoration that they were in Candy's bedroom. The young woman lifted the bed covers and asked Terrence to deposit the sleeping child there.

With well trained and fast hands the young woman took off Stair's shoes and day clothes without disturbing his sleep. Then, she put on him the pajamas and covered him with a soft blanket. When she turned to face the young man, she caught him looking at her with the sweetest expression diffused over his features.

She was deeply moved by his unguarded tenderness, but not wanting to awaken the child, she took her finger to her lips signaling that they should leave the room quietly. Terrence followed her without saying a word, still too bewildered with the complex feelings that had been assaulting him through all the afternoon and evening.

Once again in the parlor, Miss Pony and Sister Lane kept chatting with the young couple for some time more when Candy announced:

"I have asked Stair about the blue car and now I can definitely say that he truly believes Terry's car is his."

"Where did he get such idea?" asked Sister Lane with a chuckle.

"I think it all started because his blue toy car is lost, and Terry's car happens to be exactly the same model and color. After lunch, I searched for the little car in the box where he keeps his other toys and in my bedroom without any luck," the young woman answered.

"Don't you think he could have left it in the cabin?" Miss Pony suggested, her hands busy with her embroidery.

"Cabin?" interrupted Terrence.

"Let me explain, Mr. Grandchester," interjected Miss Pony, "Mr. Ardlay, who is a nature lover, is particularly attached to the area around Pony's Home and a few years ago he built a log cabin twenty-four or twenty-five miles from here, up in MacIntyre Mount. Mr. Andrew uses it once or twice a year as a retreat when he is too tired of his business and social commitments. He stays there alone for a few days and then comes back to his usual life. Candy looks after the place throughout the year. A week ago, she went there to clean it and leave some supplies; she took some of the kids with her, because they wanted to play in the snow over there. Stair went with the party and took his toys with him."

"So, Miss Pony, you suspect the toy could have been abandoned up there," concluded Sister Lane, "Do you think it is possible, Candy?"

"It's likely. I recall seeing Stair and Larry playing with the blue car in the cabin's living room. In fact, now that you mention it, I think it might have been the last time I remember seeing that toy."

"Perhaps it would be good idea to search for the car over there. If we find the toy, we could disabuse the kid from the wrong notion he is holding now. I wouldn't like to see him cry when I leave taking away what he thinks is his," proposed Terrence with a serious tone. The fact that he spoke of his "leaving" with such a stern expression made Candy worry.

"Why don't you go there tomorrow?" said Miss Pony addressing the young couple, "It didn't snow today and, actually, the temperature warmed up a bit. I'm sure the roads are still in good conditions to reach the cabin if one drives carefully. I wouldn't suggest it if you weren't here Mr. Grandchester, but since you're with us, would you do us the favor to take Candy there?"

"Miss Pony, are you implying that I do not drive carefully?" asked Candy reproachfully.

"Just a bit too spiritedly, my dear," responded Miss Pony and at this last remark Sister Lane could not repress her laughter.



Candy sat down near her window. Her room was barely lit with the dim light of her table lamp. In her hands she had her old rosary and prayer book. For a reason clearly identified by her, that night she couldn't concentrate enough to begin with her prayers. In her mind, she reviewed the events of the previous two days, trying to find a sensible interpretation for that riddle named Terrence.

One minute he was a passionate lover and the following he would withdraw and evade her eye contact as if she had done something wrong. Candy perfectly knew that those have always been Terrence's ways. Every time he felt insecure or suspected that someone could hurt him, he would give everyone the cold shoulder and upstage, just as if he were performing.

However, the young woman had thought that they had overcome that initial phase of distrust many years before. It was true that they had been apart for a long time, but she had thought that through their correspondence and after the meeting in Pittsburgh, their relationship had bloomed again. Contrary to all logic, in the last twenty-four hours he had reverted to his confusing swings of mood in a way that was playing havoc with her mind.

"Why does he kiss me as if there was no tomorrow one moment and the next he does not even want to answer my questions? First, he gets jealous for no good reason; then he makes a fuss about something that happened ages ago, when we were apart and uncommitted. Is there an end to his sulking? And then, when we could have taken advantage of the trip to talk, he just refuses to speak. Why did he bother to come all the way down here, just to be silent and broody?"

"At times, Terry, I feel I hate your unbearable tendency to withdraw just as much as I've always loved you. Is it impossible for us to come to an understanding, Terry? Or is this gap of eight years between us far too big for us to overcome it?"



Chapter 6

*The Log Cabin*

It had been agreed that Terrence and Candy would leave very early in the morning, before the children woke up. Miss Pony had particularly insisted on this, arguing that she would need Candy's help, later on during the day.

For this reason, the young woman was surprised when the lady gave her a basket full of food as if they were going to be away for the whole day.

"But it'll only take us a couple of hours to go there, search for the toy and get back. We can come on time for brunch," Candy said looking dubiously at the huge basket.

"You surely don't want to have our guest starving, dear. Besides, since the day looks as though is going to be sunny, you could take Mr. Grandchester for a walk around the cabin," explained Miss Pony while she covered the basket with one of her embroidered cloths.

"The grove next to the cabin is so beautiful this time of the year. It looks like a Christmas postcard, doesn't it? Don't you think it is a great chance for a winter outing, Candy?" added Sister Lane backing up Miss Pony.

Candy rolled her eyes unable to contradict Miss Pony and Sister Lane when they teamed up for a cause. Therefore, the young woman could only shrink her shoulders and carry the basket outside, where Terrence was already waiting for her. When he saw her, the young man automatically walked towards her.

"Are we traveling to Alaska?" he questioned half smiling.

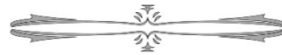
"Don't ask me. Once they set their minds on something, there's no way to make them change," she whispered. He grabbed the basket to put it in the car's backseat, unconscious of the shivers that ran through her body when his gloved hand brushed hers.

Without further comments, Candy and Terrence took their leave from the ladies of the house and set for their journey. As the car moved away, Miss Pony and Sister Lane remained for a while at the door, waving goodbye.

"Are you sure of what we just did?" asked Sister Lane to her old friend.

"Absolutely! They do need some time alone to sort things out," Miss Pony replied smiling, "Besides, it really looks as though we're going to have a sunny winter day. When they come back in the afternoon, we may start thinking where we can buy white flowers this time of the year. Take me at my word, Sister Lane."

The women shared a smile of complicity as they watched the car disappear behind the last curve.



Candy's eyes were lost in the ever-green foliage of the surrounding trees. Like soldiers in a parade, the pines and red cedars seemed to march in front of her eyes, whilst the car advanced along the road. She didn't dare to look at the driver, afraid of catching his glance. She didn't find the right words to speak either; hence, she remained silent, absentmindedly looking at the moving landscape. For more than twenty minutes, since they had reached the road, Candy limited herself to hear the sound of her own heartbeat without saying a word.

"This is outrageous!" Candy told herself, *"Why am I acting like a tongue-tied young girl? . . . My goodness! My cheeks are burning! Am I blushing?"*

The young woman closed her eyes for a while, trying to breathe deeply, in an attempt to control her emotions. Finally, when she believed her heartbeat had slowed down a little, she dared to turn her face and see Terrence.

He was wearing a navy-blue turtle-neck sweater, under his tanned trench coat. For a change, he was sporting a flap driving cap that matched his coat, instead of a more formal hat. Candy thought that his relaxed attire reminded her of his younger self, on a similar winter morning several years before, when he gave her a ride along Manhattan. Candy couldn't avoid admiring his features once again. Something like bliss invaded her heart at the sight of him.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked her, breaking the silence.

"Am I? . . . I . . . I haven't noticed! It . . . it must be this bright day that sets me in a good mood," she managed to improvise an explanation.

"That has always been your virtue," he replied, now his eyes fixed on the road.

"Smiling?"

"I meant, having a sunny disposition, regardless the circumstances," he told her and something in his tone had a hint of wistfulness.

"And yours has always been to mock at everything and everyone," the young woman said with a wink, trying to lighten up his mood.

"Is that a virtue?"

"Oh look!" she interrupted him, "We're already there! Isn't the view splendid?"

Terrence had to admit that Candy was right. The house was built on top of a hill that was now covered with snow. A fan of pine trees surrounded the log cabin by both flanks, breaking the monotony of the white background with shades of green.

The man parked the car right in front of the porch and lingered a bit inside the vehicle, observing Candy as she ran towards the door. She was wearing pants over a long riding coat and a French beret. He thought that it was funny how she could still look feminine in that boyish attire. He concluded that something in her eyes, her playful curls or maybe in the way she carried herself were so utterly attractive to him to a point that she could be wearing a burlap bag and still he would feel drawn to her.

Terrence got out of the car and followed Candy inside the cabin.

The place was certainly not a mansion but was comfortably furnished and full of interesting details here and there. The brown shades and natural patterns of the wood gave warmth and depth to the whole atmosphere, while the sun, entering from the many windows, lit everything up marvellously. The living room was spacious, having only a big and inviting couch and two contrasting armchairs around a stone fireplace. There were some black and white photographs on the main wall, all of them with exotic landscapes, surely taken during Albert's constant adventures abroad. A thick shag rug decorated the floor; its light ivory hue contrasting with the rich dark chocolate of the furniture. On a corner, a small bookcase with curious objects and a number of selected books spoke volumes of the owner. On a first quick overview, Terrence identified Verne's novels, Livingstone's biography and Darwin's accounts of his trips on the HMS Beagle around South America, Tahiti and Australia.

"Very much like Albert," he thought.

The main room also served as the dining place, with a solid cedar rustic table at one side. The colorful tablecloth that covered it and the dried lavender spikes arrayed on a basket, were the only feminine touch in the room, an obvious trace of Candy's influence. There was a fully equipped kitchen and an extra room at the back; a staircase led to the single bedroom upstairs.

"How do you like my uncle's hiding place, Mr. Graham?" asked Candy with her usual light tone, "He comes here to escape from the pressures of Wall Street and the fickle Dow Jones. When he's here, he's simply the Mr. Albert you once met."

"Does he come here on his own?" he inquired, partly curious and partly reluctant to talk about his old friend.

"Oh yes, quite alone, and doesn't allow anyone to disturb him during his meditations. Not even Georges or me."

"Georges?" said Terrence raising his eyebrow with a questioning look.

"Mr. Georges Villers, his personal assistant and best friend. You must have seen him once. Georges escorted me when I travelled to England to study at Saint Paul."

"I believe I have a vague recollection of the man," he concluded, his eyes now observing the presence of a couple of glass demijohns with drinking water in the kitchen.

"When I came here last week, I stocked up the pantry," she explained anticipating his question, "in case Albert wants to use the cabin one of these days, now that he's back in Chicago. He's been under great stress of late."

"I suppose a magnate's life can be tough," he commented casually.

"It is. . . but now, I think we must start looking for the toy car. Don't you think?" she suggested, changing the subject, remembering Miss Pony's advice.

"All right, pray tell, where should we start?"

"I'll search in the bedroom upstairs, and if you don't mind, you can look into the kitchen and around the living room."

"What about the room in the back?"

"That's Albert's dark room. I never allow the children to play in there, because there are chemicals that can be poisonous and equipment they should not mess with. I kept it locked when I came with the kids."

"I'll search around here, then."

Thus, they separated to begin their search and were soon rewarded with success. Alistair had left the blue car and a coloring book inside a hand-made trunk that was used to keep the linens. Once the objective of the expedition had been achieved, Candy suggested breaking their fast and Terrence offered to bring the food basket into the house.

When he went out to pick it up, he was surprised to notice that the sky had turned gray, and a hesitant wind was beginning to blow. He thought that besides the possible change in the weather, for his and Candy's own sake it would be best not to stay for long in the cabin. For months he had dreamed of an opportunity to be alone with her; ironically, now that the occasion was there, his mind was not at ease to seize it. Things were becoming more complicated than he had expected. He felt he needed more time on his own to weigh things before he could talk to her.

In fact, Terrence had not managed to sleep the previous night, thinking over and over about his past, and how it suddenly seemed to cast shadows over his future. When the dawn broke, he was still debating whether he should tell Candy about the darkest episode of his life.

For many years, whenever Terrence thought about Candy, he always imagined that, after the initial disappointment over their breakup had worn out, Candy's life would go on rather smoothly. *"After all,"* he had thought, *"a person with her independent and optimistic character would not be driven to despair even if her heart was broken. It must be so! His Candy would surely get over him and would be happy, as she deserved, without needing him or anybody else for that matter!"*

But the previous day, she had spoken of tough times and even threats from those who had always hated her. He simply couldn't forgive himself for not being there to shield her from those hardships. If she knew what kind of life he had led during that precise period, would she be able to forgive him? Should he conceal it?

Ignorant as she was of his dark past, Candy had been open and receptive to his wooing. Just the day before, he was sure that she would welcome his suit at any time. Otherwise, she wouldn't have allowed him such liberties as he had already taken since Pittsburgh. But what if she knew about his struggles with alcohol? If he told her, would she reject him? What to do to avoid such disastrous consequences?

If he intended to make a decision, he needed a cool head, and being alone with her would not help. Any miscalculation could shatter —once again— his most cherished dreams.

While Terrence was still outside, the young woman had climbed on a small ladder and was busy searching for something in the pantry; so, she didn't notice when Terrence came into the house once again. Candy had taken off her riding jacket, which allowed Terrence to appreciate the softly curved outline of her body, boldly traced by her pants. A woman wearing pants was not a common sight in those days, and even if the garment was not tightly fitted, it would have attracted the masculine eye just by its being unusual.

"Trousers!" he thought frustrated, *"Why did she have to wear trousers precisely today that we're alone and I need to keep my head cool?"*

"What are you looking for?" he asked, after coughing once to clear his throat.

"A jar with preserves . . . yes. . . here it is!" she said triumphally, "Miss Pony packed some of her home-made bread for us, and I thought it would go well with these apricot preserves."

Candy twisted her waist to face the young man as she descended from the ladder, but by one of those strange things that happen when it is most unlikely, she missed the step, swinging her arms to regain control.

Next thing she knew, she was enwrapped by Terrence's arms that had run to her rescue, catching her before she fell.

"Who would have said that Freckled Tarzan could catch a fall from a three-step kitchen ladder? Lost practice, monkey?" he said huskily, taking the apricot jar to put it on the kitchen counter without averting his eyes from hers.

Candy could not answer. She perfectly knew that they didn't need to continue embracing, for her feet were now firmly set on the ground; but she couldn't part from his arms now that she was there. For a moment, her mind fought between the natural urge to give in and her resolution of not allowing Terrence more liberties, until they had talked. However, right now, he was pressing her firmly against his body and she was reluctant to move away.

In turn, Terrence had forgotten all his previous resolutions in an instant, as he was, once again, completely lost in her green eyes. With his index finger he grazed her lower lip so slightly that she could barely perceive it. Yet, the caress still made her tremble.

"These lips were made to be thoroughly kissed as often as possible," he whispered with all the intention of claiming her mouth as his once again.

"Terry. . . please," she complained weakly, averting her face to avoid the kiss, "don't start again."

"Do I offend you?" he asked disgruntled.

"It is not that . . . it's just . . . it's just unfair to come closer now, if you are going to withdraw again. Don't you see?" she said, finally managing to broach the subject as she freed herself from his grip.

A shadow clouded Terrence's face at Candy's words. He also moved away from her, closing his fists.

"You see what I mean?" she argued, "For a reason I cannot fathom, you decide that I said or did something wrong, and you close all communication, just when there are so many things we should be saying to each other."

"Is that what you think? That I'm crossed to the point of punishing you with silence?" he asked, surprised at her interpretation of his reactions.

"Is it not, Terry? Weren't you angry at me the other night because of my phone conversation with Albert?"

Terrence's face paled for a second. Could he deny that he had been green with jealousy?

"So, I'm not so good an actor as they say," he accepted reluctantly.

"Perhaps only when you're being ridiculously jealous, Terry," she blurted crossing her arms on top of her chest.

"It is not as simple as you seem to deem it, Candy."

"Then why don't you try to explain it to me? Speak up, Terry! Do I seem such an irrational creature that I can't at least try to understand your view? Tell me how did I offend you yesterday? What have I done?"

Terrence felt guilty and discomfited. Unwittingly, his internal struggle had made her believe that he resented her.

"It is not so, Candy. I . . . apologize if I gave you . . . the wrong impression," he said ashamed. "It is true I was jealous the other night." He had the courage to admit, his eyes desperately searching for hers, as if begging for a confirmation that his fears had been unfounded.

Seeing nothing but the purest love shining in those pools of green, he took heart and decided to say more.

" . . . but yesterday, it was completely different, Candy. I was not angry at you, but at myself."

"What do you mean?" she insisted, confused by his words.

Terrence closed his eyes. He had recognized that determined look in Candy's face and understood that she was not letting him go without a clear answer. Apparently, just as much as he had wanted to wait a few days more to think things over, Candy was unwilling to wait. There wasn't a way out now. He couldn't hide his past from her. She would insist on knowing everything about him . . . and sooner or later, she would find out. . . He had to tell her.

"Yesterday," he began hesitantly, "when you told me about the time you met Dr. Martin, I realized . . . that I have failed you more than I ever thought . . . perhaps to the point of no redemption. . . maybe to the extent of making our being together impossible. . . I'm afraid my faults will eventually stand between us."

"Fail me? Terry, don't say that. When have you ever failed me? And what is now standing between us?" she retorted, her nervousness and fears growing by the second.

"Don't you see? Didn't you meet Dr. Martin very soon after we broke up?" he asked.

Candy was flabbergasted for a second. It was the first time he openly alluded to their previous relationship.

"Well . . . yes . . . I know," she stuttered confused and more nervous than ever, "but I don't see how . . ."

"Candy, are my failings invisible to you?" he demanded and then, after sighing heavily, he gathered the courage to explain his meaning. ". . . For a long time, the weight of my mistakes has lain upon my shoulders. Believe me, in eight years I have had enough time to regret that we drifted apart. By now, I am certain that my lack of courage that night in New York was the grossest error in my life . . . I shouldn't have let you go. . . This certainty notwithstanding, it was not until yesterday that I fully understood the effect of my ill-advised decisions on your life. I should have fought for. . . us . . . not only for my sake, but also for yours."

"But, Terry, you know well that there wasn't any other way out. If I had known of any other possible solution, do you think that I would have consented to give you up?" Candy replied, feeling that her certainties crumbled at the vehemence of his words, "Susannah . . . she . . . she needed you! It was your duty . . . our duty!" she insisted, resourcing to the only argument of pretended rationality she had clung to for long.

"Oh, do not speak of duty, Candy! I loathe the word! For the sake of a wrong sense of duty I ruined my youth and yours," he said, raising his voice and turning his body to face one of the windows.

"How can you say that? She loved you, Terry! It was impossible to stay together knowing that someone who had sacrificed it all for you was to be unhappy," she replied, still unwilling to discard the one conviction that had served her to justify her own decisions.

Terrence hesitated for a second. He wondered how much of the truth about Susannah he could tell Candy. Would the truth hurt her even more? Should he protect Candy from a new blow? Should he be honest, instead? The young man lowered his eyes for the first time in the heated conversation, searching for the right words to continue.

"For years I've tried to convince myself of the same lie, Candy," he finally began, looking at her again. "But the moment I saw you again in Pittsburgh, when I had you again in my arms, I ended up dispelling the very last of all those fantasies. That night, you asked me if she had been happy and she truly was, but only a selfish soul like hers would have been satisfied with the shreds of affection I could feel for her. Only a person devoid of generosity and compassion, as she was, could have been happy knowing that I, whom

she claimed to love so deeply, was miserable all the time. If she had only pitied me and released me to run to you But she never truly cared about me. She only thought of herself.”

“Terry, this cannot be!” Candy gasped in horror. In her mind, Susannah had always been the personification of selflessness and sacrifice. Terrence’s words unveiled for her a very different woman.

Candy walked hesitantly towards the dining table, grabbing it with shaking hands before she could manage to sit. For a long time, the only thing that had sustained her resolve had been the idea that **he** could be happy with Susannah. In Pittsburgh, he had avowed that he was not grieving after her death because his affections for her had only been tepid. That had been quite a shock. However, confessing that he had been miserable all the time, and that Susannah had been selfish enough to ignore it was entirely a different matter.

Terrence observed how her eyes had clouded, moving nervously from left to right over and over. He comprehended her shock and allowed her some time before reassuming his dark tale.

“She knew you were . . . unhappy? . . . All this time? . . . I still can’t believe . . . that she. . .that she could . . . be aware of your suffering. . . and do nothing!” she mumbled, her voice a mere whisper.

In a haze, Candy vaguely remembered the words in Susannah’s letter to her several years before. Now, in this new light, that letter had taken on a very different meaning. Candy felt for the first time that she had been fooled.

“This can’t be true!” she whispered, feeling a sudden nausea.

“It was so, even if you deny yourself to believe it, Candy,” he continued, standing in front of her, “I had thought about concealing this truth from you, because I know you have always regarded her as a saint and wanted to believe that I could be content by her side. But, Candy, I have learned my lesson the hard way. When the accident happened and I did not tell you what was going on, it all went wrong. You have asked me to speak up. Well, then I must confess with all honesty that I was not happy all this time.”

Candy raised her face to look at him. Her eyes were now full of tears.

“I failed in that part of my promise to you,” he continued lowering his voice, “for happiness has eluded me persistently. All on the contrary, when I let you go, I lived in hell for months and only God, perhaps moved by your prayers for me, saved me from killing myself. Nevertheless, all that I suffered was my own doing. That is why I accepted my fate and even forgave Susannah for her shortcomings and the part that she also played in this sad, vulgar story. In a way, I deserved her, with all her convoluted and sick ways, just as I deserved each year of the misery and loneliness I lived in. . . but you did not. If you suffered or cried for this undeserving man, it was my fault, I . . .”

“No, Terry, I will not allow this!” she interrupted vehemently, meeting his eyes with hers again. “I will not let you take all the blame. If we are to label this as a mistake, then I must partake in the guilt. It was I who left that night; it was I who did not turn back even when you tried to stop me. You speak of your failings only, but what of mine? I did push you into this decision. That makes me your executioner. Don’t you see?”

she riposted, and then, realizing the weight of her own words, she screamed: "Gracious God! What did I do?" And she buried her face in her hands, covering how her cheeks were now crimson red, burning in a mixture of shame and rage she had never felt before.

However, Terrence would not have her taking the blame. Such a possibility had never ever crossed his mind.

"No, Candy, I should have tried harder, I should have insisted, I . . . I should have run to the station and stopped you there. I, who was fully aware of how lucky I had been to win your affections, I should have understood that, for such love one fights until the last breath . . . But what did I do? I stayed in that bloody hospital . . . paralyzed. . .shocked. . . and offered my protection to her, leaving you alone. Tell me, Candy, where was I when Neil Lagan harassed you?"

"Terry . . . he . . . he didn't. . . didn't harass me. . . You're exaggerating," she responded nervously.

"Am I? Then why do you stammer?" he asked mercilessly, "I don't believe you, Candy. You've always been a bad liar. Yesterday, I had the feeling that you weren't telling me even half of the things that truly happened. And yet, I think I know Lagan's sick mind well enough to fill in the gaps. You are trying to make light of something that was serious and left you unemployed with the clear intention of breaking your will and corner you. You speak of duty? Well, now I see that instead of being by another woman's side, my place and my first duty was to be with you at that moment and protect you. I failed you on that."

"You're taking too much upon yourself, Terry. There was no way you could have helped me. Besides, I was not helpless. I told you how Dr. Martin and I supported each other back then. . . and there was Albert and Georges . . ."

"And you think it is a consolation to me that other men had to step in for you, because I had deserted you?" he blurted angrily, "Even a poor and broken man, as Dr. Martin was in that time, offered you a hand. What of me? Do you want to know where I was, Candy, while all this happened to you?"

"Terry, this is not helping us; there's no need to go over the past . . . at least, not this way," she said, as her face changed from crimson to pale in a fraction of a second. The direction that their conversation seemed to be taking terrified her.

"No need? This is all about the past! Yesterday, I realized that the past, **my** past, could be way too heavy and large for us to be together."

"What are you saying?" she asked paling even more.

"That perhaps, if you found out the truth about me, the degree of my cowardice and degradation, you wouldn't be here with me. You would be appalled if you knew who I became," he replied bitterly.

"Terry . . . don't speak like that . . .you're hurting yourself unnecessarily," she pleaded.

"Yes, I have to speak up, you said. Well, you must know that while Dr. Martin courageously overcame his drinking problem to help you, I was sinking in my own drunkenness. I drowned myself in alcohol because

I wasn't able to decide whether I was strong enough to make a decision and either break free and recover you or keep the promises I had made. For months, Candy, after we broke up, I fell into alcoholism and almost ruined my career in the process. That was the extent of my pathetic lack of resolve. What I did of me during those days, how I lost my dignity, my pride and my innocence in just a few months; that is a tale your chaste ears wouldn't like to hear, Miss Ardlay. If you had seen me then, you would have been ashamed of me and regretted that you ever met me."

"I DID SEE YOU!" She screamed, finally breaking into tears and standing up, a strange force possessing her body, "I did see you! . . . It hurt me to see you so, but that didn't change my feelings for you!"

This was Terry's turn to be taken aghast.

"You saw me?" he asked in disbelief, coming close to her and taking her by the shoulders, while she began sobbing softly. Suddenly, realization struck him ". . . So it was you! . . . it was you, after all!"

Candy raised her eyes, full of tears, timidly. She barely nodded, but he understood her, nevertheless. Then, sighing deeply, she took courage to speak:

"I didn't love you less then because you were heartbroken and had let circumstances beat you. I loved you even more, because, when I saw you overcome your intoxication, I understood that you were grand enough to conquer your demons. . . I saw you in that shame of a theatre and I knew that you would not stay there forever. . . I knew you were the kind of man whose virtues can rise over his weaknesses . . . I knew that someday you would be again in the place you truly belong to, holding yourself with dignity. Later, when I heard of your return and your great success with Hamlet here and in England, it didn't surprise me. I had expected that from you, right there in the ambulant theatre. . ." she made here a pause, her expression turning darker, "The only thing I regret now, knowing what you've just told me about Susannah, is that I let you go, once again. I should have waited for the show to finish, and instead of running away, I should have run into your arms and told you how much I loved you . . . but I do it now, Terry . . . I loved you then and I love you now, as I have constantly done all these years. And I will always do it, even if you step out of my life again . . . Please, don't do it. I lied to you in New York. I can't be truly happy without you," she asked, and he understood she was pleading with all her heart.

Terrence was ecstatic. In all his life, he had never imagined that someone could love him that way; with such constancy and absolute faith in him.

"How can you say that? Don't you see I don't deserve . . . ?" He could not finish the sentence because she muffled his words with her lips in a passionate, bitter-sweet kiss as he had never received before.

"She is kissing me. . . out of her own volition. . . she loves me in spite of everything. . . there is a God, then!" He managed to think before he lost his ability to produce coherent thoughts for a while.

She held his face between her hands and her lips explored his with a nervous hunger, as if trying to erase with her gesture the bitterness of the many nights he had spent in harsh regrets. Slowly, he began to respond, matching her passion with equal earnest.

Their arms searched their way till they were locked in an embrace. One kiss led to another, in a delightful and liberating succession that lasted for long glorious moments. After a while, her breathing heavy, she let escape a sob. He felt the salty taste of her tears mixed in their kiss and moved to wipe them away with his own lips.

“Do not cry, Candy,” he whispered between kisses, “I understand. . . hush. . . I understand now. I thought that I had a vision of you that evening, darling. . . I saw your tears, just like now. . . If I had known for certain that you were there. . . I don’t know what I would have done! . . . Perhaps I would have run away, out of shame, or run to your arms, repented . . . One thing I knew then . . . I knew that I couldn’t continue stuck in the mud. It wasn’t easy to get out of it . . . to come back. . . to start all over, but I did it all for you. Even though I made the mistake of returning to Susannah, misled as I was, I did it for you. Ever since that day in the ambulant theatre, every little victory I won over this weakness of mine, all my endeavors and the success that came later, everything was always dedicated to you. . . because. . . you see, you have always been the only woman that I” he hesitated for a second, but then, emboldened by her previous confession, he managed to finish saying “the only woman that I love. . . Always, since I saw you on the ship, at first glance. . . I intuitively knew that I loved you. And that was what I tried to say in my first letter to you last May; that my love for you has never changed.”

“Oh Terry!” she said bursting in loud heartbreaking sobs.

Terrence pulled her to his chest to console her, not certain of the reason that had triggered her outburst, but anxious to know it.

“God, Freckles . . . what did I say? Do not cry anymore, my love,” he urged, rocking her softly in his arms.

They remained locked for a while, her sobs slowly subsiding under his tender touch.

“No, Terry . . . you didn’t say anything wrong,” she began, when she had recovered her ability to produce coherent speech, “It is just . . . that you’ve finally said that you love me. . . you don’t know how much I have yearned to hear you say that!” she confessed.

“Then I promise I’ll say it often, from now on, so you get used to hearing it and not cry,” he replied with a faint smile, barely curving his lips.

Suddenly, a violent gust opened the door that Terrence had not locked properly. The lovers broke their embrace and ran to the entrance. In front of their bewildered eyes, a most powerful and gelid wind swept over the woods with unexpected fury.

“I can’t believe it!” she said in amazement, “It was sunny and bright when we arrived . . . where did this snowstorm come from?”

“Don’t know, Candy, but for the likes of it, we’re not going anywhere at least for a few hours,” he concluded, unconsciously crushing Candy’s frame against him protectively; but then, seeing the strength of the violent wind he added, “I think it would be good idea to close all the window shutters,” and putting on his coat he went out to turn his words into action.

Candy followed him with her eyes while he secured the shutters just when they were beginning to slap noisily against the walls. As he closed them one by one, Candy noticed that soon the whole house would be in the dark. So, she decided to get some candles from the pantry. When Terrence came back into the cabin and locked the door behind him, the room was already lit with dim candlelight. The young woman had her back turned, busy piling logs in the chimney.

"Let me do that," he said taking her place.

"Then, I'll boil some water. I think we can use a cup of tea now, though you'll have to do without lemon," she commented with a shy smile.

Terrence smiled back in silence. He loved the way she could predict his habits and manias. While he lit the fire, he looked at her from time to time. She had removed her snow boots and was walking around the place without shoes. He felt a delicious wave of pleasure bathe his soul at that simple proof of their growing intimacy.

By now, it was clear that they would have to stay in the cabin for some hours, perhaps even for the entire night, and the thought of it made the alarms of his head go off. Now that everything seemed to have cleared up between them, it only rested him to ask the big question. He would certainly have enough time to do that thanks to the storm. The problem was what to do afterwards. Terrence thought that being a gentleman would be a difficult task that day.

A few minutes later, with the fire already crackling on the hearth, they both sat at the table to enjoy their tea and some of the bread that Miss Pony had packed for them that morning. They had fallen into an uncommon comfortable silence, slowly relaxing from the exacerbated tensions of their passionate conversation. Outside, the wind was roaring, and the temperature was dropping dramatically.

"You know, I think this is not a common storm. It has all the strength of a blizzard," he said breaking the silence, "I remember there was a great blizzard in New York the year after the war started. It was during the first days of March, if I'm not mistaken. We were rehearsing King Lear at the time, but all work had to be canceled for two or three days. All communications with New Jersey were disrupted because the winds turned down the poles and the power went down for a whole night."

"Hopefully this one will not be as bad as that. I expect it will ease up in a few hours," she replied calmly while they both cleared the table, "Even if we had to stay here for days, we would have water and enough supplies for the two of us. Do not worry."

Terrence mused that surviving the blizzard was not exactly what was worrying him.

After the meal, Terrence chose a book from the modest selection that Albert kept in the place, and sat by the fire to read it aloud, with Candy resting her head on his shoulder. She had picked up a chenille blanket from the bedroom and had covered her feet with it.

Such a freedom to enjoy each other's presence was a totally new experience for both. It seemed that it was just yesterday that they had to sneak out into the school park to meet secretly, in between classes.

Now, suddenly, they were two adults, free and independent, stranded in some secluded corner of the world. Nobody would irrupt into the room to intrude in their intimacy; nobody had the power to force them to part from each other's presence, there was nothing in the way. Candy could scarcely believe it. To be thus cuddled with him, the fire warming her face till it was blushed, inevitably reminded her of another moment they had shared long before.

"Doesn't this make you think of Scotland?" she asked interrupting his reading.

He put down the book and looked at her in silence. Under the dim light of the fireplace, her eyes had turned iridescent, with shades of gold flickering over a green ocean.

"Yes, of course," he admitted, "but you must allow that our circumstances have changed a great deal. I was just a stupid pup back then, too arrogant to accept that I was dreadfully afraid of you."

She laughed out loud at his comment.

"You, afraid of me? I didn't know that could be possible!" She said in disbelief.

"I'm in earnest, Candy, I was scared of the things I felt for you," he avowed, while leaving the book aside. "It was something so overwhelming and out of my control that I dreaded what could happen if you ever found out. If I let it show, you could end up hurting me like no one else; or so I believed. That is why I played around with you, pricked you with rude jokes and pushed you away with harsh words from time to time. But the truth is this, that evening, while we both contemplated the fire as we are doing it now; I was dying to hold you in my arms like this," he said softly pressing her head to his heart, kissing her hair. "For years, I regretted my cowardice that afternoon."

"I don't know how I would have reacted, if you had dared," she wondered.

"Oh, you would have told me off and slapped me in return," he laughed wholeheartedly. "I'm happy that you seem to have dropped that bad habit, love."

"Please, don't mention it! If I hadn't reacted so harshly that time, at the May Festival . . ."

Candy stopped in the mid of her sentence. Suddenly, Terrence's face had turned serious and instinctively she read the question that was printed in his eyes.

"I think this may come too late now, but I'm sorry about my reaction that afternoon, Terry. I did not mean to hurt you. . .it's just that," she raised her eyes searching for words, "it was unexpected . . . and I was too young and inexperienced."

"But it was just a kiss," he interjected, a slight hint of reproach present in his voice.

Candy looked at him, a bit annoyed to discover that he had not caught her meaning.

"Terry. . .it was. . . my first time. Do you remember? I told you then . . ." she said, lowering her eyes.

Terrence's eyes lit in a complex mixture of emotions. It had always been his secret joy and pride to have been the one who had stolen her first kiss. But the pain experienced when she had compared him with Anthony at such a moment had embittered what otherwise could have been the sweetest memory of his adolescence. Even as an adult, regardless of how he had tried to reason about the matter, he hadn't been able to get over that feeling.

"I . . . believe" he interrupted her; still unsure how he was to explain himself, "it was rather a hard blow for me. . . I acted impulsively, but with my heart doing its best to express what I couldn't put in words . . . and then," he paused, his eyes searching an imaginary spot in the void, "you mentioned **him** . . . you implied that **he** wouldn't have been as rude as I was."

Candy, who had been observing the whirlpool of emotions in his expression, realized for the first time that her words had hurt him more than her slap.

"Terry," she called him, holding his face to force him to look at her directly, "I am sorry. I was too shocked and confused to understand the way my words were hurting you. As a young girl, I had imagined my first kiss would occur much later, in different circumstances. You took me by surprise, when my own feelings were unsettled, disconcerting . . . unknown. I had never felt what you were provoking in me. But today, Terry, you are not talking to the same frightened and wide-eyed young girl I used to be. Now, I know that there's no man who can compare to you. Can you please forgive me?"

Candy's words filtered in Terrence's ears like a soft summer breeze. For someone who had grown feeling rejected, hearing her say that she esteemed him above any other man was a soothing balm on his opened wounds. Slowly, as something similar to confidence began to grow within him, he could acknowledge his own fault.

"Only if you can forgive my rudeness, as well," he finally answered Candy's question, after a pause that was beginning to make her worry, " . . . I wish I had kissed you more tenderly, but I'm afraid, as a first timer in love, I was as ignorant and confused as you were . . . and, of course, my slapping you back was inexcusable . . . I will never forgive myself for that," he accepted, truly ashamed of his own reactions.

"No, Terry. Let's not get stuck in regrets. Consider everything forgiven from my end, and forgive yourself," she replied with a smile that was sealed with a new kiss, far more pleasing than their rather awkward first attempt.

"Being a young folk is a dreadful experience. Right?" He said when their lips had parted, "anyway, I would do it all again just to win the right to steal your first kiss one more time. . ." he concluded, his mouth curving again in his characteristic roguish smile. She responded with a knowing smile, nodding her head.

They both stayed in each other's arms for a while, without saying anything. Terrence needed some time to digest the ego boost that Candy's confession had represented, and she appreciated the opportunity to recover from all the emotions that their conversation had elicited in her.

However, Terrence's possessive nature did not allow him to rejoice for long. Soon, his mind wandered in another direction and his body tensed at the thought. Candy, who was resting her head on his chest could sense when his heart rhythm changed.

"Candy . . ." he began, partly insecure of what he was going to say.

"Yes?"

"I don't know if I should ask . . ."

The young woman moved away from his embrace just enough to face him with a quizzical eye.

"But. . ." she cued him.

"No . . . forget it. It does not signify," he said changing his mind.

"Terry, this will not do. You have a question, you should ask it," she insisted.

Terrence pursed his lips, still doubtful, but after a while he finally dared to ask.

"You said that all these years you . . . kept loving me. I must confess that's more than I would have ever dared to expect. . . Yet, I was wondering. . ." he paused again, "if during this time, you ever. . . had someone. . . I wouldn't blame you for it, if you did. How could I? It is just that . . ."

"You mean if I ever had a beau after we broke up?" she said, rephrasing his words more exactly.

"Well . . . yes," he avowed averting his gaze, nervous at the answer his question could elicit.

This time Candy was amused. She had never seen such a childish look in his usually serious eyes.

"Not a regular beau," she began slowly, as if measuring every word, "I attended a few balls escorted by one or other gentleman that Annie would introduce me to . . . and perhaps . . . I went on some dates. . ." she then paused to see his reaction. He didn't utter a word, keeping his eyes averted, "but nothing serious ever came out of those occasions. It frustrated Annie immensely, but I never felt at ease with any of these men. It was very difficult to tell whether they were truly interested in me or in the money I could inherit. Besides . . . I couldn't help myself; I would compare all men of my acquaintance with you, and when I did it, all of them seemed to pale in my estimation," she concluded reaching for his hand to caress it softly.

His chest relaxed and his hand opened so she could have access to his palm, making the feeling of her caresses more intense.

He couldn't produce a reply. She silently observed him blinking nervously for a while as they intertwined their fingers. The light in his eyes told her that he was pleased, but something in his lips betrayed that he was hesitant, as if looking for the right words to say next.

"For a long time," he finally said, "I thought I had lost you forever. As one year succeeded the following, I began to accept that you would get over me and someone would eventually . . . win your heart. . . On a rational level, I knew it was the most natural and desirable outcome. I told myself that I should feel satisfied

that at least one of us could be happy. But every time I pictured you with. . . another man. . . “; he hesitated, his voice turning throaty, “my generosity ended, and my passion unleashed the worst in me. I hated myself in those moments, knowing that I was being selfish and unfair, especially when I was promised to another. . . yet, I just couldn’t avoid. . . feeling jealous,” he concluded, his eyes full of longing and deep emotion.

She came close to him, flinging her arms around his neck and resting her right cheek on his. The young woman couldn’t utter a word. However, in the warmth of her embrace, he understood that his fears had been unfounded. At that thought, his heartbeat slowed down. After a while, though, his sense of fairness told him that he could not drop the subject of their past just yet.

“Now, I think I owe you an explanation,” he continued, pulling her into his embrace as he rested his back on the couch.

“An explanation?” she asked clueless.

“I asked you about your past, I think I must be honest about mine. I mean. . . I lived under the same roof with another woman for a number of years. I believe that calls for an explanation.”

“I don’t need it,” she responded snuggling her petite frame close to his, unwilling to cover that topic.

“Perhaps it’s me who needs to get it off my chest. Would you care to listen to me, even if the story is unpleasant?” he insisted, inwardly certain that the explanation was required, if he wanted to tear down the last barrier between them.

Candy doubted for a moment, but seeing he was determined she gave up.

“If you must, go ahead,” she accepted, with her head resting on his shoulder.

“Well. . . after that occasion in Rockstown and as soon as I had enough money to pay for a ticket, I returned to New York. Finding work in show business was not easy then, because I had set a very bad precedent . . . you can imagine that” he began rather hesitantly. Then, with almost an imperceptible sigh he continued, “That was the year The United States entered the war and there was a draft. I was not yet 21³² to be included, but I knew it was only a matter of a few months for me to reach that age. So, I inquired . . .”

Candy raised her head to look into his eyes with a thousand unspoken questions. She had been afraid that he could have been forced to enlist, but since she had never read about that on the news, she thought that by some kind of miracle he had been spared. He understood her questioning look and hurried to address them.

“It’s not what you’re thinking, Candy. I was informed that I would never be eligible to be drafted, for I was, I mean, I still am a resident alien, as they say”.

“Because you were born in England,” she said in a whisper, trying to spell out his meaning.

³² According to the Selective Draft Act of 1917, all men between the ages of 21 and 30 years were required to register to be subjected to a potential conscription. Some individuals were excluded from this mandate for multiple reasons such as physical and mental health, being the sole provider of a family with minors, being a convicted felon or a resident alien.

"Actually, that is not exactly so. Ironically, I was born in the United States, but not in a hospital, which opened the doors for an irregular registration of my birth. My mother told me that, as soon as I was born, my father made immediate arrangements with the British embassy to have me registered as his Majesty's subject. For men like the duke, pulling off this sort of things is quite easy³³. So, my name is not registered as a native of this country, which makes me officially an English expatriate, you see. However, the people at the draft registry told me the Army was seeking entertainers as part of a strategy to cheer up the troops. They also gave me the contact information of a small troupe in New York that had signed a contract with the government to provide those services. They said that, if I wanted to serve the United States as part of the war effort, that was a way I could do it despite my ineligibility. As you may imagine, that was not a high drama company, but was far more dignified than the job at Rockstown. Moreover, the role they would fulfill was probably more charitable and socially important at the time. So, I contacted them, and they were happy to have me".

Candy continued to look at Terrence as though all that information was difficult to process. For a moment, Terrence hesitated about proceeding, knowing that he had not yet begun with the most unpalatable parts of his tale.

"Please, go on," she said breaking the silence, which finally spurred him to continue.

"Well, knowing that my new company was bound to travel to Europe soon, I felt that I needed to come to terms with Susannah before my departure," he sighed at this point, deviating his eyes from Candy's, "Now I wish I had not done so, but at the time. . . well, you know, that blasted mistaken sense of duty did not allow me to see things clearly. . . So, I visited Susannah for the first time in a long time, thinking that she might be angry at me for being away for over a year, without much of a word from me in all that time. To my surprise, I found her just as willing to reassume our relationship as ever. I honestly felt so guilty that I did not pay any heed to the fact that it was not natural for a woman to be so forgiving and understanding; especially when I never spoke of love with her. All I could offer was my resolution to keep the promise of a loveless relationship. I told her that I needed time to recover financially and that my current job would force me to be away once again. Consequently, we would not be able to speak of marriage for some time. She was, of course, worried that I would be working so close to the line of fire, but anyway accepted my proposal. With that understanding settled, I parted to Italy in the fall that year".

"How did Susannah live during that time, I mean, how did she and her mother manage if Susannah was not working anymore?" asked Candy, her charitable heart still concerned for the misfortunes of a person she imagined in great need.

"She was not destitute, if that is what you mean. The Stratford Company had paid a decent sum as compensation for the accident. Susannah and her mother could live with decorum with the interest they got from that money. And while I was away in Europe, I sent her as much as I could from my pay, as well. Additionally, this time, unlike my previous absence, I kept communicating with her on a regular basis. So, she did not have reasons to feel emotionally abandoned ever again".

"I see," said Candy with her eyes fixated on the floor. Knowing that the Marlowe's had been financially safe at the time, despite Terrence's partial inability to help them at that time, made her feel less anxious.

³³ In fact, birth registration was irregularly handled in the United States in the years prior to WWI: <https://www.history.com/news/the-history-of-birth-certificates-is-shorter-than-you-might-think>

However, knowing that another woman was aware of Terrence's whereabouts during that period, while she was ignored the risks that he was facing in the front make Candy feel uneasy, to say the least.

For years, it had been painful for her to accept the fact that Terrence was officially out of her life. If he was successful, she would not be there to share his triumphs with him. If he was sick, she could not nurse him back to health. If he needed a friendly ear to share his troubles, she could not be there for him. And as he risked his life, in the same country where Albert had been the victim of that terrible bombing episode, she was denied the consolation of receiving news from the man she loved. Now that she had learned about this fact, she felt torn between her need to know more, and her fear of opening a conversation that would bring him disturbing memories. Terrence, on his part, observing Candy's mute struggle, did his best to address her unspoken questions without revealing the most unsettling details of his experience as a war entertainer.

"My time in Italy was rather short and not even half as dangerous as you may imagine, Candy. I was just there to give those poor chaps the opportunity to relax and escape from their fears and worries, if only for a brief hour or two. In fact, I'm grateful for the experience because it taught me to appreciate life. It also restored my dignity by making me feel my craft could be put to good use. And, more importantly, I felt as if life had given me the chance to redeem myself from my past mistakes," he said, as his fingers slightly caressed Candy's cheek, trying to help her process the feelings that were so evident in her troubled face "Before I could realize it, the year of my contract was over and so was the war. When I returned to the United States, by the fall of 1918, I found that, as a byproduct of my participation in the war efforts, my reputation had been partially restored, at least in the eyes of my peers. This is, although my time in Italy had not been made public in the papers, it had been a well-known fact among my colleagues. Perhaps partly because Susannah had informed everyone she knew about my work in the front and that we would surely marry after the end of the war. So, when I returned, getting parts was not as difficult as it had been before. By the end of the year, Robert Hathaway himself sent me a message saying that he wanted to talk with me. You surely imagine how excited I was. Yet, when I went to see him, he was not as open and supportive as he had been before. I could see he had his reservations, but anyway, he offered me a small part. I accepted gladly and promised myself that I would not let him down this time."

In that moment he paused, searching for the right words to address his relationship with Susannah in a more explicit manner.

"Obviously, I was aware that I had not been offered a leading role, but I did not care," he said finding the courage to continue, "I was again working with a prime troupe on Broadway. I would have been perfectly content if that had not meant that my time to keep my promise to Susannah had come. Despite my reluctance, this occasion I kept my word and asked for her hand in marriage. To my surprise, this time her mother posed some objections, suggesting that a longer engagement was desirable, so that I could offer her daughter a better position. Susannah did not seem so sure about her mother's idea but ended up accepting it. Therefore, we fixed a date for the spring of 1920, and we also agreed that meanwhile, Susannah would take therapy and try with a prosthetic, with my financial support, of course."

Candy moved in her seat, feeling increasingly uncomfortable as she began to understand Mrs. Marlowe's motivations.

"From then on, my routine centered on my work and Susannah. Every day I would pick her up –and her mother– at their place in Brooklyn to take her to Saint Vincent's Medical Center in Manhattan. Then, I would go to work and after, would take the Marlowe ladies back to their home. Sometimes I dined with

them and went back for a late rehearsal. It was a tiresome routine, but I coped with it. Finally, almost three years after you and I broke up, I got my first leading role since *Romeo and Juliet*, and the best one I could have asked for."

"Your Hamlet!" Candy said, momentarily forgetting about the unpleasant aspects of his story. She remembered how happy she felt the moment she read about his successful return as a lead actor.

"It was an absolute success," he smiled briefly, feeling encouraged by the admiration that he saw beaming in her eyes. "After the first week, all tickets were sold out for the rest of the season. We had such good reviews that Robert came out with the idea of touring not only in the United States but also in England. After that dreadful war, the British were trying to forget the past with a good dose of entertainment. Robert said that a new star like me would be more than welcome. He had some friends in London, who had shown interest in our Hamlet's version, so things were arranged easily."

Terrence made yet another pause, knowing that the worst part of his explanation was about to unfold.

"With the prospect of a long tour, Mrs. Marlowe suggested that I should get them a place in Manhattan and a driver to take them to the hospital during my absence. I leased a flat for them, in the same building I was living in, just before I left for my tour that fall. Susannah had to stay in New York to continue with her therapy; so, because my absence could extend for several months, we had to consider whether we would be able to marry the following spring, or if it would be advisable to wait until my return to start making plans. Even though Susannah's mother was not so happy with this potential change of plans, she had to agree; especially after I had complied with her wishes regarding the flat, the driver and additionally, a car."

"During the six months that I was absent, Susannah began to write. Her work was not brilliant, but still passed as regular entertainment. It was not difficult for her mother to find a troupe that would be interested in playing something written by Terrence Graham's fiancée. In a way, my name opened new doors for Susannah, and I was happy for her. Since my return to America after the war, she had always been so dependent and possessive with me, that I felt relieved to find her excited with her new career when I came back from England."

"Now, the success we had in England had given us excellent revenues. So, Susannah's mother got greedy again. As soon as I got back, she insisted that the flat was too small for her daughter, especially when she was gaining a reputation as a playwright and would have to receive prospective clients, directors, and fellow actors as part of her new career. I told Mrs. Marlowe to choose whether I should marry her daughter and throw a large spring wedding party as she wanted, while still living in the same flat, or buy a house first and wait for six additional months before the wedding. This time Mrs. Marlowe hesitated and asked me for time to think it over. I believe she was torn between her fears that success and money would drive me away from Susannah if I didn't marry her at once, and her apparently endless greed. In the end, we made a compromise: I would give up the lease of the two flats, buy a house instead, and move in with Susannah and her mother as her chaperone, until we got married. The wedding date was fixed for the winter of 1920."

"In a way, Mrs. Marlowe got everything she wanted in the deal. She got a townhouse in Manhattan and the public statement that Susannah and I were living together. All wrapped in the same package. Though we were not married yet, in our circle, the fact that we moved in together was a way to say that I was a taken man. Other women interested in me would think it twice before trying their luck with a man who had already taken his fiancée under his roof. I must admit, Mrs. Marlowe was a very clever woman."

Terrence stopped here, seeing that Candy was looking at him with questioning eyes, once again. However, this time her expression was clearly different.

“Am I scandalizing you?” he asked.

“Not, really. . . I knew you and Susannah had lived together. It is only hard for me to understand how a mother could have proposed that sort of arrangement. It does not seem . . .”

“Proper?” he finished her sentence, “Darling Freckles, Mrs. Marlowe does not live up to the high moral standards you are used to. Besides, in the world I live in, people do not care a great deal about propriety, so the Marlowes could get away with their scheme without fearing the rejection of our circle. Of course, in the more conservative echelons of New York’s society, Susannah could not pass as a lady anymore after I moved in with her. But truth to be told, Mrs. Marlowe was and still is a mercenary. Her husband died leaving her almost penniless, but she used Susannah’s beauty to secure an income. When I met Susannah, she paid for all her mother’s expenses with her salary, as if the lady could not work to support herself. Mrs. Marlowe is not an old woman. She must be about my mother’s age; she could very well do something to earn her living, but she preferred to live at Susannah’s expense. It does not surprise me that she did not flinch at damaging her daughter’s reputation, if in return she got a luxurious house and a comfortable living.”

“Poor Susannah,” mumbled Candy horrified.

“Do not pity her, Candy. Susannah was not an innocent victim in this story. Perhaps, she could have been feeble and even childish at times, but she was not blind to her mother’s schemes. She was aware that her mother was only searching for new ways to use my money as she pleased. Nevertheless, she did nothing to stop her. What is more, whenever she complied with her mother’s plans, her agreement always came with a price. Every time the wedding was postponed, Susannah accepted only after playing an award-winning scene in front of me, reminding me of her sacrifice and her sufferings during the time I had left her. She would manipulate my guilt to reassure herself that I would keep true to my promise until the wedding came. I hated that routine, but I would end up consenting to Mrs. Marlowe’s plan and put up with Susannah’s blackmail, just because I had promised you that I would stay with her. But I swear that more than once I wanted to turn my back and never return. I didn’t, now I wish I had.”

Candy was speechless. In all her life, she had never met such a complex character as the Susannah that was being disclosed by Terrence’s narrative. The young man noticed her silence and made a pause in his dark tale. The next part he still had to unveil was even more difficult to tackle.

“Candy, I’m telling you all this, because I want you to know that, even though Susannah and I lived under the same roof. . .”

“Terry, you don’t need to say this. I truly don’t. . . I don’t need to know.” she interrupted feeling her guts wrenching.

The young woman had left her place resting on his chest, to sit down stiffly by his side. Terrence, understanding her reluctance, approached her, taking her chin under his hand to force her to look at him

"My love, I know that my situation with Susannah was highly compromising. Most people thought that I had taken her. . . as my mistress. But you must know that it was not true. I mean, we lived in the same house, but we were never intimate. Do you take my meaning?" he asked, his eyes nervously looking at hers, "It was never part of our arrangement. To consent to such a thing would have made my gesture of providing a house for her and her mother equally predatory and ungentlemanly. Moreover, the following spring, Susannah got ill. Her convalescence was so long that, when fall came, we had postponed the wedding a third time for 1921. Unfortunately, her ailment increased more and more during that year and the following one. Finally, she was declared terminally ill and then died by December 1922, about two years after we moved in together," Terrence concluded.

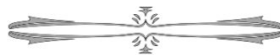
Candy felt like a weight had lifted from her shoulders when she understood that he had ended his account. For a long time, she had tried to overlook the fact that Terrence had lived with Susannah out of wedlock. Notwithstanding her efforts to avoid judgment, deep in her heart, Candy felt that such a decision, even when he was promised to Susannah, had been beneath Terrence's sense of honor. It was not what she would have expected of him. Now, knowing that despite the appearances, Terrence had acted honorably with Susannah made her feel relieved.

"I appreciate your honesty, Terry," she said shyly. When Terrence felt that her tension had eased, he circled her in his arms again.

"I cannot be proud of the things I did during the days I gave myself to drinking, Candy," he continued, this time his tone turning especially solemn while his eyes darted into hers, "I wish I could turn back time and offer myself to you as the untarnished nineteen-year-old boy that I was when we broke up. Unfortunately, I cannot. I am a man who has lived some heartbreaking experiences and has sullied his record in more than one way. Yet, at least I can tell you, that after I made my return, I've done my best to live honorably. All that I have now has been honestly earned. And as far as my relationship with Susannah went, once I asked for her hand in marriage, I honored her and remained faithful to her, even during her illness. I did it because I felt it was my way of being faithful to you. This is all I can offer you now; not even half what I had when I invited you to New York. Would it be enough?" he hesitated, "Would you . . ." his face paled as he search for the courage to finish his sentence, "Would you dare to overlook my past mistakes and consent . . . to be . . . my wife?"

Candy smiled showing her dimples for the first time in their conversation. Her face gave him an answer before she could speak.

"For this lifetime and all the others that a soul can outlive, Terry, yes I would, and I will," she answered, hugging him tenderly and thus they remained for a quiet, perfect while.



Terrence opened his eyes the following morning but couldn't see much in the darkness. The fire had consumed the last log in the chimney and the windows were still shut. Surely it was freezing cold outside, but it was still sweetly warm inside. A particular fragrance penetrated his nostrils. He could not define its

nature. It was not perfume and had nothing to do with the fresh linens that covered him either. He closed his eyes again and inhaled deeply. The sweet aroma was intoxicating. He let himself sink in its enticing effect for a while, without questioning its source. After a while of indulgence, he noticed the first signs of arousal in his body.

His muscles tensed and in doing so, he could realize that his right arm was holding her waist. It was hers the fragrance that he was perceiving, not her perfume, but the natural aroma of her skin. He had held her close before, but never had he perceived her stimulating scent as now. He was scooping her from behind and she was still peacefully asleep. He could sense her regular breathing from her back practically glued to his chest. Her scent, her closeness, her warmth, the combinations of such sensations were pure bliss for him. Who would want to awake from this dream?

Nonetheless, he opened his eyes again. This time he forced them to get used to the darkness and after a while, he started to distinguish the shapes around him. He recalled the events of the previous day. No, he was not in a dream this time. It was the most amazing and sweetest of realities. Now he could descry the mass of her golden curls in the shadows of the room. He reached with his hand to caress them softly. They were in delicious disarray. His pulse was speeding up by the second and he knew the reason very well. Still, he waited some more.

Then, he remembered that there had been a snowstorm the fateful night in which they had broken up; it was curious that another snowstorm had been instrumental to give them an opportunity to finally come to terms with each other. And now he was there, holding her from behind, just as he had done that night before letting her go. But things were so different this morning.

As if to make sure that she would not fade in the darkness, he held her even more tightly and delved his face in her mane, until his nose could feel the skin of her nape. Her scent could be perceived more intensely that way. He knew that the sensations were already running amok in him, but he didn't want to part just yet.

He remained still for a while, delighting in the fact that he had slept with her for the first time in his life. He felt so reassured, that having felt jealous of Albert seemed now ridiculous. The previous afternoon, Candy had told him the unabridged story of her life with Albert in their little apartment in Chicago, including her subsequent discovery of his real identity, his role in Neil's affair, and how Mr. Ardlay and Candy had become as close as brother and sister through the years.

"I have been a fool," he thought, "but what counts now is that she is here, sleeping with me!"

Terrence smiled anew. He was thankful for the bad weather and the snow that had piled up, making it impossible for them to return to Pony's Home. Had he planned to have so long a time to talk to her freely, things surely wouldn't have worked out that well.

He recalled that not long after dinner, Candy had fallen asleep on the couch while he was feeding the fire in the chimney. When he found out, his intention had been to carry her to the bedroom, so that she could

sleep more comfortably and leave her there, while he spent the night on the sofa. However, when he had deposited her on the bed, she opened her eyes, still half asleep, and pulled him softly to her arms.

"Don't leave me," she had pleaded, "It's too cold."

Terrence, who honestly did not need much inducement, had easily given in to her pleas. He had taken off his shoes to lie down next to her, scooping her from behind.

"I think we can indulge just this bit," he had said to her ear before she had fallen asleep once again.

He sighed deeply, utterly satisfied. For him, it didn't matter that they had slept fully clothed and nothing else had happened. He knew that no other man had ever gone this far with her and that was more than he needed for the moment. Moreover, she had promised to become his wife, and soon further intimacies would be possible between them.

Regardless of his happy prospects, the only thing he could wish for this morning was that she would be wearing his wedding ring, so that he could freely take her as his body was urging. But a man who has waited for almost a decade could wait for a few days more, if necessary. Couldn't he?

In fact, he had talked with her about a wedding in early spring, to give her some time to plan things and find someone that would substitute her in Pony's Home. Surprisingly, it had been her own idea that they should not wait that long.

"I don't want to be apart from you anymore, Terry. I'm afraid that something would happen if you left for New York, and I stayed here till spring. Why don't we get married as soon as possible? Would you care if we do not have a large wedding with reporters and all your friends from Broadway?"

"Friends?" he had frowned, "I don't have any besides Robert and I don't think I truly need him at my wedding. As for the reporters, the further those professional meddlers stay away from us, the better! I would marry you tonight if possible. I proposed a date in spring thinking that ladies usually make a huge fuss about weddings and need time for their preparations. Wouldn't you mind if we just had a very simple ceremony?"

"By now you should be aware that I am not a conventional lady. I do not care about the wedding ceremony. I care about being married to you," she replied practically beaming.

He smiled again at the recollection of Candy's response. Yes, she was like no other woman, and like no other, her arousing scent was now impossible to take any longer. Reluctantly, he unlocked her and went in the direction of the bathroom, hoping that the freezing water would cool him down.



Candy finally woke up. Having slept with her clothes on, she was sure they would be messy. The young woman stretched her body and then rolled across the bed. When she buried her face on the pillow next to hers, she could sense his fragrance. She smiled at the memory of the previous day.

Candy's smile grew at the recollection of the new intimacy they had shared.

"I believe I've been really naughty!" she thought, *"I wonder what Aunt Elroy would say at my wanton behavior?"* Then, she giggled imagining the old lady's disapproving face. *"But I don't regret it at all."*

"You look very pleased with yourself, Miss Ardlay," said Terrence who came out of the bathroom in that precise moment, with his hair slightly wet and perfectly combed. His pants were a bit wrinkled, but apart from that, he still looked quite presentable.

"I am very happy, Terry," she responded, and then observing him she added, "and a little envious. How can you look so neat after sleeping with your clothes on? Look at me! I am a complete mess, not to speak of my hair!"

"I don't see anything wrong with your hair," he told her frowning.

"You are very gallant, but I don't need a mirror to know how these hideous curls behave. They've been with me long enough for me to understand their nature."

Terrence laughed at her words and pouting face.

"I take you don't like your curly hair as much as your freckles," he said while he sat on the bed, next to her.

"Not really. They are too much like me, I'm afraid. I mean chaotic and unruly. I've always envied Annie's luscious straight hair," she concluded blowing one curl that was hanging annoyingly over her forehead.

Terrence reached with his right hand to caress her ringlets. In his eyes shone that particular light that was hypnotic and frightening at the same time.

"You are a very beautiful woman, Candice," he told her, lifting her chin to make her see him right to his eyes. "Why you choose to ignore it is a mystery to me. But trust me in this one; Mrs. Cornwell does not hold a candle to you and your dazzling curly hair," then making a pause, he added with meaningful tones, "Beyond my objective appreciation of your beauty, I can speak extensively of the many things that make you attractive to me, in a more intimate and subjective level, but that is a topic I will cover with you when you become my wife."

Knowing that his self-control was still precarious, Terrence limited himself to kissing Candy on the forehead and then left her alone to preen herself. Meanwhile, he went out to open the window shutters and assess the situation after the blizzard.



The snow was definitely a problem. The car was practically buried in more than three feet of snow and the road was now nonexistent. When Candy joined Terrence outside, they both discussed the different alternatives they had. To stay in the cabin for another day was not an option. Candy was certain that Miss Pony and Sister Lane were by now pretty worried, and she didn't want to alarm them more. Terrence, on his own, knew that if he was to remain a gentleman, they had to go back to Pony's Home as soon as possible. So, the question was how they could go back without the car.

Fortunately, Candy remembered that there was a farm a couple of miles away, whose owners she knew very well. Mr. and Mrs. Kinkaid had been her patients more than once. If they managed to reach there, Mr. Kinkaid could lend them his sleigh and one of his horses to go back to Pony's Home.

"You don't pretend to walk to the farm with snow this thick, do you, Candy?" Terrence asked doubtful of her scheme.

Candy smiled at him and ran towards the house. A few minutes later she came out with a pair of skis in her hands.

"What about skiing?" she asked with a playful look.

"Don't you forget there are two of us?" he objected, crossing his arms on his chest.

"You're such a bore!" she rebuked him, "Of course there's another pair in there. Albert keeps several. Go and pick yours."

"All right! It seems we'll do it your way, Freckled Tarzan. But you'd better know your way around these woods, because I don't want to get lost in this cold weather."

"Do you forget who you're talking to? I've lived in these woods most of my life. Come on, hurry up and we'll be having breakfast at the Kinkaid's in no time!"

After closing the house properly and taking with them Alistair's toy car and coloring book, they skied their way through the woods, following Candy's directions. True to her calculations, they arrived in the Kinkaid's farm by breakfast time. The farmers, a kind middle-aged couple, welcomed them warmly. They were especially thrilled when Candy announced that the gentleman with her was her fiancé. Since she said that they would marry soon, they took advantage of the opportunity to invite them for breakfast as a way to celebrate the news, just like Candy had predicted. After the meal, Mr. Kinkaid offered his sleigh before they could ask for it.

Candy winked at Terrence, proud of how exact her plans had been. He smiled at her, and then told her in a low voice.

"I'll remember to take you with me next time I plan to be stranded during a blizzard. You've turned to be a most resourceful companion."

Chapter 7



White Daffodils and Red Tulips

Candy and Terrence were warmly welcomed by all members of Pony's household when they returned that morning. Just a few minutes after they had parted the previous day, Sister Lane had heard on the radio about the blizzard's warning. The two ladies had been a little bit worried about the young couple's safety at the beginning, but as the blizzard had started past 10:30, they figured out that they were safe in the cabin by then.

Later, when Sister Lane realized that Candy would have to spend a whole night with a man who was not her husband (ye), she needed to pray a double round of her rosary that evening. No matter how many times Miss Pony tried to reassure her saying that Mr. Grandchester was a gentleman, the good nun did not have a moment of peace the whole night. Of course, Sister Lane had no doubts about Terrence's good breeding, but being more apprehensive than Miss Giddings, she could not forget that a gentleman is not necessarily a saint.

Despite all these alarming considerations, when the young couple returned home, Sister Lane felt relieved after looking into Candy's eyes. Knowing the young woman since infancy, the perceptive nun could have told if something amiss had happened, just by observing her behavior. Terrence, conscious of the situation, felt alleviated and proud of being able to look at Candy's teachers in the eye, without having anything to hide.

Blissfully unaware of adult issues and worries, Alistair was utterly pleased to recover his toy and coloring book, all at once. As Terrence's rented car had stayed in MacIntyre Mount, it occurred to him that the "magic" had simply reverted. He reckoned that a small car to play with was far more fun than a big car that only adults could drive. So, it is only understandable that he was not disappointed with the change.

As it was a Sunday, everyone was forced to leave further conversation for later in order to attend church. The local priest would regularly arrive about noon for a special service just for Pony's Home residents. Now, that was an awkward experience for Terrence, who hadn't attended mass since his days at Saint Paul's Academy. As member of a "Recusant"³⁴ family, Terrence had been raised as a Roman Catholic. However, ever since he left his father's house, the young man had led his life away from the constraints of any conventional religion. He was neither an atheist nor an agnostic, but traditional forms of spiritual expression were not his cup of tea. This conviction notwithstanding, he knew that, if he wanted to marry Candy, some tolerance was required. When the mass was over, he thought that for this first occasion, and considering he had lost practice, he had fared well keeping up with the mass rites.

Over the meal that followed, Terrence and Candice informed the good ladies about their engagement. Of course, congratulations were in order. And Miss Pony, who prided herself on having been instrumental in the match for more than one reason, was particularly delighted when she hugged Candy to wish her joy. Sister Lane joined in the joy in her demurer style, but equally happy for the couple. Some explanations were required too, because little Alistair did not understand quite well what a wedding entailed. When Candy told him that Terrence would become part of their family after the happy event, the kid looked at Terrence and back at Candy for a couple of times before asking:

"Will you be my brother?" said the kid looking at Terrence again.

"No Stair, he will be your uncle," Candy explained.

"Uncle G!" Stair said spontaneously with his trademark smile.

"After what you and your blessed blue car have done for us, Little Inventor, you can call me as you wish," replied Terrence taking the kid to sit on his knee.

Candy looked at the pair, wondering how Archie would take this curious bond that was forming between his son and Terrence. Not having a temper given to excessive worries, she sighed and decided to hope for the best.

During the evening, Albert called again to confirm that he would be arriving the following day. Despite the weather conditions the previous days, train traffic had been restored, and he estimated he could make it to be there on the 22nd. This time, Miss Pony noticed that the guest did not flinch during the call. She supposed that having secured Candy's promise of marriage, the young man felt now certain of her love for him. Nonetheless, Paulina Giddings was not fooled by Terrence's serene countenance, at the moment. Being old and wise, she knew that a man's jealous nature does not fade overnight. The good lady also knew Candy's disposition. So, she supposed that the couple would have to struggle a great deal in the years to come to overcome the clash of Terrence's

³⁴ Here, it is implied that the Grandchester family was one of the few noble houses that refused to obey the Royal command to convert to the Church of England, remaining in the Roman persuasion during the Reform Movement. Historically, the descendants of those families who decided to remain faithful to the Catholic Church are called "Recusants."

possessiveness and Candy's independence. Yet, she hoped that their love, which had passed the test of time and separation, would also win over their weaknesses.



Faithful to his appointment, Albert arrived at Pony's Home by 11 am, the following day. He was gladly surprised to see Terrence there. After the first moment of mutual recognition and the usual pleasantries, the two men engaged in conversation as naturally as in the old days. Candy was more than pleased to see the two men she loved the most getting along so well.

But adult conversation could not last for long in Pony's Home, at least not while the children were up and eager to look for new adventures. Albert was a great favorite among the little troupe; consequently, he was practically kidnapped for the whole afternoon and part of the early evening. The rest of the adults were grateful to him for distracting the children and allowing them some time to do other things. For this reason, it was not until later in the evening that Terrence could have a quiet time to discuss more serious matters with his old friend.

The blond man was trying to enjoy some peace and a cup of coffee in the dimmed parlor, when Terrence came to sit next to him.

"You had quite a day," began Terrence.

"You must be kidding me! Today, I've discovered that I'm not so young anymore," Albert chuckled behind his mug.

"You still look the same to me."

"Well, I can't say the same about you. Last time I saw you, you were a sixteen-year-old kid, a good number of inches shorter and far skinnier. You think that makes me feel younger, old mate?"

"Then, what I'm going to tell you might not help you a great deal either," anticipated Terrence raising his eyebrow.

Albert, who was already expecting that some serious talk would take place sooner or later, left his cup on the coffee table.

"You have all my attention," he said.

"This morning, I suspected that you were not so surprised at my being here," Terrence said. Albert's knowing look made him understand that he was right in his appreciation, "We

haven't seen each other in a long time, but I see that you can still read in me as an open book. So, I suppose that if I ask you for Candy's hand in marriage, I won't be shocking you."

"Are you actually asking me that?" riposted Albert with a tilt of his head.

"I am."

"I reckon the lady in question has already given you her consent."

"Yes, she has," replied Terrence unable to hide his happiness.

"Then, if you two had set your minds on that, I believe neither I nor the rest of the world can do anything to prevent it. You may consider yourself engaged."

"But you approve, don't you?" inquired Terrence frowning.

"Of course, I do, idiot!" Laughed Albert, "In fact, I'm glad that it is you and not another man. I don't think a lesser kind of guy could handle her spirited ways. And to be honest, I'm also convinced she's the right woman to handle you, pal. Congratulations!" he added, giving Terrence an affectionate pat on his back.

"And when exactly are you planning to have the ceremony?" asked Albert as he took again his unfinished cup of coffee.

"In two or three weeks," was Terrence's plain answer.

Albert averted his eyes from his coffee and darted a meaningful look towards Terrence.

"Why the rush?"

"Easy, man! Nothing out of order has happened. You have my word," responded Terrence understanding Albert's suspicion, "It is just that the distance between New York and this place is far too big for long engagements. We've done that before and don't intend to repeat it. I'm a free man of independent means, she's of age, and we have your consent. Why wait?"

Albert's shoulders relaxed.

"I take you understand that with such a short notice there won't be much time to notify people and make plans for a fancy ceremony," Albert warned.

"Well, the fact is we both prefer something intimate and quiet. As for the essential requirements, I've already called my mother and she agreed to bring my birth certificate by herself, instead of sending it by post. She's the only person I care to have with me for the occasion. Candy said she only needed you, the ladies of this house, the Cornwells, and Dr. Martin. She knows the rest of her friends wouldn't make it on time. We were thinking of having the ceremony here in the chapel. So much for preparations."

“So, as expected, you two have set your mind on shocking the world,” stated Albert with a mischievous light twinkling in his sky-blue eyes. “Then, people will talk, my cousins will be appalled, the press will be making all kinds of wild speculations . . . I can already see my aunt’s face when she finds out . . . I love it!”

They both laughed at the thought.

The men kept talking for a good while. They agreed that prior to the wedding the newly engaged couple should travel to Chicago to arrange a few practical matters. Albert suggested that spending New Year’s Eve with the family could be a good way to introduce Terrence to the older members of the family. Terrence was not thrilled with the prospect, but he supposed he couldn’t escape from Candy’s relatives forever. It was arranged that they would discuss the scheme with Candy before Albert left for Chicago.

A few minutes before midnight Albert admitted that he needed some rest. The following day he would have to travel back to Chicago, taking Alistair with him. Thus, he would need all his energies to keep up with the kid’s endless chatting.

“Albert,” Terrence called his friend, who was already heading to the bedroom he had been assigned.

“Yes?”

“Can I call you Dad, now?” asked the young man with half a smile curving his lips.

“You do it and I beat you to a pulp, old mate,” the man joked back, but then feeling again his back aching, he added, “but then, perhaps my back wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“All right, I’ll stick to Albert, then,” Terrence concluded chuckling.



Terrence’s memories of Christmas celebrations were mostly dull. During his childhood, he vaguely remembered that his father used to throw large dinner parties for his aristocratic relations. Children were not included in those celebrations; so, he only had blurry memories of himself sneaking from his room, late at night, to observe the elegant guests from the top of the stairs. Then, he would go back to his room and spend the rest of the night awake, partly anticipating the gifts, but mostly desirous of the time his father would spend playing with him. He recalled those first Christmas mornings as an instance of the very few times his father would give him some attention. Unfortunately, as the years went by and the duchess had her own children, she did her best to practically ban Terrence from the family circle.

Therefore, the young Terrence spent quite a good number of Christmas' Eves locked in his dorm at Saint Paul's.

Later, and since he had become an actor, Christmas had always meant work. Even during the years he had lived with the Marlowes, he had never felt as one is supposed to on such occasions. The three of them lived in the same house, but the house was not his home. So, without a home, what man can pride himself on having a real holiday? As for his mother, she was all business during the winter season, just like her son. Hence, Christmas was never what it ought to be.

Now, for the first time in his life, Terrence witnessed a Christmas celebration in a way he had only read about in fiction. It was not the turkey stuffing –though that was good–, or the many stockings hanging everywhere in the parlor, or the popcorn tinsel, as in the good old days. Trimmings, food, and gifts were there, but the main star of the occasion was the deep and sincere love that pervaded the air of a true home such as Pony's place.

Observing the affectionate treatment that every child enjoyed in the house, Terrence could better understand the sort of upbringing that had nurtured Candy's caring heart. It was not a surprise that his lonely soul had been attracted to hers like bees to flowers. Considering all this, he was thrilled that such warmth could enter now into his life, offering new prospects for the Christmases to come.

After the traditional dinner, the whole party gathered around the Christmas tree for a story or two, and then the children were dismissed. It was a custom in the house to go to bed early on Christmas' Eve to save energy for the great opening of Christmas presents the following morning. When the children were sent to their dorms, Terrence cast a look to his fiancée, and she answered back with a silent glance. A couple of hours later, when everybody was already in bed, they both met again in the parlor to spend some time together before retiring to their respective chambers.

When Candy entered the room, Terrence was reclining on the wooden mantelpiece, observing the photos that decorated it. Faces of children, adolescents, and even adults, all of them former dwellers of Pony's Home, in all sizes and frames adorned the fireplace with their bright smiles. Among all of them, the fair face of a young girl, with long blond hair and bright green eyes made his heart halt.

"You had this photo taken at Saint Paul's, right?" he asked, feeling her presence behind his back.

"An easy guess. The uniforms speak for themselves," she said, looking fondly at the picture of Annie Cornwell –née Brighton–, Patricia O'Brien, and herself, taken almost 12 years before.

“Whatever happened with the four-eyed girl?”

“You mean Patty?” she corrected, rolling her eyes at Terrence’s irreverent habit of nicknaming everyone. “She lived in Chicago for a few years, during the war, and studied there to become a teacher. After graduating, she worked for some time in an inner-city school and then, three years ago, she decided that she wanted to resume her studies. She applied in Oxford and was accepted. She’s now there doing a PhD. in Literature.”

“That’s befitting. She was always a bookworm. No boyfriend yet?” he inquired, curious.

“No. . .” responded Candy wistfully, “I’m afraid her heart is still in mourning.”

“There are loves that resist to die, even when all hope is lost,” he told her, kissing her hand, “which reminds me. . .” he added, as he conducted her to sit on Miss Pony’s rocking chair, next to the tree, “I think, I’d rather give you my Christmas gift now.”

“But is not Christmas yet,” she protested weakly. However, when he looked at her with that playful smile of his, which seemed to appear on his face only for her, Candy knew she couldn’t contradict Terrence.

“It’ll be Christmas in just a few minutes,” the man replied pointing at the clock while he sat on the parquet, at her feet.

“All right, as you wish,” the young woman ended up complying. Right after, she bent her body to pick up a rectangular package, which she handed to him saying: “Merry Christmas, then, Terry.”

The young man took the package in silence, a bit surprised with the fact that she had something prepared for him.

“Won’t you open it?” she asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Are you sure this is not going to explode when I open it?” he teased, pretending to look at the box suspiciously.

“You’ll never know if you don’t take the risk, you piker³⁵.”

Pricked by her words he finally tore the wrap. When he had uncovered the gift, he stared at it for a while. It was a heavy leather-bound book with the appearance of a real antique.

“Thomas Hanmer’s³⁶ edition of Shakespeare’s historical plays!” he read astonished.

³⁵ Piker – a coward (1920s slang)

³⁶ Thomas Hanmer was a British baronet and politician from the 18th century who is well known as one of the earliest editors of Shakespeare’s works

"It's all I could get," she told him shrinking her shoulders, as if the book were not exactly what she had in mind for him.

"All you could get. This book must be over 170 years old!"

"180 to be exact," Candy corrected, opening the book and pointing to the inscription on the first page, dated in 1744, "but the man from the shop in Chicago told me that professional troupes like yours only use the text as in the First Folio³⁷. This one is edited and might only be good to decorate your library. I wish I could have gotten one original of the First Folio for you," she said, and her voice sounded slightly disappointed.

Terrence was amused by her naïve remark.

"If you're planning to rob the British Library, please tell me in advance, so I can figure out the way to get you out from prison; in case they catch you, of course," he laughed.

"Then, you don't like it, huh?" she asked, pouting.

"Are you jesting? I love it!" he said sincerely, his eyes still fixed on the old volume. "I have always wished to start a collection with antique editions like this one, but never had the time to search for something so rare. Besides, it might not be the First Folio, but it should have cost you a little fortune. This volume is a real jewel! You shouldn't have gone that far."

"I'm an heiress who seldom indulges shopping; thus, a little extravagance now and then cannot harm anybody. . . I'm glad you like it!" Candy smiled, as she realized that he was pleased with the gift.

"Thanks, love," he replied. Candy, who hadn't got used to his new affectionate way of addressing her, blushed bright red. Her cheeks contrasted with the pale pink of her dress.

"We could get other volumes of the same collection later, if you wish," she suggested, trying to overcome the thrill of his hand caressing hers softly.

"I'd like that! But. . ." he stopped for a second as a question began to form in his mind, "This is not a gift you get in a last-minute holiday shopping. How come you got it when you didn't know we were spending Christmas together?" he asked intrigued.

³⁷ First Folio – It is the oldest published collection of Shakespeare's 36 plays. Published in 1623. The First Folio contains Shakespeare's plays unabridged and without edition. There just a few copies of this publication located under the custody of important libraries such as the British Library in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford University.

“When I went to Chicago last month, I decided to get something special for you. I didn’t know I was going to be able to see you during the holidays, but I supposed that sooner or later we would meet again.”

Terrence remained in silence for a while. It melted his heart to realize that he had been in her thoughts all that time, just as much as she had been in his. Never one to easily put in words his deepest emotions, he only kept holding her hand, hoping that she could understand his feelings under the effect of his touch.

The clock struck midnight at that moment.

“Would you like to open your gifts now?” Terrence offered.

“You’re speaking in plural?”

“Judge by yourself if my grammar is right,” the young man told her, handing her a modest package wrapped in red paper, which was hidden among the many presents under the tree.

Candy smiled, guessing by the size and shape of the object that it was also a book. The young woman thought that it was actually the first time she was going to receive a present from him, not counting the flowers he had sent her in Pittsburgh, of course.

It was not without emotion that she tore the wrap to uncover a burgundy hard-bound book. The title, embossed with golden letters, ran: “*Poems in two volumes by William Wordsworth*”.

She noticed that there was a bookmark inside and suspecting it had been left there with a purpose, she opened it on the marked page and read aloud:

*I wandered lonely as a Cloud
That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,*

As she was beginning to read, he joined her in the third line, reciting by heart. They both continued till the end.

*When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of dancing Daffodils;
Along the Lake, beneath the trees,
Ten thousand dancing in the breeze.*

*The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee: --
A poet could not but be gay
In such a laughing company:
I gazed -- and gazed -- but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:*

*For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the Daffodils.*

When they finished the last verse, a mystical silence ensued, the poem's words still ringing in Candy's ears.

"Do you remember, Candy?" he asked her, his voice a velvety whisper, "that morning in March, you were running wild through the school park, oblivious to my presence, until you stumbled onto me."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, identifying the moment he was alluding to, "I couldn't see you lying on the ground, hidden in between the daffodils bed. I remember I fell down most ungraciously," Candy laughed at herself.

"I was quite absorbed by the perfume of the flowers, and didn't see you coming either . . . I was. . . I was thinking of you. . ." he confessed, daring to reveal his true feelings at that moment, "and then you appeared as if conjured by my thoughts. I was happy to see you. . . especially when you landed right into my arms."

"How could I ever figure that you were glad to see me? The first thing you did was to mock my clumsiness, very cheekily, if I should say. To make matters worse, I hadn't seen you in about a month, since you irrupted in my room **that** night, and when I mentioned it, you gave me the cold shoulder, as you usually did" she sulked.

"And you retaliated calling me with some colorful epithets . . ."

"I did?"

"Oh yes, I can quote you: **You are an ungrateful, insufferable, and conceited boor, Terry,** you said."

"Did I make you angry?"

"Rather the opposite, Candy. You made the sun shine for me that morning. It was the first time you called me Terry and not Terrence. I was elated. Since then, every time I see a daffodil, I think of that day and how your voice calling me thus makes my heart beat faster."

Candy observed that Terrence's eyes had turned deep blue, like the waves of the sea on a sunny morning. She was mesmerized for a few seconds, her throat dried with emotion. To

think that he was not even touching her in the moment, but had the power to discompose her so with his words . . . It was alarming!

“They say that daffodils are the flowers of rebirth,” she said hoarsely, closing the book, “. . . because they bloom by Easter time, every year. When you sent me that beautiful arrangement of daffodils in Pittsburgh, I thought . . . that perhaps . . . it was a sign that our love could flower again.”

“It was!” he told her, and she noticed that he had taken his hand to his pocket to extract a small package, “This is yours,” he said simply, putting it in her hands.

Candy suspected the content recognizing the characteristic light blue box, attached with a ribbon; but was a bit intrigued, noticing that the box was a bit worn by the edges.

She undid the ribbon to open the box, her hands a bit clumsy. A perfect one-karat round diamond, mounted on the classic Tiffany’s setting, greeted her with its dazzling sparks.

“If I had been less short of money, I would have bought you something fancier, but my career was just starting then,” he avowed, his voice veiled by the emotion.

“Your career . . . was just starting?” Candy repeated, trying to comprehend his meaning. Then, looking back at the box, she observed that the ribbon was not as white as it was expected and even the turquoise blue of the case was a bit faded, “Do you mean that you bought this ring. . .”

“. . . before you went to New York, for the *Romeo and Juliet* premiere,” he explained, “I had planned to propose that evening, but you know, all went wrong . . . then, I never had the courage to return the ring. Even during the time that I was unemployed and in need of money to buy whisky, I did not dare to sell it. I’ve kept it ever since. . . However, I had my doubts whether I should give it to you now, or buy another one, perhaps with side stones or with a diamond band. Something more appropriate for the lady of my heart. This one is too simple . . .”

“It’s perfect, Terry!” she interjected, her eyes full of tears by now, “I couldn’t wish for something different.”

The young woman took the ring out from the box, with the intention of putting it on, but something made her pause. Her eyes had caught an inscription inside the ring, next to Tiffany’s trademark, that simply said:

“*An ever-fixed mark*”

Candy recognized the quote and smiled between her tears. Seeing she was paralyzed, he helped her slide the ring down her finger.

“When I saw you in November . . . and we danced together. . . I understood that, even though I wanted to court you slowly, it was going to be beyond my abilities to wait for long. Therefore, I gave instructions to my housekeeper to search for this box and send it to me. I had set my mind on asking you to be my wife as soon as possible. That is why I came here. . . Merry Christmas, Candy.”

“It couldn’t be merrier,” she said, kneeling down, right where he was sitting on the floor, to kiss him deeply on the lips.

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is **an ever-fixed mark**
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

-William Shakespeare (Sonnet 116)



Annie Cornwell was beyond herself when Albert brought her the news about Candy’s impending wedding. For years, Annie had dreamed of the mind-blowing dinner and ball that she would prepare for such a wonderful occasion. She had planned to make it as grand as to humiliate all those that had once attempted to make Candy the object of their scorn, for having committed the sin of being an orphan. Now, all those plans were to be aborted. It was just like Candy to come up with the unimaginative idea of marrying in Pony’s Home chapel with just a handful of guests, no flowers, not time to have a dazzling dress made, and not much of a decent reception. That would have been enough to cross Annie, but on top of that, Albert had evaded the task of telling Archie, asking her to do it in his stead.

“I’ll have my hands full with Aunt Elroy. . . Besides, you’re his wife. I’m sure nobody could be fit for the task better than you,” had been Albert’s words.

To say that Archie was not going to welcome the news was –by far – an understatement. Annie dreaded the moment she would have to break the news to him but knowing that there was no way to avoid the bitter scene, she decided to do it right after Christmas.

That evening, when she had put little Stair to bed, Annie had suggested to her husband to spend some time in the music room. Archie, who always enjoyed listening to his wife play the piano, welcomed the idea. The young woman played a couple of movements, while Archibald read a book sitting comfortably near the fire. Inwardly, she revised her strategy, doing her best to refine it. She was convinced that if she used the right approach, the blow would be a little bit less shocking.

When the last note of the concerto movement she was playing ended, the young woman left the piano to sit on the settee, by her husband’s side. She took a large wooden box and a beautifully ornamented book that she had left on a table nearby. Next, she opened the box getting out a number of old photographs with the clear intention of sorting them. She laid the book, which was a photo album, on the settee, proceeding to arrange a couple of the photos from the box on one of the blank pages.

Absentmindedly, Annie cleared her throat, to distract Archibald’s attention from his book. The young man raised his eyes from the page he had been reading, and observed his wife, apparently absorbed in the task.

“Look at this picture, Archie,” she invited, when she saw that she had his attention, “do you remember when we took it?”

Archie eyed the photograph, tilting his head for a better view. His eyes smiled at the memory.

“Of course, darling, I do. We were at the zoo, in London. Uncle Albert worked there, and Candy took us all in one of our free Sundays, when they let us out from jail,” he said chuckling.

“Oh yes! Now I remember,” she joined, acting her role the best she could, “There was this man with a camera taking pictures in the park. Wasn’t I who suggested the idea for a group picture?”

“Yes, Annie, I think it was your idea,” he agreed.

“And then, why is it that Candy is not in the photo?” she asked faking ignorance.

Archie rolled his eyes and pursed his lips in annoyance.

“Don’t you remember? That irritating Brit made an unexpected appearance at the zoo that day. Typical of him to rain in other people’s parades. And of course, Candy would always make excuses for him and gave him the attention he did not deserve. She must have been with that shoddy aristocrat, somewhere in the park,” Archie commented drily.

Annie raised her eyebrows. Internally, she said a prayer.

“Will you ever cease to hate him, Archie? It’s been years and, actually, if you assess the facts objectively, Terry never did anything so bad as to deserve your hatred.”

Archie looked at Annie astonished at her bringing up such a topic.

“I mean,” Annie continued, seeing that Archie was silent, “all your fights with him at school were always provoked by the most childish of things. You’re an adult now, aren’t you? Why holding a grudge for so long?”

“Annie, you amaze me, honey!” Archie responded visibly upset, “You perfectly know that I made peace with him at school, at least for Candy’s and Stair’s sake. What I can’t forgive him of is his hurting Candy afterwards. Good Lord, Annie, have you forgotten that he dumped her?”

“That’s not true, Archie. I have already told you how things happened. Terrence never dumped Candy, as you put it. Their breakup was something on which they both agreed. I have never approved of their decision, but you cannot blame him only. I’m sure he was just as hurt as she was.”

“I think we have covered this in the past, Annie.” The man replied peevishly, noticing that his wife was not comprehending his view. “When a guy breaks up with a girl, because he intends to give his word of marriage to another woman –to me – that counts as dumping. I’m pretty familiar with the story of the accident, Miss Marlowe saving him, losing her leg, and all that jazz, and believe me, I’m not impressed in the least. He should have found another solution. God knows I would have found it, had I been in his place! He had a jewel of a woman in his hands, and he was as stupid as to let her go and hurt her! Whenever I remember the day the men from the train station brought Candy to this house, fainted and paled with that fever, I want to smash his pretty boy’s face until not even his mother can recognize him. Have you forgotten how hard it was for Candy to get over him and recover? How she lost weight and her smile for years?”

“But, Archie, honey,” Annie said using her sweetest tone and putting a hand on his shoulder, trying to assuage his exaltation, “Candy certainly recovered after that, and I’m sure she does not resent Terrence. Why should you?”

“Oh, Candy is a saint, but not me! Besides, I don’t need to forgive him. Happily, that scumbag is out of our lives forever. As I told you the other day, Candy made a narrow escape and I’m glad for her,” he said conclusively, and doing so, he took his book again with all the intentions of reassuming his reading and forgetting about the infuriating Grandchester topic.

“What if, all of a sudden, he. . .he were back into our lives, Archie? What would you do?” Annie hinted timidly.

Now Archie was more and more sullen. Annie had always been a sweet-tempered and tactful wife; so, he didn’t understand where all this sudden nagging had come from.

“Good Lord, Annie, I don’t care to answer this sort of rhetorical question! The man will never be in our lives again. Period! In fact, he doesn’t even care! He’s free and alive on this world and is fooling around with other women. Don’t you remember the photo on the papers the other day? No, I would say that our Candy and the whole family are safe from ever having to put up with his disgusting presence.”

“Archie . . . what if that woman on the papers had been Candy?” Annie blurted, knowing that the worse was coming.

This time Archibald looked at his wife as if she had grown a second head. The wheels in his head turned, making him realize where the conversation had been leading to, from the beginning. Then, he stood up from his seat, walked towards the piano, then to the fireplace as he rubbed his forehead, and back to his wife. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it for a while. Annie was there, her eyes glued to the carpet and her hands together on her knees, waiting for the inevitable fit of rage that would follow.

“You’re surely joking, aren’t you, Annie?” asked Archie at last, still unable to give credit to his wife’s implications. But then, Annie’s silence following his question told him more than her words.

“Sweet Jesus! Was it truly Candy . . . with . . . HIM?!!!” he finally yelled, completely out of himself, “This cannot be true! Has she gone insane! How did this happen?”

“He was the one who contacted her again, when his mourning time was over,” Annie began without looking at her husband, “then he made the encounter happen, during her trip this Fall . . . and it appears that their feelings have not changed.”

“This is impossible! Why didn’t you tell me this before, Annie? Why did you hide it from me? Had I known, I would have prevented . . .” he blurted, his voice louder and his temper rising by the second.

“Would you, Archie?” Annie interrupted, gathering the courage to contradict her husband, “Do you honestly think that you could have prevented Candy’s heart from loving Terrence? Could you do it in London?”

Archie was speechless. His lips pressed against each other in frustration and anger. He hated to admit that Annie was right. Nobody could stop Candy when she set her mind –or her heart – on doing something.

“They have loved each other all these years, despite the circumstances,” Annie continued. “When all of us believed their love was dead and gone, they still loved each other in the distance. Can’t you feel moved by such an enduring and faithful love, Archie? Please, try to be reasonable.”

“Nonsense!” resisted Archie. “He’s a dirty opportunist! I will not allow him to go any further with her.”

“Archie, there isn’t anything you can do about it. Albert has already accepted Terrence’s request of Candy’s hand in marriage.”

“Has everyone gone insane? And since when all of you conspire behind my back, to protect that good-for-nothing scoundrel?” he screamed.

“. . . since you chose to be so irrational!” Annie exploded, standing up abruptly. “I would have told you from the very beginning, but you were always so bitter about Terrence whenever the subject was brought up that I was sure you would be throwing a tantrum like this when you found out. Then, you would have argued with Candy, and she would have told you off . . . and . . . I would have felt awfully bad at seeing you two at odds with each other. You know how much I hate conflict! Or even worse, you could have gone as far as confronting him. And he is not a man one can mess with without suffering the consequences, Archie. I was scared for you!”

Archie was surprised at Annie’s reaction and words. She was not one to ever raise her voice, and now she was practically yelling at him.

“But now, I give up!” she continued, “If you want to play the fool, you’re free to do it. Terrence and Candy are coming in two days, and they will be staying here for New Year’s Eve. They will be getting married in January. So, you’d better get used to the idea and try to be civil, for once. Otherwise, if you make a scene you will have everyone, including me, against you!”

Before Archie could object to Annie’s words, the young woman ran away crying. Archibald was left alone in the music room, sulking and cursing Terrence’s entire family line. Since that line was quite long, it must have taken him a good while to finish his cursing.



Annie was sitting in her room, still sobbing silently, after the fight with her husband. She knew it could have been worse. For instance, if the same incident had happened seven years before, when they were not married yet, Archie's overprotecting reaction towards Candy would have hurt her deeply. Oh, she would have been madly jealous! And she had good reasons to be it. Fortunately, things had changed a great deal for her during the last ten years.

Annie was not blind. She knew that Candy's buoyant personality and good looks had awakened the man within Archie when still a boy. Moreover, Annie was convinced that Archie's feelings had evolved from a passing fancy to a more complicated passion when his cousin and even his own brother had joined in; all of them equally besotted by the same girl. To make matters worse, the power of that early attraction had heightened, thanks to the everyday interaction they had been forced into, since Candy's adoption.

With more mature eyes, Annie could see now that it had been an imprudent move to place three boys, who were awakening to manhood, under the same roof with a girl they all were strongly attracted to. Had it not been for the boys' good nature and the loyal affection they had for each other, things could have gone pretty wrong.

Annie admired Archie and Stair for their gentlemanlike behavior at such a young age. They had stoically accepted Candy's choice. For her and Anthony's sake, they had stepped back with a maturity that many grown-up men would have envied. However, their hearts had not gone unharmed in the process. What had been an adolescent crush, had turned into a wistful and repressed passion.

Older and always more collected than his brother, Alistair had borne the situation more graciously. Archie had suffered it more deeply, especially when Candy continued to ignore his feelings after Anthony's death. In the middle of all this, Terrence and Annie herself had entered scene, unknowingly making the problem far more entangled.

The mutual attraction between Terrence and Candice had been uncommonly strong from the very beginning and obvious for everybody. To prevent it would have been an impossibility. Such rare affections are untamed and lifelong lasting; once they are ignited, nobody can do anything to extinguish them. Annie had seen this; Archie had not. His heart had resisted, fighting with all its might to preserve his unrequited love. In a certain way, Annie's attachment to Archie had been similar in strength.

Nevertheless, at twenty-six, Annie could see her feelings for Archie when only fifteen, as immature and selfish, but certainly not less strong. It was this inner force which had allowed her to wait for Archie's heart to change, no matter the years and the circumstances.

As time went by, Annie had wondered how she would have reacted if Candy had reciprocated Archie's feelings. Would she have had the courage to step back as Archie had done for Anthony? Would her love for Candy and Archie have reached such a level of selflessness? Annie knew herself well, and she had good reasons to believe she wouldn't have, at least not back then, at that age, when her selfishness got the better of her. She was not proud of this weakness of hers.

However, her faults didn't prevent her from understanding that such lack of generosity was perverse, especially when taken to the extreme of separating two souls who loved each other. Therefore, she had clearly perceived Susannah's intervention in Terrence and Candy's lives as evil and illegitimate. Annie was just grateful for never finding herself in such a situation between Candy and Archie.

Seen in perspective, her story with Archie had been a lot more fortunate. They had been an issue for six years when they finally got married, in 1919. In all that time, Archie's feelings for Candy had subdued. It had been a slow transformation, difficult to perceive, even by Annie's vigilant eyes. Archie had never received any encouragement from Candy, never felt what it was to be the one owner of that particular smile of hers. So, almost imperceptibly, his tender feelings for her had suffered a transformation.

Then, when he formally announced his engagement to Annie, he had to fight great opposition to finally take her to the altar. The objections had been so strong that –had it not been for Albert's decided support– Annie and Archie would have had to resort to an elopement. At the time, Archie was studying Business in Harvard³⁸. They had been separated for over six months and Archie had discovered that the distance was making his heart fonder and restless. Not willing to wait for longer, he had proposed to marry her a year before finishing the program. Such news had not been well received by the Andrews. As often happens in such cases, the family's opposition had ended up creating a stronger and more intimate bond between the young couple, and for that Annie was thankful.

In her mind and heart, these difficult times had become the most endearing memories of her own love story. They had first tried to announce their intentions when Albert was absent on one of his business trips, but the family had not accepted it. She remembered that Aunt Elroy

³⁸ CCFS says that Archie studied in the University of Massachusetts. While UOM is a prestigious university, it is unlikely that a wealthy family such as the Ardleys would have chosen it to educate one of its most promising heirs. UOF was originally a public university focused on agriculture development and funded by the US government to provide education for the middle class. Harvard, also located in the State of Massachusetts, was and still is one of the most prestigious private universities (nationally and internationally) and is usually attended by students coming from elite families, which makes it a more natural choice for Archibald's education.

had forbidden Archie to visit his fiancée, and the Brightons, offended by that public humiliation, had also been adamant to promote the relationship between Cornwell and their daughter. Yet, Archie had kept meeting with her in secret, travelling from Cambridge almost every weekend, reassuring her that nothing would stop him from making her his wife. Annie remembered that, on one of those occasions, Archie had first told her that he loved her, and his words had been sincere.

Later, Albert returned from his trip and set everything in order so they could marry as they wished. Then, once married, Archie and Annie had both discovered together the mysteries of physical love. This new intimacy had eventually bonded them to a higher level. Finally, their incursion into parenthood had ended up by making them as close as a man and wife ought to be. Annie's patient love, having grown in depth and lost in selfishness, had finally won Archie's heart.

Despite all these great victories, Annie knew that Archie would always keep a soft spot for Candy. She had been his first love and both shared memories of the halcyon days they had lived together as a family, even if only briefly. They had also cried together about the loss of their loved ones and, usually, such things constitute bonds as strong as blood ties. Nobody could erase that, even if they attempted to do it.

To sum up, Archie's affection for Candy had suffered a transformation, changing in kind but not losing in depth. In a way, Archie's present feelings for the one he would now refer to as cousin resembled those of a possessive brother, overprotective and overzealous of her well-being. Annie remembered that he had always opposed all her match-making schemes for Candy. In Archie's eyes, no suitor seemed good enough for his dearest Candy. They all either lacked in fortune, lineage, character, good breeding, or temper. And that was a great deal to say because Archie, though rich, had never been a snob. His love for Candy and Annie despite their humble origins was proof of that. However, when it came to a candidate for the position of "Candy's husband", Archie was worse than Aunt Elroy.

But any of those imperfect candidates would have been a zillion times preferable in Archie's opinion, compared to the most revolting person of Terrence Graham Grandchester. He firmly believed Terrence had been the only one responsible for Candy's sufferings in the past. Unfortunately, this was the man of Candy's own choice. This fact placed Annie in the middle of the one situation she had always dreaded: the open conflict between the feelings of her most beloved people.

For the first time in her life, though, she was decided. She would back up Candy on this one thing, even against her dearest husband. This time, she was not going to fail Candy. She owed her at least this one proof of loyalty.

Annie sighed again, wiping her last tear with her already damp handkerchief, when the door of her chamber opened. Her husband entered and turning the lights on, he approached her. Annie felt his presence coming, but she did not raise her eyes to meet his. His steps sounded heavy and tired.

The young man stood in front of her, looking at his wife with a vacant expression for a brief moment. Then, he knelt in front of her, placing each one of his hands on the armrests of Annie's chair.

"Forgive me, sweetheart. I accused you unjustly," he said penitently, his eyes searching hers eagerly.

Annie finally looked at him. His blue eyes were as swollen and red as hers. She thought she hadn't seen him so discomposed in a long time. Her heart shrank and her hands flew immediately to his cheeks.

"It's O.K., Archie, I understand how you felt . . . I love Candy just as much as you do . . ." she whispered. Still hesitant, she added: "but, believe me, there's no reason to fear. Candy will be fine with Terrence."

Archibald's face clouded. He might have repented of his explosive reaction; nonetheless, his opinion of Terrence was unshaken.

"I wish I could feel the same as you. I just can't trust him," he avowed.

Annie understood that wars are not to be conquered in one battle. She smiled timidly, while tenderly caressing her husband's handsome face.

"I know, Archie, but Candy is a grown-up woman, and one especially independent for that matter. Do you think she would worry about pleasing us when choosing a husband?"

Archie sighed heavily, shaking his head.

"Then, can we—at least— try to welcome Terrence properly, as it corresponds to Candy's future husband?" she dared to ask, knowing that she couldn't push too far.

"Annie," he warned, his eyes shining with stubborn determination, "I can only promise you that I'll be civil. You have my word on that . . . But I can't pretend that I'm thrilled to see him take my cousin with him, as if he deserved her. Besides, if he makes one false step that can harm Candy, one only, and I'll make him pay dearly."

"That won't happen, Archie. You'll see," replied Annie standing up and leading Archie to do the same, "Everything will be fine," she concluded, resting her head on her husband's chest.

Internally she prayed that the two hot-headed young men could keep an appearance of civility, if only for Candy's sake.



The engaged couple arrived in Chicago in the morning of the 28th of December. As usual, Georges Villers received them in the station with his characteristic quiet affability. Albert had told him the summarized version of the story, but now, seeing the young woman, Georges could fill in the gaps that his employer had left in blank. Since Candy descended from the train, Villers observed the extraordinary transformation in the young woman's countenance. If she was usually cheerful, now she was radiant; if she had always been a pretty girl, now she looked ravishing; if she had been a storm now, she was a whirlwind. And the one responsible for these improvements was this rather stern young man, who walked now by her side. Georges had a strong feeling of *déjà vu*.

The trip to the Ardleys' manor house had not been boring. Georges had always been the quiet type and Terrence was never talkative when strangers were around, but Candy did most of the talking, becoming the bridge between her two companions. At the end, some kind of conversation had been possible and even a fleeting smile had appeared on her fiancé's face at some point.

When they finally arrived at the house, Albert was already waiting for them in the foyer with the Cornwells. Curiously, before any pleasantries could have been exchanged, little Alistair darted to Terrence's arms, even before noticing Candy.

"Uncle G! You're here!" the kid cried joyously, "You've come to play with me!"

Candy and Albert laughed openly, something in their smiling faces made them look more like brother and sister than ever before. Annie smiled in her own subdued manner and Archie's eyes popped out from their orbs. Next, he looked questioningly at his wife.

"Stair met him at Pony's Home," she mumbled.

Archie did not reply, but he couldn't repress his displeasure. Having his favorite cousin romantically entangled with a man he disapproved was one thing, but having his own son interacting with the said man without his knowledge was too much to bear.

Fortunately, the others didn't notice anything amiss, since Albert was busy hugging his old friend, utterly happy to welcome him at his home.

Right after, Terrence turned to see Annie.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Cornwell," he greeted kissing Annie's hand with a light touch, his eyes looking at her with mute gratitude.

"The pleasure is mine. And the name is Annie," she replied.

Acknowledging Annie's opening for a more informal address with a bow, Terrence swiftly moved to greet her husband. He perfectly knew that he shouldn't expect the same affability had received from the son, now that he turned to the father.

"It's been a long time, Cornwell," the guest said extending his hand to Archibald, "I'm glad to find you so well."

"Thanks. I hope you had a pleasant journey, Grandchester," Archie replied coldly, glaring at Terrence with reserve.

"Oh yes we did," intervened Candy hugging her cousin briefly, "Marvelous trip, indeed, especially considering the blizzard last week".

"I'm glad to hear that, kitten," Archie replied stressing the affectionate pet name as he hugged Candy to welcome her.

Something within Terrence recoiled in distaste upon hearing the soubriquet but choosing not to give Archibald the pleasure of ruffling his feathers on the first encounter, he remained unaffected.

Unaware that the hostilities between Archie and Terrence had just started, Candy turned to hug Annie and then looking at all her relatives, she asked the one question she had been dying to ask.

"Now, will you guys feed these two starving travelers for Goodness' sake?" she said playfully.

"All right, but you must promise not to eat all the dessert before we finish the first course," intervened Albert, affectionately placing his hand on Candy's shoulder.

"Will you start, now, Bert? You certainly are misconstruing the events that unfolded during our last dinner. What will Terry think of me?" she said tongue-in-cheek.

"Only that my lady has a sweet tooth, but I've known that since long ago," said the man in question, winking at her.

Candy pouted her lips blowing a kiss for her fiancé, and then hooking one hand in Albert's arm and the other in Terrence's, she directed the party towards the dining room.

Behind, Archie followed, carrying Alistair possessively. Internally he felt his stomach revolt every time Candy cast an affectionate look towards Terrence and wondered how much of that he could take in one single afternoon.



Despite Archibald's poor expectations, the meal had gone quite well. The time had passed without any unpleasant event and the conversation had flowed wonderfully, partly because Candy was never out of words and partly because Albert and Terrence connected so well that could talk forever about everything and nothing in special. Annie, of course, barely made a comment, but that was nothing out of character in the young woman; her husband also remained mostly silent, yet nobody ever expected him to be at his best in that first meeting with his former classmate.

After lunch, the guests retired to their respective quarters to change their traveling clothes. Later during the evening, they would face the formidable Aunt Elroy, who had preferred to remain in her chambers during the meal and meet Terrence Graham in her private parlor, at teatime.

As expected, the old lady had been rather reticent about the idea of Candy's marrying so suddenly. Despite her long-standing reluctance to receive Candy as a true Ardlay, the matron had eventually nurtured a reserved degree of acceptance towards her adoptive niece. Consequently, now she was not too happy to let Candy's hand go to an unknown suitor. As a matter of fact, when Albert had first presented the news, her alarms had gone off immediately. The man in question could be a fortune hunter with no breeding or connections that would represent a problem for the whole family. Approving such a marriage without a careful analysis could be disastrous.

Therefore, Aunt Elroy had asked all the possible questions a matron can pose on such occasions. Albert was happy to oblige her with as many details as he thought she could digest. Knowing that Candy had first met Terrence in Saint Paul's Academy had been a good start. Only a son from a well-to-do family could have attended such a school. On the other hand, the thorniest argument against his suitability was his being in the entertainment business. Aunt Elroy was a lady of the old school who still believed that actors and actresses were mere immoral liberals, with whom decent families like hers, should have nothing to do. However, considering he was a Shakespearean actor with a great name and a comfortable situation, she was inclined to condescend a bit, especially when Alabert

reminded her about his noble origin. After all, a British aristocrat, no matter if he was at odds with his father, was sort of a gain for the family as connections were concerned. In a way, Aunt Elroy had never expected that Candy would do as well as that. Since she had refused marrying Neil Lagan, the old lady had feared that one day the young woman would end up marrying a vulgar country bumpkin.

Besides these attributes, the man was single, without children and of an acceptable age. So, Aunt Elroy felt more or less satisfied after Albert's had finished his account. Of course, she made her nephew promise to prepare a reasonable prenuptial agreement to protect the family's best interest and make the appropriate arrangements about Candy's trust.

As far as the wedding date was concerned, she strongly opposed the idea. An Ardlay should be married with all the honors as corresponded to her station in life, and that needed time. Naturally, the old lady had also her suspicions about the urgency of the wedding. But Albert alleged that Candy and her fiancé were simply very much in love and adamant to be separated. Albert also purposefully reminded his aunt that since Candy had always been so willful, if contradicted in her desires of marrying soon, she could resort to an elopement. This last suggestion had brought Aunt Elroy the memories of the scandal of Rosemary's elopement with Captain Brown thirty years before. Not wanting any repetitions of such an embarrassing event, she accepted with the reserves that she first had to meet the groom.

After that interview, Albert rejoiced in his success. The truth is that neither Terrence nor Candy cared a straw about having Aunt Elroy's approval, but the goodhearted Albert, despite his initial desire of shocking his aunt, as in the good old days, had decided that it was best if she agreed with the whole scheme. He didn't want to have his aunt's health jeopardized because of a vexation. Thus, when it came the time for Candy to introduce her fiancé, the path was already nicely prepared by the cunning William Albert.

When introduced to the old lady and because he somehow felt that this interview could be important to preserve the peace in Albert's household, Terrence made his best efforts at civility. He consented in explaining, though briefly, the state of his affairs as far as his job and fortune went. When questioned about his relationship with his father, he was less approachable, stating simply that they hadn't been in touch for about eleven years. However, he did not economize words to explain that his affection for Candy had been long standing and that he was a man of enough means to provide for her as it was expected.

The moment Aunt Elroy mentioned Candy's trust the young man made it clear that he was not in need of money and that he would make arrangement with Albert to dispose of that money only as Candy would think best, without his intervention or profit. This last gesture had ended by winning the old lady's good will, to the point that she even consented to the

impromptu wedding. Yet, when she was informed that the event would take place at Pony's Hill Chapel, she almost fainted. Candy then ingeniously mentioned that since the wedding would be a private affair, the details of the place where it would be held will never be known by the Chicagoan elite. Only the closest circle –including her, of course- would be invited.

Aunt Elroy appreciated her inclusion, but having certain qualms about travelling to an unknown place in which not all her usual comforts would be available, she said that perhaps the wedding would have to take place without her presence. Notwithstanding this reservation, the old lady concluded that she approved of the match, though she would have preferred a great wedding in Chicago. Nevertheless, since the couple was not going to change their minds about that subject, she wished them well.



In the following days, Terrence had observed Archibald Cornwell closely and he knew that Cornwell was doing the same. At first, the actor had feared that, despite the years, Archibald still fancied Candy while being married to another. Yes, Archibald had been as obnoxious as he could in every interaction with him. Yes, Terrence felt nauseated every time Archie called Candy “kitten” and was sure that he was doing it just to bother him, although everybody else, including Candy, seemed to take his use of that pet name as a well-established habit. Nevertheless, upon a careful inspection of Archibald's interactions with his wife, Terrence started to understand that the young magnate's feelings for Annie were not of indifference. It was clear that the quiet ways of the refined Anne Cornwell had won his heart. Terrence felt relieved about that score.

Yet, as he had suspected for long, Cornwell was not pleased with Terrence's reappearance in his cousin's life. In a way, Terrence understood Cornwell's feelings. The actor believed that his fiancée had not yet told him the complete story of her experiences during their long separation. He also guessed that Cornwell, having witnessed her heartbreak as a member of her intimate circle of friends, was not appreciative of Terrence's role in the story. In this point, at least, Terrence thought that he couldn't agree more with his old classmate. The question was how long Terrence's short temper could stand Cornwell's brotherly zeal, which was a bit over the mark for his taste.

But Archibald Cornwell was not the worst part of the package that came with marrying Candy. Terrence knew that New Year's Eve would bring the challenge of facing the Lagans and other still unknown relatives that would attend the ball which had been prepared for the occasion. Had Terrence been on his own, he wouldn't have cared how to handle all these people. But now, he understood, this was Candy and Albert's family and for their

sake he had to try his best to survive the evening without causing offense if possible, and certainly without leaving any bleeding noses behind.

The young man was lost in these thoughts now that he was waiting for Albert in his studio. They had an appointed meeting to discuss the financial aspects of the prenuptial agreement. While he waited, his eyes inspected the room trying to make himself familiar with his present surroundings. Unlike his father's studio, which he remembered as solemn and dark, this one was painted in warmer colors, and the furniture was less pretentious, though still refined and luxurious.

Terrence walked towards the marble fireplace to closely inspect Rosemary Brown's painting which hung over the mantelpiece. So far, he had not had time to assess the so-called remarkable resemblance between his fiancée and Albert's late sister.

"If the painter was faithful to the model," he thought, his right hand caressing his chin, *"the hair is not of quite the same hue of gold. Candy's is slightly darker, and her curls are more marked. There aren't any freckles on this painting either. Besides, the nose . . ."* he said narrowing his eyes, *"Candy's is smaller and turned-up,"* the mere recollection of this particular feature of his beloved made him feel like kissing the tip of her nose.

Then, when concentrating in the eyes, his appraisal changed.

"The eyes . . . Bloody Hell!" He stopped, realizing that the similarity was striking. It was not only the same shade of jade green, but the shape and expression that had stolen his heart were both just there. Then, he saw the oval shaped jaw, so similar to that of Candy and the lips curving in a shy smile.

"Candy's smile is always more open, but still . . . there is something in this smile that so much reminds of hers. Yes, I must admit that it is a remarkable coincidence."

Terrence sighed, feeling like he was missing Candy's presence. In the previous days they had always been surrounded by relatives with very few opportunities to be alone. He half-smiled thinking that it was ironic that he had somehow survived being away from her for long years, but now that they had finally come to an understanding, it was becoming unbearable to go a day without kissing her, at least once. But proper kissing had been practically impossible those days.

"Especially whenever that watchdog of Cornwell is around. Bugger it!³⁹ Who does he think he is? It is easy to play the chaperone when he can get all cozy with his wife every night."

³⁹ Bugger it – British slang similar in meaning to "shit" or "fuck".

Seeing Candy on a daily basis was not helping either. His desire was growing each minute to a point that was almost unbearable. He continued to pace the room as he lit a cigarette, which was a clear sign of his growing nervousness. He approached the window resting his body over the frame, to observe the patterns in the stained-glass panes. Not finding much to distract his mind there, he turned his head towards Albert's desk and then his eyes caught a photo standing in a silver frame.

He moved closer to observe the photo. It was a boy, fair as an angel, with the biggest pair of light blue eyes Terrence had ever seen. His expression was serene with a hint of sweetness in his gentle smile. But, behind the surface of his arcadian façade, the boy seemed to project a maturity, perhaps sadness, which was beyond his age.

Then, without understanding how, Terrence knew that he was beholding the image of the longtime gone Anthony Brown. He felt a well-known pang in the chest. Instinctively, the man turned the photo down, unable to continue looking at that face anymore. He was just doing that, when Albert entered, catching him in the act.

"Yes, that was my nephew, Anthony," said Albert as he approached the desk.

"I sort of . . . guessed it," replied Terrence putting out his cigarette on a crystal ashtray on top of Albert's desk.

If Terrence's gesture turning down the photo had not been enough, the peculiar uneasiness in his voice gave him away completely.

Albert's broad shoulders began to shake slightly while his mouth contracted, trying to repress his own reaction. It was obvious he was trying hard to muffle his chuckles but was failing miserably. Finally, not able to contain himself, the man burst into open laughter as he slightly tossed his head back.

"By all means, can you explain what is so funny?" asked Terrence, visibly upset with his friend's laughter.

"You certainly are, mate," answered Albert still chuckling as he sat down in front of his desk. "God, you really slew me⁴⁰ here!"

"I'm glad you find me so comical," rejoined Terrence trying to recover his usual nonchalance, while he sat in front of Albert, "The directors I've worked with do not think I make a good comedian, even though I tried my best during the War."

⁴⁰ Past form of "You slay me" – 1920s slang meaning "that's funny"

“Will you ever give my poor nephew a break?” asked Albert without losing his smile, restoring the photo to its original position, “Come on, you are alive, and she is going to be your wife. Can you relax a bit?”

Terrence averted his eyes and after some effort to regain his coolness, he ended up by admitting to himself that his friend had good reasons to laugh.

“All right, I accept that I can be a dip stick⁴¹, at times,” he said reluctantly.

Albert sighed as he crossed his legs and looked at his friend.

“It’s good that you can see it, Terrence,” the blond man responded, and then turning a bit serious added, “but you must take care with that, pal. You’re about to marry a spirited woman who, despite her love for you, will not allow you to lock her in a cage. Remember that the green-eye monster is a bad counselor.”

“I know, dear Iago⁴² and believe me, I’m doing the best I can.”

“I sincerely hope so,” Albert interjected. In that moment, Georges entered the room and then the talk became all business.



Candy observed the dress she was going to wear that night for the hundredth time. She was still unsure of her choice. She had bought it on impulse because its subtle cream-champagne hue had enticed her. The bodice was tied up to one hip with a golden crescent moon with crystal beads, which she also liked a great deal. Yet, now on second inspection, she wasn’t quite convinced with the low back and the mermaid skirt it featured. The latter she believed impractical, and the former she felt prudish about.

Spending time to consider this kind of thing made her feel silly. There were other more serious issues to conquer that evening. She was about to introduce her fiancé to “la crème de la crème” of Chicago’s Elite and face what she was sure would be a decided disapproval. Of course, she didn’t care much if they were displeased. However, she knew that her relatives would not hesitate in throwing their unsavory darts all evening. For that

⁴¹ Dip stick – British slang for “stupid”

⁴² Iago – The main villain in Shakespeare’s “Othello”. One of the most famous lines said by this character is this: *O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-ey’d monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on.*

reason, she wanted to have her wits sharp and ready to defend herself with elegance and let the world know that she was not in need of courting their favor hosting the wedding of the century.

The hyenas would be there, waiting to scavenge whatever they could. She was not going to make it easy for them. When she was child, working for the Lagans, she had used her fists to defend herself. As an adult, she had learned to fight with her words and set more than one air-headed lady straight. If they believed an orphan was an easy victim to prey upon in a ballroom, they were missing the mark. So, concentrating more in her strategy, she finally began to dress, or rather to undress first, because there was no way a camisole could ever work with such a low back as the one featured in her dress.

When she was finally done, she looked at her reflection in the mirror and recognized that despite its inconveniences, the gown was very becoming on her. Then, when she was working on her make-up, she started to think of the other great issue of the evening, the only one that she truly cared about. It was the 31st of December.

That very morning, she had received a flamboyant flower arrangement with twelve tulips of a crimson shade she had never seen before. These tulips had a center with a velvety texture, almost black in color. Something she had never seen in other variations of the species. The effect of such a contrast had her mesmerized for a good while. Now, the card that came with the arrangement had no signature and the message had only three words: *“Auld Lang Syne”*

Candy didn't need more words to know who the sender had been, and which was the occasion for the offering. Twelve years before she had met the man of her life, and he certainly was making clear that he hadn't forgotten about it. This thought made her heart flutter. She hoped that, despite the presence of “the herd” (speaking of the hyenas), she could still find the way to enjoy the evening with Terrence, and if possible, steal some time for a moment in private. How she was to accomplish such a thing, she still had to figure it out.

The young woman looked mischievously at the lipstick she had in her hands. Annie had insisted that bright red was now the newest thing to go for. Of course, Candy loved the idea; yet, she hadn't seen anyone wearing so bright a color. In fact, wearing make-up was a new fad not completely accepted by Chicagoan matrons, but Candy was an enthusiast of the trend. She smiled thinking that for such a momentous evening, it was worthwhile doing something daring. She was applying the lipstick when a knock at the door made her start.

“Come in. It's open,” she said still sitting at her Louis XVI dressing table.

When the door opened, she could see in the triple mirror the reflection of Terrence's debonair figure entering the chamber. The double-breasted tailcoat tuxedo he was wearing made him appear at his best. She wondered if she would ever be able to look at him without feeling affected.

Despite his usual aloof demeanor, Terrence was not alien to the same agitations Candy was experimenting. As he entered the room, he couldn't avoid being allured by the young woman's presence. He stopped in the middle of the room looking slightly bewildered.

"I see you're not ready yet. I'll come back in a minute or two, then," he offered turning to leave.

"No wait, I have to put on this necklace, but the clasp has always given me problems, could you help me?" she asked, standing up to hand him a necklace with cabochon moonstones set all along a gold chain.

He did not answer, but as he took the jewel in his hands, she supposed that it meant he agreed to do the task. She turned her back to him and slightly bowed her head so he could fasten the necklace. Then, she felt the polished surface of the stones falling on the right place around her neck, and she heard the clasp click. Next, there was silence.

The amber light of the room made Candy's skin shine like mother-of-pearl. Without seeing Terrence, Candy distinctively felt his eyes running through her naked back. She remembered feeling the same that evening in Pittsburgh. But this time, she also clearly distinguished the growing heaviness of her own breathing. Terrence's body was but a few inches from hers; however, they were not touching each other. Therefore, it was almost surreal to feel her skin trembling under the intense effect of his gaze. She closed her eyes to concentrate on this sensation that seemed to be born deep within her, like a sharp and still delicious pain that diffused from the center of her belly to cover her every cell and make her skin crawl.

For a second, still with her eyelids closed, she felt herself falling into a liquid media, disrobed from every other consideration that had been bothering her that afternoon. One single thought possessed her mind: to feel him close, closer than ever before. It was an all-consuming urge that frightened her with its intensity. Still, they were not touching. "*Was that what is called desire?*" She wondered in silence.

"Do you feel it, my love?" his voice, soft and low asked her, and she opened her eyes, letting go of a sigh she didn't know she was holding. She didn't answer, but he knew she understood his meaning. "You must see that, if I touched you now," he said with difficulty, "everything would change between you and me. Even though nothing could please me more, I'm not sure how you would feel about it."

"I . . . don't know," Candy replied, shocked at the realization that she was more inclined to say that she wouldn't mind at all if he dared. However, she didn't voice her thoughts.

"If you're undecided, then, I think we should hold back. For the time being, I'd better wait for you outside, if that is all right with you," he proposed.

Candy understood the wisdom of the plan and let him go.



"What the bloody hell is happening with me?" Terrence asked himself, while still waiting for his lady. He could hardly believe he had proposed Candy to anticipate their vows. After all the efforts he had gone through so far to keep things on safe ground, just for her peace of mind, he had almost thrown everything to the wind.

Whatever society could think about such matters, he didn't give a damn. If the world had been ruled based on his standards, he would have certainly made love to her since that evening in the cabin. But he was aware she saw life in a different way. For her sake, he was willing to wait. So far, he had felt content to face all suspicions about their wedding, without having anything to hide. After all, it was just a matter of a few days. Wasn't he a grown-up man perfectly able to keep control over his impulses?

Then, what had he been thinking of when he had dared to ask her if she would . . . ?

"I don't recognize myself . . . and what is more surprising is that she actually hesitated! She didn't give me a definite negative answer!" He couldn't keep his mouth from twitching into a roguish smile.

Terrence knew Candy's opinionated ways far enough to understand that, if she had been offended, she would have told him as much without reserves . . . but she hadn't. He shivered in joy at the mere thought.

At that moment, Candy joined him in the corridor and together they descended to the ballroom. A few of the guests had already arrived, but they were mostly busy paying their respects to Albert and Aunt Elroy. From one of the corners of the large room, a string orchestra provided a soft musical background as the guests mingled and greeted each other. Annie met the engaged couple at the end of the staircase and kept them company while introducing Terrence to some of the old members of the family, already gathered near the dining room.

More than one eyebrow rose at the news of Miss Ardlay's decision to marry a well-known entertainer in a private ceremony with disregard to all the polite society of Chicago. Yet, the elders of the family did not dare to utter their disapproval decidedly. They had heard that Emilia Elroy had given her approval, on the grounds of the groom's connections, and they did not plan to contradict her, at least not publicly.

As the evening progressed, more and more guests made their entrance. Ladies with their fashionable turbans and head pieces with feathers or rhinestone appliqués, and gentlemen with the latest white waistcoats under their tailcoat tuxedos soon filled the room. More than one feminine eye was caught by the presence of the debonair man that was now being introduced as Candice Andrew's fiancé. Many of these ladies had already seen him at least once in their lives, but only on stage as he incarnated one or other character. Looking at him from so close a distance and being able to engage him in brief small talk was undoubtedly an experience to remember.

Terrence Graham might not have been a millionaire, but more than one rich lady that evening thought that they wouldn't have cared about the size of his bank account, if such a man had ever proposed to any of them. Now, of all the women available, he had chosen the vulgar Candice Ardlay, a nobody without parents who had the fortune of having been adopted by the head of their family. What an irony! What a disappointment! What a loss!

Candy knew the women of the Ardlay family, and she was aware of her not being a favorite among them, especially among the young ones. She could see the envy poorly disguised in their faked smiles and insincere congratulations. However, firmly attached to Terrence's arm as she moved across the ballroom talking to them, she felt that she could weather everything. So, the intent looks that some women cast upon her fiancé and the occasional poisonous remarks darted at her did not bother her in the slightest. She played the game and defended her ground pretty well without great trepidation.

Terrence also felt the pressure of women's intent gaze upon him, but somehow, he was used to that unwanted attention and had learned to tolerate it, if necessary. By contrast, he was much more painfully aware of the insistent glances that other men cast upon the beautiful petite blonde that clung to his arm. He understood that men his age or even older would naturally look in admiration at her figure and her incredibly expressive eyes. Yet, every now and then, he observed one or other man looking at him with the typical attitude of one who reluctantly admits defeat.

"*Was this one of Candy's suitors?*" he would be tempted to wonder. The sole idea made his blood boil, yet he did his best to dismiss such thoughts arguing with himself, "*This will not*

do. I would soon be fighting an army if I intend go to war with every man who has ever desired her. After all, isn't she by my side? Isn't my ring she's wearing?"

While Candice and Terrence were busy keeping up with so many introductions and insincere congratulatory words, the guests kept pouring into the grand salon for about 30 minutes or so. Among those who arrived last was the Lagan family, who seemed to be dragging their feet to attend William A. Ardlay's New Year's Eve reception. As much as Raymond and Sarah Lagan would have preferred to throw their own party at their new home in Miami, they both knew the Ardlay's reception was one of the most important social events in Chicago. If they wanted to keep their place in Midwestern society, they couldn't miss it. Their children felt forced to do their parents' bidding.

The ball was about to start when Eliza Reagan, dressed in a luscious lamé gold dress and with her forehead adorned with a feathered headpiece, entered the room. Her parents and brother followed her a few yards behind. She stood up by the foyer, thinking that her figure could be better appreciated by the gentlemen if she lingered there for a while in the right poise. As she surveyed the room studying the crowd, she couldn't believe her eyes when they took in the view of the tall, arrogant person of Terrence Graham. The redheaded woman promptly revised her appearance and finding herself at her best, walked resolutely towards the group in which Graham was engaged in conversation.

"My, my, my! What a pleasant surprise, Terry! Long time no see, darling!" she interrupted enthusiastically, offering her hand to be kissed, without noticing that it was Aunt Elroy herself who was engaged in conversation with Terrence.

"I think it is still customary that young people should first greet their elders. Good evening, Eliza," interjected Aunt Elroy visibly displeased.

"Excuse me, dear Aunt, in my rush to greet my old friend, Terry, I did not observe you were here. I apologize," Eliza said, while she discreetly retrieved her hand, seeing that Terrence had no intention of either kissing or shaking it.

"That's more like it," responded Aunt Elroy and then added, "I'm glad you are eager to get reacquainted with Mr. Graham, because he is about to become part of our family."

"To become . . . part of our family?" asked Eliza stumbling at her words, confused for a brief second.

It was at that precise moment that Candy, who had been distracted by some other relative for a little while, rejoined Terrence and Aunt Elroy. He immediately surrounded her shoulders with his arm and spoke to Miss Lagan.

“Well Eliza, what your aunt was trying to say is that Candy and I are engaged to be married this coming January. So, I suppose we’ll be *cousins*, or something along those lines,” the young man said addressing Miss Lagan with a scornful tone, especially as he pronounced the word “*cousin*” with a certain disdainful emphasis.

Eliza paled for an instant. For her, the most insignificant detail suggesting that Candice could be considered as her superior in society was an unpardonable offense. But finding that the stable-girl was about to get married to such a man, while she –far prettier and from a family of repute– hadn’t received any formal proposal yet was a capital slight. At this thought, her rage mounted by the second giving her the nerve to attack with full force.

“What a surprise!” she said first, with a faked smile that did not fool either of her interlocutors, “Who would have said it! Let me find Neil to tell him the good news!”

After saying that, the young woman curtsied and left them, to seek for her brother. Aunt Elroy seized the opportunity to leave the engaged couple at their own devices, while she moved to talk to other guests. Candy also attempted to move to another spot of the ballroom, but Terrence firm grip didn’t let her.

“Stay. Allow them to come to us and charge with all their might,” he whispered to her left ear.

“Terry, there’s no need. We can still spend a pleasant evening without having to fight with them,” she said cautiously.

“Come on, Freckles. Let me do this. Will you?” he asked, winking at her very swiftly.

It was then that Eliza came back, practically dragging her brother through the now crowded room. The young man bleached in a second when he saw Terrence in front of him. Her sister had not told him anything to prepare him for the encounter.

“Here, you surely remember Terry, from Saint Paul, Neil,” Eliza told her brother. Something within Terrence shuddered each time that Eliza called him *Terry*, but he kept his outward serene countenance.

“Isn’t it a surprise to find him here?” Eliza continued, “But that is not all, Neil. Hear this; he is going to marry Candy. What do you say?”

Neil stood there, flabbergasted and growing angrier and angrier at his own sister for putting him into such an embarrassing situation.

“I thought that you would never consider marriage,” the young man finally said addressing Candy, without even looking at Terrence.

“I must admit that I once thought the same,” Candy replied to Neil, feeling a little sorry for the young man that looked confused and uncomfortable before such unexpected meeting.

“I know what you mean, dear Candy,” interjected Eliza, ready to throw the first arrow. “After all the bitter disappointment you went through when Terry left you the first time. Very shocking and unfeeling! You have been very sweet taking him back. I wouldn’t have been so good to you, Terry,” the redheaded woman added turning to see Terrence, whose face was unreadable.

“Perhaps it was Candy who dumped our old friend and you are drawing the wrong conclusions, Eliza” suggested Neil taking his sister’s cue, “If I were you, Grandchester, I wouldn’t be so sure she is going to keep her promise to the end. She has . . . How should I put it? . . . Some history leaving men waiting for her at the altar,” Neil darted.

Candy was now fuming. The few shreds of pity she had felt for Neil disappeared in thin air.

“That is hardly a comment a gentleman or a lady would ever make,” Candy riposted.

“And what can you know about being a lady?” replied Eliza acidly and she would have said more if Terrence had not interrupted her.

“A lot more than you’ll ever know, Eliza,” Terrence said raising his left eyebrow “You two are amazing! Sending you to Saint Paul’s Academy surely cost your family a great deal, and yet I can now certify that it did not help you at all to polish your peasant manners. But hear me out, the lady here with me, who will certainly be my wife within a few days, is too far above your level to ever be bothered by the foolish remarks of some lesser minds such as yours. Now, if you excuse us, we have better things to do than talking to you.”

Before either of the Lagans could react, Terrence took his fiancée away, to gravitate in another angle of the room, where the couples were beginning to gather for the opening dance. As the first notes of the waltz *Deep in My Heart, Dear*⁴³, began, Terrence led his fiancée to the dance floor forgetting about the rest of the world around them.

“Peasant manners!” Candy repeated smiling at him, “I had forgotten how sharp your tongue can be.”

“They were begging for a lesson, weren’t they?” he replied, his eyes lost in the glossy red of her lips, “But that is not even half of the whole lot they truly deserve. There are other things beyond mere words that I would like to use to make them learn.”

⁴³ Waltz included in the operetta “The Student Prince” by Sigmund Romberg, which premiered in Broadway on December 2, 1924.

“Take it easy. They are not worth it,” she told him, her hand softly caressing his shoulder. “Now they will retreat to some dark corner to lick their wounded pride and plan their next attack.”

“Come what may, I don’t think that can affect us in the least,” Terrence said smiling. The truth is that he was more concerned about the position of his hand as he embraced her during the dance than anything else. If he moved an inch higher his fingers would be set on fire touching the bare skin of her back, an inch lower he would be sensing the curves of her hips. Either way, he would be attempting against his own sanity and then the only solution would be taking her hostage to his room for the rest of the evening.

Despite his qualms, Terrence did not hesitate to dance every piece with Candy until supper was announced. The lady was happy to oblige.



It was about past eleven and the guests were already finishing the final course of the meal, when one of the servants approached the host’s table to leave a message for Terrence.

“Mr. Graham,” the man whispered at Terrence’s ear, “There’s a call for you, from New York.”

“Did they say who is calling me?”

“I think it is your mother, sir,” the well-trained servant replied, keeping his voice low enough so that only Terrence could hear him.

The young man tilted his head to talk to Candy, who was seated by his side, explaining that he would take his mother’s call. The young woman assented, reminding him to give his mother her best regards.

As soon as that was said, the young actor presented his excuses to the rest of the attendance, leaving the table to accompany the servant. Someone else seated at another table noticed his exit and surreptitiously followed him. All along, a pair of dark eyes observed all those moves from the distance.

The servant conducted Terrence towards one of the adjacent rooms, where he could take his call, leaving him alone after that. Miss Baker, who was indeed waiting at the other extreme of the line, was happy to hear her son’s voice sounding so uncommonly cheerful when he finally took her call. They briefly discussed the details of her arrival and exchanged the usual greetings and good wishes for the New Year. When Terrence finally hung up the phone, he

leisurely took his gold cigarette case and lighter from the interior pocket of his tailcoat and took the time to light a cigarette, as if he were waiting for something. The door opened, and thus entered Neil Lagan, which did not surprise Terrence in the least. He had been expecting a tête-à-tête with his former school mate sooner or later.

“I thought you would remain in the corridor for the whole evening,” said Terrence nonchalantly, behind a smoke puff.

Neil was taken aghast by Terrence’s remark and stood motionless for a second.

“Come on, Neil, do you think I didn’t notice you following me? Say what you want and dry up⁴⁴ man,” Terrence encouraged him while he reclined his weight on the table next to him. One of his arms supported the other by the elbow as he inhaled from his cigarette once again.

“You surely think yourself the king of the hill because Candy accepted you,” Neil began acidly, “She has never been quite bright, but I honestly thought she knew better than taking again a sap⁴⁵ like you,” Lagan blurted advancing a few steps, but keeping himself at a cautious distance from his interlocutor.

“A sap . . . that’s perhaps a word the better describes someone else besides me in this room. But take it as you wish. She is marrying me, anyway,” Terrence replied with a triumphant smirk curving his lips.

“And you have the nerve to brag about it! You left her for that quaff of a broad⁴⁶ you had in Broadway and now you want to be rewarded.”

Terrence kept looking at Lagan with the same disdainful eye, without wincing at his offensive words. His eyes shone in intense shades of green, blue, and gray behind the smoke coming from his mouth.

“You truly are pathetic!” he finally responded contemptuously after a brief silence, “Tell me Neil, are you still sore because she gave you some icy mitt⁴⁷ some years ago? What were you expecting? That she would throw herself into your arms only because you fancied her?”

⁴⁴ To dry up – 1920s slang meaning “get lost”

⁴⁵ A sap – 1920s slang meaning “an idiot”

⁴⁶ A quaff – 1920s slang for slut // broad – vulgar slang to refer to a woman.

⁴⁷ Icy mitt – 1920s slang for “rejection”

The actor's words hit the nail. Neil's eyes gave away the fury of his hurt pride. Now, having had a few whiskies that evening, the young man was ready to do whatever it was necessary to retaliate. . .

"So, Candy told you about it? Perhaps she failed to mention a few details that you should not ignore."

"Since you seem so willing, go on and enlighten me," invited Terrence mockingly.

"Now, here it comes," Terrence thought, *"I wonder what sort of fabrication he's going to produce."*

"Did she tell you I fooled her once to make her meet me in a solitary place, so we could have a . . . private conversation?" he added suggestively.

Terrence put out his cigarette on a nearby tray and looked at Neil's amber eyes as if he were looking at a cockroach. However, his countenance did not recoil a millimeter.

"You must be completely ossified⁴⁸ to believe I could buy that," he said so calmly that Neil decided to be more explicit.

"Perhaps you would, if I told you how I sent her a messenger saying that **you** wanted to talk to her," Neil began maliciously. "The silly girl did not hesitate for a second and ran right into my arms, unwittingly. When she realized that it was me instead of you, it was way too late to escape. Oh, she's a fiery sweet thing to taste! I will spare you from hearing the details; suffice to say that on your wedding night you will realize someone else was there before you. We'll have something in common, after all, Grandchester."

Instinctively, after delivering his lines, Neil backed off a little. Terrence, on the contrary, did not move. His face, like a professional gambler, did not betray any emotion. Then, suddenly, his mocking laughter filled the air. Reagan was bewildered by his reaction.

"What sort of ludicrous pulp fiction have you been reading of late, Lagan?" asked Terrence, still laughing as if someone had told him the funniest of jokes. Slowly he approached Neil until they were face to face. "Do you honestly believe that I would give credit to your melodramatic falsehoods? If that is all you have to say, we can easily go back to the party."

Terrence walked past Neil, as if he intended to leave the room. Then, before Lagan could react, the young actor turned and with fits as fast as blazing bolts hit Neil's stomach first,

⁴⁸ Ossified – 1920s slang for "drunk"

making his body bend with pain. Then, he hit right on his mouth, so hard that Lagan immediately began bleeding.

Next, Terrence pulled Lagan gripping his lapel firmly so he could look at him.

“Listen to me, motherfucker,” Terrence roared at Neil, who was by then totally seized by terror, “Candy is *my* woman, and if you understand what that means, you will think it twice before you dare to repeat your slanderous lies to any available ears. If I ever hear you’ve been opening your big mouth again, I’ll pull out the rest of your teeth one by one. And remember, the name is Graham, not Grandchester. Do you understand?”

At that moment the impeccable figure of Georges Villers entered the room.

“Georges! Look at what this bastard has done to me! My tooth!” cried Neil believing his salvation was coming. To his surprise, the phlegmatic Villers did not move in his defense.

“I’m sorry to say this, Mr. Lagan, but you had it coming,” replied Georges offering Terrence his handkerchief so he could wipe Neil’s blood from his hand, “I heard what you’ve just said and believe me, Mr. Graham was magnanimous with you. In my time, when a gentleman said such things about a lady, it meant pistols at dawn and you have never been a good shot, sir. If I were you, Mr. Lagan, I would leave at once before your parents see you bleeding like this. You surely understand that I will have to report everything to Mr. Ardlay, and he will not take kindly that you are saying such slanders against Miss Candy.”

Humiliated and frankly scared of whatever his uncle could do, Neil used his own handkerchief to cover his mouth and without any other word left the room.

“I’m sorry you had to go through this, Mr. Graham,” apologized Georges, visibly upset.

“Don’t worry Mr. Villers,” said Terrence patting the man on the shoulder. “Now, let’s go back to the room, before Miss Ardlay starts wondering what happened with us. Can I count on your discretion? I wouldn’t like that she found out about this.”

“Absolutely, sir.”



As collected as Terrence had remained for the whole scene with Neil, in reality, his chest was as heated as a boiling caldron. The idea that Lagan could have taken advantage of Candy’s naïveté sent his rage to the sky. Had he not been such a skillful performer, he wouldn’t have been able to laugh at Lagan’s words out loud. In fact, for a brief moment he had been almost taken in by Neil’s lies but had reacted just in time to preserve his unruffled demeanor.

Whatever had happened, Terrence was not going to allow Lagan the satisfaction of thinking that he had succeeded in affecting him. Ultimately, his had been the last ace to win the hand. However, while he walked in the direction of the ballroom; he was still fuming.

On his return, the couples were again dancing. This time a well-known tango –despite the disapproval of the elderly ladies – was playing in the air. Hastily, Terrence’s eyes swept the dance floor to find Candy, until he finally spotted her golden mane behind the shoulder of a blond man, whom he could immediately recognize as Archibald Cornwell.

The thermometer of his tolerance had surpassed its limits. Seeing Candy dancing with other men was never his favorite view, but he could still forebear it. He knew it was expected that an engaged lady would dance a piece or two with someone else besides her fiancé during a party. But a tango, in which the dancers have practically to intertwine their legs, was out of the question. Too angry after his recent encounter with Neil, the young man didn’t hesitate to approach the dancing pair.

“Candy, may I have a word with you?” Terrence interrupted with serious tone.

“Didn’t you learn to wait your turn while a lady is dancing with someone else?” asked Archibald, visibly upset, as he stopped his dancing.

“Can it wait for a minute or two, Terry?” Candy asked a bit nervous, observing the hostile glances exchanged by the two men.

“No, it can’t. I need to talk to you about a pressing matter,” he insisted, irrationally making up the first excuse he could think of to snap her up out of the ballroom.

Seeing that the other couples were starting to notice the awkward scene, Candy presented his excuses to Archie –who did his best to remain civil just for her sake– and left the room following Terrence.

They walked through the corridors until they reached Albert’s office. Candy, who had remained uncharacteristically silent, entered the room hoping that Terrence would have a good excuse for dragging her out of the party in such a rude manner. She waited until the door was closed to speak up her mind.

“Could you please explain what was so pressing to take me out in the middle of the dance?” she asked, “Is there a problem with your mother?”

“No, she’s perfectly fine. She sends you her regards,” Terrence replied coldly, still unable to regain his composure.

“Then, what is it?” she demanded, feeling her temper rising. The anger evident in her voice only served to trigger Terrence’s harsh reaction.

“Do you think you can go dancing the tango with any man you wish?” he blurted furiously.

Candy’s eyes opened wide. She couldn’t believe her ears. Was this his problem? Jealous, again? This was too much to bear, she thought.

“What are you talking about? I was dancing with my cousin Archie. He is not any man!” she replied angrily.

“We know very well he is not your cousin for real. Not too long ago he had a huge crush on you, so I believe he should be taking care of his wife instead of oozing his suave ways at you in a dance way too risqué for my taste. As for you, Candy, if you’re ever going to do the tango, you’ll do it with me and that’s it.”

Now, that was the end of Candy’s endurance. As much as she loved Terrence, she was not a woman to allow anyone –including him– to maneuver her.

“You must be out of your mind, Terrence!” she yelled and this time he flinched at her explosive words. “It might be difficult for you to understand, lucky as you are to have a father and a mother, that for this orphan, Albert, Archie and Annie are my family even if their blood doesn’t run through my veins. So, Archie is my cousin, whether you like it or not, and even when I marry you, that will not change. Whenever I want, I’ll dance with my cousin as much as it appeals to my fancy. I’ll be your wife, not your slave.”

At these last words, the young woman stormed out of the room leaving behind a very vexed fiancé.



The rest of the evening had not run smoothly. The couple had returned to the party separately and Terrence had presented his excuses to retire even before the New Year started. Candy, being the daughter of the host, had to remain, even against her inclination, until the whole excitement of the New Year countdown and subsequent congratulatory expressions had passed.

Albert understood that something amiss had happened between the couple. Yet, knowing that they were a pair of wildcats, he expected that a good deal of fights would be inevitable between them. Since it was far beyond his power to do anything about it, he just let it flow.

While Albert enjoyed his evening as corresponded to his optimistic nature, Terrence was upstairs pacing his chamber with a mood way far from Albert’s Socratic peace. The actor reviewed the events of the evening and still too upset to acknowledge his fault, killed the last minutes of the year and received the New Year brooding and boiling in anger.

Downstairs, the party went on long after midnight. It wasn't until past three in the morning that the silence began to reign in the manor house. As if the quiescence of the hour had a sort of soothing effect, Terrence's temper slowly abated. It was then when he realized that he had eventually allowed Neil's malicious comments to enrage him and made him lose control, hitting the person that least deserved the blow his rage.

"I'm such a clot⁴⁹!" he said aloud, rubbing his forehead nervously.

"I still wonder at her willingness to marry me," he continued thinking, already set in his usual self-deprecatory mood. Suddenly, a unexpected thought assaulted him: *"What if she is reconsidering? No . . . it couldn't be. . . she loves me. . . doesn't she? . . . but . . . what woman would want to live the rest of her life with a jealous psychopath like me!"*

This last idea made him shudder in panic. He left the armchair where he had been seated for the last hour and started to anxiously walk across the chamber. Terrified, he eyed the clock over the mantelpiece. It was fifteen past three. The party was finally over. Would she still be awake?

He hesitated for a few minutes more. For a moment, he thought that it would be a lot wiser to wait for the morning. Perhaps if she slept for a few hours, she would be a lot calmer and willing to hear his apologies. But then, he feared that she could be awake, making the resolution to break the engagement. If he waited till morning, it could be too late. After all, when she had broken up with him in New York, it had only taken her a few minutes to make up her mind. He knew that once her mind set on something, her resolve could be unwavering. How had he gotten himself into such a predicament? Terrence hated his own guts! No matter how old he turned, when it was about Candy, he was still a wretched fool, unable to control his emotions.

Finally, he came out of his room and walked in the direction of her chambers, still undecided whether he would dare to knock. When he reached there, he stopped for a second. Terrence sighed heavily, whilst he rested his forehead and both of his hands on her door.

"I'm dying to talk to you, my love," he called her in his thoughts.

However, since no light could be seen under the door, he suspected she was already asleep. He was not as selfish as to wake her up. He was gathering the courage to go back to his room to wait for daylight, when he distinctively heard a convulsive gasp coming from her chamber. She was sobbing!

⁴⁹ A clot – British offensive slang for "a dim wit"

“Candy?” He called her, knocking softly. The sobs waned and a total silence ensued.

“Candy . . . please, open. I need to talk to you,” he pleaded again, but still no answer came.

He was about to go back to his own room when he heard the locks unfastening. Under the dim light of the corridor, he could barely descry her blond curls turned almost copper-like in the darkness. She had opened the door just a couple of inches without saying a word.

“Candy!” he called her again, his voiced turned into a plea.

“Terry? . . . You shouldn’t be here at this hour,” she finally spoke huskily.

“I know. It will be just a minute,” he insisted.

Candy stepped back in order to let him in. She hoped that in the darkness of the room, Terrence would fail to see that she had been crying. Therefore, she didn’t turn on the lamps, but Terrence was not fooled. He was sure that he had heard her sobbing and even when only the moonlight coming from the windows lit the room, his eyes easily confirmed his suspicions.

The young man closed the door behind him and stood there for a second, looking at her.

“I . . . I’m sorry. . . .Please, forgive me,” he said in almost a whisper.

Candy looked at him, clenching her fists, without being able to say or do anything for a while, fighting hard to control her reactions. Eventually, her repressed emotions cluttered in her throat until it was impossible to stop her tears from flowing again.

“No . . . I beg you. Don’t cry,” he pleaded in his sweetest tone, gathering her into his embrace.

Instinctively, as she found her face buried in his tailcoat jacket, she rested both of her hands around his waist. Still sobbing, the young woman inhaled deeply. His wood and amber fragrance invaded her nostrils and soothed her soul.

“I’m sorry too, Terry!” she finally said, her words muffled on his chest.

“You shouldn’t! It was my entire fault,” he replied, resting his chin on top of her head.

“But if I had reacted less harshly”

“Hush, my love,” he murmured, basking in the softness of her curls between his fingers, “Just say that you forgive me, and I’ll leave, so you can sleep.”

As an answer, he distinctively felt that she was now pressing him tighter within her arms.

“I do! But don’t go just now,” Candy said timidly.

Terrence was ecstatic. Only a few minutes before, he had feared that she could cancel the engagement and she was now asking him to tarry in her bedroom. Unable to utter his gratefulness, he only held her closer. She allowed him to embrace her a bit longer, and then, feeling the need to talk to him some more, she took him by the hand, conducting him to sit by her side on the window seat. Through the panes, the moon shed its light over their faces.

"I'm sorry our New Year's Eve went so wrong. I couldn't even wish you a Happy New Year," she said wistfully as she took his hands to kiss them.

When her lips touched his knuckles, she immediately felt that his right hand was swollen.

"What happened to you?" she asked, worried. Even in the darkness it was obvious that Terrence's hand was bruised.

"It's . . . it's nothing," he replied retrieving his hand. How could he have forgotten that her trained eye would easily notice the contusion?

"Terry, don't lie to me! Your hand looks as though you had been punching the walls," she insisted.

"I told you it is nothing!" he said again, not willing to open such unpleasant subject, especially not now that they were just making up; not ever, if he could prevent it.

Terrence covered his swollen hand with the other. He saw her again. She looked so beautiful under the moonlight, her face without make-up, and simply clothed in a silk robe with Oriental patterns. He approached his face to kiss her, but she averted her face.

Confused by her rejection he looked at her questioningly. Her intense gaze mutely told him her conditions to restart further intimacies.

"All right, all right! If you insist on knowing everything! I gave Neil a couple of blows," he finally admitted, hoping that she would be satisfied with just the plain facts.

"You did what? Why? When?" she blurted in confusion.

Even when he felt annoyed by her insistence, Terrence found her successive questions and astonished face comical, and the fact that her robe slightly opened as she moved, revealing her cleavage, beguiling.

"Too many questions. . ." he replied. "Let's see if I can answer in one sentence and promise me you will forget about it after that. I hit Neil's face, after I took my mother's call, because he is a blooming bastard. There, you had it all in a nutshell."

If Terrence had thought that Candy's eyes couldn't be bigger, she proved him wrong as she opened them as big as saucers, at his words.

“Just like that?” she asked bewildered. “Neil must have said or done something to provoke you. . .”

“Of course, he did, but I don’t want to talk about it.”

This time Candy narrowed her eyes unwilling to close the topic without further inquiries. She had known Neil for long enough to understand that he was not one to physically attack a stronger opponent as Terrence was. No, if Neil had provoked Terrence to the point that the latter had resorted to violence, the initial provocation must have been verbal and very serious.

“Terry, what exactly did he say . . . was it something about me?” she questioned him, unwilling to yield in her interrogatory.

“Damn! How can she be so perceptive at times!” he thought frustrated. For a moment, he didn’t know what to say. He had to admit that Lagan had thrust his blatant words aiming right at his weakest spot.

“Suffice to say that on your wedding night you will realize someone else was there before you. We’ll have something in common, after all, Grandchester.”

As if pricked by a thorn at this recollection, the man stood up, his hands in his pockets.

“Please, Terry. What did he tell you?” Candy insisted, standing up behind him and reaching for his shoulder with her right hand.

Terrence didn’t know how Candy had managed to make him speak that much. Nevertheless, he was determined not to say more.

Despite his resolve, the young woman insisted again, convinced that his reticence implied that something really serious had transpired that evening.

“He told me about the time he sent you a message pretending to be me,” he finally yielded to her, after a moment of silence, his back still turned.

“That? . . . He has no shame! . . . And no brains either. . . Why would he tell you something that would only make you enrage and attack him? He’s still the same idiot,” she giggled lightly.

Terrence, who hadn’t noticed he was holding his breath, finally exhaled. He was certain that Lagan had only been toying with half-truths to torture him; however, in the back of his mind remained the doubt that perhaps . . . Now, noticing that Candy could see humor in such a revelation, he felt a bit relieved. Had Neil done something to Candy, she surely would be affected at the simple mention of the incident. That reassurance notwithstanding -Terrence

hated to admit it even to himself- he had many other questions about that day, but it would have been indelicate to pose them. So, he remained silent.

Candy began to understand Terrence's harsh reactions that evening. Though she couldn't justify his lack of self-control, she figured that Neil's account of the event must have been unpleasant enough to put him in the worst of moods.

"I should have prevented this," she said, one hand resting on her waist with her elbow turned outwards, while the other hand scratched her forehead. "I should have told you this before. His account of the story was surely exaggerated at his convenience."

"I thought as much," he replied turning to see her.

"Now, I must tell what truly happened," she concluded as she walked a few steps away from the window.

"There's no need Candy. It's all in the past. I didn't even want you to know about my incident with Lagan."

"Perhaps it is in my past, since it happened so long ago, but it is something new for you. Let me tell you the story."

Candy sat this time on her unmade bed, placing each hand on the edge of the mattress. He kept standing up in front of her.

"It was a few months after our breakup. By springtime," she began. "I was already working at the Happy Clinic, in Chicago. That afternoon, when I finished my shift, a man was waiting for me outside. I hadn't seen him in my whole life, but he appeared quite decent. So, I didn't perceive anything amiss when he talked to me. He told me that a gentleman wanted to see me. He gave me your name."

He lowered his eyes at this last sentence, feeling indirectly responsible.

"Once I heard that, I couldn't think anymore! Days before, I had found out about your struggles keeping up with the pressures of your career and the rumors of your drinking problem. I knew they were a symptom of the pain you were undergoing. The more I read in the papers about it, the more I worried about you. I couldn't even sleep at night, just thinking that you were suffering even more than me."

At this point, her voice had turned impassioned, and his heart shrank at this new proof of her constant love for him.

"When that man told me you were looking for me, all I could think of was running to you. I would have given anything to help you . . . to make sure that you would be fine. So, when the

man took me in a car several miles away from Chicago, I didn't have the presence of mind to suspect any treachery."

The realization of the great peril in which she had put herself for his sake made his blood run faster within his veins.

"We finally arrived at a villa in the middle of nowhere. Even then, that didn't raise my suspicions either. It was not until I entered the house and Neil appeared in the living room that it dawned on me that I had fallen into a trap. He locked the door behind him. I was so mad at myself for allowing him to set me up so easily!"

She made a pause here, knowing that the following part of the narrative was not going to be easy for Terrence.

"Then, Neil started babbling nonsense about how convenient it would for me if I married him. I couldn't believe his nerve. When I rejected him for the hundredth time, he threatened me with forcing me to marry him. My sole idea at that moment was to leave at once. I ordered him to give me the keys. He refused."

She stopped again. The recollection of the events she had tried so forcefully to forget brought her a new comprehension of the events. Now, more mature and worldly-wise, the realization of the danger she had been in horrified her. She also began to guess what sort of falsehood Neil had used to upset Terrence.

"What happened then, Candy?" he asked, worried at her silence, coming closer to her.

"Well, you know Neil, he's anything but a gentleman. . .

Candy looked at Terrence, and the expression of terror in his darkened blue eyes confirmed her suspicions.

"The jerk hugged me, taking me by surprise, and attempted to force a kiss on me."

Terrence's face turned red.

"But he has always been a wimp and a coward. Even a small woman like me can outdo him if she wants to. I scratched his face hard, gave him a low blow, and pushed him with all my might till he fell back. While he was still there, whining, I picked up the key, which had fallen out of Neil's pocket, and went out running. He didn't attempt to chase me."

"Holy God!" he cried falling on his knees in front of her, his hands holding her face, almost trembling, "To think that he could have . . . and just because of me! I don't know what I would have done if he had. . ."

Weary with so many emotions in just a few hours, he instinctively searched her lips with his, until they met in a kiss that was pregnant with longing and pent-up passion. Since they had arrived in Chicago, they hadn't had many opportunities to enjoy such intimacy. There had always been someone around, either a relative or a servant, whose intrusive presence wouldn't give them a respite. Now, in the middle of the darkened room, only the sound of their lips coupling repeatedly could be heard.

Candy sensed that this time his kisses had a different overtone. Before, he had always teased her lips softly before deepening the caress. In this occasion he had penetrated her mouth in one single, hungry thrust. There was something so passionate in the way he was now holding her, that she had had to prop her weight on her elbows, over her pillow.

Soon, his lips were not satiated by stationing in her mouth, and advanced in wet waves to her cheeks and then to her neck. She heard him saying something, but his voice was muffled by her own skin, and she couldn't understand him at first. As she didn't answer, he spoke to her ears once more.

"Tell me nothing happened that night. Please, I need you to say that!" he pleaded.

"Nothing happened, Terry," she said almost panting under the force of his caresses.

"But he touched you!" he growled, as his weight forced her to recline on her back; his body poised to lie on top of hers, "Where did he touch you? Did he kiss you?" He insisted feverishly.

"No! I didn't let him," she whispered, unable to say more, shocked by the electric current sent by his lips kissing her naked ear lobe in an unexpected, sensuous fondle, as his tepid tongue stroke her.

Before either of them could calculate the intensity of the fireworks that exploded inside them, the young man was lost claiming her. The rubbing movements of their bodies thus meshed, loosened her robe, partly revealing the soft swell of her breast. Even in the darkness, his pupils dilated at the sight and his lips followed his eyes. Her taste was enticing. Under this new touch, almost like soft, desperate bites on her décolletage, Candy perceived once again that strange sensation so much like a lurch or a spasm inside her lower belly, which sent warmth radiations across her entire body. She intuitively understood that it was him, his caresses, his smell, and strong hold over her body that were igniting these reactions. She also comprehended that these sensations represented unmistakable proof that she was getting ready to give herself to him.

She felt scared of the unknown, but at the same time, she was unable to act against her own desires. Therefore, instead of reacting according to her fears, she simply responded by holding him closer to her body. Under the fire of his hands roaming slowly across her legs

and hips, she fuzzily understood that her longing for him was stronger than her reservations. Her only will was to give him whatever he asked from her. In his head, the only thought was that of possessing her.

Under the moonlight that filtered through the windowpanes, the twelve red tulips seemed to shine. Deep within the bright corollas, their velvety black core resembled the burning charcoal of a passion long withheld.

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Capítulo 8

Ballade 1, Opus 23

The warm aroma of coffee caressed her tongue in each slow sip she took. It was the first day of the New Year and Candy knew that the whole household would not wake up till midday. She was glad about it. Since it was just nine o'clock, she expected to have enough time to sort the jumble of feelings that threatened to explode from her chest into a million sparks.

She felt just as new and inexperienced as the year that just began. This newness was the most delicious sensation she had ever felt. Leisurely sat in her favorite armchair, facing the French windows in her chambers, she drank her coffee savoring it slowly. In one hand, she held the letter that had greeted her when she had woken up that morning. On her fingertips, she could still feel the distinctive texture of the skin that the previous night had merged with hers, into a new unit of which she was now an essential part.

The young woman felt the morning chill filtering through the sheer material of the white curtains. She rested her head on the back of the seat and left her mug aside. With her right hand, she fastened the silk scarf she had loosely tied around her neck, when the maid had entered the chamber to serve the coffee. Candy knew her sensitive white skin would show the pink marks he had left across her body. She smiled and felt grateful that the winter cold would allow her to cover the marks without raising any suspicions.

Candy smiled anew. Such a unique occasion required a new smile and she had invented one that morning. Still smiling, she thought that it was curious that she did not feel ashamed. In

fact, the only thing she regretted now was having decided against such happiness ten years before. She sighed and read his letter again.

January 1st, 1925

My love,

As much as I would have liked to stay with you until you woke up, I deemed it was best to leave before any indiscreet eye could pry into things that only concern you and me. Therefore, I hope you can forgive my leaving as a thief who flees when it's still dark. I promise that very soon, I'll share with you many dawns, days, sunsets, and evenings without any partings and nobody will have anything to say against it.

As I am writing this, I realize that I have dwelled on Earth for more than twenty-seven years, ignoring that the only thing that truly matters is the state of ultimate bliss a soul can achieve when blending into another soul. Last night, for the first time, I was given a glimpse of such a blessing thanks to your generosity. For this gift, just on the anniversary of the first time we met, I will be eternally grateful. I would gladly wait for twelve more years to win the right to be called your lover, if that were necessary; however, as circumstances stand, I sincerely hope that no more waiting will ever be required.

Passionately yours

J.G.

P.S. I took your diary with me. I'll give it back to you as soon as I finish reading it a dozen times.

Candy closed her eyes savoring his words. Though brief, this was, without question, the first love letter he had ever written to her. No playful banter to hide his feelings, no masks, no small talk . . . just the complete exposition of his bare soul. It was the written proof that what had happened a few hours before had not been a dream . . . Well, she had to accept that the postscript was still one of his usual pranks. Albert had returned the diary she had written in Saint Paul's Academy along with Terrence's old letters just a few days before, when he had visited Pony's Home. Now, Terrence had shamelessly stolen it, but today she would forgive him for everything. As another sip of coffee flowed down her throat, she remembered the intimate details of their encounter the previous night.

She had never imagined that a soul could be virtually disrobed in the act of lovemaking. As profound as her connection with Terrence had always been, nothing they had shared before could compare to that deep feeling of belonging to one another that had sprouted from their collision the previous evening. This man she had just given herself to had practically transfigured in front of her eyes. As he unclothed his body, he had also opened up his inner being to a degree she could hardly believe possible.

The young woman sighed once more. She wondered to what extent their communication had been of the verbal kind and how much of it had been only through their skins and fluids. She could not differentiate now one from the other.

Had his avowal of his loving her at first sight been verbal? How had he conveyed his passionate urge to protect her? Had it been by his great efforts to be gentle at the ultimate moment of taking her, even against the force of his passion? Or had he actually whispered it to her ears? Did she use her own voice to confess how she had desired him or so long? Had she dared to ask him to take her more intensely? Or had she said all that only through her moans? She couldn't say, but she knew all that now, and her heart was overflowing with certainty.

In a way, this knowledge scared her, because she understood that the man was in her hands and she was in his in the same manner. If she failed to love him as he needed, he would be hurt beyond repair, and she would be hurting herself in the process. The same could be said if he failed in the same endeavor. Because the ultimate result of their union was this sort of fusion in which the two of them were now melted. She only hoped she could live up to the challenge of loving this frightfully possessive man, so utterly vulnerable, and incredibly strong at the same time.

Now, how was she going to face the world this morning and mask all these joys? She knew not, but right now, that did not rank high in her list of important things to do. In fact, the only thing she really wanted to do was to get out of her room and find him, if only to bask at the sight of him.



Despite his swollen hand, the piano keys seemed to dance under his fingers that morning. After the initial dramatic chord followed by several bright arpeggios, a sweet waltz-like rhythm with a hypnotic theme started to fill the air of the room. Soon, the scales and chords flowed in a frenetic succession. This ballade had always made him think of her, passionate and yet sweet, soft in her own way and at the same time full of an extraordinary force, at times playful, others wise and, above all, kindhearted. He had always known she was like that, ever since he first laid eyes on her. Even more, for years, he had suspected that those traits of her personality that made her so explosive at both, anger and joy, would make her a wonderful lover. He had not been wrong . . . Oh yes! She had been all that in his arms.

Chopin seemed to provide the perfect tune so that his heart could sing that morning: “*She’s mine! Only mine! . . .*” What an overpowering feeling running through his veins! Was he the same man he had been so far? No! He had been reborn this blessed morning of January and his new self was a man that knew what happiness was.

Had anyone told him in his years of great dejection that one day he would wake up with the taste of her body –every inch of it– imprinted irrevocably in his mouth, he would have considered it cruel mockery. But here he was, just about seven months after he had dared to write his inarticulate letter, turned into the one owner of her soul and body. That was a state of fulfillment beyond compare.

To think that she had given him the rights of a husband even before their marriage were dutifully sanctioned by all authorities was exultant. When things happened, neither of them could think clearly. They both gave and took freely, no rational considerations in between. Then, when it was all over and peace replaced frenzy, it was his turn to fear. He had called himself a scoundrel and marveled at his talent for breaching propriety twice the same evening, the latter occasion being worse than the first one.

Terrence smiled remembering that she had been the one to appease his apprehensions. His heart could barely hold his joy when she had told him that she didn’t regret what had happened.

“How could I feel ashamed of being yours?” she had said resting her golden head on his shoulder, “I know this is not what I’ve been taught, but I can’t understand how it could be wrong before God, when he knows that in my heart, I’ve always been your wife, and always will.”

The original theme repeated itself, flowing from Terrence’s fingers, while he used the eyes of his mind, to see saw himself kissing her hair and whispering *“thank you”*. At times, the simplest words can be charged with the deepest of meanings.

“I wish I could do something as grand and generous for you as you have done for me, tonight!” he had said between kisses.

“Say you’ll love me forever.”

“That’s an easy task. I can’t do otherwise.”

The notes interlaced now, giving the illusion of waves that lapped over the sand. Then, they returned to the waltz-like theme, this time in crescendo, with fuller chords, in a more dramatic version. Finally, they burst in a cascade, falling for passionate seconds to end in a final decisive chord in G minor.

A soft applause cut the silence that followed. Even before Terrence turned his back, still sat in front of the grand piano, he knew it was her. When he finally saw Candy, dressed in a red turtleneck sweater under a gray jacket and matching straight skirt, he stretched his right arm, and she answered coming to him. He made room for her on the piano stool, and she sat next to him, her legs and body opposite his. He didn’t let her say a word before he had thoroughly kissed her lips and caressed her face in mute recognition of her features under daylight.

“Good morning, my wife,” he murmured, holding her tightly.

“Good morning, husband. I had dreamed of hearing you play again!” she replied looking at him adoringly.

“I didn’t do it for many years, but for the last months I have been in the mood to practice again. Did you like my Chopin?”

“I have always liked this ballade; however, you could be playing Chopsticks, and I would like it just as much, because it is you playing.”

“If you are going to flatter me that way, you’re not going to help me much to improve my technique,” he complained playfully.

“Maybe not, but perhaps, if you let me see your hand I can help in some other way,” she suggested taking his hand in hers.

“It seems that the ice bag you used last night worked well. I think it is less swollen,” he said, thinking that he would gladly punch Neil again, just to repeat the erotic scene of having her fussing about his bruised hand, while they were both in bed, only covered by her sheets.

“I’ll get some Epson salt and ask for a washbowl for you to submerge your hand in a solution for a while,” she tried to stand up to do as she had said, but he did not allow it.

“Later . . . you can give me a complete bath in Epson salts, if you wish, granted that you take the bath with me,” he whispered, his eyes charged with all the hues of blue and green they could command.

She blushed as he made her body recline in his arms, covering her mouth with another ardent kiss. They were just in the middle of it, when a masculine voice coughing made them start. Their lips parted and their faces turned. Candy lifted her torso but did not leave his arms immediately.

“Good morning, Archie!” She said smiling behind the bright pink of her blush, “You rose pretty early.”

“Good morning,” Archibald said barely gathering his wits to respond coherently.

It was strange! Finding his cousin in a passionate embrace with her fiancé had not been as shocking as the overwhelming feeling that invaded him when the couple first looked at him, after they broke the kiss.

Archibald didn’t know himself. His head dictated that he should protect his cousin from this man that could only be back in her life to hurt her again and then leave. Nevertheless, this morning, they both were covered by a strange aura, as if they were immersed in a private world in which Archie was only an intruder. The feeling was intangible but so real that he didn’t know what to do or say.

“Is Annie already up?” asked Candy, waking Archie up from the haze of his internal confusion.

“Yes, she’s with Stair right now, getting him ready for brunch,” Archie finally managed to say.

“Then, I think I’ll join her. I want to ask her if she has some Epson salt. Would you, gentlemen, mind if I leave you for a while?” Candy asked standing up.

Terrence did not let go of her hand, which he had been holding possessively all the while. Candy, already standing by his side, exchanged with him one of those private glances, and he reluctantly released her hand.

“We’ll meet you in the breakfast room in fifteen minutes. What do you say?” she asked them both already moving towards the door.

“All . . . all right,” acknowledged Archie, slowly recovering his ability to think coherently.

Terrence only assented with his head, already reading Candy’s purpose in leaving him alone with Archibald.

“This is one of your typical conciliatory moves, Freckled Tarzan. But you’ll have to pay me back for this . . .”

An awkward silence reigned for a while, as soon as the young woman closed the door behind herself.

In his usual aloof manner, Terrence closed the piano lid and walked towards the window, feeling the need to light up his morning cigarette, but finally deciding against it. The curtains were opened, so he simply chose to cross his arms over his chest, stare at the garden view, and ignore Archibald’s presence. He was not in the mood to talk to someone who so decidedly disliked him.

Archibald sat on Albert’s armchair near the fireplace and taking the newspaper that lay on the nearby table, pretended to read for a while. He eyed Terrence’s motionless figure by the window from time to time, wondering if he should start the conversation. Archie had wished to have the opportunity to talk to his former schoolmate since his arrival. However, now that Candy had so obviously given him the chance, he didn’t know how to go about it.

Feeling the need of caffeine running in his veins to activate his brain, Archibald decided to pick up the phone and ordered it. Not too long after he had done so, a footman entered with the coffee service on a silver tray.

“Care to join?” said Archibald to Terrence, breaking the silence between the two.

Terrence, who had been entertaining his mind with the most agreeable thoughts about the previous evening, barely shook his head to reject the invitation. Despite all the years he had been living in the United States, he still couldn’t understand the fascination that Americans had for coffee. He thought that he would rather wait for some very strong black tea to begin his morning. He knew that Candy would take care of having tea prepared as he liked it when they met for breakfast. *“Should I be concerned that I’m allowing her to spoil me in this manner? . . . Nah!”* he cheekily told himself, smiling inwardly.

While Terrence turned his back again to continue his apparent careful inspection of the Ardleys’ garden, the servant left the two men alone once more.

“Will you stay there, staring at the window till brunch?” asked Archibald, unable to find a friendlier way to start the conversation.

"I was planning on it, but I suppose you have a better idea," Terrence responded, turning to see Archibald and lazily walking towards the fireplace. As he moved, he took his Alfred Dunhill's lighter from one of his pockets.

"I thought this could be a good moment to discuss something with you," Archibald said behind his cup of coffee.

Terrence, playing with his gold lighter, leaned his elbow against the mantelpiece, while resting part of his weight on his left leg.

"Let me guess," Terrence replied in his usual mocking tone, as he raised his eyebrow, "you want to say that you don't approve my marrying your cousin."

Archie's teeth clenched at Terrence infuriating manner of putting things so forwardly.

"I wasn't going to say it that way, but I must admit that such is the bottom line," Archie admitted, leaving aside his cup to ready himself for the verbal match.

"Then, it is my turn to say that I don't care a damn," challenged Terrence now looking straight at Archie's eyes.

"I was expecting a response like that. But whatever you or I might think about the opinions of the other is not relevant. My point here is to warn you that you'd better not blow it up this time," blurted Archie, with a threatening glare in his blue eyes.

"Please, Cornwell, I have had enough drama in my life, on and out stage," riposted Terrence, not disguising his annoyance, "Believe me, I don't need this melodramatic talk in which you threaten me with death if I ever make Candy suffer again."

"Well, if you had known better, you would have stayed out of her life and let her be happy on her own!" Said Archie. This time he left his seat to meet Terrence's height.

"It is very easy for you to say that. You, who have everything, a lovely wife, a charming child . . ."

"Oh, please, Grandchester! Are you going to blame me, because I am happy? Happiness is something that happens to people who work on it. Instead, all you've done is to push it away."

"I know very well what I've done!" Accepted Terrence, his voice raising, guilt and anger mixed in his tone.

"No, you don't, you, arrogant fool!" yelled Archie, his face turning red, "You have no idea of how difficult it was for her to recover after you left her so cowardly. You want to know what happened because of your catastrophic idea of inviting her to New York?"

Terrence did not answer this time. A fast blink and a sudden tension in his temples were his only reaction.

“Well, you must know that after you broke her heart so callously, she walked under the snow for hours until she caught pneumonia,” continued Archibald, taking advantage of his interlocutor’s silence. “She fainted on the train because of the high fever. People from the train station brought her to this house, unconscious! She, who had always been healthy and strong, was so delirious and pale that we feared for her life!”

This time all colors bleached from Terrence’s face, but he did not interrupt Archibald.

“And all, just because you couldn’t act like a man and love her as she deserves. If your damned-aristocratic honor was forcing you to give your word to another woman, couldn’t you have spared Candy the humiliation of travelling hundreds of miles just to be dumped?”

“Do you think I hadn’t thought about that thousands of times for the last eight years? Do you think I rejoice in my stupidity and cowardice?” Terrence finally exploded, “Believe me, Cornwell, I may have not known the particulars that you have just told me, but I am perfectly aware that I hurt her. I’m not proud of it.”

“Then, if you knew what shame means, you wouldn’t have dared to come back! She has been fine without you for a long time!” responded Archibald raising his voice again and turning even redder with anger.

Terrence received the verbal blow stoically. Inwardly, he acknowledged that the same thought had been in his own mind as well. In fact, the agony he had undergone before sending Candy his first letter after eight years of silence had partly owed its long duration to the same regretful thought. For the first time in the conversation, Terrence lowered his eyes.

“I cannot blame you for thinking that way. I was of the same mind for some time.”

The unexpected change in Terrence’s tone took Archibald by surprise. If he hadn’t been so convinced that Grandchester was not capable of feeling shame, he would have said that he had sounded truly repented.

“Then, what made you change your mind?” inquired Archibald frowning in doubt.

“The realization that I’m a just a windless sail without her!” was Terrence honest reply. “I may be a bloody bastard, but I’m not stupid. I do not ignore that in this marriage, mine is all the gain, Cornwell. A bleak man like me, with a colorless life as the one I’ve always led, has very little to do with one that makes the sun shine, as she does. But I’m a selfish fellow, if you wish, when she opened her door, I couldn’t refrain from entering in her life and offering my heart. Would you have done otherwise in my place? Sincerely, would you?”

This was Archie's time to lower his eyes. He knew very well that, in the past, if given such an opportunity, he would have seized it without thinking.

"No, I wouldn't have done differently," admitted Archie unable to lie on a subject so close to his heart. Moreover, Terrence's words, charged with feeling, had impressed Archibald greatly. Yet, he was not willing to give up so easily. "But then, how can you be sure that this time you will not bring her pain? Last night, for example, was another classic. You cannot hide that you two argued after you took her out of the ballroom so rudely."

"I have no wish to hide what was so evident to your eyes, Cornwell!" Responded Terrence irritated by Archibald's comment, "As much as she loves me, she does not agree with my every whim. I wouldn't like it, if she did. I cannot promise we will never have a crossed word. But I can assure you one thing, what happened before will never be repeated. I won't allow anybody to come in the way between us."

"I wish I could believe your words, Grandchester."

"Words are nothing, Cornwell. Allow time to prove whether I can make her happy or not."

"If you don't . . ."

"I know, I know, I'll be a dead man," allowed Terrence raising both of his hands

"At least on that we can agree," concluded Archibald throwing himself on the couch nearby.

Terrence understood that the match was over –for the time being. Thus, feeling a bit more relaxed after the unpleasant things had been said, he took his cigarette case and opened it in front of Archibald.

"Butt yourself⁵⁰," he offered.

Archibald eyed him suspiciously.

"Come on, don't be such a skeptic. There's nothing dodgy⁵¹ about these cigarettes," Terrence said taking a cigarette himself.

"All right!" Archibald accepted it, if still a bit reluctantly, "But only one, because I'm trying to quit. You should think about that too. You know Candy dislikes it."

"You can say that again!"

⁵⁰ Butt yourself – 1920s slang meaning "take a cigarette"

⁵¹ Dodgy – British slang meaning "not to be trusted", "dangerous".

Terrence smiled beneath the smoke of his cigarette. He imagined that it was just fine that Archie was blissfully ignorant of what had happened in Candy's room in the small hours of the day. Otherwise, their little argument would not have turned out so well.



Brunch was a rather informal affair that day. Only Albert, the Cornwells, and the engaged couple shared the table without the presence of other relatives, including Aunt Elroy, who had breakfast at her usual hour in her quarters. The tensions between Archie and Terrence seemed to have relaxed a bit after their conversation and Candy prided herself on that a little victory. It was a pity, however, that she couldn't enjoy it at the most because other preoccupations were keeping her mind busy.

Candy was afraid that the extra doses of happiness she had taken the previous evening could become too obvious at some point during the meal. Besides, it was most unsettling to be looking at Terrence and be reminded by his mere presence of the things that had transpired between them. What was even worse, that morning, even the most innocent thing seemed to trigger an intimate memory.

As she spread butter on her toast, and Terrence was immersed in a conversation with Albert, she couldn't avoid thinking how this nonchalant man had transfigured in front of her eyes.

"Touch me!" He had begged her, taking her hand in his and leading her to caress his cheeks. Slowly, she had outlined his firm jaw and strong neck, little by little becoming bolder, until she did not need more guidance. He then had closed his eyes, allowing her to witness his absolute surrender to the feelings that had subdued his will for so long. She had clearly distinguished his breathing shortening its rhythm and the skin of his bare shoulders and arms turning rough as he shuddered under her touch. At the same time, Candy had marveled at the effect that his skin had under her palm. It was as if an emboldening force radiating from him invaded her, and yet she had also felt as if she had been falling, her whole being weakening.

"Would you pass me the butter?" Annie repeated for the third time, finally startling Candy.

"Oh yes! Here you are," she responded a bit embarrassed for her lapse.

Candy wondered how she was going to keep a pretense of normality. Terrence sent her a look of understanding across the table, but it only provoked another flashback that disrupted her even more.

"This is the way it should have always been between you and me. This is what I had planned for us long ago," he had whispered to her ears just the moment before consummating their union.

Unable to hold her flush anymore, the young woman excused herself for a minute and went to the bathroom to wash her face.

Fortunately, nobody in the group, except Terrence, had noticed anything amiss.

Even under the effect of the cold water, once in the toilet, Candy's blush did not give way that easily. On the contrary, in the provisional privacy of the bathroom more vivid images of the peak of their first encounter flooded her mind.

She saw herself, with her hands grabbing the covers, while she panted in increasing despair. To be possessed by him, with such an unmistakable force pouring inside her, seemed to be at the same time savagely primeval and utterly spiritual. Her legs had instinctively curled and hugged him with a firm grip. His moans had welcomed her gesture.

Thus, entrapped by her legs and arms, he had started to call her, giving her all sort of sweet appellations she had never believe possible from his mouth, until his words transfigured in only moans that melted with her own.

Candy rested her head on the cold surface of the marble, elated by the memory, her hands shaking as if she were experiencing again her climax. It took her more than ten minutes to recover her composure before she could re-enter the breakfast room to continue with the meal.

When she came back, it amazed her that Terrence could be so serene. But then, he was the king of masks, she knew well. In fact, if she had read his mind the moment she entered the room, she would have needed another time-out in the toilet. Truth to be told, Candy's petite frame as she moved across the breakfast room to take her seat in front of him, had reminded Terrence of the delicious aftermath they had enjoyed.

She was so light that her weight resting on top of him had been almost imperceptible. Nevertheless, the feeling of her every curvaceous form pressed all over his body was a delight he had been happy to relish. He clearly remembered how he had closed his eyes, while their breathing and pulse normalized, and delved his fingers in her short curls.

"I love you," he had repeated, unaware that he had said it several times during the height of their lovemaking.

"I love you, too, Terry; more than anyone else," she had responded giving him light pecks on his chest.

He hadn't said anything, but the implications of her words had made a tear roll down his cheek. That was precisely what he had craved for, a confession of his being the center and the top of all her affections. His heart could not take less than that. He had sighed deeply and turned his head, feeling that the need to sleep invaded his mind and body.

Among all the many things he wanted to do with her, sleeping together once again ranked in the highest places. Nothing was as intimate and unique. He had only done that with her and was sure he would never do it with another. Yet, that evening he had not slept at all.

"So, where would you go in your honeymoon?" asked Annie timidly, unwittingly interrupting Terrence's pleasurable musings.

"I'm afraid all travelling will have to be postponed for later," he answered in his usual cool tone, always the master of his reactions in front of others.

"Oh really? What a pity! Annie and I travelled to the Caribbean islands on our honeymoon. It was a wonderful experience," interrupted Archibald with a patronizing tone that made Terrence's nerves irk.

"Well, the truth is that I wanted to visit Italy, but the war had just finished the year before we married and most people recommended us to go somewhere else. Europe was too messy back then," explained Annie doing her best to neutralize the effect of her husband's uncalled comment.

"You made a wise decision, I assure you," replied Terrence in his usual collected manner, "I toured in England in 1919. When the season was over, I went back to Rome for a few days to visit a friend from my times as a war entertainer.

"I didn't know that you were working on the Front," rejoined Albert, showing interest in the conversation.

"It was just during the last year of the war," replied Terrence minimizing the importance of that period of his life, which he didn't deem appropriate for polite conversations over a good meal, "I made a good friend during that period, whom I visited in the occasion I'm now referring. In that trip, I observed that, although Rome was untouched, the degree of devastation was obvious in the regions of the interior and, obviously, not fit for pleasure travelers, let alone honeymooners. Whereas now," he added looking at his fiancée with a smile, "I really would like to take Candy for a big tour, but I'm afraid I have already used all my days off and even requested an extra week for the sake of the wedding. As soon as we get to New York, I'll have a new play to prepare."

"I'm sorry to hear that," rejoined Annie politely.

"Don't be, Annie," interjected Candy smiling brightly, "The last thing I would like to do now is travel. I had enough of trains and hotels this last November, and Terry, as much as he's trying to do his best for my sake, he's tired and desirous to be home by now. He's been on the road for over two months."

Terrence, sitting in front of Candy, could not reach for her hand, but the almost imperceptible change of color in his iridescent eyes made her understand that he was pleased with her thoughtfulness. And to add charm upon joy, he could only congratulate himself at the implication in Candy's words. She had said "to be home" and not "his place," suggesting that she was talking about the home that both would share.

"I, on the contrary," interrupted Albert, "never tire of travelling. It is only a pity that I can only do business trips. Georges says that when I went to Africa and Italy, I took all the holidays a man can take for a life time. Isn't it unfair?"

At this last comment all the party burst into laughter.



After brunch, Albert and Terrence had a private discussion about the incident with Neil Lagan. Albert was visibly displeased with his nephew's unpardonable behavior, but Terrence, who was in such a good mood, judged that Neil's lost tooth was enough punishment for the time being. However, Albert considered that a good talk with Neil's father was in order.

While the older man explained Terrence what he was planning to do, the actor had to force himself a great deal to focus and follow Albert's logic. In his mind, all he could think of at the moment was Candy.

In front of the forceful truth of the physical and spiritual communion he had enjoyed with her, everything else seemed irrelevant. Terrence thought that he could learn to enjoy their fights if they would make up in such a pleasurable way each time.

He never thought he would have to thank Lagan for anything, let alone for such a delicious anticipation of his wedding vows. Truth to be told, what had occurred between the two men seemed now almost comical.

He remembered how he and Candy had lain together on each other's arms, after their lovemaking. At some point of their intimate conversation then, he had begun chuckling out of the blue.

"What's so funny, Terry?" she had asked him, curious at his outburst.

"I . . . I was thinking how you kicked Lagan's . . . shall I say, nether regions? –he said for lack of a better expression to use in front of his lady – and knocked him down with a single push. I mean, you were just a petite girl! . . . He's such a nesh wimp⁵²!" Terrence kept chuckling.

"I didn't see it as funny when it happened," she admitted, enjoying Terrence's good humor, *"but now, in retrospective, I have to accept that it is sort of amusing. I must also say that I scratched him badly. He still has a slight scar, on his left cheek."*

"Does he?" he asked laughing louder, *"Lord! I have to confess that I added a new decoration on his face this evening."*

"What did you do?"

"I think . . . I think," practically in stitches, he had had some difficulty to finish his sentence, *"I think he lost one tooth when I punched him."*

"You must be joking!"

"Not at all! My hand is not swollen for nothing," he had said showing his reddened knuckles.

"Oh, your hand! What have I been thinking!" she had said, getting up as if pulled by strings, *"I'll bring something to make the swelling go down."*

She was so seized by her worries for him that did not take notice of his eyes inflamed in lust as he observed her full nakedness when she had stood up.

"I always knew she would become a beauty. Heck! I have a good eye!" he had told himself smugly.

During the conversation, more than once Albert recognized in Terrence's eyes the absent look of a man madly in love. Even masked by his usual standoff bearing, the serenity beneath his every gesture gave away that the young man had made peace with his fiancée. Albert had also noticed the intense and endearing looks that Candy had cast upon him during the meal, so the man thought it was a safe bet to say that they were once again in good terms. As to when the reconciliation had taken place and what had been said between the couple, Albert thought it was best not to ask.

⁵² Nesh wimp – British slang for "pathetic", "effeminate", "sissy".

A man of the world, as Albert was, he understood that his times as Candy's confidant had come to an end. From now on, his little cry-baby would have someone else to turn to along the storms of life. Albert knew that perhaps in some great crisis, she would seek his counsel and support, but only if Terrence was not there for her. And to judge by the actor's possessive nature, he had all intentions to be there all the time.

Not of the jealous kind, Albert took this with philosophy and soon after he explained what he planned to say to Raymond Lagan, the millionaire let his friend go to his fiancée. After all, that day Terrence didn't seem to be at his best for male conversation.



For the Ardlays, the 1st of January was usually a day to spend at home and with family. However, they eventually received callers during the late afternoon, especially those close to the family. During teatime, the Brightons paid a call to the Ardlays and Cornwells. Mr. and Mrs. Brighton had hosted their own big New Year's Party in their mansion the previous evening, but once the said social commitment was over, they wanted to spend the first afternoon of the year with their daughter and her family. They took with them a young niece from Detroit, who was staying with them for the winter season.

When the butler announced the callers, Candy and Annie were in Great Aunt Elroy's Tea Room playing cards, while Stair -sitting in front of them- painted his coloring book. Mrs. Elroy watched over the kid while doing her needle work. The gentlemen were playing pool in the game room in another wing of the house.

As soon as the visitors entered the Victorian-style room, the New Year's greetings and hugs were exchanged and the servants were ordered to bring tea and pastries for the callers. Annie took care to send one of the maids to notify her husband that his parents in law had arrived to visit them. The formal introduction of Miss Sally Brighton was also performed with all propriety, and Sally, who was a vivacious brunette of twenty-four, was greeted and acknowledged by Great Aunt Elroy as "a very charming young lady."

When the footman brought in the tea-service, the ladies had taken their places next to Aunt Elroy and around the tea table. Sitting next to Candy, Annie's cousin carefully observed her surroundings. She had been extremely impressed by the grandiosity of the Ardlays' residence, and now she wanted to take notes of every detail in the room. From the three-sided bay windows to the Japanese accents and the Queen Anne furniture, every aspect of the room spoke of a fortune that had been on the making for three generations.

Sally also observed the smiling Miss Andrew, who was engaging her in conversation. Her golden curls and bright green eyes were indeed the most striking features of her countenance.

Nevertheless, there was something in her demeanor that made Sally suspect that Miss Ardlay was more than just a pretty face. The young woman had heard that Miss Ardlay had been adopted, just as her cousin Annie. So, she had expected to find the same kind of subdued and sweet sort of woman Annie was. To her great surprise, this young woman with sparkling eyes and lively personality was quite the opposite.

Sally was still trying to sketch her interlocutor's character, when Annie brought up the news about Miss Ardlay's engagement and her impending wedding scheduled in just a week-time. The Brightons were just expressing their congratulations to Candice, when the host, his nephew, and future son-in-law came into the rose and lavender room to greet the callers. Sally had been properly lectured by Annie's mother to be especially attentive to Mr. Ardlay, because he was a very eligible bachelor. Nevertheless, once the stately presence of Terrence Graham entered the room, it was impossible for Sally to notice any other man –or human creature– in the tearoom.

Candy secretly smiled seeing Sally's reaction. The blonde could not blame the young visitor for being mesmerized by Terrence's good looks. Candy knew well that most women had the same reaction, but that was of no consequence for her, she thought, *especially* now.

The young woman was happy to be ignored by Sally during the rest of the call. While the other members of the party kept the conversation going, for once, she preferred to remain quiet and observe. Once her mind was not occupied by conversation, it easily flew back to the previous evening.

She saw herself walking through the long and darkened corridors of the manor house, as she went in search of some ice for Terrence's hand. While she walked, she had done her best to assimilate what had just occurred between Terrence and herself. She simply couldn't believe her wantonness! However, if she was honest with herself, she had to admit that she had desired what had happened since they have first slept together in the cabin . . . perhaps even before . . . perhaps at some point of the last eight years, despite her conviction that he was another woman's own, she had dreamed –in her sleep and awake– to be with him in that way.

Of course, her imagination had not been as precise and intense as reality, but her longing for his touch had been basically the same. Oh! To be taken so passionately had been for her all and a lot more than she had ever expected!

Noticing that her hands were slightly shaking at the recollection of his ardent caresses all over her body, she tried to hold them together. While she was trying to calm herself down, she realized that not only she was not ashamed of what had befallen, in all honesty, she was wishing it to happen again, her present light soreness notwithstanding. While she pretended that she

followed the conversation in the tearoom, she remembered what Terrence had told her about his relationship with Susannah.

Despite her generous nature, Candy understood that she had been terribly jealous of Susannah all those years. Now, all of a sudden, she found herself as Terrence's indisputable lover. The previous night, she had not played the role of a fiancée imposed by a misplaced sense of duty, and their union had not been an anonymous and irrelevant sexual encounter, either. Oh no! He had poured his soul in their lovemaking and that made him *irrevocably hers*. They had been together for only a couple of weeks and keeping their relationship chaste had been impossible. He had lived with Susannah for about two years . . . and nothing had happened. The taste of her victory over Susannah and any other woman –Sally included– who had ever desired her place was indescribable! He was hers!

Even in front of the whole party, Candy couldn't stop a smile from appearing on her face.

Terrence, on his own, had been a bit mortified finding the seat next to his fiancée busy by some unknown lady. To make matters worse, the annoying stranger didn't quit staring at him. Unable to change the situation, he sat opposite the ladies and contented himself to revise his pleasant memories.

Privately, he amused himself remembering Candy's angry looks when she had discovered that he had read tidbits of her old diary, while she had gone to bring ice for his hand. She had carelessly left the book lying on her dressing table and he hadn't resisted the temptation of reading. At her return, when she realized what he had in his hands, her colors had gone up to her face in all shades of red.

"That's my diary!" she had screamed half angry and half embarrassed, while she rushed to her bed, with all the intention of recovering her old diary from the obtrusive hands of her lover. *"You shouldn't be prying in my privacy!"* She had argued trying to grab the book without much success, for he was too fast and big for her.

"Your privacy?" he asked chuckling, utterly amused with her reactions, *"But you have welcomed me into it tonight, sweetheart! Do I have to remind you what has just happened?"*

"That doesn't give you the right to read my diary with permission. That's none of your business!" she had insisted blushing even more at his implications.

"Well, for what I have read so far, this diary is very much of my business, because apparently I am the star of the narrative," he had smiled egotistically, raising the diary high enough for her not to be able to reach it.

"I have almost forgotten that you are such a bigheaded fool!"

"Yes, I see that you describe me in such terms along this book, and I'm also a scoundrel, and a rogue."

"Because that is what you are. Give me my diary!"

"But then you also say that I'm kindhearted . . . and that my smile is charming . . . and . . ."

"I must have been crazy when I wrote such things!" she had said, giving up her attempts to recover the diary for a while, while crossing her arms and pouting in frustration.

"Crazy for me?" he asked, approaching her, both kneeling on the bed, in front of each other.

He had come closer, in one of those feline movements of him. Although she was still mad at him for reading her diary without her authorization, she had not resisted his approach.

"I never imagined that you could think of me as a tiger, baby?" he had said hoarsely, very close to her ears.

Candy's eyes had opened wide, understanding how far he had gone in his reading.

"GIVE ME MY DIARY" she had screamed, this time moving faster and managing to scratch his right hand, to which he reacted yelling.

"Ouch! My hand!" he said contorting his face in pain –or at least so he seemed.

When she realized she had unwillingly hurt him, she forgot everything about the diary issue to tend his soared hand.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Terry. I'm so clumsy! Forgive me . . . let me see your hand!" she had begged him.

He had easily complied and let her fuss about his hand as much as she had considered fit.

"Now, that's a good trick to pacify my tigress," he had thought thanking his histrionic skills as he lay back on the pillow to enjoy the pleasure of being spoiled by her.

"I suppose your wedding will be all over the papers next week, Mr. Graham. Will you and Miss Ardlay be married in Chicago?"

Terrence slowly moved his eyes to acknowledge the presence of Sally Brighton, who was now addressing him. The fact that she was trying to begin such a conversation with him, when Candy was seated just next to her was preposterous. Another lady would have asked the bride instead, but it was obvious that Miss Brighton was trying to draw him into a conversation with her.

“You’re wrong, Miss Brighton, Candice and I are not interested in having the press or any other obtrusive presence in the ceremony. It will be a very private affair. Just a handful of our intimate friends and family,” he answered dismissively using his most distant tone.

“But you certainly shouldn’t disappoint your admirers keeping such an important event in secret!” insisted the young lady, and though Terrence’s countenance did not show any changes, Candy knew he was more than exasperated with Sally Brighton’s forwardness.

“As any man in love, Miss Brighton, I am the first one to be interested in divulging the fact that Candice has accepted me as her life companion. This will be appropriately reported in the papers later. But I strongly refuse to have any strangers at my wedding. My admirers, if I truly have any, should know that I have always been a private man. They must be used to my misanthropic ways by now.” he concluded, and as he did, he stood up bowing courtly to the ladies and moved to other side of the room, where the men had gathered to talk to Mr. Brighton.

Miss Brighton held her tongue for the rest of the call.



The day had finally come to an end. Terrence had retired rather early after dinner, but Candy had stayed with Stair for a little longer and accompanied Annie to put him to bed. Once the boy was asleep, Annie had requested her friend a word in private in her own bedroom. Candy thought that Annie wanted to discuss Archie’s slight change of attitude towards Terrence after their conversation that morning. However, when they got into the Cornwells’ chamber, Annie started babbling aimlessly for a while, showing signs of nervousness.

Candy, a bit alarmed by her sister’s uneasiness, took her hands in hers in that reassuring way she had always used since childhood.

“Annie, is anything wrong?” Candy asked looking straight to Annie’s deep grayish blue eyes.

“Wrong?” Annie repeated as lost.

“Anything wrong between you and Archie? Any problem with Alistair?” Candy cued.

"Oh, no! Not at all, Candy. . . it is just. . . that," Annie understood she couldn't go around the bushes anymore, "I . . . I received a call from Miss Pony this morning . . . she asked me something."

"Really?" asked Candy, thinking that it was strange for Miss Pony to request help from Annie, since it was always herself who dealt with most needs in Pony's Home. "What did she ask you?"

"Miss Pony wanted . . . wanted me to talk to you," explained Annie retrieving her hands from Candy's, feeling that hers were sweating.

"About?"

"About your wedding," responded Annie leaving Candy more clueless as to why the preparations of such a simple ceremony could be such a problem.

"About the ceremony? I thought it was all covered! The priest has been engaged for the ceremony, Miss Pony said she would cook and . . .

"Not the ceremony, about the . . . wedding night," Annie finally said, averting her eyes from her friend and turning bright red as to match Candy's sweater.

Realization finally dawned in Candy. Apparently, Miss Pony, always concerned in Candy's welfare, had requested Annie—as a married woman—to have "the talk" with Candy, before she faced her wifely duties. Candy could hardly hold her smile. She was grateful for Miss Pony and Annie's thoughtfulness, but it was obvious that her poor Annie was not up for such a delicate task . . . not that Candy truly needed to be enlightened on the subject . . . especially now.

"I see," Candy finally said, raising her eyebrows. Her dimples appeared on her cheeks as her mouth curved in a sweet smile, "I don't think you should mortify yourself on that score," she continued, trying to figure out how she was going to go about this without telling too much.

"Of course I should!" insisted Annie, trying to embolden herself. "My mother talked to me when it was my time and . . . and I'm thankful for her advice. I . . . don't know what I would have done. . . if . . . if she hadn't explained things to me . . . This is, I . . . I never. . . never imagined what a wife's duty implied. . . I mean . . ."

"I know what you mean," said Candy taking pity on the poor stammering Annie.

"No, Candy, you can't imagine what it is. . . to be with a man!" Annie responded vehemently. "A lady shouldn't know, in fact . . . this is, until she is properly taught by an experienced married lady . . . like me."

"Annie, this is not the XIXth century!" Candy said giggling, "Knowledge is not a sin. When I said you shouldn't worry about talking to me about my wifely duties, I was serious. I am fully aware of what happens between a man and a woman when they make love."

Annie opened her eyes like a couple of large blue saucers.

"You do?"

"Well, of course, in theory," Candy added, biting her tongue for the white lie she had just implied. As much as she trusted Annie, she was aware of her limitations. Candy was sure that she would have given Annie pain if she confessed that she had recently added practical skills to her sexual education. What had happened the previous night was something she would not share with anybody but her lover, not even Albert.

"How come?" asked Annie bewildered.

"Annie, I'm a nurse. Some of the particulars of human reproduction are taught in nursing school. Besides, I've been assisting with deliveries for many years now. Believe me when I say that I know how babies are made. Wasn't I at Stair's birth by your side?"

"Well, yes . . . but I thought that you would not know exactly, how . . . how babies are conceived."

Candy observed her sister and sighed. She was sure that Archie was a loving and tender husband; so, she imagined that Annie's uneasiness on tackling the subject was only due to her shy nature and her very tight upbringing. In fact, after Annie had returned from her honeymoon, Candy had tried to elicit from her friend a few particulars about her impressions on her experience as a married woman, but Annie had evaded the topic always blushing and changing the subject. Therefore, Candy was moved seeing her friend was willing to broach a topic so difficult for her, only for her best friend's sake.

"Do not worry for me, Annie," Candy repeated, "I think I know enough to face what is to come. Moreover, even though Terrence tends to appear like a rather stern and sometimes even harsh kind of man, I can assure you he will be with me all that a woman can wish for in a lover."

Annie was surprised by Candy's nonchalance on such a delicate matter, not to mention her amazing trust in her husband-to-be. However, this shouldn't come as a surprise, thought Annie. After all, she had always known Candy as a fearless and self-assured sort of girl. So, Annie relaxed and changed the subject to the more comfortable and neutral topic of Candy's wedding dress, which they hadn't had time to order yet.



Candy was exhausted! Presenting her usual easy-going and confident self to her family and acquaintances had been a titanic task. The sensation of giddiness and the constant flutters in her stomach had not abandoned her for a second. At times, she had thought that everyone would be

able to discover what she was trying to conceal. The fact that Terrence had been around her most of the time had not helped at all. His intense glances in her direction only served to stir her desire for him even further.

The worst part of the day came after teatime. A familiar sensation of discomfort in her belly and the impossibility of talking to her fiancé in private had only worsened her weariness, especially once dinner was over. Annie's unfortunate attempts at introducing her to the secrets of the marriage bed had been like rubbing salt to injury. Now she was on her way to her own room, wondering if Terrence was already asleep in his own chambers. She couldn't blame him if he did. She knew well he hadn't slept the previous night. Despite her desire to be with him, given her present circumstances, it was best if Terrence was now recovering in his room.

She entered her room, but before she managed to turn on the lights, a pair of strong arms pulled her until her back crashed against Terrence's broad chest.

"Gosh! I was going off my trolley, here⁵³! I thought you would never come, darling!" he said in a hushed voice, his arms clasp around her waist, just as he had done a few days before in Pony's Home. Candy clearly recalled that morning and how he had trapped her between the sink and his body.

This time, he grabbed her jaw to force her face to turn, so she could see him in the corner of her eye.

"Terry . . . I didn't expect that you . . ." she began.

"Come to you tonight? I've lived like a monk long enough, my love. It doesn't suit my nature," he said before forcing her face in the necessary angle to cover her lips with his.

Candy was so shocked by Terrence's unexpected presence in her room, that she couldn't do much beyond responding to his kiss as he demanded. To judge by his forward words and the hungry way of kissing her, he was not as tired as she had imagined he would be. Moreover, it was more than obvious that he had assumed that, after their first intimate encounter, her boudoir—and her body— would be open for him permanently. Unfortunately, Candy knew she would have to disappoint him on that score . . . but perhaps not just yet. His kisses tasted so much like heaven that she did not find the courage to make him stop.

⁵³ Going off one's trolley – British slang for "going mad"

He delved his tongue deep in her mouth, while his left hand boldly moved from her waist upwards. His daring moves were a clear sign that he was not willing to waste time. As much as he was making her head reel, she knew that it was time to stop him before it was too late.

"Terry, please," she pleaded in between his kisses, "We must talk."

"Please, darling. Let me make love to you first; then we can talk, will you?" he asked, while both of his hands found their way beneath her sweater.

"Can't wait, Terry . . . we can't make love now," she said, and he froze in their embrace.

"What . . . what do you mean? Do you regret . . . ?"

Candy gave a hint of a smile. It was just like her Terry interpreting things the worst way possible. Taking advantage of his bewilderment she turned to face him.

"No, Terry. I don't regret anything, but there's a reason we can't make love tonight."

"Which is?" he asked, his aggravation now evident.

Candy raised her eyes, trying to find the right words to explain what was going on to Terrence. Then, after considering for a few seconds, she concluded that the only possible way was the direct approach, no matter how embarrassing things could be.

"My period started just a few hours ago, Terry. I'm sorry," she said as fast as she could and then lowered her eyes.

This was a cold shower of reality for the young man. He was not ignorant of the ways of women; however, as someone who had never sustained a long-standing affair, this was something totally out of his consideration. His expression of disappointment mixed with discomfit was almost touching.

"I understand," he mumbled when he finally recovered the ability to produce coherent speech, "I'm sorry if I did not consider that you could be indisposed."

"I'm not exactly indisposed, just not fit for the activity, Terry," she replied, reaching with her hand to brush an errand strand from his forehead, "When we fixed the wedding date for the 7th, I did it on purpose. . . This is . . . I had planned it all, so that we wouldn't have to worry about this for about a month after the wedding," she tried to explain, still blushing as she did it, "but I did not count that we. . .that we would."

"Anticipate our vows?" he helped her to finish, amazed by the fact that she had given some thoughts to the matter, "I didn't plan it either, love."

And saying this he drew her back into his embrace, but this time in a more chaste fashion.

"Today, I understood that I had been holding a wrong notion," he told her while he rocked her gently from side to side.

"Really?"

"Yes. I always thought that once you and I had made love, this urgent need I feel for you would alleviate at last, but I was wrong. Being with you last night only intensified the urge. I've been burning alive in desire like never before. Having to keep the pretense of normality has been like a day in hell. Now I understand the need of honeymoons."

"I've felt the same!" she said, burying her face in his chest.

He could hardly give credit to his ears. Had she actually acknowledged she had desired him? He was simply enraptured.

"If I had been less impulsive and wait till the wedding. . ."

She raised her face and smiled at him, putting a finger on his lips.

"Don't even say it. I wouldn't change the way things happened. I wouldn't change anything that has ever happened between you and I, except our senseless separation."

He closed his eyes and answered with a kiss charged with all he had in his heart.

"Would you mind if I stayed and slept with you? I mean, just sleeping together," he asked after breaking the kiss.

"I thought you'd never ask."



Chapter 9

*The cravat, the diary and the music box*

Candy was lying on her side, with her head propped up on her elbow. She could not take her eyes off the sleeping figure next to her. The previous mornings, it had always been Terrence the first to wake up; consequently, she had not been able to contemplate him while still in slumber. She could only see his side profile, as his face was half-buried in the mint-green pillow, while lying on his stomach. He appeared to be deeply asleep for his expression looked uncommonly relaxed, unguarded, almost as serene and open as that of a child. The usual errand lock of hair that would often refuse to stay in place was again over his forehead, taunting her with another excuse to caress his face.

Even though his shoulders and back were now relaxed, she could still distinguish his well-defined muscles. As the sheets had moved during his sleep, she could see him half naked. Assuming he could be cold, she had tried to cover him with the blankets, but when her hands touched his back, she had felt he was rather warm. Having second thoughts, she had decided against her initial idea.

With her left hand she reached to caress his back very lightly. She pondered the new features of his personality that she was discovering thanks to their newly gained intimacy. One thing was now clear for her; physical contact was a capital issue for Terrence. He had promised her that he would only sleep by her side, as long as her period ended, but at the very end, he had not been able to fulfill his promises. Without having intercourse, he had led her into other games and caresses that had been a fine substitute for the last four nights. She couldn't complain about it.

Candy supposed that the following two days that remained before their wedding would prove to be pretty trying for him. To begin with, as soon as the day broke, they would have to prepare for the journey to La Porte and then to Pony's Home. Unfortunately, since Pony's Home could only offer two guestrooms, Terrence and Albert would have to stay in the only hotel the village could offer, while the Cornwells and Ms. Baker stayed in Pony's Home.

Terrence had been quite put out with the arrangements, but neither Ms. Baker nor Mrs. Cornwell would have allowed it in a different way. The ladies had to stay in Pony's Home to prepare all the details for the ceremony, which "*would be simple, but didn't have to be plain*" –in Ms. Baker's own words. Candy had agreed with the disposition, if only to keep Terrence at a certain distance for the last two evenings before the wedding. She knew that if he were to stay in Pony's Home he would insist on coming to her room to spend the night together. As much as she loved to be with him, she knew Pony's Home could not afford the relative freedom that the Ardlay's mansion had allowed them to enjoy, due to its large proportions and the fact that Candy's room was pretty distant from her relatives' chambers. Back in Pony's Home, Candy honestly did not believe she could get away without being noticed by either one of her teachers. Unable to contradict his mother and his wife-to-be when they agreed on something, the young man had to comply, despite his decided displeasure.

Candy perceived that he shivered under her palm. This time, she decided to cover his back with the blanket. She also lay on her stomach, next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Cuddled next to his sleeping form, she kept caressing him under the covers. Relishing their closeness, she reviewed the events of the previous days.

The morning of the 3rd of January, Ms. Baker arrived in Chicago accompanied by the lady that served as her personal aid. Terrence and Candice had gone to the Station to pick her up, but for the sake of secrecy, only Candy had waited for Ms. Baker on the platform, while Terrence remained in the car with the chauffeur. Even though Terrence had already developed a career of his own without connection to his mother's own fame and power in the entertainment industry, they both maintained their true relationship in secret. Terrence had explained to Candy that, in more than one occasion, he had suggested his mother they should go public avowing their son-

and-mother relationship in a press conference. Ms. Baker had always refused without explaining her reasons. Terrence tended to believe that his mother –as any woman– had still a vein of vanity, and preferred not to be dated so easily by exposing to the world that she had a son who was already a grown-up man. Little did he know that Ms. Baker had other motives, far more generous than he imagined.

Whatever Eleanor had in mind, she had asked her son to be as careful as usual. So, when her train finally arrived, only the petite figure of Candice White Andrew stood there waiving her hand to welcome her. Soon, a tall and elegant woman dressed in a black Coco Chanel coat and a large, brimmed hat of the same designer, descended the train.

The two women stood there for a little while, one in front of the other, slowly recognizing each other. For Candy, Ms. Baker appeared just as beautiful and charming as she had always been. Despite the fact that a few additional expression lines had been added to her beautiful face, Candy thought that Eleanor looked as though she hadn't aged during the last eight years. On the contrary, Ms. Baker required a few seconds to recognize in this elegant young woman dressed in a light brown coat, the young girl she once met. The long blond hair was gone, to be replaced by a bobbed mane, finger-waved and crowned by a cloche hat. Still, the sweet green eyes, the trade-mark freckles and dimples were there. Ms. Baker finally made the first move and hugged the young woman affectionately.

"It's been a long time since Rockstown, madam!" said Candy, unable to hold a tear when hugging Ms. Baker.

"So long that I thought I would never see you again, Ms. Ardlay," Eleanor replied, surreptitiously lifting her black veil to kiss Candy, but putting it back as soon as possible.

"It is Candy," responded the young woman with one of her open smiles that Eleanor believed so engaging.

"Then you must call me Eleanor."

"Thanks, Eleanor! But now we must go, before anything unwanted happens," warned Candy hurrying up, as she offered her hand to Ms. Baker's companion and proper introductions were made.

Terrence moved in his sleep, distracting Candy from her memories. The man turned to rest on his back and murmured something intelligible. With one arm, he pulled Candy's body into

his embrace and continued to sleep. The young woman, seeing that he was not yet awake, rested her head on top of his chest and kept thinking about the recent events.

Days before, Terrence had revealed his mother's identity to Albert, asking him for help to preserve the secrecy. Therefore, careful preparations had been made to host Ms. Baker in the Ardaly's manor house without any intrusion from the press. For the two days that she would stay in the house, only a small number of the most trusted servants would be on duty and only the closest family circle, this is Albert, Georges, and the Cornwells would be at home. Great Aunt Elroy had left the house the day before, to spend a few weeks in Lakewood, as a way to rest after the Holidays' celebrations. Albert had made sure that no other callers would appear in those days, sending notes to his acquaintances to let them know that he would be away from Chicago for about a week.

Informing the Cornwells of the reasons for all these precautions had been a business that Candy considered worthy of being registered in the annals of the family. She was the only one who knew what was coming. She had guarded herself from letting the others know the true identity of Terrence's mother, as well as the adolescent obsession that Archie still had for Ms. Baker. So, she sat down to enjoy the scene that developed in front of her eyes in more or less the following way:

When Terrence –who ignored that Archibald had admired his mother since his youth– explained that his true mother was not Lady Beatrix Grandchester, Duchess of N***⁵⁴ as his old school mates supposed, that was shocking enough. Then, when he revealed that he was the secret son of Eleanor Margaret Le Breton, better known by the stage name of Eleanor Baker, Archibald's jaw dropped to the floor in an instant.

Annie was also impressed, but in a more natural way. However, she couldn't explain why her husband appeared pale and wide-eyed, as if in deep shock.

"You're making this up," Archie had finally mumbled.

"Making this up? Do you think I would willingly admit that I am a bastard child just to make sport of you, Cornwell?" Terrence asked, raising his eyebrow in his characteristic gesture.

⁵⁴ N**** - In this fanfiction, The Grandchester family holds a Dukedom and other titles since the 14th century. As it happens in real life, the name of the family (Grandchester) and the name of the Dukedom are not the same. In this story, I will be using the initial N*** followed by three stars to stand for the name of the title, imagining it is a non-royal dukedom of the highest rank. The reader can imagine the title name that best fit their fancy.

"You can't be Ms. Baker's son. She is too young and beautiful to be your mother!" Archie insisted in total denial.

Then it was Annie's turn to look at her husband in surprise. Not only was he being rude with Terrence beyond the limits of propriety, but she had never heard him openly admit the beauty of another woman just right in front of her.

"I'm sorry if I appear to you as too old and ugly to be my mother's son, but it is the truth. Candy here can testify that, she knows my mother well," said Terrence dismissively, not willing to waste time justifying his parentage.

Archibald turned now to his cousin with a questioning look, feeling that day had brought him surprise upon surprise in a very upsetting manner.

"Terry is telling the truth. I met his mother many years ago in Scotland. She visited him there, while we were in summer school. Years later, I saw her on another occasion, here in America," Candy explained.

Now it was the turn for both young men to look at Candy in shock. Archie could not believe that his cousin had met Eleanor Baker and never told him about it, and Terrence was intrigued as to when Candy and his mother had met after Scotland.

"So . . ." intervened Albert clearing his throat, *"the reason why Terrence is asking us to be discreet is because his mother prefers to keep his relationship with Terrence in secret, for she is an unmarried lady. You're all grown-up people to understand how delicate such a matter can be for a public figure. She will be staying in our home, and I want to offer her all the comfort and security she requires. Now, Terrence is part of our family and if he and his mother have a secret, it becomes ours. Understand?"*

"Yes, uncle! Anything Ms. Baker requests. You must know I am a life-time devotee of her talents, and nothing would please me more than welcoming her to our family, right Annie?" said Archibald whose tongue had suddenly become loose to everybody's surprise.

"Well, yes," seconded Annie still bewildered by her husband's strange reactions.

Terrence, who had followed Archibald's uncommon swings of mood, finally understood what was going on with his old school mate.

"He must fancy my mother! How bizarre! . . . He's about my age! . . . Gosh, that's twisted!" he thought half amused and half sickened.

Later, he shared these impressions with Candy and as they compared notes, Terrence joined his fiancée in her decided amusement. Yet, the entertainment did not

stop there. When Eleanor finally arrived, Archibald, who could still command his suave manners pretty well, did his best to engage the object of his admiration in conversation in front of Annie's disconcerted eyes. Miss Baker found Archibald a most charming young man of great taste and informed mind. However, to judge by Annie's glaring looks, Terrence suspected that Achie's success at charming Eleanor that evening would cost him to find his chambers closed on his nose for at least one evening. For once Terrence, who enjoyed his fiancée's company that same night, felt pity for his old classmate.

With the corner of her eye, Candy checked the hour on the clock. It was almost 4:30 am. She thought that she would let Terrence sleep for another half hour before waking him up. The servants usually started their work at 6:00 am. So, it was safe for him to go back to his room as late as 5:00 or 5:30 at the latest.

Candy thought that beyond the comical side of the recent events, Ms. Baker's arrival had meant for her an opportunity to open her heart to a woman that would fully understand her feelings for Terrence. The second day of her stay, Ms. Baker had requested Candy to come to her chambers to show her something she had brought for her.

Candy had vivid recollections of the intimate conversation they had shared.

"I had wanted to have some time in private to talk to you, Candy," said Ms. Baker as she sat in the bedroom's sitting area, padding the loveseat to invite Candy to join her.

The young woman complied and once they were together, Ms. Baker took Candy's slim hands within hers.

"I want to thank you for waiting for my son, and for being generous enough to forgive his shortcomings," the older woman said, her eyes showcasing all the shades of green and blue that were so much like her son's.

"I believe there was nothing to forgive, madam. What we suffered was the result of our ill-advised decisions. Both of us must partake of equal shares of the blame," she admitted lowering her eyes. *"That afternoon, when we last met, you were so sure that he had pulled himself together on stage because of my presence, and I didn't want to accept it. I didn't believe I could have such a power over him."*

"Do you see it now?" asked Ms. Baker, knowing perfectly well Candy was referring to their encounter in Rockstown.

"Yes! If I had only believed your words then . . . if, instead of letting him go, I had reached for Terry and told him that I was also living in hell without him, we would have saved us a great deal of suffering. Even years later, you offered me another chance to

see him, when you sent me that ticket to attend his Hamlet's premiere. Once again, I was stubborn enough to refuse the tempting offer. I was so foolishly convinced of my own judgment in the matter . . ."

"So was he, I'm afraid," replied Ms. Baker with a sad smile. *"To acknowledge your responsibility in this affair speaks well of you, Candy. However, as much as I would have loved to see you together since Rockstown, I must admit that, in that time, he was not fit to offer you what you deserve, whereas now, he truly is a better man,"* Eleanor concluded with motherly pride shining on her face.

"Oh, yes! I couldn't agree more! He is the best of men." Candy smiled exuding the love she had for Terrence through her every pore.

"Should I understand he has been gentle enough with you?" asked Eleanor with a meaningful look in her eyes.

Candy was taken aback. Was Eleanor implying what she thought? Or was it only her imagination? She didn't know what to reply. Observing her reservations, Eleanor added.

"Last night, I went to Terrence's room because I wanted to discuss something with him. I knocked and he didn't reply; then, I realized that the door was not locked, and I entered the chamber. He had retired early on the grounds of being tired. But it was past eleven and he was not in his room. I think I know enough of the world to understand where he was."

"Eleanor . . . I . . ."

"No, please! Do not distress yourself on my account, Candy. If anyone knows what it is to love a man beyond conventions that is certainly the woman talking to you. I'm not saying this to make you feel uncomfortable. On the contrary, I just wanted you to know that I am grateful for the unconditional love you have bestowed on my son. A love like yours, so strong and daring, is what he needs more than anything in the world. A mother can only be happy to see her child's future thus guaranteed."

"Thanks for understanding," Candy finally said, comforted by Eleanor's words, *"and to give a proper reply to your question, the answer is yes. He is all that a woman can desire in a man. What has happened between us so far has always been with my consent and considering my interest, as well as his."*

"I am glad to hear that. I remember his father was also quite skilled in that department. So, I somehow expected that the son would take after him at least on that," explained Eleanor naturally, observing that her daughter-in-law had still the grace of blushing at

her comments. *“As for other aspects of his character, I am proud that Terry has turned out a whole world better than his father,”* confessed Eleanor, her eyes clouding for a fleeting moment, *“I mean, Terry has learned to be honest with his heart and fight for his affections. Even, when I must admit I would have liked to see him react before, a long, long time ago. Anyway, I am happy he was lucky enough to find himself free when you are still willing to take him back. His father, unfortunately, never fully realized the extent of his mistakes until it was already too late.”*

“But surely His Grace must have loved you a great deal to defy society and have a son with you. Perhaps he was only too weak to contradict his family. I suppose they threatened him with disowning him or something along those lines,” argued Candy always trying to find good in everyone.

“Oh darling, my story with Richard Grandchester is far more complicated than that. A peer of England cannot disinherit his Heir Apparent⁵⁵, unless it is legally proven that the heir is guilty of high treason against the crown. Conceiving a child out of wedlock may be a bit scandalous, but nothing more.”

Candy looked at Eleanor in complete bafflement.

“What I mean, Candy, is that if he had truly wanted it, Richard could have married me without losing his right to the title and the properties entailed to it. Of course, he would have been scorned and ostracized by the rest of his peers, and the strength of his political influence in the House of the Lords would have been diminished. But poverty and the loss of his birthright were never his destiny. Obviously, back when I was nineteen, I didn’t know any of these details and did not doubt his word when he presented me the same scenario you are suggesting.”

“So, he lied to you!”

“Yes, and for a long time. Richard was in love with me, but only to the extent his station in life allowed. When he first approached me, he had seen my portrait in a gallery in London. I had sat for it as a favor to an artist. I was used to that, because the aunt who raised me was a great patroness of arts in New York.”

“It was love at first sight then,” Candy supposed.

⁵⁵ Heir Apparent – In English aristocracy, an Heir Apparent is a person who is first in line of succession and cannot be displaced from inheriting a title, except by a change in the rules of succession.

"That is right, I believe the Grandchesters tend to ignite in passion in the spur of the moment, but not all of those passions are strong enough to survive time and opposition. When Richard courted me, he knew he could only offer me "his protection", as they call it. Marriage was never in his mind, but, of course, he was not honest with me about it. If you cared to hear a long and sad story now, I could elaborate on it."

Candy, who had always wanted to know more about Terrence's parents and the story of his birth, expressed her future mother-in-law that she would be honored if she confided in her to tell her story.

"You see," began Eleanor with a deep sigh, "I had left New York angry and disgusted after my director and mentor, Maurice Barrymore, had made an indecent proposal I was not willing to comply with. I traveled to work in London, fleeing from the loss of my honor and, ironically, lost it all in Richard's arms. When I see my son interact with you, and charm you with his every gesture, I see the way his father would be with me. Surely you understand how difficult it was for me to resist Richard."

Candy assented in silence, comprehending that as much as Terrence took after his mother in looks and in his passion for the theatre, some of his ways, character traits, his bearing and even his manner of walking were those of his father.

"However, less principled than his son, Richard did not have scruples to seduce a young girl who knew very little of the world and had never been with a man before. But he did not count that there would be a child."

"Surely that made him doubt as to what to do with you and the baby."

"I imagine he had his share of doubts, but the way he solved his dilemma was more scandalous and immoral than my being with a child out of wedlock."

"What did he do?"

"Well, all the time he courted my favors, he was already engaged to be married with Lady Beatrix. It would be a marriage of convenience for both parties, but that is not an oddity among noble families. Nevertheless, the relationship had grown especially cold because both of them had been unfaithful and there were rumors that the engagement would be canceled."

"Terry's stepmother had a lover!" exclaimed Candy covering her mouth with her hands.

“And so did Richard, but society is always harsher with us women, whenever we dare to go against conventions. Richard could have broken the engagement pretty easily and nobody would have blamed him for it. In the eyes of the world, he was the injured party, for Lady Beatrix’ liaison was suspected by some. However, instead of doing that, Richard negotiated with her.”

“What do you mean he negotiated with her?” asked Candy, more and more scandalized at the duke’s actions.

“His father was already sick and anxious of seeing his line secured for more than one generation before his death. You must know Richard did not have any brothers who survived infancy or cousins that could continue the family line in Richard’s absence. Consequently, if Richard died without a viable heir, that dukedom would become extinct. The old duke was terrified about that possibility. So, my pregnancy turned out to be very convenient for the old duke and his son. You see, Richard could not doubt that the child I was expecting would be a true Grandchester, because he knew he had been my first and only lover. Whereas, based on Lady Beatrix’ previous behavior, he could not be so assured that the children his wife-to-be could provide would be truly his. Of course, he could have searched for another candidate with proper pedigree, but that would have demanded time, and Richard’s father was not willing to wait. Hence, cunning as he could be, Richard proposed Lady Beatrix that he would not cancel the engagement if she consented to take my child as hers, in the case the baby was a boy.”

“I’m sorry to say this, Eleanor, but it is beyond my comprehension that a person can be as callous.”

“For Richard this was a very acceptable and even noble arrangement, because it didn’t leave the child in destitution of his birthright if it turned out to be a boy, of course. For, as the son of the duchess and not of an unmarried actress, Terry would be raised and seen publicly as a legitimate son and heir, you see. If it was a girl, the child would stay with me, and Richard would provide for her. Anyway, his marrying me was always unthinkable, but at least this way, he could preserve the child and provide an heir for the Dukedom.”

A fundamental question remained to be addressed in this strange story: Why had Eleanor accepted such questionable arrangements? Eleanor could read Candy’s face as she silently tried to make sense of the matter but didn’t dare to utter her doubts. Seeing this, Eleanor, who had decided to open her heart to her future daughter-in-law, answered Candy’s silent question.

"I accepted Richard's proposition not without great struggles, and not as readily as Richard expected," she explained. "In fact, when Richard discussed this with the now Duchess, I was away in France. Let me explain. After we became lovers, I had the audacity to believe in Richard to the extent of leaving my troupe and following him, first on an idyllic trip to his villa in Scotland, and then to Paris. Despite the knowledge that I was doing something improper, I cannot deny that those were, without question, the happiest moments of my life so far. Yet they ended as soon as I Richard discovered that I was pregnant. He should have concocted his whole plan then, because just a few days after, he told me he had to come back to England to arrange something with his father. I was as naïve as to imagine that he wanted to announce his father that he would marry me, so I let him go without concern, while I waited in Paris."

"How did you discover his true intentions, then?"

"I shiver at the memory, Candy!" The woman exclaimed rubbing her arm, as if living the sensation again. "About a month after his departure, I read in the papers that he had married Lady Beatrix and parted with her to Scotland. I almost lost the child with the shocking news. I felt so hurt and vexed at his betrayal, that as soon as I could travel without endangering the child, I went back to New York, hoping that my aunt Gladys would still receive me. Fortunately, my mother's sister proved to be more loyal than Richard and immediately offered her support for me and the child."

"So, you were resolved to go on as a single mother. That was very brave of you, Eleanor."

"Yes, heartbroken as I was, I could not give myself the luxury of depression. A mother must be strong for her child."

Candy assented, without knowing that a time was coming in which life would urge her to put aside her sadness for the sake of her own children.

"But then, how did Terry end up living as a Grandchester and not as a Le Breton?" she asked intrigued.

"Well, when Richard found out that I was not in Paris waiting for him, he came to America to search for me. He had married Lady Beatrix, but had neither given me up, nor his expectations of an heir. He wanted to have it all, a wife of rank to cope with his obligations as a peer of England, a mistress who loved him, and a first son to inherit the dukedom in due time. Men like him are not used to take a no for an answer when they set their minds on having something."

“How did you receive him?”

At this point, Eleanor dropped her eyes still feeling a pang of shame about her behavior.

“I resisted his advances at first, but then again, he lured me into living with him once more, much to my aunt’s chagrin. He justified his decision to marry Beatrix, saying that he didn’t want to lose his birthright, but that he planned to divorce his wife as soon as he took possession of his title. This time, I did not believe him so easily. Yet, at the end of the day, I still loved him very much and wanted to hold to the illusion that he loved me just the same. So, I accepted his arrangement. We lived together in a country house he leased in New Jersey using a false name. For the rest of my pregnancy, we lived as if we were truly man and wife. I must admit I still cherish the memory.”

“I cannot blame you. Having the man one loves, while expecting his child must be a unique experience.”

“It is, and I am sure you will enjoy such blessing very soon, without the bitterness and guilt that sometimes clouded my own happiness then.”

Candy felt her cheeks warming up at Eleanor’s suggestion.

“I felt bad for taking another woman’s husband,” continued Eleanor, “even if I knew Lady Beatrix did not love Richard and felt awfully sad for disappointing Aunt Gladys. But even when everything yelled at me that I was doing something wrong, I resisted seeing the truth.”

“When did you discover Terry’s father’s true intentions?”

“Until he confessed it all after Terry was born. In fact, following Richard’s plan, right after the wedding, Lady Beatrix had not let herself be seen in London, living only with her chamber maid and another trusted servant in the villa in Scotland, for some time. Then, when Richard followed me to the U.S., his wife also came to New York, and lived secluded in a house in Long Island. So, she was ready to receive the child after his first year of life and present him to the world as her own son. I could not believe such cold calculations could have been made over my son’s future without my knowledge. At the beginning, of course, I refused to cooperate with such outrageous plans.”

“What made you change then?”

“Oh, Candy! The life of an actress is always uncertain, and I, in my passion for Richard, had almost ruined my incipient career. I had failed to finish my contract in London,

and then, not having worked for almost a year due to my pregnancy, could not hope for a sound return. To make matters worse, my former director, who was considered the King of Broadway at that time, was still resentful for my rejection. So, the odds were not in my favor, you see. I knew I would have to struggle a great deal to find a job, even if I was on my own, without the responsibility of a child. With a child by my side, things seemed impossible!”

“But your family . . .”

“I couldn’t expect much from them. First, my mother had died when I was only three years of age, and my father disowned me when I decided to become an actress. My eldest brother followed my father’s advice and wouldn’t have helped me either. Aunt Gladys supported me in my dreams and was my unconditional ally even after I left Richard, the first time. Unfortunately, she still resented my stubbornness when I did not take her counsel of not accepting Richard back. Therefore, when the father of my child cornered me with his proposition of taking our son as the legitimate heir of the Dukedom, I was alone in the world and without expectations. I could not refuse, even if it took me several sleepless nights to decide.”

“I see. You thought you had nothing to offer Terry, whereas his father could put the world at his feet.”

“That is, succinctly, what I thought,” Eleanor rejoined, while she fought a tear begging to form in the corner of her eyes, “but, even though I yielded to Richard’s proposal about Terry, I did not consent to remain his mistress as he offered me. I was far too humiliated by his negotiating our son with such shameful arrangements that I couldn’t stomach the idea of staying in the dark as his lover, for the rest of my life.”

“I understand your indignation. But loving him as you did, it surely cost you a great deal to give him up.”

“You can say that again, dear. It almost killed me, especially when he got so angry at me. He never imagined that I could dare to reject him. I hurt his aristocratic pride as it had never been hurt and he made me pay for it. We broke up in very bitter terms. I still remember his last freezing look when he left the house that day. I didn’t see him again for a few months, after our argument. However, faithful to his part of the deal, he sent me a monthly allowance to pay for my expenses as long as I had Terry with me. The day of Terry’s first birthday, when I had already weaned him, Richard reappeared to claim his son. He was a changed man, so cold and distant that I even doubted about giving my son to him.”

“But you finally did it.”

“Well, when he saw my hesitation, he promised me that the boy would be raised in America and that I would be allowed to see him in secret. With that hope in mind, I finally let Terry go.”

“Obviously, the duke did not keep his promise.”

“For the following two years he did. I saw my son perhaps five or six times. At first, only a trusted servant would bring the boy to my house, but when Terry was nearing his third birthday, Richard brought the child himself on a few occasions. He seemed to have warmed towards me once more and insisted that the three of us spent the day together as a family.”

“He must have missed you despite his resentment.”

“I imagined so, but I was too hurt and humiliated to even consider reconciliation. For him, I was good enough to be his lover, but not to raise my own son and be by Richard’s side as his wife. I was utterly offended. I only allowed his presence in my home because of Terry’s sake. But even that pretense of happiness lasted very briefly. Then, Richard’s father died.”

“I supposed that His Grace forgot his promise about raising Terry in America.”

“You are right. He took Terry away when he returned to England to claim his title. Everything happened too fast! When I found out, the Grandchesters were already leaving New York. Seeing my son disappear in that boat was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, Candy. Nevertheless, I kept true to my word for my son’s sake, or so I thought back then. Now I know that, even when my decision was made with the best of intentions and thinking of my Terry’s best interest, it was a disastrous mistake. It only made him a miserable and lonely child, which is why I am so grateful with God that he can now aspire to happiness by your side, having his own family. He is a different man when he is with you.”

Candy thought that it was sad that the two women who had a claim to Terrence’s heart had once believed that giving him up could be the best for him. It was clear that Terrence had not been of the same opinion.

“I hope I don’t disappoint your hopes this time, Eleanor.”

“Oh, you won’t, I’m sure! But now, what I wanted to show you is this,” announced the veteran actress as she rose from her seat to open the wardrobe’s doors. Candy observed her sudden change of mood and identified Terrence’s own ability to swing emotions in a second.

Eleanor extracted a large package, which she opened to wave a delicate white ankle-length dress made of filet lace with an empire waistline.

"I know you were considering wearing Mrs. Cornwell's wedding dress, but I would like you to think of this one as a possibility. Perhaps it was a great presumption, but I couldn't refrain from buying it. I saw it in one of my favorite shops just a few days before I came here, and the unusual style caught my attention immediately. Everybody is going for the low waistline these days, making this one so different that stands out. What do you think?"

With elated eyes Candy observed the combination of floral and geometrical designs in the delicate sheer lace. Each detail, from the beads on the hem and on the butterfly short sleeves to the blue ribbon rose buds on the bodice, exuded charm and elegance.

"It is a dream, Eleanor! You were so thoughtful! Of course I'd be honored to wear it for the wedding."

"I'm so happy you like it!"

"But how did you know my size?" asked Candy intrigued as she observed the label.

"Oh . . . I just made a lucky guess based on my own observations years ago and a few details I could get from my son more recently," Miss Baker explained with a smile, but then her face turned a bit serious. *"Unfortunately, I couldn't find a veil to go with it."*

"Oh! It does not matter," she hurried to say, *"I've thought about not wearing any veil . . . there's something different I want to wear . . . a headband. . . for something borrowed⁵⁶."*

"Really? That sounds like a very good idea! I believe you have a flare for fashion, after all"

Terrence perceived the light weight on top of his chest. His hand flew in an automatic movement to rest on Candy's head. He twisted his fingers within the intricate ringlets of her mane until his fingertips reached her neck. She allowed his caresses in silence, her hand on his chest, slowly moving in circles. After a while of this mute exchange, the young woman heard him humming the melody line of Auld Lang Syne. She could hear his grave, attuned voice vibrating in his lungs, close to her ears. She moved her hand to reach his, intertwining her fingers with him playfully, as she muffled a giggle on his skin.

⁵⁶ According to the old saying: "something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue", Candy will take her old diamond ring, her new dress, the blue ribbons in her dress . . . and a borrowed headband.

“Good morning, love,” he finally said ending the song.

“Good morning, Terry.”



The leafless trees were whitened by the snowflakes that kept falling persistently, if only lightly over the solemn yard. The long procession of stone angels and saints keeping their silent guard seemed to last forever. A timid, almost plaintive gust swept the place making Candy's veil flow in the wind. As if trying to collect the courage that she lacked, her hand softly squeezed the arm of the man that was walking by her side. With her other hand, she held the white flowers she had brought for the occasion.

The young woman and her companion walked along the alleys, where only silence and solitude appeared to reign eternally. Beneath the blue veil of her wide brimmed hat, Candy's eyes observed the serene postures of the statues that adorned each grave. Some of them extended their arms, as if protecting the ones there dormant. Others crossed their hands over their bosoms, in incessant prayer. Finally, after walking across the marble tombs, feeling moved by the overwhelming presence of death, the two companions reached the doors of the Ardleys' Mausoleum.

The man, dressed in black as it was his custom, left the lady for a moment while he ascended the stone staircase. Extracting a key from his coat, the man opened the doors of the magnificent building. Then, turning again towards Candy, he offered her his hand to help her walk the stairs.

“Do you think you can do this, Miss Candy?” asked the man, slightly frowning.

“Yes, Georges. It's been long overdue. I must do this now.”

“Would you like me to come in with you?” the man offered.

“I think I must do this alone,” Candy replied, and Georges simply assented.

Without any further comment, Candy left Georges' side and entered the Mausoleum. Once inside, she marveled at the way the light filtered through the stained-glass dome in the roof, making the place less gloomy than she expected. The shades of purple, yellow, white and blue from the dome colored the marble upon which the metal plaques of each grave rested.

Candy read in silence the names of three generations of Andrews that lay there, patiently waiting for the last trumpet that would announce their resurrection. Still insecure, she walked for a few steps into the mausoleum, listening to her high heels resounding in the air.

Finally, after moments that seemed to last for an eternity, her eyes found the plaque she was looking for:

In Loving Memory of
Anthony Brown
Beloved Child, Nephew, and Cousin
October 1912

Candy's eyes caressed the inscriptions, and her fingers followed them, lightly brushing Anthony's name. Even protected in her leather glove, her fingertips perceived the coldness of the polished steel. She thought that the warm and radiant Anthony could not possibly dwell in such a lonely and icy place.

"I've come to say goodbye, but I've been fooling myself, Anthony," she murmured audibly. "As much as I wish you were here, you cannot have been retained within these walls. All on the contrary, you are in a far better place, where there's surely light to spare, a place where winter never freezes and kills life, and flowers never wither."

Candy sighed and closed her eyes for a brief moment.

"For all these years, I've been holding to your memory, and, in certain way, you will always have a place in my heart, until we meet again. But, you see, He is back! You must know it. I'm certain that in the heavenly peace where you dwell, there's no room for jealousy. Right? So, I believe you understand that after you left, I learned to love again, in a different way, with a different kind of love. But for long years, this love had to be repressed almost as if *he* had gone where you are . . . yet not exactly, because I knew *he* was breathing somewhere in this world. And the certainty that he was there, but out of reach, hurt me to the core."

"I fought these feelings, but to no avail. I didn't understand why, after you left, if only for the generous purpose of allowing me to meet him and love him, I should have to forget and never see him again. But now, I comprehend that we only unwittingly postponed what was inevitable. All I wanted to tell you is that I am forever grateful that your passage in my life, so brief as it was, somehow prepared the way for me to flee from America, and in the grief for

my loss, find him. We didn't know it then, but God made us meet because we needed each other in many ways. I am his beacon and safe port; he is my anchor, my flesh and soul."

"Thank you, Anthony. Tomorrow, I'll become his wife in the eyes of the world and start a new life. I don't know where the future will take us after that, but I promise you that whatever happens, I will be a very happy woman. So, where you are, you may rest assured that I will be fine with the one my heart loves."

"Rest in peace, dearest Anthony," she concluded, leaving three roses in the iron grave vase, "Uncle Albert and cousin Archie send you their love."

Then, moving a couple of steps further, she found Alistair's grave, and a smile grazed her face.

"Dear, Stair! Last time we talked, you were so sure that I was travelling towards my happiness. Yet, many tears had to be shed before your good wishes could have an effect. I still have to complain about your music box, you know? It has been silent these many years. Will you ever fix it?"

Candy stopped her monologue, and her smile grew wider.

"No, Stair, you know I'm just joking, dearest friend. As long as Terry is with me, the magic of your most sincere good omens will last. Thanks for the love and kindness you bestowed in my life. Until we meet again, my dear cousin."

Candy muttered a prayer, placed other three roses in Stair's vase and finally headed towards the door.

When she came out of the mausoleum, the young woman offered the remaining six roses of her bouquet to Georges

"Would you like to put these roses in Aunt Rosemary's grave?"

The man's face transfigured unexpectedly at Candy's words.

"You're very thoughtful, Miss Candy. Yes . . . thank you," he replied taking the roses with him.

Candy waited for him, letting Georges have his own private moment with his memories. In the meanwhile, she prayed for him, asking God to show Georges how to let go and finally live, just as Terrence had taught her.



The afternoon of that very day, Candy was busy packing. The wedding would be held the following morning and after lunch, she and her husband would immediately travel to New

York. In her mind, she reviewed the list of all the things she would require for the first week while the rest of her belongings were sent to her new home. She had always been one to travel light and had no plans to change her habit.

“If necessary, I would go to the end of the world without any baggage, granted that Terry is with me in this new beginning!” she mused, her eyes smiling at the thought.

“A few dresses and suits with one coat to match them all would be enough”, she thought. She verified that whatever was left behind would be carefully packed in boxes. As she reviewed the very few objects that she still had to leave outside the one suitcase she would travel with, she couldn’t avoid a wistful sigh escaping her chest.

She had lived in that room for over eight years. There, she had hidden her tears and lifted every prayer along with Terrence’s name, pouring her heart to God, to whom she could not hide her feelings. Her missal and rosary, only companions of her long nights, rested over her modest dressing table, as the mute witnesses of the incredible power of prayer.

The young woman decided on leaving them outside, as to use them in the last evening she would spend in her old room. Next to it, little Alistair’s coloring book, which had the strange attribute of appearing everywhere, lay innocently under the old music box. She made a mental note of taking the book to its rightful owner before it got lost again.

Candy turned around once more. Looking for any other missing object she would need to pack. She thought that it pained her to leave her teachers behind. Parting from all the ones she loved so dearly was the hardest part of embarking on the adventure of marriage. However, she was at peace, because Miss Pony and Sister Lane would not be left alone, despite her absence. The good ladies had confessed to her that since Terrence’s first letter had arrived, they had started their preparations to find proper aid.

“How come you could be so sure that we would eventually come to an understanding?” she had asked surprised at their knowing smiles.

“The understanding was already a fact when you decided to reply to his letter, Candy. It was just a matter of time to restore things where they ought to be,” was Sister Lane’s response.

Candy’s dimples drew on her face once more. Unknowingly, during her trips in November, she had taken a letter to Sister Lane’s superiors in Cincinnati, requesting the aid of two young novices. After the engagement was announced, Sister Lane only required a call for the final arrangements to be made. The nuns would be arriving just the day after Candy’s departure. On the other hand, Candy was glad that the monetary matters would not represent a problem either. The donations secured for the year were more than enough, even with two

new members in the family. Besides, since Terrence had left her Trust at her disposal, she had made arrangement to begin a Fund that would provide for Pony's Home's needs for the years to come.

After a last look at her wedding dress, which she had hung on a mannequin next to her bed, she left her room to join the jolly party in the living room. When she finally got there, everybody seemed to be involved in the most animated conversation. In one corner, little Alistair played with Terrence, oblivious to the bitter fact that very soon his dear Aunt and newly gained Uncle would be miles away from him. She reflected that it would be the first loss the little boy would ever experience, and her heart went to him, knowing it was impossible to avoid him the pain.

"Can planes be as **bic** as a train, Uncle G.?" asked the kid extending his arms.

"I've never seen one as **big**," replied Terrence chuckling, "but one never knows, perhaps someday we'll be able to see such a monster."

"Yes!" Alistair assented enthusiastically "I have a **bic** one in my coloring book. How should I color it?"

"A plane as big as train, huh? You'll need lots of crayons then. I can help you if you wish," offered the man.

"Your coloring book and crayons are in my room, Stair," remarked Candy joining the pair, "go and fetch them."

The boy stood up but pulling Terrence's hand he begged.

"Come with me, uncle."

Terrence gave the boy a half smile and unable to deny him his company, followed Alistair to Candy's room. The young woman looked at them adoringly as they disappeared in the corridor.

"Did you leave your dress inside the closet," asked Annie, who had also observed the scene between her son and Terrence.

"Don't worry, Annie. I remembered to leave it hanging on the mannequin to avoid wrinkling," Candy replied perfunctorily.

"But then Terrence is going to see the dress!" said Annie horrified, "It's a bad omen!"

Candy smiled thinking that Annie would die if she knew that Terrence had seen more than just a dress before the wedding.

“All right, I’ll go and stop calamity from ever falling upon me,” the young woman responded mockingly, but still following Annie’s pressing words, if only to appease her friend’s apprehensions. She knew too well that when she reached her room it would be too late.

When she finally opened the chamber door, Alistair was about to hastily pool the coloring book from the dressing table. Candy could clearly hear Terrence’s voice behind the kid, warning him.

“Wow, wow, Little Inventor, watch out! If you pull the book this way, you’ll throw this box, and your Aunt will not appreciate if it broke,” the man said saving the said object from disaster.

“The box don’t work, Uncle,” the boy replied.

“Doesn’t work? You mean it is already broken?” Terrence asked as he took Alistair’s music box in his hands and opened it for closer inspection.

In that moment, to Candy’s great amazement, the old melody that she had not heard in many years filled the air once again.

“It plays!” said Stair also surprised.

“It does!” added Candy standing behind them and making the man turn to meet her eyes.

“Is it so surprising?” inquired Terrence, intrigued.

Without answering his question, Candy took the small music box from his hand and made several trials opening and closing it. Each time the music reassured as expected when lifting the cover.

“I can’t believe it, Terry! This box has not worked for years! What did you do with it?”

“Well . . . actually nothing . . . I just opened it,” he replied shrinking his shoulders.

Candy shook her head while laughing softly. Then, standing on tiptoes, she gave Terrence a kiss on his cheek murmuring to his ear:

“You’ve repaired my Happiness Box, honey!” she whispered.

“Have I . . . ?” he asked, giving her a meaningful look that made her blush.

“Oh well, it is a long story I’ll tell you, while we help Stair to color this new page. What do you say, Stair?” she said, now addressing the boy, leaving the box on the dressing table and taking the coloring book in her hands.

“Is it a story about a hero?” the boy asked already enthralled at the perspective.

“Oh yes, a war hero that looked exactly like you!” Candy replied touching the tip of Alistair’s nose.

Then, Terrence took the kid in his arms, while Candy used her hands to pick up the crayons and book. With his hands full with Candy and the child, the man guided them to exit the room. Before closing the door behind him, he saw Candy’s dress hanging on a mannequin, but chose not to say anything about it. The following day she would be his bride. His heart soared at the mere thought.



Wednesday, the 7th of January 1925

Dear Diary,

It's been many years since I wrote my last entry. I can scarcely believe that I may now continue this story with a full and sincere smile on my face. Today is my wedding day. Guess who is the groom? Yes! The very same boy I used to complain about twelve years ago, when I first started writing on you (the same, but not exactly, because now he is not a boy anymore, but a man). I suppose you could rightly ask me why I am marrying such a conceited cad, who is an awful scoundrel and an incurable boor. But you also know, dear diary, he is nothing like that. After all these years you surely understand that his is the noblest soul I've ever met. My one and only soulmate!

Now I can finally write here that I love Terry with every fiber of my heart! He is already my beloved husband in all senses. Do you understand what I mean? God and you must know it! This ceremony that is about to take place, just as soon as I close this entry, is only the confirmation of what has been in my heart since long, long ago. The marvel of it all is that I have been in his heart just as long. He has proved it to me with his actions, his words, and his body.

For years I believed this was only an impossible dream that could never come true. Today, my suitcase already packed tells me that this is for real. After lunch, I'll be parting to New York to live with him. My hand trembles as I write this, and I have to fight back my tears of happiness. I must not ruin my make-up. Eleanor did such a good job that I don't want to disappoint her crying before the photos are taken.

In a few minutes more, I will not be Candice White Ardlay anymore. I will be Candice White Grandchester or Mrs. Terrence Graham Grandchester, if you will. Even though, most people might prefer to call me Mrs. Graham, since they only know him by his stage name. They ignore that it is not his legal name. Can you believe he has gone by the name of Graham all these years, but never officially changed his name? I suppose there's something there. I have a presentment about this. Anyway, I suppose you and I will have time to discuss the matter later, when we arrive in New York.

I must go now, dear diary. Thanks for listening to my heart that sings along with the bells I'm now hearing.

C. W. G.



Candy's wedding went as in a dreamy cloud for her. When it was all over, she could barely remember flashes of the smiling and tearful faces around her and some special moments here and there as the main highlights of the ceremony. Albert's eyes were beaming with pride as he led her through the chapel's central aisle. Before their entrance, he had told her that she had made him truly proud, becoming the lady he had once striven to raise. Candy thought that he had a tear in the corner of his otherwise sky-clear eyes, but she did not mention it to avoid him further embarrassment.

All on the contrary, Miss Pony and Sister Lane did not try to hide their teary faces. Candy noticed that Sister Lane held the silver rosary that Terrence had given to her as a Christmas present, while Candy advanced along the aisle. Candy knew the nun was internally praying and passing the silver beads one after the another in her nervous fingers. Miss Pony's lace handkerchief was not enough to hold her tears, even behind her smiling face.

Candy also remembered that Annie's hands had faltered more than once while she played the March in the Chapel's old piano, despite her skillful expertise in the instrument. Archie, who had ironically received the unexpected honor to stand up with Terrence as his best man, was there very serious. However, Candy knew that little by little, her cousin was warming up to the idea of admitting Terrence into the family. Someday, she hoped, Archie would learn to trust in Terrence just as much as Alistair did. Jimmy Cartwright, who had managed to make it at the last minute, was silently standing next to Miss Pony. Candy knew that Jimmy was a bit resented. She hoped the young man would eventually forgive Terrence for taking her away from Indiana.

Eleanor, more beautiful than ever in a ravishing blue dress, if looking prettier could be possible for her, was also doing her best to hold her tears. However, by the middle of the ceremony, not even her well-trained histrionic skills saved her from failing miserably to hide her emotions.

But what bit all her memories by far, was **her Terry's** deep-sea eyes looking at her as she walked towards him. In one single look, he seemed to reaffirm all the secret love confessions he had already avowed to her just a few days before. Another highlight she clearly remembered was his expression of surprise when he recognized the silk white band she was wearing on her head. She had tied it charmingly, letting escape the waves of her golden hair to frame her face. Terrence smiled when he saw his initials on the long-lost white cravat embroidered over the silk fabric. Her jade and gold eyes instinctively conveyed for him the same message that the two of them later put in words as they said their vows.

In the future, Candy would always wear a smile whenever she remembered the moment they pledged love to each other in one of their classic displays of unconventionality. No matter how many times they had rehearsed their vows they ended up coming in a slightly different way.

"I . . ." Terrence had paused for a second, making the audience hold their breath just to surprise them saying afterwards: "If I, Terrence Graham Grandchester, have come here, in front of you, Candice White Ardlay, it's because I'm finally free from the falsehoods that before kept me tied, free to believe that the impossible can happen, and take you to be my only lawfully wedded wife to have and to hold from this day forward. Now, here in the presence of our family and friends, I offer you my solemn vow to be your faithful partner for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, from this day forward until death do us part. . . and . . . with this ring I thee wed and pledge thee my troth," he ended sliding the wedding band in her small finger with his own trembling ones.

The young woman smiled back and taking a hint from him she replied:

"I, Candice White Ardlay, take you **back** Terrence Graham Grandchester, this time forever, to be my lawfully wedded husband. Before God and these witnesses, I vow to love you as long as we both shall live. I take you with all your faults and your many virtues as I offer myself to you as your wife for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. . . until death do us part. So, with this ring I thee wed and pledge thee my troth."

The priest rolled his eyes. Unable to stop the couple's exuberance, he decided to resign himself to the abuse of the traditional lines. Terrence gave his wife an impish smile, happy that once in his lifetime he could give himself the luxury of twisting some classic lines to his own convenience, without any consequence for his career. Candy felt happy to follow his lead, perhaps too well, for the old priest's taste.



The hour to finally part from Pony's Home had been a difficult one for everybody, especially for Miss Pony and Sister Lane. No matter how long they had tried to prepare for the sad separation, it was still poignant and excruciating. But perhaps the one farewell that was the most difficult to bear was that of little Alistair. When the child discovered that his Aunty and Uncle would finally part for a long time, he had broken into the most touching tears he had ever shed. It took Candy all her strength to finally detach herself from the boy, when his father took him in his arms.

The newlyweds, after saying their last farewells, entered in the limousine that would take them to Chicago. Inside, as Candy silently wiped her tears, Terrence wondered if it was enough with the love of one single man –no matter how deep it could run in his heart– to make up for the loss of so many beloved friends and relatives, that now waved their hands, slowly disappearing as the car advanced on the road. When Candy instinctively buried her face on his chest, he enfolded her body within his arms and for the first time in many years, he prayed . . . He prayed that his love could suffice.



Whenever Terrence Graham travelled –which was very often due to his job– he always did it in style. Some may have thought it was a need derived from his public figure condition. But truth to be told, it was partly a consequence of his rooted disgust with people in general that forced him to search for the most exclusive means of transportation, if only to keep himself alone. Along with his reclusive habits, he had also to admit that, within his aristocratic skin, he needed luxury to breathe. Therefore, the only way to travel between Chicago and New York that could satisfy his standards was on the Twentieth Century Limited and that was exactly how he had planned to return home after his wedding.

The newlyweds were taken to LaSalle Street Station where their train would leave at 6:00 pm. He expected they would be just in time for supper, travel all night and finally arrive to their destination by 9am. He had done this journey many times during his career, but never ever his pulse had beaten so wildly. Walking on the red carpet that covered the platform, with his usual decided gait, he felt the warmth of his wife's hand in his. Under the usual severe expression of his face, partly veiled by his formal felt hat and the lifted lapel of his coat, his eyes shone with joy.

The young woman walking by his side looked at him, studying his every gesture. At times, she had to repress a giggle, as she thought that his serious expression did not make justice to his true noble nature. His hurried strides required her to walk faster than usual. Nevertheless, she did not object, because she understood his ability to tolerate the presence of other people was wearing out just in the same proportion their mutual need of each other was growing unbearable.

They finally boarded the train, being conducted by an attendant that carried their luggage to their private compartment. Candy, who had never traveled in the Twentieth Century, was mesmerized by the rich wood panels covering the walls that made the compartment look

like a small seating room. The decorations on the ceiling and the small Tiffany lamps screamed that comfort was not enough without beauty.

The train employee left the suitcases on the floor, and asked if the passengers required any other service.

“Would you send us a waiter? We’d like to have dinner brought to the compartment,” instructed the gentleman tipping the employee.

When the couple was left alone, a sudden silence fell between them. He looked at her for the thousandth time that day. Her figure was wrapped in a fur collar coat that she was now unfastening.

“What do you think of the Twentieth Century Limited, Mrs. Graham?” he asked while helping her to take off her coat, hanging it along with his in the small closet of the compartment.

“Looks quite expensive,” she replied, a bit distracted by the tickles that his nearness was provoking in her.

He noticed that she had changed her white lace dress for a warmer one with an ankle-length skirt. The dark navy-blue shade of the garment contrasted with its white puritan collar and made her pale complexion glow quite becomingly. She felt him looking at her, but then, before she could meet his eyes, he averted them.

“Is Terry always going to be a riddle to me? Just when I think I have figured him out, he comes with something unexpected,” she asked inwardly.

The young man sat with blasé air on the large couch that seemed to be the central piece of furniture of the compartment. Candy entered the small toilet to check herself in the mirror. She reordered her short curls, which were still held by the white cravat, transformed into a headband. While she moved her fingers to reshape the waves framing her face, the glitter of her engagement ring and wedding band caught her eye. It was real; she was his wife, and this was their first evening as a married couple. Yet, she felt a bit frustrated that they had to spend their wedding night in a train compartment. *“Certainly, a lady and a gentleman couldn’t do much in such a situation. Could they?”* she wondered.

Candy was taken aback by her own thoughts. She couldn’t believe they were actually running along those lines. However, if she was honest to herself, the truth is that she desired to be with him again and not just for a few fondling caresses as they had shared the previous days.

“Can a wife voice these sorts of things?” she asked in her mind, observing her blush appearing again all over her face. *“Goodness, when did I become such a minx?”*

Candy, still debating this in the toilet, heard the waiter's voice. Terrence ordered the meal and asked also for the compartment to be fixed for the evening, whatever that could mean.

When she came out of the lavatory, the young woman found her husband reading with imperturbable air what appeared to be a script. Seeing him busy, she sat by his side and tried to occupy her eyes observing the buildings that appeared and disappeared in the window as the train rapidly made its way out of Chicago. After a while, the buildings would be replaced by the immense crop planes she knew so well. The young woman would have tried to hold his hand, but he had both of them holding his script; so, she rested her right elbow on the window frame and her chin on her hand, leaving her other hand in the crook of her right arm.

"It is amazing how serene he seems, when I'm burning here! The air is turning stifling!" she thought pretending to be interested in the grayish landscape.

Not too long after that, the waiter returned bringing the room service trolley. Terrence again dealt with the man. Candy cast a discreet look at the two men while talking. Being used to arranging things by herself, she thought that for once it felt nice to have someone to take charge of those details. Once the waiter left, Terrence returned to his script. Candy, perplexed by his indifference towards the food which he had insisted on ordering, turned again to observe the window. She was not hungry either.

Nervously, she rested the weight of her legs on her high heels, lifting the tip of her feet. She saw her navy-blue Mary Jane shoes. They sported a white trimming and a bow she liked a great deal. Despite her efforts to occupy her mind admiring her shoes, soon she felt silly losing her time thus.

"Should I simply take that obnoxious script from his hands and kiss him as I am dying to?" she thought. *"Darn, Candy! Can't you think of anything else?"* she chastised herself.

Finally, another train attendant knocked at the door. This time, Terrence addressed her for the first time in almost fifteen minutes.

"They've come to fix the compartment for the evening. Would you please stand up, Candice?"

Candy did as she was told, while the employee entered the compartment and before Candy's astounded eyes transformed the couch in a bed.

"The Compartment has a bed?" she thought surprised, *"Does that mean that Terry plans to . . . Oh! Good Heavens!"* Candy felt her ill-timed blush covered her cheeks once again, and she had to turn her face to hide it from the train employee.

When the task was done and the attendant had disappeared, Candy heard the distinctive click of the door's lock as Terrence sighed in relief.

“I thought they would take forever!” he exclaimed irritated while turning to face her, his facial expression now transformed into the private Terrence he had revealed to her in the previous days.

“They?” she asked stumbled.

He gave her a roguish smile and then walked past her towards the window.

“Yes, they, all of them,” he explained while pulling down the window’s blinds, “the train employees, the chauffeur, the passengers, the servants, my mother, your friends, your teachers, your family, the people in the crowd, everyone!” he numbered in growing exasperation.

As he approached her decidedly, she began to think that perhaps this train ride was not going to be as taxing as she had thought. He stood in front of her and held her by the shoulders.

“I mean everyone who has been between you and I these last three days,” he continued, his finger now lifting her chin, to meet her eyes, “I thought they would never leave us alone,” Terrence concluded just before he lowered his face to brush her cheek with his, while his hands moved to hold her waist.

“Haven’t you missed this?” he last said as he lifted her body until her face was at his level. His lips captured hers and Candy’s arms went around his neck, just as her senses exploded again at his multidirectional assault over her body.

“Of course I had missed this,” she thought, “It is what I have been wishing for all this while. . . Oh Ah! . . . The way he’s kissing me! . . . His hands on me! . . . Oh God!”

With husky voice she managed to say to his ear:

- Yes, I wanted to be with you, Terry, but for a moment, I thought you were not interested. You’ve been too busy with your reading.

He laughed at her reply.

“My love. I know myself. If I start with you, babe, I won’t stop in order to deal with train employees and order dinners. See?” He asked rhetorically while plunging his mouth to bite her neck. She responded moaning.

He perceived her shivering in his arms, which made him understand it was up to him whether things were to end up fast or last all evening. He decided on the second option, liberating her body for a moment.

“I think we should undress, my love,” he said to her ears, allowing her feet reach the floor once again.

She nodded in silence, beginning to remove her earrings, while he took off his Anderson & Sheppard bespoke jacket. Then, when she was about to unfasten the white head band, his hand deterred her from doing it.

“This, which you wore for me today, my lady, has topped my day just as much as your love vows. Leave it on you, please” he added taking the extreme of his cravat that dangled from her nape and rested on her shoulder.

“It was my way of returning what is rightfully yours, Terry,” she said with a playful smile, seductively unfastening the pearl-like buttons of her dress.

“What? The cravat or yourself?”

“Both,” she responded suggestively.

“Well said, madam. Had I known the day I bandaged your arm with my cravat that I would receive it back wrapping such a delicious package,” he said eying the opening of her dress greedily, “I would have claimed it a lot sooner.”

“Well, the master of the realm can very well claim as much as if he wishes, now” she invited and he acted upon her words . . . and her body, just as much as the reader can expect.



The noise of the running train lulled Terrence to sleep, but he did not want to give in just yet. It was warm and cozy beneath the covers with her nude body snuggled next to him. He could feel her regular breathing on his chest and knew she was not asleep either. Her back was so smooth to the touch that reminded him of the feeling of silk. He let his hands glide all over it and lower.

“You’re awake, right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“May I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“What happened after the last page of your old diary?” he inquired, producing at last the question that had been suspended in his mind, since he had finished reading her diary.

“I came back to America and became a nurse,” she replied succinctly.

“I know that, silly,” he laughed, “I mean, how did you come back? You left before Georges or Albert could find out, isn’t it?” he inquired, intrigued.

“Well, yes. I suppose I just improvised,” she responded smiling.

He traced her dimples with his index finger, half charmed by her smile, half alarmed by her implications.

“What do you mean by “improvise”?” he insisted.

“I didn’t know exactly what I was to do when I left. I just knew that I couldn’t stay in the Academy and that I had to go back to America. So, I just packed and started my journey. I travelled in a wagon, hidden within a large hay bunch, without the knowledge of the driver. I imagined that it would take me to the port. Once there, I would figure out how to get money and buy a ticket. But I fell asleep and when I woke up, I was on a farm. The farmer, a man named Mr. Carson, was a grumpy widower with three children. The youngest of the kids, the cutest little girl, fell sick and I helped her during her illness. This delayed my trip for a few days. Then, they helped me to get to Southampton, but since I didn’t have money for the ticket, someone suggested that I could stow away. So, that’s what I did.”

“You stowed away??? I can’t believe it!!! Lord, you truly are gutsy!” he said chuckling, highly amused by her boldness.

“I know it was very irresponsible from me, but I felt compelled to be back before the winter came. If I couldn’t be near you, at least I wanted to be in the same country you were in, and not a whole ocean away. Fortunately, I had a safe trip and even made some friends on the way.”

Moved by her words, the young man reflected on the dangers she exposed herself to in her juvenile impatience. He shivered at the mere thought of the thousand calamities that could have befallen.

“Thanks God nothing happened to you,” he exclaimed holding her even tighter, “I wouldn’t have forgiven myself if it had.”

“We really have to do something with you, Terry. When will you learn that not every disaster on the world is your responsibility?” She retorted him sweetly.

Terrence smiled back at her comment while marveling at the fact that a simple hug had put him in the mood once more.

“Tell me more about your trip. How did you stow away?” he asked, while caressing her in a more intent manner.

“I . . . I met a Mr. Juskin . . . he was a sailor and. . . Mr. Carson’s friend.”

She tried to continue her narrative but did it very poorly since his kisses suffocated her words and all conversation had to be postponed for a good while.



Chapter 10



Mrs. Graham - Mrs. Grandchester

Word had reached the press that something serious was going on with Terrence Graham. A friend of a friend had leaked the information that he was engaged to be married with some rich heiress from Chicago. If that was true, it could make a great heading for the Entertainment section. However, the elusive Mr. Graham had neither been seen in New York nor in Chicago. The local tabloids had left a few of their reporters at the Grand Central Terminal waiting at the hours that the Twentieth Century Limited usually arrived. They knew the young actor's habits and expected that he would be seen walking the red carpet any of these days. They wanted to make sure they would be there to accost him with questions.

But Terrence had not been in show business for so long to be trapped that easily. Understanding that his presence at the Ardlays' New Year's Eve party would eventually reach the press, he had prepared one of his tricks to avoid the reporters. Instead of going all the way to the Grand Central Terminal, he and his wife got off the train at Harmon, NY. Although passengers were normally not allowed to leave the train at that station, which was only used as a telegraph post and ticket office, he had played the celebrity card to be granted an exception. Roberto Barbera, his chauffeur, was already waiting for his employer and new wife at Harmon. The young couple made the rest of the trip in Terrence's 1923 Packard Model 126, until they reached Greenwich Village by lunch time. The young man knew that he would have to face the media sooner or later, but he wanted to do it on his own terms, in a press

conference. He didn't want to have his bride frightened by the usual aggressive questions that reporters carelessly threw at celebrities when not controlled by the protocol of a press conference.

Blissfully ignorant of her husband's musings, Candy enjoyed the 3-hour final ride in the height of her expectations to finally arrive in her new home. She had never been to Greenwich Village and found it less cold than other parts of the great city. Terrence's lived in a large apartment building on East 10th Street. It was a 12-story brown-brick construction located just a few blocks from Washington Square Park. Candy was thrilled to find out that she would have at least a little patch of greenery near her home.

The lobby was decorated in Elizabethan style and had a courtyard garden that added some bright colors, which Candy found very pleasing. The apartment was anything but small. It was a three-bedroom apartment with a library, a spacious living room and a very comfortable dining room full of light. Large windows allowed the sunrays to bathe the rooms maximizing their effect on the white walls. The furniture followed very simple lines, playing with ivory, navy blue and Nile green accents in a white atmosphere. The composition was sleek and neat, just as its owner. Candy loved the place at first sight, thinking that it only needed a few plants and flowers here and there, and perhaps some curtains in the master bedroom. She imagined she could fix that very soon.

Once the luggage was installed in the bedroom, Candy was properly introduced to Mrs. O'Malley, the housekeeper, a stout middle-aged woman of salt-and-pepper hair. The woman was of Irish descent, and Candy soon entered with her in conversation as she mentioned that one of her best friends had Hibernian⁵⁷ roots as well. Mrs. O'Malley, who already knew Candy by name, since she had received most of her letters in the previous months, was pleasantly surprised by the new Mrs. Graham. She found that the young woman had an easy conversation, and her good breeding was evident.

Mr. Graham had been acting out of character before his tour started and his housekeeper, who had lived in the world long enough, supposed that it was somehow connected with the scented pink envelopes that he had been receiving every week since June. She was afraid a new attachment was being formed in her employer's heart. Her previous experience with the late Miss Marlowe had been so bad that she feared the day a new woman came to live with Mr. Graham. The housekeeper's apprehensions had risen when her employer had requested her to send him the engagement ring he kept in the safe.

⁵⁷ Hibernian: Irish. Candy is referring to Patricia O'Brien, who although native of Oxford, has Irish ancestors in this fanfiction, as suggested by her last name.

“Would he bring home another “fiancée”?” wondered Mrs. O’Malley, not so sure her master’s taste in women could match with her preferences for a mistress.

But the peak of Mrs. O’Malley’s surprise had been the moment her employer had called her to announce that he would return home with his new “wife”.

“Now, this is something really different,” judged the housekeeper, *“This new woman should be more like a true lady to make Mr. Graham commit to such a degree. Not like that young chit of a girl that called herself his fiancée.”*

It is a bit of an understatement to say that Mrs. O’Malley had never liked Susannah Marlowe. Yet she couldn’t stop wondering how come a man who had lived with a woman for years, never making a decent woman out of her, offered his hand in marriage to another after just six months of epistolary relationship. Mrs. O’Malley would not be the only one asking such a question in the following months.

Nevertheless, this time Mrs. O’Malley was grateful for her employer’s apparent impulsivity. She found the new Mrs. Graham not only an unassuming beauty, far more engaging than Ms. Marlowe, but extremely kind and well mannered. Therefore, when Terrence gave her the rest of the week off, Mrs. O’Malley went home not only satisfied with her new mistress, but sure that this time she would be serving a lady.



The remains of that Thursday and the subsequent weekend were spent at the peak of bliss for the newlyweds, as they indulged in their spiritual and physical communion without a third party to interrupt them. Being the two free spirits they were at heart, they tried everything they could fancy, enjoyed the most delicious baths, far more extended than needed, and nibbled anything they could pick from the kitchen between one and another round of lovemaking. Terrence discovered that his wife was an avid learner of the arts of Aphrodite, and complimented himself for having found a lover that met his expectations in every way imagined. He, who had always believed luck was not on his side, suddenly encountered his hands full of a passionate and sincere love. He thought he would go mad, but out of joy. How was that for a change?

Unfortunately, even the best moments in life must come to an end, and the following Monday he had to wake up to the reality of a business meeting with the Stratford Company, which could not be postponed. Before leaving, he had entreated his wife not to venture alone outside their place to avoid reporters. Candy did not like the idea quite much, but for the time being, she deemed he surely had good reasons to be so careful. So, she contented herself

with getting acquainted with her new home and cleaning up the mess they both had made of the place in the previous days.

Terrence, who anticipated the usual meeting to discuss the new plays they were to prepare for the coming season, was about to have a surprise, and not precisely a good one. After all the members of the troupe had arrived and the good wishes for the New Year had been exchanged, Mr. Hathaway broke the most unforeseen piece of news, announcing that he had decided to retire and sell the company.

As was to be expected, the intelligence of such a change set all the performers in the most nervous and volatile of moods. However, Mr. Hathaway announced that he had decided on selling the troupe only to one that would assure him that the company would continue working on the same line of high drama they had always maintained. The preservation of the current members and their present working conditions was also one of the requirements for the sale. In fact, he had already a couple of prospective buyers who were willing to meet those conditions, and one of them especially was someone of the best theatrical lineage.

These words assuaged the performers' apprehensions; thus, the meeting could go further to consider three different plays for the season. After agreeing on the calendar for the readings, a couple of possible job openings, and future rehearsals, the meeting came to its close. When the performers were about to leave, Mr. Hathaway approached Terrence and requested him to stay longer for a private talk. Nobody was surprised by this particular event, because it was usual for Hathaway to have a word with his leading actor every now and then.

The two men entered Hathaway's office and the man, knowing well that his pupil did not drink, offered him a cigar, instead.

"No, thanks, Robert, I'm trying to quit," the young man said sitting on the office couch as he crossed his leg.

"Are you serious?" Hathaway asked, frowning in disbelief as he sat in front of Terrence with a glass of Bourbon in his hand.

"Oh yes. Someone told me that quitting could be good for my voice."

"And since when do you take people's advice? It's not like you, Terrence," chuckled Mr. Hathaway shaking his head.

"Well, it is never too late to begin. Right?" Answered the young man, resting the back of his neck on his two hands, as he reclined on the couch.

"I suppose." Hathaway replied, looking at his whiskey absentmindedly. "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about this sale matter."

"You don't have to say anything, Robert," Terrence interjected, "I perfectly understand that your wife's health should go first. I would do the same if I were in your place. You shouldn't worry about us and concentrate on making a good deal. The rest is inconsequential."

"Thank you, Terrence. I assure you that I'm doing this only after considering carefully what is best for all. Still, I worry about you, in particular."

"About me? Why should you do that?" The young actor inquired, suspecting that Robert had something unpleasant to reveal. "Are you thinking about selling to someone I may not like?"

"Well, I still have to meet a person you can honestly say you truly like," chuckled the older man behind his glass. He knew well his pupil's standoffish habits.

"I was speaking in general terms. I know Public Relations are not among my most refined skills, but I think I can be professional enough to manage with a new director."

"Perhaps not the one that may be leading the company for next fall."

Hathaway's somber tone made Terrence's state of alertness grow higher.

"Robert, who are you talking about?" He asked more directly.

"The Barrymore family is making me an offer that is far above the amount I expected." Mr. Hathaway confessed, this time leaving his half empty glass aside.

"So, the Royal Family wants Stratford," concluded Terrence crossing his arms over his chest.

"I'm afraid they do."

"I suppose you're afraid what may happen if they discover who my mother is."

"Well, partly yes. But I'm also concerned that John Barrymore may not like competition in his own company."

Robert Hathaway knew that John Barrymore was used to leading roles and would not hesitate to displace any other star that could outshine his figure.

"Perhaps, it is me who would not be willing to deal with them," responded Terrence with his usual nonchalance. "No offense, I know the Barrymores are a talented bunch, but their father almost ruined my mother's career. I just don't see myself working with his children. Especially if they want to patronize me, as they normally do with everyone in Broadway."

This last comment made Hathaway's face cloud. He did want to make a good sale, but not if that meant his favorite pupil would be treated unjustly.

"Then, if you put it that way, I'll discard that possibility."

“Don’t do such a foolish thing, Robert,” said Terrence emphatically, “I appreciate your loyalty, but in this issue, you should only consider what is best for you and Melanie.”

“I wouldn’t like to affect your future, son.”

Then, perhaps for the first time in his life, Terrence gave Hathaway a look that was close to an affectionate glance.

“You’ve done far enough for me, Robert,” the young man replied padding his mentor’s shoulder, “I think I can manage in some other company. . . Who knows, I may even try as a freelancer. My mother suggested me something like that a few months ago.”

“Are you sure?” Hathaway asked, still doubtful.

“Almost nothing is sure in this world, Robert. Anyway, I still think you should sell to the Barrymores if they are making you such a good offer. I’ll find a place for myself sooner or later.”

“I really appreciate, Terrence,” said the older man, visibly moved by the young man’s sincere concern, “All I can hope for now is that we have the best of seasons as my farewell to the stage.”

“I may have a couple of aces under the sleeve to guarantee a bit of extra publicity this year,” Terrence remarked with half a smile.

“Really? What are you thinking about, son?”

“Well, in first place, after the success with Macbeth, I’ve been thinking about doing another villain’s role. This time I’d like to do something even more challenging. What do you say if we do Richard III instead of the Tempest that you proposed as the main play for the season?”

“You want to be Richard the 3rd?”

Now, this time Robert was pleasantly surprised. Doing Richard III as his farewell play was something any director would like. The play was so complex and strong that it could bring him the soundest of successes in his career as stage director, especially if he could count on a leading actor of Terrence’s stature.

“Then, I suppose our make-up and custom department will be working some extra hours with you. Turning a good looking fellow like you in Richard III will be a trying job.”

“You’ve always said that the best make up is in the performer’s voice and attitude. I think we’ll do great with this play.”

“All right! Let’s try with Richard III this season,” Robert concluded clapping his hands once to rub them together in anticipation of the good performances that would come.

“There’s something else, Robert,” Terrence added casually, “I would like to have a press conference to make an announcement.”

“YOU want to call a press conference?” Robert asked as he opened his mouth in disbelief, “I think I can now retire in peace. I can say I have seen it all! Terrence Graham wants to talk to the media. Is the world about to end now?”

“Oh, please Robert. Do not dramatize!” Terrence chuckled. “I know I have always given you a hard time with press issues. Yet this time, I do have a piece of news I must announce officially. You see, Robert, I’ve just gotten married.”

The thickest of silence ensued for the following seconds before Robert could recover the ability to speak.

“Did I hear well? Have you said that you are married?”

“That is right!” said Terrence raising his eyebrows as if he had said the most natural of things.

“Then all those rumors are true after all. I dismissed them as soon as I heard them. I was convinced you were not of the married kind.”

“You were wrong, my friend. I am a taken man, and a very happy one.”

Terrence’s open smiled as in a man who was truly happy seemed to be alien to the young man’s face.

“Who are you? What have you done with my leading actor?” Hathaway joked, unable to recognize his gloomy leading actor in this man who seemed genuinely content.

“Blast, Robert! Is it so difficult to believe it?”

“Wait! Does this have anything to do with the Angel from Pittsburgh?” was Hathaway’s immediate conclusion.

“Everything! Only that the Angel is not from Pittsburgh. She is from Indiana, but now she is here in my flat and I have serious plans to keep her hostage for the rest of my life.”

“You are a strange man, Terrence! Are you sure you don’t care if I sell the company to the Barrymores and leave you unemployed now that you just got married?”

“Of course I’m worried, Robert.” Terrence accepted in all honesty, “But I’ve been through worse, and my Mrs. Graham is not one who faints at the sight of troubles. Of that I’m more than certain,” he added, confident about his wife’s loyalty and strength if any difficult time knocked at their doors.

“Then you must introduce your Mrs. Graham to Melanie and me at once. What about dinner with us next Friday?”

“That sounds good, but I think I have to ask my lady first.”

“Now you begin to sound like a married man.”



Oxford, December 30th, 1924

Dearest Candy,

I am beyond myself with your news! When I read your letter, I could scarcely believe how good God has been with us all. To know that you and Terrence have been able to recover the wonderful love that has always united you both, despite all circumstances, is by far the best news I've received since little Alistair was born.

Through the years, I always thought that having you two alive in this world, only to be separated from each other, was the grossest atrocity ever. Now, I must confess,

dear friend, that I saw him when he came to England this year. He was in the role of Mark Antony and was as regal as ever. Of course, he didn't see me. I was just another spectator appraising his superb performance. You know well my shy ways. I would never have dared to let him know my presence.

Nevertheless, I saw him when he was coming out of the theatre, even if it was only in the distance. Outside the skin of his character, he looked tired and sad, as if struggling. Far from the splendidly happy boy I saw in Scotland so long ago. I suspected that even after all these years, he was still missing you. Now I know I was right.

As much as I enjoyed his work, I purposefully did not mention it when I saw you at your birthday party this May. I knew the "Terry-talk" was taboo with you and I did not want to worry you with my observations on his somber demeanor. But now, I can tell you all, knowing that he should have recovered his smile by your side.

I am happy for you both. Please, give Terrence my most sincere wishes for your future life together, and tell him I believe he is a very lucky man. I'm only sorry that I couldn't be at your wedding. But I don't blame you. I know you two had been waiting far too long.

Now I can only hope to see you two soon. Yet I'm afraid I won't be able to travel to America next summer. I must finish my dissertation this coming year. I wonder if you would be the one coming to England, now that you are married to Terrence. Who knows? He might be touring here again very soon. I would love to welcome you to my home if that ever happens.

Till we meet again, I remain

Your faithful friend

Patricia O'Brien.



Candy sighed while she folded Patty's letter and put it back in her in her wooden box, where she kept her correspondence. It was the first missive she received in her new address in New York. Her heart had shrunk at reading the line that spoke of Terrence's sadness. Deep in her heart, she still couldn't forgive herself for having left him that fateful night in the hospital. However, she was working with all her might to make it up to him.

After their idyllic first weekend together, she had started to get acquainted with the people in his world. On Monday, she had met with Mrs. O'Malley and Mr. Barbera, the only two servants Terrence kept for his home, to become more familiar with their duties and explain that her addition to the household would not imply more work for them. In fact, Mrs. O'Malley was surprised to find out that the lady of the house wished to exempt her from her cooking responsibilities, because Mrs. Graham herself planned to do the cooking. That was an absolute scandal, thought Mrs. O'Malley, but for a reason unknown to her, it was practically impossible for the woman to resist the charm of her new mistress and her strange notions on how to run a household. So, she let her be.

Roberto, who didn't like Mrs. O'Malley's Irish cooking, welcomed the change, particularly when he discovered that the new mistress was indeed a very good cook. And such an appraisal coming from an Italian was indeed a great compliment to Candy's skills in the kitchen. Even Mrs. O'Malley had to admit that her mistress outdid her.

As for the cleaning and the laundry, the housekeeper was happy to concentrate her efforts in that direction. Not that the occupants of the house gave her too much work. Mr. Graham had always been a tidy fellow, a rarity among men, thought the woman. His wife was even more scrupulous with order and cleanness. Sometimes, Mrs. O'Malley believed that her mistress wanted to turn the apartment into a hospital, but she coped with her demands because Mrs. Graham had a way to requests things so cheerful and kind that was hardly taxing.

The following Friday, Candy had met the Hathaways, and it had taken her just an evening to win their good graces. Melanie Hathaway had been less prone to be seduced by Mrs.

Graham's charm. She had been Susannah Marlowe's intimate friend, and for this reason, the woman was a bit defensive when her husband brought her the news of Terrence's recent wedding. Mrs. Hathaway knew that Terrence had kept a proper mourning after Susannah's death, but still resented the fact that the young man had married this new woman all of a sudden. It seemed all too much to bear, knowing that her friend Susannah had waited for years without ever reaching the altar. However, Melanie knew that putting off the wedding had been, on more than one occasion, Susannah's mother's own fault. Surely the new Mrs. Graham had been smarter than that and seized the opportunity when it came. Did that make her an opportunist trollop?

The Hathaways were not aware of Candy's presence in Terrence's life prior to his arrival in New York. The young man had always kept the relationship only to himself, and Susannah had never confided Melanie the dramatic details of her story with Candice White Ardlay. Therefore, when Candy was introduced to the director and his wife, they did not have any information to bias their minds beyond the fact that this was the woman who had reached what appeared to be unreachable.

Despite Melanie's reservations, it only took her a few minutes to understand that this young woman, absolutely opposed to Susannah's reserved ways, was the indisputable sovereign of Terrence's heart. Melanie was completely dumbfounded.

In the past, Susannah's constant boast of Terrence's devotion to her had been so eloquent that Mrs. Hathaway had no reasons to think differently. Consequently, seeing Terrence's apparent collectedness around his fiancée, the woman imagined that he was one of those men that would never show their affections for their significant other in public. But the young man that introduced his wife to her that evening was a totally different Terrence Graham. The man's hands would be on his lady at the first excuse available and his face would involuntarily light up in a smile whenever he looked at her. He was, without question, a besotted man.

Robert Hathaway, who had never been partial to Susannah, had not been fooled. He was convinced that the relationship between his two performers had only been a pretense, at least on Terrence's side. This new girl had been different from the very beginning. What had happened in Pittsburgh was so out of character for Terrence, that it had to be a very serious case of the strongest kind of love. The interaction of the young actor with his wife during the dinner was the ultimate confirmation. Robert was happy to find his leading actor merely human, after all.

Eventually, even Mrs. Hathaway was won by this young woman that was unpretentious and good natured. There is something about real love that makes people shine in a certain

irresistible light. It was clear that Mrs. Graham was now bathed in that light. Despite Melanie's loyalties towards Susannah, she couldn't resist Candice's charms, and, by the end of the evening, she declared to her husband that she was looking forward to furthering the acquaintance.

Yes, everything in Candy's new life seemed to march smoothly, she thought, leaving her correspondence aside and walking towards the window. She checked the daffodil bulbs she had brought from Pony's Home. Since the temperature was too low those days, she kept them inside a dark closet and watered them regularly. She closed her eyes and wished for Spring, although, in her heart, it seemed the sun had come out before time this year.



Finally, after a wait that had been particularly difficult for Candice, the dreaded day of the press conference arrived. Not being used to talk in public, let alone in front of the cameras and under the pressure of the media, the young woman hardly slept the night before the event. As a matter of fact, it was not planned to allow a great number of questions about their recent wedding because the main object of the conference was not Terrence's personal life, but the presentation of the new plays for the spring season. However, the Grahams had studied carefully how they were going to face the reporters and how much they cared to disclose. Despite all these preparations, Candy feared that the novelty of the situation and her usual inarticulateness would ultimately ruin the plans.

It was with great trepidation that she waited in the adjacent room, while her husband and the other performers, along with Robert Hathaway, made their entrance to the hall where the conference would be held. As she paced the room nervously, Candy could hear the moderator opening the conference.

"Ladies and gentlemen, The Stratford Company welcomes you to this conference. We thank you all for your presence and interest in our work. We will be very pleased to present the plays that we will be featuring this coming season, as well as the performers that will be in the leading roles. We will also make an announcement of great importance related to the future of our troupe and allow a round of questions on this matter. Finally, we are aware that you are all interested in asking our leading actor, Mr. Graham, some questions regarding certain ongoing rumors about his personal life. Mr. Graham will be open to answering a few questions on this topic, but only by the end of the conference. Now, to introduce our featured plays and our cast for this season, I here present our director and manager, Mr. Robert Hathaway."

Trying to control her restlessness, Candy rubbed her hands, while Robert Hathaway announced the plays. The selection of Richard III was the one issue that attracted the most

attention at this point of the conference, because it had been a very long time since the troupe had last put on stage such a play. The fact that Terrence Graham would be in the leading role also led to a round of questions on the matter, which Terrence answered in his usual sober tone. Hearing his collected voice, the young woman wondered again at the fact that she was now part of his life. Candy knew that she was the only one entitled to hear that same cold voice turn tender and sweet in her arms. She looked at the rings in her left hand once more, as if to confirm that she was not dreaming.

When the presentation of the plays and the cast for the season was over, Robert Hathaway made the formal announcement of his impending retirement. As was expected, this piece of news was the subject of many questions about the reasons for such an early retirement and the future of the company. Candy thought that Mr. Hathaway was handling the reporters' questions most graciously. On the one hand, the way he explained that his main interest was now his wife's health had been particularly touching for the young woman. On the other hand, as a cunning businessman, Hathaway only disclosed a few details about his plans to sell the company but did not reveal the names of the prospective buyers. Yet he promised the media that, as soon as he had more solid information on the matter, he and the new owner would be giving an interview to let their public know the details.

Finally, the time to close the conference with the last round of questions came. Candy's hand went to her heart, to touch her old crucifix and give herself courage.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, to close our conference, Mr. Graham will be addressing you about the rumors we all know about. I only remind you that only a few questions will be allowed here, and no further interviews will be given afterwards. We will appreciate your respecting these terms. Now, Mr. Graham, if you please."

"Certainly. There is very little to say on this matter, so I will be brief," Terrence began as serious and self-possessed as in the previous set of questions, "Regarding the rumor about my having married in recent dates, I'm glad to inform you that the information is correct. The lady who is now my wife and I got married a couple of weeks ago."

The statement aroused a general uproar. Forgetting about the usual protocol, some of the reporters cast questions to the air and the order had to be restored by the moderator.

"Gentlemen, ladies, please. I remind you that you must raise your hands to pose questions," the man pointed out and then, addressing one of the reporters he said: "Mr. Callaway, from the Daily News."

"When will you introduce your wife, sir?" The reporter asked, taking the moderator's cue.

“What would you say if I told you that as of right now, Mr. Callaway?” replied Terrence standing up and moving towards the door of the adjacent room.

Then, the door opened and a young blonde in a Jean Patou’s black dress with a lace collar entered the hall. The cameras rained their flashes over the woman, while her husband conducted her towards the empty seat next to him. Once seated, the young man addressed the audience once again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am hardly overstating if I say now that I am proud and pleased to introduce my wife, Mrs. Terrence Graham.”

“The name of your lady,” an anonymous voice cried.

“I suppose she can provide you with the information herself,” Terrence said passing the microphone.

“Well, good afternoon to you, first of all,” began the young woman with a nervous smile, “My name is Candice White and before I got married to Mr. Graham my family name was Ardlay.”

The reporters again raised their hands.

“Mr. Rodgers, from the New York Post,” named the moderator.

“Mrs. Graham, could you expand a bit more about yourself? For instance, are you related to the Ardlays from Chicago?”

“Gladly, Mr . . .” Candy began hesitantly.

“Samuel Rodgers,” replied the reporter.

“Thank you, Mr. Rodgers, you’re most kind,” she responded with a smile. “The answer is yes, I am part of the Ardlay family; however, my association is only by adoption. Mr. William Albert Ardlay is my adoptive father. I entered the family when I was thirteen. Before that, I was raised in an orphanage in Indiana. I have never known who my parents were.”

The revelation of such news delivered with the most sincere and unpretentious voice gained the sympathy of the audience. Another reporter raised his hand then.

“Mr. Norton, from the Chicago Tribune,” called the moderator and Candy made a mental note to remember the name of the reporter this time.

“Mrs. Graham, I’ve come all the way from Chicago because there were rumors that the new Mrs. Graham was from there. I see the rumors were not false. Now that you have revealed who you are, I know my readers will want to know more. I mean, everybody in Chicago knows

your prominent family and will surely be interested in knowing how the Ardleys took the news of your marrying an actor.”

“Thanks for your interest, Mr. Norton,” responded Candy and Terrence observed she was gaining confidence by the second, “I have the fortune of having a very good relationship with my adoptive father. As a Chicagoan, you surely know that he is rather a bit too young to be the father of a woman of my age. Due to this reason, I have always thought of him as a friend, even as an older brother, and as any good brother, he has always been supportive in all my decisions. He and all the elders of our family know my husband and have approved of our marriage. They couldn’t do otherwise, you know, because I am most lucky to be married to the best of men. Well, this is my very biased opinion, I’m afraid,” she concluded casting an affectionate look to her husband.

The latter comment made the audience laugh and then again, another reporter was called to pose a question.

“How did you and Mr. Graham meet, madam?”

“We met a long time ago, sir. We attended the same High School, you see, but had lost communication through the years, as often happens with schoolmates. I met him again during one of my trips this last November,” she paused to look at him if only to smile briefly and continue. “Mr. Graham was on one of his tours, and I was on my own fund-raising trip. I have worked raising charity funds for Indiana’s orphaned children for the last four years. You can say that we happened to coincide.”

“Were you and Mr. Graham High School sweethearts?” asked a lady in the bunch without being cued.

“No, madam. We were just good friends, but hadn’t been in touch for long time,” Candy replied with an enigmatic smile.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” interrupted the moderator. “One more question only. All right, Ms. Steel, from the New York Times.

“This question is for Mr. Graham,” the alluded woman said, and Terrence nodded his accord.

“Sir, your sudden wedding has made everyone wonder how come a man can propose and marry a woman in just a couple of months, after being engaged for years to another without ever marrying her. May I ask for the reason?”

Terrence knew this question was coming sooner or later. However, the malicious intent disgusted him no matter how expected.

“Well, Miss Steel,” he began turning even more serious than before, but without losing his jaunty unconcern, “as a man who lives on the stage, I tend to believe in fate. This is, I think, that beyond our willpower and most sincere intentions, sometimes circumstances work in unexpected directions, leading us towards the most surprising outcomes. My relationship with Miss Marlowe was marked by those unforeseen turns of fortune. Her accident, the ups and downs of my own career –which you all know very well–, and the fatal disease she suffered interposed over and over during our engagement, making our marriage impossible. It had nothing to do with the degree of my commitment to her or the strength of my word of honor. I’m afraid it was simply not meant to be. After such an ordeal, I met Candice again, and reality struck me with one truth: wise is the man that seizes the opportunity when destiny opens the doors to happiness. Beyond this, all I can add has been better said by The Bard: ***Now is the winter of “my” discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York; and all the clouds that lour’d upon “my” house in the deep bosom of the ocean buried***⁵⁸.”

And after this last statement, Terrence stood up helping his wife to come out of the room. The moderator closed the conference and, as previously established, no further questions or interviews were allowed.



Later in the evening, the Grahams were back in their quarters, finishing dinner. Mrs. O’Malley and Mr. Barbera had already been dismissed; so, the couple just enjoyed one another as they cleared the table.

“Be honest, Terry. How did I do it?” Candy asked while putting on an apron to wash the dishes.

“Very well, I would say, especially taking into account that you made such a fuss about your inability to speak in public,” he answered naturally as he left the plates in the sink.

“Really? When I was there, I thought I was messing up the whole thing. Now I’m only glad that it is over.”

“Do not worry about it anymore. After this, they will insist a bit on getting an interview, which will never happen, of course. But if they don’t get what they want, they’ll soon find something else to occupy their readers and forget about us. I promise you won’t have to go through this again, Freckles,” he concluded briefly brushing the tip of her pert little nose with one finger.

“I really hope so. It feels really weird to be questioned about your private life by a total stranger. But now that it is over we can forget about it. Right?”

⁵⁸ Terrence is using here the first lines of the opening monologue of Richard III but is changing the verses slightly to fit the occasion.

Terrence looked at his wife and in a reflex response he raised his left eyebrow. She immediately knew that he was not willing to drop the subject just yet.

“As a matter of fact, before we close the subject, I have only one complaint,” he said crossing his arms on his chest while leaning on the kitchen counter.

“You do?” she asked with a tone that invited him to explain himself.

“Yes, you lied twice as you answered the questions and we had agreed to stick to the truth without disclosing what is too personal,” he reproached mockingly.

Candy internally wondered once again, how he managed to look so handsome while being so annoying at the same time.

“What do you mean? I did not lie!” She finally reacted defensively.

“Oh yes, you did,” he contradicted most emphatically.

“Prove it!” She challenged leaving the plates aside and turning off the faucet.

“First, you said that I am the best of men and we both know very well that is untrue.”

“Goodness, Terry. You are insufferable!” She responded with half a smile on her lips, “but still, I insist, you are the best of men **to me**! I stated that clearly and it is not a lie.”

The young man did not make the smallest attempt to hide a cheeky smile at her response.

“Indeed?” He remarked after a second of silence with a nod of his head, “I can’t say you are not flattering me, but your second lie still stands, and it hurt me. So, I won’t forgive you that easily,” he concluded pouting.

“May I ask what second lie I’m accused of telling?”

“You said that you were not my High School sweetheart. Do you deny that?” he asked accusingly.

Candy was startled by this second accusation.

“Of course, I don’t deny it!” she responded cockily, “I said it because it is the truth; we weren’t sweethearts at Saint Paul’s,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“How can you say such falsehood, Mrs. Graham? And to my face! You were **my** girl at school!” He insisted most decidedly.

“Absolutely not! You never asked me,” she retorted with both hands on her hips.

“Words were not required. Every fact spoke to prove it. We saw each other very often, went on private outings together, we danced together at the May Festival and, if I should remind you, I was the first man to kiss you. . .” he listed with a playful tone.

“Still, that didn’t make it official!” She insisted, not willing to give in. She came back to her dishes, as if dismissing the discussion right there, but he wasn’t willing to knock it off just yet.

“Well, perhaps not for you, but it was crystal clear for the rest of the world. Everybody at school knew you were **my** girl. Even Dandy-boy ended up accepting it,” he boasted.

“All right! I accept our friends somehow knew we were . . . sort of . . . involved. But just four people do not make **everybody at school**,” she responded, still resisting the argument, even when she had to admit certain truth in Terrence’s words.

“And you think I’m referring just to your cousins and your two friends?”

“And you’re not?”

“Not at all. When I said everybody, I meant **everybody**,” he stated forcefully and then, casting a most mischievous look he added: “At least, it was a well-known fact in the boys’ dorms that you were **my girl**” he said relishing as his tongue pronounced the last two words with greater emphasis, before he continued to make a revelation he had been planning to use in order to tease her. “Have you ever thought why other boys never tried their luck with you?”

Candy’s eyes opened in surprise as she realized what he was implying.

“And may I ask who spread those false rumors?” she demanded angrily, leaving the dishes abandoned once again and turning to see him with a threatening eye.

“How am I to know? Information leaks somehow. Word of mouth, I suppose,” he replied cheekily, raising his hands with pretended innocence.

“Word of mouth! A very dirty and deceitful mouth, I believe,” she mocked, “You did it, Terrence Graham Grandchester! I can’t believe you told other boys that I was your girlfriend! How dared you?” Candy accused him with a pointing finger, beginning to be truly angry.

“I didn’t say such a thing. I was just a boy, but raised as a gentleman, I would never have dared to say as much. I may have . . . perhaps . . . acted a bit protective once . . . or twice,” he added looking at his nails nonchalantly.

“What do you mean by protective?”

“I mean that boys usually talk about girls, you know. And well, I may have overheard a conversation in which your name was mentioned, as a pretty girl other boys wanted to pursue, and . . .”

“And?” she asked now fuming.

“Don’t remember clearly . . . it’s all fuzzy now. . .” he said rolling his eyes, pretending ignorance, “perhaps I once. . . or twice joined that conversation and . . . warned the audience about the misfortunes that could befall to the young man who dared to approach you. Just as the sort of kind advice a good friend would give. They understood well, I think,” he concluded with a smug smile on his face.

“You threatened them! You’re such a bully! And a liar! How could you?”

“How? This way, *madame!*”

And saying this last thing, he moved fast to hold her and plant a kiss on her mouth, but she averted her face, and his lips could only land on her cheek.

“Get your hands off me! I’m mad at you!”

“I know it, which makes it all the more provoking!” He whispered while swinging his face swiftly until his lips finally met hers, commanding a deep kiss she could not resist.

“Terry . . .!” she said, but so weakly that he knew she was about to yield.

“Hush, **sweetheart**,” he said before they forgot about the dishes for the whole evening.



By the end of January, Candy was all busy with a purpose: deciding the present she would give her husband for his 28th birthday. The task –as simple as it might seem– was utterly difficult for the young woman, because her mind would wonder thinking of too many things and none in particular.

That afternoon, the young woman had spent three hours window-shopping in Lower Manhattan without deciding on anything. Disappointed, she returned to her apartment hurriedly, as she still had to finish cooking. Unexpectedly, as her car turned the corner on her street, she observed in the distance a couple of men. The strangers were standing on the sidewalk right in front of her building, as if looking at it with interest.

When Mr. Barbera stopped the car just in front of the building’s doorsteps, and Candy could get out of the vehicle, she remarked the impressive grey Bentley that was parked next to the spot where the two men stood. The expensive car and the elegant attire of one of the men

made her focus her eyes for closer inspection. It was then, that her heart stopped as she recognized the distinguished demeanor of a man she hadn't seen in many years.

"Your Grace! Is it really you, sir?" the young woman addressed the man respectfully, despite of her surprise.

The tall gentleman turned his head in a familiar haughty gesture. A bit bewildered, he looked at the young blonde with French beret and black coat that was talking to him so unexpectedly. There was something in those big green eyes that brought him a vague memory, yet he couldn't point out its origin.

"I'm so surprised to see you in New York, your lordship," the young woman continued, a sunny smile appearing on her face after the first shock had passed.

As the man only kept staring at her under the shade of his homburg hat, Candy understood that he hadn't recognized her yet.

"Do you remember me, sir? I'm Candy . . . From the Royal Saint Paul's Academy," the young woman explained, briefly curtsying.

Just as the duke finally identified the corner of his mind where the recollection of those green eyes was fixed, the man next to him whispered something to his ears.

"I believe this is the marchioness, sir," the man said but Candy couldn't hear his words.

At this last remark, the older man raised his eyebrow. Suddenly, all the pieces of the puzzle fell in their right place, and he comprehended not only to whom he was talking, but what had happened in the last twelve years.

"I do remember, you, young lady," the duke finally acknowledged, bowing his head slightly.

"I'm happy to see you again, sir. What a surprise! Terry didn't tell me you were coming."

"It is because my son does not know about it. In fact, I haven't decided yet if I should see him," the man replied inexpressively, but Candy could see the passing flash of sadness in his eyes.

"Oh. . . I see," Candy said even more baffled than before. Knowing Terrence's resentful nature, she immediately supposed that the young man would not be open to an unexpected visit from his father.

"I think I may leave the call for another day, perhaps," Richard Grandchester commented in his usual phlegmatic tone.

“Well, sir, if you allow me,” Candy said trying to embolden herself, “Terrence is not coming soon, but I would be honored if you had a cup of tea with me. I mean, if this is agreeable to you.”

The duke observed the young woman and the hunch that she could be instrumental in his purpose hit his heart.

“That would be really agreeable, yes, thank you,” he replied.

Candy and the duke entered the building, while the man who accompanied him remained in the car with the chauffeur. When the young woman opened the door of her apartment, she could catch the surreptitious look that the man gave to his son’s home. However, she did as she hadn’t noticed, asking her guest to take a seat while she went to the kitchen to give instructions to Mrs. O’Malley.

Once the tea was served, the woman sat in front of her father-in-law, doing her best at politeness. She observed that Richard Grandchester looked almost the same as she remembered him. Only his hair, which was now completely gray, and a few expression lines on his face that were now more accentuated, marked a difference. Inwardly, the man also took careful note of Candy’s appearance, appraising how time had made her turn into a beauty with a rather uncommon combination of sweetness and assertiveness in the way she carried herself.

“At least, Terrence does not have a bad taste. That’s a relief” he thought.

“I will not take much of your time, Your Grace,” began Candy once Mrs. O’Malley had left the room to continue with her duties, “You must remember the only one occasion that we met before now and what was said about Terry’s future.”

“Certainly,” replied the man intrigued by the direction that the young woman had given to the conversation.

“I feel I must express my gratitude for taking my words into consideration that time. It has not been easy for your son to find his own way, but I believe the freedom you allowed him has been beneficial for his character.”

“I can see he has done pretty well for one who left home almost penniless,” the duke admitted a bit reluctantly.

“Yes, but there is a limit to freedom and detachment, sir. As much as Terry needed distance from both of his parents to make a man out of himself, a permanent estrangement from one’s father is nothing to be desired, not even for the most independent of souls,” she dared to say

and perhaps the reproach implied in her words was only softened by the sweetness of her tone.

“Terrence hasn’t shown any interest in having a father for almost twelve years,” the duke argued with a glare in his eyes that was of the same intensity as his son’s when turning defensive.

“As his father, you must know he can be particularly proud and stubborn,” she said, and her remark made the duke chuckle.

“He’s a Grandchester, even if he has changed his name to deny all connection.”

“Not really, sir,” she interjected, “He uses his middle name as surname just as his public façade. In all these years he has never made arrangements to change his name officially. Did you know it?”

The duke remained silent for a second.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” he finally interjected.

“I do not know, sir. I haven’t broached the subject with him because we have been married for less than a month now. But I tend to believe that, at least in a subconscious level, he does not want to sever the connection entirely.”

“You think so?” he asked a bit skeptically, tapping his temple with his index finger.

“Let’s say it’s a wife’s hunch, sir. I believe Terry needs a father just as much as he needed his mother. I remember he used to say that he didn’t care for her, but time has shown that he was lying to himself. It is very likely that he is also denying that he misses you. Perhaps, if given the chance, you two could make things work out, even if excessive pride runs in the family.”

The duke laughed inwardly at this young woman’s who talked to him with a frankness that very few ever dared to use with him.

“It might be more difficult than you may expect, young lady,” the man responded after a pause, “To judge by your surprise a while ago, I suppose that Terry never told you that I wrote to his mother a few months ago.”

“No, he didn’t,” replied Candy raising both of her brows, “but if you were so kind as to enlighten me on the matter, I would appreciate it.”

“I wrote to Eleanor telling her that I wanted to seek reconciliation with my son. In that letter, I requested her to inquire with Terry whether he would be at least willing to talk to me. He was

on one of his tours, but Eleanor wrote to him to communicate my intentions. Later, she informed me that he never replied or tackled the subject with her.”

Candy was amazed at this new piece of information. She understood that it should have taken a great deal of courage for the proud Richard Grandchester to resort to Eleanor for help. Her heart was moved by this proof of his tender feelings for his son.

“Perhaps he never replied because his mind was occupied with other worries, sir. I must confess that I may have been a distraction during that time, because it was just after his tour that he travelled to my home to propose. We married three weeks after that. I’m afraid I’ve monopolized his attention so far. However, it does not follow that he does not really care for you.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. . . . Do you think that I should stay today and meet him, then?”

Candy tilted her head as if pondering her answer for a while.

“Well, I believe things might not go so great if he is taken by surprise now,” she finally concluded, “Why don’t you allow me to talk to him first? . . . It may even take a few days to convince him, and at the end it might not even work, but . . . would you be willing to wait to see if he can be persuaded?”

“How long would that be?”

“Give me a week,” she proposed assertively.

“Let’s make it two weeks. I’ll stay in New York for up to two weeks waiting for him to contact me if he is willing. If he is not, I would appreciate if you called me.”

“It’s a deal then, sir,” she concluded offering her hand to her father-in-law.

“Done!” the man replied, shaking Candy’s small hand.



Terrence and Candy were different in many ways but had a few traits in common. Being stubborn was one of those features they shared. Place two strong-willed, pigheaded human beings under the same roof and you are up for trouble, no matter how much love there is between them. For this reason, even though Candy had the best of intentions to promote reconciliation between her husband and the duke, the risks she was taking were great.

That evening, when her husband came back from work, she was determined to target the subject and do as much as possible to persuade him. But being a very inexperienced wife, she failed to sound out her husband's humor before broaching the subject.

The rehearsals for Richard III had started that day and Terrence was plunged into the difficult process of studying the character's psyche. He had announced to his wife that during the following weeks his routine would be seriously affected. That meant that he would need to spend long hours studying on his own, without being disturbed during that time. Therefore, fearing that he would soon disappear into his library for at least a couple of hours of intense study, Candy had decided to tackle the issue right after dinner. With that intention, she started saying:

"Terry, do you ever think about your father?" she dared to ask while they were still having tea and Mrs. O'Malley had already retired.

"No. Never," was Terrence's sharp reply. Of all the topics he would have desired to address that evening, his father was the last one, especially when his feathers were already a bit ruffled after the usual mishaps of a first rehearsal.

Candy sensed his tenseness, but against an internal voice that told her to wait for another moment, she decided to follow her plan and kept on:

"Truly? Don't you feel it's been many years since you last saw each other?" she insisted, while idly picking a couple of sugar lumps for her tea.

"Precisely, we have lived apart and estranged far too long to even care about each other."

The young man concentrated in his tea after uttering this answer. Unconsciously, he began tapping the table with his fingers.

"How long?" She inquired again, not willing to give up.

"Since I left Saint Paul, of course. It's been over ten years," he replied, this time already feeling his temper rise before Candy's insistence on the subject.

"Since Saint Paul, Huh? So, it's close to the time you and I were separated from each other. If we could make things work after so long a time, I don't see why you and your father . . ."

"There's no point of comparison!" He cut her in the middle, indignation already evident in his voice. "Things happened between my father that I can neither forget nor forgive. He took me with him just to abandon me when I was merely a child! No decent father would ever do that!"

"You left me in England without much of an explanation and I left you later, here in New York. However, it still worked," she argued back with equal vehemence in her voice.

“Blast, Candy!” he began raising his voice as he threw the napkin on the table, “The mere idea of comparing our relationship with that of my father and I is ridiculous! The two occasions we left each other, you and I, it was always because we considered it the best thing one could do for the other. As mistaken as we could have been in our judgment, we did it out of generosity. Whereas my father never had an excuse to abandon his child, except for the fact that I was the son of the woman he hated.”

“How did you know that was his true reason? If you give yourself the chance to talk . . .”

“Stop it, Freckles,” he interjected now in a very foul mood. “I know where you’re going. You’ve been talking to my mother, haven’t you?” he asked accusatively.

“No, your mother and I have not discussed this matter,” she responded feeling that her temper had already taken enough blows to remain collected.

“Then, what has come upon you? We have never discussed my father before and I don’t see the reason to start doing it now. Topic’s closed,” he concluded rising from his seat, ready to leave for the solitude of his library. He knew he was about to explode. In such cases, it was preferable to be alone and wait for his temper to subside. Unfortunately, Candy had other plans.

“Terry, what would you say if I told you that your father is here, in New York, and wants to see you? Would you consider it a closed topic anyway?” she suggested as her last resource to keep him focused on the topic.

“So, that is the point of this conversation!” He finally exploded. “My father came here during my absence, and he convinced my wife to plea for his case. He wants to use you to blackmail me! That is the kind of treacherous thing Richard Grandchester would do. He hasn’t changed a bit! I forbid you to ever talk to him again, Candice.”

“Why do you have to twist everything and make things look so crooked and perverse?” she retorted also rising from her chair, her blush as the physical evidence of her responsive anger, “The man crossed the Atlantic just to see you and is ready to swallow his pride and you only see that he wants to blackmail you? . . . And you can’t forbid me anything!”

“You’re still the same meddling girl I met. You don’t have the slightest idea what that man did to my mother and to me. . . and what he would have done to you and I, to us, if I had allowed it. There’s no way I can let him get into my life again. Never intrude in things you don’t understand, Candice!”

“Do you think I’m so dense that I can’t understand that he hurt you with his absence and his emotional abandonment? Do you think I ignore that he was a real scoundrel with your mother?”

“Aha!” He screamed pointing at her with an accusatory finger, “You have been talking to my mother and you denied it!”

“All right, she told me about her relationship with your father, how you were born and taken to live with your father, as the heir of the Grandchester family, but she never mentioned that your father had sent a letter.”

“But surely His Grace informed you well, didn’t he, Freckles?” The young man blurted bending his body as if addressing his verbal blow to hit her harder.

“I don’t see why you ask me as if I had been cheating on you, Terry,” she reproached him acidly, “You are behaving most irrationally here. It is not as if your father is going to take control of your life again. Christ! What are you afraid of? He only wants to have an interview with you. Could you please at least consider listening to what he has to say?”

“The one being irrational here is you, Candy. Since you already know so much about the matter, I should tell you that I have given enough thought to the idea and, since last November, I have decided against it. I knew you would try to meddle as it is your custom, but desist, Freckles. I won’t allow it. Not this time. Not about this matter. It’s off limits!”

“Off limits?” she asked with her eyes shining in angry disbelief.

“Yes!”

“Well, consider my bed off limits, as well, sir.”

Terrence started at this last angry threat.

“You can’t do that, Candy. You’re my wife!” He screamed, now hurt and infuriated.

“But that does not mean I have to be at your disposal even if I’m mad at you!” she riposted acrimoniously.

“So, is that your last word?” he asked as if issuing an ultimatum, “Fine, Mrs. Graham, two can play a game. I’ll sleep in my dressing room in the theatre tonight. Believe me, it will not be the first time I do that!”

Candy was flabbergasted at this, but instead of stepping back, her wrath only increased exponentially.

“Very well, go ahead, sir, but if you’re going to wait there for me to beg you to come back, you’re very mistaken,” she retorted forcefully.

“We’ll see, madam, we’ll see,” he roared.

At this last angry statement, Terrence turned back, and taking his coat fumed out of the apartment. His wife remained home to face the bitter aftermath of their first marital fight.



When anger ignites, there is no room for reason. Vexation clouds our judgment and only the feeling of having been wronged controls our minds. In such cases as this, the bitter flavor of self-defensiveness corrupts any generosity that love can inspire in the human heart. After their argument, Terrence and Candice abandoned themselves to their indignation and wounded pride. For a whole night, both thought over and over what had been said, and equally concluded that the other was in the wrong and, as the injured party, each one decided that it was the other's duty to ask for forgiveness.

Nothing can hurt a man more than being expelled from the marital bed and, in equal measure, nothing can offend a woman more than being expected to allow intimacies, when pending offenses have not been solved. In a way, they both were right to feel offended, but their youth and inexperience did not allow them to recognize that they had failed at expressing their hurt.

Thus, for the whole weekend, Candy resisted in her trench at home, not knowing a word about her husband. At first, she was just angry at his stubbornness that prevented him from accepting that reason was on her side. Then, she resented the way she had been treated. She couldn't believe that he was forbidding her to get involved in one aspect of his life, and yet expected to share her bed. Later, she got angrier at his silence and absence, only to begin worrying about him a few hours after, and finally, she missed him. When she got to this point, she began to review her memories of the argument, and with great horror she recognized the points where she had acted imprudently. This realization was even more pungent than her own anger.

He followed a similar path. He couldn't recognize himself during the whole weekend. For the last two years, he had often spent a night and even a complete weekend in the theatre, simply plunged into his work, studying a character. But this time, his restlessness did not allow him the peace of mind to concentrate on his study. He spent long hours as a lion in a cage (or should we say, "a tiger"?) inside his dressing room, exasperated by his own indignation and the effect that the lack of nicotine was causing in his brain. In his wrath, he couldn't distinguish the true nature of his anger. He could only reason in circles, always coming back to the same point where she had refused to sleep with him. His male pride was

so utterly wounded, that for three days he was blinded to the true motive of his fury: his resentments against his father.

However, when the morning of the 28th of January came, Terrence found himself waking up as miserable as on all his previous birthdays, perhaps even more, taking into account that he had slept for four nights on the couch of his dressing room. As it was a Wednesday, morose and put out, he had gone to the country club for a ride and then a shower before the rehearsal. However, not even the exercise had made him feel better, especially when a few acquaintances had found him in the locker rooms and congratulated him on his recent wedding. Wherever he went, he couldn't get Candy out of his head.

He mentally revised the events as he scarcely ate breakfast and, for the first time in days, perhaps moved by his ever-increasing need for her, he began to see his fault. However, the pressures of his job did not allow him to concentrate on his ruminations for most of the day. It was not until the young man had come back to the empty theater after dinner that the full weight of his guilt fell on his shoulders. Then, suddenly, he remembered the moment he had yelled at Candy saying that he considered the topic of his father to be "off limits" for her. Like in a nightmare, he recalled the indignation and hurt drawn on her face. She looked as though he had slapped her hard. As if jabbed by that memory, Terrence had stood up from his seat, taking his jacket and coat, and left his dressing room in the direction of his apartment. He was ready to acknowledge he had been in the wrong.

Unfortunately, when he arrived home, he only found Mrs. O'Malley who was about to leave after her duties for the day had been completed. The good woman informed her employer that the lady of the house was out and just a few minutes before had called to say that she would not go back for dinner, as she had decided to meet her husband at the theater.

As expected, this last piece of news had meant the world to Terrence. To say that he almost strangled the taxi driver to force him to go faster on his way back to the theater is an understatement. When he finally got there, he found his own car parked in front of the place, and Roberto quietly reading the newspaper inside the automobile. Suspecting that he and his wife would need a long talk before being ready to go back home, Terrence dismissed the driver for the day. Seconds later, he made his way to his dressing room with his heart beating so loudly that he could sense it in his temples.

When he opened the door, his eyes swelled at the sight of Candy's light figure wrapped in a green dress. She was standing in the middle of the room with her coat still hanging in her left

arm and her eyes surrounded by dark circles, as evidence of her lack of sleep. However, when he entered the room, her face lit up again.

“Forgive me!” they both said in unison, just before he swept her in his arms in a passionate kiss that tasted of longing and regret. With starved lips, his mouth took hold of hers over and over again, while the salty flavor of their tears mixed. Candy, who had been planning all day long what she would say to Terrence, forgot completely every line, while his lips rubbed hers repeatedly with an aggressive intensity. Just that morning, she had awakened after a dream in which he kissed her with equal ardor; yet in the dream, they had not trembled like they were doing right now.

It was as if the twinge of the long years of separation had increased tenfold and needed to be mitigated with the forceful collision of their skin. They both acted driven by a compulsion never experienced before, consenting in silence and moving towards the same aim unmistakably. There, standing in front of each other, with her body clasped between the wall and his tall frame, with their clothes on and her shivering legs opening access for him, they made love again, ardently and unexpectedly. In their every move, they poured their anguishing feelings and exorcized their demons once more, soothing the flesh and healing the soul.

They understood they were crossing a line at that moment. It was a lot more than a physical surrender. It was a mute understanding that their wills had been broken voluntarily, for the sake of their unity. Finally, when passion had subsided, it gave way to tenderness, while they both lay together on the couch, letting their pulses slow down.

“I went home to beseech your forgiveness,” was the first thing he could say still immersed in the delicious clouds of their aftermath.

“I came here to do the same,” she admitted smiling, while lightly outlining the cleft of his chin with her index finger.

“But it wasn’t your fault . . . I know you meant well.”

“The intention was the best, my love, but my persuasion methods are rather defective,” Candy accepted with a sad smile.

“If only I hadn’t reacted so defensively, I might have seen the reason in your words.”

Candy looked at him intently, trying to process what he had just said. Her only objective that evening had been that of recovering her husband. She scarcely could believe that he was conceding that she had been on the right. However, in the loneliness of the previous nights, Candy had learned that being right is not as important as loving and being loved in return.

“I think I prefer to put to rest this issue of your father for now. It is best that you solve it on your own.”

“And if I told you that I don’t want to keep you at bay on this matter? That I need your help because I hardly know how to go about it?”

“Then, I would say that I will gladly be there for you. But if ever again my help is unwanted, please let me know that you need to handle things on your own.”

“I will. Do you think you can accept that?”

“If you say it in a way that does not make me feel rashly excluded from your life, I think I can,” she hinted.

“I hurt you when I told you that the issue was “off limits”, right?” he guessed.

She assented silently, her head finding its place on his shoulder.

“Yes, but do not feel so bad about that, Terry. I retaliated in the worst way possible. I hurt you too, didn’t I?”

“You know I need you with me . . . by my side. . . in my bed . . . in my body, every night. These last days I’ve been a total wretch without you.”

Candy’s heart shrank at this confession. Suddenly, a pang of regret assaulted her again.

“And today was your birthday. . .” she said with disappointed voice, “I wanted it to be different . . . to make it a day to celebrate and be merry together. If only I hadn’t been so stupid saying that . . .”

“Forget what was said, love,” he interrupted, kissing her forehead, “Let’s remember only what we can learn from this senseless fight.”

Seeing her still heavyhearted, after a second of hesitation, he decided to add: "Besides, this birthday was not that bad after all."

"How can you say that? Everything was a mess! Just like New Year's Eve," she said pouting.

"All on the contrary, darling Freckles, this past New Year's Eve will always be engraved in my mind as the most glorious night in my life until that moment, for it was the night I made you mine. And tonight, precisely on my birthday, you gave the present of making one of my oldest dreams come true."

She frowned, asking for an explanation. He vacillated again for an instant, wondering if he had begun a conversation that she was not ready to face yet. But then, deciding that they had already advanced well enough in the depth of sensuality, he proceeded speaking freely.

"For many years, it was a cherished fantasy of mine to make love to you in this room that is my sanctuary. I told you that I had slept in my dressing room before and I was not lying. Whenever I thought I couldn't stand my life anymore, I would come here to spend the night and—in this complete silence—I would summon your memory and fantasize about taking you, body and soul, right here. Sometimes it would be sweet and profound, others intense and blazing as it was tonight."

"You surely have a very peculiar imagination, Terry," she said unable to avoid her blush at his brazen avowal.

"Not more, not less than any bloke out there, darling," he laughed at her remark. "Since very early in our youth, most of us men think of girls that way."

Candy blinked flabbergasted.

"Since youth? . . . Did you think of me *that way*. . . at school?" she asked in shock.

"Oh yes! All the time, darling Freckles!" he replied with the most mischievous smile drawn on his face, "Believe me, Candy, my love for you was never of the platonic kind. I have always lusted after you . . . most ardently" he said huskily, breathing in the fragrance of her curls.

She remained silent for a while, half appalled, half flattered. This unexpected glimpse at the male's psyche represented a breakthrough in her understanding of men. Suddenly,

considering her previous experiences with physical love, an unthinkable question burst into her mind. To her great surprise, she found the courage to utter it.

“What other fantasies of the kind did you have?”

He could hardly believe that she was showing interest in the subject but welcomed the opportunity to open yet another door to further their intimacy.

“I could write a book on that. Do you honestly want to know more about it?” he asked with a decided sauciness in his voice.

“Oh well . . . I . . . am . . . curious,” she admitted biting her lips.

“There! That’s something you shouldn’t do so carelessly,” he remarked pointing to her lips.

“What?”

“Biting your lips that way. You have no idea what that makes to a man’s mind!” he stated impudently, while his fingers traced her lips. “Perhaps we can start with this on my thorough account of my mental rambles about you. But you must make me a promise before we begin.”

“Why do I have the feeling that you want something in exchange for the disclosure?” she asked with an impertinence that equaled the forward tone he was using.

“Of course, everything has a price on this world, my lady.”

“All right, say your price for a glimpse into your fantasies,” she challenged him with a pert look.

“That you allow me to make them come true.”



Over a week after, Richard Grandchester finally called on his son, as previously arranged days before. The Grandchesters had agreed to meet in Terrence’s home after dinnertime. To ensure privacy, the domestic aid had already been dismissed before the duke’s arrival. Mrs.

Graham herself opened the door to receive her father-in-law and after the usual courtesies, she took him to Terrence's library, where he awaited the visitor.

Once she had left the two men alone, Candice ran to the living room window and opened it to observe the street. As she had suspected, the duke's driver and secretary had remained in the car as the previous occasion. This time however, the temperature was dropping, and the sun had already faded on the horizon. Following her good heart, the young woman went downstairs, crossed the street and invited the two men to have a cup of tea.

At first, the two men were disconcerted by the invitation. They looked at each other in bewilderment for a few seconds, before the secretary could reply.

"Your Ladyship, I don't think it would be proper."

"Well, perhaps if we introduced each other first, things would be less awkward. Could you please get out of the car, gentlemen?"

Still insecure and amazed at their being called "gentlemen", the two men obeyed the young woman.

"All right," Candy started offering her hand, once the three of them were face-to-face, "most people believe my name is Candice Graham, but to you, I suppose I may safely introduce myself with my real name, Candice White Grandchester."

"Edward Perkins, Your Ladyship," said the secretary still surprised by the warm handshake of the young woman.

"John Samuels, my Lady," said the chauffeur equally confused with the situation.

Candy, a little amused with the formality of the two men, decided to ignore the way they were addressing to her. After the first handshake, she simply conducted them towards her apartment. Once there, she invited them to the dining room and served them the tea she had promised.

To be invited by a member of the Grandchester family to have tea in a place other than the staff quarters was something out of the ordinary for the two men. But to have the said member of the family sitting with them to enjoy tea together was almost the end of the world for them.

“So, Mr. Perkins, how long have you been working with my father-in-law?” Candy asked naturally as a way to start conversation, once seated in front of the two men.

Perkins, who was a strong-built and almost bald man of about fifty, looked at her in disbelief. The members of the family never gave him the treatment of “Mr.”, barely addressing him with his plain last name.

“Twenty years, madam,” he answered shyly, thinking that perhaps in America, it was normal for the people in service to be thus treated, “*Americans are a strange race*,” he thought.

“That is indeed a lot of time, Mr. Perkins. And you Mr. Samuels, how long have you been in service?” Cady continued the small talk.

“Twenty-five years, madam,” said Samuels, who should be in his late forties and had dark expressive eyes.

“So, I suppose you both knew my husband as a child. Was he a naughty kid?” She asked curious.

“The Marquess?” asked Perkins, feeling less uncomfortable as the tea warmed his body that had been almost freezing in the car. “Well, madam, I saw him little, because he was already at the Academy when I entered in His Grace’s service. But the few times that I could interact with him, I remember him as a very quiet child.”

Candy was now surprised by the appellation given to Terrence, but put that aside, reminding herself to comment it with her husband at a later time.

“You surely remember more of him, Mr. Samuels?” she asked to the chauffeur.

“Oh, yes. The duke hired me the year he came back to England after his father’s death. I remember that His Lordship was as any normal child out there when he was a wee lad, madam. He was a curious, always asking questions. Later, I saw him rarely; he was always in the countryside, with his tutors, and then at school. The few times that I saw him, he looked taciturn, if I may say. It might have been the effect of the strict school he was in, I suppose.”

“I see,” she replied, and the conversation went on with Candy leading it all the while the duke and his son talked in the library.



When the Duke of N*** entered the room where Terrence received him, he had a strong desire to give his son a hug. However, being a Grandchester, he kept his impulses in check and his pride well on high. He thought that the confessions he had to make that evening were humiliating enough to add unnecessary sentimentalism to the interview. Besides, very likely, Terrence would not allow such an unexpected display of affection. So, he merely nodded his head as a way of greeting.

“It’s been a long time, Your Grace?” Terrence said, using the most formal –and distant– treatment possible as he turned his frame from the window, in front of which he had been standing.

“Certainly, Terrence,” said the duke with a voice that was just a few vibrations lower than that of his son, but very similar in color and texture.

“Would you please take a seat?” Terrence offered, walking to the seating area of the library.

Both men sat in front of each other, and even though Terrence offered his father some tea, the duke declined saying that he had just had dinner.

“Before anything else is being said, Terrence, I want to thank you for your willingness to have this interview.”

The young man, with his elbow resting on the chair’s arm rest and two of his fingers on his right temple, observed his father with reserve.

“It is not I who should receive your appreciation,” the young man said coldly. “You must thank my wife, for she did all that was in her power for us to have this conversation.”

“You seem fortunate in your choice of wife,” admitted the duke, his face also wearing the same unreadable expression of his son.

“I am, sir. But surely you have not come all the way to America just to congratulate me for my wedding.”

“You are right. My motives are of a less celebratory sort.”

“May I inquire about them?” Invited Terrence with a slight movement of his left eyebrow.

“Certainly. It’s been some time now, that I have given myself the opportunity to revise some of the major decisions I’ve made in life,” started the duke and then made a brief pause, perhaps searching for the most appropriate words, “As a result of this . . . assessment, I have found a few things that I regret most decidedly.”

“Such as . . .” Terrence asked, and his father noticed the subtle challenge in his tone.

“Such as those regarding your mother, my wife, and you, Terrence.”

This time, Terrence could not refrain from giving a hint of a mocking chuckle as he switched position in his chair.

“A rather vulgar story, if I may say. A man, two women and a bastard child,” was Terrence’s acid remark.

Richard Grandchester would have been offended by Terrence’s impertinent words at another time. But now, he knew that his son’s willingness to talk did not imply that he would be receptive. Oh no! He was ready for an exchange that at times would be distasteful, perhaps even offensive.

“Sadly, you are right,” the duke accepted, “A great deal of men share with me the same dishonor.”

At this last sentence Terrence’s eyes incensed in blue fire.

“Honestly, sir, if you crossed the Atlantic only to tell me what a dishonor my existence brought to your life. . .”

“Son, at least do me the favor of listening to what I have to say before you start twisting my meaning,” the duke interrupted trying to appease his son’s defensiveness, “I did not imply that I consider you a cause of shame. It is rather the opposite.”

Terrence remembered something Candy had told him about his tendency to interpret other people's words in the worst way possible. With this memory in mind, the young man's shoulders relaxed.

"All right. . . go on," the actor said in a more sedated tone as his way to invite his father to continue.

"Terrence, I want to be honest with you about my feelings in all this personal issue. So, first of all, I must admit that I am not proud of the way I handled my relationship with your mother. For long years I decided to be angry with her when the true offense had been all of my doing."

"To place the blame on others is certainly easier," was Terrence's response, but this time his voice was not so sharp or accusative. In fact, there was something wistful in his tone. The details of his recent fight with his wife were still fresh in his mind.

"You are right, son, it is easier, but at the very end, it only leads to more disappointment and pain. Facing the truth would have been a lot wiser and less harmful."

"Of what truth are you talking about, sir?"

"I am referring to my feelings for Eleanor," Richard Grandchester explained, his voice slightly changing at the mention of Terrence's mother, ". . . these feelings which I mistakenly took as a passing fancy when I first met her. I failed to understand my own heart and, as the cocky, imprudent youngster that I was, I always thought that I could end the affair whenever it was necessary. But I did not count on my falling in love with her and her becoming pregnant. When, I found out that she was expecting a child . . . my child. . . my joy was immense, but also my anguish."

"*Did he say his joy?*" Terrence thought, astounded at his father's choice of words.

Unable to read his son's reaction over the mask Terrence was wearing, the duke went on with his account:

"All of a sudden, I surprised myself wishing that both, Eleanor and the child, could be under my protection, bonded to me for the rest of my life, but I was blinded by my rank and breeding. Marriage was unthinkable. When my father proposed to make a deal with Beatrix so that this child could be my legitimate heir if it turned out to be a boy, I was thankful for the possibility. Of course, that still excluded Eleanor from the picture, but young and stupid as I was, I

wanted to believe that a solution could be found, in which I could gain everything and lose nothing.”

“That is hardly ever possible when great things are at stake, sir,” Terrence interjected, still able to keep on with the conversation, despite the violent feelings that his father’s words were awakening in him.

“I know it now, Terrence, but back then I supposed that I could convince Eleanor to comply with the deal and remain my mistress all the same.”

“And you called that honor?” Terrence dared his father, infuriated at the mention of his mother in such terms.

“It seems that the only one who knew what honor meant in this story was your mother, Terrence. She gave you up convinced that it was the best thing for you but did not consent to be left under Beatrix’ shadow for the rest of her life. As an older man, I understand the greatness of her decision, but at the time I was furious with her. When she expelled me from her bed and her life, because I would not consent to divorce Beatrix, I believed I would die. But I didn’t; instead, I grew bitter and resentful. Now I know that my anger was my defensive reaction to the pain I felt because I had lost her. I thought that my love had turned into hatred. However, the truth is that I kept loving her, granted with a very selfish and destructive kind of love.”

Terrence was now bewildered by his father’s sudden frankness. Nevertheless, he hardly understood why he had chosen him to avow such things.

“Don’t you think that I am not the right person to be making all these confessions, sir?” the young man asked.

“It has cost me a lot to gather the courage and wit to tell you this, Terrence. It is embarrassing for a father to confess such things to a son. I sincerely hope you never have to engage in such a conversation with a child of your own. But I am now convinced this is the only way I can clearly explain how I acted with you. I want you to know that . . . that I desired Eleanor’s child with all my heart. Even if it had been a girl, I would have done my best to protect her. But when you were born and I realized that I could keep you by my side as my legitimate heir, this was -without competition- the happiest moment in my life.”

Terrence required all his histrionic skills to remain collected at this last confession. The young man could hardly believe that he was truly listening to his father say that his birth ranked as his most cherished memory.

Once again, the duke could not tell the tremendous weight that his words had in his son's heart. So, he simply continued his story.

"Unfortunately, as much as my heart soared just to see you, when I finally returned to England to become the Duke of N***, the memory of Eleanor was like a burning thorn in my chest. Every time I saw you, the hurt of Eleanor's rejection would pierce me once again. What was worse, the more you grew, the more you resembled her. Whenever I saw your eyes, it was Eleanor's eyes that I saw. At times, I thought I couldn't stand it anymore and, in my weakness, I feared that I would end up taking the first ship to America and throw myself at Eleanor's feet. Once, over twenty years ago, I was very close to doing something of the sort".

Seeing the questioning look in his son's eyes, the duke realized he had to give more details about said occasion.

"Perhaps you may have a slight recollection of the time I took you to Scotland with me when you were just five, with the intention of meeting with your mother away from prying eyes".

At this mention, Terrence easily identified the occasion his father was alluding to. In fact, the event had been engraved in his young mind as a rare happy experience that was followed by dreadfully painful events.

"I do remember, yes," he responded gloomily, his mind now saddened by the memory.

"I thought you would, but you surely don't know that was the last attempt that your mother and I made to reconcile. At that time, she was very clear with me; nothing would satisfy her if I didn't divorce Beatrix. In return, she was willing to retire from acting and devote herself to you and me. It was all too tempting and also feasible, as I had sufficient grounds to divorce Beatrix. Unfortunately, I knew that if I complied with your mother's demands, it would be the ultimate scandal for the house of N***. But I'm a Grandchester, and my stupid sense of duty never allowed me to give in to my own desires."

"How many times I felt the same during the unending years I lived with Susannah?" asked Terrence to himself.

“For this reason,” the duke went on, “after we returned to London empty handed, you and I, it was even more difficult to keep you near me. Again, you were this constant reminder of her!” Richard added, his voice half regretful, half exasperated.

“So, you decided to cast me away, like an old pair of shoes,” retorted Terrence, his voice growing lower and dryer.

His father responded by evading his eyes and taking a second to recover his composure so that he could continue.

“It was complicated, Terrence. When Beatrix suggested sending you to High Peak Hall under the care of your governess and tutor, to enroll you later to a boarding school, I thought it was the best solution possible, no matter how young you were. With her pregnancy, I noticed that she was growing more and more hostile towards you, and I was too afraid that your presence would finally erode my resolve to resist my feelings for Eleanor. So, in my stupidity, I thought that such solution was the only one to save my name and your future from total disaster.”

“Did you ever think that I would have rather had both of my parents by my side than a seat in the House of the Lords?⁵⁹” reproached Terrence unable now to remain unruffled.

“Not at the time, Terrence. I was blinded by my prejudice and allowed it to embitter my soul for many years. When you came to me, asking me to save your friend from being expelled from Saint Paul’s, I saw in your eyes that you were infatuated with her. After all the pain I had gone through to keep our name clean, I mistakenly believed that it was my duty to save you from sinking it into a new scandal of your own making. If I saved her, she would remain in school with you and the attachment would only grow stronger.”

“The scandal . . . an inconvenient attachment . . . of course,” Terrence riposted irritated at the slight to his wife implied in his father’s words, “A girl that your peers would have despised, for sure! The rancid fools!”

“I know son, I understand the folly now.”

⁵⁹ The House of Lords or simply “The Lords” is the upper chamber of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. It is composed by the Peers of England and the Ecclesiastic Authorities. At the time of this story, the peers of England did not have to be voted to occupy their positions. They received the honor automatically because of their hereditary titles. If it was revealed to the world that Terrence was bastard instead of a legitimate child, he would not be allowed to succeed his father as a duke and take a seat in the upper chamber.

“What you don’t understand is that, if you had granted me that single request, *Your Grace*,” Terrence replied, stressing his father’s address sarcastically, “I would have forgiven you everything that happened before. It would have given me several years to be with her. You don’t know what it would have meant to me. Moreover, only God knows what other terrible consequences that additional time with her would have spared me from. Not to mention the things that would not have befallen upon her, if we hadn’t been separated in that manner!”

Upon hearing Terrence speaking with openness for the first time in the conversation, just at the mention of his wife, the duke understood even more the depth of the attachment formed in his son’s heart.

“Believe me, son, when I saw your wife last week and identified that she was the same girl, I understood the importance of your request that day. Unfortunately, my realization came twelve years late.”

Both men made a pause here. The tremendous weight of the things just said floating in the air.

“Candice told me that it was not the first time you two met,” Terrence said, resuming the conversation after some seconds of heavy silence.

“That is right. You are indebted to that girl for the freedom you enjoyed which allowed you to study drama and begin your career. You must remember you were still underage at the time.”

“I’m indebted to her in more than one way, sir.”

“So am I,” the duke replied. This was the first time they agreed on something during their difficult conversation.

“Terrence, I’ve told you all this because I have finally understood that my greatest mistake was my inability to disassociate my feelings for your mother from my relationship with you. I let my wounded pride control me and forgot how to be a father to you. Certain event made me realize this last year.”

“Could you explain yourself better?” Terrence inquired genuinely intrigued.

“I attended your performance in London last spring.”

This time, Terrence was taken aghast. In all his life, he had never dreamt that his father would ever attend one of his performances. So certain he was that his choice of profession was a slander to his father's aristocratic pride.

"You surprise me, sir," the young man remarked with a blank expression in his face.

"When you first acted in England, several years ago, I totally refused to see you," the father admitted lowering his eyes, as if ashamed. "However, this second time, age had softened me, I think. I acknowledged that I wanted to see my son, even if it was only on stage. When you appeared on scene, I suddenly realized that far from being ashamed of your trade, I was feeling proud of your evident talent. You must know that your work surpasses even that of your mother."

Terrence unconsciously increased the grip of his hands on the chair's arm rests. To hear a word of praise from his father's mouth was a pleasure so alien to his heart, that –for a second– he doubted his ability to continue with the conversation.

"What I experienced that evening," said the duke, still deep in his memories, "made my previous beliefs crumble down during the following days. I understood that I had sacrificed my own happiness for the sake of a name that you now hide as if being a Grandchester were a shame. It was a real blow."

Terrence, unable to sustain his father's gaze, lowered his eyes, for the first time in the conversation. When younger, he had been relieved when he had decided to go about the world as Terrence Graham. He had felt that hiding his surname would erase his connections with his father and all the painful memories associated with him. Now, he knew better. His father, his past, his real name, and all that it implied could not be simply erased at will.

"This blow, nevertheless, was not the worst," the duke went on, "What hit me the hardest was seeing you, not a boy anymore, but a man, respected and acclaimed by others. It made me feel my loss more acutely. I had lost my only chance to be a father and watch you grow, being there for you."

"You have other children, sir," Terrence interposed, but his voice was now almost sad.

"You perfectly know that Beatrix' children are not mine!" Richard Grandchester blurted in frank disgust.

“So, you also believe the rumors,” responded Terrence recovering his cold tone.

“I don’t speak of rumors; I know it as a given fact. However, I do not blame Beatrix. We both knew what we were signing for when we got married. She knew I was going to bring you home as my heir and I suspected, it can be said that I almost knew, that she was not going to give up her romance with her cousin.”

To hear his father openly disowning Beatrix’ children was another surprise for Terrence. The young man’s resentment against his stepmother awoke once more.

“And still, she always hated me for taking the place that she said belonged to her son,” Terrence said mockingly.

“Beatrix has played with fire, but the fault has been mine for letting her do as she wished. I’ve lived enough to regret our shameful arrangement, but it is done. You are my only son and Heir; that is the essential matter here.”

“His heir? Is that what he is searching for, an heir?” was Terrence internal question. The possibility made him defensive once again.

Unable to remain in his chair, the young man stood up.

“Your son! . . . Your heir! . . .” Terrence said while pacing the room and stressing his words with an air full of sarcasm, “Long ago you said that you were going to disinherit me if I dared to disobey you. Didn’t you?”

“You are old enough to understand now that I was just trying to intimidate you. As the Heir Apparent of the dukedom, you cannot lose your rights at your father’s whims.”

“My ***father?***” Terrence asked derisively “And where were you, ***father***, when I needed you every summer and holiday? Where were you when I needed someone to teach me how to go about a girl instead of making a fool out of myself with my damn insecurities? Where were you when I made the most stupid decisions of my life? And when I almost drowned myself in alcohol? Where you too busy with The Lords to do something for your alcoholic son?”

Terrence’s reproaches darted in the older man’s heart hitting well on target. The duke ignored his son’s drinking problem and learning about it in such terms was a hard thing to take.

"I can only say that I'm sorry, Terrence," the duke responded with a husky voice, "I cannot change the past, but I am . . ." the man hesitated, as if words were too painful to utter, ". . . most deeply sorry for it."

The duke lowered his head, dreadfully ashamed of his poor performance as a father. Unfortunately, he didn't know what else to say or do. He was nailed to the seat, wishing his son would find a way to understand the weight of his regrets. However, to judge by Terrence's tone, he feared more and more that at the very end, the interview would not take them anywhere. His hopes for reconciliation shrank.

Terrence's mind was occupied with very different thoughts. He could hardly recognize his father in this man, sitting in his library, with a defeated air and without any more words to say. Part of the young man still despised Richard Grandchester, and all that he represented. Still, he could not deny that the things the duke had just said had dislocated his understanding of his father and his connections with him. Furthermore, Terrence knew that he could not throw the first stone here. He was not the intransigent sixteen-year-old boy he once had been.

"Sir," Terrence broke the silence, sitting again in front of his father, "I have spoken harshly because I feel you've wronged me in many ways. Nevertheless, you have been honest with me, and I want to respond in kind. If you had come to me, say ten years ago, I would have told you that saying *"I'm sorry"* is not enough when so much harm has been done. Very likely, I wouldn't have given you the opportunity to have this conversation. . . But you've come now, when I am a man with his own share of mistakes and shame. You see, sir, I have also come to my knees to say *I am sorry*, in front of someone I once wronged. And in my case, I had the fortune of finding a forgiving heart for whom simply saying *I'm sorry* was enough. Now, in all fairness, I cannot send you back to England without accepting your offering of peace. But it does not mean that I am ready to be your son. That, I'm afraid, will need more time."

The duke, who had raised his head gradually as his son went about his discourse, felt his heart relieved and his hope rose again.

"I think that will suffice," the man responded in his usual sedated tone, "Perhaps we should attempt to be friends, first of all."

"That will be agreeable, sir."

Son and father understood then that the end of the conversation represented the overture of a new beginning in their otherwise deteriorated relationship. What the future might bring was in their hands.



Darkness had already descended over the city, when the duke and his servants left Greenwich Village. After the end of the interview, only the duke had emerged from the library. Terrence had said his farewell right there, staying in the room to digest alone what had just transpired. Therefore, Candy was the one to pay the final courtesies and see her father-in-law get in his gray Bentley. The lightest snowflakes began to fall over the city, when Richard Grandchester waved her good-bye from the passenger's seat.

Once the car had disappeared behind the first corner, the young woman ran towards her home. But once she entered, instead of irrupting into the library, she waited for a while in the living room. Hesitating whether Terrence would prefer to stay alone or require her presence, she killed the time passing the pages of a magazine. Finally, more and more worried because of the silence, she knocked softly at the library's door, but no answer came. She then decided to enter, almost on tiptoes.

The room was submerged in the dark. Feeling the atmosphere charged with the most heart wrenching feelings, she did not turn on the lamps. Instead, she silently walked towards the place where her husband was seated. Only the distant skyline visible from the window provided the dimmest of lights, illuminating Terrence's face. When Candy sat down on the carpet, right at his feet, she could notice the still fresh tears that marked his cheeks.

The young woman rested her head on his knee, while her hand softly caressed his other thigh. For an instant, they remained silent. Terrence's hand slowly moved to cover Candy's hand on his lap, and, as if her warmth gave him courage, he finally whispered:

"He said that he anticipated my birth . . . with joy," the young man told her with a throaty voice, almost sobbing. "He said that my birth was the happiest moment in his life," he repeated as if only to himself.

She responded by kissing his hand, back and palm, and every finger, with the lightest kisses. Still and overwhelmed by the emotions, he let her caress him, as though he were too tired to

respond. Then, lowering his head to look at her, his heart began to recover his beat at the sight of her face transfigured by tenderness.

“Would you play for me the Lullaby that we were practicing yesterday?” he asked her, on an impulse.

She only nodded her head in agreement, rising from her place to walk towards the living room. She left the library door open, for him to listen to the music coming from the adjacent room.

Candy was not gifted with musical talent, but she loved music, and she loved her husband even more. So, despite a few mishaps during the performance, she played the Lullaby he had requested a couple of times. Meanwhile, Terrence remained in the library, letting his heart open the cage in which his resentments against his father had dwelled for long years. When the last of them had flapped its wings and kissed him goodbye, the young man felt the need of his wife’s nearness once again.

He then stood up and joined her in the living room, sitting astride on one end of the piano bench, next to her.

“Let us repeat it once more. You do the right hand, and I do the left as we used to do it in school,” he suggested, while he held her by the waist.

They both went *da capo* and played the small piece coordinating their hands, making together the sweetest of music. When the last note died in the air, unable to resist it anymore, she turned to hold his face with both of her hands and after a deep kiss on his lips she told him:

“Tonight, I’ll be the one making love to you, Terry.”

And faithful to her word, she proceeded to unfasten his tie. He simply closed his eyes, surprised and seduced by this unexpected offer. Emotionally exhausted, the young man allowed his wife to treat him with the longest and most delicious caresses from her mouth and hands on every parcel of his body. As she advanced, the energy generated by her, began to pervade in their bedroom, until his pulse recovered his usual rhythm first, and then speeded up responding to her ministrations. Sooner than expected, he had to keep under check his natural impulses to take control over their passionate exchange. Yet he had not dreamt of a love night like this one for so long, to break its spell with his impatience. So, he let her spoil him with the sweetest of tortures.

When she finally opened for him the threshold of her own self, they both adored each other with their bodies until the last shadow in his heart was thoroughly dispelled. Outside, the bitter cold of February could do nothing to disrupt their mutual warmth.



In the small hours of the following day, the young couple was still awake. In the quiescent room, Candy lay by his side, as she listened to her husband's account of what had been said between him and his father.

"Among the many things he said that surprised me," Terrence confessed almost by the end of his story, "there was something about a time, when I was still little."

Candy, who had been listening to him with her head resting on his chest, lifted her neck to look at him in the eye, suspecting that the following revelation was going to be important.

"Do you remember that I once told you that I had one single memory of my parents together, with me?"

"Of course I do, Terry," Candy nodded in assurance, "I remember everything about our conversations in Saint Paul's"

"Well, he told me that he and my mother had met that time because they were considering a reconciliation. They met in his old Villa, the one you know, in Scotland. My father brought me with him."

"They tried to make it work after your father had taken you away to England! I didn't know that."

"Neither did I," he said with a sigh, "I mean, I remember about the occasion, but of course, I ignored what had been at stake. Apparently, my mother was willing to abandon her career to be with him and with me if my father divorced his . . ." Terrence had some difficulty alluding to his stepmother, "his wife," he finally said, knowing that Candy disliked when he used scornful epithets, "Obviously, he didn't accept her terms".

"His loss!" Candy replied putting herself in Eleanor's shoes, seeing her as the offended party, "Your mother did the right thing not allowing him to persuade her to do otherwise".

“I know,” Terrence agreed, but a passing cloud in his eyes revealed he harbored some misgivings, “but as a child, I imagine I would have loved to have her near me, no matter what. As an adult, however, I can’t blame her.”

“Did you know at that moment that she was your mother? Did they tell you?”

“No, but there was no need. I felt, rather than knew, that she was important to me. Those few days in the villa, I remember she would play the piano for me and talk to me, in a way that perhaps reminded me of other fuzzy memories I had of her. Something in her voice seemed so familiar, so comfortable, and warm. It felt safe . . . Beatrix, the duchess, had never been like that. . . Unfortunately, that was only a fleeting moment. After those days, my father took me back to London, and weeks later to one of his country homes in the countryside, where I was looked after by hired hands, away from the rest of the family, until I was old enough to attend Saint Paul. It was not until then that I could confirm that Eleanor was indeed my real mother.”

“Good Lord, my poor love,” she cried kissing his forehead and pulling him into her embrace, where they remained in silence for a good while. She, of course, sensed that there was much more to the story that he had chosen to edit from the current conversation, but knowing how painful those memories could be, she decided to change the subject, looking forward to a better future.

“Will you see your father again before he returns to England?” she asked.

“We’ve arranged another meeting before he leaves, but after that, only God knows when we’ll be able to see each other,” he responded with a hint of wistfulness in his voice.

“You sound as if you wished to see him more often.”

“It is strange!” Terrence said frowning, unable to understand his confusing feelings about this father. “For many years I didn’t think of him . . . tried not to think of him. . . and now, I feel I want to know him better.”

“It is not strange at all, Terry!” Candy replied, shaking her head. “It is just natural for a son to desire his father’s company. You two have a lot to catch up, I suppose.”

The young man’s hand moved to interlace his fingers with hers as he continued.

"I never thought . . . this is . . . never imagined I could feel this way," he stumbled with his words, "I always thought he hated me."

"That is an alien feeling for a father's heart, Terry. Your father is a man with lots of defects, he might have been even cruel and deceitful with your mother, but . . . his failings notwithstanding, he is still your father and now you know he loves you."

"I wouldn't have discovered it if you hadn't insisted . . . just as you did the first time, with my mother," he told her with just a thread of his usual rich baritone voice.

"Nothing pleases me more than helping you."

The young man cast an affectionate look at his wife, caressing her face and brushing her golden curls off her forehead.

"You've always been my guardian angel, haven't you?"

"Guardian angel sounds a lot better than Freckled Tarzan."

Spurred by her comment, a mischievous expression appeared all over his face

"Freckled Angel, then?" he asked with half a smile.

"I shouldn't have opened my mouth!" she said chastising herself and making a pout he couldn't refrain from kissing.

When their lips separated, Candy remembered something she wanted to ask.

"Terry, there's something I want to tell you. You must know that while you and your father talked in the library, I invited your father's secretary and his chauffeur to have a cup of tea with me."

"You invited father's employees?" he asked, amused.

"Yes. . . it was freezing outside for them to be waiting in the car. Poor fellows!"

“The old man should have had a heart attack when he saw you talking to his servants,” Terrence laughed for the first time in many hours. Even in the dulllest of situations, Candy managed to do something to make him laugh.

“Well, I admit he was a bit surprised, but didn’t say anything.”

“He’d better. This is my home, not Buckingham Palace,” he replied turning serious again. “Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

“Not really, I wanted to tell you something that came to my mind while talking with your father’s employees. I’ve noticed something.”

“Which was?”

“Did you know that when your father’s employees refer to you, they call you *marquess*? What does that mean?”

“It’s just a courtesy title,” he said indifferently.

“What’s that?”

“My father holds a number of titles besides that of the Duke of N***. He is also a marquess, an earl and a baron.”

Candy listened a bit overwhelmed. She had never considered the highly privileged position of Terrence’s father.

“Impressive! But what does that have to do with you?” she asked, puzzled.

“A duke’s first son is addressed using the second higher title of his father, just as a courtesy. It does not mean that he truly is the Marquess of A***, which is my father’s secondary title. It is just a formality. The duke’s first son remains a commoner until his father dies and he inherits the dukedom,” he explained, feeling a bit awkward as his mind recalled information he had tried to forget about for a long time.

“But wouldn’t the dukedom belong now to your brother? I mean, after you left the Grandchester family and became an actor; didn’t you lose your position of first son?”

Terrence took a few seconds to respond to that question. He knew that Candy was naively asking such questions, as many people unfamiliar with the laws of succession of the peers of England would. Moreover, he knew that before taking her to the altar, he should have informed her about the responsibilities that could fall upon him -and her- in the future. However, it wasn't for nothing that he had evaded that part of his life for so long, secretly wishing it would just go away. So, realizing that she was entitled to know, he decided to respond with a succinct account that would momentarily inform her of the particulars.

"Well, not strictly speaking," he sighed heavily, "Beatrix would love that, to be sure, but the peerage laws of succession are complex. Only if she could prove that I'm a bastard, things could change. Even then, the legal process would be long, difficult and, in the end, she could lose anyway. Remember she is also involved in the lie and legally recognized as my mother. Besides, my father could retaliate by revealing that her children are not his. He says he knows, as a fact, about the illegitimacy of my so-called siblings. I suppose that in this case he is not making idle threats. If those facts reached Parliament, it would bring the most shameful scandal for all the families involved. I don't think Beatrix would ever run the risk of having her children publicly exposed as bastards as well. So, she's cornered. And to judge by my father's words, it seems that he still expects that I will succeed him someday."

Candy noticed that, as he spoke, a wide range of emotions seemed to stir in the bottom of his eyes.

"Would you ever be interested in that?" she inquired, sensing that such was the main issue at stake.

"I've never seen myself in that role . . ." he reckoned. "For years, I foolishly thought that I was dead to my father's eyes. I guess I was just too young and naïve, thinking that way. Now that my father wants to come close to me . . . I really don't know. . . It is really confusing as it is now."

Candy regretted having pursued this topic that seemed, once again, to be disturbing for her husband. Concerned about his mood, she did not pay attention to the implications that her husband's position as the son of Richard Grandchester could have for her own future. Therefore, always one to care more about her loved ones than about herself, she decided to make light of the issue.

"Oh, well. How old is your father?" she asked.

“He must be in his mid-fifties,” he replied a little intrigued by the seemingly unconnected question.

“He looks like a very healthy man to me,” she remarked smiling, “So, according to my calculations, you still have some twenty years or more to think if you want to become a duke or not.”

Terrence knew that only an acknowledgement of his bastard condition could save him of his destiny, but seeing the practical wisdom in Candy’s words, the young man relaxed and taking her hint he said:

“For the time being I just care to be the Duke of Gloucester⁶⁰.”

“That is really scary!” she replied, faking fear as she covered herself with the blankets, “To think that you could be plotting my own death in that murderous head of yours!”

“Deformed and crooked creatures like me, have other unspeakable designs for young ladies like you . . .” he continued jestingly, “perhaps worse than death . . .” He was going to add something else, but a yawn did not allow him to finish his sentence.

“By your yawns, I would say that the best design Richard III can have now should be that of sleeping at least a few hours before the next rehearsal.”

“Perhaps you’re right, My Lady,” he conceded while he scooped her from behind, as he usually did before falling asleep. Very soon after that, she felt his breathing turning regular and rhythmic, proving that he was already deep into sleep.



⁶⁰ The Duke of Gloucester was the title held by Richard Plantagenet before his ascension to the Throne of England as Richard III. Terrence is here alluding to his leading role in the play Richard III.

Chapter 11



The Season of the Daffodils

Richard Plantagenet, Duke of Gloucester, had been born deformed and physically twisted. His hunchbacked body and his limping stride disgusted the eye, but his seducing manners countered the effect of his deformity. His heart, deceitful and ruthless, knew well how to disguise his wicked intentions⁶¹. Since he appeared on scene, with his uneven step, he addressed the audience openly admitting his being “***cheated of feature by dissembling nature***”, as well as “***deformed, unfinished, sent before time, scarce half-made up***”. Proper acknowledgement of his poor appearance been made, he concluded that:

“Since I cannot prove a lover, to entertain these fair well-spoken days, I am determined to prove a villain.”

He shamelessly confessed his murderous plans making the audience his accomplice, just to turn and interact with his fellow characters, appearing to their eyes as a well-intended man. So, for the whole of the first Act, Terrence enticed the spectators with an amazingly mature version of the cynical Richard III, just as wickedly alluring as it is clearly intended in The Bard’s verses.

⁶¹ The reader should know that this description corresponds to Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard III. It should not be considered as a historically accurate description of the actual historic figure.

Robert Hathaway was not performing that evening. He had concentrated all his efforts on the direction of the play and –during the presentation– he gave himself the luxury of enjoying its development as he also appraised the reactions in the audience. After the initial monologue, he knew that Terrence would be making the headings in the Entertainment section the following morning. In his thirty-eight years of career, he had never seen such a masterful performance of the part.

Assigning such a complex role to an actor who was not yet thirty, Robert Hathaway had taken great risks. However, his gains had been great. No critic that evening could say anything about the performance that was other than flattering. Moreover, from then on, more than one mature performer on Broadway could rightfully feel threatened by Graham’s accomplished talents at such a young age.

The public was equally seduced to judge by their mesmerized faces. In that moment, Hathaway thought that his decision to retire had been most timely. The pupil had surpassed the mentor. Yet, far from feeling jealous, Hathaway experienced a sort of fatherly pride that was most satisfying.

From the first box, another pair of eyes witnessed the performance with a fluttering heart. Knowing well most of the lines, by force of hearing them over and over while Terrence rehearsed, Candy followed the play poorly containing her awe. The man on stage was so different from her husband that she could hardly believe it possible that both could be the same.

Richard grotesquely limped his way down the path of perdition, sinking lower and lower until all the audience could do nothing but hating him. However, after the great battle, when Richard cried desperately “**A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!**” just to be rightfully killed⁶² by the Earl of Richmond, it was already clear that the same audience that had hated Richard, would soon be acclaiming Graham upon such an outstanding performance.

As expected, the ovation was long. Under the rain of flowers and “bravos” that ensued, Candy finally saw the real face of her husband, as stern as usual, beneath his characterization of the evil king. The last time he bowed before the public, when he finally waved goodbye, he took one of the roses he had picked and threw it to his wife, just before the curtain fell.

⁶² *Rightfully* according to the play. It is not meant to imply that the murder of Richard III in battle was actually the right thing to do or that the killer was in reality the Earl of Richmond.

Knowing her own cue, Candy picked the flower and her clutch, hurriedly exiting the box. Outside, Roberto Barbera waited for the young lady. He had orders to escort his mistress to the dressing rooms and then prepare the car to leave the theater. However, just as they were walking along the corridors a voice called Candy using her maiden name.

“Candice White Ardlay” screamed a female voice behind her, forcing Candy to turn her back.

When she did it, the blonde’s eye encountered the weary figure of a woman dressed in black that she couldn’t recognize.

“How can I help you, madam?” Candy replied, making a sign for Roberto, implying that she was willing to talk to this lady. The chauffeur felt a little uneasy with the delay. His employer had given him strict instructions about not letting any stranger approach his wife as she exited her private box. Yet, Roberto waited as his mistress ordered.

“Or should I say Candice Graham?” the woman asked with a hint of irony in her voice, as she got closer.

“You’re right madam, I’m Candice Graham, now. Can I assist you in any way?” asked Candy again.

“Don’t you remember me?” the lady asked shrinking her eyes, but then, as if reconsidering, she added: “Of course you don’t. I must have changed a great deal over the years, especially the last two.”

Candy then made an effort to spot something familiar in the woman’s face. The hair was grayish, but apparently it should have been light brown. The eyes were blue with a sharp glare that was almost shrewish. Yet, the features were classic and distinguished. In her youth, Candy supposed, the woman should have been a beauty. Suddenly, as if struck by lightning, Candy identified the lady that was in front of her.

“Mrs. Marlowe?” she asked, still hesitant.

At the mention of that name, Roberto startled almost unperceptively. He gave the woman a second look and with some difficulty he finally recognized the mother of his employer’s former fiancée. She had certainly aged dramatically.

“Yes, that’s me, young lady. I’m sorry to approach you this way, in such a glorious evening as this should be for you as **his** wife, but I didn’t have other way of contacting you. Terrence took care of never sending me his new address.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Marlowe,” answered Candy making her best effort at politeness, but remembering her time was running short, she said: “as you surely understand, I am in a bit of a hurry now, but if you wish to talk to me, we can make an appointment and perhaps have tea some other day. What do you say?”

“That will not be necessary. I’ll only take a minute of your time,” the lady replied as she extracted a package from the bag she was carrying. “My only purpose is to give you this.”

Mrs. Marlowe extended the package enfolded in brown paper and carefully tied with yellowed pink ribbons.

“This? What . . . ?” Candy stuttered in confusion.

“It’s something my daughter Susannah left for you before . . . before her passing,” explained Mrs. Marlowe with a croaking voice. “When she trusted me with it, I told her that we could mail the package to the same address she once wrote to. But she made me promise to deliver the package personally, right in your hands. She told me that sooner or later, if I followed Terrence’s life closely, I would eventually find a way to see you and make sure that you receive this.”

Candy didn’t know what to say. Susannah Marlowe’s intentions when charging her mother with such a task and (above all) the mysterious contents of the package were unfathomable for her.

“I . . . I appreciate you went through so much trouble, Mrs. Marlowe,” she muttered.

“It’s a promise I made to my daughter in her agony. That’s all, young lady,” replied the woman squaring her shoulders as if trying to defend her dignity.

“I see.”

The two women looked at each other, not sure of what should be said in such a moment.

“Now, I won’t deter you any longer,” Mrs. Marlowe finally said. “Our paths must part in very different directions. But before they do it, I just have to say one more thing,” Mrs. Marlowe paused briefly, as one who is struggling to utter words too difficult to say, “Thank you . . .” she finally said, “Thank you for saving my daughter’s life. You allowed this mother to enjoy her child for a few more years,” the woman concluded, and Candy noticed her eyes clouded with repressed tears.

“Not at all, Mrs. Marlowe. Do not mention it,” Candy said sincerely moved by the woman’s evident pain.

“All right. Have a good life, Mrs. Graham,” Mrs. Marlowe said with a slight move of her head.

“You too, Mrs. Marlowe, I wish you well.”

And turning her back, the woman made her way, leaving Candy and her chauffeur behind. Reacting after the awkward scene, Roberto took his mistress by her arm to urge her to move. Very soon, more people would pack the corridors and recognizing the star’s wife, they could importune her with questions.

A little upset by the unforeseen encounter, Candy trusted the package in Roberto’s capable hands, and ran to her husband, doing her best to put aside the disgruntled feelings awakened by Susannah’s memory.

When she finally entered Terrence’s dressing room, the young man was back into his own handsome self, working on the knot of his tie. Forgetting everything beyond the beloved sight of him, she held him tight, resting her chin on his broad back. He beheld her slender hands holding his white waistcoat as the vision reflected on the mirror. For a while, none of them spoke. He closed his eyes and caressed her hands and arms, savoring the sensation of her body pressed against his back.

“You were marvelous, tonight!” she finally said, “I was afraid that perverted hunchbacked king could have taken my husband as hostage,” she joked.

“Are you sure he’s not somewhere in this room?” he asked using the same special voice he had devised for his character, while he swiftly turned to face her, without breaking the embrace.

She giggled in his arms, allowing **her** Duke of Gloucester to enjoy the flavor of her kisses.



The celebration after the premiere had been exuberant. The Stratford Troupe had prepared it as a farewell party of sorts for Hathaway. Of course, there wasn't any other place to celebrate in such an occasion than the Algonquin Hotel, natural home for artists, playwrights, critics and actors, especially when Robert was an active member of the Algonquin Round Table⁶³. So, surrounded by the dark wooden panels and lit by the amber-like lamps of the lobby-bar, Candy met the most colorful collection of intellectuals and artists of the ebullient New York City.

Most attendants loved jazz, so the presence of a good band was a must for the occasion. However, when the Stratford Company made its triumphal entrance into the lobby, the band stopped for a while to let a round of applause and cheering words for the director and leading actor sound in the air. Camera flashes bathed Terrence Graham and the young lady whose hand lay in the crook of his arm. Wrapped in a flamboyant red chiffon dress that showed her calves under an asymmetric hem, the blonde seemed to attract the cameras. The photographers were delighted to have the opportunity of capturing her figure, since she seemed to be rather reluctant to make public appearances at New York Jet Set gatherings. The following morning, her bright smile would appear in the newspapers, making a comely contrast with the serious expression of her husband.

One of the first attendants to approach Graham in order to congratulate him on his performance was Alexander Walcott, the famous critic. Candy found the stout man with round glasses partly funny and partly awkward. Beyond his owl-like appearance and acid remarks, she found there was something sad in the bottom of his eyes. She guessed that beneath his seemingly self-possessed manners, there was the heart of a very lonely man. Despite his reputation, when addressing Terrence and his wife, Walcott was all that is polite and civil.

Terrence later explained to Candice that half of New York artistic community loved Walcott, while the other half hated him for his controversial reviews. However, it seemed he had a liking for Graham, for whom he had always shown respect. Walcott even congratulated

⁶³ The Algonquin Round Table: A group of actors, art critics, writers, and other intellectuals who met in The Algonquin in NY at lunch time from 1919 to 1929.

Graham for his wedding and complimented the beauty of his wife before he moved away to talk to Robert Hathaway, with whom he stationed for a good long while.

After that first meeting, other many came that evening. A whole plethora of famous names and effervescent characters were introduced to the young lady, who marveled at the sophisticated world in which Terrence lived. Ironically, no matter how riotous his surroundings, the young man remained distant and coldish, being civil with everyone, but never personal. Knowing his ways and accepting them as they were, the young woman enjoyed her evening getting to know Terrence's peers and simply being by the side of his phlegmatic person.

Candy knew that her husband should be rather nervous and uncomfortable that night. The uncertainty of the reviews that would be published the following morning, along with the presence of too many people around him, were wearing his tolerance out. She observed that with every acquaintance they greeted, he became more and more aloof. She thought it was a pity that he felt so uncomfortable at a party in which such good music was being played around. The jazz band was all that one could wish for on the dance floor and there was also a string orchestra sharing the gig. Her feet ached to dance, but he seemed uninterested in the activity. It was all surprising then –when a violin played the opening bars of a most popular piece that season– that he asked her:

“I think that is our cue, Freckles. Care to do the tango?” he asked.

“Of course, I do!” she accepted gladly.

In front of the astounded eyes of his colleagues, fellow artists, critics, and other media people, Terrence led his wife along the sensuous twirls of Jacob Gade's most famous tango. The hypnotic notes of the piece along with the obvious electric currents that flowed between the couple, made most dancers stop to simply admire the pair.

Candy, who had always been a skillful dancer, found in him a perfect match. He proved to be as creative on the dance floor as he could be in intimacy. In a way, she thought, dancing was an invention devised to entice dancers in an exchange that somehow mirrored lovemaking. Now she could understand why they had always been compelled to dance together since they were a pair of youngsters.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked, whispering into her ear.

“This new tango has a funny name. Do you know it?” she asked.

“No. Pray tell, madam”

“Jealousy,” she replied getting lost in his eyes.

He arched his eyebrow and with half a smile he commented:

“Touché.”

Willfully forgetting they had an audience, the couple continued gliding along the dance floor until the final dramatic chords ended the piece on a high note. After that, the couple lingered at the party a bit longer, dancing some more and alternatively talking to some of the attendants. However, very soon, Terrence’s ability to maintain a civil façade was reaching its end. Therefore, even though Candy would have loved to dance every energetic Charleston and Baltimore that evening, she was ready and willing to leave when her husband required it.

Hathaway, knowing Terrence’s habits, was not surprised when the young man announced that he was leaving. In fact, compared to other premieres in which he had remained in the party less than an hour, one could have said that he had broken his own mark resisting far longer than usual, and dancing as he had never done before. The veteran actor supposed that such a miracle could be attributed to the effect of his wife’s presence. Clearly, she had managed to engage him in social interaction more than he would have done on his own.

Finally, when the last farewells and good wishes for the best reviews the following morning were said, Terrence was more than relieved to go home with his wife. Nevertheless, not one to lower his guard in front of strangers, he didn’t say much until they were safely enclosed in the privacy of their bedroom.

There, he could finally openly discuss his impressions on his own performance and the thrill he had felt knowing that this time she was there for him, watching from the box, not just as a guest, but as his wife. Candy, who was sitting on their bed taking off her high heels, looked at him from the corner of her eye. His face was glowing. Very far from the usual stern look he had worn in public.

All of a sudden, while they were still commenting on the reception and the people Candy had just met, Terrence surprised his wife by kneeling in front of her. Before she could react, he

started helping her to take off her silk stockings. The young woman tried to protest –granted very feebly- that it was not necessary, but he interjected her.

“You must allow me,” he told her, looking fixedly at her eyes. “You can’t expect that I remain unflappable when you wear a dress like this.”

Still speaking, when her legs were already nude, he began caressing her calves with a blatantly erotic intention.

“You didn’t notice . . . you never notice . . .” he continued with a suffocated chuckle, “but most men in the party were looking at you as if they could eat you with their eyes . . . but that’s all they can do. Whereas I . . .”

And saying this last, the man glided his hands beneath her hem, until her knees were fully exposed. The view of her well-shaped limbs made his eyes sparkle in shades of blue and green. By now, Candy’s breathing was turning irregular. When he finally lowered his face to start kissing her right knee, she distinctively felt the rest of her body beginning to prepare for what was going to come.

Growing bolder, his hands and lips slowly advanced their way up. He lifted the sheer material of her skirt, leaving a wet trail of kisses and soft bites on her inner thighs, until his mouth reached the coveted target between her legs. Her reactive sharp gasp at his intimate fondles made all conversation unnecessary for a good while. She understood that they would crown his success that evening with all the due fireworks. She was glad they had left the party so early.



Very early, when it was still dark, Candy woke up in the stillness of her bedroom. Her husband was deep in the arms of Morpheus, again lying on his belly, which was one of his favorite positions. For the whole previous evening, she had wanted to ignore the presence of the package that Susannah’s mother had given to her. Now that she was awake, her curiosity piqued her intensely. So, leaving the bed as quietly as possible, she put on her silk robe and closed the bedroom behind her.

She had instructed Roberto to leave the package in the kitchen pantry and that’s exactly where she found it.

With fast hands and the help of one of her kitchen knives she tore the brown paper cover. When the content of the package was exposed, she opened her eyes in disbelief. It was a bundle of over thirty letters enclosed in pink envelopes that time had turned yellowish. On top of them there was a white envelope that seemed to be more recent and had Candy's maiden name written on it.

Her amazement grew exponentially when her hands spread the pink envelopes over the marble of the kitchen island. Under the light of the lamps, she could recognize her own handwriting.

"These are my letters to Terry!" she said appalled. "The letters I wrote to him from Chicago . . . so . . . so long ago. . . and they are all sealed! He never opened them!" she added in shock, stuttering audibly.

Unable to find an elucidation for the unopened letters, she grasped the white envelope, guessing that it carried an explanatory message provided by Susannah herself. Sitting on one of the kitchen stools, the young woman finally opened the white envelope and read its content thus composed:

24th of November 1922

Dear Candy,

This is the second letter I've written to you over the years and surely it will be the last. If you are reading it now, I should be in a place that I hope is better than this world, in which I have experienced so much physical pain that has left me weary and heavy-hearted.

I am certain that, by the time this letter reaches your hands, Terrence will be by your side. Even at this moment when I write, while he is in this very room reading absent-mindedly, I know that within his heart, he is with you. It has been all the same during the five years of our long engagement, since he came back to me. His words and his presence are here with me, but his heart remains in that spot in the Midwest where you are.

Do not pity me, Candy, I have grown accustomed to his indifference by now. Yet at the beginning it was not like that. I used to hope, as I once wrote to you, that his heart would eventually turn towards me, but all my hopes have been disappointed. I wish I could say that hadn't it been for this dreadful disease, which is now cutting my life short, he could have learned to love me in return as more years separated him from you. However, now that I am close to seeing my Creator, I cannot lie to myself anymore. Were we to live for decades and grow old together, I know for certain, it would be the same. He would remain stubbornly in love with you, perhaps even more, because his love for you seems to grow deeper as each day goes by.

But do not think -Candice- that I resent him for his inability to love me as I wish to be loved. On the contrary, I am most grateful for his benevolence at staying with me, even if only inspired by pity. Does my pathetic passion arouse scorn in your heart? I do not care! I've been happy enough with the few scraps of affection that he throws to me.

Read well now, Miss Ardlay, and then decide how you are to judge me. I have dwelled in heaven just by knowing him mine, even if it was only to the eyes of the world and not in reality. With this little glimpse of glory, I have rejoiced, and my greatest sin has been that I've been happy, while he has been miserable. Yes, that's right! His sorrow has not been ignored by me. In my selfish passion, for now I have to be honest with myself and give it its rightful name, I have not hesitated to keep him away from you, knowing that this separation pains him greatly. I wish I had your strength and selflessness to release him. But I'm afraid I'm not cut out for such heroic deeds, as you are, Miss Ardlay.

So, even when sometimes I thought that it was best to let him go to you, I always ended up by keeping him in chains. It was the same from the very beginning. Ever since I laid eyes on him when he first came to Stratford's headquarters, I made up my mind that he would be with me for the rest

of my life. I was so determined that I did not hesitate in lying, cheating, and forging all sorts of plots to achieve my aim. Stealing your letters to him was only one of the many things I did. Things that now make me blush in shame.

I believe an explanation here is necessary. Once I came to Terrence's old apartment to announce that there would be a casting for the Romeo & Juliet's production. In that occasion, as I ascended the stairs to his place, his landlady trusted me a letter that had just arrived for him. It was your letter! I was mad with jealousy at discovering your exchanging letters with him. So, I kept that letter and for the following weeks, I debated between tearing it into pieces or restoring it to its rightful owner.

At least, for that occasion, I ended up doing the right thing, but following a motivation that today I understand was selfish. When I finally gave him your letter, I also confessed my love for him and begged him not to continue his romance with you. In my arrogant heart, I believed that my beauty and the passion of my confession would be enough to make him sway from his love for you. I just made a fool of myself.

He responded with cold charity. As the gentleman he has always been, he respectfully dismissed my love entreaties and took your letter in his hands as it had been a precious jewel. I ran away breaking into tears. He did not stop me. I was so humiliated that in the very spot I swore I would take him away from you at any cost.

It was after this incident that I bribed his landlady to intercept most of your letters -not all of them- to not arouse suspicion. However, even when he scarcely received letters from you, his passion did not subside. I was at a loss.

Then, the blessed accident happened. Yes, blessed event that allowed me to win him over you. I am most ashamed to acknowledge this, because this has been the way I've regarded the whole affair. When you said your

farewells that evening in the hospital, I could scarcely believe that you were actually leaving him into my hands. It was beyond my wildest dreams.

In that occasion, you asked me to take good care of him. So, as I ready myself for the grave, I must confess I did not keep this promise. He has not been happy. For years, I feared that one day you would appear in our lives and reproach me for not being true to my own word. If you had done so, I wouldn't have been able to answer and what is even worse, I would have been powerless to retain Terrence. For, you know, I am certain that even if he is bound to me by his sense of honor, were you willing, you would only have to snap your fingers to have him kneeling at your feet. Yet you never appeared, not even once, in all these years.

As I have already said it, I am not proud of my actions. I know most people -if they knew my story- would condemn me. But only I understand my weakness. I simply did not have the strength to live without him.

Nevertheless, I am aware that in my passion for Terrence, I have wronged you both greatly. If I could rewrite this story, as I do with my plays, I would change most of the plot. I think I would go back to Act I and make Susannah Marlowe a tragic heroine who selflessly upstages leaving the protagonists live their love and be happy. But my own decisions in real life have turned me into the antagonist of this sad story.

Now, my life is reaching its end. I do not complain. I believe it is all very well, because my existence was only ruining Terrence's life. When I am gone, I know he will run to you. I know because I've made inquiries. Yes, I've hired mercenary hands that have informed me that you are still single. Sometimes I wonder if it is because you still love him. I sincerely hope that is so. He deserves as much.

I will ask my mother to contact you as soon as Terrence marries you. As a way to atone, at least to a very little degree, all my wrong doing, I want to return the letters that I stole.

There, I have confessed it all, Candice. Thanking you for your kindness towards me and begging your forgiveness is all I have left to do before I close this letter. Be sure that when I breathe my last, I will be blessing your name.

Sincerely yours

Susannah Marlowe

When Candy finished Susannah's tortuous letter, tears began to roll down her cheeks. She could scarcely control the turmoil of her emotions, which were of such a complex nature as she had never experienced before. The old image of Susannah Marlowe she had previously held had slowly faded in her mind. Ever since Terrence had revealed some details about his life with his former fiancée, Candy's opinion about her had dramatically changed. However, knowing Susannah's heart by reading her confessions, in her own words, was beyond the limits of her understanding. Candy's faith in human nature almost faltered at that moment.

She felt sorry for Susannah's evident despondency and total lack of self-esteem, but she was also mad –deadly mad– at Susannah's audacity to steal her letters. Even more, the woman's open avowal of her being aware of Terrence's suffering made Candy utterly angry. It had been in Susannah's hands to release him from his misery, but she did not do it. Such cruelty seemed unforgivable for Candy. However, perhaps the part of the letter that had set her head in the most upsetting commotion was Susannah's conviction of what could have happened, if Candy had dared to reappear in Terrence's life.

"Were you willing, you would only have to snap your fingers to have him kneeling at your feet".

The weight of these words opened Candy's eyes to a reality she had never considered, and that realization hit her in all its full and bitter force: Unknowingly, Candy had committed the

same sin. It had been in her power to put an end to Terrence's pain, and she had not done it. Abashed by this realization she cried bitterly, burying her face in her own hands, and in that way, her husband found her.

"Good Lord, Candy, what has happened?" he said rushing to hold her in his arms, "What is it, my love? Talk to me!"

She wanted to explain, but for a good while, nothing but sobs came out of her throat. Growing more alarmed, Terrence looked around the room until his eyes were caught by the unwrapped brown paper package and the pink envelopes spread over the kitchen island.

"What's this?" he asked, and Candy turned to see what he was referring to.

Still crying, she sighed internally. The young woman had desired to hide this whole issue from him, not wanting to disturb his mind with thoughts of the past. Unfortunately, since now secrecy was impossible, Candy supposed that the only viable approach to the matter was the truth.

"This package was given to me tonight . . . when I came out of the box . . . by the end of the play," she began with broken voice.

Terrence's alarms went off, but didn't say anything, letting her continue.

"It was given to me by the most unexpected person."

"Who was. . ." he cued, impatiently.

"Mrs. Marlowe," she said already anticipating Terrence's reaction.

"What bloody hell?" he exclaimed unable to avoid swearing.

"She said that it was something that Susannah had requested her to give to me," Candy explained noticing that Terrence had first turned pale and then red in indignation.

"Wretched woman!" Terrence chuckled bitterly, shaking his head in disbelief. "She had to play the big drama to the last minute."

“Come on, Terry, do not get upset. It really isn’t worth the while,” she tried to appease his growing wrath.

“But still, it has made you cry, sweetheart,” he insisted, wiping her tears with his hands.

“I’m fine, Terry. It is only that I was surprised to discover the content of the package. Have you seen it?” she asked, turning to the island behind her back.

“What are all these?” he asked aloud, unable to hide his bewilderment when he finally recognized the usual pink envelopes she always used.

“These are your letters, Terry!” she explained. “The ones you never received.”

“But . . . all these letters . . . it can’t be!” Terrence exclaimed, sorting the sealed letters one by one, looking at the dates on the stamps and brushing his own name and old address clearly written down on Candy’s own handwriting, “They . . . they never reached me . . . you . . . you wrote me so many, Freckles!”

“Yes, I’ve told you before. I never knew how it was that so many of them could have gone astray! The answer is that Susannah stole and secretly kept them. She left a posthumous letter explaining herself . . . and sort of apologizing,” Candy concluded pointing to Susannah’s missive lying on the kitchen counter.

Terrence looked at Susannah’s writing on the white papers, his expression now turning dark. Knowing Susannah’s deranged mind, Terrence understood they had been the victims of her treachery even as early as the times of their long-distance romance.

In normal conditions, Terrence would have embarked on one of his temper fits upon discovering Susannah’s dirty pool. However, seeing how upset his wife seemed to be, he chose to console her instead of abandoning himself to anger.

He took Susannah’s letter and tore it to pieces in silence, not given it the undeserved honor of reading a single line on it. Once he had disposed of the offensive papers, he gathered all of his letters and took them in one hand. With his free hand he held Candy close to his nude chest and then kissed her forehead.

“I’ll read these tomorrow,” he murmured, his lips still on her. “For the time being, come to bed with me, darling. I want to sleep some more with you by my side. Will you?”

Candy silently nodded in agreement. Walking towards their bedroom, with Terrence's arm over her shoulder, Candy did her best to dismiss the dark thoughts that were eating her heart.



A week after the premiere, the Grahams had established a comfortable routine. Candy did some volunteer work in the Red Cross twice a week. She had to use a false name and always moved from her home to the hospital escorted by Mr. Barbera to avoid reporters. This was a little nuisance, but she coped with it, knowing that it was a little price she had to pay for being a celebrity's wife. In the evenings, when she didn't work, she went to the theatre with her husband. Sometimes she would see the play all over again from her box. Some other times, she would stay backstage. His colleagues got used to her presence for she was unobtrusive and even helpful. More than one member of the troupe wondered how come such a charming woman could have fallen for a man like Graham. Sure, he was good-looking and successful, but that was not sufficient compensation for a life by the side of a gloomy character such as Terrence. Some thought that the charm would sooner or later wear off. But for the time being, they were thankful for her presence that seemed to put him in an almost friendly mood.

In the mornings, Terrence would sleep up till late, but Candy could not follow him there. Her years of experience working with children had trained her to wake up early. Therefore, when she did not work as a nurse, she liked to spend the morning with Mrs. O'Malley. She had found that the lady enjoyed her presence, and both fell naturally into conversation.

One of those mornings, while the two women were working in the kitchen, Mrs. O'Malley dared to make a question that had been burning in her tongue.

"Mrs. Graham," the woman began, "Did you know Mrs. Marlowe and her daughter?"

"Why, yes, Mrs. O'Malley. Why do you ask?" she responded, leaving aside the carrots she was slicing.

"You must forgive us, Roberto and I, for we have discussed this behind your back. He told me that Mrs. Marlowe came up to you the night of Mr. Graham's premiere. We were both very intrigued as to what that woman could have to say to you, especially when she didn't know you. Or so we thought, at least."

Candy took a second to pick carefully what she was going to say to her employee.

“Oh, well . . . it happens that I met them,” she started, trying to sound as light as possible, “But our acquaintance was very brief, to be honest. I only spoke to Ms. Marlowe a couple of times. As for her mother, I only saw her once before the other night.”

Mrs. O’Malley made a pause here. Having lived on this world long enough, the woman was beginning to understand many things about her employers. The housekeeper had read in the newspapers that Mrs. Graham had known her husband since her school times. Now, Mr. Graham had lived for years with a fiancée he obviously had never loved. Then, two years later, he brought home a wife he was obviously madly in love with. On top of all this, the former fiancée and the present wife knew each other. It was rather easy to guess the existence of a love triangle, which had been discreetly concealed.

“Roberto told me she gave you a package,” the housekeeper continued.

“Yes . . . it was . . . a posthumous letter that Miss Marlowe wrote to me.”

“If that is the case, Mrs. Graham, I must warn you not to believe anything that girl might have written to you.”

“Why do you say that?” Candy asked, intrigued by Mrs. O’Malley’s earnest words.

“Well, Mrs. Graham, I lived for some time with those Marlowe women. They hired me on a live-in basis, because Miss Marlowe needed special help, or so she thought. You can say I got familiar with her ways. She was a deceitful pretty thing . . . and her mother . . .!” The housekeeper said emphatically while rolling her eyes in disparagement.

“You sound as if you didn’t like them,” Candy suggested doing her best to handle the topic with grace.

“How could I!” Mrs. O’Malley said with a sigh. “If you allow me to say this, I believe Mrs. Marlowe was way too interested in Mr. Graham’s money, and he was way too generous for my taste. These ladies lived in such a style that they should have kissed his feet in gratitude. However, Miss Marlowe was always nagging Mr. Graham to get more and more, as if that great house he had bought for them was nothing. It was a beautiful townhouse, much bigger

than this place. It really pained me to see Mr. Graham abused by that scold. He is a good sort of man, and the best employer I've ever had."

"I see . . ." Candy could scarcely say as rejoinder. However, Mrs. O'Malley did not need encouragement to continue her diatribe.

"Besides, Miss Marlowe was a spoiled litt'l lass in the body of a woman. She certainly was infatuated with Mr. Graham, but I don't think he took great pleasure in her affection. For years, I wondered why he could be in such a relationship. Then I concluded that he pitied her, for the accident and all, you must know ma'am. To think that she was only his guest, or sort of, for he never married her! But she acted as though she was his wife, ordering me around and yelling at me when I did not do as she wished. Yet, if I may add, she never cooked for him, or even checked if I was ironing his shirts all right. She never did anything a wife must do for her husband. Roberto and I had lots of sour moments with those ladies. We only stayed because we liked Mr. Graham."

Candy's anger towards the Marlowe ladies, and also towards herself grew higher as Mrs. O'Malley spoke. However, she concealed her emotions rather well.

"I am really sorry to hear that, Mrs. O'Malley, but I appreciate your loyalty to my husband," she said trying to close the unpleasant topic.

"Thanks ma'am," the housekeeper said with a nod, but then, as she hadn't finished what she had to say, continued her story. "When Mr. Graham told us that he would leave his townhouse for Mrs. Marlowe and live in another place, Roberto and I refused to stay with that she-dragon. So, he offered us this job, not taxing at all, for I don't have to stay here overnight or during the weekends. I felt lucky. Then, when he called me to say that he had married, I must confess this, Mrs. Graham, I was afraid."

"I think I understand your fears," Candy replied with a sad smile, pitying the good woman.

"Then I met you and I couldn't believe it. The papers say you are some great rich lady, but you don't seem like that to me . . . this is . . . you **are** a lady, but not a stuck-up litt'l fool. You are a great mistress and a real good wife for Mr. Graham. I wouldn't like that anything that chit of a lass could have written to you would disturb you, ma'am."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. O'Malley! I appreciate your kind words. Do not worry about the letter. It . . . it didn't say anything of consequence. But now, I must hurry, or the stew will not

be on time. Right?” Candy tried to present her brightest smile, and the housekeeper, thinking that she had done her duty, obeyed her employer without making any more comments.

Candy turned to her labor, cutting the vegetables for the stew, while Mrs. O’Malley left the kitchen to start her cleaning. Despite Candy’s sincere attempt to dismiss the housekeeper’s words, they only added fuel to her uneasiness. The more she discovered about Terrence’s life with Susannah, she could less understand why her husband had not resented her for giving him up.



The morning of the 12 of April Candy woke up a little nauseated. She got up from bed and went into the kitchen to make some licorice tea to ease the unpleasant sensation. As she poured the warm liquid in her cup, she checked the kitchen clock. It was six in the morning. It was a Sunday; so, she expected to stay in bed a little longer after having the tea. She just hoped that her sickness would ease.

With lazy steps, sipping her tea very slowly, she came back to her chambers. On the bed, Terrence was still deep into slumber. Nevertheless, the pinkish light of the dawn was already filtering through the white curtains.

The young woman approached the bedroom window, opening the panes to breathe the morning breeze. Some fresh air –she thought– would make her feel better. Once the window was opened, Candy remembered what day it was. . . It was Easter! As the realization of the date sank in her head, the view of her daffodils flowering in their terracotta pot, made her smile.

She sat on the garden chair which she kept on her balcony, to contemplate the delicate trumpet-like flowers. The aroma of her tea soothed her upset stomach, whilst she revised her plans for the morning. She hoped they could make it to a late mass. She was determined not to miss this Easter service in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, even if she had to drag Terrence to church. Candy giggled audibly at the thought.

After living with Terrence for three months, she felt her heart was starting to get used to his constant presence. It was a sweet and comforting familiarity, a peaceful bliss like she had never felt before, a thorough state of completeness. She imagined that it was what people called happiness. Most love stories seemed to finish right there, with the protagonist achieving such a state and becoming boring to the reader.

However, Candy couldn't say that life with Terry could ever be boring. In public he was mostly a circumspect, collected sort of man, but with her, he was as fun as she could wish. Together, they were a pair of rioters enjoying to the fullest the life they shared. They took long rides in the country club, went out for walks in Upper East Side, attended concerts, visited art galleries, or just stayed home for reading and some music. Whatever they did together, they enjoyed it and laughed out loud from beginning to end. That, of course, had to be done within the limits of their work commitments and their evading the ubiquitous photographers. But those inconveniences were nothing in her eyes. Life was good for Candice W. Grandchester

Then, there was the issue of their newly discovered intimacy. After almost four months of sharing his bed, she understood that she had married a daily-basis sort of lover, with demanding and domineering habits. His behavior in the bedroom tended to be predictable in its ultimate intent –that of possessing her–, but unpredictable in style and approach. She could not complain.

For a man of his preferences –she mused, smiling– it was all too frustrating having to skip a week every month, but Candy couldn't help the course of nature. Could she? The young woman's thoughts froze at this moment.

“Jesus! When was the last time that I bled?” she asked herself, frowning.



In March, Richard III was a great success. In April, after five weeks of capacity crowd every evening, the company began to prepare for the following tour. They expected to go Southeast this time, starting by the end of May and closing the season in New Orleans by July.

In the meantime, the sale of Stratford Company was announced as a matter of fact. The Barrymore siblings –Lionel, Ethel, and John– would be the new owners by the winter season. The three Barrymores were all in their forties and considered among the most acclaimed veteran performers on Broadway. Even though John, the youngest, had achieved stardom doing light comedy in the previous years, he had made incursions into high drama with great success as well. Hence, rumor had it that Terrence Graham would have to move to another company, because there wouldn't be room in Stratford for the two leading actors, especially when both actors' reputations had grown so high as to make them appear as professional rivals. Knowing his game well, the young actor started to meet with other directors that were

interested in his work. However, no sound offer that could entice the young man had been made so far.

One lazy morning in April, Terrence was in his library revising the income-tax report sent by his accountant. Candy was busy in the hospital; so, he had the day pretty much to himself till dinner time. He wanted to get rid of the odious tax report before she came back. While still concentrating on the task, he heard a knock at the door. It was his housekeeper, who had come to deliver the mail. The lady entered the library, put the letters on top of his desk, and discreetly left the room.

Once alone again, Terrence perused the correspondence, sorting those letters addressed to his wife, from those under his name. As expected, being the social kind of person Candy always was, most of the correspondence was for her, and only three of the letters were addressed to him. The first letter he read was from William Albert Ardlay. In the missive, the man told him about a new business that was claiming his presence in Europe. The magnate was a little upset because this new trip meant that he wouldn't be able to be with Candy for her birthday. The two men had made plans to host a party in Pony's Home that day. In his letter, Albert asked Terrence to continue with the plans despite this setback. Albert would try to make-up for his absence in advance. In his letter, Albert asked Terrence if he could spend a week with them in New York before he left for London on April 24th.

Folding Albert's letter to put it back in its envelope, Terrence thought that having his friend visiting for a few days seemed a very pleasant idea. He imagined that Candy would also be very happy to have such a beloved guest in her new home. He hoped the visit would truly serve Candy as consolation for Albert's absence during the following months.

Terrence was still thinking about Albert's visit, when his eyes were pleasantly surprised by another envelope with very particular handwriting. It was a letter from William Bridges-Adams, the director of The New Shakespeare Company in England. It had passed a year since Terrence had worked with him in London and since then, no communication between the two men had been exchanged.

The young actor liked Bridges-Adams for more than one reason. The man was only eight years older than Terrence but had made a brilliant reputation since his days at Oxford. He was also ambitious, perfectionist, and a purist among Shakespearean directors. People jokingly called him *Mr. Unabridges-Adams* for his stubborn insistence on presenting the plays without edition and cutting, as in the First Folio. Terrence himself was an unrelenting purist.

Therefore, it was not without interest that Terrence opened Mr. Bridges-Adams' letter. In it, the young director, who had been informed of Hathaway's retirement, was offering Graham a steady job in his company. Terrence had to read the letter more than a couple of times for him to understand the importance of the message thus conveyed. In terms of money, prestige, and career development, this was by far the best offer he could get at the moment. On top of that, since the job required him to move to England, the opportunity to see his father more often seemed to open right in front of his eyes.

Yet . . . just yet . . . it was also true that the offer had its drawbacks. One was the fact that his mother would remain in New York. So, gaining one of his parents, he lost the other. The second disadvantage of working for The New Shakespeare Company was for his wife. Terrence knew that Candy was very attached to America. Most people that were dear to her lived in this country. It was already bad enough to have Candy living in New York, miles and miles away from her dearest Indiana and Illinois. To take her even further this time, to the other shore of the Atlantic, may be too much to ask. Could his lively wife resist this separation? Would a husband be enough consolation for the loss of all those beloved friends and relatives when living in good old England? The last thing he wanted was to see her spirited personality marred by homesickness. Frankly troubled by these considerations, the man kept Bridges-Adams' letter in one of his desk drawers.

Finally, the third letter was from his father. Inside the envelope, besides the message, there was a key. Intrigued by the object, Terrence started to read the long letter, in which his father referred, among other things the following story:

*In his youth, Duncan Grandchester, before coming into the possession of his title as the Third Duke of N***, served in the Royal Navy in the times of Elizabeth 1 and fought the Spanish Armada in the heroic defense of England in 1588. During that glorious quest, he met a young pilot about his age that was outstandingly brave and as dexterous with the sword as any gentleman of breeding. This young man, by the name of William Adams, was saved by the young marquess during the fight and since then, a strong bond between the two young men was born.*

However, the lives of the two friends had to follow very different paths after the battle. Duncan returned to England to take possession of his dukedom, and Adams, who was an adventurer, embarked in a number of expeditions that took him first to the Arctic, then to Siberia, and finally to the Far East. After a series of hazardous events, Adams arrived in Japan where he was labeled as a pirate. After having made a narrow

escape from execution, Adams managed to win the Shogun's⁶⁴ good graces and through the years became a prominent figure in those distant lands.

*The sailor never returned to England, but remembering his noble friend the duke, corresponded with him, whenever a Portuguese ship sailed for Europe. In this way, Adams received news of his friend's marriage, and how his wife tried in vain to provide an heir for the house of Grandchester for ten painful years. Finally, in 1606, the duchess gave birth to a healthy boy that in time would become the 4th Duke of N^{***}. The year the young marquess became 2 years of age, Adams sent a particular birthday present.*

It was a steel box, inlaid with gold, copper, silver, mother of pearls and emeralds, over a darkly oxidized background. The pieces of metal and the stones were arranged in a masterfully accomplished handwork in capricious designs of plum blossoms⁶⁵ surrounding a phoenix bird. The box was accompanied by a letter explaining its origin and the occasion for the gift.

Edo, 3^d of January, 1608

Most High and Noble Prince⁶⁶,

News has reached these faraway lands that Heaven has blessed your honorable house with the arrival of an heir. As years divide one communication from the other in our correspondence, I hope this modest offering may reach your hands upon the celebration of His Lordship's third birthday. The gift, humble as it may appear to a Peer of England of such lustrous lineage as Your Grace, comes from the bottom of your servant's heart.

*Its work is very similar to those of the Moors in Toledo, but I believe the Japanese Smiths are more skillful. They call this crafty work *Shakudo*.*

The object has a story of its own, for it belonged to a noble lady of these lands, who was particularly dear to your humble servant. After her death, her eldest son offered it to me as a memento, saying that the flowers and the bird engraved on it represented peace, justice, prosperity and the beginning of a new era.

⁶⁴ Shogun: Is a title given to high military commanders of noble birth who ruled Japan on behalf of the emperor during different periods of the early history of that country.

⁶⁵ Plum blossoms. In Japan the fruit that is here translated as "plum" is actually an oriental variant of the apricot.

⁶⁶ Most High and Noble Prince. A very formal address for a duke in the peerages of England.

As much as the object is dear to me, connected as it is with a most beloved creature, I have the wish to present your house with it. By Your Grace's hands my life was saved once, and your servant does not forget this favor. May this object stand between your most honorable family and that of your servant as a symbol of our undying friendship.

Yours Humble Servant

William Adams

The duke was particularly flattered by the gift and offered it to his wife as a present. Since then, passing this box from one generation to the next, became a tradition. Usually, on the day of the heir's wedding, the duchess would pass the box to her first son, so that he could later offer it as a gift to his wife the day the next heir is born.

When I made the disastrous mistake of marrying Beatrix, dear son, my father entrusted me the said jewelry box. However, he explicitly instructed me that I should keep it for you and forbade me to give it to Beatrix. He knew my case would be a particular one in the story of our family, because the mother of my heir would never be my wife, and my wife would not be the mother of my heir. So, he said that I should keep it and give it to you when you married.

*Therefore, I have sent this precious object to a bank in New York. Enclosed in the envelope I send you the name of the bank and the key for the safe in which it is now kept. Since you are now married, it is your turn to have this box and give it to your wife when you judge it fit. Consider this as the symbol of the new understanding reached between you and me, regardless of your decision of whether you want to become the 15th duke of N*** after my passing or not.*

Your father

Richard Grandchester



Albert finally came to New York to stay with the Grahams. His visit was very much enjoyed because, as usual, he was all that is charming, interesting, and fun. Long gone were

Terrence's suspicions about his friend. So, he decided to enjoy –even if very briefly– their friendship. Candy, of course, was beyond herself and wanted to show Albert the whole of New York in just a few days. The good man had to remind her that he already knew the city well enough.

“Some sightseeing can be fine, but during this visit I’m mostly interested in spending time with you both, naughty kids!” he had told her, not containing his chuckles.

“Hey, Bert! If we are a naughty couple, you must be considered accountable for 50% of our so-called mischief. After all, you were the one who raised me.”

“If that is the case,” Albert replied, as a repartee to Candy’s joke, “I will be happy to share my part of your evil doing with Miss Giddings and Sister Lane. As my partners in crime, they should be accountable for their share in the dubious business of raising Candice White”.

Candy laughed out loud at Albert’s words and threatened him with letting the ladies of Pony’s Home know about the matter.

Tempering Candy’s exuberant plans to entertain Albert, Terrance had planned a few excursions. An evening at the theater was the first mandatory outing, of course. After the play, Albert spent the whole evening joking with Terrence about his characterization of Richard III, making Candy bend in laughter with his jokes. Some horseback riding together was also part of the entertainment, but for this occasion, Candy declined to partake in the activity, leaving the two friends to have their share of the sport, while she and Georges enjoyed ice-tea in the Country Club Restaurant. A long walk in Central Park could not have been missed either. As part of the unplanned fun the three of them –closely followed by good old Georges– had to run to flee from the photographers who never ceased to chase Terrence. When they were back at the Grahams’ apartment, Albert declared that it had been the best flight he had participated in ever since he was seventeen. He then recounted the story of how he had stolen one of his late father’s cars and fled until he reached Pony’s Home. Georges discreetly commented that he didn’t have such good memories of the same occasion, as he had the fright of his life when he realized that his charge had escaped. However, Georges conceded that all that bitter experience was all forgiven because Miss Candy had been there to meet Mr. Ardlay. In Georges’ opinion, meeting Miss Candy was one of the best things that ever happened to the family.

One evening, Albert took control of the kitchen to prepare one of his Italian meals from scratch. Of course, Mrs. O’Malley and Roberto were also invited. The latter was so pleasantly

surprised that had almost kissed Albert after trying his pasta sauce, saying that his was even better than that of his “mamma”. Mrs. O’Malley was also pleased, but for other reasons. When her mistress had announced that the guest was going to cook, the housekeeper had panicked. The good woman feared that Mr. Ardlay would leave a complete mess in the kitchen, as most men usually do in such cases. However, she was amazed by his tidiness and thanked him greatly for not giving her extra work.

It was after that dinner –when Terrence had already gone to the theater– that Candy and Albert stayed at home for a quiet evening together. The young woman had been looking forward to having a private tête-à-tête with her old friend. There, cozily sat in the spacious parlor, Candy referred Albert the story of Susannah Marlowe’s posthumous confessions.

“I understand your feelings. That young lady was indeed a complex character,” Albert commented when Candy had finished her story.

“I am so disappointed, Bert!” she complained, “I thought she was capable of all sorts of sacrifices for Terry, and now I know that she never truly loved him!”

“In that you’re right, Candy. Whatever she felt for him could not be labeled as love. I must confess that I was also deceived when you told me the story of the accident the first time. I should have been more perceptive and give you a better piece of advice at that moment,” the man said, his usual jovial expression turning serious.

“Oh, no, Albert, do not blame yourself. It was me who came to New York that time and saw with my own eyes without seeing the truth. It was me who assessed her character so poorly . . . It was me who made the decision, you see,” she explained fidgeting nervously with her engagement ring and alliance.

Visibly disturbed, she stood up from her chair and moving to the fireplace, she took in her hands one of Terrence’s photos that rested on the mantel piece.

“Terry felt so confused and overwhelmed that he was not himself that night, you know,” she said while she looked at his picture with a tender expression in her eyes. “When he offered to take me to the station, I think he was not even totally aware that I was decided to break up.”

Candy’s voice almost faltered for a moment.

“It wasn’t until I told him that it would only make things more difficult that he finally understood that it was over. I had already made up my mind without even asking him,” she concluded placing the photo in its place, turning again to face Albert.

“Then, in the years that followed, I stubbornly refused to hear Annie and Eleanor. They both were of the same mind on this issue. It pains me to think that Terry suffered because I paid no heed to their words. I just gave him up, instead of fighting for him. I’m so angry at myself . . . and with Susannah, as well! How could I be so stupid and allow her to deceive in that way?” Candy exclaimed, raising her face to prevent her tears from rolling down her cheeks.

“Have you discussed this with Terrence?” Albert asked when she had finished her self-deprecatory speech.

“We talked about it that day in your cabin, when we finally reached an understanding. However, he doesn’t accept it was my fault. He always blames himself and excuses me all the time. I don’t understand how come he didn’t resent me for deserting him.”

“Well, as I see it, you two are in a competition for taking all the blame upon your own shoulders, while excusing the other. That will not do, Candy,” Albert sentenced leaving his cup on the coffee table in front of him.

“What do you mean?”

“I think that in order to get over these unpleasant memories you both have to see what happened with the right lenses. You want my honest opinion here, Candy?” he asked looking straight to her eyes.

Candy nodded in silence.

“Oh well, I believe now that you both are to be blamed. Last time we talked about this topic right before your wedding, you had a more balanced opinion of the issue and were convinced of your equal share of the blame. Now you’re letting Susannah’s letter disturb your views. The truth is that your decision was harsh and impulsive, and Terrence’s indecision was cowardly. Moreover, the way he handled Miss Marlowe’s growing obsession from the very beginning was careless. Miss Marlowe and his mother had also their share of guilt here, but that is their own problem. By the letter you mentioned, it seems that Miss Marlowe realized it, even if it was too late to make more effective amends,” Albert concluded standing for a while to stretch his long legs, “Anyway! What is in the past cannot be changed, Candy,” he

said, his voice turning a bit wistful, "That is something I learned many years after Anthony's death. You surely remember how I blamed myself for the accident. I know now that the past mistakes cannot be mended. We only have power to change our present and hope it can help us build a better future. Will you let these regrets and resentments eat your heart now? That has never been your style, cry-baby."

"I know . . . but it is being so hard!" Candy exclaimed sitting now on the couch, looking defeated.

"Forgiving others and oneself takes time, I'm afraid. But it is always best to let go, Candy." Albert said, putting his hand on her right shoulder as he sat next to her, and then trying to sound more cheerful he added: "As for Terrence's past sufferings that seem to worry you so much, I think he is quite over his grief now. To judge by his constant good mood since I arrived here, it seems that you are doing a great job making it up for him."

Candy smiled feebly at that last comment.

"I still think you should talk this over with him," Albert insisted.

Candy bit her lower lip, understanding the wisdom in Albert's words, but still unsecure on how to act on this matter.



Albert and Georges parted for Europe on the appointed date. After that, Candy merely had time to do all the packing. The season was over, and Terrence had arranged to have a week off before his summer tour. The couple would spend a few days in Pony's Home and then meet Mr. Hayward and the troupe in Philadelphia.

Candy had readily accepted Terrence's invitation to accompany him in his tour, guessing that in the future, it would be more difficult to oblige him. They also had plans for a belated honeymoon after the last commitment of the season; so, they would be away from home for about three months in total. With such an extended absence, careful packing was a must.

Besides the packing, Candy and Mrs. O'Malley had made plans for a thorough spring cleaning before closing the apartment for so long. They were in the middle of this task, when Candy found something while disposing of the contents of the trashcan in Terrence's library.

It was a letter that was still wrapped inside an opened envelope, which had been carelessly wrinkled and disposed of. The paper had first caught Candy's attention because it had British stamps. At first, she had thought that it was a letter from Terrence's father. The idea that he could be at odds with the duke, once again, made her take the envelope for closer inspection. She was surprised when she discovered it was a letterhead envelope from the New Shakespeare Company.



The morning of the 7th of May, Candy woke up again with an upset stomach. Knowing her drill by then, she put on her robe and went into Miss Pony's kitchen to make some tea. While she waited for the water to boil, she reminded herself that she was turning twenty-seven that day. The young woman remembered the large party that Miss Pony and Sister Lane had thrown for her the previous year. It was wonderful! Even Patty had been with her on that occasion! All of her friends, especially Albert, had showered her with gifts. However, at the time, she ignored that her best present was on the making precisely on that very day. She clearly remembered that it had been on her birthday that Terrence had composed his first letter to her after eight years of silence. That seemingly simple note, which he wrote in great turmoil and hesitation, had changed her life dramatically.

While drinking her tea, Candy thought that it would be a great idea to begin her birthday watching the sunrise from her dear garden. She tiptoed into the guestroom she was sharing with her husband. She got dressed and took care of leaving a brief note on the pillow, in case Terrence woke up before she came back from her morning walk.

Once outside, the young woman deeply inhaled the forenoon breeze. She filled her lungs with the distinctive fragrance of her beloved countryside and a smile grazed her lips. With her usual brisk pace, Candy walked across Sister Lane's vegetable garden. Her tomatoes were ripe and ready for Miss Pony's famous soup. Going past the barn, Candy made a brief stop to greet Caesar and Cleopatra. Then, once behind the barn, she took a brief stroll in Miss Pony's orchard. Very soon, she thought, the apple tree would begin to bloom. Finally, she reached the old chapel.

Opening the grill of the chapel yard, her eyes rejoiced in the sight of her garden in full bloom. One of the new nuns, who was a flower lover, had taken care of it. That way, the nun had said, they would have a fresh flowers supply for the altar. Candy thought that the lady was doing a

great job. The roses and peonies looked very healthy and happy, blooming in all shades. The forget-me-nots that Candy had raised from seeds since the previous fall were now a small patch of blue in one of the beds. Their tiny buds should have been opening since February. It was a pity that she couldn't see them in their first bloom.

Candy sat on the bench that Miss Pony had recently placed in the garden.

"I want to have a place to watch Candy's Garden during the afternoons and say a prayer for her," the good old lady had said.

From that point, the young woman could admire **the crowd, the host** of golden and white daffodils that were still blossoming. They had had an especially cold Spring in Pony's Home that year, pushing the blooming season of the daffodils almost a month later. The sunrise kissed their corollas, clearly pleased with their unpretentious beauty.

There, while breathing the scented morning zephyr, Candy's chest opened wide, allowing her regrets and her own guilt to fly away and never return. For a moment, she closed her eyes, and deep within her heart she saw Susannah's pale face again. Candy's lips murmured:

"I forgive you."

. . . and Susannah's face faded to become just another blurred memory of her past.

While she was still there, with her eyes closed and her heart feeling light, she felt Terrence's lips locking on hers in a soft, wet kiss.

"Happy birthday, my Lady Freckles!" he said when their lips had parted.

"Thank you, Terry," she replied with her brightest smile. "How come you woke up so early?"

"It just happened. Who knows, perhaps I'm thrilled because I'll see Dandy-Boy today!" he said tongue-in-cheek while rolling his eyes.

"Will you two ever knock it off?" Candy asked frowning.

"What can I do? The good old chum is a bad loser!" he replied shrinking his shoulders and wearing a petulant smile.

“Nonsense! When will you dismiss that fantasy of his being in love with me?” she pouted as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“It is not a fantasy. He had a huge crush on you at school. He may love his wife now, but deep in his heart he still resents me for winning your love. A matter of hurt pride, I believe.”

“What a silly interpretation!” She said shaking her head.

“Call it as you wish,” he replied still smiling priggishly as he pulled her into his embrace, “it will not change the fact that I won.”

“You’re such a pompous fool!” she said smiling before he kissed her again.

“Someone said, we’re all fools in love, darling,” he replied in between kisses.

When they separated to catch their breath, she gave him an intense look. Her expression had changed from playful to earnest.

“Terry, there’s something I’ve been wishing to tell you.” She hesitantly began.

Terrence perceived her change of mood and became serious as well.

“What is it?”

“Terry . . . you’ve just said something that is quite deep. We’re indeed all fools in love, and I’m afraid I have not been the exception.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been fighting with some harsh regrets of late, Terry.”

Terrence’s first reaction was to panic as she spoke of regrets. But five months of happy marriage had reassured him well enough. He immediately reasoned that she could not be speaking of her decision to marry him. Therefore, he let her speak.

“The more I’ve reflected about the time you and I were apart, the more I realized the great harm my rushed decision of breaking up with you did to your life.”

“Candy, I think we have discussed this,” he interrupted, but she raised her hand begging him to allow her to finish.

“Terry, it is important for me to say this. I have spent a few weeks feeling terribly angry at myself. You see, during those long years I had three warnings telling me that I had made a mistake. However, I did not listen,” she explained holding his hand in hers. Later, she made a pause and after a deep sigh, she asked him. “Tell me, Terry, in all honesty, if anytime during those eight years, I had come to you, and asked you to break your engagement with Susannah to be with me instead, would you have accepted?”

Terrence frowned at his wife’s question.

“Candy, there is no use to think of this now,” he resisted to answer.

“Please, answer me, Terry. Would you have received me if I had come to you?” She insisted, looking at him in earnest.

The young man lowered his eyes for a second. He knew the answer very well, because he had often dreamt of it.

“Candy, I still think that it was on me to take the initiative. I should have done it long before. But if you ask me, the answer is simple. If you had been willing, I would have taken you with my arms wide open and without hesitation!”

Candy buried her face on his chest and stood silent for a while, until her heartbeat recovered its rhythm.

“So, you must forgive me, my love,” she finally said, raising her face to see him. “Because I sacrificed you for the sake of someone that did not deserve all the trouble we went through.”

“Candy. . .” he protested rubbing her arm affectionately, as he held her.

“Do you forgive me?” Candy asked once more.

“Do you actually need this?”

“I do!”

“Then, I forgive you, but perhaps it is you who must forgive yourself.”

“I’ve just done it, Terry.”

“Then if it is all said and done, I want us to make a promise here,” he requested. “Promise me that we will never discuss this topic again, so we can look forward to whatever comes ahead.”

Candy agreed and they both enjoyed one another, kissing in silence for a while. The morning light was shining openly after the first rosy and golden hues in the sky had faded. Then, it was Terrence who broke the silence.

“I want to be the first one to give you a present today,” he said while giving her a package he had left on the bench. Engrossed in his kisses, she hadn’t noticed its presence.

Always one to receive a present with great alacrity, Candy had thanked him kissing his cheeks and lips several times before she proceeded to open the gift.

When the wrap had been torn, Candy’s eyes opened like big green saucers at the delicate designs of a beautifully crafted jewelry box. She grazed with her fingers the wings of the Phoenix bird surrounded by blossoms while her husband told her the story of the family heirloom that was being handed to her. As she listened to Terrence finishing his tale, Candy shook her head. She was smiling.

“You’re breaking the family tradition, Terry. You shouldn’t be giving me this box now,” she remarked jokingly.

“I know . . . but I thought the box would be a good replacement for that old one you keep in the closet. After all, the clippings with my reviews deserve a better case. Don’t you think?” he asked, tapping the tip of her nose with his index finger.

“You’re so full of yourself. I should have never shown you those clippings,” she pouted faking indignation. “Anyway, my old box is in pretty good conditions. I think you should put this back in the bank safe. I shouldn’t have something so valuable.”

“No, I want you to have it now,” he insisted.

Then, Candy looked at him with an expression he had never seen in her eyes before; so earnest and tender, that made his heart skip a beat.

“Well, if you insist . . . I can keep it, but I won’t start using it until December,” she compromised wearing an enigmatic smile.

“Why the wait?” He inquired, intrigued by her mysterious expression.

“Because, by then, I might be rightfully entitled to have it,” she said, her eyes lost in the daffodils dancing with the breeze.

“What do you mean?”

“Terry . . . I’m pregnant,” she responded turning to look at his eyes.

The wind carried the sound of her words until they softly blew into his ears, like the notes of a song. He blinked a couple of times, unable to move the rest of his body. The news shouldn’t have come as a surprise. He knew it was only the natural consequence of their living as husband and wife. In fact, he had to admit that he had given some thought to the matter but had never discussed it with her. However, now that the possibility seemed to have become a fact, his heart was pounding wildly with a mixture of exalted emotions. Joy, pride, tenderness, hope, euphoria, fear, and anxiety, all together, appeared overlapping one another all over his face. She was with a child! **His** child!

“Are . . . are you certain?” he finally asked with not even half of his voice.

“Absolutely!” she said nodding, her green eyes now glossy with tears of joy.

“Good Lord!” was all that he could say before he opened his arms to hold her close to his chest again.

With her ear pressed to his body, Candy could hear the altered pulse of Terrence’s heart.

“Are you happy with the news?” she asked without leaving his embrace.

For an answer, he lowered his face to brush his lips to hers for a lingering, sweet kiss. Instinctively, his hand moved down to caress his wife’s belly.

“You’ve made me a very happy man, my love,” he finally said sighing. He paused for an instant, and later, with a hopeful tone he added: “I only wish I could find a good job before our child is born.”

Candy looked at him. This was precisely the occasion she had been waiting for to bring certain topic up.

“Why did you dispose of the letter from The New Shakespeare Company, Terry? Didn’t they offer you a job?”

Terrence was taken by surprise. Observing his bewilderment, she supposed she owed him an explanation.

“I found the letter in the trashcan, while doing the cleaning, Terry, but I didn’t read it,” she told him with a sheepish look.

“How did you know about the job, then?” he asked, raising his eyebrow.

“Well, if you read my diary, I could as well read your correspondence. Yet I didn’t do it. I just sort of guessed the topic of the letter; your reaction just now only confirmed my suspicion. Feminine intuition, I believe,” she replied, a bit puckishly, “but I’m at loss as to why you seemed to be uninterested. Isn’t it a great company?”

Terrence looked at her in silence, pondering how to explain his decision.

“Candy, I’ve made up my mind about this,” he began matter-of-factly; “I will not take this offer. I will not drag you to another continent away from your family and friends, especially not now that you are going to be a mother?”

“You must be joking, Terry!” Candy said astonished. His sincere desire to spare her a pain had moved her, but the one-sided decision offended her intelligence.

“I’m not jesting, Candy. I’m in earnest! You, and now our child, are more important to me than my career. I will never take you where you don’t want to be, just to please my ego. I’m sure I can get another job in New York, when the season is over.”

“Terry, you are very generous, my love. But I have something to reproach you for. Why are you making this decision without even telling me? Why are you thinking for me?”

“Because selfless Freckled Tarzan would push me to pursuit my ambitions without a thought about herself. That’s why. But I won’t allow it, Candy.”

“Terry, I appreciate your concern, but this is not the kind of marriage I expect. I don’t want you to pave each path I’m supposed to walk. I am not a frail creature that you should keep in a high tower where no harm can reach me. I suspect that this job offer is a very good one and you are being very impractical in refusing it in such a rude way. That will not do.”

Terrence was baffled. He had never considered things the way Candy was putting them.

“Candy . . . I”

“I have a better idea,” she interrupted interlacing the fingers of her right hand with his.

“Oh, really?” Terrence asked, amused by her decided tone. Inwardly, he reminded himself that he had married a very nosy girl. “All right, humor me.”

“Write to this man in England . . . this Mr. . . Mr. Bridge something.”

“Bridges-Adams.”

“That one! Tell him that you are very pleased with his offer, but first you have to consider other options here in America. . . fix a date . . . when is it that the preparations for the winter season begin?”

“Well, after July or August. It depends,” he told her, unable to hide a smile. She could be charmingly bossy, when she wanted.

“All right . . . tell him that if you cannot find anything better by July, you would be very obliged if you could sign a contract to work for them.”

“You seem to have it all figured out quite well,” he said whistling and wearing his hall-mark half smile.

“Do not mock me. This is good common sense. I’m not saying that you take this offer right away. But certainly, you should leave the doors open and, when the time comes, take the

best offer you can get. Whether the job is in America or England is not of great import. That is what Albert would tell you, and believe me, he knows a lot about business.”

At this point Terrence had to concede that his wife’s words were making a lot of sense. However, the emotional consequence of a business-like decision like the one she was suggesting could be great for her.

“And if the best offer is in England?”

“Then, I’ll pack my suitcases and go with you there, following my husband as millions of wives have done before me, and surely many more will do afterwards. It is not a tragedy, Terry,” she replied naturally.

“But you’ll be away from home,” he still resisted, reaching to caress her cheek.

“My home is wherever you are, Terry.”



The rest of the day had been spent in the most pleasant manner. The Cornwells had arrived after breakfast and the rest of Candy’s friends who lived in the vicinity, like Dr. Martin and young Jimmy Cartwright, joined them for dinnertime. By sunset, the whole party dined in the front yard as on other great occasions in Pony’s Home.

Archie had brought a few bottles of wine from Great Aunt Elroy’s cellar but was surprised when Candy refused to drink. The young woman thought it was about time to break the good news; therefore, standing up with a face glowing with happiness, she announced that she was expecting a baby. Everyone hurried to congratulate the Grahams upon such auspicious news. Only Miss Pony and Sister Lane did not seem surprised. They both had noticed Candy’s morning sickness and blissful aura during the previous two days, since her arrival. The two good ladies had also figured out that the young father-to-be was already in the secret since that morning, because his radiant face had given it away all day long.

Annie was elated, Dr. Martin was glad, little Stair felt moved to join everyone in their happiness, even when he didn’t comprehend the reason quite well. In sum, the atmosphere was so festive and buoyant that even Archie felt compelled to congratulate Terrence. As long as Candy was happy, the young millionaire and the actor could be at peace.

In the evening, when everyone was either gone or retired to bed, Terrence lingered in the parlor for some time. He had a copy of Hugo's most popular novel⁶⁷, which he had brought with him to read during his tour. The young man thought that it was just a happy coincidence that he had chosen a book that so eloquently spoke of fatherly love now that he found himself standing on the threshold of fatherhood.

As he perused the moving passage in which the good-hearted Jean Valjean rescues little Cossette from the Thenardiers, he couldn't avoid thinking of his wife's childhood. True, Candy's life in Pony's home had not been as tragic as poor Cossette's, but children without parents carry within them a wound no matter how caring and encouraging the surroundings may be. Moreover, Candy's experience of emotional abuse at the Lagans' had been as heartbreaking and cruel as Cossett's in Hugo's story. Terrence was grateful to Albert for playing the role of Valjean in Candy's life. Knowing Eliza's irrational hatred towards Candy and Neil's insane passion, Terrence shivered at the thought of what could have happened to **his** Candy, had it not been for Albert's intervention. After all those hardships at such a young age, the young man marveled at the fact that Candy could have become a woman so full of energy and joie-de-vivre.

Having seen her interact with little Alistair and all the children in Pony's Home, he was sure that she would be a tender and loving mother. On the contrary, he was not so sure of his own skills as a father. However, the instinctive love that he already felt burning in his chest for his unborn child made him certain that he could at least try to face the feat of parenthood.

Terrence read for an additional half an hour. When the clock struck 10 pm, he figured out that Candy had finished her prayers by then. He left the parlor to retire for the evening. When he opened the door of the guestroom, he saw his wife seating near the window as she closed her prayer book. In his heart, he also joined her pleas for their future as a family. When Candy looked at him, she smiled.



⁶⁷ Les Misérables.

EPILOGUE



An English Garden

In August 1925, after spending a quiet week in Scotland, Terrence Graham and his wife arrived in Stratford-Upon-Avon. In the previous months, the couple had toured in the Southeast or the United States, returning to New York in July, just in time to pack for a definitive move to England. Not without great sadness, they had said their farewells to the Hathaways and dismissed their loyal employees with a proper final payment and due recommendations for a future job.

A final visit to Indiana or Chicago had been impossible. Candy notified the Cornwells as well as Miss Pony and Sister Lane of her impending departure in a phone conversation. For her surprise, upon receiving the news, Archie had moved real fast, organizing an impromptu trip to take his family to New York for a final farewell. He had also invited Miss Pony and Sister Lane to travel with them. However, even though the ladies could have left the children in the novices' capable hands, they had graciously declined the invitation. Being the selfless souls they were, they did not want to make things even more difficult for their dear daughter. So, they preferred to stay home and pray for Candy as they had always done since she was a baby.

Nevertheless, the separation had been as teary as was expected. Ms. Baker and Annie promised the Grahams to visit them very soon. A wire sent by Albert from France told them that he and Georges would pay them a visit in late August, in their way back to America. As

all their friends and relatives disappeared in the distance when the ship finally left the port, Candy sighed, while her husband held her close. Despite the sadness of the moment, their hearts were emboldened by the certainty that their mutual love would sustain them, no matter what the future could bring.

With so much traveling and so many poignant emotions during the first months of her gravity, a lesser woman would have either fallen sick or felt depressed. It was a fortune that Candy had never been a squeamish or weak sort of girl. After the initial morning sickness had died down, she had a very healthy and uneventful sort of pregnancy, which allowed her to keep on the move all that time and face her new life, supported by Terrence's love. However, already five-month-pregnant, Candy had felt relieved the day she finally crossed the threshold of her new home.

Terrence had taken on lease the same Tudor-style cottage where he had stayed the year before, during his spring retreat. When opening the doors of the studio, his heart had come to a halt. In that same room he had agonized in hesitation and fear, trying to compose his first letter to Candy. To be back in the same place, having secured her love, elicited in him the most pleasant feelings. It was a mixture of elation and victory as he had never experienced before. Watching her humming around with her figure turning rounder as his child grew within her made him even happier, if such a thing could be possible.

As expected, Candy missed having her friends and family close to her. Nevertheless, the change from New York to Stratford had suited her a great deal. Being a country girl at heart, the more natural and quiet surroundings agreed with her and did lots to improve her mood. The old cottage had a huge backyard, facing the river and a small garden in the front, which previous tenants had neglected sadly. Since the first time she had laid eyes on the almost dried grass and faded ivy, she made the resolution of starting a new garden. Being almost the end of summer it was the perfect time of the year to begin the project. She hired someone to clear the weeds and till the soil, while she planned her landscaping for the following spring.

When the Duke visited them in mid-September, and his son asked him tongue-in-cheek for his step-mother's health, Richard Grandchester had turned to see his daughter-in-law and her gardener while at work in the backyard. With a sly smile he had said:

"You know, troublesome garden pests never seem to go away . . ."

“Perhaps I should send Candy to lecture your gardeners at Arundel Park,” Terrence said, referring to his father’s main Estate in Cheshire, where the Duchess usually sojourned during the fall.

A couple of months later, Eleanor Baker arrived in Stratford. She had cancelled her entire winter season to take care of Candy during the end of her pregnancy. The lady had plans for an extended visit in order to assist her daughter-in-law after the birth of the child, spend the holidays with the young family, and leave right after her son’s birthday. She had taken a house on lease near her son’s to avoid major intrusions. However, meeting Richard Grandchester during her stay in the Bard’s hometown had been unavoidable. Fortunately, they both had faced the encounter with distant civility. In the years to come, the two of them would have to get used to such meetings for the sake of their son and grandchildren.

The birth of the child was expected for the beginning of Terrence’s London tour. Unfortunately for the young couple, Terrence couldn’t give himself the luxury of taking a special leave of absence during his first season in his new job. Therefore, he was more than grateful that his mother and new housekeeper could be with his wife when the due time came.

Nevertheless, things turned out in a different way. The baby, willful and unpredictable as the parents, had unexpectedly arrived two weeks in advance, making it possible for the new father to be present at the birth of his first son. Terrence decided to name him Richard, after the Shakespearean character he had embodied during the time the baby had been conceived. Candy knew that Terrence would not openly avow the true reason for his choice, but she let him keep the pretense. After all, what really counted was that his heart was slowly coming to terms with his father. The young man’s reticence notwithstanding, the proud grandfather was beyond himself with the news. Finally, the day after Richard’s birth, Candy moved all her old clippings and letters to the ancient jewelry box she had received as a present for her 27th birthday.



For the following ten years, life in Graham’s cottage passed as peacefully as it is possible when two obstinate and strong-minded people cohabit and weather the hardships of this world together. Despite a good number of slamming doors followed by passionate make-up moments, their life was all one can call happy and fulfilling. The family grew in time, with a baby girl born a couple of years after the birth of the eldest and a second boy, who came as a final blessing five years later. In between these happy events, the couple faced some

painful events such as the fire of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in 1926 and the bitter experience of a miscarriage, some years later. Dark times notwithstanding, Terrence's name became more and more respected on British stages and Candy's reputation as nurse and midwife as well as benefactress of all noble causes gained renown in all Warwickshire and beyond. They had eventually bought the old cottage and Candy had transformed it into one of the most beautiful places in the area, with the most lavished small garden in the shire. Patty, who had remained at Oxford as a professor after her graduation in 1926, became a regular visitor every summer. Other beloved friends paid regular visits during the years, among which William Albert and the Cornwells became the most assiduous.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 came as a bitter surprise for most investors and corporates. Albert Ardlay's fortune was not impervious to the effects of the crisis, but in general terms, survived despite some losses. Albert's conservative decisions in the previous five years had finally borne fruit, securing the jobs of those that worked for his corporate. Lakewood had been sold in that very year, just a few months before the Crash as part of Albert's retrenching schemes.

The Lagans were even luckier. Using all sorts of tricks –not all of them legal– Mr. Lagan and his son had taken advantage of the convulsed times to get into new business adventures in America and abroad. Their resorts and casinos spread with great success. Unfortunately, having more money neither improve their character nor make them happier. Neil eventually made a convenient but loveless marriage and Eliza remained single.

While Candice and Terrence raised their young family in Stratford, the duke's household suffered some unexpected losses. In 1927, the youngest of Beatrix Grandchester's children died of a rare disease characterized by a weakness of extremities, sight loss, and seizures. The doctors consulted could never properly diagnose the case. He was only fifteen when he died. Two years later, Beatrix' eldest son, Henry Grandchester, made an excellent match, marrying the wealthy daughter of a Marquess. While the two families had high hopes for the future of the young couple, these hopes were disappointed when Henry died unexpectedly in a car crash. The marriage did not produce any children. Finally, in 1931, after battling a period of depression upon the loss of two of her children, Beatrix Grandchester's health declined, culminating in severe hypoglycemia that caused her death. Her daughter Joanna survived her and lived on to make an advantageous marriage with the first son of an Earl. Considering the difficult circumstances of her childhood, with a distant father and an overprotective mother, followed by the unexpected loss of her favorite siblings, it was a real miracle that she managed to survive, building a family of her own, and achieving a certain level of content.

Not so long after his wife's funeral, Richard Grandchester visited his only son in Warwickshire to announce that he had requested a leave of absence from Parliament and this request had been granted. He intended to use this sabbatical of sorts to start a long journey. It could have been merely a coincidence that said journey ended in New York.

Pony's Home continued to operate hosting more than 30 children each year. Mrs. Carnegie had kept faithful to her promise, providing college education to those children that remained in the orphanage without being adopted. At the same time, Candy and Annie had teamed up to continue the financial support for the institution even long after Miss Giddings retired in 1933.

Unable to continue with her beloved children because of her weak heart, Miss Giddings had lived with William Albert Andrew for the last two years of her life. Terrence had taken a six-month leave in 1935 so that Candy and their three children could be by Miss Giddings' deathbed. It was a sunny April morning when Sister Lane and Candy said a last prayer as the good lady's soul flew away to her Creator. Had it not been for Terrence's presence by her side, Candy did not know how she could have faced such a heart-breaking event.

In the spring of 1936, Eleanor Baker paid her annual visit to her son's family. She had retired four years before and was by then living in Edinburgh while writing her memoirs. One warm afternoon, whilst the children were taking their nap, Eleanor and Candy sat under the garden gazebo to drink some tea and have some female conversation. The afternoon air was fragrant with roses, lavender, apple blossoms and daffodils. In the distance, the Avon murmured as its waters were caressed by the spring breeze.

The ladies made a pretty picture having tea at the gazebo. Eleanor, always elegant and still good-looking despite her fifty-nine years, looked quite charming in her Madeleine Vionnet's morning dress. Candy was wearing a simple white dress with flower prints that marked her waist, still comely slender despite her four pregnancies and her thirty-eight years. Time seemed to suit both women, who bore each one their own age with grace.

As most women that year, they had been discussing the affair of King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. It was the greatest scandal that the British Monarchy had faced since the excesses of the Prince Regent over a hundred years before. Of course, both Eleanor and Candy agreed that the two lovers had the right to marry and wished them the best, even though Eleanor did particularly like Mrs. Simpson. During the conversation, Candy had dropped more than one

intentional hint about the right that real and pure love has to live freely and come into the open. However, Eleanor only smiled enigmatically.

While Candy served the tea, Eleanor observed the garden under the shade of her white Florentine hat. Having seen the plain backyard as it had been back in 1925, she was astounded with the transformation the place had undergone through the years.

“You’ve done real wonders with this place, Candy,” Eleanor tactically said changing the conversation to praise again her daughter-in-law’s accomplishments in gardening.

“Well, flowers are my passion, right after Terry and our children,” she had replied with a dreamy look. “Besides; Mr. Simms helps me a great deal tending the garden. I usually think of me as his assistant only.”

“Tut, tut, tut! You know very well that most of the merit is yours. When I see this garden and then remember the pitiful state in which it was, I am amazed at the miracles you work with flowers. . . and with people’s hearts, as well. One only has to see the way Terry gets along with his father now.”

“They have progressed at lot, haven’t they?” Candy asked, delighted to remember the last time the duke had been visiting them.

“Indeed! But things wouldn’t have worked so well if you hadn’t convinced Terry of having all your children registered officially under the name of Grandchester. It melted Richard’s heart like marshmallow, dear. That was the best move, ever!”

“Well, that is Terry’s true name, after all. Here in Stratford, everybody knows who he is. Sometimes, when we go out and people greet him on the streets, they call him **his lordship**. At the beginning he would make angry faces whenever that happened. But now, I believe he has got used to it. Yet you know he still uses the name of Graham on stage.”

“Speaking of which, what did Terry mean the other day about exploring other career options? Does he intend to leave the Royal Shakespeare Company⁶⁸?”

Candy got serious this time and left her cup of tea on the garden table.

⁶⁸ In 1925, the New Shakespeare Company received the Royal Charter, becoming from then on the Royal Shakespeare Company.

“Mr. Bridges-Adams is going to resign after this season. It seems that he has some interesting projects directing an opera and a possibly working for The Royal Academy or the British Council. They offered Terry his position, but he might not accept it.”

“He fears that the same budget problems would persist in future productions and with the Festival⁶⁹, huh?”

“Yes . . .and apparently he is thinking about an early retirement.”

“Are you serious?” Eleanor asked raising her eyebrow. Terrence would be forty the following year and was at the peak of his histrionic powers. Very few would think of retirement in such favorable circumstances.

“Yes, we’ve been really serious here. Terry still loves Shakespeare, but I think he is a bit weary of travelling, Eleanor. He’s been on the road for almost twenty-three years. Our children are growing too fast, and he wants to have more time with them before it is too late. After all, our financial situation is more than comfortable as it already is right now, despite the international crisis.”

“I see . . . travelling is one of the drawbacks of our profession, I’m afraid,” Eleanor accepted pursing her lips. “If I had been able to trade the glory of the stage for that of a family, I would have chosen the latter. In fact, you know well, that once I tried to do it . . . but well . . . now here I go again . . . let bygones be bygones. Right?”

“Certainly! God has taken charge to set things in its right course after the years, hasn’t He?”

“You speak wisely, dear,” Eleanor concluded taking another sip very slowly and then again changed the subject. “Now, we must make plans for the summer. I’ll be more than happy to have my grandchildren with me, while you two love-birds enjoy yourselves. Where do you plan to go this time?”

“Would you believe me if I told you we want to stay home this time? We have suddenly realized we haven’t had this house for ourselves since Richard was born. So, I think we’ll take a holiday at home, this year.”



⁶⁹ The Festival - Eleanor is referring to the Stratford-on-Avon Festival, a prominent festival of music and drama, which Bridges-Adams directed for about 15 years.

Chicago, May 14th, 1936

Dear Uncle G,

How are you and Aunt Candy doing? Everything is going swell with me, despite of my annoying sister. I know you must be laughing, but having a ten-year-old sis' can be a real pain in the neck, you know. Anne notwithstanding, I think this summer will be ducky! Uncle Bert has promised to take me to Africa with him. He says that it will be the first holiday he has taken in the last twenty years, and he wants to make it special. We'll be to Cairo, Morocco, and then to Kenya. I'm thrilled with the preparations, but Father has warned me that he will only let me go if I keep my first place in the school Honor Roll. But you know that has never been difficult for me. Finals have already started and I'm Acing so far. So, I'm already packing for Africa.

Anyway, I believe Uncle Bert really needs the break much more than I do. You know that when Miss Pony and later the old Great Aunt Elroy passed away, he was so sad and all. But since he has been planning the trip, his mood has improved a lot. I'm sure we'll have lots of fun. He says we may spend a few days with you on our way back to America.

Now, speaking of the future, I want to tell you a big secret. I'll be starting my junior year next school year and Father is already thinking about college. He wants me to study Business in Harvard, just as he did. But I'm afraid I'll disappoint him on that one. I want to study Engineering Science in Boston and then if I'm lucky, I'll enter graduate school at MIT. I believe that might be the best for me. Aunt Candy always says that my inventions are better than those of Uncle Alistair, because mine last longer before they explode. If I go to MIT, I might find a way to make them work well. What do you say?

I've talked about this with Aunt Patty when she came last Christmas, and she told me they have a great engineering program over there. She's my accomplice and will be helping me with the admission process when the time comes. She has some former colleagues from Oxford, that now work there. Now, I'll only have to convince Dad that business is not my thing. But for that, I count on Aunt Candy. So, please, let her know I'll need her persuasion powers when you two come next December. I know she can twist Dad around her little finger if she wants.

Well, I think that's all for now. Please, give Aunt Candy and my little cousins Rick, Gwen and Terry my regards. Next time I send you a letter, it'll be from Cairo.

Best Wishes
Stair



Terrence folded Alistair's letter with a smile still lighting up his face. He chuckled once more remembering the boy's lines referring to Candy's persuasion powers. With his first-hand knowledge about the extent of Candy's charming manners, the man anticipated that clueless "Old Dandy-Boy" was already a defeated man in this fight.

The political tensions in Europe with the rise to power of Adolph Hitler and his recent alliance with Mussolini were worrying, to say the least. Being a liberal at heart, Terrence despised the policies promoted by those political leaders, which he considered dangerous and very close to a dictatorship. With so many bad news around, it was all too good to receive a cheerful and carefree letter as Alistair's. Terrence had always had a soft spot for the young man. Moreover, he was convinced that Archibald should let the boy find his own path. However, if a war ever happened again, he thought, he would do everything in his power to help Archibald to keep the boy safe from danger.

The actor stood up from his chair, having finished his perusal over all his correspondence. It was already the first week of June and his children were in Edinburgh for the summer. He looked at the shelves on his large bookcase thinking which poetry book he wanted to take to bed that evening. His eyes swept across his now large collection of antique editions of Shakespeare plays and poetry. Yet, he was not in the mood for Shakespeare sonnets that night. Instead, he took Candy's old volume of William Wordsworth's poems.

When he came out of his studio, the house seemed particularly quiet, and he wondered what his noisy wife could be doing. As he came into the master bedroom, the phonograph playing "*More than You Know*" and the sound of running water coming from the bathroom broke the silence.

"Oh! There you are! Where have you been hiding?" asked Candy coming out from the toilet.

The woman approached her husband and placing his hands on her shoulder and waist, playfully danced a few steps with him. Terrence followed her gladly. He knew that was a song she especially liked. She had first bought the record on the occasion of one of his tours,

saying that it brought her some consolation during his absence. Having lost their third child in a miscarriage that year, Candy had been depressed during the months that followed the unfortunate event. His being away, even if it was for a brief fund-raising tour, had made things worse for her. The song made her feel a little better, somehow.

He remembered that evening in 1929, when he had finally returned to Stratford a few days in advance, without previous notice, eager to be with her. He had found her alone in the parlor, sitting in the dark. Even in her pain, her eyes had lit up again as he had entered the room. After that, he had skipped the fall season that year, to stay with her and her two children. Hurt by their loss, they both needed each other more than ever. In time, their emotional mourning ended, and their hearts healed. Three years later, Terrence Jr. was born.

Now, fully recovered, her smile was as bright as it had always been since the day he met her. However, at the present, he also saw a hint of mischief in her eyes, as they moved slowly with the song.

“What do you say if we take a warm bath before going to bed, love?” she asked suggestively.

As a way of answering her question, he smiled back and began to undo his tie. She then turned to her dressing table. Leisurely, she proceeded to take her jewelry off while he went into the toilet. When she finally entered the bathroom again, only on her French knickers and a dainty camisole, he was already comfortably installed in the bathtub.

She admired his fitted figure for a second, anticipating the feel of their bodies under the warm water. However, remembering she still had to undo her hair, she turned to the bathroom mirror and started to take her hairpins off.

“Anything new in the mail?” she asked while the ringlets that had been arranged stylishly on her hairdo started falling on her back, one by one.

“Only from Alistair and Albert. They’ll be travelling to Africa and might be visiting us when they come back to America, by the end of the summer” Terrence replied while enjoying the sight of his wife taking off her undergarments right in front of him. Her curls, liberated from her hairdo, fell to her back and made him feel the urge to caress them.

“I still feel like a twenty-year-old when I see her thus. God, she’s got the most beautiful pair of legs!” he mused.

When Candice turned, with her hair loose covering her breasts, and got into the tub, Terrence experienced the same feeling as one has when re-reading a good poem. Each stanza is familiar and yet the effect it produces in our soul is anew.

She sat between his legs, resting her back over his chest, without saying a word. She knew well where they were heading, as his hands began to roam over her body, with the pretense of soaping her. Experienced as he was in the delicate art of lighting her fire, very soon she couldn't resist the temptation of turning to face him. One second after, they were but one.



The following year, in springtime, Richard Grandchester had a stroke and passed away in his Edinburgh villa. Then, his son Terrence became the 15th Duke of N***. After the scandal of King Edward VIII's abdication, the previous December, the fact that Terrence succeeded his father after living as a commoner for so long, was *peccata minuta*. With the threat of a new War, King George VI had more important things to do than questioning the succession of a non-royal dukedom, no matter how prominent this was.

Terrence and his family moved to Arundel Park, making it their favorite residence and home of the altruistic projects they engaged in, after Terrence's retirement from the stage. They would spend the spring season in London, as the new duke attended the Parliament sessions, as his ancestors had done for centuries. Sometimes they would take a summer vacation in Scotland, or come back to their small cottage in Stratford, which they still considered their home, although Eleanor was, by then, the rightful owner. It was all a great pity that Eliza Lagan was never invited to visit her "*dear cousin*" the duchess in any of her properties across England.

During that fall of 1937, the new duchess had all the bad weeds removed in Arundel Park and with the years, she made remarkable improvements in the gardens. Her rosary and daffodil beds became famous in all of Cheshire.

In time of Daffodils

in time of daffodils(who know
the goal of living is to grow)
forgetting why, remember how

in time of lilacs who proclaim
the aim of waking is to dream,
remember so(forgetting seem)

in time of roses(who amaze
our now and here with paradise)
forgetting if, remember yes

in time of all sweet things beyond
whatever mind may comprehend,
remember seek(forgetting find)

and in a mystery to be
(when time from time shall set us free)
forgetting me, remember me

- ***E.E. Cummings***

THE END