

ANNA BONACINA
THE SUMMER THAT STRAWBERRIES BLOOMED
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pages 1-9

Sunday morning. Of a morning in June like many others in a village like many others.

The tiny church was full and outside a storm was raging, the most arrogant that anyone had ever seen in Tigliobianco¹. Or at least the most arrogant storm that Agnese could remember and she had been living there forever, in a small pink house just out of the village, in front of another small house, a yellow one, where her archenemy lived: Elvira.

Agnese and Elvira were the same age and had the same passions. They could have been great friends if they hadn't been archenemies and now, sitting in opposite naves but in the first row, sure enough, they were glaring at each other.

It had all started long before that stormy Sunday, when an event that would leave a mark in the lives of most of the few village residents was about to unfold. Agnese, on this morning when our story begins, in a church quite full of people, was thinking that nobody had ever seen a storm like this in Tigliobianco.

Father Attilio, very old, had just said in a shaky voice: «Go in peace». Then he had looked the parishioners in the eye, slightly embarrassed, as if to apologize. Go in peace where, since outside the divine wrath seemed to have broken loose? Who would dare to go out of the church while the perfect storm was running wild?

Sure enough, standing and piling up one on top of the other, close to the open wooden main door, the residents of Tigliobianco, who had attended mass that morning, couldn't bring themselves to go out.

«Father, it's hell outside», said quite reasonably Elvio, who had just turned fifty at the time.

¹ *Tiglio bianco* means "white lime tree".

«Well, indeed...» the priest agreed, making his way through the small crowd with his long nose, and watching the sky and the hailstones pouring down on the churchyard. «Do you want to stay until it stops?»

«Maybe we could organize a snap card game...»

«Oh no, I've got to go!» a woman's voice announced in a quite challenging tone.

Forty-six heads turned all together to look at her, and the priest's housekeeper Luisa didn't even flinch, as always.

«Where do you think you're going, Luisa, if as soon as you step out of here you'll get struck by lightning right on you head?» Elvira asked.

«I'm going, the strawberry jam is on the stove.»

«Did you go out leaving the stove on?» asked Father Attilio, terrified.

«Yes, but now it's time to turn it off since the jam is ready, for sure.»

«For the strawberry cake?» said Agnese faking indifference.

Luisa, pleasant as always, answered: «You mind your own business!» She never would have revealed a single secret of the recipe of her strawberry cake, that was so good it had earned its own name: The Supreme.

The Supreme was Luisa's pride and joy, she was a priest's housekeeper, but aspired to be a master pastry chef. Her mythological recipe notebook, a threadbare booklet with a stained black cover, was in itself a legend, more secret and impenetrable than the Voynich code.

«I'm going!» she then announced, walking out.

The forty-six heads followed her with their eyes as she opened a useless checkered umbrella and steadily made her way along the churchyard. «Twenty thousand Lira that she's going to get struck by lightning», Vittorino bet.

A young boy just about to enter a vigorous adolescence, leaning right behind his shoulders, echoed: «I'm in!»

His name was Cesare and that morning he had come to church with his older brother Ettore and their mother. With the dream of becoming a doctor, in his heart he hoped that he would see the effects of lightning on a human being with his own eyes, they would have left him completely electrified.

In that exact moment - and this will be forever remembered by those who were attending the function on that Sunday morning in June - in fact lightning struck in front of the church of Tigliobianco, and to be precise, on the priest's housekeeper Luisa and her checkered umbrella.

The whole church screamed. Father Attilio fainted.

«I won!» exclaimed Vittorino, who had never lost a bet in his entire life.

«What about the recipe notebook?» they heard Agnese murmur in the back.

Three women dressed almost identically, friends since birth, - Claretta, Rosamaria and Evelina - looked at her with a certain admiration. It took some courage to think about the recipe notebook, with Luisa still fuming on the churchyard. And those three did appreciate courage. Claretta, recently widowed, had just had the audacity to open the only grocery store in Tigliobianco, that in her mind was a store of «*gourmet delicacies*», and to better convey the idea she had decided to call it non other than *The Emporium of Delights*.

That was exactly when the storm, quick as it had started, decided it had caused enough damage and that it was time to leave. The rain stopped and before the astonished eyes of the church occupants a mighty rainbow manifested itself.

«A sign», whispered the woman while Father Attilio was carefully being laid down on a bench in the last row, and Cesare - future medical doctor - rushed to take a close look at the electrocuted priest's housekeeper. When would he have such a wonderful chance again?

Very far from there, that same Sunday morning, in the same moment when Cesare was running toward poor Luisa, lying fuming in the churchyard, and a rainbow was shining almost offensively above Tigliobianco, Priscilla - blue class of the second year of kindergarten - in a small playground, right between the slide and the sand, was offering a daisy to a blond boy. His response was to shove her, making her fall on a bench forehead first.

It would take thirty-two years for the destinies of all of them to cross paths.

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Venice, May. Thirty two years later

«So I left without taking the flowers», Priscilla Greenwood was telling her friend Rebecca, a pretty brunette with a pageboy bob.

«At least you could have kept the flowers. What were they?» Rebecca managed a luxuriant garden center, and the topic awoke a certain professional interest in her, if anything.

«I don't know, yellow stuff. Buttercups?»

«Buttercups? Who gives a buttercup bouquet as a gift? They must have been daffodils.»

«Rebecca, that's not the point. The point is that I can't even have dinner at my parents' that my mom immediately invites a random single guy to try and have me settle down.»

Her friend continued almost as if she wasn't listening. «How could you ever think of buttercups?»

And the other did the same. «And where does she find them, I wonder. Does she walk up to them at the gas station? At the supermarket? I can just see her inspecting their carts to check they're not buying baby food, and then tapping them on the shoulder: 'Excuse me, are you available? Because I can see that you're buying frozen fish soup. And my daughter still hasn't got a boyfriend, she's pretty, you know? And she's also quite a successful writer, inexplicably. Here, I'll give you a picture'. *Et voilà* she takes out a picture of me and sticks it in his hand like a Scientology leaflet.»

«Anyway, I read somewhere that supermarkets are an excellent hunting ground. Single guys go grocery shopping too, you know», Rebecca answered biting into an olive that had definitely seen better days.

She had this gift of never getting the gist of the conversation. Priscilla generally found it refreshing, but that evening it was wearing her out. She raised an arm signaling to the waiter that she wanted another Americano. Strong. Whatever.

«But at least he did bring you flowers», Rebecca offered, since she had always had a soft spot for Lucinda, Priscilla's mom. «And he could have been interesting... was he cute at least?»

«Cute? A man shouldn't be cute, not after nine years old! Tweety the canary is cute, not a man! And anyway he was a real estate agent, and do you know how long you can talk about the benefits of a terracotta flooring? Twenty-six minutes! TWENTY-SIX! I counted them.»

«So after the twenty-six minutes you left without taking the poor daffodils?»

«They weren't daffodils. I know daffodils. Sunflowers? Anyway no, I waited till the end of dinner, I said my polite goodbyes, said thank you to everyone, kissed mom and dad, shook the guy's hand and then yes, I got my things and left.»

«Sunflowers I doubt it. I think you'd recognize those too. It's the ones with the huge black round inner part, you know? You've seen them a thousand times... and he didn't try to take you home?»

«Yes, but I said I wasn't going home.»

«And where were you going?» asked Rebecca wide-eyed.

Never had she seen Priscilla not wanting to go home. It was difficult to make her come out, and even that aperitif had been hard work.

«Home. But instead I said that I was supposed to meet someone at midnight sharp in front of the Phoenix, and I could be not even one minute late.»

«I can just picture your mom. And who were you supposed to see at midnight sharp in front of the Phoenix?»

«Rebecca, nobody! Concentrate!! I just wanted to go home, lock myself inside with a bottle of rum and try to kill Calliope!»

Rebecca put down the glass of white wine firmly on the table. «You don't really want to kill her.»

«Yes I do!» answered Priscilla, sloppily tying her reddish hair on the back of her head. «I'm taking that whore down.»

A grey-haired man holding a beer, sitting at the table next to them, turned his head just enough to avoid being excluded from the planning of a possible murder. His cousin Vittorio was in the police. You never know.

«But... and then what?»

«And then who knows... maybe I'll take up hardboiled fiction», answered Priscilla trying to pull out the orange slice from her glass.

«Like what?»

«Well, like seedy alleyways, taxis to chase, that kind of stuff.»

«I like Calliope», Rebecca dared to say in a low voice.

«I don't anymore. I've been putting up with her for nine years. Nine years. And do you want to know how many words I wrote this morning? One thousand seven hundred eighty nine!»

«Is that a lot or a little?» asked her friend who was an expert in hellebores but not in Microsoft Word.

«Close to nothing. A total failure. In three hours and twelve minutes. I can't do this, Rebecca. Either I kill her or I'm finished. After nine years and seven novels I'm allowed to declare that I'm truly fed up with Calliope of the Topaz, right?»

Priscilla looked resentfully at the orange slice still stuck in her drink.

Beautiful, blonde, from the eighteenth-century, clothed suggestively, disputed by several men of whom the most determined were for sure the shady pirate Jack Raven and the languid count Edgar Allan, Calliope was the fully-fledged perfect opposite of her creator, who told her adventures in an oversized sweatshirt and black leggings, with her unruly hair tied up with random hair clips and eating hazelnut chocolate and pepper-flavored potato chips from a bag. While Calliope was suffering through a thriving and remarkable love life, Priscilla, at thirty-six, had - as they say - called it a day. She had allowed herself three loves. From the first one she had gotten a tiny scar on her forehead, right above her right eyebrow. From the second, lived with great passion during university, a period of sleepless nights and a bruised heart. From the third, six months of therapy. She'd had enough.

She should have known at four years old, at the first scar, that love wasn't an option. Her friends met boring but decent men and settled down, while she

searched for the fictional adventure as you find in novels and got therapy sessions in return. Well, she'd had enough. She was through with the meaningless loves. Only the ones in books, from now on.

«Okay, so kill her», gave in Rebecca. «But at least kill her good. And don't put sunflowers at her funeral. Ask me, first.»

«I promise.».

«Do you remember doctor MacMillan? He was so hot, eh?» said Rebecca all of a sudden. «You didn't kill him too, right?» she added with a look of concern.

«Oh... Roger MacMillan. What a man! No, no, he's alive.»

Priscilla Greenwood, whose last name was actually Verdebosco², had behind her an intense career as an author of *Harmony* novels³ of the white series, starting with a first novel with the title "Passion and Intensive care", in which the main character was dreamy doctor Roger MacMillan, pediatric heart surgeon. She had fallen in love with him a little bit too, because he had come out really good: dark, sexy, sweet but unpredictable. All the moms of his little patients loved him, as well as all the nurses of the ward and of the whole hospital. She had imagined him in every single detail and still today she could see his face, if she concentrated. Oh, doctor MacMillan... Her very first and personal remedy to the disappointing real men. A fetish that never failed to console her.

Then she had switched to historical romance and had invented the unfortunate heroine Calliope and her many adventures which had caused a sensation. First in all the bookstores in Italy and then in Europe, in the end she had conquered the United States. But now that she was a celebrity for romance readers, for the first time in her life she had the infamous white page block. That is, she was in trouble.

She had known right from the start that, to be credible as the Queen of Romance, she needed to change her very Italian name. Had anyone ever heard of a Queen of Romance who was called Verdebosco? So she had concealed her true identity behind a charming pen name and anglicized her last name, creating the wonderful Priscilla Greenwood. On the cover of her books, under her ten-years-old old picture, there was a brief and fictional biography that mentioned she owned a large ranch in California, while she raised thoroughbreds commuting between the prairies and her New York attic on Fifth Avenue.

Actually, she lived in a small apartment in Venice, and her mother Lucinda called every night at eight o'clock to remind her that her biological clock was mercilessly ticking, and if she was to go on like that, she would become an old spinster. She was ignoring the fact that her daughter wanted exactly that: a life of spinsterhood, couch and made-up stories that didn't have anything to do with

² *Verde bosco* means "green woods".

³ *Harmony* is an editorial collection of romance novels published in Italy since 1981.

real life. Lucinda had an extraordinary talent for real life and couldn't wrap her head around the fact that Priscilla, on the other hand, was completely lacking it. She found this whim of building a high wall and staying isolated in her own fantasy world totally incomprehensible.

As a matter of fact, Priscilla had long since chosen to live in that thin space between sleep and wakefulness, where just a few people are allowed to live. That eternal border land separating reality from imagination and where, sometimes, somebody stops, gazing at the cliff that separates them.

It happens to those who grow up surrounded by stories, that they cannot get out and end up creating a tiny and sheltered world, protected from reality. An Alice who had never come back from Wonderland. This was Priscilla.

Hurt by real life, she had found refuge in the imagined one and she had curled up there, in the blank spaces among words. Where she was safe.

«Do you remember when he defused the bomb in the hospital and saved all the children in Pediatrics? And when he was about to succumb to the charm of the evil pharmaceutical rep?» Rebecca asked.

«Good times, the ones with Roger MacMillan...» Priscilla sighed, picking a potato chip from the small plate in front of her. Her creativity wasn't functioning now and it was definitely Calliope of the Topaz's fault. That bitch. It always worked out for her, apart from the murder attempts.

Rebecca, Priscilla noticed, was glancing at the clock slightly troubled.

«Do you have to go?» she asked coming out of her moment of nostalgia.

«Well... I...» her friend stammered, embarrassed.

«Rebecca, do you have a date? If you have to go...»

«Not me...» Rebecca looked down guiltily.

«Not me, what?»

«A date, I mean.» She stared at her with dark agonizing eyes. She looked like Bambi.

«Oh, no...» Priscilla complained, struck by sudden and woeful insight.

«At eight. But we can leave in a short while!»

«Rebecca, not you too... for the love of God, did Lucinda force you? Tell me if my mother is blackmailing you! What does she have? I'll pay you more!»

Rebecca was heartbroken: «I thought that maybe you would like each other... he's a colleague of Filiberto's and he just got separated.»

Priscilla gave her a very sad look: «Just separated too... I'm going home».

She was about to leave, but her friend stopped her. «Are you mad?»

«No, but I'm going home. Cut it out, please. I'm fine as it is. I'll get a cat, some knitting needles, you can give me primroses... as long as you let me do what I want, because I'm getting a bit tired of dodging the men you're trying to saddle me with.»

And to soften her words a bit, she stroked her black bob.

Half an hour later, Priscilla was lying on her bed in a T-shirt and high socks, with her legs raised up against the wall and the laptop abandoned next to her.

She wasn't mad at Rebecca, but if she and her mother would go on like that, she wouldn't have the courage to get out of the house anymore, and her next pretender would wait for her in a dark corner of the hall, between the front door and the umbrella stand. She would end up like one of those people who die on the kitchen chair, in front of a plate of cuttlefish with peas, and people will notice weeks after, when they start smelling the stench in the hallway. Priscilla shivered in her Snoopy shirt.

To be honest, she even had the *physique du role* for such an ending. With dark blue eyes and a cascade of hair pouring down in rust-colored waves, she looked exactly like a Pre-Raphaelite painting, an inconvenience she tried to correct by using combat boots and Peanuts T-shirts. And, of course, it was vital for her not to be found dead on the kitchen chair. Because okay, she was through with men, but that wasn't a good reason to become a case in the news with interviewed neighbors and acquaintances murmuring: «she was a nice person, but so solitary, you never saw her around.»

It was time for a change of scenery. To kill Calliope in a new place.

So with a firm, single movement she deleted the one thousand seven hundred eighty nine words she had written in the morning, and googled: "remote villages houses for rent".

Not even Calliope of the Topaz, woman of many resources, would be able to survive a summer in the middle of nowhere.

So, two days later, Priscilla found herself writing to her editor. They had worked together on all of Calliope's seven novels, filled plot holes, discovered historical and storyline inconsistencies, solved issues that seemed insurmountable. Cecilia was her guardian angel. Always on point, always with the right suggestion at hand, always ready with a bottle of whiskey of excellent quality, when it was necessary. But now not even she would be capable of performing the miracle, all Priscilla had left was the hope that this sudden escape from Venice could save her bruised creativity.

Cecilia, Calliope won't show signs of life that can be defined as such. Maybe she's dead. I hope so. I'm going to go and find out. I spotted a villa that looks like the dream of a Victorian under the influence of a good dose of opium, crazily blooming in a remote village where I can hole up.

Distraught kisses

P.

P.S. Anyway, the name of the village is Tigliobianco. It's a tiny dot with no skill or purpose. The right place to bury the body of a blonde of loose morals.

She clicked on send, closed the laptop and stuck it in her bag.
Tigliobianco. She just hoped it was a quiet place.
Well, it was microscopic. If it wasn't quiet there...

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(pages 21-26)

Meanwhile, Elvira was looking for her Dracula, a big black cat with sharp teeth. The night before he hadn't come home and now he hadn't even showed up for breakfast. It wasn't like him. She had found him two years before, when he was still a small black fur ball, terrified in a corner of the yard, and she had taken him in, defending him from the chickens' attacks and especially from the ones by Evaristo, who felt he had to mark his territory. Elvira had grown attached to him and spoiled him with sardines.

More and more worried, the woman was wandering in the garden smacking her lips and calling out for him.

«Mrs Elvira, did you lose Dracula?»

Agata, twelve years old, her messy hair red as the head of a match, was looking at her with interest.

«Hello Agata. I can't find him. Yesterday he didn't come home for the night and this morning he's not here...»

«Do you want me to help? I'm going to be a detective when I grow up, you know.»

«Thank you, dear, I'd appreciate it.»

The child looked at her, excited. «I'll immediately get to work.» And turning around, she ran at full speed barely avoiding Agnese, who was coming out of her gate and stopped to watch curiously. Everybody knew she didn't like her neighbor nor Evaristo, but she did find Dracula cute. Sometimes, when Elvira didn't notice, she had him come in her house and cuddled him a bit, she might even have given him a can of tuna. So she observed Elvira with a certain interest, and decided to go in search of the poor cat herself.

But now she had stuff to do. Wearing her best blouse, a soft cream color, she had every intention of going straight to the rectory and comb through it to look for the lost recipe notebook. She still didn't know what to tell Father Casimiro, but she would think of something. Contrary to what Elvira believed,

Agnese didn't have a single malicious bone in her body and was not even remotely capable of coming up with a diabolical plan. And it was too bad, because a diabolical plan was what she needed the most now. Instead, the only thing she could think of, while she was walking quickly towards her destination, was the sweet but particular flavor that enveloped the Supreme. She had tried to recreate it in every possible way without success, it was impossible to figure out what the hell Luisa had hidden in that cake. This would be the year of her victory, payback from last year's defeat, and to win by a landslide she needed the Supreme. What a *coup de théâtre* it would be to resuscitate the Supreme, Elvira would be so jealous.

Strawberry Competition!
Sunday July 31 at 10:00
in the square of Tigliobianco.
See you
at the annual strawberry cake competition!

Said the signs hanging pretty much everywhere in Tigliobianco. There wasn't a woman who didn't dream of winning that competition that had become, year after year, a true event. July wasn't July without the Strawberry Competition!

Everyone had their own recipe, and every year tried to improve it with secret ingredients, sometimes unlikely. Rosamaria once added a good dose of ginger, creating something that could hardly be forgotten. There were those who used mint leaves, cinnamon sticks, chocolate flakes in an effort to make it better than the others, but none had beaten the sweet, simple delight of the Supreme.

The Supreme didn't care for garnishes, it staked everything on the dough. But it was lost, together with the priest's housekeeper Luisa and her recipe book. It lived only in the memory of those who had tasted it, they talked about it like it was a mythological creature, full of nostalgia and with a respect rarely granted to a strawberry cake.

Supreme or not Supreme, every last Sunday of July, no matter what, the Strawberry Competition was organized and almost all of Tigliobianco's residents participated, stuffing themselves with cake and waiting for the winner to be announced. Father Casimiro or the mayor Fernando had that honor, one year each, in a perfect example of separation between Church and State.

The square was decorated with red ribbons and furnished with long counters where the cakes, proudly lined up, waited to be tasted first by the jurors, and finally devoured by the ravenous audience. In all the years she had been assiduously participating in the competition presenting just about any kind of strawberry cake, Agnese had never won the prize; so that year she had decided:

she had to find the lost recipe notebook and resuscitate no less than the Supreme.

So predictably, once she got to the rectory, Agnese hadn't devised any plan, and when the priest opened the door in shirtsleeves and a beaming smile, all that she could say was: «I'm looking for the priest's housekeeper Luisa's recipe book. It's for the Strawberry Competition! You don't understand, but that recipe book contains the recipe of the Supreme and I must, must, must find it!»

Father Casimiro patiently sighed. Since he had arrived in the village, the legend of the recipe book haunted him.

«Agnese, the recipe book, again? We already searched for it in the rectory, you know that...»

«We haven't searched well enough! Look, Father, the book must be there! So, are you going to let me in?»

«And turn everything upside down?»

«How am I going to find it otherwise?» asked Agnese with desperation in her voice.

«Look, I'm busy now. There's a parishioner here with me...»

«Who?» asked the gossip, trying to peek into the rectory.

«It's none of your business. Come back in the afternoon and let's see what we can do, all right?» said Father Casimiro with a smile.

«Will you let me look everywhere?» insisted Agnese, noticing the shopping cart that Vladimiro, the local village lunatic, used to carry his things. «Is Vladimiro with you?»

«Agnese, go home», ordered the Father, out of patience. «I'll see you later and we'll solve this story about the recipe book once and for all. Did it ever cross your mind that maybe Luisa didn't want somebody to find it?»

«Oh well, it would be really like her! To get struck by lightning with the recipe book safely hidden who knows where for thirty-two years: it would be just like her!» she blurted out. «I'm going, but I will be back. And if you happen to see Dracula, Elvira's black cat, tell me because we're looking for him.» And she confidently crossed the square glancing one last time at Vladimiro's cart. So much junk...

A person who had no interest in the Strawberry Competition, on the other hand, was definitely Virginia. On Sundays, when she was free from the children who were left in the care of their legitimate parents, she devoted herself to her boyfriend Tommaso. No strawberry cake could compete with those locks that fell before his eyes. He was a good-looking young man very committed both to studying to get into Chemistry at university, and to becoming the next world champion of a videogame called "Kingdom of Hearts and Chains". Two activities

with a high level of housewifeliness that made him the perfect boyfriend for Virginia, who on the other hand spent her days surrounded by children.

«Aren't you going to make a strawberry cake?» Andrea was in fact asking her, in a break from a frenzied two-player soccer match with his twin brother.

«Oh no, on Sundays I'm with Tommaso.»

«Ugh!» protested Tobia, who felt a pang of jealousy whenever his babysitter mentioned her boyfriend. «Tommaso is ugly!» Then he grew suspicious: «Do you love Tommaso more than us?»

«Don't be silly, not a chance!» she reassured him.

«Thank goodness. But if you do win there's a prize, did you know?»

«Did you know?» confirmed Margherita.

«Yes, but it's not like it's a super prize», Virginia said, discouraged. «Last year it was a meat tenderizer.»

«A meat tenderizer! Cool!» the twins instantly shouted together, showing an excitement that is rarely reserved for meat tenderizer.

«I think you should participate», insisted Tobia.

«I don't know how to make a strawberry cake.»

«We'll help you!»

«Mmmm... we'll see», Virginia hesitated, and then exclaimed enthusiastically. «I bought a new nail polish. Black. Who wants to try it?»

«I do!!!» all the children shouted together.

Nobody was thinking about a strawberry cake anymore.

After frenetically confabulating for some time, the three Gossips came to the conclusion that there was only one way to defend themselves from the new tenant of Villa Edera, the enemy and invader: get to know him. But how?

Rosamaria had a bold idea: «Listen, I've got an idea. But don't get me wrong.»

The other two just looked at her in anticipation.

«I thought that there's only one place where we can find out about who this Verdebosco girl is...»

She hesitated and Claretta lost her patience: «So? I don't have all day!»

Rosamaria summoned all her courage: «We have to go to the library».

A dreadful silence followed.

«Are you sure?» Claretta protested. «Isn't Ernesto's stationery shop enough? He even has stamps, which I need, and at least I'll be doing something useful too.»

«Rosamaria is right», Evelina surprisingly exclaimed. «Let's go to the library. I'm really curious to see what's it like inside.»

Claretta put up the BE RIGHT BACK sign on the shop door. And the three of them marched towards Leaves street, heading to the town library.

If someone had seen them from behind, they would have had a hard time telling them apart, with three grey-haired buns, the same short but solid build, and even the same way of walking, determined, of those who never have time to lose.

But when they got there, they found it closed.

«Here it says it opens at three», read Evelina examining the plaque with opening hours.

Claretta kept on pushing and pulling the door, while Rosamaria was peeking through the glass trying to see something and started to violently knock on the window when she saw Amanda, the librarian, with her arms full of a wobbly stack of books.

«She's inside», she announced, «I saw her. Let's keep knocking. I'm sure at some point she'll give up and open.»

And she started banging on the glass even harder, until she saw Amanda patiently putting down the stack of books on the counter and coming close.

Amanda had been the librarian in Tigliobianco for six years, and with passion and patience - essential quality for any librarian - she had revived the tiny town library. She had bought new books, organized a small newspaper section with the local newspaper and other periodicals and magazines, struggled with the extremely low budget she was granted, and all this with a smile and never losing an ounce of her kindness. The kindness that allowed her to deal with every kind of setback, like for example a morning visit by the three gossips, quite stoically.

«The library opens at three», she informed them opening the door. «Haven't you read the opening times? They're hanging right outside», she informed them indicating the plaque hanging before their eyes.

«Oh yes, of course!» Evelina protested. «We need it now. Move over.»

«Ladies, really. Now the library is closed. You have to come back when it's open», insisted the librarian.

«Hey girl, didn't you hear us? We don't have all day», Rosamaria declared.

The three of them moved the poor shocked girl to the side, and marched into the little hall.

«So this is supposed to be the library?» they wondered looking around with their hands on their hips.

Amanda believed it wiser not to answer. «So, ladies, what is it you need so bad?»

«Verdebosco.»

«What?»

«What has Verdebosco written? Is it possible that a librarian doesn't even know who she is?» burst out Claretta, rolling her eyes.

Showing infinite patience, the young woman sat down in front of the computer. «Let me look it up.»

The three of them were staring at her with folded arms.

«There's no Verdebosco in our catalogue, I'm sorry.»

«Oh of course! I knew coming here would be useless», one of the gossips muttered.

«And they pay you to stay here? Or are you a volunteer?» asked another, genuinely curious.

Amanda lived with her mother, who was widowed and in addition to that on a wheelchair, and therefore had developed a certain practice with old ladies, but the sweetness of the woman she lived with had never prepared her for the three gossips' attitude, although she'd known them since she was born. So she sighed and gave up, while she searched the internet.

«She's such a know-it-all», murmured Rosamaria in the meantime.

In no time at all the librarian found an answer to their curiosity. «Verdebosco Priscilla. She uses a pseudonym to write. That's why I couldn't find her.»

«A what?»

«A pseudonym. A pen name. A name she made up, get it?»

«Oh, this is a good one! Now Villa Edera is being rented out to people who use false names! Let's leave, we're not getting out of the rabbit hole in this... hole!» Claretta protested, heading quickly towards the exit, followed by her friends.

«But...» Amanda tried to say, «don't you want to know what pseudonym she uses and what she writes?»

But the three of them were practically already outside the door. She raised her shoulders and forgot about them the second she heard her cell phone chirp.

When they were back on the street, Evelina protested with her hands on her hips: «I knew it wouldn't help to come here. In seventy-seven years I've never set foot in here. There must be a reason!»

The other two nodded vigorously and marched towards their positions.

5

Priscilla had her nose stuck in *The Bishop Murder Case* by S.S. Van Dine, and the more she read the more she felt like leaving Calliope to her fate, and maybe trying to take on a classic crime novel, the kind with closed rooms and murders

committed with a blowgun and a poisoned dart obtained by a plant you can only find in Papua New Guinea.

While she thought of the most terrible ways she could kill someone, in front of her a very young couple was holding hands and every now and then looked at each other in evident adoration. How had they found each other? Priscilla wondered with a hint of admiration. How was it possible that, among the billions of people populating Earth, those two had found each other? Was it ever possible? It was pure magic. Recognizing each other and being recognized. Trusting the other person so much that you could raise your eyes and let everything seep through. Really, how was it possible? Gazing at the countryside that was unraveling out the window, Priscilla found herself wondering, and not for the first time, why something that to the whole world seemed so easy, for her was impossible instead.

Her last love, a couple years before, had simply disappeared into thin air. Without a word, without a goodbye. On Wednesday he was there, and on Thursday it seemed he had never existed. Disappeared, *whoosh*, a ghost. Priscilla had thought she was going crazy for weeks. How was it possible that a person she had shared so much with could do that to her? She had clearly felt a long thorn sticking in a corner of her heart, she had felt its point making its way and settling in, painful and still, opening up a long crack, like the ones you sometimes enjoy skipping on the sidewalk. From that moment on, there was a before and an after, separated by that invisible scar. Then something deep down had cunningly put in place a brilliant defense mechanism, and everything in her had fallen asleep. Just like that, as when princess Aurora pricks her finger on the spindle and the whole castle falls asleep. The servant falls asleep with the broom in her hand, the cat while he is licking his paws, the cook in the kitchen with his arms still covered with flour. Even the fire in the fireplace isn't burning anymore, it goes out. Everything was simply petrified, and Priscilla hadn't felt anything else, apart from the fact that sometimes, in the most unexpected moments, she started crying. She could be at the supermarket, putting tangerines in a bag, and with no warning, tears were running down her face. Silent. Inappropriate. And treacherous.

The thorn, from its place - down to the left - suddenly pulsed to the memory.

So it was still there. Motionless and stuck deep. Ready to vibrate and remind her of its eternal presence. Not everything was sleeping.

Better to think of the lethal poisons of Papua New Guinea, she thought picking up Van Dine again.

(pages 56-60)

While Tommaso was dedicating his day to a game of "Kingdom of Hearts and Chains", that for sure would mark a turning point in his life as a young nerd, Virginia had picked up the twins and Margherita again.

«I'm weally happy!» the little girl had screamed, hugging her knees.

«I'm happy too», Virginia had smiled. «What do you want to do? What about a game of chess?»

The children loved chess. The rules were very simple: everything was fair and you had to produce all the sounds of war, including the heart wrenching screams of the sacrificed pieces. The victorious king was crowned at every game, the queen sometimes fled with the opponent king, causing a great scandal in her line-up that at that point started to hunt her down mercilessly, often helped by the opponent queen who joined forces with the enemies. They were epic games. Virginia packed them with mythological tales, so now the children were extremely prepared about Trojan horses and Zeus's secret love affairs.

Few things could distract the four of them once a game had started. One of those few, for example, was a group of people in a clear state of agitation in front of Anita's café.

«What's going on?» asked Tobia, raising his eyes from the lifeless body of a pawn. He had just had to put down a seriously injured horse, to prevent him from suffering.

Virginia, Andrea and Margherita followed his gaze. Anita was bringing out a glass of fresh water and at the same time talking frantically on the phone. All the others were pressed together, watching something on the floor.

«I don't know» answered Virginia.

«Let's go see!» Tobia screamed, and started running followed by the others.

Vladimiro was lying on the floor and wasn't moving.

«The ambulance is about to arrive!» Anita exclaimed, trying to calm everyone down.

«Yes, of course... it'll be here in twenty minutes», commented Evelina quite reasonably, while Rosamaria and Claretta were grumbling about the poor efficiency of emergency vehicles. They had left their position as soon as they had seen the man collapse to the ground, and now nobody would have been able to get them out of there.

«Let's call Ettore!» suggested Agata, who had joined the group equipped with her usual notebook. Ettore was still her hero. And, let's not forget, also a doctor.

«Ettore is a pediatrician», silenced her Claretta, who went to see him for a check-up twice a week, but wanted to make it clear.

«So what?» screamed Agata who wouldn't allow interferences between her and her love full of passionate admiration. «A pediatrician it still a lot more of a doctor than you!»

«Let's call Ettore, come on» Anita confirmed, and went back to calling.

«Vladimiro, Vladimiro, wake up», whispered Virginia crouched beside him. «What happened?» she then asked.

«What do you think happened?» answered Rosamaria. «If he goes around with a coat in this heat, of course at some point he's going to faint!»

Vladimiro's dog had wriggled out of the cart and had curled up under a table, near the café wall.

«Come on, Vladimiro, I'm taking off your coat, okay?» said Virginia starting to handle the body of the poor man without any appreciable results. A moment later the whole gang of the old men card players caught up with her, and Vladimiro's coat was finally removed.

«Here's Ettore!» exclaimed Agata with a certain elation despite the dramatic situation. Okay for the concern, but love is always love.

«Let me have a look!» said Ettore, who had just arrived together with Cesare, with a confidence that only their white coat could give them.

Agata joined hands in admiration.

«It's nothing, he's waking up. Let him breathe, come on. Vladimiro, are you there? Come on, now drink some water», said the doctor, holding the glass to his lips.

Margherita stretched her small finger and pointed it firmly to his cheek. «Is bettow now?»

«Yes, he's awake», Virginia confirmed, «Don't worry.»

«We called an ambulance», Anita told Ettore.

«You did the right thing. It's probably just a heat stroke, but a few days in the hospital can only do good. A few blood tests, two or three proper meals...»

«We have always taken care of Vladimiro, and fed him», Anita protested vehemently. They had only one homeless man in the village, of course they treated him as you should!

«I know, I know... but it will do him good just the same», Ettore defended himself.

«You bet it will do him good!» intervened Agata, always ready to take the side of her true love, who gratified her with a smile.

«Come on, let's take him inside and have him sit down while we're waiting for the ambulance.»

Vladimiro was delicately lifted up and taken into the café, where he was put on a chair and spoiled with another glass of water, sugar and lemon.

«Would you like a tramezzino sandwich?»

«Would you like a croissant?»

«Would you like a salami sandwich?»

«Would you like us to go get you a slice of pizza?»

«An apple?»

«A shot of schnapps?»

«A snap game?»

All the village that had gathered outside started to transfer inside the café, except for the dog that stayed curled up under the table.

«Would your dog like some water?»

«A little bit of prosciutto?»

«Some leftover lasagna?»

«Anti-flea medicine?»

Only two small suspicious figures stayed outside the café. Two fearless six-year-olds in short pants and dinosaur T-shirts that saw before them the opportunity of a lifetime: Vladimiro's unattended cart nearby.

Tobia and Andrea, wide-eyed and in disbelief at such luck, stealthily sneaked up. Vladimiro's treasure was just a step away from unveiling itself in front of them. The twins' mouths were dry in excitement, but in contrast their hands were itching from the thrill. Lightning-fast, they got next to the cart and were just starting to rummage inside when, in the distance, they heard a siren.

«Let's take it away, quick!» Tobia suggested. And in a second they were out of everyone's sight, slipping into the first alley, with the magic cart at full speed. Followed only by Cesare's amused look.

The moment that Claretta came out to greet the ambulance with the memorable words: «Already here? How come?», the twins were already far with their loot.

When Vladimiro was taken away, conscious but dazed, only then, when it was over and calm was restored, Virginia realized she was holding Margherita's hand but she had lost the twins. Not too worried, she looked around with a contemplative air, and it took her only a moment to figure it out. If the twins were missing and Vladimiro's cart was missing, the two things had to be closely related.

Six-year-old rascals, she thought with a hint of admiration.

«Come on, Margherita. Let's go get your brothers.»

And she headed with firm steps towards the soccer field, where she was sure she would find them.

That afternoon, Priscilla was strolling with no particular destination, her steps heading along the narrow streets of Tigliobianco. There were a lot of people,

despite the village being so small. And everyone seemed quite agitated. Then she saw the ambulance parked in the square that was taking away the cart guy.

While people around her were absorbed in real life, she was discarding new ideas, one after the other, waiting to find the right one. A gift. A surprise. Priscilla was gazing distractedly at the small crowd around the café and the ambulance, reflecting on her thoughts. Then she saw him. The only person who wasn't moving. The man who looked like Roger MacMillan, magically come out of one of her novels. So dangerous.

He had his back to her, slightly bent over, as if he was looking for something on the floor. So, despite the fact that she smelled danger just as a drug-sniffing dog smells a stick of heroin, she stopped to watch him with a certain curiosity. What in the world was catching the attention of that tanned man on the side of a street of Tigliobianco? If it had been Roger MacMillan, there would have been an abandoned baby and he would have been for sure concentrated on saving him, she thought. What if..

She stepped closer, silently, in the confusion that whirled around her, trying to get a better look. The dog. The dog with drooping ears, that she had seen in the cart of the man who was sick, was now all holed up under a table. The man bent over him seemed as if he was talking to him.

It's amazing how many extraordinary things are made of the fabric of small gestures. The tiny ones. The ones that pass us by without making a sound. So this is what happened in that exact moment: Priscilla came close to the man as if magnetized, and in that exact moment, Cesare reached out and pet one of the dog's ears, murmuring a few words. And she saw him. She didn't simply see the gesture that was happening before her eyes. She *saw* him. She saw a man who had noticed a scared and confused dog, who had stopped beside him and had decided to use a few seconds of his life to let him know he wasn't alone. A man who stops to reassure the dog of a homeless, what kind of man is that? He wasn't saving children from a burning school like Roger MacMillan, yet in that minuscule, infinitesimal gesture, stroking a soft ear and saying a few words, there was so much humanity that Priscilla was captivated.

The skin around that tiny thorn stuck in the corner of her heart suddenly started to heal, and, from the crack of the before and after a - timid - sprout emerged, in the exact moment when the child living under her skin stopped to watch.

And to think that his brother claimed that in Tigliobianco nothing ever happened. He had been there just for two days and someone had fainted, a love note had been left on the car and a shopping cart had been stolen. And then the woman who in that moment was looking at him from afar but not quite, frozen as someone who, out of a Victorian novel, has seen a ghost. She was the Dark

Pippi he had seen at Claretta's shop, and who had put down the groceries with some resentment as soon as she had seen him. She didn't have braids anymore, but it was her. He had found her!

Cesare looked at her too, and then started to move towards her. Slowly. So she wouldn't run away. Creatures like her go back to hide in invisible places in the blink of an eye. He needed to be careful, extremely careful. As a matter of fact, Priscilla first widened her eyes then turned and ran away. But...

«Can anyone tell me who that is?» Cesare asked to no one in particular, but in fact addressing the three Gossips.

«It's the writer living at Villa Edera», answered Rosamaria promptly. «She wanted prosciutto with no preservatives, can you imagine?»

«Intrepid, at the very least», observed Cesare.

«I didn't give it her, for sure», Claretta intervened.

«So no one knows anything about her?»

«No, imagine that.»

«Not even her name?»

«Oh, that we know. Verdebosco, Priscilla», Evelina informed him. «But she also uses a false name, you know?» she added conspiratorially. «Amanda knows everything.»

Cesare was already planning a visit to the library.

21

(pages 104-106)

All seven of them sitting at Virginia's kitchen table, they were staring at the notebook with the black cover in front of them. It looked so harmless. Absolutely unaware of the vicissitudes it had caused for thirty-two long years.

«Have you already seen the recipe of the Supreme?» asked Agata, curious.

«We're going to make it!» the twins shouted together.

«Is that why you enrolled in the Strawberry Competition?» exclaimed the other one. «Agnese will have a fit.»

«Oh... well, but we didn't know it was the Supreme when we decided to make it», Virginia justified herself.

«And now you want to tell her?» Cesare intervened.

The baby-sitter and the children remained quiet, guiltily.

He burst out laughing: «In my opinion, you can enjoy your discovery and do a fabulous *coup de théâtre* at the Strawberry Competition. Without feeling guilty.»

«Do you think they won't get mad?» inquired Virginia, doubtful.

«I think you have the right of enjoying your moment», Cesare smiled stroking Margherita's little head, she was sitting right besides him. «Moreover, it's time for a generational change on the highest step of that podium.»

Priscilla, meanwhile, driven by a curiosity she'd had since the moment she had heard about the Supreme, was leafing through the meticulously handwritten notebook.

And suddenly, the recipe of the famous strawberry cake manifested itself before her eyes.

What you need:

A basket of strawberries
3 eggs
7 tablespoons of sugar
1 pinch of salt
1 small cup of fresh cream, 125 ml
260g milk
315g flour
1 packet of yeast
acacia flowers without the green stalk otherwise you can see it
honey

First of all, separate the flowers from the stem and remove the green stalk too.

Divide the egg yolks from the whites

I whisk the egg yolks with sugar and add the salt, the cream and the milk.

Then the flour and the packet of yeast well sifted with no laziness and I mix well.

I beat the whites until stiff, I add them always turning in an up-down motion as you should.

Then gradually the acacia flowers, without ruining them, always mixing in the same way.

I put the mixture in the buttered medium-sized mold and drop five big strawberries in the dough, chopped and sprinkled with flour so they won't sink. Or seven normal strawberries.

On top I put butter flakes and a good sprinkle of sugar and put it in the oven.

The oven must be well heated before, and I put it at 180° C for 15 minutes fan-assisted and then 45 minutes static. Then it should be ready, but always check with a toothpick. When I take it out of the oven I let it cool down and sprinkle the cake with acacia honey and stick the strawberry points on top, the reddest I have.

If I feel inspired, first I cut the cake in the middle and fill it with some custard I like and maybe cut-up strawberries or jam. Maybe a mixture of strawberry juice and maraschino.

If I feel inspired.

So it always remains a mystery.

«Acacia flowers...» whispered Priscilla. «Brilliant. Who would have thought?»

«An evil genius, Luisa», added Agata admiringly.

«I wouldn't want to ruin the moment, believe me, but where can you find an acacia still in bloom in July?» asked Cesare pragmatically.

Six heads turned to look at him with pity.

«At Villa Edera», everyone said together as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Tobia, at the height of his enthusiasm, performed an Indian war cry with a consequent dance around the table. A second later, all the children - small and big - were following him.

And right there, in Virginia's kitchen, while they were improvising a wild dance swarming noisily out of the room, with Priscilla's eyes wide and vibrant a few centimeters from his, Cesare couldn't resist. He cautiously reached towards that face - so intense, so close - and slowly pressed his thumb on Priscilla's lower lip.

«I see you», he whispered softly.

(pages 142-145)

That evening, at seven o'clock sharp, they all gathered in church, and Amanda started to distribute letters and clues.

There were some who couldn't contain their excitement for this adventure, and others who still couldn't figure out what the point was. Among the latter was Cesare who, confused, wondered what he had done wrong to deserve all this, but had decided to follow Amanda to the probable defeat. At this point, what did he have to lose?

«But explain it to me. Why exactly do we have to set up all this? You know that it would take a lot less for these things, right?» asked Claretta.

«I guess we're enjoying village undertakings. That's how it goes this summer», answered Elvira.

«Well, but we can do more than that», unexpectedly intervened Rosamaria, with a pensive look on her face.

«More than this???»

«For example, Priscilla can't arrive at Villa Edera and wait for Cesare in jeans and a T-shirt...» she stated confidently. «Certain things require the right attire.»

«And balloons!!!» yelled the twins.

«Yes, all right, but I'm positive that girl hasn't brought any elegant dresses with her.»

«Oh no! Now we've got to get it right!» specified Evelina.

«Yes, but there are so few of us, where can we find elegant dresses here?» asked Virginia.

There was a moment of intent silence, then Claretta suddenly raised her head.

«In Ludovica's closet! The huge one in the attic!» she exclaimed full of vigor just thinking about desecrating the closet of the rich owner of Villa Edera.

«Oh no», someone tried to object.

«Oh yes, indeed! There must be clothes of entire generations of Del Pizzo in there, from Gualtierio onwards.»

«If we're lucky they'll date back to the sixties, otherwise to the beginning of the century», murmured Amanda.

«It'll be perfect! But what if the girl won't play? Let me point out that she's been a recluse for three days and she seems to be in a horrible mood», Agnese said.

Amanda had thought about that. And she knew she had just one try, and she had to do it now.

«I'll go to her», she said firmly placing a hand on Cesare's shoulder and slightly squeezing her fingers. «I'll go to her and talk to her. You hand out letters and clues and organize. And you, Cesare, pull yourself together, you look like you died three days ago.»

And without adding anything else, she quickly left the church and headed confidently towards Villa Edera.

Priscilla was sinking into the couch with her laptop on her knees and was writing. She would finish that stupid novel and then she would leave, she would bury everything under a gravestone. Everything. And this time, it would be forever.

But then she heard knocking on the door.

She would have ignored that request as she had done for the past few days, but she had realized that morning that she had almost finished the food in the house and deep down she hoped it was someone with provisions.

She could accept the heartache, but starving to death...

She didn't even have time to think that it could be Cesare, she heard Amanda's firm voice utter from behind the closed door: «Priscilla, open up this door immediately!»

And she obeyed.

A second later, the librarian was holding her tight and she was crying, again.

«What's going on?» asked Amanda without letting go.

«Ask Cesare, what's going on!!» shouted Priscilla in the poor girl's ear.

Amanda rolled her eyes: «Now you tell me exactly what he's done to you and I'm sure we can solve it.»

«Oh, what he's done to me, what he's done to me... why don't you ask your sister-in-law what he's done to me, that bastard?» sobbed Priscilla on Amanda's shoulder.

Amanda pondered for a moment: what did her sister-in-law have anything to do with this? Domitilla, her brother Piergiorgio's wife, lived in Modena.

«I don't understand... what sister-in-law?» she then asked, grabbing the writer by the shoulders and forcing her to look her in the eye.

«Cesare's wife, that's who!» growled Priscilla.

Was this a conspiracy? Was everybody going to keep lying to her?

«What wife? What are you talking about?»

Priscilla wiped her nose on her sweatshirt sleeve: «What do you mean, what wife?»

«Yeah... what wife? Cesare's not married.»

Priscilla remained silent, frozen. He wasn't married?

«He isn't married?» she asked, as a matter of fact.

«No. Where would you get such an idea?»

«I heard the girls from the Book Club saying wow, Cesare's wife is so beautiful, so elegant and attractive and so on...»

Amanda rolled her eyes. Now it was clear. «Well, I'm telling you that this wife doesn't exist and she never has.»

This is what had happened.

Right before Priscilla stopped at Anita's café to look for Cesare, Irene was explaining her diabolical plan to her friends, to avenge the honor of poor Laura who, after a lifetime of being in love with Cesare, exactly when she had decided, like it or not, to take action, she found herself dealing with the new girl. If that wasn't bad luck. Irene had actually told all about the terrifying scene she had witnessed just a few days before, reporting every detail she had seen, along with several others that she had made up, and Laura had been hurt beyond words. She therefore was ready to collaborate on whatever plan her friend was going to come up with.

They only needed Priscilla to be providentially within earshot, so when the writer had passed by their table, Irene had started to talk about a mysterious wife who was waiting for Cesare at home.

That's why Priscilla had locked herself inside the house without a word during three days of pain that had to have been enormous. Dear, trembling, fragile Priscilla, who could blame her.

Amanda would be giving the six of them a piece of her mind. And from now on, they could hold their book club at Anita's café, as far as she was concerned.

Priscilla, afraid to believe it, looked into the girl's eyes: «So who the hell is Bianca?»

«Bianca...» whispered the librarian, smiling and exhausted.

«Yes, Bianca! I saw the text where he was saying that he missed her!»

Amanda sighed. This was for sure the most surprising comedy of errors she had ever witnessed.

«Priscilla, Bianca is Cesare and Ettore's cousin, she's twelve years old.»

«Who?» asked Priscilla wide-eyed.

«Their little cousin, and yes, she had a predilection for Cesare, she has such a strong bond with him, she wears oversize sweatshirts, listens to horrible music and Cesare spoils her beyond imagination.»

That was the moment when Priscilla, drained by so many emotions all together, sat on the couch and started to cry again. This time of relief and surprise.

«Well, you could say I finally met someone who cries more than me», smiled Amanda looking at the writer with amusement and affection. «So, are

you ready to get out of the house and take part in the most fabulous, extraordinary, amazing treasure hunt that was ever created for a woman?» she asked sitting down beside her.

«Sorry, for what?» asked Priscilla who had even stopped crying for the surprise.

«I'd like to talk to Cesare, though, try to explain...»

«Come on, get dressed», answered the other girl patting her leg and ignoring her requests.

«Do you ever do normal stuff in this village?» Priscilla asked genuinely curious, conscious of the fact that behind that game there was something she wasn't allowed to know.

Amanda seemed to guess her concerns and tried to convince her: «So, Priscilla, there are those rare moments in life when you have to take your heart and throw it over the fence, and then run to get it and see if all went well. You *must* know. You've been writing about this all your life. You and thousands of others! Think about all the love stories written over the centuries... they never would have existed if the protagonists hadn't decided to take a leap of faith: Scarlett confessing her love to Ashley, Jane Eyre agreeing to marry Rochester and we know quite well that Bertha was in the attic, Anna becoming Vronskij's lover... And I know that where we are now is supposed to be real life, but who cares? For once, life can actually be like a novel! I know you're afraid, but if there ever was a moment in which taking a chance was worth it, it's this one, believe me. I'd never tell you if I wasn't sure that at the end of all these adventures there will be a happy ending for you.»

It was the longest speech she had ever pronounced in her whole life.

Priscilla listened and cried some more while the sticky black thing that had invaded her up to a moment before pulled back little by little, leaving space for air bubbles that made her take deep breaths between one sob and the other. And while Amanda looked at her, waiting, she floundered in unbecoming indecision.

What would Calliope of the Topaz do? She would do the treasure hunt for sure, but that woman was also impulsive, without a shred of common sense. She wasn't impulsive. Or was she? Maybe being impulsive and daring to be brave could be the right choice this time.

She thought about all the times that he had looked at her as if she were this precious thing, and a piece of her heart melted a bit. And suddenly Penelope and the letter came to her mind: if she gave up everything, she would never know what would happen, if something was going to happen.

In that tiny village there was a very old lady who had decided to lock herself up in her house forever because of a man who had hurt her and let her down.

And what if she ended up just like her? What if she gave up everything for fear and pride and found herself at the end of her life, old, just like Penelope, closed between the safe walls of her home? For her there wouldn't be a Priscilla who was ready to write a false letter to try and make sense of all that grief. She would get covered in spider webs and that's it.

What was riskier, that or giving love a chance? She saw Cesare's face again, just as he was coming close to give her their very first kiss, and she knew she had decided.

This time Calliope would win, not Penelope.

Priscilla would allow herself one last act of terrible courage.

Maybe the fear of having to put her first kiss with Cesare together with all the other memories in the closet of the heartaches she had experienced and the hopes that had been destroyed was stronger than the fear of going back. In that closed rested the shreds of past relationships, of fantasies that were not fulfilled, of dead smiles, of voices she would never hear again. If she had stuck just one more heartache in it, the closet full of shadows would become her life.

So Priscilla looked Amanda in the eye and simply said: «All right, let's go play.»

One minute later, while Priscilla was washing her face, Amanda texted Cesare saying: «Make sure you don't mess up».

The man looked at his fellow villagers, all waiting, and smiled.

They didn't need anything else: in no time, half the village was hiding, waiting for a revenant Priscilla.

33

(pages 154-162)

In the huge hall of Villa Edera, Priscilla, now alone, was waiting. Wrapped in Ludovica's green dress, with her rust-colored hair that was already escaping from the little combs and her lips red as ripe fruit.

What if everything went wrong? What if Cesare started laughing? What if, in the end, he didn't come? Then the courage she'd had would just be stupidity. What would become of her and of all this passion? The love she cherished and finally had the courage to give would never find its path to the soul it was destined to, it wouldn't be embraced. It would keep wandering. That hopeful love would fill with fear and rage and instead of sleeping safely in Cesare's arms would be out in the cold, curled up in some corner.

So, naturally, Priscilla was terrified. Terrified like those who take off, one at a time, all the membranes enveloping their soul and desires, and who find themselves suddenly naked and vulnerable, with their heart on a plate, offered with both hands. You had to be mad to do something like this. Because when you're offering something with both hands, you know, you've got nothing left to defend yourself with. Especially if what you are holding out is a naked and raw heart, surrounded by a potpourri of desires, fantasies and oddities. Especially oddities scared her. How can you not tremble if only you realize what unspeakable audacity you are dressing yourself in? What unforgivable recklessness. Fools and heroes commit such crimes. And Priscilla was both then: a foolish hero dressed only in love, certainly not in armor. The real hero stands still with his heart on the plate and stays there, intrepid and trembling, while his survival instinct and his common sense shout together: leave! And your soul, silly and passionate, begs instead: stay.

In her soul she had created a kind of enchantment, woven fabrics of imagination, sewn all the scraps of her dreams one after the other in a never-ending quilt, and now she's thinking that this is her swan song, that if despite all the threads she used to create it, this dream will be mocked and offended, then that will be enough. That if in front of the never-ending embroideries of her offered soul he says no, then only ice will remain.

So here is Priscilla, with a green dress from the previous century, surrounded by dozens of ivory colored balloons. There she is, motionless, waiting to find out if the man for whom she has set her soul will want to feed on it or disregard it.

Until she heard the door open, and her heart stopped. It stopped and then it burst.

Cesare had prepared a speech. On the road to Villa Edera, he had tried the words he would say two or three times, and they seemed perfect. But then he opened the door, and he saw her.

Priscilla in a dark green dress, with her hair up escaping all over, with her blue eyes that as soon as they saw him filled with wonder, then panic, then something else he couldn't read and lastly with love.

And so all that he could say, standing with a bottle of rum in his hands, was: «I love you».

No speech. Priscilla, who in her mind would have wanted to pronounce all the words in the world, remained quiet instead, with her throat full of words unsaid, while inside her everything melted and burst and screamed and twisted, and in the end she stayed there, motionless, while a treacherous tear fell from the corner of her eye and trickled down her cheek, slow and undisturbed. One of those tears she had vowed to never shed again.

Then Cesare reached for her and caught it delicately with a finger.

It would take a couple of hours before Cesare and Priscilla could say everything they needed to say to each other: that he had had a high fever and the phone wasn't working, that's why she hadn't got the text message; that she had been tricked by Irene and her friends from the Book Club into thinking he had a life in Venice that he kept a secret from her. That Amanda had come up with that literary treasure hunt, with the support of the whole village, because she knew how much Cesare cared about Priscilla.

It would take a couple of hours in which they would say some other «I'm sorry» and some other «I love you», some other tears and glasses of rum. And little by little, some laughing and some caressing. There would be knots to unravel, slowly, with patient hands, without rush, and tangles to loosen. There would be silences when Cesare wanted to come closer and kiss her again and again, and others when Priscilla wanted to find the courage to hope that that would turn out to be a small and perfect love, to be kept in a bag next to the setting powder, to stick in the sleeve like a tissue; a light one, to hide between the pages of a book. One she could keep in a pocket and feel with her fingers while searching for change, and touch when she was around other people and no one was looking.

Neither would do what they had in mind to do, because it was one of those moments in which you must get close slowly. You must proceed cautiously, through all the fears, being careful where you put your feet and hands, where you place words and silences. So, instead of all they couldn't say, those two talked about pirates and serial killers drinking Claretta's cheap rum.

They weren't capable of saying the right things, yet who knows how, they did anyway. One "I love you" and "I'm sorry" after the other, they told each other everything.

Until Cesare looked at Priscilla with infinite tenderness, among the dozens of balloons now half inflated that invaded the house.

«I used all the threads of all the colors I had to sew this dream of you», she explained.

Nonsense. Just a single, surreal leaf fallen from an invisible tree that has thoughts for branches.

Yet - and here it is, the miracle - Cesare looked at her and understood: he saw the heart on the plate, offered naked and raw, the bundles of fantasies, the tangle of thousands and thousands of colored threads wrapped around that woman in front of him, with a soul dancing on the surface of her eyes. So he whispered: «I know».

And then finally came that tiny, minuscule moment of silence they had been waiting for all evening, the one where they knew they had found each other. Once again, one in front of the other.

Priscilla wanted to say something - I'd choose you, in every life, in every dream, in every possible reality, in the white space between every line of every story ever written or still to be written - but she couldn't, because the emotion was making her disappear.

And Cesare understood that too, that emotion was making her fade into that other world, the one where she sought refuge when she was scared, so he opened his arms.

She curled up against his chest, and a second before their lips lightly touched, Cesare murmured: «And how does this story end?»

Priscilla shook her head: «You will forever be that story I will never, ever want to write an ending for.»

«Didn't they live happily ever after like in your love stories?» he provoked her, playing with a rust-colored lock.

«Love almost always ends. Stories never do.»

«So we can decide that this is only a story?»

She smiled: «A story is never only a story.»

And then Cesare slowly put his hands in her hair, and finally, right at the last line of the chapter of this story, he worked up the courage to kiss her.

So while Priscilla and Cesare found each other again, the rest of the village, though wondering about the fate of their treasure hunt, had the event of the year to organize. Love is important, but the Competition is the Competition!

The following days, the square was decorated with strawberry red festoons and long wooden tables were placed in its center, ready to accommodate the competing cakes.

In Tigliobianco you couldn't see almost anyone on the streets. Everybody was inside preparing their cake. Agnese, sadly without the recipe of the Supreme, had decided to risk a cheesecake. Elvira, with Dracula happily loitering around her feet, was chopping up a dark chocolate bar for her tart.

In every house, that Saturday, tables were full of juicy red strawberry baskets. Also in Virginia's, who, surrounded by the children with dirty mouths and hands, was about to begin preparing the first - and probably the last - cake of her life. And the Supreme, as the first cake of her life, was a great responsibility.

«Let's start, then. Who wants to break the eggs?»

«I do!» the children screamed, including Margherita, who already had her face, her little hands and her dress all red. The juice of the strawberries she had been eating for the last half hour was dripping down her leg, and now was staining her foot too. Virginia looked at her with a certain absent-minded interest: would she get a stomach ache?

«Guys, fortunately we have to use three eggs. Margherita, you start, so you'll stop eating strawberries. You're almost a strawberry yourself.»

«Me, a stwabewy?» asked Margherita, studying herself carefully and touching her stomach to check.

«Yes, you've almost turned into a strawberry. That's what happens to children who eat too many. Then I'll have to give back a giant strawberry to your mother instead of a girl!»

«Then it's our turn!»

So, while screaming and laughing, enveloped by a cloud of flour and by the smell of a basket full of fresh acacia flowers, three children and a young girl were playfully resurrecting no less than the village legend.

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The Strawberry Competition, as we mentioned, was the event of the year in Tigliobianco.

That Sunday morning, the square was furnished with stalls, long tables and white and red striped awnings. Dozens of wonderful cakes covered in bright red strawberries were taking up every table, each with its label reciting the ingredients, the name of the cake and who had prepared it. The church's old stereo system filled the square with a fair-like music, every year the same. The whole village was gathered waiting for the judges who, after tasting all the cakes, would vote for the winner. That year, the prize was a nutcracker with the engraving: Strawberry Competition - Tigliobianco.

Everyone was wandering among the tables to see the others' masterpieces, to understand if they were better than their own. Elvira found herself, at some point, in front to the table of the ladies from the Book Club who, needless to say, had baked the cake together following their guru Irene's precise ideas and indications.

Evanescienza, recited the stiff paper card next to the very thin cake. And following, a recipe without eggs, without milk, without butter, without sugar, with rigorously hand-ground whole wheat flour.

«Only thirty-eight calories per slice!» explained Irene proudly.

Elvira looked at her with a certain dose of ill-concealed contempt. The world was falling apart.

Priscilla and Agata, who were participating as a couple, were behind their table, proud owners of the ugliest cake that had ever participated in the Strawberry Competition.

At the table next to them, people were staring with admiring wonder at Virginia and the children's one: a triumph of sweetness, with shiny strawberries

and tiny white flowers that peered out of what seemed a super soft dough sprinkled with honey. The recipe, to be honest, didn't say they should be put on top, but Virginia hadn't resisted and a little snowfall had settled on the cake.

«Wow, it's gorgeous!» kept on repeating Agata, who was dying for that glorious moment to come, when they would reveal their secret to the whole village. Then she was distracted by Ettore's figure, who, together with Cesare, was making his triumphal entry in the square.

«Oh...» she whispered to her teammate. «He's more gorgeous than Virginia's strawberry cake.»

«You can say that again», she agreed.

Priscilla, who was looking in the same direction although focusing on brother number two, honestly didn't feel like contradicting her. Cesare or a strawberry cake, they both made her want to nibble on them bit by bit.

Just before the judges started their round of tasting, two things happened almost at the same time.

The first one was that Father Casimiro's car parked in front of the church and Vladimiro got out, all cleaned up and decently dressed. Tramezzino immediately noticed, and from his basket under the café chair, first he raised an ear, then his head and finally he rushed through the square as fast as he could wagging his tail. His owner picked him up and a small crowd moved towards them, smiling: Vladimiro had never received so many hugs in his entire life. When he was finally able to talk, all he said was: «What about my cart?»

The twins, so proud, were quick to answer: «We took care of it!»

In that exact moment, the second thing happened. In the general confusion, unnoticed and in perfect silence, a female figure came out of her house and headed toward the square, slow but very elegant. Her white hair was in a bun held in place by ivory bobby pins. She was walking slowly, as if she wasn't used to it anymore, wearing a silk burgundy dress down to her feet. She arrived in silence up to the edge of the square, and there she stopped to watch the hugs that were still being given out.

The first to notice her presence was little Margherita, who pulled at Virginia's hand and asked: «Who's that?» pointing at the figure with her finger.

The baby-sitter followed her gaze and gasped for a few seconds before whispering: «It's Penelope.»

And all the heads, one after the other, turned to look.

Penelope. Who had come out of the house so rarely for many years, who for some was only a legend. Penelope who always had messy hair and the sad face of those who never understood what they did to deserve all that pain. Penelope, to whom the most important thing had been denied, and no, it wasn't a

fiancé, but an explanation, an act of humanity. Penelope who had never been able to break free from the claws of the wait in seventy years of silence.

There she was, in front of them. Ninety-two years old, finally free, finally alive.

Penelope was back.

Agnese was the only one who stepped away from the still and incredulous group. She headed towards the old lady and gently took her hand. Then, very slowly, she took her to a bench under a tree and just said: «Sit here, Penelope. Stay with us.»

The old lady answered only: «My name is Amaranta». She sat properly, with her back upright and a pure gaze, while Cesare offered her a glass of apple juice.

Virginia started to cry and between sobs she kept on repeating: «It worked, it worked». One second later, of course, Margherita was crying with her, clinging to her leg.

Agata took Priscilla's hand and, without taking her eyes off Penelope, murmured: «Did we make a poem?»

«Yes, the kind that can fly», the writer confirmed.

Penelope had come out of her house. She had chosen to reemerge from her shell, from that house where she had been hiding for seventy years. If an almost one-hundred-year-old could come out of her lair, it meant that anything was possible, that you can escape from any haven, that you can open the door and let the light in. And while Priscilla thought about this, she met Cesare's eyes who were watching her from afar, and looking back at him, she smiled.

There was no need for any havens anymore, nor any other place to escape to.

Claretta was the first to recover from the surprise: «What about the Competition?»

A few minutes later everyone was back behind their table, while the judges were passing by tasting and jotting down their unquestionable judgements on a notepad.

When they got to Virginia's table they raised their eyebrows: they had been doing that job for about forty years and could recognize the Supreme. They glanced at each other. The first took a fork and broke off a piece of cake, he pulled it close and only after looking at it for some time he put the fork in his mouth and said: «It's not possible».

The second did the same and said: «It's incredible...»

Virginia and the children were trembling with excitement.

Lastly, the third judge tasted his piece and declared: «The Supreme.»

In the general bewilderment, among all the people crowding Virginia's table, Priscilla turned to whisper to Agata: «Look at the twins».

The two children were red-faced and frozen with emotion. They weren't sure if they were authorized to cheer yet and it was almost killing them.

Among the frenzied voices, Agnese's stood out. She had been looking for that recipe for years, and now, just like magic, a sixteen-year-old entered the Strawberry Competition with no less than a revived Supreme? Was it a joke?

«You! Where did you dig up the recipe from?» she lashed out.

Virginia, proud of her deed, revealed with the calmness of her sixteen years: «In Vladimiro's cart».

And Andrea and Tobia, finally, howled wildly in triumph.

The story of that Sunday in July, when, at the same time, in all their glory, Penelope and The Supreme reappeared, would mightily become part of the local mythology in its own right.

One year later

«In the end, who rented Villa Edera this year?» Evelina asked the other two.

«Hmph... I think a family with a strange name like Passiflora. Or Frangipane⁴. Half English and half Italian.»

«All we needed now are the English», grumbled Claretta. «I'll have to sell them maybe muffins or other odd things they eat».

«Let's hope for the best, since last year everything possible happened.»

And the three Gossips indulged in a moment of silence while recollecting that strange summer when they had saved Penelope's life and helped dumbbells Cesare Burello and Priscilla Greenwood.

«Anyway, we should decide who comes to Villa Edera next year», one of them suggested.

«Yes, it's not like Ludovica can do whatever she wants just because it's her house», the other agreed.

«Every time these weird characters show up...» the last one concluded.

Claretta was holding, using a finger as a bookmark between pages that were already a bit rumpled, a novel with the following title: *The summer that strawberries bloomed*.

It wasn't another adventure of Calliope of the Topaz. It was a totally new novel, it was about a woman who wouldn't give up and a recipe lost and then

⁴ *Passiflora* means "passion flower", and *frangipane* means "frangipani".

recovered, with a magnificent happy ending. On the very first page of the book you could read the inscription: «To Tigliobianco, the place where everything really can bloom. Thank you.»

In that moment, the twins ran past them at blazing speed, they were one year older, but walking still wasn't an option, always in a hurry. And now each of them was pushing a small shopping cart, full of their treasures. You had never seen happier children. Behind them, holding hands, were Virginia and Margherita who could perfectly master almost the whole alphabet.

«Look at those two», said Claretta motioning to the twins with her eyes.

The bells of the mass were chiming and Father Casimiro appeared to look at them.

«What do you say, let's go?»

«Yes, or the priest will get upset.»

The three of them got up from their stools and crossed the square, heading toward the church where they sat down on the last bench, from which they could see everything.

They could see Amanda and Ettore with Celeste, their tiny newborn baby, and they could see Vladimiro with Tramezzino on his lap and Irene and all the Book Club gang whom Amanda had been treating coldly for a year and Agnese and Elvira, sitting next to each other and confabulating. They could see everything from their position.

Including that little corner where a bookstand had been built, on which an anonymous ruled notebook was resting, a bit worn-out, with a black cover, opened on a special page...

That same Sunday morning, in the same moment when the three gossips were sitting on the church bench, Priscilla sat with her legs dangling from the kitchen table looking still quite sleepy and holding a cup of coffee. Around her, only silence.

And then the subtle sound of a door opening and closing, a few steps in the hallway and Priscilla raised her eyes from the cup, in time to welcome Cesare's smile, who was peering through the door. Just a couple steps and she found herself with his lips in her messy hair, his arms and his smell all around her.

Priscilla smiled, grateful, while from above Cesare's shoulder her gaze fell on a small frame hanging next to the red fridge: the cut-out from a local newspaper article, with a picture of Virginia and the children smiling, each holding a slice of strawberry cake. The title of the article recited only one word in big black letters:

The Supreme

