Vichi De Marchi

The Secret of Rioba's Nose

1. Dawn of Fear

Emma turned on the lights in the back room. She moved cautiously, as if afraid of disturbing someone. Dawn had yet to break, but she had woken up very early and gone to the bakery earlier than usual. She had been awakened by the shouts of German soldiers in the street—they seemed to be chasing someone. She had heard them clearly: first the yelling, then the gunshots.
"When will this war end?" she thought, filled with anguish.
She quickly took off her coat, put on her baker's apron, and started bagging the freshly baked bread, following the list of orders the owner left on the counter every night before getting a few hours of rest, only to reappear when the shop opened.
Emma loved her job. She loved the smell of bread, the chatter with customers, and running errands for the bakery.
She was almost done organizing the bags when she noticed a shadow moving behind the fogged-up glass of the back door. Her heart leapt into her throat. Who could it be at this time, in a still-dark Venice?
Panic-stricken, she grabbed the knife from the counter. The shadow moved closer, and a hand reached for the handle. Only then did she realize she hadn't locked the door. She took a few steps back, gripping the knife even tighter. She knew she would never actually use it. Fear had paralyzed her. The echoes of the gunshots from the night before rang in her ears.
The door opened slowly, and a tall figure wearing a cap appeared in the dim light.
Emma screamed,
"Elio, is that you?!"
It was a cry of relief.
"Calm down. I work at this hour. You, on the other hand, what are you doing here?"
"Did you forget that I work here too?"
"Yes, but you usually arrive later!"
Emma smiled. Elio wasn't just another shop assistant. The owner, Sior Bepi, had taught him the art of pastry-making. He was the one who prepared the sweets at dawn.
"Put that knife down, unless you plan on killing me."
Emma realized she was still holding it mid-air.
"You scared me."
"You scared me too."
"I thought you were a thief."
"Of course, a bread thief!" Elio laughed.

Emma looked at him with admiration as he spoke so cheerfully. He was handsome, slim, a head taller than her, with dark eyes that burned like embers.

"Why did you come so early?"

Emma hesitated. She didn't want to confess her fears to Elio, not even her fear of the war. She simply shrugged.

"I can help you make the cake dough," she offered instead.

"Are you crazy? If the boss finds out, he'll be mad at me."

"And who's going to tell him? Not me, that's for sure." Emma gave him a sly look.

They both knew they weren't supposed to do this. She was just an assistant. She was to serve customers and deliver bread around the city. She wasn't allowed to mix dough or bake like a real baker.

Whenever she complained, the owner would soothe her:

"You're only fourteen, and you've been working here for just three months. Learn to be a good assistant first, and then we'll see."

"Why can Elio do it and not me?" she had stubbornly replied.

"Because he's sixteen and already skilled in the trade."

Hearing those words, Elio would usually make funny faces to tease her, but later, when they were alone in the back room, he would say kind things to cheer her up.

Emma, for her part, could never stay angry for long. In truth, she enjoyed serving at the counter and even more so walking around the city with the breadbasket. Her legs moved swiftly up and down the bridges, and she could walk for hours without feeling tired.

But that morning was different. They were alone, and they had time. When would they ever get another chance?

Emma was so persistent that, in the end, Elio gave in.

"Just for today! And if sior Bepi finds out, you'll deal with him yourself!" he said, looking her straight in the eyes.

She nodded, delighted, then listened carefully as he explained how to mix the ingredients for the tart.

"It's the easiest thing in the world," Elio said with slightly smug air.

They kneaded the dough and put it in the oven, laughing and sharing secrets until it was time to open the shop.

"Clean your apron. The boss will be here soon, and if he sees you covered in flour, he'll be mad at me," Elio warned her.

Outside, a faint winter light had already appeared. It was time to open the bakery.

For once, Emma obeyed without protest.

The first customers were usually housemaids and workers heading to their jobs. It was wartime, and flour was scarce, but no one wanted to give up bread. Then came the students. Only around

nine o’clock would Emma grab her basket, sling it over her shoulders, and set off on her delivery route.
She usually stayed in Cannaregio, the neighborhood where she was born and raised and where the bakery was located. Only occasionally did she have to go farther to San Marco or Castello. She loved those trips away from home and the shop because they let her discover new streets, new corners of a city that always seemed different to her.
Only the deliveries to the German soldiers' barracks made her uneasy. Not because they spoke a language she didn’t understand—she didn’t care about that. What unsettled her was the way the guards, with their rough manners, rummaged through her basket. There were almost always two of them: while one inspected the bread, the other kept his weapon pointed at her.
"It’s not like I’m carrying a bomb," Emma would mutter under her breath, making sure they couldn’t hear her.
Usually, though, she would just stare at their polished boots. Sometimes, in their eagerness to search, they would accidentally tear open a bag of bread meant for someone else. When that happened, she would look at them with an angelic expression and whisper a curse in Venetian, confident they wouldn’t understand.
It was her small act of defiance.

2. The Complaining Sister

That evening, Emma left the bakery later than usual. It had been a long workday, but she didn’t feel tired. Just a few more minutes, and she would be home.
The humidity broke into tiny, invisible droplets that made her shiver. When she reached the front door, she rang the bell insistently. The light filtering from the kitchen windows on the second floor was on. She rang again, and finally, the door opened. She ran up the stairs, dimly lit by a faint glow.
"Emma, hurry up, dinner is ready." Her sister’s voice greeted her as soon as she walked in. "You’re always late."
Emma sighed. She could already tell they were going to argue again. It happened often, especially since she had started working.
Her older sister’s name was Anastasia, but Emma had always called her Complaint, because it seemed like nothing ever pleased her. Maybe not even her fiancé, a lanky guy with tiny eyes who, in Emma’s opinion, had only one merit: putting up with her.
Complaint was twenty years old. After her, their brother Mario was born—Emma’s favorite sibling.

Emma stared at the red-and-white checkered tablecloth covering the long kitchen table. At the head of the table sat their father, silent and absent. Next to him was their mother. She was silent too, her mouth corners permanently turned downward in disapproval. She rarely changed expression; she was always unhappy. Like Complaint, it was just part of her nature.

"Move, that's my seat," Emma said to her sister, who was sitting next to Mario.

"No, I'm not moving."

"That's my spot!"

As expected, they ended up arguing while the rest of the family continued eating, unbothered. In the end, Emma stormed off to her room, taking her bowl of soup with her. She was always hungry, and no matter what, she never forgot to eat—not even when she was angry.

"Don't make a mess! I sleep there too!" Complaint yelled after her, considering it a true misfortune to have to share a bedroom with such a hot-tempered sister.

Emma ate quickly, then lay down on the bed. She was still boiling with anger. Why had no one stood up for her?

She thought of a thousand ways to get revenge. Complaint loved that little hat with fake flowers, the one her nosy fiancé had given her. Fine, she'd make it disappear. She glanced around, searching for the perfect hiding spot—but there wasn't one.

Then she had an idea—the bakery! Of course! She would hide it inside the oven that had broken that day. The repairman wouldn't come for another week. Seven days would be enough to drive her sister crazy. And then, maybe, she'd give it back.

She was savoring the thought of revenge when Mario walked into the room.

"Have you calmed down?"

Emma barely looked at him. She was mad at him too.

"You could've said something! That seat is mine."

"Why does it matter where you sit?"

"It just does!"

She didn't want to admit that she liked sitting next to him.

"Come on, let's go for a walk."

"No, I'm tired."

"That's not true—you're just angry."

Emma sighed but got up from the bed. She was glad he had asked, but she kept that to herself. She grabbed her coat, headed for the door, and went down the stairs. Mario followed her, amused, pulling his rough gray beret down over his forehead, never went anywhere without it. They walked in silence until they reached the train station, a place Emma loved. She liked entering through the grand arched doors, crossing the gleaming hall, watching the trains arrive and depart, then stepping outside to observe the gentle swaying of the gondolas moored on the opposite shore.

When she grew up, she decided, she would sway her hips like the gondolas.

A shiver ran through her. She still didn’t understand why Mario had asked her to go for a walk so late. The curfew was approaching, and now, she was actually tired.

"Let’s go back," she said with a smile.

Emma had one good trait: she quickly forgot her worries, and even her plans for revenge.

Mario smiled back. He loved his rebellious, lively sister. The only thing that saddened him was that she had left school too soon. But that was what she had wanted. She never liked her teachers, and at home, no one had made a fuss about it.

"You’ll go to work," they had decided once Emma finished trade school.

On the way back, at the foot of the Ponte delle Guglie, Mario hesitated.

"I need to ask you something."

Emma looked at him in surprise. Mario’s face was unusually serious. "That’s not like him," she thought. She could sense her brother’s emotions almost as if they were her own. Seeing him so worried made her uneasy too.

"But it’s a secret," Mario added.

Emma remained silent.

"Can you keep a secret?"

The mystery deepened. She nodded.

"And can you keep a promise?"

"You’re dragging this out!" Emma blurted.

"Just answer me."

"Yes, I can keep secrets, and I can keep promises too."

"There’s a notebook you need to deliver. It’s a favor for me."

"That’s all?" Emma was disappointed. She had imagined something much bigger.

"No, there’s more. You must not talk to anyone about this notebook, you must deliver it exactly where I tell you, and under no circumstances are you to read it. Do you promise to follow these three conditions?"

Emma felt a pang of sadness—Mario had secrets, while she told him everything.

"Why aren’t you answering?"

"Fine, okay," she replied reluctantly.

"Promise me!" Mario pressed, looking her straight in the eyes. "It’s really important! Maybe one day I’ll explain, but not now. It’s better this way for everyone."

Emma felt a wave of alarm. "Why so many secrets? This isn’t like him," she thought.

"Yes, of course, I promise," she said, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

"Tomorrow morning, I’ll give you the notebook."

"I wake up early, before you. Better give it to me tonight."

"Don’t worry. I’m leaving early too."

Emma didn’t ask where he was going. Instinctively, she sensed that she shouldn’t ask too many questions.
They walked home in silence.
That night, Emma struggled to fall asleep.
The secret of the notebook tormented her.

3. The Secret Notebook

Mario held a steaming cup of milk in his hands. The oversized pajama jacket made him look like a scarecrow, with his lanky eighteen-year-old frame and perpetually messy hair. He had woken up before Emma and had been waiting impatiently in the large kitchen to hand her the notebook, giving her only a few brief instructions and a lot of warnings.
Emma was surprised. She had imagined receiving something elegant, bound, worthy of a secret mission. Instead, it was a small, thin notebook, worn from use. The rough red paper cover had lost its brightness—if it had ever had any at all.
She wanted to know more, not just act as a messenger. But she had already promised.
"Hide it!" Mario said, almost as if he feared they were being watched.
Emma slipped the notebook into the pocket of the apron she wore for work.
"It might be visible there. Find another spot."
"I can put it here." She lifted her sweater and slid the notebook under the belt that cinched her skirt at the waist.
Emma glanced at the kitchen clock: seven o’clock.
"It’s late, I have to go. The bakery is already open by now."
She hurried through the corridor, silently going over Mario’s instructions. She was afraid of forgetting them, of making a mistake.
On the street, she quickened her pace. She didn’t want to be scolded. The owner cared about punctuality. Fortunately, no one seemed to notice her delay.
She was greeted by sior Bepi, the shop owner, with his usual phrase, which he repeated every morning, smiling with satisfaction:
"Hot oven and crispy bread: if the customer smiles, they’ll come back tomorrow!"
Emma burst out laughing. She was convinced that for the baker, that funny saying was a good luck charm, a wish for good business.
He pretended to be upset, though he was never truly angry.
"There’s nothing to laugh about. With the war, it doesn’t take much for things to go wrong. You kids don’t understand people’s misery."

His concern was real. The war had been dragging on for years, and in that January of 1945, it was more evident than ever. The Nazis were in the city, inspections were constant, as were the arrests, and people were struggling to make ends meet.

"These days, the bullies have the last word."

Emma believed him. She had seen it with her own eyes during her first days at work. The Germans had entered the bakery with their guns drawn.

"We're looking for a fugitive bandit," one of the soldiers had said in broken Italian. To them, even the partisans were bandits.

"There's no one here!" sior Bepi had stammered.

"Search!" The German barked orders without even looking at him.

They had turned the shop upside down in their search for the fugitive while the owner stood still in a corner, arms wrapped tightly around himself as if to protect himself, his face pale—flour-colored. When they finally left, he let out a sigh of relief. Not a word about the mess they had left behind.

Only Emma had protested:

"What a bunch of bullies! Look at all this bread on the floor..."

She would have kept ranting about the Germans if the baker hadn't scolded her harshly.

"Enough talking! And not a word about what happened. If people hear about it, they might buy their bread elsewhere."

"Why would they?" Elio had asked.

"Everyone's scared nowadays. If they know the Germans come here, they'll go somewhere else."

Luckily, that hadn't happened. The neighborhood customers had continued to buy what little bread was allowed by the ration cards at "Brutti ma Buoni," the name of sior Bepi's bakery.

That morning, the bakery was bustling as usual. Emma was so busy serving customers that she had almost forgotten about Mario's notebook. Until the owner, right at nine o'clock, shouted:

"Delivery time!"

Emma jolted slightly. She smoothed her apron, ready to head out. But instead…

"Come on, Elio, it's your turn today." The owner's voice announced a change in the delivery schedule.

"What do you mean, Elio's turn? I'm the one who usually delivers the bread!"

"I know, dear girl. I'd rather keep Elio in the shop too, but the basket is heavy today. It's cold. Let him go."

Panic gripped Emma. She had no idea what was written in the notebook or who it was meant for. But she knew she absolutely had to deliver it by noon.

"No matter what," Mario had said.

"I want to go! I’m strong, look!" she insisted, grabbing the wicker basket full of bread, ready to hoist it onto her shoulders.

But Elio was quicker and stopped her.

"I’m not stealing your job! Let it be, sior Bepi is right. I’ll go today. It’s too heavy for you."

At that exact moment, perhaps because of the struggle over the basket, the notebook slipped to the ground.

Emma let go of the basket and quickly bent down to grab it.

But Elio had already seen it.

"Why were you hiding it?"

"It’s none of your business!"

"Hmm, Emma has secrets."

"Cut it out."

"What is it? A diary?"

"None of your concern," Emma snapped, tucking the notebook back under her sweater.

"If you have secrets, you can tell me," Elio teased. "Is it from a boyfriend?"

Emma turned as red as a pepper.

"Why do you care?"

"Because I do," he answered seriously.

To Emma, those words seemed to linger in the air like a question mark.

But she had no time to ask. She grabbed the abandoned basket and hurried out.

Even though the weight slowed her down, she tried to move quickly. She knew the route by heart.

But that day, there was a new customer on the list—a small guesthouse that had ordered three kilos of bread.

"If I go there first," Emma thought, "the basket will be lighter afterward."

So, she set off determinedly toward Campo Santi Apostoli. The guesthouse had to be somewhere nearby.

It was hard to find, hidden within the maze of narrow streets and small squares.

Searching for it wasted precious time. Mario had told her that the notebook had to be delivered by noon. She had to hurry.

That morning, she didn’t stop to chat with Nina, the market fruit seller at San Leonardo, as she usually did, nor with Toneto, a gentle old man with a limp who waited for her every day at his door to collect his bag of bread.

"Emma, are you in a hurry?" he had asked, disappointed that he wouldn’t get to tell her another story from his days as a soldier.

They were always the same stories, that Emma knew by heart, but she always pretended to be amazed to make him happy.

"Yes, I really have to go," she replied with a smile, as if to apologize.
It was almost noon.
With the basket now empty, she climbed the steps of the Ponte dei Mori two at a time, gripping the iron railing.

4. The Hiding Place

From the top of the bridge, Emma immediately spotted the statue.
It was pressed against the corner of a red brick building—hard to miss. It depicted a man wearing a pleated tunic that left his legs exposed. He had a large black iron nose on a white stone face, a short beard, and a head covering. The statue, resting on a pedestal a few dozen centimeters from the ground, was taller than Emma had imagined.
She quickly descended the bridge steps and observed it up close. She didn't like the eyes. They stared at her with a malevolent gaze. Perhaps it was the fault of that black nose that made it so peculiar. Someone had broken it off, and the restorers had replaced it with a new one—iron, indestructible. She had the unsettling feeling of being watched—worse, judged—by that face of stone and metal.
"What an absurd idea," she thought. "A wicked statue?
Impossible!"
She tried to push away that thought by recalling what her brother Mario had told her.
"That's the statue of Sior Rioba. A lot of people in Venice know it. When you go there, touch the iron nose—it brings good luck."
Emma had laughed when she heard that, but now she wasn't so sure. Good luck or not, those eyes truly seemed to scrutinize her. She reached out to touch the so-called lucky nose.
"Nonsense!" she thought. "I can't be scared… it's just stone and iron."
And yet, the more she looked at the statue, the more she remembered the story Mario had told her:
"Sior Rioba was no hero. He and his brothers were swindlers, selling cheap fabrics as if they were precious. They say they were punished with a spell that turned them to stone."
"A real spell?"
Emma wasn't sure whether to believe the tale, but one thing was certain—Mario had sent her there with a precise mission:
"Take the notebook to the Rioba statue. Don't read it, and don't talk about it to anyone."
He had also warned her:
"There are three other statues just a few meters apart, between Fondamenta de la Sensa and Campo dei Mori. You only have to deal with the one with the iron nose."

She repeated the instructions to herself the entire way. Now it was time to act. She crouched down and ran her fingers over the red bricks behind the statue's base. One shifted slightly, just as Mario had said:

"One of the bricks isn't cemented. You have to remove it, place the notebook in the empty space, then put everything back exactly as it was."

Emma glanced around—the street was deserted. In a swift motion, she pulled out the loose brick and retrieved the notebook from under her sweater. Now she understood why it was so small and thin—it had to fit into an incredibly tiny niche. Her heart pounded; she was afraid of being caught. If someone read those pages, Mario would be in serious trouble—of that, she was certain. Otherwise, why so many secrets?

She worked as quickly as possible. In just a few seconds, the notebook was tucked into the hollow, and the brick was back in place. But as she bent down to pick up her basket, she saw that a tiny corner of the notebook was peeking out from under the brick.

"I have to do it all over again," she thought, hastily retrieving it.

At that moment, an elderly couple appeared in the distance. They were walking slowly, pausing now and then, never stopping their conversation.

Emma lowered her gaze, afraid of being recognized. The Rioba statue wasn't far from the bakery. They could be customers.

She was right.

"Still out delivering bread?"

The man let go of his wife's arm and walked toward her. Emma knew them both—they lived above Sior Bepi's shop.

"No, I'm done," she replied, embarrassed, holding up her empty basket.

"Walk with us a bit? We're heading home."

Emma felt trapped.

"I want to stop by the church first," she said, pointing toward the nearby Church of Santa Maria dell'Orto.

"Such a good girl. Say a prayer for us, too!"

The man's wife smiled warmly as she eyed the notebook Emma was holding.

Once the couple had moved on, Emma got back to work. This time, she placed the notebook more carefully, ensuring the brick fit perfectly back into place. She stood up, satisfied. Mission accomplished!

The bells of Santa Maria dell'Orto struck noon. It was time to return to the bakery—but something held her back. She realized she was hungry and pulled a small roll from the pocket of her apron.

Less than fifty meters from the statue, in Campo dei Mori, she spotted a vera da pozzo—one of the old well curbs found all over the city. They were small "monuments," some larger than

others, built to protect the wells and sometimes decorated with one or two steps running in a circle around the base. This one in Campo dei Mori had steps, too.

She sat on the first step. Anyone approaching the statue wouldn't see her, but she, from her hiding spot, could observe everyone who passed by.

She set her breadbasket down, feeling pleased, and began eating slowly.

Curiosity was eating away at her. She had promised Mario a lot of things, but not this—nothing stopped her from finding out who the red notebook was for. If she was lucky, she might find out.

Emma had convinced herself that Mario had a secret love, and maybe the notebook was meant for a girl. Surely, it was an unhappy love—perhaps she had already been promised to someone else. The more she thought about it, the more certain she became. Her brother was hiding something, that much she knew. In the past few days, he had been acting strangely—sometimes moody, sometimes inexplicably cheerful. And he often disappeared for hours without saying where he was going.

Emma sighed, squeezing the bread in her hands.

If only she could find out more…

5. The Incident

Emma was tired of waiting. She had been hiding behind the wellhead for more than half an hour, and no one had stopped at the statue—not even to touch the lucky nose.

Mario had rushed her for no reason. Maybe he was afraid she would waste time wandering through alleys and squares as she loved to do.

"There was no urgency at all," she thought.

She was about to leave when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a black cloak flutter around the statue.

"This is it!"

It was a woman—or maybe a girl—it was hard to tell. Her face was partially covered by a scarf. She stood upright in front of the Rioba statue. A few black curls peeked out from under her hood, covering her forehead. She looked delicate, perhaps frightened, judging by the way she moved her head in quick, nervous jerks, scanning her surroundings as if afraid of being watched.

Emma expected her to pull out the brick and retrieve the notebook at any moment.

"Just as I imagined! It's a woman."

At that instant, the stranger pulled a hand from beneath the folds of her cloak, and Emma noticed a silver bracelet on her wrist, with a large gold medallion. She leaned forward slightly

to get a better look, risking being seen, but her curiosity was too strong to ignore. She hoped to catch a glimpse of the woman's face.

"Could she be the woman Mario is in love with?"

A sudden movement betrayed her. Her foot knocked over the bread basket, tipping it onto its side. It was barely an audible noise, but it was enough—the woman turned sharply, staring directly at the spot where Emma was hiding. She took a step toward her, then another. Now she seemed taller and more confident.

Emma curled up even tighter, her heart pounding. She was sure she was about to be discovered. She had the impulse to flee, but at that moment, the woman suddenly turned around. Maybe an unexpected thought had changed her mind. She hurried away from the statue in the opposite direction of Emma and disappeared beyond the bridge.

"If I hadn't knocked over the basket, the notebook would already be safe," Emma muttered under her breath. She was worried. Anyone could find it now. What should she do? Leave it there? Take it and bring it back to Mario?

She dismissed that second option. If she returned with the notebook, her brother would bombard her with questions, she would have to confess everything, and he would surely be angry.

"No, better to stay quiet."

And yet, she needed to see him. She ran all the way home instead of returning to the bakery. She was so out of breath that Mario immediately grew suspicious.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, everything's fine," Emma replied, trying to hide her anxiety.

"Why did you come home? You're usually at the bakery at this hour."

"I'm going now. I just wanted to tell you that I did everything as you asked."

"Good, good," Mario repeated.

Emma needed reassurance.

"How do you know the right person will pick up the notebook?"

Her brother burst out laughing.

"That's nothing for you to worry about. I bet it's already in good hands."

Emma felt guilty, as if she had shredded the notebook right in front of Mario. Because of her, the person it was meant for had run away without taking it.

"Let's hope so," she muttered, unconvinced.

She left without saying another word, her breadbasket swinging from her shoulder and her heart heavy. The last thing she wanted was to disappoint her brother.

At the bakery, everyone noticed her bad mood.

"Who upset you?" asked old Bepi with his usual good-natured smile, not taking her pale face

too seriously.

“No one, I’m just cold,” Emma replied.

But Elio wasn’t convinced. He waited until they were alone in the back room before speaking.

“Did something happen during the bread deliveries? The fruit vendor said you didn’t stop to greet her like you usually do.”

“With all that weight on my shoulders, I wasn’t about to stop and chat.”

“You could have let me go instead.”

Emma remained silent for a moment. A doubt was tormenting her. Could she trust Elio? In the end, she decided to take the risk.

“If you had to write a love letter, would you hide it in a monument?”

“I don’t get it—what are you talking about?” Elio’s voice betrayed a hint of nervousness.

“Like a statue… that’s a monument, right?”

“What a strange idea! If I wrote a love letter, I’d give it directly to the person I love.”

“But what if you couldn’t? If something prevented you?”

“Then I’d find a secret place.”

Emma nodded, satisfied.

“You’re not thinking of writing a love letter, are you?” Elio asked, feigning amusement.

“Me? Are you crazy? And who would I even write it to?”

“Exactly, who?”

Emma thought that Elio had a habit of leaving questions hanging in the air. Still, talking to him had helped. Why worry? Surely, the girl in the cloak had already gone back to retrieve the notebook.

With that thought, she returned to work in a better mood. But that evening at dinner, the uneasiness crept back into her.

6. To the Island of San Servolo

The next morning, Emma arrived at the dock near San Zaccaria, out of breath.

“Hurry up, Emma, it’s time to go.”

The boat was waiting only for her to depart.

“Sorry, I’m late! I forgot this at the bakery,” Emma said, climbing aboard with a sack of flour pressed to her chest.

The man at the helm shook his head.

“Aren’t you tired of going to visit the lunatics every week?”

Emma wanted to snap back at him but held her tongue.

“No,” she replied curtly. “I’m not tired of it.”

“If you say so…” muttered the sailor, starting the engine. “I have to go there to deliver goods, but believe me, I’d gladly do without it.”

Emma pulled her shawl tighter against the wind. She couldn’t stop thinking about the notebook hidden at the foot of the Rioba statue. She needed to check on it as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the boat had pushed off from the dock and begun its slow journey. Emma shivered. The sky was streaked with low clouds that turned the lagoon’s waters a dull gray.

After a few minutes, she broke the silence.

“I’m in a hurry today. What time are we coming back?”

“It depends on what needs to be loaded. I’ll let you know when we’re leaving.”

At the bow sat a man—perhaps a doctor or a nurse—because a sliver of white fabric peeked out from beneath his coat, likely a uniform. He remained silent, not interacting with anyone. Emma studied him for a moment, curious, then looked away.

The boat passed by the tiny island of San Giorgio Maggiore, its grand basilica reflecting in the basin of San Marco. Emma had never set foot on that island, but every time she passed it, she waved as if greeting an old friend. That day, however, she didn’t. It wasn’t just because of the cold.

She was haunted by a question she couldn’t answer—what if someone else had found the notebook meant for the girl?

San Servolo was approaching. She could already see the somber building with barred windows that covered a portion of the island. It looked like a prison. It was an asylum. And for years, Gigio had lived there—a kind man whom Emma called "uncle" even though he wasn’t really her uncle.

He had insisted:

“I have no children or nephews. I could be your uncle,” he had told her during their second meeting, his sea-blue eyes wide.

Emma had hesitated.

“Why not?” she had replied. After all, what harm was there in having a pretend uncle?

He had seemed happy.

It was Sior Bepi, the owner of the bakery, who had sent her to San Servolo.

"Every week, you’ll have to take this sack of flour to a friend of mine, have a little chat, and then come back."

It was her first days on the job, and Emma hadn’t said anything. She knew she was supposed to make deliveries around the city, but she had never heard of San Servolo. Elio, on the other hand, knew that island.

"You do know there’s an asylum there, right?" he had told her brusquely one day as they were loading sacks onto the cart outside the bakery.

Emma had looked at him, frightened.

"Then why don’t you go instead?" Her voice had a reproachful tone, as if it were Elio’s fault she had to make deliveries to such a dangerous place.
"I can’t. The boss says I’d waste too much time." He gave a half-smile, almost as if apologizing.
Emma didn’t understand.
"Why do we have to bring flour to the lunatics?"
"Not 'to the lunatics.' There’s a bakery there; they don’t need our bread. But there’s also a certain Gigio… They say he was the best pastry chef in all of Venice before he ended up locked away on the island. Sior Bepi learned how to make bread from him. That’s why he’s grateful to him."
"Well, then let him go to San Servolo himself."
Emma had grown suspicious.
"He must have done something strange to end up there."
"Sior Bepi says no, that it was all a story made up by the competition."
Three months had passed since that conversation and her first visit to Gigio. Emma thought back to how foolish she had been to be afraid. Gigio didn’t seem crazy at all. Only when he heard the screams of some patients would he cover his head with his hands and clench his teeth, as if the noise was unbearable to him. Fortunately, the doctors had placed him in the non-agitated ward because he was always calm.
The boat docked at the small pier of the island, and Emma was the first to disembark. There was an unnatural silence, broken only by the sound of the wind and the water lapping against the boat’s hull.
"With this freezing air, I’d better hurry," she thought, walking quickly after greeting the guards at the dock who were overseeing the unloading of goods.
By now, everyone on the island knew her, and no one paid her any attention anymore.
The park looked more desolate than usual. The bare trees were white with frost. That silence made her uneasy.
"It’s nothing, you’re just tired," she told herself, trying to calm down. But as she passed near the vegetable gardens, she saw a figure moving slowly among the rows. It was the boy who worked there. He turned suddenly, his eyes following her every step.
Emma quickened her pace. It wasn’t the first time she had encountered him. He was young, barely more than a teenager. His gaze seemed to burn—a bottomless pit of despair and violence.
The feeling of being followed stayed with her until she reached the bench where Gigio was waiting for her, as he did every Wednesday. He sat motionless, his torso upright, his face turned toward the lagoon. He wore a jacket worn by time and a gray wool cap covering his now-bald

head. When he saw Emma, he smiled, revealing a toothless mouth, and a childlike enthusiasm lit up his face, marked by a web of wrinkles. He rubbed his unkempt beard.

"Hello, Emma. Finally, you're here. You didn't forget the flour, did you?"

"Here it is."

Emma handed him the sack, still thinking about the boy who had been watching her. She turned her head to check, but the garden was empty.

"Good… I think I'll make a cake tomorrow."

Emma grew alarmed. She knew that Gigio was only allowed to bake bread in the large oven that served the patients on the island.

"The doctors won't allow it."

"Why not? My cakes used to sell like crazy—everyone in Venice wanted them."

"It's different here. And besides, you know why you ended up in San Servolo."

"Just slander from the competition… My gifts never hurt anyone."

At some point in his career, Gigio had started hiding small surprises inside his cakes without his customers knowing. They were cork stoppers, playing cards, tiny glass marbles.

And, of course, it had caused him a lot of trouble. His business had collapsed. A woman had even ended up in the hospital because she swallowed one of his "special gifts"—a small magnet. His family, exasperated by his eccentricities, had sent him to San Servolo.

With the doctors, he had seemed perfectly lucid and not at all remorseful.

"What harm can gifts do? I love my customers," he had explained.

After a few months, seeing how calm he was, the doctors at San Servolo had assigned him to weaving wicker baskets, and soon after, to making bread—because he had never hidden anything inside the loaves.

He had made it clear to the doctors: "Bread is for living; you don't stuff it with surprises. It's not a holiday every day."

Since then, every week, Sior Bepi sent flour for him.

But sweets were strictly forbidden: he couldn't prepare them or even bake them.

Gigio, who always talked about the day he would go home, remained silent that day. It was Emma who decided to confide in him:

"If you had a secret, like a letter or a notebook, where would you hide it, Uncle Gigio?"

"Under the bed. Sometimes the nurses don't check there. Or in the church. There's a huge organ. Do you want to see it?"

Gigio suddenly stood up and started walking toward the small church of the asylum island. They passed the pharmacy rich in medicinal herbs that he knew one by one. But when they reached the church door, they found it locked.

Emma wanted to turn back, afraid she wouldn't hear the boatmen's call announcing the departure from the island. But he insisted.

"There’s a place where we can see the organ."
He led her to the nearby building, up the stairs, and down a corridor where a low window with iron bars overlooked the church’s interior, right above the imposing instrument.
"Do you see how beautiful it is? That’s where I would hide my secrets."
"Or you could put them under a brick, out in the street!" Emma objected.
"Oh no, my dear girl! That’s too dangerous. Someone could find them."
"Uncle Gigio, I think I’ve made a mess."
She was about to tell him about her troubles when she heard the boatman’s call.
"Departure!"
She had to go. She hugged Gigio, then rushed down the stairs and ran toward the dock, chased by his voice.
"Take me with you, Emma! Just for an hour… I want to see my home. Then I’ll come back, I swear!"
Emma ran even faster, trying not to hear his desperate plea.

7. Elio and the Students

The boatmen had dropped Emma off at the Riva degli Schiavoni, near San Zaccaria, and then departed.
During the journey, she hadn’t stopped thinking about Gigio and his plea for help. Living in San Servolo must have been truly horrible. She swore to herself that she would help him.
“I’ll get him out of there. I’ll talk to the doctors. Even if I’m just a girl, they’ll listen to me. Or I could ask Mario to come with me,” she thought. “He’ll surely know how to find the right words.”
The thought of having her brother by her side comforted her. Yes, it was the right thing to do. But not right away. First, she had to solve the mystery of the red notebook.
In the distance, she heard a bell tower chime. Eleven o’clock. If she hurried, she could do everything within an hour and still make it back to the shop.
She quickened her pace. The statue of Sior Rioba was waiting for her.
Would the notebook still be there in its hiding place?
She only slowed down when she passed near the Bridge of Sighs. She could almost hear Gigio’s voice again, his desperate sigh asking to go home. She imagined the same sighs, the same pleas for help from those who had crossed that bridge in the past. It was the last glimpse of the world that, up until the late 18th century, prisoners saw before being locked away in the terrible Piombi prisons.
“Gigio is a prisoner too,” she thought.
The air had warmed up slightly, or maybe it was just her brisk walking that made her feel warmer. She avoided passing between the two tall marble and granite columns in Piazza San

Marco. As a child, she had loved the column of Saint Theodore, with the saint slaying the dragon. But now she preferred to stay away, especially after what Sior Bepi had told her:
“Never walk between those two columns carrying the breadbasket. It brings bad luck.”
“And if I pass without the basket?”
“It’s the same, my girl. Just avoid it. That’s where they used to execute the condemned.”
Emma shuddered.
“What a terrible place for an execution, it’s so beautiful here!” she thought, staring at the rippling water of the San Marco Basin. She tried to find a positive side to it—she always made an effort to do that. “Maybe they brought them here for this very reason, so they could die with beauty in their eyes.”
Emma also avoided going near the German command center. Nazi soldiers were everywhere—on the streets, on the vaporettos—but that building, in particular, unsettled her. She couldn’t stand their greeting, that guttural “Heil Führer” echoing through the alleys.
She walked quickly, weaving through the crowd, until she reached Campo dei Mori. To her disappointment, it was unusually crowded. Groups of children, just out of school, were chasing each other under the distracted gaze of their mothers, who chatted near the statue of Rioba.
Her heart skipped a beat when she saw two boys trying to climb it. Luckily, an adult quickly intervened and chased them away.
Emma desperately hoped that the girl with the cloak had already come to retrieve the notebook. To avoid attracting attention, she walked away and wandered through the nearby alleys. When she returned, Campo dei Mori was deserted once more.
She approached the statue and, heart pounding, moved the brick. The hiding place was empty—the notebook was gone.
She let out a sigh of relief. Now she could relax. It never crossed her mind that someone else might have taken it.
With a lighter step, she headed toward Strada Nova. Five more minutes and she would be back at the shop. The main street was bustling with people and carts.
Suddenly, she heard a familiar voice behind her. She turned around.
It was Elio, chatting with a small group of young men standing by the roadside. They looked thoughtful and wore clothes of fine fabric. They all seemed older than him.
When Emma approached, they looked at her awkwardly.
"Hi, Elio!"
"Hi, Emma. What are you doing here?"
Elio seemed surprised, maybe even annoyed by her presence. He didn’t introduce her to his friends, and they didn’t say a word to her. They even stopped talking among themselves.
Emma felt out of place, like she had stepped into a forbidden room.

"Aren’t you supposed to be at the shop?" she asked, immediately regretting such a foolish question.

Elio smirked, as if to say, “Can’t you see that I’m here and not there?”

The others were waiting for her to leave—she could tell.

“So rude!” she thought. But, really, why should she care? She didn’t know them. She had never seen them before.

One of the boys was holding a large book.

“A Latin dictionary,” Emma noted. “But Elio only finished elementary school… What a strange group.”

She left without saying goodbye. She was mostly upset with Elio. But also with the others, who acted so stuck-up.

Later, when she saw him at the shop, she didn’t speak to him.

"Did a tarantula bite you?" Elio teased.

She didn’t answer.

Eventually, Elio gave in.

"I know you’re upset, but I couldn’t introduce you to my friends. One day I’ll explain."

Hearing that, Emma grew furious.

"Everyone keeps telling me ‘one day I’ll explain’… You! My own brother! I don’t want to know anything! Keep your secrets to yourself."

They didn’t speak again until closing time.

It was Elio who finally came to her. He had just pulled down the shop’s shutters and didn’t want to let her leave without an explanation.

"Want to go for a walk?"

"No, I’m tired."

"Are you still mad?"

"No, but today was exhausting."

And it really had been. The island of the mad, the statue of Rioba… She just wanted to sleep.

"Then tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, yes."

Her bright smile swept away all tension.