

Chapter 20

They sat all together for breakfast in the wide kitchen, when the phone started ringing persistently. Kateri finally answered and a few minutes later, she came back looking pale and bewildered. She collapsed on a chair.

“What’s the matter?!” Luigi worried.

“Aigle Noir was arrested.” Kateri murmured in a plain voice.

“Arrested?! And why?”

“They found Marcel, one of the Forrestier brothers, stabbed to death. Aigle Noir was charged with murder and taken to jail”

Chiara felt a pang in her heart.

“But was he accused?” Luigi insisted.

“Some time ago Aigle Noir accused Marcel of being his sister’s pusher and beat him up outside Babeuf’s pub. Several witnesses seem to have told the police that on that occasion Aigle Noir had threatened him to death.” Kateri explained, looking down, and clenching her fists so powerfully that her knuckles turned white.

“And when is the murder supposed to have been committed?”

“Last night. Between ten and eleven o’clock.”

The room was filled with deep silence. The kids had stopped eating and stared at Kateri with scared eyes. Asa, who’d been noisily lapping his food next to the door, quickly swallowed the last mouthful and seemed to listen carefully to the whole story with upright ears.

In the middle of this silence, Chiara’s voice came up loud and clear

“You just said that the murder was committed last night, between ten and eleven, didn’t you?”

“It seems so, according to the coroner. Yet only the autopsy will reveal the death time with precision.”

“In that case, Aigle Noir is definitely innocent.” Chiara burst out, with flushing cheeks.

“Innocent? And how can you tell?” Her father surprised.

“I know for sure...because last night around eleven, Aigle Noir was right here.”

Chiara answered, trying to avoid her father’s eyes.

All eyes were now upon her and with her red face she swallowed and repeated firmly

“Last night Aigle Noir was here. Right here.”

“And what the devil was he doing here?!” Her father stammered, puzzled and worried about the way the story could go on.

“He wanted to see me...to give me a little doll as a present...” Chiara stood up vehemently, ran to her room and came back in a second carrying her amulet; “This is the present, an amulet!” She said.

“But how can you insist on such a thing!” Her father got angry, “if he’d come then we’d have seen him, wouldn’t have we?!”

“You were already sleeping.”

“And...you’re telling me that that individual walked into this house, aren’t you?” Her father continued, growing increasingly paler.

Chiara shook her head, “He didn’t. I was looking out of the window. Aigle Noir saw me and called me and I went outside, into the garden.”

“You...you went out in the night to meet that...that savage?” Her father stammered, his voice choked with astonishment.

“I did.” Chiara confirmed, looking up at him with limpid eyes and staring at him in the eyes with proud intensity. Then she added firmly “Aigle Noir’s not a savage!”

“Well, did everybody hear this? Is everybody listening to this? What would your mother think of you if she learnt that you’ve been going out in the dark, in a foreign and unknown country with a...with that person?!” Her father continued, turning even paler.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I just went out to receive my amulet.” Chiara defended herself desperately, with a broken voice.

Silence was loaded with tension. Nobody dared to interfere in an argument between father and daughter, except for Asa, who whined for a short while from his place by the door, with the imaginable intent of helping Chiara. But all he achieved was having Babik silently slip off his chair, grab him by the collar and chain him outside. Then Babik came back in on tiptoes, but remained startled on the doorstep as father and daughter had started fighting again louder and louder.

“I’m really upset and disappointed with you!” The father thundered.

“But I didn’t do anything wrong!” The daughter shouted.

“A sensible girl wouldn’t go out at night with a stranger!”

“Aigle Noir’s not a stranger to me!”

“Worse than this, he’s a savage!”

“Many people are much more savage than he is, believe me!”

“You’re taking the wrong road girl!”

“That’s not true. Bad things can happen even in the sunshine, under everybody’s eyes!”

“You behaved very badly, you betrayed your uncle’s and aunt’s trust. You were their guest, you had no right to behave like a...like a ...”

“Calm down now, Ernesto. You’re really overdoing it.” Luigi came up. “There’s nothing wrong in what she did, after all. Aigle Noir’s a good guy, believe me...he’s just very unlucky. He and Chiara have become friends, what’s so bad about that? And it’s not so outrageous to go out for a few minutes to say hello, no matter if it’s day or night.”

“Are you saying that...well, do you mean that she’s right?” Ernesto muttered, feeling confused but also slightly relieved. At the end of the day, he was making this scene above all to fulfill his fatherly duties and to save his reputation before Luigi and Kateri.

“If our heart is innocent, our actions won’t be evil.” Kateri said in a low voice.

Chiara gazed at her with eyes full of tears;

“You know this...” She whispered.

“If you all think so...” Ernesto muttered, half reconciled.

“Did you really meet Aigle Noir around ten?” Kateri asked, her eyes shining with hope.

“Of course I did.”

“How can you tell so precisely?”

“I passed by the dining room and heard the pendulum clock striking ten.”

“This is in line with what Aigle Noir told the police...” Kateri whispered.

“And what would his version be exactly?” Luigi asked.

“That last night he was at Bella Bella’s village and that on the way back, he was given a lift by a truck driver, who left him at the Trois Rivières at about half past ten.”

“And couldn’t this truck driver go to the police and confirm Aigle Noir’s words?” Chiara asked.

Kateri shook her head sadly.

“Nobody knows where he is...And the description provided by Aigle Noir to the police is far from detailed. He said this man could be in his thirties and his French was pretty good...But you know, if the truck driver finds out that a “savage” is somehow involved in some bad affairs, he’ll take good care not to show up! Anyway, the police are searching for him and he’s Aigle Noir’s only chance.”

“I’m going to go and tell them all I know.” Chiara said.

“What? Do you really want to go to the police? Are you really going mad, girl?” Her father got angry again.

“I can prove Aigle Noir’s innocence and it’s my duty to do it.” Chiara insisted.

“Well, I can tell you that you’re not going to do anything at all!”

“And why?!”

“Do you really mean what you’re saying, girl? You want to go to the police and tell them *Here I am...I was with him that night!* And what will they think of you?!” Her father burst out again.

“They may think whatever they want...my conscience is clear and this is all that matters to me.”

“You’re just too young to give evidence and then...then we have no time, we’ve got to leave, remember? Don’t play the fool now, we have to get back to Italy!” The man shouted, scared and confused.

“I’m not going anywhere before telling the police that Aigle Noir was with me!” Chiara repeated stubbornly.

And once again it was Luigi who helped her “Chiara’s right.” He said.

“This might be the only chance for Aigle Noir.” Kateri added.

“I don’t give a damn about the guy! I just won’t allow my daughter to get involved in this bad story. What I’m going to do now is take her and leave this place! And this is my last word!” The man shouted excitedly.

“Dad, please! Don’t make me feel ashamed of being your daughter.” Chiara replied in a low voice. “You’ve always taught me honesty and loyalty. You’ve always told me how important it is to set a good example. What kind of person would I be, if I let an innocent be condemned?”

“What the devil do you have to do with it...you’re under age, they won’t even consider you! Let them find that truck driver; you’ve got nothing to do with this!”

“I’m fully involved, like all the others. Aigle Noir’s a human being and he’s being wrongly charged with a murder he didn’t commit. It’s my duty to inform the police.”

“And if he’d really killed that guy before coming here?” Ernesto objected.

“Neither before coming, nor afterwards. The Reserve’s too far from here.” Kateri explained, unexpectedly.

Ernesto, discouraged, turned to his brother

“What do you suggest?”

“Accept it. Let Kateri ring up the City Police first, then let me drive her downtown.”

“Are you sure she won’t have any problems? Will they let her go or will she have to stay for the trial? Come on, guys...I have to be back at work next Tuesday! And I want to get back home with both my children. Have I made myself clear enough?”

“Your flight’s booked already, Ernesto...don’t worry.” Kateri tried to calm him down.

But Ernesto walked back and forth in agitation and muttered

“Why the hell did I do this...If only I’d known...”

“Bye dad...don’t worry, everything’s going to be ok.” Chiara said, walking past him to join Luigi, who was moving the car out of the garage, while Kateri had withdrawn into the office to make some phone calls.

“Be careful, all right?” Her father said, still upset.

He watched the car until it disappeared behind the bend, then went back into the kitchen, and tried to will time away.

“Come and finish your breakfast.” Kateri told him gently.

“Breakfast...who cares about breakfast...” Ernesto murmured “I’ve got other things to worry about now!” But before finishing his sentence, he was already sitting at the kitchen table, ready to eat up everything Kateri offered him, talking to himself and shaking his head.

Later, Kateri had to drive to school and Ernesto, accompanied by all the children spent some time tidying up the bowling green.

“Come on, don’t be so angry. Everything will be all right, believe me!” Luigi told him, throwing a glance at Chiara who was sitting quietly beside him, looking down, with both hands on her lap.

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course I do!”

“And what are they going to ask me?”

“The truth.”

Chiara looked up at him with imploring eyes

“Are you sure that I’m doing the right thing?”

“Of course I am. And please, don’t worry about your father...you know, he shouts and makes a fuss, but he’s a good man and when he gets over this anxiety, he’ll be the happiest man in the world.”

“I’m very sorry about that scene...” Chiara murmured, looking down “I didn’t mean to cause you so much trouble...”

And she started crying silently.

Luigi let her vent her grief, then reached out a hand and stroked her on the cheek.

“You’re so cute.” He said lovingly and behind the tears, Chiara smiled.

“Will I have to answer many questions?” She asked after a while.

“The necessary ones...”

“And what if they don’t understand Italian?”

“No worries, they always use an interpreter on these occasions.”

“And if they don’t believe me?”

“I’m sure they will.”

When they walked into the big building, provided with very large windows that generously hosted the daylight, Chiara felt her knees tremble and clung to Luigi’s arm, murmuring

“I’m so scared...”

“Come on darling, don’t worry.” Luigi tried to encourage her.

They went up a wide staircase arm in arm, running into several white-collars who went up and down very hastily, carrying folders, parcels, and files. Then, they walked along a never ending corridor that opened onto several rooms, from which they could hear an incessant typing noise.

“It sounds like a bank rather than a Police Department!” Chiara thought to herself. Suddenly she realized that she was no longer scared.

An usher approached them and accompanied her to a door that bore a shining plate with the writing *Chef De Division*. Chiara turned to Luigi smilingly and joked “You won’t run away, will you? If they take me to jail, you’ll have to bring me a loaf...with a blade inside!”

Then, she disappeared behind the door, while the usher walked back to his desk.

Now Luigi was the one who felt a bit worried and nervous and walked back and forth with sweaty hands.

“Poor girl, I’m afraid they’re going to grill her...what a mess, what an awful story!”

He thought “They’re going to keep her in there for a long time I’m afraid!”

And yet, after less than half an hour the door opened and Chiara appeared. Luigi ran to her.

“And?!” He asked anxiously.

“Done”

“Did they press you?”

“Not at all. It was a piece of cake, really! I was in a cold sweat and thought they would give me a third degree!” Chiara exclaimed, flying down the stairs.

“What did they want to know from you?”

“Well, as soon as I entered, they registered my details, checked my papers and asked me to tell them what I knew about this fact. I talked and it was soon over!” She laughed.

“Was there an interpreter?”

“Of course, a bespectacled beanpole. So funny!”

“And what did the Inspector tell you?”

“Nothing, he just sat at his writing desk, while another policeman wrote down all I was saying. Then he stared at me with his punching eyes, gave me some papers to sign, and let me go.”

“Was that it?”

“Yes, nothing else. Well, actually as I walked to the door, he called me and with a smile he said *ciao!*”

They both laughed and cheered. Then Luigi said

“What about popping by the school to tell everything to Kateri?”

“Why not? She’ll be so happy!”

They drove back, laughing and joking enthusiastically. When they arrived at the school, Luigi asked

“Would you like to come with me?”

Chiara shook her head.

“No, thanks I’d rather wait here.”

“Ok then, I’ll be back in a minute.” Luigi promised.

With her head leaning back, Chiara watched him walk away with long steps and sighed with relief

“I had to do it. For all of us.”

Luigi walked into Kateri’s office in silence and saw her with papers up to her eyes and a tuft of hair hanging down on her face. He walked behind her and put his arms around her. The woman startled and turned around

“Oh, it’s you! I didn’t hear you come in!” She exclaimed.

“Everyone ought to enter your sanctuary holding their breath!” Luigi laughed.

“How did it go?” Kateri asked anxiously.

“Very well. Chiara gave evidence and now we just have to wait...”

“I’m scared.” Kateri whispered, bowing her head. Luigi opened his arms wide to let her hug his waist and press her face against his chest.

“I’m so tired...” She said.

Without replying, Luigi consoled her by gently stroking her shoulder with his big hand. He waited for a reaction that came indeed very soon. After a few seconds Kateri looked up at him with her big eyes and said firmly “Once again the Lord has been with us...”

After saying this, she freed herself from his arms, went back to her desk and ordered “And now go away, I’ve got loads of work to do!”

Luigi smiled and walked out in better spirits; another storm was over.

Chapter 21

Kateri had just began to work again and was carefully going through some computer data, when someone knocked on the door.

“Come in!” She said, without looking up.

Jade came in, with the upset face of someone who had just stopped crying. She walked towards the desk, then stood in silence. Kateri looked up at her and asked her “What’s wrong?”

“Aigle Noir was arrested this morning.” Jade answered with a trembling voice.

“I know.”

“I was with him when the police came...I wanted to help him escape, but he wanted to stay!” She burst out, with feverish eyes.

“He did the right thing.”

“But I wanted to help him and he chased me away!” She insisted desperately “Aigle Noir’s nice with everyone, except me...with me he shows only indifference and sometimes hatred.”

Kateri didn’t reply and after a short moment, the girl murmured “I’ll spend all my life waiting for him, even if they condemn him.”

“How can you think that they might condemn him?! He’s innocent!” Kateri snapped at her.

A wicked light shone in Jade’s eyes.

“He killed that bloody bastard and did very well to! I was there when they fought and if I’d had a knife, I’d have stabbed Marcel myself!”

“You shouldn’t speak like this. Aigle Noir would never kill another human being.”

“Everyone down in the village believes that Aigle Noir has done justice!”

“No one should take the law into their own hands. There are laws and court of laws for this purpose.” Kateri replied severely.

Jade laughed

“Laws? What are you talking about? There is no law and no justice when it comes to one of us!” She commented sarcastically.

“You may be right, but Aigle Noir is innocent.”

“I don’t think so. Aigle Noir has done justice crushing the head of a disgusting snake!”

“When Marcel was murdered, Aigle Noir was very far from the village.”

“And who can say this?”

“Chiara can.”

“She, again!!! Since the day she arrived, he has stopped looking at me in the face, he doesn’t realize if I’m around anymore! Tell me, what the devil does he like so much about her anyway?!” She screamed.

“How long have you known him?”

“Who? Aigle Noir? We’ve always known each other, we’ve grown up together...”

“And did he treat you in a different way before he met Chiara?”

“No...” She had to admit, reluctantly.

“Well now, why are you blaming it on Chiara then?”

“Because he talks to her and not to me... because when she’s around, he unfailingly shows up. Because he’s like her shadow! Because he has never looked at me the way he looks at her! And I just want to die! I want to die!” She sobbed.

“You’re a foolish girl.” Kateri stated icily.

“I’m so tired of this life.” Jade repeated, in a flat voice.

This made Kateri flare up with anger; she grabbed her by the arms, shook her violently and exclaimed “You dare not say it anymore! What?! You’re tired of living because a guy doesn’t fall down to your feet when he looks into your beautiful eyes?! And do you think one may be tired of living for such a foolish, stupid reason?”

“Nobody loves me, nobody cares for me...”

“What do you mean with nobody? Would you call your parents nobody? Would you call me nobody? And then, even if you really had nobody looking after you in this world, you wouldn’t be allowed to throw your life away like this! Life is such a precious gift! You’ve got to live your life for yourself and for the others too. You can’t throw it away at sixteen!”

“Your sister was sixteen, when she killed herself!” Jade challenged her.

Hearing these words, Kateri wavered as if something had hit her in the chest and she turned very pale. She let her arms down and remained silent for a long moment. Then she started talking again, her voice vibrated with deep sorrow.

“It’s true” she said “my sister took her life when she wasn’t even eighteen. She took her own life without any apparent reason. It is due to this, that I cannot accept your words and I say no, no, no. You can’t just throw your life away like a dress that doesn’t suit you anymore, simply because you’re not getting enough attention. We have to love, we have to give without expecting anything in return; we have to love the others, the whole creation and life in itself because these are the Lord’s gifts. How do you know what your future will be like? It might be full of joy and happiness, how can you tell now? What do you know about life to hate it so much?”

Jade listened in silence, with her head down, which made Kateri go on talking

“There are millions of unfortunate people in the world...people who are condemned to misery due to permanent or fatal illness. There are millions of poor who can hardly escape starvation and though they still love their lives, they wouldn’t throw it away like rubbish.

“Nobody loves me and nor do you.” Jade murmured.

“And what do you know about my feelings? Have you ever read what’s deep in my heart, to know for sure whether I love you or not?”

“You’re always so hard on me...”

Kateri was struck by these words. “It’s true” she murmured, like talking to herself

“I’m not good at communicating my feelings...”

Upon these words, Jade, who felt very awkward, walked away saying

“I’m going back to the children now...”

“What are they doing?”

“They’re modeling clay with Professor Lasnier.”

“Professor Lasnier you said? Here we are, he’s definitely one of those who would have good reasons to despise life.” Kateri added sadly.

“Why?”

“Two years ago, before coming over here, he lost his young wife and their little son in a car accident.” Kateri explained tiredly.

“And he likes you very much, but you don’t even deign to glance at him...”

“What makes you say this?” Jade said in a slightly trembling voice.

“Do you understand now how difficult it is to read into other people’s minds?” Kateri sighed.

“It’s really time to go to the kids now...” Jade opened the door wide and walked away along the corridor, thinking to herself

“Lasnier likes me and I didn’t even know it!”

As she arrived in front of the carving hall, she opened the door slowly and tried to pretend to be composed and indifferent; Professor Lasnier was bent over the sketch of a little horse and very quietly gave some hints to the little author. Jade stopped and looked at him

“I had never noticed how handsome he is indeed...” She thought, surprised.

“And he’s also a true artist; when his hands touch the clay, the sculpture takes to life like in a miracle...”

Professor Lasnier passed on to another child and to another work of art and noticed the girl standing by the door.

“What are you doing there?” He asked her, while his face brightened.

“I’m here to...to help you...I just wanted to see if...if you needed my help...” The girl stammered.

Lasnier looked at her with some surprise;

“If I need your help? Well, let me see...no, I don’t think so. But if you feel like staying, well...I’ll be very happy.” He said.

Jade didn’t move and thought “It’s not true, he doesn’t like me at all. Kateri told me so just to make me feel better!”

“Something wrong?” Lasnier asked, staring at her with questioning eyes. Jade shook her head. Passing by, Lasnier reached out a hand and gently stuck a piece of clay on the girl’s nose, making her look like a Pinocchio puppet; then he laughed and walked to another little girl who was calling for his help.

“He loves everyone, he really does.” Jade sighed. Yet she actually felt better “What can I do?” She asked.

Lasnier opened his arms wide “You can pray to the Great Spirit!” He said cheerfully. Once alone, Kateri tiredly went back to her papers and piled them up thoughtfully. But then, instead of going through the figures, she let her mind wander beyond the glass window and beyond the dark forest, to the blue sky that was already faded by the first autumn mist.

“My soul is miserable and heavy.” She sighed.

She passed a hand across her face. “Will I ever win this never ending fight?” She thought sadly. “There is so much hatred and so much violence in Jade’s words...Will

my people ever be able to live in peace with other human beings? Where does this huge gulf that separates us come from? Aren't we all the Lord's creatures?"

She looked away from the window, put her elbows on the desk, clasped her hands and rested her forehead on them.

"I'm so tired."

Mademoiselle Constance entered the room shortly later carrying some papers to be signed and found her sitting like this, with closed eyes and her forehead leaning on her clasped fingers. The woman walked on tiptoes, thinking that Kateri was sleeping. But Kateri wasn't sleeping. Kateri was praying.

Chapter 22

“Can I help you?” Chiara asked shyly, walking into the dining room where her father, with his few hairs standing on end, was indiscriminately throwing clothes, shoes and various other objects into his case.

“I don’t need any help, thanks...I can make it on my own.” The man answered hastily, without looking into the girl’s eyes.

Although both of them had been trying to find an excuse to make-up since the previous day, pride and shame were making things very difficult.

It was Chiara who took the initiative at last. “If mum saw you...packing that way!” She joked.

“She would shriek like a goose!” Her father replied with relief, while the girl tipped the content of the case out on the sofa without hesitation and restarted the job from top. Then, pretending to be very busy, she said softly

“I’m sorry dad...about yesterday.”

“You ought not to be sorry...” The man muttered feeling awkward. “I was the only fool in the whole story!”

“What are you talking about, dad?”

“I know very well what I’m talking about. Behaving so foolishly at my age. But it’s not easy, you know? It’s not easy at all to be a father. You’ll experience it yourself!” He thundered.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be a father, dad...” She laughed.

“Chiara, look what Babik gave me.” Matteo shouted, running in and showing her the statuette of the two bears.

“But you cannot accept it, it’s a present given to him from his mum. And it’s too nice an object.” Chiara said.

Babik, standing on the door, watched them without speaking. Chiara turned to him and said

“Did you give it to Matteo?” Babik closed his eyes, then opened his mouth in a broad smile and nodded repeatedly.

“You’re so cute...” Chiara said, then she turned to Matteo and asked “And you? What are you going to give him as a present?”

Matteo scratched his head and mentally went through the list of his toys.

“I’m going to give him my spaceship, the one that dad bought me at the Duty free Shop in Milan.” He said brightly.

“After all, I’ve got another one at home and after all, I’ve changed my mind...when I grow up, I want to be an agronomist instead of an astronaut.”

“An agronomist?” His father surprised. “And what is that exactly?”

“They were talking about it on TV last night, he’s the one who’s always on a helicopter and flies over plains and forests. It sounds so exciting!” Then he left the room with Babik.

“He definitely doesn’t lack imagination!” His father commented.

“Ernesto come and have a look, I’ve got something for you!” Luigi said, entering the dining room triumphantly.

“These are special hooks for salmon-trout angling. Believe me, with these ones they’ll bite as soon as you plunge the fishing line.”

The two brothers started examining their new hooks with lots of interest and Chiara decided to go back to her room and continue packing for their imminent departure.

Valentina sat on her bed combing her dolls’ hair and no sooner had she seen the statuette that Matteo had just received from Babik, she rummaged under the mattress and came up with a box of biscuits and a couple of chocolate bars. Then she went into Chiara’s room and handed her the whole lot, saying solemnly “My present for your journey”.

Chiara looked at the two twisted soft bars and realizing how difficult it must be for the girl to separate from her beloved chocolate, she replied

“It’s very kind of you, but it’s not necessary.”

“Oh no, if you don’t want them, you can always pass them on to Matteo...he really likes chocolate!” The girl insisted.

Chiara therefore put the present in her bag and rummaged in a small case where she found a red-coral necklace. It was her present for Valentina.

“This is for you” She said.

“Is this...really mine?”

Valentina ran happily to the mirror, put on the necklace and admired her image, first full front and then as profile. She smiled like a diva, but closed her mouth immediately when her braces appeared. Moving away from the mirror, she frowned and said to herself

“When I get rid of this thing, this necklace will suit me so much!”

She went back to her room to put the necklace around her favourite doll’s waist.

In the meantime, in the kitchen, Kateri had just baked a cake that spread its delicious flavour through the house, capturing the children’s attention.

“Wait for the others to join us!” The woman recommended and walked into Chiara’s room holding a red-leather book in her hand;

“This is the story of the Blessed Kateri.” She explained. “And it also includes interesting information about my people’s life.”

“Thank you so much...it’s such a beautiful present!” Chiara exclaimed, slipping the book inside her bag under Kateri’s attentive eyes. The woman added “I shall miss you so much.”

Chiara impulsively hugged her and said “I’ll miss you too. It has been so nice over here.”

“Chiara, Chiara! Dad says we’ll be late!” Matteo called, running towards them.

“We won’t. You’ve got plenty of time. Now, follow me into the kitchen and have your breakfast.” Kateri said.

They gathered around the table for the last time, but due to Ernesto’s agitation they all ate little and very hastily. After breakfast Luigi stood up to drive his big car out of the garage and for all of them it was time to say goodbye with kisses and hugs, while Asa jumped around and barked.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Call us when you arrive.”

“Give a kiss to mum and grandma.”

“We’re looking forward to hosting you in Italy!”

“Have a good journey.”

“See you soon then...”

“We’ll miss you.”

Ernesto was the first who jumped in the car and sat in the front beside his brother, while Chiara and Matteo took their seats in the back.

“I’m so sorry that I can’t take you to the airport.” Kateri regretted. “But they’re waiting for me at school...”

Last kisses and last recommendations. Luigi’s big car left, reached the road and disappeared behind the bend, while Kateri, Valentina and Babik kept waving goodbye and Asa barked like crazy.

“This place has stolen a piece of my heart.” Chiara thought to herself, turning back to look at the red-roof house that slowly disappeared behind the trees.

“Is it a long way to the airport?” Ernesto asked, slightly worried.

“No more than a couple of hours. We’ll be there very early.” Luigi reassured him.

Feeling much better, Ernesto leaned back, but a moment later he startled

“Chiara, did you put the passports in the bag?”

“Of course I did, dad...don’t worry!”

Suddenly, they heard a persistent tooting behind them.

“It’s Kateri’s car.” Luigi said, looking in the rear-view mirror; “How could she reach us so quickly?”

“Yes! It’s really them!” Matteo shouted joyfully, peeping out from the rear window.

“And Asa’s there too!”

Chiara turned back and saw Kateri’s ramshackle old car right behind them. Valentina was sitting next to her mother and beside blowing kisses, she spoke words that were totally unintelligible in the distance. In the back, Babik’s face popped out, alternating from the right to the left window and was in both cases partly hidden by Asa’s big muzzle. The two cars drove like this for a few minutes, with everybody exchanging greetings and kisses, until Kateri’s car turned with a final tooting, taking a side road and disappearing.

“Great woman, your wife!” Ernesto commented enthusiastically.

“She is indeed.” Luigi confirmed “Kateri’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“It was really nice of her to follow us with the kids.” Chiara added.

Nobody talked for some time and the way to the airport suddenly seemed to be too long and too empty.

Chiara remained in silence for the rest of the journey, with her head leaning back and closed eyes. Sitting next to her, Matteo was reading a magazine, while the two brothers in the front talked in a low voice, thinking that the children were sleeping.

But Chiara didn’t sleep at all. Her mind was travelling back to all the striking events of their intense vacation and her heart was full of sadness.

At the airport, Luigi took them to the departure halls and stayed there until they had completed all the boarding procedures. Then it was time to go and Chiara felt a pang in her heart watching the long and moving hug between the two brothers.

“Your visit was the most precious gift to me...” Luigi said.

“You take care.” Ernesto recommended, with his round face flooded with tears. “And come soon to Italy with your family.”

“I will. I promised it to Kateri.”

Luigi’s tall figure walked away. He reached the hall and disappeared in the crowd after a final goodbye. Ernesto was immediately taken by his feverish agitation again.

“Is everything done? Have we got all that we need? All the papers and passports?” He asked several times.

“Yes, dad. It’s all right, stop worrying.” Chiara answered patiently.

“What did they say? Do you understand what they’re saying? Is that our flight?” He alarmed whenever he heard some nasal voice announcing the departure or the arrival of this or that flight on the loudspeaker. And it was always Chiara’s task to reassure him and calm him down.

She was very anxious too and kept looking around like someone who is expecting a visitor. Only Matteo, who had provided himself with sandwiches and magazines, sat quietly next to his sack and read.

“Shouldn’t we move to the boarding hall now?” Ernesto asked, on tenterhooks.

“It’s really too early dad, we’d better stay here a bit longer.” Chiara implored, watching insistently the vast hall and the far-away exit. “But why the hell should we wait any longer? We’re going to miss our flight, I bet we are!” Her father lost his temper, as he started seeing groups of people walking to the passport check area and then pass on to the boarding hall.

Chiara took up her bag with a resigned sigh and walked on, following Matteo and their father.

“Chiara, Chiara!”

Her name echoed like a gunshot and Chiara turned back. Aigle Noir was at the other end of the hall, racing in their direction weaving through the crowd of people and luggage. His feet looked like they were dancing on the smooth floor, while his long hair and the fringes hanging down from his shirt waved in the heat of the race, creating a kind of halo around him.

Chiara let her bags fall down and ran to him with a joyful heart. They met in the middle of the hall and were stopped by sudden shyness.

“I thought I’d be too late...” Aigle Noir panted.

“I knew you’d come!” Chiara replied, her eyes bright with tears.

“I just wanted to... I want you to take this.” And he removed a necklace from his shirt pocket, handing it to Chiara.

Chiara held it in her hands and was moved as she looked at it. It was a long thread of white beads, with the proud profile of a vermilion-eyed black eagle, engraved on a white locket.

“It’s so beautiful!” She exclaimed, putting it on immediately.

“I made it for you...” Aigle Noir murmured. “I hope you’ll remember me”.

“Did the police let you go?”

“Yes, thanks to your help.”

“I’m sure they’re going to find the truck driver too and everything will be all right.”

Matteo, who’d just run to them, pulled her sleeve and said reproachfully, looking up at Aigle Noir “Dad wants to talk to you!”

“I’ll be there in a second. Goodbye Aigle Noir...” Chiara said, walking away from him. When she looked back, she saw that Aigle Noir was still standing in the middle of the hall and looked lost.

“I’m going to write to you!” She promised.

His face brightened.

“I’ll come over to Italy one day!”

“Of course, we’ll meet again! Thanks for everything Aigle Noir...” Chiara added while Matteo, holding her hand, tried to drag her away to join their father, who was already waiting for them at the passport check.

“You can...you can call me Pierre!” The young man unexpectedly exclaimed with sparkling eyes. As he pronounced his own name, he realized that he had come to the end of a path and was ready to take the main road.

“Goodbye Pierre!” Chiara shouted running away, while a whirl of lights turned on inside her heart.