

## Chapter 4

Matteo was sound asleep in his elevated bunk bed, when something pulled his arm  
“Matteo, wake up... come on, Matteo!”

He opened his eyes, but being suddenly blinded by the light that some invisible hand was pointing into his face, he quickly turned away.

“Who...who’s there?! What’s that???” He stammered fearfully, and sat up.

“It’s just me!” Valentina’s voice said.

“What’s the matter with you?” Matteo mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

But Valentina did not answer and pointed the beam of light to the opposite wall, more precisely onto the face of Babik, who was sitting on his little bed trying to understand what was going on.

“C-couldn’t you turn on the light?” Matteo grumbled.

“No, Maman might see it and wake up!” She answered. “I’ve just y cookies and I’m still so hungry!” She exclaimed.

“Hungry? But...it’s the middle of the night!” Matteo wondered. In reply to this, Valentina picked up some crumbs that were scattered on the sheets, brought them to her mouth, then added: “There’s plenty of barley cookies in the kitchen, let’s go and get some!” Matteo stepped off the ladder with some difficulties and cautiously touched ground. Valentina grasped his arm, and whispered “Hush!”

In the meantime, Babik got up as well and joined them and all barefoot, paraded like ghosts along the corridor, with Valentina, who walked ahead of everybody, throwing her beam of light here and there and repeating: “Ssh!”

At last they arrived in the kitchen and Valentina, after carefully closing the door behind her, turned on the light, which definitely dazzled Matteo’s sleepy eyes.

“You must be completely mad!” The boy grumbled.

While Valentina explored the cupboard and the fridge, Matteo and Babik climbed up the table and sat down next to each other with dangling legs. The girl soon joined them, with hands full of barley croissants.

“Voilà!” She cried cheerfully, sitting down beside them and eating so quickly and greedily, that Matteo had to exclaim: “I hope your mum won’t catch us!”

“No worries, she won’t!” She laughed, showing her buck teeth.

“You’ve lost your braces, haven’t you?” Matteo scolded her.

“No, I haven’t! I’ve got them here with me...” She replied, patting her hand on the pyjama pocket and sinking her teeth into another cookie. “Would you like some more?” She offered.

Matteo shook his head : “You’ll get as fat as a seal!” He argued. “As a seal!” Babik laughed heartily with his mouth still full of sweets. Then, as if some sudden thought

was growing in his round head, he swung his bare feet forward to slide off the table, ran to the backyard door, opened it slowly and finally whispered: "Asa..."

They all heard a chain squeaking, then all of a sudden a white whirl rushed in from the dark and jumped on Babik. The two friends started their usual rolling on the floor. "They do it all the time!" Valentina laughed, twisting her thumbs with great ability. Matteo tried to imitate her without success.

Babik went back to his seat and started eating again. Asa, waiting on the doorstep, pulled the chain as powerfully as he could and stared at the child with adoring eyes, sweeping the floor with his white furry tail. Babik caught the message, jumped down again and gave his friend a cookie which he ate in a flash.

"He's going to catch the verminous disease!" Valentina warned. Babik became thoughtful and began to scratch his big head, then took the dog by the collar and ledut, disappearing in the dark together with his best friend. Matteo was impressed and his eyes followed the two for a while.

Out there, the silent night ruled over the meadows and the woods and only a soft wind made the poplar tops tremble. A nocturnal bird stirred in its sleep, letting out its call. A wild duck replied to this, from the pond. Everything was silent again.

Keeping his eyes on the dark rectangular outline of the open door, Matteo grasped another cookie and brought it to his mouth. Babik was back at last. He walked towards the table and jumped on top of it with a sigh of satisfaction, which allowed Matteo to start breathing normally again, and to eat his croissants in peace.

Asa had now walked back to the door too and kept a careful eye on the situation.

"I'll be a spy, when I grow up, you know..." Valentina confided to her two friends.

"A spy?" Matteo wondered and quickly replied "And I'll be an astronaut", thus exciting his friends' admiration. Satisfied with himself, he somehow felt bound to add: "If you want, I'll take you on my spacecraft!" Valentina shook her blonde head: "No...I'm afraid I won't be allowed to...". "Well, I'll take Babik with me then!"

"No, you won't. Babik will soon be travelling back to the North, to the glaciers."

Valentina said and Babik nodded. "And what's he going to do up there?!" Matteo asked. "He's going to go seal hunting with his dad..." Little Babik nodded again.

"...And he's going to travel in a twelve-dog-drawn sledge. These dogs are as big as Asa, you know and he's going to sleep in an igloo...And when the ice melts, he's going to travel downstream with his kayak..." Valentina said, feeling carried away with the conversation, while the other two gaped at her and the dog whimpered on the doorstep with lively eyes.

"I don't like ice..." Matteo said. "And I don't like snow either." He added. "You don't?!" Valentina marvelled "And how do you survive in winter?" "It doesn't snow so much where I live."

"Doesn't it, are you serious?! Well, we really get loads of snow over here, sometimes over three metres!"

"What? Three metres?" Matteo replied, incredulous. "As much as three metres, believe me! And the river gets frozen, so you can go with your sledge on it. At Carnival time, we organize the Ice Sculpture Championship, where the winner is the

one who carves the most-beautiful-ice sculpture. Two years ago, *maman* won the first prize for building a two-metre-high statue representing an Iroquois...”

“But how do you get outside with a three-metre-snow wall?”

“Easily enough. We use the fire escape and wait for the snowploughs to clear out the path, which usually happens very quickly...”

“Isn’t it freezing?”

“Oh yes, it’s really cold, but it’s great fun! I always wear a beaver hat, a parka jacket and a pair of *clagues* to keep myself warm. When the storm breaks out, the wind throws ice crystals into your face and nobody goes to school until it stops. However, the *souffleuses* are so efficient and “blow” the snow to the road side too quickly I think!

Once, dad had to shovel half a day, to get his van out of the snow. Then he looked at the number plate and realized that it was not his own van that he had just freed from the snow, but our neighbour Marcel’s!”

They all laughed heartily with their mouths still full of tasty sweets. Proud of her success, Valentina continued:

“Another day, the *souffleuse* was swallowing up two kids who had just built an igloo and were playing inside it. The workers realized what was happening just in time to avoid them! Can you imagine how shocking it must have been! Being almost swallowed up by a steel monster and then being spat out into the frozen river!?”

The three children were so involved in Valentina’s story, that they didn’t even notice the presence of Luigi, who had quietly opened the door and was now standing on the doorstep.

Only Asa first realized what was going on and was wise enough to disappear into the dark garden. An instant later, Babik turned his head, noticed the man and quickly jumped off the table, uncertain whether to follow Asa’s example and run away in the dark, or to stay there, keeping as still as a statue. Matteo decided that it was better not to move, while Valentina, after gulping down her mouthful, whispered: “...What about *maman*...?”

“Maman’s sleeping, luckily for you!” The man said, trying to make his voice sound as rough as possible. He walked towards the table, lifted her up and rebuked her “Could you possibly stop eating at night?! It’s a very bad habit of yours, you know that already. Don’t you?”

“I know, dad. You’re right... dad.” The girl regretted and crouched in her father’s chest. Before letting her down, Luigi hugged her lovingly and added “Come on, off to bed now!”

“You’re not telling *maman* about this, are you, dad...?” Valentina implored.

“To bed!” He repeated brusquely.

Having said this, he packed them all off to their beds with a tender cuff and the three of them disappeared in the corridor. Alone in the room, Luigi started clearing the kitchen and taking a look around to dispose of any traces of the night’s banqueting. He poured himself a glass of milk and walked towards the backyard door in a thoughtful mood. Asa popped out of the dark and nudged his head against Luigi’s leg.

“You were there too, weren’t you? You rascal!” Luigi laughed, whilst the dog merrily wagged his tail. “And now to your bed!”. The dog obeyed and again it disappeared in the dark, while Luigi remained on the doorstep and admired the horizon which was clearing up from the East. A couple of minutes later, he went back in, closed the door and decided to get some more sleep.

No sooner had she heard her parents’ door close, Valentina turned on her lamp again, and shouted “Out of Danger!”

“About time too!” Matteo added from Babik’s bed: “This bed is like a sack of rags!”

“You know, Babik used to sleep on caribou leather...” Valentina explained, while Matteo stepped onto the ladder of his comfortable bed with a sigh of relief and Babik quietly wrapped up in his crumpled sheets.

“Do you think your dad is going to blow the whistle on us?” Matteo asked.

“I’m sure he’s not! Dad’s usually on my side.” Valentina replied.

“Lucky you, my father would have slapped me in the face!” Matteo exclaimed.

“And now, let’s get some sleep!” Valentina ordered and turned off the light, unwilling to go on with the conversation.

In the dark, Matteo didn’t speak for a while, then he asked gently “Are you sleeping?”

“Yes!” Valentina answered.

“Is Babik really going bear hunting on the ice caps...with a sledge?”

“Not really...not in a sledge. They use *ski-doos* now...! What a drag!” And she briskly looked away, to inform him that their conversation was over.

But Matteo could not sleep and listened to his sleeping friends’ breathing. When he finally closed his eyes, he fell into a strange kind of sleep and dreamt about himself racing and racing, sinking into the snow, whilst a steel monster ran after him with immense clutches having frozen breath; and he tried to run away, but couldn’t run fast enough; and he tried to shout, but his voice didn’t sound... It was only at daybreak, when the birds started twittering in the branches, that he sank into a really deep, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 5

After making her bed with care, Chiara went to the window and looked out. The sun was shining on the grass and was reflected in the light-blue flashing of the pond water. Two little squirrels stopped gnawing their acorn, as they perceived someone's presence.

"Oh, don't worry about me!" Chiara said gleefully and the two rodents continued eating their breakfast fixing their careful eyes on her, as if they had actually caught her speech.

Chiara left her room and walked into the children's. Here, she found that the beds had been made roughly so she tried to flatten at least the most evident bumps, when a chorus of loud laughter attracted her to the window. Next to the house, on the rich lawn of grass, her father was trying to start a reluctant lawnmower and beside him stood Luigi, who was bursting his sides with laughter. Not far from them, Valentina, Matteo and Babik lay tummy-down on a heap of freshly-cut grass, leaning on their elbows with cut flowers in their mouths, enjoying the scene with big smiles on their faces. Asa was there too, crouching among the children with a turned-up muzzle, wagging his tail as per usual. He was watching the two brothers too and seemed to smile.

Chiara's look concentrated on her dad; his rolled-up trousers and bare chest, somehow made him look different...he looked younger and definitely happier.

"If only mum could see him now...To think that she wanted me to make him swallow a dozen pills a day!" Chiara thought to herself. Then she took a look at her watch "Mum must be sleeping now..." She sighed.

Asa's barking brought her back to reality: he was now standing upright, barking angrily after the lawnmower which was racing down the slope all alone, with the two men running and shouting hopelessly after it. And loud laughter pervaded the lawn again.

"It's really nice to be here. To think that I didn't want to come over..." Chiara thought, moving away from the window and walking towards the kitchen, attracted by a delicious smell of stewed apples, stuffed duck and freshly-baked bread. As she walked by, she cast a glance at the lounge mirror, just to check whether her light-blue blouse suited her slender figure. "Well, if only I could get rid of these horrible spots on my forehead..." She sighed.

In the kitchen, Kateri was busy at the electric oven, checking on the cooking of a towering fat duck surrounded by a cascade of golden potatoes.

"Mmm...that looks tasty." Chiara said, moving closer. The woman turned round and looked at the girl removing a tuft of hair from her eyes, then she announced smiling

"It's almost ready!"

"May I help you?"

“Of course, darling: would you please arrange the bread and the fruit baskets on the table?”

Chiara obeyed. Shortly after, the merry party walked loudly in from the backdoor, followed by Asa and brought a pleasant smell of cut grass and leaves into the house.

Kateri’s voice quickly damped their uproar “Come on kids, now go and wash your hands with your dad and uncle! And you, dog, out!”

Nobody dared to reply and they all walked on tiptoes to the bathroom, while Asa went and lay down by the door, strategically positioning his tail out in the sun whilst pointing his head in the table’s direction, hoping for some leftovers.

They sat around the big table, where Kateri charmed them with tasty *tortelli*, stuffed duck with a wild-rice filling, corn-on-the-cob covered in salty butter sauce and stewed apples filled with jam.

Ernesto was about to plunge his fork in the delicious food, when a sudden silence made him raise his head; he saw that Luigi, who was sitting beside him without speaking, was looking intently at Kateri. The woman sat at the head of the table and waited with her hands together. Ernesto felt very awkward, put down his fork and did not know what to do with his big hands. In the meantime, little Matteo, giggled and chuckled, finding the situation very amusing.

"It’s Sunday," Luigi explained to him "...And we usually say a prayer and make...make good resolutions..." "...Resolutions?..." His brother replied, trying to understand.

" Sure. " Kateri said "We thank God for His gifts and confide to Him our weakness and projects. Come on, Luigi, you start ..."

The husband, embarrassed by having all those eyes on him, started talking with a broken voice and said "Lord, we thank You for this food ..."

"Well and what about the confession?" Valentina pressed him sharply. "Sure...the confession; I’m asking you my Lord, to forgive all my sins..." Luigi continued, swallowing with difficulty.

"You ought to say what sins, dad!" Valentina insisted.

"...And my negligence and omissions..." Luigi went on, now speaking in a plain voice.

Valentina was about to come up again, but Kateri came first and said

"It's your turn now, Valentina."

"I...I wish to thank you, Lord for...for bringing us our cousins from Italy..." The girl muttered, caught by surprise.

"And what else?"

"And then...please, forgive me for..."

"For what?"

"For eating cookies in bed and for getting up at night to steal croissants!" She confessed in one go.

Kateri's face brightened, she turned to Babik and asked him something.

The child nodded “I’ve given Asa worms.” He said very seriously.

Nobody understood what he meant, except for Kateri, who appreciated it instead and lovingly stroked the boy’s head.

“I came downstairs with Valentina last night...” Matteo confessed, rather confused.

“And what am I supposed to say now?” His father asked himself, feeling nervous.

Luigi tried to rescue him and said “Thank you, my Lord, for everything... Amen”.

And firmly stuck his fork in the duck.

“I...I must confess that yesterday I was stupidly frightened by a boy...a Native American boy, who stared at me from outside the window...And when I turned, he had gone already...” Chiara murmured at once, keeping her head down and nervously making balls with bread crumbs. It wasn't a real prayer and no confession either; but Kateri found it very interesting.

“Aigle Noir!” She exclaimed vigorously, then, turning to her husband, she added

“Aigle Noir is back!”

In a state of excitement, she tied the bib around Babik's neck, who was sitting beside her. Then in a surge of delight, she added “Come on, eat now my dears ...God bless you all.”

“Who is Aigle Noir?” Chiara asked, after a long hesitation.

“He's a young man from the Reservation, a distant relation of Kateri.” Luigi explained.

“And where does he stay?”

“Well, who knows? In the bushes, on the isle, up North...This country is so big and he knows every smallest part of it” Luigi replied.

“Why did he go away?” Chiara insisted.

“Because he's savage. This is the reason. Whenever Kateri tries to get him to study for his degree, he beats it!” Luigi burst out.

“He refuses to adapt to the life of the whites and above all, to the constraints his people is compelled to.” Kateri added sadly.

“And just think that he's so incredibly clever! He can do every sort of thing...he's good at hunting, fishing, painting, sculpting! He speaks all languages and learns in a flash. He would be a genius...if he were not savage!” Luigi explained.

“If he had lived in the past, he would certainly have been a Chieftain.” Kateri remarked decisively.

While they talked, Chiara tried to recall the proud dark face and shivered, dreaming of the young man riding a galloping white horse, ahead of his Redskin warriors.

“...And now that he's back here, what is he going to do?” She timidly asked Kateri.

“I hope he's coming back to school. If he passes his degree examination, he'll have a chance to work at the *Bureau* with me, you know, I'm sure he would be of great help with the issues concerning our people...” Kateri said.

“Don't be too positive! That fellow has no intention in doing office work at all. I bet if you let him in through the door, he'll jump out through the window!” Luigi exclaimed, causing Kateri's eyes to darken.

“All right, but if he doesn't feel like studying, isn't there anything else he can take up?” Chiara asked.

“Sure! He could carve wood, create souvenirs for tourists, build boats, work rich leathers...But if he doesn't use his abilities for social purposes, then all the gifts he was given by the Lord will be useless, believe me.” Kateri answered. Then, in the

hopes of changing subject, she turned to Valentina and said “Come on little girl, put on your braces!”. “But it hurts so much!” The girl protested.

“Listen to mum!” Luigi came up.

Everybody got involved in a lively conversation and only Chiara went on eating in thoughtful silence.

“Why do you call him Aigle Noir?” She suddenly asked. Everyone was surprised by the unexpected question and threw her questioning glances; everyone except for Kateri, who answered with a gentle smile “Aigle Noir was this guy’s ancestor, who was a brave chieftain. At the registry office, our friend’s name is Pierre, Pierre Delisle, but he doesn’t like being called this way.”

“Aigle Noir, oui, oui. How ugly your face must be!” Matteo started singsonging, but the kick he received from Chiara from underneath the table, made him stop very quickly. Feeling tears in his eyes, the poor boy bent his face over the plate.

“What would you like to do this afternoon?” Kateri asked her guests.

“Why don’t you take them with you to grand-mère and grand-père?” Luigi suggested “in the meantime, we can go on mowing the lawn!”

Kateri’s eyes sparkled “Would you like to visit my grandparents with me?” She asked Chiara.

“Of course, I would!”

“Great, I must warn you though that there isn’t much to do over there. My grandparents live in a small house in the woods...” The woman added doubtfully.

“I’m sure she’ll love it, don’t worry. Come on, go and get ready now, we’re going to tidy up the kitchen!” Luigi said, coming quickly to the point.

Chiara walked into her room and put on more comfortable clothes, while Kateri drove her car out of the garage, Valentina put some apples in a take-away bag and Babik put the collar round Asa’s neck with Matteo’s help.

Meanwhile, the two brothers cleared the table and chatted lively. Before Ernesto’s admiring eyes, Luigi threw the waste into the incinerator and stuck the dishes in the dishwasher. When they finished the housework, they both went to the door and said goodbye to the leaving party, who were already in the car.

“Don’t worry for the two of us, stay overnight if you like!” Luigi suggested to Kateri.

“Wow, thank you dad, we’re going to sleep at grand-mère’s!” Valentina shouted, and clapped her hands. Chiara, on the contrary, started shivering at the idea of sleeping in the middle of the woods, in an unfamiliar house.

“See you tomorrow!” Luigi exclaimed, and joined his brother on the veranda. They were looking forward to starting their work again, while the small merry party drove northwards.

“We’ll be there in little more than two hours” Kateri said gladly.

“Two hours is a long time...” Chiara thought to herself, sighing. Yet she dared not to say anything and preferred to focus on the shining green of the surrounding never-ending lawns.

## Chapter 6

After crossing an ancient bridge covered with rafters and turfs and driving along a winding narrow road which was tinged with yellow, due to the forthcoming autumn, Kateri came out in the middle of a vast glade. The whole area was surrounded by birches and several ponies were quietly grazing among swarms of chickens. On both sides of the glade, there were a few wooden cottages, giving onto a small lake fenced by cane thickets.

“My grandparents’ house!” Valentina exclaimed, pointing to a sloping-roof house, whose back side was protected by some trees and a high palisade.

Due to the grass bumps, Kateri’s car jolted all the way along the lane that lead to the house. The woman jammed on the brakes to give way to a brood of ducklings that were single-filing after their swinging mother that was heading for the lake. The woman finally parked her colossal car by the door of the cottage.

“Here we are!” She announced.

The blind on the main-door was silently lifted by a tall old woman in Native-American clothes, who timidly stepped on to the doorstep. She had very white plaits framing a dark wrinkled face and was wrapped in a rich fringed shawl decorated with beautiful geometrical patterns. The same pattern was on the moccasins that she wore under the long buckskin gown.

She received Valentina’s warm hug without a word, while Chiara, Matteo, and Babik were waiting a few steps back. Kateri put her hand on her mother’s shoulder and spoke to her in a low voice; the old woman nodded and pointed to something among the trees.

“Grand père is building his new canoe.” Kateri translated.

“Let’s go and have a look, *pèpè* makes beautiful canoes!” Valentina exclaimed and ran towards the lake, followed by Matteo, Babik and Asa, the latter who put all the chickens to flight with his loud barking. While Kateri entered the house, Chiara followed the kids slowly behind, climbing over a heap of all kinds of objects that rose beside the house. There were steel sheets, wheel clamps, beams, a pony cart, an old baby cot and some rusty iron scrap, all of which were covered in weeds.

Beyond the palisade, the river moved into a bend forming a little lake and flew onwards into the birches. Right there, on the lake’s shore stood a small squat man who was painting a red elk with big indented horns on a white canoe.

Chiara, who expected to find a scornful redskin in his typical dress, was left gaping by the sight of that little smiling round man. He wore a check shirt and a pair of vivid frog-green trousers, crowning it all off with a pair of long strikingly-yellow rubber boots and a flaming-red-peak hat.

“Salut!” The little man said gleefully when she was close enough and took his hat off, revealing a completely bold dark head. Then, he went back to Valentina for some more cuddles and patted his own thighs so hard, that Asa jumped on his thighs several times to lick his face.

“You Italian cousin?” He asked Chiara in a faltering French, staring at her with a pair of small slanting eyes that looked incredibly lively behind the round glasses. He laughed and Chiara laughed with him, finding him to be very friendly. After putting on his glasses again with great care, the man went back to his work, painting his elk with strong colour touches.

“Is the painting of the riding on the caribou leather ready, Pèpè?” Valentina asked, standing beside him and looking at him with admiration.

The man nodded without taking his eyes off his work.

“And what about the cot, the one with hedgehog quills? And the bone ladle? And the nerve whip?” The girl pressed.

“Yes, yes, it’s all done!” The man answered and dried up his face with the back of his hand.

“Can I see them?”

“Of course you can.” He left his work, walked towards a shack among the birches and cleaned his hands in a checkered rag. Babik followed him, enchanted by the long rubber boots that *swish-swashed* at every step.

“Come on now!” He said turning round as he reached the door of the shack.

The children rushed in, but Chiara remained outside to contemplate the forest, the canes and the lake waters that were softly rippled by a gentle breeze.

Asa, who was about to enter the shack, turned round and glanced questioningly at the girl, who was now admiring the beautiful rust-brown bushes. Then he walked in her direction and wagged his tail as if he was trying to say “I see that you’re not going in, therefore I’m going to stay here and look after you!”. He set straight off for the river, more precisely for the spot where the stream rapidly flew downwards and broke under the bridge. The dog crossed it, arrived on the opposite shore and galloped away, eager to smell all the good flavours of the wood and to leave its mark on every birch rind. Chiara walked slowly after it and lingered on top of the bridge to watch the stream flow part around a small bushy isle, before rushing down rapidly to the bridge. Then she bent down, picked up a twig, threw it into the flowing water and watched it as it knocked around, floated about and finally canalized in a trickle that quickly wound its way down to the valley, disappearing in the rocks.

“This is life; you never know where to start from, then you find the way...and there you are!” She sighed.

Looking in the isle’s direction, she caught sight of a young angler. He stood balancing on the rocks with his legs wide open and had his back to her.

“Precarious balance I would say...” Chiara thought after watching him carefully; the young angler plunged his landing net into the flowing water with lightning speed and when he lifted it back up an instant later, it was swarming with silver fish. When he turned and laid it down in the basket beside him, Chiara recognized that particular thick hair and that face; no doubt, it was Aigle Noir!

The boy had noticed her too and was now staring at her, motionless. Chiara blushed, moved quickly away from the parapet and rushed across the unsteady bridge to reach Asa, who was barking like mad in the shore weeds.

“God, he must be thinking I’ve been spying on him!” She thought, when she got closer to the dog. As Asa saw her approaching, he started wagging his tail, but didn’t move from his place.

“What’s wrong now?” Chiara said.

Asa barked louder and louder and Chiara noticed a cute yellowish animal hiding in the bushes, staring at the big dog with his huge black-ringed eyes; the small animal was wet and shaking and obviously didn’t know how to find safety, as all escape routes were barred by the river on one side and by the dog on the other.

“Get away from here!” Chiara reproached Asa.

But Asa now barked even louder and was about to attack the poor animal, that suddenly bristled and wagged its grey-ringed tail, ready to leap at the dog’s eyes.

This frightened the girl, who quickly jumped back.

“No worries, it’s just a raccoon.” A voice behind her shoulder said in fluent Italian.

Chiara turned around and saw Aigle Noir standing just a few steps away from her.

His trousers were rolled-up above his knees, he held a basket full of fish in one hand and the landing net on his shoulder and watched her with his deep dark eyes .

“I...I’m not worried...” She stammered out, wondering why the boy could speak her language “It’s the dog...he’s not obeying me...”

Aigle Noir did not answer, instead he brought two fingers to his lips and let out a piercing whistle. Asa responded as if he had received a peremptory order, in fact he stopped barking immediately, lowered his ears and his tail, and moved quietly towards them, while the lucky raccoon rushed off in a flash, and disappeared in the thick bushes.

Chiara grabbed Asa’s collar and was ready to walk back.

“Don’t run on the bridge; this wood is really old.” Aigle Noir recommended as she walked past him. She felt her cheeks blushing and burning and walked on with her head high up, trying to fake a challenging and proud expression.

“You’re staying at Kateri’s.” She heard Aigle Noir’s voice again. It was not a question, but rather a statement and once again Chiara found herself wondering how he could know so much about her.

She felt uncertain whether to run to try and get as far away as possible from the “savage”, or to satisfy her secret curiosity to learn as much as she could about the mysterious individual. The former impulse prevailed and Chiara walked fast in a sort of rage, thinking to herself “Why is he always in my way?!”

Walking slowly across the bridge, she saw from the corner of her eye that Aigle Noir was still standing there, which made her feel deeply confused. She started running after Asa as fast as she could and once arrived at the house, she looked back furtively to check whether someone had followed her. But Aigle Noir was no longer behind her.

In the house, Valentina, Matteo, and Babik nestled on a mat, watching a TV program that dealt with uranium seekers. “Wow, it’s a colour TV!” Chiara thought. Then she

took a look around and admired the simple but comfortable house that had a big fireplace, an old wooden cupboard full of decorated bowls, an ancient wool winder, a long table surrounded by benches and a large swing beside the fireplace. The room was split in two by means of a large wall mat, beyond which Chiara could hear the voices of Kateri and grand- mere. Shortly later, they were joined by grand-père and a tall and thin man wearing hunting clothes. The man was accompanied by little twins of about two years of age, toddling ahead of him. With their little round and dark faces and their canvas dungarees, the two kids had the typical Native-American look. As they entered, they jumped on Asa, twisting and pulling his ears, letting out joyful cries. The patient animal let them continue, looking here and there beseechingly, but nobody seemed to care, including Babik, who was too busy watching an exciting scene on TV, where a prospector on a dog-drawn sledge was trying to run away from a herd of howling wolves. Meanwhile, Kateri stepped by the wall mat to welcome the newcomers with a bright smile and to invite a young local woman to come in. The Native-American girl wore a fringed buckskin-dress and a hanging bead necklaces which Chiara was literally enchanted with.

In the meantime, Asa had had enough of the twins' brutal grip and had stood up with a powerful shake and a frightening kind of roar, causing the shouting kids to run as quickly as they could to the young lady who had just come in and was ready to hold them on her lap. She sat down on the floor and spoke to them slowly and quietly, while Asa - nestling now next to Babik with his muzzle leaning on his paws and his aching ears facing downwards - kept an eye on them.

"Brother Novak, these are my Italian niece and nephew!" Kateri said, introducing Chiara and Matteo.

"Oh, *mais oui, Italians! I know Italia!*" The man smiled, showing his long wolf-like teeth "I've been to Europe with Brother Sam Bull and smoked the calumet with him in Milan and London, right in front of Westminster."

Still sitting in the corner, his young wife smiled with satisfaction and Brother Novak went on talking proudly "We have some business with Italy, in the Turin area, to be more precise; we supply them with canoes, snow shoes, sculptures... and they ship us embroidered tunics, belts, mittens..."

As she noticed Chiara's surprised expression, Kateri explained "These objects are very interesting for tourists, for Americans in the first place." Then she changed the subject "Brother Novak is our most valuable forest guide, and he's an excellent hunter as well...and he can tell beautiful stories." The man's face brightened with pleasure as Kateri added "Please, can you and Poka stay with us for dinner? It will be ready in a minute!"

Brother Novak and his wife exchanged a few words, then she shook her head and stood up. "Poka ought to go and take the kids to bed. I'm going to stay...and tell you some of my beautiful stories." Her husband exclaimed. The young woman went outside, followed by Brother Novak, who skillfully arranged a kind of rucksack on her back and let the twins slip into it. Poka greeted everyone with a nice bow and walked away crossing the lawn with short and quick steps.

Night was about to fall and the sky was full of threateningly low clouds; the chickens were making their way to bed by climbing tree branches one by one, while the ducks were quietly cleaning their feathers on the lake shore.

Everyone went back in the house and while grand-père and Brother Novak sat down to eat, Kateri and grand-mère appeared from the other side of the wall mat, carrying a hot soup bowl and roughly-sliced baked bread.