

**EVA FORTE**

**TWO**



**La Sagnatela Editore**



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**Eva Forte**

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Publisher of the English edition: Tektime

**To those who gave me the courage To begin this new adventure**

# CHAPTER 1

## The countryside

There is no such thing as waking up early when the city is still sleeping, and the silence of the night starts to break under the motion of the first sounds of the day. In wintertime, it still seems to be cradled by the moon, with that coldness that surrounds you as soon as you step out of bed, leaving the warmth of the night and the perfume of the fabric softener on the sheets.

The warmth of the duvet, with all its smoothness, gives way to little shivers that help me to wake up while I am walking through the still dark and silent house. After turning the coffee maker on, my morning rituals start to unfold one after the other. The shower turns on, with the strong warm stream that chases the foam away. My bathrobe is already prepared nearby, to prevent the coldness to become bothersome and bitter. With the first news of the day, I taste the hot steaming coffee, freshly made while I am still not dressed; the little things that put me in a good mood, even before leaving the house and facing everyday life. As every Monday, there is a lot of excitement in seeing her again after spending two days fantasizing about her life and about what she could be doing in every single moment of her day.

During the last few years I've lost the enthusiasm of having a lasting relationship with a woman, given the last affair, the break period after every relationship is having its benefits. Since I met her, the idea of feeling affection for another one vanished, at least for now. This new adventure made of platonic encounters and stolen glances becomes more and more exciting day after day, almost in the hope that all

remains on this level without any actual contact, without knowing who she is and what she is doing in her life.

I overhear my neighbour's dog barking and, as regular as clockwork, he opens his door on the landing for his usual morning stroll in Villa Borghese. An old lady took the job of taking that little dog for a walk, being as loud as possible and making it impossible to believe it is actually that little. A nice

woman, now alone and without any interests other than helping the engineer by taking a short walk with that tiny dog for which she has no further interest. Wrapped up in her big mat coat, she took the leash and went down the stairs, one step at a time, dragged by the tiny dog dying to reach fresh air after a long night indoors. Before leaving my home, I always wait until I can no longer hear barking. The nice old lady has a special affection for me and always feels obliged to brief me about all her health vicissitudes without taking a breath, and when this happens, I always risk missing my morning rendezvous with my charming stranger, something that generally puts me in a bad mood. So far, it has only happened a few times where we didn't meet at the café, or at least on the route that takes her away from the café, for it is that eye contact that energises me for the whole day.

As soon as I hear the front door close I am ready by the door, jangling the keys and with my backpack on my shoulder and with my jacket well buttoned under my warm scarf, without which I would be lost during the coldest months. I chump at the thought of what will she be wearing today. I often try to imagine her and I make bets with myself to see if we are also in touch on these frivolous things. I also tried to guess at least the colour of her trousers or what she would

generally wear. A childish game that makes me smile when I realise that I have guessed something about her. I step up the pace on the road, this morning the old lady lingered with the engineer who gave her a piece of advice on where to take his 'furry kid', as he loves to call it.

In the threshold of the café, I see her with her usual breakfast mate, sitting at the small table near the fridge with the display cakes. Every day, our eyes meet and when she doesn't break the eye contact the warmth of our smiles becomes one. Then it's over, our non-affair stops there, even if I always try to look at her without her knowing, to see how she moves, how she teases her hair. One of the first times I had a seat just behind her, for the curiosity of smelling what perfume she had and to be able to remember her all day long by more than just an image in my head. During these three months, after our first meeting, I have never heard her name and this makes it all even more intriguing and mysterious. About her, I only know that she is a real morning person like me and that she can't help starting the day without a cappuccino and a plain croissant.

Sometimes I hide behind the fridge, which allows me to look at her unnoticed through the glass, between the soft colourful cakes in it. A few days ago, her friend must have noticed me, given the way she looks at me every time we meet. So I abandoned my new hiding place to come back to my usual position on the side of the counter, between her and the exit, so that I would not lose a moment of our rendezvous.

When I dared to confess this platonic love to Stefano, I had to wait for five minutes for him to stop giggling. I must have entertained him a lot, especially the part about me hiding between cakes and pastries in

the café. Knowing me and my easiness in approaching the female sex, he was very surprised by the fact that in these months I didn't step forward. He doesn't understand that the beauty of my feeling lies in the fact that I have idealised her. Going any further would make everything come to an end, especially the vibe of the unknown, which fills this story with mystery.

After a week of ceaseless rain, today the sun has finally returned, so I took the chance of taking a day-off to go for a stroll in the countryside of Rome. Therefore, after half an hour I am already far away from the chaos of the city, from the crowded highways, and from the tall buildings that concealed the sky. In my car, I don't even turn the radio on, for so much of her memory is on my mind. For a few seconds I even had the crazy idea of showing up and asking her to come with me. I would have taken her to one of the gorgeous parks on the Flaminia to finally tell her all about me, if only to know her name.

In the end, reason had notched up and I am about to arrive at my mum's in a little village with four houses in a row that got stuck back in time. You can still breath the scent of freshly baked bread in a wood-fired oven and the cold blowing on your bones as soon as you enter the main street. The wind wraps you up and accompanies you while it whistles in your ear, almost whispering advice on your life. I often come here to wonder in this surreal setting of ancient times.

My mother also seems like a woman who didn't accept the passing of the time. Always beautiful, despite the wrinkles that mark the years, with the rough and gnarled hands of someone who didn't even spare a second in the fields or in the kitchen. Her only step forward has been forcefully accepting the mobile phone that I gave her as a gift last

Christmas. Since my dad is gone, knowing that she is alone and so far away from the city makes me feel restless, and being able to reach her, at least by the phone, makes me feel more peaceful. After her first reluctance, she learnt how to use it and sometimes she even sends me some pictures so that we feel closer, despite the distance.

Today I didn't inform her of my arrival, I know how much she loves surprises and so I wanted to wait until the last moment to see the weather before getting to the street. Once I arrived at the main street, the first one to welcome me were two hens that had escaped from who knows which henhouse. These animals always make me laugh, always upright and unwieldy. As soon as their squawking goes away, I start to hear the smooth sound of shoes on the road with the light echoing between the empty and silent houses. The sun begins to warm walls and my gloveless hands. When I reach her house, at the bottom of the dark staircase without a front door, I overhear her voice in the distance and the sound of the rolling pin that hits the marble countertop. Today it must be the fresh pasta day, something that makes her very happy and so, between this and that rolled crust, she enjoys singing herself old songs and changing the words she doesn't remember here and there. As I am coming up the stairs, trying not to make any noise, her voice becomes more and more warm and solid and replaces my café memories printed in my mind until that very moment. This place has the ability of making me forget everything else. A bit like becoming a child again, without big worries apart from having a bit of bread and freshly brewed gravy between this and that game. For a second I even had the will of going back to the street and chasing those two smug hens in their escape, to scare them a bit and to fulfil my ears with the sound of their uncontrolled bickering.

Arrived at the front door, I stood for a moment in order to catch my breath after these steep and slippery stairs in the darkness that pulls the morning light away behind me. The door is open, as it is still a habit in the small villages, and behind a thin colourful plastic door curtain I discern her, inside with her apron on and her sleeves rolled up, going from one side to the other of the big kitchen in the hallway. What I love about her is that her smile is always ready to welcome you. I sneak into the room without making any noise whispering "Mum..."

as if it was a magical and untouchable word. While she suddenly turns, I see in her eyes a mix of surprise and endless joy, so we end up hugging as if we didn't see each other for such a long time. As if I was still a child, she kisses my cheeks over and over again, in that soft embrace of hers from which I don't want to loose. Curious about my arrival, she makes me sit down beside her while she starts to make coffee and puts on the table biscuits, a pie, and a bunt cake that has already be tasted, all of them rigorously hand-made by her. As she doesn't receive a lot of visits, every time that I arrive she has to catch up with all that she has to offer me at home and I know perfectly well that even a slight refusal could be taken as an offence. So I started to eat a piece of pie with orange jam, my favourite one. While she tinkers with the small coffeepot for two, she starts to tell me all the gossip of the area: from the arrival of the new country priest, to the multiple births of the two foals on the next-door farm.

She has such tender manner of speaking that it seems like she is still singing, and I stay there, listening without blinking an eye, wrapped up in that atmosphere that is completely out of this world.

Today I feel in the mood for sharing, so I tell her about my mysterious café woman. She sits down and, placing her arm on the wooden table, listens to me as if I am telling a fairy tale. She doesn't interrupt me and as soon as I stop talking she remains silent for a few seconds, undecided whether to comment on this absurd non-affair of mine or to remain silent. Then she stands up, smiles at me, and goes to the coffeepot that started to puff and to throw some spatters of coffee on the cheap white and spotless stove. After this endless silence she asks me if I was here for that reason and whether she had to tell me what she wanted me to do... Because in her opinion every love affair, even the crazy ones like mine, must take their own course without anyone putting their nose in, risking changing the right course of things. While she is pouring me some coffee in the china teacup that is so fine that it looks fake, I answer that I just wanted to share my life with her as I have always done, without wanting anything more. She caresses my face, smiles, and starts to tell me how she and dad had met. A story I was already so familiar with but that I love to hear from her. Her eyes glisten, for the first time since my dad died I see in her the melancholy of the solitude and the absence and I realise that I must treasure these moments

together, to remember them forever, recording them in my memory, hoping that they can be played forever. After taking the package prepared with fresh hand-made pasta, a piece of every dessert and fresh eggs and vegetables from the garden, I step back on my way towards the car. The wind has now weakened and the higher sun warms my face.

You can begin to smell the first scents of lunch, in some house they are roasting pepperoni. From an open window you can smell the

perfume of a cake right out the oven, and the whole village participates with those scents that blend in such a beautiful way that only small villages can give as a gift to their visitors. I stop by the baker to buy white pizza, always warm and freshly baked. I already know that I am going to regret this purchase because anytime that I eat it I feel bad because it is well seasoned and slightly heavy. But if I don't eat it, it doesn't feel like I have been here, between the little mountains of Lazio. To break this blissfulness made of hands greasy with oil and of mouths satisfied with pizza and rock salt, there is the ringing of my mobile phone that makes me wince and breaks the spell. Next time I must remember to turn it off. Like an equilibrist, I manage to take it out of my pocket without dropping my pizza and I succeeded in not breaking the eggs wrapped in journal papers in my package. On the screen I see the picture of my ex-girlfriend Lucia but as soon as I answer the call, it stops ringing. I'll call her later. I spent the most amazing years of my life with her, in a unique harmony that lasted six years, until she accepted a job abroad and I refused to follow her. It was then that I realised it wasn't the major love that we thought, a mutual awareness that makes us still bounded today. During this time, she has come back to Italy, so we are more in touch, and not only with messages and e-mails. Seeing her again is always great, for a few seconds I even thought that letting her go has been a mistake but then I realise it was only a purely egoistic matter, and now I have accepted our long-distance friendship that gets stronger every day. Tonight, we are going to see each other again, finally alone, to tell each other face-to-face about this year spent apart.

I got into the car and after placing the package on the back seats I

drive towards the Capital with my lungs full of fresh air and my shoes dirty with soil. Today I would really like to see her but I perfectly know that I



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