

Rosette

**The girl who
couldn't see
rainbows**



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The Girl Who Couldn'T See Rainbows:
ISBN 978-8-87-304512-0

Аннотация

The encounter of two lonely souls in the fascinating context of an imaginary Scottish village is the starting point for a great love story where nothing is like it seems. The main character - Melisande Bruno - is the girl who can't see rainbows, for she is able to see only in black and white. And her opponent, as well as great love, is Sebastian McLaine, a writer relegated to a wheelchair.

Melisande Bruno flees from her past and refuses to accept her diversity: she was born with a particular and rare sight impairment that prevents her from distinguishing colours and her greatest dream would be to see a rainbow. Her new employer is Sebastian McLaine, a famous writer of horror novels, relegated to a wheelchair due to a mysterious car accident. A figure lies in the shadows, ready to feed on other people's desires... Two solitudes that intertwine; two destinies united by their darkest dreams in which nothing is as it seems. A Gothic novel waiting only to be read...

Содержание

Chapter one	10
Chapter two	21
Chapter three	43
Chapter four	55
Chapter five	70
Chapter six	89
Chapter seven	104
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	106

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Translated into English by Maria Calabretta



Original Italian title:

La ragazza dagli arcobaleni proibiti

Italian edition by:

Youcanprint

Title:

The girl who couldn't see rainbows

Author:

Rosette

Translated into English by:

Maria Calabretta

Published by:

Tecktime

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To my husband, Luca Raggi, who is the living demonstration that we must never settle for less, and wait for the right person to come along. And that although there are a great number of cynics, romantics always win in the long distance

Chapter one

I raised my face to the mild wind. That light breeze seemed to be benevolent, almost a friend, a sign that my life was changing its course, and this time in a better way.

With my right hand I firmly tightened my grip on my suitcase, and resumed walking with a renewed confidence.

My destination wasn't far away, according to the encouraging directions of the bus driver, and I hoped he had been honest and not simply optimistic.

Once I got to the top of the hill I stood still, partly to breathe again, partly because I couldn't believe my eyes.

Was that supposed to be the modest home? That's how Mrs McMillian had called it when she talked to me on the phone, with the naivety of people accustomed to living in the country. It was clear that she was joking. She couldn't have been speaking seriously; she couldn't be that naive about how things really were in the rest of the world.

The house stood majestically and royally as a Fairy Palace. If the choice of that position was motivated by the desire to disguise it between the thick and lush vegetation surrounding it, well... the attempt had miserably failed. I suddenly felt intimidated, and I missed the enthusiasm with which I had travelled from London to Scotland and from Edinburgh to that picturesque, aloof and quiet village of the Highlands. That job offer arrived like a boomerang,

a godsend in a pitiful and hopeless moment. I had resigned to moving from one office to another; one more anonymous and shabby than the other, as a dogsbody, destined to live only of illusions. Then I casually read an announcement and made the phone call that triggered a radical change of residence; a sudden, but strongly desired move. Until a few minutes ago it seemed like a magical thing to me... What had changed, after all?

I sighed and forced my feet to move again. This time my stride wasn't as proud as a few minutes ago, but rather awkward and hesitant. The real Melisande emerged again, stronger than the counterweight I used in my attempt to drown her.

I walked the rest of the road with exasperating slowness, and I was immensely pleased to be alone, so that no one could guess the real reason for my hesitation. My shyness, a protective cloak with a life of its own, despite my repeated, unsuccessful attempts to get rid of it, was back in the limelight, reminding me of who I was.

As if I could forget it.

I reached the iron gate, at least ten feet high, and there I was overcome by a new paralyzing hesitation. I bit my lip, considering my alternatives. They were very few, indeed.

Going back was out of the question. I had paid the expenses for the trip in advance, and I had very little money left.

Very little, indeed.

Plus, what did I have waiting for me in London? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Even my roommate struggled to remember

my name or, at the most, she distorted it.

The silence around me was absolute, resounding in its stillness, broken only by the dull thuds of my heart.

I set the suitcase down on the path, unconcerned of grass stains. Anyhow, they meant nothing to me. I was destined to a black and white universe, devoid of any hint of colour.

And not in a metaphorical sense.

I brought my hand to my right temple and exercised a slight pressure with my fingertips. I had read somewhere that it helped to reduce tension, and although I found it stupid and basically useless, I did so; obedient to a ritual I didn't have any faith in, only out of respect for a consolidated habit. It was pleasantly comforting to have some habits. I had discovered that it helped me calm down, and I never got rid of any of them. Well, at least not until that moment.

I had violently turned in an opposite direction than my usual one, letting myself be carried away by the flow, and now I would have done anything to go back in time.

I missed my room in London which was as small as the cabin of a ship, the distracted smile of my roommate, the pranks of her plump cat, and even the peeling walls.

Suddenly, without warning, my hand again grasped my leather suitcase, and the other one let go of the gate I was unconsciously clinging to.

I don't really know what I was going to do - leave or ring the bell - but I never got the chance to find out, because in that same

instant two things happened simultaneously.

I looked up, attracted by a movement beyond a window of the first floor, and I saw a white curtain fall back in place. Then I heard a woman's voice. The same I had heard a few days earlier on the phone. The voice of Millicent Mc Millian, dreadfully close.

“Miss Bruno! It’s you, isn’t it?”

I turned abruptly in the direction of the voice, forgetting the movement at the first floor window.

A middle aged woman, skinny, wiry and mild-looking, was still talking, like a river in full. She overwhelmed me.

“But of course it’s you! Who else could be? We don’t receive many visits here at Midnight Rose House, and we were waiting for you! Did you have a nice trip, Miss? Was it easy for you to find the house? Are you hungry? Thirsty? You’ll want to rest, I presume... I’ll call Kyle right away to bring the luggage to your room... I chose a nice, simple but delightful room on the first floor...”

I tried, with poor results, to answer at least one of her questions, but Mrs Mc Millian didn’t stop her incessant flow.

“Obviously you’ll stay on the first floor, and likewise Mr Mc Laine... Oh, but of course, he doesn’t need your help. He already has Kyle, who is his nurse... Actually he’s a handyman... He’s also a driver... Of whom we don’t know, since Mr Mc Laine never leaves the house... Oh, I’m so glad that you’re here! I really miss the lack of female company... This house is a little gloomy. At

least inside it is... Here, in the sun, everything looks wonderful... Don't you think? Do you like the colour? I realize it's daring... But Mr Mc Laine likes it.”

This, I thought bitterly, was a question I was happy I didn't have to answer.

I followed the woman inside the courtyard, and then into the enormous hall of the house. She didn't stop chanting for a moment, she sounded like the sound of a bell. I just nodded here and there, giving a quick glimpse to the surroundings as we went through them.

I realized that the house was surprisingly huge. I expected a more sober and rigorous decor, masculine, considering that the owner, my new

employer, was a man who lived alone. Obviously his tastes were all but minimal. The furniture was sumptuous, elegant, and antique. 18th century, I guessed, although I wasn't an expert in antiques.

I quickened my pace so as to not lose the housekeeper, for she was as quick as a cheetah.

“The house is very big” I murmured, taking advantage of a break in her long monologue.

She glanced at me over her shoulder. “That's right, Miss Bruno. But half of it is closed. We only use the ground floor and the first floor. It's too big for a man alone, and too tiring for me to take care of. Apart from the heavy cleaning, for which a cleaning company is hired, I'm the only one here. And Kyle, of course,

who has plenty of other tasks. And now, you.”

Finally she stopped in front of a door and opened it.

I reached her, slightly winded. I was already out of breath and exhausted.

She walked into the room with a warm smile on her lips.

“I hope you like it, Miss Bruno. By the way... do you pronounce it Bruno or Brundò?”

“Bruno. My father was of Italian extraction,” I said, while I contemplated the room.

Ms Mc Millian began to chatter, telling me various anecdotes about her brief stay in Florence, Italy when she was young and about her vicissitudes as an art history student with the rigid local bureaucracy.

I listened to her distractedly, too excited to pretend to be interested. That room that she described as simple, was the triple of my London dump! My initial doubts were swept away. I put the suitcase on the dresser, and I admired the large canopy bed which was antique like the rest of the furniture. A desk, a wardrobe, a bedside table, a carpet on the wooden floor and a half opened window. I headed in that direction and opened it completely, indulging in the beautiful landscape that surrounded me. In the distance I could see the village that I barely passed through on the bus route, perched on the other side of the hill, a riverbed disappeared to my right, hidden by the dense vegetation, and the underlying garden, well cared for and full of plants.

“I love gardening” the housekeeper went on, coming to my

side.

“I especially love roses. As you can see, I've picked a bouquet for you.”

I turned, just then noticing the large vase on the dresser, overflowing with a bouquet of roses. I quickly covered the distance that separated me from it and stuck my nose within the petals. The perfume instantly dazed me, almost making me light-headed, causing me a slight dizziness.

For the first time, in my twenty-two years of life, I felt at home. As if I had finally landed in a safe and welcoming harbour.

“Do you like white roses, Miss? Maybe you would have preferred orange, or pink. Or maybe yellow...”

I returned to earth, dragged by the devious question, even though that gentle woman uttered it innocently and unconsciously.

“I like them all. I don't have any preferences,” I murmured, closing my eyes.

“I bet you like red ones. All women love red roses. But they seemed inadequate... I mean... They should only be given by a boyfriend... Are you engaged, Miss Bruno?”

“No”. My voice was little more than a breath, with the tired tone of those who never gave a different answer.

“How foolish of me. It's obvious that you're not. If you were, you wouldn't be here, in this remote place, far away from your love. Here I doubt you'll meet someone...”

I reopened my eyes. “I'm not looking for a boyfriend.”

Her expression cheered up. “Then you won’t be disappointed. It’s practically impossible to meet anyone here. Everyone is already engaged. They literally get engaged when they are toddlers, or later on, in kindergarten... You know how small rural communities are, closed to the new and the different.”

And I was different. Irreparably different.

“As I told you, that won’t be a problem for me,” I said in an unwavering tone.

“Your hair is a gorgeous tone of red, Miss Bruno. Enviably so. Just like a respectable Scottish, although you aren’t.”

I casually passed my fingers through my hair, smiling rigidly. I didn’t answer, for I was accustomed to that kind of comment.

She started chattering and again my mind wandered off, full of bad memories, the slowest to disappear, the ones that wouldn’t fade and the quickest to be recalled. In order not to let the burning thoughts of my memories overflow, I interrupted her when she started to tell me another story.

“What will my working hours be?”

The woman nodded in approval, approving my dedication to work. “From nine in the morning to five in the evening, Miss. Obviously you’ll have a break for lunch. By the way, I inform you that Mr Mc Laine prefers to eat his meals in his room, in complete solitude. I’m afraid he won’t be a lot of company.” She grimaced and her tone was apologetic. “He’s a very bitter man. You know... because of the tragedy... He’s like a lion in a cage, and believe me... when he roars, you’ll feel like giving everything

up and leaving... As the three other secretaries before you did..." Her eyes looked at me, as sharp as a magnifying glass. "You seem to have more common and practical sense than they did... I hope with all my heart that you'll last longer..."

"Despite my slim and fragile appearance, I'm gifted with endless patience, Mrs Mc Millian. I assure you that I'll do my best," I promised, with all the optimism I could muster.

The woman gave me a big smile, conquered by the earnestness of my statement. I hoped I didn't count my chickens before they hatched.

The woman moved towards the door, still smiling. "Mr Mc Laine will be waiting for you in his office in an hour, Miss Bruno. Don't be afraid. Hold you ground, it's the only way for him not to send you away at the first opportunity."

I blinked, overwhelmed by the initial agitation. "Does he like to upset the staff?"

She became serious. "He's a tough man, but correct. Let's say he doesn't appreciate chickens, and he eats them in a single bite. The problem is that many tigers turn into chickens in his presence..."

She said goodbye to me with a smile and abandoned the room, ignoring the cyclone that was twirling in my head, generated by her final words.

I went back to the window. The breeze had vanished, replaced by an unusual stuffy heat, more characteristic of the continent than of that country.

I wearily brought my mind to a standby mode, freeing it of all evil thoughts. It was once again a white page, untouched, fresh, and free of any concern.

With the fulminating certainty of a person who knows herself well, I knew that that peace was relative, as ephemeral as a footprint on the sand, ready to be erased by the tide when it retreats.

Mrs Mc Millian's welcome didn't deceive me.

She was just an employee, no more or less than I was. She was nice, actually very nice, come to think of it, she was on my side and had offered me a complicit alliance spontaneously, but I mustn't forget that she wasn't my employer. My stay in that house, so delightful and so different from any place I'd ever known, depended entirely on him. Or rather on the impression I would have made on him. Me. Just me. I knew too little about him to be able to relax. A lonely man, condemned to a worst prison than death, relegated to a life in the midst, a lonely writer with a bad personality... According to the subtle insinuations of my guide, he was a man who enjoyed making people feel uncomfortable, maybe he loved to vent his need for revenge on others, for he couldn't take it out on his only enemy: fate, which was blind, blindfolded, and indifferent to the suffering it caused here and there; it was somewhat democratic.

I took a deep breath. If my stay in that house was intended to be short, it was probably better not to unpack my luggage. I didn't want to waste my time.

I wandered through the room, still incredulous. I sat in front of the mirror above the dresser, and I sadly looked at my face. My hair was red, of course. I only knew it because others told me, I wasn't able to define the colour. I lived a life in black and white; I was also a prisoner, just like Mr Mc Laine. Not of a wheelchair, maybe, but I was also incomplete. I passed my finger on a silver brush, placed on the dresser along with other toiletries; an exquisite, valuable item, made available to me with an incomparable generosity.

My eyes ran to the big wall clock, which treacherously reminded me of the appointment with the owner of the house.

I couldn't be late.

Not on our first meeting.

Maybe it would be the last one, if I didn't manage to... What did Mrs Mc Millian say? Oh, right. Hold my ground. It was easy to say for the princess of chickens. My favourite word, the one I used most frequently, was sorry, declined according to the circumstances in I'm sorry or I apologize. Sooner or later I would apologize for living. I straightened my shoulders, in a surge of pride. I would sell my skin dearly. I would have earned the right, the pleasure, to stay in that house, in that room, in that corner of the world.

On the landing, while I descended the stairs, my shoulders curved again, my mind was screaming, my heart dashing. My peacefulness lasted... how long? A minute?

Almost a record.

Chapter two

When I reached the lobby I was aware of my inevitable ignorance. Where was the study? How could I find it, if I barely managed to get to the hall? Before sinking into despair I was saved by the providential intervention of Mrs Mc Millian who had a broad smile on her thin face.

“Miss Bruno, I was just about to call you...” She took a quick glance at the clock on the wall. “You’re on time! You’re really a rare pearl! Are you sure you have Italian origins, and not Swiss?” She laughed at her own punch line.

I smiled politely, adjusting my step to hers as she climbed the stairs. We passed the door of my bedroom, apparently directed down the hall, towards a thick door.

Without interrupting her chatter, she knocked on the door three times, and opened it.

I stood behind her, my legs trembling as she peered into the room.

“Mr Mc Laine... Miss Bruno is here.”

“It’s about time. She’s late”. The voice sounded rough and rude.

The housekeeper broke out in a loud laughter; she was used to her employer’s ill humour.

“Just by a minute, sir. Don’t forget she got here. I made her lose time because...”

“Let her in, Millicent.” His interruption was abrupt, almost like a whip, and I jumped in place of the other woman who, unscathed, turned to look at me.

“Mr Mc Laine is awaiting you Miss Bruno. Please, come in.”

The woman retreated, waving me in. I gave her a last worried look. Trying to encourage me, she whispered “Good luck.”

It had the opposite effect on me. My brain was reduced to a liquefied pulp, devoid of logic, or knowledge of time and space.

I dared a shy step inside the room. Before I saw anything I heard his voice dismissing someone.

“You can go Kyle. See you tomorrow. Be on time please. I won’t tolerate further delays.”

A man was standing, a few feet away from me, tall and vital. He stared at me and greeted me with a nod of his head and he sent me an appreciative glance as he walked past me.

“Good evening.”

“Good evening,” I replied, staring at him longer than needed in order to delay the moment in which I would make a fool of myself; I was sure that I would have let Mrs Mc Millian down, and lose my silly hopes.

The door closed behind me, and I remembered my good manners.

“Good evening, Mr Mc Laine. My name is Melisande Bruno, I’m from London and...”

“Spare me your list of skills, Miss Bruno. Which is quite modest, anyhow.” The voice was now bored.

My eyes lifted, finally ready to meet those of my opponent. And when they did, I thanked God for having greeted him first. Because now it would've been hard for me to even remember my name.

He was sitting behind the desk, on his wheelchair, one hand outstretched on the edge, touching the wood, the other playing with an ink pen, his dark eyes locked on mine, unfathomable. Again, I regretted not being able to see colours. I would have given a year of my life to distinguish the colours of his face and hair. But such joy was forbidden to me. Without appeal. In a flicker of rationality I realized that he was gorgeous: his face of an unnatural pallor, black eyes, shaded by long lashes, black, wavy and thick hair.

“Are you mute, by chance? Or deaf?”

I dropped back down on earth, precipitating from dizzying heights. I could almost to hear my limbs crashing on the ground. A loud and frightening rumble, followed by a scary and devastating crunch.

“Excuse me, I was distracted,” I whispered, blushing instantly.

He looked at me with exaggerated attention. It seemed as though he was memorizing every single feature of my face, dwelling on my throat. I blushed even more. For the first time in my life I longed for my birth defect to be shared by another human being. It would have been less embarrassing if Mr Mc Laine, in his aristocratic and triumphant beauty, couldn't notice the redness flowing violently over every inch of my skin.

I swayed on my feet uncomfortably, under his blatant examination. He continued his scrutiny, gazing at my hair.

“You should die your hair. Or else people might mistake it for fire. I wouldn’t want you to end up under the assault of a hundred fire extinguishers.” His inscrutable expression got a little animated, and a sparkle of amusement shone in his eyes.

“I didn’t choose this colour,” I said, gathering all the dignity I was capable of. “The Lord did.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you religious, Miss Bruno?”

“Are you, sir?”

He placed the pen on his desk, without taking his eyes off of me. “There is no proof that God exists.”

“Or that he doesn’t exist,” I replied with a challenging tone, surprising even myself for the vehemence with which I spoke.

His lips curled into a mocking smile, and then he pointed to the upholstered armchair. “Sit down”. It was an order, rather than an invitation. Nevertheless, I obeyed instantly.

“You didn’t answer my question, Miss Bruno. Are you religious?”

“I’m a believer, Mr Mc Laine,” I said quietly. “But I’m not much of a church-goer. In fact, I never do.”

“Scotland is one of the few Anglo-Saxon nations to practice Catholicism with unparalleled dedication and devotion.” His sarcasm was unmistakable. “I’m the exception that confirms the rule... Isn’t that so? Let’s just say that I only believe in myself, and in what I can touch.”

He leaned back on the wheelchair, tapping on the armrests with his fingertips. Yet I didn't, for a second, have the impression that he was vulnerable or fragile. His expression was that of a person who had escaped flames, and is not afraid of jumping back into them, if he considered it necessary. Or simply, if he felt like it. I pulled my gaze away from his face. It was bright, almost translucent, a glossy bright white, unlike the faces I was used to seeing. It was demanding to look at him, and even listening to his hypnotic voice. He seemed a snake charmer, and any woman would be delighted to suffer his enchantment, and the secret spell stemming from him, from that perfect face and from his mocking glance.

“So you're my new secretary, Miss Bruno.”

“If you confirm my job, Mr Mc Laine,” I said, looking up.

He smiled ambiguously. “Why shouldn't I hire you? Because you don't go to church on Sundays? You must think I'm very shallow if you believe that I'll send you away or... keep you here on the basis of our short chat.”

“Likewise I don't know you enough to make such an unflattering judgment on you,” I agreed smiling. “I'm aware, however, that a profitable employment relationship also arises from an immediate liking and from a favourable first impression.”

His laughter was so unexpected that I jumped. With the same suddenness with which it was born, it died. He stared at me coldly.

“Do you really think it’s easy to find employees willing to move to this village forgotten by God and the world, distant from any fun, mall or disco? You were the only one who answered the ad, Miss Bruno.”

The amusement was lurking behind the frost in his eyes. A sheet of black ice, broken by a thin crack of good humour that warmed my soul.

“Then I won’t have to worry about the competition,” I said, folding my hands nervously in my lap.

He studied me again, with the same irritating curiosity with which he would gaze at a rare animal.

I swallowed my saliva, displaying a fictitious and dangerously precarious ease. For a moment, just enough to formulate a thought, I told myself that I had to escape from that house, from that room overflowing with books and from that disturbing and gorgeous man. I felt like a helpless kitten, a few inches away from a lion’s mouth. A cruel predator and a helpless prey. Then the sensation vanished, and I was ashamed of my foolishness. Before me there was a man with an unrestrained personality, arrogant and overbearing, who for a long time had been condemned to a wheel chair. I was the prey of the moment, a shy girl, fearful and afraid of changes. Why not let him have his way? If he enjoyed making fun of me, why did I have to preclude him the only fun and entertainment he could have? It was almost noble on my part, in a way.

“What do you think of me, Miss Bruno?”

Once again, I forced him to repeat the question, and once again I surprised him.

“I didn’t think you’d be so young.”

He stiffened instantly, and I fell silent, fearful of having upset him somehow. He pulled himself back together, and captured me with another of his heart stopping smiles. “Is that so?”

I moved restlessly on the chair, undecided about how to continue. At that point, summoning all my nerve and encouraged by his gaze, locked on mine, in a silent and exciting dance, I started talking again.

“Well... you wrote your first book when you were twenty-five years old, fifteen years ago, I think. Yet you look as though you’re slightly older than me,” I spoke my thoughts out loud.

“How old are you, Miss Bruno?”

“I’m twenty-two, sir,” I said, again lost in the depths of his eyes.

“I’m really too old for you, Miss Bruno,” he said with a chuckle. Then he lowered his gaze, and again the cold winter night came over him, as cruel as a snake. Every trace of warmth disappeared. “Anyhow, don’t worry. You won’t have to worry about sexual harassment while you sleep in your bed. As you see, I’m condemned to immobility.”

I fell silent because I didn’t know what to answer. His tone was bitter and forlorn, his face sculpted in stone.

His eyes pierced mine, looking for something that he didn’t seem to find. He gave me a small smile. “At least you don’t pity

me. I'm glad. I don't want it, I don't need it. I'm happier than many others, Miss Bruno because I'm free, in a complete and most absolute way." He frowned. "What are you still doing here? You may leave."

The sudden dismissal disturbed me. I stood up hesitantly, and he vented his anger on me.

"Are you still here? What do you want? Your salary already? Or do you want to talk about your day off?" He accused me irritably.

"No, Mr Mc Laine." I awkwardly went to the door. I already had my hand on the handle when he stopped me.

"I'll see you at nine in the morning, Miss Bruno. I'm writing a new book, the title is: The unburied dead. Do you find it creepy?" His smile widened.

Sudden mood swings had to be a dominant trait of his personality.

I had to remember that in the future, or I'd risk a hysterical break down at least twenty times a day. "It sounds interesting, sir," I replied cautiously.

He rolled his head back and laughed heartily. "Interesting! I bet you haven't ever read one of my books, Miss Bruno. You seem to have a delicate stomach... You wouldn't sleep all night, haunted by nightmares..." He laughed again, suddenly speaking to her with familiarity, proving again that he was subject to mood swings.

"I'm not as sensitive as I seem, sir," I replied, sparking another

wave of laughter.

He maneuvered the wheelchair with his hands as smooth as a feline and with an admirable ability, born from years and years of practice, and he came to my side surprisingly fast. He was so close I couldn't muster a rational thought. Instinctively, I took a step back. He pretended not to notice my movement, and pointed to the bookcase on my right.

“Get the fourth book from the left, third shelf.”

Obedient, I grabbed the book he was pointing to. The title was familiar to me because I had carried out a search on him on the Internet before I left, but indeed I had never read any of his work. Horror stories were not my kind, definitely they were more suitable for strong palates, and unfit for me, for I preferred a more delicate and romantic literature.

“Zombie on the way,” I read loudly.

“It's the best one for starts. It's the least... how can I say it? Least frightening?” He laughed whole-heartedly, obviously at me, and at the uncomfortable awkwardness that transpired from every pore of my body.

“Why don't you start reading it tonight? Just to prepare for your new job,” he suggested, his eyes laughing.

“Okay, I'll do it,” I said with little enthusiasm.

“I'll see you tomorrow morning, Miss Bruno,” he dismissed me, again with a serious expression. “Lock the door to your room; I wouldn't want the spirits of the palace to visit you tonight, or some other dreadful night creature. You know what I mean...”

He paused, with a flash of merriment in the darkness of his eyes. “As I said before, it’s difficult to find employees out here.”

I tried to smile, although I wasn’t very convincing.

“Good night, Mr Mc Laine.” Before closing the door I couldn’t help myself and I blurted “I don’t believe in spirits or night creatures.”

“Are you sure?”

“There is no proof of their existence, sir,” I answered involuntarily copying his previous statement.

“Nor that they don’t exist,” he replied. He turned his wheelchair and went back to his desk.

I closed the door gently, demoralized. Maybe he was right, and zombies did exist. For sure at that moment I felt like one of them. Dazed, my thoughts were fuzzy and I felt suspended in a limbo, where I no longer knew how to distinguish between real and unreal. It was worse than not being able to distinguish colours.

I dined listlessly in the company of Mrs Mc Millian: my mind was elsewhere, with someone else. I feared I wouldn’t recover my thoughts until the next morning, when I would return to where I had left them. Something told me that I had entrusted my gullible heart to the wrong person.

I remember very little of the conversation I had with the housekeeper that night. She was the only one who spoke, incessantly. She seemed to be in seventh heaven, for she finally had someone to talk to. Or rather, someone to listen to her. I was

perfect for that. I was too polite to interrupt her, too respectful to show my disinterest, too busy to think of other things, therefore I didn't feel the need to be alone. If I had been alone, all my thoughts would've certainly been focused on him.

In my room, an hour later, sitting comfortably in bed, with my head resting on the pillows, I opened the book and started reading. I was already terrified when I reached the second page, and foolishly so, considering it was just a book.

In spite of my common sense, of which, in theory, I was well-supplied, the atmosphere in the room became suffocating, and I felt the need to get a breath of fresh air.

I walked barefoot through the darkened room and opened the window. I sat on the windowsill, soaking in the warm, late summer night; the silence was broken only by the chirping of the crickets and by the call of an owl. It was pleasant to be far away from the frenzy of London, from its fast rhythms, always on the brink of hysteria. The night was a black quilt, apart from a few white stars here and there. I liked the night, and I idly thought that I would've liked to be a night creature. Darkness was my ally. Without light everything is black, and my genetic inability to

distinguish colours was meaningless. At night my eyes were the same as those of any another person. For a few hours I didn't feel different. A temporary relief, of course, but it was as refreshing as cool water on warm skin.

The next morning I woke up to the sound of the alarm clock, and stayed in bed for a few minutes, bemused. Following my

initial confusion, I remembered what happened the day before, and I recognized the room.

Once dressed, I went downstairs, almost frightened by the deep silence around me. The sight of Millicent Mc Millian, cheerful and loquacious as ever, dissolved the fog and brought peace to my turbulent mind.

“Did you sleep well, Miss Bruno?” She began.

“I’ve never slept better,” I said, surprised to realize that it was true. For years, I hadn’t abandoned myself so serenely to sleep; I had set aside my negative thoughts for at least a few hours.

“Do you want coffee or tea?”

“Tea, please,” I accepted, sitting at the kitchen table.

“Go to the living room, I’ll serve it in there.”

“I’d rather have breakfast with you,” I said, stifling a yawn.

The woman seemed pleased and began to bustle around the stove. She resumed her usual chatter, and I was free to think of Monique. I wondered what she was doing at that hour. Had she already prepared breakfast? The thought of my sister again put the weight on my thin shoulders, and I gladly welcomed the arrival of my cup of tea.

“Thank you, Mrs Mc Millian.” I happily sipped the warm and pleasantly perfumed drink, while the housekeeper served toast and a series of little jars full of various inviting jams.

“Try the raspberry jam. It’s fabulous.”

I reached towards the tray; my heart was already in fibrillation. My diversity came back to bury me. Why me? Were there others

like me in the world? Or was I an isolated anomaly, a wacky joke of nature?

I randomly grabbed a jar, hoping that the old woman would be too busy to notice my mistake. There were five different jams, so I had a chance in five, two out of ten, twenty per cent to pick the right one at my first attempt.

She hurried to correct me, less distracted than I thought. “No, Miss. That's orange.” She smiled, not at all conscious of the agitation that was mounting in me, and of my sweaty forehead. She passed me a jar. “Here, it's easy to confuse it with the strawberry jam.”

She didn't notice my forced smile, and resumed telling me of her love story with a young Florentine who in the end left her for a South American girl.

I ate half-heartedly, still nervous because of the incident, and I already regretted not having accepted to eat alone. That way I would have had no problems. Avoiding potentially critical situations was my mantra. It always had been. I had to make sure that the delightful atmosphere of the house wouldn't make me act recklessly and forget the necessary prudence. Mrs Mc Millian seemed to be a smart, intelligent and thoughtful woman, but she talked too much. I couldn't count on her discretion.

She paused to drink her tea, and I decided to ask her some questions. “Have you been working for Mr Mc Laine for many years?”

She brightened, happy to be able to tell me new stories. “I've

been here for fifteen years. I arrived a few months after Mr Mc Laine's accident. The one in which... Well, you understand. All the previous servants had been sent away. It seems that Mr Mc Laine was a very cheerful man, who loved life and was always happy. Unfortunately, now things have changed."

"How did it happen? I mean... The accident? That is... please forgive my curiosity, it's inexcusable." I bit my lip, fearful of being misunderstood.

She shook her head. "It's normal to ask questions; it's part of human nature. I don't know exactly what happened. At the village I was told that Mr Mc Laine was to be married the day after the car accident and of course the wedding was called off. Some say he was drunk, but I think that it's just an unsubstantiated rumour. What we know for sure is that he went off the road to avoid a child."

My curiosity was aroused, fuelled by her words. "A Child? I read on the internet that the accident happened at night."

She shrugged. "Right, it seems that it was the grocer's son. He had run away from home because he decided to join the circus company which was on tour in the area."

I dwelled on that news. This explained Mr Mc Laine's sudden mood changes, his constant bad mood, and his unhappiness.

It was understandable. His world had crumbled, broken into pieces, as a result of a wretched fate. A young, wealthy, handsome man; a successful writer, about to fulfil his dream of love... And in a matter of seconds he had lost almost all he

had. I would probably never experience such bad luck, but I could imagine it. You can't miss what you don't have. My only companion had always been Nothingness.

A quick glance at my wristwatch confirmed that it was time to go. It was my first day of work. My heart beat faster, and in a glimmer of rationality I wondered if it depended on the new job or on the mysterious master of that house.

I climbed the stairs two by two, irrationally afraid of being late. In the hallway I crossed Kyle, the nurse-handyman. "Good morning".

I slowed down, embarrassed because he caught me rushing. He must have thought that I was insecure, or worse yet, rash.

"Good morning".

"It's Miss Bruno, isn't it? Can I call you by your name? After all we're in the same boat, at the mercy of a crazy lunatic." The harsh and brutal ruthlessness of his words surprised me.

"I know, I'm disrespectful to my employer, and so on. You'll soon learn to agree with me. What's your name?"

"Melisande".

He bent in an awkward bow. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, red-haired Melisande. Your name is really unusual, it's not Scottish... Even though you look more Scottish than I do."

I smiled politely, and tried to move past him, still fearing to be late. But he blocked my way, standing on the landing with his legs stretched out. The timely intervention of a third person

cleared the situation.

“Miss Bruno! I won’t tolerate any delays!” The cry undoubtedly came from my new employer, and it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Kyle moved out of the way immediately, allowing me to pass. “Good luck, red-haired Melisande. You’ll need it.”

I gave him a fierce look, and ran to the door at the far end of the hallway. It was half closed, and a smoke ring was coming out of it.

Sebastian Mc Laine was sitting behind the desk, like the previous day, holding a cigar between his fingers, and his face was unyielding.

“Close the door, please. And then sit down. I’ve already wasted enough time while you socialized with the rest of the staff.” His tone was harsh and insulting.

An act of rebellion pushed me to answer, like a reckless lamb in front of a wolf.

“It was just normal courtesy. Or would you prefer a rude secretary? In that case I can leave. Immediately.”

My impulsive response took him by surprise. His face lit up with amazement, the same that probably was reflected on mine. I had never been so daring.

“And here I had already labelled you as a toothless dog... That was hasty of me... Really too hasty.”

I sat in front of him; my legs no longer supported me, regretting my irresponsible frankness. I was terrified of the

potential explosive consequences.

My employer didn't seem offended, indeed. He smiled. "What's your name, Miss Bruno?"

"Melisande," I replied automatically.

"Debussy, I guess. Did your parents love music? Maybe they were performers?"

"My dad was a miner," I confessed reluctantly.

"Melisande... A pretentious name for the daughter of a miner," he remarked, his voice vibrant with a restrained laugh. He was playing with me, and in spite of my decision of the day before, I wasn't sure I wanted to let him do it. It would surely become his favourite diversion.

I straightened my shoulders, trying to recover my lost composure. "And why Sebastian? From Saint Sebastian, maybe? A very inappropriate choice."

He absorbed the blow, wrinkling his nose for an infinitesimal moment. "Hide your claws, Melisande Bruno. I'm not in war with you. If I were, you'd have no hope to win. Never. Not even in your most daring dreams."

"I never dream, sir," I answered with as much dignity as possible.

He seemed impressed by my answer, sensing that it was extremely honest. "You're lucky then. Dreams are always a scam. If you have nightmares they upset your sleep. If you have pleasant dreams, the awakening will be doubly bitter. It's best not to dream, after all." His eyes didn't leave mine, they were

captivating. “You're an interesting character, Melisande. A little slip of a thing, but funny” he added teasingly.

“I'm glad that I have the necessary requirements for this job, then,” I said, ironically.

I tortured my lower lip with my teeth, overwhelmed by repentance. What was happening to me? I had never reacted with such deplorable impulsiveness. I had to stop it before I lost my control completely.

His smile now went from ear to ear, amused beyond words. “Indeed you do. I'm sure we'll get along well. A secretary who has no dreams, like her boss. There's a special affinity between us, Melisande. In a certain sense, between our souls. Apart from the fact that one of us has no longer had one for a long time now...”

Before I could make sense of his ambiguous words, he returned serious, his eyes were again inscrutable, distant and lifeless.

“You must send a fax of the first chapters of the book to my publisher. Do you know how to do it?”

I nodded, and with a pang I realized that I already missed our verbal joust. I wished it would last forever. I had drawn from that exchange as if it were a miraculous source, filling me with vitality and an exceptional energy.

The next two hours flew by. I sent several faxes, opened the mail, wrote letters of refusal for various invitations, and sorted out the desk. He silently wrote on the computer; his forehead

corrugated, his lips narrow, his white, elegant hands flying on the keyboard. Toward lunch time, he caught my attention with a wave of his hand.

“You can take a break, Melisande. If you like you may eat something, or take a walk.”

“Thank you sir”.

“Did you start reading my book, the one that I gave you?” His face was still far remote, immobile, but a flash of good humour showed in his black eyes.

“You were right, sir. It's not exactly my kind of literature,” I said sincerely.

His lips curled slightly, in an oblique smile, able to penetrate the armour of my defences. An armour that I thought was stronger than steel.

“I don't doubt it. I bet you prefer Romeo and Juliet.”

There was no irony in his voice; he was just making a statement.

“No, sir.” Controversy became natural to me, as if we had known each other forever, and I could be myself, fully, without deceptions or masks. “I just love stories with a happy ending. Life is already too bitter, I'd hate to make things worse with a book. If I'm not allowed to dream at night, I'd like to do it at least by day. If I'm not allowed to dream in life, I want to do it at least with a book.”

He carefully considered my words, for such a long time that I thought he wouldn't answer. When I was about to leave he

stopped me.

“Did Mrs Mc Millian explain the name of this house?”

“She may have done it,” I admitted with a half-smile. “I fear, however, that I only listened to her half-heartedly.”

“Good for you, I get lost after the tenth word,” he complimented her without sarcasm. “I’ve never had a generous spirit. I’m selfish.”

“Sometimes you have to be,” I said without thinking. “Or else other people’s expectations will crush you. And you’ll end up living the life that others have decided for you.”

“Very wise, Melisande Bruno. You’ve found the key to spiritual peacefulness and you’re only twenty-two years old. Not many people manage to succeed in doing so.”

“Peacefulness?” I repeated bitterly. “No, the wisdom of knowing something doesn’t necessarily mean you accept it. Wisdom is born in our minds; our heart follows its own path independently, although dangerous. And it tends to make fatal deviations.”

He moved his wheelchair, and came to my side of the desk, his eyes probing. “Well? Are you curious to learn the reason for the name Midnight Rose? Or aren’t you?”

“Midnight Rose” I translated, struggling against the emotion of having him so close. I had avoided male company for a long time, since my first and only date. It had been so disastrous to mark me forever.

“Right. In this region there is a legend of centuries, or perhaps

thousands of years ago, according to which if we witness the blossoming of a rose at midnight, our greatest and secret wish will magically come true. Even if it's an obscure and cursed wish.”

He clenched his hands, almost challenging me with his eyes.

“If a person wishes something that will make him happy, it's never obscure and cursed,” I said calmly.

He looked at me carefully, as if he couldn't believe his ears. A devilish laughter escaped him. I felt a chill run down my back.

“Very wise, Melisande Bruno. I'll admit that. Those words are scandalous for a girl who couldn't kill a mosquito without crying.”

“A fly maybe. With a mosquito I wouldn't have any problems,” I said bluntly.

Again he became alert, a dim flame warming the frost of those dark eyes. “How much valuable information I've learned about you, Miss Bruno. In a few hours, I've found out that you're the daughter of a former miner with a passion for Debussy; you can't dream and you hate mosquitoes. I wonder why. What did those poor creatures ever do to you?” I heard the amusement in his voice.

“Poor my foot,” I replied promptly. “They are parasites; they feed on people's blood. They are useless insects, unlike bees, and not even as pleasant as flies are.”

He hit his hand on his thigh, laughing out. “Flies are pleasant? You're very strange Melisande, and very funny, maybe too much

so.”

As unpredictable as the weather in March, his mood changed abruptly. His laughter choked into a cough, and he stared at me again. “Mosquitoes suck blood because they have no other choice, my dear. It’s their only source of livelihood, can you blame them? They have refined tastes, unlike the praised flies that are used to wallowing in human waste.”

I gazed at the desktop, cluttered with papers, uncomfortable under his cold stare.

“What would you do if you were a mosquito, Melisande? Would you give up eating? Would you starve to death so you wouldn’t be labelled as a parasite?” His tone was unrelenting, as if he required an answer.

I contented him. “Probably not. But I’m not sure. I would have to be in a mosquito’s place, to be sure of it. I like to believe that I could find an alternative.” I carefully kept my gaze off of him.

“We don’t always have an alternative, Melisande.” For a moment his voice trembled, under the burden of a pain that I knew nothing of and that he had come to terms with every day for the past fifteen years. “See you at two o’clock, Miss Bruno. Be on time.”

When I turned to him, he had already turned the wheelchair, hiding his face.

The awareness of having made a mistake crushed my heart in a vice, but I couldn’t make it up to him in any way.

Silently, I left the room.

Chapter three

At two o'clock, I entered the office. Kyle was leaving, carrying an intact tray, with the air of a person who wants to drop everything and everyone and move to the other end of the world.

“He’s in a foul mood, and he refused to eat anything,” he mumbled.

The thought of being the involuntary cause of his state of mind struck me deeply in every fibre of my being, in every single cell. I had never hurt anyone, almost walking on the tips of my toes, so as to not disturb, mindful of every word I uttered so that I wouldn’t hurt anyone.

I stepped over the threshold, one hand leaning against the frame of the door left open by Kyle. At my entrance his eyes lifted. “Oh, it’s you. Come in, Miss Bruno. Hurry up, please.”

I hurriedly obeyed.

He pushed some sheets on the desk written with a male calligraphy towards me. “Send these letters. One goes to the manager of my bank, and the others to the addresses on the bottom.”

“Right away, Mr Mc Laine,” I replied reverently.

When I raised my eyes on his face I joyfully noticed that he was smiling again.

“How formal, Miss Bruno. There’s no hurry. These letters aren’t that important. It’s not a matter of life and death. I’ve been

a living dead person for many years now.”

In spite of the rawness of his statement, he seemed to be in a good mood again. His smile was contagious, and it warmed my turbulent soul. Luckily, he never stayed angry for too long, even though his anger was frightening and violent.

“Can you drive, Melisande? I need to send you to pick some books up for me at the local library. You know, for research.” The smile was replaced by a grimace. “Of course I can’t go,” he explained.

Embarrassed, I squeezed the sheets in my hands, risking creasing them. “I don’t have a license, sir,” I apologized.

Surprise altered his beautiful features. “I thought that today’s youth was in a hurry to grow up exclusively to have the right to drive. Usually, they secretly do it before then.”

“I’m different, sir,” I said laconically. And I really was. I was almost an alien in my diversity.

He looked at me with those black eyes that pierced through me like radar. I held his gaze, inventing a plausible excuse then and there.

“I’m afraid of driving, and therefore, I’d probably end up causing some disaster,” I explained quickly, smoothing out the wrinkles from the sheets that I had crumpled.

“After all the sincerity on your part, I smell a lie,” he chanted.

“It’s the truth. I could really…” I lost my voice for a long moment, and then I tried again. “I could really kill someone.”

“Death is the lesser evil,” he whispered. He lowered his eyes

on his legs, and he clutched his jaw.

I mentally cursed myself. Again. I was really a troublemaker, even without a steering wheel between my hands. I proved to be a menace, unforgivably insensitive and only capable of making mistakes.

“Did I offend you, Mr Mc Laine?” I asked anxiously, and he snapped out of his slumber.

“Melisande Bruno, a young woman from who knows where, as weird and funny as a cartoon... How can this girl offend the great horror novelist, the devilish and depraved Sebastian Mc Laine?” His voice was flat, compared to the harshness of his sentences.

I twisted my hands, as nervous as I was at our first encounter. “You’re right, sir. I am nobody. And...”

His eyes thinned, threateningly. “Indeed. You aren’t a nobody. You are Melisande Bruno. Therefore you are someone. Never allow anyone to humiliate you, not even me.”

“I should learn to be quiet. I managed to do so very well before coming to this house,” I murmured gloomily, my head bent.

“Midnight rose has the power to bring out the worst of you, Melisande Bruno? Or am I the one who possesses such an incredible ability?” He offered me a kind smile, with the generosity of a king.

I happily accepted that silent peace offer, and found my smile again. “I think it depends on you, sir,” I admitted in a low voice, as if I were confessing a capital sin.

“I already knew that I was a devil,” he said solemnly. “But am

I that bad? You leave me speechless...”

“If you want I could get you a vocabulary,” I said humorously. The atmosphere was lighter, and so was my heart.

“I think you’re the real devil, Melisande Bruno,” he continued to tease me. “Satan in person must have sent you here, to disturb my peacefulness.”

“Peacefulness? Are you sure you’re it wasn’t boredom?” I asked.

“If it was, with you here, I’ll never experience it again, that’s for sure. Perhaps, as time goes by, I’ll end up regretting it,” he said with emphasis.

We were both laughing, on the same wavelength, when someone knocked three times on the door.

“Mrs Mc Millian,” he anticipated, without looking away from my face.

I reluctantly looked away from him to welcome the housekeeper.

“Dr Mc Intosh is here, sir,” said the good lady, with a hint of anxiety in her voice.

The writer instantly got upset. “Is it Tuesday already?”

“Of course, sir. Do you want me to show him to your room?” She asked kindly.

“All right. Call Kyle,” he ordered, with a harsh voice. He spoke to me in a tone that was even more severe. “See you later, Miss Bruno.”

I followed the housekeeper down the stairs. She answered my

unexpressed question. “Dr Mc Intosh is the local doctor. Every Tuesday he comes to visit Mr Mc Laine. Apart from his paralysis, he's as healthy as a fish, but his visits have become a habit, and also a precaution.”

“Is his...” I hesitated, trying to choose the right words “...condition irreversible?”

“Unfortunately yes, there are no hopes” was her sad confirmation.

At the foot of the stairs a man waited, dangling the briefcase with his instruments.

“Well Millicent? Did he forget about my examination again?” The man winked at me, trying to involve me. “You must be the new secretary, right? Then you'll have to remind him of his future appointments. Every Tuesday, at three o'clock in the afternoon.” He held out his hand with a friendly smile. “I'm the local doctor. John McIntosh”.

He was a tall man, almost like Kyle, but older, perhaps between sixty and seventy years old.

“And I'm Melisande Bruno,” I said, shaking his hand.

“An exotic name for a beauty worthy of Scottish women.” The admiration in his eyes was eloquent. I smiled gratefully. Before arriving in that village that wasn't even marked on the maps, I was considered pretty, at the most graceful, but most often just acceptable. Never beautiful.

Mrs Mc Millian was delighted by that compliment, as if she were my mother and I the daughter to be married. Luckily, the

doctor was elderly and married, judging by the big wedding ring on his finger, or else she would probably start matchmaking to organize a beautiful marriage in the idyllic frame of Midnight Rose.

Once she ushered him upstairs, she came back to me, with a mischievous expression on her thin face. "It's a pity he's married. He would be a wonderful catch for you."

Too bad he's old; I would have liked to add. I stopped myself just in time when I remembered that Mrs Mc Millian was at least fifty years old and that she probably found the doctor attractive and desirable.

"I'm not looking for a boyfriend," I reminded her firmly. "I hope you won't start trying to set me up with Kyle."

She shook her head. "He's also married. I mean... He's separated, which is uncommon around here. Anyhow, I don't like him. There's something unsettling and lascivious about him."

I was about to argue on the point that I was the one who was supposed to like him in the first place, then I thought better of it. Mainly because I didn't like Kyle either. He wasn't exactly the type of man I would ever dream of, if I could. No, I was being unfair. The truth was that having met the enigmatic and complicated Sebastian Mc Laine, it was difficult to find someone who could measure up to him. I mentally scowled myself. It would have been pathetic and predictable of me to fall into the net stretched by the handsome writer. He was just my employer, and I didn't want to end up like millions of other secretaries who

fell in love with their bosses. Wheelchair or not, Sebastian Mc Laine was out of my reach.

Undeniably so.

“I’ll go upstairs,” I said. “How long do the visits last, usually?”

The housekeeper laughed cheerfully. “Longer than Mr Mc Laine can bear.” She started a series of tales about the doctors’ examinations. I broke her off immediately, with the firm conviction that if I hadn’t interrupted her in time I would still be there the following Tuesday, listening to her tales.

When I reached the landing, my steps noiseless on the soft carpet, I saw Kyle emerge from a bedroom. It seemed to me to be the one of our employer.

He noticed me and winked confidentially. I kept to myself and refused to play along with him. Mrs Mc Millian was right, I thought as he reached me; there was something deeply disturbing about him.

“Every Tuesday the same story. I wish Mc Intosh would end these unnecessary visits. The result is always the same. As soon as he goes away, I’ll suffer his patient’s bad mood.” His smile widened. “As you will.”

I shrugged. “It’s our job, isn’t it? Aren’t we paid for that, too?”

“Maybe not enough. He’s really unbearable.” I was stunned by such a disrespectful tone. I wasn’t sure if it was just the frankness of country people, genuine in their ruthless judgments. There was more to it, like a feeling of envy towards whoever could afford not to work, but to live out their hobbies, like Mc Laine. To

envy him, although he was relegated to a wheelchair, imprisoned in his house, was preposterous.

“You shouldn’t speak like that” I admonished him, lowering my voice. “What if he heard you?”

“It’s not easy to find employees around here. It would be difficult for him to replace me.” He said it as a fact, condescendingly, as if he were doing him a favour. Those words were the same of those of Mc Laine, and I realized their intrinsic truth.

“Here there are no opportunities to have fun,” he continued, in a more insinuating tone now. Casually, at least apparently, he moved a lock of hair from my forehead. I suddenly moved backwards, annoyed by his warm breath on my face.

“Perhaps the next time I touch you, you’ll appreciate it more,” he said, not at all offended.

The confidence with which he spoke sparked my fury. “There won’t be a next time,” I hissed. “I’m not seeking for distractions, and certainly not of this kind.”

“Sure, sure. For the moment.”

I remained silent, even though I would have liked to give him a kick in the shin, or a slap on his unpleasant face.

I marched down the hallway, ignoring his quiet laughter.

I was already opening the door to my room, when Mr Mc Laine’s door sprung open, and I could clearly hear his voice, no longer stifled.

“Get out of this house, Mc Intosh! And if you really want to

do me a favour, don't come back anymore."

The doctor's response was calm, as if he were used to those bursts of anger.

"I'll be back, Sebastian, at the same time next Tuesday. Oh, and I'm glad to find you as healthy as a fish. Your appearance and your body can compete with those of a twenty year old boy."

"What good news, Mc Intosh." The voice of the other was ironic. "I'll go out to celebrate. Maybe I'll also go dancing."

The doctor closed the door without answering. As he turned, he saw me and gave me a tired smile. "You'll get used to his dancing moods. He's quite pleasant when he wants to be. That is, very rarely."

I loyally ran in defence of my boss. "Anyone in his place..."

Mc Intosh kept smiling. "Not anyone. Everyone reacts in his own way, Miss. Keep that in mind. After fifteen years he should have at least accepted it. But I'm afraid Sebastian doesn't know the meaning of this word. He's so..." He had a slight hesitation. "...passionate. In the broadest sense of the word. He's impetuous, volcanic, and stubborn. It's a terrible tragedy that this happened to him of all people." He shook his head, as if the divine retributions seemed unfathomable to him, then he briefly bid me farewell and left.

At that point I didn't know what to do. I looked at the door to my room. I was tempted to run inside and hide. I was afraid to face Mc Laine after his recent anger. Even though it wasn't addressed to me. Once again the decision was made for me.

“Miss Bruno! Come here right now!”

To be heard through that thick oak door, he had to shout out loud. This was too much for my shaken nerves. I opened his door; my feet moved by force of inertia.

It was the first time I entered his bedroom, but the furniture left me indifferent. My eyes were instantly attracted to the figure lying on the bed.

“Where's Kyle?” He asked me sharply. “He's the laziest person I've ever known.”

“I'll go look for him,” I offered, happy to have a plausible excuse to escape from that room, that man and that moment.

He shocked me with the strength of his cold look. “Later. Now come in.”

Somehow the fear I felt subsided enough to let me to enter his room with a high head.

“Can I do something for you?”

“And what could you do?” An ironic smile quivered on his full lips. “Give me your legs? Would you do it, if it was possible Melisande Bruno? How much are your legs worth? One, two, three million pounds?”

“I would never do it for money,” I said impulsively.

“He levered his weight on his elbows, and stared at me.” What about love? Would you do it for love, Melisande Bruno?”

He was teasing me, as usual, I told myself. Yet, for a few moments, I had the impression that invisible wind gusts were pushing me in his arms. The momentary moment of madness

passed and I recovered, recalling that this was an unknown stranger in front of me, and not the sparkling prince in shining armour that I couldn't dream of. And certainly not a man who could fall in love with me. Under normal circumstances I would never have been in that room, sharing his most intimate moments. A moment in which he wore no mask, bereft of any defences, stripped of any formality imposed by the outside world.

"I've never loved anyone, sir," I said thoughtfully. "Therefore I don't know what I would do in that case. Would I make such a sacrifice for my loved one? I don't know. Really."

His eyes didn't leave me, as if they were unable to do so. Or maybe I was just imagining it, because that was how I felt at that moment.

"It's a purely hypothetical question, Melisande. Do you think that if you really fell in love with someone... you would give him your legs, or your soul?" His expression was unreadable.

"Would you do it, sir?"

At this point, he laughed. A laugh that echoed in the room, unexpected and fresh as spring wind.

"I would, Melisande. Maybe because I've loved, and I know what it feels like." He glanced at me, as if he expected me to make some questions, but I didn't. I didn't know what to say. He could talk about wine or astronomy, and the result would've been the same. I wasn't able to debate about love. Because, in fact, I had no idea of what it was.

"Bring the wheelchair nearer," he said finally, in a

commanding tone.

Pleased to fulfil a task I was prepared for, I obeyed. His arms struggled in the effort, and he slipped into his torture device with a consummate ability. It was so hated, but necessary and precious.

“I understand how you feel,” I said compassionately.

He looked up at me. A vein pulsed in his right temple, triggered by my comment.

“You have no idea how I feel,” he said succinctly. “I’m different. Different, do you understand?”

“I’ve been different since I was born, sir. I can understand you, believe me,” I weakly defended myself.

He tried to catch my gaze, but I didn’t allow him.

There was a knock on the door, and I welcomed Kyle’s arrival, who walked in with a blank expression.

“Do you need me, Mr Mc Laine?”

The writer made a gesture of anger. “Where have you been, you lazy bum?”

A flash of rebellion flickered in the assistant’s eyes, but he didn’t comment.

“Wait for me in the study, Miss Bruno,” Mc Laine told me, his voice still trembling with repressed violence.

I didn’t look back as I left.

Chapter four

Several days passed before I managed to recover the initial alchemy with the owner of Midnight Rose.

I avoided Kyle like a plague, to discourage even the slightest hope he might have. His greedy eyes always sought to capture mine, every time he met me. But I kept him at arm's length, hoping that it would be enough to dissuade him from trying new, unpleasant approaches.

On the other hand, I began to appreciate Mrs Mc Millian's company. She was a smart woman, not a busybody as I had mistakenly judged her at first. She was totally loyal toward Mr Mc Laine, and this quality brought us very close. I carried out my duties with a passionate diligence, glad to be able, at least in part, to take some weight off his shoulders. I missed our arguments, and my heart threatened to explode when they resumed.

They started again unexpectedly, as they had the first time.

"Damn!"

I abruptly lifted my head, as I leaned over some of the documents I was rearranging. His eyes were closed, and he had a vulnerable expression on his boyish face that stirred me.

"Are you all right?"

His gaze was very cold, and I almost regretted that he had reopened his eyes.

"It's my damn publisher," he explained, waving a sheet. The

letter had arrived with the morning mail and I hadn't paid attention to it. It was my duty to sort through the mail, and I regretted not having given it to him sooner. Maybe he was angry with me for having missed an important letter. His next words revealed the mystery.

"I wish I had never received this letter," he said disgustedly. "He demands that I send him the rest of the manuscript."

My silence seemed to fuel his fury. "And I have no other chapters to send him."

"I've seen you write for days" I dared to say, puzzled.

"I've been writing crap for days, and I threw it all in there," he pointed to the fireplace.

I'd noticed that the fire had been lit the previous day, and it surprised me, considering the summer temperatures, but I didn't ask for explanations.

"Try speaking to your publisher. Do you want me to phone him?" I suggested quickly. "I'm sure he'll understand..."

He broke me off, shaking his hand sharply, as if trying to shoo a fly away. "He'll understand what? That I'm in the middle of a creative crisis? That I'm experiencing the classic writer's block?" His mocking smile made my heart beat fast, as though he had stroked it.

He threw the letter on the desk. "The book isn't moving forward. For the first time in my career I seem to have nothing to write, I feel as though I've exhausted my flair."

"Then do something else," I said impulsively.

He looked at me as if I were mad. “Sorry?”

“Take a break, just to understand what's going on,” I explained frantically.

“And what should I do? Go jogging? Take a car ride? Or play a tennis match?” The sarcasm in his voice was so sharp it tore me up. I could almost feel the sticky heat of the blood flowing from my wounds.

“There are not only physical hobbies,” I said, bending my head. “You could listen to some music, maybe. Or read something.”

Now, he would probably get rid of me in a flash, like the person who had suggested the worst nonsense in history. Instead, his eyes were alert, focused on me.

“Music. That’s not a bad idea. I don’t have anything else to do, do I?” He pointed to a record player on the top of the library. “Go get it, please.”

I climbed on the chair and pulled it down, admiring its details at the same time. “It's magnificent. It’s an original, isn’t it?”

He nodded as I placed it on the desk. “I've always loved antiques, although this is a bit more modern. In the red box you'll find some vinyl records.”

I stopped in front of the bookcase, my arms hanging along my hips. There were two dark boxes of similar size on the same shelf on which the record player had been. I passed my tongue over my dry lips, my throat parched.

He called me impatiently. “Move it, Miss Bruno. I know I'm

not going anywhere, but that doesn't justify your slowness. What are you? A turtle? Or did Kyle give you lessons?"

I would never get used to his sarcasm, I thought angrily, as I made a hasty decision. The time had come: should I confess my peculiar anomaly, or take the easy way out, as I had always done in the past? Such as grabbing a random box and hoping it would be the right one? I couldn't open them first to spy the contents; they were both closed with large pieces of tape. At the thought of the terrifying jokes I would have had to endure if I had told him the truth, I made my decision. I got up on the chair and pulled down a box. I put it on his desk without looking at him.

I heard him rummaging in it silently. Surprisingly, it was the right one. And I started breathing again.

"Here it is." He handed me a record. It was Debussy.

"Why him?" I asked.

"Because I've re-evaluated Debussy since I've known that your name was chosen as a tribute to him."

The primitive simplicity of his answer left me breathless, my heart full of hopes that hurt like thorns. Because they were too good to be true.

I didn't know how to dream. Perhaps because my mind had already understood at birth what my heart refused to do. Namely, that dreams never come true. Not mine, at least.

The music started, and invaded the room. First gently, then more vigorously, up into an exciting, seductive crescendo.

Mr Mc Laine closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair,

absorbing the rhythm, making it his, snatching it in an authorized theft.

I looked at him, taking advantage of the fact that he couldn't see me. At that moment he seemed tremendously young and fragile, as if a mere gust of wind could take him away. I also closed my eyes to that scandalous and ridiculous thought. He wasn't mine. He never would have been. Wheelchair or not. The sooner I realized that, the sooner I would have gotten my common sense back, my comforting acquiescence, and my mental balance. I couldn't jeopardize the cage I had deliberately locked myself into, risking to suffer terribly for a simple fantasy, an impossible dream, worthy of a teenager.

The music ended, passionate and inebriating.

We re-opened our eyes at the same time. His had resumed their usual coldness. Mine were shadowed and dreamy.

"I'll never finish the book at this rate," he decreed. "Get rid of the record player, Melisande. I want to write a little, or rather, rewrite everything."

He gave me a brilliant smile. "The idea of the music was brilliant. Thank you."

"You're welcome... I didn't do anything special" I stammered, avoiding his gaze, or else I'd have gotten lost in its depths.

"No, as a matter of fact you didn't do anything special," he admitted, making my spirits drop, because of the quick way he got rid of me. "You're the one who's special, Melisande. Not what you say or do."

His gaze locked with mine, determined to capture it as usual. He raised his eyebrows ironically, in an expression that I knew so well now.

“Thank you, sir,” I replied.

He laughed, as if I had made a joke. It didn't bother me. He thought I was funny. Better than nothing, maybe. I remembered the conversation we had a few days earlier, when he had asked me if I would have given my legs or my soul for love. At that time I replied that I had never loved, therefore I didn't know how I would have behaved. Now I realized that maybe I could answer that insidious question.

He pulled the computer towards him and began to write, excluding me from his world. I went back to my occupations, but my heart was fibrillating. Falling in love with Sebastian Mc Laine was suicide. And I had no desire to become a kamikaze. Right? I had always been a person with common sense, practical, reasonable, incapable of dreaming. I was even incapable of day dreaming. Or at least I had been up to that point, I thought.

“Melisande?”

“Yes, sir?” I turned to him, surprised that he had spoken to me. Usually when he started writing, he lost touch with everything and everyone.

“I want some roses,” he said, pointing to the empty vase on the desk. Ask Millicent to fill it, please.”

“Right away, sir.” I grabbed the ceramic vase with both hands. I knew it would be heavy.

“Red roses” he specified. “Like your hair.”

I blushed, although there was nothing romantic about what he had said.

“All right, sir.”

I could hear his look piercing my back as I carefully opened the door and went out into the hallway. I went downstairs with the vase in my hands.

“Mrs Mc Millian? Ma’am?” there was no trace of the old housekeeper, and then a thought came to my mind, too small to grab it. The woman, at breakfast, had told me something about her day off... Was she referring to today? It was hard for me to remember it. Mrs Mc Millian was a source of confused information, and I rarely listened to it from start to finish. Also in the kitchen there was no trace of her. I sorrowfully placed the vase on the table, next to a basket of fresh fruit.

Great. I realized I had to pick the roses in the garden. A task beyond my ability. It was easier for me to grab a cloud, and dance a waltz with it.

With a persistent buzz in my ears, and the feeling of an imminent catastrophe, I went outdoors. The rose garden was in front of me, the roses in bloom like a fire of petals. Red, yellow, pink, white, even blue. Too bad I lived in a black and white world, where everything was shadowed. A world where light was unfathomable, indefinite, forbidden. I couldn't even dream of distinguishing colours because I didn't know what they were. Since birth.

I took an uncertain step toward the rose garden, my cheeks in flames. I had to make up an excuse to justify my return without any flowers. One thing was choosing between two boxes, another was to pick roses of the same colour. Red. How is red? How can you imagine something you've never seen, not even on a book?

I stepped on a broken rose. I leaned over to pick it up; it was dead, lethargic in its death, but it still smelled nice.

“What are you doing here?”

I brushed my hair off my forehead, and regretted not tying it up in my usual chignon. It was hung over my nape, and was already soaked with sweat.

“I have to pick some roses for Mr Mc Laine,” I said laconically.

Kyle smiled at me, the usual smile full of irritating allusions. “Do you need help?”

In those hollow words, empty and ambiguous, I found a solution to my problem, an unexpected shortcut, and I jumped at it.

“Actually you were supposed to do it, but you weren't around. As usual,” I said bitterly.

His face was crossed by a quiver. “I'm not a gardener. I already work too much.”

This statement made me laugh. I put a hand to my mouth, as if to hide my hilarity.

He looked at me furiously. “It's the truth. Who do you think helps him to wash, dress and move?”

The thought of Sebastian Mc Laine naked almost caused me a short circuit. To wash him, dress him... I would have done it very willingly. The following thought, that I would never be the one to do it, made me answer harshly.

“But for most of the day you are free. Of course, at his disposal, however, he rarely disturbs you” I reinforced the message. “Come on, help me.”

He finally gave in, still annoyed. I handed him the shears, smiling. “Red roses,” I said.

“All right,” he grumbled, setting to work.

In the end, when the bunch was ready, I escorted him to the kitchen where we picked up the vase. It seemed more practical and easy to split the task between us. He would carry the ceramic pot, I the flowers.

Mr Mc Laine was still writing, fervently. He only stopped when he saw us come back together.

“Now I understand why it took you so long” he hissed at my address.

Kyle hurried away, clumsily placing the vase on the desk. For a moment I feared that it would fall down. He had already left when I started to arrange the roses in the vase.

“Was it such a difficult task that you had to ask for help?” He asked, his eyes glowing with uncontrollable anger.

I floundered, like a fish that had stupidly bitten the bait. “The vase was heavy,” I excused myself. “The next time I won’t bring it with me.”

“Very wise”. His voice was deceptively sweet. In truth, with his face shadowed by a two day stubble, he looked like a malicious demon that had come straight from the underworld to bully me.

“I didn’t find Mrs Mc Millian,” I insisted. A fish still clinging to the bait and hasn’t yet realized that it’s a hook.

“Oh, right, it’s her day off,” he acknowledged. But then his anger, only temporarily alleviated, reappeared. “I won’t tolerate love stories among my employees.”

“The thought never crossed my mind!” I said impetuously, so earnestly that I got a smile of approval from him.

“I’m pleased to hear it.” His eyes were icy despite the smile. “Of course that doesn’t refer to me. I have nothing against having an affair with my employees.” He stressed the words, as to reinforce the fact that he was mocking me.

For the first time I felt like punching him, and I realized it wouldn’t be the only time. Unable to vent my rage on who I would have liked to, my hands tightened over the bouquet, the thorns forgotten. The pain surprised me, as if I were immune to thorns, since I was busy fighting off other ones.

“Ouch!” I snatched my hand away.

“Did you prick yourself?”

My look was more eloquent than any answer. He stretched his hand out to catch mine.

“Let me see.”

I gave it to him like a robot. The drop of blood stood out on

my white skin. Dark, black to my abnormal eyes. Crimson red to his normal eyes.

I tried to pull my hand away, but his grip was strong. I watched him, bewildered. His gaze didn't abandon my finger, fascinated, hypnotized. Then, as usual, it all ended. His expression changed to the point that I couldn't read it. He seemed nauseated and hurriedly looked away. My hand was free, and I put my finger in my mouth to suck the blood.

His head turned in my direction again, as if driven by an unrelenting and unwanted force. He had an agonized and distressed expression. It lasted just a moment, though. It was incredible, and illogical.

"The book is going well. I recovered my streak," he said, as if answering a question I had never made. "Do you mind bringing me a cup of tea?"

I clung to his words, as if they were a rope thrown to a person who was drowning. "I'll go right away."

"Will you be able to manage on your own, this time?" His irony was almost pleasant after the scary look he had given me earlier.

"I'll try," I replied, playing along with him.

This time I didn't meet Kyle, and I was relieved. I moved through the kitchen with greater ease than I had in the garden. Since I ate all my meals there, in the company of Mrs Mc Millian, I had learned all her hiding places. I easily found the kettle in the cabinet beside the fridge, and the tea bags in a tin can in another

one. I went upstairs with the tray in my hands.

Mc Laine didn't look up when he heard me come in. Evidently his ears, like radar antennas, had already understood that I was alone.

"I brought both sugar and honey, not knowing which one you prefer. And milk."

He sneeringly looked at the tray. "Wasn't it too heavy for you?"

"I managed," I said with all the dignity I could muster. Defending myself from his verbal jokes was becoming an exceptional habit; certainly preferable to the terrible expression he had a few minutes earlier.

"Sir..." It was time to tackle an important issue.

He gave me a smile full of frank kindness, like an amenable monarch towards a loyal vassal. "Yes, Melisande Bruno?"

"I'd like to know when I'll have a day off," I asked breathlessly, gathering all my courage.

He opened his arms and stretched out, voluptuously, before answering. "Day off? You've just arrived and you already want to get rid of me?"

I stood on one foot and then on the other while I watched him pour a drop of milk and a tablespoon of sugar in his tea, and then sipped it slowly. "Today is Sunday, sir. Mrs Mc Millian's day off. And the day after tomorrow will be exactly one week from my arrival. Maybe we should talk about it, sir." It seemed like he didn't want to give me any day off.

"Melisande Bruno, do you think that I don't want to give you

a day off?" He asked mockingly, as if he had read my mind.

I was already mumbling that no, I wouldn't have dreamed of thinking such an absurd thing, when he added. "...because you would be perfectly right."

"I don't understand you, sir. Is this another of your jokes?" I asked in a thin voice, in the effort to control it.

"What if it's not?" He replied, his eyes as unfathomable as the ocean.

I stared at him with my mouth open. "But Mrs Mc Millian..."

"Kyle doesn't have a day off, either," he reminded me with a sly smile. I had the distinct feeling that he was having fun.

"He doesn't have fixed hours like mine," I said dryly. I longed to explore the village and the neighbourhoods around the house, and I was annoyed that I had to fight for my rights.

He didn't even blink. "Anyhow he's always at my availability."

"Then when should I go out?" I asked, raising my voice. "At night maybe? I'm free from dusk to dawn... Should I go out instead of sleeping? Unlike Kyle I live here, I don't go home in the evening."

"Don't you dare go out at night. It's dangerous."

His soft words set in my conscience, causing a shiver of fury. "Then we're at an impasse," I said, my voice as cold as his. "I want to visit the area, but you don't want to give me a day off. On the other hand, however, you ordered me not to go out at night, saying it was dangerous. What else can I do?"

"You're even more beautiful when you're angry, Melisande

Bruno,” he said. “Anger turns your cheeks a lovely pink colour.”

I basked in the joy of that compliment for a delightful moment, then I was overwhelmed by anger. “Well? Will I have a day off or not?”

He smiled wryly, and my fury disappeared, replaced by a different and absurd excitement.

“Okay, you can have Sunday off” he finally granted.

“Sunday?” He had given in so fast it stunned me. He was so quick in his decisions to make me doubt I’d be able to follow him. “But that’s also Mrs Mc Millian's day off... Are you sure...?”

“Millicent is off only in the morning. You can have the afternoon.”

I nodded, unconvinced. For the moment it had to be enough. “Agreed.”

He pointed to the tray. “Would you bring it to the kitchen, please?”

I had already reached the door when a thought struck me, with the impact of a meteorite. “Why Sunday?”

I turned to look at him. He had the expression of a rattle snake, and in a flash I understood everything.

“Because today is Sunday, and I'll have to wait seven more days.” Therefore mine was just a Pyrrhic victory. I was so furious that I was tempted to throw the tray at him.

“They’ll go by in a hurry,” he said amusedly. “Oh, don’t bang the door, on your way out.”

I was tempted to do so, but I was hindered by the tray. I would

have had to put the tray on the floor, so I gave up. He probably would have enjoyed it even more.

That night, for the first time in my life, I dreamed.

Chapter five

I looked like a ghost, eerie in my nightgown which was blowing in the invisible wind. Sebastian Mc Laine kindly stretched out his hand. “Would you like to dance with me, Melisande Bruno?”

He stood still at the foot of my bed. No wheelchair. His figure flickered, faded, and it had the same consistency as dreams. I covered the distance between us, as fast as a comet. He gave me a lovely smile; the smile of a man who doesn't doubt your happiness, because it reflects his.

“Mr Mc Laine... you can walk...” My voice was naive, and sounded like that of a little girl.

He returned my smile, his eyes dark and sad. “At least in your dreams, yes. Why don't you call me Sebastian, Melisande? If only in the dream?”

I was embarrassed, reluctant to abandon the formalities, even in that fantastic and unrealistic situation.

“All right... Sebastian.”

His arms circled my waist in a strong and playful embrace. “Can you dance, Melisande?”

“No”.

“Then let me guide you. Will you allow me to do it?” He stared at me sceptically now.

“I don't think I can,” I admitted sincerely.

He nodded, in no way disturbed by my sincerity. “Not even in a dream?”

“I never dream,” I said incredulously. Yet I was dreaming. It was an undeniable fact, right? It couldn’t be real. I was in his arms in my nightgown; I could see the sweetness of his gaze and the absence of a wheelchair.

“I hope you won’t be disappointed when you wake up,” he said thoughtfully.

“Why should I?” I objected.

“I’ll be the object of the first dream of your life. Are you disappointed?” He stared at me with a serious and doubtful expression.

He was pulling back now, and I planted my fingers in his arms, fierce as claws. “No, stay with me. Please.”

“Do you really want me in your dream?”

“I wouldn’t want anyone else in it,” I said boldly. I was dreaming, I reminded myself. I could say whatever came to my mind, without fearing the consequences.

He smiled again, more handsome than ever. He twirled me around, speeding up the pace as I learned the steps. It was a realistic dream, frighteningly so. My fingertips perceived the softness of the cashmere of his sweater, and under that, the strength of his muscles. At some point I heard a noise, like a pendulum clock striking the hours. I laughed. “Also in my dream!”

The sound of the pendulum was not particularly pleasing to

me; it was a shrill sound, distressing and old.

Sebastian pulled away from me and he frowned. "I have to go."

I jumped, as if struck by a bullet. "Do you really have to?"

"I must, Melisande. Dreams also end." His quiet words were sad, and they sounded like a farewell.

"Will you come back?" I couldn't let him leave like that, without putting up a fight.

He studied me carefully, as he always did during the day, in reality. "How could I not come back now that you've learned to dream?"

That poetic promise calmed my heartbeat, already uneven at the idea of not seeing him anymore. Not like this, at least.

The dream dimmed, like a candle flame. And so did the night.

The first thing I saw, opening my eyes, was the ceiling with the exposed beams. Then the window, half closed because of the heat.

I had dreamt for the first time.

Millicent Mc Millian gave me a kind smile when she saw me appear in the kitchen. "Good morning dear. Did you sleep well?"

"Like never before in my whole life," I said laconically. My heart felt like it would burst out of my chest, when I remembered the star of my dream.

"I'm happy for you," said the housekeeper, without knowing what I was referring to. She went into a detailed account of the day she spent in town. She told me of the mass and of her meeting with people whose names didn't mean anything to me. As always

I allowed her to speak, but my mind was occupied by much more enjoyable fantasies; my eye always fixed on the watch, in the feverish anticipation of seeing him again.

It was childish to think that this day would be different, that he would behave differently. It had been a dream, nothing else. But inexperienced as I was on the subject, I was under the illusion that it might reflect onto my real life.

When I entered the office he was opening some letters with a silver paper knife. He hardly looked up at my entrance.

“Another letter by my publisher. I turned off my cell phone so I wouldn’t have to talk to him! I hate people with no imagination... They have no idea of an artist’s needs, of his timing, or his spaces...” His bitter tone brought me back to earth. No greeting, no special recognition, no sweet glance. Welcome to reality, I said to myself. How stupid of me to think the opposite! That’s why I had never dreamt before. Because I had no beliefs, no hope; I didn’t dare to hope. I had to go back to being the same Melisande I was before I came to that house, before that meeting, before that illusion.

But maybe I’ll dream about him again. That thought warmed me more than Mrs Mc Mililani’s tea, or than the blinding sun beyond the window.

“Well? What are you doing, standing there like a statue? Sit down, for crying out loud.”

I obediently sat down in front of him, his reproach still stinging.

He passed me the letter with a serious expression. "Write to him. Tell him he'll have his manuscript on the due date."

"Are you sure you'll be able to finish it by then? I mean... You're rewriting everything..."

He reacted angrily to what he thought was a criticism. "My legs are paralyzed, not my brain. I had a moment of crisis. It's over. Definitely."

I prudently stayed silent all morning, as I watched him press the computer keys with unusual energy. Sebastian Mc Laine got annoyed easily, he was moody and quick-tempered. It was easy to hate him, I considered, studying him secretly. And he was also gorgeous. Too much so, and he was aware of it. This made him doubly detestable. A non-existent person had appeared in my dream, the projection of my desires, not a real man, in the flesh. The dream had been a lie, a wonderful fairy-tale.

At a certain point he referred to the roses. "Change them, please. I hate to watch them wilt. I want them to be fresh at all times."

I found my voice. "I'll do it right away."

"And be careful not to hurt yourself this time." The harshness of his voice astonished me. I hadn't prepared myself adequately for his repeated outbursts, loaded with spite.

I picked up the vase and brought it downstairs. Halfway down I met the housekeeper who rushed to help me. "What happened?"

"He wants new roses," I explained breathlessly. "He says he hates to watch them wilt."

The woman looked upwards. “He finds a new complaint every day.”

We brought the vase into the kitchen, and then she went to pick fresh roses, strictly red. I dropped to a chair, as if I had been contaminated by the mood of the house. I couldn't stop thinking of that night's dream, partly because it was the first of my life, and I could still feel the thrill of that discovery, and partly because it was so vivid, painfully so. The sound of the pendulum made me jump. It was so frightening that I had heard it in my dream too. Perhaps it was this detail that made it seem so real.

Tears flooded my eyes, unstoppable and useless. A sob escaped my throat, stronger than my notorious self-control. The house keeper found me in that state when she returned to the kitchen. “Here are the fresh roses for our lord and master,” she said cheerfully. Then she noticed my tears and brought her hands to her chest. “Miss Bruno! What happened? Are you ill? You're not crying for Mr Mc Laine's reprimand, are you? He's a tease, as moody as a bear, and adorable when he remembers to be nice... Don't worry about whatever he told you, he's already forgotten about it.”

“That's the problem,” I said with a tearful voice, but she didn't hear me, already lost in one of her dialogues.

“Let me make you some tea; it'll make you feel better. I remember that once, in the house where I worked before...”

I silently put up with her endless chatter, appreciating her failed attempt to distract me. I drank the hot drink, pretending to

feel better, and I didn't accept her offer to help me. I would carry the roses up. The woman insisted on accompanying me at least to the landing, and seeing her gentle determination, I couldn't refuse. When I returned to the office I was the usual Melisande, my eyes dry, my heart in hibernation and my soul compliant.

The hours passed, as heavy as concrete, in a silence as dark as my mood. Mr Mc Laine ignored me for the whole time, speaking to me only when he couldn't avoid it. The spasmodic desire for that day to end as soon as possible was the same as the one I had that morning to see him again. Could it have been only a few hours earlier?

"You may go Miss Bruno," he dismissed me, without looking into my eyes.

I wished him a good evening, as polite and cold as he had been.

I was looking for Kyle, at his request, when I heard a sob coming from under the stairs. My eyes opened wide and I was uncertain about what to do. I hesitated, but then I came to the source of that noise, and what I saw was astounding.

Kyle was weeping with his face in the shadows, his shape indefinable. The man had a paper tissue, and was just a pale copy of the seducer I had met previously. I stared at him in amazement.

He noticed my presence, and stepped forward. "Do you feel sorry for me? Or are you having fun?"

I felt that I had been caught in the act of spying on him, like an indiscreet busybody. I resisted the temptation to justify myself.

“Mr Mc Laine is looking for you. He'd like to retire to his room for dinner. But... Are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?”

His cheeks coloured with dark spots, and I guessed he was blushing from embarrassment.

I stepped back, also metaphorically. “No, sorry, forget what I said. I don't want to get involved in other people's problems anymore.”

He shook his head, unusually gallant. “You're too nice to be a busybody, Melisande. No, I... I'm just upset about my divorce.” Only then I noticed that he didn't have a tissue in his hand, but a crumpled sheet of paper. “She's gone. All my attempts to heal the break have failed.”

I almost laughed. Attempts? And how had he tried to fix things? By coming on to the only young woman in the neighbourhood?

“I'm sorry,” I said uncomfortably.

“Me too.” He took another step forward, coming out of the shadows. His face was full of tears, contradicting the bad opinion I had of him.

I gazed at him uncertainly, in great embarrassment. According to the etiquette, what was one to say to a person who had just divorced? How could you cheer him up? What could you say without hurting him? Of course, when the etiquette was drafted, divorce didn't exist.

“I'll tell Mr Mc Laine that you're not well,” I said.

He seemed to panic. “No, no, I'm not ready to go back to the civil world and I'm afraid Mc Laine is just looking for an excuse to kick me out of Midnight rose. No, just give me a minute to pull myself back together and I'll go to him.”

“A minute to pull yourself back together, of course,” I echoed, unconvinced. Kyle looked terrible, his hair dishevelled, his face flushed from his tears, his white uniform wrinkled, as if he had slept in it.

“All right, then. Goodnight,” I said, longing for the shelter of my room. It had been a terribly long day, and I wasn't in the mood to console anyone, except myself.

He nodded to me as if he didn't trust his voice.

I went in the kitchen before going upstairs. I didn't feel like having dinner, and it was only right to inform the kind Mrs Mc Millian. She gave me a radiant smile, and pointed to a pot on the fire. “I'm making soup. I know it's hot, but we can't just eat salads until September.”

I was overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt. I cowardly changed the answer that was about to come out of my mouth. “I love soup, heat or no heat.”

Before she started with her chatter, I told her about Kyle, leaving out the most embarrassing details.

“He really seems upset about the divorce,” I said, sitting at the table.

She nodded, continuing to mix the soup. “The relationship was destined to end. His wife moved to Edinburgh a few months ago,

and they say that she already has another man. You know how unpleasant gossip can be... He's not a shin of a saint, but he's fond of this place and didn't feel like leaving the village."

I poured a glass of water from the jug. "Is that why he can't bring himself to leave?"

The housekeeper served the soup in the dishes, and I started eating eagerly. I was hungrier than I thought.

"Kyle always says that he's sick and tired of this place, of the house, of Mr Mc Laine, but he wouldn't leave. Who else would hire him?"

I looked at her over my plate curiously. "Isn't he a registered nurse?"

Mrs Mc Millian broke a bun in two pieces, meticulously. "Of course he is, but he's mediocre and lazy. It can't be said that he works hard here. And often his breath smells of alcohol. I don't mean to say he's a drunk, but..." Her voice conveyed her disapproval.

"I love this house," I said, without reflecting.

The woman was amazed. "Do you really, Miss Bruno?"

I bent my eyes on the plate, my cheeks burning. "I feel at home here," I explained. And I was honest. Despite the mood changes of my fascinating writer, I was at ease among those walls, far away from the pain of my past.

Mrs Mc Millian began to babble on, and I was relieved when I emptied my plate. My mind ran on deviating and uneven tracks, and the final destination was always, inevitably, Sebastian Mc

Laine. I was torn between the uncontrollable need to dream of him again, and the desire to leave any illusion behind me.

Kyle peeped into the kitchen a few minutes later, more annoyed than ever. "I hate Mc Laine," he began.

The housekeeper stopped her sentence in half to reprimand him. "Shame on you, speaking like that of the person who feeds you."

"I'd rather starve to death than have to deal with him" was his answer. The venom in his voice made me shudder. He wasn't a devoted servant, I had already guessed that, but his hatred was almost tangible.

Kyle opened the fridge and pulled out two cans of beer. "Goodnight, dear ladies. I'm going to my room to celebrate my divorce." A nervous tick made the right corner of his eye twitch.

The housekeeper and I silently looked at each other until he left the room.

"It was really indelicate of him to talk that way about poor Lord Mc Laine" were her first words. Then she stared at me frowning. "Do you think he intends to commit suicide?"

I laughed, before I could hold it back. "He doesn't seem like he's the type," I calmed her.

"That's true. He's too shallow to have deep feelings for anyone," she said disgustedly. Her concern for Kyle disappeared like dew in the sun, and she went on to list the advantages, according to her, of living in the country, compared to the city.

I helped her wash the dishes, and we retired. I went to the first

floor, and she to the ground floor, in a room not far from the kitchen.

I tossed and turned for a long time before falling asleep, and then I fell into a restless sleep. In the morning my cheeks were streaked with dried tears that I didn't remember shedding.

I didn't dream of Sebastian that night.

The next day was Tuesday, and Mr Mc Laine was already grumpy early in the morning.

"Today, as punctual as a tax collector, Dr Mc Intosh will come," he said grimly. "I can't talk him out of coming. I've tried everything. I tried threatening and begging him. He seems to be immune to all my attempts. He's worse than a vulture."

"Maybe he just wants to make sure you're in good health," I remarked, just to say something.

He stared into my eyes, and then he burst into a roaring laugh. "Melisande Bruno, you're a character... Our beloved Dr Mc Intosh comes because he considers it his duty, not because he has a particular affection for me."

"His duty? I don't understand... In my opinion, his only purpose is to perform an examination. He must have some interest in you," I said stubbornly.

Mc Laine grimaced. "My dear... You're not as naive to really believe that everything is what it seems, are you? Not everything is white or black, there is also grey, so to say."

I didn't answer. Anyhow what could I say? That he had realized the truth about me? For me, there really was nothing but

white and black, to the point of being nauseated by it.

“Mc Intosh feels guilty about the accident, and he thinks he'll make up for it by coming to visit me regularly, although I don't like it at all,” he added spitefully.

“Guilty feelings?” I repeated. “What do you mean?”

A flash of lightning lit up the window behind him, followed by a loud sound of thunder. He didn't turn away, as if he couldn't pull his eyes away from mine.

“It seems like we're in for a torrential flood. Perhaps that will distract Mc Intosh from coming today.”

“I doubt it. It's just a summer storm. In an hour it'll all be over,” I said practically.

He looked at me with such intensity that subtle chills crawled along my spine. He was a strange man, but his charisma cancelled any other flaw.

“Do you want me to sort out the rest of the shelves?” I asked nervously, avoiding his fixed gaze.

“Did you sleep well last night, Melisande?”

The question surprised me. His tone was light, but it had a pressing urgency that pushed me to tell him the truth.

“Not really.”

“No dreams?” His voice was light and clear like the water of a mild stream, and I let myself get carried away by that refreshing flow.

“No, not last night.”

“Did you want to dream?”

“Yes,” I said on impulse. Our dialogue was surreal, yet I was ready to continue it forever.

“Maybe it will happen again. The silence of this place is ideal for dreams,” he said coldly. He turned back to the computer, already forgetting about me.

Great, I thought, humiliated. He had thrown me a bone like he would with a dog, and I was so idiotic as to grab it as if I was starving. And I really was starving. For our glances, our intense complicity, and his rare smiles.

I hunched my shoulders and started working again. At that moment I thought of Monique. She managed to turn men’s heads, to allure them into a net of lies and dreams and conquer their attention with consummate expertise. I had asked her once how she had learned the art of seduction. At first she answered. “It’s not something you learn, Melisande. It’s innate; if you don’t have it you can just dream about it.” Then she turned to me, her expression soft. “When you get my age, you’ll know how to do it, you’ll see.”

Now that I was her age, I knew less than I did before. My relationships with men had always been sporadic and short lived. All the men I had met had always asked me the same questions: What’s your name? What do you do in life? What car do you drive? When they learned that I had no driver’s license, they stared at me as if I were a rare beast, as if I was suffering from a terribly contagious disease. And I certainly wasn’t a person who shared her thoughts.

I passed my hand over a book cover. It was a luxurious edition, in Moroccan leather, of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen.

“I bet it's your favourite book.”

I raised my head. Mr Mc Laine was looking at me from under his lowered eyelids with a dangerous sparkle in the black depths.

“No,” I said, placing the book on the shelf. “I like it, but it's not my favourite.”

“Then it has to be *Wuthering Heights*.” He gave me a breathtakingly unexpected smile.

My heart leapt, and almost fell into the emptiness. “That's not it either,” I replied, happy for the firm tone of my voice.

“It doesn't have a happy ending. As I've already told you, I prefer stories with happy endings.”

He twirled the wheelchair, and came a few feet away from me, his expression thoughtful. “*Persuasion*, always by Austen. It has a happy ending, you can't deny it.” He didn't hide that he was enjoying himself, and I was also appreciating that game.

“It's nice, I'll admit it, but you're still far off. It's a book focused on waiting, and I'm not good at waiting. I'm too impatient. I would end up giving up, or changing my wish.”

Now my voice was frivolous. Without realizing it, I was flirting with him.

“*Jane Eyre*.”

He didn't anticipate my laughter, and he looked at me, puzzled.

Several minutes passed before I could answer him. “Finally!”

I thought it would take forever...”

A shadow of a smile erased his frown. “I should have guessed immediately, actually. A heroine with a sad and lonely story behind her, a man with a painful past and a happy ending as a result of many ordeals. Romantic. Passionate. Realistic.” Now his lips were smiling as well as his eyes. “Melisande Bruno, are you aware that you might fall in love with me as Jane Eyre did with Mr Rochester, who coincidentally, was her employer?”

“You aren’t Mr Rochester,” I said quietly.

“I’m as lunatic as he was,” he objected with a half-smile that I couldn’t help but return.

“I agree. But I’m not Jane Eyre.”

“That’s also true. She was wan, ugly and insignificant,” he said, slurring the words. “No person sound of mind, and of eyes, could say this about you. Your red hair would be noticeable miles away.”

“That doesn’t really sound like a compliment...” I said, whining jokingly.

“Whoever stands out, in one way or another, is never ugly, Melisande,” he said gently.

“Then thank you.”

He sneered. “Who did you get that hair from, Miss Bruno? From your Italian parents?”

The allusion to my family helped to blur the happiness of the moment. I looked away, and continued sorting the books on the shelves.

“I’ve been told that my grandmother was a redhead. My parents weren’t, nor is my sister.”

He brought the wheelchair nearer to my legs, which were stretched in the effort of fixing the books. At that short distance I could recognize his soft scent. It was a mysterious and seductive mixture of flowers and spices.

“And what’s a pretty red-haired secretary with Italian ancestors doing in a remote Scottish village?”

“My father emigrated to support his wife and daughter. I was born in Belgium.” I was looking for a way to change the subject, but it was hard to do. His closeness confused my thoughts, knotting them in a bundle that was hard to untangle.

“From Belgium to London, and then to Scotland. At only twenty-two years of age. You’ll admit that it’s at least unusual.”

“I want to see the world,” I replied evasively.

I gazed at him. His frown had disappeared like snow in the sun, replaced by a healthy curiosity. There was no way to distract him. Outside, the storm raged, with its violent intensity. A similar storm was unrolling within me. Communicating with him was natural, spontaneous and liberating, but I shouldn’t, couldn’t speak freely, or else I would regret it.

“Your need to see the world brought you to this remote corner of the world?” His tone was openly sceptical. “There’s no need to lie to me, Melisande Bruno. I won’t judge you, in spite of the appearances.”

Something broke inside me, releasing memories that I

believed buried forever. I had trusted someone just once, and it didn't end well, my life had almost been destroyed because of it. Only fate had prevented a tragedy. My tragedy.

"I'm not lying. Even here you can see the world," I said smiling. "I've never been to the Highlands, they're interesting. And I'm young, I can still travel, to visit and explore new places."

"So you plan to leave." His voice was hoarse now.

I turned to him. A shadow had fallen over his face. There was something desperate, furious, and predatory about him at that moment.

Short of words, I just kept staring at him.

He quickly twirled the wheelchair towards the desk. "Don't worry. If you continue being so lazy, I'll send you away myself, so you can resume your journey around the world."

His harsh words made me feel as though he had tossed a bucket of frozen water over me. He stopped in front of the window, anchored to the wheelchair with both hands, his shoulders stiff.

"You were right. The storm is already over. There is no way to avoid Mc Intosh today. It seems that I can't do anything right."

"Oh, look, a rainbow." He called me without turning around. "Come and see, Miss Bruno. A charming sight, don't you think? I doubt you've already seen one before."

"Indeed, I have," I countered, without moving. The rainbow was a cruel symbol of what I was eternally denied: the perception of colours, their prodigies, and their archaic mystery.

My voice was as delicate as a sheet of ice, my shoulders stiffer than his.

He had again raised a wall between us, tall and insurmountable. A shatterproof defence.

Or maybe I was the one who had built it first.

Chapter six

“Would you like to have dinner with me, Melisande Bruno?”

I stared at him with wide eyes; I must have misunderstood him. He had ignored me for hours, and the rare times he spoke to me he had been unpleasant and cold.

At first I thought of refusing, outraged by his childlike and moody attitude, then curiosity got the best of me. Or maybe I was hoping to see his smile again; that lopsided, friendly and warm smile. However, whatever the reason, my answer was yes.

Mrs Mc Millian was so shocked by the novelty to be silent for as long as it took her to serve our dinner, stirring up our mutual amusement.

Mr Mc Laine was relaxed, and he no longer had that severe expression than I had learned to fear.

We sat quietly and began speaking only when the housekeeper left us alone.

“We managed to leave our dear Millicent speechless... I guess we'll end up in the Guinness world records,” he remarked with a laugh that struck my heart.

“Undoubtedly,” I agreed. “And that’s a monumental task. I never thought I’d see that day.”

“I agree”. He winked at me and grasped a meat skewer.

The improvised dinner was informal but delicious, and his company was the only one I wished for. I promised myself

I wouldn't do anything to ruin that idyllic atmosphere, and then I remembered that it only partially depended on me. My companion had already shown on several occasions that he was irritable, and without any apparent reason.

Now he was smiling, and I felt a stabbing pain at the thought that I would never know the exact colour of his eyes and hair.

“So, Melisande Bruno, do you like Midnight Rose?”

I like you, especially when you're so laid-back and in peace with the world.

I said aloud, “Who wouldn't like it? It's a slice of paradise, far from the usual frenzy, stress and madness.”

He stopped eating, as if he fed off the sound of my voice. And I also began to chew more slowly, so as to not break that spell, as fragile as crystal and more fluttery than an autumn leaf.

“For those who come from London it must seem so” he granted. “Have you travelled a lot?”

I brought my glass of wine to my mouth before answering. “Less than I would have liked. But I understood one thing: you can discover the world in its corners, folds and grooves, not in the large centres.”

“Your wisdom equals your beauty,” he said seriously. “And what are you discovering in this lovely Scottish village?”

“I haven't seen the village yet,” I reminded him, with no resent. “But Midnight Rose is an interesting place. I feel like the world could stop right here and now and I wouldn't miss my future life.”

In response he shook his head. “You have perceived the most

intimate essence of this home in such a short time... I still haven't succeeded in doing so..."

I didn't answer; the fear of spoiling our regained intimacy curbed my tongue.

He studied me closely, as always, as if I was the content of a slide and he was a microscope. The next question was pondered, explosive, and the premonition of an imminent disaster.

"Do you have a family, Melisande Bruno? Are any of your relatives still alive?"

It didn't sound like an idle question, made just for the heck of it. There was a keen and authentic interest in it.

I hid my hesitation by sipping some more wine, and in the meantime I was thinking about how to answer his question. Revealing that my sister and my father were still alive would give rise to a series of other insidious questions that I wasn't ready to deal with. I was realistic: he had invited me to dinner that evening just because he was bored, and he was searching for a break. I, the still unknown secretary, was ideal for the purpose. There wouldn't be another dinner. I chose to lie because it was easier, less complicated.

"I'm alone in the world." Only when I stopped speaking, I realized that it wasn't exactly a lie. As a matter of fact it was a lie only in part.

I was alone, regardless of everything. I couldn't count on anyone except myself. This fact had made me suffer so much that I thought I would lose my mind, but I had gotten used to it. It

was absurd, sad and painful, but it was true.

I was accustomed to not being loved. I was misunderstood and alone.

He seemed absurdly satisfied with my answer, as if it were the right one. Right for what I couldn't say.

He raised his half empty glass of wine to make a toast.

"What are you toasting to?" I asked, imitating him.

"I'm hoping that you'll dream again, Melisande Bruno. And that your dreams come true."

His eyes smiled at me over the glass.

I gave up trying to understand him. Sebastian Mc Laine was a living enigma, and his charisma, his animal magnetism, were adequate answers for me.

That night I dreamt for the second time. The scene was identical to the previous one: I was in my nightgown and he was at the foot of my bed in dark clothes with no trace of the wheelchair.

He held out his hand, a smile curling the corner of his mouth. "Dance with me, Melisande."

His tone was mild, sweet and soft as silk. It was a request, not an order. And his eyes... For the first time they were pleading her.

"Am I dreaming?" I believed it was just a thought, but I had said it out loud.

"Only if you want it to be a dream. Otherwise this is reality," he said categorically.

"But you're walking..."

“In your dreams anything can happen,” he replied, guiding me in a waltz, like the first time.

I felt an angry rage. How come in MY dream other people’s nightmares were erased, while mine still remained intact? It was MY dream, but I had no influence on it, nor could I alter it in any way. Its self-sufficiency was bizarre and irritating.

Suddenly I stopped thinking, because being in his arms was more important than my personal drama. He was unbelievably beautiful, and I was honoured to have him in my dreams.

We danced for a long time, to the rhythm of a non-existent music, the bodies in perfect sync.

“I thought I wouldn’t dream of you anymore,” I said, stretching out my hand to touch his cheek. It was smooth, warm, and almost hot.

His hand rose to entwine with mine. “I also thought you wouldn’t dream anymore.”

“You seem so real...” I said breathlessly. “But you’re just a dream... you’re too sweet to be real...”

He burst into an amused laughter, and he held me tighter.

“Do I make you angry?”

I looked at him, dourly. “There are times in which I’d like to punch you.”

He didn’t seem offended, indeed he was satisfied. “I do it on purpose. I like to tease you.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s easier for me to keep you at arm’s length.”

The shrill sound of the pendulum invaded the dream, causing my discontent. Because he was retreating, again. As if it was a signal.

“Stay with me,” I begged him.

“I can’t”.

“It’s my dream. I decide,” I replied.

He stretched out his hand and stroked my hair, his fingers lighter than feathers.

“Dreams escape us, Melisande. We create them, but they don’t belong to us altogether. They have their own will, and they end when they decide to do so.”

I insisted, like a little girl. “I don’t like it.”

His face was crossed by an unusual seriousness. “Nobody likes it, but the world is typically unfair.”

I tried to hold back the dream, but my arms were too weak, and my scream was just a whisper. He disappeared quickly, like the first time. I found myself awake; my ears dull with loud noises. Then I realized, with dismay, that they were the arrhythmic beats of my heart. It was also going on its own way, as if nothing belonged to me anymore. I had no control over any part of my body.

But the thing that upset me the most was that I also didn’t have any over my mind, and my feelings.

The letter arrived that morning, and it had the disruptive effect of a stone thrown into a pond. It falls in a certain spot, but its effects reverberate to surrounding spots, in concentric and very

extensive circles.

My mood was sky high, and I began the day humming. Definitely it was an unusual thing for me.

Mrs Mc Millian served breakfast in a religious silence, pretending not to be curious about the dinner of the previous evening.

I decided not to lose any time. I had to clear her doubts before she could create her own ideas, which could damage my reputation, and perhaps even Mr Mc Laine's. Any wishful thinking toward him was solely in my dreams, and I mustn't yield to its evanescent magnificence.

"Mrs Mc Millian..."

"Yes, Miss Bruno?" She was buttering the toast and asked the question without raising her eyes.

"Mr Mc Laine felt lonely last night, and he asked me to keep him company. If I weren't there, he would have asked you. Or Kyle," I said firmly.

She adjusted her glasses on her nose and nodded. "Of course Miss. I've never thought badly of you. It's obvious that it was an isolated episode."

Her confidence froze me, although it made sense. Deep down I also agreed with her. There was no reason to hope that the County's golden bachelor would fall in love with me. He was on a wheelchair, but he wasn't blind. My black and white world was the living and constant proof of my diversity. I couldn't afford the luxury of forgetting it.

Never. Or my dream would break into little pieces.

I climbed the stairs like any other day. I felt restless, in spite of the calmness I displayed.

Sebastian Mc Laine was already smiling when I opened the door and it sent my heart sky high. I wished that it would never come back down.

“Good morning sir,” I greeted him calmly.

“Aren’t we formal, Melisande?” he asked in rebuke, as if we had shared a greater intimacy than a simple dinner.

My cheeks burned, and I was sure that I had blushed, even though I had no idea of the real meaning of this word. Red was a dark colour, just like black was in my world.

“It’s just a matter of respect, sir,” I said, mitigating my formal tone with a smile.

“I did nothing special to deserve it,” he answered. “In fact, I must’ve seemed hateful to you sometimes.”

“No, sir,” I replied, walking on a mined ground. The risk of triggering his anger was always latent every time we spoke, and I couldn’t lower my guard. Although my heart had already done so.

“Don’t lie. I can’t stand it,” he replied without losing his marvellous smile.

I sat in front of him, ready to carry out the job for which I was paid. Of course I wasn’t in love with him. That was out of the question.

He pointed to the pile of mail on the desk. “Split the personal mail from work, please.”

It took a great effort for me to tear my eyes away from his, for they were full of a new sweetness. I could feel them on me, warm and irresistible, and I struggled to concentrate.

A letter drew my attention because there was no sender and the calligraphy on the envelope was familiar to me. As if that wasn't enough, the recipient was not my beloved writer, but myself.

I froze with the envelope between my fingers, my head full of contrasting thoughts.

“Is something wrong?”

My eyes met his. He stared at me attentively, and I realized that he had never stopped doing it.

“No, I... It's all right... It's just that...” I was lost in a huge dilemma: should I tell him about the letter? If I didn't do it, Kyle might do it later on. It was he who collected the mail and put it on the desk. Maybe he hadn't noticed that one letter had another recipient. Could I count on this, and put the letter aside and reclaim it later? No, that was impossible. Mr Mc Laine was too keen-sighted, and he didn't miss a thing. The weight of my lie came between us.

He stretched out his hand, with his back to the wall. He felt my hesitancy, and he wanted to see with his own eyes.

With a heavy sigh I passed him the envelope.

His eyes left mine for one second, just the time to read the name on the envelope, and then they sought mine again. Once again there was hostility in his gaze, as dense as fog, slimy as

blood, and black with mistrust.

“Who’s writing to you, Melisande Bruno? A far-away boyfriend? A relative? Oh, no, how stupid of me. You told me they’re all dead. Who, then? Maybe a friend?”

I leapt at the chance and continued to lie. “It must be from my old roommate, Jessica. I knew she would write to me, and I gave her my address,” I said, surprised at how the words flowed from my mouth, natural in their falsehood.

“Then go ahead and read. You’ll be anxious to do so. Don’t worry, Melisande” His tone was sweet, but veiled with a chilling cruelty. At that moment I realized that I still had a heart, in spite of my previous convictions. Although it was swollen, syncopated and disconnected from the rest of my body. As my mind was.

“No... there’s no hurry... maybe later... I mean... Jessica won’t have any big news...” I stammered, avoiding his frosty look.

“I insist, Melisande.”

For the first time in my life, I was aware of how sweet poison could be, of its seductive scent and misleading spell. His voice and his smile didn’t reveal his fury. Only his eyes betrayed him.

I picked up the envelope he was handing me as if it was infested.

He waited. There was a trace of sadistic amusement in those bottomless eyes.

I put the envelope in my pocket. “It’s from my sister.” The truth burst out of my mouth, liberating, even though there had been no way of avoiding it. He remained silent, and I bravely

went on.

“I know I lied about my relatives, but... I really am alone in the world. I...” I lost my voice. I tried again. “I know I was wrong, but I didn’t want to talk about them.”

“Them?”

“Right. My Dad is still alive. But just because his heart still beats.” My eyes became tearful. “He’s almost a vegetable. He’s an alcoholic at the last stage, and he doesn’t even remember who we are. I mean Monique and me.”

“It was stupid of you to lie to me, Miss Bruno. Didn’t you think that your sister would write to you here? Or did you take off so you wouldn’t have to take care of your father, leaving the burden on someone else’s shoulders?” His voice echoed through the office, as deadly as a shot from a gun.

I swallowed my tears, and I gazed at him defiantly. I lied, it was undeniable, but he was describing me as a despicable being, who didn’t deserve to live and unworthy of respect.

“I won’t allow you to judge me, Mr Mc Laine. You know nothing about my life, or the reasons that made me lie. You’re my employer, not my judge, and even less so my executioner.” The deadly calm with which I spoke surprised me more than him, and I put my hand to my mouth, as if it had been talking in my place, separated from my mind, as independent as my heart and my dreams.

I stood up suddenly and made the chair fall backwards. I picked it up with trembling hands, my mind in a catatonic state.

I had already reached the door when he spoke with a bitter voice. "Take the day off, Miss Bruno. You seem very upset. See you tomorrow."

I reached my room in a daze, and ran into the adjacent bathroom. Here I washed my face with cold water, and studied my image in the mirror. It was too much. All the black and white that surrounded me was more disturbing than a funeral cloth. I felt as if I was dangerously hovering over the edge of a cliff. I wasn't afraid of falling. It had already happened many times before, and I got up every time. My skin and my heart were dotted with millions of invisible and painful scars. I was afraid I'd lose my mind along with the lucidity that had kept me alive until that moment. If that were to happen, I would have preferred to crash into the ground.

The tears I didn't shed twisted my bowels, and I was a basket case. A zombie, like the character of one of Mc Laine's novels.

I put my hand in the pocket of my tweed skirt in which I had stuffed Monique's letter. I had to read what she wanted, I could no longer procrastinate. I pulled it out, and went to my bedroom.

It weighed like a bag of reinforced concrete, and I was tempted not to open it. Its content could only be one: pain. I thought I was very strong before I arrived at Midnight Rose. How wrong I had been. I wasn't strong at all.

My hands moved against my will, I was reduced to a puppet. They tore the envelope, and spread the sheet it contained. A few words, typical of Monique.

Dear Melisande,

I need more money. Thank you for what you sent me from London, but it's not enough. Can you ask for an advance on your salary from that writer? Don't be shy or fearful. They say he's very rich. After all, he's alone, paralytic and easily swayed. Hurry up.

Yours always, Monique.

I don't know how long I stared at the letter, maybe a few minutes, maybe hours. Everything lost importance, as if all I really was just an appendix of Monique and of my father. For a second I wished they would both die, and that terrible thought filled me with horror. Monique had tried to love me, although in her selfish way. And my father... well, the good memories of him were so rare that they blocked my breath in my throat. But he was still my father. The person who had given me life, and was convinced that he had the right to trample it.

I carefully folded the letter, with meticulous and exaggerated attention. Then I closed it in the chest of drawers.

Money.

Monique needed money. More money. I sold everything I owned in London, very little in truth, to help her out, and just a few weeks later, we were back to the starting point. I knew that Dad's treatment was expensive, but now I was starting to get scared. If Sebastian Mc Laine had fired me - and God only knew if he had good reasons to do it, even if for no other reason than to amuse himself - I would end up in the middle of a street. How

could I ask him for an advance after what had happened? Just the thought of doing so was appalling. Monique had never had many scruples; she had an enviable impertinence, but for me it was different. I wasn't good at communicating and asking for an impossible support. I was too afraid of a refusal. I had done it once, and I could still remember the taste of the "no", the feeling of rejection and the noise of a door being banged in my face.

"Kyle is a real bum. He disappeared with the car in the afternoon, and he returned just a half hour ago. Mr Mc Laine is furious. That guy deserves a kicked in the teeth, I tell you. Leaving the Master without assistance!" Mrs Mc Millian's voice was full of outrage, as if Kyle had done her a personal wrong.

I kept moving the food in the dish without the slightest trace of appetite.

The woman continued to speak, as talkative as ever, and didn't notice. I forced myself to smile at her, and I dived again into the darkness of my thoughts. Where could I find the money? No, I had no choice. I would receive my salary in two more weeks. Monique would have to wait. I would send it all to her, hoping it wasn't a reckless move. The risk of being fired without warning was frighteningly real. Mr Mc Laine was an unpredictable man with a lousy and obviously unreliable personality.

I was so frantic when I returned to my room that I couldn't cry, nor stand still. I lay on my bed, invoking sleep but it was late to arrive. I had no control over anything; I was an outcast in my own body.

Needless to say I didn't dream that night.

Chapter seven

My ears buzzed and I felt as though I was surrounded by hot black mud, from which I couldn't escape. Mr Mc Laine's welcome wasn't as cold as I had expected, perhaps because he simply ignored me, and didn't answer my greeting. Throughout the morning he pretended that I wasn't there, and I was overcome by unhappiness.

"Shit! This damn computer!" He punched the table, one inch away from the computer.

I tried to talk naturally. "Is something wrong?"

He sneered, without looking at me. "Something? Everything's wrong. Everything."

I waited in silence for him to explain.

"It stopped working, damn it!" He pointed to the computer, his tone full of bitterness.

I clumsily walked to his side, in an attempt to help him, even though my technological knowledge was very limited.

He didn't object when I bent to look at the screen. I felt his eyes on me, and his breath was so close that I could feel its warmth on my cheek.

I got up as quick as a cheetah, and I went back to my side of the desk, stumbling over my own feet.

"Do you want me to call a technician?" I suggested weakly.

"First try turning the light on, please."

My fingers pressed the light switch several times, with no results. “There’s a black out.”

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