

Rosette

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



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The girl who couldn't see rainbows

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## 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 Brunò?"

"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.

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