

CHAPTER 5

ROSA

“You’re hired.”

Disbelief and elation rocket through me at the same time. I can’t believe that he’s called me back about the maid job. I thought he’d decided I wasn’t worth taking a risk on.

“It’s only for a month. Consider it a trial.”

The relief that I just felt fizzles out at his words. Of course, it isn’t permanent. I haven’t got any experience—or any confidence.

I try to make my voice strong. I don’t want him to hear my self-doubt, or he might just change his mind about even giving me the one month of work. “I understand.”

“You start tomorrow morning. It’s a live-in position, so bring your stuff with you.”

Oh God, I never realized that he’d expect me to live in. But I can’t turn down this job—because who knows if and when another offer will come along. And one thing’s for sure: the sooner I can get enough money together, the sooner Ethan and I can leave Chicago and move somewhere where we’ll be safer.

But the thought of what I need to do has my heart breaking.

Kathleen has stayed for dinner with us tonight, so I explain the situation to both her and Kori. “Please can you keep Ethan here and safe for me? I’ll be back as soon as I’ve earned enough money to get away from Chicago. I wouldn’t ask if I had any other option...”

And they both agree immediately, and their kindness makes my eyes fill with tears.

But the hardest part is when I have to explain to Ethan that I’ll be away for a little while. “I’ll visit as often as I can, I promise, and it’s just while I earn some money so that we can make a new start.”

He looks at me with his huge brown eyes, and my chest tightens. I can tell he's confused, and by the time morning comes, I've almost changed my mind. But then I tell myself that he'll be safe with Kori and Kathleen and that this is what I need to do if we are ever going to get enough money to start a new life for ourselves—somewhere far away from Chicago where we'll be safe from Grayden.

I make sure I arrive at the casino with plenty of time to spare. I instantly regret this, however, when I find myself having to hover in the foyer with Stella and the same security guard from yesterday looking down their noses at me.

I slept naked with just a sheet wrapped around me last night so that I could wash my clothing and leave it to dry until morning, but I can tell by their sneers that they've noticed I'm still wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

I try to tell myself that I showered this morning as always, including shampooing my hair, and my clothes are freshly washed and ironed, but I still can't help the flush from rushing up my cheeks.

I have a small bag that Kori lent me. Inside is a precious photo album of Ethan that I took with me when I fled from Grayden, plus an oversized sweater of Kori's that I can just about fit into.

Kori also insisted that she lend me a couple of books in case I have any spare time and want to try and keep my mind off things—as if I'm going to be able to do anything except think about Ethan—but I appreciate her trying to help me. Kori knows how hard it is for me to leave my son, especially after what we've just been through, but I know for certain that he'll be safe with her and taken care of.

Just after 10 a.m., I breathe a huge sigh of relief when Camillo—Mr. Marchiano, I correct myself in my mind—arrives. With each minute that ticked by past the allocated time, a hundred doubts rushed through my mind, worrying that he'd changed his mind.

He frowns when he sees my small bag. “Is that all your stuff?”

“I don't need much,” I say quickly.

He reaches out a large hand. “I'll carry it out to the car.”

“Oh no, please don’t trouble yourself. I can manage...”

“Give it to me,” he growls in a low voice, and I immediately hand it over, trying not to let my hand shake.

We get into his sleek black SUV, and I sit huddled in the passenger seat, trying to make myself as small as possible.

He drives through the streets with ease. His phone vibrates with messages in the holder on the dashboard, but otherwise, it’s silent. His right hand wraps around the steering wheel, bulging the veins and drawing my attention to the pattern of lines that lead up his arms under the rolled-up sleeves of his dark shirt.

The open-mouth skull swallows a rose as it fades into the crackly branches of a tree, surrounded by more roses in some seamless blend of dark shadows and highlights like smoke. There’s a story behind them, but I know it’s not one I should be interested in. I swallow hard, turning my attention back to the front and not to the man beside me. Ruthless and bloody to the very core, he’s dangerous—especially with those thick scars along his knuckles.

“Do you have questions?”

“No,” I whisper.

“None?”

“No, sir.”

He exhales before his hand flexes against the steering wheel, straining those inky lines. “Okay. I have a question.”

I nod.

“Why did you agree?”

“Like I said, I need the job.”

“Why?”

I open my mouth and snap it shut again.

“Never mind,” he says when he sees I’m not going to explain further.

I fiddle with my hands in my lap, and I’m thankful when he changes the subject.

“Now, I know we addressed this in the interview, but you need to know a little more about what you’re getting into with my brothers. You’ll be in charge of the cooking, cleaning, maintaining the house, and ensuring that all our domestic needs are met in full. Okay?”

“I understand,” I whisper.

The hand with the open-mouth skull rubs at his jaw, and he mutters another one of those Italian curses I don’t understand. “Nulla...difficile per chi...” I want to ask him what he means, but I know my place. I’m an employee now. Seen and not heard. Spoken to and not with. I’m not here to get to know him or his brothers. I’m here for a job. Not to learn what makes a man like him tick, or why he’d chosen those specific ink designs. Ethan’s counting on me.

“Why have the previous maids not lasted?” I ask carefully, wanting to know exactly what I should avoid doing.

He rubs the back of his neck. “From the maids we’ve had over the last month, I would say that there were four main issues. Maids 1 and 5 couldn’t clean to my brothers’ exacting standards. Maids 2, 3, and 6 couldn’t cook for shit. Maid 7 lied to us by not telling us that her brother was a cop. Maid 8 stole from us and hoped we wouldn’t notice. And Maid 9 just didn’t last.”

I take a deep gulp. Now I know what I have to do to keep this job...

I’ll have to impress with my cooking and cleaning—but as Grayden has always found fault, I know I’ll have to try much, much harder.

I can’t lie to them in any way. Which is okay because I never lie—except when I forgot to tell Camillo that I’m on the run from my husband and that I have a son.

And I can’t steal. Which is fine because I never steal. Although Grayden would definitely disagree with this—because he’d say that I’d just stolen our son.

Oh Jesus, I haven’t got a hope in hell of keeping this job.

“We’re here,” Camillo says as he guides us smoothly through the gates, past scary-looking armed men, and up the drive.

His house—his mansion—is stunning, but the only real detail I can take in is the huge statue of the Virgin Mary which stands on the front lawn.

Then my eyes drop from Mr. Marchiano and hit my lap as finally I place his name and face... He and his brothers are business associates of my father—they're bloodthirsty made men. Oh God, what have I got myself into? Men like the Marchianos, Grayden, and my father take what they want and snuff the life out of things that stand in their way...

Grayden's criticism is one thing, but who knows how men like the Marchianos deal with failure and mistakes? I'm their employee now, and every single detail of my work and performance will be put under the microscope by them. The SUV parks up, and I stumble out. But my feet are rooted to the floor of the garage. And I feel panic rise.

My chest tightens.

This is a mistake.

I've been so desperate that I haven't thought it through.

I've traded one house of horrors for another.

“Rosa?”

My fists clench at my side. That faint little voice, the one that told me to run from Grayden, whispers it'll be alright. And I desperately want to listen to it now. Even if it's just for a week, I'll earn enough money to buy me some time to try again.

I can hear the breaths coming in and out of my mouth, faster and faster. The world swims, and dots dance across my visions.

“Rosa?” The urgent snap of his voice jerks me back to the present.

Ducking my head, I start walking toward the newest devil in charge of my life. I clench my teeth together and will my mind to quiet—to stop the string of thoughts that bombard me like bullets, each one shattering more of what remaining confidence I have after it's been battered again and again over the years. And now, there's nothing but a husk left behind—a husk of a woman I should have been but will never be.

With a feigned confidence and some semblance of dignity I don't feel or have, I lift my chin and meet Camillo's arched brow. He stands by the door, his head tilted as he regards me.

This is rock bottom, a pit of hell I'm willingly walking into, and I'm not going to give up. I can't give up.

My jaw nearly unhinges as I take in the interior of the mansion. From the outside, it seemed massive, but inside it hits me that this is now all my responsibility. Dread wells inside of me, threatening to cement me to the ground as he gives me a brief tour of the first level.

First, he shows me into a sprawling open plan reception room that's home to a spacious living room, a dining area, and a kitchen that is piled with dirty dishes everywhere.

He opens the refrigerator. "You'll probably have to stock up on food, but see what you can find for dinner."

I catch sight of some readymade pizza crusts and tons of various toppings—pepperoni, sausage, ham, mozzarella. They must like pizza—and that's definitely something that I can't get too wrong. "Shall I make pizza for tonight? There's plenty of ingredients—"

"No," Camillo snaps, making me jump. "Those ingredients are leftovers. I bought too many."

"What, er, would you like me to cook?"

"I'll leave that to you to figure out. Just make sure that it's not pizza."

I give a quick nod.

"And make sure that it's cooked through and not left soggy at the bottom," he blurts out.

My eyes widen as I nod again.

"And it can't be burned on top..."

I gulp. He's obviously remembering my feeble answers when he asked about my cooking skills.

"And make sure you include some vegetables."

"I can do that," I squeak.

"But make sure they're not raw."

Oh God, he's convinced that dinner's going to be a disaster—and after all the feedback I've got from Grayden over the last few years, I know that he's right.

He leads me into a small room a little way from the main reception room. "The previous maid used this as her bedroom." The room is tiny, almost like a broom closet, and it has a small attached bathroom. "We gave her the choice of our guest rooms, but she insisted she wanted to be on the first floor." He shrugs. "I think she might have heard Marco having sex. I mean, he is pretty loud—"

"This will do me fine for a bedroom," I say as quickly as I can.

He shows me the rest of the rooms on this level, including an office, plus so many other rooms that I find it hard to keep count of them all.

I climb the stairs slowly after him, holding onto the dusty banister as I follow his broad back up the stairs. A running list starts in my head as soon as I see each room and make a mental note of all the things that need to be cleaned if I'm to do a good enough job.

"This is my brother Alessio's room." He pauses, rubbing at his neck. "He's, um, particular about how things are put away."

I nod quickly. The heavy door opens, and I peer inside. It's relatively clean.

The next few rooms aren't too terribly kept either, but with each new room, the list in my head grows longer and longer. It'll be a tough job, but doable—I hope. Already, I'm mapping out the path to get it done in the most efficient way possible, plus what products I'll need and what equipment.

Camillo stops before another door, and he heaves a sigh. "You'll be starting here."

"Yes, Mr. Marchiano," I murmur.

“It’s just... You can just call me Camillo.”

I merely nod. Because calling him that would be far too familiar for someone I’m supposed to be working for. Even Grayden hadn’t wanted me to call him by his first name. I shudder as I remember what he would say: “Keep my name out of your filthy, worthless mouth, you stupid bitch.”

Perhaps Camillo doesn’t mind if I call him by his first name, but his brothers definitely might. I make another mental note not to call them anything other than ‘Mr. Marchiano’ or ‘sir’—else I’ll probably find myself out on the street once more.

“This is my room,” he says as he gestures at the closed door in front of us. “I have to go and deal with some work stuff, so I’ll leave you to sort out what you need. There are supplies down in the hall closet, some under the basin in the bathroom, and more in the cupboard next to the pantry.”

So, spread out and far from each other. I nod, not wanting to cause problems already. Grayden always hated how I’d make sure all my supplies were on hand in a small rolling caddy unless it was specific to a room. He said it made me look like a cheap motel maid and not the wife of a prominent businessman like himself.

The sound of Camillo’s thundering feet on the stairs makes me flinch, and I take a deep inhalation through my mouth, trying to settle myself. My hands shake as I turn the doorknob.

I immediately regret it.

The piles of dishes in the kitchen were bad enough, but this room looks like a bomb’s gone off in it.

The same wood flooring from the hallway is buried beneath the piles—no, make that mountains—of clutter. Discarded clothing is tossed in heaps all over the place—it’s hard to know what’s clean and what isn’t—and a multitude of empty drinks, car magazines, electronics chargers, and other various items lie discarded wherever they were finished with.

Oh God, what did I sign up for?

I take a few steps back into the hallway. Surely, he doesn’t really live like this, does he? This is a test. It has to be a test. Right? And if I fail, I’ll be out...

Okay, Rosa. One step at a time.

The mental pep talk does nothing for the way my body quivers. I ball my hands and make a quick beeline downstairs to what is now my bedroom.

There I find a closetful of clothes that the last maid must have left behind. She looks like she might have been a similar size to me. I run my hands over a pretty jade green velvet dress. Why on earth would she leave this all behind? I can only think that she must have left in a hurry.

I pick out a pair of black sweatpants and a simple white T-shirt. They're freshly laundered and ironed, and I decide that these will do as a makeshift uniform for now. Even though the top is a little too tight around my breasts and middle, at least it's clean and presentable.

From a simple glance, it's clear these men are almost as desperate as I am. The thought should make me feel better, should give me some semblance of power, but all it does is make me anxious. Because what it actually means is that there are even more things that they'll expect me to do perfectly, with every remaining speck of dust or smudge being stacked against me, just like Grayden used to do.

I go to the places Camillo mentioned and gather everything I can find to tackle the problems I've seen. The familiar feel of the bright yellow rubber on my hands and forearms is oddly soothing and enough to keep the panic from dragging me under its waves. And with the quick snap of a trash bag, I set to work in Camillo's room.

I start with the empty drink containers, mostly energy drinks, which look like they haven't been here for that long, thank goodness. Then, I decide to tackle the endless piles of clothes. On closer inspection, most of the clothes appear to be clean, but I don't want to risk putting a used item back into the closet, so instead, I bundle them to take down to the laundry room later.

Beneath the mass of clutter lies a luxurious dark room that might just suit the man I've met. The black wood paneling behind the enormous bed with rumpled black bedding is accented by a large ornate mirror that is too high to be anything but decorative. It's beautiful, even covered with dust.

I stirp the bed sheets and put them on to wash in the laundry room. And by the time I've cleared half of the room out, it starts to look hospitable again, and it's enough for me to see the finish line. Hauling another basket of laundry down, I notice the minuscule number of suits Camillo possesses. Instead, he appears to prefer plain black shirts, T-shirts, and tank tops, together with combat pants, jeans, chinos, sweats, and dark leather jackets.

I thought mafia men all prefer to flaunt their wealth with obvious designer suits that tell the world that money's no object?

Grayden certainly had loved to show off his money, opting for the most expensive and well-tailored suits he could afford, together with polished Italian leather loafers, expensive wristwatches, Cuban cigars for celebration, and anything and everything to prove to the world that he's someone of importance.

I step inside his closet and run my fingers over the clothes hung in there. I wonder why he dresses in the way that he does. But then, I dismiss the thoughts about Camillo's clothing choices from my head with a decisive shake. I'm snooping on day one. What the hell is wrong with me?

Getting back to work, sweat drips down the crevice between my breasts and down my spine by the time the floor is immaculate. The dark wood dresser that matches the bedframe is clear of clutter, dusted, and polished to perfection. Its sleek black surface shines back so brightly that I can see myself in the glimmer of the reflection. But I wince away from looking at myself before I get trapped.

Going back to the task in hand, I notice that there's hardly anything personal in the room but work out equipment and wrapping for hands. Does he box, perhaps? With a body like his, that wouldn't surprise me.

I tell myself to focus as I move onto making the bed with the freshly washed bedding. The silken fabric is soft and warm against my hands as I struggle across the massive bed to get the sheet in place. My hands only tremble slightly with each crease of the corners. Perfect. It has to be perfect—the corners have to be tight enough to bounce a quarter off.

I swipe at my brow, dabbing the glow of perspiration away as I take in the now spotless room. It's massive, dark, and brooding, just like Camillo. It suits him.

The attached bathroom is actually quite clean, although again, it's beyond messy. I'm beginning to think that Camillo's real issue is a lack of putting things away rather than being dirty per se.

Next, I set to work on Marco's and Alessio's bedrooms, fighting the wince at the sting from the residual pain in my ribs flaring to life. But I charge on with cleaning, laundry, and ironing until a text from Camillo tells me that they'll be home in two hours. With most of the lower level now also clean, I decide I'll have to leave the remaining areas until after dinner.

Setting my sights on the pantry, I step inside, but my mind ignores all the ingredients that I could potentially use for tonight's dinner. Because my senses are overwhelmed by the far wall...

My eyes widen in wonder, taking in the sheer abundance of cakes and candy. The shelves there are stacked with colorful packages, each one a promise of sugary bliss. I remember now that Camillo said his brothers have six kids between them. That explains it. Although I should get back to planning dinner, I can't help but linger.

Because cakes are my weakness. My difficulty. My Achilles' heel.

Cakes are what lies between me and a thin, beautiful body.

I know I should turn around and vow to never look at these shelves again, but my feet stay rooted to the spot.

Brightly colored boxes of Twinkies catch my eye first. The golden sponges with creamy filling practically call out my name. I reach out, almost on instinct, my fingers grazing the cool wrapping. I can almost taste the spongy sweetness and the burst of vanilla cream as it melts in my mouth.

Next to them are Ding Dongs, and I imagine biting into the sumptuous chocolate cakes filled with fluffy white cream. And to the right, the shelf groans under the weight of a variety of Hostess cupcakes, their chocolate frosting glistening under the pantry's soft light. Each one is a work of art, topped with that iconic swirl of white icing.

Rows of Little Debbie snacks are neatly arranged, and Zebra Cakes, with their white icing and chocolate stripes, jump out at me. I pick up a box, feeling the familiar crinkle of the wrapper, as I imagine the first bite—the soft cake giving way to the sweet cream center, the chocolate drizzle adding just the right amount of richness.

It's a treasure trove of indulgence, and I can practically smell the sweet, tantalizing aroma—and the hundreds of calories packed into every little package.

And that one word—calories—wakes me up from my dream. It curls around me like an insidious whisper. Because all these tempting treats are off limits. I'm on a diet. I'm always on a diet. I can't remember a time since my teenage years when I haven't been counting every single calorie whether it's been a day of bingeing or fasting.

But the cakes look so good. My stomach growls, a traitorous sound that echoes my thoughts. I've been down this road before, and it never leads anywhere good.

I wrap my arms around myself, as if holding on tight will keep me from reaching out. The memory of the promise I make to myself every night before I fall asleep flickers through my mind.

It's not just about the cakes. It's about the feeling that comes with eating them. The momentary bliss that floods my senses with every bite—and the sweet escape from my troubles.

But that bliss is always short-lived, giving way to guilt and self-loathing that stick around much longer than the taste of frosting on my tongue. I know this cycle all too well.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to center myself. I picture the version of me that I want to be—thin, confident, healthy, and beautiful. She wouldn't be staring longingly at a table full of cakes; she would walk away without a second thought.

But that idealized version of myself seems so distant, almost like a stranger.

It's only when I check the time that I force myself to turn away. Because I have to keep this job. I have to get enough money for Ethan and me to get away for good.

Dinner. It still needs to be tackled. It has to be something simple that I can't mess up. With another glance at what's available, I settle on steak and homemade fries alongside a fresh salad.

As I peel and cut the potatoes, my gaze drifts to the kitchen counter, and a pang of longing shoots through me. Ethan should be sitting there doing his coloring while

I prepare the meal. My heart seizes, and I nearly slice my finger before I banish the feeling and focus on what I'm doing.

The smell fills the kitchen and my mouth waters. I survey the spread. Freshly chopped salad with a homemade dressing and the steak and fries sizzling away as they cook. An angry growl erupts from my stomach. I've gone days without eating much, and this meal isn't for me.

I pull out the dishes and set the table. The last plate and the napkin leave my hands just as the front door opens.

I tug at the white T-shirt that's rising over the slope of my hips. My hands are clammy and shaking as I move back around the counter to clean up the small stack of dishes.

I hear someone go into the office while someone else goes up the staircase.

Dessert. Oh God, I've forgotten about dessert. "Shit," I mutter, wincing at the way the sound travels around the quiet space. The flannel slips from my hand and splashes into the hot soapy water, flinging the suds onto my T-shirt and chin. Hastily, I mop at them with one hand while the other hand fumbles around in the water to find the sponge.

Terror seizes my legs, and I lock them in place to keep them from wobbling over. The last thing I need to do is faint on my first day. But I know I've already messed up.

After a few minutes, I hear a couple of people coming into the kitchen, so I start to dish up. Their voices carry toward me until there's an abrupt halt in their conversation.

A low snarl sounds.

I whirl around.

"Who the fuck are you?"

And the blood drains from my face.

Two men dressed in black tailored suits and dress shirts glare at me. The slightly older looking one must be Marco. I can't find my voice as his pitch-dark eyes narrow onto me.

The other man, who must be Alessio, tilts his head and crosses his arms over his chest. "He asked you a question," he growls.

The walls close in, inch by inch. And Marco's eyes scan me like a predator about to pounce.

"I-I..." I swallow thickly. My mouth gapes open like a fish.

Marco's large hand slams against the counter.

Flinching, my back pushes up against the sink.

"Who. The. Fuck. Are. You?"

“Rosa,” I squeak out.

“Rosa who?”

I try to speak again, but only a croak comes out. I grasp the counter with a tight grip to keep myself up. “I’m the...new maid.”

“What’s for dinner?” A familiar voice sounds as I watch Camillo shoulder past his brothers and slide into a chair at the table. “I’m hungry,” he complains. “Can’t you wait to chew her out until after we’ve eaten?”

“The new maid will tell you what’s for dinner,” Marco taunts without taking his eyes off me.

“I told you I hired someone.” Camillo’s voice rumbles in defense.

Marco looks me up and down. “Are you actually qualified to do this sort of job?” he demands in a terse, terrifying voice.

I can’t breathe around the lump in my throat. It’s like he can sense that I’m weak, worthless, and totally wrong for this job. He’s like a shark in the waters scenting blood.

Everything is swaying.

I can hear the thunder of my pulse in my ears drowning out everything around me.

“Mr. Camillo hired...me today. One...month’s trial.”

Marco leans closer and looms over me, looking me up and down, pinning me with his terrifying stare. “I’ve got three rules for new maids,” he says in a low, dangerous voice. “One. If you break it, you pay for it.”

I nod my understanding.

“Two. If you fuck up, you’re out.”

I give a small squeak in response.

“Three. If you steal from us, you’re fucking dead,” he snarls.

And the only thing I can manage is a large gulp—as I wonder if the clothes left behind in the maid’s room belong to a woman they killed...

I rapidly blink back the tears that are burning the back of my eyelids.

“Oh, and rule four,” Marco clips.

“Come on, Marco,” Camillo interrupts in a low tone that I can’t quite identify. “You said there were only three rules.”

Marco glares at him before turning back to me. “Four. If you’re going to cry, go the fuck outside. I can’t stand fucking criers.”

I don’t trust my voice, so I just give the tiniest nod while praying that the threatening tears don’t fall.

Alessio narrows his gaze. I can see his mind whirling behind his eyes. But I can’t work out what he’s thinking.

“Smells good,” Camillo says into the awkward silence as his brothers take their seats.

Marco grunts and sips at the glass of water. “We’ll see.” He’s big and not as muscled as Camillo but nearly. The dress shirt pulls tightly across his chest, and his jaw is set tight. A perma-scowl wrinkles his forehead as he doesn’t take his glare off me.

My legs feel wobbly as I place the serving dishes on the table before backing away slowly and tiptoeing into the hall.

My legs give way halfway to my room. I cover my mouth to muffle the sob as I press my head to the cool wall.

I shove myself up and make it the last few feet to my bedroom, closing the door.

Useless.

Waste of space.

You call this clean?

Do you really want to eat that now?

You don’t have to take another serving. You can say no, it won’t kill you.

You think this shit is something I’d eat?

You're just a worthless hole for me to fill tonight...

The words whispering in my head sound just like my father, mother, sister, and Grayden. They roar into a crescendo of noise, leaving me unable to hear anything but these words, each of them feeling like a knife in my gut.

I manage to make it to the bowl just in time before I lose what little's in my stomach, before sinking to the floor and letting my tears rush out.

But I know I can't stay here. I have to go back out and face them...