

CHAPTER 3

ROSA

My clothes are the same ones given to me two days ago at the shelter. I have no spare money to buy new ones, and I'm far too big to fit into anything of Kori's. I look and feel miserable.

My hands shake as I take in my shabby appearance in the window I pass. The hair dye is patchy at best, brown in some places and an orangey color in others. It's definitely not the solid black it's meant to be. The jagged ends of my bob aren't as noticeable if I keep my hair tucked behind my ears, but I still know they're there.

My stomach protests with hunger, and I feel a little dizzy, but I ball my hand. A little less to eat won't hurt me. There's plenty of fat to spare. The words sound distinctly like my mother's as they ring through my head.

All day, I've been walking the streets again and trying anywhere and everywhere in the hope of finding a job. I need to find something, anything, to just get back on my feet. To simply provide for my son and prove to the world I'm not as worthless as Grayden or my family think.

Except as I sit on the bench, looking at my trembling hands, I think they're right. What do I know about working—about anything? My entire life, I've been reaching out for unobtainable goals and failing every time. Tears sting my eyes, and I push out a breath, willing them away.

Ethan's wide brown eyes and trembling mouth flash into my mind, giving me the energy to push off the bench and march into the sleek casino across the street from me. I smooth a hand down my side, over the curve of my hip, pulling out the wrinkles as best I can.

I keep my eyes downcast as I move into the building, hoping not to draw the wrong kind of attention.

Catching my lip between my teeth, I do a quick scan of the lobby, searching for the front desk.

Around me, women in their skin-tight clothing and designer fashion labels drape themselves over men whose high-end suits and polished shoes scream money. I freeze

in the doorway. They might know Grayden or my father. My blood runs cold as I quickly look for an escape.

But the casino might be hiring. I can't leave, not without even asking if they have any job openings. But if someone sees me, they might tell Grayden.

I can't move. I can't breathe.

A body jostles into me, and I hear the indignant huff of a woman behind me. It's the push I need to take a step, and then another. The front desk comes into view. I practically fling myself to the side of it, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible as I clutch onto the edge.

"Can I help you?"

My gaze lifts to a sharply dressed woman. Her name badge tells me that she's called Stella. Her lips form a smile that definitely doesn't reach her eyes—like she knows I don't belong in a place like this.

I need to say something. I need to open my mouth.

"Hello?" she grits out.

I blink, feeling my nails bite into my palm hard enough to leave little crescents behind. "Yes. I just...wanted to ask if you have any openings? The woman at the pharmacy down the street said that she thought you're hiring."

Her brow arches as her gaze drifts lower, taking in my shabby clothing—and probably also my weight.

"We're not really looking to hire anyone."

"Please," I plead, clearing my throat when it cracks around the word. "You have to have something. Anything."

"There are no jobs available here. Not for someone like you."

It takes all my effort to keep my lips from wobbling. "Please, I'm a hard worker. I can clean the rooms. I can take the trash out. I'll do anything."

Stella gives a brief wave to someone behind me before she turns her attention back to me and her face hardens again. "We don't have any openings at this time." Her tone is terse and hostile.

“I...” But my voice fades as a man steps into my peripheral vision. I flinch and cower into the front desk, waiting to be grabbed. I can just feel Grayden’s hand wrapping around my arm and squeezing, bruises in the shape of his fingers blooming in its wake. Terror paralyzes me.

“Hey,” a male voice barks into my ear, pulling me back to the present. He gestures toward the door with a sharp jerk of his hand. The wired earpiece in his ear and the straight buzz cut complement the serious downturn of his lips. My eyes catch on the golden embroidery on his blazer: Security.

“You’re making a scene,” he snaps. “Do us both a favor and leave quietly. Follow me—”

“Wait! Please.” I clutch at the front desk for dear life. “I need a job. Any job.”

Tears blur my vision. I’ve failed yet again. And I slump my shoulders in defeat. What’s the use? There’s nothing for me here.

Stupid. Useless. The words Grayden has said to me so often echo in my ears.

“What’s going on?”

I startle as a deep rumble sounds from behind me, sending a shiver skittering down my spine.

The way the security guard halts and makes his tone suddenly respectful makes me think that the new man is important. “Mr. Marchiano, it’s nothing. We’re just escorting someone out.”

“Leave her.”

“Boss?”

“I said leave her. Do I need to repeat myself a third time?”

“N-no, boss.” His hand drops, and he steps away from this man who is now standing next to me.

He’s imposing with wide shoulders and a broad chest that strain against his black shirt. I can’t keep my eyes off his rolled-up sleeves which showcase his strong forearms—they’re breathtaking: muscled and with magnificent dark ink scrawled across the tan skin. Everything about him is as beautiful as it is terrorizing.

My heart labors in my chest as my eyes lift to his face. A powerful jaw covered with dark stubble. Luxurious, black locks are pulled back from his face in a half knot at the back of his head, allowing the thick strands to just brush the back of his neck and curl gently around his ears.

His rich brown eyes scan me from head to toe, and I fight the urge to curl inward and make myself smaller—a worthless endeavor if there ever was one. I take an involuntary step back. I’m only five foot two, and the way he towers over me makes it clear that he’s definitely well over six feet tall.

“What are you here for?”

I flinch at his voice. And I can’t even form an answer as my mouth feels like it’s full of thick cotton.

“She’s looking for a job, Mr. Marchiano,” the woman at the front desk sneers, leaning over the desk so her chest is more pronounced.

But the man doesn’t spare her a glance. His eyes are solely fixed on me.

“I told her we don’t have any positions open. At least none she’s suitable for.”

Stella’s words make me want to curl up into a ball. Again, his eyes flicker over me, and my fingers can’t help but tug at my baggy hoodie. I should leave, but for some reason, my feet are rooted to the spot.

He tucks his large hands into his pockets. “We’re looking for a maid,” he says carefully. “Well, the family is, not the casino.”

“C-can I apply?” I stutter out the words, lifting my gaze to his for just a second before my eyes drop.

“Follow me,” he commands.

“But Mr. Marchiano—” Stella starts to say something in an appalled tone.

But all he does is shoot a look at her to make it clear that she should stop talking.

Stella narrows her eyes at me, and the security guard quietly moves back into place.

I watch as he sets off at a stride, stunned that someone is finally offering me an interview. Then, I remind myself that it’s only an interview, and I still have to convince him to actually give me the job.

I stare at him. Even from the back, he's built full of muscle and is intimidating as hell. My knees shake for a second.

"Well, don't keep him waiting," Stella snaps, her words making me jolt forward and take off after him.

His large body slides gracefully into a booth, sleek and powerful like a panther waiting to pounce. I swallow. This is for Ethan. That's all that matters.

The plush dark of the seating blends in with his black attire. "Sit."

I don't belong here, and I know it. "Okay," I mumble, mortified by how awkward and ungraceful I am as I squeeze into the booth.

"What's your name?"

"Rosa Dev—" I stop myself. "Um, just Rosa." I curl my hand tightly under the table, unable to keep the trembling at bay. My gaze lands on the immaculate table of the booth, a beautifully polished and lacquered oak wood that blends seamlessly in with the rest of the surroundings. Elegant and modern.

"Camillo Marchiano." He extends his hand toward me, but I refuse to shake it. My hands are clammy and shaky, and I can't let him notice this.

The sound of a tray dropping from somewhere nearby makes me jump and yelp. Get yourself together. "Sorry. You, er, said you were looking for a maid?"

He leans back into the booth, his massive arm spread across the back. I don't stare for too long and quickly avert my gaze again. But my mind continues to roll over his name. Camillo Marchiano. It tickles the back of my mind, but I can't seem to place it, especially not with the thundering of my pulse in my ears and the roiling of my stomach.

"I am. My brothers and I have found ourselves in a bit of a...jam." He hisses the last word, aggression rolling off him in waves, making me push back against the booth.

I give the tiniest nod.

"How many years' experience have you got? We're only looking for someone with excellent skills and references."

My heart plummets as he says this, knowing that I have exactly zero work experience in this or any other job. My eyes look at the table instead of his eyes as my mind

scrambles to find a way to fix this situation that's already falling apart at the seams. I need to have confidence, and I need to make eye contact and smile—neither of which my body wants to do right now.

“Well?”

“I don't have any professional experience,” I whisper.

He clenches his jaw, and I can tell that he's annoyed at me. He must think that I've got a cheek asking for this job and that I'm wasting his time. “We don't just hand out jobs to anyone,” he clips.

“I understand.” I pray that I don't have tears in my eyes even though I can feel the sting. I lift my chin and stare at his face—a face that's rugged and rough in a way that makes my insides flutter.

But his posture and the way his mouth curls in the corners into an unimpressed scowl terrify me.

He's the type of man that you hear stories about. The ones even Grayden and my father seem to tremble near and avoid. My chest tightens at the thought. Why would someone like him want to give me a chance?

My eyes dart around the place once more, and my foot bounces beneath the table. This has to work. Short of getting on my hands and knees for this man and begging, I'll do anything I can. “But I'm a hard worker.” The words blurt from my mouth before I can stop them.

I take a breath, trying to make myself sound far less desperate than I am. For Ethan's sake, I have to get this job. He can't say no. I won't let him. “I...I can clean and do laundry and know how to stock a pantry. I'm used to doing housework—I've had lots of practice. I can do whatever you need me to do as a maid.”

“Can you cook?”

“Um, perhaps. Yes, a bit, I think.”

His brow arches. “You don't sound sure.”

I know I'm not a very good cook. Grayden's told me this so many times over the last five years. I've tormented him with dry chicken, tough steaks, and overcooked pasta.

But if I have to cook to get this job, then I'll try my hardest to improve my cookery skills—I'm willing to do whatever it takes.

He drags his hand down his jaw and looks past me. "Hard work is great and all, but my brothers are demanding. It's not a job for the faint of heart. They're particular in what they like."

He's looking everywhere but at me now. He's avoiding eye contact. I've made him uncomfortable. Shit. Shit. Shit. How did I mess this up in such a short time?

"I can deal with demanding." Again, I blurt it out, desperation clinging to each word as it leaves my mouth. "I'm not scared of hard work. I can handle whatever you throw at me. I just need a chance. Please."

Now I'm begging. There's no dignity. She's left the building, alongside my sanity and self-worth. But I'll beg and beg until I can find something.

He mutters something under his breath. "Nulla è difficile...per chi..." I can't quite catch all the words, but it's something in what must be a foreign language, and I'm not sure what it means. His massive body doesn't move, but the muscle in his jaw ticks.

Please don't say what everyone else has been saying to me: No. No, thank you. Sorry, but no. You're not the sort of person we're looking for. Good luck with life, but you've failed.

He gives me a soft smile as he looks at me.

My heart hitches with hope...

And his smile is genuine—not one of those fake polite smiles you're given just before you're turned down.

I hold my breath as he gives his answer...

"I don't think you're right for the job."

Wait, what? He didn't really just say that, did he?

"I'm sorry, Rosa."

I close my eyes, my head dropping.

I really thought I had a chance, and the only thing I can do now is will my tears to stay back until I'm at least out of the building. My body is sagging, and I start to slide from the booth.

"My brothers are difficult to work for," he says in a rush, his body softening and his brown eyes swirling with a different kind of emotion. "It wouldn't be fair to you..."

"I understand. Thank you for your time."

"But why don't you fill in one of our casino application forms? Then, if something comes up, they can contact you."

"Okay." The word puffs out on a breath of air. Because it's worth a chance. All I've got to lose is another few minutes of my time.

"Follow me." He stands, giving me the once over again, slower this time, before curling his fist by his side and marching away. Each step forward is purposeful and powerful.

He's leading me back toward Stella. My insides clench at the thought of her looking down at me again. But I know I have to leave my details with the casino. Because maybe, just maybe, it'll lead to a job for me. And I remind myself that I'm doing this for Ethan. This is all for the boy who's my whole world.

I start to fill out the form that he takes from behind the front desk and hands to me.

I sit a few tables away from him, but I can feel his gaze lasering into me.

And it makes me shudder.

Because he's dangerous—and I don't understand him. And it's almost as if he's feeling guilty for not giving me the job...