
Chapter 1

Candice Papageorgiou sat in the waiting room of R. Hamilton & Co. with her mother, Claudine. The room was empty save for the receptionist hidden behind her walled in cubicle. The jarring, white overhead light hit her like a cold glare, cutting into her intoxicated senses. She glanced around in boredom and let out a loud belch. The receptionist glanced up over the wall of her cubicle and raised a brow that earned a laugh from Candi who turned her attention to her recently manicured fingernails. Fuck it, a chip already. Once she left here, she'd head to the salon and get the nail polish fixed. Maybe after that she would hit up her bestie for lunch at the pub.

"Candice," the receptionist called eying her in a peculiar way. Candi glanced up at the woman in the business suit. She held a clipboard and her long, blonde hair fell past her shoulders.

"Please follow me to meet with one of our recruiters."

Candi turned and gave her mom, who was absentmindedly scrolling through her phone, seemingly oblivious to the whole thing, a look.

"Don' do anythin' I wouldn't do," she jeered in her direction,

flinging her Gucci bag over her shoulder, and proceeded to follow the lady to the back room.

The room was divided into cubicles where recruiters sat taking phone calls, others scrolling through computer screens. When the receptionist stopped, Candi found herself standing in front of a broad-shouldered man with dark blond hair and a short, well-groomed beard. He wore a light blue, button-down shirt that complemented the muscles beneath admirably. She licked her lips and sat in the chair adjacent him. Watching as he finished typing something out on his keyboard, she admired his strength, imagining how it would feel to have his large hands running all over her soft body.

He looked up and she smiled seductively. She was not one to play shy. If she liked what she saw, she showed it. And why not?

He gave her a wry glare. She glanced down at his left hand. No ring... fair game. Not that any shit like that had ever stopped her before. Anyhow, she decided to behave as the meeting commenced. She had pissed off her old man enough and he had insisted that she begin taking responsibility for herself. Coming here had been the first step.

“How can I help you, Miss...” he glanced at the clipboard left by the secretary, in front of him.

“Papageorgiou.”

She flashed her brown eyes at him, a pout gracing her lips at the formality of his greeting.

“I need to find a job, Mista...” She glanced at the nametag he wore above his left chest. “Hamilton,” she stated in her thick New York accent.

Originally a native of Manhattan, the gangster vernacular came naturally to her, that and the fact that her father spoke the lingo himself.

The last thing he had said to her before she found herself being driven to this place was, “You need to start takin’ responsibility for your own shit, Candi. You’re not gonna freeload off o’

me for the rest of ya life. I'll kick ya out on yer ass, ya little bitch."

She had laughed in her drunk, obnoxious way, all the while chugging her latte. After losing her latest job due to irresponsible behavior, the chances of her finding new employment were seemingly slim. In the last six months alone, she had been through at least that many jobs and the reasons she'd been relieved of them had all been the same. Either she was intoxicated on the job, irresponsible with the customers, or she didn't show up at all. She'd lie and give excuses as to why, mainly for her own amusement, but they all caught on in time. It wasn't hard to spot a slacker.

After her father had hauled her ass to the car, he'd ordered her mother to drive her to meet with a job recruiter. He told her under no circumstances was she to come home until that order had been obeyed. Candi just snorted and laughed; she knew his palm was itching to slap the grin right off her face. Instead, he slammed the car door and watched as she gave him the finger while the car rolled down their luxurious driveway.

As she sat across from Mr. Hamilton, he picked up the clipboard and eyed her resume silently. She watched in anticipation, waiting to see his expression change as he took it all in, but he remained collected and stoic. Disappointed by his lack of reaction to her she slumped back in her chair and glared, waiting for him to respond. She wasn't used to being ignored by others. She was used to making a scene, to having eyes turn towards her in shock and hearing whispered comments between observers behind her back. She was the one who made the waves, rocked the boat, tipped the apple cart. She knew the impact she had on others and loved it. Let me see what they do if I do this... and she'd let the fireworks fly and feed off the shock she'd induced in those around her.

This man, however, seemed to have a glass wall around him that she couldn't penetrate. He wasn't impressed by her, that

much was clear. As she sat and waited, he finally lowered the clipboard and stared at her. She eyed him back and a grin spread across her face once again at his speechlessness. He did not seem intimidated in any way—also unusual. She seemed to have that effect on most men. There was no doubt she was pretty—which was the reason her lack of boundaries could seem appealing to some. If she were some ugly mutt she'd be regarded with disgust. However, even the most attractive women couldn't help but cater to her simply because she was good-looking. It seemed to be the one quality capable of redeeming her obnoxious and out of control behavior with others. It had worked to her benefit each time she'd lost another job due to her lack of responsibility. Someone would always take pity on her pretty face and give her another chance.

Clearing his throat he sat up straighter in his chair and fixed her with a stare. "You have quite the resume, Miss Papageorgiou."

"Candi."

"Candice," he corrected sternly.

She shot him a coy smile, shifting in her seat.

"Why so many jobs in such a short amount of time?" he asked though he knew the answer. The reason was obvious. By the presentation she'd just given him he could read her type like a book. Young, irresponsible woman in her early twenties, very likely living off her daddy's money. Full grown, high-maintenance, does whatever she wants type. He'd seen it all before and he wasn't impressed. Even her pretty face couldn't sway him to want to give her an easy road. Opportunities came for those who would work hard for them. She'd have to prove herself before he'd work to land her the type of job she was looking for.

"Well, to answer your question, Mista Hamilton, my services just aren't appreciated by the majority."

He allowed himself a small chuckle at her cockiness.

“I’d like to hear a little about those services you mention. What happened at your last job?”

He glanced again at her resume. “As a checkout clerk?”

“I was baggin’ up some bitch’s groceries and the lady couldn’t lift the bags with one hand, eh? So sue me.”

“That doesn’t seem like something that would get you fired?” Ralph questioned.

“The head lady spoke to me about it, ya know and I got pissed off and might have thrown the customers shit in her bags a little as I was baggin’ the rest of em’.” She shrugged.

Ralph glared at the girl. “Sounds like you have a way with customers. What happened at the job before that, just last month?”

“The fast food place? Shit, the customer didn’t like the soda I gave him, so I threw the fucking drink in his face.”

At this, Ralph’s eyebrows rose, and Candi let out a loud guffaw, turning several heads.

He glanced over her resume again, crossing his arms across his chest.

“To be quite honest with you, Candice, I’m not so sure I can help you out here today.”

“Well, now see, I need you to. My old man, he won’t let me come home unless I come here to meet with you and try to get a job. So that’s why I need your help, Mista Hamilton. Think you can pull some strings for me?”

“I’m not so sure. Your resume is downright shocking and to be frank, there is no way in hell I’m gonna try to look for a medical receptionist position for you, like you’re requesting, after the reasons you’ve been let go.”

“But I went for the training so I could get my ass outta retail. I got my certificate. I’m legit.”

“Well, as true as that may be, Miss Papageorgiou, if you can’t handle bagging a person’s groceries without a problem, there’s no way I’m gonna help you get access to their medical care.”

She rose from her seat. Clearly, she wasn't going to get her way with this guy.

"What, you think you're better than me, Mista Hamilton, huh? You in your fancy suit and shit... My father wears suits fancier than that. I don't need your stinkin' jobs..."

Ralph sat back in his chair enjoying the show, as heads turned in his direction wondering if they should lend a hand. He just smiled and waved them off. It wasn't often he was entertained at work.

"You won't be able to live off your daddy's money your whole life, Miss. Tell you what though, when you've grown up a little then you come back and see me, and we'll talk." He handed her his card with an amused grin.

She glared at him, caught at her own game. For once in her life she was had, speechless, she'd lost the bet, missed the mark. This guy wasn't gonna fall for her looks like all the rest.

She sat back down in the chair and looked him in the eyes. If her seductive charm wouldn't work on him, her tears might. Tears always did the trick.

"To be honest, Mista Hamilton," she said dabbing at her eyes. "I'll tell you the truth. I need this job because my father has the one and only thing in the world that matters to me. It's my dog." She dug out her iPhone and showed him her screensaver. Pictured was a large Samoyed puppy sitting in the lap of his owner, nearly drowning her in all his fluffy white fur.

"My Coo Coo, my father's got him. If I can't get a job, my father will make me give him away. I can't do that; it just can't happen, Mista Hamilton. My dog, my Coo Coo, is my best friend in the whole world. I can't live without him."

Ralph sat back and stared at the girl, unamused by the act. He watched as she grabbed tissues from the box on his desk and wiped her fake tears with them.

"Look, Miss, I'd like to help you out here today. Really, I would. But quite honestly, with a resume like this," he stated

lifting the clipboard, “and the stories you’re telling me about your work history, no one in their right mind would take you on. I’m sorry to say it, sweetheart but you’ve dug yourself into a hole. The best I can do is scout out some community service projects for you to participate in until you can repair your reputation a bit. If you can manage to get through that without incident, then we’ll see.”

“Look, Mista Hamilton...”

“Ralph,” he nodded in her direction, easing up on her a bit.

“Ralph,” she said looking perplexed. “For real, I’ll level with ya. My father ain’t shittin’ about givin’ away my dog. I really do need to find work, so he won’t give him away. He’s playin’ hardball because I’ve fucked around so much. I need this. I need something.”

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. “I wish I could do more for you, Candice but honestly, if I were your father, I’d probably be doing the same thing. It sounds like your old man is trying to teach you some responsibility. Like it or not I agree with him. A person who can’t be responsible for themselves shouldn’t have the responsibility for anyone or anything else, in my opinion. It sounds like your father’s trying to instill some values in you.”

For the first time, she looked concerned as the reality of her situation sank in. She wrung her hands through her hair causing Ralph to hesitate slightly.

“I don’t know what to do. I can’t leave here without something. I can’t leave and tell him you can’t help me. He’ll throw the book at me. He’ll send my dog off to the pound. If he does, it’ll be all your fault, Mista Hamilton,” she said turning panic ridden eyes to him. If it weren’t for her sheer panic, he would have criticized her logic, but he didn’t. It was clear that she was finally experiencing some distress at her predicament and, although her accusation was incorrect, he let it go for the good of the lesson she was beginning to learn. It seemed as if she was

finally beginning to understand the effect her decisions could have on her life.

“Tell you what,” he said after contemplating quietly for a moment. “I may be able to help you out after all.”

“Really, Mista Hamilton? Please, could you? I’ll do anything.”

He held up a hand to silence her. “I told you, call me Ralph.”

“Sorry, Ralph,” she replied obediently.

He concealed a small smile, secretly marveling at how the tables had turned and although he tried not to notice, just how cute she was when she was eating humble pie.

He took out a post-it and handed it to her along with a pen.

“Write your father’s number down there. I have a proposition to run by him. If he gives me the go ahead then I’ll help you out, but only if I get his approval first.”

She looked at him quizzically. “What kind of deal is this, Ralph?” she asked cautiously. “I ain’t gonna go live in no convent or nothin’ like in that crazy *Sister Act* movie.”

Ralph chuckled out loud.

“I don’t think we need to go that route yet, Candice,” he said with a teasing grin. “But don’t push me. I’m sure I can find a convent around here that would be willing to take in a sinner in need of redemption.”

She grinned a bit at his teasing but this time it was no act. She was grateful for his help after the scare hit her that she might not have any other options. She jotted her father’s number on the pad and handed it back to him across the desk. Before she rose to leave, he glanced down at the note. “Thank you, Candice,” he replied. “I’ll be in touch.”