

## ELIRA

I'm still wearing the dress.

It's no longer the bright white that stuck out so vividly among the others on the rack, calling to me like it was my destiny to wear it. I knew it would fit perfectly even before I tried it on, just had that feeling.

I've always known I had an average body, *too* average even, but the dress somehow accentuated curves I don't have, flattering me in ways that have never made me feel so beautiful.

Now, wearing the same dress, I've never felt so ugly.

Whimpering pulls my attention to the corner of the cargo space, but I don't allow my eyes to linger on the girl. She's having a private moment, one all of us have had at one time or multiple since we've been in this space.

There were a lot more moments in the beginning. Most of us have run out of tears by now, but every time the back doors open to the cargo truck, the shaking intensifies. That hasn't happened in what feels like hours, the rumbling of the truck constant, so it must be coming soon.

I wish I knew where we were. Or where we're going. Or knew this country at all.

James, my fiancé the whole reason I agreed to make the illegal trek to America, lives in New York State, which must be hundreds of kilometers away.

Which means he can't save me. Nobody can save me. Nobody even knows me.

The woman next to me chants words to herself that I don't understand, but I think the language is Russian. Everyone has been too frightened to speak, so even the foreign words sound like a courageous bit of comfort.

"Do you speak English?" I ask. I don't bother asking if she speaks Albanian.

"*Shh*," someone hisses.

The Russian woman doesn't answer. Instead, she quiets, the universal *shhh* one thing we all understand.

It's dark in here, only slivers of light shining in through cracks in the exterior, but when the door opens, we've caught glimpses of each other. We're a melting pot of kidnapped girls. It makes me wonder if our kidnappers simply camped along the Mexico-US border, waiting for international girls, vulnerable and alone, to snatch.

Or maybe they weren't at the border like I was. Maybe they snatched these girls from an airport. Maybe they have all kinds of ways of stealing freedom.

It's a sick sort of irony for this to happen in America when Americans seem to have such warped opinions of my country. My people welcome foreigners with open arms, not ... this.

My throat hurts as my heart pangs, and I close my eyes in case tears dare to come. My dress, *the* dress, sticks to my skin with sweat and filth and mocks me, reminding me what a stupid girl I am to ever think I should leave Albania. That

there could ever be a better life for me somewhere else. Somewhere like here.

What. A. Fool.

The rumble of the truck eases as we slow, pulling my eyes open. I wrap my arms tightly around my knees and stare at the cargo door, waiting for the inevitable.

Will it be my turn?

Will I be chosen this time?

Do I *want* to be?

I'm not sure. I'm terrified, already my hands are trembling before I even hear their voices, but I think breathing in the smell of urine and fear, drowning in the unknown, must be worse than the fate on the other side of that door.

Or not. Either way, I'll find out. If it isn't my turn now, it will be soon.

The hoarse voice of the driver floats into the cargo space just before he bangs three times on the door. The sound is so jarring that I flinch, scooting inches away.

My mother's voice enters my head, and I use it to drown out the sound of the metal door grinding open, basking the dark space in blinding light.

*Be a good girl, Elira. You know what men want.*

She told me this at the airport when she thought she was sending me off to a better life as a betrothed woman. Even so, there was nervousness in her eyes that didn't feel like it belonged in a fairytale ending. She must've known even happiness comes at a cost.

*You know what men want.*

Except, I don't know what these men want. Not really, not beyond the obvious. I don't know anything, and that scares me worse than the guns they carry.

Even squinting, I can only make out a man's silhouette as he climbs into the cargo space, the light behind him too

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bright for my sensitive eyes. His hand lifts to cover his nose as he coughs.

“Jesus Christ, how long have you had this load?”

The driver cackles at the new man’s repulsion for us. We’re nothing to him. Less than nothing to him. Our filth is somehow more of a burden for him than it is for us.

“About a day and a half. Only three stops left.”

The new man shakes his head. Slowly, my eyes adjust. I can see his thick eyebrows and the blue of his shirt.

“Up,” he growls, and I don’t know if he’s talking to me, but I stand, my spine rigid.

The Russian woman stands as well, and as he steps up to each of us, I have to look away. He has an evil in his eyes that I didn’t hear in his voice, and now I can say with certainty that I don’t want to be chosen. I want to live in this cargo space until I die.

He grasps my jaw, roughly jerking my head up to look at him, and my breath stutters, but I don’t cry out like I want to. I can feel how wide my eyes are and imagine how weak I must look to him, how vulnerable. I wonder how much he likes it.

He looks down at my dress, *the* dress, and he must not see the magic it did for me because his lip curls and he lets go of my jaw, moving on to the Russian girl.

I slowly lower to the floor, not making a sound in case it reminds him I exist, and when he makes his choice, I hate myself for being so relieved it isn’t me.

\* \* \*

HOURS PASS.

I don’t know how many. Time is impossible to measure in the thinning space, but by the time the door opens again, it’s dark outside. Last time the door opened to reveal the night

sky, it let in a cool breeze, so I cross my arms in anticipation. No breeze comes. It's just as hot as it was before.

Something is different this time. I can sense it without pinpointing exactly what it is, and I think the others can too.

We're on edge. There's only one stop after this, so the time for wondering who will be next is over. It's all our turn now. The four of us make up the last pick of the litter, the unwanted ones, and I can only imagine this isn't a good place to be.

When the sliding door is fully opened, the driver stands with his hand hovering in the air. Two other shadows are perched on either side of him, and when a flashlight he's holding clicks on, the little I see of the men disappears as I duck my head. The beam glides over us, blinding our sensitive eyes one by one.

"Out."

Tension squeezes my shoulder blades, but I don't move. I won't be the first to obey the command, not when I don't know what's waiting for us.

The driver growls before banging the flashlight against the side of the truck, startling every one of us who've become accustomed to the silence. "Out." He's louder this time. More insistent, and it occurs to me that I don't know the number of women in here who speak English, if any. I also don't know how long until the driver becomes violent.

The smell of urine gets stronger as a girl starts to cry, and I throw a glance that way, not knowing what I hope to convey but wishing I had said something sooner. That we would've acted like we were in this together instead of hoping ill fate to fall on each other instead of ourselves.

I stand, straightening *the* dress for reasons I'm unsure of, and slowly make my way out of the truck. The driver grows impatient with me, his hand waving in another universal *hurry up* gesture.

As I climb off the truck, I lock eyes with a man I wish I hadn't, making that mistake the second time today. He smiles ever so slightly, but it isn't a kind smile. There's no warmth, no welcoming.

The driver yanks me by my arm, throwing me between the two men, and he roughly pulls on the two girls who've chosen to follow me. He has to go inside the cargo space to retrieve the other girl, and I busy myself taking in my surroundings as a distractor from the screams.

I can feel eyes on me, but I don't look the man's way. Instead, I look out at ... dirt. More dirt than I've ever seen in my life. It stretches more kilometers than I can count, and if I didn't know better, I'd say it led to the edge of the Earth. The strange theories about the Earth being flat must have come from people who live here.

Where are we? Mars?

I search for trees, for water, for any signs of life, but there's nothing. There looks to be hills in the distance, but even those look barren, no green in sight. It makes sense, I guess, when I think of how weird the air feels. I've never been outside of Albania, but I've heard the air is more humid there than most places. This is the opposite. There isn't any moisture here to spare for the plants, let alone for the air.

"In a line," Driver snaps after shoving the last girl onto the dirt.

"Do they all speak English?" the man who smiled at me asks. I can still feel his eyes on me. Instead of looking at his face, I stare at his bright red shoes, moving when Driver shoves me into another girl to manually form the line himself. I don't know if I should pretend I don't speak English or not, I just get the sense that I shouldn't stand out. Not to these men.

"Hablo Inglés?" he asks, clapping his hands in front of the woman he brought out of the truck. He not only

butchered the pronunciation of that sentence, but he also is speaking Spanish to a Filipino woman. I've never seen a man this ignorant.

She nods and cries when he slaps the side of her head.

"Yes," she says.

He moves to the next, and when he gets to me, I hesitate. I don't know why. I don't know why I think it matters, it just feels like it does. Like I should keep everything hidden that I possibly can.

"Nuk flas anglisht."

"What?" Driver's eyebrows bunch as if he thinks he didn't hear me correctly.

I shake my head like I don't understand. "Nuk flas anglisht."

When he slaps the side of my head, I cringe and raise my hands as if to cower. "Nuk flas anglisht! Nuk flas anglisht!"

Driver takes a step back to address the two new men. "All but that one."

"Is she a virgin?" The man who smiled at me asks. I don't see him point or look to see where his eyes land, but I know he's referring to me.

My skin crawls hearing that question, little bugs worming their way beneath the surface. I can hear my mother's voice again.

*Be a good girl, Elira. You know what men want.*

"Can't exactly ask, now can we?"

"You didn't check for a hymen?" He sounds disappointed. I can hear the frown in his voice.

"She's fresh off the boat, my guy. She hasn't been checked for shit."

"What about you?" the other man asks, grasping the Filipino's chin.

I don't see or hear how she responds because when a warm finger snakes beneath one strap of my dress, I jolt

upright, my head snapping to face my unwelcomed admirer.

He glides his finger up and down, sending the bugs beneath my skin squirming, and it takes all my willpower not to scream or try to run. We're already out in what must be the middle of a desert. It would be too easy to kill me if they wanted to.

His finger moves to my mouth next, and instead of recoiling, I close my eyes and hold my breath while letting him brush my chapped bottom lip. When he stops, I open my eyes.

"Hmmm." His lips twist to one side like he's thinking while his eyes trail me. He looks like I'm a menu and he's trying to decide what he wants to eat. "My boss might be a little ticked, but I think you'll make a nice addition to his collection."

He smiles at me, revealing a slightly chipped front tooth that would be endearing if he wasn't a monster.

"I think you'll be a nice addition to *my* collection," he says, his voice quieter as he tucks my hair behind my ear.

I don't recoil, nor do I respond to words I'm not supposed to understand. I don't know why he says them. Maybe to scare me, maybe to hear himself speak.

"How much?" he asks the driver who's been speaking with the other man. He turns his head this way while I bow mine. Blood rushes past my ears.

This is it.

This is the next step. The *first* step, really.

I am now this man's whore. This man's boss's whore.

When my eyes sting, I close them, telling myself it might not be that bad, that in a way, I was coming here prepared to be someone's whore, even if it was under the guise of marriage.

It could be okay. It could be... It could be...



It could be worse than death.

“Thirty thousand.”

My heart pangs as the man speaks with the finality of a judge slamming a gavel.

“Sold.”

