

## Chapter 1

### Carmen

I don't recognize myself.

I stare at the image in the mirror, of the girl I know is me. My normally curly black hair is hanging sleek, flattened and shiny over my shoulders. They cut bangs that now lie heavy on my forehead. I have a very discreet makeup in earthy colors, where I usually use vibrant shades of green, pink and orange. The dress feels exclusive, black, shiny, not something I'd ever waste money on, but the matron lent it to me. Gold sandals, bare legs. No panties.

Naked. That's how I feel. Vulnerable. As if I'm a piece of meat, put like a slab on a chopping block at the butcher's. I don't know why. He's just a man, like any other man. Why am I so intimidated by this one in particular?

Luciano Salvatore.

Is it because he literally *is* the whole organized crime on the west coast of this country? Because he owns the house I live in, with all the girls working for him? Because of the gossip? The girls who get sent there coming back with frozen faces, never ever mentioning what happened? We always gossip about the johns, but no one dare say anything about Mr. S.

Yes. I'm afraid. I've worked here five weeks. Before that, I roamed the streets for two awful years. I should be overjoyed. Not many girls in my situation get a chance like this. Maybe he'll like me? Maybe he'll make me a regular? Those girls come back with gifts, get to move to a place of their own. On the other hand, some just disappear, and I don't know what happens to them.

I don't recognize myself. I'm beautiful. I know I'm pretty, but I've never looked as elegant, as luxuriously affluent as I do right now. Still, I'm filled with nothing but dread, my stomach a knot, my heart pounding heavy. I feel as if I'll be walking to the gallows.

Looking around the fairly cozy room, bright, a bit old-fashioned, with old wooden furniture painted white, and fabrics with little roses on them, I wonder if I'll return here, if I'll see it again.

Dear god, let me see it again.

Dear god, make him not like me.

Three harsh raps on the door makes me flinch. The matron enters before I even have time to answer.

"It's time, Carmen. The driver is here."

It feels as if all blood drains from my face. The matron gives me a look that briefly tells of pity, then her features harden.

“He’s just a man. They’re all slave to their cocks in the end. You know the trade. Work that lush mouth of yours. Ride him. Take command. You know what to do, how to make him relax. Make him come again and again, until you’ve spent him. He won’t have time for any games. He’ll be satisfied and send you on your way. Don’t ever show your fear, don’t bare your throat to him. You’ll be back here before you know it.” She strokes my cheek. “You’re a stunning beauty. He’ll love you.”

My stomach clenches. I think I’d prefer if he didn’t. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I force a smile and nod.

“He’s just a man,” I repeat, then I follow my matron, my teacher, caretaker, my new mother. It’s harsh love, but it’s what I have.

As I pass the common room, the conversations go silent and all faces turn toward me. I hold my head high. I have no choice, so I better just make the best of it.

He’s just a man.

On the street waits a limousine with tinted windows. A man stands on the sidewalk. He’s tall and blonde, blue-eyed, tanned. He looks like a viking to me. I’m his absolute opposite. Short, even though the heels makes me somewhat taller, and more close to a normal height for a woman, Colombian and dark. His nose looks as if it has been broken a couple of times and it gives him a bit of a brutish look, but he has kinder eyes than most men I come across. Well, the men I come across all want something from me, their faces hungry, sometimes vicious. I very rarely meet anyone who looks at me as if I’m a person. This man does.

“Carmen?”

I nod.

“I’m Lucas.” He opens a back door and gesture for me to enter, so I do. He sticks his head in. “Enjoy the ride. It’s not very far.”

“It’s cold,” I say with a shudder. I’m more cold on the inside than I am from the actual temperature in the air, though, but how can I tell anyone of that.

“I’ll raise the temperature for you.” Even his voice is kind. He closes the door and I settle in.

Black leather seats, and a mini bar that I immediately examine, curiosity getting the better of me. Sadly it’s only got a few bottles of water. Maybe it’s intentional. I could have used a shot of anything that is strong, that would numb me, but maybe Mr. S won’t allow that. I realize

we're moving, and that I never even noticed when he started driving. He's good. The ride is incredibly smooth. And much too short.

I gawk as we pass through the guarded gates to the mansion. Everything is beautiful and bright. Very non-threatening. The garden, the white house, a fountain. Birds are singing and the sun is shining. Surely a man with such good taste can't be all bad?

My family lives in a shed that gets too hot during the days and too cold during the nights. We have to go to the common well to get water, but we do have electricity. I used to love to sit and read, but since we all slept in the same room I was always shouted at to turn off the light and go to bed. An uncle was moving to USA, with the promise of work at a farm. I wanted something else than a dirt floor, and calloused hands. I wanted a life, so I went with him. My uncle died in a car accident and I ended up alone, at sixteen, with nowhere to go. A girl always has one merchandise she keeps with her at all times, so I began selling it, my mind somewhere else, drifting to the stories I had read in the books. Heroes and heroines. Dragons. Witches. Happy ever afters.

None for me. No happies. Nothing but humiliation and filth. It was a blessing at first, being picked up by the matron after two years out there. I have nice clothes, a clean room, a shower. A blessing. Until today.

I have run out of luck, and I know it.