

THE CHERRY ORCHARD HAD A high-class retro feel. Embossed velvet wallpaper and gold framed armchairs hinted at luxury and taste.

Lilly kept reminding me it was a business arrangement—a one-time transaction. I would have preferred to sell a kidney rather than my virginity, but then, desperate times required desperate measures.

“This is nice,” said Lilly, whose vocal quaver wasn’t lost on me.

“Lil”—I took her trembling hand—“you don’t have to do this. We can find another way.”

“I’m going through with it. You’re here to encourage me, not put me off.”

I sighed. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

As we waited for someone to show us through, two men walked in. They were tall, very well dressed, surprisingly gorgeous, and hardly the type I expected to see. They could have had their share of girls, free of charge.

The tall, dark, and handsome one oozed sophistication. I found it hard not to stare. His pants hung elegantly from his waist, and his crisp white shirt revealed enough of a buff physique to make any girl drool. There was something remote in his dark-blue eyes that intrigued and intimidated me at the same time. And that was just from one glance.

His eyes found mine and remained. My cheeks fired up. That was new. I’d never blushed from a man’s stare before.

He towered over me, so I had to lift my face. As he continued to gaze at me with those deep-blue eyes, my legs weakened. I had to lean against Lilly, who was having her own moment gaping at the hot stranger’s friend.

I lost all sense of place and time, staring at the gorgeous man, who held his sensuous mouth in a tight line while a streak of aquamarine smoldered beneath those enviably long lashes. Although mesmerized, I forced myself to turn away.

Even with my back to him, I could still feel his eyes burning into me. I stole another glance. That unshifting stare seemed a little inappropriate, especially when his burning gaze wandered down my body.

Was he surveying the merchandise? The thought of that sickened me. I looked away. Any man at a place like this would have to be rotten.

A woman came to meet us. Dressed in slacks and a pink cotton shirt, she looked more like a suburban housewife than anything else.

She crooked her finger. “Come with me, ladies.”

Just before stepping through the red velvet drapes, I turned for one final look at the man. Like deep-blue magnets, his eyes drew me in again. Although those chiseled features spelled “*heartbreaker*,” the fire of attraction raged within.

The room we entered reminded me of a dressing room in a theater. Girls leaned into a mirror, applying makeup and chatting. Some didn't even look sixteen.

"They're underage," I whispered to Lilly.

She was off in a world of her own.

"Lil."

"Did you see those guys?" she asked.

I nodded.

"He was gorgeous," she said.

"The tall, handsome one?" I asked, realizing that was a vague question, considering that both men were tall.

"The one with the wavy light-brown hair."

"I was too busy staring at Mr. Dark and Sophisticated to notice."

She squeezed my hand and giggled. It was the lightest she'd been all night. I supposed seeing sexy men gave Lilly cause for hope.

I looked around the room. There must have been about forty girls in there. I noticed some whose bodies hadn't even developed. Dressed in string bikinis that covered very little, they appeared jittery and bit their nails while their friends whispered words of encouragement.

The woman in charge entered and gave them what sounded like a pep talk. I heard her say, "Think about the cash," to a really young girl, who she pushed out to join the others as she lined them up for their little parade.

She looked over at Lilly, beckoning her to hurry along.

"Shit. They're really young. They're underage," I whispered to Lilly.

The woman in charge turned and looked at me. Wearing an icy expression, she approached me. "Can I have a word?" she asked.

Sensing that I was about to be kicked out, I touched Lil's hand. She drew a tight smile and nodded reassuringly. There was nothing I could do. Poverty was a powerful decider. Morality came off second best when debt and hunger loomed large. And virginity was a powerful commodity.

"You'll change into your bikinis. And no more whispering or gossiping, okay?"

"I'm not here to sell myself. I'm here to give my friend moral support."

"Then I'll have to ask you to leave." She followed me out to the reception area. "We're here to facilitate life-changing opportunities for those who have the courage to take control of their lives."

"You make it sound like one of those self-help seminars."

"This is all about self-help. I don't know of too many girls who enjoyed their first fuck or ended up marrying the guy. At least this way, their lives change for the better. Now, please leave. Unless..." Her eyes ran up and down my body.

“You’re very beautiful, even without makeup. If you’re still intact, you could easily raise half a million.”

I crossed my arms as her eyes hovered over my chest. “No, thank you. I’ll do it the old-fashioned way.”

She laughed. “And marry wealth, you mean? Good luck. They’re all in there, buying their thrill before settling down with rich girls. Money attaches itself to money.”

I shrugged. I couldn’t be bothered telling her that my ambition didn’t extend to marrying wealth.

“Remember, if you change your mind...” Her tone softened. “Why don’t you go have a drink and think about it? Think of what you could do with all that cash.”

I sighed. It was tempting, especially with that handsome stud whose eyes had fucked me already. I sensed he might be in the market for me. But it felt wrong. Sleazy. Besides, by his mere presence in that establishment, he’d already become a creep.

Taking sheepish steps, I made my way back to a civilized world where things happened naturally.

I ran into a couple doing a drug deal and a young girl squabbling with her boyfriend and reminded myself that life wasn’t that black and white.