Surprise, Surprise

XAVIER

Did I feel bad about the way Darla and the rest of the French girls treated Angela?

Honestly, yeah.

never seemed to get over it.

Darla was the biggest bitch I knew, and not even the girl that wiggled her way into my money deserved that kind of heat. But at the same time, it was kind of like the animal kingdom.

Darla and I, we'd had a thing back in prep school. It was casual, never more than sex. For me, anyway. But she had

You had to just let the women take runs at each other until they were tired enough to come to bed.

So while she was a bitch to everyone, she was a bitch with a side of uncontrollable, envy-riddled rage to whichever girl I brought along. Angela leaving the table had been a victory in her eyes.

She had the server bring a bottle of champagne for the table, and once it popped, we were ordering round two within minutes.

I had forgotten what the French were like—they could drink. I downed my third glass and leaned back, taking in the

table. Beautiful women everywhere. And sure, they could drink. But so could I.

About an hour later, when the table was cluttered with uneaten chocolate and Grand Marnier soufflés, I saw my father stride over to us.

"Ladies," he said, and then he took a seat in Angela's vacant chair. "Where's Angela?"

"She wasn't feeling well. A migraine," I responded without pause.

"Ah, too bad," he said, shaking his head. "Poor girl. She really is a good one, Xavier."

"I know."

"Do you?" he said, his gaze unblinking. I nodded. Two could play this game. "Good," he continued, "because I have a surprise for the both of you. Come on, let's go to the suite and give her the news."

"Your wife is in pain, Xavier. Why you're not with her already is astounding." So I finished the glass of Pinot Grigio that Angela had barely touched, and I followed my dad out of the gala.

ANGELA

That bitch, she really ruined everything.

"Already? We've barely finished dessert."

I had been in the bath for what felt like ages. I had showered first, needing to get all of the grossness off of me, watching as the hot water splashed off my skin and pooled at my feet.

And I'd been here, sitting in the boiling water, ever since. It felt nice, the burn. Like a reminder that my body could

a new feeling for me. I'd never had someone, a man, put his hands on me like that before.

I closed my eyes. Maybe I'd stay here forever. Xavier probably wouldn't even notice. My hands went to my knees, where the French man had put his hands first. Then they worked their way up my legs, to my thighs, the same way his had.

My fingernails dug into the pale skin of my thighs. I wanted to remember that type of pain. That type of helplessness. So that every time I was about to complain about having a bad day, or hearing some stupid girl insult me, I'd

As hard as it was to remember, I didn't want to forget. Even after everything that had happened with Lemor, this was

I hurried to pull the plug out of the drain and wrap a plush hotel towel around myself. Then I opened the door. "I was just taking a shower," I said, hearing my voice hitch. Those were the first words I'd said aloud since the ballroom.

"Hello? Angela?" My eyes darted to the closed bathroom door. That sounded like Brad. Why was he here? Had they

Both Brad and Xavier were seated, and they looked up at me when I walked in.

"How are you feeling? Have you taken something?" Brad asked.

"Of course, I'll leave you to it in just a moment. But first ..." He paused, taking something out of his jacket pocket. It looked like one of those tourist key chains you could buy at the airport, but I couldn't make out what the letters were.

"St. Toma?" Xavier said, squinting his eyes at the keychain.

"Me too," Xavier chimed in.

"I'm confused ..." I said, trailing off.

"Wrong. I'm taking the meeting for you. Your marriage, your love, that comes first." A panel of rage covered Xavier's face, but it disappeared a second later.

"That's impossible. I have another meeting with the property manager tomorrow—"

and closed, and Brad was gone. "Jack?" was the only word I could muster.

"The jet leaves at 9 a.m. Don't keep Jack waiting. You know how he gets about tardiness." And then the door opened

"I know," I said. "I ...I agree," I added.

"You agree? Well, that makes me so glad," he said, sarcasm dripping off his tongue. Then he spotted something by the

door. I followed his gaze and felt my stomach drop. He walked over to it, slowly, and picked it up. My gown.

the thoughts that swam around my mind.

On a jet all to ourselves.

would take us to an island.

called it a day.

...left it. On the floor." I nodded. It was all I could manage. "And you just

shoulder. I was waiting for the screams, the harsh words and the cruelty. But instead he smiled at me, no more than an inch

And with one more second of him peering down at me, bearing into me, with nothing more than that sinister smile, I felt like I'd come undone.

It was surprising I had any tears left. He stepped closer to me, and closer still, and then he dropped the dress over my

around me. I closed my eyes. Part of me was excited to go to sleep because any dream would be better than today. But the other part of me willed

myself to stay awake. Because the sooner I fell asleep, the sooner I'd be confronted by Xavier.

in bed, watch a movie, and pretend the world outside didn't exist.

he wasn't going to wait for me, no matter the destination.

the lobby and hopped into the car, we were on our way.

Or maybe it was because I was adapting faster than I thought I would.

we're en route to, due to some weird weather that was pretty suddenly onset—"

staff, who, in turn, loaded it onto the jet.

I closed my eyes. Still numb.

turtleneck, so I was thankful for the early morning activity happening around me.

I'd be going on a honeymoon with a man who hated me. I crawled into bed, cuddling up with the massive pillows all

been fighting a ghost in my sleep or my dream hadn't been better than the events of yesterday at all. I saw the light streaming in from the window and turned to the clock: 8:37 a.m. I'd slept in. All I wanted to do was stay

But instead I had twenty-three minutes to pack and meet Xavier outside, where a car would take us to a jet and the jet

The clothes came on, and then I padded to the bathroom to check on my face. My eyes were still red, like I hadn't stopped crying, and I didn't have the energy to put any makeup on. So I tied my hair in a topknot on my head and

I rolled my suitcase to the lobby without waiting to see if Xavier was still in the suite. I'd learned my lesson yesterday:

On my way through the foyer, my eyes darted all around. I was beyond paranoid I'd run into the French man with the

Even if I did see him, I wouldn't be alone. Hotel employees and guests moved through the lobby at high speeds, drinking coffee and chatting merrily. The man

I climbed the stairs the same way I'd done in New York, again behind Xavier. When I reached the inside of the jet, I was expecting to have the same ohmygod reaction.

But instead I felt numb, like nothing could surprise me or impress me anymore. I took the same seat I'd had on the

The plane took off shortly after, and this time, I was far less worried. Maybe it was because I'd been through such horror over the past twenty-four hours that smooth sailing thousands of miles above everyone else was a welcome change.

He was interrupted by my stomach falling fast. It felt like the plane had just dipped by a thousand miles—like I was on the scary part of the rollercoaster, but there was no track below.

I looked around for someone to tell me this was normal. But Patricia hadn't come out of Xavier's room, and the other

Jack's voice came back, "...More than expected, I apologize for the—" And then we were bouncing up and down, like the sky was a trampoline, and the next time I looked out the window, I saw a flame coming from the plane's wing.

The other flight attendant ran out from an area at the front of the jet, her dangly earrings dancing aggressively with her movements. "Put this on!" she screamed at me, throwing a life vest my way. My heart was beating out of control as I slipped my head through the orange vest. I didn't know what was happening,

My stomach was all the way in my throat, my eyes closed tight, and I imagined I was on one of those carnival rides that lifted you up and then let you fall. It was all black. I didn't know if that was because my eyes were still closed or because there was nothing more to see. I

didn't feel the point of impact, and I couldn't tell you if I felt any pain.

When I felt clean, I pushed the stopper into the drain and took a seat, watching the tub fill. still feel, that it was still intact.

remember what real terror felt like.

"Take your time, we'll wait," Brad called back. I went into my bedroom and found a bathrobe hanging in the closet, which I traded the towel for. Feeling adequately covered, I walked into the living area.

"No ...no, I think I'll be okay. Just some rest. That's all I need."

heard what had happened? Who would've told them? Who else saw?

"St. Toma! It's an island, a private island, in the Caribbean," Brad exclaimed, clearly excited. "White sand beaches, clear ocean, and one of the best resorts in the world."

"You're going," Brad said, standing up and buttoning his blazer. "The both of you. You leave tomorrow, and you're taking the jet. Happy honeymooning," he said with a wink, and then he walked to the door. "What? Tomorrow?" I asked, my voice shaky.

"The pilot," Xavier said, standing. He whipped a pillow against the floor. "This is a goddamn travesty."

I knew what he was going to say before he said it. "I presume this is your gown," he said.

between us. The smile was cold and eerie, like it held some meaning just out of my reach.

"Xavier, let me explain," I whispered, the tears coming again.

Somehow the silent weapons were worse than the ones that shouted daggers right at me; they were the ones that tore through my skin and left their mark right on my heart.

And then he turned and walked back out the door, the same way his father had. And again I was left alone, with only

I woke up in a cold sweat. The duvet was half off the bed, and pillows had been strewn all around me. Either I had

I had never dreaded something so lavish sounding in my life. I hopped out of bed and, pulling a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt from my suitcase, peeled the bathrobe off.

couldn't try anything here. But I didn't see him, and I made it to the car out front without any interruptions.

The driver put my suitcase into the trunk and then helped me into the back seat, and as soon as Xavier emerged from

We drove right onto the tarmac, and the driver helped me out of the car. He carried my suitcase to the waiting airport

way to Paris, and Xavier went to the bedroom without saying a word to me. "Patricia, do you mind?" he'd asked on his way there. A pretty flight attendant with auburn hair scurried after him, disappearing into the bedroom.

We'd been flying for around six hours, and I was just finishing off a bag of potato chips, when I heard the pilot speak over the intercom.

"Mr. and Mrs. Knight, this is Jack, your captain. Just wanted to give you a heads-up about some possible turbulence

flight attendant was nowhere to be seen. We dropped again. My breathing started getting faster. And then we dropped again, this time for even longer.

That's not good. That's not normal.

And then we dropped again, but this time, we didn't stop.

and then the plane dropped again, and before I could stop myself, I was throwing up in the seat next to me.

All I knew was that it was over almost as quickly as it had started.