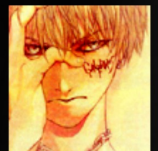


# veronica **MARS**

M without Mercy or Remorse



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# veronica MARS

## Episode 3: A Long Time Ago

Veronica woke up on a mattress, which was strange. Mercer never let her sleep on a mattress; sometimes, if she was good, she got a blanket and got to sleep at the foot or side of his bed, collared and leashed to his bedframe. Most nights, she slept in a locked cage. And when she was bad-

She shuddered, closed her eyes and curled into a ball, whimpering.

She didn't want to think about what happened when she was bad.

The mattress was sturdy, firm, comfortable. There was a pillow and a blanket, both of good quality. She was naked but she was used to being naked when not in public, so that was nothing new. She wasn't wearing a collar, which was new for being alone – Mercer liked to keep a collar around her neck as a reminder of what she had become.

No windows were in the room. The shelves were bare. There was no television but there were outlets, also bare. The bed was a pullout couch in what appeared to be an empty storage room somewhere.

*Where am I?* Veronica thought, pacing around the room. She wrapped the blanket around herself, remembering to feel self-conscious.

*You must be utterly shameless, they had told her at the Care Facility. You are not a person, and only people are capable of feeling shame.*

A moment uncollared, a good night's sleep, and solitude were already making her feel more like herself.

The door was unlocked so she opened it, stepping into a basement hallway. A stairway to her left hinted at sunlight, so she started walking up the stairs, listening for some sign that might tell her where she was. She got to the landing and looked around. There were sounds of *Mercy for Mercer* coming from what she thought was a kitchen.

“Good morning, Ronnie,” came Madison's voice. Veronica froze in place, looking in the other direction. “Are you hungry? I've got breakfast ready for you.”

The thing the Facility had done to her brain processed Madison's words as a command. Slowly, regretfully, eyes glancing for any means of escape, she moved towards the kitchen.

Madison was smiling, eyes sparkling as she ate some fruit and yogurt. She was dressed in clothing Veronica couldn't have afforded even when she had been able to earn a living, light beaming through large windows into a minimalist white kitchen that had all the warmth of a tomb.

“You can put down the sheet, Ronnie, it's just us girls here,” Madison said, looking pleased with herself. “Though given your performance last night, I guess modesty is the last thing on your mind. Come on, lose the sheet.”

Veronica let the sheet fall from her body and pool at her feet.

“C'mon, Ronnie, you know better than that,” Madison *tsked*. “Pick it up and fold it neatly. If you're going to be my maid for the next little bit, you're going to have to work.”

*As if you've ever worked a day in your life,* Veronica thought but did not dare say. She turned around to hide the expression on her face, bent at the hips to pick up the sheet, folded it neatly and placed it on the counter. She flushed when she noticed Madison clearly admiring the view.

"I always thought you were a tight ass, girl, but you have a tight little ass," Madison said, popping a berry in her mouth. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"The coffee machine is over there," Madison said, pointing. "Make me some, and if I like it you can have what's left."

Naked, Veronica padded across the kitchen and did what she was told, Madison watching her the whole time. She sipped at the coffee when it was done.

"Delightful," Madison said. "You were clearly born to serve your betters, sweetie."

"Thank you, Madison," Veronica said.

"We're friends here, Ronnie," Madison smiled, reaching one and pinching one of Veronica's nipples. "You can call me miss. Understand, Ronnie?"

"Yes, miss," gasped Veronica. Madison released Veronica's nipple and smiled, staring at her.

"Spread your legs, good, like that. Hands behind your head. Good." Madison stood up, stretched. "Not so clever now, are you, Ronnie?"



"No, miss," answered Veronica. She could be – a dozen different responses came to her mind, some of them physical. Even now it would be easy to overpower Madison and escape, but...

*Where would I escape to that they wouldn't find me?* she thought. She lowered her head, trembling as Madison ran a hand across her flank.

"Follow," Madison said, simply, and Veronica did, leaving the food and the sheet behind.

Madison led them to an entertainment room and flung herself down on a couch, letting Veronica stand exposed in front of her.

"I'm not gay or anything, but you are cute," Madison said, giggling. "And I can tell that you want to fight back but you're not going to, are you?"

"No, miss," Veronica said.

"What happened to you?" Madison asked. Veronica dared to look up. The other woman looked genuinely curious.

*Maybe, Veronica thought, maybe I can get her to take mercy on me.*

"What did Big Bad Mercer do to you, Ronnie?" Madison asked, direct. "You can tell me. It's just us girls." Veronica bowed her head, shuddering. She didn't want to tell Madison anything, but she knew better than to disobey. Reliving the worst moments of her life, she opened her mouth and began to speak.



The case was simple enough. An out-of-state senator from the east coast was being accused of trafficking minors through Neptune, and Veronica had been hired as an outside consultant to try and find proof. The FBI was having trouble with the various funding cuts that same senator had inflicted on them, preferring law enforcement to protect and serve him and his donors rather than the country he was happy to take advantage of. Veronica didn't mind the extra work and she had a good track record from her time with the Bureau, so taking the job seemed like a no-brainer.

She had a contact that had fed her information on where the senator might be landing his private plane, and sure enough there he was. She got some pretty good photos of the senator getting off the plane along with the teenager he'd gotten off with, he leading her into the back of a waiting limo. Her contact had told her where they'd be going but she followed the limo anyway.

Her contact had been right so far, but that didn't mean that he'd continue to be.

Veronica's car was an old beater. It was easy to overlook, but older cars let the driver control the lights. As day turned to night she kept her headlights off, her car and the limo heading into the outskirts of Neptune, out towards the middle of nowhere. She thought she knew every inch of Neptune, but the house that loomed up out of nowhere was new to her, a recent build, and worrying – someone needed money to build a house that big and keep the construction quiet.

She found an overlook to park, tested lenses to see what would work at distance in the dark. The driveway up to the house was long and winding and, sure enough, Senator Sicko and his prosti-tot got out and were greeted by

"No fucking way," Veronica said, putting the camera down, blinking, and picking up the camera

again.

She'd seen Mercer Hayes at his parole hearing three weeks ago and had presented evidence to make sure he would stay rotting in prison where he belonged, but there he was. He looked good, confident, standing in what looked like linen as he shook the senator's hand, running his own hand through the girl's hair with a predatory grin. Veronica snapped picture after picture, making certain to get the senator and Mercer.

"This is the best spot," a voice said, making her jump out of her skin. She pulled her taser and pointed it at her contact, he holding his hands up. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"Do you know who that is?" Veronica asked.

"Who, Mercer?" her contact asked, lowering his hands, keeping a polite distance. "My boss, I think."

*What?*

"What?" Veronica said. Her body moved as her brain played catch up, driving the taser into his side once, following him down to make sure he'd stay put. Her camera went into the passenger seat as she ran for the car, but a brilliant light appeared in front of her, blinding her.

She heard something, felt her eyes get heavy.

*The fuck-?!*

"The fu....," Veronica stumbled, fell. She was tired, suddenly, so tired.

*Come on, this doesn't call for a nap, she thought, and then she thought nothing at all.*



Someone slapped her face, hard.

Veronica sputtered and tried to spring to her feet, but didn't move at all. She strained and fought but she was bound and blindfolded. Someone laughed above her, but not as far above her as they should have been.

*I'm strapped to a gurney probably, Veronica thought, forcing her breath slow and deep, taking stock of things. I'm still wearing my jacket, but the pockets are empty so they went through them. Five – no, six – people around me by voice, one of them smells like... fuck.*

"Mercer," Veronica spat.

"Told you she'd remember my cologne," Mercer said. "You owe me a twenty."

A hand brushed through her hair on the way to undoing the blindfold. Mercer loomed over her, smiling.

"Hi, Veronica," he said. "My friends are going to take us on a little trip."

Veronica looked around the room; her contact was there with two people she did not recognize, Senator Sicko sitting and molesting the girl sitting in his lap.

"She doesn't look like much," the senator said, "and she's too old for my tastes." Veronica met the eyes of his victim and shuddered at the drugged out look – was that what they had in mind for her?

“Don't worry, Mars,” Mercer said, smiling as he ran his fingers over her scalp. “We have other plans for you.”

“Stop touching me.”

“No.”

“Indeed.” A massive figure stepped out of the shadows, taller and broader than anyone Veronica had ever met. He stalked towards her like a predator, moved her head back and forth with two fingers pressed against her cheek. She glared up at him but he met her gaze, appearing bored. “She will be easy enough to break.”

*Fuck you,* Veronica thought.

“Fuck you,” Veronica said, certain that she would never break.

She did anyway.



They took her somewhere – she wasn't sure where. A box was fitted over her gurney that blocked out all light and sound, and they pumped some sort of gas into the box with her. The next time she was conscious was in some sort of sterile facility, the lights calm and low, other girls like herself being led or pushed around.

Veronica's gurney was pushed into a room and she heard a familiar buzzing sound as Mercer came into view, holding up her stun gun.

“Remember this?” he asked. Her eyes went wide and she screamed, bucked, trying to free herself through the sleep haze as he pressed the taser against her left breast and pulled the trigger.

She screamed, every muscle in her tensing, her heart feeling like it stopped before it started hammering in her chest. He did it again, and a third time, then a fourth, clearly enjoying himself.

“I've dreamed about this, Mars,” he said, rubbing the taser along her cheek, his other hand gripping her hair. The taser moved down her neck, her breast, between her hips, pressed inside her.

“Mercer-”

“Shhh.”

He tased her again.