





Tony tossed his cigarette butt in the gutter and shoved from the doorway. He had things to do. Nothing was going on here this afternoon. As he stepped toward the curb, a couple of buildings away, two of his gang acknowledged his presence with nods but didn't approach.

In the distance, the deep rumble of a car engine broke the silence. A second later, a girl sprinted down the street at a full run. Tony slipped into the shadows.

*What the hell?*

No *chica* outside his ring ever wandered this neighborhood unless homeless or a whore — and no whore he'd ever seen could haul ass like that.

She dove into an alley and disappeared in the darkness. The deep rumble grew, and a Rolls Royce idled along the street before pausing at the alley, the driver peering into its depths. With the car running, the man opened the door and limped toward the narrow passage.

Tony pushed from the recess and let out a low whistle. Five others joined him, and they retreated around a corner. They didn't need to get sucked into a murder rap, or maybe worse, messing with some john rounding up a runaway.

After several seconds, the man exited the alley, crawled back into his car, and it rolled off, creeping down the block toward the river. Tony waited, the possibilities toying with his mind. That alley had no exit, but no sounds reached him to make him think the guy had wasted the babe. He held up his hand to keep his gang quiet. Then the girl stuck her head around the corner, hesitated, emerged and scanned the surroundings.

Tight jeans, no coat, no apparent personal belongings. She was either in trouble, or just trouble, period. A flick of his wrist, and his group advanced into the street.

Their movement caught her eye, and she froze. Focus forward, she ignored them, straightened her posture, held her head high, and started toward the river.

The boys taunted her. "Hey, *chica*!

What you doin' out here?"

Her pace picked up.

Tony arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms. She acted like she belonged on this street and had every right to be here. If women could have *cojones*, this girl would have an enviable set.

"Hey, white momma! We talkin' to you!"

She kept going. What was this girl doing in this neighborhood? He snapped his fingers, and in a blink, his gang surrounded her.

"We asked what you doin' here, bitch," one of them said.

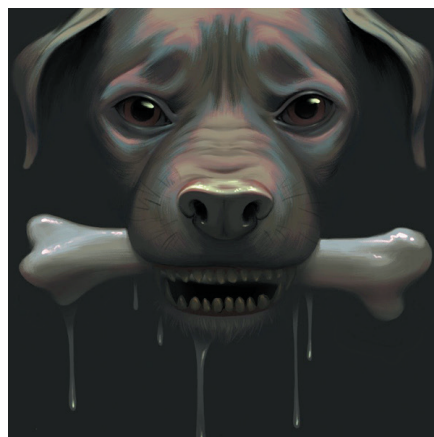
Her posture stiffened. "I'm going to the river."

"Why you wanna do that? Dontcha like it here?" The comment brought sniggers.

"My boyfriend is down there. We had a fight, and I took a walk. I'm going back. If I don't show up in a few minutes, he's going to come looking for me."

No sniggers this time — only outright laughter.

"Shut up." Tony took charge — they'd had their fun. He moved to the front of the group and let his gaze drift over her. Tangled dark red hair, torn shirt, a thin film of dirt coated her skin and clothes. Damned street urchin. If this girl was legal age, it couldn't be by more than an inch. "Don't nobody go walking these streets. 'Specially not no little white girls." He stepped up until he stood inches from her. "You hookin'?"



Terror flashed across her gray eyes, but her voice remained firm. "No. I'm not a hooker. I told you, I'm going back to my boyfriend."

He had to give her credit. The little babe had some grit. "You a long way from the river, *chica*. You two musta' had some hellacious fight." He fingered the tattered seam of her shirt while the others grunted in agreement.

She wrenched her shoulder away from his hand and tried to push her way out of the group, but they tightened the circle and began to close in.

One of them stretched his arm toward her when someone yelled, "Cops!"

"Split!"

They skittered like cockroaches. Tony pitched a glance at the *chica*. As tough as she pretended to be, this kid didn't have a chance out here. He yanked her arm and dragged her along with him.

A squad car screeched to a halt, and two police officers scrambled out as he and his captive rounded the corner. The men's voices filtered down the street. "I'll get Tony — you go after the others!"

Tony picked up his pace. The girl was slowing him down. He dashed into an alley and jerked open a door, threw her into darkness and crowded in after her, slamming and bolting the door behind him.

He pressed her against a wall, his hands on her shoulders, leaning into her. She started to speak, and he clamped his hand over her mouth, whispered in her ear. "Make a sound and you're dead." At this point, threats, however empty, were his best option to keep her quiet. Seconds later, someone rattled the door handle.

Voices penetrated the walls. "I lost those kids again, damn it. They're slippery as wet slate. What happened to Tony and the girl?"

"Hell if I know. They came down here and disappeared. Must've jumped the fence. Jesus, that kid is slick." A deep thud vibrated as one of the men banged his fist against the door. "Screw it. Let's get out of here."

The girl wiggled, her breath >

behind it, had a thin haze of greasy film coating it. No other "guests" wandered around the lot, no one checking in or out. Tiny prickles stung his neck, and he jerked his shoulders to shake it off then walked around the car and opened the passenger door. "Come on."

A deep grimace contorted her face, and she didn't budge. "No. I'm not a prostitute."

The comment put him over the edge, and the muscles in his shoulders pinched into a tight knot. He raked his teeth across his bottom lip. "Babe, I don't know what the hell you are and I don't give a shit. But you're comin' with me 'til I figure out what to do with you." He dragged her from the car, pulled her inside, and flung her across the room. Then he slammed the door and threw the lock.

Grumbling, he grabbed the cigarettes stuffed in his pocket and whacked the pack hard against his palm several times. He leaned on the edge of the dresser and lit one as she dropped onto the side of the bed. "Wanna smoke?" he asked between drags, reaching over to snap on a table lamp. The bulb crackled and buzzed then cast a gloomy haze over the room.

"No, thanks. I don't smoke."

He peered at her through the smoky fog. "You drink Pepsi, little white girl?"

She shrugged without making eye contact, instead picking at a cigarette burn in the frayed bedspread.

He reached into a small cooler, pulled out an icy soda, and tossed it on the bed. After looking at it for a few seconds, she picked up the can and held it in her lap.

The room's heat closed in on him. Hot air billowed from the rusted floor unit under the window, so he set his cigarette on the edge of the battered dresser and stepped over to adjust it. When he turned around, she'd slipped out of his sweatshirt and was examining a gash on her arm.

He took a second to check her out. Besides the tear in her shirt, filth covered her, like she'd fallen in a pile of dirt. Tendrils of dark red hair had

escaped her loose ponytail and stuck to her face. Blood clotted on her left arm, and she rolled the cold can over the wound. He moved closer to the bed. She shrank away.

His muscles quivered, and he tensed his jaw. She wasn't making this easy. "Lemme take a look at that."

"It's fine. I'm fine. I just want to go home. Can you just let me go, please?"

He grunted and spun then propped his hip on the dresser and picked up his smoke. Naïve babe. "You ain't my prisoner, *chica*." Between drags, he kept his gaze on her, surveying her injuries. "So where you live?"

Her voice came out in a whisper. "Columbia."

Tony ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. "Columbia. Which one? Alabama, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin? Or Colombia, South America?"

Her mouth dropped open, and he suppressed a smile. "That don't include the spin-offs like Columbia City or Columbia Heights, or the counties, or the Columbus-es. But outta' those Columbias, South Carolina's the biggest, 'bout 91,000 people, and North Carolina's the smallest, 'bout 900."

"What do you do, read the atlas in your spare time?"

"On occasion."

Her brow creased, and she stared at him. "What kind of criminal are you?"

"Unh-uh. Answer my question. Need

me to run through those again?"

"No!" A breath shot from her. "Missouri."

He nodded. "Okay. Illinois's closer, but Missouri's just a couple hours. If you said South America, we might have a problem." He twisted to flick his ashes in a cup. "What's your name, *chica*? Or you want me to just call you *puta*?"

"I'm not a whore." She hesitated. "Cassie."

"You got a last name, Cassie?"

"Do you, Tony?"

He dipped his head to hide his smile. She had grit and spunk. He dropped his guard. "Touché. You know, if you'd stop sparring with me, I might be able to help you." He took a last draw on the cigarette and stubbed out the butt.

She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes, squinting at him.

*Careful. Don't lose your focus now.* "So what you doin' on my turf?"

"I got lost."

"My ass. Who's the guy in the Rolls?"

She paled. "I ... uh ... No one."

He rolled his eyes. *Just get rid of her. You don't have time for this. Not tonight.* "Okay, so you got a date with some asshole and what? The guy —" He stopped and pulled a chair over to sit in front of her. "Did that prick rape you?"

At that, her toughness shot from her faster than the air from a popped balloon. An uneven breath caught in her throat, but to her credit, she didn't cry. "No." She swallowed. "No, but he tried. I got away."

Spanish flowed from his mouth. "*Hijo de puta. ¿Quién es? Who is he?*"

"I don't know."

"*¿Que?* What you mean, you dunno. Huh? You got a date with some dude and you don't know his name?"

In a soft voice, she said, "I was hitchhiking."

With her tone so low, it took him a second to process what she'd said. When his mind unclogged, a current of anger rippled through him. She'd been hitchin' but didn't want to get

