

# HITCHIN'



**ALEXANDRA CHRISTLE**

Hitchin'  
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For Bill  
A gifted photographer and friend.

In memory of William Frank Cavanaugh  
October 29, 1954 – July 4, 1981



# 1

*East St. Louis, December 1975*

**A**nthony Scarlotti leaned against the thick, wooden door of an abandoned building, concealed in the shadows of the alcove. He took a drag on his cigarette as the street's hushed emptiness stretched out, seducing him, seeking to draw him into its deadly vacuum. Across the road, a trash can tipped over with a crash, and he jerked, pressing deeper into the recess. A tin can tumbled and clinked along the cracked pavement, its echo perforating the quiet. Then a mangy dog, ribs protruding, straggled from an alley with a rotting bone in its mouth. The creature saw him and snarled, yellow teeth bared, and slinked off.

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, its 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.

He 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 *cajones*, 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!"

He 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 strained through his fingers. He moved his hand from her face—he didn't want the damned kid

to pass out on him. Her chest heaved in rapid breaths, her heart pounding against his ribs. He kept his face close to hers, inhaling the herbal scents in her hair. He'd been wrong—this kid didn't come from the streets.

*Don't go there. This hot little chica is nothing but jailbait.*

He shifted his position but stayed pressed against her until both their heartbeats slowed, and the musty, stagnant air started to suffocate him. He opened the door and shoved her out. She stumbled and fell against the wall, caught her balance, and spun to flee. He snatched her by the waistband of her jeans and yanked her back.

"Let me go." She pulled against his grip.

This girl was testing his patience. "I let you go, you gonna split?" Her shoulders fell. "No."

*Like hell.* Nevertheless, he loosened his grip.

She whirled around, hands on hips, and stared him down. "Are you Tony?" In the dim light of the alley, shadows spilled over her, giving her a waif-like appearance.

"Yeah."

"Why did you grab me? I needed their help."

He gave her a thorough once—or twice—over. Her attitude, her speech—maybe he'd been wrong about her age. "You seen yourself, *chica*? You look like a damn strung-out addict. The only help you gonna get from the cops is a rap sheet."

She deflated. Some. Damned spitfire, this little redhead.

"What you doin' here, anyway? This ain't your 'hood."

"I told you. I had a fight with—"

"Yeah, yeah. The *bombre* who dumped you in the middle of East St. Louis." He watched her. "That the guy with the Rolls?"

She blanched and swallowed then curled her lips in.

Hit on something there. He took her by the elbow and propelled her forward. "Let's go." She struggled against him, but he led her out of the alley and around the block to a beat-up Impala that boasted more rust than paint. "Get in." He opened the door.

She held back. "I'm not getting in a car with you. Do you think I'm crazy?"

Anger welled in him, and he muttered a string of expletives in Spanish. Sexy or not, this little hothead had pushed his last button.

He gritted his teeth. "Get in the goddamn car before I tie you up and stuff an oily rag down your throat."

She peered through the car's back window at the piles of junk in the back seat.

"Yeah. I'm not joking." He waited, arms crossed.

Some of her superior attitude faded as she slumped. Her chest rose with a ragged deep breath, and she slid into the front seat.

He closed the door and kept his gaze on the car as he skirted to the driver's side, continuing to mutter curses. She didn't try to bolt—maybe she'd finally realized her options had run out.

He started the fifteen-year-old Chevy and crept into the quiet street, taking his time. Stupid to outrun the cops then get pulled over for speeding. Using his knee to steer, he dug for his pack of smokes, pulled one out, and lit it. He cranked down the window and let his arm hang out, for all appearances relaxed and calm.

His nerves couldn't be wound up any tighter.

She hunched her shoulders and wrapped her arms around herself, shivering.

*Am, hell.* What had compelled him to grab this girl?

*You know the answer to that.* She needed someone to help her. He tossed his cigarette, rolled up the window, and pulled over. When he started to turn in his seat, she shrank away, pressing against the car door.

Teeth clenched, he leaned over the seat, pulled a sweatshirt from a pile of clothes, and thrust it at her. Stupid kid. "Here. Put this on. It's freezing out. Why the hell ain't you got no coat?"

She opened her mouth, clamped it shut, and slipped the sweatshirt over her head. Her voice meek, she squeaked a quiet "Thank you."

Without comment, he pulled onto the street. No other vehicles cruised the area—too early for the pimps and addicts. A soundless emptiness enveloped the car.

Still huddled away from him, she watched him for a minute. "Why are the police after you? Do they know you?"

He choked out a strangled laugh. "Yeah. They know me."

"How? What did you do?" She cocked her head. "Kill someone?"

Her caustic tone cut through him, the accusation curdling his blood. *Let it go. You don't have to justify yourself to her.* "Haven't had to yet." He glanced her way. "But I might now."

She shut up.

He pulled into the lot of a dingy motel and parked in front of a room. A weathered fake brass 5 hung on the door, barely attached with a loose screw. The window, black from the dark drapes 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 Columbuses. But outta those Columbias, South Carolina's the biggest, 'bout ninety-nine thousand people, and North Carolina's the smallest, 'bout nine hundred."

"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? He?”—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 in *his* car? The contradiction pissed him off, and he straightened. “Hitchhikin’. In East St. Louis? You’re some kinda crazy bitch.”

Her expression tight, she knotted her hands into fists. “That’s a hell of a condemnation coming from a...murderer.”

“I told you. I ain’t killed no one.” He paused to stifle his annoyance. *Forget it. Why would she think anything else?* “You a runaway? How the hell old are you, anyway? Sixteen? Why you hitchin’?”

She didn’t answer immediately—coming up with another lie, no doubt. “Unlike you, I don’t have a car.”

“So where’d you hitch from?”

“Columbia. Where else?”

“That’s over a hundred miles from here.”

“Wow. Did you learn that from your atlas, too?” Her tone dripped with contempt. Mocked him.

He jerked her from the bed and stuck his face so close their noses nearly touched. “Listen, you stupid little bitch. I don’t give a damn who you are or why you’re here. But you’re in my way, and I need to get rid of you.”

The blood drained from her face. Death wouldn’t have made her more ashen. “Please—please don’t kill me. I’ll”— She squeezed her eyes shut, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

A scent of fear seeped from her. She really believed he intended to rape her. *Dear God.* An icy knot formed in his chest as he loosened his grip and tipped his head, rolling it across his shoulders. “Siddown.” He took her shoulders and set her back on the bed, went into the bathroom, and grabbed a clean washcloth. Wetting it with warm water, he wrung it, then went back and tossed it at her. “Here. Clean up that cut.”

She stared at the washcloth laying on her lap.

Heat flushed through his body, and he snatched the cloth and grabbed her arm. A large damp spot stained her jeans.

“Ow.” She tried to pull her arm away.

His Spanish flew. He wrenched her up and dragged her to the bathroom sink then splashed warm water over her arm until her drenched clothes clung to her body, molding to her slender frame. In all the places he shouldn’t look.

“Stop it! I’m soaking wet. Give me the washcloth.” She snagged it from him.

He ran his hand over his mouth, covering his smile, then crossed his arms as she wiped at the cut. It continued to ooze and looked fairly serious. She should probably get it checked by a doctor. He had some contacts, but only as a last resort. He needed to get rid of this *chica*, not take her under his wing like a helpless puppy. He cursed again, causing her to glance at him. *Why tonight?* “So how’d you get that cut? Did Rolls have a knife on you?”

She winced. “No. I got caught on a piece of metal on the Dumpster.”

*Ab.* That's how she got away from the guy. An image of her crammed behind the rat-infested garbage container in the alley danced in his head. Gutsy. "Why didn't Rolls haul you outta there?"

"He came halfway down the alley, but then said the rats could have me and left."

"Lucky rats."

She glared at his reflection in the mirror.

"How'd you get so dirty?"

"I rolled under the warehouse door as it was going down." She twisted the faucet to rinse and wring out the cloth.

He tilted his head, eyes narrowed. "Which warehouse?"

Head turned slightly, she spoke over her shoulder. "I saw a sign hanging from a couple of nails when he drove in—Henson Aeronautics."

"Henson...*Jesucristo*. Dennis Henson?" Anger flowed through him, and he frowned. He knew the kid—it hadn't looked like him. "Are you sure that's who that was? That shit? How the hell'd you get away from that asshole?"

Setting the cloth on the bar, she turned, but ignored his question. "How do you know him?" She looked him up and down. "I wouldn't expect to see you in his social circle."

Smart-mouthed little *puta*. He studied her and considered his answer. The truth wouldn't do. "I sell him coke. He's one a' my best customers."

The blood drained from her face.

"You didn't answer me. How'd you get away?"

She pulled herself up, planted her hands on her hips, looked him in the eye, and spat, "I bit him in the balls."

Tony nearly choked. Maybe he needed to reassess this little *chica*. No wonder the Henson kid was limping down that alley. A cough shot from him, and he grabbed a towel and threw it at her. Then with a deep sigh, he rubbed at his forehead and shook his head. Justifying this one was going to take some serious smooth double-talk. "Get dried up and come on."

"Where now?"

"I'm takin' you home."

## 2

**E**verett Jackson Hayes, Jr. charged the corner on his Honda Elsinore. His front tire slid, and his left leg shot out for balance. He hit the berm to slingshot from the corner and down the hill. The bike skimmed close to the outside line, but today there were no spectators lining the fence who might get slapped with debris. He blew across the finish line and skidded to a stop.

Jerry Addison jogged over with a stopwatch in his hand. “Damn, Rett. Two minutes, ten seconds. If you can keep that up, you’ll blow away Richards. No prob.”

Rett took off his goggles and helmet and shook out his dampened hair. A cold gust of wind rustled through the trees surrounding the track, giving him a chill. “Yeah. That prick took me out in October. It won’t happen again.” He ran a hand through his shaggy mop. “Let’s get this baby loaded up. It’s freezing out here.”

A voice cut through the quiet of the empty track. “Can’t take the cold, pussy?” A young man strolled over to them.

Tension twisted his muscles. “Richards. What’re you doing here?” “Watching you take your little Sunday afternoon joyride. Can’t you get that heap to go any faster than that?” He sneered.

Anger bubbled through Rett, and he knotted his hands into fists.

Jerry grabbed his arm and spoke in a low tone. “Ignore him. Let’s go.”

Rooted to the cold, hard-packed dirt, Everett glared at his adversary for several seconds.

Finally, Richards backed off. “Get a real bike, and you might have a chance.” He wandered off the track.

Rett let a low growl escape and grumbled under his breath. They pushed the bike into an open trailer hitched to his black Ford pickup.

“Don’t let him psych you out. You’ll be ready for March. No prob,” Jerry said.

He locked down the bike and raised the tailgate with a solid clunk. “That asshole should’ve been barred from the track after that crap last fall.”

“Don’t sweat it. He’ll be riding in your dust in March. Besides, I got money on you, pal. You’d better come through.”

Rett’s laugh echoed across the quiet track. “You do not. The season is over three months out. Don’t even tell me your bookie is taking bets already.”

“I don’t have a bookie.”

He slapped his friend on the shoulder. “Jer, when are you going to stop taking things so literally?”

“I’m an engineer. Obtuse is a type of triangle, not a thought process.”

Rett chortled and climbed in the truck then headed toward I-70. The drive to St. Louis took fifty-six minutes door-to-door. Still plenty of time to get cleaned up and to his parents’ house. They’d nearly reached the exit when Rett asked, “Hey, wanna come over for dinner?”

Jerry eyed him. “Did your mom invite me?”

“What makes you think I’m going to their house? Maybe I’m going to cook.”

Jerry burst into laughter. When he finally caught his breath, he said between wheezes, “No, man. No offense, but I see enough of you and your dad at work.”

“Speaking of work...”

“Oh, no. No. Not a chance. It’s Sunday, and I don’t want to hear it.”

“Jer. We gotta figure out this plastic. If we could just tint the damn stuff, think of everything we could make.”

“I know. Windshields, sunglasses, blah, blah, blah.”

Rett blew out a breath. “You have no vision, Jer.” He fell silent. His friend had managed to invent a true scratch-proof plastic. Not scratch-resistant, scratch-*proof*. And he couldn’t seem to fathom the implications of that. The guy was his best friend, but sometimes... He took the exit for Jerry’s apartment complex. The Hayes product

had already been used to reinvent thermoplastics. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. They needed to tint it.

“Stop thinking about work. Think about the race in March.”

“Who says I’m thinking about work?”

Jerry faced him. “I’ve known you since high school. You always think about work. You need a girlfriend or something.”

Rett pursed his lips, downshifted the truck’s gear into second, and pulled into the complex’s lot. “I tried that already—it didn’t work out too well, if you recall.”

Jerry cut him a glance but didn’t respond as Rett coasted through the parking lot to his building.

“I’m through with women,” he muttered. A snort came from his friend, but he ignored it. “Did I tell you the NHL has contracted us to replace their acrylic screens at all the rinks?”

“Four times. That’s great, Rett. Truly. I’m sure all the hockey fans are overjoyed.”

“Every time we try to tint the stuff, it makes it flexible.”

“I know. I was there, remember?”

He pulled up to the apartment building. Jerry was hopeless. His line of vision ended at the top of a test tube. “Okay. See you in the morning. Seven a.m.”

Jerry threw open the car door. “Day starts at eight.”

“Wow, I can’t pull anything over on you, can I?” As soon as the man shut the door, he backed up and headed home. Jerry could annoy the hell out of him. His friend was brilliant. And, Everett admitted grudgingly, a hard worker. But when he had time off, he was *off*. Not that he could really blame him for that. Just because Rett had no life didn’t mean his friend couldn’t have one.

THE HUGE WREATH on the door of Rett’s parents’ house loomed before him as soon as he turned into the drive. Behind the living room window, tree lights sent a burst of color through the twilight. Without ringing the bell, he went inside, pausing at the entry to peer at the familiar display. A smile crept over his face, and he made his way down the hall, inhaling as the scent of chocolate

chip cookies drifted from the kitchen. He wandered to the back and found his mother dropping final spoonfuls onto a cookie sheet.

“Hi, Mom.” He kissed her on the cheek and scooped a glob of dough from the bowl as his father strolled in.

“Thought about getting a haircut recently?”

Rett sighed.

His mother said, “He’s fine, Jack.”

He scraped the dough from his finger with his teeth and licked the sugar from his lips. “Hundred thirty seconds on the track today.”

His father raised his eyebrows. “Not bad.” He sat on a stool at the kitchen bar. “So what’s bothering you?”

The uncanny ability his father had to read his moods grated on him more than the haircut comments. He shrugged. “It’s the VitraPlas, Dad. Jerry and I’ve been working on it for two weeks and can’t figure out how to tint it. It makes it malleable. We can’t make windshields that bow in the middle.” Their inability to solve the problem ate at him, and he dragged his finger along the inside of the bowl. “Hit a bug and watch the windshield go *boing*,” he muttered.

His dad chuckled and put a hand on his shoulder. “Let it rest for a while. Two weeks isn’t a long time in this business. It’ll come to you.”

Rett shook his head. Easier said than done. Nonetheless, he dropped the subject and spent the evening overeating his mother’s cooking and talking sports with his father until heading home. Tonight, he didn’t stay up to watch TV, but went to his apartment complex’s gym. After a short workout, he donned a pair of boxing gloves and smacked the punching bag. Again. And again. Then he switched to the speed bag and gave it a solid pummeling until the rhythmic pounding emptied his mind of all conscious thought. His muscles taut and skin slick from the workout, he jogged to his apartment to shower and cool down.

When he finally went to bed, he felt better, although he still had no answers.

# 3

Cassie picked up the towel Tony flung at her chest and blotted as much as she could. Water dripped from her clothes, but considering their condition, it hardly mattered.

She checked out the guy as he dug in a tote bag. The inconsistencies surrounding him were piling up. He alternated between street-wise and educated, in both his dialect and his vocabulary, but looked like he was about seventeen. Who was this kid?

“Hurry up. We gotta move.” He shrugged into his jacket and stuck a revolver in the pocket.

“Why? Are the police going to knock on the door?”

“They might.”

She nodded at his gun. “What’s that for?”

He spun around with a scowl. “What the hell do you think? I’m a fuckin’ drug dealer.”

“I hate guns.”

He edged toward her, invading her space to the point that if either of them exhaled, they would touch. “Yeah? You hate guns? How ya feel about drugs? Got some coke, some smack...I can get you some reefer or speed, but there ain’t no money in ’em.” He slipped his fingers through her tangled hair and focused on it, dragging his fingertips gently against her scalp. “We might have to take it out in trade. Whatever you want, *chica*.” His warm breath drifted over her skin.

Heat flowed through her body in waves, stealing her breath. She jerked back. This young man—this *boy*—was dangerous. And not just because of his chosen profession. Her voice sounded hoarse as she whispered, “I don’t use drugs.”

His manner changed in an instant. He pivoted. “Good for you. Let’s go.” He slung the duffel over his shoulder, plucked the sweatshirt from the bed, and headed toward the door.

But she hung back. “Is it loaded?”

“*Jesucristo*. What the fuck you think? Ain’t gonna do me no good empty.”

Eyes narrowed, she glared at him. He grabbed her, pulled her across the room, propelled her outside, and locked the door. Then he threw the sweatshirt at her. “Listen, doll, I’m gettin’ tired of you. You want me to leave you out here? Fine. Have a ball.”

Hours had passed since her escape from... *Rolls*. The sun dipped below the tops of the buildings, casting long shadows across the street, the chill air even more frigid than before. A strip of cheap, rundown stores lined one side of the avenue. At the end of the block, a few cars waited at a Jack-in-the-Box drive-through. Women in spike heels and short skirts, with cheap fake fur wraps draped over their shoulders, loitered at corners. He’d brought her deep into East St. Louis’s red-light district.

He threw his tote in the trunk of his car and faced her. “You wanna stay, *chica*? You’d probably pull in enough cash to get a bus ticket.”

The comment shook her from her stupor. “No. I’ll go with you.”

Tony shoved her into the Impala and drove down the block, but before taking the ramp to I-70, he stopped at a pay phone. “Stay here.” It wasn’t a request.

He dialed the phone, and she leaned over to roll down his window.

“Yeah, man, I split. I don’t need no cops breathing down my neck. I’m lyin’ low till tonight. Tell Aguiar I’ll be there. Midnight. I ain’t shittin’ around, either. I got the cash. Enough for the whole buy, and I wanna meet him. I’m sick of being jerked around by the hired help.” He slapped down the receiver and climbed back into the car.

As he merged onto the interstate, he said, “You shoulda rolled the window back up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you wanna eavesdrop, you oughta roll the window back up. Unless you want someone to know you’re listenin’.”

She glared at him.

“First rule. Cover yourself, *chica*.”

“I’ll keep your advice in mind the next time I’m involved with a pusher.”

His mouth twitched in a smile. “Just don’t give me any more shit.

I got enough time to haul your ass to Columbia and get back, so just shut up. And put your fucking seatbelt on.”

She clicked the belt into place. What compelled her to obey his commands slipped outside her realm of understanding, but she didn't want to cross him.

Enigma didn't come close to explaining this guy. When he'd scooped her from the street, she'd feared the worst—rape, murder, horrors her wildest imagination couldn't conjure. Instead, he'd... rescued her, in a sense, although she still wasn't sure being with the police wouldn't have been a better option. Regardless, he had yet to hurt her, even though his volatile mood swings terrified her. One minute, he seemed concerned about her, and the next, he threw her across the room like a sack of grain.

She stole a glance at him. Although he looked young, his eyes held a knowledge of life that only came with age. *Did that come from living on the streets?* A thin white scar ran from the edge of his eye along his temple, made more prominent by his tanned skin. With his untrimmed dark hair, he had a reckless appeal. The scraggly growth on his face smacked of a kid pretending to be an adult. On the other hand, his muscular chest and arms filled his t-shirt, making him look like anything but a kid. She released a breath and dropped that thought immediately.

Almost.

He took the next exit, and her heartrate accelerated for every mile per hour the car slowed. What now? Some side road where he could rape her? Panic danced along her spine.

He must have sensed her fear, because he glanced toward her. “You know, babe, if I intended to rape you, I woulda done it at the motel.” He leered at her. “More comfortable.”

She slouched in the seat.

He pulled into a McDonald's drive-through. “You hungry?”

Heart pounding, she croaked, “I'm fine.”

He turned to face her. “Sorry, babe.” His tone dripped with a false sweetness, and he reached over to brush her cheek. “I wanted to take you to the Robert E. Lee, but I left my tie back at the motel.”

His hand lingered on her skin, and a warmth flooded her. She inched away and let out a tentative laugh. The fancy riverboat on

the Mississippi would no sooner seat them than they would two monkeys from the zoo. But she relented. She'd had nothing to eat since leaving Columbia this morning.

He ordered two Big Macs, fries, extra ketchup, and a couple of Cokes. When the girl handed him the bag, Tony said, "Thanks, fox."

Cassie didn't miss the smile the girl at the window gave her... chauffeur. The guy was smooth and would be a force to reckon with—if he lived to see his twenties. He pulled into a parking space and passed her a burger and fries, then positioned his food so he could eat while driving. Glancing at his watch, he threw the car into drive, left the lot, and made his way to the interstate.

With skill, he steered the car while eating and still managed to keep his eye on her. Aggravation crept through her, and she scrunched her mouth. Did he think she would open the door and roll from a car flying down the road at seventy miles an hour?

She finished her food and sat silently, arms crossed, staring out the window. The entire ordeal and this—*rescue*—by Tony made her shiver. Eyes squeezed shut, she, who hadn't been to a church in years, thanked God for protecting her.

She pushed up the sleeve of his sweatshirt and ran her hand over her arm. Even after washing, grit and grime rubbed onto her palm. The gash from the Dumpster stung and hadn't completely scabbed over. It still felt sticky. The entire day made her feel defiled and dirty. She needed a shower. Her stomach lurched. What had she been thinking? Was her job so important she would risk her life just to get a story?

*Yes.*

After a few moments, she examined Tony. Oncoming cars lit his face enough for her to see his features. He was good-looking, if battle-weary. Although she couldn't see them now, the image of his eyes was ingrained in her mind. The color of deep cinnamon, sometimes they appeared smoky, as if he were wrapping her in them like a caramel apple. Then they would clear, like hardened amber jewelry with little bits of history locked inside.

Whichever color they transformed into, the frightening coldness in them made her fear him.

Did he have a girlfriend? She shifted in the seat. Tony fell far

from boyfriend material. The intensity of this man was multiplied exponentially by his apparent youth.

His voice broke into her thoughts. "You never answered my question. How old are you?"

His civil tone didn't mask his insistence, so she relented. "I'm twenty-six. What about you? Are you old enough to be driving at night?"

He grinned and looked at her.

Her heart leaped.

"Thirty."

Her mouth fell open. *Thirty?* "I thought maybe you were twenty-one. At the most." She paused. The inconsistencies in him brought out the reporter in her. He didn't add up. A thought occurred to her—only one explanation made sense. "So now you're what? An undercover cop?"

Taking his eyes from the road for far too long at this speed, he stared at her, his expression hard. "No. Now I'm a drug dealer."

She grunted in disbelief. In spite of his harshness, the incongruities in him continued to puzzle her. "Why? What makes someone like you get into dealing?"

"Someone like me?" he said with a short laugh. "A poor *wop* who's a high school dropout and ain't got nowhere to go? Money, little white girl. It's the only way to get ahead in this world."

"I don't think you're a dropout. You don't talk like it."

His mouth settled into a thin line.

Undaunted, she pressed him further. "Aren't you afraid I'll turn you in? You're awfully open about it. What if I turned around and called the FBI or somebody?"

Tony jerked the steering wheel and ran the car onto the shoulder of the highway at seventy miles an hour. Pieces of gravel flew, popping under the metal frame, as the car screeched to a stop. He threw the gearshift into park and faced her. "You listen to me, *chica*. There's a whole world out there sweet little girls like you know nothing about. But it's real and it's dangerous, and it can get you killed. Don't *ever* threaten a criminal, whether you intend to follow through with it or not. Life is meaningless in my world, and the people in it don't give a shit who lives or dies."

During his outburst, his amber eyes turned cloudy. No hint of kindness softened his glare. Terror settled over her, an intense chill cascading through her skin.

Using her name for the first time, he said in a quiet voice, “Cassie, this isn’t your world, and it isn’t your problem. Stay out of it.”

His soft tone emboldened her, and she knitted her brow. “Drugs are everybody’s problem. Dealers—like *you*,” she seethed, “make it that way.”

The muscles in his jaw tensed. “Fine. Go home and vote wisely in the next election. Do your part to end it.”

“You don’t sound like a dealer. You sound like a cop.”

He drew his hands into tight fists. The muscles in his neck strained until his veins bulged. “Goddammit, you’re one persistent broad. You can’t judge a book by its cover, babe.”

A semi roared past, shaking the car.

She scanned his face. “I’m not. I’m reading the pages, and somewhere in you there’s a chapter that says you’re a good man.”

Tony laughed and his features softened. “*Jesucristo*. What the hell are you, a goddamned writer?”

“I’m a reporter. I went to Journalism School at Missouri.”

“God help me. It figures.” He put the car in drive and pulled onto the road, muttering. “Fucking reporters. You think you can change the world.”

“I can try.”

He continued driving in silence. After a while, he said, “It wouldn’t work, anyway. You’d have to call the DEA.”

“What?” What the hell was he talking about?

“The FBI doesn’t handle drug cases. If you wanted to report me, you’d have to call the DEA. If you’re a reporter, you should learn your law enforcement agencies.”

“You know an awful lot for an uneducated *wop*.” The word fired from her mouth.

“I’m a pusher. It’s in my interest to find out these things. I like to know who’s coming after me.”

She scowled at his glibness. “You’re disgusting.” The smile easing across his face sent a flush of tingling nerves through her.

TONY MADE THE remainder of the two-hour drive in silence until he reached the outskirts of Columbia and the girl started to give him directions to her apartment. When he pulled up front, she rested her hand on his arm. "Tony, listen, thanks for helping me out."

"Yeah, sure." He shifted his position on the steering wheel. The small misadventure was over. His stomach clenched. Her face would haunt him for a long time. He needed to get her out of his head. Pronto. "I gotta get back to St. Louis."

"Right. Thanks for the ride. I owe you one." Her light tone belied the somber expression in her gray eyes. She got out and walked to his window, starting to pull her arm out of the sweatshirt.

He reached out the window and grasped her hand. "Keep it." Moonlight glinted on her red hair, begging him to run his fingers through the tangled curls. He shook himself from his thoughts. "Look, *chica*. Promise me something. Knock it off with this hitchhikin' shit."

She let out a small laugh. "That's a pretty safe promise." She hesitated. "Be careful."

"I have to in this business."

Cassie started to back away, but his grip tightened. "So what's your last name, anyway?"

"Phillips."

"Cassie short for Cassandra?"

She nodded.

"Well, Cassandra Phillips, I'll keep an eye out for your byline."

Her gaze floated over his face, settling on his eyes. "What's your last name?"

"Scarlotti."

"You said you were a— Why do you speak Spanish?"

His face lightened with amusement. "I said I was a *wop*? I'm Sicilian. But ya gotta speak *spic* if you're gonna hang with the *spics*, *chica*."

She studied him. "You don't look Sicilian—or Italian, either. You look sort of Hispanic."

"Yeah? Well, there ain't no telling who my asshole father fucked." He shrugged. "And he kept my ma so drugged up, he coulda brought me in from the street and she woulda thought I was hers." He focused

on a car passing behind her then pulled his gaze back to her, finally letting go of her hand. “Take care of yourself, *chica*.”

She nodded and backed away then slowly mounted the steps to the building. Before she went inside, she turned and looked toward him for a long moment. He stayed while she disappeared through the door, watching until a light came on in an upstairs window. Drawing a long breath, he shifted the car into drive and made a U-turn.

During this stunt, no matter what he said, she continued her relentless interrogation, apparently unwilling to accept him at face value. He shook his head. Tony Scarlotti’s education came from the streets and a quiet obsession with reading. Hundreds of idiots thought they could make an easy buck selling drugs. They all either got killed or hooked on the stuff.

*Like Tom?*

He cursed violently and slapped the steering wheel. *No. Not like Tom. He did not get booked on this shit.* Tearing his thoughts away from his brother, he dragged himself to the present. No, his plans required some finesse if he wanted to reach his goals.

*Are you sure? Are you sure this is the way?*

He gritted his teeth, whipped past a slow-moving car, and refocused. His reputation on the streets painted him as a man who eliminated problems without hesitation. Cassie seemed frightened by him, and it was for the best. He played his role and did it well—because this was more than a job to him. Still, his intent did not include hurting innocent people.

Cassie Phillips was an innocent—in several ways—and yet, her guilelessness made her more dangerous than the most ruthless drug lord. Something about her had stirred deep desires he’d buried seven years ago.

Needs he’d abandoned when his brother was killed.

A part of him had died the day that news reached him, and he wouldn’t rest until the truth came out. Meanwhile, this job that consumed him and the ghosts that haunted him had turned him into a dangerous man, one who had no illusions about himself.

And right now, that man had a meeting to get to.

## 4

Cassie trudged to the elevator and pushed the button for the fourth floor. As the lift ascended, she leaned against the wood-tone paneling and closed her eyes. This experience had gone far beyond draining. An emptiness permeated every cell in her body. In her pursuit of a prize-winning story, she'd come away with more than she'd expected, and nothing she could ever write about.

The elevator doors parted, and she plodded down the hall, the tightness in her chest closing as her temples throbbed. Writing any kind of story about Tony would require more time with him. Aside from smoking a few joints and popping a couple of white crosses during exams in college, the drug world was completely alien to her.

Her hand shook as she stuck her key in her door lock. *Is it the story you're after, or just Tony?* Her face burned. She shoved into her apartment and slammed the door.

She needed a shower. Cold. But she only got as far as the sofa before her legs gave out and she fell onto it, unable to move. No rational thoughts. Just a vacuum remained where her soul used to be. A hypnotic doze had almost overtaken her when a noise brought her to consciousness...someone at the door. She bolted upright, her heart in her throat.

The doorknob started to turn. A scream rose, but before any sounds could form in her throat, her roommate appeared in the doorway. "Jackie! What are you doing here?" The fading adrenaline rush made her heart hammer against her ribs.

Her roommate tossed her keys and bag on a table by the door. "Um, I live here?"

"Yeah, but...I thought you were out of town." Her voice caught, strained and breathless.

“It’s Sunday night. Work tomorrow?” Jackie threw a glance her way then stopped. “Cassie! What happened to you?”

She opened her mouth to answer, stared at Jackie for a second, then dropped her head and linked her fingers behind her neck. How in the world could she explain this one?

TONY CRANKED UP the speedometer. He couldn’t afford to arrive late to this buy. Too much of his future hinged on its outcome. His little jaunt to Columbia had interfered with his plans—his desire to spend a few more minutes with Cassie had put him behind schedule.

What the hell had gotten into him? He should’ve given her some money and driven her to the bus station. He had to get his mind off that woman or he would screw up tonight, and a screw-up in this business could land him dead. Dead did not fall on his agenda.

With the thirty grand tucked in his suitcase, if his luck held, a kilo of cocaine would be in his hands tonight. Cut, it would sell on the streets for nearly a hundred thousand bucks, and he’d be one step closer to his goal. A few more big scores, and he could quit this, return to Columbia, get Cassie, and disappear.

*Jesucristo, asshole. What kind of dream world have you fallen into?*

With effort, he turned his attention to his driving as he made his way to East St. Louis. He exited the interstate and wound slowly to the riverfront, found a parking place on a quiet side street, and locked the car.

Hands in his pockets, he slipped down the deserted street. Adrenaline made his heart race, and he paused to calm his nerves. Beneath his arrogance hid an animal ready to bolt. With one quick look behind him, he ducked into an alley and huddled in the rear entryway of a closed office. A silhouette came from the shadows, but Tony didn’t jump. He slid from the doorway. “Got my merchandise?” He wrapped his fingers around the grip of the .44 in his pocket.

“Kilo, just like you ordered.”

“How many times can I step on it?”

“Cut it in half, man. Double your money.”

Tony shoved the man against the bricks. "This is shit. I can't make a living off this crap. I gotta be able to step on it twice or I don't make enough profit."

The man sniffled. "Try it, man. I'll give you a line. I'm tellin' ya, you can cut it. Maybe one and half times, and it'll still be ten percent pure. Plenty high for street sales."

Heat flushed through his body. This had wasted his time, and that didn't make him happy.

The man hunched and averted his eyes. He ran a grimy finger under his nose.

Tony grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him up. "You stupid fuck. You stole part of this stash and cut it yourself, didn't you?" He shoved him again and pulled out his gun. The man whimpered when Tony pressed the barrel to his neck. "Listen to me, fuckface. I got the cash for a real buy. This worthless crap ain't gonna do me any good. I'm tired of screwing with you. Take me to meet your source."

The man cringed, and his voice fell to a raspy whisper. "You think I'm nuts, man? He'll kill me. I ain't squealin'."

"Yeah? How about I blast a hole in your head, asshole? You won't be squealing then." He pressed the gun deeper.

The man squeezed his eyes shut. "No, man...don't shoot me! I'll get him, I swear!"

Disgusted, Tony released him. The man sniveled, shifting on his feet. Tony reached into the addict's pocket and yanked out a .22. "Worthless piece of shit gun. What are you going to do with this toy, asshole? You couldn't kill a fuckin' cockroach with this." He stuffed the pistol in a pocket.

The man started blubbering. "Shit, man. Don't kill me."

Tony held his shirt at the neck and pushed him against the wall. "It's Aguiar. I know it's Aguiar. You find the prick and tell him Tony Scarlotti's lookin' for him. I want a serious buy, and I want it quick." He raised his .44 and fired into the doorframe by the man's ear. The blast resounded in his head, making his ears ring.

The pusher screamed and covered his ear with his hand. "Shit! You crazy bastard! I can't hear nothin'!"

Tony leaned over and whispered into his other ear. "Next time, I'll blow your fuckin' ear off. Don't double-cross me. I don't like it. Get in touch with me tomorrow." He ripped open the man's jacket and pulled a plastic bag full of white powder from an inside pocket. "I'm takin' this with me. You tell him he'll get his money when I get some decent goods."

"You gotta pay me, man! He'll kill me if he don't get his money!"

"Then I guess you got a problem, don't you, dumbshit?" He shoved his gun in his pocket and hustled down the alley.

A police cruiser coasted by, and Tony ducked into another doorway until it disappeared. The cops' broadening interest in this district was largely due to him. His drug dealings were no secret, but it didn't concern him. Name recognition meant everything. Being another nickel-bag street dealer didn't mesh with his plans.

He made it to his car and drove from the quiet area. That sleazebag go-between had taken a portion of the stash for himself and powdered down the rest, claiming it could still be cut. It confirmed his suspicions that Aguiar was a major dealer. Unfortunately, his information would probably come from a new contact. If Aguiar's reputation held true, this worthless shit wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

He pulled into a parking place at a nearby bar and locked the .22 and bag of coke in the glove compartment, then sauntered into the dingy lounge and shed his jacket in the overheated room. A cloud of smoke hung in the air, creating a murky veil in front of the television screen. A flickering image of Johnny Carson filled the small TV, as he feigned surprise over another sexy actress's suggestive comments. Tony slid onto a stool, and the bartender glanced his way. He gave the man a small nod, and a shot of tequila appeared in front of him.

He threw the burning liquor into his mouth and swallowed then set the glass on the counter with a thunk. The bartender poured him another, and he twirled the glass in his fingers, watching the liquid spin.

"Hi, Tony," a whispered voice said. "I didn't think you was coming tonight."

A hand fondled his leg. Without turning to face her, he gazed at her reflection in the filmy mirror behind the bar. He raised a finger, and the bartender set a bottle of Falstaff in front of her. She picked

it up and drank. Tony spun his stool to examine her. Bleached hair lay against her head in stiff curls that past encounters told him felt like straw. Deep red lipstick the color of her low-cut dress accentuated her full lips. He grabbed her arm and leaned close. "If you didn't think I was comin', why you wearing that dress?"

She wrenched her arm from his grasp. "Fuck yourself."

He took his glass and tossed the tequila down his throat then scanned the room and settled on a brunette in the corner. As he threw some bills on the bar and stood, the brunette came to meet him. She slipped her hand around his arm with a scant smile at the woman in the red dress.

He shot a final look at the blonde. "Don't fuck with me, *puta*."

She cursed at him as he left the bar, but it didn't matter what the whore thought of him. Women loved Anthony Scarlotti, and never turned him down. He slid his arm around the brunette's waist as they went outside then pulled her close to kiss her long and hard. His only care now was whether to take her in the car or wait until they reached her apartment. Or both.

But he broke away from her and swore. An image of Cassie Phillips hovered in his mind.

"What's wrong, Tony?" She ran her tongue along his ear.

He pushed her away. "Nothing. Let's go." He scowled as he led her to his car.

Plenty was wrong.

CASSIE SIGHED SO deeply her shoulders lifted then fell in defeat. "...and then he dropped me off and left." She flopped against the sofa cushion, burying herself in its familiar comfort.

Jackie shook her head. "I don't even know what to say. Are you going to write a story?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't see how. It's too personal. I can't substantiate any of it." She hesitated. "Unless I could find him again. I kind of know where the motel was."

"Are you crazy?" Her tone peaked. "You can't go off trying to find him. He has a gun. He might decide to shoot you next time."

"But Jackie, he was nice."

Jackie's eyebrows shot up so far her bangs hid them. Her jaw dropped.

"Okay, he was nice some of the time. But he brought me home. And he's smart. You can't fake smart. Do you know what a great story it would be to explain what makes someone like him become a drug dealer?"

"Sure. About as great as the one about the reporter who gets herself murdered by a drug dealer because she asks too many questions. Besides, he told you why. Money."

She puffed out a breath. Something about Tony Scarlotti pulled at her, but she could never explain that to her roommate. She couldn't explain it to herself.

"Look, I'm going to pick up a pizza from Shakespeare's. I'm starving. Want some? I'll get pepperoni."

"Yeah, I guess." Her stomach churned. *If I don't vomit first.*

As soon as Jackie locked the door, she plodded to her bedroom and stripped off her clothes, tossing the torn shirt into a trash can. In the bathroom, she stepped into the tub and turned on the faucet. Hot water pelted her in a stinging spray, but did nothing to wash away the horrors of the day. She flattened her palms on the tile wall, head bent. Although home and safe, her chest ached.

The pain swelling through her made her bite her bottom lip...all for the wasted life of a man she didn't even know.