

CHAPTER 1

Gina Salas stepped off the bus and shot an uneasy glance over her shoulder. Her heart pounded in her temples, her neck, even her fingertips, with each step she took.

She scanned the vicinity. The bus' headlights sliced through the inky haze. Steam rose from the wet blacktop, shimmering and swirling around her feet. Not a soul in sight, just bricks and cinderblocks rising to the skies. The tension paralyzing her lungs eased, and the breath she'd been holding escaped with a shaky whoosh.

She was being ridiculous. Wasn't she? She inhaled slowly, her chest expanding to the point of pain, her gaze darting right then left. The back of her neck prickled.

Gina could feel eyes watching, waiting, even if she couldn't identify the source.

For about the hundredth time tonight, doubt preyed upon her. Coming here, to this God-forsaken section of Atlanta was a gi-normous mistake. An exercise in futility.

She spun around and lurched back toward the bus. With a screech, the door snapped shut. Gina pounded her fist against the side of the bus. The driver stared straight ahead and stepped on the gas. Belching blue smoke in her face, the bus roared away taking every bit of illumination with it. The streetlights in this neighborhood had either burned out or been shot out.

Darkness was preferable to the sight of hopelessness and poverty.

A block away, from the corner of a wood-sided building, a security light flickered, throwing hazy shadows across the sidewalk. Graffiti covered the cinderblock buildings surrounding her.

Gina scanned the area again, the eerie glow enticing her toward the illusion of safety. As she stepped off the curb to cross the deserted street, she tromped into a puddle and splashed dirty water up her calves.

"Damn!" she grumbled, grime squishing between her toes. "What the hell am I doing here?"

She should never have ventured into this place alone. But what choice did she have?

The pounding bass of what was probably some gang-banger's pimped-out ride ricocheted from building to building, echoing so loud that she couldn't determine the source of the heart-altering rhythm. It was ridiculous to feel reassured by that sound, but she did. Hearing bad rap music, she knew she wasn't in a war zone in a foreign country.

She passed an alley guarded by an iron gate padlocked from the inside. The smell of fried fish mingled with the odor of fermented rubbish. Something rustled in the trash bags propped against the gate. Picturing a rat the size of a Bassett hound, she sped up, keeping her pace just under panicked, her soaked insoles suctioning to the bottom of her feet with every step.

This afternoon's thunderstorm had brought down tree limbs and dropped the temperature from a sweltering ninety-three down into the mid-seventies. Spring in Atlanta. You could never predict the weather a half hour in advance.

She wished she'd brought a jacket. Her silk cami just wasn't cutting it. She chafed her arms to flatten the goose bumps that just wouldn't disappear.

Between the eerie steam rising and the sense of eyes watching, her blood thundered through her veins.

Gina peeked around the corner. Streetlights ahead, thank you, God. She breathed a sigh of relief and stumbled forward, wobbling on the metallic platform sandals she'd borrowed from her best friend, Sylvie Hendricks for her sojourn into Hell.

Another poor choice in a myriad of recent bad decisions.

A gust of wind whipped Gina's short skirt—another loaner from Sylvie—around and between her legs, cutting her stride by half. The fabric rode up, barely covering her tush. She tugged at the hem, but it clung to her damp skin.

Lucas had convinced her to wear this ridiculous outfit. He'd said the people in this neighborhood would take one look at her pinstriped suit and their lips would clamp shut tighter than a virgin's thighs.

Of course, when she'd dressed for this adventure, she'd thought her boyfriend—now her asshole ex-boyfriend—would be here with her, but Jimmy Thomason had refused to come to this part of town on “a wild goose chase.” He'd added that if Brittany had come here, she deserved whatever she got.

And that was the end of Jimmy the Geek.

Gina knew her chances of finding Brittany were slim whether she was dressed like a party girl or not. But she'd had to do something. When Lucas Ford had come into the offices of Harney and Billings, where she worked as a legal assistant, saying that he'd heard that someone matching her little sister's description had been seen in this part of town, she knew she had to come check it out for herself.

God knew nobody else was looking for Brittany. The Missing Persons detective, Penny Anderson, had been apologetic when she'd said they wouldn't be actively pursuing this case without proof that her sister was taken against her will. Just because Brittany had turned eighteen two days before she'd disappeared, she was an adult.

Two women posed seductively at the corner, both dressed in vibrant spandex. The blonde's hair, teased into a rat's nest, formed a fluorescent halo around her face. The neon purple dress washed out her pasty skin.

Just feet away now, Gina studied the dark-haired woman from behind. Her heart stopped, a lump forming in her throat. Could it be? Was it Brittany?

Gina tripped toward them just as the dark-haired woman turned to face her. Wait a minute. Not a woman.

A girl.

Not Brittany, thank God, but a pretty girl with a café au lait complexion and eyes that shone the color of sunflowers in the light of the streetlamp. She looked younger than Brittany, but despite the differences in coloring, she resembled her sister.

It was no great mystery what they were doing, trying to make a living on their backs. Chills skittered down Gina's spine.

What could cause a girl this one's age to fall into this degradation? Drugs?

Is that what Lucas had been alluding to this afternoon? That Brittany was hooking? Just because she'd been seen in this part of town?

Gina wrapped her quivering arms around her middle.

"Cain't we call it a night?" the younger of the two asked. "I'm beat and we ain't seen nobody but junkies in a hour."

"Boss said if ya leave without a John again, he'd bust our heads open. If this don't work out, we're going to the truck stop. Always plenty of action there."

Oh, my God, Gina thought. Was Brittany being exploited and threatened and forced into this life? "Hey," she called out.

Both prostitutes spun to face her. "Hey yerself," the blonde called. One hand on her hip, she eyed Gina with a tight-lipped scowl. She was a bag of bones, except for the dark circles under her eyes and the enormous cone-shaped boobs that looked like they were trying to escape from the purple spandex encasing them. "This is our spot. You better get yo' ass outta here."

"I'm not a whor...prostitute," Gina replied before she remembered how she was dressed.

"You must be lookin' for some fun. We'd give ya a good price on a threesome."

Gina gaped. "No. Not lookin' for fun. No fun." She sounded like a complete moron. She forced her shoulders back and ignored the pain in her feet and legs from wearing the ridiculous shoes. "I'm trying to find someone."

Makeup coated the blonde's face like spackle, filling the beginnings of crow's feet beside her light blue eyes. Blood red lipstick against her chalky white skin made her resemble a clown. She reeked of cigarettes and cheap perfume. "If yer lookin' for a man, yer in the wrong place. Or maybe yer needin' a hit?"

"No. No. No." Gina forced her mouth closed and rummaged around in her bag that only contained her driver's license, a bus fare card and a couple of twenties in case she ran into trouble. And Brittany's senior picture. She held the photo out for the ladies to see. "Have you seen this girl?"

The older woman's eyes narrowed. "You a cop?"

"Of course not." Gina snorted, glancing down at herself. The idea was ludicrous. In her too-short skirt and her too-tall heels, dirt covering her lower legs and shoes, she didn't think she could look less like a cop. Her dark brown hair had long ago fallen out of its clip to hang limply around her face. "She's my sister," she said, jabbing her finger at the picture of the pretty brunette girl. "Someone told me she'd been seen near here."

"Maybe yer sister don't want to be found."

"I have to try. Please look at the picture. Have you seen her?"

"We ain't seen nobody," the older woman said without a glimpse at the photo. She grabbed the younger one by the elbow and tugged her in the opposite direction.

"Let go o' me, Bitsy." The younger one jerked loose and turned to face Gina again. "I might'a seen her."

Gina grasped the girl by the shoulders. "Where?" she shouted, panic warring with hope. The girl cringed like a kicked puppy. Gina schooled her features and forced her hands to relax. She took a step back.

"Sorry. Where might you have seen her?"

"Mind your own business, Celeste," the older woman said. She reared back as if to strike the girl.

Gina captured the woman's twig-like wrist, her grip clamping down until she felt a pop. Bitsy grimaced. Gina released her with a warning look.

The girl stared at the photo, her eyes shuttered, faraway. "Maybe she can get out," she murmured, her expression haunted.

"Get out?" Was she imprisoned somewhere? Gina choked on a sob. When the girl didn't continue, she begged, "Please...tell me."

"They call it a auction, but it weren't like dat. It were just one guy, a big guy, dressed real fancy. The others call him 'Boss Man.' He look over all us girls and pick who he want. He took her and 'nother. He say he a movie producer and he gonna make 'em famous."

A lump the size of a grapefruit clogged Gina's throat. "Do you know...was she there voluntarily?"

"Nope. None of us was." Her bottom lip quivered. A tear hung suspended from her bottom lashes.

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"And tell 'em what? My daddy sold me for a month's worth'a vodka? 'Sides, Bitsy watches me all the time. Boss' orders."

Gina's throat burned. She swallowed down her gag reflex. "Celeste, do you know where this auction took place?"

She shook her head. "'Bout an hour away from here. A big building. Big enough for them to drive us in and out of in the back of a truck. Once, while we was standin' 'round, the doors rolled up so's the van with her in it," she pointed at the photo, "could pull in, and I saw boats in a river or lake or something. Fancy boats."

Gina thought of Lake Lanier, about an hour north of the city, a popular boating and fishing haven. "Did you talk to my sister?" Tears blurred her vision. She'd known something horrible had happened to Brittany.

The girl shook her head again. "The men was always tellin' us to shut the fuck up, even when we was in the back of the truck."

"Then how did you know she was there against her will?"

“Cause she yelled and screamed and kicked ‘em every time they come near her. They stuffed a rag in her mouth, but she still fought. Until the big guy come and look her over. She had a look like she be hit by a two-by four.” A small smile transformed the girl’s face. “She head-butted him. He smacked her, though, knockin’ her on her ass. She stopped fighting so hard then.”

Gina covered her mouth with her fist and bit her knuckle. A sob seared her throat. “Celeste, I need you to come with me. To the police.”

Bitsy jutted those cone-shaped boobs in Gina’s direction and huffed, “You can’t take her. She’s my ‘sponsibility.”

Gina glared at the woman. “You miserable, disgusting, depraved piece of sh—”

“Hey,” a voice that sounded like rusty gears grinding came from behind her at the same time clamp-like hands crushed her shoulders and whipped her around. “You better not be tryin’ to rob my stables.”

“N-no,” Gina squeaked, raising her hands as if he had a gun to her head. She looked up at the man who’d accosted her. Up and up. He was the tallest man she’d ever seen, a full head taller than she was in her heels. Muscles rippled down his massive neck.

Gina’s knees knocked into each other. She clamped them together and forced herself to suck in a breath, filling her lungs with his He-Man body spray.

“Maybe you lookin’ for a little lezzy action? Or a threesome for your old man? I don’t care as long as you pay the going rate.”

His high, scratchy voice didn’t fit his massive physique. He should sound like James Earl Jones not a Munchkin from the Wizard of Oz. He’d used some sort of gel to spike up his black hair all over the top of his head. Long strands hung down the back of his neck. Guess nobody told him the mullet went out in the eighties.

Still clasping Gina’s shoulders, he perused her like she was the buffet at Golden Corral. “Maybe you lookin’ for work?”

Rage singed her nerve endings like sparklers under her skin. She jerked away from him at the same time she brought her knee up to shove his nuts up to cradle his Adam’s apple. He dodged the knee and backhanded her across the cheek with a loud smack. Pain exploded in her brain. She shook her head. Her vision blurred. She swiped her tongue across the back of her teeth to make sure he hadn’t knocked any loose.

Her jaw throbbed. She could feel it swelling. She balled up her fist and reared back. The bastard grabbed her elbows, pulling her against his cement-hard body. He wrapped his arms around her, squeezing the breath out of her.

She coughed in his face. “You sick bastard!” She stomped on his foot, satisfied with his “woof” of pain. “You prey on young girls, using them, treating them like slaves or worse.”

She struggled against him, aiming her knee at his crotch again. He released one of her arms to try to protect his groin. Her elbow connected with his nose. He grunted and leaned back, a massive clenched fist drawn back.

I'm going to die. She shook her head, her body writhing, trying to break free but he held tight to her other arm.

"Something wrong, Teeny?"

Gina froze. That voice, deep and gravelly, gave her heart palpitations.

The huge man—Teeny did he say?—grinned, but it looked more like a grimace. "Nope. Got it under control," he said as he glanced over her shoulder at the newcomer.

"Dude, don't you know it's not polite to punch a woman?"

"She hit me first."

"Not surprising. You're a fuckin' rat bastard," he growled.

Anybody who'd insult this mega-creep must be insane, or have balls the size of Virginia hams. Or maybe he was even bigger than Teeny. That was a frightening thought.

Teeny giggled. The sound, like nails on a chalkboard, raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

But he loosened his grip on Gina's arm, scowling down at her. She jerked away from him, spinning around to get a look at the source of that voice, the man who could stop a human freight train in his tracks.

He was just a few feet behind her. She froze, her eyes widening as she looked him up and down. He wore his long, dark hair loose to his shoulders. Eyes the color of charcoal pierced the night with the intensity of an alligator on the prowl. He was tall—not as tall as Teeny—but more dangerous. She didn't know how she knew that, she just did.

While Teeny was volatile, this man was quiet rage bubbling just below an icy surface. Gina's gaze met his. One of his eyebrows raised in a high arch as if wordlessly asking her to explain herself.

His camouflage army jacket loosely covered a black T-shirt and bore the name Scarpelli on the tape attached to his right chest pocket. Faded and tattered jeans clung to his hips. She felt like a bunny staring down a rabid wolf.