

SKIN OF TATTOOS: Excerpt 620 words

“Ay yo, homes!” A familiar voice sliced through the bustle. “Mags!”

I twirled faster than a ballet dancer, my stomach clenching. Fuck. It was him. Rico. Slashing across the street aiming the shopping bag in his hand at me. His baggy shorts slung so low the waistband of his boxers showed. Socks, white as fluorescent light, pulled neatly to his knees. Ink flowing out of the arms and neck of his plaid shirt. Exactly how he looked the last time I saw him.

The memory of that day bore down on me. We were kicking it at a street corner, and Rico was bragging about how he shot a trey-eight into the ceiling of a liquor store he was jacking, and the storeowner pissed his pants. As he was talking, he took the .38 out of his waistband in a live re-enactment, and I just had to take the piece, feeling its cold weight in my hand for just a second or two before handing it back to Rico. That second or two cost me twenty-six months of my freedom.

Rico threw his arm around me. A thick gold chain shone around his neck. I had a cord with an orange arrow slung around mine.

“*Ese.*” My voice had as much life as a three-day-old soda.

I never knew if he dropped that thirty-eight by accident, as he said, or if he saw his chance to set me up. I kinda figured the latter. Someday, somehow, I’d get him to admit the truth to me.

“I thought that was you. But I said to myself, ‘Mags, in that fuckin *pendejada*? Couldn’t be.’ But I looked again and *simón*, it was. Whatup with this shit?” He flicked the red nose ball. I caught his wrist in midair and stared him down in his swamp eyes. “Easy, fool,” he said.

I dropped his wrist. “Just making a few bones.”

“I heard you was back. We been waiting for you at the *garaje*, but you ain’t showed up.” Rico drilled my eyes. “You avoiding your homies or what?”

The ball was itching my nose like an oversized mosquito bite. “I got parole and all that. I just wanted to get set up first.”

“I figured you needed a couple days to get readjusted, get some pussy.” He shook his head. “But damn, this shit?” He shook his head. “You ready to get crazy again?”

“Keeping it lo pro, Rico.”

Rico studied me. I suddenly glimpsed myself in his eyes—I had become a small brown man.

He brightened up. “Hey, I just had a kid. A boy. I’m buying some bottles and blankets and shit right now.”

“Felicidades.”

“With Maribel. But I got my side action, feel me?”

“You were always real slick with the jainas.” I knew a little flattery would soften the rough edges of the meet. He smiled big.

“Tell you what, loco, I’ll give you some lessons, make you real smooth.”

“Yeah, I’m out of practice now.” I tried to laugh.

“A lot of changes gone down in the barrio. We need to catch you up.” His arm hooked my neck in a chokehold. “You our *firme* homeboy, man, you’ll always be part of *la familia*. We need you, fool.” He squeezed a little too hard. “You come by the *garaje*. We got a jump in day after tomorrow. We’ll be waiting. We’ll hook you up again, then you can dump this shit.” He pointed his forefinger at me with a barbed wire smile. “Missed you, Mags.”

I watched him vanish into the crowd of shoppers, and spat on the ground to get rid of the bad taste that had flooded my mouth.

