

PROLOGUE - HITZAURREA -

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The passenger held out a handful of pesos to the cab driver with gold-capped teeth. He had just pulled along the curb of Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas, amidst a honking chaos of cars and a myriad of little green Volkswagen taxicabs that resembled limes on wheels. The smart beetles, or *bochos*, as they were affectionately called in Mexico City, scurried around in all directions, hustling passengers along busy streets where two lanes of traffic became three at random, and where metered cab fares varied greatly from one customer to the next. While the young man waited to receive his change, he noticed the *taxista* studying him with exaggerated attention in his rearview mirror. He was used to that kind of attention, for he had been blessed with that one-of-a-kind attractiveness that made both men and women look twice. He was tall and slender, with a lean muscular body and a mass of thick, unruly light brown hair that framed his handsome face in loose curls. His lips were full, his nose straight. His jaw was square and chiseled, and more often than not, he sported two days of beard growth.

“Something wrong?” he asked the cab driver.

The sudden question startled the Mexican, who apologized at once for staring at his customer in such a rude manner.

“*¡Con mucho perdón, señor!* I was looking at your eyes. They are *muy*—peculiar.”

Indeed they were, much to his chagrin. His extraordinary stare made it difficult for him to go through life unnoticed. The young man had heterochromia iridium: one iris was a different color than the other. His left eye was deep blue and the other hazel, speckled with gold flakes.

He gave the cabbie a shadow of a smile, slammed the passenger door and got lost in the revolving tide of people walking up and down the avenue leading to Plaza Garibaldi. The twenty-three year old man had only spent three days in the Mexican capital and, already, he could not wait to leave.

Night had just fallen over the metropolis, and even though Christmas was right around the corner, the temperature was still in the high seventies. In the distance, he could already hear the cacophony of dozens of mariachi bands vying for attention and a promise of a paid gig to someone's wedding or a lucky girl's upcoming *quinceañera* party. People from all around the world were strolling around Plaza Garibaldi. Entire groups danced to the uplifting beat of "La Cucaracha," the quintessential song played upon request by every mariachi band from Jalisco to Veracruz. New lovers favored the less illuminated corners of the Plaza in order to listen to tear-jerking serenades. Everywhere, rugged Mexicans with thick handlebar moustaches and wide-brimmed hats urged the crowds to pay a visit to their watering holes.

The young man followed the instructions and walked across the Plaza in search of the statue of the great Mexican musician José Alfredo Jiménez. Dressed in the typical mariachi attire, the prolific singer carried a long wool blanket folded over his right shoulder and held a large *sombrero* in his hand. Looking straight ahead with its frozen stare cast in bronze, the imposing statue appeared unconcerned with the ebb and flow of passersby moving about at its feet, night after night, like drunken ants.

Now that he had found the spot, all the young man needed to do was wait for his contact to arrive. He leaned back against the stone pedestal and rolled a cigarette between nervous fingers. Trying hard to act natural, he lit the cigarette and inhaled the acrid smoke. Given the circumstances, this was easier said than done. Now was certainly not the time to attract any unwanted attention. A group of eight mariachis were standing just a few yards away from him. They were cracking jokes and tuning their instruments while waiting for someone willing to pay a few pesos in exchange for a *ranchera* song praising the valiant men of the

great State of Mexico. The men were dressed in matching black *charro* costumes, tight straight-cut black trousers adorned with gold-plated ornaments worn along the outside of their pant legs and short fitted jackets over immaculate frilled shirts. Intricate patterns made of gold thread had been embroidered on their jacket sleeves, as well as on the outside rim of their wide felt hats. They looked brave, much like the bullfighter in his "Suit of Light." When a Mexican family walked up to them to request an audition, the band members did not waste any time in picking up their instruments and finding their allocated spot within their semi-circle formation. Before long, they were pouring their hearts out, playing and singing a colorful rendition of "Cu-cu-rru-cu-cu Paloma."

The young man never saw the person who walked up to him from behind. He jerked sideways in pure reflex, startled by the stranger who had just tapped him on the shoulder. As he pivoted on his heels, he realized the stranger was just another peddler, a street photographer. He was about to wave the man off when the Mexican, undeterred by his obvious irritation, grabbed him by the sleeve and whispered in his ear, "Don't think. Just play along."

The young man quickly collected his wits and nodded. The Mexican he had taken for another con artist was actually the person he had come to meet. Without missing a beat, they started haggling over the price of a *muy chunga* souvenir picture from Plaza Garibaldi. The young man, unsure of what the phony street vendor was getting at, played along quite convincingly. After a short while, they settled on a reasonable price, and he gave the contact a chunk of money. Satisfied, the photographer instructed him to pose by the statue and snapped his picture with an instant film camera. When done, he pulled a thick paper stock photo frame out of his messenger bag. He affixed the photo inside with care and folded the frame cover over the snapshot. At last, he handed it to the handsome young man with a wide grin and a "Gracias."

The young man stood stock-still for a fleeting moment, his fingers clutching the cheap-looking cardboard frame. "Greetings from Mexico City" was printed over the front in silver foil lettering. When he looked up, his mysterious contact had disappeared into the crowd.

The card was unusually thick. Without a doubt, something had been inserted behind the photograph. He tucked it in the waistband of his jeans and walked briskly past the columns of the Plaza and out into the not-so-safe streets of the adjacent neighborhoods. Few tourists ever

ventured in this part of town, save for small clusters of blurry-eyed club-hopping youngsters looking for drugs. Should they score without being mugged or beaten, they would keep the party going until dawn in some fancy hotel room of the “Zona Rosa.” The young man ignored the lewd catcalls of street pushers advertising live sex shows at nearby cabarets. He was a tourist to them, a *gringo* whose pockets must be lined with silver dollars. Glad for the easy disguise, he kept on walking with his head down, on a mission. He needed to find a quiet place where he could rip the photo frame apart and pour over its contents.

When he was confident that no one had followed him, he walked into a dingy bar, ordered a bottle of *Dos Equis* and asked the bartender for directions to the bathroom. He followed the guy’s scrawny thumb toward the back of the grimy building, pushed the door of the men’s room open and locked himself into one of the stalls. He pulled the photo frame out of the back of his blue jeans and ripped it apart. Behind the over-exposed instant snapshot, he found a little booklet. Because the light inside the stall was dim at best, he had to climb on top of the filthy toilet bowl to get closer to the flickering neon light.

He examined the booklet carefully, running his fingers over the grained cover with reverence. It was a French passport. He took a deep breath before he flipped it open to learn his new name. He read it out loud, so as to imprint the name into his memory. At last, he stashed the official document in his pocket and took a moment to calm his nerves.

“¿*Perdido?*” asked the bartender as soon as his customer had returned to the bar.

Before he answered cautiously, the young man took a long swig out of the beer bottle that had been waiting for him atop the sticky Formica counter. “Am I lost? No. No, I’m not.”

“We don’t see too many *gringos* like you around here,” the sinister-looking Mexican continued, eyeing him with a suspicious look.

“I see.”

“Did you come here to score or use? Because if you did, you came to the wrong place, *amigo*.”

“I’ve got what I asked for right here in front of me,” the young man replied gruffly while pointing at his drink. “If my presence here is such a problem to you, I’ll be on my way.”

“¿*Que no!* ¿*Que no!*” The bartender’s attitude changed at once. He gesticulated wildly for the man to keep his seat. “We’ve had, um, trouble

with the law lately, so I had to ask. I'm sure you understand. Even though I knew all along that you were a good man!" he added with a toothy smile and a sleazy wink. "Sooo, *bienvenida, amigo!* Your hard-earned pesos are welcome here anytime! I'm Manolo, proud owner of this fine establishment!"

"And I'm Rafael," the young man replied as he firmly shook the bartender's hand. He was pleased at how easily the name rolled right off his tongue: Ra-fa-el.