

Chapter One
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Mexican Beer

It was a February afternoon in the Southern California beach town of La Jolla. Natives still referred to the town as a Village and newcomers who bought into the town in the past twenty years with their countless millions, referred to it as their second or third home. The town is nestled along the San Diego coastline about 20 miles north of the Mexican border.

Rudy Steinway sat on the dry sand under the palm frond surf shack at Windansea Beach and closed his eyes. Green board shorts, a pink shirt and pink lei adorned him. He looked good and he looked drunk. His lips covered the mouth of the amber bottle of beer in his hand as he drained the last drop. He loved the mouth to mouth and still tasted the hops and the alcohol and smelled the cool beer. He thought of nothing, a fair thought to lie between his ears when striving for intoxication.

It was one of those presidential holidays and heat that had been moving west off the Sonoran Desert still lingered in the county and the beach was packed with revelers. There was a small west swell coming in that the surfers were riding. The paddle out for the celebration of the death of Margo had finished two hours before, but there were still people gathered in small groups along the shore, holding their drinks and holding conversations about her. She was a surfer who grew up in La Jolla before going out into the surfing world where she won three women's world

titles. Survived terrible wipeouts in Hawaii at the North Shore, only to have the Big C take her out at thirty-two.

Rudy wore the pink shirt with a picture of Margo branded onto the chest that had been given out to the celebrants. He fingered the pink lei that circled his neck, another gift to the celebrants. Margo had been three years older than him and she had given him surf lessons twenty years before. A very kind, very good lady, were the thoughts that idled in his brain. And beautiful to boot. A cheer leader at La Jolla High School where Rudy loved to watch her perform with the other girls along the sidelines at the basketball games. Hollywood picked her up for some beach and blanket movies, but Hawaii and the surf circuit is where she garnered her laurels. Now she was gone.

He slowly opened his eyes and studied the amber bottle for many seconds and then shifted his gaze to a small skiff moving south along the kelp beds two hundred yards from shore. At 29, he still had the eyes of a sniper, he only used his reading glasses in his profession as a lawyer for scanning legal documents. His unconscious made a note that it looked like a Mexican *Panga* boat and it moved like the Patrol Boat River that he rode for eight months in Viet Nam in the winter of 1968.

The *Panga* slowed down in the middle of the kelp bed and his subconscious mind registered some objects rolling off the side of the boat. Then it turned west and sped out to sea where a formation of dark rain clouds portended an evening shower.

Good, thought Rudy, San Diego needs rainwater. Lots of it.

Rudy put his third empty bottle into the cardboard carrying case and put that into the large paper bag that contained the wrappings for four eaten fish tacos. He gently pushed away the muzzle of his large German Shepherd from the paper bag. "You're not a sea gull, Axel, and we're taking the papers and empties to the trash can, not littering on the beach." Axel licked the crumbs from Rudy's hand and lay down on the sand.

Steinway was no longer a practicing alcoholic. That practice ceased a year ago upon the death of his wife in a commercial plane crash in a corn field in Iowa that took the lives of two hundred and thirty-three people. No survivors except for the memories and personal effects kept by those that were left behind. Authorities said it was an engine mishap. They said it made no difference that the former vice President of these Disunited States was on the aircraft.

The surfers framed the shack's hipped roof with more eucalyptus, tied it up at each corner, and topped it with palm fronds. The shack had no walls. Surfers stored boards in the rafters and partied in the shade on hot days. On cool nights they brought their women here to drink wine and watch the submarines race and segue into some body surfing. A nice way to keep warm on a cool night.

Rudy put his sunglasses on and held onto Axel and closed his eyes tightly to squeeze small tears that ran down his cheeks.

A good day to celebrate death, he thought.

Chapter Two
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The Wedding

There is an eighty-year old wooden building on the grounds of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla that wealthy people rent out for weddings. It comfortably houses eighty people plus staff, and from its elevation of about one hundred feet above the Pacific Ocean, it offers a sweeping view of the town to the south and across seventy miles to San Clemente Island far to the west.

On this February afternoon his eldest daughter Cristina's wedding having finished and the interior photography completed, Emiliano Zapata burst through the front door and onto the wooden porch of the house. He moved past the caterers standing beside the tables set with hors d'oeuvres and plates of exotic fruits and vegetables and dips and over to the redwood railing. He leaned against the railing and heard a creaking sound of old weathered wood.

“Gringos,” he muttered to himself. “Incompetent bastards built this place a hundred years ago before the Mexicans came back to ante up the skill in the construction trade.”

A caterer holding a tray of glasses of Gran Cru white wine, Cristal Brut champagne and Mexican beer bottles moved to him. He pointed to the amber colored bottle of Pacifico beer and the caterer set the tray on an adjacent table, unscrewed the top, and gave the beer to Zapata. Zapata frowned and the caterer pulled a cut lime from the tray and Zapata exchanged a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill for the bitter.

"Gracias Señor." The man nodded and Zapata motioned him to stand still with the tray. Zapata rubbed the lime against the rim of the beer bottle. Some of the juice squirted onto his fingers and he felt the mild acidity move down his skin. He lifted the bottle to his mouth and took a long drink. The perspiration beaded on his face and just as quickly the hot air dried it into salt. He wiped his cool forehead with the back of his hand, then dropped the back of that hand to his lips where he licked the salt. Then he flipped the hand over and creased his lips with the lime. He took another deep drink, looked south to La Jolla proper, closed his eyes and listened to the quiet breaking of the ocean waves and the muffled sounds of the indoor mariachi players.

I'll take a freaking beer any day of the week.

He squinted his eyes into the high sun standing over the ocean and watched the distant rainclouds slowly moving east toward La Jolla, an occasional lightning

bolt visible in the gray sky. Too distant to hear any thunder and he was glad that the wedding had gone as planned and San Diego would get some much-needed rain during the night. He reached into his jacket pocket for some Prada sunglasses and turned toward the building to watch the people exit through the doors. He beamed at them and they waved back with their mischievous grins. He exchanged the half empty beer bottle for a glass of white wine and the caterer left with another C note.

Emiliano Zapata wore a black sharkskin suit made especially for the occasion in Milano. The padding in the shoulders diverted attention from his short legs. His white linen dress shirt had the stitching "EZ" over the left breast pocket. Inside the pocket was a silk burgundy handkerchief, the coloring matching his gabardine tie. If you didn't ask, he would tell you the history of his threads, the special and extensive crafting and cost to himself.

For those who cared, his big feet were stuffed into Italian shoes, *Mercutio Loafers* crafted by the Berluti fashion house by one of their retired craftsman now living in Verona. EZ cared.

They hurt his feet.

Zapata drank lightly from his glass and closed his eyes and felt the white wine glide down his throat. At five thousand dollars a bottle, he liked that people were impressed by Domaine Leflaive Batard Montrachet Grand Cru. He preferred Mexican beer, but he had a role to play.

Zapata's shadow stood several feet to his side. His name was Alejandro. Younger by ten years. Taller by six inches. Dark Latino built like a jaguar. Left hand man in a right-hand world. A muscular accountant. Packing.

Moving over to Zapata was Michael R, the managing director of the La Jolla Theatre, quarter full wine glass in hand. Yes, his last name was the letter R. A roughly handsome 45-year-old man who wore an ocean blue tie over a work shirt that lay over faded blue jeans torn at his knees. An artiste. R appreciated expensive wines. R appreciated that EZ was on the Board of Directors of the Theatre, and that a sliver of Zapata's wealth supported most of the Theatre's productions.

"Excellent taste my friend," said R, who swept his hand at the setting. "This is a beautiful location for the wedding."

"Gracias. Weatherman called it perfecto." Zapata raised his glass to the still blue sky over the ocean and R joined him the salute. "It'll take about an hour to reset the dinner indoors, but a little rain won't dampen this party."

R drank deep. "I really like your threads." He reached over and stroked Zapata's suit as if it were an expensive cat.

"Mucho Gracias."

R waved at two beautiful ladies that stepped out of the house and onto the porch.

"We could use this in one of our next productions. Italian politician style. Fantastic tailoring." He pulled a small camera from his torn jeans and said, "EZ. I want to take a picture of this and show it to our costume designer. Is it OK?"

EZ nodded and sipped and smiled as the porch filled with revelers. He was content. For the moment. Now there was only one left to join with a reputable family. Daughter, that is. Not son. For twenty-three-year old Tomas was still living the good life. Well-educated, money in the bank -- well, money in the bank where his father knew the president of that bank. But also lots more, just not as accessible. And single. A single young man in an illicit world where certain types of women were attracted to the affluence gained in that world.

Mucho types of women.

R took several photographs and put away his camera and went back to drinking. He loved this wine. It reminded him of that time at the Venice Film Festival twenty years prior when he was an assistant for the Italian film director, Federico d’Nuzzio and the . . . But that is another tale.

Zapata’s other daughter, Veronica, walked through the open door of the house and onto the porch and waved to her father when she saw his head turn in her direction.

Both men raised their glasses to her and the waiter immediately exchanged them for fully filled virgin wine vessels.

“My next project,” said Zapata and they drank deep and Veronica was joined in the distance by a tall light skinned boy with golden hair.

Eighteen this coming Wednesday, Veronica garnered a 4.3 GPA at the prestigious private Queens School in the center of La Jolla. She was making the difficult choice between USC and Stanford for her next curriculum. Raven hair like

her family. Clear olive skin like her sister and mother. Not short in height like her parents, but just shy of six feet. And her eyes, her dazzling blue eyes hinted at a trace of German blood in the family's past. She was the only one in the family with those eyes. These were the eyes that a person first encountered up close with her until she blinked and they were no longer blind to her beauty. She didn't have her father's nose. Or ears. Or mouth. Zapata had the face of the clown that followed after the King, telling truths with jokes, keeping everyone in stitches while their world disintegrated and the Jester ascended the throne. Sometimes he wondered how he could have sired such a beautiful daughter. But then he stopped his wondering – somethings are not to be wondered about.

Zapata's spirits floated on the wine as he watched his Cristina and his new son-in-law, Don Jose, move through the doors. A videographer and more wedding guests followed after them.

With one hand holding up the side of her dress and the other hand holding onto her new husband, she led her bridesmaids carrying the train of her dress through the giddy people and wrapped an arm around her father, "We are having such a wonderful wedding father. We are going to remember this the rest of our lives."

Of his three children, she resembled her father the most. Same height. Four inches under six feet. A stocky body that became harder, not leaner, after numerous hours with a private trainer. Intense black eyebrows. Large ears covered by perfectly cut shoulder length black hair. She no longer had his nose. Plastic surgeon

took care of that. She no longer had his lips. Same surgeon, same time, discount package. Fortunately she had her mother's breasts. His were too saggy to be on a woman. Man breasts from the good life.

He shook hands with his new son, who said, "Mr. Zapata. I am delighted to be a part of the family."

The kid had an unusual manner of speaking. The words. The phrases. Different from the language that Zapata dealt with on a daily basis. This was one of the reasons why he still considered the 23-year-old Don Jose as being a kid. East Coast education. Maybe that's what they taught at those Ivy League schools. Didn't matter. Kid's family lived in an estate in lower Florida. Private jet. Colombians. Affluent. Old money that generated out of the 1970s marijuana-cocaine business and cleaned up in the car dealerships and real estate holdings diversified in Europe and the United States. The family learned last century from their brokers that their wealth needed to be diversified so one cataclysmic event wouldn't bring down their house and have them living back on the coffee bean farm on the sides of the mountains outside of Nuqui.

Old money, new money. No difference to Zapata and the newly arrived members to the club. It bought everything they needed. Real estate on the coast. Season boxes for all the sports teams. Membership in most clubs. Transportation to all the countries which did not have your photograph in their wanted files. Want your kid to go to Harvard? Give a \$1 million endowment for a faculty chair and the paperwork can be arranged. Prefer the West Coast? Stanford? USC? Where there's

a will there's a way. Let me rephrase that: where there's money, lots of money, there is always a way.

“You're family. Call me EZ now.”

Obediently. “Yes, EZ.”

Don Jose actually had a very striking face set a top a muscle less body. Curly short black hair. The pale skin of an English man. And swollen red lips that proclaimed some African blood in the family heritage. In public, he was proud of his racial democracy and his education. In private, he included his families wealth in this pride.

Don Jose and R exchanged a warm grasp of hands as Zapata said, “De nada, Welcome to the family.”

R watched all this and said, “Here comes your mother-in-law.”

Zapata joined R in having the waitress refill his glass as he watched in the distance his wife, Serena, exchanging pleasantries with guests as she moved slowly toward them.

EZ watched her and unconsciously ran a brief history of their relationship, similar to the memory retrieval of a dying person:

When she was fifteen, Zapata discovered her in a Mexican pageant play in Puerto Escondido. Serena was beautiful in a different sort of way from Veronica. Curvaceous hips of a mother-to-be that would bear three children without the aid of a C-Section. Large breasts that proclaimed her nurturing personality. He

immediately purchased a casa along the playas for her family and kept the house well-guarded. He was twenty-seven at the time with a family in Guatemala.

Guatemala's where he grew up in the family business. As a teenager he dropped out of school and helped with the roadside market that they owned outside of Otero. His mother relegated him to the spices. Ginger, cinnamon, basil and the like. But his specialty was cardamom. It was expensive and turned a good profit. It allowed him to travel to the farms in the foothills where he fronted the farmers money so they could plant and harvest their crops and send the dried seeds to him. He paid them fair money and they gave him their best product and their support. Everyone in the region came to know him, illiterate to educated, vegetarians to meat eaters, poor to rich. In each one of those categories as he refined his business, he went from the first side to the second, with brief stops in between.

When he was twenty the local capo asked for his help to bribe a government official who refused to allow small planes to use the local air field for drug shipments. Zapata accepted the job; the official accepted the bribe and Zapata became a committed befeater.

The capo's daughter was Zapata's first wife.

EZ knew everyone there was to know but was very discrete in his outward behavior. When violence occurred in the country, as it was apt to in his type of business, he was always distant from the scene. Quiet, not braggadocio, he had no problem letting others take the credit as long as he took the profit.

He divorced his wife and left her with a steady income and charge of their only son. He took Serena for his bride and his second son soon appeared. Two years later his now married daughter made her appearance. He became one of the most powerful men in his profession.

There was a rumor of retaliation in Mexico on his second family for some deed that he had ordered in the past. He sent them to California to stay with some distant German relatives. They lived in San Diego proper and as soon as he befriended a banker, they purchased a beach home in the suburb of La Jolla where Veronica was born.

He liked the western states of countries where he had homes: Iztapa, Guatemala; Puerto Escondido, Mexico; San Diego, California. His La Jolla home was two miles south of Windansea Beach. It housed several beautiful structures overlooking a small cove where reefs and rocks deterred most visitors. It was five acres of solitude where his wife and children lived away from the drugs and maiming and killing that were the trappings of his business.

His thinking included California as one of the western states of Mexico. In his thinking, California would soon house more Latinos than Anglos. But he didn't want to annex California back into Mexico. That would cut into his profit margin. He didn't want to pay the Mexican army for additional protection when the Americans did it for such a cheaper price.

EZ smiled and woke from his reveries to the chatter between R and Don Jose and Cristiana and Veronica with the gold-haired boy and he realized that Serena

still hadn't reached them. He searched through the party but the standing guests blocked any views to the distance. He motioned Veronica over.

"Si, Papa?"

"Where is your mother?" Veronica rolled her head to her right and EZ saw Serena in an animated conversation with a man he now recognized as Chase Bottomley, the artistic director for the Theatre. R and Bottomley ran the Theatre - EZ's Theatre - but they were as different as Whiskey and Tequila. R was gracious and mannered, Bottomley was brilliant and groping.

"She outta be in pictures with what her hanging out with the artistes all the time," EZ half jested. "I sure hope you don't start wearing those tattered blue jeans like those people." Veronica frowned and R drank deep to loosen his fears from information that his brain didn't want to deal with. Not now, not ever, too much danger.

"What people?" Veronica played with him. Cristina and Don Jose had moved off with their attendants with the photographers from some more close-ups.

"R. Look at him." R gave a small bow. "These highfalutin artists that think they can change the world with all their words and talking." County stood quietly next to Veronica and observed through the top of his wine glass from which he sipped.

"Didn't you discover mama in a play? And don't you support her theatrical ambitions?"

EZ shrugged his shoulders and motioned for Veronica and County to go off. "You two get some fruit. I need to talk business here." They nodded and folded into the people.

R started, "They could be . . ." before being cut off,

"Michael, what are we doing about Chase?"

R's eyes followed EZ's and then his chin slipped down toward his chest. He winced his eyes and became more distraught as he watched the couple move inside the building.

"You didn't tell him his replacement is flying in?"

"No," said Michael. "No one has accepted our offer yet."

"They want more money?" asked EZ.

"I don't know who we can get. I'm working hard."

"Is he Jew? Cuz we got too many Jews working at the Theatre. Need more beaners like me."

"Trying to find the best man, or woman? Maybe Catholic?"

"Big family, huh?" said EZ. "Bunch of kids. Once he starts getting some coin, no way he's gonna leave here except in a box."

"Excuse me?" Michael face perked up.

"Twist of speech, that's all." EZ looked at Alejandro, whose wrap-around sunglasses made it seem as if he were watching everything. A shoulder holster imprinted below his right armpit.

"Alejandro." Alejandro moved in his direction. "Bring Serena and Bottomley and the newlyweds." Alejandro nodded and walked toward the house.

EZ turned back. "We gotta talk, Mr. Michael, we gotta talk." His first name used a second time always brought the wrath.