

TEQUILA SUNSET

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ONE

IN THE SUMMER IT WAS HOT, IN THE WINTER it was cold and all year round the halls and cells of Coffield Unit were busy with the business of incarceration. This day it was not so bad, teetering between two extremes. The ceiling-mounted fans did not turn and the big heating units that blew and blew, but did little to chase away the chill, were silent.

Flip lined up with the convicts, dressed in their white cotton uniforms, waiting for the COs to open the door and let them out onto the yard. Barred windows let in sunshine to compete with sallow fluorescents. It would be good to be outside.

When the door opened the COs counted them off. Already they had been counted before getting into line and they would be counted again when it was time to go back inside. Counting was a constant and if ever the numbers didn't jibe everything stopped.

They went out mixed, but as the cons distributed into the yard they broke into their component parts. White boys congregated by the weight pile, blacks by the half-court basketball blacktop and the Latinos by the handball court. Within each division were individual cliques, but the most important grouping was by race. The colors approached one another's domains only when certain dictates had been observed. In this way the facilities could be shared without it coming to blows.

Flip was not the youngest Latino on the yard. That honor went to Rafael Perez, eighteen years old, doing four for sexual assault on

a child. He was shunned, and when anyone took notice of him it was bad news. The other Latinos didn't even let him find a corner to hide in; he was forced to stand away from the walls in the no man's land between handball and basketball courts, exposed to everyone. He seemed smaller now than when he came.

Today Flip stood with Javier who was doing thirty-five and Omar who wasn't ever getting out. Both men were old enough to be his father. They kept close and they let no one touch him, not on the yard or on the inside, because he was one of them. Flip was an Azteca. They called each other Indians.

Javier was tattooed from his navel to his collarbone and on his arms, too. The marks showed on his wrists where his cuffs pulled back. He had his initials over his left eyebrow. Many of his pieces he had done on himself. He did good work. Flip hadn't ever gotten anything from Javier, though Javier offered more than once. None of Javier's marks were a gang patch and he didn't do gang patches. They were Aztecas, but no one could prove it. That's how they all stayed out of Administrative Segregation, where gang members went and never surfaced again.

If anyone asked, they were all just good friends. Old-timers watched out for new fish and new fish did favors for the old-timers. There was nothing the COs could say about that. No Indian would give up another Indian. From time to time one of them would be picked off, sent to Ad Seg, but that was just bad luck.

In all there were two hundred and fifty men out of four thousand in Coffield on the yard. They were watched on the ground and from the towers. Double rows of thirty-foot cyclone fencing and yards and yards of densely coiled razor wire stood between them and a tall concrete wall. There were flatlands beyond. It was two hundred yards from the wall to the first tree and the COs in the tower were excellent shots.

Enrique Garcia was one of the last out. He'd been in the hole for sixty days and now he was free of the belly chain and ankle cuffs.

His size was intimidating though his waist was thick. The COs were careful watching him when he came on the yard because there was trouble before and there could be trouble again. In the time Flip had known him, Enrique spent more days in the hole than out.

The sun reflected off his bald head. When he came close to the others he smiled from under a mustache that made him look like a bandito. He rapped knuckles with Javier and Omar and Rafael and César and all the other Aztecas. And Flip, too. His fingers were tattooed. Under his shirt he had ink of an Aztec warrior in full headdress and a bare-breasted maiden beside him. Flip had seen it once. A scorpion crawled up his neck. That one didn't stand for anything.

"What's the word?" Enrique asked.

"*Nada, jefe*," Omar said. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to be seen. Flip, *¿cómo estás?*"

"I'm doing my time," Flip said.

"Not much longer, right?"

"Another week."

"A week? So soon." Enrique looked up at the sky and let the rays of the sun fall on his face. He breathed in the cool air like he was thirsty for it. Flip had never been in the hole, but he could understand.

A group of convicts took over the handball court and broke out in pairs. They did not mix with the Aztecas because they were La Eme. There was longtime peace between their cliques because Enrique had brokered it. Flip stepped off the corner of the court to give them all the space they needed. Before long they were playing, the echoes of the ball bouncing around their corner of the yard.

"How's that motherfucker Danbury?" Enrique asked.

"He got out of the infirmary, took protective custody," Javier said. "Ain't nobody seen him since."

Enrique showed his teeth. "Teach those *negros* to talk shit. He shows his face again, it'll be his ass. *¿Sabes lo que quiero decir?*"

Flip looked across the open ground to the basketball court where the blacks held together. They were watching Enrique and talking among themselves. There was no peace between the Aztecas and them. There could be no peace. They had Danbury to answer for and Danbury to avenge and there was no easy way to work that through. Flip was glad he would be out of it soon.

"Flip," Enrique said and he put his hand on Flip's shoulder. "The first thing I did when I got out, I made some calls for you. When you get home, you're gonna be looked after. Everybody will know your name."

"*Gracias, jefe*," Flip said.

"It's nothing. Blood don't stop at the gates. José, he's my boy, he'll watch over you like I would. You got no worries."

The blacks weren't looking their way anymore. Some of them shot hoops.

"No worries," Flip said.

Enrique squeezed Flip's shoulder, shook him gently. "No worries."

TWO

“NUMBER TEN!” THE CO CALLED. FLIP GOT out of his bunk. He had the top, Daniel the bottom. When Flip was gone, arrangements would change. Flip’s things were in a white cloth bag with a string tie.

“Time’s up,” Daniel said.

“*Adiós*,” Flip said. “See you on the outside.”

“Not if I see you first.”

They laughed.

The CO stopped at the cell door. He was one of the new ones and Flip didn’t know his name. “Number ten, open up!” he yelled down the line and somewhere a buzzer went off. The CO put his key in the lock, turned and pulled. “Step out.”

Outside the row of cells there was a yellow line painted on the concrete. Flip grabbed his bag and walked over the line, stood facing the wall while the cell was locked up again. When he felt the CO’s touch on his elbow, he turned and marched, the CO at his back.

The convicts in their cells called out to him. *See you, man. Hasta la vista. Good luck, hermano.* Flip raised his hand to them until they came to the end of the line.

“One prisoner coming out,” the CO said.

Danny Mascorro worked the gate. He buzzed the lock and the CO used his key to get them through. Now they were in a dead zone between gates, Mascorro behind reinforced glass. They were

under the eye of closed-circuit cameras. Flip nodded to Mascorro and Mascorro nodded back.

After the second gate they proceeded down a long hall with no windows. At the end was a steel door. A CO peered through a slot at them and there were more buzzers and more locks.

They left Flip in a big cell with benches along three walls. He was in there for a long time, until finally another CO he didn't recognize came to get him. The CO took him down a passageway to another, smaller cell adjoining a large room with desks and computers. Women in TDCJ uniforms were at work there, clicking away on keyboards, and they ignored him. Flip sat down and waited.

There was a window in the room beyond his cell and through that window he could see a tree. He didn't know if he was looking at something beyond the walls or if there was a garden spot just past the glass. In his imagination it was a yard with concrete benches and flower beds and a flagpole flying the American and Texas banners. Maybe there was a little plaque dedicating the space to somebody or the other. Quiet and peaceful.

He was daydreaming when one of the women called his name. "Huh?" he said.

"Felipe Morales?"

"That's right."

"Let's get you out of there."

Flip waited until a CO could come and unlock the cell, and then the woman had him sit in a plastic chair by her desk. She was black and had extra long nails. Her hair was straightened and braided.

"I'm going to do your release processing," the woman said. "There are a lot of questions, but we'll do them just as quick as we can so you can be on your way."

"Okay."

"All right, let's get started..."

The whole interview took an hour and a half. The woman gave him an envelope with bus fare and a few extra dollars besides. He

had to sign his parole certificates. After that Flip had to go back into the cell again for another hour. He could see a clock from where he sat. It made time go more slowly, the sweep hand going round and round, and the minute hand edging forward. His palms itched and he wanted to be out of there, but everything in prison took time, even getting out.

A CO brought him a bag and pushed it through the bars. When Flip opened it up, he saw the clothes he wore on the day he went inside. He hardly recognized them. No one looked as he changed out of his uniform. The clothes fit loosely on him because he was leaner now. He folded up the uniform and set it on the bench beside him. The CO did not come back to collect it.

"Felipe? It's time," the woman said at last. "Kurt, could you take him? The van's out there."

The CO, Kurt, let Flip out of the cell and walked him out of the room. They passed through two short hallways and into a broad area with rows and rows of plastic chairs locked together, lots of fake wood paneling and a big counter. On one side there was a security station set up with a metal detector and a table for searching bags. Two women were going through the process right then. In the plastic chairs there were more women and a few men and a bunch of kids, from babies on up.

On Flip's side there was just a velour rope like the kind that closed off the line at a movie theater. Kurt unhooked it from the stanchion and let Flip through.

They moved past the rows of plastic chairs into a relatively narrow foyer. When Kurt opened the door for Flip a blinding crash of sunlight rolled over him and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. The sky was cloudless and pale blue and the sun was like an unblinking eye.

On the yard there was some grass, but it was patchy and mostly trod away to dirt. Out here there were two squares of neat green bracketing a concrete walk. Here was the flagpole with the banners

waving and here was a wrought iron fence that could keep in no one and an open gate. A tan van with the TDCJ logo stamped on the passenger door waited on the asphalt roundabout.

The driver was an older man. He came around and hauled open the van's cargo door. The windows had metal mesh on the inside. "Hop on in," the driver said.

"Good luck," Kurt said and he offered Flip his hand. They shook.

Flip climbed in the back of the van. There was more metal mesh between the seats and the front of the cabin. The cargo door locked from the outside.

"Next stop, Palestine," the driver said.

"Where's that?" Flip asked.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Doesn't matter. You won't be seeing much of it."

The van carried Flip fifteen minutes through greened country until they reached a scattering of houses along the little highway. They passed a sign that said TENNESSEE COLONY, POP. 300. They passed a simple white church with a mobile home next to it. The letter board out front read: PASTOR ON VACATION. GOD ON DUTY!

They found a bigger road and even some traffic. Flip just watched the miles slip by. Palestine seemed to grow up right out of the countryside, a busy small town with broad streets and clean buildings. The driver navigated without pause. He had done this a thousand times before.

"Bus station," the driver said and they slowed to the curb. The building was compact and had a Greyhound-logo sign on the front, benches for people to wait out of the sun and a snack machine.

The cargo door was pulled aside and Flip stepped out onto the sidewalk. The driver shut the van up behind him. "And that's it. Get your ticket inside. You're headed to El Paso?"

“That’s right.”

“Long haul.”

“I’ll be all right.”

The driver produced a little clipboard the size of an open hand.
“Just sign off. Here’s a pen.”

Flip put his signature to a green form and got a yellow receipt back. He crumpled it up and put it in his pocket.

“Stay out of trouble.”

“No problem.”

The driver got into the van and pulled away. Flip stood on the curb with his bag and watched him go. When the van was out of sight, he went into the ticket office. No one looked at him strangely at all.