

An excerpt from:

# **IDENTITY CRISIS**

by

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“What we are matters more than who we are.”  
-Derek Hamilton

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Paco was searching for a needle, and it was not because three buttons were missing on his shirt—he hadn't noticed. A clean needle would be good, a new one impossible. His last one had broken the previous night when he passed out and rolled over on it. Now he was desperate. He still had some of his stash, but no way to inject it.

He found what he was looking for at just after five o'clock in the morning on a narrow residential street six or seven blocks from the downtown area of Querétaro, the capital city of the state of the same name in central México. It was still dark, but a small lamp over the entrance to the house illuminated a sign that read, Dr. Miguel Ferrer, Plastic Surgeon.

The house and its neighbors were designed in a modest Art Deco style, with touches of glass block and curved outer corners. It was set back from the street about ten meters, providing parking for three vehicles on a red brick terrace, but no cars were present at this hour. The neighborhood had been largely built in the late twenties and early thirties. Paco did not notice this; he couldn't have said why it was different from any other neighborhood in Querétaro where he scrounged for medical waste, or even that it was. His life was built on his inner sensations, curving back on itself. He was usually unaware of external detail beyond his current necessities.

Along a high brick wall that edged the adjacent property stood two trashcans of contemporary design. One was made of dull green plastic and was covered with a hinged lid, which Paco ignored as being the standard trashcan of Querétaro. The other, orange with a biohazard symbol on the front, was his target. It was locked into a steel frame, for which only the biohazard crew had a key, and the top was self-locking as well. When it was picked up, the crew would simply exchange it for an empty one. Other than the clinic staff, only the team in the disposal plant had a key to the lid. However, Paco had a stout pry bar in his back pocket that the lid design was not made to resist; it was planned more to prevent casual or uninformed entry.

He worked the tip of the bar into the small space between the lid and the side of the can until he felt it stop. Then he lifted it slowly until the lid buckled, leaving a space about the thickness of his wrist, although two brackets on opposite sides still held it in place. He pulled back his sleeve, exposing a network of tracks, and reached in. His fingers moved over a variety of sealed bags whose contents he didn't want to think about, until he found one with the right feel. The texture of small, hard tubes and plungers. As he worked it through the opening, headlights appeared on the street and he ducked behind the green can, waiting for the car to pass.

Instead, the car slowed, pulled onto the terrace, and stopped. The headlights went out and three men got out of the car. From the interior lights he could see that one of them, smaller than the other two, was wearing a white mask. In the back seat he could also see a mop of short, spiky blond hair. A woman, but her face was turned away and she didn't get out. The dome light flashed on a lot of leg, the skirt barely long enough to cover the essentials. The rear door closed and the light went out as she was reaching for a cigarette pack and a lighter from her purse. Paco did not move.

As the men approached the entrance, another car came slowly down the street, pausing briefly at the apron, before it pulled in next to the first car. Another small man got out, unlocked the door to the clinic, and after a brief exchange, all four went in. Paco waited a moment, half expecting a third car, but when none appeared, he moved back to the orange can, finished fishing out the needles, chose three that looked fairly clean, and slipped off down the street, not thinking much about what he had seen, or whether the woman had seen him. He was good to go for a while. Paco wasn't capable of thinking beyond the next few days, and usually not that far. As for the past, it was mostly a blur, and it was unlikely he would remember for long anything he had just seen.

Inside the clinic, the man from the second car led the others through a pink waiting room and into the examining room beyond. This room was pink as well, but a lighter shade. It was Dr. Ferrer's favorite color. A series of before and after pictures lined the walls; a promising tale of double chins gone missing; breasts augmented, shrinking, or simply aiming higher; noses changing from aquiline to ski jump in profile. No faces were displayed in the breast pictures. On the back wall, framed in black lacquer, hung three diplomas with gold seals.

One of the larger men, an American who called himself Ernie Watley, sat in a chair near the desk and adjusted the pleats of his pants. He had a jowly face that could have used some attention itself along the jaw line. He wore a pale green silk shirt and black slacks. The other, from his appearance, an upper class Mexican, was largely framed, and fleshy in a muscular way with a full mustache and pale skin. Leafing through an open file folder on the desk, he lifted out three eight-by-ten photos and spread them out side by side.

Dr. Ferrer, the man from the second car, pulled on a white coat and motioned for the masked man to sit on the examining table, all stainless steel with a vinyl cushion under a roll of white paper.

"How has it been?" the doctor asked, scanning the edges of the bandages, but not yet touching them

"Solid food," came the mumble from the mask. "Tired of straws."

"Well, you'll have to go slowly on that. Bananas will do to start with, I think." He washed his hands carefully in a small sink and placed a tray with scissors and sterile wipes beside him after he pulled on a pair of surgical gloves, snapping the wrists. Slowly he began cutting through the lower bandages. "This is good," he said, when part of the

man's jaw appeared. He turned toward the man at the desk. "You see the scars? Quite small and very neat, all in shadow under the curve of his jaw. With time, who knows? Probably they will become almost invisible, and with a beard, gone entirely." He resumed his cutting. The nose was revealed. Ernie Watley got up and looked at it closely.

"It's broader, isn't it?"

"Yes, and the scars follow the line where it joins the cheeks," the doctor said. "The trick here was to broaden the base with inserts without restricting the air flow inside."

The patient began to open his mouth, as if stretching it for the first time in a long while.

"Don't do that yet," the doctor said quickly, "only a little, do you see? Like this." He opened his mouth like a fish in an aquarium expelling a small bubble. "Only that much, and in the center. Mostly with the lips at first."

When the bandages were gone, the doctor cleaned the man's face with the sterile wipes and turned toward the Mexican at the desk. "Now you see. We are very close, I think."

The Mexican rose, photos in hand, and held them up to the patient's face. "Very good," he said after a while. "Not perfect, but then, he doesn't have to be."

"As close as we can get, I believe," said the doctor. "We have the bones beneath to consider. Each face has its own contours, but the inserts over the eyes are just right, to develop the ridges more. And with contacts, the irises can quickly become brown. He turned to Watley. "What do you think?"

Ernie Watley gave him a broad grin. "Works for me. What do you think, Bill?"

"Mirror," he said. Only his lips moved.

Dr. Ferrer handed him a round mirror.

"Jesus," said the patient. "No more Bill March. Don't know how I feel." He moved the mirror at different angles and stared.

"You'll feel great once you get the money," said Watley.

"We are finished, then," said the Mexican, "but for the contact lenses."

"Yes," said Dr. Ferrer, but don't rush on that. Let his eyelids heal before you see the optometrist.

"Antonio, you're forgetting one more thing," said Watley to the Mexican. "We've still got to find some sap to vouch for him. That's the final piece of this."

Antonio grinned broadly. "I hadn't forgotten. I know just the man. His name is Paul Zacher."

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