

An excerpt from:

# VANISHING ACT

by

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## Chapter One

Saturday morning in central México—the sun was just rising above the stand of lime trees near the eastern wall of my courtyard as I sat next to the fountain with my coffee. Orlando, the grackle who'd decided to live in our garden six months ago, was hanging about below the table, waiting for something promising to drop. Nothing did, but he wasn't easily discouraged. Fall had begun but there was nothing to suggest it but the calendar itself. The rainy season had ended without much fanfare. The hills around San Miguel would stay green for another month. I couldn't think of anything to be upset about, not that I was trying very hard.

To the south, the city of Oaxaca was in a state of nearly complete insurrection, the teachers' strike had ballooned into a bitter showdown over whether the governor of the state would continue in office. Neither side was giving a centimeter. Radical groups from other parts of México had gleefully joined the fray. Knowing little about the issues, it was the fracas itself that attracted them. The scent of violence always draws a crowd.

Our last case had ended there in mid July with only five (or seven, or ten) killed, depending on your source of information. Only a few of the victims were dead from our efforts, and they weren't included in the official numbers. The newspapers were ignoring the violence, but no one else in the city of Oaxaca could. Restaurants and hotels were going bankrupt every day. Pickup loads of police in ski masks were tooling through the streets randomly shooting at people. Strike leaders disappeared in the night. It was good to be home in San Miguel de Allende, where the disputes that reached our ears were mainly centered on art and good living.

Ongoing political strife over the July presidential election still rippled through the headlines from México City; Obrador, the loser, had formed a shadow government in the

streets, but nothing much touched us here in the highlands of the *bajío*, where 8,000 expatriates joined 65,000 locals in enjoying the unhurried elegance of colonial México. Nothing much, that is, other than an occasional murder and its accompanying mayhem. Small potatoes, now, in the larger scheme of things.

Through the *loggia* at the back wall of the house I saw my live-in girlfriend Maya coming toward me, hand in hand with Cody Williams, our retired detective friend from Illinois. Investigating murder and mayhem was our business when I wasn't painting pictures, and it looked like more of it might be on the way.

"*Que pasa?*" I asked.

"It's going pretty well, except for a disappearance back home," he said. I looked at a sheaf of papers in his hand, hanging at his side. The grackle was looking at them too, his head cocked to one side in a speculative way. Maybe there was a grease spot on the first page that could make it meaningful for him.

"Back home is out of our jurisdiction," I said. "Go find some road kill, Orlando," He lifted one foot, stared at it tentatively, then, as Cody and Maya reached the table, wandered off through a concealed path he had made under the bromeliads.

Cody sat down and Maya went back to the house to bring more coffee.

"You look relaxed," he said.

"Nothing to worry me. I get to just sit here with the scent of lime blossoms in the air knowing that my studio is full of pictures ready to go off to the Private Lives show at Galeria Uno. Not a care in the world. But you've got something, right?"

"I talked to Donna yesterday." He settled his 230-pound bulk into one of our cast iron garden chairs. The wicker ones that wouldn't hold him had been destroyed years ago.

"Your ex," I said. When Cody had moved to San Miguel de Allende, six years earlier on his retirement, Donna had chosen to stay behind in Peoria. They were just getting around to working out terms for a divorce settlement and it was looking like the startup of a long process. Cody hadn't said what he was asking for, but we'd heard plenty about Donna's side. Having never met her, we didn't try to stay neutral.

"Soon to be ex," he said.

"How close are you?" asked Maya, just returning with coffee and some almond croissants.

"A lot closer suddenly, but I still have one big hurdle. Donna's nephew has disappeared; his name's Peter Welsh and he's the son of her sister, Jean. If I look into it

she'll sign off on the settlement I proposed and then we can finally set a court date for the hearing. It's another bit of her leverage."

"But you don't have to actually find him?" asked Maya.

"No. I only have to try. She saw enough open cases when we were still together to know that they don't all get solved, no matter what you do. It's a best effort kind of thing, but she knows I'll take it seriously. I always do."

"How tough does it look?" I asked.

"On the face of it, not so terrible. Peter was laid up in the hospital in Kenniston, Wisconsin for a few days, checked himself out and went to a hotel for about a week, then disappeared, leaving his belongings behind in his room. His car hasn't turned up yet."

"Depression? Possible suicide?" said Maya. "Fear of the impending winter in Gringolandia?" A sly grin came over her face. Last year we had been to a funeral in Minnesota in February. We decided that the cemeteries must estimate the number of graves required over the approaching winter and dig them all before frost turned the soil into granite.

"Possibly all three of those." He paused to sip his coffee. "But in his hotel room he left behind a document that he was apparently working on while he stayed there. It's possible he intended to go back home, because there's nothing about suicide in it and he *was* on the mend. Donna faxed it to me yesterday afternoon. It's a bizarre story of what led up to his hospital stay. I'm not sure what to make of it. I spent thirty years in that business and I've never seen anything like it."

"Bizarre in what way?" I asked. We had seen bizarre sliced thin, quivering in aspic, and over easy. Medium rare and parboiled. What other way could there be?

Cody shook his head with a peculiar rigid set to his jaw.

"I'm not going to say any more right now other than that there are some strange things in it. You guys can read it and determine your own reaction. I don't want to influence you." He pushed it across the table between Maya and me. It was handwritten in a level, but large and loopy script on lined notebook paper. The ripped-out edges had come through nicely on the fax. It was dated ten days earlier.

"So you don't know what to make of it?" asked Maya.

"Exactly."

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