

NICKEL CITY SHAKEDOWN

By Gary Earl Ross

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A confidently written mini-mystery full of laughs and swagger. We like the characters, the details of setting, the author's easy-going loping prose and the seamless English/Spanish parlance. Stories in the mystery/private dick genre are often known for their wise-cracking, smart ass dialogue and in Nickel City Shakedown the author takes his place with the best of them.*

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AND

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“A knight-errant,” Phoenix said. “But don’t call him that or we’ll never get his head through the doorway.”

Just wonderful junk. Oh, and thanks to Gideon Rimes, we discovered a rum we’d never heard of.

Nickel City Shakedown

A Gideon Rimes Short Story

by

Gary Earl Ross

For Ramona and Digna

Christmas in Puerto Rico sounded like the perfect escape from a Buffalo winter, so I didn't hesitate to agree when Phoenix Trinidad proposed spending two weeks there. But she continued pitching the idea long after she closed the sale.

"A few days in San Juan," she said over dinner at La Kueva. It was a crisp night in early November, but it was warm inside the small restaurant, despite large plate glass windows that permitted a view of passersby on Hertel Avenue buttoned, bundled, and scarved against Nickel City wind. Phoenix's shirt collar had two buttons open and the jacket of her pantsuit—her lawyer's uniform, I sometimes teased her—was on the back of her chair. "I have a ton of Hilton Honors points to use, so we're staying at *Condado Plaza*. We'll hit the beaches, Old San Juan, a couple of museums, *El Morro*."

"*El Morro*?"

"The huge fort overlooking San Juan Bay. You'll love it. It was built in the 1500s—or they began building it then and continued a couple hundred years. It's full of history."

"No doubt." Brought up by my godfather Bobby Chance, a now retired English professor who loved all things historical, I too was fond of exploring the past. Having served in the Iraq War in streamlined FOBs, or forward operating bases, I was especially curious about old military forts with footprints rooted in the permanence of conquest and exploitation.

"You'll love the museums too, for the same reason." Phoenix sipped her piña colada. "Then there's the Bacardi distillery, kayaking on a bioluminescent bay, snorkeling. And the food! So many wonderful places to choose from."

I pushed up my stainless steel eyeglass frame and smiled. “Is that why you brought me here tonight? To the best Puerto Rican restaurant in Buffalo?”

“*Si.*” Phoenix caught her lip between her teeth in the faint, hesitant smile I would always remember from the first time we made love.

“If we do this for two weeks and I gain weight from food like this,” I said, gesturing towards the pork chops and *mofongo* on my plate, “you may start to rethink our relationship.”

“I said a few days in San Juan. Then we’ll drive down to Ponce so you can finally meet Tia Rosita. We’ll be there for her birthday, January fifth. It’s a milestone, eighty. She wants me to review some legal stuff with her. Also, she’s got a new boyfriend.”

“And you want to check him out.”

“You know me so well,” she said, smiling again.

Our room at the *Condado Plaza* Hilton overlooked the beach and the hotel pool, but we spent only one afternoon at the beach and one evening in the pool. Apart from a tour of the Bacardi distillery, we spent most of the time in Old San Juan, exploring shops and museums, walking the steps and ramps of *El Morro*, quite a workout. After three days, despite a huge Christmas dinner the first night and lots of restaurant food, the hotel scale had me down a few pounds.

We left San Juan a few days after Christmas, after making love one final time in morning sunlight and indulging in one last buffet brunch. Our rented Kia was small and uncomfortable. By noon, with Phoenix wheeling us down Highway 52 for the ninety-minute ride from San Juan in the northeast to Ponce in the south, I felt like astronaut John Glenn shoehorned into the Mercury Seven capsule.

Our hotel was The Fox on *Calle Reina Isabel* across from the *Plaza las Delicias*, home to the historic firehouse turned museum *Parque de Bombas*. When Tia Rosita told her new love the City of Ponce, named after a descendant of the conquistador Ponce de Leon, was founded on my August birthday in 1692, Fernando insisted on putting us up in The Fox because he thought a Leo would enjoy the decorated lion statues in the nearby museum. An astrology buff herself, Tia Rosita added that because I belonged to what I was surprised to learn was the House of Pleasure, I should be especially vigorous near the lions.

Having listened to the blue tooth call as we neared Ponce, I had understood nothing of the exchange in what seemed to me rapid Spanish. But I had noticed the flush in Phoenix's normally cinnamon cheeks and laughed when she explained what her aunt had said.

"You're not embarrassed?" she said.

"No. Makes me less afraid to turn eighty." I thought for a moment about one of the few Spanish words I knew. "So we're at The Fox. Why isn't it called The Zorro?"

"That would appeal to the eleven-year-old strapped into your brain's back seat."

"You know me so well," I said.

Smiling as we passed the red and black *Letras de Ponce*, the twenty-foot high P-O-N-C-E that marked the entrance to the city, she said, "You'll see."

The hotel exterior was bright blue, with an architecture and design that suggested a mix of art deco, pop art, neoclassical Spanish, and Crayolas on steroids. Once we were inside, I understood why it had not been named the Zorro. Enlarged sections of Andy Warhol's Marilyn Diptych and other pop art pieces—including James Dean, Frank Sinatra, Ingrid Bergman, and Elvis—hung in various places amid neon lighting and bold colors.

“This was once a Fox movie theater,” Phoenix said as we rolled our bags over to the check-in desk.

I nodded. “I can tell from all the vigorous paintings of dead movie stars.”

Our room had bright stripes, a cherry red bedspread, and more reproductions of pop art standards, including another Marilyn Monroe above the headboard and a couple of Lichtensteins I recognized from the Albright-Knox back home, a red-headed woman surrounded by yellow and on the bathroom door a comic book explosion. For a moment I wondered how vigorous I would feel beneath the gaze of a surreal sex symbol and near a graphic novel panel designed to inspire premature ejaculation. But I would have to wait to find out. After we unpacked, I slipped into a lightweight sports jacket and Phoenix donned a lightweight pantsuit for the drive to Tia Rosita’s one-bedroom high-rise near Pontifical Catholic University.

Tia Rosita was lithe and silver-haired, with a loose flowing turquoise dress and glittering eyes behind rhinestone glasses. As Phoenix often said, she bore more than a passing resemblance to Rita Moreno. She smiled when she let us in, the same hesitant smile I sometimes saw on Phoenix, and introduced us to the *caballero* she had been seeing for several months. Fernando Pabon was a big man in a tan *guayabera*, with two opened buttons revealing gray curls of chest hair. In his early eighties, he still looked good. He had massive brown hands and thinning white hair brushed back to reveal a broad, creased forehead. The smile beneath his white mustache was full of teeth too flawless to be anything but false. He embraced us in the living room, which had an artificial Christmas tree in one corner and a Three Kings manger display on a table beside it.

“Sit, sit,” he said. “You too, Rosita. I’ll get *ron* for us all!” Then he disappeared into the kitchen as I took an armchair and the women sat on the couch across from me.

For a minute or so, Tia Rosita held Phoenix's hands and peppered her with questions in Spanish. Then, with a smile that seemed both curious and flirtatious, she turned to me. In English better than Phoenix had led me to believe she spoke, she inquired about my background, my time as a soldier, and my experiences as an investigator. Quickly at ease, I answered in brief, slow sentences, the shortest reserved for my time in Iraq, and sprinkled in compliments about the décor of her apartment. Finally, she asked how I felt about Phoenix, her only living relative.

"*La quiero mucho,*" I said, having anticipated and prepared for that particular question. I held her eyes with mine for a quiet second or three afterward, as if underscoring the love I had expressed. Then she smiled broadly and said something to Phoenix in Spanish. They both laughed.

At that moment Fernando returned, pushing a brass drink cart into the center of the room and stopping near the coffee table. The cart held four glasses, an ice bucket, and a bottle of Don Q Gold on the top glass shelf and half a dozen other bottles on the bottom. Using tongs, he filled the glasses with ice and poured in two or three fingers of rum. He passed the rum to Tia Rosita, Phoenix, and me. Before sitting in the other armchair, near the drink cart, he raised his own glass and said, "*Salud!*"

We all sipped.

For a few minutes Fernando and I said nothing as Phoenix and her aunt resumed talking. Now and then catching a Spanish word I recognized, I figured their discussion included shared experiences and mutual acquaintances. The old man and I exchanged occasional glances and half smiles throughout, but I saw his jaw tighten when Phoenix mentioned Tio Pedro, her late uncle. When Phoenix asked him about his business, which he had sold some years ago to retire, he

explained it was a *taberna* in San Juan, but Tia Rosita corrected him. “*Club nocturno*,” she said, clearly impressed by the difference between a tavern and a night club.

Leaning forward, elbows on his upper thighs, Fernando deflected attention by turning the conversation to me. “Gideon Rimes, *investigador privado*. Wow!” His moustache stretched above his smile. “Phoenix tells Rosita about your many adventures and Rosita tells me. The crimes you solve. The killers you catch. You must be famous. Buffalo’s Mike Hammer.”

I shrugged. “Maybe more like Buffalo’s Don Quixote, a well-meaning pain in the *culo* to some people. Sometimes I even charge toward windmills and get knocked to the ground and beaten up.”

Fernando and Tia Rosita both laughed. Phoenix looked at me and rolled her eyes.

“Ah, *un caballero andante* in the modern world!” Fernando said, clapping his hands together. He looked at Phoenix. “What do you call it in English?”

“A knight-errant,” Phoenix said. “But don’t call him that or we’ll never get his head through the doorway.”

Fernando looked confused.

“*Cabeza hinchada*,” Phoenix said. “*Con orgullo*.”

Fernando’s face lit up, and he laughed. Tia Rosita half smiled, half frowned. Phoenix winked and blew me a kiss, which I took to mean she would tell me later what she’d said.

Gradually, talk turned to what we all should do over the next week and a half, before Phoenix and I returned to San Juan for a final night in a hotel there and our flight home. Tia Rosita said in English that Ponce, the second largest city in Puerto Rico, was not unlike Buffalo, the second largest city in New York. The pace of life was different, slower, but, like Buffalo, it was rich in history and had many attractions. Then she and Fernando took turns suggesting

where we should go and things we should see—the history museum, the art gallery, another bioluminescent bay. Then, to my surprise, Tia Rosita mentioned a place called Gilligan’s Island.

“Gilligan’s Island?” I said.

“Caya Aurora,” Fernando said. “I don’t much like it there.”

“An island off Guañica,” Phoenix said. “Before you ask, the TV show wasn’t filmed there. Gilligan’s Island is just a nickname. It’s got beaches, swimming, places for picnics.”

“It’s not so special,” Fernando said. “For something special you should see *La Cruceta del Vigia*, the hundred-foot cross overlooking the city. And *Castillo Serrallés*.” He poured more Don Q into his glass. “It was once the home of the family that makes this *ron*. But you have to do that without us. Too much walking for me and Rosita at our age.”

Just then we felt the first tremors and saw ornaments shaking on the Christmas tree, the Three Kings display beside it vibrating.

Fernando looked from me to Phoenix and back. “Another earthquake, a small one.”

That night beneath a crisp white sheet and a red spread, her right arm across my belly and her right leg thrown over both of mine, Phoenix asked what I thought of Fernando.

“He’s trying too hard to make us like him,” I said. “And doing so without talking about himself, which is kind of awkward. I like him, but my opinion isn’t the one that counts.”

“Your opinion counts.”

“I’m not the one who manages Tia Rosita’s finances.”

“My father was very protective of his baby sister. He would want me to look after her. Especially if some guy was trying to get at the retirement money Tio Pedro left her.”

“Of course.”

Phoenix was quiet for a long time, her fingers lightly, absently stroking my side. “There’s something about him I don’t trust,” she said at last. “Fernando, I mean. It’s not just my lawyer fallback that everybody is guilty of something.”

“I understand.”

“So you’ll look into him?”

I kissed the top of her head. “Already in the works.”

The weather was warm and sunny the next week. Phoenix alternated between two sun hats and two pairs of sunglasses. I depended on a baseball cap and my transition lenses to cut the glare. Also, I stuck to the half dozen loose-fitting *guayaberas* she’d bought me in San Juan. In no time we fell into a routine, even as we felt mild earth tremors off and on throughout each day, with the epicenter in nearby Guañica. We got used to the tremors as easily as we did our routine.

Most days the four of us went out in the late morning, with me behind the wheel of the Kia and Fernando riding shotgun, giving directions as Phoenix and Tia Rosita squeezed into the back. Those excursions were short: the art and history museums; the boardwalk at *La Guancha* Park, where we bought souvenirs from vendors; lunch twice in *Plaza Ponce de Leon*, a mall-style building from the 1920s. By mid-afternoon each day we returned to the apartment so Tia Rosita and Fernando could rest as Phoenix and I took a walk or drank on the balcony. Once, coming in from the balcony, we heard noises from behind Tia Rosita’s door that made Phoenix turn scarlet. As I steered her to the elevator, I said, “Eighty’s looking better all the time.”

The next day we all went to the red and black *Parque de Bombas* museum and posed for pictures beside display cases of antique firefighting equipment and the painted lions throughout the museum. The symbol of Ponce was the lion, Fernando explained. Some years earlier white

lions had been placed in the firehouse museum and elsewhere around the city and an army of artists had been enlisted to turn each one into a unique work of art. The result was a dazzling array of colors, combinations of colors, iridescent blends, and intricate designs that included geometric shapes, stripes, spots, humanlike eyes, and even lipstick. I told Fernando we'd had a similar public art program in Buffalo two decades earlier, with bison statues that were still in public parks and outside buildings. I did not tell him that the lions, especially the ones with painted-on eyeglasses, reminded me of W.W. Denslow's version of the Cowardly Lion in early editions of *The Wizard of Oz*. But I did mention in passing some of the more brightly colored lions looked vigorous, which made Phoenix give me a gentle elbow shot to the ribs.

Two days Phoenix and I ventured out alone in our rental, once to a coffee plantation that involved too much walking for her aunt and once to *Cerro del Vigia*, the hill above Ponce that was home to *La Cruceta* and *Museo Castillo Serrallés*, where the walking involved steep climbs too. From the observation deck that formed the crossbar, the giant cross offered a panoramic view of the city. The tour of the 1930s mansion-turned-museum began with drinks in a room which displayed classic Don Q bottles behind glass and continued through ceramic floor-tiled rooms and polished stairways that still had furniture, artwork, and portraits of the Serrallés family, founders of the namesake distillery that was the oldest family-owned business in Puerto Rico. After the tour ended in the gift shop, we toured the extensive Japanese Gardens outside.

Though one evening we took the Kia into the mountains to a restaurant called *Hacienda Maribo*, most evenings we used an Uber to go to dinner and return to the apartment by eight-thirty. By ten Phoenix and I were back *Plaza las Delicias* for a nightcap before bed.

Our final Sunday, three days before we were scheduled to leave, was Tia Rosita's birthday. Fernando arranged to have dinner from an upscale restaurant and a cake with candles

shaped into an 8 and a 0 delivered to her apartment. We sang “Happy Birthday” in Spanish, me looking at the lyrics Phoenix had written out for me. Fernando’s gift to her was an emerald pendant, ours a new audiobook of an abridged *Don Quixote* with background music.

After cake, Tia Rosita announced she needed some time with her niece to discuss family matters—the “legal stuff” Phoenix had mentioned. Fernando invited me to join him for a drink at his place. I hadn’t thought about whether he had a place, even though I had seen enough of Tia Rosita’s apartment to know he wasn’t living there full time. When we boarded the elevator, I expected we would take the Kia to wherever he lived. To my surprise, he pressed 7 and we got off ten floors below. He led me to a door down the hall, opened it, and flipped the light switch.

His apartment was a mirror image of Tia Rosita’s, but more sparsely furnished. A well-worn brown leather couch and a single non-matching stuffed armchair, a smaller flat screen TV hanging from a wall, no coffee table, a round kitchenette table with one chair in the dining nook, plain curtains, no Christmas decorations, and a single folding lawn chair visible through the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. One end of the couch had a couple shirts draped over the armrest and a pile of magazines on the cushion. He gestured me toward the uncluttered side and went into the kitchen.

I found it curious he was willing to pay for us to stay at The Fox when he had a place we could have slept right downstairs. I told myself he must have wanted to make a solid impression.

He returned with two glasses and a bottle of Don Q Cristal. He handed me one glass and set the other on the armrest of the chair. He poured me three fingers of the clear rum, and I said, “*Gracias.*” Then he poured himself a bit more than I had, and sat in the chair, standing the bottle beside it on the carpet. He raised a toast, and as we sipped, we felt another tremor.

“This *ron* is smoother than the ground, no?” Fernando smiled at me. “Gideon, I hope these little earthquakes don’t make you want to leave our island.”

“Not yet.” I sipped more Cristal, a bit less sweet than the Gold, with a bit more bite. “But as I said the other day, earthquakes are completely new for me. Buffalo’s had a few over the years, mostly minor, unfelt by most people. These...”

“These are minor,” he said. “Little ones, more than usual but still baby shakes.” He hoisted his glass. “*Ron* is good for when the ground shifts beneath your feet.”

“*Ron* certainly is.” I raised my glass. “To Don Q, with a distillery right here in Ponce.”

“*Por supuesto!*” Fernando wagged a finger at me. “But you’re in Puerto Rico, Gideon. The Q is pronounced *coo*.”

“*Si*,” I said.

He laughed. “How did you like the tour of *Castillo Serrallés*?”

“I enjoyed it, but not as much as Phoenix. She was there as a little girl and kept pointing out how things had changed. In some of the pictures she even saw people she had met through her Tio Pedro, who worked there.”

“A distillery executive,” Fernando said. For a moment he was quiet, lips pressed together. “Rosita has told me much about Pedro. Too much. *Es coma una sogá en mi cuello*.”

“I don’t understand.” But I did recognize *cuello* as *neck*.

“It is hard sometimes to run a race against a dead man.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding.

We each took another sip.

“So, your hotel is all right then?” he said. “I chose it because I thought you might like the movie pictures and everything around the plaza.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We like the bar next door. We’ve stopped in there a couple times.”

He nodded. “What about the room? Does Phoenix like it?”

“She does. Nice décor. Pleasant atmosphere. She especially likes soaking in that bathtub.” I shrugged. “It’s fine.” I hesitated. “Thank you for booking it, but we *can* pay—”

“No, no, no,” he said, waving his hand. “I hope to be her new *tio*, yours too. It’s the least I can do. You came all this way to see if the old man courting Tia Rosita is serious or...” He drank more Cristal—a swallow, not a sip. “You know, before I was born that hotel used to be *Teatro Fox Delicias. El cine, a...a...*”

“A movie palace,” I said. “That explains Marilyn Monroe and James Dean.”

“*Si*. It was designed by a famous Ponce architect and built on land given by a member of the Serrallés family.”

I leaned forward, my forearms on my knees and both hands around my glass. “Fernando, I like you. You seem like a very nice man. You don’t need to impress me. This is my first time here in Ponce, my first time meeting Tia Rosita. I’m not the one you have to win over. It’s Phoenix. Tia is her only family, and she feels she has to watch over her.”

“*Ella es una abogada*. Sorry. Lawyers make me nervous.”

“Lawyers or women lawyers?”

Grinning, he shook his head. “Rosita waits for you to ask her niece to marry you, but she is afraid the girl is too independent to say yes. So I am nervous Phoenix will say no to me too.”

“I was married before, when I was in the army,” I said. “Phoenix tells me she came close once but came to her senses at the last minute. What we have now works for us.”

“You are both hardworking professionals in your prime. It makes sense you need space, especially you with the work you do.”

“But you don’t need Phoenix’s permission to propose to Tia Rosita. You just need to let her get to know you better. To let her know you before Rosita says yes. The real you.”

For a time he said nothing and stared at his glass as if weighing what I’d told him.

“Ah, I didn’t invite you out for a drink so you could put in a kind word with Phoenix,” he said finally. “*Caballero andante*, I want to hire you, to do a job.”

Now it was my turn for a heartbeat or two of silence. “Something back in Buffalo? I’m not licensed here. If it’s security work, my guns are locked in my safe at home. Besides, when we get to my second thumb, we both know I’ve hit the end of my Spanish vocabulary.”

Fernando laughed. “Your complexion makes you look enough like you belong here. But the minute you speak a word of Spanish, they’ll talk to you in English.”

“I don’t even have to open my mouth. That place you took us for dinner, up in the mountains, with the goats outside?”

“*Si. Hacienda Maribo.*” He thought for a moment. “Ah yes! The boy gave us four menus. Yours was the only one in English, before you ever said a word. But this isn’t bodyguard work or tracking down a killer. You don’t need Spanish.”

“What is it then?”

“A background check. I know Phoenix brought a small computer, and the hotel has wi-fi. As *un investigador privado*, you must have use of information sites not open to private citizens.”

“I do. “

He removed a slip of paper from the breast pocket of his *guayabera*. “Then please look into this man for me. I will pay you for your time.”

I looked at the paper, which had a name scribbled in thick marker ink. “Juan Alejandro Quiñones. Who is he?”

“A man with the power to ruin my life, which he has tried to do time and again.”

“How?”

“I would rather not say. Must you know to...to *take* my case?”

“Not necessarily, but if it’s something you could take to the police...”

“No! It is...delicate.”

I sat back and looked at him, hard. “So he’s shaking you down.”

“Shaking me...?”

“Blackmailing you. Threatening to reveal something you don’t want known unless you pay him.” I waited for a response before continuing but none came. “When was the last time you heard from him, this Don Q?”

Fernando took a deep breath. “Not for a very long time, years. He is not worthy of the title Don, but I want you to find out if he is still a danger to me.”

Just then came another tremor, a somewhat stronger shaking we felt mainly in the floor.

“Give me two days,” I said. “I’ll have something for you before we leave for San Juan.”

On Monday we were shaken awake before dawn by the strongest earthquake yet. Phoenix moved closer and put her right arm over my torso as I slid my right arm under her. We lay still for a long time, until the tremors and aftershocks seemed to pass.

“Imagine that,” I said. “The bed was shaking and it wasn’t even us.”

“Don’t quit your day job, Mr. Colbert.” Phoenix patted my chest before she got her phone off the nightstand and called Tia Rosita. She sat on the edge of the bed as they talked. Though I didn’t understand the Spanish I knew my lover well enough to recognize her soothing voice. “A little tired and a little scared,” Phoenix said after she clicked off. “We’re on our own till dinner.”

We stayed close to the hotel, breakfasting in a coffee shop and exploring nearby stores. Phoenix bought another sun hat and pair of sunglasses, and I picked up a Ponce tee shirt with a vivid lion picture. We had a late lunch at the Plaza Hotel and Casino, half a block away from The Fox, and spent an hour and change at the slot machines. I lost forty bucks but Phoenix collected three hundred from a machine called Wild Panda. "It takes patient observation," she said, as if lecturing me. "I watched three people feed a lot of money to that machine and walk away with nothing to show for it. Every game gets you a bit closer to the big one, so I knew it was due."

"Don't quit your day job, Calamity Jane." I shook my head. "The big one."

The entire time we were out and later as we joined Tia Rosita and Fernando for dinner at a restaurant near the high rise I was uncertain whether the tremors I felt were the ground beneath me or something inside me much worse than phantom cell phone vibrations.

The big one came the next morning with a sound I could only describe as a bang. Our floor felt as if it had dropped two feet. Then the shaking began, a deep rumbling, violent and angry and more forceful than anything we had felt to that point. I pulled Phoenix closer and held her tight in the center of the shuddering bed as I heard screams in the distance. Enough light came through our lattice window that I could see the walls moving, slightly warping. The pink lamp jittered to the edge of the nightstand and fell to the carpet, as did Phoenix's plastic water bottle and the potted succulent atop the storage cube unit that served as our dresser. Across from the bed was a white student desk that doubled as a stand for the flat screen TV, which fidgeted to the edge and fell against the matching white chair before tumbling to the floor. The light above us hung from a rod fixed to the ceiling. I watched the bowl-shaped glass shade sway and tipped my head back to keep tabs on the framed picture of Marilyn above our headboard. If either piece loosened, I would have maybe a second to throw myself over Phoenix.

Finally, it stopped.

For a long time we just lay there, unspeaking. I made no attempt to ease what had happened with humor. I had felt helpless, something to which I was unaccustomed. I was used to *doing* things, to doing something to determine my fate. Even during combat there had been choices to make, orders to follow, paths to take us out of the target zone. This morning there had been no course of action but to wait out the earthquake and hope for the best.

Two hours later, as we had agreed at dinner the night before, I met Fernando for *domplines* at a small place a few blocks away from The Fox.

He stood when I stepped inside the café and had his hand out when I reached his table. “Oh, Gideon!” He pumped my hand hard. “I am glad to see you in one piece, to *be* in one piece. *Ay Dios mio!* This morning’s earthquake was unlike anything in memory!”

“Tell me about it,” I said as we sat. “Phoenix is trying to change our tickets so we can leave tonight from here rather than drive back to San Juan. We have no idea how the roads are.”

“I got here more an hour ago,” Fernando said. “I knew there would be a long line after such a wake up. You got here just in time.”

A young woman in a bright yellow skirt took our order. As we waited for our coffee and *domplines*, fried dough patties filled with egg, cheese, and ham or bacon, I pulled my notebook from my *guayabera* breast pocket. Before I could open it, Fernando placed his hand over mine.

“I am worried Phoenix is going to find a way to take *mi* Rosita to Buffalo.”

“She offered,” I said. “Tia Rosita won’t go anywhere without you. But you refused to leave. Why?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“You’re both retired and don’t need to go to work. You can have privacy in Buffalo, either by renting an apartment short term or moving into my place while I stay with Phoenix or vice versa.”

Fernando smiled sadly. “But this is my home, and it’s winter.”

“Nobody’s asking you to give up home,” I said. “Just come with us until things calm down. Believe it or not, right now there’s no snow in Buffalo.” I slid my hand free and opened my notebook. “I usually type things up for my clients, but I spent the last hour packing.”

“You are finished with the job? Even with two earthquakes?”

“Yes.” I leaned forward on my elbows and looked into his eyes. “I was a cop for most of my twenty years in the army and a campus cop for a few years after I retired. I’ve been doing this kind of work for a long time.” Then I sat back and picked up my notebook. “Juan Alejandro Quiñones, born in Guañica eighty-two years ago. Orphaned at age six. He would have spent his life in an orphanage if not for his mother’s sister’s family, who cared for him as one of their own. He had a solid home life, good grades in school, and friends. The family moved to Ponce when he was fourteen. Three years later his *tia* and *tio* were dead, leaving him and his cousin, a few months older, to take care of themselves.” I lowered the notebook. “Following me so far?”

“*Si*,” Fernando said.

I continued. “Despite his grades, Juan Alejandro got into a fair amount of trouble. Petty theft. Street scams. A home burglary in his mid-twenties that sent him to *Las Cucharas*, the Ponce prison called the Spoons. Released after serving his full sentence, he took a job with his cousin’s newly formed adult entertainment company and remained a law-abiding citizen until his death in a swimming accident forty-five years ago.”

“So he is dead? Then I have no need to fear him.”

“I’m surprised you’d worry about somebody you haven’t heard from in forty-five years.”

Fernando looked away for a moment.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said. “A single fingerprint found at a Miami bank robbery more than fifty years ago, before Quiñones went to prison, matches his right index finger. Whether he was involved or just there is uncertain. A stray fingerprint or a hole in the robber’s glove? Who knows? Either way, the robbery and his time in the Spoons predate AFIS.”

“AFIS? It sounds like some kind of bug or sickness.”

“The FBI’s Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System,” I said. “It went online in 1999. There was no request that put the two separate fingerprints together...until now.”

His eyes widened. “Two fingerprints?”

“I have a friend in the FBI who does me favors from time to time.”

For a few seconds Fernando stroked his chin with his fingers, as if thinking about what I’d told him. “So what does all this mean?”

“It means Quiñones went stateside at least once, maybe robbed a bank without being caught, and returned to Puerto Rico. It also means the five thousand he may have stolen never showed up on the radar here. But I have an idea what could have happened.”

“You do?”

“If he brought the money here, it was the start-up for a small gentleman’s club that grew into one of San Juan’s most successful strip joints.” I paused to lock eyes with him before I continued. “Lip Service. The name probably doesn’t mean anything in Spanish but it certainly appeals to the imagination of English-speaking tourists.”

“Your idea is most interesting,” he said after a few seconds.

“It is, isn’t it...Juan Alejandro.”

“You mean—”

“I got your fingerprints the afternoon I met you, before you hired me. Remember after we had rum? I took the glasses to the kitchen in Tia’s apartment.”

“Yes.”

“Phoenix and I were both concerned about the man who had stolen Tia Rosita’s heart, especially when Tio Pedro left her well provided for. So I decided before we left home I would run a background check of my own. I had a portable fingerprint kit in my sports jacket.” I closed my notebook and slid it into my pocket.

“So what happens now?” Fernando asked.

“Ordinarily, that would depend on the swimming accident, which happened on a boat excursion out to Gilligan’s Island.”

“*Si. Isla de Guilligan* is a good place for picnics and swimming but it can hold terrible memories when the swimming goes wrong.”

“My next move would have depended on whether the man who died did so accidentally or was murdered.”

He stiffened. “Murder! How dare you—”

I cut him off by holding up my hand. “Lucky for you, the boat was full of tourists and locals whose statements confirmed a young man got tangled in mangroves and drowned before he could be freed. He was identified as Juan Alejandro Quiñones by his cousin...Fernando Pacheco Pabon, who had opened Lip Service a few years earlier.” I paused. “By dying, Fernando gave you a fresh start, a new identity and a business.”

Fernando/Juan wiped his eyes. “I loved him like a brother. It still hurts so much.” He took a breath and shook his head. “So much better than me, he was. Always generous and trusting, always helping. I have tried to honor his memory by being as much like him as I could.”

“Even in a high-turnover business like a strip club, there had to be employees who knew the truth.”

“A few who understood losing the club would cost them their jobs so they kept silent. They are all dead now.”

I nodded. “But after years of being Fernando, of running his business and paying his taxes, you’re afraid to take a chance on air travel, afraid you’ll get caught by TSA. That’s why you hired me, to see if Juan Alejandro would stay dead with people poking around his grave.”

“*Si*. Maybe I wanted you to know the truth but was afraid you might not believe me.”

“I won’t ask you about the bank because that I don’t want to know. The statute of limitations is five years.” I spread my hands apart. “If you did it, you could walk into FBI headquarters and say so without being arrested.”

“Really?”

“But I don’t want to know for another reason. Phoenix. If she knew for certain you’d done it, she might disapprove of your relationship with Tia Rosita.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Then do you plan to shake me...down?”

“I don’t shake down,” I said softly. “I shake *up*. *Caballero andante*, remember?” I let that sink in a moment. “Phoenix and I don’t keep secrets. She already knows what I know. She’s on the fence about you.”

“On the fence?”

“Unsure about you but willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.” I paused a few seconds. “If Tia Rosita is happy, Phoenix is happy. I like Phoenix happy. She manages her *tia*’s money, does her taxes, has power of attorney, visits her three or four times a year. If something strange happens to Tia’s money, Phoenix will be very upset. When she’s *unhappy*...”

“I understand, Gideon. I understand.”

“Good.”

Just then our *domplines* came, much to my delight because I was starving. When I saw their size I was glad we had ordered two each. I was certain I could have eaten three or four. We bit into them at the same time, and the old man smiled.

“Rosita knows everything about me,” he said as he chewed. “Even what you don’t want to know. We don’t keep secrets either.”

“Glad to hear that.” I chewed, savoring the taste before swallowing. “Then I guess the only thing left to settle is my fee for undertaking this investigation—even though it was done before you asked me.”

He stopped chewing. “You said you’ve been doing this work a long time.”

“And you said you would pay me.”

“I did. Since becoming Fernando, I have been a man of my word. How much?”

“For now you get the friends and family rate...Tio Fernando.”

Lips pressed together, he smiled as he resumed chewing. After he swallowed, he asked what the friend and family rate was.”

“This excellent breakfast,” I said. “And a bottle of Don Q to pack in my suitcase.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Nickel City Shakedown*,” the second Gideon Rimes short story, was written at the start of the coronavirus lockdown. It was inspired in part

by the death of my slightly older cousin/sibling Bobby last November and the two earthquake-filled weeks over the Christmas break I spent in Puerto Rico with my partner Tamara and her relatives there. (If I never experience another 5.6 earthquake it will be too soon.) The main character of a relatively new mystery series, Rimes is in part inspired by my son David, who did three combat tours in Iraq and became a cop when he returned to the States. Rimes is a black Iraq War vet-turned cop-turned PI. The Rimes novels and short stories are not police procedurals but urban adventures that, I hope, hold up a mirror to society. For more information visit www.garyearlross.net.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Gary Earl Ross is a retired University at Buffalo professor with more than 250 publications, from stories, novels, and plays to scholarly papers and op-eds. His books include *The Wheel of Desire* (2000), *Shimmerville* (2002), *Blackbird Rising* (2009), *Beneath the Ice* (2018), and the mysteries *Nickel City Blues* (2017), *Nickel City Crossfire* (2020), and the forthcoming *Nickel City Storm Warning*. He has just begun work on the fourth Rimes mystery, *Nickel City Naked Lady*. His staged plays include *The Best Woman* (2007), *Picture Perfect* (2007), *Murder Squared* (2010), *The Scavenger's Daughter* (2012), *The Guns of Christmas* (2014), *The Mark of Cain* (2016), *The Trial of Trayvon Martin* (2017), and *Matter of Intent* (2005), winner of the Edgar Award from Mystery Writers of America. An occasional actor and director, Ross has appeared in eighteen plays and directed nine. His plays *Stoker's Guest* and *Split Wit* have both been accepted for production but are awaiting the end of the pandemic for scheduling. Among Ross's other awards are three Emanuel Fried Best New Play Awards, a LIFT Fiction Fellowship, an ASI/DEC Fiction grant, and a Saltonstall Foundation Playwriting Fellowship. Both *The Scavenger's Daughter* and *Matter of Intent* have been adapted into motion pictures by Chhoti Productions of Mumbai, India, the former under its original title and the latter as *State vs. Malti Mhaske*. He likes to tell directors and editors to criticize him freely. With five siblings, five children, five grandchildren, two ex-wives, and thirty-five years as a union rep, he is beyond hurt feelings.*