

THE DEAD POOL

By

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AN EXCERPT

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CHAPTER ONE

“You may have heard of me, Mr. Zacher. I’ve been around this town for more than a few years.” The man lowered himself into a leather chair in my great room on Calle Quebrada in San Miguel de Allende, México. He crossed his legs and pressed his hands together, waiting. I saw at once that he wore better shoes than I did, but that was

not unusual. Most of mine are spattered with artist's pigments. It was just after eleven o'clock in the morning. I had flown downstairs out of my studio and pulled on a clean shirt for this unannounced meeting. We usually require an appointment, but we didn't have any other cases going.

I turned his business card over. The reverse was blank. The front bore the name *Lucas Burke* in engraved letters on tasteful cream-colored granite paper, the kind with tiny threads in it. "I'm sorry, but I haven't heard your name before."

"Harlan Burke, the Hollywood actor, was my father. Perhaps that will help you to understand who I am."

I nodded, sensing that he needed some encouragement. "I did think the moustache looked somewhat familiar. Sure, I remember him well. *The Hall of Mirrors, The Wax Museum, Alien Moon*. He specialized in horror, not the Texas Chainsaw stuff, but an earlier, more gentile variety. Women loved him because they were always saved in the end."

Lucas Burke responded with a satisfied smile. "Exactly. He preferred the Edgar Allen Poe kind of stories, the old style psychological dramas. He had loved Poe as a kid, and when he became a successful actor he collected Poe memorabilia. He even owed two of his letters. Of course, I didn't get one when dad died. You see, I was not born a legitimate son of his. As a detective you will quickly discover that, I'm sure, as you get into this case, so let me save you the time. My half-sibling brothers do not acknowledge me."

I gave him a sympathetic nod. Was there the hint of a challenge in his smile? I wondered whether this opening was partly a test for me. "Of course that would be a problem. Who was your mother?"

Burke's eyebrows went up. "While she was not exactly a chambermaid in a Duluth hotel, I prefer to say no more, if only to protect her reputation, although she is many years dead now. Her family name was Badenhorst, and I used that name too until I went to court and changed it when I turned twenty-five. Naturally, the Burke name took me a bit further in Hollywood than I might otherwise have gone."

"I can see your reasons for that. You are, if I may say so, on the wild oats side of an old movie dynasty." I was now wondering how he was going to prove this lineage, or if it would even matter once we got into his problem.

“Yes, and like other royalty, that side is often more prolific than the legitimate one. But my father was a good man, nonetheless. I have no regrets, or, not that many, anyway.”

“So how can we in the Paul Zacher Agency help you today? I believe Harlan Burke has been gone for more than twenty years now.” I handed him my card. While our website images were better, where we were loping in slow motion through the breeze in a meadow full of tall grass with our hair lifting at each stride, the card was often enough at this stage.

He only glanced at it and grinned before he put it in his shirt pocket. “And what was your father’s name? I think I can guess what people called him.”

“Theodore, but everyone called him Zach. He’s still very much alive, by the way. I’m only forty myself.”

“Of course. Now we can proceed. We have each revealed our little secrets.” He rubbed his hands together.

“You’ve been on our website, I assume.” I wasn’t sure I had told him any of my secrets, or how many of his might remain, but he seemed eager to establish contact at a more personal level.

“That was where I started, but you were highly recommended.”

“Then you know that my partner is named Maya Sanchez. She’s a historian and author by training, and our associate in the Agency is Cody Williams, a onetime homicide detective from northern Illinois. Maya brings the cultural perspective of a Mexican native, and Cody supplies forensic and procedural expertise.”

“And you are a rather well known local painter showing at Galeria Uno. It’s quite a diverse group.”

“And that is exactly the point, since three perspectives are better than one. I started this agency because, as I was told, artists see things differently. After twenty previous cases, I can’t deny that. It’s become one of our strengths.”

Smooth and polished as he was, Lucas Burke was no longer young, but still trim without being athletic in his bearing. Besides the moustache, he had his father’s arched eyebrows, cleft chin and expressive gray eyes, but beyond that, the shape of his face was more rounded than oval, and it therefore seemed somehow softer, if not exactly weaker.

His wavy hair was full and not yet all white. He was dressed in a crisp pale blue shirt and pressed khaki pants.

“Tell me what brings you to us today,” I continued. “We don’t have another case going at the moment, so if we can come together on your problem, the Agency can get right to work.”

“Then let me get to the point immediately. Someone is trying to kill me.” He studied my face for a reaction, which I usually try to withhold this early in a case, then looked away. His eyes settled on my seated portrait of Maya dressed as Frida Kahlo that hung over the mantel.

“You are quite certain of that.” We don’t usually take paranoiacs if we can help it.

“Yes, there’s no mistake. I live up on Montes de Oca. Do you know that street?”

“Of course. It’s nearly vertical with fabulous views and it runs one-way downhill. It is a test for any driver’s brakes and personal courage.”

“And it’s also one narrow lane wide, so it offers only a small margin for errors. The buildings are scarred on both sides. Like most people on that street, I don’t have a garage, but I do have a single level parking space under one corner of my house. Three mornings ago I came out to run some errands and noticed a tiny trickle of dark liquid coming from behind one of the front tires. I touched it and smelled it. It was brake fluid. I knew this because my father had at one time owned a race car and a crew at Daytona.”

“Your brake line had been cut.”

“Exactly. Hence my visit.”

“What kind of car do you drive? Because most cars now have a hood lock that only releases from inside. That would make it difficult for anyone to lift it and cut your brake lines unless you left the car unlocked.”

“That’s right. You’re not so easy, are you?”

“I hope not. Being easy doesn’t last long in this business, and we’ve survived twenty other cases.”

“It’s a thirty-one-year old Camaro, a classic. A tiny bit of vanity for an older gentleman to drive, I guess you could say.”

“A chick magnet?”

He smirked. “Not once they look inside to see who’s at the wheel, but they always do look before they shrug and walk away.”

“Have you had any threatening messages or phone calls?”

“Nothing like that.” He batted this thought away, as if he found it too tacky for someone in his position.

“Do you have any enemies? Someone who would hate you enough to kill you?”

“Apparently, but I’m not aware of them.” His voice took on a rather prim tone as he folded his arms. On one of his fingers was a massive gold ring set with a square yellow diamond. It looked like nearly two carats.

“Don’t be offended if I ask whether it might be preliminary to blackmail?”

“I have always led an exemplary life in all respects.” He managed a smug look.

“Congratulations. Few of us could say that.” Had I been taking notes at that moment I would’ve written, *morally and ethically challenged*. “You said your half siblings do not acknowledge you. Could this crime be something related to them? Perhaps inheritance issues, although I assume your father’s estate was settled long ago. Was there a lawsuit perhaps?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. Quite sensibly, my father took care of me in that respect some years before his death. My name never appeared in his will, but I have to say I was generously provided for. He even gave me outright several paintings from his legendary collection. The rest was in real estate and a portfolio of bonds.”

“And this caused no bitterness from his other heirs?”

“If there was, I heard nothing of it. Nothing at all.”

“Did he explain it to them?”

“All he told me was that he had made things right with the family, whatever that meant to him—and them. They don’t ever talk to me, and if they talk about me to other people, it never gets back to me.” His face expressed some satisfaction at this. I wondered if that reflected his true feelings, but that may have been a premature speculation.

“You all move in different circles. Perhaps that’s the easiest thing, but here’s a thought that just came to me. Are you sure they even know you exist?”

He gave me a long cool look with his lips slightly pursed. “Well, I have sometimes wondered whether they do or not, but that also strikes me as absurd, since at its core

Hollywood is just as small a town as this enclave of expats in San Miguel, so they must know. People see things, and people talk. Who is sleeping with each other is daily gossip.”

“Maybe by ‘making things right with the family’ your father meant that he had shielded the transfer of assets to you in some way they wouldn’t ever discover.”

“Anything is possible on that score. My father was a man who could be at once open handed, and yet still play things close to the vest. A complicated person.”

“I assume you’ve approached the police about this incident?”

“Yes, I spoke to Licenciado Delgado that same morning. He sent a man out to look at the scene. Peña, his name was. He took some photos of the engine area and a sample of the fluid on the pavement and made some notes, but I’ve never heard any more back from them.”

“Do you have any children, Mr. Burke?” I had started making notes of this as we went along.

“I am divorced and I had one son, Aaron, but he was killed in Afghanistan in 2005. For what reason, I couldn’t tell you, then or now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. So in that case your heirs would not be drawn from your own immediate family members? Excuse me if I seem intrusive or insensitive in asking that, but you can see why it could be relevant. You wouldn’t be leaving anything to your half siblings?”

“No. I’ve made bequests to two cousins on my mother’s side, and then the remainder will go to various charitable and educational causes.”

“Are you close to your cousins? As it looks, they would be your only remaining family, at least that acknowledges you.”

“I saw them both last at a Fourth of July picnic in the Hamptons twenty-eight years ago.” He seemed to take some satisfaction in the distance of that relationship, but I didn’t see any reason to pursue it. It may have had its roots in the larger family issues.

“As part of this investigation I’m going to need to talk about you to other people in town and possibly elsewhere. It will be necessary to divulge your name and probably that you have had an attempt made on your life. Normally we are quite discreet, but it’s not always possible in this kind of case. Are you OK with that?”

“Not entirely, but please do what you need to do. My primary goal is to be free of this kind of threat.”

At that moment Maya entered, unaware that we had a client. Lucas Burke’s appointment had been arranged on short notice half an hour after she left. He quickly got to his feet. She had been riding Martina, her Lusitano mare, but she never hesitated to meet people in her equestrian gear, which always looked smart and somehow still fresh. I introduced them and, after a few words to her in defining his problem, I said goodbye to Lucas Burke and left them together. In addition to being the head of the Agency that bore my name, Maya was our business manager and she could explain to him about our terms, the starting deposit, and our reporting process.

More than that, I also wanted her to take his measure for herself, which was easier to do when I wasn’t present. As a Mexican, she frequently had valuable insights into gringos that I couldn’t always come up with myself. They often behaved differently towards her when no other expats were present.

As I stood in the back garden near the fountain staring into the bromeliads I was thinking about his presentation. By his own statement, Lucas Burke was a man who had always been shunned by his family, other than his father and presumably his mother. His manner suggested a tentative need for acceptance, but also a willingness to withdraw his hand quickly if none appeared to be forthcoming. I pulled out his card again. Besides his own identity, it offered the name of *The Sumner Group* in pale letters in the lower left corner, one I had never heard of. Beneath it read, *Private Banking*. Perhaps it was the kind of bank that didn’t need to make itself known to a lot of people to still do well in business.

At the same time, Lucas Burke appeared to be of an age (I was guessing about sixty-eight or seventy) when most men are retired from the world of commerce. Perhaps continuing to use the Sumner Group name brought him a sense of validation or of trust, a credential even if he was no longer employed there, if he ever had been. Our partner Cody’s carefully maintained contacts in the Chicago Police Department could probably give us some information about the Sumner Group and its less public activities, and maybe who some of their clients might be. I made a note to check it online myself once Burke left. But the Internet, although it tries to appear to be the complete information

source, still doesn't tell you everything you'd like to know, as well as offering many things you absolutely know that you don't.

Maya appeared a few minutes later with a check in her hand. "Martina was very naughty today. She spooked at that green hose again when we were cantering. I didn't give her all her carrots at the end." She reached out and gave me two of them. I wondered where they'd been. Had Martina spit them out when she rejected them? I set them on the bar.

"I know you've spoken to her about that more than once. Can I make you lunch? The leftover fajitas from last night look quite perky and the tortillas are still good."

"So are you." She gave me a long hug. At five-foot six she's about six inches shorter than I am, so her head tucks most comfortably into my neck.

She had changed into her street clothes and we were halfway through lunch when she first mentioned Lucas Burke. "I believe he is a nice man. You know how I hate that word, it's so bland, but he works hard at being nice. From his family history he *needs* to be nice, I think, in his own mind, just to survive. I give him some credit for that. He told me about his standoffish siblings."

"I saw that too, but does that mean he really isn't nice?" We've had some reprehensible clients in the past. This is a chancy business, and that doesn't only refer to getting paid.

"No, but it might. Sometimes when a person is a victim or an intended victim, you need to look behind their reflection in the mirror, as we say. Everything is reversed that way."

"We can do that, since we always give more than we promise in the Zacher Agency," I said.

"Think of his sense of rejection, building year after year."

"Maybe he was only trying to be nice to you."

"I didn't flirt with him. This time I was all business."

"He has a vintage Camaro."

"I didn't see it on the street when I came home. That could've made a difference, briefly."

"It's probably still in the shop waiting for a new brake line."

Maya's flirting skills were legendary. She might've majored in it in college and graduated with honors, but now it lingered only as a hobby. "Anyway he appears to have the money to hire us. What did you think of him?"

I mopped up the last of my grilled yellow bell peppers and onions with the chicken strips and rolled them into a tortilla as I considered this. "He offers a credential that looks both quirky and impressive, but at the same time it's hard to check out. We have had, as you know, clients in the past who were less than legitimate. No pun intended there. I too thought Lucas Burke was *nice*."

"Nice has never made you passionate. I've tried it. Edgy works sometimes."

"And I was always iffy about Mother Theresa, too. You knew that, and she was never edgy, to my knowledge, at least."

"So was I. And more than iffy." Maya's family had always been aggressively secular and anticlerical. They disliked everything about the Church in México.

"Then where are we in—what is this—case number twenty-one?"

"Where we always are, Paul darling. Uncertain of everyone but ourselves."