

ANGEL FACE

by

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The thirteenth book in the Murder in Mexico series of mysteries

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CHAPTER ONE

The sizzling Mexican teen star, Claudia Arango, appeared in only three movies before her career and her life were abruptly cut short. But that memorable third role was not her final public appearance. Much later she returned for an unexpected curtain call that attracted a huge group of fans, both old and new. In fact, by the time I came face to face with her for that last entrance, Claudia had been dead for thirty-one years.

My introduction to her was a crowd scene worthy of her glory days in the movie business, and if no news cameramen were present, the ecstatic crowd didn't notice.

On that recent February afternoon, Maya and I were headed toward San Miguel's Mega supermarket on the Ancha de San Antonio, when a set of blue and red flashing lights in the rear view mirror drew my eye. I drifted to the curb expecting the *tránsito* cops to roll in behind us, wanting to check our emissions sticker, but instead they solemnly cruised past at a pace no faster than a sedate walk. In their wake came an improvised hearse converted from a twelve-year-old Chrysler minivan, and inside I saw a casket without flowers cruising by.

This all converged just beyond the exit from our Panteón, the modern cemetery, near the new convention center hotel, still not quite finished on that day. The fact that the hearse was *departing* with a coffin, instead of entering, raised a distinct question. A swarm of two or three hundred people thronged down the street behind it, the nearest ones placing their palms on the back door as if at a mobile *séance*. They were moaning and wailing phrases that sounded like *Santa Claudia, Santa Claudia, es un Milagro, Madre de Dios!*

"Who is Saint Claudia and why would she create a miracle?" I asked Maya, who is my partner both in the Paul Zacher Detective Agency and in my life. She's not religious, but being Mexican herself, I thought she might at least recognize the name. There are too many other saints here for me to remember, even though my name is on the letterhead of the agency. My expertise lies elsewhere, like in painting when I'm not investigating.

"I don't know. I never heard of her. But when someone leaves the cemetery in a box like that, the same way they came in, to me that's not a good sign." She shook out her shoulder-length hair.

If this was an old Mexican folk saying, I'd never heard it before. The people in the crowd included both men and women, and none of them looked like Americans or Canadian expats. Few of them appeared to be younger than middle age. This suggested nothing to me. After all, I was not on duty, since I was thinking more about whether Mega would still have some of their giant shrimp left for a barbecue that evening, bacon wrapped and six minutes on a side over real charcoal.

Ten minutes later the crowd had advanced to the *glorieta* beyond us and continued to follow the hearse and the *tránsitos* up the *libramiento*, the belt line that circles most of San Miguel, clotting the circulation behind them. When an opening in the traffic occurred, I pulled away from the curb and followed the crowd as far as the Mega parking lot, where I turned in.

Nothing at all about this spontaneous performance suggested we had just encountered our next case. They've all been unique, but the one involving "Santa Claudia" was in a class by its own, as Maya would say in her near perfect English. At that time, the name of Claudia Arango meant nothing to me.

We were looking for dinner, not another case. When we're not investigating, I have my art, which is usually more compelling than any crime or missing person case could be, our business partner Cody has football games to watch in season, and Maya studies the history of this part of México with a greater or lesser degree of seriousness. Right now she's talking about starting a new book. Her last one, a sympathetic and sensitive study of the early years of our town's revolutionary hero, Ignacio Allende, traced his rebellious tendencies to his aristocratic family background. It has now gone out of print without hitting *The New York Times* bestseller lists. "México is such a small platform," she was told by one successful New York agent who didn't want to represent her, "and the press you get there is always *so* bad. Have you considered writing about the drug cartels? I mean, why not at least go with the flow?"

While we're the only private detective agency in San Miguel de Allende, it still sometimes happens that the perfect case almost literally overtakes us as we're driving down the street.

By the following morning I had set this incident aside without much conscious effort. At times, even after all the years I've lived in San Miguel, I simply don't know what I'm looking at. Furthermore, Maya and I usually avoid religious issues; they offend people too easily. At around ten o'clock, as I was about to go up to the studio to stretch a canvas, I took a call on my cell phone from Diego Delgado. Licenciado Delgado is one of the prosecutors in the local Judicial Police, so he handles major crimes in a function somewhat like an ADA in the States, but with more of an investigator's duties. He was calling to ask if he could stop by for a chat. Usually when we wanted to talk to him we went to his office in the old Presidencia (city hall) overlooking the *jardín*, our main plaza, so I took this call to suggest he needed a favor.

"Diego Delgado is on his way over," I said to Maya as I walked out to the loggia, where she was going over some of her notes on the laptop. She always preferred to work out there because of the garden view. Although she recently passed her thirtieth birthday, she looks the same as when we first got together about nine years ago. At around five-foot-six, she's taller than most Mexican women, and she has stayed trim by avoiding the daily intake of tortillas that accumulates around many people's waists here. Her hair has a bit of wave with a touch of henna and reaches to her shoulders, but it was her wide smile that first caught and held my attention then, and it still does today.

"He's coming to our house?"

"Right. He wouldn't tell me why, but I'll get out the good tequila anyway."

"Should I pick up the great room?"

"I'm sure it's only business." Nothing was wrong with the great room, and this time of year, since the start of planting season on Candelaria, February second, we also ate most of our meals out at the edge of the garden.

Although Maya and I are happy drinking Azul Reposado as our house brand of tequila, we always keep on hand a bottle of the Herradura Añejo for those visits of Delgado when we think he has something choice for the agency. Ten minutes later Maya let him in. They stood in the *zaguan* for a couple minutes more exchanging the usual niceties before they joined me in the great room. A visit with him always starts with hearing about how his boys are doing in college, where one is studying law at the University of Guanajuato.

Delgado was wearing one of his brace of brown suits in varying shades. None of them were really his color, but the one he wore that day was a bit further off than most. Other than that, he was the same; his neatly trimmed mustache resembled that of a 1940s Mexican movie star in a black and white B-grade film, and the slight bulge at his neck always suggested his starched collar ought to be half an inch larger. His calm brown eyes often had a look of assessing us or our situation before he spoke.

Maya offered him a shooter of the Herradura, which he had instantly spotted as he walked into the great room, just before his eyes moved toward my seated portrait of her as Frida Kahlo over the mantle. He once asked me how I'd gotten her eyebrows to join like that when they really didn't in life. He thought like a cop, and the idea of painting a feature that was not really there was something he couldn't get his very concrete mind around. He took a seat on the sofa and pressed his palms together.

"But, of course, even though I am on duty for this visit, I cannot in all politeness refuse..." It didn't matter that it was before lunch, either.

"You must keep your strength up," offered Maya. "Your job is so demanding. But there are no murders in town lately?" She waved away my offer of one for her.

He shrugged. "One or two in the campo this month, *como siempre*, as usual."

"But, even so, you brought us something that concerns the agency?" I said, sitting down beside Maya.

"Not in the way of crimes, I think." His manner was uneasy, not what we normally saw from him. It made me think he was on an errand forced on him by someone else.

"I see," I said, although I didn't. Maybe ours was only the rest stop with the best quality refreshments as he moved down Calle Quebrada.

He tilted the shooter slowly upward, a blissful look in his eyes.

"Of course, your personal company is always in demand. There are times now and then when I am faced with issues that are not strictly police business, but yet may require the steady hand of someone with, let me call it, mature experience in delicate situations."

"So this is a sexual matter? Possibly an offense by the uniformed police against a *gringa* that needs mediation?" asked Maya immediately, raising her eyebrows.

Delgado flushed a degree or two. “No, most thankfully.”

I merely smiled. He would work his own way into it, *poco a poco*. “Is there a role for Cody in this?” Besides being a former homicide investigator in Illinois, our associate Cody Williams has a strong psychology background. He also furnishes our main muscle on an as needed basis, being six-foot three and weighing in at 230 pounds.

“I know he was a police negotiator in his former career. There may be a task for him here. You will be the judge.”

Silence followed as the rest of the Herradura shooter rolled down his throat. Maya lifted the bottle with a questioning look, but he shook his head with some degree of reluctance. He spent a brief moment firming up the crease on his pants leg.

“There was an incident at the Panteón yesterday. Perhaps you have heard about this already.”

“I saw a big crowd and a hearse on the Ancha. The hearse appeared to be leaving with a casket inside.”

“Yes. That would be the case.” I wanted to ask him how it was that a casket was leaving. That had to be exceptional, since every cemetery is tighter than a prison. Escape is virtually unknown and no one ever leaves without a court order, which are uncommon.

“Whose body was in that hearse?” asked Maya. I could sense her patience starting to unravel.

Delgado looked at her gravely. “Unfortunately, it was carrying the body of Claudia Arango.”

“What!” Maya jumped out of her chair. The name meant nothing to me. “She was a movie star,” she added in my direction, sensing my lack of reaction, but still staring at Delgado, “a starlet, as you would say, and she grew up here.”

“And she died?”

“She died not long before I was born, so it was nearly thirty-one years ago.”

“And they exhumed her body yesterday? Was it foul play and they just discovered it?” I didn’t see any place for the Paul Zacher Agency in this, or even for Delgado, and the more I heard, the less I wanted to know.

Delgado raised his hands in the air. “Here is the story of this. Her father died two days ago. He had seventy-five years of life. It was his final wish that his daughter’s bones

be raised from the ground and placed in his coffin with him. She was his dearest child, and of course, so successful in the movies, even if briefly.”

“She was, if I recall the story right,” said Maya, “just a few days short of her nineteenth birthday when she was killed in a car accident in México City. My father was a big fan and he always talked about her when I was growing up. I have seen all three of her movies I don’t know how many times. The middle one was with a vampire. The last one was her biggest hit. It was called *Angel Face*. It was like a coming of age picture for her, where she was mature enough to be really sexy on the screen without apology. Before that, not so much.”

“But isn’t this unusual?” I said. “Moving her bones from one coffin to another? Does that happen here?” I tried to imagine this being permitted in southeastern Ohio, where I grew up. There had to be some law against it. I saw my own bones being moved from this place to I wasn’t sure where...

“Well, it *does* happen,” said Delgado with a weary smile, as if he was not the one to judge that kind of decision.

“The family can do that?”

“In México the remains, even long buried, are still owned by the family,” said Maya. “It is their choice to do that or not. They can dig her up and move her to a different cemetery any time.” She shrugged. I knew what her choice would’ve been: leave her where she was and pile on more dirt.

“So now I am wondering how we can help you with this,” I said, turning back to Delgado. “It seems simple enough, am I right? Yesterday the coffin was removed from the cemetery and taken to the mortuary to have the bones placed with the father’s body. Then I suppose they will dispose of the empty coffin some way...” Most likely it would go to the dump, where the people who lived there and eked out a tenuous existence scavenging through piles of rubbish would find some use for it, possibly as housing, depending on what condition it was in. I held back a shudder.

An uncomfortable look came over Delgado’s face. “Well, not exactly, because we have the coffin in the police storage now.”

“Empty?”

“Ah, no.”

“And that happened because you needed to hold the bones for a while?” prompted Maya.

“Well, there were no bones, because it seems that the body of Señorita Arango had not...ah, was not...*decayed*. I mean, not at all.” He cleared his throat several times. “Even after, as you say, thirty-one years in the ground. The gravediggers opened the coffin at the Panteón, thinking to remove the bones there and hold them in a box for the father’s funeral. When the word about the body’s condition spread by cell phone, soon it became a crowd, then almost a riot.” He cast a despairing look at his empty shooter and Maya popped the lid off the Herradura. “*Mitad, por favor,*” he said. “Half, please.”

“And this is why, as we sat in the van while the hearse and the crowd moved past us on the Ancha yesterday, people were murmuring, ‘*Santa Claudia! Santa Claudia! Es un milagro de Dios!*’”

“Yes, so it seems. People have taken this up as if it was...I don’t know. As if it was intended by God that she come back. That is why I came to see you today.”

“I have no belief in miracles,” said Maya, flatly. Her family’s position was that the Church was an albatross that had hung around the neck of México for centuries, hindering progress.

Maya looked like she would refer to hold this at arm’s length. “There must be some scientific explanation for her condition,” said. “She was famous and they would have given her the best embalming they had at the time, am I right? Her body would have been prepared for burial in México City.”

Delgado shrugged elaborately. “Well, we do not know this. Her father cannot tell us now what he ordered for her burial, and both her brothers were younger at that time. They wouldn’t have known.”

“What is their position on what should be done?” I said. “Why can’t they just put her back in her own grave? Or sometimes I think they would cremate the remains and put the ashes in with her father.” I was hoping we wouldn’t be needed in what looked like the kind of superstitious mess where common sense would have no bearing on the outcome. Where people started drawing battle lines without thinking things through. For me, the question of what to do with a body that had already been buried so long seemed oddly abstract. Who would still be mourning her other than a few fans with long

memories and little else to do but watch old movies? Probably hers were no longer available unless they'd been digitized. Some film stock doesn't last more than three decades.

"That is what I wanted to talk with you about today. Her brothers have two different ideas about what should happen here. The older one is Padre Miguel, and he wishes that the remains will not be reburied."

"Why not?" This was incomprehensible to me.

"He envisions to make a shrine to his sister, as if it could be a pilgrimage site."

"And then she would be reburied in the shrine?" I said, thinking of a memorial in the pavement, like the star walks on Hollywood Boulevard.

Maya had gotten up and could be heard in the background moaning softly at this idea.

"Well, reburied is not exactly the word, I would think. Displayed under glass like a saint beneath an altar is a better way to say it. The way it is often done in Italy, as I have been told."

"You're not serious."

He gave me a reproachful look. "But yes I am, and the younger one, Luis, he is not so trusting of his brother, the priest, and wishes to have her reburied with little disturbance or publicity. He says to me in my office before I came here, 'Let her rest in peace. My father was no longer so sharp in his mind, and he did not know what he was asking in his final days. If he had, he would have stayed silent.'"

"But the older brother would have control of the estate here, and as you say, he is a priest."

"He *was* a priest." A subtle change of tense, but less subtle than most in México.

"Now I understand," said Maya, folding her arms as she walked back into this conversation. "So this is the ex-padre Miguel Salazar we are talking about?"

"Yes."

She turned to me with a frown. "He was defrocked for fathering two children in the campo and acknowledging no responsibility for them. Many say he is a scoundrel, taking advantage of young girls who are in awe of him as their pastor and spiritual guide.

They say he even had sex once in the confessional.” She nearly choked on that last sentence.

As we probed the issue further, I saw more of how this could go and probably would. Settling a feud between two Mexican family members was not a task I welcomed. History among kinfolk is often an obscure and unreadable component of such situations. Even if I had been a successful negotiator I could expect to receive the thanks of no one at the end, since people tend to become invested in their grievances over time.

“The Paul Zacher Agency is not a mediation board,” I said to Delgado. “We have in the past sat down a couple of times and talked with people to try to bring some reason into a situation, and Cody’s psychology background was always helpful there, but with these religious overtones, this sounds too complicated. Has someone in the family suggested to you that we be called in to mediate this? You haven’t addressed how this came about. At least an invitation would be helpful as we consider it.”

His expression clouded slightly. “No, you are right, but you *have* done a number of the official mayoral portraits over the last few terms, I believe? Helping out with this dilemma might be a way of ensuring that you would get more after it was finished.”

“I did do the last four of them,” I said. Despite his denial, this looked like it might be a case where Mayor Mario Trebol was trying to deflect some messy squabble over the disposition of this famous body so it didn’t cloud the final year of his tenure. He was always in tune with public relations, and keeping San Miguel high on the list of tourist destinations had been a priority since his first day in office. I leaned toward Delgado. “Was it the mayor who asked you to bring us into this? You can tell me, off the record.”

His hands went up as if at a traffic stop. “I do not say that. But somehow the younger brother, Luis Salazar, has also gotten the idea that you might help in settling this. You see,” here his hands spread widely apart as if to show they were gripping nothing, “for me there is no issue here, since no laws have been broken, even though I fear it could get very bitter if it’s not dealt with quickly, and with some degree of finesse.” His eyebrows lifted at the end. Who else but you could do this? they suggested.

“And dealt with firmly,” echoed Maya, less intent on diplomacy, her lips set. Her mastery of English slang was an achievement she was justly proud of, but I wasn’t sure

whether she'd yet come across the term *stiff* in reference to a potential client for the agency.

"So Mayor Trebol doesn't want to see this pop up in *Atención*, or *AM San Miguel*, or anywhere else in the press, isn't that right?"

"Or, since you ask, on Channel Three. That would be my guess, but you didn't hear it from me. I am only an employee of the Judicial Police, and this is merely a social call, brought on by your legendary hospitality." He nodded politely to Maya.

"So who will be paying us?" she asked in her function as manager of both accounts payable and receivable, not smiling back. In fact, she was now the head of the agency that bore my name, since that was the only way I could get her to come back after she left me four years ago. The main issue between us had been our lack of control over the violence we faced all the time, and the violence we used to respond to it. In persuading her to come back, a critical issue had been that as head of the agency she could choose our cases.

"Well, I understand our department has some unspent discretionary funds for public relations; normally they would go for a fiesta in the Parque Juarez on the mayor's birthday. We feel this might be a better use for them. City Hall supports this idea."

"I see. What would you like us to do specifically?" I asked. I did not add, "For this nameless client."

"We would wish you to support the younger brother, Luis, in this dispute, and lend your prestige and powers of persuasion to help bring about the unofficial and very private reburial of Señorita Arango's body with no further embarrassment to the city of San Miguel. No one from local government would be present, since they were so well represented at the first interment, as I am told. The mayor is most sensitive to the fact that *Conde Nast* named us the best city in the world to visit not long ago, and he does not wish to see us made a mockery of in the press, yours *en el Norte*, or anyone else's. We are well aware of how the U.S. media looks for ways to ridicule anything Mexican. You will understand this, I am sure."

"I do understand what they do, although I don't understand why. But we'll take this on and keep you posted."

I didn't think Maya and I needed to discuss at any length whether we ought to take this case. Delgado's cooperation had been a vital resource to us on most of our others, so declining his request for help was out of the question, even had we wished to, which neither of us did. A single glance at her expression told me this.

Delgado leaned forward with a more intent look on his face. "There is one more thing, and while I hate to ask this, I believe you should see what you're going to be dealing with."

Maya and I both stared back at him, preferring not to understand this.

"Of course we'll meet separately with both ex-Padre Miguel and Luis Salazar to start with," she said. "Then, if it's progressing, we'll meet with them together, and more than once, if required."

"Thank you, and here is their contact information." He withdrew a folded sheet of paper from his inside coat pocket and pushed it across the coffee table, a weathered door with blackened iron straps from a former hacienda stable, now heavily varnished. "I would also like you to view the body we are discussing, so you know what is what here."

Maya and I looked at each other blankly for a moment. The detective business always involves a hardening off process, and I had become accustomed to seeing dead bodies on several earlier cases. Some I had killed myself, which made it harder, some Maya had killed, and a few were Cody's victims. None of them was pleasant to view, but at least they had the appeal of being freshly dead, so they bore some reasonable resemblance to the way they'd looked in life, moments earlier. The prospect of viewing a body that had been thirty-one years in the ground was something else entirely, no matter how little decay was said to have occurred. Privately, I suspected that aspect of Claudia's Arango's condition had been overstated. I felt an uneasy sensation in my stomach that, as it turned out, was going to be with me for a while. I made a note to lay in a supply of antacids on my next trip to the Mega supermarket. Normally I have a cast iron stomach.

"Shall we say at the police storage building near the old stables at two o'clock this afternoon? I believe you have been there before."

Once Delgado was out the door, I was on the phone to Cody before he had pulled away from the curb. We needed some real forensic experience here, and Cody was just the man.

