

DEATH IN THE THIRD ACT

by

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AN EXCERPT

The Nineteenth Paul Zacher Mystery

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Any book starts as one person's idea and finishes by being a group effort. I am most grateful to the following:

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If it is shown in the first act that a rifle is hanging on the wall, in the second or third act it absolutely must be fired.

—Anton Chekhov

The primary task of art is to illuminate and comment on life, but if art precisely mirrored life we wouldn't need it.

-Derek Hamilton, *A Philosophy for Our Time*

For Kristine

CHAPTER ONE

Now and then I hear about some lucky person getting The Call. Usually it's an actor landing the stage or movie role of a lifetime, paired with an established leading man or actress, or a musician being invited to go on tour as the front act to a big star, a position that will jumpstart his career. It's always a life-changing moment.

In the first five or six years I was painting, into my mid twenties, I used to dream about getting The Call too. The phone would ring one morning as I sat at my easel and on the other end would be the voice of the assistant to the curator of painting at the Museum of Modern Art.

"Do you have, Mr. Zacher," she would say, after introducing herself in a cultured voice, "a set of images of your available recent work that you could email to us so we can select three pictures of yours to include in a group show? We're going to call it *Up and Coming Painters in America: How the Future Looks from Here*. We've heard so much about you recently in New York." This made me wonder whether she knew I lived in México, but I would say nothing about that. I had moved to San Miguel right after college.

Then my partner Maya Sanchez would come in so she could help me up off the floor of my studio. Except that Maya and I weren't yet a couple back then.

Later on, in my dual career as a detective at the Paul Zacher Agency and still a painter, it was always clear that it would be the painter who got The Call if one ever came. Detectives don't get calls like that. Detectives get calls when their dry cleaning is ready or their oil change is finished. Too often it's a wrong number at three A.M. when somebody's husband didn't make it back from the local bar. None of these paths lead to glory, and few even lead to satisfaction.

I was ruminating about this as the three of us that comprise The Paul Zacher Agency were all sitting front row center in the San Miguel Play House on Avenida Independencia in San Miguel de Allende, México. Maya was on my right, and our partner in the Agency, Cody Williams, was on my left. We were there because I had gotten The Call ten months before. It was not quite in the same league as the summons to artistic glory from the Museum of Modern Art. In fact, The Call had come in for me as a *detective* after all.

“Did you see the photo of the actor they’ve got playing me tonight?” Maya said closely against my ear. She gripped the playbill in her right hand. “I think she’s *older* than I am! She could be thirty-five. Maybe even thirty-six.” Maya was thirty and we had been together for nine years. Her figure was graceful and flexible. In fact, she had posed nude for me in more than forty pictures, now widely dispersed from Calgary to Quito. “They could’ve picked someone twenty-four to play me, you know? Like I would be an ingénue. And besides, this woman doesn’t even look Mexican!”

“Actors don’t always play their exact age or ethnic background,” I said in an undertone, “although I’m sure the director wants them to be close whenever that’s possible. What if she’s intelligent and perceptive, with a real knack for languages, and occasional bouts of snorkiness? Wouldn’t that be a good fit for you? That’s what acting is all about. I’m sure she’ll be fine, since they cast her based on her skills. Her task will be to reach into her psyche and her depth of experience and come up with a plausible version of you.”

“Good luck with that,” she said with a flip of her hair. Maya’s English was nearly perfect and she had given extensive study to American slang.

“Anyway, young actors must be hard to find here.” The San Miguel expat population of around ten thousand was mostly retired in an active way, but there were few Americans or Canadians still in their twenties. And fewer still of those were actors.

This also raised the question of who would be playing me. I’d find out soon enough. Hopefully it wouldn’t be some dwarflike character actor with elevator shoes and taller ambitions. I’m a fraction over six feet and loose in build, and I turned forty earlier this year. The photo of the actor in the program was only a head shot, so while he was about the right age, possessed of sufficient maturity, and good looking with excellent teeth, it didn’t tell me much more. His name was Lance Bitman.

Our partner, Cody Williams, presented his own casting problem. I could imagine the audition call that went out for him. He was six-foot-three and weighed around 230 pounds. He’d spent thirty years on the homicide squad in Peoria before he moved to San Miguel at retirement in his late fifties. Over the thirty years of his stint on that beat he’d been shot four times, but if that came up onstage the scars could be faked with makeup.

The photo in the playbill of the actor cast as Cody showed a man in his fifties with a wide face, but you couldn't tell much more.

The Call I'd received in this instance came from the theater where we were seated that evening, attending the debut of a new play. It came from Ken Fairfax, the theater manager, an actor with decades of experience, and the director of this production. He told me they had become part of an educational project with a young bilingual Mexican MFA student at the University of Guanajuato, a campus in our capital city known mainly for law and theater studies, a combination that may not have been as odd as it looked at first glance. Especially for law students planning a career in litigation or criminal defense. The student's name was Rodrigo Ferrer.

Ken told me Ferrer's master's thesis required him to write a detective play in English and have it produced. The San Miguel Play House was going to host and assist the production for a three-night run, although Ferrer would be bringing in support people from among his peers, faculty, and friends to serve as stage manager, prop mistress, several roles onstage, and similar tasks. Ken Fairfax was going to mentor the project as well as directing. I had known him for several years, but not well. While he was a serious person in theater matters, his easy sense of humor lay not far below the surface.

"That sounds exciting," I said to him on that first call, in a measured tone, "but I'm not sure how I could help you with it. Are you looking for consultation on detective procedures? Because our partner, Cody Williams, would be the one for doing it by the book, American style. Maya and I rely more on improvisation."

Ken went on to explain. He asked if I had on file good records of all our cases (there had been eighteen of them by that time), and would I be willing to allow Rodrigo Ferrer to review them, select one, and dramatize it? Since he had lived in the States for eight years before coming back to México for college, he was confident of his English writing skills to dramatize the action, but for credibility, he felt he needed a genuine case to build the plot around, and he didn't know much detail of how a real detective agency operated.

In fact, I could do that, I told Ken, since all my case notes were accurate and complete from the beginning. To some degree these outings represented solid efforts that sometimes achieved only a mixed level of success. That meant the files were realistic

about the challenges detectives face in this kind of boutique agency, and they were always honest about what hadn't worked, because we wanted to learn from them ourselves. Maya and Cody, hearing this with tiny stars dancing in their eyes, had no objection, either. Of course, we insisted that all the client and suspect names be changed in the play, even those of the people who hadn't survived.

Although the direct benefit to our detective agency business was not obvious, it did sound like fun, even if part of that was merely the vanity of watching a number of skillful people, well practiced in pretending to be other people, prancing around on stage simulating the three of us—or more likely, simulating a group of detectives more intelligent and skillful than we'd ever really been, but still more interesting to the audience. To do this would illustrate what kind of magic the theater was able to provide, since we knew the raw material better than anyone else could.

Within two weeks Rodrigo Ferrer, a personable and very polite young man of twenty-three, had chosen his favorite case from our files and was hard at work to make it, as he must've thought, come alive as a drama. While these cases had often been more dramatic to us than we wished, and leaning far more often toward tragedy than comedy, still, there were many ways for him to do this that we hadn't thought of when the cases originally played out. I couldn't help but notice that he especially connected with Maya as we all guided him through this process. I had to ask myself whether he was thinking the role of Maya might best be played by Selena Gomez in his MFA production. Even an active female detective might still be seen onstage in very short skirts and enticing cleavage, although none had ever made an appearance like that in our case notes except for a few of Maya's Mata Hari efforts. I intentionally neglected to tell Rodrigo that Maya had been posing nude for me all through our first case. It seemed like that would add nothing to her onstage presence.

One of the things I've learned in this business is that reality has too many subsets to keep track of, and I was most interested to see what Rodrigo Ferrer's spin might be on ours, young as he was. It would be, I was certain, uniquely his own. We had never been fans of drama in life, since we usually spent most of our time fighting it off. Painting also demands a sense of calm and careful focus. I had never been a theater person, either, but I'd found myself in recent months warming to the opening night as it approached. After

extracting his chosen case record from the files, Rodrigo Ferrer had come by the house twice more to record conversations with all three of us in an attempt to capture, as he said, “the tone and timbre of your speech for the way it would come across onstage.” It did not escape me that he asked us to repeat actual phrases from the case record. We’d already given him permission to quote from it freely whenever it was helpful.

Tonight we were guests of honor for the opening night of *Identity Crisis*, the rather violent story of our eighth case that I had filed under the same title. Before the lights were dimmed I turned and looked back over the audience. The show had sold out. It was not a large theater; it could’ve been about 125 seats. Cody leaned across me and said to both of us, “Break a leg, kids.” I wondered if that was an omen. Of course, it was not another case at all, only fantasy and reenactment. Our last case had ended late in May in Guatemala, and this was early October. It was merely a pleasant theater evening with a uniquely personal twist, a welcome and stimulating break from our normal routine.

Or so we then thought.