

An Excerpt from

UNEASY RIDER

by

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The Fourteenth Book in the Murder in México Series

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The modern horse, through many generations of selective breeding, has become an extension of the human ego, an astounding feat of genetic engineering.

-Derek Hamilton, *Wonders of Modern Science*

CHAPTER ONE

The dark-skinned boy whose body lay crumpled at my feet that morning was clearly dead. He had arced through the air to land about thirty meters from the nearest derailed boxcar. On impact, his head had been driven in between his shoulders. When his backpack straps ripped free, the bag burst open ten or twelve feet past the body.

As word began to circulate about the train wreck behind Rancho Aria, many people assumed it was the daily banana train up from Cocobamba, in the state of Tabasco. That wasn't true, because the banana train runs on the tracks across the valley, on the other side of the Rio Laja. This derailment had occurred with the Devil Train on its sad biweekly run north from Guatemala. Local people call it the Devil Train because of the poor devils who cling to the tops of the boxcars. I arrived on the scene about two hours after the accident happened.

My partner, Maya Sanchez, both in life and in the Paul Zacher Agency that bears my name, called me upon her arrival at the rancho to ride just before nine o'clock. Our other partner, Cody Williams, would catch up with us later, since he was still talking to the rescue crew closer to the wreck. After thirty years as a police detective in Illinois, procedural matters always caught his attention. His car was parked near the fatal crossing. We had driven out together right after Maya's call.

A minor track repair fifty kilometers to the south delayed the Devil Train on this morning's trip for three and a half hours. It normally passes San Miguel de Allende, our town in the state of Guanajuato, México, just before four in the morning, and I hear it if I'm lying awake thinking about a case. That's why, at 7:07 A.M. on a Tuesday, when the Devil Train was crossing a feeder road that came down out of the *cantera* quarries

northeast of town, it was still more than three hours late and going much too fast. This information only came out later.

La Estrella was the name of the battered yellow dump truck that hit the train. Its forty-year-old heavy-duty chassis carried an eighteen-year-old box that was overloaded on every run with several tons too much rough-cut stone. The downward slope of the road leaving the stone-cutting yards leveled out at the tracks, and from 6:30 to 7:30 in the morning they were always clear, or at least they had been until that day. It had never been a problem, the quarry owner said. The train didn't belong there so late. This was followed by a shrug. The accident was as much fate as anything. No one was to blame. Too sad, he added. The driver was his sister's oldest son. He was twenty-four years old, a member of the family.

He'd probably never needed to slow down before crossing those tracks in the past.

When the truck's brakes failed, the train bulged out on the impact. Seven cars left the tracks and capsized, ripping a stretch of the rails loose with them. The driver was pinned in the collapsing cab between the slabs of onrushing stone and the rail cars. Like the kid at my feet, he was dead instantly.

Walking hand in hand some distance out from the line of the wreckage on the coarse, stony soil, Maya and I counted five dead bodies that morning. I almost expected to hear the sound of the crash still echoing through the air, but the scene was oddly silent.

The Devil Train is not a passenger route. It runs from Guatemala City to the U.S. border and points beyond. Most passengers riding it are on the run, often fleeing a tough situation in a tougher town back home. Others are more upbeat, on their way to a better paying job over the border. The cargo is mainly coffee and sugar, fruits and vegetables, and some inexpensive apparel, most of it destined for U.S. markets. Sometimes a few empty cars on the way to pick up a distant payload are also linked onto the chain. Easy to identify in the rail yard where the train is assembled, they often carry unwanted guests when it leaves. Other migrants precariously ride the roofs of the cars, where access is easy from the ladder next to the brake wheel at the top. Once aboard, they're vulnerable to rain and sun, and worse, to random mishap or its deadly partner, fate.

The seven twisted cars had spilled hundreds of sacks of coffee beans onto the landscape, cases of mangoes, and thousands of pairs of blue and green flip-flops. From the

last fractured car a mound of plaid shirts erupted, as random and unrelated as at the used clothing stalls at the San Miguel Tuesday Market. Once darkness settled in, none of this would last long. By daylight, the scene would look like the grounds crew had come through and cleaned up, but for the ruined cars.

As Maya and I walked we saw three empty undamaged upright boxcars with the sliding doors open. These would've held passengers, certainly shaken but still able to run once they hit the sandy ground. Maya's face was dark and brooding.

On impact, it would have been five of those hitchhikers from the roofs who were killed outright, thrown through the air. No one could tell how many others ran away unharmed or bleeding into the surrounding countryside, since, as we read in the paper later, forty-five cars of the train remained on the tracks undamaged.

This tragedy happened in a part of our horse country that had been serene until that morning, and it was about 9:45 when Maya and I stopped near the compacted body of that young man. Since he was dead we could only commiserate. In his foreshortened posture his face was not visible, but from his clothes I didn't think he was Mexican. He wore a faded blue-gray tee shirt that said *MALDONADO*, and below it, *31*. Below this he had on calf-length cargo pants ragged at the hems. His ruptured backpack had spilled a few items of clothing nearby. Beside them, a comb and a toothbrush wrapped in toilet paper rested on the sandy ground. Flies buzzed on his skin, the only sound.

Maya said, "The ambulances already took away six survivors before you got here this morning." She and I had been together nearly ten years and I don't remember ever seeing that much pain in her face. I put my arm around her shoulders.

Now the police were combing the wrecked freight cars and the surrounding terrain in search of more victims. One of them told us the coroner's van was on its way from Guanajuato. The local medical examiner that normally performed all the autopsies in town worked only as needed. He was a retired eye doctor, and if in some weeks he didn't work at all, he didn't mind. Now he was overwhelmed.

Not far from the dead migrant Maya stood with her eyes half closed under a deep frown. Most Mexicans don't like to get too close to the dead. Her riding helmet was still in place and she was gripping the reins of Martina, her Lusitano mare, in her right hand.

The startling wreckage of the train, the sheer numbing violence of it, reminded her, she said, of the big earthquake in Mexico City.

“I was only a baby when that happened, but the debris was piled up in mounds for years in some neighborhoods, although not in ours. Whenever we drove by, my mother used to tell me to keep away from those areas to avoid rats. All the good neighborhoods had been restored first. I was older by the time I realized the damage had favored no one, only the reconstruction had.”

Clouds were collecting over the quarry that sliced through the hill to the northeast. This time of year the late afternoon clouds will often work themselves up into a downpour that lasts into early evening. How many migrants were out there now, clustering under the thin groups of mesquite trees, huddling in the shallow arroyos, waiting for us and the police to move on. Many of the rail cars would have some fruit they could take away with them, beyond what had spilled. I stood there shaking my head, making no sense of it. We’ve seen enough death in the thirteen cases of the Paul Zacher Agency, and it rarely benefits anyone, but this scene expressed a special horror.

It happened along the more distant trails of the very upscale Rancho Aria, where Maya rode Martina four days a week. It was a select environment that offered immunity from tragedies like this, or so you thought once you gained admittance, as Maya and I recently had. Any rider could always be thrown from his mount, of course, but that was his own fault. The Central Americans aboard that train, all young men as far as anyone could see, were merely looking to improve their lives, as were we all in different ways, but they had chosen a tougher course in hopes of making that happen.

Two police officers in navy blue uniforms passed us with clipboards. I stepped back a dozen paces while they scanned the body at my feet, probing the pockets with gloved fingers, checking for identification before moving on. One of them took the victim’s left shoe off and probed inside it. Removing the insole, he drew out two U.S. ten-dollar bills and two singles before setting the shoe near the victim’s bare feet and slipping the folded bills into the boy’s pants pocket. The other shoe had not traveled with him as he soared through the air. Most of these desperate nomads were on the road without documents. If they carried anything precious, they often hid it in their shoes, which can’t be picked like pockets.

This far from home, who they were was no longer clear. Another tragedy emerging from the derailment was that their families might never know what happened to them. No money would be flowing back to Guatemala City, San Salvador, or Tegucigalpa in Honduras. Each of the five bodies would be anonymously buried beneath a steel rod ending in a square frame at the top. There a file number would be crudely scrawled on paper under glass. Over time, the sun would bleach that number away, the last meager trace of their identity.

The two officers walked back to the road. This boy had been the last of the five.

The rail accident occurred in July, and we had taken no cases in the Agency since the one we filed as *Angel Face* finished in March. Afterward, I badly needed to step back and gain some perspective. In the last week of that case I had turned forty, nearly lost Maya to another man (quite a formidable one), and come within seconds of dying in a hacienda fire. That was the ascending order of horror I ranked them in. I needed some time to take a hard look at my life. Maya understood my long silences and gave me some space, as I sometimes did for her.

During the weeks following I had painted voluminously, always my salvation, no matter what my state of mind. It may also have been a way of not thinking, since daubing paint onto a canvas does not require the use of any of the analytical parts of the brain, only the creative ones.

While this went on, Maya decided to return to her long dormant high school passion—riding. To me, it was as unexpected as if she had sprouted a third arm, but when she told me about her plan, I could see the inner logic of it in her eyes.

Martina studied the boy's crumpled body for another long moment, wrinkled her flared nostrils and snorted in graphic distaste as she wheeled away, pulling Maya with her. One front hoof pawed the ground. I knew that she detested anything different in her environment, and was ready to move on to less threatening sights. Maya steadied her, and gripping her mane, swung herself up into the English saddle with a modest grunt. She's five-foot six, tall for a Mexican woman, but even for someone with a trim and athletic build, that first stirrup is still awfully high off the ground.

At a walk, she rode beside me back to the stable, about a kilometer along a faint path that wound through the prickly pear cactus and mesquite. I couldn't tell whether the

frown on her face was due to the horror of the accident or something else. She had seemed subtly unsettled recently, during a time that was for both of us a readjustment, but she didn't appear ready to talk about it yet.

While riding bloomed into Maya's life again with no warning, I was smoothing out the rough edges of my existence after the *Angel Face* case. Back in March I had been searching for distraction. Maya was drifting too. Our partner Cody had vanished into his third-floor condo on Prologación Aldama the moment March Madness started. After we finished second-guessing our agency process over a couple of beers or cognacs, he rarely had a lot more to say about a case, although I knew he remained unsettled about *Angel Face*. Some of these cases you have to work through afterward by degrees. Nearly four months later that one was still not fully resolved within all of us.

Immediately following that fire I had found my distraction in a series of therapeutic paintings of vintage rusty cars based on photos I'd taken in junkyards in the U.S. years before. I placed each of them against the ruined facade of one of three local haciendas. It was about textures, ruffled forms, and the color of oxidized metal against ancient stone. They read as sad and nostalgic the way ghost towns do. The best feature of these paintings may have been that they had no connection whatever with my life at the time.

I was unconsciously brooding about earlier days, about symbols of aging and death, images of defeat. Tired of painting worn out tires, I didn't feel the need to go any farther after that trio, even though they sold right away at my gallery in San Miguel. People who know me understand that I follow my eye instead of the trends. Usually I couldn't say what they are. But it was never intended to be a long series, since I wanted to move on, not to linger in the shadows of the past.

Maya, Martina, and I reached the crest of the low hills behind the grand ranch house and paused. The paddock and ring were laid out further down on the right, with the jumping turf beyond. Past the front gate the highway runs north to Dolores Hidalgo and south to San Miguel. Maya's face was more composed now. Martina glanced at me as if to say, Let's move on, it's time to go home.

For her, home is where the carrots are.

When Maya bought Martina, what I mainly knew about horses was that they could be awfully big, and even if they weren't, you still wanted to watch where they put their feet if they got too close. Even an adolescent pony probably weighs 600 pounds. I had also heard you didn't want to walk directly behind them without giving them a heads up. How could there be anything subtle about an animal that could without warning kick you back over the fence you just walked through?

Hearing that Rancho Aria had a Lusitano mare for sale, one that had been a brood mare for several years and was a bit rusty in her training, brought us out to inspect her. Maya was well aware that she was a bit rusty herself. Within two days we made the deal, and Martina happily remained in her familiar stall among her friends.

When we came around the corner of the owner's house and stopped farther down the slope in front of the paddock, two horses were being brushed and bathed. Maya took off her gloves and said goodbye to Martina, patting her neck and cheeks. I couldn't help notice the relationship that had grown up between them in less than four months. She found four carrots, and Martina nodded her approval of each of them. A groom named Rodrigo came over, took the reins, and led the horse away. Further down, a woman in the ring was leading her mount through some dressage patterns. Her manner and bearing had a familiar look, but I was too far away to identify her.

Rancho Aria was a scene of great dedication and discipline. No place for beginners, if you weren't serious you didn't get in. I was far from understanding the process or the goals, but Maya was already bringing me along like a young colt newly under saddle. She started naming the horses to me in their stalls, greeting them as we passed. Many knew her. There was Mádrigal himself, the king stud. A sweet-tempered guy, she said, although at sixteen, coming to the end of his best years.

Distracted, I was staring up at the house while she talked about her progress in riding. Although the rancho property was more than 200 acres, the architect had recognized the single finest home site and built on it. Maya had given me only a minimal description of the owners, Max and Phaedra Kingman. This was sketchy because she hadn't yet met either of them. Her characterization of the stalls and exercise pens, the vet

care included in boarding, was much more precise, and in her view, unparalleled in this part of México.

A moment later I turned to see a tall Mexican talking to Maya with a familiar grin on his face. Familiar to her, not to me. I had never seen him before. Even dressed in a polo shirt and riding breeches, he reminded me of Zorro, especially in his flashing teeth. He was an attractive man with a widow's peak in his black hair pointing down to a dimple in his chin that had to be a challenge to shave. I could tell it was one he was ready to meet, knowing well the effect he created. His manner suggested that he and Maya went back some distance. High school buddies, I wondered, although he seemed older than her thirty years, closer to my age of forty.

When I stepped into the space between them his smile vanished. Maya introduced me. His name was Raul Sanchez. He had the same family name as Maya.

"Those *ladrones* (thieves) from the train will be all over us before the day is over," he said in clear English, frowning with a wave back into the hills. Obviously, he enjoyed foreign elements in his environment no more than Martina did.

"A few may still be hanging around, but the ones we saw weren't moving very fast," I said.

"Just wait, then. I'm going to put on some extra security in the compound tonight."

He nodded to Maya with a grin and walked off as if he had other important business to attend to.

"He's the trainer for this entire rancho," she said. "It's an important job and he's very good at what he does."

And at *who* he does, I thought. I saw a subtle arrogance in his bearing that went beyond his job requirements. After Maya's dalliance during the last case, I was reluctant to face that challenge again.