

LOST IN CHIAPAS

by

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AN EXCERPT

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CHAPTER ONE ON THE ROAD AGAIN

“Not exactly 221B Baker Street, is it?”

The man with one foot on my front step shook my hand too vigorously, chuckling at his own joke, but a trace of nervousness lingered in his voice. At my shoulder, my partner Maya gave me a startled look.

“That would be Sherlock Holmes’ digs in London,” I said, more to her than our visitors. “Please come in.”

“I’m Garrett Anderson and this is my wife, Zina.”

He had emailed me five days earlier to ask if they could interview us at the Paul Zacher Agency about a problem they had with their daughter. They didn’t give us any more detail than that, even though he’d phoned afterward to confirm our appointment.

My first impression was that his clothes looked as if they’d been purchased especially for this visit to San Miguel de Allende. His pale olive-colored travel shirt was all straps and flapped pockets, nicely ironed and creased, but it didn’t look like it had ever seen any road service before. His left hand gripped a hat with the right side brim turned up in a sassy curl like an Australian bush hat. Zina Anderson wore a khaki golf skirt with comfortable walking shoes. With it she had on a golf polo with a light weight navy vest. At least they hadn’t showed up in shorts and tank tops, thinking all of México was tropical. We’re at 6400 feet here and the climate is all about moderation. The beach is too far away in both directions to be handy on a hot day.

The Andersons’ appearance gave me the impression that some upscale outfitter in the States had furnished them with off the rack safari gear, as if their trip could mutate into a trek through the bush at any time without notice. I guess you never know what you’re going to discover in the mountains of central México. Zina’s makeup was a degree too careful and complete for a Tuesday morning in the second half of November. They both looked like they were a comfortable fifty years old and thought it was their prime.

“I’m Paul Zacher—we spoke on the phone yesterday—and this is Maya Sanchez, my partner and the head of the Zacher Agency.” His eyebrows went up as I invited them inside. With a ruddy complexion, Garrett Anderson was about my own height, a fraction over six feet, but he had twenty pounds on me. He had insisted the meeting today would be with the Agency principals only. I merely agreed to that without suggesting to him that we only used principals.

The Andersons looked like prosperous people who were used to being fully in command of their home turf, but today found themselves a bit off their best game on unfamiliar ground. Their balance appeared to be slightly impaired as they stepped into the foyer, watching their footing on the slate tiles. Garrett started eyeing the two Diego Rivera copies I had painted but he didn’t ask about them. Zina looked back uncertainly over her shoulder after she crossed the threshold. I checked the street too, but no one was following them. We don’t get much trouble here unless we ask for it.

The Agency doesn’t have an office for interviews as such, so Maya and I led them into the great room, where they sat on the sofa facing the fireplace. It’s more informal and relaxing that way. I think that being inside someone’s house makes it also feel more confidential. No one is just going to come walking in as you sit there telling your family secrets. Opposite our guests, over the carved stone mantle, Maya stared back at us out of my painting of her dressed as Frida Kahlo. Zina looked around the room as if assessing our design taste or our furnishings budget. Both could vary widely.

“I believe you’re looking for your daughter,” Maya said, “is that right? Please start by telling us about her.” Many times clients don’t know where to begin. For this meeting Maya had put on a pair of black slacks and a white silk blouse. At five-foot-six with a trim build, it was a good choice for her business look.

They both nodded gravely, glanced at each other with raised eyebrows for a cue, and Garrett Anderson began.

“Our daughter’s name is Megan Anderson and she’s twenty-four years old. Until she finished college last spring, she had spent her entire life in Minnesota, except for a two-month-long summer break in Spain two years ago.”

His eyes flickered up and down between the portrait of Maya and then Maya herself. “When she graduated from the University of Minnesota five months ago she wasn’t sure what to do next.”

“Her degree is in anthropology,” Zina added, parenthetically, with a slightly perplexed shake of the head. “She likes to study primitive societies and how they work.”

The clear subtext was that Megan had not grown up in one and might have to go farther afield to see one in action.

I didn’t ask whether in Zina Anderson’s mind today’s México might fit that description. Some days it certainly did. Stands selling cow’s head tacos came readily to mind. Still, you never know how Americans view this country, and I’d be the first to admit that in some places here it’s still only 1950 on a good day. We don’t mind that. I’d rather have it be that way than chasing the latest trend all the time.

At the mention of anthropology, Garrett’s left hand twitched with a gesture that may have been more dismissive. “Let’s just say that after graduation Megan found herself at loose ends. I mean, is there any clear job pathway with a degree like that? Even with good grades, and she had plenty of them, it’s still a dead end. She couldn’t even teach without going on to get a master’s degree at least.”

“Oh, Garry, you have to give her *some* credit, even if that wasn’t the major you would’ve chosen for her. She did minor in Spanish, don’t forget that part,” said Zina. “Surely that’s worth something.”

“Right. That’s going to be a big help when she ends up chopping lettuce at Taco Bell. Anyway, right before she graduated she got connected somehow to an organization that sends missionaries down here to Chiapas. I’m not sure how she met them. I only know she sure as hell didn’t get that idea from either of us.”

“We’re Unitarians ourselves,” said Zina, with a complacently tolerant smile, “so, as you can see...”

“What you can see is that we don’t entertain a lot of mumbo-jumbo at our services, right? Quite frankly, I thought that was a bunch of shameless zealots she’d gotten herself hooked up with. But that’s just me.”

Searching for something more interesting to look at, he waved his own comment aside, and ended up staring at Maya. She smiled at him as if he were the first man who’d

ever noticed her, although she had minored with honors in flirting, and had even caused talk of starting a new major in that field, something many Mexican women would've flocked to in droves.

Zina Anderson made a vague gesture, as if the word *zealot* was one that rarely surfaced in either her vocabulary or among her lunch companions. "But let me finish, Garry! She brought two of them over to the house one night during her last term of school, kids wearing khaki pants and starched button-down shirts on a hot day in May. It seems like we never have any spring in Minnesota anymore. They wouldn't even have a glass of wine with us, like they thought it was a sin or something. I mean, I even offered them a dry white." Zina sighed softly. "Well, Megan wanted to be *involved* somehow, and when no promising job offers came her way, I think she started looking farther afield, in her mind, I mean. I could see that happening."

"Too damn far afield, if you ask me." Garrett shook his head. "I always thought she would've done better with a marketing major. A lot of people noticed that she had a kind of magnetism about her that would've been an asset in that field."

Zina looked at him briefly and then back at us. "She doesn't strictly have to work, you know, because she has a small trust fund from her grandfather's estate." She spoke in an offhand manner, as if this were nothing unusual.

"How much does that bring in?" asked Maya.

"It pays her around \$4,000 a month. But it's not an interest payment, because it's an income stream from a small company her grandfather started that the family still owns and operates."

"That's good because there's no capital she can get at," Garrett added. "It's all locked up in a trust."

Thinking this was not the best of terms for it, in my mental notes I wrote down, *absence of trust, possibly on both sides?* "That would provide her a very comfortable life down here. And where do you live?" A monthly check like that would also appeal strongly to a cult leader recruiting new members.

"Edina," Zina said. "That's a southwestern suburb of Minneapolis. First tier."

“I’ve been there,” I said quietly, not expecting to hear this. “It was on our first case, the murder of Toby Cross. His family lived there then and we went back for the funeral.”

“In the winter,” said Maya, shaking her head dubiously. “It was very sad. We didn’t know how they could bury him, with the ground all frozen so hard like stone. Imagine.”

“I can recall that we heard about it at the time,” said Zina, “partly because it happened in México, which as we all know from the news, can be *so* dangerous, although we don’t know the Crosses socially. They live in the Country Club neighborhood and we’re in Indian Hills, on Navajo Trail. It’s much woodsier there, of course,” she said with a wrinkle of her nose.

“And how did that case come out for you?” said Garrett, with an air of throwing out a tough question.

“We solved it, and the murderer was apprehended.” I didn’t look at Maya as I said this. She had, in fact, killed the murderer of Toby Cross herself, and that finished the case.

“So what would you like the Paul Zacher Agency to do for you?” Maya said after a moment of silence in which the Andersons exchanged glances.

“We would like you to find Meg and bring her home,” said Zina. “Or at least, watch her get on a nonstop plane to Minneapolis where we could meet her at the other end. As I said, part of our concern is that it’s so dangerous down here.”

I had heard about the danger of México so many times that I’d long ago stopped trying to rebut statements like that. Next we’ll be seeing folks coming down here wearing Kevlar vests for underwear.

“We’ve already been in contact with the police and both the hospitals down there in Chiapas,” said Garrett. “They had no information for us.”

“It sounds like you think she’s been brainwashed,” Maya said. “Is that true?”

“I don’t know what else to think,” said Garrett, rubbing his palms together. “She’s always been a sensible girl, and a strong one, I used to think, goin’ her own way, but these people she got in with, I just don’t know how it could’ve happened. Maybe they’ve got her hooked on drugs. This *is* México, you know.”

Maya nodded slowly. "I've noticed that too."

"She might not be as tough as you think, Garry. She likes to put on a good front, but inside, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if she isn't just still a kid at heart, dressing up to make herself look like a grown up." She turned to Maya. "Megan was always into costumes, you know? Halloween was her favorite time of the year. Remember that one when she was a witch in a miniskirt, Garry?" He ignored this as if he did.

A barrage of explosives went off in the street outside, coming at us like mortar rounds. Zina and Garrett both sprang to their feet, although she didn't fall into his arms. I got up and put a steady hand on both their shoulders.

"Don't worry! Please! It's Revolution Day, November 20. Fireworks are traditional." Perplexed, they only looked at each other.

"You mean it's not some kind of attack?" Zina said.

"You mean they *celebrate* revolution here?" said Garrett at the same moment.

I nodded solemnly. What did he think the fireworks on the Fourth of July celebrated? I brought them both a glass of cold water while Maya got them seated again.

"What if we find Megan and she won't come back with us?" I said, after a long silence while they readjusted their composure.

"Why on earth wouldn't she?" Anderson gave me a blank look as if this were beyond possibility. "How could she resist being rescued from a mistake like that? Surely she's had enough time to realize it by now."

"You said she was twenty-four. She might have developed a mind of her own since she left home," said Maya. "It would be the time for that to happen with many women of her age. Maybe that's even *why* she left home."

Garrett only shook his head as if this idea was well beyond him, and not in a direction he was headed in.

"I have to tell you," I said, "that this would be a long distance field investigation with a lot of time and expenses, but I'm sure you've already thought of that. Chiapas is not an hour's drive away. It's on the Guatemala border, so it's far south of here, in fact it's the southernmost part of México, even below the Yucatán, and somewhat to the east."

“We do know she was in San Cristobal de la Something, for a while at first. I could find it on the map, if you’ve got one.”

“Right,” I said, “it’s San Cristobal de las Casas. A lot of the area around that city is Zapatista country, so it’s semi-independent. That means when you get out of town, there are no federal or state police, no government health care or education.”

“So what you’re sayin’ is that it’s a wide open town.” Garrett gave us an uncomfortable look.

“I don’t know how wide open the city itself is. It has the reputation of being a refined place, but I’m just telling you what I’ve read about the broader area, and by that I mean Chiapas as a state. I haven’t been down there myself, but I know it’s very rugged country. What do you have as her last address?”

“We can give you what we were using to communicate with her,” said Garrett, “but she stopped emailing us three months ago, not even responding to ours, and her cell phone doesn’t work any more.”

“Has she been silent for that length of time in the past?” Maya said. “I suppose she hasn’t ever been away from home that long.”

“Well, here’s what it is. She’s been angry with Garry a couple of times before when she wouldn’t talk to him for a while, like several weeks. We weren’t sure that this silence wasn’t another period like that.” From an inner pocket of her vest Zina Anderson produced a folded sheet of paper that listed all the information they had on Megan’s circumstances in Chiapas.

The top of the page displayed three photos of her from different angles. She looked like an appealing young woman with an oval face, clear features and thick blond hair hanging straight down from a part in the center. Her lips were full and sensuous, her nose straight, and her look was direct and unwavering. Based on her appearance, she did not resemble a mental drifter, unable to decide what she wanted to do or how to go about it. Nor did she seem like she’d be open to the oppressive and controlling dictates a cult leader might impose on her. Of course, the Andersons had not used that word, but it was already in the air.

I wondered for a moment whether her parents had read her right. Sometimes adults watch their children get older year by year without seeing them change into

grownups. They remain Little Timmy or Tammy, always in need of protection and counsel. Garrett Anderson looked like he had some experience in his life of events not going exactly his way. How he dealt with it was another question that couldn't be answered this early in a case, but that didn't mean we wouldn't eventually find out.

"Do you have any specific reason to think she might be in danger?" I said.

"Nothing concrete, but we *are* worried." Zina's two-handed grip tightened on her purse.

"Was there anything alarming in her emails, before she stopped writing back? Anything that to you suggested a threat?" Maya said.

Zina shook her head. "Nothing much. The tone didn't ever change."

"Did she mention any of her friends down there by name?" I said.

"One of those button down missionary boys she went with was named Leo Cochrane. We knew that before she left. Other than that, once she got there we saw hardly any detail in what she wrote; it was more like she was simply staying in touch. But she is that way sometimes; Meg doesn't always want to share what's going on in her life. I was private like that myself at her age, but then, my father was a tyrant."

"What she was sending felt like no more than a damned courtesy to me," said Garrett.

"Can I ask why you chose the Zacher Agency?" Maya said.

"Sure, that was easy enough." He smiled broadly. "You're the only American-style detective agency operating in México that I could find, and we don't speak any Spanish. Even after a long search by my attorney, we couldn't come up with anybody else, other than some agency at Lake Chapala that was more about real estate and title issues. I'll be copying him on everything you send us, by the way."

"Then it wasn't because of our shining reputation," I said, nonetheless grateful for this lukewarm vote of confidence.

"No. But we would like to have a few references, if you don't mind."

We discussed terms for a while. This was Maya's area, and she spelled it out by cost per hour of time spent traveling, a different and higher rate for hours spent in investigation, the fact that we don't mark up our expenses and we always submit receipts, and that there would be three of us on the ground in Chiapas. I didn't say this was

because it would be riskier than Puerto Vallarta or Edina, Minnesota, but that's what I was thinking.

We talked about our reporting procedures. Maya then outlined our different areas of expertise, starting with Cody and his background as a Peoria homicide detective for thirty years. She addressed his ability, at 230 pounds and six-foot-three in height, to provide muscle on short notice. He had not been able to attend this meeting. When she said I was also a painter, their eyebrows went up, but they didn't comment. Where we left it was that by midafternoon we would email the Andersons copies of three different references, and they would wire \$8,000 U.S. as a retainer into our local bank account by the end of business on the day after tomorrow if they wished to proceed. This would cover travel expenses to San Cristobal de las Casas, hotels, meals and a certain amount of time on the ground there. I had instantly realized we wouldn't be flying because we couldn't bring our guns on board. It would be two long days on the road.

Garrett Anderson nodded throughout this explanation. The business part of the investigation appeared to be reassuring in its resemblance to his home turf, and money was not an issue. I hadn't asked what his business was, but he had the manner of someone who was clearly in business for himself, and that, in the end, was where our common ground emerged.

Just before noon, Maya and I stood in the doorway and watched the Andersons walk down Calle Quebrada in the direction of the overpass, a little more than a block away. There they could descend the steps, land on Canal, and easily find a taxi back to their hotel. They'd mentioned they were staying at the Rosewood, an upscale hostelry between the Ancha de San Antonio and Parque Juarez that had figured prominently in an earlier case, one we filed as *The Book Doctor*. Zina Anderson was gripping her husband's arm firmly, as if that were her custom, or it just may have been the irregular sidewalk. They were chatting with a lot of animation, a sign I took to mean that they had found a reason to be confident in the Paul Zacher Agency after all.

Our task was now to find our own reasons to be as hopeful as the Andersons seemed to be. When we went back inside I called Cody to see if he was back home. I knew that football broadcasts had not yet begun for the day. Even though this was a Tuesday, there must be one happening somewhere.

Late that afternoon an email came in from the Andersons approving our references, and with a brief introduction saying they had attached a string of twenty-two of Megan's emails that were complete up to the start of her silence. The most recent was ninety-three days old. I scanned them briefly and even though I saw some place references I didn't recognize, they seemed routine and as they'd been described. Maya printed them out thinking to go over them with Cody when he came over for a briefing. Ten minutes later a messenger arrived from the Rosewood Hotel. He handed Maya a large envelope containing a sealed letter bearing the name of Megan Anderson and the instructions to hand it to her face to face once we found her. Maya thought there could be no clearer sign of the Andersons' confidence. "I've got a good feeling about this one," she said, taking my hand. I squeezed it back, although I rarely have a good feeling going into a case. I always feel better when they're finished.

She was more upbeat about this case than most others recently because, she added, it looked like a simple missing persons affair. None of us had ever been to Chiapas, and this was a good excuse to go. It was possible that Megan had zoned out on drugs, I also suggested, and she only needed to be brought out of her fog and packed up for a return flight. That would explain the communications shutdown most easily.

"Probably no one will even be killed," Maya suggested, cheerfully. This was always her hope. I had no response to that. By early evening Cody called back to say he was fully aboard and ready to leave as soon as the deposit hit our account.

On Thursday the \$8,000 bank transfer arrived. Maya and I pulled out the suitcases from the storage wall in the art studio. We were feeling good, ready for a break out of town. We had deep pockets behind us, the insights from fourteen earlier cases with widely varied configurations, and nothing to distract us. We all knew that missing person cases tended to be about misunderstandings, about rebellious children or restless spouses nursing an itch for something new. About people whose identity no longer suited them and they were searching for a change of name and scene. It looked like Megan Anderson had not been dragged kicking and screaming into the wilds of southern México; she was a sensible girl who had gone down there herself in the company of Leo Cochrane and simply drifted out of touch. It might even be that she'd ended up in a place with poor Internet service, something we experienced ourselves now and then even in our house on

Quebrada. And Chiapas was not considered to be the model for cutting edge infrastructure in México.

Like Maya, I also wanted to think we had caught a break. After all, whatever could go wrong on a simple case like that?