

SCORPION RISING

by

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AN EXCERPT

The Twentieth Book in the Paul Zacher Murder in Mexico Mystery Series

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CHAPTER ONE

Allowing for the height of her glossy black heels, the woman I had been observing across the crowded courtyard of the San Miguel Library appeared to be about five-foot seven. Parted in the middle, her hair was dark brown but not quite black, shoulder length, and expertly layered. Noticing my interest, my partner Maya Sanchez suggested this was an expensive haircut that only a couple of expat stylists in town could've pulled off, and at American prices. As a point of reference, my own bi-monthly trims here cost a little less than two dollars.

Maya and I weren't on duty that warm October night in central México, which was not a problem for either of us. In fact, at that time the Paul Zacher Agency that bore my name had no investigations running, which was fine with me. I'd rather be painting, and I currently had a series of urban landscapes going that absorbed my attention in a most satisfying way.

My interest in the unknown woman across the courtyard was purely personal, since occasionally someone I see in passing will end up in one of my paintings, just from memory. Her figure was trim, athletic, and from ten meters away, when I first saw her, I thought she appeared to be about thirty years old. When she came up to speak with me five minutes later, as I was already looking through the crowd at other people, I could see from the fine lines around her eyes that she was nearer to forty, although she'd kept a distinctly youthful look. Part of it was a quick smile that required no invitation; another was her brisk and graceful walk.

An additional part of her initial charm lay in the easy mobility of her face and the way her features were composed. Her eyes flickered with movement and her entire presentation suggested openness and welcome. I realized that I could hardly take my eyes off her. For a long moment she had me contemplating portrait painting again; I was already mixing skin tone pigments on my mind's palette. Some people might even say that hers was a face that was hard to forget. I would've agreed at that first meeting, but I was wrong. Even with my painter's exact visual memory, I found to my surprise that I was able to forget not only her face, but also every aspect of her existence within a matter of hours. I'll get to the reasons for that in a moment. Everything about the case that came out of this encounter with her went against the grain. We've had cases that went wrong right out of the gate before, but never in quite this way, and never so completely.

“I’m Robie Hughes,” the woman said, extending her hand. “And you are Paul Zacher.” Her eyes challenged me to contradict her. From what I learned later, I should’ve questioned the first part of her statement.

I shifted the glass of Chilean red to my left hand in order to take hers. Her fingers were long and slender. They felt cool, much like her expression. The design of the two silver rings she wore appeared to be Indian in style, but more New Mexico than old México. Robie Hughes was looking at me as if she expected me to say something clever, which I can occasionally do, but not consistently, and rarely on demand. Maya knows this better than anyone. When I only nodded with a slightly off-balance grin, she went on.

“You’re a marvelous painter and you also do investigations.” When she pressed a business card into my hand I didn’t look at it right away, waiting for more.

“How can I help you?” I said, after a moment. Service is my life, occasionally. At that point I decided we wouldn’t mind picking up another case, although that was Maya’s call. It had not been long since we wrapped up the bizarre investigation we filed as *Death in the Third Act*. Bizarre probably applies to most of the earlier ones we’ve had. As a boutique detective agency, we avoid the drug traffic scene as something better left to the army, and terrorism is not our cup of tea. We prefer intimate crime, the vile act of one person against another. We love to explore the rationalizations and self-deceptions that drive more spontaneous transgressions.

“I’m having a small problem.” Robie Hughes’ smile was tight-lipped, as if in an effort to keep this encounter light, and her voice moved lower as she stepped closer to my ear. Maya was watching her carefully. “Maybe it’s not so small.” A more serious look came over her face. “Someone is trying to force me to leave San Miguel. I wonder if you can help with something like that? It may not be the kind of problem you’ve ever handled before.”

That, I thought, looked like an excellent bet. This town offers broad tolerance for divergent views and behavior. Most people who leave after settling here do so because they discover it’s not their cup of tea, but rarely are they forced to go.

Her eyebrows went up, lending emphasis to her appeal. I couldn’t tell whether she was afraid or only irritated. She looked like a woman who could take care of herself, and there was nothing panicky or even especially worried about her manner.

“Of course,” I said. “Every case is different. Can you come and see me tomorrow? Early afternoon is best.” This allowed me to paint in the morning. I pulled my Paul

Zacher Agency business card out of a shirt pocket, where I keep them for easy access in a group like this, and gave it to her.

“I’ll be there at noon.” She smiled, moving off in her designer jeans, an expensive pair although they didn’t look new, and a turquoise cami that played well off her eye color, which was itself a shade of green, almost like an emerald tone of jade. I stared at her bare shoulders for a moment. She wasn’t the kind of person that anyone would normally have a reason for trying to eject from this town, as far as I could see. After living for nearly twenty years in San Miguel de Allende, I thought I would know. She looked like a keeper in a way that not every expat was. I wondered why I had never met her before.

My partner, Maya, came up and placed an affectionate but possessive hand on my shoulder, following Robie Hughes’ departure with her gaze. Nearly as tall, Maya was wearing her normal pricey spray-on jeans that still weren’t as good as those Robie Hughes wore, although they may have been tighter, with a white cotton embroidered peasant top we’d bought in Oaxaca on one of our earlier cases. Although her heels were lower, Maya’s jewelry was better: chunky old Mexican silver made for the tourist trade of the forties or fifties. Its mellow seasoned luster now glowed with its own South of the Border patina.

Maya and I had been together for more than nine years and it still worked as well as ever. We talked about marriage now and then, mostly in theory, but nothing ever happened. Her family wasn’t pushing her about it. They were upscale business people from Mexico City and they had not raised her in the Church. In fact they were strongly anti-religious. I knew that for some people it was a mistake to get married after living together that long—a scary fact. There was nothing else scary about her, unless you found yourself up against her on one of our cases. She didn’t ever care to discuss it, but she had killed two people on our earlier adventures.

“Who was that?” Maya asked in a harmless tone, staring after Robie Hughes. Her voice expressed a casual curiosity; one that I knew understated her interest when she asked after a woman that appealing.

“Robie Hughes is her name, she told me. Do you know anything about her?” I handed Maya Robie’s card. It had only her name, address, and a cell phone number over the low-contrast image of a pack of wolves or wild dogs running hard through an arroyo after unseen prey. Not having grasped the detail of it before, I wondered what kind of business that might describe.

“No more than the name, I think. Maybe not even that. She has a problem for us to check out?”

I looked into her brown eyes. Maya’s oval face was the same shape as Robie Hughes’s, but it expressed an entirely different message. “She only told me that someone’s trying to run her out of San Miguel. Imagine that.”

She gave me a modest shrug, not fully up to the Mexican standard. “Someone’s wife would be my guess, don’t you think, Paul? I mean, really. Most women wouldn’t work it that hard at a charity event, unless they were giving it away.” She continued to stare after Robie, just now disappearing into the crowd nearest the entry. I had the sense that Maya was thinking Robie was closer in age to me than she was herself, since I’d recently turned forty.

“Maybe. That’s where I’d start looking. But it’s a new case, right? It sounds like this one will pay.”

“No problem with that.”

We’ve had a few problems with payment now and then. Maya called some of our efforts Boy Scout cases, those where we acted for the public good and then no one paid us, and usually no one even said thanks at the end. Our partner, Cody Williams, who had a psychology degree that only lacked his dissertation before he became an Illinois homicide detective, called it a case of internalized rewards. We could feel good about what we’d solved, even if it didn’t buy any groceries. As a painter, I was OK with this at times because I was accustomed to canvases sitting around for a month or two before they caught a buyer’s eye. Besides, I always enjoyed looking at a picture of mine for a while before it was sold. I thought of it as my reward phase, but studying it also gave me the occasional clue about what I might have done better. But Maya, who paid the bills, didn’t always see things in that light. More than anything else, she wanted turnover and resolution. Her idea of closure was always more exactly defined than mine was.

People were drifting around in front of us as they listened to a mariachi trio, and the fingers of the women often sought the hands of their men, especially when the song was *Besame Mucho*. More than a few were starting to dance.

I couldn’t spot Robie Hughes in the crowd anymore, even though at a fraction over six feet, I’m taller than most people in San Miguel. I wondered whether if I plunged into the group she’d disappeared into I would find her there at all. She had left me with an odd sense of unreality, not that she was at all threatening. For one thing, I couldn’t identify her look. She acted in every way like an American woman who’d been in México

for a number of years, as many have here, but at the same time, her appearance was more exotic. This word might convey more than I really mean, but I still sensed that aside from being younger than most retired expats, there was something about her that was five degrees off the standard USA expatriate image, which really was no standard at all. That didn't mean she was Canadian, either. I found I couldn't say more about it than that. At our meeting tomorrow I planned to find out more detail to flesh out my speculations.

We were attending a benefit at the Biblioteca in this central Mexican town of 75,000. From the eight or ten thousand expatriates here, it's easy to draw a crowd to support a charitable cause. Many have extra money, and the tourist traffic has been getting stronger the past few years. Even so, any time anyone writes anything good about México, the American press levels a barrage of bullets over the edge of the trenches at the border and we all hunker down. In this open courtyard, surrounded by seventeenth century arches, a hundred or so contributors circulated. The same musical group always entertained at these affairs because their Renaissance costumes were better than those of any other. They delivered local color, even if the music they played wasn't much different. They looked like fifteenth century troubadours in maroon velvet and gold braid. Maya had reminded me when they came in that they weren't mariachis; this was a *tuna* band, and it had nothing to do with fish. They mostly played the music of old Spain.

We were there to write checks for an organization that selected deserving local high school seniors and paid their college tuition for four years, if their grades justified it. For most of them, it was their only shot at getting a college degree. The library went back more than sixty-five years, occupying a densely ochre building on Calle Insurgentes, wrapped around two sides of the Santa Ana church. I've never understood the architectural plan of it, but the interior provided enough warrens to store a lifetime supply of books in two languages. In the past it had been a slaughterhouse, and both before and after that, a convent. Given the state's relationship with the church, I suspected the slaughterhouse period might have been in the 1920s, when the government closed all the convents, dispersed the nuns, and tried without success to suppress the Catholic religion. Everyone is getting along better now.

The thought of Robie Hughes and tomorrow's appointment soon slipped from my mind, as the mayor accepted the microphone with a gracious nod and rose to give what he promised would be a "brief" speech. I looked at my watch.

Oddly, a few glasses of red wine can either make my memory a bit vague, or give it more focus and definition. On the following morning it seemed like the former effect. It wasn't until I was sitting down to paint at around ten o'clock that I recalled in mid brushstroke that I had scheduled a noon appointment with Robie Hughes, and it suddenly made me jittery. Normally I would've remembered it when I reviewed my plans for the coming day as I stood before the bathroom mirror shaving or brushing my teeth. Maya would usually have gone riding in the morning but she showed no sign of leaving. I think she was waiting to see what Robie Hughes would be wearing for this meeting, so she must've remembered it. She liked to scope out other women when they crossed my path as potential clients. Sometimes she was subtle, other times not so much.

"Today your Miss Cutie Hughes will appear in a short skirt, with a tight top in another eye-catching color, possibly red," she said. "At her age she still wears short skirts." Maya had reluctantly settled into being thirty, but I hadn't noticed any rush to let down her hemlines.

"Maybe she has terrific legs like you do," I said, shrugging. "I wouldn't know." A fair and balanced perspective is important to me although I don't watch much cable TV. You can't be an acute observer without being impartial, and as a painter and a detective, being free of bias is the key to doing both well.

"You already know she does. You could probably paint her nude without having her enter the studio. Do you want me to call Cody in for this meeting?"

"Not until I find out what it's about. Maybe she's only paranoid and there's nothing to it. We've seen that before, too. It's not like it's a murder case. I'll be interested in having your take on her after she leaves."

Our friend and business partner Cody Williams is a retired homicide detective from Illinois who, although he lives here full time, has chosen not to use San Miguel as a place to continue his retirement. He and I have handled more than a dozen and a half cases together over the past few years, and Maya has been involved with most, if sometimes under protest. Now that she's replaced me as head of the agency, she's in the front rank of all of them. Sometimes it's a living, sometimes it's closer to dying; you can never tell in advance.

Each of us has killed one or more people in the process, but we've all still been able to keep out of the Mexican prison system. When I'm not on a case I'm mostly painting. Right now I'm working on a series of cityscapes of different San Miguel neighborhoods. The one on my easel upstairs is based on a scene near Calle Caracol

Dorado up by the high-rise condo. In this case, high-rise means six floors tucked into a steep hillside. Looking down from the Libramiento, the highway edging the town, near the top at the back it looks like one story. While the *barrio* views are prominent from the executive floors, I'm not sure they helped sell the project. It's all crisp and new, but I don't mind gritty, and México, away from the haciendas and the beach resorts, does gritty better than where I came from in Ohio, where grittiness is rarely charming. It's not often charming here either, but it is real.

We were sitting out in the loggia of our mostly colonial-era house on Quebrada. I say mostly because there was no roof on the dining room when I bought the house, and my painting studio on the second floor is a remodel of two former bedrooms. The rest is mostly eighteenth century.

With a client meeting approaching, I had given up any further thought of painting that morning, so I made another pot of coffee. On the back wall of the garden, beyond the fountain, the new shoots of our giant bamboo, as big around as my forearm, were growing in height about five inches a day, still drawing on the ground water from September, the height of the rainy season. We could almost hear them squeaking from the effort. Nothing more had been happening with the Agency since the case we wrapped up in October, one that had been a real hall of mirrors, since the murder had occurred in the theater during a play. I had no problem with moving on. I was painting again, Cody had his police pension, and Maya was still selling a few copies of her biography of Ignacio Allende's early years, our town's revolutionary hero, although her publisher had quietly let her know there wouldn't be another printing. She planned to buy out the remainder copies and have them shipped down here to stock the two local bookstores. She spent most of the time lately riding her Lusitano mare.

I was pleased with the way the rooftops and terraces of my *barrio* picture made an almost abstract effect. The character of the slabs in the walls and roofs at different angles suggested Cubism. They caught the light at interesting angles. I liked to play with abstraction without actually going all the way there. It's no more than a tease for me—I never commit to it. But as a painter it's hard to work to a schedule with a fixed endpoint, and the idea of Robie Hughes coming soon to interrupt me had more or less shut down my painting process for the day.

I looked at my watch. It was about 11:15. I usually don't have any forebodings when a client is coming in. It's always better to keep my mind open until I hear the facts, but this one was still bothering me and I couldn't have said why. Maybe I should call Cody in on it after all? He had a way of taking an initial inventory of a new client that gave nothing away in his face. But no, I decided I'd wait and get some detail first. Maybe it was a case we wouldn't want. Cody hadn't attended the Biblioteca benefit and knew nothing about this. Maya and I had gone mainly as a way of putting in an appearance and supporting a cause we believed in. Sometimes, as I had, you could hand out a few business cards.

By a quarter after twelve Robie Hughes had not appeared at our door, and I began wondering why she was late, but of course, it was México. Noon could mean 12:45 more often than 12:00, although most expats didn't operate that way. To pass the time I went into the kitchen to clean out the coffee pot and wash the breakfast mugs.

"I don't think she's coming," I said to Maya ten minutes later. She shrugged but made no move to leave for the ranch. When by one o'clock Robie Hughes had still not appeared, I called Cody and told him what was going on. He didn't sound worried.

"What do you want to do?" he said. From the warped sound of his voice, he might have been stifling a yawn.

"I feel like there's something wrong here, I don't know why. Anyway, she gave me her card, so I've got her address. Her problem sounded a bit threatening."

"You sound like you want to go over there and see if she's all right."

"Yes, I think so. I'd like to have your criminal instincts along."

"You're going to ring her doorbell, and when she doesn't answer, you want me to pick her lock for you."

"Pick it for *us* is more like how I look at it. It could come to that. Another felony for you would be nothing on your mixed record. We get caught, I'll testify against you, and then I'll walk free in exchange for helping the police. You'll go down for it." I would never suggest this to him, but I believed that after thirty years as a homicide detective in Peoria, he rather enjoyed doing the occasional break in. It gave his career more symmetry, after always being on the side of the good guys, who could be boring people that he very well knew were not always that good when no one was looking.

Ten minutes later Cody showed up at our door with his lock picks on his belt, and we drove off in his Ford, leaving my SUV for Maya. She gave us the princess wave from the doorway because it reminded her of Vanna White, and we always watched *Wheel of*

Fortune when we were home. She'd observed that Vanna's body language was *so* American, one of the few things about the U.S. lifestyle that she coveted for herself. Maya also liked to practice her vocabulary by solving the puzzles.