

An excerpt from:

*THE*  
*PREDATOR*

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

From the violence of the rainstorm, I almost expected to find Boris Karloff on the doorstep when the bell rang. I debated whether I should mop up the leak coming under the door into the entry before I opened it, but just then the doorbell rang again. From the low angle of the wind, water was still driving in over the threshold. I'd almost missed the ring of the bell between two thunderclaps. Outside, the rain was hitting the street so hard it almost bounced over the head of our visitor. Under the single nearby streetlight on the other side of Calle Quebrada it came off the cars like a drumroll. Even in central México's dry season, we can still get a downpour like this in San Miguel, usually when we're at an outdoor restaurant and the car is parked four blocks away with the umbrella behind the front seat so we never remember to take it with us.

It was nearly 8:30 in the evening and I had thought I was done for the day.

When the man came in his appearance immediately reminded me of his father. He had the same broad chest over a narrow waist, and wavy dark hair with a widow's peak. His once crisp tropical shirt, now damp and wilted, was opened two buttons to underline his virility, and his tight jeans, wet to the knee, said he might still be in play as he bent over and leaned his rolled up umbrella in the corner near the door. The water streaming off it bled into the spreading puddle. He wore an elaborately worked Navajo concho belt in silver and turquoise. It would have taken a skilled craftsman a week to make his stamped and embroidered Western boots, now soaked. He pulled them off and stood them in the corner too. When he turned back to me and grinned I placed his age at about thirty-five.

"I'm Paul Zacher," I said, using a low-key tone designed to put him further at his ease. I was wearing paint-stained jeans and one of my older STAFF tee shirts, one with a frayed neck. "I

would've dressed better but we didn't know when exactly to expect you because of the storm, and I was painting earlier."

The truth was I didn't expect him at all anymore.

"Then you must be the head of the agency. I'm Mark Sandoval." His eyebrows went up as he gripped my hand too hard. His palm was wet, but I was expecting that. He was about the same height as I am, a fraction over six feet, but he might have outweighed me by fifteen pounds, most of it in the shoulders.

"Not anymore. I'm only the founder. Come on in."

"Nice town," he said as we crossed the *zaguan*, the entry. "It must be pretty old, I guess. I couldn't see much detail in this downpour. I got in from Leon on the shuttle after lunch but the rain kept me inside my hotel most of the day."

Two days earlier, Maya had received an email at our Paul Zacher Agency address from this same Mark Sandoval, son of the late Professor Vincent Sandoval, an archaeologist we had once worked with, who had spent a distinguished career in the Yucatán. In his email, Mark didn't say exactly that he wanted to employ us, only that he had some questions about his father. Naturally we always welcome referral business, although this was not quite that. The message closed with a curious phrase: *buluc yo kal mulob*, for which he offered no translation, which made us think he didn't know what it meant. We surely didn't. Maya suggested it was something in one of the Yucatecan languages, Toltec or Mayan, but she couldn't guess what.

She was waiting for us in the great room. Maya has been head of the Zacher Agency for a couple of years now, but she likes to put me out in front because my name is still on the stationary. We don't have an office as such, or a sign on the door. México is an informal place to do business most of the time, and I normally like to hold these interviews out on the loggia, but even though it's sheltered from the rain on two sides, in a downpour like this, a fine mist often drifts in and coats everything. She rose as we came in. I always watch to see how men relate to her because it gives me a cue as to who should be leading the conversation. Although Mexican women with no formal training possess the ability to flirt at journeyman level or better merely from instinct, Maya has always been Olympic medal grade. She's taller than most of the local women, about five-foot-six, and her shoulder length hair shows a splash of henna in the right light. Her figure is an artist's dream—she's modeled for me in about forty pictures.

"Nice to meet you," she said warmly. "I was very fond of your father. That was our saddest case."

"Thank you. I went over a lot of his notes from when he worked with you guys. He was skeptical at first about that fifth codex, but then he was sold on it."

I thought he held her hand for a couple of seconds too long, or perhaps she was holding his, but she already knew from that how it would go. When he sat down he studied my painting of Maya over the fireplace for a moment, the one where she was dressed and made up like Frida Kahlo in a seated pose, her hair up in a bun. Hanging one of my lush nudes of her up there would have been too distracting for most first interviews.

“Would you like a brandy?” I said. “Something to take the chill off? And a towel, perhaps?”

Mark Sandoval accepted both. I poured three cognacs while Maya fetched a clean hand towel from the cabinet in the powder room off the entry. Before we got into this any further, I wanted to figure out how much he knew about his father’s death, so I decided to be direct before she took the lead.

“Of course we heard about it, but we never had any detail. Exactly how did your father die?” I said, feeling disingenuous in asking, although I didn’t know much about the circumstances myself. It had happened several years ago, on our second case, where the Mexican government, the Zapatistas, along with a private collector who had deep pockets, had all been running after a previously unknown fifth Mayan codex that had unexpectedly come into our possession. Halfway through the case we’d discovered Professor Sandoval’s left hand on our doorstep one night after the doorbell rang. We only knew it was his by his college ring, but I wasn’t going to tell Mark that. The image was still too graphic in my mind. Cody Williams, our retired homicide detective partner, had picked up the hand in a plastic bag and brought it inside. He always has a practical turn of mind in situations like that.

Mark Sandoval shook his head as he wiped his neck. “I don’t know the detail, either. I never even heard whether the Mexico City Police made an arrest. I guess the process can be kind of vague down here if you’re not connected. It didn’t help me any with closure, though. At least they sent me a death certificate, although it was hard to read. I don’t know much Spanish, although my dad was fluent, since he went to grad school in Mexico City. I never wanted to learn it, you know? Growing up in Albuquerque, I mainly wanted to fit in.”

Maya leaned forward. She was wearing one of her form-fitting scooped tops, and depending on her posture, this worked quite well when she wanted to focus a male client’s attention.

“In your email you said you had found some important documents you wanted us to look at. Do you think those papers have some bearing on his death?”

“They were in his safe.” Even as he nodded, he made a vague gesture. “I found five other file drawers full of papers in his office at home that weren’t under lock and key. There was

nothing more distinctive about them than that, I guess. Not like they pointed to anybody as his killer.”

“Wouldn’t you have looked in the safe first after he died? It’s been several years.” She asked this with a smile that said she was no more than casually curious. I didn’t believe it. I was also wondering why this was coming up after so much time had passed. Mark Sandoval raised both hands, palms outward.

“Hey, some of that stuff I couldn’t deal with right away, OK? I was grieving. I took the will out, and I found the two life insurance policies right away, but the other papers I did no more than scan. Dad’s death was a horrible shock. He was only fifty-eight. I really thought he had another twenty-five years in him. Then I was faced with selling his house into a real estate market that was far off its peak, and getting rid of his furniture. Anyway, these papers were just archaeology. There was no shortage of that in his office, believe me. I had three good offers on his library just like *that*, all from college professors, people he had worked with.” He snapped his fingers and gave Maya a careful smile that suggested, “Hey, you might understand me better than he does.” It made me wonder what my face might be showing.

“But still, they were the only archaeology papers in the safe, right?” she said. “Locking them up like that might have suggested to you that they had some special significance.”

“Yes, but they didn’t look any different then.”

“What makes them different now?” I asked, trying to move this along. Nothing Mark Sandoval had said so far justified his trip down to San Miguel. It was December, and the weather, while never harsh, was not as good as what the beaches were offering. With all the bad press from the U.S. news media, there were bargains everywhere.

“Well, I think having them stolen before I could even get to this meeting tonight suggests they had some value.” Score one for him, I thought.

“You didn’t mention that earlier,” Maya said, with no special inflection, but I could hear the subtle hardening of skepticism in her tone. She didn’t care to be set up.

“Well, you can see why I didn’t trust the phone after that. I knew I’d be able to tell you in person, more privately.” His smile suggested a level of intimacy that I wasn’t feeling yet before he knocked back a good portion of the cognac. It was our client variety, a popular label, but still, one Maya and I didn’t usually drink when we were alone. We never wasted the high-end stuff on a preliminary meeting.

“How did that theft happen?”

“I was in the Houston airport this morning waiting for the connecting flight. The papers were in a case with my laptop that I always carry with me on board. It was sitting next to me,

leaning up against the seatback. I was talking to a woman on my left and when I glanced at the computer case again it was gone. I should've kept my hand on it, I guess. I felt really stupid, because it had only been sitting there about five minutes. I jumped up and looked around, but I saw no one running away, or carrying anything that looked like my laptop case. I even made a circuit of the waiting area right away."

"And when you returned to your seat the woman you'd been talking to was gone too," suggested Maya, "even though you had been getting along so well with her."

"Yes! You are *so* savvy! How did you know that? It must be because you're in this business!"

She nodded briefly and glanced at me. "More likely they wanted the laptop, don't you think, Paul?"

I couldn't be sure. Mark only shrugged. "So you don't have any of those papers anymore, right?" Maya looked at me as if my hearing had begun to fail, although my fortieth birthday was still off in the distance. "I don't suppose you copied them before you left?"

Mark shook his head. "Stupid of me, I guess. I remember that they dealt with the time he spent in Ek Balam, which is an ancient ruined city not far from Chichén Itzá in the state of Yucatán. Valladolid was his base when he worked there a few months before he was killed. I remember they had started some new excavations using Guatemalan labor. I guess it's a big site."

"Aside from finding them in the safe, why did you think they were important enough to bring down here and show them to us?" I asked.

"I know he was working on putting together some material for a new book, and those pages in the safe could have been part of that."

I also knew that Vincent Sandoval had earlier published a memoir titled, *My Life in Ruins*.

"I thought they might be worth something because he'd set them aside like that," Mark went on, "although I never heard him talk about them apart from his planned book. But I want to tell you something confidentially." Mark leaned toward Maya.

"*All* of this is confidential," she said, also leaning forward, but no more than a centimeter.

"For some reason, Dad never told me everything. I could sense he was often holding back, OK? Like sometimes I'd try to get him to estimate the value of the contents of some of the tombs he'd found, but he would never say. He always answered that their value to science was the biggest part of it." A patient, and even affectionate, smile came over his face. "Look, he was not a mysterious guy. You worked with him, right? He never had any time for mumbo-jumbo—he was always mister scientist. When something was worth guarding, he knew it. So if he kept those

papers in his safe, I thought they must have some real value, you know? There were eight pages of text without any pictures.”

“Was there ever an attempt to rob his office?” I asked, watching the light from the recessed ceiling fixtures refracting through my cognac. At a different angle, they would’ve created an uncomfortable glare as they came off Mark Sandoval’s teeth.

His brow wrinkled. “Funny you should say that. We did have a break in not long after his death. I always thought that it was done by someone who had read Dad’s obituary in the paper. Some people operate that way, but they didn’t get into the safe. Nothing of value was missing in the room, either, as far as I could tell.”

I nodded. It could’ve been just that. I never know how to value old information.

“Did he have a computer there?” I asked.

“I had already sold it, and the printer too, thank God. Those were the first things to sell. I’m sure they would’ve taken both of them.”

“His books were already gone too by then?” asked Maya.

“Sure. Dad wasn’t even in the ground a week before the guy sent a crew to pack them up. They went to somebody at Brown University, as I recall.”

“I know you didn’t have any with you, but were there any photos or sketches with those papers when you found them in the safe?” I asked.

“No, but there was a funny hand-written note at the end that I memorized. I’m glad now that I did, because I think that was at the core of it. I wish there was more.”

Aside from the diminishing torrent outside, mostly kept at bay by our two-foot-thick stone and stucco walls, the silence within seemed to collect more thickly around us. The corners of the great room where we sat darkened further. Here was the key to why Mark Sandoval had come. I found myself leaning toward him. Even after the soaking he’d taken in the downpour, a subtly diluted hint of expensive cologne came off him.

“Go ahead and say it,” said Maya. “We’ll never tell anyone.”

She wasn’t taking him seriously yet, but he was enjoying the suspense. I couldn’t see her face, but I knew how it must have looked.

“There was a part in Mayan that I couldn’t even pronounce, and I sent you that in my email. The rest of the note read, *From SI 41° 2.2K.*” His voice was a bare whisper.

Maya straightened up and threw her shoulders back before she looked at me with raised eyebrows.

I felt no strong reaction. “That has to be partly a compass reading, not a temperature, although I suppose it might be down there. In Fahrenheit, 41° Centigrade would be about 106°.”

I'd been a Boy Scout once and developed a knack for quick conversion between the two that had always been handy in México. There were times when Maya thought I still wore that uniform, like when we took on cases where the client could never pay us. Our partner, Cody Williams, called it acting *pro bono*. Maya called it *como estúpido*, but then, she wrote the checks to pay the bills when each case was finished. There were times when we didn't break even, but at least we felt good about ourselves. Maya never got that part, since not everyone here gets to have self-esteem.

"Forty-one degrees is nearly northeast," I continued, "since north is zero and east is 90°. Two point two K is easy, that's the distance in kilometers from a fixed point. But S1? It must be the starting point, whatever that means."

"Is it some place at Ek Balam, or a view from it?" said Maya. "We can dig that out easily enough, I think. No pun intended." She gave Mark Sandoval a sly look, which made me think she was hoping to get more out of him. I wasn't sure he had much more of value to be extracted. I suspected that if we were partying with him some of his other virtues would more easily emerge.

Still, this left me wondering why he hadn't done this research himself before rushing down to México. The Internet toll way is a route open to anyone with the price of admission. Wi-Fi is available in many places for the price of a cup of coffee, and often for free. I looked him over again. Self-indulgence was etched on his face and bearing, in his perfect teeth, whiter than anything in nature. It was on the maker's label in his clothes, I thought, although it may have been called something different in the ads in *GQ Magazine*. I began to understand why he had found his father's will and the life insurance policies first, and initially brushed the field notes aside. Surely in the public mind his father's work in Mayan archaeology was one of the more romantic sciences. But the people who practiced it daily in the torrid, snake-infested and bug-ridden jungles of the Yucatán knew another story entirely. I recalled a description Vincent Sandoval had given me of the process in the field, when I once remarked to him that I knew it must be hot and sticky. It went something like this, and it has stayed with me all this time. These weren't his precise words, but they're not far off.

"Hot and sticky? Let me bring you up to speed, Mr. Zacher. I've been on more than a few digs there. After a month the inside of your camera is filled with four varieties of mold and fungus. Now I bring only disposables and I have the pictures developed right away. After two months your teeth feel too large for your mouth. After three months your canvas or leather boots rot and fall off your feet. Now when I'm there I wear only boots constructed from inorganic materials. Imagine."

He was a sophisticated person in many ways. I could still see the curl of his lip as he said this and I felt a wave of sentiment come over me. He had walked with a slight limp, the result of permanent nerve damage from a snake bite he got while on a dig.

Had Mark Sandoval gone through all of his father's money and was now broke, blowing the last few dollars on a plane ticket to come down and sit in our great room in order to spin this tale with its subtle hook of adventure in the jungle? I felt the roots of doubt probing further into my mind. This case was looking more every moment like one we didn't want, whatever the exotic object of it was going to be.

"And you don't remember any more from those pages other than that handwritten note?" Maya asked. She looked at me as if to signal she had no more questions.

He shook his head.

"Mark," I said softly, trying to round this out, "didn't your girlfriend want to come down here with you?" This was no more than a hunch, although it wasn't much of a stretch. A guy like him probably couldn't get up in the morning without looking back over his shoulder at some leggy chick spread out next to him under the damp sheets.

He looked at me sharply. "Liza reads *The New York Times* every day online. I tried to get her to come, but she's scared to death of crossing the border, even by plane. Now that it's gotten so bad, she won't even use a Mexican gardener. She wouldn't trust them with sharp tools." Nodding, I tried to picture this young Liza. She was probably a twenty-two-year-old blonde, with the sculpted butt of a distance runner, long perfect legs, and a smoky look fixed permanently on her face. Her lips were what Botox had strived for, and her teeth were the culmination of years-long research by Colgate. Ten successful cases in this business have given me a certain knack for this kind of speculation. I'm rarely wrong.

"What is it that's gotten so bad about Mexico now?" I asked quietly, reluctantly putting this image out of my mind. I have a near-perfect visual memory and I knew I could get it back later in a blink.

He almost chuckled. "I think you must know what I'm talking about, since you live here. It's got to be going on all around you. You know what I mean."

"I feel like I *should* know, Mark, since I've been here since the nineties, but I don't. It's only gotten better. We even have good Internet now and cable TV. We've got a first class pizza place too, with better Italian sausage than I ever had in Ohio."

Mark shrugged as if he was never going to make his point to me, which was a shrewd guess. There's a good reason I don't read the American newspapers or watch the news broadcasts—their Johnny Depp version of Mexico is nothing that has ever existed other than in

their own minds. Sure, there's trouble in a dozen spots on the border, but as I told an old friend from college who emailed me to ask how safe it would be to visit, you don't avoid Key West just because Detroit makes you nervous. It's a big country.

"I told Liza that as long as she was with *me*, she would never turn up as one of those headless corpses by the side of the road. 'Trust me on that one,' I said to her. 'No one down there is going to mess with us.'" Mark Sandoval ended this with a firm nod. Statements like that make me wonder if he'd been ripped off by his cab driver without realizing it and whether he still had his wallet. There's no prescription that treats naiveté other than experience, and he hadn't been here long enough to take the cure.

"She must have been reassured. And she replied?" asked Maya. I could hear the acid on her tongue, but he missed it.

"She said, without much confidence, I thought, 'You go on down there first, Mark, and tell me how it works out. Send me an email after you've talked to the Zacher people. I might join you if there's a decent hotel in Valladolid.' I know I didn't pronounce that right."

Mark's version sounded like something between Polaroid and paranoid. He gave me a lift of his shoulders that was a better approximation of the true Mexican shrug than I had ever seen from a new arrival. My respect for him grew by maybe four or five percent. But then, vagueness is understood and respected here; like a full skirt, it can cover your ass without revealing much about its underlying structure. Certainty is usually more suspect.

"Is she your heir?" said Maya, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "Just asking."

"Eventually, but even more I'd like to be hers." A broad smile accompanied this statement, as if he didn't realize that would mean she'd have to be dead for it to pay off. "We're still sorting out the terms of the prenuptial agreement. Those stolen documents in my computer case were part of my asset inventory. Like what if they led to something with real value down here? You can see my concern. In doing this I'm only trying to be fair to Liza."

"Of course," I said, knowing I'd be the reluctant closer on this deal if it even came to that point. "Exactly what would you like us to do for you, Mark? Your instructions, accompanied by a deposit, would start the process, once we decide whether to take the case."

His dense eyebrows went up. "You mean you might not want to do it? My dad thought you guys were great." He smiled like a man with his hand out on the *jardin*, not the gesture I was looking for. I wondered whether he felt himself automatically accepted, in the same way a kid whose father went to Yale or Dartmouth expected a pass in the entrance process. It's called legacy admission, but the Zacher Agency has never practiced it.

“You already said that.” I felt like adding that we hadn’t been able to save his father, but I didn’t want to go there.

Sandoval assumed a serious look. “I want you to take this up and find out what that note means, what’s on the other end of those directions. My dad never got a chance to tell me before he was murdered. I know that he would’ve eventually. That’s why they were in his safe. To me, it’s like part of his legacy.”

“What do *you* think it means?” Maya was back into this. “Be frank, because otherwise we won’t know when we’ve succeeded, if we decide to try.”

“All right, I’ll spit it out.”

“OK.” Maya and I looked at each other. We were hardly holding him back. For a long moment we waited in silence as Mark Sandoval studied the ashes in the fireplace, perhaps like tea leaves. It reminded me that it was time to clean them out.

“It’ll mean what you guys think it means, OK? But that’ll be huge, because you’re the experts; that’s why I came down here, and that airport is a long way from this town, let me tell you. You’ve heard this a lot before, I’m sure, but the fact is that I need your help. Don’t let me down now.” It was the tone of an adult orphan. He drained the dregs of his cognac.

Maya studied his face for a moment, trying to frame her thought diplomatically. “I want to bring our partner, Cody Williams, in on this one before we make a decision,” she said. “Can you give us a call back in twenty-four hours?”

As I handed him a business card, I could see this wasn’t the answer Mark Sandoval wanted or expected. He reached into his pocket and handed me a card that wasn’t his. Looking at it, I saw it was the first version of our own agency card, one I must have handed to his father one night at dinner in this house. He hadn’t ever been our client, but an expert who verified that our fifth Mayan codex was genuine. If he had survived the case, his reward would have been that he got to translate and publish its contents. It would have been called the Sandoval Codex.

The rain had finally paused during our conversation. Donning his damp boots in the entry, Mark Sandoval took off in the dark down the street in the direction of the arched bridge, swinging his furled umbrella. His other hand was in his pocket, and he studied the pavement as he walked—a good strategy in San Miguel. A block away, he could take the steps down to Calle Canal below and catch a cab. He didn’t look back. As I watched him walk down Quebrada, I felt Maya’s hand on my shoulder. Her fingers went up my neck.

“He has the ego of his father, but not his intelligence, I’m afraid.”

“Nor his charm or insight.”

We went back inside. I got out the cognac we normally drank and took our glasses out to the loggia, where the mist had fallen away with the rain. I toweled off two chairs while Maya mopped the table. The air didn't feel chilly. I wanted to talk about painting, about how I needed to get something going again that was huge in scale, dramatic and vivid. I wanted to impress myself—always the key to impressing anyone else. Maya wanted to talk about the approaching holidays. Neither of us was religious, but we always entertained between Christmas and New Year's. Although she had set her notebook and a pen on the table, ready to make a note from time to time, we talked little more about Mark Sandoval that evening. His visit didn't seem significant anymore. Certainly it wasn't in the way he thought it was. I didn't say this to Maya, but I doubted that we'd see him again.

My feeling that there would be no more to this case than this single interview was another example of how easily we could be wrong in this dodgy business, but then, for persistent investigators, being wrong is only a forgotten crossroads on the way to being right.

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