

# ***TWILIGHT AT TIKAL***

by

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**AN EXCERPT**

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## CHAPTER ONE

*“You don’t know me, Mr. Zacher,”* the letter began in a firm, almost elegant hand, *“but I learned about your services from one of your former clients. Although she asked me not to use her name, she told me she’d had a very positive experience with the Paul Zacher Agency a few years back.”*

A rather formal beginning, I thought, and not the style of anyone very young. Setting it to one side I again studied the front of the grayish blue airmail envelope with its four rows of short diagonal red and blue stripes lining the borders. These days it’s rare to receive a regular paper letter that isn’t a bank statement or an ad from some business. This one bore two real postage stamps and the postmark was dated four days ago in Guatemala City, Guatemala, where the return address was the Hotel Goya. In its design and texture it felt like an artifact from the 1940s, as if it had fallen out of somebody’s stamp album or scrapbook of mementoes. I didn’t mind that; I often prefer retro things myself.

“We don’t know anyone in Guatemala, do we?” I said to Maya Sanchez, my partner in life and in the Zacher Agency. I had been reading aloud to her as we sat outside having breakfast in our vine-covered loggia at the edge of the garden at our house in central México. The rest of the mail—the Telmex phone bill, a flyer from la Comer supermarket, and a monthly statement from a local bank account we had closed more than a year earlier, was waiting unopened on the end of the table. I knew from prior mailings that the bank account statement showed we still had thirty-four centavos left in the account, less than two cents in American money. The one in my hand was the only envelope that had looked interesting enough to examine more closely.

On that brilliant day in mid April the weather was warm and welcoming, even at 6,400 feet here in San Miguel de Allende in the mountainous center of the country. Our banana tree, after struggling through the mild winter, was beginning to find a reason to live another year, although how many bananas it would decide to produce was still an open question. Often it seemed to survive here under protest.

Maya put her finger to her lower lip. “I don’t think we do know anyone that lives there. Who would be the woman client that recommended us? Usually our clients have been men. Most women prefer not to have the kind of problems we take on.”

“But yet there was your friend, Marisol Cross, on our first case,” I said. That had been seventeen clients ago, when we were almost unwillingly drawn into this business. We’d filed that case as *Twenty Centavos*, and there were some dark reasons for remembering it all too well.

“And Liza Carver in the Yucatán case,” she added. With good reason we had filed that outing as *The Predator*.

“Right, and then we were working for Barbara Watt in Oaxaca,” I said. “The case with all that Aztec gold that was cast into the shape of a human skull.”

“We haven’t seen her in a while.” Maya looked relieved as she dredged up the last of the yogurt on her plate with a wedge of pineapple.

“Sometimes I miss her, though.” I looked off neutrally into the bromeliads, although nothing about Barbara Watt could be called neutral. Somewhere out there among the random cover of sago palms and hibiscus, I knew that Orlando, our long-tailed garden grackle, was listening to this with interest. He always displayed the veiled movements of a spy, although I don’t think he has the mental capacity to be one. Being a good mimic isn’t always enough.

“I’m sure you do miss her. Barbara was gorgeous and she could never keep her hands off you.”

“In that way she was almost Mexican, but she was also a fan of my painting. It did send a certain message.”

“And I sent one back to her.” With a satisfied smile Maya set down her empty coffee mug with a focused impact on the wooden plank table.

“I guess that’s why we haven’t seen her in a while.”

Written on onionskin paper so thin it practically drooped over my fingers, the letter from Guatemala carried the old-fashioned aura of a black and white movie, possibly one featuring Humphrey Bogart and Sydney Greenstreet. I spread it out and started reading again.

*“Your website informs me that you have handled some missing persons work in the past. My current problem concerns my nephew, Darren. He’s thirty-seven years old and the son of my late sister, Nora. I suppose you could say I’m his guardian now, although I would never have thought he needed one until he disappeared here in Guatemala not too long ago. Perhaps I should start at the beginning.*

*“From the little I’ve been able to put together thus far from others, it all began to turn bad for Darren during a rough night in Antigua, where he had lived for several years.”*

“That phrase has an interesting ring to it, and Antigua does sound familiar,” I said, “but I can’t place it. Is it a historic town of some kind?”

Maya was a historian by trade with a master’s degree from her hometown university, UNAM in Mexico City, and she knew something about Central America, which had briefly remained part of México until right after the War of Independence of 1810-21. San Miguel de Allende, where we live, is a historic town that played a role in that conflict much like Lexington and Concord had in the States. It’s the place where the War of Independence began. She was nodding.

“I was in Antigua for two weeks with my family about ten years ago, when I had just turned twenty. It’s an old colonial settlement, founded the same year as San Miguel, 1542. Until an earthquake wrecked it some time in the 1770s it was the capital of Guatemala, which was then just another province in New Spain, as México was then called. It also has its own volcano. San Miguel is a bigger town, though.”

Here we have about 75,000 people, and that includes a colony of eight or ten thousand American and Canadian expats. Usually they make up our principal client base, but apparently, not this time.

“I wonder if Guatemala is a tough place,” I said. “We don’t hear much about it.”

Maya looked at me solemnly. “Any place can be tough if you’re not careful. Of course, it’s not like Honduras, the most dangerous place in the hemisphere.”

I picked up the letter again. “I’m surprised we’re not being asked to look at a case there.”

*“My nephew Darren had gone for a meeting that night at The Blue Gazelle. That was five weeks ago. None of his friends ever saw him again—and I’ve tried to talk to all of them, at least the ones I could find. I came up here from Panama City ten days ago at the request of his girlfriend, Ixobel Bak, but I haven’t been able to get anywhere with this. Even though my Spanish is excellent, the police haven’t been*

*much help, although they are unfailingly polite. Even so, Ixobel doesn't have much confidence in them. I have located several private detective agencies here in the capital, but I strongly prefer one that someone I know has used and now recommends."*

"Ixobel Bak?" I said. I'd pronounced the x as *sh* in what I thought of as my best Yucatán pronunciation.

Maya shrugged. "Probably. A Mayan name, I'm sure. If I remember right, Bak means flesh."

I did not follow up on this. The letter writer went on to furnish some contact information and a brief catalog of his unsuccessful efforts so far. It was mainly an itinerary of towns in Guatemala and the contacts he'd located or mostly failed to locate in each one. While the contacts were often sketchy, they still offered a place to start. I regarded them as inconsequential details with little more than potential before the writer closed with his wind up pitch.

*"My friend (your former client) said you would certainly charge extra for the travel expenses. Please have no concerns about that. I possess ample means and if you take this case I would like all three of you to come down and meet with me in Guatemala City. I am offering, in addition to all expenses, twice your normal rates. Please take advantage of this, Mr. Zacher. As you can see, I don't know what else to do now. I'm sure I can no longer trust anyone here.*

*"Sincerely yours,*

*"Bernard Emerson"*

"As I now recall, people are rarely killed on missing person cases," Maya said wistfully, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "And besides, we haven't had a vacation in a while."

Having people dying around us was one of the aspects of a detective agency business like ours that she most disliked, especially when she was forced to kill them herself, as she had twice before. Vacations, on the other hand, always drew her interest.

"Not since that cult kidnapping fiasco in Chiapas last year," I said. "If you want to call what Bernard Emerson is offering a vacation, I guess the jungles of Guatemala can be quite balmy this time of year, if you bring enough bug spray." I suspected that in late April they would be steaming like a hotel and restaurant laundry in downtown Shanghai in mid August.

“Then dig your snake-proof shorts out of the armoire again, Paul darling. I think we’ll have to take this case. And for once, it won’t be pro bono. Señor Bernard Emerson sounds like a man of both taste and means.”

“A perfect combination.”

That settled it at once, since Maya is the head of the Agency that bears my name on the door.

This was a modest enough beginning to our eighteenth case. They often are when they start in ways that belie the way they end. Our clients usually do not come to us about a shootout or a car bombing. We don’t like to get involved with religious terrorists or drug cartels. I think of our business as a boutique agency that prefers to look at crimes that are more private and personal, rather than political, fanatically religious, or having their roots in business decisions, like who is going to run the drug sales in this territory. Not that they can’t still become nasty and violent beyond all reason.

Cody Williams, our longtime partner in the Zacher Agency and a thirty-year veteran of the Peoria Homicide Squad, was happy to join us going south, since both football season and March Madness were finished. Baseball was starting up, but he considered that a slow game. His 230 pounds of law enforcement skill and six-foot-three height also make for better security in the field, since even when he’s unarmed he presents a bigger threat than most people care to encounter face to face.

We had no other case going on and I was able to wrap up a small landscape painting I’d been working on. The great disadvantage to signing up for a long distance job like this one was that we couldn’t bring our weapons on the plane, or get them through airport customs on arrival even if we had. None of us wanted to drive down to Guatemala City, although that was possible. But being unarmed always left us feeling exposed and vulnerable. We knew that in order to get started we’d have to rearm ourselves quickly on arrival.

Two days later the three of us flew from Mexico City into Guatemala City via Interjet. Next to me sat a small, round-faced nun wearing a sky blue habit. Although that seemed like a practice outfit for Eternity, she spent much of the flight reading a long magazine article about Kim Kardashian. She traced each sentence with her finger—

possibly she was practicing her English. Maya was seated across the aisle with Cody and I found some time for reflection over a couple of Finlandia vodkas on the rocks.

Of course, as Maya pointed out, not every disappearance is a murder. More often people choose to vanish because of family or financial reasons. Sometimes they're fleeing the law, escaping from an exhausted marriage or a twisted business partnership. You never know until you reach the scene, and you don't always know then. Not having ever been there, I was assuming that Guatemala was much like México in the sense that you couldn't always tell at first glance what you were looking at. Even in bright sunshine, I expected it might take a while for our vision to clear after we departed the plane.

We arrived in Guatemala City in late afternoon. The flight had taken only about two hours. We didn't have a lot of baggage and none of us looked especially suspicious, so we sailed through customs and immigration in less than half an hour.

Although Maya had remarked that this capital city had been founded the same period as San Miguel, the 1540s, coming in with our rental car we saw nothing that looked like an early colonial core, and we were staying in the old center, one block from the main square. While a few buildings were extravagantly nineteenth century in their decoration, there weren't many like that, and I saw nothing that appeared to be earlier. Even the cathedral design reflected the style of the early eighteenth century.

Driving in closer to the hotel, we saw a number of buildings that were scarred by peeling paint and graffiti. Many windows were boarded up. We had been told when we picked up the rental Nissan Maxima that this was not the best part of town and we ought to find secure parking for it. This turned out to be more an omen of things to come than we could ever have anticipated.

Bernard Emerson had booked us into the Hotel Goya. How handy to start our search for Darren right there, where his uncle had penned that letter. For a five-dollar bill—we didn't have any local currency yet, and dollars speak their own language almost anywhere—the concierge whisked the car away to a secure location. As the desk clerk gave us our room keys, he said that meals and drinks were included for us—we could just sign the tab and enter our room numbers. Nor did we need to worry about any gratuities. I wondered if Bernard thought we might be marking up our expenses, but we never do that. As we expected, there was also a note waiting for us at check in.

*Dear Señores of the Paul Zacher Agency,*

*I have been required to withdraw from this hotel to another that I will not name for reasons you will soon discover. Perhaps I should not be surprised to now find myself under threat as well, much like Darren was or still is—the subject of your case. I will shortly contact you face to face to our mutual benefit. Settle in at the bar and have a drink on my tab to bring us luck. More and more I feel we're going to need it. While Guatemala is a country most pleasant in its landscape, customs, and in its people, it is also not without its darker patina of risk. Please be ready and focused on your mission. If you have not come down here prepared for violence, I hope you will find a way to arm yourselves quickly. I would not be able to sleep at night if I felt I had lost my nephew for any reason I could prevent.*

He signed off with a series of normal courtesies that came from a long residence in Latin America. While in a general way I approved the tone of this missive, it seemed that his handwriting had lost some of the calculated polish of his earlier letter. It was looser and more scattered, as if, as he'd suggested, he was now under increasing stress himself. I don't like to make any judgments so early in a case, but I felt that Bernard Emerson's position was already deteriorating even as we tried to establish ours. Perhaps we should be hurrying more than we were, but until he reached us to set up an opening interview, there wasn't much more we could do other than brace ourselves for the approaching struggle.