

An excerpt from

*THE GIRL FROM
VERACRUZ*

Chapter One

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The pervasive odor of death and disinfectant singed my nostrils like acid as we walked into the cold room at the San Miguel city morgue. Under the bluish light of the spiral energy-saving bulbs, the interior surfaces were all stainless steel and polished concrete. Our footsteps echoed as we approached the table where the body awaited us. I had worn my flannel-lined denim jacket, but the cold air traveled up my sleeves and its fingers probed my collar. Usually in chilly weather we stayed out in the sun.

The small morgue looked and felt like an afterthought, tacked on to the back of Hospital General, a facility the planners had failed to think of when it was built. Perhaps no money had been available at that time. At one end, a pair of doors facing the parking lot opened on a ramp to admit those that were too late for end of life treatment. Another pair inside communicated directly with the hospital's main corridor. We had come in through the tiny reception office off the street, using the only door for the living; Maya Sanchez, my partner and now the head of the Paul Zacher Agency; Cody Williams, our retired homicide detective associate from Illinois; and Licenciado Diego Delgado of the San Miguel Judicial Police. He was our normal contact whenever the agency had business with official law enforcement. We had gathered there at Delgado's invitation, and he had signed us in. He was the only one who knew why we'd come, and he hadn't shared that reason with us, other than that we were going to see a body at the morgue. As we entered, he switched on the string of three intense work lights over the table.

The toes, one with a tag, were the only parts of the body visible outside the sheet until Delgado pulled it down below the shoulders. We looked upon the face of a young girl, eyes still more than half open, lips parted to reveal her excellent teeth. Her expression was not a smile. As I knew from earlier cases, the withdrawn, unfocused stare of the dead is never anything but

disconcerting. “I am far beyond you,” it seemed to whisper. Circling the girl’s neck was a mild abrasion that might have been from a choker worn too tight, a fabric not as rough as rope, and surely not the cause of death. Delgado would certainly bring it up in his own time, but as an injury, it looked like no more than a bruise or a scuff on the skin.

“She’s not Méxican, I think,” Maya said, with a distressed look. She held her arms tightly over her chest in the cold, her hands tucked through the elastic cuffs of her white quilted jacket. Her knees occasionally pumped up and down. In this part of México people seeing their breath is like being visited by a ghost.

The dead girl had worn her hair short, ending just below her jaw. This is unusual, and it always catches my eye when I see it here. Normally I enjoy that style because it feels like bucking the trend. More often women’s hair gets shorter only as they age, and not always then. You’ll still see an eighty-year-old from the countryside now and again with a braid reaching below her waist.

“She might be Honduran,” Delgado said, “but, as I told you as we drove in, we have no identification, so we can’t be sure.” He turned away slightly, as if distancing himself from this dead girl. I found this hard to read.

“If she were Honduran she probably wouldn’t have carried an ID,” I said. Delgado shrugged. I thought that whether Honduran, Guatemalan, or from Belize, she had a Mayan look.

“About fourteen years old, do you think?” asked Cody as he leaned over the corpse and blocked two of the overhead lights with his six-foot-three frame.

“We are calling it thirteen to fifteen. She was brought in last night around ten o’clock.”

The dead girl had the Central American version of dark skin, which is to say not very dark, with an Asian cast to her eyes, and broad full lips. Although there are a lot of ways for Méxicans to look, the one that now dominated her face was one I’d already seen too many versions of, none of them easily forgotten. She may have been attractive in life, but death, in its dreary slackness, erases that quickly with its appearance of permanent indifference. Looking at her like this, I wondered whether I would even recognize her in life, on the street or next to me on a bus, not that it mattered now. As a painter, my visual memory is exact, and I knew I had never seen her before, but I also didn’t think Delgado had summoned us there to identify her. There was no possibility of that and he must have known it.

Delgado pulled on a pair of latex gloves. If you have a problem with latex here you have no business being an investigator. No one gets coddled. He had worn no lab coat for this meeting, only his normal neutral brown suit, shiny at the knees and elbows. The last time I'd seen him replace one was when the jacket took a bullet under his arm that didn't touched his skin. I had never thought that brown suited his warm skin tones, but that was another matter. He reached under the sheet at one side and lifted out the dead girl's left arm, which was stiff with rigor mortis, holding it palm downward to expose her nails.

"An expensive job," Maya said, immediately bending over to examine the manicure. The design was done with four colors executed in an Art Deco style. I glanced down at the toes, and in this better working light I now saw a simpler version of the same theme. Delgado turned the hand over. The palm and fingers were calloused and rough. They might have even been chemically bleached in places. Raising his eyebrows, Cody leaned over to study the wrist and forearm through the reading glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

"Needle marks, five at least, none of them all that recent. On the wrist there's that encircling mark again like on her neck. But obviously you have no autopsy yet. Do you know the cause of death?"

Delgado returned the hand to its place under the sheet and rotated the head to the left—the girl's right—to expose a deep impact wound near the base of the skull. It had been cleaned and the hair pulled away on both sides. The killer would've been right-handed, I thought. "I was told we have no money in the budget now for an autopsy. You know how it is—we have to transport the body to Guanajuato (the state capital) and then back in the morgue van, plus the cost of the procedure. We are going to list the cause of death as a cerebral hemorrhage. That is most likely true, although we can't be sure. In any case, we have seen this kind of injury before more than once." His voice echoed shallowly off all the hard surfaces.

Certainty is often elusive in México, and we all understood that, but in the case of a murder, you'd want to get closer than that kind of approximation, even as well qualified as its source was.

Cody nodded, but I could see that his narrowed eyes were silently questioning this decision. "An educated guess, based on long experience," he offered. When Delgado added nothing more, he continued. "What was the weapon?"

"We think it was a brick, from the contour of the impression on the skull."

That made sense. People here often keep a decoratively painted brick near their front door to stop it from blowing shut as they try to bring the breeze inside the courtyard or pick up the mail. The maid would use it too when she was out washing down and sweeping the sidewalk every morning.

Maya stopped shivering for a moment while she stared at Delgado blankly, parsing this for another layer of meaning. I could see that Cody, with his confidence in police procedure, didn't care for it either. Not understanding it myself, I stepped in.

“Licenciado Delgado.” As many cases as we'd cooperated on together, we had never gotten around to being on a first name basis. I was always *Señor* Paul Zacher. “What is happening here? Why are we looking at this body?”

An elaborate Mexican shrug followed. He turned away for a moment before he walked to the foot, where he lifted the sheet to reveal the same abrasions on both ankles. Like most Latin Americans of either gender, this girl had possessed fine skin.

“As the only other investigators in San Miguel, I wished you to know about this. When I questioned the refusal of a routine autopsy, I was told that this girl's death didn't matter.” From the corner of my eye I noticed Maya twitch at this phrase. “The body is to be cremated this afternoon, the ashes held for a while in the hope that a relative might appear or that at least we can find a name to put on her grave. Otherwise, the remains will only be buried. I do not know what they will put there for a marker; a bronze number perhaps, or her date of death, on paper behind glass inside a steel frame. We have a young priest who attends the burial for nothing, *gratis*, in these situations. Unfortunately, our problem is that no one has called to report her missing. That is rare for a girl this age when the time goes overnight.” His expression contributed nothing beyond the information in his statement.

“But you gathered the usual forensic data?” Cody asked in a neutral tone.

“Of course; DNA samples, body cavity swabs, fingernail scrapings; the normal information, if only for our files. She has no body hair. It was all shaved, and she has been sexually active.”

“Her death doesn't *matter*?” finally said Maya, practically spitting, as if this phrase had been stuck in her throat for a while and only now dislodged like a chicken bone. I had observed that she'd been simmering over this the whole time. “She doesn't matter? How did they say that? Who told you this? What did that mean to you?”

“You will be able to make your own conclusion to this, I believe.” Delgado’s face still remained strictly neutral, although his narrow mustache twitched slightly, perhaps at being challenged by a woman, even Maya, one that he knew outranked him socially because her skin was as pale as mine and Cody’s. More pale, actually, since she avoided the sun more than we did.

Cody shifted his weight from one foot to the other and stared at his fingernails instead of at Delgado, his neutral look. “I guess somebody important doesn’t want you to look into this any further.” He knew enough not to say, *more important than you*.

Delgado shrugged again, raising both hands as if to hold off a gang of reporters. “I don’t say that, but as of this morning I am removed from this case, for whatever reason, and no one replaces me. Officially I am out of the office having my teeth cleaned at this moment. We have many crimes now, you see, to occupy our time, and as always, a limited budget, both in personnel and funds. My view does not matter either now because this is out of the map for us.”

“But how many of those other important cases involve a murder, especially of a young woman?” asked Cody, quietly. His hand gestured toward the corpse, but only slightly.

“Well, you raise a good point, and this *is* the only murder case we have at this time, but there are other cases of great importance to the San Miguel community nonetheless. Our new mayor has made public safety a major priority, as you must know by now. You will also have seen the improvements to the *glorietas*.” The bases of the statues on all the roundabouts had been refaced with limestone. They didn’t seem any safer to me, but the birds liked them better because water now streamed down their sloped sides.

Apparently Delgado saw all this as part of the same effort to enhance public safety.

As he turned away from the body I thought I heard Cody mutter, “other cases like serial jaywalking, aggravated failure to yield the right of way,” but I wasn’t sure. Delgado took pride in knowing almost no English and he wouldn’t have understood even if he had heard. Maya had pulled out her cell phone and was shooting pictures of the girl’s face and profile, her hands and feet with details of the wrists and ankles. Delgado turned over the hands again so she could get the nails and the palms. Maya had pulled her hair back into a ponytail before we left the house as if she’d been expecting to do this. I could imagine how ghoulish the girl’s features would look against the stainless steel, the uneven yellowy brown sheen of the polished

concrete with its ragged patches of glare, and the puckered edges of the stiff morgue sheet. I wondered for a moment if it went into the regular hospital laundry between uses. How many dead bodies had it covered in the past? This country is a practical place, sometimes too practical to be entirely comfortable.

“I can supply a set of more detailed photos to you, particularly of the head wound,” Delgado volunteered, “ones made with better light.” Maya nodded without comment.

“Ah, I have to mention that we don’t typically take pro bono cases anymore,” I said softly into the silence that followed as Delgado pulled the sheet back over the girl’s face. I was the one who usually got us involved in such profitless and unsatisfying ventures. By now it was clear that was why he’d brought us into the morgue. Maya, who paid the bills at the end of the month, especially objected to working for nothing. If there was any romance to being a private detective, she hadn’t discovered it yet, and she had largely stopped looking.

“But even so, we will be taking *this* one,” she snapped. “Where are this girl’s clothes? I need to see them.”

“We have them downtown.” If Delgado’s face expressed any surprise, it appeared to be masked by a subtle look of triumph.

“Then, if we’re finished here, let’s go.” She slid her phone back into its case and we left. Privately, I wondered whether this girl would have gotten as much respect from Maya if she were still alive. Maya had her own set of class prejudices too, many of them unconscious, but violent death was one of the few events that would’ve neutralized all of them.

As we walked outside, the fresh air filling my lungs felt like relief, and I wondered whether Delgado had really heard the words, *didn’t matter*, from his superior, or did he instinctively know that was the best way to pull us into the case, especially with Maya present. He was no lightweight, and I suspected he had his own feelings of sympathy for the dead girl, and more than a little indignation over the dismissal of the case. Like most Méxicans in any job, he didn’t care to have his supervisor looking over his shoulder, but because of his position, he would have felt limited in what he could express to us. Although he’d had some ethical issues when we dealt with him on our initial investigation, I now suspected he might make a better chief than his superior when his turn in the lineup finally came. He was in his mid forties now, and he often displayed what I thought of as a conflicted humanity as a Méxican cop. The law

doesn't get much respect here, starting with the people at the top of the social ladder, who set the example for everyone else. Most of our cases had ended with unorthodox resolutions.

"She was found last night lying face down between two cars at the top of Calle Faroles, in the Atascadero neighborhood," said Delgado as we drove out of the parking lot in his unmarked white Nissan sedan. He pulled onto the Libramiento and headed past the empty Tuesday Market toward the Salida a Querétaro on the way down to the *jardín*, where his office occupied the second floor of a historic building. "We were unable to locate any witnesses. No other marks were found on the body beyond what you saw, other than some minor abrasions at the knees, which we think came from falling after she was struck."

"Do you have the height and weight?" asked Cody, who had begun recording this. His cracked brown leather bomber jacket creaked at the elbows as he bent over the notepad on his knees. Once in the car, driving through the sun-filled streets, we were all too warmly dressed again. Sitting behind Cody, who always needed the foot room of a front seat, I rolled down the window.

"One-point-six meters and fifty-four kilos."

"Did she have a purse when you found her?" I didn't expect that she had. The killer would have grabbed it to conceal her identity or to loot the contents, not that there would've been much to take.

"No purse that we could find, and no keys or money in her clothes. No jewelry on her hands neck, or ears, either. I'll show you the clothing—it wasn't much for a cool night. I thought she might have only just run outside when she was attacked, maybe fleeing from someone in one of those houses. Or maybe she ran into trouble on the street when she got out there for some other reason."

"Not usually much trouble on those streets up in Atascadero," Cody said.

"No, as you say, not much." Delgado's tone was more accommodating now that we were on the case.

"And no name," Maya said softly. "Wait, turn here if you could, and go down the back way into Atascadero through the stone arch onto Santo Domingo. I want to see the place where the body was found on Faroles."

Delgado swerved off the Salida a Querétaro and onto the rough cobblestone road that went under a stone arch and wound its way downhill. For a long block we passed newer houses

painted in pastel colors on the view side at the left. Only rolling open land dotted with prickly pear cactus flanked the road on the right, with the occasional gnarled mesquite tree breaking out of the knee-high weeds. About half a kilometer farther in we came to la Puertacita Hotel. Opposite, Delgado swung steeply uphill onto Calle Portón, where he connected to Fuentes at the top. This was a neighborhood that embraced long views from pricy houses and terraces layered onto the steep terrain. I was speculating that the unknown girl had been part of a household staff in one of them. I knew Maya was thinking this too. The quarrel that ended her life had probably begun as a disagreement among coworkers, although that wouldn't explain why Delgado had been bumped from the case. Still, some people simply don't want publicity of this kind. Perhaps of any kind.

Cody turned to Delgado. "Had any of your people made the rounds of the houses on Fuentes or upper Faroles yet?"

Delgado spoke over his shoulder. "Just a few last night. It was late, and we approached about six of them nearby. They came up with nothing and we were going to send someone back this morning, but now, as you understand, that will no longer happen."

"I think that's shameful," said Maya, "to force you to walk away from this." I knew if I looked at her I'd see the firm set to her lips and a nasty tension in her jaw.

Delgado responded with a small shrug. "Perhaps, but we of the judicial police do not have your freedom of movement. My priorities always come from a list made by others." At least he made no reference to *fate*; that word always got Maya's back up.

After driving for a block that went gently downhill on Fuentes, we pulled over and parked at the Faroles intersection. Getting out, I don't know what I expected, but I sensed no aura of the killing still hanging in the air.

"It was just here, between two cars." He pointed at the cobblestones.

Starting at our feet, Calle Faroles sloped steeply back down toward Santo Domingo. It was a street where you'd jam your front wheel into the stone curb and stomp on your parking break as you pulled up if you wanted to find your car still waiting for you when you returned. No one was parked there now. We stood next to a house that was painted yellowish green and had a radius corner at the intersection. Next to it, a tall stand of bougainvillea grew from a half-circle cut out of the slate sidewalk and climbed above the parapet. Around the corner on the Fuentes side stood a service box for the phone company. As always, the box looked out of

place and too utilitarian for the neighborhood. The property had a southwestern view over the city toward the Parque Juarez and beyond. The walls of the other houses around us offered a street scene with little information—anonymous façades in dark red, pale green, and mustard yellow. A few farther up were faced with stone—a low-maintenance surface. From behind the wall of one of them, an Italian cypress aimed like a sundial pointer at the mid day sky. Many other houses displayed fashionably rusted steel doors facing the intersection, which formed a T where the one-block-long Faroles ended at Fuentes.

Both Cody's knees creaked as we all squatted and scanned the oil-spotted cobblestones. I didn't see any blood, or anything else the police might have missed. My ability to see things differently was what drew me into this business to begin with, but it wasn't offering me anything now. Gravel and road dirt filled the spaces between the grapefruit-sized cobblestones. In my mind I could see the girl lying there face down. There was nothing obviously threatening about this area, but it was the last thing she had seen as she died. It had the same upscale anonymity that other better neighborhoods in San Miguel had. It wasn't sinister; only private, elevated, and quiet. After a minute of concentrated scan on the paving stones, Cody found a plastic bag in his pocket, another element of his standard equipment kit, and wrapped it over his fingers. Fishing along the lower edge of the stone curb, he lifted out a ballpoint pen and slipped the bag around it without touching it directly. It had been lodged in a crevice where the cobblestones had pulled away slightly. He offered the bag to Delgado.

"I guess you might still be able to take a look at this, right? Check it for prints? Like it could've come in last night when you were out here and you'd forgotten to send it to the lab. Maybe you'd left it in your pocket then and didn't recall it when you got back to the office." It dangled between his two fingers. "Even though you're off the case now, I mean." His glance was pointed even if his words were more circumspect.

Delgado nodded without looking at him before he accepted it.

"Did you notice anything unusual about it?" I said.

"A perfectly normal cheap old ballpoint pen, well used. Its only interest is in the location where we found it, in the same way that anything at a murder scene has some potential interest. Maybe the prints will tell us something if it belonged to our victim, or maybe not. Her prints might be associated with some others on it. You always have to check *everything*."

I couldn't help but hear the subtext embedded in the slow and steady way he articulated that last sentence, but Cody wasn't looking at Delgado, and his point may have been lost.

Later Maya stood across from us in the cavernous eighteenth century room near the floor-length French doors overlooking the *jardin* from Diego Delgado's office. We had lived together for years and I could read in her manner the discomfort that made her want to be off by herself. The four of us were waiting for a moment while an assistant went off to locate the dead girl's clothing. Delgado had sent the pen to the forensics lab to be fingerprinted as we walked in. It came back shortly after the clothing ten minutes later. As Maya joined us to look, none of us had much to say. Normally at this point on a new case we'd be full of incidental questions, but Delgado's equivocal position had left him with little to contribute to the conversation that we'd now be forced to have later among ourselves. Now that we were on his turf, I could feel him pulling back by degrees. Overhead, a shining new ceiling fan with green lacquered blades waited for the command to cool his desk, but it was still late morning, and even though May is our warmest month, we were all still chilled from the morgue.

The cardboard box waiting for us on Delgado's desk was labeled with yesterday's date and the time, 21:55. Scrawled above a line meant for the name was the word *desconocida*, unknown female. Inside in a plastic bag we found a pair of cheap sandals, handmade village craft style with no maker's mark or seller's label. A pair of brief denim shorts with no pockets and no belt. Showing no wear, they were more minimal than most girls her age would wear in public in San Miguel, but not necessarily unexpected for a hot day, and yesterday was as warm as usual for May. The top was white cotton, sleeveless, with two buttonholes below the collar. The fabric was dirty on the front from its sudden contact with the street. It had a single pocket that could have carried a pen if the girl had no purse. I thought it was a long shot that the ballpoint had ever belonged to her. Women don't usually carry pens in their upper pockets unless they're wearing a work jersey or a lab coat. Even poor girls here are fashion-conscious to the extent they can afford to be.

"The top button is missing," Maya pointed out. We hadn't seen it on the street, but that meant nothing.

The girl's underwear had been separately boxed in a plastic container that might have contained someone's knitting. The minimal bra and panties were black and expensive-looking.

They also both had a Victoria's Secret label. I watched Maya as she studied them. Her look was grim. I knew this underwear was more expensive than what she generally wore herself—she was never personally extravagant. What was she thinking about that?

Delgado stood off to one side, not watching this.

“So here is a girl wearing pricy underwear, yet she looks in many ways like household help,” said Cody. “We're staring at a world of contradictions between this box and what we saw at the morgue. Think of how rough her hands were, yet with a fancy manicure and matching pedicure.”

“If she had suddenly risen in life,” I said, “I don't think the condition of her hands would reflect that for a while. They'd need some time to soften up, to catch up with her new status.”

“No one rises suddenly in life here,” said Maya, with a sideways slash of her right hand. “Or even slowly. You may make more money than your family did when you were growing up, you may get more comfortable in a better house, but you are still locked into the same social position. I think this girl was hooked up with an older man, one with money and status, probably a gringo in that neighborhood where she was found. He would have given her things like this, things no one else could have seen or known about, but her status would not have changed, and he would always be far above her. I think she would have spent a lot of time on her back earning her new privileges.”

Delgado avoided her unflinching expression.

“But would she even have reached the age of consent, I wonder,” said Cody. “Isn't it fourteen? Not that consent is always a part of it.”

Maya gave him a sharp look. “By federal law, the minimum age is twelve in most of México, going by state. Some have it higher, but none can have it lower. Here in Guanajuato, it is also twelve.”

His mouth suddenly falling open, Cody looked too startled to respond. I was surprised myself. That age seemed almost medieval, more suited to a time with high infant mortality rates and short life spans, when women had to start having children early and often didn't live to raise them to adulthood.

Delgado said nothing in response as he picked up the pen, now no longer in its bag, and unscrewed the lower tapered barrel from the top. None of this was news to him. I knew he would've considered the significance of the expensive underwear before he called us in,

although he hadn't commented on it. After all, he was off the case. To see whether the pen still worked, he drew a rough circle on a blank page of notepaper with the ink refill, and then peered through the bottom plastic tube into the light of the tall windows overlooking the *jardín*.

"Haha!" he said, (he would've spelled this Jaja) as if confirming something he couldn't have known. He jerked his pencil drawer open, where he located a wire paperclip. Bending the sharp end outward, he used it to snag the corner of a tiny piece of paper rolled up inside the barrel of the pen. Drawing it out, he spread it flat between the V of two fingers on his cheap, plastic laminate desktop. Its printed wood grain had worn through in several areas to reveal a dirty white under layer, notably where his elbows normally rested. We all leaned over it simultaneously. On the paper was written in minute letters the name *Yadira*, followed by a phone number. The script was polished and mature; I doubted that the girl had written it herself. She may not have been literate, but still could've read the numbers.

"So here then is your case, my friends," said Delgado with the grin of someone who has unexpectedly been proven correct. "Now you are launched. Do not ever say that we of the judicial police have not come to your aid at a critical time."

"Where is that area code—229?" I asked, pointing to the paper, but not recognizing the number.

"Well, that would be the city of Veracruz."