

SKULL DUGGERY

AARON ELKINS



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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Journal of Forensic Sciences, vol. 52, no. 6, November 2007. Paper by Alexandra M. Croft and Roxana Ferlini. Ms. Croft was also helpful with additional information and kindly reviewed a section of the manuscript.

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ONE

Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico

NOT for nothing had Flaviano Sandoval been the village police chief for almost six months now. For one thing, he had learned to recognize trouble when he saw it. And this man sitting across the desk from him, oh, he was trouble, all right. Definitely not a local—Sandoval knew everybody who lived in Teotitlán (*everybody* knew everybody who lived in Teotitlán)—and for sure not a *turista* come to shop for weavings or to stay at the Hacienda Encantada up the hill. So what else could he be? Only trouble.

And trouble was something Flaviano Sandoval was averse to, by disposition and by constitution. Never ever there was a man *not* cut out to be a police chief, it was Flaviano Sandoval. Small, soft-bodied and sharp-featured (some might say rodent-faced), he had little ability and no great desire to project command presence. He was fretful, easily intimidated, and prone to nervous stomach upsets. It had never been his aim to be a police chief. It had never been his desire to be a police chief. His desire was to one day be mayor of Teotitlán. But traditions were traditions, and before one could be considered for that esteemed post, one had to prove one's civic merits in a long-established progression of service positions. For two years he had served as chairman of the school board, for a year before that, as the administrator of the municipal marketplace. In six more months, God willing, he would have finished this grueling, nerve-racking tenure as chief of police with mind and body whole, and would move on to become the executive officer of the village council. And one year after that—again, God willing—he would be elected as *alcalde*, from which the step to mayor was virtually assured.

But for now he was still the *jefe de policía*, and trouble was the last thing he wanted. The man had been spotted an hour earlier, at about five P.M., slogging up the steep, cobbled street toward the resort, and his looks had set off alarm bells: a jail bird's face, heavy-jawed and sleepy-eyed, with a drooping Emiliano Zapata mustache and a dirty, graying ponytail hanging down in back from under a tattered *campesino's* hat, and with leathery, pockmarked skin as creased and pouched as an old valise that's seen a lot of use out on top of the bus too many times. Blue-green tattoos—lizards? snakes?—twisted up the sides of his neck from the grimy collar of his denim jacket. Pompeo, the senior of Sandoval's two policemen, had stopped him to talk to him. When he found that the man had no identification, had a total of several pesos on him, and had a story that didn't add up, he'd brought him in to see the *jefe*.

That had spoiled the *jefe's* day right there. Pompeo was a good sergeant. Unlike Sandoval, he had been born to be a cop. He loved the work and he was big and fierce-looking enough to be intimidating in a way that Sandoval never could. (If truth be told, Sandoval was a little afraid of him himself.) Pompeo had been there for a decade, so he knew the ropes and he'd been the main reason that Sandoval had thought he could cope with the chief's position at all. If Pompeo took care of the street situations—the traffic run-ins, the occasional quarrelsome drunk—Sandoval, who had taken a month-long correspondence course in public administration, after all, could surely handle the administrative matters. Also, Sandoval had given himself a reasonable command of English, of great use to a local police chief on summer weekends, when the place was lousy with tourists.

The one fly in the ointment was that Pompeo sometimes—now, for instance—took his job too seriously. Why had he stopped the man in the first place? Had he been hurting anyone, threatening anyone? No, he was just walking peaceably up the hill, and what was the law against that? Probably he was heading up past the Hacienda Encantada and out of town entirely. The dirt road wound through the dry hills all the way to San Lucas Tepitipac. That was probably where he was going. If Pompeo had just let him continue on his way, he would not be a problem. Or at least he'd be somebody else's problem, which was just as good.

But here the man was, sitting right in front of him. Pompeo, as conscientious as ever, had made his official report of the detention, and unless the chief wanted to tear it up and erase it from the log, he was stuck with it. But this Sandoval would not do. Despite his many and varied self-acknowledged deficiencies, he was a man who was faithful to the regulations and to his responsibilities, as he understood them to be.

Besides, what if Pompeo found out?

So far the stranger had told Sandoval that his name was Manuel Garcia (a likely story; if there was a more common, less traceable name in Mexico, Sandoval would have liked to know what it was), that he was from the village of Santiago Matatlán, and that he was on his way to Oaxaca to look for work, but the second-class bus that he'd thought would take him to the city didn't go there after all, and had dropped him off in Teotitlán to catch a bus that did.

Pompeo was right. None of it added up. Sandoval didn't like the man's story, and he certainly didn't like the man. It wasn't that this Garcia was belligerent exactly, but he wasn't what you'd call cooperative either, and there was an indefinable air of sleepy menace about him. Sandoval was ill at ease being in the same room with him. Ask a question and Garcia would answer, but at his leisure, with a weary, downward curl on his lips, and sometimes even a sigh, as if he'd been through this a hundred times before, and his patience was being sorely tried, and would you mind getting on with it so he could go on his way, since you were just going through the motions, and there was nothing you could do to him. Surly, that's what he was. Contemptuous. He'd dealt with the police before, Sandoval had no doubt about that. Probably he'd been in prison—that face, those tattoos—maybe even in the United States.

“Ever been north of the border?” Sandoval asked.

“No.” That was the way most of his answers had been. One or two words, or three at most.

“Ever been in prison?”

“No, not me.” He yawned and gestured with his chin at the coffeepot on the burner. “How about a cup of that coffee, Chief?”

“Help yourself,” said Sandoval. “The cups are on the sink.” He watched Garcia get up to pour himself a cupful. He wasn't a particularly big man, but he was bull-necked and thick-chested, and he carried his arms a little away from himself in that showy way that serious weight lifters have. More evidence of US jail time, Sandoval thought. That was one of the truly crazy things about the *Yanqui* prisons: weight lifting rooms. Why in the world would you want to give your bad guys bigger muscles?

Garcia sat down with his coffee, which had been on the burner for eight hours now. (Coffee-making was the responsibility of the junior officer, Pepe, who could not be dissuaded from the notion, taught to him by his mother, that the longer coffee sat, the more tasty and restorative the brew. It had been a long time since Sandoval could do to get him not to boil it for five minutes.) Garcia took a sip of the tarry stuff and made a face, but had another swallow anyway. Two were enough, however, even for a tough guy like him. He set the cup on the desk and leaned back with another sigh, an audible, resigned sigh, to savor

what Sandoval's next pointless question would be. He scratched listlessly at his chin. It had been four or five days since he'd shaved, and stiff, silvery bristles glistened on his jaw.

It was clear that the man thought he wasn't dealing with a real cop here. Well, that was true enough. Sandoval knew only too well that he wasn't a real cop. All the same, he wasn't without resources. The village had sent him to Mexico City for a week-long training program. And as part of that program, he had undergone a full day's instruction, complete with role playing, on techniques of interrogation. He had learned a few things there. He had learned that one doesn't lay all one's cards on the table up front, oh no. One baits a trap and then gently, subtly, helps the interrogatee fall into it.

He steepled his fingers at his chin and smiled in a friendly, relaxed manner, although his heart was thumping away. "I understand," he said casually, "that the bus driver let you off here and told you you could catch a bus to Oaxaca in the morning? Is that correct?"

"That's right."

"Well, that's very interesting. It's true there is a bus from here to Oaxaca, but if I remember correctly, the bus from Santiago Matatlán also continues right up 190 to Oaxaca. Why then would he let you off here?"

"I'm just telling you what he told me. Maybe he wanted me off the bus. I don't think he liked me."

That part certainly held water, Sandoval thought. So much for that trap, but he had more than that to work with. "I see. But you know, now that I think of it, unless I'm mistaken, it no longer makes a stop in Teotitlán at all. So how—"

"I didn't say it stopped *in* Teotitlán," Garcia said without even a momentary pause. "He dropped me off at the junction, where the road heads into the village. I walked in from there." Sandoval had handed it to him. Very cool, very sure of himself.

"I see," he said yet again, scowling. "To get the morning bus to Oaxaca, the one that leaves from the market square."

"That's right, unless there's another bus stop."

"No, it's the only one. So then exactly what were you doing on the road up to the Hacienda Encantada?"

"I don't know nothing about no Hacienda Encantada. I was going up in the hills, find someplace to sleep where no one would bother me."

Sandoval was thoroughly discomposd by now. He was no good at this sort of thing; why did he even try it? He didn't believe a word of Garcia's story, but he didn't see what he could do about it. The man was too experienced for him; he knew a fraud when he saw one. One thing Sandoval did know was the sooner Garcia was out of Teotitlán the better, but nothing could be done about that until morning. All he could do for now was to see that he made no trouble tonight.

"Well, my friend," he said, "we'll give you a nice place to sleep. And I don't think anyone will bother you."

"You're putting me in jail?"

"Just for the night," Sandoval said, first darting a glance into the outer office to make sure Pompeo was there, in case Garcia was going to make things difficult. But Garcia merely shrugged.

"Do I get a meal out of it?"

"Unless you have an objection to goat meat tacos."

Another shrug. "Okay. And what happens in the morning?"

"We'll see in the morning."

He signaled through the doorway to Pompeo, who marched Garcia off to the women's cell. (There were two cells in the municipal building, one for men and one for women, but the men's was current.

occupied by the Herrera brothers, who were sleeping off too many glasses of mezcal at their sister's wedding, which left only the women's cell.) Garcia went without a word, contracting the burly muscles of his shoulders; a body builder showing his stuff.

Sandoval hoped with all his heart that *nothing* would happen in the morning, that he'd simply see Garcia on his way and be done with it, but there were of course obligations that went with his job. For all he knew, Garcia was a dangerous fugitive. If it came about later that Sandoval had done nothing checking on him, it might well bring the unwelcome attentions of the attorney general's office and the state police, the *policía ministerial*. Talk about trouble.

He downloaded onto his computer the photo that Pepe had taken of Garcia as a matter of routine. This he attached to an e-mail query to the *policía municipal* of Santiago Matatlán, asking what they could tell him about the man. He did it with a little smile of satisfaction. Garcia would no doubt have been surprised to learn that even here, in this out-of-the-way little village, the police had certain high-tech methods at their disposal. Santiago Matatlán, about twenty kilometers to the south, was a mezcal-producing village even smaller than Teotitlán; perhaps six hundred souls. The police would know everything that went on there. And they had a computer too.

He sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Just let it not require that I have any dealings with the state police," he prayed silently. Nothing good ever came of dealing with the *policía ministerial*, as he had learned through hard experience.

When he'd first become chief, there were only a few village ancients who had any recollection of the last time someone had been murdered in Teotitlán, and they didn't remember it themselves, recalling only their parents talking about it when they'd been children: a woman had bashed her straying husband's head in with a stone *mano*. That had happened more than fifty years ago, before Teotitlán even had a police chief. None of Sandoval's predecessors had ever been confronted with homicide.

And what had happened? With only two measly weeks on the job under his belt, he had been confronted with one. It had been a terrible experience, the worst experience he'd ever had. No doubt it had taken years off his life, and it was a marvel that he hadn't developed ulcers.

A group of Canadians who had been staying in a bed-and-breakfast in Teotitlán had been hiking in the dry hills near the village. One of them, in falling down the shaft of a long-abandoned silver mine, had discovered the body—the skeleton, really—of a young girl. He had reported it to Sandoval, who had brought in old Dr. Bustamente, the district's *médico legista* (or *médico forense*, as he had taken to calling himself since *CSI* had started appearing on Mexican television), who had declared that she had been murdered: a savage series of blows to the head, a finding that was soon confirmed by the state *médico legista* in Oaxaca.

So in had come the swaggering *policía ministerial*, thuggish and intimidating, to take charge, issuing commands, making threats and accusations, frightening old men and women, interrogating respectable people with terrible sexual questions, things people in Teotitlán never even thought of before. The worst of it was that for a whole month the *policía ministerial* worked on it, terrorizing the whole village, and in the end they never did solve it. And so the poor child's bones now lay in a box in some grisly police storeroom somewhere in Oaxaca, instead of in a Christian grave in the Teotitlán cemetery, where Sandoval and the elders wanted to inter it.

And so the mere thought of the *possibility* of having to deal once more with those arrogant overbearing bullies in their sinister black uniforms straight out of some old Gestapo movie (and very fitting that was) had his stomach churning now.

But, happily, it appeared that this was not to be. The reply from the police chief of Santiago

Matatlán was waiting for him when he came in the next morning:

This man, Manuel Garcia, is not a resident of Santiago Matatlán. He appeared here two days ago, unable to give a satisfactory reason for his arrival. He has committed no crime of which I am aware, but his appearance and manner are not wholesome. I sent him on his way, and I suggest you do the same.

Nothing could have suited Sandoval more. At 8:10 A.M. he stood with Garcia in the parking area between the church and the covered market, having first fed him a jail breakfast of buttered tortilla, re-fried beans, and cocoa. At 8:15 the Oaxaca-bound bus rattled in its predictable fifteen minutes late. Sandoval handed Garcia a fifty-peso note he'd signed out from the treasury—the fare was ten pesos—and told him to keep the change.

“Thanks.”

He watched as Garcia mounted the steps into the bus. “Better if you don't come back here,” he called after him, not unkindly.

Garcia turned and laughed. “Back here? Not a chance. You won't see me again, not in this lifetime.”

“God willing,” Sandoval mouthed to himself, watching with relief as the bus got on its dusty, noisy way.

TWO

Six months later. Strait of Juan de Fuca, aboard the ferry Coho

“**FOLKS**, if you look out the windows, you’ll see a pod of orcas only a hundred yards off the port side, at about eleven o’clock.”

At the announcement, most of the starboard passengers arose en masse to make for the windows on the other side. Ordinarily, Julie Oliver would have been among the first, but this time she simply sat there, her eyes glued to the laptop on the table in front of her. She and Gideon were returning from one of their periodic weekend “city fixes”—a concert or opera at the Royal Theatre, a walk in the gardens, a good restaurant or two—in Victoria, British Columbia, closer by forty miles to their home in Port Angeles, Washington, than Seattle was. Like the cyber-enlightened twenty-first-century couple they were, their noses had been buried in their laptops since the *MV Coho* had left Victoria’s Inner Harbour, the Empress Hotel—that grand, old, ivy-covered dowager—had disappeared behind the headland, and the ferry had slipped into the pale, thready winter fog of the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

“Julie,” Gideon said, “did you hear? There are orcas on the other side.”

“Can I ask you a question?” she said instead of answering and then didn’t wait for his reply. “Can you tell me what in the world made me think this Hacienda thing next week was a good idea?”

“Sure. You said it would be nice to go somewhere warm and sunny for a week. You said it would be a snap, a free vacation; you said there would be good food, interesting surroundings, and exotic ruins. You said it involved next to no work for you and none at all for me.”

“Did I?” she said grimly, still staring at an e-mail. “It appears I may have misspoken.”

The “it” they were talking about was the result of a telephone call from Julie’s cousin Annie, who managed the Hacienda Encantada, a small, rustic/luxury dude ranch and resort, mostly patronized by Americans and Canadians, located in the hills above the peaceful little weaver’s village of Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, Mexico. Annie, it seemed, had to go back to Winston-Salem in mid-December to clean up the final details of a messy divorce, and could Julie fill in for her for a week or so? It was the slow time of year, so there really wouldn’t be much to manage. Julie would live right there at the Hacienda—best room in the place—so lodging and food would be taken care of. And Gideon would be more than welcome to come along if he wanted to. The food alone, Julie assured him, was worth coming for. They had a wonderful Oaxacan chef that he would love. Dorotea’s cooking was famous. Her recipes had been featured in *Sunset* and *Gourmet*.

It meant that Julie would have to take vacation time off from her supervising park ranger post at Olympic National Park, but December was a slow time of year in the Olympics—not many wayward hikers to rescue—so it had suited her fine. As icing on the cake, the Hacienda would pick up the round-trip airfare—for both of them.

It hadn’t been hard for Julie to convince Gideon to join her. Not only did it sound terrific, but mid-December would be during his winter break from the University of Washington-Port Angeles, and since Julie had called Annie back the next day to tell her the deal was on.

It wasn't as outlandish a proposition as it seemed on the surface. The Hacienda Encantada was owned by a man named Tony Gallagher, Annie's uncle, a long-time expatriate American, who ran the place pretty much as a family affair, with the managerial staff made up of fellow expatriate Gallaghers, and one or two in-laws. One of the in-laws was Julie's favorite uncle, Carl Tandler—Annie's father—who had lived and worked there as head wrangler and stockman for well over thirty years, since its preresort existence as a working ranch. He had first come as a twenty-two-year-old in 1972 for a summer job, had fallen in love with and married Tony Gallagher's sister in 1975, and had settled down. Annie had come along a few years later and had lived her early life there, attending an American boarding school in Oaxaca City. But in 1997, at nineteen, she'd fallen for a sharper named Billy Nicholson, a flashy, good-looking yoga instructor from North Carolina who was conducting a workshop at the Hacienda, and had followed him back to North Carolina and married him, against her father's warnings. When they broke up five years later, she returned to the resort, remorseful and contrite, to gratefully take on the job of resident manager.

As for Julie, she had spent her high school vacations helping out at the Hacienda and had found the life so exotic, so glamorous—to say nothing of having a schoolgirl crush on her handsome, taciturn Gary-Cooper-like Uncle Carl—that, against the advice of her parents, she had entered a community college to study hotel management with the aim of eventually working full-time at the resort. Although a year in the program and a bit more maturity made her conclude that the hospitality industry might not be her cup of tea, she had at least a basic grounding in the field.

Thus, taking over for a week—or so she said at the time of the phone call—was a no-brainer. True, she hadn't been there since she was nineteen, but all she'd have to do was coordinate meals and meetings for the guests, arrange transportation from the airport for them, plan recreational outings, handle intake if any new guests came along, and one or two bits of administrivia that might or might not require her input . . . in other words, a piece of cake. There'd be plenty of time to do things with Gideon. She expected that her afternoons and evenings would be virtually free.

And then had come this new e-mail from Annie. Tony's brother, Jamie Gallagher, who was the accountant/bookkeeper, would be leaving for Minnesota in a couple of days, a long-awaited opening for arthroscopic knee surgery at the Mayo Clinic having popped up. Would Julie mind keeping an eye on his part of the business too?

"So now," she said, "I'll have to post expenses to the ledger, record income, make sure the peso-dollar conversions balance, pretty much all-around handle the revenue and expense streams, really. I hope the Hacienda survives."

"I'll help out," Gideon said gamely, although he didn't see how.

She responded with a gentle smile. "Thanks, honey, but I don't see how. You have many wonderful strengths, but keeping expense accounts isn't one of them."

She was putting it nicely. He was hopeless with money. Before Julie came into his life, he had stopped even trying to balance his checkbook. Whatever the bank told him his account contained at the end of the month (and it often came as a great surprise), that's what he compliantly posted.

"I could be your enforcer," he offered. "You know, the strong-arm guy if they don't want to pay up?"

"I'll certainly keep that in mind," she said with a smile. "Oh, heck, it won't be that bad. The place is going to be practically empty. Only a few rooms booked. Frankly, I'm more worried about you."

"About me? What's to worry?"

"Well, if I have less time available, what are you going to *do*? You can't spend all your time visiting the archaeological sites."

“I’m not going to do anything. I’m going to vegetate. That’s the point.”

~~“So you say, but I’ve yet to see you do it. You’re not taking along any work at all?”~~

“Nope. My prep for next quarter is done, the paper on Neanderthal locomotor biomechanics has already gone off to *Evolutionary Biology*, and I have no outstanding forensic cases. Nothing.”

She closed the laptop’s lid. “Well, I don’t know why I should be worried. Some old skeleton will turn up for you; it always does.”

“No way, not this time. I’m not bringing any tools with me; no calipers, no nothing. Nobody will even know how to find me, so what could happen?”

“Something will happen,” she declared. “Come on, let’s see if we can still see the orcas.”

He got up to go with her. “What could happen?” he repeated in all sincerity.

THREE

EVEN at the best of times, Dr. Bustamente, with his bald, bony head, scrawny neck, and narrow hunched shoulders, bore a remarkable (and frequently remarked-upon) resemblance to a vulture. But never so much as at this moment, thought Flaviano Sandoval. The old buzzard had been leaning over the leathery carcass for twenty minutes, probing, prodding, scrutinizing, his beaky proboscis almost buried in the dried-out cavity that had once held a full complement of internal organs.

Not that the thing on the table would have held interest for any but the most starving of vultures, not anymore. It had been out in the sun a long—a very long—time, and had been found the day before by old Nacho López while he was out in the hills gathering firewood a couple of kilometers from the village. Findings had been scarce, so with his burro, he had strayed from the usual paths, paths that had been in use for a thousand years and more, since the days of the Old Ones. He had seen the thing from a distance, lying in an arroyo that ran along the base of a line of low cliffs, and he had thought he'd struck gold: a gnarled madrona trunk, he'd thought, something that had washed down from the wooded areas higher up during the last rainy season. Madrona was the best of all firewood, rarely found and hard to chop, but how it burned! Not only that, but this was a big trunk, thick as a man. It would save him an additional four-kilometer, mostly uphill trek to where the trees started, and his legs weren't what they once were. He hurried to it, hauling along the braying, increasingly stubborn burro. But Nacho's eyes weren't what they'd once been either, and he was almost on it before he grasped its real nature. So shocked was he that his eyes had rolled up in his head and he had fallen down on the spot in a dead faint.

It wasn't as if the old man had never seen a mummy before. Anyone who spent any time in these parched hills and valleys had come across them: shriveled, sun-blackened mice, rabbits, birds, even the occasional goat that had strayed from its herd and been lost. But a *man*? A withered, grinning mockery of a man still dressed in a few shreds of human clothing? It was the devil's work, enough to make anyone swoon.

When he had come to, he had hurriedly untied the two old canvas feedbags from the burro's back with shaking hands and had ridden the animal home to tell his wife, who had sent him to tell the priest, who had told the *jefe*.

That had been late yesterday afternoon, too late to do anything about it before dark. But the next morning, Sandoval, old Nacho, and the burro had gone out into the hills to retrieve the body. They found it where Nacho said it was, in an arroyo at the base of a cliff, not more than a hundred meters from where the little girl's skeleton had been found earlier (a bad omen, Sandoval thought at the time). Pepe, the junior of Sandoval's two policemen, had come along to help with the lifting that would be necessary. But in the end, Sandoval had had to get it up onto the burro by himself. Young Pepe, although he offered to assist, looked so pale and faint-hearted that Sandoval hadn't the heart to ask him. As for Nacho, once he'd pointed the thing out, he had crossed himself and retreated, refusing to come within ten meters of it. Sandoval wasn't feeling at his most stout-hearted himself, but the remains were so light and so rigid that he had had no trouble getting them onto the animal without

assistance.

He was much relieved that the smell (almost nonexistent) and the feel (like parchment) of the thing had been nowhere as bad as he'd expected. It was terrible to look at, all right, but then it wasn't necessary for him to look very closely to set it on the burro's back and quickly cover it with tarpaulin, during which he did a great deal of squinting and eye-averting. Still, by the time he'd gotten the tarpaulin tied down, he could feel his stomach acting up.

As soon as he had assured himself that what Nacho had seen the previous day was truly a body, he had used his cell phone to alert old Bustamente, the district *médico legista*. Bustamente had immediately driven in from Tlacolula and was now waiting impatiently—almost avidly, Sandoval thought unkindly—in the cemetery, at the door of the two-room concrete-block building, one room of which served as municipal tool and equipment storage, and the other as the village mortuary. Once the body was in the windowless mortuary room and on the ancient, enameled-iron embalming table, Bustamente had taken charge of it, a responsibility Sandoval was all too happy to relinquish.

He had planned to remain there with the doctor, having steeled himself to do what he regarded as his duty. And indeed, he managed to last through the cutting away of the tattered clothing and even to assist in a gingerly fashion. But his resolution began to fade when the boots came off to reveal not the hide-like tissue that covered the rest of the body, but horrible, greasy skeleton feet: eaten-away bones held together by rotting ligaments. Still, Sandoval held his ground, despite the noises coming from his stomach.

Not for long, however. When the leathery skin proved too tough for Bustamente's scalpels, the doctor had gone grumbling into the storage room and emerged with a pair of heavy-duty pruning shears. "Ha, these should do the job," he said, clacking them together and advancing on the corpse. That had been too much for Sandoval, who fled.

He took the opportunity to walk the few blocks to his office in the municipal building to swallow a couple of spoonfuls of Pepto-Bismol and sit quietly with the shades down for twenty minutes to settle his stomach. It didn't help much. Beyond even the revolting physical aspects that were bothering him, he just didn't have a good feeling about this business. Maybe the corpse itself didn't have a bad smell, but everything about it did.

He remained in the office as long as he could, long enough to swallow another dose of the Pepto-Bismol. The second one did calm some of the roiling that was going on inside him, but it did little for his frame of mind. He returned with sinking heart and dragging step to the mortuary as Bustamente was just straightening up from the body, from which the entire front wall had been removed, so that it was wide open, like a picture in a medical book. On Bustamente's face was a look of pinched satisfaction that struck terror into Sandoval's heart. God help him, he'd *known* this was going to be trouble.

"Well?" he said gruffly.

"This man has been murdered," Bustamente pronounced, relishing every word and speaking as if he were on the stand, somberly addressing the court as an expert witness. It was something the old fellow couldn't have had the opportunity to say very often in his long tenure.

"Murdered," Sandoval repeated hollowly from the depths of his chest. It was exactly what he'd been praying not to hear. What had he done to deserve this? How could this be happening to him *again*? It was incredible: only two murders in the last half-century, and both of them during the one-year tenure of Flaviano Sandoval, whose stomach fluttered at the idea of looking at a corpse. It was unbelievably unfair, not to be borne.

However, once more he steeled himself to face the matter head-on, as the responsibilities of his

position demanded. "What makes you think he was murdered?" He could hardly get the words out.

Bustamente bridled. "I don't *think*, I *know*." He crooked a bony finger at the police chief. "Come over here," he commanded and led him to the sink. "Look at this." When Sandoval realized he was looking at a man's chest just sitting there in the sink like a slab of raw-hide, his insides started gurgling again.

Wordlessly, Bustamente stuck his finger into a dark hole not far from the middle of the slab. "You see?"

"From a bullet?" Sandoval asked. If he squeezed his eyelids together, leaving just a slit, he could see it without really seeing it.

"Without question." He removed his finger. "You see how the borders of the perforation appear to have been eroded or eaten away? So that the hole is 'cratered,' as we might say?"

"Yes," said Sandoval queasily, although all he could make out through his squint was a roundish hole with blackened edges. There was no denying, though, that it was the right size for a bullet hole. He had shot enough rabbits to know as much.

"This eroded area is what we refer to as an 'abrasion collar,' " Bustamente continued, in the manner of a teacher talking to a not-too-bright pupil. "It is the result of scraping from the rotating motion of the bullet as it penetrates the skin. Being unique to gunshot wounds, it leaves no doubt as to the source of the penetration. Judging from the size of the hole, I would guess the bullet was .32 caliber, but leave that to the experts."

"I see. And it would have killed him?"

Bustamente uttered a croaking, incredulous laugh. "Certainly, it would have killed him. Imagine it had happened to you." To illustrate, he jabbed a bony forefinger into Sandoval's chest at about the same spot. "It would have exploded your heart, devastated it."

"Ah," said Sandoval, whose heart was, in fact, feeling more than a little devastated. Murder. Tumult. Inconvenience. The State *Procuraduría de Justicia* taking over his office, taking over the whole municipal building, all four rooms of it. The *policía ministerial* giving him orders, making clear their contempt for him, swaggering and bullying their way through the village. Detectives . . . judges . . .

It was only what he'd expected, he thought with a resigned sigh. *Expect the worst*, his stern, cheerless father had counseled him on many an occasion, *and you will get what you expect. Only what will be worse*. Sandoval had quoted it to one or two people and they had laughed. But his father had meant it as a joke, and the message had sunk in.

"And if by a miracle that were not enough," continued Bustamente, "the fall would have finished the job."

"He had a fall too?"

"A long one. There are many broken ribs. Was he perhaps found at the foot of a cliff or mountain, at some height of some kind?"

"Yes."

Bustamente was pleased. "You see?"

Sandoval heaved a forlorn sigh. "This means I will have to report the matter to the *policía ministerial*, doesn't it?" he said glumly, already knowing the answer.

"The sooner the better, I would say. I would not waste any time. They don't like delays."

"And what happens to the body? Do you take it away with you?"

"Not me!" exclaimed Bustamente. "I submit my own report. That's the end of my responsibility."

"So what do I do with him? We can't just leave him here."

“I suggest that is precisely what you do. Lock the place up securely and await the attentions of the *policía*, who will not be long in coming, I promise you.”

Sandoval nodded soberly. *If only old Nacho had stayed on the regular paths like anyone else. Or he had to stray sometime, couldn't he have waited a few measly weeks longer?* Sandoval would no longer have been the *jefe* by then; he would have been safely, agreeably, delightfully engaged in the administration of the village council's affairs, with no responsibility for corpses or murders or—

“You have a problem on your hands, Chief Sandoval,” Bustamente observed.

“You're telling me.”

“No, I mean an additional problem. I found no bullet. I searched the thoracic cavity thoroughly. It was not there.”

Sandoval frowned. “But why should you expect to find the bullet? It might be anywhere. Do you expect to find the bullet when you shoot a rabbit or a deer? Bullets continue on their way—”

Bustamente shook his head. The problem was, he said, that there was no exit wound. The mummified skin on the back and sides of the body was intact. *Ergo*, the bullet had never exited. But he had searched the thoracic cavity thoroughly and it was nowhere to be found.

“I don't understand. How can that be?”

Bustamente twisted his skinny neck, working out the kinks. “Shall we go outside now? I want some fresh air.”

They went to a stone memorial bench in the cemetery, where they sat awkwardly side by side. Sandoval himself felt a little better there; the air was fresh and he was among family. It seemed sometimes that half the population of Teotitlán was either a Sandoval or related by marriage to a Sandoval. Bustamente offered him a cigarillo, was turned down, and lit one for himself.

“So then where is it, this bullet?” Sandoval asked. “If not inside the body, then where?”

“There is only one possible answer.” Bustamente got his cigarillo going, shook out his match, and emitted twin streams of blue smoke from his nostrils. “It could only have fallen back out through the perforation by which it entered.”

That didn't sound right to Sandoval. “But can a bullet do that? Come out through its own wound?”

“I don't see why not. It's not usual, that's so, but—”

“And you said it was a problem for *me*. Why is it a problem for me if you found no bullet?”

Bustamente dropped the barely smoked cigarillo onto the concrete pad that supported the bench and ground it out under his sole.

He arched his scant eyebrows. “Do you want to turn in a report to the *Procuraduría de Justicia* in which you tell them you were not capable of finding a bullet that probably lies within a meter of where the corpse was discovered? Would you prefer the *policía ministerial* to find it for you?”

“I would not,” Sandoval said softly, but with feeling.

Bustamente uttered a short laugh. “I should think not. You had better return to where he was found and locate it. And if you do not find it there, you must search every millimeter of earth on the way back. That is my considered advice. It may well have come out while the body was on the burro.”

Sandoval blew out his cheeks and exhaled. What a job this was going to be. “I'd better get started now.” They both stood up. “Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

“Nothing that would interest you,” Bustamente said curtly. “I will have my own report for the police next week. And now if you'll excuse me—”

Flaviano Sandoval was by nature a mild, even a timid, man, given to diffidence and conciliation, opposed to temper outbursts, but at this he bristled. “I *am* the police,” he said forcefully. “If you have any additional information, I wish to know it.”

But Dr. Bustamente was not a man to be intimidated, least of all by Flaviano Sandoval. “I meant the real police,” he said drily, but it was beyond him to resist demonstrating his expertise. “If you must know, however, I can tell you that it is my judgment that to become desiccated to this extent, he had to have been lying out in the open for at least eight months, more likely ten.”

“And I would say no more than six months,” Sandoval said, still bristling.

Bustamente stared at him. “Chief Sandoval, I have twenty-two years of experience in these matters. I have certificates in forensic medicine, in clinical pathology, in maxillofacial pathology . . .”

Sandoval let him rattle on. It was Bustamente’s fault he was in this mess—well, in a way it was—and he owed the officious, self-important old man a comeuppance.

“Six months,” Sandoval repeated when Bustamente paused for breath. “No more.”

Bustamente smiled a lipless smile. “Oh yes? And perhaps you would care to tell me on what premise you base this learned conclusion?”

“On the fact that I know who this man is, and he was most certainly alive six months ago.”

That very satisfactorily took the wind out of Bustamente’s sails. “You know . . . you saw . . . well, who is it—was it?”

“He claimed his name was Manuel Garcia. A vagrant. I had him in the jail for a night in May. Then I sent him on his way. I myself put him on the bus to Oaxaca. I watched the bus leave.”

Bustamente leaned back, narrow-eyed, reassessing him. “And why did you not bother to tell me that earlier?”

“Because you didn’t bother to ask me,” Sandoval said spitefully, but a moment later he felt a stab of guilt—well, a prick of guilt—partly because he knew he was being petty, but mostly because he knew it wasn’t the truth.

Why then had he kept it to himself? Because he’d been hoping that Bustamente would conclude that there was nothing sinister about the man’s death, that it had been the result of exposure, or a simple fall, or a heart attack, or best of all that the cause had been impossible to determine. Then Sandoval would have had Garcia quietly buried in a nameless grave at the far corner of the cemetery, an anonymous, unmourned death with no follow-up required. To have supplied his name would only have complicated things, and to no useful end. That far he’d been willing to go to preserve his and the village’s tranquility. But homicide? Murder? No, duty required otherwise, and for Sandoval duty was paramount.

Besides, Pompeo was sure to find out.

“And what else do you know about him that you neglected to tell me?” Bustamente asked coldly.

“Nothing at all.”

Nothing beyond what he knew within ten seconds of setting eyes on him: Manuel Garcia was going to be trouble.

ALL the rest of that day, Sandoval, Pepe, and Pompeo searched diligently, twice walking the two kilometers that the burro had carried the body, and then back; four times altogether. The chief’s back locked up with an audible click after two hours of bending and stooping, so that he was reduced to prodding at objects on the road with a stick. Young Pepe began complaining of neck and knee pain not long after that, and even the granite face of the indestructible Pompeo wore a look of suffering by the time they were done. In all, they retrieved sixty-five pesos in small coins, five shotgun pellets

(collected, just in case), and a Belgian five-cent Euro coin. But of anything even vaguely resembling .32-caliber bullet? Not a sign, not a hint.

TWO or three times a week—the number was left to his discretion—Sandoval had his dinner up at the Hacienda, a familial perk that went along with his being the brother of their award-winning cook Dorotea; a delightful arrangement as far as he was concerned. He had eaten there the previous evening, and being conscientious about presuming upon the Gallaghers' courtesy, he would ordinarily have avoided dining there twice in a row. But after the day he'd had, he was in sore need of the restorative powers of Dorotea's cooking. An exception was in order.

He parked his car in the lodge's lot and made his way, somewhat more stiffly than usual, to the buffet table in the dining room. Sometimes he would eat with the guests to keep up his English skills—necessary because on summer weekends the village overflowed with American tourists—and because it pleased Mr. Gallagher to show off his relationship with the *jefe de policía*. But Tom Gallagher wasn't in residence this week and Sandoval was in no mood to sharpen his English. Instead he carried his food to a separate nook at the back of the dining room that was kept for the various Gallaghers. He sat himself slowly and carefully down, with something between a groan and a sigh. Always, the smell of Dorotea's thick, smooth mole sauce went a long way toward reviving his spirits.

After a while he was joined by old Josefa Gallegos, who supervised the housekeeping staff, and Annie Tandler, the receptionist. Josefa was Mexican and Annie was American, but both, he knew, were somehow related to Mr. Gallagher, as was everybody else in a management position at the Hacienda. From the beginning it had been a family affair.

As usual, Josefa had little to say. Elderly and increasingly deaf, she gave him a grunted *buenas tardes* and immediately set to attacking her *enchiladas de pollo con mole poblano*. Annie, also as usual, was more talkative.

"You don't look your usual cheerful self, Chief," she said in her perfect, idiomatic Spanish.

Sandoval had always found Annie easy to talk to—always a smile at the corners of her mouth, the one; never grumpy or taciturn, a good talker and a good listener both—and before they'd gotten their coffee and flan he'd told her the whole story.

"We looked and we looked. It's nowhere to be found, Anita. You don't know how I hate to turn in my report without having found it. The *policía ministerial* will find it, I know they will—they have so many resources at their disposal—and we will look like bumbling incompetents. I will look like bumbling incompetent."

"You're positive it's not still in the body somewhere?"

"Yes. Well, not positive, no, but that is what Dr. Bustamente says. And I'm afraid to poke around in that thing myself. I wouldn't know how to do it. I don't *want* to do it." He shuddered. "And then on top of that, there is the report I am required to file with the *policía ministerial*. How do I do that, what do I write? I know nothing of such things. The last time this happened, everything I did was wrong, but did they tell me how to do it right? They did not."

"Couldn't Dr. Bustamente help you with that?"

"Bustamente," he said scornfully and drew himself up. "I refuse to give him the satisfaction."

"Chief Sandoval," Annie said slowly, "I have an idea."

He looked at her with a modest upsurge of hope. An idea was one idea more than he had. "Yes?"

“You know I’m going to the United States in a couple of days. Well, my cousin Julie is arriving tomorrow to take my place, and her husband is coming with her on vacation. I’ve never met him, but he’s a forensic scientist who works on such things all the time. He might be able to help you, examine the body, maybe find the bullet, or at least give you some advice. Maybe he could help you with your report. I’m sure he would know about these things.”

Sandoval considered. “But would he be willing to do that? A prominent man, on vacation, after all . . .”

“From what Julie tells me about him, he’d like nothing better.”

“He hasn’t seen that thing,” Sandoval muttered.

“What have you got to lose by asking him?”

“Indeed, nothing,” Sandoval said thoughtfully.

“He’s supposed to be very famous, you know. They call him the Skeleton Detective.”

“Skeleton detective.” Sandoval uttered a short laugh as he dug into the flan, then uttered what was for him a rarity: a joke. “I suppose you wouldn’t happen to know any mummy detectives?”

“Not enough chiles in the flan,” Josefa muttered in her thickly accented English, possibly to the flan itself. “She’s supposed to be such a wonderful cook, how is it she don’t know how to put enough chiles in the flan?”

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