

EXCERPT FROM

## **Margaritas & Murder**

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

*Jessica Fletcher is on her way to San Miguel de Allende in the mountains of central Mexico to visit her publisher Vaughan Buckley and his wife Olga. Stranded in the León terminal late at night when a driver fails to meet her flight, Jessica gets a ride from the teenaged son of the airport janitor.*

I wondered if Juanito had taken a shortcut, or if this was the highway to San Miguel de Allende. It certainly didn't look as if it accommodated a lot of traffic. The road was a narrow and winding roller coaster carved into the sides of low hills with rocks and brush for borders, rarely steep for very long but with enough twists and turns to challenge the bravest fun-seeker. Later, the land flattened out, allowing Juanito to press harder on the accelerator. The countryside flew by, our headlights reflecting off the flanks of many a cow grazing nearby or occasionally wandering onto the road itself.

It seemed to me that the farther away from León we got, the faster Juanito drove. We passed through tiny towns, hurtling down the main thoroughfare. Speeding up rather than slowing down when locals appeared by the side of the road, we raced along the dry trails leaving a plume of dust in our wake.

I clung to the top of the front seat and braced my hand on the door, struggling to stay upright in the rocketing car. Desperate, I tried to remember the Spanish words meaning "please slow down"; I settled on yelling "*por favor, no mas rapido*" over the roar of the engine, and praying that Juanito would understand. He answered me in rapid-fire Spanish, the only word of which I grasped was "*bandidos*."

Bandits! He was worried about bandits.

He looked around to reassure me, grinned and held up what to him must have been a trusty weapon. It was a baseball bat. Good heavens! I could see the headlines: American tourist and Mexican boy face off against bandits with a can of hair spray and a Louisville slugger. After that, I held on and squeezed my eyes shut, only opening them to peer at my watch every few minutes, a wasted exercise because it was too dark to see the dial.

“San Miguel,” Juanito sang out some time later.

I looked up. The car had crested a hill, and there, nestled in the valley below, were the sparkling lights of a good-sized city.

“Wonderful,” I said, relieved this harrowing ride would soon be over. The town looked as if it weren’t too far off, and I estimated we could be at the Buckleys in fifteen minutes or so. I wondered what their house would look like. We had never discussed that. Would it be a Spanish-style stucco with dark beams jutting from the eaves? Or would it be built of brick or stone with long narrow windows, or perhaps with filigreed iron balconies? I pictured Olga in a long caftan, floating through a room with high ceilings and whitewashed walls dominated by oil paintings. She was an elegant woman, tall and slender with a deportment that suggested royalty, a perception that Vaughan delighted in, knowing the real woman. Many people were intimidated by her at first, but that didn’t last long if they took the time to look beyond first impressions. She was warm and sweet, and made an effort to see to the comfort of everyone around her. Of course, I also knew her silly side. She was a great mimic, and had a devilish laugh that was infectious. Her house would be, well, I couldn’t think what it would be. I knew one thing: It would be a welcome sight regardless of its architecture and décor.

The fifteen minutes came and went. The lights of San Miguel in front of us became lights to the side of us, and eventually lights behind, as Juanito

maneuvered the car down the tortured mountain road. By that time I was too tired to be fearful of his driving any more. Instead, I daydreamed—or should it be nightdreamed—imagining myself already at our destination. I saw myself tiptoeing up the stairs to Vaughan and Olga’s guest room, trying not to awaken them, sinking into the freshly made bed and sleeping deeply. Just the thought of cool sheets and a soft pillow relaxed me. The ride had been an adventure I could recount in the morning over coffee. Vaughan loved a good story, and I thought of ways I could embellish it for his amusement. Not that it required much embellishment. But my vision was instantly shattered when we rounded a curve to find a boulder in the center of the road.

Juanito swerved to the right, the wheels of the car climbing the rocks bordering the shoulder. I slid across the bench seat and slammed into the door. Thank goodness it didn’t open. We careened ahead, balancing on two wheels, the low-hanging branches of trees reaching through the open window, grabbing at our clothes and scraping the top and sides of the car, sounding like the screeching of chalk on a blackboard. Juanito cut the wheel sharply and the car righted itself, jouncing over the rough surface, and came to a stop before two trees, the headlights riding up and down their trunks in smaller and smaller waves as the car’s movement settled. Suddenly, it seemed, the only sound I heard was the hiss of steam escaping the radiator. The engine had died.

Juanito, his face ashen, released a stream of Spanish curses, and pounded the steering wheel with both hands.

“Juanito, are you all right?” I asked.

My hands were shaking. A hundred questions flashed through my mind. How would we get to San Miguel now? I couldn’t see the lights of the city any more. Did that mean we were closer to level ground? Perhaps we could walk the rest of the way. Were we near a home on the outskirts of the city? Could we call

for help? I had a cell phone. Would it work in the mountains of central Mexico? Did Juanito have a cell phone, too? Did the police patrol the highways around San Miguel? Were we stuck here till someone found us? How long would that be?

I took inventory of my body. I felt no pain, but my heart was pounding. I knew I might possibly be in shock, but doubted I had any serious injury. We hadn't struck anything, even if the car had taken positions more appropriate to stunt driving than cross country travel. I guessed I would be sore the next day, however. When I'd banged into the door, the window crank had given me a good poke in the hip.

"Juanito?" I said again. "Are you all right?"

He was silent. But he seemed to be straining to hear.

*He doesn't speak English, Jessica,* I reminded myself. "*Como esta usted?*" I was asking How are you? Not exactly the correct question, but perhaps he would understand my meaning.

He didn't answer, but he whipped around, his eyes wide, as the back door flew open and I was yanked into the night.