

THE JERICHO JOURNALS

by

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AN EXCERPT

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CHAPTER ONE

One day, about fourteen months ago, the painter Edward Jericho disappeared. While he was fairly well known locally, he was not famous beyond our borders, and not many people were aware of his absence at first. I rarely ran into him more than three or four times a year, so his departure wasn't obvious to me.

People from the United States and Canada come and go here in San Miguel de Allende with no special regularity, since this is a destination town in the way Aspen or San Francisco is, or Cape Cod in the summer. Set in the mountains of central México, it is at once an art colony, an active music scene, a retirement haven where the dollar can be stretched to new limits, and a refuge for writers both famous and anonymous. Besides the tourists, for longer sojourns it draws people with a slightly different take on living. A comfortable niche awaits those who are chasing an unconventional dream, a walk on the wild side later in life with sensible shoes, or an expatriate lifestyle free of hometown or family expectations.

That description fit Edward Jericho perfectly. He was known to stand out as an eccentric in a town replete with eccentrics. Since this absence had gone on longer than any others, when speculation began to spread about his whereabouts I still heard little conjecture that he might have come to harm. The subtext was more that he was perfectly capable of wandering off for his own obscure and private reasons, even for fourteen months. At times it sounded as if people were starting to reassure themselves out loud.

Charming and historic, at its center a nearly literal snapshot of colonial México but for the cars and more interesting paint colors, the town of San Miguel is still not for everyone. Some restless exiles eventually hoist their anchor and sail off to the next beckoning Shangri-La. Rumors about these comings and goings are rampant among the expat community of eight thousand, seeming to dance lightly from tongue to tongue. About a month ago I heard some gossip that an auction was going to be held to sell off the household and studio effects Jericho had left behind. This suddenly gave his extended absence a sharper and unwelcome edge.

Although he was rumored to have some family money, always a boon to any artist, he was renting the fine old house he lived in, a transient condition suited to a vagabond lifestyle.

The story went that he had simply abandoned what appeared to be all his worldly possessions, right down to his shoes and clothing. Later, a woman who had been working in the house to organize his belongings for the auction noticed that a half finished painting was still resting on his easel when she arrived to prepare the catalogue. Next to it, the brushes standing upright in a small ceramic vase had never been cleaned, and their bristles were now hardened into solid colors. Dried paint inched its way across his palette in serpentine squiggles. As a painter myself, I began to suspect that something had to be uncomfortably suspicious about Edward Jericho's protracted absence. Even if we like to think of ourselves as footloose and free to roam on impulse, wouldn't we at least clean our brushes and take along our shoes?

High quality brushes are expensive anywhere, and since Edward often demanded sable for his work, the types he needed were not always easy to locate in San Miguel. Serious painters can never settle for inferior ones, since they make up a vital part of a skilled technique. Next I heard that the landlord had been forced to go to court and finally received permission to auction off Edward's belongings to pay the back rent. That's not so easy to do here; squatters have more rights than they have in the States.

While Edward was successful in finding buyers for his work, for his subjects he preferred images from the past, and reproduced exquisite versions of Renaissance or later mythological or devotional subjects originally painted by other artists. He was highly knowledgeable about the Pre-Raphaelites, a group of nineteenth century English painters who sought to return to the techniques and values of Italian painting before Raphael came on the scene around 1500.

Privately, I would have described Edward not as an artist, since he put none of his own ideas into these paintings, but as a serious and even profound *student* of art. Even if some people questioned his creativity, the sophistication of his technique was remarkable. He could paint masterfully in a wide variety of styles.

Still, he lacked both the passion and the originality it takes to develop important finished work from his own ideas and to create unique images. My partner, Maya

Sanchez, whose command of nuanced English, particularly of the slang, is remarkable for a Mexican woman, even one as well educated as she is, once described Edward Jericho to me as *effete*.

Of course, as a visual artist, language is not my long suit, even English, and I had to look up that word. Decadent, or lacking in vigor, is the definition I found. Maya doesn't mind it when I sometimes tell her that her English is better than mine, although she never says that to me about my Spanish.

We both slightly knew his former live-in girlfriend, the poet Rocio Valdez. While she was not overtly sexy at first glance, never working at it, and was normally a person of restrained presentation, she was clearly sensual in subtle ways. I had noticed this even in the movement of her fingers. I didn't think she could ever take a less than passionate man as her companion for four years, which is how long she and Edward were together. My impression of her was that she was a woman who welcomed being loved, not to make her whole, to supply a missing part, but to add a subtle gloss to her own list of individual accomplishments.

Edward exhibited his work as the foremost talent in a collective gallery downtown on Mesones with four or five other artists. It was called Galeria Reflejo, and none of their work was at all similar. I knew him mainly because we traveled in the same crowd, although on different edges of it. He had once paid me the firm compliment of buying a *tondo* of mine (a circular painting, this one about thirteen inches in diameter) that was a plausible copy of a Raphael cherub I admired. Edward wouldn't have settled for anything less than a picture that required careful study to see whether it was genuine. Perhaps the same was true of his own painting.

Yes, I do copy things now and then too, but mainly to see how other artists work, because there is no better way to understand that than by pursuing those same effects, even 500 years after they were pioneered by someone else. Still, copies comprise less than one percent of my work.

Edward was also a horseman, although I didn't know how serious, which was why Maya came out to the loggia one morning as I was enjoying a second cup of coffee at the edge of the garden, and with subtle but inescapable emphasis slapped a copy of our weekly bilingual paper, *Atención*, down on the table next to me. I took this to mean she'd

found something compelling inside, and I slipped my arm around her waist. My hand found her left hip. At thirty, an age she doesn't mind acknowledging to the right people, she still maintained the slender athletic figure she'd had when we got together eight years before. Her dark hair still had the touch of wave and hint of henna it had then. It reached to about three or four inches below her shoulders.

"Look at this," she said. "The rumor of Edward Jericho's household sale is true."

The half-page display ad announced the auction of the painter's furniture, collections, and studio effects for the coming Saturday. In the list of offerings, she had highlighted in luminous yellow-green one line in particular. *Lot 86: A large box of equestrian books and CDs. No tack.*

"Paul, check this out. He must have some wonderful resource books, and several of those dressage CDs are very expensive. They're letting them go as one lot!"

Maya had gotten back into riding, her high school passion, about a year and a half before, with the purchase of a Lusitano mare named Martina.

Three lines further down I pointed to another. *Lot 89: Assorted art books.* Any art books Jericho owned would likely be uncommon and the finest quality. The man was a collector in many areas. We had been in his house only once, for a party three years before, but some of his collections interested me more than his own painting. I had a suspicion that he might have some good reference material on the Pre-Raphaelites. Those books could fill a gap in my own painting reference library.

I also had a third reason for going to the auction, one of the best. I was curious to see what my own *tondo* of the Raphael cherub would bring. I think Edward had paid me about \$800 for it.

At the same time it occurred to me that, because of the ambiguity of Edward's extended absence, this auction might also be of interest to the Paul Zacher Agency, the private detective group that bears my name. At the moment we didn't have a case underway, not that we needed to have one all the time. Often I'd rather be painting.