Cozy Mystery Sample

One of my goals in life is to find a good mystery. As a 63-year-old woman and a breast cancer survivor, I’ve seen my collection of mystery movies and read every novel there is (at least at my library). My librarian is always saying, *“Sorry Clara, we still don’t have any new ones.”* When I had to retire early because of my diagnosis, I told myself I was going to continue to live my best life. I told myself that, if anything, I would travel more when I was healthier, because I’d already be out of work.

So, here I am, in Guatemala City, the rich overlooking those so poor they are searching through things in the garbage to repair and sell at some of the open-air markets. It doesn’t stop me from getting some souvenirs though.

My daughter, Georgina, can’t travel much because of my little grandson Matheus, so I bring back things from all my trips.

When I get to the stall that sells bits of Guatemalan sweets, like Canillitas de Leche (a dessert made from milk, sugar, and cinnamon) I wonder when I can take my grandson here to try everything. At three, I think he’s old enough to at least partially enjoy these things. The woman who I go to buy from holds out tiny little samples on a plate held by her left hand while her right arm is in a cast, and I figure she must be used to it, as she holds the plate with a practiced ease.

When I get ready to try one, a woman from the next stall over says, “American, yes?” She reached towards me, and her nails were bit so close that it looks like her fingers sometimes bled. Her hair was a bit wild, and her eyes were bloodshot, and I don’t think she was crying.

“Yes.”

“An American man died recently. Eating one of those.”  
 I laugh uneasily, expecting it to be some sort of bad joke. “No one has died from eating mine,” she says, and I realize what she is trying to do there and am not going to fall for it.

“Maybe I can get one of those from each of you.” I wouldn’t mind two, I never turn down extra food, and I do feel bad buying from one stall simply because it is two steps closer than the other one.

“He still died,” the latter woman says.

A man from across the way says, “yes, he did.” The man’s voice was deep, more a growl than attractive, and I’m pretty sure he’s a smoker.

I don’t know what I am meant to say, if this is something to get into, so I look at the woman I currently have money out in front of. “Anything to say for yourself?” I tease.

“He was not a good man.”

It is not exactly comforting, and I don’t know how I am going to explain to her that I need proof that he actually had not died.

“Maybe I don’t want to eat right now. I think I’ve lost my appetite.”

They all laugh then and the woman who started it says, “it is okay American woman, we are just having a good time.”  
 Still, as I buy the sweets, I’m relieved my grandson is not here.

When I get back to my hotel, in the nicer part of town, I turn on the television, with the subtitles, and watch the news, because if I am going to be in Guatemala, I may as well know a bit of the action.

The man on the screen makes me stop in my tracks. He is an everyday man a mess of black hair just long enough to be called shaggy, and a bit of a beard. The newscaster says, “his wife and young son said they last saw Steve at 4pm yesterday, when they were walking the market and he said he needed some privacy to get them special gifts he didn’t want them to see. If anyone has any updates about his whereabouts, his family misses him desperately, and they refuse to go back without him, despite her mother, who is elderly and fragile, being watched by a nurse when they are here. The police are taking any tips at this number.”

A number scrolls across the screen, and almost without thinking, I dial it. I don’t know if I’ll actually be able to help, but I can give the bit of information I do have.

The man says something in Spanish, and I quickly say, “do you or anyone speak English?”

“Of course, ma’am. What can I help you with?” His switch to English is effortless, his accent barely there.

“I want to make a report about that American man that went missing.”

“Oh? And what do you know about him?”

“I don’t have a lot of information to give, but when I was in the market yesterday some of the vendors talked about a man that died after eating Canillitas de Leche because he was a bad man.”

“Okay, what vendor was it?” he asks.

“Oh, uh—” I pause.

“What market were you in?”

“Mercado Central.”

“But you still don’t know who?” he asks.

“I can go back and check.”

He sighs. “Fine. Do that and call back. But, most likely, they were making a joke.”

I don’t know how to explain that it very much didn’t feel like a joke, so I say goodbye and hang up, promising myself I’ll go back to the market very first thing in the morning.

The market is a maze of stalls, and I don’t know how I’m going to find them again, but I remember bits and pieces. The first woman, with an arm in the cast. The woman next to her had her nails bit back. The man—well, I had only heard him from behind, so I don’t know even bits and pieces about him, so this will have to be enough.

But I look at every single stall and none of them are right. There are a lot more than I remember, but the women aren’t there. I suppose after admitting murder it would make sense to disappear, but I don’t know why they admitted murder to me in the first place. Surely they didn’t just tell everyone passing their stalls that.

There is no point in calling the police back and saying, what, that one of them bites their nails?

But I find myself not able to let it go. This man, he has a little son. How much older or younger he is than Matheus I don’t know, but he needs his father. Matheus’ father was never involved, and soon my grandson will realize that that is different. This little boy deserves better.

Chapter Two

I just don’t know what my next plan of attack is. I look up information about Steve, trying to see if he is a bad man like was said, but of course there are only positives online, every interview talking about how he was funny, and his eyes sparkled. Besides, if they were murderers, wouldn’t they try to find any reason they could to kill him?

I do the only thing I can think of doing and look him up on social media. His page is overrun with people, some of whom he probably barely knows or doesn’t know at all, talking about how amazing he is and how much they need him to come back safely.

Other people, on more of the depths of the internet, saying he didn’t really go missing at all, but instead ran away because he wanted away from his family, that he’s just another father trying to get away from a young child. That hits close to home.

My phone rings, and it is Georgina, with a video call. I answer right away, telling myself that is more important than getting into someone else’s business. Besides, I have been gone for a week, and we haven’t had a good chance to video chat yet, just send texts and pictures back and forth.

When I answer, it is Matheus who is holding the phone. “Grandma!” he calls out.

“Hey there! How are you?”

“Are you bringing presents?”

“I always bring presents, don’t I?” I tease.

“Matt,” Georgina says, “that’s not the right way to say hello to your grandma.”

“Are you bringing presents please?”

“I am bringing presents, you’re welcome.”

“Mom don’t encourage him,” she groans.

I laugh. “I’m his grandmother, I’m supposed to encourage him. What do you want me to bring you Matheus?”

“Are there monkeys in guacamole?”

“Guatemala, and yes there are, but I don’t think they’ll let me take one back on the plane. How about a monkey toy?”

“Fine,” he says, with a sigh I know he learned from his mother, who now takes the phone.

“Be careful out there,” she says. “You know how I feel about you traveling alone.”

“You know,” I muse, “an American traveler went missing.”

“What? Mom, why would you tell me that? Did you know them? Are you safe?”

“No, I just saw him on the news. I don’t think we ever met. And I am safe. I promise. These things happen, but he probably left the city. In Guatemala City, it really is safe.” I don’t know if that is true. The man was last seen at the market, that was probably where he disappeared from, but I also realized I had been absentminded again and said enough to the point where I made Georgina nervous. “I’ll be careful. You don’t need to worry. I’m a grown woman.”

“Okay,” she says. “Anyway, we have to go, we have a playdate with Jeremiah. But I will text you later, make sure everything is still fine.”

“It will be, love you both.” They say the same thing and we end the call. This only makes me want to help even more. After all, there are people waiting for Steve, people whose life revolves around him. I can’t imagine having information that could possibly be helpful and not using it.

I go deeper into the web, trying to see what people say. I decide to do something I’ve never done before and on one of the forums I post what I had heard in a comment, thinking no one would ever read it. After all, I would be lucky to get five likes on a social media picture. But, apparently, people are interested in this, because I am overwhelmed with how many comments there are on mine, and I barely can figure out how to open the threads, much less actually respond to them.

*The markets are a dangerous place for a woman all alone.*

*He’s probably in the drugs, but they probably are too. Sometimes they do drug deals at the market.*

*Sometimes drugs are hidden in food.*

*I know them. They’re best friends, live in my building. Drug dealers, yes, but not so bad as people worry they may be.*

It’s the last comment which catches me. I don’t know if I really shared enough for anyone to know them, but I do know that I have to figure out how to find this person and see what they have to say.

I figure out how to private message the commenter and say, *can you tell me where to find the women? The women that told me about the man dying.*

*Do you think it’s smart to get involved in that?* YouPostedHereFirst asks right away.

*I think I need to. I can’t just forget about this.*

*Did you know him?*

*Does it matter? Can’t I care about him anyway?*

*I’ll send you an address, but that’s all I’m telling you. You can’t ask who I am, and you’ll have to figure out where the women are and how to find them all on their own. I don’t really want to get involved.*

*Thank you!*

*Are you sure you want to do this?*

*I don’t feel as if I have another option.*

The poster sends the address and I see that there are a lot more comments on my post, but nothing else that proves to be helpful. I look up the address and see it is close enough to walk to, so I don’t have to mess with the road system that I don’t really like. I had put myself in the heart of the city so I could walk everywhere for a reason.

With it being in such a nice part of town, it looks like an expensive place to stay. Maybe selling drugs makes good money or maybe the market does, though it doesn’t look like the kind of job that would, selling little pieces of Canillitas de Leche to strangers.

I hadn’t made a plan of how I would find them though; it’s not like I can walk into the apartment building and wait in the hallway. I stand outside of the door and one of the many roaming dogs of the street comes up to me. I know I should ignore him, that’s always what they suggest you do, but as he comes up and sniffs my purse, I realize I have a few pieces of jerky in case I get hungry and don’t want to spend money on the snacks (the reason the jerky is still there is because that is never true, I always want to try the local snacks). I reach for one piece and offer it to him, until a woman comes running out and says, “you can’t feed him, he’ll come to the apartment all the time now! We need to get him away from here.”

When she goes to grab my hand, I see how close her nails are bit but also that her hair is bleach blonde and she has less bust than she did before. I study her, wondering if she’ll recognize me, wondering if I recognize her or if this is simply another nervous nailbiter. But the sharp angle of her nose says otherwise.

Chapter Three

I can’t tell if she recognizes me, but she’s not saying anything, surely she would be nervous about this all if she knew she had told me she murdered someone. Or rather, her friend did. But I had a feeling they both were involved. That still doesn’t tell me why she told me though.

“Look,” she says, “I know that you are a tourist, but we live there. It’s bad enough that we hear all your noise deep into the night and the traffic is worse than New York City, can you at least let us have some freedom for these nasty animals?”

“He’s hardly nasty,” I say, though the drool is falling onto the ground.

“Get out of here, or I’ll have security help you get out of here.”

I know a lot of buildings have security, because they really aren’t as safe as I told my daughter they were. I need to get more information from her before I leave.

“Listen, I’m not here to cause any trouble. I’m just waiting for someone. I can’t be let in without them coming to get me. You know that.”

“Who are you waiting for?” she asks.

I wonder who I am supposed to say while not knowing any names, so I try the next best thing and lean in and say, “I don’t know their name, but I know they have what I need.” Even if she tries to turn me in, the police won’t care about one tourist coming here to buy drugs. They have a lot of bigger issues to deal with.

She holds her composure easily enough. “We don’t have anyone who does that here.”

“I didn’t even tell you what I’m looking for.”

“Whatever you’re looking for then, we don’t have it.”

I take a deep breath and say, “fine, but I’m going to feed this dog.”

I give him the piece of jerky in my hand and dig in my purse for the other one.  
 “Okay, okay,” she says. “I’ll let you inside and then you can go wait at the door of the person you are waiting for. I’m not introducing you to anyone.”

“I don’t know which door I’m looking for.”

“Then I guess you can go knock on a few and ask.”

“I said I don’t even know her name,” I point out.

“Get out of here. I don’t know what you think you’re doing but feed the damn dog then. At the very least, get out of here.”

She looks cagey, like she knows something is wrong, and I wonder if I need to bail now, but at my age, after surviving breast cancer, things don’t scare me as much as they used to. “Listen, I won’t feed the dog, but are you sure you don’t know who I am looking for?”  
 “Positive.”

“Well, in that case I will go on my way, but it was nice talking to you. What’s your name?”

“I don’t see how that is any of your business.”

“Maybe not, but I like to hear about people who are nice to me.”

“I’m not nice,” she turns and walks into the apartment, pulling the door shut behind her.

“That is true,” I mutter to myself, “you’re not nice at all.”

But I did have a plan that she hadn’t realized: I recorded the conversation. Of course, she didn’t say anything that I was looking for. No name, nothing. The only thing suggesting I even know her at all is the bit down nails and the sharp angle of her nose. If someone else said that I would point out they were features more than one person could have, but I am certain.

Afterwords, I go back to the hotel and pull out my phone, getting ready to message YouPostedHereFirst, though I don’t know that anything will actually come from asking. I don’t know what I want to ask at all. So, I decide to start in a safe place.

*Thank you. She was there. Or one of them, at least.*

*They’re leaving soon.*

*What makes you say that?*

*They were packing and loading boxes in the middle of the night, and when they came out for a minute earlier, they looked different. I think they were coming for a package.*

*Do you know what?*

*No idea. Anyway, I’ve said too much. Good luck.*

Them leaving doesn’t seem to be the best start, as it means I have even less time than I thought I did. I walk back to the apartment, but this time I decide to be a bit more inconspicuous. I walk past the apartment and around the neighborhood, filled with expensive shops made for high-end tourists, coffee shops, and then, on a passing thought, up the local parking structure. There’s a moving truck. It, of course, could be a coincidence, but how many people are moving today?

The truck is closed, so I have no idea what could be important enough to be packed in the middle of the night. I know this next part is dangerous, but I begin to open the back. It rises, and I am completely shocked. I start looking around and see household furniture, boxes of pans, everything you would expect when someone is moving.

Then I hear her, the nail-bitten woman, and she is coming to the truck, on the phone saying, “do you really think telling people helped? Sure, you maybe but us—Fine, hang up then.” She is a ways away, but she is coming, and I’m not sure I can run in time. This time, she definitely will recognize me. So I do the only thing I can think of: I close the door softly and crawl back into the dark truck interior.