

EXCERPT FROM

Blood on the Vine

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher is in California's Napa Valley to learn about the wine business to use as a possible backdrop for one of her novels. She has been invited to visit property owned by infamous ex-Hollywood heavy-weight Bill Ladington, a blatant womanizer involved in a bitter vineyard land dispute that leads to murder.

Bill Ladington had been right. The views along Silverado Trail were spectacular. I looked down over the valley and its thousands of symmetrical rows of grape trellises that followed the contour of the land as far as the eye could see. Some vineyards were relatively flat; others twisted up hillsides and disappeared over their crests. All were brightened by lovely yellow wildflowers called mustard flowers, which inspire a number of festivals throughout California's wine country. Besides the trellises, the other distinguishing feature across the sprawling landscape were windmills, hundreds of them spaced throughout the vineyards.

"Do those windmills generate power?" I asked.

"No, ma'am," Raoul replied. "The vineyards turn them on when the temperature gets cold enough at night. The air above the ground is warmer than the air at the ground. The breeze created by the windmills circulates the warmer air over the vines."

"Seems like a sensible, low-tech solution to a problem," I said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Some of the wineries we passed looked like European estates, with huge iron gates, and access roads lined with poplar trees reaching far into the vineyards' inner recesses. Others, more recently built – at least the main buildings looked more contemporary – were closer to the road, and large signs invited visitors to come sample the product.

When we reached Halton Mountain, Raoul turned off on to a very narrow, winding macadam road edged with tall, thick bramble bushes. Then, suddenly, he made a sharp left turn and we were on a dirt road wide enough for only a single car. I looked up and was surprised to see tall, swaying palm trees along the sides of the road; had we left northern California and driven to sunny Los Angeles?

I looked ahead. Looming large on a rise of land was a castle, obviously the one inhabited by William Ladington that, according to him, had been built by the Spanish. I don't know enough about architecture to question any castle's origins, but I knew one thing for certain about this one. It was huge. And as we got closer, I realized we were about to cross a drawbridge over a moat.

"A moat?" I said.

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Ladington had it dug years ago."

"For security purposes?"

"I wouldn't know, ma'am. I don't question what Mr. Ladington does. Ever!"

I glanced at Raoul, whose face was set in what appeared to be anger, although he was such a serious, unsmiling young man that it was hard to gauge. I looked down and saw that the moat, which I judged to be twelve feet wide, was half filled with brackish, green water; huge boulders lined the bottom.

I didn't have time to ponder it because we were over the bridge and on a circular gravel drive in front of the castle. Massive black wooden doors opened and the lord of the manor stepped through them and stood at the top of the steps. There was no doubt it was William Ladington; I'd seen his picture in enough tabloids to recognize him immediately -- six feet, four inches tall, broad shoulders, square, tanned and deeply lined face, and a full head of steel gray hair. He wore tight jeans, a little too tight considering the

overhang of his stomach, a white gauze shirt open halfway down his chest, and highly polished cowboy boots. He stood with his hands on his hips and a smile on his craggy face.

I opened my door before Raoul had a chance to come around to do it for me, and stepped out of the Jeep. Ladington didn't bother to come down to greet me. He simply motioned for me to join him on the steps, which I did.

"Well, well, well," he said in a loud, hoarse voice, "the famous Jessica Fletcher. You bring that book for me and Tennessee?"

"No. I didn't have one with me."

Ladington turned to Raoul. "Hey, get yourself over to town and buy up some of the lady's books. Go on. Get going. Fletcher. Jessica Fletcher. Get the ones with hard covers on them."

Raoul, who had been standing next to the Jeep, got in it and drove off.

"Come on in, sweetheart," Ladington said.

I didn't move.

"You planning on standing out here all day?"

"Mr. Ladington, if we're going to get along, I prefer that you not call me 'sweetheart' or any other term of endearment."

He laughed. "One of those fem libbers, huh?"

"No, just someone who believes in and demands respect between people."

His face screwed up into exaggerated shock at what I'd said. Then he broke into a wide grin again. "Fair enough. What would you like to be called? Mrs. Fletcher. Jessica? Jess?"

"Jessica will be fine," I said, extending my hand.

"And I'm Bill. Plain ol' Bill," he said, shaking my hand and guiding us through the huge doors.

He led me into a foyer the size of my home in Cabot Cove. Here, the Spanish influence was more evident to my untrained eye. There were huge,

colorful oil paintings, heavy tapestries, and sizable wall ornaments made of steel or wrought iron as we made our way down a lengthy hallway to the rear of the castle. He opened glass doors and we stepped out on to a broad brick patio that overlooked an Olympic-sized pool, and an expanse of vineyard that stretched to the base of a barren hill. Separating us from the vineyard was the moat, narrower at the back than in front. A wooden footbridge that could be raised and lowered by hand spanned it. It was down. An armed security guard sat in a yellow director's chair next to it.

"Is that Halton Mountain?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am, Jessica, that's exactly what it is. How do you know about Halton?"

"Friends told me about it last night at dinner."

"They tell you it's the finest piece of land in the whole damn valley?"

"They said it was a good place to grow grapes."

"Your friends are fond of understatements." He pointed to his right, to another mountain on which grape trellises were strung up to its crest. "That's Howell Mountain. It's almost as good as Halton."

"Why aren't there vineyards on Halton Mountain?" I asked, returning my attention to the bare hillside.

"There will be, Jessica," he said sternly. "There will be."

I pointed in the direction of another vineyard that seemed to butt up to the southern edge of Ladington Creek. The trellises were different from those on the Ladington property. "Is that your land, too?" I asked.

"No. It belongs to a rotten SOB named Jenkins."

"I take it you and Mr. Jenkins aren't friends."

"I'd like to see him dead. That's how friendly we are."