

EXCERPT FROM

Provence—To Die For

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher has settled in France for a much-needed holiday. She's staying in the home of her friend Martine, who is, at the same time, vacationing in Cabot Cove as a guest at Jessica's house. Jessica is looking forward to two months of rest and relaxation but her first night in Martine's country farmhouse is not exactly what she expected.

That night . . . following a supper of salad, bread, and a country pâté Martine had thoughtfully left for me, I made a fire in the living room fireplace and curled up to read. The book I'd chosen was a mystery by a popular author I'd never read before. His descriptions of eerie atmospheres and sinister characters were very well done, but the graphic descriptions of blood and gore had me skipping paragraphs. His hero was following a trail of blood on the floor, the crimson drops leading to . . . A chill raced up my spine and I shivered. Outside, the wind wailed and rattled the shutters. The old house creaked. I heard two thuds. Instantly I became acutely aware of the sounds around me. The crackle of the fire and the pop when the flames hit a pocket of sap. The mantel clock with its slightly offbeat ticking to the time of its swinging pendulum. The scratching of a branch brushing against an outside wall. I was in an unfamiliar house, out in the country, isolated, my nearest neighbor, whom I hadn't even met yet, down the road past the orchard.

"You're doing a good job of scaring yourself, Jessica," I told myself out loud. "It's time you went to bed."

I marked my place in the book and left it on the living room table. This was not a good bedtime story. Better to tackle it during the day, and save the night for a

different kind of book, maybe the novel by Rosamund Pilcher that took place in Scotland, or perhaps the book of French poetry I'd picked up in the airport.

I banked the fire in the hearth, checked the locks on the front door and the one in the kitchen, and went upstairs to my new bedroom. I changed into my night-clothes, washed up, and climbed under the covers. The sky had cleared. Moonlight spilled through the single window opposite my bed. The shadowed patterns on the cold white disk were sharply delineated. Off in the distance, an animal howled. A wolf?

"You'll never get to sleep with the moonlight in your eyes," I grumbled, flinging back the quilts and feeling around on the floor for my slippers. I crossed the room to the window and knelt on the window seat to keep from banging my head on the sloped ceiling. Tiebacks held the curtains open. I released them from the hooks, and started to pull the panels of fabric together when a movement caught my eye. A large tree in the front obscured my view of the barn, but I thought I saw the shadow of its door closing. Was someone sneaking around out there? I sank down on the window seat and stared through the branches, daring the prowler, if there was one, to show himself. The tree swayed with each gust of wind, and leaves rolled over the concrete patio outside the front door below, but no other shadows, materialized.

"This is ridiculous," I told myself. "You can't spend half the night watching out the window." Without turning on a light, I pulled my coat from the wardrobe, put it on over my nightclothes, and padded downstairs. Now where had I seen that flashlight? *Right! The mantel.* I pocketed the light, crossed the kitchen, opened the front door as quietly as I could, and slid out. Moonlight filled the patio and illuminated the front of the garage.

I walked quietly to the big barn doors and opened the one on the right. The wind grabbed the door and threatened to slam it back against the garage. I held on

tight and peered into the gloomy interior, endeavoring to see if someone was hiding behind the rusting tools. I flicked on the flashlight and played the beam over the metal hulks and discarded furniture. The garage was empty. I shone the light on the ground. Were those smudges on the damp ground footprints? They appeared to lead to the left.

Feeling-a bit foolish but determined not to take any chances, I grabbed the nearby bicycle pump, latched the barn door, and tiptoed stealthily around the side of the garage. A trail led past the building, uphill between tall trees, and into the woods. The moonlight was fainter here—as was the wind—but by now my eyes had become accustomed to the dark.

I listened to the sounds of the night. Was that some wild creature making those snuffling noises? I moved forward slowly, stopping every few steps, straining to hear over the rustling leaves. The moisture from the wet ground and soggy leaves underfoot seeped into my slippers. “Next time you chase a prowler, Jessica,” I told myself, “remember to put on your shoes.” A sound up ahead put all my senses on alert. I crept up the wooded path, gripping the pump like a baseball bat for protection, squinting to detect any movement that might give away the intruder. I crested the rise and stopped. About thirty feet in front of me, someone was kneeling on the ground digging under a tree. A small dog was circling the person and whining.

“You there!” I called out, forgetting to speak French. From the top of the hill, I directed the flashlight toward the kneeling figure. “What are you doing? This is private property.” I held the bicycle pump aloft. “You have no business here.”

The dog barked sharply but backed away from this advancing apparition wielding an unknown weapon. The animal’s owner, dressed in a dark hooded jacket that concealed his face, cursed fluently and took off down the hill, a white canvas bag flapping on his back, the yapping dog running ahead of him. A moment later I

heard the revving of a car engine and the whoosh of tires on the sand and gravel road below as the human and canine trespassers made their escape.

I lowered the bicycle pump and stood for a moment, waiting for my pulse to slow. Well, it was nice to know it wasn't just my heated imagination that had conjured an intruder, wasn't it? What could he have been burying under the tree? Loot from a robbery, perhaps? I shone the light on the ground beneath the tree, but there was nothing to see, except a shallow hole with an earth pile next to it. A distant bark sounded, followed by a howl, and then more barking. Coyotes? Did they have coyotes in France? Suddenly aware of my damp slippers and cold feet, I hurried to return to the house, not even stopping to replace the bicycle pump in the garage. Tomorrow, I pledged to myself, I would come back and see if there was anything more I could find.