

EXCERPT FROM

A Question of Murder

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher is in New England attending a writers' conference at an historic mansion where her friends are hosting a murder-mystery party. As both a crime solver and mystery author, Jessica is an old hand at this sort of thing, and promises not to reveal the ending. But when a mystery scene appears all too real, she must decide what's scripted and what isn't—and who really dunit.

The girl was young and pretty. Large yellow sunflowers on a mid-calf length white dress perfectly matched her blonde hair and her sunny disposition. Her smile was wide and genuine; there was a sweetness about her that was palpable.

The young man standing next to her was not so sanguine. He was of medium height and wore a brooding expression along with his khaki slacks, two-tone boat shoes, and pale blue button-down shirt. A maroon cardigan sweater loosely tied around his neck and draped down his back completed his preppy wardrobe. He was handsome in a crude sort of way. By that I mean there was a thickness to his facial features that contributed to what seemed a perpetual frown, a lack of interest in others in the drawing room—with the single exception, of course, of the young woman, whose name was Cynthia. His name was Paul.

With the young couple was an older man wearing a purple silk smoking jacket, and a patrician woman in knee-high riding boots, wide-hipped tan jodhpurs, and a white silk blouse.

"Feel like taking a walk?" Paul asked Cynthia in a deep voice that carried to the others. Softly he added, "Let's get out of here." He ducked his head down, gave her a soft kiss on the neck, and stroked her arm, gliding his hand from her shoulder down to her fingers.

Cynthia shivered and took a step forward. "What a grand idea," she said, turning to the older couple. "I certainly could use a walk. I hear there's a full moon."

“You won’t see any moon,” declared the older man, whose name was Monroe Whittaker. “Not with the fog out there off the lake. Besides, there’s still snow on the ground, and more in the forecast.” His tone was that of a board chairman used to making statements that no one would dare challenge.

“That’s okay, Daddy,” Cynthia said, plucking at the collar of her dress. “It’s so warm in here with the fire going. I really need some fresh air. I’m sure Paul does, too. Besides, you always say a walk after dinner is good for your digestion. Isn’t that how you put it?”

Her father said nothing, his ruddy, full face set in stone. Victoria Whittaker addressed Paul: “We have a very busy day tomorrow with the attorneys coming. Cynthia will need a clear head. I want to be sure she gets enough rest. Make sure you don’t keep her out late again.”

“He won’t,” Cynthia said, kissing her mother’s cheek. They put on outdoor jackets, and she wrapped a red and green tartan scarf around her neck. She grabbed Paul’s hand, smiling up into his eyes, and led him through the French doors into the garden, her voice trailing back into the room, “Let’s look for that moon anyway.”

“I haven’t changed my mind,” Monroe Whittaker said the moment they were gone. “I don’t like him.”

“That’s patently obvious,” said his wife, checking her hair in the mirror over the fireplace. “But the least you can do is to be civil to him this weekend.”

“Civil?” Monroe snorted. “How about if I pack his bag and send him away from here? Would that be civil enough?”

“Monroe,” his wife scolded, “you’re not thinking clearly. Cynthia is like all young women her age. She’s rebelling against us because it’s the thing to do. I share your view of Paul. He’s obviously not in Cynthia’s class. I’ll give him credit for trying to dress the part, although anyone can see the poor quality of his clothes.” Her small laugh was dismissive. “Not that I’d expect him to know the

difference. His father is a policeman in New York City. Good Lord, you know how crude policemen can be.”

“A cop? How do you know that?”

Victoria turned to her husband, her hand still on her hair. “Did I say that? I don’t recall exactly. Does it matter? He must have told me. But the point is that the more we challenge the young man, the more we’ll push Cynthia into the relationship. Trust me, darling, the best way to see the last of him is to shower him with kindness, and expose him to our daughter’s lifestyle and breeding. He’ll soon enough become uncomfortable and seek his own kind.” She turned back to the mirror. “I think I’ll go up. Are you coming?”

“Not yet,” he growled.

With that, Victoria left her husband alone in the room.

Monroe went to the open doors and peered outside. “Damned fog,” he muttered. He walked to his desk and slumped heavily in the chair. His face reflected the unpleasant thoughts he was having at that moment, eyes narrowed, his mouth set in a harsh slash. Suddenly, he slammed his fist on the desktop. He reached into a desk drawer, withdrew a bulky envelope that he shoved into the pocket of his smoking jacket, and stormed out the doors into the night.

As he left, a maid carrying a carpet sweeper entered the room through another door. She leaned the sweeper against the wall, pulled a cloth from her apron, and proceeded to dust the furniture, moving from a table to the mantle to the desk. She ran her dust rag across the broad mahogany top, paused and bit her lip. Her eyes darted to the French doors and back toward the door through which she’d come in. Gingerly, so as not to make a sound, she drew open one drawer after the other, dipping down and twisting her body to see into the back and rummaging inside with her free hand.

Victoria’s voice could be heard from another room, “Monroe, have you seen my handbag?”

The maid swiftly closed the drawers, ran to the other end of the room and resumed her dusting. She was only a minute into her chores when the room's stillness was assaulted by the snap of a weapon being discharged from somewhere outside, followed by a woman's piercing scream. Cynthia burst through the doors. "Help!" she shouted. "Someone help me!"

Paul stumbled into the room behind her, his outdoor jacket open, his hand pressed against his chest. Blood the color of cardinals oozed through his fingers and ran down the front of his blue shirt. The maid gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. Then, wailing, she rushed out the door, replaced by Monroe and Victoria Whittaker coming in from opposite ends of the room. Paul fell to his knees at Cynthia's feet. With a final, agonizing gasp, he pitched forward, his face coming to rest on her shoe.

"Daddy," Cynthia shrieked, and collapsed into her father's arms, sobbing.

Victoria tiptoed toward the prone body and leaned in to see. "Is he dead?" she asked calmly.

Her husband scowled down at the body on the floor, and looked over to his wife. "Yes, I'd say he's dead. Very dead."

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Lawrence Savoy clapped his hands to gain everyone's attention. "Okay, peeps. That wasn't bad. Let's try it again one more time. And Paul, try to avoid Cynthia's shoe when you land on the floor. Makes it hard for her to fall into her daddy's arms if her foot is stuck under your head."

"Yeah, yeah." Paul said, looking down at his shirtfront. "What a mess! Laura, you put too much blood in the sponge," he said to the props girl, who was trying to wipe the crimson stain off his shirtfront.

"It'll wash out," Savoy said. "At least we know the prop works. The blood came right through your fingers just the way we wanted it to. We'll do it without the blood this time. Just be aware of Cynthia's foot." Savoy took a few steps away, stopped, turned and added, "And Paul, project please. This isn't a scene

from a movie. Your Brando mumble doesn't work on the stage. It's a play with a live audience. P-r-o-j-e-c-t!"

"Yeah, Larry, okay," Paul said, shrugging on the fresh shirt Laura held for him. He grabbed the towel she'd slung over her shoulder and wiped his hands.

"It's Mr. Savoy," the director chided, crossing the stage to where Paul stood. "My friends call me Lawrence, but you haven't achieved that status. Just because you come from a theatrical family and were in some B-movies doesn't impress me."

Paul smirked, tossed the towel back at the props girl, and sat next to Cynthia on the sofa.

"Victoria, my darling," Savoy called from where he'd taken a seat in the fourth row of the auditorium. "You found just the right arrogance, my sweet, but I want to see a little more evasiveness when Monroe asks you about Paul's father. And Monroe, please can that British accent. We're supposed to be in Connecticut, not the Cotswolds."

"I can't help the way I speak, Lawrence," Monroe said.

"Of course, you can. You're an actor. Just put on a Connecticut accent."

"And what, precisely, is a Connecticut accent?"

Savoy closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. He looked up again and said, "Just tone it down. Okay?"

Cynthia put her hands against Paul's chest and shoved him against the arm of the sofa. She popped up from her seat and stormed to the edge of the stage. "Mr. Savoy," she said, her face suffused with anger, "Will you please tell him to stop mauling me? If he can't keep his hands to himself, I swear I'll sock him, even if we're in the middle of a scene."

"Really, young man," Monroe said, scowling at the young actor. "How unprofessional."

"Hardly surprising," Victoria added.

Paul grinned, ran a hand through his dark hair, and retied the sleeves of the maroon sweater in front of his neck. He eyed his older colleagues and shrugged. "Some of us still have urges," he said.