

EXCERPT FROM

You Bet Your Life

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher had come to Las Vegas two years earlier for the wedding of her friend and former Cabot Cove neighbor Martha Reemes to wealthy businessman Victor Kildare. Now, the new Mrs. Kildare is on trial for murder, and Jessica has returned to Sin City to be a character witness for the defense.

The present

The hairdresser, Krista Scarborough, left the stand, and the judge instructed the prosecutor to call his next witness.

"Please state your name and spell your last name," the prosecutor, Shelby Fordice, asked the attractive young woman now occupying the witness stand.

"Lydia Bellis. B-e-l-l-i-s."

"How are you employed, Ms. Bellis?"

"I'm a manicurist at Opal Salon here in Las Vegas."

"Have you had occasion to spend time with the defendant, Martha Kildare?"

"Yes, I have."

"Please tell the ladies and gentlemen of the jury under what circumstances this occurred."

"She—that's Mrs. Kildare—she has a weekly appointment at our salon."

"How long has she been coming to your salon every week?"

"Oh, I'd say about two years."

"And were you her regular manicurist?"

Ms. Bellis nodded slowly. "Her standing appointment was with me, but if I was out for any reason, she'd let one of the other operators do her nails. She was very loyal to Opal Salon."

"Manicurists and hairdressers become pretty friendly with their clients," said the prosecutor. "Correct?"

Ms. Bellis smiled. "Oh, yes, we become *real* friendly. We talk about a lot of things."

"Yes, I imagine you do. Did the defendant, Mrs. Kildare, ever discuss her husband, and her marriage, with you and others in the salon?"

The defense attorney seated next to Martha quickly stood. "Objection," he said firmly. "What others heard in the salon is hearsay coming from this witness."

"Objection sustained," the judge, a heavyset man with a Brooklyn accent, said from the bench. To the witness: "Confine your answers only to what *you* heard."

"Yes, sir."

Under questioning from the prosecutor, the manicurist confirmed what the hairdresser had testified to minutes before.

Fordice faced the jury and raised his eyebrows. "You say Mrs. Kildare said she wanted to kill her husband?"

Ms. Bellis nodded.

"Please answer the question, 'yes' or 'no,' Ms. Bellis," the judge said.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. The answer is yes."

Fordice turned and rested one hand on the lectern. "Do you remember the exact words she used?"

The manicurist nodded again. "I mean, I do, sir."

"And would you please tell the court what those words were."

"She said, 'I'm so mad I'd like to kill him.'"

"'Kill him?' Those were the exact words she used?"

"Yes, sir."

"And in your opinion, Ms. Bellis, did she say these words in jest? Was she joking?"

“Oh, no. She sounded real serious. She was real upset.”

“Your witness, Mr. Nastasi.”

The attorney for the defense, Vincent Nastasi, approached the witness stand.

“Ms. Bellis, have you ever been angry with anyone close to you?”

“I guess.”

“So angry that you wanted to kill them? Figuratively, of course.”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Have you ever gotten so angry at someone you loved, your boyfriend or your mother or your sister, for instance, that you said, ‘I could just kill him—or her.’? Lots of people feel that way from time to time. That’s not unusual now, is it?”

Fordice called out, “Objection, leading the witness.”

“Rephrase your question, Mr. Nastasi,” said the judge.

“Let’s take your boss, Ms. Scarborough, as an example. Have you ever been angry with her?”

“We have disagreements.”

“Sure you do. Everyone does. Think you might ever have said of Ms. Scarborough, ‘I’m so mad, I could kill her’?”

“Maybe. But this was different.”

“Why was it different, Ms. Bellis?”

“Because Mrs. Kildare never talked that way. She always seemed like such a nice lady. When she said she wanted to kill her husband, I was in shock.”

Shock had been my response, too, when seven months ago, I’d opened the Cabot Cove newspaper one morning to see the headline: *Former Resident Accused of Murder*. I’d heard about Victor’s death the month before. What I hadn’t known was that he was bludgeoned in the head and pushed in the pool where his blood had run into the clear water, a rusty stain hovering over the turquoise tile. The police had arrested Martha, his wife, even though she’d denied being in the house when the crime occurred.

Accompanying the article was a photograph of Martha, a publicity shot that had been taken for the Cabot Cove Village Theatre Troupe's production of *Witness for the Prosecution*. Martha had played the lead, the same role Marlene Dietrich made so memorable in the movie version.

The judge called a ten-minute recess after the manicurist had finished testifying, and I took the opportunity to step outside the courthouse for some air. I'd forgotten how hot Las Vegas can be in June; it was like breathing in fire.

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I'd arrived in Las Vegas late the previous afternoon after a pleasant and uneventful America West flight from JFK Airport, in New York. Mr. Nastasi, Martha's defense attorney, had dispatched an associate from his office to meet me at McCarran Airport, and the young man had driven me directly to the law firm in downtown Las Vegas. Nastasi was a short, stocky man with a shaved head, close cropped salt-and-pepper beard, and a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact demeanor, not abrasive but not terribly warm either. After keeping me waiting in his reception area for a half hour, he burst through his office door, apologized for the wait—he'd been rehearsing a witness—and ushered me into his private office, a masculine room in dark woods and heavy burgundy leather furniture. Original Frederick Remington paintings of the old west dominated the walls, except for one wall containing floor-to-ceiling bookcases with a movable library ladder to enable access to the top shelves.

"Good flight in?" he asked after we'd been seated, him behind a massive, paper laden desk, me in a chair on the opposite side.

"Yes, fine, a very nice airline. I'd never flown it before."

"As good as any of them, I suppose," he growled. He was in shirtsleeves, the collar of his white shirt open, tie yanked down, black suspenders dotted with bright yellow sunflowers straining at what might have been weight lifter's shoulders.

"It was good of you to come," he said, "although as I told you when I called, I hope you're not needed as a character witness at sentencing. I don't intend for there to be any sentencing. Your friend, Martha Kildare, is innocent, and I'm committed to making sure the jury believes that."

"As I told you, Mr. Nastasi, I was planning to be here anyway. I'm only sorry I missed the first few days of the trial. I'll do anything to help Martha, and I share your hope that sentencing won't be necessary. Whether I'm called as a witness or not, I'm here to lend Martha whatever emotional support I can."

"Just seeing you in court will be a boost to her morale, Mrs. Fletcher. Do you mind if I call you Jessica? I'm Vince."

"First names by all means."

"I haven't put you on the witness list because I'd like you in the courtroom. Potential witnesses are precluded from being in court until they testify. I may add you later. I don't think the judge will deny me. We get along pretty good."

"Add me? In case there's a sentencing?"

"Maybe before that. The prosecution is trying to paint Martha's marriage to Victor as one made in hell. I may need you to testify otherwise."

"I really don't know much about their marriage except that—"

He held up a hand. "We'll get into that during my prep of you, if I do feel it's necessary for you to take the stand. In the meantime, I've arranged for you to visit Martha in jail tomorrow. It's a short court day; the judge has a meeting at three."

"Fine. Thank you for all you're doing for my friend."

"I'll level with you, Jessica. I always go into a murder trial confident that I'll win for my client. This trial is no different. But there's a lot stacked against Martha Kildare. Lots of things stacked against her."