

EXCERPT FROM

Madison Avenue Shoot

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher's nephew Grady and his nine-year-old son Frank have been visiting the set where Jessica has been making a television commercial. Grady is ready to go home, but Frank has wheedled his father into staying a little longer so he can watch filming start on another commercial. Grady agrees to "10 more minutes" but when it comes time for him to meet Frank at the set, the youngster is nowhere in sight. Jessica and Grady search frantically for the boy. Then Jessica gets an idea.

"He was wearing his earphones," I said to Grady. "Let's get someone to page him and tell him to get back to the set."

"Aunt Jess, you're a genius. Of course. Why didn't I think of that?"

We retraced our steps to the Severson set, which was between takes.

Lance was sitting on a stool in an empty room, the walls of which were covered in royal blue wallpaper with a random pattern of tiny foil stars. The movie lights gave the stars a twinkling effect. A different make-up lady was powdering Lance's brow. He looked a little uptight. You'd think he'd never been in front of a camera before.

A grip with a line of clothespins attached to the placket of his shirt was winding a cable over his shoulder. Two others were removing ceiling tiles to accommodate an overhead light while Akmanian [the director] was directing another to shift around light stands while he stood on top of a ladder, peering through the camera lens.

I found Dave Fitzpatrick and explained our problem.

"Sure, Mrs. Fletcher. What channel was he on?" he asked, donning his own earphones.

"I'm not sure. Can we try them all?"

“Don’t see why not. We’re not shooting at the moment.” Dave pulled a receiver from his belt, pressed a button, and spoke into the microphone. “Frank Fletcher, if you’re on channel one, your dad is looking for you. Please come to the Severson set immediately.” He repeated his message on the three other channels.

Grady and I sighed with relief and stood up tall to spot Frank when he came bounding onto the set, as we were sure he would. But five minutes passed, and then ten, and Frank did not show up.

“I’m going to kill that boy when we find him,” Grady said, exasperated. “Just ten minutes. That’s what he promised. And look—” He looked at his watch. “It’s been almost three quarters of an hour. He’s in big trouble now. He’s going to hear from me, but good.”

“And I’ll be next in line,” I said. “Grady, where else did you go with him before I met up with you this morning? He was all excited about the different things he’d seen. And he was talking about a carpenter.”

Grady slapped his forehead with the heel of his palm. “Right. We were with the guys building pieces of the set. One of them let him try the nail gun.”

“Where was that? Was it on this floor?”

“Yeah,” Grady said, looking around. “I think it was this way.” He grabbed a passing grip by the elbow. “Where did you guys set up the carpentry shop again?”

“Down that way,” the man said, pointing to a dark hallway. “But it might be locked. I think they’re packed up for the night.”

“We want to check anyway,” Grady said.

“Then hang a left at the end and it’s two or three doors down on your right. Flip on the hall lights as you go.

“Thanks,” Grady said.

We took off at a jog.

“He’d better not have tried that nail gun again,” Grady said, his voice tight. “I told him it was a dangerous tool, but he was so fascinated by it. Oh God, Aunt Jess, you don’t think he’s hurt, do you? I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Let’s not borrow trouble. We have to find him first, then you can berate yourself. But if he’s not here, Grady, I think we should get help.”

We followed the grip’s directions, switching on the overhead lights in the hall as we went. At the end of the corridor, we turned left. All the doors on the right were closed. Grady turned the knob of the first door. Thankfully, it was unlocked. He pushed it open. The room contained several light stands, but was otherwise empty. There was nothing at all in the second room. The third room was dark, but filled with equipment. I wondered why so much had been stuffed into the one room when there were two others that could have been used as well. Grady groped along the wall for the light switch. Only a single fluorescent came on. The bulb next to it flickered and went off.

“Frank, are you in here?” Grady yelled.

No answer.

He looked at me uncertainly. “He’s not here, is he?”

“I hope not,” I replied, “but let’s look around anyway.”

The room was crammed with light stands, dollies used to move the camera, giant clamps, reflectors, ladders, and at the rear lines of rolling carts, piled high with lumber and other building supplies. The floor was littered with wood chips and sawdust. I skirted the standing pieces, moving some and inching sideways around others to reach the first carts. I was afraid to look and afraid not to. There were rolls of screening, and black fabric. I pushed them aside in case there was a small person inside. Grady tried to peer behind the carts for his son, but there were too many and not enough room to maneuver them.

“Let’s roll some of this into the hall,” I said. “We can get help putting it all back if he’s not here.”

Grady had to drag several stands into the hallway before he had room to move out one of the carts. He backed up, pulling it toward the door, stopped, and ran around the other side. “Oh God,” he said, stooping down.

“What? What is it?”

He held up a pair of red earphones, dusted with flakes of wood. I could see a sticker on one of the earpieces. It was the number one. “These are his, Aunt Jess. He must be here,” Grady said, his voice cracking.