

EXCERPT FROM

Majoring in Murder

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher is a visiting professor at Schoolman College in Indiana, a small liberal arts school with an aggressive program to turn the institution around financially. Jessica has only been on campus a short while when she finds herself facing an impending tornado.

I'd seen a green sky before, but nothing like this. The color was not the green you picture when you think of grass and trees. It wasn't mint green or hospital green or even olive green. It was more like the color of the ocean when it pushes into the bay and up the river, when the bottom is murky and an oar dipped in the water roils up the particles of silt into a muddy cloud. It was that color green.

I climbed the steps of the Hart building, debating whether to return to my apartment or go inside and wait out the approaching storm. The quad, usually alive with students, was eerily empty. Only the soft rumble of thunder, and the rustle of leaves in the oak trees in the square, broke the silence.

"I don't like the looks of this, Mrs. Fletcher." Professor Wesley Newmark, chairman of the English Department, stood on the top step studying the darkening sky. The wind elevated the few strands of sandy hair he'd carefully combed over his baldpate.

I followed his gaze. "What do you see?" I asked.

"You ever been in a tornado?"

"I thought we were north of Tornado Alley."

"Those borders are very flexible in Indiana. Wind is coming from the southwest. From the back of the building. Probably why we aren't seeing anything." He squinted at me as a gust of wind spit droplets on the lenses of his

glasses. He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his gray tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. "You'd better get inside. If the alarm goes off, take shelter in the basement." He wiped his glasses and replaced them on his nose. "I've got to get to my appointment. I'm late already." He started down the steps, hugging his bulging leather briefcase with both arms to keep the wind from catching it. A strong gust pulled the sides of his jacket back, exposing a wrinkled white shirt flapping over his generous stomach.

"Where are you going?" I called out, but the wind carried my voice in another direction. He didn't answer, or if he did, I didn't hear him. He hurried down the stairs and ran across the quadrangle in the direction of Kammerer House, where the English Department had its offices.

I opened the door to the Hart Building. It was Saturday morning and most classes had finished for the week. A few students sat cross-legged on the floor of the hall, their books piled beside them, half-empty coffee cups in their hands. I recognized two of them and smiled as I passed. Across the hall from my classroom, a television set played to an empty faculty lounge. A message flashed on the screen: "Tornado Watch Till 4 pm this Afternoon." *Oh my.* A tornado was not the kind of stimulation I'd had in mind when I'd agreed to come for the fall term.

It had been cloudy, but not threatening, when I'd left my small but cheerfully decorated one-bedroom apartment, to walk to campus. One of four carved from a large Victorian house, the apartment was a model of efficiency, every piece of furniture in the combination living room-dining room serving a multiple purpose. The sofa could pull out to a guest bed, the side tables contained drawers or cupboards for storage, and the chairs were on wheels so they could be easily moved to wherever they were needed. The table by the bay window would make a lovely place to serve dinner, but it functioned as a desk

for now. Usually, I would have worked from home, but I'd been driven out by the sounds of a rock band practicing next door, a occurrence, my neighbor assured me, which only happened once a month when it was his turn to host the musicians.

The classroom offered a quiet sanctuary in which to work on my next manuscript; at least it would have if my thoughts didn't keep drifting to the impending storm. After an hour of fussing with my outline and trying to dictate notes into my mini cassette recorder, I decided the time had come to leave. Perhaps the band had gone home by now. Outside my window, the rain had stopped, but a charcoal gray sky promised more to come. I packed up my papers and mentally calculated how long it would take to reach my off-campus quarters. I hurried down the empty hall, pushed open the doors, and stepped outside.

A pinging noise and the sharp feel of hail hitting my scalp made me shrink back under the narrow overhang and raise my briefcase over my head. This was a novel experience. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been in a hailstorm, and certainly not one with golf ball-size ice pellets. I watched fascinated as the hailstones bounced down the stairs and rolled onto the path. Across the quad, between two buildings, was a small parking lot, and I heard the hail strike the hoods of the cars. The unmusical percussion jarred me from my reverie. *Oh dear*, I thought. *There's going to be a lot of damage from this storm.*

The door opened behind me, and Frank, a maintenance man at the college, grabbed my elbow.

"Professor Fletcher, you can't stay out here," he said, tugging me back into the building. "Everyone's already in the shelter. Come quickly. There's not a lot of time. I'll take you to the—"

A series of short horn blasts interrupted his instructions. Spurred by the alarm, I ran after him down the deserted hall to the emergency staircase. The thunder was louder now. Or was it the wind? I was having trouble distinguishing the source of the sound. The loud roar was deafening, punctuated by the clatter of breaking glass and crashing debris. I felt the building shake, and the hairs rose on the back of my neck.

We raced down the flight of stairs to the basement and through an open door into a concrete bunker illuminated by bare light bulbs screwed into wall fixtures. A dozen people were huddled on benches or sitting on the floor.

“Oh good, you found her,” someone called out. “What about Professor Newmark?”

“Couldn’t locate him,” Frank called back, as he and another man hauled the iron door closed and shot three deadbolts just as something massive slammed into the metal from the other side.

“I saw him over an hour ago,” I said. “He said he was late for an appointment across campus.”

I felt a hand on my arm and turned.

“Come. There’s room on this bench.” A woman slid over to make space for me to sit.

The concrete walls muffled the blast of wind, but the iron door creaked and rattled on its hinges as if a giant were throwing his weight against the panel to break it down. A moment later, the lights went out. Only a red bulb above the door remained illuminated, casting a feeble light. The rest of the shelter was steeped in darkness.

“Talk about just in time,” yelled a voice I recognized as one of my students, Eli Hemminger. “Like to keep us in suspense, huh professor?”

“I prefer to save these kinds of hairbreadth escapes for my novels, Eli,” I said, shivering as I realized the danger I’d been in. “But this is more like a thriller than a mystery.”

We lapsed into silence, awed by the demonstration of power beyond our concrete walls. In the dim light, there was nothing to do but concentrate on the fury of the storm and wait for it to subside. Eventually, the bellowing wind passed over us, and the door, dented but still locked, stopped creaking. I heard the faint static of a radio as someone attempted to pull in a signal.

“Frank, don’t you have a flashlight?” a voice from the back of the bunker called out in the dark.

“Yeah. Hang on a minute. I’ll find it.”

He flicked on the flashlight and panned the beam around the confined quarters. “Everyone okay?”