

EXCERPT FROM

## Nashville Noir

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

*Jessica Fletcher was on the Cabot Cove committee that sent a talented young country music songwriter to Nashville, Tennessee, to learn about the music business. Soon Jessica finds herself in Music City when the young woman is accused of murder. Detective Perry Biddle of the Nashville Police Department, is skeptical about Jessica's interest in the case, but he is reserving judgment.*

I was perusing the books on Biddle's shelf when he returned. He took a candy bar from his pocket and put it on the desk, then removed his suit jacket and carefully draped it over the back of his chair. He was a short, stocky man with a thick neck, large chest, and muscular arms that were evident beneath his shirtsleeves. He wore a starched pale yellow shirt with a purple tie and suspenders to match. He was a fussy dresser, if not one I would describe as particularly stylish.

"This isn't my office," he declared. "I work out of the West Precinct. We cover Music Row, where the murder took place, but we're undergoing renovations of the building so I hang out here." He grimaced for a moment against an unspecified pain and said, "Okay, Mrs. Fletcher, here's the deal. Just talked to the DA's office. As it happens, Ms. Gabriel's court-appointed attorney is in the records room now, going over some reports. When he comes out, you can ask him about putting you on the young lady's visitors list. Judging from the way she's been acting since we picked her up, she might not want to see you. Don't be insulted if she stiffes you."

"I hope she doesn't," I said, "but that's her decision. I won't be offended if she declines to talk with me."

"I'll say this for her," he said, "she aced the alcohol and drug screenings. Clean as a whistle. Hasn't seen the shrink yet, though. We put in for it, but the guy's so busy he can't do her until tomorrow. That's what happens when you have all these whackos on the streets. We arrest one hundred and forty people a day in this city. Hard to keep up."

He ran a hand over his bald spot, a circle of pink scalp peeking out from beneath brindle-colored wavy hair.

“And the charge against Cyndi is murder?” I asked.

“The prosecutor will probably go for murder-two, unless her lawyer can negotiate it down to manslaughter.”

“Has she admitted to the assault?”

“No, ma’am. Says she saw him there, got scared, and ran out to call the cops. Of course, she never made that call. She just disappeared.”

“Did she give a reason for why she was there in the first place?”

“Says she had an appointment, but he kept her twiddlin’ her thumbs. Said she went in to tell him she couldn’t wait around anymore and found him on the floor. That’s her story, but we don’t believe it’s how it went down.”

“So far it sounds pretty circumstantial to me. Have you looked into any other possible suspects?”

Biddle picked up the candy bar he’d left on the desk and tore open the wrapper. “Want one?” he asked. “Got another in my jacket pocket.”

“No thanks,” I replied.

“It’s a Goo Goo Cluster,” he said, eyeing me.

“Should I know what that is?”

“Made right here in Nashville. Can’t call yourself a Southerner if you’ve never had a Goo Goo.”

I smiled. “I’ll have to try one some other time.”

He shrugged and leaned back, his leather chair squeaking under his weight. He munched on the candy bar, his face thoughtful. Finally he sighed and said, “We’re professionals, Mrs. Fletcher. Fact remains, your girl was at the scene, and her prints are on the trophy she used to kill him.”

“A trophy?”

“Award, then. Same as.”

“Like a Grammy or an Oscar?”

“A CMA, Country Music Award. Big and heavy. And before you ask again, yes, I had my guys check out the staff and whoever else was in the building.”

“And?”

“His secretary, a Ms. Anderson—Edwina’s her first name—said he was alive when she left for home at five and passed your girl in the hall coming in.”

“Is she the only one who saw Cyndi?”

“No, ma’am. The security fellow—” Biddle leaned forward, winced at the chair’s creaky objection, and ran his index finger down the front page of the report on his desk. “Clevon Morgan of Smoky Mountain Security Services said that when he tried the door to Marker’s suite at five forty-five, she came flying out of there like a bat out of you-know-where, crying and hysterical.”

“It’s not surprising that she’d be hysterical at discovering a man fatally injured. She might not even have known that he was still alive.”

Biddle sucked a bit of chocolate off his thumb and nodded. “If she hadn’t taken off, her story might carry more weight. But she hid out until we found her. Juries tend to see that as an indication of guilt.”

“She was obviously frightened and not thinking clearly at that moment,” I offered.

“Had a lot of time to think in the days after. Never came forward.”

“She’s very young, Detective Biddle.”

“The jails are full of young people, Mrs. Fletcher.”

“Unfortunately true, but—”

Biddle raised his hand to stop me. He eased back in the chair, again to the accompanying creaks. “Tell you this. Don’t know if she went in meaning to kill him or not. The shrink will give us a better idea. But these things happen. From what I hear, this type of situation is not unfamiliar to someone like you who writes about crime, so

you know how people can snap if they're under pressure. Found a letter on his desk signed by Cyndi Gabriel, accusing the deceased of having stolen songs from her and demanding payment. Mentioned that to your Sheriff Metzger and he confirmed it, said he'd heard that from people in— What's the name of that town you're from?"

"Cabot Cove."

"Right. Cabot Cove. Anyway, that letter, and your sheriff's confirmation, ties a neat bow on it for me."

"Did you respond to the call from the scene yourself?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Call that came in said the victim was dead, so we got involved. Was me along with our West Precinct commander, our ranking officer, and a crime scene investigator to collect evidence. Because the vic was still breathing, the fire department sent EMTs, who took him to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center. They've got the Level One trauma center for this area."

"Did he ever regain consciousness?"

"No, ma'am, and we had a twenty-four-hour guard on him, but no opportunity to question him about the attack. Once Marker gave it up, the case moved from aggravated assault to murder."

"And you arrested Cyndi."

"Yes, ma'am. Once we finished questioning her here, she was run past our Night Court commissioner. He advised her she was being held for a capital offense and denied her bond. We turned her over to the Sheriff's Office, the ones who run the jail."

"How is she?" I asked.

"What I hear, she's doing okay. I called out there to check on her. She's sort of a fragile type, so I asked them to handle her with kid gloves, keep her away from the hardened criminals. They're very sharp out there. Already had her in isolation for her own safety. Don't worry, she hasn't been abused or browbeaten. But they can watch her more carefully, make sure she doesn't become a suicide risk."

“Good heavens! Is that a possibility?”

“You never know, especially with first timers.”