

EXCERPT FROM

## A Palette for Murder

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY, FIRST PRINTING OCTOBER 1996

*Jessica Fletcher is in the elegant Hamptons, New York's tony gathering place for the rich, famous, and arty. She's there to relax and indulge her secret desire—to learn to paint. In no time, however, she must trade her budding skills as an artist for what she does best—solving a tantalizing mystery.*

As I stood waiting for Miki, the model, to return, I thought about being there on this Saturday morning. I'd signed up for the life drawing class in the Hamptons because it was far from my home in Maine. I knew that Cabot Cove had similar classes -- at least two local artists-of-note held them.

But I would have been too embarrassed to have taken them there. Jessica Fletcher sketching nude models? The gossip mill would have gone into high gear. My closest friends would be calling to see whether I'd slipped into senility without them having noticed it.

No. If I was to pursue this dream of mine, it would have to be done surreptitiously, at least in the early stages of my "fling." Perhaps one day I would be proud enough of what I'd drawn and painted to show it off to my friends. In the meantime, I was committed to remaining a closet artist. Here, in this studio in the Hamptons, I was Mrs. Fechter, who came to the class with her hair hidden under a brightly colored turban, and who was partial to oversized sunglasses which never left her nose.

Two of my "works" hung on the walls of my home. My friends visit often, but no one ever asked who painted them. And, of course, I hadn't signed them.

"Pretty scene," one friend said. "Where did you get it? Flea market?"

"Nice colors. Goes with the couch."

"Are those *birds*?"

"Are those *trees*?"

“Let’s go,” Carlton said to Miki.

She snuffed out her second cigarette, came inside and again took her position on the platform.

“We’ll do fifteen this time,” Carlton said. “Full frontal view.”

Miki faced us. A wan smile came and went. She directed a stream of air at a lock of hair that had fallen over her forehead, hunched her shoulders, allowed them to relax, and settled in for another modeling session.

Time passed quickly; I was surprised when that day’s lesson was almost over. Miki had used each of her breaks to go outside to smoke. Now, she settled in for her final pose of the morning. Carlton instructed her to lean forward, with her head down between her legs, her hair skimming the floor.

“I hate this pose,” she said.

“But it’s a classic,” Carlton said. “We’ll do ten minutes and call it a day.”

I’d loosened up as the morning progressed, my strokes with the pencil more free-flowing now, less constricted. My chubby colleague next to me had filled his paper with odd shapes, mostly boxes and circles, his vision of Miki. I preferred mine, as imperfect as it might have been.

“Time,” Carlton announced.

I started to pack away my materials. I looked up. Miki was still in her pose. Strange, I thought. Carlton noticed it, too. He tapped her shoulder, laughing as he did. “Hey, Miki, wake up.”

Instead of straightening, she slowly continued in the direction in which she’d been leaning. Over she went, face-first.

“Good Lord!” I said, going to where she was sprawled on the cold, bare floor. I knelt and placed my fingertips on her neck. There was no pulse.

The others had formed a tight circle around us. I looked up. “She’s dead,” I said.

There were screams, and muttered curses.

By the time I stood, Carlton had already called the local police. He asked for an ambulance, but I knew it was too late. I covered Miki's bare body with her robe.

Minutes later, the door opened and two uniformed officers entered, followed closely by a man and woman from the town's volunteer ambulance service.

"She's dead," the male medic said.

"I know," I said.

One of the officers looked at me. "Who are you?"

"I'm . . . I'm J.B. Fletcher. I'm a student here."

"Fletcher?" Carlton said. "I thought you were Mrs. Fechter."

"Well, you see, I—"

The older of the two policemen narrowed his eyes. "You that famous mystery writer?"

"I really—"

"It is," one of my fellow-students said loudly. "It's Jessica Fletcher. I've read some of your books."

I held up my hands and said, "I really think who I am is beside the point. Our lovely model is dead."

An hour later, after Miki Dorsey's body had been removed, and we'd all given statements to the police, I packed up my things, left the studio and started walking back to the inn. I couldn't shake the vision of the lifeless young woman sprawled on the platform, her future snuffed out, her dreams and aspirations never to be fulfilled.

Dying so young violated the natural order of things. There was no rationalizing it, whether it occurred because of war or disease, famine, acts of nature, or natural disasters. The young were to live until it was time for them to die.

My eyes filled up, and I wiped a tear from my cheek. I ached for the young model named Miki. And I felt a little sorry for myself. What was to have been a pleasant foray into the world of art had ended in death, right before my eyes.