

EXCERPT FROM

Death of a Blue Blood

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher has been invited to a New Year's Eve ball at Castorbrook Castle, the home of the earl of Norrance and his countess. Jessica's escort: Scotland Yard Chief Inspector George Sutherland. Their winter holiday together holds great promise until Jessica discovers a body in the garden, and she and George tangle with the local constabulary. Here is the complete first chapter of Death of a Blue Blood.

James William Edward Grant, seventh Earl of Norrance,

and

Marielle Grant, Countess of Norrance,

request the honour of your presence

at their

New Year's Eve Ball

Castorbrook Castle

Chipping Minster

Gloucestershire

"Great old pile, what, lass?" George murmured to me as we both leaned forward in our seats to capture the view through the windshield of the twin towers of Castorbrook Castle.

I patted my shoulder bag, which held the precious invitation, and shivered in excitement. I've been to many wonderful places, but this would be my first New Year's Eve ball in a castle.

"Built in the eighteenth century, in the style known as Gothic," our driver called over his shoulder. "It bears a resemblance to the Palace of Westminster, doncha' think?" He was referring to the building where the Houses of Parliament meet in London.

"A smaller, less-ornate version," I agreed, "minus Big Ben."

"If you put a giant clock face in one o' them towers, it'd come pretty close." The driver crested the hill, leaving behind the avenue of plane trees. He turned left, taking a route around a large pond, the surface of which mirrored the banks of rhododendrons along the shore and

reflected the tips of the towers shimmering in the water.

“Looks like we won’t be getting in any ice-skating,” George said to me.

“Good thing, since I didn’t bring my skates.”

“Too early in the winter for that,” the driver called out, eavesdropping on our conversation as he had been the entire two hours from London. “Don’t get snow out here before January, most years anyway. You’ll find a bit o’ frost about in the mornin’. Might see a flake or two before the New Year, if yer lucky. Been raining on and off—why I suggested we start out when we did. Don’t fancy driving these hills in a storm.”

“Thanks, Ralph,” George said as the car pulled to a stop in front of the impressive entrance where a series of arches, flanked by evergreens festooned in red ribbons, led to an interior courtyard.

“Happy to oblige, George. I’ll be at the cousin’s in Stow-on-the-Wold a few days if you change your mind and decide you don’t want to miss the fireworks on the Thames.” Ralph handed him a card on which he’d written a phone number.

George tucked it in his vest pocket. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

While the men retrieved our luggage from the space next to the driver’s seat, I tugged on the hem of my tweed jacket, smoothed away the travel wrinkles of my skirt, and inhaled the sharp country air. No one was out front to greet us, but perhaps they hadn’t seen the car coming or heard the crunch of the tires on the gray gravel. We’d arrived a little earlier than expected. Ralph had taken the afternoon off from his usual duties as a London cabby to drive us to the Cotswolds, where we would welcome in the New Year as guests of Lord and Lady Norrance, friends of my British publisher, which was how I’d landed on the invitation list.

Ralph cocked his head at the building as he wrestled my rolling suitcase to the ground. “Yer host, Lord Norrance—you call ‘im by his title, Jessica—is seventh generation,” he said. “Opens the place up to the public every summer—many of the great houses do now, you know—and does the occasional wedding or some such. Not a bad setting to launch a new life together, what? Wish I coulda done that for my daughter, Allie, and ‘er beau, but ‘er mum says, ‘Save yer pennies. A pretty picture won’t keep ‘em warm in winter.’ Too practical by half, that one.”

“She was very wise,” I said, taking the handle of my bag from him.

“Ralph’s a dreamer,” George said. “That’s part of his charm. But you’d have empty pockets, old chap, if it weren’t for your wife, Kay.” George clapped Ralph on the shoulder as the driver closed the hackney’s door.

“True, and don’t I know it.”

A former bobby, Ralph had retired due to injuries sustained during a crackdown on gangs by the Metropolitan Police—the drug pusher was caught, but Ralph’s knee was a casualty of the operation. Opting out of a desk job, he’d exchanged a life pursuing criminals for one escorting tourists, although many of his customers turned out to be his previous law enforcement colleagues. My companion, Chief Inspector George Sutherland, was one of them.

George Sutherland and I had met years earlier during a trip I’d taken to England to be the weekend guest of Marjorie Ainsworth, the reigning grand dame of British mystery writers. Marjorie had become old and feeble and was confined to a wheelchair, and I felt this might be the last time I would see her alive. Despite her advanced age and failing health, she’d recently completed what was being touted as her finest literary effort, *Gin & Daggers*, although there was growing controversy over whether she’d had the help of a ghostwriter.

Yet none of that mattered to me. Simply being able to spend a weekend with this wonderful and wise woman, whose books set a high bar for any of us other writers of crime fiction, was a joy to contemplate. However, I wasn’t the only guest that weekend at her imposing manor house outside London. A number of others had gathered, which made for spirited conversation, some of it occasionally contentious. Because she fatigued easily, Marjorie had retired to her bedroom the first night of my stay after having played the generous and welcoming hostess.

At three o’clock that morning, I was awakened by a sound coming from the direction of her bedroom. Was it a weak female voice crying for help? I got out of bed and went to find out. Marjorie’s bedroom door was ajar. I stepped inside and approached her bed. What I saw horrified me. Marjorie Ainsworth was sprawled on her back, a dagger protruding from her chest like a graveyard marker.

Because of her fame, the investigation wasn’t left in the hands of the local constable.

Scotland Yard was called in, and Chief Inspector George Sutherland arrived to spearhead the inquiry. Not only was he charming; he was undeniably handsome, six feet four, impeccably dressed, and with eyes that were, at once, probing and kind. We ended up working together to bring Marjorie's murderer to justice, and in the process we developed what might be called a mutual infatuation. Over the years, it became obvious that we were attracted to each other beyond solving murders, and we wondered whether one day we would give life to our romantic inclinations. It hadn't happened, at least not yet, and time spent together was limited. That was why I'd leaped at the chance to spend New Year's Eve with George at Castorbrook Castle.

"I'm Scotland Yard's favorite cabbie," Ralph had informed me when George introduced us. "Unofficially, of course. Had to bone up on Yard history when I was in training. Couldn't let those nobs in their fancy offices know more'n me."

London cabbies are required to go through an intensely challenging program, learning the history of three hundred twenty places of interest as well as how to find all the streets in the city, a process that can take years. Those in training—"Knowledge boys," and more recently "Knowledge girls"—often make multiple attempts at passing the test, as many newly minted lawyers do in taking American state bar exams. Ralph had passed on his second try, a source of great pride.

"Don't lose that number, now." Ralph started up the engine. "Ta, George. Ta, Jessica. See you next year!"

We waved Ralph off.

"Mrs. Fletcher, Mr. Sutherland, my sincerest apologies."

George and I turned to see a gentleman in a tuxedo hastening toward us, followed by a rough-looking man lumbering behind him. The second man was brushing his hands against the sides of his heavy trousers, raising small clouds of dirt with each pass.

"I'm Nigel Gordon, butler to Lord and Lady Norrance. We were only just alerted to your arrival. You weren't due for another two hours." He looked at his watch. "Angus will take your luggage up for you." He indicated the man behind him. "Please follow me. The family will soon

sit down for tea. Would you care to join them straight away? Or would you prefer to freshen up before the introductions?"

"I'd prefer to freshen up," I said.

Nigel hurried us across the interior courtyard and into the entry hall, a vast marble space with fifteen-foot-high columns joined by pointed archways and flanking a half-dozen closed doors, and one open one. I barely had time to notice the intricate carving between the arches, the huge holiday-themed floral arrangement standing on an oak table, the medieval statues, the velvet-covered benches, and the elaborate Oriental rug underfoot before the butler ushered us through the open door to the base of a broad staircase, where a redheaded woman, wearing a large watch on a chain around her neck, awaited us.

"This is our housekeeper, Mrs. Powter, who'll show you to your rooms," Nigel said.

"We do have a lift if you find the stairs wearing," Mrs. Powter said, eyeing us up and down.

"Actually, I'd welcome the stairs right now." I smiled, but she remained impassive.

"Could do with a bit of up-and-down after the long sit," George added.

"When you're ready, Mrs. Powter will show you to the drawing room where the family is gathered," Nigel said, giving us a quick nod. "Please excuse me. I shall see you shortly."

He was gone before we could thank him properly, and he was not the only member of the household in a rush. Mrs. Powter set a brisk pace trotting up the steps. The staircase curved around to the second-floor landing before continuing on up. George and I were afraid to stop and catch our breath for fear of losing sight of our escort. Mrs. Powter was halfway down the hall when we reached the third floor.

"I hope these will be satisfactory." She stepped back from the open doors to adjoining rooms.

I walked into the first room. "Oh, this is lovely."

It was a sun-filled square with a four-poster bed, the gold and filigree canopy of which almost touched the ceiling fifteen feet above our heads. The walls above a paneled wainscoting were covered in blue silk. A pair of what might be ancestral portraits stared down at the bed and across to the window, which overlooked a garden two floors below.

"Very nice," George said. "I see Angus has already been here." He tapped the top of my suitcase, which had been laid on a bench at the foot of the bed.

"He must have taken the elevator," I said.

"No doubt. Or else he's in training for the hundred-meter sprint."

"I wonder if your room is as nice."

"Let's go see."

Mrs. Powter was still on guard in the hall. "Will you need assistance unpacking?"

"I think we can manage by ourselves," I said.

She looked at her watch. "I'll be back to collect you at half past three. Will that be sufficient time?"

"We'll be ready and waiting." I resisted the urge to salute.

She walked briskly to the end of the hall, opened a door to what was probably the back stairs—or perhaps the elevator—and disappeared through it.

"Seems we've put them out by arriving early," George said.

"We're not *that* early, are we?"

He made a show of looking at his watch. "We're not due here for one hour, thirty-five minutes and—ten seconds, give or take a second."

"Oh, dear. Is it just as rude to be early as it is to be late?"

"Nothing of the kind. Besides, you'd think people who are capable of putting on a New Year's Eve ball would have all the details worked out by now."

"I suspect that if I had a hundred people coming to my home for a party, I'd feel pressured, too."

"You, my lass, would take it all in stride. Now let's take a peek at my living quarters in Castorbrook Castle. How do they compare to yours?"

"Pretty much the same," I said, entering his room, "although your ancestral portraits appear to be sixteenth century, while mine are of a later vintage."

"How do you figure that?"

"These gentlemen are wearing ruffs." I gestured at the stiff ruffled collars under the double chins of the aristocrats depicted in the paintings. "Mine are wearing cravats."

“I bow to your superior knowledge of historical neckwear, and to your powers of observation.”

“I happen to be reading a book on the Renaissance now. The author spends a lot of ink on clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles.”

“See how handy it came in?”

I laughed. “I think I’d better go unpack before Mrs. Powter returns with our marching orders.”

“And I’ll do the same. Shall I knock on your door at twenty-five past, just to be safe?”

“I’d appreciate that.”

I unpacked my bag as quickly as possible, shaking out a blue dress I planned to wear down to tea and hanging up the rest of my clothes in a tall armoire. Buildings of Castorbrook Castle’s vintage don’t have closets unless the owners have added them in a modernization.

A door fitted into the paneling opened into an old-fashioned bathroom with a claw-foot tub. I washed my hands and face at the pedestal sink and used a linen towel folded atop a small round table next to it, before changing into my dress. I wrapped a plaid shawl around my shoulders—the Sutherland tartan, a gift from George—in anticipation of the chilly rooms for which English manor houses are infamous, and tucked a pair of reading glasses into my dress pocket.

Ready in no time, I turned in a circle, examining the contents of my room. In addition to the canopy bed and armoire, there were a single nightstand with a candlestick lamp, a small desk and chair, a marble fireplace with a coal basket inside, and, under the tall window, a built-in seat with an upholstered cushion. I crossed to the window, leaned on the cushion, and looked out at the view of the countryside’s rolling hills and the gathering clouds in the distance. Cows were grazing on what was left of the grass in one pasture. The spire of an ancient stone church poked into the wintry blue sky from a valley beyond. Below me was a garden; the high stone walls enclosing it matched the limestone blocks of the house. I tried to picture where the walled garden was located in relation to the house, but we hadn’t had time to get our bearings before Nigel had whisked us inside.

The garden had several gravel paths that ran along the back and sides, with concrete

benches on which to rest and enjoy the views. The paths crisscrossed in the middle, leaving triangularly shaped beds in the center. Flowers withered from the cold waved on their brown stems, the only spots of green being a few holly bushes. Specimen trees and what I believed were bare rosebushes filled the beds at the far corners, but I couldn't identify any of the other plants from this distance.

A fragment of color closer to the building caught my eye, and I pressed my forehead to the glass to see what it was. It was not a plant, but a patch of purple fabric. Perhaps the gardener had dropped a cloth on the ground when he was working. Would that have been Angus? I knelt on the window seat and unlatched the window. A cold breeze reminded me that it was winter, but holding on to the casement, I bent forward. The wind ruffled my hair, and the purple fabric below billowed, floating off to the side—and revealing a leg and a dark shoe. They weren't moving.

"Oh, dear."

I raced to George's door and knocked urgently.

"Is Mrs. Powter here already?" George said, buttoning his vest and reaching for the jacket he'd left on the bed.

"No. Come look. Someone is hurt in the garden!" I opened George's window and directed him to look down.

"That swath of purple cloth?"

"Yes, and it's covering a leg and foot. I saw them when the wind blew the cloth aside. If she tried to call for help, no one would be able to hear her with all the windows closed. She must have injured herself in a fall and is unable to get up."

"We'd better go downstairs and investigate."

"Should we leave a note for Mrs. Powter?"

"No time. She'll have to find us later on."

We dashed down the hall to the door we'd seen Mrs. Powter open to find both the back staircase and the closed brass gate of the elevator.

"I'll take the stairs," George said. "Do you want to wait for the lift?"

"No, I'll follow you. You go ahead."

If I'd known I'd be running down the stairs, I would have chosen better shoes, but I managed to keep George in my sight as we descended several flights spiraling around the elevator shaft. We stopped on what we assumed was the ground floor.

"Which way?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"You take that hall. I'll try this one," he said. "If I don't find the garden, I'll look for someone to help. Call out if you find her."

George took off, looking into rooms on either side of the corridor. I went in the opposite direction, following the stone floor, glad of the shawl in the frigid air. At the end of the hall was a heavy curtain. I pulled it to one side to discover an opening that led into a large greenhouse, its tall potted plants blotting out the dimming afternoon light. The leaves of a tropical plant just inside quaked when I stepped into the room, allowing some of the cool air to follow me. On the wall to my right was a heavy glass-paneled door that led to the enclosed garden.

I held back the curtain. "George! Down here," I called. I opened the door, but it was very heavy. I looked around and noticed some wet dirt tracks on the floor. The plant was on a rolling stand. Clearly it had been moved before to hold the door open. I did the same thing and stepped into the walled garden. A woman was lying in a puddle just beyond the door. She wore only her purple dress and brown shoes; without a sweater or jacket, her attire was no match for the wintry day. I knelt next to her, pushing her blond hair aside to feel for a pulse on her neck. I couldn't find one. I lifted her wrist to try again and was surprised to find red stains on her fingers. I wondered briefly if she was a fan of pistachio nuts. When I was a child, they were often dyed that color, leaving my fingers and lips cherry red.

But there was no dye on this lady's lips, and from the gray color of her complexion, I guessed that she'd been dead for a while. How awful to die alone without the comfort of friends and family around you. I shivered and pulled my shawl closer as the icy air and brutal wind reminded me not to linger. I'd better go find George before there were two bodies in the garden.

I heard a bang and turned. The door had slammed shut behind me. I went to it, pulling and then pushing on the brass handle. It was locked. I peered through the glass to see if someone was inside. No one. "What do I do now?" I muttered, annoyed that I hadn't checked to make

certain that the wheels of the plant stand were positioned correctly to keep it from sliding away.

I rapped on the glass with my knuckles, but they made barely any sound. I took off my right shoe and used the heel to knock on the door again. "Hello! I shouted. "I'm locked out here. Help! Someone help!" There was no answer, only the muffled sound of a dog barking somewhere.

I stepped back and looked up at the side of the building. All the windows were shut, which meant Mrs. Powter must have discovered us missing and closed the ones in our rooms, probably grumbling about inconsiderate guests.

A gust of wind caught my dress, just as it had the one of the poor woman dead on the ground. My skirt flew up, flattening against my chest. I shuddered as I pushed down the billowing material. I wondered if I should cover the victim with my shawl, but it would do her lifeless body little good and leave me without a shield against the elements.

I walked to the outer path by the stone wall, climbed on a concrete bench, and waved, hoping someone might notice me from one of the myriad windows that overlooked the garden. There were lights on in a few of the rooms. I could see people walking back and forth, but no one stopped to peer outside. In fact, someone drew a heavy drape across a window, undoubtedly making the interior warmer by blocking the drafts. It was bitterly cold on the periphery of the garden, and water from an earlier rain had seeped into my shoes. Even my arm-waving exertions did little to warm me up.

I climbed down and looked across to the glass door. Several yards to its left, wedged between a bush and an ornamental stone column, was another door, a wooden one, which I hadn't noticed earlier. I hurried over. Stepping into a flower bed to get to what I hoped was an exit, I yanked on the handle. The door flew back to reveal a shallow closet, its shelves packed with flowerpots, garden tools, seed packets, boxes of Mole-Rid, bottles of insecticide, and bags of aluminum sulfate and lime. Even in the unlikely event I could have squeezed inside the closet, it wouldn't have offered much protection.

Well, George will find me soon, I thought as I retreated to the glass door. *He must be nearby.* I continued knocking on the panels with my shoe, and at regular intervals shouting into the wind. Minutes went by with no George. The sky darkened, and the temperature dropped. The

trees and bushes took on eerie shapes in the gloom. Had he gotten lost? It was not outside the realm of possibility, given the size of Castorbrook Castle. Could he have become disoriented and taken off in a direction away from where I waited? And if the staff was in the kitchen or readying the ballroom, they might not hear him call, just as they didn't hear me as I pounded my shoe on the door. I pictured George wandering the hallways, unable to find anyone to help.

Stop it, Jessica. He knows to look for you.

My teeth chattering, I switched shoes, taking off my left one and pushing my frozen right foot into the damp leather pump, and resumed banging on the door. My arm was tired, my feet hurt, and the shawl wasn't much protection against the currents of air swirling fiercely around the enclosed garden.

A bolt of lightning illuminated the charcoal sky, followed by a clap of thunder. I huddled against the door, but it provided scant shelter. I sank down, shoe in hand, and leaned against the glass, too tired to keep hitting the panes. I felt a drop of water on my head and pulled the shawl over my hair. I drew up my knees, making myself as small as possible.

Then the door opened behind me. I fell backward across the sill just as the rain began pelting down.

"Jessica, are you all right?" George said, lifting me up. "I'm so sorry. I never came upon anyone to ask for help. This place is huge. I got terribly turned around and had trouble finding my way back, until just now."

"Th-thank g-goodness you're here," I said, my teeth chattering.

George closed the door to the garden and groped along the wall until he found a light switch, bringing the indoor jungle to life. Graceful plants and exotic flowers bloomed in the warm, moist air, making quite a contrast to the climate I'd just escaped.

He wrapped his arms around me. "You're safe now. How do you feel?"

"I'm cold and miserable, George, but I'm a lot better off than that lady out there."