

EXCERPT FROM

The Highland Fling Murders

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher and a group from Cabot Cove visit the British Isles and end up in a castle in Scotland, home not only to the ghost of a celebrated witch whose death is being chronicled by a local novelist, but also to Scotland Yard Inspector George Sutherland. After an accident—or is it?—that nearly takes Jessica’s life, she returns to the castle to find herself questioned on a topic she’s not ready to address.

“May I ask you a question, Mrs. Fletcher?”

“Of course.”

“Providing you don’t think me too forward.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Are you and the Inspector --?” She covered her mouth with her hands and looked at the floor, then back up at me. “Are you and Inspector Sutherland having a bit of a *screed*?”

“I’m not fluent in Gaelic yet, Fiona. Translate.”

“Mrs. Gower says you and the Inspector are havin’ yourselves a romantic fling.”

“Does she now?”

“Everybody’s talking about it.”

“Are they?”

“I have to admit I can see it in your eyes. In his eyes, too. Hard to miss.”

“Well, Fiona, I hate to dispel any juicy gossip, but Inspector Sutherland and I are simply good friends. That’s it. Sorry to disappoint.”

“All right.” Her expression said she was placating me, not believing a word of my denial of any romantic relationship with George.

“Well, Fiona, thank you for the tea and the plate of -- *tablet*”

“You’ve got it, Mrs. Fletcher. I’d best be going before the old shrew gets to yelling for me.” She grabbed two pieces of fudge from the plate, went to the door

and opened it. "Good night, Mrs. Fletcher. Glad you like Malcolm's writing. He'll be famous one day, and I'll be his proud wife."

I didn't try to fight my sweet tooth. I savored a piece of fudge with my tea and returned to reading Malcolm James's novel. Time passed quickly. I finished it, took off my glasses and leaned back in the chair to contemplate what I'd read.

Malcolm really hadn't ended the story because, I suppose, there wasn't a closure to Evelyn Gowdie's murder twenty years ago. Malcolm's fictitious detective character worked the case up to the point where he'd identified a number of suspects in the community. Malcolm had inserted a final handwritten page on which he'd made notes to himself concerning integrating Daisy Wemyss's murder into the overall story. I was disappointed he hadn't wrapped things up. After all, he was writing fiction. Ending his story didn't depend upon a real solution to the actual murder. I couldn't help wonder why a publisher would commit to a first novel without the ending having been written. Probably because the rest of the manuscript showed such promise. The story woven by Malcolm James was compelling, taut, a proverbial page-turner.

I mentally reviewed the suspects he'd developed. One in particular stayed with me, a woman who aroused the detective's suspicions because she was one of only a few people who knew where Evelyn Gowdie would be when she was killed.

Thinking of her caused me to turn my attention to Rufus Innes, the gillie who'd guided Ken and me that day. As far as I could tell, he was the only person who knew we'd be going to that particular river, and that we would be fishing near the bridge from which the log was thrown. At least I assumed he was the only one who knew where we'd be.

Maybe he'd told others where he intended to guide us.

Maybe he was known to always take fishing clients there. No, he'd made a

point of telling us that he and his fellow guides seldom took clients there. But he took us there that day. He even directed me to the spot in the river near the bridge where someone was waiting.

But *was* someone waiting there for me? Perhaps not. Whoever threw that log might have come along *after* I was in the water and fishing near the bridge. And I had to accept the possibility that the log wasn't aimed at me. Maybe it was a kid throwing it into the water just for the fun of it, not realizing anyone was down there.

Conjuring such scenarios proved to be fatiguing, so I decided to go downstairs to see if any of my Cabot Cove contingent was still up. I found Seth Hazlit sitting in front of the fireplace reading a book he'd found on one of the castle's many bookcases.

"Still awake, Jessica?"

"Yes. I was reading. I see you are, too. Good book?"

"*Ayuh*. About Robert Burns. Died at thirty-seven, poor fella. Lived near a seaside town called Ayr for most of his short life. Loved it there evidently. Wrote this about the town. '*Auld Auyr, wham ne'er a town surpasses, For honest men and bonny lasses.*' Bonny lasses. I like that."

"It does have a nice ring to it."

"Gotten over your episode on the river?"

"I think so."

"Still don't have any idea who might 'a thrown that log at you?"

"I'm not even sure someone did. I mean, someone did -- throw the log -- but maybe it wasn't intended to hit me."

Seth raised his eyebrows the way he always does when doubting me.

"I just don't know," I said defensively. "It all happened so fast. Maybe Sheriff McKay will know more after they cut the cross out of the bridge's railing."

He stared into the fire, brow knitted, lips pursed.

"How much for your thoughts?" I asked. "You've never given them away for a penny."

He slowly turned and looked at me, locked his eyes on mine. "Jessica, we've been friends for a very long time."

"We certainly have."

"And I've lived through most of your misadventures, either because I was with you, or heard about it over the television or radio."

I squeezed his arm. "And you've been staunch and loyal at every turn, Dr. Seth Hazlit, for which this particular lady has always been very grateful. Now, Seth, what's your point?"

"My point is, Jessica, I'm not at all comfortable staying here."

I sighed. "I suppose I can't say I don't understand. But despite the things that have happened since we arrived, I'm actually having a good time."

"Of course you are, considerin' you get to spend time with George Sutherland."

I cocked my head and didn't attempt to keep a smile from forming. "And what does that mean?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know Jessica. It just seems to me that you and the handsome Scotland Yard Inspector have an obvious mutual respect for each other."

"Why shouldn't we?"

He held up his hand. "Of course you should. Anything beyond respect, Jessica?"

"Romance, you mean?"

"*Ayuh*. Always known you had pretty strong feelings for him. Knew that years ago when you met him in London. Fairly obvious to any astute friend. I know you pretty well."

"You certainly do. But do you know what, Seth?"

"What?"

"As much as I adore you -- and you know I do -- I really don't think whatever feelings I might have for George to be -- of interest to anyone but me."

"And him, of course."

"Yes. And George. Of course."

"Just don't want to see you get your feathers singed, Jessica. Only reason I bring it up."

"I don't have any feathers, Seth."

"Course you do. Every beautiful woman's got 'em. You're no exception. I'm sure Sutherland has noticed them."

"I think it's bedtime," I said, standing.

"A little sleepy myself." He stood and clamped a hand on each of my arms. "Just want you to know that I'm always here for you, no matter what happens. You remember that, *heah*?"

"Yes, Seth. I *heah* loud and clear. Good night."

I made sure I was out of his sight before I dabbed at a tear that had formed in my left eye, and was running down my cheek. He was such a dear friend, and had been for many years.

And he was jealous of George.