

EXCERPT FROM

Murder at the Powderhorn Ranch

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

The urge to challenge herself by learning something new finds Jessica Fletcher taking flying lessons, a decision that does not meet with the approval of her dear friend Dr. Seth Hazlitt. In fact, he's downright concerned. So when old friends call to invite Jessica for a visit, Seth decides to give her a different sort of challenge, one that will have drastic consequences down the line.

"Jessica, about this flying lesson nonsense, I—"

"Pardon me for interrupting, Seth, but it isn't nonsense. It represents something I have the need to experience. Nothing nonsensical about that."

"I suppose not. But I just can't figure out why you're doing it."

I looked out the window to where birds fluttered about my ten-quart feeder, vying for space on the four perches. The sun cast a pretty pattern on my kitchen counter. I thought of the morning and my introduction to flying – not just being in a plane, even a small one; my frequent flier bank is overflowing -- but to have placed my hands, and feet, on the controls and making the plane do what I wanted it to do. I broke into a grin.

"Pleasant thought you're havin', I take it."

"Extremely pleasant." I sat forward and placed my hands on one of his. "Seth, haven't you ever felt a compelling need to challenge yourself, to reach beyond what you're comfortable with and conquer something you'd always considered unattainable?"

"Course I have. Do it all the time."

"I think we're talking about different things," I said. "I know you're always seeking new advances in medicine, and that you take courses to learn about subjects that interest you. You thoroughly enjoyed that series of cooking

courses you took last year. And the seminar on collecting rare, first-edition books had you glowing. Remember?"

"*Ayuh*. Those were mind-expanding experiences."

"They certainly were. But I've reached a point in my life where I feel a need to challenge myself physically. Run a marathon, climb a mountain, drive a race car -- learn to fly."

He said nothing.

"Don't you understand?"

"I suppose I do. I *think* I do. I just don't want you to be doing something that's dangerous."

"I know, and I appreciate your concern. But flying a plane doesn't have to be dangerous. Jed says more people are killed every year at railroad crossings than die in airplane accidents around the world. He says—"

My defense of my newest hobby was interrupted by the ringing phone. I picked up.

"Jessica? Jim Cook."

"Jim! What a pleasant surprise."

Jim and Bonnie Cook had lived in Cabot Cove for years until fulfilling their dream of owning and operating a dude ranch out west. They looked at many ranches for sale in Colorado until deciding on an 80-acre property in the town of Powderhorn, five hours west of Denver, nestled in the Powderhorn Valley and adjacent to more than a million acres of uninhabited wilderness. The closest commercial airport is a forty-five minute drive from the ranch, in the town of Gunnison.

We threw a lavish going-away party for the Cooks when they left Cabot Cove. They were active, well-liked, respected members of the community. I'd kept in touch with them over the years via an occasional letter, phone call and

the yearly Christmas card. They'd invited me on many occasions to be their guest at the ranch. Unfortunately, my schedule never cooperated. The Powderhorn was open only from early June through mid-September.

After some preliminary chit-chat, Jim said, "Bonnie and I decided we won't take no for an answer this time."

"About what?"

"About you coming out here to visit. We've got a horse all picked out for you, the trout are jumping, and one of our best cabins has your name on it. Besides, we're always looking for another square dance partner."

Bonnie Cook got on an extension: "Please come, Jess. It's been years. We miss you."

"And I miss you, too."

"No excuses," Jim said. "If you're working on another book, we'll set you up with a computer."

Seth indicated he wanted to join the conversation.

"I'm here with Seth Hazlitt," I said. "He wants to talk to you." I handed him the phone.

"Howdy," Seth said.

I refilled our coffee cups while he talked with the Cooks, half listening to what he was saying. But when I heard, "Jessica and I would love to come out to the ranch," he had my full attention.

"We?" I mouthed.

"Sounds good," he said. "That'll give us two weeks to get ourselves ready, clear my slate of patients for the week, and let Jessica get herself geared up to go."

I retrieved the phone.

“Can’t wait to see you,” Jim Cook said. “It’s a perfect week for you and Doc to come.”

“But I—”

“We’ll send you all the info you’ll need, travel arrangements, clothes to bring, stuff like that.”

“How wonderful we’ll be seeing you again,” Bonnie Cook said. “I can’t wait for these next two weeks to pass.”

I looked at Seth, who sat at the table, hands folded over his stomach, a satisfied smile on his face.

“Bonnie, Jim, can I get back to you?” I said. “I have to—to handle something.”

“Of course,” said Jim. “We’ll be here all day. By the way, the week you’ll be coming is perfect for us. The Morrison family picked that week for its annual reunion. They come every year. We don’t book anybody else that week, which means we have three cabins available, one for you, one for the doc, and—one empty one.”

“I wouldn’t want to inconvenience this family,” I said.

“That’s no problem, Jess. I asked them whether they’d mind having other guests, and they said they’d be honored to share the week with you. You’re famous even out here in the wilds of Colorado.”

“I’ll call you later, Jim.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

“Well, Dr. Hazlitt,” I said after hanging up, “I know you’re my physician, but I didn’t realize you’d become my social secretary, too.”

“Sounds like a wonderful trip, Jessica. I’ve been looking to get away for a week. It’s been a hectic couple ’a months at the office. I could use a week in that

clean, crisp Colorado air, good, hearty home-cooked meals, songs around the campfire. I figured you'd enjoy those things, too."

"I would, but—"

"Seems to me that saddling up a big, strong steed and ridin' him up into the rugged Colorado mountains would fit in just fine with your new need for adventure."

"I haven't ridden a horse in -- in a very long time."

"How long a time?"

"Oh, thirty years. Maybe more."

"You never forget."

"But the horse might."

He stood, stretched and gave me a friendly smile. "Of course, maybe riding tall in the saddle is a little *too* adventuresome for you."

"Oh no, it's—"

"Have to run. Give Jim and Bonnie a call and let 'em know you'll be accompanying me. Think I'll mosey down to Charles Department Store and see what sort of duds they have. Maybe a Stetson hat and a red bandana."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Next thing I know you'll be singing like Roy Rogers and calling me ma'am."

"Nothing of the sort—ma'am. Or should I say 'pardner?'"