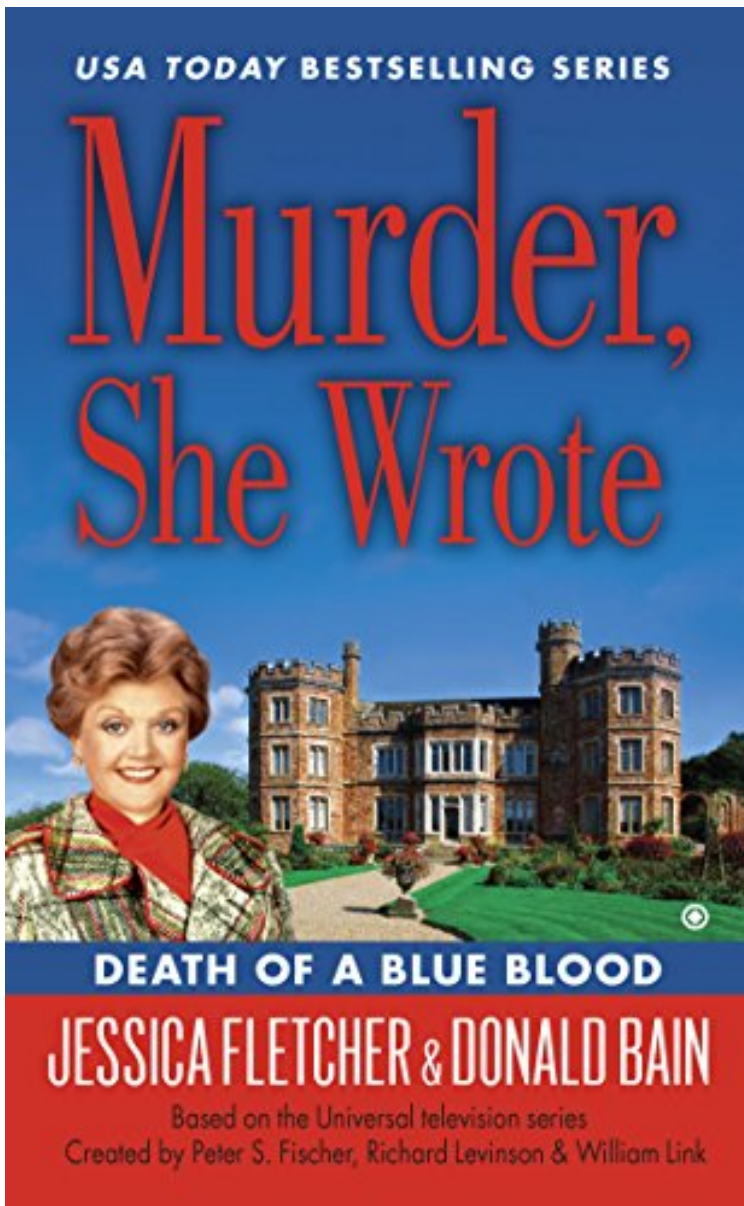


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Murder, She Wrote: Death of a Blue Blood



Par Jessica Fletcher, Donald Bain
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Par Jessica Fletcher, Donald Bain :
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the newest mystery in the USA Today bestselling series, Jessica Fletcher is invited to ring in the New Year with British aristocracy. Too bad someones about to end the life of the party....Jessica Fletcher and her friend Scotland Yard detective inspector George Sutherland are invited to attend a New Years Eve Ball at Castorbrook Castle, thanks to her British publisher. Shortly after arriving in the idyllic English countryside, Jessica discovers the body of a ladys maid in the garden.While their host, Lord Norrance, his snobbish third wife, other members of the household, and party guests squabble over the tragic death in tight-lipped, perfectly mannered, thoroughly British style, family relations are strained as old

wounds are reopened and cutting remarks are freely handed out. And that's only during teatime! As midnight beckons at the ball the next night, the earl offers a toast, complete with fireworks. But the merriment crashes to a halt when he falls ill and dies, apparently poisoned and the number of suspects with a grudge against the lord of the manor sprouts like English ivy. Now it's up to Jessica and George to find the killer or killers before another corpse welcomes in the New Year....

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES
OBSIDIAN Chapter One
James William Edward Grant, seventh Earl of Norrance, and Marielle Grant, Countess of Norrance, request the honour of your presence at their New Years 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 Years 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, don't you 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 clockface in one of 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 of 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 cousins 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 cabbie 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 him 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.

I 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 straightaway? 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 are 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 Years 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 Castles 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, then changed into my dress. I wrapped a plaid shawl around my shoulder—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. Thank 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. Chapter Two Who was

Chapter Two Who was

she? I asked George in a low voice. Apparently she served as lady's maid to our hostess, Lady Norrance? He nodded. Her name was Flavia Beckwith. She'd been with the family many years. Drink your tea. Didn't anyone miss her? I whispered. With all the hustle and bustle of the staff getting ready for the ball, no one thought to look for her. I took a sip from the delicate china cup and replaced it in the saucer. I was wrapped in a heavy blanket in a wing chair in a corner of the drawing room near the tall Christmas tree, the branches of which held swags of gold ribbon, gold glass balls, and electric candles. George sat on an ottoman by my side. There were ten of us gathered for afternoon tea. George and I were the only ones who weren't members of the family, but a few other guests were expected to arrive at any moment. Our hosts, Lord and Lady Norrance, had fussed over me in my disheveled state, but they were understandably far more upset to learn of Mrs. Beckwith's demise. What in blazes was she doing in the garden? Lord Norrance asked, glaring at his wife. Marielle, the Countess of Norrance, raised a hand to tuck a loose strand of hair into her chignon. I asked her to find a sprig of holly that I could use for my hair for the ball. She checked her image in the mirror over the fireplace. I didn't ask her to go into the garden. Any sensible person knows it's far too cold to walk outside at this time of year, said a gravelly voice belonging to the Dowager Countess of Norrance, the earl's widowed mother. Honora Grant was a slight woman in her seventies, but her delicate appearance belied her tough nature. Earlier, when she had leaned on Nigel's arm as he escorted her into the room, she had pointed to a seat with her cane. Put me over there where I can see everyone. Marielle, you know that's my chair by the fire. Find another place, if you please. Lady Norrance obligingly vacated her seat so her mother-in-law could take it. Nigel placed a pillow he'd carried in on the chair, and Honora settled herself down. She cast a critical eye on the room's other occupants. I hope you're not planning to cancel the ball because of this unfortunate incident. Oh! We hadn't thought... The earl's wife trailed off. You really should, you know, said a young woman dressed in jodhpurs and boots. We've had a death in the family. She released the scarf around her neck and shook out her dark blond hair. Nonsense! the earl said. This event has been on the social calendar for many months. Jemma, must you irritate your father? Sorry, Mum. We could hardly cancel now, the earl said. People are already arriving. He waved an arm toward George and me. And very welcome you are, said Rupert Grant, the earl's younger son, nodding at us, causing a curl from his carefully gelled hair to flop onto his forehead. He was a boyish-looking fellow in his mid-twenties. Besides, Flavia would not have wanted to discomfort the family in any way. He leaned forward to pluck a pastry from a silver tray. Isn't that right, Mother? You're correct, of course, dear. Please take a plate and napkin. Mrs. Beckwith was dedicated to Castorbrook Castle and our family. Wasn't she the children's governess once? the dowager asked. Yes, Grandmother, Rupert said, but she needed another job when the three of us rudely decided to grow up. He cocked his head at his sister, Jemma, the horsewoman, and their older brother, Kip, who sat across the room and idly paged through a magazine. And Mother gave the old girl another position. Ridiculous! She wasn't even trained. Honora thumped her cane on the floor. Can't imagine she could have been a proper lady's maid without training. But then your mother probably doesn't know the difference. Marielle flushed and looked to her husband for defense, but he was lost in thought as he stared into the fire. Rupert popped up out of his seat, taking the tray of pastries with him. Would you like to try one of these, Grandmother? They were made by our new French chef. What was wrong with the English one? Clover is still in the kitchen, Marielle said. We simply felt Chef Bergre would add an elegant touch to the cuisine, in particular for special occasions. He has been a wonderful change. She turned to her husband. James, would you like a cream tart? Don't encourage him to eat those sugary things. He's too heavy as it is. You'll give him a heart attack, Honora said. The earl patted his stomach. I don't think I've put on much, have I? Nothing wrong with plain English cooking, the old woman said, but she allowed her grandson to put a piece of pastry on her plate. I like Clover's scones better than those, Jemma said, flinging a booted leg over the arm of her chair. Even from my seat some distance away, I could detect the aroma of horse that clung to her clothing. Nigel, would you please see if anyone wants more tea? Marielle took a seat on an upholstered settee. The low table in front of her held a silver tray with a silver teapot, sugar bowl, and creamer. Jemma, sit up, dear. Kip, where is your wife? Sitting in the window seat with Adela, Rupert answered for his brother. Two young ladies who'd been whispering together on the other side of the room looked up and waved. Poppa's showing me her new ball gown, Adela called out. You should see it, Rupe. I'm going to look like a poor relation. My gown is three years old. Cost me a bloody fortune, Kip said. You'd think she was already a countess. Put that mobile away this instant, the earl said. You know how I detest the use of electronics during teatime. And at the table, and in the library, and in the garden, Rupert said. I daresay there are few places you tolerate them, Father. Perhaps we should send those two out to the cloakroom. The young women giggled. Poppy tucked the cell

phone away in her pocket, but not before a final check of the screen. Rupert, I don't need any smart talk from you, said the earl. If you ever have an estate to run, you won't be so flippant about the responsibilities. Unfortunately, I'm your younger son, as you well know. I have no prospects for inheriting an estate. More reason for you to pursue gainful employment. You could change your mind and give me a piece of this one. I'll not break up Castorbrook for you. You've already... Not another word. I've accommodated you enough. I trust you'll use this opportunity wisely. I won't be supporting you forever. Kip will take care of me. Won't you, Brother? Leave me out of this. If you need a job, Rupert, you could always take Mrs. Beckwith's place, Kip's wife, Poppy, said, smirking. Her companion in the window seat gave her a shove in the shoulder. I was just joshing, Adela. No need to get violent. You're always picking on Rupert, Poppy. Kip being the heir doesn't make you Queen of the May. No? Poppy said archly. I thought it did. While no one was paying him any attention, Kip slipped a small flask from his pocket and poured its contents into his teacup. Honora, who had appeared to be dozing, lifted her head. Those young people are completely without conversation. She peered over her spectacles. In my day Yes, yes, Mother. The earl cut her off. We know everything was superior in your day. Well, I don't know what I said that prompted you to speak so rudely to me, James. I never intended disrespect, Mama. My mind is awash with a million problems. I'm upset over the loss of our staff member, the anticipated consequences, and how we will replace her on such short notice. Your wife should be able to dress herself in an emergency, I would think. Can we not discuss this now? Marielle said. While the family bickered, Nigel had picked up the tray and made the rounds of the room, stopping at each person. I'll have another cup, George told him when he'd worked his way to us. How are you feeling, Mrs. Fletcher? Much better, Nigel. Thank you for asking. Our sincerest apologies for your regrettable introduction to Castorbrook Castle. No apologies necessary. I'm just sorry for the family's loss. Have the authorities been notified? George asked. Yes, sir. Someone from the constabulary is expected shortly. I'm afraid there will have to be an inquest. Isn't that standard procedure when someone dies of unknown causes? I asked. It is, but it's awkward timing with the ball tomorrow evening. Time is precious. With so much to prepare, the staff hope the business will be concluded before the start of the festivities. And the family must wish that, too, I imagine. I'll see if I can help him along, George said, lowering his voice. Please let me know when the officer arrives. Of course, sir. And thank you for any service you can provide. Can you really speed up the inquest, George? I asked softly when Nigel had moved away. Won't the police have to interview everyone in the house? I understand the pressures of the social occasion, but after all, a woman has died, and she deserves the appropriate investigation. I would never interfere with the local authorities or their proper procedure. I hope you know that. But given the state of affairs, perhaps I can convince this gentleman to delay some of his inquiries until the day after the ball. Or, if he allows it, assist him in organizing his analysis so that it doesn't interfere with the efficient workings of the house. After all, that lady most likely died from exposure, which you very well might have done if I hadn't found you. And this lady, who is very grateful for your rescue, begs to differ with you. Without an autopsy, how can you say that was the cause of her death? I'm not saying it emphatically. Heart attack, stroke are also possibilities. In fact, that's probably what felled her in the first place. But once she was incapacitated, hypothermia is not an unreasonable conclusion, given the circumstances. It only needs to be ten degrees centigrade that's fifty in Fahrenheit for a body to cool to dangerous levels. She was careless. The weather was wet. She was inappropriately attired to venture out of doors, yet she made that decision. And she got locked out, as did I. Are you saying that I was careless, too, George? I was inappropriately dressed for the outdoors. Of course not. Completely different scenario. Clearly she must have had some infirmity and was unable to return inside. Unfortunately, no one on the staff thought to look for her. Neither did anyone in the family. Why didn't Lady Norrance ask after her? She sent her on the errand in the first place. Agreed. However inattentive everyone was, I don't see it as an instance of willful negligence. Whether from the elements or from lack of medical attention to a fatal malady, the lady collapsed and died. Can you really come to any other conclusion? I felt as if our exposure to the family's squabbles had become contagious, and George and I were now communicating or rather miscommunicating in the same manner. I took a deep breath and sipped my tea. It's entirely possible that she died of hypothermia, of course. I'm glad you see it that way, lass. But I didn't. Chapter Three So, Mrs. Fletcher, you were the one to discover the body of the deceased? Yes, Detective Sergeant Mardling. I noticed the purple fabric of her dress when I looked out my window. Then George I mean Chief Inspector Sutherland and I ran downstairs to try to find the garden. I reached it first, but it appeared that she'd been dead for some time. Yes, well, when she died the time of death is yet to be determined. Of course. There were five of us gathered in a ground-floor room down the hall from the

greenhouse. The space was not much bigger than a walk-in refrigerator and equally as cold. Standing wooden shelves that ringed the room held cans and jars of preserved fruits and vegetables as well as crates of root vegetables. Mrs. Beckwith's body had been laid on a long wooden table and covered with a white tablecloth. Detective Sergeant Mardling pulled it aside. What's her age? How old was this lady, Mrs. Beckwith, as I believe you said? Yes, sir, Flavia Beckwith, Nigel replied. I believe she was in her fifties, but I cannot say with certainty. She was guarded about her personal information. I can ask the earl if he knows. Well, I can ask the earl myself, if it comes to that. Will have to speak to the earl at some point, won't I? Dudley Mardling was not the kind of police officer I expected, although I couldn't say exactly what an English detective was supposed to look like. He was short and plump with pink cheeks and curly sandy hair. Dressed in a green canvas jacket, he wore a gold watch and had buffed fingernails. His assistant, Constable Willoughby, was his physical opposite in every way. She was six feet tall, as narrow as he was round, with stick-straight hair brushed back from her face. Her uniform was wrinkled, and the grease marks on her hands suggested that she might be an avid weekend car mechanic. And who removed Mrs. Beckwith or rather the body from the garden and brought it to this room? Mardling looked down at the table that held the deceased. I did, with the help of another member of the staff, Nigel replied. And you are Mr. Gordon, if I remember correctly? Yes, sir. Nigel Gordon, butler to Lord and Lady Norrance. And the other staff member who assisted with the removal of the body? Is he here? Not at the moment. That would be Angus Hartwhistle, our gardener. We couldn't leave her where she'd fallen. It was raining. Mardling grunted. Nigel rushed on. Angus suggested this space because it is stone lined and the temperature is consistent. We use it as an auxiliary larder for vegetables. We trusted that this would serve you better. It was a well-thought-out decision, George said, nodding at Nigel. He turned to Detective Sergeant Mardling. The garden is next to the conservatory, but that area is maintained as a warm, moist environment, which would have been conducive to more rapid decomposition. Appreciate your input, Chief Inspector. Do you have any official capacity in this matter? George coughed. Not at all, Detective Sergeant. I am a guest of the earl and his countess, as is Mrs. Fletcher. It was simply our misfortune to find this poor soul. I certainly am aware of your rank with Scotland Yard, but since this is my investigation, I'm sure you won't mind if I continue the questioning. By all means. What do you suppose caused this? Mardling gestured at the red coloring on the deceased's fingers. Anybody know? Perhaps a stain from berries in the garden, Nigel ventured. Did she like to cook Indian food? Willoughby asked. Some of the spices can leave you with marks on your hands. She looked at her own discolored fingers and quickly tucked her hands behind her back. I understand there is to be a big do here tomorrow night, Mardling said. A New Year's Eve ball, I put in. How many are expected? George and I looked to Nigel. One hundred forty-five, precisely, plus six musicians. All staying here? Twenty-two guests have been invited to stay at the castle. The rest either reside in the neighborhood or are putting up at nearby establishments. Would have thought the castle had more than twenty-two bedrooms. Do you have more than twenty-two bedrooms, Mr. Gordon? We have nearly fifty, sir, but many of them are not suitable to occupy as yet. The earl intends to redecorate as funds and time allow. The building is more than three hundred years old. A bit hard to keep up. He sneaked a peek at his watch. Presentation de l'diteur In the newest mystery in the USA Today bestselling series, Jessica Fletcher is invited to ring in the New Year with British aristocracy. Too bad someone's about to end the life of the party.... Jessica Fletcher and her friend Scotland Yard detective inspector George Sutherland are invited to attend a New Year's Eve Ball at Castorbrook Castle, thanks to her British publisher. Shortly after arriving in the idyllic English countryside, Jessica discovers the body of a lady's maid in the garden. While their host, Lord Norrance, his snobbish third wife, other members of the household, and party guests squabble over the tragic death in tight-lipped, perfectly mannered, thoroughly British style, family relations are strained as old wounds are reopened and cutting remarks are freely handed out. And that's only during teatime! As midnight beckons at the ball the next night, the earl offers a toast, complete with fireworks. But the merriment crashes to a halt when he falls ill and dies, apparently poisoned and the number of suspects with a grudge against the lord of the manor sprouts like English ivy. Now it's up to Jessica and George to find the killer or killers before another corpse welcomes in the New Year....