

How the Story Ends

—MinervaDeannaBond

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This story is a follow-up to "The Celtic Riddle," the last *Murder, She Wrote* movie. In this story, Jessica tells her great-niece a fairy tale about a brave princess, a dragon guarding a treasure, and the prince waiting for the princess far across the sea. Only Seth knows that the story is, in fact, true. Before reading this story, I suggest listening to Kerrie Roberts' "Rescue Me (How the Story Ends)."

I also owe *The Mask of Zorro* a debt for the beginning of this story. Those who have seen the movie will know what I'm talking about. :)

Written for the Definitive Guide to *Murder, She Wrote's* Fanfic 100 Challenge. Prompt: Cave.

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"This can't be how the story ends," the princess thought to herself. She had followed every clue, every line of an ancient song, to find this cave and unearth a glorious treasure, and now it was all about to be ripped from her. The cave held a vicious, fire-breathing dragon, and it was guarding the treasure with its four watchful eyes, preparing to breathe fire at anyone who dared enter his lair. Already, the kingdom was living in fear after three innocent souls were taken by the ghastly creature, and the princess was determined to do what no one else had done.

She had entered the cave in search of what was so forbidden, and now she was staring into the dragon's maw. Faced with her death, she thought back to everyone she loved, to her prince who lived in a faraway land across the sea, and how she never got to tell them all the things she wanted to say.

The creature opened his mouth and prepared to let his fire go...

But wait! The brave princess had a trick or two up her sleeve. Acting quickly, she grabbed her bag of treasure-hunting supplies and struck that dragon right on his snout. The monster roared and fell with a crash to the floor of the cave, and the princess grabbed the treasure, looked back at the dragon, and –

"Spit right in his eye and said good riddance, that's what she did."

Jessica Fletcher's head whipped around at the gravelly voice coming from behind her. "*Seth!*"

"Uncle Seth!" little Morgan Macgill giggled from her bed. "That's not what the princess did!"

From his position in the bedroom doorway, Seth Hazlitt playfully rolled his eyes and waved a hand. "Oh, excuse me, little miss. I forgot you've only heard this story about a hundred times." He grinned when his great-niece groaned out another *Uncle Seth*. "Go ahead, finish the story. What did the princess do? Did she slay the dragon?"

Morgan sat upright and shook her head, blonde ringlets flying. "She didn't slay the dragon. She looked at him and felt sorry for him, because he had to think about all the people he hurt. That was a whole lot worse than being slayed. And the princess gave the treasure back to the kingdom, and everyone lived happily ever after."

"Very good!" Jessica praised. "I'll make a storyteller out of you yet."

Morgan's face lit up. "And a detective, too?"

"Heaven forbid," Seth said, striding into the room and ignoring the look Jessica was sending him. "I don't think your Aunt Jess could handle the competition."

"Oh, stop it." Jessica turned back to Morgan as Seth joined them on the bed. "Morgan, you can be anything you want to be, and don't you forget it."

Morgan's big blue eyes, so like her aunt's, widened in delight. "I wanna be just like the princess in your story, Aunt Jess. She's so cool!"

Jessica shared a surreptitious glance with Seth before replying. "Why do you think she's cool, sweetheart?"

"'Cause she entered the dragon's lair and whacked him on the nose and saved the treasure, and she wasn't afraid of anything!"

"Oh no, Morgan. The princess *was* afraid of something. She just didn't let it show."

Morgan frowned. "What was the princess afraid of?"

"Think about it, sweetie. When the princess was facing the dragon, what was she thinking about? Or rather, *who*?"

Little eyebrows knit together as Morgan contemplated this. A moment later, the light bulb went off. "Her prince! The princess was afraid she'd never see her prince again!"

"Yes, Morgan, yes!" Jessica laughed. "Yes, that's exactly what the princess was afraid of. She was worried that she'd never see her prince again..."

Here her voice grew softer. "Or tell him that she loved him."

Morgan noticed her uncle take her aunt's hand at this point, but she refrained from saying anything. "Didn't she already tell him she loved him?"

Now it was Jessica's turn for a pensive moment. "Well... let's just say it took her a long time to realize just how much the prince loved her. And she'd loved him for ages and ages, but she was afraid to tell him. It took a

lot to bring them together, but when they were, the princess told the prince she loved him."

Morgan watched the movements between her aunt and uncle as Seth squeezed Jessica's hand and the two smiled at each other. "Sounds like you and Uncle Seth."

Seth barely hid a chuckle and Jessica's mouth quirked upward. "Now, where would you get an idea like that?" Jessica asked.

"I notice things," Morgan said simply, sounding more like a grown woman of Jessica's age instead of a seven-year-old girl.

Seth now let the pent-up chortle out. "Lord, Morgan, you sound more like your Aunt Jess every day."

"Good."

The single word lit Jessica up like Independence Day. "That's my girl. And now, it is definitely time for bed." Morgan scrambled down underneath the blankets and Jessica tucked them snugly around her. "Good night, darling," Jessica said, kissing her niece's forehead.

"Good night, Aunt Jess."

Seth then bent over for his kiss and gently tweaked Morgan's nose. "Night, Peaches."

"Night, Uncle Seth. I love you guys."

"We love you too, sweetheart." Jessica gave Morgan one last kiss and then turned out the light. "Sleep well." She and Seth paused on the threshold, watching their niece drift off to Dreamland, and quietly closed the door behind them.

Seth chuckled and hooked his arm around his wife's. "I really meant what I said back there, you know," he said as they walked down the hall together.

"Morgan's just like you."

Despite a shake of her head, Jessica had to agree. "She's an observant little thing, that's for sure."

"Observant? She's like a little hawk. She's starting to see things most kids her age don't. Pretty soon, she's gonna realize that the fairy tale is a true story, and she's already more like the princess than she knows."

Jessica sobered at the thought. "Do you think she'll be disappointed years from now, when she hears the real story?"

Seth slid his arm out of the crook of Jessica's and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Jess, honey, I think she'll be about as disappointed as a Red Sox fan when Big Papi knocks one out of the park. Come on, she'll be thrilled. Her great-aunt is the princess who fought a dragon and saved a treasure, and her great-uncle is the prince. And you can't ask for a better fairy tale land than Ireland."

"I know, I know," Jessica said as they entered their bedroom. "But it's taking away that fairy-tale element."

"Hey now, that doesn't sound like the Jessica Fletcher I know." Seth sat them both down on their bed and gently caressed his wife's cheek. "Aren't you the one who's always saying *any* love story is a fairy tale? What really happened with you in the Uisnech cave in Ireland was the beginning of our love story. Don't you remember?"

Indeed, she did. Jessica remembered that moment, which happened one year ago now, all too vividly. Upon learning that her old friend Eamon Byrne had passed away, she made the journey from Cabot Cove to Ballymure, Ireland, in order to claim the inheritance he'd left her. As it turned out, he'd left her more than just Rose Cottage. Each heir in the will had received a clue that led to an ancient treasure. These clues turned out to be lines from an old Celtic poem, which Jessica and Breeta Byrne worked tirelessly to assemble and solve.

But the treasure that the riddle led to was forever in danger from a killer that stalked the Byrne family, claiming victims one by one. John Herlihy was first, followed by Michael Davis. When Nora Flood, the family's housekeeper, was murdered, it was the last straw. Jessica knew that she and Breeta had to solve the riddle before someone else was killed. Unfortunately, it was right after Breeta had assembled the clues and gone to find the treasure that Jessica figured out the true identity of the killer. Later that night in Uisnech Cave, Jessica came face-to-face with the "dragon." Charles McCafferty, the Byrne family's attorney, had emerged from the depths of the cave with a moldy bundle under his arm – the treasure. Everything came to a head when Jessica confronted him with his crimes and the truth about his past as "the Lost Boy," Eamon Byrne's long-lost son. Enraged, Charles pulled a gun on Jessica.

It was in that moment that time seemed to slow down to an infinitesimal pace. Rather than seeing her life flash before her eyes, Jessica saw her family and her friends back in Cabot Cove. Most important of all, she saw Seth. Her best friend was thousands of miles across the ocean, and if this was indeed it for her, she was never going to see him again. She would never be able to tell him how much their friendship meant to her, how grateful she was to have him protecting her... or how much she truly loved him. The secret would die with her.

This can't be how the story ends. No. I've got to stand firm. I am no damsel in distress. My story hasn't yet been written. I have to fight!

And fight she did. When Charles told her to stand aside, she did just as he asked – and walloped him in the head with her purse, knocking him to the

floor of the cave and the treasure out of his hands. The garda, led by Inspector O'Dwyer, showed up not a minute too soon and placed Charles under arrest. Just before they led him out of the cave, he twisted in the officers' grips to look back at Jessica. She stared back at him with disappointment, feeling nothing but compassion for such a wretched soul. Death would have been the easy way out for him. Now he would have to live knowing he caused innocent people such pain. It was a sentence Jessica wouldn't have wished on her worst enemy.

Thankfully, the story had a happy ending. Jessica and the Byrnes rejoiced in opening the treasure together, revealing Nuada's Silver Arm. Even more precious than the bejeweled relic, though, was the inscription engraved on it in the Gaelic language: *Happiness comes to all those who cherish others*. Hearing Breeta's translation made Jessica yearn for home even more. She longed to return to Cabot Cove and hug her cherished ones, especially her dearest friend. The story was not over yet. For her and Seth, it had barely even begun, as she later found out.

Jessica smiled as the last few memories surfaced and subsided like the tide. "You're right, Seth. While I was in that cave, I was so worried I'd never see you again or tell you how much I loved you."

"Well, you didn't even tell me *that* until months after the fact," Seth teased. "I know. I guess I just didn't want the story to end with either of us getting hurt."

Seth took Jessica back into his arms and kissed her temple. "But it didn't."

"Thank God. It still hasn't ended." Jessica smiled. "We still have many more years together, Seth, to cherish each other."

"Ayuh. And what happens when we cherish each other?"

Jessica snuggled deeper into her husband's embrace as he rocked her in his arms. "We'll live happily ever after."