

Murder, She Wrote
Christmas In London
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I own nothing. This story basically follows cannon. Merry Christmas!

**Thanks to my lovely Beta!*

I set my book aside for the second time and sigh deeply. My flight from Boston's Logan airport to London was supposed to give me a chance to catch up on some reading. Closing my eyes briefly, my thoughts slide to a tall handsome Scotsman fond of tweed sports jackets with green eyes that constantly twinkle with mirth.

George Sutherland, the reason for my inability to focus on the book in my lap.

I had waited until the middle of December to accept his offer to spend Christmas across the pond. Our most recent time together in Cabot Cove had once again been marred by murder.

I chuckle as I remember what my dear friend Seth Haszlit had assumed George was going to ask me. George had invited me to come spend Christmas with him in London; Seth had thought he was going to propose marriage. I had been on edge for days, waiting for the question. I was relieved and, I admit, a little disappointed when I heard the real question.

From the moment we'd met in London, years ago, there had been an attraction between us. We've become very close friends but nothing more. Although, I know George would welcome a progression in our relationship if I indicated I had the same notion.

And it's there that I get stuck. I care deeply for the handsome inspector. I've come close to admitting to myself that I may very well be in love with the man. Our busy professional lives would not allow us to be together like most couples and neither of us would ask the other to give up what they love to do. And

there's the rub, as they say.

I sigh again, closing my eyes. I decide to try to rest for the last couple of hours of the flight.

George Sutherland stood in the biting London air. He took one last puff on his pipe and headed inside to warm up. Standing in front of the arrivals board, a broad smile spread across his face when he found the correct flight. Next to the flight number the word 'Landing' was flashing and his heart jumped. She was here. He would have her nearly all to himself for eleven days.

As Jessica gathered her belongings once the plane landed, she noticed the fluttering in her stomach. She smiled. Eleven days. Eleven days to spend with George, including Christmas and New Year's Eve. She was a very happy lady.

George scanned the faces exiting the customs area. A little girl, with her hair in pigtails, came bounding toward him. Her mother managed to detour her just shy of crashing into the inspector. He smiled at them and winked at the girl, to show her no harm was done. Youthful giggles echoed in his ear as he directed his gaze back to the flow of oncoming travelers.

A smart blue pant suit caught his eye. Next, eyes that nearly matched the bright blue material. His beaming smile nearly split his face.

"Jess," he breathed.

She quickened her paced toward him.

George chuckled as he took her in. Jessica Fletcher traveled like women used to. She was immaculately dressed in a well tailored pant suit, a Christmas tree broach on one lapel. Pearls graced her earlobes and her neck. Her black pumps matched the small rolling suitcase she pulled behind her. The picture of class, she was. The smile she sent him warmed his heart even more than expected.

In reality, it had been barely a month since they'd seen each other. The looks on their faces would lead onlookers to believe

it had been much longer.

Knowing the area would be swamped with travelers, George had taken up a position along the wall to wait for her. Now he was glad he had. He opened his arms in welcome as she reached him, parking her suitcase between them and the wall.

"Hello stranger," he whispered in her ear as he held her close.

I take a deep breath as I embrace George. I smile at the lingering smell of his pipe. He'd mentioned his annoyance at the smoking ban in Britain on many occasions. While I don't appreciate the smell of cigarettes, I do enjoy the scent of a pipe. The mental picture of George bundled up against the wintry London weather, puffing away on his pipe make me smile a little more.

The combination of his cologne and pipe smoke that are uniquely him calms my frazzled nerves. Traveling during the holiday season is always more hectic than one expects, especially a long flight over the sea.

"Hello yourself," I reply as I look up into his face.

"If ye aren't a sight for these old eyes, Jess."

"Oh, not so old George."

He smiles as he leans in to kiss my cheek.

"Shall we go get your luggage, lass?"

"Aye," I say, lacing my arm through his while he takes the handle of my carry on. He laughs at my attempt at a Scottish brogue as we head toward the baggage claim.

"What do you mean she doesn't have a reservation? I called weeks ago and set it up!"

It was a rare thing to see George Sutherland at the point of shouting. As long as I've known him, I've only seen it a handful of times. And it was usually while he was working.

"George," I say, laying my hand on his arm. His gaze meets mine and I watch as some of his anger dissipates.

I turn my attention back to the young man behind the counter and glance at his name tag. "Colin, could you check one more time please?"

"Of course Mrs. Fletcher," he responds quietly. While the computer works, he steals a nervous glance at George. I hide a smile at his discomfort. George can be a very daunting figure. He is just over 5'6" tall, is still in good shape due to his job, and carries himself with the authority of someone who has spent their entire life in police work.

Poor Colin.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Fletcher. There is no reservation. I checked the entire month. I even checked under the inspector's name, in case the reservation was entered incorrectly. I can't find anything."

I spot the Grosvenor's assistant manager heading our way as Colin finishes.

"Mrs. Fletcher," she bubbles. "It's so good to see you! Did I know you were visiting us for Christmas?"

"Apparently not, Julie. It seems the reservation that Inspector Sutherland made for me a couple of weeks ago has gone missing." I watch her expression dim a few degrees. *What a headache for her. For all of us, I suppose.*

"Well, that can't be right. Thank you Colin; I'll take over." Julie's fingers fly over the keyboard and her look of confusion deepens. "Humph, how strange." Julie looks back at us sympathetically. "Why don't you two have a seat in the lounge? Let me check a few more things and I'll be right there."

"Alright," I glance at the busy lounge area. "We'll be by the fireplace."

"I'll just be a minute."

As we make our way toward the fireplace, a cushy bench against the window becomes available. George is muttering under his breath and sits down heavily. I sit, laying my coat across my lap, and look at him. It takes him a moment to feel my gaze through his frustration. When his stormy green eyes meet mine, I raise an eyebrow.

"What?" he blusters.

I tilt my head, "George, that poor young man. He'll be scarred for life. There was no need to be so gruff; it isn't his fault the reservation has disappeared."

"Oh, Jess!" He folds his arms across his broad chest only to immediately uncross them.

I open my mouth to respond as Julie comes up to us. She sits down to my left and sighs.

"Mrs. Fletcher, I can't apologize enough. That reservation is nowhere to be found and unfortunately, as you can guess, we're completely booked through the holidays. If you can give me a few more minutes, I'll call around and see if I can find you a place. Someone may have had a cancellation."

"Julie, these things happen. Technology is not always our friend," smiling, I try to ease her falling spirits. I half blame myself. Normally I would have booked well in advance and would have been calling to confirm the reservation when this one was made.

"I really do apologize. You know we love having you stay with us whenever you're in London. Can I get the two of you anything before I make those calls?"

George and I look at each other, he shakes his head slightly. "No thank you."

"Okay, back in a jiffy."

George and I sit in silence for a few minutes. A thought that has been nudging its way to the forefront of my mind since hearing that there was no reservation finally settles. I find

myself studying George's dapper face. He catches me and I feel heat fly to my cheeks.

"Lass, what exactly is it you're thinkin' I've done?" He leans his elbows forward on his knees and meets my lowered gaze. "Ah, I see." George leans back into the corner of the fireplace and wall, a look of veiled amusement on his face.

"Jessica Fletcher, you think I organized this whole situation. You're thinkin' there never was a reservation at all, aren't ye?"

I feel the color in my face rise under his close scrutiny.

"I admit it crossed my mind." Part of me would never believe George would pull such a stunt and part of me recognizes how much he wants to spend time with me. Especially since the last time we were together turned into such a circus.

"I can't decide if I should be hurt or laugh out loud that you find me capable of such underhandedness."

I feel even more ashamed as he speaks. Of course he made the reservation. George Sutherland is, first and foremost, a gentleman. Always.

"I'm sorry George. It only flitted across for a moment. I know you would never do anything like that. You are a true gentleman, in every sense of the word. Forgive me?"

"Agh, lass, of course," he gently touches my cheek. "I suppose I ought to be honest with ya, so you don't keep me up on that pedestal."

My eyebrows rise as he takes my hands in his. I love the feel of his hands, large and masculine, always warm and comforting. His gaze falters for a moment and then he finds my eyes again.

"I thought about it."

"What?" I ask incredulously.

"Thought about askin' you stay with me at the flat. Thought

about *forgetting* to book a room for you. Unlike some city dwellers," he quips, "I have two bedroom and two loos."

"Well, aren't you fancy," I say attempting to lighten the mood further.

"I am," he states, eyes twinkling. His thumb caresses my knuckles and he sighs heavily. "I know how you feel about stayin' under the same roof Jess. I knew it before you had me stay with the good Doctor Haszlit at Thanksgiving. As much as I care about you and would love to spend every minute with you, I know that wasn't necessarily your plan."

It's my turn to sigh heavily as I watch his face. He's hurt; I see it for an instant before he pushes it aside again.

"It isn't that I don't want to spend my time with you George. Would I have flown across the ocean at Christmas if I'd wanted space?"

"I suppose not," he replies, a small smile forming.

Just as I open my mouth to continue, Julie appears at my elbow. I can see from the tightness in her shoulder that she was unsuccessful.

"Mrs. Fletcher, I'm afraid there isn't a decent room available in all of London. There is one place about forty-five minutes out of town, but that's all I could find."

George chuckles and we look over at him expectantly.

"There's no room at the inn, Jess. It struck me as funny." The smile in his voice is contagious, both Julie and I burst into laughter.

"I can't apologize enough for this inconvenience...." I place my hand on hers, halting her profuse apology mid sentence.

"That's alright, Julie. Really. You did your very best. I have a friend who has room and I'm sure I'll be welcome." I look over at George as I speak to Julie and watch his eyes widen.

"Really? Oh, I'm so very glad! I really didn't want to be responsible for throwing J.B. Fletcher out into the rain at Christmas."

I stand and start to pull on my coat. George stands to help me slip it on and then takes the handle of my larger suitcase.

"Thank you so much for your patience and understanding, Mrs. Fletcher, Inspector. Do you have plans for New Year's Eve yet?"

I look to George and he answers, "I didn't make any big plans Jessica."

"We're available."

"Oh good! We'd love to have you as our guests for dinner that evening. The chef is preparing an amazing meal and there will be dancing. It's always a wonderful time. Will you come and let us make up for today a little."

"That sounds perfect," I smile.

I thank Julie for her service with a hug and head to the door with my luggage in tow. I can't help but smile a little brighter as Julie calls a 'Happy Christmas' after us and I hear George whistling behind me.

CH 2

George's flat is only two miles from the historic Grosvenor Square Hotel, but there had been a few accidents due to the rain and hurried driving. Our trip is quiet, neither of us wanting to reopen the conversation that we'd started just yet. I sink into George's luxurious silver Jaguar. I think about a previous ride in his classic 1960's XK 150, also silver. When he had decided to get a more practical work car, George had moved the other to his family home in Wick. I chuckle softly at the thought of the phone call I'd received after he had purchased this one earlier in the year.

"What's funny?"

"Just thinking about the call I got when you bought this car." I

watch his attractive face light up. "You were like a kid in a candy store."

"Aye, I was rather excited." He reaches across the console and takes my hand. "Would have been even better if you'd have been here."

I sigh contentedly as George eases the car into a parking spot along the street. "Well, I'm here now to enjoy it," I squeeze his hand and smile.

"Yes, well, keep in mind that you *were* staying at the hotel."

I laugh out loud at his sheepish expression, "Are you telling me that the fastidious Inspector Sutherland, golden man of Scotland Yard, has a messy flat?"

"I don't recall the state of things, exactly. I *was* in a hurry to retrieve a beautiful woman from the airport. I thought it best to cover my bases," he winks at me and jumps out of the car.

He ushers me out of the rain and into a small stairwell. I feel the warmth of his touch through my coat and try to concentrate on my steps. I'd rather not fall or miss a step because I'm feeling like a school girl.

After hanging my coat in his front closet, George heads back out into the rain to get my bags. The first thing that strikes me about the space is the light. Even though it is an older building, there are multiple windows on two walls. In my travels I have discovered that corner units, anywhere, really are the best. I notice many masculine touches of dark wood and leather. A large leather armchair sits near a window and a tall mahogany book case. I can picture George relaxing in that corner with his pipe and a book in the evenings. I pass my hand along the back of the tan micro fiber couch on my way to the bookcase. I hear George's foot falls on the stairs as I peruse his book collection.

I gasp when I see the top two shelves. My books, all of them, in order of publication. I reach for one and flip open the cover. As I expected, it has a personal note from me inside. I slide it

back in place and turn as the door opens.

"Here we are lass. I'll just set them in the bedroom for you." When George returns to the living room a moment later, I haven't moved. He shrugs out of his coat and hangs it up without taking his eyes from me. He walks back to me with a look of concern.

"Jessica," he prods, placing a hand on my elbow. "What is it, love?"

A little overwhelmed, I look up into his granny smith colored eyes and take a breath.

He misinterprets my silence and closes his eyes. "Maybe this was a bad idea. There must be somewhere with availability. Just give me a mome....."

I touch the side of his face and his words stop.

"You have all my books."

Confused, his gaze goes to the bookcase and returns to me. "Of course I do. You gave them to me, remember?"

I smile at the thought that he is now most likely concerned with my mental state.

"But you have them out, all of them. In order. I've never seen them like that."

"Jess, they're like that in your guest room in Cabot Cove."

Infuriating man! I take a breath. "George, I have never seen my books displayed so prominently and in their entirety in anyone's home, other than my own. Is that clearer?"

He smiles and slips his arm around my shoulders. Turning us to face the books, he says, "I like having them here where I can see them. If I'm missin' you, I can pull one out an' see your smilin' face on the back. And I can hear your voice as I read your note inside. It's for purely selfish reasons that they sit

there dear lady."

I go up on my tip toes to kiss his cheek. "You are a dear sweet man George Sutherland.

"Augh," he protests. "Tea or a shower first, my lady?"

"Hmmm. I think I'll freshen up a bit and then tea by the Christmas tree. Would a fire be too much to ask?"

A wistful look crosses his face before he replies, "Your wish is my command." He leans down to kiss my forehead and then turns away to start the fire.

I continue to watch him for a moment. Something has just shifted between us and the tension is wreaking havoc on us both.

"I won't be long."

"Take your time Jess," George replies without pausing in his work.

I sigh as I head into the bedroom and close the door.

This trip just got a whole lot more complicated.

Refreshed from a hot shower and a clean set of clothes, my determination to clear the air between George and I has heightened.

I open my door and smile at the sensation of feeling at home. George has coaxed a cheerful fire to burn, set the tea to steep, and the Christmas tree glows in the corner. I catch the sound of Bing Crosby singing over the popping of the fire. George has relaxed into the far corner of the couch. I notice his eyes are closed and his breathing is slow and even. Having not bothered to put shoes back on, I pad quietly to the couch. Sitting on the opposite side of the couch I lift the lid of the white tea pot.

"Mmmm," *he remembered*. On a previous trip to London I had discovered the most delicious Christmas tea. It is difficult to come by, but so worth the hunt. My taste buds now eagerly

await the spicy holiday treat.

I feel George's gaze on me as I pour us each a cup of tea. I hand the cup over with a smile. His gaze is more intense than I'd anticipated and my heart jumps as his fingers brush mine, taking the cup from me.

"Feel better?" he asks quietly.

"Much," I reply. "Washing away hours of travel always feels amazing."

I close my eyes as the hot tea hits my tongue. A sigh of contentment escapes my lips after I swallow.

George chuckles and some of the tension eases. "That look on your face makes the months of searching worth every second."

"Did it really take months? What about that shop I found it in last time?"

"Gone. I scoured London and then the rest of Britain to find this blasted tea. I bought a case once I found it."

If not for the smile in his voice, or knowing how he likes a good hunt, I'd have thought him annoyed.

Setting my cup back on the low coffee table, I slide closer to George. "It is a wonderful Christmas surprise, George. Thank you."

The same wistful look from earlier crosses his face again. For a moment, I don't think he's going to reply.

"Anything for you darlin' Jessica." His lips smile but I catch the sadness in his eyes. He sets his cup down and gazes ahead at the fire.

I have a dozen theories for the tension between us since the hotel and his sadness now. I know which conversation all this tension is leading to and I know that we really should talk about it. But I hadn't expected our relationship to come up so quickly after my arrival. I need courage to ask the questions whose

answers might be more than I'm ready for.

We sit in the soft light of the fire and the Christmas tree not speaking for a while. Just as the silence is becoming too much, I feel his hand on mine. Questioning blue eyes meet striking green.

"I'm sorry, lass."

I squeeze his hand and scoot next to him. "Will you tell me what's bothering you?"

"Aw, Jess, I'm just a grumpy old man." He raises his left arm and I settle in against his side. He's stalling, and he knows I know it. I place my left hand on his chest and pull my feet up onto the couch behind me.

"Have you taken to lying to me then?" *Where did I find the guts to say that?*

His arm tightens around me and he sighs deeply.

"Never that, Jess. Never." He kisses the top of my head. I can feel him gathering his resolve. I feel as if a swarm of butterflies have taken up residence in my stomach.

"I'm not sure you really want to hear what's on my mind Jess. You're here for a holiday and I've managed to make it awfully serious in your first day. All I wanted was for you and me to have some time together and have a Happy Christmas. Really, I did."

I take a deep breath and let it back out. I lift my hand from George's chest and cup his cheek, forcing him to look at me.

"And we shall. The very happiest of Christmas'. But I feel as though you want to say some things to me and you're about to burst in an effort not to. That's no way for either of us to spend the next ten days."

As I watch his eyes flicker to my mouth and back up, I realize how close we are. Much closer than we usually allow ourselves to be. Only inches separate us. I watch the struggle in his eyes.

This dear sweet man loves me, I know he does. But our friendship is vitally important to both of us and he won't risk it. No matter how badly he may want to. He starts to look away, but I bring his face back to mine. His green eyes are misty with emotion and questions.

"I," my voice catches and I begin again. "I know we have a lot to talk about George. We've put it off for a long time. Why don't we agree to have the conversation we need to before I leave? We can enjoy Christmas Eve with your family tomorrow and Christmas the next day, together as planned. Then you and I can sit down and figure this out, once and for all. Hmm?"

He searches my eyes and smiles. "Are you sure knowing that a heavy conversation is coming won't put a damper on the next few days? I really feel badly enough about how this trip is going so far."

"I have a wonderful man to spend the holidays with, tea worth its weight in gold, and the promise of a very insightful conversation in the future. Christmas will be just wonderful, George."

He chuckles and hugs me to him. "Ok, Jess. We'll put it aside for a few days and have a wonderful time."

I lay my head back down on his shoulder and watch the fire burn.

I become aware of my surroundings gradually. The scent of George's cologne and the softness of his shirt against my cheek. The low sounds coming from what is left of the fire. I hear the sound of a page turning and slowly open my eyes.

George sets the book on the arm of the couch to replace his bookmark; it's a picture of his daughter and her family.

How on Earth did he get a book without waking me? I wonder.

"A good rest?" he asks, hugging me.

"I hadn't intended to take a nap," I say as I sit up. "I'm sorry."

"No need, Jess. You're entitled to be a little sleepy. You jetted across the ocean, found no room at the hotel, and got stuck here with me."

I see his smile out of the corner of my eye, but slap at his arm anyway. "Oh, you. How did you manage to get that book? I don't normally sleep quite that soundly."

He laughs his deep throaty laugh. "It was right here on the table, Jess." He indicates a side table I hadn't noticed next to the couch.

"Ah."

I stand to stretch out my back and wonder how to keep the easy feel between us. Waiting to have the conversation we need to also means it won't be far from either of our thoughts over the next few days.

"What are your thoughts for dinner Jessica? Would you like to go out, order in? I could make dinner if you'd like."

I turn to George as he stands to work out kinks in his back. His left arm is probably asleep from my laying on it.

"Don't look so surprised woman. I've cooked for you before...once."

His indignant look causes laughter to bubble in my throat.

"True. Why don't we go out, if you think it won't be too busy. We'll be eating home cooked meals for the next couple of days."

"I can think of a few places that shouldn't be overrun by noisy tourists. Leave in a bit?"

My hand goes to my ruffled hair, "Give me a half hour?"

"Thirty minutes it is."

We return home a few hours later in high spirits. George had taken me to one of his favorite pubs. The traditional dishes

perfect comfort food, even if I was already thinking of what they would do to my waist line. There had been live music and a lively crowd; it was a wonderful cap to a very long day.

I put my coat in the closet as George stokes the embers of the fire.

"I think this lady is about to fall over."

George stands as I walk toward my bedroom door.

"I had a wonderful time. Thank you for showing me a tourist free evening, George."

"You're most welcome lass. Now off to bed with you. There'll be no early wake up call. We're due over at Eileen's by one. Plenty of time to sleep in and putter around on Christmas Eve morning."

"And then church tomorrow night with everyone, right?"

"Aye, that's the plan."

"I'm looking forward to spending time with your family. You've told me so much about them over the years, I feel as though I know all of them."

"I'd venture they feel similarly Jess," he says with a smile.

"Good-night, then." I reach up to kiss his cheek.

"Night love."

CH 3

The morning of Christmas Eve dawns clear and crisp. I awake feeling much refreshed as the sun warms my face. I stretch slowly and decide not to get up just yet.

My thoughts circle around George and the conversation that lays ahead for us. He deserves honesty from me, so I suppose it's time I'm honest with myself. I love him. I think I've known for a while.

He is one of my dearest friends; no matter how much time passes between us seeing each other, it's like we were just together. I hold deep respect for him as a professional as well. Few have been more diligent or passionate defenders of justice and safety. We are just as happy to sit in silence and read as we are to have deep meaningful discussions.

"Why does the ocean have to be quite so large?"

I sigh.

Pushing away heavy thoughts of our relationship, I slip from bed to face the day.

A joyous cacophony is the only way to describe the scene as we enter Eileen's home. The atmosphere is festive and the welcome warm. On the way over George had given me a quick recap of who would be here and who belongs to whom. I'd been hearing stories that involved these twenty-three people for years, but keeping them straight is still a challenge.

Eileen and her husband James had shared dinner with George and I on a couple of occasions. They're both wonderfully funny and still very much in love. Their oldest daughter, Charlotte, is the mother of George's 'Little Man', Blake. A recent announcement of baby number two on the way for Char and Harry had put a smile on George's face for weeks.

As someone takes my coat and purse, I receive a hug from one side.

"Oh Jessica! It's so good to see you!" Jane is twenty-two, I believe, and a picture of beauty. George had told me he'd taken her most recent picture out of his office after all the young detectives kept asking about her.

I laugh and hug her back. We'd only met once before in person, but we've kept up through email. Her grandfather has been sharing stories about her since she was about ten years old; I feel as though I've always known her.

"Hello dear. It is wonderful to see *you* again. Happy

Christmas!"

"Look at that, we'll make a Brit of you yet." Laughing she leaves my arms for her grandfather's.

Eileen takes my arm after a kiss to my cheek. "We're so pleased you finally accepted Dad's invitation to join us this year. Welcome to the madness." I laugh as she does a quick round of introductions.

I accept a seat on the couch near Char, knowing George will make his way toward his great-grandson as soon as possible. Blake has quite the set up on the floor, with a good sized pile of Legos. As the youngest he draws most of the family's attention, like a young prince holding court. Jacob, one of James and Eileen's nephews, is building with him. The sight of a twenty year old and a two year old playing on the floor with legos is quite charming.

Conversation flows easily around the house. I sit, just observing, for a few minutes. I have wonderful friends in Cabot Cove and around the world. I am lucky to be the aunt of wonderful nieces and nephews. But every once in a while, usually around the holidays, I miss this. Generations of family gathering to celebrate. Loud discussion and laughter abound. The house is beautifully decorated, with warm and homey touches. The large Christmas Tree in the corner is covered in handmade ornaments and surrounded by gifts. I feel extremely blessed to have been included in such a showing of love.

My reverie is broken by a glass being handed to me. I look up into George's happy face. I take the glass of white wine he hands me as he sits down next to me.

Charlotte laughs aloud when Blake springs from the floor and launches himself at George. I grab his drink just in time to avoid a mess.

"Grandpa!" Blake throws his little arms around George's neck.

"Hey sport! How's my little man?"

"Good. It's Christmas tomorrow!"

"I know. Have you been a well behaved boy, so Santa can come tonight?"

Blake looks seriously over at his mother, "I tried Grandpa."

We all chuckle.

"Well, then I'm *sure* Santa will come to your house tonight Blake," I say.

He looks at me a little shyly.

"Do you remember me telling you about Grandpa's friend, Blake? This is Mrs. Fletcher." Char reminds him gently.

He nods. "'Appy Christmas, Mrs. Fletcher."

My heart melts for this enchanting little boy.

"Happy Christmas to you too Blake. And you can call me Jess, it's so much easier than Mrs. Fletcher."

Smiling, he hops back down to the floor. I am drawn into a conversation with Charlotte about the new baby and George takes up a discussion with James' brother Lewis, who is a lawyer.

After a couple hours of mingling and snacking, we are called to the table. Eileen, her sister-in-law Emma, and Emma's girls Josie and Jules, and James' sister Phyllis have done most of the cooking. Everything looks and smells amazing. I find myself seated between George and James' oldest sister Doreen Howard. Doreen is a teacher, so we find a lot to talk about. Discussion and food flow for hours.

I help with the clearing and washing up, despite many good natured protests. Many hands make light work and we're all back in the living room before long. Gifts, I've been informed by Blake, are next. After which some will head home and some of us will rest a while until we leave for the midnight service.

Blake's excitement can no longer be contained as he bounces from relative to relative.

"Blakey, come sit with me while the grown ups get coffee. You can hold this present, but don't open it yet," Jane gives her sister a wink as she claims her nephew's attention.

"Coffee, Jess?" George indicates a vacant seat next to him. "I'll get it."

"Yes, please. I'll need it to stay awake for church."

Phyllis, or Phil as she is more commonly called, laughs and agrees with me. "I've fallen asleep many a year. It makes for a long day, but the church is never so beautiful as on Christmas Eve all aglow with candles."

"Sounds lovely. I'll have to enlist someone to poke me if I start to nod off."

Jane and her cousins volunteer enthusiastically. Only half of us will be attending the service. Other family groups will head home to take part in other traditions.

"Such talk!" Eileen gasps in feigned severity.

George settles next to me and hands me my coffee.

"I believe, Little Man, that it's time for presents. Your Grandpa is in charge, you'd better check with him first."

Blake's big eyes go to James, sitting near the tree. Poor Jane will probably have bruises from her nephew's constant bouncing, but she keeps on laughing.

"Ready...set...go!" James says. Blake tears into the gift on his lap and James begins handing others around. George's family normally picks names for gift giving because they're a large extended bunch. This year it seems as though no one stuck to the name they got, which leads to many exclamations of surprise.

I sigh deeply and lean back into my chair as the hubbub

continues.

"Alright, Jess?" George whispers to me.

"Mmmm, perfect," I say.

A bit later, the living room restored, the remaining family sits quietly. There are a few quiet conversations, but most of us sit half dazed by sleep and a heavy meal.

George and I catch up with Jane, hearing the latest with school and her boyfriend Michael. One of the reasons he couldn't join us until later is due to a recent promotion. He's a sous chef in an upscale restaurant. I lean comfortably against George as we listen.

"It's a really great opportunity and he loves it, most days," she laughs. "Apparently the head chef has his days."

"I've heard that's rather common among chefs," I say.
"Especially in the more elite kitchens. Is Michael working all week?"

"I think so. He's working a lot of extra time right now. He wants the experience and for them to know he's grateful for the chance."

"He's a fine chap," chimes George. His right arm is draped behind me and I feel his fingers graze my arm.

"We should go for dinner this week. Do you think we could get in?"

Jane glances at her grandfather, then back at me.

"Do you often forget who you are? I bet J.B. Fletcher could get a table *tonight* if she wanted one."

George chuckles as my color rises. "She's always forgettin' tha she's famous," he teases, squeezing my shoulder.

"Alright, then. Dinner on me on whatever night you can join us, Jane."

"You two should go without me, really."

"I'll be seeing plenty of your Grandfather this trip, which I admit *is* strange; I'd love to spend some more time with you," I smile and pat her hand resolutely.

"It's a date! I'll check my calendar when I get home and let you know tomorrow. You're coming to dinner at Charlotte's, right?"

"As if I'd miss your sister's Christmas punch," George says with a gasp.

Laughing, Jane takes her leave to pick Michael up before the service.

"How about a walk dear lady?"

I turn to meet George's gaze. So close. Fresh air sounds like a wonderful idea.

"I'll get my coat."

"Meet ye at the door," he kisses my cheek.

After a refreshing walk, I thoroughly enjoy the candlelight service at George's side. We say a brief goodnight by the fireplace once we return to his flat. I crawl into bed, weary to the bone, but happy and content.

CH 4

I have never outgrown that feeling of magical anticipation on Christmas morning. I wake up excited for the day every year. A day to celebrate miracles and family invariably gives this lady a joyous heart.

I rise early, even though we didn't get home until nearly two in the morning. I slip into my robe and slippers and head to the kitchen. I turn on the oven and get the coffee pot ready. I open a low cupboard to find the dough I had made and hidden yesterday. It rose beautifully; my stomach rumbles at the thought of cinnamon rolls.

I busy myself quietly getting the living room ready. Turning on the Christmas tree lights, I smile. Christmas with George Sutherland. My heart beats a little faster and I laugh at myself. Once the fire is crackling away, I return to the kitchen and make short work of the cinnamon rolls. Once they're in the oven, I start the coffee for George and the kettle for myself.

I'm whipping up the cream cheese frosting, when I hear George's bedroom door open. I hear him pause in the kitchen doorway, but continue what I'm doing. I fight the heat I feel rising in my cheeks. It's just breakfast.

"Well," he breathes.

"Coffee's ready," I say as I set the bowl on the stove top to stay warm.

George still hasn't moved, so I turn to face him.

"Merry Christmas."

His eyes are misty and he has such a tender look on his face. He's leaning against the doorframe, watching me. He breathes in deeply, smiles, and steps toward me.

"Happy Christmas, lass," he says, taking my hands in his. "What's all this?" He indicates the oven with a tilt of his head.

"Just breakfast," I answer quietly.

He steps closer and slides his arms around my waist, pulling me to him. I rest my hands on the soft fabric covering his chest.

"Jessica Fletcher...famous mystery writer...is up early on Christmas morning, in my kitchen, making what smells to be cinnamon rolls from scratch...but it's *just* breakfast."

His expression warms me down to my toes.

"Seven-thirty is not all that early and *you're* up now," I glance at the clock, "Less than thirty minutes later. Besides, I made

the dough yesterday. I hardly did anything this morning."

His eyes grow wide, "When did you make this secret dough? Where was *I*?"

I laugh at his surprise. "Asleep on the couch. Before we left for Eileen's yesterday."

He hugs me closer still.

"And here I was thinkin' you'd had a little rest with me. You're a sneaky woman, Jessica."

"I had gifts to wrap and dough to make. No rest for the weary," I intone dramatically.

"Do you know, dear lady, when I last had Christmas breakfast made for me in my kitchen?" He has grown serious again.

"No," I whisper while trying to calm my racing heart. We are so close.

George's right hand caresses my cheek, "Ages and ages."

The intenseness of his gaze takes my breath away further. *He's going to kiss me*, I realize. Right here in his kitchen. In our pajamas. I recognize that I very much want him to and lean into him.

My eyes flutter shut as his lips claim mine. His deep, languid kiss sends electricity shooting through my body. I miss the warmth when his lips leave mine. The depth of emotion evoked by this man astounds me. He is one of my best friends, but I didn't expect to feel this way again. Not after Frank. Not this late in my life.

I open my eyes to George's face etched in concern.

"Have I just lost my best friend?"

The oven begins beeping incessantly. I ignore it for a moment, placing a gentle kiss on George's lips.

"Never. We have a lot to talk about. But not today."

I turn to the oven to retrieve our breakfast.

"Will you grab plates and silverware? I was interrupted before I could set the table," I quip with a wink.

We busy ourselves for the next few minutes setting the table and gathering hot drinks.

George holds my chair out for me as I reach the table. "Thank you," as I speak my eyes are drawn to the window.

"George..."

He looks up as he takes his seat. His gaze follows mine and he begins to laugh. Snow flutters past the window, draping London in quiet.

I smile widely as George hums 'It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas'. I sip my tea and relish watching him dive into his breakfast with sheer joy.

CH 5

Christmas morning had past quietly for George and I. We'd eaten a leisurely breakfast, had tea by the fireplace, and watched the snow fall. We had exchanged gifts, a little more cautiously than on previous occasions perhaps. I had managed to find a first edition of an antique criminology book George had been coveting for years. It pays to have friends in the book business.

George's gift to me took my breath away. I smile again as I finger the pendant at my neck. A beautiful Celtic heart and knot design on a delicate chain rests just below my throat. Diamonds sparkle at the edges of the design. I'm still a little in awe of the generosity of this man who loves me. The necklace was my 'big' gift as George said; but, he also had a brooch made for me the last time he was home in Wick. I decided not to wear it to Charlotte's for fear of the speculation it could start. A beautifully designed pewter brooch with George's family crest is sitting on my nightstand back at the flat. The necklace has

caused enough curious glances from George's 'girls' as he often calls them.

Blake pulls me out of my reverie by leaning on the couch next to me.

"Miss Jess?"

"Yes, dear," I respond as I lean a little closer.

"I got a new book!"

"You did? How exciting!"

Blake hands the book to me as if sharing a secret.

"I love new books," I enthuse.

"Could you read it to me?" he asks, climbing onto the couch.

"Of course."

Blake snuggles into my side as I start the story.

Lowering her camera, Charlotte smiles.

"She's really something Grandpa."

George starts, "How did you know I was behind ye?"

Char laughs, "Oh Grandpa! It's like you're connected. Like you always know where she is."

"That bad, huh?"

Wrapping her arms around George, she smiles again.

"It's okay to love her, you know?"

Hugging her back, he sighs.

"That's good. I couldn't stop if I tried."

"Go sit with them, so I can take a picture," she orders good

naturedly with a nudge.

George joins Blake and me on the couch. I enjoy watching the affinity these two have for each other. Blake climbs onto George's lap, he slides closer to me. Blake stops the story to comment on one of the pictures and I find my gaze meeting George's. He makes no effort to hide the love and affection in his eyes and my heart jumps. He's never looked at me quite like this before.

I clear my throat and return to the story.

Char takes Blake upstairs for a nap after the story, leaving George and I alone on the couch.

"You are adorable," he whispers in my ear. Taking my hand when I laugh, he continues, "You are. And you just made that little boy's day."

I scoff, "I think Santa made his day."

George laughs and pats my hand, "Alright, alright. I'm going to disappear to the porch, I'll be back."

I watch George walk away to gather his coat and pipe. I sigh deeply and shake my head at myself. He keeps reducing me to a teenager with butterflies.

You are a grown woman, Jessica. Act like it!

I decide to head to the kitchen to help. I need a bit of distraction.

"Hello Jessica. Story time over?" Phil asks as I enter the kitchen.

"It was time for my audience to take a nap."

"Dad's asleep, then?" Eileen laughs.

Phyllis and I join her.

"He's smoking his pipe. I was not about to go out in the cold

with him."

Eileen comes around the counter.

"May I see?" she asks, indicating my necklace. "He wouldn't let me see it before he gave it to you. I managed to wheedle a few details, but not many."

"Oh, of course. I certainly wasn't expecting anything like it. I shocked him by being speechless," I chuckle.

"It's gorgeous. So elegant and simple."

"I agree," Phil chimes in.

"Dad always has had good taste."

I smile and gently touch the pendant.

"That he does. What can I do to help in here?"

"Do you never just sit and relax, Jessica?"

"Oh Phil," Eileen interjects.

"I'm not accustomed to so much down time," I reply. "And *I'm* usually the one cooking."

Phil laughs and sets a loaf of bread in front of me. "Slice this then. Everything is almost ready and Char should be back down in a few minutes."

"Ugh! I'm so full," Jane moans, collapsing into a chair.

"Maybe it was that *fourth* roll that did it," her sister teases.

Jane shoots her a look and sticks out her tongue, "Don't judge. Just because you can say you're eating for two."

I laugh at their banter and relax further into my chair. I've taken up a spot next to the fireplace. I find myself lost in the flames. My racing mind is filled with thoughts of family and George. I can't help but wonder what lies ahead for us.

"You know he loves you, right?" Jane asks quietly.

My gaze flies to hers. She's moved closer so no one else can hear. Perched on a footstool, she studies my face.

"You do know," she says matter-of-factly. "What you may not know is that we love you too. And we think you're really good for him."

Her gaze gets lost in the flames and she takes a breath.

"He was so sad when Grandma died. He didn't laugh for ages. It was heartbreaking...on top of our own pain. Watching him hurt and being helpless to make it any better. I was little, but I remember missing his smile and that twinkle he gets in his eyes."

A soft smile appears on Jane's lips.

"And then he met you."

I must have an incredulous look on my face because she laughs.

"No really, he wasn't so sad after a few years, but he wasn't all the way back either. That changed in the months after he met you. We gradually got all of him back and I've never seen him look at another woman since."

"Oh, Jane...", I shake my head and gaze at my hands.

She leans in and puts her hand on mine. "I mean it. Women are always trying to talk him up. I've seen it happen at the grocery! He is polite and congenial and completely unavailable. I asked him once, not long after he'd met you...maybe the next year...why he never went out. He tried to evade the question, but I have my ways of getting him to talk," she chuckles.

"Know what he said?"

I slowly shake my head.

"I'm taken. I stared at him for a good two minutes. He had mentioned you, but I hadn't realized how he felt; it took me

some time to figure out who he meant. At first I thought he was talking about Grandma.

"A few months later you came to London on a book tour. Between your commitments and his case load, I think you only saw each other once. He took me to lunch the next week...my Grandpa date...he was still smiling and he mentioned you. Then, being eleven or so, I said I knew who he was taken for."

Jane smiles at me. "Oh Jess, the look on his face. Called out by a child. He actually blushed. He tried to back pedal. Said you were just friends, which I know now is true. I was a pretty romantic kid...I didn't believe him."

She pauses for a moment, thinking.

"I think he tried not to care. I don't think he expected to fall in love again."

I sigh quietly and watch the leaping flames.

"Neither did I," I whisper.

Jane looks at me with tears in her eyes. "I hope this love story has a happy ending."

Chuckling I pat her cheek, "So do I dear. So do I."

"You're going to talk about it then? While you're here? I'm...I'm sorry, that's none of my business. I suppose none of it was. But, I care about both of you. I just...just want to see you happy."

"You were just the only one brave enough to speak up Jane. People have been eyeing this necklace all day.

"I feel as though I've been in your life since you were ten...Your Grandfather is very proud of 'his girls'. I love *you* too dear and to be honest...it was nice to get someone else's point of view."

"Oh, Jess," she says, standing to hug me. "I'm a terrible romantic, that's all."

I hug her tightly and laugh.

"I see nothing wrong with that. Especially at your age."

"I had better get Michael back to work."

"The restaurant is open today?"

"Yep. They opened later, but they're open for dinner tonight. I think I'll watch a movie and go to bed early." She kisses my cheek, "Love you!"

"Love you too. I'll call about dinner this week."

"Okay." Jane continues her good-byes and my eye drift back to the fireplace. Thoughts of me in London and George in Cabot Cove run through my mind like a film strip. Every scenario requires sacrifice and it's in those sacrifices we seem to be stuck.

"It looked awfully serious over here for a while," offers a quiet voice.

I look up to see Eileen smiling down at me, a cup of tea in her hand.

"I thought you could use this."

"Thank you. Jane and I were just talking."

"About Dad?"

I chuckle, "I knew I should have worn a different necklace."

Eileen laughs, "Sorry Jessica. It wouldn't have mattered. He wears his heart on his sleeve when it comes to you."

I sip my tea as she sits down across from me. I watch her watching me for a moment.

"How do you feel about it, Eileen? He's your father."

She smiles and shakes her head. "I wish we got to see you more. I like watching the two of you together. It's a lovely thing

to witness. Two people caring for each other the way you do."

She looks at me for a moment and then looks across the room to George.

"I've always thought you were a perfect match, Jess. I think it's mostly a question of logistics, isn't it?"

I nod and take another sip of tea. I let the warmth spread through my body and relax my mind. Any further conversation is interrupted by George coming across the room.

"Jess, ready to head out soon? The weather has decided to get blustery. Finish your tea first," he winks and walks away.

Eileen and I look at each other and burst out laughing.

George and I get back to his flat around eight o'clock. He busies himself starting a fire, while I turn on the Christmas lights. I love the soft happy glow of Christmas lights. They make everything seem a little more beautiful.

I stand quietly, arms crossed, and examine the collection of ornaments on the tree. There are fancy glass balls hanging next to handmade wooden ornaments. I turn one over to find a year and Charlotte's name. I love how eclectic George's tastes run. From symphony concerts to fishing, a shiny Jaguar to jeans and sneakers.

I feel his presence behind me before he speaks. His arms circle mine and I relax back against him.

"You've been awfully quiet this evening lass. Is anything wrong?"

"No," I say quietly. "Not wrong exactly."

"We weren't going to talk about it today...isn't that what we said?" He leans down and kisses my cheek.

I hug his arms closer to me.

"That's what we said." I take a breath. "I had a chat with Jane

tonight...and then Eileen."

"Ah," he says as he holds me closer and then turns to the fireplace.

I turn away from the tree. George rests his arm on the mantel and stares down at the fire.

"I asked them to leave it be."

He seems upset, but I know the girls hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Jane loves you very much," I walk closer to him, but stop short of touching him. "She wants you to be happy, that's all. Please don't be angry with her...she didn't say much that I didn't already know."

He chuckles. "She's a hopeless romantic, that one."

"She knows it," I say smiling. "I told her there's no harm."

Without moving, he meets my gaze.

I step closer and touch his arm.

"There's nothing wrong with believing in happy endings, George. It takes a strong heart to believe in them these days. I hope she never loses that hope."

"What about you Jess? Do you still believe in happy endings?"

"I never stopped," I sigh. "I thought my story was over though. That I'd already had mine."

His green eyes hold my gaze and his left hand caresses my cheek. "So did I. And then, in the middle of a murder investigation, I met my second happy ending."

"Oh George," it comes out as a whisper.

"She was smart," he continues. "And beautiful. She has the most amazing blue eyes. She challenges me. No matter how hard I tried...I couldn't get her out of my mind."

He searches my eyes as he pulls me into him.

"She wrapped herself around my heart without even realizing it."

Tears have gathered in my eyes. I blink and they race down my cheeks.

"I've wondered many times if she had any idea how deeply she is loved."

Ignoring the tears that continue to fall, I respond, "I think the last few days have given her a better idea."

"I hope so," he breathes, mere inches from my lips. His eyes continue to search mine, a slow smile spreads across his mouth. His arms tighten around me, pulling me completely against him.

"Maybe this will help too."

George's lips move against mine. I gasp, surprised again by the electricity between us. I am breathless from his impassioned search of my mouth. After a few moments our lips slow as we attempt to catch our breath.

"Tha gaol agam ort my dear Jessica," he whispers, in his native Scottish. A kiss is lightly dropped on my nose and then he claims my mouth again with a deep kiss.

Looking into his eyes, I struggle to speak.

"Translation?" I finally manage.

He hugs me close and rests his chin on the top of my head.

"Literally, it means 'I have love for you'."

I lean back in his embrace. I meet his eyes and my heart jumps. The love shining in his eyes robs me of breath yet again. How had he hidden it all these years?

"If you'd looked at me like that, even once...I would have

known."

His laughter reverberates between us. "And have you run for the high hills? No lass, I fought hard to hide it. To keep you at ease in our friendship."

I smile a watery smile. "There really aren't many men like you."

"Old fashioned, you mean."

I snuggle back into his embrace. It feels as though a rabble of butterflies have filled my stomach. It's time for me to be as brave and honest as he has been.

"I...", my voice catches. "I do love you George Sutherland. I just don't know what to do about it."

I feel a tear run down my cheek as I look up at him again. He's beaming. A hand slips behind my neck and his passionate kiss makes my knees weak. I hadn't realized how much I missed being kissed.

"I know this doesn't settle everything for us, he starts quietly. "Do you've any idea how long I've been longin' to hear those words from your lips?"

I kiss his lower lip and lay my head on his chest. "I think I've a fair idea. I wanted to say it, you know. But every time we discussed us, we never came to any sort of solution. We're both busy professionals and neither of us would dream of asking the other to change that."

"Aye, that's true. Didn't make me love you any less...there were days I wished it would have."

"Has it really been so bad?" I ask, meeting his gaze again.

"Loving you over the years has been exquisite agony dear lady." My face falls at his description. His finger under my chin gives me no choice but to meet his eyes again.

"I wouldn't change a moment of it Jess. Every time I wanted to

kiss you and didn't. Every night I wanted to take you in my arms and never let go, but kept my distance. Every single moment has been worth it to have you here now."

"Now what?" I ask searching his face.

The mischievousness I'm so fond of sparkles in his eyes.

"Oh I can think of a few things..."

"Inspector! Really," I feel heat rush to my cheeks.

He laughs. Really laughs and I join him. I lean into his embrace once more and he holds me close. It has been so long since I've felt in love and so at peace. I feel a little foolish for the giddy thoughts and feeling bouncing around inside of me. I suppose love makes us all a little younger.

The reality of figuring out the next step for us starts to settle over me. I sigh deeply.

"None of that dear lady."

George releases me from his arms and takes my hand. Leading me over to the couch, he smiles.

"I have a plan."

"Oh, really? Just like that?"

"No," he laughs, "Not just like that. I've been working on this plan for years."

I nudge his arm with mine.

"Well, aren't you one for secrets."

"I know you, Jessica Fletcher. I needed a solid plan before bringing it to you!"

He looks down at me and loops his arm around my shoulders.

"It's been a long day and it's getting late, are you sure you

want to get into this tonight?"

I roll my eyes. *Is he serious?*

"That's true. I guess I'll head to my room and stare at the ceiling until morning. Really George!"

He tries to stop a hearty laugh from exploding, but is unsuccessful.

"Alright Love. Alright!"

George takes a moment to collect his thoughts.

"I've been contemplating retirement. For a few years actually."

My eyebrows rise in surprise.

"You never said anything. At least not seriously."

"If I had, you would have felt I was only doing it for you and you would have said no."

He watches me. Waiting. I can't deny that would have been the case, so I nod slightly.

"Now...I've been working on these solutions for a while and I realize you're gonna need time to think it all over. So, I'll tell you what I've been thinkin' and you can make one of those list you're so good at later, hm?"

Winking, he kisses my temple.

"When I first mentioned retiring to the girls, they laughed at me. They said they couldn't imagine me sitting on my duff, smoking my pipe all day."

"It's quite a picture," I respond dryly.

"Well, I started some lists of my own. What do I like to do? What haven't I done? Where haven't I gone? I came up with an extensive list of books I want to read. A few places I'd like to travel. I've even thought about writing a criminology book."

"Hmm, I've always thought you should do that."

"I talked to the high ups at the Yard about consulting and teaching some classes. They thought both offers held merit. They left it up to me; if I decide to retire, they'll take me in either capacity."

He takes a moment to squeeze my hand.

"I'd have a very flexible schedule with these positions. I wouldn't have to live in London all the time. I could spend time at home in Wick. Or...I could call Cabot Cove home."

A small gasp escapes my lips. I hadn't expected such an offer.

"But George...the girls...Blake...they're here. How could you move to Maine?"

"I have spoken to my dear daughter, at length. She helped me come up with some of these options. She adores you Jess; she's rooting for us to give this a try."

"I'm listening," I say quietly.

"I know you have a system, a 'set up' lets say, when you write. Could you do that anywhere? Or does it need to be in Cabot Cove?"

"I wrote in New York," I say. "When I was teaching there; I still wrote. I suppose my *system* is portable."

"What if we split the time? Some of the year in London or Wick, some of the year in Cabot Cove? Not a strict schedule obviously. You'll have book tours, I'll have cases or classes. I just mean when I have a class, maybe you could write here. Maybe I could travel with you on promotional tours, if you wanted company. If I'm not needed here at all, we hide away in Cabot Cove while you write.

"I know it's a lot of ifs and maybes, Jess. It would mean calling at least two places home. But it could also mean you and me, together. Finally."

I study his face as he finishes. He really has been thinking about this for a while. My eyes grow misty again at the level of planning he has done and the sacrifices he seems more than willing to make.

He's watching the wheels turn behind my eyes and smiling.

"I know you need time to process darlin'. First impressions?"

"I don't deserve you..."

"Ridiculous," he scoffs. "You deserve anything and everything your heart desires."

George hugs me tightly to his side.

"Why don't you go get ready for bed. Make that list I know is forming in your pretty head. And we'll continue this in the mornin'. Hmm?"

I nod slightly.

"Knowin' I'm not out on this limb alone is enough for me at the moment."

He chuckles and leans down to place a soft kiss on my lips.

"Know that I love you no matter what you decide Jessica. I always will."

I feel a sob catch in my chest. *This man...*

"Goodnight George," I whisper.

Rising unsteadily from the couch I head for my room. At my door, I glance back at George. He's watching me with a joyous smile on his lips.

"Oh and Jessica...I'm counting on this being for keeps."

I close the door softly and lean back against it. Breathing slowly around the sob that still hangs in my chest, I sigh. Pushing off the door, I walk toward the bathroom. A hot bath. A

bath and time to think.

A few hours later I sit staring at the list in my lap. After a long soak in the tub, I had grabbed the legal pad I always have handy and had climbed into bed. Resting against the headboard I had begun my list. Reviewing it now, I smile. On one hand it seems so simple; I love him, he loves me, and we want to be together. It's the logistics that make it hazy.

"He's willing to leave his family behind for part of the year for you woman. Stop being so pragmatic. Have a little faith," I say quietly.

I lay my pad and pen down on the nightstand. Swinging my legs around, I sit on the edge of the bed gathering my thoughts. I know attempting to sleep would be a futile exercise at the moment. I decide tea might help.

I reach the living room and smile. The lights on the tree are still on, bathing the room in soft light. Just before I turn to the kitchen I notice light coming from underneath George's door. Walking closer, I see that his door is slightly ajar.

Looking through the crack, I see him sitting up in bed, case files in his lap, glasses low on his nose. I push the door open further and knock on it to get his attention.

Startled eyes peer over his glasses. He takes them off and sets them aside with the files.

"Jess? Everythin' okay? I thought you'd be sound asleep by now."

"I've been working on that list," I say walking up to the bed.

"I see," he says slowly. He indicates that I'm welcome to join him.

I climb onto the bed and sit next to him. I face him slightly and study his face for a few moments. I see hope and love, but also trepidation. He's not at all sure of my answer.

I reach out and trail fingertips down the side of his face.

"I think that you are one of the most amazing men that I have ever met. I am so grateful to count you among my dearest friends."

I pause for a moment. George's face falls, the trepidation moving to the forefront in his eyes. He looks down at the comforter.

"George..."

"It's alright, Jess." He takes a breath. "You don't need to-."

"Yes." I cut him off.

His teary green eyes meet mine and I smile.

"What?" he whispers.

"Yes. To all of it."

His expression grows incredulous. Our hands find each other on the bed.

"Och...Jessica...I"

I chuckle lightly and decide to put him out of his misery. I tug on his hand and wrap my other arm around his neck.

"Yes," I whisper again.

I pour years worth of kisses into one, trying to make him understand. I've decided to be his. For keeps.

"We'll figure it out," I murmur near his ear.

His hands begin to wander as he claims my lips again. I vaguely realize that we are no longer sitting. George's kisses are searing and then gentle. I feel goose bumps spread across my body when one of his hands brushes bare skin at my side.

"I'm never letting you go. You know that right?"

My laughter is silenced by his next assault on my mouth.