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Opening Extract from...

Death of a Kingfisher

Written by M. C. Beaton

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Chapter One

*Where'er you walk cool gales shall fan the
glade;
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a
shade;
Where'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs
shall rise,
And all things flourish where'er you turn
your eyes.*

– Alexander Pope

It is a well-known fact that just when a man reaches his early thirties and thinks he is past love, that is when love turns the corner and knocks the feet from under him.

That was what was about to happen to Police Sergeant Hamish Macbeth. But on a particularly fine sunny day when the mountains of Sutherland in the northwest of Scotland stood up blue against the even bluer sky and not a ripple moved on the surface of the sea loch in front of the village of Lochdubh, he

was blissfully unaware of what the fates had in store for him.

The only irritation in his life was the appointment of a constable to assist him, police headquarters in Strathbane having discovered that the small police station in Lochdubh was an excellent way of getting rid of the deadbeats. Constable Dick Fraser was marking time until his retirement. He was a lazy grey-haired man, but he had an amiable disposition, and since he'd arrived in Lochdubh a month ago there had been no crime at all, which suited him very well.

Hamish learned that there was a relative newcomer, an elderly widow called Mrs Colchester, who had bought an old hunting box some miles outside Braikie. During the winter, he had meant to call on her, but somehow the days and months had slipped past.

Dick was asleep in a deck chair in the front garden, his breath causing his grey moustache to rise and fall.

'Get up!' snapped Hamish.

Dick's pale blue eyes slowly opened. He struggled out of the chair and stood up. Most of his weight was concentrated on a beer belly. He was quite short for a policeman, dwarfed by Hamish who was over six feet tall.

'What's up?' he asked sleepily.

'We're going to call on a newcomer, a Mrs Colchester.'

'Someone killed the old bitch?' asked Dick.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I heard gossip she’s considered poison. Bad, nasty mouth on her and she’s got two grandchildren from hell living with her. Also, she’s right fed up because Lord Growther, who used to own the place, left Buchan’s Wood, the prettiest part of the estate, to the town of Braikie. Now some lass on Braikie council has been appointed the council director of tourism and the environment and she’s been running tours to the wood. She’s renamed it the Fairy Glen.’

‘Where on earth did you pick up all this gossip?’ marvelled Hamish. ‘You hardly move.’

‘When you’re out, people stop by the hedge for a wee chat. It does not, surely, take the two of us to go there.’

‘Oh, yes it does, you lazy moron. Brush down your uniform. It’s covered in biscuit crumbs. Let’s get moving.’

The house which Mrs Colchester had bought lay six miles to the north of Braikie. It was an unprepossessing place at the end of a long drive, being built of grey granite without any creepers to soften its harsh square structure.

The doorbell was an old-fashioned one set into the stone. Hamish rang it. They waited a long time until they heard shuffling footsteps approach from the other side of the door. The woman who answered it was squat and bent,

leaning on two sticks and peering up at them out of sharp black eyes from under a heavy fringe of wiry grey hair.

‘Mrs Colchester?’ asked Hamish.

‘Yes, what is it? Is it those grandchildren of mine again?’

‘No, no,’ said Hamish soothingly, removing his peaked cap and nudging Dick to do the same. ‘Just a wee social call.’

‘You may as well come in. But make it short.’ Her accent had been anglicized but still held some lilting traces of the Highlands. Somewhere in the Hebrides, guessed Hamish.

She led them into a large square hall patterned with black-and-white tiles. It was wood-panelled. There was a hard chair by the door and a side table against one wall. Apart from those items, there wasn’t any other furniture, and no paintings decorated the walls.

‘Drawing room’s on the first floor,’ said Mrs Colchester. She waddled across the hall to where a stair lift had been built. She climbed in, fastened a seat belt, and said, ‘Follow me.’

The stair lift went on and up, smoothly and efficiently, stopping on the first floor landing. Light flooded down from a blue glass cupola up on the roof. She extricated herself from the lift and led them into a large drawing room.

Hamish looked around, wondering if she had bought the furnishings along with the house. There were several grimy landscapes of Scottish scenes decorating the walls. The

furniture was Victorian, heavy, solid, and intricately carved. A large silver-framed mirror dominated the marble mantelpiece. There were several round tables, dotted here and there, small islands on a sea of rose-patterned carpet, bleached pale by the sunlight.

From the window, Hamish could see Buchan's Wood. A tour bus drove up to a newly built clearing which served as a car park and began to dislodge passengers. He swung round.

'I believe you are upset that Buchan's Wood, or the Fairy Glen as I understand it has been renamed, is not a part of your estate.'

'Oh, sit down and stop poking about,' said Mrs Colchester. 'Do you dye your hair?'

Hamish's hair was flaming red in a patch of sunlight. 'No,' he said crossly.

'Well, as to your question, I was upset at first but then that Mary Leinster called on me. She persuaded me that the beauty of the place should be shown to as many people as possible. She has the second sight, you know.'

'A lot of people claim to have that gift,' said Hamish cautiously.

'Oh, but she is the real thing. I have my two grandchildren staying with me for the school holidays. Charles is twelve and Olivia sixteen. Mary called on me last week and said Charles was in peril because he was going to fall into the pool below the falls. I know he can't swim. I didn't believe her but two days later Charles

did fall in and, if it hadn't been for one of the tourists who dived in and rescued him, he would have been drowned.'

'I think we'll take a look at the place,' said Hamish.

'Go ahead. Are you as stupid as you look?'

Hamish blinked. Then he rallied and said, 'Are you as rude and nasty as you appear?'

'Get out of here,' she snapped, 'and take that fat fool with you. And don't come back.'

'After such a warm welcome,' said Hamish sweetly, 'it will be right hard for me to stay away. Come along, Dick.'

As they walked down the stairs to the hall, they found two children at the bottom of the stairs surveying them.

'I gather you must be Charles and Olivia,' said Hamish.

'Cut the crap,' said Charles. 'Is the old bat dead yet?'

'She is very much alive,' said Hamish coldly.

'Christ, she'll live forever,' said Olivia gloomily.

Hamish sat down on the bottom step and surveyed them curiously. Charles was small and thin with a shock of fair, almost white hair and flat grey eyes. His sister was a slightly taller version with the same colour of hair and eyes. Both had very white skin and thin pale lips and long thin noses.

'Why do you want your grandmother dead?' he asked.

'Because our parents say our school fees are too much and they are threatening to send us to the local comprehensive where we'll be stuck with morons and chavs. If Granny dies, they get the money.'

'You're English?'

'Yeah, from London,' said Olivia. 'You know, where real people live, instead of, like, moronsville up here.'

The floorboards above them creaked. 'Here she comes,' said Charles. Both children scampered out the open door and disappeared down the drive.

'Let's go,' urged Hamish. 'A little o' Granny Colchester goes a long way.'

'I'm hungry,' complained Dick. 'She could at least have offered us something.'

'That old cow? Forget it. Let's have a look at this wood.'

Groaning, Dick heaved his bulk into the passenger seat of the police Land Rover. 'You'll need to feed your beasties anyway,' said Dick. Hamish had two pets, a mongrel called Lugs and a wild cat called Sonsie. He had left them behind at the police station. To Hamish's relief, both animals seemed fond of Dick.

'Just a quick look,' said Hamish, 'and then I'd like to visit this Mary Leinster. I mean, think how easy it would be to get someone to shove that child in the pool and then get a friend on hand to save the boy. Second sight

confirmed. No more arguments about the use of the wood from Granny.'

They parked beside the tour bus. Hamish noticed that what looked like a gift shop was under construction. Mrs Timoty, an old-age pensioner from Braikie, stood at the entrance to the wood beside a turnstile. 'That'll be three pounds each,' she said, 'and five pounds for the car.'

'This is police business,' said Hamish, walking past her. They followed a pokerwork sign with the legend FAIRY GLEN.

Sutherland's frequent Atlantic gales leave the landscape dotted with poor bent-over apologies for trees, like men with their jackets blown up about their ears. But there are a few beautiful glens and waterfalls, sheltered from the brutality of the wind.

Because of the proximity of the Gulf Stream, former Scottish gardeners had been able to plant rare varieties of trees and shrubs. A gravelled path twisted its way among the beauty of overhanging trees and great bushes of fuchsia. They stood aside to let the tourists make their way back to their bus.

Hamish, followed by Dick, came to a rustic bridge spanning the pool. The roar of the waterfall, which descended into the pool, filled their ears, and little rainbows danced in shafts of sunlight.

'My, but it's rare bonnie,' said Dick.

'Shh!' said Hamish. 'Look at that!'

A kingfisher dived into the pool and rose again, a fish in its beak, its sapphire-blue wings flashing. It disappeared under the trailing branches of a weeping willow.

Large flat grey stones surrounded the pool. Hamish guessed the boy must have been playing on one of them when he was pushed in. If he had been on the bridge with the sightseers, then someone would have noticed. The boy would need to have been lifted bodily over the railing.

Hamish had a longing just to stay there, drinking in the peace of the place. But he was becoming curious about this Mary Leinster.

‘I think we should go to the town hall in Braikie and visit Miss Leinster,’ he said. ‘Did the gossips tell you how Mrs Colchester got her money?’

‘Herself was married to a merchant banker. Before his death, he sold the place to an American bank and she copped the lot on his death. So the daughter and son-in-law, that would be a Mr and Mrs Palfour, are right cheesed off because they’re finding it hard to make ends meet. He’s a landscape gardener and owns a nursery, but it’s this recession. No one seems to want their gardens landscaped. The kids go to a progressive private school, you know, the kind where they’re allowed to express themselves, which translates into a lot of four-letter words and no work.’

Hamish looked at his sidekick with new respect. He knew how valuable gossip was in any investigation. He laughed. 'Maybe you're like Poirot, Dick, and sit in your deck chair and exercise your little grey cells. How did you hear this?'

'Mrs McColl, her what is married to that crofter up the brae at Lochdubh, goes out cleaning, and twice a week she and Bertha Dunglass goes up to the house. When Granny gets a letter from her daughter, she reads it aloud and laughs her nasty auld head off.'

A cloud passed over the sun. The pool below them grew dark, mirroring the flying clouds overheard. Although it was a windy day, the glen was sheltered.

'Let's go,' said Hamish.

Braikie was not very large and would have been considered a fair-sized village in England. The locals did refer to it as 'the vil-lage', feeling that sounded, well, *classier*.

The town hall was a massive red sandstone building. Mary Leinster had secured an office on the ground floor. They were told she was out but was expected back at any moment. They took seats in the reception area and settled down to wait.

Dick promptly fell asleep. The rumblings of his stomach and his gentle snores sounded out a little symphony.

A small woman walked into the reception area and spoke to the receptionist at the desk and then swung round. 'Mr Macbeth? You wanted to see me?'

Hamish nudged Dick awake and got to his feet. The sun pouring in the open doorway was in his eyes and he could not see her clearly.

'Come through to my office,' she said. Her voice had a gentle Highland lilt.

She entered a room to the left of the hall and ushered them in. Mary Leinster took her place behind a desk and waved them into two chairs in front of it.

Hamish looked at her in wonderment. She had a heart-shaped face and wide blue eyes fringed by heavy lashes. Her hair was long and curly, strawberry blonde, and rioted down to her shoulders. She was wearing a low-cut green blouse of some silky material which showed the tops of two round white breasts.

Mary looked at Hamish and gave a slow smile. She had pink curved lips.

Hamish experienced a sudden breathlessness.

'What has brought Sutherland's famous police officer to see me?' she asked.

Hamish pulled himself together. Dick was gaping at Mary, his mouth open. Hamish leaned across, shut Dick's mouth, and glared at him.

'It is about the boy, Charles Palfour,' he said. 'I believe you haff the second sight.' Hamish's

accent always became more sibilant when he was excited or upset.

‘I don’t know if I have or not,’ said Mary. ‘I just had this premonition. It came and went in a flash. I saw the boy struggling in the water. I have often seen him playing down on those stones by the pool. So I warned Mrs Colchester that the boy was not to play there. She didn’t believe me. So it happened, ten days ago, just as I had envisaged. Do you believe in the second sight, Mr Macbeth?’

‘Hamish, please.’

‘Hamish then. I feel we are going to be friends.’

‘We have a seer in the village of Lochdubh, Angus Macdonald, who claims to have the second sight. You must forgive me, Mary. You see, before I met you I thought it might be a stunt to promote the Fairy Glen.’

She gave a charming giggle. ‘Hamish, the place is extremely popular already.’ Then she grew serious and leaned her arms on her desk. ‘With the recession, you know, there’s not enough work up here. Because of the popularity of the glen, we have been able to give work to wardens, build a gift shop, and bring money into the economy of the region. Now you must excuse me. I have a meeting.’

Hamish stood up. Dick had fallen asleep. Hamish surreptitiously kicked him on the leg, and he awoke with a jerk.

'Here is one of our brochures.' Mary handed one to Hamish. On the cover was a very good colour photograph of the kingfisher, rising from the pool, sunlight flashing from the spray on its wings.

Hamish desperately wanted to see her again but she was now holding the door open. He said goodbye and walked sadly out to the police Land Rover. He didn't know anything about her. Had she been wearing a wedding ring? He could not remember.

As he moved off, he said, 'I wonder if she's married.'

The sleepy source of gossip next to him said, 'Yes, she is.'

'How do you know that?'

'Oh, a wee bittie talk here and there. Her husband is Tim Leinster. He and Mary's two brothers are builders. Not much work around these days but I suppose they got the contract to build the gift shop.'

'Now, that would be right illegal if she's giving contracts out to the nearest and dearest.'

'No, it was passed by the council. They're the only builders in Braikie.'

'Then why haven't I heard of them?' howled Hamish.

'They only moved up here from Perth last year.'

'Why?'

'I suppose they followed Mary when she got the job. Also, they've done a bit of work here

and there since they arrived and everyone says they're reasonable and honest.'

That's life, thought Hamish gloomily. Romance walks in one minute and walks out the next. Why am I such a failure with women? He thought of how he had nearly proposed marriage to television presenter Elspeth Grant; how he had once been deeply in love with Priscilla Halburton-Smythe, daughter of the colonel who ran the Tommel Castle Hotel, and how he had been forced to end the engagement because of Priscilla's sexual coldness.

Was he turning out to be one of those sad sacks, always doomed to fall in love with the unattainable?

He mentally pulled himself together. He probably wouldn't see her again.

When he got back to the police station, it was to find an angry message from police headquarters telling him to go directly to Cnothan where two stolen cars had been reported.

Hamish loaded the cat and dog into the back of the Land Rover. Dick was wide awake now and complaining bitterly of hunger.

On the road, they passed a tour bus with the legend Fairy Glen on the front. It seemed to be full of people. He reflected that Mary seemed to be a dab hand at publicity.

Hamish considered Cnothan a sour, unfriendly place, and although it was on his beat, he visited it as little as possible. One bleak main street led down to a man-made loch. The locals prided themselves on 'keeping themselves to themselves'.

He knew there was a caravan park and camping area outside the village and headed there. The missing cars were a blue Ford Fiesta and a Peugeot. He checked with the slatternly woman who ran the campsite to check for recent arrivals. She said there were just two, brothers, Angus and Harry McAndrews. Their tent was pitched out at the edge of the campsite.

The two men were seated outside their tent, cooking sausages on a frying pan over a camp stove. They were both skinheads, covered in prison tattoos.

'Whit does the filth want wi' us?' demanded one of them.

'I'm looking for two stolen cars,' said Hamish.

'Whit's that got tae dae wi' us?'

Hamish looked around. Next to the brothers' tent was a large bell tent with the front flap tightly closed.

'What's in there?' he asked.

'Naethin' tae dae wi' us,' said the one who seemed to be the elder.

'Then you won't mind if I have a look.'

They both stood up. One reached down and picked up a tyre iron. 'Get lost, copper,' he snarled.

Hamish reached out, seized the arm holding the tyre iron, and twisted it hard. The man let out a yelp of pain and dropped it. His brother tried to run but Dick stuck out a foot and tripped him up. They cuffed both of them. Hamish then looked in the bell tent and found the cars. He charged both of them with theft. He phoned headquarters in Strathbane and was told to stay on guard until a police van arrived to take them away. To make sure the brothers did not try to escape, even though they were handcuffed, Hamish forced them down on the ground and dragged their trousers around their ankles.

He turned round to tell Dick to put the stove out only to find that Dick had served himself sausages on a paper plate and was busily eating them.

'You're a disgrace,' complained Hamish.

'It's not as if they're evidence,' said Dick through a mouthful of sausages. 'These are rare good. I wonder if they got them locally?'

Back at the police station after what seemed like a long day and having completed all the necessary paperwork, Hamish retreated to the kitchen. From the living room came the noisy sounds of a television game show. He put his

head around the living room door and shouted, 'Mince and tatties for supper?'

Dick reluctantly lowered the sound, the remote control clutched firmly in one chubby hand. 'What's that?'

'I asked you if you wanted mince and tatties for your supper?'

'Oh, aye, grand,' said Dick.

'I'll call you when it's ready.'

Dick threw him a pleading look. 'Could I no' just eat my meal in here in front o' the telly? Just the once?'

Hamish thought wryly that Dick looked like a child pleading with a stern parent. 'Oh, all right. But don't you start dropping food on the floor!'

Dick smiled and blasted up the sound again.

It wasn't as if the man was deaf, grumbled Hamish to himself. It was almost as if by jack-ing up the sound, he could be part of the show itself. 'I've spoiled him,' said Hamish to Lugs and Sonsie. 'I've been happy just to go on as if I'm still on my own. But tomorrow, no more deck chair for Dick. He can come out on the rounds with me. Also, he'd better begin to do his share of the cooking.'

He knew Dick was a widower whose wife had died ten years ago. He seemed to have no idea at all of household work and had even on one occasion plaintively asked Hamish to show him how the vacuum cleaner worked.

But the man was pleasant enough, and it didn't look as if any major crime was ever going to happen again.

The morning would prove Hamish wrong.

He was frying up bacon and eggs while Dick watched a breakfast show on television when the phone in the office rang.

When he answered it, Mary Leinster gasped out, 'It's me. Mary. Come quickly. They've hanged him! In the glen,' and rang off.

Hamish erupted into the living room and yelled, 'Turn that damn thing off. We've got a murder!'