

Michelle Sloan



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SKATING
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A Note on the Author

Michelle Sloan trained as a primary school teacher and studied drama and arts journalism. She is the author of several books for children. *The Edinburgh Skating Club* is her debut adults' novel. Originally from Edinburgh, Michelle now lives in Broughty Ferry with her family.

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For Kay and Karen, with much love

Chapter 1

18th century, Edinburgh

It was, considered Mrs Alison Cockburn as she strode across the cobbled streets, increasingly difficult to traverse Edinburgh's Old Town without trailing one's skirts in 'nastiness'. She looked up to the unusually clear blue skies, punctured by the gleaming spire of St Giles' Cathedral, and was about to take a deep breath of the smoky, autumnal air when she plunged her right foot into the familiar warmth of a heap of malodorous, steaming horse manure.

She shut her eyes momentarily and let out a long groan. 'Intolerable!'

'Aye, but at least it's from a horse,' said a passing man, with a smirk.

Mrs Cockburn raised an eyebrow. It was true: the contents of a chamber pot were no longer to be hurled from upper windows during the daytime. Grimacing, she hoisted her skirts and withdrew her foot, examining what now clung to her shoe. No patten could have won the battle against such a gargantuan pile of nastiness, even had she worn the devilish clicking things; they had been thrown out after one attempt at walking on cobbles.

Glancing around, she raised her heavy skirts to well above an 'appropriate' level, gave the petticoat layers a tarantella-like swoosh to remove the last of the filth, and, pulling her shawl firmly around her forearms, continued on her way.

As she approached the town's spine, the Royal Mile, the noise and smells intensified. Around her the good folk of Edinburgh loitered and gossiped while children played at their feet in the dirt, and ruddy-armed washerwomen pegged out their linen on criss-crossed lines in the narrow closes. Shrieking gulls swooped undeterred by the street vendors and shopkeepers who bellowed and shook their fists at the flying robbers. Laughter, shouts and swirling voices caught on the putrid wind as Alison Cockburn turned and headed up the Lawnmarket towards the castle. Cramped, overcrowded and dingy, Edinburgh's Old Town was no longer a desirable neighbourhood and the gentry were leaving in their droves, heading across the drained ditch that had once been the cesspit of the Nor' Loch to the space and symmetrical neatness of the New Town.

Almost at Castlehill now, Mrs Cockburn noticed a large cart piled high with trunks and boxes at the mouth of the close known as James Court, and as she turned down the wynd she saw that a line of aproned footmen were passing items hand to hand to be loaded on to the cart. She navigated her way down to the other end and saw that the human chain was snaking its way from the very doorway she was intending to enter.

'Be careful with that lantern, young man!' shouted a voice from above. 'Ah, Mrs Cockburn. What a delight to see you!' Mrs Cockburn looked up at the rotund face of her friend peering from a window some three storeys up.

‘Good morning, Mr Hume!’ she called back. ‘I see I have come visiting at a most inopportune time.’

‘Indeed, Mrs Cockburn, we are in a state of chaos . . . Do be careful with that!’ he snapped suddenly as two footmen staggered into view from the doorway below him carrying a heavy wooden chest. ‘As you see, Mrs Cockburn, today we leave the slum.’

Alison Cockburn rolled her eyes. ‘I see, Mr Hume. Paradise awaits you, does it so?’

‘Paradise indeed, Mrs Cockburn. They say St Andrew’s Square is quite heavenly.’

‘Choirs of angels will herald your arrival, I have no doubt,’ replied Mrs Cockburn with a wry smile. ‘And how will you write about human nature, Mr Hume, when all you observe are angels?’

At this, her friend let out a bellowing laugh that echoed around the high walls of the courtyard, causing the footmen to look up in surprise.

‘You and your dear sister will never want to associate with your devilish acquaintances from this side of town again.’

Another figure appeared at the window beside Hume, a woman with the same round cheeks as her brother and ringlets framing her face. She was clutching to her bosom a small, rust-coloured and extremely fluffy dog, which was panting so excitedly it looked as though it were smiling.

‘Not a bit of it, Mrs Cockburn,’ said Katherine Hume. ‘You must come and see us often.’

‘Good morning to you, Miss Hume. And Foxey too.’

Hearing his name, Foxey’s ears pricked and he looked at Mrs Cockburn below. Unfortunately, he also caught sight of a cat lying in a patch of sunlight, its tail flicking angrily.

Foxy shot out of his mistress's arms like a ball from a musket and disappeared into the house.

'Oh Lord,' said Katherine Hume. 'Foxy's seen the cat. Catch him, brother!'

'That is the second time this week!' hollered Mr Hume. 'Katherine, my dear, this is too much.'

'I told you to keep the door closed.'

Their bickering continued as Mrs Cockburn looked at the main door. 'Can't we just shut the one down here?' she said, and was about to kick the doorstep out of the way when a flash of orange fired out of the passageway. The cat let out a yowl and bolted up the close with Foxy on its heels.

'Catch him!' yelled Mr Hume, now very red-faced and wringing his hands. 'For pity's sake, catch him, Mrs Cockburn. Save him before he's snatched and skinned and his pelt turned into a fine lady's muff.'

Alison Cockburn groaned for the second time that morning before dropping her shawl, hoisting her skirts up once again, and hurrying back up the close towards the Lawnmarket. She pushed her way out on to the busy main street and caught a fleeting glimpse of Foxy in full cry racing down the hill.

There was nothing for it: she would have to run.

Chapter 2

‘I must say, Mrs Cockburn,’ said Mr Hume, standing to carve a thick slice of venison from a handsome joint, ‘I was very impressed with your commitment to catching our beloved little friend.’

They were sitting in the dining room of the Humes’ elegant abode in the New Town. The ceilings were decadently high and appointed with the finest cornicing, the windows long and draped in rich damask curtains. But despite the cheerful flames in the marble fireplace it was draughty and chilly, and so Mrs Cockburn had kept a shawl wrapped neatly around her shoulders. Instead of the usual drunken, night-time bellowing that could be heard in the Old Town at this hour, there was only the gentle clop of horses’ hooves on the quiet streets.

Mr Hume continued, ‘And your athleticism is quite astounding – for a woman.’

Mrs Cockburn noticed a sideways glance from Katherine, a trace of a smile on her lips. She reached for her wine glass and took a sip of the claret, casting her mind back to the calamitous experience of chasing at full pelt down the High Street after Foxey, who in turn had been hell bent on catching the blasted cat. With her skirts and petticoats bunched up, exposing her stockings, she had, at times, on the steeper stretches completely lost control, managing to knock over an apple cart and scatter several

unsuspecting chickens; she had slid through countless piles of nastiness, barely managing to regain her balance as she tripped over uneven cobbles, and had come close to a head-on collision with two footmen carrying a sedan chair before finally catching up with the panting Pomeranian in the kirkyard, the cat nowhere to be seen.

Foxy had seemed delighted, and possibly relieved, to see her. And there they had flopped, recovering together amongst the dead – both considering what had just occurred, and wondering what the aftermath might look like on their return journey to James Court. Now, reflecting on her adventure, ‘athleticism’ was not, she thought, quite the word that sprang to mind. She swallowed her wine.

‘Indeed?’ she said smoothly. ‘In truth, I was aware of movement in parts of my anatomy that have never moved before.’ A snort escaped her, and Katherine reached for her handkerchief and clamped it over her mouth, her eyes shut tight, her shoulders shaking. Mr Hume paused in his carving and stared at his sister.

‘Why, dear sister, are you in some sort of discomfort?’ he said. ‘Are you choking?’

‘I do not understand what ails you both. I watched you dash up that close, Mrs Cockburn, as nimble as a young lad – as though your very life depended on saving dear Foxy!’

‘You are very kind, Mr Hume,’ said Mrs Cockburn, drying her eyes with her napkin and attempting to steady herself, ‘to compare my sudden and somewhat maniacal burst of energy in such Panglossian terms. I can assure you that if you were to discuss it with the good tradespeople who found themselves in my way, they certainly would not describe my movements so favourably.’

Mr Hume shook his head in confusion and returned to sawing the joint. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘Foxy is most grateful to

you, as are Katherine and I. I do recall perhaps your looking a little troubled when you returned – your attire somewhat rearranged.'

At this, Katherine was off again.

Mrs Cockburn looked down to the floor, where Foxey sat gazing up at her with adoration . . . or was it hope that she might drop a sliver of ham from her fork into his jaws?

'I must say,' she said, 'I thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience. It was quite exhilarating.'

'Interesting. How so, Mrs Cockburn?' said Mr Hume.

Mrs Cockburn placed her knife and fork on her plate and considered. 'The speed of movement, the rush of the sharp autumnal air in my face.'

'Indeed?' said Mr Hume with genuine interest.

'But, dear brother,' said Katherine, 'by saying "for a woman", were you not implying that Mrs Cockburn's athleticism must necessarily be less than a man's?'

'Well said, Katherine,' interjected Mrs Cockburn. 'When, for that matter, did you last witness any male display of athleticism, Mr Hume?'

David Hume momentarily pushed his lips out so that, with his large cheeks and big, glassy eyes, he had the appearance of a bloated fish. He stroked his chin, and then, quite suddenly, his face broke into a broad smile. He raised a finger to the air.

'I know exactly when I saw an impressive display of outstanding athleticism from not one man but several fine gentlemen. Last winter, when I was invited to witness the Edinburgh Skating Club in action at Duddingston Loch.'

'Athleticism?' said Katherine. 'Come now, brother. Balance and poise, yes, but surely no athleticism.'

'Forgive me, but you are quite wrong, dear sister – and you weren't there,' replied Hume, with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Balance and poise are indeed essential, but in terms of athleticism there was stamina, strength and at times quite impressive speed. They jump and leap and perform all number of quite exhausting feats.’

‘It sounds wonderful. I should offer my services. Ah! But no! As you have so rightly pointed out, I am a woman,’ said Mrs Cockburn with a smile. ‘That door is firmly closed, as are those of all the other societies. Let me see. Here in our city we have the Speculative Society, the Lunar Society, the Arts Society, the Celtic Society, the Philosophical Society, the Oyster Club . . .’

Mr Hume chewed and nodded at each one.

‘. . . the Dialectic Society, the Select Society . . .’

‘Don’t forget the Cape Club, the Poker Club, the Crochallan Fencibles and the Easy Club,’ added Katherine.

‘Yes!’ said Mrs Cockburn, raising her glass in agreement. ‘One wonders if the gentlemen of Edinburgh are ever at home.’

‘I take your point, Mrs Cockburn,’ said Mr Hume. ‘And if I could make it so, I would have you as a member of all these societies. With your wit, intelligence and indeed your athleticism you would make a fine addition.’ He smiled, and stabbed at a potato on his plate, popping it into his mouth.

‘Perhaps Mrs Cockburn should do just that,’ said Katherine.

‘And how do you propose she manages that, dear sister?’ chuckled Hume. ‘Would you have her pose as a man?’

Katherine raised her eyebrows and looked at Mrs Cockburn. ‘My dear brother said himself that you looked as “nimble as a young lad”.’

Mrs Cockburn once again began to chuckle.

‘Katherine, what are you suggesting?’ said Mr Hume, looking shocked.

'Is this a dare, Miss Hume?' said Mrs Cockburn, loading her fork with asparagus.

Katherine smiled. 'I do believe it is,' she said.

Chapter 3

21st century, Edinburgh

The image on the screen was a painting of a man dressed in full Highland dress. He gazed back at the undergraduates in the lecture theatre with nonchalant disdain, dark clouds brooding behind him.

‘Consider the boldness of his expression, the dramatic lighting, the vitality, indeed the spontaneity of the brushstroke; there’s a striking realism of character. Seeing these paintings you already feel you know the sitters. This was Raeburn’s indisputable skill, and what made him not only Enlightenment Edinburgh’s most sought-after portrait painter but an essential component, the visual representation if you will, of that particular period. Not only was he part of the cultural movement, but he captured it and recorded it in the genius of his painting.’

Somewhere in the room a phone began buzzing like an angry bee. There was a general shifting as several students began frantically rummaging in their bags. Everyone else sat with eyes glazed.

Claire Sharp sighed. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she said with a wave of her hand. ‘To be honest, that’s the last slide.’ She clamped her thumb on the remote, ending the lecture. The lights came up and the roomful of bodies leapt into life.

‘Essays are due in in two weeks,’ she heard herself drone over the noise, ‘and with the end of the semester looming – and, of course, exams – you should keep on top of everything.’ She knew she sounded boring. She felt boring as she said it. They were bored and she was bored. She snapped shut the lid of her laptop and watched as the students began grabbing their jackets, chatting and moving down the stairs to leave the room. No one said anything; a few faces smiled weakly in her general direction but most just looked delighted to be escaping. Claire knew how they felt. Within a couple of minutes, the lecture theatre was empty. She reached for her coat and began packing up her bag. The buzzing bee began again. Claire tutted and reached into the bag to retrieve her phone. There were two missed calls. It must have been *her* phone vibrating. She swiped her finger across the screen, feeling relieved that she hadn’t berated her students.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hi, Dr Sharp, it’s Liz from Abercrombie and Murray here. Just to say the couple who visited your flat on Sunday have decided not to make an offer after all. They say they’ve seen something else more suitable, I’m afraid.’

‘Hmm,’ said Claire, sinking down into a chair. ‘But they seemed really keen. They *were* really keen. That was their second visit and they practically begged me to tell them what I wanted for it.’

There was a pause.

‘That’s just the way things go, I’m afraid,’ said Liz eventually. ‘I’ll keep you posted if there’s any more interest in a viewing. Bye for now.’

‘Oh, okay,’ said Claire. Did that mean she would have to keep doing open viewing twice a week, too? ‘Actually, Liz—’

It was too late. She’d gone.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger,' muttered Claire.

'Rehearsing another riveting lecture, Dr Sharp?' said a voice at the door. A small woman, laden down with plastic bags straining under the weight of several books, wandered into the room.

'Very funny, Jen.' Claire stood up to resume packing her bag.

'Bad day?' said her friend.

'Just, you know, stuff,' said Claire. 'What are you doing here anyway?'

'I thought maybe you'd like to go for a drink?'

Claire twisted her mouth into a smile. 'On a school night, professor?'

Jen raised her eyebrows. 'I *think* we're allowed to do these things now we're grown up, but if you want to phone your mum first?'

'Very funny,' said Claire, but then she traced the alternative in her mind: the cramped bus journey home, the trudge through the gloomy grey streets and then the stairwell of her tenement flat, opening the door to emptiness. Another lonely night in. This, or a convivial evening with Jen and the journey home cushioned in the glow of red wine.

'Okay,' she said. 'Might be nice to moan at you for a bit.'

Just then her phone began to vibrate again. It was a voicemail message.

'Let me just get this,' she said to Jen. 'My phone was ringing mid-lecture.' She rolled her eyes, and wriggled her arm into her coat. 'It's probably just the estate agent again, telling me that my flat will never, ever, ever sell.' She tapped the screen and pressed the phone to her ear. But it wasn't Liz.

The voice was quiet and slow. 'Dr Sharp, my name is Peter. I'd like to have a chat with you about an opportunity that might be of interest to you. I can assure you it will be well paid. I'd be grateful if you could call me back.'

Claire frowned. 'That's a bit weird,' she said. She played the voicemail again, this time on speaker, turning the volume up. She didn't know anyone called Peter. She didn't recognise the voice, which was neutral, with no strong accent – educated but not posh.

'An "opportunity"?' said Jen, still standing by the door. 'Is it a wind-up?'

Claire shrugged. 'It's a bit too odd for that. I mean, it doesn't make sense for just a wind-up.'

'Well, then, you'd better call him back,' said Jen. 'I'll head off to the pub and meet you there. The Beehive okay?' She made for the door and disappeared, leaving Claire alone, frowning at her phone.

'Okay,' she called after Jen. 'I don't know if I *should* call him back. I mean, it could be a scam, couldn't it?' But Jen had gone, and so, reluctantly, she hit the call back button.

'Dr Sharp?' It was the same voice.

'Hello? Yes, is that Peter?' said Claire. 'Look, I got your message. Sorry, but do I know you?'

'Dr Sharp, let me explain. I need an expert to undertake some research,' said the voice.

Claire frowned. 'I see,' she said slowly. 'What kind of research?'

'It would be much easier to tell you in person. Would you be able to meet me tomorrow at the National Gallery, by the Skating Minister. It's time things were put right. I'll be there at one. You don't have any lectures or tutorials at that time, I believe.'

‘Meet you? What? Look, this is all a bit too cloak and dagger for my liking,’ said Claire with a nervous laugh. ‘And how on earth do you know my timetable? And as I don’t know you, how will I know who you are?’

‘I’ll see you there, Dr Sharp. Don’t worry about recognising me. I know who *you* are.’

Then Peter hung up.

Claire took the phone from her ear and stared down at the screen. She shook her head as her mind raced. What on earth was that all about? But then one thought surfaced very clearly in her mind: she really needed that glass of wine.

Chapter 4

The door to the National Gallery swung open and the doorman on the other side gave Claire a polite smile. She entered the reception area with the most bizarre sense of trepidation. She had walked through these doors more times than she could count, not only as an art historian, but also as a student and as a child, skipping in clutching her dad's hand. She had dragged him to the same paintings over and over again. Her favourites – Gainsborough's *The Honourable Mrs Graham* and Velázquez's *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs* – were as familiar and as comforting as members of her own family. But of course her most visited, studied and loved was *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch*, attributed on the small card underneath to Sir Henry Raeburn.

But rather than the lovely feeling of homeliness she usually felt on her arrival, today her stomach lurched and her red-wine head throbbed as she walked through the main halls of the gallery. It had been Jen who had persuaded her to come. Claire had initially wanted nothing to do with Peter. But over their glass, or rather bottle, of wine, things had been said and discussed that had made her re-evaluate the situation. Most pointedly, Jen's eyes had widened to the size of dinner plates at the suggestion of a clandestine meeting in an art gallery in front of an iconic painting. It was too exciting to turn down, she had said.