

EXCERPT FROM

## Trick or Treachery

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

*As Halloween approaches, something strange is in the air in Cabot Cove. A fire-and-brimstone spiritual medium has some townsfolk on the lookout for evil omens, and an eccentric newcomer has others whispering about a real-live witch. When a body turns up in the graveyard, Jessica Fletcher has to make sure a guilty ghoul doesn't get away with murder.*

"This is so irresponsible," I said.

Seth chuckled. "Come on now, Jess, you know the media will do anything for a story. This piece of nonsense probably sold lots of newspapers."

"But it isn't true."

"True enough," he said, sitting back, wiping his mouth with a napkin, dropping it on the table and folding his hands contentedly over his corpulent stomach. "Can't argue that we got this nut, Tremaine, livin' in our midst now. Nobody likes havin' him around, but you can't keep a man from openin' an office. Wouldn't be Constitutional."

"Yes, I know," I said, "but the fact that someone is claiming that a ghost called the Legend of Cabot Cove will wreak vengeance on the town unless its unhappy spirit is mollified shouldn't be the basis for a story that a newspaper treats as fact."

"Jess, you've dealt with the media enough to know that all it takes is a kernel of an idea, one rumor, and they're off and running. Did you read in the story how Tremaine claims Cabot Cove is the center of the spirit world in New England?"

"Of course I did," I said, unable to keep the annoyance from my voice. I slapped the newspaper down on to the table and shook my head. "Seth, Lucas Tremaine is already preying on certain individuals in this town. Oh, he's clever, I'll give him that. He charges 'dues' for his society and then swears its members to secrecy so no one is quite sure what he's getting away with. On top of the dues,

members pay extra, a lot extra as I hear it, to contact their departed loved ones. The man has no shame. Richard Koser told me Tremaine has at least a dozen followers at that center of his out on the old quarry road."

"If that's all he's got, he won't be in business very long. If you can call ghost hunting a business."

"He's bilking these people out of their hard-earned money."

"Can't tell people what to spend their money on, Jess. Chances are, when they find they aren't really talking to dead relatives, or come to learn after talkin' to them why they never liked 'em in the first place, they'll desert him and that will put an end to his nonsense. That buildin' he's in was practically condemned ten years ago, and it's been sittin' empty ever since. Drew Muscote tells me it's rotten through-and-through. He wanted to tear it down to keep from havin' some kids end up in there some day and having the ceiling fall on them, but the town board wouldn't go along with him. You'd think they'd listen to the best highway superintendent we've ever had, but you can't always figure how elected officials will think. Go on, finish your pancakes before they get cold."

I ate in silence, but my mind was working overtime.

Lucas Tremaine had arrived in Cabot Cove two months ago, claiming to be a scientific investigator, although he was never specific about what degree he held or where he had studied. His organization, the Society for Paranormal Investigation, or S.P.I., was housed in a building that had once been a notorious roadhouse. His "headquarters," if that's what you could call it, had been in Cabot Cove's inventory of untaxed property ever since the owner skipped town owing everyone, and our civic leaders were evidently happy to rent it to anyone who was foolish enough to want it.

Shortly after his arrival, Tremaine took a series of small ads in our local newspaper inviting people to join his allegedly scientific society. People laughed

when they heard that Tremaine actually believed in the Legend of Cabot Cove and wanted to contact the spirit world, and thought that no one in town would respond to the ads. But a dozen people did, perhaps looking for something new in their lives, or seeking the companionship of like-thinkers, or maybe even believing in ghosts the way Tremaine claimed to. No matter what the reason for reasonable people to respond to what was clearly a scam, Tremaine's presence in Cabot Cove had become unsettling. His hints that people in power might be hiding information had caused a few otherwise rational townspeople to begin questioning whether some of our leading citizens were covering up the existence of spirits in Cabot Cove, spirits which, if not appeased, would take their revenge in fearsome ways. That anyone would put even a modicum of credence in Tremaine's maniacal rantings and ravings boggled my mind.

Mara came to the table, a coffee pot in each hand: "How's breakfast, folks? More coffee, Seth, Jessica?"

"Excellent as usual," Seth said, pushing his cup in her direction.

"No more for me, thanks," I said, taking a deep breath to cool my ardor.

Mara leaned over the table and filled Seth's cup halfway with decaf, then switched pots and filled it the rest of the way with regular coffee. She looked down the row of booths along the front window overlooking the harbor, and lowered her voice. "She's been coming in regular since she moved here," she said, nodding at a table in a far corner at which a woman sat alone.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"That woman who rented a cottage on Paul Marshall's estate. She's real strange, like. She looks at you with those eyes like she's boring a hole right through you."

"Where did she move from?" Seth asked.

"Somewhere down south."

"Down south?" I said. "Florida? Georgia?"

"Don't know for sure. Massachusetts, I think. Salem Massachusetts," Mara said.

I laughed. "I'd hardly call that 'down south.'"

"Well, it's south of here," Mara said, chuckling.

"Ayuh, it certainly is south of here. The whole country almost is south of here," Seth said.

"You didn't like the pancakes this morning, Jess?" Mara asked, pointing to the few scraps I'd left on my plate.

"They were wonderful, Mara, as always, but I've been on a diet and fill up faster than I used to."

Mollified, she wandered off with her coffee pots and stopped two tables away where Mayor Jim Shevlin and his wife were having breakfast with Joe Turco, a young lawyer. Mara's Luncheonette enjoys the advantage of having the best view in Cabot Cove - it's right on the Town Dock - as well as being the gathering place of choice for our village officials. If you want to know what's happening in Cabot Cove, take your meals at Mara's. The reporters from the local newspaper and radio station do. That's how they get most of their leads on breaking news.

I'm willing to bet the reporter from the Bangor paper stopped in at Mara's and heard talk about S.P.I. Or, if not here, he could have picked it up, along with a bag of doughnuts, at Sassi's Bakery. In small towns like Cabot Cove, the news gets around the old fashioned way - by mouth. Of course, there's a lot of salting and flouring that gets done to the news when so many cooks are handling the recipe, and sometimes you have to search out the truth, like plucking a bone from the fish chowder. I thought about Lucas Tremaine. What was the truth behind his move to Cabot Cove?