

EXCERPT FROM
A Little Yuletide Murder

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Cabot Cove is getting ready for its annual Christmas festival and Jessica Fletcher is on the planning committee. She's excited to participate since it will be her first holiday season at home in some time. Anticipating a cozy Christmas by the fireside with friends, Jessica finds that celebrating peace on earth will be delayed— until, that is, she can solve a little yuletide murder.

"Where's Rory?" I asked.

Seth leaned forward and scanned faces at the long head table. "You're right, Jessica," he said. "Rory hasn't missed a holiday planning meeting for as long as I can remember."

Rory Brent was a prosperous local farmer who'd played Santa Claus at our holiday festival for the past fifteen years. He was born to the role. Brent was a big, outgoing man with a ready, infectious laugh. He easily weighed two-hundred and fifty pounds, and had a full head of flowing white hair and a bushy white beard to match. No make-up needed. He *was* Santa Claus. His custom was to attend the planning meeting fully dressed in his Santa costume, which he proudly dragged out of mothballs each year, stitched up gaps in the seams, had cleaned and pressed and wore to the meeting.

"Is he ill?" I asked.

"Saw him yesterday," Seth said. "Down to Charlene's Bakery. Looked healthy enough to me."

"He must have been detained. Maybe some emergency at the farm."

"Ayuh," Seth muttered.

A few minutes later, when Jim Shevlin invited further comments from the audience, Seth stood and asked why Rory Brent wasn't there.

"I had Margaret try to call him at the farm," Shevlin said. Margaret was deputy mayor of Cabot Cove. He looked to where she sat to his right.

She reported into her microphone, "I called a few times but there's no answer."

"Maybe somebody ought to take a ride out to the farm," Seth suggested from the floor.

"Good idea," said Shevlin. "Any volunteers?"

Tim Purdy, a member of the Chamber of Commerce, whose business was managing farms around the United States from his office in Cabot Cove, said he'd check on Rory, and left the hall.

"You can always count on Tim," said Seth, sitting.

The meeting lasted another half hour. Although there was disagreement on a number of issues, it warmed my heart to see how the citizens of the town could come together and negotiate their differences.

Coffee, tea, juice and donuts were served at the rear of the hall, and I enjoyed apple juice and a cinnamon donut with friends, many of whom expressed pleasure that I would be in town for the festivities.

"I was wondering whether you would do a Christmas reading for the kids this year, Jessica," Cynthia Curtis, director of our library and a member of the Town Board, said.

"I'd love to," I replied. "Some traditional Christmas stories? Fables?"

"Whatever you chose to do," she said

But then I thought of Seth, who was chatting in a far corner with our sheriff and another good friend, Morton Metzger.

"Seth usually does the reading, doesn't he?" I said.

“Oh, I don’t think he’d mind deferring to you this year, Jess. It would be a special treat for the kids to have a famous published author read Christmas stories to them.”

I suppose my face expressed concern about usurping Seth.

“Why don’t you do the reading together?” Cynthia suggested. “That would be a different approach.”

I liked that idea, and said so. “I’ll discuss it with Seth as soon as we leave.”

Seth and Mort approached. “Feel like an early lunch?” Seth asked.

“Sure. Nice presentation Mort,” I said, referring to the report he’d given about how the police department would maintain order during the festival.

“Been doing it long enough,” he said. “Ought to know what’s needed. ‘course, never have to worry about anybody gettin’ too much out of hand. Folks really pick up on the Christmas spirit around here, love thy neighbor, that sort of thing.”

We decided to have lunch at Mara’s Luncheonette, down by the water and a favorite local hangout. The weather was cold and nasty; snow was forecast. “I hope Mara made up some of her clam chowder,” I said as the three of us prepared to leave. “Chowder and fresh baked bread is appealing.”

We reached the door and were in the process of putting on our coats when Tim Purdy entered. I knew immediately from the expression on his face that something was wrong. He came directly to Sheriff Metzger and said something to him we couldn’t hear. Mort’s face turned serious, too.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“There’s been an accident out at Rory’s place,” Purdy said.

“An accident? To Rory?” Seth asked.

“Afraid so,” said Purdy. “Rory is dead!”

“Rory is dead?” Seth and I said in unison.

Purdy nodded, grimly.

“Means Santa’s dead, too,” Seth said.

He was right. My eyes filled as I said, “I’m suddenly not hungry.”