

Tidings of Comfort and Joy

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Summary:

Christmas 2009, Jessica meets an old friend.

Author's Note: For Twilight2000.

A stiff breeze blew in from the Atlantic just as Jessica stepped out of her cab, and she tightened her scarf with the ease born of long habit. For most of her life, she'd assumed she would live out her years in Maine's cold winters, but she had to admit that lately, even New York was a bit chillier than her bones preferred. The temptation to accept one of the many holiday invitations she'd received from friends and family in warmer climates was strong on days like today, even if she had promised Grady that she would be back in the old house to meet him, Donna, and Frankie. They'd been coming to Cabot Cove for Christmas since Frankie was born, although Jessica sometimes suspected it was as much a handy excuse not to go to Donna's parents' as much as Grady wanting to be in his old home for Christmas.

"Same time next week, Mrs. Fletcher?" the cabbie asked as he handed her her school bag, stuffed with drafts from her advanced writing seminar. The school was pushing instructors to use computers to mark papers, but while Jessica found new technologies very useful in her own work (so much information, right at her fingertips!), she still preferred her old red pen for her students. Nothing would ever replace sitting in front of a warm fire, seeing a young talent emerge on the paper.

"Oh, no, the school's on break," she replied, taking her bag and pressing a discreetly folded bill into his hand. "Happy Holidays, Jake. Give your wife my best."

Jake, a twenty-year veteran of the New York transportation industry, slipped the bill into his pocket without looking. "Thanks, Mrs. Fletcher. And thanks again for the book. Marie'll be bragging for weeks to her friends that she not only got the new J.B. Fletcher novel the very first day, but a signed copy. Merry Christmas!"

Jessica waved as she headed into the building. A J.B. Fletcher novel for Christmas was no longer the reliable occurrence it had once been. She had learned long ago that writing was one of those professions there was no real retirement from, but she had allowed herself to scale back to writing when she wanted to. Her agent has spun it as keeping the demand high.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Fletcher," the new doorman said as he held the door for her. He'd only started last week, the fourth since she had first taken this apartment fifteen years ago. Ahmed had left a decade ago, was now (according to the card received yesterday) assistant manager at the Chelsea Pines Hotel. His wife was expecting their second child.

"Thank you, Mitchell." There were days that remembering the names came less easily to her than it once had, but she still remembered them. It helped, she supposed, that there were fewer to remember now. She spent most of her time here or in Cabot Cove, traveling less. It was all part of getting older, she supposed, but the truth was that planes and trains and taxis in strange cities had lost some of their appeal. She was happy now to know where she was going to sleep every night, and if her life was considerably less adventurous than it had been in the

years following her first book, well, there were also fewer corpses falling across her path.

"Jessica!" A man her own age stood, a bit stiffly, from one of the lobby's couches. He had noticeably aged since Jessica had last seen him, oh, five years ago now, but considering the life he had led, Michael Hagarty was still looking fine.

"Michael! What on earth are you doing here? Oh, please tell me you're still retired." It had been some time since Michael's presence had automatically led to chaos and intrigue, but one could never be too careful.

"A man can't visit an old friend, take her out to a pre-Christmas dinner?" Michael asked, his Irish brogue a bit thicker than it had been during their more adventurous years. When Michael had said he was retiring to a quiet village, Jessica had given it a week, tops, but perhaps she'd been wrong.

"Now?"

"Did you have other plans?"

"Only a quiet evening at home." It was a token protest. Shenanigans aside, she did enjoy Michael's company. The notion that any visit from an old friend might be a last visit was one she chose not to dwell on.

"Well, then, let's be off, shall we?"

Which was how she found herself in a favorite Italian restaurant around the corner, sipping the one glass of wine she would be allowing herself tonight, reminiscing about events that in retrospect seemed so absurd.

"I'm not sure Grady ever quite forgave you for dragging him into that," Jessica said, chuckling. "I had to call Donna twice to assure her that the woman in Grady's hotel room really was a reporter, and even then, she had trouble accepting that there were international assassins involved."

"How is Grady these days?" Michael asked.

"Oh, he's doing just fine. His business is going along nicely. I know he's hoping his son will join when he graduates in May, but between you and me, Frankie's set his mind to try for the FBI." In fact, her grand-nephew had confided to her that he had already applied and planned to break the news to his parents at Christmas.

Michael shook his head. "Accountants, fighting crime. Computer types, too. It's all graduate degrees and binary code, these days. Not like it used to be."

Jessica smiled, but she knew the feeling well. Her own books were considered quaint now, charming throwbacks to a more innocent era (a notion that Jessica, who had lived through that era, found amusing). She had always done her best to keep up with scientific advances and social trends, but in the end, purely forensic puzzles and detailed police procedure had never interested her as much as human motivations.

"Which, " Michael continued with the air of someone very deliberately changing the subject, "brings me to the purpose of this visit."

"Oh? And I thought it was just a visit to an old friend," Jessica said, in a tone that made it clear she'd never believed any such thing.

Michael reached into his jacket and pulled out a small envelope. "An old mate of mine, name of John Cathcart, passed away recently. No family to leave his things to." Michael shook his head ruefully. "Hazard of the trade, I suppose."

Jessica didn't comment. She wasn't entirely sure how things between Michael and his daughter were these days, but given that he hadn't yet mentioned her in all the discussion of holiday plans, she could guess that they had never quite managed to overcome the distance between them.

Michael shook himself. "Anyway, I was going through his things, old pictures, that sort of thing, and I ran across something I thought might interest you." He pulled a picture from the envelope and handed it to her.

Jessica felt her breath catch. It had been years since she'd a picture of Frank anywhere but in her own albums, and not since his death had she seen one that she didn't know by heart. This was an old one, Frank and Clint and Lee in all their youth and vigor, alongside several men in what she recognized as old British Navy uniforms. By the background, and just by their faces, Jessica guessed that this was early in the war, before the Dixie Damsel.

"That's John on the left, there," Michael said. "I did some digging. The details are a bit sketchy, but it sounds like your Frank and his men got them out of a tight spot." Michael smiled. "It sounds like he was quite a man."

"He was that," Jessica agreed, still looking at the picture. Clint was gone now, and Lee had followed not long after.

"Someone...someone told me once that in some ways, a marriage as happy as ours can be a curse for the one who's left behind. Nothing else can ever be that good."

Michael smiled. "I think anyone who ever saw your face when you spoke his name knew better than to try to live up to that. Try other angles, maybe," he added with a touch of his old mischief.

The arrival of their food spared Jessica a response, and they spent the rest of the meal in small talk. It wasn't until the waiter had taken the check that Jessica allowed herself to look at the picture again. She was so lost in thought as they left that she almost missed Michael raising his hand for a cab.

"I don't really think we need..." she started.

"Oh, we've got another stop to make, bit too far to walk."

"What stop?" Jessica looked at him suspiciously. Oh, this was sounding very familiar.

"Oh, just have to pick something up from a friend, just some documents, entirely mundane and silly."

"Michael, what are you up to? You're not working, are you?"

"Jessica, I'm shocked you would think any such thing," he answered. "I'm retired, remember?" A cab stopped, and Michael opened the door for her. "Trust me. Would I lie to you?"

Very familiar.

Jessica stood for a moment. She was right around the corner from her apartment, from a pile of student work she needed to mark, from her last mug of coffee made just the way she liked it. From the uneventful life she had settled into these last few years. Her rather boring, uneventful life.

She touched her purse, thinking of Frank, young and smiling. "I have to be in Cabot Cove by Thursday," she said. "That's not optional."

Michael's smile widened. "You have my word." He helped her into the cab. "Merry Christmas, Jessica."

"Merry Christmas, Michael."