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# Rest Ye Murdered Gentlemen



*Par Vicki Delany*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFIRST IN A NEW SERIES!In Rudolph, New York, its Christmastime all year long. But this December, while the snow-lined streets seem merry and bright, a murder is about to ruin everyone's holiday cheerAs the owner of Mrs. Clauss Treasures, Merry Wilkinson knows how to decorate homes for the holidays. Thats why she thinks her float in the semi-annual Santa Claus parade is a shoe-in for best in show. But when the tractor pulling Merrys float is sabotaged, she has to face facts: theres a Scrooge in Christmas Town.Merry isnt ready to point fingers, especially with a journalist in town writing a puff piece about Rudolphs Christmas spirit. But when she stumbles upon the reporters body on a late night dog walkand

police suspect he was poisoned by a gingerbread cookie crafted by her best friend, VickyMerry will have to put down the jingle bells and figure out whos really been grinching about town, before Vicky ends up on Santas naughty list

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The tips of the tall turquoise and green hats bobbed in the lightly falling snow as the elves weaved through crowds of painted dolls, toy soldiers, shepherds with their sheep, reindeer, poultry, clowns, sugarplums, gingerbread people,

and candy canes.I feel like an idiot, Jackie grumbled. If Kyle dumps me because he sees me in this ridiculous getup, itll be on your head, Merry Wilkinson.I paid her no attention. Jackie always grumbled; it was her natural state. I could only imagine the level of grumbling if shed been left out of our group. She wore a knee-length tunic of gold, turquoise, and forest green over black leggings. Her hat was a foot-high turquoise triangle with a green pom-pom bouncing on the end. Papiermch formed into hornlike appendages and then covered with green felt had been attached to the front of her high-heeled, calf-high boots. Turquoise triangles, outlined in gold glitter, were painted on her cheeks, and her eye shadow was a matching shade of turquoise. I thought the playful makeup brought out my shop assistants natural beauty much better than the overly applied stuff she normally wore. I kept that opinion to myself.Shouldnt you... ah... be helping? I

nodded to the line disappearing into the crowd. One of the littlest of the elves was in great danger of wandering off, so enchanted was he by everything going on around him.If I must. She sighed heavily, but hurried to take the boys hand and, with a soft word, guide him back into the line.My mother marched at the front, leading the group toward our float. She was singing scales, and even if the children couldnt see over the crowd they should have been able to follow the sound of her voice. My mother had been a diva at the Metropolitan Opera. She knew how to make herself heard.I adjusted my mobcap and retied the strings of my apron.It was December first and we were assembling for the Santa Claus parade, the biggest event of the year in Rudolph, New York, otherwise known as Christmas Town. If theres one thing we know how to do in Rudolph, its Christmas.I checked behind me for stragglers and then hurried to catch up. The children were from my moms vocal classes. The youngest ones would sit on the decorated flatbed while the teenagers marched beside, singing carols. They were all dressed in the same colors and style as Jackie, in varying degrees of quality depending on their parents sewing skills. They were elves, and I was Mrs. Claus.Jackie had argued for considerably more dcolletage in her elf costume and a much shorter tunic. Id put my foot firmly down on that. Then she stubbornly refused to let her mother make the costume roomy enough to fit over her winter coat. I let her win that one. Jackie could freeze if she wanted to. The childrens costumes had been made large enough to fit over winter coats and snowsuits. I wore two wool sweaters under my dress, a pair of thick tights, and heavy socks, all of which added about thirty pounds to my frame. I didnt need thirty pounds, but it was Christmas and if I was going to be Mrs. Claus, I wanted to dress the part.Up ahead, I saw

Mom climb onto the float. Small children scrambled up after her. The teenagers took their positions and immediately pulled out their smartphones while waiting to begin. Parents milled about snapping pictures.Ho, ho, ho, Santa Claus boomed, waving greetings left and right as he walked through the crowd, heading for his own float.The youngest children squealed in delight; the teenagers rolled their eyes and continued texting, while the parents clapped their hands and tried to look thrilled.It was, of course, not Santa but my dad, the appropriately named Noel. Dads round stomach was real as was his thick white beard and the shock of white curls only slightly tinged with gray even though he was coming up on sixty. He totally looked the part in the traditional Santa costume of red suit with white fur cuffs, red and white hat, wide black belt, and high black boots.I was the last one onto my float. I grabbed my long skirts in one hand; Jackie took the other and hauled me up with as much grace as if she were landing a pike through a hole in the ice.Everyone ready? I called.

The children cheered. It seemed like we might actually be able to pull this off. This was the first year I owned my own shop in Rudolph, and thus was responsible for my own float, but in the past Id always tried to get home to help with the parade. Other years, wed used a handful of the younger kids from Moms classes to sit on the float, but this yearwithout consulting me firstshe decided to make the parade the focus of their fall program. All told, there were thirty children, aged five to seventeen.Id decorated the float so it looked like Santas workshop. It had bales of hay for the elves to sit on, a couple of battered old wooden tables as workbenches, whatever I could scrounge in the way of hammers for tools, and some broken toys that looked like they were still being assembled. It was, I thought proudly, just great. George Mann, a crusty old farmer whod been roped into helping by my dad, provided the tractor that would pull the float. Id tried to get George to dress in costume, but hed looked me in the eye and said, No. I doubted George owned anything

but muddy boots, brown overalls, and faded flannel shirts anyway. If anyone asked who he was supposed to be, I'd say the farmer in charge of the reindeer. I had high hopes for my float. My goal was nothing less than the best in parade trophy. One thing we didn't have to concern ourselves with was creating a north pole-like atmosphere. Here on the southern shores of Lake Ontario we get snow. A lot of snow. It was falling now, big fat fluffy flakes. The temperature hovered just below the freezing point and there was no wind; people would be comfortable standing on the sidewalk or sitting on blankets spread out on the curb while waiting for the parade. All the shops, including mine, Mrs. Clauss Treasures, were closed this morning so everyone could participate in the festivities, but the business development office had set up stands at regular intervals to serve hot drinks and baked goods. The semiannual Santa Claus parade is the highlight of the tourist year in Rudolph. People come from hundreds of miles away to see it. When I'd walked through town this morning, going to check that the float had survived the night, I'd noticed that all the hotels and B&Bs had No Vacancy signs outside. That would make everyone happy. I say semiannual parade, because we have one in July also. What the heck, gotta get those marks, I mean tourists, to town somehow. The parade assembly area was in the parking lot behind the town's community center. This morning the lot was a churning mass of adults and children in costume, marching bands, flags, floats, some definitely better than others, and tractors to pull them. Hey, kids, give us a smile, a voice called out. Russ Durham, editor in chief of the Rudolph Gazette, lifted his camera, and the giggling children struck a pose. Jackie, supposedly embarrassed to be seen in her costume, leapt to her feet and cocked a hip as the camera clicked. At an unseen signal, engines at the front of the line roared to life. Marchers stamped their feet. Trumpeters and French horn players blew into their instruments. Children applauded and the high school cheerleaders did cartwheels. Nothing, however, seemed to be happening at the front of my float. I clambered up onto a bale of hay and peered through the plastic-wrap windows. George was in the tractor's seat, where he should be. Let's get going, I called. He shrugged, not bothering to turn around. He might have said something but I couldn't hear over the noise of the parade starting. Then, to my horror, George got out of his seat and jumped to the ground. He opened the flap at the front of the tractor and his head disappeared into its mysterious depths. My heart dropped into my stomach. I made my way through jabbering kids and climbed off the back of the float. Russ had gone to see what George was up to. When I reached the engine, the two men were scratching their heads. Your kids look great, Russ said to me. His accent was slow and sexy, full of the color and spice of Louisiana. They sure do. So do you. He gave me a smile full of dancing hazel eyes and straight white teeth. I do not. I look like a harassed old lady. I peered at him through my spectacles. The frames contained nothing but plain glass, part of the costume. I'd stuffed my black hair inside the red and white checked mobcap that came complete with attached white curls. A beautiful harassed old lady, then, he said. I felt my color rise. Hopefully Russ would think the red cheeks were part of the costume. But I had more important things to worry about right then than how I looked. Please, please don't tell me there's a problem, I begged George. Darn thing won't start, the old farmer replied. It has to start! What's the holdup there? someone called. The floats near the beginning of the parade, where we were, represented a toymaker's front window, a candy store, a turkey farm, a groaning dinner table, and the stable in Bethlehem. The quilters guild had red and green quilts arranged on their laps, and the high school marching band members were grins. The book clubbers wore long skirts and bonnets and were led by Ralph Dickerson, wearing a nightgown and cap and carrying a candlestick. The role of Scrooge definitely suited Ralph, the town's budget chief. It all looked like total chaos, but the town had been doing this for almost twenty years and they had it down pat. Why don't you try it again? Russ helpfully suggested. Been tryin', George replied. A man vaulted over the bar at the back of the toymaker's float, the one directly in front of mine, and landed lightly on his feet, his movements a considerable contrast to his appearance. He looked to be about ninety years old with his enormous gray mustache and sideburns, nose accented by a lump of putty holding up his glasses, and an outfit of woolen jacket, knee-length breeches, and shoes with buckles, but I knew he was a thirty-year-old by the name of Alan Anderson; occupation, toymaker. Alan was the second-most popular man in Rudolph, after Santa, but only when wearing his toymaker regalia. He was tall and handsome with blond hair that curled around the back of his neck, sparkling blue eyes, and a ready laugh, but he could be quite shy, and he preferred to go incognito, so to speak. Alan and I had dated for a short while in high school. It didn't last after graduation. He'd been happy to remain in Rudolph, learning woodworking from his father and making beautiful things, slowly and carefully. I had stars in my eyes as I planned a fast-paced life in the hectic, exciting magazine world of Manhattan. We'd each got what we wanted, but one of us hadn't given up the dream and returned to Rudolph. I'd wondered briefly if the old spark might be rekindled, but December in Christmas Town was not a time to be

courting. We were all too darn busy. Alan gave me a smile before going to join George and Russ. Need any help here? He also stared into the depths of the tractor engine, the three men looking as though it would start if only they focused hard enough. Georges tractor might have been at its best during World War II, but that was no reason for it to give up the ghost now. Cant you do some kind of temporary fix? I asked. George didnt dignify that comment with a reply. Russ looked confused I guessed engines were not his thing, but he didnt like to admit it. Alan patted his pockets as if he might find exactly the right tool. Jingle Bell Lane, Rudolphs main street, down which the parade would pass, was out of sight of those of us at the back of the community center, but we could hear the excited murmur of expectation. I groaned. George continued to scratch his chin. Alan threw me an apologetic look. Im sorry, Merry, but I have to get back. Were about to leave. Sure, I said, forcing out a smile. Are you, uh, going to the post-parade party? He shuffled his feet in their buckled shoes. Wouldnt miss it. Perhaps Ill see you there. Good luck with the float. I might have spent a moment wondering if Alan merely meant hed be at the party, or if he was trying to say something deeper, but one of the orange vestwearing marshals arrived at a trot. Whats going on, Merry? You have to get moving. I waved my arms. It wont start. We cant push the dratted thing. In the line behind me, drivers began shouting at us to get out of the way. I could see the front of the parade turning into the street. I wanted to cry. Youll have to walk, Russ said. Lets get the kids down. But my float! All my work. Nothing you can do about that now, Merry. What, my mother sang, is happening down there? I glanced frantically around. Some of the kids were only five or six years old. Theyd been recruited because they looked so cute in their costumes, not to walk a couple of miles. In any event, many of them wouldnt have adequate boots. A wave of questions washed over me as the proud parents began demanding to know what was going on. The candy store float pulled around mine; the marching band followed. Jackie yelled at me to hurry up. As if I hadnt noticed that we were being left behind. Ive an idea, Russ said. George, wheres your truck? George jerked his head. Pine. The small street behind Jingle Bell Lane. How long would it take to attach the tractor to the truck? Russ asked. Minute. Run and get it. You can pull the dratted tractor. Georges truck was occasionally called upon to retrieve vehicles that foolishly tried to cross the shallow waters of the bay before the ice was thick enough. But I didnt see that it could help us now. I eyed the mess of floats, marchers, bands, clowns, parents waving their children off. We cant get the truck through. Theres no room! Go, George, Russ said. Fall into line behind the last float, then hitch up Merry, and join the parade. Ill help you. Okay. George sauntered off at his usual slow, rolling gait. You can bring up the rear, Merry, Russ said. Wait until everyones out of the way, and well hook up the truck and fall in line. But Santa is supposed to be last, I wailed. Santa is always last. Merry, what is the holdup? My mother appeared. The children are getting restless. As am I. It is no good for my voice to be out in this cold for overly long, you know. She waved her hands. Her leather gloves were a perfect match to her gown. Mom had flatly refused to be an elf (hideous little creatures, shed declared) and instead spent what was probably a mind-boggling amount of money to have a New York seamstress who sewed costumes for Broadway create a gown that wouldnt have been out of place in the ball scene of *Pride and Prejudice*. Id been furious, thinking she wanted to upstage a bunch of kids. Today, I had to admit (as I usually did) that shed been right (as she usually was). Rather than putting herself above the rest of our ensemble, her gown, in reverse colors forest green with turquoise accents tied the group together into a very impressive whole. You folks need to get that out of the way. Officer Candice Campbell of the Rudolph police the one person I didnt need right now arrived on the scene. Its blocking traffic. Gee, I hadnt noticed, I said. Candy. Her mouth twisted. Candy was what shed been called in high school. Now that she was an officer of the law, she really hated that name. Which is why I said it. We didnt get on any better as adults than we had in grade nine. Its all in hand, Officer, Russ said with a smile. The hard cop-like demeanor Candy tried so hard to project melted a fraction. Then she remembered who she was. And that I was watching. I hope so. Otherwise, Ill have to issue you a ticket, Merry. Blocking traffic. Thats for starters. I ground my teeth. The quilt guild float passed us. The women wore identical green and red earmuffs and were pretending to sew despite their heavy mittens the cloth spread out on their laps. Problems, Aline? a woman called, clearly enjoying the spectacle. Perhaps well see you at the finish line. Her fellow quilters laughed. Mom ignored them. Perhaps only I could tell that inside she was seething. Mother hated to be shown up in anything, whether upstaged at the Met or falling out of order in the Santa Claus parade. Groups of anxious parents had followed Mom and were milling about. I told them a replacement vehicle was coming and suggested Mom use the opportunity to warm the childrens voices and the children up. She went back to the float. Jackie hauled her up. Not quite the sort of arrival on stage Mom was used to, but she didnt miss a beat. Children, we will begin with Jingle Bells. She gave the note. These kids were taking singing lessons, and some of them were showing

considerable talent. The perfect notes rose into the cold crisp air to land on gently falling snowflakes. Listening to them, I almost forgot how upset I was. Everyone loved being in the parade, but getting ready and assembled in all the chaos was extremely stressful. Children, not to mention their mothers, could be brought to tears, and more than one fistfight usually threatened to break out. Over the years, I'd heard hundreds of people swear never to do it again. A month later they'd be back, signing up for the parade once again. As the pure young voices rang out, I could see people visibly relaxing. Grins appeared on ruddy faces, and folks gave their neighbors warm smiles and exchanged handshakes. The Christmas magic was back. I remembered that I was supposed to be angry when the penultimate float passed us. If I had any competition for best of parade, this was it. Vicky Casey, my closest friend since babyhood, might be the person I loved most on earth after my parents, but when it came to the parade, she was my bitterest enemy. Vicky owned Victorias Bake Shoppe. As well as the usual delights to be found in a small-town bakery, Vicky specialized in gingerbread. Gingerbread cakes, gingerbread bread, gingerbread cookies. Even gingerbread hot chocolate mix, and her special ginger tonic that, added to a glass of whiskey, was guaranteed to warm the cockles of your heart on a cold winter's night (whatever cockles might be). Last year she'd won best of parade with the elves Christmas Day feast. This year her float was done up like an old-fashioned bakery, with cardboard boxes painted and arranged to resemble an open hearth, a wood-fired oven, and a table covered in rolling pins, pie plates, and cookie cutters. Shelves held breads, pies, and cakes so realistic she'd caught one of her nephews trying to steal a fake cookie. The people posing as bakery workers, gathered from the ranks of her vast extended family, were dressed in long skirts and aprons for the girls, and striped gray pants and high white hats for the boys. Vicky tossed me a worried look as her float passed. Okay? she mouthed. Engine problems, I mouthed back. Realizing that neither I nor anyone with me was in life-threatening danger, she pumped her fist in a triumphant gesture and sailed on by. I really hated that smirk. Almost as much as I hated the glare Santa Claus, aka Dad, threw at me as his high golden sleigh, pulled by nine giant stuffed reindeer mounted on a tractor almost as old as Georges, passed. In any other parade Santa might be the star of the show, but in our town that role went to Fergus Cartwright, the mayor. Looking somewhat like a polar bear losing his fur, His Honor was wrapped in a thick white blanket, with a bushy white faux-fur hat plopped on his hairless head and white mittens on his hands. The mayor sat on the golden throne-like chair at the back of the sleigh, waving regally, while Santa stood in front yelling Ho, ho, ho. Members of the town's fire department, dressed in their firefighting gear and Santa hats, walked on either side of the sleigh, handing candy canes to laughing, clapping children. At last, Georges behemoth of a truck came into sight. Russ ran to meet him, and he and George quickly attached the truck to the front of the tractor. We had no way of moving the tractor aside while the parade was assembling and didn't want to waste precious minutes to do it now. I ran back to my float. You can't start now, Candy said, trotting beside me. Santa has to be last. Is that an official bylaw? If it isn't it should be. Arrest me then, I said. I climbed onto my float. Can we go now, Merry? An adorable little girl peeked out from under the brim of her overlarge hat. Yes. Let's go! George clambered into the cab of his truck, and Russ leapt up after me as, accompanied by the cheers of the singers and their anxious parents, we jerked into motion. Officer Candy looked as though she were mentally searching the legal books, trying to find something anything to charge me with. Rudolph! Mother called out. She sounded the note, and the choir began to sing Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. You can't come with us, I said to Russ. You're not in costume. The way I look at it, Mrs. Claus, you made me miss taking shots of the start of the parade, so you owe me a lift. Just think of me as the official photographer of Santa's workshop. He lifted his camera and snapped a close-up of my scowling face. Chapter 2 For the crime of falling out of order and thus disrupting the smooth running of the event, my float was disqualified from best in parade. That the head of the judging committee this year was Vicky's uncle Doug had nothing at all, he assured me, to do with his decision. Then he buried his face in his chest and hurried away. I didn't even have time to get mad again. I left Mom and the parents to get the kids off the float and calm them down. Russ and his camera had jumped off somewhere along the parade route. George would haul the float to Mom and Dad's place where it would spend the next six months in the carriage house. Jackie and I had to make our way to Mrs. Claus's Treasures posthaste and get everything ready to open the shop for the crowds of eager shoppers who would, the plan went, soon pour through the doors. But first I had to run to my own home and let Matterhorn, my dog, out for a stretch. I lifted my long skirts and galloped through town as fast as I dared on the fresh snow. I cut through the park and rounded the bandstand. Not a person was in sight. Everyone was either still at the parade route, sipping hot chocolate and nibbling cookies, or getting their own businesses ready. To my left, the bay off Lake Ontario was a soft blur of white on white. To my right the

shops and houses were all beautifully decorated for the season. I had no time to admire my surroundings. I'd been planning to let the dog pee in his crate today, but a horrified Vicky had told me that we were at a very delicate stage of housebreaking, and to do so might set us back months. Why she used the royal we when she was neither the one peeing nor the one rushing home to attend to that, I didn't know. I didn't quite know how I'd ended up with a dog, and a Saint Bernard puppy at that. Matterhorn, or Mattie as I usually called him, knocked me flying as I opened the door to his crate. He then proceeded to stand over me and threaten to lick me to death. I sputtered, wiped a copious amount of drool off my face, and staggered to my feet. My apartment is one half of the second floor of a gorgeous nineteenth-century Victorian, accessible from the narrow servants staircase that opens onto the backyard. Knowing what was next, Mattie bolted down the stairs and waited for me to catch up. I opened the back door. He still wasn't quite sure about this snow stuff, and stood on the threshold for a moment, sniffing the air. I gave his rear end a slight push with the toe of my boot and out he went. He did his business, and then, apparently deciding that this snow stuff was okay after all, cavorted about the yard, leaping at flakes, trying to catch them in his mouth. I watched him play, feeling a smile on my face. Next year I might do my float as a Swiss watchmakers workshop on Christmas Eve. The kids would love Mattie. He could wear a barrel tied under his chin. He threatened to be big enough by then for the kids to sit on. I snapped myself back to this year. Come on, boy. Time to come in. Mattie, come here. Mattie! He was showing no inclination of giving up his fun to be stuffed back into his crate. Not only had I found myself with a new dog, but over the Christmas season, my busiest time of the year. Cursing my lack of foresight, I stomped into the yard and dragged the resisting thirty-pound, ten-week-old puppy back into the house. I then ran all the way to the shop. We were ready to open with five minutes to spare. Jackie refused to wear the elf costume any longer and had changed into the clothes she'd brought to work. I planned to keep playing Mrs. Claus, hoping it would charm the customers. My tights and the bottom foot of my skirt were soaking wet. The snow that had gathered when I chased the dog around the yard was melting in the warmth of the shop. Ignoring the chill running up my legs, I ran a critical eye over the display areas, pleased with what I saw. As can be assumed by the name of my business, I specialize in Christmas decorations. My stuff tended to be one-of-a-kind items made by local artists or crafters, or occasionally brought in from my sources in New York City. I'd spent five years as a deputy style editor with a well-known lifestyle magazine. Locating items that were unique, beautiful, and yet affordable to the average buyer was what I did best. I peered through the shop windows. In keeping with the theme of my float, I'd created a display to resemble the elves jewelry work area. A local jeweler had lent me some of her older or seldom-used tools and I'd scrounged an old-fashioned wooden school desk and a few kerosene lamps for props. Some of the most eye-catching pieces of jewelry were laid out on black velvet cloth next to a cluster of sparking glass Christmas trees, while a brightly painted wooden Santa inspected them through his spectacles. A couple, her wrapped in fur, him in a calf-length black leather coat and gloves, stopped to inspect the display. I saw her pointing at a glittering rhinestone brooch in the shape of a wreath. I flipped the sign to Open and unlocked the door. The couple came into the shop. Let us know if you need any help, I said. Thank you. Your first time to Rudolph? Yes, and it won't be our last, will it, honey? That parade this morning has got to be one of the best I've ever seen. Nothing like a good old-fashioned parade to get the holiday spirit flowing. I grinned at him. A man after my own heart. I left them to browse. Jackie came out of the back, dressed in black ankle boots, black tights, a short black skirt, and snug blue sweater. I noticed the man give her a quick once-over. I didn't employ Jackie because she attracted male customers, but it was a bonus. I adjusted my fake spectacles and settled the mobcap and white hair into a better place on my head. The bell over the door tinkled and customers began to flood in. I assigned Jackie to staff the till, while I wandered the shop floor, answering questions and helping people choose gifts or decorations. About an hour after opening a man came in. He was alone, but that wasn't unusual. Plenty of women nudged their husbands in the direction of my shop while they went to Diva Accessories next door. He carried a camera and a notebook; that was unusual. Betty Thatcher, owner of Rudolph's Gift Nook, the shop on the other side of me, burst in, hot on his heels. The Nook sold mass-produced Christmas decorations, most of them made in China. Nothing wrong with that. We shouldn't have been in competition, but as far as Betty was concerned, every hundred dollars spent on an ornament at my shop could have been used to purchase a truckload of discount decorations at hers. Betty hadn't had a float in the parade she never did but I'd seen her there, lurking in the crowd and smirking at my misfortune. Mr. Pearce! she cried, I totally forgot to tell you about my idea for expanding the store. The newcomer gave her a strained smile. I have all I want, thank you, he said in a strong English accent. He was probably in his late forties, short and lightly built, with a bad comb-over and a pale complexion that retained

the memory of teenage acne. He approached me, while Betty, tiny but formidable, plucked at his sleeve. Why dont we go for a coffee? Or I suppose youd prefer tea. She snorted out a laugh. My treat. You have to see the Cranberry Coffee Bar. Its one of our most popular spots. Thank you, he repeated. I have the coffee shop on my list. Can I help you? I asked. No, said Betty. Maybe after tea. Come along, Mr. Pearce. Thank you for your time, Mrs. Thatcher. I have all I need from you. Even Betty couldnt fail to notice that shed been dismissed. She threw me a glare that said it was all my fault this Mr. Pearce didnt want to have tea with her. I have a few free minutes right now, she said, defiant in the face of defeat. I expect to be soooo busy for the rest of the afternoon. The crowds just never let up at Rudolphs Gift Nook. You are soooo lucky, Merry, not to have that problem. Pleased with her parting shot, she left. I still didnt know who this man was. His coat was wool, his scarf cashmere, his gloves leather, his camera a Nikon. Nigel Pearce, he said. Im with World Journey magazine, here to do a feature on your town and its Christmas spirit. Welcome, I croaked. I mean, welcome to Rudolph and to Mrs. Clauss Treasures. World Journey was one of the top travel magazines in Europe. I saw you at the parade, he said. Late, were you? Mechanical problems. Are you the proprietor? Yes. I held out my hand. Merry Wilkinson. I spelled my name, as I always have to, otherwise people think its Mary. He touched my fingers with the tips of his leather gloves. He wasnt exactly warm and friendly, but if Nigel Pearce wanted to write about my shop for World Journey magazine, he could be as cold as he wanted to be. Pretty town. The Christmas stuff is a mite over-the-top for my taste, but they say some people like all this holiday kitsch. Were going to title the article Americas Christmas Town. How nice, I said, ignoring the fact that hed called my beautiful artisanal goods holiday kitsch. I did not leap into the air and high-five Jackie, although I wanted to. My father and the burgomasters and burgomistresses of Rudolph would be beyond delighted. Theyd been trying for a long time to have our town known as Americas Christmas Town, but we had stiff competition from the likes of Santa Claus, Indiana; Christmas, Florida; North Pole, Alaska; and Snowflake, Arizona. If World Journey gave us the label, it would pretty much be official. I could imagine my dad saying, Take that, Snowflake! Nice shop. Nigel lifted his camera and began taking pictures. He should have asked permission first, but I was hardly going to slap him down for being rude, now was I? Nice staff. He focused on Jackie. She tossed her hair, tilted her chin, stuck out her chest, and beamed. Why dont you come out from behind the counter and show us some of these pretty things, love? Jackie threw me a questioning glance. Your boss wont mind, Nigel said. Ill get some shots of her looking... Christmassy. There wasnt much to do right now anyway. The customers had stopped browsing and were watching Nigel click away. A few stepped politely out of the way; several stepped forward, trying to inadvertently get themselves in the frame. He took pictures of Jackie standing beside the gaily decorated live Douglas fir (replaced every month), Jackie showing a customer a display of quilted place mats, Jackie helping a man choose a gift for his wife, Jackie posing among our collection of three-foot-tall stuffed Santas, Jackie being Jackie, pretty and flirtatious. He took one picture of me ringing up a sale. He told me not to smile it made me look too young to be Mrs. Claus. My mom would kill someone when she heard shed missed this. At last Nigel had all the pictures he wanted. I told Jackie to get behind the counter as a line was forming, and I walked with the photographer to the door. I handed him my card. He put it in his pocket without a word. Have you heard about the parade reception tonight? Six thirty at the community center. Santa will be there, some local musicians are playing, a childrens choir is singing, and there will be plenty of refreshments. Everyone is welcome. Its all part of Christmas in Americas Christmas Town, right? Right. I smiled, trying to look friendly. He glanced across the room at Jackie. She waved and called out, Catch you at the party, Nigel! He left. With the speed and agility of a lion catching sight of an unattended baby zebra, Betty Thatcher leapt out from the door of her shop. \*\*\*What an unfortunate thing to happen, Vicky said to me after shed modestly accepted the first place trophy at the post-parade party. Tractor breakdown, and you went to so much trouble. Oh, well, better luck next time. The trophy, a hefty two-foot-tall, gold-painted reindeer with a big red glass ball for a nose, was prominently displayed in the center of the room for all to admire. Plaques ran across the base, with the names of the first place winners and their years. Until next December, the trophy would once again sit in the place of pride on the top shelf of Vickys bakery. A smaller statue, of Rudolph in bathing trunks and sunglasses, was awarded for the summer parade, but it didnt have the prestige of coming first in the main event. It, too, adorned the bakery. We were gathered in the main hall of the community center for the after-parade festivities. The prizes had been awarded, every group (except mine!) pretty much got something for showing up. Moms class sang Christmas songs. Their Silent Night was so beautiful that a few of the tourists were brought to tears. As was Mom, when she heard there had been a journalist from an internationally famous magazine in the shop that afternoon. She was mollified when Nigel sauntered in,

laden with photography equipment, and I introduced them. Nigel then went on to take more photos of Jackie: in front of the buffet, admiring the trophies, sitting innocently on Santa's knee. Kyle Lambert, Jackie's current boyfriend, glowered all the while. But even Jackie had to give way to Mom and her school. I had no doubt that if a big if we were the cover story of the magazine, as Nigel had hinted, the photo of her, resplendent in her Broadway-worthy gown, surrounded by pink-cheeked, beribboned, turquoise and green elf-costumed kids, would be on it. The main room of the center was fully decorated for Christmas, with a real tree with all the trimmings, rows of red stockings pinned to one wall, and colorful baubles hanging throughout. Santa held court for the kids in a big, comfortable wingback chair, listening to their wishes and posing for pictures. Alan, dressed in his toymaker getup, was acting as Santa's assistant, taking notes on a lengthy scroll of paper with a pen that had an elaborate feather stuck to one end. His Honor held court, or attempted to, with the adults, accepting praise for how well everything had gone. Victoria's Bake Shoppe had catered the affair. Hot chocolate, with or without ginger tonic, huge slabs of gingerbread cake, and perfect gingerbread cookies cut in all sorts of interesting shapes. Fortunately, Vicky had forgone the anatomically correct boy and girl cookies that had been served at my last birthday party to my considerable surprise. People came from far and wide to Rudolph for parade weekend. I talked to people today from California, Quebec, and Wyoming.

With the feature in *World Journey*, we might start getting tourists from Europe and Asia. Dollar signs danced in my head. My skirt and tights had dried over the afternoon, but then I had to make another dash across the park to feed Mattie and let him out before coming to the party, and I was soaked once again. I was beginning to lose contact with my toes. I was thoroughly beat and wanted nothing more than to go home, put the fire on, pour a glass of wine, grab *Holmes for the Holidays* or *More Holmes for the Holidays*, which I read every year, and go to bed early. But I wouldn't be able to do that until December twenty-sixth. The store was closed, of course, on Christmas Day, but somehow I managed to get myself talked into hosting Christmas dinner in my tiny apartment. I glanced around the crowded room. Russ had given me a wave when I came in, but had spent his time interviewing town dignitaries and taking pictures for the paper. Pretty much everyone who lived in the vicinity of Rudolph, New York, could be counted on to be here: business owners, the farmers and craftspeople who supplied our shops and kitchens, representatives of the service clubs, town employees. About the only people missing would be the restaurant staff. They'd be getting ready to serve dinner. The politicians had come out in force, including two state representatives. Speaking of which, I spotted Sue-Anne Morrow glad-handing the crowd. (Glad-handing the locals anyway. She ignored the obvious tourists.) Sue-Anne hadn't declared her candidacy yet, but she made no secret of the fact that she would be challenging Fergus Cartwright for the mayoralty in the forthcoming elections. She was going to run on the slogan Rudolph can do BETTER! Our town was prospering, but the number of visitors had dropped off from the heights of a few years ago and sales were down. Nothing we could do about the recession that had stung the entire state, but Sue-Anne wanted everyone to know it was all Fergus's fault. *Revue de presse* Praise for the Year-Round Christmas Mysteries *Rest Ye Murdered Gentlemen* is a delightful story set in Rudolph, NY a festive Christmas town that really knows how to make the season sparkle for its visitors. Delaney pens a humorous tinsel-covered tale that made me laugh out loud even while keeping me guessing. Merry Wilkinson is feisty and fun and I can not wait to join her on her next case. *New York Times* Bestselling Author Jenn McKinlay Witty writing, an unexpected solution, and truly likable characters ensure that the appeal of this holiday-themed series will last long past the Yule season. *Kings River Life Magazine* Delightful... Full of holiday glitter and charm right out of a Currier and Ives painting. I enjoyed every word of it. *Open Book Society* [A] promising new series. *Fresh Fiction* This is a great holiday-themed cozy that is much needed and enjoyed. *A Cup of Tea and a Cozy*