

A CHRISTMAS CONUNDRUM

by Stacy Wilder

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

In the background, Bing Crosby crooned “White Christmas.” An evergreen candle flickered and released the scent of pine. I opened a velvet lined box and carefully unwrapped the tissue paper protecting the sand dollar shaped glass ornament.

When my new husband returned home from Christmas shopping, I planned to surprise him with a decorated tree. As I gazed at the bauble, memories of our honeymoon surfaced. My eyes scanned the artificial tree branches until I found the perfect spot for the memento that Brad and I’d bought in the Caymans.

As I hummed to the tune, my Labrador retriever, Duke, snored softly by the sofa. A snowy Christmas was unlikely in Charleston and even less likely in Florida where we’d be spending the holidays. My heart fluttered in anticipation of our first holiday with my parents. Duke was startled awake when my neighbor, Lou, burst through the front door.

“Lizzie! *Oh, my gawd.*” He smacked his palm on his forehead. “It’s a disaster. What am I going to *do?*”

Duke rushed to greet him, tail wagging. “Hey, boy.” Lou patted my dog’s head.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Since acting was his hobby, the man had a flare for the dramatic. I was sure whatever was wrong wasn’t as bad as his demeanor indicated.

He plopped down on the couch with a grunt. “Someone is *stealing* the Christmas decorations. Last week the custom order for the mayor’s big shindig disappeared. And the decorations for Christmas on the Battery are gone. Poof!” He lifted his hands toward the ceiling and flicked his fingers. “And I just had two more employees quit. What am I going to *do?*” he repeated with a distinctive whine.

Lou and my best friend, Peg, had owned an interior decorating firm. After Peg died, Lou’d inherited her share of the partnership. He intended to slowly shift the business from residential design to commercial. However, when Lou and my mom planned my wedding, he’d discovered

he had a gift for creating memorable occasions. PeggyLou Designs now offered commercial, residential, and event services.

Since Lou was responsible for decorating some of the most prominent spots in town, I understood why he was so upset. “Do you have any idea who’s behind it?”

“I can’t imagine who’d be such a Grinch. You *have* to help me find the thief before my *whole* holiday decorating business is destroyed.”

Lou and I had been close friends before Peg’s death, but we’d become even closer afterward. I was surprised he was just now telling me about the theft. “Have you reported it to the police?”

“I filed a report for the first one, but I wanted to talk to you before going to the cops again.” He stared at his clasped hands. “I was hoping my favorite PI might help.”

I’d investigated plenty of theft cases, but Brad and I were due to leave for Florida in a week. While I mulled over how I could best assist, my phone rang. I fished the device out of my purse and answered before it went to voice mail. “Mom, can I call you back in a few? Lou’s here.”

Lou jumped off the sofa and rushed over. “Babs,” he shouted as soon as he got close.

He and my mom had become fast friends when they’d collaborated on our wedding. Not many people called Barb, ‘Babs.’ Lou was one of the exclusive members of the Babs club. My husband had yet to be invited.

“Put her on speaker,” Lou said.

I pressed the button and set the phone on an end table.

“Hi, Babs.”

“Halloo. How are you?” The pitch of her voice rose a few notches. She sounded more excited to talk to Lou than to me.

“Not good.” As he explained his situation, I turned my attention back to the tree.

Lou noted my disinterest and picked up the phone. “I’m going to make a cup of coffee,” he mouthed. He took the device off speaker and headed for the kitchen.

As I meticulously placed purple, red, and green glass ornaments equally spaced apart, I wiggled and jiggled to Stevie Wonder’s “What Christmas Means to Me.”

Duke curled up in his spot by the sofa to resume his nap.

Lou returned from the kitchen with a steaming mug in his hand. “So, it’s settled then. Thanks so much, Babs. You’re a doll.” He handed the phone back to me.

“Honey, I hope you won’t mind if we come to Charleston for Christmas,” Mom said.

It sounded like a statement, not a question. “Should be fine. Let me talk to Brad and get back to you.” I ended the call and glared at Lou. “What just happened?”

He set the cup on the table and grabbed my hands. “Your parents are coming to Charleston for Christmas, and Babs is going to help me with the workload while you solve the crime. Isn’t that fantastic?”

“Yeah, fantastic.” My voice dripped with sarcasm. My lie-detecting Lab woke up and yipped.

Someone once told me that all dogs have superpowers. Duke’s gift was communication. He whined when something was up. He yipped when someone wasn’t telling the truth. Very few people knew of his lie-detecting ability, and Lou wasn’t one of them.

Bab’s Famous Sour Cream Coffee Cake

Serves 10-12

Cream together with a mixer:

1/4 cup butter, softened

1 cup sugar

2 eggs

Slowly mix in:

2 cups flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

Blend in:

1/2 pint sour cream (1 cup) – *tip use a little extra for a moister cake*

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Preheat oven to 360 degrees.

Pour + one third of the batter into a well-greased Bundt pan (enough to cover the bottom of the pan). Separately melt 3 tablespoons of butter. In another bowl, combine 3 tablespoons of sugar and 3 tablespoons of ground cinnamon. Sprinkle half of the cinnamon mixture on top of

the batter, then add the remaining batter. Pour the melted butter on top and sprinkle the remaining cinnamon mixture. Bake at 360 degrees for thirty-two minutes or until a cake tester comes out clean. Allow to cool for fifteen minutes before inverting the pan to release the cake. Delicious warm with a pat of butter.

Peg's Percolator Spiced Tea

Serves 10-12

Ingredients:

2 ½ cups unsweetened pineapple juice

2 cups unsweetened cranberry juice

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 ¼ cups water

1 tablespoon whole cloves

3 sticks cinnamon

1/3 cup brown sugar

Pour juices and water into the percolator. Place remaining ingredients in the basket and perk. Serve hot. If you don't have a percolator, you can use a saucepan. To modify for a saucepan, add the brown sugar, salt, and cinnamon sticks to the liquid. Place the cloves in a loose tea basket and bring to a boil. To turn it into a cocktail, add a splash of golden or orange rum to each mug. Garnish with a cinnamon stick.

The Christmas Conundrum Playlist:

1. "White Christmas," Bing Crosby
2. "What Christmas Means to Me," Stevie Wonder
3. "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," Bing Crosby
4. "I'll Be Home for Christmas," Bing Crosby
5. "You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch," Thurl Ravenscroft

6. "Jingle Bells - Instrumental," Elvis
7. "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," Brenda Lee
8. "The Christmas Song," Nat King Cole
9. "Winter Wonderland," Johnny Mathis
10. "Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town," Bruce Springsteen
11. "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful," Perry Como
12. "O Little Town of Bethlehem," Aaron Neville