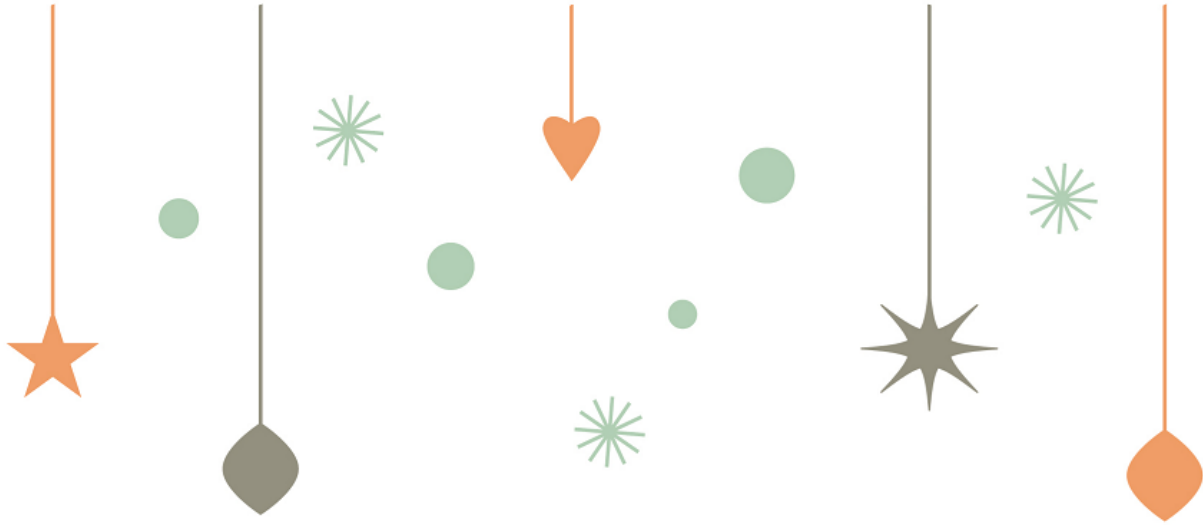


Case File #25: Curse of the Christmas Star



Mrs. Kalani perched on one of my pie shop’s pink barstools and gripped the counter. The pie shop had just closed, the pendant lights reflecting in windows blackened by the night.

“Just tell us what happened.” Charlene, my cryptogenarian piecrust specialist, patted our new client’s knee.

Charlene’s white cat, Frederick, lay draped over the shoulder of her cranberry knit tunic. Frederick yawned and buried his head beneath her fluffy white hair.

Mrs. Kalani knotted her hands in the fabric of her colorful muumuu. “I took the Christmas star from church storage, along with the other pieces of the living nativity scene, on Tuesday.”

“You know the church, Val,” Charlene said helpfully. “It’s the one you were going to get married in before you were dumped at the altar.”

“I wasn’t at the al—” I forced a smile. It didn’t matter. My failed engagement had made room for someone better, Detective Gordon Carmichael. “Please, Mrs. Kalani. Go on.”

“Well, we always get everything out early for a good cleaning, and to see if anything needs to be repaired. At seven that night, I locked the hall. When I returned the next morning, I discovered a ground-floor window was broken and the star was gone.” She pressed a thick hand to her face. “It was horrible!”

“What does the star look like?” I jotted notes in my order pad.

“It’s solid crystal,” Mrs. Kalani said.

“Eight-inches in diameter and the literal star of the show,” Charlene said. “Kalani’s hip-deep in you-know-what if she doesn’t get it back.”

Mrs. Kalani paled. “Er, yes.”

I glared at Charlene and turned to our client. “And nothing else was taken from the church?” I tugged down the hem of my holiday Pie Town tee.

“The star is the only thing we had of value,” Mrs. Kalani said. “We called the police, but you know how it is. Between the Christmas festival and the surf competition, our little theft is going to get lost in the shuffle.” She patted my hand apologetically. “I’m sure your Detective Carmichael did his best.”

Warmth flushed my cheeks. “Do you have any ideas who might have taken the star?”

“Thistleblossom,” Charlene said darkly.

“She may have coveted that star, but I don’t think she could have crawled through a window.” Mrs. Kalani gnawed her plump lip doubtfully. “Mrs. Thistleblossom is over a hundred years old.”

“Never underestimate an angry centenarian.” Charlene glanced at me. “Old Thistleblossom thought she was going to inherit the star from her sister. But when her sister kicked the bucket, she donated the star to the church instead. Thistleblossom was so furious, she cursed the star.”

I resisted banging my head on the counter. Charlene was obsessed with all things paranormal. She’d dragged me on more Bigfoot hunts than I cared to admit. To her, a holiday curse would be irresistible. “There are no such things as cursed Christmas stars.”

“That’s what you think,” Mrs. Kalani said, glum.

The insanity was spreading. Bad enough Charlene believed in curses, but if our sensible choir mistress did too, San Nicholas was in trouble.

“The first year the star hung over the living nativity, a camel ran away with a wise man.” Charlene ticked off her points on her fingers. “Year two, Joseph was bitten by a llama. Year three, the goats escaped and stampeded down Main Street. They trampled a shepherd.”

“I’m detecting a theme,” I said.

“The curse?” Charlene asked.

“I was thinking live animals, but—”

“No,” Mrs. Kalani said. “It’s the curse.”

“There’s got to be a rational explanation,” I said. “There are no such things as cursed Christmas stars.” The idea was just... wrong.

“Whether there is or isn’t,” Mrs. Kalani said, “the living nativity is our biggest night of the year. We need that star. Besides, it’s not like anyone was killed.”

“One of your wise men, Jake Acosta, nearly lost his thumb to that donkey,” Charlene said. “On top of the llama incident, he was pretty upset last year. And wasn’t he playing the shepherd during the stampede?”

“But Jake didn’t lose his thumb.” Mrs. Kalani rubbed her hands on her knees, wrinkling the fabric. “He’s playing a wise man again this year, and we’ve promised him an animal wrangler.”

“I’m amazed he’s coming back for more,” I said dryly.

“Oh,” our client said, “it’s a huge honor to be in the living nativity. No one gives up their spot.”

“Sure,” I said. “This is San Nicholas. Who needs opposable thumbs?”

“Ignore Ms. Scrooge,” Charlene said. “She’s got a Christmas phobia.”

“I do not.” True, holidays growing up had always been emotional. When I was little, my father had deserted my mother and I just before Christmas, and my mother had struggled financially. But she’d always gone all out make the holiday magical.

“Will you find the star?” Mrs. Kalani asked.

Charlene slithered off the barstool and stretched, her ancient joints creaking. “The Baker Street Bakers are on the case.”

Having no better leads, Charlene and I drove to Mrs. Thistleblossom’s creepy Victorian and rang the bell.

After a long wait and the clicks of locks being undone, the door opened. Mrs. Thistleblossom stuck her head out. “What do you want?” Her black dress bagged around her hips. Roughly chest height, she glowered like Rumpelstiltskin.

I swallowed. Not that I believed she could really cast a curse, but did she have to look so witchy?

“Leave this to me, Val,” Charlene said loftily. “I have a special touch with old people.” She turned to Mrs. Thistleblossom. “The crystal star. Hand it over.”

Mrs. Thistleblossom sniffed. “I heard the church lost my star. Serves them right! I should sue. That star was in my family since before I was born.”

“In the ice age?” Charlene asked, and I nudged her.

The hairs on Mrs. Thistleblossom’s chin trembled. “What’s my star to you two?”

“The police have taken fingerprints and are tracking down the usual suspects,” I said. “We’re looking at the unusual suspects.”

“Casting curses, Thistleblossom?” Charlene tut-tutted. “Shame on you. ‘Tis the holiday season, when our hearts open to the wild spirit of gratitude and generosity. Not curses.”

The old woman's fingers twitched, and I took an automatic step back.

Heh heh. Curses. I cleared my throat. "Can you tell us anything about the star that might help us determine who took it?"

Mrs. Thistleblossom rubbed her chin with gnarled fingers. "I might have seen someone lurking around the church when I was on my evening constitutional."

"Refreshing the curse?" Charlene arched a brow.

I frowned again at my piecrust specialist, not that my glowers were doing much good. Charlene would never back off if there was a possible curse involved.

"If I was or if I wasn't is no concern of yours," Mrs. Thistleblossom snapped.

I studied the tiny woman. *Had* Mrs. Thistleblossom actually...?

Nah. "What did this person look like?"

Mrs. Thistleblossom rubbed her nose. "Like a wise guy."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Mobsters in San Nicholas? "Er, what does a wise guy look like?"

"They all look the same. Funny hats. Weird robes. Hang around babes in mangers. Now get off my porch!"

"Fine you old witch." Charlene stomped down the steps and into the overgrown yard.

I hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Well?" Mrs. Thistleblossom snapped.

"Did you actually...?"

She slammed the door in my face.

Embarrassed, I joined Charlene at her yellow Jeep.

"If I get like that when I'm old, hold an intervention." Charlene tossed her white hair.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

When she got old? "Probably not. Let's talk to a wise guy with a grudge."

Charlene knew where Jake Acosta lived. We hopped in her yellow Jeep and drove to a low-slung ranch house at the base of an overgrown hill.

A woman with frizzy blond hair rushed from the green front door. "Help! He's gone crazy!" Her chest heaved beneath her blue unicorn tee.

"Wife?" I asked out of the side of my mouth.

"Girlfriend," Charlene said, stepping from the car and adjusting Frederick around her collar. "Wives know how to put up with crazy. Where is he?" she asked the blonde

“The backyard.”

We hurried through a side gate and into the yard.

Beside a swimming pool, a pleasant looking, sandy-haired man raised a sledgehammer over his head. His bathrobe hung open, exposing plaid flannel PJs. A crystal star glinted on the pavement in front of him.

“Stop!” I skidded to a prudent halt, ten feet away.

“It will never stop until it’s destroyed,” he wailed.

“Jake,” I said, forcing the wobble from my voice, “let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about!”

“Whatever the problem is,” I said, “we can deal with it.”

“Whatever? It’s a curse! And you can’t stop me.” He raised the sledgehammer higher, and I flinched.

A jet of water hit him in the chest. “Cool off, Jake.” Charlene played the hose up and down, soaking him.

He sputtered. “It needs to be stopped.” The sledgehammer thunked to the grass behind him.

I snatched up the star. “It’s church property.”

“Holy ground doesn’t stop this curse,” he said. “Since *that’s* become part of the nativity, I’ve been bitten, spat on—”

“Smashing a cursed object won’t end a curse.” Charlene hit him in the face with another jet of water.

“Char—” I whirled, and a stream of freezing water struck my chest. “Charlene!”

“Whoops. Sorry,” she said, in a not-sorry tone. “I missed.”

Hurrying to her side, I turned off the hose before she could turn me into an ice sculpture. “I’ve got the star. We’re done here.”

“I nearly lost a thumb,” he wailed. “That damned donkey.”

She shook her snowy head. “He’s right. This curse needs to end.”

“How?” Water dripped from his bathrobe to the pavement. “Fire?”

She sneered. “Amateurs.”

“Just stay away from the animals,” I said, making a futile stab for reason.

“It’s not enough,” Charlene said. “You’re young. You haven’t experienced what Jake and I have.”

Seriously? My teeth chattered. “The church has promised an animal wrangler—”

“I tried holy water last December.” Jake’s brows drew downward. “That was the year of the donkey attack.”

“We all know who and what caused this curse,” Charlene said. “She’s got to end it. It’s the only way.”

Charlene, Jake and I climbed the steps of Mrs. Thistleblossom’s Victorian and knocked. I studied a wilted fern as we waited.

The door cracked open. Mrs. Thistleblossom peered out. “You again.” Her eyes widened. “Mine!” She lunged for the crystal star.

I skipped backwards, my heel striking a pot with a dead cactus.

Charlene tutted. “Now, Val, give Mrs. Thistleblossom her star.”

“It’s the *church’s* star.”

“She’s old,” Charlene said. “You need to be patient. Humor her. When you get older, you’ll understand what it’s like.”

Rolling my eyes, I passed Mrs. Thistleblossom the star.

The old lady bobbed in an approximation of a jig, her black skirts swishing around her ankles. “It’s back!”

“And now,” Charlene said, “you have to freely return it to the church.”

Mrs. Thistleblossom hugged the star closer. “Why the devil would I do that?”

“Because everyone knows you cursed that star when your sister gave it to the church,” Charlene said. “The only way to end it is if you freely return it.”

I rubbed my chin. This might actually work. If people believed the old lady no longer had a beef with the star, they’d stop believing in the curse. The bad luck would effectively end, especially with an animal wrangler on the scene.

Mrs. Thistleblossom’s eyes narrowed. “And again I ask, why would I do that?”

“Er,” Charlene said, “for a pie?”

And that’s the trouble with amateur detecting. The outlays are nearly always greater than the rewards.

“One pie?” Mrs. Thistleblossom squinched up her face like one of those wilted apple dolls. “Are you kidding? This star is a family heirloom.”

“Pie Town offers a pie-of-the-month club,” Charlene said.

I blinked. What? *Whoa*. A pie was one thing, but a monthly pie would get expensive. Pie Town was doing well, but I couldn't afford—

“One pie a month?” The elf-like woman snorted. “Cheapskate. I hear tell you've also got a two-pie a month club.”

For Pete's sake, we had the star. No one asked us to lift the so-called curse. “N—”

Charlene stepped on my foot.

Scowling, I yelped and rubbed the top of my sneaker against my jeans.

“Deal.” Charlene turned to Jake. “Satisfied?”

He nodded. “You sure this will work?”

“I know curses, son. This will end it. Trust me.”

My piecrust specialist and I climbed into her yellow Jeep. We watched Jake stride to his Prius. I could have been imagining the new spring in his step and lift in his shoulders, but I don't think I was.

“I'm not thrilled about what this cost us,” I said, “but that was some crackerjack curse breaking.” If curses were simply a reverse-placebo effect, Charlene had effectively neutralized this one.

“Curse breaking?” Charlene made a face. “Don't be daft. There's no such thing as a cursed Christmas star.”

I sputtered. “But... you...” She believed in fairies and alien abductions, Bigfoot and phantom horsemen... “Why not?”

She rubbed my shoulder. “I understand. It's hard to trust when two of the most important men in your life let you down. But there's one man you can always count on.”

“Gordon?” The detective was practically perfect.

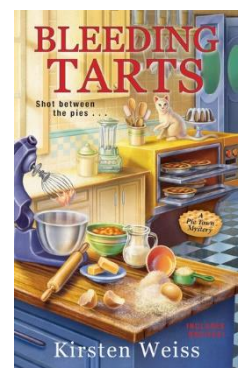
“Santa, and this is San Nicholas. He'd never allow a Christmas curse.”

Note from Kirsten

You can read about Charlene and Val's adventure with the phantom horsemen in [Bleeding Tarts](#), book 2 of the Pie Town cozy mystery series.

Val's new pies are foolproof—but not bulletproof.

Old West ghost towns are as American as apple pie. So what better place to sponsor a pie-eating contest than the Bar X, a fake ghost town available for exclusive private events on the edge of Silicon Valley. Valentine Harris



is providing the pies, hoping to boost business for her struggling Pie Town shop and become a regular supplier for the Bar X.

But no sooner does she arrive in town than a stray bullet explodes the cherry pie in her hands. And the delicious dessert is not the only victim. Val finds the Bar X bartender shot dead in an alley. Egged on by her flaky friend and pie crust specialist, Charlene, Val aims to draw out the shooter. But solving a real murder in a fake ghost town won't be easy as pie. And if Val doesn't watch her back, her pies won't be the only thing filled full of lead . . .