



*Persimmon
Worthing
Short
Mysteries*



volume one

PERSIMMON WORTHING SHORT MYSTERIES -- EXTRACT

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THE PIRATED PLUM PUDDING

Those of you who have spent any time at all in small towns know that very often a town will have a quirk, or personality, that makes it memorable. And if you have ever visited my hometown of Blossom City, you know for a fact that it is a town with a distinct quirk: rarely does a gathering or event take place without something untoward happening.

Take, for example, this year's Celebration of Festive Desserts. On the Wednesday afternoon before the gala, I was watching a rerun of The Great British Baking Show (as one does when one prefers Paul and Prue to daytime soap stars) when someone set my doorbell ringing. Punching it as if it was a pedestrian-controlled walk light failing to do its job. Before I was out of my recliner, a voice joined the constant chimes.

"Persimmon! It's me! Persie? Are you there?"

I shouted. "Coming, coming. For crying out loud, stop with the doorbell."

When I wrenched the door open, my friend Marie stood there, peeking out from the faux fur-trimmed hood of her neon pink parka. I glanced behind her and noticed she had run her Rav4 up onto the berm of snow the neighborhoods kids had created when they cleared my driveway last week.

Marie pushed past me into the foyer. "Persimmon, the worst thing has happened! The absolute worst!"

Initially, I assumed Marie was indulging her fondness for drama. She had majored in theatre at college (in the process winning her school's award for Best Portrayal of Panic). But as I closed the door, I noted her face was pale despite the frigid air outside. Her hands shook when she reached for her scarf. This was no act.

"Take a deep breath, Marie," I said. "I've got coffee and a fire on in the kitchen. You can warm up and tell me what's going on."

She followed me down the hall, shucking her parka and puffing out gasps of air. "They lost my pudding! Jonas called me this morning first thing. 'When are you planning on dropping by with your dessert for the Celebration?' he asked, and I said it was already there, and had been for days, and he said, 'Hmm.' You know how ominous a 'hmm' can sound, right Persie?"

"Yes, very," I said, and waved her into the kitchen. She tossed her parka onto a chair at the table and plunked herself on its neighbor.

“Well, this ‘hmm’ signaled doom,” Marie said. “Jonas told me, ‘We can’t seem to find it.’ I asked if he knew what my pudding looked like, and he said, ‘Of course. Dark steamed pudding in a white crockery bowl with a holly design on the side. Your signature bowl.’ He seemed very sure they didn’t have it, but I jumped in the car and sped over to the community centre. I spent the last four hours, four *hours*, searching the place for my plum pudding. It’s not there.”

“Whoa, that’s not good.” Blossom City’s amateur and pro bakers donated desserts to the annual Festive Desserts Celebration to be auctioned off. The Celebration raised several thousand dollars every year, all donated to a good cause. This year, given the current sad state of our health care system, the Celebration committee had chosen Blossom City’s hospital as the recipient.

I placed two mugs of coffee on the table and pushed the sugar and cream toward Marie. “Any chance you have a backup?”

Marie poured a smidge of cream into her mug and stirred slowly. When she met my eyes, her face was morose. “Not this year. You know how costs of everything have been going up? So, I cut back this year and made only two. Joe and I ate part of one to test the quality. I can’t very well donate the leftovers to the Celebration.”

“I suppose not, but there are people in town who would gladly pay heaps of money for your leftovers.”

I knew what her answer would be, but I asked the next question anyway. “Have you thought about whipping up another one today?”

Marie’s voice rose an octave. “What? Persimmon, you yourself make puddings. You *know* they have to age. Maybe if I had six weeks. But two days? I’d be cheating the buyer. What would people say?” She shuddered. “Omigod, this situation is the absolute worst.”

Marie’s lost plum pudding might not be the absolute worst thing that could happen in Blossom City, but it was up there. Perhaps a notch or two below absolute worst. Tickets for the Celebration were sought-after items and sold out months ahead. Barbers, hair salons, and spas were booked solid leading up to the event, and on the second Friday of November, the day of the gala, the fortunate ticket holders donned their finery and swanned into the community centre, eager to see and be seen. And to consume some of the most decadent and calorie-laden treats available.

The desserts—Panettones, Roscons de Reyes, Pistachio Baklavas, Honey Cakes, Babkas, Turrons, and steamed puddings, including of course, Marie’s sherry-laden one—were sold in a fiercely competitive auction. Many of the winning bidders then hosted tables where guests could enjoy a sampling of the prize.

Marie’s dessert consistently commanded the highest price, often raising four figures. You might wonder why someone would pay that amount for a steamed pudding. It all came down to connections—the eager samplers who crowded around Marie’s pudding as the host doused it with brandy and set it alight included Blossom City’s power set. As important as it was to outbid others and acquire Marie’s pudding, it was vital to be among the guests with a seat at that bidder’s table. Both were accomplishments to be bragged about for the next year.

If Marie’s pudding was not on offer at our gala, we’d raise many fewer dollars for the hospital. But perhaps worse, the Celebration would suffer a gut punch to its reputation that might take years to rebuild.

Somehow, we had to recover the lost pudding or find another one as close in quality to Marie's as possible. "What about Rhoda?" I asked.

Marie frowned at me. "What about my sister?"

"She has the same recipe, and every year her pudding wins the Festive Fair in Chanterelle. Would she have an extra?"

Marie shook her head. "Rhoda took two of her puddings, in her traditional red bowls, and flew to England for the holidays. How she will get them through British Customs, I don't know, but she's convinced she can win the Plymouth Plum Pudding Prize."

"She's not entering the Chanterelle Fair this year?"

"Oh, she'd *never* miss entering. Blakie dropped by on Sunday and told me Rhoda had left one pudding at the house for him to enter into the fair for her. He said, 'Mom gave me a page of instructions about care and transport of the thing. And two more pages of how she'd disown me if I ruined it somehow.' So, no chance of borrowing one from Rhoda. Besides, hers don't hold a candle to mine, if I say so myself."

I glanced at my pantry door. "Remember when you shared your pudding recipe with me, Marie?"

She jerked upright. "You haven't given it to anyone, have you?"

"Of course not."

"Thank heaven. That's a secret family recipe. You're one of my best friends and I love you to bits, but if you passed that recipe on, or even admitted you had it, I'd have to kill you."

"I completely understand. However, I have made a few puddings with your recipe. In fact, there's one in my pantry right now. Shall I give it to you?"

Marie squirmed on her stool, gazed around my kitchen, and cleared her throat. Her acting skills failed her then because, when she finally looked at me, her face was a picture of discomfort. "Oh, that's so generous of you, Persie, but I couldn't take your only pudding."

I waved her comments away. "Pfft. It's the least I can do to help you and to save the Celebration from what is sure to be a complete disaster without your dessert."

Marie reached over and patted my hand. "Dear Persie, please understand I mean this in the most constructive way. Some women, like you, are born with silver spoons in their mouths. Some women, like me, take stainless steel spoons and craft delectable desserts."

I stared at her. My cheeks felt warm. "Are you saying I'm an inadequate baker?"

"Heaven forbid! I think you are perfectly adequate." She sipped her coffee. "For someone with a silver spoon in her mouth."

"So, no to my offer?" I said.

Marie nodded. "It's a no, but with thanks. No offense intended, Persimmon."

"None taken," I said. But between you and me, my feathers were ruffled. Adequate baker? Merely adequate? For a fleeting moment, I considered friendicide.

I rose and moved to the counter, where I refilled my coffee. I brandished the carafe at Marie. "More?"

“Ta.”

I poured, resisting the urge to slop the steaming hot brew over her outstretched hand.

After I reclaimed my chair, I said, “Since we can’t find a satisfactory replacement pudding, we must solve the mystery of what’s happened to your dessert. Then we can retrieve it.” I picked up my phone. “I’m calling in reinforcements.”

I phoned both my cousin Cleo Branch and my friend Lacey Lavender, gave them a synopsis of the problem, and asked them to hurry over.

* * *

By the time Cleo and Lacey arrived, I had broken out a bottle of Blossom City Winery’s Ice Wine. When one wants to solve a mystery, it is important to equip oneself with the best tools. What better fuel for creative thinking than a divine nectar?

Lacey punched the doorbell and charged inside before I could take two steps from the kitchen. After she rid herself of layers of scarves, her parka, gloves, and hat, she removed her fogged glasses and squinted at me. “Did you know Marie’s Rav4 is atilt on your driveway? It looks like it wants to shoot for the moon.”

I nodded, the doorbell chimed again, and Cleo opened the door. “Hello! I have sustenance for us all.” She handed me an extravagant *Bûche de Noël* from her bakery. Another perfect fuel for our mystery solving endeavors.

I ushered them into the kitchen and set about slicing the Yule Log. “I’m surprised you had any of these left in the bakery, Cleo. Didn’t Sergeant Courgette buy the lot?”

Cleo chuckled. “Not even Milton can consume as many as my bakery made this year.”

Lacey said, “That man is trying to buy his way into your heart, Cleo.”

Cleo shook her head. “Don’t be silly. Milton has a sweet tooth, that’s all. I’ll be counting on him to outbid everyone at the Celebration for my *Bûche de Noël* this year, as usual.”

“At least you know who’s buying your dessert,” Lacey said. “Every year, my light fruitcake goes to an anonymous bidder. And they never share it with the crowd.”

“Whoever it is must want it all for their own enjoyment,” I said.

“I know! If it’s so good this person doesn’t want to share it, perhaps I should open a business.” Lacey glanced at Cleo. “Just light fruitcakes, so I wouldn’t be competition for Cleo’s bakery, of course.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said. “If everyone can buy your cake, we won’t be able to promote it as ‘one of a kind’ at the auction.”

Lacey mulled it over. I held my breath. Cleo and Marie glanced at each other.

Lacey said, “Yessss, I see your point. Better to have a collector’s item.”

I started breathing again and gestured at the coffee, wine, and Yule Log on the kitchen table. “Shall we turn our minds to the mystery of Marie’s missing steamed pudding?”

“Someone has absconded with it,” Marie said.

“What makes you think that?” Cleo asked.

“Not only did the men managing the dessert donations search for it, but I did as well. It’s gone.”

“Men,” Lacey said. She poured a slug of ice wine into her glass and knocked it back. “Often hopeless. Did you ask the women?”

Marie said, “No women on the donations crew this year.”

“Why would someone run off with your pudding?” Cleo said.

I had been thinking about that very question for the last hour. “There are several motives. Jealousy, greed, revenge. Who do we know with one or more of those reasons to nab the pudding?”

Lacey eyed the wine bottle. As she pulled it over, she said, “Greed? Do you mean someone kidnapped it?” She poured another glass of wine.

“I was thinking more of someone who has never topped the bidding at the Celebration. Someone who desperately wants one of Marie’s creations for their own.”

Marie’s head jerked up. “Oh! Philip Devon Charles, the Anglophile. If I had a dollar for every time he’s said, ‘I come from a long line of near-nobility,’ I’d be as wealthy as Persimmon.”

“Quite the stuffed shirt, that man,” Cleo said.

“Exactly,” Marie said. “Two weeks ago, he told me, ‘If I could win your plum pudding at the auction, I could fulfill my dream of hosting a truly British dessert table. Alas, I consistently come up short.’ Perhaps he took it?”

Lacey licked the rim of her wineglass. “Yesh. I can totally see him as a pudnapper. My guess is he’ll invite bigwigs over for holiday festivities and serve your dessert. I love this wine, Pershie.”

“Have some coffee, Lacey,” I said. “It goes nicely with Yule Log.”

She shook her head. “I’m good.”

“If Marie’s pudding was dropped off at the community center a few days ago,” I said, “then our wannabe Brit is in the clear. He’s been in hospital in Victoria since Saturday.”

“Oh my,” Marie said. “I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“I’m sure he’ll recover. I heard he went to Victoria for a traditional cream tea and consumed at least six scones loaded with clotted cream. In the ER, after they pumped his stomach, the doctor told Philip he’d suffered a bout of abdominal distendia extremis.”

Lacey raised the wine bottle, held it to the light, and peered at the dregs. “In other words, the stuffed shirt overstuffed himself.” She upended the bottle and watched the remains of the wine drip slowly into her glass. “What’s next on our motive list?”

“Jealousy,” I said. “Do we know anyone who envies Marie’s star power, and the fact her desserts always command the highest price?”

“Fiona Whittle,” Cleo said. “Places a distant second in the auction of steamed puddings every year. Wants to test all puddings for evidence of illicit substances.” Cleo grinned at Marie. “Fiona mentioned she saw you picking magic mushrooms last summer.”

“What? She must have been hallucinating,” Marie said.

“Strike out Fiona’s name,” I said. “She went to Mexico last week for a combo vacation and baking workshop.”

“Won’t help her,” Marie said. “Not even if she laces her pudding with tequila.”

“Ooh, I bet that would be tasty,” Lacey said.

“That leaves revenge,” Cleo said. “Is there anyone Marie has offended who might want to get even?”

“I seriously doubt that,” Marie said. “I’m the world’s nicest person. Isn’t that right, Persimmon?”

I hesitated for a nanosecond. Then I said, “Usually.”

“Usually?” Marie sat back and folded her arms. “Name one instance where I’ve been less than nice. One.”

As you’ve probably guessed, I wasn’t about to mention, in front of Lacey and Cleo, that Marie thought I was merely an adequate baker. One’s ego can take only so much battering each day. “Cynthia Schmidt,” I said.

Lacey and Cleo leaned forward in their seats. Marie frowned. “And?” she said.

“And do you remember the interview you did for a food magazine two years ago?”

“Of course,” Marie said. “They were very interested in our annual Celebration.”

“You’re correct,” I said. “Plus, they asked about the other local steamed pudding bakers. You said it was a challenging dessert to master and that certain bakers, like a local gingham-loving fraulein, would do well to search for a simpler hobby and under no circumstances should give up their day jobs.”

Lacey laughed. “I remember that! Cynthia was pished.”

Cleo pushed the coffee carafe nearer to Lacey. “Have some coffee, Lacey.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Marie said. “I never mentioned her by name. How could she be upset?”

I said, “Everyone in town knew who you were talking about. There are no other German bakers in Blossom City as fond of gingham as Cynthia.”

“She did not do it,” Lacey said, speaking in that deliberate way the tipsy do. “I saw her in Desire Lingerie on Saturday. She was stocking up on a few little things.” Lacey widened her eyes and blew on her fingers. “Hhhhhhottttt and *skimpeeeee!* She swore me to secrecy, so that means you’re sworn too. Right?”

We all nodded.

Lacey smiled, her eyes sliding past each of us like a car skidding through a left turn on icy streets.

We sat there.

“Lacey?” I said.

“Yep?”

“Why did Cynthia swear you to secrecy?”

“Oh! The best thing ever! She was getting married the next day. In Las Vegas. To her therapist!”

Lacey worked hard at focusing her eyes on Marie. “Cynthia told me she had you to thank for it all. If not for your insult about her puddings, she never would have gone for counselling and would have missed the love of her life.”

Marie leaned back in her chair, folded her arms, and glared at me. “See? Cynthia thinks I’m the best.” Then her face crumpled, and she sobbed. “Who would do this? Promise me you’ll solve this case, Persimmon.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Lacey placed her hands on the tabletop and rocked back and forth, and back and forth, and then heaved herself upright. She swayed slightly. “Whoa. Not good.” She leaned toward Marie. “Don’t worry, Marie. Pershie will find the perpetrator.” Lacey giggled. “The pudnapper who pirated your pudding.”

“I’m driving you home, Lacey,” I said, and steered her toward the door.

As I maneuvered Lacey’s Volkswagen van along the streets to her house, Lacey lolled in the passenger seat and hummed. “I don’t get it,” she finally said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s like no one ever saw that pudding. Maybe Marie is imagining it.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

Lacey said, “Maybe she only thinks she dropped it off. Maybe it’s still in her house.”

When I got home, I phoned Marie. “When exactly did you drop off your pudding?”

“Sunday. But it wasn’t me. Blakie delivered it for me. When he visited me last Sunday, I asked if he could run it by the centre on his way back to Chanterelle. He’s such a good nephew.”

* * *

It was a short, enjoyable drive to the neighbouring town of Chanterelle the next morning. The road was clear, the snow in the valley fields was still fresh and sparkling, and the sun did its best to warm the day.

After Blake invited me in, I told him I was helping his aunt track down her missing plum pudding. “Marie said you dropped it off for her?”

Blake nodded. “Yup. Last Sunday.”

“Do you remember who you gave it to?”

“Dunno. Never got a name. Gray hair, glasses, maybe dentures?”

Yes, well, that could be any of the men on the committee.

Blake went on. “Honestly, I’m not surprised the pudding was misplaced. She was a bit dithery.”

“Who’s that?” I said.

“The woman I gave it to.”

I fanned myself. “Blake, could I trouble you for a glass of water?”

I followed him into the kitchen and waited while he poured a glass of water for me. I noticed a steamed pudding sitting in a red bowl on the counter. “Is that your mother’s famous pudding?” I said.

Blake glanced at it. “Yeah. I have to take it to the Chanterelle Festive Fair tomorrow.” He handed me the water, and I took a seat on a kitchen chair. As I sipped the water, I stared at the bananas on the table. Sitting in a white crockery bowl with a holly design.

“Marie told me your mother threatened to disown you if you failed to deliver her pudding to the fair.”

Blake chuckled. “Yeah, she’s always saying crazy things like that. She doesn’t mean it, though.”

“She’s won the fair’s grand prize every year for at least a decade, right?”

He nodded.

“I imagine it would be an awful blow if she didn’t win? And an even greater one if she discovered that her pudding was never entered into the competition?”

“I suppose,” Blake said. “But that won’t happen because I have her pudding right here and I am taking it over there tomorrow. Just like she wants.”

“Don’t you mean you have your Aunt Marie’s pudding here?” I pointed to the bowl of bananas. “That’s Marie’s signature bowl. You didn’t drop Marie’s pudding off at the Blossom City community centre, did you, Blake? Why not?”

“I dropped it off. I did!”

I shook my head. “No. What you don’t know is that the entire crew handing donations this year are men. No women accepted the dessert donations.”

Blake’s mouth made an ‘O.’ Then his face fell, and he collapsed onto a chair across from me. “I ate it. Mom’s pudding. I love those puddings. I’m weak.”

I nodded. “And then you had to replace it somehow.”

“Yes. I thought Aunt Marie would have a bunch of her own puddings and would give me one if I asked. But she said she had only made two this year and one was half-eaten. Then she asked me to deliver her pudding to the community centre. I didn’t plan on stealing it.”

“But you did.”

He hung his head. “What now?”

I thought about the dilemma. Marie needed her pudding back. Rhoda, Blake’s mother, expected a pudding to be entered in her name in the Chanterelle Fair. Blake was a victim of good baking and his appetite. True, he was also a thief. But perhaps he could be redeemed.

“How about this?” I said. When I laid out my solution, and the price Blake would have to pay, he enthusiastically agreed.

Blake packaged up the white crockery bowl, as well as the steamed pudding in its red bowl, and followed me home. There, we carefully transferred the pirated pudding back into Marie’s signature bowl. I removed my own steamed pudding from my pantry and handed it to Blake. “You promise, now. Every year at Blossom City’s Celebration of Festive Desserts, you will do whatever it takes

to outbid others for Lacey Lavender's light fruitcake. You will not share it with any of the guests. You will take it home and dispose of it."

"Can I eat it?"

I considered his question. "Well, you can try. And bless your heart if you succeed."

"Do I have to remain anonymous?"

"That's entirely up to you, Blake. But if you ever stop buying Lacey's fruitcake, I will expose you in a split second. And your mother will disown you. Got it?"

His head jerked up and down. "Yes, yes. No problem."

That afternoon Marie and I dropped off her pudding for the Celebration. When Jonas asked where Marie had finally found it, I said, "I'm embarrassed to say it's my fault. I promised Marie I would deliver the pudding, but I have been under the weather, so I didn't get around to it until now."

Friday evening at the Celebration, as usual, the fortunate ticket holders dressed in their finery and swanned into the community centre. As usual, Marie's plum pudding raised more money than any other entry. As usual, the power set clamoured to share a piece of Marie's dessert with the winning bidder.

In a plot twist, however, an anonymous bidder didn't purchase Lacey's fruitcake. Instead, Blake Matthews outbid everyone for it. "Imagine that," Lacey said to Marie. "I finally know who likes my cake."

Later, as Marie, Cleo, and I shared a post-dessert coffee, Cleo said, "A toast to Blake. Our saviour. And to you, Persimmon, for putting it all in motion."

We clinked mugs. Marie said, "I'm so glad we no longer need to run the con about the anonymous bidder. I mean, how many of Lacey's fruitcakes have the three of us bought? Twenty?"

I nodded. "At least. One does not need that many door stops."

Cleo giggled. "I put last year's fruitcake outside for the birds and not even the woodpeckers could make a dent. Light fruitcake, my arse."

* * *

On Sunday, Blake phoned me. "Mrs. Worthing, about that fruitcake."

"Oh yes, did you taste it?"

"Impossible to slice. Not even a hack saw helped. I put it out for the birds."

"Any takers?"

"Not even a woodpecker."

"Ahh. Perhaps bury it in the garden. Wherever you want to kill a few weeds."

Blake laughed. "On the upside, Mom's pudding—your pudding—won the grand prize at the Chanterelle Fair. The judge said it possibly was the best one Mom had ever entered."

So imagine that. A pudding made by an adequate baker won the grand prize at the Chanterelle Festive Fair. It's really a shame one must keep that a secret.

The End