



I was just hot-gluing the last popcorn and cranberry strand to the second of two five-foot-high topiary Christmas trees when my best friend came breezing into Maisie's Daisy.

BeBe Loudermilk stopped dead in her tracks, and gazed around my antique shop, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

She gestured towards the half-empty crates of apples, oranges and kumquats scattered around my work table, at the halved pineapples and the pomegranates spilling out of grocery sacks, and at the freshly fallen drifts of popcorn littering the floor.

'What the hell?' she said dramatically. There are very few statements BeBe makes that are not laden with drama.

'Are you now turning to fruit vending as a sideline?' She shook her head sadly. 'And I thought you were doing so well with the antiques.'

‘Christmas decorations,’ I said, pressing the popcorn strings on to the surface of the topiary tree, which I’d already covered with what seemed like a whole orchardful of tiny green crab apples and kumquats. ‘For the historic district decorating contest.’

‘Ohhh,’ she said, drawing it out.

With one tentative fingertip, she tapped the tree I’d completed, knocking off a kumquat, which rolled on to the floor, joining half a dozen other pieces of fallen fruit.

‘Cute,’ she said dismissively.

‘Cute? Is that all you can say? Cute? I’ve spent three whole days with this project. I’ve blown a good three hundred dollars on fresh fruit and nuts and styrofoam forms, and strung what feels like ten miles of popcorn and cranberries. And just look at my hands!’

I held them out for her to see. There were needle pricks on my fingertips, hot-glue burns on my palms, and multiple bandages from self-inflicted skewerings.

‘Criminal,’ BeBe said. ‘But why?’

‘Because,’ I said. ‘I am, by God, going to win the commercial division decorating contest this year, even if I have to cover the entire surface of this building with every piece of fresh fruit in Savannah.’

‘Again . . . why would you bother? I mean, what’s in it for you?’

‘Pride,’ I said. ‘Last year I really thought I had it sewn up. Remember, I did that whole deal with the gilded palmetto fronds and magnolia leaf swags? And I

had all those dried okra pods and pine cones, and I didn't even make honourable mention! They gave first place to that stupid boutique on Whitaker. Can you believe they won with those lame-o kudzu vines and hokey birds' nests and stuffed cardinals? I mean, stuffed birds! It was absolutely Hitchcockian!

'A tragic oversight, I'm sure,' BeBe said, looking around the shop. 'Remind me again why it was so crucial for me to come over here today?'

'You promised to watch the shop,' I said. 'There's an auction at Trader Bob's, over in Hardeeville, that starts at noon. This close to Christmas, I can't afford to close up while I go on a buying trip. I was also hoping you might help me put up all the decorations before I leave in an hour.'

She sighed. 'All right. What are we doing?'

I gestured towards the pair of topiary trees. 'Help me drag these outside. They're going in those big cast-iron urns by the front doors. Then we've got to tack up the over-door plaque with the pineapples and lemons and limes, and swag the grapevines around the show windows. I've got two kinds of grapes – green and red, and we'll hot-glue those once the vines are in place. Then the only thing left is the window display. But I'll set that up once I get back from Hardeeville.'

With a maximum amount of huffing and puffing, and some very unChristmas-like swearing when BeBe broke an acrylic nail, we managed to get the decorations in place.

‘There,’ I said, standing out in the street, gazing at our masterpiece. ‘Take that, Babalu!’

‘Who’s Babalu?’

‘They are,’ I said, pointing across Troupe Square. ‘My nearest and queerest competition.’

‘That’s not very nice,’ she said. ‘I thought you loved gay men.’

‘You don’t know Manny and Cookie,’ I told her.

Manny Alvarez and Cookie Parker had opened their shop on Harris Street the previous spring. Manny was a retired landscape designer from Delray Beach, Florida, and Cookie *claimed* he’d been a Broadway chorus boy in the road show of *Les Misérables*, but he was fifty if he was a day, totally bald, and he weighed close to three hundred pounds.

‘I tried to be nice and welcoming. I took flowers over there on their opening day, and invited them to dinner, but from the moment they opened, they’ve been trying to put me out of business,’ I told BeBe. ‘They’ve tried to snake some of my best pickers. They called up the city and complained about my customers parking in loading zones, they even went to the gift mart and came back with the exact same line of aromatherapy candles and bath salts that I carry, and now they sell them for two bucks cheaper.’

‘The nerve!’ BeBe said. She craned her neck to look across the square at their shop. ‘Looks like they’re working on their Christmas decorations too. Must be half a dozen men swarming around over there. Wow,

look. They've got a phone company truck with one of those cherry picker buckets to hang lights along the front of the building.'

'I'm sure whatever they do will be gaudy as hell,' I said, flouncing back into the shop with BeBe following close behind. 'You should have seen what they did for Halloween. The whole façade of the building was a red devil, with the shop's windows lit up with yellow lights as the devil's eyes.'

'Cool,' BeBe said.

'They blinked on and off all night. I thought I was having a seizure the first time I looked over there and saw it. It damn near drove me nuts,' I said. 'And it was *so* over the top.'

'Not Savannah at all,' BeBe agreed. 'But flashy. You gotta give 'em that.'

'Anybody could do what they've done,' I said. 'If money was no object. And those two are apparently rolling in it. I heard Manny personally donated twenty thousand dollars for the downtown business district's new Christmas lights. Of course, it's nothing but a thinly veiled attempt to buy the decorating contest.'

'That is a lot of dough, though,' BeBe said. 'Where do they get their money?'

'The old-fashioned way,' I said. 'Inherited. I heard that Manny had a much older lover down in Florida who died two years ago. He founded a telecommunications company, and when he died, Manny got everything.'

‘Except good taste,’ BeBe said. I shot her a grateful look. She really is the world’s best best friend.

‘All righty then,’ I said, wiping my hands on the seat of my jeans. ‘I’m gonna head over to Hardeeville. I should be back by about four. There’s plenty of change in the cash register. Prices are marked on everything. Anything brown or orange should be considered Thanksgiving merchandise, and you can mark it down 50 per cent. And if you see Manny or Cookie lurking around outside, trying to steal my decorating ideas, just set Jethro on ’em.’

‘Jethro?’ She sighed heavily.

At the sound of his name, Jethro, the shop dog, poked his nose out from under the work table where he’d been hiding, hoping I’d perhaps drop a sausage biscuit along with all that runaway fruit.

‘He adores you,’ I told BeBe. ‘And he’s great company.’

‘He sheds,’ BeBe said. ‘He drools. He farts.’

‘At least he’s consistent,’ I said, heading out the back door to my pick-up truck.



It was one of those winter mornings that remind you why you live in the South. Sunny, with a hint of coolness in the air. Despite the fact that we were less than two weeks away from Christmas, the thick grass in Troupe Square was still emerald green, and Spanish moss dripped like old lace from the oaks surrounding the iron armillary in the middle of the square. On this beautiful winter morning, I was just as thankful for what wasn't as I was for what was: no gnats, no blistering heat, no suffocating humidity.

I should have been heading in the opposite direction, but instead I turned my beat-up old turquoise truck around the square. I'd just quickly drive by Babalu, I thought. So I could reassure myself of how superior my decorations were. But my heart sank as I slowed to a crawl.

The three-storey shrimp-pink exterior of Babalu had

been transformed. Twining vines magically covered the façade. A pair of towering palm trees in rococo concrete urns flanked the shop's front door, which itself was wreathed in a fabulously elaborate swag of moss, boxwood, smilax and cedar. Everything, including the palm trees, had been painted flat white, then sprinkled with glitter. Hundreds of cut-glass chandelier prisms dangled from the white vines, and sent crystal refractions of light on to the sidewalk. It was a winter wonderland.

And standing right there on the pavement, directing the man in the bucket of the cherry picker, was the Snow Queen himself, Manny Alvarez.

'No, darling,' he called, cupping his hands to be heard. 'You've got the lights all bunched up there on the right side.'

The bucket-truck had traffic blocked in front of the shop, and I had no choice but to stop behind it. My truck's brakes made a grinding noise, and Manny whirled around to see where the noise was coming from. A smile lit his face when he spotted me.

'Eloise?' he said, one eyebrow lifted. 'Checking on the competition, are we?'

I gritted my teeth. 'Hello, Manny. Looks like your side of the square has had some unusual weather for Savannah.'

'You know me,' he said airily. 'Fantasy is my life. And really, that whole nuts and fruits and berries thing all the locals down here seem to be clinging to is so five minutes ago. Don't you agree?'

‘The Historic Commission’s guidelines specifically call for using natural, vernacular design elements,’ I pointed out. ‘I guess that’s why the “locals”, as you call them, tend to follow the guidelines.’

‘Oh, guidelines,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Boring! Cookie and I believe in following our muse, in order to allow the full range of creative expression in our work.’

‘How nice,’ I said. ‘It’ll be interesting to see what the judges think of stylised white palm trees in the context of an eighteenth-century historic district.’

‘Won’t it, though,’ he said.



Trader Bob's Treasure Trove Auction House is a grandiose name for what is, in reality, a converted chicken house on a dead-end street on the outskirts of the tiny town of Hardeeville, South Carolina, just across the Talmadge bridge from Savannah.

Because Trader Bob, aka Bob Gross, doesn't believe in wasting time or money on a catalogue or advance flier, a Trader Bob auction is always an adventure. Some days he'll have a container load of fine English or Dutch antiques, mixed in with odd lots of tube socks and bootleg videos bought from distressed merchandise brokers. More than once, I've arrived at Trader Bob's to find him hammering down cases of half-thawed frozen pizzas and slightly dented cans of off-brand pineapple.

But on this December morning, the parking lot, nothing more than a mowed cornfield, was only half full of the usual assortment of dealers' vans and trucks,

which was fine by me. Fewer dealers should mean lower bids and better deals.

I was greeted at the door by Leuveda Garner, Bob's sister and business partner, who gave me a friendly nod and proffered a numbered cardboard bid paddle.

'Hey, Weezie,' she said. 'Long time, no see.'

'Merry Christmas, Leuveda,' I said. 'Got anything good today?'

'Are you in the market for refrigerated dairy cases? Bob bought out a Piggly Wiggly grocery store over in Easley. We've got a bunch of old fixtures and display racks. There're a couple good cash registers you might be interested in.'

'I was thinking more of antiques. Is everything going to be store stuff?'

'Not all of it,' she said quickly. 'We also got everything from the owner's estate. Some furniture, dishes, linens, all the junk from the attic and basement, and a couple of barns on the property, too.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Old crap like you like, Weezie. Better go find a chair. Bob's starting early today, because he's driving to Hendersonville tonight to pick up a load of furniture, and we heard there's rough weather in the mountains.'

Sure enough, as my eyes got accustomed to the dim light of the chicken house, I saw Bob standing at his podium, microphone clipped to his shirt front, holding aloft a life-sized cardboard cut-out of the Birdseye Jolly Green Giant.

‘All right now,’ Bob chanted. ‘I need a giant bid to start us off. Folks, this is vintage advertising art. Whadya give now? Whadya give? Gimme a hundred. Let’s go, ho, ho, ho. Get it?’

The audience groaned, but they got it, all right.

With no time to check out the merchandise, I picked a folding metal chair close to the front, and did my best to eyeball the offerings from there. Some auctioneers don’t mind if you shop while they talk, but Bob Gross runs a tight ship, and he doesn’t like any distractions once he’s started working.

As Leurveda had promised, there was an entire small grocery store worth of fixtures and display racks lined up on both sides of the chicken house walls. My eyes locked tight on a battered red-wire three-shelf bread display rack with a tin Sunbeam bread sign affixed to the top. The Sunbeam girl’s topknot of golden curls still shone bright as she bit into a slice of white bread. It would be just the thing for a display fixture at Maisie’s Daisy. I could already envision it piled with stacks of old quilts, tablecloths and bed linens.

Right beside the Sunbeam girl leaned an old turquoise-painted wooden screen door, with a bright yellow Nehi orange soft-drink metal door push advertisement.

‘Mine,’ I whispered to myself. Again, I lusted after the screen door for myself. I could already see it as a kitchen door for my own townhouse on Charlton Street.

I looked nervously around at the other auction-goers

to size up the competition, and was elated to see that most of them only seemed genuinely interested in the more modern fixtures Bob was rapidly auctioning off.

When the Sunbeam bread rack came up half an hour later, Bob started the bidding at two hundred dollars. I kept my paddle down. Way too high, I thought. Today, with this thinned-out crowd, he'd be lucky to get fifty bucks for it, the price I had already budgeted spending on it.

'Two hundred?' Bob implored, searching the room for a bidder. 'How 'bout one seventy-five?' He held his arms wide in disbelief. 'Folks, this is Americana. You can't put a price on Americana.'

'One hundred eighty.' The voice came from the back of the room, and I'd heard it recently. Only this morning, to be exact. I whirled around in my chair to see Manny Alvarez, frantically waving his bid paddle.

'That's more like it,' Bob said approvingly. 'A man who knows values.'

Manny Alvarez! What was he doing, slumming over here in Hardeeville? I'd been buying from Trader Bob's for years, and I'd never seen any other Savannah antique dealers make the trek over to my secret source before. Had Manny followed my truck over the bridge?

'We've got one eighty,' Bob said jovially, looking around the room. 'Anybody else?'

My fingers turned white as I gripped the paddle. A hundred and eighty was actually a fair price for the bread rack – cheap, even. But I hadn't budgeted spend-

ing that kind of money for something I had no intention of selling.

‘One eighty going once,’ Bob droned, staring directly at me. ‘Weezie Foley, I can’t believe you’re not bidding on this thing. I thought of you as soon as I saw that little Sunbeam gal.’

‘One eighty-five,’ I said, through gritted teeth.

‘One ninety,’ Manny fired back.

My heart sped up. ‘One ninety-two?’

Bob rolled his eyes but nodded, accepting my chintzy raised bid.

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ Manny said. ‘Two hundred.’

Bob cut his eyes in my direction. My paddle stayed where it was. Christmas was coming. I had gifts to buy. Bills to pay. The commode in the shop was making weird gurgling noises that foretold a high-priced plumbing problem.

Bob looked at Manny. I looked at Manny. He had his chequebook out, and a smug ‘nonny-nonny-boo-hoo’ expression on his face. I hate smug. But I hate broke worse.

‘I’m out,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘You sure?’ Bob asked, his gavel poised mid-air.

I nodded.

‘Sold for two hundred dollars,’ Bob said. ‘You got yourself a great buy, mister.’

‘I know,’ Manny said. He gave me a broad wink and went over to Leurveda to cash out.

I turned around and tried to concentrate on the rest

of the auction, consoling myself that I would probably have no competition for the screened door with the Nehi advertisement.

The screened door was a twelve-dollar steal, for which I gave myself a pat on the back, but my paddle stayed in my lap after that, as Bob auctioned off the rest of the Piggly Wiggly people's earthly belongings, which included an astonishing amount of Tupperware containers, beta-format movie tapes and case after case of empty canning jars.

Finally, Bob paused to take a swig of coffee from his styrofoam cup. He glanced down at his watch, and at the greatly diminished crowd of bidders.

'Folks, it's getting late, and I gotta head for the hills. Tell you what. I got three mixed-box lots here. We don't have time to drag the stuff out of 'em. Leuveda!' he called towards the back of the room. 'Hon, tell 'em what all's in these boxes.'

Leuveda stood up and ran her hand through her sandy blonde curls. 'Bob, there's good stuff in there. Some nice old glass Christmas ornaments, some vintage linens. I think there was at least one Christmas tablecloth, and some old aprons and things. Miscellaneous pieces of china, and a jewellery box full of odds and ends. The family took all the really good stuff. But there's probably some good old costume jewellery left.'

Bob nodded approvingly and Leuveda took her seat again and resumed cashing out the dealers who were preparing to leave.

‘Gimme twenty – one money for all three boxes,’ Bob urged.

Two men in the front row got up, stretched, and started towards the door.

‘Twenty,’ Bob repeated. ‘Leurveda, didn’t you say those ornaments were Shiny-Brites? Still in the original boxes?’

‘Four, maybe five, Shiny Brite boxes,’ Leurveda agreed, not looking up from her adding machine. ‘There’s a strand of bubble-lights too.’

My pulse blipped upwards. I’ve collected old glass ornaments for years, and Shiny Brites – especially in their original boxes – were at the head of my want list.

But before I could say anything, a skinny red-headed woman in front of me cocked her head to one side. ‘Give you five bucks, Bob.’

‘Five!’ he howled. ‘You can’t buy a single Shiny Brite for that.’

‘Five,’ she repeated, standing up.

‘Weezie?’ he said, noticing my fidgeting.

He had me and he knew it. ‘Seven,’ I said, mentally crossing my fingers while trying to keep a poker face.

‘Estelle?’ He went back to the redhead. ‘You gonna let her get away with that?’

She shook her head resolutely.

Bob sighed. ‘You’re killing me. Seven once, twice, sold for seven dollars.’

I smiled and waved my paddle number at him, which he called out to Leurveda, who’d already added it to my total.

‘I gotta get out of this business,’ Bob said, shaking his head in disgust.

It was nearly four by the time I got the truck loaded. BeBe, I knew, would be champing at the bit to be relieved at the shop. Still, I couldn’t resist peeking inside the heaviest of the cardboard boxes as I loaded them in the bed of the pick-up, alongside the screened door.

The bitter loss of the Sunbeam bread rack to Manny Alvarez was quickly forgotten as I lifted out four yellowed cardboard boxes of Shiny Brite glass ornaments in their original carton.

‘Yes!’ I exclaimed, peering inside the brittle cellophane box-top window at the glittering coloured glass orbs. Not just unadorned round balls, the boxes also contained rarer, and more desirable, glass figural ornaments in the shapes of angels, snowmen, and santas. Some had flocked swirls or stripes, and a few were kugel and tear-drop-shaped. Each box held a dozen ornaments, and all were in fifties colours – turquoise, pink, pale blue and mint-green.

I never bother to read price guides for the things I collect, because these days I only buy when the price is cheap, and I’m never looking to resell, but still, even I knew my seven-dollar purchase was a winner.

Beneath the boxes of ornaments, I unwrapped a neatly folded, if slightly stained fifties Christmas bridge cloth, with decorative borders of red and green holly leaves interspersed with playing card motifs. There were eight kitchen aprons, all with Christmas themes,

ranging from practical red and white gingham and rickrack to a flirty red ruffled chiffon, to a starched white organza apron with hand-crocheted lace edging and an appliquéd snowflake pocket.

‘Adorable,’ I said, happily patting the pile of aprons. Beneath them I found a cardboard box filled with dozens of delicate vintage lady’s handkerchiefs, and beneath the aprons, I found the jewellery box Leueda had promised.

The box itself was nothing special, I’d seen dozens of embossed leather boxes like this one at yard sales and thrift stores over the years. Inside I found the expected jumble of old glass beads, discoloured strands of cheap pearls, orphaned clip-on earrings, and inexpensive dimestore bracelets and brooches.

I rifled the jewellery jumble in the bottom of the box with my forefinger, like a painter stirring paint, until something sharp jabbed me, drawing blood.

‘Oww!’ I exclaimed, sucking my wounded finger. With my left hand I picked up the piece that had stuck me.

It was a brooch. A big, gaudy, blue-jewelled brooch, maybe an inch high, in the shape of a Christmas tree. A blue Christmas tree.

My mobile phone rang. I looked at the caller ID panel and winced. BeBe. Time was up. She was tired of playing store, I knew. Anyway, I had to get back and finish decorating the shop before getting ready to hit the holiday party circuit tonight.

‘Hi,’ I said, cradling the phone between my ear and

shoulder as I pinned the brooch to my blouse. 'How's business?'

'Great,' BeBe said unenthusiastically. 'Your dog drooled on my shoe. Your toilet sounds like it's going to explode. But all is not lost. I sold that ugly brown stick-looking table by the door for \$250.'

'You what?' I exclaimed.

'Yeah, I couldn't believe it either,' she said, laughing. 'And I got cash, so don't worry about the cheque bouncing.'

'Two hundred and fifty,' I repeated dumbly.

'Great, huh?'

'Not so much,' I told her. 'That was a signed, handmade Jimmy Beeson hickory-stick table from the 1920s. It came out of one of those old lake lodges up at Lake Rabun in North Georgia. I paid almost a thousand for it myself.'

'Oh,' BeBe said. 'So, marking it \$250 was kind of a loss-leader thing?'

'No,' I said sadly. 'The price tag was \$2500. Two zeroes.'

'Whoopsie,' BeBe said. 'Look, I'll make it right with you when I see you. But I've got to lock up and go and get ready for your uncle's party tonight. Is it all right to leave Jethro alone until you get here?'

'Go right on,' I said. 'He used to like to chew on the leg of that table. But that's not a problem any more.'