

“Bloodstains and Candy Canes” - Excerpt

“Cheating? It’s not a contest, who cares if they bought cookies?” Shaw asks. For a cop, it’s odd he doesn’t understand cookie exchanges are all about besting the other bakers.

“Because the whole point is for everyone to make homemade cookies and share the recipe. If one of these women stooped to passing off bakery cookies as their own, they might be capable of murder.”

His frown deepens to a scowl. “I think you might be taking this baking thing a little too seriously but fine, I’ll check.”

Dylan Shaw inches to the kitchen doorway, careful not to cross the police tape. The room is crowded with the forensic team doing their thing. I catch a glimpse of one of them bagging the murder weapon, a knife with an elaborate Christmas tree on the handle. I wonder if it belongs to Agnes? It doesn’t seem her style, but would a killer really bring a knife to a cookie party?

I creep closer to see if the butcher block is missing a knife when Shaw turns and plows smack into me. I stumble backwards—darn these high heels anyway. Shaw has quick reflexes and grabs my arms to hold me steady. I don’t fall, but my knees turn to jelly at his touch.

“You’re right, the box is stamped with Queen Bea Bakery. I’m going to let the detective know. You should rejoin the rest of the, um…”

He couldn’t quite finish the sentence, so I finish it for him. “Suspects?”

Longer excerpt

Looking for a way to make my *faux pas* up to him, I was confident I'd found the perfect peace offering at a local flea market when I was poking around for Christmas gifts. A beautiful, old Montblanc pen. Who wouldn't feel confident enough to take the sergeant's exam with the Rolls Royce of pens in their hand? The pen was a bit pricey for my current financial status, but I had figured the look on Shaw's face when I gave it to him would be totally worth it.

But now, after a continuing radio silence from him, I have to wonder if I read our whole relationship wrong? Are we not at the gift giving stage? And if I pissed him off by pushing him to take the exam and we're through, what am I going to do with the pen?

So am I mad at him? Darn skippy I am.

"What makes you think I'm upset?" The frost in my voice chills even me. When did I learn how to be so bitchy?

"Because you're acting weird." After a moment, he frowns. "Are you seeing Zach again?"

"What? No!" Why on Earth would he think that? "Shaw, I'm serious. I think it's important. Will you please go in the kitchen and tell me if the box on the counter is from a bakery?"

"I don't want to contaminate the crime scene," he grouses in an uncharacteristically bitter tone. I could smack myself on the head for not thinking before speaking.

As a rookie, he'd made a mistake and accidentally disturbed a crime scene. It didn't hurt the case, they still got their conviction, but to this day the detectives involved haven't let Shaw live it down. They're the same detectives who tried to wrongfully

convict my ex-boyfriend Zach of murder this past summer. Defying them by helping me prove his innocence had nearly cost Shaw his badge. How can I ask him to risk his reputation again on a hunch?"

"Why does a bakery box even matter?"

Of its own accord, my hand rests on his arm and my voice warms at least ten degrees. "For starters, it backs up the kid's story that he's a delivery guy. Detective Thatcher might appreciate the information so she doesn't waste too much time questioning the wrong suspect."

"Good point," he says, looking over his shoulder at the closed door to the den.

"It also means one of the women at the cookie exchange planned on cheating."

"Cheating? It's not a contest, who cares if they bought cookies?" He clearly doesn't understand cookie exchanges are all about besting the other bakers. Or maybe my neighbors back home are a little too cutthroat. An idea to consider another time, like when there isn't a killer roaming around.

"Because the whole point is for everyone to make homemade family favorites and share the recipe. If one of these women stooped to passing off bakery cookies as their own, maybe they're also capable of murder."

His frown deepens to a scowl. "I think you might be taking this baking thing a little too seriously but fine, I'll check."

Ever so gingerly, Shaw inches to the kitchen doorway and cranes his head inside, careful not to cross the police tape. The room is crowded with the forensic team doing their thing. I catch a glimpse of one of them bagging the murder weapon, a knife with an elaborate Christmas tree on the handle. I wonder if it belongs to Agnes? The ornate tree

doesn't seem her style, but either the killer grabbed the nearest weapon, or they brought it with them.

I start to creep closer to see if the butcher block is missing a knife when Shaw turns and plows smack into me. I stumble backward—again, the shoes' fault, I wouldn't have nearly landed on my butt in my clogs. Fortunately, Shaw has quick reflexes and grabs my arms to hold me steady. I don't fall, but my knees feel like jelly at his touch.

“You're right, the box is stamped with Queen Bea Bakery. I'm going to let the detective know. Seriously, you should rejoin the rest of the, um...”

He can't quite say the rest of the sentence, so I finish it for him. “Suspects?”

His cheeks pink, and his gaze drops mine as he nods. “Yeah, the rest of the suspects.” Still holding on to me, he pulls me close for a quick, soft kiss. “Be careful, babe. One of those women might be a killer.”

Reeling from either the kiss or him calling me babe, I'm not sure which, I make my way back to the patio. Common sense says what should bother me more is the idea one of the women I'm mingling with might be a killer. I graduated near the top of my class in vet school, so why does this one sandy-haired, lantern jawed, cop confuse me so easily?