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A DONUT SHOP
MYSTERY 



"A DELIGHT."
—Diane Mott Davidson

Jessica Beck

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TRAGIC TOPPINGS

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CHAPTER 1

The day Emily Hargraves disappeared after visiting my donut shop, I had no idea that it would be the beginning of a series of seemingly unrelated events that would ultimately lead to the death of one of my dearest friends.

To be honest, I didn't think much about my encounter with Emily at the time. As the owner of the only donut shop in my small North Carolina town, I speak with a great many people in the course of running my business during the day, and Emily really didn't make much of an impression on me at the time. I did remember that she said she was on her way to Two Cows and a Moose—her newsstand just down the block from Donut Hearts—and while she wasn't exactly a regular at my shop, it wasn't unusual for her to visit when she wanted a sweet iced pastry treat. Emily didn't indulge that often, but when she did, it was all the way. No topping was too outlandish, no combination of tasty additions too much for her. In other words, she was my kind of gal, and we'd been friends ever since she'd come back to town after graduating from college.

I wish I had taken the time to chat with her a little more before I served her a blueberry donut with chocolate icing, sprinkles, stars, and a chewy sour gummy worm coiled on top—all per her request—along with a pint of the chocolate milk we sold in cute little boxes, but she came in when things were crazy, and I barely had time to do more than share a smile, serve her, and then take her money.

As it turned out, it appeared that I was the last one to see her. At least that's what Chief Martin tried to tell me a few hours after Emily had visited my shop. He wasn't all that pleased with me, but that honestly wasn't unusual. I wasn't sure if his frustrated relationship with my mother had anything to do with his attitude toward me, and I wasn't about to ask. It was a sore subject between the three of us, one that I was very careful to avoid whenever possible. Chief Martin and my mother had been trying for months to arrange their first official date, but every time it approached, Momma had found a new and sometimes ingenious way to postpone it. She finally promised the police chief that she wouldn't drag her feet any more, and they were slated to finally go out on their first real date later that night.

Until then, things would continue to be tense, and I'd been doing my best to avoid the police chief for the past few weeks, but now with Emily's disappearance, that wasn't going to work anymore.

When it came down to it, there weren't many folks in town who wanted Emily found more than I did. April Springs was very much like a small family, and when one of us was in trouble, it felt as though all of us were.

“We’ve been over this already,” I said to the police chief as we stood in my donut shop covering the same ground again. Chief Martin purposely avoided looking at any of my donuts as we spoke, since he’d been on a diet ever since his divorce had become final. His weight was dropping, even if it was ever so slowly, but I’d never seen a man go to such lengths to avoid a donut so thoroughly in my life. I explained yet again, “She came by for a donut and a pint of chocolate milk, and that’s the last time I saw her.”

“What kind of donut did she buy?” he asked as he jotted something down in a small notebook.

“Does that really matter?” I asked.

“It might,” he answered. “You never know with these things.”

“It was blueberry.”

“Just blueberry?” he asked, his pencil still poised over the paper.

“No, it had chocolate icing, sprinkles, stars, and a chewy sour gummy worm on top.”

He scowled at me. “Suzanne, this is no time to trot out that odd sense of humor of yours. This could be serious.”

Why was I not surprised he didn’t believe me? “I’m telling you, that’s exactly what she ordered, but I can assure you, there wasn’t anything wrong with what I sold her.” I was probably a little too defensive about it, but my donuts had shown up in police investigations a few times in the past, and I didn’t want to even consider the possibility that the donut Emily had bought from me could be connected to her disappearance.

“Take it easy,” he said as he jotted the donut’s complete description down. “I have to ask. Who knows? It

might turn out to be important.” He closed the notebook, and then added a little apologetically, “Suzanne, I’m just doing my best to collect information right now.”

I lowered my voice as I asked, “Why the fuss, Chief? She hasn’t been missing that long. It’s not like there’s any reason to suspect foul play, is there?”

He shook his head. “No, at least not from what I’ve been able to uncover so far.”

“Then what gives?”

The police chief almost whispered the next thing he said to me, and I had a difficult time hearing him. “Truth be told, she had an appointment in her shop with the mayor about a zoning waiver she’s been trying to get for parking, and when she turned up missing, the boss was afraid it reflected badly on him somehow.”

I wasn’t all that fond of our mayor, and I knew that he wasn’t afraid of throwing his weight around, especially when he was soon going to be up for reelection.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Is that all you need from me?” I asked, completely finished with this conversation if I could manage it.

“We’re good for now,” he said as he put away his notebook. “If you happen to think of anything else, give me a call.”

I nodded my agreement. “You know, you really should speak with Gabby Williams. She spends half her day looking out her front window, so she might have seen something everyone else missed.” Gabby was my nearest business neighbor. She owned ReNEWed, a secondhand shop that specialized in nice clothing gently used. If something was going on in town, chances were good that Gabby knew something about it. I’d used her as a source for information in the past myself,

and though the facts and rumors she gave me were often valuable, they never came without some kind of price, even if it was just sharing a cup of her favorite tea and listening to her latest spin on the world of April Springs.

“We’ve already spoken,” the chief said abruptly, and for a second, I actually felt sorry for the man. He was usually able to hold his own with folks around April Springs, but I knew that going up against Gabby, he’d have a battle on his hands. Most folks did, and I always tried my best to keep dancing that fine line that kept me off her expansive list of enemies.

“Did she have anything helpful to add?” I asked.

“Only that Emily walked into your shop, and that’s the last time she saw her.”

I shook my head. “Do you honestly believe that she still might be here? Feel free to search the place if you’d like. Emma’s in back doing dishes, but I guarantee you that Emily’s nowhere to be found on site.”

The two young women had been friends for years, sharing the root of a common name, and my assistant was upset by Emily’s disappearance. Conversations could get confusing if both of them were in the room at the same time, something the young women always had fun with.

“How’s she holding up?” the chief asked softly.

“I didn’t realize you knew how close they were.”

He nodded and smiled briefly. “Believe it or not, I know quite a bit about our little town. Why don’t you wait on your customers out here, and I’ll go have a word with Emma in back.”

I would have loved to listen in on that interview, but I still had a shop to run, and I needed our customers to

know that I was on the job. Besides, there was no doubt in my mind that Emma would tell me everything they talked about once Chief Martin was gone.

“Suzanne, what’s happened?” my mother asked six minutes later when she came bursting through the front door of Donut Hearts. She was a petite little thing, but anyone who judged her by her size was in for a rude awakening. My mother could take a stand against a grizzly bear and a mountain lion teaming up together and send them both scampering for the hills.

“Emily Hargraves is gone,” I said.

My mother looked shocked by the news. “What do you mean, she’s gone? You’re not saying that she’s dead, are you?”

I fervently hoped not. “No, she apparently missed an appointment with the mayor in her shop, and now everyone thinks she’s vanished completely.”

Momma wasn’t buying that, though. “Nonsense, no one just disappears.”

“Apparently that’s exactly what happened. The mayor arrived at her newsstand ten minutes after she left here. He found the door open, and no sign of Emily anywhere.”

“Couldn’t she have just stepped away for a while?” Momma asked.

“I was wondering the same thing myself, but I can’t imagine her not locking the front door on her way out. After all, the guys were all in there.” The “guys” I was referring to were the store’s namesakes: Cow, Spots, and Moose, three much beloved stuffed animals from Emily’s childhood that she’d named her newsstand after. They now occupied a place of honor in her store

on a shelf by the register. Emily took it one step further, dressing her three mascots in whatever seasonal outfits struck her fancy. In years past, they'd made appearances as Santas, superheroes, leprechauns, Uncle Sams, and a host of other characters.

Momma looked hard at me for a moment. "And how do you figure into all of this?"

"What makes you think I'm involved?" I asked, trying to muster as much indignation as I could manage. "I'm not a part of every odd thing that happens in April Springs."

"No," Momma said, "but you're usually in the middle of most of them, so don't bother denying it."

"Why do you think I am this time? It's pure coincidence that Emily came by the shop this morning."

My mother pointed outside to the police chief's cruiser. "Perhaps, but I know Phillip wouldn't ordinarily be visiting you here unless it was related to business, given his strict diet."

I wasn't above using our police chief's presence to motivate my mother to change the topic of conversation. "You shouldn't even be here then, should you?"

"Why ever not?"

"Isn't it bad luck to see him before your first date?"

"We both know that's when you get married. Suzanne, enough nonsense. I won't discuss my love life with you."

"Fair enough, as long as mine is off limits, too," I said.

Momma chose to let that slide. "Where *is* Jake this week?" she asked.

"He's in Dillsboro," I answered. My boyfriend was a state police investigator. As a matter of fact, that was

how we'd first met. Our dating life had been turbulent for a while, but these days, the only problem we had was too much time apart as he traveled the state solving crime.

Momma nodded. "That's right, I read about it in the newspaper this morning. Who could imagine that someone might rob a train in this day and age?"

A pair of daring bandits had robbed a recreational train that traveled private tracks in the North Carolina mountains, sticking up its passengers car by car, and then vanishing into the woods on waiting four-wheelers before anyone could stop them. It wasn't exactly the Great Train Robbery, but it was enough to spur Jake's boss into action. It didn't hurt that the governor's daughter had been on the train on her honeymoon. I'd ridden that train more times than I could count, but fortunately, I'd missed that particular trip.

"Jake said they made off with a lot of loot," I said. "He's working the backcountry with dogs searching for them right now."

"The things that man does in the course of a day's work," my mother said.

"Don't kid yourself. He loves every second of it," I said.

Chief Martin chose that moment to come out of the kitchen. He had a stern look on his face that quickly melted when he saw my mother.

"Hello, Dorothy. You look lovely today."

So help me, I almost caught my mother blushing. "You should save some of that praise for later," she said.

"Oh, trust me. I've got plenty more where that came from." It was odd seeing that boyish grin on the police chief. I nearly told them to get a room, but I kept my

mouth shut just for a change of pace. He smiled broadly at her and said, "I'll see you at six."

A troubled look crossed my mother's face. "Should you be going out on a date with me when you're just beginning a new case? If you'd rather postpone and keep searching for Emily, I'd understand completely."

"Not on your life," he said. "I'm not willing to wait another minute for our first date. Believe me, I've waited long enough." That much was true; the man had been pining over my mother since they'd been in grade school together. In a softer voice, he added, "Besides, I'm not even certain this is a real case. Emily's a grown woman, and until we hear differently, I'm not jumping to any conclusions about where she might be."

I was happy my mother was going out again, but I didn't need to hear any more from them at the moment. "Chief, did you need me for anything else?" I asked.

He looked surprised to see me still standing there. "What? No, we're finished, at least for now."

"Good. If you'll excuse me, I've got work to do." That was a big whopping lie, since we didn't have a single customer waiting to be served, and Emma clearly had things in back under control, but I wasn't all that crazy about having the police cruiser parked in front of my shop, no matter what folks thought about the fond relationship that existed between cops and donuts.

"Yes, I'd better be moving on myself." I couldn't believe it when he tipped the brim of an imaginary hat to my mother, and I was about to say something when Momma said, "I'll see you this evening, Phillip."

"I can't wait," he said as he left the shop.

After he was gone, Momma said, "I'm afraid you'll be on your own for dinner tonight, Suzanne."

“That’s fine,” I said. “I’ve already got plans myself.”

“Jake’s not going to have time to come back to April Springs just to take you out to eat, is he?”

I shook my head. “No, but it’s the next best thing. Grace and I are going out on the town.” Grace Gauge was my best friend, and frequent coconspirator. She liked nothing more than digging into an investigation with me, but things had been quiet lately.

At least they had been until Emily stepped away from her shop without telling anyone where she was going.

I was just getting ready to close the donut shop for the day at the crack of noon when something caught my eye outside. A man was approaching Donut Hearts with a halting, limping gait, and for a moment, I didn’t recognize him. But as he got closer, I saw that it was George Morris, a retired cop and good friend who had been injured, not in the line of duty, but following a lead for me. I’d been overwhelmed with guilt since his accident. No, “accident” wasn’t the right word. His injury had resulted from a purposeful event, and my part in causing it was something I still had a hard time coming to grips with.

I rushed to open the door for him, and did my best to hide the sadness I felt when I saw him. With my bravest smile, I said, “George, you’re looking good.”

He grinned at me. “Suzanne, you’re lying through your teeth, but I appreciate the sentiment. How are you?”

“That’s what I should be asking you,” I said as I stepped aside and let him in.



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