

Hazelnut and Homicide (Sticky Sweet Cozy Mysteries Book 15)

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Hazelnut and Homicide Sticky Sweet Cozy Mysteries, Book 15
Summer Prescott Books Publishing

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1

Talk of Visitors

"You did an amazing job. It's absolutely perfect."

Lydia smiled but brushed the compliment away. "When part of the flavoring is chocolate, it's easy to create something delicious."

"Still, this is something wonderful, dear," Annette said. "My granddaughter is going to love it. And I'm sure the customers will too."

The two women were in the kitchen of Lydia's shop, Doherty's Taffy and Trinkets. They had come in early before opening so Lydia could show off the new flavor she had whipped up. While Lydia had been creating new flavors of saltwater taffy throughout the summer to keep customers coming back to her boardwalk shop, she also created recipes and designs for special events. She had made special taffy for a promotion party, a grand opening of a play, and for the 4th of July. When Annette told her that her family would be visiting, Lydia declared that this was a special event too and she needed to make a new candy to celebrate.

Lydia knew how important Annette's family was to her. Her daughter and granddaughter had been living with her while their new house was being built out of town near Annette's son-in-law's new job. When they finally moved, Annette began experiencing empty nest syndrome again.

Luckily, Annette had found a place at the taffy shop. She not only helped make the candy, but Annette also put her crocheting skills to good use. She made nautical-themed toys that were sold

in the souvenir section of the shop, and they were selling very well. Her Ocean Point, NJ starfish practically flew off the shelves. This provided her with some extra money. However, what was more important were the friendships she'd forged at the shop. Annette had befriended the younger employees and gave grandmotherly advice. She also had invited one coworker, Mona, to stay with her after her condo had suffered fire and water damage earlier in the summer.

Lydia knew that she was lucky to have the employees that she did and that everyone got along so splendidly. She had begun to think of everyone there more like family than staff, though it did help that they were all very capable of creating sweet saltwater taffy and running the shop smoothly. Most of her employees had also helped Lydia find clues when she found herself involved in a case too. It was because of how helpful they were and how much she cared about them that Lydia went out of her way to show her affection for them in candy form.

"Since I have your stamp of approval on this flavor now, why don't we whip up a larger batch?" Lydia suggested.

"I think it will have to be quite a large one," Annette said happily. "I know that my family will want many pieces. And we'll need some for the customers too."

Lydia began taking out the proper ingredients as she spoke. "For this recipe, we'll make two taffy mixtures. One is the dark chocolate taffy that we've made before. The other is a new hazelnut one that I created. After both mixtures have been pulled and aerated, we'll twist them together so they there is a perfect blend of the two parts in each bite."

The two women fell into an easy rhythm as they began the taffy making process. Lydia listened as Annette talked about her family's upcoming trip. The only thing that caused Annette's enthusiasm to wane a tiny bit was that the trio would be staying at a bed and breakfast rather than at her house.

"I suppose they have become accustomed to their privacy now," Annette said. "And perhaps they want a little more space. Mona is staying in one of my guest rooms now. Maybe they will take two rooms at the bed and breakfast."

"I'm sure you'll still be able to see them often during their stay," said Lydia as she transferred the chocolate taffy onto their pulling machine.

"Yes. And I'll take my granddaughter to the beach. And we'll color. And my daughter and I will sing

some of our silly songs, and Ron can tell me about his new job. And I'm sure everyone will love Mona."

"I'm sure they will," Lydia agreed.

Perhaps she knew she was being talked about or it was simply the time that she was supposed to arrive for work to be there for the opening shift, but Mona arrived at that moment. She was joined by Kelsey and Jeff.

Lydia would be away from the shop in the afternoon, and she wanted to make sure that they would have proper coverage on this beautiful beach day. She felt confident that the shelves would stay stocked, and customers would be happy with all four of them working. She and Annette began explaining how to make the hazelnut chocolate taffy.

Annette's good mood was semi-infectious. Kelsey and Jeff were soon grinning ear to ear as they listened to her talk about her excitement for her family's arrival that evening. Jeff started asking if any of her family liked surfing because he would be happy to show them the best spots. Kelsey wanted to know if they would be in town long enough to see her Shakespeare in the Sand performance. They all chatted about how much the taffy would be appreciated.

It was only Mona who seemed subdued. Lydia pulled her aside to talk to her.

"What's the matter?"

Mona shrugged. "Nothing exactly. Or nothing yet. I feel bad that it's taking so long for my condo to be fixed. Cora of Cora's Coral Condos is really dragging her feet with my repairs. I think I'm at the bottom of her list. I bet I've been staying with Annette longer than she bargained for."

"Annette loves having you as a guest," Lydia assured her. "I know this for a fact. And I really think living together has been good for both of you. This came at a time when you were both missing your families."

"And that's what I'm nervous about," Mona admitted. "I'm a little scared of meeting her family. What if they don't like me?"

"I think you're very likable," Lydia began.

"I'm a little weird."

"But in a good way. And it's clear that you're important to Annette. I'm sure they'll like you," Lydia said. "But I do understand what you're going through. I was very nervous about meeting Daniel's friends, Gavin and Gwen. I was so afraid of making the wrong impression and that they wouldn't think I was a good match for him. I was a wreck."

"What did you do?"

"Well, my plans to impress them got sidetracked when I needed to clear Gavin of a murder charge. And they did appreciate my help with that. But, in the end, it was my interactions with Daniel that won their approval. I didn't need to try so hard. And I didn't need to worry. I don't think you need to either."

"Thanks," Mona said. "That does make me feel better."

"And maybe you'll wind up being good friends with them too. I'm having lunch with Gavin and Gwen – well, and Daniel too this afternoon."

Mona smiled. "I bet it will all work out. And hopefully, there won't be another murder case to sidetrack this visit."

Lydia held up her fingers and crossed them for good luck. She certainly hoped that there wouldn't be another murder in town while Annette's family was there. That was the one thing that could put a damper on the visit.

Lydia tried not to choke on her soup as she laughed at a story that Gavin had just told. Gwen snorted and tried not to spill the drink in her hand, while Daniel shook his head in embarrassment. Gavin liked to tell stories about their time in the Coast Guard together, but it seemed that his favorite ones to tell were ones where Daniel was still getting his sea legs.

Recovering from her soup, Lydia reached under the restaurant table and took Daniel's hand. She squeezed it to let him know that she was laughing with him and not at him. He squeezed back.

While Lydia had been nervous about meeting Daniel's friends from his past, now she was glad that she had. She enjoyed spending time with the boisterous Gavin and self-assured Gwen. She also liked seeing Daniel with them. While Daniel had opened up to her more about his life before he moved to Ocean Point to work as a lifeguard, he was still a private person who didn't talk much about himself. It was also the reason for his move. He needed a change after grieving the death of his wife whom he had cared for when she became ill. However, when Daniel was with these friends, he seemed to focus on the happy memories instead of his loss.

"If we're going to talk embarrassing stories," Daniel began.

"What? Was that embarrassing?" Gavin asked with mock confusion. "I think everyone gets seasick at some point in their lives."

"How about we talk about your wedding vows?" Daniel suggested.

"Oh, this," Gwen said, rolling her eyes.

"What happened?" asked Lydia.

"Go ahead and tell it," said Gavin. "I think it's an endearing tale."

Daniel's handsome face smiled, and he continued. "Gavin was so nervous about reciting his own vows that he wrote them on his hand so he could read them. Unfortunately, he started sweating, and some of it became illegible."

"I think my nervousness shows that I wanted everything to be perfect on our special day," said Gavin. "And I wanted to properly express my love for you, Gwen."

"And most of your sentiments were lovely even if you were reading smudged words from your sweaty palm," his wife replied. "Except for the part where you misread my name and called me

Owen.”

They all laughed. Then, Gwen leaned across the table and kissed her husband on the cheek. Daniel squeezed Lydia’s hand again.

She was feeling at ease with all of them now. She would be sorry when Gavin and Gwen finished their vacation in Ocean Point (which had been extended since a good portion of their original trip had Gavin stuck in a jail cell) and returned home.

“I guess it’s all right if you tell stories like that, Daniel, if it inspires my wife to kiss afterward.”

“Your wife Owen?” Lydia joked.

“Never mind. I take it back,” Gavin said. “I’ll be the storyteller. Besides, I have an ulterior motive anyway. I want to remind Daniel how much he loved being part of the Coast Guard so that he’ll come back with me.”

“I’ve started a life here,” Daniel said.

“Yes. And I think it was exactly what you needed,” Gwen agreed. “But I don’t know if you’ll be happy as a lifeguard in a tourist town forever.”

“I still save lives,” Daniel replied.

“That’s true,” Lydia said, not quite liking the direction the conversation was turning. “He saved my life.”

Gavin leaned closer to his best friend. “Don’t you miss it?”

Instead of answering, Daniel focused on his lunch. Lydia tried to keep the happy expression that had been on her face throughout the meal in check. This was not the first time that Gavin had

brought up how Daniel should return to his old job and his old life, but this time, it did seem more convincing. She was sure that Daniel was considering it, but he didn't want to discuss it with her yet. Could he be ready to leave Ocean Point? He had never been a fan of New Jersey. Yet, she thought that what they had (whether they wanted to put a label on their relationship or not) was special. Would it be so easy for him to walk away from it?

"Or not?" Gwen said, and Lydia realized that she had gotten lost in her own thoughts and missed what had been said.

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"Just that I hoped we could come by your new house again before we leave," said Gwen.

Lydia nodded quickly. "Of course. I still haven't unpacked everything, but the house is officially mine now. Well, mine and my dog's. And you're always welcome."

"Do you have time for dessert?" Daniel asked his friends. "Or do you need to get going?"

"I think we will take some of that taffy that Lydia offered us. But we should go," Gavin said. "Otherwise we'll be late for this spa appointment thingy that Gwen signed us up for."

"Yes. I thought after your time in prison, you might like to do something relaxing," Gwen said, standing up. "I hope that we'll see you again soon."

She hugged Lydia and Daniel and then Gavin did the same. They said their goodbyes and left, chewing on some of the hazelnut chocolate taffy that Lydia gave them.

"I hope you don't mind them bringing that up," Daniel said.

Lydia was glad that he seemed to be bringing up the topic of returning to the Coast Guard. It was starting to feel like an elephant in the room. She didn't know if she should be the one to talk about it or not.

"I don't mind. I like being a part of that conversation."

"They just heard from me what an ordeal it was to sell your childhood house and find a new one. They wanted to be supportive."

"Oh," Lydia said, realizing that they were talking about different things.

"And I'm really glad that you found a house that's perfect for you and Sunny. Right next to the dog beach is ideal."

She nodded. Then, realizing that it was going to be something that she obsessed over if she didn't ask him about it, she decided to ask what his feelings were about returning to his old life.

"So, I notice that Gavin has been bringing up the Coast Guard more..."

"Lydia!" a voice called out, interrupting her discussion.

She looked up and saw her brother, Leo, and his girlfriend, Suzanne, waving. She waved back, and they walked up to their table. Daniel invited the couple to join them, and they sat down.

Lydia felt torn. On the one hand, they had interrupted her when she was trying to gauge whether Daniel would be leaving her or not. On the other hand, she was pleased to see how happy Leo and Suzanne were again. There had certainly been some bumps in the road in their relationship, but now things seemed very good between the pair.

"Everything okay?" Leo asked, and Lydia realized that her thought process must be showing on her face. "You didn't come across another dead body, did you?"

"If I did, I would have called you," Lydia said to her detective brother. "I haven't been involved in any mysteries lately except how to best unpack my house."

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