

BLACKBERRY CRUMBLE

A CULINARY MYSTERY

JOSI S. KILPACK



DESERET
BOOK
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

CHAPTER 1



Quiz me,” Sadie said, straightening the row of cherry chocolate chip cookies she’d laid out on the platter. Pete Cunningham, her *absolutely-certain* boyfriend, was also laying out cookies—blueberry muffin tops to be exact. The Fourth of July had been several weeks ago, but she’d chosen the color scheme of red, white, and blue for the annual Latham Club summer picnic, which made the cookies a perfect fit.

“Okay,” Pete said in his rich voice, placing a final cookie in his row—you couldn’t really stack or layer blueberry muffin tops, but he was doing a wonderful job of arranging them as attractively as possible. More points in his favor, though he didn’t need extra credit. Their relationship had moved to a new level the last few months, and Pete had proved himself a hundred times since then. “How many exits?”

“Three,” Sadie said with confidence; that was an easy one. She popped open a plastic clamshell container and tried not to be offended by the store-bought cookies. She’d have made more cookies if she’d known the other people on the food committee weren’t making their own. “Double doors straight ahead, single doors to the close

left and far right. The doors behind us don't count because they lead to the kitchen, which leads to the fenced parking lot."

"Good," Pete said. "But always assume you're in the six position on a clock and specify exit locations by the hours they represent. That would make the double doors eleven o'clock, since they are slightly left of straight ahead. The single doors would then be at eight and two."

"Got it," Sadie said, a little thrill of discovery rushing through her. People might say you can't teach an old dog new tricks—and at the age of fifty-six, Sadie could certainly be considered a mature student—but she was proving the cliché wrong under Pete's excellent tutelage. "What else?"

"How many chairs are along the walls?" Pete asked. "That will give you an idea of how many people are expected to be here."

"About seventy," Sadie said, glancing quickly at the left wall and estimating that there were twenty-something chairs lined up. Two other walls had what looked like equal numbers of chairs, and the fourth wall had the tables for the food. However, since she'd helped plan the event, she already knew how many people were expected. Originally, the annual picnic-style dinner was supposed to be held outside, but Garrison, Colorado, was at the mercy of a hot spell so the event had been moved to the city hall—a former elementary school with a nice-sized gymnasium and an overzealous air conditioning system. It was 5:30 in the evening, ninety degrees outside, and yet Sadie had goose bumps since it was a chilly sixty-five degrees in the gym.

"And where are your keys?"

Sadie's head snapped to the side, and she looked at Pete in surprise. "My keys?" she asked. In the weeks since she'd started asking him to quiz her about her surroundings—honing her skills of

observation—he'd never asked about anything other than the place they were at or the people they were with.

Pete glanced at her as he straightened the row of store-bought M&M's cookies someone else had brought and then wiped the crumbs off on his apron. Sadie thought he looked very cute in the apron. "If you had to leave in a hurry, you'd need your keys. Where are they?"

"Um, in my purse."

"And where is your purse?" Pete said, turning to face her and crossing his arms over his chest. His silver hair caught the light streaming in through the high windows, but Sadie was in no mind to appreciate it the way she normally would.

She had failed.

"In the kitchen," she said in defeat. "With the other half a dozen people helping with the food."

"Not to mention anyone who comes in through the back door, which is unlocked to make it easier for people to come in and out." He gave her an understanding smile, but didn't stop there. "I counted three other purses on the counter next to yours, each one of them likely holding wallets and keys. With no one specifically assigned to stay in the kitchen at all times—not that that's foolproof either—there's no one to keep an eye on those purses. They're a prime target for theft, especially since the gate is open, and Goose Park, a common hangout for transients and drug users, is right across the street."

Sadie's shoulders fell. "It's not fair," she said, suddenly petulant. "I don't have any pockets. Even if I wanted to keep my keys with me, I can't."

"Don't you have a code on the door of your car? You can leave your purse in your car where it's safer."

"That's gotten me into trouble before. I need to keep my cell phone close by."

"So keep your phone on your person."

"Pockets," Sadie reminded him, lifting the sides of her skirt to demonstrate how pocketless she was.

Pete shrugged and smiled at her. "Then wear clothing with pockets when you know you'll be unable to keep your purse with you."

Sadie narrowed her eyes at him. "Easy for you to say," she said, half-serious and half-playful. "You're a man. Everything you buy comes with pockets."

Pete grinned back at her in a superior way. "I believe, however, that men's clothing doesn't have a corner on the market."

"But some styles don't offer a pocket option," Sadie continued, reflecting on the women's clothing industry as a whole. Because of the same patriotic theme that had helped her choose the types of cookies she'd made, she was wearing what she called her Betsy Ross dress—a navy blue, cotton sundress which looked as though it had been sprinkled with white polka dots. Upon closer inspection, however, the dots revealed themselves as stars. The bodice fit well, with a wide, navy blue belt that set off her waist, even if it did make her hips look a little more prominent. Pockets on a dress like this would pad her hips even more and keep the A-line skirt from falling correctly.

"Then don't buy those styles," Pete said. He took a step closer to her, and Sadie felt the now-familiar zing as the protons between them started dancing. She loved the zing, something she hadn't felt between them for too long. But now wasn't the moment for protons.

"O-okay," Sadie said, finding it hard to stay focused as Pete moved even closer. His hand brushed her arm as he raised it to tuck

her hair behind her ear. She'd been growing it out and it was now a choppy bob that was deceptively difficult to do despite its looking rather haphazard. Her breath shuddered slightly at his touch even as she felt herself leaning into him. They were alone, creating the perfect moment for him to steal a kiss . . . or three. The voices of the rest of the food committee could be heard through the door behind them; they were all in the kitchen. The scent of Pete's cologne mingled with the smell of the cookies—was there a more perfect combination than baked goods and Peter Cunningham?

"Just remember that if someone takes your keys, you're stranded, and whomever it was you were supposed to be going after is getting farther and farther away."

Shop talk or not, he was totally flirting with her, and she was completely under his spell.

When words failed her and she was feeling herself pulled into the reservoirs of his beautiful hazel eyes, he spoke again. "I've got two words for you, Sadie Hoffmiller."

"What?" Sadie breathed, thinking of all the things he could say that were only two words. *Kiss me* made the top of the list, right under *Love you*, which he'd yet to say out loud.

"Voice mail."

"What?" Sadie said, pulling her eyebrows together in surprise.

"If you can't keep your purse with you, chances are you're too busy to answer your phone anyway. Let them leave a message, and you can enjoy the peace of mind of knowing your personal items are safe."

"Oh," Sadie said, trying to hide her disappointment. "That's a really . . . smart idea."

"Well," Pete said with a sarcastic shrug and another of his adorable smiles as he tapped her nose playfully and moved away, "I didn't

find my shiny badge at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box.” He wiped his hands on his apron again, and in the process drew attention to the very badge he was referencing, clipped to the waistband of his pants.

At that precise moment, it caught the same light that had caught Pete’s hair earlier. The metal gleamed heroically and initiated a wave of . . . envy in Sadie.

She looked away, chastising herself for being silly. She was not, nor would she ever be, a police detective. She was a retired schoolteacher, for heaven’s sake. And yet she’d had several adventures over the last eight months that had created a longing for . . . something. She didn’t know what, exactly, but listening to Pete talk about his work—the details he *could* talk about—ignited something inside her that drew her toward his expertise.

It had also drawn her to a few websites about how to become a private investigator. She had purchased a set of lock picks online and a practice lock she sometimes played around with in the evenings, but she hadn’t told anyone about those things. Instead, she peppered Pete for tricks of his trade and made him quiz her about details or procedures while she kept up with her community-oriented life as though it hadn’t somehow lost some of its appeal.

The squeaking of a hinge caused both Sadie and Pete to look up as a young woman entered the room. She didn’t look familiar, and Sadie had been part of the Latham Club—a nonprofit community service group—for several years. Maybe the woman was a guest, but she’d entered alone. Was that a newspaper tucked under her arm? Sadie’s observation skills were getting better all the time.

A voice from behind them broke into their study of the new arrival, however. “Detective Cunningham?”

Sadie and Pete both turned toward the doors that led to the

kitchen. Glenda Meyers stood in the doorway. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but it seems we filled the punch bowl so full that none of us can carry it. Would you mind helping us bring it out?"

"Of course not," Pete said.

Sadie sprang into action, stacking emptied cookie containers in an attempt to clear the tables. There needed to be room for the trays of lunch meat and veggies, not to mention the punch bowl, chips, and array of salads the club members would be bringing with them. Initially this was supposed to be a lunch, but after juggling the schedules, it had become a dinner . . . of lunch-type foods, since no one wanted to do much cooking—well, other than Sadie, who was always cooking something.

"Would you mind throwing these away?" Sadie asked as Pete moved toward the doorway. "Be sure to keep half a dozen or so for leftovers." There were always store-bought cookies left over, unlike her homemade varieties, which disappeared quickly. A fine argument for why being late to these types of events might be fashionable, but not wise. Pete nodded, and Sadie handed over the stacked containers. He winked at her while turning toward the doorway and the awaiting Glenda.

Once Pete and Glenda had disappeared, Sadie's eyes were drawn back to the woman who'd entered the gym . . . alone and uninvited. To Sadie's surprise, however, the woman was no longer standing at the far end of the room looking out of place. Instead she was striding toward Sadie with purposeful steps.

There were only a few yards between them, and Sadie finished assessing the woman as quickly as she could. Shoulder-length, wavy, strawberry-blonde hair tucked behind her ears, no bangs. Blue-gray eyes and a fair complexion with a smattering of freckles made her look younger than what Sadie believed to be her thirty-something

years. Her makeup was minimal, and she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. The woman's jeans fit her widish hips well, and the purple tank top, while not quite the right color for her hair, went quite well with her figure, which, while full, was shapely. The woman was of average height, maybe an inch shorter than Sadie's five foot six inches. Her purse was a large, ornate, white leather number which, if Sadie wasn't mistaken, was rather high-end—making it look out of place on a woman who didn't seem particularly polished. Perhaps it had been a gift?

"Hi," Sadie said with a smile as soon as the woman came to a stop on the opposite side of the table. She put out her hand. "I'm Sadie Hoffmiller. I don't believe we've met. Are you part of the Latham Club?"

"No," the woman said. She took Sadie's hand, gave it a single firm shake, and dropped it before unconsciously wiping her hand on her jeans. She was nervous. "I came to talk to you."

"Me?" Sadie said, surprised. Granted, her name was on all the posters and fliers advertising the luncheon, but the urgency in the other woman's voice and intent of her words didn't seem to have much to do with that.

"A neighbor of yours said you'd be here," she said as she took a cursory glance at the three-dimensional, crepe-paper watermelon slices and real beach balls dangling from the gymnasium's ceiling. "I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"O-kay," Sadie said carefully. "What can I help you with?"

"I'd like to hire you," the woman said as her eyes snapped back to Sadie.

"Hire me?" Sadie repeated. "For what?" She looked down at the cookies. "Catering?" Sadie enjoyed helping with the food for

community events, but cookies and cakes didn't seem to fit the intent of this woman. Who needed emergency catering?

"Investigation stuff," the woman said, leaning toward her and lowering her voice as though fearful she'd be overheard.

Sadie couldn't deny feeling flattered, but her attention was drawn to the newspaper in the woman's hand. It was an obvious explanation. The woman must have stumbled onto an article about one of the unfortunate incidents Sadie had been involved in. Some of the situations she'd found herself in made Sadie sound rather heroic, but there hadn't been anything written for weeks, and most of the mentions Sadie had cut out of the paper had been short and tucked between public notices and ninetieth-birthday announcements in small papers.

"I'm not an investigator. I just have really bad luck." She smiled at her own joke.

The woman shook her head. "You're exactly what I need," she said. "Someone obscure, who can help me make sense of things."

Sadie wasn't so sure that being called obscure was complimentary. "I don't understand what you're asking," she said. "I'm not . . . for hire." Though wouldn't it be cool if she were? She remembered that wave of envy she'd shrugged off a few minutes earlier in regard to Pete's badge and her own fantasies about private investigation work. Then she imagined how Pete would react if he were listening to this. He'd probably find it funny, which would make Sadie feel defensive.

"I can pay whatever it takes to make this worth your time," the woman said, keeping her eyes trained on Sadie. She was beginning to sound a little desperate. "Twice that, if I need to."

"But I'm not an investigator," Sadie explained again. "I don't know what you've heard, but it was likely overstated and—"

The woman cut Sadie off by putting the newspaper on the table.

Sadie couldn't help but look down. Her own face stared up at her. She immediately looked to the masthead. *The Denver Post*—the largest newspaper in Colorado. Sadie wasn't aware of the *Post* having run anything about her for several weeks. Where was that photo from, anyway? Her hair looked fabulous.

"I realize coming to you this way isn't exactly proper," the woman said, drawing Sadie's attention away from the newspaper. "But I don't have time to waste. I don't know if you believe in fate, Mrs. Hoffmiller, but I do. I believe in cosmic forces playing out in our lives from time to time, and I believe that this article coming out right now is no coincidence." Her voice was soft, but intent, confident, and yet not overbearing.

Right now? Sadie looked back at the paper, noticing the date for the first time. Friday, August 10th. That was *today*. She read the headline—"Modern Miss Marple: A Magnet for Murder?"—and felt a swirling heat take hold of her stomach as recent insecurities of sticking her nose in too many places it didn't belong began rising from the corner of her mind where she'd been trying to stash them.

"Mrs. Hoffmiller," the woman said, causing Sadie to look up once more. "I really do need your help." The woman's face changed in an instant, her expression falling and her eyes filling with tears. "I think my father may have been murdered."

Blueberry Muffin Tops

½ cup shortening
¼ cup butter
1 egg
1 cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
1½ teaspoons lemon zest (can use 1 teaspoon lemon juice instead)
2 tablespoons milk
2 cups all-purpose flour
1½ teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup fresh blueberries, or frozen blueberries (no need to thaw)

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a large bowl, cream the shortening, butter, egg, sugar, vanilla, lemon zest, and milk. In a separate bowl, combine dry ingredients. Add to shortening mixture until just mixed. Fold in blueberries, careful not to crush the berries. The batter might be a little crumbly.

Drop by teaspoonfuls (or 1-inch scoops) onto parchment or silicone-mat baking sheet (blueberries stick like crazy).

Bake 12 to 15 minutes or until muffin tops are golden brown. Cool on cookie sheet for two minutes before moving to a rack to cool. Makes 3 dozen.

Optional glaze

1½ tablespoons butter
1 cup powdered sugar
2 tablespoons lemon juice

Mix all ingredients together. Drizzle over cookies while cookies are still warm.

Note: A streusel topping might taste really good too!

CHAPTER 2



Sadie blinked at the other woman. “Murdered?” An all too familiar thrill rose up from her open-toed, navy sling-back sandals and left her spine in an all-out tingle.

The woman nodded and wiped quickly at her eyes, seemingly embarrassed over her tears.

“What makes you think he was murdered?” Sadie asked automatically. Before the woman had a chance to answer, Sadie’s eyes were drawn to the newspaper again—“Magnet for Murder?” She started feeling squirmy.

The doors at the back of the gym opened again, and laughter echoed through the room as four women—all Latham Club members—entered, their heads bobbing as they talked to one another while they clicked across the hardwood floor in their heels. Sadie looked at the clock. Ten minutes before the official start.

“My name is May Sanderson,” the woman said, glancing warily at the other women. She opened her purse and began rummaging through it. After a moment she pulled out a pen, then leaned forward, writing something in the margins of the newspaper still lying on the table between them. “This is my cell phone number,” she

said when she straightened. "Please call me when you've had time to think about what I've said. Money isn't an issue, but time certainly is." A slight pleading had entered her tone, confirming how serious she was about this.

With that, she turned and headed for the back doors, keeping her head down. The other women glanced at her briefly before returning to their discussion. Sadie's mind was already filling with questions as she glanced down at the phone number, noting that the first three numbers weren't a Colorado area code. She looked up again, wondering if she should follow May Sanderson and get more information, but the younger woman was already gone, leaving Sadie to field the questions left in her wake. Why did she think her father had been murdered? When had it happened? What would Pete say when she told him about this?

"Coming through!"

Sadie quickly stepped aside to make way for Pete, whose arms were wrapped around an enormous punch bowl, filled nearly to the brim with dark red punch. Glenda hadn't been kidding when she said it was too full for the ladies in the kitchen to carry. Pete was taking tiny steps and still the punch threatened to tidal wave out of the bowl at any moment. He began lowering his entire body, bending at the knee but keeping his back straight, so as to put the bowl down on the table without spilling.

Sadie saw the newspaper at the last possible moment, right where the punch bowl was headed. She reached for it quickly, startling Pete in the process. A wave of punch sloshed forward, splashing onto the table, the newspaper, and a cookie tray, before compensating by going backward, soaking Pete's apron.

Sadie gasped and raised a hand to her mouth while one of the

women exclaimed from the other side of the table. Pete set the bowl down on the now punch-covered table.

"I'm so sorry," Sadie said as Pete stood up, revealing that his apron was completely soaked. He quickly untied it, and Sadie was dismayed to see that the punch had turned his powder-blue shirt a lovely shade of lavender. She looked around for some napkins before realizing they hadn't been set out yet.

"I'll get some paper towels," one of the women said. She came around the table and headed through the door that led to the kitchen. Pete wiped at his shirt with a dry part of his apron, but it didn't do any good.

"I'm so sorry," Sadie said again, moving toward him, feeling horrible. The woman returned with a roll of paper towels a moment later, and the other women began blotting and cleaning up the punch. Pete took a few paper towels and backed out of their way as he wiped at his own clothing.

Sadie watched as one of the women picked up the punch-soaked newspaper by one soggy corner, not even glancing at the headline, and tossed it in the big gray trash can behind the table, along with most of the blueberry muffin tops, also ruined.

"What happened?" Pete asked.

"I'm so sorry," Sadie said for a third time, embarrassed to be the cause of such a mess. "I was trying to get the newspaper out of the way."

"What newspaper?"

"The *Post*," Sadie said, her eyes going for the garbage can again. "The red-haired woman who came in before you went into the kitchen brought it." Her eyes went back to Pete. "I'm in it."

"Sadie, do you have any more of those cookies we can set out?" one of the ladies asked. The table and floor were mostly cleaned up.

Glenda walked through the doorway. "Sadie, Paul is running late with the meat trays. Has he called you?" She stopped short when she noticed the mess. "What happened?"

The women hurried to explain. Glenda looked at Sadie with surprise and disappointment. "We've got five minutes to finish setting everything up!" she said, her voice rising with every word. As if waiting for such an introduction, the back doors opened and another group of club members entered the gym.

"Um," Sadie said, trying to think of an explanation as Glenda's hands went to her hips.

"Where's the punch ladle?" someone called from the kitchen.

Sadie's head swirled as she tried to triage the situation and determine what was most in need of her attention.

Pete's hand at her elbow caught her attention, and she looked at him. His calmness helped ease the frantic feelings welling up inside of her. "I'm going to go home and change," he said, giving her arm a squeeze. "Call me if you need me to pick something up on the way back, okay? I'll help them find the ladle on my way out; it was in the box you brought from home, right?"

Oh, bless him, Sadie thought to herself as she nodded. They made such a great team.

"Good," Pete said, smiling to let her know he wasn't angry. "You do what you need to do. I'll be back."

He didn't wait around for any more discussion, allowing Sadie to turn her attention to the other expectant faces. "I have more blueberry muffin tops," Sadie said. "They're on top of the fridge, in the blue Tupperware." Glenda nodded and headed back to the kitchen. Sadie turned to assess the table. "We'll need some damp paper towels to wipe down the table so it isn't sticky. Heather and Savanna, will you take care of that?" The two women nodded and

followed Glenda. “Shanna, can you help me adjust the punch bowl?” Sadie asked. “Between the two of us, we ought to be able to move it without making another mess.”

Shanna nodded but stepped back as far as she could, probably to protect her cute floral skirt. They carefully adjusted the bowl, and then Sadie headed to the kitchen to retrieve her cell phone so she could call Paul and see where he was with the meat trays. He should have been here half an hour ago.

It wasn’t until the phone was ringing that she thought about the newspaper article again, and about May Sanderson asking for her help. It would be a couple of hours before she could get her hands on another paper to see what the article said, but the headline flashed through her mind again, and her stomach clenched. “Modern Miss Marple: A Magnet for Murder?” What was the article about?

It took two tries to call Paul; she’d bought a new phone a few months ago, but she still didn’t know how to use it very well. Finally, she got the touch screen to work and put the phone to her ear.

Paul answered and spoke before Sadie could even say hello. “I’m coming, Sadie. I swear.”

“Sadie?” Glenda called from the kitchen while Paul explained about a mix-up at the delicatessen and how he’d almost run out of gas. Glenda continued, “Do we have more forks? I don’t think this will be enough!”

Sadie closed her eyes and forced her brain to slow down. She simply *had* to focus on the luncheon right now. The article and May Sanderson would have to wait until later. She glanced at the clock on her way to the kitchen while Paul continued his explanation. It was going to be a long night.