



Romancing
the Scone

Maddie James

The Matchmaking Chef Series

Romancing the Scone

The Matchmaking Chef Series II

Book I

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Chapter One

“There he is again.”

Sydney Schul jerked her head up, bonking her forehead on the top of the display case where she'd just placed a fresh tray of scones. “What? Ouch! Where?”

She rubbed her head and looked to where her cousin, Suzie Matthews, pointed. “Over there. On the bench across the street in front of the library. Your stalker.”

Sydney squinted, wiped her hands on her apron, and took a couple of steps toward the big picture window of her bakery. “Oh, Suzie, are you sure?”

“Dead positive. I remember his jacket.”

“Well, shoot.” *Dammit.*

Puzzled, Sydney blew a strand of hair out of her face and eyed the guy. “I thought maybe he was gone. I really didn't believe he was stalking me anyway. I mean, Chelly gets riled up about stuff like that, but you are always so levelheaded, Suzie, which has me a bit worried. And you know me; I don't pay a bit of attention to anything other than what's happening straightaway in front of me. So, what do we do now?”

Suzie picked up her cell. “Time to call in the local forces.”

Grasping her wrist, she said, “I don't think that is necessary.”

A brow arched above Suzie's right eye. “Syd, listen to me. Let me give Matt a call. He can advise.”

“Suzie, Matt is about as effective as Barnie Fife. I mean, I love him, seeing that he's Chelly's husband and your brother-in-law and my cousin-by-marriage and all, but nothing big ever happens here in Legend, and I'm suspecting nothing big is going to happen with this guy. Let Matt be. We don't need to involve any of Legend's finest.”

She tried like hell not to look out the window again. “Besides, I don't have a stalker.”

Glancing across the street, Suzie said, "Need I remind you that the guy followed you all around the Piggly Wiggly on Saturday?"

Well, that was true. He had a cart with only a few items in it, but he had watched her like a hawk. She also noticed he had a little notebook with him, and he frequently jotted down things while he stood a fair distance behind her. It wasn't the first time she'd noticed him lingering about, either, but that didn't mean he was a stalker. "He was shopping. Just like me. You know how I have to go through the entire store one aisle at a time. Likely that's the way he shops, too. I don't think that's anything to be concerned about."

The notebook thing bothered her a little, however.

"What about the Thursday before at the pancake breakfast you catered for the American Legion? He was there, too."

"He was eating!"

"Well, maybe so! But who is he? And why is he always staring at you!"

Sighing, Sydney moved closer to the door and stared at the gentleman across the street. It was early spring, and he wore a light blue fleece jacket, jeans, a nice pair of Nikes, and a black ball cap pulled low over his forehead. Nothing weird about that. In fact, he looked rather normal.

"I don't think stalkers sit out in the open, in the middle of the day, watching their prey from a few feet away."

"Hmpht."

"I don't think they wear Nikes, either."

"Unless they need a fast getaway."

Sydney turned. "Oh, Suzie, stop it! The guy is not a stalker! I mean, why would he stalk me? I am a nobody. I'm not famous like you. You're the big television star and cookbook author. I'm a lowly baker and coffee shop owner in a very nondescript little southern town where nothing, and I repeat nothing, ever happens."

She looked her cousin square in the eyes. Suzie's suddenly shot open wider.

"He's standing up."

Sydney jerked her gaze back to the street. Her gut tightened, but she refused to acknowledge it. Well, sort of. "So what?"

The man looked right, left, and then stepped off the curb.

"Shit." Suzie flipped her cell open again.

"Stop that," Sydney told her. "You are not calling Matt."

“He’s coming. Look! He’s staring straight at the store front door.”

“Great! I’ll sell him some coffee and Danish. Now move it, and put that phone away.” She hustled back toward the counter, unsure why her tummy was twittering like a house afire. Stalker my ass, she thought. The guy is probably just new in town and trying to get a lay of the land.

“He’s on the sidewalk!”

Staring at her, Sydney said, “Quit! Go in the back if you are going to have a conniption right here in the bakery. I don’t need that.”

Sydney rounded the display case and pretended to straighten things on the counter. His shadow crossed the door.

“Oh, God. Oh, God!”

“Suzie, shut up!”

This was all rather unnerving. Suzie never acted like this or got spooked by things. What in the world...?

The bell on the door jiggled.

Glancing up about the time the door closed and the man stepped fully into the bakery, Sydney plastered her best Southern Belle smile on her face and said, “Good morning, sir! Welcome to Sydney’s Sugar High Coffee Stop and Bakery. What can I get you this morning?”

Behind the display case, she waved Suzie off, who was pressed to her back like a cat in heat.

The man didn’t say a word but took a leisurely pace moving forward, then let his gaze fall to the baked goods in the display case. “A cup of black coffee to start,” he said finally, shifting back and forth while looking over the goodies in the case.

“One cup of black coffee coming up!” She turned to stare at Suzie who was blocking her way. Keeping eye contact, she gripped both her arms and maneuvered her to the left so she could get to the Bunn coffeemaker. “Suzie, do I smell something burning in the back?”

A look of horror crossed her cousin’s face. “Muffins!”

“Go check please?”

She was off, and Sydney sighed, “Thank, God.”

Turning, she placed a thick mug of coffee on the counter. The man still stood at the case, scrutinizing her scones.

“Those...orange?” He pointed.

“Yes. Just baked and frosted. A local favorite. Shall I get you one?”

“What’s the icing?” The ball cap lifted a bit, and she caught his gaze. Barely.

“It’s a butter cream, sort of. With a hint of Curaçao and a little something else for tartness.”

“A little something else,” he mumbled.

“Shall I get you one?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“For here or to go?”

He glanced up and about the place, then finally responded, “Here.”

Crap. She halfway hoped it was to go, honestly. Suzie was so unpredictable.

Peering through the case, he watched her every move as, with gloved hands, she reached inside, covered one of the nicest scone specimens on the tray, and moved it to a small dessert plate. She always used real dishware in her bakery when people were staying to eat. It was homier that way, and she really wanted people to feel at home here.

So they would come back, of course.

Did she want this guy to come back?

Quit letting Suzie get to you. He’s harmless.

She handed him the plate. “Three dollars and fifty cents.”

His head jerked up. “That’s all?”

“Yes, sir. One dollar for the coffee, two-fifty for the scone. Tax included.”

He mumbled something unintelligible, pulled some bills out of his wallet, and dug two quarters out of his jeans pocket. He scooped up his pastry and coffee and sauntered off toward a table in the corner.

“Great,” Suzie whispered from behind her. “Now your stalker has set up shop in your bakery. I’m calling Matt.”

Sydney faced her. “Oh hell, just go on and do it. Geez!” If there was anything Sydney knew better than the back of her hand, it was her cousins, Suzie and Chelly, and how they were. Once Suzie had something in her head, there was no getting her to back off. “Have at it, cuz.”

Suzie scurried off to the back. Sydney wiped down the counter and ordered herself not to look at the man in the corner. But she did peek, once.

Stone Kellerman stared at the scone in front of him, glanced briefly up at the woman behind the counter—was she the Sydney of Sydney's Sugar High Coffee Stop and Bakery? He'd have to peruse her later—then back to the object of his affection on the plate.

Damn. Real plates. Why hadn't he thought of that? Added to the charm.

Yes, the town was full of charm. Something else he didn't have a lot of in downtown Atlanta. He had urban. She had charm.

But he wouldn't think of that at this moment. He had a scone to consider.

And there it was, the thing he sought, the reason he was here, the possible cause of his demise or perhaps, the reason for his rise to glory.

The *Double Orange Scone of Sinful Decadent Desire*. Aptly named. Almost like sex on a plate. At least in his world.

But Curaçao? In a scone? How absurd.

Yet, it might work. Might.

Lifting his fork, he poked at the end of the baked confection devoid of glaze. A few crumbs flaked off. Moist, flaky crumbs. He frowned.

People loved that about scones. A delicate mixture between dry and moist, flaky and crumbly. Had she achieved it?

So they said. Now, he was observing, witnessing, experiencing one for his very self.

His chest grew tight. The proof would be in the tasting. Still, he was concerned about that butter cream and Curaçao combination.

His fork bit into the scone and cut off a piece. He lifted the morsel to his lips, sniffed first—ah, a nice aroma—and deposited the bite on his tongue. His lips clamped over the fork and raked all of the crumbs and glaze away and into his mouth before departing.

Melting. In his mouth.

Eyes closed, he savored the first taste. Moist, yes, with an earthy bite. Sweet orange flavor ran through the biscuit-y chunk. And... there was a hint of something else. Nutmeg? Maybe. Allspice? No. No. Nutmeg. Yes. Orange and nutmeg...wait. Maybe a touch of..

Nut.

Not *nutmeg*. Maybe both.

He took another bite, rolling the scone over his tongue. Yes, a nutty flavor. But what exactly was it?

He wasn't sure.

He might have to buy another one to take with him back to the Lodge so he could continue his flavor deconstruction in private.

Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate on the subtle nut flavor.

Not your everyday nut, he was sure. If he could only get a handle on it...

Now wouldn't that be just it? An ingredient so obscure one could not distinguish it from the rest. Just like her to come up with something like that. Hm. Well, it was just like him to do the same.

He swallowed then returned his attention to the scone. With one fork tine, he dipped into a puddle of glaze on the plate. He touched the tine with sugary icing to the tip of his tongue, rolled it around on there for a moment to hit all the right spots of his palate, and then swallowed.

Eyes closed again, he savored the flavors...floral, orange blossoms? The liquor? Double... Double orange. What were the two orange flavor combos? Wait...what did she say, something with a hint of tart?

Yes. Tart. There it was. Strangely complimented by the butter cream...

Damn!

Not just sex on a plate. Bad, twisted, kinky and oh-so-very satisfying sex on exquisite bone china.

"More coffee?"

Startled, he glanced at his cup. Hadn't touched it yet. Was totally and thoroughly absorbed in the scone. Still chewing, he lifted his gaze to the woman holding the coffee carafe. "I actually haven't taken a drink yet. Come back in a little while?"

Her eyes were a deep shade of blue, and for a moment, he was totally distracted by them and had forgotten the scone. Well, almost.

"No problem. I'll check back. Am interested to know how you like it."

"The scone?" *Shit, was she onto him?*

"Well, that, too. But also the coffee. It's a new blend. From Hawaii. Has a tinge of macadamia nut in it."

Again, he glanced at his cup. A tingling ran up his spine. "Sure thing. I'll try it." He picked up the cup, lifted his eyes again, and caught her smile as she turned away.

A twitter of excitement rolled up in him as she sashayed toward the coffeemaker and replaced the pot. If he hadn't been so absorbed in the coffee and scone, he wouldn't have minded staring at her a little longer.

But not at this moment. Right now he was about to jump out of his skin.

He took a sip of the brew. Then another bite of the scone. Another sip of coffee. Relished in the blending of flavors.

The woman is brilliant.

A perfect blend, scone and coffee, so subtle the married ingredients that the average, ordinary person would not know whether it was the individual thing—scone or the coffee—that was so wonderful, when in fact, it was the combination of the two, that made them so perfect.

Yes, brilliant.

And not too smart. Because unknowingly, she had just given him her secret. Macadamia nut flour. Oh, he'd have to figure out the measurements, baking being such an exact science and all, but that was it all right. And he'd bet his bottom dollar it was Grand Marnier, not Curaçao, in the glaze.

Satisfied, he tipped the coffee back up to his lips, nodded her way, caught her gaze, and gave her a thumbs up.

Her innocent smile back spoiled his excitement. But only for a second.

It warmed her heart to see a person enjoying himself so much.

Sighing, Sydney stepped away from the counter and pulled her gaze away from Mystery Man—she much preferred that handle than stalker—who was still hanging out in the corner. The bakery was slow this morning, only a handful of customers, so she was actually glad to have someone here. He'd ordered another scone, the same kind, and was on this third cup of coffee.

She didn't think a thing about it; Suzie, on the other hand, was rattled.

"He should be gone by now," she whispered into her ear, while Sydney was cleaning off a table in the opposite corner.

"Suzie, get a grip. He's harmless!"

They both filtered in and out, from the kitchen in the back to the front of the store. They were using her place, rather than Suzie's kitchen at her B&B, to bake about a dozen trays of goodies for a writer's retreat hosted at the Lodge. Of course, the kitchens at the Lodge were top-notch, seeing that Suzie's husband was executive chef and owner, but Suzie preferred baking with Sydney at her place when they joined on these catering adventures. Besides, the Lodge was set up for all kinds of cooking; Sydney's place was designed exclusively for baking.

“I love it here,” Suzie told her, leaning in to her right, pushing at some dough on the butcher-block counter.

“It is nice, isn’t it?”

“You’ve worked hard to get it exactly the way you want.”

Nodding, she smiled, glancing about. “I know. And patience is not always my virtue, but I was willing to wait to get exactly what I wanted.” She pulled a rack of biscotti out of the oven.

“Well, you’re doing so well. And that award!”

Sydney’s heart fluttered at the mention. Her toes hadn’t hit the ground for days after she’d been notified. At the thought, her chest swelled with twitterings. She was about to launch into an excited response, when the bells on the door tumbled again signaling either that someone had left, or come in.

Suzie was up to her elbows in flour, kneading that yeast dough for the cinnamon rolls.

“I’ll check,” Sydney told her.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she peeked into the store and saw no one. Then, moving further in, she glanced around the corner to where Mystery Man had been sitting, wondering if he had left.

Something icky landed in the pit of her stomach.

Mystery Man, indeed, was still there. And so was Chelly’s husband, Matt, Legend’s own Barney Fife—and she meant that in a good way—standing over him as he sat at his table.

And she wouldn’t have been so alarmed, had Mystery Man not abruptly stood, and shouted.

Chapter Two

“Oh, dear Lord.”

If she had counted the steps it took her to race to Matt’s side, she would have said it might have been three. Or maybe even, two. She leapt like a startled deer crossing the road.

“Matt! Matt! Oh, hello, Matt!”

Why am I repeating myself?

Matt spun as she grasped his elbow. “Well, hello, Matt!” The repeating again. “Fancy seeing you here this morning?”

The local cop eyed her. “Sydney, I’m in here every morning. In fact, I was in here *this* morning. Your first customer, as usual.”

She gave him a slow nod and hooked her arm at his elbow. “Yes! And that is why I’m surprised. Coffee?” If she had to drag him away, she would. Mystery Man was her best customer so far today. She didn’t want to lose him.

Matt uncurled her arm from his. “Syd, I’m here on business. Not coffee.”

“Seems I’m loitering.”

Sydney looked to MM, who had said those words, then back to Matt. “What?”

“Got an anonymous call, Syd. Said there was a mysterious loiterer here at the bakery.”

Shooting her gaze across the room, she just caught Suzie’s strawberry blonde mane ducking back into the kitchen. “Nooooooo...” To Matt, she then said, “Mistake. No loiterers here.”

“But this guy?”

“My best customer all day!”

Sydney sidled up to MM and smiled. She even went so far as to give him a Southern Belle-like pat on the arm. “Oh, puh-lease, Matt. He simply loves my scones!”

Turning, she practically tucked the man back into his seat. “Never you mind now, you hear? Stay as long as you like. Oh, my goodness. Your coffee cup is empty again.” She reached for it. “Let me go fill that up and...”

MM’s hand circled her wrist, stopping her. Hot, his palm was hot. Suddenly, it was like she was having a hot flash.

“That’s fine, ma’am. No worries. I was just leaving.” His gaze skittered across hers.

With that, he pulled a couple of dollars out of his pocket and deposited them on the table. Glancing up, he tipped his ball cap toward Sydney, and skidded his gaze past Matt as he passed. The jingles on the door sounded his exit.

For a moment, she was held spellbound by his touch, and that brief connection they’d made with their eyes.

Oh. Boy.

Blowing out a pent up sigh, Sydney looked at Matt, and then shouted, “Suzie Matthews! Get your fanny out here. Now!”

* * * *

Stone made a beeline to his car. Head down. Hands pushed deep into his jeans pockets. His brain rattling through the revelations of the past hour or so—macadamia nut flour, Grand Marnier, and something tart—and that damned local shop cop and the innocent Southern Belle routine of Miss Sydney.

At least she had saved him.

He chuckled to himself and smiled.

He was going to have to be more careful. The cop didn’t appear to be an accidental thing. Had someone reported him hanging around? He’d not thought anyone in this Podunk town had even noticed his presence.

Should have known better. He was from a Podunk town, himself, deep in the heart of Georgia. Podunk town people always notice newcomers. He’d been living anonymously in the city for way too long.

“Careful, Stone,” he said out loud, then fished his car keys out of his pocket. He clicked the key fob to unlock the door, crossed the parking lot next to the library, and glanced over his shoulder toward the bakery.

Sydney, and that cop, and that redheaded friend of hers were outside standing on the sidewalk, facing the bakery, looking up over the door. His gaze traveled up, too.

Best Scones in the South, the banner above the door read. Just looking at it made his stomach roil.

Then the redhead sidled her gaze his way and stared.

Yes, he was going to have to be careful.

* * * *

Closing her eyes, Sydney sank into her tub, bubbles up to her neck, warm-bordering-on-hot water swirling from the jets surrounding her, and a nice glass of Pinot Noir sitting on the edge of the tub. Billie Holiday crooned *I'll Be Seeing You* from her stereo in the bedroom. Billie's distinctive voice, the tickle of ivory, and the bluesy instrumental rolled over her body, lulling her into a definite state of tired bliss.

I'll be seeing you.

Mystery Man's eyes suddenly swept into her head. Her eyes flashed open, and she sat up a little. Even immersed in hot water, she suddenly got the shivers.

What if Suzie was right? What if he truly was a stalker? Although she couldn't imagine such a thing, she had to wonder why he was here in Legend.

She had to admit the man had appeal. She liked his looks. Tall, nice build, carried himself with assurance. Maybe she'd just ask around. Everybody knows everybody in Legend. Surely someone knows who he is. And maybe, just maybe, he's somebody's visiting cousin who just likes coffee and scones.

But he picked apart that scone like he was dissecting a frog in a high school biology class.

Weird.

Sometimes people just eat like that, she justified. She had a boyfriend once who would only eat one thing at a time on his plate. Turned out he was a bit on the bi-polar side, that one, but a nice guy.

She swallowed. Who was she kidding? The old boyfriend ended up drinking himself into oblivion, and they put him away when he assaulted a woman on the street in Pigeon Forge.

Shit.

But that had nothing to do with MM. Nothing. She was just letting her imagination get the better of her. MM was a tourist, likely. Sometimes when people come to the Smokies they don't like to stay in Gatlinburg or even Pigeon Forge. They like to be on the fringes. Usually they stay at the Lodge.

But this guy?

She sat straight up again, sloshing a little water and some bubbles to the floor.

“Is he staying at the Lodge?”

Her brain raced. Where else would he stay in town? There are no hotels, except for the B&B, and Suzie would know if he was staying there. Unless he was staying with friends or family, he had to be at the Lodge.

She slid back into the water. “Okay, that’s it. Tomorrow morning when Suzie and I deliver the pastries to the Lodge, I’ll scope out the guests at that writer’s retreat. That has to be it. He’s a writer. He’s just visiting. He’s checking out the local haunts. Maybe he’s a travel writer or something, or... Or, a food editor!”

A gurgle of excitement burst up inside her. *A food editor!*

She’d already snagged a little fame from *Southern’s Best* magazine. Perhaps, someone else was interested in featuring her?

“Oh, Suzie, my dear, you are so wrong. The guy is not a stalker, he’s doing some subtle research on my bakery. Hot damn!”

She slapped the water, feeling very confident and happy with herself, having worked through this loitering/stalker dilemma on her own. This had to be the reason he was checking her out.

Had to.

She closed her eyes again and settled her head back against the tub. Almost immediately, her cell phone rang, and she reached to the small table next to the tub to punch the speakerphone button.

“Hello?”

“Sydney?”

“Yeah, hey Suze. Guess what? I have this thing figured out.” She smiled up at the ceiling, picturing Suzie on the other end in her mind.

“Sydney, bad news. Brace yourself.”

The image popped away, and Sydney opened her eyes. “What?”

“He’s in jail.”

“Who?”

“Your stalker.”

Confusion scrambled her brain. “What?”

“Matt arrested him.”

“Oh, Suzie. What did you and Matt do?” If they screwed up her chance at another magazine interview, she would disown them forever!

The voice on the other end grew louder. “Listen to me, Sydney. Your stalker! The man with the scones this morning. Matt took him in. He’s in jail. Found him sneaking around in the alley behind the bakery trying to peek in the back windows, just ten minutes ago.”

A strange buzzing shot through Sydney’s ears.

Her apartment sat directly above the bakery.

Chapter Three

“What a joke.”

Stone studied the cinderblock walls around him and rose to grasp the iron bars that separated his jail cell from the hallway. The time was somewhere past nine in the evening, and he'd been tossed in the clink about twenty minutes earlier by Deputy Do-Right. He shook the bars a little, just to test their strength.

Secure enough, he supposed, for the kinds of criminals they got around here.

The kind, of course, he was not. He wasn't a criminal at all, just a man trying to save his business.

Huffing out a quick breath, he pushed back and paced from one side of the cell to another. What in the hell was he thinking?

Well, he knew exactly what he was thinking. It had occurred to him earlier that evening that people in Podunk towns are way too trusting. And that sometimes, they even leave their doors and windows unlocked.

That's all he was thinking.

Nothing really major. Just a little minor breaking and entering. Hey, if the door was unlocked, did it really count?

Did a goat have teeth?

Evidently, Legend wasn't exactly that kind of town. Not in this day and age, anyway. The bakery was shut up tighter than a drum. Oh, he'd rattled a couple of windows and jerked on the back door handle once or twice, but to no avail. And it wasn't like he was really going to steal anything, he just wanted a glimpse of the scone recipe.

Just a glimpse.

Or perhaps some of the ingredients would be stored on a counter, and he could do a quick survey.

That wasn't stealing, was it? Just to look?

Except, he did have a photographic memory and intellectual capital notwithstanding...

He hadn't had time to contemplate it all, though, because that's when Deputy Do-Right had crept up behind him in his cruiser and turned his light beam on him.

Busted.

This wasn't good. The last thing he needed was bad publicity. The very last thing.

Voices rose up from the outer office. A woman's. A man's. The deputy, he assumed. Then the woman again. Didn't sound like she was too happy.

The man argued back. Happiness wasn't on his agenda, either, he could tell.

Then footsteps. Quick ones. Coming closer.

Smaller ones, then louder ones, all followed by the back and forth of the voices.

Standing close to the iron bars now, he leaned toward the hallway to see if he could get a better hearing and seeing position.

That's when the blonde head popped around the corner, and *that's* when he took in the midnight blue of Sydney Schul's eyes for the second time that day.

He gulped.

"Release him."

Sydney stopped square in front of the cell. She bit the words out to the deputy but looked straight at him.

"Get him the hell out of there."

"But Sydney, he was poking around outside your place."

"The man just likes my scones." She peered into his eyes. "Right? You just like my scones, right?"

He had no clue why she was defending him. "Yes, of course. Your coffee and your scones. Ms. Schul, let me explain."

She waved him off. "No need." Turning to Matt, she added, "It was my property he was messing around on, and I'm not pressing charges. Release him, Matt."

"But, Syd..."

"Do it. Now."

Stone pursed his lips and waited. Last thing he wanted at the moment was to look a gift horse in the mouth. He could play this game.

He cast his gaze first on Sydney, then Matt, and back again to Sydney.

“Well?” She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot. That was kind of cute. He wanted to smile, but didn’t.

Deputy Do-Right reached into his pocket. “If you say so, Sydney, but Suzie is going to…”

“I do say so, and never mind about Suzie Matthews, I’m calling the shots here.”

“All right.”

Matt pushed the old key into the lock, and within seconds, the door crept open.

“Thank you,” Stone said, tipping his head toward Sydney. “I’ll be on my way now. I’ve caused enough excitement tonight.” He slipped between the cop and the woman, ready for a quick getaway.

Would he be so lucky?

“Wait a minute, Buster,” she said. “I’m not finished with you, yet.”

Um, guess not.

* * * *

His car had been impounded, Matt said, when they took the guy into the station. The impound lot was out on Spicer Road, near the mountain side of town. It was a place people really didn’t want to go at night. Secluded. Dark. A little spooky. And there was that old, creepy story about the roaming spirits of lovers who had leapt to their deaths near there, at a notorious Lover’s Leap up on Legend Mountain. Matt had said he’d take the man out there to pick up his vehicle, but Sydney put her foot down real hard and told him flat out, “No.”

To hell with legends and lore and things that go bump in the night. She had some schmoozing to do, and then some. The last thing she needed was for the town of Legend to put a bad taste in this food editor’s mouth.

Now, here she was, close to midnight and driving into No Man’s Land with a male stranger in her passenger seat whom everyone thought was a stalker, and she had just sprung him out of jail as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Not making a lot of sense here, Sydney, she chided herself.

Nevertheless, she needed to keep a level head. If her suspicions were correct, and this man was a food editor for a major food magazine, or a network television show, or a foodie Web site or something, she had to keep him happy.

And happily in scones and coffee, if need be.

"I'm very sorry about all this," she told him, staring straight ahead. "My apologies for the town, the police force, the universe, whatever. Totally uncalled for."

"It's okay. Thank you for getting me out of there, however."

"No problem. Glad to do it."

He cleared his throat. "Actually, I was snooping around."

She gripped the steering wheel tighter and said a prayer.

"Oh?"

He didn't immediately respond. With her fingers firmly wrapped around the wheel, she negotiated a slight curve, the beams of her headlights playing over the skeletons of trees alongside the road, and glanced his way.

He sat looking straight at her.

Her lips went dry.

He didn't look like a stalker, she assured herself. He was actually a very nice looking man. If he looked menacing, or sported a sinister tic like squinting his eyes at her or something, she could more easily consider him a bad guy, but as it was, he just looked rather normal.

And hunky, too.

She wondered what color his hair was, always covered up under that ball cap. It was short, whatever the color.

Same thing about his eyes. Always hidden.

But maybe he doesn't want you to see his eyes, Sydney. Eyes reveal things. Bad things. Windows to the soul. Bad soul.

Stop it, Sydney.

Man, was she conflicted.

"I was curious, actually."

Curious.

Crap.

Sounded like something a stalker would say.

"Um. About?"

She waited. What would she do if he said something like, *about how you would look with a noose around your neck while I'm having my way with you and peeling the skin off your back with a paring knife all the while.*

Her tummy went all ruffle-y.

“Oh, well... about your kitchen, actually. Loved your scone, by the way, and the coffee. You were baking a lot today, and I’m sort of a food buff, and I love seeing how other people set up their kitchens, so, I thought I’d sneak a peek in your back door or window. Just curious, mind you. But...”

Ah, ha!

She smiled.

Knew it. Knew it, knew it, knew it.

He had food editor written all over him.

Gotcha!

“If you had asked, I would have given you the grand tour.”

He pondered that. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Perhaps I can take a rain check on that?”

Sydney spotted the sign for the impound lot and pulled off onto a darkish side road. Rain check. “Oh, well, sure.”

Really Sydney? Are you sure?

Of course I am.

There was a little, shack-like building close to the gate, and the guy who watched over the lot was supposed to be there waiting for them. He lived just down the road. Even though she was convinced the guy sitting next to her was safe now, the spooky, dark, tree-covered lane was a mite unsettling.

A horn blasted from their right, and she braked hard, shrieked a little, and parked the car. Mike’s truck was parked in a side lot.

“Oh! Sorry.”

“No problem.”

Without hesitation, she decided to forge ahead. Turning in her seat toward Mystery Man, she spied Mike getting out of his truck and heading toward the gate. She stuck out her hand toward MM.

“I’m Sydney Schul, and I really believe we should just cut to the chase here.”

MM’s eyes widened. She could tell that even from under the brim of his ball cap. “Oh?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

"I'm St...St...Steve..." He took her hand.

Mike flashed his flashlight toward their car and then banged it on the chain link. Sydney guessed that meant the gate was open now.

They both jerked their gazes toward him. Her hand remained in his palm.

"Gate."

"What?"

"Steve Gate. That's my name."

Turning back, it was her turn to reply, "Oh."

Mike banged on the gate again. She guessed he wanted this transaction to happen quickly so he could back home to his warm bed and coonhound.

She shook Steve's hand then quickly released it. He made a move toward the passenger side door, laying a hand on the handle. "I know who you are," she told him.

The light flashed around inside the car. Mike shouted something.

Steve looked a tad uncomfortable.

"Okay," she plunged ahead. "I don't know really who you are, but I believe I know why you are here. You are in the food biz, right?" His eyes widened, and she saw his hand lift the door latch. "You're an editor, right? Or a producer? You saw the article in the magazine, and you want to know more about me. Right? It's okay. You don't have to sneak around. Let's just set up a time for an interview and the grand kitchen tour and move ahead."

Her shoulders fell and a whoosh exited her lungs. There. All out in the open.

A brisk rapping came at her window, startling her. "Sydney! What the hell? C'mon."

Turning, she said, "Okay, Mike!" Geez.

Steve took advantage of the pause and quickly left the car. It was so abrupt that it gave her a momentary brain shake. What? Why was he retreating all of a sudden when all he'd been doing for a couple of days now was move toward her? He gave her a backward glance and said, "Sure thing, hon. Thanks for the ride. Will be in touch," then slammed the door and off he went.

She sat for a moment, a little deflated, and watched him walk alongside the burly Mike. He pulled his wallet out of his hip pocket, she supposed to pay the impound fee. Mike led him into the small shack, a light came on inside, and the door closed.

She slapped the palm of her hand at her forehead. "I'm an idiot."

An unsettled feeling snaked across her abdomen. This all felt just too...weird.

* * * *

“In the first place, I can’t believe that you convinced Matt to let the stalker go, and in the *second* place,” Suzie went on, tugging a tray of cinnamon rolls out of the back of Sydney’s van, “I can’t believe you drove the man all the way out Spicer Road to get his car. I mean, that’s like *Deliverance* territory out there. Not the kind of place you want to be with a stalker, and...” Sydney took one side of the tray and steadied it while Suzie balanced it in her arms. “And thirdly, I can’t believe that you freakin’ invited him back to your bakery for a tour, no less. Are you insane?”

Sydney chewed on that a second. Probably.

But not in the way that Suzie thought. She was still convinced that this Steve Gate was harmless, not a stalker. She just hadn’t totally figured out yet why he was snooping around her place. He hadn’t reacted much when she’d blurted out that she knew why he was following her. He’d just sort of cut her off, slammed the door, and left.

What was that all about?

Had she scared him off? Had he changed his mind about her because she was too assertive? She could be that, you know, assertive.

Dammit.

Had she ruined her celebrity foodie career before it even got off the ground?

So, she had to turn the tide somehow. Take another tack. My God, was she actually plotting in her mind a way to get him back to the bakery?

Yes.

She followed Suzie up the back entrance to the Lodge, mulling all that over in her head while carrying another tray of pastries, and entered the kitchen. It was barely six o’clock in the morning, and she’d been up since four. Since she’d not gotten home until after midnight, she’d managed barely three hours sleep, since for the first hour she lay in bed asking herself the same stupid questions that had rolled off Suzie’s tongue.

What was she thinking?

How could she be certain this man was a food editor? All she had was a hunch. Was he a stalker, like Suzie insisted? Or maybe he was simply a harmless lover of scones.

Whatever.

She had to put it out of her mind right now, though; there was nothing she could do about it now. Time would tell whether Mystery Man or Steve Gates or whatever-the-hell his name was ever crossed her path again.

She didn't care. Not right now.

This morning, she had too much work to do to bother contemplating.

"I don't want to talk about it right now," she told her cousin.

"Fine." Suzie put down the tray of rolls, brushed her palms together, and headed back toward the door. "I'll go get the last tray of muffins. Can you start arranging the platters?"

She nodded. Of course.

"But I will say that I do not think he is a stalker. I really do think he's connected some way in the food entertainment business."

Suzie circled back in one fluid movement and caught her gaze. "Sydney, I know the food entertainment business. I am *in* the food entertainment business. I know editors and producers. They don't sneak around back alleys trying to break into bakeries, and they don't stalk people in grocery stores. If they want you, they'll approach you straight up. Sneaking around is not what editors do."

Sydney gulped and took in every word Suzie said. It all made sense.

"But maybe he just..."

She put up a hand. "Stop. It. Now."

Her shoulders slumped. "Okay. Got it. I'll steer clear."

Stepping forward, Suzie forced eye contact with her again. "Repeat after me, Sydney Schul, as God as my witness, I swear on my fanciest spatula that I will not invite that man into my bakery for a tour, and if I see him coming, I will close the shop and call Matt. Got it? Now, repeat after me."

Sydney mumbled the words while her dreams of being scone-famous evaporated.

Oh, well. Suzie was probably right. Likely not room in this town for two celebrity chefs anyway, right?

Of course.

She'd let Suzie go with it and be happy riding along on her coattails.

Sort of.

"So, now I'm heading back to the van for that last tray. Let's get busy here."

"Sure."

They had a continental breakfast spread to get out in the smaller dining room of the Lodge before seven. The annual writers' conference attendees had trickled in yesterday, according

to Suzie, and the retreat started today. Truth be told, she was happy to keep her hands busy for the next hour or so, and her brain devoid of any thought of stalkers or editors or men in general.

“Just work, Syd,” she mumbled. “It’s what you do best.”

Chapter Four

Stone took another sip of coffee, grimaced, and sat the cup back on its saucer. Rubbing his temples, he looked down at the glossy magazine shining up at him from the table and longed for another cup of the Hawaiian coffee he had yesterday at Sydney's. Headache. Not enough sleep. Needed triple-octane caffeine. Questioning why in the hell he had traveled all the way to Legend, Tennessee in search of a damned scone.

Again, his gaze flipped over the magazine cover and settled on the words at the bottom. *Best Scones of the South*, the tagline read, page 52.

That's why.

After last night's fiasco, he'd pretty much decided to leave Legend and Sydney Schul and the lovely orange scone behind. Time to get his ass back to Atlanta where he belonged. He'd even packed his bags this morning and had them sitting by his Lodge room door. He was ready to head out but had decided on a hearty, mountain breakfast before he did.

He was resigned. Nothing more here to do. Give up his hair-brained scheme of somehow sleuthing the recipe away from the lovely Sydney.

Stupid thought.

With a tinker of glassware and muffled voices, he lifted his gaze from the magazine to the scene through the doorway of the Lodge dining room to another room—one set up for a meeting, it looked like. Through that door, he could see the back of a woman—tall, blonde, thin—who wore a sky blue chef's apron and sported a long ponytail down her back. A familiar blonde woman. Like, the same woman who seemed to be the center of his attention lately.

Sydney.

A strange stirring settled in his gut.

He really did like the looks of the woman. Tall and thin, with sea blue eyes that could knock the socks off most men. She was busy, always busy, and focused so intently on her work. Probably part of her success. She was determined and a bit assertive. Took that kind of business sense to make it out there in the world.

No doubt, she had worked hard to make a name for herself. He admired that in a woman. In anyone. And he admired that in her.

Which was another reason why he should leave. Why this cock-eyed plot had possessed him, he wasn't quite sure. He was still dumbfounded as to why he carried through with it thus far.

He just wasn't used to losing. And he wasn't used to not owning the title of *Best Scones of the South*, himself.

She turned, and he dropped his gaze a little, then after a moment, slowly looked back up again. She bustled about, placing pastries on a platter, straightening sugar packets, and checking on the silver-plated coffee maker on the table. He supposed this was why she and the other woman were baking so much yesterday. Looks like they were catering in breakfast.

He sniffed.

Would she have more scones?

Could he?

No.

Stone fidgeted in his chair and glanced back to the magazine. Absentmindedly he thumbed through the pages to page 52, and saw Sydney's smiling face staring back at him. In one hand, she held an orange scone, with the other, she was shaking the hand of the magazine editor. And behind her, was the sign that sported the coveted words that usually hung over his bakery door.

Best Scones in the South.

According to *Southern's Best* magazine, that is.

No.

Right then and there, he decided. It wasn't time to leave Legend. It wasn't time to give up his quest. It was time he got down to business.

Time to romance the scone.

Or seduce the chef.

Whichever came first.

* * * *

“The coffee is good but not as good as yours.”

Startled at the voice over her shoulder, Sydney jumped and turned at the same time. “Oh! Wha—?”

Half a tray of homemade donut holes skittered to the floor.

“Dammit!”

The spicy scent of his aftershave made her dizzy. Dropping to the floor, she made a futile attempt to scoop up rolling and escaping donut holes into her apron.

“Here, let me help with that.”

Large hands reached around hers and scraped a few stray donuts off the floor, then gently placed them in her apron.

She glanced up. “Thank you. Um. Steve?”

He didn’t have his ball cap on, pulled down low over his eyes, for the very first time she’d seen him. “It is Steve, right?”

He stood and gave her a hand. She took it and straightened to stand, still holding her apron bottom cradling the ruined donuts.

“Yes, I’m Steve.”

“No hat.”

A hand went to his head. “Oh. Yeah.”

He smiled, and her heart did a little pitter-patter. Were those green eyes he sported beneath those dark, hooded eyebrows?

Definitely.

With little crinkly wrinkles around the corners. Nice.

“Thanks for the ride last night and getting me out of jail. I think I owe you.”

She relaxed a bit. “No problem. Matt gets all up in arms sometimes. You know, small town, not much going on, have to earn your cop keep...”

He nodded. “Still, it was nice of you to go out of your way...”

“I was happy to do it.”

Steve shoved his hands in his pockets. “I was wondering when I could cash in on that rain check.”

Sydney bit her lip.

I swear on my fanciest spatula...

His eyes captured hers and held. For whatever reason, she didn't want to look away. "Mornings are really busy for me," she heard herself say, "Can you come by around two this afternoon?"

Smiling, he nodded, "Yes. See you then."

Then he was gone, and Sydney was left holding an apron full of donuts and wondering two things: why she had caved so easily, and what would she wear when he came by.

Did she actually, sort of, like this man?

* * * *

The usual morning coffee crowd came and went. Around noon, business picked up again. There was a different crowd who liked to grab up a large coffee to go, after lunch, to take back with them to their downtown offices. By one o'clock, Sydney's tummy was all a twitter, not so much from the fact that Steve was coming, but because she was hoping that Suzie would not pop in this afternoon while he was here.

After all, this was her business, right? Not Suzie's?

Conveniently, she chose to forget about the oath.

Besides, she had never been totally convinced that Steve was any kind of stalker, but she was pretty darned certain that he had something to do with the food business. Why else would he be here?

And this was her chance. Maybe her only chance. She had to take it.

Take a risk.

At a quarter 'til two, after she'd tidied up the place and spruced herself up a bit as well, she glanced toward the street to see if she could see anyone approaching. Nope. Usually at this time of the afternoon, she was doing some prep for tomorrow morning's baking. She supposed she could do that, pull out some ingredients and such. Get all her ducks in a row. That way she would look busy when he did arrive, and she would have things ready for in the morning.

She hustled back to the bakery. Every morning she made three types of dough: yeast dough for cinnamon rolls and pastries; quick bread dough for muffins of various kinds; and a batter for scones. She usually featured just one scone a day since she liked to play with her scone recipes, and it was too much to do several kinds each morning. The day before had been orange, today was *Mountain Blackberry*, and tomorrow morning would be *Sugar and Spice*.

She had her own secret recipes, and no one, not even Suzie, knew the exact ingredients. She'd played with the measurements for months before she found the right combination.

Three separate prep stations were located around the kitchen. So, she busied herself at each one by filling up the ingredients' canisters in each workstation and pulling down added ingredients for the special items on the menu tomorrow.

Chocolate chips, vanilla, cinnamon, canned fruit, maple syrup, cane sugar...

She was so in her element that she didn't hear the bells jingle on the door and jumped probably three feet into the air when she heard a man's deep voice call out from across the room, "Sydney?"

At that moment, a cup of flour flew out of her hands, puffed up into a nice soft cloud in the air, and drifted all over her prep station.

And her.

"Well, shoot!" She glanced down at herself, covered with flour.

Steve rushed forward. "I am so sorry. I thought you heard me come in. I didn't mean to startle you!" His hands were everywhere, wiping flour off her shoulders and brushing down her arms.

"Hazard of the business," Sydney mumbled. Then after a second, she shook herself out of her trance, and backed up. "No worries. Let me just..."

Embarrassment set in like a house afire.

She raced to the back door and onto the concrete stoop, all the while calling herself three kinds of stupid. How would this food editor take her seriously if she was wearing half her ingredients instead of baking with them?

Dammit.

Bending at the waist, she shook her head and flour rained down to the concrete. She pulled her band out of her ponytail and fluffed her hair until it stopped giving up the flour. Then she righted herself, flipping her hair back over her shoulders. By that time, Steve was at the door. She whipped off her apron in another flurry of flour, sending the cloud flying out into the alley. By the time he had joined her on the stoop, she'd managed to rid herself of most of the powdery stuff.

"I didn't mean to startle you so," Steve began, stepping closer.

"I didn't hear the bells."

"You were busy. I should have waited."

She watched his eyes. They were soft and caring. Not stalkerish at all. Suzie should just see his eyes, and then she would know...

He took another half step closer and reached toward her face. “Here, you’ve got a little bit more...right...there.” With a light touch, he brushed away some flour particles from the tip of her nose. “And here.” His fingertip moved to her cheek and swept over it like velvet. Again, he flicked away errant patches of flour from her cheek, then forehead, “And here...” and then finally, from her chin.

All the while Sydney simply stood and let him, unable to let go of the grip his gaze had on hers. And unwilling to move lest he stop touching her so damned tenderly.

Little spritzes of candy-coated sparkles were dancing in her chest.

It was...nice.

His fingers lingered on her chin, and before Sydney knew it, he tipped her face up to his, leaned in, and dipped his head so that his lips could capture hers in one sweet, soft kiss that held promise of something not so sweet and soft in the future.

Like, sex. Hot and spicy sex.

It had been a while since her last boyfriend.

Steve broke the kiss but kept his face close to hers and whispered, “Dinner tonight?”

To which she promptly answered, “Oh, yes.”

Chapter Five

Sydney didn't know why she was so nervous. It was just a dinner date with a new guy in town.

A guy she knew nothing about.

A guy whom Suzie claimed was a stalker.

A guy whom she, Sydney, felt was probably only interested in her because of the magazine article.

It was a business meeting, really, and not a date. That's what she told herself, anyway.

But she wanted it to be a date. Sort of. She'd broken up with Jimmy Chandler six months ago when it became obvious there was no future there. Jimmy was perfectly content fishing his days away. But even though Jimmy was a dear, she knew there was not a life together for the two of them. She'd be the go-getter and make all the plans. He would simply follow along behind in her trail.

No, she wanted a man to be her equal. Her sidekick. Someone who would go get 'em same as she. That wasn't Jimmy Chandler.

But could it be Steve Gate?

Too early to tell.

But she liked him. A little.

Hence, it was exciting to think about it as a date, even if it wasn't.

"Business dinner," she reminded herself, as she smoothed her palms down her black slacks, adjusted the plum sweater on her shoulders, and peered at herself in the mirror one last time. Jewelry, check. Lipstick, check. Eye makeup, check. No food in the teeth, check.

She was ready.

He'd told her he would pick her up at the bakery at seven o'clock that evening. She'd been ready and antsy since six-thirty. Now it was five minutes after seven, and she wondered if he'd backed out, until a small, silver sports car pulled up to the curb and Mr. Steve Gate himself popped out of the driver's side and sauntered up to the bakery door.

She met him with a smile, and within a few minutes, he had whisked her into the car—a little Beemer roadster—and off they went.

Her palms were damp as a dishrag.

"I'm really not all that familiar with dining places around here, so I..." he began, glancing at her once and again while he drove.

She hadn't thought about that. Legend is not the Mecca of dining out, to be certain. "Oh, there are a few local hangouts. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I was thinking some place quiet, where we could talk and such, so..."

Sydney thought about that. There was the diner. No. Too noisy. The BBQ place over on Jacobs Street. No, that wouldn't do, either. There was Pigeon Forge, but that was a forty-minute drive and she didn't think...

"So I made us reservations on The Deck, at the Lodge."

Sydney's throat clamped up tight. *The Lodge? The Deck?*

The deck was reserved for fine dining, and Sydney had only been there when invited by Suzie and Brad. Not a lot of locals made reservations on The Deck. Usually out-of-towners and guests ate on The Deck, because they didn't mind dropping a few extra dollars for flown-in, fresh seafood or high quality, right off the ranch, Black Angus steaks.

Crap.

"Oh?" she looked at Steve and gave him a half-hearted grin. "How nice."

She just hoped Suzie and Brad were home with a sick kid, or something. Not that she wanted Suzie's little boy, Petey, to be sick, she just wanted Brad and Suzie to be *somewhere else entirely*.

* * * *

As he led Sydney up the dining room stairway toward The Deck, she noticeably stiffened. Her gaze darted right and left as they crossed the threshold and the server led them to their table. A soft breeze wafted about as they rounded the east side of the Lodge and were seated at a table in the corner. Steve had scoped it out earlier in the day. Secluded, yet public, overlooking the lake to the side and with a mountain backdrop to their rear.

He wanted this to be a nice evening for a couple of reasons. One, he had to set the mood, so Ms. Sydney Schul would be comfortable with him—enough so that he could broach the subject of the scones without any suspicion on her part—and two, he rather liked the spunky woman and was excited to spend the evening with her.

Icing on the cake, er, scone.

He chuckled to himself.

Didn't explain her sudden nervousness, though, and he decided he had to do what he could to calm whatever jitters she had.

* * * *

Sydney had to admit the man was trying, but she was just too damned jumpy. They made small talk, but it was so very difficult for her to keep her attention on him. She *needed* to keep her attention on him because pretty soon she was going to get him to reveal why he was in Legend and what he wanted with her and her bakery.

But the thought of running into Brad or Suzie out here on The Deck was making her extremely nervous. So much so that it was very difficult to concentrate on a word Steve Gate was saying.

So, she decided to just drink wine. Steve had ordered a bottle. And at this moment in time, she'd already had one glass.

"How do you like the Lodge?" Discussing something neutral was a safe bet, she decided.

Steve glanced about. "Very nice. The owner has done a great job with the renovation."

"Brad is good at about anything he touches. He and Suzie have done wonders with this place. You know, Brad wanted to tear it down and build a new hotel on the premises. Suzie fought him tooth and nail and won."

"Brad and Suzie Matthews, right?" he asked. "The owners?"

"Yes. You know of them?"

"Of course. Brad's reputation as a chef is widely known in hotel circles. But Suzie, she is the one I'm most familiar with."

Sydney smiled. "The Matchmaking Chef on The Food Channel."

"I'm addicted to The Food Channel." He leaned closer and whispered, "I Tivo it every chance I get."

Laughing, Sydney felt some of her jitters fall away. "She's good. You know she's my cousin?"

His eyes widened. "No. Really?"

Nodding, she added, "In fact, do you remember that strawberry blonde in the bakery the other morning? That was Suzie. We work together some times."

"Well, I'll be." She could see wheels turning in his head. Perhaps he was thinking about the connections in the business? "I didn't recognize her."

"No television makeup," she offered.

He nodded. "Sydney, I'm glad you are more relaxed now. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Busted. It was showing.

What would she say?

"Steve, it's just that..."

He leaned closer. "I like you, Sydney. There is no need to be nervous."

No need to be nervous. All was fine, right? Except that she couldn't relax and have the conversation she wanted to have with the man because she was so worried about Brad or Suzie stepping around the corner.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. She'd heard that somewhere, sometime.

She leaned his way, too, and placed her fingertips in his open palm lying across the table and said, "When you mentioned the Lodge, Steve, I was sort of hoping we would be someplace a little more...well, private."

Steve sat back, and his left eyebrow arched. Without breaking eye contact, and with a flick of his wrist, he beckoned their waiter to the table. Steve crooked his finger, and the waiter leaned closer to hear what Steve had to say.

But Sydney heard him very clearly. He said, "That dinner we just ordered? Room service, please. I'm in the Chalet Suite. Make it happen."

Next, he pulled a few bills out of his jacket pocket and slipped them to the man, rose and helped Sydney to her feet. She rather liked the way he held his hand at her lower back as they left the table.

She gulped, half relieved to be heading off the deck, and pretty darned nervous about what was going to happen next.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, they were tucked into Steve's suite, sharing a Surf & Turf platter and a salad like they were an old married couple. Steve had suggested the entrée, a house special

designed for two, so Sydney had gone with it as well. She knew anything on Brad's menu would be excellent, and she wasn't disappointed.

Suddenly the entire scenario felt way too much like a date, and to be honest, she was mighty confused. The fact that she was very much enjoying his company was the source of her confusion, and she had to remind herself constantly why she was here.

Why *was* she here? Oh, yeah, to finally learn why Steve was tailing her and move all this food biz discussion forward. Was he an editor? A foodie fan? What?

Time to get down to business.

She thought about what she'd blurted out in the car the other evening and decided to pick up that conversation right where they had left it.

"So, Steve, let's talk about why you..."

"Sydney, I have to tell you that I am in love with that orange scone of yours. You have to tell me more about it."

Okay... We'll talk about the scone first. Not a bad idea. Could lead right into the line of discussion I want to start.

"Well, Steve. It's simple, really."

He chuckled. "Not simple. It has fabulous flavor. Very complex. And I love it with the coffee you served up."

He noticed that. Hm. Good.

"I intentionally serve that coffee on orange scone day."

"I figured as much."

She leaned forward, loving this conversation. How often did she really get to talk about her scones? It made her almost orgasmic. "It's the flavor combination, you know? People don't realize it, but all they know is they want to come back for more."

"It's brilliant, actually."

Satisfied, Sydney sat back and took another sip of her wine. "I thought so."

"I get a hint of nut in the scone....it's subtle, but noticeable. Yet, the texture is not nut-like."

She smiled. He was good. "It's the flour."

His eyebrow peaked. "Oh?"

"It's a nut flour."

"Ah. Will you tell me what kind?"

Sorry, Buster, until I know more about you, that secret is safe with me. Grinning, she replied, “No.”

He grinned back. “You are a sly one, Ms. Sydney Schul.”

“I’ve been told that.” Her tummy did a little twitter.

He studied her for a moment. “It’s macadamia nut flour, isn’t it?”

She tried very hard to keep a poker face and wondered how she was succeeding. How did he guess that? “You are just thinking that because of the coffee. It’s Hawaiian, remember? It’s tricky.”

It was his turn to sit back in his seat now. “No... You’re trying to throw me off track. It’s macadamia nut flour. I’m certain. And I bet my bottom dollar that it’s Grand Marnier in the icing and not Curaçao.”

“You’d lose that last dollar then,” she countered.

“You’re certain about that?” Leaning forward again now.

She did the same. “Positive.”

For about ten long seconds, they sat there at the little table staring into each other’s eyes, then finally Sydney said, “Talking about food is a little like foreplay, isn’t it?”

Steve took a deep breath. “I have to admit, I’m a little turned on here.”

“You, too?”

“Well, Ms. Sydney, I do recall thinking to myself the other day that eating your scone was something akin to hot, decadent sex on a plate.”

Glancing down at their table of barely touched food, and then back up again into Steve’s eyes, Sydney mustered up everything in her and quietly said, with a tart hint of wicked in her voice, “Steve, eat my scone.”

In a flurry of clothing and dishes, they both bolted over the table, mouths fused and fingers fumbling until they finally tumbled into the bed in a tangle of limbs and bedclothes.

* * * *

Sydney inhaled deeply for the first time in about three minutes. Steve’s kisses were intoxicating and she needed to push him away to come up for air. His naked body was blanketed over hers, her long legs wrapped around his pelvis, and their bodies covered with a solid sheen of sweat. In a wild frenzy of coming together they groped and sucked and tasted, and met each other thrust for thrust.

“My God you are as smooth as Red Velvet Cake. I love being inside of you,” Steve mumbled in her ear.

He stroked, and her insides felt more like Molten Lava Cake, ready to erupt at a mere stabbing in the right place on her...

“Oh, God, my Ggggg...”

“Grand Marnier?”

“Nice try. No, G-Spot. My... Um, oh yeah... G-Spot. Don't. Stop.”

“Never, my sweet.”

“My God, what a big spatula you have, Steve...”

“The better to please you with, my little Crumb Cake.”

“Oh yes, Steve. Talk food to me. Talk freakin' dirty food to me...”

“Wicked, sloppy, oozy, food.”

“Chocolate. Yes... Sweet mother of chocolate...”

“Melt for me, baby.”

“Double-boiler me, Hot Stuff. Now. Oh, Now!”

Sydney grasped Steve by the shoulders and held on tight. As her body took over and commanded release, Steve's ground into her like a standing mixer run amok with the beaters flying. In seconds, they were like just-made pudding, hot and runny all over the bed.

They both flopped onto their backs, breath after breath huffing out of their mouths.

“Yummy,” Steve finally muttered.

“Room for dessert?” Sydney countered.

Chapter Six

She woke slowly, her eyelids fluttering and taking in a streak of sunlight coming through a window opposite her. It took only half a second for her to recollect exactly where she was.

In the Lodge.

In Steve Gate's bed.

What in the world was she thinking?

She barely knew the man, and yet, she had flung herself at him like a narcissistic nymphomaniac who had been deprived of sex for six months.

Well, it had been six months.

Still, she was such an idiot! And where was he?

Unmoving, she stared ahead and listened. No breathing. No snoring. Wait. Water running. Yes, the shower. He was taking a shower.

Sitting up, she scanned the room, pulling the sheets up to her neck. Naked, oh God yes, she was naked. Blips of memory from the night before skidded across her mind's eye.

Good sex.

Oh. Mama. Yes.

But anyway, she had to think. Was this stupid with a capital S? He had admitted to nothing, no specifics about himself. They hadn't gotten that far. Had she ruined her chances by sleeping with him?

Hussy.

What *was* wrong with you?

So, all right. It's done. What now? Should she stick around and see what his next move would be? Should she get out of here before he leaves the shower? Was this just a silly one nightstand and all would be forgotten on both ends by sundown?

"Crap. I have no clue what to do here," she whispered.

She got up and stepped toward the bathroom door. The shower was still on. Glancing about, she noticed her clothing scattered all over the floor, mingling with his.

"Find panties." That would be a good first step. She did, and then her cami, and pulled it over her head, too. "Okay, now I feel just a tad less...vulnerable."

Vulnerable. Ugh.

Yes.

It was how she felt. Maybe she should just leave this scenario and see if he comes poking around anymore. Then she would know.

Her slacks were draped over an end table by a leather chair. She hurried toward it and snatched them off. When she did, a couple of magazines fell to the floor.

She glanced down.

Southern's Best. Well, that piqued her interest. Crouching, she picked up the magazine and saw it was the one that featured her scones. She leafed to the page, knowing it by heart. She had the same dog-eared magazine at her home. As she found the page, she sucked in a breath.

There she was in the picture, with a fat, red circle around her face.

Big. Red. Circle.

Bulls-eye.

What?

A fissure of something terror-like gripped her gut.

Was Suzie right? Steve is a stalker? She had delicious hot-fudge, almost-stranger sex with a freakin' stalker?

Oh, *shit, shit, shit!*

She dropped the magazine to the floor. As it fell, she noticed a second magazine lying there, too. Another issue of *Southern's Best*. She reached for it, lifted it closer.

This one was dated a year earlier and on the cover, was a picture of a man in front of his bakery, with a sign—one very much like the sign hanging over her bakery—that read *Best Scones in the South, 5th Year in a Row*.

A man. In front of his bakery. Best scones in the south. 5th year...

She looked harder at the man. Then lower to the address label on the magazine.

Stone's Scones with an Atlanta address.

Steve?

No.

Stone Kellerman.

She'd heard of him. Everyone had heard of him.

She ripped the cover off the magazine and let it flutter to the floor. "You goddamned scone stalker," she whispered.

* * * *

With the force of a thousand sore muscles, Sydney punched at the yeast dough, kneading it over and over again. She sprinkled some flour, blew her bangs out of her eyes, and dug the heel of her hands into the dough again.

"It's yeast dough, Sydney. It requires a tender touch. You might as well go at it with beaters."

Suzie was right, of course, but she needed to put her frustration into something. Might as well be the yeast dough.

"So what's up with you this morning?" she prodded.

"Nothing." Sydney moved to another bowl of dough waiting to be punched down and put her fist into it with a satisfying pop.

"Doesn't look like nothing."

The pressure inside of her was enormous. It bubbled up inside her chest, squeezed her neck, and couldn't help but spill over and out of her mouth.

"If you must know, I slept with him, all right! Are you happy now?" she yelled, looking straight into Suzie's face.

The look Sydney got back was blank.

"You slept with whom?"

Whom? Whom else? Why does she need to make me say it?

"Oh, the hell with it." Sydney attacked the dough again with full force, punched and kneaded it, then all of a sudden, reached her arms around it, wadded it up into a big, fat ball, scooped it up close to her chest, and dropped the entire thing into the trashcan.

"Sydney? What on earth?"

She whirled. "I slept with him, okay? The scone man. The stalker. The Stone of *Stone's Scones*. Not Steve. Not an editor. A traitor. A stealer of recipes. A jealous scone man from Atlanta who swept me off my feet, temporarily, that is, because *I do not feel one bit of emotion* for this man except contempt. And hate. And humiliation. And stupidity.

"He wasn't after me, he was after my scones."

"Sydney..."

Her shoulders slumped, and she sank onto a high stool. "I slept with a scone stalker."

For a moment no one moved. Suzie didn't say a word and kept her distance from Sydney, who swore if she heard the words, *I told you so*, come out of her mouth she would probably have a convulsion, whatever that was.

"Stone Kellerman? That Stone? Of *Stone's Scones* in Atlanta who had the best scones of the south until you..."

Sydney sniffled. "Yes. That Stone."

"Oh, Syd..."

She put up a hand. "I don't need your sympathy."

"I understand."

"But he's not a stalker. Not of the people kind, anyway. He's just a scone stalker. Damned man was just after my scone recipe."

"Unthinkable." Suzie moved one step closer.

"He'll never work again in this business."

"Of course not."

"I'll write a letter to *Southern's Best*."

"You do that."

"I slept with the bastard."

"I know."

"It was good."

"Damn."

"Yeah."

Another moment of silence fell over the kitchen, then Suzie said, "You like him, don't you?"

"I hate his guts." She sighed.

Suzie stifled a smile.

“He better get his ass out of town, or I’m gonna have it on a cake pedestal.”

“I’m sure he’s long gone.”

“He better be.”

She sniffled again and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “Goddamned scone stalker...”

* * * * *

On his way back to Atlanta, Stone took the long way to the Interstate. A very long, round-about way. In fact, the route took him right through downtown Legend, and while he was there, he figured he might as well take one last look at the bakery across the street.

He parked in the parking lot beside the library and for a while, just watched the morning coffee-goers go in, and out, with satisfied looks on their faces.

He wondered if today was an orange scone day.

A boy of about thirteen crept by on his bicycle. Stone rolled down the window. “Hey kid!” he called out.

The boy looked back over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Wanna earn five bucks?”

His eyes lit up. “Sure!”

Stone reached a ten-dollar bill out of the window. “I’m in kind of a hurry here. Can you go into Sydney’s over there and get me an orange scone and a cup of coffee to go? You can keep all the change. I’ll be right here.”

The boy nodded, eagerly. “Sure thing!” He grasped the bill and parked his bike, then after looking both ways, crossed the street and entered the bakery.

* * * * *

About ten minutes later Stone sipped at his coffee while cruising down I-75 toward Atlanta. He had Hawaiian coffee in his cup and an orange scone in a little white bag on his seat, but in the place where his heart usually beat strong and happy, he felt a little empty.

Chapter Seven

"I can't believe you talked me into this."

Glancing about the New York set at The Food Channel, Sydney felt a mite uncomfortable. She was not used to this. Suzie? That was another ball of wax. Her cousin was very used to television sets and cameras following her every move as she cooked. But Sydney, no.

"You wanted fame? I give you fame."

"I sort of didn't expect this. I was thinking another magazine article, or something."

"Well, getting out of Legend wasn't such a bad idea, was it? You've been pining away there ever since you ditched out of Stone Kellerman's hotel room. Time for a change, sweetie."

"I did not ditch."

"You left him without a word while he was taking a shower, Sydney!"

"The man lied to me. You know that as well as I."

"You could have cut him some slack. I mean, he never really did anything to you, did he? The man was just upset about losing out to you, and you know how men are when they lose. They do desperate things."

"Like lie? Give fake names? Snoop around? I can't believe I'm hearing what I'm hearing, Suzie. Criminy! You were the one who thought he was a stalker!"

"I was wrong. When I'm wrong, I say I'm wrong."

"Humpht." Sydney had just about had enough. "Well, he's the one who left town without a backward glance. I'm sure he's not pining away after me in Atlanta. Besides, I don't know what Stone has to do with today and this stupid show—which is going to be a disaster, by the way. I don't know a thing about doing a television show."

Suzie grasped her by her upper arms and turned her bodily to face her. “Sydney Schul, snap out of it. You know that Patricia, the producer of my show, would never have agreed to this if she hadn’t thought it would make an excellent show. And it’s Valentine’s week, for goodness sake. The perfect time to talk scones.

She frowned. “I don’t get that.”

Suzie waved her hands in the air. “Never mind, you will. Now, how was makeup?”

“Like I thought I would never get out of there. Is that stuff sliding down my face?”

Smiling, Suzie brushed a wayward hair from her cheek. “No, you look beautiful. Hey listen, this is a great opportunity to promo your shop and your scones. It’s like a cakewalk once you get started. Just let me do the talking...”

A deep voice broke the air between them. “Quiet on the set. Cameras rolling in...”

“...and you’ll be fine. Follow my lead.”

“...in three...two...one...” Pause.

Suzie looked straight into the camera. Sydney felt like a statue beside her.

“Good morning and welcome to the Matchmaking Chef! I’m Suzie Matthews and today we are romancing the scone. Not your everyday scone, mind you, but a perfect match made in Heaven, of scone and coffee, that will tickle your taste buds and pacify your palate with a sweet blend of orange and nutty flavors that are to die for.”

Suzie turned to Sydney. “Today I have a very special guest, my very own cousin, Sydney Schul, owner of Sydney’s Sugar High Coffee Stop and Bakery in Legend, Tennessee, my home town, and whose *Double Orange Scone of Sinful Decadent Desire* recently earned the title of *Southern’s Best* magazine *Best Scones of the South*. Sydney, welcome!”

An errant and unexpected smile broke across her face. “Hi! Thanks! This is fun!”

Suzie smiled back and hooked her arm into her elbow. “And we’ll be back, right after this.”

“Cut!”

Grimacing, Sydney looked to her cousin. “That was bad, huh.”

“Just relax, Syd. It’s all going to be fine. Just pretend we’re in your kitchen back at the bakery.”

“Then give me something to do with my hands. I need something to do with my hands.”

The voice, again. “...and rolling again three... two...”

“Here.” Suzie pushed toward her a bowl of dough.

“...one.”

“Today we are making orange scones, the recipe that made you famous, right Sydney?”

“Well,” Sydney pulled the dough out of the bowl and began fiddling with it on the counter, “this is the scone that got me the award, but I’m not giving away all my secrets here, Suzie.” She leaned closer and whispered, “Even if you are my cousin.”

A few snickers went up from the set. Sydney relaxed a bit.

Suzie leaned in. “I’ve heard, Sydney, that I wouldn’t be the first person to try to romance the orange scone recipe away from you. Is that true?”

Suddenly, Sydney had visions of tabloid articles about her and Stone plastered all over supermarket checkout lanes worldwide. Would she not let this rest?

Besides, it had been a couple of months. It was a bygone. A distant memory.

A sad dream that haunted her every night.

But she smiled sweetly for the camera. “Now that’s a story that will never be shared on national television, my dear cousin.” Inside, her guts were quaking like an 8.6 on the Richter scale.

“But it’s true, right? That a few weeks ago someone was stalking your scone recipe?”

If she were able to look at herself, Sydney was certain her eyebrows would be positioned into a perfect vee, with the ends of both right and left brows pointed up, and the insides pointing down at her nose, and her face squished into a surprised, but deliberate, scowl.

“Dear cousin, we are not going there.”

Suzie reached to Sydney’s dough and broke off a hunk. “I do understand, but it’s an incredible story, you know. That’s why I figured out I had to get to the bottom of it. Particularly since it’s Valentine’s week.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The scone stalker, my dear. Remember?”

Out of the corner of her mouth, Sydney bit, “Are you freakin’ crazy?”

“Cut that part, but keep rolling,” the voice said again.

She wished he’d stopped the cameras so she could get a grip on Suzie and the direction this conversation was going.

“He was not a stalker,” though, were the words that came out of her mouth.

“Oh?”

“No. And if I remember correctly, I kept telling you that he wasn’t a stalker, Suzie, but you kept insisting.”

Suzie looked directly into the camera, leaning forward a bit. "I know. I was a bit unnerved. But I was wrong, and when I am, I do correct myself. In fact," she glanced at Sydney again, "I'm going to make a public apology right now."

This didn't feel good. "Suzie, what in the world?"

Sydney looked down into her hands and realized that she had rolled a handful of dough into a very tight wad.

"Which brings me to the introduction of our next guest."

What the hell? I am your guest, Suzie.

"This is really quite a story, folks. You see, before Sydney held the honor of *Best Scones of the South*, another gentleman held that title for five years in a row. Please meet, Stone Kellerman of Stone's Scones in Atlanta."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Sydney heard applause, but knew that couldn't really be happening. Could it?

What. The. Hell.

And then in walked Steve, er, Stone. Her stomach plummeted and her heart kicked up some kind of weird pitty-patty cadence.

But there he was, looking sheepish as hell. Looking even more handsome than ever. Looking good enough to eat.

Please. I can't be here if he talks food to me. I'll have an orgasm on the spot.

Suzie faced him. "So, Stone. It was quite a surprise when you were ousted by a small town girl, huh?"

Sydney squeezed the dough in her hand. Hard.

He chuckled and looked to Sydney, who couldn't muster up a word.

"Very surprised. I was used to winning."

"So much so," Suzie went on, "that you took a little undercover trip to Legend to check out Sydney's scones, did you not?"

"I must confess. I did."

His gaze never left hers.

"And did you check out Sydney, as well?"

He smiled. "Afraid so. In fact, I became quite enamored of her."

"Enamored? Well..." Suzie glanced back to Sydney, who wanted to stick her tongue out at her, but didn't. "And were you able to romance the recipe out of her?"

Sydney felt her gaze narrow.

“No ma’am,” he said. “She’s got that recipe locked up tighter than a drum.”

“But you tried?”

“Oh yes, I tried.”

“And do you have anything you would like to say for yourself at this point, Mr. Kellerman?”

He paused, still looking Sydney in the eyes. “Yes.”

“And?”

“I still think it’s Grand Marnier.”

Sydney uttered something that sounded like, “Pphuw”

Suzie continued to prod. “Anything else?”

He tipped his head in a slow nod. “Ms. Sydney is definitely one tough cookie. A little tart like Key Lime Pie, but smooth and silky as a Crème Brulee with a hard sugar crust, to boot. I think that recipe is safe with her for a long time.

“Of course, if she lets me talk food to her, anything is a possibility.”

Enough. Her panties were wet already.

Sydney had remained calm and civil and camera-pretty-like for way too long. She gripped and grasped that ball of dough in her hand, measured its weight, looked Stone square in the eyes and said, with quite a bit of sass and spice, “You goddamned scone stalker you!”

And beamed him square in the center of his forehead.

“I deserved that.” Stone rubbed dough off his forehead. What did he expect? He’d told Suzie this wasn’t going to work.

“You bet you did.”

“Let me explain, Sydney.”

He watched Sydney jerk out of Suzie’s grasp. “Get those cameras out of my face,” she said. “This is over. Done. Finished! Cut!”

He was surprised at her fervor, though.

Suzie grabbed Sydney’s hand again. “The cameras stopped rolling minutes ago. Now, will you get a grip?”

Glaring, Sydney stepped back and faced both of them. “Me get a grip?” She angled her body toward Stone. “You!” She pointed. “You scone stalker you! You lied to me. You gave me a fake name! You talked food to me, and I fell for it. You...you...you...”

A pent-up breath escaped her lips and Stone watched the life sail out of her, exhausted, he figured. Poor thing. He wished this hadn’t happened quite this way...

Then Suzie stepped forward. “Syd...”

She jerked her posture back upright. “And you! My own flesh and blood! What do you think you are doing, bringing him here? You were the one who said he was a stalker. Why did you bring me here for this...this...this...?”

“Sydney, we need to talk.” Stone stepped forward.

She backed away. “No. I’m not talking to anyone. In fact, I’m going home.” She whirled. “Somebody get me a cab. Now!” she yelled. “Where is that producer of yours, Suzie? I am getting out of there this very *instant!*”

Rushing away, she headed toward the dressing room.

Stone took a quick step after her.

Suzie grabbed his arm. “Let her go,” she told him. “Patricia isn’t going to let her go anywhere.” Then turning to him she added, “Sorry this didn’t turn out exactly as I had it worked out in my head.”

“Ditto,” he said. “Now, will you let me do this my way?”

* * * *

In the end, she didn’t get on a plane for home. There still was a matter of a television shoot that she had agreed to, dammit, and Patricia Plum, hard-nosed producer that she was, would not let Sydney out of her contract.

She had managed, however, to postpone it a day. She figured the world owed her that. She wasn’t leaving Suzie’s New York hotel room suite until then.

Scones be damned. The last thing she felt like doing was a Valentine’s week matchmaking show.

She should have seen that coming. After all, that’s what Suzie does.

Play matchmaker.

It had worked for Chelly. It had worked for Patricia. And it had even worked for Lyssa Larkin.

But it hadn’t worked for Sydney, and it wouldn’t. No use in trying.

Thing was, Stone had looked delicious standing there yesterday in the studio. Totally and utterly handsome and sinfully delicious. But she could never trust him. Not after what he'd done in Legend.

The door to her bedroom cracked ajar, and Sydney lifted her head off her pillow to glance that way. "I'm going out for a little while, to take a walk," Suzie said. "Won't be gone long, just want some fresh air. Sleep in as long as you want."

"Okay."

She left, and Sydney snuggled deeper into the down covers. Her eyelids grew heavy again, and she had nearly dozed back to sleep when the bell to the suite sounded.

"Who in the world?"

She sat up. Maybe the person would go away.

The bell rang again.

She padded to the door and peeped out the peephole. Suzie.

Sydney opened the door. "I forgot my key. Sorry." Suzie stepped toward a table, picked up her key, and slipped it into her pocket. "Bye!"

After latching and dead bolting the lock, she headed back to bed.

It seemed like just a short time later the bell chimed again. She groaned. "Again! What did you do, lose it this time?"

Stumbling once more out of her bedroom and through the living room, she made it to the door, unbolted the deadbolt, and swung the door open. "I swear, if you forget your key one more time..."

Not Suzie.

Stone.

Sydney started to heave the door shut. Stone stopped the motion and held out a white paper sack. "Stop," he said. "I have scones. Take your choice. A Cream Scone with Raspberry Preserves and Clotted Cream, or a Chocolate Marshmallow Scone with Powdered Sugar Glaze, or, my personal favorite, Blueberry Streusel with Lemon Curd. Take your pick."

She blinked. Looked at the sack. Sniffed. And looked back at Stone.

Then, she narrowed her gaze and gave him the once over.

"Where did you get these?"

"A little shop around the corner. I've had my eye on it for a couple of days. Wanna go check it out?"

“Shall we go undercover?”

“I’m game, are you?”

“Definitely. But I need to get dressed first.”

“I’ll wait.”

“You better.”

Sydney let him in, and he closed the door behind him. She was halfway across the living room when she turned, looked back, and said, “You had me at clotted cream, you know.”

His left brow arched. “Oh?”

“That’s right.”

“I had hoped I had you at Red Velvet Cake.”

Her cheeks flushed hot. “Well, that, too, but don’t get cocky about it.”

“No, ma’am.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here.”

“Good. Let’s go stalk some scones.”

The End

About the Author

Maddie James is widely published in fiction and non-fiction, with numerous romance novels in print, in both e-book and paperback formats, and translated into a least five languages. Writing with an edge of suspense, her stories span the romance genre from contemporary category to paranormal. Writing as Mia Jae, she pens erotica.

Being a Libra, Maddie strives to balance her time wisely—not that she always succeeds. The day job, the kids and grandkids and granddogs, those pesky yard-sale junk projects that nag at her, those “to be read” books, and a plethora of characters and unfinished stories in her head often make that task a challenge. But she tries. Really. She does.

Maddie is a member of Romance Writers of America (RWA), and several of its chapters—Kentucky Romance Writers, KYOWA Romance Writers, Published Authors Special Interest Chapter (PASIC), and RWA’s Published Author Network (PAN). Her first published novel, *The Wild West*, a Kensington Precious Gems Romance, won the Calico Trails Cameo Award.

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Thank you again for your purchase, and we look forward to becoming your number one resource for high quality electronic fiction.

Best,

The RP Team

Suzie is back and here to stay! This time she's wreaking havoc as *The Matchmaking Chef*.

The Matchmaking Chef series by Maddie James
Coming throughout 2009 from
Resplendence Publishing

Perfectly Matched

Suzie Matthews is busy working on her new cookbook, *Perfectly Matched*, when she asks the local "wallflower" to help her with her project in an attempt to bring the young woman out of her shell.

Mary Lou Picketts dreams of falling in love with country music star, Nash Rhodes, but knows she'd settle for Thurman Phillips down the street if she had to. But she doesn't want to. Not really.

When Nash comes to Legend for a music benefit and stays at the lodge, Suzie wonders if she can perfectly match this miss-matched couple.

Hot Crossed Buns

Wild Katie Long, she'll never settle down, will she? But Chris Marks has had his eye set on her for a long time. She just doesn't know it yet. When Chris hires Suzie to set him up with a romantic dinner for two, so he can woo Katie in style, Suzie does all she can to set the scene and the mood.

Thing is, Katie isn't about to be wooed and she's hotter than hot crossed buns when she figures out what Suzie and Chris are up to.

Dates du Jour

Speed dating? Speed eating is more like it. When Suzie sets up lunch date after lunch date for Lyssa Larkin, Legend's homegrown homecoming queen of 1992, she knows she's about bit off more than she can chew. Lyssa inspects and rejects her dates in two bites and then sends them on their way. Suzie wonders if she really wants to date or just eat two lunches, and worries that soon Lyssa's hips won't fit on her dainty chairs.

That is, until Suzie takes a risk with a man the exact opposite of what Lyssa describes as “perfect for her.” A man that Lyssa knows, but doesn't know, and is falling for her hard and fast. Suzie just can't help but work some of her matchmaking magic behind the scenes...

Side Dish

Becca North doesn't want a boyfriend, but her BFF Nora certainly does—even if she won't admit it. Becca is so off men.

But when Nora, owner of Nora's Novel Niche, meets Suzie the Matchmaking Chef during a book signing, she finagles a way for the matchmaker to arrange a picnic lunch date for her—on television, no less! Nora drags Becca along for moral support, and to check out her date.

Thing is, Nora's date would rather check out Becca instead.

Sam Ackerman is a busy man with a business to run and no time to pursue a relationship. The last thing he needs is to be hooked into a matchmaking scheme played out for the world on national television, but he reluctantly plays along for his friend, Suzie. He knows right away, that his “date” Nora, as beautiful and smart as she is, isn't for him. Her raven-haired BFF hanging around on the sidelines, though, is a tempting candidate.

So, he decides to forgo the entrée and head straight for the side dish.

***Ladies of Legend: Finding Home* by Janet Eaves, Magdalena Scott, Maddie James and Jan Scarbrough**

What happens when four writers who love romance get together and create a town, the people who live in it, and the stories of those people's lives? You get Legend, Tennessee — where four women from different backgrounds find purpose, love and their future in a town intent on preserving its past.

Ladies of Legend: Finding Home is an anthology including four novellas:

***Claiming the Legend* by Janet Eaves...** Lilly Peach is running from something so frightening it finally takes a whole town to cover her back.

***Midnight in Legend, TN* by Magdalena Scott...** Lovely Midnight Shelby finds Legend on the Internet after becoming tired of being one of her now ex-husband's "beautiful things."

***Bed, Breakfast, and You* by Maddie James...** Suzie Schul finds home only when the "fling" she had many months earlier shows up with a plan on her B&B doorstep.

***The Reunion Game* by Jan Scarbrough...** Plain Jane Smith reunites with her long lost love by playing a game of "bait and switch" with her famous twin sister.

*Also available from Resplendence Publishing
More Tales from Legend, Tennessee*

***Beauty and the Beast: A Ladies of Legend Novella* by Janet Eaves**

Special Agent Polly Chapman has multiple identities... She is known to many as a savior. To others she is a killing machine. But all who know her, or think they know her, believe her untouchable.

Until she's injured.

Now the man sent to piece her back together when "The Agency" considers her broken has only two choices— Catcher Stevens must fix her, or kill her.

***Harvest Moon: A Ladies of Legend Novella* by Janet Eaves**

After her sadistic husband is dead, Winifred Butler believes herself finally free of his horror. But he continues to torment her from the grave as his secrets and lies, treason and terror, bring Agent Tom Green to her door. She is as determined to keep her past a secret as Tom is committed to bringing her secrets to light. Only one of them can win. So both must fight the attraction to the other, knowing they have everything to lose...

***Murder on the Mountain: A Ladies of Legend Novel* by Maddie James**

In the two long years since her Tennessee state trooper husband's murder, Kate Carpenter thinks she's coped with his death, although everyone in Legend, Tennessee tells her she hasn't. She can't see what the problem is, really. She has her parents, and her best friend Patti Jo, and her students. What else could a twenty-nine year old woman want?

A man, Patti Jo keeps telling her.

Sent to Kate's classroom on an investigation, ATF Special Agent Mike Lehmann uses his drug prevention training as his cover. His mission? To find out what Kate knows about her husband's "death." Recent reports indicate he is alive and that he faked his death because of his involvement in a drug-running operation. Mike's task is to expose Carpenter, and if she's involved, Kate.

And he'll stop at nothing to get the answers he seeks.

***The Christmas Gift: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Janet Eaves**

Christina Montgomery dreads another Christmas with the questions about her soldier husband, Johnny, hanging over her and her daughter's heads. She believes he died with his small sniper squadron a little over two years earlier, even though his was the only body unaccounted for. The Marine Corp has indicated they are leaning towards calling Johnny a defector. There are even a few Legend locals who believe it, too. This is something Christina refuses to consider. Until one snowy evening, two weeks before Christmas, a man looking very much like Johnny arrives at her Tennessee farm with no idea of who he is.

Stunned, confused, Christina doesn't know what to do with him. Is this man's sudden appearance a Christmas miracle? Or is it Christina's worst nightmare come true?

***Christmas Collision: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Magdalena Scott**

Rebecca Mayfield, *the* divorce lawyer in New York City, doesn't believe in happily ever after. Why would she? Her beloved husband and law partner died of a heart attack a couple of years ago, and she spends every day of her lucrative work life ending someone's marriage.

Her friend and former client, Midnight Shelby McClain, invites Rebecca to her new "hometown" of Legend, Tennessee for the holiday. Small town Christmas—probably incredibly hokey. But Legend worked some magic in Midnight's life. What might be there for Rebecca?

Her rental car slides off the icy road and is stuck in a ditch. She hikes through the dark in the deep snow toward the only light she can see...from a little cabin on the mountain.

David keeps a vigil each Christmas Eve in a little weekend cabin on the mountain outside Legend. He needs this time alone—away from his high stress life in Knoxville. He does *not* appreciate the interruption of having to take care of yet another lost soul—no matter how cute and spicy the package it's wrapped in.

The power goes off, but the sparks continue to fly between these two strangers... There's something magical about this cabin. Maybe this is the Christmas to find love—and a new beginning—in Legend, Tennessee.

***Home for the Holidays: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Maddie James**

The last thing Chelly Schul wants is to go home for the holidays. She left her hometown of Legend, Tennessee on a wing and a prayer two years earlier and hasn't returned. Her leaving humiliated her entire family, particularly her sister Suzie, since she ran off with Suzie's (almost-ex) husband.

Legend Police Officer Matt Branson values being alone. Even during the holidays, he enjoys the solitude. Dubbed the town hermit, he tells himself he prefers his "cave" to socializing. His friends say he still pines after that lost love...although he begs to differ.

All that changes the snowy day he pulls over the older model sedan heading into Legend. His gut slams against his backbone as Chelly rolls down the car window and looks up into his eyes.

His high-school sweetheart is back in town—the woman who sent him into his cave in the first place.

***Santa's Kiss: A Legendary Christmas Novella* by Jan Scarbrough**

Actress Dawn Smith's world is crumbling. She's always lived on the edge, seeking thrills, making herself into someone different. That's why her success in Hollywood came so easily for a small town girl from Legend, Tennessee. But things have changed. Dawn needs to get away from the bright lights, but it's Christmastime and that has always meant going home to family. She can't face family this year.

Clint Roberts, former high school football hero and current car dealership owner, is a popular fixture in Legend. Affable and fun-loving, the bachelor is everyone's best buddy. Most people know about his infatuation for one-time Legend girl, now superstar Dawn Smith.

Dawn needs someone to turn to, but she's rejected her family. When Clint shows up on her doorstep in a snowstorm dressed as Santa bearing gifts and food, she welcomes him. Will their night of lovemaking bring Dawn more heartache or can Clint convince the actress that it's time for her to come home for good?

***Where Her Heart Is: A Ladies of Legend Novel* by Magdalena Scott**

Two years ago, Betsy McClain gave up on her husband and her hometown. She packed up her baby daughter and moved to the City. Now she's temporarily back in Legend, Tennessee. But when Betsy agreed to this house-sitting job, she didn't know her favorite room was being renovated, or that her handsome almost-ex-husband was the carpenter.

After his wife and baby left him, Mike McClain was forced to grow up. Now he considers himself Mr. Responsibility. LizBeth Ann soon falls in love with her big handsome daddy, who takes her for picnics and is her "date" for little girl tea parties. But though Betsy, with her big blue eyes and cascades of golden blonde hair, looks like an angel, she seems determined to treat him like the devil. How can they let go of the past so the little family can have a future?

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