

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

Love

&

Scones

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Love and Scones

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Allie Maldonado climbed the stairs to the Cooking Channel's temporary offices in Austin, trying not to feel panicked. Leona Crocker, one of the channel's most popular cooks, was taping her shows in Texas. She'd be traveling to Allie's restaurant in Konigsburg next week to make scones for an episode of *Miz Leona's Country Cooking*.

Allie had already met with the producer, Stanley Weisz, and his assistant, Chris Murray. Today she was to meet Miz Leona for the first time. She looked down at her outfit—jeans, Gap T-shirt, vintage tweed jacket. Was it maybe a little shabby? But Miz Leona always looked down home on her show. She probably wouldn't care.

She stepped into the office, then stopped short, staring. *Miz Leona?*

The smooth bob that framed the woman's face was nothing like the bouffant she wore on television. In person, she looked like someone who owned a show that had made her several million dollars. She wore a slim black dress accessorized with a stack of gold bangles and four-inch black heels. She also wore a steely grimace that looked more like Miranda Priestly than Betty Crocker.

Allie cleared her throat.

Stanley glanced up, his mouth edging into a cautious smile. "Hi, Ms. Maldonado, we were just talking about you. Leona, this is Allie Maldonado, the chef you'll be working with next week in Konigsburg."

Leona gave her a smile that didn't seem to go much farther than her lips. "A pleasure."

Allie felt a little like curtsying.

"We just have some details to discuss." Stanley checked through his notes. "I know we'd talked about making your scones, but we thought perhaps we'd do something a little different."

"Different how?"

"We're going to do one of my competitions." Miz Leona picked an invisible piece of lint off her sleeve. "My scones against yours. We do one every couple of months." She raised her gaze to Allie, her accent edging south. "We'll have a good ol' time. You'll love it."

Allie doubted that. She remembered those cooking contests. Somehow Miz Leona always managed to win. "Who'll judge?"

"We always bring in some chefs to serve as judges," Chris explained.

Miz Leona turned to Allie, her gaze becoming frigid. "Real chefs. Not like you and me."

*Not like you and me.* Allie took a grip on her temper, remembering the years she'd spent as a pastry chef in San Antonio. *Real chefs. Right.* All of a sudden she really wanted to be the first to knock Miz Leona off her throne. "How will this work?"

"We each make our own best version of the contest dish. Then the judges do a blind tasting. May the best baker win." Miz Leona gave Allie a rattlesnake smile.

Okay, she'd grown up in Brownsville. She could deal with snakes. Allie took a deep breath. "Right. May the best baker win."

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"I don't see the problem." Steve Kleinschmidt leaned against Allie's kitchen counter, munching on a peanut-butter cookie. "Your scones are a religious experience. You're the best of the best."

Allie gave him a fond look as she measured her flour. His skinny, five-foot-eight-inch frame was encased in the usual outfit, khaki slacks and a knit golf shirt that did nothing for his slightly concave chest. His thinning blonde hair had drifted down across his forehead,

almost touching his horn-rims.

Everybody called him Wonder Dentist. Allie was the only one besides his mother to call him Steve. She was pretty sure they were in love. On the other hand, he'd never told her how he felt about her even though they'd been together for almost two years. Beyond the fact that he loved her cooking, of course.

"You're prejudiced," Allie said. "Leona Crocker has the entire might of the Cooking Channel behind her. I've seen those contests. She doesn't lose. Ever."

"Well, this time she will. No kidding, Allie, you're the best baker I've every met. I've had baked goods from here to the Gulf Coast, and nothing compares to yours."

"I only wish you were one of the judges." She dumped flour into the bowl of her mixer, along with some sugar and salt and a stick of butter.

Steve's glance sharpened. "You're making scones, aren't you?"

"I need to do a little practice." She watched the mixer paddle blend through the ingredients. "I should be able to do this one-handed, given the number of scones I've made over the last few years."

Steve nodded, frowning. "Don't you usually put in something besides flour and salt and sugar and butter?"

Allie stared at the mixer, then turned off the power. "Crap."

"What?"

"I forgot the baking powder." She pulled out the can. "I'll have to add it now, but it probably won't get blended in." She dumped in the powder, then started the mixer again. A fine white cloud rose from the bowl. "And crap again."

"Baking powder?"

Allie nodded disconsolately.

"Probably won't make much difference. You got some of it in there."

"I need all of it in there," she grumbled. "Damn it, I can't afford to make any mistakes."

"You won't. You'll be great."

"Right." She began beating eggs and cream with more than her usual vigor.

Steve moved further down the counter, out of range.

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Later, Allie wondered if she'd jinxed herself with that first batch. As the week went on, the scones got worse and worse. Some were too wet, others too dry. One batch had burned sugar topping. Today she'd used some raspberries she'd picked up in Austin. They had even Steve pursing his lips.

"There's a lot of raspberry taste." He placed the rest of the scone carefully back on his plate, then leaned back in his Adirondack chair on the patio.

"I should have added sugar to the flour I tossed them in. I knew they tasted sour." Allie crumbled her scone into her napkin. "Damn it. I know this stuff. Why isn't it working?"

"You're trying too hard. Some things you do on instinct—no thinking involved. Just let your automatic reflexes kick in—you're a born baker."

*Born baker.* Allie closed her eyes. At the moment, she felt more like a born loser. "At least I'll do peach for the show. I could do those in my sleep."

"Peach." Steve's eyes took on a reminiscent gleam. "Fredericksburg peaches. All golden and sweet and juicy. Heaven."

Allie sighed. "Knock wood." She rapped her knuckles on the arm of her chair.

The back screen door of the restaurant swung open and Denny, her sous chef, stuck his head out. "Hey, Al, there's somebody here from that TV show to see you."

Allie froze. It would be just her luck to have Miz Leona show up on a day when the only scones she had on hand contained raspberries that could have doubled for alum. She wiped her suddenly damp palms on her apron and walked back inside.

Chris Murray sat at the front counter. Allie checked the plate in front of her. Toffee squares. Okay, at least one thing had gone right.

Chris grinned at her. "These cookies are wonderful! I need this recipe."

"It's in my cookbook. I think Stanley got a copy for your show."

Chris held up the book. "I know. I swiped it. Everything I've tried has been terrific."

Allie raised an eyebrow. Chris didn't usually try to butter her up quite so much. "Did you need something from me?"

Chris's smile became a little more fixed. "Well, we need to know what you're going to bake, so we can be prepared."

"Since it's the Hill Country, I thought peach scones. They're in season right now."

"Yes, I guessed you might want to do that. But you see, there's a problem."

Allie frowned. "What problem?"

"That's what Miz Leona's going to make." Chris's smile had moved into grimace territory.

"But this is a contest. Can't we make the same thing?"

"You'll both make scones, of course, but Miz Leona likes to have some variety. She suggests you try some other kind."

Allie folded her arms across her chest. "So basically, you're telling me I can't make my specialty. The scones my café is famous for."

Chris's smile collapsed. "Look, Allie, it's her show. She wants to do a feature on Hill Country peaches and then do peach scones. I'm sorry, but you'll need to make something else."

Allie swallowed hard. *Suck it up, Maldonado.* "Okay, I'll come up with something. I assume you don't care what it is as long as it isn't peach."

"Do whatever you want, but keep it local. Miz Leona loves to talk about local produce. We'll be here in a couple of days to start setting up."

Allie closed her eyes as Chris escaped out the front door. What else was in season? Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries. She grimaced. She'd already had a disaster with raspberries. She could try blueberries, only they weren't local. They came from East Texas or out of state. That left strawberries, maybe from Poteet.

She sighed. Strawberry scones would be safe. They also wouldn't be nearly as good as peach. She was beginning to see why Miz Leona always won.

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"I don't understand why you can't both do peach." Docia Toleffson wiped a bit of margarita salt off her nose. "I mean they still wouldn't be identical. I've tasted lots of peach scones and none of them have been exactly like yours."

Allie slumped in a corner of the booth. At least a glass of wine at the Dew Drop Inn should improve her mood.

"They probably sent a spy up here and sampled your scones. They knew your peach scones are legendary." Steve took a swallow of Spaten.

"It doesn't make any difference. I still have to do something else."

Docia shrugged. "Okay, you do strawberries. No problem, right? Strawberries are good."

"They just don't have that ...tang." Allie stared at her wine glass. "They're sweet, so you don't get the contrast with the sweet dough. And chances of getting good berries are small. Most of them are the size of ping-pong balls and taste like sludge. I wish I had time to pick my own."

Steve smiled reminiscently. "Remember those blackberry pies you baked after we picked those berries down by Morgan's winery? Best thing I ever tasted."

Cal Toleffson shook his head. "Only you could remember a pie you tasted a year ago."

"When you taste ambrosia, it sticks with you."  
 Outside there was a distant, ominous rumble.  
 "Rain." Allie sighed. "Why not? Everything else is going south."

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Allie stared down at the flats of strawberries then up at Denny. "This is all they had?"  
 "According to Cardenelli this is the best of it. I don't think he'd screw around with you, Al. I checked, but I didn't see anything else."

The berries weren't quite ping-pong ball size. But they were big enough to make her doubtful. She picked up one and bit into it. "Crap."

Denny nodded. "Pretty watery." A gust of rain blew against the window. "Maybe you could try down in San Antonio."

"No time." The competition was tomorrow. The production crew had spent the day setting up lights and camera angles in her kitchen. "Let's dice these up. I'll toss them with a little sugar before I add them to the batter. It may work."

"You'll kill 'em, Allie." Denny patted her on the arm, then headed for the knife rack.

Allie sighed. Killing Miz Leona might be her best option.

After a half hour, she sent Denny home. Chopping the strawberries into a tiny dice was therapeutic, and besides she was sick of pep talks. By the time she'd swept the last of the diced strawberries into a plastic container, it was raining heavily, water running in sheets down the windows. As she lifted the strawberries into the cooler, someone hammered on the back door of the kitchen. She peeked through the rear window.

Steve stood on the doorstep holding a bucket in one hand. His clothes were running water, his hair plastered to his head. Catching sight of her, he waved furiously.

Allie threw open the door. "What on earth? Steve, you're soaked through."

He lifted the bucket to her, careful to stay on the doormat. "Here, hang onto this. I've got another one in the car."

Allie stared down into the bucket. It was filled with dark, thumb-sized berries, small globules glistening with rain water. Blackberries. She popped one into her mouth and tasted a mixture of tart and sweet with an explosion of juice.

Ambrosia.

Steve reappeared carrying a second bucket, also full.

"Where did you find these? The only blackberries I've seen in stores were from out of state."

"I went out to Morgan's winery. Those blackberry bushes we found before. Lots of ripe ones the birds hadn't gotten to yet, though I had to fight off a couple of grackles. Could I maybe borrow a kitchen towel?" He pulled off his glasses, now thoroughly steamed over.

Allie's throat clenched tight. "Oh, Steve. Did you pick these all yourself?"

He shrugged, wiping the towel across his sopping hair. "Sure. No big deal."

"But it's dark."

"I had that flashlight lantern I bought last year when we had all those power outages. I just set it out a rock so I could see. So what do you think? Blackberry scones?"

Allie caught sight of his hands, bright red from bramble scratches. A small puddle of rainwater formed at his feet. She blinked back the tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. "I think blackberry scones will be terrific. Let's get you home and out of those wet clothes." She pushed him gently toward the front door.

"But don't you need to get ready?" He turned away from her to stifle a sneeze.

"Later." Allie wound her arms around his waist, pulling him along through the restaurant. "After I make you a bowl of chicken soup."

"Ah, your chicken soup," he muttered dreamily.

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Ally stared down at the dough rolled out on her board. She could see lumps of blackberries, along with flecks of butter. *Please, please, please let this work.* Last night she'd tried a test batch, after she'd laid the berries out to dry on sheet pans. Even with wet berries, the scones tasted good.

Now she took her slicer, dividing the dough in two, then four, then eight triangles. She laid them out carefully on the parchment-lined baking sheet Denny had prepared for her. Miz Leona's crew had cleared out most of the prep tables and set up folding chairs for the audience. Docia and Cal and Steve had managed to snag seats on the front row.

Behind her, Miz Leona babbled away as she prepared her own scones for the oven while the camera followed her around.

Allie took a deep breath as the lights switched on in front of her. "Now sometimes you'll want to toss your fruit in sugar, particularly if it's underripe." She caught Steve's eye and smiled. "But this fruit is perfect. It was picked yesterday. It doesn't need anything but a little flour."

She hoped profoundly she was right.

She headed for the oven. Miz Leona had already put her peach scones in the one on the other side of the kitchen. They looked luscious. Allie glanced down at the sheet in her hand. Hers looked good too. "Let the best baker win," she muttered and slid the sheet inside.

Miz Leona was talking again, this time to the crowd. Her drawl became more pronounced whenever she was on camera. "Oh, y'all," she trilled. "isn't this excitin'? And y'all get to taste fresh scones after the judges." She gave them a brilliant smile, fluffing the ends of her wheat-gold wig. The audience smiled back. Miz Leona walked toward her, brilliant smile still in place. "Well, Allie darlin', you all ready? Time to introduce our judges."

The monitors at the side of the room switched to Brenner's restaurant down the street. Allie saw Lee Contreras, one of the owners, give her quick thumbs-up.

The three judges looked remarkably serious, given that they were about to be fed. One was from Chicago and another from Las Vegas. At least the last one was from Austin, although from one of the ritzier restaurants, so he might not be too impressed by a Hill Country cook. The crowd applauded politely, and Allie crossed her fingers as the monitors went blank again. She saw Steve slipping toward the door. Maybe he wanted a spot at the head of the line after the judging.

Her scones looked luscious coming out of the oven, dark purple blackberry juice mingling with the crunchy turbinado sugar she'd sprinkled over the top. She plated up three of them and placed them on a tray next to Miz Leona's golden creations.

Chris Murray draped a towel over the tray and picked it up. Allie followed Miz Leona and the camera crew down the street to Brenner's, along with a sizeable portion of the audience.

As she walked in, Allie glanced toward the side of the room where Lee stood with his partner Ken Crowder. They were both grinning widely. Steve sat on a bentwood chair in front of them, his expression bland. Allie raised an eyebrow, but Ken shook his head, mouthing "Later."

Miz Leona stepped up beside her as the camera turned their way. She stretched her arm around Allie, squeezing her shoulder. "Oh my," she cooed. "Isn't this just so excitin'?" Allie forced a tepid smile. "Oh my, yes."

Chris placed Miz Leona's golden scones in front of the judges. Each one took a bite. "Wow," the first murmured. "This is just terrific." He marked something on a slate at his side.

Judge two nodded, making her own mark. "Absolutely wonderful. The peach is just sweet enough and it's almost melted into the pastry. It's very good."

Judge three frowned slightly. "It's very, very good. Just maybe a little...bland. But very good." After a moment, he marked his slate.

Miz Leona's clasp on Allie's shoulder had become almost painful. Allie was careful not to look at her face.

Chris placed Allie's scones in front of the judges. She wondered if the scones looked a little *too* rustic. Miz Leona's had been golden perfection. Hers looked sort of, well, sloppy.

Judge number one took a bite, and Allie held her breath. "Oh," he said, frowning slightly.

Allie's heart gave a mighty thump. She managed not to bite her lip.

"Oh my god." He took another bite. "I've never tasted anything like this in my life." He scribbled something on his slate, while Allie tried to figure out if he liked it or not.

Judge two slid her fork into her mouth. Her eyes widened. Hastily, she took another bite. "Absolutely incredible. Just...incredible."

While judge two was scribbling on her slate, judge three took his own bite. His mouth spread in a grin as he chewed. "Yes ma'am," he said blissfully. "That is One Bitchin' Scone."

Chris licked her lips. "Your scores, judges?"

The first judge held up his slate. "I gave scone one a 5. It was an excellent scone. I gave scone two the same. It was really...superlative."

Judge two held up her slates. "I concur. I gave the peach scone a 4.9. Absolutely wonderful, but a wee bit dry. I gave the blackberry scone a 5. Because, well, it was perfect."

Chris swallowed hard. "I see. Judge three?"

The Austin judge shrugged. "I gave the peach a 4. I gave the blackberry a 10."

The crowd erupted in cheers.

"Our judging scale only goes to 5," Chris said between gritted teeth.

"Your problem, not mine. That blackberry scone was off the charts."

Miz Leona dropped her arm from around Allie's shoulders. After a moment she stepped forward. "I need a bite of that," she snapped, taking the plate with Allie's scone out of the third judge's hand.

He gave her a narrow-eyed look. Allie had a feeling he'd planned on finishing it.

Miz Leona took a bite, then smiled over her fork. "Oh my, my, that is tasty!"

Chris shoved one of Miz Leona's peach scones into Allie's hands and she took a quick bite. "That's very good. I like the almond extract. It gives it an extra kick."

"Thank you, darlin'. And congratulations." Miz Leona kept her bright smile in place.

"Now let's see about feedin' all these fine folks who came to see our little ol' contest today."

To their credit none of the audience rolled their eyes, but Allie saw a couple of smirks.

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Allie lounged in one of the mismatched chairs in the dining room at her restaurant. They'd closed for the day to accommodate the filming. Now she savored a late cup of coffee, along with one of the test blackberry scones she'd made the night before. Cal, Docia, Lee and Ken were arrayed across from her, while Steve massaged her feet.

The chef from Austin wanted to order some desserts for his restaurant. The other two judges had stopped to congratulate her, and the woman from Las Vegas had asked her to join a food festival in the fall. All of her scones had disappeared within the first thirty minutes, and Lee and Ken had had to break up a shoving match over the last ones.

However, based on the murderous look Miz Leona had given her as soon as the cameras stopped, Allie probably wouldn't be showing up on the Cooking Channel again for a while.

Docia munched on her own blackberry scone. "This is so good Allie. I mean Miz Leona's weren't bad, and if yours hadn't been there, I'd probably say they were really good. But compared to yours, hers were like the ones you get in the grocery store."

Lee gathered up crumbs with a fork. "I don't suppose you'd consider blackberry cobbler for the restaurant?"

Allie gazed fondly at Steve. "Nope. I think the supply of blackberries has been exhausted. Right Steve?"

He nodded, leaning back in his chair. "Between me and the grackles, I doubt Morgan's got a single blackberry left. And there's no way I'm going out there again unless there's another emergency."

Allie turned to Lee and Ken. "What went on before we got there with the scones? You both looked like you'd just heard the juiciest gossip in town."

Ken grinned. "Well, you know you had that video hookup so you could see the judges when they were introduced?"

"Right."

"We had monitors in the restaurant, too. And Weisz decided he wanted to test the hookup again, just when the scones were due to come out of the oven."

Allie's eyes widened. "They knew whose scones were whose?"

Lee shook his head. "They *would have* known, if the monitors at Brenner's hadn't gone blank at just that moment."

Docia raised an eyebrow. "And how did this miracle happen?"

"I tripped over the power cord and unplugged the monitors." Steve smiled beatifically.

Ken shook his head. "Geez, I thought that producer was going to have you neutered."

"It was an honest mistake. You know how clumsy I am."

Allie pushed the sheet pan toward him. "Here. Take the last three. You earned them."

"Anything for you, Al." He looked up and held her gaze for a moment. "I mean that, you know."

Allie's heart gave another great thump. Maybe words didn't matter after all. Maybe actions were enough. All of a sudden she really wanted everybody else to go home.

Lee sighed. "We'd better get back to the restaurant. We've got a dinner crowd to serve."

"We'll go with you." Cal pulled Docia to her feet. "Let's leave Al to savor her victory. Also Wonder." He grinned at them both and headed for the door.

Allie sat with her feet in Steve's lap, feeling the soft pressure of his fingers as he rubbed out the kinks. "It was your blackberries that did it."

"Nah. You could make scones out of turnips and they'd still taste great."

"Come on, Steve. Let me give you a compliment. Thank you for helping me. It made a big difference."

He looked up at her, the light reflecting off his glasses. "You're worth it."

"So are you."

They sat in silence for a moment, then Allie smiled at him again. "Hungry?"

"Always. Are you offering to feed me?"

"I'm doing better than that. I'm offering to feed and bed you."

Steve grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

"Right. Well then, let's get a move on, shall we?" Allie slid her feet back into her clogs. "You really are a Wonder, you know that? I will never question your nickname again."

Wonder slid his arm around her shoulders, pushing her gently toward the door. "Let's eat, Babe."

**About the Author**

Meg Benjamin writes about South Texas, although she recently moved to Colorado. Her comic romances are set in the Texas Hill Country in the mythical town of Konigsburg. When she isn't writing, Meg spends her time listening to Texas music, drinking Texas wine, and keeping track of her far-flung family. She recently retired from twenty years of teaching writing, Web design, and desktop publishing. She love to hear from readers—contact her at [meg@megbenjamin.com](mailto:meg@megbenjamin.com).

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