

# I SCREAM, YOU SCREAM

*a Mystery a la Mode*

*by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

From the day I could hold a crayon in my chubby little hands, I have colored inside the lines.

I *yes, ma'amed* and *no, sirred* and *pardon me'ed*. I smiled the right smile at all the right people. I dated the right boys and never let any of them get past second base until the day I married the right man. I shoved every last mean or petty impulse down deep into the darkest recesses of my soul, until I was as perfectly perfect as I could possibly be.

Yet still somehow I found myself up to my armpits in a vat of toasted praline pecan, scooping sundaes for my perfectly smug ex-husband and his perfectly bodacious girlfriend.

Proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that life just ain't fair.

"What kind of topping you want on that, Wayne? We got salted caramel, brown sugar pineapple, bittersweet fudge, and brandied cherries, all homemade."

Wayne Jones, my two-timing rat-bastard of an ex, hooked his left thumb through a belt loop on his Dockers and draped his right arm over the shoulder of the living Barbie doll at his side.

"What do you think, Brittanie?"

Because of course the little love muffin was a Brittanie. What else could she possibly be?

Brittanie heaved a sigh that sent her gazongas bouncing. "I don't

know.” She skimmed her coral-tipped fingers over her nonexistent hips. “I hardly ever eat sweets.”

Wayne’s lips curled. “Well, Tally is an expert on sweets. Why, I bet she’s tried every possible combination. So why don’t we let her decide?” He patted Brittanie’s perky little butt. “What do you recommend, Tally?”

*I recommend you kiss my ample be-hind.*

Honestly, if the entire staff of Remember the A-la-mode hadn’t been watching the exchange with eyes as big as low-hanging moons, if my biggest display freezer didn’t need a new motor, if we’d had more than two paying customers that Saturday afternoon, and if Wayne wasn’t thinking about hiring me to provide dessert for the annual employee picnic at Wayne’s Weed and Seed . . . well, if it hadn’t been for all that, I would have told Wayne and Little Miss Fancy Britches exactly what I recommended.

As it was, I bit the inside of my lip and counted to eleven in my head—just counting to ten was never quite enough with Wayne—before plastering a bland smile on my face.

“With the praline pecan, I would go with the bittersweet fudge. The caramel would be redundant, you’re allergic to the pineapple, and the cherry would just be gross.”

“All righty, then. Let’s give that a go.”

I dragged my scoop through the luscious French pot ice cream that would put Remember the A-la-mode on the map, filled the pressed-glass sundae dish with two perfect globes of praline pecan, then ladled warm fudge sauce from the dipping well. With a slow, sensuous slide, the chocolate oozed down the sides of the scoops, forming a puddle of melted ice cream and fudge in the base of the glass dish.

Hand to God, there’s something downright sexual about ice cream sundaes, about the creamy, melty decadence of them. I felt like a pervert handing that sundae across the counter to my ex and his new girlfriend. Like I was handing them a sex toy or something.

I kept reminding myself how much money—and publicity—I could finagle out of the Weed and Seed employee picnic.

Outside of Texas, folks may not think of lawn care as a big deal or

a company picnic as a society affair. But the residents of Dalliance, Texas, take their grass seriously, and they're fighting a never-ending battle with nature to keep it green and free of nut grass and fire ants.

And while Wayne may have been a crap husband, he was a savvy businessman. He'd turned Wayne's Weed and Seed into the CNN of Dalliance; the distinctive lime green trucks were always plastered with birthday and anniversary wishes, announcements about the latest Rotary event, and admonishments to support the troops and get right with Jesus. In just under two decades, Wayne had parlayed a couple of riding mowers and a Leaf Hog into a Dalliance institution.

When Wayne's employees and his best customers got together to celebrate victory over another scorching Texas summer, the *Dalliance News-Letter* would be there to record the event. Having my ice cream dished up to all those people would mark an important step in my transformation from Tallulah Jones, Woman Scorned, to Tallulah Jones, Successful Entrepreneur.

Fingers crossed.

Wayne spooned up a big glob of ice cream and sucked it in. Wayne's sweet tooth rivaled my own, so I was anxious to know what he thought. "Damn, Tally. That's some fine ice cream. What do you think, sugar?"

I almost responded. After all, I'd been Wayne's "sugar" for most of my adult life. But I caught myself just in time as Wayne handed the spoon to Brittanie.

She dipped the tip of the spoon into the ice cream and held it to her lips. She shuddered. "Ooh, it's way too rich for me."

Wayne rolled his eyes. "Ah, geez, Brit. Lighten up and have just a bite."

Brittanie thinned her glossy lips and narrowed her deep blue eyes. In a heartbeat, the curvy coed went from looking like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth to looking meaner than a skillet full of rattlesnakes. I dang near got whiplash watching the transformation.

"I would think you'd be happy if I didn't pig out on ice cream, Wayne. I mean, you don't want *me* to get fat, do you?"

Whoa. Low blow. Behind me, I heard the synchronized gasps of

Alice, Kyle, and Bree.

Apparently I was going to have to learn to count to twelve with Miss Fancy Britches Brittanie.

Wayne had the good grace to look abashed. He clicked his tongue against his teeth. “Dang it, Brit. Don’t be a sore winner.”

Winner? *Winner?* I couldn’t count high enough to let that one slide.

“Lord a-mighty, Wayne, do you really think you’re some kinda prize? I hate to bust your bubble, but I washed your BVDs for over fifteen years, and you ain’t a prize.”

That drew muffled snorts of laughter from the peanut gallery.

Needless to say, Wayne was not amused.

He flushed a shade of red I’ve only ever seen on baboon butts and the faces of self-important middle-aged men. A sort of precoronary crimson.

“Now, dammit, Tally—”

“Oh, hush, Wayne,” Brittanie snapped. “You had that coming.”

Wayne’s lips thinned and a vein in his temple popped out. His eyes slid back and forth between me and Brittanie, and I could see the tiny wheels turning as he tried to decide who had pissed him off more, me or the twinkie.

I wanted to kick myself. With every pulse of that vein in Wayne’s forehead, I saw my chances of catering the Weed and Seed picnic growing smaller.

Thankfully, Wayne decided the twinkie was the larger thorn in his side.

“Jesus, Brit,” he growled. “You forget who butters your bread, little girl?”

Brittanie stroked the pendant at her throat—a delicate gold trio of Greek letters stacked one atop the other—before tucking her arm through his and leaning toward him. She tipped her head down and looked up through mile-long lashes.

I’d seen this dance a hundred times. *Done* this dance a hundred times: the Ego-Strokin’ Two-Step.

“Don’t be angry, baby,” she cooed. “Let’s just sign that ol’

contract with Tally and get ourselves home.”

Wayne grunted assent. A wave of conflicting emotions overwhelmed me, leaving me lightheaded and a little queasy. Gratitude and relief that, with Brittanie’s help, I would get my contract. Shame that I had to sign the dang thing after Wayne and Brittanie walked all over my dignity. Revulsion at the thought of Wayne and Brittanie having make-up sex within the next thirty minutes or so.

Some images a woman shouldn’t have to endure.

Bree, Alice, and Kyle were still lurking behind me. I shot them a dirty look, and my niece Alice—chronologically the youngest, but the most mature by a mile—herded her nemesis-slash-major-crush, Kyle, and her mom, Bree, into the back room. I ushered Wayne and Brittanie to a wrought-iron café table and spread out my preprinted contracts.

“I’ve already filled in most of the details,” I said, trying to sound efficient instead of desperate. “You tell me what you want and for how many people, and I can give you a quote.”

Wayne made a big production of shuffling through the papers, drawing a pair of dime-store reading glasses out of his shirt’s breast pocket so he could read through the fine print on the contract.

I sat quietly until he slipped the glasses back in his pocket and pushed the stack of documents toward me. He folded his arms across his chest, the big man back in charge.

“Looks fine, Tally. Are you sure you can pull this off on such short notice? We usually have a couple hundred people.” He coughed. “But I guess you know that.”

Awkward.

“So what would you like to serve?” I asked.

Wayne rolled his eyes. “Brittanie decided we should do a—a whadcha call it?”

“A luau,” Brittanie supplied.

“Right, a luau. Pig roast and flower necklaces and stuff.”

While I shuddered to think what kind of poi you could get in North Texas, and I’m not usually a fan of theme parties, a luau at least had the potential to be classy.

“All right; then maybe something tropical? Everyone loves

Tahitian vanilla ice cream, and we could top it with fresh pineapple, mango, and a gingered caramel sauce. How does that sound?” Wayne frowned, but before he could open his mouth, I added, “I’ll do some without pineapple for you, Wayne.”

Wayne shot a glance at Brittanie. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her give a tiny nod.

“That sounds fine, Tally. But here’s the thing. I want to put the Weed and Seed stamp on this hoedown. So I’d like the ice cream to be green.”

“Green?”

“Yep. Wayne’s Weed and Seed green.”

Wayne’s Weed and Seed green wasn’t just green, but an intense chartreuse.

So much for classy.

“Wayne, I don’t know. I’m not sure how to get all that ice cream a real bright green without it tasting funny.” I held my breath, praying he would just let it go.

“Well, how about that sauce stuff? Could you make that green?”

“I don’t know. That’s a pretty tall order.”

Brittanie leaned forward in her seat and drummed a manicured index finger on the top of the contract. “I hear what you’re saying, Tally. I really do.”

Oh, lordy. It was one thing if she wanted to manage Wayne, but I wasn’t too pleased at Little Miss Fancy Britches managing *me*.

“But branding is really important for a growing business,” she continued.

I turned to Wayne. He shrugged. “Brittanie just got her degree in marketing from Dickerson.”

“Branding,” Brittanie said, giving the word as much weight as a bottle blonde with big ta-tas could. “We need the green.”

She rested her hand on Wayne’s forearm. “Baby, I know you wanted to help Tally out, but I think we should go with the original plan and have bright green fondant-covered cupcakes. I was so disappointed when Petite Gateau canceled on us, but I bet Deena Silver could help us find someone else. Lord knows we’re paying her enough to cater the

meal; she ought to throw in the dessert for free.”

I bristled at the notion of Wayne throwing me a bone, giving me the job out of pity. But the ominously erratic hum of the display freezer was a constant reminder that I was in debt up to my eyeballs. I needed this job badly, even if it meant working with Wayne and Brittanie. Even if it meant making Day-Glo green sundaes.

“I can do it,” I blurted.

Brittanie sighed and shook her head. “Really, I don’t think—”

“No, I’m serious. I can do it. I can use a coconut sauce instead of caramel. I’ll tint the coconut sauce green, and with the fresh pineapple mixed in, the effect will be Wayne’s Weed and Seed green.”

Brittanie pouted, but Wayne reached for the contract. “Get me a pen so we can sign this thing.”

I looked over at my display freezer, filled with tubs of ice cream—rosewater pistachio, raspberry mascarpone, peanut butter fudge. My own recipes, mixed by my own hand, in custom-made vertical batch freezers I’d designed myself. If I couldn’t pay the bills and those freezers went kaput, my heart would melt right along with the banana caramel chip.

They say if you lie down with dogs, you’ll get up with fleas. As I clicked open my ballpoint and reached for the sheaf of contracts, I tried to pretend I didn’t feel an itch coming on.