

A man and a woman in chef uniforms are in a kitchen. The man, on the left, is wearing a black chef's hat and a white chef's coat, smiling at the camera. The woman, on the right, is wearing a white chef's hat and a white chef's coat, looking towards the camera. The background shows a kitchen with stainless steel walls and equipment.

MARIANNE
EVANS

THIS COMPETITION ISN'T
JUST ABOUT WINNING

WINDFALL

A SAL'S PLACE
BONUS STORY

Windfall

Marianne Evans

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Windfall

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Dedication

To my dad, Frank DeSantis, who taught me about the love, passion and joy that accompanies every dish of food you prepare for the ones you love.

Praise for Marianne Evans

Four-Stars, RT Book Reviews ~ Hearts Communion, Woodland Series ~ Evans' latest is a heartwarming, as well as heart-wrenching romance. Readers will empathize with her heroine's struggles. Her final acceptance of the hero's love and God's comfort, is remarkable. ~ Susan Mobley, Reviewer

Night Owl Reviews Top Pick ~ Hearts Key, Woodland Series ~ I loved this story and I'm looking forward to seeing what Ms. Evans writes next. ~ Maria, Reviewer

Five Stars ~ Reader's Favorite Book Reviews ~ Hearts Communion, Woodland Series ~ Marianne Evans' writing style really pulled me in with this story. I will certainly be looking for more of Ms. Evans' works. Highly recommended! ~ Brenda C., Reviewer

Other Titles by Marianne Evans

Novels

Hearts Surrender

Hearts Communion

Hearts Key

Devotion

Search & Rescue

By Appointment Only

Beautiful Music

Novellas

Hearts Crossing

Finding Home

Operation Breathless

Dollar Downloads

A Face in the Clouds

1

Introductions

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ~ 2 Corinthians 9:8

"Daddy, again! Again!"

"Suzie, c'mon. You've already seen it a ga-billion, ca-jillion times—"

"Again!" She squealed and giggled, bouncing on his lap. Chocolate colored hair, fashioned into satiny pigtails, flew as she bounded from her perch and charged for the TV. She pointed an unyielding little index finger at the nearby DVD player. "Wanna see. Please?"

Those big, green eyes, the fluttering of those impossibly thick, long lashes of inky black, and most of all the sweet cooing of the word 'please' were impossible to resist. A three-year-old girl held his rough-and-tumble heart in the palm of her pudgy little hand.

And Scott Allen wouldn't have had it any other way.

He released an exaggerated groan and a long-suffering sigh. "OK, OK. You win. You *always* win." Following a wink and a tender tweak to Suzie's nose,

he inserted a treasured DVD into the machine and swooped her into his arms while she burst into giggles all over again.

"I love Daddy."

He melted to the core. "Daddy loves you right back, baby girl."

She snuggled against his neck. While he toted her back to the couch, looking forward to an hour of hunkering in and watching a bit of TV, he noticed the expectant way her gaze homed in on the flat screen which burst to life, taking Scott back to the day of the filming...

"For the fifteenth year running, Motown Master Chef asks the culinary question: Can high-end chefs bring their own unique spark to short-order cooking and satisfy the everyday palate?"

The emcee of the TV special, Jake Pullman, launched into further introductions; Scott battled a quivering stomach and zips of electricity that sizzled against his nerve endings. Never had he been so nervous. He waited in the restaurant kitchen, behind a set of metal swinging doors, awaiting his entry cue from Jake. Through a small oval window, Scott continued to watch the proceedings.

"This year's edition takes place at a legendary Detroit diner, Sal's Place, and our competition features two superb chefs with compelling stories to tell. Let's meet them right now."

Scott expelled a stream of air in an attempt to remain steady. He looked down, at a clean, though somewhat worn, tile floor. With a quick glance to the

left, he took in his combatant for today's taste-off. Sarah Rutherford. She adjusted her apron and seemed to gather herself as well while she shifted from foot to foot. Long brunette hair was slicked back into a smooth, shiny ponytail. She was tall and slim—with the face of a super model—or so Scott had always felt. What a stunner...

"Sarah Rutherford is the head chef at Premiere, a European-style eatery in Troy known for its inventive entrées. Sarah is participating today to both honor and support her sister, Lucia, who is a recent survivor of breast cancer. She's definitely in this game for all the right reasons, so Sarah, come on out!"

Scott jerked to attention when Sarah fixed in place a dazzling smile and pushed through the kitchen divider. She never wavered as she strode to the front counter of the restaurant. Scott caught his breath, captured by the double-whammy of Sarah's smile and what he knew was coming next—*his* introduction.

"Now, let's meet Scott Allen. Scott runs the kitchen at Bella Toscana Café in downtown Detroit. He may have graduated from the renowned Poscelli Culinary School in Florence Italy, but downhome roots and affection for Detroit bring him to Sal's Place and earn him the chance to win a ten-thousand dollar paycheck that would help fulfill his dream. And what's that you may ask? Nothing less than establishing a restaurant of his very own."

Scott moved through the swinging doors, blinded for a moment by the bright overhead lights and the unerring presence of a trio of camera operators. He shook hands with Jake and gave Sarah a smile. She acknowledged the gesture with playfully narrow eyes and the tempting curve of her lips. Scott watched her

for an extra beat or two, transfixed.

“The rules sound so simple. Our chefs have ninety minutes to create three separate entrées—one for breakfast, one for lunch, and one for dinner. But these meals need to feature a creative approach to diner food. No lobster, no filets, just home-style comfort food with their own unique interpretation.”

While Jake continued on with the rules and processes, Scott had just one thought, ten thousand dollars. That kind of money could—and would—change his life. Although he stood on faith, and trusted God to move His hand through the day’s proceedings, Scott was determined to shine bright and claim the final monetary prize.

No matter how extraordinary his competition.

2

Round One

What Scott had always loved about Sarah Rutherford was her single-minded focus, a determination to achieve her very best and accept nothing less.

The ante in today's competition, he realized, had driven her to a whole new level of performance. Presently, she prepped and plated a breakfast Panini fresh from the press and garnished her first round entrée by circling the sandwich with blackberries, strawberries, and grapes which formed an appealing and colorful frame. The pancetta, eggs, and brie combination would be killer good.

While she polished off her presentation, she moved past him in the cooking area, brushing against his back on her way to the pantry. "Right behind you." What a voice—low, smooth, authoritative—yet undeniably feminine. When he gave her an elongated, arched brow look, she tossed him a devilish smile. Her eyes sparkled with sass when her gaze dropped to his skillet of simmering eggs and thyme layered by peaches and cherries. She hummed an approving sound that tickled a soft spot right behind his ear. "That's quite a dish. Very bold. Very Italian."

"Shocker, right, me cooking Italian? Although,

you're hardly playing fair, feeding pancetta to Sal Cocossa."

Their laughter mixed, and Scott found he loved the blended sound. Sarah gave an innocent flutter of her long, dark lashes, returning fast to her station with a sifter and a plastic bag of confectioner's sugar.

"Hey, it's not my fault he's one of the judges. This is simply what I came up with to share." She nudged his shoulder. "Your dish smells like heaven," she murmured.

It did, he thought, and he wasn't about to leave anything on the table. He needed this money desperately. A business plan had been drawn up and left at the bank last week. The powers that be awaited nothing more than the formality of final signatures...that and a hefty down payment.

Scott battled against an ingrained instinct bent toward ambition and a thirst for success. He wanted to win...desperately. But at the same time, he wanted that victory to be honorable. *Right*.

Scott stood next to Sarah behind a long counter set up with bar-style seating. There, he faced a quartet of judges and an assortment of bystanders who eagerly soaked in the atmosphere. Scott figured Sal Cocossa, the owner of the diner, and Libby Maxwell, food critic for *The Detroit News*, would be their toughest critics. Next to Sal and Libby sat Jennifer Douglas, a long-time waitress and treasured institution at Sal's Place. She had been recruited to join the day's proceedings along with Callie West who represented the typical customer and those who frequented the diner. Callie was a

brunette beauty who seemed to blush easily and duck from the limelight. Scott enjoyed the way a pair of uniformed men kept careful watch over Jennifer and Callie. One sported a classic cop crew cut and uniform. The other wore the garb of an emergency services specialist. The men kept careful watch over Jennifer and Callie, in a manner best defined as protective. A heart-prompted reflex left Scott's gaze flashing toward Sarah. There it lingered.

"This is delicious." Libby Maxwell's comment came as she extracted a fork smoothly from her freshly ingested bite of Scott's frittata. "It's smooth and creamy in texture to a point that it literally dissolves against my tongue." But then she gave a delicate wince. "My only critique would be a word of caution with regard to the use of cherries. The natural tartness of the fruit can overwhelm if you use a heavy hand."

Scott wilted, but worked hard to show nothing but warm, accepting calm on the outside.

"Sarah," Sal began, "a pancetta Panini. What a marvelous selection to serve an old Italian like me." A round of laughter circled the crowd. "It's delicious." Sal indulged in another bite of the Panini then tilted his head and peered at his fellow judges. "What do you think?"

"Wonderful," came Jennifer and Callie's unison response.

Libby, however, drew in another bite, and narrowed her eyes. "Agreed, but I'm a bit concerned by the thickness and a slightly over-crisped texture to the bread. It might be somewhat difficult to eat around the crust, but the flavors definitely make it worth the effort."

Scott noticed the way Sarah's clenched hands

twitched. Beyond that, she simply nodded.

Jake stepped into place next to Scott, and a camera man claimed the spot right in front of them. "Scott, we heard Sarah teasing you about Italian cooking. Is the dish you prepared an ode to your culinary training in Florence?"

"Maybe, but I look at this serving more like a hole-punch in the ticket to my future."

Jake nodded then turned to Sarah. "Sarah your trademark is meticulous attention to detail."

"Thank you, yes."

"We told the audience briefly about the cause for which you're fighting. Can you expand on that for us?"

While the judges took bites of Sarah's sandwich, she watched them. She pinned the corner of her mouth for an instant. The nervous gesture was familiar to Scott, and he found himself transfixed by the way she moistened her lips with the dart of her tongue.

"My sister, Lucia, is a breast cancer survivor. I *love* the word survivor, by the way." A soft ripple of laughter ensued. "But healthcare doesn't come cheap. I'd love to help alleviate some of the stress on her family by donating the bulk of my winnings to her."

Jake eyed the camera. "Like I said, folks—she's in it for the right reasons. We'll be right back with round two!"

Grateful for a break in the action, Scott fingered his water bottle. He placed it on the surface of the desk in front of him and sent it into a brief spin. He tracked the fidget of his hands then noticed Sarah wasn't much better off. She squirmed on the chair across from him.

This woman unsettled him and shook up his carefully orchestrated sense of balance.

"You delivered a great round, Sarah."

"Thanks, Scott. That goes for you, too."

Silence pounded at him. "You know...I, ah...I've always respected you."

She froze for a second. She had nearly lifted her own water bottle to her lips. Nice lips, Scott thought. Lusciously plump, long and full. What would they taste like? Sweet, most likely. Texture? He'd bet the farm they'd feel like satin.

"Likewise. You're one of the good guys." She peered at him, eyes brimming with unspoken questions. "You've come a long way since the accident. You've changed."

"Yeah, I have." The words came smooth and easy, but inwardly Scott braced.

She set the water bottle aside, unconsumed. "You've changed for the better, I should add."

She was drawn into the conversation, he realized. His heart skipped, skipped again then accelerated. A grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "I can only hope."

Now Sarah was the one to fidget nervously with her water bottle. She slid the container back and forth between her spread hands. "The recovery. It took a lot out of you, didn't it?"

"Took it out then gave it back all over again, thank God. Only the arrogance is gone, along with that cocksure attitude I used to be known for. Recovering from the motorcycle crash was a journey, but I've ended up in a much better place." He smirked at himself. "Who'd'a thunk it?"

Her eyes softened. Taken under by a strange sense of spiritual thirst, Scott absorbed her affection as Sarah

tilted her head and paused.

"I'd'a thunk it. I've always believed in your strength of heart." She gave him a look that was playfully reproachful. "There's a lot more to your character than you ever let on."

Jake Pullman pushed through the door of the office space they shared, breaking into the conversation. The host's interruption put an end to electro-charged atmosphere, but not Scott's shock at Sarah's words, and a burgeoning infatuation.

"Scott and Sarah are you ready to create your lunch entrées?"

"Yep." Scott ended eye contact with his competitor and pushed away from the desk. He lifted to his feet, trying and failing to avoid Sarah's impact.

Sarah didn't move right away. Instead, she continued to study him for a moment, visibly lamenting the intrusion. She extended a hand to restrain his exit. "Our conversation. To be continued?"

Why did those quiet words, coupled with her ready acceptance and gentle demeanor, unfasten so many of the restraints that secured his emotions? "Yeah, to be continued." He steeled himself, and gave her a jaunty grin. "Right after round two."

3

Round Two

Scott didn't often allow himself to look back. He didn't like to revisit the dark, oppressive cloak of reckless abandon that used to form the pattern of his life. Once upon a time, he had believed every day would lead perfectly to the next. Once upon a time, he had believed his skills would overrule everything else and win him success no matter what his choices, no matter what his beliefs.

Thank God he had learned differently—even if the circumstances surrounding his turnabout were horrific.

He attempted to blink past the phantom sensation of sliding along unforgiving cement. He sealed his ears against the recollection of squealing motorcycle tires, the grind and scrape of metal on metal—metal on concrete...pain...bones snapping in his leg, his arm.

Scott refocused in a hurry, ladling even batches of al dente bowtie noodles into a quartet of gleaming glass bowls. The pasta was perfectly coated by an overlay of Gruyere and sharp cheddar cheeses, tomatoes, and his own unique twist to the mix, chunks of thick, well-cooked bacon. A small bowl of fresh fruit would polish the dish then lunch would indeed be served.

At the adjacent counter, orchestrating her meal