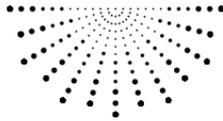


(EXCERPT) VANGIE VALE  
AND THE MURDERED  
MACARON

THE MATCHBAKER MYSTERIES, BOOK ONE

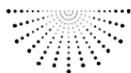


R.L. SYME





## DEDICATION

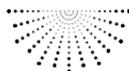


*For my mom.*

“People in small towns,  
much more than in cities,  
share a destiny.”

-Richard Russo

## CHAPTER ONE



*Saint Agnes, Montana*

Someone had painted a mural on the big front window of my bakery, blocking my view of the parking lot. It looked like a bad homecoming float: flaking red hearts cascaded all the way down one side and circled up around the other, with *Happy Valentine's Day* painted in frilly white script in the center. In order to even see my car, I had to get close enough to look between the letters, where the glass was still clear.

That was saying a lot, considering my car was a monstrosity of green paint with a wheelbase so wide, it took up a space-plus. The Humvee had been a parting gift from my dad when I'd left North Carolina. Moving to the mountains apparently required a quote-*big-rig*-unquote.

The Tank was overkill, but that was my dad for you. Overkill was his first, last, and middle name. His thirty-three year-old daughter had moved across the country, and he'd paved the whole way with Duke flags and Humvees.

He has no idea what happened. He still thinks I chose this.

Before I could give much more thought to the mural that had sprung up overnight, the bell above my door gave a sad little jingle. “So, do you—” my shop neighbor, Emma Brent, started to ask in her bubbly voice. Then she squealed. “Oh, Vangie! Your hair...”

I glanced at my reflection in the streaky window, focusing on the unpainted parts between the hearts. Dark pins held down tufts of short, brown hair, making my pixie cut go flat across the front. “I have to wear a cap when I’m baking. I forgot to fix it.”

“I’m gonna get you a mirror for back there.” Emma came up behind me, pulling out bobby pins and running her fingers through the spikes. “You have customers.”

“Not today, I don’t.” I angled my head toward the empty dining area.

My blonde, stylish friend fussed with my hair until it resembled something vaguely presentable. While I’d rather be holed up in the kitchen, poring over French pastries, Emma loved fashion and cuteness, and was a perfect gift shop owner, with her eye for decoration and detail. I probably had her to thank for that mural, come to think of it.

“Vangie, you have to care more about how you look.” She clucked at my apron, which was still covered in the crime scene spatter of morning baking. Emma tugged it off me and held it out in front of her, like it was made of nuclear material.

“Do you like the mural?” she asked once she’d finally disposed of the apron. “It matches the one I did on my window. Subconsciously, it will make people want to shop in both stores.”

I looped my arms over my chest, eyeing the paint job, not sold on the marketing. I didn’t want to say no—she was a

good friend—but I couldn't say yes. Given that it obscured my view of the Tank, it would keep me from seeing customers as they entered my oddly-shaped store.

"You mind?" Emma lifted the glass coffee carafe and the end of her sentence. "You'll have to make a new pot for the lunch rush anyway."

"Aww. It's so cute that you think there'll be a lunch rush." I was about to join her at the coffee pot when a *ding* sounded off to my left.

"I told you we missed a turn, Henry." The speaker, a sharp-featured woman, drawled out Southern-tipped words as she turned up her pointy nose at whoever lingered outside the door. "Honestly. I wish you'd stopped and asked for directions."

Miss Georgia offered me a cramped little smile and kept walking around my tables. A slim, sandy-haired man breezed in behind her, dressed in the most spectacularly cut charcoal pinstripe suit.

His gaze flitted around, like he couldn't really focus, and he followed the woman who was likely his wife. This must be *Henry*. He could have passed for a supermodel with those cheekbones.

"I'm so sorry, darling. I appear to've forgotten more than I thought," he said in a breathtaking James-Bond-ian accent. His vowels were elongated and refined, and he smelled like freedom. Like the beach.

Like home.

I was oddly grateful Emma had fixed my hair.

"I swear, some days, I could throttle you within an inch of your life. We're gonna be late," pouted Miss Georgia. She'd finally made it to the counter, where she stood with a black-gloved hand on one hip.

Emma cleared her throat from the corner of the room. I

didn't need her to say it—I'd been talking about not having customers, and I finally had some. *Get to it.*

I crossed between the feuding couple, slid behind the white-wood-framed bake case, and lit up the fakest of fake smiles.

"What can I get you?" I asked.

"Coffee," Miss Georgia bit out. "Wait." She held up a hand and took a deep breath, all her movements exaggerated. "Is it...organic?"

"Organic and grass-fed," I said, a sing-song answer to a drama-queen question. James Bond let out a small chuckle, and I found myself meeting his eyes. They were dark, deep, delicious, and...totally married.

I cleared my throat. "It is organic, yes."

"You should really put that on your sign." Miss Georgia placed one finger on the white-wood counter. "You know, we almost didn't stop."

And that would've been a travesty.

Grabbing one of the paper cups, I bit my tongue and poured the coffee, leaving an inch below the rim. Miss Georgia seemed like a cream and sugar girl. I passed it across the counter and waited for more ordering.

James Bond raised a brow and slid a hundred dollar bill in my direction while his wife made a clip-clop beeline for the condiment bar. "Keep the change," he said in a low voice. "Sorry about her."

"We need to get to Saint Agnes before noon," she said. "If you're not ordering, Henry, just leave the poor girl alone."

"This *is* Saint Agnes," I said, pushing the hundred back. "And I can't make change for this."

"I mean it." Henry covered my hand, stopping the progress of the bill. "Keep the change. Lord knows we can afford it."

When I looked down at his hand—no wedding ring—and

glanced at his perfect jawline, I felt a strong impulse to ask him to pull up a chair and read the phonebook. But he was definitely married, ring or not.

"This is Saint Agnes?" Miss Georgia turned so fast, she almost caught the open-topped coffee cup with her elbow.

"It sure is." I pulled the bill out from under Henry's hand and clicked open the vintage cash register. When the old drawer finally popped out, I shoved the money into the till and cursed my sister for convincing me to choose cutesy over functional. But at least it had opened. Some days I wasn't so lucky.

"We're right on the edge of town," Emma interjected with a low giggle. "That's why my shop next door is called *Saint Agnes Agates and Gifts*."

"Hmmm," said Henry, a thousand-watt smile lighting his features. "I suppose we should have noticed that."

"Where are the city limits?" the woman asked.

"You passed them, back at the sign that said *Welcome to Saint Agnes*," I said. "Technically, you're in the city limits right now, but just barely."

The woman snubbed her nose up and turned in to Henry, her fancy high heels clacking on the refurbished floors. "I knew we should have asked for directions. I don't care if they did move the highway, your memory is a sieve."

"You can ask *us*," Emma said. "Tourists always stop in, asking for directions. We're used to it."

"We're looking for a bank. The Rocky Mountain Bank." Miss Georgia drew her neck straight and delivered her words with a flare of gravitas, like she was announcing the next Academy Award winner. But it was just a chain of banks all over the state. Not like Fort Knox or something.

"Oh yeah, that's down on Broadwater." Emma pointed toward the center of the small town. "You'll want to take a right at the stoplight."

“The stoplight?”

“There’s only one.” I offered a quick smile. “Can’t miss it.”

“So, I have to ask.” Henry lowered an elbow onto the counter and looked up at me through dark lashes. “What is this *Matchbakery* business anyway?” He picked up one of the laminated menu cards and read from it. “‘Let the Matchbaker decide for you.’ What does that mean?”

Pulling the card from his hand, I drew my lips together. This happened almost daily, which meant I had plenty of opportunities to regret my lack of willpower. My little sister—who had a lot of ideas about bakeries, it turned out—had helped with the branding for my new business. It had seemed charming and original at the time, given that I would be better-known around town for the job that had actually brought me there, but which would take up very few hours. And given that baking had been my only solace since...well, since Edward. But even then, the Matchbaker concept was more trouble than it was worth.

I slid the card back onto the pile. “I...match you. To a pastry. Or to a coffee drink or a sandwich, or whatever.”

“What?” Henry’s brows both shot up. “You *match* me?”

“She tells you what you want to eat today.” Emma sidled up to me. “Like a psychic.”

“I am *not* a psychic. Let’s get that straight. I just... I read people.”

Henry held out his hand, the corners of his mouth tugging up. “Read me.”

I pushed at his arm. “I don’t need to see your palm.” This was something I got pretty often too. The urge to roll my eyes was strong with this one.

“Tell him what he wants, Vangie,” Emma said, giving me an elbow in the side.

But I didn’t want to Match this one. This too-cool-for-

school, over-attentive *married* man. He didn't need more attention. He needed a leash.

"Yes," Henry said, drawing closer, gaze going darker. "Tell me what I want."

"I can tell you what *she* wants." I nodded at Miss Georgia, avoiding Henry's strange, insistent eye contact.

"Yes, you should do Scarlet. She's the one who wanted to stop, after all." He took his wife's hand and pulled her to his side, in front of the counter, the wattage of his smile dimming just a touch. He wasn't used to being turned down.

I looked up and down Scarlet's body. *Of course* that was her name—it matched all those long, Georgia vowels and perky, pretty, petite features. A little self-indulgent, but too worried about appearances to order a mocha. "Dark roast with room for cream. That much was easy."

Scarlet made a pointed huff and turned her nose up—a classic for a reason. She wore a three-piece tailored skirt suit in slate gray, thick hose, and black ankle boots with stiletto heels and the kind of intricate silver bead and buckle work that couldn't be done by a machine.

She didn't have the too-skinny look of a woman who eschewed dessert for fashion's sake, but she didn't succumb often. She was the type who would order a fancy dessert, like a macaron—which she would both spell and pronounce correctly—and let it sit on her counter, taunting her, until she couldn't hold out any longer. Or it went stale and was no longer appetizing.

I stepped behind the glass case and constructed a small paper box. Henry shadowed my movements, leaving his wife to stew in front of the cash register.

"I'm dying to know what you'll pick for her. She really is a sugarholic, y'know." He leaned on the counter like an underwear model and the edge of his accent tapered off, turning almost American on his last words. Interesting.

I slipped a glove on my left hand and pressed a sheet of tissue paper into the bottom of the box, crinkling it just enough that it would safely hold the delicate cookies. Using my sanitary hand, I selected a small, white macaron. Perfect smooth top, perfect ruffled foot, filled with a vivid red raspberry buttercream.

“They’re macaroons, Scarlet.” Henry smiled over at Miss Georgia, his accent back in spades. “You’re a macaroon.”

“Macaron.” Scarlet corrected him at once, sharpish, and I couldn’t help but indulge the tiny smile pulling at one corner of my mouth. Another score for the Matchbaker.

Three more small delicacies joined the vanilla-raspberry. Pretty little pops of color nestled into the ruffled white paper. A bright green matcha cookie filled with ginger buttercream—because she would want people to think she was interesting enough to like green tea, even though she probably hated all things umami. A graham-cracker-crusting peach pie cookie—because it would remind her of home. And a strawberry cookie crusted with sanding sugar, pretty and pink and filled with a glistening layer of jam—because her husband would actually eat one of them, and he seemed the type to be attracted to sparkly things.

I folded the box top over. This was more of my sister’s work—there was a clear plastic cut-out in the middle, showing the customer their “matched” treats, and the store’s script-y signature logo had been stamped on the top of each box in a robin’s egg blue. Henry took it out of my hands and pulled out the green tea macaron, examining it in the light.

“These are quite perfect,” he said, fully back into James Bond mode. “I’ve never seen the like.”

“Oh, give me that ridiculous box,” Scarlet huffed, grabbing it from him, but Henry kept the green cookie, his thumb cracking the top.

He looked at it carefully, turning it over and over in his

hand. "It's more fragile than I would have expected. When I pulled it out of the box, it felt quite hard."

I took off my glove and stepped back to lean against the counter beside Emma. She sipped at her coffee, clearly not as intrigued by Henry as I was.

"Macarons are made from meringue, so they're very delicate," I said, as though he knew what meringue was. "Hard on the outside, but soft on the inside."

Henry bit into the cookie and it crumbled around his lips. His eyes went wide, and he stared at the little dessert tucked between his fingers. "That's incredible."

"Oh, come on." Scarlet pulled on his arm. "We can't be late. You have a call with Brad at exactly one o'clock. You know they moved the shooting back just for you and we have a plane to catch tonight."

His golden brows drew together with artful precision, and all the pieces locked into place for me. He was an actor. Shooting. Accents that tried too hard. An aggressively put-together wife. So much LA in one little package.

Scarlet sighed and stalked across the room, coffee in one hand and purse on the other arm, swaying to some internal runway rhythm, not waiting for his frustration to ebb.

The actor picked up the dessert box with a rueful smile. "Thanks for these, Miss Matchbaker."

"Henry." Scarlet stopped in front of the door, hissing at him, "Stop *flirting*."

"I'm being polite, darling. You should try it."

"You always flirt with the fat ones." Scarlet's voice was too loud not to carry all the way across the room, which was no doubt intentional. "I swear, it's like you have a pork fetish."

Henry glanced over his shoulder, his features constricted, shaking his head in apology. Before he could say anything, his wife yelled out, "What street did they say to turn on?"

My chest moved fast, breath rushed. I hated bullies.

Maybe more than philanderers. I gripped Emma's arm before she could answer and plastered on that fakety-fake smile again. "Take your next left. Then look for the stoplight and turn right."

Henry gave us apologetic eyes but no more of his melty accent. Then the bell dinged again, and they were gone.

"Evangeline Vale!" Emma hurried across the room, stopping at the window and watching the car pull away. "I can't believe you just did that."

I pulled the bake case closed with a hard tug. "Justice was served."

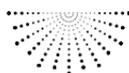
"Holy crap, girl. They're really taking a left." Emma put her finger on the window, pressing it in between two painted red hearts. "There she goes."

I stood behind her, watching the black car turn up the road. An old, beat-up pickup pulled in behind it, headed in the same direction. Away from Saint Agnes. I watched until the black car disappeared into the canyon. "Yup. They'll be at the stoplight in Rolo in about fifteen minutes. Teach her a lesson."

"What lesson is that?" There was a touch of sarcasm in her bright tone. She already knew, of course. It was the same lesson everyone learned eventually.

Karma occasionally wore a clergy collar and called itself the Matchbaker. At least, it did in Saint Agnes.

## CHAPTER TWO



The lunch rush turned out to be as disappointing as the breakfast rush had been. Just Nadine Winters with a couple of the coffee ladies, a tourist family who asked for the full Matchbaker treatment—eye roll—and Peter Mayhew, parish councilman, stopping by to see whether the Ash Wednesday service had been added to the calendar.

By the time the place cleared out again, the sun was starting to peek through the silver sky. It looked like there might be a little warmth headed our way, if the Chinook stuck around. The townspeople talked about *Chinooks* like they were the Eucharist. We just called them warm spells, back home.

Because of the wonderful Valentine's Day mural, I didn't see Leo until the bell was already ringing. The tall, lean, dark-haired young man had been my first staff hire—an effort to catch the after-school crowd that dispersed as soon as the final bells rang at all the Saint Agnes schools. Leo Van Andel was one of the local high-school heartthrobs, and he drew quite the crowd of female admirers.

Smart marketing, that's what I called it.

“Sorry I’m late,” Leo called out, breezing through the front door, dressed in a dark T-shirt and light jacket, looking like an Abercrombie & Fitch ad. Behind him lurked his usual companion, Austin Krantz, the quiet but deadly quarterback of the Saint Agnes high-school football team.

“You’re always late.” I smiled at him from behind the counter, then made eye contact with the fair-haired young man in thick-rimmed glasses and a black letter jacket. “Hi, Aussie.”

“Hey, Miss Vee.” He at least returned the smile this time. Austin was serious and focused, and used the afternoon to do his homework while his mother was at work. He was a good kid who, by virtue of his football status alone, kept some of the female attention off his best friend.

Leo threw his backpack somewhere in the kitchen and reemerged coatless, tying a white apron around his waist. He had thick, dark eyebrows and an easy smile. He also happened to be seriously interested in baking, and he’d recently turned eighteen, so I felt comfortable leaving him in charge when I needed to run errands.

“I have to go to the bank,” I said, taking off my own apron. “Austin, make a fresh pot if you want. Emma’s next door, if you need anything.”

“We’ve got this, Miss Vee,” Leo said, putting his thumbs behind the straps of his apron. “Oh, and if you need help prepping for the weekend, my mom said I can come in early on Friday morning.”

“You’re a doll, kid.” I grabbed my purse and clicked open the cash register. “Let’s make it 3 a.m.? We’ll whip up some more macarons to give you practice.” I picked out the deposit envelope from under the drawer, then waved at both the boys. As I turned toward the exit, Austin was rinsing out the coffee pot while Leo wiped down the counters.

The little bell over the door dinged, and I looked up to

find the significant wattage of a familiar James Bond smile smacking me like a hand to the face. I'd been feeling mildly guilty all afternoon, wondering on and off about how Miss Georgia and her husband had fared on the road to Rolo.

"Well, well, well," Henry said, his face plastered with happiness. "That was a treat, if I do say so myself. Better than the macaroons."

"Macarons," I couldn't help correcting. I gripped the thick strap of my purse. "Sorry. I mean. I really am sorry."

"I'm happy to report, no one was injured in the commission of your little crime, and I had quite an enjoyable afternoon watching Scarlet implode, if I do say so myself." He leaned on the wooden wall near the door, looking impossibly hot and—I reminded myself—indubitably married.

"At least you were entertained." I tried to walk around him, but Henry blocked my path.

"Yes," he said, nearly purring out the word like a predatory cat as he moved toward me. "I was...entertained." He leaned in so close it made all the fine hairs on my neck rise, and I found myself stepping back, even though what I really needed to do was to slip past him.

"Watch out for her, man," Leo's voice called out from the back of the bakery, full of both warning and laughter. "She's what *you* would call a vicar."

Those perfectly-manicured eyebrows rose right on cue, and Henry stepped back, nearly into the wall. "A vicar? Really?"

"Well, I prefer 'pastor,'" I said, tightening the grip on my purse. "Since we're in America." *And you're clearly not British, anyway.*

"But..." Henry looked from me to Leo and back, his dark brown eyes confused and wide open. "I thought... Aren't you the Matchbaker?"

“Part-time.” I shouldered past him, ready to be on my way. “Thanks, Leo. Bye, Austin.”

“Bye, Miss Vee,” my staffer yelled after me as I scrambled out the door. Unfortunately, Henry didn’t take the hint, and he stepped out right behind me, his shoes scraping on the sidewalk.

“Now I’m the one who’s sorry,” he said, grabbing my arm. “Please, let me apologize. I get...” He sighed, all exasperation, and I stopped, letting him walk around me. I owed him.

“It’s fine, really. Leo’s just protective of me. Like a little brother.”

“No, I shouldn’t have been...looking at you...like that.” Henry stuffed his hands in his very fashionable pockets, raising his shoulders. “This afternoon with Scarlet. It just got me on edge.”

“Is your wife okay?” I asked, looking around the parking lot. “I don’t see her.”

“Wife?” Another brow-raise. “Good heavens, no. Scarlet’s not my wife.” He gave a tiny shake of his head. “Definitely not.”

I cocked my head to one side, studying him. My first impressions of people were almost never wrong, but I had been so convinced he was married, even when he wasn’t wearing a ring. Was it possible he was lying to me?

Not that it mattered. He had a plane to catch, and I was *not* interested in anything romantic with anyone for a long—long, long, long—time.

“She’s at this bed and breakfast we had to find,” Henry nodded back toward town. “We missed the appointment and the man I need to meet had to get a crown put on at one o’clock, so we’ll have to stay the night. Meet him tomorrow.”

A pang of regret caught me hard in the chest. “I’m so sorry for sending you to Rolo,” I said, letting the words

tumble out. "I don't usually do things like that, but she was so—"

"Really. It's fine," Henry said, putting his hands out to calm me, but he didn't make contact this time. "She is impatient on her best day. It's part of what makes her a good agent. I wouldn't have brought her at all if we hadn't met with one of her director friends in Madison Falls."

A truck drove by and the driver waved two fingers at us, the typical Montana-road greeting. I returned the gesture and Henry glanced after the vehicle.

"You know that man?"

"No." I took the purse off my shoulder, digging for my keys. "People are just friendly around here." I looked around the parking lot again, recognizing Leo's old, beat-up Datsun truck, and the Tank, of course, but I didn't see another vehicle. "Where's your car?"

"Back at the B&B," he said, thumbing over his shoulder. "Scarlet went down for a nap, and I needed to get out and stretch my legs."

I glanced through the big, muraled front window of the bakery and saw Leo standing behind it, his arms crossed, staring at us. He gave me a crook of his head, like he was asking if I needed him to come out and kick some fake British butt.

Henry followed my gaze and clucked his tongue behind his teeth. "That one has got a *look*, as Scarlet would say."

"A look?"

"It's what she says right before she pounces on someone."

"Well, that's just gross." I took a big step toward the Tank. "Epic gross. Leo's only eighteen."

"Not like that," Henry said, laughter lining his tone. "She'd want to see if he had representation. Hand out her card. That sort of thing." He followed me, standing near one giant front wheel while I opened the creaky door. "I really am sorry

about the..." He gestured back at the mural. "I didn't mean to hit on a vicar."

A thrill shot through me, but I quickly quelled it. It would be just my luck to fall for a gorgeous and totally inappropriate guy... I'd done it before, and it had cost me everything. I'd learned, hadn't I?

I waved a hand, stepping one foot up into the Tank. "Don't mention it. I'm only part-time at the church, anyway. It's not big enough to need a full-time pastor. They barely use me ten hours a week."

"You don't strike me as the vicar type." He took another step forward, and I hugged back against the frame of the vehicle.

"I'm sorry, but I really do have to run," I said, inching my way up into the seat. When I finally landed in it, I reached for the door, but Henry held it. He had this look on his face... one I'd seen before. When someone needed to talk, but didn't want to admit that need, they looked stoppered up, like a cartoon pipe holding back gushing water. A little of their desperation always leaked out onto their features. That's how Henry looked. A little desperate, but trying to hide it.

"Well, if you have to run..." Henry released the door, but I still didn't pull it closed.

"Do you need a ride?" I heard myself asking. "It's pretty cold out here."

"I forgot how cold Montana can be in February." He lifted his shoulders, and his impeccably cut suit moved with him. "Would you mind dropping me back at the B&B?"

"Sure. I'm just on my way to the bank." I pulled on the door and looked up to see Leo still in the painted window, joined by Austin. Both boys were shaking their heads at me in slow motion. But I still felt guilty for making Henry miss his appointment at the bank. I had to make up for it somehow.

“Great.” He settled into the passenger seat, giving me another dazzling smile. “I really do appreciate this.”

We drove through the small town, barely long enough for the Tank to fill up with Henry’s crisp, clean scent. He pointed to the auto shop on the corner of Mockingbird Lane, and I turned. Down at the end of the street, yellow school buses had lined up, waiting to be boarded by the students.

“Is that the high school?” Henry asked, losing just a touch of his accent again.

“Yeah, although it serves the whole county now. There used to be a school in Rolo, too, but they had to close, I guess. Now, all the students from three or four towns bus in to Saint Agnes. Bedford, Rolo, Markham. They call it a co-op school.”

“It’s right here,” Henry said, pointing to a Victorian-style, green-paneled home with a little sign out front that read *Mockingbird Bed and Breakfast*.

The black sports car with the small rental company sticker on the windshield sat in the well-manicured driveway. Neat piles of snow lined the sidewalks, and the streets had been cleared all the way to the curb. Likely by hand, given the precision of the rounded little banks.

“Thank you for the ride, Miss Vee,” he said, opening his door. “Or should I call you *Vicar*?”

“You can call me Vangie.” I pressed on the brake pedal and gripped the shifter, trying to ignore the little twinge of regret that he’d left my vehicle—and probably my life. Something felt unfinished. “And I am really sorry about sending you to Rolo.”

“No, you were right to do it.” Henry leaned down, looking effortless and breezy. “She can be horrid, on her worst days, and today was...” His brows tightened. “Well, let’s just say, she deserved it.”

“I hope things go well for you in Saint Agnes,” I said. The

trick I'd pulled on Scarlet had caused Henry some grief, too, and that wasn't what my life was supposed to be about.

I was supposed to be doing penance, not vengeance.

"Thanks, Vic," he said with an easier smile, and all the tension released from his face. "I hope you don't mind me calling you that. It's short for Vicar. Somehow, Vangie just doesn't suit you."

A tickle of amusement bubbled up through me. I'd never been fond of the name my parents had chosen for me. *Evangeline*, like they were branding me for the mission field. I'd chosen urban ministry over foreign ministry, and preferred Vangie to Evangeline and whiskey to wine. I excelled at letting my parents down.

"I'll answer to it," I said, still not shifting the car into drive.

"Look. Vic..." He paused and I somehow, I knew what was coming. This man had something on his mind. "What are you doing for dinner tonight?"

"Probably reading sermons and watching *Sherlock*."

"Would you have an hour or so to chat with me? I'll pay for the meal."

The words set off a little warning bell in my head. Typically, I didn't make a habit of doing pastoral counseling one-on-one in restaurants. But being in the same room, alone, with him...that wasn't safe, either. He was too...handsome? Charming?

No.

Smooth.

But dinner was the least I could do. It was my fault Henry and Scarlet were stuck in town for the night. So when I pulled up in front of the Rocky Mountain Bank, I had a phone number in my pocket for one Henry Savage, and a promise he'd walk back to the Matchbakery without a coat, again, if I didn't call.

I walked into the bright lobby of the hometown bank, envelope in hand. Austin's mother, Nikki Krantz, glanced up from her teller counter and motioned me forward. Our daily ritual.

The woman was straight-up beautiful—the kind of stunner who drew your eye from across the room. I'd never met Austin's father, Auggie Krantz, who had been killed in action years ago, but there was something to the adage that beautiful parents made beautiful children.

I placed the envelope on the plastic pad emblazoned with the bank's logo and smiled at Nikki. "How are you today?"

Nikki Krantz didn't answer me, clearly focused on her task. With elegant fingers, she began to sort the checks and count the cash, and her mouth drew into a thin line.

"Have you heard?" said a voice from the next half-boxed, half-private counter. A pretty young blonde with a loose, low bun hovered over the top of Nikki's space. "Henry Savage is in town!"

My breath slowed almost to a dead stop. I tried not to let any emotion show on my face, but the little blonde's eyes flashed when she spied interest.

Nikki shook her head with a tiny exasperated sigh. "Tessa, you made me lose count." The words were just clipped enough to get the other teller to back up, but Tessa's didn't stray from me.

"I saw him in the bank, here, myself." Her brows accentuated the *myself* and she looked around, carefully sneaking the edge of a smartphone over the top of the counter. "Don't tell anyone, but I got a picture of him and that woman."

"Which woman?" I asked, trying to remember if Henry said he'd dropped Scarlet off before or after they went to the bank. Not that it would have mattered... Nikki looked up with another sigh. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to make you lose count again."

“No, you’re fine,” the teller said, moving to the side counter so she could tap the pile of checks back into order. “It’s been a tizzy in here, I’m afraid.”

“I’m gonna put it on Facebook,” Tessa whispered to me, drawing her lips to one side. “If Nikki and I hadn’t switched lunch breaks, I would have followed him and gotten his autograph.”

“Wait,” I said with a shake of my head. “Autograph?” I’d guessed he was some sort of actor, but *famous* was a whole different ball of beans.

“Of course.” The blonde smirked with a roll of her eyes. “I love him in that TV show. The Western one, with all the pelts. He’s like a fur trader or something.”

“Oh, for Lord’s sake,” Nikki said, slapping her hand over the checks. “Tessa, will you just shut up?” She offered a consoling look to me. “I’m so sorry about that, Pastor Vale. I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no. It’s fine.” I raised my hands apologetically. “You don’t have to worry about me. I’ve said much worse.”

“Still. I don’t like to say those things.” The dark-haired beauty glared at the young woman at the next booth until Tessa slid off her stool and walked over to the little cluster of staff standing next to the drive-through banking tubes. “They have no sense of decorum.”

I tried to stay silent while Nikki finished up her deposit, even though I wanted to sneak a few questions about Henry Savage in Tessa’s direction. I pulled my own smartphone out of my purse and set it on the counter so the bulk would hide my secret internet research.

I opened the browser and went straight to Wikipedia. Sure enough, a search for Henry’s name pulled up a picture of a familiar sandy-haired stud. It looked like it had been taken at an awards ceremony—the white canvas drop cloth

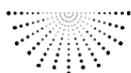
behind him was covered in gold words and a gold statue imprint, repeated every foot or so.

His acting credits weren't extensive, and it looked like he hadn't been on the scene for very long. Until recently, he'd played mostly supporting roles. His current show, which had to be the fur trader show Tessa was so hot and bothered about, was called *Bronson* and he played a character called Tom Bronson.

But a couple of familiar words along the right hand side of the screen caught my attention and I stopped breathing for real as I read his vital statistics.

*Hometown: Saint Agnes, Montana.*

## CHAPTER THREE



When I returned to the bakery, there were a few cars in the parking lot. All the kind of second-hand, beat-up models that smart parents let their teenagers drive. Safe enough to protect the people inside, old enough not to be worth repairing if someone backed into them at the Wal-Mart.

Austin did homework in the corner, trying to avoid eye contact with the pile of girls at the next table. Leo was huddled behind the bake case, packaging something for a blonde about his age who bit her lip and rocked back and forth on one foot. She was probably hoping he'd notice her. He didn't. As a rule, Leo Van Andel was oblivious, which was likely why he had such an extensive fan club.

He handed the paper box to the teenager and then walked back to the cash register to make the appropriate change. His eyes lit up when he saw me, and he came around the case, leaving the little blonde with her cash and her box of pastries.

"That guy who was in here, the one who got in your car," Leo said in a low voice. "Do you know who he is?"

I set my purse behind the white wood case and took the apron he offered. "I do now. I didn't when he was in here before."

"Turns out he's some kind of movie star." Leo's voice was low, reverent, like he was impressed. It was a bit surprising. Up until now, he hadn't seemed to care about much of anything except baking and school. He hadn't even mentioned a girl in the four months he'd been in my employment, and frankly, I wasn't sure he watched *any* television, certainly not a show about fur traders.

"Yeah, I guess he is." I tied the apron around my waist, trying not to let it show how much I'd been thinking about that some-kind-of-movie-star since I'd agreed to meet with him to talk. I did *not* add the fact that we'd just gotten off the phone, fixing the time, as I pulled into the parking lot.

It was starting to feel like a dinner date.

"Lisa's mom came in, talking about how they all saw him at the bank this afternoon, and she described him, like to a T." Leo shook his head. "I guess he's a big deal. He went to school here."

I grabbed a cleaning cloth and the vinegar spray and swiped at the counter, trying to add this information to the picture I was forming of Henry. It was strange to be out-of-the-know in Saint Agnes. A big perk of being a pastor in a small town was being privy to everyone's everything. Yet I hadn't heard a peep about the movie star who'd grown up here, let alone that he was flirty. Okay, and gorgeous.

It unnerved me.

I didn't like not knowing things.

"Did your mom go to school here, too?" I asked, as Leo trailed me around the counters like a little, dark-haired puppy dog.

"She went to Markham, before the co-op." Leo leaned against the back counter, looking out over the dining area. "I

had no idea about him, Miss Vee, or I would have warned you.”

“Well, now we know.” My hand stilled and the scent of vinegar pooled around us. The smell took some getting used to. I still hadn’t managed it, even after months of being open.

“It kinda seemed like he was hitting on you.” Leo’s tone took a sudden turn. More the protective, dangerous edge he’d had when he was staring at us through the mural earlier.

“I guess you could call it that, although I have a feeling he flirts with everyone, so I wouldn’t worry about me, kid.” I glanced at the clock over our heads. “It’s about time to close up. You have homework?”

“Just Advanced Chem,” he said, waving a hand. “It can wait.”

“Can you box up the rest of those macarons I made this morning? I want to drop some by a couple of places on my way home.”

Leo got to work constructing the little treat boxes. I kept working on the counters, but the repetitive activity didn’t do much to keep me from thinking about Henry.

I knew I should call and cancel. But it felt like he was hiding something, and I wanted to give him the opportunity to unburden himself. There was a sacred bond between minister and the ministered-to. It was a little like the Match-baker instinct, that helped me to run this bakery, but I often felt people’s need to confess before they even said a word. And I could sense their need to debrief theologically, before they even knew themselves.

The bell dinged over the door, a little louder than usual from an unnecessarily forceful push. In walked the tall, broad-shouldered, dark-bearded sheriff of Twin Valley County, Malcolm Dean. Probably the last person I wanted to see that day, or any day.

My hand clamped around the cloth, and I took in a deep,

soothing breath. Dean was my neighbor in the back hills, up against the mountain. He seemed to have taken an instant dislike to me, and he'd been nothing but a thorn in my side. This was the first time he'd ever set foot in my place of business; as a general rule, he avoided me, though the last couple of days, he had taken to getting on me about using my cell phone out in front of my house.

Okay, so maybe I was a little bit on his property when I was doing it. But just barely on the corner.

Sheriff Dean stalked up to the counter, his brow furrowed. He nodded at Austin, then at Leo, and his dark eyes finally settled on me. I dropped my shoulders and stood straight, facing him.

"Evangeline," he said with a nod, his tone hard-edged. "I need to speak with you."

Leo was at my side in half a second. "Hi, Sheriff. What can we do for you? You here for the Matchbaker treatment?"

Malcolm removed his wide-brimmed white hat, a look of disdain crossing his rugged features. "I'm here to see Miss Vale."

I held up a hand, calling Leo off, but he didn't seem to relax one bit. I pointed back to the bake case. "Can you finish those boxes? I'll just be in the kitchen with the sheriff."

The tension the man had brought with him was palpable, and I was glad there were no donut jokes floating around in my head. Malcolm Dean was not one to laugh at himself. He took life way too seriously for that.

We walked far enough out of sight to have privacy, but no farther. I didn't like the idea of being alone with a man who seemed to hate my very existence.

Malcolm set his hat on my stainless steel counter and reached into his pocket. "I'm going to show you a picture of a woman, and you're going to tell me everything you can about her. Okay?"

I nodded and crossed my arms, preparing myself for mug shots. But when he flipped on his phone, my breath expelled fast.

A woman's hand clutched the edge of a white box with a clear plastic top and a blue Matchbakery logo. There was one pink macaron visible, still nestled in the tissue paper, with an ovular cracked impression, like a fingerprint, in its perfect, rounded top.

The next picture was from a little farther away. The Matchbakery box sat on the torso of a woman, just where her belly button might have been. A few inches above the edge of the box was a deep, jagged gash. Above that, another. And another. I counted five, all together.

My intake of breath was sharp, and I had to grab Malcolm's arm to steady myself. I hadn't been prepared for gore.

He flipped to the next picture, keeping his arm tensed while I leaned on him. His other hand went to my shoulder. "What can you tell me about her?"

I swallowed hard, looking at the unfamiliar planes of the woman's face. She had dark, wavy hair with frayed ends and large, soft lips. Her eyes were closed, but from her slackened features, there was no doubt she was dead.

"Can you tell me who she is?" he asked, gripping my shoulder just a bit.

I realized I'd been pitching forward, and righted myself. I didn't want to faint in Sheriff Dean's arms. It was just a picture of a dead body, and it wasn't my first.

"I...I'm sorry." I swallowed hard, releasing his bicep and covering my mouth with one hand. "I'm not sure who that is."

"Can you tell me when she was in here?" He flipped to the next photo, which was more focused on her face. Her features were sharper in this one, her beauty in starker relief,

but it also showed there was dirt smeared on one side of her face and she had a gash on her lip. Light, yellow bruising mottled the skin around one eye and around her neck.

I shook my head. "I don't recognize her."

"But she was clearly in the bakery." Malcolm flipped back to the first picture again. "This is your box."

"It is my box, yes. But she didn't get it here."

"Look at her face again." He slid his thumb across the screen until the frontal shot of her face came up. "You're telling me you've never seen her in this bakery? Not today or yesterday, or ever?"

I took a step back, suddenly feeling crowded by his big body. "I don't appreciate the insinuation that I'm lying to you."

"Excuse me, Miss Vale," he said through grinding teeth, "but surely you can understand why I would be surprised that you don't seem to know the girl who died with your product in her hands." He clicked the phone off and stuffed it in his pocket, grabbing for his hat.

"That's *Pastor* Vale to you, *Sheriff* Dean." I crossed my arms again, feeling suddenly protective.

"You're not a pastor right now," he said with a grunt. "Not that I'd trust you any more if you were. I'm speaking to you because a box of cookies from your bakery was found at the scene of a *homicide*."

"So I clearly must be involved." I stepped back again, feeling the hard edge of the countertop press into my lower back. "I suppose you're going to go after her clothing designers, too, and the people who made her shoes? Just in case they're involved in her death?"

He gave a curt shake of his head. "You're blowing this out of proportion. I'm not here to accuse you of anything. I'm just trying to establish the timeline of the murder."

"It sure feels like you're accusing me of something."

"I have to ask these questions, Evangeline."

I cringed at his use of my full name. Ever since we'd started our little neighborly dispute, he'd refused to call me anything except Miss Vale or Evangeline, and it drove me insane...which, come to think of it, was probably why he did it.

"Well, I told you, I don't know who she is. Question answered."

"Do you know how she got her hands on a box from this bakery if you haven't seen her before?"

"No."

"And how often do you make the cookies in this box?"

"I made a batch this morning. I won't make them again until this weekend. But I've never made them before, here in Saint Agnes."

He scratched something in his notebook. "Does anyone else ever wait on your customers?"

I opened my mouth to deny him again, but this time I let it hang open. I'd left Leo in charge just this afternoon. I snapped my lips closed.

"Who would wait on them besides you?" the sheriff kept pressing.

"What the hell is going on back here?" Leo hissed, coming around the corner, eyes blazing, arms held out wide, like he planned on a fight.

"It's okay, Leo," I said, waving a hand at him. "The sheriff is asking me questions about a customer."

"Which customer?" He came around the steel-topped table and stood between me and the sheriff.

Malcolm pulled out his phone again and went through the same series of pictures. Leo didn't flinch until I put my hand on his arm and pulled him back. He gave me a frustrated *I'm handling it* glare, the cute kid.

"I don't recognize her," he said.

“Do you know how she could have gotten that box?” the sheriff asked, stuffing his phone back into his pocket with an angry puff of air. “I find it strange that neither of you seem to know who she is, when she’s clearly been in here.”

“You don’t know that she’s been in here.” Leo stepped forward, tensing against my hand. “Anyone could have given her that box.”

“How many of these boxes do you give out a day?” Malcolm asked, retreating just enough that some of the tension in the room seemed to ease.

“Not many, these days,” I said. “We get a steady stream of people on and off, but most of them eat in-house. On a typical weekday, I’d say we give out maybe ten of them.”

“Are there any other staff besides the two of you?”

“I hire a cleaning crew out of Madison Falls once a month, and when I’m in a pinch, Emma Brent from the agate store next door comes over to help me out. But she’s never in here when I’m not.”

Malcolm’s brow went up. “Does she have a key to the place?”

“Yes.”

“I have one, too.” Leo finally un-tensed, allowing me to pull him back like a leashed pit bull.

“Does anyone else have a key?” said the sheriff.

“Leo, Emma, and I have some spares in a locked box in the office. But no one else has access to them.” I looked up at the clock. It read 5:04. I pushed on Leo’s back. “Can you go shoo those girls out of here? Let’s lock the doors.”

“You want me to get rid of Austin, too?” Leo asked, going around the table to avoid the sheriff.

“No, his mom will probably be by soon to pick him up. I just saw her at the bank and she’s off at five.”

Like a good staff person, Leo followed my directions, but

that left me alone again with Malcolm Dean hulking over me, accusing me of all sorts of things.

“I’d like to go through your transaction records for the day, Evangeline.” The sheriff slid his wide-brimmed hat back onto his head. “It seemed like there were some other cookies in that box at one time. I couldn’t tell exactly what they were, but there were crumbs in the paper that weren’t from the pink cookie you saw in the first picture.”

“What color crumbs?” I felt my throat thicken. My mind had sorted through all of today’s customers, and I was positive I’d only sold one box of multi-colored macarons today. Unless Leo had sold a box right after my departure, and the buyer had immediately given the box to the murdered girl, and she had immediately been killed, it was unlikely this was a different box of cookies.

The sheriff had his little notebook out and was flipping through the pages. “It looked like there were some bright green, some white, and then another, darker color, maybe brown. I couldn’t be sure, because we didn’t want to move the evidence until it had been fully documented. I’ll have more information in a day or two.”

I hadn’t entered the price of the macarons into the till, because Henry hadn’t wanted change for his hundred dollar bill. Even if Malcolm were to check the register, he wouldn’t see the sale of macarons at eleven-thirty. The only way he would know was if I told him.

Something made me not want to tell Malcolm about the cookie purchase. But I didn’t know Henry, and it wasn’t my job to protect him, let alone go to jail for him. Besides, keeping evidence from the police was a crime.

Vangie Vale was a lot of things, but not a criminal.

“I did sell one box like that today.” I swallowed hard as I watched Malcolm scratch something onto his pad. “It had

four macarons in it, and I think the transaction happened around eleven-thirty.”

“Do you have a credit card receipt for that sale?”

“No. They paid in cash.”

Malcolm raised his dark eyes to mine, holding them hard.

“Do you know who the customer was?”

I took a deep breath and told the truth. “Henry Savage.”

Once the words were out of my mouth, I felt a rush of relief, like I’d been holding something back.

“Henry Savage?”

“Apparently, he’s some movie star who used to go to high school around here.”

“And he was in here alone?” Malcolm flipped to a new page and continued scratching notes.

“No. His agent was with him.” My mind went right to Miss Georgia and her pinched-up face. “Scarlet. Her first name is Scarlet. I don’t think I ever heard her last name.”

“And they were on their way...?”

“From here...” I licked my lips and took in a breath. “They had an appointment at the bank at noon.”

“Rocky Mountain Bank?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what for?”

“No.”

“And did you see them again after that?”

I paused. These questions were ridiculously simple, and telling the truth was a requirement, but I still felt compelled to protect Henry. He felt like one of my flock, now. Not like a stranger. I forced all the air out of my lungs and refilled them. “Henry came back, just after Leo showed up. He has his last period free, so this was before school got out.”

“Did he buy another box of cookies?”

“He did not.”

The sheriff's brows drew together, hard. "Why was he here, then?"

"They ended up missing their appointment." I reached my hands backward and grabbed the cold, steel countertop. "He came back to let me know they'd taken a room at the Mockingbird B&B."

*And to flirt with me...is that what you want to know, Malcolm? Hmm?*

I had to clap my mouth shut to keep from uttering those words. When he kept writing, I tried to ignore the pounding of my heart. Was it possible Henry really had been involved in this murder? Or Scarlet? Otherwise, how had the box ended up on a dead woman's body?

"Down by the high school?" Malcolm finished his scrawling and folded the cover over, sticking it in the opposite pocket from his phone.

"That's the one." I let my voice lift slightly at the end, in a *we're finished here* way, but I had a feeling I would be seeing more of Malcolm Dean before the night was through, and I didn't like that one bit.

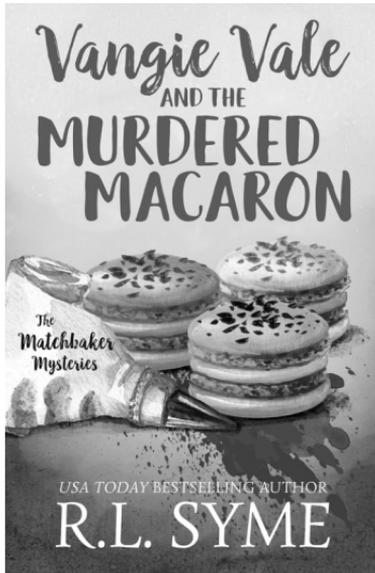


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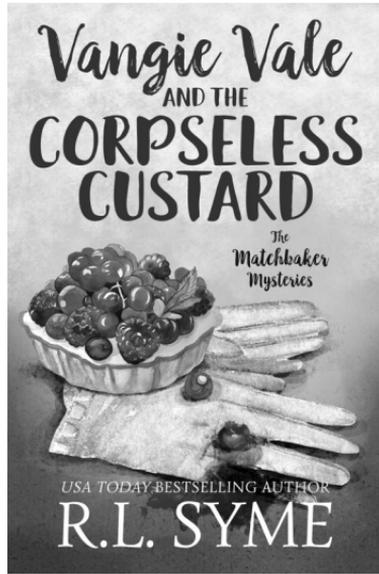
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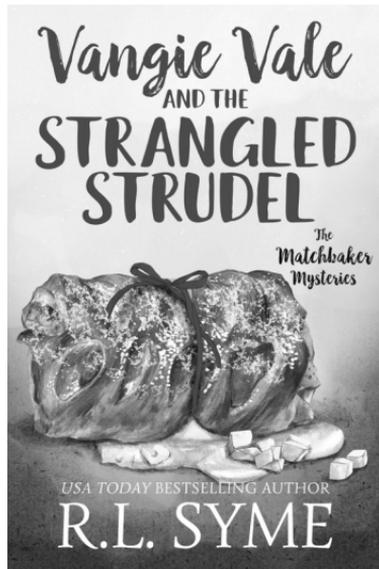
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