



Stone

KING

THE KINGS OF FIRE 1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAILIN GOW

Stone King

Kings of Fire Series #1

Kailin Gow

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for picking up Stone King, the first book in the Kings of Fire Series.

This series is a New Adult Enemies to Lover Dark Romance and contains dark themes that may have some triggers. Recommended for 18+.

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Summary.



LAYLA

They say there is a fine line between love and hate. He was a monster when I met him. But beautiful as sin. Son of celebrity Chef Errol King, founder of the International Culinary Institute Academy in Northern California, he ran the dream school I received a scholarship to attend. Axel King hated me with a passion. I just didn't know why until I found out his deep dark secret.

AXEL

She was all wrong for the school. The drop dead beauty was all wrong for me. But I want her.

Chapter 1

Layla



I'd been dreaming of this day for weeks and it was finally here. Standing just outside the huge and imposing closed gates in front of the International Culinary Institute Academy, my heart raced. I was early and I knew they wouldn't open the gate for another ten minutes, but I'd wanted to arrive as early as possible.

It was such a momentous occasion, and, in addition to being early, I had certainly dressed the part.

With my large, pink rolling suitcase in tow, I was a splash of summer blooms in my floral summer dress and pink high heeled sandals. Although my dress had an ample and modest length skirt, it did have a cute cut-out at the back and was nicely cinched at the waist.

I had to assume that that was why so many of the young men passing by turned to take a second look at me. But I hadn't come all the way out from Amarillo, Texas to northern California just to meet cute boys, so I ignored them as I looked up at the impressive Academy.

The large and majestic building was like a castle, built of solid blocks of dark stone and enhanced with rich dark wood at the windows and doors. Turrets rose high at the corners of the building adding to the drama of its architecture. Set in the midst of a redwood forest, there was something almost magical and enchanting about the site.

To the left was a tall edifice built with the same dark stones but with dozens of multicolored, stained-glass windows. And far to the right, I could just barely make out a few of the three-story structures that I assumed were the dormitories.

“Yes, Mom. I promise I'll call the minute I settle in. Yes. Yes. I promise.”

I turned to the high pitched, sweet sound of the female voice to find a petite, dark haired Asian girl climbing out of a white Mercedes. At the wheel of the car was the girl's mother who quickly got out to come help her daughter with her suitcase.

"I've got it, Mom," the young woman said patiently.

"You don't need me anymore," the older woman said with chagrin. "My little Katrina is all grown up now and no longer needs her mother."

"And you should be proud of that fact," Katrina said gently, trying to console her mother. "Remember Annie? She's two years older than I am and she still relies on her mother for everything. Would you prefer that?"

"No," her mother said. "But I just wished you hadn't grown up so fast. This is all happening too fast."

Katrina grabbed her suitcase from the backseat of the car and dragged it out. "You promised you wouldn't do this, Mom."

"Yeah, yeah," the older woman said, wiping away a stray tear. "Give me kiss and go on with your life."

Katrina kissed her mother, gave her a warm hug then stepped back to watch her get back in the car and drive off.

"They sometimes have a hard time letting go, don't they?" I said, empathizing with the girl.

She looked at me with the most beautiful brown eyes and smiled. "Try to understand a Chinese mother. One day she's pushing me to go out on my own. The next she's pulling me back to stay at her side."

I laughed and held out my hand to her. "Sounds a lot like my mother," I said. "I'm Layla, by the way."

"Katrina," the cute brunette said. "But you can call me Kat. Kat Lee."

"Nice to meet you, Kat."

“You’ve got a bit of a twang,” Kat said. “Where you from?”

“Texas,” I said, unaware that my accent was so instantly discernable. “Amarillo.”

Kat let out a long whistle. “Ooh. That’s a long, long way from here. I’m just from San Francisco... barely an hour away from here.”

“So, I guess you’ll be going back to visit with your parents pretty often,” I said.

“Oh, no,” Kat said. “I need to concentrate on my studies. I’ll be living here in the dorm and I’m quite happy about that, although a little nervous at the same time. You? Are you staying at the dorm?”

“Yes. This is my first year here, so I’m a little nervous, too.”

“My first year, too.”

I pulled out the letter that I’d received when I was accepted. “Let’s see here,” I said as I tried to unfold the sheet of paper.

“They sent you a paper acceptance letter?” Kat said a little surprised.

Feeling the heat of a blush come to my cheeks, I concentrated on the letter. “We only have intermittent internet back home... so. Oh, here it is. I’m in Dorm C, room 205.”

Kat pulled out her phone and looked at her acceptance letter. “Hey,” she let out with a happy smile. “What do you know. We’re going to be roommates.”

I bit down on a happy grin. What luck. The first student that I met is not only nice and charming and polite, but she was my roommate. “Good,” I said. “I was a little bit worried I’d be with someone I don’t like, but....”

Kat smiled. There was something sassy, yet shy about her. Something playful and mischievous, but also tame and unsure. “I’m a very likable person,” she finally said with a grin.

Someone finally came to open up the large wrought iron gate.

“First year students,” the stern woman called out. “Head over that way.” She pointed to the large, castle-like building. “Those who are coming back for another year, head over to your dorms unless you have a need to discuss a matter with the administration, in which case, we ask that you put it off until a little later unless absolutely necessary. We would like to tend to the newcomers before they get lost.”

“Let’s stick together,” I said to Kat. “If I get lost, I don’t want to get lost alone.”

“Same here.”

We followed the stream of young new students who made their way to the administrative building. Inside, a row of a dozen tables, each ten feet apart, was set up at the back of the large space. At the top of each table was a board with the letters to the various dorms.

“Ours is over there,” Kat said, pointing to the cardboard marked ‘C’.

Pulling our respective suitcases on the smooth white tiled floor, we got into the appropriate row.

“This place is so big,” Kat said.

“A lot bigger than I expected,” I admitted.

“So, how did a girl from all the way in Amarillo, Texas end up in a culinary academy north of San Francisco?” Kat said as we waited.

“Scholarship,” I said simply. “Back home I’ve been entering cooking contests since I was a kid. I’ve won a lot of ribbons and trophies and a few cash prizes, but this tops it all. And I beat out a lot of talented people to make it here.” I looked at her. “And what made you come here.”

She shrugged and smiled. “My mom.”

“Really?” I said with a reluctant chuckle.

“Well, sort of,” Kat said. “My parents own a string of Chinese restaurants, most of them in the northern part of California. They also have a base store in Singapore. They both thought a few classes here would do me good, but... truth be told, I really do enjoy cooking and it’s something I would have wanted to do anyway. I just like letting my mom think that it was all her idea.”

I let out a soft snort as my gaze fell on a dark haired boy standing with a small group of students by one of the nearby pillars. The young girls looked at him with open adoration while the guys looked at him with envy.

He certainly was a sight to behold. His dark hair made his brilliant green eyes stand out all the more, giving him such an alluring and mysterious appeal. He had full lips that pouted just enough, and a strong well chiseled jaw. Though dressed in the tan slacks and an ample white shirt, it was easy to see that he was muscular and athletic.

No wonder the girls were all over him.

But as I listened to Kat talking about her mother, I glanced up at the dark-haired boy again and noticed how his scanning gaze of the large room stopped on me.

I was about to smile, but something stopped me. He averted his gaze quickly enough, but there was more to it than just that. There’d been something hard and cold in his gaze... disdain even.

I tried to dismiss it and convinced myself that I’d imagined that disdainful look, but...

Again, and again, my gaze came back to him, intrigued by his good looks and cold demeanor. Looking above the heads of the students around him, he scrutinized with a haughty glare the goings-on around him.

The more I looked at him, the more stand-offish he appeared, as if he was above it all.

Then, his gaze returned to me. For a second, I anticipated a smile, after all, the glint in his eyes indicated a certain

amount of approval of what he saw. But an ugly scowl quickly erased whatever approval I thought I'd seen.

“What are you looking at?” Kat said glancing around.

“That guy over there,” I said, barely daring to look his way. “The one with the dark hair and the ‘I own the place’ attitude.”

“Axel?” Kat said, glancing at the guy then back at me.

“You know him?” I said.

“Well, not personally,” she said. “But I know of him.”

“So, what’s with the attitude? I mean, he’s looking down at everyone as if he’s something special.”

“Maybe it’s because he sort of is,” Kat said. “He’s Axel King.”

“You say that as if it should mean something to me,” I said.

“It should,” Kat said with a cautious smile. “He’s Errol King’s son.”

“Oh, Holy crap,” I let out. “Errol King? *The* Errol King? Celebrity chef, Errol King?”

“The one and only, legendary Chef King.”

“And that guy is...”

“His eldest son, Axel King.”

Chapter 2



I TURNED BACK TO FACE the tables and tried to put the arrogant looking young man out of my mind. But as Kat and I neared the table, when it was almost my turn, I noticed him standing there, right beside the table.

My turn came and I froze.

“You’re next, Layla,” Kat said with a slight nudge.

Still, my feet refused to move. For some reason, the arrogance and the disdain in his eyes had me frozen in place.

“Miss,” the woman behind the table said.

I wanted to tell Kat to go first, but I set aside my apprehension about Axel and finally approached the table.

“Good morning, young lady,” the woman at the table said with a bright and cheery smile. “I’m Mrs. Brighton, Campus Director and it is my pleasure to welcome you to the International Culinary Institute Academy. And what is your name, dear?”

“Layla,” I said. “Layla Tyler.”

Mrs. Brighton looked at her list and found my name. “Yes. There you are. In room 205. Layla Tyler from Amarillo, Texas.”

“That’s right.”

“And you’ll be sharing a room with Katrina Lee.”

I turned to point to Kat. “Yeah. She’s right there. We’ve already met.”

Mrs. Brighton waved Kat over. “I’m happy to see that you girls seem to already get along and like each other. That helps make things easier. We get dozens of request every year from students wanting to change roommates.”

Kat and I smiled and nodded.

I shot a quick side-glance at Axel who just stood nearby, watching. I could have sworn he was scowling at me.

But why? What did I ever do to him?

“I’m sure that you girls will have a good time here at our academy,” Mrs. Brighton was saying. “You’ll find that our professors are knowledgeable and professional, as well as patient and understanding.”

“Right,” I said, trying to pay attention. I could feel Axel’s heavy gaze like a weight on my shoulders.

“This academy was built by a man who views the making of good food as a true art. Errol King hand-picked every single professor here and he oversees their curriculum. Nothing is left to chance. His reputation rests on the success of every single one of his students. And that is also why he only accepts the best candidates.”

Axel stepped forward, his chin rising as he looked down at me.

“Oh,” Mrs. Brighton said with a pleased smile. “Speaking of Errol King, this is his son, Axel King. You’re just in time to show these girls to their dorm.”

My breathing suddenly became difficult as my heartrate accelerated. Damn it. The guy was still looking at me with such disdain.

“Axel is the campus ambassador,” Mrs. Brighton went on, still smiling and cheery. “You’ll see him here and there throughout the campus. He likes to help new students settle in, and he likes to see his father’s vision become a reality. He’ll show you to your dorm.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, trying to sound natural and calm, as if his cold demeanor had no effect on me. I almost held out my hand to him but quickly saw that there was no point.

“You’re late,” he said in a flat dry tone.

I looked at Mrs. Brighton who pressed an uncomfortable smile as she averted her gaze.

“Not to argue,” I said, looking him straight in the eye, “but, I was here before the gate open and I did not dawdle one bit. I came straight here and patiently waited in line for my turn.”

“Nice try,” he shot back.

“It’s not a *try*,” I argued. “It’s the truth.”

He arrogantly looked at the huge Rolex on his wrist. “Either way. Your excuses are of little consequence to me. It’s too late. I no longer have the time to waste here. I have to get to my first class.”

Frustrated by his repugnant attitude, I released my hold of my bright pink suitcase and walked up to face him. He stood tall, much taller than me and I suddenly felt small as I looked up at him. “I don’t know what your problem is, or what it is that I did to deserve this unwarranted treatment from you, but I got up at four o’clock this morning to get on a six o’clock flight from Amarillo, Texas to San Francisco. I then got on a bus to ride all the way out here so that I could be here on time for that gate out there to open up.” I pointed to the pillar by which he’d stood with the students just moments earlier. “I saw you just standing there doing nothing but looking arrogantly around you, and I know that you saw me. You saw me right here in this line. If you don’t want to show me to my dorm, fine! But drop the bullshit that I arrived late.”

“Amarillo,” he said with an obnoxious cluck of his tongue. “Figures.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I said, my lips getting tighter and my eyes narrower.

“Texas,” he said, eyeing me with open disgust. “My father doesn’t usually let country hicks in. He has just as much a disdain for country bumpkins as I do. You and your cheap, imitation Louis Vuitton suitcase and your cheap fake leather shoes. I bet that Barbie doll blonde hair of yours comes out of a bottle, too. Are those blue eyes contacts or the real thing? Hey? I bet you’re just a mousy little girl with dull brown eyes who dusted herself off and thought she could come to the big city, to a big campus and play with grown-ups. Damn. What

the hell are you going to cook up for us? Your country grits and biscuits? Your possum stew and greens?"

I clenched my jaw, unable to believe he'd said what he'd just said. How dare he? Who the hell did he think he was?

"Well, you know what, Mr. King?" I said, jutting my chin up to him. "At least I got here on my own merit. I worked hard to learn what I know, and I worked hard to earn the scholarship that got me here. At least I didn't just sit back and let my daddy pave the way and then just stroll on in with a silver spoon in my mouth."

And with that, I turned to get my dorm key from Mrs. Brighton who was as red as a beet. I glanced at Kat, nodded and started to walk away.

"A scholarship. Right," he shouted out to me. "I should have figured. And who did you have to fuck to 'merit' a scholarship to this establishment?"

I huffed with fury and humiliation.

"Just ignore him," Kat said as she tugged at my arm.

But, no. That was impossible. I turned back and stomped my way back to him, the heels of my sandals clicking loudly with every step. There were no words. There was no need for words. Facing his smug and arrogant expression, I swung back and struck him so hard, his head whipped back.

With my hand stinging so bad I was certain it was bleeding, I turned back to join Kat and walk out of the administration building.

"You'll regret the day you set foot on this campus," Axel shouted as the door closed behind me.

"Damn," Kat said as we walked on. "Don't take offense, but... wow. You've got balls."

"Yeah," I said, not sure I'd done the right thing. I'd allowed my anger to get the better of me. Not the best idea in the world.

"You hear me, you hick," Axel said as he stormed out of the building and perched on the top step.

I didn't look back.

“From this day forward,” he went on. “Your life will be a living hell!”

Chapter 3

“This is so unexpected,” I said to Kat as we headed to the dorms. “It’s like walking onto the grounds of a lavish home with everything so beautiful and well-kept.”

Huge trees rose high into the air, their thick and dense canopy offering cool shade from the intense sun. Flowering bushes dotted the landscape as well as pleasing flower beds that brought bright pops of red, orange, yellow and white to the otherwise green backdrop.

Kat looked around and nodded. “I had heard that the academy was in a beautiful setting. But this is really... wow.”

We passed in front of Dorm A, a beautiful three story building with tall columns and generous balconies. The entrance was flanked by two elegantly trimmed topiaries that added charm and whimsy to the building.

Next came Dorm B. The two story structure was built of old stones and had an interesting architectural appeal. The main entrance looked like the entryway to a horse stable, with two wide wooden doors. Painted black, they were in dramatic contrast to the pale gray stones of the building.

Old style lanterns hung between every window and the balconies were adorned with the intricate designs of the wrought iron railings.

“I love the charm of the place,” I said as I looked at all the attention to detail in virtually every aspect of the buildings.

“Apparently, this whole place was once owned by a railroad baron. What we now call the administrative building was their mansion.” She pointed to the Dorm B building. “That was once their stables. I don’t believe they actually had a horse and buggy for transportation, but I think they just enjoyed breeding and riding horses. Apparently it’s been updated and refurbished and now has huge loft-like dorms for the richer among us.”

We arrived at Dorm C. The smaller, two story wooden structure was absolute enchanting. White shutters flanked every window that were also enhanced with flower boxes overflowing with bright, colorful blooms.

The gabled roof was adorned with gingerbread that was charming and gave the building a cozy and homey feel.

“I guess this is us,” Kat said.

“I love it,” I said. “I feel like I’ve suddenly been transported to old world England, or Scotland. Like a fairy tale.”

“Let’s hope that the fairy tale continues on the inside.”

She reached the door and pulled it open, holding it for me.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile as I pulled my pink suitcase inside the cool corridor.

The old world charm continued inside the building, but with added touches of elegance and modern convenience.

The high ceiling was dotted with numerous light fixtures that offered the space a warm glow.

“Room 205,” I said. “That means that we’re on the second floor.”

I turned to my left and found the staircase that led to the second level. Turning down the hall, we came to our room.

“Here goes nothing,” Kat said as she pulled out her key and unlocked the door.

We both gasped as she pushed the door opened.

“Oh, wow,” I let out.

Large planks of beautiful wood covered the floor. The white furniture was modern, but warm and inviting. A quick glance at the kitchen told me that it was indeed modern and inviting.

“Look at the view out of this window,” Kat said as she hurried to the large, six foot high window.

Leaving my suitcase at the door, I went to her and looked outside. It was mesmerizing. The flowers, the fountains and the winding walkways made for a beautiful design that I knew I would never tire of.

Kat and I both turned at the same time to take a look at our new home.

“Look at that kitchen.”

I nodded as I looked at the modern appliances and ample counter space. “I guess we’ll have a lot of room to practice recipes in here.”

“And invite guests,” Kat said. “Look at the living space. This is gorgeous.” She ran her hand over the back of the white leather sofa, then turned on one of the lamps. After looking at the glow through the lampshade a moment, she turned it off.

“So, now is the big question,” I said. “What are the bedrooms like?”

There was a closed door on either side of the large living space.

“Okay,” Kat said with a mischievous grin. “You look in that room and I’ll look in this one.”

I put my hand on the doorknob to the door. “On three,” I said, feeling playful and giddy. “One, two... three.”

We both opened the doors and squealed.

“Oh, my God,” Kat shouted.

I silently echoed the sentiment.

The door that I’d opened led to a huge bedroom, all done in bright pinks, magenta and orange. Every piece of furniture was painted white, and a set of French doors opened into a huge walk in closet.

In the closet, a dozen black chef’s jackets were hung. Awed by them, I walked into the closet and fingered the thick fabric, eager to wear them.

“This is wild!” I heard from a distance.

But still I was entranced by the jackets that I would be wearing for the next months.

“Layla?” Kat said coming into the room. “My room is nuts. Oh, wow. Yours is, too. Hey, where are you?”

“In here,” I said.

She walked in and found me, still touching the jackets.

“Hmph,” she let out, understanding my suddenly quiet demeanor. “Me, too. Cool, isn’t it?”

“They thought of everything,” I said quietly.

“Hey,” she said. “I mean. I didn’t mean to pick rooms without discussing it with you or anything. The other room is the same, only it’s done in purple, hot pink and blue.”

I looked at her and smiled. “I like this room.”

“Then it’s settled.”

I finally released my hold of the chef’s jacket and walked past Kat out of the closet to better inspect the bedroom. Past the bed was a large window and beside it a glass door that led to a small private balcony.

“It’s almost too good to be true,” I said softly, almost to myself.

“Well, the place does cater to the very elite and very, very rich,” Kat said. “You were lucky to get a scholarship to this place because the tuition alone is three times that of any other culinary institute. Add to that a dorm room like this... and you’re talking some pretty big bucks.”

I looked at her and smiled. “So, I guess your parents did pretty well for themselves.”

She let out a laugh. “Good enough.”

I opened the door to the balcony and stepped out. The fragrant air caressed my skin, adding to the lightheartedness that I felt. I was on a cloud, and I loved it.

As I turned to head back inside, I noticed a small metal plaque beside the door.

“The Stanfield Estate,” I read aloud. “Built in the early 1900s, the site was turned into a culinary school by Mr. Stanfield’s granddaughter in 1987.”

“Yeah,” Kat said. “I read somewhere that she was a real gourmet.”

“Speaking of which,” I said as I headed inside to get my suitcase. “I’m starving. How about you?”

“I’m with you. Let’s go check out the cafeteria.”

“I’ll just leave this in my room and I’m ready to go.”

I rolled my suitcase into my new room, smiling as I noted how the pink of my luggage matched that of the cushions on the bed.

Meeting Kat back in the living space, we then headed out.

The cafeteria was at the very back of the large castle like building. Three sets of double doors led to a cafeteria that looked a lot more like an old world dining hall than the typical school cafeteria.

Long heavy wood tables were scattered here and there instead of lined up as I’d usually seen in cafeterias. There were also a number of smaller round tables for smaller groups.

“Student chefs are the ones who cook, so this should be good,” Kat said.

We found a vacant table to the right of the large room and sat down. Four menus were stacked in the center of the table.

“We even get served at the tables?” I said, surprised.

“Yep,” Kat said. “The full treatment.”

A young woman quickly came to see us.

“Hello, students,” she said with a cheery smile. “I’m Amanda Gutfield and I am serving up Italian today. Do you want more time to look at the menu?”

Kat and I took a quick glimpse at the menu.

“I’ll try the calamari,” Kat said.

“And I’ll have the fettuccini with the King oyster mushrooms.”

“With garlic bread?” Amanda said.

“Sure,” I said then turned to Kat. “I’m not planning on kissing anyone today.”

Chuckling, Amanda left us, giving us a chance to take a good look around.

Most of the tables were full, with student from various stages in their studies. At one table, the students seemed to be picking apart every component of the sauce Amanda had made. They each dipped their pinky into the sauce, tasted it, and smacked their lips as they sought the spices she’d used.

“This is so great,” Kat said. “I’m starving and it smells delicious in here.”

“I didn’t even eat the peanuts on the plane,” I said. “My last meal was a bowl of cereal hours ago.”

Amanda soon returned with our meals. “Enjoy,” she said as she set down our plates.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m sure we will.”

I leaned over my plate, practically drooling as the delicious aroma wafted up to my nostrils. Judging by the scent, the dish was perfect, with just the right herbs and spices.

I picked up my fork and started to poke at the dish, looking at the components as the other students had. “I’m sure that we could learn a lot just from eating here.”

Kat nodded as she took a bite of her dish.

“Have you had a chance to check out your schedule yet?” Kat said.

Taking a small bite of my dish, I shook my head then reached into my purse to pull it out. “I hope we have a few classes together.”

I flattened out the sheet of paper on the table and turned to try to read it, but suddenly felt something warm and wet over my shoulder.

Startled, I sat back and looked at the thick red tomato sauce that was streaming down my shoulder and over my beautiful summer dress. Before I had time to fully realize

what was happening, I felt the same heat and moisture over my head.

Confused, I looked up at Kat who stared at me with wide eyes, then looked to my right to see Axel standing there with an empty plate in his hand.

“Oops,” he said.

It took me a moment to compute what had happened. It all seemed so impossible, so unlikely, yet there I was, my golden hair stained with tomato sauce and my pretty dress ruined.

But before I could respond, an Axel lookalike stumbled over to Kat and dropped his place of spaghetti all over her.

Kat and I stared at one another then looked up to the two guys standing at our sides. The two men burst out laughing, holding their guts from the intensity of their amusement.

“Not so hot looking now, are you?” Axel said.

The lookalike glared directly at Kat. “And you’re hanging out with this country hick? What the fuck?”

“Don’t waste your time with her, Kobe,” Axel said. “The important thing is that we teach this loser a lesson.” He turned to look down at me, a pleased grin on his face. “This is just a friendly little reminder that we, here at the academy, expect everyone to be on time, all the time. Lateness will not be tolerated.”

Fuming, I sat there a moment, trying so desperately to collect my thoughts.

“Nothing to say, hicky?”

I stood and faced him. Damn. How could someone who looked so good, so charming and pleasing to the eyes be so ruthless and cruel?

But there were no words, just action. I raised my hand to him, prepared to slap him once again. But this time he anticipated my move.

He caught my hand in his and I was immediately struck by the surprising electric shock that went through me. His touch

was warm, even hot, and it sent a strange jolt of pleasure throughout my body, despite the ugliness of his gesture.

“Tsk. Tsk, little country girl,” Axel whispered, his voice suddenly so deep and husky. He stepped closer while still gripping my hand in his. “Do you really think that slapping a member of the staff will leave you in good standing here? Look around you, peasant. I’m a prince here and you’re nothing.”

My heart raced. Damn, how I hated the effect he was having on me. While the hold he had of my hand was harsh, I could have sworn that I’d sensed a light caress of his thumb over my skin.

For a moment, our gazes locked. He stood so close that I could smell his breath, his sweet and enticing breath.

“Don’t ever try to raise your hand to me,” he warned, his eyes suddenly shifting to something harder. “Or I just might have to break that delicate little hand of yours.”

He let go of me, suddenly filled with disdain as he took a step back. “You look like something the cat dragged in,” he said with disgust. “Go hose yourself off.”

He turned to Kobe, slapped him in the gut with the back of his hand. “Come on. I’ve had enough of that barn stench in here.”

The two young men, smug and arrogant, walked out.

For a moment, all I could hear was the heavy sound of my own breathing and the deafening pounding of my heart. Humiliated, I looked down to Kat who was on the verge of tears. I silently shook my head, urging her to keep her emotions in check.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” someone from across the room shouted.

Two young women headed out, giving us a wide berth when they passed us by.

“I can’t believe you had the gall to try to slap Axel King,” one of the girls said. “Shit. You must really be from out deep

in the sticks.”

“Axel King is the prince of this campus,” the other girl said, looking back at me with disgust. “What nerve.”

Another male student came by. “You’re lucky that Axel and his brother chose spaghetti. It could have been much worse. There was some very hot minestrone on the menu.”

I looked around me, looked at the students seated at the various tables around me. Their eyes said it all. They all looked up to Axel King and respected him. As for that lookalike... his brother, I had to assume that he as Axel’s twin. The resemblance was just too striking.

Clearly, both were in charge here. And, clearly, I’d overstepped the boundaries.

Damn.

Not only did I now have Axel to deal with, but the entire student body now hated me.

“This is just so awful,” Kat muttered. She jumped to her feet and turned to run off, leaving her uneaten plate on the table.

“Kat,” I called out after her. “Wait!”

Chapter 4

I hurried after Kat, but slipped on the spaghetti, losing my footing. By the time I scrambled back to my feet and gained control enough to be able to run, she was already out the door. I ran past the students who continued to jeer and criticize my actions, then pushed through the doors.

She was gone. I looked around and couldn't find her. Then, in the distance, I spotted her, turning the corner at the other side of the building.

I ran after her, running as hard as I could. Turning the corner, I saw her enter a small, gated enclosure. An oasis of fruits and vegetables were surrounded by a protective wrought iron fence. I slowed down as I approached and calmly entered the campus vegetable garden.

Hearing Kat's sobs, I looked around and saw her seated on a cement bench amidst large zucchini plants.

"Kat?" I said tentatively as I came up to her.

She simply sobbed louder.

"There's no excuse for what those guys did to us," I said, peeling a long strand of spaghetti off her shoulder.

Nodding, she continued to sob.

"We could go to the administrative office to file a formal complaint," I offered. "I know that they're big shots around here, but that doesn't excuse their behavior."

Kat shook her head and looked up at me. "That would only give them more ammunition to come after you... us. No. Let's leave it at that. They had their fun. Hopefully, they'll leave us alone from now on."

"Kat," I said. "We can't just let them bully us like that. We can't just let them win. We have to stand up to them. We have to stand up for ourselves."

"I know that you're probably right," she said, finally getting control of her sobs. "But I don't see any way that we can win this. Please. Let's just drop it."

I looked at her, wanting to argue. I knew that it was never a good idea to let a bully intimidate those around him. Bullies rarely backed down of their own accord. No. They always came back for more. If they smelled a weakness, they went on the attack.

But I just reached for Kat's hand and helped her up. "Come on. Let's go get cleaned up."

She forced a smile and we walked out of the vegetable garden.

"I guess the one good thing in all this is that we now know that we'll be working with fresh produce," I said, hoping to make her smile.

It worked. She looked up at me with a silly grin.

Smelling of garlic, rosemary and thyme, we walked back to our dorm. There was something comforting in being with her, of not having to go through the humiliation by myself.

Hopefully, soon, we'd be able to laugh at the incident.

"I'll let you head into the shower first, if you want," I offered as we walked into our apartment.

She looked at me with a surprised grin. "Why? We each have our own shower."

"We do?"

"Didn't you open that other door in your bedroom? We each have our own bathroom."

"Perfect," I said. "I'm hitting the shower right away and I'll meet you back here and we'll figure something out for lunch."

I left her and went into my bedroom. As promised, another door in my room led to a magnificent bathroom. The large shower stall was tiled in beautiful antique tiles of rose and wisteria. A long counter had two sinks and in the corner, a large tub with massaging jets.

I took off my dress, careful not to get spaghetti everywhere, and dumped it into the sink. In the shower, I

turned on the cool water and simply let it stream through my hair.

Just as I chastised myself for not bringing my toiletries into the bathroom, I noticed the soap, shampoo and conditioner dispensers.

Wow. They had really thought of everything, and then some.

I squirted some of the floral scented shampoo into my hand and washed my hair. The heavy scent quickly rid me of any and all traces of garlic and herbs.

Feeling fresh and revitalized, I headed out into my room and opened my suitcase. I grabbed the first thing on top. A bright yellow tank top and my short black gym shorts with double stripes of yellow. They were my favorite work out shorts, super comfy and super sexy. After slipping my feet into soft canvas tennis shoes, I was ready to go.

With my hair still damp and streaming and dripping down my back, I went out to join Kat in the living area.

“You okay?” I said when I saw her just sitting there in an armchair, staring into space. “I thought that a good shower would spruce you up.”

She shrugged. “What a horrible way to start the semester. And to think that Kobe could treat me that way and then laugh about it.”

Puzzled, I came to sit on the sofa across from her. “You know him?”

She nodded. “A few years ago, we were at the same culinary camp. It was this thing set up by several junior high schools in my area.” She looked at me with sad eyes. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say that we were the best of friends, but we did get along. We worked together on a few projects and there were never any issues between us. I don’t get it. I don’t understand why he would do this.”

Biting my lip, I looked at her.

“I know it’s silly of me,” she went on. “When I learned that I’d been accepted here and that he would be here too, I was really looking forward to seeing him again.” She sank back into the armchair. “Why did he have to be so cute? Are all good looking guys bad?”

“No,” I said with a snort. “I’m sure they’re not.”

“But he’s soooooo cute.”

I chuckled. “Tell me about it,” I said. “The fact that Axel is so gorgeous makes it hard to hate him for what he did. Damn. It’s not fair.”

When Kat didn’t respond, I tapped her knee with my hand. “Don’t let this get to you. You’re stronger than this. I know you are.”

“How do you know?”

“Just looking at you, I can tell that you have drive and determination. You’re the kind of person who gets through anything and everything that you put your mind to.”

She just stared at me.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

She offered me a shy grin, then looked up and let out a sigh. “I’m starving. What are we supposed to do now?”

I looked back at our nice kitchen. What were the chances that it was stocked?

“I’ll go see what we have here.” I got up and headed to the kitchen and opened the fridge. “Well. They were nice enough to stock us with bottles of water, but that’s about it.”

“So what do we do?”

“Look,” I said as I closed the refrigerator door. “You stay here, sit tight and relax. I’m going to go back down that cafeteria kitchen and see what I can’t bring back here.”

“Really?” she said, happy with the suggestion. “You’d do that?”

“Just watch me.” I winked at her and turned to leave.

Eager to please her and lighten her mood, I headed back to the cafeteria hoping to run into Amanda. But I opened the door to find an empty lunchroom.

Disappointed, I headed to the kitchen at the back. “Hello,” I called out softly. “Is anyone here?”

With no answer, I entered the kitchen and found the fridge. While there was plenty of chicken, beef and seafood, I wanted something quick and easy. I grabbed a few eggs from a carton, a nice wedge of a sharp cheddar and got to work.

I dropped a dollop of rich creamy butter into a frying pan and looked around as I waited for it to melt. It was easy to imagine myself working in that kitchen in the days to come. Given enough time, I could whip up some real great dishes and wow the students with my culinary instinct.

But for now, I cracked a few eggs into the butter and heated them up. I also added a few fragrant herbs. It already smelled delicious.

“You’re still here.”

Though I’d only met him for the first time that very morning, I already recognized that deep throaty voice of his. The hairs at the back of my neck pricked up and I could have sworn that my skin sizzled.

“What’s it going to take to get rid of you?”

I smiled. “A degree and a recommendation letter to a three Michelin star restaurant.”

“Fat chance of that happening. We don’t give out degrees to greasy spoon cooks.”

I turned to glance back at him. Damn, he looked good. He, too, was fresh out of a shower. His dark hair looked even darker as the damp curls clung to the nape of his neck. His thin cotton t-shirt, cut up here and there in a fashionable bad boy manner, showed off his muscular build. It was almost impossible and should undoubtedly be illegal to look so good. His black jeans were tight, but not too tight.

“You’d be surprised,” I said, meeting his gaze.

I caught the dip of that gaze as it dropped into the neckline of my top. My breasts instantly tingled under the hunger of his gaze.

Shit... my nipples actually perked up, just from him looking at me. I could just imagine what his touch could accomplish.

“And what are you whipping up, Chef Hick? Scrambled eggs and bologna?”

Pulling out my sexiest smile, I stirred the eggs in the pan. “It takes a very intuitive talent to make perfectly scrambled eggs. Just the right amount of salt and pepper, a few little cubes of a real good cheese and...”

“Please,” he said, holding his hand up to silence me. “Spare me your country kitchen tricks and tips.”

“Hmph,” I let out as I brought my attention back to my eggs.

“If you were as smart as you claim to be, you’d leave,” he said.

“Why should I?” I said without looking at him. “I have every right to be here. My good cooking won me a scholarship, remember?”

“To hell with your scholarship. I have every right to make your life here a living hell,” he said, his voice oddly husky and strained.

I suddenly became aware of my tight and very short gym shorts. Playing the game, I shifted my weight to one leg, jutting my hips up to one side in a provocative manner.

I heard the tortured groan that escaped his lips.

“And where were you going all dolled up?” he said with a grunt. “The gym?”

Turning off the heat and setting the pan aside, I turned to him with my spatula held up and pointed at him. He hadn’t anticipated my turning to him, and I caught him ogling my ass.

He quickly slapped on a grimace, but it was too late. I'd seen the hungry interest in his bright blue eyes.

I wanted to take full advantage of the position that he was in and play up the sexual tension until he was in pain.

“What...?” I said, jutting my hip to the other side. “You don't like this type of attire? I shouldn't be surprised. A cold-blooded snake like you probably isn't used to seeing a woman who actually looks like a real... hot... blooded... woman.”

Staring at my breasts, he licked his lips, the sexiest move I'd ever seen. I was about to copy the move, the need to lick my lips suddenly so urgent, but I held back, refusing to give him the satisfaction.

“The girls here are classy, and they know how to dress appropriately,” he said. “You're just proving even more how you don't belong here. Why don't you go back to your little hick town and get a job at the corner diner?”

I looked down at my breasts, cocked my head playfully to the side and looked back up at him. “I guess I would make a lot of tips dressed like this, wouldn't I?”

His chest rose and fell as he struggled to breathe. “You're indecent,” he growled. “Your boobs are practically popping out and your ass... Your ass is...”

I turned my back to him and popped my ass out for emphasis. “My ass is what?” I asked innocently as I picked up the frying pan and dropped the eggs onto two plates.

“Those shorts are barely more than a g-string.” he said with much difficulty. “What kind of girl goes around campus dressed like that?”

“A hungry one,” I said as I turned back to him. “In case you've already forgotten, you and your little brother ruined my lunch.”

“He's not my little brother. He's my fraternal twin.”

“Who cares?”

“You're deliberately cock teasing,” he said, his eyes again dipping into my shirt.

I chuckled deep in my throat. “That’s all in your very vivid imagination, jerk.”

“Jerk?” he said, looking incredulously at me. “Me? Look at my face. Look what you did to me. There’s actually a bruise from where you hit me, you savage wild cat.”

“Aw,” I said with mock sympathy. “I have a feeling that it’s your fragile ego that was bruised a lot more than that pretty boy face of yours.”

He sucked in his cheeks and took a step closer to me. “Perhaps no one has enlightened you yet. Perhaps out in the backwoods of Texas they didn’t tell you who I am. I am...”

I yawned in his face. “Yadda, yadda, yadda. Yeah. Yeah. You’re the almighty Prince Axel... the handsome but empty headed son of the great and talented Errol King. Clearly, he over-indulged you and that explains why you are now such a ninny.”

Fuming, he stepped closer still. “Take it back.”

Not the least bit intimidated, I took a firm and solid step towards him. “If you can’t stand the heat, then stay the fuck out of my kitchen.”

His clear blue eyes darkened, but I could have sworn that his lips curled up ever so slightly. As angry as he was playing it, he was amused by all of this.

Shit. Was he enjoying this dispute?

“You deserve every word,” I said, leaning closer to him as I looked up into his steamy blue eyes. “You deserve it all... the words, the criticism and the slap.”

“Fine,” he said, taking a small step back. “If that’s the way you want to be. But I’ll give you a word of warning.”

“Sure,” I said with lack of interest. I turned back to tend to pick up my plates. “Why don’t you do that?”

“I own this school. And I really mean that I own it. Your destiny is in my hands. And that of your little crybaby friend, too.”

He was pushing this too far. I set the plates back on the counter with a clatter and spun back around. I reached out and struck him again. “You leave Kat out of this. She didn’t do anything to you. For that matter, I didn’t do anything to you. What kind of a depraved, spoiled brat of a man bullies two young, innocent women the way you and that brother of yours did? If you’re really such a big man on campus, then why don’t you leave me and Kat alone?”

Below his seething eyes, I could see the red handprint on his cheek. I’d hit him and I’d hit him hard.

“Now, you’ve really gone and done it,” another male voice bellowed.

I looked behind Axel to see his brother, Kobe.

“There’s no excuse whatsoever for striking him.”

“Right,” Axel said as he licked the corner of his lip then turned to open the freezer door. He pulled out a chunk of ice and wrapped it in a dishcloth. Glaring at me, he put the ice to his sore face.

His eyes hard and uncompromising, he came up to me... right up to me. So close, for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

Shit. I immediately felt the wetness of my arousal soak my panties. Why did this jerk of a guy have such an effect on me?

“Damn it,” he said, sneering as he looked down at my scrambled eggs. “You can’t even make good, properly scrambled eggs without burning them. How the hell are you going to manage any of the more difficult things that we’ll ask you to do here? Cut your losses and just leave before you humiliate yourself even more.”

“Axel’s right,” Kobe said. “Students like you only make the entire institution look bad. You’re going to ruin our reputation.”

Axel looked at me, that look of disgust and disdain back in his eyes. “Layla, right? Lay... la. Such a hick name.”

“That’s right,” I whispered in a deep husky voice. “Lay... la. And I know guys like you. You’re going to be whispering my name all night long.”

With that, I picked up my plates of egg and walked past him and his brother, careful to swing my hips with all the sexuality and sensuality that I could muster.

“Never mind her,” Kobe said. “We have dates with Selena Branson and Tilly Moss, remember?”

“Yeah,” Axel muttered.

“They’re hot as hell,” Kobe went on.

“Right,” Axel said.

“A good blow job will do you good.”

A sinking sensation filled my belly. For some stupid reason, the thought of him with another girl bothered me. Damn it.

He’s just a good looking jerk, I told myself. Get over it.

As I reached the small double swinging doors that led out into the dining hall, I turned to face them as I set my butt on the door.

I looked straight at Axel and tried to discern what was in his eyes. A little bit of anger, some irritation, and a good dose of arrogance... but above it all, there was lust.

“Go and let some silly girl service you like a king,” I said. “But it’s my face that will run through your mind as you find your wicked pleasure.”

Before they could say anything more, I pushed my butt into the door and headed out.

My heart raced. On the one hand I was proud of having held my own. There was no way I was just going to stand down and let him bully me. My parents had raised me to be tough, to stand my ground, to stand up for myself.

But at the back of my mind, his words concerned me. Did he really have the power to have me kicked out of the school? Could my culinary career be over before it even began?

Chapter 5

Axel



I looked at my brother, Kobe, his cock firmly embedded in Selena's mouth. Then I looked down at the top of Tilly's head, my cock in her huge mouth as she bobbed up and down, taking me in so deep. She seemed to be enjoying it, licking and sucking and groaning all the while.

After my tiff with Layla, my brother and I had picked up the girls and gone to our private mansion just off campus. I was horny as hell and eager to whip it out and shove it into Tilly's warm and willing mouth.

But now, as I watched her work on me, I felt hollow. She was an okay looking girl with big brown eyes and dark hair that she often dyed various colors. Today, it was green. She had a reputation for sucking dick like a pro, but she had very little in the way of culinary skills. The only reason she'd made it into the Academy was because of her father's enormous donation to the school.

"You must be distracted," Tilly said as she kissed the tip of my cock and gave me a quick hand job as she looked up at me. "Your hard-on is softening up."

"Yeah," I muttered as I sank back into the soft leather sofa and looked up at the coffered ceiling. "Get your lips back on it, babe."

She greedily took my cock into her mouth again, and as I closed my eyes, Layla's face appeared. Those beautiful eyes that were wide and innocent. Those luscious lips that had such a wicked curve to them when she smiled.

And what to say of her body. Damn! Her generous, firm, round breasts, that tiny waist and her full, plump ass.

"Now, that's more like it," Tilly said as my hard-on returned in full force.

Shit! Layla was right. I just couldn't get her fucking face out of my mind. I couldn't let go of her fucking hot body.

Fuck her! She's just a hick!

I opened my eyes to look at the splendor of my life. My brother and I had deliberately chosen to live off campus so that

we could live by our own rules. Our home was huge and lavish and had everything we could ever need.

Living here also gave me a chance to let go of the responsibilities of being the family representative at the Academy. Somehow, Kobe managed to shrug off that responsibility easily enough, but for me... I knew that I represented my father in so many ways. Errol King's reputation had to be upheld at all costs.

As Errol King's son, I was held to a higher standard, but I was also afforded the respect and reverence that came with the title. People cleared the path for me wherever I went. The guys all wanted to be my friend and the girls all wanted to suck my dick.

But this hick. This Layla chick from out in the sticks. How dare she answer back to me. How dare she raise a hand to me.

How dare her! Parading around in those super-hot short shorts. And that tank top with those fucking boobs that I just wanted to... Argh!

The bitch was getting to me and it was only day one. I had to find a way to get rid of her. She didn't fit in with the school body. She was an outsider, an interloper, and I was certain the elites of the school would reject her. Worse, they would question how we could possibly let such a low class person into such an elite school.

But, damn... I just couldn't get her out of my mind. She had the body of a bombshell, the kind of girl who stands out even in a nudie magazine. And yet, there was something so... shit... so elegant, classy even... for a girl from the sticks.

Man, to walk into the house and have her there, waiting for me, eager to suck my dick then cook me a gourmet meal.

The thought of her lips, so soft, so warm, so...

Tilly squealed with delight as my hard-on got even harder.

Silly twit, I thought. *This hard-on has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with Layla's firm tits.*

I closed my eyes and imagined my hands over those inviting breasts. Man. I arched my back and shoved my cock deep down Tilly's throat, causing her to gag a bit.

The silly twat just giggled and took more of my cock in. She sucked like there was no tomorrow.

Fueled by my visions of Layla, I was ready to explode.

As Tilly sucked harder, my mind went to how Layla had slapped my face. Not once, but twice. The violence of it all. Yeah. I was mad. Mad that a girl could hit me. Mad that a girl could show such disrespect. But, damn... why was my cock getting harder still at the thought of her violent act?

The passion of it all. Yeah. That was it. Oh, the passion in those eyes when she hit me. Ooh. Shit, she was such a fierce and untamed animal.

Focusing in on the stinging sensation that I could still feel across my cheek, I came, spewing my pent up anger, frustration and lust into Tilly's eager mouth.

She pulled back, letting me spill my seed all over her face, down her neck and over her mushy breasts. Looking at me with an attempt at being sexy, she slathered the sticky cum all over her.

Idiot, I thought as I looked away.

What a fucking idiot.

With a quick and sharp motion, I pulled my shorts up and put my dick away. "Get me a cold drink, will ya?" I said to Tilly.

Thrilled by the command, she got to her feet and sauntered off to the kitchen.

As I waited, I brought my hand to my cheek, wondering what to do about Layla. If she'd been a man, the answer would be simple. I would have punched the guy back, kicked him out of school and that would be that.

But Layla. Fuck it. I just couldn't get her out of my head.

Angry and frustrated, I grunted when Tilly brought me an ice cold beer.

“Not a beer,” I said with irritation. “Get me a soda.”

“Sure thing, love,” she said, ever so chipper.

As she trotted off, I turned to look at Kobe as he shoved Selena’s head further into his crotch. Though she was clearly struggling to maintain a good rhythm, she was enthusiastic and eager to please.

Kobe grunted, the throaty sounds becoming louder and louder as he approached his climax. Finally, with his hand at the back of Selena’s head, he pushed her to take him all in as he exploded in her mouth.

Yeah, I thought dismally. There had to be something better than just getting blown by twats. There had to be more to it than just this.

And that something better was called Layla.

Chapter 6

Layla



I made it back to the dorm with my overdone scrambled eggs and was surprised to find Kat in a really cheery mood.

“What’s with you?” I said as I set the plates on the dining room table. “I thought you were devastated by what happened at the cafeteria.”

“I was,” she said as she jumped out of the armchair and came to the table. “But I decided to put it behind me. No point dwelling on it.”

“Good for you,” I said, noting how nicely dressed she was.

Wearing a simple straight black skirt with a pale blue button down shirt, she looked every bit a student.

“Besides, I have my first class starting in ten minutes.”

“Well then, you better wolf down these eggs fast,” I said as I sat down.

She sat beside me and looked at her plate. “Smells great.”

“Sorry, they’re a little overdone,” I said. “I got distracted.”

She took a bite and savored it for a long moment. “A little firmer and a little dryer than I like, but the flavor is really nice. The herbs that you put... what are they?”

“My grandma’s secret,” I said with a grin.

She chuckled as she quickly ate the eggs. “My first class is on Far Eastern Cuisine, and it’s taught by someone that I know.”

“Really?” I said, eating my eggs. “You know someone that works here? What other surprises are you keeping from me?”

She laughed. “Ms. Betsy Lee used to work for my parents,” Kat said. “She was the Head Chef at one of their

high end restaurant in a really posh part of San Francisco.”

I looked at her and smiled. “It must be nice to know someone here. You know... a friendly face.”

She took one last bite and stood to bring her plate to the sink. “Especially after what happened earlier. I want to put that whole episode out of my mind and simply concentrate on enjoying my classes and learning everything that I can.”

After stopping at the fridge to pick up a small snack sized carton of milk, she came back to the table, and smacked her lips. “That was really good. I’ve been trying to figure out what you put in there. Really interesting. You’re going to have to tell me your grandmother’s secret.”

“One day,” I said with a teasing smile. “Are you leaving already? You didn’t even eat all your eggs.”

She nodded. “I’d like to catch Ms. Lee before all the other students arrive. But they were really good. Catch you later.”

I turned to watch her leave and suddenly felt so fortunate to have met her. So far she was proving to be really easy to get along with and she made me feel at home despite being so far away from my family.

“Are we going to have dinner together?” I called out as she reached the door.

“Sure,” she said, turning to me with a teasing grin. “Hopefully by then I’ll have gotten over what happened in the cafeteria and be able to face going there again.”

She opened the door to head out, but then poked her head back in. “Hey. Don’t you have any classes to get to?”

I opened my purse to look for my schedule. “I don’t know,” I said as I rummaged through it. I’d allowed myself to be so bothered by Axel that I’d completely forgotten about classes. “I think I do. But I don’t know what.”

“Get to it,” Kat warned. “You wouldn’t want to be late to your first class.”

Smiling, I waved, and she headed off, closing the door behind her.

Increasingly frustrating and a little panicked, I started to pull everything out of my purse and finally ended up turning the whole purse upside down, emptying the entire content on the table.

“Damn it,” I let out. “Where is it? I know I had it here. Shit!”

Leaving the last few bites of my eggs, I got up and walked to my room. Could I have left it in a pocket? No. My pretty summer dress had no pockets. I’d not worn a jacket. The only place it could be was...

Oh! Damn it! On the cafeteria table where I left it when Axel so eloquently dumped his spaghetti on my head.

Marching back into the main living space, I clenched my fists and paced back and forth, my anger growing with every step.

Not only had Axel King ruined my hair, ruined my lunch and humiliated me, but he would now be the reason that I couldn’t get to class.

For a moment, I considered returning to the cafeteria to try to find it, but... When I’d gone to make the eggs, the place had been cleared. Surely my schedule was at the bottom of a garbage bin buried under soiled napkins and leftover pasta.

“Now what?”

I looked at my watch. I would have to take a chance and go to the administrative office and ask for another copy.

Rushing back to the kitchen table, I shoved my stuff back into my purse and headed out. Walking as quickly as I could, I arrived at the administrative building sweating and breathless.

“You look like someone in dire need of some assistance.”

I turned to look at the handsome man standing behind the counter. Smiling, I approached him.

He was an appealing looking older man, perhaps in his early to mid-30s. He had dark curly hair and beautiful darks eyes that seemed to continually smile. Wearing a black chef’s

smock, he appeared ready to head to a class, or go work at a high end restaurant.

“Well,” I said, leaning onto the counter. “You would be right on that account. I do need help.”

He smiled and openly looked at me with an appraising gaze. “I’ll do my best to assist you.”

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. He gave off such a titillating vibe, as if fun and excitement followed him everywhere.

“I know this sounds awful, this being the first day of class and all, but I seem to have misplaced my class schedule. Is there any way that I could get another copy?”

“Tsk, tsk,” he said, his eyes playful as he shook his head. “That’s not a very good way of starting off the semester, Ms...”

“Ms. Tyler,” I said. “Layla Tyler.”

He frowned a moment. “Tyler? Isn’t that...? Oh, yes. The scholarship student, right? You’re the one who won the scholarship. Yes. We have very high expectations for you, indeed.”

I smiled.

“You won a few competitions, right? The junior level?”

I nodded. “That’s me.”

“And we received several recommendations from one of our alumni.”

“I’ll do my best to live up to everyone’s expectations,” I said. I looked brazenly into his eyes. “And you are...?”

“Mac,” he said. “Chef Mac. It’s short for Macintosh.”

“Well,” I said. “Nice to meet you, Chef Mac.”

“Alright,” he said, looking around on the desk in front of him. “So, you’ve lost your schedule...” He continued to look. “And, I just so happen to have a copy of it right here.” He pulled it out and handed it to me.

“Oh,” I said, so relieved. “Great. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Well,” he said with that ever present playful grin. “Seeing how you’re in one of my classes, you can thank me by doing well.”

“You’re teaching here?”

“I certainly am.”

I looked down at my schedule. “Which class do you teach?”

“The World of Spices,” he said.

“Ah,” I said as I looked up at him from under my lashes, giving him a flirting smile. “How interesting. And what is it that qualifies you to teach such an important class?”

He returned the smile and leaned onto his side of the counter, bringing his face closer to mine. “As it so happens, my specialty is Creole and Cajun cooking.”

“Oh,” I let out.

“That’s right. I grew up in Louisiana and learned all about the rich and hot spices. I have a few restaurants down there. One in New Orleans and two in Baton Rouge.”

“You just keep getting more and more interesting.”

“I also have a bistro on the Gulf coast of Texas.”

“Well, now you’re in my territory,” I said with a playful grin. “I’m from Texas. Amarillo, to be precise.”

“Then, I’m sure we’ll get along quite well,” he said.

I smiled at him, meeting his gaze. He really was a very attractive man. The more I looked at him, the more appealing he became. He was a solid man who knew where he was going, knew what he was doing and got it done. There was something so manly about him, so sexy and self-assured.

I glanced down at my schedule again and found that I didn’t have a class with him that day. Too bad. I was really

looking forward to cooking up something hot and spicy with him.

“Well, Chef Mac,” I said, extending my hand out to him. “It’s been very nice meeting you. My first World of Spice class is at the end of the week, and I very much look forward to learning all that you know.”

He nodded as he straightened up. “I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“I’m sure I will. But now I’m running late and must go. Thank you so much for the copy of my schedule.”

“No problem,” he said. “See you in class.”

I turned to walk out.

“Oh,” Chef Mac called. “Ms. Tyler.”

“Yes,” I said, turning back to him.

“Take one of these,” he said, handing me a flyer. “As a scholarship student, you might be interested in entering the cooking competition that we’re going to be holding this year on campus. We usually only allow seniors from graduating class, but this year we’ve opened it up to all classes. I think someone like you could bring something new and exciting to the competition. I hope you’ll take the time to consider it.”

I looked at the flyer. “Sounds interesting. I certainly will look into it.”

“The grand prize is a doozy,” Chef Mac went on.

I quickly scanned the flyer to find the prizes. “Oh. Wow. An appearance on a new cooking show.”

Chef Mac nodded. “It’s produced by Chef Errol King’s producers. It’s going to be a big deal. Not to mention having your winning dishes incorporated into the menu at Chef Errol’s restaurants.”

“How can I refuse?” I said. “Thanks again.”

Feeling upbeat about my prospects, I walked out into the sundrenched afternoon and then on to find my first class.

With only minutes to spare, I walked beyond the administrative building and back to a long narrow, two story building in which many of the classes were held. I glanced at my watch and ran into the building then rushed to the second floor where the class was.

I opened the classroom door, my watch telling me that I was definitely late by a few minutes. Flushed and sweating, I found a vacant station, then turned to the front of the class, hoping my late arrival had gone unnoticed.

No such luck.

Not only had my late arrival been noticed, but it had been noticed by none other than Axel King who stood at the front of the class, his arms crossed over his chest as he glared at me while shaking his head in disapproval.

Chapter 7

Layla



After letting my tardiness sink in for a moment, Axel walked between the rows of working stations, smiling and nodding at the various students.

“Who can tell me what the name of this class is?” he let out, glancing dismissively at me.

A heavy set girl with short blond curls and a bright smile raised her hand. “This is the Professionalism and Etiquette of the Culinary Chef class.”

“Exactly...” He looked at her expectantly.

“Margot,” she offered. “Margot Van de Leer.”

“Thank you, Margot,” Axel said as he walked on, his hands clasped behind his back. “What would some of you say are the worst sins of a chef?”

“Not knowing what he’s doing,” a student offered.

“Not trusting his team of sous-chefs,” another one said.

Axel came to stand right in front of me, his hard gaze saying it all. “My first job was working at one of my father’s highly refined and well liked restaurants,” he said. “My job started at nine o’clock in the morning.” He turned away and looked at the class. “My father counted on me. Don’t think for a minute that because I was his son that he let me off easy. No. On the contrary. I had to prove that I very much deserved to be there.”

Attentive to his every word, the students all followed him with their eyes.

“What time do you think I arrived at that restaurant every morning?” he went on.

“Nine o’clock,” one said, as if it was the obvious answer.

“No.”

“Eight-forty-five,” another tried.

“No.”

“Eight-thirty,” Margot offered.

“No.”

“Eight o’clock,” a tall, thin older woman said.

“That’s right,” Axel said. “My job started at nine, but I was there every single morning at eight. Why? Well, there were certain things that I wanted to ensure were done, in their place, cleaned, prepped, whatever the case may be, before I actually started working. But the other reason...” Again, he brought his accusatory gaze back to me. “The few times... and I do stress that they were few indeed... that I arrived at five, or ten or even fifteen past eight, I knew that there was no risk of my being late to actually tend to my duties. In other words, this assured that I would never, ever be late.”

He came to my workstation and leaned his fist on the counter. “You, Ms. Layla Scholarship Tyler, are late again. Late to register, and now late to your first class. Tell me, Ms. Tyler, is this what I should expect from you for the rest of the semester?”

I could feel my blood boil. I was literally only minutes late. The class hadn’t even begun. How dare he mock me in front of the entire class.

“No, sir,” I said, keeping my tone humble and reverent.

I dared to look up at him, wondering how someone so young could get an important teaching job at such a prestigious school. I looked closely at him, considering the possibility that he was a little older than I thought. Perhaps twenty or twenty-one.

“Please, class,” he called out, raising his voice in an attempt to make the point crystal clear. “Do not let Ms. Tyler be an example of what a professional culinary chef should be. Whether it be on the job or here in class, tardiness is grounds for instant dismissal.”

He slowly made his way back to the front of the class. “Contrary to what Ms. Tyler seems to think, this is not the type of work, or the type of class, that you can simply saunter into as you like. Perhaps, Ms. Tyler believes that, as a student here on a special scholarship, she is allowed special privileges.”

At the front of the class, he turned around and once again looked directly at me. “If anything, consider the fact that it is each and every one of your tuitions that has helped make her enrollment here possible. That’s right. Your tuition, the money that you and your parents have worked so hard for, is in part making it possible for her to be here at no cost to her whatsoever.”

My ears were hot, my cheeks were boiling and my eyes increasingly moist as he continued with the onslaught of accusations and belittling comments.

“She needs to be respectful, hard working and earn her keep... right?”

“Right!” the class answered.

Every student turned their angry eyes to me and the student who shared a portion of my workstation picked up his things and moved to a different spot.

“It just goes to show you,” a snotty looking girl said with her nose in the air. “If you can’t be bothered to work to pay your tuition here, chances are you’ll never work hard enough for anything in your life.”

That’s not true, I wanted to say. I’d worked hard and I’d saved up a substantial amount of money. I had planned to go to the community college near my hometown, but winning the scholarship changed all that.

I wanted to stand up and tell them all that. I wanted them to know that I wasn’t just some slacker who was taking advantage of the system.

But I could see it in their eyes. I could hear it in the mean and cruel comments they shot at me.

There was no point telling them anything.

Axel's word was the law of the land, and I was but a mere peasant with no rights to voice my opinions at all.

After a long moment of silence to ensure the message had sunk in, Axel clapped his hands together and looked at the class. "Well, that's it for this first class. I do hope that it was informative." He nodded. "You can all go."

Over? I thought. But I was only a few seconds late to the class. How could it already be over? I looked at the clock on the wall then at my watch.

Damn it. In my haste to set my watch to California time, I'd screwed it all up and had actually arrived at the class nearly an hour late.

Disappointed in myself, I hopped off the stool and turned to leave. Just as I reached the door, I heard Axel clear his throat.

"Not you, Ms. Layla," Axel called from the front of the class, his tone hard and reprimanding. "I need you to stay right where you are."

"Serves you right," a girl said as she pushed past me.

"You don't deserve to be here," another one added.

They all seemed to enjoy knocking into me, shoving me aside as they made their way out the door. When the last of them had made their way out, I simply looked at the floor, wondering what Axel was going to say now.

Everything had been said. What more could he add?

I heard his footsteps but didn't look up. I couldn't stand the thought of having to face him again. The steps got closer, and closer still until his shoes came into view. He reached past me and closed the door.

"Let's get something clear right now," he said in an eerily calm voice.

Looking up, I met his gaze as he stepped forward, making me take a step back until I was up against the wall.

I felt heated and flushed, but not the same way I had before. No, this time it wasn't embarrassment or humiliation. It was the lust created by the sexual tension that seemed to arise every time I was in the same space as him.

"You've been nothing but trouble since the very first moment you stepped onto the school grounds." His eyes were hard as he held my gaze, daring me to fight back.

"And you've been nothing but an arrogant ass," I said, holding his gaze.

"Speaking of ass," he said, licking his lips and taking a daring look up and down at me. "I bet that ass of yours has been around a time or two."

Saying nothing, I simply held his gaze.

"Tell me," he went on. "Who exactly did you have to sleep with to get in here? I mean, it's clear that it's not on merit. So... who is it? Mr. Grundy from administration? Mr. Knowles from human resources? Or is it an affiliate out in Texas? Mr. Abrams?"

I had no desire to justify my being at that class. If he wanted to insinuate that I'd slept my way to a scholarship, that was his business.

"Just seeing the way that you parade your big, round tits around, you enjoy male attention, don't you? And showing off that firm, plump ass that any red-blooded man would want to drive his hardened dick into... come on. Who was it? Who did you let fuck you? Or who's old dick did you suck on to get here?"

Disgusted by every single word that came out of his mouth, I slapped him so hard, a trickle of blood trailed down from the corner of his mouth.

"You crazy girl," he growled as he brought his hand to his bleeding mouth.

I immediately regretted the move. As angry as I was and as out of line as he was, I knew that it was wrong to strike him. I instinctively reached out to touch the unfortunate wound.

He immediately took a step back. “What’s with you? Because you’re from Texas? Always so violent?” He groaned and ran his tongue over the cut on his lip.

“I’m really...” I began.

Making quick and angry motions, he opened the door and walked out, leaving me just standing there, bewildered.

Biting my lip, I stared out at the empty classroom, examining myself more than the space around me.

No, I silently answered his question. I wasn’t a violent person. And, no. That wasn’t my Texan upbringing. I’d been raised to be kind and understanding, all while never allowing anyone to step all over me.

“You draw out the worst in me, Mr. Axel King,” I said into the empty room.

But the vision of his face filled the empty space in front of me. He’d been so close to me, so enticing. But the look of hurt on his face. Not just from the sting of the slap, but he’d seemed hurt deep inside, as if I’d slapped his soul.

His ego had quickly recovered, however, and he’d resumed his hard and uncompromising stance, just before turning to leave me.

I was a little ashamed about what I’d done. Damn it. I’d known men. Yes, for one so young, I’d learned how men could be. They saw a pretty girl and they somehow came to believe that they owned her. They seemed to believe that because they wanted her, they should have her.

There were days when it was a curse... inheriting my mother’s beauty queen looks. My mother had been Miss Amarillo, Miss Northern Texas, Miss Texas and Miss Southwest. Her long legs, curvaceous body and thick, long blond hair had helped her to win all of those pageants, but also her quick wit, big heart and kind soul. She might have looked like a Barbie doll, but she had so much more to offer.

And so did I.

Pulling in a long, deep breath as I turned to leave the room, I resolved to turn over a new leaf. I wasn't going to hold Axel's arrogance and misguided ego against him. I was going to look at him as a wounded bird who needed help and understanding, not a slap.

After all, that was the kind and southern thing to do.

Chapter 8

Layla



The rest of the day flew by. Between my angst about Axel and my excitement for all the new things I was to learn, I had little time to sit by and mull over the horrible start to my stay at the Academy.

My second day, however, went a little better. While I met up with a few of the students who'd witnessed my dispute with Axel, many seemed to be unaware of what had happened, and they were actually pleasant towards me.

And with every passing day, the events of that first day paled more and more until they were just an unfortunately blip on my radar.

By the time Friday rolled around, I'd put it completely out of my mind. It wasn't all that hard. I had other things to put my mind to; namely, my first class with the very handsome and sexy Chef Mac.

As I left my dorm room and made my way to my class, I stopped briefly at the cafeteria and picked up a little something.

Smiling, I continued on and reached the classroom a few minutes early. Seeing Chef Mac up at the front of the class, so sexy in his black chef's jacket, I went up to him.

"I know I'm probably not the first to do so," I said. "But... here." I held out the bright red apple I'd picked up at the lunchroom.

His smile was broad and genuine as he looked up at me.

I shrugged sheepishly. "It's not a Macintosh, but..."

He took the apple from my hand, careful to let his warm fingers scrape the palm of my hand as he did so.

"It's not the first," he said, looking so intently into my eyes. "But it certainly is the most beautiful apple I've ever

received.”

The look in his eyes told me that we were no longer talking about an apple. I smiled as I felt the heat of a blush creep up to my cheeks.

“Thank you,” he said, setting the apple on his desk.

Students had begun to arrive.

“My pleasure,” I said as I took up a seat at the front of the class.

Soon the seats were full, and the class settled down.

“Welcome, everyone,” Chef Mac said. “My name is Chef Mac. Mac for Macintosh.”

“Hence the apple on your desk,” a perspicacious student said.

“Right,” Chef Mac said with an amused chuckle. He looked at me and smiled, but quickly resumed a more professional stance as he looked over the class. “The world of spice. What a wonderful world indeed. Where would we be without spices? How dull would our meals be? There have even been reports of chimpanzees rinsing their fruit in the salty ocean water. Seasoning? I believe so.”

“Smart,” a student called out.

“So, tell me,” Chef Mac went on. “What spices are you familiar with?”

“Salt and pepper,” a student called out.

“You’re technically half right,” Chef Mac said. “Peppercorns are indeed a spice, however, salt is a mineral. However, for the sake of this culinary class, we’ll include it.”

“Cinnamon, clove and cumin.”

“Good,” Chef Mac. “More?”

“Chili and curry,” another student said.

“Right.”

“Oregano, thyme and basil.”

“Now, here we go,” Chef Mac said. “What is the difference between a spice and an herb?”

“Spices are the actual plant, the roots, the seed, the bark that are ground up. Herbs are the leaves of a green plant.”

“Pretty good,” Chef Mac. “So, let’s see if there are some other spices that you’re familiar with. Other common spices are nutmeg which I’m sure you’ve all heard of and know. But how many of you are familiar with mace.”

The class was silent.

“This is the outer flesh of the seed of the nutmeg, which is less pungent. It’s an interesting find.”

“I want to make something with mace,” the girl at the desk beside me whispered to no one in particular.

“Then we have turmeric, paprika and bay leaves.” He looked at us all. “And so, so much more that we will explore.”

I smiled at him as I took in the information.

“There are also various forms in which we can find spices, such as...”

“Whole or ground up,” a student called out.

“Exactly.”

“And what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?” Chef Mac asked.

I raised my hand.

“Ms. Tyler.”

“Whole spices will retain their flavor much longer. Up to a year. Ground spices, while perhaps easier to use, will lose their flavor in three to six months.”

“Very good,” he said. “Yes, indeed. The compounds in every spice react when exposed to heat, moisture and even oxygen. Which leads to the importance of how to store spices which we’ll get into later.”

“My mother always kept her three favorite spices in clear plastic containers right beside the stove,” a girl said.

Chef Mac looked at her and smiled. “That’s not the optimum way of storing them, but we’ll look into that next week.” He looked up at the class. “Today, as an introduction, I just want to get a feel of where you are in the spice world.”

“I love fennel,” a large guy called out from the back of the room.

“My favorite is dill seed.”

“I couldn’t live without cardamon.”

The girl in front of me raised her hand. “Is onion powder and garlic salt a spice?”

Chef Mac smiled and nodded. “Although in both cases, I’d rather use freshly minced garlic and chopped onions.”

The class went on with other comments and questions as Chef Mac slowly made his way between the rows of desks.

I looked up at him as he passed by my desk and could have sworn he was undressing me with his hungry eyes.

“I hope that this class has piqued your interest,” Chef Mac said to the class. “And I’ll see you all next week.”

I quickly finished jotting down a few words to remind me of what he’d said. Then, as I got up to join the flow of students who were leaving the class, Chef Mac came up alongside me.

“I was wondering if you’d given any consideration to that competition,” he said.

“Sure,” I said, “I’d be a fool not to.”

“Good,” he said. “I do hate to see talent go to waste. I really think you could have a shot at winning this.”

“I’ll certainly do my best,” I said.

“You know,” he went on, his hand gently coming to take a hold of my elbow as he accompanied me to the door. “I’d be happy to help you out if you need it... you know, like a coach. Or maybe just a sounding board. Talk it out with me, see what ideas you have. Discuss possible recipes and of course, how to season.”

Surprised by the offer, I looked at him. “Really?”

“Sure,” he said. “I’d be happy to. I love seeing my students succeed.”

“That would be great.”

“You can come and try out your recipes at my place. I live not too far away, just off campus. It would be quiet and calm. The perfect setting for a rising star.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

“Say yes.”

“Yes,” I said with a smile. How could I refuse such a great offer?

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a card. “That’s my home address,” he said as he handed it to me. “And my phone number if ever you need to reach me.”

“Good. Great.”

“How does tomorrow morning sound?”

“Perfect.”

“Does nine o’clock sound fair?”

“I’ll be there.”

I left the class, thrilled by the prospect of working intimately with Chef Mac. In fact, I was so excited, that after gathering up the ingredients that I would need for my recipe, I went to bed early, slept soundly and woke up as the sun rose and prepared for the day.

I took a quick shower, washed my hair then put on a cute little red summer dress with tiny white dots.

Not really wanting to discuss the matter, I was happy to see that Kat hadn’t gotten up yet. Not that I had anything to hide, but I didn’t want to get into the time I would be spending with Chef Mac. Not yet.

I quietly packed my food into two canvas bags and slipped out of the dorm room, then headed out to find Chef Mac’s home.

I left the campus and walked down a pretty little tree-lined street. Homes were set far back from the street, with generous green lawns and well-trimmed hedges.

Reaching the address on the card, I found a quaint two story brick home with green shutters at the windows and bright yellow flowers dotting the pathway to the door.

As I walked up to the door, I could hear from inside the gentle sounds of classical violins and other strings.

Hmmm. Why wasn't I surprised to find that he listened to classical music?

Setting one of my bags down, I rang the doorbell and waited.

Moments later, the door opened.

"Layla," Chef Mac said with surprise. Scratching his head, he looked at me with bleary eyes.

Wearing a pale blue robe that appeared to have been hastily thrown on, he was a dream to see. His chest was enticingly exposed, showing the muscular torso of the masculine man.

He caught my gaze and pulled the robe tighter to him, but the motion only served to open it at the hip, giving me a glimpse of something even more enticing than his torso. Even flaccid and sleepy, he had an impressive appendage.

"Am I here on the wrong day?" I said.

"No," he said. "No. Of course not."

A sneaky smile made it to my lips without my consent and I looked up to meet his gaze. There seemed to be a mutual understanding of what was really happening beneath the pleasantries.

I looked at my watch. "Oh," I said, only partially apologetic. "I'm a little early, aren't I?"

"A little bit," he said with a welcoming grin as he looked down at his attire. "I don't often have guests here and I always tend to be dressed casually at home."

He stepped back to let me in.

“I was just starting a pot of coffee if you haven’t had your dose yet,” he said as he led me inside.

The home had a very eclectic feel to it. There was a throwback to another era, several eras, in fact. He had a metal partition between the entryway and the living space that was very mid-century modern. In a corner beside the entryway closet there were three wooden giraffes, and as we made our way to the kitchen, I noticed the explosion of color coming from a series of abstract paintings on the wall.

His kitchen, while relatively small, had everything that a chef could need. There was plenty of counter space, a double oven, a large refrigerator and a pot filler beside the gas range. There were no upper cabinets, just shelves filled with classic white dishes, a few white knickknacks and standard glassware.

Behind the large farmhouse sink was a sunken row of potted plants that received more than adequate sunlight from the huge window. I had to assume they were all herbs. Fresh herbs. No surprise there.

“Pour yourself a cup of coffee,” Mac said. “I’ll go get decent.”

“Don’t fret about that on my account,” I said as I set my bags down on the counter. “I don’t want you to have to change your habits just because I’m here.”

He smiled. “I insist.”

He walked out of the kitchen and started up the stairs to the second floor. I sneaked a peek up and was rewarded with a few tantalizing glimpses of his underside.

I smiled at the pair of hard muscular butt cheeks that peered back at me.

Yeah. He was hot alright. Incredibly hot. How in the world was I ever going to get any work done? All I could think about was getting closer to him, touching him.

Shit.

I chose a cup from the shelf and went to the coffee maker to pour some of the freshly brewed coffee. I added a drop of cream from the creamer that was beside the coffee maker, then leaned back against the counter to take a sip.

My body was jittery, excited and eager for... something. I took another sip of the coffee, hoping to bring my mind back to focusing on my reason for being there, but my body tugged my brain back to thinking about Mac and that irresistible body.

He returned wearing a pair of relaxed fit, faded blue jeans and a super thin cotton t-shirt that did little to hide his torso. If anything, the thin, almost transparent fabric highlighted every muscle, and every line of his exquisite body.

Damn. I actually had to bite my lip to keep my cool.

“Where do you want to start?” Chef Mac said.

“The flyer said that the first round was going to be historical dishes.”

“That’s right,” Mac said. “Contestants are asked to pull a recipe from the distant past. They’re looking for something that is no longer popular and that is rarely made, if ever. It requires a bit of researching and every year we have some very interesting entries in this category.”

“Well, with that in mind, I was thinking of making my award winning Bedfordshire clanger.”

“Your what?”

I smiled. “It’s a suet pastry filled with a savory meat filling at one end and a sweet fruity filling at the other. There’s a pastry wall, or dam, separation between the two.”

He smiled and cocked his head to the side. “Clearly, you’ve already done your research. I’m impressed.”

“Hopefully, the judges will be also,” I said as I pulled all my ingredients from the bags.”

“The stage is yours,” Mac said as he pulled a stool up to the island counter and watched me.

“Okay,” I said to myself. “I’ll start by preparing the pastry.” I pulled up my plastic container of suet.”

“What’s that?” Chef Mac said. “It looks like...”

“Yeah, I know,” I said with a smile. “It looks like magots. It just the ground up fat of an animal. I believe it’s from the animal’s kidney, but that’s as far as my knowledge of the stuff goes.”

“I have to admit that in all my years in the culinary world, I have never worked with suet. And, as you can see from my reaction, I’ve never even seen suet.”

“Well, I’m happy to be able to bring something new to your culinary knowledge.”

I added flour, salt, and butter.

“This is where it gets a little messy.” I plunged my hands into the mixture, then added an egg and water to make the mix mushier and stickier still. I worked it, bringing it all together until it started to form a ball.

“I need to dust the counter with some flour,” I said, realizing what a mess I was about to make.

“Sure,” Chef Mac said. “Go ahead. Do what you need to do.”

After dusting the counter, I rolled out the dough until I had a good sized square and then used a smaller portion of dough to make the dam between the sides.

I then sliced an onion and threw it into a hot saucepan and added celery and a sliced bell pepper.

“Caramelized onions?” Chef Mac said. “Smells good already.”

I smiled at him, doing all I could to concentrate on what I was doing. It was almost impossible. His gaze was so intense as he looked at me, watching my every move.

As I threw the meat into the pan, he came around the island and stood behind me. He reached around me and

picked up the pan, shaking it up to move the meat and vegetables around.

“And what seasonings are you going to be using?” he said.

“In the past, I’ve used salt and pepper, then a bay leaf with rosemary and thyme.”

He nodded, lightly pressing his chest against my shoulder as he continued to shake up the content of the pan.

“You season as you go?”

“I do,” I said, reaching for the small containers of spices and herbs that I’d brought with me.

He let go of the pan and picked up two of my small containers. “Rosemary and thyme.” He turned to look back beyond his farmhouse sink. “Why don’t you go and cut up some of those fresh herbs? You’d be surprised just how intense the flavors can be when they’re fresh.”

“You don’t mind?” I said, reluctant to use his herbs.

“It would be my pleasure to have a small part in your recipe.”

I went to the row of potted herbs and snipped off a few fragrant leaves with my fingernails. When I returned to the gas range, I brushed past Chef Mac. The light and innocent touch was enough to set me aflame.

After seasoning the meat in the pan, I poured in some beef bouillon and put a lid on it.

“I’m going to let that simmer for an hour,” I said.

“How are you going to keep your dish from getting soggy?” he said.

“That’s the trick,” I said. “It’s finding that perfect balance between dry enough to maintain the integrity of the pastry, but not so dry that it’s unpleasant to the palate.”

He nodded. “And what is your sweet filling going to be?”

I pulled three green apples from my bag along with a stalk of rhubarb.

Again, he nodded his approval.

“And my secret ingredient,” I said, pulling an unlabeled small bottle out. I held up the bottle, showing him the amber liquid inside.

“Whiskey?”

“Bourbon,” I said.

Reaching for yet another saucepan, I melted a pat of butter, quickly peeled and sliced up my apples and tossed them into the butter and let them cook down a bit.

“Cinnamon?” Chef Mac suggested.

“Actually, I prefer this.” I picked up my bottle of Hatch chili peppers.”

“Oh,” he said, his brow cocked. “How interesting.”

As I continued to prepare the meal, he repeatedly came around to dip his finger in the apple mixture and in the savory mixture.

Stirring the meat with the liquid now adequately reduced, I dipped in my finger to taste.

“What do you think?” he said, clearly assessing my capacity to assess my own dish.

“I can definitely taste the difference with the use of the fresh herbs.”

“It’s nice and fragrant,” Chef Mac said with a nod. “But there is nonetheless something a little bland in the overall flavor.”

“You think?” I said, momentarily caught off guard by his disapproving comment.

“You have to remember that the judges in this competition have tasted flavors from all over the world. They’ve had rosemary and thyme. They’ve had beef stews flavored with pepper and celery salt and clove. You have to up your game and bring them something new and surprising. Now, your choice of these clangers is novel and interesting, but the flavor so far is common and ordinary.”

“Oh,” I let out, somewhat disappointed.

He tenderly pushed a tendril of my hair out of my face and looked into my eyes. “The only reason I’m being so hard on you, so honest, is that I really want you to win. I want you to realize what you’re getting into.”

“I know,” I said softly.

“As it stands, Layla,” he said. “This would not make it past the first round.”

Ouch!

“Don’t underestimate your competitors,” he went on. “There are students here from all over the world and students who’ve had the advantage of a few years of study. Not to mention, the ever present entry of one Axel King.”

Startled, I looked up at him. “Axel King? Errol King’s son? He enters this competition?”

“Every year,” Chef Mac said with a nod. “And he wins.”

At the sound of Axel’s name, I felt both perked up and demolished. My body heated up as his face and body came to mind, but my ambition felt like it’d been slapped silly.

“Why in the world would he enter a competition like this?” I said softly, almost to myself. “He already has the prestige of being Errol King’s son. He already holds an important position at the academy. Why enter this? Why rob other students of the opportunity to win these prizes?”

Chef Mac chuckled and shrugged. “The worst thing in all this is that he doesn’t take the prizes.”

“So, what’s the point?”

“His father.”

Puzzled, I looked at him. “His father? What does he have to do with this?”

“Axel has an unending need to prove himself to Errol. He wants to always prove that he’s the best.”

“Really?” I said with a bit of a scoff. “Is he that insecure?”

Mac chuckled. “Not really. He just takes this whole culinary thing very seriously. In a way, his participation in these contests push other contestants to up their game. Every year students work hard to try to beat him. And they come up with some very interesting concepts. Even if they don’t win first prize, their efforts in the contest do not go unnoticed.”

“And I bet that Axel is competitive like crazy,” I added.

He laughed. “Yep. That, he is. Relentless, disciplined and, yeah, a little crazy about all this.”

As I continued to work on my dish, I thought about Axel. I’d essentially written him off as a spoiled and arrogant rich brat. I’d assumed that he was on the lazy side, riding on his father’s coattails and simply taking the path of least resistance.

I had to admit that I was wrong. He really did take the whole culinary art thing quite seriously.

After rolling out my suet dough and placing the barrier between the two sides I took the savory meat out of the pan and poured it onto one side of the dough. I then took my apples that were now in a thick bourbon infused syrup and set them on the other side.

Carefully, and under Chef Mac’s intense and scrutinizing gaze, I added an egg wash around the edges to hold it together, then rolled up the dough and pressed the edges together. The final touch was adding a small apple I’d cut out of a scrap piece of dough, then I scored the apple side of the clanger and gave another egg wash over the entire thing to give it that beautiful golden coloring.

“Now, it’s time to go into the oven.”

I had already preheated it and a waft of heated air came out when I opened the door to put in my clanger.

“All that’s left now is to wait,” I said as I turned to Mac.

Taking slow and sensual steps, he made his way to me, his eyes smoldering, and his lips curled up slightly at the corners.

Damn, he looked good.

My entire body went on full alert. Something was about to happen. Something exciting and thrilling. I could feel the sparks fly. I could feel the electricity between us. Oh, my God. It was going to be fabulous. I could just sense it. My pussy was already wet with the anticipation of his fingers expertly weaving their way in and out of my wet flesh.

I held my breath a moment as he took the final steps and came right up to me, his eyes laser focused on mine.

But just as my lips parted to receive his kiss, just as my hands began their rise up to take a hold of him, his gaze shifted just left of me and his hand rose to follow the direction of his gaze.

“Don’t forget to set the timer,” he said, his smoldering gaze coming back to teasingly look upon me. “You wouldn’t want your clanger to burn.”

Once again, his words and his throaty tone made me wonder if we were still talking about my cooking or something else entirely.

My body certainly reacted as if we were talking about something else. Something far more interesting. Something intensely spicy and exciting.

“Oh,” I finally said when I found my voice. “Right. We wouldn’t want that.”

“Is thirty minutes enough?” he said.

I would easily take hours and hours, I thought dreamily. “Yeah. Well, thirty-five to forty. That should do it.”

As the clanger heated up, we looked at each other, the heat in the kitchen soon reaching a torturous level. Damn, how I just wanted to throw myself into his arms. Was I reading him right? Was he interested in me? Or was this just his friendly everyday way with people?

To pass the time, he showed me a few of his favorite spices, brought me out to a small greenhouse that was attached to the house. All he need do is step out a side door of the kitchen and he was in a magnificent world of fragrant herbs and fresh tomatoes.

When the timer went off, we headed back into the kitchen, and I took the clanger out of the oven and let it cool. Then came the moment of truth.

“Here goes,” I said as I sliced into the dish.

“Looks appealing,” Chef Mac said. “No leakage. I admit that I’m a little surprised.”

I laughed. “So am I. I’ve certainly had issues with leakage before.”

I cut several one inch slices, then stepped back to let him take one.

“I must say, the crust is very nice,” he said, holding the piece up to inspect it.

“Thank you.”

“But now is the big test,” he said. “How will it taste?”

I held my breath as he took a bite and let it sit in his mouth as he slowly chewed on it. He nodded and he looked up at the ceiling and nodded some more.

Anxious to hear his opinion, I shifted from one leg to the other then started drumming my fingertip on the countertop.

Finally, he rolled his tongue around his mouth to clear away any remnants of the clanger and looked at me. “The texture is nice. The pastry, like I said, is spot on. Very flavorful and flaky all while holding its shape.”

Damn it. I could almost hear what was coming.

“However...”

And there it was.

“The meat... elk you said?”

I nodded.

“It’s a little tougher than it should be. Requires too much chewing.”

“I need to cook it longer,” I said.

“Right.” He picked up another slice and looked closely at it again, this time bringing the piece to his nose before handing it to me. “You tell me what’s missing.”

I took the piece and bit into it. He was right. The meat wasn’t as tender as it could be. As for the flavor, it tasted like what it had always tasted like. “It tastes fine,” I said.

He looked at me with a pleasant smile. “Unfortunately, ‘fine’ just isn’t good enough here.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“This would be fine for a diner or a small family restaurant,” he said. “I mean, it’s not bad. The flavor is pleasant enough, in a very pedestrian sort of way.”

“It’s just not good enough,” I said dejectedly as I leaned back against the counter.

I’d grown so accustomed to always winning prizes and getting endless praise for my cooking that his harsh words were like a pail of icy cold water.

He put his hand to my shoulder and gave me an encouraging little shake. “Don’t let my criticism of your work get you down, Layla. I’m only telling you this because I know that you can do better. If this clanger of yours had been awful and unredeemable, I wouldn’t even bother trying to help you. But I know that you have it in you to really walk away with this whole competition. You’re not that far off. You just need to hone your seasoning skills a little more.”

I nodded. “Do you want to try the sweet side?” I said in a small and fragile tone.

He smiled at me. “I certainly do.”

I sliced into the sweet side that had the cut out of dough in the shape of an apple that was now golden brown.

Once again, he visually inspected the piece, sniffed it, then took a bite. “Very nice,” he said as he nodded.

Nodding, I looked at him, waiting for more.

“I’m not so sure it was a good idea to cook your apples first,” he said. “I would suggest you try putting them in here raw and letting them cook down in the oven.”

“Right,” I said. Just hearing him saying it... it sounded so obvious. Just as one would in preparing an apple pie.

“The apples are a little too mushy, and I can barely detect the rhubarb, but the flavor is nice. That little shot of bourbon comes through... not too strong. Just enough.”

He finished off his piece then looked at the clanger. “Have you ever considered adding a drizzle of icing over the sweet side?”

“I have,” I admitted. “But consider that, historically, this is something that was brought out to the mine, or the field or to battle. It was meant to be something that could easily be wrapped up in a cloth and carried out. Icing would make a sticky mess.”

“But we’re not going to be taking it out to the mine or field.”

Smiling, I looked up at him, his eyes so wise and worldly. He was right. I’d been too strict in my desire to stick to the historical nature of the recipe. But these were modern times, and I could adjust it.

“After all,” Chef Mac said. “We asked for historically inspired recipes. We want the contestants to modernize them somewhat. So long as the main integrity of the original recipe is upheld.”

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

“So, you’re okay with my harsh criticism,” he said.

“Bring it on,” I said, putting on a brave face and smiling at him. “I have two months to perfect this and my other recipes, should I make it to the second and third round. I want to give myself the best chance of winning this, and if it means having my ego dented slightly by your harsh, yet constructive criticism, I’m all for it.”

“Good,” he said, setting his hands firmly on my shoulders.
“I’m happy to hear it.”

I left his house later that afternoon and felt like I was floating on a cloud. Not only was there something so electrifying about being with him, but I truly felt that he was bringing my culinary talent to a level I’d never dreamed of.

I returned again the next day, excited to spend more time with him. Our time in the narrow kitchen was like a well-choreographed dance, with us passing one another, brushing up against one another and reaching out to delicately touch one another with increased intimacy and familiarity.

I wasn’t at all shocked when he came up behind me and took a firm hold of my hips.

“Don’t stop what you’re doing,” he said as he gently nudged me to one side, opened the utensil drawer, grabbed a spatula, closed the draw, then took a hold of my hips again to put me back in position.

He could have held onto me forever and I would have been in heaven.

Chapter 9

Layla



Monday morning arrived with a blast of sunshine accompanied by a surprisingly chilled breeze from the north. I donned my tight skinny jeans and pulled on a short cropped long sleeve red sweater.

I was still elated and floating on that endless cloud that Chef Mac had so artfully created, and I never wanted to step off.

I floated through the day, going from one class to the other with no incidents, only my flourishing confidence in my abilities.

Then came my class with Axel. I suddenly felt a tiny jitter of apprehension but refused to let it take over me. I was going to get to the class early, be a good and attentive student, then get on with my day.

At least, that was my intention.

To my surprise, my early arrival went unnoticed as did my very presence. He didn't gaze at me, notice me, gawk at me or address me in any way.

For the first time, I saw him as a true professional, teaching and acting like a mature adult as he spoke to the class. He was eloquent and articulate, precise and interesting. But as the class wore on and he didn't make the slightest attempt at making eye contact with me, I grew increasingly irritated.

Why?

I had no idea. I should have been relieved. I should have been happy to just go to my class and be treated just like all the other students.

Yet, that wasn't the case. That wasn't the case at all. As the minutes ticked by and he continued to ignore me, I grew

more and more agitated and sought some way of getting his attention.

The class came to an end without incident, and I left feeling strangely empty and hollow.

It didn't make sense and I tried not to dwell on it. But as I made my way back to my dorm room and found Kat there, I had to bring it up.

"Axel is just out and out ignoring me," I said as I threw myself onto the sofa. "What's up with that?"

Kat shrugged as she came to sit in the armchair across from me. "Who knows what goes on in a King's head?"

"Are you having any issues with Kobe?"

"Oh, please," Kat said with a wave of her hand. "I'd just as soon never hear his name again. The guy is really such a jerk."

I looked at her, surprised. "Really? Is it that bad?"

She shrugged.

"You'd tell me if he was pushing you around, wouldn't you?"

Again, she shrugged.

I had noticed how Kobe just so happened to be at the cafeteria every lunch hour when we stopped in. I had also noticed how Axel, on the other hand, was never there.

Hmmm.

In addition to ignoring me in class, was he actively avoiding me at the cafeteria?

Damn it.

I should be relieved to never see him again, but this only added to my frustration.

And, again, I couldn't understand why.

But I finally managed to put Axel completely out of my mind when, at the end of the long week, I headed to my World of Spice class.

Yes. I was finally going to see Chef Mac again after four tortured days of not seeing him at all.

The moment I walked into the class, I could tell that our time apart had affected him as it had me. We were eager to be together again, eager to spend time with each other.

That made sitting through the class almost impossible. It was a good thing that he was tutoring me in private, because I did not absorb a single thing he said in that class.

All I could think of were his hands on my hips, his lips on my neck, his dick up my ass.

Oh, my God.

I crossed and uncrossed my legs, desperately trying to calm my aching pussy that just wanted to be alone with him.

When he turned away from the blackboard and looked out over the class, I thought I discerned a slight bulge in his pale gray slacks.

The sight only added to my burning hunger for him.

The endless hour finally came to an end and the students took their leave. I didn't need to have Chef Mac ask me to stay. I'd come to that decision the moment I'd stepped into the class.

I stood and remained beside my desk, while his gaze darted from me to the door and back to me. The moment the last student was out the door, he came around his desk and up my row.

His steps were strong and determined as he came to me, reaching out to pull me to him and kiss me with unhindered passion.

His hands quickly went up my skirt, grabbing my ass as he kissed his way down my neck and into the top of my tank top. He quickly nudged the fabric aside with his tongue, finding an aching nipple and expertly suckling on it until I thought I was going to have an orgasm right then and there.

I let out a loud groan as I melted into his arms. He brought his lips back to mine, plundering my mouth with his tongue.

In the distance, through the thick fog of arousal, I heard a sound. A portion of my conscience told me that we were no longer alone, but the pleasure being brought to my body was stronger than any warning sign.

The sound became louder, more insistent and demanding of attention. I wanted to continue to ignore it, but when I heard a loud cough, I knew that I couldn't ignore it any longer.

I pulled away from Chef Mac who seemed to not have heard the sounds at all. He continued to kiss my neck as I looked around. At first I saw nothing, but as I shifted Mac around and looked over his shoulder, I finally spotted the intruder.

Axel stood there, in the doorway, his eyes both confused and angry. For several seconds, he stood there looking at me. His lips parted as if to say something, but he quickly shut his mouth and simply turned around and stormed out.

Chapter 10

Axel



I realized that I'd stood at Chef Mac's door for far too long. The moment that I saw him with Layla in his arms, I should have turned and walked away.

But I was frozen in place, unable to believe what my eyes were telling me. Part of me was aroused by the sight of the older man taking such tender care of Layla, tending to her body the way any woman would want to be tended to. He grasped her firm round breast in his hand, kneading the mound with hunger all while grabbing her ass with his other hand.

Although the skirt Layla wore partially obscured my vision, I could tell that Mac was in deep, his hand well up there, digging for more.

And Layla loved it.

My hard-on annoyed me. The sight of her shouldn't affect me in such a way. And the sight of her in that older teacher's arms should affect me even less. Shit, if she wanted to have it with an old man, that was her business. If she preferred an old dick to a firm young one...

Hell, who was I kidding?

Chef Mac was loved by all the students. He could quite literally have any girl on campus, and I knew for a fact that there were a number of guys who would enjoy spending some time with him as well.

But, of course, he had Layla. Luscious, beautiful, sexy Layla.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

As I walked away from Chef Mac's classroom, I tried to calm my hard-on. But it refused to relax. My cock absolutely refused to forget what I'd just seen. On the contrary, the visions of her face, her cries of passion, her clinging to Mac

wanting more and more... those visions were burned into my brain. It would be weeks if not more before the images faded away.

And yet, there was a part of me that was excited and aroused like never before at the mere sight of her. Damn it. Even in the arms of another man, she was all I could think of.

How could I go through the rest of the day without finding some relief? It was impossible.

Over the course of the past week, I'd repeatedly called upon Tilly to come over and relieve me of my hunger for Layla.

Of course, the poor girl had no idea that my cock simply reacted to the image in my head of Layla. It never, in any way, had anything to do with Tilly. I wondered if it would even matter to her.

I often thought of that forbidden fruit. Was it only because I couldn't allow myself to have Layla that I wanted her so bad?

Maybe if I could just fuck her one time, I would get her out of my system.

I couldn't allow that to happen. I couldn't sink so low as to fuck a country hick. Damn it. I was a King. I was Errol King's son. I was important here and I could have any girl that I wanted.

Except her.

Fuck it, I thought as Layla's face, tits and ass repeatedly flashed through my mind.

I was going around in circles, thinking of her, telling myself not to think of her, only to think of her some more. I knew that the images of Layla would remain in my head, prompting the need to tend to my raging cock over and over again.

All week, I had headed straight home, eager to take a cold shower, open a cold beer and call Tilly over. I didn't want to

give myself tendinitis by repeatedly jerking off thinking of Layla. I needed Tilly to do that for me.

There had been days when I would arrive home in a bad mood. One night, I had arrived to find Kobe fixing himself a sandwich.

“You’re Errol King’s son and you have an important part in this culinary academy and you made yourself a sandwich?”

He’d taken a bite of his sandwich and looked at me. “Hey. Don’t knock it. This is pretty good.”

“Right.”

“What’s wrong with you, anyway?” Kobe had said. “You’ve been moody all week. Are you tired of teaching at the academy? Are you tired of being Errol King’s prodigal son?”

I’d glared up at him. “That Layla bitch is getting on my nerves, and I need to find a way to get rid of her. We need to devise a plan to make her leave.”

“We?” Kobe said. “Hey, man. Keep me out of this. If you have issues with that girl, that’s your problem. From my end, I know that Kat thinks that Layla is pretty cool, and I think she would be upset if Layla was to leave.”

“Who the fuck cares what Kat thinks?” I looked at my brother, wondering how fraternity twins could be so diametrically different. Sure, we looked alike on the outside, but on the inside, we were barely like brothers, much less like twins.

I knew that Kobe had met Kat at some summer camp a few years back, but I had no idea that he had a thing for her.

But I hardly cared one way or the other. None of that mattered to me.

Most nights, Tilly would come over and service me again and again, marveling at my ability to get it up so quickly.

“You’re going to give me lockjaw if this continues,” she had said with a laugh.

I don't care, I'd thought. *Just suck on it until I can't stand it anymore.*

"We could remedy that by going up into your room and making love," she suggested. "It would give my mouth a break, and... well... you know. I want your cock inside me, Axel. I want all of you."

"Not tonight," I'd said. Every time it was the same story. She wanted more and I wanted only relief. I would simply stand and pull my pants up. "I'm tired. I think that's enough for tonight."

"But... you just said... you wanted me to..."

"That's enough," I had said with finality. Just get out, I'd wanted to yell. Get out!

Disappointed, she'd looked woefully at me, but I simply turned away and headed up the stairs, letting her find her own way out.

As the days of the past week passed, I could do nothing to get Layla out of my mind. I was going crazy, and I had to do something. How long could I go on living like this?

But now, this added another difficult element to the problem. Seeing her in the arms of another man, seeing her so passionate, so sexy, so wild with abandonment, I knew that I couldn't go on living like this any longer.

I had to have her.

As she came out of the classroom, I spotted her. Though her hair was slightly disheveled, there were no other indications of what had just happened. There was no sign of the wild wanton woman I'd just seen. She was like an angel, a beautiful, innocent yet super sexy angel as she headed down the hall.

I followed her, my mind racing as I tried to find a way to be alone with her. Up ahead, I knew there was a room, an abandoned teachers' lounge. The door was often left open.

Yes. That would be perfect.

I sped up, came right up behind her and when she came up to the door to that empty room, I pushed her inside.

“What are...?”

She didn't have time to finish her question then my lips were over hers. She tasted like heaven, and I wanted more and more. It seemed like I just couldn't get enough of her. I couldn't believe the strong reaction my body had to her. Just having her breasts pressed against me drove me nuts. Just holding her in my arms... and kissing her.

Damn. I was about to burst before anything could even happen.

I pulled away from the kiss, and looked at her, expecting her to hit me, to slap me, to yell at me, or worse, to yell for help. But she did none of that. Instead, she reached up to wrap her arms around my neck and pull me in for a heated kiss.

Damn, it was so unexpected. As cold as we'd been to one another these past weeks, we were now like two heated beings, unable to disentangle ourselves from one another.

She quickly took the reins, ridding me of my clothing with surprising ease. Clearly she'd been down this road before. She peeled off my shirt, then pulled down my pants and I was soon naked in front of her.

My cock was already erect and eager to touch her.

She pulled her cute blue and white summer dress over her head and stood there, absolutely and completely nude. No bra. No underwear. Just her super sexy baby blue leather pumps.

Fuck, I thought as I bit down on my lower lip. How could a girl be so irresistibly hot? It was insane. It should be illegal. What she was doing to me should be illegal.

But it was so good as I reached for her and let my lips trail over her skin. My fingers delved deep inside her, finding the folds of her pussy. She was wet, wetter than I thought a woman could ever be.

And her breasts, I groaned as I took a hold of one, so firm and yet so soft. I muttered incoherently into her ear. I knew my words made no sense, but they just came. Beautiful. Hot. Damn. Fuck. Oh, shit. Can't have...

But my incoherence didn't seem to bother her. If anything, her own mutterings quickly became incoherent. She pushed me back until I was sitting on the sofa set in the middle of the room. In all her glorious nudity, she climbed aboard, straddling me and deftly guiding my aching cock into her heavenly warmth.

My God. I wanted to explode on entry. She was so hot, so wet, so tight, so fucking exciting. Her big round boobs bounced up and down in my face as she worked me, riding me like a wild seductress.

"Yes!" I cried out, no longer able to hold back the flood of excitement that'd built up. "Yes! Holy shit! Yes, Layla. Yes!"

I exploded like I'd never exploded before. I had dozens of orgasms. Many on my own, hundreds into Tilly's mouth, but none of them could compare to this.

Layla's own orgasm quickly followed, her wild cries of wanton satisfaction echoing in my ear.

"Oh, yes, Layla," I cried out, holding her to me as if my life depended on it. But then my eyes flew open with the realization of what I'd just said. I had never called out a girl's name before, and I quickly questioned what it meant that I should call out hers.

Then again, this was the first time that I had actually entered a girl... other than her mouth, that is.

I frantically kissed her while my orgasm subsided, reveling in every sensation my body felt. I was already eager to start all over again, this time more slowly.

But Layla pulled back and simply sat on my lap, my cock still deep inside her. She cocked her head to the side and looked at me funny.

I looked back at her, puzzled by the expression on her face.

“Alex King,” she said softly. “Are you telling me that I’m your first?”

Staring at her, I said nothing.

“Do you mean to tell me that, up until this very moment, you were a virgin?”

Chapter 11

Layla



I still couldn't believe what had happened with Axel. I remember trying to capture his gaze. I had tried to get him to look at me but he looked away.

What had really happened between us? I could still see the shock in his eyes when he'd walked in on Mac and me. That look of pain, hurt and confusion had been so clearly etched in his face.

"We can't do this," I'd told Mac. "You can't do this."

"We're both adults," he'd argued.

But I'd nonetheless broken free of his hold. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Breathless and oddly concerned about Axel, I'd rushed out the door to find him. The corridor had been empty, with no sight of him. He'd just vanished.

Walking slowly, I considered calling out his name, but before I could, I felt a warm body come up behind me and guide me through a door to the right.

"What are...?"

But his lips were over mine, stifling me, but bringing me a wave of such warmth and love that I immediately gave in, willingly giving myself to him.

I would have never expected him to pull me into an empty room and make love to me in such a passionate way. But there we were, entangled together as if our love had no bonds, our need for each other so complete.

We'd been both rushed with craze in our love making, discovering each other's bodies, our scents, our tastes.

Everything about him pleased me. The feel of his skin, the strength of his muscles, the touch of his hand, the musky,

manly smell of him and the sweet and ever so pleasing taste of him.

I couldn't remember what had tipped me off that he'd previously been a virgin... something in the novelty of it all, something in the innocent excitement.

But my suspicions had been quickly confirmed by the look in his eyes when I mentioned it. He hadn't denied it.

Hmmm, I thought pensively. He'd been a virgin up to that point. And I was the one he'd chosen to lose his virginity to. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

As we'd held onto each other, letting our powerful orgasms subside, I'd had so many questions to ask him; so much that I wanted to know about him and why he'd been so mean to me. I had him in my arms, and I wanted to hold him to me and never let go.

But, let go I did. I had no choice.

As suddenly as he'd pulled me into that room, he'd suddenly disentangled himself from me and stood.

"Axel," I began as I reached for him, willing him to stay. "I thought that..."

He grabbed my hands, gripped them tightly a second, then threw them into my lap as he stood, got dressed and quickly walked out.

"But..." I said into the empty room.

Confused, I'd sat and stared into the room. All alone in the room, I had tried to make sense of what had just happened.

Was he embarrassed by the unexpected loss of his virginity? Was he embarrassed that it'd been with me?

"Damn it, Axel," I'd said aloud. "Why are you doing this to me?"

I'd begun to think that we had a special connection. Why else would he allow himself to lose his virginity with me? It had to be special. *I* had to be special.

Didn't I?

Those moments, wrapped in his arms, I'd felt his heart beating against my breasts. I'd felt his warmth and his tenderness and his masculine need. In his arms, I'd allowed myself to consider romantic feelings for him, to open my heart to him. There was so much about him that I wanted to know.

But now, we were right back where we'd started, with him hating me and me not understanding why. I was the hick from the country and he was the school prince whom everyone looked up to.

Over the course of the next few days after my time with him, I didn't hear a word from him. He made no attempt to contact me and I was at a loss as to why.

Then, the following week, I made my way down to the large tent that had been set up on the campus grounds for the big culinary competition.

I was professionally dressed as I walked there. I wore straight white cotton slacks with my black chef's jacket. My hair was pulled back into a smooth and simple ponytail.

Today, it wasn't my beauty that was to be judged, it was my talent; my absolute skills in the kitchen, and my instincts when it came to flavors.

As I walked on, I knew there was a good chance that I'd see Axel there. After all, Chef Mac had said that Axel always took part in the competitions.

Apprehensive about seeing him again and excited about the completion, I entered the large tent and looked around.

They'd done a beautiful job of setting up twelve workstations with added equipment set up along the back that the contestants would have to share.

A few of the contestants were already there, reading over their notes, their recipes. Aside from one girl who was in one of my classes, I knew none of the participants. They were all older students in their second or third year at the academy.

Then I noticed the station with my name on it. Interesting. I had one of the stations that was right up front.

Right in front of where the judges would be seated at a long table facing us.

But more interesting than that was the name tag at the station beside me.

Axel King.

My heart fluttered. Had he deliberately set it up so that we would be working side by side? Was this his way of slowly reconnecting with me?

I looked around and finally saw him standing in the far corner beside the large fresh produce stand that the competitors would all have access to.

He was talking with one of the coordinators, nodding as he listened and frowning as he spoke. Then he looked up and caught my gaze.

The frown deepened, but only after his eyes lit up for the briefest of moments.

Damn, he looked good. It was the first time I'd seen him in his black chef's jacket and he was a sight to see. His confidence level seemed to be at an all time high, adding his appeal.

He was so handsome, and so sexy, the few other girls in the competition couldn't take their eyes off of him.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity, I slowly walked over to him, eager to have a word.

"Hello, Axel," I said, friendly and smiling.

"Hi," he said, colder than an icicle in January.

"Um," I said, suddenly fearful of his reaction. "I was just wondering... the other day. I thought... Well, I was thinking of you and how you were doing."

"Fine," he said bluntly, barely glancing my way.

"I thought that maybe, since you hurried..."

He turned such a cold and impenetrable glare my way, my words stuck in my throat.

“I’m busy here,” he said. “If you don’t have anything pertinent to say, walk away.”

The sudden sting of tears came to my eyes, but damn if I was going to allow him to see them.

I glanced briefly at the man he’d been talking to, then turned to walk away. I’d just reached the edge of the large tent when I felt a presence behind me.

I turned to see him there, looking so irresistible, I wanted to reach up and caress his cheek. He’d come after me. Perhaps in front of the coordinator he hadn’t wanted to say much. A smile crept over my lips.

“It shouldn’t come as a surprise to learn that it was a mistake,” he said with a completely lack of warmth or affection.

I shook my head, trying to make sense of what he’d said.

“Watch yourself, hick,” he went on.

I could feel the blood drain from my face with every word that came past his lips.

“Watch your back,” he said. “Everyone here knows that you don’t belong at this prestigious academy, much less this competition. It’s time you turned around and went home, little girl.”

But... we made love, I wanted to say. *You hugged me, you kissed me and you loved me. I was there. I saw the look in your eyes. I felt the affection in your touch. You loved me. Tell me that you loved me.*

“You need to pack up your fake Gucci and head home,” he said. “If you can’t see that, then I’m going to do everything I can to make you see it. You need to leave. The sooner the better. Got it?”

I stared at him in disbelief. How could he have been so warm and so hot with me just a few days earlier and now be so incredibly cold.

The realization struck me. He’d simply been playing with me. He was simply toying with my emotions. Damn, was he

even truly a virgin or had that all been part of the game, too. Had it just been a little trick to make me feel special.

Damn it.

I'd been so eager for his touch that I'd let myself fall for it.

As hurt as I was, I looked up into his cool, cool eyes. If he thought that he was going to be able to force me out of this competition, he had another thing coming.

I was there and I was there to stay.

"Afraid of a little competition?" I managed to say.

"Not at all," he said.

I smiled, sweet, innocent, alluring and finally, menacing. "You should be," I whispered. "I'm going to whip your pampered ass."

"If everyone will settled in at their workstations," the master of ceremonies called out, "we'll get started with the first round of the competition."

Without looking at Axel, I made my way to my station and didn't even look at him when he came up to his.

A small crowd had gathered around and were seated in the dozens of chairs set up for the event. The judges were at their table, chatting among themselves.

"Welcome, everyone. I'm Terry Bishop, and I'll be hosting today's event." He looked around as the crowd grew. "Allow me to introduce to you, our esteemed judges. From right here at the academy, we have Ms. Candace Donner and Mr. Denis Fitzgibbons. Then from the highly regarded Chez Gaston restaurant, Mr. Francois Bellavance, and from the equally esteemed Villa del la Vienna, Miss Beatrice Jankles."

The audience applauded.

"We are all here to encourage our contestants who will be making historical dishes with a modern twist," Terry said. "From Los Angeles, we have Robert Murray who will be making an old style blood pudding."

The audience applauded as he went on to name the other contestants. Then came me.

“And here we have Layla Tyler from Amarillo, Texas. She’ll be making Bedfordshire... what is this? Clanger?”

He looked at me with a curious grin and I simply nodded.

“Right,” he said. “A Bedfordshire clanger. Can’t wait to see what that is.”

He then turned to look at Axel and the audience applauded even before he could say a word.

“The man who needs no introduction, our own beloved and endlessly talented, Axel King.”

The crowd roared with their love of him.

I glanced sidelong at Axel, curious of his reaction to all this adulation. While he raised both arms into the air to wave at the crowd, there was something reserved and humble in his smile.

Terry waited for the crowd to settle down, then looked at all the contestants. “Everything you need for your chosen recipes is there in the pantry and back there in the refrigerators. You all have two hours to prepare your dishes which will then be tasted by our judges. I wish you all good luck. Get settled, get ready, and begin!”

The excitement in the air was contagious as we all rushed to the pantry to pick out the ingredients that we needed.

At one point, so focused was I on choosing the perfect vegetables, I reached out for a large red onion, only to have someone’s hand immediately cover mine.

I looked up into the startled face of Axel. He, too, had clearly been caught up in the excitement and hadn’t seen me.

But for that quick and electrifying moment, we froze.

He recovered first. “Nice try, hick. A clanger? What the hell is that?”

I had no time to argue with him. I simply reached for another onion and went on my way. I couldn’t allow him to

distract me now. This was too important.

I had trouble finding the suet that I needed and for a moment almost panicked. We'd all been told to submit our list of ingredients to the coordinator.

I found oils and butter and shortening and lard, but no suet.

Damn.

What would happen to my crust without it? Would the flavor change? And what about the texture?

For all the times I'd gone over the recipe with Chef Mac, I never once considered trying it with shortening or lard. I wanted to kick myself.

Then I found it. Tucked behind a row of exotic cooking oils was a small plastic container with the maggot like substance.

As I headed back to my workstation, Axel came up beside me and looked at what I had in my arms, his gaze making a beeline for the suet.

"Interesting choice," he said. "Why am I not surprised that maggots would figure in your recipe. Good luck getting the judges to taste that." And he hurried on to his workstation.

After another trip to the refrigerator and pantry, I finally settled in to get to work. It didn't take long before I was in the zone and laser focused on my work. Everyone around me disappeared, even Axel. All that mattered was getting my fillings and crust perfect.

"You have thirty minutes left," Terry called out.

I'd made my four perfectly shaped clangers and had already put them in the oven. All I could do now was wait.

I stooped down to look inside the oven, hoping that my crust would hold and I'd have no leakage. In addition to a wonderful flavor, I knew that the dish's appearance was also important.

As I stood, I glanced at Axel's workstation. His workspace was clean and impeccable. He was still busy

working, making some sort of confit. It was interesting to watch him work.

He, too, was clearly in the zone, concentrating solely on the work at hand.

“Fifteen minutes left,” Terry informed us.

I looked down at my clangers. They were coming along perfectly. The crust had begun to get that beautiful golden color.

But all around me was chaos. A few of the contestants were clearly running out of time. Two of them had been overly ambitious, choosing dishes that were virtually impossible to make in the time limit that we had.

Three others seemed to just have bad luck. One of them had left a pot on the stove too long and had to start her dish over. Another one turned from one counter to the other with her dish in her hand and the contents of the plate slipped off and made a mess on the floor. The third chaotic participant just seemed lost. He turned one way and the other at his station, unable to focus.

“One minute, everyone,” Terry called out. “You have one minute.”

Smiling, and somewhat relieved, I opened the oven door and pulled out my perfectly golden brown clangers. They looked spectacular.

I set them onto a serving dish and waited.

“Time’s up!” Terry said. “Stop working and step back from your workstation.”

As I took my step back, I looked sidelong at Axel and noticed his intrigued glance at my clangers. He frowned, obviously curious about what I’d made.

One by one, the contestants were asked to bring their dishes, complete or not, to the judges table. They were then instructed to give a brief history of their dish.

Several of them walked back to their workstation clearly disappointed. A few more seemed both optimistic but a bit

apprehensive, while only a handful appeared fully confident in their dish.

“Layla Tyler,” Terry said. “Could you bring your Bedfordshire clangers to the judge?”

I picked up my dish and walked to the judges table, setting the plate in the center.

“Tell us what you have here,” one of the judges said.

“My Bedfordshire clangers with a savory wild boar filling on this side and a lightly sweetened apple filling on this side.”

“Interesting,” Ms. Donner said. “So, we have the meal and the dessert. How brilliant.”

“But how does it taste,” Mr. Bellavance said.

The four clangers were sliced up and every judge tasted the savory side.

After many tries at Chef Mac’s house, I had ultimately decided to take out the elk and go with the wild boar.

“I love how moist this is without being runny,” Miss Jankles said. “And those flavors. Absolutely sublime.”

“I agree,” Ms. Donner said.

“This crust,” Mr. Fitzgibbons said. “Such a unique flavor...”

“It’s made with suet.”

They all looked at me with surprise, but nodded their approval.

“Now,” Ms. Donner said. “Let’s try the dessert.”

On cutting the crust, the rich and gooey apples inside spilled out.

“I can see nice, big chunks of apples,” Mr. Fitzgibbons said.

They all took a big mouthful.

“Oh,” Miss Jankles said, turning the mouthful around in her mouth. “What is that...? Hmm. So interesting. What is

that little *je ne sais quoi* that is going on in my mouth?”

Mr. Bellavance nodded. “Indeed. Is that whiskey?”

“Bourbon,” I said.

They all nodded their approval and Mr. Fitzgibbons even reached out to take another generous mouthful.

“Very, very nice,” he said as he chewed. “The blend of this unusual crust with the sweet/tart flavors of the apples... and then you throw bourbon into the mix... genius. Absolute genius.”

Beaming, I smiled, bowed my head slightly, then turned to head back to my station. I couldn't help sending a proud glance at Axel who stoically ignored me.

“And last but not least, Axel King.”

Axel brought his dish to the judges, but I barely listened to their comments. Of course, I assumed that whatever Axel had done, it was going to be good.

But my thoughts were on my own dish and on my chances of going on to the second round.

Moments later, as Axel returned to his station beside me, I noted the proud gleam in his eyes. He, too, knew that he had a winner.

After a bit of deliberation, the judges returned and gave their conclusions to Terry.

“As you all know, three of you will be eliminated today while the others will go on to the next round,” he said, looking at the card in his hand. “Leaving the competition today are, Milly Englund, Vincent Grady and Emma Dyson.”

The three contestants came forward, unhappy and disappointed.

“I wish you all good luck and hope to see you again for next year's competition.”

As they moved aside, Terry looked out at the nine remaining contestants. “Congratulations to you all. You are all moving on to the next round. You'll have another week to

hone your culinary prowess. But, be ready for anything. Next week, your challenge will be announced at the start of the competition. All I can tell you is that we'll be looking for original and unusual blends. What flavor will you pair with cumin? What seasoning will you use with saffron? Know your seasonings, people. Know our seasonings."

Wow, I thought with a little apprehension. So, there was no real way of getting ready. I couldn't practice a particular recipe. Like he said, I would have to be ready for anything.

"It's easy to win when you get to practice," Axel shot my way. "But let's see how you perform at a moment's notice."

I looked at him. "I'm great under pressure," I said, even though I didn't fully believe it. I came closer to his station as I prepared to take my leave. "More than anyone else, you should know that about me by now." I winked at him and left him.

Chapter 12

Layla



“Feeling confident for the second round?” Mac said as he came up to me.

We were once again in his kitchen getting ready for the next round of the competition.

I smiled, proud of my performance in the first round, but I knew that it was only going to get harder with every passing round.

“I know it’s going to be rough, but that’s why I’m here. To really hone my seasoning skills.”

“Well, then you’ll have to concentrate and stopped being so distracted.”

I knew he was right. My mind was all over the place, especially going back to that day under the huge tent.

The entire day of the competition had been tense. Half my mind had been on making the award winning dish while the other half had occasionally strayed to Axel and his behavior towards me.

Throughout the days and nights since that day, I had come to conclude that Axel had simply wanted to fuck the new hick girl in town and now that he had, he was moving on. I had to assume that seeing me with Mac had turned him on... or something.

It was all so frustrating just thinking about it, thinking about him. But my mind was on an annoying loop of thinking of him, trying to forget him and thinking of him again.

Damn it. Why does he affect me so?

“There you go again,” Mac said.

He had pulled up a stool to the island in his kitchen while I prepared a light snack. “What are you talking about?” I said.

“You’ve been getting this dazed look lately,” he said. “Like you’re off in some other land.”

I shrugged. “I guess I am a little distracted.”

“A little?” he said with an amused grin. “I wonder if you even know where you are.”

I chuckled and reached out to pat his hand. “I’m here. All here.”

“Good,” he said as he reached for a carrot stick and dipped it into the dip I’d just made. “Good,” he said as he crunched on the carrot. “But now we get to work.”

“Right,” I said.

“Let’s get started. What’s on the menu for round two?”

“Round two is about unusual blends, and out of the ordinary seasonings. So, I was thinking of practicing with a fusion of curry rice with a clove-infused chicken with caramelized carrots, roasted peppers and a chutney on the side.”

“Interesting,” Mac said as he gestured from me to begin. “Let’s see how you do.”

I began the preparations, but felt even more anxious than the other times I’d been at his house.

A part of me longed to forget all about Axel, and Mac was the perfect diversion.

My lips were suddenly dry, longing for the taste of Mac, or was that Axel’s taste that lingered in my mouth.

No. It was Mac. Axel was over. It was done. We’d gone down that road and it led nowhere. Besides, Mac was so sexy, so mature, so knowledgeable. Why bother with Axel at all?

Right, I thought wryly.

I pushed myself to think of those intimate moments in the classroom and I was brought back to the sensations Mac had brought me. Before I knew it, I was playing that scene in my head over and over again.

I could feel him, taste him, smell him, and it all made it nearly impossible for me to concentrate on what I was doing.

“Is it just me, or are you even more stressed than before,” Mac said, reading my mind.

“I assume that with every advancement in the competition, I’m going to be more and more nervous... maybe a little unsure. I mean, the competition was fierce. Everyone did such a great job, even those who were eliminated.”

“Are you telling me that you were surprised that you’d made it to the next round?”

I shrugged. In a way, I was, especially considering the weight that Axel had at the academy. He could have me eliminated no matter how well I performed. What would it take for him to simply push the judges to write me off before I even have a chance to compete? .

Not much.

So then, why hadn’t he done exactly that?

Did he really want me to leave?

I smiled, thinking of his arms around me as he’d made love to me. It’d been so intense, like nothing I’d ever experienced before. Damn it. The connection had been so strong, I still couldn’t believe that he hadn’t felt it.

Or maybe he had, but he just couldn’t admit it.

Wishful thinking. Yeah. It was wishful alright.

“Are you there, Layla?” Mac was saying.

“Huh?” I said, looking sheepishly at him. “What?”

“Where did you go just now?” he said with a smile. “It was like you’d gone off into some distant, but very pleasant place.”

Damn it. Had I gone back to Axel again?

I shrugged and pushed Axel out of my mind. “The judges really got a kick out of my clangers,” I said, quickly shifting gears. “Only one of them had ever vaguely heard of such a

thing. They were impressed by the idea, by my research into them and by the actual taste of them, the savory and the sweet.”

Mac smiled that sweet and complacent smile of his. “I know, Layla,” he said. “I was there, remember?”

That’s right. He had been there, silently cheering me on from the sidelines. But my focus had been so split between my clangers and my thoughts of Axel, that I’d barely been aware of Mac at all.

I shrugged. “I know,” I said as I prepared the chicken. “I’m still so excited about all of this.”

He came around the island and stood behind me. He gently brought his hands to my shoulders and massaged my tense muscles.

“Look at you,” he said. “You’re a bundle of pent up stress and anxiety. You do know that your energy, positive or negative, can be transmitted to the meal that you prepare?”

I looked back at him. “Do you really believe that?”

“Sure, I do,” he said. “A meal that is prepared with love, will be enjoyed and savored, whereas a meal prepared in haste, with impatience or with anger, will only be eaten as sustenance and not with pleasure.”

He continued to rub my shoulders, his hands coming down over my arms, down to my forearms then over my hands.

As I set the cover on the pot of the chicken, he pulled me away.

“You now have an hour to kill before that chicken is done,” he said, in his husky tone that was heavy with want. “How about we finish what we started last week.”

I turned to face him, looking into his wise eyes and seeing all the passion in them. Where Axel had looked upon me with wonder in addition to hunger, Mac had a slightly more pragmatic element to the way he looked at me.

You’re analyzing this way too much, I thought. *Just enjoy being with the man. Let go. Let him pleasure you.*

“If I remember correctly,” he said, reaching under my skirt to grab my ass. “I do believe that I had one hand here before you so suddenly ran out.”

I was about to defend my actions, but clearly he had no interest in why I’d left. He leaned in to kiss me. His lips were moist and warm and so, so hungry. As he reached up with his other hand to grab my breast, the kiss intensified.

I sank into him, wanting more of him. But images of Axel’s stunned face flashed through my mind.

I pulled away from the kiss. “This isn’t right,” I whispered. “You’re my teacher. We really shouldn’t...”

“Shouldn’t or don’t want to?” he said, looking fiercely into my eyes.

Knowing that he was right, I smiled.

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “Look. How can you reject anything that will help calm you, relieve your stress and, ultimately, make you perform better?”

His smile widened while his horny eyes narrowed as he led me into the living room and the large leather sofa.

“Does that mean you’re going to claim responsibility for my win?” I said with a teasing grin.

“I just might do that,” he said, guiding me down onto the sofa.

As I lay back looking up at him, he peeled off his shirt and I was, once again, reminded of why I found him so fascinating. His strong and muscular torso looked like it’d been sculpted out of the most gorgeous granite... hard, smooth, strong.

He shimmied out of the drawstring linen pants he wore and showed me all that he had to give me.

I was wet just looking at him, just allowing my eyes to explore every line of his exquisite body.

With his intense gaze upon me, I unbuttoned the top three buttons of my dress, giving him better access to my full

bosom.

He quickly took the invitation, climbing over me and nestling between my legs while he buried his face between my breasts. My hands were in dire need of his skin and they rose of their own accord, reaching for him and running over the smoothness of his skin.

As he guided his hardened cock deep inside me, I let out a sigh of relief, a sigh of pleasure.

“Told you this would help,” he said as he slowly stroked his way in and out of me.

I smiled up at him. “I just might need to call upon you more and more often.”

“Call at will,” he said, his eyes suddenly closing as the sensations of my warmth filled him.

I arched my back, then brought my hips up to meet his, willing him to go in deeper and deeper.

Our orgasms grew in harmony, slow and delicious. Our arousal levels kept in tandem, as he covered my skin with tender kisses. When we finally erupted, our cries filled the home, echoing from every corner.

“Now, tell me that you don’t feel more relaxed,” he challenged.

I let out a small laugh. “On the contrary,” I said. “I might be so relaxed that I won’t care about the competition at all. All I’ll want to do is stay here with you.” I reached up to kiss him while my fingers played with the soft curls at the nape of his neck.

“We can stay right here as long as you want,” he said.

Chapter 13

Axel



Throughout the first round of the competition, I'd been acutely aware of Layla's presence. How could I not? She was right there, looking great and professional in her white chef's jacket. Her hair was pulled back, off her face, accentuating her beauty.

It seemed that no matter what I did to dissuade her, to break her confidence and to, ultimately, send her home, she resisted.

I had to admit that a part of me admired her determination and her strength. So many other students would have already succumbed to the pressure, packed their bags and run out.

But not Layla. No, she dove into her work, surprising me with just how talented she really was.

Clangers? What the hell? It'd seemed so ridiculous, but the judges had loved them and had loved her.

As I'd tried to concentrate on my own dish, I had also tried desperately to ignore the presence of Chef Mac who stood on the sidelines the entire time, his eyes intently on Layla.

It was impossible to deny that there was something going on between them. When I'd initially caught Layla in Chef Mac's embrace, I'd thought it was a one time thing... his attempt at getting closer to the hot new student.

But as I'd glanced at him, every time catching his hungry gaze on Layla, I knew there was more. And that knowledge gnawed at me. I hated it. Hated how it made me feel. Hated how it possessed me.

Though it was no surprise that I'd made it to the next round of the competition, I should have celebrated. I should have been happy, victorious.

But I'd simply watched Layla leave the tent with an empty sensation in my gut.

Damn. I had to do something about her. I had to get her out of the academy.

I headed home, eager to talk to Kobe about the entire situation.

"Where are you going to?" I said as I entered the house that we shared and found him all dressed up and ready to head out.

He wore pale blue dressy shorts and a nice white button down shirt that had a delicate pale blue seam around the hem.

I was so accustomed to seeing him casually dressed that it struck me.

"Oh," he said with a nonchalant shrug. "Me and the guys are heading into town. We need to break away from the campus life a bit."

"Oh?" I said, a little disappointed. Feeling the need to break away as well, I followed him as he headed into the kitchen. "Mind if I tag along?"

He looked up at me, clearly surprised by my request. "Um," he said with weighty hesitation. "Maybe some other time, bro. One of the guys is going through a rough time and we all want to help him out."

I looked at him. I knew him inside and out, and while we were so polar opposite when it came to most things, the one thing I knew about him was that little twitch at the corner of his mouth when he lied.

What was he really up to?

"I was kind of hoping to talk to you about my situation," I said, my need to talk growing.

"You mean about that Layla chick?"

I nodded.

"Man," he said. "I don't know what to tell you. You've got the hots for the girl, and you don't want to lower yourself

to her level. What does that say about you?”

Stunned by his question, I took a step back and looked at him. “What do you mean, what does it say about me? It means that I have standards. It means that I have pride in who I am. It means that...”

“Look, bro,” Kobe said, suddenly displaying a level of maturity that was uncharacteristic of him. “I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t help you. You’ll have to figure this one out on your own.”

“And yet, you’re going to go out and have a beer with your buddies and help one of your friends out?”

Kobe looked around as if vaguely looking for an answer... a suitable lie. Then he shrugged. “His situation is just less complicated than yours.”

He grabbed his car keys out of the large crystal bowl on the counter and headed for the door.

“When will you be back?” I said.

“I don’t know.”

“Where are you going, exactly?”

“Damn, Axel,” he said as he glanced over his shoulder at me. “What are you? My mother? I’m going out with the guys, and I’ll be back when I’m good and ready. Get off my back.”

“Well,” I went on, truly reluctant to let him leave. “Don’t make any plans for tomorrow night. We’re having dinner with Father.”

“I know.” He opened the door and walked out, closing the door behind him.

I was alone. Alone with my unending thoughts of Layla. My mind raced back to the vision of her in Mac’s arms. Then skipped to the moments when I held her in my arms. Then a quick run to the competition... standing so close to her, telling her to leave the academy, all while desperately hoping she’d stay forever.

Shit. The rest of the afternoon was a bust, with me doing nothing important, nothing with meaning.

With my father's impending visit, I forced myself to shrug off the oppressive weight on my shoulder and concentrated on preparing dinner. I pulled out the large brisket I'd bought and unwrapped it.

In a large stainless steel bowl, I mixed a variety of spices and a bit of oil and slathered the mixture onto the piece of meat. Wrapping it back up, I then put it back into the refrigerator.

The entire process took less than fifteen minutes.

"Great," I said into the cavernous home. "What do I do now?"

I felt lost. I was lost. I went to bed lost. Woke up lost and spent a good part of the next day lost.

I took the brisket out of the refrigerator, gave it another good rub, then put it into the smoker.

The rest of the morning was spent getting ready while thoughts of Layla repeatedly came back to haunt me.

I'd hope to see Kobe come out of his room before my father arrived, still intent on talking with him, but I could hear his loud snoring through the door of his bedroom and knew that it could be hours before he woke up.

Finally, with my father soon to arrive, I managed to find some solace in preparing the evening's meal. Cooking for my father was a feat in it of itself.

What does one buy for the man who has everything?

Where does one bring a man who's seen the world?

Well then... what does one cook for the man who has experienced virtually every culinary dish?

As I headed into the kitchen to get a head start on the preparations, I briefly considered setting aside the brisket and offering him a simpler dish. How about hamburgers? How about pizza? How about hot-dogs?

I laughed at the thought, imagining my father wolfing down a hot-dog with freshly cut French fries on the side.

Then again, my father would most likely raise his nose at a brisket just as he would pizza or burgers.

I checked in on the large brisket and everything looked great. I then made sure that the three excellent bottles of wine that I'd bought were at the right temperature and finally got started on the root vegetables I'd bought along with a few new spices I'd never used before.

Sure, I thought to myself. *Why not add the uncertainty of new spices to stress me even more.*

I felt the weight of the night to come. My father, his critique, his assessment. Me, feeling that it was never good enough. Always wanting to prove myself more and more.

Damn it.

Why couldn't I just relax and enjoy my time with my father?

I knew that when I walked through the corridors of this academy, everyone looked up to me. They all admired me... or perhaps feared me. I was their prince. I was a King.

But, what was I really?

Errol King's son. His son. Nothing on my own.

I prepared the meal all while opening one of the bottles of wine... a nice French wine, aged in an oak barrel with elements of cranberry.

I'd gone through half the bottle by the time my father rang at the door.

"Hello, Errol," I said as I opened the door for him.

"What's that smell?" he said on entering the house.

So soon? No pleasantries? No small talk? Just straight to whatever I was preparing for the meal and how wrong it potentially was?

“Must be the wine,” I said, trying to keep it light. “How about a glass?”

“Sounds good,” he said. “French?”

“Of course,” I said.

“And where is that brat brother of yours?” my father so eloquently said.

I couldn’t have said it better myself. I’d heard the bathroom door slam fifteen minutes earlier and assumed he’d had a rough night.

“He’s upstairs getting ready,” I said. “He should be down in a minute.”

Please be down here in a minute, I silently pleaded. I needed Kobe to keep my father occupied while I finished preparing dinner.

“Your visit into town is a little unexpected,” I said as he sat at the peninsula and settled into watching me work.

Great, I thought as I started chopping fresh vegetables for the salad. All I needed was the added pressure of his keen eyes constantly on me.

“I like popping in and taking you two by surprise.”

Don’t I know it, I wanted to say.

“What’s on the menu tonight?”

“Brisket.”

“A little pedestrian, don’t you find?” he said.

“Not if it’s done right,” I ventured.

I glanced up at him and saw the slight curve of his lips. While he liked taking digs at me, he also respected how I refused to back down. I stood up to him. I stood my ground.

“Sorry I missed the first round of the competition,” he said. “I’ll be sure to make it for the second round.”

How many times have I heard that before? “Don’t worry about it. I know that you’re busy with your many endeavors.”

He shrugged, somewhat taken aback by my comment. Taking a sip of his wine, he looked at me over the rim of his glass.

“I didn’t have a chance this time to see the list of judges,” he said as he carefully set his glass back onto the counter. “Was Ty Jennings there?”

“No,” I said, concentrating on my tomatoes. “He couldn’t make it this year.”

“Did you ask Chef Mac if he was interested?” he went on.

“No. He wasn’t even up for consideration. Why would he?”

My father shrugged again, and I could tell that there was more to the innocent sounding question than he let on.

“Hey, Dad!” Kobe said, bounding into the kitchen like a happy pup. “When did you get in?”

He held up his wine glass. “Three sips ago.”

Kobe managed to keep my father busy with chitchat about nothing in particular while I checked in on the brisket and vegetables.

Everything seemed to be in order, the meat being tender and perfect, and the vegetables nicely roasted.

“If you could set the table, Kobe,” I said. “Dinner is ready.”

“Sure thing, bro.”

By the time I got the salad tossed and the brisket sliced, the table was set, and my father had taken a seat at the head of the table with Kobe at his side.

I was nervous and couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t the first time I’d made dinner for my father. I knew what I was doing. I’d made brisket for my buddies a few times... those nights when we wanted to have fun, relax, have a beer and a good meal.

But now... damn it. Was it my thoughts of Layla that were making my brain foggy? I looked at the bottles of French

wine. A nice cold brew would have suited the meal better. Maybe a lighthearted meal with a few beers, some jokes and stories would be nice.

Yeah... my brain was foggy all right. My father with jokes and beer? Never.

I brought the meal to the table and my father looked up at me.

“Sure smells interesting.”

Interesting. That was his euphemism for odd.

“I tried something new,” I said, serving him,

“Obviously,” he said.

We settled in to eat and eventually the conversation turned to things other than the meal that I’d made.

“I heard that the competition is fierce this year,” my father said.

“Just like it is every year,” I said with a shrug. “After all, we do attract some of the most talented student chefs out there.”

My brisket was perfect. The flavors were on point and the tenderness unmatched. My father had said nothing about it so far.

“What about that girl from Texas,” he said. “I’ve been hearing a lot about her. I heard that she’s an interesting student with lots of potential. What do you know about her?”

“Not much,” I said with another disinterested shrug, but my heart wasn’t disinterested at all. It took on an aching beat, longing for something it’d never had before.

Errol looked to Kobe who seemed to be miles away. He’d been acting so strange lately, so secretive. It wasn’t just that he had gone out with his buddies and come home so late. He’d done that before. But he was now so vague about his outings, so defensive. A part of me feared what he might be up to. I knew that one of his buddies dabbled in illicit substances and couldn’t help but wonder if Kobe had allowed

himself to get dragged into something he could no longer get himself out of.

“Have you heard of her?” Errol asked Kobe as he nudged him with his elbow.

“Who?” he said, coming back to earth.

“That girl from Texas. Lola.”

“Layla,” I was quick to correct... way too quick.

They both shot me a quizzical glance.

Kobe then looked to our father. “I heard of her. But I don’t know anything. You know I don’t like to keep up with that stuff. All that matters to me is that the students enjoy their time here and leave with a solid degree.”

I looked at him, knowing full well that he didn’t even care about that.

And lately, he cared even less. Did he really think that I hadn’t noticed the distant look in his eyes?

Something was going on with him, and the more I looked at him, the more I worried about him. I was tempted to bring it up right there in front of our father. If he was involved in something untoward, I thought it only right that our father know about it.

Eager to also change the subject about Layla, I took the plunge. “What have you been up to lately, Kobe?” I said casually. “I haven’t seen you around much.”

He pressed a silly yet irritated grin at me with a quick sidelong glance at Errol. “I’m busy on campus,” he said.

“Busy with what?”

Kobe took a huge bite of his brisket and chewed in an exaggerated manner, stalling for time.

“Speaking of the academy and the campus,” Errol cut it, breaking the growing tension between us. “I recently received an interesting email regarding one of our professors.”

“Really?” I said. “Who?”

My father set his fork down and reached into his breast pocket to pull out a folded sheet of paper. He opened it up and read. “Chef Mac.”

I frowned, suddenly concerned. “What about him?”

He handed me the sheet of paper. “Here. Read it for yourself.”

Shit, I thought as I read the email. *Damn the bastard.*

Chapter 14

Layla



After moving forward to the next round in the competition, I spent more and more time with Chef Mac. Not only was he a great tutor, but my time with him helped to put Axel out of my mind.

When it came to my knowledge of spices, we'd covered all the bases, but I felt a growing need to spend more time with him. The more I got to know him, the more fascinating I found him.

He made me laugh and he had the ability to calm me whenever I let my emotions get the better of me. He taught me things I'd never dreamed of in the kitchen. There was something soothing and inspiring about him, and the few times when we put my tutoring aside and he prepared dinner for me, I was blown away. The flavors that he created were rich and had depth.

"Looks like I still have a lot to learn," I'd told him.

"I've been doing this for years," he said. "You'll get there."

Then he went on to teach me even more in the bedroom.

As the week progressed, I was practically living at his house, arriving early, cooking and testing my various recipes during the day, then staying to have fun and relax with him for a good part of the evening.

With the second round of the competition just around the corner, I felt ready, confident and relaxed, all thanks to Chef Mac.

Heading home one night after a long day of working with exciting spices from faraway places, I returned to the campus and headed to my dorm. From a distance, I saw a figure standing by the main entrance to my dorm. He was tall and paced back and forth impatiently. As I approached, he looked

up and saw me, pulling his shoulders back as if readying for a confrontation. He was edgy and determined.

And when he started to walk towards me, a foreboding sensation filled me. There was conviction in every step, so much so that I almost stopped walking, but continued on.

Dusk was falling, preventing me from clearly seeing his face, but I knew who it was. In such a short amount of time, I'd come to know his stance, his gait, the sway of his shoulders and the tilt of his head.

My heart pounded. What did he want this time? Was he finally going to admit to thinking about me all the time? Was he going to pull me into his arms and tell me how he couldn't live without me?

No.

As his face became visible, I could see that none of that was going to happen. He had that fierce 'I want you out of my school' look.

"Out on the town?" he said when he was close enough.

I didn't look directly at him and I didn't stop. I simply walked on, forcing him to fall in step alongside me.

"With the study schedule that you have, don't you think you're coming home a little late?"

At this, I glanced sidelong at him. "Are you keeping track of my comings and goings, Alex?"

"It's Axel," he said flatly.

"Whatever."

"No. I don't care where you go and when you get back, it's just that..."

"Well, obviously you do care, or you wouldn't be here waiting outside my dorm and reprimanding me for coming in late."

His lips pursed for a brief moment and he pulled his shoulders back, a move I'd come to recognize whenever he was uncomfortable or contradicted.

“Where are you coming from?” he said bluntly.

I said nothing.

“From Chef Mac’s house, right?”

I stayed silent. He had no right to ask me, and I certainly didn’t owe him a response.

“Damn it, Layla. Where were you?”

“Damn it, Axel,” I said in the same tone. “Are you a dorm mom now?”

We arrived at the stoop to the dorm, and I was about to reach out to open the door, but he grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me off the stoop and onto the small path that led to the back of the building.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I said as I tried to pull away.

“Answer me. Were you at Chef Mac’s house?”

“Shit, Axel. Why didn’t you just park outside his house and you’d already have your answer.”

He tightened his jaw, clearly upset. “Were you?”

“Yes,” I shouted. “Are you happy now?” I pulled free of his hold and turned to head inside.

“No,” he said, reaching for me and this time, pulling me closer to him. “I’m not happy at all. In fact, I want you to stop.”

“Stop?” I said, looking into his determined eyes. “Stop what?”

“Stop seeing him.”

“Ha!”

“It’s not a joke.”

“No doubt, it’s not a joke,” I said. “I doubt you even know what a joke is. It may not be a joke, but what it is, however, is ridiculous. Not only do you want to force me to leave this school because your royal little ass can’t stand to be in the same space as my little, humble, simple self, but now you

want to tell me who I can and cannot see. You're delusional, Axel. Positively delusional."

"Really?" he said, his tone suddenly menacing, as his eyes narrowed into two evil slits. "You do realize that you're a student here while he is a professor."

"Yes," I said.

"You realize what that means?"

"I'm an adult, Axel."

"We have strict rules about this, you know."

"Strict rules against a professor tutoring a well deserving student?"

He snorted and sneered. "Phrase it however you want to, Layla, but the fact remains. It's against the rules. If you won't stop of your own accord, I'll report both of you. Do you know what that means?"

A chill ran up my spine. Damn him.

"That means that the two of you will then be able to spend as much time together as you want... off campus. He'll be fired and you will be kicked out of this academy and out of the competition. So, weigh those options carefully, Layla. Is he worth it? Is it worth losing everything just to be with him?"

"You've wanted me out of this school since day one," I spat at him. "What the hell do you care one way or another? Are you jealous? Do you feel inferior compared to the wise and experienced man that Mac is?"

"I don't give a fuck!"

"Right," I said, cocking my head to the side as I looked at him, trying to understand what he was up to. "You don't give a fuck, but you certainly care *who* I fuck."

He was silent as he looked down at me, his grip on my arm relaxing but still holding me. His jaw tightened and his nostrils flared.

Damn it, Axel, I wanted to say. *Why can't you just come out and say what you think, what you feel? Why these silly*

games? What is this really about? Do you want me for yourself? Do you just want to make my life miserable?

For all of my questions, I couldn't find an answer.

Chapter 15

Layla



If Axel truly believed that he could force me to stop seeing Chef Mac, he was, indeed, delusional. How dare he try to control my life that way. How dare he tell me how to live my life.

The very next day, as I spotted Mac outside his classroom, I noticed Axel coming down the hall.

You think you can control me? I silently told Axel. *Well, watch this.*

I sauntered up to Mac, a lascivious smile on my lips and a come-fuck-me sway to my hips. I looked intently into his eyes, all while acutely aware of Axel's approach in my periphery.

"Hey, beautiful," Mac said as he snaked an arm around my waist.

"I've spent all morning just reliving what you did to me last night," I said, just as Axel got within earshot. "You drive me crazy, you know that? I just can't get enough of what you do to me."

As I leaned in to kiss Mac, Axel walked by, his jaw tight and his fists tighter. Smiling, I gave in to the kiss and silently promised to show Axel even more of my affections for Mac.

Over the course of the week, I continued to flaunt my relationship with Chef Mac every chance I got. Axel deserved it. I could see how it was affecting him, and he deserved every ounce of discomfort. He deserved having my relationship thrust in his face, and then some.

And I was more than willing to continue.

By the time the second round of the competition rolled around, I could tell that Axel was growing more and more tense. My relationship with Mac was really getting to him.

I arrived at the huge competition tent before Axel. I felt relaxed and confident, despite not knowing what I was up against. This past week, Chef Mac had forced me out of my comfort zone and had made me use spices that I'd never even heard of.

I'd grown particularly fond of saffron and juniper berries and hoped that the day's competition would lend itself well to the use of them.

Only minutes after my arrival, I saw Axel slowly making his way into the tent. He had an expression on his face that I'd never seen. He appeared troubled and tired.

Just as with the first round, his workstation was beside mine. He barely looked at me as he made his way over, but I could clearly see the tightening of his jaw. It had almost become a permanent feature on his face.

As we stood stiffly beside each other, each trying to ignore the other, the tension between us was almost palpable. My God, how he affected me.

Finally, the other contestants streamed in and went to their workstations. Then Terry Bishop strolled in, smiling and waving at everyone like a big time celebrity.

He once again introduced the judges. Candace Donner and Beatrice Jankles sat on one side of him while Denis Fitzgibbons and Francois Bellavance sat on the other. They all smiled and nodded, ready to give their expert opinions on the dishes we were about to prepare.

"For today's challenge," Terry said. "We ask that you prepare a flavorful rice that is to be served with a relatively bland piece of pork. You can use any type of rice that you wish, but we want the rice to be the star, enhancing the simple piece of meat that you'll be asked to work with. Put your seasoning knowledge to the test and... begin!"

Everyone raced to the pantry, picking up various items, some of them clearly hoarding more than they could possibly need. While I was focused on what I want to take, I couldn't

help but notice how Axel deliberately steered clear of me, not even coming down the same aisle that I was in.

I shrugged it off, got my little basket of ingredients ready and headed back to my workstation to begin.

The heat was more stifling than it had been for the first round, making concentrating a little more difficult, but with more than enough time to spare, my dish was well on its way.

While chopping some fresh garlic and chives, I shot a sidelong glance at Axel and noticed how he was struggling. It wasn't like him, and I couldn't help but wonder if I was responsible.

I shoved the thought to the back of my mind and concentrated on my dish, and in the end, I made it through to the next round.

Despite Axel's distracted demeanor, he also made it through to the next round.

Over the course of the following week, every time I crossed his path, he'd seemed more and more angry and bitter. It was clear that he was jealous of my relationship with Mac, and I suddenly felt a little guilty for shoving it in his face.

At the end of my Professionalism class with him, he cornered me, pushing me up to the wall all while pressing his chest against mine.

"Stop what you're doing," he said. "You have no idea what you're up against."

I arrogantly glanced at the wall at my back. "I'm up against the wall, Axel. Do you really think that Chef Mac would ever treat me this way?"

He faltered and hesitated, no longer sure of his intention.

"Chef Mac would never treat me like this."

Axel leaned into me, pressing his hardened shaft against me and immediately arousing my interest.

"Stop this foolish game."

"What game, Axel? The game that you instigated?"

He went blank, simply staring at me for a long moment. His breathing became labored and loud as he closed his eyes and pressed into me a little more. His lips were just a few inches away from mine. I could smell him... almost taste him.

Kiss me, I wanted to say.

He inched closer and my lips parted, eager to welcome his kiss, while my eyelids grew heavy. But the kiss never came.

I opened my eyes to see him step back.

“Stay away from him,” he said as he released me and walked away.

“I can’t, Axel,” I said following him. “I can’t stop thinking of him. I can’t stop wanting him. You don’t understand what he does to me. I’ve learned so much from him. He lights me up in the kitchen, then turns me in the bedroom and drives me crazy. I’m addicted to him.”

“You’re a fool.” He looked at me, red-faced.

“You’re jealous.”

He grunted and stormed out.

I stood there, angry, horny, and hungry.

You don’t want me to see Mac? Ha!

I took in a deep breath and headed outside, walking straight in the direction of Mac’s off campus home. I walked fast, eager to see him, eager to find relief for the fire Axel had lit.

I ran up the pathway and hopped up to the stoop to ring the doorbell.

Nothing.

“Mac,” I called out as I knocked on the door. “Mac!”

Still nothing.

Now what?

I looked around. Everything was quiet on the small residential street.

“Where are you when I need you?” I whispered. I knew he didn’t have any classes that afternoon.

I waited another few minutes. Maybe he was in the shower. But when I rang the doorbell again and still got no answer, I left and headed to my dorm. If I couldn’t find Mac, I would have to deal with this myself.

I reached the door to my dorm room, hurried inside, and, after a quick look around to assure that Kat wasn’t home, I headed into my bedroom.

With thoughts of my last escapade with Mac running through my head, I lay back on my bed, pulled up the skirt of my dress and slid my fingers under my panties.

Mac had invited me to take a shower with him. We’d lathered up under the steaming water, rubbing our bodies up against one another. My breasts tingled at the thought, heightening the stimulation to my clitoris.

In the distance, I heard a voice, noise, commotion, but my mind was focused on the goings-on inside my panties.

But as I continued to think about my shower with Axel... no I mean Mac. I’d showered with Mac. Then why was Axel’s face coming to mind? And why was my oncoming orgasm suddenly so intense at the thought of him?

Oh, shit. I groaned out loud as I thought of that one wondrous moment with Axel, when we’d pressed our bodies together and held each other with more than just passion.

In all of his sexual innocence, he’d done everything right, had touched me in the most exquisite ways.

I burst out groaning as the force of my orgasm finally reached its climax, filling me and leaving me breathless and sated.

“Layla?” Kat said as she opened the door. “Are you all right? Oh!”

I raised my head off my pillow and looked at her as I quickly pulled my hand out of my panties and pulled down my skirt.

“Oh!” Kat said again as tears streamed down her face. “I’m sorry!” She turned away.

“Kat! Wait! What’s wrong?”

She slammed the door.

I slid off the bed and came after her. “Kat?” I said as I came into the living room and found her curled up in the armchair. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry. I knocked but you didn’t answer, and...”

“Is that why you’re crying? Kat, forget about that. It’s no big deal.” I shrugged and chuckled despite my embarrassment.

“It’s not that. I mean, I’m sorry for barging in, but that’s not why I’m crying.”

“Then, why?”

“I ran into Kobe.”

“Oh,” I said more calmly as I sat across from her. “What happened?”

“He was with a few of his uppity, elitist friends.”

I nodded. “Okay... and...?”

“I waved at him and said hi,” she went on. “He’s been civil with me lately... even nice. We chat. We laugh. The other day at lunch, he’d bought two pieces of cherry pie and he just passed by my table and slid one to me. It was really sweet and unexpected. But today... he was like a whole other person.”

“What’d he do?”

“He said he had no time to talk to a groupie like me. He and his buddies were on their way to pick up ‘real women’. His friends laughed while he just looked at me with disgust. Then one of his friends started making fun of my shoes, then the other commented on my hair and then the first friend said that they would never pick up a girl like me. I looked straight into Kobe’s eyes. I was so hurt. I couldn’t believe he would let them talk to me like that. He hesitated a minute, and I

really thought that he was going to defend me, that he was going to tell them that he liked me, that we were friends. But, no. He snickered and nodded.”

Kat looked down at herself. She was wearing pretty black shoes with a narrow red skirt with a white and red striped blouse. She was really cute and there was no reason for them to mock her that way.

“What’s wrong with me, Layla? Why would they say that about me? Back in San Francisco, I got hit on all the time. I always had a date on the weekends and the boys always treated me nice. What’s with the guys here?”

“Good question,” I said with a smile as I reached out to pat her hand. “I think that being the sons of famed chef, Errol King, has gone to their heads.”

“So, you’re still having issues with Axel, I take it,” Kat said.

“He’s relentless,” I said. “He walks around here, all high and mighty, expecting us to all grovel at his feet. Damn. It makes me so mad. And to find that Kobe is treating you just as badly... that only makes me even more mad.”

Kat pressed a smile.

“Misery loves company, right?” I said.

She shrugged and nodded. “I guess.” She was silent and pensive for a long moment. “Speaking of Axel making you mad... did you hear that he got Chef Mac fired?”

Frowning, I stared at her.

“Yeah,” Kat said as if to drive the message home.

“Are you sure?” I finally managed to say.

“Yeah,” she said. “I saw him just a little while ago walking out of the dean’s office. He didn’t look happy. Apparently he headed straight to his classroom to clear it out and is set to move out of his house soon.”

I jumped to my feet, found my purse on the dining room table and pulled out my phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting him,” I said as I quickly tapped out an urgent message.

I stared at the phone, willing it to show me an answer.

Nothing.

I continued to stare.

“Layla,” Kat said softly.

“What?” I said, unable to tear my eyes off my phone.

“You can’t just stay there waiting for an answer.”

“He usually answers right away,” I said, hearing the desperation in my voice. “He always has his phone on him.”

Chapter 16

Layla



I walked off campus and straight to Mac's house, eager to find him and talk to him. I had to hear it from him, otherwise, I just couldn't believe it.

How dare Axel have him fired!

As I walked up the pathway, I noticed that the front door was ajar.

"Mac?" I called out, poking my face into the slit of the open door.

I heard movement from inside, him mumbling and the clatter of dishes.

"Mac," I said, letting myself in.

I found him in the kitchen, three boxes set up on the counter as he filled the boxes with various items.

"Mac," I said softly, coming up the island. "What's going on?"

He glared up at me with a look in his eyes that I'd never seen before. He was beyond mad. He was enraged. "I'm pretty sure you already know," he spat.

"I can't believe it," I said. "I want to hear it from you. Are you really leaving?"

"Shit, Layla," he shouted as he slammed a pot onto the countertop. "You're the one who set this whole damn thing up. You knew this would get me fired. Axel said he'd warned you. And still, you just kept coming here, knowing that you were risking my position here at the academy? Fuck. I thought you liked me. I thought you cared about me. I thought we cared about each other. But clearly, you only care about yourself. Had your fun, Layla? Huh? Did you have enough fun with me and now you can just have me discarded?"

“Axel is just a silly boy who is jealous of the man that you are,” I said, desperate to calm him. “He’s jealous of the relationship that I have with you, and he’ll do anything to destroy that.”

Pressing his lips tightly together, he looked at me, steam practically coming out of his ears. He shook his head, then resumed packing. “It’s more serious than that. This isn’t just some puppy love, crush, jealous fit. And because of the precarious position you put me in, I’ve lost my job, I cannot return onto the campus grounds, and I have to be out of this academy assigned home before noon tomorrow.” He glared up at me. “Happy?”

“No,” I said, reaching out to take a hold of his hand, but he pulled out of my reach. “I’m not happy at all. I don’t want you to leave. Where will you go? Will you find a place to live somewhere here in town?”

“I’m going back to Louisiana.”

“Louisiana?” I shouted. “You’re moving to Louisiana?”

“I have a few restaurants there that are doing very well,” he said. “I think I’ll dive back into taking care of them.”

“But...”

He looked up at me. “There is no ‘but’.”

“I can talk to Axel,” I said. “I can tell him how wrong he is to do this.”

“There’s no point,” Mac said. “What’s done is done.”

“No,” I said on the verge of tears. “This isn’t done.”

He picked up the pot he’d slammed on the counter and shoved it into one of the boxes then angrily closed the box and taped it up. “It’s over, Layla. It’s over.”

“Mac,” I said with a sudden realization. “The competition. The finals are tomorrow. I need you.”

“You’ve had me, Layla,” he said. “I’ve shown you all that I can. You’ll do fine.”

There was nothing left to say. I stood there and looked at him, willing him to look at me, willing him to say something, anything, that will keep me from walking out of his house.

Nothing came.

Resigned, I turned and slowly walked to the door. With every step I took, I heard his voice, telling me he was sorry, telling me to stay, telling me he needed me.

But the voice in my head never materialized and I walked out in silence.

After a quiet dinner at home alone and a fitful night's sleep, I got up and prepared for the final round of the competition.

We were to have three hours to prepare a gourmet meal consisting of hors d'oeuvre, an appetizer, main dish and dessert. I already had the entire meal planned out in my mind and had even tried three separate appetizers with Mac.

Mac. Damn it. Just the thought of him being forced to leave the academy made me feel ill. A part of me refused to believe that Axel could be so petty and vindictive, but I had to face that fact. He was a narcissistic, spoiled brat who thought the world revolved around him.

Well, I thought as I made my way to the competition tent. I'll show him. I'll show him that a girl from Amarillo, Texas could teach him a thing or two.

But the moment I saw him, that smug look on his face, I was suddenly so angry I was shaking.

"Hello, Axel," I said tightly as I made it to my workstation. "Feeling confident today?"

He glared at me. "As always."

"No doubt if you can have a professor fired on a whim, you can rig this competition to your advantage."

At this, he glared at me with ice cold eyes and an uncomfortable grimace.

Once again, Terry introduced the judges and the remaining contestants. Five of us remained. One was to be eliminated after the tasting of the hors d'oeuvre and appetizer, with another one eliminated after the main dish.

Despite this, everyone was expected to work hard and cook the entire meal.

Pressure.

The moment Terry gave the go ahead, I headed to the pantry and refrigerator to get my leg of lamb, juniper berries along with the root vegetables that were to be caramelized and served with it.

Ignoring my hors d'oeuvre and appetizer for the moment, I started preparing the lamb, and once that was set, I got to work on the quick and easy hors d'oeuvre, then the appetizer; a delicate mushroom and shrimp mix in a golden flaky pastry.

Then I quickly prepared a simple but tasty salad and finally I got to work on my dessert. A rich and delicious chocolate *mi-cuit*, oozing with chocolaty goodness on the inside.

I was in the zone, concentrating on the task at hand and ignoring everything that was going on around me. But when I heard a loud clang, I looked over at Axel's workstation. He stood there with a whisk in his hand and a stainless steel bowl on the floor with partially whipped cream splattered everywhere.

He glanced up at me and I flashed him a confident smile.

His cheeks were red, and he seemed agitated, but there was also anger in his eyes. He quickly picked up the mess and started up a new batch.

Smiling as I brought my attention back to my own meal, I realized just how rattled he was. Was it just the competition, or the prospect of losing to me?

I took a quick look at his work station and realized that he, too, was making lamb. How interesting.

The time to bring our hors d'oeuvre and appetizers to the judges finally arrived.

“This light and flaky pastry is perfection,” Francois Bellavance said of my shrimp and mushroom appetizer. “Absolute perfection.”

They all loved it and I was thrilled.

Axel was also praised for his appetizer, though his hors d'oeuvre left something to be desired.

With one contestant eliminated, the remaining four participants brought their dinner salad and main course to the judges.

“Juniper berries,” Denis Fitzgibbons said as he tasted my dish. “Love it. And your lamb is cooked perfectly. Not dry and absolutely flavorful.”

I nodded and smiled, then listened attentively as Axel's lamb was critiqued. While he received much praise, there were also a few criticisms. His lamb was a bit dry and slightly bland compared to mine.

Hmm. Did that mean that I had a chance to win?

One more contestant was eliminated, leaving Thomas Crenshaw, Axel King and little old me.

Thomas brought his dessert up and the judges appeared to love it. Then Axel brought his and was praised.

I suddenly regretted choosing a dessert that was so fickle. It was impossible to know ahead of time if the small chocolate cakes would have their soft, gooey center just right. Darn it. I should have made an extra one to test it out myself. As it stood, I would only know the moment the judges plunged their dessert spoons into the soft chocolaty exterior.

Holding my breath, I watched them all pick up their spoon and dive in. Yes! The first one was perfect. Then another one and another and another. They were all firm on the outside and perfectly soft and runny inside.

“Perfection,” Francois Bellavance said, licking his spoon. “*Parfait!*”

“I’m going to have to eat the whole thing,” Candace said.

Pleased, I smiled, bowed and returned to my workstation to wait for their decision. It seemed to take forever, but Terry finally returned with the results.

Thomas, Axel and I stood side by side and listened attentively.

“In third place...”

The crowd was silent, but my heart thundered in my ears.

“Thomas Crenshaw.”

We all politely applauded him and he stepped back.

“And now,” Terry said when we all once again fell silent. “We have two contestants left; a runner up and the winner of the competition.”

Yes. Yes! Who won? Who won!?

“I will read the name of the winner,” he went on to clarify. “And the winner... of the competition... is...”

Heart pounding. Breathing painful. Palms clammy.

Come on. Come on.

“Layla Tyler!”

What? Did I hear him right? Did I win? Oh, my God. Did I really win?

“Layla Tyler,” Terry said as he came up to me and held out his hand. “You’ve won the competition.”

I was suddenly surrounded by the judges and others who’d come to congratulate me. Even Errol King came up to shake my hand.

Chapter 17

Axel



For the first time since being a part of my father's academy, of participating in this grand culinary test, I'd lost. I should have been disappointed, more disappointed than what I actually felt.

But I couldn't help but look at Layla with pride. Of all the elite students who thought they knew so much, who came to this school just for the prestige, I was happy to see Layla take it all.

She deserved it.

Damn, she was good.

Sucking in my cheeks, I turned to her and extended my hand. "Congratulations."

She looked at me, surprised.

"No one will ever accuse me of being a sore loser," I said.

"You came in second," she said. Though she smiled, there was a tinge of bitterness in her voice. "That's hardly losing."

How dignified of her. No surprise there. For a girl from the country, she had more refinement in her little finger than many people had in their entire body.

I looked at her for a long moment, her hand still in mine. I wanted to pull her into my arms and whisper in her ear just how proud of her I was. I wanted to kiss her and suggest that we celebrate her win together.

But her smile faded, and her lips tensed up. She was being as diplomatic as she could under the circumstances, surely not wanting to appear standoffish in front of everyone. As the seconds wore on, however, I could see her anger at me bubbling up.

She pulled her hand out of mine and turned to Terry and the judges who'd come to congratulate her. A local reporter also came up to see her.

“Ewan Palmer from Landau Press,” he said. “Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“No, of course not,” she said with a brilliant smile. “Ask away.”

“You're the first student to beat out Axel King,” he said. “How does that make you feel?”

“Elated,” she said. “Surprised. While I had full confidence in my ability to cook a perfect meal, the past wins by my competitor here made me wonder if winning was at all possible.”

“What do you think gave you the edge?”

“Determination. The will to win. I've worked very hard to get here. I've put a lot of time into perfecting my recipes. This isn't a chance win. This is pure...” She looked at the reporter for a moment, looking for the right word. “Me,” she finally said. “This is pure me. My love of food. My devotion to my craft. My respect for each and every ingredient that goes into a meal.”

I watched her with growing awe. She was beautiful as she spoke, but she was also inspiring in the way she exposed her passion for the culinary arts. She would go far. I had no doubt.

“Some might say that you have a natural instinct,” Ewan said. “What do you say to them?”

Layla shrugged. “I guess at the heart of it, that's true. Someone once noted how I never used a timer. I just seem to instinctively know how long it takes to make something and I am rarely wrong. I know how to plot out my time. How long to whisk something before it's too much. How long to knead something before it's too much. How long to bake something... Well, you get the picture.”

He smiled. “Killer instincts, indeed. Well, congratulations again.”

“Thank you.”

I smiled and she glanced at me and caught it. A slight crease came to her brow as she cocked her head slightly to the side.

“What are you up to?” she whispered through a clenched jaw as the crowd began to disperse.

“Nothing,” I said with a growing grin.

“Well, tell your lips because they seem to be having a party on their own,” she snapped.

You’re what we’ve been looking for, I wanted to say. You’re exactly what my father has been hoping to find in this culinary academy.

But I knew it was too soon. She wouldn’t understand it. She probably wouldn’t believe me.

No. I would have to wait to tell her of my father’s plans to find the next star chef that could be brought into the family enterprise... a star chef who could work with me and Kobe... and run the King empire.

Without saying anything, I watched Layla walk away, floating on a cloud of her victory.

With the huge tent almost empty, I finally felt the huge weight slip off my shoulders. I was able to stand tall and breathe.

I was tired. Exhausted. The past week had been more of a strain than I had anticipated. Dealing with Chef Mac had proven to be stressful. I’d hope to convince Layla to stop seeing him, but her refusal had forced my hand.

“Can I talk to you a minute, Chef Mac?” I had said as I’d entered his empty classroom.

He’d closed up his laptop and tucked it under his arm. “Actually, I was just on my way out.”

“It will just take a minute.”

He’d looked at me, his jaw tense and his eyes suspicious.

“What is it?”

“Look, you know that I like you. I admire and respect you.”

“Yeah, yeah, Axel. I’m sure you’re not keeping me from heading home just to tell me how much you like me. Spit it out.”

“We know you’ve been leading a double life, Mac,” I said.

His eyes widened in surprise, but he made no effort to deny it. He simply nodded.

“My father was very disappointed at this discovery.”

“I’m sure he was,” Mac said. “I’ll admit that I am a little surprised that he was able to learn of this.”

“Yeah,” I said. I hated what I had to do. I hated even more the thought of Layla’s reaction. She hated me already, but now she was going to detest me with a vengeance.

We’d remained silent for a long time, both pensive.

Then Mac looked around his classroom. “Does this mean that...?”

I nodded. “You have to go. This will be your last day in this classroom and we’ll give you until noon tomorrow to vacate the house.”

He’d pulled in a long and tired breath. “I see.”

“I suggest you go and see the dean right away.”

He’d nodded and I had left him then.

Now, with Mac gone and Layla taking the whole competition, I had to find a way to make her understand my actions. As difficult as it would be, I had to try.

In the distance I saw her, beaming with pride all while displaying a humble blush. She was spectacular. My father and his producer were speaking to her. She smiled, blushed deeper and seemed truly flushed by their comments.

“You deserve it, Layla,” I whispered. “You deserve it all.”

A wave of intense fatigue swept over me and while good manners would have dictated that I go speak with my father, I turned and left. The heat was getting to me. The stress of it all...

I hurried home, eager to get to my bedroom, to my bed. With every step I took, all I could think about was going to sleep.

I made it home, my limbs shaking violently. I had just enough time to throw myself onto my bed.

And I was out.

Chapter 18

Layla



Though my hand was in Errol King's as he congratulated me on my win, I could still hardly believe it. I'd come to think for certain that the whole thing was fixed, and that Axel would win no matter what.

But I'd won. I'd really won.

While I smiled and nodded at Errol King and his producer, I noticed Axel quietly slipping away.

Wait a minute. Did he think that I was just going to let the whole Chef Mac thing slide by?

I chatted with Errol King a few more moments, then left in search of Axel.

As I marched my way to his home, I thought about what I wanted to say to him. I wanted him to reinstate Chef Mac. There was no reason for him to be sent away. I was even willing to leave the school myself in exchange for bringing Mac back to his class.

By the time I reached Axel's luxurious house, I was pumped and ready. I had all my points in line, and I was ready to throw them at him. His head was going to spin.

I rang the doorbell and patiently waited.

"Come on, Axel," I said when he didn't answer. "I know you're in there. I saw you walk away from the competition tent with your tail between your legs."

I rang again. Still nothing.

"Come out here and face me like a man," I said a little louder.

When he still didn't come, I banged on the door and was surprised to see it swing open. I poked my head inside.

"Axel?" I called out.

A strange groan and plaintive cry came from upstairs and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

“Axel?” I slowly entered the house and looked up at the second floor.

The plaintive cries grew louder. “No,” he called out. “Stop!”

Had someone broken into the house? Was he being attacked?

No. Axel was strong and athletic... and he wouldn't be whimpering like this. His cries were strange, almost like those of a child.

I slowly made my way up the stairs where his voice was coming from and then spotted the open door to a bedroom. The cries intensified. But they weren't cries of pain. They were cries of fear.

“Axel?” I said softly as I entered his bedroom.

He was curled up on the bed, his sheets and bedcovers all kicked down to the foot of the bed. He was still fully dressed except for his shoes that laid haphazardly beside the bed. He haven't even changed out of the clothes he wore during the competition.

“No,” he muttered tearfully. “No.” His face was covered in sweat, but there was a line of wetness on his cheeks. Tears.

“Axel, wake up.” I came to the side of the bed and reached out to touch his shoulder.

“No!” he shouted out. “Don't touch me. No. You can't touch me. No. No! Don't touch me there. Stop it. No! It doesn't feel good. Stop it! I don't like it.”

“Axel, you have to wake up,” I said, gently shaking him.

“Stop it!” he shrieked. “I don't want you to touch me! Stop it!”

A heartfelt sob rose to my chest as tears filled my eyes when the horror of what I realized Axel was crying about hit

me. I pulled my hand back hoping it would ease his crying, but he kept whimpering and begging not to be touched.

“You’re having an awful nightmare, Axel,” I said, coming in close to his face. “You have to wake up. Wake up.”

I was hoping that was all it was. A nightmare. But as I watched his face wince, and his body coil into himself like a wounded child, I knew something horrible had happened to Axel, and it may have traumatized him to this day.

Chapter 19

Layla



After a while, Axel calmed down and seemed to have slipped into a more pleasant dream. I reached out to put the back of my hand against his brow.

He was incredibly hot.

“Damn it, Axel,” I whispered. “What’s going on with you?”

I pulled my phone out of my purse and dialed the number Errol King had just given me.

“Mr. King. This is Layla. Layla Tyler.”

“Yes, Miss Tyler,” he said in a very professional tone. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m at your son’s house and he doesn’t seem to be doing very well. He has a fever and...”

“I’ll be right over.”

He abruptly ended the call and for the next five minutes, I sat watching Axel, trying to understand what was happening to him.

Clearly concerned about his son, Errol arrived at the house only moments later and had a doctor come to check in on Axel.

After the doctor left, Errol looked at me then looked at his watch. “I have to be in San Francisco in two hours and...” He looked at Axel.

“I can stay here with him,” I offered. “I’ll stay with him until he wakes up and makes sure he gets whatever he needs.”

Errol King smiled at me. “I know he’s been giving you a hard time lately. He’s a tough competitor.”

“That he is,” I said.

“It’s all the more admirable that you would willingly sit here and take care of him.”

And that’s what I did over the course of the next few days. I spent the days and a good part of the nights watching over him, silently pleading for him to wake up.

As I looked at him, perspiration accumulating on his brow while he tossed and turned, I tried to understand what had happened. The doctor had been unable to explain why he was so feverish.

Had the stress of the competition pushed him over the edge? Had my affair with Chef Mac affected him so deeply?

Watching him as he once again was carried away on some awful nightmare, I couldn’t help but wonder what trauma he had suffered. What had set off the stream of bad dreams? Was it simply the fever that was the cause, or something else?

I prepared to leave the house one afternoon as Kobe came in to stay with Axel. I was tempted to ask him what he knew about the possible trauma his brother might have had. After all, he was his brother, his twin. If anyone knew what hardships Axel had gone through, it should be him.

But I said nothing, simply smiling and nodding as I left the room.

I was in a strange slow motion sort of fog all those days, going back to my dorm room and trying to make as if everything was normal, all while acutely aware of how strange things had become.

The following morning, as I arrived at the house, Kobe looked up at me with the first glimmer of hope I’d seen all week.

“He opened his eyes briefly this morning,” he said.

“Oh. That’s such great news.”

“He said he was thirsty, maybe a little hungry, but he fell back asleep before I could bring him anything.”

“I’ll fix him some soup and bring it up to him,” I offered.

“Good. Thanks.” He looked around uncomfortably. “I have to get going and my dad won’t be able to make it today.”

“That’s okay, Kobe,” I said. “I can spend the day here. I have no classes.”

“Good. I’ll be back later tonight.”

Tonight? I wanted to say. But I could understand that he needed to get back to his own life. I couldn’t imagine that tending to his brother could be very exciting.

I headed into the kitchen and quickly prepared a simple broth that I brought up to Axel’s room. He stirred the moment I walked in, and I immediately went to his bedside and pushed his damp hair off his brow.

“I’ve brought you some soup, Axel.”

His eyes fluttered open, and he mumbled incoherently.

I set the bowl of soup on the bedside table then did my best to stack a few pillows up in order to sit him up a bit.

He opened his eyes again, but his gaze was unfocused and lost. I settled in to spoon the warm broth into his mouth, and he greedily took every spoonful.

“Do you want some more?” I said as I stood to leave.

But he’d already fallen back asleep.

I brought the dish back downstairs, tidied up the place a bit, then headed back up to check in on him. He slept fitfully, but the nightmares seemed to have diminished. I touched his brow and found that it was far less troubling than it had been. Perhaps not normal, but better.

Before he could begin to stir again, I headed down to the kitchen to prepare something a little more substantial but still easy on his stomach that hadn’t seen food for a while.

I prepared a soft porridge with blueberries and strawberries and brought it up to his room.

“It’s almost dinner time, Axel,” I said, treating him almost as if he were awake. “You must be hungry.”

Still propped up on the pillows, his lips parted though he didn't open his eyes.

"You are hungry, aren't you?" I sat on the edge of the bed and fed him, ensuring he got a big berry with every bite.

But after only a half dozen spoonfuls, he turned away and fell asleep.

As the evening wore on, I looked for something to do; something that would keep me awake. This past week had been exhausting and it was starting to wear me down.

I'd picked up a cookbook from a shelf in the kitchen and settled into the armchair in Axel's room. I flipped through the book, noting several interesting ideas. The photos were beautiful and enticing.

As I read the ingredients the author suggested for a creamy maple syrup pie, I drifted off, thinking of my own part in the recent competition as my eyelids grew heavy.

"I'm starving."

I heard the feeble voice through my fitful sleep.

"Hey. This is good. Even cold, it's good."

Who? Where am I?

"Really good."

My eyes flew open and I sat up, throwing the cookbook off my lap.

"Axel!"

"Yeah," he said with a sheepish grin.

"You're awake!"

"Yeah. And I'm hungry."

"Oh, Axel. You're awake," I said again as I made my way to the side of the bed.

"Yeah. And so are you. Have you been sleeping there long?"

I glanced back at the armchair. “Huh. I don’t know. I dozed off.”

“Clearly.”

I looked at the empty bowl of oatmeal. “Want me to go fix you something else. You must be starving.”

He shrugged. “This was good. Hit the spot. But I don’t think I’m ready for anything more just yet.” He patted the mattress, inviting me to sit down.

I gingerly sat down beside him.

“How long have I been here?” he said, looking around at his room.

“A few days now,” I said. “You really had us worried.”

“Us?”

“Kobe, your father and me.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “I’m glad you’re the one who is here now.”

“You are?”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I opened my eyes and saw you sitting there, sleeping.” He chuckled. “You looked so uncomfortable. Somehow that comforted me.”

I snorted. “Why am I not surprised to find that you are comforted by my discomfort?”

He let out a soft laugh. “I wasn’t comforted by your discomfort. I was comforted by the fact that you would bother to be uncomfortable just to be here with me. I was comforted just knowing that you were here.”

He reached out to take a tentative hold of my hand.

“How are you feeling?” I said, so acutely aware of the touch of his skin against mine.

“Okay, I guess. A little queasy.”

“You had some awful nightmares,” I said. “You really had me worried for a while.”

He looked at me funny and I could tell that he remembered the nightmares he'd had. I wanted to ask him about them but didn't want to force him to relive that.

Over the course of the next few days, we spent a lot of time together. I fixed his meals as he slowly recuperated and gained strength.

He never brought up the nightmares and I just couldn't help but think that he was covering up for someone. That he was protecting someone.

Someone who'd touched him.

Someone who'd hurt him.

And I knew exactly who it was.

Chapter 20

Layla



As the days passed, I eagerly awaited the day when Errol King would return to visit with his son. He visited regularly. Despite his busy schedule, Errol King did managed to show up at the Academy more and more, mainly to see how his sons were doing. He seemed to genuinely care about Axel and Kobe.

That was good that he did show up at the Academy, although he had others managed the school for him. Axel seemed to have a deep wound which he had been carrying since childhood. The way he cried out, the tears streaming down his face, made my heart ached just thinking about what he went through. No child should have been through what he'd been through to affect him so profoundly that even as a young adult, he'd still harbor nightmares. The more I thought about what Axel said during his nightmares, the more I'd come to think that he'd been abused as a child.

And that had to be at the hand of his father, Errol King.

It had to be.

Axel was extremely intimidated by his father. He'd even entered the cooking competition every year just to keep proving that he was the best...that he was indeed Errol King's son.

That pressure to be Errol King's perfect son took its toll on Axel.

What a tyrant of a father Errol King must have been to Axel growing up.

What kind of mental, psychological, and physical abuse did he inflict on poor Axel?

When Errol finally came by, he spent an hour sitting with Axel, talking to him and making sure that everything was alright.

Although he seemed concerned about Axel, I couldn't help getting angry.

As he left Axel's room, I fell in line behind him, unable to hold my pent up anger any longer. "Mr. King," I said. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you."

"Sure thing," he said without missing a step as he headed down the stairs. "But make it fast. I have to be at a meeting at the academy in fifteen minutes."

"Mr. King," I said, trying to capture his gaze. "I think that Axel has been through a very trying... traumatic time."

"The fever was bad," he said. "But that's all behind us now. He's getting better and should be back at the academy in no time."

"No, sir... what I mean is..." Oh, damn it. This wasn't going the way I'd planned. "What I mean is that I believe that Axel may have been traumatized as a child."

Frowning, Errol looked at me. "What are you talking about?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"I'm afraid I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Axel cried out during his nightmares. He cried out to someone who was touching him, begging them to stop. He was weeping, too. Like a child. Something horrible happened to him. He may seem strong and in charge most of the time, but when he was feverish, he became like a small and injured child. He regressed to that time in his life when he was hurt. So hurt that he internalized it for years. Until it physically broke him down."

Errol King stared at me with his brows furrowed.

I finally asked him point blank, "Mr. King, what did you do to him?"

Errol looked at me with disbelief.

"Do to him? I've never done anything to him."

"You never beat him?"

“What? Beat him?” At this he stopped and turned to look squarely into my eyes. “I assure you, young lady, that I never laid a hand on either of my boys. I may not be the best father in the world, but I certainly would never even consider striking them, no matter how naughty they might have been.”

Stunned by his decisive response, I just stared in silence as he opened the door and walked out.

Chapter 21

Errol



As I stepped out of my son's house and closed the door, Layla's words echoed in my head. What was she insinuating? How dare her to accuse me of abusing my own son whom I loved more than anything.

Yes, I was taken aback and upset by her accusation, but I couldn't help but think that there was something to her question.

After all, she had become really close to Axel. Axel had always been frank with me, but there were times when I felt he had a side to him that he tried to hide from his mother Taryn and me. Axel had been an overachiever since childhood, and he was competitive in many ways, but he had self-doubts, even some trepidation when it came to new things, that I had to encouraged and push him a bit to help him along.

But debilitating nightmares?

Crying out for someone to stop?

What the fuck?

I was about to turn around and head back inside to find out what more she knew when I saw Taryn come up the drive.

"Errol," she said as she killed the engine and hurried out of her car. "Where is he? Where's Axel?"

"Calm down, honey," I said as she came up to the stoop.

Forever a fashion plate, she looked great in a blush colored suit with a crisp white shirt and white leather slingbacks.

"He's awake," I said. "He's doing better."

"I want to go in and see him."

Just as she was about to open the door, Layla came out.

“Mr. King, I...” She stopped as she almost bumped into Taryn. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Taryn,” I said. “This is Layla, the student I was telling you about.”

Taryn smiled as she appraised Layla. “So, you’re the girl who has my son jumping through hoops.”

Layla smiled as she glanced at Taryn then at me.

“Taryn is my wife,” I said. “Axel and Kobe’s mother.”

“Oh,” Layla said. “So happy to meet you. Axel is...”

“I know. I know,” Taryn said. “He can be difficult at times, but he’s a good boy... a good man, I mean. He has a kind heart and would do anything to help us out. He’s the perfect son.”

“Actually, I was going to say that he’s doing much better. Um... I... well...”

“I’m very much troubled by what you said earlier,” I said, guiding both women back into the house.

“I didn’t mean to accuse you,” Layla said. “It’s just that... He just sounded so awful... so scared.”

“What are you two talking about?” Taryn said.

I looked at Layla then at my beautiful wife. I knew her well enough to know that she was going to freak out when I told her. The very thought of anyone touching her precious babies was enough to throw her into a raging fit.

After a moment’s thought, I nodded, giving Layla permission to say what she had to say.

“Axel’s had awful nightmares, crying out that someone stop touching him. He was scared and I’m sure he’s traumatized by something.”

I looked at Taryn’s calm face, but I knew that her emotions were bubbling up inside. Saying nothing, she backed up into the living room and sat down.

“You think that someone abused him?” she said, looking at Layla with troubled eyes. “Someone touched him without his consent?” She shook her head. “What? Like when he was a child?”

“I don’t know,” Layla said, quickly going to sit in the armchair across from Taryn. “It seemed like it. He sounded small and afraid. He sounded like a little boy facing off with a terrifying adult. I could be wrong, but the emotions in his voice were just so strong, so convincing. They were also quite repetitive. Over and over again he begged not to be touched.”

Taryn looked up at me, her eyes imploring me. “Who?” she said, her voice restrained. “Who could have done this to him?”

Chapter 22

Axel



I heard my mother's voice downstairs and expected her to burst into my room at any moment. Though she was not a woman given to panic and hysteria, I had no doubt that she was concerned when she learned that I'd fallen ill.

But I wondered how I would ever be able to tell her of the hellish nightmares I'd had these past few nights.

Through the fever, I didn't remember much of anything. I barely remembered the end of the competition, didn't remember getting home that day and had no recollection of Layla so constantly at my side, nursing me back to health all this time.

The nightmares, however. Those I remembered. I remembered them all too well. Probably because they weren't just nightmares. They were actual memories from a far, far away time...memories I had repressed because they were so horrible.

But now I remembered. All the sordid details.

How old had I been? Five. It'd begun when I was five and had gone on until I was well past seven years old. I could still remember her face so clearly. She had big blond hair, bright red lips and a huge bosom. Her laugh still haunted me; part giggle, part cackle.

She was a flirtatious and exuberant woman, very touchy feely with everyone, and she'd been particularly fond of me.

A chill ran up my spine just thinking of what she did to me. What she wanted me to do, too.

I was too young to know better, to know anything, but every time it was over, I felt dirty and disgusted. Sick. There was a great deal of guilt and fear that she made me feel, warning me that if I told anyone about our secret, she would tell my parents what a horrible bad kid I've been. That she

would make sure my parents hate me and punish me. She also said she would harm Kobe, my parents, and our baby brother. She said she can make them disappear, and I would be homeless and without a family. No one would want such a nasty little snitch.

For over two years, I endured her molestations. For over two years, I tried to find excuses to get away from her. Whenever she came around, I would head off to a friend's house. If I'd somehow missed that opportunity and was trapped in the house, I would spend an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom, just to avoid being with her.

My memory was foggy as I tried to remember what part she took in my life. How had she come to be in my life and to have such intimate access to me? It was vague. A friend of my mother's? An employee of my father's?

I wasn't sure. All I knew is that one day, she was gone.

I was relieved and thought that I was finally free, but as the years passed and my interest in girls grew, I realized that I had a blockage; a sexual blockage. Despite my attraction to girls and my desire to be with them, something kept me from giving myself entirely to them. Something always held me back. Sure, girls like Tilly could blow me, since that wasn't intimate, but when it came to me doing anything sexually intimate with a woman on a woman, I couldn't.

Over the years, I developed a particular aversion to overtly sexual women. I didn't know why. I just did. However, Layla, with her beautiful and sexy body, her exquisite face, that luscious blond hair and that heartwarming smile... she threw me off, she...

I hated to admit it, but she scared me. Not in the typical frightened sense, but more in how she really made me feel deep inside. I saw her sensuality, but also saw the good-hearted woman beneath it, adding to my confusion.

That one time I'd succumbed... I'd been unable to control myself, to hold back and my fears of sexual intercourse faded, replaced by the intense need to have her. I wanted her more than my fears.

As wonderful and spectacular as it'd been though, I'd felt dirty and degraded immediately after. It was crazy. I was drawn to her, excited by her and yet felt dirty for having touched her.

Shit. Was I going crazy?

I wanted her. I wanted more and more of her.

I turned to look out my bedroom window, trying to make sense of it all. Since the very beginning of the semester, I'd been on a merry-go-round of emotions, and it was wearing me out.

Then there was the issue with Mac. What a shock that had been. Learning that he and Layla were hooking up was upsetting enough, but to learn that he had already impregnated two women from school and his own restaurant, added to my anger.

He'd had an affair with a young student, getting her pregnant, then dropping her. Then he'd seduced an employee at one of his restaurants and had had her fired the moment he'd learned she was pregnant. He was a heartless ass who used women for his own sexual pleasure...women who looked up to him for guidance. He was a harasser, and though the women gave him consent, his treatment of them was heartless. And I didn't know about his past until that day Dad showed up with the letter.

Mac's relationship with Layla had come on so quickly. I couldn't help but think that he was an active predator, deliberately going out on the hunt for young, feminine blood.

The thought made my blood boil. I didn't want her to become another victim of his. I didn't want her hurt. I couldn't stand it. I'd rather drive her out of the school than have her ruined by Mac.

I looked at the armchair where Layla had been sleeping as I'd awakened. I'd been initially surprised to see her there, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was no surprise at all.

Despite having all the sexual powers a girl could have, she was a sweet and kind hearted soul who tried to bring good to everyone around her.

And I had essentially pissed on her.

Damn.

And despite how dreadful I'd been towards her, she still came to sit at my bedside and took care of me.

What a woman. She was extraordinary.

No wonder I was falling in love with her.

Chapter 23

Taryn King



When Errol said Axel had something happened to him as a child, I looked into my husband's face with disbelief. My boys. My beautiful little boys. They were so innocent and joyful. Who in the world could have ever mistreated them? Who had access to them to the point where they could freely abuse them without my knowledge?

"I don't believe these are mere nightmares," Layla was saying. "He seemed to have gone back several years, remembering horrible events in his life."

She seemed genuinely concerned for my son and I immediately liked her. I would have to tell her that at some point, but now, all I wanted to do was figure out who had mistreated my boys.

"We'll figure this out, Taryn," Errol said. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

You're damned right, we'll get to the bottom of this. My son is traumatized. Whoever did this to him will pay.

The rolodex in my head spun around as I tried to find the culprit. I'd had very few babysitters. For all my ambitions and desire to build a name for myself in the culinary world, I'd been a hands-on mother, always there for my babies. I always had time for them. They came with me to work and I kept an eye on them.

Then when? Who? Where?

We'd temporarily hired a nanny who'd helped out when they were toddlers. She was a sweet, older woman who was attentive and caring, giving me an occasional reprieve from the exhausting task of tending to two young and energetic boys.

But I'd always been there all the same. She was rarely alone with the boys.

Then another face came to me like a bolt of lightning. Not that of the nanny, but Erica. Oh, my God. Yes. Erica Babbette.

My heart raced as I thought back to the woman Errol had hired as an assistant at one of his restaurants. She was smart, ambitious, fun and flirty.

Flirty. Oh my God.

At the time, I'd seen her flirting as innocent fun, but... Her voice suddenly echoed in my ears.

“What beautiful little boys.”

“You two are going to be little heartbreakers.”

“What I wouldn't give to be five years old again.”

“There you go, breaking my heart again.”

She'd been charming, and she had indeed charmed us. Even when she'd flirted with my husband, I hadn't felt threatened. It was just her way.

I was suddenly flooded with visions and words. When I'd bring the boys to the restaurant Erica was working at, she always offered to look in on them. She loved playing with them and telling them stories.

I had appreciated her, all that time thinking that she really loved my boys... in a healthy way.

Oh, my God, I thought as I gagged. The signs were all there.

Tears filled my eyes as I remembered Axel and how he'd grown increasingly uncomfortable around her.

On the few occasions when I'd asked her to stay and take care of the boys, they had both initially loved her, always looking forward to spending time with her. They found her fun and amusing.

But as time wore on, Axel would throw a fit every time there was even the prospect of her watching over them. I'd shrugged it off. I guess it'd suited me at the time. On days when I was busy and needed a helping hand, I simply forced

the boys to accept my decision. I justified my actions, despite Axel's plaintive whines. He's just a capricious little boy... he's just shy... he's uncomfortable with girls... he's uncomfortable with women.

I don't know what I was thinking, but I never, ever, in my wildest dreams thought that this was going on.



“TARYN?” ERROL ASKED, touching my arm. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head, remembering where I was. I was at Axel and Kobe's house near the culinary academy Errol and I had opened and had our twin sons run. Axel and Kobe were a bit young to manage an entire academy, but Errol insisted that they get thrown into management so they can have a head start running the King businesses.

At first I thought Axel had collapsed due to the immense pressure and stress he was under, but now I knew it was more, and I was damn worried.

“I'm going to go up to see him,” I suddenly blurted out as I got to my feet. “I want to see how he's doing.”

Layla nodded. “He was awake just a few moments ago. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you.”

I headed up the stairs and walked into my son's bedroom. He suddenly looked so small and frail in that bed like he did when he was a little boy. Suddenly images of the sweet little boy he'd been repeatedly played in my mind since hearing of his possible trauma. My heart was breaking as I looked at my poor little Axel.

“How are you feeling, Ax?” I said.

“Happy to see you, Mom,” he said with a tired smile. “Really happy to see you.”

“What's all this about?” I said as I sat on the edge of the bed. “Fever... sleeping for days. What's going on with you?”

He shrugged. "I don't know. The stress of it all got to me, I guess."

I chuckled softly as I reached out to pat the back of his hand. "You guess, huh."

"Are you going to be in town for long?"

I had planned on staying for a while, but with this new information, my need to see Erica Babbette in person suddenly took precedence over everything.

"I'd love to, honey," I said. "But there's someone in New York that I have to see."

"Oh?" Axel said. "Are you going to go see Grandma?"

"No." Although my mother lived in New York City and my family was from there, my present state of mind didn't allow for a friendly visit with anyone.

"Uncle Bobby? Dad said that he just opened up a new restaurant."

"No," I said. "I might drop in if I have the time, but..."

"Well, say hi all the same. I know that they're both busy running the family restaurant out in Brooklyn, but it would be nice to see them again."

"I'll send them your love if I see them," I said, thinking about what a big shot chef my brother had become.

Before Axel could ask any more questions, I stood and looked down at him. "That Layla girl looks like a keeper." I turned and headed to the door, then glanced back at him. "I like the way she's taking care of my little boy."

He smiled, his sweet and innocent, yet sad smile. "I like the way she's taking care of me, too. I think I might keep her around."

"I think that's a good idea."

I looked at him, trying to read him.

Yes. I was going to make Erica Babbette pay for what she'd done to my boy... my boys.

I closed the door and pulled out my phone before making my way downstairs.

“Russell,” I said. “Can you have the plane ready for me in twenty minutes?”

“Sure thing, Mrs. King. Where to?”

“New York City.”

Chapter 24

Layla



The day after Axel's mother visited him, I headed up to his room to bring him lunch.

"How does a nice ham sandwich sound?" I said. "With a nice, freshly made coleslaw with my own special blend of spices."

"Sounds great," Axel said. "I'm ready for some real food."

I set the tray across his lap as he propped himself up to eat.

"It's good to see you... well, being your old self again," I said.

He cocked an amused brow as he took a bite of the sandwich and looked up at me. "Are you sure about that?" He chewed a bit, then added, "I mean, my old self was pretty crappy to you."

"Yeah," I conceded. I wanted to say more. I wanted to tell him how happy I'd been spending time at his house with him. But was the old Axel really back? Like, completely back?

"This is good," Axel said, holding up the sandwich. "What'd you put in here?"

"A little of this and that," I said.

The room was silent as he took a few more bites. I could feel the tension growing. Was my time here over? Was he setting up to send me on my merry little way?

He finished with the sandwich, ate all the slaw, then wiped his hands on the linen napkin I'd put on the tray.

"That sure hit the spot."

"Good." I picked up the tray and looked down at him. "I really am glad that you're better. I guess you won't be needing me around here anymore."

His eyes widened with surprise, but then he caught himself and looked at me pragmatically. “I guess I have taken up quite a bit of your time this past week.”

I nodded. “I’m glad I was able to help.”

“I don’t want to be an imposition...”

“It wasn’t an imposition,” I said with a shrug. “I... I liked...”

He reached for the tray and set it down on the bedside table, then took my hand in his and pulled me until I was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You liked what?” he said, looking intently into my eyes.

I felt flustered and cast my gaze down to his chest. “I guess with you being sick... and quiet... well, it was nice. I saw a more vulnerable side of you, and I...”

“So, you liked being here? With me?” he ventured.

I sucked in my cheeks, expecting him to add some snotty comment. When he said nothing, I looked into his eyes and nodded, holding back tears. What if he didn’t feel the same as I did? What if he thought I was just another one of those girls who had tried to see him when he was sick?

I waited with bated breath.

“I liked having you here with me, too,” he said softly. I’d never heard him use that tone before. Not while he was sick. Not when speaking to anyone else. Not even that one time we’d made love. “And I would like it if you could stay.”

I couldn’t help but smile. My heart pounded with joy and my eyes filled with blissful tears. I wanted to fall into his arms, lay upon his chest and hold him forever, but I was frozen in place, afraid that it was all a ruse.

“I’m a complicated man,” he said as he ran his fingers through my hair then cupped my cheek. “But, I’m a good man.”

I snorted softly. “Funny. That’s what your mother said of you.”

Smiling, he cocked his head to the side. “My mother said I was complicated?”

I smiled back at him, enjoying the verbal sparring. “Actually, I believe the word she used was ‘difficult’.”

He laughed and squeezed my hand. “Yeah. That’s my mother all right.”

We sat in silence for a long moment. The air was thick with our mixed emotions, neither seemingly willing to put themselves out there.

“I never really got the chance to tell you just how happy I am that you won the competition,” he finally said.

“I am pretty proud of myself,” I said, jutting out my chin.

“As you should be.”

He gently pulled me to him, his free hand coming up to grasp my elbow and pull me closer. “The least I can do is give you a congratulatory kiss.”

“The least...” I whispered as my eyelids grew heavy and my lips readied for his.

His lips just barely brushed against mine, as if testing the waters, then grew hungrier as his mouth took over mine.

“I’m such a dunce for rejecting you the way I did,” he said when he pulled away from the kiss.

“You have been quite... well... mean.”

“I think I was afraid of what you did to me... how you made me feel. I wasn’t ready for that.”

“And now?” I said.

He looked me in the eye. “I love you, Layla.”

I was stunned by his words.

“I love you,” he said again before kissing me.

Those three little words opened up a whole new world for both of us.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I realized how much I felt for Axel, “I love you too,” I said.

“Good,” Axel smiled, before placing his forehead against mine and closing his eyes. “If you didn’t feel the same, I’d be devastated.”

Chapter 25

Layla



We were sprawled out together on his huge sectional in the living room watching an action flick. The last few weeks had been blissful. I got to know Axel on a whole other level, and I loved every minute of it. We had so much in common in the kitchen, our way of seeing food, the process of preparing food, and the importance of bringing a full and well-rounded experience to the customer.

Everyone on campus learned of our budding relationship, and their attitude toward me completely changed. It was as close to being treated like a princess as I would ever get.

It was great being with Axel, even when we weren't doing anything special. Even though we spent a lot of time in the kitchen, working and sharing ideas, the truth was that just being wrapped up in his arms was enough to leave me feeling complete.

"Think of all the headache I could have saved myself if I'd just given in to falling for you," he said when we took a break from the movie and got up to stretch our legs and make a fresh batch of popcorn.

"That's what happens when you're stubborn," I said with a teasing grin. "You miss out on the good things."

"Speaking of missing out on a good thing, my father doesn't want to miss out on your talent. He wants you in his elegant Belair restaurant."

"Well, I know that he's supposed to be taking one of my recipes into his kitchen. Is that what you mean?"

"No, Layla. I mean you. He wants you. We all want you to become a part of the team. But with all the offers you're sure to get now that you've won the competition... well you've got choices, Princess. My father is worried he might lose out."

I leaned back and looked at him. “You want me as part of the King team? Like a real, integral part of the team?”

“We want you, Layla. You’d have just as much input as we all do... your recipes, your ideas.” He looked thoughtfully at me. “So. What do you say?”

“I say, I couldn’t imagine working for anyone else,” I said, thrilled at the prospect of working with Errol King and his sons.

Kobe suddenly burst into the house and ran up the stairs.

“Well... hello,” Axel called up after him.

“Yeah!” Kobe shouted just before he slammed his bedroom door.

“What’s with him?” I said, glancing at the staircase. “He’s been so...” I looked at Axel as I searched for an appropriate word. Kobe had been acting strange, preoccupied and increasingly secretive.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Axel said. “But I would sure like to find out. I don’t want to be overdramatic about the whole thing, but he’s been acting really strange lately. Some days I barely recognize him.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’d kind of noticed. While you were sick, he had a few heated arguments with your father about staying here to help keep an eye on you. He always had somewhere to go. That was why I was here so often. Kobe wasn’t.”

“Thank God you were here. I’m grateful for that, but damn, I hope he’s not getting himself into any trouble,” Axel said.

His phone beeped a notification and he headed back into the living room to grab it.

“What?” he muttered. “Holy fuck.”

“What is it?” I said, coming up behind him and wrapping my arms around his waist as I tried to peek at his phone’s screen. I couldn’t see anything.

“Holy...” He choked on his words, and I thought I heard a sob come from him.

Alarmed, I maneuvered myself around to come up and face him. “Axel, what’s wrong? What’s going on?”

He simply handed me his phone as he turned away, wiping the tears from his eyes. His face was red and his mouth contorted into a grimace.

I looked at the screen of his phone. It was an article from a New York City newspaper.

Well-known New York chef, Erica Babbette, was found dead in an alleyway trash bin late last night. Reports say that she had been dead for days and was bludgeoned to death. The authorities are blaming the sudden spike in violent crimes across the city. There are calls for an autopsy from many of her fans.

I read the name over and over again; Erica Babbette. Then I looked at the photo of her at the start of the article.

She appeared to be in her late thirties, perhaps early forties. An attractive woman with a vivacious spark in her eyes and a very welcoming smile.

Setting the phone down, I looked at Axel who was shaken by his uncontrollable sobs.

“I can’t believe it,” he muttered.

She’s the one, isn’t she? I wanted to say. *She’s the one who hurt you. She’s the one who traumatized you. She’s the one who had you twisting and turning in your bed with awful nightmares.*

And now, she was dead.

Chapter 26

Taryn



I put down my phone as I read the breaking news. New York Chef Erica Babette was dead.

Closing my eyes, I held back tears. The tears that I'd been shedding since I found out about Axel's continued assault from that woman, for years. For years! How could I not know? How could Errol not know?

Erica Babette seemed so friendly, so good with children. Being young parents, especially a first time mother, I was desperate for some help with child care. But I'd never sacrifice my child's innocence for it. How fucking dare that bitch. That monster for what she did to my boys.

My dear Axel. He would never be abused again. Not by her, that molester. That monster! Erica Babette was gone.

Axel can lay his nightmares to rest. That woman who had abused our trust in her, had misused her authority as a caretaker even temporarily, would never again harm another young child.

How dare anyone harm not only a child's body, but mind to the extent the child would be traumatized for life. Especially my Axel. And when I thought about how Kobe was in her care, too, it made me shudder.

Thank God, that woman was gone.

Like everyone else who read the breaking news on the internet and through social media, I was surprised. Just a bit, but not much.

Like I thought. They attributed that monster's death to the high crime rate happening in New York City at the moment. The increased homicide rate, lack of law enforcement, and criminal prosecution. There wasn't even an investigation into her death. My how times have changed.

That was why when you wanted justice, and there was no longer a system for it, you do something about it.

I always believed that justice would be served when you take matters into your own hands when the people who was supposed to be protecting innocents had turned a blind eye to crime.

So when it comes to protecting your loved ones, especially your kids, a mother's got to do what a mother's got to do.

Now that Axel had have his traumatic breakdown, it made me worry about Kobe, too. Kobe was more laid back than Axel. He had always been more sociable, and not as serious as Axel, but from the phone call I had from Axel earlier, it seemed that Kobe was acting strange, like he was on drugs or something.

Axel told me Kobe apparently was gone all the time Axel was ill. Layla had stepped in to check on Axel instead, which was why she was over at Axel's all that time.

Thank God. It brought her closer to Axel. I smiled. Axel had never talked about a girl in the kind of tone as he did about Layla. He was definitely in love. Axel was like his father Errol. So much like him that he wouldn't recognize love until he'd almost lost it.

Errol almost lost my love with all the dumb, stubborn foolish things he did. Such an alpha male, Errol was sexy as hell and just as cocky, but dense when it came to true love.

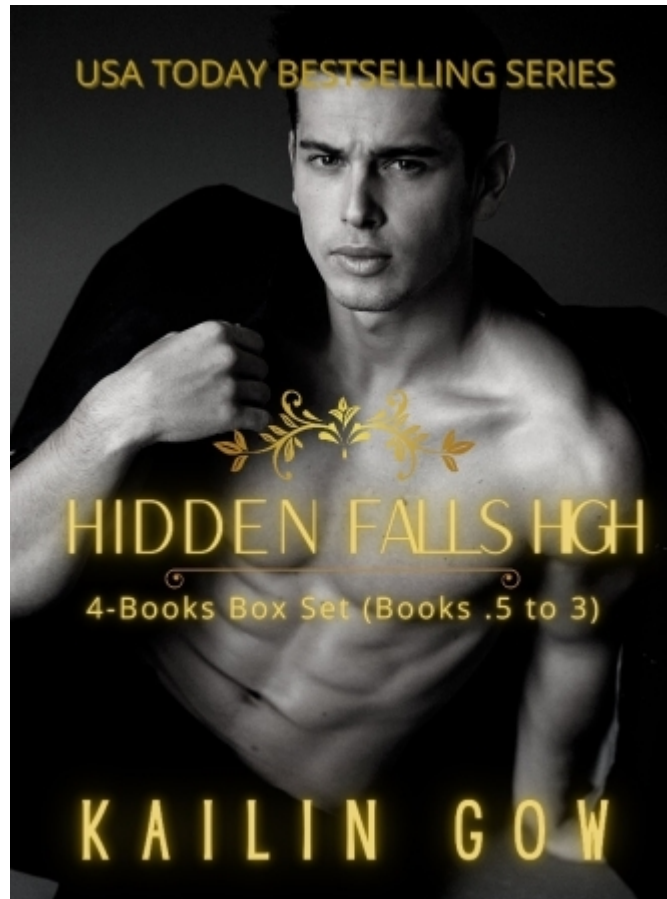
Apparently his son Axel was that way too. Thank God Layla stuck with him. Tough smart women like us were exactly the kind that could tame the Kings.

Now was Kobe King just like his brother and father or was his strange troubling behavior something else? Whatever it was, this begs for a trip back to California to see how my other twin boy was doing.

Because something tells me Kobe may be hiding a secret even darker than Axel's.



Layla, Axel, Kobe, Kat, and the Kings' story will continue in:
Sinner King: Book 2 of The Kings of Fire Series.



Now that Nat Donovan had left...

Hidden Falls High has a new King...

Dante Black, the blackest of the Blacks.

Another home, another new school.

Another target.

Life was supposed to be smooth sailing when you're at the end of your high school year.

Of course it is.

Especially when you're the one your father relies on to take care of loose ends. And by the time you're 17, you've already earned yourself a reputation amongst the Inner Circle as someone to be feared.

Who am I? I'm the charming Prince, the Golden Boy, the one no one suspects to have no heart.

Until I saw her...my target. The girl I will bring down because she is his crush. Summer.

Who knew crushes could be so cruel?



There is someone new living in the Donovans' old mansion in Hidden Falls, the exclusive enclave in Malibu. He's a senior at the Academy, but he seems older like

he's already seen so much in the world. Maybe he has. Maybe he's not of this world.

I thought I had finally found peace at Hidden Falls High...but the nightmare is just beginning...

***Hidden Falls High is a Dark High School Romance mature YA/New Adult series intended for 17 and up due to language and mature matters. Any sex is consensual.

Another home, another new school.

More Books like The Inner Circle



BOOK SERIES



BAD BOY ROYALS OF KINGSBURY PREP (Complete)

RH New Adult/High School Bully Dark Contemporary Romance – HEAT 4 out of 5

Tempest and The Black Envelope (Books 1 and 2) with Bonus and Clue on the Treasure

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07Z44T1PF>

Revenge

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07SQP3HL3>

Secret Princess

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07YLHJ38K>

Fallen Royals

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XXC625K>

Reign of Rebels

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XM3FKW6>

Link to Kingsbury Prep Series

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/bookseries/B07S7ZVZWQ>

Complete Series Box Set

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B08781CS94>

Kingmakers of Kingsbury Series

RH Bully Fantasy Paranormal Shifter Fae Romance – HEAT 4 out of 5

Long before there was an All-Royals Academy called Kingsbury Prep, there was the Kingmaker and her kings.

As Violet Kingsbury, I was born to be a kingmaker. In a time when wars were common and thrones were fought after, the only name that could bring about peace...the only man that could trump the decrees of kings was Kingsbury. The Kingmaker. But when the legendary Kingmaker is disposed, and the time of the Choosing has come, can I, the daughter of The Kingmaker rise to take the place of my father? I am about to find out as the strongest, most capable, and most legendary princes across the lands come to challenge me for the Choosing including 4 of the most handsome princes who not only wants to win, but to want to win me, too:

Avery

Axel

Reggie

Ollie

*Becoming Kingmaker, even as The Kingmaker's daughter, will not be easy in a male world where ladies were supposed to be daMs.els who needed saving. To become Kingmaker, I will prove to all, especially the princes, that I am here to stay, and will be the one doing the saving. **Kingmakers of Kingsbury Series, is a Reverse Harem Bully Romance with mixed genres elements, action, and mature scenes recommended for age 17 and up.*

Kingmaker's Kings (Book 1)

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082QMNCW4>

Kingmaker's Kiss (Book 2) (May 18, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B084BZYW28>

Kingmaker's Kill (Book 3) (July 28, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B084BT8154>



HEARTBREAK FALLS

5 RH Bully Dark New Adult/High School Romance Mystery – HEAT 4 out of 5

With a name like Heartbreak Falls, one didn't expect to find love at the new town I had moved to courtesy of my new stepfamily aka Mom's new husband and his sons.

Something was up with my new rich stepfather, his sons, and what happened to their last stepmother. Something was up with the entire town, which my stepfamily seem to run. Along with the school where my stepbrothers reigned as cruel princes. All 3 of them were known as The Heartbreakers. Two were twins and my age, and then there was Tristan, the oldest. Gorgeous but god-awful hateful to me. What was up?

I was about to find out...if I lived long enough.

***Heartbreak Falls is a RH Dark Bully Romance and mystery for 18 and up. It is YA/NA and has themes of bullying and sex. If that's fine with you, then dig in! Bully Me Not is book 1 of 5 and contains a cliffhanger.*

Bully Me Not

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XNQV36Q>

Break Me Not

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XX7HZZZ>

Dare Me Not

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07Z4369V7>



DESTROY ME NOT (JUNE 29, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B084C143VR>



LOVE ME NOT (SEPTEMBER 28, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B084BTRVYN>



LINK TO ALL SERIES

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/bookseries/B07Y6PZ57G>

HOUSE

RH Dark College New Adult Romance – HEAT 5 out of 5



IT WAS HIS LAST WILL and testament.

For one week, four of us was to live together. Play nice to each other like we used to when we were kids.

Seb, Thomas, Ashford and me.

Three of Mr. Keystone's sons and me, the maid's daughter.

All those years, the three sons bullied and ridiculed me because I was the maid's daughter.

So, why was I back? Why did I cared to be in the same house as those three tormentors?

Because I was in Mr. Keystone's will.

He had always been kind to me, even if his sons weren't, so I could only honor his wishes. And he was like a father to me, and didn't treat me like the maid's daughter. But as soon as I could, I left to go to college. Two years ago. Meanwhile, the boys went their separate ways, too. Estranged from each other.

So why was I here having to live in the same house with his sons for a week?

I don't know, but I'm about to find out, even if it meant my old adolescent feelings for all three of them might surface again. And if being in the mansion we called a house together might jog some memories of the wild nights we've had here.

It's just one week. I could survive that. Or could I?

***House is the first book in The House Series, which is a Reverse Harem Dark College Romance recommended for age 18+ due to mature themes.*

House (The House Series, Book #1) (May 26, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0863Z36S5>

Haven (The House Series, Book #2) (August 25, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B087BFJWK5>

Habit (The House Series, Book #3) (Nov. 2, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B087B6MZDM>

HEIRS (The House Series, Book #4) (Feb. 8, 2021)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B087BCKS27>

Haunt (The House Series, Book #5) (April 6, 2021)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B087BGL27P>

Home (The House Series, Book #6) (Nov, 2021)

FALLEN FAE ACADEMY

RH Bully Romance Fantasy Paranormal Fae – HEAT 4 out of 5

“At Fallen Fae Academy, the magic will either complete you or kill you.”

My name is Harley, as in Harlequin. Plucked from my home from Las Vegas, NV, and placed into an University on an arts scholarship, suddenly I am the girl the four hottest and most popular boys have decided to “initiate”.

This is no ordinary “hazing” ritual, and these boys are no ordinary boys.

This mysterious University looks like any ivy league campus, but it isn’t. Step in and you are transported beyond your wildest imagination. I should be ecstatic being here. Except surviving “Initiation” is going to take everything I’ve got.

Don’t let the beauty of the four fae boys fool you. They are as dangerous as they are beautiful. And underneath everything, runs a deep secret. One I need to find out before Initiation kills me.



THEY THINK A HUMAN is weak. They think I shouldn’t be at this university. I’m about to prove them wrong.



**THE FALLEN FAE SERIES is a 6-book RH Academy College Bully Romance Series featuring a badass heroine, four deadly, striking fae princes, heart-pounding action, super steamy love scenes, and great romance.

Initiation: Year 1 Fallen Fae Academy Book 1

<https://www.amazon.com/Initiation-Year-Academy-Reversed-Paranormal-ebook/dp/B07V9L8LHD>

Transformation: Year 2 Fallen Fae Academy Book 2

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07WWFXVCH>



DECLARATION: YEAR 3 Fallen Fae Academy Book 3

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07XLMS.GDJ>

Interruption War Year 3 (Fallen Fae Academy #4) (April 13, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0833JC8YJ>



DISRUPTION (FALLEN Fae Academy #5) (July 13, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B084DB7F1B>

Succession (Fallen Fae Academy Book #6) (October 19, 2020)

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B084D4VRCY>



FALLEN FAE ACADEMY Box Set Part 1 (Books 1 -3)

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B08772LQFT>



FALLEN FAE B. I. SERIES

RH Paranormal Romance Fantasy – HEAT 4 out of 5

Fae-ther Issues (Fallen Fae B.I. Book #1) Coming in 2021!

Now that it is changeling Harley's Mission to find and capture the rogue dark fae her evil father has unleashed into the human world, Harley leaves the opulence of her mother's kingdom in the Faery Realms. to return to her human adopted parents' home in Las Vegas to start her career as a trainee FBI agent. Piece of cake, isn't it, especially since she has finally discovered and mastered the powerful fae magic she went through the Fallen Fae Academy to learn. When a series of unusual murders show up along the Strip, and a close friend becomes the suspect, Harley would never have guess who would show up to give her some advice and clue to solve the murders...her evil dark fae wizard father. But could she trust him? Meanwhile the four princes from her Fallen Fae Academy days grapple with her decision to live in Las Vegas instead of assuming the throne of her kingdom in the Faery Realms.



FAE-MOUS (FALLEN FAE B.I. Book #2) (March 2021)

Harley's last case took her from casino to casino along the Las Vegas Strip in search of a killer who may have been a rogue dark fae, who wield a power she had yet to encounter. With the aid of her former classmates and still current lovers from Fallen Fae Academy, Harley devise a scheme to lure out the killer. Things become complicated when Harley and her guys discover the unusual murders before were a mere distraction from a bigger plot, her father and the rogue dark fae minions he had unleashed, had planned and had already set into motion...one that involves Las Vegas' former past as an Atomic bomb testing site to the beginning of the Apocalypse.



FAE-FUL (FALLEN FAE B.I. Book #3) (May 2021)

The clock is ticking. Harley and her guys must figure out the clues where the rogue dark fae army will unleash their dark magic and destroy the human race. Using the powers of all the kingdoms. in the faery realms., Harley and her four fae princes' powers converge to fight the power of the dark fae in the fight of their lifetimes.

CRUEL PRINCES OF WYVERN ALL-BOYS ACADEMY

(RH Bully Romance Fantasy Paranormal Shifters) - HEAT 4 out of 5

Enter the Wyvern All-Boys Academy as the Only Girl or Get Killed for Defying the Royal Decree

Diamonds and Dragons (Cruel Princes of Wyvern All-Boys Academy Book 1)

<https://www.amazon.com/Diamonds-Dragons-Reverse-Fantasy-All-Boys-ebook/dp/B07SFV1PRH/>

Roses and Emeralds (Cruel Princes of Wyvern All-Boys Academy Book 2)

<https://www.amazon.com/Roses-Emeralds-Reverse-Fantasy-All-Boys-ebook/dp/B07TS1BKLT/>

Silver and Starlight (Cruel Princes of Wyvern All-Boys Academy Book 3)

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07VXVK2KV>

Cruel Princes of Wyvern All-Boys Academy Complete Series Box Set

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B086V6ZJKH>



BAD BOYS BILLIONAIRE BACHELORS CLUB (Standalone Novels)

Billionaire Romances – Heat 3 out of 5

Bidding on the Billionaire

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07CB8VXFY>

Movie Merger

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07BX7DZ4G>

Buying the Billionaire

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07BXC37RQ>

Broken

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07BX97343>



VAMPIRE SAMURAI (PULSE VAMPIRE WORLD SERIES)



I AM EVIE EVERHEART. As a Life's Blood Carrier, I am pursued by all vampires who want to become All Powerful or to become human again. Which is practically ALL vampires. Basically, I'm screwed.

Then I meet him, the Vampire Samurai and his band of brothers, consisting of another vampire, a fae, and a shifter.

What they want of me, I've yet to find out.

Friend or foe?

I don't know. But as a carrier, all I know is that I must do everything I can to keep the vampires from getting my blood or humanity as we know it, would end.

**Vampire Samurai is a new series in the PULSE Vampires World Series, a YA/New Adult series appropriate for age 17 and up.

Vampire Samurai Vol. 1

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0863PL3T2>

Vampire Samurai Vol. 2

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B084HHV1VY>

Vampire Samurai Book 3

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B084HHSW3Q>

M.A.G.E. Series



P rince of Paradise

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0847HFDPK>

Kailin Gow's Bio



From visiting Romania, ALA YALSA Award-winning and Million-Selling Author Kailin Gow was asked to write stories about vampires; visiting the Black Forest in Germany and seeing the castles of Europe inspired her to write fantasy; visiting Asia's mystical mountains inspired her to write action adventure and mythological dystopians. From her experience in college as a peer counselor and her volunteer work with women's shelters, she was inspired to write contemporary romance with social issues for women, new adults, young adults, and teens. Having faced adversity, including battling stereotypes and bullying, Kailin Gow has become a well-known speaker and influential figure in media. Her adventurous bold spirit has taken her around the world, where she has ridden on top of elephants through jungles, hand-fed sting rays, studied kung fu from a Shaolin Temple monk, and learned cooking from a celebrity chef. She is a USA Today Bestselling author and has been a #1 Amazon bestselling author over two-hundred times. Her Bitter Frost Series is in development as a TV Series, and her contemporary romance Loving Summer is set to become a feature film. An multi-award-winning filmmaker, director, and actress; Kailin's films have premiered at Cannes, Los Angeles, Rome, England, Paris, Korea, Japan, and even in India's Ministry of Culture.

Compelled to write her first fiction book because of 9/11, Kailin Gow now has over 400 fiction books published under Kailin Gow and various Pen Names in many genres. As a speaker and host, she has hosted international shows at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium, been a celebrity judge at beauty pageants, been a judge for writing contests, and hosted television series. She was featured as an Indie Author Success Story on the homepage of Amazon.com for a month and is also included in Amazon's book called Transformations. She is the first and only Taiwanese American to have been featured

on Amazon's homepage as an Author Success Story, and the first to have sold over a million books.

She has over 50 Series, written under Kailin Gow:

***For Middle Grade (STEM Books in School) ***

Fairy Rose Chronicles - age 13 and up.

Amazon Lee Adventures Series

For 16 and up

The Frost Series

The Wolf Fey Series

The PULSE Series

FADE Series

DESIRE Series

Fire Wars Series

Alchemists Academy

Wordwick Games

Wicked Woods Series

Steampunk Scarlett

The Phantom Diaries

Stoker Sisters

Beyond Crystal River

Red Genesis Series

The Summer Pact

For 18 and up (New Adult/Coming of Age)

Hidden Falls High (YA/NA)

Loving Summer

The Donovan Brothers

Saving You Saving Me (You & Me Trilogy)

Never Knights

Rock Hard Musical

Shadowlight Academy (Reverse Harem Paranormal Romance)

Shadowlight Hunters Academy (Reverse Harem Paranormal Romance)

Society of Supernatural Sleuths (Reverse Harem Paranormal Romance)

For 18 and up (Adult/Steamy Romance)

The Protege

Master Chefs

The Blue Room (Spin-off of Never Knights Trilogy)

The Blue Room Chronicles

Sessions

HEAT

UNassumed Series

Beautiful Girl (Standalone Novel)

The Tutor (Standalone Novel)

Rock Hard

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