

Cooking With Fire

By

Kira Barcelo

©2010 by Blushing Books® and Kira Barcelo

Copyright © 2010 by Blushing Books® and Kira Barcelo

All rights reserved. No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,
a subsidiary of
ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

The trademark Blushing Books® is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Barcelo, Kira
Cooking With Fire
eBook ISBN: 978-1-60968-582-9

Cover Design by ABCD Graphics

Blushing Publications thanks you whole-heartedly for your purchase with us!

There are plenty more stories such as the one you've purchased from Blushing Books! Visit our online store to view our might selection!

<http://www.blushingbooks.com>

This book is intended for adults only. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

Chapter One

Pulling into her usual spot in the lot behind the restaurant, Carolyn Hammond consulted the clock on her new Mustang's dashboard. 9:25 AM. Only an hour and a half late this time, she noted with a giggle. That, in her book, was a vast improvement for her, considering that punctuality wasn't exactly her forte.

Of course her business partner wouldn't see it that way. As usual, her older brother Cliff was already there. He didn't come often, but when he did, he was the same stickler for promptness that he'd always been. Seeing his SUV parked in a spot only a few feet away from her car, she imagined he'd been the first to arrive, even long before their true-blue, dedicated sous chef, Rhonda Neely.

And if their phone conversation earlier that week was any indication, the main dish on the menu was bound to be war. Yet another heated argument with her brother was the last thing Carolyn needed, especially after the grueling task of going over the business' books only the night before. That had been depressing enough. Was it any wonder she was never in a hurry to get to work anymore?

But maybe she could diffuse the situation. She'd been successful at that before. Even with her stomach in knots and her nerves on edge, with the amount of sleep she was getting dwindling more and more each night, she could somehow avoid a total blowout with her brother. All she had to do was keep her own emotions in check. Consulting her reflection in the restaurant's windows, she smoothed down the skirt of her yellow sundress, inspected her brand new French manicure, and sailed breezily in through the Beachcomber Bistro's main entrance.

"Honey—all my honies—I'm home!" she sang out in her lilting voice. "Good morning, good morning!"

Cliff was seated at the bar with his back to her, but hearing her voice he tossed a stony glance over his shoulder. Carolyn caught sight of the color draining from the face of the head waiter, Jamie Holbrook, who stood behind the bar.

"Good afternoon," her brother corrected her evenly. "Nice of you to join us, Carolyn."

Her spontaneous reaction was to laugh. "You sound like a high school teacher with that remark."

"I *should* have been a high school teacher. That would've been a lot less dangerous... financially."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Let me go put my things down."

Cliff wouldn't stay long. That was the good part. She consoled herself with that fact as she headed through the kitchen to her modest little office, which was located through a door next to the big industrial freezer and up a flight of stairs. Her brother usually stayed a couple of hours and then headed back to his other, home-based business. It was just that, whenever he was at the restaurant, it was always a *long* two hours.

If nothing else, her cozy office granted her some tranquility. Hailey, at nineteen the youngest member of her staff, was a good kid. Those potted plants that brought some greenery to her surroundings in the office would have died had the sweet-natured young waitress not taken it upon herself to water them regularly for Carolyn. The young college student had also given her the WORLD'S BEST BOSS mug, set on her desk and filled with Hershey's kisses, to commemorate last year's Boss Day.

What a joke, huh? Carolyn thought glumly. World's *Worst Boss* was more like it. If business didn't pick up and the profits—if they could even be called that—continued as dismally as they had in the past seven months, the Beachside Bistro would have to close its doors. And then, at thirty-six, Carolyn would have to consider going back to the only thing she knew how to do, and that was clerical work. She would have to resign herself to working for someone else, to admitting that she'd been a failure at running the restaurant that she and Cliff had bought together with the money their father had left them.

Fixing herself a cup of hazelnut coffee from the Keurig machine on the table near her desk, she sighed and fired up her PC. There wasn't much for her to do until the restaurant opened for business at eleven-thirty. Maybe surfing the internet for a while, checking out the sales at her favorite stores, would calm her nerves.

The person knocking at the door didn't wait for her to allow him in. Cliff popped his head into the room.

"Hey—we need to talk," he announced firmly.

"Okay, fine. Let's get this over with." She waved a hand at the chair facing her desk. "Have a seat. Want some coffee?"

Sighing, her brother ignored the offer and sank into the arm chair. "This isn't going to take long, Carolyn. I have to get back to work. And besides, what I have to say isn't going to take more than a few minutes."

She stiffened. "Look, I know what you're going to say, Cliff—"

"No, I don't think you do. I know I've given you a hard time over your...well, your free-spirited attitude when it comes to this place, but to be honest...the real problem is me."

Carolyn's eyes widened. "*You?* How do you figure that? You're hardly ever here."

"I know. That's the problem." Cliff half smiled, but his expression was somber. "Ever since we've owned the Beachcomber, I've given you a hard time over the way you run this place. But, you know, the fact is that I'm not even here on most days. The Beachside Bistro is in trouble, and it's got me as a co-owner. A guy who can't fully concentrate his time or his energy on making this place the success that it could be. That doesn't make me much of a co-owner, now does it?"

She was speechless. He'd totally thrown her for a loop with that one.

"I really can't let you take that blame, Cliff." She was almost afraid to admit that, knowing she was opening up herself for criticism. And rightful criticism at that.

"And I can't let you take it all, either." Her brother leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. "Like I can't expect you to run this place by yourself. That's why I'm getting out. I've selling my half of the business."

"What?" Nervously, Carolyn laughed. "Oh, I get it. You're just teasing."

"Oh, I'm dead serious, sis." He went on, his tone apologetic. "I know I should've talked to you about it first. Knowing you, though, you would've tried to talk me out of it. If this place goes down, you're going to lose everything. At least I have my other business, but you've only got the restaurant, Carolyn. That's why I'm stepping down and Alex is stepping in."

"Alex? Who's that?" she demanded.

"Alex Stanton. He's your new business partner. Well...as of two o'clock yesterday afternoon, he is." Cliff chuckled, adding, "That's when we closed. We signed on that proverbial dotted line. He bought me out. And he's coming in to see the place in about an hour. He's excited about working with you, Carolyn."

"Sonofa—Cliff, I can't believe this!"

She kept her voice down, remembering that the walls were thin and her staff could overhear everything. Trembling with emotion, she rose and came around the desk, confronting her brother.

“You never thought to discuss this with me, Clifford,” she spat out the words. “You just went ahead and made this decision—a decision that impacts the restaurant—without me.”

“I sold *my* half of the Beachside Bistro,” he reminded her. “It was my half to sell, Carolyn. And I did it because Alexander Stanton’s already run a restaurant. He’s got experience and he’s a smart man.”

“He’s a stranger!”

“No, he’s not. He’s an old friend of mine from college. You’ll like him. Well...” A mischievous smirk crossed his face. “I’ve told him about...uh...your little quirks.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, honey, what do you think I mean? You waltzing in here whenever you feel like it, for starters. The way you let that lazy, good-for-nothing executive chef of ours take advantage of you. The way you spend more time taking breaks and having fun rather than being a hands-on boss. And he told me not to worry, that he’ll straighten you right out.”

Carolyn’s eyes widened. She pulled back her hunched shoulders, standing to her full height, which wasn’t more than a tad over five feet.

“Cliff, you had no right to do that,” she said, completely unable to hide her hurt. “This is *my* restaurant. And you are my *brother*. If you wanted to bail on me, then you should have had the decency to tell me. But, no. What do you do? You turn around and sell out to some old friend of yours...some arrogant jerk who plans on ‘straightening’ me out.”

“Carolyn, honey, I’m sorry.” He stood up and took her by her forearms. “I’ve tried to tell you. All these months, I’ve tried. Now you’re going to lose everything. I had to do something drastic. Please understand. I really think this will be for the best. Alex is just what you need.”

Another knock at the door. This time it was Hailey Ryman poking her head in. Slim little thing, with mousey brown hair up in a ponytail, and yet a magnificent, soulful pair of green eyes.

“Cliff, Carolyn, sorry to interrupt you guys,” she began. “But there’s a man down in the kitchen. He says his name is Alex Stanton. And...” The young waitress frowned. “He says he’s our new boss?”

“Is that so?” Seething inwardly, Carolyn looked from her waitress to her brother, who glanced at his watch.

“He’s early,” Cliff said. “See what I mean? He’ll be great for business!”

“For somebody else’s business, maybe. Not for *mine*.” Then she told Hailey, “He’s not your boss. *I* am.”

“Carolyn, he’s co-owner now. That *does* make him the boss, too,” her brother pointed out.

“You don’t own the Beachside Bistro anymore, Cliff. That means you don’t have a say in this. And if he thinks he’s coming in and taking over, he’d better guess again. Or the one who’s getting straightened out is him.”

At that, she rounded the desk and sat back down, slamming her computer mouse and ledger down vehemently.

“Aren’t you coming down to meet him?” Cliff asked, his voice shaking slightly.

“In a few minutes.” In her anger, she refused to look at him. “He can cool his jets. He’d better get used to waiting. That’ll be happening to him a lot, if I have anything to say about it.”

“Wow. Way to get off on the wrong foot in a business relationship.”

“Good. I don’t give a damn. Go back to your own business. I’ll take care of mine,” she said, coldly turning her back to him.

Hailey slipped away, visibly uncomfortable with having witnessed the battle between the siblings. Cliff said nothing else, but as he sauntered out the door he looked ashen and upset. This was, by far, the worst thing her brother had ever done to her.

I had to do something drastic. Alex is just what you need.

Carolyn clicked off from Internet Explorer. In time, she would forgive her brother, though for now she couldn’t remember ever having been as furious at him. This was partially her own fault; the last time they’d spoken, she’d confided that she was having sleepless night after sleepless night. That was how badly she was fretting over the bills. The restaurant was barely turning enough of a profit to maintain the expenses of running it, and she was close to foreclosing on her home.

Maybe Cliff had been a bit dramatic by selling his half of the restaurant, but his heart was in the right place. But the same sure as hell couldn’t be said of this Stanton character.

Maybe if she just laid down the law to him. Let him know he was a partner now, but she was the one in charge. She checked her reflection in the handheld mirror in her top drawer, ensuring she looked presentable. Her hair, recently touched up with a pretty frosting, was longer now than it had been in years. The newfound stress had added some pounds to her frame, so her favorite yellow dress was tighter than usual. For the most part, though, she looked fine.

She resigned herself and went to the door. No use in putting it off any longer. Whether she liked it or not, she now had a new business partner.

So it was time to meet Mr. Alex Stanton.

* * *

First order of the day: The kitchen needed a thorough cleaning, a real scouring, from top to bottom. And if he had his way, the next step would be to fire that useless chef, Marta.

“How long has it been since you cleaned this place?” Alex Stanton asked the woman.

From the moment he first laid eyes on her, he knew exactly who Marta DeLong was, and he’d disliked her instantly. It didn’t help that his old friend, Cliff Hammond, had confided that Marta was more adept at manipulating Carolyn Hammond and taking advantage of the woman’s friendship than she was at working and managing that kitchen. Carolyn had given her a job, and in return, the so-called chef was helping to run the woman’s business into the ground.

“Ummm, I don’t know. Maybe last week?” Marta replied.

“Maybe last week? Looks more like maybe last year.” He ran his finger along an overhead lamp and displayed the grime on it to her. “See that? That’s filthy. You’re preparing food for customers in here.”

“Uh-huh. Well, you’ll have to take that up with Carolyn.” The smug chef smirked at him. “She’s the one in charge.”

“Actually, we *both* are from now on. Got that, ma’am? You and the other two chefs can grab a mop and some sponges. We don’t open those doors until this place is spotless.”

Marta whirled around to face him. She wasn’t so smug now. “What?”

“You heard me. We’re not opening until this place is spic and span. So I suggest you get to work. *Now.*”

“Alex? Alex Stanton?”

At the sound of his name, he turned on his heel. That woman in the yellow dress coming towards him had to be Carolyn Hammond, aka his new business partner. Was that the way she typically came to work? Not that he was complaining. But in that dress, which she filled out with a pretty curvalicious figure and shapely legs, and those sassy sandals, she had him thinking about other scrumptious things that didn't involve serving food.

"You must be Carolyn," he said and extended his hand. "It's great to finally meet you."

"Oh. Okay." She accepted his hand, but only briefly, and the moment seemed awkward. "Is there a problem here?"

"A problem? No, not at all." Smiling, he thrust his hands into his pants' pockets. "Our chefs were just getting to work on cleaning the kitchen."

"But we're about to open shortly. They have to get ready for the customers."

"They *are* getting ready. They're cleaning our restaurant. Why don't we let them do that and in the meantime you can give me the grand tour?"

She was earnestly pretty. The other Hammond, her brother, was a great guy, but he was a *guy*. Alex wasn't in the habit of noticing other guys' looks, but Cliff's sister had his gaze lingering on her something wicked. She was a little on the high maintenance side, though, or at least it looked that way to him. Meticulously manicured fingernails, jewelry coordinated with rest of her outfit, makeup done without being overdone. That wasn't the usual type of woman that caught his attention.

But that didn't matter. He wasn't dating Carolyn Hammond; he was going to run a restaurant with her. That is, once he helped her keep her pretty little feet on the ground and her head out of the clouds.

"You didn't tell us your brother sold the restaurant to—to *him*."

Alex remained silent, but it wasn't easy. Marta DeLong was being insolent and sullen with Carolyn, occasionally glaring over at her new boss. They were a short distance away from him, but not so far that he couldn't hear what was being said.

"Believe me, it was news to me, too," she confessed.

"Do we really have to clean the kitchen? I don't have time for that, Carolyn. You know that."

"Fine. You can clean it later."

"Oh, great. Thanks, Carolyn." Marta left, but not without first flashing Alex a bitchy, triumphant glance.

"I sure hope she cooks as well as she pits Mommy against Daddy to get her own way," he muttered.

Carolyn twirled around to face him. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I just told her to clean this place from top to bottom before we even open those doors." Alex tossed a hand into the air. "And you told prima donna over there she could clean it afterwards. One way or another, those chefs aren't going home today until you can eat off this floor. I'll see to that personally."

If he'd thought Marta DeLong had stared at him with daggers in her eyes, that was nothing compared to the way Carolyn was glaring at him.

"Take it easy, cowboy," she drawled. "You just got here. Why don't you and I start over? I'll give you that tour before the doors open."

Cowboy. He should have been offended by her familiarity, but after all, this was his friend's kid sister. And she'd stirred something inside him, with that sexy way that word—"cowboy"—was delivered, decadent as melting chocolate, in that womanly voice of hers.

“Okay. Good idea. Let’s start over.” He managed a smile. “Lead the way...cowgirl.”

Her eyes flashed again. He expected her to go off, but to her credit, she restrained herself.

“Good. Come along then.” Cool. Snippy, but cool. She turned and led the way out of the kitchen, back into the dining area.

With each step, those hips swayed in that form-fitting dress. Alex considered himself a consummate professional. This wasn’t his first restaurant and Carolyn Hammond wasn’t his first business partner, though she was the first one with great legs and a cute little bottom.

Business. Why was he having such a tough time zeroing in on that? Most likely, his loyalty to his friend was getting in the way. Cliff had told him his sister had a few problem areas, not the least of which was her fun-loving nature that had her out cavorting in her new car—a sporty little Mustang, though her finances were strained to the hilt as it was—when she should have been giving the restaurant a little hands-on attention. He had promised Cliff that he was going to take Carolyn in hand, and take her in hand he would.

And if anyone needed a little hands-on attention, it was Carolyn Hammond. As in, his hands giving some much-needed attention to that adorable bottom, with her over his knee, would do wonders with giving her an attitude adjustment.

Carolyn stopped near the entrance, pulling a menu out from behind the counter and handing it to him for his perusal. That young waitress was looking on curiously, but she seemed to relax when Alex offered her a nod and a smile.

“This is the Beachcomber Bistro’s menu,” she said. “You can look that over.”

“I already have. That was one of the first things your brother and I discussed.”

“Oh.” Again, her demeanor cooled towards him. “And what did you think?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll have to see how your chefs pull off each dish. But I’d like to discuss paring it down a little, maybe updating it. The restaurant’s menu is...” Alex paused, extra careful not to offend her. “Well, it’s all over the place.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He scowled sternly at her. She hadn’t snapped at him, but she didn’t have to. With one upturned eyebrow, one inflection of her voice, the lady could convey her displeasure very thoroughly.

“What I’m trying to say is that you have to decide what you’re serving in here,” he explained. “So that the customer understands what they’re making the trip out here for.”

“And?”

“*And* you’ve got a lot of stuff thrown together. Pizza, typical beach resort fare. Hell, you’ve even got some Asian dishes on there. And stuff you would expect to find in a place with the word *beachcomber* in it. There’s seafood.”

“Well, Mr. Stanton, that’s because that’s what the original owners served.” Was it his imagination or was she talking slowly to him? As if she were explaining to a confused child...or an idiot? “That’s what the clientele is used to. For your information, this was a very beloved restaurant for many years. My parents—Cliff’s parents—they used to take us here all the time. We’re trying to stay true to that tradition.”

Alex minded his manners and spoke respectfully to her. “I understand that, Carolyn. But that tradition isn’t very profitable for you, is it? Because if it was, you wouldn’t need me. You and your brother would be making a mint off this place.”

“Let’s understand something here, Alex Stanton. I *don’t* need you. I don’t even want you here. But you now own part of *my* restaurant.”

“That’s right. I do.” He fixed his hands to his waist, glaring right back at her. Enough of treating her with kids’ gloves. The tough businessman in him busted out. “That means I have a say in how this place is run. Because I have an investment in this place. And I’m not going down the tubes over something that worked once but isn’t working with people now. And I’m not letting you go down the tubes, either. I told your brother that.”

“Wow. My hero!” Tossing her head saucily, she stalked across the room. “Anyway, we don’t have a choice. We’re stuck with each other. I don’t freaking like it anymore than you do, so let’s just get on with this, all right?”

Talk about a piece of work! Sarcastic, overgrown brat, calling him *my hero*. She’d gotten him to wince when she’d used language that, though not quite vulgar, it came close. He knew women talked like that, but ladies didn’t. He’d pegged Carolyn Hammond for a lady. Obviously, he’d misjudged her.

“So you’ve been here for a while now. Oh, you know what? You probably came when I wasn’t even here. So go ahead.” She folded her arms across her chest and eyed him like a petulant child. “Spit it out. What’s wrong with the décor? I know you don’t like that, either, because obviously there’s no pleasing you. And you know everything.”

He scratched his neck, taking his time in replying. “I don’t know everything, Carolyn. You’re being very combative. I understand that you feel like I’m intruding into the business you and your brother built together. But I’m your partner now. And I want to work with you. Now are you going to work with me or not?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not at the moment, no.” He swallowed his disappointment. That wasn’t the response he’d hoped to get from her.

“Then I guess I have to work with you. But I like the décor just as it is. I had things redone in here. So don’t you even think of changing anything.”

He waited for her to stamp her foot. That was the only thing missing from her mini-tantrum. Alex held back a smile. “That’s fine. I wouldn’t change a thing, either. The place is very inviting, just the way it is. I like what you’ve done here, too.”

“Well, good.” If he didn’t know better, he would have said she was disappointed that he hadn’t challenged her. “And you won’t change the menu, either.”

“Ah, no. You *will* most definitely compromise with me on that one. In fact, you and I need to get to work on revising it as soon as possible.”

“But—oh, fine. But not today. I have a lot of work to do today.”

“All right. That’s fine. We’ll start on that tomorrow. I’ll be here tomorrow morning at about seven. We can start brainstorming on the new menu then.”

“At seven? What’re you, crazy?” Carolyn laughed. “I don’t do mornings.”

“That so? Well, you do ’em now. Your brother mentioned that. Your little bankers’ hours are history, Ms. Business Partner. I’ll expect you bright and early tomorrow morning. Seven. On the dot.”

“And what if I’m... fashionably late? Which happens to be more my style?”

He studied her expression. She was being cute, but in reality, she was challenging him. He’d been there only a little over an hour and between that sullen chef and Carolyn herself, he felt like he’d been sailing a small rowboat in a full-blown, Category 5 hurricane.

“I don’t suggest you do that,” he said, his tone dangerously low.

“No?” Carolyn stepped closer to him, close enough that he could smell her perfume. It made his head spin...or maybe it was the proximity of her body. “Why is that?”

He squared his shoulders. Hopefully she couldn't tell that she had aroused him. "Because you're playing with my money now, too. Not just yours. And if you want to go bankrupt, ma'am, well, that's your business. But half of this restaurant's mine now. And I ain't losin' it because you want to be 'fashionably late.'"

She blinked. "Well...I'll try to get here on time."

"Good. Thank you."

"But don't expect me in here at that hour every day."

He'd been en route back to the kitchen. Alex wanted to check on that leisurely princess, Chef Marta. But then he stopped and turned to face Carolyn.

"Actually, young lady, I *do* expect you in here at that hour. Every day. At least until we get this place up and running as I see fit."

"I see. Well, you might find yourself being very disappointed."

"Yeah? I hope not. Because I don't want to have to spank you, but if that's what it takes to teach you to get in here on time, then I'll do it. And I'll spank you once for every minute you're late."

Jamie, the head waiter, was passing by that very moment. Alex tried not to laugh, seeing him look from him to Carolyn, then back again, and then the young guy scurried over before he could break into laughter.

As for Carolyn...had he gotten through to her? For the slightest second she flinched, looking worried. To his chagrin, she forced a laugh.

"I'd like to see you try," she dared him with barely concealed fury.

"Ah, no, I don't think you would. I don't make empty threats...cowgirl. Seven o'clock. On the *dot*."

Hell, he was already peeved beyond belief. He had a terrible feeling he'd live to regret his decision to buy out Cliff Hammond, effectively buying himself the sinking ship that was the Beachcomber Bistro. Before storming off to the kitchen, he added, "And next time I tell that woman to clean the kitchen, don't you undermine me in front of her. I wouldn't do that to you, Carolyn."