

“Too Hot To Handle”

an exclusive
free read

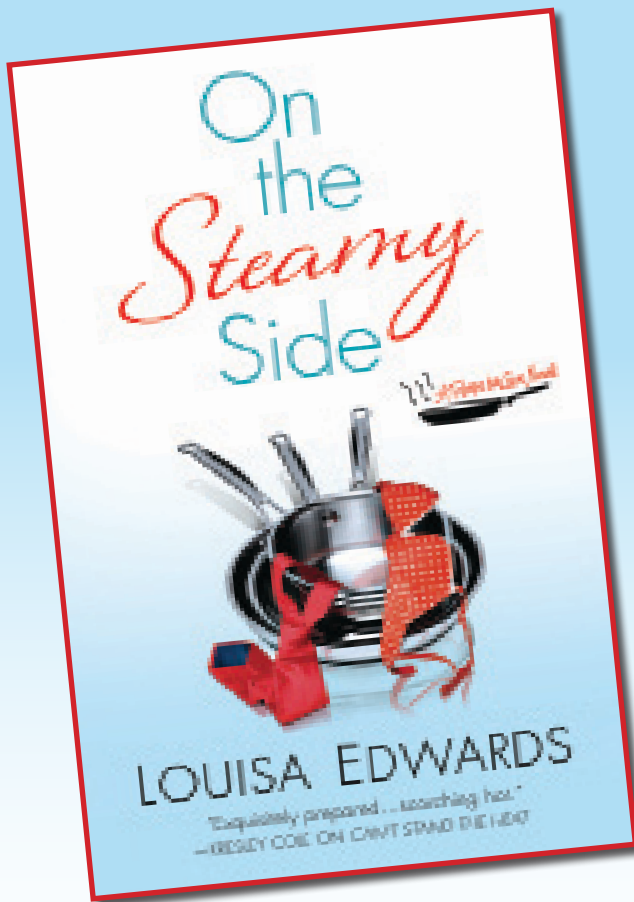


LOUISA
EDWARDS

From the author of
CAN'T STAND THE HEAT

LOUISA EDWARDS

comes a new **RECIPE FOR LOVE** novel



On the Steamy Side

**A sassy
Southerner
and a jaded
TV chef
spice up
a NYC
restaurant.**



ON SALE MARCH 2, 2010!

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

by Louis Edwards

*March 2009, about 15 hours
after the events of "Spring Fever"*

This dessert was about to give Violet an aneurysm.

Come on, she thought, as she held her breath and attempted once more to position the hulled-out strawberry filled with chocolate liqueur in the exact center of the impossibly light, ridiculouly fragile meringue.

Her heart was going ninety to the dozen, but her hands were as steady as a surgeon's. That shot of espresso she'd cajoled out of Grant, as he taught his server minions how to brew a decent cup, had kicked in.

This time, finally, at last, it was going to be perfect. She'd get this miserable, godforsaken, disastrously complicated version of strawberry shortcake right at least once, and then she could show it to Chef and tell him it was a great idea, thanks ever so, but it wasn't going to work for the dessert menu. Because if she had to do fifty of these a night? It would kill her.

She pushed down the itchy buzz of annoyance that Chef Adam Temple had hired her as the pastry chef of his brand new restaurant, Market, and then proceeded to start giving her ideas for her menu before the place even opened. Par for the freaking course, she knew that. There wasn't a chef/owner alive who didn't stick

his nose into the dessert menu at some point, no matter how much he'd disdain to claim any actual expertise in pastry. Hell no, pastry was way too girly-fem for most of the testosterone jockeys riding the hot line and calling out orders in professional kitchens these days. Chef Temple seemed to be better than most, she had to admit—but that was small consolation when it came to this strawberry nightmare.

Violet cast a glance at the loud, boisterous row of line cooks diligently clearing down their stations and shoving each other around after a full day of testing menu items for Chef Temple. They were all done with their assigned tasks, and here she still was, taking another swing at this damn shortcake, and she was going to wind up closing the kitchen. She gritted her teeth and got a better grip on the slippery berry. Not tonight, she swore silently. Tonight of all nights.

Because tonight . . . she had a date.

Yes, Violet Porter, Queen of the Casual Hook-Up and card-carrying member of the Relationships Are For Suckers Club, had a date. And she was actually kind of stoked about it.

In a stomach-clenchingly nervous kind of way.

Exhaling slowly through her nose, she thrust the memory of warm, laughing eyes and sun-bronzed skin from her mind and lowered her hand toward the dish of meringue. She willed her touch to be as light as the air that puffed those egg whites into a pretty pile of glossy, white peaks—almost there, almost . . .

“Hey! Where the hell’s my spoon?”

The strident voice right behind her startled Violet into smashing the strawberry into the delicate meringue, which cracked and

formed a crater in the dead center of the dessert. Violet whirled to face the guy who was about to get a dough hook through his throat, strawberry held aloft in a hand that shook with adrenaline and pure rage.

Doug “The Dogface Boy” Dobson stood there, hands on his hips and a scowl on his thick, meaty face.

Okay, nobody called him Dogface except Violet, but she wasn’t giving up on it. Sooner or later, that nickname was going to stick. It was too stunningly apt.

“You steal my spoon, little girl?” the guy sneered, looming over her in a sad attempt at intimidation that was severely undercut by the cheerful flexing of the colorful tattoo on his forearm. Lots of the Market crew had tats—barbed wire, tribal bands, skull and crossbones, a butcher’s diagram of a pig . . . but Dogface? He had a cartoon toucan like the bird on the cereal boxes. Not exactly an image to strike fear into the heart.

“You’re barking up the wrong pastry chef,” Violet said, smirking. She cracked herself up sometimes.

His thick lips tightened. “No, I ain’t. I know you got my spoon, and you’re gonna give it back. Or else.”

She cocked her head to the side, taking in the dogged—*ha ha*—determination on his red-tinged face. Civilians, by which she meant normal people, probably wouldn’t understand all this kerfuffle over a spoon, but in the world of a professional restaurant kitchen, certain mundane items tended to take on exaggerated importance. Clean side towels, tongs, and wooden spoons were among those implements hoarded like gold by the Market crew.

Everyone had a favorite cooking utensil—Violet would freak the

eff out if someone laid a hand on her beautiful French marble rolling pin—so she found herself in the unenviable position of actually sympathizing with Dogface.

“Look, Doggie—I mean, Dougie. For serious, man, I didn’t touch it. Did you check with Billy?” Billy Perez was the dishwasher. Nine times out of ten, if something went missing it was because the ever-efficient Billy had swiped it and cleaned it to within an inch of its life.

That wasn’t what Dogface wanted to hear, though. He screwed up his face into an expression of disgust, slamming his fist into the pastry board with a wham that actually made Violet jump.

“Chicks in the kitchen,” he sneered, “always the same, taking shit that ain’t theirs, messing stuff up. Unprofessional, is what it is. Stupid little bitch. Won’t even face me like a man.”

Violet tensed, quick and hard, before forcing herself to turn away. She’d heard it before, of course, but that didn’t make it any easier to take. Professional cooking was very much a boys’ club, one she’d fought hard to be accepted into. With varying degrees of success. Doug, here, was one of the guys who was never, really never ever, going to treat her like an equal.

The familiar anger and resentment simmered up in the back of her throat, bitter and hot with the words she wanted to spit into his fat, scowling face, but she stomped it down. She hadn’t gotten where she was by making waves.

No white water, she chanted to herself, staring blindly down at her ruined strawberry shortcake. *Just smooth, calm seas.*

“Hey, buddy.” Jonathan Wildman’s deep, growly voice reverberated in the nearly empty kitchen like the bang of a heavy oven door,

making her jump. “You wanna face someone like a man? You can talk to me.”

Whirling away from her pastry board, Violet saw the organic farmer who’d supplied her with the beautiful strawberry she was still clutching in her hot little hand, standing in the back kitchen doorway and aiming a quietly intense look of deep dislike at Dogface.

A wave of stunned disbelief swept over her head and nearly knocked her off her feet. Violet fought the undertow of shock pulling at her balance, distantly aware that she was staring at Jonathan as if she’d never seen a hot farm boy before. But she hadn’t seen one like this, tall and broad and going all fierce avenging angel on her behalf.

It was that last bit that tipped her over the edge from reality to whatever weird fantasy land she was standing in now. This man she barely knew was riding to her rescue, and never mind the fact that Violet Porter didn’t need rescuing—never had, never would—there was still something incredibly sexy about it.

She thought she probably ought to be ashamed of how much she wanted to jump Jonathan in the middle of the kitchen, when, really, she should be laying into him for assuming she was some desperate damsel. But that whole reward-the-conquering-hero-with-sexual-favors thing was kind of hardwired into the species, after all.

The very fact that she wasn’t upset sort of upset her, and she scowled at both men, who were facing off, toe to toe, clearly unaware that she was still in the room. “Cool it, studs,” she said. “Back the fuck down, or get a room. Whichever. I’ve got a dessert to salvage, here.”

For a second, she thought they hadn’t heard her—they were like two dogs growling over a ham bone, completely focused on each

other. Starting to get seriously annoyed, Violet grabbed a spoon off her station and brought it down on her table with a loud crack.

Both guys jumped and turned to stare at her, and a mild voice from across the kitchen said, “Is there a problem here?”

Violet squeezed her eyes shut against the sight of Chef Adam Temple leaning casually against door that led into the dining room, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

Perfect. Just what this party needs—another Alpha male. And bonus! This one signs my paycheck.

She opened her eyes and the first thing she noticed was that the spoon she was holding, the one she’d whacked against the table, was wooden. And unfamiliar. As in, not hers.

Oops.

Jonathan hadn’t felt this righteously ticked since he saw Sherman Willis, who owned the property down the way from Wildman Farms, beating on a skinny yellow lab with a stick.

The rush of intoxicating heat through his bloodstream nearly bowled him over, anger lifting him onto the balls of his feet, tightening all his sinews, and waking up every muscle in anticipation of delivering a punch to the head of the hulking bully standing over Violet.

Most guys savored this feeling, Jonathan knew. His brother, Zack, got into a barroom scrap nearly every Saturday night; he always

said a man was only truly alive when his blood was up.

Jonathan didn't enjoy being pissed off. He was too big, too tall, and he'd learned early that if he didn't judge his strength carefully, he could hurt people without meaning to.

In this case, however, he totally meant to.

Until another male voice penetrated the red fog encasing Jonathan's head, and he came back to himself enough to realize that not only did Violet look more annoyed than fearful or victimized, but there was another man in the kitchen with them.

The new guy carried authority in the set of his shoulders, the loose, easy way he propped a hip on a stainless steel counter. The way he didn't bother to raise his voice to defuse the escalating tension.

He wore a white chef's jacket, like everyone else around here, but there was something familiar about him.

"No, Chef," Violet said. "No problem. Just a little . . . friendly discussion between Doug and my . . . um. Jonathan."

Oh, right. This new guy was the executive chef and owner of Market, Adam Temple. Which probably meant that Jonathan should let him take over dealing with what was essentially a personnel issue. But before he could open his mouth to explain exactly what he was discussing with *Doug*, Violet cut him off with a threatening glare and a jerk of her head.

Jonathan subsided, but it took a second for his body to get the memo that battle was no longer imminent. His fingers throbbed as blood returned to them, and his shoulders ached from the combination of the release of tension, and the work he'd done all day at the Union Square greenmarket, lifting crates of vegetables, and haul-

ing flats of berries from his family farm's stand to trucks sent over by various restaurants around town.

“Jonathan, huh?” Chef Temple cocked his head to one side, studying Jonathan's face. “You remind me of someone, but I can't quite place you.”

After a split-second internal debate on how it might affect business for this chef to know that the guy he'd just caught in an almost-brawl was a farmer, he said, “You might be thinking of my older brother. Zach Wildman? We have a stand down at the greenmarket.”

Chef Temple snapped his fingers. “That's it. Knew I'd seen you someplace before. What brings you uptown, man?”

Jonathan's gaze slid to Violet before he could help it, and she blushed, which appeared to fill in the blanks nicely for the chef. “I gotcha,” he said. “You and Vi, huh? New York's a small town, when you get right down to it. Where you off to, Doug?”

Doug, who'd been inching his way toward a door in the side wall this whole time, as unobtrusively as a lumbering six-foot bear of a guy could manage, froze in his tracks. “Uh, downstairs to get changed. Is that okay?”

“Sure thing, buddy.” Chef Temple pushed away from the counter and slung an arm over Doug's shoulders. A hint of steel entered his tone as he said, “We'll just take a quick detour by my office, first. Have a little chat.” Clapping the now-grimacing Doug on the chest with his free hand, Chef Temple said over his shoulder, “Hey, it was nice to meet you, Wildman. Come back anytime.”

Violet stepped forward, a wooden spoon held out in front of her like a peace offering. “Wait, Chef. It wasn't anything. Doug was

actually right—I did have his spoon! Sorry, Dougie. I’ll just put it over here on your station. So see, Chef? It was just a misunderstanding. You don’t need to . . .” she trailed off, her cheeks as red as the perfect strawberry she still clutched in one hand.

“Oh, I think I do,” Chef Temple said easily, his arm around Doug’s shoulders looking more like a headlock than a friendly hug. “Doug and I are overdue for some face time. We’re going to talk about teamwork, kitchen hierarchy, and treating key members of the team with respect. Yeah? Okay. Come on, bud.”

Violet winced when Temple said “respect,” which Jonathan didn’t understand. He was glad she had a boss who wouldn’t put up with harassment like that. But as Chef Temple marched his obnoxious employee over to the door that apparently led down to the office, Jonathan studied Violet.

The lines of her body were rigid with something that didn’t seem like gratitude or relief, and when the two chefs disappeared down the stairs, she slumped over her table with a whispered, “Shit.”

He shook his head in confusion. “What? If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to make excuses for that piece of crap. Did I misread the situation, or something? Is he a friend of yours?”

“Are you kidding me?” she asked, narrowing those big, brown eyes. “What do you think?”

Crap. This was exactly the kind of thing Jonathan sucked at. He blinked, struggling to figure out how he’d managed to screw things up before they’d even gone on their first date.

“Um. Is this one of those things where you’re pissed off at Doug, but you’re taking it out on me because I’m still standing here?”

And that was evidently the exact right thing to say, because her eyes went wide with surprise, and she bit into her succulent bottom lip for an instant before dropping her head back with a sigh.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be pissed at you. I know you were only trying to help.”

Jonathan felt like he’d been dropped head first into a play where he didn’t know any of the lines. “Wait. So you’re saying I didn’t help?”

“No, it’s . . . you don’t get it, okay? What it’s like to be the only chick in a room full of dicks. I can’t just be as good as they are—I have to be better, smarter, tougher, cooler under pressure. I can’t have my boyfriend coming in here and fighting my battles for me! Not that you’re my boyfriend.”

The hasty addendum at the end zinged straight to Jonathan’s heart, for some stupid reason. All the blood surging around his body was starting to make him light-headed. He frowned. “What you’re saying is, I should’ve seen that bum running his nasty mouth off, coming at you, threatening you—and I should’ve stood here and done nothing. That’s how you would’ve preferred that I deal with it.”

Her eyes flared with frustration. “You big lug, *I* was dealing with it. And God, then for Adam to come in and tell him off . . . what a mess. The guys are never going to let me hear the end of this.”

It was the defeat in her voice more than the actual words that spun Jonathan’s head around. He’d obviously shoved himself into the middle of a tricky situation. But had he screwed up badly enough to end things between them before they even began?

“Violet,” he said, then stopped. She sounded like maybe she

wanted an apology, but if Jonathan said he was sorry for protecting her, it would be a lie. “I didn’t mean to—tell me what I can do to make this better.”

She looked down and away, grabbing the dish off her station and scraping its contents out into the trash can. “I think maybe you should leave,” she said, her chest rising and falling with the quickness of her breaths. “I’ve got this dessert to redo, and I can’t get out of here until it’s finished. Rain check on the date?”

Jonathan was paralyzed. She still hadn’t looked at him, and he had the inescapable feeling that if he walked out of this kitchen right now, rain check or not, he was never getting another shot at Violet Porter.

Without a backward glance, she headed over to a sink in the corner and started washing out her dish.

Jonathan watched her, his mind heaving with indecision. Leaving was probably the smart thing to do, he knew. She’d asked him to go so she could finish her work, and God knew Jonathan respected a healthy work ethic. But he couldn’t help feeling that if walked away, it wouldn’t be out of respect or manners or anything like that—he’d be giving in to fear.

So maybe he wasn’t a barroom brawler, like Zack. Maybe he didn’t like getting pissed off and using his bulk to scare people.

But Jonathan Wildman was no coward. And this time, he wasn’t going down without a fight.

Violet kept her head down and tried to convince herself the mois-

ture on her face was merely steam from the power hose at the dishwashing station.

It was dumb, but she didn't want to watch Jonathan leave. Even if it was, of course, what she wanted. She couldn't have some man hanging around, messing with her kitchen rep, and hoping for more than she'd be able to give him.

She swiped her cheek on her shoulder and scrubbed the dessert dish harder than strictly necessary. Water rushed into the sink, filling her ears with white noise and drowning out any sounds like retreating footsteps or doors closing.

Stop it, she told herself. You asked him to leave, and he's gone.

When she turned around, there'd be no towering tall man with sun-baked skin, tawny hair, and eyes like silver smoke to greet her with a wide smile. And if the knowledge gave her an achy, hollow feeling just below her breastbone, well, that would be Violet's little secret.

Except when she shut the water off, the first thing she heard was: "I never would've pegged you for someone who'd back down off a challenge."

The deep, gruff voice sent shivers down her spine. Violet told herself they were shivers of surprise as she whirled to confirm with her eyes what her heart already knew — Jonathan Wildman was standing next to her station.

He wasn't exactly smiling, but he wasn't scowling, either. She couldn't quite read his expression.

"I told you to go," Violet said, unable to process what was happening.

“Yeah, I know.”

“You didn’t go.”

“I know that, too.”

She reached for a clean dishcloth and started wiping at the ramekin, just to have something to do with her hands. Scared, bewildered, and not even sure what to hope for, which was a combination pretty much guaranteed to tick her off, she said, “So why are you still here?”

His eyes flashed a warning bolt the instant before he crossed the kitchen in three long strides and caught her in his arms. Steel bands of muscle at her shoulders and her side, one big, warm hand sliding up to curve around the back of her neck, and Violet gaped up at the man holding her in pure astonishment.

“For this,” he rasped, and bent his head to hers.

Violet gasped, which had the advantage of opening her mouth for his hot, demanding kiss. The gasp turned into a breathy moan that would’ve mortified her under normal circumstances, but holy hell, these circumstances were anything but normal, and Violet defied any woman to hold in the moans when Jonathan let his inner wild man loose. The ramekin slipped from her fingers and shattered into a million pieces of porcelain on the floor, and she didn’t care.

His mouth was hard and demanding, hungry for her in a way that roused Violet to respond with equal passion. She pushed up on her toes, curled her hands over his shoulders, and gave as good as she got. He let out a muffled groan and pushed her back against the counter behind her, the metal a cold line against the small of her back. The edge of the counter jabbed painfully into her hip, and she didn’t care.

All she cared about was that the kiss go on and on and on.

For a long, delicious, suspended moment, the only sound in the kitchen was the huff of panted breaths, the creak of the metal counter against Violet's back, and the liquid slide of two mouths dueling for dominance.

When breathing finally became an issue, Violet tore herself away, sucking in a noisy breath and dropping her forehead to his chest. "What the hell was that?" she asked shakily, her heart beating so fast it seemed like it wanted to leap from her chest like something out of a sci-fi movie.

"That," he said, his voice every bit as wrecked as hers, "was me getting things bass ackwards."

She tensed. "Meaning..."

Cupping her chin with one broad, work-roughened palm, Jonathan tilted her head up until she was forced to either look him in the eye or admit that she was hiding. "Meaning the kiss usually comes at the end of the date, not the beginning. And here I've gone and kissed you twice already. My mom would skin me if she knew."

"Let's leave your mother out of this," Violet said, trying to get her lungs working normally again.

"Yeah," he said, making a face that she knew shouldn't be appealing, but totally was. "I didn't think that one through. No mom talk on the first date. Check."

Violet shook her head, wishing for once in her damn life she could look a gift horse in the mouth and just smile and say "thank you" instead of "What on earth makes you want to go out with me, after all that crap with Doug?"

“I knew it! Rain check, my Aunt Fanny. I was never going to see you again.”

“It’s not like I was ditching you! I thought I was letting you off the hook,” she protested. Happiness bubbled up in her veins, as sticky and sweet as strawberry syrup. “Geez, all that and you still want a date? I’m starting to wonder what I’ve gotten into here. Are you a masochist, or what?”

He tucked a wayward lock of her short hair behind her ear thoughtfully. His body was still pressed against hers, holding her against the steel counter, but for some reason, she didn’t feel hemmed in or claustrophobic. She felt . . . safe.

“Nah, not really. It’s more that I know how to work through pain. You know? When it’s important enough—nothing can stop me from getting it done.”

If he hadn’t been holding her up, her knees probably would’ve given out at his serious look of honest intent. God, who was this guy, that he could look so open, so focused on her? It made Violet’s head swim, which reminded her of exactly how crazy this all was.

Stiffening against the powerful lure of his embrace, she started to pull away. She had to protect herself, this was all happening way too fast, he was too perfect to be true; this was going to change everything . . .

A remnant of the thunder clouds he’d shown Dogface earlier rolled through Jonathan’s gray eyes as he frowned down at her. “Stop it,” he said. “I’m not him.”

“Who?” Violet asked, lifting her chin.

He made a frustrated sound. “Any of them. Whoever. The guy

who hurt you and made it so hard for you to trust me.”

Violet stared up at his set mouth, his eyes dark with knowledge there was no way he could actually have, and realized distantly that she was shivering like a bowl full of warm custard.

Jonathan realized it about the same time she did—she could tell because his face softened, and his hands gentled against her back. He started stroking down her spine in light sweeps of those strong, lean hands, the way she imagined he’d soothe a frightened animal.

“If they don’t respect me, working here will be a living hell,” she said, before she even knew she meant to. “I can’t be weak.”

His hands stilled on her back. “I know,” he said, his voice soft and low. “And I’m sorry if I made things tough for you. I can understand you needing to stand on your own feet in the place you’ve made for yourself—but can you understand that I’ll never be able to see someone coming after you without wanting to lay them out?”

That was almost the weirdest part of this whole deal. “I’m not so much used to someone having my back,” she admitted, feeling awkward. “I know I didn’t . . . react the way you were probably expecting.”

He laughed, and the rich, rolling sound settled her nerves like a cup of hot cocoa. “Don’t worry. I’m getting used to expecting the unexpected with you.”

She grinned up at him, relief making her all light and floaty. “Oh, good. Then you won’t mind if I make you work for our first date?”

He groaned. “More than you already have, you mean?”

Violet shrugged, trying not to grin hard enough to split her cheeks.

“Hey, if you’re not man enough to beat some egg whites into submission, I can always go ask Doug . . .”

Mmm. That made him growl and press tighter to her, nudging his hips into hers and sending shudders of pleasure racing up her spine. She lifted her face and he took the hint. His mouth moved hard and demanding across her lips, pushing and taking and sweeping her up in the moment.

In a minute, they’d have to stop. She had to get the strawberry shortcake right before she clocked out, and in a minute, Adam was going to get through chewing out Doug, and they’d both come back upstairs. Really, she thought, pushing eagerly into the kiss and fisting her hands in Jonathan’s sun-tipped hair—really, this was crazy. They had to stop. Really.

Any minute now.

And don't miss the novel
that started all the talk!

LOUISA EDWARDS

first RECIPE FOR LOVE novel



"deliciously sensual"
—**Orlando Sentinel**

"a sophisticated
modern romance"
—**Library Journal**

"... get into this kitchen!"
—**PublishersWeekly.com**

"In her wickedly entertaining debut, Edwards dishes up a captivating contemporary romance expertly seasoned with plenty of sizzling sexual chemistry and deliciously tart humor." —**Booklist**



© LOUISA EDWARDS 2010