

KATRINA KWAN

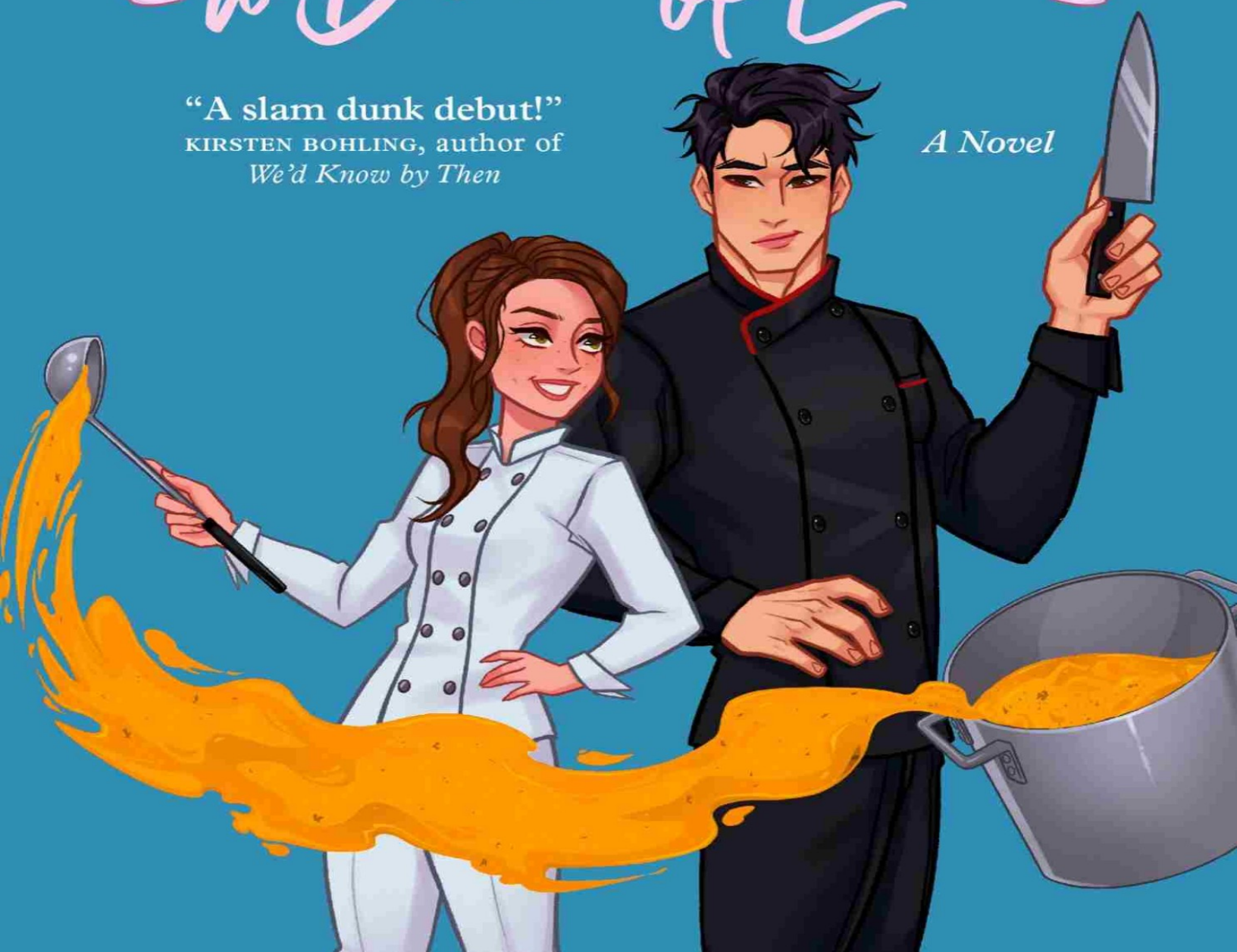
KNIVES, SEASONING, AND

a Dash of Love

“A slam dunk debut!”

KIRSTEN BOHLING, author of
We'd Know by Then

A Novel



KATRINA KWAN

**KNIVES,
SEASONING,
AND**

a Dash of Love

A Novel



RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

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For Jolie, Kira, and Kirsten



Chapter One

CONTROL. THAT'S WHAT he likes the most about running his own kitchen.

Everything has its place. Everyone has their roles to fulfill. Everything is measured and timed and seasoned.

Perfection.

He expects nothing less.

He likes his knives dangerously sharp—it's more dangerous to work with a dull blade—and he likes his waitstaff to pick up orders the second the plates hit the line. He's never bothered with a chef's hat because they're quite frankly pompous as fuck and it's hot enough in here as it is. He keeps his apron clean and the sleeves of his black chef jacket rolled up to just below his elbows.

Trained at the prestigious Gagnon-Allard School of Culinary Arts, he's the pristine image of the world-class chef everyone believes him to be. He's the great and mighty head chef of La Rouge, Alexander Chen. Under his guidance, the restaurant has achieved three Michelin stars—the epitome of culinary prestige.

But right now?

Right now, he's stressed as fuck, and *boy howdy* does his kitchen staff know it.

"What the hell is this?" he asks, voice booming over the roar of hood fans and sizzling skillets. While the noises of the kitchen don't stop, the talking

does. None of the other chefs dare make a peep.

“A steak,” Peter answers evenly, though the hard set of his jaw betrays his cool tone.

Alexander stiffens, staring down his nose at the *rotisseur*. He lowers his voice, quieter than before and somehow more frightening than when he was yelling. “I don’t want to make a parody of myself, Drenton. But if this steak were any rarer, it’d still be alive on the damn pasture. The table wants it cooked well-done.”

Peter looks like he wants to cry. Embarrassing for a man in his mid-thirties, but alas—Alexander has that effect on people.

“But these are prime triple A! Just look at the marbling! Cooking them well-done would be—”

“An absolute travesty and crime against God? I know. But it’s what the customer wants. Refire and run it, then I need another one for table ten on the fly.”

Peter gestures to the stove beside him with a huff. “Yes, Chef, but I’ve been trying to—”

“I don’t need your excuses. I need a cook who can do their damn job.”

Freddie, the *pâtissier*, hesitantly clears his throat. “Um, Chef?”

Alexander turns in one swift motion, the movement both effortlessly aggressive and smooth. He’s an owl making a pinpoint turn midair to lay its sights on new prey. Freddie is only a few inches shorter than Alexander, and just as broad. Nevertheless, he tries—and fails—to hide a grimace.

“The new hire is here. For the sous *chef* position.”

Alexander’s nostrils flare. “What sous chef?”

It’s at this exact moment Alexander spots movement on his periphery. All he catches is a glimpse, but it’s more than enough. A wisp of light-brown hair. Tanned skin. The worn-down fabric of a white chef’s coat that’s seen better days.

Then he remembers. Alexander’s last sous chef, Mitchell, left almost a week ago. He hadn’t even bothered to tell Alexander in person that he quit. The sniveling weasel had stuffed his resignation letter into the pocket of one

of Alexander's spare aprons, and that was that. Couldn't handle the demands of the job, apparently. Very few can.

Alexander can't say that it was a surprise. It was more of an inconvenience, if anything, trying to find a replacement. Despite his confidence as a chef, he knows handling an entire kitchen like this one without a second-in-command would be next to impossible. There are too many moving parts, too many chefs to keep in line. This kind of work requires a divide-and-conquer approach.

Hence the new, last-minute hire.

The new hire that's now staring up at him expectantly. There's something oddly familiar about her, but Alexander can't quite figure out why.

"You're not what I was expecting," Alexander states.

He half expects her to blanch or flush or quiver like a mouse beneath his intense scrutiny. Alexander's more than aware of the kind of effect he has on people. The kitchen is his kingdom, and as head chef, he's the rightful king.

He's intimidating. He's powerful. He's in his element.

The woman lifts her chin and holds his gaze instead, defiance in her eyes. "I get that a lot," she replies calmly, the lovely lilt of an accent gracing her words. It sounds Southern, but it isn't distinct enough for Alexander to pinpoint.

She sticks her hand out and says, "I'm Eden. Eden Monroe. It's nice to meet you."

Alexander doesn't shake her hand. He glances at his watch instead. "You're late."

Eden frowns. "I'm on time for my scheduled shift. You said on the phone to be here at three."

He glares at the other kitchen staff. "What's rule one, people?" he prompts.

"Fifteen minutes early is on time, on time is late, and if you're late, don't show up at all," the chorus of chefs mumble in practiced unison. They sound like robots, his policy on tardiness so drilled into their brains that the response is automatic.

Again, Eden doesn't seem fazed. She takes it in stride, even going so far as to give Alexander a polite—albeit incredibly tight—smile. “Duly noted. Won't happen again, Chef.”

Chef.

The way she says it makes his ears ring. It's gentle, but there's a hint of snark buried somewhere deep down.

He decides he doesn't like it.

Alexander gives her a disinterested once over. She's short, no more than five feet to his six. Her oversized chef's jacket looks more like an artist's smock than a professional's uniform. Alexander notes the splash of faded freckles across the top of her cheeks and bridge of her nose. They seem to stand out against the spotless steel environment of his kitchen.

There's something strange about her demeanor, he notices. Wide-eyed and jumpy like a newborn foal, her gaze darting around his state-of-the-art kitchen—with its fleet of polished steel gas ranges, designated task stations, and impeccably organized army of staff—as if she's stepped into Wonka's Chocolate Factory and can hardly believe her luck. Too green, too unsure. She doesn't look like she belongs here.

It's not that he doesn't think women can cook. Far from it. Some of his greatest inspirations growing up were female chefs: Julia Child, Nigella Lawson, Christine Hà. And, of course, his mother.

It's just that Eden's résumé boasted accolades and years of prior experience working in kitchens like this one. He has a hard time believing that the woman standing before him is going to be his new sous. She's so—well—ordinary.

Most sous chefs he's worked with have an air of authority about them. It's not arrogance necessarily, though Alexander's no stranger to a hotshot sous with an ego too big for their apron. They're the ones in charge of calling the shots when the head chef is otherwise occupied. They're the ones hungry and eager to move up the ladder, to learn all that they can and prove themselves in preparation for one day running kitchens of their own.

Eden is...*not* that.

But the night is young, and Eden hasn't even had the chance to prove she's not completely useless. If she is, Alexander will have her replaced. It's just that simple. There are plenty of ambitious chefs out there who'd kill for an opportunity to work in his kitchen.

Between running La Rouge and trying to find a replacement sous chef, he must have gotten his dates wrong. A mistake he won't make again. He'll conduct a more formal interview tomorrow, but for now, he needs all hands on deck.

"Drenton," he snaps. "Give her a tour. Keep her at your station for tonight."

"And the steak?"

"I'll make the damn thing myself." Alexander turns to Eden, more than a little aware of all the chits printing out on the line. "Tomorrow, Monroe. Two hours early."

She noticeably swallows. He finds satisfaction in finally eliciting a normal response. He's used to being on the receiving end of wide-eyed timidity.

"Two hours? I don't know if I can make it."

"Training starts immediately. Unless you don't think you can handle it. If that's the case, you can just go. You'll only be in the way."

She crosses her arms. "Who says I can't handle it?"

Alexander doesn't bother responding. It's an abnormally busy day, and even though the restaurant has only been open for an hour, orders are piling up. There are still a million and one things to do, and answering rhetorical questions isn't on his list.

Tickets to call.

Dishes to verify and plate.

Steaks to *not* screw up.

Dinner rush hits them like a tidal wave, but Alexander's prepared. He always is. He's been doing this long enough to know how to keep things moving. Lack of momentum is the fastest way to ruin a night. Food stops going out, orders keep coming in, chefs become overwhelmed with ten

different dishes they're trying to prepare at the exact same time. It's a nightmare.

So he keeps things moving, calling out times and demanding accountability, and more often than not yelling at his chefs to get their heads out of their asses and focus on the tables that have been waiting the longest. It's an extra headache not having a sous chef at the ready to help him with plating and putting out fires—one of them quite literal—but he manages somehow.

By the end of the night, his feet hurt. His arches ache and his back is sore from carrying his chefs through the worst of it. He doesn't even take his break because, for him, there's no such thing as sitting down on the job, not even for a breather.

He's tired and getting agitated, his fingers itching for a smoke. Even when there's a backup in the dish pit and one of the idiot waitstaff drops an entire tray of food out front, Alexander sucks it up, leans into the throbbing pain in his feet, and helps send out the last of the dessert that Freddie has diligently prepared. Alexander has to give credit where credit is due. Freddie's handmade *éclairs* are to die for. It's just a shame he takes forever to make them.

Alexander's about to ring the bell to call for a pickup when something distracts him. A woman's laugh.

Eden's laugh.

It's light, and the sweetest sound he's ever heard.

He risks a glance over his shoulder as he stabs the last chit onto the check spindle. Eden and Peter are at the meat station, already cleaning up the area and preparing for closing. They speak in hushed tones, almost conspiratorial, looking at ease with one another. They look like this is perfectly natural, two old friends who've done this countless times before. It doesn't take long before Freddie wanders over and joins the conversation. Alexander briefly wonders what they're talking about. It's not like anyone willingly talks to him about nonwork things.

Then he shakes his head. He doesn't care. He rings the bell and sends out the last order of the day.

Eden laughs again, bright and bubbly.

Alexander does his best to ignore her wide smile and concentrates on overseeing cleanup. He sincerely hopes she isn't this much of a chatterbox once she's fully trained. He doesn't like personal conversations during work hours. There's too much going on in a kitchen, lots of sharp objects and hot metal and scalding water. Unnecessary small talk will only get in his way of giving out clear, concise orders.

His dark-brown eyes lock with her light-hazel ones. Eden looks away quickly, and he suddenly realizes that he's been glaring this whole time. He turns to head toward the kitchen doors to check on the *maître d'*. The sooner the last customers eat, pay and leave, the sooner they can all clock out and call it a night.

Somewhere deep down, Alexander knows that tomorrow's training will prove incredibly...*interesting*.



Chapter Two

EDEN HAS A confession to make. She may or may not have embellished a few things on her résumé to get this job.

Alright, fine. Who's she kidding?

She definitely embellished *a lot* of things on her résumé to get this job.

She really did attend the Gagnon-Allard School of Culinary Arts ten years ago. For all of two weeks. Had it not been for Parsons—the rat bastard—Eden would have been able to stay.

She should have known she could never be that lucky. She was admittedly worried when she got the call about the sous chef position, concerned that Shang would recognize her and realize how full of shit she was.

Except he didn't. There hadn't seemed to be an inkling of recognition in those cold, hard eyes.

He apparently goes by Alexander now, which she thinks is super weird, but Eden will always know him as Shang.

Shang, the mildly dorky, adorably sweet apprentice chef who shared a handful of classes with her—however brief her stint at Gagnon-Allard truly was. Even though Eden was forced to leave the school of her dreams, she'll always remember the way Shang helped point her in the right direction on her first day of class. Or the fact that he always seemed to smell like roasted hazelnuts and vanilla. Or the fact that his smile used to light up a room.

The contrast between who he was and who he is now is jarring.

A part of her wants to ask what the hell happened, but it would only expose her truth. Eden can already see how the conversation would pan out.

She'll ask why he turned into such a prick. He'll ask how they know each other. She'll say they met at school. And then he'll undoubtedly look into her credentials and realize exactly to what extent she's a fraud.

Half of her references are fake. She handed in a list of made-up names and dummy phone numbers that all linked back to her so she could pretend to be her own references. There's no shortage of websites online that generate fake, usable numbers and provide voice-modifying programs. It's simply a matter of knowing where to look. It's probably illegal and definitely immoral, but...

But Eden needs this job.

So, as curious as she is, she keeps her mouth shut.

Getting to La Rouge two hours earlier than she'd planned is a giant pain in the ass. It's located in Seattle's downtown core, so she has to grab three different bus transfers followed by a quick sprint from the station to the restaurant's back doors to make it on time. The cold winter air burns her lungs and rips at her throat. By the time she arrives, Eden is out of breath and starting to sweat. Her hair—which she's thrown up into a bun to keep out of her eyes—is a windswept mess, flyaway strands everywhere.

She bursts through the doors to find Alexander leaning against the polished preparation table, looking at his watch while casually sipping coffee from a mug in his other hand.

"You're a minute late, Monroe. This is my kitchen, and I expect you to follow my rules."

Eden isn't a violent person, but she really wants to kick him in the shin. She refrains because—yeah, no—kicking her new boss will probably be frowned upon.

Probably.

"It won't happen again," she says, but Alexander's already turning away, immediately launching into a rapid-fire spiel.

“We have a *saucier*, *poissonier*, *entremetier*, *rotisseur*, *garde manger*, *grillardin*, and a *pâtissier*—each with their own *chef de partie*, *commis chefs* and multiple assistants. The prep cooks work between seven A.M. and four P.M. to prepare for service. Service officially begins at four P.M. and goes until midnight, but as my sous chef, you’ll have to be here at eleven and stay until well after close. We serve on average a thousand dishes to roughly two hundred and fifty guests per night and—” Alexander holds her with a cold gaze. “Are you listening, Monroe?”

Eden stands her ground even though her head spins with a vengeance. Yesterday offered her a glimpse of what it’s like to work in a kitchen like La Rouge, but to hear Alexander lay it out so plainly makes her stomach flip. He makes it sound simple. Like managing a team of twenty-odd people is that much of a breeze. If she’s going to be his sous chef, she’s going to need to learn the ropes—and fast.

“I’m listening, Chef,” she says quickly.

Alexander grunts. “Drenton showed you where the walk-in fridge is, right?”

“Yes, he did.”

He nods once, not bothering to look directly at her. *Smug bastard*. “Good. Go make me something,” he says.

Eden frowns. “What?”

“Consider it your interview.”

“But you’ve already hired me.”

“Everyone who works for me goes through a three-month probationary period. If you can’t meet my standards, I let you go—no cause needed.”

Eden supposes that makes a lot of sense. She did think it was weird how quickly she landed the job. It was a brief phone call, a few simple questions about availability, and *bam!* Hired. It smells kind of desperate to be honest, but Eden isn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. It wouldn’t be the first time in history someone was hired on the spot.

If he wants her to whip up a meal for him to judge, fine. She’s going to blow him away.

“Do you have a specific request?” she asks, shrugging off her winter coat to reveal a plain white tank top underneath. She wastes no time pulling her secondhand chef jacket out of her backpack and slipping it on.

“Make whatever you want, just don’t bore me. You have an hour.”

“And I have free reign of ingredients?”

He glances at his watch again. “You have fifty-nine minutes,” he corrects before taking another sip of his coffee.

Eden fights the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she gets to work.

She’s only mildly perturbed that Alexander remains where he is, watching her every move like a hawk. It’s intense, his eyes. She can feel the heat of his stare glued to her every movement, observing her. Is he waiting for her to make a mistake? Eden remembers how focused Shang used to be in class, but this is on a whole other level.

Her nerves—thankfully—don’t win out.

Every measurement is precise. Every cut is clean. Every choice of herbs and spice is complementary.

She tastes as she goes. Her palate is one of her greatest strengths. Eden knows exactly how much salt and pepper to add after half a bite. She knows how much chicken stock to add based off the texture on her tongue.

Alexander watches as she brings another spoon to her mouth. His gaze lingers on her lips. Eden, for a moment, fights the urge to squirm. Do the other chefs here not work the same way? It’s imperative for a chef to taste their work. Sometimes that’s the only way to know if a dish will turn out right. This is as much a science as it is an art form, and minor verification tests along the way are perfectly acceptable.

So why the hell is he staring at me like that?

She wonders if she’s made a mistake somewhere, if she’s screwed up somehow and Alexander is the kind of asshole who won’t point out the problem until *after* just so he can rub it in her face.

He definitely gives off that kind of vibe. This man is waiting for her to fail.

“What?” Eden asks, preparing to plate. She grabs a lovely ornate dish off the shelves below the cooking station, gilded filigree wrapping around the circumference.

“Licorice powder?” he replies flatly. “For a saffron risotto?”

“I was going to use white truffle shavings, but I know how expensive truffles are.”

“Licorice powder,” he says again, almost accusatory, in disbelief.

Eden hands him the plate and a clean spoon. “Don’t knock it before you try it.”

Alexander eyes the food. Eden knows she did everything right. She’s watched so many cooking shows that she can recreate almost any recipe she comes across. It’s a gift of hers, near-perfect duplication after one or two viewings. If she has to fake it until she makes it, then so be it.

She throws in chicken stock for saltiness. White wine for acidity. Butter for creaminess. Parmigiano-Reggiano for nuttiness. A pinch of saffron for earthiness and color. And the licorice powder? That’s to add an unexpected hint of sweetness. Perfectly balanced.

He takes a bite. She holds her breath.

His face is frigid and unreadable. Eden can’t tell if he likes it or hates it. Somehow *not* knowing is the worst possible outcome. All she can do as he studies her dish is study him right back.

His black hair is cropped short at the sides, but slightly longer up top, borderline militant in its neatness. He’s got a strong jaw with trimmed stubble, also very neat and orderly. It’s his eyes that make Eden’s stomach feel strange. They’re not just dark and deep, but serious and cold.

As he takes another contemplative bite, there’s a glint in his eyes. Whether it’s a good or bad sign, she can’t tell. She worries he sees right through her, knows her secret, remembers her from their time long since gone by.

She’s about to ask for his opinion about the dish she’s prepared when a group of chefs enter the restaurant through the back doors. She recognizes two of them, Freddie and Peter, having met them the day before. They’re