

How to Bake a **Cupcake**



A Novella By
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CHAPTER 1

“Jackson and Jasmine Taylor, I like the sound of that.” He took a long sip of his coffee and stared at her intensely with those deep, dark eyes of his. She held his gaze for a moment, but then his eyes started to wander, as he examined every inch of her being.

Jackson was a lion, more ferocious than the others. Jasmine didn't like being pursued, especially like this—so steadily and aggressively. In the past she would have simply felt flattered, but had made it a point to steer clear of Jackson Taylor, the man rumored to be a womanizer. Yet, he hadn't allowed her unflattering reputation to deter him from trying to claim her as his prize. In fact, he seemed to be turned on by it. If she hadn't already scoped out the dean's son, Stacey Fisher, as her target, perhaps she would have given Jackson a chance—a real chance that is.

“Excuse me,” Jasmine replied in a forceful tone before sliding past Jackson to give the barista her order.

“I'll take a tall espresso!” Practically shouting at the girl behind the counter, Jasmine attempted to make her voice heard over all the chatter taking place around them. Café Milano, located right across the

street from the south side of UC Berkeley's campus, was always busy, and this day was no exception. After all, finals were looming, so everyone was getting their caffeine fix to keep them up through what would undoubtedly be a long study night. As she stood at the counter waiting for her order, Jasmine could feel Jackson's eyes pierce the back of her skull.

"That's a pretty strong drink for someone so petite." Ignoring his comment, Jasmine continued to wait patiently for her order. Not one to be ignored, Jackson moved in closer behind her. He stood so close that she could smell his cologne—Issey Miyake, the same brand Demetri used to wear. At \$72.00 a pop, that was an expensive scent for a college student. Jasmine knew because she used to buy 4.2-ounce bottles for Demetri regularly, while most teens her age could barely afford one. Yet, it was clear to her and anyone who had eyes to see that Jackson wasn't an ordinary college boy. A graduate student at the Haas School of Business, working on obtaining his MBA, Jackson wasn't a boy at all—Jackson was a man.

After giving the barista exact change for her coffee, Jasmine gathered her belongings and began to head toward the door, but of course, Jackson had to stand in front of her with his legs spread shoulder-width apart, and block her path. She was forced to face those deep, dark eyes yet again, as he stared at her and took a bite out of a delectably large cupcake that seemed to appear out of nowhere. "Will you be my study partner for the night?" he asked, grinning devilishly before raising his cup to take another sip of coffee.

What a cocky bastard. Jasmine tried to come up with a witty response to his flirtatious question, but caught a glimpse of Stacey entering the café out of the corner of her eye, and suddenly, all thoughts shifted towards him. Her heart revved up like she had just finished a ten-yard dash. Taking a deep breath, she looked past Jackson in order to follow her soon-to-be honey's every move.

"Excuse me," said Jasmine, completely abandoning the thought of engaging him in a game of ping-pong wit.

Aware that her attention had averted from him, Jackson took a step back, then looked over his shoulder to follow the path Jasmine's eyes had taken. He saw Stacey and smirked. "I'm surprised you didn't order a *small* coffee with lots of sugar and cream," he said mockingly, referring to her light-skinned, curly-haired, object of affection.

"Don't hate," she replied, as she pushed past him and began walking toward Stacey.

Jasmine hurriedly attempted to maneuver her way through the sea of tables and chairs that occupied the café. She wanted to make it over to Stacey before anyone else clamored around him. Yet, before she could make it just two feet away from Jackson, David Sims, one of the star athletes on Cal's football team, jumped in front of her and asked if she needed help carrying her things. His wide body blocked her view of Stacey, and she immediately became annoyed.

"No thank you," Jasmine replied, irritated, yet still trying to sound polite. If it were any other day, she would have stopped to flirt with David, as she did with most of the guys who showered her with attention. This time however, Stacey was the only boy on her mind, and she so desperately wanted to talk to him.

Without even looking David in the eye, Jasmine slinked past him and continued to head toward Stacey. Unfortunately, some beady-eyed girl beat her to him, and she watched as the unidentified young lady smiled and giggled at everything Stacey said, while flaunting what appeared to be newly-whitened teeth. Unfortunately for her, Jasmine already had her game plan mapped out, and it involved a lot more than a recent trip to the dentist.

"Stacey," Jasmine chimed, while sliding in between him and his female companion. "I didn't think I'd see you here. After all, your score on Professor Murphy's last quiz proves you're more than ready for the final." Feeling absolutely no shame for having interrupted what she had deemed to be a meaningless conversation, Jasmine remained unaffected by the stunned look on the girl's face as she continued to talk to Stacey.

“Hey Jazz,” Stacey replied with a huge grin. Seeing those dimples she adored practically forced Jasmine to fall into a trance. “I’m not here to study,” he continued, “I actually just stopped by to drop off some lecture notes to a friend.” Stacey pointed toward the young lady who stood behind Jasmine with mouth agape. Unknowingly adding to his friend’s frustration, he asked Jasmine how she was doing, then pulled her into a hug. Jasmine, aware of her power to intimidate, purposely squeezed Stacey tightly before cocking her head to the side to shoot a look at his friend. It didn’t take long for her to get the point, because she quickly scurried away.

“Wait!” Stacey called out to his buddy as he slowly released Jasmine from his embrace, but she was already on her way out the door.

“Don’t mind her,” said Jasmine, dismissively waving her hand in the air. “So, I was wondering, do you have time to go over a few probability questions with me for the stat final?”

“Sorry Jazz,” Stacey replied before glancing down at his watch. “I have a meeting with the coach in a few. Besides, you’re a smart girl, I’m sure you can figure them out. In fact, you could probably teach me a thing or two.”

Stacey was right; Jasmine was a smart girl, but she’d be willing to play dumb if it meant she could spend more time with him.

Before she could think of something to say that would persuade him to reconsider, Stacy placed one hand on her shoulder and said, “I gotta bounce, Jazz, but it was good seeing you, as always.”

“You too,” she replied, feeling a little disappointed.

Stacey took a few steps toward the door, then turned around and added, “Say hello to Missy for me, will you?”

“I will,” Jasmine assured, smiling faintly. It pained her to watch him leave so soon, which is why she convinced herself that his hectic schedule and nothing else, was the reason for his early departure. After all, Stacey was a busy guy. Between classes, football, and working alongside his father in the dean’s office, did he really have much time to devote to a social life? Whether he truly did or not, one thing was

certain: Stacey was extremely popular with the ladies and the men. The ladies adored him because he was fine, intelligent, and extremely ambitious. Guys liked him because he was cool, athletic, and basically everything they aspired to be.

As Jasmine watched Stacey exit via the double doors of the café, she couldn't help but feel a little defeated. Yet, tomorrow was another day, and she had a lot more tricks up her sleeve.