

Not in the mood for his teasing, she tossed her head and muttered, “Just like Mama.” Was there no one who appreciated her experimental seasonings? After giving the orangey-brown liquid a final stir, she secured the pad around the pot’s thin bail and lifted. Filling the gravy boat was her last task before heading into the dining room. Two steps across the floor, she felt a jerk, and the pot tipped at a steep angle, making the gravy slosh toward the edge. “Oh, no.”

Mister Spengler stepped close, his leg pressing against the side of her skirts, and reached for the bottom of the pan. “I’ve got it. Let go.”

For a moment, she swayed from the impact of his solid arm against hers. “No, the pot’s too hot.” But her denial was pointless—either she let him take the pot, or the broken bail would drop the pot and all its contents to the floor.

With a muffled grunt, he lifted the pot from her hands and carried it back to the stove, his lips curled in a grimace.

Ivey’s heart lurched. The sight of the hot metal pot in Mister Spengler’s broad hands wrestled a cry from her mouth. “Ahh.” She rushed forward and grabbed onto his sleeve to drag him toward the sink and the water bucket. But her feet skidded. The man hadn’t moved an inch. “Hurry, we must get your hands in cold water.” Again, she tugged hard on his sleeve, but her boots just slipped on the wooden floor.

The mighty oak of a man remained rooted in place. “I’m fine.” He looked at her, one dark eyebrow winged upward.

“You can’t be. Blisters must be forming as we waste time talking.” She stepped next to him and reached for his hands, turning them so the palms faced upward. Leaning close, she inspected the surfaces, expecting to see reddened and bubbled skin. Instead, she noticed thick calluses that ran in a bumpy line at the base of his fingers, and scars in irregular patterns marked the surface of his palms.

The man inhaled. “My hands are around heat all day long. Your pot was nowhere near my forge’s temperature.”

Ivey straightened and looked up into Mister Spengler’s brown eyes. As dark as cocoa powder. Staring, she also saw little tan flecks like caramel bits. What he said made sense, but she’d never known of anyone who could touch a pan right off the stove and not get burned.

A throat clearing interrupted. “Is everything all right?”

*Mama’s voice.* That sound should remind Ivey of a pending task. But, for the life of her, she didn’t know what that was.