

*Here's an excerpt from "Death by Devil's Breath," Chili Cook-Off mystery #2 by Kylie Logan. And here's what's happening . . . Maxie (my main character and sleuth) is traveling as part of the Chili Showdown, a group that sells their wares at cook-offs around the country. She's just arrived in Las Vegas and is standing with hunky Nick Falcone, the head of security, watching the judging for the world's hottest chili, Devil's Breath.*

So here's the thing about a chili cook-off. The way it works--or at least the way the Showdown contests always work--is that each contestant ladles one scoop of their chili into a bowl and that chili is then delivered to the judge for tasting. As for what they're supposed to be judging, they were looking for things like good flavor, the texture of the chili, the aroma and how skillfully the spices were blended. Of course, for this special Devil's Breath category, heat mattered, too.

When everyone was settled, Tumbleweed got the first scoop from Brother William, delivered it to The Great Osborn went back for another, and so on.

"They're not actually going to eat that stuff, are they?"

Since I knew Nick was a philistine when it came to chili, I tried to be understanding. "Spicy is what chili is all about."

"The only thing spicy is good for is burning your lips and scalding your insides."

Like I could miss an opening as good as that?

I looked up at Nick. Even all the neon in Vegas couldn't compete with the vivid blue of his eyes. "What's wrong with burning your lips?"

He looked down at me. "It all depends if you're talking a little burning or too much."

I leaned back. Just a little. Just a hair's breadth closer to his chest. "Is there such a thing as too much?"

Nick barked out a laugh. It was the first I realized his gaze had moved up the stage where The Great Osborn had just swallowed his first spoonful of Brother Williams' brew and his lips puckered and the tips of his ears turned red.

Nick laughed. "Guess that's my answer."

And here I thought we were talking about something other than chili.

I crossed my arms over my chest and turned my attention back to the contest, watching as Hermosa swallowed a taste of chili, coughed and pounded her chest.

Yancy was next. He popped a spoonful of chili in his mouth, let it sit on his tongue for a couple seconds, swallowed, and smiled.

Next up, Reverend Love. She put a tiny bit of chili on her spoon and carefully touched it to the tip of her tongue. She let it settle in, flicked her tongue toward the spoon again, and her mouth fell open with surprise. She took a drink of water.

"Amateur," I grumbled. "Water doesn't help."

"So now you're a chemist?"

This time, I didn't dignify Nick's question with so much as a glance. "You don't have to be a chemist to know spices. The capsaicin in peppers is what's hot, and when you taste it, then drink water, all the water does is spread the hotness all around your mouth."

"So now you know about hot lips and hot mouths?"

This time, I wasn't going to rise to the bait. But then, I was pretty busy watching Dickie who spooned up a mouthful of chili and called out, "You guys are wimps! You have to be bold to make it in this town. You have to be daring!" And with that, he swallowed down two more big gulps of Devil's Breath.

Dickie's cheeks turned fire-engine red.

His shoulders stiffened.

He took another taste.

So, Okay, the guy was a total jackass, but I had to give him credit; he knew how to handle his Devil's Breath.

And so it went.

"You guys are light-weights," Dickie called out and took a taste of the final contestant's chili. "You think this stuff is hot? You don't know hot! Hermosa, now there's one hot chick! And hot—" Another bite and Dickie sat back in his chair. "There's a restaurant here in town that serves only hot food. It's got three seating sections: daring, wild and downright crazy."

He hauled in a breath. "And then there's the place where all the chili is free." Dickie pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his brow. "This place . . . and the chili is free and . . ." There was a glass of water nearby and he glugged it down so fast, the water dribbled over his chin. "All the chili you can eat is free, but . . ." His shoulders dropped, his arms fell to his sides.

"Water is ten dollars a glass."

It was the last thing Dickie said before he fell, face down, into his bowl of chili, and the last bad joke he'd ever tell.