



I Can Handle Him

Debbie K. Lum

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I Can Handle Him is a bubbly, suspenseful, and satisfying romance.

There are obstacles on the road to love—sometimes even deadly ones. So the young and hopeful characters of Debbie Lum's romantic thriller *I Can Handle Him* learn across one life-changing summer.

Former coffeehouse coworkers Tory, Nick, and Quinn have been thrown back together for another long, potentially sultry, San Antonio summer. The girls are in from Austin; Quinn's readying herself for her first year of teaching, and Tory's between semesters at law school. And Nick, well: Nick's still in town, and still irresistible. He's also helping a brand new, innovative coffee shop that rivals their former place of employment, and is trailed by the rumor that he's deadly trouble.

The girls don't believe it, though—not even when their decision to stand by Nick costs them dearly. Tory's nascent-lawyer mind is set to work double time to prove her old friend innocent after accidents pile up around him. Investigations are initiated, but it seems more likely to Tory that the troubles originate with Reed, the town's entitled heir, whom she's always known to be more dangerous than his cavalier hipster attitude suggests.

Elements of the story are as irresistibly sweet as the turquoise cinnamon buns that Nick makes his shop's trademark. Sexual tension sizzles—often directly announced, but also frequently apparent in the thoughtful things that the friends—and maybe matches—do for one another when they're feeling down, from cheeky gifts to showing up at just the right time.

A supporting cast makes the novel all the more suspenseful, from old family friends who refuse to forgive to young up-and-comers whose familiar actions drip with new suspicions. There are stalkers, allusions to a previous assault, and tragic deaths, but also enough quips about couponing and home cooking mishaps to keep transitions light.

Superficial details inhibit the story's momentum, as does an early tendency to let in-jokes stay in for too long. Important details about the lead characters' deep connections are concealed for longer than is necessary, though they can be inferred. Dialogue, both external and internal, is peppered with overly youthful slang and shorthand, and pop culture references and typecast characters, including a gay best friend and a beat poet, threaten to date the text.

At a few points, the novel becomes decidedly religious; these forays into faith are saccharine, though, compared to the rest of the story's more playful air. These friends and lovers are at their best when they're flouting expectations. The romantic elements themselves are slow to bloom but are wholly satisfying when they do. Suspenseful elements are equally well handled, with an ending to the mysteries around Nick that shocks, surprises, and sates—even to the extent that the book's happy epilogues feel unnecessary.

Teasing and titillating until the end, *I Can Handle Him* is a bubbly and suspenseful romance.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (April 23, 2018)

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