

SEX ON A PLATE



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Bonus Preview

MOUTHWATERING SERIES, BOOK TWO

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CHAPTER 1



The serpentine check-in line leading to the airline counter had been stalled for the last twenty minutes, and there was no indication that it would resume moving anytime soon. Lulah was so stressed that her shoulders were locked up around her ears. Furiously tapping her foot, she checked the time on her cell phone once again and scolded herself for arriving at San Francisco Airport so late. Anyone who flew regularly through SFO knew of its long lines and longer delays. But what had really bollocksed up her plans was a sudden rainstorm that slowed traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge to a crawl. She hadn't expected that, and by the time, she arrived at the airport, she was super late and super stressed.

She concentrated on drawing in several deep, calming breaths, but her attention was diverted by a group of airline employees gathered in a corner, gossiping, and having way too good a time. She debated walking over there and demanding they do something to help their co-workers out. Studying their bored, disgruntled expressions, Lulah thought the better of it. They might suspect she was some sort of troublemaker, maybe worse, and bar her from her flight to Austin. If that happened, she'd be in big trouble. Her best friend, Charlie, would never forgive her.

She needed to clear her mind and chill out.

She glanced at her cell phone again and debated what to do. Play Candy Crush? Nah. Check her email inbox again? Noooo, that would just make her more nervous than she already was. Besides, the art federation people had emailed to advise that they wouldn't be making a decision about the apprenticeship in Thailand for another couple of days. Check the celebrity gossip news? Ding, ding, ding, ding, we have a winner, Lulah thought.

As she scrolled through Perez Hilton's website, she wondered if there would be a story about Charlie and the new restaurant she was opening in Austin in a few days with her boyfriend, Drew. Charlie and Drew had fallen in love while competing on a reality TV culinary competition called *Food Fight!* Lulah, being an investor in Charlie's food truck, had been featured on the show as well, and it amused her to be stopped by people on the street asking for an autograph or wanting a selfie with her. She shook her head at the thought. Imagine wanting someone's autograph because she'd been seen on television serving food, washing pots, and counting out change? One of her beloved idols, Andy Warhol, declared that one day everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes. Lulah wondered if Warhol had ever envisioned that such fame could be gained for just being ordinary. She had no interest in that. She wanted recognition for her talent, her art, not because she had been on TV. Being on *Food Fight!* had been a lot of fun, but it was time to get out of Dodge. She was leaving the country in less than a week to travel the world and find inspiration.

Before Lulah even had a chance to read about the antics of America's newest pop diva, a female voice from behind attracted her attention--a simpering female voice.

"Oh, Des," the woman sighed, "This week together has been aMAYzing. I feel like I've known you my whole life. Can't you stay here for a little while longer?"

"I'll miss you, babe, but it just can't happen. I've got a ton of stuff going on back home, and I've got to get back to work. Besides, I wouldn't be able to give you the attention you deserve."

Lulah shivered at the sound of the man's voice. It was soft, deep, and husky, as if it had been caressed with sandpaper. It was the kind of voice that brought to mind rumpled bed sheets, hours spent making love, and waking up early to do it all over again.

What was the name for the male version of a siren's call, Lulah wondered. Because this guy definitely had that going on.

"Well, maybe I can come out to see you," the woman persisted. "I've got some vacation days saved. Let's see where this all leads, hmm? What do you say?"

"Babe, that sounds tempting. But right now, I've gotta stay focused on my work. I'll be working all the time and not able to give you the attention that you deserve. This was only one time, one perfect moment, and we were lucky enough to share it. We can never get it back. Best if we don't try." He sighed. "I know it hurts, but we'll always have Pacifica."

Lulah snorted and rolled her eyes. This guy might have it going on, but he was a player with a capital P. Curious, she turned and snuck a look at the woman. The nymphette was totally clueless. She wept like a beautiful fairy tale princess; large crystalline tears trickled from her wide blue eyes and adhered to her lower lashes. How did she do that, Lulah wondered, recalling her own running mascara and snotty nose whenever she was in tears. Not that she cried often. The last time was when her father died two years ago.

She watched the woman smile sadly and nod her head in reluctant acceptance. Lulah looked toward the man, curious to see who had inspired such devotion, and let out a stunned breath. He was even more enticing than his voice. He stood well over six feet tall. The Henley shirt molding his body revealed a torso and shoulders cut like a swimmer's. Lulah's eyes drifted to the man's worn jeans, which encased a backside that Charlie would have deemed "biteable." His mouth was a wonder; smooth, full, and brimming with humor, with a Cupid's bow top lip. His perfection was marred by a somewhat crooked nose, one that may have taken a punch or two. But it didn't detract from his beauty. He was real, and confident, and virile, the

very definition of a man, not like the man-boys she always seemed to attract. As someone who worked with her hands, Lulah's eyes drifted to his hands and fingers. They were long and strong and filled with white scars, reminding her of the scars that she had seen on the chefs competing on *Food Fight!* A two-day growth of beard had Lulah thinking about all the places he could give a woman beard burn.

Out of nowhere, he looked over and ensnared her with eyes the color of espresso, deep, dark, and drowning. Eyes that, when they looked at a woman, seemed to see her most private secrets. His gaze made her uncomfortable. He was the type of man a woman might do anything for...give up anything for. She swallowed. Intuitively, Lulah understood she needed to be on her guard and stay well away from this guy. She raised an eyebrow at him before turning away. At last, she made her way to the front of the line.

She walked up to the counter where the consultant took her ticket and identification and began processing the paperwork. The employee asked, "Do you have any luggage to check?"

"No. Thanks. This is just a quick trip," Lulah responded.

Is this your first visit to Austin?"

Lulah nodded and said, "Yes."

"It's a fun place. I'm sure you'll have a great time there." Handing Lulah her boarding pass and ID, the woman added, "Your flight will board at Gate Fifty-Seven."

"Thank you," Lulah replied and made her way to the security checkpoint and another long line. Once through security, she walked over to a shop to buy a bottle of overpriced water. She still had a few minutes to kill before her flight boarded, so Lulah roamed around the store. Spotting the paperback book section, she wandered over to see if anything might interest her. The cover of a cozy mystery caught her eye, and Lulah picked it up to read the back cover copy. Deciding to purchase the book as well, she began to walk to the cash register when she spotted the husky throated Adonis. He was leaning against the counter and flirting with the cashier. Without thinking about it, she

retreated behind a magazine rack and lowered her knees a little to disappear from his sightline, as she waited for him to leave.

Knowing she was behaving childishly, she muttered to herself, “You’re a foolish eejit, Riordan.” Nevertheless, she remained where she was. She only hoped he hadn’t spotted her. If that happened, she would feel even more foolish. Fortunately, he left a short time later and Lulah was able to make her purchases in peace before walking to her departure gate. After finding an empty seat in the waiting area, she laid her large duffle bag on the floor as a sort of footstool. She propped her legs up, leaned back, opened the book, and began to read.

She hadn’t been sitting for long when she became aware that someone was standing nearby, watching her. Keeping her eyes on her book, but not on the words, she attempted to ignore the person until she was asked, “Is this seat taken?”

Her body stiffened. Uh-oh, she thought. Sexy Voice.

She laid the book on her legs and sat up a little. “No, it’s not,” she admitted. She couldn’t understand why he wanted a seat right next to her when there were plenty of others available. Unless—

“My name’s Desmond Jordan,” he said, offering his hand, “Des for short.”

Lulah looked at him for a few moments before shaking his hand. He then placed his other hand on top of hers. Oh, yeah, she thought. He was putting the moves on her.

“Really,” she said, incredulity permeating her voice. “Already?”

Des raised his eyebrows in confusion. “What do you mean ‘already?’”

She pulled her hand away from his with a jerk and asked, “You can’t be that clueless, can you? You end a relationship with someone not thirty minutes ago, and you’re already hitting on me?”

“I’m not hitting on you. I’m making polite conversation with a fellow traveler.”

Lulah pivoted her body to face the man. “Oh, come on. I’m a little older than your naïve friend. I’m not fooled that easily.”

Scrutinizing her face, he said, "You're not that old. What are you, thirty-one? Thirty-two?"

"I'm twenty-eight! Not that it's any of your business."

"Really? Huh," he said, staring. "Well, you're very beautiful."

She sat back in her seat. "I bet you say that to all the women you insult."

Des put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Hey, you don't need to tell me twice. I'll shut up."

Lulah gave him a curt nod and picked up her book again. But, as time passed, she continued to feel Des' eyes on her.

"What?" she squared off.

"Your hair. It's gorgeous."

Lulah unknowingly ran her hand down her flame red tresses.

"It reminds me of an Irish Setter we used to have when I was a kid," he added.

She noticed his slight smirk but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of responding to the insult.

"Thanks," she replied with gritted teeth.

"And," he noted, "You've got a great accent. Irish, right?"

"How astute of you."

"First time in the States?" he asked.

"No. I've lived in California for more than half of my life." Why was she answering him?

"But you've never been to Austin, right?" At her questioning look, he added, "I heard you mention that to the woman at the check-in counter.

"Look," he rasped, leaning in, "you're going to Austin. I live in Austin. Why don't we meet up some time?" He gave her a devastating smile. "We'll go out and I can show you the sights. Better yet, I'll make you dinner. I'm a chef—"

As Lulah's mam would say, the penny dropped.

"Ah, now I understand," she interrupted. "You think you can finagle some sort of assistance from me because I was on television?"

“What? No. I don’t even watch much television unless...were you on *Game of Thrones*?”

Lulah couldn’t be sure if he was joking or not. Ignoring his question, she said, “So, you just happen to want to cook dinner for a random woman you met at an airport?”

“Yeah, why not? You’re a very attractive woman. A little prickly but...”

“Prickly? First you call me old—”

“I did not call you old.”

Lulah ignored his comment. “Then you try to romance me in the hopes of getting some sort of assistance from me with the public. Maybe recommend your restaurant to the press? And you have the nerve to call me prickly.” Lulah rose from her seat. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Chef God’s-Gift-To-Women, but I’m so not interested.”

Des stood up as well. “My only motivation, Ms. Prickly, is to spend a few hours in pleasant conversation with a beautiful woman.”

Lulah was still annoyed, despite her unexpected warm reaction to him calling her beautiful. Nevertheless, she subdued it without mercy. “And maybe more?”

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “It crossed my mind.”

“Well, you can uncross it. I’m not as gullible as your previous conquest and you are *so* not my type, Chef.” She picked up her duffle bag. “But cheer up, Des. We’ll always have Gate Fifty-Seven.”



SHE MANAGED to avoid seeing the annoying chef again from the time boarding commenced all the way to the flight’s arrival in Austin. She kept reminding herself that she was grateful for the reprieve.

Walking into the Arrivals terminal, Lulah spotted Charlie making a mad dash toward her. She laughed with delight and ran to her friend, and the two embraced as if they hadn’t seen each other in years, and not four months.

“Lulah-belle, you made it,” Charlie cried out as she brought her

friend into a tight bear hug. "Oh, I can't believe you're here. Let me look at you."

"Look at me? What for?" Lulah asked, laughing. "Darlin' we face-time every week."

"I know. But I've still missed you."

"I figured that with Drew, you'd be too busy to miss me," Lulah replied. She was happy that her best friend had found love but, on occasion, she did feel a little lonely. And, she was surprised to admit, jealous.

"You know that would never happen," Charlie said. She pulled away from Lulah and studied her face. "You look great. Excited about your trip?"

"Yes. I can't believe that in less than a week I'll be on my way to Japan."

"It's about time. You've postponed your adventure long enough," Charlie declared. She glanced down at Lulah's large duffle bag and asked, "Is this all you brought?"

"Yeah. I'll be travelling light."

Charlie picked up Lulah's bag and swayed a bit before setting it down again. "Whoa, this thing is heavy. What do you have in here?"

"It's not that heavy. Why are you wobbling?" Suddenly concerned, Lulah asked, "Are you okay?" Her eyes grew larger as her voice became softer. "Oh, Charlie, don't tell me you're pregnant?"

"What? No!" Charlie exclaimed. "The only baby in my near future is the restaurant. Look down."

Lulah did as Charlie asked and laughed. "Why are you wearing high heels?"

Charlie lifted her foot to show off the four-inch-high stilettos. "I've been practicing wearing them for the restaurant opening. I want to look confident that night and feeling tall helps. Besides, they go with the dress I'll be wearing."

"Good thing you have another three days. You need lots more practice before you break them in."

Charlie sniffed. "You can take your own damn bag then."

Lulah grinned, picked up her bag, and the two headed to the short-term parking lot.

As they were busy conversing, the friends managed to walk past Charlie's car twice, but soon it was found, and they were on the road. As the car merged onto the highway, Charlie gave Lulah an overview of Austin.

"You're going to love it here. The different neighborhoods and parks. The art scene here is huge. The people are fun and eclectic and the scenery's beautiful."

Lulah studied Charlie's face and said, "You're very happy here, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am. Don't get me wrong. I'll always love the Bay Area. I grew up there. But I think we made the right decision to open our restaurant in Austin."

"Are you nervous about the opening?"

"Me? Nooo." Charlie laughed before confessing to her friend. "Truthfully, I'm terrified. I rely on Drew a lot to calm me down."

"I bet," Lulah smirked.

They drove a few moments in silence before Lulah asked, "And things with Drew are good?"

"Really good," Charlie said, looking at Lulah pointedly. "Better than good."

"So, are we going to the restaurant now?"

Charlie glanced at her friend. "Now? You're not too tired?" she asked.

"Nah, I'm fine. It was a short flight." She patted Charlie's arm and said, "Come on, take me to see your baby."

Charlie giggled and changed lanes. In a short time, they arrived at an open plot of land just off a popular downtown street. As Charlie went on to explain, most of the land had once been paved right over, and it had been a parking lot for ages. On one side, toward the back, Charlie and Drew's food trucks stood side by side, like an old married couple, and a large white tent with tables inside it took up much of the rest of the space.

Getting out of the car, Charlie said, "Welcome to Love, Charlotte."

Pointing at the tent, Lulah said, "I see you've taken rain into account."

"Actually, it only rains in Austin about sixty days out of the year. The tent is for the hot, sunny days, of which there are many. But the canopy does come with sidewalls to protect customers in case it does rain."

Lulah pointed to an area near the tent. "And over there is where you'll have musicians and dancing?"

"That's the plan. Although at this opening, we're going all out with a local acoustic quartet that's very popular."

Doing a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, Lulah said, "It's going to be lovely, in fact, it's going to be pretty fucking amazing!"

Charlie said, "The menu is fairly simple, of course. We'll offer a couple of items for each course. But we also have a prix fixe menu."

"Will you'll be serving that at the opening as well?"

"Yes, plus there'll be hors d'oeuvres offered when the guests first arrive. We've invited everybody we could think of: the cream of Austin society, the movers and shakers, celebrities, politicians, and community leaders, as well as other local chefs, and, of course, restaurant bloggers and the press."

"That'll be brutal, lots of pressure," Lulah commented, adding, "has there been any comment about the fact that Love, Charlotte is made up of two food trucks and a bunch of tables and chairs in a former parking lot?"

"Yes, but it's mostly been positive. The real test will be at this soft opening."

Lulah knitted her eyebrows. "What's a soft opening?"

"It's kind of a dry run for a restaurant before the official Grand Opening. If it doesn't go well, it won't matter that our Grand Opening is still a week away. By then, we'll already be an amusing blip on the Austin restaurant scene."

"Is there *anything* I can do to help?"

"Just being here helps, Lulah. You always calm my nerves."

A male voice called out, "Are you giving us your seal of approval, Tallulah Riordan?"

Lulah turned around to see Charlie's boyfriend. "Drew Salinger. Yes, it is. How are you? Are you taking care of my best friend?" Despite Drew's obvious love of Charlie, Lulah's protective instincts still flared from time to time.

Drew smiled and gave her a brief hug. "I sure am, although I got the better end of the deal, the way Charlotte takes care of me."

Lulah spotted Drew and Charlie exchange some secret look. For a moment, she felt a little wistful but then remembered that the most important thing in her life right now was her art.

Behind Drew, a voice called out, "Get a room."

Lulah laughed and called out, "Erin, how are you?"

Drew and Charlie's sous chef came forward and gave Lulah a hug. "I'm doing great. Very excited about the opening."

"I hear you're going for a patisserie degree now."

"Yeah, I started about six months ago and I love it," the elfin blonde replied. "You're going to have to try some of my delicious creations before you leave town."

"I'll be sure to."

They all spoke for a few more minutes before Drew said, "Erin, we need to go over that list again."

"Sure thing, boss. Later, Lu," Erin said as she followed Drew.

After the two left, Lulah asked Charlie, "So, what's the plan?"

Charlie replied, "I'm doing most of the appetizers and braises and Drew is on roasting. Erin is our sous chef, of course, and she is also making the desserts."

"And you'll be serving all that at the opening?"

"Yes, plus there'll be hors d'oeuvres offered when the guests first arrive. To take advantage of our appearance on *Food Fight!*, we've based them on dishes we made on the show."

"Smart idea."

"The only thing I'm worried about is the tent." Charlie said as she led Lulah inside. "I know that the table decorations will be attractive,

and the guests will be concentrating on their meals, but I feel like most of the space here—the vertical space—is...boring.”

Lulah looked up and shrugged, saying, “Well, it is a tent.”

“I know, and at first, I figured I could paint something on the canvas. Nothing representational,” she reassured, as she saw the expression on Lulah’s face. Charlie couldn’t even draw a stick figure. “I want something fanciful, you know? Otherworldly, I suppose.

But you can’t paint on this material as it’s waterproof. The paint won’t adhere. So now, I’m thinking I could put up some paper lanterns in different colors. Or maybe fairy lights. What do you think?”

Lulah was silent a moment and then said carefully, “Yes, that would look nice.”

Charlie groaned. “Nice? You hate the idea, don’t you?”

“Not exactly hate. But it’s a little basic. Kind of like what someone would put up in a dorm room.”

“Ouch.”

“I just think it needs to be a little more special. And more dramatic. With flare.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay. I’ll give it some thought.” She scrunched her face while considering various ideas. “Maybe I could hang some colorful fabric on the ceiling,” she said, her statement sounding more like a question.

Lulah grinned at her friend. “Charlie, all you have to do is ask.”

“No, Lulah, you are my guest and best friend. I didn’t invite you here to work.”

“It’s because I’m your best friend that I’m volunteering, darlin’. Please, I would love to do this. And I have some ideas to make it magical for not too much money.”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “Oh, Lulah, are you sure?”

“Of course, I am. You doubt my talents?”

“No, but I don’t want you to think that I’ve invited you here early so you can be put to work.”

"I don't. Besides, I need to be doing something over the next few days. I'll be bored to death otherwise."

"You *really* want to do this?"

"Yes, Charlie! So, let's hit some craft and art supply stores and get this project going. We don't have much time."

"Let's go," her friend replied, taking her keys from her purse.

"Oh, one more thing," Lulah said as she followed Charlie to the car. "The compound I'll be making for this project? You're going to need to sacrifice your KitchenAid mixer."