

PERFECT PAIRING



THEA LAMBERT

Bonus Preview

MOUTHWATERING SERIES, BOOK FOUR

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CHAPTER 1



Willa grinned as Stu, the new waiter at Love, Charlotte, appeared confused and horrified when one of their fellow servers shouted, “I’m eating the parson’s nose!”

Willa explained, “Stu, it’s just an expression for the meat at the tail-feather end of a chicken. My grandfather called it that all the time. He also referred to it as the part ‘that went over the fence last.’”

Their boss, Charlie, had just delivered a large platter of roast chicken to the communal table, and commented to the waiter who had done the shouting, “And, Daniel, I always use the back end to make stock.”

“Damn.”

Willa and her co-workers sat down at the table where Charlie and Drew, their bosses, were setting out various platters for the weekly employee meal served every Monday when the restaurant was closed. The dinner—roast chicken, maple and ginger glazed carrots, and a leek and rainbow chard gratin—looked far more sumptuous than its humble origins. But Willa knew that the team would have come to the dinner even if they’d been served baloney sandwiches. The staff meal had only begun a few weeks ago, but everyone made sure to attend. There was something about sharing good food, stories, laughter, and support with those who were in

the trenches week after week. Serving was a hard job, so knowing your co-workers had your back was comforting.

Only a couple of weeks ago, Willa had dealt with a party of eight twenty-somethings who had way too much money, booze, and self-entitlement. They had kept her running all evening. As she delivered their complicated coffee orders at the end of the meal, she realized she had missed one order. Before she could apologize, the guest demanded to know where his coffee was.

Knowing the “customer is always right,” even when he wasn’t, Willa apologized and rushed to get him his coffee instead of pointing out that she had asked him twice if he wanted coffee, but he’d been too busy texting to reply. When she returned a minute later with the beverage, the man began to complain.

“You’re too late. I finished my dessert before you even got the coffee out to me.” His voice became louder. “I don’t want it now.”

Before Willa could reply, Charlie arrived at the table and said, “Good evening, sir. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Yeah, your waitress here is too slow. And incompetent. She forgot my coffee, and when I told her to get me one, it took her forever.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I had to eat my dessert without my coffee, and I think you should comp me—no, comp the entire table for the desserts and the coffee.”

Charlie paused a beat then smiled at the man. “Of course,” she said softly. “Let me update your bill.”

Willa defended herself as she and Charlie walked to the office, “He didn’t order coffee! I asked him twice, but he ignored me.”

“Well, he looks like trouble to me, and I’d rather deduct the dessert and coffee than have him disturb the other customers and spread false tales about the restaurant. Don’t worry about it. I don’t blame you.”

When Charlie handed the man the updated bill, he took a long look at it and muttered, “That’s better,” before handing over his credit card. When Willa brought the check, he signed the receipt and picked up his card, but not before saying, “If you expect to be a decent waitress, you need to respond quickly to customers’ requests, and NOT move around like a tortoise.”

“P-pardon me?” she stammered.

“You heard me. Get to a gym, drop fifty pounds, and quit making your customers suffer.”

Willa stood frozen in shock and embarrassment, barely hearing the gasps from several other tables, when a command rang out.

“Get out.”

Charlie was once again standing next to her. And standing by her.

“What did you say?” the man asked.

“I’ve comped you your desserts and coffees. You’ve paid. I won’t have my servers being mistreated and insulted.”

“Who’s being mistreated? I’m doing her a favor with my advice, saving her from a future heart attack.”

“We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone. So, get out. And don’t come back.”

The man and his party of friends stood up and walked away. All except one, a woman. She opened her purse and pulled out two one-hundred-dollar bills. “I’m very sorry,” she whispered, dropping the cash on the table and following her companions out of the restaurant.

Charlie looked at the credit card receipt and then at the cash. “Well, she took care of the tip he stiffed you on. At least you’ll get something out of that joker.”

“The only thing I’ve got is nausea. I wish she had told the guy off.” She shook her head. “Give my share to the others. And thanks, Charlie.”

At the end of her shift, she had returned home and tried to shower off the evening’s events, but it wasn’t working. She went to her kitchen table where she kept her writing box. The nineteenth century box was her most prized possession, a gift from her grandfather when she turned ten and announced she wanted to be a writer. Her brother laughed, her sister said it sounded boring, and her parents asked why she couldn’t stick with a career at the jewelry store they owned, adding: what could she write about? Only her grandfather took her seriously.

She sighed. She missed him dreadfully.

Willa opened the box and then her laptop that sat inside. She was tired of all this work bullshit. She began to write.

Usually, my Friday blog post is about the best fashion ideas for plus-sized women like myself. My goal has always been to offer a sense of how good we can look and feel, with just a little bit of inspiration.

But, as we all know, there is a war being waged on women whose dress sizes are in the double digits.

Then she wrote about the incident at the restaurant, noting how the patron insulted her under the guise of “helping” her.

Our group is still being discriminated against. But now the rationale is that it's all being done for our own good. Fat equals unhealthy. Therefore, the fat are unhealthy.

But that's absolutely untrue. My blood pressure and pulse rate are in the normal range. My cholesterol is low. I am not diabetic or even pre-diabetic. And it's all without taking any medications. But these attitudes persist. So, to those medical professionals, insurance companies, government bureaucrats, and the “well-meaning” public: Don't assume you know anything about a person based on their body type. We may be using food as a crutch. We may have metabolic issues. Or we may be taking medications that affect weight. Or not. Do not judge us by what you see, because you know nothing about us.

Surrounded by her restaurant family, Willa listened to the jokes and laughter, and let the chatter bring joy to her soul. She reminded herself to note those happy comments in her senses notebook. She then leaned in to take the chicken platter, grabbing a thigh before passing the platter along. Willa then helped herself to the carrots and the gratin. She loved the way the bright red and orange stems of the rainbow chard peeked out of the white cream sauce in all its jeweled splendor.

“This is delicious,” Willa said. “I didn't know chard could taste so good.”

Charlie said, “It's all Erin's doing. Her forte may be sweets, but even with savory dishes, she makes everything taste great and look pretty.” Charlie stood and raised her voice to gather the attention of the table. “Speaking of Erin, I have an announcement to make. Drew and I are both thrilled and saddened to announce that our sous chef will be leaving Love, Charlotte in a little over three weeks. She has just accepted the pastry chef position at Enchanté restaurant.”

The crew clapped, whistled, and passed out their congratulations as Drew brought over a tray holding three champagne bottles and several wine glasses. He and Charlie began to fill and hand out the glasses to the group. Once everyone had a glass, Drew looked at the sous chef and said, “Erin, when we first met, you were a frightened and defensive nineteen-year-old who was homeless and suspicious of my every move. But you came to trust me and then discovered your love of cooking and baking. You’ve blossomed ever since. It’s been a blast having you as our sous chef, but it’s time for you to show the world your passion and talent when it comes to patisserie. And I know your new family at Enchanté will love you as much as we do.” Drew held up his glass. “To Erin.”

“To Erin,” the group toasted.

Erin’s eyes filled with tears as she said, “I’ll miss you all so much.”

This, Willa thought, is why she felt like part of a real family. The support everyone had for one another was something special.

When the applause died down, Erin said, “We also need to toast Willa on her Op-Ed piece in the *Austin Tribune*.”

“That’s right,” Stu said.

Drew raised his glass. “Good job, Willa.”

As the crew began to clap for her, Willa wondered how many really understood her blog about health and body positivity. But one of the editors at the *Tribune* had read her blog post after the incident at the restaurant and asked her if they could publish it in Sunday’s paper. She jumped at the chance.

Charlie added, “You should be proud. It was great piece. Anyone who has been the brunt of weight-shaming will feel it.”

“Even though it’s getting some pushback,” Erin said.

“Well, I expected they’d get a bunch of letters to the editor,” Willa replied.

“Actually, I was talking about the TV interview that reporter, Annaliese Roper, did with a personal trainer about your piece. He said that people like you are ignoring the other health aspects and are doing a disservice to your readers.”

“Is that right?” Willa asked, shaking her head. “He’s a trainer. He’s probably worried about all the money he and his fitness fascists will lose

if people don't feel ashamed of their bodies. Probably doesn't have two brain cells to rub together." Noticing her co-workers' surprised looks, Willa took a breath and said, "Let's forget about him and get back to Erin's celebration."

The dinner continued, but Willa's good mood had evaporated. She left a little earlier than the others and made her way home. Walking up the stairs to her third-floor apartment, she asked herself what exactly she had expected from the op-ed piece. Did she think the world would suddenly agree with what she wrote, and prejudice against fat people would just disappear? *Of course*, there would be pushback. She had expected nothing less. This was simply a minor battle in a long war.

As she entered her apartment, the familiar ring tone for her mother rang out. *Little Miss Can't Be Wrong*. Willa took out her cell phone from her purse and hit decline.

She changed into a comfortable pair of pajamas and made herself a cup of Earl Grey tea. The heavenly scent of bergamot usually calmed her, but not tonight. Willa told herself not to watch the interview with the personal trainer, but the temptation was too powerful. She went to the local news app on her phone and found the piece. She sat back on her bed and watched as a tall, buff, Malibu Ken type with shaggy blond hair was filmed in his gym doing burpees with Annaliese. The next shot showed him sitting at a table across from the reporter.

He said, "The problem is that words from someone like this blogger—Willa, is it?"

Annaliese nodded.

"—This Willa Brandt's opinions are dangerous. She's not a medical professional. She's not a nutritionist. She's just a blogger who speaks with pride about her weight problem and her supposed normal blood pressure and low cholesterol. But there are other factors which determine if someone is healthy. High blood sugar levels, wear and tear on your joints, fatty liver disease, inflammation. These are all things that can lower the quality of a person's life. And for what? Another piece of pie?"

"I believe every person is more important than that. And that's where nutritionists and trainers come in. We offer support when you don't have

the willpower. But even if you can't afford a personal trainer or a gym, you can make changes. Take regular walks, use soup cans or milk jugs for strength training, stretch. Make the commitment to move and improve."

Improve? What is that supposed to mean? This, she thought, is exactly what the problem is.

Willa went through the comments on her blog, as well as those at the news station. Most of them were in her favor. But others were mean and mocking. She decided to ignore them and get some sleep. But the interview kept her awake. Finally, she gave up, grabbed her cell phone, and looked up the station's phone number. Because of the late hour, she wasn't surprised that her call went to Annaliese Roper's voicemail.

"This is Willa Brandt, the writer of the op-ed piece in the *Austin Tribune* and I'd like equal time on camera to respond to your interview with Cade De Klerk. He's doing a disservice to those he claims he wants to help, as is your station if you don't give me an opportunity to rebut his arguments." She then left her phone number and said, "Please call me ASAP."

Willa was not going to let this Cade De Klerk have the last word.



Cade De Klerk gripped the ankles of his client who was struggling with her sit-ups. He egged the woman on. "Come on, Sonia, only seven more crunches to go."

"Cade," the woman huffed, "I don't think I can do it."

"Yes, you can. After what you've been through for the past eighteen months? Next to that, this is just a little inconvenience."

Sonia grimaced as she struggled with the next crunch. "So, oxygen's... an inconvenience?"

Cade nodded. "Haven't you heard? Breathing's overrated."

Sonia broke into a laugh and said, "Okay, you've convinced me."

"Good. Four more. Three. Two. One. Great, and we're done."

Sonia fell back on the mat and closed her eyes. "Thank God."

Cade stood and held out his hand for Sonia. When she shook her head, he chuckled and said, "Come on." She took the trainer's hand and

he pulled her to a standing position. As the two headed to get the water bottle Sonia had left by one of the walls, he said, "Really strong job today. Now remember to have a source of protein within the hour, okay?"

He picked up the bottle and handed it to her. After she took a long draw of water, Sonia asked in jest, "Is chocolate a protein?"

"I was thinking more like a yogurt with some fresh fruit. But some low-fat chocolate milk will work."

"Good," she replied, and took another gulp of water. "So, how's the hunt going to find a second location for Defiance Fitness?"

Cade gave her an excited smile. "We made an offer on a place and are waiting to hear back."

"That's great. Will you or your business partner be in charge of the new location? I like Artie, and he's a nice guy, but I want to keep training with you."

"We haven't decided yet," Cade replied. "Both locations are pretty much the same distance from our homes, and we're both flexible. We'll decide when we hear if our offer is accepted. Anyway, you know that you're my favorite client. I'll follow you."

"Sweet talker."

"And how's everything going with you?"

Sonia wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and gave him a knowing look. "Everything?" she asked, "Or just my remission status?"

He shrugged. "It all goes hand in hand. Keeping to a healthy weight, focusing on a healthy diet, making time for regular exercise. And don't forget about managing your stress. Supplements. Support groups. Do you still go to your support group?"

Sonia shook her head. "No. I felt weird about being there now that I'm healthy, and they aren't."

"I get that. But it's still good to go. Believe me, they understand all the feelings you're going through. Feelings that your friends and family, no matter how much they love and support you, can't possibly understand. And the group is thrilled when one of their own has beaten this son of a bitch. I still go."

"Really? Hasn't it been ten years?"

“Twelve. And having the support of people who’ve been down the same road is a comfort. Trust me.”

Sonia was quiet for a moment and then said, “Okay, maybe I’ll start up again.”

“Do it.”

“Bully,” she replied.

Cade laughed and said, “You won’t regret it.”

The two shared a brief hug before Sonia left for the locker room. Cade then went in search of his business partner, Artie. He spotted him at the front desk where Artie was paying particular attention to their new receptionist. When the young woman moved away to answer the phone, Cade walked up to him and whispered, “Hey, Artie, give it a rest, will you? I’m not interested in our gym becoming involved in a sexual harassment suit.”

“We were just talking, bro,” Artie protested.

“Yeah, I’m well acquainted with your ‘talking.’ Knock it off and show some professionalism. We’ve got more important things to think about. Like the second location. Have you heard from the realtor yet?”

“Yeah, I just did,” Artie replied with a grimace. “The seller accepted another offer.”

Cade sagged against the reception desk. “Really? Damn, that would have made the perfect new location.”

“Yeah. Oh well, we’ll just have to keep searching.”

“You don’t understand, man,” Cade said, “I was hoping to get the new place open by the new year.”

“Take advantage of all those resolutions, huh?”

“You make it sound bad. People will be at their most eager to make the changes they need in the new year. They’re feeling motivated. They’re feeling positive. If we can’t open until March, or even February, we’ll have to wait until swimsuit season to recruit another group.” He noticed that Artie’s eyes and attention were drifting away somewhere past Cade. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Now, there’s someone I’d like to see in a swimsuit,” his partner murmured.

“What?”

Artie tilted his head toward something past Cade's range of vision and murmured, "Brick House, twelve o'clock."

Cade turned toward the gym entrance and did a double-take as a woman walked in. He was stunned at what he could only describe as a Greek goddess, like the ones he read about in school. Like the gods and goddesses of mythology, she appeared larger than life, standing at almost six feet tall. He focused on her long, shapely legs encased in a pair of jean shorts. His eyes then meandered to generous hips that any man would want to claim, to her slightly cinched-in waist, and then to high, round, and bountiful breasts. Although she was facing him, and he couldn't see her bottom, Cade knew without a doubt that it would be just as luscious as the rest of her. His vision then drifted to her face that drew him in like a magnet; pink plump lips, lush black lashes, and piercing sky-blue eyes.

Piercing eyes that were directed at him.

She began to walk with purpose toward Cade, and he felt the need to stand straighter, tuck in his tee shirt, and smooth out his shaggy blond hair. His usual type of woman was shaped more like a female MMA fighter. But there was something about her. Soft. Earthy. *Real*. He couldn't understand it.

When she got to the counter, Artie leaned toward her and said, "Welcome to Defiance Fitness. How can we help you?"

"Actually, I'm here to speak to Cade De Klerk," she said, nodding to Cade.

Cade broke into a smile, happily surprised. "Sure. What can I do for you?"

"It's about the TV news interview you did yesterday."

"Great," he said, excited that his opinions got through to this woman. "So, the interview inspired you to pay a visit."

"That's one way to put it."

Cade said, "Well, let me give you a tour of our facility, and you can tell me what exactly you're looking to focus on and improve."

"Improve?"

"Yeah." As he noted her mouth forming into a grimace, Cade added, "There's no need to be shy or embarrassed. From the trainers to the clients,

everybody here at Defiance Fitness has a goal to make themselves the best they can be. So, what are your goals?”

“You’re being very presumptive. I’m not here to ‘improve’ anything. My name is Willa Brandt. I’m the person who wrote the piece in the *Austin Tribune* that you trashed.”

“Oh. You wrote that piece?” Cade was surprised. He didn’t know what he pictured the author would look like, but he hadn’t anticipated her to be as enticing as she was.

“Yes,” Willa replied. “And you need to contact the news station and record an apology.”

He uttered a laugh. He couldn’t help it. The gall of this woman. “Apologize? And why would I do that? Your piece is completely irresponsible.”

“It was not!”

“Yes, it was. Because you’re saying that overweight people, in terms of weight and health, are okay just the way they are. You’re completely off base.”

“No, it’s you that’s off base,” Willa replied, stepping closer to him. “There are plenty of studies that show you can be fat *and* healthy.”

“And there are plenty of studies that say the exact opposite!”

“Look,” she said, sliding her hand into her back jean pocket—Cade watched and wished it was his hand doing that—pulling out a memory stick, and holding it out to him, “Here is a collection of articles and studies about the health of the overweight and obese. I also provided a copy for Annaliese Roper although she hasn’t returned my call. Don’t you owe it to the public, whom you claim to care about, the courtesy of reviewing this data?”

“It wouldn’t make a difference. I do read the literature. All the time. It’s my job to keep up with the newest research. But it hasn’t changed my mind. Anyone who says that you can be healthy and obese is doing millions of people a disservice. Just as you are doing to your readers... and yourself.”

“I’m doing a disservice to myself.”

Staring into those mesmerizing blue eyes, he forgot for a moment what he wanted to tell her. Finally remembering, he said, “You’re shortening

your life. Maybe settling into a painful life. Yet you're trying to make a case for yourself by referring to articles that are not accepted by most health professionals."

"Oh, you're a health professional now?"

"I didn't say that. Look, do yourself a favor. Instead of trying to ignore your problem with unconfirmed studies, why don't you use that energy to bring down your weight. It's evident you are a determined person, and I guarantee that even a ten percent loss of weight will have a tremendous effect on your body and mind."

"My mind?"

"Studies show most overweight people are depressed."

"Ah, so now, I'm depressed," she exclaimed. "Do those studies also talk about being fed up? Because the heavy are sick to death being categorized by those who know nothing about us. And those who *are* depressed are often so because of people like you. You judge us on nothing more than our size. We are individuals whose weight is simply a genetic trait, like having red hair, or are short, or left-handed. It's just a descriptor of who we are, not what our worth is!"

Before he could form a reply, a woman's voice exclaimed, "I was hoping for a meeting, but watching you two is better than I could have imagined."

Cade and Willa turned to see Annaliese Roper grinning at them.