

JUST DESSERTS



THEA LAMBERT

Bonus Preview

MOUTHWATERING SERIES, BOOK THREE

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CHAPTER 1



Erin Flickenger entered the last set of numbers into the restaurant's spreadsheet and quickly hit the "save" button. She let out a sigh of relief. It had taken her nearly two hours to input the information, but it was finally done. And while it had not been as easy as her absent bosses—Drew and Charlie—had led her to believe, it hadn't been as difficult as she had feared.

In fact, Erin's first week as the acting manager at Love, Charlotte had been pretty great, considering the short notice she'd been given. Five days ago, she'd been awakened before sunrise by her panicky boss.

"Erin, sorry for this early call, but we just got a call from Josie," Drew said over the phone, referring to his de facto sister. "She's asked for help with her addiction. Finally." Erin could hear the relief in his voice. He'd been worried about Josie for several years, and had managed to get her into rehab once before. But she had quickly fallen off the wagon.

"Charlotte and I need to head to Dallas right away," he continued. "We want you to take charge of the restaurant for a few days."

As Drew was finishing the call, Charlie, his girlfriend and business partner, grabbed the phone. “Erin, I know what you’re going to say, but you’ll be fine. You know what to do. You’ve been watching us and handling lots of things for a while now, and you have a good head on your shoulders. You can do this. If you need anything, just give us a call. As soon as we get Josie in a rehab facility, we’ll head back to Austin.”

Erin was so surprised that she barely replied with a feeble “okay.”

Originally, Erin had expected Drew and Charlie to be away for two or three days, tops, but they had encountered difficulties in finding a bed for Josie. The wait had proven tough for Josie, who kept changing her mind about going through treatment. Happily, they got word that afternoon that Josie had been accepted into a top-notch facility and would be entering it in three days. Erin hoped she wouldn’t run away from the help she needed.

As she waited for her bosses to return, Erin felt proud of the job she’d been doing at the restaurant. Her goal, after graduating from the Baking Institute of Austin, was to learn as much as she could about the business end of a bakery, and then open her own shop as soon as she could.

Feeling pleased with herself, Erin grabbed the cookie she had promised herself as a reward for completing the spreadsheet. She took a bite. The mini-cookie was firm but light, and flavored with cinnamon and sugar like a churro, but with the added kick of cayenne pepper. She let the flavors melt on her tongue and smiled.

“Damn, I’m good,” she said.

“What are you good at?” Willa, one of the servers, asked as she walked into the office.

“These cookies.”

“You’re right about that. They’ve been extremely popular

this evening,” Willa agreed and then added, “Hey, we’ve got a situation out at one of the tables.”

Erin looked up from the computer, “What kind of situation?”

“The money kind.”

Erin rose out of her seat and asked, “What do you mean?”

“It means that Table Six can’t pay. And you would not think that could happen to these customers either. The guy, whose card was declined, is dressed straight out of *GQ* magazine, and he’s wearing a vintage Patek Philippe watch.” Willa used to work at her family’s fine jewelry store in Dallas, so she knew her stuff.

Erin picked up her cell phone. “Maybe I should call the police. I can’t let Love, Charlotte get screwed over by someone who’s obviously a con man.”

Erin had seen her share of grifters back when she lived on the streets. She was determined not to allow anything to happen to Drew, the man who helped her to make a new life for herself and discover her culinary talent.

“Well, before you do anything,” Willa replied, “he’s asking to speak to the manager.”

Which was Erin for the foreseeable future.

She nodded. “Okay. Tell him I’ll be out in a minute.”

While Willa left to speak to the patron, Erin stood and inspected her chef’s coat. It was covered in brown, red, and green sauces, making it look like Jackson Pollock had attempted to paint an abstract Christmas tree on it. She wanted to appear a little more professional and serious for this conversation. Fortunately, the tee shirt she wore underneath was clean—no food stains had soaked through. She fluffed her ash blonde pixie-cut. Maybe the blue tips on the ends didn’t scream “management,” but she couldn’t do anything about that. She opened the door and headed to Table Six.

As she neared the table, Erin noted that the party was made up of very well-dressed, professional men and women who were smiling and joking with one another. All except one man. Erin noted his square jaw and stormy gray-blue eyes; he had the face of an all-American boy. But, Erin thought with appreciation, he was no boy, he was a man. Definitely a man. In spite of his seated position, she could tell he was tall. With that height and those broad shoulders, he could be a quarterback. Or the Marlboro Man. Without, of course, the emphysema. He could definitely be a cowboy.

His fine charcoal gray pinstripe suit was paired with a plum-colored tie. The man was not afraid of daring colors, she thought. Unfortunately, all the genetics and style in the world could not make up for the imperious look on his face, a look she had been well acquainted with back home in Ohio. She took a deep breath, donned a smile, and approached him.

“Good evening. You wanted to meet with me?” Erin asked in a soft voice.

He replied quietly, “Yes, I did. Is there somewhere private where we can talk?”

“Sure. Follow me.”

The man excused himself from the table, saying to the other guests, “Please excuse me, I’ll be back in a minute. I want to make plans for some catering.”

The group gave its blessing and went back to their conversations. The man stood. He picked up one of the churro cookies from a plate on the table and popped it into his mouth, nodding at Erin. She led him away from the tables and to a small saltbox shed that served as the restaurant’s office. Following her into the tiny room, he did a three hundred sixty degree turn and asked, “How do you get any work done in here? You barely have room to swing a cat.”

“As you can see, I’m pretty petite. It’s a prerequisite to

work here.” She lifted one of her blue tinted hair tips. “Just call me Smurfette.”

He raised his eyebrows, his expression puzzled. Clearly no sense of humor, Erin thought with a sigh.

Erin wondered what he would have to say for himself and remembered her manners.

“Please have a seat, sir. I’m afraid Love, Charlotte doesn’t do any catering at this time, but I can recommend—”

He stopped her by raising his hand in a haughty manner.

“I’m not here for any catering. I simply wanted to make sure my guests weren’t aware of the real reason for our discussion.”

“I see. I know your card was declined.”

As the man sucked in his cheeks, Erin hoped that at least he would have the grace to be a little embarrassed and apologetic.

“Your waitress *claims* my credit card was declined. That can’t be. It’s got a very high limit.”

“I’d be happy to re-run it for you, just to make sure,” she offered, holding out her hand.

He removed the card from his suit pocket and handed the black card to Erin. She walked over to the machine and noticed him eyeing her plate of mini-churro cookies.

“Please feel free to help yourself,” Erin offered.

“Thanks. They’re delicious.”

As he ate one cookie and then a second, Erin ran the card through the machine. Once again, the message that came through was “card declined.”

Erin hesitated a moment before telling the man, “I’m afraid it’s still saying declined, insufficient funds, uh,” she looked at the name on the card, “Mr. Smith. We also take—”

Again, he interrupted. “I have no other cards with me.”

“Oh?” Erin was surprised.

“No. I only bring this card with me when entertaining business contacts.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Smith, but you’ll need to ask one of your fellow diners to cover the payment.”

He pressed a thumb and index finger against the inner corners of his eyes and said, “You want me to tell them that my card has insufficient funds to cover the paltry price of the meal?”

Erin thought a bill of almost six hundred dollars was not paltry, but she replied, “Unfortunately, sometimes this happens, but I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“Something like that could ruin my reputation, and that of my company.”

“I appreciate your concerns. Perhaps you could call a friend or business colleague to cover the costs. Your bill is over six hundred dollars and, as I’m sure you can appreciate, I have a business to run.”

He asked, “You own this place?”

“Well, no, but I am acting manager while the owners are out of town,” she replied, standing straighter. “And while the tab may seem like a paltry amount to you, I assure you it will not be for them.”

“I understand that. I do. Just tell them that Heath Smith is the diner, and that I’ll pay them back immediately.”

“And how do I know you are the real Heath Smith?” And, Erin wondered, who the heck was Heath Smith? Was she supposed to know him?

“This is ridiculous. Let me show you my driver’s license.”

Erin shook her head. “You could be impersonating the man,” she pointed out.

The two glared at one another as Heath Smith said, “It seems we are at an impasse.”

They were quiet for a moment until Erin’s face bright-

ened. "I've got an idea. Just a minute." She grabbed her cell phone and texted Willa, their server.

Are you sure he's wearing a genuine Patek Philippe watch?

It wasn't long before Willa replied.

Yeah. And it's worth nearly seventy grand.

Perfect, Erin thought.

"Okay," she said, turning back to Mr. Smith. "I have a way to solve this. I'll let you leave with your friends—"

"Business associates," he interrupted.

She resisted rolling her eyes and continued, "Regardless, you can leave with them, none the wiser, and I will keep your watch until the bill is settled."

In a protective gesture, the man's hand covered the watch. "Are you kidding me? This is a Patek—"

This time, it was Erin who interrupted. "Yes, yes, I know all about it. It makes very good collateral, don't you think? Tomorrow, you can pay the bill, and I'll return the watch to you."

"This is absolutely ridiculous!" he complained as he unconsciously grabbed another cookie from the plate.

"Not at all. If you're unable to pay your bill, and you don't want to ask for help, I have no other option. And, with all due respect, I don't know you."

The man scowled.

Erin shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sorry, but it's up to you. My only other option would be to call the police."

Heath Smith stared at her for several moments before he grunted in agreement. He gave the watch a lingering look before removing it and handing it to Erin.

"Thank you. I'll put it in our safe and write you out a receipt for it," she said, examining the watch that cost more than her dad's yearly salary.

As Erin handed the scowling man a receipt, he snarled, "The money will be delivered here first thing tomorrow."

“Could you make it at noon? I’ll be in by then.”

He stood and said, “There had better be no scratches on the case.”

“Don’t forget your credit card,” Erin replied as she held it out to him.

Heath snatched the card and exited through the door, slamming it behind him.

Erin studied the vintage timepiece. It was beautiful, but worth seventy thou?

Willa came in and saw her holding the watch. “Collateral?”

Erin nodded. “There’s a saying that is totally right on: *The rich are different from you and me.*”



HEATH SMITH STRUGGLED NOT to shout at the two men sitting across from his desk.

“Why can’t you find her?” he asked, trying to remain calm. His tight jaw and gritted teeth belied him. “You’re one of the largest investigative firms in the country, and she is one person.”

Five weeks ago, he discovered that the company’s CFO, Mary Anne Martin, had been embezzling money. She was one highly devious person who had put the very existence of his family’s company in jeopardy.

He continued, “I couldn’t even pay for a business meal last night because my credit card was declined. What the hell are you doing to find Mary Anne and, more importantly, the company’s money?” Heath was trying his best to maintain his cool, but these guys were frustrating him.

Over the last three years, Mary Anne had quietly embezzled several million dollars before completely disappearing five weeks ago. This situation was endangering the

company, and the livelihoods of every employee. Including him.

“Have you spoken to her parents in the last couple of weeks?” Mary Anne had always spoken about them, so perhaps they knew where she was even though they claimed they didn’t. He was tempted to call them himself. There had been talk that her father, a Texas state senator, had plans to run for President. Maybe a well-placed threat to tell *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Huffington Post* about her crimes might loosen her parents’ tongues.

Heath grimaced at the thought of blackmail and worried about the person he was becoming ever since the embezzlement had come to light.

The investigator replied, “I had a long, in-person conversation with them the other day. If they know anything, they’re being very tight lipped. But, honestly, I think they were as surprised as you.”

“That is frustrating.”

“We’ve established that she flew to Chicago and then headed to Dublin, Ireland where she spent some time touring the country by car. Unfortunately, her trail went cold. But we have our best people on the case, keeping watch for her at the major UK airports as well as The Chunnel.

“In the meantime, we’re also working with our contacts in the UAE and Moldova. We think she would be inclined to head to one of these places. They would give her the kind of lifestyle she’d like.”

“And neither of those countries have extradition treaties with the U.S.”

The man shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

Heath said, “It goes without saying, you’ve got to find her before she arrives in any country with no extradition treaty. Otherwise, we’ll never get the money back. Even a portion would be better than nothing.”

"We understand, and we'll be in touch."

The investigators shook hands with Heath and left the room as he picked up a Murano glass paperweight from his desk. After they shut his door, he growled in frustration and slammed it against a wall. The sheetrock split and the paperweight shattered into two jagged pieces.

Heath stared at the fragments on the carpet as his telephone extension began to ring. He answered the call from his personal assistant and assured her everything was alright. Then he willed himself to calm down. He couldn't believe he'd been duped by the woman. She was the daughter of a philanthropist and a popular Austin politician. She was a former Miss Texas. She played pinochle weekly, and baked cookies for the employees. Her name was Mary Anne for God's sake. So open and innocent. And he believed that she was a reflection of her name. He had trusted her with the company, and now they were on the edge of ruin.

Yet another woman he had been wrong about.

He heard a knock on his office door and called out, "Come in."

A member of his company's accounting department entered and said, "Sir, I have the cash for the Love, Charlotte restaurant. I'll be leaving to deliver it shortly."

"Thanks, Reid, I really appreciate it," he said, walking up to the man. Reid was one of the few employees privy to the embezzlement news, and Heath knew he would be discreet. "And that includes the twenty-five percent tip, right?" The service had been excellent. No need for the server to be screwed just because the temporary manager had been unreasonable.

Reid nodded.

"And don't forget my watch. Call me if that acting manager gives you any problems."

"Don't worry, sir. I'm on it."

“Smurfette,” Heath mumbled with irritation.

Reid’s eyebrows rose. “Pardon?”

“Nothing. I’ll see you shortly,” Heath said.

After Reid left his office, Heath looked at his left wrist, once again thinking about the watch. It had been his father’s. His eyes drifted to the silver framed photo on his desk. The picture had been taken the last time the family was all gathered together. He studied his mother and sister, the happiness radiated in their expressions. Following his father’s death, Heath had done his best to take care of them, as well as the property development business his dad had started. But sometimes he felt as though he was failing miserably and, worse, disappointing his dad.

His father had died shortly before Heath had graduated from college, and there hadn’t been enough time to pass on all his business knowledge to his son. Instead, Heath had relied on the personnel his father had employed for years, and assumed they were honest and doing the right thing. Instead, one of them, Mary Anne, had betrayed Heath, his father, and two families—his blood family and the company family. Now the business was hemorrhaging money and he needed the missing funds to staunch it very soon or else there would be no company.

While only a few people in the company were aware of the crime, he had yet to reveal anything to his mother or sister. The knowledge would be a terrible blow to them.

Heath’s mother had pined for her husband for the last six years. And his sister Meghan had her own set of problems. She still really missed their dad and was just coming to terms with his death when her boyfriend took off, leaving her high and dry after revealing she was pregnant. Meghan was staying strong for her little girl. And Heath knew that her upcoming marriage was another step in the right direction. She and her daughter would be taken care of, he hoped.

As though he had magically conjured his sister, Heath's personal assistant buzzed his line to say Meghan was there to see him.

"Hey, stranger," he said, rising from his desk chair and walking over to an agitated Meghan. He gave her a kiss on her cheek. "What are you doing here?"

"Heath," Meghan whined, "you've got to do something about Momma. She's driving me crazy."

He sighed. He was so tired of being the referee between his mother and sister.

"What's wrong now?"

"When I told her that Tim and I were getting married, I knew I'd have to make sacrifices in the wedding plans. Momma's insistence on a four-hundred-person guest list when I didn't want a big affair. Having the ceremony held at St. Mary's Cathedral even though I would have preferred one of the gardens in the city. I've even agreed to wear her own wedding dress," she shivered, "once I can make some alterations."

Heath could understand that last sentiment. Their mother's gown from the late eighties was a nightmare of puffed sleeves, a voluminous skirt, and yards of lace and tulle.

"But," Meghan continued, "I want to choose my own caterers and my own wedding cake designer."

"Mom only wants you to have the best."

"I don't *want* the best." Meghan closed her eyes in a grimace for a moment and said, "Let me rephrase that. I want someone with great ideas, someone I know, and who knows me and my tastes, likes, and dislikes. In short, I want my friend from The Baking Institute to create the wedding cake as well as all the other desserts for the reception."

Heath frowned. "Are you sure? If this baker is a student, he's probably fairly inexperienced. You really want to take a chance like that?"

“First, he is a she. Second, she’s so talented. Third, I’ll be helping her.”

“With your cake?”

“Yes, and the other desserts. I want to be a part of the process.”

Heath laughed. “And you don’t think choosing your guests, invitations, flowers, music, trousseau, and gift registry is not being part of the process?”

“I want to feel like I am making a contribution to my wedding day, and how my new life is going to be.”

Not for the first time, Heath wondered what Meghan meant about her new life. When she first enrolled at The Baking Institute, he and his mother approved of her decision. Meghan didn’t say much as to why she wanted to attend, so they believed Meghan was doing it as a lark, a way to pass the time until she settled down. He wondered now if her plans were more involved than that. And he wondered what her fiancé Tim thought about them.

“So, an untested, unknown baker will make your cake?” he replied, doubt shading his eyes.

“Heath, I’m taking classes with her. I know her work. She’s amazing.”

“Okay, then I guess an untested, unknown baker will make your cake.”

She squealed with delight and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek, before pulling back and declaring, “And you have to tell Momma.”

He sighed and sat at the edge of his desk. He couldn’t deny her anything. “Okay.”

Meghan hugged her brother and said, “Thanks. And you’ll tell her before the party Friday, right?”

Damn, he forgot about the engagement party. “All right. I’ll do it by then.”

“I’ve got to go,” Meghan said, “I’ve got class in ninety

minutes.” She gave him another exuberant hug. “I love you so much, big brother. Oh, this is going to be great!”



ERIN CHECKED the time on her cell phone and made a mad dash across the school parking lot. She normally arrived well before the start of class, but with her bosses away, she had to field a lot of questions from the restaurant staff. Not to mention having to wait for that arrogant Mr. Smith’s emissary to inspect the watch with a jeweler’s loop and ensure it was still in pristine condition before handing over the money owed. Erin grunted. She should have figured the man wouldn’t show up and take care of the payment himself. Must be nice to have minions, she mused. At least he’d included quite a generous tip for Willa.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a panicked yell a few yards ahead of her.

“What the—” she wondered aloud as she saw a classmate engaged in a tug of war with a small, stocky dog with one pointy and one floppy ear. The prize the two were fighting over was a white chef’s coat.

“Let go, you mongrel,” the student yelled while the black, gray, and tan animal used its entire body weight to pull at the fabric, and the dog was winning the battle. The man yelled, “Drop it,” and gave the fabric an extra hard tug at the same time the dog did. Erin heard the wrench of the fabric. As it ripped, the victorious dog sped off with a white sleeve in its mouth, and the student fell to his knees.

“It’s ruined,” he moaned as he picked up the ravaged coat. “I can’t go to class like this now.”

A couple of other students helped him up and, offering commiserations and reassurances, led him into the school. Realizing she had wasted time watching the scene, Erin took

off at a run and arrived at class with only moments to spare. She quickly slid past several students to sit down next to her friends, Meghan and Mikey, who had saved a space for her. Erin had met the two in an introductory baking class their first year, and the trio got along like a house on fire, sharing the same love of pastry and bake goods, as well as the same sense of humor.

Erin said, "You won't believe what just happened out in the parking lot—" when Megan cut her off.

"It'll have to wait. I've got great news," Meghan said, eyes bright, "It's a go."

"It's a go? Really?" Erin said excitedly, sucking in a breath, the dog story forgotten. She hadn't been hopeful that she'd be chosen to design Meghan's wedding cake, despite being the bride's first choice. From what she had gleaned in conversations with Meghan, the Smith family was part of the Austin elite, and the matriarch was a very particular woman who preferred something traditional to impress her "Daughters of the Alamo" cronies.

Erin understood that in order to have a successful business, she would have to cater to clients with all kinds of tastes but, personally, she wasn't interested in doing traditional designs. And neither was Meghan who said, "It's true. My brother's agreed that I should get to choose who will make my wedding cake. He'll be telling my mom, and she adores him, so it's only a matter of time." As Erin squealed and gave Meghan a hug, the bride-to-be added, "But I want to assist you with the bakes."

Erin pulled away and nodded. "Of course, who wouldn't want to be a part of the process for their own wedding?"

"Well, my brother was surprised," Meghan said with a chuckle, "but I'm still doing it."

They heard a throat clear and turned to Mikey.

“Engaged?” he asked. “This is some news. Congratulations, Meghan.”

Meghan murmured, “Oh, yeah. Thanks. So, Erin—”

Mikey cut in. “When did this all happen?”

“Tim proposed a couple of months ago. You were visiting your brother in Amarillo.”

“Right. I’m surprised I haven’t heard about it.”

“I’ve mentioned Tim before.”

“Not recently. I would have remembered.” He pointed to Meghan’s left hand. “No engagement ring.” It sounded like an accusation.

“I don’t wear it when baking.”

“Right.”

“Anyway,” Meghan continued, “I asked Erin to design the cake and create the other desserts.”

Erin watched Mikey, surprised by his reaction. Was he upset that Meghan hadn’t asked him to make the cake? But his interest was in creating artisan breads and rustic desserts, nothing as detailed and high-end as a wedding cake.

Meghan turned back to Erin. “The point is, with my brother’s help, we’ll hardly have any trouble convincing my mother.

“Convince?” she asked, “I thought it was a done deal?” Erin didn’t like the “convincing” part.

“When you meet her, you just need to persuade her that you’re perfect for the job. Wait, I’ve got a great idea. Tim and I are having an engagement party at the country club on Friday. You should come. It’s only one hundred or so guests. I swear the only reason we’re having a party in the first place is because Tim and my mother think it’s good for our families’ businesses.”

Engagement party at a country club? Memories of the club her parents, and occasionally she, worked at raised her concern.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Erin replied, “I don’t think your mom would be interested in having ‘the help’ attend.”

Meghan’s look was one of disappointment. “You’re not ‘the help,’” she said. “You’re my guest. And my friend. Please?”

Erin opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, desperate to come up with an excuse. Before she could reply, Meghan said, “Mikey, why don’t you and Erin come together? I’d like more of my friends at this party. As I said, most are Tim’s work colleagues. Or they’re our parents’ dusty old friends.”

“Mikey studied Meghan for a moment and said, “Okay, I’ll come.”

“Good,” Meghan replied before turning back to Erin. “Now you’ve got reinforcements.”

Erin said, “I don’t know. I wouldn’t be able to get there until after nine because of the restaurant—”

“That’s fine. It starts at eight, and there’s no formal dinner. Just cocktails and hors d’oeuvres.”

“I could pick you up,” Mikey added and turned to speak to Meghan. “We’ll be there.”

“Okay, I’ll come,” Erin replied and gave an inward sigh, already dreading having to make a return appearance to the Rich and Idle Zone.