

Chapter One

“Meg, someone puked in the bathroom.”

Meg Sanders closed her eyes and counted to ten very, very slowly. It didn't change Jonah's words—or their implication. By the time she turned to face him, she had her expression under control. Mostly. “You're telling me...”

“I'm clocking off.” He held up his timesheet. “My shift ended thirty minutes ago and I'm about to go into overtime.”

If she let that happen, cleaning up someone else's puke would be the least of Meg's worries. “Okay, go ahead.” Their boss had a notorious temper when it came to overtime, and they'd all learned to avoid going over the allotted hours whenever possible. Jonah was a decent dude, and she didn't want to drop that hammer on him. “I'll take care of it.” Last call had already been sounded and the lights were all up. If the last four people didn't file out soon on their own, she'd call them cabs and kick them to the curb.

Thankfully, it didn't come to that. Jonah clocked out, and she must have looked as miserable as she felt because he herded the patrons out and waited for her to lock the door before he headed for his car.

Yeah, Jonah was a good dude.

He'd even blushed a little when he'd asked her out a few weeks ago—and took it well when she turned him down. She might have cited her insane work schedule that would only get more insane once school restarted in the fall, but the truth was far more pathetic.

How could anyone compare after she'd been with a prince and his bodyguard?

What was supposed to be a single night straight out of her dirtiest fantasies turned into the standard she was in danger of comparing every future relationship to. Not that she could call

being picked up at a club on her twenty-third birthday and going home with two guys for the sexiest night of her life a relationship. It wasn't. The amazing sex was just that—sex.

Even if she was starting to suspect it had ruined her for life.

No use thinking about it now.

They left. They never called.

You're the one who snuck out without saying goodbye. They probably took a hint.

Meg laughed softly at the absurdity of her spiraling thoughts. She found the mop bucket and hauled it to the sink and squirted some soap into the swirling water. Easier to focus on her hurt pride than the money stress she couldn't quite escape. The deadline to pay her fall tuition was this week and she hadn't quite come to terms with the fact after all the hours and tips and even a second job... she was still short.

Seriously short.

Short to the tune of two thousand dollars.

Not that much money in the grand scheme of things, but it might as well have been on the moon for all Meg could access it. She'd gone so far as to fill out a couple credit card applications, but they sat unopened on her desk at home. They were just a temporary fix. Fall tuition would turn into spring tuition, and even if she could scrape together the money this time, she wouldn't be able to do it next time. Better to just bow out gracefully now and leave her degree unfinished.

But she hadn't filled out *that* form, either.

She was stuck in place, unable to move forward or go back. If she dropped out, she was no better than what her mother had always called her—a fuck-up destined to retread the footsteps of

her family for as long as living memory. Poverty. A marriage or four. Crippling debt that she'd never be able to climb out from beneath. A job that slowly sucked every bit of joy out of her life.

She couldn't do it.

She couldn't go back to that small town and that dingy trailer and face the family she'd given the middle finger to when she turned eighteen and graduated with honors. Meg had worked too damn hard to put herself in the position to make something of her life.

Look at her now.

Cleaning up someone else's puke.

She wheeled the bucket down the dim hallway to the pair of bathrooms situated near the back door. The bar could stand in for countless bars across the country. The lights a little too low, the floors a little too sticky, the alcohol a little too cheap. But it was what passed for her second home. She loved most of the people she worked her, and if her boss was kind of a dick, well, that went with the territory.

Meg took a slow, deep breath and pushed open the first door. The smell of vomit sent her reeling back a step, but she mastered her response. *Just get it over with and you can go home.* Home, to her tiny apartment filled with secondhand furniture. It wasn't much to look at, but it was *hers* and she loved it. There was only this filthy bathroom between her and her lumpy bed and damned if she'd let the stench permeating the air beat her.

She got to work.

It was, in short, awful.

Jonah hadn't caught the mess in time and part of it had dried. When the door swung open behind her, Meg was cursing up a storm and scrubbing with the mop at what looked like melted

cotton candy and corn. *Never eating either of those things again.* She didn't even realize she was no longer alone until a masculine chuckle rolled through the bathroom.

She jumped and swung the mop around, nearly braining... Meg froze. This was it. She'd finally lost what was left of her mind, because transitioning into an exhaustion-fueled hallucination was the only explanation for *him being here*. She blinked, and blinked again. He didn't disappear. "Theo?"

Theodore Fitzcharles III, former Crown Prince of Thalanian, propped the door open with a leather shoe that was no doubt designer and gave her a pained grin. "Hey, princess."

She looked from him to the half-cleaned vomit to the mop in her hand. For one second, Meg seriously considered whacking him with it just to rumple him a little. Even when he had her pinned to a couch and was fucking her within an inch of her life, Theo never ceased to look perfectly put together. The man was downright pretty, though he was too masculine for that adjective. His face was all sharp angles and full lips and blue eyes that held stories she could only guess at. Tonight, he wore a plain white T-shirt that looked like it might have been ironed at some point, and a pair of jeans that probably cost more than Meg's monthly rent. She couldn't even hold it against him, because it was so purely *Theo*.

No, she couldn't hold that against him.

But she *could* hold the fact that he'd been MIA for *three fucking months* against him.

She considered the mop in her hands again, but ultimately decided going after him with it would just prove how angry she was. Meg dunked it into the dirty water and went back to cleaning. "Didn't expect to see you again."

"Do you normally leave your number when you don't expect to see someone again?"

He had her there, but she'd never admit it. She'd left her number when she still thought the night had passed with two strangers who's only real sin was being so rich it blew her mind. It was only when she snuck down the hall that she'd learned the truth. Theo was the exiled prince of Thalanía. An exiled prince came with more baggage than she had—and that was saying something.

But she hadn't gone back for the number.

She still wasn't sure why.

Her excuse of not wanting to face them in the light of the morning didn't hold up to three months of absence. Meg scrubbed harder at the mess on the floor. "*If* it was an invitation—and it wasn't—then it was one to call me. Not stalk me to my place of business and show up after hours when I'm alone and defenseless."

He laughed. The bastard *laughed*. "Defenseless, Meg? Never. If there's anyone defenseless in this scenario, it's me."

The words proved what she'd already suspected—he wasn't going to be any more honest with her now than he had on that night three months ago. If he'd told her who he really was in the club, she might still have gone home with them, but at least she would have done it with eyes wide open. But he hadn't been honest—neither of them had. She opened her mouth to tell him to get lost, but that wasn't what came out. "Where's Galen?"

Theo shrugged. "He had a few errands to attend to."

Another suspicion proved correct. "He doesn't know you're here, does he?" Theo might play to his own set of rules, but Galen had one priority—Theo. *He'd* made it very clear that he had no intention of continuing anything with Meg. It was the one comfort she'd had. She and Galen outvoted Theo.

At least they had until he showed up here without his shadow in tow.

Theo gave another of those shrugs that meant nothing at all. “Contrary to what you seem to believe, we’re not attached at the hip.”

“Could have fooled me.” She waited, but he seemed content to lean against the doorframe and watch her, so Meg gave a shrug of her own and got back to work. Ultimately, his presence there changed nothing. The second she walked out of that apartment three months ago, she’d decided to leave everything—*everyone*—in it behind. “We’re closed.”

“Meg.”

She didn’t want to look at him. That way lay dragons. He was too attractive, too magnetic, and he knew it. But she couldn’t resist him murmuring her name in that tone of voice. She just didn’t have it in her. Meg sighed and met his gaze. “It’s been three months, Theo. You said you’d be gone a couple weeks, tops. Even if I was interested—and that’s a big *if* at this point—the opportunity has passed.”

“I’d like to take you out for dinner. Or a drink.”

His ability to steamroll right over what she’d just said was a neat trick, but not one she planned on indulging. “Goodbye, Theo.”

“Wait. Fuck, Meg, just...wait.” He scrubbed a hand over his face and, for the first time since he appeared, she noticed the dark circles under his eyes. As if maybe he hadn’t slept much since she’d seen him last. *Doesn’t matter. It can’t matter.* He let his hand drop and pinned her with a look. “Shit got complicated after we left New York, and we had to jump through some hoops until things calmed down. I wasn’t going to come back here—or risk contacting you—until I knew it was safe.”

She splashed water onto the floor and got back to scrubbing. “Theo, I had fun that night. So much fun. But that’s all it was—fun. Your life is complicated. My life is complicated. There is such a disconnect between the two, it’s absurd.”

“Who the fuck cares about the disconnect? *We* connected. You and me and Galen.”

She couldn’t argue that, so she didn’t try. This Theo was hard to deny, but she remembered all too well how he got when those blue eyes went calculating. He’d been raised the Crown Prince of Thalanía, which meant he’d been raised to lie from birth. He wanted her, and he’d say whatever it took to claim her like some kind of trophy. She was a girl who grew up in a trailer, and he was a guy who’d grown up in a palace—there was no way he could see her as anything *other* than a trophy.

He sure as hell didn’t see her as an equal.

What could she say to get through to him? “Theo, what does that apartment cost you a month?”

His gaze went shuttered. “I don’t see how that matters.”

“That answers my question.” She laughed a little, the sound as broken and sad as the room they currently stood in. “I’m a year away from getting my Master’s degree and I can’t even pay my tuition no matter how hard I hustle. I have no doubt that your problems are real and present and more than valid, but it’s like worrying about how to fly a rocket to the moon when I can’t even afford a car. We live in two different worlds.”

“Princess—”

“No.” Meg held up a hand, forestalling whatever argument he’d prepared. “I’m not a princess any more than you’re a pauper. And that’s okay, but let’s be honest right now. You’re standing there wearing designer right down to your skin and I’m cleaning up someone else’s puke for

barely more than minimum wage. We're too different, Theo. No matter how good the sex is, it would fall apart at some point, and it would fall apart ugly. I'm choosing to keep the memory of that night a happy one without all the emotional baggage three people would bring to any relationship..." She shook her head, barely believing the words out of her mouth. Three people. Hot as hell in the bedroom for a single night, but in a relationship?

A recipe for disaster.

Theo sighed. "You're not going to get anywhere the way you're doing it."

She blinked. "Actually—"

He was already moving. He snagged the mop from her hands and nudged her out of the way. He curled those perfect lips at the mess on the floor and muttered something about idiot drunks, but before she could say anything, he started scrubbing the floor with a vigor she hadn't been able to muster.

Meg should stop him.

Any moment now, she'd step in, demand the mop back, and finish the job she started.

But the strange sight of Theo doing manual labor kept her rooted in place. What was he playing at? Meg didn't know, and the not knowing twisted something up inside her. No matter what his goal in coming here, she was being reasonable, damn it.

Reason always prevailed.

He finished in half the time it would have taken her. Neither of them spoke as he carried the bucket to the utility sink and washed it out. What was there to say? No matter what plans Theo held when he showed up, this was goodbye. It had to be.

He dried his hands and turned to face her. "What else do you have to do before you lock up?"

“I’m nearly done.” She’d saved the worst task for last, which was just as well. The last thing Meg needed was him hovering while she tried to count out the till or something that required actual concentration. She cleared her throat. “You should leave.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

It wasn’t quite a denial of her command to get out, but it was clear he wouldn’t be going anywhere until he did exactly as he intended. Meg set her jaw and went through the motions of closing up. Theo’s presence shadowed her every step despite the fact he never moved from his spot near the back door. It didn’t matter. She could *feel* him taking up more than his fair share of space, his energy too much for this dingy bar.

After double checking that the front door was locked and the Open sign was off, Meg headed for the back door. She nearly missed a step. God, he was so gorgeous it actually *hurt* to look at him. He wasn’t as brutally large as Galen, built more like a blade meant to slice and stab than a crushing warhammer. But his white shirt still stretched across serious muscles in his shoulders and chest, and she knew from experience exactly how much strength he could bring to the table.

Stop that.

Stop thinking about that night.

Theo held the door open for her and she caught a whiff of his scent as she stepped past him. It stopped her cold. Sandalwood and spice. A combination she would associate with the best sex of her life until her dying breath. Meg closed her eyes and inhaled, taking in every bit of him she could manage, a junkie in need of the smallest fix.

She couldn’t say yes to whatever he was proposing. It might start with dinner, but it wouldn’t end there. And wherever it ended would only result in her plans derailed, her heart shredded, and her life in shambles.

No, Meg couldn't say yes.

She forced herself to open her eyes and keep moving. She locked the door behind her and headed for the street. Theo kept pace easily. "No car?"

Who drove in New York? Oh yeah, someone as rich as sin—like Theo. "I take the subway."

"The subway." He said the words like talking about shit on the bottom of his shoe. "No. Absolutely not." Theo fished a set of keys out of his jeans and pushed a button, making a car down the street chirp. Meg didn't need to look at it to know it was expensive. Of course it was.

She clung to her patience with slippery fingers. "Goodnight, Theo." If she got into the car with him, she had no idea where she'd end up. Not because Theo was some crazy murderer—but because Meg didn't trust herself with him. Throw Galen into the mix and she was a goner.

No, her only option lay in running as far and as fast as she could.

"Meg." There it was again, that hint of growl in her name. He stepped closer, his presence overwhelming her despite there being a good foot between them. "Meg, let me walk you to the subway station." He reached out and tucked a flyaway strand behind her ear, his thumb brushing across her jaw as he withdrew. That tiny touch had lightning dancing beneath her skin. She wanted him. Good lord, she wanted him. Meg was Pavlov's dog panting for another taste.

"I don't think that's a good idea." She reached out without having any intention of moving and touched his bottom lip. Meg dropped her hand immediately, the memory of his lips on other parts of her burning through her body. What was she thinking? She had to get out of here and she had to do it now. It took every bit of will she had to step back and then step back again. "Please don't come here again."

Theo studied her with those gorgeous blue eyes. He seemed to see more than she had any intention of showing, and she held her breath as he considered. Finally, he nodded. "Okay,

princess. I won't come back here again." He shifted closer and cupped her jaw. Even knowing she should shove him away, Meg couldn't help leaning in, a flower seeking his warm sunlight. His lips brushed hers, the contact so fleeting she was half sure she imagined it.

And then he was gone, releasing her from the trap of his touch and moving back. "You know where to find me should you change your mind."

"That won't happen." *It might happen.*

"I guess we'll see, won't we?" He chuckled and headed for his car.

"Arrogant ass," she muttered. Theo might be sin personified, but he was wrong on this note. She would *not* be seeking him out.

Meg headed for the subway, every step leeching out the spark of energy being in Theo's presence had brought her. By the time she made it home, she wasn't a woman who'd caught the handsome prince's eye. She was just a graduate student with more debt than she knew what to do with and no magical solution for how to keep moving forward.

The door to her apartment was perpetually off its level, so she had to throw her shoulder into it to get it both opened and closed. The flimsy deadbolt wouldn't keep out a mouse determined to break in, but she'd never had a problem with that sort of thing in the years she'd lived here.

A quick shower and she collapsed face-down in her bed. Normally, sleep came with little effort—she worked too damn hard to be anything but completely exhausted at the end of her days—but tonight her mind wouldn't stop racing.

Impossible not to compare her shitty bed with the one in Theo and Galen's apartment, the one that had fit all three of them with ease and felt like sleeping on a cloud. Meg rolled over and cursed into her pillow. *Stop it, stop it, stop it. There are a thousand and one reasons why staying*

away from them is the only choice you have, and you know it. Good sex is the only reason why saying yes would be great.

Good sex did not outweigh all the bad. It just didn't.

She had to remember that.

Seconds ticked into minutes into hours as Meg watched the city lights play across her ceiling. She had a meeting in the morning to explore financial options with the college, and she needed not to be totally exhausted for it, but that wasn't going to happen.

Damn Theo.

At six, she gave up and took a shower. As she got ready, she rehearsed what she'd say to the financial advisor. They saw cases like hers all the time, and unfortunately the college wasn't in the business of charity. Meg's financial aid had run dry last year, and she wasn't in a position to petition for grants at this point. She was up shit creek without a paddle, and that's exactly what the financial guy would tell her when she sat down with him.

But she had to try.

Worst case, I take a hiatus and spend a year saving money and working my ass off and complete my degree next year.

It wasn't the end of the world if she had to defer. It just felt that way.

She carefully applied her makeup—a low-key lipstick and eyeshadow meant to look like she wasn't wearing anything at all—and dressed in her one good professional outfit. A dress she'd rescued from her friend Cara's donation pile and made adjustments to, and the heels she'd worn when she graduated high school. They weren't fancy, but the black pumps completed the look better than boots or flip-flops would.

An hour later, she knocked on the door and stepped into the office. "Mr. Taneka?"

“Come in, come in.” He didn’t look up from his computer as she approached the faded chairs situated in front of his desk. They’d only met a few times over the course of her college career, but she was always struck by how *small* Mr. Taneka was. Physically, he could only be termed delicate, but that impression didn’t last once he opened his mouth. His voice was a deep bass that and his attitude, frankly, sucked. He was less than five years out from retirement, and his complete lack of give-a-damn was never more apparent than when she’d asked him for help.

Now, she was here to ask for it again—hopefully with a better outcome.

Meg had nowhere else to turn.

She watched the clock as he finished doing whatever he was doing on his computer. It could have been solitaire for all Meg knew. At ten minutes, she cleared her throat.

Mr. Taneka sighed. “You’re still here?”

“Well... yes.” She clasped her hands together and fought to keep her voice even and neutral. “We haven’t had our meeting yet, Mr. Taneka. Fall tuition is due this week and I’m hoping you have a solution that will help me keep from having to take time off.”

He sighed again, louder this time, and sat back. “Ms. Sanders, I don’t know why you’re wasting both our time.”

“Excuse me?” He’d been blunt before, but this was above and beyond. She pressed her lips together to keep from screaming in his face. What did he have to worry about? He had a cushy office job and his path through retirement and beyond was all but assured.

She didn’t have the luxury.

She didn’t have *any* luxury.

Mr. Taneka gave her a look like she’d escaped a mental ward to storm into his office and ruin his day. “What game are you playing, Ms. Sanders? Your tuition is paid in full.”

Meg blinked. “What? That’s impossible.”

“On the contrary, I have the information right here.” He turned the screen to face her. Sure enough, the balance owed was at zero.

Impossible.

She was two grand short yesterday. Meg wasn’t the type of person who just magically misplaced *two thousand dollars*. How could—

No.

No, he wouldn’t dare.

She cleared her throat. “Would it be possible to see the source of that payment?”

“Ms. Sa—”

“A name, Mr. Taneka. I just need a name. Please.”

Another of those long-suffering sighs. He clicked a few buttons. “A Mr. Theo Fitzcharles made the payment at five this morning.”

That son of a bitch.