

Chapter One

Meghan Clark shuffled papers across her desk as she scanned the space for her phone. Normally, she wouldn't have her personal phone anywhere near her on a workday. Especially *this* workday. Like neck-high frothing waves, two high-priority projects threatened to drown her. But she was on the threshold of wrapping them up. Once they were done, she'd be able to breathe again.

She cut another glance at her phone. A compulsion. An unhealthy addiction. But Adam said he'd call when he got back to town. He hadn't, though he should have arrived in the early afternoon. Normally, she wouldn't be this anxious, but things had been off between them for a month or so. He'd insisted things were fine. Which itself *wasn't* fine.

"Meghan, is everything ready for the Simmons-Burnett engagement dinner tonight?"

She lifted her gaze to her boss, Emily, who stood in front of her desk against the urban Atlanta backdrop through the office window. Meghan's two colleagues sat nearby in the large office. The tasteful and comfortable décor invited clients to plan and consult about their important events.

"Yes, I've confirmed all the guests for the venues," Meghan told her. "For both dinners. That was the last thing I had to do. The Fink-Walton party as well. I'll go early to one to check everything then head to the other. At least they're near each other."

Emily's eyes crinkled with her smile. "Good job. I knew I could count on you. They'll have a great event, and you'll get some rest afterward."

Meghan forced a smile. If only that were true. After she went home that evening, she'd have completed the biggest projects for her event planning job for the spring. Marked off. Her caseload of early-May engagement, retirement, and rehearsal dinners would then give way to a short though welcome lull.

But Adam said he had news for her, and he'd tell her that weekend. Whether it was good or bad, she had no idea. His voice had given away nothing, so her fretfulness had been stuck in high gear since a few days ago when he'd left on a company trip. He hadn't called and had only texted once. Could she even look forward to a restful and romantic weekend? She braced for the worst.

Another thing hovered in her mind, her dad's mitral valve heart procedure the following week. It wasn't supposed to be too serious, but there was always a chance it was more than they thought. Or that he and his wife, Jill, were trying to protect her by playing down the dangers.

An hour later, Meghan slumped into the driver's seat of her car, almost too tired to start the ignition. She still had to attend the events, though not for the entire evening. Emily allowed the employees to leave work early on the days when they had evening events. She'd go home to rest and regroup. Then she'd have a clearer mind before heading out again.

Still no call from Adam, though she'd texted him. *Are you back yet? What, no news?* She regretted that after sending it. Sounded clingy. Needy and entitled. But they were a couple, weren't they? Was she being demanding just because she wanted him to act like it?

A glance at herself in her rearview mirror reflected dark, anxious eyes and a worried downturn of her lips, making her look older than her twenty-eight years. Even her stylish shoulder-length haircut looked exhausted and cranky.

The frown hung with her until she reached her garden-level apartment and unlocked the two deadbolts on the front door. As soon as light flooded the hall and living room, she kicked off her stiletto-heel pumps and removed her chunky necklace. She headed toward the lamp table in the kitchen cove.

Call her old-fashioned, but she had a backup landline on the table, in case of emergency. In case she lost her cell phone, or it somehow self-destructed. The phone blinked and hope flickered inside as she pushed *play*. When she heard Adam's voice, relief cascaded over her. His flight was delayed, and he wouldn't be in until late. So, he'd touch base the following day. He didn't say when. At least there was a reason, though she couldn't guess why he'd called her landline instead of her cell.

In bare feet, Meghan shuffled to the fridge. A peek inside met her low expectations. A lonely half-burrito from yesterday's dinner would have to do, unless she was able to sneak an hors d'oeuvre from a tray passing by at the dinner that evening.

Once heated, it did a passable job in dulling the growl in her stomach. She lay down for a rest, not to sleep, still scanning her list to make sure everything would be perfect for the evening.

Two hours later, Meghan headed out again, refueled to some degree by her brief rest and a fresh change of clothes. She'd completed most of the details in advance, as usual.

For bigger events, she worked in tandem with one of her colleagues. But an engagement party at a restaurant was relatively straightforward to plan compared to a multi-day conference. She and Emily had considered doing two in one evening doable because of the simpler format and the fact that the two restaurants were near each other. The previous day, she'd overseen the room setup for each venue, reviewed the program with the staff, and double-checked the seating and access. That evening, she only had to survey everything again with a careful eye at both venues.

Then go home to crash.

Her first stop was MacDowell's, an upscale steak restaurant with a large private dining room. Meghan greeted a few of the waiters who were still setting up. "Looks great, guys," she told them.

She turned toward the doorway as the bride, groom, and their parents entered. The Simmons-Burnett wedding party. The couple and their parents greeted Meghan.

The room grew noisy with six additional people.

"Everything looks great." The bride, a thirty-something brunette, addressed Meghan then shifted her gaze to her tall groom-to-be, seeming to forget Meghan's existence.

Meghan smiled as she felt herself grow invisible. A hollow breeze flowed through her. She'd had that once. Though not with Adam.

A noise in the hallway caused everyone to turn as two more couples came in, dressed in business casual and silky dresses. “We’re a little early,” the woman in three contrasting necklaces said. “We wanted to see the happy couple first.” They glanced around, their smiles turning to confusion. “Where are Becky and Matt?”

“Becky and Matt who?” asked the bride’s mother.

“We’re here for the Fink-Walton wedding.” One of the new arrivals, a man in a tweed sport coat, spoke up.

“This is the Simmons-Burnett wedding,” Olivia Simmons said. “Are you all in the right place?”

As Meghan observed the exchange, a ripple of cold terror trickled through her. She blinked at the cluster of guests. “Wait.” She approached them. “This is the venue for...” Her mouth dropped open. “Simmons-Burnett.” Everyone fell silent and stared at Meghan. “Oh my gosh...”

She shot a stricken look at Olivia and her groom, Justin, whose mouths had fallen open. “I think I sent your guests to the wrong venue.”

“You what?” Olivia’s mother sputtered, her face turning a mottled pink.

Meghan stifled the urge to ball her fists to her ears and wail, *No, no, no!* She had to remain professional. And think fast.

“Stay calm, everyone.” She gave her voice an authoritative edge as would a teacher of fifth graders, but added a reassuring smile. “Usually, everything goes like clockwork, but every once in a while, details get turned around.”

She went to the two couples who’d just arrived. “There was a glitch in communication—my glitch, that is. Becky and Matt are at Goldman’s, just across the highway. Do you know it?”

“I know the place,” one of the men said. “It’s not that far.” He looked at his wife, who appeared relieved. “Good thing we came early.”

Meghan turned to the bridal couple and their parents. The mother of the bride struggled to compose herself, looking like she wanted to tear Meghan’s hair out. “It’ll be fine, Mrs. Simmons. I really apologize for this. We have time to straighten it out.” She kept her voice calm even as her heart pounded against her ribs like a mob of angry men locked in a basement. “I have a text list and an email list of all the guests for both parties. I’ll notify them all immediately of the mistake and send them on to Goldmans.”

“And what about *our* guests?” Olivia put her hands on her hips.

“I’ll do the same for your list.” Meghan swiped her tablet where she’d been double checking everything for weeks, hoping her calm demeanor would convince everyone things were still going to unfold smoothly, despite the mix-up. Having all the guests in a group mailing would be a lifesaver that evening.

After a few swipes and a lot of perspiration running down her back, she said, “Done. This will reroute all the guests in both parties. If anyone doesn’t get the message in time, I’ll let them know as soon as they arrive.”

“What about the other guests? Will they know to come here?” The groom asked.

“I’ll have someone there do the same. I’ll call Goldman’s now.”

Meghan left the group to breathe deeply and have a quiet space. She phoned the manager of Goldman's. "Can you get him for me?" she asked the hostess who'd answered the phone. "It's urgent,"

She explained the mix-up and the man chuckled. He said, "It happens. I'll take care of them." His casual attitude sent Meghan a gust of relief, but the guests might be another story. Time would tell. They wouldn't necessarily let her know they received her message. She'd simply have to wait it out. And pray.

By the time all the guests were rerouted to their respective restaurants and bridal parties, both dinners ran late by thirty minutes. A few couples at each venue hadn't gotten the message and had to get back in the car. Some grumbled while others were more gracious. If the venues had been farther from each other, the whole evening would have been an unqualified catastrophe.

Meghan made an appearance at both restaurants, rushing from one to the other as a steady stream of panic surged through her veins. She addressed everyone's concerns, speaking soothingly instead of howling in shame. Fortunately, the event at Goldman's had a later start time, so she was able to take the microphone at the beginning of each event and apologize to everyone for the confusion. After doing the same at Goldman's, she slipped out of the restaurant and returned to her car. For the second time that day, she didn't immediately start the car, but stared through the windshield at a cluster of trees blackened by the night.

How had she done this? Had her anxiety with Adam, along with that of her father's upcoming surgery, thrown her off balance? She always double and triple checked everything, had always been known and praised for her organization and efficiency. The events were relatively simple, but there'd been many others which had competed with her mental bandwidth, resulting in an apparent overload of details.

What would Emily say? Word would surely get back, along with Meghan's own confession, which she'd make to her boss as soon as possible.

Emptied of strength, Meghan started her car and returned home, opened the door, and trudged in like an elderly woman. A layer of humiliation blended with dread of Emily's reaction hung on her shoulders like a tattered shawl. Despite her turmoil, she went to bed and fell into an exhausted sleep.

The following morning, Meghan awoke with a promising level of energy, until she remembered the debacle of the previous evening.

She'd failed and deserved to be fired. There was nothing to do, nothing to say. As she stared at the ceiling, she whispered a pathetic prayer. She'd ruined the engagement party for two different couples. Trashed the first phase of their happy futures together. And probably lost her job. No, she'd certainly lost it.

And here, she'd had visions of moving up in the company, eventually being entrusted with higher-level clients in a special, elite account only Emily handled.

Meghan had tried human resources, she'd tried bookkeeping, but event planning had been the sweet spot, the place where she belonged. Her organized mind and sociable nature fit right into that profession. Staying in the company would enable her to put all her vision and planning skills to higher and higher tests.

So much for *that* dream. At least, in her current company. What would she do now? Would she have to start from scratch? She could always try to get her old job back in Virginia, the one she had before fleeing to Atlanta...

She pulled herself from the bed, her limbs heavy like concrete. After brewing coffee, she collapsed on the couch and gazed at her phone. She should call Emily. But first, there was a message. Maybe Adam?

Not Adam. Emily.

“Meghan, I heard about what happened last night. I don’t know how it happened, and won’t be able to discuss it until Monday. We’ll look at it then. Sounds like everything went okay afterward, but I was surprised, because you’re usually such a perfectionist. We’ll talk about this on Monday.”

Meghan couldn’t discern from Emily’s tone if she was frustrated or even ready to fire Meghan. She’d be forced to wait until Monday. Until then, she’d scour the internet for job openings.

On top of everything else, Adam still hadn’t called. He could be tired from his late flight, and would call her later. But over the last month or two, making excuses for Adam had become her new hobby. She was tired of guessing the reasons for his recent lukewarm attitude, his failure to respond in a minimum of ways.

She’d met Adam at a training workshop for social media, one offered to local companies in various disciplines. Emily had wanted her to receive more training in that area, since she was not only lousy at it, but disinterested. Yet, in her industry and many others, it was essential, so she decided to go and learn to like it. During a coffee break, Adam introduced himself, then later sought her out during the lunch break. He did the same the following day, which led to a date. That was six months ago.

Her gaze found the wall clock. Almost ten o’clock. Wouldn’t he be up?

She tapped his number, knowing better, since it was his place to call her. But she needed a friendly voice. No, that wasn’t the first thing she needed. She wanted reassurance, as well as a distraction from her failures at work. His number rang four times. Then a woman’s voice answered. “Adam’s phone. Who’s this?”

Meghan froze. The words, *his girlfriend, who are you?* ricocheted inside her brain. Instead, she disconnected.



Luc Badaux clicked *purchase ticket* then leaned back in his chair with a long sigh. Whatever his misgivings about flying to Chicago for a few days, it was still his mom’s sixtieth birthday. She’d be thrilled by his visit, and that was worth all the inconvenience. It was even worth putting up with Dad.

His gaze wandered through the tall plate-glass window of the fourteenth-floor building where he worked. The flat landscape stretched out to a dry, steamy horizon. Flat, lifeless. No green for miles, except a few intentionally landscaped puffs neatly spaced

apart on the street far below. He could only imagine the sizzling West Texas sun outside. A few days up north would be a pleasant break, wouldn't it?

After a year and a half in the Lone Star state, Luc hadn't grown accustomed to the moon-like landscape and the furnace of heat in spring and summer. He hadn't grown up there and had never learned to appreciate its uniqueness the same way the natives did.

Face it, you made a mistake coming here. He let out a humorless chuckle. Roughly one week after his arrival to work in his so-called dream job at a tech startup, that sad truth had hit home.

His blunder in judgment had entwined a more devastating mistake, one he'd spent the last year trying to expunge from his mind. He'd tried to call her, to backpedal, but nothing he said would erase his error. On top of that, she'd blocked his number.

"You losing concentration, Frenchy?" Luc's office mate, David, rose to get a can of Coke from the small fridge in the corner of their sunlit office.

"Don't call me Frenchy, Redneck." But Luc was smiling. At least he got along well with David, which was more than he could say for the rest of his team. "Or else I'll have to curse you out in French. It'll sound pretty, but believe me, it won't be."

David guffawed. "Tough talk. Go eat a croissant, will ya?"

Luc laughed. He'd been taking that kind of teasing for most of his life in the US, though usually it was good-natured. He'd spent his first twelve years in the South of France with his French father and American mother. Then his dad got a new job in suburban Chicago. Luc gradually became fully Americanized. On most days. He could easily put on an authentic French accent if it suited his purpose. And he still craved plenty of things he'd left behind. The French pace of life, the sing-song music of the Provence accent. And his grandma Isabelle, who he'd always called *Mamie*.

He should go back to see her. She was almost ninety and frail. He didn't know how long she'd last after her winter bout with pneumonia. Hard to believe his sweet, pillowy grandmother had raised his obnoxious, irascible dad.

Back to work. He had a lot to do if he was to be caught up enough to take off time next week to fly to Chicago.

