



*Claiming*

THE

LIMELIGHT

— THE LIMELIGHT SERIES —

LONDON  
GATES

# CLAIMING THE LIMELIGHT

THE LIMELIGHT SERIES

BOOK ONE



# LONDON GATES

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

## CLAIMING THE LIMELIGHT

I'm not a good man. Not by any stretch of the imagination.  
I'm ruthless, cunning, cold, and unattached. And I like it that  
way.

I know who I am and I like the way I live my life, but one little  
waitress comes crashing into my life and has everything going  
sideways.

I have rules. No dating employees, not again.

Megan intrigues me in a way no one has before. She makes me  
come alive and not just with lust.

But can I allow one waitress to flip my world upside down?  
Can I let her into the darkness that is my life?

I just needed out of Ohio. Needed to get away from my life  
there. Landing at Club Limelight has me thinking that my luck  
might be changing.

It doesn't take me long to feel at home, making friends at my  
new job, until I run stack dab into Hunter.

He might be used to intimidating other people but I'm done  
letting others walk all over me. But the more I get to know  
him the more confused I get.

I like him. No, I more than like Hunter. And I know he likes  
me too. So then why does he push me away only to pull me  
back in again?

Not to mention his job as "The Fixer."

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# CHAPTER 1





## HUNTER

“*I* never thought I’d see that fucking face again,” I say as I stare at the bloodied, bruised mug of the asshole who completely screwed me over about a year ago. Snarling, I shake my head and rub my hand along my jaw, the shadow bristling against my palm fitting for a day like this.

“I thought you’d be happy to see him.” Waylon Nyx lets a low, rumbling chuckle echo off the concrete walls of the dingy room in the basement of his recording studios. The small box of a room is windowless, dark, and full of dread. The cracks in the walls splinter out like fingers trying to escape what is essentially a blood-tinged cell, a room with a vague odor that hints of lingering death. Most people would never think a dismal place like this could exist in such a chic, expensive building in the trendy part of town. But I know better. All of the bleaker aspects of the city reveal themselves to a guy like me, someone who is well-versed in dealing with the underbelly of society.

More than anyone else in Los Angeles, I understand that every building holds a host of secrets, ghosts that linger in the dark corners like the place my old associate finds himself in now, tied to a metal chair, his face bleeding from numerous gashes.

Unfortunately, not a single drop of his blood has been spilled by me. Yet.

Taking a deep breath, I fold my arms across my chest and weigh the situation, thumbing over the face of my Grim Reaper tattoo. I hadn’t wanted to come here to begin with. Mr. Nyx is a pain in my ass like no one else—and I have several deeply rooted thorns in my backside these days. Even the site of his studio, where plenty of famous recording artists come to create the music he releases into the world, making millions off other people’s talents, makes me angry. I only come here when I can’t avoid it, and something about the tone Mr. Nyx used when he contacted me earlier told me this was one of those times.

Dragging my hand down my face, I say the words I know the man in the three-piece suit wants to hear. “I’m listening.”

This time, his chuckle grates on my nerves like the whine of a dentist’s drill, and I have to shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans to keep from making Mr. Nyx’s face look a little more like Jonathan’s. Bloodied. Battered.

Through slitted eyes, the man I once trusted with everything glares at me, his swollen jaw unmoving. He knows better than to even try to sway me to spare him. Even if he hadn’t stolen from me, I’d make him pay just for stabbing me in the back. He’s been a witness to many of my other business transactions and is probably mentally counting the seconds he has left alive.

“It’s pretty simple, Hunter,” Mr. Nyx says as five fat fingers slam down on my shoulder. He has to strain to reach that high. I tower over him—at six-four, I’m nearly a foot taller than this man with the “simple” business proposal.

“Go on,” I prompt as I see him mulling over the situation in his mind.

“You’ve got something I want, something I’ve been trying to bargain with you for so long, I can’t even remember the first time I made my request.” I close my eyes for a second, trying not to groan. Are we really talking about this again? “Now I’ve finally got something you want.” He chuckles again and pats my shoulder until I move away.

Turning to face him and shaking my head, it’s my turn to laugh. I ask, “Are we seriously back to that? You know I have no intention of selling Silver Towers.” The apartment complex is one I’d gone to great lengths to acquire. It is in a part of town I knew was going to blow up soon, and I’d gotten it for a steal. Now it’s worth far more than any amount of money someone like Mr. Nyx could offer me. He’s rich, but not that rich.

But he’d made plenty of offers over the last year. Every time, I told him exactly where he could go. There are other apartment buildings nearby, ones that aren’t as nice as Silver Towers, ones that don’t cost as much. He could buy one of them and

fix it up. Sure, he wouldn't be able to sell it or rent out the units for the same amount as I'm getting now that the area has taken off, but Mr. Nyx is an intelligent, cunning man. Surely, he could find a way to make one of those other properties into something trendy.

"We are back to that again." He's done laughing now. He runs a hand down his black tie, attempting to smooth out his white button-down over his paunch. "Listen, I know you've been looking for Mr. Williams here for a while. I found him for you." He shrugs like I should thank him or shake his hand. The guy's got balls to take that sort of approach with me. "Now, you take your friend away from here safe and sound, and I get Silver. Otherwise..." He makes a small facial gesture, pulling one corner of his mouth up as he looks over his shoulder at his two thugs who are leaning against the wall...next to a couple of my own guys who are prepared to do whatever is necessary in the blink of an eye.

At the moment though, I believe Mr. Nyx may have a point. I have been looking for my former friend for quite some time, and now here he is.

Not that I would give a flying fuck if Nyx pulled a gun out of his waistband right now and blew Jonathan's head off.

But then... I would still be left without answers, and the one man who can give them to me would have his brain matter mixing with the mildew on the concrete wall behind him.

Not to mention, I want to be the one to pull the trigger if it comes to that.

"You want to give me Jonathan in exchange for Silver Towers?" I clarify.

He nods. "I got the contract all drawn up. Just need your signature." That smirk from before grows wider, morphing into a full-fledged smile.

I want to crock back my fist and knock the grin right off his fat face.

But I don't. As much as I don't want to give up Silver Towers, theoretically, getting the information I need from Jonathan

would be worth even more. Besides, unlike Waylon Nyx, I do have the skills and assets to buy another nearby apartment complex and turn it into something that will draw in high-end clients who will pay tens of thousands a month to live there.

His beady eyes are boring into me, and I think he's holding his breath as he awaits my answer. I suppose he didn't notice the absolute terror that crossed Jonathan's face the moment he saw me. Nyx honestly seems to think I am trying to save Jonathan's life—rather than just wanting to be the one who takes it should things not go as planned. Jonathan knows me better than Nyx; he knows that crossing me is signing his own fucking death certificate.

Without a word, I give a sharp nod, and the chuckling is back as Mr. Nyx gestures for muscled moron number one to hand him the contract and a pen.

I know better than to sign anything without reading it, but this is a pretty simple document. I don't need my lawyer, Leah, to tell me I'm essentially signing over Silver Towers to Mr. Waylon Nyx in exchange for what would legally appear to be nothing. He at least put the sales amount on there.

One dollar.

When I'm satisfied he's not extorting anything else from me, I step over to the barren gray wall and slap the paper against it, hastily scrawling my name in the correct place.

“Very good, very good!” Mr. Nyx says as he rubs his hands together. I thrust the paperwork and pen at him, imagining what he would look like with the writing utensil jutting out of his eye socket. He hands me a single George Washington, which I want to throw in his face but shove into my pocket instead.

“Give me a moment with my...friend?” I ask as he reviews the document.

“Sure, sure, whatever you want!” Mr. Nyx folds the contract and slips it into the interior pocket of his jacket. “We'll leave you to it.” With another bark of laughter, he pounds me on the shoulder and says, “It was great doing business with you, Mr.

Stone.” He extends his hand, and I eye it like a rabid dog before I finally decide to be the bigger man and shake it rather than chomping it off.

Both his footsteps and his laughter echo down the hall toward the stairs as his goons fall into line behind him.

I turn and look at my men. Cameron is eyeing me like he’s not sure I know what I’ve done, but Omar leans against the wall, a bored expression on his face.

“I think I’ll handle this myself,” I say, and both of them nod, though I can tell they are disappointed not to get in on the fun. “I’ll let you guys have a turn later.”

That perks them up, but as I wheel around to look at Jonathan, all semblance of joy leaves my body.

The stereotypical single lightbulb sways as I bump it with my shoulder crossing the room. Jonathan grunts but says nothing. Just looking at him makes both of my hands curl into fists. Shadows alternate covering his face and exposing it as the light swings, but his expression does not change.

“Well,” I say, keeping a foot or so between us so that I don’t prematurely break my new toy and lose any chance I might have of finding what’s mine. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you again. Alive.”

His lips are swollen, bloodied, and cracked, but he still manages a smile. “Fuck off, Hunter,” he croaks. “You’ll never get what you want.”

“You sure about that?” I ask, stroking my chin as I consider where to land the first blow. I wonder if there’s a bone in his face that isn’t already broken. “As you know, I always get what I want. One way or another.”

“You can’t hurt me any more than I’ve already been hurt,” he says, and I see the defeat in his eyes. He thought everything would be better when he stole my hundred million dollars and took off.

But he was clearly wrong.

He’s mistaken about his last statement, too.

My fist curls and flies free in a flash, slamming into his cheek right below his eye socket. I hear the crack as the bone shatters. Blood flies from the split in his skin, splattering the wall and my shirt. I don't give a shit about either.

Jonathan moans in agony, but it just fuels me on, and I land a left jab to the other side of his face. His head flips around as more blood sprays the room.

“Tell me what the fuck you did with it!” I demand. I can tell it's not enough for him to speak, though, because he still manages to grin at me. It's as if he's in so much pain now, his mind can't even process more.

I'm up for the challenge.

Again and again, I ram my fist into his face, pummeling him in the stomach and shoulders as well, wanting to snap every fucking bone in his body. When I rear back and lift my size twelve Gucci shoe into his groin, the whole chair tips over, and his head snaps to the side, smacking into the concrete.

A rivulet of blood snakes toward my shoes, and I step out of the way to spare them. He's out, but I can hear his raspy breathing. “Fuck,” I mumble as I pull my cell from my pocket.

Brandon answers with one word. “Boss?”

“Bring the vehicle around.” I hang up and put it in my pocket before he can respond. Turning to the others, I say, “Bring him.” This isn't the first time my overzealous nature has caused me to incapacitate someone I need answers from. I'll give him some time to wake up and then try again on my own turf, away from the exterior lights of the city proper.

Omar and Cameron gather up my newest acquisition, freeing him from the chair with a pocketknife as I turn and head toward the stairs.

I don't bother to let Mr. Nyx know we are leaving. He'll figure it out when one of his goons finds an empty, blood-spattered room. I don't have to worry about the kidnappers going to the police either.

The scent of exhaust from the nearby traffic hits my lungs as I push the outside door open. Los Angeles always smells about

the same, at least in the downtown area—smog, piss, or garbage. A glance up at the sky leaves me wanting for stars. Not a single one can be seen.

Brandon is waiting at the vehicle. He opens the back as my other two runners lift Jonathan up and deposit him in the darkness next to a well-used tire iron that's never seen a flat.

I get in the passenger seat and wait for the others, trying to decide how to make this asshole talk once we get back to Club Limelight. They call me The Fixer, so I feel like I should be able to fix this. But with Jonathan, nothing ever is what it appears.

That's when I know what must be done. If he's not going to tell me where the money is, the trunk isn't the darkest place he'll find himself in tonight.

The next time someone tosses Jonathan Williams' body, it'll be into a shallow grave.

## CHAPTER 2





MEGHAN

“Is that tray going to table twenty-seven?” Allie asks me as I come out from behind the bar with another round of beers for the rowdiest group in Club Limelight this evening. It’s super busy for a weeknight, and the club’s DJ, Audio Anarchy, is dropping beats that have almost everyone up and out of their chairs and on the dance floor.

Not this group of six guys who are in town auditioning for some boy band, though. All they do is sit and toss back beers like they are water. I don’t mind. Tips from them have been good, and I am shoving twenties into my bag behind the bar like a mad woman. Everyone is in a giving mood tonight, and it looks like I might actually make enough in tips to pay the monthly rent on my shitty apartment in just my first week here.

“Yeah, this tray is for them,” I tell Allie as the blonde smiles and shadows me. Earlier in the week, I’d been following her around, watching her do everything so I could learn, but now, she said I was capable of doing things on my own. Still, for a night or two, she’ll continue to hang out with me to make sure everything goes smoothly.

“Here we are!” I say, arriving at the table just as one of my favorite songs saturates the space around us. I can’t help but move my hips a little to the sick beat as I place the beers on the table in front of the young men. A couple of them are kind of cute, but I’ve been too busy tonight to flirt.

Well, except for the bit of casual philandering I do to get higher tips. But that’s a given.

“You boys enjoy,” I say with a dazzling smile and quick flip of my long auburn tresses over my shoulder. I swivel my hips a bit more, pretending it’s part of my dance, and watch as the bills appear on the table.

“You’re beautiful,” a tall blond with glossy eyes says, sloshing his beer as he attempts to get the glass to his lips.

“Thanks,” I say with a shoulder shrug. “You just make sure you’re not the one driving home, babe.”

He laughs, as do the rest of his drunk friends. Another one, a shorter guy with bright orange hair says, “Haven’t you ever heard of Boober...I mean Uber!” And they all laugh.

“Someone’s head is in the gutter,” I tease, but I know my boobs are great, so why wouldn’t he have been checking them out?

With the tips secure in my apron, for now, I flash another smile and then turn around to wind my way back across the dance floor, remembering what Allie told me the other night about not letting my smile fade too quickly. “Other customers are watching you,” she’d said. “Even if those customers can’t see your face anymore, it’s still important to look genuine.”

It was good advice, and I planned to use it in other situations as well. Besides, smiling helps to keep a person’s outlook positive, and I need to focus on the good things that have come my way recently.

My shift is almost over, and I need to put these tips away before I go back out to check on another table. The club is busy, but we’ve had a full staff working here every night I’ve been waitressing so far, so no one is too rundown, unlike the diner I used to work at back in Ohio where my feet felt like they were going to disintegrate after every shift.

Allie’s long blonde ponytail swings back and forth as we head back to the bar. “You’re cleaning up tonight!” she says. I feel bad she’s not making any tips since she’s shadowing me, but she insisted I keep them. “You keep making those sorts of tips, and you won’t be living in that nasty place much longer.”

I let out a loud sigh as the two of us push through the half door that leads to behind the bar. “Yeah, it’s not that bad, but it sucks my landlord is a scumbag.” I shake my head and wait for Carter, the bartender, to move aside so I can stash my cash. All the girls who are working have a system for keeping our tips safe, and I am glad I listened to Allie and brought a big bag because I have all kinds of bills in there tonight. It’s nearly

overflowing. Counting them after my shift will definitely make my smile more genuine.

I turn and catch Carter's eyes, and he grins at me. He's a good guy, kinda cute with dark hair that's frosted on the tips and goes up in a swoosh in front of his right eye. He's super talented, too. At the moment, he's juggling bottles and wowing the crowd. It sort of reminds me of that Tom Cruise movie my mom used to watch all the time...*Martini*, or something.

"Meghan, can you take these drinks to forty-three?" Carter asks as I get ready to go back to my station and check on my other tables one more time. The next shift starts in about ten minutes, and while I'm having fun, I am ready to go home and rest. "Sadie's caught up over there with the Jax Blue crowd."

I look across the crowded club. Between the heads of all the dancers, I'm able to see the famous actor sitting in one corner of the spacious room with a ton of other people surrounding him. He has a big personality, and even from here, I can see he's entertaining them with a story. Sadie is standing there, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, probably waiting for someone to make up their mind about what they want to drink. I'm a little jealous. Part of the reason I really wanted to work here is because I heard a lot of celebs come in. What I wouldn't do to rub elbows with LA's rich and famous. My dreams are already coming true, now that I'm here, and I can't help but feel the excitement pulsing through my veins with every drop of the bass.

"Sure!" I say in response to Carter's request. I have no problem helping out a fellow waitress. She would do the same for me.

"Like I keep tellin' the big guy, you're a keeper!" Carter says with a quick wink that makes me blush. I take the tray and head to forty-three, though I'm not exactly sure which table that is, so I'm glad Allie is with me.

As we walk, she guides me in the right direction. "You haven't met the 'big guy' yet, have you?" she asks, having to shout a little over the music. My song has ended, and some techno version of the newest J-Lo song is playing. Audio Anarchy,

whose real name I've learned is Dylan, is dancing on the dais, and when he sees us, he waves. I wave back, careful with my tray of drinks as I wind my way between the dancers.

The big guy—I think he's usually just called Boss from what I can tell. Or Hunter. I think that's his name. "No, I haven't met him yet," I say. "When I came in for my interview, he was out. I talked to Ethan and Lexi."

Ethan, the club bouncer, was smokin' hot with his huge, musclebound arms and winning smile. He was also hilarious, and with his mop of unkempt dark hair, I could see why tons of girls did their best to flirt their way in here—just to stare at him.

"Lexi is so sweet," Allie murmurs. The waitress in question, who has been here a long time, apparently, is currently dancing near the DJ stage while she takes an order, her curly dark hair bouncing around as she does so.

"Yeah, she's great. Everyone is, so far." I smile at Allie as we arrive at the table and set the drinks down. This table is full of men and women, and they don't tip as well as the last group, but I take the few bucks they're giving me and thank them.

This might be my last table of the night. I'm dreaming of a bath—even if it is in a tiny tub in a shitty little apartment.

It's *my* shitty little apartment.

"You are liking it here, aren't you?" Allie asks with a grin. "I can tell."

"Yeah, it's great." I nod and glance around. The sleek, black décor gives the place a trendy look, while the blue LEDs uplighting the walls set the ambiance as cool and hip. Audio Anarchy has neon strobe lights that pass over the crowd on the dance floor, and similar lights beam down from the ceiling. I've never been to any of the private rooms down the halls in the back of the club, but I've heard those are for VIPs only.

That's one thing I haven't quite figured out yet. The club is amazing to work at. Everyone is super nice and eager to help. But I don't know what some of the lingo means. The other

day, someone told Allie they had a golden key, and Carter said if anyone ever tells me that phrase to let him know.

I have no fucking idea what it means, though. I wonder if I ever will.

“Any place is probably better than Ohio,” Allie says, jarring me from my thoughts.

I turn to respond as a whirling dancer almost takes out my tray. Thankfully, it’s empty. I pull it to my chest as the blonde looks at me, her nose in the air, and demands that I “Watch it!”

“Sorry!” I say, trying to look apologetic, but it’s hard. I didn’t do anything wrong. Still, Allie constantly reminded me earlier in the week that the customer always has the right of way, even if I think it’s not my fault.

The blonde, who’s wearing a strappy, short, bright pink dress, glares at me and then whirls back in the other direction, leaving Allie and me laughing. “She’s wasted!” Allie says.

My laugh doesn’t last long. The mention of Ohio and someone being wasted has me thinking about the life I left behind. I’d gotten out of Ohio as quickly as I could, but I miss my mom and am afraid of what I left her to deal with alone.

The face of a middle-aged drunk with greasy, dark hair cut in a mullet wearing a wife-beater comes to mind, making a chill pass down my spine. My mother has no idea what happened whenever her head was turned.

I hope I never see that bastard again.

Shaking it off, I respond to Allie. She grew up in California, so she has no idea what life is like in some parts of the country. “Yeah, I really love it here,” I say. “And as soon as I can get into a nicer apartment, it’ll be even better.”

“Keep getting tips like that, and it won’t be long,” Allie says as we reach the bar and I can take the money out of my apron again. I glance at my watch and see that I only have two more minutes. I’ll see if Carter has anything else for me to do before I go.

“Silver Towers is right by where you live, right?” Allie asks, bringing my mind off my money.

“Silver Towers?” I repeat, not sure what she’s talking about.

“Yeah, those nice apartments. Hunter owns those, you know? You should see if he can get you an apartment in there—for a deal, of course. Those rooms are so fucking expensive.” She rolls her blue eyes.

“I doubt I can afford that yet,” I tell her. “Besides, I’ve never even met Hunter.”

“He’s cool. You’ll like him. He can be...moody.” She shrugs, and I wonder what that means, but I don’t ask.

“Well, my shift is up, but I’m going to make sure Carter doesn’t need anything,” I tell her. “Thanks so much for all of your help.”

Allie gives me a quick hug. “You did a great job tonight. Keep hustling like this, and you’re going to be shadowing the new hires before you know it. Get home safe.” She heads over to talk to Lexi and Sadie with a pep in her step, and I wonder if she ever has a bad day. Allie wears her optimism like a second skin. Maybe if I spend enough time with her, it will rub off on me.

With a quick wave, I walk away from her and see that Carter is swamped, even though the other shift of waitresses is coming on. I lean on the bar. “Need anything else?”

He turns to me slightly wide-eyed, like he’s surprised I’m asking. “Sure. Take this whiskey to Betty Lewis?”

“Betty Lewis?” I perk up at the mention of the starlet’s name. “You don’t have to ask me twice!”

Carter sets the glass on my tray with a thankful smile and goes back to work. I see the woman across the club, and I’m so excited to get to meet her, I’m not paying attention to where I’m going at all. I feel like my entire body is tingling. She’s so beautiful and talented. I’ve seen all of her movies.

With my eyes locked on the flawless face of the raven-haired beauty, I don’t see the twirling blonde girl until the very last

second. As quickly as I can, I turn to get out of her way and run smack-dab into a brick wall that shouldn't be in the middle of the dance floor.

My tray flips, the whisky flies, and the brick wall yells, "Awww, fuck!"

I look up into piercing blue eyes and mutter my own, "Aw, fuck."

# CHAPTER 3





## HUNTER

“*Y*ou’ve got to be fucking shitting me!”

I can’t help but curse as the sharp scent of whiskey soaks into my clothing. This night is definitely not going as planned. The jacket I put on over my shirt in the vehicle to hide Jonathan’s blood splatter is now covered with sticky liquid, and the waitress in front of me is staring up into my eyes like she’s never seen a human before.

“I’m so sorry!” she says as she grabs a rag from her apron and runs it across my jacket and the front of my shirt before I can jump back out of her reach. All she’s doing is rubbing it in with her nasty rag that’s probably already wiped down a thousand surfaces. I don’t grab hold of her to stop because, in my present mindset, I might squeeze too hard, and even though part of me wants to hurt her, I know that’s just my own devil whispering in my ear.

“Why don’t you fucking watch where you’re going?” I growl at her, staring into wide, jade-colored eyes. I sort of remember having seen this redhead around before, but I have no idea what her name is. She’s obviously new. Otherwise, she’d know better than to be carrying her tray like that through the dance floor. She should have had her arm on the other side. Allie needs to do a better job of training these new girls.

Why can’t anyone just fucking do their job?

“I said I’m sorry,” she shoots back, her head pulling to the side a bit with emphasis. “I didn’t do it on purpose!”

My eyes widen as I take her in. Did she really just clap back at me? Me? I can’t help the sarcastic grin that spreads across my face. “Well, your sorry ass doesn’t make my jacket any less sticky, now does it?”

“That’s why I was trying to wipe it off!” she says, her tone slightly less angry and a little more matter-of-fact. She doesn’t seem scared of me at all, and I can’t quite figure out why.

Unless she doesn't know who I am.

It shouldn't matter; most people are scared of me from a simple glance in my direction. I do a good job of looking the part of the angsty bad boy who might just blow your brains out. "Don't you know that the customer is always right?" I ask her, narrowing my eyes slightly. Part of me just wants to hear what she comes back with. The way one side of her ruby lips curl up when she's defending herself is sexy, and despite my irritation, I can feel my body start to respond to hers.

"Yes, of course, the customer is always right," she says. "That's why I'm apologizing to you for running into me." She sets one hand on her narrow waist, and my eyes can't help but roam back up from those slightly rounded hips to a pair of breasts that look like they'll fit perfectly into my hands, to a lovely, but puckered face.

I need to get away from her before I either rip her fucking head off or fuck her brains out.

Luckily for me, Allie shows up right then. "Oh, shit," she mutters, seeing the stain on my clothes. She grabs the girl by the arm. "So sorry, boss!" she tells me as she yanks the girl away. "Meghan, did you apologize to Mr. Stone?"

Her jade eyes widen into the same look I saw on a doe once right before I plowed into it with my truck. "Mr. Stone?" she says, and in the back of my mind, I think I like the way my name sounds on her lips.

But then Carter is there, and I can tell he's in a hurry. I'm forced to pull my attention away from the new girl to hear what the bartender has to say. "Hey, Hunter," he says, "I have a message for you from Brandon."

I step farther away from Allie and Miss Sassy Pants. "Yeah, what is it?" I ask, thinking I already know.

"He said the package has been delivered." Carter stares at me with his eyebrows raised for a second, checking to make sure I'm clear.

I am. This is not the first time I've brought my other work back to the club. So I say, "Thank you" tersely before giving

the girl one more glare and storming off toward one of our private rooms down the hallway.

Before I leave the dance floor, I turn to look at Dylan, who is hard at work behind his turn tables. I catch his eyes and make a signal for him, my thumb toward the ceiling as I raise my hand a few times. He nods in understanding, and I rush on down the hallway, already feeling a shift in the music as the heavier beats begin to drop and the speakers go crazy with a high-pitched techno sound that will mask anything that goes on elsewhere in the building.

Leaving the club floor behind, I proceed down the hall toward the private room I already instructed Brandon and the others to bring Jonathan to. I noticed when we pulled up that he was conscious again, so hopefully, now he'll be willing to answer some of my questions.

Outside the door, I take a deep breath. My mind is filled with only one thought: I need to find out what the hell that bastard did with my money.

Pushing the door open, I look around. Brandon, Omar, and Caleb are here, as well as Leah. I silently curse under my breath at the sight of her. Not that I don't appreciate her legal expertise; it's just always a little harder to break the law when I know the one person who understands it better than anyone I've ever met is watching.

Her hazel eyes narrow on me, and I give her a cocky smile. She readjusts her arms and shakes her head, her dark hair catching the light. A shrug is all I can give her, and she backs up a few steps, knowing well enough there's not a word that can come out of her mouth that will change my mind.

Taking off my jacket, I try to ignore the scent of whiskey and hand the garment over to Brandon.

"Whew, Boss, you must've thrown back several shots to smell that strong," he jokes.

I turn and glare at him, not thinking it's funny at all. Stupid, clumsy, sexy-as-fuck waitress...

Brandon puts his free hand up in the air, a sign he understands he needs to shut his fucking mouth, and then moves back toward Leah. His blond hair looks a little disheveled, which is odd for him, but then, something tells me Jonathan didn't come into the room easily.

We are not in a dingy basement with only one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. No, this room is much different than the last one I sprayed Jonathan's blood all over. The lighting is better. I can see the full extent of damage to Jonathan's face and feel a ripple of satisfaction. His bruises are almost the same shade of blue as the walls. The paint also has pops of other colors in abstract shapes and designs. It's a nice room for customers who need the space for their own gold key issues.

It's a shame I'm about to fuck it up.

Thank God for washable paint and scrubbable carpet.

I push my sleeves up to my elbows and then approach the man in the chair. He's tied still, but not to the chair. Jonathan's not going anywhere anyway. Fuck, he used to work for me. He knows how this works. He's either going to tell me what I need to know, or he's not.

And if he's going to be a stupid motherfucker and not tell me, the only way he's getting out of this room is rolled up in a rug.

"All right, Jonathan," I begin, noticing I have some cuts on my knuckles from our last round. "Are you ready to talk?"

He looks even worse now than he did when I started roughing him up, to begin with. He can't really smile, but he tries as he tells me, "Go to hell."

Shaking my head, I say, "You know if you don't tell me, you'll be there in a few minutes, right?"

He chuckles under his breath. "I'm not going to fucking tell you anything, Hunter. You call yourself The Fixer, but you couldn't fix jack shit. It's all your fault, you know? If you hadn't fucked everything up, I'd still be working for you."

His words are meant to get a rise out of me, and they're almost working. But he's remembering the situation wrong. I step forward and ram my fist into his throat, crushing his windpipe.

He'll still be able to talk, but he won't be able to waste his words anymore.

"Listen, Jonathan, I'm done playing fucking games. You're going to tell me where my money is, or you're going to die. Which do you prefer?"

He is gasping for air as he stares up at me, his dark eyes barely slits, they're so swollen. "You'll never find it," he croaks out. "Never. I'm not giving it to you, Stone. My life is over, and I accept that. I'll save you a seat in hell."

I stare at him, watching his head roll to the side as he continues to fight for air. I think I hear Leah say something behind me. I'm sure she wishes I hadn't been so reckless. I'm going to have to kill him now.

But then...I was going to do that anyway.

"Fuck," I mutter and take a few steps back, fingering the gun I have obscured in the back of my waistband.

"Jonathan, come on," Leah says, taking a step closer. They used to be pretty close before he stabbed us all in the back. Maybe she thinks she can talk some sense into him. I know she can't, but I'll let her try. "There's no reason for you to sign your death warrant. We can get you medical attention quickly enough. All your suffering can be over if you just tell Hunter what you did with the money. You know you shouldn't have taken it, to begin with. Is that why you never spent any of it?"

"How do you know I didn't spend all of it?" he asks, a maniacal chuckle coming out through his hoarse voice.

"It's no use, Leah," I tell her. "He's ready to die."

"Jonathan," she implores him, bending down to get closer to his face. "Come on!"

Despite the fact that I've cracked his throat, he somehow manages to gather enough saliva together to spit in her face. She is shocked as a glob of bloody mucus lands on her cheek.

"You son of a bitch!" I shout, pulling her aside as Omar hands her a tissue he's plucked from somewhere.

I deck Jonathan so hard in the same spot where I broke his cheekbone earlier that his head smacks back into the wall behind him. “You want to spit in the face of the one person who still thinks your soul deserves redemption? You fucking piece of shit.”

His eyes roll back a bit, and I think he might pass out again, but he’s still attempting to smile with his bloody, cracked lips, half of his teeth broken now.

“Fine, I’ll tell you where the money is,” he says, his head meandering worse than a drunk driver as he tries to turn to face me. “I shoved it up her fucking cunt!” Again, he manages to laugh hysterically, and I am done. I don’t even see the point in trying to get information out of the asshole anymore. He’s made it clear he doesn’t want to tell me, and I’m done playing his fucking games.

I pull my gun from my waistband and stretch my hand out, waiting for someone to oblige me. It’s Caleb who drops a silencer into my palm. I can still hear the pulse of the music turned up to disguise the sound of what I’m about to do, but I don’t want to take unnecessary chances.

It would be for the best if no one outside of the people standing in this room and the few others who are aware of what truly goes on in Club Limelight ever know what happened to Jonathan Williams.

Making sure his head is in front of a red splash on the wall for easier clean-up, I lift the gun and take aim. He has one more chance to speak up, but instead, he chooses to tell me to fuck myself.

I pull the trigger, and his head jerks back as red and gray splatter all over the wall. Jonathan jerks a bit, then he goes still, his head falling over onto his shoulder.

He’s right. I might never find the money, but at least I won’t have to wonder where he is anymore. He’ll be in a shallow grave in less than an hour.

# CHAPTER 4



MEGHAN

Allie's words are not quite registering in my mind as I try to comprehend what has just happened. "That was—who?" I ask, still stunned not only by the extremely sexy man I've just had a spirited encounter with but more so by the fact that I think she just said that he was my boss, Hunter Stone.

"Yeah, that's Mr. Stone, Hunter," she says. "Boss, The Fixer, uh...the Big Guy."

"You can keep calling him all those nicknames if you want to, but it won't change the fact that I just spilled whiskey all over my boss!" I say, turning to face her as I run a hand through my hair. "Holy fuck!" I shout.

"Don't worry about it," Allie insists. "He'll be fine in a bit. That's just how he is. Everything about Hunter is...intense." She makes a face like she's either remembering something that took place in a bedroom or wishes she had such a memory. "Just let it go."

"I have to go apologize to him!" I declare. Thoughts of what will happen if he fires me or makes it miserable for me to work here come to mind. I was just starting to like it here. I've even made some friends. I can't risk losing this over my own smart-mouthed comments.

"Oh, no, honey," she says, grabbing hold of my arm. "Not right now. He's really busy back there, and he will not like it if you interrupt him." The look on her face makes me think he must be doing something in the private part of the club, and putting two and two together, I wonder if she means he's entertaining a woman—or two.

My mind wraps around what that would look like—that unbelievably sexy man with the dark hair and piercing blue eyes completely naked as a woman or two make him moan, his muscles tightening, his teeth gripping his bottom lip...

Shaking my head, I snap out of it. Well, I figure they can't possibly have gotten started yet, right? He just left here. "I'll



be quick.”

“No!” she says, a stern look on her face. “Don’t do it! Promise me!”

My mouth falls open, and then I shut it again. She seems pretty serious about this.

“Fine,” I say. “I won’t.” She eyes me again for a second but then lets me go and disappears into the crowd, swallowed up by the twirling blonde who has become the bane of my existence, as well as a few other people who are dancing right here.

I take a deep breath as my eyes go to the hallway where the private rooms are. Hunter just went down the hallway a minute ago. He can’t possibly be getting it on, or whatever, just yet, right? And if Allie meant he had actual business to attend to, well then, I could interrupt that for a quick apology, couldn’t I?

I see one of the other waitresses coming back from that direction with a full tray full of drinks in her hands, and she seems irritated. I rush over to her, hoping we can help each other out. I can’t remember her name, so I don’t try to guess it as I stop in front of her, making her pull up short so she doesn’t splash the six glasses of what look like Guinness all over me.

“You need a hand?” I ask her.

“Oh, uh, no, it’s okay,” she stammers. “It’s just the guys in room six said they wanted these, and then they changed their mind, so now I’ve gotta go all the way back up there to the bar, and I have no idea what to do with these.”

“Huh. Well, there’s a table over there that’s been ordering them all night. I’ll just take them over there. I bet they’ll drink them.” I hook my thumb over my shoulder, gesturing at a nonexistent table I just made up for my own purposes.

“Do you mind?” she asks, scrunching her face up like she hates to bother me.

“Not at all!” I hastily take the tray from her as she thanks me for my help. It’s clear she doesn’t know my name either, and I

don't tell her because there's a good chance this is about to backfire on me, and I don't want there to be a trail of evidence. My whole purpose in doing this is to not get fired, after all.

But I've got to try. The only way I can gain access to the back hallway is if there seems like a legitimate reason why I would be there, and hunting down Hunter...my boss...doesn't seem like a legitimate reason.

Once I have the tray secured, I take off at a pretty good clip, hoping I can figure out what room he went into somehow. I know it's not six, at least I think it's not, since that waitress just came from there. I suppose Hunter could be meeting with those guys, but I doubt it. When I walk past six, it's really loud, and it sounds more like a group of guys watching a football game than anything else.

But I have no idea what goes on back here. I caught Carter's mention of the package being delivered earlier, but I don't think that meant there's a shipping department in the back.

I walk past the doors slowly, listening to each of them. I don't know why I've gotten it in my head that Hunter's back here meeting up with some chick—or a fleet of them—but I can't help but continue to let images of his muscular body bare of even a scrap of clothing, writhing on a couch on top of a woman while another woman strokes him from the floor, fill my mind.

“Get your head out of the gutter, Meghan,” I tell myself. I should definitely save my lewd thoughts about my boss for when I'm home, not while I'm still at work.

I get to a door a little bit farther down the hallway, and it seems fairly silent except for the murmur of voices and some heavy breathing. Then I hear a strange sound I can't quite put my finger on, but it sounds vaguely familiar, like something I might've heard in a movie. Was that a...silenced gunshot?

No, it couldn't be. I know Mr. Stone has a reputation for being a hard ass. But he's not a murderer.

Is he?

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I push the door open. What I see takes my breath away, and the tray of drinks I've been so careful with tumbles from my grasp, pitching forward as every glass of Guinness falls to the ground in slow motion and shatters.

I can't think about that at the moment, as my hands fly to cover my face and try to prevent the scream lodged in my throat from breaking free.

Before my eyes is the most gruesome sight I've ever seen in my entire life. A man, his face bloodied and broken, slumped in a chair, a splotch of red growing wider by the second on his forehead, and behind him splattered on the wall of the club...

Nothing but blood and brain... and is that... skull fragments?

The scream I am about to release is stifled when a hand is forced over my mouth, and I'm pulled tightly against a body. I never even saw anyone else in the room, except for me and the corpse, so I have no idea how he got to me so quickly.

"Don't scream."

The words are practically whispered against my cheek in a short, clipped manner that makes me not even want to breathe, let alone release the wail that's still fighting to part my lips.

I swallow it and the burn of bile back and catch a whiff of whiskey. Without even turning my head, I know exactly who has his arms around me, and my emotions jumble together. I'm terrified, outraged, mortified, and...nope, not even going to allow my mind to register how turned on I am by the solid wall I've found my body pressed up against for the second time tonight.

I take a few deep breaths around his hand as he turns to a woman I am just noticing for the first time and says something I don't understand. Perhaps my ears are clogged with my own unreleased scream, but the next thing I do hear is Hunter telling a couple of guys who may or may not have already been in the room before me to get the body the fuck out of there.

*Body.*

They hop to it, producing some sort of a rug from somewhere, and begin to wrap the man in it. I've never seen a dead body before, and like a car wreck, I can't seem to pull my eyes away from this one until he's covered with the rug, and the two men are moving him past me and out the door. It's only then that I try to pull away from Hunter and follow them, but he has a tight grip on me, and I wish I'd made my move before. I wish I'd driven my heel into his toes and made a break for it. But he is stronger than me, and it seems he's pretty determined to keep me in the room.

When the body is gone, Hunter locks the door, probably just to give him a few seconds on me should I try to make a break for it again, and loosens his grip on my arm, but only slightly. He no longer has his hand on my mouth, and he's about to regret that decision.

"What the actual fuck?" I blurt out, my eyes wide as I oscillate between looking at Hunter and the girl in the room.

"Calm down," Hunter hisses. "I guess no one has told you the truth about what goes on here at Club Limelight, huh?"

"The truth?" I ask him. My eyes go to the door again, but he steps between me and the only exit, and I sure as hell am not inching one step closer to the blood on the wall. "I thought this was a goddamn club, not a cover-up for a murder...place!" I sound stupid, but I don't care, and I see him biting back a vicious laugh. His face contorts as he fights to compose himself.

"It's not a murder place," he says, his voice so fucking calm it just makes me angry. But maybe that bodes well for me not being his next victim. My stomach rolls over. It hasn't even occurred to me what a murderer might do to a witness whose only worth is delivering shots and cocktails to drunken patrons. Was there a bullet in this room with my name on it, too? Hunter studies me with cold, calculating eyes. Perhaps he's wondering the same thing about bullets and the risk of letting me leave this room. "Tell me your name."

I don't want to tell him, but the brown-haired girl I've never met supplies it for him. "Meghan," she says, and my eyes dart

back to her.

“Meghan,” Hunter says, and I flinch slightly as my belly tightens at the sound of my name on his lips. But the smell of blood reminds me that I have got to fucking focus. “They call me The Fixer for a reason, doll. I fix things. In this instance, that asshole committed a lot of wrongs against a bunch of people, namely me, and I was... fixing it.”

“But—you killed him,” I remind him. “He was dead—as a fucking doornail!”

“He deserved what he got, sweetheart. Believe me, I gave him plenty of chances to spare himself,” he pauses and lets his dark stare slide to the gory wall. “But he chose the option that left him swimming with the fishes.”

I try to process everything he is telling me as he goes on about how he only kills bad guys, people who deserve it, and that he does everything within his power to keep from having to kill, but sometimes it happens, and it’s his job to solve problems for his clients, and then he says something about the gold keys, and I’m lost.

*He doesn’t see how screwed up this is. He’s justifying it. He thinks I should understand.*

I need to get out of here. I need to go to the police. Fuck working here. It’s bound to make me an accessory to a crime—or, worse, dead and rolled up in a rug. I shudder.

“Calm down, Meg,” he says in a tone that makes my body want to obey.

The other woman leaves the room, and now it’s just him and me, with my heart beating out of my chest.

“Time to go. I need to get the cleaners in here.”

My eyes go back to the stain on the wall, and I taste the bile rising up in the back of my throat. “How can you do that?” I ask, wishing I could just shut up and nod and get out of here, but my mouth has a way of betraying me. “How can you just blow some guy’s brains out? How can you just kill someone? I don’t get it!”

He shakes his head and says, “I don’t expect you to.”

“I mean, really, Hunter, what the fuck?” I ask, which makes that rich chuckle escape his perfect pink lips, but I don’t find him funny, and at the moment, I don’t think he’s cute. “No, really!” I shout. Cue the hysteria. It’s hard to draw a breath. I can feel my pulse in my fingertips. “What the actual fuck?”

# CHAPTER 5



## HUNTER

The last expression I should be wearing is a smirk, but I can't help it as I take Meghan in. She's standing before me, wearing a short black skirt, a green button-down that makes her eyes glow as it hugs every inch of her, and heels that could have done some damage had she chosen to introduce me to the spike on the back when she was trying to get away from me earlier.

We are all alone in the room, other than the lingering essence spilled from Jonathan's head onto the wall...and I need to get my mind out of the gutter. Rules are rules, and I need to stop checking her out or else I'm going to be tempted to break one of my most important ones—never get involved with employees. No matter how fucking hot they are.

"Listen, sweetie," I say, taking a step toward the waitress. She instinctively backs away from me, running into the wall, and the way she pulls her arms in close to her body makes me think she's not the kind of girl who likes to be called sweetie. She folds her arms beneath her chest and stares up at me, one eye slightly narrowed in defiance.

Sweetie is definitely not the right word for her. No, Meg is more of a firecracker than a glass of sweet tea. They're both nice on a hot summer night, but only one causes an explosion.

"You like the people you work with here, don't you, sweetie—Meg?" I ask, changing my tactics. We are all professionals here, after all, aren't we?

Her green eyes are wild again for a moment as she searches her brain for the proper response to my question, and I see a vague answer as she nods her head. I continue. "If I were you, I wouldn't think about going to tell anyone about any of this. I would just let it go, like the good girl I can see you clearly are. After all, you're part of the Club Limelight family now, and we take care of our own. That means we take care of you, and you take care of us. Got it?" I give her a pointed look and also turn on my best smolder because it never hurts to be



irresistible, and watch her go over her options in her mind. I don't know if she's been working here long enough for the loyalty card to work, but that's all I've got right now.

That and the smolder...

"But...why did you—" she begins, and I know we're about to play another round of twenty questions.

*Boring.*

She's a cute girl. Actually, that's not even the right word for her. Her large green eyes and auburn hair make her light skin look creamy and smooth, and for a moment, I contemplate what it would feel like to run my thumb across her high cheekbone, but I don't because we're at work, and I don't date employees.

Well, that and I'm pretty sure there's blood on my hands.

The woman has a figure, too. I'd noticed her perfect, perky breasts before when she'd doused me with whiskey, and now, I can't help but linger on her narrow waist and shapely legs. I shake my head to clear it. Then, I proceed to remind her of the one thing she needs to keep in the front and center of her mind. "You don't want to know the details of what went down here, or why, Meg," I say in a serious tone as I take a step away from her, trying to keep the situation as professional as possible, which isn't easy considering the topic at hand. What happened with Jonathan was personal.

I continue, "Just trust me, he deserved it. He made his choice. We're all better off this way. Sometimes, I might have to do things I don't want to do. I might have to do things that, if you hear about, you might not approve of. But just remember, the world is a better place because of what goes down at Club Limelight, okay? We're the good guys."

She looks at me like I just tried to convince her the moon is made of frozen yogurt, but she's nodding, and that's all that matters at the moment. Perhaps I've finally swayed her into trusting the fact that she needs to keep her mouth shut about all of this.

Then she asks, “Who do you think you are? Fucking... Superman?”

The way she asks, in a cynical, sarcastic tone makes me laugh. “Well, I don’t want to brag,” I say with a humble shrug.

She shakes her head, red locks dancing around her face. “Superman didn’t need a gun.”

I can’t help but contract my bicep. “Neither do I.”

She shakes her head, and it looks like she wants to say something mouthy again, which I love, but then her eyes go back to the spot across the room that’s lingering here like another entity.

I realize we’re standing in a room with brain matter on the wall, and I need to let my cleaners get in here and straighten this place up before the blood starts to sink in and can’t be removed from the paint or out of the carpets and furniture.

“Why don’t you head back to your shift?” I ask. “Or better yet, take the rest of the night off.” I flash her a winning smile, letting her know I really am a good guy.

“My shift is already over,” she says, and then her eyes fall on the broken glass, and she mutters, “Shit.”

“We’ll take care of it.” My eyes flick to the wall across the room for a minute before I add, “All of it.”

She is looking at the blood again, too, and that’s the last thing I want, so I take her by the arm gently, and move her out into the hallway, keeping my hand on her in a casual manner as we head back toward the club. I see the cleaners coming, and one of them mouths “Nine?” to me, and I nod to let him know that’s the room number in question. It usually is. No reason to spread these things around if it can be helped.

Meghan walks alongside me, but I can tell she’s still in a daze. Part of me feels bad for her, but I’ve got a lot to do to take care of this situation, and I don’t have a lot of time to be sympathetic to her. Still, I want to make sure she’s safe. We look out for our own here. “You need a ride home?” I ask, thinking she might not be all right to drive.

She shakes her head, snapping out of it a bit. “No, it’s okay. I can drive. It’s not far.”

Meghan seems to be a bit calmer now that we’re out of the room. She’s a smart girl. I can tell just from talking to her, and while I’d like to appreciate her for both her body and mind, since I don’t date people who work for me, I’ll have to appreciate her for her brain instead of those curves.

“And do you work tomorrow?” I ask. “Because if you need to take another day off, that’s cool. Just give me a call.”

“I’m fine.” Her tone conveys to me that she’s not fine—she still sounds like she saw a ghost and is trying to rationalize it all in her mind, but I’m not going to be able to convince her that she didn’t see what she saw, so I’m going to have to make sure she’s not going to tell anyone about it.

I see Ethan, the club’s primary bouncer, standing at the end of the hallway, and I can tell by his expression he’s waiting on me. It’s also the only reason why he’d be away from his post.

“Well, if you change your mind, give me a call,” I say, flashing Meghan my winning smile again. All this nice guy shit is making my cheeks hurt. I haven’t smiled this much in ages. “I’m free to take your call any time of day or night.”

“Okay,” she says, her voice still more than a little vacant. I wish we could go back to the playful banter from before, but now is not the time, and I can tell by her face she is on the edge of flipping out. I need some backup for this. I have other things to do, and this exchange is becoming too personal for me all of a sudden.

“Ethan,” I say, stopping in front of the muscular man, “everything okay?”

He shakes his head. “Got a client at the front with a gold key, boss,” he says. Then, his eyes shift to Meghan. He knows what I’ve been up to, and I can tell by the questioning expression on his face he wants to know if she is aware, too.

“Who is it?” I ask, referencing the client.

He replies, “It’s a celeb. Important client—standing in the entryway, near the front door. Anything I can help you with?”

Ethan is fiercely loyal and one of my best friends. He'd do just about anything to maintain the integrity of Club Limelight, and I respect that. He's just the backup I need in this situation.

"Yes, actually, there is something you can do," I say, my hand still on Meghan's shoulder. I need to stop touching her, but I can't not touch her... "Meghan here has had a little bit of an... unpleasant experience. Thankfully, her shift is over. We need to make sure she gets home safely. Walk her out for me."

"Absolutely," Ethan says, lunging a bit at the waitress, who shrinks back a little.

I shake my head slightly and pull him aside. "She's scared," I whisper and pat him on the back. "And dangerous after what she saw. She could be a whistleblower. I don't want a girl like her to be collateral. Be nice."

"Boss!" he says, holding his hands out in front of him. "When have I ever—"

I cut him off with a sharp look, and he laughs. "I've got it," he says, but as I step out onto the club floor, pretending to look for the celebrity in question, I'm listening in to the conversation behind me.

"So," Ethan says, his voice a low rumble, "you saw something you're wishing you hadn't seen, huh?"

"I guess you could say that." Meghan has a little more life in her voice now that I've walked away from her, and I have to wonder if maybe I intimidate her more because I'm her boss, even though I'm not quite as burly as the bouncer I've left her with. I do tend to come across as menacing, even when I'm not trying to. And then there was the drink incident... and when she walked in right after I murdered someone...

I see the celeb, but I'm not in any hurry to rush off until I'm sure Ethan has this situation handled. Ordinarily, I'd just leave him to it, but Meghan isn't like all of the other girls who work here, and I want to make sure she's okay.

"You do remember signing an NDA, right?" I hear Ethan ask her. "A nondisclosure agreement?"

"Uh...yeah, I guess so," Meghan says.

“Cool.” Ethan infuses his voice with fake joy. “So you understand you can’t just run off to the police or the press now, don’t you?” Before Meghan responds, he says, “And I guess you know how Mr. Stone handles traitors?”

I turn around to check her reaction when Ethan breaks out into that goofy laugh of his, and I see that Meghan is smiling slightly, despite herself. He fake punches her lightly in the arm and says, “I’m just messing with you. But seriously...we’re cool, right?”

“Cool,” she says, and I take a few more steps into the club to watch from amidst the dancers as Ethan leads Meghan away. When he gets to the bar, he turns and winks at me, and I know she’s not going to say anything.

I take a deep breath, trying to pull my eyes away from her. She’s a beauty, that’s for damn sure. But she also seems like she could easily be trouble for me, in more ways than one. Not only did she find out about something she shouldn’t have any knowledge of, way before most of the waitresses who work here are made privy to such information, but thinking about that smokin’ body is going to keep me up tonight.

And I can’t date her.

I don’t date people who work for me...no matter how fucking hot they are.

With another inhale that smells like whiskey and blood, I head across the dance floor toward the waiting celebrity, hoping that whatever the fuck their problem is, it doesn’t involve blowing anyone’s head off. It’s not that I mind killing when it’s necessary, but it gets messy, and I’ve had enough mess for one night.

As I step through the dancers, I can’t help but think about Jonathan. It wasn’t all that long ago that he would’ve been one of the guys helping me fix this problem. Now, somewhere in the night, my guys are dumping his body in the darkness, putting him someplace where he’ll never surface again.

I push the remorsefulness aside and remind myself it’s just business. It doesn’t matter that the guy used to be my best

friend. He stabbed me in the back and stole from me, and now...well, in the end, we always get what we deserve.

# CHAPTER 6



MEGHAN

*R*eturning to work the next day after what I witnessed in the private part of the club is more than a little intimidating. Dressed in a short red skirt and a black top tied up at the bottom to reveal most of my bra, I stand outside in the parking lot for a solid five minutes, contemplating how I even got here.

Last night was a bit of a blur. After Ethan warned me about talking and escorted me out, I went back to my shitty apartment and took some medicine to help my pounding head. It had also put me to sleep, thank God. I hadn't even realized how much of a headache I'd developed until I got home.

But after a solid eight hours of sleep, I'd had plenty of time to think about it. Did I really want to walk back in there? Did I want to see those people, knowing what went on behind closed doors? Or would it be better to just get back in my car and keep driving?

*Drive where, though?* I ask myself as I hear the beat thumping through the wall. I'm standing in the back of the building, near where the employees park, and not a lot of people are around, only a few people walking along the sidewalk in the distance. No one is watching me contemplate everything I know about life. I could run away, and the people of Club Limelight would probably forget I exist in a week or two.

I have no place to go, though. I can't go back to Ohio and fucking Mitch the perv. That's for damn sure. And what if Hunter Stone believes that because I never showed up for work again, that I'm a narc? The last thing I need is for him to hunt me down. I picture that dead guy in my head, and a shiver goes down my spine.

If I walk in there, I'm essentially saying I am cool with all of this. I'm cool with what I saw, what Hunter explained to me, what Ethan had to say—all of it. Is that who I am?



I'm not sure, but I know I don't have anyone else to be right now.

With a deep breath, I push through the door and take a quick glance around, expecting to see Hunter standing there, ready to interrogate me about who I may have spoken to, or Ethan preparing to remind me of what happens to traitors.

Instead, I see Carter with a big grin on his face as he's tying an apron around his waist. "Hey, there she is! How's it going, Meghan? Did you get some sleep? That color looks great on you."

I glance down, having sort of forgotten what I am even wearing. "Oh, hey," I say, still cautious. "Yeah, I got some sleep. Thanks."

"Cool." He takes a few steps toward the hall that leads out to the dance floor. "I hear it's a bit wild tonight, so it'll be steady—but better for tips." He winks at me and spins around to walk away, leaving me contemplating everything.

"Hey, girl!" Allie seems to come out of nowhere, along with Lexi and Sadie. "How are you?" She gives me a hug like she hasn't seen me in a while. "Are you ready to make some more money?"

"Hi," I say, already feeling a bit better. "Yeah, I think so."

"All right!" Sadie lifts her hand, and I instinctively give her a high-five. "Nice skirt, by the way. Your legs look sexy as hell. You're gonna clean up tonight."

"Uh...thanks." I want to say something to tell her I think she looks nice in her black leather skirt, too, but I'm still hesitant, and now she's headed out to the floor, too.

"Don't forget to clock in!" Lexi says with a sweet smile, and then she's gone.

Allie arches her eyebrows at me. "You okay?"

"I'm okay," I say, but the words come out slowly. "I'm just... I'm fine." I see no reason to go over what happened last night with her. "The incident" is over now—I may as well just see how things go.

“I’ll shadow you for a bit, but I really don’t think you need me that much longer, do you?” Allie asks as I walk over to clock in and put my purse in a locker. I’ll take my tip bag with me.

“No,” I tell her as I punch in my numbers. “I think I’ll be all right.”

As we walk out to the dance floor, I have to wonder why I suddenly think I’ll be all right. I saw a dead body, a guy murdered by my boss, something he openly admitted to doing, and then I was told if I was loyal, I wouldn’t say anything to anyone.

And now...here I am...being loyal. But why?

It has nothing to do with how hot Hunter Stone is, that’s for damn sure! But then...everyone here is so nice. I would really hate to see anyone else get in trouble. I don’t even know if Allie, Lexi, Sadie, or Carter really know what happens here.

I decide to just do my job. Putting my head down, I move quickly from one table to the next, getting orders, bringing drinks, flirting enough to get some tips. I lose myself in the music, the dancing, and the laughter, and whenever I think I feel eyes on the back of my head, I refuse to look around.

What good could come of it anyway?

I also avoid looking at the hallway that leads to the private rooms. I have no reason to be down there. I don’t serve the people who occupy them. So I may as well focus on what I can do.

After a couple of hours, Allie goes off on her own, wishing me luck and telling me that I can holler at her if I need anything. I go back to the bar for a refill for a table of basketball players and notice that Carter is talking to that woman I saw in the private room the night before.

The conversation seems hurried, and then she pats his arm and heads back down the hall to where we punch in and store our things. I’ve seen some other rooms down a hall there and think they might be offices. Carter makes more drinks, but I can’t help but wonder who she is and what she does here. I’d never seen her before last night.

A pang of jealousy hits me in the gut as I wonder if maybe she's Hunter's girlfriend. That would make sense, right? She was back there with him. They seemed close. And she clearly has some sort of important job here, or at least it looked like it when she was talking to Carter.

I decide not to ask him, though, as I give him my order and wait. He arches an eyebrow at me. "Are you all right, Meghan?" he asks. "You look like you've got a lot on your mind."

I manage a grin. "Just trying to remember which table ordered what drinks," I tell him, and he nods, but I wonder if he can see right through me.

The night ends in a whirlwind, as predicted by the bartender when I came in, and by the time I reach my apartment, I'm ready to fall into my bed. But at least I didn't see anyone with their cranium inside out tonight.

Over the next few days, I continue to go to work and do my job, joking around with the other waitresses and the rest of the staff. Ethan even gives me a friendly nod from across the room a time or two, and I have to wonder if he's already decided I'm trustworthy.

I like being trustworthy...

I like my job. I'm not sure why I decided to stay, but by the end of the week, I think I've made the right decision. I've made a lot of money, I'm starting to make some real friends, and I haven't seen anything else creepy.

I have seen that woman a few more times, though, and as I start to pack up for home a few nights after "the incident," I see her again. As I pull my bag out of the locker where I stashed it earlier, she comes down the hallway, a serious look on her face as she says something in a hushed tone to a man I have only seen around a time or two but can't remember where.

Was he one of the guys with the rug? Maybe...

"Have a good night, Meghan," she says, smiling at me and giving me a little wave.

I lift my hand and wave back at her. “You, too!” I call, even though I don’t know her name. Even the guy waves at me and smiles.

That’s when it hits me. I fucking love my job. I love the atmosphere here, I love the money, but most of all, I love the people. These guys are becoming my family, and even if I haven’t met all of them yet, it’s worth keeping my mouth shut to protect this place. Because Club Limelight isn’t just a place to work—it’s a place to find one’s family.

Still grinning, I wave goodbye to the other waitresses and head out to my car. It’s a shitty Ford Focus I got off a used car lot right before I moved here, but it does the job for now. If I keep making tips like this, soon enough, I’ll be able to buy a new car.

Maybe I can even get something really nice. I dream of leather interiors and high-end speakers as I make my way to my equally shitty apartment. As I pull out of the parking lot, I see the Silver Towers and remember Allie telling me that Hunter owns them.

That’s one person I have not seen since the night of “the incident.” And even though he’s smoking hot and interesting in a way I can’t quite describe even to myself, I am glad he’s been absent during my shifts. I don’t know what I’d say to him even if I did see him again. “Hey, how’s it going? Murder anyone today?”

I’m chuckling at my own demented joke as I walk up to my apartment, keys in hand. It’s a crappy ass apartment, but I’m not in a bad part of town. Still, I need to be careful. This is the city.

With a long sigh, I push the key in, shove the door open, and then stop dead in my tracks, my eyes doubling in size as I take in the sight in front of me.

At first, I’m petrified, afraid that my apartment has been broken into by some kind of a serial killer and I’m about to end up like the guy in the rug, but then I realize the large, sweaty man on the floor looking over his shoulder at me isn’t some stranger who had to break the door to get inside.

He just used the key.

“Mr. Koobak?” I ask, stepping into the living room as he hauls his ass up off of the floor. “What are you doing in here?”

The landlord has one of the floorboards pulled up, and it’s clear he’s been looking around down there. Once he’s up, he comes at me, and I can smell the sweat pouring out of his hairy pits, visible from his oversized wife-beater.

“Now, you listen here, you little whore, I can come into your goddamn apartment anytime I want to!” He grabs me by both arms and shakes me. “You gotta be an escort to be making that kind of cash!”

I pull away from him, pissed at the accusation. “You better not have touched a fucking penny of my money!” I shout at him.

Terrified to stay there, I run back out the door, not sure where I think I’m going, but I can’t stay there, not with this crazy man standing in my apartment making accusations against me.

Jumping in my car, I head to the only place where I know I’ll feel safe. I head home.

To Club Limelight.

# CHAPTER 7



## HUNTER

*I made it through another night.*

Standing at the bar, watching Carter make drinks as Leah and I discuss business, I'm having trouble concentrating because all I can think about is how another night is over, and I've gotten through it without approaching Meghan. I'm so fucking proud of myself, I'm considering fixing myself a drink. But I never take a sip of alcohol while I'm on the clock, and technically, I've got a couple more hours before we shut down and I can officially say I'm off.

Leah is talking about day-to-day financials for the club, something she does a great job of handling for me, along with legal shit, and I am nodding, pretending to listen to her, but my mind is elsewhere. I've got a lot going on. Besides Jonathan's demise and the sale of Silver Towers. I've had a few clients come in with gold keys recently, and we've been dealing with that.

It's a lot, but they don't call me The Fixer because my job is easy.

As Leah is speaking, I catch a glimpse of auburn hair through the window in the door behind her, and a wave of confusion washes over me. I think that has to be Meghan. In fact, there seems to be something deep inside of my body that immediately lights on fire just because she's nearby, but I have no idea why she'd be here.

"Carter," I say, interrupting Leah. She glares at me, but she doesn't call me on being a jerk. I'll apologize later. "Isn't Meghan's shift over?" I ask.

"Yeah, about an hour ago. Why?" he asks, topping off a fruity-looking pink drink with a cherry before he puts it on a tray.

"I swear she just walked in," I tell him, and excusing myself from Leah, I head down the hall and through the door to the back.

Allie and some of the other girls had stuck around to chat like they sometimes do, and I walk into the locker area to see Allie hugging Meghan as she cries. Allie's stroking her hair and whispering something to her, but it seems clear to me that something awful has happened, and my gut instinct is to run to Meghan and protect her, to fix anything that's wrong. After all, it's my job to fix things, and I see someone I care about, to some degree, anyway, obviously in a lot of pain.

"Meg?" I say as I approach, trying to keep from charging across the room and pulling her against my chest. "What happened?"

She looks up, her beautiful face lined with streaks from tears, her green eyes puffy and raw. "Oh, hi, Mr. Stone," she says, sniffing. I can tell she's surprised to see me and maybe a bit embarrassed. "It's nothing." She waves her hand at me like she doesn't want to talk.

"Clearly, it's something," I insist. I rest my hand on her shoulder gently and ask, "Did someone hurt you?"

She shakes her head and tries to come up with an answer that I will believe without telling me the truth, but as she peers into my eyes, I realize that she wants to tell me what happened. I give her a reassuring smile and tell her she's okay now.

"It's just...uh...I went home, and when I opened my apartment door..." She's sniffing, and Allie steps away to grab her a tissue from next to the sink in the lounge. Meg thanks her and dabs at her eyes. "When I went inside my apartment, my landlord, Mr. Koobak, was in my apartment. It scared the shit out of me." She laughs a little, and I increase the wattage on my grin that's meant to make her feel better, but inside, I am already mobilizing to kick this fucker's ass.

"What happened?" I ask. "Why was he in your home?"

She swallows hard. "I'm not sure. He was on the ground, digging around under a floorboard. He started calling me a whore...accused me of being an escort. I didn't even stop to see if he took any of my money." She wipes at her eyes again before saying, "I have about a grand in there I haven't gotten a



chance to take to the bank yet. Anyway, I just turned around and ran, and...I didn't have anywhere else to go."

I want to say comforting words to her, but all I can do is pull her gently to my chest and wrap my arms around her. "You're safe now," I tell her, not letting the smell of vanilla and roses cloud my thinking. She's worked an entire shift and still smells delicious.

Hearing Leah behind me, I let up a bit, but I am ready to let my monster out. I need more information. Leah says, "You did the right thing, Meghan."

Letting Meghan go, I drag a hand through my hair, telling myself I shouldn't overreact. Who knows what the fuck that bastard was doing in her apartment, but it probably isn't worthy of me introducing him to the business end of my Glock.

And that's when I see the bruises.

"Meghan," I say loud enough to make her jump, which I instantly regret, but I don't stop to apologize. "Your arms!" I look at both of them, and sure enough, both of her biceps have bruises. I can easily see that they are in the shape of fat, meaty fingers.

"He grabbed me," she says. "Shook me a few times before I could get away."

"Jesus Christ," I mumble. That's it—this guy is about to wish he'd never even rented Meghan a room, let alone broken into it.

Turning to Leah, I say, "Why don't you and Allie take Meg to the lounge, get her a drink, maybe a bite to eat, and I'm gonna go...talk to...the guys." I try to make my face seem relaxed so Meghan won't be worried about what I'm going to do, but Leah is on it.

"Yep, I think that's a great idea. We should totally find something to eat—preferably something smothered in melted cheese!" Leah and Allie walk on either side of her as they head into the adjoining lounge.

As the girls get comfy in the plush orange and gray furniture in the employee's space, I head to my office to get her address from Meg's application. I pull it from a filing cabinet and am not at all surprised to see what it says.

"Green Terrace Apartments," I read, noting the apartment number as well. That's a shitty place over by Silver Towers that I've considered buying in the past. It could be a trendy new complex with a few million dollars' worth of upgrades, but since I owned Silver Towers, I didn't see the point in snatching it up.

Until now.

Pulling my cell from my pocket, I dial the number of my accountant. I know it's the middle of the night, but Peter will always answer for me.

He picks up on the third ring. "Mr. Stone?" I can hear the sleep in his voice.

"Hey, sorry to wake you," I say. "I just wanted to let you know I'm about to acquire an apartment complex."

My statement is met with a long pause, and I think perhaps he's fallen back to sleep before he asks, "Do I even want to know how much?"

I can't help but chuckle, but when I picture Meg's beautiful face streaked with tears, all I can say is, "As much as it takes."

"All right," Peter says on a sigh. "As long as you use the business account, there shouldn't be any problem, but I'll move some money around if required."

"That's what I needed to hear." I hang up without saying goodbye and hope he can remember this conversation in the morning. I'm sure he will.

My next call is to Brandon. "Grab Caleb and bring the truck around back. We've got some work to do."

"Yes, boss." He doesn't question me or complain that we're going out in the middle of the night. He's a professional. Just like me.

Before I leave, I go over to my desk and grab an extra gun out of my drawer and put it inside my jacket pocket. I already have one in my waistband, as I always do, but I want to make sure I'm prepared for this dirtbag.

Mr. Koobak.

Within a half hour, I am banging on the door of the apartment occupied by one Marvin Koobak, landlord, and as it turns out, the owner of Green Terrace Apartments.

How lucky for me.

Fortunately, I happen to have a copy of all of the paperwork one requires in order to purchase said apartment complex in the middle of the night. It might seem astonishing to some people, but there's a reason I have the reputation I do for getting things done.

I hear a low rumble and a few curse words as Koobak drags himself to the door. When he unlocks the many locks and yanks it open, he shouts, "What the fuck do you want? Do you even live here? Don't you know I don't see renters in the middle of the ni—"

Before he can get the last word out of his jowls, I grab him by the neck and force him backward into the entryway and up against the wall. Brandon and Caleb step in quickly, getting the door closed.

I put enough pressure on his throat that he's not going to be able to yell, and in this apartment complex, something tells me a lot of shouts for help go unanswered.

He's wearing a pair of boxers and a wife-beater that looks like he's had it on for five straight days. The stench of body odor so pungent I swear I've stepped into the bottom of a gym bag full of jockstraps hits me, and it's all I can do to keep from gagging.

This is the asshole who dared to put his hands on Meg?

"I'm here to buy this shithole of an apartment complex from you," I say, putting some pressure on his throat so that he's wheezing with each intake of air.

He tries to shake his head no, so I release a bit of pressure. He manages to croak out, "It's not for sale."

"Oh, I think it is," I tell him. "I think the moment you put your goddamn hands on Meghan Taylor what's yours became mine!" I give him another hard jab, and he cries out.

"She's...an escort," he says, as if that justifies it. "She's used to being roughed up."

I can't help but raise my knee and jam it right into his tiny cock. "She's a waitress, you fucking prick!" I shout as he grimaces in pain and uses his hands to cover what's left of his manhood. "And you had no business snooping around her apartment!"

"I didn't take nothing!" he squeaks out.

I don't know whether I believe him or not, but that doesn't matter at the moment. "Tell you what, Marv. You cooperate, and I'll let you live. You keep being a dick, and we'll acquire your apartment complex a different way."

"Okay, okay!" he says, raising his hands up into the air. "I'll sell it to you. If the price is right."

"Brandon." All I do is say his name, and my man produces a bag of cash that makes Koobak's eyes glow with greed. He doesn't need to know that the contract says two million dollars, and that's not what's in the bag.

Quickly, the slimeball agrees and signs the paperwork, chuckling under his breath the whole time, like he's gotten himself a deal. When all of the paperwork is signed, I take it from him and hand it to Brandon. Koobak reaches for the bag of money, but I put up a hand to stop him.

"What were you looking for in Meg's apartment?" I ask.

Koobak's eyes shift uneasily, and then he begins to stammer. "Oh, uh...roaches," he says.

"Bullshit," I tell him.

"Listen," he says with a shrug. "What does it matter? She's just a dirty little bitch from Ohio."

Rage overcomes me, and the hatred I've been trying to keep in check since the moment I saw Meg crying boils over. Before I even think twice, I pull my gun and send a single bullet through his forehead.

He crumples to the floor, and even though my decision was hasty, I don't regret it.

"Get him taken care of," I direct. Caleb and Brandon hop to it as I take care of the money and the paperwork. Other people might leave a trail the police could follow in such a circumstance, but I know that we can cover this up easily enough, and no one will ever even know I was here.

And the apartments will still be mine.

Less than an hour after Meg walked into the club crying, I'm back in the lounge, watching from a distance to see her laughing with Leah and Allie, a few remaining slices of pepperoni pizza on the table in front of them.

I can't help but smile. Seeing her happy makes my heart sing in a way I can't remember experiencing before.

She catches my eye from across the room, and I can see a thousand questions lingering there. I know she has tomorrow off, and I'm glad. Even though I won't get to see her, at least she will get some well-earned rest.

"Meg," I say, "you ready to head home?"

"H-home?"

I nod. "I'll drive you. Don't worry. You don't have to worry about...anything...anymore."

With reassuring smiles from her friends, she gets up and walks to me, and I feel my body respond to her. But she still works for me, and for now, I need to protect her and nothing more.

No matter how badly I want her.

# CHAPTER 8



MEGHAN

*M*y coffee is a little more bitter than I like it, but I'm almost out of creamer. I need to get to the store. It's my day off, and I have a lot I need to do. For now, I sit on my sofa, curled up with a blanket tossed across my legs, half staring out the window, half staring at the plank on the floor that still sticks up a little from when Mr. Koobak was messing around in my apartment. Thank God he didn't find my stash of money in the closet.

It's been a week, and I've spent much of that time at work, so I haven't had a lot of time to ponder it. Last weekend, I spent a great deal of my time off sleeping. I don't know if I was traumatized or just exhausted from a long week at work, but I needed to catch up on my sleep.

This weekend, which is actually Sunday and Monday for me since pretty much everyone has to work Saturday at Club Limelight, I plan on getting some things done. My apartment needs repairs, some of which I can't do myself, but I do know how to paint. A splash of color on the walls would definitely lift my spirits.

And now that I have a new landlord, perhaps I can get that leaky faucet fixed, and a dishwasher that doesn't sound like I'm washing a load of ball bearings every time I turn it on with its high-pitched whine and clunking noises.

Taking another sip of my coffee, I contemplate that new landlord of mine. Hunter Stone. He's so...weird. That's not the right word. I guess he's just unusual. A bit of color creeps into my face when I think about how concerned he'd been when he found out what had happened with Koobak, and then, when he'd brought me home...

I'd tried insisting that he didn't need to go to any more trouble, that I could handle driving home myself, but he'd been a gentleman and escorted me to his expensive black SUV. As I'd climbed in, I'd thought about how earlier that night I'd been

contemplating getting new wheels and how that machine would be perfect.

And then he'd climbed in behind the wheel, and the SUV wasn't the only bit of perfection I had in my life at the moment.

Hunter had driven me home, and when he went to hug me and tell me I would be just fine, he'd see to it, our faces had sort of...brushed against one another in such a way that his luscious lips were on mine for just a fraction of a second.

Even now, I can still feel their warmth, and I can't help but lift a hand to my mouth. A longing awakens deep within my core, and I have to fight it, something I'm beginning to get used to as all week these urges have washed over me as frequently as the tide coming in to dampen the shore.

A sigh escapes me as I think about what it would be like to really kiss him, to feel the pressure of his mouth against mine, to part my lips and taste him. I can only imagine my tongue dancing with his as hints of cinnamon and whiskey fill my senses.

If I think about kissing Hunter too long, I will think about doing other things with Hunter, and that's a dangerous game. He is my boss, after all, and while he was unbelievably kind to me last week when I needed someone, nothing has happened since then. At work, he's been cordial, checking on me, seeing if I needed anything else, but it's not like he was whisking me away to the bedroom I know is located off of his office. It's not like I turned around and caught him staring at me often.

That had only happened a time or two, and it was probably just as much a coincidence as it was that we'd accidentally brushed lips. Although I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the sparks every time my eyes landed on his pristine blue orbs, and a few times, when we'd physically touched in passing, my heart would lurch up into my throat.

I didn't act on any of it, though. What was I going to do? He's Hunter Stone. He has all of the money, all of the clout, and all of the women he could want, including celebrities, lining up



for him. But the fact that he was looking at me, and smiling, well...I did like the way it made me feel.

I liked the way *he* made me feel.

With a deep breath, I finish my coffee and decide I need to do something with my time. I hop up off of the couch and go take a shower, and when I come out, I'm ready to bring some happiness to my life in the form of paint. I haven't quite decided what color to go with, but I know it has to be cheerful.

I do realize that I can't just paint, though. I need permission from someone. This is still a rental unit even if I'm pretty sure my original landlord is dead. I'd heard some neighbors talking about him moving to Canada to be closer to his mom when I came into my apartment the other day, but I don't think that's true.

I'm pretty sure my new landlord killed my old landlord, but all Hunter would say about it was not to worry, I was safe, and when I asked where Mr. Koobak was, he said something about swimming with the fishes, and I don't think he meant Mr. Koobak is on an extended scuba diving expedition to the Great Barrier Reef.

Checking the time, I see that Club Limelight hasn't opened for the day yet, but I bet that Hunter is there. He is usually there, from what I can tell, unless he's off handling some other kind of business. And since I can't paint my apartment without the permission of my current landlord, I decide I should head into the club and see if he minds if I liven the place up. Maybe he can even help me decide between Blushing Bouquet and Ray of Sunshine.

Something tells me not to ask him how he feels about Deep Ocean Blue.

I am about to walk out of the apartment when my cell phone rings. Having no idea who could possibly be calling me, I pull the phone from my pocket and check the caller ID.

It's my mom. I swear under my breath. I don't want to talk to her. Honestly, I don't even want to think about her. My mom

and I were always close—until she married Mitch. Then everything changed.

The ringing stops, and I put the phone back in my pocket. Now I need a minute before I can drive anywhere. My thoughts mull over the memories I have of the happy times I shared with her before everything went downhill.

After my father died, Mom and I only had one another, so we latched on to that, and she was my everything. I thought I was her world, too. Then, when I was fifteen, she met Mitch, and not long after, they'd gotten married.

It wasn't like I didn't want my mom to be happy. I absolutely did. I wanted her to find someone who would love her the way that my father had. But Mitch wasn't that man. Mitch didn't really love her. He knew all of the right things to say to get her to do everything for him, and then, well, behind her back, he was checking out every other woman in the tri-state area.

Including me.

At first, it was just a glance here and there, but then his eyes began to linger, and just a few weeks before I moved out, there was an incident. That's when I had to tell her. But Mom didn't want to hear it. She didn't believe me.

She chose him over me.

That's when I'd decided I had to leave. I am a smart, capable, hardworking, determined young woman. I'd already spent too much of my time trying to save my mom from that man, trying to save her from her own bad decisions. Then it occurred to me, that I needed to save myself.

And that's what I am in the process of doing.

Now that my apartment is safe to live in, it's time to save these walls.

Over the sudden intrusion of my mother into my life and mind, I head out, keys in hand, ready to see the new landlord.

“Good morning, dear,” my elderly neighbor, Mrs. Woodside, says with a smile as she fumbles with her keys. “How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks,” I say with a cheerful smile. She has always been kind to me. “Do you need some help?”

Just as I ask the question, she manages to get the key in the lock and get it turned. “There we go,” she says as I hear her cat begin to meow, happy that she’s home. I hear that cat a lot, but it doesn’t bother me. It’s kind of nice having someone like her next door, someone who cares about other people so much. She even brought me cookies once.

I start to walk past her when she asks, “Did you hear about the new landlord, dearie?”

I pause and look at her for a moment. I don’t want to say too much, but she looks concerned, maybe even a little sad. “I’ve heard some rumors,” I tell her with a shrug. A lot of what I’ve heard around here has come from her talking to Mr. Banks out here in the hall. He lives across from her.

“Well, I’ve heard he’s going to tear all of this down and put in some high rise like Silver Towers.” She sighs and picks up her kitty, Mr. Whiskers, petting the orange cat on the head.

“Oh?” I don’t know what to say.

“Yes, well, there’s no way I can afford something like that on my income. I suppose I’ll have to start looking for another place.” She sighs and looks down at the floor, shaking her head.

“I wouldn’t worry about it just yet, Mrs. Woodside,” I say, keeping my tone upbeat. “From what I’ve heard, the new landlord is a good guy. I bet he’ll help you out.” I hope I’m not overstepping, but I bet Hunter won’t turn out an old woman on a fixed income. For that matter, if what she’s saying is true, I may have to do some negotiating for myself.

He wouldn’t turn *me* out, would he?

She smiles. “I hope you’re right, dear. You have a blessed day.”

“You, too,” I say and head on my way, thinking I need to speak to my new landlord on her behalf. Perhaps, if the conversation about paint colors goes well, I can mention it.

I drive over to Club Limelight and decide to knock on the front door, rather than going in the back. I can hear people inside, so I know that the crew is getting the place ready to open in a few hours.

The guy who opens the door is one I recognize from the room the night of “the incident,” but I don’t know his name. “Hey,” he says, like he’s seen me before but doesn’t know exactly who I am. I think he mostly works the dayshift.

“Hi! I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m looking for Hunter. Is he here?” I ask with a hopeful tone in my voice.

He stares me up and down, and for a minute, I think he might just slam the door in my face. But then he asks, “You work here, right?”

I nod. “That’s right. I’m a waitress.” I start to tell him my name, but he turns around quickly and beckons me in before shutting and locking the door behind us.

“Just a minute,” he says and heads back toward the bar, leaving me standing there, a bit lost. I see a few people, but I don’t know any of them.

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe I shouldn’t be here. For the first time in a while, Club Limelight doesn’t feel like home, and I’m seriously considering turning around and running right back out the way I came.

# CHAPTER 9



## HUNTER

The financials for the renovations I need to make to the new apartment complex I have acquired look solid. I go over them a couple of more times before putting a pin in them. I want to make sure that we can create an upscale complex, but it's also important to me not to drive out the current renters. I'll need to make sure that the current residents have access to affordable units while I expand to bring in new clientele who can afford higher rates.

This is something I always consider when I buy a new property, but in this case, I'm especially thinking of Meg. I know about how much she makes here a week, including her tips, and it's a lot. But she's new, and she might not have had much saved up. I don't want to put her out of a home while I'm trying to help her.

Just the thought of her has me closing my eyes and imagining her beautiful face. A tightening in my pants jars me back to reality. She's off limits, and my brain knows that, but my dick seems to keep forgetting. I'd managed to give her a wide berth this week, since I "accidentally" kissed her when I dropped her off last weekend, but every day, it gets harder and harder.

And I don't just mean the task of pretending like I'm not interested in her, as my twitching cock reminds me. With a sigh, I try to put myself back in work mode. I have a lot to do. That's nothing unusual; I always have a lot to do.

A knock on my open office door has my head turning away from my work once more. Omar is standing there, a slightly confused expression on his face. "What's up?" I ask, rubbing my hands together as my mind makes the transition from math to whatever his concern is.

"Boss, there's some girl here asking for you," he says. "I think I've seen her before. She looks familiar...but I don't know."

“Some girl?” I repeat. He nods, so I say, “Send her in.” Anyone who would come here this time of day asking for me must be someone I’m familiar with.

Omar gives me a head bob and then melts into the hallway. I try looking at the spreadsheet I have open again while I wait, but only a moment later, I hear a familiar voice as Meg breezes into the room.

“Can I paint?” She stops about two feet in front of the door, like she’s not sure she should be here, like something is bothering her.

Now it’s my turn to be confused. It seems like a strange question to just blurt out, and I am wondering why she hasn’t opened with a greeting or at least provided a lengthier explanation as to why she’s asking.

Deciding I need to get to the bottom of this strange attitude, I lean back in my chair and take her in. She looks hot, as always, in a pair of jean shorts and a black T-shirt that hugs her in all of the right places. But she’s holding her purse in front of her like she’s afraid she might be mugged at any moment, and I can tell that something’s bothering her.

So I go back and start over.

“Good morning, Meg,” I say with a slight smirk on my face. “How are you today?”

She clears her throat, clearly feeling a little embarrassed for just barging in and blurting out that question. “Good, thanks. How are you?”

My smile grows. She’s adorable and has no idea. “Fine, thank you.” Now that we have that out of the way, I go back to her question. “Can you paint...what?”

“My apartment,” she says as she takes a few steps closer to me. “I mean, I don’t have a landlord now. Well, I guess I do, but technically, that would be you, right? And my walls are just a boring plain white. It’s actually more of an eggshell. So I was hoping that you wouldn’t care so much if I livened it up a little bit with some color.”

She seems slightly more relaxed now, and I get why she's here asking that question now. I've been meaning to put a property manager in charge at her complex. It's on my very long list of things to do.

Without even thinking about all of the work that I need to get done before the club opens, I close my laptop and push back my chair. "Sure, you can paint," I tell her, standing and making sure I have my wallet and keys.

"Oh, are you leaving?" she asks, staring at me with those wide green eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt if you have a meeting or something."

I can't help but chuckle as I say, "Nope. I'm coming with you to get the paint."

Her eyebrows knit together as I come to a stop in front of her. "But...why? If you want to approve the colors before I paint, I can just text them to you."

Shaking my head, I tell her, "It's not that. You'll need a ride to the store."

Now her eyebrows raise as she says, "I have a car, you know."

A chuckle escapes my lips as I feel the heat rising between us. I have to take a step back to keep my head on straight. "That old death trap? I don't think so." I can see her getting into an accident, some idiot texting and driving hitting her from behind where the paint and other flammable liquids used for home remodeling are located, and her car bursting into flames, Meg unable to get her shitty car door to open.

She opens her mouth for a second, and I can see that she's about to insist that this isn't necessary when I have to interject.

"Do you not want me to come?" I ask, maybe putting a little too much of a rasp in my voice, especially on the last word.

She bites down on her bottom lip and stares up at me for a second before she says, "No, I want you to come," and my thoughts go to a very different place than the paint store.

"Boss?"



Omar is back, snapping me out of my dirty thoughts about Meg. “Yeah?” I say, my head turning in his direction like it’s on a pivot.

“We got the new lager selections in. Should we have a few bottles on hand for tonight?” he asks.

“That sounds like a good idea.” I both want to thank him for reminding me that the only time Meg is going to see me come is when I change locations, not in the bedroom—and I also want to break Omar in half for interrupting. It’s an awkward juxtaposition of feelings that leave me uncomfortable and annoyed.

Until he walks away, and I’m back with her. Alone. I want to reach out and take her hand, but she’s not my girlfriend, so that would be silly. “Let’s go,” I say and head for the door.

She comes along with me, and we don’t say anything at all as we cross the parking lot. I open the door of my black Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio, and she climbs in. Thoughts of what happened the last time we were alone together in this vehicle come to mind, but I brush them aside as I go around and get behind the wheel.

The scent of vanilla and roses hits my lungs as I start the car. I’ve been smelling traces of it all week when I’m in here, but now that the source is in the confined space with me, I can’t breathe deeply enough.

“This is such a nice car,” Meg says as I pull out of my designated parking spot and head to the closest Sherwin Williams.

“Thanks,” I say, not bothering to tell her this is more of a utility vehicle for me, that I have plenty of other, nicer cars in my garage, a place I rarely visit anymore, so this is what I usually drive.

“I’ve been thinking of getting a new car, just so you know,” she continues, jabbing me for insulting her vehicle earlier. “I just have to save up.”

I can’t help but smirk as I make a right turn, trying not to look at her. “Maybe you should consider a loan. It’d be a shame if

you got close to having enough money only to have that Gremlin of yours explode.”

“It’s not a Gremlin!” she insists, thinking I meant the kind of car and not the monster from the eighties movie. “And it won’t explode.”

I chuckle under my breath and pull into the paint store parking lot. “Do you know what color you’d like to paint?” I ask as we both get out.

“No, not yet,” she admits. I pull the door open for her and have to hide my smile as she breezes into the store. This is just such a normal, couple-y thing to do, and it’s been a while since I had a girlfriend I could do these sorts of things with. It makes me forget for a few minutes that I’m The Fixer and this lets me just be me. Hunter.

She walks confidently to the paint samples and scrutinizes them. I can’t help but watch her. She leans her chin on her hand, her mouth puckered to one side, and I can almost hear her having an inner monologue with herself as she puzzles over the various shades of pink and yellow.

“I like this one,” she finally says, reaching for a shade of pink that reminds me of the way her cheeks color when she’s a bit embarrassed. “But I’m afraid it might be too much to paint a living room pink. Don’t you think?”

I realize she’s asked me a question a beat too late but I manage, “I think...it’s your apartment, and you should paint it whatever color makes you happy.”

She grins at me. “Technically, it’s your apartment,” she says, moving over to the yellows. She pulls out a few samples and compares them.

“You can just pretend it’s yours for as long as you live there,” I tell her with a shrug.

She catches my eyes for a second but then looks away. “That’s nice of you.” She’s back to the paint samples when she says, “Some of the residents are a little worried you might make some changes that put them out of their budget on rent.”

“Oh?” I ask. “Why is that?”

“You know, people talk.” She is trying to sound nonchalant, but I think she’s really worried.

“I always make sure that the old residents can afford their rent in my new projects,” I assure her with a confident smile. “As long as I’m around, you’ll always have a home, Meg.” I can’t help the deeper meaning that seems to wedge its way into my words.

Her eyes stay fixed on mine for a long moment before that same shade of pink she was looking at earlier manifests in her cheeks, and she pulls her eyes away. I know she’s trying to figure out exactly what I meant by that statement, and she won’t be able to get to the end of it.

Because I don’t even know what I meant.

I’m sending her mixed signals because I am torn—I want to be with her so badly, but she’s an employee, and I can’t be.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “What about blue? Do you like blue?” And she bursts into a rich giggle I can’t explain, but before I know it, I’m laughing, too.

I guess I’m not the only enigma in the paint store that needs solving. Meg knows how to keep me guessing, and that’s just one of the things I love—*like*—about her.

# CHAPTER 10



MEGHAN

I wake up early on Monday morning, not because I've gotten enough rest and my body isn't tired, but because my mind is blazing away as usual, firing thoughts about everything from work, to that guy I saw Hunter shoot, to whether or not I have enough time to paint my entire apartment in one day.

Yawning, I stretch my arms up over my head and glance at the clock. It's not even 8:00 yet, but I haul myself out of bed. It would be nice if I could get at least a couple of rooms painted today. The apartment isn't that big, and neither are the rooms, but there's a lot to tape off, especially in the kitchen, and I'll need to move my furniture around. That would be the perfect job for a strong man with bulging biceps.

My mind immediately goes to Hunter, and I feel myself blushing. He was so helpful at the paint store yesterday, so polite and funny. It makes me think about what it would be like if he came over to my apartment—or is it his apartment?—and helped me paint.

Sitting up on the edge of my bed, I look at my cell phone nestled next to my clock on the tiny nightstand I found in a dumpster a few days ago. A lot of my furniture is second-hand stuff. It had to be because I didn't have much money when I got here.

I don't have Hunter's phone number, so I can't call him and ask him if he'd like to come and help me paint even if I wanted. Besides, what are the chances he has two whole days to blow off with me? It's not like he didn't have things to do yesterday that I'd interrupted. I'd seen how busy he was when I walked into the office. Nope, I'm not going to even think about calling the club and asking for him.

As much as I'd like to see him...that would be selfish. And silly. He's my boss, after all, and the only reason he went with me yesterday was because he's my landlord, and he wanted to make sure I didn't paint anything...fuchsia. Or chartreuse.

I get up and yank an old T-shirt out of my dresser, as well as a fresh pair of panties, a bra, and some cut-off jean shorts. I see no point in showering when I'm just gonna get messy.

Dressed and with my hair up in a messy bun, I head into the living room where Hunter helped me set all of my paint and supplies. He even offered to help me tape everything off when we got back from the paint store, but I'd insisted he'd done enough.

I have to push him out of my mind or else I'm gonna accidentally paint my best interpretation of what he looks like into the wall in the living room. I can't help but giggle as I think about what that would be like—if he ever came over again and saw that I'd painted him on the wall.

Laughing to myself, I say aloud, "He probably wouldn't even recognize himself anyway. It's not like I'm...Rembrandt."

It's too quiet in here, and I can hear Mr. Whiskers next door telling Mrs. Woodside he's hungry, so I decide to turn on some music. I don't want it to annoy my sweet neighbor—or anyone else—so I don't turn it up full blast, but it's enough for me to be able to get lost in the tunes as I begin to paint. I've got a Spotify station that has all of my favorite songs from the club, and though they don't sound quite the same in my small apartment as they do when they're spun by Audio Anarchy beneath the pulsing glow of the lights on the dance floor, it's enough to take my mind off of all of the work I'm going to have to put in to make this place look presentable.

I move all of the furniture from the living room into the center and drop a large plastic drape on it. Next, I put another one on the floor, taping it to the baseboards so it won't move around. Then, I use the special tape Hunter insisted I get to tape off the edges all the way around the floorboards and the ceilings. For that, I have to climb up on a chair. I really wish I would've thought to ask him about a ladder, but I didn't, and it's too late now. I can reach this way—on my tiptoes. It's probably not the smartest, safest thing I've ever done, but I'll live. Probably.

Once it's all taped off, I get ready for the fun part. Painting!

And then I remember that Hunter insisted that I buy some primer. I can still see his face now as his eyebrows knit together over those piercing blue eyes, and he said, “What do you mean you don’t think you need any primer? What are you, Meg, a neanderthal?” I’d laughed because I don’t know exactly what came next in evolution after neanderthal, but I’m guessing they didn’t use primer either.

But I’d bought a couple of cans of primer, and now I realize I have to put it on the walls first. That doesn’t seem like as much fun.

At least I have a top-of-the-line rolling paintbrush. Hunter had scoffed when I’d picked up the cheapest one. I told him, “Some of us aren’t rich, Mr. Stone,” to which he’d laughed and said, “I’m buying, Meg.” I’d tried to talk him out of it, but at the end of the day, it was his apartment.

So he’d paid for all of the paint and supplies and told me to save up for that new car so I didn’t die in the Gremlin. I couldn’t tell if he was calling it that because he doesn’t know what model my car is or if he thinks it’s a little evil monster from an eighties film.

I roll on the primer and don’t stop smiling about Hunter. He was so nice yesterday, and I couldn’t help but notice that he likes to call me Meg. Not Meghan like everyone else—but Meg. It makes me smile on the inside to hear that nickname slide off his lips.

After about an hour, the living room is mostly primed, and I’m starting to get hot. I decide that’s due to all of the manual labor and not the fact that I’ve spent a good deal of my waking hours so far daydreaming about my boss.

I figure I should open a window and turn on a fan, which means I need to turn the music up slightly, and then I get back to work.

Once the primer is on in the living room, I decide to go ahead and tape off the kitchen. It’ll take a while for me to do that with all of the cabinets, so maybe the primer in the living room will be ready for me to put the first coat of actual paint on when I’m done.

“At least there’s not a lot of wall space in here to have to paint,” I remind myself as I finish with the tape.

When I finally get to painting the first coat of a nice, bright yellow in the living room, I grin. It’s just the right color, and I love it, I do think it will take two coats, but that’s okay. If it will make my apartment more cheerful, I’m all about that.

I’ve decided to use this same color in the living room, kitchen, and small entryway. My bedroom will be the light pink color, and I have a can of blue for my bathroom, but I don’t know if I’ll get to all of that today.

Hunter had said, “If you made it red instead of pink, you’ll have the primary colors.” When I asked him if he thought my bedroom really needed to be red, his face had turned just that very shade.

I am being silly, and I know it. He’s my boss. He’s nice. Despite the fact that he killed a guy at the club, and I think he probably killed my previous landlord, he’s a sweet guy. I can see it. Maybe other people can’t, but he doesn’t fool me.

Somehow, I manage to get the living room and kitchen painted, as well as my bedroom primed before I realize just how sore and tired I am. It’s been a long day, but I’ve gotten a lot done. I can work on finishing up everything else during the day this week, when I’m done working at the club and sleeping, and have it all done by next weekend.

But for now, my back is aching, as are my limbs, and when I notice the tape all over everything in the kitchen, I decide not only am I not cooking tonight, I’m not even going to put the furniture back. I’ll sit on the couch in the middle of the room.

I move to pick up my phone to order some Thai from a great restaurant I found nearby, and my arm screams at me not to move so much. *I need a shower*, I think to myself, not only because of the muscle aches but because I’m covered in paint and sweat.

After pressing a few buttons on my phone to let the restaurant know how hungry I am, I see that I have about thirty minutes or so before my food gets here. That’s plenty of time.



The water takes a few minutes to heat up, so while I'm waiting, I strip off my clothes and let my hair down. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and see that I have paint on my left cheek. A giggle escapes my lips. Maybe it's just as well that Hunter didn't come over and see me this way. I'm a mess.

Stepping into the shower, I let the hot water work its way into my muscles and let out a deep sigh. It feels so good, and I can feel the tension rolling out of my tissues. The small space steams up pretty quickly since the exhaust fan doesn't work worth shit, and I feel my head beginning to get a little foggy, lost in thoughts of Hunter.

I know it's stupid to indulge my feelings for him, but as I run body wash all over my torso, I picture his face in my mind. His rugged jaw, those beautiful eyes, the way he holds his mouth when he's trying not to smirk at me.

The images in my head drop lower down his frame, past his muscular biceps to what I can only imagine is a six-pack of washboard abs, the perfect low V, and runner's legs with hard, muscular thighs and calves.

And then there's the part I just glossed over. Hunter's a badass. He's so confident and tough. He's gotta be well hung to pull that off, right?

I realize I've dropped the loofah I was using to soap myself up, and my hands are running over my hardened nipples. I can't help but imagine it's him tugging on them, teasing me, bringing me to life.

The warm water pours over me, and I picture his mouth leaning down and taking my erect peak between his teeth, sucking and flicking at my sensitive skin with his tongue. Leaning back against the tile, I let out a soft moan and slide one hand down my abdomen.

I can't tell if the wetness between my folds is strictly because of the shower or due to my juices, but the more I run my fingers along my slit, the more heated I become. I can see him on top of me, his hand holding my wrists above my head as he spreads my dripping thighs and pushes into me.

One finger won't do—no, it'll take at least two or three.

I press into myself, my other hand grinding against my clit. It doesn't take much for me to start feeling my muscles spasm around my pulsing fingers as I think of Hunter thrusting again and again. I toss my head back and let out a few lewd moans. I don't even care if the neighbors hear me, I'm so lost in my daydream.

When I finally come, I come hard, his name on my lips and my body continuing to vibrate beneath my fingers for several seconds as every muscle in my body sings for him.

Still panting, I pull my hands away and grab my loofah, trying to get my head out of the clouds. I do another scrub of my sensitive parts, getting one more tingle to race up my spine, before I rinse out my hair and get out of the shower, turning it off and grabbing a towel.

I'm still feeling the high from my orgasm as I pull on some comfy clothes and head into the living room just in time to answer the door. I know I'm smiling at the delivery boy like I'm walking ten feet off the ground, but I tip him well, so when he turns to leave, he's smiling, too.

I may regret getting myself off while daydreaming about my boss later, but for now, I can't help but think it was the most satisfying thing I've done in a long time.

# CHAPTER 11



## HUNTER

The white box on top of my desk brings a grin to my face, even before I open it up and peek inside. I know I should stop staring at it. I shouldn't have even bought it to begin with, but when I'd stopped by the famous jewelry store the other day, on my way somewhere else, of course, I'd seen the perfect charm for Meg.

Twenty minutes later, I had an entire bracelet with charms that remind me of Meg—a paintbrush, a paint bucket, a car, a drink, and a musical note. The bracelet had all kinds of beautiful beading on it as well, and she'd be able to add other charms to it later, if she wished to. I thought it was a nice gift, something she'd really enjoy.

If I ever figure out a way to give it to her...

It has been in my bottom desk drawer for a few days now, and I know it should probably stay there. It isn't as if I have any reason to be buying her jewelry or anything else. She is an employee, and even though I think she's...nice-looking, intelligent, funny, and pleasant to be around...I don't date people who work for me. Period.

Even if they smell divine and laugh like the tinkling of a bell at all of my jokes, even the not-so-funny ones...

With a sigh, I take a quick glance at the bracelet and admire it for a second before shaking my head again, opening my bottom desk drawer, and dropping it in. It's been a week since our painting excursion, and I've managed to stay away from the girl for the most part.

It hasn't been easy. I've seen her across the club floor, always looking hot as hell in short skirts and blouses that make her cleavage pop out the top just enough to make a guy wonder how those taste, but I haven't spoken to her more than a quick "How's it going?" in passing. I stick to the shadows, only going out onto the floor when she's working if I don't have a choice.

While it's not the most convenient way to live, I've gotta figure out a way to get this girl out of my mind. The longer I let her take up residency in my thoughts, the more difficult it's going to be to force her out.

Still, it won't be easy. Just picturing her grinning at me in the paint store as I teased her about painting her bedroom red has a stupid smirk on my face and my pants feeling tight again.

I hear Leah's voice and the knock on my open door at the same time, and I do my best to get rid of the grin as I look up at her, but it's difficult. I wish my laptop were open so I could pretend it was an email or a meme, but I haven't opened it yet.

"What are you all smiley about?" she asks, standing at the corner of my desk with her arms folded. She's grinning at me like she thinks she knows what's going on, but I hope that's not the case. "Someone sure looks cheery...for a hitman."

I shake my head at her and release a low chuckle. "Very funny," I tell her. "Don't you know hitmen have a great sense of humor? They laugh all the way to the bank and to the coroner's. What's up, Leah?"

"Do I have to have an excuse to come into your office?" she asks me, her face only slightly more serious than before.

"No, I guess not," I reply, opening my laptop as I'm sure she has important business matters to discuss.

As she comes around my desk to instruct me on what it is we need to talk about, Leah notes, "Something seems different about you lately, boss. I'm not quite sure what it is, but I see it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mumble, trying to be my grouchy old self, but she doesn't buy it.

"You have a smile on your face a lot more often. You're cheerful, sometimes almost pleasant to be around. Why, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were in love."

A chuckle tries to escape my throat, but I almost choke on it. "In love?" I repeat. "That's the stupidest bullshit I've ever heard, Leah. You know I'm not even fucking seeing anyone."

She shrugs and says, “You don’t have to be dating someone to have feelings for them.” She tells me which spreadsheet to open, and I do so, but I’m not letting this go.

“I’m not dating anyone. I haven’t even been out on a date with anyone in...months. So how could I possibly—” I see Dylan, DJ Audio Anarchy, walking by in the hallway and remember that he had mentioned his cousin or someone was looking to meet some people because she was new in town. He’d tried telling me she was a ten, but I wasn’t interested.

Until now.

Now I see a reason to try and convince Leah that my disposition has nothing to do with matters of the heart—even if she’s mostly correct. I don’t love Meg, but the word “smitten” kind of feels right.

“Dylan!” I shout just as Leah is telling me about one of our loss ratios. I have to shout loudly because he has those AirPods in like he always does. I’m loud enough, and he stops abruptly, turning back to the room.

He presses one of them to stop the music. “Yo, bossman! What’s up?” he asks, hanging from the doorjamb, like coming all the way in might get him in some kind of trouble.

“Hey, who was it you said was in town and was looking for a date? Your cousin?” I ask. Leah stands up straight, her eyebrows raised, like she wonders what the fuck I’m doing. That makes two of us.

“Yeah, Veronica,” he says. “She’s cool. You’ll like her. You want her digits?”

“Yes, please,” I say, eyeing Leah from my peripherals as he comes in with his phone. He shares her contact information with me, and I thank him before Dylan heads out of the room, leaving Leah shaking her head.

“You can go to great lengths to deny that I’m right, but that doesn’t change the fact that you know yourself that something is different with you.”

My only response is a terse grunt that makes her chuckle, and we turn our attention back to the laptop. But in the back of my

mind, I know she's right. Damn it.

That doesn't mean that Veronica and I won't enjoy a lovely steak dinner, and perhaps Dylan's cousin will be enough to make me forget the waitress—what's her name?—for good.

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Meg. Her name is Meg. I haven't forgotten.

Dinner with Dylan's cousin did absolutely nothing to make me forget the sexy waitress back at Club Limelight. In fact, now, an hour after I dropped Veronica off, I'm standing in the gym, beating the living fuck out of a hanging sandbag, wondering why I just wasted a couple of hours of my life.

Her voice is still grating on my last nerve as I whale onto the bag, giving it a right hook, a left jab, and another right hook. "So...what do you do for a living, Hunter? I'm a model. People think that modeling is so easy, but it's not! It's really, really hard! I have to look good all the time, and even though it's easy for me, I still have to get up super early to do my hair and makeup!"

She'd gone on and on in a high-pitched, nasally wheeze that made me want to take the chopsticks we were using and cram them through my ears. So much for steak. She'd insisted on Chinese, which was fine, except she didn't like anything on the menu.

She'd eaten a bowl of rice...

"You seem angry." I hear a voice over my shoulder and see a guy who hangs around the gym a lot taping up his gloves as he saunters over to me. "Bad night?"

"I guess you could say that," I reply, letting loose another punch on the bag. I watch it swing for a second and realize I should probably introduce myself. "I'm Hunter." I can't shake his hand, but I stick out my right glove, and he pounds it with his.

"Name's Ryan," he says. "Nice to meet you."

He's a big dude, probably almost seven feet tall, with well-defined muscles, but I've seen him in the ring and he's slow. I think he's probably in his thirties or forties. Maybe he's just getting back into boxing after a rest.

"You wanna spar?" he asks me. "I hear you're pretty tough."

I didn't come here looking for an actual match, but I don't see any reason not to. He might be taller than me, but I'm pretty sure I can take him. "Sure," I say, and we approach the nearest empty ring.

"This is a nice place," he tells me as we walk alongside one another. "Way better than the last place I used to practice, though it's been a while."

"Yeah, it's pretty nice," I say, looking around like I'm not sure, like I don't own the place. I don't think he knows I do. I don't plan on telling him.

The two of us spend quite some time in the ring, boxing, having fun taking shots at one another. He gets me good a couple of times, but for the most part, I dominate the round and even have to pull a few punches to keep from doing some major damage. I'm used to sparring with my bodyguards and bouncers, not just some random Joe, and I feel like this guy isn't as skilled as most of them are, but it's still fun, and by the time I look up and realize it's past midnight, I decide I should probably get back to the club. After all, it's likely busy, and the fact that I'm not there always makes me nervous.

"That was fun," Ryan says, his busted lip bleeding a bit as the two of us sit down to take off our gloves and dry off the sweat that trickles down our faces.

"Yeah, it was a good time," I tell him. I hesitate to ask him if he wants a job at this point because I'm not too sure of his skills, but if he keeps working out here, I think I may be able to bring him on eventually. If he's trustworthy and not a criminal himself.

"See you around," he says with a wave, and I wave back before gathering my stuff and walking out to my SUV. I



usually take a shower at the gym, but I've decided to go ahead and wait until I get home this time.

Home. That's an interesting thought.

I head back to the club, thinking about what it might be like to actually have a home to go to. I have a room off of my office in the back of the club. I have a garage where I keep my cars. I also have a storage unit where I have a bit of furniture from my last apartment, mostly pieces my mother gifted to me that have been in the family for a while.

But I don't have a home. I don't have anything away from the club to call my own, and since I am a prominent businessman in the community, as I pull into my parking spot, I think perhaps I should talk to Leah about getting my own place.

I don't like to be away from the club—but maybe I should be. Maybe I should start putting some space between Hunter the businessman, Hunter the club owner, Hunter The Fixer, and whoever the fuck is left behind when all of that is stripped away from me.

Stepping into my office, I take a look around. This isn't my home.

It's time for me to find my home.

# CHAPTER 12



MEGHAN

Something is different.

From the moment my eyelashes flutter open in the morning to the sound of my favorite song filling the space in my freshly painted bedroom, I know that the day is special for some reason, though it takes me a moment to remember why.

And then, after I sit up and stretch, my mind playing catch-up, it hits me—today is my birthday.

A huge smile crosses my face as I think about the fact that a day I've been waiting for ever since I was old enough to know what alcohol was has finally arrived. I am finally old enough to legally drink the substance I've been carrying to other people for the past few weeks! I am finally old enough to go out, go into any club, disco, bar, adult movie, you name it, and get in with no questions asked. Well, except for maybe the question of, "Where is your ID?"

But after a few moments of reveling in the glory of it all, another thought comes to mind.

*My mom isn't here to celebrate with me...*

This is the first year I've ever been away from her on my birthday, and the idea of not seeing her smiling face, of not having her bake me a chocolate volcano cake, makes tears form in my eyes. My mom is terrible at baking and always makes two round cakes but doesn't level the bottom one off so there's a big hump, which usually causes the top one to split into four or five pieces. It's so funny—we call it a volcano cake. But it usually tastes pretty good. Except for that time she accidentally put in salt instead of sugar...

I laugh and cry at the same time, feeling a bit sorry for myself. I know I have friends at the club I could've invited to celebrate with me, but it's not the same as having my mom, and a pain in my heart reminds me of how much I miss her.

My phone rings, and I brush away my tears as I pick it up. As if she's reading my mind from across the country, my mom is calling me. I haven't spoken to her since I got here; it's too painful. I did send her a couple of texts to let her know I am all right. But I answer now. I wouldn't be here to celebrate my birthday at all without her, so I should at least say hello.

With a deep breath, I say, "Hi, Mom."

"Meggy?" she asks, her voice a few octaves higher than usual. "Is that really you?"

I sigh and blink back tears. "Yeah, Mom. It's me. Hi."

"Oh, it's so nice to hear your voice." I can tell she's about to cry, too. It makes me feel guilty at first, but then I think of Mitch, and anger replaces my sadness. "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Mom," I tell her.

"How are you? What are you doing today? How's your job?"

Mom asks me a million questions, and I hurry through the answers to all of them because I don't really want to chat, not with her, not right now. I keep thinking about how we could be together if she would've chosen me instead of Mitch.

After about twenty minutes, I make up a lie. "I've gotta go, Mom. I'm having a birthday thing with some friends."

"Oh, that's so great!" she gushes. "Call me tomorrow and tell me all about it!"

"Sure, sure," I say, but I have no intentions of calling her, and she probably knows that. She tells me again that my card is in the mail, and I hang up, feeling worse than I did before she called.

I've got to do something to shake this. After all, it's my twenty-first birthday, goddammit!

Despite not having the kind of friends one might choose to spend their birthday with here in the city, I decide to go and have a fun day anyway. I've got a plan—there's that new café down the street I've wanted to try. I'll go there for a birthday lunch. Then, after that, I'll go spend some of my well-earned

tip money on a new dress. I should have time to get that done before I head to work.

With a smile on my face, I shuffle to my ocean blue bathroom to take a shower and get ready for a fun day. I deserve to celebrate me—even if no one else cares that today is an important day for Meghan Taylor.

Later that afternoon, with my belly full of a delicious croissant sandwich stuffed with yummy chicken salad, as well as a piece of chocolate cake that did not look like an explosion had taken place beneath it, I stroll down the street from the café to a little boutique I saw when I drove by earlier. It's a trendy place, and whatever I find here is sure to be expensive, but I've got a wad of cash in my purse burning a hole through the leather. I may as well pick out something pretty.

The bell over the door alerts the sales associates to my entrance, and at first, when two middle-aged women with bleached blonde hair turn to look at me with dark eyes, I think perhaps I've just walked onto the set of that old movie *Pretty Woman*. Will they be rude to me because I don't fit in here? Then one of them smiles and asks how she can help me, and I realize these people are nice after all.

"What are you looking for today, dear?" she asks, coming over to me. I read her name *Hillary* on the golden badge pinned on her crimson top.

"I'm looking for a dress for my birthday," I explain. "Something...fun." I don't want anything too fancy because I'm planning to wear it to work tonight. It can be a little fancier than usual, a little less sexy, a little more...classy. My thoughts immediately go to Hunter. He hasn't been around much since our trip to the paint store, but if he does come through the club tonight, I'd like for him to see how I could look on a date.

Not that I think he's going to ask me out. He doesn't seem interested in that, though there were times when I thought that he might be. I figure if he can go a week and not even speak to me, he must not be thinking about me at night when he falls asleep.

“Let’s take a look over here,” Hillary suggests, and I follow her to a rack of flirty dresses with short skirts that show a bit of cleavage but have sequins, rhinestones, and other embellishments that make them a bit more upscale than what I’m used to.

I look through the selection, unsure of what to try on, until my eyes fall on a bright blue number that reminds me of a stunning pair of familiar eyes. Immediately, a smile crosses my face. I know I look okay in blue, and if Hunter even begins to notice the symbolism, it’d be worth it, even if it isn’t one of my best colors.

The skirt lands about midthigh when I hold it up to me. It’s cut down just below my bra line, with peek-a-boo sleeves.

“You should try that on,” Hillary says with an encouraging smile.

I glance at myself in the mirror and know she’s right.

A few hours later, I arrive at work in my new dress, sporting sparkly silver heels and a new pair of earrings that really set it off. I’ve gotten my hair professionally styled, and I’ve had my makeup done. I look like a celebrity myself, so when it comes to the higher-end tables tonight, I fully expect to get my fair share. Seeing famous people was one of the main reasons I came to LA, so I’m super excited to get my chance.

As soon as I walk in, my coworkers notice. “Wowza!” Carter says, running his hand through his signature swoosh. “You look amazing, Meghan!”

I can’t help but blush. “Thanks,” I tell him. One by one, the others greet me the same way, all but Hunter. I don’t see him anywhere.

“What’s the occasion?” Allie asks me, her arm still around me.

I had been debating all day whether or not I was going to tell them. But when Allie asks, I can’t help but reply, “It’s my birthday.”

“What!” she shouts as everyone else echoes the sentiment. “Happy birthday!”

“I wish I would’ve known!” Sadie proclaims, hugging me. “I would’ve given you a gift.”

I shake my head. “No, no, that’s okay. I’m just... happy to be here. With my friends—my family.” They all give me a quick hug before we have to get to work.

I can’t help the smile that’s on my face as I begin to take orders and serve my customers. Lots of people compliment my dress, and while I think I always look good at work, I know they can see how happy I am tonight. It makes me do an even better job of meeting their needs than usual.

Not only is it my birthday making me smile, but I also got my wish. One of my tables is a group of actors from my favorite show, *Midnight Madness*, and I am so thrilled to be flirting with the handsome Lane Brooks that I can’t wipe the smile off of my face.

And then I turn around and practically collide with Hunter again, and I’m so glad the tray in my hands is empty. “Oh, shit!” I say, staring into his eyes—eyes that perfectly match my dress.

“Hey, Meg,” he says, a friendly smile on his perfect lips, his hands on his hips, all nonchalant like we talk all the time. “How’s it going?”

“Uh... fine,” I stammer, still trying to get my shit together. “H-how are you?”

“Good, good. Listen, I’ve got a VIP client in the back I need you to wait on tonight, okay? He’s extremely important, so do your best job, all right?” He claps me on the back like we’re just old pals, and I stare at him like he’s lost his fucking mind.

“Back there?” I ask, my eyes wide as I think about what happened the last time I was in that part of the club.

He seems to have forgotten, though I’m almost certain it’s an act. “Yeah, room five,” he tells me. “I’ll be in and out. Thanks.” He gives me a head bob and walks away.

I’m not sure if I should run to Allie and ask her what to do or if I should just get on with it, but it takes me a moment to start

walking again. At least it wasn't room nine—the redrum, as I like to think of it...

With a deep breath, I head to room five. The door is slightly ajar, and the scent of cigar smoke hits me before I even walk in. I do my best not to cough and glide in with a smile on my face worthy of my birthday.

Seven men in expensive suits sit at a table, playing cards while they finish a round of beers. Most of them look old enough to be my dad, though a few are younger. All of them stop talking and look up as I enter the room.

Clearing my throat, I ask, “Another round?”

They stay quiet for a beat before one of the older men, with dark hair and chocolate eyes that seem to penetrate to my soul, and not in a good way, says, “I'll have a scotch this time, on the rocks.”

“Yes, sir,” I say with a confident nod. Then the rest of them place their orders, and I rush off to get their drinks, just as Hunter enters the room.

By the time I get back with the drinks, they're talking business, Hunter is sitting with them, and I try not to listen because I figure none of this is my concern. I set the drinks down, clean up the empties, and get the sense from Hunter that whatever this guy is talking about, he doesn't like it.

“Listen, Victor,” he says, “I understand your concerns, but I'm not prepared to increase the percentage you're getting from our distribution network. It's just not feasible at this time.”

“That's bullshit!” this Victor person says. “You gotta increase these margins.”

I try not to linger, but one of the men signals for my attention, and I realize he's already finished his drink, so I head off to get another.

As I work the table, being perfectly polite, keeping my mouth shut, I learn a lot. Victor Velasco, otherwise known as the Raven, is a work associate of Hunter's, but he's angry about their agreement at the moment. These other men all answer to him, and he has total power over them.



Which tells me he's a very dangerous man.

# CHAPTER 13



## HUNTER

Meg is a distraction—in the best way possible.

She's serving the table full of the Raven and his men like a professional waitress, which she absolutely is, but she's only been doing this for a few weeks. Yet, from the looks of it, you'd think she had been a professional waitress in a club with this level of clientele for years.

As Victor Velasco goes on and on about how he wants me to increase his percentage when it comes to the special products we distribute with the Raven's help, I am about to tell him where he can go, but I don't because he is a powerful man, and I don't feel like killing him and all of his associates.

"All I'm saying is, think it over," Victor says to me, finally calming down a little bit with the sixth drink Meg has brought him. She's standing near him now, gathering up more empties. All of the guys seem to like her. She's so polite—and quiet. They have to believe that everyone I bring in here is going to keep anything they overhear to themselves, and I know Meg is the girl for that.

If she can keep what she saw go down in room nine to herself, when she hadn't even been working here that long at the time that she witnessed it, the girl has a mouth like a steel trap and can be trusted with anything.

Looking at her mouth gets my mind thinking about other things it could do, and I have to look away. The last thing I need is to get a hard-on while I'm having a business meeting with a guy like fucking Victor Velasco.

He's continuing to go on and on about securing his place in this sector and that sector, and I'm doing my best to stay polite, telling him that certain sectors are already assigned to different associates of mine.

He shakes his head, leaning forward. "Hunter," he says, "you know what sector I feel you're completely leaving us out of?"

Under her breath, Meg mutters, “The reality sector?”

The table grows quiet, and every eye turns to her. I watch as she presses her perfect, ruby red lips together, her jade eyes growing wide as she holds her breath and wonders how she can take it back.

Victor’s face is even more comedic than Meg’s as he stares at her pointedly, his eyes narrowed as his forehead tips forward at her. “What did you say, *mija*?” He calls her his child, but it doesn’t sound like a term of endearment coming out of his mouth. It sounds more like a curse.

“Uhm, I was saying...reality dictates that it’s not feasible for you to...spread yourself too thin!” She plasters an overly wide, faux smile on her face and grins at him for a long moment until he begins to chuckle. Then, the rest of the table erupts in the same laughter, and I take a deep breath, knowing the moment has passed. Meg turns and looks at me, and all I can do is smile at her. She seems to be checking whether or not I’m angry, and while it probably would’ve been best if she hadn’t said anything at all, she’s so clever, it’s hard for me to be anything but impressed with her.

In fact, the entire evening, she’s done nothing but impress me. She’s an excellent waitress, an excellent student, and obviously, all it takes is a smile from her to charm everyone she comes into contact with. I can see more on the horizon for Meg. When Velasco begins to ask her opinion about a few other business matters, I sit back and listen to her.

She knows nothing about the underbelly we conduct our business in, but when he asks her questions about how to motivate his workers, how to gather better information from his customers, and other issues she would know about as a waitress, he listens. They have an actual conversation, and I am even more impressed.

It’s clear to me that Meg is capable of great things, given the opportunity. And since I pride myself on seeing the strengths of others and helping develop them to the greatest extent possible, I am beginning to see her as a real gem.

Thinking of gems makes me remember the gift I have for her. Maybe I should give it to her tonight? Would she accept it simply as a token of a job well done, or would she think it meant more than it did? But then...it certainly is more than just a reward for doing a good job one evening to me...

I am jarred from my thoughts when I realize the Raven is speaking to me again. Meg is back to carrying off empties, and he has my full attention when he says, "Marco will be here in a few weeks. Maybe the two of you can come to a better agreement than I was capable of."

My eyebrows raise as I try to come up with the most appropriate response. "Marco?" Repeating his name not only buys me a few moments, but it also helps me process. "I didn't realize he was coming back to LA."

The Raven shrugs, finishing off the last of his scotch. "He's coming home. I don't really give a fuck whether he works for me here or somewhere else, as long as he does a good job, but his mother, well...she's happy her little boy will be home." He chuckles and clinks his ice cubes together.

I force a smile, but I'm not happy. My mind immediately goes to Leah. When she hears this news...that Marco will be back, she's going to be upset, to say the least. I briefly think over their history. I'm not sure about all of the details, but I know he hurt her—badly.

All of these negotiations are beginning to make my head ache, so I'm glad when the Raven says it's time for him to fly away to take care of other situations. "I'll be in touch, *amigo*," he tells me, offering me his hand.

I shake it, bidding him good night. Before he goes, he pats Meg on the shoulder. "This one is *muy inteligente*," he tells me, and I couldn't agree more. She is very smart. He says something else in Spanish to his men, and they leave the room, and once again, I am alone with Meg.

After avoiding her for a week, I'm not sure what to say to her. She turns to me, her mouth in an O, her eyes wide, and eventually gets out, "Sorry!"

My brow furrows as I consider what she might be apologizing for. I realize she's afraid she fucked up earlier when he caught her murmuring about him getting a grasp on reality. I don't want to give her any indication that she should say stuff like that again, but I also don't want her to think she did a bad job.

I've already decided she needs an adequate tip to make sure she remembers not to say anything to anyone. So now is as good a time as any to give it to her. I have the bills rolled up in my pocket. Pulling them out, I say, "You did a good job tonight, Meg. No worries." That's as personal as I intend to get as I hand her the cash.

My fingertips brush her palm, and a jolt of electricity razors through me, settling low in my core. I take a deep breath and try to ignore it, but our eyes lock, and I know she feels it, too.

For a moment, the idea that she is my employee is the last thing in the world I care about.

But then...I know what I have to do. "See you tomorrow," I say and take a few steps toward the door, my headache worsening the closer I get to the music blaring on the dance floor.

Right before I step out into the hall, I turn and glance at her. Jade eyes bulge as she looks at the tip, and I almost laugh. She stares over at me, her mouth agape, and I feel a twitch in my pants. All I can say is, "You look gorgeous in that dress."

Before she can process, I head down the hallway toward the dance floor, looking for Leah. I want to make sure that she knows the club is hers. I'm out. Dylan gives me a nod, and I wave at him, knowing he's got the entertainment under control. Ethan's at the door, looking tough, though I can tell from here, he's screwing around with the guy trying to get in. Carter's behind the bar, and the waitresses on the floor are more than capable of getting us through the night.

"See ya, Leah," I say, deciding now isn't the time to tell her about Marco. Why ruin what's left of her evening?

She's standing behind the bar looking at a report. "You going to bed?"

I nod. “Headache.” I salute her, and she grins at me, saying she hopes I feel better.

Walking through the employee area, I see a few other familiar faces, waitresses on breaks, and other people switching shifts. I bid them goodnight and head to my room off of the office in the back of the club.

Closing the door, I thank God for soundproofing and head to the bathroom. I turn the water on in the shower to heat up, and down a couple of Tylenol, hoping it helps my throbbing head. But the more my thoughts return to Meg, the more my other head begins to throb.

The warm water helps relieve some of the tension I’m carrying in my muscles responsible for at least part of the pounding in my head. I wash my hair quickly, then rinse and get out, drying off. Going to the mirror to brush my teeth, I think about Velasco’s face when Meg told him to secure a place in the reality sector. She’s so fucking clever. To see her politely discuss business with a guy like the Raven is just a further reminder of what a treasure she really is.

With my headache dissipating a bit, I head to bed, Meg’s face lingering in my mind’s eye. The way that dress accented her breasts, hugged her waist, and fell halfway down her muscular thighs has me physically reacting beneath my towel, and I know I can no longer fight off the feelings I have for her—not in the solitude of my own bedroom, anyway.

Lying down on my bed, I let my mind run wild. I see her in here with me, my hands roaming her body, my mouth tasting those ruby lips of hers. She moans slightly into my mouth as I tug down her dress.

I watch her strip, taking her time, teasing me, and in reality, my hands find their way to my hardness. I take hold of my dick with one hand, my other hand cupping my balls as I think about what it would be like for her to slowly slide out of her bra, her pink nipples hard and ready for my mouth.

In a lacy thong, she’d slide to the floor, taking me in her hand, staring up at me with those wide eyes as her tongue darts out and circles my head, lapping a drop of precome off of it. Then

she'd wrap those lips around my length, taking me fully into her sweet, warm mouth. Her hand is on my balls as she opens wide, letting me explore the back of her throat.

I can't help it as I pick up speed, all the while imagining it's Meg's mouth I'm thrusting into. When I finally release, I find myself panting, a sheen of sweat covering my skin and a sense of loneliness settling over me like nothing I've ever felt before.

Without even bothering to clean up right away, I stare at the ceiling, trying to convince myself that I can't let this happen again. I can't keep thinking about Meg, like being with her is an option. It's simply not.

But accepting that fact is beginning to feel a lot like knowing I'll have to live the rest of my life without air. Both analogies are impossible and are equally as likely to kill me.



# CHAPTER 14



MEGHAN

Three thousand dollars.

Who tips three thousand dollars? Apparently, Hunter Stone does. It's been two days since he asked me to wait on that table in the back of the club, the one that introduced me to the Raven, who is yet another crime lord, from what I could gather. I had been trying my best not to listen to the conversation, but it was hard when Hunter was talking in secret code about their operations, and my brain felt the challenge of trying to decipher what they meant, even though I knew it was in my best interest to not only play dumb, but be dumb.

Nevertheless, I'd gone and opened my mouth and said something stupid. I'm just glad the Raven was a lot more of an understanding guy than his name might imply. We actually ended up having a decent conversation. When he first started asking me questions about my opinion on different aspects of business, I thought he was doing it to get back at me, to make fun of me with his other muscle-bound business associates, but then, when I actually started talking to him about it, he seemed to respect what I was saying.

It had almost been like talking to someone at a party or an acquaintance at a get-together. We had a decent time chatting to one another and left the situation amicably—him thinking I wasn't just a dumb broad and me thinking perhaps I didn't need to be worried about him taking a hit out on me.

My reflection in the mirror tells me I'm looking pretty good this afternoon. I finish with my eyes and run some lipstick over my lips before I give my hair one more fluff and head out. I am taking a detour to the bank before work, and since the bank closes at 5:00 and work starts at 9:00, I will have some time to kill. I contemplate going back to the café I visited the other day for my birthday, but that seems more like a lunch sort of place, so I think I might try another restaurant nearby...

I almost run into Mrs. Woodside as I'm turning the corner to head down the stairs. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" I say, reaching out to steady her so she doesn't fall. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, dear, I'm fine," she says with a smile and a chuckle. "Takes more than a little near-collision to knock this old lady off her game. You look pretty, dear. Where are you going?"

I look down and check my outfit. Since I'm going to the bank, too, I don't want to wear anything too revealing, so I have on a black skirt that hits mid-thigh and a red button-down, short-sleeved shirt that I can tie up later if I need the tips. "To the bank. And work," I say.

"Shouldn't you be laughing then?" she asks, and I give her a puzzled look. "You know the saying 'laughing all the way to the bank'?" That makes her laugh, and even though I'm not sure what she's talking about, I laugh, too.

"Right, right." I do like talking to her, but some of her references are from another era and go over my head.

"Say, I heard that we're all going to be able to keep our current rent. I got a letter in the mail the other day. Isn't that lovely?" She pats my arm, and I can tell she's feeling relieved.

"I'm so glad to hear that," I tell her. I haven't checked my mail recently. It's usually just bills. But I'm so glad Hunter did that. "Well, you have a good evening, Mrs. Woodside."

"You, too, dear. And I hope you make lots of tips tonight!"

"Thanks," I say over my shoulder as I head down the stairs. She knows I'm a waitress, and that's all she needs to know. I'm not sure she'd approve of me working at a club, and I know she wouldn't understand if I told her about what Hunter does.

I drop the money from my tips off at the bank and gawk at the receipt for a good ten minutes as I decide I can afford a fancy restaurant. Really, I'm making more money at Club Limelight than I ever would've thought imaginable, and while I am tempted to stop and buy myself another dress, I know I need to save up.

I need a new car, I am reminded every time I get in the Gremlin, as I've begun calling it, thanks to Hunter, and I need a new apartment eventually, too. I don't want to stay in this place forever unless Hunter does something really spectacular with it.

My tips are good for a nice steak dinner, though. By the time I'm done, I decide to head over to work a little early because I've got nothing better to do.

I park and stroll inside, listening to the thumping sound of the beat on the dance floor through the walls. Audio Anarchy is really on fire tonight. From the looks of the parking lots around the club, it's pretty busy. I hope that's good for another few hundred bucks in tips.

The back area where the employees get ready or hang out before and after shifts is busy. I see Mia and wave at her. She's talking to Allie, who turns around and sees me then, too.

Sadie is literally dancing by as she exits the restroom. I put my bag away and turn to talk to her, but out of nowhere, Hunter is there, too, and I almost collide with him.

"Why are you always popping up out of nowhere?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything, and I can't read his expression. His lips are pressed together in a thin line, and he's not quite meeting my gaze. I begin to panic, wondering if I did something wrong. Maybe he's going to fire me...

"Here."

He shoves a box at me, and I'm so caught off guard, it doesn't quite land in my hands. It gets bumped up into the air, and we both grapple for it as it's falling to the ground. Hunter catches it before it makes contact with the floor.

"Wow, bossman," Carter says, looking into the mirror hanging on the wall near the lockers as he fixes his hair—probably for the hundredth time that day. "Nice catch. You must've played ball in high school."

Hunter says nothing to him, only grumbles over his shoulder, and I have to wonder what kind of ball Carter is talking about,

but I'm not familiar with a lot of...ball sports, so I keep my comments to myself.

Trying again, more gently this time, Hunter hands me the red box. It's not very big, small enough to fit in my palm, and has a white ribbon tied around it that has been slightly displaced because of the fall.

"What is this for?" I ask, my eyes darting back and forth from the box to his face and then down again.

"Well," he begins as he looks at Sadie as if he wants her to get lost. She steps away, but only going so far as to talk to Carter behind Hunter. "I didn't realize it was your birthday the other day. If I would've known, I wouldn't have made you work that special room. Besides, I would've gotten you something."

"So...this is a birthday present?" I ask.

He nods and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Yeah. I wasn't sure what to get you. I'm not very good at gifts."

I don't know what to say. I certainly wasn't expecting him to get me a gift. "Wow," is about all I can muster.

Pulling the white ribbon from the box, I hold on to it with one hand as I flip the lid open with the other.

It's a necklace, a simple pendant, but the stone, which I'm assuming is a crystal of some kind, is pretty big. I take it out of the box and hold it up. "That's so pretty!" I say as it catches the light and creates prisms. "Thank you so much, Hunter! You really didn't have to do that."

"Holy hell!" Sadie says, coming over. "Damn, all you got me for my birthday was a gift card!"

I am confused. Sure, it's a nice necklace, but it's not that big of a deal. Maybe it's just the fact that it's jewelry that has her practically hyperventilating. It is a little odd to get jewelry from your boss.

"Uh...like I said, I'm not good at picking out presents. Gift cards are easy. Besides, it was an expensive gift card," Hunter says in his defense.

“Not as expensive as a diamond necklace,” Sadie says, but she’s grinning as she playfully elbows him.

“Diamond?” I repeat. My eyes dart from Sadie to Hunter and then back again. “This can’t be a diamond. It’s huge!”

“The boss doesn’t deal in cubic zirconia, new girl,” Carter says with a wink.

I turn back to Hunter, and he’s running a hand through his hair.

Carter continues, “I wish we would’ve known it was your birthday.”

“Yes!” Sadie agrees. “We could’ve had a party! We could’ve gone out to celebrate.”

I feel warm on the inside just hearing that she would’ve liked to have taken me out. “Like I told you the other night, it’s really not that big of a deal.” I want to put the necklace on, but I’m scared to. God, what if I lose it or it gets stolen? And I thought that was a lot of money I’d put in the bank. Hunter probably has that much stuck in the cushions of his couch.

“Want me to hook it?” Sadie offers.

No, I want Hunter to hook it. I want to feel his breath on the back of my neck, to feel his fingers graze my skin.

But he’s not offering. So I say, “Sure,” and she steps behind me to hook the necklace.

Then, Hunter says something I don’t understand. “Carter, call in the backup crew.”

“What?” Sadie asks as she finishes hooking my necklace so I can put my hair down. I can’t help but hold the diamond between my finger and thumb and admire it. I’ve never seen a diamond this big before that I can recall. I catch my reflection in the mirror and can’t help but smile.

Tuning back into the conversation, I hear Hunter say, “You only turn twenty-one once, right? You need to enjoy it. Even if we are a couple of days late.”

“I’ll go phone them right now,” Carter says. Then he puts his hand on my shoulder. “Too bad I can’t come, but there’s really

no backup for me.”

“Wait—what’s happening?” I ask as Carter heads off to do... whatever he just said he’s going to do.

“We’re going out to celebrate!” Sadie exclaims. She hugs Hunter quickly and thanks him before grabbing me by the arm to pull me into the employee lounge. I turn and look at him, catching his eye, still too stunned to know what to say.

“Guess what, ladies?” Sadie declares the moment we walk into the lounge. “We are going to paaartaay!”

“Say what now?” Mia asks, perking up immediately.

“That’s right! In honor of Miss Meghan’s birthday, we are going to party! The bossman has called in the backup crew!” Sadie is practically jumping up and down.

And then, Mia and Allie hop up, and the three of them are jumping up and down. They pull me into the huddle, and I can’t help but hop with them, though, I’m not screaming like they are.

“We are going to have the fucking best time ever!” Allie declares, hugging me. “Thanks for getting older.”

I laugh, not sure what to say to that other than, “Any time.”

“It’s too bad Lexi called in tonight, though,” Mia says, sticking out her bottom lip. “She is so much fun at parties.”

“She’s the queen of parties,” Allie agrees.

“Well, maybe it’s time to make a new queen of parties,” Sadie says, and when she turns to wink at me, I know we’re going to have a fucking good time.

# CHAPTER 15





## HUNTER

That was embarrassing.

I have never felt so awkward around a woman in my whole life. I'm not sure exactly what it is about Meg, but whenever I see her, I get all tongue-tied.

Probably because I want to tie my tongue around her...

As soon as the girls head off to make their plans, I go back to the office where Carter is calling in the backup crew. I signal at him to let him know I'm going, too, and he nods, giving me a devilish grin. I shake my head at him, wanting to make fun of him for always spending so much time on his hair, but I leave it be and walk back into the lounge just in time to hear one of the girls say, "All right, McDuff's it is!"

McDuff's. That's not a bad place to go party, but it's no Club Limelight. The joint is just a few blocks down from here, and I think maybe they will walk at first, but when I go outside, I see Allie's car is gone. Perhaps she is the designated driver. Or perhaps they will call an Uber.

Or perhaps they will notice I have followed them, and I will bring them all home...

I will not be drinking tonight as my only concern is making sure my girls aren't harassed. I know Greg McDuff. He runs a decent enough joint. The chances of anything happening to the girls while they're there is slim, but Greg McDuff also knows me, so if something does happen, and I have to get involved, well, there's a good chance that the cops will not be called. Not if Greg McDuff values his operation.

I decide to drive, too, in case I really do have to drop all four of them off at their various apartments after this is over. This parking lot isn't nearly as full as my own, so I find a spot and head inside.

A popular techno track plays over the loudspeakers as the clubgoers bounce up and down. The speakers sound shitty

compared to ours. The lighting is all wrong. It's too dark on the dance floor to even see who a person's dancing with. The booths and tables are all worn. I don't know why anyone would rather come here than Club Limelight. But then, this isn't my regular clientele either. These people probably can't afford more than a drink or two from my menu, and Ethan likely wouldn't let half of them in. Some of them look pretty damn shady, especially the men.

I find a table in the corner where I can keep an eye on the bar and the dance floor, which isn't easy with the piss-poor lighting, but I will make it work. The girls are at the bar, ordering shots and making sure Meg gets enough to celebrate her birthday properly. I can hear them shouting and laughing from here, and it makes me smile. I'm glad I can give this to them. My backup crew is mostly people who made so much money working for me, they've gotten out of the clubbing business, either by starting their own businesses, going back to school, or investing, but they like coming in from time to time, and they're good at their jobs.

I hope Meg really did like the necklace. I wanted to give her the special bracelet I'd picked out for her, but I was afraid a lot of people would see and ask about the charms, and that is just between Meg and me for now. The necklace was nice, too, and I think she was surprised.

My eyes gravitate to Meg. She looks sexy with her shirt tied up so her flat stomach is showing. When she takes the most recent shot set before her, she wrinkles up her nose, and I almost laugh.

I watch from the shadows as the girls continue to have a good time. The waitresses who come by to ask if I want anything get shooed away without another glance. The redhead in the black skirt is the only woman I'm interested in, and I'm staying sober to make sure she has a good time.

We've only been there for about an hour when the first predators start closing in. I see a group of five guys checking out my girls from across the bar. At first, they keep their distance, only pointing and laughing at what I can assume are

lewd jokes they are making to one another. But as they creep closer, like lions going after their prey, my hackles go up.

One of them, a tall, lanky guy with his shirt unbuttoned almost to his navel, starts dancing next to Meg. She is a little tipsy at this point and doesn't notice him at first, but Sadie does.

I can't hear her from this far away, but I know that look as she yells at him, gesturing for him to get lost. Meg turns to look at him, stunned, and moves closer to Sadie. The guy laughs and puts his hands up, but he doesn't really back away, and as soon as the girls are back to dancing again, he makes another move. This time, his friends are even closer.

I am out of my seat and moving through the crowd like a skilled motorcyclist weaving through the turns on a mountain pass.

My plan is to simply tell him that the ladies said no, but when I see him grab Meg by the hips and pull her against him so that he can grind into her, my plan changes. Without a second thought, I grab hold of the guy's arm and rip it up and off of her, twisting it until I hear a loud cracking noise, and he screams out in agony.

"I think the ladies said they didn't want to fucking dance with you, jackass!" I shout at him as I toss him to the ground and slam my boot into his gut.

"What the fuck!" one of his friends shouts as the four of them come at me. A couple of them appear to be in decent shape, but one is short and pudgy, and the other is almost as rail thin as the guy I just laid out. His bones should crack nicely when I break them as well.

Everything happens in a flash as I move to protect my girls. Fists fly at me, but I dodge them, throwing my own. I punch the first guy in the jaw while I simultaneously kick out against another, sending him tumbling backward into another dancer. That guy turns around, pissed, and now, the dancer is punching him.

In the meantime, Chubby comes running at me full speed, trying to ram his head into my gut. I catch him and launch my

knee into his groin a few times before I have to let him go to send the thin guy's nose through the back of his skull.

A fight has broken out all around us now, and all I can think about is getting the girls out of there safely. "Come on, girls!" I say, taking Allie by the hand and looping my arm around Meg's waist. I see Sadie and Mia are already headed toward the door, but Allie always gets petrified in these sorts of situations, like she can't even move, and Meg is staring at me with saucers for eyes.

"Let's go," I say.

"Your lip is bleeding," she tells me, but I don't let go to feel it. I guess one of those assholes landed a punch after all.

"My car's not far from the door!" I shout to her in response, and the five of us manage to get out the door as the bouncers are running toward the place where the majority of the fighting is going on.

Once we are outside, we have to navigate around the streams of other people running for their cars, but I know the girls are safe now. "Watch out for the vomit!" Sadie shouts, dodging a puddle, and that makes everyone laugh.

"Leave your car, and I'll send Brandon and Omar to get it," I tell Allie, who is jogging along with me in a daze. I let go of her long enough to pull my keys out and unlock the SUV, as well as start the engine, but then I grab her again and pull her along. Meg is right beside me, still shocked, and the other two girls are far enough ahead that they're climbing into the backseat by the time we arrive.

I help Allie into the back while Meg climbs into the passenger seat, which makes me smile. That's right where she belongs.

As soon as we're all loaded, I throw the vehicle into reverse and head out of the parking lot as quickly as I can. I don't know if McDuff will know I started this fight or not, but I don't feel like having words with him, not on a night when we are supposed to be celebrating Meg's birthday.

"Party's over!" Sadie laments from her spot behind me. "It's too bad those guys had to be such assholes. We were having

fun!”

“I know!” Mia agrees. “And we never got to do those shots out of Meghan’s belly button.”

My eyes widen as I glance over at her. She tucks some hair behind her ear and looks away, her face turning the same shade as her crimson shirt. I can only imagine how sexy it would be to see the other girls doing shots out of her belly button. Fuck. I wanna try. My cock’s getting hard just thinking about it.

I know what we need to do, and I don’t think twice about it. I’m not going to be dropping them off at their various apartments. No, we are heading back to Club Limelight.

“I can’t believe you did that, Hunter!” Allie’s voice is the most slurred of all of them. “You kicked those guyses azzes.”

“That was pretty cool,” Mia agrees. “But when you broke that guy’s arm, and the bone snapped, that was nasty.”

“That made me want to hurl!” Sadie agrees, and they all start laughing.

I steal another glance at Meg, trying to determine what she thought of me coming to the rescue, but she’s looking out the window, and I think her mind must be on other things. It’s too bad we have company in the backseat. Her hand is sitting on the edge of her seat, and my fingers tingle with the desire to reach over and slip her hand into mine.

It’s about midnight when I pull into a parking spot at the front of the club. We’ll go in the main door, like partiers, not like we work there. “What are we doing?” Meg asks me, but I don’t answer her. Instead, I get out, opening Sadie’s door before I go around to open the other back door and then open Meg’s and offer her my hand.

Finally, her warm fingers are in mine, and that electrifying sensation shoots up my arm. I can’t help but smile at her before I turn around to head inside. I don’t want to let go of her, but I do.

The club is hopping, and it will cost me a lot of money to send all of these paying customers home. But then, that necklace

the beautiful redhead is wearing also cost me a lot of money. She's worth it.

As we head inside, I tell Ethan, "Kill it."

He looks at me for a second with his eyes bulging out of his head, but then he nods, and I'm hardly in the door before word spreads and my team goes about sending all of the clubbers home.

Dylan makes an announcement. "We're sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but the club has just been rented out for the rest of the night by a very prestigious client. If you'd like to rent out Club Limelight for yourself, give us a call, but for now...you don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

"What's happening?" Meg asks, turning to look at me.

"It's your birthday party," I say with a shrug. "Let's celebrate."

I can tell she doesn't know what to say, so I leave her standing there, contemplating, and head to Carter. "Only make your best concoctions for us, Carter."

"Anything for you, bossman," he says before running a hand along his hair, which cracks me up.

The club clears out, and Dylan drops one of his favorite tunes. I turn around to see my crew on the dance floor, killing it, and I can't help but look at Meg. She's smiling so brightly, I know I made the right decision. That smile is worth millions.

# CHAPTER 16



MEGHAN

All of this for me? I can hardly believe it. Not only did Hunter give me a lovely necklace, but he let us have the night off. And then, when those douchebags started grabbing us on the dance floor, he literally kicked their asses.

Now he's brought us back to Club Limelight and cleared the floor so we can party. Carter is behind the counter making some excellent drinks while Audio Anarchy drops some sick tunes. This is the best birthday I've ever had.

Allie brings me a fruity drink, and we pick up right where we left off at the other club, all of the waitresses dancing together. Of course, Hunter let the backup staff stay, too. I don't know these people, but they sure seem to know how to have a good time as they join us on the dance floor.

Most of the guys aren't dancing, though a few are. Ethan is in the middle of it, which doesn't surprise me, but the moves he's performing are obviously meant to be funny. He's always joking around. When he starts the "water-sprinkler," everyone loses it laughing. Mia actually spits her drink across the floor, and someone has to go get a mop.

I glance around and see Hunter leaning against a wall, talking to that other big guy who never smiles. His name starts with an O...Omar or something? I don't know what his job here is, but like most of the other guys who are always in the back, he looks tough. At least some of the other guys are friendly, like Kaleb and Cameron, though Kaleb is always shoving food in his mouth, and Cameron is obsessed with video games to the point I saw Leah take his phone away once last week. Still, they always speak to me. Omar just kind of grunts.

Not that I care at the moment. He's not the big, tough guy I've got my eye on. It's the boss standing next to him I can't help but stare at. Not only is Hunter wickedly handsome, but he is also a mystery to me. I need to know more, to unravel him.



All I really know is that he's rich, owns this club, and has some sort of mafia/gangster connections that allow him to beat people up and make them disappear without going to jail. But he doesn't seem to just kill for sport. No, he only does it if he has a good reason. He's kind of like Batman...or Robin Hood.

Before I even know what I'm doing, my feet are moving in his direction. I set my empty glass down on a table and walk over to him. I've had a bit to drink tonight, but the fight sobered me up, so I know exactly what I'm doing when I stop in front of him and wait for Omar to finish his sentence.

"Hey, Meg," Hunter says, a lilt of a question in his voice. "Are you enjoying your birthday party?"

"I would enjoy it more if you'd dance with me." My voice sounds sultry even to my own ear.

Hunter arches an eyebrow over a sapphire eye. "Uhm...sorry to disappoint you on your birthday, Meg, but I don't dance."

I can't help the smirk that takes over my face. "You own a club, but you don't dance?"

He shrugs. "I own pots, but I don't cook either."

That makes me giggle in a way that has me questioning my sobriety. But I am sober. I run my fingers down the front of his shirt and reach for his hand. "That's fine. Don't dance then. Just come out to the dance floor and rock with me."

His mouth falls open like he wants to say something else, but he doesn't. Instead, he takes my hand, and we walk out to the dance floor, but not to where everyone else is jumping around, showing off their best moves. No, Hunter creates our own special place for us, and when he wraps his arms around my waist, I get as close to him as I can, my hands on his shoulders near his neck.

The scent of bergamot and pine has my knees weakening, and it doesn't hurt that he feels like a wall of chiseled marble beneath my palms. My skin feels like it's on fire where his hands are resting, and he's not even touching me directly. Thoughts of what it would feel like if his hands were on my

hips without this stupid skirt in the way have me biting down on my bottom lip.

I have to focus on something else, so I say, “Thanks again for the necklace. It’s absolutely gorgeous.”

“You’re welcome,” he says with a sheepish grin. “I wasn’t sure what to get you, but I thought a diamond was fitting for someone like you.”

“Why is that?” I ask, lifting an eyebrow.

“Well, because diamonds are formed under immense pressure. When the weight of the world tries to get them down, they take that energy and make it into something beautiful, something powerful, something...priceless.” He shrugs, like his words aren’t the most amazing statement anyone has ever said to me.

“You really think all of that about me?” My eyes lock on his, and I feel myself falling into some sort of trance. Not only is he kind, thoughtful, handsome, and rich...he’s really smart, too. Hunter Stone is the whole package.

“*I know* that about you,” he says with an intensity that makes me think he knows everything about me.

I lift up onto my tiptoes and press my mouth against his warm lips without even thinking about what I’m doing, without considering that people are watching, or that he’s my boss. All I can think about at this moment is expressing my gratitude and my longing for him.

When I realize what I’ve done, my face flushes, and I have to pull back. I’m ready to untangle myself from his arms and run away, but then I see the gleam in his eye, and he pulls me back, his mouth coming down hard on mine, devouring me.

The whoop from behind us that has to be Allie hardly registers as I am tasting Hunter Stone. Cinnamon, whiskey, and a hint of mint wash over me, and I can’t get enough of him. My hand slides to the back of his head to pull him closer as he continues to kiss me deeply. The fire that started beneath his hands on my hips radiates to my core, starting that familiar ache of want I’ve felt for days every time I think of him.

Hunter pulls away, and I find myself gasping for air. He looks around, and I can see he's thinking about all of these people watching us. I expect him to be embarrassed, but instead, he slips his hand into mine and says, "Let's go."

My feet are moving without question as he leads me to the back of the club, where the lounge and office are. I can hardly keep up with his long strides, and I am trying not to giggle like a giddy schoolgirl, but excitement pulses through me. I hope we are going somewhere private—not so he can yell at me for kissing him in public, but so I can finally get a deeper understanding of what it's like to be with this man.

Hunter pulls me through the door to his office and locks it behind him. I know he has a bedroom back here, but we don't make it that far. As soon as the door is closed, his mouth is on mine again, and this time, I can taste his want in every kiss.

He backs me up until I bump into his desk as his hands slide along my body, pressing through my clothing and leaving me breathless. His mouth slips to my neck, and I am gasping for air, begging him not to stop.

But Hunter does stop. He looks into my eyes and asks, "How much did you have to drink?"

I know why he's asking. He wants to make sure I can consent. "I'm sober," I tell him. "And I want this."

That's all the confirmation he needs as his hands fly up to the buttons of my shirt, making short work of it. I am not as quick with his as I fumble along, trying to get them undone. Once I'm in my bra, he grabs hold of his white button-down and gives it a tug. All of the buttons I have missed scatter across the floor as he tosses his shirt aside.

The sight of his chest takes my breath away. I run my fingers along his perfect pecs, down to his washboard abs and the V that is visible just above the waist of his jeans. I want to reach for his zipper, but before I can, he is removing my bra, and his mouth clamps down on a nipple. My hands no longer work as all I can do is shout his name and lean back onto the desk.

His tongue works in circles around my hardened peak, sucking, licking, bringing me to life. I have one hand on his shoulder now, but the other I am using to brace myself against the surface of the desk. I am losing the battle of keeping my feet beneath me.

And then he hikes up my skirt. I've already soaked through my silk panties, my thighs slick with want. He runs a finger along the outside of the silky fabric, and I grab hold of his hair, trying to keep air in my lungs.

Yanking them off, he bares me to him, and I am ready to spread myself as wide as possible to take him in, but he has other things in mind. With my skirt around my waist, he picks me up and sets me on the edge of his desk before dropping to his knees.

"Hunter?" I say, knowing what he's going to do. I'm not sure I'm capable of handling it at the moment. He licks up one thigh and then down the other before his tongue laps against my outer folds. "Oh, fuck!" I shout as he plunges inside of me, and then, he is a wild animal, lapping up my juices as he sucks my clit, burying his face between my legs. I lean back on the desk, trying to keep myself from slipping away.

When I come, it's hard. I am a ball of spasming muscle, crying out, trying to hold on to him, the desk, anything to keep myself from literally slipping away. He keeps me there, begging for more, begging for him to give me some relief, until I can't handle it anymore, and then, Hunter sweeps me up into his arms and carries me into his bedroom.

When he drops me on the bed, I take a moment to breathe, gulping in deep pants. He stands near the bed, removing his belt, socks, and shoes, and then unbuttons his jeans. I work my skirt off over my hips, so I am completely naked before him. When he pushes his jeans and boxers down over his hips, his cock springs free, and I am left moaning, longing for him.

He doesn't make me wait long. I spread my legs for him, and he pushes inside of me in one deep, powerful thrust that leaves me squirming beneath him. He is huge, bigger than any man

I've ever had, and the feel of him stretching me to my max has me crying out his name.

"God, you're so fucking hot, Meg," he says as he pounds into me again and again. I can't respond with words, but I sink my nails into his muscular back, wrapping my legs around him. He lifts my hips, his mouth on a nipple again, as I claw at the bed with one hand, trying to keep from plummeting over the edge. But I can't help but shout as he sends me toppling into ecstasy once more.

He pulls out without finishing, and I am confused until he guides me to turn over, tucking a pillow beneath my chest. This time, when he rams his way in, I can hardly handle it. "Fuck!" I shout. "Oh, Hunter, oh, God!"

My words inspire him to hit me harder, and when his hand begins to work my clit, I know I am not going to be able to take this much longer. My body is already convulsing around him. I've never felt this good in my life.

When he finally releases inside of me, I am almost relieved. My lungs are burning, and my muscles are tight and sore, but if that's the price I have to pay for the best sex of my life, so be it.

After a few moments, we move beneath the blankets, and I rest my head on his chest. He kisses the top of my head, and then he's out. I will follow shortly, but as my fingers trace the shape of the diamond necklace he gave me, I can't help but think about how that's the only thing I am wearing.

This night did not start or end how I expected it, but it is definitely a night I will never forget, and as I fall asleep, I'm hoping it's the first of many nights I will fall asleep in Hunter Stone's arms.

# CHAPTER 17



## HUNTER

I'm with Meg on a private beach, someplace tropical, where the ocean breeze stirs the leaves on the palm trees and makes her hair dance around her shoulders. The sky is vivid blue and meets the ocean in the distance, and all I can see is sand, sea, endless sky, and this gorgeous woman with her arm around me.

The sound of my alarm wakes me from this amazing dream, and as the buzzing drags me away from her, I hear her sweet voice echo in my head. "I'm so glad you finally fucked me."

My eyes are wide open now as I make my phone stop chirping and turn to find that the woman hasn't completely faded. She's not wearing a bikini with a flower in her hair. In fact, she's not wearing anything at all—except for the diamond necklace I gave her for her birthday. The piece of jewelry that started all of this.

She's waking up now, too, thanks to my alarm and having to pull my arm out from under her to turn it off, and as she blinks a few times, she remembers what happened—what we did—and her smile brightens.

"Oh, fuck," I mutter when my mind catches up with the world around me. Not only did I fuck her, but I also kissed her in front of everyone. The entire staff is going to know what we did. When Leah finds out, she's going to hang me. How many times have we talked about this, about how me sleeping with employees is the finest way to fuck everything up and have me right back where I was last time?

No, I swore to God I'd never do this again, and I shouldn't have crossed that line now. Yet, here she is, pulling the sheet around her gorgeous body so she can lean on her hand and smile at me, her beautiful face innocent and unassuming.

"Hi," she says, using one finger to slowly stroke my arm. "How did you sleep?"

All I can do is shake my head. I'm doing my best not to freak out, but I feel like I've fallen under the spell of a minx, and the longer I allow myself to lie here next to her, to pretend like this is okay, the worse it's going to get.

Memories of all of the shit my ex did to me, shit she was able to get away with because she was my employee, rush through my mind, and all I can say is, "This... was a mistake."

Meg's forehead crinkles as she pushes up to a sitting position, staring at me. I need to move, to get out of this bed, to put some distance between us. I swivel around, grab my boxers, and slip them on as she is still processing. I toss her skirt to her about the same time she gets there.

"Mistake?" she echoes. "What do you mean, Hunter? Having sex with me was a mistake?"

I nod. "Yeah, I'm sorry, Meg, but we can't—"

"Meghan!" she shouts at me, and now it's my turn to be confused. She picks up her skirt but keeps the sheet as she stands up to climb out of bed. She has gone from happy, to shocked, to fucking pissed in about ten seconds, and I am reminded of the night when she spilled that drink on me. You don't fuck with Meg unless you want to get your ass handed to you. "My name is Meghan! No one calls me Meg."

I am confused as I thought she liked that nickname, but as she storms into the adjoining office to find the rest of her clothes, I'm left with the realization that she probably did like it up until the very last time I said it. Now, it's a lie, like everything else I've said to her.

She's in the other room, angrily pulling on her clothes, and I stay back, knowing that I don't need to see her bare body again. It will make me regret my decision to call this thing off when it's barely even begun.

"Where the fuck is my shoe?" I hear her ask. Then a banging sound is followed by, "Shit!"

I rush into the room to see her crawling under my desk, and she's just hit her head really hard on the bottom of it. "Meg—han, are you all right?" I ask.



“What the fuck do you care?” She pulls out, and I see her shoe at the same time she does, over behind a potted plant by the door. I move to get it for her, but she says, “I’ve got it. Wouldn’t want you to get too fucking close to me. We might accidentally end up married.”

“Meghan,” I say, hoping she’ll let me explain. All she does is shake her head, and I know now is not the time. She doesn’t know about my ex, and she doesn’t know about my rules about dating people who work for me.

At least, she didn’t. Until a few minutes ago.

“You might want to go ahead and have one of your backup waitresses come in tonight,” she says, headed for the door. “I think I might’ve caught something from this asshole I hooked up with last night. I’m not feeling well.” She pulls the door open and turns to glare at me before she heads out into the hallway, slamming the door so hard the pictures on the wall shake.

Slumping down onto my couch, I take a few deep breaths. “Well, that went well.” I go over everything that just happened in my head again, and I realize I have been an absolute asshole. I should never have let this happen to begin with, but once it did, I shouldn’t have said anything to her while we were still in bed together. I should have at least had the decency to wait for her to get up, get dressed, maybe even go home and shower. Then I could’ve called her into my office early and said in a calm, polite voice, “We broke one of the cardinal rules of Club Limelight, and that is that I don’t date employees, and here is why.”

Now she’s driving home, she’s mad, and she’s not coming in tonight. Fuck! What if she quits altogether? Am I prepared for that? Do I really want to come to work every day knowing I’m not going to see her gorgeous face across the dance floor or accidentally bump hips with her in the hallway?

“Shit,” I whisper, getting up and heading back to my room to throw my clothes on. I’ve made a horrible mistake, and even though I don’t date employees, I’ve got to find a way to make

her calm down until I can explain the situation to her. I can't just let her go forever.

Either way, I am an absolute asshole who owes her an apology.

With my keys in my hand, I rush out the door, noticing the club seems empty at the moment, which is a rarity. I figure the night janitors are still here somewhere, but I'm glad no one saw her walk of shame, even if everyone knows what we did last night.

I rush to her apartment, hoping I haven't waited too long, and she'll at least listen to me. When I reach her door, I pound on it. "Meghan!" I shout, being sure to use her proper name. "We need to talk." I know she's here. I saw her deathtrap in the parking lot.

"Go the fuck away, Hunter!" she screams. "I'm busy! I'm online trying to list an enormous diamond necklace for sale. I bet if I sell this fucker, I'll never have to work again!"

I drop my head into the door, knowing I deserve all of that—for her to sell the gift I gave her and for her to not want to work for me anymore. "Meg, come on! You've got to let me explain!" The door next to hers opens, and an old woman holding a cat peers out at me. "We're just... having a disagreement," I explain. She shakes her head and disappears.

"You could've explained before you said I was a mistake!" Meghan yells, and she's right on the other side of the door now. "You could've at least said good morning. But no, you just had to let me start the day off by telling me how you wished you'd never fucked me!"

"I never said that!" I say, trying to keep calm. "I don't regret what happened, Meghan. I just...can't date you. And if I can't date you, then we can't do that again. And if we can't do it again...we shouldn't have done it, to begin with. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have ever led you on to begin with when I don't date employees." I was rambling at this point, but I needed her to hear it.

"So you're trying to say that you're glad you fucked me, but you never want to do it again because you shouldn't have done

it, to begin with?" she yells. "What kind of fucking games are you playing?"

"No!" I say. "That's not what I said. It's not what I meant to say, anyway. Meghan, I...I really like you. A lot. I think you're smart and beautiful and kind...and perfect in every way!"

"Then why am I a mistake?" she asks in a sarcastic tone.

I get a text from the new supervisor I hired telling me there's a disturbance in one of the hallways and asking if he should go check it out. I almost laugh. I'm the disturbance... I text him back that it's fine, I'm on it, and return my attention to Meghan. "You're not a mistake. But I made a mistake in not being upfront with you and telling you that we can't be a couple because I don't date employees. That's all I'm trying to say."

"Oh, okay," she says. "If that's all you're trying to say then fuck off!"

I am ready to bang my head on the door, but I decide to try one last time. "I'm so sorry, Meghan. I never meant to hurt you. You're a great waitress and an amazing person. And I'm sorry for being a fucking asshole."

With one last look at the door, I turn to go, convinced there's nothing I can say at the moment to make her understand. She just needs to take some time and cool off for a bit. Then, maybe in a few days, we can talk about this.

The sound of locks being undone has me stopping in my tracks. She pulls the door open, and I can see that she's been crying. Her eyes are puffy, and tear streaks stain her beautiful cheeks. Her hair is messy, and her shirt is misbuttoned. I've never seen anything so goddamn gorgeous in my life.

"So... what do you want, Hunter?" she asks me point blank. "Work and life situations and histories, all of that bullshit aside, what do you want? Do you want me?"

I look at her, still mesmerized by her beauty, my mouth dropping open as I try to process her question. The simple answer is yes, but nothing in life is ever simple.

I stand there for a beat too long, and by the time I'm ready to speak the truth, that I do want her, she slams the door in my face and shouts, "That's what I thought! Get out of here, asshole!"

"Meghan! Goddammit!" I kick the door in frustration and turn to go. I've really fucked up this time, and it has nothing to do with sleeping with her. Speaking to her seems like it's only making both of us more and more frustrated, so with my heart in my throat, I turn and walk away, hoping I can find a way to fix this.

If I have to give Meg up completely, I might not ever recover.

# CHAPTER 18



MEGHAN

I hear Hunter walk away, and I immediately collapse on the floor of my apartment, pulling my knees up into my chest as I wrap my arms around them, my head resting on my legs as I sob and sob and sob.

My heart feels as if it is being wrenched out of my chest, and I can't quite get enough air into my lungs. That sensation reminds me of when we were making love last night—or when he was fucking me, anyway—which just serves to make me cry harder.

I didn't love him. I didn't know him well enough or long enough to love him. This isn't one of those stupid-ass movies where the two people lock eyes across a dance floor and know they're meant to be together. We're not fucking Bonnie and Clyde or Romeo and Juliet or Tristan and Isolde. We're not... anything now. But we could've been.

We could've been any of those couples. We could've been better than any of them.

I do realize that all of the couples I've just listed ended up with tragic deaths to mark their demise, so perhaps I should think of less star-crossed lovers to compare us to, but it doesn't matter.

We're not Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez...the second time around.

I can picture Hunter's face in my mind, smiling at me, the way he looked when he kissed me, how his body gleamed in the dim light while we were having sex, and every time I see him, I collapse under another wave of grief. I feel so fucking stupid for ever thinking he would want to be with me anyway. He's the rich owner of a successful club and apparently has the underbelly of LA in the palm of his hand. Who the hell am I? Just a waitress at his club who clearly wanted to get laid last night, so he obliged.

Some of the things he said to me keep playing over and over in my head, like a TikTok video I haven't swiped away yet. He

doesn't date people who work for him. He doesn't get involved with employees. That was the mistake—not me.

But when he got out of bed this morning, wiping the joyful grin right off of my face, it sure the hell felt like he was saying I was the mistake, that it wasn't just because I work for him that he didn't think we should fuck around but because he didn't want to be with me.

It's really hard not to take this shit personally. It's really hard to see a guy you really like practically fall all over himself getting out of bed just to get away from you and then say, "Oh, but it's not because there's anything wrong with you, baby. It's just your job that's the issue."

Well, if he keeps this shit up, it won't matter because I won't want to work for him anyway. I meant what I said about calling in. I'm not leaving this apartment until I get my shit together, and something tells me that's going to take a while.

The carpet in this apartment is pretty thin. I should probably complain to the landlord about that. My hips are sore from sitting on it for so long. After an hour or so of lying on the floor, oscillating between crying fits and five-minute breaks where I pretend I know how to breathe again, I pull myself to a sitting position and then eventually, like a baby deer on fresh legs, to standing.

I'm not planning on going far. I head to my bed. I can still smell him all over me and really wish I could take a shower just to wash off his scent, but for now, I kick off my shoes and climb beneath the blankets, burying my head beneath my pillows with my blankets pulled up over the top of that. I theorize I can lie here like this for a good ten hours or so before I have to get up to eat or get some water. Maybe to pee... For all intents and purposes, this bed is my new home, and I'm not going anywhere unless I have to.

Eventually, the tears start to run down my cheeks again, and I start hiccupping and wallowing, and even though I'm doing everything I can to try to get myself together, it's just not working. I am a mess in every way imaginable, and I can't

stop thinking that loser, John Wilcox, in high school told me I'd never be good enough for anyone is probably right.

Eventually, I fall asleep, and when I open my eyes again, the sun is going down. I can tell through my blanket fortress. I push the comforter aside and rush to the toilet—my bladder wins—and then reassess.

I still feel like shit. A glance in the mirror tells me I *look* like shit. I don't even want to touch my phone because my friends are probably calling to check on me. The shower is calling my name, so I hop in and rub myself raw, trying to get the smell and feel of Hunter off myself.

When I am done, I get dressed in sweats and my slippers and head to the refrigerator. What I find there is abysmal. Because I am never home, I don't even have either of the two things one must have in these situations—chocolate and wine.

Slamming the fridge, I mumble under my breath and go to get my keys and wallet. A trip to the convenience store will have to be the cause of me breaking my eternal vow to never leave the bed again.

I don't care that my hair is wet and I have no makeup on. I rush in, grab the few items I need, and wait for the teenage boy behind the counter to ring them up.

“Tough day?” he asks, bopping my wine with the wand before moving on to one of three kinds of chocolate I laid on the counter.

“Yep,” I say.

“Boyfriend break up with you?” He doesn't look like the type of guy who is going out with a new girl every weekend, with his bad skin and thick glasses.

“No. My dog died,” I tell him, and the cocky look on his face fades away.

“Oh, my God! I'm so sorry!” He looks like he's about to cry, and I suddenly feel bad for the lie. But rather than trying to make up something else about it, I take my bag, hand him enough cash to cover it, and head out, letting him do what he will with the change.



Back at my apartment, I am ready to go inside and eat chocolate and drink wine while I watch the newest season of that raunchy real estate show on Netflix, when the door next to mine opens and Mrs. Woodside pokes her head out.

“Hello, dearie,” she says with a warm smile. “I was hoping that was you.”

I know I look like a disaster, and I’m suddenly embarrassed to be seeing anyone in this state, and then it occurs to me that she likely heard the fight Hunter and I had earlier, too. I was screaming all sorts of obscenities at him... I feel my face flush with embarrassment and fully expect her to tell me I’m going straight to hell the same way my grandmother would have if she’d heard me say the F word.

“Hello, Mrs. Woodside,” I say, my voice trembling slightly, like I am in the principal’s office at school.

“It sounded like you’ve had a rough day, honey,” she says. “I guess you broke up with your boyfriend?”

I am wondering why she is asking this, but since I’m not sure, I decide it is easiest to say, “Yes, I, uh, I broke up with him.” She doesn’t need any details.

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, dear. You know, the good ones will always find their way back to you. If they don’t, they’re not that good. Anyhow, I made these for you.” She extends a plastic container full of brownies to me.

I don’t know what to say. It’s one of the sweetest things anyone has done for me in a long time—other than the necklace I still haven’t taken off and the party my friends threw for me at work last night.

“You didn’t have to do that!” I exclaim.

“Well, I love to bake, and Mr. Whiskers isn’t much for brownies.” She laughs and gestures for me to take the container, which I do.

“Thank you so much,” I tell her.

She smiles and nods. “I sure hope you feel better, and he either gets his shit together or you drop his ass.”

My mouth falls open as I stare at her. Did Mrs. Woodside just say the S word? And the A word? She's giggling as she ducks back into her apartment, and I am left with the first genuine smile on my face since Hunter ripped it off.

In my apartment, a few minutes later, I have my three chocolate selections, a bottle of wine, and a container of brownies with me, along with my laptop, and am watching my favorite show until I am so full of sugar and alcohol I practically pass out. Shutting my laptop, I try not to think about Hunter and put the lid on the brownies. This is my agenda for tomorrow as well, and I don't want them to get stale.

I fall asleep hard and sleep late into the morning. I wake up to the sound of my alarm and turn it off. I'm not going anywhere. Later, when it's almost time for me to go to work, I haul my ass out of bed and go take a shower before I phone the club.

"Club Limelight."

"Carter?" I say, not sure if I recognize his voice or not. He shouldn't be there already. I've called the club floor number instead of the office because I don't want to talk to Hunter.

"Oh, my God, Meghan! How are you? Are you okay?" I can hear the concern in his voice.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I tell him. "I, uh, I just wanted to let you guys know I'm not coming in tonight. I mean... I'm sick. I'm not fine. But I'm okay." I'm not making any sense.

When I finally give him a chance to talk, the bartender still sounds sympathetic. "No worries, Meghan. We had a feeling you might be out again tonight. We've got your shift covered. You just take care of yourself, all right? And when you're ready, we look forward to having you back. We all miss you."

I feel tears forming in the corners of my eyes again at his kind words. "Thanks, Carter," I say, sniffing a bit. "That's really nice of you."

"Of course," he says. "If you need anything, let us know, all right? We're here for you."

I can only assume everyone knows what happened because they saw Hunter and I disappear into his office during the party. I feel like I'm doing the walk of shame over the phone, but Carter is being so supportive. It really makes me feel lucky to have such a caring work family.

I thank him again and hang up, but then it's back to my date with chocolate, brownies, wine, and real estate drama.

As I watch, I can't help but go over the conversation I had with Carter and how it warmed my heart. It's been a long time since I felt like part of a family. I certainly haven't felt that way since Mitch joined my real family. The idea that I can have people in my life who treat me like we are related by blood makes me smile. It's nice to know that I'll have them until I'm ready to start my own family.

I scoff at the thought. Like that's going to happen anytime soon. I don't even have a boyfriend, and if I continue down this path, I won't ever have one.

Not that you have to have a boyfriend to get pregnant...

I am about to put a bite of brownie into my mouth when my words register. "Oh, fuck!" I say aloud. "We didn't even use a condom."

# CHAPTER 19



## HUNTER

The phone rings a few times as I sit behind my desk trying not to think of how good Meg tasted when I had her legs spread wide on this very surface not that long ago—a million years ago. It's going to be difficult for me to focus on working here when every time I enter the room, I think of her sexy body, how good she felt, and how amazing it was to finally take her.

My thoughts are jarred away from the events of the last few days when I hear a familiar voice on the phone say, "Hunter! Long time no hear. What can I do for you, man?"

The sound of his voice makes me chuckle under my breath. "Tommy! How are you doing, you asshole?" I ask, and we both laugh. "How's the Vegas heat?"

"You know, we can't complain too much. It is a dry heat after all," he jokes, poking fun at the people who think that the desert air isn't so bad. "What can I do for you, man?"

Tommy runs the Vegas Club Limelight, and the two of us go way back. He's just one of the guys I've called recently to see if they can help me out with tracking down the money Jonathan stole. Now that I don't have Meg to obsess over, I've decided to refocus on the fact that that asshole stole from me, and I want my money back.

I explain the situation to him, getting up to pace back and forth as we talk. When I'm done explaining how Jonathan was my best friend and business partner who double-crossed me and took a hundred million dollars out of my account while he was doing it, I ask, "Have you heard anyone mention anything at all that sounds like it could be related to this?"

"No, man, I'm sorry," Tommy says. "Out here, we get all kinds of high rollers, but I think I'd remember something like that, some punk kid walking around with that kinda money. Nah, honestly, I think if he'd been spending it, everyone would know. He probably did something else with it."

“Something else?” I repeat, not sure what he’s getting at.

“Yeah, like squirreled it away somewhere or traded it to a cartel for the good stuff. Maybe he invested it into some new street drug. Who the fuck knows? I think you’re chasing smoke though, man, I hate to say.”

Tommy’s words irritate the hell out of me but only because I know there’s a good chance they are true. It’s been too long. I wasn’t able to track down Jonathan or the money for all of this time, and now that the punk ass is dead, I may never know what happened to my money.

The entire situation is infuriating, and I wish Jonathan was still alive so I could kill him again. But then, I also wish he was alive so I could torture the fuck out of him until he tells me what he did with my goddamn money.

Tommy says a few more pleasantries, and I pretend to be cordial, but as soon as he hangs up, I ram my fist through the sheetrock behind my office chair. Drywall, splinters, and a plume of dust hit me in the face, almost making me sneeze, but I’m too pissed to even do that.

Yanking my hand out of the wall, I see that I’ve split open my knuckles, but that’s an everyday occurrence for me. The fact that it wasn’t on someone’s face is different...

“Leah’s going to be pissed about that,” I mutter, otherwise not giving a damn. It didn’t make me feel any better, though. I am still ready to go exhume Jonathan’s body from his shallow grave so I can kill him again.

My phone is ringing, and for a moment, I think maybe it’s Meg. But then, before I even look at the caller ID, I know that’s not the case. Meg wouldn’t be calling me even if she did have my cell phone number. So then I think perhaps it’s another one of the club managers I’ve called looking for leads on Jonathan.

But when my eyes actually connect with the screen, and I see who it is, I’m shocked. As quickly as I can, I fumble with my bleeding hand to answer. “Riley?” I ask my younger sister. “Is everything okay?” She never calls me at this time of day.

“Oh, my God, Hunter! You are not going to believe what that bitch Hadley did!” Riley is obviously worked up about something, and while I’m sorry she’s upset, it is nice to hear the sound of her voice. It’s nowhere near the time of our regularly scheduled call, but just hearing her speak brings a smile to my face.

“What happened, Ri?” I ask. “Did you get into another fight?” I check the time. It’s the middle of the night in London. She should be asleep.

My sister groans. “I’m pretty sure you can’t call it a fight when that bitch swings like a kindergartner with a chicken wing for an arm.”

I bite back my laughter at the analogy. I am supposed to be angry at her when she gets in trouble and shout at her for letting us all down or something of that nature, but it’s difficult to treat her that way when I’m the one who has taught her not to take that shit from anyone.

She’s spoken to me about this Hadley girl before. She’s the daughter of some hoity-toity member of the House of Lords or some shit that makes her think she’s special. Ri has told me about how she walks around with her nose in the air making statements like, “I’m a direct descendant of Elizabeth I, you know” to which Ri really wants to crack her head open because everyone knows Elizabeth I didn’t have any kids—something she’s learned over there that I have no clue about.

Regardless, I’m supposed to be the mature adult here who gives her solid advice about how to interact with other humans, and every time she gets into a fight, for any reason, I feel like I’m failing because I have taught her how to survive, not how to play a meaningful role in society. Not that kind of society, anyway. Nevertheless, I am proud of the kid.

“I just didn’t think it was right of her to take that girl’s lunchbox from her, even if it did have a Pokémon on it and Hadley thinks that’s lame. Who died and left her the fucking queen of the universe! Not Elizabeth the First!”

Again, I find myself stifling laughter. “Isn’t this the same girl who wears Hello Kitty socks?”

“Exactly!” Riley says, grumbling a bit into the phone. “Anyway, the Headmaster says I have to do twenty hours of public service to make up for spilling the blood of a classmate. Really, she’s lucky I aimed for her lip and not her nose, or else she’d have to get a nose job to actually fix something instead of to just make that schnoz smaller.”

This time, I actually can’t control it, and I catch myself laughing out loud at her before I’m able to rein it in. “Listen, Ri,” I say, trying to find my ‘responsible big brother’ voice, “you know you can’t act that way and not expect to have consequences. Can you please try your best to keep your hands to yourself? You’ll be eighteen before too much longer, and then, you’ll be considered an adult. If you get arrested in LA, that’s one thing, but I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to bail your ass out of jail as easily over there—and forget about making it go away. I don’t have the same kind of connections in England that I have here.”

“Okay, okay,” she says. “I just wanted you to hear it from me instead of from the Headmaster. I mean, I know he’ll call you, but at least you’ll know what it’s about, and you can tell him the truth, that I was defending Muriel Packer and her lunchbox.”

“I hope Muriel appreciates what you did for her,” I say, envisioning a nerdy kid with buck teeth, thick glasses, unruly hair, and a Pokémon lunchbox held tightly in her grasp.

“Oh, she does. We are best friends now.” I can hear the eye roll in my sister’s statement.

“So let me get this straight. You don’t want anyone else to make fun of Muriel Packer, but you don’t like her either?”

“It’s not that I don’t like her,” Riley corrects. “It’s just... we don’t need to be best friends.”

“All right. Well, just play nice with the other kiddies, all right, sis?” I check the clock and see that the club has been open for about half an hour. It’s time for me to go make my rounds and check that everyone has everything they need in order to be successful for tonight’s shift, but I don’t want to hang up until I’m sure my sister is okay.



“Yes, sir,” she says, her tone dripping with sarcasm. I tell her I love her, she does the same, and then we say goodbye.

My phone goes back into my pocket, and I decide I’d better wash the dried blood off of my hand before I go out to the club. I think there’s a drywall repair kit in the closet, but I’m not sure it’s big enough this time. It’s not like this is the first time my fist has met the inside of the building.

As I walk down the hall to the club, my stomach begins to tighten with nervous anticipation. I haven’t seen Meg since she opened her door and asked me if I wanted her or not, and I did not answer in a timely fashion, so I don’t know what will happen when I see her now.

But I want to see her. I need to see her. I’ve missed her so much. It has only been a couple of days, but it feels like a lifetime. I can still smell her on my sheets; I haven’t washed them for that very reason. I’m already picturing her face when I walk out and survey the club.

Allie waves at me. I see Sadie and Mia across the floor, taking drink orders, and Lexi is dancing her way through the crowd with a tray. I am confused as I continue to look around. Then I see Stephanie, and my heart plummets into my stomach.

Turning around, I approach the bar. “Carter?” I call, and as soon as he gets done with the customer he’s serving, he comes over. “Why is Steph here?” She’s one of my backup waitresses who used to work here but has moved on to other things.

“Oh, uh... Meghan called in sick,” he says, and I can tell by his tone he both didn’t want to tell me that and also doesn’t think she’s actually sick.

I nod, trying to accept what he is telling me. Disappointment runs through me as I think about how it’s going to be a long night without her, but all I can think to say is, “Yeah, I think there’s something going around.”

He nods, but we both know that’s not the case any more than it always is. Besides, that’s not why Meghan’s not here. It’s because of me. I’m sure Carter, along with the rest of the staff

who was here that night, saw us kissing and then disappear together.

My bartender probably thinks I am a douche. And he's probably not wrong...

I start to turn around and go back to my office when he calls, "Are you all right, bossman?"

Carter and I are good friends. I've known him for a couple of years now, and I think I could probably confide in him. But now just doesn't feel like the right time. "Yeah, yeah, I'm good," I tell him.

He pretends to believe me and goes back to work, but as I head to my office, the music begins to dull, the lights are no longer as bright, and the energy of the club seems to dwindle around me.

Without Meg here, nothing is as good as it could be...

# CHAPTER 20



MEGHAN

Today is my day off.

I awoke to this realization not long ago, and ever since then, I've felt reenergized, despite my horrible diet the last few days, relentless bouts of crying, and worry over the fact that I had unprotected sex with a man I thought cared for me but actually doesn't care about anyone but himself, apparently.

No, today is my day off; it's the first day of my weekend, and I am going to enjoy it. That tip that Hunter gave me for waiting on his fellow mafia king is practically burning a hole through my bank account, so I may as well go have some fun.

There's not really a beach in the part of Ohio where I grew up. We have a few lakes, but nothing like the ocean, and one of the reasons I was excited to move to California was to be closer to the Pacific, so I've decided that today is as good a day as any to drive down the coast, find a secluded beach, and spend some time in the sun. The fact that it is slightly overcast will not deter me. I grab a book I've been wanting to read for a while, as well as my bathing suit, just in case, a towel, a nice, big floppy hat, some sunscreen, and my sunglasses.

Then I load up into my car and head in that direction, wishing I had a convertible so I could feel the wind whipping through my hair, but the tip Hunter gave me is not quite big enough to stop by the car dealership.

It is big enough for me to go through the drive-thru of a popular coffee place and get a large latte and a pastry, though, so I do exactly that before continuing my adventure.

I drive through city traffic and then out through the suburbs before I even glance at the clock. I want to be as far away from the hustle and bustle as I can get without ending up in a situation where I'm forced to get a hotel for the night. I drive through towns that get smaller and smaller until I've been driving for about an hour and a half since I left LA, and I

decide this is the perfect place for me to pull over and see what coastal living is all about.

A few other cars are in the beach parking lot as I pull in and get out, stretching my back and taking a look at the beach. It's gorgeous, and I can't wait to get closer to the ocean.

My feet are warm in the sand as my flip-flops sink in and nearly disappear with every step. The ocean begins to call to me, a soft roar that ripples as the white foam licks the shoreline and then retreats. Seagulls call overhead, circling, looking for food. White, fluffy clouds like something out of a Bob Ross painting drift lazily by, and in the distance, I see the billowing sail of a boat trying to collect the soft breeze for fuel.

I can't help but stop and breathe in the salty air. It smells so crisp and clean, and with each inhale, a spark of renewal ignites within me. I'm beginning to forget all of the shit I've been through the last few days.

The first thing I must do is dip my toes in the water. I think it may be a bit chilly today because I don't see many people actually playing in the waves. I know that there are different currents and things like that which affect the water temperature, though I'm no ocean expert. I love it already, though, and we just met.

That thought has me thinking of Hunter, and I have to shove the thoughts out of my mind. I do not love him—I did not love him—and it is silly for me to even let the thought enter my mind...

I slip my flip-flops off and walk over. The water is a bit chilly as I stick my toes in, but it feels good, refreshing. My feet sink into the wet sand that squishes between my toes. I lift my head to the sun and let it warm my face as a huge smile seems to erase all of the hardship of the last few days. I knew I needed to be outside today, and this is the perfect place to get some Vitamin D.

A little ways down the beach, a family has a large towel spread out, and the dad is playing with two little girls in the surf while the pregnant mama watches, rubbing her belly.

They aren't going too far into the chilly water, but whenever it reaches up and laps at their legs, they squeal and latch on to their daddy. I get a little misty-eyed looking at them because it makes me miss my own dad.

It makes me miss my own family. Not just my parents and being little, but somehow, it makes me miss the fact that I don't have a family like that yet. I don't have a man who loves me enough to want to have two adorable children and one on the way, with me. I don't have anything anywhere near that.

With a heavy sigh, I turn around and find a spot farther down, away from their giggles and squeals, and see a place near a large rock next to a palm tree to spread out my towel so I can read. It's beautiful here, and as I settle onto the towel, I try to let all of the worries that have been consuming me lately go, but it's hard. I grab my book out of my bag and remind myself of what it's about. I've been excited to read it for a while but haven't made time.

My book is open, but my eyes are on the horizon as I stare out at the surf. I can't help but think about how much my life has changed since I got to California. I never would've thought I'd score such an amazing job as the one I have at Club Limelight, and I've already made such great friends.

When I think about Hunter, my heart aches and my stomach twists into a knot again. It seems like my emotions are always on a roller coaster with him, and I know that's not healthy for me. I need to let him go. If I can forget about what happened between us, ignore his existence, and just go on about my job, my life will be much happier.

That will be easier said than done, but with time, I should be able to manage. It's not as if he will go out of his way to speak to me anyway. He didn't those first few weeks when there was clearly something going on between us, after he kissed me in his car. He stayed away from me like he thought I had the plague or something.

The ocean draws slightly closer as I think about how powerful Hunter is. He makes Mitch, my horrible stepdad, look like a cockroach that can easily be squashed. I remember thinking I

could never break free of Mitch's grasp when I was younger, and now, I know people who could make him disappear without a trace. It's too bad Hunter and I aren't on speaking terms, or maybe that's what I'd get my mother for Christmas.

Not that she'd appreciate it. How did she get so sucked in by him that he can do this to her, and she doesn't even notice? She just let him pull her into his world where he is lord of everything, and she's a serf.

The waves are making me tired, so I decide to lie back and rest, letting my mind go blank. I'm not going to worry about my family, present or future. I'm not going to worry about Hunter and the fact that he is not the person I thought he was or that we didn't use a condom. I'm just going to let the ocean sing me a lullaby.

I doze off, and when I open my eyes again, the sun is going down. Beautiful shades of pink, yellow, and orange glow from the heavens, and it's enough to take my breath away. I sit and stare at it until the sun is almost invisible below the horizon, and then I decide I'd better head home. I'm hungry for one, and I really don't want to drive through city traffic too late at night.

Gathering up my belongings, I head to my car, glad I came here. It's been an amazing day, and I know I can go back to work on Tuesday with my head held high.

I get my keys out and have them ready. Glancing around, I see that the family is gone, and there are only a few people milling around. A few of them look a bit shady. I don't really know this town or what it's like after dark, so I decide to be cautious. I walk with a purpose toward my car.

My key is in the lock, ready to turn, when I sense someone on my right and turn to see a guy in a dirty white shirt and board shorts coming over. He looks about ten years older than me, and even at this distance, I can smell that he's been drinking.

"Hey there, sweetie," he says, a crooked grin on his face.

"Stay away from me," I tell him.

“What?” he asks, as if I’ve done something wrong in expressing that I don’t want to be bothered. “I just wanted to see if you wanted to have a little fun.”

He gets too close to me, and I don’t think twice about what I do next. Taking a page from Hunter’s playbook, I attack first and ask questions later, ramming my knee right into the asshole’s crotch.

Doubling over, he backs up, grabbing at his junk. “What the fuck?”

“I told you to stay away,” I shout at him. “What the fuck is the matter with you men that you think you can just do whatever the fuck you want to, huh?”

He doesn’t try to answer, and I get my car unlocked and am inside before he can even stand up. With my doors locked, I peel out, spraying dust, sand, and pebbles in his face.

Adrenaline courses through me as I head back into the city, the music up loud as gangster rap blares from my speakers. I sing along with it, rapping like a typical white girl with no skills in that department, and I don’t care because it’s fun.

Today has been a day all about me. I have dealt with my feelings, let go of a lot of pent-up anxiety, and decided I am strong enough to face obstacles head-on. When I go into work next, I will do and be whatever I feel like doing and being, and the only person I’m going to worry about pleasing is myself.

I know my friends will be supportive if they have figured out what happened, so I’m not worried about that at all, even though it is a little embarrassing. Still, I will embrace it. Did I fuck Hunter? Yes, I did. Did it end badly for me? Yes, it did. Would I do it again? Fuck no. But it’s over now, and I can’t change it. So...I am now the new and improved Meghan, impossible to fuck over, impossible to bring down. And anytime someone starts to get on my last nerve, I will think of the ocean, calm my nerves, and then unleash the power of the tides that dwells within me.

And then I’ll knee them in the crotch and drive away with a smile on my face.



# CHAPTER 21



## HUNTER

*M*y fists grind into the bag at the gym, and I am working up a sweat, trying to get the angst out of my mind. So many things have fucking gone wrong lately that all I want to do is punch the living shit out of this bag until it either disintegrates or my arms fall off.

I'm whaling on it, giving it everything I've got, trying not to think about Meg and how I haven't seen her since that day she walked out of my office, and I followed her to her apartment with the intention of making things right and only managed to make things worse. I'm trying to forget how perfect her body felt wrapped around mine or what it sounded like when she moaned my name.

I'm trying to forget that Jonathan stole from me, and I didn't have the patience to interrogate him long enough to get the clues I needed to find the fucking money. It would've been wise to let him live long enough to tell me at least something to help me find it, but I was confident I could track it down.

Now I've used all of my resources and haven't gotten an inch closer to finding it. It's like the money just disappeared off the face of the earth, like a big hole opened up and swallowed it.

Much the same way that Jonathan disappeared from the face of the earth.

The final straw for me was getting a phone call from the Raven, fucking Velasco, asking me about the terms we'd "negotiated" the other night at the club. He seems to have forgotten that we never actually agreed to anything and that I was pretty adamant about not wanting to give him what he wanted.

He wants to come back and try again, and I don't want to see him, especially not since I know Marco will be in town soon. That asshole is going to stir up all kinds of trouble, and I don't want that for Leah or for my operation.

Leah has not busted my balls at all about Meg, and I think that's odd. Either she actually doesn't know, which is shocking because I figure everyone at work is gossiping about us, as people tend to do, or she just doesn't want to upset me. Since I've never known Leah to let something like this go, I think it has to be the former. Which makes me grateful to my staff. I consider bringing them all something nice, like ice cream sundaes, but then I remember that they're not twelve and ice cream melts.

Gift cards would probably be a smarter option... I let loose another round of aggravation on the bag, but it refuses to die, so I punch harder.

"Hey, there! Someone seems to be having a bad day," I hear a male voice say over my shoulder.

I turn to see Ryan, the guy I sparred with not too long ago, strolling toward me, taping up his gloves. "Hey," I mutter, but I'm not in a friendly mood, so I decide to save all of the social energy I have left for when I head to the club in a bit.

"Don't let me interrupt you now," he says, still using that teasing tone. "It's best just to let it all out on the bag."

"Yep." That's all I've got, and since it seems like the guy can't take the hint that I don't want to be spoken to, I decide it's time to call it a night. "See ya," I call to him, and then I head to the showers.

I manage to rinse off the sweat, but I can't rinse away the thoughts in my head, how I have fucked up more times than a whore on a pogo stick lately, and if I don't get my head out of my ass and start making better decisions, I'm going to have all kinds of issues.

When I'm done, I get out and dry off, thinking I need to get my priorities straight. As long as I have this issue going on between Meg and me, I'm never going to be able to concentrate on anything else. So I decide that as soon as I get back to the club, I'm going to straighten it out.

Assuming she's even there.

As I get dressed, the possibility that I may have already blown it crosses my mind. What if she decides she can't work for me anymore? If she thinks I'm such an asshole she won't be able to come in and cover her shift with me there, what will I do then? I can't even think about it. The idea of not seeing her anymore, of not ever looking out across the dance floor and seeing her beautiful smile, her red hair cascading down her back, makes me want to take a match to the club and burn the whole thing to the ground.

No, I've got to find a way to fix things with her.

Still thinking about what I need to say to her, I head back to the club and pull my SUV into my regular spot. When I look over and see her shitty deathtrap of a car in one of the parking spots, a sigh of relief exits my lungs.

But with the next inhale, I am fully aware of the fact that this means I have to figure out what to say to her. I am still her boss, after all. I can't just avoid her like she doesn't exist when I am in charge of making sure she has everything she needs in order to do her job. It's also my responsibility to make sure she does her job correctly so that our patrons are happy. How can I do that if I pretend not to know who she is?

I will have to figure out some way to speak to her, to say something that makes sense.

Heading in the back door, I walk through the lounge and see Carter looking in the mirror as usual. I'm about to shout at him to do his primping on his own time, but before I get the words out of my mouth, I check the time and see he's got a couple of more minutes before he's on the clock. The other bartender is on duty alone at the moment as they switch between who has the long shift and who has the short one.

I'm glad I bit my tongue on that one, but I have a short fuse tonight, and I can feel that it's about to blow.

"Hey, boss," Kaleb says, stepping out from behind the refrigerator as he closes the door. He has a large sandwich in his hands, which doesn't surprise me. The kid is always eating, but he still probably only weighs a hundred and a quarter at best. "Do you know if that mayo in there is still good?"

I stare at him for a moment, dumbfounded, trying to figure out why he is asking me about condiments. “What? I don’t know,” I tell him with a shrug. “Did you check the date?”

“Yeah, it says it expired yesterday, but I figure it has to have a couple of days on it still, right?” He’s looking at me like I’m his mom and I’m supposed to cook him dinner—and wipe his ass when he’s done in the bathroom.

“Fuck, Kaleb, I don’t know. Did you put it on your sandwich already?”

He stares at me, slightly wide-eyed, and then nods.

“Well, you’ll probably be fine,” I tell him, gesturing for him to go away, which he does. I turn, headed for the club floor, and see Carter is staring at me pretty hard. “What?” I ask.

“Nothing, Hunter. It’s just... you were a little rough on the kid, weren’t you? He just asked you your opinion about something.” Carter stays away from me, like he’s afraid he might be next, but he also tends to be the one to make sure the younger guys are all doing okay.

“He asked me about a condiment,” I tell him. “I think he’s old enough to figure that out by himself.”

Carter doesn’t say anything for a second, but then he asks, “Are you all right? Something...troubling you?”

“Everything is hunky-dory,” I reply, doubting he’s ever heard anyone say that before. I’m not even sure where I heard it. Probably my grandpa. I wave him off, too, and head out to the club floor.

Almost immediately, my eyes collide with hers, and all of the oxygen leaves my lungs. She is a sight to behold after all of these days. It hasn’t been long on the calendar, but it feels like a million years.

She looks good, too, standing there in a short black skirt and a tight purple top. I wonder if that’s the same black skirt she was wearing when I was devouring her pussy, but I know it’s not. I see the subtle differences in the cut.

Meg looks at me for a split second and then turns with an elaborate flip of her hair, and I am left feeling cold and alone.

Around me, the sounds of the club march on. Dylan's dropping some fierce beats, people are dancing, the lights are flashing, and laughter rocks through the air. All I see is her.

Once she's done delivering her tray of drinks, I move in, no longer able to keep myself away from her. I approach her cautiously, like a man walking toward a person standing on the ledge of a building two hundred stories up. I don't want her to get away from me and shatter all over the dance floor.

"Meghan?" I say, remembering her shouting at me for not using her full name before. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Mr. Stone, sir." She takes a very professional tone with me. "Was I doing something wrong in my waitressing?"

I stare at her, a bit dumbfounded, not sure how to respond. "No, of course not," I reply.

"Good. Then, if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to continue on with my work." She turns a bit, like the conversation is over.

Instinctively, I reach out and put my hand on her arm. She stares down at my fingers like they're ripping into her flesh. I pull away. "It'll only take a moment."

A loud sigh escapes her lips, and she follows me across the club floor to a secluded corner. "Yes, sir?" she says again.

I look at her for a long moment, trying to formulate what I want to say. The words *I'm sorry* are on the tip of my tongue, but they won't come out. When I finally do manage to work out some words, they aren't the right ones. "Are we good?"

Her mouth drops open slightly as she struggles to comprehend what I'm asking her. "Uh... yeah," she finally says. "We're good. Why wouldn't we be good? We're not just good—we're the best. I am the best I've ever been. Now, if you will excuse me, Mr. Stone, sir, I have work to do." Before she spins on her heel to walk away, she adds, "I wouldn't want to make any *mistakes*."

As she walks away from me, she starts whistling a tune, and it's a song I recognize but can't place. It's going to drive me crazy for the rest of the night until I think of it.

But what's really going to drive me crazy are the words she just peppered me with like bullets. No, we are obviously not good... And she's still under the impression that I think she's a mistake.

## CHAPTER 22





MEGHAN

The words to YonKaGor's "Another Mistake" continue to roll through my mind after I walk away from Hunter, whistling the tune that Audio Adrenaline just happened to drop about the time my shift started. It was a remix, so slightly different than the version that keeps playing in my head, but fitting nevertheless.

I can't believe Hunter had the nerve to come and ask me if we are all right. Of course, we're not all right! How could we possibly be all right? After the way he treated me—fucking me and then telling me it was nothing but one big oopsie... Fuck him.

I have some interesting tables this evening, and I do my best to put all of my attention on bringing my patrons the drinks they ordered without letting Hunter get to me, but it's difficult. I can't help but play our conversation over again and again in my mind. Thankfully, it doesn't seem to be affecting my ability to do my job. I'm gathering tips in the double digits with each tray of drinks I bring. It doesn't even bother me when that stupid-ass blonde twirling girl, who comes here almost every night and apparently likes to see us spill our drinks, almost takes me out.

What does bother me is when I see Hunter talking to another woman on the other side of the bar. I think I recognize her; she's an actress or singer or something. No one who has made it big, but the fact that he's willing to stand there in the middle of the club and chat with her right in front of me has my blood starting to boil. Granted, he isn't touching her. His arms are folded, and there's at least a foot between them. She looks like she's having to shout for him to hear her above the music, but she's gorgeous, and him being so close to her makes me want to go ram a drink tray up her ass.

"You all right, Meghan?" Carter asks me as I come back for another round of beers.

“I have never been better,” I tell him, forcing a smile I know he’ll be able to see right through. Behind him, I see Leah working on something that looks like a ledger. She turns and looks over her shoulder, smiling at me, but then she’s back to her work.

Carter raises an eyebrow at me, but he doesn’t ask me anything more, only pours the beers I need, runs a hand through his hair, and sends me off. He’s very busy, so it’s not like we’d have time to chat about all of the ways my life has been a fuck-up lately.

As I carry the tray across the dance floor, back to my table, I begin to wonder about the nature of Leah and Hunter’s relationship. They seem very close, almost like a couple sometimes, though I never see them do anything intimate. Still... I wonder... has she ever dated him?

“Here you boys go!” I say in a flirty voice as I set the drinks down in front of a table of men.

“Well, thank you kindly,” one of them says in a thick Southern accent that makes me smile. “You sure are purty.”

“Why, thank you!” I purr at him. “It’s nice of you to notice.”

“He flirts with everyone,” one of the other guys says, and then the guy sitting next to him punches him in the arm. “Ouch! I mean...not that you’re not pretty. You are. You’re gorgeous. I was just saying—”

“Drink your beer, Kenny!” the guy who punched him says, and they all laugh. I collect my generous tip of \$30 and head to another table, where the women are finishing up and all I need to do is gather the empties, which I do. Dancing to the music Audio Anarchy is playing, I head back to the bar.

Pushing through the half-door, I put my empties away just as Leah seems to finish up what she was doing in the ledger. Perhaps it’s the flirting that the boys at my beer table have been doing all night making me feel bold, but I find myself asking Leah a burning question. Even if she’s never dated Hunter, they’re close. She’ll know the answer.

“Leah?” I call to her, yelling a bit above the music.

“Hey, Meghan,” she says with a friendly smile. “What’s up?”

“Can I ask you a quick question?” I say to her.

“Sure,” she answers immediately, walking a bit closer to me, the ledger in her hands. “I may not have the answer, but I will do my best to help.”

A loud laugh escapes my lips. “I think you’ll have the answer. You and Hunter are pretty close, right?” I ask. She nods. “Cool. So I guess you’d know—is it just me, or does he fuck all of the waitresses and then leaves them hanging afterward?”

Leah’s eyes widen to almost twice their normal size as she stares at me, dumbfounded, and I suddenly feel very silly for having blurted that out. I know Carter heard me because his ears are red, and he’s glancing over his shoulder at us every few seconds. I think the patrons seated at the bar probably wouldn’t know what I was talking about enough to have pieced it together unless they heard every word, and judging by their expressions, they didn’t.

But Leah did, and she is still gasping for air when I say, “Never mind. I guess that answers my question,” even though it really doesn’t. I start to walk away, oddly proud of making her form that expression, thinking that I should just get back to work. She’ll probably say something to him. They’re super close.

Her hand clamps down on my arm, and she gently pulls me toward her. “Come with me, Meghan. Please?”

My eyes go back to my tables, but everyone looks like they’re pretty good for the moment. “Fine,” I say, setting my tray down behind the bar. She pulls me into the employee lounge area.

At the moment, there’s no one else around, but Leah keeps her voice down anyway. I can hear her over the thumping of the bass from the dance floor, but it’s not particularly loud. “Did the two of you... sleep together?” she asks me, still trying to process.

“You didn’t know?” I ask. “I figured you had to. Everyone else knows.”

She shakes her head. “No, I had no idea. When did—you know what? Never mind. It’s not my business.” She is flustered and presses a hand to her forehead.

I don’t mind answering the question she almost asked me, though. “The night that we had that birthday party for me. I know you weren’t here, but you have to know he shut the club down early so we could dance and drink, right?”

She nods. “Yes, I heard about that. So...the two of you slept together that night?” she asks me.

“We did more than sleep together, Leah,” I point out bluntly. “We fucked. A couple of times. And then...the next morning, he freaked out.”

“Shit,” she says, dragging a hand down her face. “Meghan, I am so sorry that this happened. I wish I would’ve known. I would’ve...said something earlier.”

“What is there to say?” I ask with a shrug. “It’s not like you can go back and make it so I have more common sense than to sleep with my boss, and it’s not like you can go back and make it so that he’s not an asshole, right?”

“No, I definitely can’t go back in time and change any of that,” she says, holding the ledger against her chest with both arms now. “But I can tell you there’s a reason why he’s acting that way. It might not matter to you under the circumstances, but I think you need to hear it.”

It’s my turn to be surprised. I feel my eyebrows shoot up and wonder if she is actually going to try to justify the way he’s treated me. “What in the world could that possibly be? His mother never loved him when he was a child, so he grew up to be a cold-hearted asshole?”

I think she’s going to laugh for a second, even though the question wasn’t meant as a joke, but then she gets a hold of her emotions. “No, it wasn’t his mother. But you see, Hunter used to date one of his employees. She started out as a waitress, and then she got involved in other parts of the

business. Ultimately, she tried to extort him. It ended up being a huge mess that caused him a lot of trouble and heartache, so...that's why he has this rule now. He doesn't sleep with people who work for him."

Her words flow into my mind, but they don't quite settle, and I'm not sure I'm willing to accept them just yet. I'll have to mull all of that over later, but at the moment, I am so mad that all I can say is, "Well, apparently he's forgotten about that rule because he didn't seem to have any problem sticking his dick in me."

Leah looks like a fish out of water trying to suck in oxygen as her mouth moves—open and closed, open and closed—but no words come out. I figure we've had enough of this discussion anyway, and I plan to turn and leave, but then she says, "I'm so sorry, Meghan."

"It's not your fault," I tell her. "Who knows? Maybe he's forgotten lots of times."

"No!" she says, her hand darting out to touch my arm. "No, he hasn't. I know that for a fact. He hasn't slept with another employee since she left."

I have no idea how she would know that since she didn't even know about me until I told her. It's definitely possible that other women have slept with Hunter, and he never told her. If no one else in the club saw it happen, they wouldn't know. "If you say so," I tell her. Now I really want to go. I need to get back to my tables or someone else will swoop in and get the tips I've been working hard for all night.

"Well, if you think of it this way," she says, still touching my arm, "since you're the only worker he's slept with since she left, that means you must be special to him, right?"

The laugh that escapes my lips sounds a bit maniacal, even to my own ear, but I can't help it. "Uhm, okay," I say. "Let's go with that. I'm special—for one night. Then, after that night is over, and he comes to his senses, not only am I not special anymore. I'm just a *mistake*."

Leah's eyes widen yet again as she asks, "Did he say that? To you?"

"Fuck yeah, he did," I tell her. "It was the first thing he said to me when we woke up. So... I have a little bit of trouble believing he could possibly think I am special in any way if that's his initial reaction to fucking me."

She chomps down on her bottom lip, and I can see her thinking over everything. I don't have time for this. I know she'll say something to him, but I don't need to wait around for it.

The door behind me opens, and Lexi comes out. "Meghan, one of your tables needs a refill."

"Coming," I tell her and then look back at Leah. "Sorry to have bothered you, Leah. Maybe this conversation was another mistake."

I turn to go, and Lexi can see I'm upset. She reaches for my arm. "What happened?" she asks.

I shrink away from her. "Nothing, babe. I'm fine," I tell her, finding a smile, but on the inside, I don't know if I should cry or scream.

Club Limelight was beginning to feel like a home, but I need to keep my head on straight. I'm here to work—not to find a family.

Family doesn't treat each other the way that Hunter has treated me...

# CHAPTER 23



## HUNTER

I need a new place to live, but I also need new offices. I can't have all of my businesses continue to run out of this small space in the back of my club. While I am continuing to consider where I should make my home away from the club, I'm also scrolling through office buildings that are currently for sale. I see a few that catch my eye and do a bit more investigating of them.

One of them is in the downtown area, and it's just about perfect. The space is ample for what I need. The building is relatively new, so I wouldn't need to do much to it, but it's very expensive, and I'm not sure I'm ready to make that kind of an investment after I just gave Silver Towers away for pretty much nothing and bought the apartment building next to it—Meg's apartment building.

Another space I find is really nice on the inside and certainly big enough. But it's a fucking strip mall, and those places just seem cheap to me. I'd rather have a skyscraper. But then again, this area of town is on the brink of booming, and if I could get the current building relatively inexpensively, I could do whatever I want with the property later.

“Busy?”

Leah's voice seems to come from nowhere. I didn't even hear her come in, but she is standing in my doorway now, one of our ledgers in her arms, the look on her face telling me that even though I'm not that busy, I should lie and say that I am so that I don't have to hear about whatever it is she's about to tear my head off over.

“Uhm—”

I hardly get a syllable out before she's interrupting me. “You fucked a waitress?”

My mouth is still agape as I stare at her, not sure how to answer. I mean, obviously, I did fuck a waitress. There's no disputing that. I'm shocked she hadn't heard about it before.



I'm curious as to how she found out about it now...and I'm embarrassed that I don't have any sort of an excuse for what I did.

Leah walks over and leans against my desk. She's standing in the exact same spot I was standing when I lapped up Meg's sweet juices as she sat on my desk in nothing but her skirt wrapped around her waist.

"I may have had sex with a waitress," I say, closing my laptop.

"In your office?" Leah asks, suddenly looking around.

I shrug. It's not her business. It isn't like no one has cleaned my desk since then.

Her eyes widen as she starts to look a bit grossed out. "Where?"

"Why is that your business?" I can't help the chuckle that escapes my lips.

"Hunter! Where?" she says, and I only laugh louder until she looks down at my desk and jumps back about two feet. "Gross!"

"I never said it was on my desk," I tell her, still trying not to laugh.

"You never said that it wasn't," she replies. "Hunter, This is serious, You have rules, remember? And one of them, one of the most important ones, is not to screw your employees."

"I know, I know," I say, holding a hand out toward her, trying to calm her nerves. "I messed up."

"I mean, rules are rules," she says in true lawyer fashion. "You can't just go around breaking them whenever you fucking feel like it! What if you broke the number one rule?"

I raise an eyebrow. "What's the number one rule again? I wasn't aware that they had rankings."

Her face is turning red she's so fed up with me. "The number one rule is don't die, idiot!" she shouts at me. That makes perfect sense to me. If I end up dead, I can hardly enforce any

of the other rules. “Hunter, you’ve got to do something about this situation with Meg. This could be a serious problem.”

“Relax, Leah,” I tell her, and her eyes scrunch up even more. I think the number one rule should actually be to never tell a female to “relax” or “calm down.” In my experience, one can get super close to actually breaking the real number one rule of don’t die if you give a female either of those pieces of advice enough.

“Don’t tell me to relax!” she barks. “I’m the one who was there when everything happened with your ex, remember? I’m the one who had to help you put the pieces of your life and your business back together, and while I don’t think that Meg would ever do anything like that to you, I still think that you have these rules for a reason, and you need to follow them!”

“You’re right,” I tell her, and that seems to make her a little less scrunched up and red. Women do like to hear that phrase, in my experience. “You’re absolutely right. I shouldn’t have done it, but now that it’s done, I need to fix it. And I am fixing it.”

She purses her lips together, her head tipped to the side as she flips her hair over her shoulder. “And...how in the world are you doing that, exactly? Because I had a conversation with Meghan, and she doesn’t seem to think it’s fixed.”

It’s upsetting that Meg doesn’t feel like I’m doing anything to fix it. I tried to talk to her. I tried to make sure we were okay, but she didn’t really want to hear me out. So...I have to tell Leah what else I’ve been doing to try and smooth it over.

“Listen, Meg’s a cool girl. I haven’t been harassing her or following her around or anything, you know? I’ve just let this go and am pretending like it hasn’t happened at all. I want her to feel like she can do the same—just forget about it.”

Except I will never, ever be able to forget about it. I’m quite confident in that assessment since I can’t get that gorgeous redhead out of my mind, and every time I see her, I want to press my lips against hers again. I want to bring her back here for round two and fuck her so hard she can’t see straight, leave her breathless and moaning my name again...

“Hunter!” Leah shouts, and I realize she has been talking to me, but I wasn’t paying attention because she’s giving me the look she always gives me when she’s talking and I’m not listening. “This is not something you can just pretend away. It’s no wonder you’ve been acting like such a colossal asshole lately!”

“Leah,” I begin, gesturing for her to take a seat in the chair across from me. “You know I wouldn’t let anyone else get away with talking to me that way, right?” It doesn’t even make me mad that she just called me a giant asshole. She’s right. I am one. I have definitely been one lately. And it’s not just because of the situation with Meg. There’s the issue with Jonathan and the money, as well as Velasco demanding more territory. No, there’s nothing easy in my life right now.

“I’m sorry, bossman,” she says. “It’s just...I like Meghan. She’s a hard worker. She’s scrappy. She’s got a great attitude. I think the two of you would actually be really good together under different circumstances. But I was there. I know how it went last time. I don’t ever want to see you in that sort of situation again. I care too much about you to watch you fall victim to a royal bitch one more time, especially one who is sneaky enough to seem to be a cool person.”

I listen to her, taking her words in, thinking about everything she has to say. I know it was hard for her to see me go through all of that, almost as hard as it was for me to go through it. She’s not just my lawyer; in a lot of ways, she’s also my best friend. I value her input, and I trust her advice.

But in the case of Meghan, I know I’m making the right decision. I need to just let these feelings for her I’m having pass, get through this, and move on. “Trust me, Leah,” I tell her, giving her a smile I hope she knows is genuine. “I’ve got this figured out.”

She takes a deep breath, holds it for a second, and then slowly lets it out. “Just be careful, okay? I’d hate to see either one of you get hurt, and I think Meghan is in a lot of pain right now. You said some things that really hurt her.”

“She told you that?” I ask, seeking clarification.

Leah nods. “Yes, she did. You’re going to have to do something so Meghan understands that when you called her a mistake, you didn’t mean it the way she took it.”

“Shit,” I mumble. If Meg’s talking to Leah about the specifics of the situation, then she is hurting even more than I thought, and that makes my heart ache. I didn’t mean to hurt her at all, and now I’ve gone and created a situation where she feels bad about herself because of me.

I still think it’s best if I give it a little time. In my experience, trying to fix things too soon usually makes it worse, and I already tried to fix it a few days ago and failed.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I tell Leah, but I’m not convinced that I should do anything at all.

Leaning forward in her chair, Leah says, “You know, everyone sees how tough you are, how you don’t take shit and know how to handle yourself in every aspect of your business—whether it’s the club, the underground, or the other legitimate businesses you run. But, Hunter, you’ve got to remember that it’s okay to be vulnerable sometimes, to be a regular human. We all care about you and want what’s best for you.”

She reaches across the desk and squeezes my hand.

“Thanks, Leah,” I tell her, suddenly feeling better than I have in a really long time. “I’m fine, I promise. And I think Meg will be, too. It might take her a little bit longer because she’s putting up with a jackass like me, but she’ll get there.”

“I sure hope so,” Leah says, standing. She walks over to the bookshelf across my office and puts the ledger where it belongs. “I like that girl,” she says with a small smile. “And I can see why you like her, too. Just...try not to make her quit. She’s good at her job, and the rest of the staff really likes her, too.”

“I know,” I assure her. “I’ll do my best not to make her quit.” I give her a reassuring smile, and she heads to the door.

Just before she exits, she stops and turns back to look at me. “Oh, and, uh, make sure you get some disinfectant wipes for that desk.”

I pick up a notepad and toss it at her, but she's out the door before I can hit her, and I can hear her laughing as she scurries away. I laugh, too. She's such a pain in my ass. But I love her.

With Leah gone and that painful conversation over with, I open my laptop and start to look at offices again. I see one I want to check out and decide to jot down some notes, but my notepad is across the room on the floor.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, irritated at myself for tossing it. I decide to just get another one for now, but when I open the drawer, I see the box that holds the bracelet I purchased for Meg.

I haven't looked at it in a while, but I can't help but open it now. I see all of the charms that remind me of her, and my heart feels heavy in my chest.

Am I making the right decision?

# CHAPTER 24



MEGHAN

Two weeks. It's been two weeks since Hunter and I fucked in his office, and while I have been feeling better about myself, for the most part, than I have felt in a long time, I'm just not feeling it at all today.

I show up for my shift, trying to look my best, but my skirt is a little tight, and I don't know why. It might be all of the chocolate and wine—but I haven't been binging on that since before I went to the beach to find a different sort of solace.

Walking into the club, I say hello to Allie and some of the other girls. They are talking to Stella Rose, the dancer who sometimes performs with Audio Anarchy. I don't know her very well, but I am drawn to her. She has a crowd around her because she's so enchanting. She smiles at me, the lights in the lounge reflecting off of her mocha skin, and I can't help but smile back.

"You're the new girl, right?" she asks, her accent something like a Southern drawl mixed with high-society British. It's lovely, and something I don't believe I've ever heard before. She extends her hand, and I shake it.

"I'm Meghan," I tell her. "It's nice to meet you. I've seen you dance a few times. You're so good. You could go on tour with JLo or something."

Stella's smile falters slightly, and I wonder what I've said. Perhaps she doesn't like JLo? But she says, "Thank you, that's sweet. I'm going to go finish getting ready. Nice to meet you." She waves her goodbyes at everyone else and steps away.

I look at Allie. "Did I say something wrong?" I ask.

"No, no, you're fine," she says, patting me on the arm. "She just has a history she doesn't like to talk about, and I think it's holding her back."

"Oh, damn," I mutter. "I didn't mean to hurt her feelings."

“No worries!” she says. “Hey, we’re all going to the diner tonight after our shift. You’ve got to come. You’ve never been before.”

“The diner?” I question.

Mia literally claps her hands. “Yeah! You’ll love it. They have the best bacon!”

“Mia and her bacon.” Lexi laughs. The others join in, and I press a smile to my face, but suddenly my stomach isn’t feeling well. I don’t know if it’s the mention of greasy bacon or something else, but a pain shoots through me, and I have to hold on to the wall for a second.

“Are you all right, Meghan?” Sadie asks me, a concerned look on her face.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I tell her with my hand over my stomach. “Just...I don’t know. Not feeling great.”

They all give me sympathetic looks, but it’s time for us to make our way to the dance floor, so we head out, and I try to put the uncomfortable feeling in my abdomen, which is now shooting down to my legs, aside.

My clients are great, as usual. I get to wait on a table full of actors from a movie that they’re making down the street. One of the guys, Rhett Carlisle, is a comedian, and every time I bring him another beer, he does a different great impersonation. His Christopher Walken is spot on. He has me laughing so hard I start to forget about the cramps I was having earlier.

And then it dawns on me... cramps. “Oh, shit!” I mumble as I drop my tray off at the bar, rushing to the back.

“Meghan?” Carter calls after me as I rush by him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, forcing a smile over my shoulder as I push through the door, almost running into Leah.

“Hey,” she says in a friendly tone. I smile, but I don’t have time to chat. I rush to the restroom and pull my skirt up out of



the way so that I don't have to mess with the belt and pull my panties down.

Red.

"Oh, God!" I collapse onto the toilet, relieved but also embarrassed. I will need to check my skirt to make sure nothing leaked through, but it isn't much blood. It's just enough to ruin these panties.

Tears fill my eyes, and I almost can't handle how happy I am to know that it's my period. For the last two weeks, I haven't allowed myself to dwell on the fact that Hunter and I had sex without using a condom, but it's been in the back of my mind. Now, seeing this, I am so happy I am literally crying, but I'm also uncomfortable because damn, if these cramps don't hurt.

I sit in the stall for a few minutes, trying to get my shit together, but the tears don't want to stop, and then I hear the outer door open, and I am a sniffling mess, trying not to draw attention to myself.

"Meghan?" I hear Sadie's voice right outside of my stall door. "Are you all right, babe?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I tell her. "Would you mind grabbing my bag out of my locker though, please?" I always keep a tampon in there and some extra panties—just in case.

"Of course," she says, and I tell her the combination so she can grab it for me.

While she is gone, I manage to get myself together. I check my skirt and see that, thankfully, there's no blood on it. I take my panties off and dispose of them discreetly, and then Sadie is back, and she slides my bag under the door. I put on my fresh panties and insert a tampon while she's peeing. When I come out, I take one look in the mirror and say, "Well, fuck." I swallow a couple of pain pills, using water from the sink to wash them down.

Sadie is giggling at my remark as she washes her hands, and I try to figure out how the hell I'm going to go back out there and finish my shift looking like I just ran a marathon. My makeup is all streaked, my hair is messed up, and my face is

puffy and red. I look awful. Forget about getting any more tips tonight.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Sadie tells me, seeing me trying to fix my hair. “But I think we can make it better. Wait here, and I’ll be right back.”

I raise an eyebrow at her, wondering why she wants me to hang out in the employee bathroom, but I do as she says, and she leaves. It gives me time to try to scrub off the eye makeup that’s dripped down my cheeks.

A few minutes later, she returns, only she is not alone as Stella is with her, and she’s carrying a makeup kit unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. “Girl, don’t you worry,” Stella tells me. “I’ve got enough experience putting on stage makeup, I can fix you right up!”

Her confidence has me smiling, so I have no objections to letting her try. She doesn’t let me look in the mirror until she’s done, but when she does, I hardly recognize myself.

I look good—better than normal. Better than ever.

“You’re a miracle worker,” I tell her, and we all laugh. “Thank you, Stella,” I add, and she hugs me before she goes.

I turn to Sadie. “Thank you so much for all of your help.”

“Of course!” she says. “What are friends for? You know, I’m not sure what the problem was, but I can tell you... if it was a guy... he’s not worth it.”

I arch an eyebrow at her. It wasn’t about a guy—not exactly. But it certainly involved the actions of one. I listen to what she has to say, thinking she’s right, and then give her a hug. Despite the situation with Hunter, I am sure now that these people are my friends, and that this is my family. Club Limelight feels like home again.

As Sadie heads back to the dance floor, I drop my bag back in my locker and head out behind her, and immediately, I can tell there is a difference. Leah’s eyes widen when she sees me, and Carter says, “Well, hello there, gorgeous.” I punch him playfully in the arm and grab my tray.

I've had more confidence in my step since I kned that asshole at the beach and realized I could stick up for myself, but now, wearing this makeup, I feel like a million bucks. I go on collecting orders, delivering drinks, and racking up tips, not even worried about the slight cramps I'm still getting.

About an hour before my shift ends, Ethan saunters over to me while I'm waiting on a table full of rowdy guys. At first, I think maybe he's just going to tell them to settle down, but then he says to me, "Are you a parking ticket?"

I stare at him for a second, waiting for the punchline, but he just looks at me, so I say, "No, why?"

"Because you've got 'fine' written all over you tonight, baby." He runs a hand through his unruly curls and just grins at me.

I can't help but shake my head. "That was...awful," I tell him. "Seriously, the worst pickup line I've ever heard, and some guy just told me he was Microsoft and wanted to crash at my place tonight."

"Damn, that's a pretty bad one, too," Ethan admits. "I'm just joking. It's what I do." He shrugs.

"I've noticed that about you," I say with a wink, and he tells my table to straighten up or he'll pound their asses before he goes back to his post by the door.

I can't help the giggle that escapes me as I head back to the bar. I spend the rest of the evening with a smile on my face and a laugh in each word that slips between my lips.

With my last tray of drinks delivered, I head back to the bar, ready for the closing crew to come in. "Have a good night," Carter tells me, looking a bit longingly at me as I take my apron off and drop it in the bin for the wash. I know he's not wanting to be with me, though. He's just jealous he can't go home yet.

"Sorry you've got the long shift tonight," I tell him. "And it's so busy."

"I'll live," he says with a shrug, but he looks forlorn. "I heard you're all going to the diner."

“Oh, yeah, we are,” I say. “Sorry you can’t come.”

“Me, too. Have fun. Try the pancakes. They’re the best.” He gives me a half-smile, and I pat him on the shoulder before pushing through the door to the employee area.

The rest of the girls are all laughing, getting their purses. “There she is!” Sadie says.

“I’m ready!” I tell them. “Let me get my stuff.”

“You wanna ride with me?” Allie calls.

“That sounds great.” I’d rather not drive to a place I’ve never been before, even if it is nearby.

They all gather in the corner by the exit, and I hurriedly get my bag to join them, but when I turn around, Hunter is standing between me and the girls.

“Hey, Meghan,” he says quietly, rubbing his hands together. “Can I talk to you for a few minutes?”

I have no idea what he wants to talk to me about, but I don’t want to keep the other girls waiting. “Not now,” I say dismissively. “We’ve got plans.”

He opens his mouth, and I can tell he wants to protest, to ask me to stay and talk to him, but he doesn’t. He glances over his shoulder, and Allie waves at him. Dropping his head, he nods. “Fine. Have a good time.”

“Yep.” It’s all I can manage as I step around him and saunter over to the girls, and as I go, I can’t help but begin to whistle that familiar tune I had stuck in my head the other night —“Another Mistake.”

# CHAPTER 25



## HUNTER

Something is definitely different about Meg.

It was clear to me earlier in the night when she'd come out of the bathroom, looking like a million bucks. She always looked good, that was for damn sure, but whatever happened while she was in that restroom, when she walked back out, it wasn't just her makeup and hair that looked different; it was the way she was holding herself.

I watched from across the club floor as she went about serving her tables, bringing beers to loud guys who'd obviously already had enough. Thankfully, we would make sure they got rides home as part of our concierge service. Meghan held her own with all of them, gathering in tips by the handful because of her confidence. She looked amazing, and she knew it.

Even watching her talk to other women, some of them celebrities who had stylists who wouldn't let them leave their houses if they didn't look like they were camera ready, told me that this was a new and improved Meg. She was just as dazzling as the most famous movie stars in the club tonight.

So...after her shift was over, I couldn't help but approach her. I really wanted to speak to her about what happened between us. It hadn't been enough for me to merely ask her if we were okay. No, I needed to actually talk through the situation with her and let her know that I still care for her—a lot.

That doesn't mean I'm ready to throw all of the rules I've set into place out the window and start dating an employee again, but it does mean I'm fully aware that I need Meg in my life. I'm not content to just stand by and watch her with her customers and friends and be an outsider. I need to be able to speak to her again, to approach her, to touch her... I wish it could be more, but for now, I'll take it.

Now I am sitting in my vehicle outside of an all-night diner watching my girls laugh and chat it up, wishing I was in there with them. Taking a deep breath, I run my hand through my

hair, my eyes locked on that beautiful face as Meg giggles at something Allie has just said.

Her hair catches the light above their table, exploding in fiery sunset hues, and her jade eyes sparkle, even though it's so late it's practically early, and she's got to be tired. She looks right at home with the other girls, even though she hasn't been here all that long, and I am glad she's made friends so quickly and easily.

Making friends isn't easy for everyone. After all, I am sitting out here in my SUV alone, watching them like some kind of an outsider. I miss that sometimes, that comradery, that easiness that holds people together. It's been a while since I've felt like I was really a part of the group that works at Club Limelight. It's different when you're the owner, the boss. People are afraid to be too open with you, afraid they might get in trouble, afraid they might be judged.

So...here I am, all alone, glad for Meg and the other girls but wondering whether the syrup is as sweet as it looks and if the coffee is strong enough to keep them up all night after they get home.

I won't know.

I can't continue to sit here. I'm not afraid that they'll spot me. After all, they are busy carrying on a spirited conversation. No, I haven't seen one of them even glance in this direction since I arrived almost thirty minutes ago. They're too caught up in one another for that. I could probably bang on the window and demand some pancakes, and they wouldn't notice.

Instead, I shift my vehicle into reverse and slowly pull out of the parking lot, not sure where I'm going but not ready to go back home yet. The club will be closing in about twenty minutes, and I just don't want to deal with any of that hassle at the moment. I'll let Leah and Carter handle it tonight.

That's one thing about living at the club: I don't usually get any privacy. Even when I tell them I'm not working, there's a good chance they'll come and hunt me down. If I let them get everything closed up and head home themselves, then I can

sneak in the back and go straight to my rooms without having to worry about them wanting to tell me about what I missed... not until tomorrow, anyway.

The streets of LA are never asleep. Plenty of other people are driving around even at this hour of the night, though most of them probably have more legitimate business that has them out at this hour. Either that or they are up to no good. My grandma used to say no one has any business being out at 3:00 in the morning unless they're up to trouble. And I would know because there've been plenty of times I've been up at this time and also into trouble...

I drive along, the bright lights catching my eye, but my vision usually takes me to the darkest shadows, the areas where things go down that other people don't need to know about. I've got a lot of deals on my mind right now—some that have not gone my way. Like the missing money and the situation with Velasco. I can't help but glance down every dark alley I pass, wondering if something is happening there that will make my life hell.

Or maybe it will make it easier. If the Raven fluttered off never to be seen or heard from again, I wouldn't shed a tear. If Mr. Nyx went missing, I wouldn't send anyone out looking for him.

I stop at a red light next to a sports car with the top down. A couple of young guys look like they are out way past their curfew. The driver revs his engine, inviting me to a street race. I laugh. I am too old for that, and there's no way the vehicle I'm currently driving is faster than his Ferrari. Now if I was in my Porsche, I'd be tempted to take him on, but when the light changes, he floors it, and I just lightly press the gas down, not needing to show off to anyone today.

Eventually, I meander back home. It doesn't feel much like home as I pull into my parking spot and head inside. It feels like work. I've been speaking to my accountant and to Leah about buying a new office space and better accommodations for me personally, but I fucking hate moving, and the idea of doing so makes me nauseated, so I keep putting it off.



It sounds like everyone is gone as I walk through the employee area of the club and head back to my rooms. I'm glad for it and am sure to lock the door behind me. Once inside, I pour myself a scotch and decide to go sit outside for a little while.

I slide the glass door open and look up at the heavens, disappointed again that I can't see a single star. One of these days, I want to live someplace where I can look up into the sky and see a tiny pinprick of hope winking back at me.

Sitting down on a deck chair, I take a deep breath and sip my drink. Even though I'm in a densely populated area, I've gone to great lengths to make this private, with tall wood-tone walls on three sides and the other looking out over a bricked-in garden area that gives me some green space but also keeps other people from invading my tiny oasis. It's certainly not an oceanside escape, but it will work for me to be able to sit out here and gather my thoughts tonight.

The scotch burns a little going down, reminding me that I'm still alive. I'm not part of the group—I'm the boss. I'm not with Meg—I'm her boss. I live at the club—I'm the boss... Sometimes I wish I wasn't the boss anymore so I could be one of them, just an average Joe worker who can be part of the gang. I haven't felt this alone in a really long time.

As I sit here, I think about the night that I killed Jonathan. I remember standing outside of Mr. Nyx's studios as the boys loaded him into the vehicle, noticing how there were no stars above us then either. It's easier to operate beneath a sea of black than it is with dots of light winking down at you, reminding you that nothing stays hidden forever.

Well, maybe that's not true. Maybe some things do stay hidden forever. I've been actively looking again for the money Jonathan stole from me for over two weeks, and even with my connections and resources, I haven't been able to find a fucking thing. I don't understand how he could make a hundred million dollars just disappear off the face of the earth.

What was even the point in taking the money if he wasn't going to spend any of it? I've followed his financials for the last year or so, since he robbed me, and as far as I can tell, the

most expensive thing the asshole has bought was a pair of Nikes worth about three hundred dollars.

So...where the fuck is my money?

If I get it back, what will I even do with it? I've thought about using it to fix up the apartments where Meg is staying. I think she deserves a better place. Her apartment isn't so bad, and I bet it looks great since she painted it. When I was there to try to win her back—something I failed miserably at—I didn't take the time to look at the paint job. Still, she deserves a nice penthouse apartment somewhere.

I can't stop thinking about her, and it's literally driving me crazy. When I close my eyes and tip my head back, I can envision her beneath me, the way her body felt, the scent of her. I can hear her calling my name, moaning, coming undone beneath me.

"You sure have fucked things up, Hunter," I mutter as I take another drink. That is the understatement of the year. For someone who is known as The Fixer, it seems like my own life is a complete and utter disaster. I finally care about a woman enough to want to make her mine, and she hates me. She won't even speak to me. And she keeps whistling that damn song.

What the hell is that song, anyway?

I pull my phone out of my pocket, determined to solve at least one mystery. I can't whistle worth a damn, but I can hum. I open up my search app and hum the song into it, hoping it's close enough for the computer inside of my phone to recognize the tune.

It doesn't take too long for it to come up with an answer. I read the title and swear under my breath. I can't help the maniacal laugh that escapes my lips as I toss my head back and think about how fucking clever Meg is.

"Another Mistake," I say to myself out loud. I read through the lyrics. Some of them fit, some of them don't, but one thing is damn sure: The woman is an evil genius for getting under my skin so completely this way.

I finish my drink and set the glass aside, closing my eyes and lifting my face to the skies. I'm not a praying man. God has to hate me for all that I've done, even if I've always been able to justify my actions. But I'm not above sending a wish out into the universe. "Let me get her back, somehow," I mumble.

When I open my eyes, I see it—way up above my head, dim beneath a rolling cloud and all of the smog. But it's there.

One tiny star.

# CHAPTER 26



MEGHAN

Music is playing over the PA system as I stroll down the sidewalk, and I can't help but sway my hips to it a bit. It's a totally different kind of music than what I'd hear at the club. Audio Anarchy drops sick beats that make people want to dance, but this music is more upbeat and catchy, and I can't help but smile as I walk along, swinging my shopping bags.

It's Monday, and I have the day off, which is awesome. I felt like last week was a long one. I had a lot of fun with my friends and made a lot of money in tips, but it's nice to have two days in a row where I don't have to do anything but take care of me.

Yesterday, I slept in and treated myself to a nice lunch. Today, I am shopping. I've already picked out a couple of cute outfits. One is definitely for work. A cute purple top and a short silver skirt. The other is more for lounging around the house—an oversized hoodie and some soft denim jeans. I suppose it will stop being summer here one of these days...at least for a little while...won't it?

I'm on my way back to my car when I happen past a salon and just casually glance through the window. What I see has me stopping in my tracks. One of the stylists is just finishing up this woman's hair, and it's stunning. On the top, it looks like normal blonde hair, but when the stylist lifts it up, beneath the first layer is a rainbow of color. It's so gorgeous, I can't help but stand there and gawk at it. All of the colors are so vibrant—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. She looks amazing, and I am suddenly so jealous of people who can be so bold.

I honestly don't think I could pull that off... But then, as I stand there, watching the woman leap up from her seat and hug the stylist, I remember how empowered I felt at the beach when I rammed my knee into that guy's groin. I remember how sexy I felt the other night at work when Stella did my

makeup. Maybe the old me couldn't pull off a hairstyle like that, but hell, this isn't the old me. This is Meghan 2.0, and I think that I would look amazing with a little color in my hair.

Just maybe not all of the colors in my hair...

I decide to go inside and book an appointment. I'm sure a salon like this is very busy, and I will probably have to wait a few weeks to get a slot. Maybe by then, my timidity will be back, but for now, I am ready to make this happen.

The woman with the rainbow hair is paying as I walk in, her stylist, a tall woman with short blue hair that's styled a bit like it's the 1940s with a black ribbon in it, says, "That'll be one-eighty, hon," and I almost choke. Damn, getting your hair done in Cali is expensive!

"Totally worth it!" the woman says as she swipes her card. "Thanks so much, Skye!"

"Thank you for the tip!" the stylist, Skye, says. "If it starts to fade, come back, and I'll touch it up. Have a great day, Rain."

I almost laugh that her name is Rain and Skye gave her a rainbow in her hair...but I keep it together as it's my turn to approach the counter. "Hey, there," Skye says. She's about my age, maybe a little older. "Are you Shirley Buckner?"

I glance around, like maybe she's talking to someone else. "Uhm, no," I tell her.

"Damn," she says under her breath. "Where is she? She's two hours late!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say. "I just...uh...I was hoping I could make an appointment." I'm starting to feel a bit jittery, like maybe this is dumb. Maybe I don't belong in a place like this after all.

"Sure, sweetie." Skye's friendly smile cheers me up right away. "What would you like to have done?"

"Well, actually, I just saw what you did to that woman's hair, and it's so pretty," I say as Rain is long gone out the door and down the street. "But I don't think I could pull that off. Maybe just one color? Like... some lowlights or something?"

“Absolutely!” Skye says. “With your coloring, you’d look great as a blonde.”

“Blonde?” I repeat. I have red hair. Does blonde look good when you have red hair? She seems to think so.

“Sure, come look.” She reaches across the counter and gently tugs my arm, and now I am following her to the back of the salon where there are tubes of color but also books with pictures in them of different cuts and colors.

She expertly flips to a photograph of a woman with long, wavy red hair, a lot like mine, and her complexion is light like mine as well. On the next page is the same model with a nice blonde color running through her hair. It’s subtle—nothing crazy—but Skye is right. It works nicely, and I agree. It’s just what I was looking for.

“That would be amazing!” I tell her. “When can you get me in?”

“Well,” she says, glancing at the clock, “I called Shirley about an hour ago to remind her of her appointment, and she said she’d be here right away. Since I already canceled my current appointment to make room for her, and her ass is still MIA, why not right now?”

My eyes enlarge as I stare at the stylist, not sure I’ve heard her right. “Now?” I clarify. “Right now?”

“Oh, are you busy?” she asks me.

“No.” I’m not busy...I’m just scared. I don’t tell her that, though.

“Sure, let’s go for it.” Skye has my arm again, and this time she’s leading me over to a station, and before I have time to think about what is happening, she’s taken my bags, put them aside, and set me in the chair.

Skye works quickly, and though she tries to explain to me each of the steps she’s taking, I don’t really know what she means. Stripping color, adding color, etc. She talks a bit to the other two girls who are doing hair here, but mostly she chats with me, asking me about why I moved to California, what I do for a living, how I like it here, etc. I find out she was born and

raised here, that she has a boyfriend—Rick—and that they are considering moving in together. She's super easy to talk to, and now I know why my grandma always joked that her stylist knew things even Grandpa didn't know.

“So...no boyfriend?” she asks me as she begins to take the little foil wrappers out of my hair.

“Ugh...” It's about all I can manage.

She laughs. “Complicated?”

“You could say that,” I tell her. “There is a guy, but we only slept together once, and then he told me I was a mistake.” I almost shake my head but then realize that's probably not a good idea.

“Well, I hope you told his ass goodbye!” she says. “No one gets away with treating you that way, Meghan. You're too hot for that—and too nice.”

I feel myself blushing. “Thanks,” I tell her. “I have basically ignored him ever since it happened.”

“Is he still coming around?” she asks, sounding shocked.

“Not exactly. We...work together.” I don't want to tell her he's my boss.

“Maybe it's time for another job?”

“It's crossed my mind.” That's not a lie. “But I like my job too much.”

“Well, then maybe you can get him fired,” she says, and I laugh. If she knew how impossible that would be, she wouldn't have suggested it, but the thought of saving up enough money to buy the club and then firing Hunter brings a smile to my face. That's a bit too much money to spend just for spite, though.

When Skye is finally done removing the foil, she takes me back to rinse my hair, and then she cuts, dries, and styles it. She won't let me see it until it's all done. I tell her not to take too much off, and she just gives me a trim and changes my bangs a little.



When I look into the mirror, I hardly recognize myself. Now I know why that rainbow woman was so happy. “Oh, wow!” I gush.

“Do you like it?” Skye asks me.

I practically hop out of my chair. “I love it!” I proclaim, hugging her.

She laughs. “I’m so glad.”

Skye rings me up, and it’s not as expensive as Rain’s color, but it’s still a lot. I don’t hesitate to give her a big tip either, though, because she deserves it, and I can afford it. My tips have been amazing lately, and something tells me that with this haircut, they’ll be even better.

On the back of her business card, Skye writes her cell phone number. “Let me know how it goes with that guy. Or if you wanna hang out sometime.”

I can’t help but smile. “Yeah, definitely,” I say. “And anytime you and Rick wanna come to Club Limelight, just tell Ethan, the bouncer, you’re my friend, and he’ll let you in.”

“Cool!” she says. We say goodbye, and then I head out. As soon as I step through the door, a woman compliments my hair, and my smile widens.

It seems like a waste to go home and not show my new hair off, but I’m tired, and I’ll see my friends at the club the next day, so I take myself home and order Thai takeout, deciding to watch some Netflix and maybe even go to bed early.

About the time I finish up eating, my phone rings. I hope it’s Skye at first, but then I realize she doesn’t have my number—I have hers but haven’t texted or called or anything. It’s no one I really want to talk to.

With a deep breath, I answer, knowing that if I don’t check in with her, she’ll just keep calling. “Hey, Mom,” I say, trying to sound enthusiastic.

“Hi, Meggy!” she gushes. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I say, my tone a little flat. I’m just feeling too good right now to think about what life is like back home and let my

mom bring me down.

“How’s work?” she asks.

We chat for a few minutes, and I am vague while she goes on about her friends and how they’re putting together a yard sale. Then she says, “Mitch and I have been talking about coming out there to visit you.”

I almost drop the phone. “What?” I ask her. “You...and Mitch?”

“Yes, of course, honey. He misses you, too.”

I almost gag. “I’m sure he does. Mom, I don’t mind you coming to visit. Hell, I’ll even fly you in.” I don’t particularly want her to visit, but I can understand why she’d want to. “But Mitch? Absolutely not.”

“Meggy, honey, I don’t understand the hostility. He’s your stepfather, and he loves you.”

“Mom! He’s a pervert! He ogles me every chance he gets. I’ve told you about this before, and I’m not going to pretend like everything is okay just because you continue to. I’m sorry, Mom. You can continue to turn a blind eye to that...asshole... all you want to. But I refuse. I love you, but I can tell you right now, I am never, ever going to see that man again, and if I do, he’d better be wearing a steel cup.”

With that, I hang up, a bit out of breath, a bit angry, but so goddamn proud of myself.

As I sit here thinking about this newfound confidence, I realize I have Hunter to thank. If he hadn’t treated me like garbage, I never would’ve realized just how amazing I can be. Now, I’m not letting anyone steal my power. Ever again.

# CHAPTER 27



## HUNTER

“*I* assure you, Mr. Stone, you’re not going to find a place better suited to your needs than this property,” Henry Scott, my realtor at the moment, tells me as we look over the strip mall he’s brought Leah and me to see. “I know you said no strip malls, but as you can tell, this isn’t an ordinary strip mall, and the property is in such an up-and-coming part of the city, even if you razed it, I’m sure you could absolutely build something that would make you your money back in a year or two.”

I stare at him, trying to decide how to respond to that. Henry is old enough to be my father and has probably been in real estate as long as I have been alive. He knows the market. He knows what’s available, and he knows what I’m looking for.

I’ve had a look at all of the different units here in what’s currently called Oak Ridge Crossings, thanks to one of the two major streets that run by it, and I see exactly what he’s talking about. It’s a Monday, and even though about half of the buildings here aren’t open—either because they are currently empty or because they’re restaurants that are closed on Mondays—the parking lot is surprisingly full.

He’s taken us to a business office that occupies three floors on one side of the shopping center, and it’s a nice space. It’s big enough for everything I need and then some. The offices here would be large with nice views, and the building itself is upscale compared to most strip malls. Each unit looks more like a luxury apartment than just another store.

I can even see myself putting in some apartment buildings in the back parking lot, which really isn’t needed, especially if I also put in a parking garage. If I did that, I could have my own apartment near my offices, and I wouldn’t have to live and work in the club.

The price is also very good considering how volatile the market is right now. “Why is it so cheap?” I ask Henry.

He gives me a professional realtor laugh and says, “Not cheap. Inexpensive.”

I chuckle under my breath. “Right. So why is it so inexpensive?”

“Because the owners are very motivated to sell. They’re moving to Dallas. They’re liquidating all of their properties in California.” He smiles at me, and I can’t help but shake my head.

Is everyone in California moving to Texas? If so, that just means more cheap properties for me with perfect ocean views. “All right,” I say. “Let us talk about it, and we’ll get back to you.”

“I wouldn’t wait too long,” the realtor says. “This one will be gone in days if not hours.”

I nod and smile, aware of the market. We step aside, and I ask her, “What do you think?”

Leah is always more practical than I am. She taps her lip with a pen as she thinks. “It’s a nice location. It’s big enough for what you want. The office space is great. It’s also not too far from the club, so when you have to go over there, and we both know that will probably be every day, you can come back here easily enough.”

“Do you think I could add some luxury apartments over there?” I ask, pointing to the location where I was envisioning a high rise.

“I don’t see why not. I already checked the zoning laws around here, and it’s legal. You’ve got the money.” She shrugs, and I bet it’s killing her not to add that I would have more money if I’d sold Silver Towers for more than a dollar—or if I hadn’t sold them at all—but she doesn’t say that.

I’d have more money if Jonathan hadn’t robbed me, too...

Returning my attention to Henry, I say, “All right. Put in the offer at full asking price, fifteen-day close, cash.”

His eyebrows raise. “Cash?” he repeats.

Shaking my head at him, I say, “How long have you been my realtor? Yes, cash.”

An excited chuckle escapes his lips as he says, “Yes, sir, Mr. Stone. I’ll draw the papers up right away and get them over to the listing agent.”

“Good. Call me back when we have a deal,” I tell him, and he knows that means he doesn’t get to fail at this. Oak Ridge Crossing is mine.

The next day, Tuesday, we sign the paperwork, and we are set to close in just two weeks, which gives me time to move some money around and also to get some inspections done on the place. Just in case. I’m in a good mood for a change. In fact, that night, as the club opens, I can’t help but smile and pat everyone on the back.

“What’s wrong with you?” Carter asks as I compliment his hair. “Did aliens come down and steal the real Hunter? Are you Martian Hunter?”

I laugh. “No, I’m just really happy today. Aren’t I allowed to be happy?”

“Sure, you’re allowed to be,” Carter says. “But that’s never stopped you from being a grump before.”

I chuckle again as I walk away, asking Brandon how his sandwich is and telling Omar to cheer up. And they call me a grump—does that man ever smile?

We have some pretty important clients come in, and I’m over visiting with them, laughing to the jokes of a stand-up comic, when I see a glint of blonde of the corner of my eye.

My attention leaves the comedian completely as I turn to see Meg gliding across the club with a tray in her hands. Her smile is absolutely gorgeous, and her body is smokin’ in a red top that hugs her in all of the right places, and a silver skirt that glitters in the neon lights. But it’s her hair that really catches my attention. It’s cut a little differently—and it’s blonde.

She looks fantastic, and I know that my mouth is hanging open as I stare at her. I might even be drooling.

“Hey, Hunter,” Ralph the comic, says, “you need a bib or a mop for all that salivating you’ve got going on? You look like a newborn staring at his mama’s tits!”

Everyone in the group laughs, and I immediately close my mouth. “Oh, uh, sorry. I think that’s... Jenny Lewis over there,” I say, referring to a famous movie star.

“Oh, I thought you were staring at that gorgeous waitress,” one of Ralph’s friends says. “Now, that girl is hot enough to make Jenny Lewis look like... a Muppet.”

They all laugh, and I have to wonder if all of Ralph’s friends are comedians, too, or if they just think they are.

I try not to ogle Meg from across the club, but it’s hard when she looks so damn good. It’s clear to me that she knows it, too. The way she walks around the club floor, so sure of herself, so confident, it’s like she’s evolved again. And she’s raking in the tips as well. Everyone seems to have their eyes on her. She’s stealing the show.

But then, the fact that everyone has their eyes on her makes me nervous, too. I walk over to Ethan after I’m done speaking to Ralph and say, “Keep an eye on Meg tonight, huh?”

“Sure,” he says with a shrug. “Why?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. Some of those guys have been drinking a bit too much at her tables, and I just have a bad feeling.”

“Sure thing, bossman,” he says, and I cross back over to the bar to see if Carter needs a hand. We are getting really busy.

I help him with a few trays of drinks, and he thanks me. “You keepin’ an eye on Meghan?” I ask him as I get ready to go speak to another customer who has gold key status if he needs it. He’s an investor from the San Francisco area, and though Bill’s not around here much, he’s an important client, so I need to speak to him when he is.

“Yeah, a couple of those guys are getting a little rowdy,” Carter says. I turn to look, and I see what he’s talking about, but Meghan’s on her way back for another round at the

moment, and I'm not about to stick around and speak to her. I can see no reason in spoiling her good mood.

I walk over to talk to Bill, but I'm watching Meg out of the corner of my eye. Carter's right—that table is getting out of control. She sets the beers down, turns to address a guy on her right, and then the guy on her left smacks her ass.

Fire rages up inside of me as I can't believe what I've just witnessed. Bill is standing in the way, and I don't want to tackle him in my haste to get there to help her, but I do have to interrupt him midsentence and dart over.

By the time I get there, though, the situation is handled. Meg has brought her stiletto down into the guy's foot. Her fist darts out and connects with his nose, and a spurt of blood cascades down his face. "If you ever fucking touch me again, you asshole, I swear to God, you'll be peeing through a straw, do you hear me?"

"Hey, baby!" he protests, but then Ethan has him by the shirt, and the rest of the jerk's friends, who had thought it was hilarious a minute ago, fall quiet. "All right, prick," Ethan says as Carter wraps his arm around Meg's shoulders protectively, "it's time for you to get your ass in a cab."

"All of you, go!" Carter shouts at the rest of the table, and all four of the men get up, grumbling as they drop bills on the table, knowing they won't ever be welcome to come back here if they don't pay their tabs.

Ethan gets them out, and I stay back, even though my instincts tell me to run to her, to wrap my arms around her and pull her to my chest. To kiss her lips and promise her no one will ever touch her that way again. But that would make me just another unwanted man placing his hands on her without her permission.

"Are you all right?" Carter asks her, and he looks genuinely concerned, which makes a fire begin to burn in my soul.

I hear Meg's response. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just one of those things. Thank you, though. I'm glad you got over here so quickly, you and Ethan."



“No problem,” he says. “Do you need some ice for your hand?”

She shakes it out a few times and says, “Nah, I’ll be all right. Back to work I go.” He releases her, and she pats his arm lovingly—and then she turns around and her eyes are on me.

The expression on her face is unreadable at first, as if she didn’t even know I’d been watching her. But then, she rolls her eyes, and even from this distance, I can tell she’s making a “humph” sound as she turns around and saunters back to the next table to check on them. Everyone seems concerned about her, but she laughs it off, like it’s no big deal.

I am utterly and completely helpless in my own club, letting my other workers take care of the one person I care most about because I can’t be there for her myself.

I return to Bill, apologizing for the disruption, and he says it’s no big deal as he continues to talk about his newest business venture, but my eyes aren’t on him. I’m looking over his head.

I’m watching Meg.

# CHAPTER 28



*MEGHAN*

“*T*hat was amaaaazing!” Allie says, coming over to me and clapping me on the back. “You actually punched that guy in the nose!”

“Really, Meghan! That was so boss!” Sadie agrees. “If I could do that when someone slaps my ass...”

“You can and you should!” Lexie tells her as she also pats my shoulder. “I am so impressed, girlfriend!”

“Thanks, you guys,” I say, gushing. I honestly don’t know what came over me. I was just so pissed that that man had dared to touch me, I had to do something. Punching him in the face was an afterthought, after I drove my heel into his toes. It had felt so good to hurt him the first time, I couldn’t help but get a little more revenge on his face.

Back at the bar, I wait for Carter to get the round of beers I need to take over to my other all-male table. These guys are far more polite than the rowdy assholes who have just left, though, courtesy of Ethan’s bouncing services.

“Something is different about you, that’s for sure,” Carter says, setting five beers down on my tray, his long fingers able to handle them all at once. “I think it’s a good change, Meghan. You seem to have really come to life recently.”

“Thanks,” I say, smiling at him. “I guess I’ve just decided not to put up with any bullshit anymore.”

I take the beers over to the table and set them down in front of the men. “Those guys were disgusting,” one of them says. He’s an older gentleman, and I’m guessing he must be worth quite a bit based on his suit. It seems a little strange to see a bunch of middle-aged men in suits in the club and not in the back rooms, but as important as these fellows look, I’m guessing they just don’t have one of those gold keys.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “Some guys think that just because I’m a waitress, that makes me some sort of a prostitute or

something, but I wouldn't have let one of those guys touch me for all of the money in the world."

They chuckle, and one of them adds, "I guess you showed him what happens when they do."

I smile at him, but I'm honestly a little tired of talking about it at this point. I just want to finish my shift so I can go home and get some sleep. It's been a long day, and while I'm totally happy with my new highlights and feeling good, my feet are getting tired.

"Well, here's a little bonus tip for your trouble, miss," the first guy says, handing me a rolled-up wad of bills. "You've done a fine job for us tonight and provided excellent service. You deserve it."

I don't want to be rude, so I don't look at the tip right then and there, but I gush all over him, like I already know it's a huge amount of money. It feels like it is, but for all I know, these are one-dollar bills. Still, it's the thought that counts. "Oh! You don't have to do that! Thank you so much!"

"I insist," he says, holding up a hand to stop me from trying to refuse. "You took care of that waste of space better than anything I ever could have imagined. Have a good night, miss."

"Thank you!" I tell him again. "That's so kind of you." I head back to the bar with a quick glance at the clock and see that my shift is just about over.

After I take a few more rounds to a couple of other tables, I call it a night. Ethan is off, too, and he walks back with me to clock out. "Well, I guess I better be careful around you right now," he says, and I know the bouncer is getting ready to make a joke.

I am a little distracted by the wad of cash I'm fishing out of my apron. I didn't get a chance to stow it away in my bag behind the bar, and I am really curious to see how much that guy gave me. But I play along with the joke. "Why is that?" I ask Ethan.

“Well, because you’re getting ready to clock out, right? And I don’t want you to clock me and knock me out!” He laughs at his own lame joke, and I give him a sympathetic chuckle.

Allie is behind us and says, “I think you need some sleep, sweetie,” and leaps up to tussle his unruly dark curls. “That was terrible.”

“Why you gotta be so mean?” Ethan asks, and I let them go ahead of me to clock out while I check out the tip.

When I’ve finished counting it, my mouth is hanging open, and I feel like I need to run back out there and tell that guy thank you again. “Holy shit!” I mutter. It’s over two thousand dollars. I haven’t gotten a tip like this ever except for the time Hunter gave me that mega tip after I worked that back room for him.

I put the money in my bag and then clock out, grabbing my stuff out of my locker. I’m so ready to go home. Turning around, I wave at some of my coworkers who are headed out the door, and then I freeze.

Hunter is standing in the doorway that leads back to the lounge—back to his quarters—back to his office.

“Hey, Meghan,” he says, his hands shoved down deep into his pockets. “You got a minute?”

“Uhm, I’m pretty tired, actually,” I sputter, hoping he’ll just let me go.

“Won’t take more than a couple of minutes.” He has a pleading look in his eyes, and even though I don’t ever want to be in his office alone with him again, I find myself moving forward. Something tells me that it’s better to just get this conversation over with, whatever it is.

As I follow him, my stomach begins to twist into knots. What if I’m in trouble for assaulting a patron? Everyone else has been patting me on the back and telling me I’d done a great job, but he hadn’t said a word to me. He hadn’t come over to see if I was okay or to tell me ‘way to go’ or anything.

What if that’s because he’s pissed that I punched that guy?

When we walk into the office and he closes the door behind me, I swallow hard, trying to come up with something to say to either defend myself or beg to keep my job.

Hunter stands in front of me, and I can't really read his expression, but he doesn't look mad. He looks...forlorn. His eyes have dark circles under them I hadn't noticed when we were out in the club with the neon lights. His hair is a little messy, and he seems like he has a lot on his mind.

"What's going on?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Nothing much. I just...you seem different recently. You've got new hair...a new swagger in your step. I just...I think it all looks nice. But usually, when someone changes like that, there's a reason. So I wanted to make sure that you're all right, that nothing's going on with you or anything. I mean... guess what I'm trying to say is, are you okay?"

I stare at him for a long moment, not sure what to say because the last time he asked me a question like this one, it was so similar—*Are we okay?* We aren't, but I told him we were. We're still not. Just being in here again, standing near his desk where he'd eaten me out and sent me over the edge, makes me want to run to him.

I'm not going to do that, though. I remember what Sadie said in the bathroom—*Don't ever let any man make you cry*. He's already done that more times than I can count, and I'm not going to let it happen again.

"Yeah, I'm good," I tell him, and as I speak the words, I mean it. "I'm better than good. I'm great. In fact, I'm pretty sure, I've never been better. Not once in my life." I find myself chuckling as I say it because I do feel so fucking good.

He seems taken aback at first, but then he's nodding along with me. "Well, that's...nice to hear," he says.

"It's nice to say," I tell him. "And as a matter of fact, I suppose there's something else I should say to you as well."

His eyes widen a bit as if he's afraid of what is going to come out of my mouth next. "What's that?"

“Thank you,” I say with a confident nod. “That’s what I need to say to you. Thank you.”

He tips his head to the side and stares at me for several seconds before he asks, “What’s that now?”

“Thank you,” I say again. He raises a hand and runs it over his chin, trying to figure out what I’m talking about. So I explain it further. “If it hadn’t been for you, I never would’ve had the courage to stand up to that guy at the beach or the punk who touched my ass tonight.” I realize he doesn’t know about the guy at the beach, but that’s okay. He’ll get the point. “I have decided that I am no longer going to let jackasses walk all over me. And I owe that all to the way that you treated me, Mr. Stone. So...thank you for teaching me a valuable life lesson.”

The look on his face is priceless as he stares at me, trying to figure out how to respond. I’m done discussing whatever it is we are talking about, so I step up to him, kiss him quickly on the cheek, and then turn to go, sidestepping some boxes lined up by the door.

I’m in such a hurry to get away from him, it hardly registers that he has packing boxes in his office, and they seem to be ready to go. Where he’s going, I don’t know, and I’m not going to ask.

With my bag in my hand, I head out to my car, satisfied that our discussion accomplished what I needed it to. I hum along to the song on the radio and wear a smile on my face all the way home.

When I get to my apartment, I lock up the Gremlin and head inside to get a snack and go to bed, but once I’m situated on the couch, I can’t help but think about how much I hate my shitty car. Granted, it’s always gotten me from point A to point B, but it’s not reliable, and as Hunter once told me, it really is a death trap.

As I snack on a bowl of popcorn with M&Ms in it, I search for new cars on my phone. At first, I’m looking for sensible used cars, but then I realize, I have quite a bit of money saved up. With this tip I got tonight, I can actually afford a new car. It doesn’t have to be as expensive and flashy as Hunter’s car, but

I can afford something nicer than another used vehicle that will only last so long, so I change my search and look up new cars in the area and am happy to see several that I like.

A new car is just the tip of the iceberg for me. I can afford a new apartment soon, too, if the tips keep coming in like this. I try to imagine myself in a nice penthouse apartment, and it brings a smile to my face. I would love to buy a house one day. I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to afford even a little bungalow in LA, but it's nice to dream. Perhaps, one day, I will be able to afford a beautiful house on the beach. As long as I'm dreaming, I may as well dream big.



# CHAPTER 29



## HUNTER

“*I* just hope it’s a relatively slow night,” Ethan tells me as I stand near the bar with him and Brandon, who has just polished off a burrito. “I feel like I have had my fair share of bouncing lately.”

“Your backup is here tonight,” Brandon reminds him, wiping his mouth on a napkin that already has hot sauce all over it. “Maybe you can just hang out in the back all night.”

They both chuckle under their breath. “Nah, the kid’s okay, but he still takes a little babysitting.”

The two of them continue to go on about what they think the night will bring, and I pretend to listen, but my eyes are glued to Meghan. Her shift just started not long ago, and we’re not that busy tonight, so I can see her easily enough as she sashays across the floor. She’s so smokin’ hot. I wish I could’ve gotten her to say more to me the other night when I pulled her into my office. I wish I could’ve gotten her to do more with me, but all I’d gotten was a quick peck on the cheek that had left me longing for more.

Ethan says something that has them both laughing, as usual, and I laugh along, even though I have no fucking idea what he’s said, but then, my eyes hone in on who is coming through the door, and every trace of humor is washed away from me.

Not only did Waylen Nyx just enter my club, but he’s also talking to Meghan. “Shit,” I mutter under my breath as she shows him to a table. For a moment, they cross behind a group of dancers, and I lose sight of them.

“What’s up, bossman?” Brandon asks me.

I’m shaking my head and stepping in their direction as I answer. “Mr. Nyx is here,” I tell them. “What the fuck could he possibly want?”

“Who the hell knows?” Ethan says. “With him, you can never tell.”

“But I know that it won’t be good.” I clap him on the back and head off, trying to figure out where Meghan took them.

“I’m going to head back to my station, but holler at me if you need something,” Ethan tells me, which I appreciate.

I am threading my way across the dance floor when one of our regulars, a blonde who is always twirling all over the fucking place, nearly collides with me. I sidestep her and come face to face with a beautiful blonde.

And her expression tells me something is wrong.

“What’s up?” I ask, fighting the urge to reach for her. “What happened?” If Mr. Nyx dared to put his fucking hands on her, I will rip them off of his body and shove them up his ass, and I don’t give a flying fuck who he is.

Without a word, Meghan holds up the shiny metallic object in her hand. It’s a gold key. “He gave me this,” she explains. “That guy who just came in here? Middle-aged with the paunch, expensive suit.”

I nod. I know who she’s talking about. “Mr. Waylen Nyx,” I tell her. “The record producer.”

“Oh,” she says, though she still looks lost. “That’s cool. Anyway...”

“Where is he now?” I ask her, trying to look over her shoulder but not managing to rip my eyes off her.

“He’s over at table thirty-one,” she tells me, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

“All right. Can you go ask Carter for a bottle of our best vodka and bring it back to room eight?”

She swallows hard, and I know that she doesn’t want to do that. She doesn’t want to go back there, even though the last time she was in this situation, I gave her a hefty tip. I have no fucking idea what Mr. Nyx wants, but I can guarantee it needs to be kept quiet.

“Sure, sure,” Meghan says and starts to head to the bar. As she passes me, I can’t help but reach my hand out so that our fingers brush. I crave the tingle that shoots up my arm from

even the smallest amount of contact with her, and as the electricity overcomes me, I feel like a drug addict who has just taken a hit—until it fades away, leaving me cold, lonely, and aching for more.

Meg is gone now, though, and I make my way over to find the asshole I wish had never set foot in my club. I force my most genuine fake smile to my mouth and walk over to him. He has a couple of his lackeys with him, but I don't pay them any mind as I offer him my hand.

He shakes it. "Well, well, if it isn't The Fixer himself," he says, and I want to tell him not to call me that in the middle of the club floor, but I don't even acknowledge what he's said. "How goes the hunt, Hunter?"

I snicker. "I'm sure that's not what you're here to discuss, Mr. Nyx. Why don't we move this conversation back to one of our preferred rooms?"

"Of course," he says, pulling himself out from behind the table. I lead the way, and he follows, his two goons behind him.

Once we're in the appointed room, we have a seat, and I hope Meg hurries up with the booze. Whatever the fuck he wants to talk to me about, it'll be easier with some drinks. "Now, Mr. Nyx," I begin, "what's this about?"

"Well, you certainly don't beat around the bush, do you?" he asks with a nasty chuckle. "It's pretty simple, honestly, Hunter. You have something—and I want it."

I scrutinize his expression for a moment, trying to figure out what he's talking about. "I already gave you my best property for practically nothing," I remind him. "So what could you want now?"

Meg comes in just then with a nice bottle of vodka and some glasses. She goes about serving us, but her presence doesn't deter Mr. Nyx from talking. "I want those new apartments you just bought, Hunter." He isn't beating around the bush. "And you're going to sell them to me."

I can't help the chuckle that escapes my lips. "The ones over by Silver Towers?" I hear Meg gasp, but all I need to do is give her a look to have her backing away from the table. She goes and stands by the wall, ready to pour again if needed. "No fucking way."

"What?" Mr. Nyx explains. "Why not? They're nothing special. I'll pay you more than what you paid for them."

"If they're nothing special, why the fuck do you want them?" I ask, taking a shot of the vodka and refilling the glass myself.

He chuckles under his breath and drinks half of what's in his glass. "I'm not going to tell you what my plans are. But trust me, they're big." He finishes off his drink.

"Before I even think about selling you those particular apartments, I need to know why you want them." He doesn't need to know why I'd want to keep them. It's clear Meg is listening. She wants to know because she lives there, but Mr. Nyx has no way of knowing that.

"Who the hell knows? Depends on what shape they're in. I'll probably raze it and put in something much nicer." That maniacal chuckle is back.

When he mentions razing the building, Meg inhales deeply. "I can't let you do that," I tell him.

"Why the fuck not?" he asks. "Why do you give a shit what I do with them?"

"Because there are people who live there already," I explain to him. "People I've made promises to."

"Shit," he mutters. "Who gives a damn?"

"The people who live there do!" Meg shouts, coming over. "People who have been living there for years. People with families... and fixed incomes... and cats. You can't just screw around with those people's lives!"

"Whoa!" Mr. Nyx says, holding up his hands. "Well, Mr. Stone, I didn't realize you'd hired a new bodyguard." He is chuckling under his breath again. "All right, all right. I won't

kick out the families and the old ladies if it gets you off my back, gorgeous.”

Meg opens her mouth to say something else, and I say, “Thank you, Meghan. You can return to your station now.”

She mutters a curse under her breath and moves back to the wall. “Well,” Mr. Nyx says, standing. His two goons get up as well. “I think that’s enough discussion for one night. But if you change your mind...”

I nod and offer him my hand. He takes one more look at Meg and chuckles again, and I hate the way his eyes roam over her, but then he leaves, and I follow him to the door, closing it behind him.

Then...I turn and face her.

She’s still standing where she should’ve been the whole time unless someone needed a refill. She has her tray in her hands, and she’s looking down at the floor. I can tell that she’s feeling bad about what happened, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that she just interjected herself between me and a very dangerous man.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask, trying to keep my tone calm.

“I don’t know,” she admits with a shrug. “A stupid thing to do.”

“Yeah, you got that goddamn right,” I say, coming over. She takes her tray and sets it down on the counter. “Don’t ever do anything like that again, Meg.”

“Well! He wanted to buy my apartment building and tear it down! Leaving all of my neighbors with nowhere to go!” She is so worked up she keeps flipping her hands around as she speaks, and she looks so hot, all I want to do is rip her clothes off and toss her on that table, having my way with her over and over again.

But I don’t. I try to focus on the problem at hand. “You have no idea what the fuck you’re getting yourself involved in. I deal with very dangerous people.”

“I am aware of the kind of people you deal with,” she says, stepping right up to me so that I can feel her warm, minty breath on my face. “But I don’t have any fucking idea why it would matter to you if I talk to one of them.”

“What?” I ask, tipping my head to the side as I try to figure out what she’s talking about.

“I mean, it’s not like you give a flying fuck what happens to me, anyway, right?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I demand, stepping toward her until I have her trapped against the wall. “Why the hell would you say that?”

“I’m just a mistake, so who the fuck cares if I get myself in trouble, right?”

I open my mouth to shout back at her, but I have no words, and instead of continuing the argument, I do the one thing I’ve been longing to do since the day I stupidly sent her home.

My mouth crashes down on hers, and after her initial gasp of shock, our tongues begin to twirl in a sensual dance as I press my body to hers against the wall, deepening the kiss.

Her hands tangle in my hair as I slide my hands up her sides, stopping just short of her bra line, but it’s all I can do to keep from thumbing her nipples through her clothing as memories of what she tastes like, what she feels like, and how she makes me feel, all come racing back to me.

If she thinks I don’t care about her, she’s wrong. Dead wrong.

# CHAPTER 30





MEGHAN

Hunter is such an asshole sometimes. I just want to slug him, but as we stand there arguing about whether or not I should've said something to that slimeball who wanted to take over my apartment building, I can't help but think about how fucking sexy Hunter is, even when he's mad—especially when he's mad.

The next thing I know, he has me pinned to the wall with his tongue down my throat, and rather than protesting or trying to get away, my leg is up over his hip, and I am thrusting into him like a bitch in heat.

This is stupid. I know that. I should be pushing him away and telling him he's already made his choice. Why would he want to make the same mistake twice? But when his thumbs find my nipples through my clothing, he's pinching them so hard, I can hardly breathe. My head tips back against the wall, and I begin to grind into him even harder.

My apron comes off first, followed by a flurry of shoes and socks, and his buttons are about to be flung off this shirt, too. Our hands fly over each other's clothes, ripping and tearing, touching and teasing. When I am down to my bra and panties, and Hunter is in his boxers, I realize the fucking door is standing wide open where anyone and everyone can come by and peek their head in.

"Hunter!" I say as I pull my mouth away from his.

"Oh, Meg," he groans, trying to find my lips again.

I yank myself free once more. "Wait!" I shout at him, but he's so occupied with my breasts, which he is squeezing and massaging so that I want to cry out in ecstasy already, that he's not really listening. "The door!"

"I adore you, too, baby," he says as his mouth clamps down on the top of my breast, and he begins to lick and suck, his mouth dipping down to find my nipple.

“No!” I jerk away from him again. “Not adore—the door! It’s open, goddammit!”

Hunter lifts his head to look at me, his eyes locking on mine, and the bewildered expression on his face tells me he’s only capable of thinking with one head right now, and it’s not the one on his shoulders.

“Go close the fucking door!” I shout.

“Oh, right,” he says, finally getting it, but he doesn’t let go of me. Instead, he kisses me again, tugging me across the room with him as he kicks the door closed. Then lifts me into his arms and moves to a couch across from where we started this game. I don’t know if he locked the door or not, but as he lays me flat on my back and begins to kiss me again, I don’t care. The whole fucking club can pour in here and watch if they want to. I just need this man inside of me—right now.

My bra comes off with a snap, and then his tongue is rolling around one nipple while the other is in his hands, and he’s examining it like an expert. He’s on his knees by the couch next to me, but that’s too far away. I want him up here, inside of me now.

Scrambling up to sitting, I grab hold of his waist and tug, and he gets the picture. He slips out of his boxers and yanks my panties off, and I grab hold of his firm ass, my nails digging in as he climbs on top of me. My back is positioned against the armrest, which gives me more leverage as he pushes inside of me. He has my legs spread so wide, he goes all the way in, deep, before he is buried up to the hilt, and I can’t help the noises that are coming out of my mouth as he works me hard.

“Fuck!” I say as he reaches between us to find my clit. He twirls it with his thumb until I toss my head back and slam it into the couch. I don’t even feel it. I want to make him feel as good as he’s making me feel, so I slide my hand between his legs, down his backside, and reach his balls. It’s hard to do more than just run my fingertips over them in this position, but he likes it and begins to grunt even harder the more I touch them.

I love the sensations he's creating in me, and I know that I'm about to tip over the edge, but I don't want to be done just yet. Pushing Hunter back, I motion for him to sit, and he does. I straddle him, getting up into a crouching position. I come down on him hard, time and time again, while he continues to finger my clit with one hand and lets his other hand roam from my breasts to my ass.

I can hardly breathe, and it's not just from the exertion of slamming my body up and down over and over again. He feels so fucking good inside of me, I am about to completely come undone. When he sees me near the edge, he reaches between my legs and finds my clit again, and now, I am a shrieking mess, steadying myself with my hands on his shoulders as I moan so loudly, I'm sure the people in the club can hear me over the music.

"You feel so goddamn good," Hunter says. I can't answer him at the moment because I am still in the middle of a very long, very intense orgasm. My pussy is spasming around his dick as the muscles in my core contract, and I can hardly even wheeze out a shout of his name. He likes it when I do, though, and he doesn't let up on my clit until I am breathless. I have to stop moving on him because I feel lightheaded, and I'm afraid I might just tumble right off of him.

It's not hard for us to change positions again since I can barely draw in a breath. He simply picks me up and sets me down so that I'm lying on a chaise now, and he has my ankles in the air. He thrusts so deeply into me that I think I can see his dick with my eyes closed. Again and again, he slams all the way in, and I can think of nothing or no one other than the incredible things he is doing to my body.

I want this to go on forever. I never want to let go of the way my body feels in this moment, and not just because he's so fucking good at what he's doing to me, but because it's Hunter. I'd be lying to myself if I tried to say I wasn't still attracted to him. I've wanted him so badly all along, and now here we are, making the same mistake we already did once. At least this time, I know it means nothing to him. At least when he walks

away and says he'll call me or some other lame-ass shit, I'll know he's lying.

If I even give him the satisfaction of being the one to determine what comes next. I need to keep my wits about me and not turn into some weeping, miserable pile of female hormones.

His cock is so thick, it's stretching me beyond my previous limitations, and before I know it, I am curling up again, my insides responding to the feel of him by contracting into a ball of muscle. I can't get any words out as my mind grows fuzzy and my vision is hazy. It's so intense this time, with my clit being so sensitive, I can hardly even breathe, and part of me doesn't know if I'll make it out alive, but it feels so unbelievably good, I can't ask him to stop.

Hunter is grunting a lot now, and I can feel his muscles beginning to tighten as well. He thrusts into me, muttering curse words mixed with my name under his breath. His blue eyes are locked on mine, and when he finally comes, I can't help but smile, knowing I did that to him. I made him feel so good. His warmth spreads between my legs, and I am glad I went ahead and got on birth control in the interim since our last encounter—just as a precaution—so I don't have to worry about that anymore.

I certainly didn't expect to be back in this position ever again, not with Hunter, that is, and when he collapses on top of me, his mouth comes down on mine. He kisses me deeply, his tongue twirling with mine, and one of my hands goes up to tangle in his sweaty hair, shoving him even farther into my mouth as I savor his taste, trying to burn this moment into my mind. I have no reason to think that this will ever happen again, so I want to ingrain every moment of it deep into my mind now.

Hunter rolls off of me, dropping onto the floor, still breathing in deeply, sucking in air, his muscular body glistening with sweat. As I sit up, looking for my underwear, I can't help but check him out. He's the perfect specimen of a man—chiseled abs, a perfect low V, a huge dick, with muscular arms and

runner's legs. He's handsome, too. With those eyes and that perfectly square jaw. What woman wouldn't want him?

I don't have an answer to that because I do want him, and not just for his body either. He's been kind to me in the past. He's powerful, and that confidence rolls off of him in waves. I know he's rich, but that's not even part of the equation for me. If he was a middle-class guy who happened to work at a club, I'd be just as interested in him as I am now.

But he's not—and it doesn't matter how interested in him I am. He has already made it clear how he feels about me. I refuse to let my emotions take over as I go about sliding back into my silky black, but now soaking wet, thong. It's uncomfortable, but it'll have to do. My shift is probably over by now, anyway.

I find my bra beneath one of his legs and put that on, too, before I step over him to get my skirt and shirt. At least this time I can find both shoes. By the time I'm fully dressed, he's just starting to pull himself up off of the floor. I take his jeans and toss them across the room to him, but that's enough to get him started.

Smoothing all of my wrinkles, I watch as he slides his boxers on and then pushes his legs into his jeans. I take a deep breath and try to focus on how he made me feel the last time we were in this position. The hurt, shame, and anger all come flooding back to me, and I know what I need to do.

Hunter sits down on the couch, a puzzled expression on his face as he looks at me. I have to wonder if he's considering asking me what's wrong.

I don't give him the opportunity to. "Well, thanks for that, Mr. Stone," I say, clearing my throat and attempting to sound as professional as possible under the circumstances. "As you know, the boss frowns upon coworkers having sex in this establishment. So, unfortunately, we will not be able to do this again."

"Meg—" he begins, attempting to cut me off.

But I'm having none of it as I lift a hand. "Now Mr. Stone, don't make this any more difficult than it already is. We can just chalk this up to another mistake. However, at some point, should you decide to permanently remove your cranium from your gluteus maximus, perhaps we can talk. Until then, I bid you farewell."

With a little wave, I head to the door, and I can't help but hum my new favorite song, "Another Mistake," as I walk out, leaving him alone with my scent all over him.

# CHAPTER 31



## HUNTER

Once again, I watch Meg walk away, and it's like a knife right through my heart. How did I let this happen again? More importantly, what the fuck am I going to do about it now?

The last notes of the song she was humming linger in the air as I sit on the couch that still smells of our lovemaking, dragging my hand through my hair and trying to get my shit together. I need an intervention of some kind. I've never used drugs, but I feel like I'm addicted now—addicted to Meg.

And it's not even just her smokin' body or the way she looks at me with those jade eyes that makes me feel that way. It's her mind, the way that she seems to know what I'm thinking, the discussions we have, the way she makes me feel alive. Meg is the whole package, and the only thing that is keeping me from begging her to be mine forever is the fact that she works here, and that makes her out of bounds.

I finish getting dressed, taking my time, not wanting to leave this place now that we've been together here. It's a mess—with empty glasses on the table, a bit of trash on the floor, and a couch that needs... disinfecting. But it reminds me of her, so I don't want to go.

Nevertheless, I can't stay here all night, so after a few more minutes of breathing in the air that still smells like her, both her perfume and her sexy body, I head out the door.

Omar is coming in my direction, looking bored and uninterested as usual, so I give him a job. "Can you clean this room up?" I ask, gesturing at the open door. "Or find the cleaners to do it?"

"Of course, bossman," he says, and I leave it to him, even though I'm not sure he's much of a custodian. Knowing him, he'll pass it off to someone else. I did notice a look in his eyes before he went in like he was afraid that there might be blood and brains in there. Perhaps he'll be happy to find it's just



some empty glasses... and maybe some less pungent bodily fluid.

I walk through the club and back through the bar area, only saying hi to Carter briefly before I dart through the employee lounge, glad Meg and her friends are gone. As much as I like to see her, running into her now would be super awkward, and I'm not ready for that.

When I walk into my office, Leah is there. She's standing behind my desk, going through some files. I don't know what she's doing, but I'm sure it's work-related. I almost run into the stack of boxes by the door, forgetting that they're there.

She glances up at me and then looks away before her forehead furrows, and she stares at me for a few seconds before she asks, "What the fuck happened to you?"

"What are you talking about?" I lower myself down onto the couch and rest my elbows on my knees, not sure if I want to tell her what happened. She'll only make me feel worse.

"You looked fucked-up," she says. "Did you do something stupid again, or are you just permanently screwed over now?"

I glare at her. "Be nice, Leah. I've had a hard night."

"What happened?" Her voice softens slightly, like she still thinks I'm a fuck-up, but at least I am her fuck-up.

My mouth falls open, and I intend to say something profound, like I've found my reason for existing or the key to my happiness, but instead, I say, "I fucked Meg again," which is kind of the same thing, but only with an unhappy ending since, in this case, I am not happy, but I am second-guessing my reason for existing.

Immediately, Leah looks at my desk. "When? Where?"

"Right there where you're standing. Right before you came in here," I say, and when a look of horror fills her face, I can't help but laugh. "In one of the back rooms," I tell her, and she relaxes slightly, but she's still mortified.

Leah pulls my desk chair out and sits down. "Why did you do that—again? I thought you were all about not dating your

employees and all of that jazz.” She actually makes jazz hands, and it does almost make me chuckle, but I hold it back.

“I don’t know why I did it, Leah. I didn’t intend to. She was waiting on a table for Mr. Nyx in the back with me, and she smarted off to him. It upset me because she has no fucking idea who she’s dealing with. We got into an argument, and the next thing I know, I’m kissing her.”

“Kissing her isn’t fucking her,” Leah says, as if I needed that clarified.

“It may as well have been for me,” I say, and I know it sounds odd. She’s not likely to understand what I’m talking about, but it makes perfect sense to me. “Once I kissed her, that was it. I couldn’t hold myself back. Obviously, if she’d pushed me off or told me no, I would’ve respected her wishes. But she didn’t. She was kissing me, too, running her hands all over me. So... we fucked. A lot. And it was amazing.”

Leah is quiet for several moments, studying me, and then she asks, “What happened when you were done?”

I take a deep breath in, hold it, and then blow it out. I honestly don’t want to think about it. “She left,” I tell her, as if it’s just that simple. “She got up, got dressed, told me it couldn’t happen again because it’s obviously a mistake, and then she was gone.”

A chuckle escapes Leah’s lips, and I scowl at her, wishing I had something to throw across the room that would make her stop, but if I throw a pillow off the couch, it’ll likely hit my laptop and knock it on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she manages between laughs. “But... that’s hilarious. She threw your own words right back into your face.”

“I am aware,” I say to her, sounding angrier than I feel. I’m honestly just depressed at the moment, not mad.

“Well, what the fuck are you going to do about it?” she asks me. “You are The Fixer, right? Why can’t you fix this shit? Why can’t you fix this mess that is your own life?”

I sit in silence, shaking my head slowly. “I don’t know,” I finally admit. “I guess...after the last time with...*her*...I can’t figure out how to do it.” I can’t even bear to say my ex-girlfriend’s name, I hate her so much. Leah knows all about that, though. She lived through it. “I’ve never been in love with anyone before like I was her, and I am afraid that if I fall in love again, it’ll end up the same. With hurt, betrayal, pain, and...the loss of a lot of money.”

Leah lets out a sympathetic sigh. “I understand all of that, Hunter. I was here for that show, remember? I have the T-shirt at home.” I roll my eyes at her for that one. “But...you’ve got to remember that Meghan isn’t her. She’s totally different. You could date her and be perfectly happy.”

“Or I could date her, and she could do the same thing—extort me for lots of money, break my heart, and run off with a friend of mine.” I shake my head even harder this time. “No, thank you.”

“Well, the way I see it, you can continue to sit around and think about her all damn day and night, or you can just get on with the inevitable. I really don’t think Meghan is capable of that.”

I want to ask her if she thought my ex was capable of it, but I don’t. I figure it doesn’t matter now. “There’s more than just that,” I say. “If I date her, she’s going to constantly be in danger. The life I live doesn’t give my lovers much of a chance to live a normal life. With all of the assholes I do business with, there’s a good chance she could end up targeted by some criminal who wants to hurt me.”

“Oh, give me a fucking break, Hunter!” Leah says, slamming both of her palms down on the desk. “She’s already in danger, and you know it!”

I sit up straight. “What the fuck are you talking about, Leah?”

“She works at Club Limelight, dumbass!” she says, and once again, I am glaring at her for insulting me. “Everyone who works here is in danger! Sure, she might be in more danger because she’s connected to you, but you can protect her the same way you protect everyone else. You’re making this a hell

of a lot more complicated than it has to be. It's like you're just too fucking scared to admit that you want her."

"What?" I narrow my gaze at her, and I am suddenly beginning to question whether or not Leah is really my friend. "I'm not afraid!"

"Aren't you, though, Hunter? It seems to me like you're doing everything you can to attempt to come up with excuses so that you don't have to admit how much you like her. You want everyone to think you're a big, tough guy who can't get hurt. In reality, you're just as vulnerable and afraid of getting your heart broken as everyone else."

"Leah, if I break this rule, what's to keep me from breaking all of the other rules I've set for my life?" Am I grasping at straws now?

She shakes her head and stands up. "Just open up that black heart of yours and date her already! It's not going to make you change your other rules—you can still have those weird rules about...no sugar after seven in the evening, you must brush your teeth after every meal, and never wear white shoes!"

I glare at her as she lists off some of my habits as if they are just as critical as my rule that says I should never date an employee. No words escape my lips, though. I don't see the point.

"I'm going home," she announces. "I hope you can find a way to get some rest and some peace. This doesn't have to be that difficult, Hunter. You fucked her because you like her. You like her because she's great." With a knowing shrug, she says, "That's really all there is to it."

With that, Leah walks out, leaving me alone in my office, staring at a wall of boxes, wondering if she's right.

If I date Meg, it'll change everything for me. Not just the rules—whether or not I can follow them—but it'll mean I'm putting myself back out there again. I'm taking a chance on whether or not I will get my heart trampled on again. I'm not sure that it's worth it.

But then...visions of her body come back to my mind, the way she smells, the feel of her as her fingers sink into my muscles, how she squeezed her core to grip my shaft... No, she's definitely worth the risk. I just have to make sure that she's safe.

If anything were to ever happen to Meg for any reason, I'd be devastated. If anything were to ever happen to her because of me, I'd die. I can't imagine how I'd feel if one of these thugs got to her because of me. I'll have to do everything in my power to make sure that she was safe—at all costs.

With a lot on my mind, I get up and walk into my bedroom. I need a shower to wash the day off of my skin, but if I do that, Meg will be washed off, too. So I'll stay dirty.

# CHAPTER 32



MEGHAN

The song from the diner is still stuck in my head as I make my way into my apartment. I can't help but hum it. I had such a great time with Allie and the other girls. Eating greasy burgers and cheese fries was almost enough to make me forget about what happened with Hunter—almost.

I lock up the Gremlin and head up to my apartment, thinking about all of the things I need to get done. If I keep myself busy, maybe I won't have to think about Hunter. I hear Mr. Whiskers meowing in the apartment next to mine, and it brings a smile to my face. Maybe I need a cat...but then, I wouldn't have a lot of time for a pet, and it would have to spend a lot of time by itself while I am at work.

Distracted by the cat, I almost don't notice that my door is standing open until I go to put the key in the lock. My body freezes up as I think about what might be going on here. It's been a while since my awful landlord was in my apartment when I came home from work. Is it possible he's back, looking for whatever the fuck it was he didn't find the first time he was here?

My keys clatter in my hand as I almost drop them. I don't hear anything from my apartment, but that doesn't mean that whoever left the door open isn't still inside. My heart is hammering in my chest as I try to determine what to do. I take a deep breath and a quiet step forward, sticking my head slightly inside of the living room.

In the darkness, my eyes lock onto a form standing across the room near where the landlord was taking my floor apart, but it's not him. I do recognize the man, though. I tip my head to the side, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

It's that guy from the club. The one who was in the room with Hunter and me right before he left and the two of us fucked. What the hell is he doing here?

I remember him saying he wanted to buy this apartment building, but what is he doing in my apartment? A low chuckle escapes his lips as he sees me. “Well, if it isn’t the beauty from the club!”

“What the fu—”

Before I can even get the words out of my mouth, a sharp pain radiates through the back of my head, and everything goes black. I am falling, and the last thing that flashes before my eyes is Hunter’s face.

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My eyes slit open, and I take a look around my apartment, unable to focus on anything. My skull is killing me, and when I try to lift my head, it screams at me in anger. I can’t see anyone in the living room in front of me, and my memories are coming back in fuzzy, slow-motion pictures that aren’t telling me much of anything.

Until I see Hunter’s face flash before my eyes. He’s smiling at me, looking down, his eyes locked on mine as he makes love to me. With that image as a trigger, the events from the time that I found myself back in Hunter’s arms until this very moment all come colliding together, and I suddenly remember that man from the club being in my apartment.

I force myself to lift my head and look around the room. I see them now. It’s not just that asshole who wanted to buy the apartment building who is crouched on the floor, digging up floorboards near the same place that my former landlord was doing the same thing, he has a couple of other thugs with him. They are all muttering under their breath as they take my floors apart.

My apartment door is still slightly ajar, which makes no sense to me. What makes them think I won’t just get up off of this dining room chair and run away? I decide to test just that and push up off of the seat, but my head is screaming at me—loudly. And then...I realize I’m also attached to this fucking chair.



The urge to groan or cry out is overwhelming, but I decide to keep myself quiet so they don't know I'm awake. Maybe it will allow me to listen in to their conversation a bit and get an idea of what the hell they're looking for. I have no idea why anyone would be looking in the floorboards of my shitty apartment. Why the hell does everyone want in here so badly?

"Nothing yet, Mr. Nyx, sir?" the other guy says in a gruff whisper as he pulls up another plank.

"Yes, Jimmy. I found the fucking money, and I just forgot to tell you. I like having my hand buried in the floor so fucking much, I decided to keep looking around, you dumbass!" He mutters a few other choice words under his breath, and I can tell he's being sarcastic.

But I'm also confused. Money—what money? They surely can't be in here tearing up the floor looking for my tip money. I just went to the bank a few days ago, so all that's in here is a couple of hundred dollars from my last shift or two. It's hidden well, but not that well, and from what I can see with my eyes hardly open, they've looked everywhere. Furniture is turned on its side, broken glass from my dishes litters the floor. It looks like they've even knocked some holes in the drywall. And I just fucking painted!

They don't seem to notice I'm awake, but then, another man comes in through the open door, swearing under his breath. I can't help but look at him, he's so loud. I notice he has blood dripping down his hand and wonder what the hell happened.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouts, practically running me over in his haste to get a towel from the drawer. Great—now he's bleeding all over my kitchen.

"What the hell happened to you?" the other guy asks.

"Fucking cat!" he screams. "Attacked me outta nowhere!"

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I wonder if he hurt Mr. Whiskers or my sweet neighbor. If he did, I will find a way to get out of this chair and beat the living shit out of him.

“Did you beat it to death?” the other guy asks the man who is sopping up his blood with one of my grandmother’s hand embroidered tea towels.

“No, fucker ran out the door before I could crack its skull.” He continues to curse under his breath, but my eyes are locked on Mr. Nyx’s, and as he realizes I am awake, he pushes up off of the floor and slowly comes toward me.

“Well, well, looky who’s awake.” He picks up a cane that was leaning against the back of my couch, and I can see that it has a smear of dried blood on it. I have to wonder if that’s what I was hit over the head with.

I don’t even want to speak to this asshole, but as he comes over to me, I feel compelled to do so. “What the actual fuck are you doing?” I shout at him. “Why are you tearing my apartment up? And you better not have hurt my neighbor!” I growl at the bleeding man.

“I knew you were a feisty one,” Mr. Nyx says, shaking his head at me as he chuckles. “I knew it the moment I saw you in Hunter’s little club. I thought, that one there has some spirit in her.” He laughs and sets his cane down, folding his arms. I don’t think he needs the cane to walk. I think it’s more of a weapon.

“I don’t have any money here,” I tell him. “If that’s what you’re looking for. Just a couple of hundred bucks.”

“Yes, we found your pocket change,” he says as the guy who is still on the floor knocks a chair over to look beneath it. “It’s nothing compared to the money we’re looking for. We know it’s in this building complex somewhere, so we will find it. One way or another.”

He says those last words in a menacing tone, and I have to wonder if he somehow thinks I have whatever the fuck he’s looking for. “How much money is it?” I ask. “A hundred grand?”

He scoffs at that. “Again, pocket change. No, little girl. Try a hundred million.”

“A hundred mill—” I can’t even finish the words. My mouth is already dry, but when I attempt to finish repeating what I thought I’d heard him say, nothing much comes out.

“Yes, that’s right. And when we find it, we’ll burn this place to the ground. Then we’ll see what happens to you and your fucking dumbass neighbors.” The three of them let out evil, maniacal laughs, and more than ever, I wish I was free so I could hurt them.

“Maybe the little bitch already found it, and she’s moved it somewhere,” the genius with the bloody hand suggests.

“Sure,” I say. “I have a hundred million dollars, and that’s why there’s a fucking safety pin holding up my boot. Wow, you really are as dumb as you look!” I know I’m not in any position to be smarting off to them, but I can’t help it. “Do you really think I’d be living here and working for Hunter at Club Limelight if I had that kind of cash?”

He is coming at me, upset that I called him dumb and insulted his looks, though, in fairness, I can’t imagine anyone’s ever thought of him as a looker. His teeth are the shade of a banana peel, and his hair is so greasy, I think I could squeeze it and then make some French fries if I owned a deep fryer. At the moment, I have one pot, a pan, a cookie sheet, and two spatulas. Yeah, I’m fucking loaded with cash!

“Back it up, Burns,” Mr. Nyx says. “She’s just angry because we beat her over the head and tied her to a chair. She’ll get over it.” He laughs like that’s supposed to be some kind of a fucking joke, and all I want to do is get out of this chair so I can pulverize him.

But I’m not that stupid. There are three of them—grown-ass men, two of which look pretty buff—and while my magical knee has proven I am capable of making men sing the high harmony, I don’t think I’m going to stand a chance against them, even if I do manage to get free.

“So…” I begin, thinking maybe I shouldn’t ask the question that’s about to come out of my mouth. “What happens if you find the money? I mean, besides burning this place to the ground. What about the residents? What about…me?”

Mr. Nyx's smile grows even snider somehow as he lifts one finger to his throat and slides it across in a motion meant to indicate he will kill us. I swallow hard. That's what I was afraid of.

"And...if you don't find it? Then what happens to us?"

With a chuckle, he replies, "Same answer, little girl. Either way, I'm just letting you hang around for a while in case I have any questions. If you haven't given your soul to the Lord, now would be a good time."

That makes them all laugh, but all I can do is wonder if there's any way tht Hunter might sense that something is wrong and come to save me. Could he find out that Mr. Nyx is here, trashing his building? Would one of the residents think to call him or have a chance? Where's the guy who sits in the front office?

I don't have any answers, but as they go back to their search, it's not God I'm calling upon for help. With every fiber of my being, I'm calling out to Hunter. "Please...hear me! Come and help me! Before it's too late!"

# CHAPTER 33



## HUNTER

I take a long hard look at myself in the mirror as I get ready to go open the club. I've had some time to think about what happened with Meg, how it felt to be with her again, and then I've also had time to reflect on the conversation I had with Leah after I admitted to her that I'd fucked the redheaded beauty.

Now, as I straighten my collar and finish fixing my hair, I know exactly what needs to be done. I only hope that Meg is willing to listen to my plan. She's probably not going to like it at first, but once I explain it to her, hopefully she'll see the logic, and she'll understand why it is that I have to fire her.

Sucking in a deep breath, I try to steady the pounding in my chest. I'll have to be careful about how I choose my words. It won't do to just blurt it out and tell her she's fired. Though, part of me would love to mess with her that way, get her all riled up just to see the fire in her eyes, and then tell her I'm firing her so that she can be my girlfriend, that I'll completely take care of her in every way possible, and she won't even need to work again.

But part of me wonders if she would ever be content with that. I'll have to find a way to make her happy. If I just volunteer to provide for her for the rest of her life, she'll probably tell me where to shove it. No, we'll come up with a plan together, something that will make both of us happy.

Nervous tension settles within my gut as I make my way out to the dance floor. The club is about to open, and I see some of the waitresses sitting around in the lounge area talking to one another. I smile and wave, but I don't feel like talking, not right now. I am still trying to decide whether or not I should fire Meg at the beginning of her shift or at the end.

"Hey, bossman!" Carter says. For once, he is not standing in front of the mirror styling his hair, so I can't help but mess with him.

“Good evening, Carter. You’ve got a hair that’s...uh...sticking up,” I tell him, gesturing at his bangs.

Immediately, his eyes widen, and he curses as he turns to the mirror. I can’t help but chuckle at him as he calls me an unflattering name. Laughing, I turn to head out to the club and almost run into Leah.

“You’re in a remarkably good mood,” she says, looking at me suspiciously.

I shrug. “I’m trying,” I tell her. I haven’t told her my plans. She’d probably try to tell me that I’m being irrational, and maybe she’s right, but I have already resolved myself that this is the plan, and I really don’t want to wait until Meg’s shift is over to tell her what I’ve decided. I’m guessing she’ll want to finish her shift, though. She does seem to really enjoy her job.

I get distracted by a problem with one of the taps, and before I know it, the club has been open for over half an hour, and the place is hopping. I hear one of the waitresses complaining that they can’t keep up with all of their tables, which I think is odd. I turn around to see what the problem is and instinctively scan the room for Meg.

My eyes can’t spot her in the crowd, which seems strange. She’s never late. I look around for her, gazing more carefully, but her red and purple hair doesn’t stick out to me. “Carter,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant, “is our whole staff here?”

He’s been busy trying to keep up with the demand for drinks without all of the machines working, so he’s a little flustered. “Uh... looks like we’re missing a waitress,” he says. “Not sure which one...”

I know immediately which one it is. I don’t need to check the schedule to see who didn’t come in. This isn’t right. Meg would be here if she didn’t let someone know she wasn’t feeling well or something. “No one called in?” I ask Carter.

Handing a tray to Lexi, he answers over his shoulder, “Nope, not that I know of. You can ask Ethan or Leah.”

“Where’s Meghan?” Lexi asks, taking the tray. “She usually handles this group of guys. They’re asking for her.”

“I’ll go call her,” I say, and I step through to the employee’s locker area next to the lounge, hoping to see her or at least hear her laugh from the attached room. But it’s quiet. It’s empty.

Pulling my cell phone from my pocket, I find her name quickly enough and dial. It rings and rings before it finally goes to voicemail. “Hey, Meghan. It’s Hunter. Just wondering where you’re at,” I say. “Hope everything is okay. Give me a call back, or call Carter, please.” I hang up, but this is weird.

I also send her a text. “You okay? Your shift has started.” That’s enough for now. With a deep breath, I head into my office to see if Leah is in there. Maybe Meg called her.

Leah is working on my laptop when I walk in. I try to stay casual. “Hey, have you heard anything from Meg? She’s late, and that’s weird.”

Though she’s in the middle of typing, Leah glances up for a second before she says, “No, but she’s only a few minutes late. Give her some time. Maybe she got a flat tire or something.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, trying to stay calm. She has a point. Meg’s car is archaic. But...she would’ve called if it was car trouble, wouldn’t she? I don’t feel right about this.

I decide to take Leah’s advice and head back up to the club to help out since they’re a girl short. I’ll need to call in a backup if Meg doesn’t arrive soon. Before long, I am busy helping out however I can, though I am not practiced enough to carry a drink tray. I won’t even attempt to do that. All the while, I can’t stop thinking about Meg. It’s so strange that she’s not here. Every time I hear the door open to the back, whether it’s someone coming or going to the bathroom or to take a break, I hope it’s her. But it never is.

Finally, when Meg’s over an hour late, I decide I have to go check on her. I can’t just stand here and pretend everything is okay, not when I have a really bad feeling in my gut that something is wrong. I’m not sure what it is—maybe that death trap of a car has finally turned on her—or maybe it’s something else, but I plan to drive to her apartment, checking for wrecks and broken-down cars along the way.



“Call in some backup,” I tell Carter, wiping my hands on a dishtowel. “I’m going to check on Meg.”

“Okay,” he calls over his shoulder. “Be careful.”

It might seem like a strange thing to say under any other circumstances, but he knows the life I live. My eyes go to Ethan before I walk out. I wish I could take him with me, but we’re busy, and I wouldn’t trust any of these other kids to be of much help if I do run into trouble. Not the type that it would require to make sure that Meg is okay.

But then, that’s silly. She’s probably fine.

As I prepare to walk to my vehicle, Leah’s words from the other night come back to my mind. She’d said that Meg was already in danger just from working here, and she’s not wrong.

All the way to Meg’s apartment, I’m looking on both sides of the road, checking for wrecks or cars with flat tires. I check to see if any of the people walking down the sidewalks might be her. The closer I get to her apartment, the more dread I begin to feel. I can’t explain why. My gut is already beginning to ache with the idea that there’s something wrong.

When I pull into her apartment complex, I see a couple of black SUVs that don’t seem to fit with the rest of the cars in the parking lot. Why would two expensive vehicles be parked right next to each other here? Most of these people drive cars very similar to Meg’s.

With a deep breath, I reach over to the glove compartment and pull out my 1911. I wouldn’t trust any other gun in this situation. It fits right into the holster under my jacket, but I’m not sure I want to keep it there... Maybe I’ll keep it in my hand for now, just in case.

Something’s definitely not right.

Stepping out of the vehicle, I note that the place is eerily quiet. I don’t hear any loud music blaring or even the background laugh track from a television. No one is walking around. With my gun in my hand, I head toward the stairs that lead up to Meg’s apartment.

Night has fallen, and while that might scare some people, it's my element. I operate best under the cover of darkness. My nervousness for Meg isn't displaced, but I feel a ripple of adrenaline as I crest the first floor, knowing that I am operating in the zone where I am most comfortable.

Just as I turn the corner to walk toward Meg's stairwell, a cat jumps down from a windowsill, and my heart lurches into my throat. I turn my gun toward it, but I don't fire. Instead, I pause for a moment, watching the kitty run away while I try to regain my ability to breathe.

That cat is familiar, though. I've seen it before. It takes me a moment to place it, but then I realize it belongs to the neighbor lady, the one who lives right next to Meg. I'm pretty sure that's an inside cat, one that's probably spoiled rotten by its doting owner. So why the hell is it out here by itself?

Before I take any more steps toward Meg's apartment, I pull my phone and send a quick text, just to be safe. I might be jumping to conclusions, but I would rather take the teasing later for being overly cautious than to end up dead.

With my phone back in my pocket and my gun at the ready, I continue my slow walk toward Meg's apartment. When I see her door standing open, my breath leaves my lungs.

Movement inside catches my attention, and I advance on the door, trying to see what's going on. I walk in with my gun drawn, and when the scene before me unfolds, I realize that Leah was right—Meg is in danger just because she works at Club Limelight. She's in grave danger.

"Well, if it isn't the doting boss," Mr. Waylen Nyx says from where he stands behind Meg. She's tied to a chair, blood splattered down her bruised temple, onto her cheek, and he doesn't seem content with that being the only damage he'll cause her tonight. He has a gun pressed against the back of her head.

"What the fuck is happening?" I ask, wanting to shoot him right now, but I can't take the chance that I'm faster on the trigger than he is.

“Now, now, Hunter. I know your employees are important to you. Perhaps this one in particular. But...if you know what’s best for you—and for her—you’ll turn around and walk away. Now.” Mr. Nyx narrows his eyes at me, and I see one of his goons across the room. He has two SUVs out there, so he has to have more men somewhere.

It doesn’t matter that I’m outnumbered, and I have no idea whether or not Ethan got my text to send reinforcements. I’ve got to handle this situation now so that Meg doesn’t get hurt. She hasn’t said anything, but I can see in her eyes that she’s terrified.

“You know I can’t do that, Nyx,” I tell him. “Now why don’t you tell me what the fuck you’re looking for? Maybe I can help you.”

Rather than responding to my comment, Waylen Nyx laughs a maniacal laugh. He is the embodiment of pure evil, and he has my Meg’s life in his hands.

# CHAPTER 34



MEGHAN

My mind is still fuzzy, and my whole body hurts. I don't even know how long I've been sitting in this chair, but it seems like forever, and I just want this nightmare to be over. But I don't want to die, either, so for now, I am stuck between a rock and a really fucking hard place.

And then I hear a voice that sounds like it has to be out of a dream. Hunter is here! And he's speaking to Mr. Nyx. Of course, the old, fat bastard is trying to tell him to fuck off, but he won't do it.

It's then that I realize Mr. Nyx has a gun lodged in the back of my neck. Fuck! How did he manage to get over here so quickly? I must've dozed off...

"Maybe I can help you," Hunter says. "What is it exactly that you are looking for?"

Both Mr. Nyx and his one goon are laughing. Before the asshole with the gun shoved into my cranium can answer the question, another couple of his thugs come into the room. I don't think I've seen these two before. They all kind of look the same—tall, muscular, and ugly. These two force Hunter to reposition himself. He takes a few steps closer to me, but we have the dining room table between us. I really wish he were close enough to touch me. I think I'd feel better about the whole thing if only his hands could be on me for a moment.

"What are we looking for?" Mr. Nyx says as he continues to laugh. "Do you honestly not know? I would've thought Jonathan would've mentioned the situation to you at some point. I truly thought the two of you were supposed to be really good friends. Of course, since he hasn't resurfaced since I handed his sorry ass over to you, it makes me wonder if maybe the two of you weren't as close as I thought. Did you knock him off?"

Hunter has an uneasy look on his face, and I get the impression he doesn't really want to talk about Jonathan or

anyone else with Mr. Nyx. But since there's not much else to do at the moment, other than dying, he says, "What happened between Jonathan and me is our business and no one else's." His tone is calm. "As to what you might be looking for here... I have no idea why you or anyone else would think there is a possibility my stolen money might be in this building. It's not as if Jonathan ever lived here or anything."

Mr. Nyx begins to laugh, and as he chuckles, the gun moves up and down, clocking me in the head a time or two. It hurts, but I am already in so much pain, I try not to flinch. "I guess he didn't tell you, then. You didn't know that the same bastard who owned Silver Towers once owned this building, too? That would be Jonathan's stepfather, and it was his stepbrother who ran this piece of shit apartment complex."

With all of the haziness going on in my mind, I am confused. I stare at Hunter, waiting to see if he understands what it is Mr. Nyx is telling him. Perhaps someday, if I live, he will explain it to me.

Hunter swears under his breath, dropping his eyes from my face for a moment to look at the torn-up floor. Even now, he is straddling two giant holes, his expensive shoes covered with sawdust from all of the burglars' efforts to tear up my apartment.

"You've got to be shitting me," Hunter says, loudly enough for me to make out what he's saying this time. "So... that asshole I took care of for breaking into Meg's apartment the first time was Jonathan's stepbrother?"

"That's right," Mr. Nyx says, "assuming you're talking about her former landlord. And the only reason I wanted Silver Towers from you to begin with is because that place was owned by a family member back at the time that Jonathan disappeared on your ass, too. So...I thought there was a good chance the money might be there. Since I've torn the place to hell looking for it and haven't found a damn thing, well, I decided to try and buy this place from you. But you refused." He swings the gun again, and I feel it thunk into the back of my skull as he asks, "Honestly, Hunter, what choice did I fucking have, you know? I couldn't just leave the money

sitting over here and have you or your little bitch find it. Now I don't know for a fact that it was in this apartment, but since the other landlord was in here looking, and I know that one of Jonathan's ex-girlfriends used to rent this place, I'm thinking it just might be."

All of the pieces of the puzzle are clear to me now. Jonathan stole money from Hunter. That's why he killed him—although, I'm not sure I would've done that before the money was found, had it been me. Thankfully, I am not a mafia crime lord, so it doesn't really matter what I would do. Now, it seems, Mr. Nyx is tearing up this apartment building looking for that money.

"Well, shit," I say, knowing I should probably keep my mouth shut. "It's not here! Do you see it anywhere?"

"Be quiet, you little bitch!" He yanks my hair, and I can't help but yelp a little.

"Get your fucking hands off of her!" Hunter says, but they make him back up farther, and now, he's on the other side of my coffee table. He's outnumbered three to one, and all of them have their guns drawn on him. While I am pretty sure that Hunter wouldn't have come in here looking for me without a gun, I don't see it anymore, and I'm nervous.

What if something happens to him? I'm not prepared to sit here in this chair and watch him bleed out all over the broken floor...

"Listen, Mr. Nyx," Hunter says, and he has his hands up in surrender. "I don't really give a fuck about the money anymore. If you want it, that's fine. Why don't you just let me come over there and untie Meg, get her out of here, and then you can do what you gotta do."

"And let you go outside and call the cops?" Mr. Nyx asks, another chuckle rolling out of his mouth. "Fat chance."

"Why the fuck would I do that?" Hunter asks. "You know me better than to think that I'd get the cops involved with anything either one of us do. No, my priority is the girl right

now. Give her to me, and you can do whatever the fuck you want with everything else.”

“You want your woman more than you want the money?” Mr. Nyx asks, and Hunter’s eyes are boring into mine like we are the only two people in the universe, let alone the room.

Finally, he says, “Yeah, yeah, I do. I want my woman more than I want the money.”

My heart restricts slightly as I think about what he’s saying. Never mind the silly *my woman* comment, the rest of it was really sweet. I don’t know how much money we’re talking about here, if it’s really a hundred million like Mr. Nyx said, but if I’m worth even a million dollars to him, that seems like a hell of a lot of money to me.

“Boss, we can’t trust him,” the tallest guy in the room says from his position near the door. “There ain’t no reason to think we can.”

“Will you let me be the one in charge here, Giovanni?” I can tell that Mr. Nyx and this Giovanni guy do not get along well. “Jesus fucking Christ!” Mr. Nyx says. “Fine, Hunter. You take the bitch and get the hell out of here, but don’t be coming back with your guns blazing because we will destroy you.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Hunter says. His eyes go to Giovanni, and the man still has his gun trained on Hunter. The other two have lowered their weapons, and I feel the cold steel leave the back of my head as Mr. Nyx takes his gun away. He has stepped back toward Giovanni a bit.

Hunter’s first steps are cautious as he comes near me, his hands still in the air. I want to rejoice in the fact that we have reached an agreement and I am about to be free, but I’m not so sure of the situation. Hunter is still being tentative, and I’m guessing it’s because of Giovanni. Any rejoicing I’m about to do has gone out the window.

“Boss, I’m telling you, this is bullshit!” Giovanni says. “We ain’t got that many men here, and half of them are busy babysitting the other prisoners! We can’t just assume he’s gonna cooperate.”



“Put your fucking gun down, boy!” Mr. Nyx shouts, and it seems clear to me that these two are not in agreement about who the boss really is. I wiggle my hands a bit, but it seems like I have zip ties around my wrists, and they are strung through the chair so that I can’t just stand up and pull my arms over the top. I really want to get out of here before Mr. Nyx loses this argument with his own crony.

“We have a deal, right?” Hunter asks, and he steps over a broken board to get a bit closer to me, but Giovanni doesn’t lower his weapon. I look around at the ground, wondering if there’s anything at all that I could use as a weapon nearby. If I tip my chair over, I could be close to the island, and I see a few pieces of broken trim there with nails sticking out. Maybe those will be sharp enough to free me if this all goes south.

“Yes, yes, we have a deal!” Mr. Nyx insists. He steps closer to Giovanni and pushes the muzzle of his gun down. “Don’t be a fucking idiot, Giovanni!” he says. “You know this is just business, and Hunter and I have been business partners for many, many years.”

Their conversation shifts to another language. I assume it’s Italian, but I’m not sure. Hunter looks at the other two men. One of them is standing near the wall that leads back to my bedroom, and the other is about halfway down the wall near the entryway, close to my couch. They both have guns in their hands, but neither of the weapons are raised.

Hunter takes another tentative step toward me, and I almost smile at him, thinking surely Mr. Nyx has better control of his fucked-up men than this. This Giovanni bastard can’t really think it’s okay to go against his boss, right? I see how Hunter controls his men, and they would never treat him that way.

“We have a deal!” Mr. Nyx yells in English, and with that, Hunter walks more briskly toward me.

“No, we don’t!” Giovanni says, and just as Hunter is about to reach my side, Giovanni raises his weapon and fires.

My cheers quickly become screams of terror as Hunter grabs me and pulls me out of the way, raising his own gun to point in the direction of the maniac by Mr. Nyx. I have no idea where

the bullet went, but I do see that Mr. Nyx has his hand on Giovanni's weapon. Did he push it away?

I don't have time to think about it because now that one shot has been fired, everyone is shooting. All I can do is scream as I hit the ground hard, landing on my side behind the island. My head careens into the floorboards, and everything starts to go black again.

I guess we don't have a fucking deal...

# CHAPTER 35



## HUNTER

All hell breaks loose around us, and all I can do is try to keep Meg safe as I fight against Mr. Nyx and at least three of his men. Bullets are flying, and as I kneel beside her behind the kitchen island, all I can think to say is, “Hi, dear.”

“Hi, dear?” she repeats, already trying her best to get free from the chair. Her head is bleeding on both sides now. A glance at the floor tells me she gashed the other side when the chair tipped over. “Is that really all you have to say to me, Hunter Stone?”

I almost laugh. Whenever she is this upset, she is even more beautiful than usual, and I want her so fucking badly. But we are in a slightly precarious position at the moment, and all I can do is protect her and keep my lustful thoughts for later.

That and pray that Ethan got the message I sent to him earlier and is on his way. I fire another shot in the direction of Mr. Nyx, seeing as though he seems to have turned on me now, despite his agreement to go ahead and work with me earlier, but even though he mostly relies on a cane to get around these days, he’s faster than he looks. I hope the conversation we had earlier was enough to stall them so Ethan can get here as several more bullets come flying in my direction.

I can’t stay here if I’m going to take these bastards out. The island provides enough cover for me to think that Meg will probably be okay hunkered down here, but there’s no way to know for certain. I need to make a move.

Popping up behind the island, I fire a shot at the goon who started all of this mess by firing the first shots. Giovanni, I think his name is—*was* is probably a more accurate word now as the bullet hits him right between his eyes. He drops backward, hitting one of the walls Meg painted only a matter of weeks ago, and leaves a fresh smear of blood all the way down it as his large body slumps to the floor.

“Well, that’s one down, and three more to go,” I mumble to myself. One of the guys has ducked for cover back in the hallway that I’m assuming leads to Meg’s bedroom and bathroom. The other actually seems to have run back out the door since he was standing pretty close to it when this all began. He didn’t look like much of a fighter anyway. And Mr. Nyx is crouched down behind a couch.

I decide to lay down some cover fire and head after the goon in the hallway when I hear a noise at the door and turn my gun in that direction, thinking it’s probably that other guy coming back. But it’s not. Thank God I’m as quick to stop my trigger finger as I am to pull it or else Ethan would be pushing up daisies later this evening.

He rushes in, firing his gun at Nyx as he says, “Hunter! I heard there was an incident.”

Always the funny guy... With him here, I continue on my way toward the hallway. “See if you can help Meg!” I shout and head for the guy in the back bedroom, knowing Ethan and his Glock will be fine as long as it’s just him and Mr. Nyx in the room, but I wouldn’t be surprised if more of his guys show up.

I run toward the back bedroom, and before I even crest the corner, a barrage of gunfire comes my way. I wait a moment and then, once he’s confused about where I am, I duck around the corner and quickly open fire. He’s standing in front of Meg’s bed, and when the bullets connect with his torso, the asshole falls backward, spraying blood all over her blankets.

I’ve always wondered what her bedroom must look like, and I’ve thought about being in this room many times, but more gunfire from the living room tells me I don’t have time to stand here and fantasize about what it would be like to take her in her own room. Satisfied that this guy isn’t going to be any more help to Mr. Nyx, I head back to the living room.

In the kitchen, Ethan is returning fire from Mr. Nyx, who is across from him, hidden almost completely by the couch and an overturned side table. I want to sneak around the other side and take him out, but before I get a chance, more gunfire sounds from the doorway.

Two more armed men in suits and a woman who looks even more deadly than the other two, even though she's wearing a skirt and pumps, come flying in the door, ready to defend their boss.

I take the first guy out quickly enough, sinking two or three bullets in him, but the other two fan out, and one of them, the other man, has his sights set on the kitchen.

"I don't fucking think so," I say. Even with the female firing at me, I duck down behind a chair and unload on the motherfucker just as Ethan does the same. He only makes it a few steps before he falls to the ground, his face landing in one of the holes that Mr. Nyx and his assholes have left in the floor of my apartment complex.

The woman is firing without fear as she comes at us, rotating between Ethan and me as she approaches. I don't have time for this shit. I need to get to Mr. Nyx. He's the real culprit here, and even though I don't like having to hurt women, it seems clear to me that this one coming at me is a murderous bitch.

A ton of broken planks of wood litter the ground. I decide to get creative and throw a bunch of those, along with the sawdust that's now covering my new shoes, in the woman's face as I duck behind the chair. She's doing a good job of pinning Ethan and me so that neither one of us can get a good shot off without jeopardizing our cover, but when the debris from the floor hits her in the face, it's not the same as getting hit by a bullet, but it'll give me a second.

One of the larger pieces of wood hits her in the nose, bloodying it immediately. She screeches in anger and unexpected pain, but then, as the tiny pieces of sawdust fill her eyes, she begins to blink, tears streaming down her face. Then, she must realize she can no longer see us to keep us pinned down, and one of us is going to pop out to kill her, so the brave bitch who came in firing with no reservations drops to the ground, trying to take cover behind Meg's coffee table.

It's not enough, and as she lies there, wiping at her eyes, both Ethan and I hit her with bullets from opposite sides of the room. She goes down, bleeding from the head and the side,

and I have a feeling, no matter how tough this bitch is, she's not getting up again.

Now I just need to take out Mr. Nyx. He's been awfully quiet since this last set of assassins came in, but now that they're all down, he's up again, firing first at me and then at Ethan.

My pistol has never failed me yet, but as I take aim at the fat face peeking out from behind the couch, I realize it's either jammed or out of ammo. "Son of a bitch!" I shout, feeling in my pockets for more bullets. I seem to be coming up short.

I hear Mr. Nyx laughing from behind his entrenchment. "So I guess Mr. Stone is about to crumble, huh?" he asks.

"Fuck you!" I shout. I prefer fists over guns anyway, and when I kill Waylen Nyx, I'd just as soon do it with my own two hands. After everything he's put Meg through, the fucking asshole deserves it.

Ethan continues to fire at Mr. Nyx, which gives me the opportunity I need to launch myself across the room at the bastard. Though my bouncer has to aim more carefully now with me moving in front of his gun, I trust my guy completely.

Waylen Nyx looks up at me with wide eyes as I barrel across the room, slamming into the couch and knocking it backward on top of him. He shouts in surprise, having never expected that move, but I think it's clear to him now that he's pissed off the wrong Fixer.

I easily climb over the couch, and seeing that Mr. Nyx has lost his gun when the couch fell on top of him, I drop down onto his stomach and begin to punch him in the face. Hard. He tries to fight back, but without his trusty cane or his revolver around, he's really nothing more than a miserable, nasty old man.

"What the fuck makes you think you can just come in here and take what doesn't belong to you?" I shout at him as I jam my fist into his nose. Blood sprays up, covering my shirt as he groans and gasps for air. I see his hand moving toward his cane, which is only a few inches from his reach. I'm not going to give him a chance to pick it up and hit me with it, though.

“You always were soft when it comes to love,” Mr. Nyx says to me, his speech slurred from the constant hammering of my fists into his face. “You don’t have what it takes to be a strong businessman anymore, Hunter Stone.”

I stop my punching long enough to listen to him, but I’m not sure why. He’s just bullshitting me now, trying to get me to be more lenient so that I don’t kill him. Either that or he’s stalling so that his assholes can get here from other parts of the apartment building and shoot me before I can kill him, possibly drawn by the rounds of shots fired.

But he knows me better than most people, so those words sting a bit, more than they would if someone else was speaking them. “Shut the fuck up, Waylen!” I tell him, but he only chuckles at me.

“It doesn’t surprise me one bit to hear you deny it.” I punch him again, this time in the side of the head, and his eyes roll backward a bit before he’s looking at me again. “You love the girl, and you want her more than you want the cash, even though the money is more important in the overall scheme of things.”

“If you think that money is more important than the people you care about, then you’ll be dancing with the devil in just a couple of seconds, you bastard,” I say.

I don’t know how he’s laughing while I’m punching him in the face over and over again so that his entire head looks like tenderized meat, but he continues to chuckle, as if this is all a big joke and I’ll get off of him without beating him to death, but that’s not the plan. I will kill him.

Moving down to his body where his vital organs are, I throw a right hook and then a left jab. That takes his ability to laugh away. Now he’s grimacing. I should probably pick up his pistol that’s lying nearby and finish him off, but beating the shit out of him is so much more fun.

“Hunter!” I hear Meg shout from the kitchen. Worried that she’s hurt, I turn my head, and that’s when a sharp pain radiates down my skull, and the room begins to twirl. Darkness fills my periphery, and I’m fighting to stay upright.



“Fuck.”

# CHAPTER 36



*MEGHAN*

Chaos has broken out all around me, and my head is killing me from where I hit it on the floor, but from the moment the gunshots rang out, I became wide awake and alert, realizing I need to do everything I can to help get Hunter and myself out of this alive.

When he took off across the room to go after that guy in the back, I picked up a piece of wood from the floor, a fragment from all of the destruction Mr. Nyx and his friends had caused to my once lovely apartment. It was hard to even know what I'm doing without being able to see, but then Ethan is suddenly there out of nowhere. "You okay, Meghan?" he asks while he's trying to shoot at the bad guys. From the sounds of it, more of them have come in the door.

"I'm just great, Ethan. How are you?" I asked him sarcastically as I whittle away at the zip ties that hold my hands around the back of the chair. The wood isn't quite sharp enough. "Do you happen to have a knife?" I ask him. "Or do you suppose you could grab one out of that drawer over there by the stove?"

"Uhm... I'm trying to kill these mobsters right now," he says. "But how about a nail?" I feel his hand brush against my palm, and then a piece of metal drops into my hand, and I try using that to get my wrists free.

It takes a few minutes for me to finally break through the restraints. Ethan helps the best he can, but he's been so busy shooting all of these awful people all around us that I have to do much of it myself.

Finally, I feel the plastic begin to give way, and then, suddenly, my wrists snap apart. My hands are sore from all of the sawing against the zip tie with the wood and then the nail, and my wrists are aching from the strain, but once I'm free, I'm bound and determined to do everything I can to help the situation. We need to get out of here as soon as possible.

I pop my head around the side of the island just in time to see Hunter take out some crazy-ass bitch who definitely hadn't been here before. It makes me wonder how many fucking people Mr. Nyx brought with him to look for this alleged cash. I was unconscious for a lot of the time I was tied to the chair, but I only saw three or four different guys.

As I peer around the kitchen island at my destroyed apartment, I see a lot of dead bodies, and one of them is lying pretty close to where Ethan is next to the kitchen island, his large body only partially blocked by what is left of the splintered wood. He's watching what's happening with Hunter very closely, and I imagine it is so that he can do his best to keep his boss from getting shot.

Thoughts of what would happen if Hunter dies in my apartment makes my eyes misty. I wish I could be of better service, but I don't even have a gun with me, and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to use it. I'd fired a rifle a few times back home because my grandpa used to take me hunting every once in a while when I was younger. It was one of the few things we could do to entertain ourselves where I'd grown up. But...that is far different from the handguns these people are using.

As I sit here on my knees, watching the fight, I notice something peculiar about the island. The assholes who'd ruined my apartment had taken the trim off of the bottom of the island so they could get the floorboards off more easily. I always thought this island was built pretty solidly, and that it had probably always been in the apartment, even though the kitchen is a little small for such a large piece of furniture. But then, as I watch the fight unfold, I notice something strange about it.

It isn't actually attached to the floor. It had just been sitting there with the trim around it, like someone had just plunked it down there. I think it's bizarre and am about to investigate the situation when the goon Hunter had shot falls next to Ethan and me had managed to get back to his feet.

Ethan is shooting at Mr. Nyx as Hunter storms over toward him, which almost makes me scream, but then, this guy gets

up, and Ethan's attention is drawn away from the battle near the couch. He shoots at the guy again, but he lunges at Ethan, and they both fell onto the kitchen floor right near me.

I let out a loud yelp and scoot around toward the other side of the island. When I do so, the island shifts and slides across the floor a bit, and I move back with it.

Ethan picks up one of the wooden floor pieces with a nail sticking out of it and clubs the guy in the head. Immediately, blood spurts everywhere, and I cover my mouth with both hands to stifle a scream. That and the gunshot wounds the man had already suffered earlier seem to be about all he can take, and he falls over to the side, landing in a heap.

"Fuck," Ethan mutters, and then he picks his gun up and aims it where Hunter and Mr. Nyx are fighting, but he doesn't fire, and I suppose that's because Hunter and Mr. Nyx are too close to one another, and Ethan might shoot Hunter accidentally.

My eyes are drawn to Hunter as he kneels on the floor, straddling Mr. Nyx and punching the shit out of him. Over and over again, Hunter pounds the older guy in the face and in the trunk with both of his fists. I watch in awe, wondering at myself how I can find something like this so attractive when Hunter is doing his best to murder his enemy with his fists, but I don't have time to ponder it too much. I'm too busy trying to think of another way to get out of the situation.

And then... I look down at the floor near the island and notice something strange about the pieces of wood there. They are a different color than the rest of the floor, like they'd been installed more recently. I think that's odd. So I pick up a shard of wood and use it to pry one of these newer pieces up out of the floor. I toss that one aside and lift another one.

That's when my eyes settle on the most peculiar thing I've ever seen in a floor before. It's a large, gray duffle bag, and it's been wedged deep in the floorboards. I take a moment to consider what I'm seeing. The whole thing seems so strange.

Even with all of the commotion going on around me, I manage to realize what it is. I almost laugh with glee as I reach down to grab the bag.

That's when I fuck up.

"Hunter!" I yell. "I found it!"

But he doesn't hear the rest of what I say because after I pull the bag out of the floorboards, I turn to see that my shout of joy has been too much of a distraction, and now, I have this duffle bag in my hand, and I'm leaping up off of the floor as Ethan runs around the other side of the island in an attempt to get to Hunter, who is passed out on the ground, and Mr. Nyx is coming at me.

"Fuck." It is the only word that will come out of my mouth. He looks like a fucking nightmare. His face is all caved in, bloodied, bruised, misshapen. One of his eyes is just a slit, and the other one is bleeding. Actual drops of blood are pouring out his fucking eyeball!

But this rat bastard is determined, and as he comes toward me, I know what he intends to do. He wants this money, and he will stop at nothing to get it.

I am not about to just hand it over, though. It's so fucking heavy, I can barely lift it, especially since my body hurts so badly from everything I've been through, but as the Frankenstein monster lunges at me, I grab the handles with both of my fists and bring it around in an arc as fast as I can.

The bag hits Mr. Nyx on the side of his bloodied head, and his body topples over. He crumples to the ground, falling on the ripped-up floor near the island, his left arm landing on the chair I was just tied to. Ironically, they'd been ripping up the entire goddamn apartment complex looking for this bag of money, and it had been less than two feet from me the whole time. It had been right under their noses!

I'll have to think about that later, though. Just because all of the bad guys are out cold at the moment doesn't mean they'll stay down. Even now, I see that Mr. Nyx is stirring again. I think Ethan is preoccupied with another one of the assholes, so I try to move away from Mr. Nyx, thinking I should just take my giant bag of money and run out the door.

A hand darts out and grabs my ankle, which is already sore from when I fell over in the chair. I screech and try to kick him with my other foot, but before I can land a blow, Hunter is there. Miraculously, he's been revived from getting knocked out by this same asshole a few moments ago, and he rushes over, swaying slightly, and kicks Mr. Nyx in the back, right where his kidneys would be.

That's all it takes for Mr. Nyx to let me go, and I can't help but slam my heel into his hand as I run past him, drawn to Hunter like he is a lighthouse and I am a ship on a tumultuous sea.

"Is that it?" Hunter asks me as he catches me in his arms, pulling me close. "Is that the money?"

"I haven't looked, but I think it has to be," I say.

He quickly lets me go and grabs the bag, swinging it up on top of the island and unzipping it. "Holy fuck," he mumbles. I glance over his shoulder and see more bearer bonds than I've ever seen in my life.

Hunter hurriedly zips the duffle bag up and then turns to me, pulling me close again. His lips descend upon my temple, and he says, "You fucking crazy woman! I can't believe you found the money and took out Nyx. Come on, let's get the hell out of here!"

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I take his hand, and the two of us head for the door. We pause for a moment for him to glance around. The entire apartment complex seems eerily quiet.

"Ethan, were you the only one who came?" he calls back over his shoulder as I peek my head back inside and see Ethan doing something in my kitchen, but I don't know what it is.

"No, I brought some of the other guys, but they're getting the rest of the residents to safety," he tells us.

"Perfect. We need to torch this place. Molotov cocktail, Ethan." Hunter catches the bouncer's eye, and I cringe a bit at the words.

"Already on it," Ethan says, holding up my bottle of Bacardi.

“You’re going to burn my apartment?” I ask.

“Too many bodies.” Hunter looks sympathetic. “Come on, gorgeous. Let’s get the hell out of here and let Ethan do his job.” He pulls me close and presses his lips to mine, and even though it stings from the cuts on my mouth, I kiss him back fiercely.

Hunter doesn’t let go of my hand as we take off running for the stairs. As we go, I see a gray ball of fur fly past us and know that Mr. Whiskers will make it out of the apartment building safely as well.

Now with Mr. Nyx and his goons dead, or so I presume, maybe this awful nightmare will finally be over. Once and for all.



# CHAPTER 37



## HUNTER

The smell of smoke fills my lungs as I lead Meg to my vehicle. I hear Ethan behind us and know that he'll be getting to his car before we get into too much trouble. The rest of my guys will smell smoke and know to get out of Dodge.

People are beginning to gather around the outskirts of the building in the parking lots and on the perimeter, probably drawn there by the sounds of gunfire and the smell of burning wood. I see Meg's neighbor, and she waves at us, so Meg lifts a hand, but there's no time for chatting right now.

I don't waste any time looking at around as I approach my SUV. Meg is covered with bruises and blood, and I'm pretty sure I have a concussion from when that bastard Mr. Nyx clocked me in the back of my head with his cane. But it's not me I'm worried about. It's Meg. Even as she sits down in the passenger seat, I can tell she's exhausted. She's breathing heavily, and her eyes are beginning to close of their own accord.

I set the duffle bag down in the floorboards behind her and brush her hair back from her beautiful face. Even with all of the blood and bruises, she is still the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen. "Are you okay?" I ask, hearing the sincerity in my own voice.

"I am now," she says, and her eyes lift slightly so she's looking into mine. "Thank you for saving me, Hunter."

I can't help the smile that crests my lips. "I will always be there for you, Meg," I tell her. I press my mouth lightly to her forehead, not wanting to hurt her any more than she already is, and then close her door before rushing around to get in behind the wheel. I need to get her some help. The idea of what could've happened, that I could've gone to check on her and found a body, makes a shiver go down my spine. But when she reaches over and puts her hand gently on my arm, I feel grounded again. I know that she's okay.

People scatter as I throw the SUV into reverse. I see Ethan climbing into his truck as well, so we will both be away from here before the police and firetrucks arrive. They'll likely be calling me soon, as the owner of the building, to tell me what's happened. But I have strings I can pull that should manage to ensure that we are not implicated in any way.

That's not who I am calling now, though, as I head home. I tell my car to dial Leah's number and wait anxiously for her to answer. When she does, she sounds like she knows something's up. I wonder if Ethan told her he got a 911 text from me.

"Hunter? What's going on?" Leah asks, and her voice is a bit shaky as she speaks.

"I need you to get Dr. Taylor to my place as soon as possible," I tell her.

Before I can even say more, she blurts, "Did someone get shot again?"

My eyes go to Meg, and I see her reaction, her mouth dropping open as she stares out the windshield.

"No, not shot this time, just hurt. Just tell him to hurry up, and I'll pay him twice the regular rate if he can be there within twenty minutes, all right?"

"Of course. But Hunter, what happened?"

I don't answer her question. Instead, I hang up right as the last syllable comes out of her mouth. Explaining to Leah what happened will take too much time and effort, and right now, I'm more focused on making sure I take care of Meg. I look over at her and see her resting her head back now. I can tell that she feels relaxed compared to how she was when I first found her, and I'm relieved that she's not more severely injured.

"He was there when I came home," she says, her voice just above a whisper. I want to tell her she doesn't need to explain anything to me right now, but I don't. I let her talk. "He hit me in the head with something."

“It was probably his fucking cane,” I say, the spot on my head where the bastard hit me still smarting.

“And then...when I opened my eyes again, I was tied to the chair. I don’t even know how long I was there.” She shakes her head slowly and then rests it back again.

“It doesn’t matter now, baby,” I tell her, reaching over to squeeze her knee. “You’re safe now. I’ll make sure you’re safe from now on.”

She doesn’t say anything, and I know she’s exhausted, so I let her rest.

Stopping at a red light, I let my mind wander. The money—that’s the money that Jonathan stole from me. The bastard. How the hell did he get it hidden in the floor of that apartment? And why is it in bearer bonds? I may never know the answers to those questions.

We arrive at my place, and I see Ethan pulling in right behind us, which is good because I don’t want Meg walking anymore. I scoop her up into my arms, and she doesn’t protest. “Grab the bag,” I tell Ethan, nodding toward the backseat.

He gets it, and the three of us go into a private entrance. The others go on about their day like nothing happened.

I carry Meg to my bed and gently lay her down. Immediately, she seems to melt into the pillows. “There we go,” I say, smoothing her hair back. “You’re safe.”

She smiles up at me, but before she can speak, I hear Ethan talking to someone. “She’s in here,” he says, leading Dr. Taylor to my bedroom.

“Well, what seems to be the trouble?” the older gentleman asks. He’s carrying a large, black medical bag, and I know he’s got all kinds of equipment in it to fix a variety of ailments.

“Just check her over,” I tell him. “Especially her head.”

“Yes, yes!” he says and sits down next to Meg on the bed.

I do my best to stay back, to let the man do his work, and not to hover as he asks Meg a few questions about what hurts. She

answers, and he does the regular doctor stuff, like listening to her heart and checking her blood pressure.

“Thanks for getting there so fast,” I tell Ethan, clapping him on the shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“I hardly have a scratch on me,” he says with a crooked smirk. “You know I’m always up for a little shootout. You gonna have the doc look at that gash in your skull?”

“Fuck no,” I tell him. “I’m fine.”

“Looks kinda nasty,” he says. “You’ve got blood on your shirt.”

“I’m fine!” I say, stepping away. “Why don’t you go get back to work?”

“Fine,” he says, shaking his head. “You sure are a mean boss.” He grins at me again and then heads out just about the time the doctor stands up and looks in my direction.

“She’ll be just fine in a day or two,” he says with a reassuring smile. “Just make sure she rests. Plenty of fluids for the slight dehydration and some over-the-counter pain medication for any discomfort.”

“Really?” I ask, shocked that it’s nothing more serious. I am also relieved, though. “Does she have a concussion?”

“No, no, just that nasty gash in the side of her head. I cleaned it up and put in a couple of stitches. They’ll dissolve in a week or so, and then she’ll be back to normal. Now, you, on the other hand, Mr. Stone...” he says, looking at my head.

“I’m fine. Thanks, Doc. You know how to see yourself out, right?”

He chuckles at me and pats my arm as he heads out the door. My eyes lock on Meg, and I am about to go to her, to tell her what I wanted to tell her before, but before I can, Leah comes storming into the apartment. “What the fuck happened?” she asks me, one of her eyes slightly narrowed, which is how she always looks when she’s mad.

“Mr. Nyx happened,” I reply. “He had Meg tied up and was tearing her apartment up.”

“What? Why?” Leah asks.

“Because he was looking for this,” I tell her, gesturing at the duffle bag full of bearer bonds that Ethan carried in for me. It’s currently on my kitchen counter.

“What the fuck is that that it could be so important you have to go around starting fires and making people homeless?” She folds her arms across her chest.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, which I immediately regret when I touch the cut on the back of my head. “It’s the money, Leah.”

“What?” I can tell by the look on her face that she’s in as much shock as I was when Meg pulled it out of the floor.

She comes over, and I unzip the bag as Meg clarifies, “That’s the money that Jonathan stole from you, right?”

“That’s right,” I tell her. “But don’t you worry about any of this. You just rest.”

She nods, and I see that she’s feeling tired. The bottle of Tylenol next to her on the nightstand is the PM version, so I guess Dr. Taylor gave her something to help her rest.

As I am examining the bearer bonds, I see something that makes my skin crawl, and I hope Leah doesn’t notice.

Some of the bonds already have a name on them. Velasco. That’s not good, and I need to figure out how the Raven and his family figure into all of this, but I don’t want Leah to know about it, not with her history. I also spy a box tucked in the bottom. It’s wrapped in black velvet, and the crest on it is the same as the Velasco family.

*What the fuck?* is all I can think.

I hastily zip the bag back up before Leah can notice and say, “I’ll worry about this later. There are more important things to take care of at the moment.” My eyes shift to Meghan, and I think Leah has gotten the picture.

“Right,” she says with a nod and a knowing smile. “Yes, I will get out of your hair. I just wanted to see what happened.” She

turns to Meghan and says, “I’m glad you’re okay. Get some rest, and let me know if you need anything.”

Meg thanks her, and then Leah leaves. Finally, we are alone again. At least for now.

With a heavy sigh, I sink down onto the bed next to Meg. She looks better already now that Dr. Taylor has cleaned up her face. I can see purple and blue marks all over her cheeks up to her temples, her bottom lip is cracked, and it looks like her left eye may turn black given enough time. But for the most part, she is okay now. All of these injuries will heal, and I am determined never to let anything like this happen again.

“You should’ve let him check your head,” she says, reaching up and touching my cheek. Her fingers are cool, and her hand feels nice on my skin. I can’t let myself think about her too much, though, because she’s injured, and my thoughts might lead me to want to take her to places she can’t go right now.

“I’m fine,” I assure her, cradling her hand with mine. “I think you should give in to that sleepiness that has your eyes blinking so much and go ahead and doze away to dreamland.”

“And what about you?” she asks, already stifling a yawn.

“Me?” I ask, smiling down at her. “Oh, don’t you worry about me. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

As her eyelids grow heavy, I bend down and gently press my lips to hers, so thankful that she’s safe and back in my bed—where she belongs.

# CHAPTER 38





MEGHAN

Bed rest isn't such a bad thing—unless you've got a tyrant known as The Fixer telling you not to breathe too loudly or you might hurt yourself. For three days, Hunter only let me out of bed long enough to go to the bathroom. The rest of the time, I had to lie in bed and entertain myself with Netflix or a book.

Most people wouldn't complain about having to take it easy for a few days, but I was used to working. I missed my job, and I missed my friends. Though a lot of them did come by to visit me. Most of them didn't want to stay around for too long, though. Every time anyone touched me or laughed too loud or asked me too many questions, Hunter would run them off like a mother hen protecting her eggs from a fox.

It was kind of cute—in an annoying way.

But the best thing about being in Hunter's apartment while I convalesced—besides his gorgeous bathroom, which was all white marble with gold accents, including the giant soaking tub that made me want to just move right in and make the bathroom my home—was the fact that I got to be with Hunter all the time. He did leave to go check on the club periodically, and he would step out of the room to take calls to handle business. But for the most part, it was just the two of us alone in his apartment all day, and it was amazing.

We chatted about our lives growing up, how he'd come to own the club, and what his ambitions were for the future. I told him about what I wanted to do long-term and lamented the fact that I'd lost a lot of things in the fire that were irreplaceable—like some letters from my grandmother and the baby blanket my mom had crocheted for me. I'm not usually a sentimental person, but I had held on to a few things, including the necklace Hunter got for me. Until Mr. Nyx and his bastards had interfered.

Hunter was really apologetic about all of that, but I assured him it wasn't his fault. He'd done what he had to do to keep

himself and his people safe, and I can respect that.

The easiest thing and the hardest thing about being on bed rest is being with Hunter all the time. My body aches, not because of the torture I've gone through at the hands of that asshole Mr. Nyx and his goons, but because I want Hunter so badly.

He's stayed out of reach for the most part, as if he's feeling this pull, too, and he's doing everything he can to keep from acting on the longing that's drawing us together. He sits in a chair across the room from me, and my fingertips ache because they can't reach him. I find myself breathing more deeply, hoping to have the opportunity to catch his scent on the breeze. I have to press my legs together to dull the ache that radiates throughout my core each time he is near me and often when he is away.

Right now, he is outside sitting on the deck, drinking whiskey and staring at the sky. The evening light filters through the dense Los Angeles air and gives his skin a soft glow, and I am mesmerized by how insanely handsome he is. He's also brave, strong, intelligent, and everything a woman could ever want in a man—even if he is also headstrong, quick-tempered, and a bit arrogant.

I can't continue to sit here and stare at him through glass panes. I need him, and if he wants to shout at me for getting out of bed, then he'll have to manhandle me back into place.

Quietly, I push back the covers and drop my bare feet to the floor. I am wearing only one of his T-shirts and a pair of panties from the package Leah was kind enough to bring me from the store. She bought me some other outfits as well. I cringe at the thought of all of the nice clothes I lost...

The sliding glass door creaks slightly as I open it, and he turns his head. I don't mind walking out here onto the deck in only my underwear because it's so secluded. No one can see us, but I can feel the breeze in my hair and see the heavens above us.

He doesn't say anything as he watches me glide over and sit down next to him on a settee made for the outdoors. I expect him to scold me and tell me to go back to bed, but instead, he just takes another sip from his glass.

“This is nice,” I say as I observe the plants he has growing out here and the seclusion of the place. I can hear the slight buzz of traffic in the distance, but not much more.

“It’s my oasis,” he says, setting his glass aside. “My tiny piece of heaven.”

“I like it.” I turn and place my hand on top of his where it sits between us on the cushion. “I couldn’t stay in bed any longer.”

“I see that,” he says, and I can see a bit of disapproval in his eyes, but nothing too scolding. “You’re feeling all right, then?”

“Yes,” I say. “But... I’d be feeling better if...” I am suddenly incapable of talking after accidentally losing myself in his gaze.

He reaches over and brushes my hair away from my eyes, his palm lingering on the flushed flesh of my face. “You’d feel better if... what?”

“Well,” I begin, feeling a heaviness in my chest as I try to inhale but only breathe in the scent of bergamot and whiskey, a scent I will forever associate with him, “I was just thinking... I owe you.”

“What’s that now?” he asks, tipping his head slightly to the side. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“That’s not true.” I bite down on my bottom lip and notice that we are suddenly closer than we were before. “I owe you for saving me.”

He grins at me and leans so close I can feel the heat from his skin on my face. “I saved you, you found my money... I think we’re even.”

I can’t help but shrug. I want to owe him—for the moment. Because I know exactly how to pay him back. “Listen, Hunter, here’s the deal. I have loved being on bed rest. It’s been very relaxing, and you’ve taken very good care of me. But...if it’s all the same to you...I feel better...and, well, I think I’d like to fuck you now.”

“You’d like to...fuck me now?” he repeats, and I can see a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

“If you want...” I give him a coy look and bat my eyelashes at him.

“Oh, I want,” he says. “As long as you feel up to it.”

Rather than answering him with words, I close the distance between us, pressing my tongue through his parted lips. The taste of his whiskey fills my mouth as I close my eyes and consume him.

Hunter’s arms are around me immediately. He leans me back on the couch, and I lift my legs, splitting them so that he leans forward over my body. The second his hip touches my wet panties, my pussy lights on fire, and the need I feel for him becomes all-encompassing.

His hands glide over my body as I reach for the button on his jeans and flip them open as his kisses feather against my neck. I can’t get his zipper down fast enough, and I’m not sure I’ll be willing to wait for him to get his jeans all the way off. I can feel his hard, thick cock on my thigh, and I want him inside of me so badly.

Hunter seems to be taking his time a bit more than I am, though. His hands slide up beneath my borrowed T-shirt, and he smooths the skin beneath my ribcage with his thumb as he watches me come undone, still kissing along my neck, up to my ear, and occasionally, my gaping mouth.

“Hunter,” I moan, the steam building inside of me so intense I feel I’m ready to explode. “Please...”

“Please what, baby?” he asks me in that deep purr that makes the muscles in my lower abdomen tighten.

“Please...fuck me,” I whisper. He lifts his head, and I lock eyes with him. “Now.”

I can tell that he finds my request amusing, but I’m no longer able to care about how needy I sound. With a nod, he swiftly moves into action, ready to give a lady what she wants.

Taking hold of the hem of my shirt, he lifts it over my head, and my nipples harden even more in the evening breeze. He takes one in his mouth and rolls the other with his finger and thumb as I run my fingers through his hair and begin to buck

my hips against him, trying to get enough friction, even through my damp panties and his jeans, in the way to satisfy the craving between my legs.

When he moves to stand so he can remove his jeans, I lunge for him, not wanting to let him go for even a second, but Hunter is quick, and a moment later, he is completely naked, standing in front of me, and all I can think about is how perfect every square inch of his muscular body is.

I reach down to pull my panties off, but he won't let me. Instead, he grabs them by the lace top and yanks them off, sending them flying across the deck, which has me laughing for a second before he's back on top of me again. He thrusts deep inside of me without hesitation, filling me completely as I gasp for air, my head tipped back, my eyes closed so I can revel in every movement as Hunter begins to set a steady pace.

My fingernails rake down his back, my hips lifting with every single one of his powerful thrusts. I have my foot on the floor, and pushing off of it allows me to get just the right angle so that he is hitting me right in the perfect spot. Each time he hammers against my clit, my body begins to sing, vibrating with a melody only he and I know.

I come quickly, holding on to him for dear life as high-pitched bleats leave my lips so that I don't even recognize my own voice. Then Hunter's mouth comes down to smother mine, and my body continues to curl toward him, every muscle contracting until I feel his warmth fill me from the inside out.

With his mouth off mine, I suck in air, his head resting over my heart. My body thrums with the ache of satisfaction, and my heart is full. This man may not be perfect, but he is everything I've ever wanted or needed, and if I can hold on to this moment, and to him, for the rest of my life, I know I'll die a happy woman.

But when he lifts his head, and his blue eyes lock on my face, I am reminded that nothing is that simple. We have so much we need to work out. What happened in my apartment hasn't fixed the previous problems we had.

He still doesn't date employees, and as far as I know, I still work at the club.

For now, though, when he kisses me again, his mouth exploring mine as if he is looking for newfound adventures, I am ready to embark with him.

Hunter lifts me off the couch, carrying me easily into the bedroom, and deposits me on the bed, and I know our quick fuck on the deck is just the beginning of a night that is sure to leave me worn out—and fully satisfied.

# CHAPTER 39



## HUNTER

Having Meg in my apartment is different than I ever could've imagined. It's better. I lived with my ex, but that was not like this at all. When I came home to her...it always felt like an argument was about to happen, like I was walking on eggshells. With Meg, for the first time in forever, I feel like I am truly coming home.

Making love to her is also better than anything else I've ever experienced in my life. She knows how to make me lose my mind in ways I wouldn't have thought possible. The way she looks at me, the way she touches me, the way her eyes light my body on fire...I can't imagine ever letting her go.

After a few weeks of insisting she take it easy, I know she's ready to get back to the world. She's ready to see her friends again and get back to work. Just thinking about that makes me nervous because I know she loves her job, but my rule is signed into the back of my mind. I don't date employees, and I don't want to fire her because she loves her job so much. It's putting me in a difficult position, and I'm not sure how to get out of it.

After I returned from the club, Meg and I made love, and now she is lying in the crook of my arm as I stroke the smooth skin of her shoulder, watching her breathe, watching her eyelashes flicker as her closed eyes seem to indicate she's drifting off to sleep.

Disturbing her seems cruel, but as she lets out a soft moan, I find myself leaning closer to her cheek, longing to kiss her softly, because I just can't stop myself from touching her.

When my lips touch her flesh, she murmurs something, and I know she's not quite asleep yet. "Hunter," she says, "you're so hot." She pats my cheek, and I stifle a laugh. She's clearly not completely awake either.

"Meg," I say, whispering to her, walking along the border of waking her and letting her sleep peacefully. "Do you like it



here?”

Her brows furrow slightly, and then, she opens her eyes and blinks a few times, turning to look at me, her hand still resting on my face. “Do I like it...where?”

I grin at her. “Well, I can see why you might not understand how specific I was being. You could think I meant LA, or the club, or my bed...but I meant, do you like it here in my apartment?” I am still looking for a new one away from the club, but that’s not exactly what I want to know from her, if she likes the space itself. I mean, does she like it here—with me?

“Yeah, I love it here. It’s a nice place, and I love the bathroom.” Her voice is husky with sleep, and I debate whether or not to continue down this path since she’s clearly not understanding me.

I am persistent. “That’s not exactly what I meant, though I’m glad you like it.”

She’s more awake now, and as she repositions on the pillow so she can see me better, she asks, “What did you mean then, babe?”

I love when she calls me that. It sounds so natural, like a secret just between her and me.

“I mean...do you like living...with me?”

It takes her a long moment to answer, which makes me nervous, but eventually, she nods her head and says, “Yeah, yeah. Of course I do. What’s not to like? You’re nice to me now. You’re not nearly as grumpy as you used to be.” She flashes that dazzling smile at me, and I can’t help but shake my head at her teasing.

“Well, I was thinking,” I continue, “you’ve been talking about finding a new apartment. What if you didn’t?”

Her head tips to the side as she contemplates my suggestion. “But...my old apartment burned.”

“I know,” I say. “I’m the one who burned it.”

“But...I can’t go back there.”

I sigh. Clearly, I am not that good at communicating with her yet. *I will get better*; I swear to myself. “Why don’t you just live here with me? Or we can find our own place. Together.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and I suppose she’s considering what that would be like, but she finally says, “Yeah. Okay.” Then she leans up and pecks my lips before she settles against my shoulder.

I’m not sure if I should be confused or happy, but as I settle back into my pillow, a feeling of relief washes over me. Meg wants to stay with me, which means I must finally be doing something right. With her head on my shoulder, I can fall asleep, perfectly content.

A couple of days later, while Meg is sitting outside on the deck, I get an idea. I know she wants to see her friends, and while they’ve been filtering by in pairs and small groups, I think it’s time we did something different.

I give Lexi a call right before her shift is set to begin and ask her for a favor. Of course, she agrees, and I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face as I go about my normal nightly return.

However, about an hour before the club closes for the night, I tell Meg, “Why don’t you go get dressed in one of those cute skirts Leah brought you, and we’ll go do something fun?”

Her eyes widen as she stares at me. “Seriously?” she asks. “You want to do something fun tonight?”

“Yeah. I think you’re well enough, don’t you?”

She doesn’t answer me. Instead, she hops up from her seat, kisses me quickly, and heads to the bathroom to get ready. I can’t help but chuckle. She’s going to love this.

My plan begins to unfold before Meg even comes out of the bathroom. I feel a wave of sneaky bliss wash over me as I go to the bathroom door and knock gently. “Meg, you about ready?” I ask her.

“Just putting on my earrings,” she replies.

Giddiness washes over me as I stand and wait for her to open the door. When she does, my mouth falls open. She looks gorgeous in a short, tight, purple sequined dress that brings out the color in her hair. The gold hoops in her hair catch the light and sparkle like her eyes.

Everything about her is perfect. I suddenly wish I hadn't made these plans so I could just carry her to bed instead.

"You look...amazing," I tell her as I push my lustful thoughts away and take her hand. "Ready?" I ask her.

"Yep, let's go!" She is practically bouncing. "Where are we going?"

"Not far." With her hand in mine, I walk back to the living room, and when she sees what's waiting for her, Meg pulls her hand away to cover her mouth as she gasps.

"Surprise!" everyone shouts.

"Oh, my God!" Meg shouts, running forward to hug all of her friends. I've invited all of her crew from the club, as well as had Dylan set up a mini DJ station, and as Meg rushes from one friend to the next, hugging them all tight, Audio Anarchy begins to drop his sick beats.

I stay back with my hands in the pockets of my slacks, watching her. She's so beautiful, and it's certain everyone is so happy to see her. Most of her friends have been by, but it's almost like a class reunion as she flitters about, a drink in her hand, talking to everyone like she hasn't seen them in years.

Before long, the dancing starts, and she hauls my sorry ass out onto the dance floor. We mostly rock back and forth, even to the faster beats, and I remind myself of just how lucky I am to have her.

"I can't believe you were able to pull this off," she says, shaking her head at me. Her red and purple curls dance around her face, making her even more lovely than usual.

"Why can't you believe it?" I ask. "Because it took forethought and planning? Those skills are in my wheelhouse, you know."

She giggles. “No, I know they are. It’s just...it was such a sweet gesture, and I’m just not used to seeing this softer side of you, Mr. Stone.” She emphasizes my last name, like she’s reminding me that stones are hard and tough to break. “I like it.”

Feeling heat rise in my face, I shrug, nonchalant. “I just... wanted to make you happy. I couldn’t think of any better way to do that than to invite all of your friends, drop some tunes, drink some of Carter’s finest concoctions, and dance.” With that, I take her hand and twirl her around.

“Whose idea was it to have tacos?” she asks me. “I’m guessing Brandon?”

I laugh. “That guy is always eating.”

“And pomegranate juice and iced tea? Those are two of Carter’s specialties.”

Laughing, I say, “I don’t know what that man needs to work his magic. I just chug it down.”

We continue to dance for a bit before Allie and Sadie come over to interrupt us, wanting to dote on their friend. Everyone from the club loves Meg so much, and it’s so easy for me to see why. She’s beautiful, inside and out, and she’s got the kindest heart of anyone I’ve ever met.

The party lasts for an hour or two before Dylan has to go. Then, just a few of her closest girlfriends stay to sit and talk, and I can tell she is loving the girl time, so I try to stay out of it. But sitting across the room, watching her, I feel myself hardening and know that I’m going to have to run the other waitresses off soon so I can take her back to bed. I’ve gotten spoiled by having her available for me every moment of every day. Now having to wait even a few minutes until I can take her is turning me into a savage.

Patience is not a virtue I can claim—and waiting for Meg is like standing in a desert, waiting for water.

She sees my restlessness from across the room. I can tell by the way she’s looking at me. As soon as there is a short break in the conversation, she yawns, and it looks a little fake to me.

“Ladies, it has been so amazing to see you!” she gushes, touching each of them on the arm. “But unfortunately, I’m going to have to get to bed. I am trying to convince Hunter to let me come back to work, so I’ll need to keep my strength up.”

“You are?” Allie asks, smiling widely and looking at me. “That’s amazing! All right, girlfriend. We’ll get out of your hair and let you get to bed.”

I politely walk them to the door, after they’re done hugging Meg goodbye, and as soon as they are gone, I wheel around on her, pulling her to me and kissing her hard. She moans softly and leans into me.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all night,” I murmur in her ear.

“Well then, Mr. Stone, why don’t you take me to bed?” she asks in a sultry whisper.

Not needing to be told twice, I sweep her off of her feet and carry her into the bedroom, and she snakes her arms around my neck, leaning against my chest. This is exactly where she’s meant to be, right here, next to my heart.

As I pause next to the bed, I say, “I’m so glad you’re staying right here with me, Meg. I don’t ever want to be away from you again.”

Her jade eyes are wide and a little glassy with unshed tears as she bites her bottom lip and then says, “Don’t worry, babe. You’re stuck with me.” Her lips press against mine hard, and I hold her even tighter. When she lets go, I see a hint of mischief in her eyes as she says, “Best mistake you ever made.”

# EPILOGUE



MEGHAN

My feet ache as I finish dropping off my last round of beers at my final table on my first night back at the club and make my way across the dance floor to return my tray and clock out for the evening. As I cross the dance floor, that woman with the long, blonde hair who is always twirling around comes right at me. I remember the time she knocked me into Hunter and made me spill a drink all over him. It was both a wonderful and awful event, and now, as she comes flying toward me, I'm not sure if I should thank her or give her a hard shove into someone else.

I decide that I'm above trying to hurt her, so I just smile at her and say, "Cute shoes."

She raises an eyebrow but doesn't speak. Instead, she twirls back in another direction, wreaking havoc wherever she lands. She is like a hurricane, but if that's what it had taken to get me together with Hunter, then so be it.

Not that I'm sure we're even together. I mean, I am still staying with him, and we are doing an awful lot of fucking, which is amazing, but...what we are exactly, I am not sure.

Tonight, I am too tired to think about it. I make my way to the bar and drop off my tray, untying my apron and dropping it in with the dirty clothes hamper. "See you, Carter," I say, patting his arm.

"Hey! How was your first night back?" he calls as he pours a beer. "Did you have fun?"

"It was great," I admit, compelled to stay and talk to him for a moment. I have missed all of my friends while I was on bed rest for nearly two weeks recovering from my run-in with Mr. Nyx. "But I'm exhausted. I'm glad he didn't give me a full shift tonight." Four hours had been enough for my first night back.

"I hate to break it to you, but Hunter said to tell you he wants to talk to you in his office." Carter shrugs and goes back to

what he was doing. I wish him a good night and continue on my way, biting my bottom lip.

As I head toward Hunter's office, I think this can't be much of anything. I mean...he will see me in his apartment in just a few hours, so what does he want now? Maybe he just wants to make sure my first night back went well.

I don't bother to knock on his office door. Instead, I just walk in, and the moment my eyes land on his desk, I think of the first night we spent together. He'd made me come so hard on the corner of that desk... Shaking my head, I remember to say something to him. "Yes, dear?" is all that comes out of my mouth, which makes him chuckle.

"Hey, how was it?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say. "It was fun. I'm a little tired, but I'll recover. Carter said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yep, that's right." His smile fades as he rocks back and forth slightly from heel to toe, his hands pushed down deep into the pockets of his jeans. "Meg, there's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to come out with it."

My gut tightens into a painful knot as my mind runs wild with all of the things he could be about to tell me. Did someone call and tell him my mom was dead? Did a staff member get into an awful car wreck? Does he want me to move out of his apartment? "What is it?" I ask in agony, irritated that he's made me wait.

"Meg...you're fired."

I continue to stare at him for several seconds, waiting for the punchline, waiting for him to tell me he's just joking around. But he's not moving. He's not even blinking, and when I read his expression, it actually looks like he might be serious.

"What the fuck?" I ask, anger building up inside of me. Is this his way of getting rid of me? Of kicking me to the curb? Of... breaking off whatever we have together? I can't believe what I'm hearing, and hot tears fill my eyes.

Before I can say anything else, though, I realize that Hunter has dropped to one knee, and there's a black box in his hand.



“What’s that?” I ask.

“Well...I was hoping that you’d marry me.” The confident man who just fired me a few seconds ago is gone, and instead, there’s this vulnerable version of the man I’ve found in my arms late at night kneeling before me with a diamond ring so big it looks like a rock sitting there in the open box.

“Marry you?” I repeat. “You just fired me...and now you want me to marry you?” Something tells me I am missing something. Something important. I do realize that the question he’s asking me is a sincere one, and now the tears that are slipping down my cheeks are of disbelief and joy. “Yes, I’ll marry you,” I say as I step closer to him. “But you’ve got a lot of fucking explaining to do.”

Hunter takes the ring out of the box and slides it on my finger. It fits perfectly, and I can’t even believe that this is real. This gorgeous diamond is mine—but even more importantly—so is the amazing man who gave it to me.

So why the fuck is he firing me?

“Meg,” he begins, still on one knee, “from the moment I first met you, I knew that you were special. Not only were you by far the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen, but you were smart and fiery in a way I’d never experienced before. The way you argued with me that first night when you spilled that drink on me told me right away that you were special. But then, I did something really fucking stupid—”

“Yeah, you did,” I interrupt, thinking he’s talking about sleeping with me and then telling me it was a mistake.

He shakes his head slightly, his face turning a bit red. “I almost lost you because I was too stupid to realize that there are some times when the rules are not the most important thing. After everything happened with Mr. Nyx, I knew I could never, ever lose you again. You’re so fucking special, Meg. And...I love you so much.”

My mouth drops open at that statement. He’s never told me that before. “I love you, too,” I whisper, so glad he’s finally said it.

A crooked smile breaks out across his face. “Those are the greatest words anyone has ever said to me.” He stops and clears his throat, and I wonder if maybe he’s getting a little emotional. After a moment, he’s able to keep going. “I know you want to keep working here, and I might be able to figure out a way for you to stay involved with the club, but I don’t date employees, and I sure the fuck don’t marry them. I was going to ask you about this the night that Mr. Nyx kidnapped you, but that ruined everything. Now that I’ve had time to think about it, I have a better answer than just firing you. I think the best solution would be for you to marry me. I’ll be your sugar daddy, and you can do whatever the hell you want to with your days. And if that includes hanging out at the bar, well, who am I to stop you? Hell, maybe you can even run the club for me, as my dotting wife, and I’ll be able to focus on... other activities.”

His logic causes a giggle to erupt deep down inside of me, and I find myself laughing for several seconds before he finally interrupts me. He’s promising me a life I never would’ve dreamed I’d be able to experience. Not only is Hunter rich, but he is also the perfect man for me, and having his money and not having to work means that I’ll truly be able to focus on what I want to do with my life.

And right now, all I want to do is work at Club Limelight with all of my friends. I love it here so much. The customers are amazing, too, and it just feels like home.

“So...you’ll marry me?” Hunter asks, and I realize he’s been down on one knee for a long time.

“Get up here!” I say, hauling him to his feet. “Of course I will! I already said I would!”

His mouth descends on mine, and I welcome him inside, wrapping my arms around him and kissing him with my whole heart. In my mind, I see a thousand nights in his arms, a million moments of laughter, and the smiling faces of our children and grandchildren.

As Hunter pulls away, he fishes something out of his pocket, one arm still around me. “This is for you, too,” he says, and

once again, he has that sheepish look on his face, like he's not sure how I will respond.

He wraps a silver band around my wrist and clips it on. "What is it?" I ask, puzzled, as I raise it closer so I can see it. The bracelet is a silver chain, but it has all kinds of little colorful charms on it. I see a paint bucket, a whiskey tumbler, a dollar sign, a duffle bag, and so many more.

"I got the bracelet for you the week after we went to get paint together, but I could never find the right time to give it to you. Since then, I've been collecting these little charms every time something happens between us, and now, well, you can see there are a lot. But there's room for even more, and I am so looking forward to all of the other experiences we will get to spend together so that we can add more charms onto the bracelet for many years to come."

When he is done speaking, I need a minute. My cheeks are wet with tears, and I'm struggling to find the right response. As much as I love the diamond ring, this bracelet is so thoughtful, so meaningful, I can hardly contain the love I feel in my heart for him. Since I met him, there have been times when I thought he was shallow or inconsiderate, but this just proves that he is neither of those things. He is thoughtful, loving, and caring. And... I just know, no matter what happens to us, we will always find a way to make it through—together.

Hunter lifts a hand to wipe away my tears, but they are tears of joy, so I never want them to end. His thumb is gentle on my cheek, and I smell his familiar masculine scent and want him to carry me off to unknown places and make passionate love to me.

His mouth comes down on mine, and I take my time, letting him explore my mouth as I concentrate on what it means to be in his arms. When he finally pulls away from me, I lean forward, not wanting to release him. A sigh of contentment leaves my lips, and I look into his eyes, one hundred percent happy, one hundred percent satisfied that I will be happy for the rest of my life with this man by my side.

“I love you so much, Meg. You’re everything I could’ve ever wanted in a woman. So smart, so funny, so fucking beautiful. I love the inside jokes we have, the way we can play with one another and still make each other smile. If there’s one thing I know for certain in this life, though, Meg, it’s that I was wrong about you.”

“What’s that?” I ask, tipping my head to the side as I try to understand.

With an easy smile, Hunter Stone tells me, “Meg, baby, you can’t be the best mistake I’ve ever made because you’re not a mistake at all.” With that, he lowers his lips to mine again, and we drift away on a sea of happiness, locked in each other’s arms.