



Working Title: **Bang! Bang!**

CHAPTER ONE MEGHAN

I stare at the body of a man sprawled in the middle of the alleyway.

Trash bags in hand, I stand there frozen, not knowing whether to go back inside and pretend I saw nothing or just casually walk past the body and dump the trash bags in the dumpster.

The answer is beyond obvious.

I quietly step back inside and close the door. Locking it, I drop the key on the kitchen floor and kick it under one of the metal counters before calling out to Billy, the line cook, "Well, damn, the door's locked."

Billy's large afro peeks from behind the wall where he's been taking his break, "Where's the key?"

I squint at the long key holder which is attached to the wall as if I've suddenly gone half-blind, "I don't know. Should've been hanging right here."

Billy stares at me.

I stare back.

"What're you looking at me for?" I say, mustering up an annoyed voice. "I can't produce another key out of my ass." When he leers at my behind, I flip him off with a quick grin, "Tell Ralph to throw these out when he comes in the morning. He knows where the extra key is. I've got to start my shift."

As I dump the bags next to the door and walk away, I call out, "Stop staring at my ass, Billy, and go call your pregnant girlfriend."

I don't have to look at him to see the guilt on his face before I push the door open to walk into ear-splitting music that almost vibrates in my bones. People are screaming and laughing as sweaty bodies grind and dance against each other with loose movements, the strobe lights working the crowd, the DJ swaying with the beats.

I slip through the go-between of the bar, nodding to Harry, who quickly hands over a drink to a waiting customer before hurrying away for his break.

"Meghan!" Comes a familiar shout of my name and I turn to smile at the greasy looking man who is one of my oldest patrons.

"You want the regular, Charlie?" I ask, seeing that his hand is empty.

"Make it two," He lifts his fingers to show me the number before shouting loudly over the music, "For me and my girl!"

His girl turns out to be a familiar looking face from the neighborhood with badly dyed lavender hair, fake lashes that look like they hurt, and a body clearly built on a surgical table. I feel sorry for Charlie but I'm not going to hurt Cookie's chance of landing a score. She's got two kids to feed at home and Charlie probably has a week's pay burning a hole in his pocket.

So I just smile, "Well, good for you!"

They both disappear into the crowd and I already know where Cookie is leading him.

"Poor bastard," a man sitting close to me comments.

I wipe down the counter, shrugging, "At least he'll go home a happy man."

"With a lighter wallet."

I just grin.

What I've just witnessed over the last ten minutes is par for the course. The Bleu Whiskey Lounge isn't your average club. The reason why my salary is pretty good is because the kind of clientele this place attracts isn't the safest, or the classiest, so we're well compensated for the risk involved.

That's not the first sex worker I've seen pretend that she's just a party girl looking for a good time. And that's not the first dead body I've seen in the alleyway behind this club and it probably won't be the last. The first time, I was foolish enough to call the police, now I know better. Last time it nearly cost me my hard-earned scholarship.

As long as I keep my head down and focus on my work, nobody will bother me here though. The midnight shift isn't the best one, or the safest one, but it's the highest paid one. And if I want to make rent for a one room apartment in the seediest part of Los Angeles and be able to afford groceries, I have to gamble with my safety. Those are the breaks.

I notice as one of the servers comes up to me, "Two whiskeys and scotch for table twenty-one."

My hand, which is already reaching for the glasses, freezes in mid air before I deliberately relax it. I cast a quick look in the direction of the table and see three men sitting there in suits. After six months of working in this club, I already know that table twenty-one is reserved for special clients. The kind you really don't want to mess with.

One of the men is facing me and when I look over at the table, he looks up and meets my gaze head on. His piercing grey eyes leave me breathless with fear. This man is no stranger to violence.

I quickly look away and start preparing the drinks. Handing them over, I warn the pretty server under my breath, "Don't linger for tips."

I watch her leave and wonder if she'll be smart enough to listen to me. She won't be the first fool to be attracted to power dressed in designer clothes and then pay the price for it. When I see one of the men grab her ass under the short skirt, I tense up. Then I see the smile on her face and I close my eyes in regret and pity.

This one won't last.

I turn my back and go back to work. Unlike other dance clubs, The Bleu Whiskey starts functioning as a bar after the clock strikes three am. The music dies down and most of the people who still want to dance the night away move on to other clubs in the district. Conversations become hushed and shady business dealings begin.

From three in the morning, for the next few hours until sunrise, The Bleu Whiskey is at its most dangerous. I have never met the owner of this club, and I never intend to meet him, although I've heard about him. The dude runs a tight ship. So tight that even the LA police department turns a blind eye if a man is shot in his club or lies

dead in the adjacent alleyway. A man with that kind of influence is not a man anyone like me should get to know.

I busy myself with preparing drinks as the sounds in the room become more muted. I keep my eyes down and my flirtatious smile, which is partly for my job description, fades away.

An hour ticks away and I look up, between orders, towards table twenty-one. The men are still sitting there. Two of them are clearly drunk but the third one, the one in the power suit with the grey eyes is stone cold sober. The glass of whiskey is in his hand as he gently swirls the liquid. Once again, he notices that I'm watching and he looks back at me.

He has a head full of dark hair, almost jet black under the flashing lights, and he arches a sharp brow at me, the corner of his lips quirking up at what he clearly perceives as my interest.

I lower my gaze.

I'm not blind.

The man is sex on a stick.

But I have an exam tomorrow, and I can't give that exam if I'm too busy being lying next to the dead body out in the alleyway.

The door of the kitchen opens and the manager, Steve, walks out frowning, "Meghan, why do we have extra servers tonight?"

"What?" I glance at him. "We have eight like every night. What do you mean?"

"Sally is still on the roster," Steve scowls. "She said you told her to work overtime."

I blink, "What? I didn't--"

I pause when I look up to see Sally leaning towards one of the drunk men who lifts her skirt and stuffs in a few dollar bills in the lining of her panties.

My heart nearly stops. "I didn't tell her to work overtime but I think she's working that table."

Steve immediately looks to his right and he goes still before hissing, "Has she lost her fucking mind?"

But he doesn't move to go toward her; he just stands there and watches as the other man grabs a willing Sally who has hundred dollar bills peeking out from her low cut top and her crotch. Her cheeks are flushed and she looks a little tipsy.

"What do we do?" I ask quietly.

But Steve's face is white with fear as he stares at their sober companion. "We ain't doing shit. She's fucked. Oh, fuck."

One of the men grabs Sally's skirt and I can hear a ripping sound. My heart nearly stops in its chest. No matter how I planned to stay out of any altercation over at table twenty-one, I can't watch something like this unfold.

The giddy smile on Sally's face has disappeared and she suddenly looks frightened as she pushes the man away. My heart is pounding as I realize that Steve isn't going to do anything. A familiar fear rises up in my throat and I try to block out a memory that seems to be overlapping with the scene playing out in front of me.

"Steve, do something!" I hiss in alarm but Steve is just frozen solid.

Sally is screaming now, trying to stop them from groping her, and bile rises up in my throat as I whisper, "I'm sorry."

I can see Steve turning towards me, his voice sounding confused, "What?"

But I block it out, grabbing two full bottles of wine and sliding through the go-between. I hear Steve calling my name in panic but I can't stop myself. "Meghan—"

The grey-eyed man watches me in interest as I stride over, my face set. He hasn't lifted a finger to help Sally who is screaming hysterically as she tries to escape his disgusting companions.

If I die, I die.

At least, I won't have to pay rent once I'm dead.

There's always an upside to every situation.

I've already reached them and without stopping, I lift up one heavy bottle and smash it down on the head of the man in front of me. He goes down, crumpling to the floor. His companion sees me and sneers, reaching out to me.

"I don't think so, fuck face," I growl, ignoring the other bottle in my hand and kneeling him in the crotch.

His scream is the best sound I've heard all day. When he joins his companion on the ground, I make it a point to kick him in the balls again.

Sally is crying, trying to fix her ruined clothes, and I scowl at her, "What are you doing standing there like an idiot? Run!"

Her eyes widen and then for the first time, she actually obeys me, sprinting towards the front door and out. No one tries to stop her. The first man that I hit with the bottle grabs my ankle and I stumble forward onto the table. The grey-eyed asshole sitting there, watching me in amusement, blinks when my flailing hand hits him and I upend his entire drink on his suit.

His small smile disappears and out of nowhere, I see the men sitting on the surrounding tables, jump to their feet, and I freeze when I realize that there are more than ten guns pointed in my direction while I lay splattered on a table, my face nearly at crotch level with this stranger who is still watching me.

The entire club has gone silent at this point and even the man who had grabbed my ankle is frozen in fear. Grey-eyes tilts his head slightly and two of the men put back their guns and move forward. I hear grunts from behind me and then a pained moan and I realize they're dragging away his companions from the table.

I swallow, asking in a meek voice, "If I move, will they shoot me?"

He just stares at me and then the corner of his lips quirks up again, "Would you like for them to shoot you?"

His voice is raspy and deep and a shiver runs down my spine at the sound. This time, it's not just fear. I can feel my lower muscles tighten in a spasm of need that I didn't anticipate and horror washes over me at my reaction.

"No," I squeak, and then quickly add for politeness's sake, "Sir."

I see a dark emotion move behind his eyes and it's almost hypnotizing. "Bang, bang."

I don't know if he's teasing me or if it's a directive for someone in the room so my mouth turns dry. "Excuse me?"

His hand suddenly reaches out and puts a finger under my jaw, tilting my head back to face him. My heart is pounding so fiercely that I wonder if he can hear it.

"You ruined my suit."

I blink at him, "What?"

He gestures towards his suit, "How will you pay me back for the damage?"

"It's a suit," I say, slowly. "You're going to shoot me over a suit?"

He just gives me a steady look.

A smart idea would be to apologize and beg for forgiveness and swear on everyone's life but my own that I will pay for dry cleaning. However, the fact that to him, his suit is more valuable than my life is pissing me off. So, I don't do the smart thing.

I do the stupid thing and say, "It's not my fault your hand was in the way."

From behind me, at the bar, I hear Steve moan, "Meghan, no!"

But I've already said it.

And since, I've already aggravated the lion, there's no harm in going out with a bang. So, I glare at the man and say, "I'm not sorry and your suit is ugly. Now, at least you have a reason to throw it away."

I hear a thump on the ground and I wonder if Steve has passed out. The adrenaline running through my veins is pushing away the fear.

"My life is shitty enough," I say to the man. "Go ahead and shoot me. At least, I know I saved a girl's life in the process. What did you do? Sit in your expensive suit and watch her get assaulted! What kind of a man even does that? And you know what else?"

I don't know why I can't shut my mouth but it's like I'm on a roll. Perhaps, if I piss him off enough, he'll just shoot me quickly and get this over with. I hope he doesn't dump me out back though. I deserve at least a small funeral.

"What?" he asks in a dangerous tone, his voice silky and rubbing against my nipples, making them ache under my shirt. "Do go on."

"I'm glad I ruined your fucking ass suit!"

The man stares at me and then he smirks, his thumb coming to rub my lower lip, as he murmurs, "You have quite a mouth on you, don't you?"

This is the part where he's supposed to shoot me dead. Why isn't he telling them to kill me?

"What's your point?" I try not to let my fear show.

The look in his eyes tells me he's almost considering it but he doesn't say anything for a long moment that seems endless. Finally, he mutters, "I think I've scared you enough for today."

I freeze and this time my voice is small, as if my brain has suddenly remembered the situation I'm in, "So, you're not going to kill me?"

His smirk is lazy and spells all kind of trouble, "Over my ugly suit? Didn't you just say that now I have a reason to throw it away?"

I wet my dry lips and mutter, "I just said that to hasten the killing process."

He blinks, "Do you want to die?"

"No?"

"Okay, then." He jerks his chin and the men suddenly put away their guns and move back to their seats, as if nothing ever happened.

I'm still frozen in my position and the man says smoothly, "Do you need some help getting up?"

My muscles feel stiff and I get to my feet slowly. It's then that I register the shaking in my hands. The adrenaline is fading away only to be replaced by the stark realization that I nearly just got myself killed.

"Um—" I stare at him and he watches me with a small smile. "I can't afford to pay for your dry cleaning."

I should be thanking him for not murdering me, not reminding him of his ruined suit, but his lazy question takes me aback, "Oh, do they not pay you enough here?"

I glance back at where Steve is laying unconscious and I mutter, "They pay me okay."

"I see."

My eyes feel wet and I blink.

His smile disappears as I rub my eyes.

"I have to..." I take a step back slowly. "I have to go cry now. I'll replace your drink in a minute."

And with that, I dart off into the kitchen like a speeding bullet.

CHAPTER TWO

MEGHAN

It takes me three days to emotionally recover from the incident but now I'm without a job. My manager wasn't pleased that he almost shitted himself and canned me. My rent is due in two weeks and I have just enough cash for a few groceries. In other words, I'm fucked.

I trudge to the bathroom and wash my face, not even bothering to look at myself in the mirror any longer than I have to. My tangled curls are in a high bun and my badly done blonde highlights are growing out and are as clear as day. I really shouldn't have let Naomi mess with my hair to practice for her cosmetology class, but when your roommate gets you extra packets of Ramen as a bribe, you kind of have no choice.

My wide set, almond shaped eyes look exhausted and bruised as I mutter at my reflection, "This is why nobody wants to date you. Ghosts have a better chance of getting a hit on Tinder than you do."

I still have a few lectures to attend today before I can go home and start my job search again. On my way back, I plan to drop off my résumé at a diner near my house and at a local bar.

My head aches and I take out two ibuprofen from my bag and pop them into my mouth. My hand hesitates on the half eaten banana but I save it instead for lunch.

I sleep my way through Art History and fumble through Ceramics. Fortunately, since I participate in classes quite frequently, the teachers don't bother me today. But then again, I look like death warmed over so they're probably taking pity on me. It's when I'm hurrying out of class that I bump into hard male chest.

"Oh shit, sorry!" I immediately crouch down to pick up the notepad that I had been in the process of stuffing in my bag.

"Meghan?"

The familiar voice makes me go still and I look up. Ricky Tomlinson, with his hipster good looks, was a guy I had a massive crush on a few months ago. The outcome of that crush was less than amusing.

"Ricky, what's the hold up?" Comes another familiar voice and I wonder if today is the day when all of my bad karma is going to come bite me in the ass.

I don't have time to move away because just then a fake-tanned hand slides across Ricky's chest from behind and a curvy brunette (Kardashian wanna be) snuggles into his side. Her eyes widen in mocking laughter. Yeah, karma is after my ass. It's Ashley.

"Oops, sorry Meghan, I didn't mean to interrupt. Were you about to suck Ricky's dick again to prove how much you like him? I'm sure you don't need a private room for that. I mean, after all, it's not like everyone here hasn't seen you do it."

Her words make me flush in humiliation but I force down my feelings, refusing to give in to the taunt. "Maybe you can give me some tips. I heard some guys bragging about it in the parking lot behind campus."

Ashley's face turns a bright red. "Excuse me?"

I put the notepad into my bag and zip it up, keeping my tone deliberately casual. "I'm sure nothing is wrong with your hearing. By the way," I fling the bag over my shoulder. "You need to ease up on your suction according to one of those guys I overheard. You get a little needy. Nobody likes that."

When Ricky snickers, Ashley flushes. "What the fuck are you laughing at? She's obviously lying!"

I shrug. "Just wanted to be helpful. I believe in returning favors."

Since we're in a crowded hallway, she can't do anything to me, but knowing Ashley I'll have to watch my back for the next few weeks. I quickly slip away, feeling only a glimmer of satisfaction at getting back at her, because I know for a fact that the video she leaked out is still circulating amongst people.

My hands tighten over the strap of my bag and I force myself to regulate my breathing. Having a panic attack in the middle of the University would just give room to more rumors. I don't need that.

I'm nearly at the gate when I see a black shiny car parked across the road from the main gate. It's not the car that bothers me, but rather the two men leaning against it, studying the students. A bad feeling crawls over me and I immediately turn my back towards them.

I'm usually not that paranoid, but ever since the incident at The Bleu Whiskey, I cannot help but feel that I won't be forgiven that easily. I decide to climb over the fence behind the college. I've nearly reached the corner when I hear a voice, "Miss Taylor?"

I freeze and then peek over my shoulder, my hand tightening on my bag. Both men are standing behind me. One is a stocky man with olive skin who's not much older than me, if I had to guess, and the other is an older man with thin, pale skin and grey hair at the temples. They're both wearing casual suits which is an odd look for campus and they study me, "You are Miss Taylor, right?"

"I uh, No? No." I try to infuse some confidence in my voice.

"Then why did you stop when we called you Miss Taylor?"

I blink and then say, slowly, trying to think of a reasonable response, "Because I thought you said, Miss Tayla."

The two men exchange a look between them before they look back at me and assert, "You're Meghan Taylor."

I take a step back, saying cautiously, "I can see why you think that but I'm not Meghan. Meghan Taylor is taller than me and really pretty. I'm Tayla. It's a family name."

It's the most ridiculous lie in the world and I'm not even sure if they're buying it. I just need to find a moment to run. If that asshole wanted me dead, he should've done it in the club three days ago. I've changed my mind now. I don't want to die anymore.

I see the younger one take out his phone to check something and I'm about to make a run for it when the older guy grabs me without warning.

"This is her," the first one says, holding his phone next to my face. "It looks just like her."

"It does not!" I protest, trying to pull away.

"It's definitely her," the other man says dryly.

"If you try to kill me, I'll scream," I promise. "I've been told that I have a very shrill voice and I'm also a biter. I'll bite your fingers off." I infuse a bit of fake confidence in my voice which sounds more like a squeak, "Try me, bitches."

The two men wince. "God, you're mean."

The stocky one gives me a long look basically rolling his eyes. "We're not here to kill you so calm down."

I immediately go still. "How do I know you're not lying?"

He blinks, a little confused and glances at his companion, "How do we prove that?"

"By letting me go?" I suggest, hopefully.

"Nice try, kid," the older man holding me snorts. "This isn't my first day on the job."

"We're here to find out why you haven't been showing up for work," the first one says, smiling at me. Okay, he looks less like one of the Sopranos when he smiles. Then, his statement registers with me and I give him a stunned look.

"Say that again?"

"The boss sent us to make sure you were okay," he replies. "Let her go, Lars. I don't think she's going to run now."

I rub my arms from where Lars grabbed me and I glare at him. "Why'd you have to be so rough, Lars?"

Lars just grunts.

Turning away from the rough old guy, I look towards his companion, "Steve sent you?"

The man looks baffled. "Steve? No, I just told you, the boss sent us."

I lift my brows, "Does the boss have a name? Who is he? You are from the club, right?" I'm growing a little confused now and just a bit wary.

The two men exchange another look and then the first one says, "Yeah, Mr. Middleton sent us. He owns the club. He's the boss and apparently, you didn't show up to work for the last three days."

I look at the two of them, "The owner sent you to check up on a missing bartender?"

I'm pretty sure that I've never met this Mr. Middleton. Of course I know of him. Who doesn't? He's the most eligible bachelor in town. At thirty-five, he's the CEO of Middleton Financial Group and owns a multitude of businesses in town, including additional locations of the club Bleu Whiskey which are spread out all over the country.

But once again, I've just heard his name. I've never seen a picture of him. From what I know, he dislikes public appearances, social media and press. I heard that he once destroyed an entire tabloid because they tried to get a hold of his pictures and sell them. He has people who speak for him at conferences but he rarely does.

I never really thought I would ever meet him, despite working in one of his establishments. I didn't even know he knew I existed. So it's a little odd that he sent two of his... I mean I can only call them henchmen even though the young one is a little cute now that I'm over my initial paranoia.

"I don't understand," I stare at the nicer one. "I thought I was out of a job."

He gives me a quick grin, "Is that why you've not been coming in? You should've at least come back for your salary, but you're not fired, Miss Taylor. In fact, you're supposed to show up for your shift tonight."

Lars just grunts.

I wonder if he has a maximum amount of words he can use a day and he just exhausted them, talking to me.

"So, I still have a job?" I repeat making sure I'm not imagining this whole thing.

"Yes."

"And he knows what happened there?"

"He does."

"And I'm not in trouble?"

The sort-of cute one bursts into laughter, "Absolutely not."

Despite the events that have taken place in the club, it has been the only source of my livelihood. I know what it's like to have nothing and dig out of the trash to eat so when my eyes fill up, it's Lars who now looks uncomfortable.

"Wait -"

"I'm not crying," I sniffle. "It's just these damn allergies."

I wipe my eyes, sniffing and start walking away, "I'll come for my shift. I'll be on time. You tell Mr. Middleton he's the best!"

Who said rich men were assholes?

I know he's got a reputation in the club but maybe that's just exaggerated.

As I exit the campus, leaving behind the two baffled henchmen, I think to myself that Mr. Middleton might not be that horrible of a boss as I had imagined him to be.

So maybe he's not a completely deranged psychopath.

I suppose only time will tell.

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